

Disharmony Without Discord
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Chapter 1: Library
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Once upon a time, there was a pony named "Twilight Sparkle." Twilight Sparkle really liked books - so much so in fact, that all of her friends called her "Bookhorse." This pony loved books so much that she often forgot about her friends. One day, while Twilight Sparkle was studying a new book, "Alicorns and Aphorisms," she had an epiphany. In the moment, Twilight Sparkle stood up, dusting the dust off from the book she had been reading (or so she thought it was from the book she had been reading). She looked around the room.

"Oh my gosh!" Twilight Sparkle exclaimed. "Books aren't just lines of text on a page." She paused.

Then, zipping over to the blue crystal sitting prominently on her end table, she pronounced: "This. This right here." She gazed attentively into the crystal. "This, too, is a book." She sat down on her haunches, somewhat proud of herself for her discovery. A few moments later, she looked up across the room, spying a pillow on her couch. Trotting over, she pronounced again: "This, too," waving her hoof around for dramatic effect. She then paused before saying, "book!" Several moments passed. Finally, she was in front of the door knob of her humble Ponyville Library door. Gazing at her reflection in the door handle, she yet pronounced again: "This. This is the book of ALL books!" Smiling to herself, she trotted back to her cushion, sat down, and continued to read.

There was a knock on the door. Still somewhat in her trance, Twilight Sparkle asked aloud to herself, "who could that be?" Trotting over to the door, she peeped through her door's peephole. To her surprise, it was none other than her best friend (and she had several best friends, to be sure) Pinkie Pie. Readying herself for what was sure to come, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Yes, hello?" she inquired tentatively.

"Oh, hello Twilight. You're here," Pinkie replied, somewhat sadly.

Caught a little off-guard, Twilight stammered, "why yes. Yes I am."

"That's good," Pinkie replied, morosely scraping the dirt with her hoof, looking down.

"Uh..." Twilight hesitated before offering, "why don't you come in?"

"No thanks, Twilight..." Pinkie replied, her voice trailing off.

"What happened?" Twilight asked, now concerned.

Pinkie hesitated before continuing. "Oh, nothing... it's just that ...all of our friends... They've been turned to stone."

"What!?" Twilight exclaimed.

"I tried to tell you!" Pinkie replied in earnest to what was sure to be Twilight's next question.

"This -- is bad. How did it happen?" she empathetically asked.

"It all started when we went on that vacation together, remember?"

Twilight Sparkle recalled: Several weeks (or was it months?) before, she had gone on vacation at the beach with her friends. Everypony had seemed to be getting along swimmingly... except for Fluttershy, that was. But Twilight had just put that down to Fluttershy's usual shyness, along with the new vacation spot; she had assumed it was no big deal.

Tapping lightly her chin with her hoof and looking down, Twilight concentrated. Images of Fluttershy filled her mind. "Hm... Why is the only thing I seem to remember about the vacation is what Fluttershy was doing?" she thought to herself. Blocking out the thoughts and recalling more of the details of the event, after a pause, she concluded, "Ah yes, of course -- in my field of view, she was simply the most prominently situated. Situamated." She inaudibly giggled to herself.

Looking back at her friend Pinkie Pie and placing her hoof to her chin to help her think, Twilight replied: "I don't remember anything particularly unusual," she said, her eyes somehow finding their way towards the sky.

"I didn't think you would," Pinkie said in earnest. "You spent the whole vacation absorbed in your books! Every time we tried to get you to do something together, you just kept saying, '...one more page...' Then Pinkie repeated herself with dramatic effect, "One more page!"

Embarrassed, Twilight almost reflexively began to offer an excuse but the direness of the situation seemed to prevent her.

"Sure," was the reply, remorsefully at first. "I suppose I ought to have taken it a little easier... but I had been wanting to read those books for a long time, and they were so interesting!" Pinkie was nonplussed.

Twilight surrendered. "Alright. I see what you mean," Twilight replied, defeated. "But what does that have to do with everypony getting turned into stone?"

Pinkie continued, "Well, after the vacation was over, everypony returned back to Ponyville. And then.... everypony started leaving -- one by one."

"Leaving?" Twilight asked, skeptical.

"Like I said, I tried to tell you."

Twilight recalled the many knocks on her library door that had occurred while she had been engrossed in her studies. "B-but wasn't that just the wind? ...or maybe an animal?" Reaching for an acceptable response, she finally settled on "I thought I was just hearing things..." Twilight said sheepishly.

Pinkie Pie continued. "The first to leave was Rarity. She said that it was of the utmost importance that she started a dress shop in Canterlot -- and that nothing would get in her way."

Twilight's thoughts began to wander. "Was Canterlot also a book?" she considered for a moment. "That does kinda sound like her," was Twilight's absent-minded reply, the origins of which had been a combination of the remnants of her trance-like mental state and her misplaced desire to prove to Pinkie that she was a good friend because she remembered everypony.

Pinkie placed a well-deserved stare in Twilight's general direction, to which Twilight submissively smiled. "I had better start taking this seriously or I might lose Pinkie next," Twilight worried to herself. She gulped and tried to focus.

Pinkie continued, "After that, Rainbow Dash dashed on outta here like a swarm of parasprites devouring a paper mâché spaghetti dinner! I think she said something about needing to train even harder to get noticed by the Wonderbolts. Next, Applejack said she had finally gotten tired of farming apples for real and went back to Cherry Jubilee's."

Twilight stood there in disbelief. After a long pause, she then hesitantly-yet-hopefully asked, "...and Fluttershy?"

"One day I went to see if Fluttershy wanted to help me prank some silly foxes, and she was just gone!" She sighed. "Her animal friends were gone too..." Pinkie lamented.

"OK. I think it's all starting to make sense." Twilight began pacing back and forth in front of the library door. "But what about the stone part?"

"Huh?" Pinkie replied, puzzled.

Turning to Pinkie, Twilight asked impatiently, "Didn't you say that all of our friends got turned to stone?" Not waiting for her reply, Twilight had a realization. Putting hoof in hoof, she announced, "This must have been Discord's doing! There is simply no other explanation for our friends disappearing so suddenly like this. We should alert Princess Celestia immediately and let her know that Discord has somehow managed to break out of his stone prison and is wreaking chaos on Equestria once again." As Twilight turned to enter the library and find Spike, who was probably still sleeping somewhere, Pinkie burst out laughing,

"Oh, no, no, no... silly!" Pinkie Pie giggled; she booped Twilight's snoot. Twilight looked confused. Pinkie grinned, "I just made the 'turned to stone' part up to get your attention, silly." Our friends weren't really turned to stone.

"You what!?" Twilight exclaimed.

Pinkie laughed again before getting serious. "It's just that you've just been stuck in that library for so long... we all missed you so much," Pinkie Pie sniffed.

Realizing her error, Twilight sniffed, too. "I know. I'm sorry, Pinkie Pie. I'll never let my studies get the best of me again." Pinkie seemed satisfied with that response. "Let's get our friends back," Twilight Sparkle decreed. "We will go after them in the order that they left. Rarity was the first to leave -- which means she would have been gone the longest -- so we should go after her first," she reasoned. "You told

me that she said she was going to Canterlot. I have no doubt that's exactly where we'll find her." Pinkie Agreed.

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Chapter 2: Rarity
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As Pinkie and Twilight approached Canterlot via stagepony, they couldn't help but admire the beautiful city from afar. Not just a city, Canterlot was the stronghold of Equestria. Every kind of pony took up residence there -- unicornpony, pegasuspony, and earthpony. And of course the two rulers, Celestia and Luna, were there -- the only two alicorns in all of Equestria (and perhaps even beyond -- if there even was such a thing).

The most prominent part of the city was built on the side of a tall mountain and extended high into the clouds -- even above the cloud mini-city where the pegasusponies resided. This is where the unicornponies of Canterlot practiced and perfected their magic. The mountain peak, made of earth, extended beyond even the tallest unicorn studytower -- higher than even where the two regal sisters resided. It was intentionally constructed like this to represent the unity of the three different kinds of ponies. It stood as a symbol that all the different kinds of ponies were always welcome in any part of the city and Equestria.

The pegasuspony part of the city was made mostly of cloud and extended outward from the side of the mountain. The architecture of the pegasuspony mini-city was heavenly -- like a chapter out of "Starswirl The Bearded's Ponypublic."

Underneath the cloud layer at the base of the mountain was the earthpony part of the city. It was surrounded by a wide and vast landscape rich in fertile soil and abundant crops, too -- enough to feed and sustain the entire population of Canterlot. In fact, the ecosystem surrounding the mountain appeared to have an ample supply of resources -- enough even to provide for the neighboring towns and villages (in a pinch) with some still left over. Canterlot was simply stunning.

As Pinkie and Twilight trotted near, taking in the soft, warm soil on their hooves and peaceful, abundant atmosphere, they could start to see the first silhouettes of ponies going about their day. Soon, they were close enough to distinguish pegasuspony from unicornpony from earthpony.

"There must be thousands of ponies who live here!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"That may be so, Pinkie," Twilight replied, "but we only need to find just one." Pinkie understood.

Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie roamed first the streets of Canterlot, asking dress-shop after dress-shop if they had seen a white unicorn mare with purple mane stop by, their efforts unfruitful. Next, they checked the unicorn part of the city, climbing step after step up and around the tall towers to various public platforms -- to no avail. Twilight even cast a spell to give Pinkie Pie temporary wings so they could look for Rarity in the pegasuspony mini-city. Finally, after seeming to have searched almost everywhere they thought Rarity might be (because nopony could search the entire stronghold of Canterlot in a day), they found themselves back at the earthpony part of the city. Then, with Pinkie's hooves getting dirty and achy and Twilight mentally and socially exhausted, they decided to turn in for the night. As they began their search for an inn, Pinkie Pie, distracted by a butterfly, almost tripped over a poor, bedraggled pony who had been sitting under a lamp-post in the street.

"My apologies," they hear the poor, dirty, bedraggled pony say, even though she was clearly not at all at fault for the little mishap.

Upon hearing the voice, Pinkie Pie's and Twilight Sparkle's eyes lit up. "Rarity? Is that you?" they say in unison.

Terrified at first, Rarity's eyes dashed around, looking for some excuse for her apparently sad condition. In a moment of surrender, however, Rarity suddenly expressed the utmost relief. In an instant, Rarity found herself in the warm embrace of two of her best friends -- Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle. A few snuffles later Rarity replied, "I'm so sorry. I thought I could make it big in Canterlot without you."

"But why'd you run away to Canterlot?" Pinkie asked curiously.

"I thought that if I fulfilled my dream of being a big fashionpony in Canterlot, I could someday return to Ponyville and also return the favor of the kindness my friends had always shown, poor, undeserving me. But seeing you two here, I see that I was wrong. I don't know what came over me. Can you ever forgive me?"

Pinkie smiled at Rarity. "Oh, Rarity, you don't have to return our kindness. You're our friend! And you're here now."

Twilight agreed. "Of course we forgive you, Rarity! And I'm sorry I wasn't a better friend," Twilight continued, referring to the unanswered knocks at her library door, some of which were sure to have been Rarity's.

Rarity smiled understandingly.

After getting back to Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie were then able to explain the full situation to Rarity. She agreed that they all must find the others.

"The only question is who should we find next?" Twilight considered. After giving it some thought, she concluded, "Fluttershy is shy. Knowing what a pony as confident and outspoken as Rarity went through, I doubt she is doing as well..." Twilight's expression turned to one of concern. "It has to be Fluttershy," she said as she decisively clopped her hooves together.

Pinkie, mirroring Twilight's concerned expression, replied, "I don't know, Twilight. Didn't you say earlier that we should find each pony in the order in which they left? Fluttershy was the last to leave. If we go and search for Fluttershy now, who knows what could happen to everypony else?"

Rarity chimed in, "I'm afraid I have to agree with Pinkie. Fluttershy may appear weak and helpless sometimes, but trust me darling, she is a strong pony on the inside and can take care of herself."

Twilight, briefly wondering if Rarity was talking about Fluttershy or herself, found herself about to protest when Pinkie Pie said, "Alright, Rainbow Dash it is! Come on, let's go!" as she hopped out of the library.

Rarity turned to Twilight, who still appeared unsure. Rarity placed a hoof on Twilight's shoulder, saying sympathetically, "trust me, Twi. She can take care of herself."

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Chapter 3: Rainbow Dash

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As the ponies chased after Pinkie Pie (who appeared to be going Celestia-knows-where) Twilight considered aloud, "Now, if I were Rainbow Dash, where would I go?"

"She does speak frequently about the Wonderbolts. Maybe she went off to join them?" Rarity replied. And so to the Wonderbolts they went.

After checking with the Wonderbolts (it wasn't easy) and turning up no leads, the three ponies thought about it some more. "Maybe she didn't leave Ponyville to try to join the Wonderbolts but to train for the Wonderbolts!" Twilight concluded. "Now, if I were Rainbow Dash, where would I go to train for such an elite flying team?" she considered.

"Froggy Bottom Bog!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"No. Somewhere even more treacherous," Twilight rhetorically suggested. "Ghastly Gorge."

After arriving at Ghastly Gorge, sure enough, there they found Rainbow Dash weaving in and out of sharp rocks, dodging monsters, and spinning up tornado-clouds like it was nothing.

Ahem Twilight cleared her throat. "Rainbow Dash! Rainbow Dash! Down here!" she put her hoof up high and waved it around.

After briefly glancing down for a moment, Rainbow Dash continued her drill.

"Oh no. She doesn't recognize us!" Pinkie worried.

"Now what do we do?" Rarity asked.

Twilight deliberated, "no. She recognizes us all right. No pegasus pony with those kinds of skills wouldn't be able to see us - even from all the way up there."

"Rainbow!" Twilight shouted more fervently. "Come down! We need to talk with you!" But Rainbow Dash just disappeared further into the gorge. Looking to each other for reassurance, the three ponies followed the blue wisp of a cloud.

As it grew steadily quieter and darker, Twilight broke the silence, "I don't think we've ever been here before," she said cautiously. "Be on your guard." Pinkie and Rarity looked more alert.

Rarity was next to speak, "this wasn't part of the original obstacle course from back when we helped Rainbow find a pet," she deduced from the absence of memorable landmarks and harsh appearances surrounding them. She followed behind Twilight.

"This is fun!" Pinkie exclaimed, bouncing up and down as she trotted along. "Weeeee!" Pinkie giggled while looking at her hooves after finding her acceleration to have been somehow reduced to zero.

"Pinkie Pie - I fail to see what's so fun." Looking over her shoulder, Rarity continued, "Indeed, you're not even moving a hoof! Wait -- I'm not moving a hoof," she said as she realized she was stuck in something. Whatever it was, it was very sticky. And the more they moved their hoofs, the more the substance clinged and the harder it was to move.

Twilight began to light up her horn. "Now girls, just relax. I'm sure everything will be fi--" Twilight stopped short of completing her sentence. A giant creature with a body as big as seven little fillies doing a crazy trust exercise, along with eight, long robotic legs appeared before her. Twilight gasped in surprise. "Run!!" Twilight shouted, "Ahhhhh!" Running in the opposite direction without looking where she was going, Twilight collided with Rarity, breaking her hooves loose from the sticky stuff that had previously ensnared them and taking Rarity with her. After tumbling into Pinkie, however, Twilight and Rarity's momentum was abruptly halted and they all found themselves stuck in what they now realized was... spider webs? Twilight, Pinkie, and Rarity all looked up at the giant spider. In just a couple of spidersteps, the giant spider closed the distance between them. In the commotion, Twilight's light spell had gone out and it was quite dark. As the creature's position blocked out most of the remaining light source, it appeared as though it was just hovering above them. As Twilight got her light spell working again to assess the situation, the ponies could tell the spider was hungry. It bared its fangs, poised for its meal.

Twilight, having regained her composure, said reassuringly, "just relax, girls. I've got this," her horn beginning to light up more -- surely soon to be charged with a spell that would undoubtedly get them out of this mess. But there was no time. The spider hissed, and Rarity screamed.

A bolt of blue zipped by the spider. The spider, confused, at first tried to reach at it with its long legs to knock it away, but the bolt was too fast. Again the bolt zipped by -- this time, cutting into one of its skinny legs. The spider got scared and scurried off into the darkness, limping imperceptibly. A few back-and-forth zips later and the bolt of blue landed right in front of them. It was Rainbow Dash!

Twilight, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie cheered for their friend.

"Miss me?" the blue pegasus pony said cheekily, striking a pose. Anypony could tell by the expression on the three little ponies' faces that they did.

After Rainbow Dash zipped them free with her unequalled flying skills (in which she flew so fast and in just the right way that she gained the ability to cut things with her hoof), the four friends hugged.

"I'm so glad to see you, Rainbow. And I'm so sorry. I should have been a better friend," Twilight said, sniffing.

"Oh, Twilight. That's OK," Rainbow Dash replied. "To tell you the truth, I thought that training all the way out here would help me become tough enough to become a Wonderbolt. But between fighting off all these monsters and foraging for food, I haven't had any time to practice my sweet flying moves. In fact, when I saw you guys coming to visit me, I was so embarrassed at just how much my skills had deteriorated that I couldn't even say 'Hi.' There's even less of a chance the Wonderbolts will accept me now. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Already have!" Twilight Sparkle replied, giving Rainbow a big hug. The other ponies joined in. "And I'm sorry, too." Rainbow looked confused. Twilight continued, "I locked myself in the library and didn't

answer you when you knocked on my door. I should have been a better ponyzen." Rainbow tried to figure out what Twilight was saying.

Pinkie, sensing the misunderstanding, tried to clear things up, "Oh, Twilight -- Rainbow didn't even come to see you once when you were holed up in your library all alone like a NEET."

"She didn't?" Twilight responded surprised, looking questioningly at Rainbow.

Rainbow defended herself, "No. I knew you were probably busy doing some dumb bookhorse stuff and didn't want to be bothered. I mean, it's not the first time you would have neglected your friends for your studies."

Twilight, somewhat embarrassed, looked down remorsefully, "You're right. I should have been a better friend."

Rainbow tried to cheer her up, "Hey! If you wanna sit alone in the library and read books all day, that's your problem. As for the fastest flyer in all of Ponyville, well -- you'll never see me reading a dumb book." She paused, "unless it's Daring Do," she paused again, "or about flying -- or the Wonderbolts."

Twilight smiled meekly.

After getting back to Ponyville and updating Rainbow on the entirety of the situation involving the remaining two missing ponies, Twilight stepped forward saying, "All right, I guess that means Fluttershy is next!"

Rarity and Pinkie looked at each other -- then sympathetically at Twilight.

Rainbow Dash interjected, "Woohoo! We've got some rescuing to do!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, doing a mid-air flip without knocking a single book even slightly out of place.

Twilight continued, "now if I were Fluttershy, where would I go?" Twilight thought aloud to herself.

Rarity spoke up understandingly as she trotted over to Twilight, "I'm sorry to have to be the one to say this dear, but we already know exactly where Applejack is. Shouldn't we go get her first? I'm sure it won't take long."

Twilight blushed, looking down, shyly scraping a hoof against the floorboard -- almost in the same way Fluttershy might if she were feeling a little shy. "No, you're right. That's clearly the most logical thing to do. I'm sorry." Rarity smiled, and Twilight continued more inclusively, "if we're five strong, we'll be able to cover more ground and find Fluttershy faster."

"So, Applejack." Twilight paused. "This should be a breeze. Applejack would never leave her family for long. And once she sees us, her best friends, she won't be able to help but come back to Ponyville with us straightaway!" Twilight theorized, perhaps a little bit too idealistically.

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Chapter 4: Applejack
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The ponies headed over to Cherry Jubilee's, where as expected, they found Applejack working on a cherry conveyor belt. "Hello, Applejack!" Twilight Sparkle addressed her. "I'm sorry I was a bad friend. Come back to Ponyville with us?" she hopefully inquired.

The other three ponies mirrored Twilight's expression, awaiting Applejack's reply. Applejack just shook her head, focusing again on her work. "Come on now, Applejack. We know you really don't want to work here, and your family misses you. Let's go!" Twilight tried to encourage her.

Stopping the conveyor belt and setting down her work, Applejack trotted over to Twilight. "I'm sorry, Twi. It's different this time. And it doesn't have anything at all to do with our friendship."

"Different... how?" Twilight asked curiously.

"Working here at Cherry Jubilee's, I get three times my pay working in the old apple orchard, and it's frankly less strenuous. Sure, I thought about just inheritin' the farm and living my life out there, but with the way the Equestrian economy is nowadays, I think I'm better off just sellin'."

Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity all gasped. Rainbow Dash just floated there in disbelief, stunned beyond words. "Sell the apple farm? But what about your family?" Twilight asked earnestly. "Won't you miss them?"

Applejack thought for a moment, "Yeah, I reckon I will. But that doesn't change the facts. And the facts are the facts."

"So what do we do now? Give up?" Rainbow Dash asked defeatedly.

"I suppose not all of us weren't going to be absolutely miserable without the others," Rarity replied resignedly but somewhat dramatically.

Pinkie licked the water out of her eyes.

"No. I won't accept that," Twilight Sparkle announced.

Applejack looked surprised. "I'm sorry Twi, but that there's the honest truth."

"But it's not!" Twilight Sparkle proclaimed. Everypony was shocked at the implication of Twilight's statement.

"Are you callin' me a liar?" Applejack glared at Twilight, a flicker of anger in her eyes.

Twilight softened. "Well, no. Not exactly." Applejack relaxed a bit. Then Twilight continued, "But yes --kinda." Applejack was suspicious.

Twilight began to pace. "What was it that defeated Nightmare Moon? Our friendship. What was it that defeated Discord, turning him into stone? Our friendship. Whatever you're going through right now, Applejack, I have no doubt that our friendship can defeat that too," Twilight Sparkle said earnestly as she stopped and awaited Applejack's reply.

"I appreciate the kind words, but it's not that easy, Twi," Applejack responded.

"Why not? We'll do anything we can to help," Twilight said in turn.

Applejack sighed. "The Flim Flam brothers have finally run us out of business, Twi. Whether I like it or not, the farm's gonna have to be sold eventually. It's simple economics. We already thought of everything, so don't you go proposing all kinds of plans and strategies or nothin' -- there's no other choice." Applejack paused briefly, taking a breath before continuing, "I thought I'd come out here to get a head start on my new life -- maybe even earn enough to keep the farm afloat for at least a little longer -- but as for savin' the farm? It just ain't happenin'."

"No. We can solve this. Come back to Ponyville with us. Let us help you," Twilight replied empathetically.

"Yeah! We can do it!" Pinkie said excitedly, jumping up and down. The other ponies smiled reassuringly.

Seeing her friends' smiling faces and hearing their encouraging words, Applejack found herself unable to mount a defense. After a long pause, she replied, "You know what, Twi? Maybe you're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

Applejack's friends breathed a sigh of relief.

"Aww. Not again!?" Cherry Jubilee said, exasperated, as she saw her best worker, Applejack, leaving once again with her friends.

Back in Ponyville, Applejack's friends started work on a detailed plan to save Applejack's farm. After several hours of study and research, Twilight announced that while it could be done, it was going to require everypony's help -- and out of the group of six friends, there was still one more pony left to find. Twilight continued, "...which means we just need to find..." she hesitated.

"Fluttershy." Rarity spoke up before Twilight could finish. Twilight looked up in surprise. Rarity just smiled knowingly. Twilight blushed a bit. Pinkie looked confused, while Rainbow wasn't even listening -- too absorbed in stretching her wing muscles for the coming journey. Applejack, suspicious about what may have been going on between Twilight and Fluttershy, seemed to be about to say something but at the last moment turned towards Pinkie and said something else.

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Chapter 5: Mare
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"So... she just vanished?" Applejack skeptically asked Pinkie Pie about Fluttershy again.

"Yeah, like... *Poof!*" was Pinkie's animated reply.

Twilight Sparkle, a bit more alarmed than you would expect for such a logical unicorn, turned towards Pinkie for clarification, saying, "but you told me she just wasn't at her house the last time you checked."

Pinkie thought for a second before replying joyfully, "oh yeah, that too!" She giggled.

Twilight just rolled her eyes.

"Well, knowing Fluttershy, she couldn't have gone far," Applejack deduced.

The ponies headed to Fluttershy's cottage, searching it and the surrounding area, turning up nothing. They couldn't even find one of Fluttershy's animal friends to help give them directions (not that any of them could speak squirrel, anyways).

"You don't think she went in there?" Rarity asked hesitantly, gesturing towards the Everfree Forest.

The other ponies shook their heads.

"I-I don't know..." Twilight cautiously replied. "I guess it couldn't hurt to search in there at least a little bit while it's still daylight out," she said, looking up at the sun. Then she tentatively continued, "I mean, unless any of you have any better ideas..."

After a brief pause, "...it's still creepy -- even in the daytime," Rainbow Dash replied, calmly flapping a little above the others. Following Rainbow Dash's lead, the Mane 6-minus-one took their first steps into the forest where both the weather changes and the trees lose their leaves all on their own.

"Fluttershy. Fluttershy? Fluttershy!" The group of ponies called out as they cautiously traversed the eclectic forest.

"Hi there!" They heard a cheerful voice say from somewhere nearby. A nearby bush wiggled. A cute, soft-spoken, light-green little pegasus marefilly with a black mane popped out. A little spooked, the group of ponies jumped.

"Oh, uhm.... hello there," Twilight said, "how are you?" The little mare just sat down on its haunches, stuck out its tongue, and blinked. Twilight awkwardly looked over at her friends who returned the questioning look. "So, are you out on a hike? Do you live around here?" Twilight asked, trying to keep the conversation going. But the cute green pegasus pony just blinked and turned, trotting deeper into the forest.

The ponies looked at each other, each seeming to subconsciously question the others about if they should follow after them or not. Twilight looked up at the sun. If they were going to follow this mare, they had better make it quick. "Wait!" Twilight called out, chasing after the mare -- her furry friends following close behind.

As the ponies chased after the mysterious mare, they found themselves being drawn deeper into the Everfree Forest. And the deeper they went into the forest, the less light there was -- even at a time like high noon (when the sun was usually at its highest). But as it was already well-past high noon -- past 3:10 even, it got so dark that Twilight needed to use her horn to cast a light spell to aid in sight. Rarity also helped. Aware of the danger of traversing the Everfree at night (which it pretty much now was), the ponies moved slowly and stayed close, at least some part of their clothes or body in frequent contact with each other's, led onward by the little mare's antics.

In one moment, the cute mare would be nowhere to be found. In the next moment, however, they would be popping out of a nearby bush or from behind a tree, inadvertently (it seemed) frightening

everypony in the vicinity. After seeing their reactions, the cute mare would just giggle to herself, quickly disappearing once again.

Studying the mare's movements and expressions carefully, Twilight thought she noticed a loneliness behind the giggle that she couldn't quite place. "Oh, I love guessing games!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed as the cute mare popped out of a bush for the umpteenth time before promptly disappearing back into the darkness.

Rainbow just groaned, after having failed to catch the sly little filly on the first several attempts and almost slamming into a tree -- not to mention the twigs she had gotten in her mane on the last attempt (not that she always dressed in style or anything). Rarity seemed to be keeping her composure pretty well, while Applejack was just focused on taking one step at a time. Twilight wasn't sure what it was about the little mare that made her feel this way, but she couldn't help but find the green little mare and their antics not only cute but even somewhat endearing.

Finally, deep enough into the forest that nopony could even tell the time of day anymore, the mysterious mare stopped in front of them. Hesitantly, Twilight asked, "is this your home?" The mysterious light-green mare happily nodded, disappearing into the cave in front of them. "Well, girls..." Twilight said, looking around at her friends. They all looked nervous. Twilight was nervous. They followed the mare into the cave.

The cave was a simple place. All of the essentials seemed to be accounted for, and the mare didn't seem to lack anything. The ponies watched as the mare shuffled about, preparing her home for her guests. A lone squirrel helped with setting up the coffee table, receiving a yummy munchy vegetable from the little mare in return as a thank-you. Finally, everything was ready, and tea was served. Neither the green mare nor the Mane 6-minus-one had said a word since their arrival. After the ponies were well-situated, Twilight opened conversation with, "thank you for the tea. It's delicious."

The green mare just nodded. A few minutes passed. Rarity, trying to think of a compliment for her host, said, "I love the décor." The green mare just nodded. A few minutes passed.

Applejack paid a compliment saying, "good construction," as she tested the coffee table, which was little more than a well-chosen sturdy log picked up from the forest, with her hoof. The green mare just nodded. A few minutes passed.

Rainbow, having been the first to finish her cup of tea and feeling a little bit put on the spot, blurted out, "This chair is just absolutely killing my back." Her friends' eyes moved from her rock chair to Rainbow Dash herself; Rainbow could feel her friends' eyes on her almost at once. She recovered with, "...great training for the Wonderbolts! Eheheh." As she felt her friends avert their gaze, Rainbow wiped the sweat from her brow. The green mare just blinked.

Rarity, having about run out of her cup of tea and trying to get a conversation started before seconds were offered (if they were offered at all), sensed that they may be running out of time. She inquired soon after with, "so, wonderful place. How long have you lived here?" The green mare just nodded.

Rainbow Dash followed up innocently right after with, "don't you like the sun?" The green mare seemed confused.

"This is a lovely cave!" Twilight rebounded. The green mare smiled cutely.

"Have you seen a little yellow pegasus pony about this tall with a pink mane?" Applejack asked as she indicated Fluttershy's height with her hoofs. The green mare's expression changed to one of sadness. She put her teacup down, ushering her guests towards the door, before disappearing deeper into the cave.

"Now why'd you have to go and ask that?" Rarity accused Applejack. "What did I do?" Applejack retorted.

"You clearly upset her," was Rarity's adamant reply.

"Well, I was only trying to find out where Fluttershy is -- you know, our best friend who has been missing for months," Applejack challenged Rarity.

"Girls!" Twilight interjected. We're never going to find her by arguing. Let's just go home tonight and try again tomorrow. As the ponies prepared to leave the cave, they heard a voice coming from deeper inside. Twilight shushed everypony to see if they could make out what the voice was saying.

Twilight quickly cast a simple sound amplification spell to help her hear. She heard the voice say, "well done, my little pony. You accomplished so much today! I should give you a reward. Drink up!"

gulp gulp gulp "Ahh..."

A brief flash of light could be seen from deep within the cave followed by a reverberating flash from Twilight's horn. Twilight responded with a scream, collapsing suddenly onto the ground. Her pony friends rushed to her aid. Thankfully, she appeared to be just passed out.

"Well, well, well... If it isn't My Little Ponies." The ponies, now suddenly feeling very little and all alone this deep in the Everfree Forest at night and in a cave, too, no less -- heard a voice approaching from the shadows.

"Wait -- I know that voice. That's..." Applejack paused before continuing. Then, all the ponies said at once as his figure stepped into the light, "Discord!?"

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Chapter 6: Fluttershy
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"But -- That's impossible. We turned you into stone!" Rainbow Dash challenged Discord, who mocked them by pretending to yawn and stretch out his very flexible limbs.

Then Discord laughed and said, "yes, you did. Surprise! But now I'm not. Strange how that works, huh?" Discord taunted them as he slinked around the ponies.

"How did you get out?" Applejack challenged him. "And what did you do to Twi?"

"Oh, I have my ways," Discord replied. "Oh, her?" Discord asked, disinterestedly, glancing over at Twilight, who was lying on the ground on her side, unmoving. "She did that to herself," Discord

replied, then adding emphasis and slinking up behind Pinkie, "...the consequences of using magic to listen in on private conversation."

"Grrr...! You better make her better! ...or else, Mr.!" Pinkie declared.

"Pffft! Oh, your dumb bookhorse is fine. She just needs a little time. --Time you don't have, I'm afraid." Discord snapped his fingers, metal cages appearing around each of the ponies. They are bound to the cages by iron collars chained to the cages. Discord laughed. "Ah, much better! I do like the G1 aesthetic - it suits you ponies so much better. Maybe you can ask your friend, 'Mee-gan' was it -- to save you?" Discord smirked.

"You better let us out of here!" Rainbow threatened.

"Now why would I do a thing like that? The fans deserve this." Discord continued, "besides, you just look so adorable all chained and helpless in this little collar of yours," he said as he slinked over to and around Rainbow's cage, inserting an arm inside and wrapping a paw around her, pulling her somewhat roughly, as Discord thought it seemed to suit a pegasus pony as tough as her, up against the bars.

"Oof!" was Rainbow's reply, as her fur came into contact with the cold iron bars of the cage, her fur partially enveloping them as the iron bars parted her fur, working their way up against her naked skin. She eyed him suspiciously.

Sensing danger, Rarity shouted, "Rainbow! Be careful!" Rainbow nodded, readying herself for any trick Discord might try to pull on her.

"Oh, don't listen to her--" Discord said to anypony who might be listening (all except Twilight were), waving his talons in the air as if to brush Rarity's semblance away but not doing so (although he could have done so very easily by summoning a cloud or even obscuring her voice), before continuing "--she's no fun." Discord then returned his attention to Rainbow, who was now even more suspicious. She studied Discord's movements carefully. With his free arm, Discord used a talon to clink and tug on Rainbow's collar; pulling back a little, she eyed it fixatedly. Several moments later, Discord playfully booped her.

"Boop!" Discord uttered. Rainbow Dash tried to follow the talon all the way to the boop but in so doing, failed to maintain her tough expression.

Almost immediately after, he pinched and tugged on Rainbow's cheeks. "Kawaii!" Discord unexpectedly emoted animatedly. Rainbow was caught off-guard. Momentarily forgetting this was Discord she was dealing with, she considered only how vulnerable she must have looked the moment she had been booped -- a time when she was supposed to have been looking her toughest. Her ears perked up, wings bristling outward ever-so-slightly. Then, realizing what had just happened, and that everypony had seen it, Rainbow's gaze quickly turned down, her ears drooped, and she blushed a little. Almost imperceptibly, her tail flicked.

"Wh-wha!?" Pinkie, who hadn't taken her eyes off Discord for one moment since he appeared, faltered and reacted, shaking her head and doing a double-take, trying to process what had happened.

Discord glanced over briefly at Pinkie and then back to Rainbow, who now somehow seemed to have been the one turned to stone. Satisfied with himself, he smiled mischievously, snaking his way over to Applejack.

"What are you gonna do to Equestria?" Applejack demanded.

"Oh, I don't know... a little of this. A little of that," Discord replied nonchalantly. Applejack's eyes narrowed. "You better not do to them what you just did to Rainbow!"

"Why, Applejack? Jealous?" was Discord's curt reply. The effect was exactly as Discord had intended -- Applejack had been stunned into disbelief.

Pinkie Pie, having recovered, retorted: "Oh, no you don't Mr.! Once our friend Fluttershy finds out about this, she'll... she'll..." She shook her hoof.

"Fluttershy!?" Discord laughed. "Oh, you should see Fluttershy now!" Discord snapped his talons and the green little filly with the black mane they had met earlier appeared before the ponies. She seemed a little confused at first, but after orienting herself and recognizing Discord, she trotted the couple of steps over, snuggling up to him.

Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack didn't know how to respond.

"Don't tell me..." Applejack was able to muster. Discord laughed.

"Fluttershy!?" All the ponies said in unison. Upon hearing the name, the green mare turned to look at them.

"Bingo!" Discord exclaimed.

"You all have your little friend Fluttershy here to thank for your current predicament -- or as I like to call her, 'Shutterfly,'" Discord affectionately replied. Then he continued, "if it wasn't for her kindness, I would have never gotten out of that dreadful stone prison." Then, turning to Fluttershy, he questioned her lovingly, "Isn't that right, my little mare?"

Fluttershy looked up at Discord, her expression a curious mixture of loneliness and longing. As if to agree, she gratefully accepted a boop and a nuzzle from him before once again turning to look at her friends -- seeing them but not really recognizing them.

The other ponies were aghast.

"And with Fluttershy out of the way, you can never again use the Elements of Harmony against me. I always knew this one would be your undoing," Discord said, indicating Fluttershy. Fluttershy looked down, seemingly in her own little pony world, not really understanding what was going on around her. "I'm so grateful you decided to become friends with her so that you could abandon her -- so that she could become good friends with me--," Discord continued, pulling Fluttershy close and hugging affectionately into her, a gesture which Fluttershy readily returned.

"Fluttershy!" Rarity implored, trying to reach her. "You must see through Discord's deception! Don't you see he's only using you? He doesn't really care about you at all!"

The green mare's blank expression seemed to waver a little. Discord, recognizing the potential danger of allowing the conversation to continue much longer teleported over to Rarity, his figure imbued with a mock anger. "Oh, you mean like how you didn't just use Fluttershy as a fashion guinea pig, who once you were through with, up and left to Canterlot to profit off all her hard work? You know she gets stagefright."

Rarity was speechless.

Rainbow blurted out, "Wait -- how did you know all that?"

Discord, recognizing his checkmate, slinked back over to Fluttershy, wrapping a paw around her, continuing, "My good friend Fluttershy here, whom I would never so selfishly abandon or make her do anything she doesn't want, told me all about it."

The green little filly looked down sadly.

"...Well, Tata! So long!" Discord paused. "I have chaos to wreak. So sorry about your precious little Twi, by the way -- I do hope she gets better," Discord said as he snuggled up against the fainted Twilight's face. "...so sorry she couldn't save the day with her super-powerful magic and all that like she always does." Discord laconically flicked her horn before exiting the cave and into the Everfree Forest. Fluttershy followed a little ways, and after looking briefly back at her former friends, continued following behind.

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Chapter 7: Friendship
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It took several seconds for the ponies to begin to process everything that just happened. Then Applejack, who was in the cage next to Twilight Sparkle, exclaimed, "Twilight! Twilight!" slapping her cheeks gently, trying with her hoofs to wake her up.

"Uh... huh? What happened?" Twilight said. The ponies seemed relieved. "Oh my gosh! You will never believe what I heard. I think the green filly is Fluttershy! Somepony just hypnotized her with a potion, causing her color to change." Twilight exclaimed.

"We know, Twilight. Discord is the one behind it," Applejack replied.

"Discord!? But how?" Twilight asked, incredulous.

Applejack continued, "we don't know. All we know is that the stone that the Elements of Harmony encased him in wasn't enough. He escaped. We weren't enough, Twi." Applejack said sadly, emphasizing the word, "we."

Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack all sadly looked down, seemingly in agreement.

Twilight gasped before making a recovery. "No. You were enough. You all were," she said, looking around at her friends. "I was the one who wasn't enough. When you all went on that vacation, I was so obsessed with reading the next newly-unearthed volume of ancient pony philosophy that I didn't have

any time to spend with you sprys [editor's note: "spry" instead of "guy," as in "parasprite" or "paraspryte"] -- my closest friends. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault." Teardrops began to fall from Twilight's eyes.

"No, Twilight. It was my fault," Applejack replied. "I was so preoccupied with the finances of the farm that when I saw you obsessed with your books and everypony having such a good time, I thought I'd just let y'all be - better that you enjoy reading among your friends, Twi, and you all having the best vacation ever while you still can than me trying to get you to do something you didn't want to do anyways. I should have been a big enough pony to have seen that's not what you really thought -- and that that's certainly not what you would have wanted -- and asked for your help." Looking up and placing her hat over her heart with her hoof, Applejack looked around at her friends and then said, "All of your help."

"No, Applejack. I'm afraid it was my fault," Rarity retorted. "I shouldn't have assumed that Twilight had our best interests in mind when I saw her reading her books." Then turning to Twilight, Rarity continued, "I made an idol out of you, my dearest Twilight. I'm sorry."

"Actually," Rainbow replied, "it was my fault, Rarity. I was so obsessed with the Wonderbolts that I didn't even stop to consider what kind of training it might take to even become a Wonderbolt. I just assumed that if it was hard it would somehow do the trick. I was wrong." She looked down.

"Actually, if you want to blame anyone for Fluttershy hating us and never wanting to see us again, blame me!" Pinkie said sullenly-yet-excitedly in only the way that Pinkie can.

"You, Pinkie?" Twilight asked, skeptically.

"Yeah! If I hadn't given Derpy exactly three cupcakes on the Saturday after that amazing vacation as a thank-you for being the best mail-deliverer ever instead of two, everything would have been perfect! It's all my fault we're all going to have to live on the moon and will never see Equestria, Fluttershy, or even chocolate rain ever again," Pinkie admitted solemnly.

Upon hearing the mention of chocolate rain, Rainbow, remembering the tough time that she had had with the cotton candy clouds that had produced said chocolate rain the last time Discord had been unturned from stone, grimaced.

Twilight smiled to herself. "Well, whoever's fault it was, we still need to find a way out of here," she said, giggling.

"Huh? Did I say something funny?" Pinkie asked, confused.

"No, Pinkie," Twilight replied reassuringly. I'm just glad to have you all as my friends. The ponies understood, and Twilight Sparkle's horn began to glow. Twilight's horn now glowing brightly, Twilight found herself free of her iron collar and chain, her cage shattering into dust beneath her as she began floating upwards. A ribbon-shaped light began to become visible, connecting each pony to the other to Twilight, and her friends' bonds were broken -- their cages too -- crashing into shambles and dissolving into dust beneath them as all the ponies floated upwards towards the cave ceiling, their ascent slowing and stopping midway. Twilight's horn then flickered and dimmed, the ponies finding themselves falling -- tumbling into the dust of the cave floor once again, albeit this time, free.

"What happened?" Applejack asked, unsure, standing up; Pinkie, in apparent dismay over the whole ordeal, was left rubbing her rump with her hoof. She flexed her tail, making sure it still worked. Rarity dusted herself off, while Rainbow stamped into the ground to make sure her hoofs hadn't gotten cracked. Twilight stood up and looked around.

"I'm not entirely sure. But what I do know is that we need to find Fluttershy," Twilight declared. The other ponies nodded in agreement. Determined, the Mane 6-minus-one rushed out of the cave and into the Everfree Forest -- it still being the middle of the night -- making their way towards Ponyville. They were guided only by the light of Twilight and Rarity's horns.

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Chapter 8: Everfree After Dark

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Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack all followed Twilight Sparkle and Rarity through the darkness, guided by the light of their horns. Although the ponies would have liked to have run full-speed ahead (as though they were cartoon characters with an infinite energy source), as they had just spent that early evening and well into the evening hiking all the way out to the deepest parts of the everfree over tangled roots and vines, thick trees, and briar bushes chasing down the green little mare that, if Discord was to be believed (and who could completely trust Discord, anyway?), was actually Fluttershy,, having used muscles that none of them -- even Applejack and Rainbow -- would have used in a typical day in Ponyville, everypony was already exhausted. This, combined with the fact that they were now traversing the Everfree at night (to get back to Ponyville and save Fluttershy and Equestria before Discord could do any more harm to either their relationship with Fluttershy or the other ponies of Equestria), made things even more difficult. Traversing the Everfree at night was nothing like they imagined it to be -- something the little ponies discovered very early on.

Because Applejack and Rainbow were the most physical ponies, Applejack being a farmpony and Rainbow an athlete, they had the most stamina. Rainbow (no wings for now) followed behind Rarity, who followed just a nose behind Twilight -- keeping on lookout for danger from the sides --, while Applejack took up the rear-guard position, confident that she could buck away any approaching danger right-quick. Pinkie, the most unreliable and random of the group -- great for parties but not so much for traversing the Everfree at night -- was confined to the middle, ...both for her own safety and the safety of the other ponies.

Still only a short distance from the cave, Twilight seemed to lose her bearings. She stopped suddenly, looking from side to side. Rarity, after passing her a few hoofbeats, took notice and stopped also. Rainbow, Pinkie, and Applejack followed suit. "Why'd we stop?" Rainbow was the first to ask.

Applejack, the rear-guard, thought she had heard something in the bushes and chimed in, "we have to keep moving or we're going to be manticofood out here for sure." The ponies shuddered at the thought.

"Twilight?" Rarity approached gently.

"I don't know where we are," was the Stoic reply from Twilight's lips.

"What do you mean you don't know where we are?" Rainbow Dash blurted out, somewhat annoyed. "When we first came into the forest, you said you were remembering everything -- that it was no

problem at all for your big, nerdy brain and to not worry about it -- at all." (The last "at all" having been added as a result of Rainbow's impatience.)

"I know where we are!" Pinkie said, jumping up and down, pointing at each of her friends in synch with her jumps, naming them off one by one. "Rainbow! Rarity! Twilight! Applejack!" Then pointing to herself she said, "Pinkie!" As she came down from the last jump, she stopped. Hesitating, she said, "Oh no! I don't know where I am, either!"

The other ponies relaxed a little while Applejack comforted Pinkie.

Everypony looked to Twilight for an explanation.

"I just don't understand. According to my memory, this should be the right way," she said, indicating with her hoof the bottom stone wall of a cliff. We shouldn't have to make a right turn here to avoid anything." Pausing, she continued, "We can't take another hoofstep until we figure this out."

Rarity retorted, "and in the meantime, we might end up as a manticore's midnight snack."

"Oh, don't be silly," Twilight shot back. "Manticores only attack ponies if the manticore is in distress. I told you ponies before, aside from not being able to see as well, the Everfree at night is not that much different from the Everfree during the day. You're all over-reacting," she brushed her friends' concerns aside.

Twilight trotted the few steps over to the bottom of the cliff face and looked up as far as the light from her horn would allow. She tapped the surface to investigate its properties. After what seemed like forever, Twilight had finished conducting her numerous tests. She pondered, "Hmm... that's odd."

The other ponies, looking up from their friendly game of hoofs and horseshoes, leaned forward in anticipation, "What?"

Twilight replied, "it just seems like an ordinary cliff-face to me."

Rainbow let out an exasperated sigh. "Alright, I'll tell you what's going on here. Twilight here is just afraid of the dark. Come on everypony, follow me; I remember the way! Rarity, I'm gonna need your horn." Rainbow flapped a little ways up above the other ponies.

As the other ponies began to get up to follow their newly self-appointed leader, Twilight pleaded, "Wait! I don't think it's safe. Let's just follow the path we took to get here back to the cave and wait until morning. We'll at least be able to see by the amount of light filtering through the trees if we're going the right way. We haven't gone very far."

Reluctantly, Rainbow was able to be talked down, although she continued lazily flapping, finally agreeing to Twilight's plan.

As the little ponies began to retrace their steps back towards the cave to set up camp for the night, the light spells that Twilight and Rarity had cast using their horns suddenly extinguished. The ponies screamed -- well, all except for Pinkie Pie, who just laughed.

"Hey, who turned out the lights?" Pinkie giggled.

Rarity and Twilight both tried to use magic to cast a light spell. Twilight tried to cast other spells, as well. But it was no use.

Now in complete darkness deep within the Everfree Forest, Twilight announced, "I figured it out! Magic must not work this deep within the Everfree Forest at night! --I don't remember reading *that* in any of my books."

"Well, that's great, Twi -- I'm glad you got everything figured out. But now how do we get back to camp?" Applejack asked.

*Shhtck! shhtck! shhtck!"

"Uh... what's that sound?" Applejack asked.

"I'm starting a fire," Rarity replied. "A lady always comes prepared for any situation."

"Shhtck! shhtck!" A few sparks could be seen.

"That will take forever!" Rainbow replied, flapping over to where she heard Rarity's voice and saw the sparks, accidentally bumping into her.

"Oof!" Rarity responded. "Well, excuse you."

"Here, let me try," Rainbow insisted, grasping at the flint.

"No, Rainbow -- this is something that requires careful precision -- something you're clearly lacking in, no offense," Rarity retorted.

"Just let me try!" Rainbow said, accidentally putting a hoof in Rarity's mane.

"Eeek! Rainbow. What are you doing? Stop messing up my mane," Rarity demanded.

"Sorry! I just wanted to --"

Rarity let out an exasperated shriek as Rainbow crashed on top of her. Rarity was laying on her back up against a hard rock, with Rainbow having fallen on top of her. The flint tumbled away.

"Rainbow! Rarity! Stop fighting!" Twilight implored. But exhausted, in a strange forest, and in complete darkness, even though their friends were only a few feet next to them, they felt hoofmeters away. Not wanting to stumble and suffer the same fate as their friends, all Twilight and Applejack could do was listen. Pinkie just sat there, staring into the darkness, listening to her friends' formless voices in front of her.

"Stop that! Get off of me," Rarity said as she writhed beneath Rainbow, trying to gain a hoofing to get out from under Rainbow but being unable to do so due to the rocky ground and briars Rarity kept putting her hoofs into. Rainbow was having just as difficult a time getting off of Rarity, manely because Rarity kept shifting her weight such that just when Rainbow felt she was about to rebalance herself -- she, too, ended up accidentally putting a hoof in a briar. Of course, it didn't help that Rainbow's wings

had somehow gotten tangled up in the overhead vines, as well. "I'm getting all dirty," Rarity complained. At last, she resigned herself. "Fine, Rainbow. If you want to try and start a fire with my flint that badly, go ahead. I won't try and stop you."

Although it had been a completely logical thing to say in a situation such as this, something about the way Rarity had phrased it caused Rainbow to blush. Suddenly acutely aware of what this might have looked like to her friends had it happened anywhere other than in complete darkness, Rainbow panicked -- as though they could see everything. "What!? No -- I don't. What are you even talking about? You're the one who kept moving."

Rarity, caught off-guard by Rainbow's unfiltered and mildly incoherent response, realized what all of this unanticipated close contact must have done to Rainbow. And after pausing a moment longer -- to herself, as well.

Their exhausted pony bodies still pressed tightly against one another -- and perhaps somehow even moreso now -- Rarity regained her composure. "I'm sorry, Rainbow. I should have trusted you and given you a chance to light a fire so we could get back to the camp."

Rainbow, realizing her error, replied, "no -- it was your flint, afterall. I should have just let you keep going. Here, let me help you find it," Rainbow insisted, smiling gently. As Rainbow regained her hoofing and began to stand up, she noticed she couldn't get more than what must have been an inch or two above Rarity. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?" Rarity inquired.

"My wings are stuck," Rainbow replied. "Could somepony lend me and Rarity a hoof?"

A few moments passed.

"Anypony there?" Rainbow asked again.

"Sheesh. We're comin'. Be patient," Applejack replied, sounding like she had something in her mouth. Twilight, Pinkie, and Applejack had formed a pony chain to try and get over to Rarity and Rainbow without ensnaring themselves, too, in the process. Twilight led the way, Pinkie (who had a hold of Twilight's tail in her mouth) followed -- while Applejack held firmly in her mouth, Pinkie's tail.

"Rainbow, where are you?" Twilight asked, as she neared where she thought Rainbow must be.

"I'm right here," Rainbow replied.

Relieved, Twilight reached out to where Rainbow's wings should be. "Oh, my you're really tied up, aren't you?" Twilight said, somewhat concerned.

"Mumpphmrrrmuphmrump!" Pinkie said, giggling.

As Twilight tried to untangle Rainbow's wings from the vines, she noticed them getting tighter around her hoof. "That's strange," Twilight said, pulling back her hoof. Then she noticed that unbeknownst to her, another vine had already somehow worked its way higher up around the same foreleg, preventing her from completely withdrawing her hoof. "Oh, my..." When Twilight tried to take a step back, she

found herself being pulled in all the more strongly. "Uh... girls?" She said, looking back at where she might have seen Pinkie and Applejack had there been any light out.

"Is something the matter, Twi?" Applejack asked.

"Well, it seems I'm a little ...stuck," Twilight replied.

"Stuck? What do you want us to do?" Applejack asked, concernedly.

Twilight, remaining calm, replied, "it should be a straight path back to the cave. Go in the direction opposite my voice. See if Fluttershy or Discord left anything behind that could help get us free. And hurry!"

"If this was the extent of Twilight's plan," Applejack thought to herself, "we must be in serious trouble."

Applejack, releasing Pinkie's tail and assuming a mounting position, turned away from her. Over her shoulder, she said, "get on. We'll be faster if you ride." As Pinkie must have been about ready to hop on Applejack's back, Rarity shouted, "Wait!" The ponies turned towards the sound of her voice. "I want to try something." Rarity, still fur-to-fur with Rainbow Dash on top, took what liberty the vines still afforded their bodies to take Rainbow's head in her hooves, kissing it.

Rainbow, shocked, resisted. "Rarity! This is no time for --" The vines wrapping Rainbow constricted her even tighter, to where she couldn't move even a hoof.

"Shhh..." Rarity comforted her, finally finding Rainbow's lips. Blushing, Rainbow found herself returning the kiss.

"Rainbow? Rarity? What are you two doing!?" Twilight asked concernedly. But all that could be heard was the sound of what must have been their smooching.

The more they kissed, the looser the vines seemed to get, until Rarity was able to get a hoof free enough to trace Rainbow's furry ponychest to down over her ponynavel to the edge of the curve of her small, usually unnoticeable, waterdroplets located between her inner flanks. Spellbound, Rainbow protested meekly only to save face in case she happened to ever be questioned about these happenings in the future. Rarity understood, continuing to the tip-tiptails, rubbing them in gentle hooflets, as Rainbow squirmed in her prison of vines. To hold her attention, Rarity kissed Rainbow even more deeply.

The other ponies were too shocked to say anything. Some strange muffled sounds, however, could occasionally be heard by Twilight.

Then Rainbow, forgetting how close her friends were to her for a moment, let out a moan that would have embarrassed Princess Celestia herself.

"Rarity must have finally touched her ...there," Twilight thought to herself, which she did likewise. Despite being very careful, a quiet, telling moan escaped from her lips.

"Uh... what is happening?" Applejack questioned dumbfoundedly anypony who might still speak Ponyish.

Pinkie, having already figured it out -- perhaps even since Celestia-knows-when -- took Applejack's cute pony face in her hooves, giving her a big, warm hug and ponynuzzle and boop. Applejack, unexpectedly overcome by what she suspected Rarity, Rainbow, and Twilight to be doing, blushed and couldn't help but nuzzle back, which somehow between the two of them, turned into a great big ponykiss.

The vines around Rainbow loosened substantially. She found herself able to stand on all four hooves -- and Rarity likewise, if she had pleased to do so. "OK, Rainbow," Rarity said contentedly, "we can stop now."

Rainbow, however -- although she understood what Rarity had meant -- namely, that they were now free enough from the vines to step out of them -- replied, "...not until I cross the finish line." Rarity blushed as Rainbow took control, her hoof exploring Rarity's cave for the first time since they had become best friends forever. Rarity, of course, being the lady that she was (and also having always had a thing for Rainbow) gladly returned the gesture.

In the meantime, Twilight continued exploring her own cave alone, the vine that had originally ensnared her having long since retreated. Twilight resisted the pleas from Rainbow to come help Rarity out with Twilight's horn in exchange for Rainbow helping Twilight out. No -- Twilight had another mare in mind that she wasn't willing to forget so easily.

Pinkie and Applejack seemed to be getting along well -- I mean, who wouldn't get along well with the pony who is literally friends with everypony in Ponyville? Applejack, surprisingly, had found herself underneath while Pinkie was on top in the classic "69" position -- surely Pinkie's idea. The two earthponies shared a surprising bond that not even they had realized up to this point.

At last, a piercing shriek by none other than the lady Rarity rang throughout the Everfree Forest followed in turn by a somewhat more masculine one by Rainbow, who had clearly been holding back for Rarity, as good gentleponies do [editor's note: especially ones that would walk 500 miles]. Twilight, who had been waiting for Rainbow, was next; plunging her hoof deep inside her cave, she gasped, "No, Fluttershy -- not there! I'll --" It wasn't until several minutes later that she realized she had said that out loud. She could only pray that nopony would mention it to Fluttershy -- or even herponyself -- ever. Several more minutes passed as Rarity, Rainbow, and Twilight sat in quiet repose, reflecting on the noises coming from Pinkie and Applejack who had not yet finished -- not quite sure if they found it arousing or irritating that they were still going, ...although, the three little fillies really had no room to complain, considering everything that they had just done right next to everyponyelse.

Pinkie, as usual, seemed to be getting a little too excited. Applejack was now the one on top. "Now bite my tail again -- this time like you really mean it!" Pinkie requested. Applejack complied.

"Eep!" Pinkie giggled. "Now, pull really, really hard!"

Applejack complied.

Pinkie, appearing suddenly dissatisfied, yelled, "Harder!" Twilight couldn't hold back a giggle any longer.

"Huh? Who's there? Twi, is that you?" Pinkie inquired frenetically, looking around as her mane swished and created an almost imperceptible sound and breeze.

"Oh, don't mind me. You do you," Twilight replied. "We'll wait," she said knowingly.

Applejack, exhausted, replied, "That's just the thing. She's already been there probably a dozen times already. I don't think she's ever going to stop."

"That's a lie! Three times. It was just three times!" Pinkie corrected her.

"Well, it sounded like a dozen times," Applejack replied defensively.

Pinkie sighed, her complexion -- if anypony could see it -- returning to normal. "Oh, alright. I guess that's enough for now," Pinkie replied resignedly. "It was just so much fun! Wasn't it, Applejack?"

"Y-yeah... um, it was great fun!" Applejack replied, questioningly. Although she had to admit she had thoroughly enjoyed herself, she wondered if she might come to regret it in the future if Pinkie ever decided to unexpectedly get frisky on her again.

"Oh, don't worry your silly little head about me, Applejack! I won't ever force you to do something you don't want to do," Pinkie smiled wryly.

"Eheheh ...of course, Pinkie. I trust you," Applejack replied, realizing that she had been more worried about what she might end up doing to Pinkie rather than what Pinkie might do to her. "I'll have to keep a close eye on myself from now on," Applejack thought to herself. Maybe if Applejack could have seen Pinkie in that moment, Applejack would have felt better -- Pinkie just sat there, looking innocent; in fact, to an outside observer, it would have been entirely plausible that she had pretended the entire thing. But then again, would they have ever done anything remotely like this at all had it not been for the darkness and unique set of circumstances that led up to it?

"Oh, uh..." Twilight began hesitantly, "No pony heard me say that thing that I didn't say did they?"

"You mean all your moaning about the things you wanted Fluttershy to do to you? Of course not," Rainbow sarcastically replied.

Twilight, looking down, blushed a deep red. She was glad that at least no pony had seen it -- or could see her now. Twilight, sitting on her haunches, reached a hoof down between her flanks, feeling her wetness from earlier. Her lavender fur was sticky. As she did so, her horn suddenly lit up bright. Rarity's followed shortly after.

So startled was Twilight by the unexpected exposure that she immediately terminated the light spell, the magic which lighted her horn having had, until now, been repressed by the strong dark energy found only deep within the Everfree Forest. It was after her magic had been recharged through such extraordinary means as had just transpired that the repression barrier was able to be broken and her magical balance restored. But as Rarity hadn't terminated her spell, everypony got a good look at each other. Needless to say, everypony was embarrassed, mumbling excuses and trying to hide the evidence of their misdeeds. Amidst the excuses, Twilight's voice was the last to be heard meekly trailing off in shame "...some kind of everfree species of poison joke," as she looked hopefully to the side that somepony might believe her and then blushing as she looked down at the ground. (And who was to say

it might not have been, at any rate? Stranger things had been known to come out of the Everfree Forest. But the deeds had been done.)

Even Pinkie was a little embarrassed -- although, admittedly and from the looks of it, she probably had more than anyponyelse to be embarrassed about. That was -- all except for Rarity.

"I honestly don't see what all the fuss is about," Rarity said, standing up proudly, her fur matted with unmentionable ponyfluids streaming across her muzzle and chest, down her side and flank, and all over her rear and up under her tail. Somehow, despite such blatant evidence of her own impropriety, she was still able to maintain an air of dignity. Rarity continued, "We're all friends, aren't we? And not just that -- the best of friends. Out of all of Equestria, our friendship alone was enough to stop Discord and save Equestria." The ponies began to stop their mumbling, hiding, and excuse-making. They raised their eyes to their friend Rarity -- hearing her words. Rarity continued, looking lovingly at Rainbow Dash. "Thank you, Rainbow, for giving me that experience. While the circumstances may have been less than ideal, I will, truly, never forget it."

Tears welled up in Rainbow's eyes as she trotted over to Rarity, giving her a gentle nuzzle. "I'm sorry, Rarity. I didn't mean to make excuses. I was just afraid that you would reject me," Rainbow said bluntly.

"Never!" Rarity replied.

Pinkie, beginning to be overwhelmed by the scene, looked towards Applejack, who returned her gaze. Embracing Applejack, Pinkie replied, "that was so amazing!" And she began to cry. Applejack just rolled her eyes at Pinkie's exaggerated antics, embracing her knowingly.

Twilight, feeling more confident than ever, smiled at the pony she had in mind.

Trotting out into the middle of her pony friends, Twilight extended a hoof. The other ponies, following her lead, trotted over as well -- extending their hooves, too. Together, they put their hooves up high.

"Friends forever!" They said in unison.

Exhausted, Twilight shined her horn, leading the way the short distance back to the cave where Fluttershy had been staying with Discord -- where they knew they would be safe for the night. While Twilight worked on putting up a magical protective barrier at the cave's entrance, her pony friends assembled the amenities for the night. After the day's happenings, even Pinkie was in no mood for sleepover games tonight. Finding a spot near Applejack on the comfy cushions they had strategically laid out, she was one of the first to fall into a deep sleep. Twilight, at Rainbow's behest, somehow found herself cuddled up between her and Rarity, across from Pinkie and Applejack, Twilight's hooves gently brushing against Pinkie's as she and her pony friends all soon found themselves fast asleep.

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Chapter 9: Ponyville
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As the ponies began to awaken from their slumber and stretch out, they realized they felt more refreshed and rejuvenated than they had ever felt before. While Twilight Sparkle pressed her pony friends, telling them they were short on time, Rarity headed off to the cave's baths to wash up --

something which she had simply been too exhausted to do the night before. In fact, none of the ponies had bathed since the curious events of the previous day. To save time, they all bathed together -- which despite all that had happened, they were still somewhat embarrassed and hesitant to do. But the lack of space in the baths combined with the urgency of the matter-at-hoof had them focused on efficiency to the detriment of cleanliness. After the ponies were all cleaned up, Twilight used her horn to take down the magical barrier, exposing them once again to the complete darkness of the deep Everfree Forest.

While Twilight calculated that it was actually daylight out, you couldn't tell that this deep within the Everfree. The ponies were still a little ways out before the sun's rays would begin to almost imperceptibly penetrate the thick and magical canopy of the Everfree -- just a little bit further out from those curious happenings of the previous day.

Thankfully, neither Twilight's nor Rarity's light spell failed this time around. And the bottom cliff-face that had been the reason for the delay moving forward to begin with? As Twilight had suspected, even though no visible light penetrated this deep into the forest, it must still be having an effect -- because the bottom cliff-face (which must have been some kind of magical Everfree illusion), which threatened to send them off-course the night before, was nowhere to be found. Everything was proceeding according to plan. Barring any encounters with distressed animals, Twilight expected everything to go smoothly -- at least until they got to Ponyville. Twilight's prediction was correct.

As they neared the entrance to the Everfree Forest from the forest-side and Fluttershy's cottage, Applejack finally felt that it was safe to ask, "so what do you think caused those vines to go after us to begin with?"

Twilight responded, "I've thought about it, and I think they were attracted to our arousal." The other ponies listened. Twilight continued, "remember when Rainbow Dash accidentally fell on top of Rarity and neither of them could get up?"

Applejack nodded. How could she forget?

Twilight said, "although they didn't see it at first, their ponybodies rubbing together caused them to become accidentally aroused, which is what caused the vines to tighten up around them."

Rainbow blushed, while Rarity, smiling sheepishly, glanced over at Rainbow.

"But then how would getting more aroused solve anything? Wouldn't they just get even tighter?" Applejack asked, confused.

"You would think so, right?" Twilight considered. "But I think that the reason they didn't tighten even more was because once they saw how much Rarity and Rainbow actually loved and cared for each other, they were repelled."

Rarity responded, "Indeed. I could tell from the very start that those vines were just in it for the pleasure -- they couldn't stand a chance against true friendship. Once they detected how much Rainbow and I really cared about each other -- they wanted nothing more to do with us. And doing what we did was the only way to show them in a way that they would understand."

Pinkie blurted out, "wow! They must have been really repelled by Twilight; there wasn't a single vine

around her almost the entire time -- she seemed to be having so much fun -- I wish I could have joined in!"

Twilight blushed, wondering how she could have possibly known that given it was completely dark -- "OK, ok! That's enough, Pinkie," she said while stopping and hiding her face.

"Makes sense," Applejack concluded, giving Pinkie a boop.

"Uh, oh! Now you've asked for it!" Pinkie grabbed Applejack by the ear, dragging her towards behind a big tree.

"N-no, Pinkie! Not now! --not ever!" Applejack protested. Pinkie giggled, letting go and hopping back over to the group. "Oh, alright!" She grinned, looking back.

Applejack, finding herself somewhat disappointed, replied... "Well, maybe not never ...just not right this instant," she found herself saying sheepishly. "It's just -- we've got more important things to do right now."

The ponies, having reached the edge of the Everfree Forest, which overlooked the beginnings of Ponyville, stopped in their hoofprints.

The ponies were in such a state of shock that they forgot almost completely about what had transpired in the Everfree Forest the previous night. Houses were floating upside-down, vegetables looked like animals, and animals looked like monsters. Worse -- everything seemed to have a mind of its own, not unlike the Everfree Forest they had just managed to narrowly escape from. Having seen Discord's handiwork before only slightly lessened their surprise and did nothing to change their unease. And of course, there was the chocolate rain as well, which Pinkie Pie didn't hesitate to enjoy a little bit of, having learned the last time Discord came back not to drink too, too much. Looking over the chaotic landscape the little ponies had once been proud to call their home, Discord and the now-green-marefilly Fluttershy were nowhere in sight.

"It looks like we're going to have to split up!" Twilight declared. Twilight's friends looked at her skeptically.

"No offense sugar, but I don't think that's the best idea right now," Applejack replied. The other ponies nodded in agreement.

"Alright, then. We don't split up!" Twilight looked more determined than ever. "We'll do this..." The ponies then simultaneously bumped hooves before saying, "together!"

"D'aww.... how cute," they heard a voice say.

"Who's there!?" Pinkie demanded, readying herself for whom she knew to be Discord.

"Why who else, but your old pal, Discord?" Discord showed himself. The ponies stared him down as he slinked around them, making comments meant to try to evoke a reaction. "How's that little head of yours, Twilight? I hope you didn't hurt it too badly violating my right to privacy." Twilight maintained her composure.

"And what about you, Rarity? Have any big successes in Canterlot, lately?" Seeing that Rarity was unphased, Discord continued over to Applejack, "...unlike Flim and Flam, am I right, Applejack?"

Caught off guard about Discord's implication that he might have had something to do with her farm's financial prospects, Applejack replied, "What do you know about Flim and Flam?"

"Don't let him get to you," Twilight replied steadfastly.

Applejack, remembering that Discord didn't have the slightest qualm about lying or manipulating the truth to create chaos, steadied her gaze. Discord just laughed derisively.

"How about you, Pinkie Pie?" Discord said, slinking over. There's a reason you didn't leave Twilight all alone in Ponyville, isn't there? --A bigger reason than "just friends."

"For Ponyville. I did it for Ponyville," she replied with the utmost sincerity.

A flash of sadness crossed Twilight's eyes as she remembered just how hard she had made it for her friends by shutting them out. Discord, taking note, slinked on over. Discord put on all of the theatrics, "oh, Twilight -- poor little Twilight! Your friends abandoned you, you see? It wasn't your fault," he said as he wrapped a paw around her. "Let your Daddy Discord look after you from now on. Forget these frenemies."

"Is that the lie you told Fluttershy to get her to side with you?" Rainbow accused.

Looking over Rainbow, Discord spotted something unexpected between her hindquarters that he seemed to delight in. "Is that a new hairstyle between your flanks, Rainbow -- or just last night's fun?" Rainbow blushed. While she had tried to get everything from last night out that morning, she had been in a rush and might have forgotten to double-check that she really had. Then, motivated by this new discovery, Discord began to inspect all of the ponies' hindquarters more closely. Pulling out a big magnifying glass, he mumbled to himself as he moved first from Pinkie, who growled and hid herself with her tail, to Twilight, who got knocked forward, putting her flank up in the air, to Rarity, whom he slithered underneath, inspecting closely between her inner thighs, flicking one of her waterdroplets just to be sure (to which she eeped). Lastly, coming to Applejack, he picked her up high off the ground, looking all underneath.

"Yes, yes. I see." Discord cleared his throat before announcing, "you little ponies have been very naughty. Have you been playing with my Mufftrap Vines without me?" Discord smirked.

"Enough of this!" Twilight shouted. "Where's Fluttershy?"

"Oh, hm... what now?" Discord asked, seeming to have nearly forgotten all about her. Counting on his talons, "One, two, three, four five..." Discord paused, "Five... now where is my dear little Shutterfly? I must have put her around here somewhere," Discord looked around, feigning ignorance. "Ah, of course! Here she is," Discord paused. "Fluttershy," he said menacingly, eyes fixed on the group of defiant little ponies.

Fluttershy, still the cute little green fillymare, slinked out from behind Discord, sitting down on her haunches next to him as she held with both hoofs a muffin that she nibbled on. The other ponies weren't sure how to respond.

"Fluttershy!?" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "Is that you? What are you doing with Discord? Come over here with us -- your friends!" The ponies all smiled invitingly.

Fluttershy looked up briefly before disinterestedly returning to nibbling on her muffin.

Discord just laughed. "Don't you ponies get it? Fluttershy is mine now. I can do whatever I want -- whenever I want with her and she doesn't mind at all! You never should have abandoned her. She was so hurt, sad, and confused when I found her all alone in the forest -- lucky for you, I rescued her from that big bad wolf who had been keeping her all to himself in that run-down cottage of his -- or you wouldn't even see her as she is now," Discord smirked.

"But we didn't -- I mean, ...we didn't mean to--" Applejack replied, confused and not knowing what to say.

Twilight, concerned, looked over at the green mare who is Fluttershy. "Fluttershy, is this true? Did Discord save you from the big bad wolf?" Fluttershy gave no response -- other than to try and pick up a nice-sized morsel of her muffin that she had accidentally dropped on the ground.

"Oh, let me help you with that, dear!" Discord rushed to Fluttershy's aid, using the precision and dexterity of his talons to zero-in on the morsel, lifting it to Fluttershy's mouth. While Fluttershy accepted the morsel, as Discord began to hone in on a kiss, Fluttershy didn't seem to even notice -- returning almost immediately back to nibbling on her muffin. Discord, seeming to be genuinely flustered, dejectedly snapped his talons, turning a pretty daisy behind him into a monstrous plant that promptly started chasing down a patch of cotton candy clouds.

"Well, I don't believe word of it!" Rainbow Dash declared as she flew up into Discord's face, staring him down. "Everything you say is a lie!" she said as she pointed her hoof at Discord. Discord just burst out laughing.

"You ponies are hilarious!" Discord belted out. Then he paused before continuing, "Alright, alright -- if you want to know the truth, I'll tell it to you -- it's actually a lot more entertaining. You see, I was just minding my own business, encased in stone deep within the Everfree Forest next to this lovely little tree with whom I had had many an interesting conversation with over the months that had passed since my imprisonment," he said, emphasizing the word "imprisonment." Discord continued, "when all of the sudden, who should I notice passing through but my dear friend Shutterfly. I wasn't lying -- she did look hurt, sad, and confused -- much to my delight. So, I did what any villain who was feeling the same way would do -- I befriended her. Her misdirected kindness towards me broke the seal on my stone prison, I offered her a drink, blah blah blah... -- and the rest is history."

"Then why is she green? She's only that way because you made her drink something!" Applejack accused him. Discord laughed.

Then after a pause, Discord replied, "think of it as extra insurance -- to make sure that no matter what, poor little Shutterfly here will never be hurt by you ponies -- her supposed 'friends' -- who neglected her and treated her so unfairly -- ever again!"

Fluttershy, who had been looking hopefully over at Discord since she heard him say the word "friends," sadly returned her gaze down towards the ground -- continuing to nibble on her muffin.

Discord then appeared behind Rainbow Dash again, "and by the way, in light of these new discoveries," Discord said, as he snapped a photograph of Rainbow's somewhat poorly-washed caked-fur posterior and put it up on an old-timey projector screen for everypony to see, before methodically doing the same for everypony else, "I would say you don't need them anymore, either."

Seemingly disinterested, Fluttershy only glanced up at the screen briefly before returning to nibbling on her muffin.

"But it's not true!" Applejack retorted. "I-I mean, I don't think it is.... is it?" Applejack asked hesitantly, looking around to see what the other ponies thought, not receiving the immediate reassurance she was hoping for. Applejack and the rest of the ponies, having been caught off-guard by Discord's antics and still unsure themselves of what the previous night's activities with each other in the Everfree Forest would mean for their friendship with each other, failed to mount a defense. Discord made sure to make good use of this opening.

"But I didn't mean it. It was an accident.... blah Blah BLAH. Yheck!" Discord mocked Applejack. "You know, you ponies really amuse me. Don't you see? You ponies blew it; Fluttershy is happy with me now, see?"

Discord leaned in to kiss Fluttershy. Fluttershy, the green little filly, was somewhat taken aback at first, but when she saw the projector screen behind him, the evidence of her friends' clopscapades that had gone on without her in minute detail, she became suddenly more compliant. Her eyes darkened a shade as she shyly leaned in for her first kiss with Discord when she let out a light cough instead, ruining the ambiance.

Fluttershy started having a coughing fit. "Oh no!" Discord replied, "have you not been taking your medicine like I told you? You must take it every day on time now, my dear -- or you'll end up suffering these terrible side effects." After snapping his fingers, a flask of green liquid appeared between Discord's talons. Fluttershy looked grateful. He placed them up against Fluttershy's muzzle -- which complied with his offering. "Drink up, my little pony!" Discord said cheerfully as Fluttershy's tongue began to extend outwards to drink down the flask of liquid.

"Now, girls!" Twilight exclaimed. In a moment Twilight zapped the flask, it shattering over the chessboard tile that Discord had replaced the grass with, green liquid spilling out everywhere. Fluttershy, dazed and confused by the sudden explosion (not to mention the coughing), backed slowly away. She collapsed onto a soft grassy spot, her green-colored body and black mane beginning to return to their original colors.

The ponies, gathering around Fluttershy to protect her, stared Discord down. They felt as though they had won.

Discord laughed sarcastically. "Oh no, I'm so scared. Don't you see? That little yellow and pink pegasus pony loves me with or without my special potion. You'll see. You can't stop me." Discord then disappeared.

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Chapter 10: Climax, Resolution ...and Conclusion

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Fluttershy, whose color had almost returned to normal by now, began to stir. The other ponies turned to face her.

"Fluttershy? Fluttershy! Are you OK?" Twilight asked, concerned.

"I... uh.... Where am I?" Fluttershy said, confused.

"Fluttershy! You're OK!" Pinkie Pie jumped in for a hug. Fluttershy, unsure of what exactly was going on, briefly hugged her back, asking, "What happened?"

Twilight, relieved, replied gently, "it's a long story. For now, we need to stop Discord!"

"Oh no. Discord is back? What can we do?" Fluttershy asked, concerned.

"Just follow my lead!" Twilight replied confidently.

With that, the little ponies headed off to Canterlot to retrieve the Elements of Harmony from the vault in Celestia's palace. They made good time, arriving quickly -- well-used to Discord's work by now. Upon arrival in the palace, they saw no sign of the Princesses. They wondered what Discord might have done with them. After obtaining the Elements (which Discord had been unable to touch due to the protective spell around them), they made their way out to the palace labyrinth and demanded an audience with Discord.

"Discord! We know you're behind all of this and can hear us. Come out!" After a few moments had passed and no pony came out, Twilight tried to emphasize her point by shouting, "now!" -- partly to try to intimidate him (although she knew that probably wouldn't work), partly to appear confident (even though she was still a little unsure), and lastly just in case he had somehow not been paying attention (unlikely).

Discord showed himself. "What is it?" Discord asked, clearly annoyed. "Can't you see that I'm in the middle of bathing?" (Discord scrubs-a-dub-dubs.) The ponies looked away, suffering from second-hoof embarrassment. Discord snapped his fingers, instantly returning to his natural attire. After taking in the scene, Discord looked around and laughed. "Oh, how fitting! Isn't this the palace labyrinth? ...you know, the same palace labyrinth where your friendship fell apart last time?" He insinuated with a smirk.

"Formation! Now!" Twilight exclaimed, completely focused.

"You know," Discord continued, "I don't know why I even put up with you ponies. I end my bath early just to have an audience with you, and this all you wanted me around for? -- to zap me back into stone? Fluttershy, what do you have to say about this, my dear?" He asked, briefly teleporting over to Fluttershy who looked uncertain. Discord put an arm around her which did little to change her demeanor.

"Ah well," Discord turned to look at the Mane 6, "I guess this is all the thanks a villain like me will ever get for saving somepony's life that he cares about," Discord mused, putting on his sunglasses.

"Time to go back to stone," Twilight said, ponyfully stomping her hoof into the ground and taking a small step forward.

The ponies formed around Discord as he munched on some popcorn. The ponies began to float up into the air when.... suddenly, something happened -- somepony faltered. Fluttershy's light from her Element of Harmony began to flicker first, and then the whole thing fell apart. It was just as Discord had predicted -- this had happened before. Discord just laughed raucously and disappeared. The chaos continued. The little ponies' confidence shaken, they couldn't help but wonder to themselves if Discord had been right. Maybe, despite all their efforts, there really was nothing they could do anymore.

"I don't understand. What happened?" Twilight asked, confused.

Discord suddenly reappeared. "What do you think happened? I won," he said.

"What did you do with the princesses!?" Pinkie demanded of Discord in the most serious voice she could muster. Discord just picked her up by the tail.

"Silly pony!" he laughed. Pinkie growled, prompting Discord to drop her.

"Oof!" Pinkie replied, her ponybody sprawled out on the ground in Pinkie Pie style.

Rainbow flew over to Discord almost like she was ready to fight one-on-one if he didn't spill the beans. Discord, never one for direct confrontation, relented. "Oh, relax Rainbow. Your precious pony princesses are perfectly peachy. They may just not be having the time of their life," he continued. "My Garden of Stone dimension is the perfect place for them to learn to not turn ponies into stone."

Applejack was aghast, "you mean you turned them into stone?"

"Pfft! I told you before -- I don't turn ponies into stone," Discord adamantly replied.

As the other ponies pressed Discord for more information (good luck with that), Fluttershy avoided eye contact and started to trot away.

"Wait! Fluttershy! Where are you going?" Twilight asked, concerned.

Fluttershy shrunk back a bit -- "O-oh... Sorry Twi, I uh.... just don't feel up to this today, I guess. Maybe tomorrow," she said shyly. The other ponies looked at her in disbelief. Fluttershy shrank. She had hoped, knowing full-well that they probably couldn't, that Princess Celestia and Princess Luna would eventually somehow be able to help. With Twilight's harsh response, this last hope had been dashed.

"What are you talking about!? This is the fate of all of Equestria! What do you mean tomorrow?" Twilight retorted, incredulous.

Fluttershy hesitated at first before continuing. No matter what she did, she just couldn't seem to get those images that Discord had put up on the projector out of her head -- and although she was hesitant to admit it, even to herself -- especially Twilight's. "Yeah... tomorrow," she replied even more softly in a somewhat defeated tone, unwilling to engage with the subconscious thoughts about her and Twilight that had bubbled up to near the surface of her conscious mind. Fluttershy started to slink away.

Discord appeared in front of Twilight, laughing. "I told you, Twilight. Fluttershy is in love with me. She would never hurt me -- not for Equestria, --not even for her best friends. I'm free! Free at last. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want!" Then Discord paused before continuing in a tone that sent shivers down Twilight's spine, "...for real this time." Discord laughed in glee. The way Discord had said those last two bits reminded Twilight of the lie that Discord had told about Fluttershy earlier -- he had said the same thing and in the same sexually-insinuating way as then. Twilight couldn't bear the thought of what Discord might do to Fluttershy ...or what Discord might do to herself (although unbeknownst to her conscious mind, it was really more likely what she might end up doing with Discord if he wasn't stopped -- and what might happen to the fate of Equestria if she did).

Twilight turned to Fluttershy in adamant protest, "but Fluttershy... why!? We're your friends!"

Fluttershy replied, "I-I don't know..." she shyly scraped the ground with her hoof.

Twilight, surrendering her insecurities about what might happen between them if she proceeded in this way, approached Fluttershy gently. "Fluttershy... I don't know what happened between you and Discord to make you feel this way -- like you can't help Equestria or even your friends, but..." Twilight stammered. "I-I don't know about anypony else, but for me at least... I always kinda admired your kindness for everycreature." Fluttershy looked up, eyes demure, curious, interested -- a little hopeful, even. Twilight continued, "you were even kind to Discord. That's something I could never do. And I uh..." Twilight paused. "I think that's really special," she blushed.

Fluttershy's eyes widened as she began to surmise where this may be going. No. If the conversation continued like this for much longer, she might have to make a decision or risk losing her friendship with Twilight -- and everypony knows how she hates making decisions.

"Why is Twilight doing this to me -- why here ...why now?" She despaired softly to herself. Fluttershy tried to think of an excuse to get away, but it only took one glance up in any direction to understand the urgency of the situation-at-hoof. Her time spent with Discord alone in the forest must have had an effect on her, because a somewhat hazy vision of Discord reigning over Equestria, her by his side -- safe, protected, loved -- flashed behind her eyes. Sure, her ponyfriend Twilight might not fare so well, but Twilight is really smart -- she'd figure something out, Fluttershy reasoned. And besides, Discord kind-of had a point -- Twilight really had abandoned her for her studies; what if she did again?

"W-what are you saying, Twilight?" Fluttershy couldn't help but reply, nervously clapping her hooves together as she looked away, an almost imperceptible blush beginning to form on her cheeks, mirroring Twilight's blush but lighter in color.

Fluttershy thought, "just don't say the thing. Please -- just don't say the thing so I can go back home to my cottage, hide in a corner, and forget any of this ever happened."

Twilight replied, "I always kinda-sorta had a crush on you, Fluttershy. I want you to be," she stammered again, closing her eyes as she said, "MY little pony!"

Various thoughts raced through Fluttershy's mind, but the predominant one was simply, "she said it! There can be no doubt. I can't believe it. Twilight really likes me?"

Discord laughed hysterically. "So entertaining!" He pronounced. The other ponies, still too engrossed in Twilight's sincere confession of love to Fluttershy to fully consider the potential consequences of the situation, eagerly looked on for Fluttershy's reply.

Fluttershy's blush intensified. Regaining her internal mental composure, "do you really mean that, Twilight?" She said plainly.

Twilight, looking into Fluttershy eyes, returned a gentle smile and nodded.

Fluttershy, wanting to believe but still holding on to some reservations, asked worriedly -- "but what about that picture of you up on the projector screen? Did you really do something like that with everyponyelse?" Fluttershy, even to her own dismay, continued the sentence in her thoughts, "...except me?" --a subconscious thought, having bubbled briefly to the surface.

Twilight blushed again, embarrassed. "What? No. I wanted to, yes -- but I just couldn't. I did that alone," she said before adding quietly, "...thinking of you."

Fluttershy's ears perked up, a blush forming on her cheeks but then rapidly fading away.

Fluttershy wondered to herself, "did Twilight really just say that? ...or did I mishear? Maybe it was just the wind or Discord playing a trick on my ponyears -- but why would he want me and Twilight to be together?" Then the reality of who she was took over.

"But I almost kissed Discord because of that, Twilight," Fluttershy said anxiously. Then she calmed down and a depressive aura took hold over her demeanor as she remembered how useless she actually is. "You don't deserve m-me (if that's what you were thinking)." Now certain that Twilight hadn't been thinking that in the least and that this was all just a bizarre fantasy she had created in her head and it was now obvious to everypony just how pathetic she really was -- too selfish to even be able to use her own Element of Harmony properly to save all of Equestria --, Fluttershy sensed imminent rejection. She looked down and started to turn away. "I'm worst pony."

"No -- Fluttershy, don't you see? We've all made mistakes. I forgive you." Twilight said earnestly. Then she added, "We forgive you." Fluttershy glanced up and around at her friends, who showed her gentle smiles, water somehow in their eyes, nodding in agreement. Then Twilight continued, "I care about you and want to be with you. You already know you're my best friend forever -- with Celestia's blessing, maybe even something..." Twilight's voice trailed off.

Fluttershy tried to make sense of her friend's words. Looking from Twilight's Element of Harmony crown to Twilight, she thought, "wow. Even a pony as smart and magical as Twilight Bookhorse is unsure of herself." Fluttershy considered silently to herself. She trusted her friends and knew they were sincere. She knew she had a choice to make -- she could go back to her cottage and try to forget any of this ever happened or try to help Twilight -- who, despite her confession of love, was still her friend -- with the Elements of Harmony and defeating Discord again (although she was sure it still wouldn't work). But she also knew her own feelings.

Hesitating, Fluttershy continued slowly and cautiously, "Twilight, thank you for telling me how you really feel," Fluttershy continued awkwardly, "...because the truth is, I kinda sorta like you, t--"

Discord suddenly poofed next to Fluttershy, wrapping his talons around her and pushing Twilight out of the way. Twilight took a step back. Fluttershy appeared uncertain. Sensing this, Discord interrupted, "Fluttershy, my dear. Of course she doesn't really mean that. She just wants you to use your Element of Harmony against me. After that, she'll forget you were ever born. Not taking your daily dose of medicine is making you confused. Oh, look! I've got a fresh batch right here," Discord offered, holding up a flask of the potion that had turned Fluttershy green before. "I even made it special this time -- just one little sip, and I promise you'll never have to feel the pain of rejection ever again." Discord wiggled the vial of fluid in front of her muzzle, trying to tempt her to take it in maw.

The ponies all looked at Fluttershy in anticipation. Looking from Discord to Twilight to her friends and then back to Discord again (who was smiling mischieopfully [editor's note: a combination of "mischievously" and "hopefully"]). Fluttershy said, a little nervous at first before gaining confidence, "n-No, thank you."

"What?" Discord replied, incredulous. Clinging to Fluttershy's initial hesitancy, he rebounded -- deciding not to give up just yet. Discord continued, "I'm just trying to keep you safe, my dear. You can't seriously want to spend your whole life living amongst colorful pastel horses, do you? Life with me would me so much more lively -- don't you think? Tell you what -- what if I fix up Ponyville again and return the princesses to Canterlot? Would that make you change your mind?" Discord asked, trying to cut a deal.

Applejack, stepping forward, was about to say something when Twilight gently held her back with a hoof.

"I'm sorry. I said no." Fluttershy replied with emphatic confidence. Then, with a little more uncertainty she confessed, "I don't know if what Twilight said to me is true. But I do know that she's my friend. And she would never forget about me." Facing Discord, she continued, "You, on the other hoof, can be very hurtful sometimes -- telling me that my best friend is going to forget about me forever? That's not how friends speak about each other, Discord!"

Discord was taken aback. Perhaps it was because nopony had ever made him feel the way even he didn't yet fully realize he felt about Fluttershy before -- not that he loved her or anything outlandish like that, but that they might be able to be friends -- something Discord knew nothing of. With no context for these beginning feelings of affection, he was unable to come to terms with them and lashed out. "Pffft! Whatever! I don't need you, Fluttershy. I don't need anypony! I'm Discord!" Discord exclaimed.

"Ponies! Formation. Now!" Twilight demanded.

While getting into formation, Fluttershy demurely looked over at Twilight Sparkle, who blushed and took the couple of hoofsteps over to Fluttershy to place a gentle kiss in her muzzle, which she accepted.

"I knew it the whole time!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, bawling. The other ponies looked at her skeptically. "What?" she replied, "I did!"

A few moments later, the ponies were in formation. Discord sat back in his sunglasses as the Elements of Harmony whizzed past him. The ponies raised up into the air, their Elements steady, and once again -- in a dazzling display of rainbow color -- Discord was turned back into stone. A wave of light began to spread across the land, returning Equestria to its usual, harmonious state.

The ponies dropped from their heights, cheering. Fluttershy was so relieved that when she thought nopony was looking in her direction, she pecked Twilight on the cheek. Twilight blushed at the unexpected gesture. Fluttershy, thinking it might have been the wrong time to do something so brazen, blushed back.

Princess Celestia had a lot of questions. Princess Luna, on the other hoof, had been wondering what took so long. That night, taking a brief respite before the long journey back to Ponyville -- as the sun set behind Canterlot, Fluttershy was with Twilight on a balcony in the unicorn section of Canterlot. From a distance their friends could see Fluttershy wrapping Twilight Sparkle up in her pink fluffy tail to help take away some of the chill from the cool night air, while Twilight could be seen explaining the different constellations to Fluttershy, who seemed to appreciate the knowledge. Fluttershy, for her part, didn't even seem to mind that her friends could see.

Later that night and back at her library, Twilight looked over at Spike, saying, "Spike, take a note please!"

Spike prepared the ink, quill, and scroll.

Twilight dictated, "Dear Princess Celestia, today I learned that no matter how hard you study or how much you read, books can never replace true friendship. Today, by my own neglect, Discord was able to break free from his stone prison. But one of my best friends, Pinkie Pie, never gave up on me, and she was there when I needed her most. Thanks to all of my friends working together, we were able to defeat Discord once again -- turning him back into stone. I also learned that you have to be honest with your friends about your feelings, no matter how weird or embarrassing they may seem. And that a true friend will help you ...even in the stickiest of situations." Twilight laughed to herself -- Spike didn't seem to get it. "If you are honest with yourself and your friends, things will surely work out for the best. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle." Twilight turned and looked at Fluttershy, who smiled back before accepting a gentle nuzzle from Twilight. Twilight paused for a moment before saying, "Annnd send it!" Spike rolled up the scroll, took a deep breath, and blew green fire onto it. In a flash of smoke the scroll disappeared, safely on its way to the Princess.

How long this little pony romance between Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle would last (or between any of the ponies for that matter) -- nopony could say for sure, but the Mane 6 did know that they would always be friends, and that this day had proven that nothing was stronger (or more important) than their friendship (and friendships) with each other.

The next day, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Twilight Sparkle returned to their usual tasks in Ponyville and life in Equestria continued on as normal -- well, almost as normal.

//End