

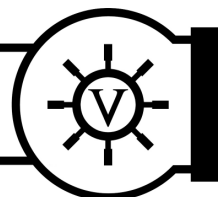
It's a Dangerous Business, Going Out Your Door

Jetfire

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PONY FICTION VAULT



The day which would go so wrong started as so many days did in Ponyville: simple and pleasant. It was, in fact, a holiday – Plowpony's Day, a day set aside since olden times to honor the hard work done by the earth ponies that tilled Equestria's endless farmlands. As such, most of Ponyville's businesses were closed, and the great bulk of the population had gathered in the radiant green parkland just beyond the city gates for a mass picnic and celebration.

Twilight Sparkle had of course enjoyed Plowpony's Day before – it was a day off from classes at University in Canterlot – but never in the company of such good friends as she had now. She had never, in fact, celebrated the day with the earth ponies for which it had been created. It was an entirely different experience from the lazy day off she was used to. She had been roused early by frantic beating on her door, Pinkie Pie insisting that she come out and help with the preparations for the day of celebration. She had breakfasted at a long communal table in the company of her friends and nearly every other able-bodied pony in Ponyville. Then had followed a long stretch of physical labors: baking bread, plucking hay, inflating balloons, making kites (apparently flying them was a Plowpony's Day tradition), constructing a stage out in the park, hanging up streamers, even marking out dance grounds for the dance competition! Twilight had assisted in them all, having much greater success than her disastrous attempts at helping during Winter Wrap Up. She had of course been helped by all of her wonderful friends, not just Pinkie Pie but Rarity, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy as well.

Now it was the stroke of noon, and the park was ready to receive its multitudes. From old mares to young colts to giggling fillies and strapping stallions, young ponies, parents and their foals, all the townspies had come out to eat good food and frolic in the warm spring sun. Twilight and her friends were nestled under the shade of an old oak tree that towered above them, its branches letting in dapples of golden sunlight amid a haze of wild green. They were lazily munching their way through a simple lunch of bread, hay, and apples. Pinkie Pie had started on dessert early: grilled sugarcane surged and splashed through her mouth as she chewed. Fluttershy, lying in the grass by the tree trunk, was trying to convince her small rabbit, Angel, to eat some hay, to little avail. Rainbow Dash was perched in the branches of the tree, gazing down at her friends with one eye while the other surveyed the sky for any sign of troubling weather. Applejack sat near the bushel of apples she had brought, watching with some amusement as the two remaining friends were engaged in an attempt at... education.

"Rarity, you can do it! I know you can. Stop being a fear-filly and give it a try!" Twilight Sparkle said with a smile. Her deep purple eyes shone with excitement.

Rarity pawed the ground with a front hoof and flinched away. "Now, darling, I appreciate your trying to help me, really I do, but I'm just not cut out for it. I'm no sorceress."

"Rarity, I keep telling you – teleporting isn't something you need special talent in magic for. Okay... my talent makes it easier for me, but every unicorn can do it! You just need some practice. Let me help you work on it."

The white unicorn blinked her brilliant blue eyes and betrayed a nervous expression. "I'm just... I've no particular need to learn to teleport, Twilight. There's no place I'm in that large a hurry to get to. And if I ever *am* in such a hurry – why, I have you."

Twilight shook her head amusedly. Her lavender coat was brilliant in the sunlight, and her cutie mark – a pink sparkle surrounded by small white stars – actually shone in the warm white rays. "Rarity, I'm not always going to be around to help you. And you know doing magic is like doing anything else – the more you practice it, the better you get. Learning to teleport will help all your other magic too!"

"Well..." Rarity wavered.

"Look, you already know telekinesis magic, right? Teleportation works on the same principle. Instead of moving something else, you're moving yourself – and instead of moving through the air, you're moving through space and time. Easy!"

Rarity gave Twilight a very despairing look.

With another smile, Twilight trotted close to Rarity until she was right in front of her. The lavender unicorn touched her horn to her friend's, and suddenly their minds were joined. *Rarity, this is actually very simple, especially for a creative pony like yourself. You've got a good imagination, right?*

Rarity was caught off-guard. She was uncomfortable when other ponies poked around her thoughts, even though she had long since learned to trust Twilight with them. *Well, I happen to think I do*, she thought. She fluffed herself a bit. *I have a great reputation, you know.*

Right, Twilight's thoughts echoed through her mind. Rarity then found herself looking into Twilight's mind, where a simulacrum of the lavender unicorn was standing in a field. A small area of the field was fenced off with white picket wood. *Teleportation magic relies on your ability to use your imagination. You have to put yourself mentally in a place before you can put yourself there physically. First, a unicorn imagines the place where she*

wants to go – she forms a picture of it in her mind. The image of Twilight in the field zoomed in on the fenced-off area. Then, the unicorn imagines herself in that place. A flickering ghost of Twilight faded in and out of the fenced-off area. The real-fake Twilight's horn began to glow, sending off a brilliant shower of sparks. Suddenly, she vanished in a burst of white light, and with another burst of white light appeared inside the fenced-off area. The real Twilight Sparkle in the real world pulled her horn apart from Rarity's, and each pony was once more alone in her head. "So like I said – it's all in the mind. That's the hard part. Once you can expertly picture yourself in places, you just need to channel that mental image through your horn, and the spell almost performs itself."

Rarity sighed. "Twilight, darling, as much as you exalt my powers of imagination – and rightly so, I like to think – there's a great deal of difference between imagining how a dress will look on a pony and imagining oneself suddenly appearing in a separate place."

"Here," the lavender unicorn said, trotting over to the picnic. She plucked a napkin from a stack and walked a few feet away into the field. She set the napkin down and looked back toward Rarity. "Just start with short distances. Teleport from where you are right now to this napkin."

"Come on, Rarity, do it!" Rainbow Dash called down from the tree. "It'll be awesome!"

Rarity noticed all her other friends were looking expectantly at her. Even Fluttershy was smiling and nodding. She swallowed hard. "Well... I suppose I can give it a whirl."

"Just use your horn, and picture yourself standing on top of the napkin," Twilight said. "Think hard – really concentrate on standing on top of the napkin. Focus your entire mind on it!"

Rarity narrowed her eyes and put the napkin squarely in her sights. She began to focus, thinking of what she would see and where she would be if her hooves were on top of the napkin. Her horn began to glow. Rarity concentrated harder, thinking of nothing else but *being on top of the napkin*. Sparks began to shoot from her horn, and the white light began to pulse in waves down her flank.

ZAPOOM!

A small mushroom cloud of white energy rose above the treetops. Rarity lay flat on her belly, her perfectly-coiffed purple mane frizzing in every conceivable direction. Her tail

was likewise sprung into coils every which way. A small burn circle cut through the grass beneath her.

"Well... that was a good first try!" Twilight said.

Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie burst out laughing, Dash cackling so violently that she actually fell out of the tree. She hit the ground in a crash of branches and leaves and rolled over on her back, clutching her sides as she laughed.

"Golly, Rarity, you're not gonna be teleportin' anywhere but the doctor's office like that!" Applejack chuckled.

"Hmph!" Rarity huffed, getting to her hooves. Her horn shimmered again, and the saddlebags that she'd piled by the tree flipped open. A mirror and hairbrush floated from its contents, the former stopping in front of Rarity while the latter began to brush her mane back into its normal curled state.

"Come on, Rarity," Twilight said, trotting over to her. "Every unicorn misses their first teleport. It's nothing to get discouraged about. If you just keep trying, I'm sure you'll get it!"

"I have *got* about as much as I'm willing to tolerate, thank you very much," Rarity said. "You University unicorns may be able to master teleportation, but I've got no need of it. It just seems too... dangerous."

"Yeah!" Pinkie Pie chimed in, finally finished with her sugarcane. "Think of all the nasty accidents you could have if you teleported wrong! You could teleport different body parts different directions –"

Rarity's eyes bulged.

"Pinkie, that's not –" Twilight began

"You could teleport yourself right into a wall –"

"That doesn't –"

"You could teleport right where somepony else is walking –"

"There are safeguards –"

"You could even teleport waaaaay up into the sky and come *crashing* down!"

"PINKIE PIE!" Twilight yelled. Pinkie blinked at her, then gave her a massive grin. Sighing, Twilight turned back to Rarity. The other unicorn was staring into space, eyes wide and unblinking. "Rarity, the Equestrian Ministry of Transport puts a blanket teleportation assistance spell over all of Equestria. It prevents... accidents. They're extremely rare."

Rarity slowly turned her eyes to Twilight. "... but not impossible?"

Twilight smiled through her teeth. "Well..."

"*Well?*"

"I mean it's not *unheard of*..."

"Aah!" Rarity shrieked. "That does it! No more teleporting!" She threw her mane back over her shoulder, stuck her snout in the air, and walked purposefully back toward the tree.

Sighing, Twilight trotted back to her friends and laid down in the grass. "Pinkie, why did you have to scare her like that?"

Pinkie shrugged. "I dunno! I just figured I'd be honest, and you have to admit there are all sorts of *crazy* things that could happen to somepony trying to teleport!" She thought for a moment. "It sounds fun! I wish I could try it!"

"Well I think Rarity's wise to wanna keep her hooves on the ground, so to speak," said Applejack, plucking another apple from the basket with her mouth and taking a careful bite of it. "Twilight, you big-city types may get a lotta use out o' teleportin' every which place, but here in Ponyville we like to take our sweet time gettin' places. As my Aunt Cider used to say, it ain't the destination that's important – it's the journey."

"Wow, that's *so* true," said Rainbow Dash, stretching her legs out and yawning. "Especially around here in Ponyville. There's only so many times you can see something new in this town – but *getting* places! There's a new adventure every time you take off!"

"See? Rainbow's got the right idea," Applejack said. She raised an eyebrow. "'Least I think she does."

Twilight narrowed her eyes. "Teleportation is a useful enough skill that I think every unicorn should learn it. Rarity just needs some practice, is all. Every unicorn does at first. She'll get the hang of it in no time." Twilight didn't mention that most unicorns started learning to teleport when they were a few years younger than Rarity's current age. Given the white unicorn's painstaking attention to detail, Twilight felt she could pick up the nuances of teleporting without much trouble. If only she had some help... "Oh! I remember!" She rose to her hooves and galloped off.

"Hey, silly! Where are you going?" Pinkie Pie called after her.

"I just need to get something from the library!" Twilight called. "I'll be right back!"

"Be sure to get back in time for the line-dancin'!" Applejack yelled. She couldn't be sure if Twilight had heard her or not. "That filly can get so excitable sometimes..."

"Like you said, she grew up in the big city," said Dash, "where there's always something happening." The sky-blue pegasus rolled over onto her belly, propping her head up in one hoof. "Must be nice, sometimes."

"Well, I'd never want to be anyplace but right here in Ponyville," Applejack retorted, taking another big bite of her apple. "I'm not the adventurous type."

At the trunk of the oak tree, Rarity had just finished brushing her restored hair. Fortunately, she always took very good care of it, and it sprang easily back into shape. Fluttershy watched her work, her own long pink mane pooling on the grass around her. "You know, Rarity," she said softly, "Twilight just wants to help you."

"Oh, darling, I *know* that," Rarity said, keeping her eyes on the mirror as she brushed the ends of her tail. "But Twilight has got to understand that not every unicorn is as... ambitious as she is. Not in the *way* she is, anyway. I've got no grand designs to be a great sorceress, like that wretched Trixie; I want to make my mark designing the *crème de la crème* of Equestrian fashion. I do one thing," Rarity brushed the last of her tail with a flourish, then sent her mirror and brush spiraling around each other in an artful spin, "and I do it well." The two tools spun themselves back into her saddlebag, which was closed with further magic.

Meanwhile, Twilight had reached the great window-pocked tree that was Ponyville's library, her home for the duration of her extended stay in the lovely town. Pushing the door open with her head, she trotted through the ground floor to a door cut between two enormous bookshelves. Twisting it open with magic, she walked inside and nudged the

fireflies in the little lamp to waking. As soft yellow light filled the small room, she began to scan the numerous boxes piled from the wooden floor up to the gnarled tree-trunk ceiling. These were a few of the belongings and supplies she had brought with her from Canterlot when she had decided to stay in Ponyville, and she had yet to unpack them. Among them, she knew, was a box of magical supplies from her younger days at the great University. All she had to do was find it. She used her magic to levitate the boxes one by one, passing them in front of her eyes to examine what had been written on the side. "Not this one... not this one... aha!" Twilight exclaimed as she found the box she sought. The medium-sized cardboard box floated out of the closet, the others returned to their stacked places. Twilight closed the closet door and then pried open the box, rummaging through it with her hooves and looking for what she knew was in there... somewhere. "Ah, here it is!" she said. Just what she'd been looking for, right in the same cyan-colored tube. "Lube!"

Mystical lubrication, designed to increase the 'slickness' of unicorns as they teleported through space-time. It was an excellent aide for new teleporters, taking some of the strain off of their magical powers and allowing them to spend more energy focusing on destination control. She unscrewed the cap with her magic, then raised the tube to her nose and took a sniff. It was still good – she'd kept it tightly sealed, and it hadn't separated out at all. That was quite fortunate: teleportation lubricant had incredibly potent magic woven into it, and when the stuff expired it could be dangerous. She made sure to screw the cap back on again –

"Twilight?" Spike's voice called down from the upper level of the library. The small purple-and-green dragon waved at her as he came down from the bedroom. "What are you doing here? I thought you were at the festival in the park."

"Oh, I am – er, I was," said the lavender unicorn. She walked out of the closet, closing the door behind her. "I just needed to pick up something for Rarity. I'm about to go back." She gave him an eager look. "Are you sure you don't want to come? It's going to be a lot of fun! There will be dancing and apple-bobbing and even karaoke!"

Spike raised an eyebrow at her. "No thanks, Twilight. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"All those reports for the Princess, I know. I don't know why she's saddled you with the soil studies; it's not even your job."

"Probably because I can get the results to her instantly," Spike said with a shrug. "I don't mind – it means I get to hang out with Big Macintosh. Do you know how refreshing it is

to pal around with another guy, after all you..." he stopped. He grinned. "Not that you girls aren't... I mean that I have a perfectly good time with..." He sighed. "Sorry."

Twilight laughed. "No offense taken, Spike. I understand. Go get some rest; I'll be back later this evening."

"Roger Wilco," Spike said, giving her the thumbs up. He turned on his heel and began to trudge back up the stairs.

Twilight was about to head for the door when a thought struck her: direct demonstration was always the best method of instruction. What better way to show Rarity that teleportation was perfectly safe than to teleport right in front of her? Twilight Sparkle thus began to focus on her destination, the soft cool grass beneath the oak tree in the park. Her horn began to glow and spark as she readied the teleport spell. She made all the necessary caveats and precautionary measures – a Shift spell to automatically move her if there was some other object in her way, a Whole spell to keep her body together in the event of unstable terrain – then grabbed the tube of mystical lubricant in her mouth.

Unfortunately, in talking to Spike, Twilight had forgotten to finish screwing the cap on the tube. It hung loosely over the opening, exposed to the air becoming rapidly charged with Twilight's magical energies.

Rainbow Dash's head was craned far back, peering up intently into the heavens. She always kept an eye on the sky when she was bored, trying to find some cloud, some threat of rain or shade that she could use as an excuse to blast off with her wings at full speed. She hated staying still any longer than she had to, except when she was tired. She blew a tuft of her short, rainbow-striped mane out of her face. "Is Twilight coming back yet?"

"I don't see her," said Pinkie Pie, glancing up from her bag of gummy worms. Pinkie Pie's love of junk food hadn't been deterred at all by the Plowpony's Day tradition of cooking all the food in wood-burning ovens on-site. She'd just had to fill her saddlebags with processed treats from her home at Sugarcube Corner. She had a batch of cupcakes ready to go after she was finished with these, though she hoped at least one of her friends would ask her for one of them. As much as she loved eating sweets, she loved even more when others ate sweets with her; it doubled the tasty goodness. It was like a little party –

ZAPOOOOOOMMM!

The explosion was so powerful it rattled the bones in everypony's chest. Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy were on their feet in moments; Rainbow Dash was in the air,

flapping up to see past the crowds suddenly silent and confused. A tall cloud of shimmering energy was rising over Ponyville, coming somewhere from the center of town...

"The library!" Dash exclaimed.

Fluttershy yelped. "Twilight!"

Dash blasted through the air, leaving a rainbow trail in her wake. She felt sick in her stomach: she'd wanted an excuse to fly around, but not this! What if Twilight was hurt? Fluttershy followed behind her. Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Applejack ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

Rainbow Dash, being far and away the fastest of the five, got there first, and drew back in shock at what she saw. An entire side of the large tree that housed Ponyville's library had been blown out, the thick trunk curled back and charred black by the force of whatever sort of explosion had just occurred. Small bits of book paper were drifting down through the air like snowflakes, an oddly calming feature amid the signs of so much violence. Fluttershy came flapping up beside Dash, glancing up just in time for a charred piece of parchment to alight on her nose. "Oh," she said softly, "Twilight... is going to be sad to see so many books destroyed."

"Twilight..." Dash whispered. "*Twilight!*" She flew through the hole into the library, coughing at the paper dust and smoke. The force of the explosion seemed to have blown every book in the library off its shelf – they covered the floor, lying in heaps and piles. Spinning briefly in a circle, Rainbow Dash bent down onto the pile right beneath her and began digging, hurling books and pieces of books in all directions. Fluttershy, breezing in through the hole, gasped; she was momentarily transfixed in shock by the sight of the destruction. "C'mon!" Dash snapped over her shoulder at her. "Help me!" The butter-yellow pegasus awoke from her trance and quickly began shifting books beside her sky-blue compatriot.

Meanwhile, the three landlocked ponies were running through the town square at top speed; even Pinkie Pie had foregone her usual hopping gait. A blur of yellow and bright red came streaking perpendicular to their advance before pulling alongside Applejack, who was leading the way. "Applejack, what happened? What's wrong?" Apple Bloom asked, panting from the exertion of keeping up with the bigger, longer-legged ponies.

"There's been an accident! We think Twilight might be hurt!" Applejack told her younger sister, barely sparing a glance down at her before turning her head back to the front. They were almost at the library... and sure enough, it was smoking and wounded from obvious damage. The four ponies skidded to a halt, catching their breaths in the middle of the town square.

Rarity stepped forward and lifted her head. "This damage all came from magic – I can feel it. Oh, dear, oh, dear, this is terrible!"

Applejack led the rest of the way through the door and into the chaos of the ruined library. By now, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy had exposed a few spots of the floor, albeit by hurling books in every direction and creating bigger piles around those spots. "I

haven't found Twilight yet!" Dash cried at them as they entered. She put her hooves to her face. "Oh gosh, what if she's..."

"Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh –"

"Pinkie!" Applejack snapped at the pink earth pony. "Cool it! Let's all just calm down and act rational-like. We're never gonna find Twilight –"

"If there's anything to find!" Rainbow Dash cried.

"We're never gonna find Twilight if we all start runnin' 'round like headless chickens! We need to act methodical-like!"

"If I may," Rarity stepped forward, "We'll clear the floor much better if we concentrate on moving the books to the edges, near the shelves. It would also help to stack them neatly, as opposed to tossing them on top of each other again."

"Okay!" said Applejack, stomping her front hoof into the ground. "You heard Rarity! Let's do this neatly, and we'll find Twilight in no time!"

Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, and Apple Bloom waded through the books and began to remove them from the middle of the room. Applejack and Apple Bloom worked together, handing off to each other in a miniature convoy. Pinkie Pie could take several books at a time due to her freakish skill at balancing on her back legs. Rarity cleared dozens of books in a sweep with her magic. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash continued to sort where they were, now more neatly. Slowly, the floor began to appear.

A pile of books near Pinkie Pie suddenly stirred. Everypony looked up; Rainbow Dash flew over and began tearing off books, once more not caring where they landed. Suddenly, Spike's head popped up between tattered volumes. The little dragon burst from the books around him, then rubbed his head. "Owww... what happened?"

The ponies tried to hide their disappointment. "Spike, what did *you* see happen?" Dash demanded. "Did you see what happened to Twilight Sparkle?"

"Are you all right, Spike?" Fluttershy asked, landing next to him and looking him over. "That seems like a nasty bump on your head."

"I think I'll be fine," said Spike, though he was wincing as he touched the growing bruise. "All I remember was turning around to watch Twilight teleport, then I noticed this huge bloom of light – something was definitely wrong. I was running down the stairs when..."

boom!" He flung his arms apart, pantomiming the explosion he'd been caught up in. "I must have been hit by a dictionary or something."

Suddenly, another pile of books, this one much larger, began to shift. Distinctly feminine groaning came from beneath the jumbled volumes. Everypony rushed over to the source of the noise, their spirits rising brilliantly. Finally, to their great relief, Twilight Sparkle rose to her feet amid the books, trembling a little but looking no worse for wear at first glance.

The six other ponies rushed to her, jostling with each other to be the first to nuzzle her close.

"You're okay!" Rainbow Dash cried, wrapping her front hooves around Twilight's neck. "I'm so... I mean, this is awesome!"

"You gave us quite a scare, sugarcube," said Applejack.

"Do you feel all right?" Fluttershy asked.

"Girls, girls, I'm fine," said Twilight, backing away to get some space. "I'm a little shook up, but I feel okay."

"What *happened*?" Pinkie Pie asked. "We saw a *huge* explosion!"

"I was trying to teleport back to the park," said Twilight. She began to shake out her legs one by one, making sure nothing felt wrong. "Then I felt this huge surge of energy – the lubricant!"

"Come again?" Rarity asked.

"I came back here to get some teleportation lubricant – I wanted to get it for you, Rarity, to help you with your teleporting practice. I guess..." she thought again. "I unscrewed it to smell it, to see if it was still good. I guess I forgot to put the top back on all the way before I teleported. Teleportation lubricant is a powerful conductor of magical energy, especially the specific energy used for jumping through space. I guess my teleporting energy carried through into the tube. There must have been an enormous magical energy charge!" Her eyes widened. "Wow. In hindsight, I'm really lucky to still be in one piece."

"It sounds scary!" said Apple Bloom.

"Don't worry! I'm all right, Apple Bloom!"

"All the same, it sounds like a very near thing," Rarity pointed out. "Twilight, dearest, you needn't have bothered on my account. I told you, I've got no use for teleporting."

"But I wanted to do it, Rarity. You're my friend, and I wanted to help." She smiled. "But I guess I should have been more careful." Then she looked around the library, for the first time taking in the extent of the damage. "Yikes, it's going to take a lot of work to clean up *this* mess."

"Well, the important thing is that you're all right," Rarity said. "We can worry about the mess after the Plowpony's Day festivities are done; no sense interrupting our day off. Now come on, we can probably still get back in time for the OH MY GOODNESS!"

"What? What's wrong?" Twilight asked. Rarity had backed away in shock, her eyes fixed on Twilight's head.

Rarity's face was severe. She glanced around the library, her eyes settling on a mirror hanging on the wall. She used her magic to pick it up and float it in front of Twilight. "Well, darling... see for yourself."

Twilight scrutinized her reflection. Everything looked normal. Her face wasn't cut or bruised, her eyes weren't bloodshot, her horn – "*Aaaah!*" she cried.

The tip of her horn was black.

"Let me see that!" she yelled, using her magic to take control of the mirror herself. She motioned it closer to her face – "Ow!" A sharp pain shot up her horn, making her wince away from the others; she cut off her magic, and the mirror dropped to the ground and shattered.

"Twilight? What's wrong?" Apple Bloom said, looking up at her. "I thought you said you were fine?"

"I... I thought I was, but my horn... it hurts," Twilight said. "And the tip of it is... black."

The little pony's eyes widened as she stared at the tip of the lavender unicorn's horn. "What's wrong with your horn?"

Twilight tried to put on a reassuring expression, but she couldn't keep the fear from creeping over her face. "I don't know."

Apple Bloom turned tail and ran out the door.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack called after her, running to the door and yelling through the square. "Apple Bloom, get back here!"

"She's probably just scared," said Twilight.

"Well *shouldn't* she be?" said Fluttershy, now sounding quite scared herself. "You have no idea what's wrong with your horn, Twilight?"

Twilight Sparkle shook her head. "No, I've never seen anything like this before." She wasn't being quite honest. She had a *small* idea of what could be wrong with her horn, but she saw no reason to alarm any of her friends just yet. *Or to start panicking myself*, she thought. *It could just be a bruise...* even though horns were hard and didn't bruise. "But I'll bet it's in one of these books around here. If we could just clean the library up, organize all the books, and sort out the ones about illnesses and diseases, I'm sure we could find at least one book that will tell us what we need to know." She swung her head back around to the mess spreading before her. "Now, you've already started piling the books around the edges, but we have to go through and pick out all the medical and magical books, and separate them out. Then we have to put the rest of the books together – ow!" she winced. She'd begun to lift some of the books off the floor with her magic, but another sharp pain in her horn had caused her to break off the spell and drop them again.

"Darling, don't strain yourself!" Rarity said. "Whatever's happened to you is clearly being made worse when you use your magic. You just sit back and take it easy; we'll handle the clean-up."

"I agree with Rarity," said Applejack. "No need to make whatever's wrong with you worse."

"Well," Twilight hesitated, "okay..."

"Right, then," said Rarity, looking about at the other ponies, "let's organize ourselves. Applejack, you go to that section," she looked toward her left, "and Pinkie Pie, you go with her; the two of you can work together. Rainbow Dash, you and Fluttershy go straight ahead; the two of you will also work together. I'll move to the right; my magic can do the work of two ponies. Now, chop chop! Let's hurry!" She clopped her hooves together. She turned back to Twilight Sparkle, a sympathetic look on her face. "Twilight, don't worry your head about any of this. We'll clean up this mess and find out what's wrong with you in a jiffy!"

"Can I help you, Rarity?" Spike asked.

"Well of course you can, Spike!" the white unicorn said with a smile. She trotted through the books to her selected station. "Come over here and help me sort through the books as I levitate them. I'll bet you know this library almost as well as Twilight."

"Er... sort of," Spike said weakly.

With a smile, Rarity's horn lit up, and more than a dozen books floated into the air. In truth, the white unicorn's insides were roiling in a storm of guilt. Twilight appeared to have been seriously hurt – and she'd been hurt trying to help Rarity. *I told her I didn't need her help!* Rarity thought, only half-listening as Spike attempted to pick out the medical books from those she had levitated. *Oh, Twilight Sparkle, why did you have to be so generous? Generosity is my job! And why couldn't I have just learned to teleport the first time?! This catastrophe could have been avoided!* A burst of disgusted energy surged through her horn, charging the books she was levitating and sending them scattering in all directions; Spike had to dodge a few that shot his way. The other ponies glanced up towards her. Rarity gave them a smile. "Sorry! Just... wasn't paying attention. Carry on!" She looked away from them and returned to sorting the books, a heavy oily feeling in the pit of her heart.

"Rarity?" Twilight's voice was right behind her.

This time, Rarity finished setting the books down in their neat piles before turning around. "Is something wrong, darling? Are you feeling any worse?"

Twilight looked gently at her. "Rarity, it's not your fault."

"I don't... oh, Twilight, don't worry, I wasn't thinking anything of the sort," she lied.

"Please, Rarity... I was the one who wasn't careful. Don't blame yourself."

"Twilight Sparkle, I said to sit tight and relax. I do not see you sitting tight, and I certainly don't see you relaxing! Go get a pillow and some root beer, if you must! You're going to strain yourself!" Rarity shooed her away with her hoof. Twilight laughed, and finally retreated. Rarity allowed herself to feel a little better, then returned to her work.

They had mostly cleared the library floor over the span of twenty minutes. All the medical books and magical books had been piled in the center; the other books were stacked along the edge of the floor, below the empty bookshelves. Twilight was impressed at the work they'd been able to do; under Rarity's gentle direction, her five friends had

sorted everything on the library floor into neat order. They had even made a pile for the damaged or destroyed books, near the foot of the stairs. Twilight's heart was heavy at the sight; books being damaged always pained her. But she had more pressing things to worry about. "Great work, girls! Now we just need to start consulting these books." She walked over to the stacks in the middle. "Now, here we –"

Suddenly, the door to the library burst open. Apple Bloom ran in, then stopped, then looked back over her shoulder. "In here, come on!" The little filly cast excited eyes on Twilight. "Don't worry, Twilight, I brought help!" She looked over her shoulder again. "C'mon, Zecora, she's in here!"

"Zecora?" Twilight echoed.

As if on cue, Zecora the zebra crossed the threshold of the library. She was wearing her traveling cloak, as she usually did during her journeys into Ponyville from her home in the Everfree Forest. The hood was thrown back, though, making her black-and-white-striped neck and head clearly visible, along with the black and white mane that she kept cut in a high mohawk; rings of gold surrounded her neck, and large gold earrings dangled from her ears.

"I have been quite patient," Zecora said in her strange rhyming speech, "now let me see the patient." She strode softly up to Twilight Sparkle and began to examine her carefully. Twilight could feel her piercing turquoise eyes staring at her – staring through her, looking deep into her. She suppressed a shiver. Though they'd all learned that Zecora wasn't evil, she could still be a bit unsettling, especially at close quarters.

"Heyyyyy, you can't rhyme 'patient' with 'patient!'" Rainbow Dash suddenly cried. No pony paid attention to her.

Zecora's gaze at last settled on Twilight's horn, which she scrutinized at very close quarters – bringing her left eye within an inch of the blunt, blackened tip. She gently raised a hoof and tapped the tip of the horn. Twilight flinched at the shot of pain – it was like a sore, several days old.

Finally, Zecora drew back. She had a sad look on her face. "My guess was correct, so bemoan your lot. Twilight Sparkle, you've got a bad case of Horn Rot."

Twilight drew in a breath sharply. "I was afraid of that."

Rarity's eyes widened. "Oh... oh my goodness gracious, what are we going to do?! Not that! *Not that!*" She was so overcome by shock that she briefly fell to the ground in a

faint, though she was on her hooves again in a moment. She hastened to Twilight Sparkle's side and nuzzled her in the cheek. "Oh, Twilight, darling... I'm... I'm sure we can find a cure!"

"Okay, hold up a second! What is Horn Rot?" Applejack asked. "Is that some kind o' unicorn thing?"

"Very much so," Rarity said.

"It's a disease that only unicorns are susceptible to," Twilight said. She walked over to the pile of medical and magical books in the center of the library. "Now that I know what I'm looking for, I should be able to find the right book..." She started to use magic, but she stopped before she caused herself any more pain. Sitting back, she used her hooves to nudge books off their stacks until she found a suitable volume: it was a thick book bound in dark blue leather, titled *Pony Problems A to Z*. Placing it on the ground, she nudged it open with her left hoof and began flipping through the pages, coming to the first third of the book, then finding the 'H' section. Several dozen pages of flipping brought her to the entry she sought. "Rarity, could you please levitate this so everypony can see it?"

With a nod, Rarity's horn shimmered, causing the dark blue book to float into the air. The other ponies clustered around it, nudging against each other to try and get a closer view. "Hey, I can't see back here!" Dash cried. "Somepony read it aloud, will you?"

"Ooo! Ooo! I'll do it! Let me do it!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, raising her hoof in the air.

"But I wanted to do it!" Apple Bloom said.

"Yeah, but I said it first!"

"Well, I'm younger, so I should go first!"

"Nuh-uh! Oldest always goes first!"

"Look! Pinkie! Just read it!" Twilight shouted. There was an edge to her voice that brooked no argument.

Pinkie Pie nodded. "A-he-he-he-*hem*," she cleared her throat dramatically. Then, finally, she began to read: "*Horn Rot, also known as Unicorn's Blight, is an affliction that befalls unicorns, either through exposure to strange magics or through the improper application of their own magical power. It occurs specifically when the magical circuit that runs down the unicorn's spine is overwhelmed with an influx of etheric energy, of such intensity that the*

cells through which the circuit runs begin to burst and die. This deadening begins and is most concentrated in the unicorn's horn, which is the focal point of the magical circuit. For cures, see Potions, Section 27C." Pinkie Pie blinked a few times, then turned to Twilight. "Okay, so what does that mean?"

"It means my horn absorbed an enormous amount of magical energy – more than it could cope with," said the lavender unicorn. She nudged the floating book aside and turned to face all of her friends. "When the teleportation lubricant was exposed to the energy of my teleporting spell, it caused that energy to be extremely amplified. When unicorns use magic, they also open their magical circuits to an influx of magic from their environment; it's part of the give-and-take of magic. In this case, my magical circuit absorbed all the excess energy from the overpowered teleporting spell, and it was too much for my body to handle. The cells in my horn were overwhelmed, and now they're starting to die."

"Die?" Rainbow Dash cried. "But you look fine! How can just one part of you die?"

"It's like what happens to hooves and noses when they get frostbite," said Twilight. This last example seemed to clarify things immensely, as the whole group put on new expressions of concern.

"So your horn is dyin'?" Apple Bloom asked. "That's awful! What are you gonna do about it?"

"Not to worry, Apple Bloom," Twilight said, smiling to try and cheer the little filly up. "There's a potion that cures Horn Rot without fail. The recipe should be in another one of my books, and the ingredients aren't too terribly hard to find. We just need to let it brew for three weeks –"

"Three weeks?!" Applejack exclaimed.

"It's got a lot of magic in it," Twilight said. "It needs all that time to draw in enough energy. But if I just take it easy until then –"

Zecora shook her head. "Of your endurance ability, I wouldn't boast. This Horn Rot is strong – you've got two weeks, two and a half at most."

Twilight Sparkle gasped. "A-are you sure? What makes you say that?!"

Zecora merely nodded. Rarity fainted again.

"So... what happens after two weeks?" Fluttershy asked, almost in a whisper. She was afraid of the answer.

Twilight bowed her head. "Best case scenario, my horn falls off – and I won't be able to do magic anymore."

Fluttershy gasped.

Rainbow Dash swallowed hard. "And... the worst case scenario?"

Twilight averted her gaze; in fact, she turned her whole body, refusing to look at them. She was fighting hard to keep from showing her own fear. Fluttershy squeaked and closed her eyes tightly.

"No... n-no!" Dash landed and stomped her hoof against the ground. "I... I don't believe there's no faster cure! There's gotta be! There *has* to be!"

"Yeah, there's gotta be somethin' we can do!" Apple Bloom said. "Twilight can't... she just can't..." The little yellow pony was on the verge of tears. Applejack sidled up to her sister and leaned into her.

"There is in fact a faster track," Zecora said.

"What is it?" Pinkie Pie asked.

The zebra didn't answer immediately. She broke away from the assembled ponies and began to wander the edges of the library, peering through the stacks of books piled beside her. She stopped at one stack and reached into it, plucking out a green book with her teeth and flinging it through the air. It skidded to a stop on the floor next to the ponies. Twilight saw that it was the same book, *Super Naturals*, that had held the cure for the poison joke that had afflicted them in their first meeting with Zecora.

"If you want a fast cure, there's just one to get," she said, nudging the book open. "You must eat the flower of the Beneviolet."

The book opened onto a page dominated by the illustration of a flowering plant. It had a thin stem and long, narrow leaves. At the top of the stem was a single flower with five broad petals, arranged in a star shape. The flower petals were medium purple. The scrap of soil drawn beneath the leaves seemed to be rocky.

"I wanna read this time!" Apple Bloom said before anypony could object. She wiped away the tears that had started to form in her large orange eyes and nudged her way over to the book. Rarity again levitated the book into the air so that everyone could have a better view of it. *"The Beneviolet is a small flowerin' plant that grows in the high mountain valleys of the Archback Mountains. It belongs to the very small family of magi... magi... magivascular plants, or plants whose special roots allow them to absorb magical energy as well as water from the surroundin' environment. The Archback Mountains that are the Beneviolet's only habitat run along what is thought to be a strong ley line, infusin' the soil with enormous magical power, which the plants absorb. This energy is collected in their five-pointed flowers, where it mixes with the plant's chemical defenses against parasites. These two factors combine to make the Beneviolet a powerful healin' plant, able to cure many illnesses, especially those of a dege... degenerative magical nature."* Apple Bloom finished the entry in much higher spirits than she had begun it. She turned to Zecora. "So if Twilight eats this flower, it'll cure her Horn Rot?"

"A Beneviolet is powerful stuff – just one flower, one time will be enough."

"Hooray!" Apple Bloom exclaimed, jumping for joy. "Now we just gotta go get it!"

Rainbow Dash's face grew doubtful. "That... might be a problem."

"What problem?" Pinkie Pie said. "It seems open-and-shut, just like a book!"

"Welllll..." the sky-blue pegasus began slowly, "do any of you ponies know where the Archback Mountains are?"

"Do you?" Twilight Sparkle asked.

"They're not far away, are they?" Fluttershy asked.

Dash flapped her wings and was airborne again, gliding to the door of the library. "Come with me," she said with a turn towards them.

They followed her back through Ponyville, through a small crowd that had gathered around the damaged library. Stares and whispers ran through the assembled ponies as the six fillies came out; the gossip intensified when the onlookers saw Zecora. Twilight Sparkle and her friends were able to pass through them without much shoving, but they picked up a small entourage that followed them to the outskirts of the town. They soon saw where Dash was leading them: at the north entrance to Ponyville, moored by a small raised platform, was the town balloon. It was decorated with banners and streamers, in

anticipation of its participation in that night's fireworks display; for now, however, it was empty, and Rainbow Dash ushered her friends toward it. "We're going up; come on."

"Fluttershy, could you fly up on your own with Dash?" Twilight asked. "That way there will be enough room for Zecora and Apple Bloom."

"Okay," said the butter-yellow pegasus softly.

The non-flying ponies climbed into the balloon's basket, shut the door, and started the burner. Untying the tether, they rose slowly into the air, flanked on either side by Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash. They followed Dash's lead, going as high as she was going, until they were far above Ponyville, chilled by the cold air of the upper altitude. Ponyville was a brilliant patchwork of houses beneath them; to the southwest, they could see the rolling fields and neatly arranged apple trees of the Apple Family's farm. Dead west was the dense green curtain of the Everfree Forest, drawn like a blanket over the surrounding terrain. The forest stretched for miles and miles until it ran against the base of a long range of mountains, spiking higher and higher into the sky as they stretched away to the north and the south.

"Okay!" Dash said. "We're high enough. You'll be able to see them from here."

"So, wait," Applejack called over to her, "are those the Archback Mountains?" She pointed a hoof at the mountain range standing in front of them. "Shucks, Rainbow, that'll be an easy trip! I don't know why you –"

"No," Dash said. "Those are the Drackenridge Mountains." She pointed her hoof in front of her, angled upward. "*Those* are the Archback Mountains."

The ponies assembled in the balloon tried to follow her hoof. She was pointing slightly up... *past* the mountains that took up so much of their view. Twilight increased the heat of the burner, causing the balloon to go slightly higher. They rose up... and there, past the Drackenridge Mountains, they could see them – barely see them. They were a ragged haze far in the distance, a purple shadow at the farthest range of sight. A long line of mountains stretched away almost parallel to the Drackenridge Mountains.

"*Those* are the Archback Mountains?" Rarity exclaimed.

"Yep," said Rainbow Dash.

"That's... outside the borders of Equestria," said Twilight Sparkle.

"Yep," said Rainbow Dash.

The balloon slowly returned to earth, the two pegasus ponies flanking it. No pony spoke for a few moments, each of them trying to find the best response to what they'd learned.

Applejack, being quite practical and not fond of awkward silences, was the first to express her feelings. "Well, don't matter how far away it is. It's gotta be closer than three weeks worth o' waitin' for a potion. I say we go for it."

"It's definitely not three weeks away," said Dash, touching down gently on her hooves. "In fact, at top speed I could probably make it there and back in two days."

"Now hold up, Rainbow," said Applejack, stepping out of the balloon and trotting down the stairs. "I don't think it's a good idea for one pony to go all that way by herself."

"So, what, you want me to round up more pegasuses?" Dash said. "I could definitely do that. Hmm," she pondered, "who owes me a favor... there's Red Comet, I helped him win that hoof-wrestling match with White D—"

"I thought all of the pegasi," Rarity emphasized the correct plural, "were preparing to help with the planting tomorrow?"

Rainbow Dash blinked a few times. "Oh yeah, that's right," she said.

"How did you forget?! That's what Plowpony's Day always means! The start of the second round o' Spring plantin'!" Applejack yelled. "They can't spare more than a few pegasi – more than a few of anypony for that matter!"

"So, what, you want me to go along with some earth pony?" Dash said.

"And what is so wrong with earth ponies?" Applejack growled, trotting up right into the sky-blue pegasus' face.

"Well, they can't *fly*, for starters," Rainbow Dash growled back. "Zecora says Twilight's got two weeks – two and a half, if we push it. I don't want to push it. I want to get that Beneviolet as *soon as possible*, and I can't do that if I have to hang back and wait for some wingless pony to climb a mountain the hard way!"

"And what if you got there and you couldn't find any Beneviolets?" the orange earth pony retorted. "You ain't the gardenin' type, Rainbow; you don't know the first thing about lookin' for flowers."

"They're *bright purple*, how hard can they be to find?"

"And another thing! Outside Equestria means outside Princess Celestia's magical protection!" Applejack said. "We're right at the edge of it here in Ponyville, and we *still* get our fair share o' monsters! Out there," she motioned with her hoof to the west, "who knows what kinds o' horrible things are out lurkin'?"

"Oooo, yeah!" Pinkie Pie chimed in, bouncing between the two ponies. "There could be basilisks and bunyips and balrogs and even world snakes!"

"What's a world snake?" Apple Bloom asked.

The pink earth pony gave her an enormous smile. "It's a snake as big as the world, silly!"

"Are you saying I can't handle myself out there?" Dash continued, pushing her snout into Applejack's.

Applejack pushed right back. "I'm *sayin'* that you got a bad habit o' jumpin' hoof-first into situations without knowin' what you're getting' into! You oughta at least take somepony with you who's more careful."

"Who? You?"

Applejack stepped back a little. She noticed all her friends were looking at her. She honestly hadn't been expecting the conversation to go this direction. Her? Leave Ponyville? Leave *Equestria*? That's not what she had been thinking at all! Applejack had spent her entire life in Ponyville. Except for one trip as a foal to Manehattan, she'd never traveled more than forty miles away from Ponyville in any direction. The thought of galloping off into parts unknown was... daunting. She almost couldn't wrap her mind around it. "Well... uh... maybe not me –"

"You gotta go, Applejack!" Apple Bloom said. "You'll be able to find the Beneviolet in no time!"

"I just... what about spring plantin'?" The orange pony found herself fishing for excuses. "I gotta stay behind and make sure... we were gonna be expandin' the south orchard..."

"Big Macintosh and I can do all that, or we can wait until you get back!" the small yellow pony said, now hopping excitedly on her hooves. "Applejack, you're the toughest and most dependable pony in Ponyville! If anypony can get to the Beneviolet in time, it's you!"

"In time?" Rainbow Dash repeated. Her voice held none of the mocking superiority that should have laced it; she was deadly serious. "I don't think she can do it in time. I don't think *any* pony can do it in time without wings. We have two weeks, and in that time whoever goes has to *get to* the Archback Mountains, find the flower, and *come back*. That's a week to get there and a week to come back, assuming the Beneviolet is easy to find." She glared at Applejack. "Think you can run that fast, Applejack?"

Twilight Sparkle was unsettled by this formulation. "Well... when you put it that way... maybe it would be better –"

"Actually," Spike said, "I think I can help with that."

Everypony turned around and glanced at the small purple dragon. They had quite forgotten he was there, and he'd helped them in that regard by remaining silent when he'd gone up in the balloon with them. "Spike, whatever do you mean?" Twilight asked.

"Come on," he said, motioning them with his arm and setting off back into town.

Spike ran as fast as his stubby legs could carry him, which wasn't much faster than a fast trot for the ponies, but they obliged him by keeping pace in his wake. He led them back to the library, and then proceeded through the piled stacks of books up the staircase, leading to the room he shared with Twilight. The lavender unicorn followed him up the stairs; the rest of the ponies hung back, glancing at each other and wondering what Spike was up to.

"Spike?" Twilight called, coming to the top of the stairs. "What are you doing?"

"Just..." his voice came from deep in the room, it sounded like the closet, "looking for... something... AHA!"

He suddenly vaulted out of the doorway to Twilight's room and bounded past her down the stairs. She followed him down and out into the main floor of the library. He turned around to face the ponies, grinning. "I can give you all more time with this!"

He held up a small glass bottle with a cork stopper.

"An empty bottle?" Fluttershy asked.

"Not for long!" Spike said. He pulled off the topper, put the bottle to his lips, and breathed. A burst of gleaming fire shot into the bottle, the swirling flames quickly filling the small space. He pulled his mouth away and placed the lid on the bottle, pushing it

down tightly. Then he held it up for them all to examine. The fire washed and bounced off the bottle's interior with a nervous energy. It changed color depending on when and from what angle it was viewed, sometimes appearing purple, other times bright green. "This," he said, "is the special fire I use to send messages to Princess Celestia. She also uses this fire to send her messages back to me – she has a repository of it in the Palace of the Sun in Canterlot. I've changed the magic in this flame to make it more like the stored fire the Princess has: instead of traveling to her, it will come straight back to me. Anything that this fire burns will be sent back through my mouth, just like the letters the Princess sends from Canterlot. So if... *when* you find a Beneviolet, just open this bottle and make sure the fire comes out right on the flower. It'll send the flower right back here to me!"

"That means whoever goes won't have to rush to come back!" Twilight said. "Oh... Spike..." she was overcome with emotion. She nuzzled the small dragon so hard she nearly knocked him off his feet, her violet eyes blinking back tears.

Spike laughed, wrapping his arms around his friend's neck. "You're welcome."

"That means y'all can spend the full two weeks gettin' to the mountains!" said Apple Bloom. She turned once more to her sister. "Applejack, you can make it in two weeks! You gotta go now!"

"But... I..." Applejack noticed that not just Apple Bloom, but Twilight Sparkle was now looking at her. The lavender unicorn had an eager, pleading look in her eyes; she was still struggling not to cry. But she smiled in relief as well; the thought of Applejack going on the journey clearly lifted her spirits. Applejack was surprised and humbled. How could she say no now? *If Twilight has that much faith in me...* "All right! I'm goin'!"

"Hooray!" Apple Bloom cried with a leap.

"Thank you, Applejack," said Twilight Sparkle, smiling.

Rainbow Dash narrowed her rose eyes. "Fine," she said in a low voice. She trotted up to Applejack and once more stuck her nose into the orange earth pony's face. "But if thirteen days go by and we *haven't* reached the Archback Mountains at *your* pace, I'm going to fly the rest of the way at top speed and look for the Beneviolets myself."

Applejack nodded. "That sounds fine to me – it's probably a good idea, just to be safe." She gave the rainbow-maned pegasus a smug look. "Assumin' you're comin', of course."

"What?!" Dash exclaimed, drawing back. "Of course I'm coming! I have to come!"

"I haven't heard you officially volunteer..."

"Well I'm officially volunteering right now!" she cried, hovering off the ground. "I'm going to the Archback Mountains with you!"

"Okay." Applejack looked back at the assembled ponies and Spike. "Zecora, would you be willin' to keep an eye on Twilight while we're gone?"

"At my home in the forest I must stay," said the zebra, "but I'll be sure to stop by at least once a day."

"Good enough," said Applejack. "With Spike here too, I reckon two more of us oughta stay behind and help look after Twilight. That'll leave three of us to go."

"Applejack," Twilight protested, "I do not need that many ponies playing nursemaid..."

"Oh, Twilight," said Fluttershy, "with something this serious, you're bound to get worse. You shouldn't be afraid to take help."

"The Horn Rot will worsen, and strike you down. In two weeks' time, you'll do far more than frown," Zecora added.

"Fluttershy, would you be willin' to stay? I don't mean to say you wouldn't be a help on the road, but you're so good at takin' care o' critters..."

"I understand, Applejack," said the butter-yellow pegasus. "I'll gladly help take care of Twilight."

"So we need one more pony for the trip," Applejack said. She considered the remaining two choices. She sighed. "Welp, I guess you can come, Pinkie Pie."

"Oh boy!" the pink earth pony cried, bouncing on her legs like they were springs. "A real honest-to-real adventure! A perilous journey across dangerous lands with unknown terrors! A bold step beyond the familiar and into the extraordinary!" She cocked her head and grinned. "I guess I wouldn't mind going."

"Actually," Rarity said, "I'd like to go – if you don't mind, Pinkie Pie."

The rest of the group stared agog at the white unicorn. "Why do *you* want to go?" Dash asked. "It's not some shopping trip!"

"It is gonna be dangerous, Rarity," said Applejack.

"Well... I know that," Rarity said, looking not at all pleased with what she was saying. "But I feel that I must go. Twilight is in the danger she's in now because she was trying to help me. I feel I need to make it right."

"Oh, Rarity, I *said* it wasn't your fault," Twilight told her.

"But it is – at least indirectly. I have a debt I must repay, darling, and I won't be dissuaded. Besides," she added with a smile, "no pony in Ponyville has my eye for color. I'll pick out those beautiful flowers with no trouble at all."

Pinkie nodded. "Okay, Rarity, you can go! I'll stay here and keep the home fires burning!"

"Now that I think on it," Applejack said, "it might not be a bad idea to have you along, Rarity. Your talents could be useful – not to mention your magic."

"Just so long as you don't slow us down," Dash said.

"I assure you, Rainbow, I'm more than capable of keeping up," Rarity answered.

"Okay, then – it's settled!" Applejack stomped her hoof on the floor. "Rarity, Rainbow Dash and I will go to those Archback Mountains and get that Beneviolet, in less than two weeks!"

Twilight Sparkle smiled. Her heart was in her throat. Today had been such a wild ride of emotion – peaceful, then violent, then tragic, and now, from her despair, a flame of hope had been kindled. She was still frightened, of course; she wasn't used to placing a problem into somepony else's hooves to solve. It was always she who tried to solve the problems of others – with her magic, with her intelligence, with the knowledge she acquired through study. Now she had to trust others to help her, and if they failed, she could pay the ultimate price. *They won't fail*, she told herself. *They're my friends, and they've never let me down before.* "Thank you all so much," she said. She looked over her friends' heads to the hole in the library's trunk, and the sunlight streaming through it. All the rest of Ponyville was out there, relaxing and having fun. She envied them. "But... I was wondering... do you think we could go back to the festival? I really did want to see it."

Applejack nuzzled her. "Sure thing, sugarcube; I can do my packin' tonight. Let's go enjoy the sun while she's still up."

The orange earth pony led the way to the library's door, the lavender unicorn by her side, and all their friends followed them into the afternoon light.

That night, lights were on all over Ponyville, and ponies talked in excited tones. They'd heard that Twilight Sparkle, the unicorn from Canterlot who had become their librarian, had been in an accident – that she'd been hurt. Now there was talk of three ponies, friends of hers, making some kind of journey. There was even the fantastic rumor that they were going to leave Equestria, traveling through the Everfree Forest and going over the mountains to the western lands beyond. No pony had gone over the mountains in recent memory – even the old gray mares could barely recall any stories of such a journey. What was out there, beyond Princess Celestia's protection? Whatever it was, it was surely dangerous. Those three ponies were certainly brave – brave or foolish.

At the edge of Ponyville, the rolling hills were filled with the apple orchards and neat plowed rows of Sweet Apple Acres, the Apple Family's bountiful farm. Normally, everypony on the farm would be fast asleep on the night after Plowpony's Day, preparing to rise early to begin the second round of spring planting. This night, however, no pony was sleeping; even Apple Bloom tossed and turned in her bed. Up in her room in the great farmhouse, Applejack was pacing back and forth, her green eyes trailing periodically over the currently empty saddlebags sitting on her bed. "Well," she finally said, "I should definitely pack my rain slicker."

"It might be a better idea to pack your quilted vest," said Big Macintosh, following his sister's movements with a patient gaze. The bright red stallion pony had agreed to help her pack, but since Applejack hadn't yet done any packing, he felt a bit useless. "It'll be cold up in the mountains."

"That's right," Applejack said. "I should at least pack a scarf. Maybe some boots, too..."

"What about a tarp?" Big Mac offered. "Somethin' you can set down when it rains so's you don't get muddy."

"That's a good idea too!" The orange earth pony sighed. She was very nervous. As much as she wanted to help Twilight Sparkle, she was still incredibly daunted at the thought of leaving Ponyville. Even the quest to find the Elements of Harmony had only taken her to the Everfree Forest. This journey would take her outside of Equestria – *far* outside, to distant mountains she could barely see from the balloon. Who knew what sorts of creatures and disasters she might encounter? She couldn't possibly pack everything she would need. She would have to bring extra apples, and blankets, and *rope*, absolutely she had to bring rope.

"Y'know," Big Mac said, "it's not too late to say no, I reckon."

"I *can't!*" Applejack whirled toward him. "Twilight needs me!"

"I'm sure some other pony could go. There's plenty o' good folk who'd want to help Twilight Sparkle. You could just stay here and help us with the plantin'."

"But..." Applejack's voice wavered. "She's... she's *my* friend. I should be the one helpin' her. Besides, I don't trust just anypony to keep Rarity and Rainbow on course. Somepony's gotta be the practical one or they won't make it to the mountains in time. I just know it."

Big Macintosh gave his sister a long, patient look. "But you don't want to go."

Applejack threw herself onto her bed and rolled over onto her back. "No, I don't. I'm... I'm scared, Mac. I ain't never wanted to leave Ponyville like this. I don't like strange places and I don't like strange folk. I got simple wants and no need for adventure." She sighed. "I wish I could just stay home."

"But why can't you?" Big Mac asked.

Applejack looked hopelessly up at the ceiling for a moment. Yet she could feel herself pulling together, summoning the strength she always somehow managed to find. A determined look crossed her face. "Because I want to help my friend, too. I want that more than I want to stay safe. If helpin' Twilight means I gotta go afar, then that's just how it's gonna be."

"So I suppose you really do want to go," her brother said.

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Applejack. "I'm just scared."

"Well, we'll be waitin' for you when you get back, so don't worry none about Apple Bloom and Granny Smith and me," he said.

Something fell onto the bed next to Applejack. Turning her head, she saw her saddlebags, closed and fully packed. Rolling over and sitting up, she looked over at Big Macintosh. He gave her a very slow smile. "I reckon you'll want to double-check those; there may be some things you want I didn't think of. And I left some room for vittles."

Applejack laughed. "I reckon I wouldn't get anywhere without you, Mac."

"Nnnope." He walked over to her, and with a twist of his neck he reached down and plucked her brown cowcolt's hat off her head. "I'm gonna go wash this. No sense startin' an adventure with a dirty hat. You'd best get some sleep. You're startin' early tomorrow, right?"

"Yep, first light o' dawn," his sister remarked.

"Good night, AJ," he said. "Sweet dreams."

Applejack clicked off the lamp by her bed. "Good night, Mac." He left her room, and she began to turn down the covers of her bed.

High above Ponyville, a veritable mansion floated in the night sky. It was made of fluffy white clouds, and it glistened silver in the pale light of the moon. Rivers of rainbow sprang from a fountain at one side, running down and off into space. Within the spacious rooms of said cloud house, on the second floor of the western wing, Rainbow Dash tossed and turned in her bed. She wrapped herself in her cloud blankets, and turned her cloud pillows over and over again.

The rainbow-maned pegasus had no need to pack. It was part of the magic of her kind that she could tolerate a broad range of temperatures, from warm to freezing cold, so she had no need of clothes, and she could eat just about any leaf and grass without bother, so she had no need of provisions. She should really have been able to go right to sleep. This was particularly the case because Rainbow Dash was not a pony given to much self-doubt. And, indeed, it was not self-doubt that was keeping her awake at present. What had her tossing and turning was doubt of the others – that is, her traveling companions for the morrow.

*It was bad enough when Applejack wanted to come, she thought. Now **Rarity's** coming! That prissy filly has probably never run in her life! Dash didn't like waiting, and she didn't like depending on others. Except for rare moments, she was always confident that if everything was left in *her* hooves, it would get done. *She* could save the day, *she* could win the race, *she* could clear the sky in ten seconds flat, and she didn't need anypony else. Her friends were important to her, but she didn't need them to do her job for her. *I should have just gotten some other pegasuses and gone! We'd be done in two days!**

Then other images came to her mind in response: she could picture Twilight thanking all of her friends, she could see Fluttershy agreeing to take care of the stricken lavender unicorn, she could see Pinkie Pie trying to cheer poor Twilight up, she could see Applejack summoning her courage to face the unknown, she could see Rarity desperate

to help her friend whom she believed she had injured. Rainbow Dash sighed. Perhaps it was true that she could have done the job fastest alone. But the other four ponies were also Twilight's friends – and they were her friends too. She could understand their desire to be a part of curing her. She hated feeling useless, and knew the others did as well.

Rainbow Dash rolled over onto her belly. In all honesty, what she really hated was *waiting*. She was a most impatient pony, and quite proud of that fact. As fast as she was, the idea of waiting for anything was abhorrent to her. *Waiting* and *holding back* so that the wingless ponies she would be traveling with could keep up with her was going to be very hard. *But there's no backing out of it now*, she thought.

Unless...

Dash threw off the cloud covers, flapping her wings to hover. She drifted slowly to the window of her bedroom and threw up the cloud curtain. The night sky was clear outside, millions of stars twinkling before her eyes that wouldn't have been visible at lower altitudes. The moon was half-full tonight, shining like a great silver bowl hung in the sky. From this altitude, Dash could see past the Drackenridge Mountains, but not all the way to the Archback Mountains – there wasn't enough light. But she knew they were out there. *I could start now*, she thought. *I'm not even tired*. It was as she had said from the beginning: at top speed, she could make it to the Archback Mountains in one full day. Even if she needed to rest when she got there, even without Spike's stupid teleporting fire, she could still be back in Ponyville with the Beneviolet in three days' time. Twilight would be cured, her friends would be safe, and there would be *no waiting*. All she had to do was fly – the thing she was best at in the world. She tensed her body, her wings twitching. Her blood began to pump.

It's dangerous! She could actually hear Applejack's voice in her head. She snorted. Since when did danger bother her?

You have no idea what you're looking for! Now Twilight was chastising her. She didn't mind, though. She was usually lucky. Okay, she was lucky some of the time. Most of the time. She'd feel it out.

But... I wanted to help... Rarity said gently in her head.

Rainbow Dash lowered her wings. *Darn it*, she thought. *I can't just do that to the others*. They would think that she had abandoned them when they needed her the most; and even if she came back with the Beneviolet, they might not forgive her easily. Dash didn't like her friends to be angry at her. And even she had noticed how much Rarity had been

bothered by Twilight's predicament. Dash had made enough mistakes in her life to know how powerful the urge to set things right could be, and how awful it was for that urge to be denied. So, for Rarity's sake, she'd have to let the white unicorn come. And if she let Rarity come, with her slow, graceful gallop, there was no way she could justify leaving Applejack behind, when the orange earth pony was a faster runner.

Sighing, Dash pulled down the cloud curtain and returned to her bed, throwing the covers back over her body in frustration. She was a big softie at heart, just a bleeding-heart filly. Everypony should be grateful that she was so nice. *But if they can't make it to the Archback Mountains in thirteen days I'm going on alone! I mean it!* she thought. *In fact I'm not even going to wait thirteen days! I'll just wait twelve! Or maybe ten! Or... or.. maybeeee...* Her thoughts blurred into nothingness as tiredness finally came over her. Her rose-colored eyes were hidden behind sky-blue eyelids, and the pegasus drifted off to sleep.

Below, in Ponyville proper, the lights were on above the Carousel Boutique. In the bedroom on the second floor of the beautiful rococo establishment, item after item of clothing floated through the air, held aloft by the telekinetic magic that all unicorns possessed. Rarity was having a difficult time packing – as she knew she would. She'd actually left the Plowpony's Day festival early to get started, but now late into the night her white velvet saddlebags were still only half full. She was currently trying to decide between two coats, fully aware of how cold it could get up in the mountains. "Oh... this one has such a lovely violet color, it goes perfectly with my mane..." she shifted the other one forward, "but this one would be thicker, and warmer... oh, I just can't decide!" She shut her eyes and began to cycle the two coats around and around. "Around and round and round and round and *there!*" she opened her eyes and stopped the spinning. The heavier coat floated in front of her. "This one it is!" she said. She floated the first coat back into her closet. Then she used her magic to carefully fold the second coat as neatly as she could. Then, with a finer focusing of her magic, she *sucked* all the air out from it, compressing it until it was much, much flatter. She was doing this to her whole traveling wardrobe, which was allowing her to pack far more clothes than she would have been able to fit into her saddlebags otherwise.

She used her magic to place the folded coat neatly inside one of the saddlebags. "Hmm... I should certainly bring at least one sweater... probably two. Hmm..." she put her hoof up against her jaw. "Best to split the difference: I'll bring one cashmere and one alpaca." She sighed. "But *which* cashmere?" To underscore her dilemma, Rarity used her horn to open one of the chests of drawers near her bed. From it she magically withdrew no less than twelve cashmere sweaters in a rainbow of colors, from aquamarine to sunflower to hot pink. They floated in the air uneasily, their motion echoing Rarity's own uncertainty.

"Rarity?"

"Oh my!" the white unicorn exclaimed, leaping back at the soft voice that had filled the silence behind her. The sweaters fell to the floor. Rarity made herself calm down. The voice was quite familiar. "Sweetie Belle," she said gently, turning around, "what are you doing awake? It's far too late."

Rarity's younger sister was dressed in a baby pink nightgown (of Rarity's own design, naturally) and blinked gently in the bright firefly light. Her curly pink and lavender mane was mussed from what had clearly been tossing and turning on her pillow. "I kept hearing you talking."

"Oh," said Rarity. "I'm terribly sorry. I'm just... having trouble packing. You know me, dearest, I have so much to choose from, and I absolutely hate to choose! But I *am* sorry for waking you, Sweetie Belle. I'll try to be more quiet. Please go back to bed."

Sweetie Belle remained where she stood. "Are you going to be able to help Miss Twilight Sparkle?"

Rarity felt her heart crack a little. "I... I believe so. Miss Zecora seems certain that the flower we'll be looking for can cure her in an instant."

"But what if you don't find it? Apple Bloom said Miss Twilight only had two weeks until... something bad happened. She wouldn't say *what* would happen."

At least Apple Bloom demonstrated some discretion, Rarity thought. "Now, Sweetie Belle, come, come." Rarity gave her a smile. "Am I not the lady and mistress of color, pattern, and style?" She used her magic to wrap a shawl around her shoulders. "Do I not know all that fashion can purvey about distinctive and daring imagery?"

This brought out a laugh from the young unicorn. "Sure you are, sis!"

"Then you've no need to worry," her older sister said. She trotted over to Sweetie Belle and gave her a gentle kiss on her forehead. "With me along, we'll find the Beneviolet easily. Then we can just use Spike's fire to send it right back to Miss Twilight, and she can eat it and be better!"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Do you promise?" Sweetie Belle gave Rarity one last nervous look.

Rarity had to pause for a moment. She nodded solemnly. "I tail-twister promise."

Sweetie Belle gasped. "Really?!"

Rarity turned around, presenting her hindquarters to her sister. "Really. Ready?"

"Ready!" cried the smaller unicorn, turning around as well. They backed into each other until Sweetie Belle's curly tail was brushing against Rarity's ringleted trail. Both ponies then twisted their tails, causing each one's tail to get caught up with the other. "Now promise!"

"I hereby promise that I, along with Rainbow Dash and Applejack, shall find the Beneviolet flower to cure Twilight Sparkle, and get it back to her right on time!" The tails raised up and down, like hands shaking. Then they came apart, and the two ponies separated. "Now, dearest, will you please go to bed? It's awfully late."

"Okay," Sweetie Belle said. "You should probably get to bed too, sis. Apple Bloom said that her sister wanted to start early tomorrow."

"Not to worry, I've just got a bit more packing to do," said Rarity. She nuzzled Sweetie Belle again. "Off to sleep with you. Sweet dreams."

Sweetie Belle trotted out through the door. "Good night, Rarity," she said. She turned around. "I love you."

"I love you, too, dearest," Rarity said. She used her magic to shut the door, then turned back to her packing. *Well, she thought, I've really committed myself now.* She smiled at the childish seriousness of it all. *There's no backing down from a tail-twister promise!* Her horn shimmered, and her scattered sweaters once again rose into the air. "I do believe I'm feeling like hot pink," she said, shifting it away from the others. She put the other eleven sweaters back in their drawer, and used her magic to siphon the excess air out of the hot pink sweater, after which it was placed in her saddlebags. "Oh!" she said, glancing over to where a deep blue sweater still lay on the floor. "It seems I forgot about you."

She was about to levitate it back into the drawer when she was struck by the urge to try something else. She locked her eyes on the spot where the sweater lay. She tried to think hard on that spot, to focus all of her mental energy onto **being there**. She began to channel the energy in her magical circuit, her horn starting to glow and sparkle. Her vision began to shimmer...

Rarity could feel herself losing control; it was going to go wrong. Quickly she broke off the magic, the sparks around her horn fizzling out, its glow going dim. She had failed – again! So many failures, and every time they cost somepony dearly. Her eyes were stinging. She sat where she was and sniffed. *I can't do it*, she thought. *I'm just not able to do it!* She was a failure and she'd hurt her friend! "Oh, Twilight, I'm so sorry! I'm sorry, Twilight! Twilight!" Rarity bowed her head and wept.

The coming day looked to be as brilliant as the one that had preceded it: there was not a cloud in the sky, and the last few stars were slowly disappearing high above Ponyville as Princess Luna retired the night. Rarity was standing at her desk in her study. There was a poster-board sign laid out on the desk, and she was busy using her magic to write on it in large, sweeping letters. There came a knock on the door. "Just a minute!" she called, putting the finishing touch on a word. "I'm coming!" The white unicorn trotted out of the study, entering the spacious main space of her boutique. She smiled when she saw Fluttershy at the front door. "Good morning, darling! I'm just about ready here!"

The butter-yellow pegasus trotted in. "I don't mean to rush you..."

"No, no, I understand. We've got a lot of ground to cover and two weeks in which to do it. The sooner we get started, the better. I just need to finish this notice," she trotted back to her study, picked up the quill with her magic, and resumed writing. "By the way," she said over her shoulder, "thank you again for agreeing to watch the shop while I'm gone."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, Rarity," Fluttershy said. "You're doing so much to help Twilight Sparkle, while I stay here safe in Ponyville. This is the least I could do."

"Now, Fluttershy, don't sell yourself short," said Rarity. She finished writing, putting an elaborate flourish on the 'y' in the final word. "Twilight is going to need you and Pinkie Pie dearly, you've said so yourself. What you're doing for her is just as important as what we'll be doing for her. It will take all of us to keep her well."

Fluttershy nodded. "I suppose so."

Rarity replaced the quill in her desk, closed up the ink stopper, and raised the sign into the air. She floated it through the showroom, past the dress ponyquins and hanging bolts of fabric, until she reached the door, where she hung it from a peg on the inside. The sign said, in bold and flowing script, *Open For Alterations Only*. Satisfied with her work, the white unicorn then used her magic to raise her saddlebags off the floor near the door, slipping the harness around her hindquarters and tightening it until she was certain it was secure. "Shall we go meet the others?" she asked.

Ponyville was still and gray in the predawn light as the two ponies made their way down Mane Street. Rarity gave a dainty nod to the night watchpony, yawning as he leaned against a fence post. Fluttershy followed behind her, her long, luxurious pink mane floating on the slight breeze. She looked over her shoulder: there was finally a line of gold on the horizon. Princess Celestia was raising the sun, and all of Equestria was beginning to rouse to the brilliant light of a new day.

Turning down Stepper Street, Rarity and Fluttershy remained silent, each one's mind filling with thoughts. Rarity couldn't help but wonder if she was really up to the challenge of a long journey through strange lands. *But I must persevere*, she thought. *Twilight needs me.*

They both spied that very unicorn as they made their way to the edge of Ponyville. She was waiting, along with Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack. Big Macintosh was there as well, and even Apple Bloom had turned out, the little yellow pony yawning hugely despite her excited eyes. Applejack noticed Rarity and Fluttershy out of the corner of her eye as she was checking her saddlebags for what must have been the twentieth time. "Mornin', y'all!" she said, before sticking her nose back into her bags. "Vest, scarf, apples, compass, apples, blanket, apples..."

"Good morning, you two," said Twilight Sparkle. Rarity immediately glanced at her horn; there was a short streak of black coming down from the tip that hadn't been there yesterday.

"Oh... good morning, Twilight, how are you feeling?"

"A little tired, but not too bad," Twilight replied.

"After breakfast, I'm gonna take her to Sugarcube Corner!" Pinkie Pie said. "I've got *cinnamon rolls* baking!"

"That sounds delicious," said Fluttershy.

"Can we get a move on, already?" Rainbow Dash said. The sky-blue pegasus was already hovering in the air, crossing her front hooves over her chest in a show of impatience. "I thought we were in a hurry!"

"Just a minute..." Applejack said, her nose still in her saddlebags.

"AJ, you've checked those things like a million times! You've got everything!"

"All right, all right!" said the orange earth pony. She finally closed both saddlebags. Big Macintosh helped her place them on her flanks, and Apple Bloom reached under to tighten the brass buckle that secured them. "Okay, then – Rarity? Rainbow? Y'all all ready? We ain't gonna be turnin' around."

"I'm *always* ready," said Dash.

"I believe I've got all I'll be needing... or at least all I had room for," said Rarity.

"Actually, do either of you have any room left in your saddlebags?" Twilight asked. She picked up a book that had been lying in the road with her mouth. "I did some searching through the library last night. There were a few books about the lands beyond Equestria, and this one was the smallest." The book was green and had a picture of a map on it; its title was *A Survey Of Extra-Equestrian Territories*.

"I believe I've got some room in my left saddlebag," Rarity said. She used her magic to take the book from Twilight, levitating it through the air and also opening her left saddlebag. Sure enough, there was just enough room to slide the book inside between a pair of sunglasses and a tube of sunscreen.

"Now are we ready?" Dash grouched.

Applejack took a deep breath. She gave her brother and sister one final look, her green eyes betraying her lingering fear. "I reckon so," she said.

"Thank you all so much!" Twilight cried, nuzzling Applejack around the snout. She trotted over to Rarity and did the same, then she looked up to Rainbow Dash. The sky-blue pegasus rolled her eyes, but consented to touch down and allow her friend to give her a nuzzle. "I don't know if I can ever repay you all for this. This could mean... I don't..."

"Don't get all weepy yet, sugarcube," said Applejack. "We ain't found the flower yet. Thank us when we get back. Now, Apple Bloom, you behave yourself while I'm gone; I don't wanna hear of any mischief you got into when I get back, is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Apple Bloom replied.

"Mac, you look after yourself, and don't think twice about askin' for help if things get too heavy."

"Eeeyup."

"Fluttershy, don't let anypony pressure you into doing more work than you're comfortable with," Rarity said. "If you have to, just close the boutique completely. I won't mind."

"Oh, no, Rarity, don't worry; I'll be very responsible."

"Sweetie Belle is going to be staying with my parents for about a week, but when she gets back do look in on her from time to time, all right?"

"You can count on me, Rarity," Fluttershy nodded.

"*Have a good time Rainbow Dash!*" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, bouncing up and giving Dash a nuzzle.

Dash laughed as Pinkie's curly pink mane tickled her chin. "Sure, Pinkie. I'll definitely try to have fun."

"Okay," Applejack said, stomping her hoof on the ground. She seemed to naturally assume leadership of the trio, and Rarity and Rainbow Dash chose not to dispute this. "Rarity, Rainbow, y'all ready?"

"Yes, already!" Dash cried.

"I'm ready, Applejack," said Rarity, squaring up her withers. "Let's begin."

"All righty, then!" the earth pony exclaimed. She reared back and let out a high-pitched whinny. "Twilight, Pinkie, Fluttershy, goodbye and take care! Mac, Apple Bloom, take care! *Let's move 'em out!*" She broke into a full gallop, thundering down the road.

"Farewell, everypony! Take care!" Rarity yelled over her shoulder as she began to follow, working to match Applejack's swift pace.

"Yeah! Let's rock and roll!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, flapping her wings and flying forward; she quickly caught up to Applejack and remained just above her. "See you all later!" she called back.

With those final parting words, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity began their journey, leaving their friends and their homes behind. Ponyville quickly retreated in their wake, until the road behind them was as empty and open as the road ahead.

"*Sha-nananananana-na-na-na! Goin' on an adventure! Sha-nananananana-na-na-na! Goin' on an adventure!*"

"Rainbow, what in tarnation are you doin'?" Applejack called up to her flying friend. They had been on the move for about three hours now, the Everfree Forest passing swiftly around them. They were following a mostly clear road that had already taken them past Zecora's hut in the wild woods. They had then arrived at the river that cut through the forest, and were now galloping on its right bank. They knew from studying a map that the river's headwaters were up in the Drackenridge Mountains, and by following it upstream they hoped to reach the mountains by nightfall.

"Well, Pinkie Pie's not here, and *somepony* has to sing!" Dash said.

"No, *somepony doesn't* have to sing!" the earth pony quickly replied. "In fact, avoidin' singin' is one of the reasons I didn't want Pinkie Pie comin' on this trip!"

"Aw, come on, AJ –"

"No! I'm puttin' my hoof down! No singin'!"

Rainbow Dash was silent for a few moments. "Can I at least do the sha-na-nas?"

"No! No sha-na-nas! That'll just lead to more singin'!"

The pegasus passed a few more moments in silence. Finally, she said, "Well can I at least *hum?*"

Applejack glanced up at her friend, and saw the innocent expression on her face. She knew better than to be fooled – Rainbow was hardly ever innocent – but couldn't deny the pout. "I *guess* you can hum," she finally relented.

"Yay!" Rainbow Dash cried. She immediately began humming the jaunty tune of the song she had just been singing.

Applejack gritted her teeth and tried to block it out. This effort was not helped by Rarity, who moments later began humming the song herself, adding her smooth, dulcet hum to Dash's coarser one. It was one of the rare times Applejack wished she could walk on only two hooves – so the other two could be free to be stuffed into her ears.

Rainbow Dash had been delighted to hear Rarity joining in with her humming. Looking down, she saw the white unicorn was also keeping pace with Applejack rather well. She was still bringing up the rear, but not far behind at all; in fact, she was right at Applejack's heels. They were actually moving fairly quickly. *Maybe we can make it in time after all*, she thought.

"Rope!"

Rarity collided with Applejack's hindquarters as the earth pony screeched to a sudden halt. Dash shot past them before coming to a hard stop and whirling around. "What? What's wrong? What is it?!" the pegasus cried.

"Confound it all, I *knew* I forgot somethin'!" Applejack cried, stomping her hoof angrily into the ground. "I forgot to pack any rope!"

Rarity was rubbing her horn with her hoof. "Is that all?" she deadpanned.

"Oh, sure, y'all laugh!" Applejack huffed. "But rope's a right handy thing to have around! I'm already thinkin' of a dozen ways we'll probably need it!"

"Well we can't go back!" Dash said. "We've gotta keep going. Going back would waste too much time."

Applejack glanced back down the riverbank. She sighed. "I suppose y'all are right..." She resumed her previous gallop. "But we're gonna be sorry we don't have no rope, mark my words."

"Sure, and when that time comes, yeah, we'll mark 'em," Dash muttered, flapping her wings once more.

As morning turned to afternoon, the ponies' stomachs began to churn. Rarity in particular was feeling hungry – running was harder work than flying, and she was not as used to sustained physical exertion as Applejack. At her insistence, they stopped for lunch beside the river. Applejack opened her saddlebags and plucked out three apples, two of which she rolled across the grass to Rarity and Rainbow Dash. "That's it?" Dash said.

"That's all from the bag," said the earth pony, closing her saddlebag with a snap. "We gotta make these apples last. So if you're hungrier for more," she lowered her head and bit up a chunk of grass, "get to foragin'!"

Rarity drew back in disgust. "You mean... eat *raw* grass? It hasn't even been seasoned! Don't you have some salt?"

"Girl, I had a lot more important things to pack than *salt*," Applejack said. "If you wanted salt you shoulda packed it yourself."

"C'mon, Rares," Dash said with a smile, chewing her grass with her mouth open, "it's spring! Everything's nice and juicy!"

"Ugh..." the unicorn grumbled, taking out her sunglasses and using magic to place them on her face.

"If you want, I can go up and pull off some leaves for you," Dash offered. "They're really tasty."

"No, no," Rarity muttered. She bent down and daintily took a bite of grass. She chewed it, wincing slightly at the strong, unrefined taste. She swallowed hard. "It's quite... *bracing*. Besides, the raw thing is so hip nowadays." She took another bite of grass, gritting her teeth. *The things I do for friendship*, she thought. *Oh, Twilight, I do hope this is all worthwhile.*

They ate fairly quickly, at Rainbow Dash's insistence; the rainbow-maned pegasus was eager to remain on the move as much as possible. Rarity ate as much grass as she could stand before mercifully moving on to the much more appetizing apple; Applejack unceremoniously chomped her way through most of the grass around her. Dash ate some grass, then flew up to snip at some of the elm leaves hanging overhead. Applejack and Dash insisted that they not lounge, so the three ponies rose to their hooves and resumed their journey, causing Rarity to whine about the damage to her digestion. All the while, the Drackenridge Mountains loomed closer and closer over the tops of the trees, until their summits were no longer visible, and they were merely a great wall of rock.

By evening, the sun had already gone down beyond the mountains, casting the whole of the forest in rapidly deepening shadow. Their path was no longer level: they had begun to gently climb, and the odd boulder was now appearing, jutting out of the ground amidst the trees as they galloped past. "Hold it!" Rainbow Dash suddenly cried, causing Applejack and Rarity to screech to a halt. The two grounded ponies looked up at their flying companion, who was intently glancing skyward. "It's gonna rain," she said. "We should probably camp for the night."

"I didn't think there were any storms scheduled for this evening," Rarity remarked.

"Everfree Forest, remember?" Dash said, flapping her wings gently as she descended to the ground. "The weather here makes itself." Indeed, nothing in the Everfree Forest followed a schedule; unlike every other part of Equestria, nature worked completely on its own in the wild green forest. Animals cared for themselves, weather systems formed on their own, and plants grew completely free of pony guidance. It was extremely strange, and one of the reasons why Ponyville was still considered a frontier town despite being centuries old. The forest was even older: it had been growing since the earliest days of Equestria, as far back as recorded history.

To verify Dash's instincts, a distant rumble vibrated in Applejack's chest. Turning around, she could see a bank of dark clouds rolling toward them, flashing occasionally with brilliant white bursts of light. The wind was also picking up, the trees beginning to sway. "Oh, goodness, let's please *do* get under cover before it starts raining!" Rarity cried, stomping her hooves one after the other in quick succession.

"Hold on, sugarcube," Applejack said, trotting off the path and into the trees. "I've got a tarp in my saddlebag that we can sling over a branch. Of course, *it sure would be nice if we had some rope...*"

"Yeah, yeah," Dash muttered, following her into the trees. "Look, there's lots of rocks around," she said, kicking at one near her hoof. "We can just use those to secure the tarp. And the trees will block a lot of the rain, right?"

"I suppose so," Applejack admitted. She was now glancing up at the branches overhead, peering through the foliage until she saw one that suited her: it was a long, thick branch that stuck nearly straight out from the tree it was attached to, and it was not too high off the ground. Pulling off her saddlebags, the orange earth pony yanked out a very, very thick roll of dark gray wool with a waxy exterior. She gripped one edge with her mouth and began to violently shake it, causing it to unfold, making it bigger and bigger with each swirl of her head. By the time it was fully unfurled, it was quite large. "Rarity," she called over her shoulder, her mouth still full of tarp, "start grabbin' some rocks with your magic, will you?"

"All right," the white unicorn said primly, her horn shimmering as her telekinesis began to work. There was actually a plentiful amount of decent-sized rocks scattered through the trees, likely remnants from rockslides. Each one she saw, she raised into the air, until she had more than a dozen floating around her.

"Rainbow, you grab the other end of this here tarp and pull it over that tree branch," she said.

"Sure!" Dash cried, taking the end of the tarp opposite Applejack; she flapped her wings and raised it up into the air. The foliage around her was heavy, but she was able to maneuver herself up and over the thick tree branch. Applejack walked forward as the tarp was pulled, and soon it was forming a triangular open space several feet wide and even more feet high.

"Now, Rarity, put those rocks down and pin this sucker in place," said Applejack. Rarity easily complied, setting the rocks down in two neat rows, one on each side, seven to a row.

The unicorn suddenly felt a drop of water hit her horn. "And not a moment too soon," she said. Another raindrop came down, then another, and water was falling rapidly from the sky. The three ponies quickly scurried under their makeshift shelter, the rain pattering down upon the oilskin surface.

"So," Rarity began, as Applejack laid out one of her blankets on the ground, "tomorrow it's up the mountains, then?"

"Hopefully we can make it over 'em in one day," Applejack said. "Or at least make it to the peaks in one day. I hope it won't be too snowy."

"At this time of year there's *definitely* still gonna be some snow," Rainbow Dash observed. "I hope you ponies packed warm."

"Oh, no need to worry about *that*, dear Rainbow," Rarity said smugly. "I'm more than adequately equipped to handle a little cold weather. But Applejack, I hope you brought something more than just that hat."

"I got my old quilted vest in here, that should be enough," said Applejack, patting her saddlebags.

"A *vest*? No, of course that's not going to be enough!" Rarity said. "I'll have to lend you one of my sweaters."

"I don't need no –"

"I *insist*," the unicorn said firmly. She looked over at Rainbow Dash. "Although you don't even have anything packed..."

"I'm perfectly fine," said Dash. "Pegasuses don't get cold."

"Pegasi," Rarity corrected her.

"Whatever!"

"So..." Applejack interrupted them pointedly, "once we get over those mountains... what's next? What's on the other side?"

"Some other place," Rainbow Dash said, rolling over onto her back. "I've seen it a few times from the air; it looks like a big field of gold."

"Rarity, didn't Twilight give you that book about the lands beyond Equestria?" Applejack asked.

"Ah, yes!" the unicorn exclaimed. She used her magic to open her saddlebag and float the book through the air. Settling it down in front of her, she opened it to the table of contents. The book was rather short, and was organized into four sections, each based on a compass direction. "Let me see... we'll be crossing the western border, right?" The other two nodded. Rarity flipped to the page where the 'West' section started. "Hmm hmmm... Everfree Forest... Drackenridge Mountains... Aha! Ahem." She cleared her throat. "*Beyond the Drackenridge Mountains, Equestria is neighbored by the Kingdom of Gildedale, a broad land of plains and grasses inhabited by free-roaming bands of earth ponies. Equestria and Gildedale have long had cordial relations, including a treaty binding each country to come to the other's aide in the event of disaster. However, individual Daleponies are often wary and suspicious of strangers, so travelers are advised to be cautious.*"

Applejack was *grinning*. "Land sakes, a whole country full o' earth ponies! That sounds like my kind of place."

"They certainly sound like a rough and tumble lot," Rarity said. "What's this business about them being 'free-roaming'? Do they not live in cities, I wonder?"

"I bet they just wander around wherever they want," said Rainbow Dash. She smiled, putting her hooves behind her head. "No rules, no borders, no restrictions! A pony free to live off the land and be her own filly!"

"I *hope* they aren't that lackadaisy," Applejack said. "That might be a pegasus' idea of the good life, but us earth ponies know the value of a little organization an' hard work, and I reckon that's true even outside Equestria."

"These ponies don't sound like farmers, AJ," Dash said. "They almost sound... fierce. Tough."

"Hmmm... I wonder if we'll see any big, strapping stallions," Rarity remarked offhand. "A bit of primitivism can be attractive in a man if he doesn't take himself too seriously."

"Okay, girls, let's not get too caught up," Applejack said. "Remember, we're not goin' for a vacation. We've gotta cross Gildedale as fast as we can to make it to the Archback Mountains. Rarity, does the book say anything about the mountains?"

Rarity turned the pages with her magic, scanning them rapidly. "It doesn't seem to say so... I believe this book is concerned solely with the lands that border Equestria, not what borders those lands in turn. But the fact that there's no mention of the mountains might imply that Gildedale's borders don't extend all the way to them."

"So we'd have to cross *another* different country," Dash said. "That's just great."

"Remember," Rarity said, "we only have to get there in two weeks. Once we get to the mountains and find the flower, we can use Spike's fire to send it right back." She used her magic to pluck the bottle of green and purple flames from her saddlebag; the magical fire flashed and shone. They had all agreed that Rarity should be the one to carry the dragonfire, due to her skill at keeping track of minute details.

"Be *careful* with that thing," Applejack said. "If we lose it or break the bottle we are in a *mess* o' manure." Just then the earth pony's stomach growled. "Huh – I reckon it's time for dinner, then." Rarity and Rainbow Dash chuckled. Applejack smiled and began to pluck apples from her saddlebags.

After dinner, Applejack pulled out more blankets, and Rarity produced a pillow enchanted to conform to the shape of her head. Rainbow Dash opted to use one of the blankets as additional padding beneath her; she was unused to sleeping on the ground, and its hardness was unnerving and distracting.

The pegasus had chosen a spot near the entrance of the tarp, though far enough away to keep her out of the rain. Restless, she had trouble relaxing, so while Applejack and Rarity talked, of all things, about business (Applejack was discussing her family's plans for expanding the south orchard at Sweet Apple Acres), she stared up at the storming sky.

Suddenly, a long, jagged bolt of lightning lanced through the heavens, curling around a bank of clouds and turning the whole world blinding white. Rainbow Dash was

entranced. She rose to her hooves without realizing it, causing the other two ponies to glance her way. "You all right, Rainbow?" Applejack asked.

"What?" Dash remarked. She shook her head. "Oh, sorry, I'm fine."

"You're not scared of the lightning, are you?" Rarity said.

Rainbow Dash gave her a strange look over her shoulder. She then looked at the ground. "Um..."

"You're *scared* of lightning?" Rarity said, incredulous. "Don't you pegasus ponies fly around in storms and hurricanes all the time?"

"I'm not scared!" Dash cried. Her face switched from angry to uneasy to bashful and more. "I'm... lightning just makes me nervous, is all."

"Why?" Applejack asked. "Like Rarity said, pegasi fly through storms all the time. Y'all *control* storms, right?"

"Well, sure, and I'm totally cool with storms!" Dash quickly insisted. "Wind, clouds, rain, even tornadoes, they're no problem." She glanced up at the storming heavens again. "But lightning... I can't..."

"Hmm?" Rarity murmured.

"I..." Dash wasn't looking at them.

"Come on, spit it out!" Applejack insisted.

"I can't control lightning!" Dash said in one breath. She turned around, and they were surprised to see how sad she looked. "It's the one part of storms that I can't control."

"Have you ever tried?" Rarity asked.

"Oh, loads of times!" Dash said, finally laying back down. "There are some really slick weather ponies that can buck lightning bolts with their back legs! I've... well, I've sort of tried that before." She set her head down on the blanket. "But every time I try, the lightning just feels so... wild. It's hot and fast and bright. And I can never be fast enough to control it, no matter how fast I fly. I just wind up getting *close* to it, and it nearly fries my tail off." She sighed. She looked truly miserable. "I'm a failure as a pegasus."

Rarity and Applejack regarded her silently. Finally the orange earth pony said, "Don't get upset, sugarcube. There's plenty of stuff lots o' ponies can't do. Shucks, I can't shear sheep."

"I'm an awful tennis player!" Rarity offered brightly. Applejack arched an eyebrow at her. "Well, I am! I've never been able to get the hang of an overhand serve."

"Look, I'm tired, girls," Dash said, turning away from them. "Can we just go to sleep?"

"A mighty fine idea," Applejack said. "We gotta get up early tomorrow if we wanna make it over the mountain by nightfall." Snuggling under her blanket, she yawned and laid her head back on her saddlebags. "Sweet dreams, everypony."

Rarity pulled on a sleeping mask and tucked the blanket around her, before gently slipping into the covers and laying her head on her pillow. She was the first to fall asleep, breathing softly within minutes; she had had a very long and hard day. Applejack followed shortly after her, snoring gently within half an hour.

Rainbow Dash remained awake, tossing and turning on top of the blankets. She rolled herself up in her own blanket, wrapped like a spring roll, but she still couldn't sleep. She was thinking about lightning. She'd thought about it countless times before over the years, and always the same frustration bubbled into her mind. *What exactly do I do wrong?* she wondered. Every other aspect of weather – rain, wind, snow, clouds – bent to her will, as it did for every other pegasus. Yet lightning remained beyond her reach. And it tore at her. Not all the time – it wasn't an obsession – but when she did think about it, she thought *hard*, because she *wanted* to master lightning. Lightning reminded her of herself: it was fierce, and fast, and wild, and powerful. Lightning was what she wanted to be like, so why couldn't she control it? *Is it because I'm not fast enough?* she thought. *Am I not fierce enough? Am I not strong enough? Am I just not as good as... her?* Dash, as previously mentioned, was not given to self-doubt. But she was not immune to it, either. Her doubts, once stirred, would linger, as they lingered now, following her to sleep where her dreams were filled with the flash of lightning and the sound of pealing thunder. She was chasing somepony through the air, the flash of an electric blue tail mingling with the blinding bolts in the stormy sky.

Applejack woke first, just as the pale light of dawn began to peek through the trees. She was always used to rising at sunup, and did so even without her trusty alarm clock. Yawning, the orange earth pony tossed off her blanket, rose to her feet, and gave herself an enlivening shake. She reached down and took up her brown cowcolt's hat in her mouth, with a toss of her head flipping the hat up between her ears. *Pappy*, she thought, feeling the familiar lightness of the hat on her head, *what would you think of your little AJ now? All grown up and on an adventure.*

She stalked gently over to Rainbow Dash and nudged her behind her ears. "Wake up, Rainbow," she said. "It's time for breakfast and then to get a move on."

Dash mumbled and turned over in her sleep; she was still wrapped in the blanket.

"Rainbow Dash, wake up!" Applejack said, louder this time. There was still no response. "**Rainbow!**" she yelled.

"Whuh? Hurm?!" the pegasus gurgled as she finally regained consciousness. She sat up with the blanket still wrapped around her, making her look like a worm. She tried moving, but gained no ground with the blanket around her. This caused her to panic. "Aah! Aah! I'm trapped!"

"Huh – yes your Majesty?" Rarity mumbled, stirring from a dream. She raised her sleeping mask off her eyes with a hoof. She frowned. "Oh, drat, it's *morning*, isn't it? And I was having such a lovely dream..."

"Oh, Celestia, I can't move my wings! I'm in a horrible –"

"Rainbow would you *cut it out!*" Applejack cried.

Dash finally realized she was not ensnared by some horrible beast. The pegasus yawned. "Morning, everypony," she said, wriggling out of the blanket. She stretched her wings back and then stretched her body forward, lowering herself until her chest nearly touched the ground. Her back cracked a few times. She cracked her head from side to side as well. "Who's up for breakfast?"

"We gotta make it quick," Applejack said, beginning to roll up her blanket. "At least it's stopped rainin'. Y'all help me break camp, and then we can go nab some grass."

"Ewww, the grass is going to be *soggy*!" Rarity whined. "Can't we just have some more apples?"

"I didn't pack two saddlebags full o' apples!" the orange earth pony said. "I only got so many with me, and we used a fair number of 'em yesterday. We gotta conserve 'em for the times we can't get nothin' else – like tonight, when we're in the mountains."

"You know, Rares," Dash said, hovering just off the ground, "my offer to get you some leaves still stands..."

Rarity kicked off her blanket in annoyance and sighed. "Well, fine. It can't be any worse than soggy, smooshy grass."

"Pluck me off a branch or two, will you Rainbow?" Applejack said, folding her blanket tightly. She began to stuff it into a saddlebag. "I've never tried leaves before."

"All right! One treetop breakfast, coming up!" The blue pegasus shot out of the tent in a rainbow blur.

Rarity used her magic to compress her pillow, shoving it back into one of her saddlebags. "That pony had best not be pulling our legs. If I have to gargle a pulpy green mess for breakfast, I'd rather just go hungry."

"She's awful enthusiastic about them leaves," Applejack replied, beginning to pull up the blanket laid over the ground. "I reckon she thinks they're pretty tasty."

"Yes, dear Applejack, but Rainbow Dash is not always the best judge of *others'* tastes," the white unicorn responded. "Do you remember the time she tried to convince us to go cliff diving?"

Applejack chuckled at the memory. "Shucks, I thought that was kinda fun. You just chickened out 'cause you were afraid o' heights."

"One plummet from the sky to my impending doom per lifetime is enough, thank you very much."

Dash abruptly soared back into the tent, with two tree branches full of green leaves tucked under each front leg, and a third carried in her mouth. "Ladies," she said, spitting out the branch in her mouth, "breakfast is served!" She dropped the two branches under her legs, gripped the third between her front hooves, and began to rip leaves off it with her teeth, chewing noisily and making satisfied sounds.

Applejack pinned one branch in place with her hooves, then bent down and nibbled off a leaf. She chewed it thoughtfully, considering the taste as it hit her tongue. "Hmm... tart," she said with her mouth full. She swallowed. "A little like a Granny Smith apple."

Rarity was busy nipping a leaf apart into small chunks. "It's not quite as bad as I thought it would be."

"That's the spirit!" Dash cried, shoving her mouth into the remaining branch and taking an enormous bite of leaves. The bright green sprouts of spring looked like a beard around her snout as she slowly chewed them down. "They're all so fresh, especially in the spring! And nopony's been walking all over them!"

"Well," the white unicorn admitted, "there is that."

At Applejack's insistence, they ate quickly, each of them finishing their branches in swift succession notwithstanding Rarity's usual daintiness. What followed was last night in reverse: Rarity used her magic to remove the rock weights around the tarp, Rainbow Dash carried it back over the branch, then all three ponies worked together to fold the large oilcloth into a shape compact enough to fit into Applejack's saddlebag. By the time the sky was orange with the risen sun, they were packed up, and they set out from amidst the trees, quickly reaching the same brisk pace they'd kept for much of the previous day.

Soon the gentle slope they'd begun to encounter yesterday grew markedly steeper, and the broad-branched oaks and elms and ashes gave way to prickly pines. The path began to grow rocky, and Rarity almost lost her footing on one particularly large rock in their path. "Can't we slow down a bit?" she cried. "We don't want to fall off the mountain!"

"When we get in danger of that, yeah, we'll slow down!" Rainbow Dash cried back. "But not before!"

"You're not even running!" the unicorn chastised the pegasus.

The Drackenridge Mountains climbed higher and higher, the path growing steeper and steeper as the morning wore on. By the time noon arrived, they were almost above the treeline – and a slight chill had begun to pervade the air. Rarity shivered. "Ooo, it's getting cold," she said.

"It has started to get a mite chilly," Applejack concurred. She and Rarity slowed to a trot.

"You girls are wimps!" Dash said as she shot past them; banking hard, she spun around and put her hooves on her hips. "It's not cold at all!"

"You wouldn't know, would you?" Rarity remarked, sliding her saddlebags off her flanks. "Pegasi don't get cold, remember?"

"Well we can *tell* when it's cold, even if we don't feel it," the sky-blue pegasus said. "And it's not that cold, not really."

"Maybe not, but it's gonna get colder the higher up we go," Applejack said. "I'd rather stop now and bundle up than do it when the snow's comin' down on us. Besides, it's time for lunch."

Dash fluttered to the ground. "Well if it's lunch time..."

"Hmm..." Rarity said, using her magic to lift two sweaters out of her saddlebags. From the right bag she produced her hot pink cashmere sweater, while from the left she lifted a sweater of alpaca wool, the color of oatmeal. The alpaca sweater was slightly heavier. "Applejack, darling, you should wear this one," she said, levitating the alpaca sweater toward her earth pony comrade. "It's heavy enough to give you some warmth under that... *vest* you've brought."

Applejack tugged a black vest of quilted wool out of her saddlebag. "This baby's seen me through plenty o' winters all by itself," she said.

"Darling, there's going to be *snow* –"

"I've been out in blizzards with nothin' but this here vest and my hat."

"Applejack, please," Rarity said, putting on a pouty expression. "I'll feel simply awful if I'm warm and you're shivering away up front. I know how much you love playing the martyr –"

"The what?" Applejack asked.

"– but be practical this time. Please?" The last word was accompanied by a flutter of the unicorn's long eyelashes. She leaned forward, her beautiful blue eyes wavering with intensity.

Applejack rolled her green eyes at Rarity's display, but even she wasn't completely immune to the unicorn's charms. Finally, the orange earth pony sighed. "Oh, all *right*," she relented. She reached up with her hooves and grabbed the floating sweater. "But don't be mad if I break a sweat in this heavy thing," she added, feeling the thickness of the material.

"Not to worry, darling," Rarity said, using her magic to unfold the pink cashmere sweater, "I can always wash it when we get back to Ponyville."

"Okay, you've played dress-up long enough," Rainbow Dash said, pounding her hooves on the rocky ledge. "Can we get to that lunch you were mentioning?"

Applejack pulled the neck of the sweater over her head. "Sure thing, just give me a second to get this sucker on." She wriggled her front legs through the leg holes, noting that the sweater was quite soft on the inside despite its rugged outer weave. The chill in the air around her was greatly dispelled. Flipping her hat back onto her head, the earth pony finally tugged her long blond mane out of the neck so that it was free. "We may have to hold off on dinner this evenin' if we wanna conserve our apple supply."

"I actually brought some granola bars," Rarity mentioned, pushing her pink sweater down more securely against her flanks. She gently extricated her curled violet mane from the sweater's neck. "They're not much, but they'll give us something to put in our stomachs. I'd rather not go to bed hungry if I can help it."

"Twilight's book said there was plenty o' grass in Gildedale," Applejack said. "Once we're over the mountains we should be able to eat off the land. If we're lucky there'll even be fruit or somesuch produce that we can store for the return trip."

Rainbow Dash blinked her rose-colored eyes and grimaced. "Oh, ponyfeathers, I forgot we'd have to make a round trip! Ugh, this is all gonna take forever!"

Rarity's expression indicated that she had forgotten this as well. "Well," she said, trying to sound happy, "perhaps we'll meet a friendly eagle or hippogriff who will give us a lift back home."

"Too bad somepony doesn't know how to *teleport*," Dash grouched, glancing at Rarity.

Rarity's eyes filled with pain; she flinched away like she'd been struck.

"**Rainbow!**" Applejack snapped.

The sky-blue pegasus quickly realized her mistake. "Ohmigosh, Rarity, I'm so sorry!" she gasped, scooting over to her friend. "I forgot –"

"No," Rarity said, shifting away from her, "it's quite all right, Rainbow." Her body language made it plain that this was a lie. "I suppose it *would* be more... convenient if I knew how to teleport. Perhaps I really should learn some day."

"Now don't you get your tail in a twist, Rarity," said Applejack, plucking some apples from her saddlebags. "You don't need to learn how to teleport if you don't want to. You're plenty useful for this trip without knowin' how, *ain't* she Rainbow?" the earth pony finished with a glare at Dash.

"Oh, well... yeah, of course!" Dash said. "I mean, you still have your other magic, and that's something AJ and I can't do." Smiling fiercely, she threw a front leg around the white unicorn. "I don't think there's a better possible group that could have gone on this trip! We've got Applejack, a tough and dependable earth pony; we've got you, a magical and... creative unicorn; and we've got me," she thumped her chest with her other hoof, "the fastest and fiercest pegasus in all of Equestria!"

Rarity chuckled, leaning into Rainbow Dash. "Perhaps you're right, Rainbow. I just hope I can be as useful as you say. I know you and Applejack are the first ponies I would choose to go on an adventure with."

"I reckon we'll all be useful to each other, before this trip is done," Applejack said. "Now, let's eat."

They lunched on two apples each and chatted happily, enjoying each others' company and all feeling much better about their prospects for the rest of the trip. When they had finished, the two running ponies took up their saddlebags again, and the three of them continued their climb into the mountains. The sky was now light gray with cloud cover, and a cool wind had begun to blow.

Higher and higher they climbed; they now had no choice but to slow down, as the path was becoming steep and jagged, filled with rocks. The wind howled around them, whipping through the crevices and cracks of the towering peaks every which way. "Whoa!" Applejack cried, stopping suddenly.

"What's wrong, darling?" Rarity asked.

Applejack said nothing. Sitting down, she took her hat off her head with her front hooves. Turning it over, she tugged around the interior for a moment and pulled out a drawstring attached to the inside of the hat. Flipping the hat back on her head, she used both hooves to tighten the drawstring as it came under her neck, until it was pulled tight and the cowcolt's hat was snugly secured.

Rainbow Dash put her hooves on her cheeks and dragged them down her face slowly. "*Can we go now?!*" she hissed.

"Yep," Applejack said, "we can go." And they began to climb again, rounding one sharp bend where the wind blew fiercely; the earth pony was quite happy that her hat was tied in place.

About an hour further up the mountains, it started to snow: small, scattered flakes at first, then gradually heavier, until thick flurries were swirling on the wind around them. Again Applejack motioned for them to halt. "I reckon it's time to bundle up a bit more," she said, sliding her saddlebags off. Reaching into her left bag, she pulled out her black quilted vest.

"I do believe you're right!" Rarity concurred; the white unicorn was shivering. Sliding off her own saddlebags, she used her magic to open the right bag and pull out her dark gray coat. It was lined with white lambswool and was exceptionally warm.

"Rainbow, you sure you're not cold?" Applejack called to the pegasus, hovering just off the edge of the path.

"I'm fine!" Dash said back, a distinct note of annoyance in her voice. "I told you before, pegasus ponies don't get cold!"

"Must be nice," Applejack remarked, snapping together the last of the snaps on her vest. She pulled out an orange scarf from her right bag and wrapped it snugly around her neck.

"Oh, heavens no," Rarity said, using magic to zip up her coat. "Think of all the wonderful accessorizing and layering we would miss out on!" This earned her an eye-roll from the orange earth pony. Both ponies repositioned their saddlebags, and with an impatient Rainbow Dash flying alongside them, they continued their push into the increasingly driving snow.

By the time evening arrived, the path was winding steeply through mountain peaks that rose sheer all around them. They were trudging through a full-blown blizzard, the snow so dense in the air that they could barely see the way ahead of them. Dash had actually come down from the sky, the wind was blowing so fast. She dragged her legs through the hoof-thick snow in between Applejack and Rarity, her rainbow-striped mane and tail whipping wildly in the wind. They were scrambling up a particularly steep rise, trying to keep their footing in the snow and the tumbling rocks. Stretching out one step, Applejack was surprised to put her hoof on level ground. "It levels out up here!" she called back to the others. She put the other foot up onto the ledge and hauled herself up, rolling onto her side as she finally reached the top. Turning back around, she offered her front hooves

to Rainbow Dash. *I wish I had some rope now, no lie!* she thought. Still, Applejack was a strong pony, and Dash was light as all pegasi tended to be, so she easily pulled her friend up onto the level space. She did the same for Rarity, though the unicorn's heavy saddlebags meant she needed to expend more effort.

Once she was on level ground again, Rarity surveyed her surroundings. They seemed to be very high in the mountains indeed; shorter mountain peaks spread away beneath them, and deep valleys between the peaks were filled with snow drifts. "Could we be at the highest point in the path?" Rarity called to her friends.

"It's sure possible," Applejack remarked. She joined Rarity in looking out below them. The snow rose a good ways up their legs.

"Girls," Rainbow Dash's voice cut through the wind, "look at *this!*"

The two ponies turned around, and their eyes widened. There was a large, round opening set into the mountainside far back from the ledge. It was no mere cave, either: the opening was a neat, smooth circle, rimmed by an outline of stone into which symbols were carved. "Anypony know what those say?" Dash asked, pointing at the strange glyphs.

"I sure ain't never seen nothin' like that before," Applejack remarked.

"Twilight's the scholar, not me," Rarity said. "It's certainly not Modern Equestrian."

The sky-blue pegasus began to creep forward, breathing out fog into the frigid mountain air.

"Rainbow!" Applejack cried. "You don't know what's in there!"

"I just wanna look," Dash said over her shoulder. "Maybe we can stay here for the night."

Rarity exchanged a glance with Applejack. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to take a peek, right?" She trudged through the snow toward Dash.

As Rainbow Dash drew closer to the mouth of the cave, she began to *hear* something. It was very faint, almost imperceptible at first: a gentle lilt, coming from deep within the blackness. With each step she took she could hear more clearly. The language was not one she could understand, but she knew instinctively that it was the spoken form of the glyphs written around the cave's mouth. It crooned at her like a lullaby, but jauntier and

more energetic. It beckoned her to wonderment. The pegasus was deeply charmed. "That music..." she muttered. She began to walk slowly forward.

"Music?" Rarity said, several paces behind her. The unicorn paused and pricked up her ears, and found she could hear it too. It was a haunting, mournful tune, sung by the most beautiful voice Rarity had ever heard, even more beautiful than Fluttershy's. It compelled her to wrap herself in its elegance. "Oh, *my*..." she whispered, beginning to walk forward.

Applejack, behind both of them, jerked back her head. "What are y'all doin'?"

"Can't you hear it?" Dash said absent-mindedly.

"The music?" Rarity said in a trance. Both ponies' eyes had grown wide and glazed.

Applejack stomped her hoof. She leaned her head forward and craned her ears. "Nope!" she said after a few seconds. "I don't hear no music. I think y'all are just pullin' my leg, to be honest. So cut it out and let's get goin'! I don't like the looks o' this cave."

Rainbow Dash and Rarity did not seem to be paying attention to her; they both continued their slow, deliberate walk deeper into the cave. Applejack was highly annoyed. "Would y'all mind comin' back here, and maybe gettin' *on* with... are y'all even listenin'?!" The orange earth pony galloped up behind the unicorn and the pegasus and shouted at them: "**Hey! We gotta get goin'!**" She stomped her hoof impatiently on the ground. Unseen by any of them, her cutie mark flashed.

Suddenly, the orange earth pony *did* hear something – something terrifying. She supposed it could be called singing, but the loud, rumbling roar was so dense and throaty that she could barely tell words were being spoken. It echoed from deep within the cave, harsh and threatening. "Rarity! Rainbow! Don't go in there!" she called, galloping forward and grabbing both ponies' tails in her mouth. She planted her hooves and gave them a tug, trying to drag them backwards. Both ponies glared back at her, their empty eyes flickering with expressions of malice. Rainbow Dash flapped into the air and jerked away, while Rarity used her magic to pry Applejack's mouth open. Both ponies resumed their forward progress, their pace picking up to a trot.

Panicking, Applejack did what she always did in desperate situations: thought about how she would handle things if she were on the farm. Galloping past her two friends, she skidded to a stop next to the wall of the cave, reared up on her front legs, and *bucked* with all her might. Her back hooves slammed into the rock, sending a long, forking crack racing up the wall and across the ceiling. Dust and crags immediately began to tumble

down, stalactites cracking off and falling like stone daggers to the floor below. A small rock hit Rarity on the head, snapping her back to her senses. "Hmm? What – oh *my!*" she cried, looking up at the collapsing ceiling. Dash was still entranced by the singing, which she could hear even over the growing din.

"Come on!" Applejack called to her. She cut across in front of Dash and ducked down, then rose *up*, putting the sky-blue pegasus across her back. Galloping with all her might, Rarity close behind her, Applejack dodged and wove around falling rock as she pressed desperately toward the entrance to the cave. Finally, gasping for breath, the three of them emerged into the driving snow of the mountains – and not a moment too soon, for the cave completely fell apart in their wake, ceiling and walls alike tumbling down into a pile of rubble that completely filled the mouth of the cave and spilled out of it onto the rocky ledge.

"Huh?" Rainbow Dash finally murmured, her pupils shrinking back to their normal size. "What happened?"

"All I recall is hearing some *beautiful* singing," Rarity said. "Applejack, darling, did you –"

A long, roaring *howl* rose up from within the crumbled cave. It came from deep in the chest of something unseen and strange, full of rage and annoyance, potent enough to cut through dozens of feet of piled rock and who knew how much more empty space deep within the cave. The roar gave way to snarling and gnashing, and the three ponies swore they could feel the ground beneath them *thud* with faint pounding.

"Geez! Is *that* what was singing?" Dash yelped, drawing back.

"It sure was!" Applejack said. "Y'all seemed to hear it pretty-like, but for me it was just as ugly then as it is now!"

"Perhaps it was some sort of magic," Rarity speculated. "A bewitching song... to lure travelers to their doom? Oh, I do wish Twilight were here. She knows this stuff far better than I do."

"So why didn't you get bewitched, AJ?" Dash asked. She smiled. "Maybe you're just too stubborn?"

"Not a clue," the orange earth pony said, "and I don't see the point in ponderin' any further. Right now I'd much like to get away from this place in a hurry."

The howling was picking up again. Rarity shuddered. "I think you're right, Applejack," she said. She gave Applejack a big smile. "And *thank you* for saving me – us. Rainbow Dash and I would be goners if you hadn't been there."

"Oh, yeah," Dash said. "Thanks a ton, Applejack." She flapped her wings and was airborne again – the blizzard had died down some at their present altitude, and the winds were not as fierce. "Now let's get going."

They moved on as quickly as their legs would carry them. As Rarity had guessed, they did appear to have reached the high point in the trail, at least for the time being, and now it was all downhill. The path soon led them into a winding, narrow valley, almost a crevice between steep cliffs jutting up on either side. As they descended from the summit into the vale, the blizzard began to pick up again, once more forcing Rainbow Dash to the ground. As the pegasus looked around, she noticed that the snow was driving incredibly thick. It cut across and around them in sheets of pure white, billowing Applejack's scarf and Rarity's coat. Dash still wasn't *cold*, but the wind was now cutting at her skin like a knife. She had to blink furiously to keep the snow out of her eyes. It was also growing darker, and not just from the snow. Night was coming on fast.

The path seemed to suddenly open up, the crevice giving way to an open plain. Now there was snow *everywhere* – it had room to swirl and gather, and was no less fierce for the wider space in which it moved. Dash scanned her surroundings. Up, down, side to side – everything had become a field of flickering white, with no visibility beyond a few feet. She was... trapped. She was closed up in a box of snow. There was no way out. "Girls?" she cried, shouting to be heard above the roar of the wind.

"*Did y'all say somethin'?!'*" Applejack called over her shoulder, her hat's brim curving in the force of the wind.

Dash began to breathe faster, slowing her pace until she finally stopped walking entirely. *I'm trapped*, she thought, again and again looking around her. "I can't see the sky!" she finally yelled to Applejack.

"Oof!" Rarity cried as she bumped into the sky-blue pegasus' rump. "What's wrong, Rainbow Dash?!" she yelled.

"*I can't see the sky!*" Dash yelled over her shoulder. She began to tremble, fidgeting furiously, lifting each leg one after the other, fluttering her wings fruitlessly in the gale-force winds.

"**Speak up!**" Applejack yelled over the winds, turning around to face her.

"***I CAN'T SEE THE SKY!***" Rainbow Dash yelled at the top of her lungs.

SKY! SKY! SKY! SKY!

The last screamed word finally cut through the interference of the wind and echoed deeply against the surrounding mountainsides. Dash was breathing hard, shivering now. Applejack looked her up and down. "*Well of course you can't see the sky! You can't even see the mountainside, even though it's right... there?*"

A rumble began to fill her ears: faint initially, it quickly grew louder. The world around Applejack began to shudder, and she looked frantically about, searching for the source of the disturbance. Rarity spun around, likewise seeking the noise's source; Rainbow Dash was still frozen in place. It was only belatedly that Applejack realized the rumbling noise was coming from overhead. She looked up, just in time to see a wall of white block out what remained of the daylight. "Oh, horseapp—"

BOOOOOMMMM!

White, cold, cold white, everywhere and anywhere, all around them, rolling and thundering and piling. The avalanche quickly buried them, snow piling on thicker and thicker. The rumbling continued for a few minutes, thundering in the darkness around and above them as more snow fell down. A few seconds later, there was silence.

"Brrrrahawawa!" Applejack sputtered, poking her head up from the snow and staring around at the blackness. The snow was packed so tightly around her that no light filtered in from above. However, she seemed to have raised her head up in a hollow in the snow. Reaching down through the freezing white powder to her saddlebags, she flipped one open and dug through it until she found her flashlight. She pulled it out and used her tongue to flick it on, illuminating a miniature blue-white cave of snow only about a head taller than her hat. There was shifting in the snow next to her, and Rarity's head popped up. A few feet away, Rainbow Dash emerged as well.

Rarity blinked twice. "**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!**" she screamed

"**AAA! AAA! AAA!**" Dash shrieked, spasming and twisting through the snow around her. "**WE'RE TRAPPED! WE'RE TRAPPED! OH CELESTIA I CAN'T SEE! I CAN'T MOVE!**"

Applejack shuffled through the snow until she was right next to the trembling Rainbow Dash. She sat with her legs beneath her and leaned against Dash's sky-blue body, pushing her head gently against Dash's head. "It's okay," she whispered gently. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay." The earth pony could feel her friend's jagged breathing, so she kept her own breathing steady and even, soothing her, like she did with Apple Bloom when she had a nightmare. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay."

Rarity slowly scooted over to join them, leaning against Rainbow Dash on her other side. She spoke no words, but began to hum a gentle tune, the music of a lullaby she often sang to Sweetie Belle. She nuzzled Dash softly as she hummed, planting a brief kiss behind her ear.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's okay," Applejack continued to whisper.

Slowly, inch by inch, Dash's breathing returned to normal. Her eyes grew back to their healthy size, and her shivering slowly abated. Her rose-colored eyes slid closed, and she breathed out a long, shaking sigh. "Th-thank you," she whispered. She didn't want her friends to see her cry, but she had a very hard time keeping the tears out of her eyes. She sniffled, and scooted away from Rarity and Applejack, wiping her eyes with her hoof. "Sorry about that."

Applejack smiled warmly at her. "It's no big thing, sugarcube. You never told me you were claustrophobic."

"I-I'm not," the pegasus pony said. She glanced down into the snow. "I just like being able to see the sky. When I can't, I get nervous."

Applejack scooted back over to where her flashlight lay in the snow. She picked it up and planted it on its base in the snow in the middle of the clear space, lighting up the snow-cave around them. She looked up at the ceiling close over their heads. "You know," she said, "I reckon we should stay here tonight."

"Under the snow?" Dash asked incredulously.

"Snow's a good insulator," Applejack said. "We never mind it fallin' on the ground durin' winter time at the farm, it keeps heat in from the ground. And down here we're out o' the wind. We can stay the night under here, and hopefully the blizzard will have blown over by mornin'."

"Won't we run out of air down here?" Dash asked.

"Not if we dig some more room," Applejack said. "And if we give ourselves just a bit of a hole..." she poked the roof of the snow cave with her flashlight, causing a small chunk of it to collapse. A few stray flakes from the blizzard without flew inside.

Rarity sighed. "I suppose it's the best we can do, in lieu of finding another cave – and I'm not terribly inclined to trust caves right now," she said.

"It's a little cramped, you know?" Dash said, stretching her wings out of the snow.

"Rarity, can you dig down a little bit with your magic?" Applejack asked. "I reckon there's a few feet o' snow between us and the ground."

Nodding, Rarity's horn shimmered, and snow began to fly away from the middle of the small space. It pulled away from the bottom of the snow-cave and revealed yet more snow, which in turn flew away, piling back against the circular opening created by Rarity's magic. About four feet down, black rock finally emerged; Applejack's flashlight clattered as she dropped it down. The orange earth pony leapt into the hollow, followed shortly by the sky-blue pegasus and the white unicorn. Reaching into her saddlebags, Applejack pulled out one of her blankets and spread it across the rock. She then pulled out another blanket and spread it down on top of the first. "Rarity, you brought a blanket, right? Bring it out here."

Rarity took a moment to unzip her coat with magic, pulling it off and sliding her front legs out of the sleeves. She reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a velvety black blanket that shimmered slightly in the light of Applejack's flashlight. Applejack gave the blanket an annoyed look. *Always has to be fancy with that one*, she thought. Still, it would serve. She took it up in her mouth and laid it on top of her second blanket. "Now we just bunch together and roll up. The three of us together with these blankets should make enough heat to keep warm."

"We can gather up in my coat, too," Rarity said, starting to shiver without the warm gray overcoat on her body. "It's quite warm."

"Sure," Rainbow Dash remarked. She yawned. "I... I'm tired, girls. I'm tired and I've been out in the wind. Do you mind if we go to bed?"

"That's the most sensible thing you've said in hours," Applejack replied with a smile. They laid Rarity's coat out on top of her blanket on the far right side, and the three ponies snuggled close together in the lambswool lining. "On the count o' three, roll left," Applejack said. "One, two, *three!*" They rolled left, and they moved left, wrapping

themselves in three layers of blankets as they did. When they reached the end, they were cocooned, and the biting cold of the snowy world outside was a distant memory.

"Don't forget to leave enough opening to breathe, darling," Rarity remarked, fumbling against Applejack's flank.

"There's air comin' in from up here," Applejack said, nosing open a small crack near her snout. She yawned. "Whew, I'm feelin' more beat by the moment. G'night, everypony," she murmured.

"Good night," Rarity said.

"Good night, girls," Rainbow Dash said. She was in between Rarity and Applejack, and the two ponies were surprised when she stretched out her wings over both of them. "Thank you... again." With smiles on their faces, Rarity and Applejack scooted closer to Rainbow Dash.

It is difficult to gauge one's tiredness after a long and difficult day until one comes to the end of it. Having endured much hardship and at least one brush with death, the three ponies now found they were utterly exhausted, and so slipped quickly into dreamless slumber.

A gentle mouth sucked daintily on Rarity's horn. Stirred from full sleep into a half-daze, the unicorn found the sensation was not altogether unpleasant. "Mmm... oh, *my*..." she cooed, snuggling deeper into the lambswool of her coat and the down of her black blanket. "Why, Commodore Silverhooves, you're so *forward*... it's only our first date..."

Rainbow Dash, half-conscious herself, obliged the dazed Rarity by wrapping her tongue around her horn. Rarity murmured and moaned until she slowly came awake, at which point she realized that nopony was taking her on a fancy date or its racy aftermath. But something *was* sucking on her horn. "Aah!" she yelped, a burst of magic flaring off her horn. It bounced Dash's head back, bringing her fully awake and causing her to flutter her wings rapidly.

"Whuh? What?!" the sky-blue pegasus murmured, sleep rapidly falling away from her.

"Huh?" Applejack muttered, shaking herself awake. She yawned, and tried to stretch, but in the cramped confines of the wrapped layers she didn't have much room. "Is it mornin'?"

"I don't know," Rarity admitted. "I just woke up."

"Welp, I'm awake too, and that means it's mornin' enough," the earth pony said firmly. "Rainbow, how you doin'?"

"My wings are a little cramped," Dash admitted, "but I've been worse."

"All right, I think it's time we rolled outta this bundle," Applejack said. "I recall us goin' left last night, so let's go right this time. Everypony ready?"

"Ready!"

"Ready!"

"One, two, *three!*" and on the count of three, they shoved themselves to the right, and kept the momentum going. The dark cocoon around them gradually got thinner, and as they tumbled, more of the cold air began to seep in. Finally, they were freed from the last layer, Rarity's coat, and the three ponies tumbled out onto the damp, dark rock. Looking around, their eyes adjusted quickly to the blackness, and they noted that there were still walls of snow wherever they looked. "I hope it's stopped snowin'," Applejack said.

Rainbow Dash looked straight up. The tunnel they had dug down still led up to the roof of their snowy enclosure. From the air hole high above, she thought she saw orange light. "Only one way to find out," she said with a smile, giving her wings a sequence of rapid flaps. She crouched back on her haunches, gathered her strength, and *shot* up, a brilliant flash of rainbow trailing in her wake. She was at the roof of the snow-cave in less than a second and burst through it in a shower of slush. Orange light poured down into the darkness, throwing up shadows across the two land-bound ponies.

"Well," Rarity said, gathering up her black blanket, "at least the blizzard appears to be over."

Applejack wrapped her scarf back around her neck and began to fold up the first of her two blankets. "That filly is always leapin' before she looks. One o' these days it's gonna get her into trouble."

"Are you forgetting all the times it already has?"

The pony they were speaking about suddenly burst back down through the hole, making it bigger and letting more light in. "The storm's all gone!" she cried happily. There was pure joy in her face. "The sky is *clear*!"

Applejack laughed. "Glad to hear it, sugarcube," as she stuffed her first blanket in her saddlebags. She took a moment to look around at the sheer snow tunnel Rarity had dug. "I don't suppose you'd mind takin' Rarity and me out of here –"

"No problem!" the pegasus said with a smile. "Now hurry up and let's go! I wanna get out of this gloomy place."

Applejack and Rarity packed up the rest of their belongings in short order, Rarity slipping her coat on over her saddlebags once they were snug against her flanks. Taking the unicorn under her front legs, Rainbow Dash flew straight up, emerging from the snow into the brilliant orange light of dawn. As Dash had said, the storm had completely blown over, and the sky was blazing orange and pink in the early morning light; only a few faint streaks of white cloud mottled the sky overhead. Rarity had to admit that after the gloom of the previous night, it was beautiful to see. It was only slightly marred when she felt her stomach growl. *We really didn't eat anything last night*, she thought. Reaching back under her coat, she used her magic to flip open her left saddlebag and extract the contents until she found what she sought: her three granola bars, wrapped in shiny foil.

By the time Applejack had joined her atop the snow, the unicorn was already chewing at one of them, and gladly offered the other two to her friends. "I guess this'll tide us over until we get down from the mountains," the earth pony said, taking a bite of the crunchy confection.

Dash was gobbling her bar up at breakneck speed. "Mmf, let's hurry, I'm sick of all this snow," she mumbled in between big bites. Naturally, she finished eating first.

Careful to stow their wrappers in Rarity's saddlebags, the three ponies set out again. Without the blizzard blinding them, they could clearly see the end of the mountain valley they had entered, a wide pass between two sheer cliffs. Trotting across the snow, they reached it within half an hour, and they found the path cut sharply to the right. They rounded the bend...

"Wow!"

The three ponies had left the bowels of the mountains, and the dramatic turn in their path, combined with the steep drop of the rock around them, along with the complete clearing of yesterday's cloud cover, permitted them to see a long, long panorama of the world below them. It was *golden*. Lit to glistening flame by the brilliance of the rising sun, they beheld what seemed to be endless fields of gold, rolling and shimmering in breezes like water upon the sea. The fields stretched into the distance, spreading out in front of them and to either side, farther than they could fathom. The further west they looked, the more of the field was shadowed, but as each second passed the sun rose higher and higher, spreading more of its radiance across their sight and bathing more of the field in glinting flame.

Open country – Applejack's heart sang at the sight of it! "So, that's..."

"Uh-huh," Rainbow Dash said, "that's Gildedale. And out *that way*..." She pointed with her hoof straight ahead into the sky. Rarity and Applejack followed her direction and looked ahead, raising their gaze from the fields of gold. The further forward they looked, the more the world was shrouded in the purple-blue haze of distance, but at the edge of their sight, sharp masses of shadow were clearly visible.

"Are those the Archback Mountains?" Rarity asked.

"They sure are," Dash affirmed. "From what I've seen, Gildedale goes lengthwise between the Archbacks and the Drackenridge Mountains. We're gonna go across its width, so it won't be as long a journey."

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" Applejack said, her hooves practically trembling with eagerness. "Come on, you lollygaggers, we got a lot o' mountain to get down!" She launched herself down the steeply sloping path, sure-footed but with the most rapid of paces she could manage.

"Yeah! Hi-yo AJ!" Dash yelled, flapping her wings rapidly and surging to catch up with her.

"Wait for me!" Rarity cried, trying her best to keep up amid the slushy snow and irregular rocks.

The three ponies spent the next few hours following the trail through several more bends and turns, always downhill, sometimes through more alpine valleys, other times straight down along the sides of the mountains. As they descended, the air grew warmer, and the snow grew more and more molten. By mid-morning, they were splashing through puddles, and Applejack and Rarity had to stop to remove their vest and coat, respectively. The wind was much gentler now; Applejack was even able to undo the tightening cord on her hat.

Finally, shortly after noon, Applejack took her last step on hard rock. Her next step was on soft, silty dirt. Even this close to the mountains, grass sprang up to meet her, still glistening golden yellow; it hadn't lost any of its luster as the sun had risen higher and grown whiter. The earth pony was ecstatic to be on level ground amid growing plants again. Tossing off her hat and slipping off her borrowed sweater, she threw herself into the tall grass and rolled back and forth, laughing with delight at the soft carpet of growth and the smell of bountiful country.

Using magic to remove her pink sweater, Rarity could only shake her head at the frolicking orange pony. *She* certainly wasn't going to be rolling in the grass. Still, she had to admit it was nice to be in warm air and on flat country again. She took a deep breath; the air was free and wild. It actually perked up her spirits to inhale, as though the very air of this new country of Gildedale beckoned her to adventure. "I do believe I'm in the mood to run," she said aloud, to her own surprise.

Rainbow Dash grinned down at her. She gave the thought some consideration, and the pegasus abruptly tucked in her wings and dropped to the ground, her sky-blue legs bending as she landed. "You know, I feel like running, too," she said. "And since I already have to hang back for you walking ponies, I won't be losing any time if I do."

Rising to her legs, Applejack gave her friend a smile. "You ain't afraid of gettin' *beat* again, are you?" She flipped her hat back onto her head.

"Nope," Dash said, "because I've never *been* beaten. Especially not by you."

"Oh, for Celestia's sake, don't turn this into a *race*," Rarity grouched, using her magic to take up both of her sweaters and fold them. Stuffing them back into her saddlebags, the white unicorn then removed a light blue linen scarf and wrapped it around her neck. "I have enough trouble keeping up with you two without you trying to outrun each other."

"Well, sister, you should have packed a little lighter! Of course you're gonna have trouble with all that stuff in your bags!" Applejack said. "Whattya say, Rainbow – first one to stop for lunch loses?"

Dash dug into the ground with her front hoof. "Sounds good to me. On your mark..."

"Get set – hey!" Applejack cried as the pegasus pony broke into a gallop, vaulting ahead of her in a blur of blue. "You lousy cheater, get back here!"

"You snooze you lose, AJ!" Dash cried over her shoulder.

Growling, Applejack started running, bearing down on Rainbow Dash with all the strength her legs could manage.

"And what if *I'm* the one who gets hungry?" Rarity cried, galloping as fast as she could at the rear. "I know how you two get! You'll starve before either of you – hey! Come back! Not so fast!" She broke into a run of her own to keep up.

The three ponies thundered across the endless plains, their swift track cutting ephemeral slashes of paths in the tall, golden grass. They climbed up and down shallow hills, splashed through small streams, leapt ditches and levees. The sun beat down high overhead, and it was warm on the flat, open landscape; even Applejack was sweating after a while. Yet they kept their furious pace, until Rarity finally coughed out "*Stop!*" How long had they been running?

Applejack and Rainbow Dash skidded to a halt, breathing hard. A light breeze was blowing, but it had not been enough to cool them. Rarity dragged herself toward the two faster ponies, her coat and mane slick with sweat. "S-s-*stop*, I... I can't go on!" Her legs were killing her, her muscles aching with the strain of the endless gallop. She had barely made it to her friends when she keeled over, flopping in the grass with her legs sprawled

every direction. She rolled her head around and glanced upside-down at Dash and Applejack, who were staring down at her.

The sky-blue pegasus grinned. "Can't keep up, Rares?"

"Do *not* call me that," she wheezed. Her stomach let out a loud growl. "I'm *exhausted* and *starving*! You ponies are ridiculous! How can you not be hungry? Lunchtime was hours ago!"

"I suppose it would be good to stop for a bit," Applejack said. A growl suddenly rippled out from her stomach. She bent at the knees. "Stars n' garters I'm hungry! I musta just lost track o' my appetite." She angled her head down slightly, aiming her mouth at a clump of tall grass. She didn't have to stretch very far, as it grew almost level with her chin. She ripped up a chunk and began to chew vigorously. It was hearty and strong-flavored, more so than what she was used to.

Rising to her feet, Rarity bit off a mouthful of the grass. Chewing and swallowing, she remarked, "It's a bit... coarse, isn't it?"

"Lotta fiber in this stuff," Applejack said. "Good for the plumbin'."

"Ick."

Applejack noticed Dash wolfing down grass, hovering over the swaying blades to nip the most tender tips. She was like a whole herd of sheep, grazing at everything in her path. It bothered her to see her friend suddenly so ravenous; the pegasus hadn't been extraordinarily hungry over the past few days. *Unless she **has** been, and just hasn't been showin' it...* "Rainbow, are you gettin' enough to eat? I know it was pretty slim pickins up in the mountains..."

"Applejack," she said between bites, "I'm fine. I'm just hungry."

"I know you pegasi have real fast metabolisms, so if you need to spend a bit more time eatin' when we stop, that's all right."

"Don't worry about me, Applejack, I'm telling you," said Dash with a mouthful of grass. She swallowed it in one big gulp and took another enormous bite. "I eat as much as I'm hungry for – I always have. If you walking ponies need to get going to keep good time, you're free to. I can catch up in a jiffy."

"Well that's awful considerate of you, I suppose," Applejack said. "But I happen to believe in courtesy, so as long as you're stopped for lunch, we'll be too."

"It would be rude to just leave you," Rarity added.

The sky-blue pegasus smiled mischievously. "So it bothers you that much that I'm so much faster than you?"

"Honestly, Rainbow, do you never stop competing?" Rarity asked.

"If you start slowing down, you start getting old," Dash said. "So I always try to go faster."

"Now, I don't hold to that," Applejack said. "It seems to me that some things have you have to take your sweet time doin'. If you're always in a rush, you can't enjoy the gentle things in life."

"*Thank* you," Rarity said. She swallowed her bite of grass, raised her head, and looked around a little. "And I must say, I would not want to live in this place, as lovely as it certainly is. It's your kind of country, Rainbow Dash, not mine."

Rainbow Dash snapped her head around. "*That* was random," she said. "What brought that on?"

The white unicorn angled her head up, looking across the horizon. "Just thinking," she said. "Haven't you ponies noticed something about this land – or rather, the absence of something?"

Rainbow Dash and Applejack joined her in looking around. They could see nothing but rolling golden fields wherever they looked. Applejack noticed it first. "Not much in the way o' buildings," she said.

"Precisely," Rarity said. "We've seen *no* development of any kind – no houses, no farms, not even bridges over some of the rivers. Gildedale may have unspoiled beauty, but it's as though nothing civilized even lives here. Indeed, it makes me wonder what these 'free-roaming' ponies are like. Do they even have culture? Can they even speak?"

"Just because they haven't built a bunch of stuff doesn't mean they're *stupid*," Rainbow Dash said. "I *like* that everything is open and free. It's like the sky, only it's land. No pony is restricted by any fences or barriers."

"Even the sky has Cloudsdale, Rainbow Dash," the white unicorn said.

"You just don't understand," the sky-blue pegasus said. "You don't understand what it's like to be free."

Rarity huffed a breath from her nostrils. "I understand *freedom* perfectly well, madam," she said indignantly. "And I'll thank you not to slander me to the contrary. But there is some freedom that can only come by *giving up* other freedoms –"

"That makes no sense!" Dash snapped. "If you give freedoms up, you're less free. It's as simple as that."

"There is freedom *to*," Rarity said, "and there is freedom *from*. In Equestria, we don't have the freedom to do everything we like – we don't have the freedom to murder ponies, for example. But as a result of that, we have a freedom *from* fear of being randomly killed. It's the same thing for all of civilized society. The ponies in Gildedale may have great freedom of action, but they also must be saddled with a great deal of worries and cares that we in Equestria don't have, because we've given up some of our freedom to act."

"That's not a fair example at all!" Dash said. "Being safe isn't about there being laws against murdering, it's about ponies not being *jerks* to each other. If you have that, you don't need to restrict anypony's freedoms."

The white unicorn shook her head. "The world is always going to have... *jerks*, darling. I wish it didn't, but it does, and so we must take that into account when we decide what actions our society forbids."

"Are you saying you'd *like* to live in a country where you have to have permission to do anything? Where you can't do anything without being told?" the sky-blue pegasus' eyes bugged out. "I can't believe what I'm hearing."

"I am **saying** that it's a tradeoff. I wouldn't like to live anywhere where I was told everything I could do. Neither would I like to live somewhere where I could do whatever I wanted. It's about striking a proper balance," Rarity said.

Dash shook her head. "It's too slippery a slope," she said. "What if we didn't have Princess Celestia as a ruler – what if our ruler was bad? What if our ruler used every excuse to take away freedoms? I'd rather live some place without any restrictions."

"And if I had to choose between only those two, so would I!" Rarity cried. "But the point is you're not supposed to choose between those two. You're supposed to find a middle ground."

Rainbow Dash and Rarity locked eyes with an intensity that thoroughly surprised Applejack. She had never known the pegasus to be so passionate about something as abstract as personal liberty – and she had never suspected the unicorn had given so much thought to that same subject. She almost wished she could let them keep arguing, not because she wanted to see her friends fight, but because she wanted to learn more about how they thought. But the sun had begun to take on hints of orange, and Twilight Sparkle was still in need. "Pardon me, y'all," she said gently, "but we're burnin' daylight. I reckon it's time we got goin' again."

Rarity was the first to blink. "I suppose you're right, Applejack," she said. "Rainbow Dash, please don't mistake me. I love the freedom that comes from acting as you please. But I know that if everypony were allowed to do completely as they wished, there would be chaos."

Dash's face was stern, but slowly it changed, growing softer and softer, and finally she smiled softly at Rarity. "You know what? You're right. Or... I guess you're right. But I don't know how you go about setting those limits – I wouldn't want to restrict anypony. I guess that's why I'm not a Princess."

"On the other hand, perhaps I'm misjudging the ponies of Gildedale," Rarity said. "We haven't even met any of them yet. Perhaps they have their own social order that works for them. I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt."

Dash smiled. "That's really big of you, Rarity," she said. "And I guess it's a little dumb of me to talk about total freedom when I live in Equestria, which does have laws – laws that help keep us safe. Maybe it is all about balance."

"And speaking of balance," Rarity said, "perhaps for the rest of the day we could balance our pace a bit?" She smiled hopefully at Applejack. "We did go so quickly this afternoon, I had hoped that..."

The orange earth pony nodded. "We can slow down a mite," she said. "Just a mite, though – we wasted some time in the mountains. Now that we're on easy terrain I'd like us to make up as much time as we can. We don't know how far Gildedale goes until we hit the next landscape, and there's no tellin' what that'll be."

Rarity sighed. "Oh, fine..."

Rainbow Dash laughed and nudged her in the side. "We'll go a little slower this time, Rares."

"All right, y'all, let's move 'em out!" Applejack said with a swish of her blond tail. The three ponies resumed their gallop; Dash and Applejack slackened their pace just a bit, while Rarity tried harder than ever to match them.

The discussion between her friends lingered in the back of Applejack's mind through the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. She took the time to look around her as she galloped, and sure enough, she could see nothing on the horizon that indicated any kind of settled population. *How do they get their food?* she wondered. *Do they just eat grass? Do they sleep in the open air? Do their foals go to school? Do they **have** schools?* The more she thought about it, the more she didn't like it. Ponies weren't meant to live like animals, with no guarantee of food or shelter. Rarity was right – some freedom had to be given up so that a pony could grow up safe and realize their full potential. A pony needed more than raw freedom; they needed education, friends, art, culture. There had to be more to life than just bare survival. That was why she was adamant that Apple Bloom went to school all year round, even during planting season. Granny Smith had always insisted that a pony didn't need 'book learning' to be successful, but Applejack knew that there was more to education than just financial security. Big Macintosh had missed some school in his younger years, and he had always regretted it; it was why he loved to learn so much nowadays. Education made a pony more than just a worker or a creature. Applejack's mother had always told her that, and the orange earth pony had never forgotten it.

She was interrupted from her thoughts by the sight of something black standing up from the plains on her left. "Hey," she called over her shoulder, "do y'all see what I'm seein' over on the left?"

"It's definitely there!" Rainbow Dash said. She flapped her wings and spun into the air. "Let's go check it out!" She flew toward it in a streak of rainbow before either of her friends could stop her. Shaking her head, Applejack turned toward the dark thing, Rarity hot on her heels.

When the two ponies arrived, Dash was sitting at the base of the black shape. It was a tall stone slab, its sides rough but straight, its peak coming to a point. It was carved all over with letters, and unlike the strange symbols around the treacherous cave in the mountains, this writing was easily readable. "The language is quite a bit like Equestrian, isn't it?" Rarity said.

"Uh-huh," Dash said. "I mean, some of the words are weird, but it's totally understandable. If this is the language they use in Gildedale, we should be able to understand any ponies we come across."

"Unless this slab is ancient," the white unicorn remarked. "Perhaps their language has changed with time. Maybe long ago they spoke Equestrian, but nowadays they don't?"

"This is almost exactly like our language," Applejack said. "And I know Twilight's mentioned that Old Equestrian was different from Modern Equestrian. Unless their *old* stuff is a lot like our *new* stuff, I reckon this is modern, or at least not *too* old."

The slab had *EAST* written in four large letters down the front of it. Below these, in smaller, horizontal script, was written *This is the Land of Gildedale, the Golden Field Between the Mountains, claimed by the Line of the Dale Lords and their Kin. Friends should take heart; enemies should take heed. In the name of Lord Broadwithers, Lord of the Dale, in the Year ____.*

Dash smiled. "What did I tell you right from the start? 'Enemies should take heed.' These ponies don't mess around."

"Welp, let's hope the first part is true, too," Applejack said. "Twilight's book mentioned they didn't like strangers."

"There's no mention of Equestria," Rarity said.

"Well, I ain't never seen a mention of Gildedale back home," Applejack said. "And they're just over the mountains from Ponyville. Maybe both countries just don't mingle much?"

"What do you think that is up on top?" Dash said, pointing with her hoof toward the peak of the slab. Set into the black stone was a spreading symbol. It looked like curved lines of gold, splayed out at top and bottom and curving inward in the middle, where they were pulled together by a band of some reddish stone. "Is it the symbol of Gildedale?"

"It looks like... it's hay!" Applejack said. "Or grass, I suppose. It's probably grass; that would make the most sense."

"The Golden Field Between the Mountains," Rarity repeated softly. It was so... wild-sounding. She could practically hear the drums pounding and horns blowing. Rarity had always grown up in civilization; admittedly, not in the glamour and bustle of Canterlot or Manehattan, but at least where the streets were smooth and the garbage was picked up twice a week. *Applejack talks about never leaving her farm... but I'm not much better*, she thought. *I haven't been a great traveler. Now here I am, in this strange and wild place.* The wind whipped at her mane, billowing her scarf around her neck. She looked past the stone slab, deep into the west. The sun was setting now, burning orange, throwing down

a long, dark shadow from the stone. She stepped around the slab and stared at the expanse of open field before her; once again it was gleaming, burning, shimmering orange-gold, like molten metal that rippled in the heat and sent up sparks. The sun, descending toward the distant Archback Mountains, was a blazing orb of orange, turning the sky its selfsame color. *But the sun comes from...* her gaze traveled back to the east, toward the Drackenridge Mountains; they were now far off, but still closer and darker than the Archbacks. Behind those mountains was Equestria, where Princess Celestia was patiently watching this same sunset, preparing to give the great heavenly body she ruled its final nudge over the horizon, to retire the day and prepare for her sister's night. "It's the same sun," she said gently.

"Come again?" Applejack said.

Rarity looked at her with an expression of gentle wonder. "The sun that's setting here... it's the same as in Equestria. It's the same *everywhere*... right? Princess Celestia is setting the sun in Canterlot, but it's also setting here... and she makes it set here, doesn't she?"

Applejack blinked at her. "Well, I guess that makes sense... huh, that's true, ain't it?" She turned toward the sunset. Her orange coat glistened even brighter in the gleaming long rays. "I mean... there ain't more than one sun..."

They stood still, the quiet broken only by the wind whipping over the fields. Even Dash couldn't make herself move. "Do you think... she can see us?" the sky-blue pegasus asked, squinting her rose eyes at the blazing sun.

"I don't know about that," Rarity said. "But I suppose, in a sense, she's here – wherever the sunlight touches." She was suddenly, deeply moved. Lowering herself on her front hooves, she bowed low to the setting sun. Rainbow Dash almost said something beside her, but her words died on her lips. A few moments later, she too bowed, averting her eyes and folding her wings. On Rarity's other side, Applejack gave her friends a stern look, but her head flitted from them to the sun and back again, and she finally came into line beside Rarity and joined her in her bow.

They remained like that for some unknown quantity of time: not too long, but not short. Applejack raised herself first. "The princess wouldn't want us to waste too much time," the orange earth pony said. "I mean, we are tryin' to help her star pupil get better." Her friends rose back to their hooves at this, and they set off again in silence, leaving the great stone marker behind.

They galloped as the sun turned from orange to red, drenching the world in crimson. The sky grew pink overhead, then red, and finally violet. Behind them, the moon was rising, silver-white, distant and demure like Princess Luna who ruled it. Dusk settled over the landscape, and one by one the stars appeared overhead.

Several hours later, well into the night, Applejack slowed her pace. "I'm gettin' tired," she said over her shoulder. "It don't look like we'll be findin' any shelter tonight, so I reckon we should just make camp out here in the open."

Rarity yawned hugely. "That... sounds like a marvelous idea, darling," she murmured. The white unicorn was completely exhausted. They stopped under the ridge of a small hill, and Rarity had barely laid down before she was asleep, breathing gently in a burrow of tall grass.

Applejack chuckled at the dainty pony. "Not even waitin' for dinner," she said. "*That* is a worn-out pony."

"I gotta say," Dash remarked, "she kept pace a lot better than I thought she would."

"She worked real hard," the orange earth pony said. She began to pull up bunches of grass. "Rainbow, help me find the thicker stuff, it'll burn better."

"We're making a fire?" the sky-blue pegasus asked.

"I don't want varmints sneakin' up on us in the night," Applejack said. She began to pile the grass into a clearing she was making from pulling it up. "Most varmints don't like fire." She soon had a large pile of grass gathered in a bare patch of dirt. She removed a log and a thin stick from her saddlebags, and set the log in the middle of the grass. She stuck the thin stick into the middle of the log and began to spin it rapidly between her hooves, boring the pointed end of the stick into the wood and creating intense friction. In little time, the wood was smoking, and Applejack quickly piled grass onto the kindled flame. Soon, a fire was crackling, the faint woody scent of burning grass pervading the air around them. "This fire won't burn for long," the orange earth pony remarked, "but it should do enough to keep us safe. I can probably wake up a little later tonight and start it again."

Rainbow Dash was busy gobbling down grass. She didn't want to admit it to Applejack, but she *was* very hungry, and she had been hungry all through the mountains. *I don't want her trying to look after me*, she thought. *We've got to spend enough time babying Rarity*. Dash spared a glance at the sleeping unicorn, curled up like a cat in the grass. The

sky-blue pegasus smiled. In truth, her heart had been deeply touched by Rarity today. Hearing her talk about freedom and responsibility had awed Dash. Where on earth had Rarity been hiding those thoughts – what corner of her fashion-obsessed brain had she tucked that philosophy into? *She said that if she had to choose, she would choose freedom*, Dash remembered. *That makes her okay in my book*.

"Bit for yer thoughts," Applejack said.

"Just thinking about Rarity," Rainbow Dash said.

"Awwww," Applejack cooed.

"It's not that!" Dash said. "It's just that she and I have never really hung out." Trotting over to the fire, she laid down and looked into the flames. "I didn't even know who she was until Twilight brought us all together. Now we're all on this journey." She sighed. "I mostly told myself that I would let her come because I knew how guilty she felt. But she's... okay."

"Rarity's a good girl once you get past her fussy side," Applejack said. "She's real sweet."

Dash smiled. "The only time we really spent around each other was when she was making my dress for the Grand Galloping Gala, and I was being a jerk. But she just kept at it, doing whatever I told her to, even guessing what I wanted when I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, we caused her a lot o' trouble – and she didn't complain one bit," the orange earth pony remarked. "That's sort of the way Rarity works. You'll hear her whine about a lot, but if you pay attention, it's all little things – her mane, her clothes, what ponies are talkin' about. The big stuff? She never complains about it, not until it gets real bad. She just keeps moanin' about the little things, until the big things ain't such a big deal in your mind."

"So it's some sort of coping strategy? She plans it out?"

"I'm not sure I'd call it plann–"

A rolling, moaning *howl* rippled across the plains, breaking out goosebumps on the two ponies; a chill ran down their spines. Rarity remained asleep. "What in the name o' Equestria was *that*?" Applejack cried, getting to her hooves.

"It sounded like it was pretty far off," Rainbow Dash said.

"If we can hear it, it ain't far off enough!" said Applejack. "Rainbow, go up and take a peek."

Nodding, Dash launched herself into the sky, shooting up a hundred feet in a second. She hovered in the air, spinning around, scanning the horizon. The light from their fire was meager and lonely amid the vast, moonlit darkness of the plains. She couldn't see anything moving, and there was a fair amount of moonlight, so she didn't think she was missing anything. "I don't see anything!" she yelled down to Applejack.

"Keep lookin' for a bit!" Applejack yelled back. "I wanna make sure there's nothin' comin' our way!"

Dash scanned the horizon again. Nothing toward the Archbacks. Nothing to her left. Nothing to her right. She turned back toward the Drackenridges –

Then she saw it.

A *streak* of blinding white light shot down the side of the mountains far to her right, going from the peaks to the bottom in an eyeblink. It hit the plains and kept going, a blast of blinding white in a faintly jagged line. It streaked clear across her line of sight in another blink of her eye, and then it was gone.

"Rainbow?" Applejack yelled up at her. "Do you see anythin'?"

Dash shook herself back to responsiveness. She gently hovered back to the ground. "Nothing," she said when her hooves were on the earth again.

"Well, I'm gonna put some more grass on the fire," Applejack said. "A wild critter'll think twice before comin' near us. Then I'm gonna turn in."

"Yeah," Dash said softly, "me too. G'night, AJ."

"G'night, Rainbow," Applejack said, getting up and walking into the tall grass.

Dash curled up and laid down her head. The grass acted as natural bedding; it was actually quite peaceful. But she wasn't feeling peaceful: her mind was racing, crackling with the images seared across it, with the memory of what she had seen. That streak... that blast of light... *It was just like lightning*. But what did that mean, lightning on the ground? The day's exertions had left her too tired to stay awake for long, so Rainbow Dash fell asleep after a short while, and for the second time in three days, her dreams were filled with lightning and thunder and the blue tail she couldn't catch.

This morning, it was Rarity who awoke first, the light of dawn brushing her eyelids and causing them to flutter open. She yawned, stretching out and noting with annoyance that she'd forgotten to take off her saddlebags last night. They were currently weighing down her hindquarters, and had given her a slight cramp. The white unicorn glanced through the grass in front of her: Applejack and Rainbow Dash were sleeping around the burned center of a fire pit, the sky-blue pegasus rolled over on her back, the orange earth pony snoring gently, curled up, her hat tipped over her face. Rarity thought that she looked extremely peaceful, free of worry and care.

She rose to her hooves. She had had a very interesting dream, involving a fashion show and Nightmare Moon. What was it about this journey that was making her dream? She was doing it much more than she normally did. *Perhaps it's all the changing scenery*, she thought. *It's stimulating my imagination*. Her stomach gurgled. *It certainly seems to have stimulated my appetite*. Rarity turned away from the fire pit and began to wander through the tall grass, experimentally nibbling on the tips of blades as she went. The white unicorn had not gone far when a scent wafted through her nostrils. *Is that...* She waded through the grass, which was becoming taller. Cattails suddenly sprang up amid the grass around her, and the ground became spongy.

Rarity parted a curtain of grass and found what she had smelled: a small pond, lonely and smooth amid the tall grass. It seemed to be filled with rainwater, as there was no stream feeding it. She walked to the edge, bent down, and gave it a sniff. The water was quite clear. A smile curled her lips. *I haven't had a bath in days!* It was no hot tub with lavender bath salts, but it was better than nothing, and she had sweated horribly yesterday. Applejack would never have allowed it – too much wasted time, she would say – but Applejack was asleep, wasn't she? Slipping off her saddlebags, the white unicorn waded into the water, which came up to about mid-fetlock. Sitting back in it, she began to splash it across her body with her front hooves, delighting in the feel of the clear water across her coat. It was somewhat chilly, but with the sun already warming the fields, not unpleasantly cold. She started humming softly to herself, growing louder and louder as she moved across her body, dunking her hair in the water as well. In little time, she was singing:

*The road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began,
Now far ahead the road has gone,
And I must follow if I can.*

But before she could sing more:

*Pursuin' it with eager hooves
Until it joins some larger way,
Where from many paths I will choose
One that will lead me home some day.*

Rarity turned around. Applejack was standing at the edge of the pond, smiling at her. A small sprig of grass was between her lips, making her resemble her brother. The unicorn waved her hoof at her. "Good morning, darling! Come on in, the water's fine!"

"I'll pass, thank ya kindly," she said. "I didn't know you knew that song."

"Applejack, *everypony* knows that song. I learned it in school from some colt on the playground."

"Welp, you look like you're about finishin' up, so come on back," said Applejack. "I'm gonna go wake Rainbow. We gotta get a move on."

"All right," Rarity sighed. Just as she had suspected – Applejack wanted to be on the move. Walking out of the water, she gave her mane and tail a shake; with no towels, she would have to settle for an air-dry. Slipping her saddlebags back on, she opened the right one with magic and removed her hairbrush, using it to work on her mane as she walked back through the grass.

Rainbow Dash was on her hooves when Rarity arrived at their fire pit, chewing energetically at the grass around her. "Morning," she muttered in between bites of grass.

"Good morning, Rainbow Dash," Rarity replied. She was feeling quite chipper; her bath and a good night's sleep had done wonders for her mood. "I'm terribly sorry for falling asleep on you two; I was just so exhausted."

"It's okay, Rarity," said Dash. She and Applejack had decided not to tell Rarity about the howl they had heard in the night. The sky-blue pegasus returned to her grass. "It just means you'll be ready for more galloping today!"

Rarity frowned. "And are you going to be joining us in the *galloping* again?"

"Maybe," Dash said in a noncommittal voice. "I might fly today – somepony's gotta keep an eye on our surroundings."

"I don't see why you would need altitude for that," Rarity replied. "Things around here are pretty flat, in case you haven't noticed."

"Doesn't hurt to be able to see far off, though," Dash said. "In case something's coming!"

Applejack winced.

"Something?" Rarity repeated, a note of suspicion in her voice. "Like what?"

The sky-blue pegasus quickly realized her mistake. "Oh... you know... like maybe Gildedale ponies! We wouldn't want to surprise them if they're supposed to be so afraid of strangers, right?"

Rarity fluttered her long eyelashes, pondering this answer. *There's something she's not telling me.* She gave her mane another good swipe of the brush. "All right, then," she said. "It's not up to me – you decide. But I suppose it might be a good idea to have eyes in the sky."

"Well, I'll start off on the ground," Rainbow Dash said, her mouth still full of grass. "Maybe switch to flying as we go."

"Welp, I've already eaten," Applejack said, slipping her saddlebags back on and tightening the straps with her mouth. "Are you ready, Rarity?"

"Just a moment," she said, using her magic to open her saddlebag. Her mirror floated out, and she examined herself in it. Her mane was a bit unkempt, but for how little work she had been able to do it still looked pretty good. "Hmmm... mm-hmm! All right, let's be on our way!"

With that, the three of them set off, using the rising sun behind them to ensure they remained on a westward course. Rarity was pleased to find that she was keeping pace easier today. Perhaps the long night's sleep had really done her that much good. *Or I'm getting more muscular,* she thought. She frowned at that. *Bulky is not in. Most decidedly not in.* She did her cardio thrice weekly to stay trim, of course, but she wanted no part of the muscles that wrapped up Applejack's legs, to say nothing of Rainbow Dash's lean, almost angular body. But when she thought about it, she realized you couldn't get bulky muscles from running, of course not. So perhaps it was just her endurance that was improving? Whatever it was, at the *moment* she was just happy not to feel worn out. But then she remembered that muscle fatigue always hits hardest on the second day. *Drat.* A shadow wheeled overhead. She looked up – an eagle? Something beautiful and dark and decidedly birdy, that was for certain. It gave her an idea for a new dress. *I shall have to*

remember to sketch it when we stop for lunch, she thought. My, these wandering thoughts do make the time pass more quickly.

The plains rushed past them as they galloped. The grass was gradually getting shorter, seeming to be worn by more wind and – perhaps – more frequent hooffalls, until it lowered to about mid-fetlock. Even now, there were no signs of development or civilization, the golden fields appearing as wild and untamed as they had from the trio's first glimpse of Gildedale. Perhaps the stone marker from before was a bare land claim? Perhaps the Daleponies didn't actually live in the eastern portion of their country. It would help explain why they never seemed to venture into Equestria.

The sun traveled rapidly across the sky, taunting them with its swift pace. Rainbow Dash glanced up, seeing it already approaching its zenith. *We're not making good enough time,* she thought. She and Applejack weren't racing today, just galloping as fast as they could with comfort, and they seemed to be covering less ground. It was what she had feared from the beginning: even at a relatively swift pace, their running was no match at all for flight. She had known *that* from the beginning, but this potent reminder of just how *much* time traveling on the hoof wasted was grating at her. She couldn't calculate how much time it would take to reach the Archback Mountains at this pace – math was never her forte – but she knew it was too much time for her liking. They were on the fifth day since Twilight Sparkle had been stricken with Horn Rot. They had nine days left, and that was if they wanted to push their luck. *Just remember, in five days, if we're not close, you're going on alone,* she told herself. She was committed to the idea now. It made her run a little faster, because as much as she wanted to get the job done, she didn't like the idea of leaving her friends behind. She wanted to give Applejack and Rarity a chance to get there in time, and maybe they would. She hoped they would.

By high noon, they decided to stop for lunch. The grass was still at mid-fetlock, so they had to do a bit more reaching and grazing to fill their bellies with the coarse golden blades. Applejack roamed north, away from the others, nipping grass as she went. Then she bit into something that was most certainly not grass – it was too feathery and thin. Looking down more carefully, she saw a short stalk protruding thinly from amid the grass. It, too, was golden, but slightly browner than the grass that surrounded it. There were more like it, and as she looked further ahead, they crowded out the grass, and grew taller and taller. It was... "Wheat!" the orange earth pony exclaimed. A tall outgrowth of wheat... actually, a *field* of wheat, stretching away in front of her, springing abruptly from the middle of the rolling plains of grass. It wasn't quite the wheat she was used to – wild and rough – but it was wheat, and there was too much of it concentrated here for it to be an accident of the wind. Somepony had planted this!

"Y'all!" Applejack exclaimed, turning and running back through the fields. "Y'all, come here and look at this!" She had wandered farther away than she thought, but they were in a shallow between a few low hills, and she had a clear line of sight at Rarity and Rainbow Dash. They looked up at her approach. "Y'all won't believe what I –" She broke off. A low *rumble* had begun to vibrate in her chest. "Do y'all feel that?"

The rumbling was getting stronger – and it was no longer merely felt. "I *hear* it!" Rainbow Dash said, perking up an ear.

"What do you suppose it is?!" Rarity said in a panic. She glanced all around her. "An earthquake?"

"Rainbow, go up and take a look," Applejack said. She was worried; what if the owner of that howl was coming?

The sky-blue pegasus blasted up into the sky, stopping in a hover high off the ground. Rarity and Applejack watched her twist this way and that, turning south, west, north – and then they saw her draw back in the air, body splaying spastically in evident shock. She bent over at the waist and *dove* back toward the ground, plummeting so fast Rarity worried she would crash. At the last moment Dash pulled back into a hover, swirling the air around the two grounded ponies; a few more flaps brought her to the ground. Her rose-colored eyes were wide.

"What is it?" Rarity asked.

"What's wrong, Rainbow?" Applejack said. "What did you see?"

Rainbow Dash took a few deep breaths, then on the last breath, puffed out: "*Ponies!*"

"What?" Applejack said, dumbfounded.

Before Dash could clarify, the rumbling rose dramatically in volume, a pulsing thunder through the air. It was coming from the north. The three ponies turned toward it, where a shallow hill crested. For a brief second, they saw a line of thin stalks appear over the hill. Then they appeared, bursting over the hilltop, powering through the grass.

Ponies!

A steady, thundering stream of earth ponies came galloping over the hill. They were a neat group arranged in orderly rows, five ponies to a row except in the front. At the head of the procession was a row of three ponies, and ahead of *them*, a whole body's length

ahead, two ponies galloped side-by-side: a dark red pony and a medium gray pony. The group was enormous, at least a hundred strong by the time the last row cleared the hill. It took the three traveling ponies a moment to realize that the large group was headed *their* way.

"Easy, girls," Applejack said. "They're probably not lookin' for trouble."

"Didn't you notice their spears, Applejack?" Rarity replied with worry in her voice.

Applejack looked again. Sure enough, each pony had a long, stout spear mounted to a harness on their flank; as they advanced the sight was like a moving forest of thin trees. As the ponies drew closer, Applejack also noticed that they all wore armor of dark red leather, stitched with red thread and streaked with the occasional trimming of gold; they were protected from head to neck to flanks to rump, with greaves around their lower legs. The leather cruppers protecting their flanks were emblazoned with the same spreading bundle of golden grass Applejack had seen on the stone marker.

"They're headed right for us!" Dash cried.

"Do you think they see us?" Rarity wondered.

The two ponies at the lead, the dark red and the gray, slowed their pace to a trot. The ponies in the columns behind them *parted* around them, like a river parting around a rock, streaming in two channels at the same brisk pace. The streams rumbled around the three ponies and curved, and then all of them slowed to a trot, then a brisk walk as they bent more sharply around. Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash realized as the earth ponies stopped that they were surrounded, encircled by two rows deep of armored ponies. Just in front of them, the dark red pony and the gray pony trotted through an opening in the circle, then slowed to a walk as they drew closer to the three travelers. The dark red pony appeared to be a colt, about a head taller than they; his eyes were deep blue, his mane and tail were light gray flecked with streaks of charcoal. The gray pony was a filly; her mane and tail were white, and her eyes were green. Looking around at the assembled ponies, Rarity noted that they seemed to all be earth colors, or neutral shades: brown, white, gray, black. Orange and red seemed to be the most vibrant colors present, and even those were muted. There was none of the pink and yellow and blue and green and more that she was used to seeing in Equestria. It gave the whole gathering a more serious feel than she was accustomed to with congregations of ponies. *The fact that they're armed and armored isn't helping matters, of course*, she thought.

The dark red colt and the gray filly drew to a halt just in front of them. Still keeping her eyes open for details, Rarity noticed the colt's champron had a crest on it, between his ears: a golden circle, evidently supposed to be a compass, with markers for the four directions. The device had a silver arrow pointing to the right. He was evidently a leader, and he addressed them in a sharp, clear voice, slightly accented: "Unicorn, pegasus, earth pony of Equestria, what is your business in Gildedale?"

The three Equestrian ponies were dumbfounded for a moment. Rarity gathered herself first. "Ah, when new ponies meet for the first time, *introductions* are generally the polite way to begin."

"You are mistaken in assuming this meeting is a polite one," the dark red colt said more sharply still. "What is your business? Be quick about it!"

Rainbow Dash snorted, frowned, and stepped forward. "Hey, *jerk*," she said, "why don't you tell us your name? Then I can tell you mine, and maybe more."

The gray filly at the colt's side stepped forward. "I don't think I like your attitude, pegasus."

"Oh yeah?" Dash retorted. "What are you gonna do about it?"

The gray earth pony bent at the knees – then whipped her head to her flanks. In another eyblink the sharp, cold steel of a speartip was vibrating gently an inch from Dash's eyes. The sky-blue pegasus reared back in shock, stepping rapidly away from the weapon in the gray pony's mouth. In another moment, she was angry again – more angry than before. She flapped her wings and lifted off the ground, then began to beat them in wide circles. A light breeze was whipped up inside the circle of ponies.

"**Hold** on, now!" Applejack cried, coming quickly between them. She sat back on her haunches; with one free front hoof, she pushed Dash back to the ground, and with the other she lowered the gray pony's spear. "There ain't no need for us to get unfriendly. We're all ponies here, ain't we?" She smiled desperately at the two Daleponies. "I think introductions are a fine idea, and bein' as how we're the guests in your land, we'll go first. I'm Applejack, this here's Rainbow Dash," she nudged the sky-blue pegasus with her hoof, "and that there's Rarity," she used her other hoof to point at the white unicorn. "Like you figured, we're from Equestria; specifically, we hail from Ponyville, just on the other side of the mountains over yonder," she motioned back to the east.

The dark red earth pony seemed to chew on his own teeth for a moment. Then his face lost some of its grim tightness. "I cannot see any harm in introductions," he finally said. "I am Ashtail, Captain of the Dale Guard and Marshal of the Eastern Quarter. This is Shield Maiden, my lieutenant." He nodded toward the gray filly. Shield Maiden gave the three Equestrians a glare, but she pulled back her spear and returned it to its harness. Ashtail nodded again. "Now, tell us your business."

"We're on a quest!" Rainbow Dash said.

"A quest?" Ashtail repeated.

"What Rainbow means is that we are on a very vital journey," Rarity said. "One of our friends in Ponyville has become dangerously sick, and the only cure that can help her in time is a plant that grows only in the Archback Mountains. Which, of course, means we have to cross your kingdom." She finished with a simple, toothless smile and a flutter of her eyelashes; anything more coquettish was liable to annoy this very grim pony.

Ashtail furrowed his brow. "We were not informed that any Equestrian ponies would be passing through Gildedale."

"It was kind o' spur o' the moment," Applejack said.

"'Spur of the moment' is not what I want to hear," the dark red earth pony said. "We do not allow Equestrian ponies to cross our land without our consent. Why were we not informed of this journey? A pronghorn should have been sent."

"A what?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Ashtail huffed. "A message should have been sent," he said, "from your ruler to ours. Trespassers are not permitted in Gildedale."

"We ain't tresspassin'!" Applejack insisted. "We just want to cross to the Archback Mountains! Our friend really needs it!"

"Be that as it may, I cannot simply take your word for it," Ashtail said. "Without permission from the Lord of the Dale, no Equestrian pony is allowed in Gildedale." He narrowed his eyes. "And even if you had permission, two-thirds of your party would not be allowed in under any circumstances. The pegasus and the unicorn are not welcome."

"What?!" Dash yelled.

"Good heavens, what have you against unicorns?" Rarity asked.

"We don't want your *magic* here, most of all," Ashtail snarled. "No more than innate earth pony magic is wanted in Gildedale. The magic of the unicorns and the pegasuses –"

"PEGASI!" Rarity shrieked. Ashtail and Shield Maiden drew back. Around the circle, some of the Dale Guard bent their necks back, ready to grab their spears. The rest of them stared wide-eyed at Rarity. She smiled toothily and looked around nervously. "Heh heh, oh my, forgive me! Just being a Grammar Nightmare. Carry on, it's no worry."

"The magic of the unicorns and the *pegasi* would overwhelm our kingdom and our way of life, so we do not permit it. That is part of the treaty we made with the Sun Queen."

"You mean Princess Celestia?" Applejack asked.

"We did read that there was a treaty of friendship between Equestria and Gildedale," Rarity said.

"It is a treaty of allegiance – not friendship," Ashtail said. "And it was modified about a hundred years ago. The Sun Queen wanted to claim the Drackenridge Mountains as Equestrian territory. We agreed, on the condition that her two more magical breeds of subjects be banned from Gildedale. And she agreed in turn. We honor her for raising our sun each day, but that is the extent to which we need her land and its magics."

"There's nothing wrong with pegasuses!" Rainbow Dash shouted. Rarity's eye twitched, but she held her tongue.

"Not in your country, perhaps," Ashtail said.

"How do you get your rain? What about your snow? What about your wind?"

"We take what the world gives us, and we endure it; that is our freedom," Ashtail said. He shook his head. "I'm wasting time debating this! You can go no further. Turn back now and we won't take you into custody."

Applejack's temper suddenly triggered. "We ain't goin' **nowhere** but forward!" she snarled, stepping forward. "Our friend needs this plant or she might die!"

"You have no way of proving that to me," Ashtail said.

"We have dragonfire!" Rarity said. She used her magic to open her saddlebag and pull out the glass bottle with Spike's fire. She noticed that Ashtail's eyes widened as she did. He was clearly unused to telekinesis. "This was given to us by a dragon on royal retainer from Princess Celestia herself. It can transmit messages instantly to and from the dragon that breathed it. Why would we be carrying it if we didn't need to send something back home quickly? Good sir, we are not liars. We are in desperate need."

Ashtail trained his eye on the bottle of swirling purple-green fire. His lip curled, as though he were tasting something unpleasant. "This... might prove your case," he said slowly. His blue eyes grew hard again. "But it just as easily connotes sinister motives. We do not write much down in Gildedale, but we do send communication back and forth between the Quarters, especially concerning the Dale Guard. A single slip of paper could contain the linchpin of our Guard's movements throughout the kingdom – and you could send it to your Sun Queen with a flicker of flame, you say? A fine device in advance of an invasion, cloaked in a story calculated to play our heartstrings."

Applejack reached a level of rage she hadn't experienced in years – not since her parents had died. The image of Twilight suffering and dying because of this **colt** burned into her mind and drove her temper to towering heights. And he thought she wasn't telling the truth – she, who held honesty so dearly! "We ain't **lyin'**! I can't believe y'all think we're lyin'!" she snarled, her voice thick and feral. "I keep tellin' ya, this is a matter o' *life and death*! So y'all have **two** choices: **get out of our way** or **get out them spears!**" She launched herself forward a single step, snorting thickly from her nostrils. Ashtail flew back a few paces at her ferocity. Rainbow Dash and Rarity were almost equally shocked, but the sky-blue pegasus summoned her own anger: she rose into the air again and again she beat her wings in a circle, whipping up a breeze that tousled the manes of the assembled ponies.

Ashtail collected himself quickly. His blue eyes softened – he *blinked*. "Please calm down," he said to the furious Applejack. "I did not mean to inspire such fury." He tilted his head to the side a bit as he looked at her, his eyes now keen and calculating. "My mother once said to me that one can take the true measure of a pony if one sees them in a rage. Your anger is real – and it can't have come from our rudeness." He walked a few steps closer to Applejack and said very softly, "You are genuinely frightened, aren't you – frightened for your friend."

Applejack closed her eyes and willed herself to calm down. She really didn't want to fight. But she so desperately wanted Twilight to be all right... "I am," she said. "I'm so scared we won't be able to help her in time." Her green eyes gazed intensely into his blue ones. "Please let us cross. Please let us help her."

Ashtail cast a glance to his right, toward Shield Maiden. She had remained still and neutral through the whole exchange, the image of a cool and calm number one, in stark contrast to her initial outburst. Her green eyes, so much like Applejack's, were wavering with emotion. She gave him a sidelong glance, and her stern face eased a bit.

The dark red earth pony sighed for what seemed the thousandth time. "You at least deserve a chance to state your case," he said. "Please forgive our shortness; we are all on edge. You have come at the most dangerous time of our year. The komagas have begun their annual run."

"What's a komaga?" Rarity asked.

As if on cue, a long, rolling *howl* flowed across the plains, chilling the spine of every pony that heard it. Ashtail saw his Dale Guard begin to fidget. "**Steady!**" he called over the heads of the Equestrian ponies. He fixed Rarity with a gaze. "*That* is a komaga," he said. He turned sharply around and addressed a black pony with an orange mane. "Sharp Sound, how do you reckon?"

The pony narrowed his violet eyes and swiveled his unusually long ears every which way. "From the east," he said a few seconds later, "about twelve miles away."

"Let's hope they don't head our direction," Shield Maiden muttered.

"**Dale Guard, Assemble!**" Ashtail shouted. The ponies circling the three travelers broke apart, lurching to the left and beginning to form back into rows. Ashtail turned back toward Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash. "I want to believe you're telling the truth, but the decision to allow you passage is not mine to make. Here is what I can offer: you will come with us. You will follow us to my fastness of Grazezeld and there you will pass the night. In the morning we shall escort you to Thatchholm, our capital. There amid the Timbered Court you may plead your case to Lord Hammer Hoof. *If and only if he permits it*, you will be allowed to cross the remainder of Gildedale. If he denies you passage, a legion of the Dale Guard will escort you back to the Drackenridge Mountains. That is your only hope for forward progress," he concluded. "I suggest you take it."

"It sounds like a long trip out of our way," Rainbow Dash growled.

Ashtail shook his head. "The Archbacks are beyond our western border," he said. "Grazezeld is to the west of here, and Thatchholm is further west still – it lies in the center of Gildedale. You will travel the same direction you were going to travel to begin with."

"I –" Rainbow Dash began.

Rarity quickly jerked the sky-blue pegasus' neck around. "Do give us a moment, sir," she said over her shoulder. She used her other hoof to corral Applejack.

"Hurry!" Ashtail said.

"It seems to be our only choice," Rarity said in the huddle. "Unless either of you have a better idea."

Dash snorted. "Well there's too many of 'em to fight..."

"I don't want no fightin'!" Applejack said, stomping her hoof. "I don't like bein' ordered around... but if we're still gonna be headin' west, I don't see no harm in goin' with these ponies, at least for a while."

Dash looked like she wanted to argue, but seeing the minds of her companions made up, she lowered her head and grimaced. "Fine," she said. "Even though there's no way these groundbound ponies could hold *me*... I guess we can follow your boyfriend for a while, AJ."

Applejack gave Rainbow Dash such a glare that the sky-blue pegasus nearly jumped into the air. "Don't *ever* let me catch you sayin' that again, Rainbow Dash, or I will *clip* you."

"Okay, okay, sorry!" she said. "Just having a little fun – you know, that thing we used to have but apparently don't anymore?"

The three of them turned back to Ashtail. "We'll go with y'all," Applejack said.

Ashtail nodded. "Thank you," he said. He and Shield Maiden were the only ponies left near them; the rest of the Daleponies had reformed their orderly rows. "You'll ride up front with Shield Maiden and I. Our pace will be brisk, so keep up; we won't slow down for you. We must clear this area quickly before the komagas arrive."

"Come," Shield Maiden said, twitching her head. The three Equestrian ponies fell into line behind her and Ashtail. They trotted along the lines of Dale Guard to the head, where they slotted themselves in front of the front row of three ponies.

Rarity was beginning to feel nervous; she had no idea how fast these Daleponies typically traveled. *It can't be faster than Applejack and Rainbow Dash's pace yesterday... can it?* she wondered.

"**Dale Guard!**" Ashtail called over his shoulder in a loud voice. "**Move out!**" With that he began to gallop, Shield Maiden right at his side. Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Rarity followed suit, and behind them each row began to move in its time. In short order the enormous procession was galloping swiftly across the golden plains. Thankfully, the next sequence of howls they heard were further in the distance, behind them. They barely perceived them over the thunder of the hoofbeats around them.

Rarity galloped as fast as she could. The ponies around her moved nearly as fast as Applejack and Rainbow Dash had moved at their fastest, and her muscles were starting to finally feel the soreness they'd earned the previous day. An hour into the journey, she found herself falling back from her friends, only to bump into the nose of a brown earth pony. "Keep up, unicorn!" she barked at her, with such ferocity she was frightened back to a faster pace. *Stupid nasty Daleponies!* she thought. *Why couldn't we have just been ignored! How did they know about us, anyway?*

Applejack was on the left side of their small row, Rarity in the center, and Rainbow Dash on the right. Ashtail was also on the left, and the orange earth pony picked up her pace enough to break her row and come up alongside him. "Can I ask you a question?" she called over the thundering hoofbeats.

Ashtail didn't look at her. "I'm listening."

"I saw some wheat a ways back there –"

"Did you touch it?!" he snapped, suddenly glaring at her.

"No!" she cried, deciding not to tell him she'd bitten off a stalk. "Is it yours?"

"It is," he said. "There are fields of wheat all across Gildedale – along with patches of potatoes, carrots, and many other plants amid the grasses."

Applejack smiled. "So y'all do farm! I'm a farmer myself – apples, mostly, and –"

"Don't slacken!" the dark red earth pony snapped at her again. "Keep up! We have a ways to go yet and we must reach Grazezeld before sundown!" He turned his head back to the front and said no more.

Applejack raised her eyebrow at him. Just then, she had glimpsed something beneath his harsh demeanor – something proud without being brash. And she had learned that at least they farmed in Gildedale, though not the sort of farming she was used to. That

made her feel better. She was convinced she could reason with a pony that knew the earth and growing things.

"**Dale Guard!**" Ashtail called a little while later. "**Heel!**" At his command, the century of earth ponies began to slow its pace, like a gradually decelerating train, until it finally stopped, still neatly arranged in rows. "**Silence!**" he barked again, and what little chatter there was stopped completely. The dark red earth pony raised his ears and swiveled them; Sharp Sound, one of the three ponies just behind Applejack and her friends, did the same. Ashtail turned around. "Sharp Sound, do you hear anything?"

The black earth pony didn't answer immediately, focused as he was on listening. But he soon looked his captain in the eye. "No, Captain. We appear to have passed them."

"Captain," another Dalepony said; it was the brown one who had chided Rarity earlier. "I believe that's Aeleroth up there." She nodded past Ashtail up into the sky.

Ashtail looked in that direction, as did Shield Maiden, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity. Amid the increasingly orange-streaked sky, a dark shape swooped in long, large loops. "So it would seem," Ashtail said. "Birdspeak, go get his report."

The brown earth pony galloped away from the Guard, beginning to whistle strangely as she did so. The dark shape in the air banked to the right and flapped its wings, headed in the pony's direction. When it was close enough, Rainbow Dash saw that it was a hawk, dark brown with a golden beak. Birdspeak halted and held up a front leg; the hawk gently descended and perched itself upon the earth pony's foreleg. Birdspeak bent her head toward the great bird of prey.

I suppose that's how they spotted us, Rarity realized. If they can talk to the birds here, they have eyes in the sky.

In a moment, Aeleroth flapped his wings and took off, pumping into the late afternoon sky. Birdspeak trotted back to the Guard. "The way is clear for miles yet as Aeleroth sees it," she said to Ashtail when she was within range of them again. "There are some komagas to the southwest, but they are not headed anywhere near our direction."

"That is good," Ashtail said. "Fall in!" Birdspeak retook her place in her row behind the three Equestrian ponies. "**Move out!**" Ashtail yelled, and they began to gallop again.

Evening wore on quickly. Applejack kept her eyes on the horizon, and as the sun turned orange the relentlessly empty landscape was finally disrupted. At the edge of her sight, she saw a small protrusion from the fields, a slightly pointed speck. As the evening wore

on, it grew larger, taller, broader. It began to resemble a house. "That thing out there," she called to Ashtail, "is that your home?"

"That is Grazezeld," Ashtail replied over his shoulder. "We're almost there. **Dale Guard! Double time!**" and the earth ponies quickened their pace. Even Applejack had to struggle to keep up with the swift gallop, which was almost a full run; Rarity was breathing hard, sweat streaking off her white coat. Rainbow Dash did a bit better, being lighter and having more stamina, but she wished she were flying now.

The speck on the horizon rapidly grew larger. It swelled dramatically as the minutes advanced, and suddenly it wasn't a speck at all – it was actually a *barn*. It sat on an enormous raised foundation of heavy gray stones which spanned more than a dozen acres and rose high off the ground. At the top the platform was flat, and the barn there was equally enormous, dwarfing the red barn at Sweet Apple Acres; it was at least ten times larger, towering over the fields. It was constructed of thick, rough-hewn timbers, sturdy pillars of full tree trunks built into the sides to hold up the walls and support the enormous wood-plated roof. At least a dozen chimneys sprouted from this roof, a few here and there emitting tendrils of smoke. The barn even appeared to be two-storied: there were platforms protruding from the roof, and a large round window of thick, leaded glass seemed to reveal an upper level as the dying light shone through it. There was a ring of copper around the window, and a copper trim around the edge of the roof like the fringes of grass turned upside-down. At the front and back of the roof, thin poles rose, and on each a flag flew, a triangle of dark red with the bundled golden grass in the center.

The sun had nearly set by the time they reached the large wooden gates at the base of the barn's foundation. Two Daleponies in full armor stood at attention on either side, wearing iron collars attached to thick ropes that were in turn tied to one of the gate doors. "**Dale Guard! Whoa!**" Ashtail called over his shoulder, and the ponies in his wake slowed to a trot. When they were closing in on the gates, Ashtail yelled again. "**Grazezeld Guard! The Marshal of the East returns!**" The posted earth ponies began to advance away from the gate on the left and the right, pulling hard at the collars around their necks. The two gates yawned open slowly, revealing a stone ramp leading up to the level foundation. "**Heel!**" Ashtail called over his shoulder, and the Dale Guard halted just before the opening gates. When they were fully opened, Ashtail addressed the gate guards. "The fastness of Grazezeld is retired for the evening! Grazezeld Guard, retire and bar the gates of Grazezeld! **Dale Guard! Advance!**" He trotted forward, Shield Maiden at his side, the Equestrian ponies and his Dale Guard in his wake. They pounded up the stone ramp and emerged atop the foundation of Grazezeld, which provided a grand panorama of Gildedale's golden fields around them, now turning dull in the darkening

night. As the last of the Dale Guard passed the gates, the two guarding earth ponies came up the ramp, pulling the wooden gates shut behind them. Applejack winced as loud twin **bangs** signaled the barring of the entrance for the night. There would be no going out that way, not without permission.

"**Dale Guard! Heel!**" Ashtail said when they had all emerged on the grounds of the fastness. He and Shield Maiden turned to face the rows of armored earth ponies. "The day's patrol is done! **Dale Guard! DISMISSED!**"

At this, the Daleponies finally broke their rigid formation. A number of them began to trot toward the large open doors of the barn. Some of them gathered in groups of three or four and began to talk amongst themselves. A few wandered toward the edges of the foundation, gazing out across the plains as stars began to appear in the night sky. "Oh my *goodness!*" Rarity wailed, bouncing on her aching legs. "I am absolutely exhausted!"

Ashtail raised an eyebrow. "I suggest you get some sleep tonight, then," he said. "We must ride just as hard tomorrow to reach Thatchholm." He turned to Shield Maiden. "Shield Maiden, our guests have traveled far and ridden hard. See that they get something to eat."

"Yes, Captain," the gray earth pony said.

"Oh, so *now* we're guests," Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

"*Rainbow!*" Applejack hissed.

"I'll check in on you a while later; I have duties to attend to." With that, the dark red earth pony turned and trotted into Grazezeld, quickly lost in the milling of the ponies around him.

Shield Maiden stepped up to Rainbow Dash. The sky-blue pegasus tensed, unsure how to take this sudden closeness. But her green eyes were bright. "I apologize for my brusqueness earlier," she said. "It is my duty to protect the Captain from threats, and from slights. I could not let an offense to his honor go unchecked."

Dash chuckled awkwardly. "Er... sure, that's okay. I guess it's okay, anyway."

Shield Maiden turned back toward the doors of Grazezeld. "Come. Dinner should just about be on; let's see what the cooks have for you lot."

She trotted toward the double doors; the three Equestrian ponies followed. The interior of Grazezeld was a vast, open space, thick pillars of dark wood holding up a tall ceiling

that stretched over a great communal hall. In the middle, a large fire burned in a raised pit of stone; there were rough cloth couches gathered around it, on which Daleponies lounged. There were similar couches scattered randomly throughout the commons, clearly meant to be moved at will. The pillars they passed were decorated with striking abstract carvings, stained dark green and dark red and gold. The floor beneath them was stone, though it was frequently covered with carpets and mats of every shape, size, and pattern. At the very back of the hall, two great doorways led off to the left and the right. Between them was a raised slab of stone, upon which a couch reinforced with wood backing was placed. Behind the couch was a pillar of wood, at the top of which was a larger version of the golden compass with the silver arrow that Ashtail wore on his champron.

Shield Maiden led Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash to the right, past the dais and through a short, twisty hallway. They emerged in a large mess hall, where long wooden tables were laid in boards, with long benches on either side. At the back wall, an open window offered a glimpse of a large, dimly lit kitchen, where wood fires burned both in ovens and open pits, and large iron cauldrons bubbled with something sweet-smelling. There were already many Daleponies gathered around the tables, eating from stone bowls, talking, laughing. Shield Maiden led the three Equestrians past them toward the kitchen window. "Kit Cauldron!" she called over the general din. "I have three hungry ponies here; what have you for them?"

"Carrot soup!" a lean, angular earth pony with a white coat replied, an apron wrapped around his body. "We got plenty of fresh grain in today, so I have bread aplenty as well."

"*Bread!*" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, shooting past Shield Maiden with a burst of her wings. She hovered in front of the kitchen window and pounded her hooves eagerly on the kitchen counter. "I am *craving* some bread right now!"

Kit Cauldron's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. Many of the nearby Daleponies were likewise astounded at the pegasus and her flight. And some were annoyed, given that Dash had jumped ahead of a long line.

"Rainbow!" Applejack called. "Get back here! It ain't our turn yet!"

Dash glanced to her left, noticed the line. She smiled sheepishly, waved a hoof at the ponies in the queue. "Sorry, everypony, didn't mean to cut," she remarked. She flapped slowly back to her friends. Shield Maiden was gazing with a smaller level of amazement, but amazement all the same. "Sorry about that, Shield Maiden."

"Rainbow can get a bit *impatient* when it comes to food," Applejack said. Dash stuck her tongue out at the orange earth pony.

Shield Maiden smiled slowly. "I understand," she said. "No harm done – and you put on a bit of a show."

"What, me?" Dash said.

"Most of us have never seen a pegasus pony before," the gray earth pony informed her.

"Oh, you thought that was a *show* just now?" Dash asked. She grinned. "Trust me, that was *nothing*. I'll put on a real show sometime!"

Saying nothing, Shield Maiden led them to the end of the line for food. It moved quickly, and in little time they took up wooden trays in their mouths, upon which bowls of soup and loaves of bread were placed. Rarity opted to carry hers with her magic, which produced another outbreak of wide-eyed staring. The white unicorn brushed back her curled violet mane with a hoof and fluttered her long eyelashes. This earned her a shove in the rump from Applejack with her tray. "Come on, Rarity, don't be a showoff!" Rarity huffed and followed Shield Maiden to the end of one of the tables, where they sat on the benches.

"You all go ahead and eat," she said. "I need to get my armor off; I'll rejoin you in a moment." She trotted off and out of the mess hall.

"More bread?" a Dalepony with a tray on his back asked as he passed by; the tray had several large, brown loaves on it.

"Oh yeah!" Rainbow Dash cried. She was already slurping up her soup. The Dalepony set the large loaf in the middle of their trays, and instantly the sky-blue pegasus picked it up with both hooves and shoved one end of it into her mouth.

"Rainbow *Dash!*" Rarity snapped, using her magic to yank the loaf out of Dash's mouth. "I will not have you or any of us forgetting our table manners, especially not now that we have a table at which to exercise them!" The white unicorn focused her magic and tore off a chunk from the end that had been in Dash's mouth. "We don't appear to have a bread knife, so tearing is acceptable, if regrettable, etiquette. Trying to swallow the bread, *that is meant for everypony*, in one gulp like a *snake* is not polite in the least."

Dash crossed her legs childishly over her chest. "Fine," she muttered. She picked up the hunk of bread and shoved it in her mouth, chewing with her mouth open.

"Uuggghh," Rarity groaned, laying her head on the table. "You are *hopeless*, Rainbow."

"You know," Dash said with her mouth full, "if you spend so much time worrying about how to eat the food, you don't enjoy it."

"That is not true at all!" Rarity replied.

Applejack rolled her eyes at the exchange. She took off her hat and picked up her soup bowl between both hooves, tipping it toward her mouth and beginning to sip. *This is great!* she thought. The soup was sweet without being too sugary, hearty without being too thick. The bread, which she bit a chunk off of moments later, was equally satisfying. Not fancy, of course, but simple and delicious and filling.

Rarity agreed. "Mmm, my, this is wonderful," she said. "And such a lovely break from all that grass we've been eating. All things considered, and setting aside the fact that we were brought here against our will, I think we've had a stroke of good luck."

"These Daleponies are bein' hospitable enough, that's for sure," Applejack agreed. "But I don't like our chances at makin' this *Lord Hammer Hoof* see our side o' things."

"That Ashtail pony seems like he could be reasoned with," Rarity said.

"Yeah, I agree," Applejack said. "He seems a decent fella once he stops bein' gruff and mean. But like he said, it ain't *up* to him. And if this Lord Hammer Hoof is the one who set up the rules about trespassers, he's gonna be hard to convince."

Rainbow Dash finally swallowed her bread in one massive gulp. "Well I think we should be prepared to make a break for it – if these ponies won't let us go, we gotta be prepared to force our way out!"

"Easier said than done, Rainbow," Applejack said. "Not all of us can fly."

Rarity sighed. "I wish I could teleport..."

"Rarity, none o' that! We'll figure somethin' out. If need be, Rainbow can go on alone."

Dash's rose eyes widened. "I thought you said –"

"I *did*," the orange earth pony said with a nod. "But that was before all o' this. If things get desperate... desperate measures may be needed."

Dash set her mouth in a grim line. She looked Applejack straight in the eye and saw the seriousness there. She nodded. "Okay. But let's hope we don't need to do that, right?" Now that she was confronted with the reality of what she had thought in her head, she liked it less than ever. She didn't want to leave her friends behind!

"Let's hope," Applejack remarked.

"Enjoying the food?" a voice came from their right. Turning, they saw Shield Maiden. Without her armor, her gray coat gave off a fine sheen, surprising for the ruggedness of her country. And on her flank...

"You have a cutie mark!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. There was an image of a heater shield on each of her flanks, colored gold and dark red.

"Of course I do," the gray earth pony remarked. "I am a pony, am I not?"

"I... er..." Dash stammered.

"We weren't sure if ponies in Gildedale got cutie marks," Rarity said. "I must say, I'm surprised as well. It is a bit... magical, I think, for your kingdom's sensibilities, is it not?"

"Oh, no," Shield Maiden said. "It's a magic all ponies share – natural. Not every Dalepony gets a cutie mark, but most do. Actually, we don't even get proper names until we have our cutie marks."

"So what are you called when you're young?" Rarity asked.

"'Filly' or 'colt,' and then described by our color," the gray Dalepony said. "Of course, if a pony doesn't get their cutie mark, they're usually allowed to choose a name by the time they start their first growth spurt. When we do get our marks, though, we usually name ourselves with the counsel of our parents and our Quarter Marshal; it's our duty to ensure that our name is both satisfying to us and informative to the ponies around us, so they know in what capacity they can rely on us in the event of trouble."

"So your name, 'Shield Maiden,' means that you are..." Rainbow Dash began.

"A warrior," Shield Maiden finished. "I am a defender of pony and plot. I strive to be stout in the face of danger." The three friends recalled her ferocity toward Rainbow Dash, and could easily believe it.

There were a few beats of silence, but then Rarity said, "What about Ashtail? His name doesn't say anything about his talents. It just describes his hair coloration."

"The Captain is... distinct," the gray earth pony said. "He can tell you more about it if he chooses." She trotted off. "I'm keeping you from your food – and me from mine! I'll go get some soup and be back."

"So, what," Dash said when she was gone, "do they just call their foals 'hey you'? That's so lame."

"I can see it makin' a kind o' sense," Applejack said. "But I don't think it's right to not name a foal."

"They seem to be just fine with it, if the fillies and colts we've met are any indication," Rarity said.

"Shield Maiden's the only one we've really talked to, and she's barely said anything about herself!" the sky blue pegasus said. "Plus, I don't buy her apology – she stuck a *spear* in my *face*! That filly is nuts."

"Rainbow Dash, be fair," Rarity said. "We've all had less-than-glamorous moments. You've no right to judge a pony by how she behaves when she loses her temper."

"That's not what *Ashtail* says," Dash remarked. She slurped another gulp of her soup.

"Well, I don't know how much I care for *Ashtail*," the white unicorn said. "Even if he is putting us up for the night."

"You just said he was reasonable," Applejack remarked. She felt compelled to defend the dark red earth pony, if for no other reason than his hospitality.

"Reasonable, yes. Right? That remains to be seen," Rarity said in turn.

Shield Maiden chose that merciful lull in conversation as her moment to reappear, carrying a tray in her mouth. She sat down beside Rarity and took a long pull of her soup. She blinked her green eyes and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry – I didn't know if you Equestrian ponies gave thanks to any gods..."

"I suppose we *could*," Rarity remarked. "Do you?"

"Sometimes," Shield Maiden said. "We do give thanks to the Sun Queen for moving the sun and the moon."

"Actually, Princess Celestia doesn't move the moon any more," Rainbow Dash said.

"She doesn't? Then who or what does?"

"Her sister, Princess Luna," Applejack said. "She's been... *gone* for a while, but she's back now, and the moon was originally hers to begin with, so she's doin' it again."

Shield Maiden's eyes went wide. "Great green earth! I didn't know the Sun Queen even had a sister!"

"It's... a long story," Dash said. The three Equestrian ponies shared a glance.

They spent the remainder of the meal telling Shield Maiden a few things about Luna, without going into the details of their quest for the Elements of Harmony. It was an unspoken agreement that their status as Bearers of the Elements was better off not being revealed. They needn't have worried – what they *did* tell Shield Maiden was enough to keep her engrossed as she ate. "That explains something that has puzzled us for more than a year," the gray earth pony said, chewing the last of her bread. "On last year's summer solstice, the night was much longer than it should have been. We even woke up to darkness! And it was caused by this dark moon goddess?"

"That's right – Nightmare Moon," Applejack answered. "But she's all gone now. Princess Luna's right as rain again."

"I would love to hear more," Shield Maiden said. She pushed herself back from the table and rolled off onto her hooves. "But we can't tarry – I suspect there's more to do before we bed for the night. Please take your trays back to the kitchen window with me." She picked up her tray in her mouth, and the others followed suit, Rarity even opting to do the work manually.

When they exited the mess hall, they found Ashtail waiting for them. He had discarded his armor as well, and his gray-dappled mane fell thick across his neck. "That was a long supper," he said. He was not quite as imposing without his armor, but he was still tall, and his muscles were on better display.

"Forgive me, Captain," Shield Maiden said with a nod.

"No harm done. There's a common bed on the upper floor that's currently not in use – sixth room in the left wing. You will be sleeping there tonight. But first," his blue eyes hardened, "I point out again that tomorrow we must ride long through land where the komagas are running. So, Shield Maiden, if you would, take our guests down to the armory and see if there is anything available for them to outfit themselves with."

"Yes, Captain," she replied. "Follow me," she told the Equestrian ponies.

Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack passed Ashtail and headed across the hall, to the doorway on the left side of the stone dais. As they walked past him, Applejack glanced to the side. His flank wasn't bare – but for a moment she was confused. It seemed as though he was still wearing his armor, and not just because his coat was nearly the same color as the dark red boiled leather: on his flank was a design of branching golden grass cinched in the middle by a band. The same symbol was on the cruppers of every Dale Guard pony's armor. It took her a moment to realize that that was his cutie mark! *His cutie mark is the symbol of Gildedale?* she wondered. What did that mean?

Turning through the doorway, they went down a short hall that descended on a stone ramp, cutting into the foundation of the great barn. They shortly emerged in a large room with high stone walls. Numerous shelves lined the walls, along with a vast number of chests, a few heavy drawers, and toward the back, a great number of small stalls. Applejack trotted toward them. In each stall was a crude wooden shape on a pole, with a body roughly like a pony's torso. It took the orange earth pony a moment to realize what they reminded her of: they were like cruder versions of Rarity's ponyquins, harder and less complete.

"I'm afraid all our armor is currently in use," Shield Maiden said. "We have none to spare. But as for armaments..." She trailed off and trotted to the other side of the ramp. She sat back on her haunches and used her front hooves to open a large wooden chest. Digging through it briefly, she dunked her head in and came out with something shiny and sharp in her mouth. "You there, earth pony – Applejack, was it?" she asked.

"That's right," Applejack said.

"You mentioned you worked on a farm. Have you ever used a hoof-axe before?"

Applejack started. "Er, sure – for choppin' wood."

"Here," she said, flinging her head at Applejack. She tossed something that fell at Applejack's hooves: it had a leather binding wound with cord meant to tighten around a

pony's foreleg. Attached to the other side was an axe blade. Applejack was quite familiar with hoof-axes, having used them often for farm work. But this was made of stouter leather and had a much thicker head than anything she was used to back home. The steel appeared to be denser, and the edge was noticeably sharper. "You may need to chop something else tomorrow," Shield Maiden said.

Applejack stepped back sharply from the weapon. "I don't go in for killin'," she said.

Shield Maiden gave her a grim look. "It's not a matter of what you want," she said. "The komagas are vicious and bloodthirsty. If you're not prepared to defend yourself you will be easy prey." She looked at Rainbow Dash. "You, Rainbow Dash... do you need anything?"

"Uh..." Dash started. "Well..." she wasn't used to thinking about this at all. She quickly put on a brave face. "Nope! I'm a pegasus, you know. We can control the weather! Anything messes with me, I'll hit it with a tornado!" She thumped her chest.

Shield Maiden gave her a look. "I forgot," the gray filly finally said. "You could just drop a lightning bolt on something, right?"

Dash's ears flattened against her head. "Uh... I can't actually do lightning," she said. She immediately made herself look confident. "But I can do wind and rain, no problem!"

"Fair enough," Shield Maiden said. Her green eyes turned on Rarity. "You – unicorn. I suppose you have your magic to defend you."

Rarity's mouth fell open. She took a few steps back. "I... I... I..." Her mouth worked uselessly for a moment. "Um... that is... my magic isn't terribly..." she squeaked out, "*aggressive.*"

Shield Maiden sighed. "Then let me see if I can find something that will fit you." She rummaged through the chest again.

Rarity's blue eyes went wide. "That's... please, that's not really necessary," she said softly. "I have no interest in taking part in any fighting."

Shield Maiden said nothing. Pulling out of the chest, she went to a stack of shelves and began to peer deep at each level, standing on her hind legs to reach the highest shelf.

"Please," Rarity said. "Shield Maiden... *darling*... don't go to this trouble on my account." She laughed weakly. "I wouldn't know the first thing to do with a weapon!"

Shield Maiden moved on to the second batch of shelves. She rummaged through them with hooves and mouth, the noise of shifting instruments making it plain that she was finding things – but not what she sought.

"Now, Miss Shield Maiden," Rarity said, more forcefully. "I must insist –"

"Oh ho **ho!**" the gray earth pony exclaimed excitedly. She had reached her head deep into a lower shelf. She was tugging hard at something. "What have we *here?*" With a sharp pull, she yanked her head out, and with it something long and *brilliant*. "Here's a pretty jewel of death for a fancy battle maiden!"

She dropped it from her mouth to the ground. It was a blade, about a foot and a half long. It had a gracefully curved edge, heavier at the tip than at the mount. Leather straps extended from the base, long and supple. The base seemed to be hollow. And it was *clear* – translucent. It wasn't metal at all. It rather appeared to be made of glass, or crystal. Graceful lines of gold filigree stretched up its sides, like the thin tendrils of infant vines. Even Rarity was momentarily transfixed by its elegance.

"I don't know what *this* is doing here," Shield Maiden said, her voice full of surprise. "Perhaps it was a gift to some ancient Quarter Marshal. It's clearly meant for a unicorn – see how it's supposed to fit over a horn?" She turned the base toward them with her nose, displaying its hollowness. "Moreover, I don't think it's pony-made – it looks deerish." She grinned at Rarity. "It's perfect for your delicate sensibilities. Go on, try it on."

Rarity stared unblinking at the horn-blade for a moment. Then she jerked back as if she'd been struck. "**No!**" she yelped. "Absolutely **not!**"

Shield Maiden gritted her teeth. "My orders are to arm you all. Please take it."

"No no no!" the white unicorn cried. "I am not about to strap a *blade* to my horn and go *swinging* it about like some... blood-stained... *barbarian!*"

"If you are not prepared to fight tomorrow, you open yourself to death," the gray earth pony said sharply. "We cannot protect you in the chaos of an attack! You must be able to fend for yourself!"

"I don't want to kill anything!"

"What if you have no choice?!"

"**I! Am! A! Fashion Designer!**" Rarity shrieked. She was panicking, beating her front hooves rapidly on the stone floor; her eyes were wide. "I make and sell *dresses!* Dresses!" Tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Please don't ask me to kill! Please don't! I can't! I can't!"

Applejack ran a hoof down Rarity's withers, but the white unicorn flinched away from her touch. She lowered her head and began to sob, her tears spattering the floor. Rainbow Dash felt powerless to help her. Applejack knew she should say something, but couldn't find her voice.

Shield Maiden did not flinch. "Then why are you here?" she asked.

Rarity sniffed. "Because... because my *friend is hurt!*" she sobbed. "She was hurt trying to help *me!* I have to help her – I have to! Even if it means going on this beastly journey! I don't want her to die!" She was crying harder now.

Shield Maiden tilted her head gently to the side. With the softest of hooffalls, she stepped slowly toward Rarity. She was very close when she reached out a hoof and stroked the white unicorn's cheek. "Shhh," she softly breathed. "Shh." Her green eyes lost all their hardness. "Dry your tears. Can I tell you a secret?" She lifted Rarity's chin with her hoof, making Rarity look into her eyes. "Come now, let me tell you a secret." Rarity sniffed loudly, blinking hard to stop the tears from flowing. She worked to get her breathing under control. Shield Maiden smiled gently at her. "I hate blood. I hate it. So does the Captain. So do all of us. If you enjoy the spilling of blood, you don't get to be in the Dale Guard." She moved right against Rarity, leaning her head against the white unicorn's. "We're ponies. We're not wolves; we're not griffins; we're not dragons. We are not meant to enjoy the taking of life." She leaned closer against Rarity. Rarity began to unconsciously match her breathing to Shield Maiden's. "But in this land there are forces that would destroy the ponies and the places we love. And because we love them, we are willing to sacrifice for them – even to do things that repulse us. Even to give our own lives for theirs." She pulled her head away and looked again into Rarity's eyes. "Do you love your friend?"

Rarity sniffed. "If by love you mean –"

"Does it make you happy to know that she lives?"

Rarity nodded. "Yes... it does. I do love her."

"Then trust your love for her. Let it guide what you feel. Love will give you *courage*, Madam Rarity. It will give you all courage," she said, glancing at Applejack and Rainbow Dash. The sky-blue pegasus was fighting back sobs. "Love will let you do what you think you cannot do. It does for me."

Rarity sniffed again. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hoof. Using her magic, she levitated the horn-blade up onto her horn, slotting the hollow base around the base of her horn. It fit snugly; indeed, it seemed to tighten as she wore it, as if by magic. Yet it easily loosened when she pulled it off again. "It fits," she said softly.

"Pray to your Sun Queen and your Moon Princess that you don't have to use it," Shield Maiden said. "But if you must, *fear not*."

Rarity smiled. She laughed with nervous giddiness. "That seems to be what I learn every week," she said softly. "I suppose the lesson takes a while to stick." Tilting her head to the side, she focused her gaze on Shield Maiden's white mane, flowing in a wave across her neck. When the gray earth pony had nuzzled her close, she had felt it against her coat and been struck by its softness. "Shield Maiden, your mane is lovely," she said. "It's so thick and full-bodied. Do you braid it?"

Shield Maiden looked slightly ashamed. She glanced away. "When I have time," she admitted. "It is a vanity, I know –"

"Nonsense!" Rarity said. "Looking good is as important as fighting for those you love! Really, deep down, it's quite similar. And since you don't seem used to magic," she smiled devilishly, "I'm guessing you've never had a unicorn braid your hair?"

"No," Shield Maiden said.

"Well you must let me at it!" Rarity said. "Do you have anything more to do tonight?"

"My duties are finished when you've all been armed."

"Well then, I shall take *this*," she levitated the horn-blade into her tail and snared it with the curled violet hair, "and consider myself armed. Now come on, let's find a couch and a mirror and get to work!" She trotted around the corner and up the ramp toward the main hall.

Shield Maiden chuckled. "Will you two be all right?" she asked the other Equestrian ponies.

Applejack nodded. "I'll be just fine, Miss." She tipped her hat. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. It's not the first time I've given that talk. And you, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head vigorously. "You are **awesome**," she said.

Shield Maiden nodded, and parted from them. She trotted back up the ramp just as Rarity cried, "Shield Maiden, darling, are you coming?"

Applejack smiled. "I reckon I like that Shield Maiden gal."

She and Rainbow Dash ascended the ramp. When they returned to the main hall, they found a small congregation of Daleponies clustered around the central fire. "I'm gonna go lay down for a bit," Dash said.

"I'm gonna go wander around outdoors," Applejack said. "If I'm permitted, anyway. I've been wonderin' about the grounds o' the barn, and what's out there."

The orange earth pony trotted off into the now dim space through the pillars. The sky-blue pegasus trotted toward the fire; the earth ponies turned their heads at her approach. "Any room to pull up a couch?" she asked.

A dappled orange pony scooted to his right to make room for her, and she plopped down in their midst, her pastel coloration a striking departure from the rich earth tones of the Daleponies. A few minutes passed in silence before a chestnut Dalepony said, "Are all pegasuses like you?"

Dash thought for a minute. *How do I answer that...* She decided to brag. "Well, all pegasus ponies can fly, sure," she said suavely. "But not every pegasus is as *fast* or as *cool* as I am."

"Cool'?" the chestnut colt repeated. "What does 'cool' mean?"

"It means... um..." the sky-blue pegasus searched for the best answer. "It means you're really good at what you do best and every other pony knows it just by looking at you!"

"Ah," he said.

"So how much cooler are you than a typical pegasus?" a cream-colored filly asked.

"Well..." she thought again. "I'd say the average pegasus is about... eighty percent as cool as me."

Applejack found she had been allowed outside rather easily; there weren't even guards at the gates of the barn, though they had been closed and it had taken a bit of work to open them. The moon shone brightly overhead, casting the fields around Grazeeld in brilliant silver. She looked out, and for miles all she could see was silver rippling in the wind. It was beautiful in that same stark, lonely way that all of Gildedale was. She did like the place a lot more now that she knew its inhabitants had a high level of civilization, even if it was concentrated in this one place. Wandering along the foundation, she noticed small gardens of plants, neatly arranged in rows or curling up little ladders. She bent close to one and sniffed; it was a pungent odor, and a familiar one.

"Herbs," a voice said over her shoulder. Turning, she saw Ashtail, standing patiently nearby. "All of them medicinal. We grow them here because we can't out on the fields; they need more attention and care."

Applejack smiled. "Y'all are a lot more sophisticated than I gave you credit for, that's for sure," she admitted. "I didn't know what to expect when I came here."

Ashtail began to walk past her. She fell in at his side. "I've never been to Equestria," he said. "I'm told there are... 'cities' there? Places where there are many buildings gathered all together."

"There's plenty o' cities," Applejack said. "Big cities, small cities, lil' towns, huge castles – we got the whole package."

The dark red earth pony glanced out across the fields. "I would love to see it someday."

"Well what's stoppin' you?" Applejack said. "We ain't like you folk – we don't ban anypony from travelin' through Equestria. Unless y'all are banned on this side?"

"We are not banned from leaving Gildedale," Ashtail said. "But Lord Hammer Hoof has decreed that we should avoid it as a matter of courtesy and honesty." He looked sidelong at her. "If we forbid Equestrian ponies from traveling across our land, but travel across theirs with impunity, are we not hypocrites?"

"Maybe that rule about travelin' needs to be changed," Applejack said gently.

"That is not my decision to make," Ashtail said. "It has been talked of before. But Lord Hammer Hoof is wise, and has ruled us well for years. There are few left who question

his judgment." He narrowed his eyes. "Even though he can be stubborn for all his wisdom."

The orange earth pony sat down on her haunches. After some hesitation, Ashtail joined her. "Why don't *you* talk to him about it?" she asked. "You seem to do a great job as Marshal and Captain. I bet he'd listen to you."

"I couldn't... I wouldn't presume to correct him," Ashtail said. There was a hitch in his voice.

Applejack *recognized* that hitch. It was the hitch in Apple Bloom's voice when she had done something wrong and Applejack made her tell what it was. And Ashtail's cutie mark – the symbol that announced his defining skill – was the national symbol of Gildedale. It all suddenly clicked. "Lord Hammer Hoof... he's your father, ain't he?"

Ashtail narrowed his eyes. "I do not allow anypony to address me as 'prince.'"

Up on the second floor of the barn, in the sixth room of the left wing, Shield Maiden lay on a rough cloth mattress stuffed with grass. A mirror floated in the air nearby, while one last tress of her white mane was twisted and woven into itself. A few minutes later, Rarity cried, "And there we go!" She used her magic to float the mirror at an angle, permitting the gray earth pony to see her mane's six new braided tresses. "What do you think?"

Shield Maiden smiled. "It's beautiful!" she exclaimed. She ran a hoof through the braids. "Much tighter than I've ever managed to get it."

"Magic, my dear," Rarity said proudly. "Though I can't take all the credit. You really have remarkable hair. And you don't even shampoo it! It's a miracle of cosmetology."

"Oh, my daughter is going to love it," she said.

Rarity's blue eyes widened. "You have a daughter?"

"Oh, yes!" Shield Maiden exclaimed. "I have a picture of her, hold on!" She got up and left the room. Rarity waited, struggling mightily to process this new information. Shield Maiden had a daughter? She seemed so young! But it would explain why she had handled Rarity's... cowardice... so well. The gray earth pony returned, her green eyes bright, clutching a folded piece of paper in her mouth.

"Oh, it's a drawing?" Rarity said. "I thought it would be a photograph."

"What's a photograph?" Shield Maiden asked.

"It's... well, it's very complicated," Rarity said. "But is this a good drawing?"

"The best!" Shield Maiden exclaimed. She was almost *bubbly* with excitement. "One of my friends from Grasreichen – that's the Southern Quarter's fastness – sketched it in charcoal; she's the best artist I know. Here!" She unfolded the paper. It was a drawing in thick black lines of a young foal with a twist in her tail and a spicurl in her mane. She had a light gray coat and dark gray hair, while her eyes were brilliant orange. "Isn't she wonderful?" Shield Maiden gushed.

"She's lovely," Rarity said. "She looks about the same age as my little sister."

"Does she now?" Shield Maiden said. Her eyes drifted over the white unicorn. "Speaking of ages... now that I think on it, we're about the same age, aren't we?"

"We are?" Rarity asked. "When were you born?" Shield Maiden told her. It took them a moment to figure out ages, because Gildedale's calendar was not quite like Equestria's. But it was close enough, and they rapidly determined that the two of them were mere months apart. "My goodness, we are!"

"Kind of interesting, isn't it?" Shield Maiden said.

"Oh... yes," Rarity said softly, looking away. In truth, it made her feel a strange sadness. Shield Maiden was Rarity's age, and she already had a foal – and presumably a husband. Perhaps they did things earlier here in Gildedale? It made sense, given how much less settled everypony seemed to be. Ponies were probably encouraged to grow up faster. *Or*, Rarity thought with some bitterness, *I'm just getting old*. "So who's her father?"

"Oh, you met him today; or at least you saw him today. He –"

The long, rolling howl was muted by the thick wood of the walls, but it still cut straight to Rarity's spine. She winced as she heard it. Shield Maiden stiffened. "Close," she said.

"Those things... they can't get in here, can they?" Rarity asked.

The gray earth pony shook her head. "They don't seem to understand the concept of a gate," she said. "As long as it's closed, they see Grazezeld's foundation as a solid stone wall too high to scale – and none of them have ever tried."

Outside, Applejack and Ashtail were on their feet. "Not far," the dark red earth pony muttered. He scanned the fields intently. "I wonder if we can see them..."

"So... what are they?" Applejack asked.

Ashtail swiveled a blue eye at her. "According to our legends, they were dragons once," he said slowly. "But long ago when the world was young they committed some terrible sin. As punishment, the dragon gods stripped them of their wings and their fire, and condemned them to wander the earth. Eons of wandering have made them mindless, slaving beasts."

Applejack arched an eyebrow. "That's what your *legends* say?"

He nodded. "It's about all we have," he admitted. "There is much we don't really know about them. Every spring, for one month, they run across the length of Gildedale, from the south to the north. We don't know where they come from; we don't know where they go; we don't know why they seem to make a single yearly trip – why they don't come back the other way in the fall or winter. All we know is that they are large, stupid, and savage. They race across the fields, and they will tear apart anything – and anypony – in their way."

A single month of pure destruction. Anything in their way destroyed? "So that's why y'all don't have no cities," she said with dawning comprehension. "It ain't just that y'all don't want to build – y'all *can't*." Ashtail said nothing. "So how big are they?"

"At least ten times a typical Dalepony's size – they are *enormous*. It's difficult to put into words unless you have seen one."

"But if they're so big, how do y'all fight 'em?"

Ashtail smiled fiercely. "We are smarter than they are. We are faster, more maneuverable. We have weapons and they do not. And," he lifted his head proudly, "we can stand firm."

Applejack did not respond. She blinked a few times.

"You know," Ashtail said. "*Stand firm*." She still said nothing. Now it was his turn to raise an eyebrow. "Does that... mean nothing to you?"

"Er..." the orange earth pony started, completely at a loss.

Ashtail shook his head. "I don't believe it. All the magic you experience in Equestria – everything we have banned here – and you don't know about the one kind of magic we *permit* – the magic common to all earth ponies."

"Well," she said, "I know earth ponies are real strong – and I'm mighty proud o' that! And we're all good at workin' with the land and the plants –"

"And we can stand firm," he repeated. "When an earth pony digs their hooves into the earth and stands firm, they cannot be moved and they cannot be broken. We draw strength from the land around us and remain steadfast against our foes. Just as the mountains do not crack against the wind and the snow, we do not break against assault."

Applejack's eyes went wide. "Really?" She had never heard about this!

Ashtail nodded. "Here, I'll show you," he said. "You said you were strong, yes?"

"Mighty strong!"

Ashtail dug his hooves into the dirt, grinding them as far as he could into the packed soil of Grazezeld's foundation. "Try to push me over. Give me a shove."

Applejack shook her head. She wasn't entirely sure she believed him. She reared up on her back legs and pushed him – only to be pushed off him herself, sending her staggering back before she could regain her footing.

"Try again! Harder!" Ashtail exclaimed.

Applejack backed up a few paces, pawed the earth with her hoof, and charged. She leaned her withers into a great forward push – but she *bounced* off of him, sending her tumbling to the ground.

"Buck me!"

Applejack reared forward on her front legs, tensed every muscle in her body, and **bucked**. She bucked as hard as she possibly could – harder than she ever bucked during Applebuck Season, because bucking this hard could actually crack her apple trees at the trunk.

Her back hooves **sprang** off of Ashtail's side, and she flipped once through the air at the sheer amount of force repelled back onto her. She rolled twice in the dirt before she

stopped, and swiveled back around. Ashtail had not been moved an inch. He grinned at her. "I didn't even feel it. Was that the best you could do?"

Applejack snarled. But she forced herself not to take the bait; he had proven his point. "So all earth ponies can do that?" she said, getting to her feet.

"Every one," he said. "At least here in Gildedale. I don't know if Equestrian earth ponies can do it."

"I bet we can!" Applejack said. "Could you teach me?"

Ashtail looked her up and down. "I don't know... do you think you're up to it?"

Applejack grinned. "I stood up to **you**, remember, boy? I made you blink."

"I blinked because I wanted to," he retorted.

"Sure you did," she said.

"But you have the strength of spirit for it, that's for sure," Ashtail said. "Standing firm is about *channeling* that strength. Making what's in your spirit come to your legs."

"I'm ready to learn," Applejack said, digging her hooves into the dirt.

"It could take some time," Ashtail said.

"We got all night, don't we?"

The dark red earth pony laughed sharply. "So we do! Let's begin."

The morning light crept slowly into the room where the three Equestrian ponies slept. Rainbow Dash and Rarity were clustered together, the former's wing stretched over the latter. Applejack slept next to Rainbow Dash, but at a steeper angle, evidently a latecomer to the large circular bed. A distant scent wafted up through her nostrils, stirring her from slumber.

BONG!

The great crashing sound pulsed through the air, bringing the orange earth pony fully awake. She yawned; she had been up late last night. But she was feeling quite well-rested – it was nice to sleep on a bed after so many nights on the ground.

"Ugh," Rarity muttered, her blue eyes creaking open. "What is that?"

BONG!

"I think it's our cue to wake up," Applejack said. She rose to her hooves and stretched, flexing her back and cracking her neck. She nudged the sleeping Dash with her hoof. "Rainbow, get up. I reckon they ain't gonna wait for us before puttin' breakfast on."

"Just a few more minutes..." Dash mumbled.

BONG!

"No, Rainbow, now!" Applejack said. "Or you're gonna miss breakfast."

"Breakfast?!" Dash snapped her head up. "Let's go, I'm starving!" She blasted off the bed and through the door in a rainbow streak. A few seconds later she flapped back to the doorway. "Uh, sorry, are you girls coming?"

Applejack put on her hat. "Yep."

The three of them left their room and joined countless Daleponies trotting down the hallway. They rounded a bend and were bathed in light from the great circular window at the front of Grazezeld. Descending the ramp, they made their way through the hall, and when they reached the entrance to the mess hall, they found Shield Maiden waiting for them. "Did you sleep well?" she asked them brightly.

"Oh yeah!" Rainbow Dash said.

"It was very nice to sleep on a bed again," Rarity said.

"I noticed you turned in late," Shield Maiden said to Applejack. "What were you up to?"

Applejack smiled. "Just... immersin' myself in your culture."

Shield Maiden twisted her head at this. Her green eyes met Applejack's own green gaze. "All right," she eventually said. "Come on: breakfast is ready, and we must eat quickly. The Captain will want to make an early start."

I hope he got enough sleep, Applejack thought. Ashtail had spent hours the previous night teaching her to stand firm. It had been difficult at first, but by the time they both agreed to stop she was able to withstand an assault seven times out of ten. As they had worked, they had talked. She had done most of it, telling him about her family, about Sweet Apple Acres, about Ponyville, about her friends. He had responded with information about Gildedale, including some of the early history and the administration of the kingdom. He had even talked a little about Lord Hammer Hoof, though he had been very reluctant to discuss his childhood. She had actually gotten him to smile a few times, and not the dour smiles he habitually gave, but real, warm smiles. Seeing them had made her happy. He was so relentlessly grim.

Reaching the kitchen counter, Shield Maiden rapped it with her hoof. "What's for breakfast, Kit Cauldron?"

"Porridge!" the lanky white pony exclaimed brightly. "With oats and cinnamon!" Then he leaned forward across the counter. Raising her eyebrows, Shield Maiden leaned in as well. "Ah... dearest, I hate to say this, but you snored again last night."

"Oh!" the gray earth pony flattened her ears a little. "I'm sorry. I shall have to go to the medic again. Did I keep you up?"

"Just a little," Kit Cauldron said. "What's important is that you got rest – you're the one who will need it. Come see me before you leave, all right?"

"Of course," Shield Maiden said. The two ponies nuzzled each other warmly. "See you later." When she got down from the counter and turned around, she saw the three Equestrian ponies gaping at her. "What?"

"Your husband is the cook?" Rarity asked in surprise.

She bobbed her head from side to side. "What can I say? I married him for his cooking. Well, that, and I love him." She trotted to the back of the food line, and with some surprised glances at each other, the three friends followed suit.

"Regarding your family again," Rarity said as they moved through the line, "where is your daughter? I would just love to meet her."

"She's in Thatchholm with the other foals," Shield Maiden said. "It's the safest place for them while the komagas are running. I must admit," she said gently, "I almost have to thank you three for showing up. Without your excuse to send us to Thatchholm, I wouldn't have been able to see her for another two weeks."

"It's our pleasure!" Rainbow Dash cried, nudging Shield Maiden in the side with her hoof. "Happy to drop in! Just wish it were under better circumstances!"

"Indeed," Shield Maiden said. Her green eyes wavered. "For what it's worth, I believe you all. I think you really are here to help your friend."

"That's real big of you to say, sugarcube," Applejack said. "Would you mind tellin' Lord Hammer Hoof that when we meet him?"

Shield Maiden's ears flattened against her head. "I couldn't presume to correct My Lord. He has made the rules and we must abide by them."

"Even if those rules will doom our friend?" Rarity asked.

Shield Maiden shifted her gaze away from Rarity. "I..."

"Shield Maiden?" Kit Cauldron's voice made her turn back to the front. She was at the head of the line, right at the counter.

"Sorry," she said gently. She took her tray in her mouth. Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash received their trays behind her.

"Maiden!" a voice called out as they walked down the tables. "Come sit with us, Maiden!" It came from a table not far from them, where four Daleponies were seated. Rainbow Dash recognized Sharp Sound and Birdspeak, along with two more colts, another black one and a white one. Shield Maiden glanced hesitantly back to the three travelers. "It's okay," Birdspeak said. "Bring the Equestrians! They can come too!"

"Do you mind?" Shield Maiden asked them.

"Course we don't!" Applejack said. "I'm always happy to meet new folks."

Smiling, Shield Maiden trotted over to the earth ponies, the Equestrian ponies in tow. "I hope you ponies are eating hearty," she said as she sat down. "The komagas are swarming all around us – I heard at least two herds in the night."

"I heard three," Sharp Sound said. He stuck his nose in his bowl and swallowed a mouthful of porridge. "Odds are good we'll have at least one encounter on the way to Thatchholm."

"We are terribly sorry for inconveniencing you all like this," Rarity said. She looked at her tray, saw only the stone bowl. She wore a resigned expression. "I suppose you don't have spoons here either."

"What's a spoon?"

Rarity sighed. Her horn shimmered, and the porridge levitated from the bowl in a giant, roughly spherical clump. She broke off a piece and siphoned it into her mouth, where she chewed it carefully. She did this a few more times before she noticed that the Daleponies were staring at her. "Is something wrong?" she asked politely.

"Is that what most unicorns use their magic for in Equestria?" the white colt asked her. "To pick things up?"

"Hmm... I suppose it's the most common thing," the white unicorn admitted. "Though it's certainly not the only thing."

"What else can you do?" Birdspeak asked.

"I heard that unicorns can disappear and reappear in a different place!" the other black pony said.

"Ah, yes... that's called teleportation," Rarity said. Her ears flattened. "I'm afraid I can't do that. Oh, you should really meet my friend Twilight Sparkle, she's an amazing sorceress!"

"So what can you do?"

"Well, this, obviously," Rarity said, dropping the porridge slowly back into her bowl. "I can also use my magic to hunt for precious gems buried in the ground."

Birdspeak shared a glance with Sharp Sound and the other black Dalepony. "Anything else?"

Rarity met their gaze levelly for a single, normal moment. Then she fluttered her eyelashes and *smiled*. "Well..." she said coquettishly. Applejack rolled her eyes. She knew *that* tone of voice all too well. Rarity was getting ready to show off. "I can also do... **this!**"

All the lights in the mess hall went out. Ponies cried out in the darkness. Suddenly, a single spotlight shone down from above, illuminating Rarity in the center of the room. "Oh," she moaned with a fake pout, "dear me, you've caught me so unprepared! So much attention, and I've nothing to wear!" She smiled again. "Let me slip into something more appropriate." Black waves helixed around her body, spinning and fusing together until they became a black evening gown, trimmed with sequins at its bunching, low-cut shoulders. "And of course I *must* do something with my hair," and her mane flew back and twisted into a tight braid, leaving only the front tress dangling down over her face. She clopped her front hooves on the floor, and black wrapped around them, forming a pair of pumps that laced up her forelegs. Every pony in the hall was now staring at her – and all the colts were leaning forward particularly far. Rarity was in heaven. "I can't forget my lovely lady friends!" she said, and two more spotlights shone on Applejack and Rainbow Dash. "For you, dear Applejack, something... appropriately rustic," she said. Applejack was suddenly being wrapped up in chambray, which formed into a heathery blue-gray dress, the top of which resembled a pair of overalls. A white chambray bandana around her neck completed the look. Rarity winked at Rainbow Dash. "For Rainbow Dash, something bold!" Brilliant scarlet taffeta spun around the sky-blue pegasus, transforming into a full gown with a ruffled skirt; lines of brilliant white trim rimmed each level of ruffle. There were also white spirals around the chest, and a white flower appeared in her rainbow hair. "And now, for my newest dear friend: Shield Maiden!" Rarity said, with a warm smile at the gray earth pony.

Shield Maiden blanched as another spotlight lit her up. "Oh, I couldn't, please –" She was suddenly levitated out of her seat and over the table.

"Nonsense!" Rarity exclaimed, setting Shield Maiden down right next to her. The white unicorn appraised the gray earth pony with intense scrutiny. "Hmm... a short skirt, I think," she said, and white silk spun around Shield Maiden's flanks. "No! Something with one piece! How about a cheongsam?" Silvery silk stretched up Shield Maiden's body and knitted itself tightly around her, forming a single unit of a dress with a high collar and short sleeves. "As for the color: green! To bring out your beautiful eyes!" The dress turned emerald green, with white trim at the sleeves and collar. Somewhere back in the kitchen, a bowl dropped and shattered. "Now just a sprinkle of jewelry –" gold earrings

hung from Shield Maiden's ears, "and voila! C'est magnifique!" Water sprang from somepony's cup and floated through the air in front of Shield Maiden, forming an impromptu mirror.

Shield Maiden gasped. She had never before felt so... pretty. "I..." she stammered, "I..."

"Well, darling?" Rarity asked, arching her eyebrows.

"I -"

"ENOUGH!"

In an instant the lights were back on in the mess hall. The water splashed to the stone floor. The dresses, shoes, and jewelry vanished. Applejack wasn't surprised. Rarity was not a powerful enough magician to actually make clothing appear out of thin air. Everything had been an illusion, albeit a very realistic one. Ashtail stood in the door of the mess hall, looking particularly stern.

He trotted between the tables, which had grown deathly silent. He stopped and glared at Rarity; the white unicorn responded by flinching, though she tried to be brave. He glanced around at the assembled ponies. "Dale Guard! I want you armed and armored and ready to ride at the doors of Grazezeld in twenty minutes! **On the double!**" He glanced at Shield Maiden. "That includes you, Lieutenant."

Shield Maiden met his gaze evenly. "Yes, Captain."

"And *you* -" he glanced from Rarity to Rainbow Dash and Applejack, "arm yourselves with what you were provided in the armory last night and meet me outside. We can't afford any further delay." He turned abruptly and trotted out of the mess hall.

Rarity glanced sadly at Shield Maiden. "I'm so sorry, Shield Maiden," she said. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

Shield Maiden shook her head. "The Captain is merely tense," she remarked. "Journeying to Thatchholm through land thick with komagas will be... an adventure," she said tentatively. "Yes, that might be the best way to put it."

Rainbow Dash swallowed. "So... it's gonna be dangerous? I guess it is, right?"

"Don't worry, you're with us!" Shield Maiden said. "The Dale Guard of the Eastern Quarter is, I think, the finest contingent of fighting ponies this side of the Drackenridge

Mountains. You have very good odds of getting to Thatchholm alive. I have to get my armor on! I'll see you at the doors!" She hastily ran off.

The three Equestrian ponies exchanged nervous glances. "This is going to be unpleasant, isn't it?" Rarity said with a sigh.

"Well... we can do it!" Dash said with a stomp of her hoof. "You heard Shield Maiden! We've got the best of the best with us! And we're not that lame either!" She summoned as much of her courage as she could muster, willing herself to face danger with a smile. She laughed. "Let's go meet those komagas and kick their butts!" She hovered in the air, kicking out with all four legs. She was really getting into it now! "Ha! I bet when one of those big ugly komagas gets a glimpse of me flying right at 'em they'll –"

"Rainbow, we oughta finish our food!" Applejack said, hastening back to her porridge.

"Right!" Dash cried. She blasted over to her porridge, picked up her bowl with both hooves, and *slurped* the whole great chunk of the stuff down in a single gulp. "Done!" she cried, slamming the bowl back to the table.

Rarity looked like somepony had stepped on her tail. She gaped at Dash with pained eyes. "AAAAGGGHHH!" she screamed, falling on her stomach and pounding her hooves on the ground. Several Daleponies looked quizzically at her, but returned to their food quickly – they had to be quick.

A few hurried mouthfuls of porridge later, the three travelers were clopping up the ramp to the dormitories, where they had to pass the rest of the Dale Guard briskly entering their rooms to armor up. When she reached their room for the night, Applejack looked apprehensively at the hoof-axe lying next to the round bed. *I don't want to kill nothin'*, she thought. But Ashtail had instructed her to put it on, and she had grown to value his judgment, if not fully trust it. She slipped the leather band around her left front leg. She took care to position the head of the axe facing out, at a slight angle. Then she reached down with her mouth and began to lace up the cord, threading it between the holes with careful twists of her tongue. When it was threaded through all the holes, she pulled it tight, and with more tongue-twisting she tied a tight knot to hold it in place. She stood up. It was surprisingly light on her leg. Bouncing back on her rear legs, she gave it a swipe; it sang in the air.

"Whoa! Watch it!" Rainbow Dash cried.

"Yes, please be careful with that thing," Rarity said. She slid the horn-blade onto her horn, and with magic fastened the leather straps to bind it tightly around her head. It did give her an elegant and majestic appearance, but the white unicorn had no appreciation for this kind of beauty.

"Come on, y'all," Applejack said, trotting out the door. "No sense keepin' 'em waitin'."

The three ponies headed down the ramp and turned sharply out the great double doors of Grazezeld. The Dale Guard was almost fully assembled, a few stragglers hurriedly taking their place in the rows of earth ponies, their upright spears looking like a naked grove of trees. They seemed to be more heavily armed today: nearly all of them had hoof-axes on one front leg. Some had hoof-axes on *both* front legs. At the front of the ranks, Shield Maiden stood, a hoof-axe on one leg, while high on the other leg a shield like her cutie mark was fastened. Ashtail came trotting up behind them. He had a hoof-axe on his right front leg, and he wore a knife in a leather holster on his left shoulder, just within reach of his mouth. He surveyed the three Equestrian ponies. "Was there no armor?" he asked Shield Maiden.

"None to spare," she said.

"Hmm," he muttered. "You three will have to be careful, then." A long, rolling howl echoed across the fields. The dark red earth pony grimaced. "Very careful." He trotted forward, toward the ramp to the gates. "**Grazezeld Guard!**" he yelled. "**The Marshal of the East embarks for Thatchholm to seek audience with the Lord of the Dale! Grazezeld remains retired from judgment and arbitration! You are to use your own discretion in opening and closing the gates of Grazezeld, as danger and safety shift! OPEN THE GATES!**" The two ponies removed the thick wooden logs barring the heavy gates and began to push them open.

Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash took their places behind Shield Maiden. Ashtail trotted back to the century of ponies and stood at Shield Maiden's side. Before them, the gates groaned open, unveiling the fields gleaming gold in the rising sun. "Here we go..." Rainbow Dash said, tensing herself.

"**Dale Guard! MOVE OUT!**" Ashtail yelled. The ponies launched themselves into a gallop, one row after the other in regular sequence. They powered down the ramp and out onto the fields, where Ashtail and Shield Maiden banked hard to the left. The ponies curved around the corner of Grazezeld, galloping past the foundation and pointing themselves due west. Their pace rapidly matched what they had achieved the previous day, and Rarity's muscles instantly complained. But she kept up as best she could. The

fastness quickly fell behind them, and they were off. Applejack looked over her shoulder; Grazezeld was already a small spot on the horizon.

Rarity's muscles only hurt more as they traveled further. She forced herself to push on, wanting to travel through what she knew was dangerous territory as quickly as possible. The news about the komagas had put their journey across Gildedale in an uncertain new light. Even if they could convince Lord Hammer Hoof to let them pass through his kingdom, would it be safe? She doubted very much that he would give them an escort; what she had learned of him did not paint him as the charitable sort. Applejack had told Rarity and Rainbow Dash what Ashtail had told her about the komagas, and it was enough to give Rarity a new round of dreams the previous night, these decidedly unpleasant. *My dreams keep getting more vivid, too*, she thought, and for the first time it occurred to her that perhaps her magic was seeping into her subconscious. Unicorns did not typically dream prophetic dreams. Indeed, seeing the future was not standard magic at all: fortune telling was superstition and scrying was folk magic. But newspaper clippings and family stories and even scholarly medical journals were filled with records of unicorns affected by magical influences that resulted in glimpses of the future. Yet she had dreamed nothing that resembled what they were facing now. Perhaps she needed an interpreter? She wished Zecora were here, or even Twilight, though she knew the lavender unicorn would scold her for putting any stock in prophecies.

The golden fields rushed past them as they traveled, the sun pursuing its course across the sky. Presently, Ashtail called "**Dale Guard, WHOA!**" and the ranks slowed to a trot, before he cried again, "**Heel!**" and they stopped. "Sharp Sound," he said over his shoulder, and the black Dalepony swiveled his long ears around.

"Nothing yet, Captain," he said.

"Dale Guard! You have twenty minutes! LUNCH!"

The earth ponies immediately broke ranks, but they did not lose their organization. They began splitting off in groups of three and four, roaming away from their captain and lowering their heads to nip at the grass growing beneath their hooves. Ashtail turned to the three Equestrian ponies. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were standing alert, panting, their coats streaked with sweat. Rarity had collapsed to the ground, the blade on her horn resting on the earth as she laid down her head. She swiveled a sapphire blue eye up at him. "Oh, do forgive me, sir," she murmured, struggling to her feet.

"Take this opportunity to eat," Ashtail told them. "We won't be stopping again until we reach Thatchholm." He turned away from them and began to walk with his head low, sniffing at the ground as he slowly moved along.

Applejack glanced at her friends, then followed after the dark red earth pony. "What are you lookin' for?" she asked.

"I had thought there would be a plot of carrots somewhere in here," he said without looking up. "I hoped some of them might be ready to eat, though if there's not enough for the whole Guard I won't bother."

Applejack shook her head. "I still can't rightly figure how y'all farm without constant tendin' o' the crops," she admitted.

"I told you, the crops we grow are partly wild," Ashtail responded. "They don't need the attention that your crops in Ponyville need. Just some rain now and then, and some organization by whatever Dalepony happens to stumble onto them –"

"So whoever finds 'em farms 'em?"

"It's part of our duty to the kingdom," he said, raising his head and looking at her. "Everypony a farmer, everypony a builder, everypony a teacher. The Guard is the only specialized part of our society."

The orange earth pony shook her head. "But that means y'all don't get as much done. If I had to take turns doin' every job in Ponyville, I wouldn't be good at any of 'em."

"You'd be surprised how proficient a pony can get," he said. "Besides, it preserves our freedom."

"I thought this was all because o' the komagas," Applejack said.

"Much of it is," Ashtail told her. "But even if we *could* settle down and specialize into jobs, I do not believe I would want to. As we live now, ponies are free to roam the land: they are at home in whatever fastness or patch of grass they lay their head in, they can travel anywhere they like without fear of trespassing, and they are provided for without any need to assign them a job or tie them to a salary." He slowly smiled. "I think it's how ponies were meant to live."

Applejack blinked her green eyes. "I don't agree," she said. "It sure sounds like how ponies *used* to live; I'll bet that's what things were like in Equestria before we got real

settled. But just 'cause that's how things started don't mean that's how things are supposed to be. A little progress is good."

"But when you move forward, you have to leave something behind," he said. "That's the way it works, right? We preserve our way of life because changing it would mean the loss of the freedom we cherish."

Applejack smiled. "You sound like Rainbow the other day. All this talk o' freedom... but how safe is it? What about your foals? How do you bring them up?"

"Our foals are educated as they need to be," Ashtail said. "We teach them how to speak, how to figure, how to tend the crops and maintain the borders. When the komaga running is finished for the year, the wise old ones among us will lead troops of sons and daughters from one end of Gildedale to the other, teaching as they go. Our foals learn with their minds as they learn with their legs, and they know what they need to know in union with the land where they need to know it."

Applejack pondered his words. So they had a kind of school after all, but it didn't seem very complete – nothing like what Apple Bloom got at school in Ponyville. But from the sounds of things, they didn't need that level of schooling in Gildedale, because Gildedale didn't seem to have jobs, or money, or any of the social framework she was used to in Equestria. It was so different, however similar the ponies themselves were. "I guess I can see some advantages," she admitted, surprising herself. Could she?

Ashtail gave her a smile. "Oh, you can?" He stepped closer. "Like what?"

She grinned. "Well, all y'all seem to be very brave," she said. "And real common-sensical, too. And loyal – y'all seem real loyal."

"We value all of those things," the dark red earth pony said. "And you do too, it would seem."

"I do," Applejack said. "But in Equestria we come by 'em our own way."

"And in Gildedale we have our ways."

Applejack chuckled. "I guess neither way's really so *bad*..."

A **howl** burst through the air – very close. Ashtail and Applejack whipped their heads around. "Too close," the dark red earth pony growled. "**Dale Guard! ASSEMBLE!**" The

ponies quickly converged. Another howl rang across the fields. "Sharp Sound!" Ashtail barked.

"From the south, four miles – and closing!" Sharp Sound said. "They're coming for us."

A ripple of fear ran through the Daleponies. Rarity's eyes went wide, facing the prospect of meeting the terrible creatures about which she'd heard. "**Dale Guard!**" Ashtail barked, snapping them all to attention. "**Battle Formations! Base Guard, Midguard, Vanguard, form up and assume positions, due south!**" He turned to Shield Maiden. "Lieutenant, plant the flag!"

Shield Maiden reached back into her armor and yanked a rolled up flag out from some hidden crevice. It was triangular, the dark red background with the spreading golden grass. One of the stouter earth ponies had mounted two spears on his armor; the gray earth pony took one and stuck it in the ground, then reached up with her mouth and slid the flag down the shaft, where it immediately began to flutter. A sharp wind was picking up, billowing the grass and the ponies' manes. As Shield Maiden worked, the Guard broke up again, this time splitting into large waves that began to advance to the south.

Rainbow Dash felt an itch deep in her bones. *You wanted action*, she told herself, *here it is!* She willed herself not to be afraid. She willed herself to think that no creature in the world could withstand the full force of RAINBOW DASH, and she pawed the ground with her hoof.

"You three!" Ashtail called to them. "The Guard forms three waves in the face of a komaga attack. The Base Guard will stay around the flag and protect our position – they keep us from retreating. The Midguard stays ahead and receives the komagas before they reach the flag. The Vanguard charges out and meets the komagas head on, past the Midguard. Choose your positions!"

"Oh, my goodness!" Rarity cried. "I'd really rather stay here!"

"I'm on Base Guard, Rarity!" Shield Maiden said. "You can stay with me."

"I guess I'll be in the Midguard," Applejack said, though it twisted her stomach. She didn't want to fight! "How about you, Rainb–"

"I'm going to the front!" the sky-blue pegasus shouted, stomping her hoof on the ground. She snorted loudly from her nostrils, flapped her wings, lifted off the ground with a rustle of wind.

"So be it!" Ashtail said. "Rainbow Dash, come with me! I lead the Vanguard! Applejack, the Midguard is already in position! Rarity, your duty is *not to move!* Do not let the komagas push us from here! Shield Maiden, the flag is yours!"

"Yes, sir!" Shield Maiden said, thumping her chest with a hoof.

"You all be careful! Promise me you will!" Rarity cried. "I couldn't live if something happened to either of you!"

"You look after yourself for a bit, sugarcube," Applejack said, nuzzling Rarity reassuringly. "We'll tend to our business."

"Come on!" Ashtail shouted.

Ashtail and Applejack galloped forward, rushing over the fields that suddenly seemed increasingly tall and hilly. The golden plains rolled beneath them as they rushed toward the front, Applejack slowing when she saw the spreading wave of ponies that made up the Midguard. It made her nervous now for practical reasons: all the Midguard was pulling out their spears, and that was another thing she lacked. *I'll just have to stick close to one of 'em*, she thought. She spotted Birdspeak and headed toward her. "Be safe!" she shouted to Ashtail and Rainbow Dash as they pulled away from her.

"You too!" he said over his shoulder.

Now it was just Ashtail and Rainbow Dash, the latter flying low to the ground. The dark red earth pony was running flat-out now, and his pace was surprising; she actually had to put forth some effort to keep up with him. The Vanguard was up ahead, their spears bobbing on their flanks as they rushed over the golden grass. Rainbow Dash climbed, surging over him and looking out across the golden fields. The horizon was at first unbroken, but when she went a little higher, she could see: dark shapes squirming on the line between gold and blue.

Ashtail reached the rest of the Vanguard. "**SPEARS OUT!**" he shouted, and the earth ponies reached back for their spears in unison, a single motion of long wood leveling out, the sharp tips almost tingling in anticipation. Nervous energy crackled in the air, whipped to a frenzy by the wind.

Dash was breathing hard. She had never before entered battle. She had *fought* before – she'd fought more than her share of fights, her loud mouth and arrogant pride getting her into plenty of trouble all through flight school, right up to the day she was kicked out. She wasn't ashamed! Her mother told her that she was unique, and that she should be

proud of that, so she was. But this was different. This wasn't about defending your honor. This was life and death. There could be killing today. *Am I ready for this?* she wondered.

Fear not. That's what Shield Maiden had said. Rainbow Dash had faced fear so many times, and each time she had beaten it. Fear kept getting back up – but she kept knocking it back down. If fear wouldn't quit, neither would she! *This is for Twilight Sparkle!* she thought, her friend's dire need flashing in her mind. *This is for Rarity!* She thought of the white unicorn's frightened terror; she didn't want to see her heartbroken. *This is for Applejack! This is for Shield Maiden and Ashtail and all the other ponies!* If it was kill or be killed, she'd charge forward, and she wouldn't be the one to die! "**EQUESTRIA!**" she shouted in a battle cry! She reared back, flared her wings, and **blasted** forward. A rainbow streak and a clap in the air gave testament to her speed and power.

Ashtail's eyes bulged. "**WAIT!**" he shouted in the pegasus' wake. "**LET THEM COME T-**" but Dash was already out of hearing.

The sky-blue pegasus flew faster and faster, the world stretching into a blur around her. There were a dozen komagas ahead of her now, and in less than an eyeblink she was right in their midst!

Her first thought was that they were giant lizards. Nothing fancier than what Ashtail had told Applejack. Second glances revealed some differences. They had stocky, muscular bodies atop thick legs. Their legs weren't really splayed to the side like smaller lizards' legs, but held under their bodies like those of a pony. The front legs ended in something like a hand, a huge paw with long fingers and even longer claws. The back legs ended in flatter, shorter paws with duller, shorter claws. Their long tails ended in tapering tips like a whip. They had a medium-length neck, again different from a small lizard, and at the end of it was the head, long yet thick, ending in a rounded snout. They had eyes on either side of their head. The eyes were dull yellow, with slits for pupils. They had scaly skin colored dark gray, and their claws were dull white.

In another instant Dash flew past them. Coming to a halt, she whirled around and looked back. The komagas were still surging forward, galloping almost like a pony. They had missed her completely! She scowled; they wouldn't ignore her for long! She flew back to the head of the herd and aimed right at the leader, bigger than the others. She streaked right up to it, yelled "Take **THAT!**" and kicked it squarely in the mouth.

The komaga **roared**, and then it reared up on its hind legs, and Dash watched it tower over her. It was huge. Oh yes, it was enormous, it was *massive*, a giant, not as big as the dragons she'd seen, not as big as the Ursa Minor, but the biggest thing she'd ever seen

after those two. It *swiped* its front paws at her like a bear and she spun to the side, dodging the blow that would have knocked her head off from its sheer force. The komaga slammed down and opened its mouth, and rows of sharp teeth gleamed. It snapped at Dash and she swung back, cartwheeling in the air and kicking the komaga in the mouth again. It roared and gave her a swipe with its front paw, then spun with heavy slowness and kicked at her with a back paw, and finished with a swipe of its tail, the thin end cracking the air like a bullwhip. All of these Rainbow Dash dodged, and she laughed. "Gimme your best shot!" she taunted. The komaga swiped at her. "Too slow! Gimme your best shot!" Slash! "Too slow!" She glanced out of the corner of her eye. The other komagas were still moving forward and had left her behind. "Let's play keep up!" she called, flying backwards. The komaga roared, and followed her, snapping at her with its jaws, but she kept just out of reach. She looked back over her shoulder; she could just make out the Vanguard. Dash grinned at the komaga, flitting to the side to dodge another paw. "Time to take you *out*!" she cried. She flew in a circle around the komaga, then another circle, faster and faster and faster and the wind *whirled*, whipping into a tornado. The great lizard sank its claws into the ground, but Dash kept spinning, and the twister grew stronger. Finally the beast was ripped up and hurtled into the air, rising over her head and corkscrewing, bouncing off the walls of moving wind. Then Dash *stopped*. She blasted away, and the tornado collapsed, sending the komaga crashing down. It hit the fields with a faint **crunch**.

Rainbow Dash flitted back above the beast, lying prone on the ground. It didn't move. Her smile faltered – *what did I just do?!* She had been caught in the intensity of the action. Had she really intended to kill the thing? She slowly flapped closer –

A huge paw raised up and slashed. She backed away, but the claws caught her tail and dragged her to the ground. She hit it **hard** and the air was knocked out of her lungs, dazing her and leaving her prone. She sputtered and rolled over; the beast had broken a back leg but was still *right above her*, and it opened its jaws, teeth like meat cleavers, eyes wild and mad –

THUNK.

The komaga *howled* and jerked away. There was a spear growing out of its neck. Sharp Sound blurred into the corner of her vision, a black streak tinged with dark red leather. The Dalepony reared on his back legs, wrapped his front legs around the spear, and *shoved*. A second howl died in the komaga's throat as the sharp steel pierced its neck completely. Sharp Sound pulled the spear tip back into the neck and *twisted*. The komaga's head gave a freakish jerk to the right, then the beast collapsed, tongue lolling out.

Dash was panting. Her eyes were wide.

"Are you all right?" Sharp Sound asked her. He pulled the spear out of the dead lizard and trotted to her side. "Are you all right?"

Dash shook herself. "I'm fine," she said. Shakily, she pulled her tail free, got to her hooves. "What about the others?"

"The Vanguard's already engaged the komagas – they've got a few of them occupied, but some broke through."

"What?!"

"Some *always* break through," the black earth pony said. "That's why we have the Midguard and the Base Guard."

"Applejack! Rarity!" she cried. "We have to help them!"

"What we have to do is kill or drive off the komagas that have engaged *us* – that's the point of the Vanguard. *Then* we help the other guards. There's no sense running off to them and letting our round of komagas through, then they'd just have to deal with more of them."

The sky-blue pegasus nodded. "Right, right, I get it."

"Come on," he said, turning. "Oh, also," he narrowed his violet eyes, "go for the head and the neck. It's the only way to guarantee a kill."

Kill. Right. "Do you wanna work together?" she asked.

Sharp Sound gave her a sidelong glance. "Sure. That tornado you summoned could be handy. Now let's go!"

Eight komagas were barreling toward the Midguard. Applejack bounced on her hooves. The ponies around her leveled their spears. She was standing near Birdspeak. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I ain't got no spear."

"I'll handle the spearwork. If I cripple one, you can cut it down to finish it. Aim for the neck!" The brown Dalepony clenched her spear tightly in her teeth. She dug her hooves into the ground, and her body suddenly went rigid. "Stand firm!" she said through her teeth.

Applejack nodded. She sidled some distance from Shield Maiden, dug her hooves into the ground, and focused her mind. *Loyalty*, she thought. That's what Ashtail had told her. Her love and her devotion to her friends and family would be the strength she needed to become immovable in the face of danger. She focused on that now. She thought about Twilight Sparkle. The lavender unicorn was depending on her to get her the cure to the Horn Rot in time. She thought of her family – that was something Applejack knew all too well. She thought of Big Macintosh, Granny Smith, Apple Bloom. She thought of Ashtail... *Why am I thinkin' of him?* she wondered. The dark red earth pony surged to the front of her mind. It didn't make any sense, but she felt as loyal to him as she felt to her friends and family right now. *Don't ponder about it – just use it!* So she thought of Ashtail along with the rest. Her body suddenly tensed, strength flowing from her hooves up her legs. She could actually sense the earth beneath her. She looked ahead. The komagas were almost there, huge and awful. Two of them were barreling side-by-side toward her. The orange earth pony breathed hard, determined to face the monsters with boldness. She suddenly wished she had some rope. They moved closer and closer –

They passed her completely, one on either side. It took her a moment to realize it. She turned and watched them run. They didn't seem to have any interest in turning around...

"Go after them!" Birdspeak shouted, taking up her spear in her mouth. "Don't let them reach the flag!"

Applejack nodded and galloped away, quickly catching up to the rushing beasts. Birdspeak came around the komaga on the right and gave it a slash with her spear, causing it to veer and attack her. Applejack leveled with the other one, coming up to its head, and glanced across, looking into its yellow eye. It surprised her. There was none of the calm alertness of a predator. The komaga's eye was alive with madness – with panic. *But why?*

"**Attack!**" Birdspeak yelled, swiping the beast before her with her hoof-axe. "**ATTACK!**"

The orange earth pony gathered herself, galloped faster, getting out in front of the massive lizard. Then she planted her front hooves, twisted to the side, and bucked! Her hooves cracked the komaga hard in the jaw, sending it skidding away from her. With a howling roar it faced her, opening its mouth full of razor sharp teeth and charging. She suddenly realized just how big it was, how imposing and immense; fear overcame her, and all thoughts of standing firm vanished. It gnashed its teeth, and she flailed, striking out with her hoof-axe. She nicked the great lizard on the lip, a dribble of golden blood squirting out. The komaga reared back and swiped again with its paw. Applejack danced

to the side, but she was hit by the back of the scaly forelimb, sending her flying. Her hat flew off her head; she shook herself, struggling to get shakily to her feet.

A red blur streaked along the komaga's side suddenly and made it howl in pain. Ashtail broke away and skidded to a stop, his spear between his teeth, its tip dripping blood; he glared angrily at the enormous lizard. The komaga turned to face him, and once more Applejack saw that panic in its eyes, the mad desperation. But it lunged, swiping with both of its massive paws. Ashtail rolled to the side, somehow spinning the spear between his four legs while keeping them all on the ground! The long weapon twirled between his legs, then came out and he spun it around his neck. He reared back, took the spear between his hooves, and thrust, catching the komaga in the cheek. It lunged at him again, but his whole body went rigid, and he held the spear out between his teeth and the komaga fell *onto* it, its own weight thrusting the speartip deep into its shoulder. Pulling away, the great lizard staggered back; the dark red earth pony sprang to his hooves and leapt atop it. He turned the head of his hoof-axe around, facing the blade inward, scooted down the swaying komaga's body to its neck, and *sliced* –

Applejack turned away. It hadn't seemed a fair fight, to be honest. Ashtail trotted over to her. The head of his axe was covered in gold, his leather armor scuffed. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

She blinked a few times. "I'm fine," she said. She was ashamed that he had done all the work – he had saved her like she was some damsel in distress. "Sorry I didn't help."

"You can help me now," he said, trotting over to her hat and picking it up with his teeth. He offered it to her. "There are three komagas headed toward the flag, and the Base Guard is the smallest of our three waves. I need to go head at least one of them off – come with me?"

Applejack flipped her hat back onto her head. "Sure," she said, though she was still feeling uneasy. A whistle on the wind made her turn her head; a tornado rose up in the distance. *Rainbow seems to be helpin' well enough*, she thought.

Shield Maiden turned her right side to the komaga, and its claws bounced off her shield. "Rarity!" she called over her shoulder. "Can you use your magic?"

The white unicorn's wide eyes flickered across the scene: the twenty Daleponies were warily striking at the three enormous lizards that had attacked their position. Shield Maiden and five others were dancing around the one nearest her, which snapped its jaws and lunged at one of them, a brown earth pony with gray eyes. The wicked teeth scraped

against the armor on the Dalepony's back, leaving deep gouges in the leather, but his flesh was unharmed; he slashed up with his hoof-axe and nicked the great jaw. The komaga spun around with surprising speed and whipped its long tail, knocking several of the ponies off their hooves. Shield Maiden stabbed it with her spear, but it ignored her and loomed over another pony –

"No!" Rarity cried. Her horn shimmered, and she could feel a great surge of power, more than she was used to. The crystal horn-blade on her head lit up from within, shone brilliant white, the golden vines etched onto it gleaming. The Dalepony was yanked away from the komaga, skidding across the ground further than she had intended. She glanced briefly up at the horn-blade: had it just amplified her magic? She used her telekinesis again, this time on all the fallen ponies, pulling them safely away from the lizard.

A howl broke through her thoughts, and she turned, and she screamed. A fourth komaga had appeared, and it was barreling right toward her! She turned tail and ran, ignoring Shield Maiden's cries to hold. The beast was still on her tail, and it was gaining ground quickly. Then the worst thing that could have happened, happened: she tripped. The white unicorn tumbled to the ground, and looking back over her shoulder saw the komaga nearly upon her. Rolling onto her back, she faced it as it came, and suddenly, struck with courage, she summoned her magic. "**Ruffian! Brute!**" she shouted, collecting her telekinesis around the lizard's head and *jerking* it hard to the side. The komaga staggered as though it had been struck. Rarity smiled at herself for her bravery, but then realized the komaga hadn't actually been hurt. And now it was angry.

It *howled* at her and lunged, and she struggled to her hooves. Skipping away from it with inches to spare, she ran, and it followed, its slower pace more than made up for by the length of its stride. The white unicorn's path abruptly came to a halt – she had run up to the summit of a particularly tall and steep hill, and she was at the edge. "Aah!" she screamed, turning around. The komaga advanced on her, mouth open, teeth gleaming in the early afternoon light. It charged her, and she had nowhere to go, and it lunged –

Rarity ducked.

The beast sailed over her, skidding along the ground behind her. The dirt began to give way. Suddenly she felt a horrible pull on her tail. She began to slide backwards, and she turned her head to see the komaga biting down on her tail, taking her with it as it slid further toward the edge of the hill. She scraped at the ground with her hooves, but she was no match for its horrible strength. "Let go!" she screamed. The komaga clawed uselessly at the earth. They continued to slide backwards, more of the hilltop beginning to give way; the great lizard's massive weight was collapsing it faster. In desperation,

Rarity remembered her magic. She focused her power on the komaga's jaws and pulled with all her might, forcing them apart. She was getting closer to the descent, the komaga's grip on her tail still ironclad. *Come on!* she thought, focusing with all her might. Beads of sweat began to break out on her forehead –

She forced open the komaga's jaws. Her tail was free, and she stopped her slide just as the ground gave way beneath the beast. It tumbled off the hilltop. It didn't fall far – but when it hit the ground, it landed right on its head with a sickening **crunch**.

Rarity rolled back onto the top of the hill. She glanced off the crumbled side gently, seeing the body of the komaga sprawled on the ground below. Something *snapped* in her head. "Aah!" she screamed again. She turned around and *ran*, ran down the hill, ran all the way down, running to the base, swinging the blade on her horn wildly. "Aah! Aah! Aah!" Her eyes were wide.

"Rarity!" Shield Maiden called, running down the hill toward her. "Rarity, wait!" She ran ahead of the white unicorn and blocked her path, rearing up and catching her between her front hooves. Rarity heaved herself forward, but the gray earth pony held firm. She looked into Rarity's blue eyes, filled with panic and fear. So like the eyes of the komagas. "Rarity, it's all right!" she said, wrapping her front hooves around her. "It's dead! It's dead!"

Rarity breathed in and out in great heaves. She shuddered against Shield Maiden's body, closing her eyes tightly. Slowly, she calmed down, her breathing returning to normal. She opened her eyes. "Thank you, Shield Maiden," she said softly. "I... I don't know what came over me."

Shield Maiden released her, nuzzled her. "Fear."

The white unicorn turned away. "You told me not to be afraid..." she murmured, flattening her ears. "I'm sorry... I've let you down."

"It was your first taste of battle – you said so yourself." Shield Maiden smiled at her. "Besides, I thought you were very brave."

Rarity smiled. Shield Maiden released her, and the two of them trotted up the back side of the hill. When they reached the top, they saw Ashtail and Applejack gathered with a cluster of the Base Guard around the flag. The dark red earth pony burst from them, and Shield Maiden left Rarity's side to meet him. "Lieutenant, your report?" he asked.

"Four komagas dead. I don't know if there were any more that got through."

"I fell back to the Midguard, and they were handling about three. The Vanguard did its job for five." He swiveled his ears around. "I don't hear them any more... but Sharp Sound is with the Vanguard."

"I think we've gotten them all, Captain," Shield Maiden said. Her face turned grim. "Did we lose anypony?"

Turning away from her, Ashtail galloped out into the field, the golden grass broken here and there by the massive body of a komaga. "**DALE GUARD! ASSEMBLE!**" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "**DALE GUARD! ASSEMBLE!**" He galloped far afield, shouting over and over. "**DALE GUARD! ASSEMBLE! DALE GUARD! ASSEMBLE!**" A rumble filled the air, growing into a thunder as the Daleponies appeared over the hills. They were scraped and scuffed; some of them were missing leather plates; a few bled. Applejack and Rarity were overjoyed to see Rainbow Dash fly in with the gathering earth ponies. She spotted them and landed neatly beside them as the Dale Guard formed its orderly rows. Ashtail galloped into view, trotting anxiously toward the Guard. When a few minutes passed and no more ponies came, he trotted rapidly down the length of the group, counting under his breath. Nineteen rows of five, one row of three. Shield Maiden. Rarity. Rainbow Dash. *Applejack*. Himself. He breathed slowly out as he returned to Shield Maiden. "Everypony's here – thank the gods."

Rainbow Dash nuzzled Applejack and Rarity. "Are you girls all right?" she asked.

"A mite scuffed, but not too bad," Applejack said. "How about you, sugarcube?"

Dash looked away. "Oh, I'm fine," she said softly. "I... I was a big help."

The orange earth pony leaned in closer. "Did you kill anything?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Dash said.

"Please do, Rainbow," Rarity said. "You simply must. You won't feel better until you do."

The sky-blue pegasus shook her head. "I didn't actually do any killing. But I *helped*. I helped a lot. Those things don't take falls very well. I worked with the rest of the Vanguard." Her rose eyes wavered. "I've... never actually used weather to *hurt* anything before."

"Ponies of Equestria!" Ashtail's voice broke into their midst. Turning, the three saw him standing with Shield Maiden at the head of the Dale Guard. "We have a long way to go yet before we reach Thatchholm."

Nodding, Applejack led the way as they advanced to their assigned place. "Please let's talk later, Rainbow Dash," Rarity whispered. The sky-blue pegasus nodded as they took their places behind Ashtail and Shield Maiden.

"Dale Guard! MOVE OUT!" The ponies resumed their previous mighty pace, leaving the killing fields behind.

The world rushed on around them as they galloped, pushing further and further west. Applejack's mind was consumed by a single image, an image that had haunted her since her first glimpse of it: the panic in the eyes of the komagas. They hadn't looked ready to attack at all. In fact, she was sure they would have continued to run past if the Dale Guard hadn't attacked them first. *They reminded me o' somethin'*, she thought. Those eyes, that frantic pace, they had brought to mind an idea that was on the tip of her tongue. If only she could recall what it was. "Rainbow?" she called over to Rainbow Dash. "When you were attackin' them komagas, how long did it take you to get their attention?"

The sky-blue pegasus churned her mind as she ran. She didn't really want to think about the komagas, because that brought to mind all the times she had lifted them up into the air with her tornadoes, only to drop them, send them crashing down, see them break tails or legs or even necks. She hadn't technically killed any of them... but there was one. There was one she had broken the neck of, and it had obviously been dying. The Dalepony that came to slice its throat had been unnecessary. She had drifted close and looked into its eye as it struggled. It had stared at her stupidly, as though it had no idea what was going on. Dash blinked. It had made her feel horrible.

"Rainbow?" the orange earth pony called again.

Dash focused on the question she was asked. "I guess... I had to attack them first, and really hit at them to get their attention." She thought more. "Honestly, they seemed distracted. Like they were thinking about something else."

"Somethin' else," Applejack repeated. The enormous lizards had been focused wholly on their forward progress. They were oblivious to the world around them. It was like – her eyes widened. No, that couldn't be it, could it? The komagas were agents of destruction, weren't they? Ashtail had said so. Ashtail couldn't be wrong. Could he?

The sky was burning orange by the time the horizon was broken again. Applejack had been stewing in her thoughts for several hours, always returning to that one idea. She looked ahead and saw a structure on the horizon, already very large. "Is that Thatchholm?" she yelled.

"Yes!" Ashtail cried over his shoulder. "We approach the center of Gildedale. You three had best get your arguments ready."

Applejack swallowed. No time to think about the komagas now. She had to think about what she would say to Lord Hammer Hoof. Ashtail had talked of him as hard and distant, but not cruel. He was fiercely protective of Gildedale and its ponies, all of whom he considered surrogate children. According to Ashtail, he was also very proud.

Thatchholm grew closer, and Applejack could tell it was *enormous*, dwarfing Grazezeld from the previous day. No, it was past enormous. Its size defied reckoning – was it really one big barn? It quickly filled the whole of her vision, enormous timbers piled one on top of the other, fixed together with burnt red mortar and supporting slabs of solid stone. The rocky foundation towered above the plain. The floor plan of the structure was at least a third the area of all of Ponyville, and the foundation was even broader! Huge stones were fixed together, slid into place so tightly that a sheet of paper could not have passed between them. The basic design of Thatchholm was similar to Grazezeld, but on a much larger scale. It had a huge round window at its summit that seemed to look down into not one, but two additional stories! Gold and silver lined the edges of the roof. And that roof – the name made more sense now. Instead of wood timbers and planks, the roof was thatched with the golden grass of the plains. It rippled in the fiery glow of the sunset, lines of pure gold running down its length likewise gleaming. Across the top of the facing side, around the great window, an image had been carved in the wood, then stained white: ponies racing out of the shining golden aura surrounding the window, which Applejack supposed was meant to be the sun. *Is that where they think they come from, the sun?* she thought.

Rarity was likewise awed by the enormous building. The sophistication of these Daleponies did not cease to amaze her, especially when it contrasted so sharply with their rustic surroundings. She was astounded by the intricacy of the wooden etchings and the precious metals. How did these ponies do so much without magic? They built, they carved, they sculpted, all with their mere hooves. She would have to ask one of them to give her a tour, if there was time.

Thatchholm continued to swell as they drew closer, coming up to a set of huge wooden gates set into the foundation, just as at Grazezeld. They began to creak open, and a set of four Daleponies galloped out, all of them wearing armor and bearing spears. "**Dale Guard! Whoa!**" Ashtail called, and the ponies in his wake slowed to a trot. The approaching ponies likewise slowed, until both groups came to a halt a few feet from each other.

Rarity noticed that the ponies from Thatchholm had devices on their champrons, the golden compass like Ashtail's, but where Ashtail had only a single silver arrow pointed to the right, to the east, these ponies had four silver arrows pointing every direction. The one at the lead, a white earth pony with a black mane, raised a hoof. "Hail, Ashtail, Marshal of the East! What is your business at Thatchholm?"

Ashtail raised his own right hoof. "Hail, Bright Tongue, Captain of the Royal Guard!" He stepped to the right, Shield Maiden stepping to the left. "I bring three travelers from Equestria found crossing the Eastern Quarter! They seek audience with the Lord of the Dale, to sue for passage across the remainder of Gildedale!"

Bright Tongue did not hide his surprise at seeing the three Equestrian ponies. "You know the law, Marshal. Pegasuses and unicorns are not permitted in Gildedale." Rainbow Dash was clearly about to say something, but Rarity and Applejack both put hooves on her withers.

"At present they seek an audience, nothing more," the dark red earth pony said.

Bright Tongue narrowed his eyes, glaring one by one at Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Applejack. "They will at least have that," he finally said. "Evening court will soon be in session; their audience will be at once. Come!" He turned, and the rest of the Royal Guards turned with him, heading back toward the gates of Thatchholm.

"**Dale Guard! Advance!**" And Ashtail's ponies moved forward, trotting at an even pace. Rarity didn't even notice the fatigue in her muscles; her nerves were working crazily. This was it. This would determine whether they would be allowed to cross the rest of Gildedale. If they failed here... *Twilight Sparkle*, Rarity thought, *we can't let you down. I can't let you down.*

Thatchholm loomed high overhead as they passed through the double gates, so tall that ponies were actually standing on ledges built into them. The stone ramp led them up on top of the foundation, where Rainbow Dash noticed for the first time several smaller buildings situated at the corners, each one the size of a normal house in Ponyville. They had thatched roofs just like Thatchholm, but were constructed of stone. The whole complex was the closest she had seen to a town in this country. The gates creaked shut behind them. Bright Tongue halted, and Ashtail called the Dale Guard to halt as well. The white earth pony turned to face them again. "I shall inform Counselor Checkboard of the Equestrians' arrival. They are to be ready for their audience in twenty minutes. In the meantime, Marshal, you will come with me, and we shall see about accommodations for your Guard. Lord Hammer Hoof will want to know of your arrival as well."

"Understood," Ashtail said with a nod. He turned around. "**Dale Guard! DISMISSED!**" The earth ponies broke ranks, beginning to mill about. "**Be ready to disrobe and report to lodgings as assigned!**" His gaze fell on Shield Maiden. "Lieutenant, will you stay with our guests? Please prepare them for their audience."

"Yes, Captain," the gray earth pony said.

Ashtail turned back to Bright Tongue. "Lead on, Captain," and with that, he followed the Royal Guard Captain into the huge double doors of Thatchholm.

Shield Maiden gestured with her head, and the three Equestrian ponies followed her into the barn. The interior was every bit as enormous as the exterior suggested. Huge pillars of wood lifted the ceiling of a massive great hall, and the ceiling flattened at the top where it was reinforced by wooden beams. Flickering torches lined the pillars at their highest heights, alongside which small balconies protruded from the ceiling, a further hint that the structure was multi-storied; the large round window from the exterior could not be seen. The Equestrians' eyes widened as they looked at the ceiling. It was carved with intricate displays, each more marvelous than the last: there were shifting shapes locked in wavering combat, topped with what looked like antlers; there were starbursts and rays and what looked like crumbling mountains; there was a sun with a pony inside it; there was a strange creature flailing back before two winged unicorns; there were two columns of ponies separating, one galloping toward flat plains, the other toward mountains where the sun was rising. Finally, there was a great carving of the branching grass symbol of Gildedale, covered in gold leaf. It was at the very end of the hall, far off, and below it, a tall wooden ramp rose high off the ground, leveling off where they could not see.

Rarity glanced from side to side as they trotted; it seemed that between each set of pillars a hallway lined with torches branched off. The Daleponies they passed lingered with wonder, staring at her and Rainbow Dash and turning to their fellows to whisper. "Pardon me, Shield Maiden," she asked, deciding to satisfy her curiosity, "but I have noticed so little in the way of trees in Gildedale. Wherever did you get all this wood?"

Shield Maiden bobbed her head. "Where exactly it came from, I don't think anypony knows," she said. "Thatchholm is almost as old as Gildedale itself. But there is a large forest in the northeast, at the base of the Drackenridge Mountains. Perhaps it came from there; that is where we found the wood to build the other fastnesses. Although... I suppose it could have come from the Shimmerwood. I'm not sure if they would have needed permission in those days."

"Permission?" Rarity repeated. "Permission from –"

"Lieutenant Shield Maiden!" a voice cried out through the hall; a hush fell over the Daleponies. A painted white-and-rust colt with a white mane advanced on them, his eyes gray, his frame thin. He had a cutie mark of a chess piece on his flanks, a black pony-headed knight. He wore a simple golden necklace.

Shield Maiden nodded. "Counselor Checkboard, I have brought the travelers."

Checkboard peered intently at the three Equestrian ponies. Applejack smiled brightly, Rainbow Dash grinned, Rarity nodded daintily. "So you have," he said. "Court will be in session for the evening in ten minutes. Due to the... strangeness of your business, you will be first to be heard. Do the Equestrian travelers intend to speak for themselves?"

"We'd better get to!" Dash shouted. "We've waited really long to –"

"They will be advocating their own case," Shield Maiden said, stepping to the side to block Dash from view. She took a deep breath. "I would like to be announced as a second to their petition."

The painted earth pony raised an eyebrow. "Are you certain, Lieutenant? The record cannot be modified after the fact."

The gray earth pony's green eyes hardened. "Are you *questioning* my decision-making, Counselor?"

The sudden surge of ferocity made Checkboard flinch. "Not at all, Lieutenant. You will be recorded as a second." He nodded to her. "I must make the Court in order. Equestrians," he nodded to the three travelers, then turned and trotted up the tall wooden ramp.

Shield Maiden turned to face them. "Have you any experience in court matters?"

"We've met Princess Celestia before," Dash said.

"But hardly in a formal setting," Rarity observed. "Certainly never in an audience at the Solar Court."

"It is enough here for you to be courteous," Shield Maiden said. "We do not stand much on pomp and circumstance. The royals and their aides are as much warriors as they are rulers, even scrawny Checkboard. Do not speak until spoken to, and answer all questions

honestly. Also," she gave them a sympathetic look, "I think Applejack should do most of the talking."

"Is there something wrong with Rainbow Dash and I?" Rarity asked sharply, though she already suspected the answer.

"An earth pony will be more credible in My Lord Hammer Hoof's eyes," she admitted.

"I-I don't... I ain't..." Applejack stammered. She had hoped Rarity could make the petition. Applejack had never been good at formal announcements. Besides, the white unicorn was so good at making everything sound formal and proper.

"Whoever wants to talk should talk!" Rainbow Dash said. "I'm getting real tired of this thing you ponies have about pegasuses and unicorns!"

"Pegasi," Rarity said weakly.

"Please," Shield Maiden said. "I say it because I want you to be successful. If Applejack speaks, Lord Hammer Hoof will hear her words with a more open mind. He does not think highly of pegasi and unicorns, fairly or no."

The sky-blue pegasus ground her teeth. "Oh, fine!" she spat. "If it'll let us get going and save Twilight, Applejack can talk!"

"But I just don't know," the orange earth pony said. "I've never been good at speakin' proper-like."

"As long as you speak honestly, I believe he will listen," Shield Maiden said.

Honesty. Applejack could do that. She was the incarnation of Honesty, after all. "All right," she said.

"We'll be right behind you, dear," Rarity said.

A horn blew through the vast hall. "That is the call to assemble," Shield Maiden said. She turned back to the ramp. "Come," and she led them forward.

At the top of the ramp, Rarity gasped. A large, tall space greeted them, already filled with Daleponies, some armored, some bare, some with the golden necklaces Checkboard had worn. A wine red carpet led from the end of the ramp to a raised stone dais, upon which was a broad throne of red wood, cushioned with a pillow of golden thread. The dais

stretched out into broad stone arms, and on either side of the throne a smaller wooden chair was placed. Above and behind the throne was another circular window, rimmed with gold, with golden points stretching up, down, left, right. In each point was set an enormous emerald. Two Royal Guards stood at attention on either side of the throne, each plate of boiled leather sewed with golden thread, the branching grass symbol of Gildedale etched in gold and raised off their champrons. Between the throne and the ramp were... trees.

Ashtail had called it the Timbered Court. He had not spoken wrong. Whole dead trees were rooted into the wooden floor all through the space, bleached white from untold years. Their gnarled limbs stretched high above everypony's head, and they were full – the trees were full, full of leaves that glistened gold in the flickering torchlight. Rarity glanced at the branch nearest her, saw the shimmer of the light across the leaves. There was no mistaking it: the leaves didn't just shine like gold, the leaves *were* gold. Thousands of gold tree leaves were neatly attached to the bleached white branches, until each tree was as full as if it were still alive. She marveled at how much painstaking work must have been involved, how many years of labor and craft had gone into such a wonder.

"Look at that!" Dash said in a whisper, pointing straight ahead. Applejack and Rarity looked. The trees weren't the only things protruding from the floor. A tall, thick slab of black rock rose up from a hole in the floor behind the throne, weathered and ancient. Its base clearly lay below them, perhaps all the way down in Thatchholm's foundation.

"Are you looking at the Dale Stone?" Shield Maiden asked.

"Is that what that is?" Dash asked.

She nodded. "We have been recording the history of our kingdom on it since the very beginning. Each year, we carve a single line into the stone, telling of the most important thing to happen in Gildedale that year. We have already filled up the back, and you can just see a few lines from this side at floor level there."

Dash squinted her eyes, training her keen pegasus sight on the point where the stone rose from the hole. There were several dozen lines carved, in small, thin slices. If the lines were that small, there were probably hundreds of lines on the back of the stone, and hundreds more below them on the front. "How old is Gildedale?" she asked.

"I don't know," Shield Maiden said honestly. "How old is Equestria?"

Rainbow Dash spoke the line that every Equestrian foal learned: "As old as the Sun and the Moon."

"I don't think we're quite that old," the gray earth pony said.

A horn blew from off to their right. The ponies assembled amidst the trees grew completely silent. Checkboard stepped out from between pillars on the right and stomped his hooves on the ground. "Hail, Ashtail, Son of Hammer Hoof, Prince of Gildedale, Heir to the Throne, Marshal of the Eastern Quarter, Captain of the Dale Guard!"

Applejack's eyes widened. Ashtail strode out, wearing a golden necklace set with a rounded emerald brooch. The ponies around them bowed low, including Shield Maiden. "Bow!" she hissed. Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and finally Applejack lowered to their front knees.

Checkboard stomped his front hooves on the ground again; the ponies rose to their hooves. He crossed over to the other side of the throne room. Another horn blew, this time from the left. For a third time he stomped his front hooves on the ground. "Hail, Hammer Hoof, Son of Storm Chaser, Lord and King of Gildedale!" Every pony bowed again, including Ashtail.

Heavy hooffalls thudded on the wood planking. Unable to resist their curiosity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash looked up, earning them annoyed glares from Rarity. An enormous dark red stallion walked slowly into view. He was several heads taller than the Equestrian ponies – about the same height as Princess Luna, perhaps a bit taller. He was powerfully built, enormous muscles bulging beneath his coat on his four legs, along his flanks, in his heavy chest. He wore a golden crest around his neck, set with a large ruby. His mane was slightly ragged, colored dirty yellow, and he had a beard of the same blond around his snout. His eyes were blue and piercing, terrible in their intensity. He walked closer to the throne, putting one hoof in front of the other –

Applejack was startled when his full body came into view. Hammer Hoof was missing his right front hoof. In fact, a good chunk of his right front lower leg wasn't there. In its place was a thick false lower leg of bone-white ivory, covered with gold filigree where the hoof would be. As the orange earth pony looked more closely, she saw that the Lord of the Dale walked with the faintest trace of a limp.

"His hoof was bitten off by a komaga when he was still a colt," Shield Maiden whispered, seeing her friend looking. "But it has never stopped him." She leaned in closer. "I have

ridden with him into battle, and I have seen him crack a komaga's skull with a single blow from that hoof."

Hammer Hoof stopped in front of the throne. Checkboard stomped his front hooves on the ground a fourth time, and everypony rose to their hooves. Ashtail walked forward until he was just in front of Hammer Hoof. He lowered his head. "My Lord Hammer Hoof."

Hammer Hoof worked his lips for a moment. "Prince Ashtail," he said in a deep and sturdy voice. "You honor this court with your presence."

"The honor is mine, My Lord," Ashtail said. Such strain and tension in his voice.

The great stallion nodded. He walked to the throne, turned around, and slowly sat in it, placing his front hooves on the resting platform. "The Timbered Court is in session!" he said sharply. Ashtail took his seat in the chair to the right of the throne.

Checkboard trotted in front of the throne and bowed. "My Lord Hammer Hoof, the evening's first petition is a matter of great importance. Three ponies from Equestria have appeared in the land. They request permission to travel across the remainder of Gildedale. Lieutenant Shield Maiden seconds their petition."

Hammer Hoof narrowed his eyes. "Let them approach the throne."

With a nudge from Shield Maiden, Applejack trotted out of the trees onto the dark red carpet, which cut a straight path to the throne. Rainbow Dash and Rarity followed behind her, and behind them came whispers, the words 'pegasus' and 'unicorn' hissing through the air.

"Silence," Hammer Hoof said. He did not shout, but his voice was like a clap of thunder; all talk ceased. The three travelers stopped in front of the throne. Rarity bowed, and glanced at the other two, who bowed as well. They rose to their hooves, and let the Lord of the Dale examine them for a minute. They felt that he was staring into their hearts, peeling apart their layers, glancing at their very souls. Was this magic? Or simply the force of his spirit? "What are your names?" he finally asked.

"Ah..." Applejack stammered. She swept her hat from her head. "I-I'm Applejack, m'lord, son o'... er, daughter o'... well, I come from Sweet Apple Acres, that's a farm, just outside o' Ponyville, in Equestria. This here's Rainbow Dash," she nodded at the pegasus, "and that there's Rarity," and at the unicorn, "and they both come from Ponyville too. It's just on the other side o' the Drackenridge Mountains."

"What is your business in Gildedale?" It was the same question Ashtail had asked, but the voice that asked it now rumbled like mighty thunder.

"Well, sir, one of our friends, a unicorn named Twilight Sparkle, had a terrible accident, and she came down with a disease, it's called Horn Rot. Now she's real sick, and she might die, two weeks from the time she got it. The only thing that can cure her in time is a flower called the Beneviolet, and it only grows in the Archback Mountains."

"I know of the Beneviolet," Hammer Hoof said. He blinked carefully a few times. "You said your friend had two weeks. When did you begin your journey?"

"It was five days ago, m'lord," Applejack said.

Hammer Hoof's brow furrowed, and she immediately felt she'd said something wrong. "It is more than two days' journey from here to the western border of Gildedale at swift gallop, and the Archback Mountains are further still. You do not have enough time to retrieve the flower and return to save your friend."

"Oh... well, m'lord, we don't need to worry about goin' back with the flower," the orange earth pony said. She trotted over to Rarity, opened one of her white saddlebags, and rummaged through it. The bottle wasn't in that one. She looked up, grinned hugely. "Er, just a minute, m'lord," she said. Hammer Hoof did not look amused. She rummaged through the other saddlebag and finally found it. "Our friend has a dragon as a – well, he's kind o' like a secretary mixed with a pet mixed with a baby brother – anyway, he has magic fire he can use to send messages and small objects from one place to another instantly. He gave some to us." She held up the bottle of dragonfire, which still swirled and burned purple and green. "All we need to do is burn the Beneviolet with this fire and it'll go right back to him."

The Lord of the Dale set his mouth in a narrow line. "Can you demonstrate this fire and its powers?"

"Uh..." Applejack murmured, "no, m'lord, this is all we got, and we can't waste it."

"Then you cannot prove it does what you say," Hammer Hoof said. "Indeed, none of your story can be proven."

"Please, m'lord," Applejack said, trying not to sound like she was begging. "Our friend really is in danger. I know you're worried... about us, but all we wanna do is help her. You have to believe us."

Hammer Hoof brought his real front hoof to his chin, giving his beard a gentle scratch. He set it back down. "Equestrian ponies are not permitted in our land without our consent," he said.

"I've heard that, m'lord," Applejack responded. "And believe me, if we'd known, we would o' sent a message ahead. But we were in such a hurry we didn't have time to really learn much about your kingdom." She smiled gently, in what she hoped was supplication.

Hammer Hoof passed another long stretch in silence. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. You may pass through my kingdom, both further west and on your return journey."

Applejack gasped. She beamed, grinning from ear to ear. "Well, howdy-dooddy! That's mighty big o' you, m'lord! You don't know what this means to us!" She put her hat back on her head. "We'll leave right away! You don't have to put us up for the night or nothin'! So don't worry about –"

"**You** may pass through my kingdom, earth pony," the Lord of the Dale said. "You, and you alone."

Applejack blinked hard a few times. "What?"

"Your friends will be escorted back to the Drackenridge Mountains," Hammer Hoof said. "You may all stay in Thatchholm tonight before you part ways."

"*What?!*" Rainbow Dash growled. "You can't do that!"

"Pegasi and unicorns are not permitted in Gildedale," Hammer Hoof said, his voice hardening. "That is the law, and I shall uphold it."

"There's nothin' *wrong* with pegasi or unicorns, least of all just one o' each!" Applejack said. "What harm could they do? Why forbid 'em now, when they've already come so far?"

"Because it always begins with one," the dark red stallion rumbled. "First one, then two, then a dozen, and soon they are all here, and Gildedale as we know it – Gildedale as I have sworn to uphold and protect it – is gone, forever. A pegasus and a unicorn in any capacity are forbidden here. The damage they have already wreaked cannot be calculated –"

"**Pardon** me!" Rarity said, stepping forward and holding her head up proudly. "I am **sick** of being talked about as though I am a **thing!** I am a **pony**, and I shall be treated with the respect I am owed!"

"**Yeah!**" Rainbow Dash shouted, flapping into the air. "We're *ponies*, just like you! What's wrong with us? Why do you treat us like freaks?"

Hammer Hoof glared at them for a moment. "Because you are not just ponies," he said. "You are more than ponies. You are *beyond* ponies. Your wings, your magic – they let you do what earth ponies cannot do. You can do all that we do, but we cannot do all that you do. In this kingdom, all ponies share burdens equally, from the greatest to the smallest. But there could never be equality with your kind in our midst."

"My Lord –" Ashtail started.

"Prince Ashtail, I have not asked for your counsel!" Hammer Hoof snapped. Ashtail looked away, his ears flattened.

"You may see 'em as bad and different, but they're my **friends**, and we get along just fine!" Applejack snarled. "And I ain't goin' nowhere without 'em!"

"You will go on alone or you will not go on at all!" Hammer Hoof thundered. He slammed his ivory hoof on the stone dais. "That is my final decision! This audience is –"

"My Lord!" a voice broke through from beyond the trees. It seemed to come from far off. "My Lord!" Now it was closer. Whispers rose from the assembled Daleponies. The two guards at the throne stepped forward, pushing the Equestrian ponies aside; they brandished their spears. A gray earth pony with a red mane and tail and a hawk for a cutie mark was shoving his way through the ponies that crowded around him. The guards crossed their spears and blocked his path. "Please!" he shouted. "Please, I must see Lord Hammer Hoof!"

"Silence!" Hammer Hoof shouted, and it grew quiet again. "Let him approach." The guards uncrossed their spears, and the gray pony stepped forward. Applejack saw that he was trembling. "What is your name, Dalepony?"

"Eagle Voice!" Ashtail suddenly cried.

The pony's eyes widened at the sight of the Prince. "My Captain! I didn't know you'd come!"

"You are Eagle Voice, then?" Hammer Hoof said. "From the Eastern Quarter, then?"

"Yes, My Lord!" Eagle Voice said weakly. He bowed, and he almost fell over. "I... I was on the twilight patrol, when Gasteon – that's my eagle, you see – he came and told me of an enormous komaga swarm. I didn't believe him but he was *insistent*, so I followed him –" Eagle Voice's red eyes widened. "My Lord, a massive herd of the komagas approaches! I saw them just on the horizon, a solid wall of gray, at least fifty strong! They are headed right for Thatchholm! They will be here by morning!"

Panicked murmurs filled the air. "Silence!" Hammer Hoof shouted yet again. "You are certain of this?"

"I swear upon my father's name, My Lord!" Eagle Voice said. "I ran... I ran all the way –"

"From the Eastern Quarter? Just this evening?" Hammer Hoof said. His expression softened. "Counselor Checkboard, take this colt to a warm bath and some oats."

"Yes, My Lord," Checkboard nodded.

"Thank you, good Eagle Voice," Hammer Hoof said. "You may have saved us all."

"Yes... the honor is mine, My Lord," Eagle Voice said. Checkboard sidled up to him, and the two turned and trotted off.

"This court is adjourned in state of emergency!" Hammer Hoof declared, his voice filling the throne room. "All ponies present must prepare for battle on the morrow!" He turned to Ashtail. "It is good fortune indeed to have you and your Eastern Guard with us, Prince Ashtail. The fight will be more even now."

Ashtail nodded. "That many komagas... they could climb on top of each other." Horror dawned on his face. "They could scale the foundation!"

"Then we must meet them before they have the opportunity!" Hammer Hoof barked. He rose from the throne, and Ashtail rose beside him. "Captain Bright Voice, you and Prince Ashtail will sit with me in council tonight," he said to the white Royal Guard captain at the front of the crowd. "We must plan well if we are to survive – if the fields are to be covered in more gold than red." He stepped down from the throne, Ashtail following, and turned to the left. "We must be prepared to kill more than we have ever killed –"

"You're wrong!"

Hammer Hoof *stiffened*. The whole court fell silent. He slowly turned around, his blue eyes burning with fury. Applejack was standing where she had stepped out, her green eyes just as intense. "What?" he growled.

Applejack was startled by his anger, but she swallowed her fear. "You're wrong about the komagas! And I don't think you need to kill 'em!"

Hammer Hoof walked toward her, his hooffalls hard as hammers on iron. "Equestrian pony," he growled, "we have been fighting the komagas since the very foundation of Gildedale. Century after century they have ravaged our land, spilled our blood, and we have in turn spilled theirs. Do you **dare** to tell us we are wrong about them?"

Applejack swallowed again. "Yes, I do! Because y'all are! You're just too stubborn to admit it! And I don't blame you – you've suffered a lot tryin' to fight 'em! But I don't think y'all have to!"

"The komagas are bloodthirsty monsters! You cannot fathom all that they have cost us! Each and every pony in this throne room has lost something – or somepony – to the komagas!"

"They ain't *monsters*! They're *animals*!" the orange earth pony cried. "I know how you feel! I know! Because before I came here I felt the same way about all of y'all!" She looked with gentle eyes at the Daleponies amidst the bleached trees. "When I first heard about Gildedale, I thought y'all would all be barbarians. I thought y'all didn't have any kind o' civilization. I came here, I saw how *empty* it was, and I thought y'all were just wild animals. I was wrong. Y'all ain't like Equestrian ponies – but it don't make you barbarians. It just makes you *different*. I realize that now. And I realize that different ain't bad. It's just... different." She turned back to Hammer Hoof. "The komagas – they're different, too. They're way different. But it don't make 'em *bad*. And it don't make 'em worth slaughterin', not if you can help it."

Hammer Hoof hissed through his teeth. "I have no time for this!" he barked. He turned around. "Keep your nonsense to yourself! I must –"

"I *wager* you!"

For the second time, Hammer Hoof stopped in his tracks. For the second time, he slowly turned around. In the crowd, Shield Maiden held her breath. "Wager?" he repeated.

Applejack nodded. "Ashtail told me about your wagers... how you use 'em to help you barter. So I'm offerin' you one now. I wager that I can keep the komagas from destroyin' Thatchholm without killin' a single one!"

Hammer Hoof narrowed his eyes. He chewed on his lip for a moment. "I will not risk the Dale Guard's safety on such foolishness," he snarled.

"You don't have to risk anypony. I'll do it alone," Applejack said. "That's the way you prefer me, right?"

Hammer Hoof snorted. "Alone, then."

"Not alone!" Rainbow Dash cried, trotting up beside Applejack. "I'll be with her!"

"As will I!" Rarity cried. "No matter what!" She stood at Applejack's other side.

"The three of you, then," Hammer Hoof said. "And only the three of you?"

"Yes," Applejack nodded.

"And every pony in Thatchholm will stand by armed and armored, ready to attack the komagas when you fail?"

"That sounds fair," Applejack said. "M'lord," she added.

Hammer Hoof nodded. "And what do you wager?"

The orange earth pony took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "If I'm right, you gotta let us cross the rest o' Gildedale – not just me, but all three of us!"

"And if you're wrong?"

Applejack grimaced. "If I'm wrong, and we survive, then you won't even have to escort us back to the Drackenridges. I won't make you send the Dale Guard on that kind o' errand while the komagas are about. So until they're done runnin', you can lock us up right here in Thatchholm!"

Rarity gasped, Rainbow Dash jumped back.

"Agreed!" Hammer Hoof shouted, stomping the ground with his ivory hoof. "The komagas will be here within an hour of daybreak, if Eagle Voice's reckoning of them is

right. I suggest you three prepare." He turned away. Ashtail gave Applejack a look equal parts hurt and shock, then followed his father and Bright Voice through the doorway on the throne room's left.

As soon as their lord was gone, the Daleponies exploded into gossip, the chatter reaching great volume in no time. Applejack remained where she stood. She felt rooted to the earth. She had never before felt this firm, this heavy, this strong.

"Applejack," Rarity said, her voice gentle, "*darling*... I don't want to be one to second-guess you... you do tend to have great strokes of brilliance in your rustic way... but I don't believe that was a very good idea."

The orange earth pony turned to her friends and smiled. "Don't worry, y'all. I got a plan."

"Get up."

Applejack's eyelids fluttered. Groaning, she rolled over and wrapped the covers further around her. Thatchholm's accommodations were a further step up from Grazezeld's – they had been given a genuine bed to sleep in. She had relished in it.

"Get up," the same insistent voice said. She was nudged in the withers. What time was it? "Get up, hurry," the voice said again.

Applejack rolled over and opened her eyes. Ashtail was standing beside her bed, his blue eyes grave, his mouth a thin line. "What time is it?" she asked with a yawn. The room was still dark.

"About an hour before daybreak," the dark red earth pony said. "Get up."

Applejack shook her head to clear the cobwebs of sleep. "All right, I'm gettin'," she muttered, rolling over and crawling out of bed. Beside her, Rarity whimpered.

"Rarity, Rainbow Dash, you two should go down to the dining hall," Ashtail said. "Breakfast is on – the cooks got up early to make enough for the whole of the Royal Guard and my own soldiers. Heh," he chuckled, "they're also planning a feast for the aftermath of the battle... for all who survive it, anyway."

"I don't think it'll come to that," Applejack said firmly, crawling out of the bed and putting her hat on. "Rarity, Rainbow, up and at 'em," she said.

Ashtail leaned in close to her. "Do you still intend to go through with this? I think you're insane. You'll all be killed!"

Applejack smiled. "I ain't got no plans to die today, sugarcube," she said.

The dark red earth pony huffed. "Then you'd best come with me. There's something I must show you."

Applejack gave him a glance for a moment. "All right," she finally said. "Rarity, Rainbow, you two go down and get some breakfast, then meet me outside a bit after daybreak."

"Yes, yes, all right," Rarity murmured. "Come on, Rainbow Dash, rise and shine... so to speak." She nudged the snoozing pegasus with her hoof. Dash mumbled in her sleep and turned over.

Applejack left her friends and followed Ashtail down the long hallway of Thatchholm's third story, past the many, many rooms that housed currently sleeping Daleponies. They passed in front of the huge circular window at the front of Thatchholm, where the zigzagging ramp led them down to the second story, then across the wooden planking and down another ramp that zigzagged to the great barn's ground level. It was dark and quiet, the cavernous space silent as a tomb. Ashtail's hooves clopped softly across the stone floor, heading between the pillars on the left and following them toward the back of the hall. Applejack suspected where he was going, if Thatchholm's layout was anything like Grazezeld's. She followed him through a great doorway, down a hallway with branches leading to further hallways on her left. Just as she had thought, she was led down a stone ramp, but this ramp curved to the left, and when she got to the bottom, the torches that burned in iron sconces revealed an armory of much grander scope than what she had seen in Grazezeld. It had a vaulted ceiling of wood, and the center was filled with dozens of racks on which hoof-axes, spears, knives, and even a few telescoping swords were neatly arranged. Stalls in the hundreds lined the walls on either side. Ashtail took her down the line on the left, and as she looked into them she could see that the wooden ponyquins were mounted with countless sets of boiled leather armor.

Finally, the dark red earth pony led her to the very end, where the row of armor stalls met the back wall – the tall stone of the foundation. Here, at the back, a stall had been blocked off: two wooden boards were nailed across it in an 'X' shape. Peering inside through the dim lighting, Applejack could barely see a set of armor mounted on another wooden ponyquin. Ashtail turned back to her. "This was my sister's armor," he said.

The orange earth pony drew in a breath. "Was?"

He looked away, blue eyes glistening. "She was... caught outside the Northern Quarter's fastness one day when the komagas arrived. She had no warning – they came by surprise. No hawk or lookout spotted them."

Applejack's heart ached. "Oh... oh, sugarcube, I'm so sorry..." This explained a few things. Actually, it explained many things, some of them very important.

Ashtail set his mouth in a grim line. She could tell he was fighting his emotions. "I miss her. I know my... my *father* does as well, but he never shows grief. He has taught me to

remain controlled and neutral, because that is the leadership our ponies need. They need calm in the midst of a storm."

"You gotta cry sometime," she said.

"She would have said that," he said.

Applejack arched an eyebrow. "Are you gonna tell me how I remind you o' her, now?"

Ashtail gave her a grim smile. "You do, in some ways," he said. "You are so loyal to your friends and your home, just as she was. But you're also different from her. My sister was... timid. Quiet. She would never have stood up to Lord Hammer Hoof as you did."

Applejack peered back into the stall. "Why are you showin' me this?" she asked.

"Because I want you to understand," he said, his voice thick. "The komagas take and destroy as a matter of course. They are forces of nature. They cannot be *managed* as you think they can. They can only be met and fought."

Applejack fought her own bubbling urge to cry. Ashtail followed his father's command well: he almost never showed gentle feelings, never allowed others to read his emotions. But she could see the pain in his eyes now. For him to show her this, to make himself vulnerable before her... She sighed, shaking her head. "I think I understand you better now," she said softly. She stepped closer, leaning her head forward. "A lot better, really. But Ashtail... you're wrong. I know you're wrong."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because I know things you don't," she said. "'Cause o' where I come from. Cause o' who I am."

Ashtail met her eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment. Applejack swallowed hard. His eyes really were *striking*. His face was so calm and neutral, but his eyes revealed so much passion. She leaned closer. He turned away. "Then I hope you're right," he said, his voice quavering. He looked hard at his sister's armor for a moment, and when he spoke again he was steady. "And there's one more important thing about my sister."

"What?"

"She was just about your size." Ashtail turned toward the stall and reared back. He wrapped his front legs around one of the boards and tugged. There was a groaning of

wood, then a **crack!**, and the nails were ripped from the stall's frame, the board clattering to the stone floor. Applejack's eyes widened. Ashtail tore off the other board. "I'll help you put it on."

"I... I couldn't!" Applejack cried. "It's your sister's!"

"But she doesn't need it now – you do. If you must face the komagas, I will at least see you protected."

"Why me? What about Rainbow and Rarity?"

"Rarity has her magic, and Rainbow Dash has her wings," the dark red earth pony said.

"And I can stand firm! You taught me!" The orange earth pony stomped her hoof on the ground. "It ain't right for me to be safer when they can't be! You can't ask me to –"

"Please take it!" he cried, whirling on her. His eyes were wide as he advanced. "This is the only set of armor to spare in Thatchholm! I wish I had armor for your friends as well, but I do not! I have only enough to protect one of you three, and I choose to protect you!" Applejack gasped. Ashtail flinched away from her. "Make of that what you will."

Applejack's heart hammered in her chest. She forced herself to focus on the important thing right now, the need to prove herself right and win her wager. "All right," she said with a nod. "I'll wear it." She wondered what her friends would think. She hoped they would understand. "Ashtail, there's another thing I need – more important than this armor."

"Anything," Ashtail said. "Ask anything of me, and if it is within my power to provide it, you will have it."

Applejack gave him a knowing smile. "It ain't nothin' big," she said. "I just need some rope."

The sun rose orange from the east, setting Gildedale's golden fields ablaze in its fiery light. Rainbow Dash and Rarity sat side by side on the edge of Thatchholm's stone foundation, watching the sunrise in silence. It was not a comfortable quiet, however, as both thought with dread on the coming day. The white unicorn's mind was focused on the date. *Seven days*, she thought. Seven days ago today, Twilight Sparkle had been stricken with the Horn Rot. One week had passed. One week remained in which they could save their friend with certainty. After that they would be putting her at grave risk.

Rarity wondered what Twilight was doing now. She hoped the lavender unicorn was sleeping. She hoped she wasn't in pain.

Rainbow Dash could not ignore her gnawing doubts. Applejack had spent much of last night telling her and Rarity about her idea, and the three of them had formalized their plan of action. She wanted desperately for Applejack to be right, in no small part because she didn't want to be locked up. But she could not be certain. She didn't have Applejack's experience, the hard-learned lessons that had granted the orange earth pony the wisdom to see what she said she saw. "Do you think Applejack's right?" she asked Rarity without turning her head. "Do you think this is gonna work?"

Rarity said after a pause, "I hope so." She had her doubts as well. Everything was riding on the orange earth pony being correct. It was not a gamble Rarity would have made. "I hope she is right. Otherwise we may not be able to save Twilight."

"It's been a week," Dash said. *Three more days until I need to leave on my own.* She hated the thought now. The closer she got to the date, the more she dreaded trying to leave her friends – and now she might be forced to leave them even sooner.

Rainbow, Applejack had said, if this don't work, and they grab Rarity and me, I want you to take off. Get away if you can, and go get that Benevolet. Don't worry about us.

I don't want to leave them! she thought, her rose eyes wavering. She felt so much closer to both of them after all this time spent in their company. The thought of leaving them behind felt like it would literally kill her. Here and now she **hated** Gildedale and its ponies for bringing her to this.

"Are you all right, Rainbow Dash?" Rarity asked her.

Dash turned her head and met Rarity's blue eyes. The white unicorn was looking intently at her. "I just... why does it have to be like this?" she asked, sounding as hopeless as she suddenly felt. "Why do the Daleponies have to make us do this? Why don't they like us, you and me?"

Rarity turned her head back toward the fields. "I think they're afraid of us," she said slowly.

"Afraid?" Dash repeated. "Why would they be afraid?"

Rarity blinked, and smiled grimly. "I think they see us as the death knell of their culture. You heard what Lord Hammer Hoof said."

"But we don't want to stay and mess up their weird moneyless culture!" the sky-blue pegasus protested. "We just want to pass through!"

"They fear what they don't understand," Rarity said, "and that's the worst kind of fear. It drives ponies to do drastic things, things that can be very cruel." She sighed. "I've been like that before; so have you and so has everypony. I understand."

Dash stomped a front hoof on the stone. "I just can't believe all this! I thought these ponies were free! But they're just mean and close-minded!"

Rarity looked at the younger pony with a flutter of her long eyelashes. "But they *are* free, Rainbow, can't you see? They're much freer than we are in Equestria. But they're so free that they're exposed. They're *naked*, dear, so they and their way of life are fragile. And they know it. They know they must resist change to preserve it, so they do so militantly."

"But Ashtail said that was mostly because of the komagas," Dash replied.

"In part, but not entirely," Rarity said. She put a hoof to her chin. "In fact, I wonder if they don't use that as an excuse. If the Daleponies *really* wanted to solve their komaga problem, why not ask Princess Celestia for help?"

"Are you saying they *like* having to fight and struggle? That's not what Shield Maiden said at all!"

"Shield Maiden... is very kind and gentle," Rarity said softly. "It's because of her that I don't think there's anything deliberately harmful in what they do to themselves. They don't enjoy suffering, but they see it as a sacrifice they must make to preserve their culture. They've let themselves grow a bit too proud of it, though. It's evident in their fashion choices –"

"*Fashion?*" Dash repeated, incredulous. "You're going to judge them based on their fashion?"

"Oh, goodness, yes," Rarity said. "Or their lack thereof. They don't seem to wear clothes for any occasion, except the royals, and even they just wear simple jewels. But what *do* they wear, and what *have* they put careful thought into?" She raised her eyebrows. Rainbow Dash stared at her. Rarity sighed. "Their *armor*. Did you see how intricate some of the leatherwork was? They use gold thread, which must be *very* difficult for earth ponies to create. That's to say nothing of how hard it is to work with leather if you don't have magic, and they *dye* it, too – at least I assume they do, if it comes from komaga hide, its most likely source."

Comprehension slowly dawned on Dash. "So they spend a lot of time on what they wear into fights... because fights are important to them?"

"Fights and guard duty," Rarity said. "They see themselves as under attack from all sides, so they've grown proud of their defense. They are a folk under constant siege – at least they see themselves that way. All because of that limitless freedom."

Dash flattened her ears. "If this is freedom, I don't want it!" she cried.

"But is it freedom?" Rarity asked her.

"I..." Dash trailed off. She thought, really thought. Slowly, from the racing channels of her mind, words were summoned. "What you were saying... before... it's about being free to take risks, isn't it? It's about being free to be yourself... and you can only do that if you're safe in other ways... right?"

Rarity *smiled*. "There we go, darling," she said softly.

"B-but I think you're wrong about the Daleponies!" Rainbow Dash said, her voice growing more confident. "They're not scared – they're just stubborn! And so many of them seem to *want* to change! Shield Maiden does, and I know some of the other Daleponies do! And they're so brave! And they discover who they are even in the face of danger – even because of it!" She rose to her hooves. "You can't discover who you are if you're safe all the time! Danger reveals a pony's hidden strength! It's revealed *yours!*" Rarity's eyebrows raised. "Going on this journey has taught me more about you than I thought there was to begin with! I thought all you thought about was fashion and girly junk and frou-frou stuff! I thought you were a total airhead! But you're really smart and kind and you *get* things that I don't! You're amazing, Rarity!"

Rarity looked up at her with wide eyes. "And you see more than I gave you credit for, Rainbow Dash," she said.

Looking at the ground, Dash sat back down. "I didn't mean to say you were an airhead," she said gently.

"Yes, you did," Rarity said. "But you don't think that now, right?" Dash shook her head. "And I don't think you're... well, I don't think you're quite as dense as I used to, if I must be blunt. You can learn and you can grow, Rainbow. And I already know you're not afraid."

"I'm plenty afraid," she admitted. "I just keep beating fear every time." She met Rarity's eyes. "You know, we don't really hang out."

"We're both Twilight Sparkle's friends," Rarity said.

"But *we're* not friends – or we didn't used to be," the sky-blue pegasus said, her heart soaring. "I wanna change that!"

Rarity nodded her head. "I'd like that, Rainbow. I'd like that very much."

"Dash."

"Come again?"

"Call me 'Dash,'" she said. "All my friends do. Well, except for Applejack. I don't know why she doesn't." She leveled a front hoof at Rarity.

Rarity raised her own hoof. "All right then, Dash." The two ponies bumped their hooves together.

There was a loud **bang** behind them, causing them both to rise to their hooves. Turning, they saw the doors of Thatchholm opened wide. Daleponies in full armor came pouring out of the great barn, their hooves thundering on the turf outside, their spears sticking up like a great moving forest. Bright Voice was at their head, and he led four of them down the stone ramp to the great wooden gates. As the other soldiers stood about, there was a loud groaning noise. Dash and Rarity trotted through the Dale Guard, and they reached the ramp just in time to see the gates fully open. Bright Voice trotted back up the ramp. "You two – pegasus, unicorn – have you eaten?"

Rarity fought back her annoyance at the label. "Yes, sir," she said. Dash nodded.

Yet more ponies emerged from Thatchholm. Shield Maiden was among them, and she trotted toward the two Equestrian ponies. "Have either of you seen Captain Ashtail?" she asked, a trace of worry in her voice.

"I haven't seen him since he woke us up this morning," Dash said.

"He and Applejack left on their own, and we've not seen them since," Rarity added.

The gray earth pony grimaced. "I shouldn't worry – he wouldn't be late for this." She met their eyes. "Are you two feeling all right? I *am* worried about you. I hope your friend knows what she's doing."

"I question your friend's competence, myself," Bright Voice remarked.

"You don't know her," Shield Maiden said. "I do not question her. Even if she is wrong, it will not be because of her own foolishness."

"Yet this is the height of foolishness, is it not?" the white Dalepony said. "To control the komagas is an exercise in futility."

"I hope she succeeds," Shield Maiden said.

Rainbow Dash hesitated before speaking next. "Even... if it means you wouldn't need all this any more?" She tapped Shield Maiden's armor with her front hoof. "Even if it means no more fighting and glory?"

Shield Maiden nodded. "The proper dream of every warrior is to some day put down her spear for good. If my daughter can grow up in a safer Gildedale, I shall give up fighting with a smile."

"I believe that's enough chatting," Bright Voice said. He turned around. "**DALE GUARD! TO THE FIELDS! FORM DEFENSE LINES EAST, SIEGE FORMATION!**" He trotted away as the Dale Guard began to move down the ramp in unison, joined by yet more ponies from within Thatchholm.

"Good luck!" Shield Maiden said, and joined the soldiers as they left.

When she was out of earshot, Dash turned to Rarity. "See? She's brave. She's even brave enough to give up fighting, even though that's her cutie mark."

The white unicorn said, "I believe you're right. So they're not all united in their fear of change." Her brow furrowed. "I may have been too quick to judge them again."

"I think you're mostly right," the sky-blue pegasus said, "but nopony is simple. They can be afraid of change but still hope for the best, can't they?"

"Perhaps they can, Dash," she remarked.

A shadow fell over them. Looking up, they saw Lord Hammer Hoof in full armor. Every plate of his armor was stitched and attached with gold thread, and there was a large ruby on his champron, ringed with gold. "Where is your earth pony friend?" he rumbled.

Rarity bowed her head. "My Lord, we cannot say. Last we saw her, she was with Prince Ashtail."

"Who is missing as well," the great stallion remarked. A **howl** carried long through the air. It was followed by a chorus of howls, wailing on the wind. "He had best hurry. You two will come with me." He trotted across the grounds toward the ramp, the two Equestrians following close behind him. Rarity noticed that he bore no extra weapons – no spear, no hoof-axe, no knife. All he had was his ivory hoof.

Passing through the gates, the Lord of the Dale turned right and trotted along the stone foundation. Reaching the corner, he turned right again, and Rainbow Dash's eyes widened. Thousands of armored ponies stood facing east, arranged in three long lines that spanned the whole length of Thatchholm's foundation. They were rigid and still, like statues, staring straight ahead. In the middle of the front line, Bright Voice stood, along with Checkboard; just as Shield Maiden had said, the thin painted pony wore armor and carried a spear and knife. She spotted other ponies whom she swore she'd seen wearing golden necklaces last night in the Timbered Court. Hammer Hoof stopped there, in an empty space in the front line. Bright Voice, Checkboard, and several other ponies lowered their heads. "My Lord Hammer Hoof," Checkboard said.

"Has there been no sign of Prince Ashtail?" Hammer Hoof asked.

"I did not see him all this morn, My Lord," Checkboard replied.

"Here he comes!" Rainbow Dash cried. "And there's Applejack!"

Everypony looked to the north. Rounding the corner of the foundation, Ashtail appeared in full armor, bearing spear and hoof-axe. Applejack followed quick behind him. Rarity and Dash were struck with wonder as their friend approached: Applejack was wearing *armor*, a full set of Dale Guard armor. Leather greaves wrapped around her lower legs, tied tightly on the inside facing. A thick leather crupper was fixed on her hindquarters, two solid pieces of boiled leather stitched together on top, stamped on either flank with the branching golden grass of Gildedale; a gap in the back allowed her tail to fly free. Her sides were protected by flanchards, slotted plates of leather joined over the top of her back by a flat leather saddle. Around her chest, a peytral of leather stitched with gold thread stretched, its arms attached to a plate of leather that curved down her breastbone;

there was a tie behind her neck that held the armor in place. She wore only upper criniere, a wrapping of leather around the top of her neck. On her head, around her face, was a champron of leather with gold stitching, and in the middle was a small emerald of deep green. On the very top of her head, Applejack still wore her brown cowcolt's hat. At first it seemed out of place, but the more her friends saw her, the more it seemed to fit, personalizing her altered appearance.

"My Lord," Ashtail said, inclining his head as they rode up.

Hammer Hoof's eyes blazed. "You gave her –"

"You said I could do with it what I wished, did you not?" Ashtail replied sharply.

The great stallion said nothing for a moment, then snorted. "So I did," he admitted. "Perhaps I was unwise." Another **howl** broke out across the fields, and several more howls answered it. A faint rumble reached everypony's ears, and when they turned toward the rising sun, it illuminated a dark line on the horizon. "Earth pony of Equestria," Hammer Hoof said, turning his gaze on Applejack, "will you still wager?"

Applejack hissed. This was it – all or nothing. "I will, m'lord," she said.

"So be it!" He trotted to the open place in the front of the line, turning and facing the east.

Ashtail trotted to his side. "Good luck," he whispered as he passed Applejack's ear.

"Equestrians," Hammer Hoof said, "the fields are yours."

Applejack turned to her friends. She noticed Rarity was wearing the crystal horn-blade from the previous day. "Rarity, why are you wearin' that? You know we don't mean to do any fightin'."

"And I hope not to," Rarity said. "But I think this thing makes my magic stronger, and we need all the help we can get."

"All right," she said. "Rainbow, you ready?"

"Ready! Let's do this!" Dash cried, excitement coursing through her veins.

"Okay," Applejack said. Sitting back on her hindquarters, she used her front hooves to lift thick coils of rope from around her neck. Setting them on the ground, she broke them up

into three coiled lengths, with a long round noose at one end tied by a loose knot. "Take your lassos." The white unicorn and the sky-blue pegasus each took up a coil of rope in their mouths. Applejack took up the remaining rope. "Now **let's go!**"

With that, Applejack reared back and whinnied, then charged, galloping with all her might toward the rising sun. Rarity followed swift behind, while Rainbow Dash flapped her wings and flew close above them. They raced over the golden fields, the mass of gray on the horizon quickly distinguishing itself as a huge number of moving shapes, large as hilltops. The howls came quicker now, louder, sharper. "There's sure a lot of them!" the sky-blue pegasus called.

"Rainbow, fly up and get a look!" the orange earth pony cried. Dash flapped her wings faster and gained altitude, soaring into the sky.

A few seconds later she descended. "Yeah, there's a **whole** lot!"

"How many are there at the very front?" Applejack asked.

"Three!"

Applejack grinned – what luck! "Perfect!" she cried. "All right, girls, remember how we planned this! It'll be easier than I thought, since there's one for each of us! I'll take the one in the middle; Rainbow, you take the one on the right, you'll need the room; Rarity, you get the one on the left! Get close and wait for my signal!"

With a nod, Rarity galloped off to the left. Dash flew off to the right. Applejack galloped straight ahead. Soon, she could see them: three huge komagas, about a hundred feet ahead of the rest of the herd. The one in the center howled, so loud it made her ears ring. Taking the end of the lasso in her mouth, she began to twirl it over her head, spinning it faster and faster, jerking it just so to open the noose as wide as she could get it. The komagas thundered closer, their clawed feet pounding the earth, making it shake. On the left, Rarity used her magic, the horn-blade gleaming white. Her lasso's noose shimmered and opened wide, while she kept the end tightly held in her mouth. Off to the right, Dash flew in a spiraling descent, using her hooves to pry the noose of her own lasso open; she had never been good at this. The three of them closed in. Applejack's vision was shaking from the pounding of so many massive feet. She focused harder than ever. *Please, Celestia, Luna, any great thing listenin'*, she thought, *let me be right!*

"**ROPE 'EM UP!**" she shouted at the top of her lungs. She was twenty feet from her chosen komaga – fourteen feet – she flicked her head and launched the lasso forward.

The huge gray lizard lumbered right into its path, and the noose fell around its neck. Applejack quickly galloped to its right side. Dash flew low over the rightmost komaga, dropping the noose around its neck; she took up the end of the lasso in her mouth and quickly wrapped some of its length around her front legs for more leverage. Rarity levitated her lasso's noose around the head and down the neck of the komaga on the left, then galloped to its right side. Applejack shouted, "**PULL!**" She planted her hooves in the earth and dug them in. She thought of Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Apple Bloom, Big Macintosh, Granny Smith, all her relatives, Ashtail, her *home* and those she *loved*. Her body went rigid, strength flooding her limbs. Rarity took a wide stance and poured all the magic she had into a rightward *tug*, the crystal on her horn gleaming blinding white. Rainbow Dash took off toward the right, flapping as hard as she could; since she was on the edge of the herd there was no other komaga to block her path.

The three of them tugged. The komagas on their lassos instantly reached the end of the ropes and were jerked hard to the right. The huge lizards struggled, and each pony felt the force of their monstrous strength. Rarity was nearly torn off her hooves; she concentrated as hard as she could, thinking of Twilight Sparkle and how she could not fail her. Dash was briefly jerked backward, but she flew with all her might, sweat beading on her forehead. Applejack concentrated on her friends and family, and she stood *firm*, the komaga unable to budge her for all its physical power. The komagas strained, desiring to move forward, and for a brief moment Applejack thought they wouldn't move – that they would simply run in place and strangle themselves.

The three komagas pivoted, their tails whipping around for balance; they curved *rightward*. "**LET 'EM GO!**" Applejack yelled, jerking her rope forward and yanking it back in a single fluid motion of her head. The noose loosened and came off. Rarity used her magic to remove her lasso's noose. Rainbow Dash actually had to let go, and she frantically flew after her komaga until she could pull the rope over its head. "**MOVE 'EM OUT, Y'ALL!**" the orange earth pony yelled again, and she and Rarity galloped straight ahead, then moved faster, breaking into a full run to escape the komagas and their trampling feet. Dash banked to the left, flying down to join them just over their heads. When they had run for a solid minute, Applejack slowed to a trot. The three of them turned around.

The second row of komagas was ten strong. For a second it seemed an immovable wall still pointed right at Thatchholm. Then those ten great lizards turned gently to the right, following the three at the head of the herd. The next row of komagas did likewise, and the next, and the next. Their path arced rightward, a gentle angle now, but extrapolated half a mile forward, the route would point them well clear of Thatchholm.

Rainbow Dash laughed. "WOOHOO!" she shouted, doing a loop-de-loop over Applejack's head. "You did it, AJ! You were right! You were right!" She plopped down in front of the orange earth pony and gathered her up in a hug.

Rarity joined in. "That was brilliant, Applejack! Dazzling! You were magnificent!"

Applejack laughed heartily. "I couldn't have done it without y'all! Y'all pulled it off like perfect pie! Y'all are honorary cowponies in my book!"

Pulling apart, the three friends took up their lassos. Applejack in the lead, they galloped swiftly back toward Thatchholm. The Dale Guard was still fully assembled, frozen in place. As the three Equestrians drew closer, they could see each armored pony stock still. All of them were **shocked**. Not a single one stood there that didn't have wide eyes. Many had mouths hanging open. Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity headed right for the center, where Ashtail, Bright Voice, and Checkboard stood, no less shocked than the rest. Only Hammer Hoof's expression remained calm, his eyes perhaps a bit brighter. The orange earth pony slowed to a halt before him, her friends behind her. She inclined her head. "M'lord."

No pony said anything for a moment. Ashtail finally breathed, "...How?"

Applejack smiled at him. "It's like I told you, sugarcube – it's where I come from, who I am. I'm born and raised on a farm. I been around herd animals all my life. Y'all don't seem to have any herd animals round these parts – well, except for us ponies, and we only sorta count. So I don't blame y'all for not recognizin' a stampede when you see one."

"Stam... pede?" Ashtail repeated, his mouth working carefully over the strange word.

"It's when a whole bunch o' herd animals get scared by somethin'," Applejack explained. "And they all take off pell-mell in the opposite direction. When critters stampede they don't notice nothin' else around 'em – they're just focused on gettin' as far away from what spooked 'em as they can. You can see it in their eyes," she widened her own eyes for emphasis, "a real madness, total panic."

Ashtail was practically stammering. "So the komagas... they are just trying to get away from something?"

Applejack nodded. "Eeyup. Somethin's *spookin'* 'em. Of course, that don't answer many questions – I got no idea what could possibly spook 'em over and over, year after year, for hundreds o' years. But that's what's happenin'."

"I don't believe it," Bright Voice breathed. "So why do they destroy and kill?"

"They only attack what's in their way – I know y'all have noticed *that*," Applejack said. "As for why they don't just move aside, a stampedin' critter don't think about much of anythin' besides runnin'. And besides, y'all did say they were *mindless*. I don't rightly know if that's true, but it's clear they ain't very bright. They may just not be smart enough to think o' movin', and they're so strong they're used to smashin' through things instead o' goin' around 'em." She smiled. "But y'all can *make* 'em move. All you gotta do is redirect the herd from the front."

"I don't believe it," Bright Voice repeated.

Applejack looked at Hammer Hoof. "So, m'lord... I think this means I win our wager," she said.

Hammer Hoof said nothing. "My Lord Hammer Hoof?" Checkboard said.

Hammer Hoof still said nothing, still staring at Applejack with a neutral expression. "Father?" Ashtail said hesitantly.

The Lord of the Dale worked his mouth for a moment. Finally, he opened it. "I was wrong."

Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash smiled. "It takes a big pony to admit somethin' like that," the orange earth pony said.

Hammer Hoof's eyes flickered to Applejack's neck, and the rope coiled around it. "That rope device you used to move the komagas..."

"Oh, my lasso?" Applejack said, pulling it from around her neck with her front hooves.

"Lasso?" Hammer Hoof repeated.

"Yessir," Applejack said. "It comes in real handy workin' on the farm." She smiled proudly. "I'm pretty good with one, if I do say so myself."

A glint appeared in the dark red stallion's eyes. "Are you good enough to teach others how to use it?"

Applejack's heart sang. "I reckon so, m'lord."

Several hours later, Shield Maiden twirled a lasso over her head, her mouth gripped tightly around the end, her head swirling to keep the noose spinning. A missed spin of her neck caused it to fly backwards. In a panic, the gray earth pony jerked the rope forward; unfortunately, the noose had come down around her tail, and the sudden pull tightened it. "Waugh!" Shield Maiden cried as she yanked her own back hooves out from under her, sending her tumbling to the ground.

Applejack chuckled as she trotted over. "Just keep practicin', Shield Maiden," she said. "You'll get it."

"You're doing wonderfully, Shield Maiden!" Rarity called. She and Rainbow Dash were sitting off to the side. "You're already much better than I am!"

"You don't know how to use a lasso at all," Dash commented.

"She doesn't need to know that, Dash," Rarity retorted.

Hundreds of the Dale Guard and Royal Guard were spread across the fields, each of them working with a lasso. Applejack scanned them, trying to pick out which of them currently needed her attention; with so many, it was rather daunting. She had been working with them for about three hours now, not counting the more than hour it had taken to fashion enough lassos for them all. At the beginning she had lined them up and given them a single group lesson. After they had grasped the basics, she had separated them, allowing them to practice on their own. She knew most of them would not learn to do it today. She had learned lassoing in a single day as a foal, but few ponies were going to be so proficient. Of the hundreds on the fields, perhaps forty had shown real skill, and of those forty less than a dozen had truly mastered the mechanics. But those eleven would be enough. They had proven to be skilled enough that they could teach others in turn after she was gone.

One in particular was currently demonstrating amazing skill. Ashtail twirled his lasso over his head, then spun it down level with his body, whipping it from one side to the other. In a fit of daring, he even spun the twirling noose under his hooves, jumping up to let it pass beneath him.

"Go Captain, Go Captain, Go Captain, Go!" Birdspeak shouted, stomping her hooves as she watched nearby.

Ashtail finally slung the lasso in front of him and let it fall to the ground. Spitting out the end, he smiled smugly. "A lot of it is in the tongue, really," he said.

"That's right," Applejack said, trotting up to him. "The tongue's how you do the real fine stuff. I'm surprised you picked up on that so quickly."

"Perhaps I am just that gifted," the dark red earth pony said, smiling more broadly. There was undisguised pleasure on his face. It made Applejack happy to actually *see* him happy.

"I think you just might be," the orange earth pony said. "And I'm glad to see it. You'll need to teach all these other ponies once I'm gone."

Ashtail's happy expression faded. "Yes... I suppose you must leave. Your friend needs you."

"And I don't know what Rarity and Rainbow would do if I didn't go with 'em," Applejack said. "Plus... my farm and my family need me. Ponyville needs me, and so do all my friends."

"Just as Gildedale needs me," Ashtail remarked. They looked away from each other. Things were suddenly awkward between them. "There is... going to be much change now. I must be here to help with it." Ashtail smiled, but there was sadness in it. "We both have our duty."

"I guess so," Applejack said. A small secret part of her heart didn't want to leave.

BONG!

The great crashing gong echoed from Thatchholm nearby. "Oh!" Ashtail said, happy for the distraction. "That means the feast is ready!" He craned his neck upwards. "**Dale Guard! Royal Guard! TAKE YOUR LASSOS AND RETURN TO THATCHHOLM!**" The assembled ponies began to trot towards the great barn.

Applejack trotted beside Ashtail. "I hope your cooks weren't plannin' on some ponies dyin' today," she remarked, "'cause there's an awful lot o' mouths to feed."

Ashtail laughed. "No, there will be plenty of food. No pony wants for food when Thatchholm throws a feast."

They joined Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Shield Maiden, Birdspeak, and Sharp Sound, and followed the great mass of Daleponies up the stone ramp and through the wide doors. Passing through the great hall, the crowd banked to the right, headed between the pillars to the back of the hall, where an enormous doorway led to a dining hall of even more impressive size. Its ceiling was held up with thick wooden pillars, and massive wooden

trusses offered further support. Hundreds of wooden tables lined with benches filled the space. At the back of the room, a wooden platform was raised, upon which stood a long wooden table with individual wooden chairs. Hammer Hoof stood on the platform, and his voice rang through the crowd and silenced it: "Prince Ashtail, you and your friends will dine with me this day." He smiled. "Including the Equestrians. They shall sit two to three seats from my chair."

"Come," Ashtail said, and the crowd parted around them. The seven ponies made their way to the back of the dining hall and up onto the platform. Checkboard and several other ponies were already standing there. The rest of the ponies waited in silence.

"You may take your seats," Hammer Hoof said. Wordlessly, the Daleponies branched off into groups and factions, choosing one table after another until all of them were filled. Hammer Hoof's own table had a high-backed chair at one end. Ashtail sat to the right of this, Checkboard to the left. Applejack sat at Ashtail's side, Rainbow Dash at Checkboard's, Rarity at Dash's side, Shield Maiden at Applejack's, and Birdspeak and Sharp Sound sat beside Rarity and Shield Maiden, respectively. Hammer Hoof remained standing. The hall grew silent. "Let us bow our heads," the Lord of the Dale said. Everypony did as commanded; Applejack removed her hat. "Let us give thanks this day, for on this day – a day in which much bloodshed was expected – nopony died. And let us give thanks that it may mark a new beginning for our Dale. Let us give thanks that perhaps, in the years to come, nopony need ever die in battle again." He paused for a moment. "And let us give thanks for the virtue of an open heart, willing to accept lessons learned." He stomped his ivory hoof on the wooden platform. "To the Wills That Draw The World, to the Earth and the Sky, to the Sun Queen and her Heavens, let us give thanks! **The feast begins!**"

A great stomping of hooves on tables thundered through the dining hall. As it subsided, the air filled with talk and chatter. Hammer Hoof slowly took his own seat. "The royal table is served last," he explained to the Equestrian ponies, "for it is the duty of a ruler to put their ponies' welfare above their own."

"Sounds mighty fine," Applejack said, setting her hat on the ground beside her. She grimaced. "Er, not to press you, m'lord, but you never actually talked about our wager... and I *did* win it, didn't I?"

"You did indeed!" Hammer Hoof thundered; his deep chuckle rattled their stone plates. "And I am a stallion of my word. All three of you have full permission to travel across Gildedale, both in the remainder of your journey westward and on your return trip eastward. Indeed," he knocked his ivory hoof on the table, "I formally declare Applejack

the earth pony, Rainbow Dash the pegasus, and Rarity the unicorn to be Friends of Gildedale. Whenever any of you wish to enter our land, you will be free to do so, and we shall welcome you as our honored guests."

"It will be recorded, My Lord," Checkboard said.

"Furthermore," the Lord of the Dale continued, "you have changed the way life in Gildedale will be lived forever. Your names will be included in this year's entry on the Dale Stone, so that all who come in ages hence will know of the great thing you three have done."

"Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh, we're going down in history!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "This is *so awesome!*" she squealed. Serving ponies now appeared in their midst, filling their stone goblets with water. Then a sturdy earth pony with a barrel on his back came to Hammer Hoof's side. He opened a spigot on the front of the barrel, and an amber liquid flowed into a stone mug beside the dark red stallion's goblet. He raised it between his hooves and took a sip, his beard catching white foam. "A good stout indeed!" he cried, slamming the mug back down.

Dash was ecstatic. "Beer! They have beer!"

"Ah, none for her, please," Applejack shouted at the beer pony.

"What?! Some for me, *yes* some for me!" the sky-blue pegasus shouted at the same pony. She glared at Applejack. "What are you talking about?"

"Rainbow, we're gonna need to leave soon after the feast is done, and the last thing we need is you all loopy-like!"

"I am not gonna be *loopy!*" Dash shouted.

Applejack gave Dash a look. "Rainbow, you know as well as I that you can't hold your liquor."

"What, and you can?"

The orange earth pony arched an eyebrow at her. "Uh, yes, actually, I can. Did you forget about how I drank you under the table at the Winter Moon Celebration?"

"Th-that didn't count!" Dash pounded a hoof on the table. "I'd already had a few drinks!"

Rolling her eyes, Rarity turned toward Hammer Hoof. "Pardon me, My Lord," she said, getting his attention. "I may already know the answer to this, but just to be certain, I must ask: do your kingdom's borders extend to the Archback Mountains?"

Hammer Hoof shook his head. "They do not. They come fairly close, but they do not reach that far." He leaned forward to speak more clearly; Applejack and Rainbow Dash were now listening to him. "Between Gildedale and the Archback Mountains lies the Shimmerwood, a great forest. It is not nearly so large as Gildedale, but it is still formidable."

"A *forest*?" the sky-blue pegasus groaned. "We're gonna have to go through a forest?"

"Don't worry," Hammer Hoof said. "Though large, it is fairly easy to traverse. It is not unfriendly, either. In fact, you Equestrians more used to magic may find it welcoming – especially you, unicorn."

"Welcoming?" Rarity said. "Whatever do you mean?"

Hammer Hoof smiled cryptically. "You'll see."

At that moment, the food arrived – so much food! There was hay and grass, toasted and grilled and salted and broiled. There were carrots and potatoes and radishes, stews and soups, and a rainbow of breads in every size, shape, and color. The table groaned with victuals, and soon everypony was busy eating, conversation interspersed with chewing and swallowing. Water and ale flowed freely, though at Applejack's stern insistence Rainbow Dash was only given a little of the latter. Rarity had to keep herself from eating too much. The food was so good, and she hadn't eaten at a gathering like this since Plowpony's Day last week; the company, the friendship that flowed so freely through the air, made it easy to eat with abandon. It made her realize that there was a benefit to the Daleponies' guarded society: if you were inside, considered a part of them, you were treated like family. They loved their own just as much as they distrusted strangers. Losing the latter tendency could also mean losing the former. *I think Dash may be right*, she thought. *It doesn't have to come to that*. The three of them had given the Daleponies a chance to change for the better, and the love she felt in the air now made her hope that they wouldn't waste it.

When most of the food was gone, Hammer Hoof rose from his chair. A sharp **bang** of his ivory hoof on the wooden platform silenced the talk in the hall. "Let the children come in!" he cried. "It is time for them to eat as well."

Shield Maiden rose from her chair, just as many Daleponies throughout the hall likewise sprang to their hooves. At the entrance to the hall, several old mares led more than a hundred foals of varying heights and ages into the large space. The little herd quickly broke apart, young colts and fillies galloping between tables on their stubby legs searching for their parents. Shield Maiden sat back on her haunches on the floor and opened her front legs wide as a light gray filly with a dark gray mane and tail barreled into her, the young pony's orange eyes sparkling. She was the very image of the drawing Shield Maiden had shown Rarity in Grazezeld. After they embraced and nuzzled, Shield Maiden led her foal up onto the platform, the young filly's eyes wide at the presence of so many nobles. She stopped and bowed to Hammer Hoof, who nodded his head in turn, and Ashtail, who likewise nodded.

"Here you go, my little one," Shield Maiden said, retaking her seat and lifting the filly into her lap. "This is my gray filly. Little one, these are some of mama's new friends! That's Applejack," she pointed at the orange earth pony, "that's Rainbow Dash, and that's Rarity. They're from Equestria! They have done us a great good service today."

The little pony's orange eyes widened. "You're a pegasus!" she squeaked at Rainbow Dash.

"That's right!" Dash said, pounding her chest with a hoof. "I can fly! Watch this!" With a flap of her wings she was airborne, hovering above her seat. The little filly gasped, filled with wide-eyed wonder as only children can be.

The little filly turned to Rarity. "You're a u-u-unicorn!" she stammered. "Oh, mama, she's just as beautiful as your stories said!"

Rarity fluttered her eyelashes and fluffed her purple mane. "Thank you very much for the compliment. You are just the *cutest* thing!" she squealed, beaming at the small foal. "I'm proud to be your first unicorn."

"Madam Rarity was the one who braided mama's mane," Shield Maiden said, turning her head to the side to show her foal her white braids.

"It's so pretty, mama!" she squealed.

"Would you like me to braid your mane as well, little filly?" Rarity asked.

The gray filly gasped. "Oh, yes, yes, yes, mama, please yes!" She looked up at her mother with pleading eyes.

"All right," Shield Maiden said, scooting back in her chair. The little filly hopped down and scampered around the table, where Rarity made room; soon the foal was sitting in her lap, and Rarity set to the task of braiding her mane. She had lovely hair just like her mother.

"Is it true that if I make a wish on your horn, it will come true?" the filly asked.

"Well..." Rarity paused. "Why don't you make a wish, and see if it comes true?"

"Okay!" the filly exclaimed. She closed her eyes tightly, scrunching up her face in concentration. "I made one!" she squealed, opening her eyes.

"Very good!" Rarity said. "But you mustn't tell anypony what it is, or it definitely won't come true."

"I won't!"

Smiling, Applejack turned toward Ashtail. "I wish we could stay another night – I really do – but we gotta get movin'."

Ashtail nodded. "I understand. It's a ways yet to the Archback Mountains, and even to the Shimmerwood. My Lord," he turned toward Hammer Hoof, "can we outfit the Equestrians with some provisions?"

"Certainly," Hammer Hoof said. "I shall see it done."

"We have to at least wait until Rarity's finished," Dash said, settling back into her seat. "And in the meantime, I think I'll have some more beer."

"Oh no you won't!" Applejack said. "You've had a whole pint already!"

"That was just a half!"

"It was a full and it was more than enough!"

Rarity smiled, comforted by her two friends beginning their usual routine. She used her magic to twist the little filly's hair into the beginnings of another braid.

Within the hour, the feast was done, provisions were gathered, and Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash were standing in the fields outside of Thatchholm, their saddlebags once more on their flanks. The Daleponies had even given Dash a set of leather

saddlebags. Rarity had been asked if she wanted to keep the horn-blade she had borrowed, but she had politely demurred. Dash's new bags were packed with bread, carrots, and a few potatoes. The three of them stood side-by-side, saying their goodbyes to Shield Maiden, Ashtail, Birdspeak, and Sharp Sound. Hammer Hoof, standing a ways off, had already given them his blessings.

"We'll miss you three so much!" Birdspeak said. "This is the most exciting it's been in Gildedale since I was a filly!"

"We'll be sure to come back and visit sometime," said Dash. "When we're not in a hurry, we can spend more time here. You could show us around!"

"When the komagas are gone, you can take your time seeing the kingdom," Sharp Sound said. "It's really quite peaceful most of the year."

"Perhaps now Lord Hammer Hoof will rethink his ban on travelers from Equestria," Ashtail added. "He will certainly be more open to changing things from hereon out."

"Goodbye, all of you!" Rarity said. "Goodbye, dear Birdspeak, dear Sharp Sound! Farewell, My Lord Ashtail, and good luck." She lowered her head. "Shield Maiden..." The white unicorn trotted forward and wrapped her neck around the gray earth pony's. "Thank you so much, for everything you did. I won't forget you."

"Nor I you, Rarity," Shield Maiden said. "I am very glad you were the first unicorn I got to meet. I shall think of you always."

"I promise to try and come back someday," the white unicorn said, her eyes watering. "I want to see your lovely daughter when she's older, when she's got her cutie mark and has a name!"

"I don't think she will forget you either," Shield Maiden said.

"Yeah, thank you so much, Shield Maiden!" Dash exclaimed, wrapping the gray filly in a hug. "You did so much for us. I wish we could do more for you!"

"More for us?" Sharp Sound repeated.

"You've done so *much* for us, all three of you!" Shield Maiden exclaimed.

"Thanks to you, everything has changed," Ashtail said.

"We were happy to help," Applejack said. She doffed her hat. "So long, Birdspeak, Sharp Sound, Shield Maiden." She turned her gaze. "Uh..."

Ashtail blinked a few times in silence.

Shield Maiden and Rarity met each others' eyes; understanding passed between them. Shield Maiden nudged Birdspeak and Sharp Sound, and the three of them turned around. Rarity nudged Rainbow Dash. "Come along, Dash, let's get a head start – you know Applejack can catch up with us."

"But why don't we all just get going now?" Dash said. "If we get too far ahead we're gonna have to wait for her!"

"Yes, well... I think we should just get going *now*," Rarity said, her tone insistent. "Come on, let's go." She began to tug Dash's tail.

"But I don't –"

"Let's get *going*, Dash!" she snarled, pulling Dash's rainbow-streaked tail with all her might.

"Okay, okay, sheesh!" Dash said, flapping her wings. "Bye, Ashtail! Thanks for everything! I want to see you again someday!"

"And I you!" Ashtail said. "Farewell, Rainbow Dash!" He bowed his head. "Farewell, Rarity."

"My Lord," the white unicorn said, bowing her head. "Goodbye, Shield Maiden! Goodbye Birdspeak and Sharp Sound! Goodbye to you all, much love!" With a soft smile at Applejack, Rarity turned around and trotted away, into the west, where the sun was just starting its descent toward the horizon. Dash followed, grumbling under her breath. Shield Maiden, Birdspeak, and Sharp Sound trotted off toward Thatchholm, and at last, Applejack and Ashtail were alone.

"So..." Applejack began. She said nothing more.

"I..." Ashtail said, but he trailed off. They stood in silence for a few moments, dodging each others' glances.

"Thank you, so much, for everythin'!" Applejack exclaimed. "We couldn't have done anythin' without you!"

"Thank *you*," Ashtail said. "Without you, and your bravery, and your strength, this season would have been as grim as it ever was. Now... there is a new spring. There is new hope."

"There was always hope, I guess," Applejack said. "Y'all just needed to see it."

"Not without you," Ashtail replied. They stared into each others' eyes. Ashtail presently blinked. "I would very much like to see Ponyville someday."

"You're welcome anytime," Applejack said. "I... I would *really* like to see you again. Come by whenever you can."

"I... would... *also* like to see you again," Ashtail slowly ground out. "You should come to Gildedale – I mean, when you're free."

"I'll... I'll try," Applejack said. "But I'm so busy..."

"Duty," the dark red earth pony said gently. "It seems we are both snared by it."

"It ain't so bad," she said. She looked away. Her heart was pounding again. "Not... not normally, anyway."

"I..." Ashtail started again, but again he found no words.

Applejack looked toward the ground. She didn't know what to say either. Her eyes drifted over the golden grass, across his red legs, toward her own... wrapped in leather greaves? "Oh!" she cried, looking back over her body. She was wearing Ashtail's sister's armor! "I put your sister's armor back on! I must have just been in a gearin' up state o' mind when I was puttin' my saddlebags on, and it was right there." She blushed. "Sorry, I'll get it off real fast –"

Ashtail held up a hoof. She looked into his eyes. "Keep it," he said. Her green eyes widened. He smiled. "My sister has... moved on. It's time I did as well. Wherever she is, she must be happy to see you make use of it. Besides, it looks good on you." His smile vanished. "Not that you don't look good normally, of course." He frowned. "That didn't come out right."

Applejack smiled. "It sounded just fine to me, sugarcube."

"I..." Ashtail again struggled with his words. "I... I don't know what else to say."

"Ashtail..." Applejack said softly. "I..."

Suddenly, from a ways off, Rainbow Dash yelled at the top of her lungs. "*APPLEJACK, QUIT TALKING TO YOUR BOYFRIEND AND LET'S GET GOING!*"

Ashtail's eye twitched. Applejack whirled around. "**All right, hold your horses! I'm comin'!**" She looked back to the dark red earth pony. "Well... I..." She shook her head, took a deep breath, and smiled. "I gotta go."

"Indeed you do," Ashtail said.

Applejack held up a front leg. "Goodbye, Ashtail."

Ashtail held up his own front leg, pressing his hoof into hers. "Farewell, Applejack of Ponyville – until our next meeting."

They lingered there for a long minute, their hooves together. Then Applejack pulled away. "So long, sugarcube," she said, turning around. She trotted forward a few paces. She stopped. She took one last glance over her shoulder. Ashtail was smiling warmly and broadly – a more genuine smile than she had ever seen on his face before. It filled her heart with warmth. Smiling in turn, she set her face forward, and rearing back, she galloped off into the late afternoon sun.

"Check!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed as she took her mouth off her priestess. She had trapped the black king in the left section of its own half.

Twilight Sparkle lowered her head and picked up her king with her mouth, moving it one square over.

Pinkie used her hooves to move her remaining knight into position. "Check," she said again.

Twilight used her black palace to take the pink earth pony's knight. It also set the black castle-shaped piece in just the right spot.

Pinkie did not have another piece she could move into immediate check. She chose to move her one remaining pawn forward a space, and wait for Twilight's next move.

Twilight moved her own black priestess diagonally across. "Check and *mate*," she said.

Pinkie blinked, looking across the board at her own king. Sure enough, she had backed it into a corner, and now it could not move out of range of Twilight's palace or priestess. With a grin, she knocked it over. "Oh wow Twilight! I didn't see that coming at all it was so *sneaky* and super clever!"

The lavender unicorn laughed. "Don't worry, Pinkie. You're getting a lot better! It took a lot more work on my part to beat you this time." It had been her own idea to teach Pinkie Pie to play chess. Three days after taking ill, she noticed that strenuous physical activity began to exacerbate her condition, on top of doing any kind of magic. She had sensibly decided to take it easy, but this had proven to be difficult with Pinkie Pie taking charge of her 'sickbed entertainment.' The pink earth pony had enough energy for a dozen pegasi, and when confined to the library she tended to literally bounce off the walls. To rectify this, Twilight had begun to teach her the many games she had learned over the years. She had already taught her several new card games; Pinkie had an impressive poker face and could bluff as well as anypony. They had started on chess yesterday, and again Twilight had been surprised. For all her impulsiveness, Pinkie was a good player. She was very aggressive, and it had gotten her into trouble at the beginning. Now, however, she was tempering her tendency to attack with cleverer coordination of her pieces, surprising Twilight several times over the course of a game.

"Can we play again?" Pinkie asked.

"I don't know, Pinkie," Twilight replied. "It's getting late, and this game took a long time." She looked up at the window. The sun was setting, streaking the sky with orange.

"Twilight," Spike said, sitting nearby, "I think you should get to bed."

"Spike, I'm feeling fine!" the lavender unicorn said. "When I start feeling bad, then I'll go to bed, but for now I want to stay up!"

"I..." Spike trailed off. He looked at Twilight's head. The top half of her horn was completely black, with a long, thin streak of darkness running all the way to the base. She could not even begin to do magic now without excruciating pain. She also felt pain if she ran too hard or jumped too high. She could not even escape the pain by avoiding magic, because the Horn Rot would trigger her magical circuit at random intervals, causing her to fall to the floor screaming in agony. There was no way to tell when she would begin to suffer. And her sleep had been... troubled. The purple dragon could see the bags under her eyes, hear the exhaustion in her voice despite her cheerfulness.

"I at least want to stay up until Fluttershy gets back," Twilight said. "I have to be awake to take her medicine, right?"

"I guess..." Spike murmured. Fluttershy and Zecora had been working together for the past week to devise new pain relievers, combining the butter-yellow pegasus' knowledge of body pain and its treatments with the zebra shaman's skill at concocting complex brews.

"Don't you worry your spikey little head, Spikey!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "Twilight's going to be just fine with a little more waketime, and that's plenty of time for one of *my* games!"

"One of your games?" Twilight repeated.

"Uh huh!" the pink earth pony exclaimed, bouncing up and down on her elastic knees. "It's called Rainbow Spy! Dash and I came up with it!"

"How do you play?" Spike asked.

"Oh, it's easy!" Pinkie Pie said. She sat back on her haunches, raised a front hoof, and swirled it around. "I spy with my pinkie eye, something colored... purple and white!"

"Purple *and* white?" Twilight Sparkle repeated. She put a hoof to her chin. What was nearby that was purple and white? She looked around the library. They were sitting on some cushions near the stairs leading up to her room, the tall shelves carved into the

walls filled with books of all shapes and sizes. A few of them seemed to be dark purple, but none had white trim that she could discern. "Hmmm... okay, Pinkie, what is it?"

"It's *you*, silly!" Pinkie laughed. "In Rainbow Spy you can spot multicolored things, but you can also spot things that are colors which are really mixes of *other* colors! You're lavender, which is a mix of purple and white!"

"*Oh*," Spike said, grinning. "Okay, then: I spy with my *spikey* eye something every color."

"Every color..." Pinkie repeated, furrowing her brow in concentration. She looked around the room. What was every color? Rainbow Dash usually tried this trick, but it was easy to beat her, because she was always talking about either her mane or her tail! But Dash was gone – *on a spectacular amazing colossal adventure!* she told herself – so there was nothing obvious to fit Spike's cue. "What is it, Spike?"

Spike smiled. "It's the chess pieces! The black ones, anyway. Black is every color brought together, right?"

Pinkie grinned hugely. "Good work, Spikey!"

"Let me try! Let me try!" Twilight exclaimed. "Hmmm..." She wracked her brain hard, trying to recall all the colors and combinations of colors she knew. She'd taken a few art classes as a foal, but that was so long ago. She did know basic light theory, Fig Newton's theory of color... *Color is a property of visual perception actualized by the reaction of cone cells in the retina of the eye to various wavelengths of light, generated by –*

"Twilight?" Pinkie asked, arching an eyebrow at her. "Are you going to go?"

"Huh?" Twilight blinked. She had been thinking too hard – again. "Oh, sorry." She smiled sheepishly. "Okay, I spy with my little eye –"

"Your *twilight* eye," the pink earth pony said.

"I spy with my twilight eye something that's colored... blue and yellow!"

"Blue and yellow," Spike repeated. "Those make green, right?"

"Yep!" Pinkie said. "So let's see what's green – is it Spike?"

"No," Twilight said.

"Is it... that book over there?" She pointed at a large dark green volume.

"No," Twilight said, a smile spreading across her face.

"Is it that book over *there*?" She pointed at another book, on another bookshelf, this one a lighter shade of green.

"Nope!" Twilight said.

"How about that book over there?" Spike asked, pointing at yet another green book.

"Nope!" The lavender unicorn was feeling very smug.

"Okay Twilight, what is it?" Pinkie asked.

"It's your cushion, Pinkie!" Twilight said with a laugh, pointing her hoof down below the pink earth pony. Sure enough, it was striped blue and yellow. "You never said we *had* to name blended-color objects, did you?"

"Noooooo," Pinkie Pie drawled out. She smiled and laughed. "Hahaha, that was a good one Twilight!"

"I guess it was," Twilight Sparkle admitted. She laughed. This was fun!

A white spark **popped** off the tip of her horn. All the books in the library rattled; a few of them flew off their shelves onto the ground. Twilight's front hooves flew to her horn as her head was wracked with agonizing pain. "AAAHHH!" she screamed, falling onto her back. "AAAHHH!" She writhed back and forth.

"Oh my gosh!" Spike yelled, dashing to her side. "It's okay, Twilight! It's gonna be okay!"

"**AAAHH!** It hurts! It hurts!" The pain was excruciating. Her eyes began to water.

"Pinkie, when did Fluttershy say she was coming back?" Spike asked. The pink earth pony seemed frozen in place. "*Pinkie!*" Spike snapped.

"Oh!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "I... I don't know! She said she wouldn't be long!"

"**AAAHH!**"

Spike brushed a clawed hand across Twilight's forehead, avoiding her clutching hooves. Her temperature, which had been higher than normal all day, was rising sharply now, as

it tended to do during these fits. "I..." he trailed off, on the verge of tears himself. The little dragon felt completely helpless. He didn't know what to do.

Twilight's eyes were shut more and more tightly, the pain in her head almost blinding. She could *feel* her horn dying, bit by agonizing bit. Suddenly, her mind was flooded with a rush of energy. Her eyes snapped open, and they were blazing white, clouded over with a glowing haze.

Pinkie Pie gasped. "She's about to do it again!" The pink earth pony *stretched* herself like a rubber band across the library, instantly reaching the windowsill where a pad and pencil lay. Another stretch took her back to Twilight's side, where she set the pad down and took up the pencil in her mouth.

"No!" Spike said, stomping angrily toward her. "No more! It hurts her when you do this!"

Twilight's fits of pain were often accompanied by flares of magic. It was at night, however, that another symptom manifested. It had been the third day of her illness when the lavender unicorn, in the midst of a pain spell, began to scream out words. She had yelled about a 'nightmare' and 'endless night.' Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy had immediately thought of Nightmare Moon. When they consulted Zecora, she had told them that the wild outbursts of magic the Horn Rot was causing made Twilight's mind susceptible to impressions from *other points* in space and time. Her first outburst was clearly a look back into the past. Zecora had suggested they keep a notepad handy to record what Twilight said she saw – because it was just as likely that she would have visions of the *future* as well. The lavender unicorn had been very upset at this, berating her friends for believing in something as ridiculous as prophecy. But her magical outbursts in the night were unfailingly accompanied by these glowing eyes, and screams about what she was seeing always followed. The fourth night, while she had been sleeping, she had woken Spike up yelling about dragons. For the past three nights, her eyes had brimmed with tears, and she had screamed about red eyes burning in the dark.

"But Spike, I'm not trying to hurt her," Pinkie Pie said.

"Well you *are!* Don't ask her questions, it makes the pain worse! I know it does!" the little dragon yelled.

Twilight screamed again. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Spike knelt down and tried to cradle her head. Her skin was burning.

Pinkie Pie gripped the pencil with her teeth. "I told you **NO!**" Spike growled, smoke billowing from his nostrils. He was crying now.

"Spike, Zecora said it didn't make her any worse!" Pinkie shouted.

"I don't care! I WON'T let you hurt her!" A tongue of green flame burst from the little purple dragon's mouth.

"What is going on here?!"

Pinkie Pie and Spike snapped their heads around. Fluttershy stood in the open door of the library, a burlap saddlebag buckled around her flanks. Her turquoise eyes blazed with quiet fury, and as she caught her friends' attention she amplified the anger in her gaze. Her stare froze Pinkie and Spike in place, all thoughts of continuing their argument vanishing. She held them captive for another few seconds; when Twilight screamed again, she blinked, and the spell was broken. The butter-yellow pegasus flapped her wings and fluttered to the lavender unicorn's side, her light pink mane and tail pooling on the floor as she sat by Twilight's head.

"Twilight," she said softly, putting her hooves around the suffering unicorn's. "Twilight, I need you to move your hooves. I have something here to rub on your horn that should make it feel better."

Twilight Sparkle began to comply – but an arc of wild, stabbing pain sprang from her horn and raced all the way down her spine. She arched her back and screamed again. Then, she spoke. "AAAHHH! AAAHH! Sparks and sprinters, trees and tines! Peril is paused but not ended! Be wary! Learn well!"

Pinkie Pie quickly jotted the words down on the notepad. Fluttershy glanced over at her and Spike. "Spike, Pinkie, could you please pull Twilight's hooves off of her horn?"

The little dragon and the pink earth pony moved to either side of Twilight's head. Taking one hoof each in both front limbs, they pulled, and slowly pried Twilight's front legs away. Reaching back into her saddlebag, Fluttershy pulled out something wrapped in wax paper. It looked like a stick of butter, pale, tinted faintly blue. Squishing her front hoof into it, Fluttershy dabbed some on Twilight's horn, then with both of her hooves she began to rub the stuff in. Soon the lavender unicorn's horn was slick with the ointment, and over the next few minutes, her screaming died down, until it was replaced by heavy breathing. Twilight's body was damp with sweat; her skin was still burning. Her eyes

slowly crawled open, and they were once more their normal purple. "F-Fluttershy..." she whispered.

"I'm here, Twilight," she said softly, nuzzling the lavender unicorn. "We're all here." Pinkie Pie and Spike moved closer, both of them smiling weakly at her.

"I..." Twilight panted, her voice weak. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault," Fluttershy said. "I think it's time you went to bed. You'll feel better in the morning after a good night's sleep."

Twilight's head drifted off to the side. "I guess you're right."

"Pinkie, Spike, could you both please try to clean up the library a little? I'm going to put her to bed."

"Can you manage her all right?" Spike asked, his voice hesitant.

The butter-yellow pegasus nodded. "Don't worry, Spike. We'll be fine." Sitting back on her haunches, Fluttershy reached her front legs under Twilight Sparkle and flapped her wings. She lifted Twilight slowly off the ground; fortunately, Twilight wasn't terribly heavy, and Fluttershy was not as weak a flyer as she used to be. Flapping her wings in strong, even beats, she hovered up the stairs and passed through the doorway. "Don't worry, Twilight," she whispered, drifting down the darkened hallway. "Everything will be all right." She reached the door to Twilight's room and pushed it open with her head. The sun had set, and in the deepening dark of the night sky stars were beginning to twinkle.

Fluttershy set Twilight gently on her hooves beside her bed. The lavender unicorn shakily pulled back the covers and climbed in, drawing the sheets and blanket up around her. "Thank you," she whispered.

Fluttershy reached back into her saddlebag and pulled out a sprig of leaves. "Eat these," she said, passing them to Twilight. "They should help bring your fever down. They'll also help you sleep." Twilight silently took the branch between her hooves and chewed on it, stripping the leaves and chomping them down. Fluttershy plucked up the empty branch with her mouth. She nuzzled Twilight gently on the cheek. "Good night, Twilight," she said softly, turning to leave.

"Wait..." Fluttershy stopped. Turning around, she saw Twilight facing her. Tears were welling up in her eyes. "Fluttershy, could you... stay with me for a while, please?"

Fluttershy smiled softly. "Of course I will," she said, moving closer to Twilight's bedside.

"I..." Tears flowed down her cheeks. "I'm so scared, Fluttershy!" Twilight rolled over, turning away from Fluttershy. "I want to believe that Rainbow Dash and Applejack and Rarity will get the Beneviolet in time! I do! They're my friends and I should trust them! But..." she sniffed, "But..." She began to sob.

"I understand," Fluttershy said softly. Sitting back on her haunches, she stroked Twilight's midnight purple mane. "I know you must be so frightened."

"I am!" Twilight sobbed. "I don't want to die, Fluttershy! I don't want to die!" She lay on her back and cried.

Fluttershy said nothing in speech. She began to hum softly, wafting up the melody of one of her favorite lullabies. Then she started to sing, but the sound died in her throat after a few notes. The song she had begun to sing was too cheery, too light for the present circumstances. She didn't wish to make Twilight sadder, but she knew in her heart that a song too happy right now would be worse than a funeral dirge. The butter-yellow pegasus wracked her mind for something more appropriate. In a few moments, words flooded her consciousness: a song from the depths of her childhood, a song she had heard once at a time when she, too, had felt hopeless. It was not a song her parents had taught her. Summoning lower notes, she slowly stroked Twilight's forehead and began to softly sing:

*When sunset's embers fade away
And darkness shrouds the land,
Your mind may fill with nameless fears
You do not understand.
Though I would fain protect your sleep
I cannot breach your head,
But twinkling friends beyond my strength
Shall aid you in my stead.*

*I cannot take your fears from you,
I cannot watch your dreams,
But all the stars that shine above
Shall guard you with their gleam.*

*What are the stars? Perhaps you ask.
The answer is a tale*

*Told many ways by many folk
Through forest, glen and dale.
The ponies say the stars are Luna's
Tears from long ago.
The deerfolk say they are the souls
Of those we used to know.
The camels say stars are suns
That burn in empty space.
The bison say they are the light
Shone from the Great One's face.*

*Whatever species speaks the truth
On this they all agree:
The stars stand watch into the night
And light the galaxy.
So in your hour of fearfulness
When you feel most alone,
Know that the stars are wi-ith you
And they shall guide you home.*

*And I am with you too,
They love you, I love you.
So do not be afraid,
Sleep now, dream now...*

Fluttershy's voice faded into quiet. Twilight was breathing gently; her eyes were closed. The butter-yellow pegasus leaned in close. She was asleep. Drawing up to her face, Fluttershy gently kissed the tears off of her cheeks. "Sweet dreams, Twilight," she whispered. She exited the lavender unicorn's bedroom, softly closing the door behind her.

Making her way down the stairs, she saw Pinkie Pie and Spike sitting near each other on the floor of the library, both looking very sad. Spike looked up as she approached. "Is she... better?" he asked gently.

Fluttershy nodded. "She's asleep."

"Oh," the little purple dragon said. His green eyes flickered toward the floor, back to Fluttershy, toward the floor again. "Can... I... can I go... sit with her?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Of course you can, Spike."

"Thanks," he said, rising to his feet. He started for the stairs, but stopped, and turned around. "Uh, Pinkie Pie," he said slowly, "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you."

"It's okay, Spikey!" the pink earth pony said brightly. "If my mama were sick, I'd be upset, too."

Spike's expression was unreadable for a moment. Then he nodded, and started toward the stairs, taking them one at a time with his short, stubby legs. He softly padded through the doorway and left their sight. Sighing, Fluttershy flew over to one of the cushions and plopped down onto it, lowering her head and stretching out her wings. Her muscles ached, though she had done no particular exercise that day. "Poor Spike," she said softly. "Poor Twilight."

"I can guess how super-worried he must be," Pinkie said softly, but even then her voice was bright and vivid. "Even though he has to know our friends are going to make sure everything is okay!"

Fluttershy tucked her head into her front legs. She blinked, carefully thinking about her next words. "I am beginning to think," she finally said, "that we should let Twilight's parents know what's happened to her."

"But why should we make them worry?" Pinkie asked. "After Dash and Rarity and Applejack are back and Twilight is better *then* we'll tell them, and then they'll be really-mega-worried, but we'll all laugh about it and talk about how it was such a close call!"

Fluttershy did not respond to this. Her turquoise eyes narrowed.

Pinkie's cyan eyes met the other pony's, and then they widened. "You don't think they can do it, do you?"

Fluttershy took a deep breath, let it out, said nothing. Pinkie's stare turned into a glare, and Fluttershy wished she could shrink into the cushion. "I..." she began. She looked away. "I... I think they'll get to the Archback Mountains and find the Benevolet –"

"Of course they will! They're our friends and they won't let us down, silly!"

"I just don't know if they'll do it in time."

"But they have a whole other week! That's plenty of time and they can just use Spike's fire to send it back lickety-split!" Pinkie Pie nodded, quite pleased with herself. The last word especially had captured her fancy: she rolled over onto her back and began to sing a nonsense song built around the word 'lickety-split.'

Fluttershy glanced out the nearby window into the starry sky. She did not have much experience with magical illnesses like this. But illness in general was something she knew well, and she knew the signs of an illness worsening when she saw them. Twilight's Horn Rot was advancing faster. Zecora had commented on it. Two weeks might now be too late. There was no way to be sure. She whimpered sadly. *Applejack... Rainbow Dash... Rarity... hurry.*

Rainbow Dash's eyelids fluttered open, then closed, then open again. Raising her head, she looked up through the golden grass at the growing light in the sky, the sun peeking over the horizon to the east. She yawned, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her front hooves. This business of waking up at dawn was still strange to her. Back in Ponyville, she would still be fast asleep, the dark cloud shades drawn tight over her windows, her fluffy cloud blankets wrapping her in their insulating embrace. She traced a hoof through the dirt beneath her. *I know why I'm waking up early*, she thought glumly, *it's this hard ground!* She had suggested yesterday that the three of them make for whatever stronghold or fastness served Gildedale's Western Quarter, in the hopes of sleeping in a bed one more time, but Applejack had shot this down, insisting that they travel in the same straight line they were (mostly) making now.

We need to make double time goin' to the Archback Mountains! she had said. *We spent a lot o' time with the Daleponies and we gotta make up some ground!*

The sky-blue pegasus had considered pointing out that Applejack had seemed to enjoy her time with the Daleponies immensely – particularly her time with a certain red colt. She had decided against it, though, as she did not want to make Applejack even crankier. The orange earth pony had been strangely silent for most of their travels yesterday, and when she did speak she had been snappy and sullen. Dash hadn't understood at all until Rarity had taken her aside and explained it in very clear terms. *Sheesh, when I yelled at her I was kidding.*

Rising to her hooves, Dash looked around the small clear space where they had made camp. Rarity was curled up under a blanket, her head on her pillow and her sleeping mask firmly in place; she was breathing gently, a tress of her violet mane hanging over her face. Applejack was propped up on her own saddlebags, her hat tipped over her head, her blanket covering her body, her new armor piled right next to her. Neither one looked immediately ready to wake up. This surprised Dash immensely. *I'm the first one awake*, she thought. That had never happened before. She had at least a few minutes before one of her friends would be joining her. What to do?

The answer was instant and obvious. Fly! Flapping her wings, Rainbow Dash shot skyward, aiming for the fingertips of rose stretched across the heavens. As the sun rolled blazing orange over the horizon, Dash twisted into a corkscrew, then angled her wings to send her spiraling through the air, the golden fields burning as they traded places with the rosy sky over and over and over again. She loved it. The rush of speed, the chaos of complex maneuvers, the somersaults her stomach did when she twisted upside-down –

everything about flying, Rainbow Dash loved. And what she loved perhaps most of all was the sensation of beating her fear. She had meant what she had said to Rarity. Her fears never left her. There was always the tiny tinge of terror before a steep dive, the racing chill of panic when she flew truly fast. But the fear would appear and then it would be gone – she would overcome it, pass it by, then look over her shoulder and laugh at it. The young pegasus had long thought, in the depths of her heart, that if she kept feeling fear, and kept overcoming it, some day she would feel all the fear it was possible for a pony to feel, and then there would be no more fear, just endless blue sky.

Now she soared straight up, wings pumping as she climbed. Speaking of overcoming fear... She rose higher and higher, glancing out as she did. All of Gildedale spread before her like a sheet of gold burning in a smelting fire, caught in the orange light of dawn. She climbed higher and higher, passing some low hanging clouds. She slowed, came to a hover, bent at the waist – there was the fear, right where it always was. It tempted her to slowly descend. *No.* She tucked in her wings and fell. Plummeting freely, she did several barrel rolls, then a somersault. Pointing her nose downward again, she opened her wings and began to flap, accelerating her descent. The world blurred around her, the ground coming at her scarily fast. She grinned, and wished she had her goggles – then she could go even faster. Less than a hundred feet from the ground, she flapped hard backwards and pulled up, then angled her wings and did a flattened cartwheel through the air. She pulled moisture from the air as she spun, fanned it through her wings, caught it in her tail, then stopped dead and flicked her tail with all her might. An arc of rainbow shimmered off her striped tail, sailing through the sky some distance before it faded.

Slowing to a hover, Rainbow Dash righted herself. *That was new!* she thought. *I'm gonna have to come up with a name for that one.* She pondered for a moment, putting a hoof to her chin. "The... Bow Bucker?" she tried it out loud. "That's not bad." Giving her wings a hard flap, she flew over the fields, scanning the ground for the camp. When she found it, she saw Rarity and Applejack standing about; soaring in low, she made a short landing, tucking her wings and taking a few large strides to slow herself and stop.

"I wondered where you'd got to," Applejack said.

"Just stretching my wings a little," the sky-blue pegasus remarked.

"Well you're just in time for breakfast," the orange earth pony said, "and I thought we'd have some apples. It's been a few days and I reckon we oughta eat 'em before they go bad."

"Oh, how delightful!" Rarity exclaimed. "Anything to avoid more of this coarse grass."

Applejack reached into her saddlebags and pulled out three apples each. "Rainbow, we could have some carrots as well, I reckon," she said.

"Huh? Oh, right!" Dash said, remembering her new saddlebags and the food stored inside. She went to them and rummaged through them, pulling out a stalk of six carrots with her teeth and setting them with the apples.

"Y'all two dig in – I'll just be a minute," Applejack said. Settling back on her haunches, she picked up one of her leather greaves and slid it up her front leg, then began to fasten its bindings with her teeth.

"Are you really gonna wear that stuff for the rest of the trip?" Dash asked.

"I can't very well stuff it in my saddlebags, can I?" the orange earth pony retorted. "It ain't all that uncomfortable, really."

"Isn't it heavy?" Rarity asked.

"Not really," Applejack replied. "It's a lot less than what I'm used to haulin' around on the farm. Plus, it's a nice reminder o' how good things worked out in Gildedale."

Rarity raised an eyebrow at the last comment. Applejack paused, her one greave in place, looking absently at it. "Applejack," the white unicorn asked, "are you going to be all right?"

Applejack blinked hard a few times. "Yeah," she said. "I'm gonna be fine." She picked up another greave and slid it on one of her back legs.

By the time Applejack was finished, Rarity and Rainbow Dash had eaten an apple and two carrots each, and both had decided to supplement their breakfast with some grass, though Rarity still grimaced at the chewy toughness of the golden blades. Applejack quickly gobbled up her own apple and carrots, then joined them, munching away. Dash was as usual wolfing down grass; her early morning flight had made her particularly hungry. About ten minutes later, her belly was full, and she fluttered back to the others to help break camp. The sky-blue pegasus wiggled her saddlebags up around her flanks with some annoyance: the extra weight at her haunches had thrown her off-balance in the air yesterday, and it had taken her some time to adjust. Rarity rolled up her blanket with her magic and folded it gently into her saddlebags, then pulled out her linen scarf and wrapped it around her neck. Applejack put her hat onto her head and gave her saddlebags a wriggle, trying to decide if they were fitting to her satisfaction. With a nod of her head, the orange earth pony said, "All right, y'all ready?"

"How fast are we going *today*?" Rarity said, a glum note in her voice.

"As fast as we can manage for a long stretch," Applejack responded.

"Oh, all right," Rarity sighed. She was actually getting used to brisk galloping by this point, but she did not enjoy it any more than at the start.

"Let's giddyup!" Applejack cried, and with her in the lead the three of them started through the golden grass, Rainbow Dash once more staying on the ground. The sun was behind them, throwing long, dark shadows across the sunlit fields ahead of them.

As they galloped, Applejack looked slightly upward, her mind dwelling intently on what rose out of the distance in front of her. They loomed dark and mighty beyond the horizon, an endless succession of sharp peaks growing clearer and more distinct with each hooffall. The Archback Mountains – at last they were in sight, not just dim shapes but solid things of rock! She trained her eyes dead ahead of her, but the haze of the distance revealed only grass and sky and far-off mountainside. "Rainbow," she called over her shoulder, "ride up alongside, up front here, and see if you can see that forest they were talkin' about."

The sky-blue pegasus nodded, quickening her pace and moving to the front. Training her vision forward, Dash's rose eyes cut through some of the haze. There was still plenty of grassland in her vision, but at the furthest reaches of her sight, much lower than the mountains, she saw a dark band. "I think I can see it!" Dash cried. "It's... I dunno, maybe a day and a half from here if we keep going like we are now!" It was mid-morning right now.

"Then let's pick up the pace!" Applejack called. She turned her head, and the sunlight caught the emerald on her champron, making it gleam with a green inner fire. It was enough to delight Rarity and make her briefly forget the aggravation of having to gallop even faster.

I wonder where the Daleponies got those jewels, the white unicorn thought. Without unicorn magic, gemstones were difficult to find, and Gildedale's more uniform landscape would not have lent itself to plentiful deposits as Equestria's rockier regions did. Indeed, she wondered whether the gems might not have come from Equestria, in a time of better relations between the two kingdoms. It almost made her want to crack a history book, though she hadn't picked up such a thing since entering finishing school. *Perhaps Sweetie Belle has a history book I can borrow,* she thought. *At least I hope she does – they should certainly teach history in grade school, shouldn't they?* Rarity smiled at the thought of her

sister. What was Sweetie doing right now, she wondered? In school, probably, back from her weeklong break with their parents. It meant that Fluttershy would have to look after her. This did not trouble Rarity. She trusted Fluttershy intimately, having known her for many years. They saw each other more than they used to now that Twilight brought them together more frequently, but she and the butter-yellow pegasus had long been close; Rarity was the first pony Fluttershy had met upon moving to Ponyville.

When the sun was high in the sky, the three travelers slowed to a trot, finally stopping on top of a low-slung hill. The rolling fields were warm, and the sky overhead was deep blue, not a cloud in it. The sight of it made Rainbow Dash's wings itch, but her stomach growled more pressingly. Her rainbow-striped mane was slick with sweat. She lowered her head and began to chomp through grass around her. "The forest is a lot closer now," she said between bites. "I think we're making good time."

"Glad to hear," Applejack said. Taking off her hat, she ran a hoof through her yellow mane. "Whew, is it just me or is it hotter today?"

"You are wearing dark-dyed leather, Applejack," Rarity observed. "Are you sure you don't want to take it off?"

"I'd just have to put it back on before we got goin'," the orange earth pony said. "And it's like I said before – where would I put it? It won't fit in my saddlebags, and I doubt it would fit in yours or Rainbow's."

Rarity nodded, and privately doubted that she could even carry the extra weight; her saddlebags were full enough as it was. Applejack's superior physical strength made her best suited for the load, and as long as she had to carry it, she might as well wear it.

A **howl** rippled through the air, coming from far off to their left. "Komagas!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

"Oh my!" Rarity cried. "I suppose we're not rid of them yet, are we?"

"Not 'til we're outta Gildedale, I suppose," Applejack said. "Rainbow, pop up and see if you can spot 'em."

The sky-blue pegasus flew skyward in a rainbow blur, stopping in the air where she nearly vanished against the like-colored sky. She spun around, scanning the horizon every which way; when facing south, she leaned closer forward. She descended as rapidly as she had risen. "There's three of them, headed right for us!" she cried.

"Do we have enough time to get clear?" Rarity asked worriedly.

"They're kind of spread out," Dash said.

"All we gotta do is stay away," Applejack said. "They won't come after us if we don't mess with 'em."

Dash had an idea. "Hey, both of you!" she said, flapping her wings and hovering a few feet off the ground. "Grab onto me!" Rarity and Applejack gave her quizzical looks. The air was split by another howl. "Come on!" Dash said. Rarity gave a little hop and wrapped her hooves around Dash's torso. Applejack, with a moment's hesitation, did the same, and the two ponies were crowded around their friend in a strange group hug. The sky-blue pegasus flapped her wings very hard, stretching them as wide as she could and giving them slow, powerful beats. Slowly she ascended, rising foot after foot off the ground. Sweat was streaking down her body; this was more work than she had thought. *I carried Rarity and all three of the Wonderbolts!* she thought. *I can do this!* It didn't occur to her that she had no Sonic Rainboom to help her this time.

She came to a stop more than twenty feet in the air; she could climb no higher. There she hovered, breathing deep and even, working her wings rhythmically. Her muscles were almost in a trance, going numb from the strain and the repetition. The air shuddered beneath them. The ground shook. Another howl slashed through the air, and a huge gray komaga pounded across the space where they had been standing. It seemed to take forever to pass, its head, its neck, its thick body, and finally its long, sweeping tail. Another one was visible a few dozen feet away. The three ponies watched them run, dipping into a shallow depression before climbing another gentle hill, then moving across a flat stretch. When they were some distance off, Dash cycled her wings backwards and slowly descended. The shaking of the earth was just beginning to subside when she stopped a foot above the grass. Applejack and Rarity peeled themselves off of her, and the sky-blue pegasus immediately tucked in her wings, flopping to the ground and panting hard.

"Shucks, sugarcube," Applejack said, looking gently down at her. "You didn't have to do that. We could have just moved."

"I... I didn't think... we'd get clear... in time," Rainbow Dash sputtered, her tongue lolling out. Rarity reached into Dash's saddlebag and pulled out a waterskin, then passed it to the pegasus; she took it up and chugged from it greedily.

"Thank you very much, Dash," Rarity said, stroking Dash's forehead with her hoof.

Dash grinned. "No trouble – I am the Iron Pony, remember?"

"Huh," Applejack huffed. "I recall the rematch goin' to nopony." She looked back to the north, where the komagas were just visible cresting another short hill. *Not wantin' any trouble at all*, she thought. They just wanted to be left alone, and simple herding tactics could steer them away from vulnerable areas. Now Ashtail and the other Daleponies knew – and she hoped they really would change. If she could put an end to such a long history of violence, Applejack would feel very proud indeed – assuming they also saved Twilight, of course.

They had to wait a while longer for Dash to recuperate, and when she was finally on her hooves she consumed an apple and half a loaf of bread, in addition to more grass and more water. About an hour passed before they were on their way again, galloping once more; Dash's wing muscles were badly in need of rest. The sun fell into their field of vision, while the Archback Mountains grew darker and taller in the distance. Soon the sky grew golden, and burned slowly to orange. Dusk approached. Applejack looked over her shoulder and saw the moon rising, full and yellow. "Just a little farther!" she cried to Rarity and Rainbow Dash.

"Hooray!" Rarity cried back, her whole body drenched in sweat.

The sun sank behind the Archbacks, the sky turning red with purple close behind. The fields darkened to a dull gray, silver moonlight already glinting off the grass. Applejack caught a sudden scent. "Do y'all smell that?" she asked, slowing to a trot.

Rarity raised her nose and sniffed. "I... is that water?" she asked.

"Sure smells like it," Applejack said. Rainbow Dash sniffed, but smelled nothing. Her sense of smell was not as good as an earth pony's or a unicorn's. Each pony type had its strengths and weaknesses in the five senses: earth ponies excelled at smelling and hearing, pegasi had superior vision, unicorns were most sensitive to taste and touch. The orange earth pony breathed in. "It's about that way, I think," she said, pointing off to her left. She trotted, following her nose, Dash and Rarity in her wake. At length, they came to a small river, winding its way from north to south. It was shallow, but seemed in no danger of drying out. "This is a great place to camp tonight," Applejack said. "We need to refill our water supply anyway, it's runnin' a mite low."

"And we can bathe!" Rarity exclaimed brightly. She used her magic to open one of her saddlebags and remove something wrapped in wax paper. She unwrapped it, revealing a bar of white soap that smelled strongly of herbs.

Dash raised an eyebrow. "You brought *soap*?"

"Of course, Dash, I wouldn't go on an adventure without it," Rarity said.

"Let me fill up our waterskins before you start soapin' up," the orange earth pony said, sliding off her saddlebags. "Go help Rainbow clear a space for us in the grass."

Grimacing, the white unicorn did as she was told, helping Dash yank up some grass, enough to form a clear space along the riverbank. Her magic made short work of the effort, and soon the grass they had removed was a flat carpet blanketing the ground, offering them some scant cushion. Applejack reappeared by then with the waterskins, so Rarity took her soap and trotted merrily off, leaving the orange earth pony and the sky-blue pegasus to set up the rest of their camp.

"Should we make a fire?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I don't see why not," Applejack replied, fishing into her saddlebag for the firestarter log and its corresponding thin stick. On an unspoken cue, Dash got up and began to pull up more grass, aiming for the thicker, tougher blades that rose around them where they lay. Dash put the grass down around the log, and Applejack set to work, boring into the shallow depression in the log's center, creating friction and sending up smoke. The grass was soon smoldering, and with a little more grass a fire was quickly crackling away, the smoke smelling wet and earthy.

"So," Applejack said, lying down and beginning to remove her armor.

"So," Dash said, lying down as well. A silence descended between them, but it was not uncomfortable. Rainbow Dash and Applejack had known each other since before Twilight Sparkle had made each of them her friends, and they were never pressed to fill silence with chatting. Most of the time, any interaction between them took on the form of a competition, usually involving Dash making a challenge to Applejack and Applejack rising to it; they were both exceptionally proud ponies, and neither one enjoyed losing. This was not always the case, however, and there were plenty of times throughout the years when Dash had come to Sweet Apple Acres just to enjoy the orange earth pony's company; she would say nothing, and Applejack, respecting her desire for tranquility, would say nothing in return. Sometimes she would read a book, other times she would do small chores around the farm, but Dash would stick beside her, and Applejack had grown to enjoy the sky-blue pegasus' quiet presence.

"How long do you think it'll take to reach the Shimmerwood?" Dash said, finally breaking the silence. Overhead, the stars were slowly appearing.

Applejack wriggled out of her peytral and set it with the other pieces of her armor. "From what you were sayin', I'd reckon about another day, maybe a day and a half. It depends on how fast we can get Rarity to go."

Silence fell again between them for another few minutes. "What do you think is in there? Hammer Hoof mentioned magic and said Rarity would like it there."

"I don't rightly know," Applejack said. She took off her hat and undid the straps on her leather champron. Sliding it off, she shook her head to loosen her hair where the headpiece had forced it down. Applejack's own mind went to unicorns – it could be community of them living on their own just as Gildedale was a kingdom purely of earth ponies.

Dash had similar thoughts. "Could it be unicorns?"

"Could be," Applejack said.

"Maybe they live on their own, and it makes them weird, like Gildedale," Dash said.

"I wouldn't call Gildedale weird – just different," the orange earth pony said. "And I bet a bunch o' unicorns livin' in the forest would be different as well. You know, thinkin' about it, it seems like one bunch o' ponies of a single type livin' together apart from other pony types makes for big differences."

The sky-blue pegasus put her head down on her hooves. "In Cloudsdale, everypony has to leave once they reach a certain age. Once you hit another age, you can come back and live there, but no pony is allowed to spend their entire life there. Maybe it's so pegasuses don't turn... different."

Applejack said nothing to this. The silence endured a while longer. Finally, she said, "Thanks again for flyin' us clear o' those komagas."

"Aw, don't mention it," Dash said. A flicker of concern passed over her face. It vanished rapidly, but Applejack had known Rainbow Dash too long to dismiss it.

"Somethin' wrong?" she asked.

"Nope," Dash said.

"Yes there is," the orange earth pony said. "Rainbow, what is it?" Dash turned her head. "Rainbow, tell me," and Applejack put authority into her voice.

"I..." Dash blinked. "It's no big deal. It's just that those komagas... I was remembering when we fought them, is all. With the Daleponies."

Applejack breathed out slowly. "You only did what you had to do, Rainbow."

"But that's not true, is it?" Dash's rose-colored eyes flashed. "You proved the komagas weren't dangerous. I... I never had to hurt any of them. I never wanted to hurt any of them."

"But we didn't know it then." Applejack leaned forward, closer to the fire. "Rainbow, you were only doin' what you thought you had to do."

Dash's brow furrowed. "I..." She sighed heavily. "You're right. But I hate it. I feel awful. I don't feel as awful as I did before, but I still feel awful."

"Well that's good, ain't it?" the orange earth pony asked. "It's like Shield Maiden said. We're not supposed to be fond o' killin'. The fact that you don't like it is good."

"I guess," Dash said. It still nagged at her. She had killed and she knew it. It made her feel childish to be ashamed, no matter what Applejack or Shield Maiden said. She should move on. She would make herself move on.

Rarity appeared at that point, smelling of herbs with a spring in her step, her mane and tail slightly damp. Sitting between Applejack and Rainbow Dash around the fire, she took out her brush from her saddlebag and began to run it through her violet mane. "I do wish I had brought some shampoo," she admitted, "but I simply didn't have the room."

"What did you pack in there, anyway?" Dash asked.

"Hmmm..." Rarity thought for a moment. "Two sweaters, one coat, two scarves – one for cold weather, one for warm – one set of galoshes, one pair of sunglasses, one smart-casual saddle, one semi-formal saddle that can double as cocktail wear if need be, two bars of soap, one bottle of eyedrops, one sleeping mask, one pillow, one blanket, four energy bars, and a month's supply of multivitamins and dietary supplements." She smiled brightly at them.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash exchanged glances. "Think that's all?" Dash asked her with a deadpan.

"Hmmm... yes, I believe so. Just the essentials, of course; there's only so much you can fit in a pair of saddlebags."

"Sure, sure," Dash said, a grin spreading over her face.

"Well, *my* saddlebags still have some apples, and y'all are free to have one each," Applejack said, digging her nose into her brown burlap bags. "Rainbow, see how much bread you've got in yours."

Dash nosed through her leather saddlebags. "I've got two more loaves, plus half of the loaf I didn't eat today."

"We can split the half-loaf between us, if you don't mind," Applejack said, plucking three apples out of her bag. She passed two of them to Dash and Rarity, while Dash tore a chunk off the half-loaf of bread and passed it around in turn.

"Rainbow, I'm gonna need you to fly up and look around through the night tonight, okay?" Applejack asked. "I don't want any komagas surprisin' us while we're sleepin'."

Dash bit into her apple and chewed loudly. "If I can wake up, sure," she said.

"I'll wake you if need be," the orange earth pony said.

Dash grimaced at the thought, not looking forward to having her sleep disrupted. She ate her bread in glum silence the rest of the evening, as Rarity and Applejack made small talk. The moon rose higher in the sky, bathing the fields in brilliant silver light. At length, dinner was finished, and Applejack said, "Rainbow, go up real quick and check for komagas."

"Do I have to?" Dash asked.

"Please?" Applejack said with a smile.

Rainbow Dash huffed. "You're just lucky I'm so nice," she said, flapping her wings and rising slowly into the air. She stopped about a hundred feet off the ground, spinning slowly in a circle and looking out across the fields. The river glistened in the moonlight, and the grass was shimmering gray. There were no disturbances for miles in any direction. Dash slowly descended. "Nothing," she said, setting her hooves on the ground.

"Well, in that case, I'm goin' to bed," Applejack said, pulling her blanket from one of her saddlebags. She bunched the bags up to form a pillow and laid her head down on them.

"Rainbow, I'll try and wake up a little later tonight so you can check again." Pulling the blanket over her body, she tipped her hat over her head.

"Yeah, yeah," Dash whined, curling up into a ball.

"Good night, everypony," Rarity said, settling head back on her pillow and pulling her sleeping mask over her eyes. "See you all in the morning."

"G'night, y'all," Applejack said.

"Good night," Dash muttered. A part of her missed the closeness of the last few days, when they had all slept in the same bed and she had used her wings to pull her friends to her side. But she was tired, and soon she was asleep. Her dreams were swirls of color, a circle of rainbows dancing through the darkness. Thunder rumbled. Lightning flashed.

"-inbow. Rainbow, wake up," a voice buzzed in her ear.

Rainbow Dash blinked her eyes open, almost hearing them creak. She yawned. "What time is it?" The air was silver with moonlight; the fire had long since burned out.

"I dunno," Applejack said, standing over her. "I guess it's time for you to check for komagas again."

"Do I have to?" Dash mumbled, lowering her head to the ground.

"Yes," Applejack said sternly. "I won't have a posse of 'em tramin' us in the night. Just go up real quick and take a look around."

"All right, all right," the sky-blue pegasus muttered, rising to her hooves and stretching. She could feel a slight chill in the air – but it didn't bother her, of course.

"I'm goin' back to sleep," Applejack remarked, trotting back over to her spot and pulling back her blanket. "If you see anythin', be sure and wake me up."

"You're not even going to wait up?" Dash said.

"I figure it ain't vital," the orange earth pony said. She rested her head on her saddlebags and lowered her hat over her eyes. Within moments, she was snoring gently.

"I figure it ain't vital," Dash repeated, mocking her friend's country twang. "Who does she think she is? Just because I have wings, it automatically makes me some kind of errand

pony?" She scowled. She had just been getting some really good sleep, too, she could *feel* it. But since she was awake, she might as well play lookout.

Flapping her wings, Rainbow Dash took off, aiming straight up. It was more work to fight gravity in a vertical climb, but she was annoyed, and took out the frustration on her body. The sudden pumping of blood through her muscles brought her more fully awake. Stopping high above the campsite, she slowly circled around, her keen eyes sweeping the moonlit fields. They were as gray and as empty as they had been earlier in the night. No movement disturbed the tall grass, save for the ripples caused by the wind. So she had been woken up for nothing. *It figures*, she thought. *I'm so nice*. The others were so lucky that she was so nice. She cycled her wings backwards and began to descend.

Then came the flash. She caught it and saw it in the blink of an eye, just as she had seen it four nights ago: a wrinkled line of blinding light burned onto the plains in the distance. It seemed to come from the Archback Mountains, but instantly it was across her line of vision – then it *stopped*. The line of light extinguished itself, there was a faint pulse of white light, and then nothing but moonlight prevailed.

Rainbow Dash marked the spot where the pulse of light had been in her mind and she **flew**. She pumped her wings as fast as they would flap, tucking in her back legs and pointing with one front hoof right at the spot where she had seen the light. Her eyes narrowed as she accelerated, the stars blurring in the night sky as she flew faster and faster, the wind whipping through her ears. When she drew close she began to descend, angled shallow towards the ground, gradually lower and lower until her hooves brushed the top of the tall grass, she was almost there, so she bent sharply down, now flying right through the grass, tall blades parting around her, some of it flying into the air in her wake. Then she was there, and she tucked her wings, springing out all four legs to start a rapid gallop, not losing her pace, tearing through the grass, and she burst suddenly into a clear space with shorter grass carpeting the ground. **"AHA!"**

"Buwah!" a voice cried out. A strange shape leapt into the air, then landed and took about a dozen steps backwards in a jumbled gait. For a moment Dash couldn't make it out, the darkness obscuring it, then her eyes adjusted to the moonlight, and she saw it. "Would you mind not doing that?" it said. "You nearly gave me a heart attack, you did! My nerves are a jumble as it is and the last I need is for some creature to play pop-a-boo on me in the dead of night."

Dash's eyes widened, more moonlight flooding them and allowing her to see more of the thing that had spoken. It wasn't a pony at all. It stood about a head taller than she. Its body was lithe and chest-heavy, supported by four long legs with long, slender muscles,

four hooves planting it to the ground. It had a short, thick neck, on which a long, narrow head rested, ending in a narrow snout. At the other end, it had a short, fluffy tail. Two narrow ears were set far back on its head, raised up and now swiveling toward her. Its slightly beady eyes were round and dark. Even in the moonlight, she could tell its fur was light brown, but it had a white belly, and a white patch on its chest. A black band of fur ringed round its neck under its chin. On its head were two black horns that stood up, but at their summits, they split, twin tines forking toward the front while the main points rose up and curved slightly inward.

The creature took a few steps forward. "Say," it said, its voice crisply accented, "you're a pegasus pony, aren't you?" The dark eyes widened. "Not every day I see your type in Gildedale!"

Dash's mouth was hanging open. She forced herself to speak. "Who... who are you?" she asked. "*What* are you?"

The creature raised its furry white eyebrows. "Me?" it said. "Oh, well, I'm a pronghorn." It lowered toward the ground in a bow. "Niles Nigellus, at your service." He rose to his hooves again and tilted his head. "And what is your name, dear miss?"

"I'm... I'm Rainbow Dash," she stammered. She was still very much in shock. "I've never seen anything like you before. Are you... an antelope?" She had never seen an antelope either, not in flesh; she had seen pictures of them in one of Twilight Sparkle's books.

"Nope!" Niles said, sounding extremely chipper. "But I look like one, don't I? Funny how that works out. Anyway, you gave me quite a fright. What are you doing out here?"

"I was looking for komagas," she said, honesty the only thing coming to her mind.

"You'll hear a komaga before you see one, no point looking for them," said Niles. He stepped forward, and he was smiling gently now. He didn't look scary – just strange.

"Well, my friends are sleeping nearby," Dash continued. "They wanted to make sure no komagas trampled them in the night."

"Not a bad idea, I suppose. So are you traveling?"

"Yes, I – wait, hold on, I want answers to *my* questions!" Now that she wasn't startled, curiosity consumed her. "What are *you* doing here? How did you get here?"

"Oh, I bolted here," the pronghorn said matter-of-factly. "Were you flying? You might have seen me if you flew. As for what, I just got done with a run, and thought I'd stop out here for a bite to eat. Also – must confess – I needed to settle my nerves a bit. Traveling across the Broken Lands is not a fun time." He shivered. "Brrr, the place gives me the willies, no matter how fast the trip is. Which is why I most certainly did not appreciate your little scare."

"Oh, sorry," Dash said. "What do you mean by 'run'? Were you running a race?"

"A race? No, well not as such," Niles said. "A message run. There was a dispatch that had to go out tonight, and I was the one on-call. Just a short hop, but the Lady was insistent, and she asks you so *nicely* you feel that refusing is to murder her dog."

"Message? You were delivering a message?"

"Well of course! For the Network, you know." He smiled at her. Rainbow Dash stared at him. "You know, the Network?" She continued to stare. He appeared crestfallen. "You haven't the faintest idea what I'm talking about, have you?"

"Uh-uh," Dash said with a shake of her head.

Niles let out a breath. "Right, then," he said primly. "Are you in any great hurry?"

Dash thought for a moment. If there were no komagas around, her friends didn't immediately need her – and they were asleep. "No."

"Well, sit down, if you will," Niles said, settling back on his thin haunches. Dash sat down as well, and noticed for the first time that he was wearing a set of saddlebags at his flanks, painted with blue swirls. "This really won't take long," he said. "Are you comfortable?"

"Um, yeah," the sky-blue pegasus admitted.

"Right," he said. He set his front hooves down on the ground in front of him. His dark eyes caught the moonlight and glistened. He took another deep breath. "Beginning. Right. War is a terrible thing, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," Dash said. "I've never been in a war."

"Well, pray that doesn't change," Niles said. "Some time ago – but not *too* long ago – two lands very far away from here had a war. It was a terrible thing – terrible – with armies and machines and ugly magic. Many creatures on both sides were killed." He looked to

the side. "Many of my kind were living in one of the lands. Many of them were killed as well."

"I'm sorry," Dash said.

"Eventually, the war was ended, and a peace treaty was signed. But the worst thing of all came after that: it was discovered that the war had been fought for completely unnecessary reasons. It could have been avoided if both sides had talked to each other properly," Niles said, falling into the steady cadence of a storyteller. "After we had buried and mourned our dead, we pronghorns got together and decided that, as much as it was in our power to do so, we would try to stop war from ever happening again – not just between those two lands, but between any land, any nation, any species all around the world. Now," he asked, "what is one of the primary causes of war?"

Dash thought for a moment. "Um... greed?"

"No, that's – well, actually, that's not bad," Niles admitted. "But try again – think of another one."

"Um... uh..." Dash wracked her brain.

"Miscommunication," the pronghorn said gently. "When one or more parties doesn't have a clear idea of what the other parties want, or what their true goals are, conflict is practically inevitable. If every creature knows what its fellows are thinking, fighting is much less likely. After coming to this conclusion, we bent all our efforts on solving the problem of global miscommunication, and it was with that goal in mind that we formed the Pronghorn Network."

"So this is a thing all pronghorns do?" Dash asked.

"Nearly all of them, yes," Niles answered. "We pronghorns have scattered across the world, and we have offered ourselves freely as a global messenger service to every race and species that will have us. Every kingdom, every republic, every empire, every city-state, every tribe and wandering herd can, at any time, contact us, and we shall deliver any messages they may have to any recipient they wish. They can either write it down," he patted his saddlebag, "or they can cast it as a magic spell, and we shall take it to its destination."

"Even if it's really far away?" Dash asked, her mind dizzy at the thought. "Even if it's halfway around the world?"

"Yes," Niles said. "What's more, we offer one of the key factors in avoiding miscommunication: speed. Not only can we deliver any message from any sender to any recipient at any destination, we guarantee delivery within one day."

"No matter where it is?" Dash asked. "You can deliver a message in one day... on the other side of the world?"

"Oh, absolutely!" said the pronghorn. "*I swear to thee my solemn decree*, as the zebras might put it."

"Do you hand them off? Is it like a relay?"

"No, no, that would risk the message getting lost," Niles said. "One pronghorn carries the message from sender to recipient."

"So then..." Dash's eyes widened. "You... *you* can go from here to the other side of the world in one day."

Niles winked at her. "My dear pegasus, I can *circle* the world in a day."

Dash's mouth fell open. That wasn't possible. "That's not possible. There's no way. *No* creature is that fast. Even dragons aren't that fast. *I'm* not that fast! Not even close!"

"Well, if you're simply talking about muscle power, then of course you're right," Niles said. "Though," he grinned, "we pronghorns are no slouch in that department. We are the fastest runners in all the wide world. But you're right – no creature by wing or leg is that fast. Besides, running won't get you across the oceans. So for our messenger runs, we travel with the aid of our magic."

"You can do magic?" Dash asked.

"Of course! We have horns, don't we?"

Dash had never thought of that. Could any creature with a horn do magic? She would have to ask Twilight. "So how do you use your magic to travel around the world?"

Niles smiled again. "We ride lightning."

Rainbow Dash's eyes bulged so large they threatened to pop out of her skull. "Say that again."

"We create and ride lightning bolts," Niles said. "See, back in our homeland, we sometimes dabbled in weather control – storms and stuff. It's our magical speciality, actually. So when we were laying out the plan for the Pronghorn Network, and realizing how fast we would need to travel, we were able to come up with a lightning bolt that feeds off our magic, and the magic of the surrounding world. We generate it, we grab hold of it, and we ride it. It's **very** fast – fast enough, as I've intimated, to take us around the world in a single day."

"You..." Dash's mind felt like it was in a tunnel. A chill raced up her spine. "You... make... *lightning?!?*"

"Well, yes," Niles said. "It's not all that different from what you pegasi do, really, at least in Equestria. You lot make the weather in Equestria, right? It's similar magic from what I've seen."

"You make *lightning bolts*." Dash was still staring bulge-eyed at him.

"Ummmm... yeeeeesssss..." Niles said slowly. "As I've said twice now. No, three times now. Well, four, counting that last –"

"**TEACH ME!**" Rainbow Dash screamed, leaping at him. She knocked him to the ground and grabbed him around the withers, shaking him back and forth with all her might. "Teachmeteachmeteachme teachmeteachmeteachme teachmeteachmeTEACHME!"

"Ho-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ld o-o-o-o-o-o-o-on!" the pronghorn tumbled out, his head bobbing back and forth. His long legs shot out and pushed him away from the sky-blue pegasus. "Hold on, now! What's all this?"

"Teach me!" Dash cried again. "You know how to make lightning! You know how to control lightning! Teach me how, please! Please!"

"Hold on," Niles said again. "I can't just teach you to make lightning out of the blue. I don't even know if you're capable of learning it."

"You just said pegasuses do something similar!"

"Pegasi," Niles corrected her. "And I said *similar*, not identical. We're still two different species, and we work different ways. My magic is channeled through my horns, yours is inherent – it comes out of every pore. I don't know if you'd be able to master the nuances of the magic. And even if you could learn, I'm not sure you *will*."

"But if I can learn, what would stop me?" Dash said. "All I can think of is you refusing to teach me!"

Niles shook his head. "My dear Rainbow Dash, if you're physically capable of it – and you may well be – the lightning out here," he swept his hoof around, "is the easy part. What's tricky is the lightning in *here*." He tapped his hoof against the side of his head.

Dash was getting annoyed. This was destiny – she could feel it, feel the rush of purpose and fate through her veins like fresh blood. She who had so long been unable to control lightning would learn to master it more fully than any pegasus before her! She was going to fulfill her promise! And this pronghorn was going to deny her! "Maybe you're just lying to me," the sky-blue pegasus snarled. "Maybe you really **can't**."

Niles narrowed his dark eyes. There was a *crackle*, and a **line** of blinding white lightning snarled between his horns, rising from the bases to the pronged tips, where it split apart into shining veins before vanishing into darkness. The brilliance of it burned behind Dash's eyelids as she blinked. "I am a Messenger of the Pronghorn Network. I **never** lie."

Dash stepped hesitantly forward. "Then teach me," she said softly. "Please, at least let me try. All my life, I've never been able to control lightning. It's always been too much for me. It's always been out of my reach. I... I need to learn. It's something I have to do." She drew herself up to her full height. "I can beat my fear."

Niles set his thin mouth in a wavering line. He looked off to the side. "Not here, at least," he finally said. "It's not something I can just explain to you over dinner. I would need to take you into the Dreaming."

"What's that?" Dash asked.

"As I said," the pronghorn told her, "it's what's in here." He tapped his head again. He looked gently at her, tilting his head from one side to the other for a few minutes in silence. Dash's heart was in her throat. "But... maybe..." he whispered. He continued to look, and Dash's spine tingled. He was looking at something she could not see. "Perhaps. You certainly have the belly for it."

"Please," Dash said. "I'll do whatever you tell me. But this... it's not a coincidence. I can feel it. I'm here and you're here because this is what's supposed to happen. It has to be."

Niles looked hard at her again. "You said you were traveling," he said. "Which way are you going?"

"Uh – west," Dash said. "We're going to the Archback Mountains. Our friend is sick and we're going to get a flower there called –"

"The Beneviolet," the pronghorn finished her sentence. "And your friends – the ones with you – are they pegasi as well?"

"No," the sky-blue pegasus answered. "One's an earth pony and one's a unicorn."

"And you have to keep pace with them, which means you can't go faster than a fast gallop," Niles said. He began to pace back and forth. "Hmmm... that might work out." He turned his head back toward Rainbow Dash. "A day's ride west at the average pony's pace will put you very close to one of our Waystations. I'm going there after this – a few more of my kind will be there as well. I'll talk to them." His face was serious now. "When you and your friends stop for the night, as the sun is setting, hover up off the ground where you're easily visible – where I can see you. I'll come to you, and... well, I'll tell you what we've decided."

"Thank you," Dash said softly. "That's all I ask. Please say yes."

"It won't just be up to me," Niles told her, "since what you're asking is not a one-pronger job. But tomorrow night at dusk you'll have your answer." He looked up into the sky, at the moon which had moved slowly through the starfields. "If you're traveling tomorrow you should go get some sleep."

"Right, right," Dash said with a nod. "And you'll come find me tomorrow, right?"

"If you make yourself findable," the pronghorn said. "Remember, high enough off the ground to where I can see you."

"Got it!" Dash said.

Niles smiled at her. "Yes, maybe you can do it. It would be a grand experiment, if nothing else." He stuck out a front hoof. "I'd best be going – my fellows are going to want to hear this, probably a few times over. Until tomorrow, Rainbow Dash."

Dash put her hoof against his, and they shook. "Sure thing. See you tomorrow."

Niles Nigellus nodded, and suddenly he moved. The wind whipped around him, and he smeared into a brown blur that parted the grass to Rainbow Dash's right. Flapping her wings, she shot up off the ground and watched him go, a dot leaving a trail across the rolling plains. He really was extremely fast. When he finally ran out of her sight, she

shuddered all over, her body wracked by shaking. She turned around and flew, headed roughly back in the direction she had come. The moon had moved across the sky, and when she had blasted toward Niles it had been right in front of her. Now it was on the other side of the sky, and she flew toward it, scanning the ground. She saw the silver gleam of the river, and followed its progress south. Finally, her sharp eyes spotted the clear spot on the riverbank, and the bright pink of Rarity's blanket stood out like a signal flag.

Dash descended in slow spirals, landing gently in the clearing and trotting a few steps before coming to a stop. She dropped to the ground and curled up, but her body was shaking again, every nerve alive with fire. She tried to close her eyes, but they sprang open again an instant later. Her heart was racing. She lay like that for nearly an hour. Sleep finally stole over her. In her dreams the lightning lit the world, striking her over and over, setting her body aflame.

"And he said they go all over the world delivering messages!"

"Uh-huh," Applejack said nonchalantly, taking a bite of grass.

"Can you imagine that? All over the world! Think of the awesome things he's seen! All the cool creatures he's met!"

"Uh-huh," Applejack murmured again.

"Are you even listening?" Rainbow Dash asked in annoyance.

"Uh-huh," Applejack said. She looked up and smiled. "Sorry, sugarcube, what was that?"

Dash groaned. "I've been trying to tell you all *morning* about the awesome creature I met last night! He's a *pronghorn*! I didn't even know there was such a thing!"

"I've been listening, Dash," Rarity said, using her magic to roll up her blanket. She drew out the air from it to compress it, then slid it into one of her saddlebags. "I think it's certainly fascinating. A whole worldwide system of messengers, zipping around and connecting all the lands! How sophisticated."

"Hold up, now – messengers?" Applejack asked, pricking up her ears.

"Um, duh, yes! That's what I've been saying!" the sky-blue pegasus cried. "I met one last night! His name is Niles Nigellus, and I'm going to meet with him again tonight!"

"And you were sayin' somethin' about lightnin'?" the orange earth pony said, her previously placid expression beginning to harden.

"Yeah! That's the best part!" Dash was quivering with excitement. "Niles said that the pronghorns get around the world by riding *lightning bolts*! It's super-fast, they can travel all the way around the world in one day! And," she squealed, "he said they might be able to teach *me*! After all these years I would finally get to learn to control lightning! You don't understand how amazing this is! I've been waiting for this almost my whole life!"

Applejack had grown more and more upset as her friend had talked. Now, she was grimacing. "So... this lightnin' ridin' business, it's real fast?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said!" Dash exclaimed, still caught up in her excitement. "Around the world in one day!"

"So I reckon it wouldn't take any time to get to Ponyville from here that way, would it?"

"Nope, it sure wouldn't!"

Applejack's face contorted with anger. "So let me get this straight. You met some creature that can travel *real fast* – around the world in one day – and you didn't think to ask him, not **once**, if he could go and get the Beneviolet from the Archback Mountains?"

The good humor vanished from Rainbow Dash's face. "Oh. I... I didn't think..."

"No! You didn't think!" Applejack yelled, advancing on Dash. "You didn't think about Twilight at all! You didn't think about us! You were just focused on how good this was for **you**!"

Dash began to stumble backwards, retreating from the orange earth pony. "I... I'm sorry..."

"If you were less **selfish** and **immature**, we might have the Beneviolet right now! It might even be in Ponyville right now ready for Twilight to chomp it down! But no! You were too caught up in your lightnin' dreams!"

"I'm not selfish!" Dash snapped, finally rising to her own defense. "I... I have to learn this! That's why I didn't think of Twilight! This is important to me!"

"More important than the life o' your friend?!"

"Applejack, I think –"

"**No!**" Applejack snapped. "Don't you defend her, Rarity! She needs to hear every bit o' this! She needs to feel ashamed!"

"I simply think that –"

"**Rarity!**" the orange earth pony snapped again.

"Don't yell at **me!**" Rarity said angrily.

"You don't understand..." the sky-blue pegasus said lamely.

"I understand plenty! I understand that you just don't care!" Applejack was well and truly angry now. Her dark red armor made her appear even more ferocious, and Dash quailed under her furious gaze. "Honestly, Rainbow, why'd you even come on this trip?! It can't have been because you wanted to help Twilight Sparkle. I seem to recall you only wantin' to come so you could prove how fast you were! You weren't thinkin' about Twilight at all! You never were!"

"Don't you **dare** say that!" Dash roared, striding up to Applejack and putting her snout in her face. "Don't you **dare** say that about me! I would give up everything for Twilight! I would die for her! For any of my friends!"

"Yet you won't think to get her help when it's slappin' you in the face!"

"You don't understand!"

"I UNDERSTAND PLENTY!"

"That is **enough!** Enough!" Applejack and Rainbow Dash suddenly shimmered across their entire bodies. They were dragged apart, Applejack's hooves leaving grooves in the dirt. Rarity's horn didn't shimmer, it shone, casting stark shadows across her graceful face. Cutting off her magic, the white unicorn turned to Applejack. "Applejack, you haven't given Dash much chance to defend herself." She turned to Dash. "Rainbow Dash, you have to admit, she has a point. Your pronghorn friend could have solved our problem swiftly. Why didn't you think to mention Twilight?"

The sky-blue pegasus' whole body drooped. "I... I did mention her a little... but I just couldn't think about anything but lightning once he mentioned it."

Rarity raised one elegant eyebrow. "Why?"

Dash's rose-colored eyes wavered. "B-because. It's something I've never been able to learn and I wanted to learn it."

Rarity fixed her with a careful stare. "No," she said, "there's more to it than that, isn't there? Why is this so important to you, Dash?"

Dash's whole body suddenly grew pale. "I... it's like I said! It's something I've always wanted to do!"

"I know a lie when I hear one," Applejack said, her voice somewhat less fierce. "Is there a reason lightnin' is so important to you, Rainbow?"

"I..."

"Please, Dash," Rarity said gently, "please tell us. We're your friends. You can trust us."

The sky-blue pegasus flinched back from her friends, her rainbow-striped mane hanging limply over her forehead. She looked at the ground, painful feelings playing out across her face. Then she raised her head, and she looked as though she were badly hurt. "Okay... okay. You can't tell **anypony** this, okay? **Nopony** in Ponyville gets to hear this. I... I can't bear for them to know. The only ponies that really know besides me are my parents and a few of the old ponies in Cloudsdale. I've never actually told anypony about this."

Applejack and Rarity exchanged glances. "We promise, Dash," Rarity said. "Not a word."

"If this is good," Applejack added menacingly.

"Applejack," Rarity scolded her.

The orange earth pony bit her lip and relaxed her face. "All right, fine, I promise. Now start talkin'!"

Rainbow Dash took a long, deep breath, then let it slowly out, until her lungs were nearly empty. She breathed in again, and out again. She raised her eyes and looked right into her friends' faces. "When I was little, just a foal, I was... small."

"Heh, you're still kinda small, Shorty," Applejack remarked.

"Do you want to hear this or not?" Dash snapped. When Applejack said nothing, Dash grimaced and continued. "But I mean, I was really small, and really weak. I was a runt. Most foals take their first steps right after they're born, and pegasuses always flap their wings right after. But my mom said I just laid there. I didn't even open my eyes for a day. A whole year went by, and they said I could barely move – that I would just lay in my bed. I wouldn't even cry. I eventually learned to stand and walk, but I couldn't flap my wings. And I couldn't run, either. My parents thought I would just be a late flyer, but by the time I was two they were really worried. They started looking around for trainers – pegasuses that could help me get stronger and learn how to fly. I went through two, maybe three; I barely remember them. But I do remember the day my parents took me to meet the next one. She was waiting for us in a big field of clouds. She was so big to me, she towered over me. Her coat was hot pink and her mane was bright blue." A smile slowly crept over Dash's face. "Her name was Firefly."

"The first thing she said to me, the first words I actually remember anypony saying to me, were 'This one *wants* to fly.' My parents say she agreed to help me for free. When we had our first lesson together, she was very polite to my parents, and she promised she would take good care of me." Dash's smile grew broader. "Then when they were gone, she said 'Every pegasus knows in their heart how to fly. You just need to do it.' Then she threw me off the edge of the cloud."

"Good heavens!" Rarity gasped.

"I fell, and I screamed, and I cried, but I flapped – for the first time, I flapped my wings. Firefly let me fall a long way before she flew down and caught me. I know she wouldn't have done that if she hadn't been sure she could catch me. She never put me in real danger. She said to me, 'Dash, I know when you stare with your eyes at me that you have the spirit of a great flyer. But you don't have the body of a flyer, and the spirit can't go far without a body to support it. You must *make* your body. And I'm going to help you.'

"We met every day, and every day Firefly pushed me farther than I thought I could go. We ran, we lifted weights, she even made me wear weights around my legs and on my back. She taught me to buckbox. She would push my wings against my sides and make me try and open them. Every night I came home, I was exhausted. My parents were worried at first; they thought Firefly was working me too hard. But she told them this was what I needed. And she promised she would never hurt me. She never did.

"After a month, I could actually run. She took over my meals, making sure I ate more protein and got more... iron, I think. And she made me work harder than ever. It's all kind of a blur to me now; it was just week after week and month after month of hard work. I got taller and stronger. I could run a little faster every week. And my wings were growing stronger and stronger. Then there was one day. I remember it really well. The sun was setting, we had just finished lifting weights. A breeze blew through my wings, they were open, so I started to flap them. I flapped harder and harder. Then... I lifted off the ground." Dash's rose eyes wavered. "I remember Firefly's face. She was so happy. She said... she always knew I could do it.

"Once I could get airborne, she started teaching me about actual flying. That went by fast. It turns out that once I could actually fly I was a natural at it! She kept making me train hard, on top of the flight training. By the time I was ready for school, I was running and flying almost nonstop." Rainbow Dash laughed. "Ha! On my first day I saw some other fillies picking on this one girl. I challenged the leader to a race, and I won. Then I punched her in the face! I got kicked out and my parents had to sign a form so the school would let me come back. Best first day of school ever!" Her smile dimmed a bit, her eyes

lowering to the ground. "Firefly stopped being my trainer once I was in school, but she never stopped visiting me. At least once a week we would go flying together, and she was always showing me her amazing tricks! I wouldn't be the pony I am today without her."

"So where does the lightning come in?" Applejack asked.

"That was Firefly's thing. She could control lightning – she was amazing at it! Sure, the other weather ponies could buck it and sometimes make it appear during storms, but Firefly could make it out of thin air, and she could make it do whatever she wanted. It was her special talent: her cutie mark was two lightning bolts on either flank. I could sometimes see her outside my window during the big storms. She would fly and wrap herself in lightning until she shone. She could run the electricity through her body and channel it through her wings. I think part of it was – oh, yeah, I have to tell you girls about this part, it's... it's important." Dash's face darkened. "You know how I've said that pegasuses don't get cold?"

"I seem to recall you mentioning that," Rarity said.

"Well, we don't. No matter how cold it gets, it never bothers us. But we feel heat just like earth ponies and unicorns – we can't take any more of it than you all can, maybe a little less. But Firefly *never* got hot. She wasn't affected by heat at all. I once saw her stand in the middle of a fire, and she wasn't even singed! I think that's part of why she could run the lightning right through her body. But she never said it was because of that. She always told me a regular pegasus could learn to do it. She... she said one day she would teach me how..." Dash's voice hitched.

Rarity's blinked her deep blue eyes. "Something happened to her, didn't it?"

"I..." The sky-blue pegasus swallowed hard. "Okay, I just said that pegasuses don't get cold but do get hot, right?"

"Uh-huh," Applejack said.

"Well, like I said, Firefly could take the heat – a lot of heat. But it wasn't just that. She was the *complete* opposite of a normal pegasus. She never got hot, but she got just as cold when the temperature dropped as a unicorn or an earth pony. She had to sleep in real blankets at night, not cloud blankets, because it gets so cold at night in Cloudsdale. She couldn't help with the preparations for winter because she couldn't stand the cold. But there was one day." Dash took a deep breath. "I... was just about five. The autumn was really wet, so there was a lot of moisture in the air, and then one night it got really cold. A

huge storm formed completely randomly out of the north and started heading towards Cloudsdale. It was so big it took the entire Weather Patrol to go deal with it. But then the spotters noticed *another* storm, this one coming out of the east. This one was even bigger, and it was dropping sleet and freezing rain. It's really bad when super-cold stuff falls on Cloudsdale, because it makes the clouds that form the buildings less stable. If enough of it falls whole chunks of the city can collapse, and it looked like there was a lot of cold sleet in this one. So all the big ponies were getting together and deciding which of them were gonna go and try to stop this new storm. The problem was that all the really fast and slick ponies were already in the Weather Patrol, and they had all gone out to stop the first storm! Everypony who was left was either too old or too young or just too slow and stiff. My parents were at the meeting; they said there was a lot of arguing over who was even capable of flying through the storm.

"While they were talking, they set another watch outside Cloudsdale to keep an eye on the new storm. My parents said that suddenly the watchponies burst in and yelled that the storm was breaking up. All the pegasuses flew out to look, and it was true! The storm was splitting up and drifting apart in two different directions. No pony could believe it. It parted almost perfectly around Cloudsdale, and the whole city was safe and dry. The Weather Patrol dealt with the first storm, and when they came back everypony was talking about the miracle that had saved Cloudsdale. It seemed like there was a party in everypony's house, and the mayor even threw a celebration!" Dash's brow grew heavy. She glanced toward the ground. "Then... after a few days... I... I realized I hadn't seen Firefly in a while."

"Oh no," Rarity whispered.

"I went by her house. I thought I would just knock on the door... but it was open. She... she wasn't there. But on her table I found a note. I was still too young to read, so I brought it to my parents. My mother started to cry as she read it. Then she read it again... out loud... to me." Rainbow Dash raised her head and looked with haunted eyes at Rarity and Applejack. "Firefly wrote that she knew she was in the best shape of any pony left in Cloudsdale. She knew she could stop the storm all on her own. Even... even though it was going to be so cold. She said to tell everypony goodbye. And she..." Dash closed her eyes tightly and let out a shuddering breath. "She said goodbye to *me*." Her eyes snapped open. "Me! She didn't have any family, so the only pony she mentioned by name was *me*! She said she was so proud of me!" She lowered her head again. "I never even *saw* her..."

Neither Rarity nor Applejack could find their voices for a moment. "I..." Rarity began. "I'm so sorry, Dash.

"She never got to teach me how to control lightning," the sky-blue pegasus said softly. "And now I *have* to learn it. I have to learn it for *her*. But I've tried and tried and **tried**. I've gone through so many teachers and so many different lessons, but I just **can't** get it. For a while now I've just... given up. But now – now Niles says he thinks I can learn. So I have to take this chance. I can't let it pass me by! And... that's why I was so excited. I forgot about everything else. I'm *sorry*." Dash finished and looked hopefully at Applejack and Rarity.

Applejack was staring hard at the ground, her green eyes betraying only the faintest hint of a waver. Rarity seemed to be fighting back tears. "But Dash... *why* don't you want anypony to know that story? I know it's very sad, but... it's so beautiful."

"Because I have a reputation in Ponyville," Rainbow Dash said, rising to her hooves. "I'm Rainbow Dash – the bravest and fastest pony of them all! I know I inspire other ponies, and don't say that's me getting a big head, because it's true! You know how all the kids look up to me. Some of them practically worship me!" She smiled, though her eyes were still sad. "They need their hero, right? What would they think of me if they knew I used to be so... weak?"

"But you overcame that weakness, didn't you?" Rarity said. "You're an even more amazing pony for having started where you did."

"Maybe..." Dash murmured. "But it is what it is, now. I need to be what they need me to be. And that's *another* reason I have to learn to control lightning. So I can come closer to being as amazing as everypony thinks I am."

"All right," Applejack said abruptly, rising to her hooves. "We've wasted enough daylight. Let's pack 'em up and move 'em out." She went to check her saddlebags. The other two travelers shared a final look, then went to their own provisions.

The three of them packed up and moved out, Rainbow Dash galloping once again, moving at the same brisk pace they had tried to keep throughout the journey. Galloping was still harder work than flying, but now Dash needed the strain and the stress. She felt spiritually drained, as though she had vomited up a meal and her stomach was empty. The work and the sweat were welcome distractions, so for the ensuing hours she threw herself into the journey, matching Applejack at the front. The orange earth pony studiously avoided her eyes, staring straight ahead. Thoughts crept into Dash's mind despite her efforts. *Is she still disappointed in me?* she thought. *She probably is. She probably doesn't think that was a good excuse. I bet she wanted to say that I should suck it up and move on.* But she couldn't. She had tried 'sucking it up.' She had tried to forget

about lightning, tried to tell herself that she didn't need to learn to control it to remember Firefly. But every time she saw a thunderstorm, every time a bolt or a sheet of lightning lit the turbulent sky, all her memories and all her regrets poured back in. Maybe Firefly didn't need her to learn lightning, but she needed it – for herself.

They stopped for lunch when the sun was high in the sky, baking the golden fields. There was almost no breeze; the air was hot and still. Dash had been almost blind to her surroundings, focused on the exertion and swept up in her thoughts. Looking ahead of her, she saw the Archback Mountains huge and solid, a dark empire of rock capped at its jagged peaks by the white of snow. Beneath the mountains, a darker band, black with a hint of green, ran across the whole expanse of the horizon. With her pegasus eyes Dash could begin to pick out a few well-defined individual trees. "So..." she spoke, her voice thick with lack of use, "I guess that's the Shimmerwood."

"It don't seem to shimmer much from where I can see," Applejack remarked. "Rainbow, can you see much inside?"

"Not yet," Dash said. "I can just now pick out a few trees."

"Well, keep an eye on it," the orange earth pony told her. "From what Lord Hammer Hoof said, it ain't just gonna be a normal forest." She looked over her shoulder; Rarity was lying on the ground, breathing hard, using her magic to move the air around her into a faint breeze. Squaring up her withers, Applejack walked around Rainbow Dash until she faced her, looked her in the eye. "Rainbow."

"Huh?" Dash said, catching her friend's eyes. The seriousness of Applejack's expression made Dash's ears flatten. "What? What's wrong?"

"Rainbow, I..." Applejack broke eye contact, then forced herself to resume it. "Rainbow, I'm sorry."

"Oh," Dash said softly. "No, it's okay."

"No, it ain't," Applejack said. "I didn't know about your thing with Firefly. I didn't know that lightnin' was so important to you. And even if that weren't the case... I... I shouldn't have gotten as cross as I did."

"No, seriously," the sky-blue pegasus said, "I understand. I'm sorry I didn't mention how serious our journey was to Niles the first time. I should have, even if lightning *is* that important to me. I promise to mention it to him tonight. I promise, even if he tells me that he can't teach me. If he can't help me, he can still help Twilight Sparkle."

"Glad to hear it," Applejack said. Then she leaned her head in close. "And Rainbow," she stared hard at Dash, "don't ever assume me or Rarity or any of us won't understand what you're goin' through. Between me and her and Twilight and Fluttershy and Pinkie, one of us'll always know where you're comin' from." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I know what it's like to lose somepony important to you."

"I... yeah," Dash whispered.

"If you ever wanna talk about it, I'm always ready," she said. "Now come on, let's eat." The orange earth pony wandered toward a patch of tall grass and ripped off a chunk in her mouth. Dash, feeling considerably less gloomy, joined her by her side. They ate in silence, but it was once more the comfortable silence that they both so cherished.

After allowing Rarity a bit more time to rest, the three of them resumed their journey. The sun traveled slowly across the sky. They heard komagas howl once in the distance, but the great lizards never showed themselves. The Shimmerwood crept closer and closer as they galloped. More and more, both the size of the forest as a whole and the size of its great trees were apparent. The top of the canopy towered off the ground, far taller than the Ponyville Library's highest branches. As evening began they had to cross another small river. The sun sank low, and the Archback Mountains now so dominated the horizon that before the sky was more than faintly orange the sun was touching the peaks. The mountains turned black in the stark shadows. The sky grew more fiery, and the long shadow of the mountains muted the burning orange that had so regularly characterized Gildedale at sunset.

Rainbow Dash almost didn't realize the significance of the time. "Oh!" she exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "We need to stop soon! Niles said for me to be visible at sunset!"

"Just a little bit further!" Applejack called. "I wanna get us closer to the wood!"

As Dash looked back ahead, she noticed something on the horizon. At first she wondered if it might not be another marker, signifying the western portion of Gildedale like the eastern marker they had seen days earlier. It quickly proved to be nothing of the sort. "Look!" she cried. "Up there! Dead ahead!"

Applejack and Rarity looked. Though it was difficult for them to see, soon the horizon revealed a small speck. It grew larger as they approached, and soon they could clearly make it out: it was a tree! "Let's head for it!" Applejack cried, steering them toward the unusual sight.

As they drew closer, they could see it more clearly. It was an oak tree, alone amidst the golden fields. Its spreading branches were thick with the wild green leaves of early spring. The three ponies slowed to a trot. Applejack immediately scoured the ground beneath the tree, and to her delight saw just what she was looking for. "Boy howdy! Dead branches!" she exclaimed. "We can have us a real fire tonight! No more fast-burnin' grass!"

"So can we stop here? Please?" Rainbow Dash said, looking anxiously at the sky. It was dark orange, rapidly darkening further to red.

"Yep, this is a great spot for camp tonight," Applejack said. "And we're real close to the Shimmerwood." The wood was black in the shadow of the mountains, a dim cluster at the base of the jagged stone. "I bet we can get there by mid-mornin' tomorrow."

"Okay yeah great!" Dash said swiftly, flapping her wings. Shooting into the sky, she rose more than a hundred feet before slowing to a hover. She looked toward the west at the shadowy mountain peaks. She hoped there was enough light in the sky for Niles to see her. She didn't even know where he would be coming from. She flapped her wings and rose a dozen feet more. She spun slowly around, scanning the ground for miles in every direction as she rotated. She didn't know how sharp *his* eyes were. The moon wasn't up yet, being past full and rising later. Could he see her? He hadn't been bothered by the prospect, or at least he hadn't said anything. *I hope he can find me*, she thought.

Suddenly, a lightning bolt flashed down from the sky to her left. It was from the south, and there were no clouds in the sky. Smiling, Dash dove toward the ground, pulling up in a swirl of wind that scattered the pile of dead wood Applejack and Rarity had been gathering. "He's coming!" she cried excitedly. "He's coming he's coming he's coming! He sees me!"

"Wonderful," Rarity remarked, using her magic to pick up the wood once more. "So what's he like?"

"Well, he's... kinda weird," the sky-blue pegasus said, touching down on the ground. "He's super nice, and really polite. He talks funny, kind of like you, Rarity."

"Pardon me," the white unicorn said primly, "but I do not 'talk funny.' I speak as befits a lady of distinction."

"Yeah, that's what I meant, he talks kind of like that. Only it's not really the same."

Rarity sighed. "Well, I hope he is as polite as you say. I would certainly appreciate some courtesy when –"

"Good evening everyone!" A voice cried brightly from behind Rarity, and before anypony could blink Niles Nigellus was in their midst. "Hello, hello, hello! Hello there, Rainbow Dash! And these must be your friends!"

Applejack and Rarity stared wide-eyed at the pronghorn, lithe and lean and built for speed. Dash grinned. "Hi there, Niles! Yeah, these are the two friends I was telling you about last night! That's Applejack, and that's Rarity!"

Niles bowed, lowering his head. "I am Niles Nigellus, Messenger of the Pronghorn Network. I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

Rarity regained her composure and lowered her head. "Good evening, sir. It is a great pleasure to meet you."

Niles approached her. He daintily extended a long front leg, cupping a foreleg under Rarity's own front hoof; he raised it, lowered his head, and kissed it softly. "It is a supreme delight to make the acquaintance of so charming and polite a unicorn. Among a type of ponies known for their grace and poise, you are truly distinct."

Rarity angled her head and fluttered her eyelashes. "Why, good sir, you flatter me. I didn't know I was in the presence of a gentlecolt."

"I am not much of a colt, I'm afraid," Niles said, lowering her hoof. "But to meet with your approval is high praise indeed." He turned toward Applejack, who had watched their greeting with some apprehension. He smiled. "I take it no kisses for you, my dear?"

Applejack took her hat off and inclined her head. "If'n you'd like, sir, you can kiss me, but I've no great need of it. A simple hello is fine by me."

"Then hello. It is very nice to meet you."

"You as well, sir," Applejack said. "It's mighty nice to meet somep – er, some creature so upstandin'."

"It comes with the job, dear Applejack," Niles said. "Good manners are essential for a messenger. It gains us access to reluctant destinations and wins us favor with hesitant recipients. Not to mention it saves us from the wrath of bad news."

"My word," Rarity said, "does that happen often?"

"With a smile and a how-you-do, not as much," the pronghorn said. "But I'm sure you've heard the axiom 'don't shoot the messenger.' Well, the saying came to be for a reason."

"I guess you guys have to be pretty careful," Dash said. She was trying with all her might to keep calm and be polite. But inside she was burning. She had to know. "So... did you have a nice trip? Er... I mean, here?"

"It wasn't far at all," Niles said. "It's gotten nice and cool, too; very good evening for a run." He looked into her rose eyes. "Oh, yes..." His long face grew solemn. "Rainbow Dash: I have consulted with two of my colleagues."

"Yeah?" Dash said, a forced smile on her face.

"Between the three of us, we have decided..." Dash almost flinched, bracing for the worst. "... that we are willing to give you a try at learning our magic."

The sky-blue pegasus' brain froze for a moment. She haltingly regained herself. "So – so you'll teach me? You'll let me learn?!" A huge smile stretched her mouth from ear to ear.

"Whether you learn is ultimately up to you. But we are willing to teach you."

"**WOOHOO!**" Dash yelled, shooting off the ground. She did several loop-de-loops in the air, spiraling and corkscrewing around. "WOOHOO! WOOHOO! WOOHOO! I'M GONNA DO IT!"

"Thank you very much," Rarity said to Niles. "This really does mean a great deal to her."

"I can see that," Niles said, watching the pegasus' acrobatics.

"All right all right this is *awesome!*" Dash exclaimed, landing on the ground with a stomp of her hooves. "So when can we go?! Can we go now?! I wanna get started right now!"

"Hold up, Rainbow," Applejack said. "We haven't even had dinner yet. It can at least wait 'til after that."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Niles said. "The business could take some time, and it wouldn't do for you to get hungry in the middle of it."

"Awww," Dash grumbled, crossing her hooves over her chest. "But I wanna go now..."

"Patience," Niles gently said. "Be calm." His eyes closed. "Breathe." He opened his eyes again.

Dash's lower eyelids raised in uncertainty. "Um... okay."

"Would you like to join us for dinner, Master Nigellus?" Rarity asked. "We would be most grateful for your company."

Niles grinned. "I don't see why not, provided I won't be eating some other creature's food."

"There's plenty to go around," Applejack said. "We got apples and carrots and potatoes and bread, and there's always lots o' grass around. Actually, we were just gonna build a fire." She motioned toward the pile of wood that she and Rarity had recollected. It was in a small pit they had dug close to the base of the oak tree.

"Oh, wonderful," Niles said. "Will you be doing any grilling?"

"Er – I didn't think so," Applejack said. "I mean, I've had grilled apples before –"

"And they're delicious, aren't they? I've had them once before in Laplaula. Nice and tart and warm."

"Oh, sure, I love 'em too," Applejack said brightly. "We love to make big ol' applekebabs back at Sweet Apple Acres on summer nights. But I didn't bring a knife to cut 'em with."

"Oh, for goodness sake, Applejack," Rarity remarked, "you know I can cut them with magic, right?"

The orange earth pony blinked. "Huh, I guess I forgot. I also wasn't real sure you'd have that fine a control –"

"Well if you're asking me to dice them, that's one thing," the white unicorn said. Her horn shimmered, and Applejack's saddlebags were thrown open. "But if it's a simple matter of splitting them down the middle..." There was a rustling through the saddlebags, and Rarity narrowed her eyes in concentration. Four apples were lifted from the right bag after more searching. Setting three of them on the ground, Rarity levitated one of them right in front of her and focused on it, her blue eyes fixed on the shiny red skin. Her horn began to shine brighter, her brow furrowing in concentration. There was a soft tearing sound, then a sharp **rip**, and the apple split in two, juicy white flesh glistening on both halves.

"Please," Niles said, "allow me." A shimmering field enveloped his two horns, and the three remaining apples rose off the ground. He fixed his dark eyes upon them, inclining his head gently. There was another sharp **rip**, and one of the apples split down the middle. With a third **rip**, the second of them split.

"I'll do the last one," Rarity said, not wanting to be shown up too badly. She wrapped her magic around the last intact apple. Niles released his own hold, and she once more bent her will upon the fruit. She was more prepared this time, so with little further effort the apple split down the middle.

"Heh, this'll be a taste o' home," Applejack said brightly. "If y'all are willin' to keep 'em floatin', we can grill 'em right over the fire. Now I just need to get the firestarter..."

"I can take care of that as well," Niles said, stepping over to the pile of logs. With a crackle, sparks began to race up and down his horns. A bright white line rose between them, and a lightning bolt shot through the air. Applejack braced herself for the bolt to blast the log pile apart, but the crackling blaze of energy instead coiled itself around the logs, wrapping them in its white-hot radiance. The logs were quickly smoking, and soon a fire sprouted, enveloping the dry tinder. As briskly as it had appeared, the lightning vanished.

Rainbow Dash could barely contain her excitement. "That was **so cool!**" she exclaimed.

"You're right handy to have around, Mister Nigellus," Applejack remarked.

"Please," he said, "call me Niles."

"Well then, if you and Rarity will get those apples grillin', I'll strip out o' this here armor and get out the rest of the provisions," Applejack said, sitting down and beginning to undo the straps on her champron.

Niles glanced curiously at her as he floated his four apple halves over the roaring flames. "That armor is from Gildedale, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh," Applejack said. "It used to belong to the daughter o' the Lord of the Dale."

"My word!" the pronghorn exclaimed. "However did you come to have it?"

"Prince Ashtail himself gave it to her, as a reward for solving Gildedale's komaga problem," Rarity said. She levitated the four apple halves she controlled over the fire besides Niles'.

Four apple halves wobbled; Niles quickly steadied his magic. "Solved? What do you mean, solved?"

"Oh, it was so cool!" Dash said, scooting closer to the fire. "See, apparently for like hundreds of years the Daleponies have been killing the komagas when they came across them, because that's what they thought they had to do, right?"

"I am familiar with that."

"Yeah, well, see, Applejack figured out that the komagas actually don't want to attack anypony at all! They're just scared and *stampeding* when they run across Gildedale! So she made three lassos, and she and Rarity and I all went out and changed the direction of a huge komaga herd! We *herded* them, just like you'd herd stampeding cows!"

"My word!" Niles cried again. "I... I would never have dreamed of such a thing. And not a single one was killed?"

"Not a one," Applejack said with pride. She unfastened the straps on one of her leather greaves. "It was mighty shockin' to the Daleponies, too."

"I'll say!" Niles said. "To hear that the komagas aren't at all aggressive... it... it goes against everything the Daleponies have ever told me. To buck *centuries* of tradition like that... How did Lord Hammer Hoof take it?"

"He was a real gentlecolt about it," the orange earth pony said. "Admitted he was wrong and everythin'. Even gave us free passage across Gildedale, now and whenever we want."

"For performing a feat like that, I can imagine so," the pronghorn said. "You three... you are quite the ponies. To come all this way and still have the strength to do so much is remarkable."

"All in a day's - oh!" Dash's mind flashed with the reminder. "Oh! Niles! We need your help!"

"We? Your friends don't want to learn about lightning also, do they?"

"No! I mean, we need your speed!"

"Yes, please," Rarity said. "We need you to help save our friend Twilight Sparkle."

"The one who's sick, right?" Niles asked. "Rainbow Dash mentioned you were going to the Archback Mountains to find a Beneviolet."

"Our friend's in powerful need of it, too," Applejack said, sliding the cruppers off her hindquarters. Finally bare, she flipped her hat back onto her head and trotted over to the fire. "She has Horn Rot, a real bad case of it. Our zebra friend said she has only about two weeks, and that was more than a week ago!"

"You have a zebra friend?" Niles repeated. "A zebra living this far from Zvaha is a story in itself. I wonder if..." He paused. "It's not important. But two weeks? That's outrageously fast for Horn Rot. My species gets it from time to time – with the powerful magic we use it's to be expected. But it moves so slowly, it would usually take about a month to cripple or kill us! For your friend's Horn Rot to be moving so quickly it would need a great deal of internal magic to feed it. Is your friend a particularly powerful magician?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Rarity said. "She's an incredible sorceress. I've never met a unicorn who had her skill *or* her power, excepting Princess Celestia, of course."

"That would explain it," Niles said. "That's the rub about Horn Rot – the more powerful you are the more deadly the disease is for you. If you've just got weak magic, or you don't use magic often, it can be a years-long ordeal without doing you harm. Bison can *live* with Horn Rot. On the other hand, if you've got big horns and lots of power, it eats you alive. I've known kudu that got it; they barely last a week. Poor blighters." He lowered his head.

"What's a kudu?" Dash asked.

"It's – oh oh, apples are done," Niles broke off, noting the way the apple slices were steaming and sizzling. He and Rarity used their magic to levitate them away from the fire. The smell wafting through the air was indeed delicious.

"Hold on," Applejack said, rustling through her saddlebags. She yanked out her tarp and unfolded it partially. "Set 'em down here." Niles and Rarity complied, gently laying the apple slices skin-down on the waxed cotton surface. Rainbow Dash pulled out a loaf of bread and some carrots, setting them beside the apples.

"Now *this* is a meal," the sky-blue pegasus said with a grin.

"Not every day I get hot food," Niles remarked.

"Welp, dig in everypony – er, and pronghorn," Applejack said, sitting down around the tarp. "Sorry about that, Niles."

"I've just learned to say 'creature,'" he said, settling back on his thin haunches. "It's the most convenient catch-all term."

"So, you were saying?" Dash said. "About the kudu?"

"Oh, right, kudu. They're antelopes. They're *big* antelopes, great massive beasts with big shoulders and great muscles." Niles raised his front hooves in an intimation of size. "Their coats are slate gray, and their eyes are always an orange-red that *smolders* in the dark. They have massive, corkscrewing horns rising high off their heads. They are powerful magicians, and most of them are famously short-tempered. It doesn't help that their specialty is *fire* magic. When it's time for the Magus Courts to choose a new Kingshaman, they'll torch the savannah for *leagues* all around in their displays of power. The really great ones can even summon Fire Elementals to do their bidding."

"Wow," Dash said. "It must be amazing to see."

"You sound like you've seen a great deal in your travels, Master Niles," Rarity said.

"Do I?" Niles asked her. He chuckled softly. "I suppose I do. My, what have I seen?" His eyes half-closed. "I have seen the crumbling obsidian castles where the Lord Of All The Herds plotted and schemed... I have sat at the great bonfires, watched the zebras and the giraffes dance around the flames to summon the ghosts of their ancestors... I have snatched a wayward parcel from the grasp of a slimy kappa, at a waterfall in a silent forest... I have wandered through llama cities where the streets are paved with gold... I have stood upon the polar ice and watched the narwhals join their horns to summon the Grand Aurora..."

The three ponies were enraptured. "Golly," Applejack whispered, "sure makes little ol' Ponyville sound small."

The pronghorn smiled at them. "Don't think yourselves unimportant," he said. "The world would be a much poorer place if not for Equestria and its ponyfolk. Your land is a font of life, a source of energy from which all the world draws. The world needs Equestria. And of course, there is only one Sun and one Moon, and they *both* live in Equestria." He used his magic to levitate a slice of apple to his mouth, where he took a careful bite. "Mmm, delicious. It makes me long for tea."

"Oh, my, yes," Rarity remarked, tearing off a chunk of bread. "A good black tea would go delightfully with these strong flavors."

"You know who makes a great tea?" he said nonchalantly. "*Nagas*. Great ivory serpent gods with golden fangs. You can see forever when you look into their eyes. Really kind of terrifying. But they serve you the most delicious red chai tea."

"Huh," Dash said. "That's kind of cool, I guess."

"Hold on a second," Applejack interjected, "we got way off our original point. The thing is this, Niles: Twilight needs the Beneviolet as soon as possible. We're still at least two or three days from the Archback Mountains, provided the trip through the Shimmerwood is quick, and..."

"You're wondering if I could go get it for you," the pronghorn said.

"Please, we're desperate," Rarity said.

"Hmm," Niles said, taking a bite of a carrot. He chewed it thoughtfully, slowly. He swallowed. "Our first duty as messengers in the Pronghorn Network is to the rulers of nations. They're the ones that make the decision to go to war, which is what we strive to prevent above all else. So we must always be on-call to receive the messages they wish for us to send. Their needs must be prioritized above anyone else's."

"Oh," Applejack said, her ears flattening.

Niles' dark eyes wavered. "But... if I can find the time... I don't see why not."

"Really?!" the orange earth pony exclaimed.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir!" Rarity said.

"Don't thank me yet," Niles said. "I can only get the Beneviolet for you if no messenger duties demand my attention. Even if I'm available, getting to the Archback Mountains is a different matter than finding a Beneviolet there."

"You've been all over the world and seen all sorts of stuff! I'm sure finding a Beneviolet wouldn't be that hard!" Rainbow Dash said.

"I suppose you're right," said Niles. He glanced up at the sky, where the stars were appearing in the vast darkness. "The night is getting on, though, so we'd best finish up our dinner. I'm not sure how long Rainbow Dash's instruction is going to take."

With a nod of understanding, the three ponies focused on their meal, passing small talk between themselves and the pronghorn. In a short while, the food was gone, and Dash rose to her hooves, quivering with excitement. "So?" she asked, trying to keep the giddiness out of her voice. "Can we go now? Is it time?"

Niles closed his eyes. He breathed in slowly, then breathed out. "Yes, I think it is time. If you will follow me." He stood, turned to Rarity and Applejack. "I'll try to have her back by morning."

"I wish she wouldn't be up all night," Applejack said. "We still have a ways to go in the mornin'."

"Trust me, she won't be tired." He smiled. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Applejack." Niles extended a front hoof, raising up Applejack's own foreleg. He kissed her front hoof gently. "You said you didn't need it... but I think every female should get to feel like a lady from time to time."

Applejack blushed. "Shucks, sugarcube, that's... well, thank ye kindly. It was great to make your acquaintance."

Niles turned to Rarity. "Madam Rarity, your company was delectable. Thank you for sharing your food and your time with me."

Rarity bowed her head. "The pleasure was all mine, Good Sir Niles. Do try and take care of our Rainbow Dash."

"With luck, I shall do better than that."

"All right, come on! Let's get going!" Dash cried, fluttering impatiently in the air behind Niles.

Chuckling, the pronghorn turned towards her. "Very well, then. I'll take you to our Waystation. Follow me."

"Bye AJ! Bye Rarity! When I come back, I'll be *lightning powered!*" the sky-blue pegasus cried. The pronghorn turned toward the south and pumped his legs. He was running almost instantly, and in the blink of an eye he vanished, the grass beyond the oak tree

parting dramatically in his wake. Rainbow Dash flapped her wings hard and soared after him, so in very short order the two of them were long gone.

"I do hope Dash knows what she's doing," Rarity said.

"I'm not sure that filly ever knows what she's doin'," Applejack remarked, picking up her tarp in her mouth and shaking it to scatter the bread crumbs.

"Now I wouldn't say that," the white unicorn countered. "Dash seems to be in control of herself most of the time. But I wonder if her enthusiasm hasn't blinded her to the risks she could be taking. What if she gets hurt?"

"Lightnin' has to be pretty dangerous," Applejack agreed. "Rainbow said so herself. And how exactly are these pronghorns gonna teach her to use it? Is she gonna get shocked or somethin'?"

"I hope they don't hurt her," Rarity said again. She raised her head and blinked. "Why is it that whenever the two of us talk, we're worrying about something?"

"Dunno," Applejack muttered, folding up her tarp and carrying it over to her saddlebags. "It might be because worryin's what we do for a livin'. You have your dress shop, I got my farm. It's part o' our jobs to worry."

Rainbow Dash flew low over the darkened fields, keeping her eyes locked on Niles as he ran. He was incredibly fast. She needed little effort to keep up with her pony friends when they galloped, but the pronghorn's speed required actual exertion on her part. The moon had at last risen, just barely less than full, slathering the grasses in silver. The stars twinkled overhead. The Archback Mountains were blacker than black to the left; far to the right, the Drackenridge Mountains were faint shadows. Her insides were tingling, pricked with a million sewing needles. She was filled with excitement, and also fear. It was just like the buildup to one of her tricks. Could she pull it off? Could she succeed? She thought she could, but there was no way to know for sure. It was like a Sonic Rainboom. Succeed or fail. But success had to happen. Failure was a possibility, but the thought of it was so disastrous she could scarcely stand to tolerate it.

At last, Niles' pace began to slacken. He powered up a shallow hill, then came to the top and abruptly halted. The sky-blue pegasus wheeled around it twice before slowly descending, coming to a running landing and galloping the last few feet to the hilltop. The space was covered by a large, flat circle of stone – a perfect circle. It gleamed white in the moonlight. "Stand back," Niles said, obliging her to retreat a few paces. Once more, lightning rose between his horns, and a powerful bolt sizzled through the air. It struck the stone on the outer edge and slowly circled, tracing a scorching line around the flat surface. The lightning completed the circuit and vanished. The stone rumbled, and then there was the sound of grinding, of rock against rock. A portion of the stone *sunk*. The descent traveled around, the inner portion of the circle collapsing like water circling a drain. Dash's eyes went wide. With a final deep **thunk**, the movement ceased, and where there had been a flat topping stone before, there was now a spiraling ramp of stone descending into the hill. "If you'll follow me," the pronghorn said, setting foot on the top of the ramp. He began to trace the path down. Dash was slightly nervous. Being away from the sky always set her on edge. But if it was necessary to learn lightning, she would do it. She set off down the ramp after him.

They spiraled down into the earth, the moonlit sky vanishing above them. Dash could scarcely see the stone in front of her hooves after a few rotations. Her breathing sped up, her skin tingling beneath her blue coat – she was nervous. *One hoof in front of the other*, she told herself. It was something Firefly used to say. So she did it. She put one hoof in front of the other, and she gradually went lower and lower. Niles Nigellus' hooffalls were a guide for her own; she followed his soft clip-clop down the ramp. At length, light began to fill the air again, slowly, and she could see in front of her once more. She was able to see the walls around her, and they were smooth and dark. Finally, Niles' hooffalls became muted, and a few moments later, she stepped off the ramp. The source of the light

became apparent: set in two sconces were sharply-cut chunks of crystal that emitted a soft white glow. No sooner had her last back hoof left the stone ramp than another lightning bolt blazed from Niles' horns. The grinding of stone filled the air once more; turning around, she saw the ramp begin to spiral upwards, leaving her stuck down here... deep in the earth.

"Are you all right?" Niles asked her.

Dash nodded. "I'm fine... I'm just... not used to being underground."

"I guess you're more comfortable with the open sky," the pronghorn said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm fine," Dash repeated. "Let's get going."

"It's not much further," he said, turning toward an opening in the rock. She followed close behind him, leaving the tall antechamber behind.

They entered into a much larger cave. It was clearly artificial: the walls were smooth, the space was open. More crystals lined the walls to light their way. Niles' horns sizzled, and a line of lightning rose between them, providing further light. Sweeping her rose eyes around the cavern, Dash caught something from the corner of her eye, a wrinkle that was more than a divot in the rock. She stopped, she stared. It was white, the wrinkle – it was more of a squiggle. And between the lines of white there was a shock of brilliant electric blue. She raised her head, following the white lines. Her eyes widened. The whole ceiling of the cavern was covered in *line* and *color*. Ripples and swirls and squiggles of white and black wavered across the stone, and in between the lines every color imaginable had been painted. Some lines were thick; some lines were thin. Red and green and blue and purple and pink and orange and teal and daffodil and violet and every other color, some colors she couldn't even name, wavered out across the tall silent stone. There were whirlpools and eddies and wrinkles. Solid lines of color would cut across the black and white borders. The lines would birth lines that birthed more lines, streaking in ever more branching fingers, and *they were lightning bolts*. Rainbow Dash couldn't take it all in – it was too much. "What is all this?" she asked.

Niles sat down beside her, joined her in looking up. "It is our attempt to depict the Dreaming. It doesn't really come close to capturing it, but we do the best we can."

Dash glanced at him. "You mentioned that last night. What is the Dreaming?"

Niles closed his eyes, let out a breath. "The Dreaming... contains all things that are. Before there was, there was the Dreaming. The gods were born of the Dreaming, and it

was in the Dreaming that they made our world. We are of the Dreaming too – all creatures, all things are, before they are made, and we stay in the Dreaming, though we are mostly in the waking world. We mortal creatures are closest to it when we sleep, when our mind is free of the weight of bodily existence – hence its name, eh? And when we die, we are in the Dreaming still. There is no Was or Will Be; in the Dreaming, all Is."

"So..." Dash murmured, trying to process such a strange explanation. "Is it like... eternity?"

"I suppose you could say that," Niles said. "The Dreaming is... it's why things can be. It is the source of truth and the origin of being. You are in the Dreaming because you exist. A waking creature cannot always touch the Dreaming. However, you will tonight."

"I will?" Dash asked.

Niles nodded. "If you would learn to truly touch lightning, if you desire to master it fully, you must master yourself the Dreaming." The pronghorn stared at her with his dark eyes. "Lightning is both electricity in the atmosphere and an emanation of the Dreaming. Lightning is the Dreaming is being. You must order yourself to receive that being, that lightning, if you are to control it."

Dash took a deep breath. "I think I can do it," she said. "I'll try not to be afraid."

"Fear is not what you need to conquer," Niles said, rising to his hooves again. "Indeed, too little fear can be your failing here. Harmony is what you must achieve." He set off across the chamber again. "Come."

Dash stood up and followed him, sparing one last glance at the painted ceiling. They passed out of the great cavern and down a long tunnel. There were doorways in the stone, and in each one she saw a simple wooden bed. Some rooms had shelves filled with books. They had gone some distance down the tunnel when more hooffalls were heard than their own. From one room on either side of them, a pronghorn emerged, as slender as Niles. One of them was a bit taller than he; the other was roughly Niles' height, and unlike the other two, it did not have a black band around its throat. Niles halted before them. "Good evening, chappies," he said brightly. "I've got our brave young pegasus here." He stepped to the side, allowing Dash to clearly see the two newcomers. "This is Rainbow Dash of Ponyville. Rainbow Dash, these are my fellow messengers, Clive Croeuxus and Audrey Alleinus."

"My dear," Clive, the taller of the two, said. His voice was thicker than Niles'.

"Hi," Dash said simply, smiling as hopefully as she could.

"Hello, dearie," Audrey, the one without the black throat band, said. "You'll pardon me for a moment."

"Huh? Why –"

"**BOO!**" Audrey shouted, starting forward. Dash flinched back, but caught herself, kept herself from retreating more than a pace. She stared hard at the female pronghorn. Audrey gave her a wry smile. "Reactive... yet not flighty. A good foundation."

"Rainbow Dash," Clive said solemnly. His force of personality was evident. "What you have asked of us is not a thing typically undertaken by pegasi. You have asked us to bestow our magic upon you, though you lack the horns to focus it. You have asked us to tamper with your spirit – with your very soul. You have asked us to expose you to the truths of existence. Do you fully understand these things you ask of us?"

Dash was silent for a moment. A tiny voice in her head told her that she could still turn back. It told her that these pronghorns were wise and kind, and they had known her limits upon first seeing her. It told her that if she chose to refuse this opportunity, they would think no less of her. She was at the height of her climb, her wings beating, ready to dive – but she could still stop now and slowly descend. She could avoid her fear if she so chose. She stepped forward. "I understand. I accept the risks."

Clive tilted his head to the side. "Do you accept that even if you succeed tonight – in fact, do you accept that, *especially* if you succeed tonight, you will never be the same?"

"I accept that."

Clive nodded. "Then follow us." He and Audrey turned as one and began to walk down the tunnel. Niles came up beside her, and the two of them followed at a similar pace. "Tell me, Rainbow Dash," the leading pronghorn said over his shoulder, "in Equestria, where your kind command the storms and make the weather, what does the typical pegasus do with lightning?"

"Oh," the sky-blue pegasus started, "well, um, most pegasuses –"

"Pegasi, I think," Audrey interjected.

"Right, sure, whatever," Dash dismissed her. "Anyway, most pegasi just sort of let lightning happen. They don't actually make it. When it *does* happen, they can change it,

redirect it, control it. They can buck it with their back legs, and if there's more than one of them, they can guide a lightning bolt's path."

"But they do not make lightning themselves?"

"Well..." Dash lowered her head. "There was... this one pegasus. I knew her when I was really little. *She* could make lightning. But I've never known a pegasus since her that could do it."

The three pronghorns shared a glance. "Very well," Clive said. "So you have some understanding of the depth of difference between your ways and ours. We pronghorns *make* lightning. We have made it since our eldest days on the prairies of our native land. We made it and built the great summer storms *around* it. We made it and used it to burn the dead and stagnant plants, to start fires that cleared the way for new life. Do you know what it takes to *make* lightning?"

"Niles was telling me a little about it," Dash answered. "Something about entering the Dreaming, which has to do with existence?"

"The Dreaming is where existence begins," the elder pronghorn said. "I am a bit older and creakier than dear Niles. I have wandered the infinity of the Dreaming many times. I do it more now in my stretching years. The Dreaming is... below... and above... and around... all that exists. Not merely all life, but all that touches it, grows up from it. The gods are always in the Dreaming. We mortals fill our minds and spirits with ourselves, so the Dreaming often has no space in us. It enters us, and we enter it, when we sleep, when our souls are stilled. It is then that we cease to move in the Dreaming – and then that the Dreaming starts to move *us*. That is important." The party had reached the end of the tunnel, and was now stopped in front of a stone wall. There were thick, dark swirls drawn all over the rock. "To make lightning, you cannot move it. You must let it move you. It moves with the folds and wrinkles of the Dreaming. When the Dreaming moves you... the lightning will come." Two *blinding* bolts of lightning erupted from Clive's horns. They struck the stone and began to writhe across it, curving and snapping and filling the air with light. For a flickering instant they perfectly matched the swirling lines drawn across the stone; then they vanished. The stone rumbled, and began to slowly sink into the ground.

When the way was clear, it opened into another large chamber, again drawn with swirls and an infinity of colors slashed with jagged lightning bolts of bold hues. There were glowing crystals on the walls here, but unlike the white light of the previous chambers, these crystals shone electric blue, casting that hue through the dark air. A small pond

stood at the back of the cavern, still and clear. In the center of the cavern was a hole in the ground; beside it was a pile of long crystals, each one glowing faintly blue. At the edges of the walls, Dash could see large clay pots. Niles hung behind as she entered the room. There was another sizzle of electricity. Dash turned and saw a lightning bolt from Niles' horns strike the ground. The stone began to slowly rise back up, blocking the entrance.

"Rainbow Dash," Clive said again. She turned toward him. "I must ask you one final question."

Dash nodded. "Okay."

"What do you want?"

"I..." the sky-blue pegasus stammered.

Audrey walked over to the hole in the ground. She picked up one of the blue crystals with her mouth and dropped it down the hole.

"What do you want?"

"I..." Dash was at a loss. What did she want? To be the fastest? To be the bravest? To be the best? Did she want to join the Wonderbolts? Did she want to save Twilight Sparkle? Did she want to fall in love? "I..."

Thick smoke began to rise out of the hole. It quickly reached the ceiling and began to billow outwards, slowly expanding in a cloud that swallowed the chamber inch by inch.

"What do you want?" Clive asked again. He began to slowly walk towards her. She could hear Niles coming up behind her. Audrey advanced on her from an angle.

"I..." Dash's breathing grew quicker. The smoke was almost upon her. "I... I want... I want so many things..."

What do you want.

The smoke swallowed her. It smelled faintly, pleasantly. She started to feel weak and light-headed.

"I..." she murmured, drawling out the pronoun.

What do you want.

She could not speak. The smoke filled her lungs. Her eyelids grew heavy.

What do you want.

The smoke pressed upon her from all sides. Her eyes slid shut. The heaviness of the smoke pressed down upon her and forced her into darkness.

Her eyes open in a vast blackness. Rainbow Dash feels strange, like she weighs far less than she should. Indeed, she feels as though she weighs nothing. She looks down –

"Whoa!" she exclaims.

Her whole body is a gleaming electric blue. Her mane, her eyes, her hooves, her wings, all of it shines in the infinite darkness around her. Startled, she takes a step backwards. The fall of her hoof on what seems to be the ground causes a ripple of light to pulse through the infinity. The ripple reveals lines of color, bursts of wrinkled **white and black lines** between which every conceivable hue is smeared. As instantly as the color appears it vanishes, leaving her in the empty dark once more.

What do you want.

Looking ahead, Dash sees the three pronghorns standing ahead of her in the blackness. One is gold, one is gray, one is green.

"Lightning is both of the Dreaming and of energy," says the green one; Clive's voice. "It moves through both and it cannot be commanded. It can only be guided."

"It can only be guided by you if you in turn allow yourself to be guided," says the gold one. This is Audrey.

"You must move together, both in body and in soul, you and the lightning," the gray one says in Niles' voice. "We shall teach you how to move now."

What do you want.

In an instant all vanishes. The gleaming blue pegasus stands in the midst of a desert, a black desert with black rocks and black sand. Each structure has a stark white outline, standing it out against the vast blackness. She looks straight ahead as

she hears a rumble, and as her bones begin to rattle. A huge herd of buffalo is bearing down on her, stretched across the horizon for miles. She thinks, *No problem, I'll just* – but she stops. Something isn't right. Looking over her shoulder, she yelps in surprise as she notices her wings are gone! She's an earth pony for all intents and purposes. The buffalo thunder closer. Dash begins to panic.

"**Why do you fear?**" a voice asks from her right.

She turns and sees Audrey, standing calmly at her side. "**Are you kidding? There's a huge herd of buffalo coming right for us! I'm gonna be trampled! We're gonna die!**"

"**I have no fear of them,**" the pronghorn says, turning to face the stampede. "**Why do you?**"

"**Because I can't fly over them!**" Dash exclaims, stomping her front hooves on the ground in a panic. "**I'm stuck here on the ground!**"

"**You are not doomed for being grounded,**" Audrey says. "**Simply find a path through the herd.**"

"**There is no path!**" Dash yells in a full panic.

"**There is no straight path,**" Audrey corrects her. "**Many times there are no straight paths. Often, in fact. But that never means there is *no* path. There is always the crooked path. It is neither simple nor obvious. It rewards the observant as well as the patient. And it is frequently superior to the straight and simple path.**"

Rainbow Dash says nothing. She looks at the coming buffalo herd. She scans it, breathing hard.

"**Seek the crooked path,**" Audrey whispers in her ear.

When Dash turns toward her, she is gone. Dash looks back at the herd. Every instinct in her mind is telling her to panic. Her natural urge is to turn tail and run. But she knows it won't save her; she cannot outrun the stampede. So she stops. She forces her breathing to slow. Her eyes that are normally rose-colored sweep over the front of the stampede, seeking openings, gaps, entrances. She finally spies a crevice between two great bulls. Stomping the ground with a front hoof, she charges, running flat out. She's in a panic – she is almost crying. What is she doing, running towards a stampede? But she forces down her fears and powers ahead, aiming for the gap. With her own speed added to the buffalos, the herd is quickly

upon her. She cuts left across the sand. The hooves are making the ground tremble. She reaches her gap and plunges into it.

She runs forward, the buffalo all around her. The line between the bulls is closed by a single rampaging cow. She takes a third of a second to pause and look – there's a gap between two more. She runs sideways, then turns sharp right and passes through the new gap. She runs it for a distance, but then faces a solid wall of buffalo. There seems to be no way forward, no way to avoid being trampled to death. Then she notices a small stump that a bull has just finished jumping over. She cuts sideways, weaving between buffalo as the next line of the stampede closes on her. Then in a straightaway she runs flat-out for the stump. A cow is headed right for the stump as well, huge head down, horns sharp. The line of buffalo meet her just as she reaches the stump. She jumps forward, aiming low, flattening out her entire body just as the cow makes a great leap of her own.

She feels the tips of the cow's hooves scrape across her back. Her belly scrapes the wood of the stump. She falls down into a forward roll that sends her tumbling through the black sand of the black desert. She's gasping and sputtering and clutching her gleaming blue hooves to her gleaming blue body. She looks ahead of her, and the space is clear and empty. She looks behind her, and the buffalo continue on their way. The herd is past. Rainbow Dash gasps out a breath.

What do you want.

In an instant she is no longer in a desert. Where before she was without water, now water is everywhere. She is in the middle of a black ocean, no land in sight on any horizon. The waves surge around her. Once more, she has no wings. Panic grips her again. She doesn't know how to swim! She thrashes about in the water, sending splashes and ripples through the salty expanse. She dips below the water, making her panic further. She churns and swirls in the water, tumbling down and down into the ocean depths. There is a black ocean bottom beneath her, black sand snaking between piles of black, jagged rocks. Black coral sticks up and out of crevices. She's helpless and frightened, striking out with every limb, swishing her tail, throwing her head around every direction. She sinks all the way to the bottom.

"If you flail, you sink," a voice says nearby. She can hear it even underwater. She turns her head and sees Clive, standing calmly on the sandy ocean floor. His green glow lights the black water around her.

She finds she can speak too. "I can't swim!" she screams, not noticing that she doesn't seem to need to breathe.

"Why do you flail? The water is calm. There is no storm to avoid."

"I... I'm so scared... please help me!"

Clive raises his eyebrows. "When you must resist – when you must fight – do so. But when you mustn't... don't. Allow yourself to be carried." He smiles gently at her. "If you flail, you sink. So be calm... and float."

Dash closes her eyes tightly. When she opens them again, Clive is gone. "F-f-float," she whispers, stammering with fear. She forces herself to stop moving. Her legs gradually still. She even stops moving her tail. She holds her breath and makes herself motionless, closing her eyes again. She can feel herself rising, but she dares not open her eyes. She finally feels the water break across her back, feels the crisp warmth of the dry air. She raises her head and opens her eyes. She is floating. "I did it!" she exclaims.

What do you want.

She is no longer in the ocean. Now she is standing on a thick limb of wood. At first she thinks she's on a particularly large branch of a particularly large tree. Then she notices the leaves. They are maple leaves, and they are *enormous*. They're bigger than she is. The branch she's on isn't very big. She's very small. She turns around and looks up. A tree bigger than her imagination soars up through the sky, branches rising up and up further than she can see. Stars light the sky above her. The leaves around her are white. Suddenly, a breeze blows, catching her and nearly tearing her off her hooves. Panicking, she wraps all four legs around the branch, but this forces her to look down, and the distance to the ground below fills her with even more fear. She is wingless yet again. It's like when she was a foal, when Firefly threw her off the cloud. She was afraid then, afraid for the very first time. That was when the fear started, and it's been with her all her life.

"Do not fear the fall," a voice says. She turns her head. Niles is standing on an enormous leaf, as calm as if he were chatting with her over tea.

"B-but... if I fall without my wings... I'll die!" Dash cries.

Niles shakes his head. "Not if you let yourself be carried," he says gently. The breeze blows again, yanking some of the enormous maple leaves off of their stems. They

spin and twist through the air, flitting through the dark sky as they begin their gentle, ambling fall. "Consider the leaves upon the tree. They fall without wings, traveling the paths of empty space. Yet they reach the ground in their time, safe and sound. The wind carries them, and they are content with its guidance." Another breeze blows, and the leaf Niles is standing on is yanked away. "You must be as a leaf on the wind," he says before he floats out of sight.

The wind howls, yanking off leaf after leaf around her. Rainbow Dash is so afraid. She clings tightly to the branch. The ground is so far away. She thinks about what Niles says. "Carried," she whispers. The wind picks up, a strong breeze. She unclenches her legs. The wind yanks her off the branch. Her stomach drops as she spins and swirls through the vast empty air. She spreads her legs wide, flattening herself, trying to be as leaflike as she can be. The wind blows around her. It billows beneath her, lifting her up, twisting her around. She spins, seeing the tree then the sky then the tree again. It is not so frightening as she thought. Dash flips and spirals, headed ever toward the ground. She seems to move more slowly the closer she gets. A strong breeze blows her along the surface of a pond; she skims it with her hooves. She has completely given up trying to steer herself. She goes where the wind takes her. At the other side of the pond, it sets her down. She alights gently on her hooves, grateful for the earth beneath them.

What do you want.

The pronghorns stand around her again.

"What do you want?" Clive asks her.

"I..."

"What do you want?" Audrey asks her.

There are a thousand things she wants. She's not entirely sure if she wants them or not.

"What do you want?" Niles asks her.

What does she want? She's always telling herself what she wants. But has she ever honestly asked the question? The pronghorns now stand in front of her. She looks right at them. "What *should* I want?" she asks.

Niles arches an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

She thinks. The Dreaming pulses around her, rainbows of color flashing between black and white. She can feel so much around her. So much life. Some outside the Dreaming, some inside, some both ways. So much being. "I..." she begins. "I want to... be."

The pronghorns smile.

"Hello, Dash."

Rainbow Dash's spectral body feels its throat constrict. Her whole astral form shudders. She knows that voice. She barely notices that the pronghorns have vanished again. Slowly, fearing every movement, she turns around. Standing right behind her is a pegasus pony. Unlike the rest of the Dreaming, she doesn't gleam a solid color. Her coat is hot pink. Her mane and tail are bright blue. There are two blue lightning bolts on either flank. Her eyes are lavender-hued. Dash steps back. "You're not real," she says, her voice grows thick. "You're just something from the Dreaming again. You..." tears well up in her eyes, "you're not real!"

"Dash," Firefly says, stepping slowly forward. "Dash, Rainbow Dash, look me in the eyes. Look at me." The gleaming blue pegasus looks. "Look into my eyes, Dash. I promised I would never lie to you. I never did, I never will, and I would never let anything lie to you about me." She beams at Dash. "I'm here, Dash. It's me."

Dash rushes the hot pink pegasus, tears streaming down her face. She leans her head against Firefly's and bawls, sobbing with all her might, happy and sad mixed all together in her heart. "I missed you! I missed you so much!"

"I missed you too," Firefly says, stroking Dash under the chin with her hoof. "My brave little Dash... you've gotten so big and strong." Firefly pulls away, her lavender eyes moist. "I wish I could have been by your side as you grew up. I've watched you all these years, but it's not the same."

"But how are you here now?" Dash whispers, wiping her eyes with her hoof. "You're... you're gone. You're in the Summer Lands."

"And I'm still there, but I'm also here," Firefly says. "Remember what the pronghorns said. Past, present, future, life, death... in the Dreaming, all Is. Being never ends. That's the secret. The energy is still there."

"The lightning!" Dash exclaims. It all suddenly makes sense. Lightning. Energy. *Being.*

"That's it," Firefly says. "The lightning is being. Being is the Dreaming." She sighed. "I wish I could have helped you learn this myself, but I think this way may be better. I'm not sure I could have been a better teacher than the ones who taught me."

"No pony could be a better teacher," the gleaming blue pegasus says.

"Maybe," the hot pink pegasus says softly. "What I've learned... as I am now... is that every real teacher wants their students to be better than them. And you're so much better than I was, Rainbow Dash. You've done the impossible and you've helped save the world and you've made so many wonderful friends. I hope someday you'll find your own foals to teach. And if you do, hope and pray that at least one of them is better than you."

"I'm better in my own way," Dash says, "but no pony is better than you at being you." She knows that both she and Firefly are right.

"I'll grant you that," Firefly says. She looks Rainbow Dash up and down. She smiles. "I think you're ready. I think you've done it, Dash. And I think it's time for you to wake up now."

"No!" Dash says, fresh tears springing to her eyes. "Please, no! I've just now seen you! Don't leave me again!" She starts to cry.

Firefly closes to Dash and nuzzles her tenderly. "Dash, I'll never leave you. I never have left you. You can't see me, and I can't touch you... but I'm in your heart, Dash. I'm on your back. I'm the wind beneath your wings. I am always with you. I love you, and I'll never stop loving you." She pulls back. "Do you understand?"

"I..."

"Dash," Firefly says seriously. "Understand."

Rainbow Dash closes her spectral blue eyes. She can feel the Dreaming breathing, in and out. It breathes with her. It is. She is. All is. The lightning is. "You are and always will be," the gleaming blue pegasus says.

"Yes," Firefly says. She begins to fade, slowly, gradually becoming more transparent. "And that means I'm always with you."

"And I'm always with you," Dash says. She closes her eyes. She can feel Firefly. She's growing more sensitive. She can feel Applejack. She can feel Rarity. She can feel Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle. She can feel her parents. She can feel Spike. She can feel Ashtail and Shield Maiden. She can feel so much.

"Rainbow Dash," Firefly says. Dash opens her eyes and looks at the fading hot pink pegasus. "I must ask you one final question."

Dash smiles. "Okay."

"What are you?"

"What are you?"

"What are you?"

"What are you?"

Rainbow Dash holds her head up high. "I am."

The Dreaming surges upon her from every direction. She is completely still. Her mind is empty of every thought. The infinity of colors closes around her and overwhelms her. It enters her from everywhere, filling her with color and being. She closes her eyes. She is everything.

The lightning comes. The lightning *is* the Dreaming. Every line of white or black is lightning, splitting the colors and setting them ablaze. The lightning fills her, swirling and spiraling through her body, lifting her up and dragging her down and pulling her apart and pushing her together. She does nothing. She says nothing. She thinks nothing.

She is!

"By Jove," a voice said through rapidly dissolving layers of darkness, "I think she's got it."

Rainbow Dash's eyes slowly opened, blinking gently. It took her a few moments to adjust to the darkness. The smoke had cleared away, leaving the cavern open and free, still lit by the gleaming blue crystals. Shaking her head, Dash rose to her hooves, trembling slightly.

"Are you all right?" Audrey said, closing to her side to steady her. "Sometimes creatures are a bit woozy when they've spent time in the Dreaming."

"I'm okay," Dash croaked, her voice hoarse. Niles was standing right in front of her; she met his eyes. He was smiling. "So... did I do it?"

"I think you did," the pronghorn said, tilting his head to the side. "Though I can't be absolutely certain. That was... different. It wasn't like the times I've guided new Messengers through a Dreaming journey. Mayhaps it's down to you being a pony."

"What did you see, there at the end?" Clive asked, his sharp voice drawing her attention. "We couldn't tell what was happening to you."

Dash smiled. "I met somepony very important to me," she said. She broke her gaze, glancing down toward her hooves on the ground – "Huh?!" she stepped back. Her wings flapped – she had wings again! Fluttering off the ground, she spun in the air, looking in surprise at her front legs. She noticed the pool at the corner of her eye and flew rapidly to it. She plopped down and bent over, looking into the still waters. Thick dark *swirls* were drawn all over her body. They curled like ferns around her haunches, they spiraled across her flanks, they traced delicately up her wings, they wrapped around her legs, they coiled about her neck, they swirled around her eyes and circled around her cheeks and ears. She turned around and around, taking in their full extent. "What are these?"

"They are sigils," Audrey said as the pronghorns moved to join her. "They trace the path the lightning takes as it moves through your body. It is also the path the Dreaming takes when it enters a physical body."

"Because the lightning *is* the Dreaming, right?" Dash said.

The three pronghorns exchanged glances. "Why... yes, that's correct," Clive said.

"You guys could have just told me that from the beginning," the sky-blue pegasus said.

"It was too simple for you," Niles said. "You needed to come to the wisdom yourself. The sigils act as a focusing aid: they will help lightning follow its ideal path through your body, allowing you to learn finer summoning and guiding skills. In time you won't need them, but for now keep them on."

"Don't worry," Audrey said, "they're waterproof."

"Then how will I get them off?" Dash asked.

"Grape jelly!" Clive said brightly. Dash looked curiously at him. "Seriously, that's what it takes. Smear it on you then take a bath. And when you're done, you can use the rest of the jelly on some Prongish muffins with orange juice."

"You guys are so weird," Dash said with a laugh. "But it's really cool."

"Well?" Niles said. "Are you going to give it a try?"

It took Dash a moment to realize what he meant. She took several deep breaths. *Being is lightning*, she told herself, *lightning is being. Lightning is the Dreaming and the Dreaming is in all things*. Her breathing slowed. She didn't make the lightning come. She didn't order it. She opened her being up. She could feel something beyond herself rushing in. Then, gently, she applied her mind. She closed herself slightly. She raised her left hoof, opened herself about it.

A coil of blinding white *snaked* up her front leg. Rainbow Dash smiled. She opened her other leg, and another coil of lightning appeared. She touched her front hooves together, then drew them apart. A lightning bolt wavered in the air between them, sizzling and crackling and filling the air with light. With a laugh, Dash rose to her hooves. She opened her wings and then she *opened* them. Sparks crackled between every feather, popping like firecrackers.

She turned back to the pronghorns, and they all stamped their hooves loudly on the ground. "Well done!" Niles said happily. "And a most successful experiment it's proven to be!"

"I'll need to tell the other Jovai about this," Clive said. "Never before have I heard of any other creature learning to use lightning in the pronghorn style."

Dash smiled secretly. *I bet they'll tell you there was one other.*

"Congratulations, dearie!" Audrey exclaimed. "Oh, this calls for a celebration! Shall we break out the bubbly?"

"I think I've got a bottle of Dom Ponygnon under my bed somewhere," Niles said.

Audrey narrowed her eyes. "Keeping a fine sparkler like that under your *bed*? Shame on you, you'll ruin it! What kind of pronger doesn't know how to take care of sparkling wine?"

"I'll have you know I've kept sparkling wines under my beds across the world and they've always popped open in smashing shape!"

"Quiet!" Clive snapped. The two younger pronghorns were silent. In the quiet, a faint ringing could be heard, like the chiming of a bell. "The alert," he said. He dashed to the stone doorway, shooting a lightning bolt at it. The sinking stone door wasn't even all the way down before he leapt over it.

"What's going on?" Dash asked, following close behind Niles and Audrey.

"It's the message alert!" Niles told her. "We make our rounds among the rulers of nearby countries over two week periods, but we also give them magical chimes they can use to transmit messages right to us in spell form. They typically use them for messages that have to go out at odd hours."

The three creatures ran down the tunnel and back into the main cavern with its great ceiling drawing of the Dreaming. Off to the righthand side near the entrance was a nook Rainbow Dash hadn't noticed before. Inside, a pointed needle of stone was hanging from the ceiling. It was vibrating now, the source of the chiming noise they had heard. Clive was leaning his head towards it, and Dash noticed that his antlers were vibrating in unison. He pulled back as they approached. "It's the Princess again," he said, turning toward them. "The same message as it's been, for all three of us."

"You mean Princess Celestia?" Dash asked.

"The same," Clive said. "She wants the word delivered by morning at all her destinations: Tesnia, Dromedor, and Salamar."

"Blech," Audrey said. "That means we'll need to leave right now!" She turned to Dash. "Sorry, Dashy, the celebration will have to wait."

"I'll take Dromedor," Niles said. "I've been handling short hops the last few times, so I'll shoulder the long journey this time."

"Salamar's nearly as far," Audrey said. "I'll take that one. I've never been to Salamar."

"Whatever you do, don't eat the purple peppers," Clive said. "And *don't* tell the Longs they look like dragons. They hate hearing that. I'll go to Tesnia." He turned to Dash. "As Audrey says, the celebration will have to wait for another day." He leaned his head toward the stone needle again; Audrey and Niles came to stand by his side and leaned their heads in as well. A wavering image of Princess Celestia shimmered off of the needle.

It split into three identical images, each of them coming to rest between each pronghorn's horns, where it hovered for a moment before slowly fading away.

"So what message is Princess Celestia sending?" Dash asked.

"The same one she's been sending for the past six months," Niles said. "She's run us a bit ragged, truth be told – sent us all over the world. She wants every god and king and ruler to know that her sister is back."

"Awwww," Dash squealed. "That's so nice! She wants them all to know about Princess Luna!"

"Nice and preemptive," Clive remarked. He turned away from the needle and began to walk towards the entrance. "With Luna resuming control of the Moon, there are bound to be at least some slight irregularities in the lunar cycle. I think this is Celestia's way of heading off complaints from every other nation on Earth." Stepping into the tall entrance chamber, Clive sent up a lightning bolt from his horns. The sound of grinding stone filled the air. "My dear Rainbow Dash," he said, turning to her. "You have my congratulations and my awe. I wasn't really sure you could do it. You have passed the test." He smiled. "And that means you're an honorary member of the Pronghorn Network."

"Really?!" Dash exclaimed.

"Really," Clive said. "So you're welcome at any Waystation of ours you come across, anywhere in the world. You know how to get in, now." The stone ramp finally reached the bottom of the chamber. "Farewell," Clive said, "and good luck." With a final nod of his head, he turned and began to sprint up the ramp.

"Goodbye, dearie," Audrey said, coming close and nuzzling her. "I promise we'll have some of that wine another time. Hey, now we're just a bolt away for you! You should pop by again, even once you're back in Equestria!"

"I definitely will!" Dash said, nuzzling the female pronghorn. "You be safe, okay? And... uh... what Clive said about the Longs or whatever."

"Indeedy," Audrey said. "Ta-ta!" She sprinted up the stone ramp as well.

Niles was the only one left. The pronghorn and the pegasus turned to look at each other. He smiled. "I wish I could say I knew you could do it," he said softly, "but in truth there was a moment where I doubted. I'm sorry."

"Don't be!" Rainbow Dash said, rushing in and nuzzling him around his thin nose. "You have no idea how much this means to me. I paid off a really old debt tonight."

"Old debts are the best debts to pay off, that's one thing I've learned," Niles said, turning and heading for the ramp. Rainbow Dash followed him, and he kept to a brisk walk. "I hope to run into you from time to time. I stop by Canterlot at least once a fortnight, sometimes even once a week."

"I'll try and be in Canterlot some time soon," Dash said. "I'd love to hear all about your journey to... where are you going again?"

"Dromedor!" Niles exclaimed brightly. "Land of the camels! Very hot and very sandy. Lots of old stone cities and statues to strange gods. You should go there some time!"

They emerged into the moonlight, the wind blowing faintly across the silvery grasses. Niles waited until Dash was off the ramp before he fired a lightning bolt at it, causing it to close itself up with the rumble of grinding stone. "Well," he said simply, "I guess this is goodbye for now."

"I guess – ohmigosh!" Dash exclaimed, her eyes going wide. "The Beneviolet! You said you would get the Beneviolet!"

"I said I would get it if I had free time," the pronghorn said. "I'm so sorry, Dash, but our duty to rulers and royals comes first. Those are our official priorities. I must abide by them."

"B-but we need you!" the sky-blue pegasus cried. "Who can get the Beneviolet in time except you?"

Niles smiled. "Why, *you* can, Rainbow Dash. You're as fast as we are, now."

"But... I'm still so *new* at this."

"You are as ready now as you will ever be – and you are braver than many a pronghorn I've known," he said. "Your friend is in good hooves with you, my dear Rainbow Dash."

Dash sighed, saddened by the loss of help for Twilight Sparkle. "I suppose so." She looked up at Niles and smiled faintly. "Thank you for believing in me."

"As I said, I doubted," Niles told her. "You believed in yourself above all, and in the end that made the difference."

Dash's smile grew broader. "Goodbye, Niles. Thanks."

"The pleasure was all mine, dear Rainbow Dash," Niles Nigellus said. He reached for her front leg, bent his head, and kissed her hoof. He trotted away from her and turned to the south. "And remember!" he called to her, bending low, leaning forward. "When the world is in chaos, remember: keep calm," he lowered his head, "be patient," sparks flashed at his hooves, "and *ride the lightning!*" An eruption of white light blinded Dash. When she opened her eyes again, a lightning bolt stretched across the fields away from her. In an eyeblink it was gone.

Rainbow Dash stood in silence for a few minutes. She turned her head to the east, toward the distant forms of the Drackenridge Mountains. She looked down at her hooves covered in the swirling sigils. She smiled sneakily. *Let's do this.*

She turned her whole body to the east. She flattened her wings against her side. She breathed in slowly, breathed out slowly. She fluttered her eyes, drifting them closed then shooting them open. She recalled what she had felt, what had come to her heart. Firefly's words. *Lightning is being.* The whole universe was lightning, then – bolts of lightning plucked like strings to make what was. She drew her own string across the world. She made herself *be* just that much more, and the lightning came to her. She opened her spirit up. She could feel sparks racing down her legs.

I am always with you.

Rainbow Dash opened herself to the Dreaming, to Being itself. She could see the crooked path before her. She was still – she floated. The world around her blazed *white* –

"I am a leaf on the wind." It came – she grabbed and she **rode**.

She moved faster than the world. It was faster than sound. She opened her eyes, felt no wind resistance because she was beyond the wind. The world was a blur. Yet when she looked she saw stillness – like snapshots, like photographs. A glance and she saw komagas far off. A glance and she saw Thatchholm looming from its great foundation. A glance and the Drackenridge Mountains appeared whole and solid. A glance behind her and she was leaving a trail of white infinity. The mountains were right in front of her she hit them and went *up* them, shot higher and higher, breathless and there in instants in seconds in heartbeats –

She pushed off with her legs and she shot skyward at an angle, a CRACK making her look down and see where a chunk of the mountain was blasted off by the force of her

lightning. She closed off her spirit and the lightning vanished, she still sailed skyward, rising another hundred feet before she slowed, and then she remembered to open her wings, flapping hard to bring herself to a hover. She looked down. She looked around.

She was above the Drackenridge Mountains. Turning to the east, she could see the darkness of the Everfree Forest, and very far off, the lights of Ponyville. A journey of nine days' hard galloping – she'd made it in thirty seconds.

Her mouth stretched into the biggest smile she'd ever smiled. She opened her spirit, gathered the lightning around her, but didn't ride it – merely carried it in her wake. "**WOOHOO!**" she whooped, soaring through the night sky, trailing white lightning. She flew through clouds, felt the lightning hiding in them, stretched her spirit to them and **pulled**, calling forth their lightning bolts, letting them strike her, letting them swirl and spiral through her leaving her safe and whole. She was ablaze. She was radiant. She felt no fear!

Rarity stood in a great circle. She was a little foal again, a blank-flanked child, the grownups towering over her. But something wasn't right. Even big ponies weren't this dark. Shadows filled the air. Big ponies didn't have legs this thin, either, and the eyes on the heads at the ends of their long, graceful necks did not gleam in the shadows, shining with power –

The white unicorn's eyes fluttered open. That dream had made *sense*. At least, she thought it had. She had no idea what the creatures she had seen were. They hadn't been ponies. But there had been a clarity to this dream that the others had lacked. She had dreamt almost every night she had been on this long and arduous journey. A few days ago, she had wondered if it was not without cause. She still wondered that – as much as Twilight Sparkle might deride her, Rarity could not shake the feeling that her dreams were trying to tell her something, especially this dream just now. But what? She tried to recall exactly what had happened. She recalled being a foal...

Her gaze drifted around the campsite at the base of the oak tree. Applejack was snoring gently, her dark red armor piled off to one side. Far to her right, Rainbow Dash was curled up, looking extremely peaceful, with so much – "Oh my goodness!" Rarity cried, the shrillness of her voice breaking Applejack's slumber.

"Huh? Wha? What's goin' on?" the orange earth pony said, rapidly rising to her hooves and blinking the sleep from her eyes.

Rainbow Dash yawned. "Morning, everypony," she mumbled, using a front hoof to rub her own eyes.

"Dash, dear, what's that on you? What's all over your coat?"

"Huh?" Applejack said, blinking a few more times. She glanced over at Dash. "Golly, Rainbow, what *is* that?"

The sky-blue pegasus stood up. Thick lines of dark blue – midnight blue – were curling all over her lighter blue coat, bending into curls and spirals along her flanks, around her wings, into her feathers, down her legs, up her neck and on her face. It made her look wild, like some tribal artifact. She swept her rose eyes briefly over her body, seeing if anything was amiss. "Oh, these?" She lifted up a front leg. "The pronghorns drew these on me. They're to help me control the lightning."

"So you did it?" Rarity asked, sudden curiosity overwhelming her. "I didn't hear you come back last night. You did it?"

"Oh..." Dash's mouth curled into a smile. "I guess." She stuck out her tongue, and sparks suddenly danced across it. She retracted her tongue, spread her wings, fanned them out, and crackles of buzzing white electricity surged through every feather. She swished her rainbow-striped tail, and a flash of light made Applejack and Rarity blink. Dash was grinning flat-out now. "But yeah, I did it!"

"Oh, congratulations, Dash!" Rarity exclaimed, stomping her front hooves on the ground in applause. "I'm positively giddy for you! I know how much this must mean to you."

"Nice job, Rainbow," Applejack said with a nod. "I knew you could do it."

"Thank you," Dash said happily. "Thank you, both of you. It feels... good. It feels more than good, really. I want to tell you all about what happened, but I'm not sure I can describe it."

Applejack reached down with her mouth and flipped her hat onto her head. "Tell it to us over breakfast, sugarcube," she said, trotting out from the oak tree's shade into the golden grass. She began to bite mouthfuls from the grass as she moved, chewing daintily.

"Well... to learn lightning, I had to get my soul right, if that makes any sense," Rainbow Dash said, flapping her wings and following behind Applejack very low off the ground. "I went into the Dreaming, which is sort of this... it's... um..." She landed on her hooves, her eyes squinting and her head tilting as she thought. She thought with all her might, trying to find something to say that was appropriate. *Twilight would know how to describe it*, she thought. Should she try and be like Twilight? But Twilight wouldn't know anything about the Dreaming. Maybe she should talk like the pronghorns. "The Dreaming is kind of... it's... it's being."

"Bein'?" Applejack repeated. "Bein' what?"

"No, not being anything in particular, it's just..." She scrambled to find proper words. "The Dreaming is..." Suddenly, she was filled with calm. *Talk about it your own way*. Dash blinked and took a breath. "The Dreaming is what's always there in everything. It's what everything has in common. Everything comes from it, and it's where everything goes." She gave a toothy smile. "Does that make sense?"

Applejack scratched her chin with a hoof. "I don't rightly know..." she murmured. "It makes sense to a point... but beyond that it don't make sense."

"I'm not sure it's supposed to make sense," Dash admitted. "But it's at the heart of all things, and it's connected to lightning. Lightning comes from the Dreaming. So the pronghorns taught me to reach into the Dreaming with my soul. I learned how, and now I can make lightning."

"Can anypony access this Dreaming?" Rarity asked.

"I think they could if they knew the right way to do it," Rainbow Dash said. "But it takes some time in quiet and thinking."

The white unicorn nodded. "So now you can use lightning? Just like Firefly?"

A warmth spread through Dash's chest. "Yep!" she said brightly. "Just like Firefly."

"Does that mean you can ride lightnin' too?" Applejack asked her. "That's what you said them pronghorns could do."

Dash didn't answer. She turned to the right and bounded a few steps away. She settled back on her haunches, pointed her nose at the sky. A look of tranquility passed over her face. Racing lines of blinding white began to swirl around her. She looked back to her friends and smiled. "Oh yeah!" There was a burst of sizzling sound, and a crackling line of white lightning rose into the air where the sky-blue pegasus had presently sat. "**THIS IS SO COOOOOOOOOOOoooooo...**" Her voice was lost to the wind as she rose higher and higher, blazing beyond the range of her friends' necks.

A few seconds later, the lightning bolt fizzled out. Rarity kept her gaze skyward. "I do hope she's all right."

Applejack was looking up as well. "I got a feelin' she knows what she's doin'," the orange earth pony said. "It's not a feelin' I always get with Rainbow, but I got it now."

A crackling noise began to rise on the air. A point of white light blazed straight above them, growing brighter and brighter; the hairs in their manes and tails and coats began to stand on end. In the blink of an eye the whole sky over their heads was white, then there was **clap** through the air and a ring of lightning spread out less than a dozen feet over their heads, sparking and snapping as it expanded more than a hundred feet before fading into nothing. Where the commotion had emerged, there was only Rainbow Dash, painted in dark blue swirls, flapping excitedly. She spiraled through the air over their heads. "Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh didyouseethat?! Did you see that?! I can do it! Oh wow that was **amazing!** Did you know the sky turns **black** when you go really high up? You can see some stars and everything, just like at night! I would

have gone higher but I started to run out of air! And it was so fast, I counted! It was less than forty seconds to get that high up! Less than forty seconds to come back down! This is amazing!" She whooped and cheered, landing in front of her friends and high-stepping excitedly. "I still have trouble believing it! I did it! Now I really am the fastest flier in all of Equestria!"

The last point made Applejack's eyebrows rise. "You sure are, Rainbow," she said, "and that means you may be the answer to our prayers!"

"Huh?"

"Well, I notice you ain't mentioned your buddy Niles helpin' us with the Beneviolet..."

"Oh!" Dash's giddy expression changed to one of regret. "He had to go deliver a message for Princess Celestia in a land of camels, far away. He said he had to obey her first before he could help us. He did say I could get the Beneviolet –"

"And you can, Rainbow, don't you see?" Applejack grinned. "You can ride lightnin', so you can go as fast as those pronghorns! You can just blast up to the Archback Mountains, find the Beneviolet, and get it back to Twilight!"

"B-but..." Dash stammered. "Hold on a minute! Wasn't the whole reason you wanted to come on this trip so that you could help me look for the flower? You said I wouldn't know a Beneviolet when I saw one!"

"I said that at the start, sure," the orange earth pony said. "But Rainbow, I judged you wrong. If you can go into some higher level of bein' and make your soul proper to use lightnin', you're observant enough to find a purple five-pointed flower. You don't even need to take it back to Twilight on the lightnin' – you got saddlebags now, too! We'll give you Spike's fire and you can send the Beneviolet back to him!"

"I suppose it would be better to get it done right now," Rarity agreed, but her heart wasn't in it. There was something holding back what should have been her excitement at seeing Twilight's cure close at hand. A whisper in her heart, telling her this wasn't right course of action.

"But I... okay, look," Dash said, leveling a gaze at her friends. "Before we even started on this trip, I told myself that if we hadn't reached the Archback Mountains in ten days, I would go the rest of the way alone! And today is the tenth day! And now I can ride lightning! So I *should* go on alone! But," her mouth scrunched up, "I don't want to leave

you two! I can't! Not after all this! Rarity, Applejack! You've done so much with me! I don't want you two to be alone!"

Applejack gave her a tender glance. "Shucks, Rainbow, I..." Her green eyes glanced at the ground. "I know how you feel. I've grown real fond o' you – and you too, Rarity," she looked at the white unicorn, "both of y'all! I mean, I was fond o' y'all before, y'all really were my friends, but now..."

"I feel as though the two of you are more than friends, now," Rarity chimed in.

Applejack smiled at her. "That's just it. We been through too much to just be friends, now." She squared up her withers and put on a hard face. "But the whole point o' this trip, however much else we've gotten out of it, was to save Twilight Sparkle! And if we can do that right now, we gotta!"

"I..." Rarity began softly.

"And it's either Rainbow rides her lightnin' straight to the Archbacks," the orange earth pony said, "or we take our chances in *there*." She pointed to her right with her front hoof.

Rainbow Dash and Rarity turned their heads that direction. They were very close now. This close, so very close, the Shimmerwood stood poised at the feet of the Archback Mountains. A tapering arm of it swept out onto the fields to their left, and tall, broad-branched oaks and ash formed an inscrutable curtain straight ahead. Its depths could not be penetrated, not even by Dash's pegasus eyes. But all three ponies could see something. No – see was the wrong word. It was like they were *feeling*, *touching* with their eyes, a sensation that did not come from sight creeping across their pupils. The forest seemed to emit a haze, a rippling waver – but not to their eyes. It was a haze across the mind.

"That place..." Applejack's voice faltered. "I don't know if it's right or not. It ain't my place to say. But it sure as shootin' ain't *normal*. It's like the Everfree."

"I want to see it," Rarity said abruptly.

Applejack glanced at her. "Rarity, I just said we can't waste time there!"

"I..." The white unicorn reluctantly looked away from the forest. "I know that, Applejack. But we've come all this way. We should at least give it a look, right?"

"We came all this way for Twilight," the orange earth pony reminded her. "If we got a way o' avoidin' goin' through a big confusin' forest to help her, we gotta take it."

"When you put it that way, I guess you're right," Rainbow Dash said. "I mean, I can always bolt back to you girls and go back with you all the slow way."

"Sure can," Applejack said, "and we'll be mighty glad o' the company."

Rarity narrowed her deep blue eyes. "You lot can make whatever plans you choose. But I'm going in there. I have to."

"What in –" Applejack paused, then raised an eyebrow at her. "Is this some sort o' magic thing?"

"I..." Rarity paused in turn. She concentrated on her feelings, setting her mind on the pulsing, breathing power that filtered in and out through the horn on her head. "I think it may be. I feel it more than I can rationalize it."

"Hold on," Dash said. The sky-blue pegasus unfurled her wings purely on a whim. She fluttered her eyelids closed. Rarity and Applejack watched her in curiosity for a minute. Her eyes slowly came open. "I can feel it, too. I can feel it in the Dreaming. There's some kind of weird lightning around the forest."

"Y'all ain't makin' me wanna go in there any much more," Applejack said.

"Well, you don't have to go in there," Rarity said firmly. "I shall go. I'll go alone if I must." She turned and headed back for the campsite.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash shared a confused glance. Rarity could be quite stubborn, this they were used to, but over something as unusual as a visit to a forest? "Rarity, wait!" Dash cried, fluttering back to the burnt-out fire. The white unicorn was using her magic to suck the air from her pillow and blanket. "Rarity, hold on! I really think you should stay with Applejack!"

"And I really think we should stick together, but apparently that's not happening, is it?" Rarity snapped, annoyance plain in her voice. "I recognize Twilight's dire need – I do – but I don't see why we can't spare even a few hours to go see the forest."

"Twilight's on a tickin' clock, that's why!" Applejack answered. "You wanted to help her the most! And now you want us to waste time goin' to some forest! Just cause you *feel* like we oughta?"

This made Rarity stop and think. Her guilt was more than ten days old now, so it did not sting as badly as it had at first. It was still there, however, and she dwelt on it now. She

still wanted to help Twilight Sparkle. She cared very deeply for the younger unicorn, so full of joy and innocent enthusiasm. Twilight didn't deserve to die the painful death that Horn Rot caused – she least deserved it. She found such happiness in magic that for her to be killed by mangled magic would be a vicious cruelty. Rarity was prepared to sacrifice much to save her. But something in her heart told her that the best way forward was into the shadows of the Shimmerwood. "I feel as though we must for Twilight's sake," the white unicorn finally said. "You think that sending Dash straight to the Archbacks will save Twilight faster, but..." her thoughts swirled, "I think that may not be the case. I know it's not." Unseen by any of them, her triple gemstone cutie mark briefly glowed.

Applejack tilted her head back, narrowing her eyes. Rarity stared boldly at her, graceful brows lowered in seriousness. The orange earth pony gritted her teeth. "All right," she said, "how about this. We're only about two hours from the Shimmerwood, by my mark. We can go there, and go just a ways in – see what it's like inside. Maybe it's real easy to get through, maybe it's open on the inside. If it is, maybe we'll think about goin' through it. But if it's thick and hard to see through, or even if it just looks too big, we're turnin' around and leavin', and Rainbow can ride her lightnin' to the mountains. That sound good?"

Rarity nodded. "Thank you, darling."

"Yeah, I know," the orange earth pony remarked. "Just let's pack up, and we can grab some breakfast on the way." She trotted over to her armor and began to slip on the first of the greaves.

"Rares, what's going on?" Dash said softly when Applejack had left them. "Is something wrong?"

Rarity shook her head. "Dash, I must at least see this forest. Chalk it up to unicorn's intuition."

"I just..." The sky-blue pegasus gave her a gentle look. "I want you to be okay."

"I am, Dash," Rarity smiled. "But thank you for worrying."

"You and Applejack can't do all the worrying yourselves," Dash said, then fluttered back to the fireside and wrapped her leather saddlebags around her flanks. Rarity nodded, and resumed packing her own white velvet saddlebags.

In short order, Applejack was armored up and all three of them were packed, so they set out, nipping off the tips of grass blades along the way. Rarity once again brought up the

rear, and she noted that now both Applejack and Rainbow Dash bore tokens of their journey: Applejack wore the dark red armor of Gildedale, Dash was covered in the dark blue sigils of the Pronghorn Network. *Perhaps I'll be accessorized as well before the journey is done*, she thought to herself. Yet a glance ahead drove all thoughts of fashion out of her mind. The Shimmerwood loomed closer and closer. She sped up, galloping faster, wanting to see it all the more quickly. The trees ahead were now blocking out the mountains, rising with dark trunks to a canopy of wild, radiant green. It was the same green Rarity recalled seeing in the leaves of Ponyville eleven days ago, the bright green of early spring. They passed another lone oak tree, a harbinger of what was coming. Her horn began to tingle.

"Hey," Rainbow Dash said suddenly, "did the Daleponies really not know about Princess Luna coming back?"

"They genuinely didn't seem to," Rarity said absently.

"It's just that Niles and his friends were going to deliver messages from Princess Celestia telling about Princess Luna," the sky-blue pegasus said. "They were going all over the world, to all different countries. But you'd think she'd have sent them to Gildedale first, right?"

"Maybe she forgot?" Applejack said.

"Or perhaps she wants to tell Lord Hammer Hoof herself," Rarity said. "Gildedale is a country of fellow ponies, after all. I can certainly see the Princess wanting to deliver such important news to her own kind in the flesh." Neither of the others disputed this. They fell into silence again shortly after.

Within an hour, they passed not a single tree, but a clump of them, a gaggle of ash sticking up from the grasses. Those grasses also were changing: in between the golden blades, pale green shoots were emerging, along with the occasional flower. A beautiful white rose bush appeared off to their right, rushing by in an instant. Then Applejack slowed to a walk. The great wall of the Shimmerwood rose high before them, less than half a mile away. Rarity drew level with the orange earth pony. "What's wrong?" Rarity asked.

"I just... I can *feel* it, now," Applejack said. Her voice betrayed unusual fear. "I can feel it comin' up through my hooves. Is that..." She looked at Rarity, her green eyes wavering. "Is that magic I'm feelin'?"

"Yes," Rarity said with a nod. "I've been feeling it for almost an hour now. It's a touch in my horn, the feeling I always get when I'm around strong magic."

"Yeah, I can feel it," Rainbow Dash said, coming up on Applejack's other side. "It's mostly in my wings."

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," Applejack said. "We got no idea what's in there."

"Lord Hammer Hoof said it wasn't dangerous," Rarity reminded her.

"The Daleponies got a different sense o' what's dangerous than we do, if you'll recall," Applejack said.

"But they're also more wary of magic than we are," Rarity said. "If they don't fear it, we shouldn't, either." Applejack's ears flattened against her head. "Applejack, please," Rarity said. "All this trip, we've trusted in your judgment, and you haven't led us astray. Please, now, trust *me*. I promise I won't lead *you* astray."

Applejack looked down at the ground, where green grass was quickly overtaking gold. Then she stopped walking entirely. Rarity and Rainbow Dash went a few steps further before they noticed, and stopped as well. They turned and looked back at her. Applejack nodded forward. "Lead on, Rarity."

Dash gave Rarity a hopeful smile and walked backwards, filling the gap between the white unicorn and Applejack. Rarity looked ahead. For the first time, there was no pony leading her. "This way," she said, looking back over her shoulder. She accelerated to a trot, her friends following behind.

It was barely midmorning. The last short distance passed quickly even at their easy pace, and Rarity scanned the forest for a suitable entrance. She found it in a gap between two great trees, oaks more massive than any she had ever seen before. Dry, dead leaves of dull brown and pale orange covered the ground, small plants and shrubs shooting up beneath the shadows of the forest canopy. There was a faint whisper of wind from deep amidst the trees. The white unicorn increased her pace gently. The three ponies passed beneath the canopy's shadow, the sun of the golden fields shaded for the first time in nearly a week. Her front hoof crunched on dead leaves and sunk into loamy soil. Another step, and she was in. Rainbow Dash followed her, then, with some hesitance, Applejack. They had left Gildedale behind at last.

Rarity peered ahead, looking for a path. Her sensitive skin could feel the air currents wrapping gently around the tall trees, the soft breezes that whispered around the

branches of the dark oaks and the white ashes. Sunlight filtered in through gaps in the canopy, splashing the floor with green-gold light. Rarity's horn was almost itching now. The magic hanging in the air between the trees surpassed anything she had ever felt. She could almost see it, a ripple like heat through empty space. Her magic circuit was alive, power racing in and out of it, sending tremors down her spine. She could smell the magic, she could touch it, she could even taste it, a sticky-sweetness at the back of her throat.

"Anypony else taste somethin' funny?" Applejack asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"I can," Rarity said, stopping and turning around. "It's magic – a great *deal* of magic. This is more magic than I've ever felt in one place."

"Can you see a way for us to go through?" Rainbow Dash asked, glancing past Rarity.

Rarity turned around again. They had come about a hundred feet into the forest. Ahead of her, she could see perhaps a way further in, but it was narrow, shrouded in darkness. Every path that seemed initially to be straight was at some point blocked by a great tree, or else a shrub or hanging vines made the way uncertain. "I suppose there might be a way forward," the white unicorn admitted, "but it could be a bit roundabout..."

"In other words, no straight path," Applejack said, her voice regaining some confidence. "Sorry, Rarity, but we can't waste time. If there's no easy way through, we gotta turn around and send Rainbow on her way." She easily assumed leadership again.

Rarity was deeply frustrated. She had felt certain that they needed to go through the forest. Yet if no easy path presented itself, Applejack's argument was sound. "I suppose you're right," she admitted. "I'm terribly sorry about all this."

"Think nothin' of it," the orange earth pony said. "You were followin' a hunch, I respect that. But we gotta do what we gotta do." She turned back toward the exit, where the golden fields of Gildedale shone in the sun between gaps in the trees. "You should probably go ahead and give Rainbow your..." She trailed off. A tingle was crawling up her backbone. "Okay, do y'all feel *that*?"

"I..." Rainbow Dash trailed off. "I can definitely feel something."

"It's more magic," Rarity said, turning around and around, trying to spot a source beyond the blazing sensation in her horn. "It's more concentrated..." She closed her eyes, focusing on her horn. She sent out a pulse of sensory magic – a low-strength, long-range

telekinetic grab. It passed over and through everything for feet around her. She could feel more magic in its path, and more than that. She opened her eyes. "I don't believe we're alone."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash began to turn in circles of their own, scanning the hazy half-shadows for some sign of movement. Turning straight ahead, Applejack found herself recalling Ashtail, and his proud insistence that an earth pony standing firm could not be moved. She dug her hooves into the soft earth, grinding them as far down as she could, while she gritted her teeth in determination. No pony noticed the three apples of her cutie mark begin to glow on either side. Her eyes widened. "I see it!" she yelled, drawing back in a jump.

"What?! See what?!" Dash cried, leaping to her side.

"Just for a second – just now – I *saw* somethin'!" Applejack cried, her heart hammering from the shock. "It was somethin' hazy... I couldn't rightly tell... but it was walkin'! It was walkin' on four legs!"

Growling, Rainbow Dash fluttered forward in a burst of wings. Landing hard in front of Rarity and Applejack, she raised her wings high. Crackles of electricity rose through her feathers, while a thin line of lightning sparked between the leading edges of her wings. "All right, show yourselves!" she cried. "We know you're here! Come out!"

The forest was silent for a moment, save the buzzing of Dash's lightning. It was, come to think of it, entirely too quiet.

"Stay your thunderbolts, pegasus," a gentle voice spoke from the shadows. "We mean you no harm."

With barely a sound, they shimmered into sight, one after the other, like strings plucked on a harp. First one, then two, then four, then eight, standing in front of and around the three ponies. Long, graceful legs stepped daintily through the underbrush towards them, not disturbing it in the slightest. Lean torsos, golden brown, were angled slightly upwards. Long, slender necks craned in their direction. Long, tapering heads ended in white muzzles and dark noses, sniffing the air gently. The three ponies were circled slowly, affording them glimpses of short tails, golden brown on top, shockingly white on bottom, crawling under thighs to become white bellies. Atop the heads, long ears tapered elegantly into points. Large eyes with pupils of every vibrant hue stared at them keenly. And above those eyes, spreading like polished branches, pale gray antlers stretched out, curved up, forked into sharp tines.

It took Rainbow Dash a moment to remember to turn off her lightning. "Sorry," she said gently as the sparks fizzled out. She smiled hugely. The deer, for a moment, said nothing.

One of them, with scarlet eyes, stepped forward. Her body was covered in writing, words made of letters from some strange, elegant alphabet. "Welcome, ponies of Equestria – welcome to the Shimmerwood," she said; she was the one who had spoken before. "*Mae govannen* – well met."

There was a faint shimmer around most of the deer, and where before their bodies had been bare, they were now wearing armor, swooping pieces of gleaming silver that seemed to be made of single plates of metal. Their champrons wrapped as helmets around their heads, gaps cut into them allowing room for both ears and antlers. Two forward-pointed crests made of clear crystal adorned the champrons; as Rarity looked, she could see thin lines of crystal around the flanchards, the peytrals, and the greaves as well.

"I am Ines, of the Periphery," the female deer said; her body remained unarmored. They noticed her antlers were particularly large and broad. "Your coming has been much anticipated."

"It has?" Rarity asked, sounding very meek.

Ines nodded. "Our Lady wishes to speak with you. We have been told to bring you to her."

"Uh, we're actually in a bit of a hurry," Applejack began. "We gotta get goin'."

Ines raised an eyebrow. "The Shimmerwood is not difficult to traverse, if one knows the way," she said slowly. "However, outsiders can frequently get lost in its depths – it is a very large forest. The magic that moves through its roots makes it unpredictable, as well."

"Which is actually why we're not gonna go through it," Applejack responded, grinning mightily. "So if y'all don't mind, thank ye kindly for the welcomin' party, but we really gotta –"

She turned around, and Ines stood right in front of her, flanked by three armored deer on either side. "Our Lady wishes to speak with you," she repeated. "We hope you will accommodate her."

"Applejack just said we were in a hurry," Dash said, regaining some courage.

"Our Lady knows of your quest," Ines said. "She has perceived your troubles from far off, and knows you have the time to spare. What she wishes to say to you is of great importance for the success of your mission."

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "She knows what we're doin'? How?"

"Our Lady has great powers of Sight."

"Then she has to know we can't afford any delays," Rarity said.

"This is no delay," Ines assured her. "I believe you will find it a necessity to speak with Our Lady."

"How can she know that?" Applejack asked.

"It is her gift to know. Come," the scarlet-eyed doe said, "you do waste time the more you deliberate."

The three ponies looked at each other for a moment, uncertainty in each one's eyes. What were they getting into here? Yet Ines said speaking with her Lady would prove vital – and that Lady clearly had knowledge of their journey. "I suppose we could..." Rarity began.

"Wonderful," Ines said with a nod. "Adao, please relieve our guests of their burdens."

One of the armored deer beside her, a buck with golden eyes, stepped forward. A light orange shimmer enveloped both of his antlers. Instantly, every buckle on all three ponies' saddlebags, and every strap on Applejack's armor, came undone. The mass of leather and canvas and velvet floated into the air, where it all vanished. "Hey!" Applejack cried. "Our stuff!"

"It has been sent ahead of you," Ines informed her.

The orange earth pony grimaced in annoyance. Her head was now bare. "Can I at least have my hat back?"

Ines' antlers shimmered. Applejack's hat reappeared on her head. "Er, thanks," she said.

Ines took a step forward and vanished. "Come," her voice came from behind them; they turned and saw her standing deeper into the forest. Three of the deer surrounding them also vanished and appeared beside Ines. Looking back, Rainbow Dash saw the other four

take positions behind them. The deer in front began walking, as did the deer behind them. Caught up in the impromptu procession, Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash had no other option but to move as well, walking side-by-side between the two groups of deer. Their pace was steady, a gentle trot. The sunlight on the golden fields drifted away behind them, and soon all traces of Gildedale had vanished amidst the trees of the Shimmerwood.

"Great," Rainbow Dash hissed under her breath. They had been walking for a little while now. "Just great. Now we're stuck with *deer*."

"What's wrong with that, Dash? Besides their rather rude insistence, of course," Rarity asked her.

The sky-blue pegasus grimaced. "Deer are weird. They spend all their time in the forests, and nopony ever sees them, except when they *do* show up, and then they're always talking in riddles and giving out advice and using magic. They're never straight-up; they always try to confuse you."

"Have you ever met a deer before?" Rarity asked. "I confess I haven't."

"Well... no..." Dash admitted.

"Fluttershy's had dealin's with deer before, and she says they're perfectly nice folk," Applejack said. Her face contorted in thought. "Er... that is, she says they're nice folk until you mess with their forest, in which case they'll wreak terrible vengeance on you with their crazy-powerful magic."

"We also have excellent hearing," Ines said, walking suddenly beside them. The three ponies drew back with a shout; Dash fluttered panicked into the air. The deer swiveled her long, pointed ears towards them, blinked her scarlet eyes, and smiled. "You have nothing to fear from us, as I have said. Please relax. You are safe here, safer than you have been at any point in your journey." She vanished, then reappeared at the front of the deer leading them.

It occurred to Rarity that this abrupt vanishing was their teleportation. It was not accompanied by the burst of sparkling magic that characterized unicorn teleportation – the deer were simply in *one* place one moment, and in *another* place another. *How elegant*, she thought. It made her reflect on her own inability to teleport, the thing that had started this whole great journey.

Dash scowled. "Deer," she said firmly, "are *weird*." Her friends, while not inclined to use such language, could not help but agree with the main thrust of her assessment.

The deer were a truly ancient folk. Thousands of years before ponies could write or speak, the various deer species had filled much of the world with civilization, forging great kingdoms and building magnificent cities of crystal and precious gems, their shared culture fueled by their strange and powerful magics. Unlike ponydom, where complex magical skill was restricted to unicorns, every deer could use magic; moreover, the average deer was far more powerful than the average unicorn, their pair of many-tined antlers able to channel and conduct much more magical energy than a unicorn's single horn. Because of this, they had not left many technological achievements behind, save their unparalleled ability to shape crystal and gemstone. Their cultural achievements were great, however: the deerfolk's common tongue had formed the foundations of many modern languages, not just in Equestria but across the world. Much of common law and accepted interspecies customs had been laid down first by the deerfolk. Their artistic achievements were magnificent, ancient deer art and sculpture renowned for its elegance. Deer had also invented the performing arts, with a particular love for the theater. Just last month, Rarity had attended an opera based on the ancient deer tragedy *Cervidaeus Rex*.

Yet taken together, these were but echoes of the past, and faint ones at that. There was much about the ancient deer that most ponies did not know, due largely to the one thing everypony did know about them. One day, for reasons nopony fully understood, the deer had gone to war with each other. It had been a terrible conflict, spreading across the Earth, lasting decade after decade, unleashing ever more powerful destructive magic. When it was over, the whole world had lain in ruins, and most of the deer had wiped themselves out. Those who had survived had withdrawn deep into the world's forests, and in this age they were rarely seen.

Dwelling on this, Rarity supposed she should consider herself lucky. There were rumored to be deer in the Everfree Forest, but nothing like the organized armor-wearing white-tails now escorting them. Twilight Sparkle would probably be very jealous when she found out; as a student of magic, she was naturally interested in the deer and their peculiar spells. She would give much to question a substantial deer population, to plumb their practical magical knowledge. All Rarity wanted from them was to hear what this Lady of theirs had to say. She knew that was the reason she had insisted on going into the Shimmerwood, though she could not say how she knew.

"I do reckon we shouldn't have come in here," Applejack whispered.

"Yeah, and whose idea was that?" Rainbow Dash muttered.

"I am sorry, everypony," Rarity said. "But I think this may work out for the best. You heard what that doe said: their Lady has some information for us. Maybe she wants to help us."

"She coulda helped us just fine by lettin' us leave, and lettin' Rainbow go over her forest!"

"Well, there's no going back now," the white unicorn reminded them. "We ought at least to see what she has to say."

They moved deeper and deeper into the forest. The light from the sun through the trees began to grow fainter, the surrounding space darker and quieter. It grew harder to see for a while, Ines and her armored companions fading into the gloom just a few feet ahead. The light from above grew dimmer. Glancing off to the side, Dash swore she saw eyes gleaming in the darkness, moving easily through the gloom of the trees. Then the seeing began to get easier. She could begin to see Rarity's tail ahead of her again, and the faint outlines of the deer beyond the white unicorn. She looked up and her eyes widened. The sunlight hadn't come back through the canopy – in fact, the sunlight was completely gone, the canopy a solid black ceiling hundreds of feet overhead. The light which lit and tinged her vision came from thousands of tiny points of light, glowing pinpricks hanging in the air between the highest branches of the trees. They bathed the forest's empty space in a warm golden glow. "Whoa..." she whispered. Applejack and Rarity looked up as she spoke, just as amazed as she.

Further and further they traveled, the constant golden light and deep shadows distorting their sense of the passage of time. When Applejack looked up, she could see walkways strung between thick branches of the canopy. Glancing to her right, she was compelled to crane her neck further: deep in the trees, a great twisting shape of dagger-point crystal hung down from two strong branches, its sheer surfaces dull gold in the twinkling light. Deer, tiny against the great structure, stepped in and out of it, the occasional line of bright light racing up its exterior. What looked like vines of crystal began to hang down from the branches of the canopy, transparent lines twinkling in the golden light. The three ponies walked underneath them, and Applejack felt the hairs on her back rise up. She looked to the left and saw another crystal dagger hanging down from the trees. There seemed to be one behind it as well, deeper in the forest. At this point, the procession turned a corner, and the tree branches grew lower, forming a sort of tunnel; the lights drew close overhead. The world was brighter at the tunnel's exit, a radiant bath of gold that so contrasted the dimness of their present surroundings that it made them squint. They drew closer and closer; the light got brighter and brighter.

They exited the tunnel, and the three ponies were further amazed. A great white oak of incomprehensible size sat in the middle of a small lake. The air gleamed gold, and rippled, eddies and currents of wild magic dancing in space. The lake was a sheet of gold, completely undisturbed. Around the oak's branches twined clear tendrils of crystal. Rising around the trunk was a four-spired crystal tower, glistening gold and flashing with bursts of light. Occasionally, a pulse of light would travel down the spires, down the tower's crystal surfaces, through crystal roots splayed out from the tower's base, and into the lake, where it would spread out over the surface of the water until it reached the shores with a silent tingle. Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash could once again taste and feel immense magic.

Ines drew to a halt before a crystal landing. She and the three deer with her stepped to the sides, parting and allowing the three ponies a clear view. At first they were at a loss, but silently a crystal bridge grew out from a landing on the island in the lake's center. It knitted itself to the landing on the shore. On the island, in between two spreading wings of the great tree's massive trunk, a meshing of crystal came apart. The whole forest, for a moment, held its breath.

From the depths of the crystal and the trunk emerged an enormous deer, ducking its head slightly to fit through the opening in the tower. It stepped across the small island and onto the crystal bridge, where it slowly moved towards them. It was *massive*, far larger than any of the white-tails they had seen, nearly as big as Princess Celestia. Its long, powerful legs and graceful torso seemed to be colored pure gold, with an underbelly of white; its neck was not as long, comparatively, as the smaller deer's. By the smoothness of its features, and the length of its ears, it seemed to be female. She had an enormous pair of antlers on her head, each one of them stretching broader than the average pony was long, filled with more than a dozen points altogether. A streamer of white silk was woven between the antlers, the long ends of which draped down from either antler almost to her hooves. A crystal circlet adorned the top of her head. As she drew up to them, Ines and the other deer bowed low. Rarity did the same, followed by Applejack and Rainbow Dash. The deer rose, and so did the ponies, by which time the great female stood quietly before them. Her eyes were dark. She smiled. "Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity of Ponyville – welcome," she said, with a voice like the ringing of crystal. "I am Falalauria. Thank you for coming so far to indulge me *bariarae* – in the home of the deer."

Ines stepped forward, and she and Falalauria began to speak in the swelling, flowing language of which the three ponies had so far heard snippets; Rarity, however, could occasionally hear words in another language, this one sharper and less graceful. Finally, Falalauria nodded, and the white-tails turned around and left their midst.

"They go to prepare your places for the night," Falalauria explained. "You will sleep in our midst, where your safety is assured. Tomorrow, you will be escorted through the Shimmerwood to the feet of the Archback Mountains."

"Um, beggin' your pardon, m'lady," Applejack said, remembering a moment later to take off her hat, "but... well, we're real grateful for your offerin' to put us up for the night, but we gotta get to the Archback Mountains as soon as possible. Our friend's life depends on it."

"Twilight Sparkle, you mean?" Falalauria said. The three ponies' eyes bulged. "I know well your quest, Applejack. I have been watching you from afar for some time now, and I know what you seek. I also know that you will be able to spend the night here free from worry, including from worry over your friend."

"How?" Rainbow Dash asked. "How can you know?"

"Because it is within my power to know," she said, stepping closer to them.

"Do you mean your magic?" Rarity asked. Her horn was tingling fiercely with all the power in the air.

"It is a magic gifted to me – perhaps to me alone," Falalauria said. "As you may have surmised from my stature, I am not a full white-tail deer. Half my blood is red deer, and it was of old the special talent of that race to see things far off, both in space and in time. When I fix my gaze I can see anything I choose across the world. Further, I can look into the past, as well as into the future. But I am also one-half white-tail, and it is their special gift to always detect the truth of things, no matter how hidden it may be." She took another step, until she was right before them. "Just as these two deer species combined to make me, so too do their magical talents combine in my spirit. The red deer's long gaze and the white-tail deer's detection of truth unite to grant me near-perfect Sight of the future."

Rarity had the composure to keep her jaw from dropping. The claim Falalauria had made was outlandish, particularly to a friend of Twilight Sparkle's. The lavender unicorn's meticulous and empirical approach to magic ruled out the existence of many of the more superstitious traditions in Equestria, fortune-telling perhaps most of all. It seemed that every two or three weeks, Twilight would read or hear about something that would cause her to repeat her insistent lecture that prophecy and foresight were impossible, that anypony who claimed to practice them was either a liar or a lunatic. Yet the golden hind standing before them seemed to be neither.

Falalauria lowered her head. As she drew closer, the three ponies noticed that her eyes were not so dark as they had thought. Hundreds of tiny stars twinkled in the black orbs, making each one a small slice of the night sky. She smiled at them. "I see inside your minds. You think my claim impossible – or perhaps you think it unsettling? That is often how it goes, when I inform other creatures of my gift. They think the existence of highly accurate prophecy means the future is fixed, that all events to come are already preordained. That may be, but I have no conception of the plan." She turned around. "Walk with me, please; I would speak with all of you in private." She began to stride down the crystal bridge. With some hesitance, Rarity followed her, then Rainbow Dash, then finally Applejack.

They crossed the bridge in silence, their hoofsteps barely ringing on the crystal surface. Falalauria's silk tresses wavered in the air behind her. Reaching the small island, they strode between two enormous tree roots to the crystal mesh, opening into a gleaming stairway. The three ponies followed the golden hind into the tower, crystal knitting itself shut behind them. Up the broad steps they went, until they arrived in a large crystal chamber, with clear walls cut into bookshelves and a central crystal chimney, in which brilliant green flames burned long and tall with no visible fuel. Falalauria's antlers shimmered white, and three small crystal daises rose from the floor. There was a much larger one nearby, on which a simple platform of wood was raised. Here Falalauria stopped and settled, turning to face them. The three ponies took their proffered places; the crystal was not hard, but soft, and soothingly cool to the skin. Falalauria looked serenely at them, her starscape eyes half-lidded. The ponies were struck by her presence: she radiated warmth and power. It was a little like being near Princess Celestia. Rarity at last spoke. "My Lady Falalauria, please tell us more about your gift of prophecy. If you know anything about our friend Twilight Sparkle, you will know she's told us that such things are impossible."

"Prophecy as such, which involves hearing of the future from the voice of a god, is very rare – though not impossible," the golden hind said. "The sight I possess is even rarer, but it is not prophecy. It is, as I said, the result of the combination of gifts from two deer species. All events, through the whole of time, come about through choice and circumstance. One of you is faced with a choice, so you make one of several available choices. From this choice, other choices rise, and you make your choices there as well, and so on into an endless sequence of choices. These networks of choices are what I See. However, I can also innately detect truth. This is what makes my Sight near-perfect. When I bend my gaze upon a creature or an event, I can instantly discern the true nature of everything I see. This makes me able to know with a high degree of accuracy *which* of any available choices are going to be made. It extends even to the natural world: I can see

the true nature of storms and trees and mountains, and know how they will react when they confront the events that will befall them."

"So... you can look at us..." Rainbow Dash said uncomfortably, "and you can see our future? Our *real* future? Not just what could happen, but what *will* happen?"

Falalauria looked gently at her. "Yes – almost," she said. "Recall that the future I see is built on choices. My sense of truth allows me to know which choices you are most likely to make. However, it is still you who must make the choices, and though you are highly likely to make choices that most correspond with your true nature, your actions are not forced. You could still surprise me. But it is likely you will not."

"How often have you ever been surprised?" Rarity asked.

"Rarely," Falalauria said.

Applejack's green eyes stared intently into Falalauria's, trying not to waver at the sight of the stars there. "You do a real good job of seein' the future, then?"

"Yes," Falalauria said.

"If that's the case," Applejack said, "then tell us: will Twilight Sparkle die?"

Falalauria did not immediately respond. Her eyelids closed lower, and she bowed her head. Only the crackle of the green flames faintly filled the air. Rarity gave Applejack a nervous glance; the orange earth pony stared hard at the golden hind. She finally raised her head. "No," she said, "she will not."

"That's great!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

"She came very close, however," Falalauria said, startling the three ponies. "She would have died if you had not chosen to venture into the Shimmerwood, because you would have sent Rainbow Dash to the Archback Mountains bereft of the knowledge I wish to share."

"Knowledge?" Dash said.

"I was sweeping my Gaze across the fields of Gildedale a week ago, and I beheld you three making your way west. Curious, I bent my Sight upon you, and so discerned your own histories and the history of your quest. I then looked upon Twilight Sparkle in Ponyville. Lastly, I looked into your futures, and I saw her doom there. I knew her only hope was

for you to meet me – for who else could tell you all her present state, and the extent of the cure she needs?"

"Present state?" Rarity repeated.

"What's wrong with Twilight?!" Applejack cried, rising from her dais.

"Her Horn Rot is advancing very quickly," Falalauria said. "It feeds greedily off her enormous magical power. It will soon reach her brain and her magic circuit, and there it will kill her. It is very intense, more so than your friend Zecora recognized at first. But she was correct when she said that only the Beneviolet can cure Twilight Sparkle in time."

"So it *can* cure her?" Applejack asked, heart pounding.

"Yes – provided you select the right one," the golden hind said. The three ponies stared at her. "When Beneviolets first flower, their petals are a sharp and violent purple. This is also when their magic is most potent – so it is when their healing abilities are the strongest. Over a few weeks, they fade to a duller, darker purple, and in the process they lose the full extent of their curative powers. Twilight Sparkle's Horn Rot is now in such a state of advance that only a young Beneviolet, with a flower of sharp and shocking purple, will have the strength to cure her. An older, duller flower will not have enough magic to fully tame the Rot."

The ponies exchanged glances filled with terror. The book had said nothing about varying intensities of magic! "Are you sure of this?" Rarity asked.

"We have much experience with the Beneviolet here," Falalauria said. "We use it often in our healing salves. We are well aware of its fading potency. Also, Twilight must eat the flower quickly. A Beneviolet begins to lose its healing abilities within hours of being uprooted. In four days' time, its powers are completely gone. But I know you carry the magical transmitting fire of your friend Spike the dragon, and that is well – you can send the flower to Twilight Sparkle instantly. If you select a young Beneviolet, and the flame sends it to her in a moment, and she eats it as soon as it arrives, she will be fully cured of her Horn Rot." She smiled. "And all this you three will do – I can See it."

"Thank you so much!" Dash exclaimed.

"We didn't know nothin' about needin' a special color!" Applejack said. It nearly made her shake with fright. If they had sent Dash up the mountains and she had picked the wrong color flower...

"I knew you didn't," Falalauria said, "which is why I contrived to lure you here. I could not guarantee any scout of mine would reach you, so instead I sought to draw you in – specifically you, Rarity."

"Me?" Rarity said.

"The Shimmerwood's ambient magic is normally constrained, confined to the strict limits of the forest, at the request of Gildedale," said the golden hind. "However, when I saw you drawing close, I stretched it out into western Gildedale, where I knew Rarity, at least, would be able to sense it. I know unicorns are drawn to sources of magic. I foresaw that when she felt the magical field with her horn, she would insist on venturing into the wood. From there I only had to set Ines and her Watchdeer to wait for you – cloaked, of course, so as not to alert you immediately. I wanted you to enter the wood of your own accord, and only then to be reassured of your safety."

"But I –" Applejack began. She wasn't sure how she felt about the golden hind reading their intentions so accurately. That was not what caused her to speak, however.

"Yes?" Falalauria said, turning her head to the orange earth pony.

"I... I *saw* your deer," Applejack said. "It was when I was puttin' my hooves deep in the dirt, standin' firm like the Daleponies. Just for a second, I saw one of 'em walkin', or at least I thought I did."

"Did you?" Falalauria asked, curiosity filling her sweet voice.

"She did!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "I remember her saying so."

"Our cloaking spells are normally impenetrable, even to other deer. I wonder why..." Falalauria trailed off. Her eyes half-closed, then opened again. "Ah, it slipped my mind. You bear the Element of Honesty, Applejack. It is no surprise that you could see them."

"How did you know –"

"I have seen your history, remember?" Falalauria said. "I know all about your accomplishments in defeating Nightmare Moon." She smiled. "Thank you. Thank you so much for healing dear Luna's soul. I know how much it means to Celestia, though she would never tell any of her subjects. You did no small thing by saving the world from eternal night, of course, but giving Tia her sister back was a great good in itself."

"You know Princess Celestia?" Dash asked.

"Oh, yes," the golden hind said, smiling more sweetly, "Celestia is a very old friend of mine. We met when we were both young, both learning magic from the same convocation of Deer Elders. She was a few years older than I, so she was well along in her studies when I first arrived. Nevertheless, we hit it off splendidly – Luna had not been born yet, so she was feeling very lonely. Being the only hybrid deer in the Citadel, I felt quite lonely myself."

"Princess Celestia learned her magic from deer?" Dash asked in surprise.

"Yes," Falalauria said, "as did Luna. You must realize that when Celestia and Luna were young, unicorn magic was not systematized; it was still wild and chaotic. The deer had the most complex and structured magical system in the world at the time, so the Elders took it upon themselves to train the two new goddesses in the use of their power. Except for raising the sun and moon, of course – they've always done that instinctively." Her starscape eyes looked down. "When you return to Equestria, could you please pass on my best wishes to Celestia? It's been so long since I've seen her, and I do miss her terribly."

"Sure will, m'lady," Applejack said. "However, I'm still mighty keen to hear about the Elements of Harmony."

"Of course," Falalauria replied. "The Elements of Harmony are older than ponydom – the deerfolk... knew of them, long ago. Those creatures closely aligned with the Element of Honesty have in the past been... gifted, I suppose, by the Element, and blessed with special magic. Since you are the living representative of the Element of Honesty, it's expected that you would inherit its gift. Applejack, you have the same skill the white-tail deer have: you can detect truth no matter how thoroughly it is hidden. This also means you can see through any illusion."

"Me?" Applejack said, feeling shocked. She glanced at the floor, feeling simple and small. "But... I'm nopony special. I'm just a hard-workin' farmer. I ain't never fiddled with magic."

"Oh no?" Falalauria asked. "Have you not noticed your skill at identifying falsehood? How easy it is for you to tell when some creature tells a lie?"

"Well..." Applejack thought. She could always tell when Apple Bloom was lying... and Big Macintosh... and Rainbow Dash... and Caramel, who was supposed to be a very good liar... "But that's just me havin' a nose for fibbin'. It ain't the same thing as havin' truth-detectin' magic. And if I could always see through illusions, how come I never done it before now?"

"You have been the embodiment of Honesty since you were young, so the magic has always existed within you," the golden hind explained. "Uniting with the other five Elements of Harmony has amplified it, so you have begun to experience its effects more strongly. However, even now, you still have only the smallest use of it. You would have to train the magic and practice it regularly to wield its full power. The reason it activated at the entrance to the Shimmerwood, I think, is two-fold: first, because you were soaking up the magic in the air of the forest, and that was granting your Honesty magic a boost in power. Second, you chose at that moment to stand firm, as you were taught in Gildedale. Standing firm is the most concentrated form of earth pony magic; that is when the magic in you flows most strongly. Those two factors combined to grant you more use than normal of your magic of Honesty, allowing you to see through my deer's cloaking spell."

"Awesome!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, rising to her hooves. "Hey, I have the Element of Loyalty! Does that give *me* any special magic?"

"Hmm... I believe so," Falalauria said. "Indeed, I think all the Elements of Harmony grant gifts to those closely aligned with them. As I recall, the Element of Loyalty gave a gift related to inspiring others."

"And Rarity has the Element of Generosity!" Dash cried.

Falalauria turned her head to Rarity, and the white unicorn felt the hind's starscape eyes staring intently at her. "Yes," she said softly, "yes she does. What that Element's gift was escapes me at the moment."

Applejack hid her surprise well. *That* had been a lie. But she couldn't think why Falalauria would tell it.

"I shall answer your further questions as you like," Falalauria said. She half-closed her eyes. "However, I believe our dinner is ready for the evening. I have said all I wished to say in private, so if you will follow me, we can talk on the way." She rose, and the three ponies rose with her, following her down her crystal steps and out through the entrance to the small island. The crystal bridge grew across the golden lake once more, and Falalauria walked across it, Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash following in her wake.

"So hey," Dash asked, fluttering up to Falalauria's side, "what was Princess Celestia like when she was younger?"

"Oh, Tia was a great troublemaker," the golden hind said with a smile. "Once she learned even the most basic magic, she would use it to get into all sorts of mischief, breaking into

forbidden sections of the Citadel, listening in on private conversations, playing pranks on our instructors and even some of the Elders. She always dragged me along because, to use her words, 'you look more honest than me.' And in fairness, I did. That may be why I never got caught and she did."

"Pretty sneaky!" the sky-blue pegasus said with glee. "The Princess was a prankster! And she even got in trouble?"

"Yes!" Falalauria stifled a laugh. "It seemed half the times I met up with her she was coming from some punishment or quiet time. But she didn't get punished nearly as much as she should have, not for all the trouble she caused. More than half the time, she could talk her way out of the consequences. She had a silver tongue even then. Of course, it helped her that nothing she ever did was mean-spirited or cruel. She was a troublemaker, but never a bully." This time Falalauria actually laughed. "I was an assistant to one of the old elk when Luna first showed up, and I recall the Elders were on pins and needles waiting to see if she was anything like her sister. Fortunately for their weary hearts, Luna shared Celestia's kindness and curiosity, but not much else. Luna was much quieter, and far more dedicated to her studies."

They reached the end of the bridge and turned right, headed around the lake. The three ponies had to move at a brisk walk to keep up with the great deer's long strides. They headed down a tunnel of low branches, different than before. At the end of it, they appeared in a clearing, in which a large platform of dark wood sat, and on it was a long crystal table on short legs. Cushions were arranged all around it. Deer, some armored, some wearing crystal circlets, some completely bare, were emerging from the trees into the clearing. The ones that were garbed had their garments vanish as they approached the table. "I thought there would be more deer than this," Dash said.

"There are many more that live in the Shimmerwood. However, they live and work and study in shifts, so not all of them are awake or free at the same time," Falalauria explained. "Moreover, I dine personally with only some of them every day. I see a different group every day of the week." A large cushion lay at one end of the table. "That is my space," Falalauria said with a nod of her head, "and you three will sit with me." The white-tails around the table, so much smaller than their great Lady, rose to their hooves as Falalauria approached. She walked slowly down the length of the table to the end, where she stepped onto the platform and stopped, towering over the low crystal tabletop on her long legs. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Applejack saw two open places on either side of her, and one further free place second from the left. Rarity took her place at Falalauria's right, Dash was on her left, while Applejack stood next to Dash. When all the places were filled, Falalauria spoke in the flowing language. All the deer bowed their

heads, as did the ponies, while Applejack removed her hat. When Falalauria finished speaking, she reclined on her cushion, and the rest of the table followed.

"Lady Falalauria," Rarity said, "have you ever visited Equestria?"

"Many times, yes," Falalauria said. "Celestia often invites me to stay with her. I cannot always accept her offers, busy as I am administering the Shimmerwood and seeing to my own folk's needs. But I try to visit when I can." Her eyes fell. "It has been more than fifty years since I was last able to visit. As I said, I do long to visit her, not to mention seeing Luna again! That will be a treat. I like Equestria very much, not the least because of its comfort with magic. The Daleponies are very good neighbors, and the Lords of the Dale has always been courteous, but I recognize their discomfort with us. However kind they know us to be, their kingdom has shunned magic – and we are a very magical race."

"Couldn't you move?" Dash asked. "There's tons of big forests in Equestria. If you and the Princess know each other so well, she'd probably love to have you living in Equestria!"

"I know Celestia would like that very much indeed," Falalauria said. "But my deer are well-settled here. We have been here for more than seven hundred years, and they are comfortable here. I couldn't just ask them to uproot their lives and their families for the sake of my personal desires. And even if I were willing to do that, it is more than familiarity that keeps us where we are."

"What more?" Applejack asked.

The golden hind paused for a moment. "There are... elements... beyond the Archbacks, which our magic keeps at bay. The Shimmerwood serves as a bulwark against such things. I would prefer not to speak of them," she said gently, seeing Dash ready to talk.

At that moment, their places shimmered. Crystal plates appeared, filled with noodles covered in a light green sauce; the plates were garnished with, of all things, pansies. The deer gathered around the table quickly began to eat, using their magic to twirl the noodles into manageable bites. Rarity was about to join them, but she saw her friends staring helplessly at their plates. "Ah, My Lady," she said to Falalauria, "my friends have no magic with which to eat."

"Forgive me," Falalauria said, "I should not have forgotten." Her antlers shimmered white, and a pair of forks with white silk straps looped around them appeared at each non-magical pony's place. Applejack and Rainbow Dash stuck their hooves through the white straps, allowing them to lift their forks and swirl the noodles. Rarity, satisfied, took

a bite of her own pasta: it had a fresh and slightly tangy taste, but not disagreeable. Warm naan floated in crystal baskets down the table, and Dash happily availed herself of the delicious flatbread.

"M'lady," Applejack said, "there was one other time it seemed like I was seein' through an illusion, it was also on our journey, right at the start."

"Oh?" the golden hind said. "I started following you just in Gildedale, but I did look back on your earlier escapades..." Her eyelids half-closed for a moment, then opened. "It would be at the cave in the mountains, yes?"

"Oh yeah!" Dash said, thumping her hoof on the table. "When we heard that singing! I couldn't stop listening to it... it was so beautiful. Rarity couldn't stop either. Applejack had to drag us out!"

"Not to mention she collapsed the cave," the white unicorn added. "It was so very beautiful when I first heard it, but after the cave had collapsed... it was horrible."

"Yes, that was another use of your magic from the Element of Honesty," Falalauria said. "The extreme stress of the moment helped trigger it – and you also stood firm without meaning to. Your hooves were dug into the earth and you were firm in your purpose. That helped channel the magic. As to what was singing..." She thought for a moment. "Perhaps it was a siren, but they don't typically dwell in caves. I know that of old balrogs could enchant their voices to bewitch listeners, but only the originals, the ones created by Lord Carcharod himself."

"Have you remembered any more about the Element of Loyalty?" Dash asked. "Or what about some of the other Elements of Harmony?"

"I would need to consult my texts on the matter," said Falalauria. "It has been some time since I studied them. I can prepare something by morning when you set out, if you would like."

"Don't take too much trouble on our account," Applejack said. "You've done real good just tellin' us everything you have, not to mention puttin' us up for the night."

"After all your hard journeying across Gildedale, I knew you would enjoy the hospitality," Falalauria said. "I wanted you sleep safely for one more night before you reached the Archback Mountains."

"My Lady," Ines said, pausing between bites of noodles, "now that our guests have arrived, perhaps you could regale us of their journey which you have seen?"

"Now that they have arrived," Falalauria said, "I think it would be best if they told it themselves."

The three ponies needed little persuading. With Applejack taking the lead, they launched into the story of their journey, Rarity and Rainbow Dash adding their own observations. Dash took over the bulk of the narrative when the subject of the pronghorns raised its head, and even Rarity and Applejack listened with wonder at the sky-blue pegasus' account of the Dreaming.

"I have wandered the Dreaming before," Falalauria said, "as have most of my deer. For you to navigate it so skillfully without complex magic is quite a feat, however."

"I had a lot of help," Dash admitted. This surprised her friends – Dash would not before have missed a chance to boast. "I learned to listen to the guidance of the ones with me."

"I should think that is as important a lesson as mastering control of lightning," Falalauria said. Their plates were empty, and with a shimmer of magic they vanished. Falalauria stood, and the other deer stood as well. "The hour grows late, though perhaps you ponies cannot tell. I must return to my tower to check the Shimmerwood's boundaries, and I would see you get a good night's sleep before your journey tomorrow. Ines, if you will show them to their prepared places?"

"Very well, My Lady," Ines said with a nod.

The golden hind turned back to the three ponies. "I take my leave of you now, but if you are troubled by anything in the night, do not hesitate to call on me. All my deer have such liberty. I shall be easy to find." Moving backwards, she stepped down from the platform and turned to go. "Good night, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity. Pleasant dreams." She began to stride slowly towards the trees at the edge of the clearing, though with her long stride it was little time before she passed between two dark trunks and out of sight.

Ines turned to them. "Come," she said, just as she had so much earlier in the day. They followed her away from the table, into a gap between massive trees, the golden pinpoints of light still glowing gently high overhead. They wound through the forest, passing another dagger of crystal hanging low from two branches.

"Miss Ines, do you know what those crystal structures are?" Rarity asked.

"They are magical amplifiers," the scarlet-eyed doe explained. "Crystal is a powerful conductor of magical energy, particularly when it is shaped as we craft it. They allow us to project our control through the whole of the Shimmerwood, regulating it and keeping it free of danger. Otherwise the wild magic here could attract untamed and dangerous creatures."

"Heh, we got a forest like that back home near Ponyville," Applejack said. "The Everfree Forest it's called. It's got all manner o' critters."

They were led to a section of the forest where the lights seemed dimmer. Great hanging bowers of crystal descended from the trees, huge gourd-shaped structures two stories tall, hanging low to the ground. One of particular size emerged before them; Ines' antlers shimmered orange, and it descended until they could step into it. Inside were three futons covered in simple white sheets with gray blankets. The crystal was vaguely transparent, and in the upper level the ponies could see their equipment and armor neatly stacked. "We shall have baths ready for you in the morning," Ines said as they stepped inside. "In the meantime, as Our Lady said, do not hesitate to call on her if you are distressed in the night."

"Whyever would we be distressed?" Rarity asked.

"Our Lady's own protection, and the protection of the whole of the deer, is great, but it does not always protect the mind from wild magic during slumber," the doe said. "Dark dreams and portents can sometimes result. Very rarely, an attack happens – but Our Lady knows such things instantly, and she will be with you in your dreams to protect you if it occurs. So, until the morning, good night." Her antlers shimmered again, and a long, dark curtain was drawn across the bower's entrance.

"Whew!" Dash breathed, flopping back on the central futon. "What a day!"

"I gotta say, it was worth it comin' here after all," Applejack said, taking off her hat and pulling back the covers on her thin mattress. "We coulda been in real trouble if we hadn't know about the colors on the Beneviolet."

"I'll say," Rarity added, snuggling under the covers. "And Lady Falalauria has been so forthcoming in all other respects. She told us all that information about the Elements of Harmony, even!"

Applejack hesitated at this. Should she tell Rarity that Falalauria had lied about not knowing the Element of Generosity's gift? But what could she say after that? She would

just make Rarity suspicious to no effect. Applejack had not detected any malice behind the lie. If it meant no harm for them, and it was nonessential information, the orange earth pony was content to let the golden hind keep her secrets, for whatever reasons she had. "I wonder how I would go about doin' that magical exercisin' she was talkin' about," she murmured.

"You wanna learn to be a truth-detecting machine?" Dash asked.

"Could be mighty useful," Applejack answered. "Heck, it's *been* useful already, twice now. And I do like not bein' fooled by nothin'."

Rarity yawned. "One more thing to ask her in the morning, I suppose," and she pulled the covers close around her. "Good night, everypony."

"Night," Dash murmured, throwing the covers over her body.

Applejack, now out of habit, tipped her hat over her head. "G'night, y'all," she said. The gentle silence of the surrounding wood was the best sort of lullaby, and the bower was dim. The three quickly fell asleep, where Rarity dreamed anew.

Rarity's horn shimmered, and the teacup raised off its saucer to her lips. She sipped it daintily, relishing in the pleasantly warm spring day, the immaculate white tablecloth, the soft pink napkins and the gilded silverware.

"May I trouble you for the scones?" a voice asked to her left. Turning, Rarity saw a young unicorn foal, her body still chubby with baby fat. Her white flanks were bare, and her deep blue eyes were large in her small head. Her violet mane and tail, however, were primly curled into great ringlets, almost too large for her small body.

"Certainly," Rarity said, using her magic to pass the flowery china plate.

"Dearest, could you top me off? And do get me an orange slice, please," said a voice to her right. Rarity looked and saw a unicorn much advanced in years. Her white coat seemed slightly faded, though it still shone in the sunlight. Her body showed that stretching gauntness that creeps up inevitably on creatures in old age. There were crow's feet around her deep blue eyes. Her mane was a slightly muted purple, as was her tail, and a long line of white ran through both. She wore crystal-framed pince-nez glasses, and a necklace of crystal around her neck. Her triple gemstone cutie mark was still bright on both flanks.

"Oh, yes, of course," Rarity said. Her horn shimmered again, lifting the tea kettle over to the old unicorn's cup and gently pouring the warm brown liquid; it steamed as it tumbled into her glass.

"I believe I would like a sandwich, darling," a voice in front of her said. Looking straight ahead, Rarity glanced across the table at a very large horse, her long legs and elegant torso requiring a much larger chair than the other three ponies. Her velvety white coat occasionally sparkled in gleams of blinding white. Her mane and tail were deep violet, and wound into several very long ringlets that shifted in the breeze, each time making a sound like the soft chiming of a bell. Her long, sharp horn rose high off her head, and beneath it, above her graceful snout, deep blue eyes glanced gently at Rarity, a single star burning far within the pupils. A pair of enormous butterfly wings, gossamer-thin and swathed all the colors of the rainbow, were folded along her sides. She wore a necklace of crystal with writing on it in a strange, flowing script. On each flank, a triangular arrangement of gemstones was placed, and transposed in the gemstones' midst was a violet starburst.

"Here you are," Rarity said, lifting the plate of cucumber sandwiches with her magic and passing it across the table. For a moment, the four ponies sat in comfortable silence,

enjoying their tea. Then Rarity finished her cup, and lowered it. "If I may ask, who are you all?"

The young foal set down her half-eaten scone. "I'm who you were."

The old mare set down her cup. "I'm who you will be."

"And you?" Rarity asked the great butterfly-winged unicorn.

She set down her sandwich. "I'm what is within you."

"That's not terribly straightforward," Rarity said. "Certainly not compared to Miss Past and Madam Future, here."

The winged unicorn smiled. "I'm them as well. I am what you were, what you are, and what you will be. I am your full flowering, darling – the actualization of your potential, to use Coltestotle's terminology."

"So I could be you," Rarity said.

"I'm the you that's most you. I'm what happens when what's inside you comes out."

"I don't understand," Rarity murmured. "I do wish you would be clearer."

"If you want clarity, I suggest you look behind you," the great winged unicorn said.

Rarity turned in her chair. Something vast and shadowy rose up from the horizon. It was long, but broad – impossibly long and impossibly broad, filling the sky, blotting out the sun, its long neck ending in its huge head. Suddenly, it tumbled down at her –

"Buwaah!" Rarity yelped as she came awake, sitting up in her futon. Fortunately, the crystal ceiling was just high enough to keep her from hitting her head. Her horn still tingled with all the magic in the air. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that it was just a dream. And what an interesting dream it had been.

She turned her head to the left. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were sound asleep, the former snoring gently, the latter curled up in her silk sheets. Wriggling out from her own covers, Rarity crawled gently to the curtain at the bower's entrance and peeked out from below it. The woods were still lit with the golden pinpoints high above, the brightness unchanged from hours before. The passage of time was not evident, but Rarity knew from her internal sense that dawn was still many hours away. Nevertheless, she felt oddly

rested, not tired in the least. Perhaps it was the magic in the air – Twilight Sparkle had once told her that unicorns' magic circuits would send excess power they absorbed into a unicorn's mind and body, refreshing them both. Whatever the reason, while she could go back to sleep, she didn't feel she needed to.

Careful to be quiet, she slid out of the bower, bracing her knees for the small drop to the ground. She couldn't explain her sudden wanderlust – she'd been doing plenty of journeying on this trip already, and didn't know why she wanted more. Nevertheless, she was compelled to explore where she could. The dream she had just had was also weighing on her mind. What had that last great shadow been? For that matter, what had the great winged unicorn been? Her past and future selves had been easy to understand, but the butterfly-winged horse defied her mind. What had she meant, she was Rarity's full flowering?

She came to the edge of the sleeping area, and with some hesitance plunged into the trees, the golden light above ensuring she was not in the dark. The white unicorn felt a gentle tug of magic from her right, compelling her to turn and follow through great, tall oaks, their upper branches knitted together by the network of walkways she had seen the day before. Abruptly, the branches hung lower, forming another tunnel like the one that had led to Falalauria's tower. Rarity's horn pulsed, indicating great power was ahead. She lightened her hoofsteps, making as little noise as she could by the time she reached the tunnel's end.

A great clearing, its roof high with towering branches, emerged, pale golden grass springing up around her hooves. She was not far from the shore of a moderately sized lake. Unlike the golden tinge of the surrounding foliage, the lake was a silent mirror of silver, seemingly unmoved by the general gilded ambiance. She could see magic rising from the water, wavering faintly like summer heat. There was a perimeter of brush and bushes around the trees just before the clearing. Rarity ducked off into it to her left, hiding herself from sight, and not a moment too soon, for on the far right shore of the lake, two deer emerged. Though both bore dull gray antlers on their heads, one, thinner and narrower, was clearly a doe, while the other, with more muscle and a squarer head, was clearly a buck. Rarity's eyes widened as she saw the doe wearing a basket around her flanks, and was even more surprised when a tiny, narrow head peeked out from the wicker rim. It was a fawn, very young, perhaps a few days old. The pair of older deer stopped at the lakeshore, and the doe's antlers shimmered. The basket was lifted off her side, set on the ground, and tipped gently over. The fawn crawled slowly out, and with a trembling in its tiny legs, it rose to its hooves. It took a few steps forward, full of apprehension, then tumbled over. She could see the doe's face fill with affection that could only be called maternal.

Doe and buck turned at an angle to face close to her direction, and Rarity worried for a moment that they had seen her. Instead, her eyes widened again, for Falalauria emerged out of the trees, her antlers bare, a circlet of silver on her head. The mother and father bowed low at her approach, and the golden hind nodded her head in turn. The small gathering of deer paused for a few moments – except for the fawn, who tried to stand up again, then gave it up and looked intently at the enormous shape of the newcomer. Falalauria lowered her head, a smile curling her lips. She very gently nuzzled the little fawn, sniffing as she did. Then she raised her head, and spoke to the two parents; Rarity could not hear what she said, and she reasoned she wouldn't have been able to understand the words anyway. The doe and the buck then spoke, and both of them nodded. Then they turned and retreated more than a dozen paces.

Falalauria turned to her left and took a few steps, bringing her to the water's edge. She lowered her head, stepped forward again, and tilted it, dunking her left antler in the lake. When she raised her head, the antler was drenched, dripping a cloud's worth of lake water. She turned back to the fawn and advanced slowly, until she was upon it, where she angled her wet antler over it. The tiny deer was drizzled by the falling drops of water. Falalauria walked in a small circle around the fawn, keeping her dripping antler over it, letting more and more water fall upon it until it was thoroughly drenched. When she reached the spot she had started from, she raised her head, and her left antler shimmered; in an instant it was dry. The golden hind then lowered her head to the wet fawn. Its wide, innocent eyes stared up into the dark night skies between her eyelids. It raised its tiny head and nuzzled her. She licked it on its left cheek, then on its right, and then she gently kissed the top of its bare head.

It struck Rarity then that she had intruded upon something sacred and private. She felt she should leave, yet she didn't dare move for fear of making a sound. Falalauria raised her head again and spoke to the doe and the buck, who in turn advanced upon their child. The buck spoke for a moment, and the doe spoke next. The doe stepped up to the fawn, bent down, and licked it on its left cheek, then its right cheek, and then she kissed it on the head, just as Falalauria had done. Then it was the buck's turn, and he repeated the same lick, lick, kiss. Both parents looked to the golden hind. She nodded her great head. The white-tails bowed low in unison. When they rose, the mother's antlers shimmered faint orange, lifting the fawn off the ground and back into its basket, which then lifted up and back onto the mother's side. Falalauria turned from them and began to walk away. The buck and the doe turned to the right and headed back whence they had come, passing through the trees and out of sight.

Falalauria was walking in Rarity's direction, and the white unicorn was doubly nervous now. Would Falalauria detect her? She had great magic, and of course there was her

powerful Long Sight. She didn't want to upset Falalauria. Rarity quickly cast a cloaking spell, shimmering her body out of sight. She wasn't confident it would be enough to hide her, but if the golden hind wasn't actively looking for her, it might be sufficient. A melody wafted through her ears, and Rarity realized that Falalauria was singing, her beautiful voice chiming with music. She sang in the flowing language, the words spiraling from her lips into a graceful song that Rarity could not understand, but it made her heart ache. She could feel the sadness in it, a gently sinking gloom settling in her chest, making the night darker, her loneliness dearer, her worries sharper. She continued for a few minutes, slowly drawing closer to Rarity, her song gradually fading away. Then she began to sing another song in another language, a language choppy and with heavier syllables. Yet the song was just as sad, indeed, perhaps it was sadder, for the harder sounds of the other language made the dense intonations of this new song weigh even heavier on Rarity's heart. The white unicorn sniffed, then held her breath in nervousness – had Falalauria heard her? The golden hind gave no indication, walking ever closer. She turned at the bend in the clearing and continued to walk. The lake was as placid as ever. She got closer to Rarity, and the song in the choppy language faded away. After a moment's pause, she started another song, and this one surprised Rarity, because she could understand this one – it was sung in Equestrian, low and gentle:

*Gil-Galad was an Elken King,
Of him the harpers sadly sing.
The last whose realm was fair and free
Between the Mountains and the Sea.*

*His hooves were sharp, his antlers keen,
His shining helm afar was seen.
The countless stars of Heaven's field
Were mirrored in his silver shield.*

*But long ago he rode awa-aay,
And where he dwelleth none can sa-aay.
Into darkness fell his star
In Annudûr where Shadows are.*

When Falalauria had finished this song, she was right in front of Rarity. She stopped walking and turned her head to the white unicorn, cloaked and hidden in the bushes. "Hello, Rarity."

Startled, Rarity dropped her cloak. Fidgeting for a moment, she then stepped out of the bushes, feeling guilty. "Forgive me, My Lady," she said with a nod of her head. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"I know you didn't," said the golden hind, turning to face her in full. "I sensed your presence when I arrived."

"Oh!" Rarity said, feeling more ashamed; her ears flattened against her head. "I'm so sorry for intruding on that ceremony. I never intended to disturb you."

"My subjects were not aware of you, and that is what matters," Falalauria said. "A baptism is not so delicate that an onlooker's presence nullifies it. I know the Dawn and Dusk ceremonies your foals go through in Equestria permit observers."

Having attended Sweetie Belle's Dawn and Dusk, Rarity knew this. If Falalauria did not mind, she wouldn't trouble herself about it, and she had other questions. "My Lady," she began, "that song you were singing just now... it was beautiful."

"I think so," Falalauria agreed. "So beautiful, though so sad, as well."

"Oh, yes," Rarity agreed. "But I wondered... why was it in Equestrian, when your other songs were not?"

"Because Luna wrote it, long ago," the golden hind said, to Rarity's amazement. "She wrote it when she was still a student, taking music. It is a song of mourning, and the Elders approved of it greatly. That seems to be all we deer do in this present age," she said with a sigh. "Mourn – weep for what we have lost. More than a thousand years since my instruction, I can still hear the Elders' insistent refrain. *Mourn*, they said. *Mourn always, mourn forever, for the deerfolk were once the apex of the Earth, but we destroyed ourselves in greed and anger. We deserve always to mourn.* And for my own part, I heard them – and I mourn." Her starscape eyes regarded Rarity. "What do you think of that, Rarity?"

"I..." Rarity began slowly. "I suppose I can't wrap my mind around it. We're taught very little about your war in Equestria – we know some things, to be sure, but not a great deal. If you're asking me how being told to mourn would set with me, however, I must admit, it would seem to get very tiring. No pony can be sad forever, can they?"

"The Elders certainly seemed to try," Falalauria said. She turned and began to continue her walk around the shore of the lake. Rarity fell into step beside her. "Most of them are gone now. All the days I knew them, they were sad. How could they not be, having lived what they lived?"

"How much do *you* know about the war, My Lady?"

She tilted her head towards Rarity. "Some. I did not live through it – I was born long after it ended. I heard the tales of it from the Elders, though... and I Looked back into the past." She sighed again. "From what I have come to know, it was terrible. There was such death and destruction, on a scale like nothing the world has seen since. Pray to Celestia, pray to Luna, pray to The Wills That Draw The World that ponydom never sees anything like it."

"It sounds simply dreadful," Rarity agreed.

"It was – and so I mourn," Falalauria said. Then she straightened her head. "Yet my white-tails do not. I have not taught them to."

"Really?" Rarity asked. "Why not?"

"It's as you said – no creature can live their whole life in sadness. The Elders could well be sad, because they were once happy, but I could not impress perpetual mourning upon my deer." Falalauria's voice grew firmer. "The Elders saw us as a dying folk, withering away until in time there would be nothing left. And it is true that we have lost much – there is much to mourn over. But there is still *life* in us. The fawn you saw this night was one of several born this spring. If he does not come to harm, he will live for a century at least. The deer are not *dead*, no matter what the Elders thought, and I shall not have their despair finish what the war started. So my white-tails have not been taught to mourn. Instead, I have taught them to laugh." Falalauria gave a small guffaw. "Well, perhaps not to laugh. We must maintain appearances. I have taught them to smile, though."

Rarity smiled. "That sounds like something my friend Pinkie Pie would say," she said. "Though she would likely have started singing by this point." A reminder flashed through her mind. "Speaking of, those other two songs, the ones not in Equestrian: I heard them in two different languages. I've heard two different languages all the time I have been here. What are they?"

"The second song was sung in the native language of the white-tail deer," Falalauria explained, "the language we have had since ancient times. We take our names in that language, even me." She smiled. "I was so noisy as a fawn, my father told me I was forever cooing and babbling at those who approached me. So the first part of my name means 'speech' in native white-tail, or Cervóla. However, the language we use in conversation is Laewtil, which is the shared language of all the deerfolk. It was created to serve as a common tongue when the Six Species decided to unite into a single civilization. The elk

invented it – they were always skilled at clever and intricate things. That was the language of the first song." She suddenly craned her neck upwards, tilting her head to the right. "Pardon me for a moment." She vanished on the spot.

Rarity was left standing by the shore of the lake. It didn't surprise her that Falalauria could teleport as well – she was enormously powerful, after all. It was so convenient a skill, and the deer made it look so easy, far easier than it had seemed when Twilight Sparkle was trying to teach her. *I still wish she hadn't bothered!* Rarity thought. Now that she had, however, Rarity could not but feel bound to learn the skill. It was a bit like Rainbow Dash's obligation to learn lightning, though certainly not as traumatically induced. Still, Twilight had tried to help her, Twilight had suffered in the attempt, and Rarity had a duty to complete what she had started.

Falalauria appeared at that moment. "Forgive me," she said, "I had to attend to something at my tower. The barrier across the Archback Mountains does not maintain itself." She saw Rarity's forlorn look. "What's wrong?"

"It's just..." Rarity sighed. "Your teleportation is so elegant and simple-looking. I don't know if you've ever seen a unicorn teleport, but it's accompanied by a tremendous cloud of magic and sparkles. Very gaudy, and while normally I wouldn't shy away from gaud, in this case it looks too pompous. I like your way much better, judged solely by appearances."

"You do, now?" Falalauria asked with raised brows.

"Very much so!"

The golden hind smiled. "Would you like to learn it?"

Rarity gasped. "Learn it? Me? Oh, I would love to! But – can I? Isn't it deer magic?"

"Magic is magic," Falalauria said. "Any creature capable of learning spells can learn any spell from any species' folio. It's a matter of having enough power and enough skill. Some deer magic requires more power than the average unicorn could muster, but our teleportation spell is very low-power. As to skill, to learn our spell requires great attention to detail and a strong imagination. Have you those?"

"Yes!" Rarity exclaimed, bursting with excitement.

"Well, then," said Falalauria, "I shall teach you here and now. It's not difficult once you have mastered the nuances. Tell me first: how do unicorns teleport? What are the mechanics of the spell? Do you know them?"

"Well..." The white unicorn thought back to what Twilight had tried to teach her. "My friend Twilight Sparkle – you know about her already – said that unicorns teleport by picturing themselves in the place they want to go. They make a mental picture of the place, then a picture of themselves being there, and then they channel their magic."

"So it relies on imagery," Falalauria said. "Our teleportation spell is grounded in sensation." She stepped closer, towering right over Rarity. "To put ourselves in a different place, we deer don't think about what it looks like. We rather think about how it *feels*. We use our sense of touch to begin the spell; we imagine what the space around our new location will feel like on our skin and coat and hooves."

"I see!" Rarity said.

"You must feel, not see," Falalauria said with a smile. Her star-filled eyes blinked slowly. "I believe you can do it. Your life has suited you for this style of teleporting. You make dresses, yes?"

"I do," Rarity said proudly. "The finest, most fashionable *couture* in all of Equestria!"

"Hmm, that was an elkish word just now," Falalauria commented. "At any rate, you are familiar, not merely with the color of various fabrics, but with their texture, yes? With their feel and weight?"

"Absolutely," Rarity said, happiness spreading through her as it always did when she discussed her passion. "A proper designer must always know her fabrics by feel. One must be able to tell tweed from mohair from hopsack from linen from cashmere with one's eyes closed! In Neighples they have a saying: *even a blind pony can dress well*. I certainly think so."

"So you know how to touch things and learn about them," Falalauria said. "You should be able to make mental notes of how things feel. That is the key to our style of teleportation." Walking around Rarity, she lowered her head and spoke gently into her ear. "Instead of trying to picture your destination's appearance, imagine how it *feels*. Imagine how it will feel when you are in it – what the ground under your hooves will be like, what the space will feel like around you, what the air on your skin will feel like. You

can even try to imagine how it will sound. Instead of picturing yourself appearing in the new place, imagine what it will feel like to already be there."

Rarity thought for a moment. It seemed straightforward enough. Could she do it? If it was as much like fabric-feeling as Falalauria suggested, she certainly could. "And after I do that, I just channel the magic through my horn?"

"Through your horn, through your thoughts," Falalauria said with a nod. "We can try it right now."

Rarity swallowed. "Do you think I'm ready?"

"It is not a very complicated spell," she said, "and all it really needs is practice. Start simply: teleport to the other shore of the lake." She nodded forward, across the silvery surface of the water. "I'll go there and mark your destination." Falalauria teleported across the lake, standing almost in a straight line from Rarity on the other side. "Teleport right next to me," she said, her voice sounding like it was still in Rarity's ear. "Don't picture it – feel it. Imagine the grass beneath your hooves. Imagine the still night air against your skin. Imagine the soft silence in your ears."

Rarity slowly closed her eyes. She thought about the other side of the lake. She concentrated, but did not strain, letting the impressions come to her gently. The other side would be grassy, but perhaps a bit shorter growing. The dirt would be just slightly damper because of where Falalauria's baptismal water had splashed. It would be a bit softer. The night air would be gentle against her skin. From high above, the soft golden light would whisper against her white coat. The smell of the forest near there would be earthy and wild.

"Now, let your magic flow through your feelings."

Rarity allowed her magic circuit to open, allowed power to flow into it from the world, out of it from her body. She let her mind fill with magic, let magic wash over her imaginings like the ocean on the beach. More magic flowed through her, concentrating in her horn and radiating into space.

"Go."

Rarity gave her magic the tiniest of pushes. The world was quiet. It was as if nothing had happened. Her spirits fell. At least this time there hadn't been a messy explosion...

"Well done, Rarity," Falalauria's voice said in her ear. Then Rarity noticed the grass around her hooves didn't feel quite the same as it had moments ago. Her eyes snapped open. Falalauria was standing beside her. She looked across the lake, and saw the very spot she had stood in moments ago. She looked down. She was on the other side.

A smile slowly crept over Rarity's face, stretching into the most enormous of grins. She stamped her hooves on the ground in glee. "**WAHAHA!**" she cried, jumping for joy. "I DID IT! I DID IT! It wasn't hard at all!" She focused on the bank to her left. She imagined all sorts of feelings – the grass, the dirt, the light, the air, the sound. She kept her eyes open this time, and so there was a *skip* in the world around her, like a twitch passing over her vision, and then she was looking at another section of the forest, and she turned around to see Falalauria standing at an angle on the bank far to her right. "I did it!" She looked across the lake. It was farther across from this side than from the other set of banks. She concentrated, focused on the rush of sensations she imagined from the far bank. She channeled her magic – it didn't take much power at all! – and the world twitched around her once more, and she was standing on the opposite bank. She teleported back to Falalauria's side a moment later. "Twilight will be so proud of me!"

Falalauria nodded. "You should be proud of yourself. You have achieved so much, Rarity. I've watched you." Rarity looked intently up at the golden hind. "You were so unsure at the beginning, so hesitant at the start of your travels. I could not read your mind, so I could not see into your thoughts, but I knew that any creature who chose to enter willingly into such a perilous journey must be very brave, no matter what appearances showed. You have proven me correct." Falalauria paused. Her night-sky eyes stared down at Rarity, and the white unicorn had the uncomfortable sensation that she was being looked inside of, similar to what she felt before Hammer Hoof, but far more intense, because she knew there was powerful magic scanning her. "Rarity," Falalauria said, and the levity had vanished from her voice, "it is convenient that you found me this night. I knew you would come; I saw it. Before I even knew of you, before I even perceived you and your friends journeying across Gildedale, I had a dream that you would come. Our paths, it seems, were fated to meet. Yet... I hesitate. I know what I ought to do, what I ought to say... but you have taken so many burdens upon yourself already. What I would say to you this night would add another, one I am reluctant to make you bear."

Rarity was startled by this. Falalauria had something to tell her? Something that would burden her? Her mind immediately flew to the others. Was it about them? Was it about Twilight Sparkle? *It could be something that would help her*, she thought, *or perhaps one of the others*. This idea played out across her mind and stuck there, and as it did her resolve hardened. "Is it something that would help my friends?" she asked.

The golden hind did not answer immediately. "Yes," she finally said. "Them, and perhaps many other creatures."

"Then tell me," Rarity said, surprising herself with her lack of hesitation. "If it is a burden that others *won't* have to bear, tell me. I do not know if I'll be able to bear it... I'm not sure at all... but I must try."

"You say this without knowing a thing about what I would tell you," Falalauria said.

"It doesn't matter," said the white unicorn. Her deep blue eyes wavered. "Or... it does matter," she held her head up proudly, "but it shouldn't. I must strive for it not to matter. Tell me."

Falalauria smiled. "You are very strong and very brave, Rarity," she said. "I should not have doubted you. What I said to you in the company of your friends before was not the truth."

"Regarding... what?" Rarity asked.

"I do in fact know the gift bestowed by the Element of Generosity," Falalauria told her. "I know it very well indeed."

"What is it?" Rarity asked.

"It is a great and terrible gift," Falalauria said slowly, "I say this from close experience."

"*You* have experience with the gift?" Rarity asked.

Falalauria nodded slowly. "A great deal." She watched Rarity stare at her for a moment. She knew it would come to the white unicorn. Sure enough, a few seconds later, her deep blue eyes bulged. Falalauria smiled sadly. "Yes: the Element of Generosity grants those aligned with it Long Sight – like the red deer. Like me." She closed her eyes. "Congratulations, Rarity. May you not come to hate it."

"But..." Rarity began, clearly confused. "What on earth does your... sight beyond sight have to do with being generous? Wouldn't it make more sense if I had the gift of... I don't know... always being able to give things, no matter what?"

"The truly generous *are* always able to give, even when they have no possessions or wealth," Falalauria said. "They give of their time, they give of their talents, if they feel great love and see great need they even give their own lives. You know this, Rarity. You

have been giving to ponies and creatures in need since the days when you had far less than you have now. You have never lacked for gifts to give, and you never will. What the generous need is the ability to discern who of those they meet are in need, and what those needs are. So the Element of Generosity grants them the ability to Look for what other creatures need. They can See in hidden places and across great distances, to find creatures that need their help. They can Look into a creature's past, to understand their experiences and the needs that arise from them. They can also Look into a creature's future, to see what needs they may someday have and prepare to meet them."

"I..." Rarity's mind was racing. "I'm not a seer! Twilight says –"

"Twilight Sparkle does not know the full extent of the world's magic," Falalauria said firmly. "I described *my* Sight to you, Rarity: how I see the choices and circumstances that will befall a creature or an object. Your own Sight is the same, at least I think it is. Moreover, you *do* have this gift. I have seen it in your life. How often do you perceive things that others miss? How often do you notice details that are, not only less than obvious, but nearly impossible to pick out by mere examination?" Falalauria inclined her head, her great antlers shimmering with magic. "How often have you known what your fellow ponies in Ponyville will need before they need it?"

Rarity thought back across her memory. She had been giving to ponies since she was a foal... but now that she remembered, her gifts had not always been well-received, at least not at the time. This is because she had a tendency, starting when she was young, to give gifts that, while potentially useful, were not immediately so. Her recipients, whether they were her friends or strangers, would accept her gifts gladly, but say, 'Oh, Rarity, whenever shall I use this?' The answer would come days, weeks, months, even years later, but it would *always* come, and then those recipients would stop her in the street or even bang on her door, thanking her from the bottom of their hearts. And then there were her clothes! Her eyes widened further. She could *always* anticipate trends without fail, one, two, three, even four seasons ahead, and she was *never* wrong. Her loyal clients had learned to put their trust in her when she told them what they would be wearing more than a year ahead. They never asked how she knew. She never questioned how she knew. She simply knew. And when she looked at ponies, her mind would jump to where they had been, what they had been doing. She had chalked it up to her obsessive-compulsive attention to detail, and that was certainly part of it, but...

"You begin to understand, don't you?" Falalauria said. "Your Sight is not fully like mine. You do not have my ability to sense the truth of things, so your visions of the future may never be as accurate. Still, even to see what *might* be is a powerful gift... powerful and terrible."

"But I can help other ponies!" Rarity said. "You've just said so! You know, I've been having dreams all this journey, and though they were nonsensical as dreams tend to be, there was always at least one element of them that made some sense, and it was a sense that wound up coming to pass days later!"

"The stress of your journey has exercised your gift, just as it exercised Applejack's," Falalauria said. "Moreover, you too have been drinking in the Shimmerwood's ambient magic, and it has boosted your gift's power."

"But I can exercise it more, right?" Rarity asked her. "I can make it stronger?"

"If you choose," Falalauria said. "As to how strong it could get... who can say? That is another thing, Rarity. While, in the past, there have been creatures who have strongly aligned with one of the Elements of Harmony, you and your friends are something **new**. There have never before been **Bearers** of the Elements: single creatures who fully embody each of the Elements and receive their gifts to an immeasurable extent. I cannot say how powerful your gift or any of your friends' gifts could become, and my Sight on the matter is dubious, the choices unclear. It may be that you will in time have Sight as accurate as mine... or even more so." Her starscape eyes widened to their full size. "You may even be able to see the One True Future of all things, if such a Sight even exists."

Rarity's head was swimming. She could be an even more powerful Seer than Falalauria? And all her other friends had gifts from the Elements of Harmony? "You mentioned the gift was terrible as well," she said, collecting herself. "What did you mean?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Falalauria said. When she spoke next, her voice was soft: "You have the ability to Look into the future of every creature you meet. You can See the pain they will suffer. You can See their whole life before them. You can See how they might die, and you know that *one* of the ways you See will be accurate. You can Watch cities grow and fade and die. You can See whole families spread from a young couple and then wither into nothing. You can Watch the forests and the farmlands and even the mountains grow old. You can even See your *own* future."

Rarity's dread grew with each word. "Have you Seen *your* future, My Lady?"

"I have," Falalauria said. "I know almost certainly how I am going to die, and when it will be. And when I first learned it, it was every bit as terrible as you can imagine." She turned to the right and began to walk around Rarity, eyeing her sidelong. "Knowing the future forces many horrible choices upon you. You are presented with opportunities to act, and you must weigh the futures you see as a result of each choice you make." She stopped

walking, and leveled a starscape eye at Rarity. "For example, I am deciding now whether or not I shall kill you – you and your friends."

Rarity's brain fuzzed out for a moment. She could manage only a very unladylike "Whu?"

The stars *grew* in Falalauria's eyes, filling up the blackness until they shone blinding, empty white. "I have Seen what results from your journey to the Archback Mountains! I have **Seen** the Dark Thing you unleash! You will set in motion a chain of events that will destroy the Shimmerwood! A chain of events that will threaten millions of lives across the world!" White power swirled around her antlers. The golden pinpoints overhead turned white and began to flash in strobes; in the flickering, Rarity could see the branches of the trees begin to stretch out like horrible gnarled arms – reaching for her. With a shriek, she jumped back, tripping over her back legs and falling on her rump. Falalauria's voice was a powerful **ringing** that filled the whole of the air. "For the good of those millions – for the safety of the whole world! – I should **annihilate** you all right now! I could do it, too. It would be as nothing! Not even Rainbow Dash with her lightning could stand against me! My power rivals that of Celestia, and I am well-versed in Battle Magic!"

Even the grass was reaching up to claw at Rarity. She shrieked. "Please!" she pleaded. "We don't mean any harm! We just want to save Twilight!"

"But..."

Rarity's hard-shut eye craned open. Falalauria's terrible face, aflame with power, began to grow dimmer. The strobing lights grew fainter and more regular. The tree limbs stopped stretching, began to withdraw.

"But..." Falalauria's antlers lost their swirling white magic. Her eyes dimmed, the blinding light in them shrinking back into the tiny stars floating in the blackness. The lights overhead resumed their golden hue, and the tree branches pulled back to their original paths. "But... if I stop you here... if I halt your journey now, I know for a fact that Twilight Sparkle will die. And the millions of threatened lives I See are just that: *threatened*. I have yet to See any creature *die* as a result of your actions, though likely at least one will." She lowered her head. She looked very sad, and for all her years, very young and unsure. "So you see, Rarity? I must weigh the possible deaths of millions against the certain death of one. The needs of the many against the needs of the few. The potential against the actual. That is what comes of Seeing what may be."

Rarity shakily got to her hooves. "My... My Lady," she began, sounding as unsteady as she felt. "I..." she stopped. She paused. *What can I say?* She bit her lip. *How can I say there's no such thing as destiny? I have a cutie mark, after a –* that was it. "My Lady Falalauria," she began, her voice growing more stable. "I... I'm not going to tell you that what you've seen may not come to pass. I believe there is a way things must go. It comes of being a pony, of growing up, finding your talent, and getting a cutie mark that reflects it. There are things that are meant to be." Falalauria was looking at her intently. Rarity began to smile, small at first. "I recognize that, and I accept it. And if I choose to exercise the gift the Element of Generosity gave me, I shall see it all firsthand. So how can I go on living? How can I move in the world, knowing all my actions may be preordained?" Her smile grew broader. "I have *faith*, My Lady. I have faith in the goodness of things. I have faith that there is more in the world than evil and darkness. I have faith that Princess Celestia and Princess Luna and all the other gods, including *you*, Madam Powerful-As-Celestia, follow a plan that leads to good, not ill. Now, from what you've said, it may be that even gods and those with godlike power need faith – so *have* faith, My Lady. You can see the future, and I know it can't be all ill. Have faith that the *good* you see is what will prevail. And if you need a *thing* to have faith in," Rarity nodded her head, "why, have faith in me! Have faith in me, Rarity the unicorn! Have faith in my friends Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy! If the Elements of Harmony came to us, surely we are meant to work good in the world, so have faith that we can! Whatever ill befalls us, whatever harm crosses our path, we shall meet it. We shall stand for friendship and goodness with whatever meager power we have, and we shall not fail – in this, I have faith. If you can have faith in that as well... then you will let us go." Her cutie mark gleamed. "I know you will let us go. I **See** it."

Falalauria stepped closer to her. There was something of a feral deer in her, wary and frightened. She stopped with her face inches from Rarity's. The white unicorn looked up at her, for once completely unafraid. Then Falalauria licked her on her right cheek. Then she licked her on her left. Then she kissed her on her forehead. "I shall have *faith* in you, Rarity," she said. "You prove to me that my Sight is not perfect, however keen it is, because so often I have no idea what I'm *looking* for." She smiled. "I shall let you go."

"Thank you, My Lady," Rarity said, bowing low.

"No, Rarity," she replied, "thank *you*. You will be a great and wise Seer – indeed, you already are." Her antlers shimmered, and a thick book bound in violet leather appeared floating in the air. "I wrote this book a century ago. It contains my own thoughts and experiences regarding the gift of Long Sight. I wrote it because I Saw in the future that I should write it, which puzzled me at the time. The red deer are all but extinct, and I could not think who else would make use of it. Now I see that I wrote it for you. It even bears

your cutie mark." Sure enough, there were three rhombus-cut crystals set into the book's front cover. "Take it, read it, draw what wisdom you can from it. Do not let it displace what is already in your heart, though."

Rarity used her own magic to take hold of the book. "I shall certainly do that, My Lady." She nodded her head. "Now, if you don't mind, I should like to return to sleep."

"Of course, Rarity," Falalauria said. "Pleasant dreams... and thank you, again. You have given me much to think about. That rarely happens."

"All in a night's work, I suppose," the white unicorn said. "Good night, My Lady." She was about to turn and go, but then she recalled her new skill – it seemed like ages had passed since she'd mastered it. She imagined the bare dirt under her hooves, imagined the still, shadowy air around the bower, imagined the way the wind curled around the great hanging crystal – and in a flicker, she was standing in front of the bower. Drawing back the curtain as silently as she could, she crawled up into the cozy space. Reaching up with her magic, she opened one of her saddlebags and slid Falalauria's book inside it. Then she squirmed over to her futon. Easing herself back into it, careful not to sprawl or muss the sheets, she cooed gently as she was perfectly in place. Drawing up the covers to her chin, she slowly closed her eyes. Her breathing grew slow and even.

"So you see, now?" the great white horse said, sitting across the candlelit table. Her butterfly wings occasionally gleamed in the dim light; her coat sparkled, and her long horn twinkled.

"I do see, yes," Rarity said, taking a sip of her wine. "You're the Element of Generosity – or rather, you're me fully embodying the Element of Generosity."

"That's right," Generosity said. "I am you if you were to be as generous as you could be."

"It sounds like an enormous amount of work," Rarity admitted. "I don't know if I could ever live up to being pure Generosity in the flesh."

"It would be a great deal of work," Generosity agreed. "It's quite possible you will never achieve a perfect embodiment of Generosity. Yet you should strive for it."

"I want to strive for it," Rarity said. "I want it in a way I've never wanted anything else. Wait... that's not quite true. I want it in the same way I want to be closer to my friends. I suppose that's natural, since they're the other Elements, and we're meant to be together. Do they have embodiments like you within them, as well?"

"Most likely," the butterfly-winged unicorn said. "I can't speak for them, of course, since all I know is you."

"Hmmm," Rarity paused, sipping her wine again. "Will I eventually look like you? Because I must say," she appraised her table-mate, "you're simply marvelous."

"You may," Generosity said. "You may look like simply a gracious and beautiful old unicorn one day. You may look like something else entirely. I can't say if you'll even be a pony by the time you're done, if you come this far. But even for you, the look isn't so terribly important. It's what you do."

"And now I've taken a step towards doing it," the white unicorn said. "This gift you've given me, of Sight, is important. The gift isn't just a gift. It's a responsibility. It's meant to make me become Generosity more perfectly."

"That's it exactly," said Generosity. "And you know, I think you're the first to get it, the first of your friends I mean. That means you're going to have to help them."

"I am Generosity, am I not?" Rarity said. "I must give whatever is needed, without hesitation."

Generosity smiled. "So you're going to do it, then? Do you think you can?"

"I don't quite think," Rarity said. She now looked exactly like Generosity. "I have faith."

In her sleep, Rarity smiled.

Rainbow Dash's eyes shot open, and she sat up, looking around. Rarity and Applejack were beginning to stir as well, the latter's eyes slowly creaking open as Dash looked at her. "Mornin'," the orange earth pony said, stifling a yawn.

"Morning," the sky-blue pegasus said, shaking her head a bit. Her dreams had been vivid, pulsing with the colors of the Dreaming. She wondered if that would be the case from now on when she dreamed. She looked at the dark blue sigils wrapped around her front hooves, still a little surprised every time she saw them. She closed her eyes, relaxed her spirit, and let the lightning in, not much, just gently, until she could feel the tiny tendrils of sparks curling around her heart and bones. As she had suspected, it was an excellent pick-me-up, banishing whatever lingering tiredness had hounded the corners of her eyes.

Rarity rose to a sitting position. "Good morning, everypony," she said brightly, her horn shimmering. One of her saddlebags opened, and her small mirror and brush swirled out of it; she levitated the former in front of her while she brushed at her violet mane with the latter. "I hope you all slept wonderfully."

"Somepony's in a good mood," Applejack said, reaching around for her hat. She found it and put it on her head.

"I had a very restful... and very rewarding... night," said Rarity. There was a kind of twinkle in her voice, the shimmer of mystery that set Applejack's eyebrow rising. It hadn't been a lie, but it had certainly been cryptic. However, it was yet another thing the orange earth pony felt no need to pry into.

A bell began to ring softly just outside the bower. Crawling forward, Dash grabbed the curtain with her mouth and pulled it to the left. Ines was standing on the ground, a ringing bell floating in the air between her antlers. "Good morning!" the scarlet-eyed doe said brightly. "I trust you all slept well!"

"We sure did!" Dash exclaimed, hopping out of the bower with a flutter of her wings. "I didn't think a flat pad and a sheet on top of *crystal* could be so comfy."

"Simplicity is often the most relaxing thing, at least that's what I've found," Ines replied. The bell between her antlers vanished. "Come, breakfast is ready. You will once more be dining with Our Lady."

"Just a moment..." Rarity said, holding out a hoof. She had worked her way to the end of her mane, giving the ringleted violet hair another curling brush. "There we are, right as

rain." The brush and mirror retreated into the white velvet saddlebag. "Now, you were saying something about breakfast, dear?"

"Yes," Ines said. Rarity hopped onto the ground, followed by Applejack. "Lady Falalauria desires your company at her morning meal. If you'll follow me."

"Ain't it the same place as before?" Applejack asked.

"No, not this morning," the deer said. "Come, I'll show you." She turned and began to walk through the trees, the three ponies following in her wake, Rarity in the lead, then Applejack, and lastly Rainbow Dash. They passed several other bowers hanging at various heights off the ground. Dash followed one up into the trees with her eyes and was startled to realize – "Hey! The lights are white now!"

The pinpoints of light hovering at the top of the forest canopy had changed color; where before they had been gold, they were now silvery-white, casting a bright and clean radiance down to the forest below. Ines nodded. "They change color according to the time of day," she explained. "They begin the morning silver, and gradually fade to gold as the day wears on. They are fullest gold at midnight, and from there gradually lighten to silver as dawn approaches. It helps us keep our day and night cycles straight."

It couldn't have been much past midnight when I talked with Falalauria, then, Rarity thought, remembering how very gold the lights had been. Then she recalled the way they had pulsed and strobed... She suppressed a shudder. She had very much believed Falalauria when she had said she was deciding whether to kill them or not. Was Rarity's speech to her the only thing that had kept her and her friends alive? The white unicorn felt the wet tingle of averted disaster flood her body. She hadn't given any thought to what she had been saying, that speech about faith; she had spoken from her heart.

They passed out of the grove filled with crystal bowers and into a small thicket, where they wended their way around smaller trees and bushes. In short while they emerged into a clearing, the silver lights casting a gleam like daybreak across the open space. A waterfall was thundering down into a pool at the clearing's center, and on the right bank a table had been laid out, crystal atop a wooden platform as before. Falalauria stood beside the table, wearing a streamer of golden silk between her antlers and a crystal diadem upon her head. Approaching her, Ines bowed, prompting the ponies to do the same. The doe spoke to the golden hind briefly – in Laewtil, Rarity realized – then nodded at them and left. "Good morning, my friends," Falalauria said gently. "I trust you all slept well?"

"Like a foal," Applejack replied.

"Good," said the golden hind. "Breakfast will be ready momentarily, but first, I thought you all might wish to take a bath." She looked toward the clear pool.

"Oh, yes!" Rarity cried happily, trotting to the water and stepping carefully into it. It was lukewarm, not hot but not cold.

"A bath sounds mighty nice, I must admit," Applejack said.

"Do I have to?" Dash said with a squint.

"For Celestia's sake, Dash," Rarity called, "when was the last time you had a bath?"

"Um..." The sky-blue pegasus thought. Had she taken a bath in Gildedale? She could have sworn she had just once. She couldn't remember it very well, though. "The last time for *sure* I had a bath? Um..."

"That settles it," Rarity said flatly. "Come on, the water's fine!" She used her magic to tug on Dash's front legs, pushing her to walk forward.

"Okay, okay!" Dash laughed, fluttering over to Rarity. She tucked in her wings and dropped into the pool, splashing the white unicorn. "Anything for you, Rares."

"I don't suppose y'all got any soap?" Applejack asked. Falalauria responded with a shimmer of her antlers, causing three bars of herbal soap to appear by the shore of the pool. Rarity gave a squeal of delight and rushed for a bar, grabbing it between her hooves and quickly working up a lather. Laughing, the orange earth pony removed her hat and carefully entered the water.

"Hold still, Dash, I'll get your wings," Rarity said, rubbing lather through Dash's matted feathers. Dash stifled a laugh at the sensation. Rarity grinned. "Oh, I didn't know you were *ticklish* here," she said slyly, running her hooves all through Dash's feathers. The pegasus laughed giddily, twisting and writhing away from the unicorn in the water.

Applejack chuckled. It was nice to see Rarity in a playful mood, so improper for once. She reached for her own soap and began to scrub under her forelegs. She found the soap worked nicely as a shampoo as well, so she gave her blond mane and tail a much-needed scrub. When she dunked her head for the final time, she lifted it and saw plates waiting for them at the table. "C'mon, y'all, breakfast is on," she said, stepping out of the water.

Falalauria was already reclining at table, waiting for them. The orange earth pony climbed out of the pond, Rainbow Dash close behind.

Rarity was about to follow them when she had a delightful idea. She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations of the spot beside the table: the softness of the grass, the cool chill of the air, the incline of the slight hill. She channeled her magic through her horn, concentrating.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash were at the table when they noticed that Rarity had stayed behind. "Rarity?" Applejack called, turning around. "Are you –" Her eyes fell upon the white unicorn just in time to watch her disappear. "Rarity?!" Applejack cried, glancing rapidly all around.

"Yes, Applejack?" Rarity's voice came from Applejack's left side. Sure enough, Rarity was standing there, dripping wet.

"How did you..." Applejack's eyebrows rose. "You learned to teleport!"

"Do it again!" Rainbow Dash cried.

Rarity closed her eyes. Her horn shimmered briefly. With only the faintest of twitches, she disappeared, then reappeared on the other side of Dash. "Lady Falalauria taught me the deer's teleporting technique," she explained, water dripping down her face. "It's not very difficult once you get the hang of it."

"I should point out that Rarity learned it easily even so," Falalauria said. "She was well-suited to mastering deer teleportation."

"I don't suppose you have any towels, My Lady?" Rarity asked.

Falalauria shook her head. "We have little need of them here, because we can do *this*," and her antlers shimmered. A warm wind seemed to scrape over every inch of their bodies, and in a second the three of them were fully dry. She smiled. "Now come, there's celery and spring rolls waiting for you. We have also prepared some tea."

"Sounds good!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, fluttering to a place at the right of the golden hind. She picked up a teacup between her hooves and began to sip it. "Ooo, this is good stuff."

"Dash, I didn't know you liked tea!" Rarity said, settling down across the table from her. "You simply must join me for tea sometime."

"Well, I don't drink it *too* often," the sky-blue pegasus admitted, "but I do like it when I can get it."

"Then we will have to set something up," Rarity said firmly.

"Y'all can keep yer tea, thank ye kindly," Applejack said, settling down beside Rarity. "M'lady, I don't suppose you'd have some coffee, or somethin' along those lines?"

"I think I can work something out," Falalauria said, her antlers shimmering again. A heavy mug of dark black liquid appeared in front of Applejack's place, eliciting a smile from the earth pony. Not even the Daleponies had had coffee! She took a long pull, relishing the bitterness and the high temperature.

"Oh, er, sorry, m'lady," Applejack said when she realized Falalauria had not blessed their meal. "I didn't mean to start before grace."

"That's all right," Falalauria said. "It's just us this morning. I typically take my breakfasts alone, so you're free to bless or not bless your own meals."

"Thank you again for all your hospitality," said Rarity, levitating a spring roll with her magic. "It has been... revelatory, staying in your midst."

"I can say the same," Falalauria said, her cryptic speech setting off Applejack's senses again. Rarity had as well, just a moment before. But she chose to ignore both warnings.

I'm gonna have to get used to ignorin' it, she thought, if I wanna use it. Everypony tells lil' white lies sometime. She hoped that when they were away from the Shimmerwood and its magic, her truth sense would at least be less urgent. She took another gulp of her coffee, while Dash and Rarity sipped their tea.

"Since we are alone, free from the ears of my white-tails, you may ask me any further questions you wish about your Elements of Harmony and their gifts," Falalauria said. "I would prefer not to speak of them in the company of the other deer. I trust them, but your status as Bearers of the Elements is not well known, and I know Celestia wishes to keep it that way, so the fewer that know the better."

"Fine by me," Applejack said. "I don't much feel like spreadin' it around either."

"Hey, Falalauria," Dash asked, "did you find out anything more about the Element of Loyalty? I was just wondering..."

"As a matter of fact, I did," Falalauria said. "I can tell you privately, if you wish."

"Nah," said the sky-blue pegasus, "I don't have a problem with my friends knowing."

"Very well," said the golden hind. "The Element of Loyalty grants those aligned with it the gift of inspiration and strengthening."

"Inspiration?" Dash repeated. "You mean I give them ideas?"

"After a fashion," Falalauria said. "Because you are so loyal to your friends, your home, and the causes you believe in, you can inspire others to feel the same degree of loyalty to their own causes – or to your causes, or any cause you choose. Moreover, you can inspire them to move forward in the face of daunting challenges. If their courage is failing, you can restore it. If their strength leaves them, you can help them find more. If their spirits are broken, you can mend them. I suppose a better way of putting it is that the Element of Loyalty grants those aligned with it powers of leadership."

"Well, I guess I get that part," Dash said. She put a hoof to her chin. "I never have been good at following orders... so it would be weird if I had *following* powers," she said with a chuckle. "And I have always done my own thing..."

"And others have followed you, have they not?"

"I don't really take the lead in anything, though," Dash admitted sheepishly.

"What're you talkin' about, Rainbow?" Applejack said. "Half the ponies in town think you're the coolest thing ever. All the foals look up to you – even Apple Bloom thinks you're amazin'."

"But that's not really the same as *leading*," Dash protested, a note of uncertainty in her voice. "No pony ever wants to go where I lead them when I actually try to lead."

"You have yet to come fully into your gift," Falalauria said. "In time, if you choose to develop your talents, you could have great powers of leadership – and you could build beyond that to a general talent at persuasion. You are not ungifted with that, I think."

Dash had to admit she was good at goading others into action. Even the toughest and most stoic of ponies in Ponyville could be moved to act by her taunting and her needling. She didn't really equate that with leadership, but she supposed they were sort of following her lead. Then there was Applejack's point about the children of Ponyville. She had of course noticed their hero worship. Nearly every little filly or colt that met her

went home to their parents that evening proclaiming that they wanted to be just like Rainbow Dash – even the ones that weren't pegasi. In fact, Twilight Sparkle had told Dash that she had inspired her to be more brave and less meek in the face of danger. All of that was well and good, but did it count as a supernatural power?

"Dash, every time you've given a speech or taken a stand, you've gotten followers," Rarity told her, seeing the doubt on her face. "You even caused me to rethink you, just by your proclamations. Getting me to reconsider my judgments is no small thing."

"I guess... so," Dash said, thinking that in fact she had never expected Rarity to consider being as close a friend to her as she had become. This sent a chill up her spine. "Hey," she said, turning to Falalauria, "does that mean I'll never be able to tell when somepony really agrees with me and when somepony is just *made* to agree with me?" Her rose eyes wavered. "C-can I have real friends?"

"Of course you can," the golden hind said, smiling gently at her. "Being a leader and being a friend are different degrees of relations. You may be able to compel others to follow you, but that doesn't make them your friends – and any real friends you make will not be so because you forced them to be."

"Rainbow, I been your friend a good while," Applejack said with a kind look, "and I never once felt like I had to be. Believe me, if I did, I wouldn'ta liked it near as much."

"I really am your friend, Dash," Rarity said reassuringly, "and no amount of magic could have forced it."

"Well..." Dash felt her insides stewing. She opened herself up, felt the lightning come in, let it tingle inside her. *I am a leaf on the wind*. The friendships she'd made had come to her – she hadn't forced them on anypony. She never tried to – if a pony (or a griffin or any creature) wouldn't put up with her, she just left them to their business. "I think you girls may be right." She let her doubts wash away, opened herself up to the movements of the world – but wasn't that following? Her good vibes were abruptly halted. How could she lead and be a leaf on the wind at the same time? "But being a leader... I think... means knowing when to lead and when to follow... right?" She looked around the table at them. She thought more. "Sometimes I take the lead in things – a lot of times. But now... after what the pronghorns taught me, I've realized that sometimes you need to open yourself up to other influences. You can't just charge at whatever you want doing things your own way. You have to let yourself be led sometimes, even if you're meant to be a leader."

Falalauria's starry eyes squinted from her smile. "Spoken like the wisest Kings and Queens of the Elk," she said. "You will be a fine leader, Rainbow Dash – you already are, more than you think."

"I sure hope I can be," the sky-blue pegasus said, unable to fully shake her uncertainty. "I'd hate to lead anypony astray."

"All right, that's two Elements down," Applejack said, gently taking command of the conversation, "one to go, right? What about Rarity?"

"Yeah," Dash said, "she has the Element of Generosity – what's *her* special power?"

Falalauria gently glanced at Rarity from the corner of her eye. The white unicorn in turn gave the tiniest of nods. "I informed Rarity of her gift last night," she said, "but if you are curious yourselves, the Element of Generosity grants those aligned with it the ability to perceive the needs of others at great distances in space and time. They can see those in need from far away. They can also look into a creature's past and see what needs they might have as a result of their life's circumstances. Furthermore, they can look into a creature's future, to see what needs they will eventually have."

Applejack's front hooves pounded the table as she stared at Rarity on her left. "You can see the future? You?"

"Surprise," Rarity said meekly, grinning.

"So you're just like Falalauria!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "That's so cool!"

"Not completely like me," Falalauria said. "Rarity does not have my ability to detect truth, so she cannot be certain which of the futures she sees is the correct one. But yes, she does possess a talent much like mine."

"I just hope I can manage it," Rarity said. "I confess I spoke with Lady Falalauria last night about it, and she made it sound quite daunting."

"It is a great burden, if you allow it to be," said Falalauria, levitating her teacup with her magic. "All of your gifts can become burdens if they weigh too heavily on you – if you do not control them. Keep in mind, my friends, that these gifts were given to you for you to use. Do not let *them* use *you*. I once made that mistake," she said. The three ponies leaned towards her. "I once felt compelled to Look into the past and the future of everything I thought of or saw or heard about. I grew a bit... obsessed with detail."

"Sounds familiar," Applejack whispered in Rarity's ear.

"It reached the point that, one day, I tried to See *everything*. I tried to See all times and all places at once – I tried to achieve true omniscience."

"What happened?" Rarity asked.

"I did it – for less than a second," Falalauria said. "Then the strain shattered my mind. I went completely mad, and was not able to recover for a very long time." She looked down and spoke more quietly. "I learned to love my white-tails even more then. They and their truth sense helped me return to myself, and they maintained the Shimmerwood in my invalidity."

Rarity was trembling. Applejack leaned against her.

"That's another lesson, by the way," Falalauria said. "Do not bear your Elements and their gifts alone. There are six Elements of Harmony for a reason. They are meant to support and strengthen each other, for they are different aspects of one friendship. In the same way, you three, as well as your three other friends, are all parts of a whole, meant to combine to form something far greater than you could be on your own."

"What *are* the other three gifts?" Rarity asked. "What about the gifts for the Elements of Kindness, Laughter, and Magic?"

"I would prefer to tell the Bearers of those Elements themselves," Falalauria said. "In this I follow Celestia's lead, as well as the lead of the Deer Elders. They thought it prudent to keep a creature's alignment with one of the Elements a private affair until such time as the creature chose to reveal it herself. I will say that, from what I have seen, your three other friends are already aware of their gifts, and already use them, whether they know the full meaning behind them or not." Falalauria nodded firmly. "And I See the day coming when all six of you will be informed of each others' full potential. Wait for that day – and when it comes, be prepared to lean on each other."

Applejack pulled away from Rarity, satisfied that the white unicorn's fear had abated. "We already do that plenty, m'lady," she said, "and by golly, Rarity and Rainbow and I have done it a lot on this trip, too."

"I think this journey has been good for all three of you," Falalauria said. "It has made you stronger and firmer friends, and it has revealed great truths about each one of you. The three of you did not know your Elements of Harmony as well as your friends, so your experiences have been helpfully illuminating. Now, though, you are reaching the

journey's close," she said. "So I would ask you to eat your breakfasts. The end of your traveling is almost at hoof."

"Except for the trip back to Ponyville, I guess," Rainbow Dash said.

"Ah, yes," Falalauria said absent-mindedly, "I *suppose* there is that as well..."

Applejack arched an eyebrow, but said nothing. She resumed nibbling on a celery stalk she had started earlier, then took another drink of her coffee. Beside her, Rarity took careful bites of a spring roll, chewing neatly and quietly. Dash, as usual, was displaying horrible table manners, but Rarity either did not notice or did not mind. They ate the rest of their meal in silence, and in little time the food was gone.

"Now, I and my morning party shall escort you through the remainder of the Shimmerwood," Falalauria said, rising to her hooves. "It's not terribly far, and our western border runs into the foothills of the Archback Mountains."

"Beg pardon, m'lady," Applejack said, "but we gotta go back and get our stuff."

"Did you unpack anything last night?" the golden hind asked.

"Well, no..."

Falalauria's great antlers shimmered. Instantly, Rarity and Rainbow Dash were wearing their saddlebags. With a ripple of leather, Applejack's armor appeared firmly fastened on her body. A moment later, her own saddlebags were buckled to her flanks. Rarity put some telekinetic pressure on her right saddlebag; the book was still inside. "Come with me," the golden hind said, turning and leading them further towards the waterfall.

"Hey, I've got another question," Dash said, flapping her wings and fluttering beside Falalauria.

"Yes?"

"You say we've got the Elements of Harmony inside us," said the sky-blue pegasus, "but what about those necklaces we got when we first used them on Nightmare Moon? You know, the ones with our cutie marks on them?"

"Necklaces..." the golden hind murmured, sliding her eyelids partially closed. A moment later her eyes opened fully. "They are foci. They are meant to concentrate both your own inner magic and the magic from the surrounding world into your spirits where the

Elements of Harmony reside. Wearing them will provide a temporary strengthening of your Elements and their corresponding gifts. Over the long term, wearing them will slowly build your gifts' permanent power. Exercising the gifts is still the best way to strengthen them, but if you want even more assistance, wearing your necklaces is a good idea."

"Celestia took our necklaces for safekeeping after Nightmare Moon was defeated," Rarity said.

"She will return them to you if you ask for them," Falalauria said, "especially if you tell her why you desire them."

They turned to the right and headed into the trees, passing through brush and fallen branches. Dash dropped to the ground and walked beside Applejack, with Rarity on Applejack's other side. In a short while they emerged onto a clear, grassy path, the trees pulling back around it. Ines and seven other deer in full armor were waiting for them, and bowed at Falalauria's arrival. Falalauria nodded her head at them. "This is our party for the day," she said brightly, turning to the three ponies. "Right now we are near the center of the Shimmerwood. It's less than half a day's journey to the western border, and we need not rush. I allow you all to set the pace – travel as quickly or slowly as you desire."

The Equestrian ponies regarded each other. "We oughta at least keep up a trot," Applejack said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Rarity said. "I would like to be in the mountains by nightfall."

"So let's go!" said Rainbow Dash, heading down the path at a brisk trot. Applejack fell into step beside her. Rarity came behind them, Falalauria beside her, the golden hind's long legs permitting her to keep up with them at a walk. The eight deer followed close behind, and the whole party set off down the grassy avenue.

As they moved, deer emerged from the trees on either side, some of them even standing up in the branches overhead. They all bowed low at Falalauria's passing, and she nodded her head each time. Does, bucks, and fawns of varying ages all watched them eagerly, but usually darted back into the trees after they had gone by. "How many deer live in the Shimmerwood?" Rarity asked Falalauria. "I seem to have seen a great number of them."

"How many at any one time is difficult to say," Falalauria admitted. "The Shimmerwood's magic is great, so it has a stretching effect on those who live in its borders."

"Stretching?" Dash repeated. "What's that mean?"

"It means that those who are, are a bit more in the Shimmerwood," Falalauria said. "Some deer who are not yet born occasionally walk in the woods, and some deer who have already died can nevertheless be found here, at least for a while."

"In the Dreaming, I learned that being never stops," Dash said, "and I wonder if it ever starts, either." Her brows knitted in thought. "Do we all just... exist forever? Is the world just a place we are for a while, before going on to something else?"

"Such has been the question of many philosophers from the antlerkin, the ponyfolk, the camels, and countless other species," Falalauria said. "The magic of existence itself is a thing each creature must explore in their own way. Of all the species I have encountered, the pronghorns are the most knowledgeable about such things, though the wisdom they would impart is often difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, for all they experience in the Dreaming, their dispositions are almost uniformly sunny." Falalauria smiled to herself. "If they can confront the mysteries of Being so frequently and maintain a perpetually cheery mood, then what they've learned can't be too bad."

The conversation died out for a while, the ponies content to think their own thoughts. Applejack was anxious now that they were on the move. She wished she could go faster, but Falalauria did not seem in the mood for swift travel, and Applejack didn't know the way out. She assumed if she followed their current path she would reach the Archback Mountains, but there was no guarantee of that, not after everything she'd been told about the Shimmerwood. To prove the point, they came to a place where the road forked in two. The rightward fork led slightly upwards, making it the natural choice in the orange earth pony's mind; but Falalauria indicated they should take the left fork, which sloped downwards. Applejack was in no position to argue, so they headed to the left. All the way to the left of the path, the ground dropped off into a vale filled with trees. The orange earth pony realized that they had been slowly ascending all the while. *I really don't know where I'm goin'*, she thought to herself. Then she wondered if she could have used her truth sense to pick the proper path. At first Applejack didn't think much of the idea, but the more she considered it, the more she realized it was a distinct possibility. Falalauria had said that her gift was determining truth, and didn't that include finding true paths to her destination? In fact, Falalauria's own truth sense allowed her to see a creature's true nature. Could Applejack do it also? She was the Element of Honesty, after all. *For ponies,*

true nature means cutie mark, she thought. It made a grin spread across her face. Maybe she could tell Apple Bloom what her cutie mark would be.

"You know, as long as you're still answering questions..." Rainbow Dash asked over her shoulder.

"Yes?" Falalauria asked.

"Well, I've kinda got a small one in mind," she said. "Or I guess it's not so small, but it's not really a big deal. Still, if you know the answer, I'd love to hear it."

"Ask," said Falalauria.

"What's the deal with the weather out here?" the sky-blue pegasus asked. "I mean, in both the Shimmerwood and Gildedale, you've got to get rain sometime, right? And the seasons change, don't they?" Falalauria nodded. "But how? I mean, I guess you deer make weather with your magic, but what about Gildedale? How do they get their weather?"

"They get it from Equestria," said Falalauria, eliciting surprised looks from all three ponies. "As do we in the Shimmerwood. We do shape some of the weather around the forest with our magic, but we get most of our weather from the actions of pegasus ponies in Equestria, and Gildedale gets nearly all their weather thusly."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Dash cried, stopping and causing a halt to the party. "There aren't any pegasuses –"

"Pega–" Rarity began, but Applejack suddenly pushed her back.

"**No!**" the orange earth pony snapped. "I've had enough! I'm **sick** o' hearin' this! I heard it all the blasted way here and I **won't** hear it no more!" She turned to Rarity and glared at her, causing the white unicorn to retreat a few paces. "Rarity, no more correctin' Rainbow!" Then she wheeled on the sky-blue pegasus and began to stalk towards her. Dash's ears flattened against her head at the furious approach. "And **you**, Rainbow, you're gonna get it right once and for all! It ain't 'pegasuses'! It's 'pegasi'! You hear me! You got that?! It's PEGASI. PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI!" She was shouting right into Dash's face. Dash's pupils had grown to the size of saucers. Her bottom lip was trembling.

"O...okay..." she said quietly. "Pegasi. Got it." She swallowed hard.

A sound like ice in a goblet gradually rose into their ears. Both Dash and Applejack turned their heads sharply to the side. Falalauria was *laughing*, a melodious sound, yet not dainty, for it grew quite loud quite quickly. Rarity began to chuckle, at first trying to stifle it, then giving up and breaking into fits of laughter. Several of the deer behind them also began to laugh. Applejack bit her lip, trying to remain cross. Dash grinned hugely, a few giggles rising in her throat. Soon she too was laughing. Applejack screwed up her face, resisting with all her might, but finally unable to stop a sharp guffaw from breaking through her composure. She gave in, laughing heartily, and finally the whole party was taken up with laughter, echoing through the trees.

By slow degrees the laughing subsided. "Oh, my," Falalauria murmured, then paused to stifle a chuckle. "I've been waiting for that the whole morning. Seeing it in my mind wasn't nearly as funny as watching it actually happen."

"Happy to be of service," Dash said smartly, throwing up a hoof in salute. "So like I was saying..."

"There are no pegasi in Gildedale, I believe you were saying."

"Right! And we never go there! At least I never hear of Equestrian pegasu – *pegasi* going over the mountains. So what do you mean they get their weather from us?"

"Most of the world gets its weather from Equestria – indirectly," the golden hind said. "The weather you create for Equestria alters temperature, pressure, and air currents in the atmosphere above it, and those alterations spread out from Equestria's borders, where they interact with existing atmospheric conditions and bring about changes. These changes spread out across the world, forming weather patterns and temperature changes, and even seasonal shifts, far beyond your country. There are other creatures in other nations that can manipulate the weather, like the pronghorns you've already met – they help regulate global weather as they travel by altering the energy in the atmosphere through their lightning. But the pegasi and unicorns and even the earth ponies of Equestria do much of the work making weather for the whole world."

"That's amazing!" Dash said. "No pony ever told me I was helping make the world's weather!"

"It's incredible!" Rarity agreed.

"Incredible, and quite true," Falalauria said. "You ponies and your country are more important than you realize. Much life and strength flows out of Equestria, and it touches places far removed from any pony's normal life."

"What about places like the Everfree Forest?" Rarity asked. "Weather there seems to happen on its own, without any guidance. Is that a ripple effect of pegasus weather too?"

"Some of it is, because weather naturally moves through the whole of the sky," the golden hind said. "However, the Everfree Forest is one of a small number of places around the world where the ambient magic is strong enough that nature can keep its own order. It's a self-sufficient environment, with the plants feeding the weather and the animals, the weather supplying the animals and the plants, and the animals helping manage the plants and even the weather. The Everfree Forest is very old, and it has been a font of powerful magic since its earliest days. That is why its ability to manage itself has endured. Believe it or not, nature used to control itself all over the world."

"Hold up, now, really?!" Applejack exclaimed.

"But that's impossible!" Rarity cried.

"It... is it?" Dash said, prompting the other two to look at her. "I mean, we just found out Equestria makes the world's weather. Is it more impossible than that?"

"But plants and animals and weather lookin' after themselves the whole wide world over..." Applejack trailed off. She stomped her hoof on the ground. "It ain't right! It don't make no sense!"

"It is the truth," Falalauria said. By now, everyone had stopped walking, and the three ponies were turned together to face her. "The whole world used to once be like the Everfree Forest, self-managing and independent of intelligent control."

"All right," Applejack said, still some skepticism in her voice, "let's say you're right, and the whole world *was* once like the Everfree Forest. Why ain't it like that now?"

Falalauria's expression grew dark. She lowered her head. Behind her, the ponies saw the deer escorting them suddenly looking sad and ashamed. Falalauria sighed. "I'm afraid that is *our* fault," she finally said. "Well, not specifically the fault of us present... but the fault of the deerfolk, the fault of our war. The magic we used in battle grew more and more powerful as the years progressed. Eventually, our spells grew so strong that casting them did irreparable harm to nature all over the world. The movement of the weather, the growth of the plants, the instinctive behavior of the unintelligent animals – all of it

was disrupted by the war. By the end, the whole natural order had been shattered, and it has never been restored. Now we thinking, magical creatures must do the work that nature once did itself, you ponies most of all." She smiled sadly at them. "I hope you do not think too ill of us. We have saddled you with a great burden and never even apologized. You ponies must manage nature because we deer *broke* it."

Applejack stared intently at Falalauria for a moment; Rarity and Rainbow Dash waited to see what she would say. Her green eyes bored into slices of night sky between the great hind's eyelids, but found them inscrutable. "You said you weren't around for the war, right?" she finally said. "That you were born after, right?"

"Yes," Falalauria said.

"And all your white-tails, they were born after the war, too?"

"That's right," Falalauria said.

"Then there's nothin' to forgive," Applejack said. "It wasn't y'all that done anythin'. I won't hold the actions o' past deer against y'all. What's done is done."

"Thank you," Falalauria said. "For all the regret the Elders espoused, I am not sure they were ever able to ask for forgiveness... so I wanted to do so once I had the opportunity."

"Think nothin' of it," the orange earth pony said. "Shoot, I think it turned out all right in the long run. If I didn't have to look after the plants and the critters, I'd have nothin' to do!"

"Yeah!" Dash chimed in. "If the weather made itself I'd be out of the job! I mean, I guess I could make a living as a stuntpony, but that doesn't pay like weather work."

"I suppose you're right," Falalauria admitted with a smile. "Things do have a way of working out for good, even in the face of much destruction. I must remember to have *faith* in the workings of the Wills." Rarity gave her a tiny smile.

Yet the white unicorn could not stop thinking about what Falalauria had shared. It dwelt at the forefront of her mind as they resumed their journey, moving briskly, but not at a run, through the forest. She barely noticed when they began to ascend pointedly, the path sloping determinedly upwards and curving slightly to the right. *Magic so powerful it can break the natural order*, she thought. So nowadays ponies administered the order that nature had previously maintained on its own. It was a crazy thought, and any of the old and purportedly wise ponies she could ask about it would scoff at her. Yet how would

they know? Old as they were, they could not match Falalauria's wisdom, gleaned from more than a millennium of life – and she was not even as old as the war. Falalauria had not, to her knowledge, lied to them when it came to matters of history and exposition, so Rarity had to assume that she was telling the truth here. It daunted her, thinking of spells so strong they disrupted the functioning of nature. It would take such power... perhaps even on the scale of what Princess Celestia herself had. That made her recall Falalauria's proclamation during her outburst last night: that she was close to the princess in power. Being a near-match for the Goddess of the Sun was no small feat. She looked back over her shoulder, catching Falalauria looking ahead. Those eyes... they didn't even seem to be self-contained. It was like there was an infinity of stars *behind* Falalauria's eyes, and onlookers only ever glimpsed portions of it at a time. *She said she achieved omniscience*, Rarity pondered. *She did it for less than a second, but she said she did succeed. And she thinks I could have more powerful Sight than her?* It made Rarity feel small and strange. What would it be like, to See everything ever? Could her mind take the strain any better than Falalauria's? She thought of the Element of Generosity she'd met in her dreams. Could *she* handle omniscience?

The Shimmerwood's overhead lighting remained bright and silver. It was some time later that Rainbow Dash noticed a *spot* in the middle of their path. It wasn't silver, it was whitish-gold, and when she passed through it, she felt something she had not felt accompanying any of the lights in the wood: heat. She glanced up briefly. Just before it passed out of sight, she caught, high above, a swatch of blue sky. They were coming out of the forest! It made her quicken her pace. Applejack, sensing her good mood, decided to trot faster also, and Rarity for once did not hesitate to join in. Falalauria and the rest of the deer behind them trotted a bit faster as well. Dash glanced behind her, behind Falalauria, to the white-tail deer lined up so obediently behind their mistress. She grinned. They hadn't said anything the whole trip. With a flutter of her wings, she whirled around and flew past Falalauria, then dropped abruptly into their line. They scattered nervously at her arrival, and she laughed. "You guys have been awfully quiet back here!"

"Ah – ah – oh, right," a buck with sea-green eyes said, stammering.

"They speak!" Dash exclaimed. This elicited nervous chuckles from the assembled deer. "So now that I know you *can* talk, I wanna hear you do it! Tell me your names!" Her rainbow lightning bolt cutie mark flickered.

"Ah," the sea-green-eyed buck began. He seemed terribly shy. "I'm... my name is Diogo, ma'am."

"Ma'am is my mom's name!" Dash said with a dazzling grin. "Call me Rainbow Dash, or just Dash if you're feeling friendly." She arched an eyebrow. "You do wanna feel friendly, right?"

"Sure!" a doe with golden eyes said, her spirits perking up. "My name is Hermínia, and it's a great treat to meet you! We've never seen a pegasus pony before."

"I guess you wouldn't have, would you? Can't be too many pegasus ponies in Gildedale. Trust me, most of them aren't nearly as cool as me. I'm about as good as it gets."

Ines laughed. "What you told me over dinner certainly sets you as a gem among pegasi. Mastering lightning like the pronghorns is very powerful magic, and takes great strength of will."

"It does take will," Dash admitted, "but like I said the other night, what it really takes is the will to let go of your control. You have to let the lightning come to you, and you have to accept it when it arrives."

"That is what we learn when we first master magic," Diogo said, confidence creeping into his voice. "We learn that all magic is give and take – magic enters us and leaves us. Our bodies must breathe magic just as they must breathe air."

"I bet you deer learn some pretty cool magic," Dash said with a smile. "I've got a friend who's a unicorn and she's all *about* cool magic. She'd love to see some of your stuff, I bet!"

"W-well," Diogo stammered, his sea-green eyes wavering.

"Come *ooonnnn*." The sky-blue pegasus raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I have gotten rather good at creating echoes of myself," the buck admitted. "It's not magic that every deer masters, but I can do it!"

"You mean like doubles?" Dash asked. "Duplicates?"

"That's it exactly," Ines said with a nod. "Diogo can do them very well."

The way she talked about him... "You're *new*, aren't you?" Dash said, leaning her head towards Diogo.

"Ah... yes, I am," Diogo admitted. "This is my first week on the Periphery Guard. I didn't know I would be meeting ponies from Equestria, especially not special guests of Our Lady."

"Then it's been a great week, hasn't it?" Dash said with a grin, nudging him in the side with her right front knee.

Diogo smiled at her. "It really has."

Falalauria glanced over her shoulder as Rainbow Dash continued to chat with the escorting white-tails. She smiled, walking closer to the other ponies. She leaned her head forward. "And she says she's no leader," she whispered. "She certainly has charisma."

"She does at that," Rarity said. "She's inspired us on plenty of occasions."

"Still... I reckon learnin' leadership was her special gift sobered her up a bit," Applejack said, "along with what the pronghorns did to her. Rainbow can talk the talk and walk the walk, but not always at the same time."

Rainbow Dash continued to hold court amid the white-tails for the next hour, as the branches overhead were broken more and more by splotches of sunlight. Finally, they rounded a bend in the road, and suddenly the path before them opened up. There was no more forest ahead – just a small road stretching away before them, with a wall of mighty brown rock rising up on their right side.

Falalauria said, "Behold: the Archback Mountains!"

Dash was so excited that she flapped her wings and flew, soaring out from the cover of the trees and basking in the warmth of the full sun. Applejack and Rarity followed her out at a gallop. All three ponies rejoiced at seeing the sky again, Dash most of all. It was a moment later, however, that Applejack looked up and saw where the sun was – right overhead. It was just now noon! "Hey now," she turned back to Falalauria, "how's it only noon? We been walkin' for hours, and we got a late start this mornin', didn't we?"

"Time passes differently inside the Shimmerwood than outside it, according to our collective will," the golden hind said. "Don't worry, it hasn't affected anything major. We merely wished to give you plenty of time to climb the mountains before sundown. Time you now have – and enough, I hope, to join us for one final meal."

Rarity looked at Applejack – but Applejack looked at Rarity, and so did Rainbow Dash. The white unicorn met their eyes for a moment, then nodded. "I believe that's all right," she said, turning to Falalauria. "You were the one who said Twilight wouldn't die."

"And she still will not," Falalauria said with a nod. "You can afford to eat with us, I See. And just around here..." She turned back to the white-tails and spoke to them in Laewtil. They scattered, their long necks bent downward, their noses toward the ground. Falalauria turned away from the ponies and joined them, her snout raised just off the ground.

The three ponies exchanged glances, glances that grew increasingly long and desperate. Finally, Dash turned back toward the probing deer. "Uh... what are you all looking for?"

"The plot should be nearby," Falalauria muttered, half to herself. She lifted her head and sniffed for a moment. "There," she said, walking off into the trees just before the forest ended. The other deer followed her intently. Curious, the three ponies trotted after them, passing between two oaks and through a small grove. They eventually emerged in a small clearing, open to the sky above, where many wildflowers were blooming. At the center of the clearing, at the top of a small hill, were...

"Pansies?" Applejack said with some surprise. A huge plot of pansies bloomed in the middle of the clearing: yellow, red, blue, pink, violet, white. The deer had clustered eagerly around it, and though they stood facing the Equestrians, they seemed almost impatient.

"Pansies are a great delicacy for deerfolk," Falalauria explained, standing in the midst of the plot. "Unfortunately for us, they do not grow deep in the forest, and they do not respond well to our magical lights. They're mostly found at the edges of the Shimmerwood, and particularly up here, where the altitude mitigates the heat from the sun."

"You *eat* pansies?" Rarity said with some surprise. She had only ever known pansies as garden flowers, cute, colorful blossoms well-suited to neat arrangements and horticultural displays. "I thought you just used them as garnishes, like you did last night."

"We garnish with them because we cannot grow them in the forest, so we only have them infrequently," Falalauria said. "It's not often we send deer up here – I can monitor the barrier around the Archbacks from my tower, and it's been a very long time since any creature came down this road into the wood."

"Well, we'll be coming back down once we get the Beneviolet," Rarity said. "You'll be able to meet us here and get as many pansies as you like."

"Hmmm..." Falalauria said, her voice surprisingly unsure. "I *suppose* you're right..."

"What?" Dash asked.

"Nothing," the golden hind said. "Come, have a bite. You'll find them quite tasty, if you've never partaken of them before."

The three ponies cautiously stepped forward, Applejack taking the lead. She had never been much for trying new things before, but after everything she had experienced on this incredible journey, she was much less frightened by the strange and the novel. She approached a pansy, bent down, and bit off the flower, chewing it thoughtfully for a moment. "Hmmm..." the orange earth pony murmured between grinding teeth, "kinda sweet... juicy. Like an overripe apple."

Dash bit up a mouthful. "I like it!" she exclaimed, her open mouth revealing half-masticated flowers.

"Dash, please, don't talk with your mouth full," Rarity said before bending her neck and nipping off a flower.

"All right, mom," the sky-blue pegasus said cheerfully, reaching down for another gobble.

The deer, for all their cheerfulness, seemed to sense the urgency in each pony's chest. They made no conversation, and for the next few minutes there was only the enthusiastic chewing and biting and swallowing of the assembled hoof-folk. It left Rainbow Dash time to ponder her time chatting with the white-tails. She had learned a great deal about them: their names – Manoela, Teodoro, Tereza, Livia, and Abel, in addition to Ines, Diogo, and Hermínia – along with some details about their studies – some of them were still learning the basics of magic – and some aspects of culture in the Shimmerwood – for example, mothers chose names for their sons, while fathers named their daughters. It just made her want to know more, though. They hadn't had time to get to know the deer the way they had the Daleponies, but what Dash had seen of them fascinated her. She had changed her opinion of them, at least in part. She still thought they were strange, but that was to be expected, being so different from ponies. They were helpful and generous and kind – just like her own friends. *I wanna come back here someday*, she thought. She reflected that they were now just a lightning bolt away from Ponyville.

When the meal was finished, Falalauria stepped out of the midst of the pansies. The three ponies followed her back through the trees, then up the path the short distance separating them from the open sky. The eight white-tails followed behind her. When she was standing fully outside of the forest, the blue sky and the stone of the mountains behind her, she turned and faced the travelers. "Now comes the hour in which we must part ways," she said, "though I do not think it will be the last time our paths will cross."

"We cannot thank you enough for all you've provided," Rarity said. She bowed, prompting Applejack and Rainbow Dash to do the same. "We shall of course relay news of your kindness to Princess Celestia when we get the opportunity."

"I don't doubt it," Falalauria said, "and when you do, please give the Princess my love. But as to what we've provided, we are not quite finished in that regard." The three ponies looked curiously at her. Ines walked up beside them, carrying a bundle of wrapped leaves in her mouth; she set it beside them. "There is naan and pansies there, enough to carry you through the rest of your journey when accompanied by the other food you have packed. Additionally, we have prepared distinct gifts for the three of you." She looked at Applejack. "Applejack."

"Yes'm?" Applejack said promptly. Rainbow Dash stuffed the bundle of food into a saddlebag.

"I kept my eye on you from the time you entered Gildedale," said Falalauria. "I heard you complain to the heavens for want of many practical things, but there was one desire that stood out, and here I grant it." Her antlers shimmered, and then floating in the air in front of her there was –

"**ROPE!**" the orange earth pony exclaimed, practically lunging for the floating coil of woven rope; it was grayish-green and looked very sturdy despite its thinness.

"Rope indeed," Falalauria said. "Spit on it, please."

Applejack stopped in her tracks. "Wha?" she muttered. "Hold on now –"

"If you please, spit on it." Rarity and Dash were as surprised as Applejack.

"Hold on, now, m'lady," Applejack said, "I don't go in for spittin', it's a filthy habit."

"That I understand," Falalauria said, "and I agree with you. But here and now, indulge me. I promise I won't be offended."

Applejack glanced sidelong at the golden hind, arching an eyebrow. Falalauria remained eagerly calm. Narrowing her eyes, Applejack grimaced at the rope for a moment. "Well..." she finally said, "all right." Trotting up to the floating coil, she worked her mouth for a moment, then with a rough sputter emitted a glob of saliva from her mouth. It splattered against the rope, but to her surprise it suddenly stretched all across the coils, making them briefly slick with spit; an instant later, the rope was dry, as though it had never been besmirched.

"Now that the rope has tasted you, it knows you," Falalauria said. "It is magically enchanted to be owned by you. No one can use it save by your leave, and if you lose it, it will always come back to you, no matter what."

"Huh," Applejack said, eyeing the rope with newfound approval. She cautiously took it up in her mouth, felt the brief tingle of magic, then held plain rope, albeit very well-woven plain rope. She bent back and hooked it over the lasso notch on the belt of her saddlebags.

"For you, Rainbow Dash," Falalauria said, turning to the sky-blue pegasus, "something to aid in your flight, whether powered by wings or driven by lightning." Her antlers shimmered, and a scarf appeared floating in the air. It was dull gray, yet it had an odd luster to it, as though there was metal woven into it.

Dash stepped forward and reached out a hoof for it, slinging it over her withers. "Uh, thanks," she said, "but I don't really need a scarf. I don't get cold when I fly."

"I know," Falalauria said, "but there is more to it than that. The scarf is enchanted to part the air ahead of it, opening up less restrictive corridors of space. It should help you navigate difficult wind currents and rough atmospheric events."

"Oooo," Dash cooed, sitting back on her haunches and holding the scarf on her hooves; it felt slick and clean, like the surface of a playground slide. She wrapped it around her neck and tied it firmly in place, then stood again; its tails dangled down between her front legs.

"And for Rarity..." Falalauria looked at the white unicorn. She smiled warmly. "You have given me so much, Rarity. You have given me back a sense of trust in the good of things, which until this day I had not realized I had lost. I shall cherish your lessons. I hope you will remember mine, such as they are beneficial. The hard part of your journey is nearly over – however, you may yet encounter peril and chaos. I would not have you do so unprepared." Her antlers shimmered, and several dark shapes wavered into existence, solidifying rapidly into...

Rarity's eyebrows rose. It was a set of armor, the same bright silver she'd seen on all the deerfolk, but the proportions were all wrong. The helmet was elegantly shaped, with two forward-pointing crests of crystal, and metal cheek plates that stretched and curved around. The flanchard swept gracefully back against where the shoulders would be, thin lines of crystal set into it like the veins on a leaf; the peytral was attached to it firmly, with no visible joints, making the whole torso set look like a single piece of steel. Four greaves floated in the air, shaped like long, thin leaves meant to wrap around the lower legs. Yet, again, the proportions weren't right for a deer. It was too short, and too broad, more akin to the body shape of a – Rarity gasped. "For me?"

Falalauria nodded. "I had my smiths craft it overnight," she said. "It is as light and as sturdy as the armor my white-tails wear. The crystal embedded in the steel is enchanted with light barrier spells, enhancing its protection, while the crystal crests on the helmet will help amplify the spells from your horn. I believe you will find it a perfect fit."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" Rarity exclaimed. "It's beautiful!" She used her magic to take the armor from Falalauria and levitate it around her own body. She raised first one front leg, then the other, then one back leg, then the other, sliding the greaves on each leg in turn. At first she was confused, because the greaves were large on her, slipping down to the ground. Yet the steel seemed to be speaking to her, so she channeled a burst of magic through the four greaves, and they instantly tightened, fitting her exactly. She ducked her neck through the hole for it in the torso piece, allowing the peytral to bump against her collarbone; the flanchards settled against her flanks and sides. Another burst of magic tightened them just as snugly as the greaves. Finally, she put the helmet on her head, sliding her horn through the convenient hole in the helmet's peak. The nose guard slid down her face. One final pulse of magic made the helmet snug on her head, not even needing a chin strap. She pranced around in a circle. The armor was incredibly light. She used her magic to slide her saddlebags out from under the flanchards and then refasten them against the silver steel.

"It's so cool!" Dash exclaimed, stamping her hooves in delight. "Now we've *all* got cool stuff!"

Rarity glanced at her friends, and realized Dash was right: between Applejack's Gildedale armor, Dash's pronghorn sigils, and now her own deerish armor, all three of them had been quite impressively outfitted. She nodded at Falalauria. "Thank you so much, My Lady," she said.

Falalauria nodded in turn. "As I said, Rarity: thank *you*." She walked around them, headed towards the Shimmerwood; they briefly turned with her, watching her move back

under the shadow of the trees. "You should search for the Beneviolet in the vales between the mountain peaks," she said. "It should be growing plentifully this time of year. Remember, only a bright, violently purple flower will have enough magical power to save Twilight Sparkle, and you must use your dragonfire on it as quickly as you can."

"Sure enough," Applejack said with a nod. "Thank you, thank y'all all so very much!"

"Thanks again!" Rainbow Dash cried, flying up and waving with her front hoof. "We'll see you on the way back!"

"Of course you will!" Falalauria said, and was there a laugh in her voice? "Farewell, Applejack! Farewell, Rarity! Farewell, Rainbow Dash!"

"Bye Diogo!" Dash cried. "I wanna see you make those echoes sometime, so keep practicing!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Goodbye, Lady Falalauria!" Rarity cried, sitting back on her haunches and waving her front hooves. "Goodbye, and thank you for everything!" They stayed and waved goodbye for a good minute. Presently, Rarity stopped waving and got to her hooves. She began to walk up the path, then stopped, realizing neither Applejack nor Rainbow Dash had moved ahead of her. She looked back over her shoulder. The orange earth pony and the sky-blue pegasus were both following her, the former smiling gently at her and nodding. Rarity drew in a breath and held herself a little higher. "Come along, now," she said, turning back to the path. "Let's see how quickly we can make this climb!" She surged forward at a swift trot, oblivious to the rocky path and the steep incline. The others followed swift behind her.

"Oh!" Falalauria's voice yelled from behind them. "And try not to be too disappointed by what happens at the Gala!"

The three ponies stopped dead in their tracks. "The Gala?!" Applejack repeated in shock.

"You don't think she meant the Grand Galloping Gala, do you?" Rarity asked.

"**Hey!**" Dash cried, turning around with the other two. "What do you know about the Grand Galloping Ga—" she stopped. Falalauria and the other deer had vanished. Dash rolled her eyes. "Okay, they're nice, they're kind, they helped us out a lot, but you know what? Deer are *still* weird."

"I'm sure they appreciate the sentiment very much," Rarity said gently. "Now come on, let's get going." Dash shrugged her shoulders. Applejack laughed, turning back up the path. Dash did as well, and the three of them set off into the towering mountains.

That morning, all three ponies awoke at once. They had found a small grotto to stay in overnight, out of the wind and the (slight) chill pervading the air. They had laid out Applejack's tarp and both her and Rarity's blankets, cushioning them against the craggy rock below. Then the three of them had bundled together at Rainbow Dash's insistence. The sky-blue pegasus had slept between the white unicorn and the orange earth pony, stretching her wings out over both of them and drawing them close to her. Now, as they woke, all three of them could feel each others' hearts beating almost in unison. Rarity gently drew closer to Dash, while Applejack sighed contentedly. "Y'know," she murmured softly, "part o' me is gonna miss this once we're back in Ponyville."

"There's always sleepovers, I suppose," Rarity said.

"Yeah," Dash said, nuzzling deeper into the blanket below her chin. "Though you girls couldn't make it up to my house – which is too bad, because it's really cool."

"Not unless Twilight cast another cloud-walkin' spell on us," Applejack pointed out.

The mention of the stricken unicorn served to focus Rarity's mind. "Let's not waste too much time," she said, pulling away from Rainbow Dash and rising to her hooves. "I think we can make it to a grove of Beneviolets today, but there's no telling if we'll find one as bright a purple as what we need."

"Right," Applejack concurred, getting to her own hooves and flipping her hat onto her head. "Breakfast first, though."

"Of course," Rarity said.

Dash fluttered her wings and was on her hooves, then trotted over to her saddlebags. She opened it and removed some carrots, half a loaf of bread, and the bundle of leaves containing the deer's food offerings. "So what are you girls hungry for? I'd like some carrots and some of that naan."

"Those pansies were mighty tasty yesterday," Applejack said. "I reckon I'd better not get too attached to 'em, else I'm gonna start nippin' 'em out o' ponies' gardens."

"I'm a little surprised no pony's ever done just that," Rarity said, lifting the bread with her magic and tearing off a piece. "Surely we can't be the first to discover their sweet taste."

"Maybe all the flower-wranglin' ponies just keep it to themselves," Applejack thought, taking up a carrot between her hooves. She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "I might be tempted to do the same."

With a grin, Dash unwrapped the leaf bundle. "Well, I'm gonna have a pansy or two, so you all can have some too or not." She pulled out three of the brightly colored flowers and popped one in her mouth, chewing contentedly.

They busied themselves with eating for a few moments, then Rarity said, "Assuming we do find the right Beneviolet today – how shall we proceed on our way back?"

"Well we're definitely gonna go back through the Shimmerwood," Applejack said. "Once we got there, though... I was wonderin' if we couldn't just ask Falalauria to teleport us back to Ponyville, if she can."

"Really?" Rarity asked. She raised an eyebrow. "You... you don't want to go back through Gildedale?"

"Part o' me does," the orange earth pony said, and she lingered in silence for a moment. Then she hardened her green eyes. "But they're plantin' now at Sweet Apple Acres, and I been gone nearly two weeks already. I can't afford to spend any more time away. I got my duty."

"When I think about it," Rarity said, "I've been away so long also. Customers are probably getting desperate for some of my spring fashions. Not to mention Sweetie Belle hasn't seen me in so long. She must be worried sick."

Dash thought about the little fillies that looked up to her, thought about her good friends and how they missed her, thought about all the jobs she needed to do back in Ponyville. Yet she didn't fill herself with regret. "Y'know..." she began. She hesitated as the others turned their attention toward her. "Duty is a funny thing. We all talk about how we have it to other things and other ponies, but sometimes we forget we've got a duty to ourselves too."

"I never forget that," Rarity said, "but ideally, you must put yourself last. Others come first."

"Well I guess there's that," Dash said, and they expected that to be her final contribution. She went on, however: "They're all connected, though – all our duties, see. You can say that your duties to other ponies come first, but if you neglect yourself, then you won't be able to help other ponies as well as you might. All this trip, all this time... we've been here

because of our duty to Twilight, but we've also not avoided the times that have let us take care of ourselves, either. When you spent all that time with Ashtail, Applejack," she pointed at the orange earth pony, "when I went into the Dreaming with the pronghorns, and when Falalauria taught you how to teleport, Rarity, and taught us all about the Elements of Harmony, that was important to each of us, and we needed to do it. But it wasn't just important *for* us – it was important for everypony who might someday need our help. Because we spent some time making ourselves better, we may be able to help other ponies that much more."

Applejack was a bit surprised to hear such wisdom from the freewheeling pegasus. As she looked at her old friend, now covered in swirling dark blue symbols, she could see a kind of bearing that wasn't there before, a kind of nobility. It hadn't come about overnight, so she hadn't noticed it happen – she hadn't been paying attention. Now it stared her in the face. Rainbow Dash was proving her own point by her own subtle, vital transformation. "That's somethin' to think about, sugarcube, for sure," she said. "I reckon even when we get back, we're gonna keep changin' 'cause of this trip."

"I'm sure Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy have changed in their own way as well," Rarity added, "and even Twilight Sparkle, though I wouldn't wish her experiences on anypony. When we're all together again, I suppose, we'll truly be able to tell." She turned to Applejack. "Though, Applejack, what makes you think Lady Falalauria can teleport us back to Ponyville? If she could do that, wouldn't she have offered to teleport us the rest of the way into the mountains?"

Applejack bobbed her head. "Maybe – but I'm not sure. It's like Rainbow's been sayin', y'know? Maybe she figured we had to make the rest of the trip ourselves, for our own good. She seemed real sure that Twilight wasn't gonna die, so maybe she figured we'd keep on learnin' and growin' goin' the rest o' the way up on hoof. She was sure holdin' somethin' back when we talked about comin' back down the mountain, that's for sure."

"Hmmm..." The white unicorn thought for a moment. "You know, you may be right. I don't yet know much about being a Seer, but one thing that seems to be true is that you have to be careful about what you tell ponies. If the future really is built on choices, and those choices come about because of the way our true natures react to circumstances, then I can see the value in sometimes withholding information from a pony. Not because you want her to be hurt, but because if you *do* tell her about her future, it's going to change how she thinks about her choices when it comes time to make them. Perhaps knowing too much about the future is going to change the choices she makes, resulting in a *different* future than what you predicted." She thought privately about Falalauria's choice to let them leave the Shimmerwood. For somepony who could See the future,

choosing not to act – to allow events to unfold naturally – was an action in itself. *I shall have to remember that*, she concluded.

Applejack chewed one final pansy carefully. "Knowin' the future... you know Twilight's gonna give you a lecture when you tell her, right?" she said with a smile. "She's never gone in for predictions and prophecies."

"Perhaps I won't tell her – not yet, anyway," Rarity said. "Falalauria said the time was coming when we would all know. Perhaps we should wait until then to mention these things."

"But when will we know?" Dash asked. "It may just be something we'll have to feel."

"Then feel it, Dash, and recognize it when it comes," the white unicorn said, rising to her hooves. "It's like when a pony gets their cutie mark – you know the moment when it happens."

"Everypony has a nose for destiny," Dash said with a nod. "That's something Firefly used to say. She *was* usually right." She stood up. "I think we'd better get going. Twilight's still in danger."

"Right on, sugarcube," Applejack said. "Think you can pack up the food while Rarity and I armor up?"

Dash chuckled. "Now you *both* have armor – it's so funny!" She began to gather up the remaining bread and carrots. "I never would have pegged you for the warrior type, Rarity."

Rarity gave her a demure smile as she trotted over to her neatly arranged armor. "You should know by now, Dash, that there's more to me than first glances suggest. Did you know I took a semester of horn-fencing at finishing school?"

"You? Fencing?" The sky-blue pegasus laughed. "I never would have seen it – well, okay, I can see it now, but not before this trip."

"Oh, I didn't like it at first," said Rarity, levitating the flanchards and the peytral over her head. "By the end of the class, though, I was decent at it. It teaches you to be observant and patient – to look for your moment, to wait for it to arrive, and when it comes," she tightened the armor around her torso with a pulse of magic, "you strike."

Applejack tugged her own flanchards on, rolling over to fasten the straps beneath her belly. "Huh – you make it sound like applebuckin'." That made her think of home again, and of her friends – and then she grinned. "Y'know what's funny? Pinkie Pie reckoned we'd see all manner o' terrible critters out here, and except for the komagas, we ain't met a one."

"Ha!" Dash laughed. "What were the things she mentioned again?"

"Balrogs an'... somethin'... somethin'..." the orange earth pony mumbled. "I don't recall, to be honest."

The earth pony and the unicorn consumed themselves with fastening their respective sets of armor. When they were finished, Rainbow Dash had packed up all the food and even folded up the tarp and the blankets. Putting those away, Applejack and Rarity fastened their saddlebags to their flanks, while Dash wrapped her scarf around her neck. Their effects securely stowed, their equipment snugly strapped, the three ponies walked side-by-side out of the grotto. They were decently high in the Archback Mountains, the air crisp around them, the wind a light but cool breeze. Gildedale shone gold far below them, the sun just rising ahead of them in the east, high above the distant Drackenridge Mountains. "Say, Rainbow," Applejack asked, "do you wanna go up ahead of us, check for Beneviolets?"

"I did think about it," Dash said. She grinned. "Tell you what: if we can all make it up into the mountain range in two hours, I'll stick with you girls."

"You don't even have a clock with you," Rarity said, the sunlight sparkling off the crystal crests on her helmet.

"Trust me, I can tell."

"All right, then," Rarity said, turning back up the steep and rocky path. "Shall we?" She launched herself forward at a full gallop, Applejack quick behind her. Dash brought up the rear, rainbow-streaked tail flapping behind her as she pounded her hooves on the dark stone, leading ever higher into the Archbacks.

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Twilight Sparkle screamed as another crackling bolt lanced off her horn, striking one of the walls of her bedroom. She thrashed about under the covers, sweat pouring down her face. Her horn was almost totally black. Tears leaked from the corners of her tightly-shut

eyes. She wasn't even thinking, just experiencing, a slave to her blinding, agonizing pain, a pain that none of the available painkillers could abate.

"She's getting much hotter! More water! More water!" Zecora cried, feeling the lavender unicorn's forehead with the back of her hoof. Apple Bloom dashed out of the bedroom, and the water in the sink was running moments later.

"Oh, oh, I wish Spike were here!" Fluttershy cried, desperately stamping her hooves. They had sent Spike into the Everfree Forest to get some poison joke – Zecora said its body-altering properties made it a strong painkiller, and Spike's scales would protect him from its strange side effects. "I think we need to contact Princess Celestia now!"

"N-AAAHHHH!" Twilight screamed. "Nooooo... frrriieennndsss...." Her voice was slurred, her mind fuzzing.

"They'll make it in time! I know they will!" Pinkie Pie cried, bouncing in place. Each pounding of her hooves on the floor was like the striking of a hammer, or the banging of a drum, and to Fluttershy it seemed like a terrible countdown had begun. "We gotta keep Twilight going just a little longer!"

The butter-yellow pegasus swallowed hard. She had first broached the subject of contacting Princess Celestia five days ago, but both Twilight and Pinkie had disagreed. Twilight's refusal had been unusual, as she was normally so quick to contact her teacher and mentor. The lavender unicorn had explained that she trusted Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash to retrieve the Benevolet in time, and she had a deep-seated fear that she would be betraying them if she went to Celestia. This was coupled with a strange worry about bothering the princess – as though it would be a bother for her to learn her student was deathly ill! Fluttershy had suspected that the Horn Rot was affecting Twilight's thinking, but her refusal had been adamant, and Pinkie Pie, with her undying faith in the abilities of her friends, had been quick to support her in this. The two of them had succeeded multiple times in overruling Fluttershy, and she cursed herself for her meekness. She should have been demanding, should have been insistent, but they were so heartfelt in their belief that the others would come through.

Now, though, Zecora was here, and Fluttershy knew the zebra was as concerned about Twilight as she was. "Pinkie, I know you have faith in your friends," she said firmly, "but if we do not act soon, this is where Twilight ends!"

"But I just know – I *know* –" The pink earth pony's eyes were bright. She seemed to have gotten only more cheerful. "I know they'll do it! They'll do it and it'll be *spectacular* and we'll all clop-clop-clop! And Twilight says –"

"Twilight's not thinking right, Pinkie!" Fluttershy shouted, finally raising her voice. "Twilight's going to die and we need to do something *now*!"

Apple Bloom rushed back in with the damp washcloth, which Zecora applied to Twilight's forehead. Suddenly a spark **popped** off the tip of her horn, and her eyes shot open, empty and glowing white. "Beware the beast that girds the Earth! The greatest challenge approaches!" Her eyes shut tightly again, and she arched her back in agony.

"What's that mean?" Apple Bloom asked.

"It means something big is going to happen!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed cheerfully. "And – *whoaaahhhh!*" The pink earth pony suddenly lost her footing, some legs going one way, some going another. She toppled over onto the ground, where she rolled onto her back.

"Not *now*, Pinkie Pie!" Fluttershy snapped, an unusual note of *annoyance* crawling into her voice. When she turned towards Pinkie, however, Fluttershy was surprised to see what had befallen her. Pinkie was on her back, and her legs were moving in the air. Her right front leg and her right back leg would move forward, while her left front leg and her left back leg would move back, then her right legs would move back while her left legs moved forward. Right legs forward, left legs back, left legs forward, right legs back, over and over. "A twitch?" she asked.

"Yep!" Pinkie said, smiling. "I just *knew* something big was going to happen!"

"What does that one mean?" Apple Bloom said. "I've never seen it before!"

"One side forward, one side back," Pinkie said. "It means I'm right about something I didn't think I was going to be right about!"

"Really?" Fluttershy said. In spite of the chaos and the deadly danger to Twilight, she couldn't help raise her eyebrows. "And that doesn't happen very often?"

"Not really," Pinkie said cheerfully, "I'm usually spot-on!"

"Yeah, but... I... I agree with Fluttershy an' Zecora!" Apple Bloom said, stamping her small hoof on the ground much like her sister. "We just gotta keep Twilight from dyin', and if that means contactin' Princess Celestia, it's what we gotta do!"

"But –"

"Please, Pinkie," Fluttershy said, pleading in her voice. "*Just in case.* If Applejack and the others are going to save Twilight, they're going to have to do it soon! So either they will, or they won't, and then Princess Celestia can save her, or... or do *something* for her, but only if she *knows!*"

Her twitch abating, the pink earth pony rolled over onto her belly, sprawling her legs out on the floor. She put a hoof to her chin, screwing up her face. "Weeeelllll..." Then she grinned at them. "Okie-dokie! Just to make you all feel better, though! We won't need Princess Celestia, you'll see!"

"All right, then," Fluttershy said. "When Spike gets back, we're sending a message to Celestia, no more argument!"

"**AAARRRGHHHH!**" Twilight groaned. Zecora pressed the wet washcloth harder onto her forehead, speaking gently to the unicorn in her native zebra language.

*If Twilight can even last that long, the butter-yellow pegasus thought grimly. This was it – the next hour or two would be crucial. Even contacting Princess Celestia required Spike to be here, and they had no way of knowing when he would be back. Fluttershy didn't dare leave Twilight's side to find him, none of them did. She felt like she might cry, but she couldn't, not with Apple Bloom here. She needed to be strong, but she felt so helpless. She sank down to the floor, then put her front hooves together. Princess Luna, she thought, I remember what you said to us the day you came back, after the party was over. You told us that you had given up on yourself – that even as Nightmare Moon, you wanted to be appreciated, but you thought there was no hope left for that, so you were focused on making everypony feel pain as revenge. But you said that when we cleansed your spirit, and brought you back to yourself, and everypony in Ponyville **did** want to love you, you realized there had always been hope for you, you and everypony. So you told us that you were going to take on a new divine role: because you had been helped when help seemed impossible, you were going to become the Patroness of Desperate Causes. I pray to that part of you now, and I know – I know I should have prayed sooner, but now things are very desperate, and we need you more than ever, and I know you're probably asleep by now, but please – hear my prayer! Don't let my friend die!*

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The path turned sharply, but Rarity merely slid into it, changing direction without losing speed. If she had bothered to think about it, she would probably have been amazed at her

physical development: she had been worn out climbing the Drackenridge Mountains almost two weeks ago, but she handled the steep incline now with ease. Her silver armor flashed in the sun. The wind whipped cold around her, but she found she didn't mind it as she once might have. Behind her, Applejack kept pace, grinning at the swiftness of their ascent. The path was narrower, rockier, higher, but they hadn't slackened their pace. They were going to do it – they were going to be in the midst of the mountains before noon, long before! They could probably find the Beneviolet in no time!

Twilight, we're gonna do it! she thought. *We're gonna save you lickety-split!* Then she thought inevitably about what would happen after. Could Falalauria teleport them back? If she could, Applejack was prepared to ask her for it. Maybe that was why the golden hind had been so hesitant to agree with their statements about the return journey. She would ask for it, even though it would mean not seeing Ashtail again – and here her heart ached. She thought of him by her side, running with her – she knew he would be able to keep pace, so tough and muscled and lean. He would lean against her, breath on her neck, say into her ear: do what you must. He would understand. And she knew she would see him again one day. She knew it in her heart. It wasn't Seeing, it wasn't what Falalauria did, but she knew. *I want him to meet Big Macintosh, and Granny Smith, and I bet Apple Bloom would love him! I bet he'd love the farm, too – I bet he'd love a real honest-to-goodness apple to eat! I shoulda given him some of our apples! We had a few to spare!*

They passed between two great cliffs, and Rarity skidded to a halt. Catching up with her, Applejack and Rainbow Dash found themselves looking down into a great gorge, the path winding widely around the other side of the peak they had just passed. Deep at the bottom, a small stream passed through, and there was a perimeter of grass around it. The orange earth pony traced the stream to the south, where the gorge opened up into a great valley. There was green there – and she could see that it was liberally speckled with *purple*. "There!" she yelled, pointing to it with her hoof. "Those have gotta be Beneviolets!"

"I'll go check it out! You two hurry as fast as you can!" Dash cried, flapping her wings.

"Remember, look for one that's *bright* purple!" Rarity cried as the sky-blue pegasus shot away.

"Right!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"Come on!" Applejack shouted, taking the lead down the path. Rarity followed close behind her. It wound widely around the peak, snaking over arms of the mountain,

bending down then rising back up over and over, but they galloped, they almost broke into a full run. This was it! They were here!

Wending their way around a corner, they galloped side by side as the path widened, opening into almost a full road. It curved again, and then descended, bending off to the right into a huge field of green grass. The valley they were in was enormous, easily a mile broad, and it continued for an untold number of miles off to the south. The stream running through it was a glimmer of silver. It was festooned with wildflowers, and most of them were –

"BENEVIOLETS!" Rarity squealed. There were so many of them! Quite apart from her circumstantial joy, the designer in her realized that the flowers were gorgeous. Their petals were broad at the base, narrowing out into what seemed to be true points, five of them making the most delightful star-shape, the very middle jet black, the stoma stretching out colored purest gold, and the petals themselves a rich and deep shade of violet. That made her stop, and pause. Deep. *Too* deep.

Applejack noticed as well. "They're all dark!" she cried. "They been growin' too long!"

"Oh, dear..." Rarity muttered. A nervous puddle was sloshing around her heart.

With a whoosh of wind, Rainbow Dash came to a galloping landing just ahead of them, surging ahead and skidding to a stop before her friends. "They're all too dark!" she said, her features betraying a panic.

"C'mon now, Rainbow, you can't have seen *all* of 'em," Applejack said, though her guts were contracting in terror.

"Yes I did! I flew low over and over and over!"

"We'll have to search on hoof!" Rarity snapped, refusing to despair. "Applejack, you take that side of the stream," she pointed off to her right, "and I'll take this side! Move as quickly as you can, but be *careful!* Dash, fly in a zig-zag over the field! Keep your eyes peeled!"

"But –"

"Do it!" Rarity said with steel in her voice.

Nodding, Dash took to the sky again, starting the flight path the white unicorn had advised. Applejack galloped through the fields, leaping the stream in a single bound and

then setting off, combing the grass, her green eyes surveying as keenly as she could, ever fixed on the ground. Rarity swept her blue eyes from side to side as she galloped. Something in her heart was telling her she had to hurry, that she had to find a properly colored Beneviolet very soon. She crossed from one side of the field to the other, but always moving forward, she galloped, she had no idea how big this valley was. She noted that the ground was unusually soft, even more so than she was used to on fertile soil.

Almost an hour later, she and Applejack arrived back at the head of the valley. They hadn't gone the whole length of it – it was too big – but they'd seen enough. "Anything?" Rarity asked.

"Not a bright one to be seen!" Applejack said, stomping her hoof.

"I told you!" Rainbow Dash cried, dropping out of the sky in front of them. "But there's gotta be more fields and valleys up here! We need to keep searching! Ugh! I wish we had more pegasi with us!"

"Pega—" Rarity stopped hard. Her eyes widened. And in spite of the dire circumstances, she smiled enormously, *lunging* at Dash. "Oh, Dash, you did it! You did it! No pony even needed to correct you! Why – why – I could just *kiss* you!"

She wrapped her front hooves around Dash's neck. The sky-blue pegasus was taken aback for a moment, then grinned slyly. "Well, if you *want* to..."

Rarity drew back, an uncertain look on her face. Then she made a little noise and planted a soft kiss on Dash's forehead. "Done. Now don't say I never did it."

"All right, that just proves *my* lesson took when yours didn't," Applejack said with a nod. "But we gotta keep focused! We gotta find another field!"

"Say," Rarity said, turning back to the north, "could there be a field at the other end of that gorge?" She squinted, trying to look through the narrow, rocky valley. At the other end of it, some distance away, she thought she could just spy a flash of green. "I think there is!"

"Yeah, I see it!" Dash cried. "I'm gonna go check it out! You girls wait here!" She flapped her wings and was gone in a rainbow streak, her scarf fluttering in the breeze behind her.

As Applejack watched her go, she noticed that the sky had grown dim. Looking up, she watched dark gray clouds rolling silently overhead. The wind was picking up as well and getting colder. "Uh oh," she muttered. "We gotta hurry – I think there's a storm comin'."

"Up here, it's got to be a *snow* storm, I suppose," Rarity muttered. "We'll never find a proper Beneviolet if it gets buried in snow!"

Rainbow Dash flew with all her might. She was going faster than normal – it was as though the wind resistance was nonexistent. *Chalk it up to this handy scarf*, she thought. *I gotta remember to thank Falalauria when I see her again*. In no time she crossed the gorge and was above another valley, this one narrower than the first. It too was filled with wildflowers, and many of them were Beneviolets – but they were all dark purple, just as before. She trained her pegasus eyes, scouring the ground, looking, looking, *looking*. She glanced further ahead. More dark purple, more dark purple.

Then it was there, far off, isolated from the others. It was on a long, low, wide, strangely-shaped hill, at the highest point. A single Beneviolet – but it was such a violent shade of purple it made her blink. She couldn't resist swinging back around and flying toward her friends again. "*I see it!*" she shouted. "I see a Beneviolet! I see one that's the right color!"

"GO GET IT!" Applejack roared at the top of her lungs. "And hurry!" The sky was completely gray now. The wind began to howl. "There's a storm comin'!"

Nodding, Rainbow Dash wheeled about and shot across the gorge a second time, her heart pumping, every hair on her body and every feather in her wings alive. She could feel the Dreaming swirl around her, feel it surge in and out of her like the ocean upon the shore. There was import to this moment – she could feel it. This was the culmination of their long, hard journey. Soaring over the valley, she flew low, coming down towards the hill. She hit it hard and galloped forward, grass brushing aside as she moved. Snowflakes began to gently descend from the sky. She skidded to a halt near the hill's summit, in a shallow depression of grass. The ground here was extremely soft – she was practically sinking into it. The Beneviolet was less than a hundred feet away. She was so giddy that she just had to shout and jump. "Yes! Yes! YES!" she yelled, jumping up into the air and slamming her hooves *hard* on the earth when she landed.

The ground began to **rumble**.

Dash's body *trembled* as the earth beneath her shook. The whole valley – the whole mountain range – **shook**. Her legs began to spread apart beneath her, nearly dragging her to the ground before she flapped her wings and hovered. Grass and dirt peeled away as the earth under her split. Beneath it, growing steadily larger, was a field of bright sea green, strangely slick, almost wet-looking. Whirling around in the air, Dash saw it continue for more than twenty feet the other direction. She spun again, and saw it continue for another twenty feet, still growing bigger. Then she looked just beneath her.

Here the green was not, and in its place was thick, empty black. The mountains were still trembling; in fact they were shaking even harder, a rumble growing louder and louder. She flapped her wings backwards, pulling away from the hill. The field of sea-green was brilliant and unnatural, and she realized that the black she had seen was a *line* that neatly bisected the sea green. It was thicker than two ponies side-by-side. The sea-green stopped expanding, now making a strangely ovoid shape of huge size. For a moment, the mountain range was still.

The great black line twitched from side to side, sending Dash's heart into her throat. Then the line **narrowed**.

The hill exploded! Dirt and grass and flowers and rock blew everywhere, filling the air as the very ground beneath her rose. She flew skyward, but it followed her, higher and higher, whole fields' worth of brown dirt falling away, revealing blackness, revealing slickness. Still the bright purple Beneviolet was intact – it seemed to be wedged in a kind of crevice, a ridge taller than Sugarcube Corner. Panicking, she arced back to the south, flying where she knew her friends were, snow now filling the air around her.

Applejack and Rarity were gaping at the sight before them. A whole chunk of the mountain had just risen into the air, and it continued to rise on a titanic column of blackness. The narrow gorge exploded, chunks of stone the size of Applejack's barn – the size of Ponyville's library – flying hundreds of feet skyward every direction, water spraying everywhere as the stream was torn apart. A sky-blue blur was suddenly hurtling towards them, streaking to a stop and suddenly Rainbow Dash hovered and screamed "RUN!"

Applejack and Rarity needed no further encouragement. They turned and galloped, no, they *ran* as fast as their legs could carry them, and it seemed that at their heels the valley shredded, hills of dirt, acres of grass tearing apart and flying away. The mountains were shuddering. They ran and ran for minutes, foam flecking the corners of their mouths, Dash flying right beside them, not wanting to leave them though she was filled with fear. Minutes turned to tens of minutes and *still* they ran, panting, and *still* the mountains shuddered, and *still* when they looked over their shoulder the tower of blackness rose, too thick, filling the horizon, unable to be properly studied.

At last they reached the end of the long valley – a steep decline. They lost their footing and tumbled down it, Rarity having the presence of mind to turn her fall into a sideways roll so the crests on her helmet did not catch on something and break her neck. They tumbled down and down until they reached a barren field of stone, the mountain peaks stretching, curving overhead all around, like an arena, like a stadium. Dash looked ahead

and barely glimpsed some crumbling stone structure – a long table, an ancient arch – far off in the middle of the barren vista. Her friends got to their hooves and still ran, running across the bare rock, until finally Rarity's newfound endurance failed her, and she stumbled to a stop, panting and hacking for breath in the increasingly cold air. Applejack stopped as well, her breath coming out in a fog. Rainbow Dash skidded to a stop before them. "*What?!*" was all she could say, was all she could *think* to say – but she got no further.

A long, low *hiss* pervaded the whole of the air. Fear raced up each pony's spine. They turned slowly around.

It had stopped rising, two miles, four miles, five miles, ten miles or more into the sky. Some of its body – perhaps *most* of its body – still seemed to be submerged in the earth, but what protruded out and up was as broad as the whole of the Everfree Forest. It was jet black all over, even on its vast belly, up and up, craning back their necks to see, until their wandering eyes stopped at its huge head, bigger than Canterlot, shaped like a giant spade. Four blazing green eyes, each one bigger than an Ursa Major, flitted with unholy speed across the world, thick black lines for pupils. It opened its mouth. Fangs the size of Ponyville were a dull bone-white. A long, dull blue tongue, wider than a dragon's wingspan, longer than the road between Ponyville and the Everfree Forest, lolled out, flicked. Another hiss rose on the wind.

Applejack swallowed hard. Now she remembered what Pinkie Pie had said. "You... you reckon that's a world snake?"

"Yeah," Dash said, "I reckon."

The world snake let out another mountain-shaking hiss. It made the dust around their hooves rise. The titanic creature actually stretched a little higher – though in this case *a little* was a quarter of a mile or more. It was sweeping its enormous head around, clearly looking for whatever had disturbed its slumber, though its eyes were obviously not meant for seeking out very small objects at very great distances. "Well," Dash said, turning to the others, her voice shaking, "*now* what?!"

"We gotta get outta here!" Applejack cried. "We gotta find another field – another valley – someplace else with Beneviolets and keep lookin'!"

"I *found* the Beneviolet! I found the one we need, the one that's the right color!" the sky-blue pegasus cried. "It's up on that thing's *head*!"

"Rainbow, you know it's gotta be gone by now! It probably blew away or the wind tore it apart! Think rational-like!"

"No, I swear! It's stuck in a crevice on the head! It's gotta still be there!"

"Well... I..." Applejack's heart sank. They had looked for quite some time. The Beneviolet of which Rainbow Dash spoke was the only one they had found so far that was the proper color. It was possible that it was the only one they would find in the whole of the Archback Mountains – unlikely, but possible. Even so, looking for another could take hours, perhaps even days, and they were two days away from the two-week limit. "I..."

"NO!"

Dash and Applejack turned their heads. Rarity was tossing her head and stomping her hooves. "No no no no no **NO!**" She trotted proudly in front of them, the wind whipping her violet mane and tail, snowflakes landing on her brilliant silver armor. "We have come **too far** – we have seen and done **too much** – to be turned aside now!" She stared hard at them, her deep blue eyes sparkling not with charm or delight but with barely-restrained fury. "We are not going to be turned aside! Not after everything we've been through! Haven't we crossed over mountains and plains and through rivers and forests? We have! We've won the praise of the Lady of the Shimmerwood! We'll have our names etched into the Stone of Gildedale!" She fixed Applejack with a glare. "Applejack! You faced down the King of Gildedale in all his pomp, all his pride, and told him he was wrong! And you **proved** it!" She swiveled her gaze to Dash. "Rainbow Dash! You entered the Dreaming with the pronghorns and you **mastered** their lightning magic, something only one other pony has done! And you mastered yourself!" She took a deep breath. "And

! I looked into Lady Falalauria's eyes when they **burned** with fury and I told her to **trust** me! And she did!" She was panting. "We! Are! Not! **GOING!**" She snapped a hoof up towards the world snake. "We are going to **beat** that overgrown garden snake, and we are going to get the Beneviolet right now!"

"YEAH!" Dash yelled, rearing back and thrashing her front legs, her blood pumping.

"All right, sugarcube!" Applejack stomped her hoof, her own heart pounding. "But how?"

"I have a plan!" Rarity said, posing dramatically. "Dash, you're going to use your lightning on that thing! Hit it in the eyes, in the mouth, in the ears if you can find them! Make it notice you, and make it mad!"

"All right!" Dash said. "What next?"

"When it's got you in its sights, you're going to lead it right over here!" she said, stomping her hoof on the ground. "And you, Applejack, will be waiting for it!"

"Okay!" cried Applejack. Then she blinked. "And what am I gonna do then?"

"You're going to let it hit you!"

Applejack's eye twitched. "Eh, come again?"

"You're going to let it hit you!" Rarity repeated. She flashed a smile. "But! When it hits you, you will dig your hooves into the earth and you will *stand firm*, just as Ashtail taught you!" Her eyes sparkled. "Didn't he say that when an earth pony digs in their hooves and stands firm, they can't be moved and they can't be hurt?"

"W-well yeah!" the orange earth pony stammered, stomping her hooves nervously. Her ears flattened against her head. "B-but that was when we were facin' komagas! This – *this* –"

"This is no different!" Rarity said boldly. "You must dig into your spirit, darling, and find your strength! I know it's there! And when that world snake crashes against you you will not be moved! So the only logical conclusion is that *he* will be moved! The sudden impact will almost certainly hurt him and daze him! He may even collapse onto the ground. Then I shall teleport up onto his head and get the Beneviolet myself!" She snorted mightily from her nostrils. "Are we all clear?"

Her two friends stared blankly at her for a moment. Then Rainbow Dash stepped forward, her scarf billowing in the breeze. "Let's **do** this!" she yelled, raising a front hoof. Rarity touched her own front hoof against it.

They both looked at Applejack. The orange earth pony felt compelled to be practical for just a moment – they would be killed! They might not even get the Beneviolet before being killed! She looked desperately into their eyes... and found only confidence. What had Falalauria said? *Have faith*. What had Niles Nigellus said? *Keep calm*. What had Shield Maiden said? *Fear not*. She could feel strength from the earth, from her friends, from her cutie mark fill her soul. She stepped forward and joined her hoof to the others'. "Let's **go to it!**" she yelled.

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Twilight Sparkle screamed in agony, the sparks from her horn making the whole library shake. Far below her bedroom, the front door opened, and Spike stepped inside.

• • •

"Remember, it's in a crevice around the left side of the central crest!" Dash said, flapping into the air.

"Right!" Rarity cried.

"Okay..." The sky-blue pegasus whirled around in the air, facing the impossibly huge serpent still twitching its head from side to side. "Here I **go!**" She launched herself forward, wings flapping with all her might. She realized a few seconds later that it was going to take her some time to fly all the way up to the creature's head, *unless... Firefly, be with me!* she thought, and she opened her spirit, letting the Dreaming flood in. She briefly stopped flapping, letting calm and the currents of the universe pour through her body, then white energy crackled around her. She put her legs together and the lightning bolt came and she rode. Sound and wind vanished around her as she streaked up, the world snake getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It filled her whole vision, a black scaly head with scales roughly the size of an Ursa Minor *each*. The air trembled as the titanic head moved, twitching, turning to fill her with its sidelong vision, and she noticed its front left eye narrow at the pupil – it *saw* her. She gritted her teeth – *I'll give you something to look at!* She willed more power into the lightning bolt, blasting forward ever faster, until she was half a mile away and then the serpent blinked, its front left eye opening again, so she unclasped her legs and let the lightning bolt **blast** forward in a second!

The lightning struck the world snake right in its eye. It didn't exactly *roar*. It opened its mouth and let out a louder, lower, sharper hiss, which was *still* enough to make Dash's bones shake inside her muscles. She flew with all her might, snow swirling around her, curving around its head toward its now-open mouth, where that spectacularly long tongue was lolling out. It moved its head to one side, then the other, frighteningly fast, and Dash clenched her stomach muscles and pulled up, knowing that if she actually collided with the thrashing titan the impact would liquefy her. She banked hard around the lower jaw, summoning a lightning bolt around her front hooves as she traveled, then she was at the front and there was the tongue so she aimed her hooves and let the lightning go.

The bolt **sizzled** out and hit the world snake squarely on the tip of its tongue. It **threw** its head back, the surge of wind that caused nearly knocking Rainbow Dash out of the air, her scarf seemingly the only thing that saved her. She could hear more of the mountains crumbling far below as more of the great black body pulled itself from the earth. She felt a sudden current of wind pull her. The creature was inhaling, and the great black portals she was dragged towards were its nostrils. She channeled the lightning through her back legs, twisted around, and **bucked!** Twin bolts lanced out and into each nostril, and now the titan *howled*, a low, awful sneering sound. It pulled back, its head growing faintly smaller in her eyes as she whirled around, and the four green eyes angled inward, toward her. The black slits in each of them narrowed. It had seen her.

"That's right!" she couldn't resist yelling. "You want me? Come GET me!" She spun around and flew and dove. Another mighty hiss, and the mountains shook. She glanced over her shoulder. The world snake's head was following her. Below her, the mountains cracked apart ever more, peaks and cliffs crumbling away like caked mud knocked off a boot. The snow filled her vision, driving her to squint her eyes. In a flash of panic, she glanced over her shoulder again, focusing with all her powers of vision. She could still see it, the flash of sharp purple high up on the blackness.

"It's coming!" Rarity said.

"Ya *think?!*" Applejack snapped, seeing the behemoth surging forward, right towards them. "I don't know if I can do this, Rarity!"

"You must!" the white unicorn cried. Her horn shimmered, and the dusting of snow that had fallen around Applejack was blown away, revealing a clear circle of rock. "You're the only way it will work!"

"But... I..." Applejack was gripped by fear. "I ain't no Dalepony! I only just learned about standin' firm, I don't got it in me!"

"Yes you do!" Rarity yelled. "Applejack, look at me!" The orange earth pony did so. "I've relied on your strength so much over this journey! So has Rainbow Dash! Whenever we've doubted, you've been there to boost us! Whenever we faltered, you were there to help us stand! You have more strength in your spirit than this entire mountain range! You can stand firmer than any pony that's ever lived! I have faith in you!"

The world snake loomed closer, the ground was quaking. Snow from the mountain peaks was tumbling down into the great open space. Applejack looked up at the titan, saw its colossal size, bigger than anything she could ever have imagined. "I'll do what I have to!" she said.

"You can do it!" Rarity cried, then turned and ran off, wanting to be well clear of the impact site.

Applejack swallowed hard, then looked down at her hooves. She ground them as far as she could into the rock, then focused on her heart. *I need strength*, she thought. Where did she get her strength? From her family and friends. She imagined Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom and Granny Smith beside her, smiling and encouraging her. She felt Rainbow Dash and Rarity and Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie and even Spike with her. She imagined Braeburn and all her cousins, aunts and uncles. They leaned against her, propping her up. She raised her head. The world snake was even closer, filling every inch of her vision. In a rainbow blur, Rainbow Dash shot past her, streaking low; she could hear her grab Rarity and lift her skyward. The world snake's body cracked apart the mountains at the entrance to the chasm. She dug deeper into the earth and deeper into her soul. Her mother and father were here now, gripping her, holding her around with their legs as they did when she was a baby. She could feel them – in that moment, it wasn't just her reaching into the earth. The Earth, the living rock beneath her, reached up into her, whispered to her without words. She could feel every earth pony from the beginning of time standing with her, all the ponies of Gildedale, Shield Maiden and Ashtail, his voice in her ear, saying to her:

Earth ponies are unbreakable.

Her face hardened. Her green eyes flickered stone-gray. Her mane and tail went rigid, stopped blowing in the wind.

The world snake was upon her. He was before her in an instant, too vast to behold, and she met him with all the strength and all the love of every pony whose hooves had ever touched the dirt of the wide world. The planet tensed its muscles with hers. She **stood firm**.

The world snake's broad muzzle hit her right on the nose.

It **bounced**.

The ground **rippled** like water on a lake, huge waves spreading through the solid rock, then **CRACKS** shot away from her in every direction, great enormous cracks that traveled across the empty space and up the mountain walls, up the peaks, cracking the mountains from their summits to their very foundations. The cracks traveled outwards, into the ranges around her, and snow-capped peaks collapsed in the distance, crumbling into chunks larger than her farm as the roots of the world broke. Yet Applejack was unscathed.

The world snake *whined*, a sharp, high pleading, almost like a dog, as it pulled back, its body almost wobbling, the air snapping around the massive spade-shaped head as it swayed. Applejack finally blinked, her body loosening up, shaking her head. She felt... well, she felt like she wanted to throw up, to be honest, but other than that, perfectly fine.

"She did it!" Rainbow Dash shouted, holding Rarity in her legs.

"I knew she could," the white unicorn said smugly. "Now, Dash, put me down near the head! It's my turn to take part."

"What about me?"

"If you can, keep hitting it with lightning! Try to pin it in place!"

"Got it!" the sky-blue pegasus said as she flew low, slowed down, came to the ground. She dropped Rarity, who hit the ground running and galloped forward, aimed straight for the unbelievably huge head.

Rarity knew this was her moment. Lightning bolts rained down from the sky, striking the earth on either side of the world snake's head. Its green eyes were unfocused, its tongue partially extended. She wove around one massive white bolt, then looked up, glancing at the world snake. Its head was still quite high up. She hoped she could teleport there. She began to think of what it would feel like, the scales hard but not craggy, covered with

chunks of dirt and rock. "Dash!" she yelled up over her shoulder. "Can you get it to lower its head a little?"

"I'll try!" came the shouted response. A lightning bolt struck the titan squarely in the middle of its head, and it reflexively smashed its jaw onto the ground. The impact threw Rarity from her hooves, skidding her across the ground. She shakily got to her feet. She looked up. Even with the head on the ground, it was still nearly a mile from its jaw to the top of its head. If only she could get closer...

"Need a hoof?" Applejack called from behind her. Turning, Rarity saw the orange earth pony galloping forward, twirling her new deerish rope which she had tied into a lasso. There was a protrusion at the back corner of the world snake's jaw, and she galloped for it, spinning the lasso larger and larger.

"Is that rope going to be long enough?" Rarity asked.

"It's as long as I need it to be!" Applejack cried, and sure enough, as she spun the rope overhead it seemed to grow longer and longer and longer. Finally, they were just above the protrusion, and Applejack reared back and *tossed* the lasso up and up. It seemed to reach further skyward of its own accord, and then its enormous noose fell around the bony point and Applejack *pulled*, tightening it. Just in time, too, because the world snake's eyes suddenly came into focus, and its head started to rise off the ground. Applejack dug her hooves into the earth and stood firm! The world snake abruptly stopped rising, its head angled towards Applejack. Its body **thrashed**, sending ripples through the ground around them, breaking apart more of the mountains on either side of it. Rarity was knocked off her hooves again, but Applejack remained unmoved. The rope was taut. Rarity glanced at Applejack, and Applejack's green eyes motioned toward the rope. "*Git up thur!*" she said between clenched teeth.

Taking a deep breath, the white unicorn imagined the air swirling around her, the cold bite of snow on her coat, the sky open but not too open – and she vanished, reappearing just above the rope in the air. Falling down, she grabbed the rope with four hooves and clung tightly to it. She looked up, towards the enormous head. The eyes were narrowed in focus and rage. "For Twilight!" Rarity cried, and began to shimmy up the rope.

She moved as fast as she could, though this was hindered by her complete lack of experience shimmying up ropes. Fear and courage combine to make powerful motivators, however, so she climbed, clutching the rope tightly between her hooves, moving as fast as she could. Further and further she rose, higher and higher. The snake kept its two right eyes on her, but what could it do?

Suddenly, the green eyes blazed, flashing with evident light. A surge of green traveled down the rope. Rarity's horn shimmered, putting up a simple barrier. Fortunately, the magic was wild and uncomplicated, though incredibly strong. Still, she was able to avoid it. It kept traveling down the rope, though, until it reached Applejack, where it hit her through her teeth and into her body. The orange earth pony was standing firm quite well, so she barely felt it – but it was enough to make her twitch, and the twitch broke her stance. She was ripped out of the ground, and she had to let go of the rope hastily before her teeth were yanked out. The world snake broke free of the cage of lightning around it, sending another green pulse out, this time into the air. It rose rapidly skyward.

"Rarity!" Rainbow Dash cried.

The white unicorn was now clutching the rope for dear life. She rose higher and higher, miles of empty sky separating her from the ground. Tears sprang to her eyes; she shut them tightly. This wasn't how it was supposed to go! She wasn't prepared for this! She was trembling; her fears were overwhelming. She reached into her mind, trying to summon some comfort, trying to will all of it away, wishing with all her might that this might be just a dream, that she might wake up in her beautiful bed in her beloved boutique and then go out into the warm sunlight of Ponyville, all her friends waiting for her... *Twilight Sparkle was screaming now, tears running down her face. The other ponies crowded around her, while Spike hastily scribbled a note on a piece of parchment...*

Her eyes opened; her cutie mark was glowing. Twilight needed her **now**. Her friends were more important than she was! She faced all her fear and trembling and put it forcibly out of her mind. She grit her teeth and climbed the rope once more. She wouldn't fail! Not now!

The world snake suddenly snapped its head to the left. The rope was flung upwards, Rarity with it, then headed straight for the side of the great beast's jaw. Losing her grip, Rarity was tossed into the air, sailing up and up from the sheer force of the titan's motions. She suddenly glimpsed the top of its head. She focused on the scales – they would be slick and hard, but not slippery, not wet, not at this point. Though they would be a little wet from the snow. There would be clods of dirt and clumps of grass and a few stray chunks of rock, she could feel them all beneath her hooves, and the wind would be whipping more fiercely than ever, the snow driving in a spiraling swirl around the giant head. She caught all the sensations in her mind, let them fill her imagination, then she let her magic surge.

In the blink of an eye she was standing on top of the world snake's head. She was shaking, trembling, but she was here! She quickly looked around. Rocks the size of boulders were

tumbling and falling off the beast's head even now, snow drifts were piling up around depressions in the skull. She saw, far off, the crest of which Rainbow Dash had spoken, rising like a great black bastion, though it was not very tall relative to the rest of the titan. She galloped for it with all her might, the snow driving around her, her hooves almost slipping several times on the scaly skin of the titan, dodging mud and snow. She got closer and closer.

The world snake began to tilt its head back, and Rarity angled herself as best she could. A *shudder* went through the titan, and Rarity couldn't keep it up – she lost her balance, fell! Her hooves slid, and she tumbled downward, rolling over snow and through mud, thinking *Ugh! Ugh! My beautiful coat! This lovely armor!* She slid further and further, and the empty sky with the mountains far below loomed ways off, but growing ever closer. Then the crest was there – she reached out her front legs and grabbed it, catching it, breaking her slide. Panting, she focused. *Twilight Sparkle! I shall not let you down!* She crawled around the crest, toward the left side of the head, and looked down. There it was. It was sitting, almost eerily peaceful, in an intact clump of grass along the middle of the crest. The Beneviolet, bright purple, gleaming purple, young and fresh. Rarity almost cried. She tried to gauge how best to reach it. She would have to slide for it. Taking a deep breath, she crawled the rest of the way around the crest... and let go with her back hooves. She began to slide down the other side of the head, working hard with her magic to keep herself facing toward the front, when the beast began to *dip* its head, angling her the other way, slowing her down, she was so close! For a moment, the world snake's head stopped moving.

Rarity snapped to her hooves and *ran* for the flower, and she could feel a surge of muscle power rising up through the scaly skin. She dove! She slid! The flower was there!

She stretched her neck and extended her mouth –

The world snake **tossed** its head, making a sonic boom from the sheer force, launching her into the sky – but with the Beneviolet clamped firmly between her teeth.

She spun and somersaulted up, flying higher and higher and higher, miles passing away beneath her. When she was finally rightways up, she looked down, and wished she hadn't: the mountains were tiny beneath her. The air was very cold. She was having trouble drawing breath.

Focus!

She was sailing upward more slowly now.

She used her magic to open her left saddlebag, sending sweaters and sunglasses and blankets flying away into the sky. She mourned their loss but kept her eyes peeled; when the glimmer of crystal emerged, she focused all her magic upon it. The bottle was caught in her telekinesis. She levitated it down to her lower legs, and when it was there she clamped her lower hooves around it, holding it as tightly as she could.

She stopped dead in the air, hung there for a moment. The whole sky was still and quiet. She used her front hooves to pull the stopper off the top of the bottle, sending the green-and-purple dragonfire billowing out. She spat the Beneviolet downward.

The fire could have blown out. The Beneviolet could have been blown away. She could have started to fall, sending both fire and flower swirling into empty sky. The fire and the flower could have gone separate directions, missed each other. A hundred things could have gone wrong.

But they didn't. The dragonfire rose *up*, the Beneviolet fell *down*, and they met just around Rarity's heart. The flower was caught in the swirling fire and it hung there for a moment, curling and gleaming in the flames. Then fire and flower dissolved into shimmering purple ether which shot up and away from her, streaking off to the east and rapidly out of sight.

Rarity started to cry. Then she started to fall. She tumbled down, the mountains drawing closer, the wind whipping fierce around her. She almost didn't care. She had done it. *They* had done it. She had completed her quest, fulfilled her duty, made good her debt. She knew the Beneviolet would reach Twilight Sparkle in time – *just* in time, but in time. And if her life was going to end now... well, she was the Element of Generosity. Self-sacrifice didn't bother her, in the end. So she fell.

Until four hooves came up behind her and wrapped around her body. "**GOTCHA!**" Rainbow Dash cried, flapping to turn the fall into a dive, a dive she slowly and gradually pulled out of.

"DASH!" Rarity screamed with joy. "I did it, Dash! **I DID IT!**"

"You did?!" Dash let out a whoop. "**YOU DID IT!**"

They flew low across the great rocky expanse, now ruined and broken from the impact of the world snake against Applejack. The orange earth pony came galloping to them as they slowed, Dash gently setting Rarity down. "What happened?!" she cried. "Are you all right, sugarcube? Are you –"

"**WE DID IT!**" Rarity yelled, bouncing up and down. "It's done, Applejack! It's done!"

Applejack gasped. "You did it? You found the flower?"

"Found it and sent it right off! I saw Spike's fire catch it and send it away with my own eyes! It's probably with Twilight Sparkle right now!"

Applejack breathed hard. Tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes. "You... you did it, Rarity! Bless Celestia, you did it!"

"**We** did it!" Rarity cried, wrapping her front hooves around Applejack and beginning to sob. "We all did it! We did it together and we could never have done it alone!"

Rainbow Dash fought back tears as she hugged her friends fiercely, but a moment later decided that she could let herself cry – just this once. "I know you're right, Rarity! I... I'm sure I couldn't have done this alone! We needed each other!"

Sniffing, Applejack pried Rarity's hooves off her neck. "All right, now I reckon we'd better make tracks! That world snake's gonna be –"

BOOM!

The mountains around the arena-like clearing were shaken apart by the descent of a huge black body. Around them, the ground ripped apart, revealing more blackness, surging up and swirling around them. Looking skyward, the three ponies saw the world snake looming miles overhead, staring **straight down**. The coils in the stone around them rose up, circling them, tightening. The coils that had been planted atop the mountains narrowed, then shifted, coming to rest atop the coils still half-buried in earth. The world snake's head lowered as it **slammed** more of its body down on top of the two piled coils. The world grew dark around them as the light was blocked off, as they were trapped in a cocoon miles tall and miles broad, slowly but surely getting smaller, the gaps between it narrowing, choking off.

"He's circling us in!" Rarity screamed. "I-I don't think... I'm not sure I can teleport us out!"

As if in answer to her, the world snake's body shimmered with a green haze, and Rarity's horn pricked with the surge of ambient magic. She could feel a powerful wall of energy, impossibly strong. Another flicker, and her hooves crackled – she looked down. The earth shimmered green too!

"I can't feel the ground no more!" Applejack cried, trying desperately to grind her hooves into the dirt, to no avail. Everything was a dull and dark green, though the light barely penetrated the growing shadows.

"Dash! Fly! Save yourself!" Rarity cried.

Another **slam**, and Rainbow Dash looked up. The world snake had piled another level of coils up. Each time it did, the opening grew narrower. Now what little space there was would be filled entirely by its head... when it struck. Dash had been hovering, but with slow wing beats she lowered herself to the ground. "I can't make it," she said softly. "Not now."

A vicious *hiss* filled the air. With still a great deal of body to utilize, the world snake drew back its head. It reared up and up, miles into the sky, but still its snout pointed straight down. It opened its mouth, flashing its monstrous fangs. Its green eyes widened in primitive bloodlust.

Dash stepped slowly around Rarity and Applejack, filling the space between them. She spread her wings, touching one on each of her friends' backs. Wordlessly, they drew close beside her, wrapping their hooves around her. She wrapped her hooves around both of them. Applejack and Rarity wound their front hooves around each others', as well. "Listen," Dash said, "I just want to say... I love you both." The snake's head rose higher. Dash swallowed. "And if this is... if this is the day I go off to the Summer Lands... I don't regret it! I wouldn't have done anything different!"

Applejack leaned her head against Rainbow Dash's, the brim of her hat bending against the pegasus' forehead. "Rainbow, I wouldn't have done anythin' different either. I wouldn'ta traded this adventure for anythin'... though..." She looked up. The world snake's head rose higher still. "I am gonna miss seein' Apple Bloom... an' Big Macintosh... an' Granny Smith..."

"I suppose... I shall miss Sweetie Belle..." Rarity began, leaning her head against Dash's. "Oh, I do hope she remembers to feed Opalescence... she can be so forgetful sometimes." She sniffed. "Still, a lady meets all things with dignity – even her end." The snake's head drew higher.

"Shucks, Rarity," Applejack said with a mirthless chuckle, "there ain't no one to be dignified for, now."

"That's not true," Rarity said softly. "There's the two of you."

The world snake's head stopped moving back. Its long tongue lolled out, and it let out another chest-rattling hiss.

"Close your eyes," Applejack said softly, wrapping her hooves around both her friends as best she could. "Close your eyes, y'all." She shut her own green eyes tightly.

Rainbow Dash shut her rose-colored eyes, pulling her friends closer with her wings.

Rarity fluttered her long eyelashes one last time, then slid her deep blue eyes closed. She touched one hoof on Applejack's hoof, and one hoof on Rainbow Dash's chest. She opened one eye briefly. The great snake's head started to fall. She shut her eye again, holding her breath.

There was a soft bursting sound – a sound of surging energy, fading off into twinkling noises. They all thought it was the world snake's magical barrier giving off a discharge. Then the soft crunch of hooves on snow reached their ears. Startled, the three ponies opened their eyes.

A lavender unicorn, her eyes violet, her mane and tail midnight purple, her cutie mark a pink starburst surrounded by white stars, stood before them, smiling peacefully. Her horn, upon which there was not a speck of blackness, shimmered with great magic. "Hello, girls. How are you all doing?"

They stared in shock at her. "T-Twilight?" Applejack whispered.

The air began to shudder. Looking up over her shoulder, Twilight Sparkle's eyes widened at the approaching head of the world snake. "Whoa!" She turned back to her friends. "Hold on!" Her horn shone more brightly, white waves of power emanating from it into space. Sparkles filled the air. The magical aura enveloped Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack along with Twilight. There was a **burst** –

All four ponies vanished. Seconds later, the world snake's head crashed into the earth, sending shockwaves through the whole of the Archback Mountains. It hissed and snarled, thrashing in fury, smashing against stone and snow and magical barrier alike.

In a flash, they were all back in the Ponyville library, landing in a heap, the shock of warmth and shelter nearly overwhelming for the three travelers. Twilight Sparkle got to her hooves and turned to face them. "Are you all right?" she asked, worry in her voice. "I got to you as soon as I could! I couldn't even be sure I would get to the right place, I just had a vision to go by, and – what *was* that thing?"

Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash stared at her for a moment, lying sprawled across the wood floor. Then they all gave a tremendous **SHOUT**, and *leaped* at each other, screaming and crying and laughing, grabbing for each other with their hooves, nuzzling each other, tumbling over each other on the floor, rolling over cushions and stray books. The commotion drew Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Spike, Apple Bloom, and Zecora out of the upper rooms. No sooner had they emerged on the stairs than Dash shot to them, trying to hug them all at once, while Rarity and Applejack galloped to Twilight and tackled her in a furious embrace, nuzzling her, even licking her – wanting to make sure she was real! With a squeal of delight Pinkie Pie bounced down into their midst, and the white unicorn and the orange earth pony embraced her as well, nuzzling her with delight, and even Fluttershy was caught up in the joy of the reunion, flying over to join the hug, and Dash flew back and picked up Twilight in a great four-legged hug that lifted her off the ground, then Spike leapt into the fray and everypony gave him a nuzzle, and Apple Bloom joined them next, laughing and giggling and Applejack took her up and was crying as she nuzzled her. Every one of them then looked over at Zecora, who started to say something in rhyme but didn't get very far because they all charged her and wrapped around her in a hug that really became everypony hugging everypony.

Ten minutes of hugging and nuzzling and laughing later, the wild energy of the reunion finally abated somewhat, and Rarity found her voice. "Oh, Twilight, you're all right!"

"*You're* all right!" Twilight said with a smile. "It looked like I got to you just in time!"

"You saved our hides, sugarcube, no doubt about it!" Applejack said, sitting back and holding Apple Bloom in her lap.

"But Twilight, however did you find us?" the white unicorn asked. "How did you *get* to us?"

"It was the Benevolet!" the lavender unicorn said. "It didn't just heal my Horn Rot – it supercharged my magic! And I was able to find you because... well, the Horn Rot was

giving me visions, and I had one just a while ago about the three of you, so I knew exactly where you'd be."

"I thought you didn't *believe* in visions," Dash said with a grin.

"I still don't," Twilight said with firmness, "but whether I believe in them or not, I was able to find you because of what I saw, so I'll take what I can get." Her violet eyes widened. "But seriously, what *was* that huge thing? It was bigger than any animal I've ever seen!"

"You saw an animal?" Fluttershy asked, her curiosity piqued. "A really big animal?"

"Well, we *reckon* it was a world snake –" Applejack began.

"Ooo! You *did* see a world snake! That's what my twitch was about!" Pinkie Pie squealed. "Was he as big as the world? I bet he was!"

"Not *quite* as big as the world," Dash said, bravado creeping into her voice, "but darn near. Nothing my awesome lightning powers couldn't handle, though."

"Lightning?" Twilight said.

"Well, yeah –" Dash began, rising to her hooves. Rarity and Applejack did the same, Applejack setting down Apple Bloom as she did.

"Holy cow!" Spike cried. "**Look** at you girls!"

The others pulled away to take in the sight of the three ponies, and what a sight it was! All three of them, even Rarity, had grown leaner, firmer, more solidly built – even Applejack's considerable muscles had been added to. Their coats were rougher, slightly longer, but their colors were as vibrant as ever. Applejack's Dale Guard armor glistened in the light of the library, the dark red leather rich and waxy, the golden stitching flickering as she moved, along with the golden symbol of Gildedale on the cruppers, while the emerald on her champron shone brilliant green. Rainbow Dash's scarf hung around her neck, while the dark blue sigils of the pronghorns swirled all over her body, making her look fierce and tribal. Rarity had the presence of mind to strike a pose, and her deerish armor gleamed brilliant, dazzling silver, the crystal crests on her helmet and the crystal streaks on the torso and the greaves sparkling.

"Where did you get that *armor*?" Fluttershy asked, her turquoise eyes wide.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," Rarity began. "My armor and Applejack's don't come from the same place."

"Yeah," the orange earth pony said. "See, my armor comes from Gildedale –"

"Where's Gildedale?" Apple Bloom asked.

"It's the country just on the other side o' the mountains from Equestria," Applejack said. "It's full o' earth ponies."

"Full o' earth ponies?!" the little yellow filly said with delight. "What're they like?"

"They're a mite different than Equestrian ponies, but deep inside they're really a lot like us," Applejack said. "This is the armor of the Dale Guard, the patrols o' warrior ponies that keep Gildedale safe."

"Warrior ponies? Ooo, this is gonna be good!" Pinkie Pie said, pulling a bag of popcorn out of nowhere.

"My armor, meanwhile," Rarity said, "isn't made by ponies. It was made by the deer of the Shimmerwood."

"You met deer?" Fluttershy asked with amazement.

"We met a whole forest of deer!" Rainbow Dash said with a grin. "We also met some pronghorns, and they're the ones that gave me these sigils!" She spun around in the air.

"I was going to say, it was fresh in my mind, those drawings do seem to be pronghorn designs," Zecora commented.

"Pronghorns?" Twilight repeated. "You met pronghorns?"

"I met three of 'em!" Dash said with a grin. "Wait, how did you know about them?"

"They stop by the Palace of the Sun a lot, delivering messages to Princess Celestia! I used to always see them when she was giving me private lessons," the lavender unicorn explained.

"Messengers? Do they risk hoof and head boldly ensuring the dispatch goes through? Oh, brave and noble servants of the global order!" Pinkie Pie said dramatically, holding a hoof to her forehead.

Twilight laughed. "Something like that. They ride lightn– hey! You mentioned lightning!" she said to Dash. "Is *that* where you got lightning powers? From the pronghorns?"

"Sure did!" the sky-blue pegasus said.

"This is such a neat-sounding story!" the pink earth pony exclaimed, bouncing up and down where she stood. "You should tell it to us! You should tell us right now!"

"Story?" Rarity repeated. She shared a glance with Applejack and Rainbow Dash.

"Huh," Applejack said. "Y'know... thinkin' back on the whole shebang... it *does* make quite a story."

"And I for one want to hear every bit of it!" Twilight Sparkle said with a smile.

"I gotta warn you, sugarcube," Applejack said, "it's a real *long* story, too."

"We've got all day!" Spike said, pointing up at a window. Sure enough, the sun hadn't even reached its apex – it wasn't even noon.

"Hmm," Applejack began. Suddenly, a long, gray length of rope dropped out of the air right in front of her. She squealed so loudly the other ponies drew back. "**ROPEY!** I really *can't* lose ya! Oh, Ropey, you're the best rope ever!" She hugged it close.

"Okay, now I *have* to hear this story," Twilight said with a puzzled smile.

"Well..." Dash said, a note of uncertainty in her voice – but she was playing. Rarity wasn't the only one who knew how to handle an audience.

"Please tell us," Fluttershy said; even she sounded excited.

"I'll lend you my ear, I would much like to hear," Zecora said, trotting over and sitting down amid the others.

"I suppose you all deserve to know," Rarity said. She used her magic and removed her helmet, shaking out her violet mane. "At the very least, you deserve to know why it took so long."

"I'm okay with tellin', provided we can stop for lunch at some point," Applejack said, setting her rope aside. "I got a hankerin' for fresh apples from Sweet Apple Acres!"

"Sure! We'll tell you everything!" Rainbow Dash said. "In fact, I bet you two will like some of the parts of the story I have to tell!" She glanced at Rarity and Applejack. "I didn't really go into detail about what happened with Niles and the other pronghorns."

"I got some stuff that happened twixt me and Ashtail... maybe I'll say it," Applejack said, and Pinkie grinned at the change in her voice.

"I also had things happen to me that you two weren't around for," Rarity added. "Hm, I suppose now we're *all* going to learn the *full* story of our journey."

"I gotta go get Sweetie Belle an' Scootaloo!" Apple Bloom cried, bouncing to her hooves. "They're gonna wanna hear this too!"

"Yes, please go get Sweetie!" Rarity said with a smile. "Oh, I so want to see her!"

"Go an' get Big Macintosh, too, why don't ya?" Applejack said. "An' tell him to bring *apples!*"

"Sure will!" Apple Bloom said, dashing for the door.

"I got a feeling we're gonna need some tea," Spike said, standing up and heading for the kitchen.

"Good idea, Spike!" Twilight Sparkle said. She smiled. "And once you've got the kettle on, go get a quill – and plenty of paper."

• • •

That night, high above the fields of Equestria, in the great shining city of Canterlot, deep within the Palace of the Sun, Princess Celestia sat in her private chambers, a fire blazing in the enormous fireplace to keep out the chill that still pervaded the spring nights. A short ground desk sat in front of her, and next to it was a large stack of official papers: dispatches, reports, proclamations, orders for the various ministries that helped Equestria function. Flipping through a report on imports, she told herself for the hundredth time that she really should have been in bed. She didn't *need* to sleep – not with her divinity – but she liked it, liked the chance to rest her mind and dream. Since Luna had retaken control of the night and all its business, she had been able to reclaim the full night off she used to enjoy more than a thousand years ago. So she *really* should have been in bed. But old habits died hard, and a thousand year habit of burning the midnight oil was a difficult one to break. There was another, even older habit at work also: her tendency to want to know as many details of the country's functioning as she

could. When she had been much younger, her tendency had been to micro-manage everything she could get her hooves on. More than fifteen hundred years of life had taught her to be more relaxed – but the impulse to be controlling was still there.

Still, she squelched it now, as she had learned to do, and with a golden shimmer of her large horn she set the report aside. It could wait until morning. The white winged unicorn rose to her hooves, her shining aurora mane billowing in divine wind. Stretching her great wings briefly, she turned and began to head for her bedroom. She had barely taken a step, however, when a trail of shimmering purple energy slithered down from a high window, stopping just in front of her. It sparkled briefly for a moment, then swirled, and a rolled-up scroll popped into being, tied with red ribbon.

Oh, Twilight, Celestia thought with a smile. She had wondered when she would be getting her student's next friendship report. In fact, it had worried her for a while: Twilight Sparkle hadn't sent her a report in almost two weeks, and she usually managed at least one report weekly. Still, Twilight was learning about friendship at her own pace, and it wasn't Celestia's business to hurry her, or to pry. She had done enough to set her on the path. Catching the scroll with her telekinesis, the Regent of the Sun was surprised to see that it was not the typical friendship report. Where those were thin, a single sheet of paper, this was a very thick roll, comprising multiple leaves, dozens of pages. No sooner had she begun to ponder the meaning than another cloud of purple magic wafted in through the window, swirling around and materializing into *another* scroll thick with pages. Then *another* cloud of magic flew in, and one more, both of them coalescing into rolled-up bundles of numerous pages. As she levitated them all before her, Celestia noticed they were numbered, 1, 2, 3, 4 written on the blank side of the outermost page. Then, a thin stream of purple magic, a fifth one, came in through her window, and when it swirled around it revealed a much thinner scroll, a single page more like what she was used to. It had *PLEASE READ FIRST* written on the outer side of the page.

Curious, Celestia trotted back to her cushion and settled down upon it, setting the scrolls on the rug beside her. Levitating the indicated scroll, she unwrapped it and unfurled it, reading:

Dear Princess Celestia,

My sincerest apologies for not writing to you over the past twelve days. Unfortunately, I have spent most of them in the grips of a particularly bad case of Horn Rot.

"Oh, dear!" Celestia said softly. "I wish she had told me." Granted, Horn Rot was a nasty disease, and it would be particularly so for a pony as powerful as Twilight Sparkle. It was

also difficult to cure with healing spells, because it just fed on the magic used and caused the victim more pain. Still, Celestia was certain she could have helped – if nothing else, she could have put Twilight into suspended animation while the cure was brewed.

In that time, my friends Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy, along with my other friends Zecora and Apple Bloom, took the best care of me they could, keeping me entertained and tending to me when I became bedridden by the intensity of the disease. In this they were ably assisted by dear Spike.

"My goodness," Celestia murmured. So it *had* been bad.

However, I am now completely healed, in as good a health as I was before, so you need not worry. The reason I am so improved is due to the actions of three of my other friends, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity. They undertook a long journey to the Archback Mountains to find a flowering plant called the Beneviolet, which ultimately cured my Horn Rot and saved my life.

"The Archback Mountains?" Celestia repeated. They were very far away, even on the wing. For three ponies, two of whom she knew were not pegasi, to make such a journey across strange lands was a sign of great bravery indeed. She began to suspect the reason behind the four scrolls, but she continued to read Twilight's letter.

On their journey, they encountered many strange and fascinating lands, and met many amazing and wonderful creatures. These included the ponies of the Kingdom of Gildedale, including their King, Hammer Hoof,

"Ha! So they got through Gildedale?" Celestia smiled, wondering how on earth they had convinced the Daleponies to let them pass. She knew young Hammer Hoof had been quite adamant about keeping magic out of his lands; he had written as much to her in more than one letter. Then she recalled that she had yet to inform Gildedale about Luna's return. She had wanted to go in pony and tell Lord Hammer Hoof herself, but she simply hadn't been able to find the time. *Perhaps I should make time*, she thought.

three pronghorns from the Pronghorn Network,

"I wonder if they met Clive?" she said. The stoic old pronghorn had been handling her dispatches for almost sixty years now and showed no signs of slowing down. The more recent additions to the route that included Equestria, Niles and Audrey, were also very pleasant – more pleasant than Clive, really, who tended to be a bit stiff and formal. He

could also get a bit pompous when he tried to talk about the Dreaming, even to her – who was in the Dreaming all the time anyway.

and the deer of the Shimmerwood, including their ruler, Lady Falalauria.

"They met Lala!" Celestia cried, smiling enormously at the thought of her very old friend. She hadn't seen her in... not terribly long in the grand scheme of things, but far too long for her liking. Then and there she made up her mind: she was going to go visit Gildedale within the fortnight to tell them about Luna, and she would swing by the Shimmerwood as well. Luna could run the country just fine for a day or two.

Through their whole journey, they persevered, drawing strength from each other, learning and growing through their experiences. They have shared their tale with me and my other friends, and I have had Spike transcribe it. It is contained in the other four scrolls I sent you, and I hope that you will read it as well. In my humble estimation, it is a tale worthy of the Royal Archives, a grand story of endurance, courage, and hope.

My own experiences, and the experiences all my friends have shared with me, have taught me a very great lesson about friendship. It is easy to be a friend of somepony when times are good, and all is well. Yet when times are bad, when darkness falls, that is when true friendship shines. A real friendship endures even the stiffest challenges, and a real friend will be by your side to lend a helping hoof not only when you are at your best, but also – especially – when you are at your worst. A real friend will give up much for you – perhaps even their own life. And if you would truly be that pony's friend, you must be prepared to give up just as much in turn. I can only hope that if I am ever called to struggle and sacrifice as much for my friends as they have for me, I will prove worthy of the challenge.

*Your Faithful Student,
Twilight Sparkle*

Celestia smiled broadly as she finished the letter. She could feel the love and the friendship radiating through Twilight's words – it was obvious she had been touched very deeply by the things her friends had gone through on her behalf. *You grow more and more wise every day, Twilight Sparkle*, she thought, *and so do all your friends*. That could only mean good for the world.

With such a strong endorsement from her prized pupil, Celestia could not resist. As she had told herself earlier, it wasn't as though she *needed* to sleep. She certainly never got tired. Seeking out the first of the four scrolls, she levitated it up with her magic, removed

the ribbon, and unfurled it. "I do so love a good adventure story," she said as she began to read.