

The Eye of Destiny

The Eye of Destiny

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Introduction

I am not a big fan of television. It simply doesn't interest me very much. Most television shows are dark, mean-spirited, filled with crude humor, and deeply inappropriate. I enjoy shows that are fun and entertaining, and those are almost impossible to find. If a television show is aimed at adults then it's certain to be full of immorality and vice.

That is why I prefer watching cartoons. As it turns out, there are cartoons out there that are wholesome, funny, and genuinely fun to watch. They actually make you smile – and they do it in a family-friendly way.

This book takes place in one of those cartoon universes. I usually prefer writing my own stories instead of writing tales about someone else's characters, but this isn't the first time I've done this. I've written three books that take place in the Tom Swift universe. It can be a fun thing to do.

A lot of the stories that I write tend to be

fairly dark. This was intended to be different. I wanted to write a story that was actually *funny*. It was quite a change for me, but I enjoyed attempting it.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this rather odd tale. If you've never met these characters before then you will be in for quite a ride. Let's just say that life is a little different in the magical world of talking ponies.

Jonathan Cooper
1/6/2015

The Eye of Destiny

Chapter 1: A Thief in the Darkness

As Crimson Star looked up at Twilight's castle, he began to feel a bit nervous. *Am I really going to do this? After all, Twilight–*

The aging green stallion shook his head, vainly trying to force his doubts out of his mind. *No. This has to be done. Besides, I'm sure the stories about her have been wildly exaggerated. She's probably completely harmless. Right?*

From his hiding place, Crimson took another look around. It was two in the morning and there were no other ponies to be seen. The sky was overcast, hiding the moon and making Ponyville even darker than usual. He was confident that no one had seen him. Normally a green pony would have been easy to spot, but he was wearing a black cloak that hid everything but his face. Now all he had to do was get inside that castle. There was only one problem: where were all the

guards?

If Crimson knew anything about castles it was that they were well-guarded. In Canterlot, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were protected by an entire army. Princess Cadance in the Crystal Empire was surrounded by her crystal soldiers. Princess Twilight *had* to be protected by something. But what?

Over the past week he had taken the official tour of her castle three times. He now knew the layout of that castle by heart – but he had never seen so much as a single guard. He didn't like that at all. Not one bit.

Are they invisible? Is she guarded by more than just ponies? Do powerful spells watch over those crystal halls?

Unfortunately, the tour guide had just laughed at him when he'd asked. Either she didn't know, or she thought the answer was so obvious that it wasn't worth asking.

Crimson finally stood up. *Luck favors the bold, I suppose.* Using his magic, the unicorn reached into his saddlebag and took out four black sneakers, which he carefully put on. He knew he looked ridiculous in them (seriously,

who thought that creating shoes for ponies was a good idea?), but it couldn't be helped. His hoofs would make far too much noise on the crystal floors of that castle. His mission required stealth – and if that meant looking silly then so be it.

After taking one last look around to make sure that nopony was watching, he carefully approached the castle, sticking to the shadows as much as possible. His greatest fear was being discovered by that unholy terror that seemed to know everything – the one they called Pinkie Pie. That crazy earth pony should be in bed at this hour, but she was impossible to predict. Crimson occasionally wondered if she was really Discord's sister, and was just pretending to be a pony in order to amuse herself.

Step by step, inch by painful inch, Crimson crept toward the giant castle. In the daylight it looked friendly and inviting, but at night – cloaked in darkness and shadow – it looked positively ominous. It seemed to be daring him to try something.

But I am no ordinary pony, Crimson thought with resolve. I am a powerful wizard,

second to none! Twilight will never know what hit her library. Well, until I tell her, that is. Then she'll know.

After what seemed like an eternity (but was really just five minutes), Crimson finally reached the massive doors that led to the interior of the castle. This was the moment of truth. He hadn't really expected to get fried by counterspells as long as he was outside; after all, that would be pretty unkind to any passing pedestrians. But attempting to break in – now, that was a different matter.

If this was my castle I'd have it surrounded by armed ponies, and a moat filled with cragadiles. The front door would be protected by an electrocution spell. The halls would be patrolled by the undead. The–

But that line of thinking wasn't helpful. There was only one thing to do: he had to try to open the door. If it killed him then it killed him. *Can I still accomplish my mission as a ghost pony? What do I know about ghost ponies? Have there been any books written on that topic?*

Crimson whipped a pad of paper out of his saddlebag and jotted down a quick note.

If he survived all of this then he would do some research. Who knows – perhaps he could get a paper published on ghosts, and then–

But he was wandering again. His mind kept drifting; it was very annoying. *It must be old age setting in. But, really. Is it my fault that I love books?*

The wizard braced himself and cast a protection spell. He then used his magic to oh-so-carefully reach out and touch the massive front door.

Nothing happened.

He slowly, gingerly, touched the latch on the door.

No sparks shot out. No undead ponies tried to eat his brain. The door did not attack him in any way.

With great fear, Crimson pulled on the latch. The door quietly swung open.

Crimson's mouth dropped open. *You mean to tell me it wasn't even locked? But–*

The wizard looked inside. He didn't see any guards anywhere. Perhaps they were all invisible, and the unlocked door was just a trap. There was only one way to find out.

After making sure his sneakers hadn't fallen off (keeping shoes attached to hoofs was such a pain!), he quickly darted inside and shut the door behind him. In front of him was a pitch-black hallway. He could see absolutely nothing.

The cloaked pony cast a see-in-the-dark spell. It wasn't a very good spell, but it did give him some rudimentary night vision – and that was all he needed.

If the castle *was* guarded by the undead, they either hadn't spotted him yet or they were toying with him. In either case his best bet was to carry out his plan as quickly as possible and then leave. His elaborate, somewhat ridiculous plan completely depended on these next few moments.

The library is the third door on the left, he thought to himself. Crimson longed to make a dash for it but knew he would create far too much noise – even in sneakers. So he stealthily crept down the hallway.

When he finally reached the library door he paused. The castle was eerily quiet. His keen senses detected absolutely nothing.

Crimson carefully eyed the door in front

of him. *Perhaps this is where the traps are. After all, Twilight is as crazy about her books as I am! If it were me, this is where I would unleash doom on intruders.*

Once again Crimson cast a protection spell on himself, and then – with great fear and trepidation – reached out and touched the door. When he didn't drop dead he pushed on the door – and it opened.

What he saw inside almost brought tears to his eyes. The room was absolutely *packed* with books. The bookshelves stretched from the floor to the ceiling, and they contained some of the rarest and most priceless books in all of Equestria. Twilight had first editions, autographed copies–

But there was no time for sightseeing. The green pony darted inside the room and closed the door. He then used his horn to generate light, so he could see what he was doing. The see-in-the-dark spell was fine and all, but it wasn't strong enough to allow him to read anything.

In the soft, magical light he could see everything. Now all he had to do was find one very special book. Fortunately, Twilight was

fanatical about organization. He had to hand it to her: she knew how to run a library.

Crimson scanned the shelves. *E, E, where are the E's... ah, here we go. Now I just need to find the right book. Eclipse, Elephant, Embers, Exercise – there it is. The Eye of Destiny. Perfect!*

The wizard reached out with his magic and gingerly removed the brittle book from the shelf. It was a large brown volume with gold lettering on the cover. Sadly, the book was not in good condition. Its spine had badly decayed, and its pages were yellowed and falling apart. *That's what you get for not using acid-free paper! What was the publisher thinking? Didn't they know any better?*

Even so, just being able to hold the book was a joy in itself. He knew that this edition of the story was almost a thousand years old (making it one of the oldest books in existence), and was in fact the oldest known copy of that obscure tale. Most importantly, it contained some key details that had been left out of later editions.

He would know – he had read that very book countless times when he was younger.

In fact, he practically had it memorized.

Crimson looked at the book with fondness. *It's good to be reunited with you, old friend. If only for a few moments.*

Seeing the book took him back. Twenty years ago he had been an important, powerful wizard in Canterlot with a magnificent library of his own. Then one day Celestia threw him in her dungeon and confiscated all of his possessions. Apparently she had given his rare books to Twilight.

The unfairness of it all grated on the elderly pony. True, he *had* led an armed revolt against the princess. He *had* invaded her castle and attempted to seize power over all of Equestria. The plan might have worked, too, if she hadn't been such a light sleeper. How was he to know that the princess found it impossible to sleep since she banished her sister Luna to the moon? He had been absolutely floored when he snuck into her chambers at two in the morning and found her wide awake, staring at the moon, crying. He had no idea that the tyrant of Equestria was even *capable* of feeling emotion, much less sorrow.

Besides, all he was trying to do was seize power and make everyone his slaves. Celestia had reigned for far too long – everypony knew that. He wanted to overthrow her for her own good.

Well, for *his* good, really. Let's be honest: absolute power really rocks. But, sadly, his plan failed, and he was imprisoned for years, and then—

But the past was the past. It was the future that he cared about. In fact, that was the whole reason he was here.

I've got the book, Crimson thought triumphantly. That's step one. Now it's time for step two.

Crimson looked around the library and saw that the room had three doors. He didn't know which one Twilight would enter, so he would have to be quick. Fortunately, Twilight would probably be both angry and drowsy, so that should give him the edge he would need to survive.

While still levitating the book in the air, Crimson reached out with his magic and deliberately knocked a vase off of its pedestal. It fell to the ground with a *crash*. The noise

sounded like a firecracker in the stillness of the night, and it echoed off the walls of the room.

The wizard tensed, ready for action. He waited – but nothing happened. He heard nothing. He saw nothing. No one showed up.

After waiting for a few minutes the truth finally dawned on him. This castle was not guarded at all! There were no patrols of any kind. Twilight was completely unprotected.

Well, of course she is, you dolt! Who would be foolish enough to attack her? Her reputation is all the defense that she needs. Only a complete moron would try to break into her home.

Crimson thought a moment. *What do I know about her? There's got to be something I can do to get her attention.*

The stallion looked around the library and saw that there was a writing desk in the middle of the room (not far from some truly bizarre mirror contraption that he did *not* want to touch). On the writing desk were three inkwells and three quills – all in perfect alignment.

Crimson smiled. He trotted over to the

desk, reached out with his hoof, and moved one of the inkwells out of line.

* * * * *

Upstairs in her bedchamber, Twilight turned over in her sleep. “Stop it,” she muttered.

* * * * *

By now Crimson was getting irritated. He had been in her library for a good twenty minutes, and Twilight *still* had not shown up. What would it take to get her down here?

Maybe I’ll just leave her a taunting note. I’ll have to adjust step three, but I can make it work.

Crimson reached out with his magic to grab a quill – but he forgot that he was still holding onto the priceless book. The instant he let go of it he knew he had made a terrible mistake. As the rare first edition fell to the floor, it twisted in the air and partially opened. It then whacked into the ground face-down with a sickening *thud*.

The wizard stared at the book in horror. The volume's fragile spine had snapped in two, and the book was now in pieces. This was *bad*.

Upstairs he heard a pony bellow in rage. It was *definitely* time to go.

Crimson ran like mad toward the nearest door – but he forgot he had sneakers on. He tripped over his shoes and went sprawling onto the floor. As he struggled to his feet and kicked off his footwear, he heard a noise behind him. He didn't even need to turn around to know what had happened: the enraged princess had teleported directly to her library. *How did I forget she doesn't need to use doors?*

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” the enraged pony shrieked. “HOW DARE YOU DAMAGE ONE OF MY BOOKS!”

Crimson desperately teleported out of the library and onto the street outside the castle. He then began running – but he wasn't fast enough. Twilight teleported directly in front of him.

The wizard had never actually seen Twilight before. He had read a great deal

about the alicorn princess, but he naturally assumed that the press accounts were largely fictional. There was simply no way that such a small, nerdy pony could possibly have done all the things that were credited to her.

But now, seeing her, all doubts disappeared. Twilight was *angry*. Her nostrils flared and her wings were spread wide. Two purple eyes – full of wrath and rage – were locked onto him. Her horn was glowing a brilliant shade of purple. She had dug her hooves into the ground and was about to blast him with everything she had.

Since he was a wizard he could sense her mana level, and he was staggered. Twilight was *powerful!* Even Celestia couldn't compare to her. *Why, if she had been on my side in the revolt–*

But he was drifting again. And he was about to be fried.

Crimson desperately tried to run, but it was too late. As he turned and galloped for his life, a bolt of powerful energy smacked into his flank and knocked him into the air. The wizard screamed in pain and tumbled out of control. His robe flew off and he crashed

painfully into the ground.

Twilight was about to shoot him again when she suddenly noticed something. Now that his cloak was gone she could see the intruder's cutie mark. To her amazement it was a magenta six-pointed star that looked exactly like hers! *No, it's not quite like mine. My mark is surrounded by five white stars, and his isn't. Do those stars represent my friends? Does he have no friends? Does—*

But that delay gave Crimson all the time he needed to complete step two. Then, using all of his mana in a single burst, he teleported out of sight.

Crimson reappeared in a cave in the middle of the Everfree forest. When he saw how close he was to the wall, he shuddered. *Only a fool teleports blindly – but it was either that or be turned into ashes. At least I got out of there alive!*

Since his magic was temporarily depleted, Crimson used a hoof to remove his notebook from his now-singed saddlebag, and checked off step two. *So far so good. Time for step three.*

Chapter 2: A Song of Time

Spike was with Twilight Sparkle in her library. “So he got away, huh?” the young dragon asked. “That’s too bad. What are you going to do now?”

“The only thing I can do,” Twilight told her assistant. She used her magic to levitate the fragments of *The Eye of Destiny* into the air, and then carefully placed them on a table in the middle of the library. “I’m going to put this book back together if it takes me all night.”

“But Twilight, do you have any idea what time it is? Couldn’t you just go back to bed and deal with this in the morning? I mean, it’s not like the book is going to go anywhere!”

Twilight looked up, startled. “Oh my goodness – you’re right! What if that evil pony comes back and tries to steal it again? That would be *terrible*! There’s only one thing we can do.”

“Go back to bed?” Spike said hopefully.

Twilight shook her head. “Nope. Spike,

take a letter to Celestia. Tell her that she needs to send a shipment of a hundred guard ponies here immediately. It's a matter of national security! They can protect my books while I try to restore this poor, damaged volume back to its original glory."

"But Twilight, Celestia is in bed! She's not going to be checking her mail at this hour!"

"Good point," Twilight said thoughtfully. "Send it to Luna, then. I'm sure she'll be awake. She's the Princess of the Night, after all! In fact, Luna's guard ponies might be even better, since they're nocturnal. Brilliant idea, Spike!"

Spike sighed. "Are you sure you need a hundred? That seems like an awful lot. What about, oh, I don't know, five? Or maybe ten at most? Where are you even going to *put* a hundred of them?"

"They'll form a defensive ring around the castle. Until we catch that book thief, all of my books are in danger! With the extra security there's no way that villain would try to come back. Tell Luna to hurry – every minute they're not here is another minute we're vulnerable!"

“Are you *sure* you’re not overreacting to all this?” Spike asked.

Twilight pointed a hoof at the remains of *The Eye of Destiny*. “Does it *look* like I’m overreacting? One of the oldest books in Equestria has been *ruined*! Its spine has been snapped, its pages broken – just look at it! It’s going to take me hours to fix all of this damage! This *cannot* be allowed to happen again. What if that villain comes back and tries to steal my signed, first-edition copy of *The Flowers of Equestria*? What then? We can’t let this madness continue!”

“Fine, fine,” Spike grumbled. “I’ll send the letter.”

* * * * *

It was about five o’clock in the morning when Spike heard a knock on the front door. He yawned, got out of his cozy bed, and ran downstairs to answer it.

Standing in front of the castle was a dark blue alicorn. Behind her were twenty of her bat-pony guards. All of them were wearing dark armor and holding swords.

“Good morning, Spike,” Princess Luna said cheerfully. “Lovely night, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t believe you actually came!” Spike exclaimed. “I really thought you would send Twilight a note telling her she was out of her mind. You do realize this is all about a book, right?”

Luna looked at Spike thoughtfully. “How many guards does Twilight have?”

“None, of course. I mean, until recently she was just the town librarian. Why would a librarian need an army?”

“But she’s not a librarian anymore, is she?” Luna asked. “She is now a princess of the realm! A princess needs protection – from assassins, thieves, paparazzi, clowns, and so forth. Twilight’s request was quite sensible. Sadly, I do not have a hundred guards, but I am happy to spare those that I can afford. I assure you, young dragon, that these are the most vigilant and ruthless guards of the night in all the realm.”

“How well do they work in the daylight?” Spike asked.

“They don’t. They sleep during the day, just like I do.”

“But isn’t Celestia about to raise the sun?”

Luna paused. “This is true. It will do Twilight no good to be protected by guards who are not awake. When I return to Canterlot I shall speak to my sister about this.”

Spike eyed the twenty new guards. “I’m going to need to find a place for all these ponies to sleep, aren’t I?”

Luna shrugged. “Your castle is quite large. I am sure there are guard barracks in there somewhere. But I am afraid that I must be going. The night is waning and the dawn approaches.”

“Don’t you want to say hello to Twilight before you leave?”

Luna shook her head. “Your princess is in book mode right now. It is best to leave her in peace until she emerges. Tell her that her princess of the night was most glad to return a favor to a friend. Farewell!”

The princess then took off into the sky and teleported out of sight.

Spike looked at the guard ponies she had left behind. “Um, so, hey there. Do you guys know what to do?”

They all nodded in unison, without saying

a word.

“All right, then I’ll leave you to it. Just remember – you are here to guard Twilight’s books, so make that your top priority. Twilight is going to have a fit – well, another fit, I guess – if any more books get damaged. She’s a nice pony and all, but she can go kind of crazy sometimes.”

While the guards took their positions around and within the castle, Spike walked back to the library and stuck his head inside. “Oh, Twilight, Luna’s guards are here. I told them—”

“Not now, Spike!” Twilight hissed. That’s when Spike noticed that Twilight was levitating what looked like a hundred tiny book fragments. She appeared to be trying to figure out how to put them back together. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Sorry,” Spike said. He turned to go – and saw that there was already a guard stationed by the library door. “Boy, you guys are fast!” he exclaimed.

The guard said nothing. He continued to stare straight ahead.

“All right, then,” Spike replied. “I’ll just let

you do your job.” He left the library and went back to bed.

* * * * *

At about nine o’clock in the morning, Spike once again found himself answering the front door of the castle. This time when he opened it he saw Twilight’s friends. “Oh, hey there! I’m glad you could make it. Twilight’s been frantic ever since it happened.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “So where are all these guard ponies you were telling me about? Are they hiding in the shadows or something?”

“They’ve all gone to bed,” Spike explained. “They’re nocturnal, you know. Luna said she would try to send some daytime guards later, but I don’t know when they’ll get here. Personally, I think—”

“It’s a perfectly logical reaction to a book emergency!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. “I hope they catch that dastardly villain pony. He sounds like a real meanie.”

Rarity spoke up. “You know, darling, that villainous pony probably has a name. I doubt

his parents looked at him when he was born and said ‘Oh look! Doesn’t he look absolutely terrifying and evil? Let’s name him Villain!’ Spike, you didn’t happen to catch a name, did you?”

“I was actually in bed when it all happened,” Spike admitted. “Twilight got a good look at him, though, and – hey, where’s Fluttershy?”

“Beats me,” Applejack said. “I stopped by her house on my way over here but she wasn’t at home. She’s probably out with her animal friends or somethin’. We weren’t exactly plannin’ on comin’ over here this morning, you know.”

Pinkie spoke up. “That’s why it’s called a book *emergency*. No pony actually plans to have an emergency!”

“I bet Twilight might,” Spike remarked. “You haven’t seen her calendar! But you don’t suppose Fluttershy’s in any trouble, do you? I mean, Twilight kind of wanted *all* her friends to be here.”

“Naw, I’m sure she’s fine,” Rainbow Dash said. “Don’t worry about her.”

After they were all inside, Spike closed

the door behind them and led them to the library. Inside the library they found Twilight. Her mane was a mess and she had a wild look in her eyes, but the purple pony was wide awake.

“I did it!” Twilight exclaimed proudly. She levitated a book in the air. “See? Good as new!”

Applejack looked at it curiously. “So *that’s* the book the varmint tried to steal. Just how long did it take you to put it back together?”

“Oh, only about eight hours. Fortunately it wasn’t as hard as I expected. I just—”

“Eight hours?” Rarity interrupted. “My dear, I don’t mean to be rude but you look positively dreadful! Don’t you think it might be a good idea to go get freshened up a bit? You surely don’t intend on going out in public looking like that!”

“And a nap might do you good,” Rainbow Dash added. “After a bit of sleep you’ll feel like a new pony. Trust me – I know.”

“I’ll say,” Applejack commented. “Rainbow, you take more naps than anypony I’ve ever seen. It’s a wonder you ever mange

to get anything done.”

“I’m just awesome that way,” Rainbow Dash replied, grinning.

Twilight spoke up. “Really, girls, I’m fine. I can get some sleep later. The big problem we’re faced with right now is that we’ve got a book thief to catch.”

“So what do you know about villain pony?” Applejack asked. “Were you able to get a good look at him?”

Twilight nodded. “I sure did! He had a unique cutie mark – it looks just like mine, but without the white stars. I wrote to Celestia and asked her about it—”

Spike interrupted. “For the record, I made her wait until *after* Celestia was awake.”

“— and she told me that the criminal was a pony by the name of Crimson Star.”

Rarity spoke up. “I’m afraid that name doesn’t sound familiar. Was Celestia able to tell you anything about that sinister creature?”

“Oh yes! Celestia knew quite a lot about him. Get this: the book that he tried to steal *used to belong to him!* You see, about twenty years ago Crimson Star was a powerful mage in Celestia’s court. He was rich, influential,

and had an impressive library of his own. Then one day he launched an armed revolt against Celestia. When his attempt to overthrow her failed, he was thrown in prison and his library was confiscated. Years later, Celestia gave most of his books to me. That's how I ended up with it."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "So what is that book, anyway?"

"It's called *The Eye of Destiny*. It tells the story—"

Rainbow Dash interrupted. "Let me guess. I think I see where this is going. A long time ago an evil wizard created a powerful magical artifact and then hid it in a secret hiding place. He then published a book about it so the whole world would know where they could find it. However, nobody bothered to look for it for hundreds of years, until Crimson Star decided he didn't have anything better to do. He tried to steal your book so he could find this artifact for himself and use it to conquer all of Equestria. Now that we know his evil plan, we're going to beat him to it in an epic battle and save the day! Did I get it right?"

Twilight frowned. “Well—”

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “You know, Dashie, that’s not the only possibility. Maybe he just wanted his old book back – you know, for sentimental reasons. Or maybe he collects rare books and needed that one to complete the set. Or maybe he was actually trying to steal a different book and grabbed that one by mistake. Or maybe he had a grudge against Twilight and wanted to annoy her by breaking one of her precious books. Or maybe he’s started a new career as a circus clown and wanted that book to be part of his act.”

Applejack spoke up. “Sugarcube, I don’t think clowns use priceless books in their acts.”

“I know!” Pinkie said. “It’s sad, isn’t it? Books never seem to have any fun.”

“No, it’s *not* sad!” Twilight shouted. “That would be terrible. Books aren’t supposed to be funny! Well, unless they’re comedies, I suppose. But the humor is supposed to come from the book’s *contents*, not the book itself!”

Rarity spoke up. “I think we’re getting a bit off-topic. Do we know which theory is correct?”

Twilight yawned. “Sorry – I guess I need more coffee. You would think nine cups would be enough to keep me awake—”

“I’ll be right back!” Pinkie exclaimed, then dashed out of the room.

“Pinkie, stop!” Rarity exclaimed. “What Twilight needs is *sleep*, not stimulants. More coffee will only make the problem worse!”

But Pinkie was already gone.

“Anyway,” Twilight said, “Rainbow was kind of correct. About a thousand years ago – after Luna’s banishment – there really was a powerful wizard, and he really did make a powerful artifact. However, he wasn’t evil or anything. He created the Eye of Destiny so he could see into the future. He was hoping—”

“To win the lottery!” Pinkie exclaimed.

Twilight frowned. “Pinkie, Equestria doesn’t have a lottery. Besides, I thought you left to go get some more coffee!”

“I already did that,” Pinkie said excitedly. “I’ve brought you something even *better* than coffee.” She handed Twilight a large white mug that contained a steaming brown liquid.

“Thanks,” Twilight said. She drank the entire cup, then set it on the table in front of

her. "As I was about to say, the reason he created the Eye was so he could—"

Then, all at once, Twilight burped. Her eyes closed and she collapsed onto the floor.

"Twilight!" Rarity exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, she'll be fine!" Pinkie said. "She's just asleep."

"What do you mean, asleep?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Coffee doesn't put you to sleep!"

"Oh, well, I didn't give her coffee. That would have been a terrible idea! What she really needs is rest, so I gave her nine doses of anti-coffee. I invented it myself! She'll wake up in a few hours, better than new. It's really for the best."

"But she was about to tell us the backstory of the Eye!" Dash complained. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Applejack pointed at the book on the table. "Isn't it obvious? You like to read, don't you?"

Dash sighed. "But that book looks long and boring."

"Maybe so, but it's either that or wait until Twilight wakes back up. Your choice."

“Fine, fine,” Dash grumbled. She gingerly opened the book and began reading it aloud.

* * * * *

Four hours later, Dash finally closed the book. “That was the most horrible experience of my life,” she grumbled. “Next time we’re going to wait for Twilight.”

Rarity spoke up. “Personally, I thought it was a lovely tale. The problem was in your delivery.”

“No, the problem is that *the entire book is a song!* Who in their right mind creates a song that is 200 pages long? Why couldn’t he write a normal book like everypony else?”

“I’m with Rainbow Dash on this one,” Applejack said. “That wasn’t exactly a hit tune. But at least we know what’s going on now.”

“Do we?” Dash asked. “Because after about page two I got really super lost. This guy desperately needed an editor.”

“It made perfect sense to me,” Rarity replied. “Perhaps you simply lacked the refinement and social graces necessary to understand a true work of art.”

“Could you explain it to us, then?” Applejack asked. “From what I could make out, he wanted to use the Eye to prevent disasters and such from happenin’. He thought that if he could foresee the future, he could save lives and create a better world.”

“No, I think you got it backwards,” Dash said. “He was heartbroken over the loss of his wife and wanted to change the past to save her.”

Applejack shook her head. “But the book said the Eye can only see into the future. It can’t even see into the past, let alone change it. How could somethin’ that foresees the future possibly bring back the dead?”

Rarity spoke up. “I will admit that the book was a little confusing on that point. In my opinion, the loss of his wife is what motivated him to create the Eye in the first place. I believe he wished to avoid such tragedies in the future by foreseeing and preventing them.”

“I reckon’ that makes sense,” Applejack replied. “But it sure sounds like the Eye didn’t work the way he wanted it to. He said it just made things worse.”

“Which makes absolutely *no* sense,” Rainbow argued. “I mean, c’mon! The Eye just shows you different possible futures. If you don’t like what you’re seeing then pick a different one! Maybe this wizard was just an indecisive, incompetent moron. If I had the Eye—”

Pinkie Pie interrupted her. “I think Twilight is about to wake up.”

The purple alicorn on the floor began to groan. “Where am I? What happened?”

“You took a nap!” Pinkie exclaimed. “Do you feel better now?”

“Not really,” Twilight mumbled. She wiped her eyes with her hooves and stood up. “Why is my head pounding?”

“It’s because you drank nine cups of coffee before going to sleep,” Pinkie explained. “You really shouldn’t do that! Well, unless you’re me. But if you were me you wouldn’t be you!”

Twilight looked puzzled. “But if I – you know what, never mind. I don’t want to know. Where were we?”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “We’re at the part of the story where the wizard created

this powerful magical artifact and didn't like how it turned out, so instead of destroying it like a normal pony he created a powerful magical guardian and hid it away somewhere."

"Oh. Right. Well, I guess that about says it all. So now we just need to find the Eye before anypony else does. Can you imagine the disaster that would happen if it fell into the wrong hooves?"

"Aw, c'mon, that's not going to happen," Rainbow Dash said. "We all know how these things turn out. Whenever there is an insanely powerful magical artifact in the world, one of two things happens: either it turns out to be a fake, or else it's real but it somehow gets destroyed before anypony can use it. If the Eye exists – which I kind of doubt – some contrived series of events will occur that will make it unusable. Crimson Star is *not* going to seize it and rule the world."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Pinkie Pie said. "*I'm* the one who makes ridiculous leaps of logic that later turn out to be true! Which means that either I'm infecting you with my Pinkie sense, or else your ridiculous leap of logic really *is* ridiculous and isn't going to happen."

Rarity spoke up. "Twilight, I don't mean to be a pest, but you really need to go and get freshened up before you venture outdoors. You look simply dreadful! A shower will do you a world of good. The Eye has waited patiently for centuries; I'm sure it can wait another hour or so. Remember, you are a princess now. Appearances are important. If you go out looking like you just fell out of a tree, the ponies of this town might think you're making a fashion statement or something. There's no telling what dreadful madness might ensue! You don't want to be responsible for that, do you?"

"Fine," Twilight said reluctantly. "I guess you're right. I'll be right back."

After Twilight left, Rarity spoke up. "Has anypony seen Spike?"

Rainbow Dash nodded. "He left about four hours ago, when we started reading that blasted book. I guess he just couldn't take it. He said something about waiting outside for Celestia's guards to arrive."

"I shoulda joined him," Applejack remarked. "That was some of the worst poetry I've ever heard."

"It's all in the delivery, my dear," Rarity replied. "Sometimes it takes a true artist to make a work's full potential shine."

"Or we could just set the book on fire," Rainbow Dash commented.

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!" an enraged voice bellowed from upstairs.

"Sounds like she really *is* awake!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

* * * * *

An hour later, Twilight and her friends were walking out the front door of her castle. "The first thing we need to do is—"

Twilight then froze. In front of her castle were twenty of Celestia's finest guard ponies. Spike was standing in front of them, talking to Celestia herself.

"Oh, don't worry," Spike was telling her. "We shouldn't need to borrow them for very long. Twilight just wanted somepony to protect her books while she looked for Crimson Star. It's really not safe to leave those books in the castle all by themselves."

"I understand," Celestia said. "Between

these ponies and the ones that my sister has lent to you, the castle should be well-protected. But the truth is you do not need any of them. You would be just as safe if I brought them back to Canterlot with me. Crimson Star will not attempt to break into the castle again.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Not to be rude or anything, but how could you possibly know that?”

Celestia hesitated. “I have known Crimson far longer than you have. He was once a great and wise pony. In fact, Twilight, he shares a great deal in common with you. It was heartbreaking to see him choose the path of darkness. I had hoped that he had changed his ways and returned to the pony he used to be, but it appears that has not happened.”

“Well, his book-stealing days are about to be cut short,” Twilight replied. “We’ll track him down and put an end to his nefarious scheme. The Eye is as good as ours!”

“I have no doubt you are quite capable of finding the Eye. But, Twilight—”

The Princess of the Sun hesitated yet

again. She finally sighed. "I knew the powerful wizard who created the Eye, and I can promise you it brought only heartbreak and sadness. Just leave it alone, Twilight. Some things are not meant to be found."

Celestia then looked at them all and smiled. "I must return to Canterlot. I trust you will not need my guards for very long?"

Twilight shook her head. "Once we've apprehended Crimson Star I'll send them all back."

"Very well. Then I will wish you all farewell."

Celestia then took off into the air and teleported out of sight.

As Spike returned his attention to Celestia's guards and began giving them orders, Rainbow Dash turned to Twilight. "The anonymous 'wizard pony' who created the Eye was *totally* that clown costume guy, wasn't he?"

Twilight frowned. "That 'clown costume guy'? What in Equestria are you talking about?"

"You know!" Pinkie exclaimed. "That bearded pony you dressed up as for

Nightmare Night!”

Twilight stamped her hoof on the ground. “Starswirl the Bearded was *not* a clown! He was a powerful wizard—”

“—who lived about a thousand years ago,” Rainbow Dash finished. “He made the Eye, didn’t he? C’mon – you know it was him.”

“I don’t know,” Twilight said thoughtfully. “I’ve been through all of his papers in his wing of the Canterlot Library, and none of them said anything about the Eye. Starswirl wasn’t the only mage who was around back then, you know. It easily could have been somepony else.”

Rarity spoke up. “Where should we begin our search for Crimson Star?”

“Let’s go to Carrot Top’s garden,” Twilight said. “That’s where I shot him last night. Maybe he dropped a clue of some sort in the struggle!”

Rainbow Dash facehoofed. “Don’t tell me you ruined her garden *again*, Twilight. Don’t you remember how mad Carrots got last week when—”

“I’m sure the damage this time was very minimal,” Twilight insisted. “It’s not like we

had a long drawn-out fight or anything. It was over pretty fast. We didn't even fight long enough to burn down any houses."

She turned to Spike. "Are you going to come along with us?"

Spike shook his head. "I think I'll stay behind and watch over the castle, just in case villain pony decides to return. You can't be too careful!"

After Spike dispersed the guards and went inside, Twilight turned to her friends. "All right, girls. Time to go find ourselves a book thief!"

* * * * *

Carrot Top was exasperated. "Why do you keep doing this to me, Twilight? Why? Why does it always have to be *my* garden? Haven't we gone through this enough already?"

Twilight winced. When Crimson Star plowed into the ground after being shot, he destroyed an entire row of Carrot Top's prized produce. What had once been a beautiful line of plants was now nothing but shattered

stems and a long furrow in the dirt.

“What am I supposed to do?” Carrot Top demanded. “Do I need to have Celestia come out here and erect some kind of magical force field to keep you ponies out? Do I need to start raising my carrots underground?”

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “You *already* raise them underground, silly! That’s how carrots work. They don’t grow *above* ground!”

Carrot Top facehoofed. “That’s *not* what I meant. I – oh, whatever. What’s the use? You need to go save Equestria – fine, go save Equestria. But *stay out of my garden!* A pony can only take so much.”

After Carrot Top stormed out of her garden and back inside her house, Twilight spoke up. “You know, I really do feel bad about all this. I’ll find some way to make it up to her.”

“I’m sure you will,” Applejack said. “But now that we’re here, does anypony see any clues? There’s gotta be somethin’ here that can tell us where Crimson Star’s gone off to.”

Rarity spoke up. “I’ll do my looking from over here, girls. Away from the dirt and, um, fertilizer.”

Applejack rolled her eyes. “And while you’re over there, worryin’ about your appearance, I’ll—”

“I found it!” Twilight interrupted. “I know where Crimson Star is hiding! He’s—”

“Let me guess,” Rainbow interrupted. “You just happened to find a flower trampled into the dirt, and thanks to your complete knowledge of every single flower in Equestria you know *that* particular flower only grows in one spot in the Everfree Forest. You also know that no gardener in all of Equestria has planted that flower in their own garden, or anything like that. The flower is the perfect clue to lead you to the villain.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Twilight replied. “Well, I mean, he *is* in the Everfree Forest. I even know the exact place where we can find him! But it’s not because of a flower. It’s because he dropped a map and circled his hiding place. Look!”

Twilight levitated the map she had found, so her friends could see it.

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “See, Rainbow, this is why you need to leave the ridiculous leaps of logic to me. Your game is *way* off today.”

Rainbow Dash looked at the map and frowned. "Does that map really say 'I am hiding here – come and get me'?"

Applejack nodded. "It sure does. Which can only mean it's a trap. I think that varmint wants to be found."

"You think?" Dash said sarcastically. "Maybe instead of going there we should *avoid* going there."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Twilight replied. "The note also says that he kidnapped Fluttershy."

"*WHAT!*" her friends exclaimed.

Rainbow Dash looked at Twilight in shock. "You know, you could have told us that first!"

"No wonder she wasn't at home," Applejack remarked. "That poor, defenseless pony! I sure hope she's not sufferin'."

Rarity spoke up. "Suffering? Why, that gentle creature is being held hostage by an evil villain in the middle of the scariest place in Equestria! I am sure she is absolutely terrified. We *must* save her!"

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "No, she's fine. I think Crimson Star is the one who's about to experience a lot of suffering. He picked the

wrong defenseless pony to mess with.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Pinkie, you’re crazy! The only way Fluttershy will be fine is if we get out there *right now* and save her. Let’s get moving!”

Rainbow Dash raced off toward the Everfree Forest. Her friends galloped close behind her.

Chapter 3: Pillar of Savage Fire

“You big meanie,” Fluttershy said angrily. “You’re not a nice pony at all!”

The cute yellow pegasus was lying on the rocky ground. Her four legs were tied securely together, and her wings were tied to her sides. Fluttershy struggled, but she could do little more than roll along the dirt.

She was being held prisoner in Crimson Star’s campsite, which was located at the top of a tall cliff that overlooked the Everfree Forest. The top of the cliff was fairly bare; there was little more than a few scraggly weeds on its rocky surface. The only building in sight was the small tent that Crimson had pitched. There was also a fire pit at the campsite, but he had put out the fire hours ago.

Crimson Star laughed. “You’d better not roll too far, little pony, or you’ll fall right off

the cliff! It's a long way down to the forest below. I'd hate to see you plunge to your doom."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Fluttershy asked. "I've never done anything to you."

"Isn't it obvious? Twilight Sparkle needs *all* of her friends in order to activate her magical friendship powers. Since I now have you in my possession, she won't be able to use her ultimate weapon against me. In fact, I can actually use you to *threaten* her. If she wants you back alive she'll have to give me the Eye. It's a foolproof plan!"

"She'll never do it," Fluttershy said.

"Of course she will! Twilight will do *anything* to save her friends. After all, she gave up her alicorn magic to save you from Tirek, didn't she? It's the same sort of thing. If she gives me what I want, I'll give her what she wants. It's a simple business transaction. Everypony is happy and nopony is hurt."

"So you're going to send her a ransom note?" Fluttershy asked.

"No, I left her a map," Crimson explained. "Of course, the map doesn't lead her to my

campsite, but she doesn't know that. Come now – you don't really expect me to monologue my entire plan to you, do you? I'm not quite *that* stupid."

"I don't know," Fluttershy said. "You *did* kidnap me, and that was a pretty big mistake. You're going to regret it. You messed with the wrong pony."

"Oh yes – no doubt! After all, I just kidnapped the kindest pony in all of Equestria. The horror! Think what terrible things will happen to me when you unleash your hidden powers of niceness!" Crimson Star burst out laughing. "Of all the ponies I have ever seen, you are by far the least scary. Fluttershy, you couldn't be threatening if you tried! You're cute and completely harmless. Kidnapping you was the easiest thing I've ever done."

As Fluttershy struggled, a butterfly flew by. The imprisoned pegasus called out to it. "Excuse me, mister butterfly? Could you please go get my woodland friends and have them come up here and rescue me from this nasty stallion? I'd *really* appreciate it."

When the butterfly flew away, Crimson Star laughed so hard he actually fell to the

ground. He struggled to regain his composure. "Did you really think that was going to work? You can't talk to animals! Oh, sure, technically I guess you can *talk* to animals, inasmuch as you can give them a piece of your mind. But animals can't understand you."

"You just wait and see," Fluttershy said. "You'd better be glad I'm such a nice pony! Otherwise you would be in a lot of trouble."

"Oh yes, of course," Crimson Star said sarcastically. "After all, *you* are the one who is tied up at the edge of a cliff and can barely move, but *I'm* the one who is in trouble. And here I thought everything was going exactly as I had planned! Silly me."

Fluttershy frowned. "You know, mister, I have come *this* close to losing all my patience with you. If you don't start behaving yourself I just might use my stare on you."

"Oh no!" Crimson Star exclaimed. "Do you mean you might *look* at me? The horror! The woe! Whatever shall I do? Oh wait – I know."

Crimson Star turned around so Fluttershy could no longer see his face. "There we go. Now I can't see your stare. Crisis averted!

Whew – that was a close one. I can't believe how close I came to total disaster!"

"Meanie," Fluttershy muttered.

Crimson Star clapped his front hooves together excitedly. "Look – down there! I can see your friends approaching the base of the cliff. It won't be long now! Soon the Eye of Destiny will be in my grasp – and then all of Equestria will be mine! Then we'll see how *Celestia* likes being locked in a dungeon for twenty years. I can already taste my revenge."

* * * * *

Twilight Sparkle and her friends were walking along a small dirt road that wound its way through the Everfree Forest. On either side of the path were tall, ancient trees. The underbrush was thick and they couldn't see very far into the forest – nor could they see where the path was taking them.

"Are you sure you know where we're goin'?" Applejack asked.

"I think so," Twilight replied. "According to this map, this road leads to the base of a cliff. Apparently that's where Crimson Star is

hiding.”

Rainbow Dash groaned. “You mean that’s where his *trap* is hiding. You can’t seriously believe that you’re going to find Fluttershy there!”

Rarity spoke up. “Even if the villain isn’t there, he will surely be someplace nearby. As long as we’re careful I’m certain we can rescue our poor friend.”

Pinkie Pie shook her head. “I think that the evil villainpony is the one who’s going to need rescuing. He’s in an awful lot of trouble.”

“Did someone say ‘trouble’?” a voice called out behind them. Twilight halted the party and looked around. That’s when she noticed that Carrot Top was about a hundred feet away, standing in the underbrush.

“Hey, Carrots!” Rainbow Dash called out. “What are you doing out here in the woods? It’s not exactly safe, you know!”

“It’s not exactly safe in my own garden, either,” Carrot Top replied sarcastically. “For your information, I am gathering some herbs that I plan on taking to Zecora’s. I’m hoping she can help me repair the terrible, tragic damage you ponies inflicted on my garden.

She has a potion that just might give me what I need.”

“Well, good luck,” Twilight said.

“Why?” Carrot Top asked suspiciously. “Am I going to need it? Are you about to unleash some terrible disaster upon Ponyville? Should I run for my life?”

“I sure hope not!” Applejack replied. “We’re actually on our way to rescue Fluttershy. Some stallion kidnapped her.”

“Then I pity that poor, deluded kidnapper,” Carrot Top said. “He’ll be lucky to escape with his life.” The golden-colored pony then turned around and ran off deeper into the dark woods.

Twilight looked at Pinkie Pie, confused. “Why do ponies keep saying things like that? Is there something about Fluttershy that I don’t know?”

“Well, not exactly,” Pinkie replied. “After all, Fluttershy is just Fluttershy. It’s her friends that can be a bit dangerous. You don’t want to get them angry.”

“You mean us?” Twilight asked.

Pinkie shook her head. “No – her *other* friends. They can be pretty protective of her.”

“Well, we’re almost there,” Twilight said.
“Just a little farther!”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “So we’re really just going to walk right into the trap?”

“What’s the matter?” Applejack asked.
“Can’t you handle it? You know, if you want to stay behind—”

“And miss out on being awesome? I don’t think so!”

* * * * *

From his vantage point at the edge of the cliff, Crimson Star watched Twilight and her friends walk along the path. “They’re almost there,” he muttered. “Time to—”

“Excuse me,” Fluttershy said from behind him. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to be leaving now.”

Crimson laughed. “Sure you are.” He then heard a low growl. Puzzled, he turned around – and gasped.

The green unicorn had never seen so many animals in one place in his entire life. The sky was filled with birds – in fact, there were so many birds they nearly blotted out

the sun. He noticed, a bit uncomfortably, that all of the birds were starting at him – and they looked angry.

The ground around Fluttershy was packed with all kinds of creatures. There were bunnies, raccoons, snakes, porcupines, foxes – it was a regular menagerie. That's when Crimson Star noticed the enormously large bears that had surrounded the cute little pegasus. And the lions. And the manticores. *Wait – manticores?*

One of the manticores was holding ropes – ropes that had once kept Fluttershy tied and on the ground. He did *not* look the least bit pleased.

Fluttershy herself was at the heart of this giant army of extremely irritated woodland creatures. She was hovering a few feet off the ground, staring right at Crimson Star with a very unhappy look on her cute face.

The manticore behind her growled. Then the bears growled. The foxes growled. Crimson began to get very, very nervous. *Are all of these creatures her spies? Do the very birds of the air watch over Equestria for their yellow queen? Is Fluttershy the true wielder of*

power – but no, that’s madness! Madness!

Fluttershy turned and patted one of the manticores on his head. “Now, now, wait just a minute before eating that bad, bad pony. Maybe he’ll apologize and then you won’t have to eat him at all! After all, we don’t want any trouble, do we, Crimson Star?”

“But that’s ridiculous!” Crimson gasped. “I can’t talk to animals, and I’m ten times smarter than you. If I can’t do it then nopony can do it! What kind of trick are you trying to pull?”

Fluttershy frowned. “That didn’t sound like an apology to me at all. What about you, mister manticore? Does it sound to you like he’s sorry?”

The manticore shook his head and took a step closer to Crimson. The birds chirped angrily and grew closer. The bunnies bared their teeth. The lions extended their claws.

Crimson took a step backwards. “Now, now, let’s be reasonable about this,” he said hastily. “There’s no reason for this to turn ugly. Just—”

The manticores growled at him, snapped their teeth, and took another step toward

him. In a blind panic, Crimson turned around and ran away – only to belatedly remember that he was right on the edge of a cliff.

A sheer cliff, leading straight down into the Everfree forest.

And he was *not* a flying pony.

Crimson Star screamed as he plunged off the cliff. “SOME PONY HELP ME!”

Fluttershy shook her head. “You should have just apologized, mister meaniepants. Jumping off a cliff was very foolish of you. Is it really that hard just to say you’re sorry?”

* * * * *

At the base of the cliff, Twilight and her friends were looking around. They had reached the end of the path and found a small clearing. The sheer face of the cliff had some ancient carvings etched into it. Other than that, though, there was nothing to be seen.

“I don’t get it,” Rainbow Dash said. “Isn’t there supposed to be a trap here? Did somepony slip up? *Please* tell me that we’re facing a villain who actually knows what he’s doing. Fighting morons is just so un-awesome.

How can I show how cool I am if I don't have a good opponent?"

At that moment they all heard a desperate cry for help. They looked up and saw a green pony falling through the air. He was flailing around desperately, screaming his head off.

Applejack frowned. "Twilight, is that who I think it is?"

Twilight nodded. "I think so! That looks like Crimson Star all right."

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "But he's not a pegasus, is he? Why does he think he can fly? Is he really that stupid?"

"Perhaps he slipped and fell off the cliff," Rarity suggested.

"Or maybe Fluttershy pushed him off," Pinkie added.

"Girls!" Twilight shrieked. "He's about to become roadkill! Rainbow – go rescue him right this instant!"

"Fell off a cliff," Rainbow Dash grumbled. "How disappointing. Some villain he turned out to be! This is so embarrassing."

Grudgingly, Rainbow Dash swooped up into the air and grabbed the hapless pony

seconds before he crashed into the ground. Crimson Star was still screaming when Rainbow Dash gently set him down.

Twilight's horn glowed and levitated Crimson Star in the air. "All right – talk! What have you done with our friend Fluttershy? If you have hurt her, so help me–"

"I'm fine," Fluttershy called out. The group looked up and saw her fly down from the cliff above. "I hope you didn't worry too much about me."

"I knew you could do it!" Pinkie Pie said happily. "That villain never stood a chance."

"You rescued yourself?" Twilight asked, surprised. "But – how?"

Crimson Star spoke up. "That pony is a dangerous lunatic. She is a freak of nature. I bet even the trees are on her side."

Rarity walked over and hugged Fluttershy. "It sounds like you did a wonderful job, dear. I should have had more faith in you."

"All right, Crimson," Twilight said firmly. "I don't know what your evil plan was, but as you can see you have lost. So why don't you just tell us what you were trying to accomplish?"

"I'm not going to say another word," Crimson said.

Twilight glared at him. She was about to say something, but Pinkie interrupted. "Twilight, c'mon, you know that's not how it works! Evil villains only monologue when they think their schemes are working. If you want to find out about his evil plot, you have to do it *before* you capture him. You did it out of order!"

"That's ok," Fluttershy said. "I've already heard his monologue. He wanted to use me to force you to find the Eye of Destiny for him. He was going to let me go if you handed it over to him. Then he was going to take over the world and throw Celestia in jail."

"Pardon me, but didn't we just foil a plot to overthrow Celestia just last week?" Rarity asked.

Applejack nodded. "Yup. Looks like there's nothing new to see here."

"He gets more unoriginal all the time," Rainbow Dash agreed. "What a letdown. But say, is the Eye of Destiny supposed to be hidden around here somewhere? I sure don't see anything!"

"I don't either," Applejack replied. "Didn't that awful song say it was hidden at the top of a tower? I sure don't see any towers around here!"

"That's because there aren't any," Twilight said. "I've studied every book I could find on the Everfree Forest. There are no towers in this area. If one existed, it was torn down long ago."

"And the Eye was lost with it," Rarity said sadly. "What a pity. I bet it would have made a charming necklace!"

"A necklace?" Crimson Star echoed. "Are you out of your mind? That artifact can see the future! It can change the fate of every pony in Equestria! And all you can think about is using it as a *fashion accessory*? What kind of fool are you?"

"Speak for yourself," Rarity said haughtily. "*I'm* not the one who just fell off a cliff."

Rainbow Dash snorted. "You tell him, Rarity. So, Twilight, what do those carvings say? Anything important?"

Twilight grunted. "You know, this villain is really heavy! I can't hold Crimson in the air all day. Applejack, if I let him down can you tie

him up?”

“Oh, don’t bother,” Crimson said wearily. “I’m not going anywhere. I have no desire to be eaten by bears, or torn in half by sea serpents, or pecked apart by a savage flock of birds. I know when I’m beaten.”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “That sounds an awful lot like he’s saying ‘please let your guard down so I can run away’.”

Crimson laughed bitterly. “There is no escape from the Queen of the Forest. You cannot hide from her. Her eyes are everywhere – everywhere! No one can hide from the lidless eye of her eternal gaze!”

Twilight looked at him curiously. “Did he hit his head on the way down?”

“I don’t think so,” Rainbow Dash said. “My rescue was pretty awesome. Besides, I never slip up on details like that! That’s the sort of thing that really hurts you on those blasted comment cards.”

Applejack spoke up. “Ok, Twilight, I’m ready.” As soon as Twilight released her grasp on Crimson, Applejack grabbed him and tied him up. After he was secured, Crimson remained still on the ground.

“I guess he really isn’t going to escape,” Rainbow Dash said sadly. “So much for my epic boss fight!”

Meanwhile, Crimson Star cackled to himself. *I’m a unicorn, you dolts – a unicorn! Didn’t you see me teleport away earlier? Mere ropes cannot hold me!*

What Crimson Star did not realize was that no one really cared. His utter lack of competence had already caused Twilight and her friends to lose all interest in him. Unfortunately, that would prove to be a serious mistake. Twilight would later realize that sometimes the incompetent villains are the most dangerous ones.

With Crimson Star secured – or at least, secure enough to achieve plausible deniability – Twilight trotted over to the face of the cliff and studied the ancient runes. “It’s a very old, mystical language,” she said at last.

Rarity spoke up. “What does it say, darling?”

Twilight frowned. “A few of the runes are pretty worn, but I can still make it out. It looks like it’s a spell – a very difficult spell. Only the highest level mage could cast this.”

Rainbow Dash nudged Twilight. “Well, you *are* an alicorn, right? So let’s cast that spell and see what happens!”

“Now wait just a minute,” Applejack said. “Twilight, do you have any idea what that spell will do?”

Twilight shook her head. “I’m afraid not. I’ve never seen anything quite like this before. Ponies don’t write spells this way anymore. I think it’s supposed to reveal a hidden passage, but to be honest it doesn’t look like a normal unveiling spell. It might do anything.”

“So it could be a trap,” Applejack said.

“But what would be the point?” Twilight asked. “Only the most powerful of ponies could possibly cast it in the first place! It’s probably completely harmless.”

“Now stop and think a minute,” Applejack replied. “Suppose that there really *is* a hidden tower around here somewhere with a magical thing in it. If it’s hidden, that means somepony hid it on purpose, and *that* means they didn’t want it to be found. If that’s true then why would anypony put the one spell in Equestria that could *unhide* it right there in plain sight? Doesn’t that seem

mighty foolish to you?"

Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Maybe they didn't want to lose it. After all, people are always losing buried treasure! How else would you find something that's invisible?"

Twilight studied the runes again. "Well, girls, here's the deal. On the one hoof, we can ignore all of this, go home, and forget all about it. Or we can cast that spell and take the chance that it will lead us to the long-lost Eye."

Rarity spoke up. "I hate to mention this, dear, but didn't Celestia say we should leave the Eye alone?"

"Aw, what does she know?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Doing nothing is so boring. I say Twilight should cast the spell. That sounds way more awesome than going home in defeat."

"I suppose," Applejack said reluctantly. "Odds are it won't do anything anyway. We might as well give it a shot."

Rarity spoke up. "I mean no disrespect to Celestia, but I *do* hope we find the Eye! I'm sure we can handle whatever happens. After all, we always have before."

"I suppose," Fluttershy said slowly.

“Then we’ll do it,” Twilight said decisively. She read the ancient runes one more time to make sure she understood what she was about to do. Twilight then closed her eyes, and her horn began to glow a brilliant purple color. Then, to her enormous surprise, a beam of brilliant yellow energy shot out from the runes and engulfed Twilight. She began to hover a few feet off the ground.

Fluttershy looked at her worriedly. “Um, is it supposed to be doing that?”

“How in Equestria should I know?” Applejack asked.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Fluttershy replied.

Then, all at once, several things happened. First, the beam of magical energy that connected Twilight to the runes vanished, and Twilight fell back onto her hooves. Second, the runes glowed a brilliant yellow color, and then they vanished as well – revealing a long, dark corridor that led into the heart of the cliff.

But Twilight’s friends didn’t notice either of those things until later, because everyone’s attention was focused on a much bigger

problem. As soon as the corridor opened, a giant pillar of yellow fire appeared. The pillar was easily a hundred feet tall and fifteen feet wide. It had giant red eyes and was clearly a sentient being of some kind. As soon as it appeared it roared in anger and moved into position to protect the corridor.

“Is that fire actually *alive*?” Twilight asked, astonished.

“Looks like it to me!” Applejack commented. “And I don’t think it’s very happy about our bein’ here.”

“Oh man,” Rainbow Dash said. “This is so awesome! So what do we do next?”

* * * * *

Less than a mile away, Carrot Top was still making her way toward Zecora’s secluded hut. The irritated garden pony was humming to herself, minding her own business, when she suddenly heard a tremendous roar behind her. She turned her head just in time to see a giant pillar of fire appear in the distance.

“Not *again*,” she grumbled. “No. Absolutely not! I refuse to be defeated. I am

going to make it to Zecora's hut, fire or no fire. You are *not* going to ruin my day again – you hear me? And if that fire monster happens to make it to Ponyville and goes and burns down my garden, I will make it rue the day it was born!”

But the giant pillar of savage fire did not hear the little pony's threat. It was focused on a more immediate problem: halting the progress of a certain purple alicorn who had opened a forbidden passage. It was time for the pillar to do what it was created to do: protect the Eye at all costs.

Because some ponies have embarrassing secrets that they do not want revealed.

Chapter 4: The Secret Tower

“**Yes!**” Crimson Star shouted. “My evil scheme is working! Soon the Eye will be mine, and I will rule over all of Equestria!”

Applejack looked down at him. “I don’t know if you noticed, but you’re kind of tied up and lying on the ground at the moment. Plus, there’s some sort of fire demon thing blockin’ the way to that passage. Just how, exactly, is this all a part of your plan?”

“All right, I’ll admit this is a *slight* deviation from what I had in mind – but still, it’s largely what I wanted. When I saw those runes I knew exactly what they meant, but I knew I could never cast the spell they described. What your purple friend has failed to realize is that the spell is *alicorn magic*. Only an alicorn can possibly get to the Eye.”

“Alicorn magic?” Twilight said, frowning. “But that would mean—”

Crimson Star interrupted. "So, obviously, the only way to open that passage was to trick an alicorn into doing it for me. Hence my plan to kidnap Fluttershy and manipulate Twilight into doing my bidding. It's true my plan to kidnap Fluttershy didn't *quite* go as I had planned, but overall it still worked. I am close to victory!"

Pinkie Pie spoke up. "See what I mean, Twilight? Villains only monologue when they think their evil schemes are working! I told you you'd get more out of him if you let him think he was winning."

"But you're still tied up," Applejack pointed out. "You ain't goin' nowhere."

"Oh Applejack. Dear, honest Applejack. I think you've forgotten something, haven't you?"

A moment later Crimson Star vanished, and the ropes that had been holding him fell to the ground. He reappeared a second later, standing on his hooves.

Applejack facehoofed. "Of course – you're a unicorn. Tying you up was a complete waste of time."

"No it wasn't," Pinkie said. "It advanced

the plot! That's important too, you know."

"Pinkie, you're so weird," Rainbow Dash replied.

Crimson Star cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, I have an Eye to recover."

The villainous pony looked up at the giant pillar of fire that was guarding the access to the secret passageway. He sneered at it. "You think you're really something, don't you? Well, try *this* on for size!"

The green unicorn shot a bolt of dark magic at the fire golem. The bolt struck the creature right between its eyes. It had no discernable effect – except to make the pillar of raging fire very, *very* angry. The creature bellowed in rage and turned white-hot. With one swift move it reached out a fiery appendage and kicked Crimson Star. The green pony sailed high into the air, screaming in fear and pain.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "I'll go save him from falling to his death. Again."

As Rainbow raced off to rescue him, the pillar of fire moved. It was still exceedingly angry and it made a beeline toward the falling green pony.

“Look!” Rarity exclaimed. “Twilight, the passage is unguarded!”

“But look where that fire thing is goin’!” Applejack interrupted. “It’s headed straight toward Ponyville!”

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “I think it’s actually headed straight toward Crimson Star. As long as he stays away from Ponyville, the fire probably will too. If he runs around here in circles then it’ll just burn down the Everfree Forest. So our homes are probably safe.”

“Burn down the Everfree Forest!” Fluttershy shrieked. “We can’t burn the forest down! All sorts of little woodland creatures live here!”

Rarity spoke up. “I think you mean ‘all sorts of horrifying nightmarish creatures’. But your point is still taken. We probably shouldn’t allow these woods to be burnt to the ground. Zecora does live here, after all.”

Twilight looked at the open passage and then back at the pillar of raging fire. “But I don’t know how to defeat that thing!” she said at last. “I’ve never even heard of a creature like that before. How in Equestria are we supposed to control it?”

Fluttershy spoke up. "We could use our friendship magic on it."

"I doubt that would work, dear," Rarity replied. "I think that only works on living creatures. You really can't become friends with, well, fire."

Applejack spoke up. "You know, we *could* use the Eye. Isn't it supposed to show the future? I bet someone like Twilight could use it to figure out what would send that thing back to wherever it came from."

"But isn't that dangerous?" Fluttershy asked. "I mean, Celestia *did* say not to use the Eye."

In the distance, the pillar of fire started burning down more trees. Twilight winced. "Honestly, I just don't see another way around it. We've *got* to use the Eye. The longer we fight that thing, the more forest it's going to burn to the ground. It'll only take a minute for me to run into that passage, grab the Eye, figure out what to do, and come right back. While I'm doing that, you girls can go and try to contain that thing. I'll catch up to you as soon as I can."

"Contain it!" Rarity exclaimed. "What do

you expect *us* to do? We're not fireponies!"

Pinkie Pie spoke up. "True, but I bet I've got some asbestos around here somewhere. We could—"

"Absolutely not!" Twilight interrupted. "That's not what I mean at all! All you need to do is keep Crimson Star away from Ponyville so he doesn't burn the city down. Have Rainbow Dash use his weather powers to put out whatever fires get started. I'll be back as soon as I can!"

As Twilight galloped into the open passage, Applejack turned to Pinkie. "What does your Pinkie sense tell you? Do you have anything *not* asbestos-related that we can use? Any tips, perhaps?"

Pinkie paused to think. "Well, for starters, the forest is on fire. We kind of need to get moving if we want to survive."

The pink pony pointed a hoof off to the right. A giant wall of raging fire was headed straight toward them.

Fluttershy stifled a scream. "I think this would be a really, *really* good time for us to leave."

"I'm right behind you!" Applejack said.

“The fire creature is over that way. Let’s see if Rainbow Dash can slow it down!”

* * * * *

The corridor that led into the side of the cliff was pitch black – lit only by the fire that raged just outside. Twilight used an illumination spell to light the passage and hurried up the tunnel as quickly as she could go. The floor and walls were roughly hewn, as if they had been formed in a great hurry. The hallway sloped upward, leading into the heart of the mountain.

As Twilight galloped down the poorly-illuminated tunnel, she began to realize that the tunnel was really, *really* long. It took her a full minute to finally reach the end of it. *Apparently whoever dug this shaft didn’t want to take any chances that someone might accidentally find it! This leads pretty deep into the mountain.*

When she reached the end of the corridor she found a giant, rusted iron door. Twilight reached out with her magic and gingerly opened it. The door creaked and

groaned, but after some determined effort on her part it gave way. The door was surprisingly heavy and stubborn. It was almost as if the door had a will of its own and didn't want to open.

Once inside, Twilight found the very last thing she expected to discover: a tower. The room she had entered was tall, circular, and had granite walls. A winding stone staircase led to another room high overhead. *So the book was right! The Eye of Destiny really was hidden in a tower. I guess the magic spell that guarded the entrance also hid this tower out of sight. That must have been a spell of tremendous power! There aren't many ponies who could have pulled something like this off. Surely it wasn't Starswirl after all, was it?*

Twilight raced up the staircase until she reached another door – this time a wooden one. Its paneling was dry and brittle; age had robbed it of much of its strength. Twilight gently used her magic to swing the door open, and then stepped inside.

This time she discovered a small, well-lit room. A pair of crystal windows let light stream in from the outside world. Twilight

saw that she was high above the cliff; far below she could see that the Everfree Forest was on fire. In the distance the pillar of fire was headed straight toward Ponyville.

Of course it is. Isn't that always how these things turn out?

Twilight looked around the room. To her delight, there were several desks scattered about that were covered in piles of ancient research notes. There was also some laboratory equipment resting on a table at the far end of the room. In the middle of the room, sitting on a stone pedestal, was a small round object about two inches in diameter. It glowed an eerie green color.

The purple pony cautiously walked around the pedestal, looking at it. There was no doubt about it: she had found the Eye of Destiny. But there was something about the ancient artifact that made her a bit nervous. Maybe it was because Celestia had warned her not to touch it, or maybe it was the fact that it was obviously created with dark magic and looked quite evil. Either way, something told her that *this* time she should not just blindly reach out and grab it and see what

happened next.

Maybe I should do a little bit more research before I do something that might doom all of Equestria. I need to know what I'm getting myself into.

Twilight walked over to the nearest desk and started going through the giant pile of research notes that the ancient, unknown wizard had left behind. She had some reading to do.

Fortunately, she had all the time in the world to figure this out. Or, at least, that's how it seemed in the calm of that hidden room. After all, her friends were on the case! What could possibly go wrong?

* * * * *

Rainbow Dash watched Crimson Star gallop off into the distance. "You could at least say thank you!" Rainbow shouted. "I did save your life, you know! Would it kill you to tip me a few bits?"

But the desperate green pony said nothing. He had only one thought: to run for his life. There was absolutely *no way* he was

going to hang around in a forest that was actually *on fire!* His mother had taught him well: when you see something burning, you move *away* from it – and he was going to do that as fast as his legs could carry him. He had no intention of being turned into a pile of ashes.

As Rainbow watched Crimson gallop away into the distance, her friends caught up with her. “Twilight’s gone to get the Eye,” Applejack told her. “She wants us to stall that fire thing until she can find a way to defeat it.”

Fluttershy spoke up. “I think she said she wanted Rainbow Dash to do all the work. You can make it rain, can’t you Dash?”

“Of course I can! Why didn’t I think of that before? One rainstorm, coming right up!”

The rainbow-colored pony shot high into the air. She quickly raced around the sky and assembled a few scattered clouds into one decent-sized raincloud. Rainbow then pushed the storm directly over the pillar of fire and began jumping on it. The cloud immediately turned dark gray and began to rain – directly onto the fire.

The fire golem looked up at the rainstorm

and bellowed in pain. It stretched out a fiery appendage and shot a bolt of raging fire directly at the cloud. Rainbow Dash managed to jump out of the way just in time, but her cloud was not so lucky. It was instantly vaporized.

“So you wanna play rough, do you?” Rainbow Dash said. “Well, try *this* on for size! If I can’t rain you out then I’ll *blow* you out!”

Rainbow Dash began flying in circles around the pillar of fire. As she increased her speed, a wind vortex began to form. In mere moments she had created a raging tornado, which coalesced right on top of the fiery pillar.

Once again the fire bellowed in pain. “It’s working!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

But she spoke too soon. A moment later the tornado itself caught fire. It then exploded, sending hundreds of firebolts in all directions. When the firebolts landed they set dozens of new sections of the Everfree Forest on fire.

The pillar then resumed its march toward the little green pony, who was still on his way toward Ponyville.

Fluttershy screamed. “There’s fire

everywhere!”

“Blast it,” Rainbow Dash muttered. “I was sure I had it that time.”

“What do we do now?” Applejack asked.

Rarity spoke up. “Isn’t the real problem that dreadful villain? If we could just persuade him to stop then Ponyville would be saved.”

Rainbow Dash frowned. “But that’s the problem! Every time I catch him he just teleports out of my grasp. He’s the most slippery customer I’ve ever seen.”

Pinkie spoke up. “Couldn’t you drop him and break his legs? *That* would slow him down!”

“Pinkie!” Fluttershy gasped. “That’s terrible!”

“Naw, that won’t work,” Rainbow Dash said. “He could still teleport even without his legs. Besides, don’t you think he knows what would happen to him if he *did* stop?”

Pinkie nodded. “That fire golem would fry him right to a crisp! Or he’d get caught in the forest fire. Or maybe he’d be eaten by the creatures that live in this forest. Why, he could meet his doom in all sorts of different

ways! I wonder which one he'd prefer."

Rarity shuddered. "But what do we do? Is there no way we can stop this dreadful apocalypse?"

"I'm on it," Rainbow Dash replied. "Fluttershy, go round up as many pegasus ponies as you can find and send them here. We've got to put out all of these forest fires before they spread any further. I'll keep working on it while you round them up. Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie – go stop that green pony. I don't care how you do it, but *stop him.*"

"I'm on it!" Pinkie said cheerfully. She began hopping through the burning forest.

As they ran through the woods, Applejack looked at the destruction around her. "I sure hope Twilight hurries up! If she doesn't then there won't be much left to save."

* * * * *

In another part of the forest, Carrot Top had left Zecora's hut and was hurrying back toward her home in Ponyville. She was hoping

to escape the forest before the Mane Six made any more progress toward saving the world – but she soon discovered that it was too late. There was fire *everywhere*.

The golden-colored pony raced through the trees, trying to find a safe passage through the blaze. She had only one thought: to get home and protect her garden.

Don't worry, little carrots, I'll save you! Just hang in there. No one is going to destroy you this time!

* * * * *

In the top of the hidden mystical tower, Twilight set down a stack of ancient scrolls. *This is fascinating! There is so much here that I can learn. I'll have to come back when the fate of Equestria isn't hanging in the balance. That is, assuming I can come back. Hmmm. You know, maybe I should just take some of these research notes with me. Or maybe all of them. I mean, it's not like anyone is using them, right?*

As Twilight began stuffing them into her saddlebag, she thought about what she had

just read. *It seems that the story in the book was mostly true. The Eye really was created to see into the future. Whoever created it was fascinated with Luna's magic. He seemed to believe that she could see into the future, and he was determined to recreate whatever gift Luna had. His only problem was that Luna had already been banished to the Moon, so he couldn't ask her how she did it. Did she use a spell, or was it a natural talent? He simply didn't know, and he certainly couldn't ask.*

But can Luna actually see the future? This wizard certainly thought she could, but I'm not sure he was right. Sure, Luna did a great job of warning Sweetie Belle that removing that thread from Rarity's headdress was a terrible idea, but you don't have to have magical powers to figure that out! I could have told Sweetie Belle the same thing. After all, anyone who knew Rarity could have predicted that she would have a complete meltdown if one of her hats fell apart while being shown to her biggest client! Maybe Luna's just smart.

Anyway, it looks like he eventually found something that worked, but he wasn't very

happy with it. Unfortunately, he didn't say why he was unhappy with the results. I guess the failure was so fresh in his mind that he didn't need to make any notes about it. Whatever it was, though, it doomed the whole project; he imprisoned the Eye in this tower and then left, never to return.

Twilight looked around to make sure that she had taken every scrap of paper in the room. *The only thing the notes didn't say was the name of the pony who created the Eye. I don't think it was Starswirl the Bearded. These notes are not in his handwriting, and this magic isn't his style. This was somepony else – somepony who didn't mind getting his hooves dirty with forbidden dark magic. I wish I knew who it was, but I guess it doesn't really matter.*

Twilight turned her attention back to the Eye. Thanks to the notes she had found, she now knew how to activate it. She remembered Celestia's warning not to use the Eye under any circumstances, but one glance outside told her that Equestria was in a lot of trouble. A whole team of pegasi was trying to put out fires that were rapidly

consuming the entire Everfree Forest. The pillar of fire was headed straight toward Ponyville and showed no signs of stopping. If Twilight ever needed to know the future, now was the time.

“Here goes nothing,” she said aloud. The purple pony reached out with her magic and activated the Eye.

Chapter 5: The Dark Future

The moment Twilight activated the Eye, the room around her vanished. She found herself standing in what appeared to be the black void of space.

A moment later the black space around her was filled with a thousand glowing yellow lines. All of the lines converged right where Twilight was standing, and a single line stretched into the darkness behind her. Ahead of her the lines branched into thousands of different paths – and then each path divided itself into more paths, and even more paths, until an infinite series of lines stretched off into the distance.

When Twilight looked at one of the lines she was startled to see it suddenly become much bigger. The line's larger size allowed her to realize what she was really looking at: each strand appeared to contain time itself. As

Twilight peered into one line she saw the pillar of fire head straight toward Ponyville. She watched Rainbow Dash soar high into the sky and hurl down toward it, attempting to create a sonic rainboom. Rainbow was evidently hoping that the shockwave would tear the fire golem apart.

But moments before she hit the speed required to ignite the rainboom, the column of fire blasted a bolt directly at her. Rainbow tried to dodge the attack, but she wasn't fast enough. The fire instantly vaporized her. Rainbow's ghost appeared just long enough to fly up to the fire and stick its tongue out.

"Aah!" Twilight screamed. "Ok, so that's one way *not* to fight it. Let's try another timeline."

Twilight zoomed out of that future and picked a different one. This time Rainbow Dash enlisted the help of dozens of other pegasi to create a giant water funnel. After sucking up the contents of a nearby lake, Dash carefully guided the funnel in the direction of the fire. She seemed to be hoping that a giant deluge of water would drown the pillar and put it out.

But as soon as the creature saw what she was doing, it shot out a volley of firebolts. The bolts struck the ponies in the funnel and instantly vaporized them. The funnel lost its integrity and collapsed. In the resulting chaos, Rainbow Dash was hurtled to the ground in a spectacular fashion and met her untimely demise. Once again, her ghost found it necessary to insult the fire golem before making its way into the afterlife.

“Ok, so that’s not going to work either,” Twilight muttered. “What else have we got?”

In the third future, Twilight and her friends united and attempted to use the magic of friendship to destroy the fire golem. But as soon as the ponies began to glow, the creature saw what they were doing. It shot out a volley of fiery projectiles directly at them. Everyone was able to dodge them – except for Twilight, who was incinerated on the spot. When Twilight’s ghost appeared it immediately made its way to the Canterlot library, where it began researching the afterlife (“Is there a book I should read about being a ghost?” her ghost asked the startled librarian) and compiling ghostly checklists.

When Twilight glanced further down the timeline she saw that her ghost spent *years* haunting that library, reading its books and performing research studies. The ghost even became the assistant librarian – the first dead librarian that Equestria ever had.

“I guess there could be worse fates,” Twilight said thoughtfully. “But that’s not really what I’m going for. If we can’t fight the fire with friendship then what *are* we supposed to do?”

Twilight checked timeline after timeline. In each timeline the fire won and at least one of her friends died (usually Rainbow Dash, who just would *not* leave that fire alone). Ponyville was burned to the ground every single time, and the Ponyville Insurance Company was put out of business by the rash of resulting claims. It appeared that the fire simply could not be defeated.

Twilight grew frantic. “I refuse to accept the idea that the fire has to win. There *has* to be a way! There is *always* a way!”

She zoomed out and looked at all of the timelines. “How is it possible that every single thing I try ends in total disaster? That doesn’t

make any sense at all! It's almost like—"

Twilight then gasped. She suddenly realized what was going on. "That's it! The Eye is—"

But she was interrupted by a noise behind her. Puzzled, Twilight turned around. That's when she realized that the single timeline that stretched off behind her did not continue infinitely into space. Instead it stretched back to a certain beginning point – and there was a pony standing there.

A pony who had noticed Twilight and who was galloping toward her.

Twilight froze. She suddenly remembered something important: the notes had told her that the Eye only had one view of time. Anyone who used the Eye was put into the same void – no matter *when* they used it. *That pony must be the one from a thousand years ago who created the Eye in the first place! This is bad – oh, this is very bad. What am I going to do now?*

* * * * *

Crimson Star was running for his life. He

heard a giggly voice shouting behind him, but he didn't care. All he knew was that the Everfree Forest was on fire and he wanted to get as far away from that fire as quickly as possible.

Ahead, in the distance, was Ponyville. Ponyville represented civilization and safety. Surely somepony in Ponyville would have a way to defeat that fire guardian. Then, once it was defeated, he could go and retrieve the Eye. It wasn't exactly according to plan, but he was willing to improvise.

He heard a voice shout out behind him again, but he ignored it. His personal safety was all that mattered. *If other people are having problems then they'll have to tend to them on their own! Can't they see I'm busy?*

A second later a large metal object whacked him on the side of the head. For a brief moment Crimson Star felt intense pain – and then he then fell to the ground, unconscious.

Pinkie Pie looked down at him. She was holding a bright pink frying pan in her front right hoof. "Well, I warned him to stop, and he didn't stop! He really should have stopped."

Applejack finally caught up to Pinkie. The apple farmer was completely out of breath. "How in Equestria can you run so fast?"

"I can convert candy to energy! And I eat a *lot* of candy."

"But it doesn't work that way," Applejack pointed out.

"It does for me," Pinkie replied.

Rarity called out to them. "It sounds like you two are having a simply delightful conversation, but don't you think we should do something about the fire?"

Applejack and Pinkie looked behind them. Even though Crimson Star was now unconscious, the pillar of fire had not stopped advancing toward Ponyville. It continued its march toward the helpless and very combustible city.

Applejack sighed. "I was really hopin' that once the villain pony was unconscious, the fire would realize its job was done and it would go back home. Apparently that ain't what it's after."

"Apparently not," Rarity agreed. "On the bright side, at least the pegasi are getting the forest fires under control. So there's that. But

I do think we're going to need Twilight's help in order to save our fair city. Where is she, anyway? Shouldn't she be here by now?"

Pinkie spoke up. "Oh, Twilight is time traveling at the moment. She'll be along later after she's done being traumatized."

"Time travelin'!" Applejack exclaimed. "But why would – that is, how could you even know–"

"It's all in the candy," Pinkie replied. With a quick move she suddenly produced a handful of rock candy out of thin air. "Here – want some?"

* * * * *

Twilight Sparkle nervously stood her ground and waited as the pony who made the Eye approached her. As it grew larger, Twilight realized that the pony was white. Then she noticed that it had wings and a horn – and a blue and pink tail that shimmered like the sun.

"Celestia?" Twilight exclaimed, astonished. "*You* made the Eye?"

Celestia ran up and grabbed Twilight with her front hooves. "You're from the future,

aren't you, purple pony? Tell me – is my sister safe? Was I able to save her? Is she alive?"

"Your sister Luna? Yes, she's perfectly fine! There's nothing to worry about. After the thousand years were over, she escaped the moon and tried to take over Equestria. That's when my friends and I used the Elements of Harmony to free her from the darkness that once consumed her. She's been ruling at your side ever since – only she's had to sit on the floor, because you never gave her a throne of her own to sit on. In fact, I spoke with her earlier today. Everything is fine."

Twilight suddenly noticed that Celestia was a mess. Her coat was matted and her mane was ragged and falling out. Celestia's eyes were bloodshot. She had a desperate look in her eye, and she had obviously not bathed in days.

When Celestia heard that her sister was safe, she looked at Twilight warily. "You're not lying to me, are you? Surely you would not dare to lie to the Princess of the Sun! Do not deceive me, little one!"

"I'm telling the truth!" Twilight insisted. "Besides, I would never lie to you. You're my

mentor and teacher! We've been close friends for years. Why in Equestria would I lie to you?"

"I just can't believe what you're saying is true," Celestia said wearily. She let Twilight go. "I've been in here for days, trying to find a path through time that would save my sister. Ever since I was forced to banish her to the moon I have been obsessed with finding a way to rescue her. I want her back so badly, purple pony. I miss her more than you can possibly know."

"My name is Twilight," the purple pony replied. "And I *do* know how much you've missed her – you told me. In the future. After she got back."

"I just don't see how that's possible. Every future I've seen in here only leads to disaster! There are no futures that end in success. There is only abject despair."

"Of *course*! What were you expecting? After all, you created this place with *dark magic*. All the Eye can do is show you disasters! It has no ability to show you what is *really* going to happen. The Eye is completely *useless*. What in Equestria were you thinking,

anyway? Don't you realize how bad it is to be dabbling in dark magic in the first place?"

"But I was desperate," Celestia protested. "I had to do it! How else could I ensure Luna's safe return?"

Twilight sighed. "But don't you see? I saw what happened when you were forced to banish Luna. She—"

Celestia interrupted. "What do you mean, you saw it? You're from the distant future! How could you possibly have seen it?"

"Oh, well, it's a long story. You see, at the time you and Luna had disappeared, and I was trying to find out what happened to you. Discord told me that Zecora—"

"*Discord?*" Celestia exclaimed. "But Luna and I turned him to stone! Did he escape?"

"No, he didn't. Well, he did at first, and then we imprisoned him again. But then you told us to let him go so we could try to reform him."

"That sounds... rather hazardous," Celestia remarked. "Apparently in the future I lose my mind. Were you able to reform him?"

Twilight thought about the Tirek incident. "Let's not go there. The point is, the reason

your sister became Nightmare Moon in the first place is because the darkness consumed her. So why in Equestria did you think that you could use *more darkness* to get her back? How was *that* ever going to work?"

"I see," Celestia replied slowly. "Then I have made a fool of myself, and created this cursed thing for nothing. Thank you for showing me the truth, purple pony. I'll lock this away so no one else will be led astray by it."

"Yeah, that doesn't work out so well," Twilight muttered.

Celestia suddenly noticed that Twilight was an alicorn. "So are you my daughter?"

"What? Oh, right – the wings and horn. No, I'm just your student. Or I was your student, until I ascended and became a princess."

"So you *became* a princess? You weren't born one?"

"No, I was born a unicorn. I became an alicorn by finishing Starswirl the Bearded's unfinished masterpiece."

"Really? But Starswirl doesn't have an unfinished masterpiece."

“Ah,” Twilight said. “Um, then I guess he *will* have one. One day.”

“Why wasn’t he able to finish it?”

Twilight frowned. “Should we even be having this conversation? Aren’t you even a little worried about changing the future?”

“I’m just a bit concerned, that’s all,” Celestia explained. “Did Starswirl die while he was writing it? Am I about to lose another good friend?”

“Oh! No, that’s not it. He wasn’t able to finish it because he didn’t know as much about friendship as I do. My knowledge of—”

“But Starswirl has lots of friends,” Celestia interrupted. “I’m his friend. Luna was his friend. So was Clover the Clever. Do you think he was some kind of recluse or something?”

“Um, well, of course not! But that’s what *you* told *me*. You’re the one who wanted me to study friendship! In fact, I send you friendship reports every week!”

“You send me *friendship* reports?” Celestia echoed. “I really *must* have gone senile in my old age. Did I actually read them, purple pony?”

“Of course you did!” Twilight said, stamping her hoof. “You told me that you loved them! I was your best student! And my name is *Twilight!*”

“The future sounds very strange,” Celestia remarked.

The timelines around them suddenly started to shake. “What’s that?” Twilight asked.

“The Eye is becoming unstable. In your time it must be very old. I believe it is about to collapse.”

“Is that why you told me not to use it?”

“How should I know? How could I possibly know why I did something that I won’t do for centuries? But regardless, the Eye is collapsing and we haven’t much time. You must tell me: how do I save my sister? What do I need to do?”

Twilight smiled. “It’s easy, actually. One day, not too many years before the time that your sister will escape from the moon, you’ll have a young purple unicorn as a student. You’ll teach her all sorts of things and she will spend all her time reading. When Luna’s imprisonment is over and it’s time for her to

escape, you'll tell that unicorn to stop reading her books and go to Ponyville to make some friends. She'll handle the rest from there."

"Got it," Celestia said. "I'll write that down somewhere so I won't forget it. And I need to tell you to send me friendship reports, correct? And then pretend to enjoy them?"

"You *did* enjoy them," Twilight said, irritated.

"So I need to be really convincing," she said thoughtfully.

Celestia finally relaxed. She smiled. "Thank you, purple pony. You have no idea what this means to me."

"The name is *Twilight*," she replied. "But wait – I still have a problem! I don't know how to save *my* friends."

"I saw that. My advice to you is to use the power of Carrot Top. She can handle it."

"What?" Twilight exclaimed. "But she's just an earth pony! She can't possibly–"

But it was too late. With a thunderous noise, the Eye collapsed. Twilight was thrown out of the void and found herself back in the hidden tower. The Eye was still in the pillar – but it was now a dull black color and had a

large crack in it. The Eye was dead.

Outside, Twilight saw the fire golem get ever closer to Ponyville. The lives of many ponies were in jeopardy, and Twilight *had* to find a way to save them – and now she realized she would have to do it *without* foreknowledge of the future.

“This is sure going to make for one whacked-out letter to Celestia,” Twilight muttered.

Chapter 6: Revenge of the Gardener

Twilight Sparkle grabbed the Eye, stuffed it into her overflowing saddlebag, and raced out of the tower. She galloped down the stone passageway and out of the mountain as fast as her hooves could carry her. As soon as she was in the open air she took to the skies and raced toward Ponyville.

By now the pegasus weather team had managed to put out all the fires in the Everfree Forest. The fire creature had not started any new fires; instead he was marching straight toward Ponyville. Rainbow Dash had gathered her team and was about to give them the order to attack when she saw Twilight hurrying through the sky.

“There you are!” Rainbow called out. “What took you so long? Did you get the Eye?”

“It’s a long story, and I don’t have time to explain. There is only one way to defeat the

fire golem. What we need to do is—”

Twilight paused. Was she *really* going to do this? What if Celestia was joking – or insane? After all, she *had* been awake for several days without getting any sleep, and she seemed a bit weird. Was Twilight really going to risk it all on the advice of a potentially crazy, sleep-deprived pony?

For that matter, how did Celestia even know Carrot Top’s name? And why did she keep getting my name wrong? Was she just out of her mind? Was she bitter because I freed Luna and she could not? Or—

As Twilight hovered in the air, lost in thought, Fluttershy reached out and poked her. “Is something the matter? That fire creature is getting awfully close to town. What do you need us to do?”

Rainbow Dash spoke up. “You need me to use my sonic rainboom, don’t you? Its sheer awesome-ness will scatter it into a million pieces!”

“No!” Twilight screamed. Then she stopped herself. *The Eye only showed dark futures. Rainbow Dash is not going to be vaporized – well, probably not. But still...*

Twilight looked at her friend. “Rainbow, stop and think! Suppose your sonic rainboom works and manages to break the creature into thousands of pieces. Those are pieces of *fire* we’re talking about. Doesn’t that mean your rainboom would start thousands of fires? Is that *really* what we want to achieve here?”

“I guess not,” Rainbow said reluctantly.

“There is only one thing to do. I need you and the pegasus team to stay right here and be ready for anything. If what I’m about to do goes wrong then you’re going to have a lot of fires to put out.”

“But what are you going to do?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Just trust me,” Twilight replied. “Wait right there!”

* * * * *

Carrot Top raced toward her home as fast as she could go. In the distance she saw her worst nightmare: a giant creature that was made of pure fire was heading straight for town. She knew that it was going to burn down her garden. She just *knew* it.

Normally she would just sigh and accept her fate – but *not today*. This time Carrot Top was prepared. If the six mighty heroes of Equestria couldn't be bothered to save her precious carrots, then she would do it herself! If an apple farmer could save the day then there was no reason why a carrot farmer couldn't do the same. Applejack had nothing on her!

Well, except for experience, and strength, and friends in high places, and magical friendship powers. Applejack *did* sort of have all of those things. But Carrot Top had something even better – at least, that's what Zecora had told her.

Carrot Top reached a hoof into her saddlebag (and she did it while she was still running, which was quite a trick!), grabbed the potion that Zecora had sold to her, and drank the entire thing. She then smashed the glass bottle onto the ground for dramatic effect.

I sure hope this works, Carrot Top thought. *I'm pretty sure Zecora has a no-refunds policy*. As the potion took effect, Carrot Top suddenly felt *really* strange. *Boy*,

did that taste bad. I am going to be soooo sick.

Carrot Top pushed that thought out of her head and redoubled her speed. "I'm coming to save you, little carrots!" she cried out. "Just hang in there a little longer!"

* * * * *

Twilight zoomed to the ground and landed beside the unconscious Crimson Star. Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie were standing beside him.

"There you are!" Rarity called out. "Whatever took you so long?"

"Do you know what we need to do?" Applejack asked.

Twilight levitated the unconscious green pony. "I sure do. Everypony – follow me!"

The group of friends then raced toward Ponyville.

"Twilight," Rarity said, as the four friends galloped along the road, "I don't mean to be critical, but are you sure we're supposed to be running *toward* the city? Don't we want to lure the fire away from town?"

"Not this time," Twilight replied.

“Can you at least tell us what you’re planning?”

The purple pony groaned as she tried to gallop and carry Crimson Star at the same time. “I’d rather not. If you knew what I was about to do, you might try to stop me.”

“I see,” Rarity said at last. “So we’re attempting one of *those* kind of plans.”

“Sure looks like it,” Applejack commented.

On the outskirts of the city Twilight stopped at a well-maintained house. Beside the house was a beautiful, enormous field of carrots. The plants were utterly pristine; there wasn’t single weed in sight.

Applejack looked around. “Twilight, why are we here? Ain’t we supposed to be *avoidin’* this place? Do you know what Carrot Top will do if we damage her garden again?”

“Oh yes!” Twilight said. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

Twilight began shaking the unconscious green pony while he was still being held in the air. “C’mon, Crimson Star. Wake up! I’ve got something for you!”

Crimson Star began to stir back to life.

“Oh, my head. What hit me?”

“I did!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. “I got a direct hit – and on my first try, too! I’d call it beginners luck, but I’ve actually had lots of practice whacking things with that pan. It’s kind of a family tradition.”

Twilight unceremoniously dumped Crimson Star into Carrot Top’s field. “Hey, Crimson. Guess what? I’ve got something for you.”

“Do you?” Crimson replied. The green pony struggled to his hooves. “Let me guess – you’re here to dish out more pain and suffering?”

Twilight used her magic to open her saddlebag. She reached inside, took out the Eye, and tossed it to him. “There you go! You wanted the Eye and now you’ve got it. Congratulations! Your evil scheme has worked. Nice going!”

Crimson caught the Eye with his own magic and looked at it in astonishment. “You mean – but – what? You’re just giving it to me? Just like that?”

Twilight nodded. “Of course! That was the last step in your plan, right? Isn’t that

what you wanted? Isn't this what you had planned all along?"

"I suppose," Crimson said suspiciously. "I just don't understand why you're doing this. I agree this certainly does look like the Eye, but I think something is wrong with it. Is it broken?"

"It is what it is. You wanted it and you got it – there are no refunds or exchanges. Have fun!"

Crimson Star was truly puzzled. He had to admit that the Eye was genuine; he could still detect traces of latent magic in it. But why would Twilight just give it to him? Why would—

Crimson Star then heard a roar of anger behind him. He turned around and saw that the fire guardian was rapidly advancing in his direction. The guardian had discovered that he had the Eye, and it also knew that the Eye was damaged. It was out for revenge.

"I don't care!" Crimson Star shouted back at it. "I'm not going to give up the Eye – not after going through so much to get it. It's mine, do you hear? Mine!"

"So *you're* the one behind all this!" an

angry voice cried out behind him. Before Crimson could even turn around, he felt two hooves smack into his flank. The green pony went sprawling across the garden.

Carrot Top began shouting at him. "I have absolutely *had* it with you, you miserable excuse for a pony! So it's not enough that you came here last night and trampled down a row of my precious, prize-winning carrots. Oh no. Now you're luring a giant pillar of fire here to burn my entire garden down!"

By now the fire guardian was quite close. Crimson Star tried to teleport away, but Carrot Top was too fast for him. She could feel the energy from Zecora's potion rushing through her veins, and she moved at lightning speed. She kicked Crimson Star again, knocking him off his hooves and driving him right into the dirt. He struggled to get away, but every time he moved she kicked him yet again.

"I am *tired* of being nice," she screamed, as she whacked him across a row of carrots. "I am *tired* of having my plants turned into ashes. I am tired of watching morons like you thoughtlessly destroy all of my hard work. I

have had all I am going to take, and *I'm not going to take any more!*"

As Carrot Top's wrath came to a boil, she began to glow a brilliant gold color. She levitated about a foot off the ground.

Crimson Star started at her in amazement. "How are you doing that? You're an earth pony, not a unicorn! There is no way—"

Carrot Top was now so angry that she was on the verge of catching fire. The glow around her turned incandescent. A beam of pure irritation – of unadulterated rage – arced out of her and soared high into the air. The beam then curved and aimed itself straight at the fire guardian.

The fire guardian looked up at it and quickly decided that its work was done. Since the Eye was dead there was nothing left to protect, and that meant there was absolutely no point in batting this deranged gardener. After all, if the golem won, what would it get in return – carrots? What in Equestria would a column of fire do with carrots?

So the pillar of raging fire vanished.

But Carrot Top's energy burst did not stop.

In fact, it *could not be stopped*. It continued on its course – only, since the fire guardian was no longer there to absorb it, it instead smashed down upon the head of Crimson Star.

On the bright side, the column of irritated gardener energy instantly rejuvenated Carrot Top's garden. The plants that had been destroyed were magically reborn, better than ever.

On the negative side, Crimson Star was instantly reduced to a pile of ashes. He was not at all pleased about this development.

When Carrot Top saw that the threat was over, she descended back onto the ground. Her glow faded. "Let that be a lesson to you," she said to the pile of ashes.

"Point taken," the ashes replied. "My apologies."

Twilight looked at the pile of ashes. "Is he dead?"

Pinkie spoke up. "No, he's fine. It's just a flesh wound! I'm sure the nice ponies at the hospital can fix him up good as new."

"If you say so," Twilight said, unconvinced.

After Carrot Top left her garden and went into her home, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy

landed beside them. "That was totally awesome!"

"But it was kinda strange," Applejack commented. "How did Carrot Top do that? I didn't think earth ponies could use magic!"

Twilight shrugged. "*You're* an earth pony, and we've seen you shoot out beams of magic before. Maybe it's just one of those things that happens when it needs to happen."

"But I'm one of the Elements of Harmony," Applejack protested.

Pinkie Pie spoke up. "Maybe Carrot Top is the Element of Gardening!"

"Or the Element of I-Won't-Take-It-Any-More," Rainbow replied, grinning. "Man, did you see that? Carrots was totally awesome! Not as awesome as me, of course, but still pretty awesome."

"At least the forest fires have been put out," Fluttershy commented. "All those poor woodland creatures are safe now."

Rarity turned to Twilight. "So what happened back there in the tower? You never did get a chance to tell us."

"It's a long story. Why don't we all come back to the castle? I'll explain everything over

a nice cup of tea.”

* * * * *

It took about an hour for Twilight to get everything cleared up. The pile of ashes was sent to the hospital, and the doctors promised to do whatever they could. The weather pegasi returned to their business (which, if Rainbow Dash was any indication, consisted mainly of taking naps). Twilight returned to her castle and had Spike send Celestia and Luna’s guard ponies back home. Finally, since Twilight was out of tea, Pinkie Pie provided popcorn and the group sat down to talk in Twilight’s library.

As they all munched on candied popcorn, Rarity spoke up. “So it was actually *Celestia* who created the Eye,” she said thoughtfully. “I suppose she was so distraught over the loss of her sister that she was willing to do anything to get it back – even dabble in dark magic. She probably thought she could recreate her sister’s gift.”

“And she *is* a powerful magic user,” Twilight pointed out. “She certainly had the

ability to make something like that.”

“But why did she lie about it? The book made it sound like the Eye was created by some anonymous *male* wizard. It certainly never hinted that it was crafted by the Princess of the Sun!”

Applejack spoke up. “Maybe Celestia was embarrassed about the whole thing. After all, she *had* made a fool of herself and all. I wouldn’t exactly want to sign my name to that mess either.”

“But she could have told *us*,” Rainbow Dash said. “We talked to her about it earlier today, remember? But instead of being honest she trotted out that tired ‘I knew this friend...’ line. It would have been *really* helpful to know that she was responsible. And why did she tell us not to use it, anyway? Since she talked to Twilight in the past, she must have known that Twilight wasn’t going to listen. Right?”

“I don’t know,” Twilight replied. “Maybe after a thousand years Celestia just forgot.”

Rarity spoke up. “But she followed your instructions! Surely *that’s* proof that she remembered.”

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Not really. Celestia also *lost the Elements of Harmony*, remember? Twilight told Celestia that she used the Elements to free Luna, and yet Celestia still didn't keep track of where they were. When Nightmare Moon appeared we had to go out and find them! Does that sound like the actions of a pony who's following a thousand-year-old master plan? Personally, I think she's just getting senile."

"Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy said reproachfully. "That's *not* very nice. Celestia's advice to stay away from the Eye was *not* all bad. If we had done that, none of those terrible fires would have gotten started in the first place. Just think of all those poor trees that got burnt to ashes."

"Not to mention the villain," Rainbow Dash replied. "But those fires weren't *our* fault. Crimson Star is the one who shot that fire creature and got it all angry and everything. It was acting pretty cool until then. If you ask me *he's* the one who caused the problem! Maybe when the fire got hit with dark magic it became corrupted or something."

“That’s certainly possible,” Twilight agreed. “I do find it hard to believe that Celestia would create something that was *that* dangerous and out of control. I just wish Celestia had told us it was there! If I’d known about its existence I definitely wouldn’t have cast the spell that was written in those runes.”

Pinkie Pie spoke up. “Maybe she forgot about the fire guardian. After all, it *had* been a thousand years. A pony can forget a lot of things in that much time!”

“So what friendship lesson did we learn from this?” Twilight asked.

Applejack thought for a moment. “Don’t awaken fire demons from their eternal slumber?”

Rarity spoke up. “Avoid traveling back in time and talking to your mentor?”

“I look totally awesome fighting fires?” Rainbow offered.

“Never cast strange, scary spells?” Fluttershy said.

“I got it!” Applejack exclaimed. “The moral of the story here is to avoid gettin’ Carrot Top angry. Whatever you do, don’t damage her carrots. It makes her a bit testy.”

Twilight sighed. “Sure, why not. Let’s go with that. After all, our work here is done. The Eye has been destroyed, Crimson Star is in the hospital being carefully glued back together, Carrot Top’s garden is safe and sound, and – most importantly – my book has been restored to its original condition.”

The alicorn looked at *The Eye of Destiny* fondly. “Knowing that Celestia wrote that book really puts a new spin on things. I think I’d like to read it again. Would any of you girls–”

Rainbow Dash interrupted. “No, no, that’s ok. I’ve got to go – um, do things.”

“As do I,” Rarity said.

“I really need to check on my animal friends,” Fluttershy said. “They’re probably still scared about the fire.”

“But Fluttershy, you haven’t had a chance to hear it performed yet!” Twilight protested.

Applejack spoke up. “Then she’s one of the lucky ones. There is no way I would ever agree to listen to that book again. Once is enough to last a lifetime.”

“Aw, c’mon, you guys!” Pinkie Pie begged. “I didn’t think it was *that* bad.”

Rainbow Dash gulped. “It was *totally* that

bad. See you later!”

The group rushed out of the room, leaving Pinkie and Twilight alone. “I guess it’s just us,” Twilight remarked. “Oh well. Shall we begin?”

As Pinkie Pie settled into a chair with a nice large cup of coffee, Twilight began to read.