

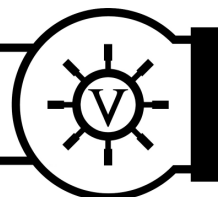
The Flight of the Alicorn

Ponydora Prancypants

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PONY FICTION VAULT



“I can’t possibly disappoint the Canterlot elite by rejecting their invitations, now can I?”

Rarity had asked herself that question a hundred times, until it became more a mantra than an interrogatory, and now she asked it again as she stood waiting at a corner of the intersection of Troika and Thoroughbred, in the heart of the Canterlot fashion district. The last two days had been a whirlwind of hobnobbing at one elegant engagement after another, and now her head was swimming with a mélange of unfamiliar ponies and places. All of them had been fabulous, and nearly all of them were becoming indistinguishable in her overstuffed mind.

She could stop now, of course. She could go back to her suite at the castle, turn down the lights, and ignore the inevitable invitations that would follow her. She had a promise to Twilight to keep, after all, and there wasn’t much time left to finish her friend’s birthday dress before the special occasion.

“I can’t possibly disappoint the Canterlot elite,” Rarity whispered the words again, her voice inaudible above the urban clamor around her. “Can I?”

“Rarity!” A now-familiar voice shattered her monologue, and she looked up to watch its owner step out of an elegant new steam-driven carriage. Fancypants, dashing as ever, wore a gray scarf over his navy blazer, and a captain’s hat complete with embroidered anchor was perched jauntily atop his head. He trotted gaily toward her with his customary jovial smile and a twinkle in his blue eyes. Rarity suppressed a grimace as she realized he had fully dressed the part of a sailor for today’s excursion. She could only hope her striped red and white dress was nautical enough for the occasion.

“I’m here,” she replied dumbly, her mind still not yet completely in the moment. She reminded herself that the witty repartee would come, as it always did.

“Indeed, my dear, here you are!” Fancypants exclaimed gleefully in his impossibly perfect Canterlot accent. “To my great delight. Now, are you ready for a glorious afternoon among the clouds?”

“Ready, *mon capitain*,” Rarity replied, following her affirmation with a gracious smile.

“Right then, let’s hop to it.” Fancypants draped a foreleg over Rarity’s shoulder and turned her toward his waiting carriage. As they approached the open door of the modern, self-propelled vehicle, Rarity gratefully braced herself against Fancypants’ extended hoof and stepped up and into the passenger compartment. The compartment

was unsurprisingly luxurious, being filled to capacity with plush cushions, expensive fabrics, and decorative gold filigree and gems. Fancy pants' smartly-dressed driver had his own seat up front. Rarity noted that in place of reins, the driver held his front hooves in some sort of yoke affixed to a metal column. The strange device had to be the steering mechanism for the carriage.

"To Canterlot Skyport, Coltsworth," Fancy pants declared upon pulling himself into the vehicle and magically closing the door behind.

The driver deferentially acknowledged the instructions, and then the carriage began to vibrate. Rarity recognized the sensation as the steam engine adding power, and she unconsciously braced herself as the vehicle shuddered and lurched into motion. It was not the smoothest ride she had experienced, but she had to admire the novelty of the conveyance.

"I've never had the pleasure of travelling by means of steam carriage before," she admitted, speaking loudly enough to be heard over the thrum of the engine.

"I'm not so sure I would quite call it a pleasure," Fancy pants responded, bracing his own forehoof against the side of the compartment as they bounced and bumped through Canterlot. "Nevertheless I feel that it is my patriotic duty to patronize the technological innovators in our fair country of Equestria." He paused. "I also must confess that I have no small financial investment in the company that produced this contraption, and perhaps my crass public display of riding the metal beast about town will drive further interest in the development of the new power source. I belong to the cadre of ponies who believe that these steam engines will eventually become part of our everyday lives. After all, enchantments have their limitations."

"Indeed," Rarity replied. "With new pony settlements springing up in the borderlands so far from the magilectric grid, the steam engine may be the key to making life on the frontier more appealing, and easing the overcrowding in the major cities."

"Quite right," Fancy pants replied, his face expressing appreciation and delight. "Rarity, you are a gem, and a cut above the mindless aristocracy I find myself mired in daily. I must know where you received your excellent education."

Rarity dared not answer that question. How could she tell the most important unicorn stallion in Canterlot, the great tycoon and tastemaker Fancy pants, that the sum total of her formal education had been received at Ponyville Day School? Were he to learn the

truth of her provincial upbringing, then surely the rest of her charade would be made plain as well.

Fancypants would realize that she was not a noble, a mogul, or a very important pony. Despite the Canterlot accent she had cultivated for years, despite all she had achieved in bringing attention to her fashion business, she was still merely a unicorn named Rarity, born and raised in the bumpkin farming village of Ponyville. Once Fancypants realized that she didn't belong here, it would all be over, and she would be on the first train back home.

It didn't matter that she was a Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, nor that she had helped save all of Equestria twice. Canterlotian elites cared little for current events and even less for dangerous conflicts. Their attention was focused inward on the gossips and intrigues of their families and noble houses. It was no surprise to Rarity that on this trip she had not been recognized even once for her part in stopping the threats of Nightmare Moon and Discord. Fancypants would have no time for her if he knew the truth, of that she was certain. Mercifully, she was able to dodge his inquiry.

"Another time, perhaps?" Rarity replied coyly. "It appears we have arrived at the Skyport." She gestured at the carriage window, inviting Fancypants to look for himself. Outside, massive cylindrical hangars loomed overhead, climbing in a long row up the side of Mount Equestria. Dockworkers and longshoreponies trotted briskly past, hurrying about their business of managing the loading and unloading of cargo at the busy port. Rarity looked up as a long shadow swept past and saw the boom of an enormous port crane swing overhead with a suspended cargo container hanging underneath.

"Too right," Fancypants agreed. "Another time, then." With Coltsworth's steady hooves on the control column, the carriage maneuvered deftly through the port and past an ornate golden gate that led to the private marina where the wealthiest Canterlot ponies kept their airyahts. Shortly thereafter, the carriage rumbled to a halt in front of the stately home of the Royal Yacht Club. Fancypants opened the door and, after a small jump to the cobblestones below, courteously assisted Rarity down.

"Thank you ever so much for inviting me to accompany you on this cruise around the mountains," Rarity said.

Even after spending multiple days in his company, she was unsure of Fancypants' apparent fascination with her. She harbored no delusion that his interest was romantic. She had seen firsthand that his consorts were mares so dauntingly beautiful that they

almost resembled the alicorn Princesses more than they did mere unicorns. While Rarity considered herself an attractive mare, especially by Ponyville standards, she in no way rivaled Princess Celestia. She flattered herself to think that he could find her interesting, for the illusion of worldliness that she projected was nothing more than the product of books, magazines, travel journals, and more than anything else, her own innate sense of style. Fancypants' interest remained a mystery.

Unlike the sophisticated stallion and his friends, class was not Rarity's birthright. She suppressed a laugh at the idea of admitting that her mother was a simple homemaker and her father was a former college hoofball star from Whinnyapolis who had played one season professionally for the Broncos before injuries sidelined him permanently. He had subsequently managed to provide for his wife and daughters by teaching primary school athletics. Rarity's parents were as far removed from high society and its rules and manners as any two ponies could be.

"Of course, I'm simply thrilled to have you along," Fancypants replied. "Have you had the opportunity for much cloud cruising before?"

"I've never actually had the pleasure," Rarity replied honestly. She gave nothing away with the admission. Very few unicorns actually plied the skies on airships, as flying was traditionally seen as the sole purview of pegasi. It was a relatively small subset of the rich and noble among whom sky yachting was a popular pastime.

"Then my dear, you are in for a treat. You see, today is actually my first time taking company out on *Fancy Free*. She was only launched and had her shakedown cruise last week. She's a new design of fast pleasure cruiser that I commissioned from Canterlot's premier naval architecture firm."

"I can't wait to take her out," Rarity replied. At that moment, a large carriage pulled by four strong young earth ponies drove into the yard in front of the yacht club, and the rest of the yachting party stepped out. Rarity's throat caught for a moment as she scanned the faces of the earth ponies pulling the carriage, wondering whether any of them might recognize her from Ponyville. It was common for many young stallions from town who wanted to see the big city to take short-term carriage team jobs in Canterlot. It was good money, and rumors abounded of the opportunities for liaisons with lonely high-class ladies. She relaxed only once she was certain that these four were unfamiliar to her.

The guests rounding out the yachting party were old friends of Fancypants. Swan Song and Goldilocks were unicorns, wealthy heiresses and widows of noble birth who delighted in hosting soirees renowned across Canterlot. Top Shelf and Chevalier were

earth pony stallions, lacking in magic and a horn but not wanting for wealth. Top Shelf, who always wore lapels and a silk top hat, owned the most famous distillery in Equestria. Chevalier was from old Manehattan money.

According to Fancypants, both stallions had been taking great pains to get closer to the two widows of late. They were all nice enough ponies. In fact, Rarity had agreed to attend Swan Song's dinner party later that night, before catching a late performance at the opera. The cavalcade of events kept coming, and she found herself for the first time feeling a hint of pity for the ponies whose lives consisted of these social engagements day after day, all year long.

"Shall we?" Fancypants asked, beckoning the group toward the club entrance. Rarity and the others followed.

The lobby of the yacht club was filled with aeronautical textures and colors, including what must have once been an entire forest of dark hardwood, and all trimmed with blue and gold accents. The far wall was an enormous picture window looking out into open air and over the rolling hills and green fields far below the mountain. The effect, Rarity realized, was to give the illusion that the club itself was a grand airship floating amidst the clouds. Off of the lobby were parlors and club rooms where stylish mares and stallions gathered around long wooden tables and sipped beverages. Fancypants informed a club attendant that he wished to take out his yacht, and the attendant spoke instructions into a conical tube that Rarity supposed was somehow used to relay messages to club employees at the marina outside.

"I've asked the good ponies of the club here to prepare *Fancy Free* for us. They'll have her larder and bar stocked, and the lines ready to cast off in a jiffy," Fancypants said, turning back to the group. "Ordinarily, I'd delight in prepping her myself, but today I'm anxious to be out in the wild blue yonder, and these folks are much quicker than I in getting a vessel shipshape."

Rarity nodded, and the other four ponies resumed gossiping among themselves. At that moment, she happened to glance at a large oil painting hanging above the massive fireplace on one side of the lobby, and barely suppressed a gasp. The painting was a masterfully accurate portrait of a fiendishly handsome white unicorn stallion with a flowing blond mane and sky blue eyes, depicted here wearing an aviator's hat with goggles pulled up to perch atop his broad forehead. Rarity recognized the likeness instantly, and the recognition sent a chill down her spine.

Him. The painting depicted none other than Blueblood, prince of Canterlot. After her disastrous first encounter with the prince at the previous year's Grand Galloping Gala, Rarity had fervently hoped that she would never have the misfortune of meeting him again. As luck would have it, her wish had not been granted. Only yesterday evening she had seen Blueblood at a dance and card party held in Count Przewalski's manor house near the royal palace.

If anypony could have spoiled her foray into high society, he could do so in a moment, for after the Gala he doubtless learned from Princess Celestia herself just who his ill-starred date had been. It was a minor miracle that he had kept his distance and said nothing. After all, he was an egomaniacal twerp, and she imagined he would, under ordinary circumstances, like nothing better than to out an interloper like herself, especially since he seemed the type to carry a grudge. Perhaps, Rarity supposed, the constant glare she had shot his direction had encouraged him to leave her be.

Why did he have his portrait here in the Royal Yacht Club, dressed in that ridiculous aviator's costume? Rarity guessed Blueblood was the type of pony who enjoyed lounging on his couch and ordering his servants to fetch him more sparkling wine and black lentil caviar, not the type who would voluntarily slip the bonds of earth and take to the sky. She filed away a mental note to ask Fancypants about the portrait once they had some privacy. She dared not indicate a personal interest in the prince in front of the others, who would take great pleasure in spreading and exaggerating that information to the far corners of Canterlot.

"You look as if your mind is elsewhere, my dear," Fancypants commented, snapping Rarity back to the present.

"Do I?" Rarity replied, feigning surprise. "I was just taking in the decor. One never knows when the aeronautical style may return to mainstream fashion, and this place is such a perfect example of the genre."

"Ah, quite so," Fancypants replied, apparently finding the answer satisfactory. "If you enjoy the club, you will find *Fancy Free* most splendid. As a matter of fact, the manager has just informed me that she will be pulling up to the dock momentarily. Shall we go and watch?"

"I would like that very much," Rarity answered. Anything to get away from the portrait's unblinking gaze.

“Excellent!” Fancypants proclaimed enthusiastically. He then addressed his other guests. “Friends, we are about to embark on the day’s adventure, if you will please follow me.”

Rarity and the others trailed behind Fancypants as he led them into a hallway leading off the lobby, and then through a thick oak door to the marina behind the yacht club. Unlike the marinas in the lakes around Ponyville, here there were no wooden piers or forests of bare masts reaching upward like dead trees, but merely a wide flat stone plaza ending in a sheer drop, its edge hewn completely straight so that airships could pull up alongside. The vessels themselves could not be stored indefinitely in the air, and were kept secure on dry land until ready for flight. To her left, Rarity could see something massive slowly turning around a corner of the mountain and knew that it must be Fancypants’ airship.

Rarity and at least one of the others gasped, and she took a few steps backward toward the relative safety of the yacht club as she saw that it was not a ship, but a monster that emerged into view. It appeared to be a massive, wide-eyed purple sea creature, somehow gliding through the sky with its thick and powerful flippers. Rarity looked at Fancypants, and was surprised to see that he looked rather more pleased than terrified.

“Ha ha!” Fancypants laughed. “There she is, fillies and gentlecolts, *Fancy Free*, my new vacation home in the sky.”

Rarity took in this information and cautiously looked again at the flying monstrosity as it drew near. Now that it had cleared the mountain, she could see that the creature was in reality a large balloon with a decoratively embroidered cover in the shape of a sea beast. Below the balloon, thick suspension cables held a graceful hull painted purple and festooned with propulsive and steering fins, each covered in gold leaf. She collected herself, and managed to turn to Fancypants to reservedly remark on the beauty of the vessel.

“*Fancy Free* is the first of her kind,” Fancypants said proudly. “She’s completely steam-driven, and equipped with all sorts of gears and gyros to control the steering. She can even hold course and altitude with no pony at the helm. Most importantly, I am pleased to be able to lay claim to owning the fastest pleasure yacht in Canterlot.”

The airship pulled up to the stone wharf and a young stallion standing on the vessel’s deck threw ropes down to another club attendant who secured the lines to metal cleats bolted to the stone. A wheeled ramp was quickly pushed over and fastened to the airship so that Fancypants and his guests could safely go aboard.

Rarity was afraid of many things, failure and public humiliation chief among them. Height and open space, fortunately, were not counted among her fears, and she quickly scampered up the ramp right behind Fancypants. When his guests were aboard and the yacht club staff had gone ashore, Fancypants asked Chevalier and Top Shelf to help him haul in the dock lines. After they had cast off, the club staff used long poles to push the yacht away from the wharf.

“And now, I am happy to announce that we are officially underway!” Fancypants said, walking toward a steering console jutting out from the open deck, positioned close to the stern. “I believe you will find hors d’oeuvres and champagne set out near the bow.” He took up a position behind the helm, and Rarity could see him fiddling with various levers and knobs. Finally, the large ship’s wheel glowed with yellow light as Fancypants magically took control of it.

Rarity could hear the steam engine chugging below deck, and feel its vibration as the deck pitched underneath her and the airship turned. Feeling a little like an excited schoolfilly, she could not stop her hooves from carrying her over to the railing to watch as the Skyport and all of Canterlot began to recede in the distance. The sky was almost perfectly clear, and she could see far below as the rocky crags of the mountains gave way to the green fields and vales of the countryside around the capital. On the side of the airship’s hull, large sail-like fins swept powerfully forward and backward in a semicircular motion, pulling the craft through the air. It might not match the effortless grace with which pegasi lorded over the sky, but the new Canterlot technology was beautiful in its own way.

“My dear, you seem to be enjoying yourself,” Fancypants said, appearing suddenly at Rarity’s side.

“I’ve always found that flying gives one such a wonderful feeling of freedom,” Rarity replied.

“But I thought you had never had the pleasure of traveling aboard an airship?” Fancypants reminded her.

Rarity blinked, but suppressed any more visible reaction. She dared not launch into the story of the time she had briefly sported a beautiful pair of magical translucent wings, and had pirouetted through the air around the pegasus city of Cloudsdale. Such a story was unseemly for a cultured and demure Canterlot lady, and she couldn’t chance Fancypants figuring out that she was really an undereducated country girl with overly

lofty aspirations. “Oh,” Rarity began, “well, I have been up in an uncontrolled hot air balloon before, but never an airship like yours.”

“Ah, of course. Well, I imagine that someday every pony in Equestria will find airship travel as common and easy as walking. Why, it was only a generation ago that the first train tracks were laid down, and just this year that the modern steam locomotive began operating between Canterlot and the neighboring towns. Did you know that the consumer price of apples in Canterlot has fallen by half since we started bringing them up the mountain from Ponyville by train?”

“Truly, you paint a dazzling picture of the future,” Rarity answered. “I imagine there will always be unicorns and earth ponies who would rather keep their hooves on the ground, though.”

“Indeed,” Fancypants dismissively replied. “But then, progress waits for nopony.” He paused. “Come now, would you like a tour of the ship? It appears my other friends are quite preoccupied with each other at the moment, so we should be able to steal away.”

Rarity saw that Top Shelf and Chevalier were practically fumbling over each other trying to deliver drinks and plates of snacks to the ladies, and she failed to suppress a laugh at the sight. “I’d be happy to accompany you, but who will steer the ship?” she asked.

“A fine question,” Fancypants replied. “I’ll explain as we walk.” He beckoned with a hoof for Rarity to follow, and then opened a door behind the steering column to reveal a staircase leading down into the airship’s cabin. Rarity followed as Fancypants descended the stairs.

“The navigation controls on my airship are a marvel of clockwork design,” Fancypants said as he and Rarity entered the airship’s opulent main salon. “I am able to use the control knobs to set a heading and desired altitude, as well as an amount of time to travel on the chosen course. I am even able to record multiple vectors so that the ship can turn around and head back toward Canterlot after a predetermined period of time. The control gears interlock with multiple clocks as well as the altimeter and gyroscope, and all are connected via gears and cables to the fins that maneuver and propel the airship. It’s an absolutely brilliant system, all invented by the pony who designed the ship.”

“It sounds ingenious,” Rarity agreed. “Do you know the ship’s architect personally?”

“Indeed not, sadly. The company that built *Fancy Free* is called North Star, and they maintain intensive security around their designs and designers in order to protect

against corporate espionage. I suppose I might have ways of finding out who was responsible if I truly desired to know, but I value my good relationship with the company too much for that.” Fancypants paused. “I apologize for boring you with all this claptrap about business and technology, I’ve been utterly selfish getting carried away like that.”

“Not at all,” Rarity replied. “Your passion for the amazing technology that is being developed today is actually quite infectious. In my line of work I haven’t the need to keep abreast of the latest science; there hasn’t been an advancement since the first automagical sewing machine was enchanted a generation ago.” Rarity did not mention that she kept close tabs on the research into new artificial fabrics that was currently underway at various fashion houses across the country. She hadn’t yet had the opportunity to ask about Blueblood, and she knew Fancypants would be able to carry on about science and technology for the rest of the flight if she encouraged him to do so.

They continued on, and Fancypants showed Rarity the rest of the well-appointed airship, including three staterooms, an observation lounge with viewing portholes on the walls and floor, and the cramped and deafeningly loud engine compartment. Finally, the tour was complete and Fancypants offered a glass of champagne back in the main salon, which Rarity accepted. After her first sip, she dared ask the question that was eating at her.

“If I may be so bold, I’d like to inquire about a pony whose portrait I saw hanging in the lobby of the yacht club,” Rarity opened.

“Hm, oh, you must be referring to the painting of the Duke of Canterlot,” Fancypants replied. “It seems only right that he should have his portrait hanging, since he is, after all, the royal patron of the club.”

Rarity coughed. Mercifully she was between sips, or she would have spewed champagne all over her host. “The ... Duke ... of Canterlot?” she repeated haltingly. Blueblood was a Prince, of course. *The Prince*.

“Indeed. I suppose that you’ve deduced that I know His Grace personally,” Fancypants continued.

Rarity’s confusion grew, as she had absolutely no idea how she might have deduced any such thing. Now, however, she was aware that Fancypants knew Blueblood. Rarity could not imagine how a courteous and genteel pony like Fancypants could even bear to be in the same room with an insufferable brat like Blueblood. “Of course,” Rarity answered,

covering her ignorance with a feigned smile. “I was hoping you would tell me a little more about the ... duke.”

“Ah, yes, I understand it now,” Fancypants replied with a chuckle. “The Duke is Canterlot’s most eligible bachelor, and you’d like an ‘in.’ Very shrewd, and surprisingly forward of you, my dear.”

Rarity felt queasy upon hearing Fancypants’ supposition, but she dared not correct him now, as he appeared poised to tell her what she wanted to hear.

“As you correctly guessed, I know Duke Polaris quite well, as he quite famously owns and runs North Star Shipwrights, and he is perhaps the only pony more crazy about airships and steam technology than I am.” Fancypants gave Rarity a sorrowful look. “But I’m afraid that I must inform you that Polaris is a world-class ass, and when I make that comparison I must apologize to all of the donkeys and asses of the world, because they truly don’t deserve to be associated with him. I strongly advise you to stay as far away from His Grace as possible.”

That description confirmed it, as far as Rarity was concerned. Somehow, Duke Polaris and Prince Blueblood were the same pony. “Oh, but that can’t be true!” she replied, throwing a hoof to her mouth in mock surprise at Fancypants’ strong words. “Why, I’ve heard that he is positively princely!”

Fancypants laughed. “Don’t let the meaningless title fool you. Polaris may be the eldest scion of the old royal family, but calling him Prince Blueblood doesn’t magically make him charming. I take great pains to limit my interaction with the Duke to transacting business with his company. Unfortunately, there is no better shipbuilder in Equestria than North Star.”

Rarity covered her surprise as best she could, but internally she reeled from the shock of the revelation that “Prince Blueblood” was merely an honorary name, and not the true identity of the obnoxious royal. What else was she mistaken about? “I certainly appreciate your perspective,” she said to Fancypants. “If I ever have the opportunity to meet the Duke, I’ll keep what you’ve told me in mind.”

Fancypants cocked his head and flashed a mysterious grin at Rarity. “If I told you that you could meet him this afternoon, would you be interested?” he asked.

Rarity felt her gorge rise at the thought of being forced together with Blueblood while Fancypants was in attendance. That would be the end of her play at being a very

important pony. At the same time, she couldn't very well refuse the offer without drawing more suspicion. After all, no genuine high society mare would refuse Fancypants' offer of an introduction with a prominent royal. There was no way out. "Oh, what a generous offer!" she said. "Thank you, but I could never take advantage of your station or commit such an imposition on your time." She had to seem reticent, but not too reticent.

"Nonsense, there's no imposition," Fancypants replied. "As a matter of fact, Duke Polaris will be at the yacht club by the time we return, preparing for the launching ceremony of his own new airship. When I placed my order for *Fancy Free*, Polaris decided he would have to build one of the new class for himself as well, rather than allow me to have sole possession of the title of owner of the most amazing yacht in Canterlot. I'll simply arrange for the two of us to attend the ceremony, and introduce you to the Duke there. I expect you'll see His Grace's true colors quickly enough."

"How can I refuse?" Rarity replied, and smiled wanly.

The ponies finished their champagne and returned to the upper deck just as *Fancy Free* was automatically executing its turn back toward Canterlot. Rarity could faintly see the contoured domes and sharp spires of the capital glinting in the afternoon sun far in the distance. She and Fancypants joined the others for idle conversation and another glass of champagne as they made for home port. As they drew closer to the city, a knot tightened in Rarity's stomach and she found she had little appetite for the delicate morsels that Fancypants had provided for the ponies' cruise. She did, however, manage to quaff more champagne. Perhaps the liquid courage would enable her to find a way out of the trap she was heading for. Irrespective of that, at least it would make her feel a little better about her impending unceremonious exit from Canterlot high society. She magically suspended her glass one more time as Fancypants poured. As with everything else he did, the stallion poured generously.

A short time later, after returning to the marina, Rarity was sorely disappointed to find that even though her hooves were on solid ground, the earth was now swaying back and forth beneath them. She tried to look out at the horizon to reorient herself, but her head was swimming and she stumbled.

"Steady there, Miss Rarity," Top Shelf said. The gray earth pony braced Rarity upright with one front leg. "You didn't imbibe that much champagne, did you?" he teased.

“Thank you, I’m quite all right,” Rarity replied, accepting Top Shelf’s helping hoof in order to regain an even keel. “I’m just having some momentary difficulty exchanging my air legs for land legs.”

In truth, she had drunk that much champagne, in anticipation of being forced to meet face to face with Blueblood again. She blinked and tried to chase the fog out of her mind. She needed to think clearly, or she might say something that she would regret. Of course, she might do that regardless. No pony had ever elicited a stronger feeling from her than the burning, righteous indignation she had experienced as a result of Blueblood’s ill treatment of her at the Gala.

“I want to thank you all for a splendid cruise,” Fancypants addressed the group. “After enjoying the wind in my mane and your stimulating company, I feel absolutely invigorated.” There were many platitudes and hoofclaps as the others thanked Fancypants. Then they dispersed, leaving Rarity behind with her host.

“Now, Rarity, please allow me the honor of arranging your encounter with royalty. I feel somewhat guilty for doing this, but I suppose it’s important that you see the true face of the old royal family here in Canterlot. Afterwards, though, please don’t say that you weren’t warned.” Fancypants led Rarity back to the lobby of the Royal Yacht Club and immediately solicited the attention of the manager. Rarity heard him inquire as to the whereabouts of Blueblood’s yacht launching festivities.

While Fancypants was speaking to the manager, Rarity couldn’t help turning her attention back to the big oil painting hanging over the fireplace. If she looked away, she couldn’t shake the eerie sensation that Prince Blueblood was peering at her from the canvas, mocking her behind her back. He of all ponies knew that she didn’t belong in this place, with these fancy ponies. When she looked at the portrait, however, all she saw was the stallion’s face staring resolutely into space.

“You’re not even a real prince,” she muttered under her breath. She had already learned a lot about Blueblood that she never gleaned from the tabloids she read in Ponyville, or from her disastrous encounter at the Gala. She felt a tingling fascination take hold of her as she imagined what it would be like to see him again. Rarity then noticed Fancypants had finished speaking to the manager, and she quickly turned away from the painting as he approached.

“It seems we’ve had a spot of luck,” Fancypants said jovially. “His Grace is currently on the north marina green entertaining the notables in advance of the launching. We’ll simply trot on over and make your introduction.”

“Oh, but surely I couldn’t presume to barge in on an important pony at his own event like that,” Rarity protested feebly, certain that at this point there would be no stopping Fancypants from shoving her right in Blueblood’s face. Rarity’s throat suddenly felt parched and she wondered if anypony might chance to walk past with another glass of champagne, or perhaps something stronger.

“Nonsense, my dear, you’re with me,” Fancypants said encouragingly. “I’m the Duke’s best customer, so he wouldn’t dare turn me or my special guest away. Moreover, I’m quite sure he’ll be tickled to see me, if only so that he can explain in excruciating detail why his new yacht is vastly superior to my own. Now, let us away so that your dreams of this pony’s princeliness can be shattered before they cause you any serious harm.”

The two unicorns walked outside, and Fancypants led them down a grass-carpeted path that veered away from the yacht club and then wound down and around the outside of the mountain. After they had rounded the first bend, Rarity was struck by the fact that despite their proximity to the noisy and bustling port, it was quite tranquil on the path. The stony spires and steep cliffs of the mountain completely isolated them from the noise and commotion of the docks. Only the whistling wind and the shrill calls of mountain birds punctuated the placid scene.

Soon, the path opened up into a small alpine meadow terminating in steep rock faces on three sides and a sheer drop off the mountain on the other. An enormous wooden ramp had been erected in the center of the meadow, leading up from the edge of the cliff to a platform decorated with streamers and bunting. On top of the platform rested the hull of an airship that looked to Rarity completely identical to *Fancy Free*. A small balcony extended from the main platform, and Rarity figured that when it came time to launch the ship, Blueblood would stand on the balcony and give the signal, at which time the ship would slide down the ramp and into the air.

That was not going to happen anytime soon, though, since the airship’s balloon had not even been inflated yet; instead it draped loosely over the top of the wooden platform. She looked around for Blueblood, hoping that perhaps he hadn’t arrived yet and that she could invent an urgent excuse to leave. Perhaps she had forgotten to feed her cat ...

“A-ha!” Fancypants exclaimed. “Our timing is impeccable.” He pointed with a foreleg and Rarity followed it with her gaze until she saw, at the far end of the meadow beyond the wooden platform, a small group of ponies thronging around a tall, white-coated unicorn stallion.

Him. Rarity took a deep breath and closed her eyes. There was no way out now. She and Blueblood were destined to meet one last time. The humiliation would be painful, but she could only hope that it would also be mercifully swift. She mentally bid Canterlot and Fancypants farewell. Rarity was halfway across the meadow before she even realized that she was walking, following in Fancypants' hoofsteps as he stepped purposefully toward Blueblood and the herd of society ponies and royalty groupies who had gathered around him.

They were only a few pony lengths away now. Rarity spied a table with light snacks and a large bowl of brightly colored punch. As she walked, she magically poured herself a cup of the beverage and floated it over. "Please let this be strong," she muttered, and desperately proceeded to down the entire contents of the cup in one gulp. At that point, Rarity realized that the punch was almost entirely distilled spirits; what fruit juice there was seemed to have been added solely for color. She stifled a cough and tossed her empty cup in a nearby receptacle. Now Blueblood was right in front of her, and it really was too late to escape the impending fiasco.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," Fancypants announced, his voice ringing as clear and crisp as a bell in the protected meadow. Instantly, everypony turned away from Blueblood to look at the interlopers. Rarity heard several gasps of "Fancypants!" and at least one query as to "Who's that mare with him?" For his part, Blueblood's eyes narrowed as he glared at one of the few ponies who could so easily steal the spotlight away from him. Then, his gaze met Rarity's, and his eyes shot open wide. Rarity saw his mouth drop open and then slowly close. He did not even blink, but only continued to stare. She had to look away.

The gathered ponies parted before Fancypants and Rarity as they walked the remaining short distance over to Blueblood. "I've come to see your new yacht, and whether it really is as vastly improved over my own as you say," Fancypants said as they drew near. "I also have someone I'd like to introduce to you." Fancypants then noticed Blueblood's transfixed gaze, and looked back and forth between Rarity and the royal stallion. Rarity tried to look nonchalant and oblivious to his awkward stare. Fancypants spoke up. "Why, Your Grace, you look as if you've seen a ghost! Can it be that you recognize my companion, the lovely Rarity?"

Blueblood blinked and finally broke away from staring at Rarity. "I apologize," he said, and then turned to Rarity with a curious look. "I do believe I must have seen you before at some formal gathering or another." His tone was carefully neutral.

Rarity laughed nervously. “Well I do believe I spied Your Grace briefly at Count Przewalski’s soiree yesterday, perhaps you saw me there as well.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Blueblood replied at length, still regarding Rarity inscrutably.

“Miss Rarity is my new favorite party guest!” Fancypants interjected. “She’s become the toast of the town since I met her just two days ago.”

Suddenly, a well-dressed society mare who had been eavesdropping on the conversation boldly stepped up to the group. “Wait, are you *the* Rarity that everypony in Canterlot is talking about? Why, I’ve heard that everypony who is anypony is dying to get you to attend their functions!” That remark instantly caught the attention of every pony in the immediate vicinity, all of whom were also listening in.

“Rarity, you *must* tell me who you’re wearing!” a mare demanded.

“Who in Equestria is responsible for your *fabulous* mane?” another asked.

“Are you seeing anyone?” a bold young stallion chimed in.

Rarity blushed and tried to shrink behind Fancypants. At this point, however, she was surrounded.

“My heavens, Miss Rarity, it seems I’ve greatly underestimated *your* popularity!” Fancypants said with a laugh. “You’ve become the center of attention. Why, this simply won’t do if we are to see a yacht launching today.” He turned to Blueblood, who stood looking cross at the crowd that had lost interest in him. “Your Grace, I am afraid there’s only one way I can think of to properly refocus these ponies’ attention on the launch of your new airship. You must conduct the launch together with Miss Rarity.”

“You can’t possibly be suggesting that I share my spotlight with *her*,” Blueblood replied, aghast. Rarity, standing behind Fancypants, knew her face mirrored Blueblood’s horrified expression.

“I’m afraid I am,” Fancypants replied. “It seems like the only way that the ceremony will be able to proceed.” He flashed a surprisingly predatory grin, looking suddenly like a timber wolf that had its next meal cornered.

At that moment, Rarity realized that Fancypants had planned this all along. He had known that he and Rarity would distract the crowd of onlookers at Blueblood’s launching, and he had anticipated proposing that Rarity join Blueblood in front of the

crowd. This was Fancypants' scheme to provide her with the promised encounter with the prince, rather than the polite introduction she had anticipated on the walk over. It made sense, of course, as Blueblood would be unlikely to give a strange mare the time of day when he could be talking about himself instead.

Even though her head was still feeling foggy, Rarity was beginning to understand that there was even more going on here. Fancypants' interference had also served to show Blueblood that he could steal the latter's spotlight whenever he wished. Perhaps Fancypants was getting even for Blueblood building his fancy yacht and then immediately constructing an even more advanced version for himself, or perhaps there was some other unspoken rivalry between the two stallions. In any case, Rarity realized that she had just been used as a pawn in a game between the two elites. She wasn't angry; such intrigues were part and parcel of the life of the Canterlot aristocracy. She was surprised, however, that a pony of Fancypants' gentility could also be so diabolical when the situation called for it.

The crowd continued to shift away from Blueblood and press in around Rarity and Fancypants. For a split second, Rarity felt a pang of empathy as she saw Blueblood standing there, looking as deflated as the limp airship balloon behind him. Then she was overcome with raucous laughter at the pathetic sight of him. She had just seen Prince Blueblood, the most handsome and sought-after royal stallion in Canterlot, practically bullied by the infinitely polite Fancypants. Blueblood's cheeks flushed and he glared daggers at Rarity, which only made her laugh more. Even if he outed her as a simple Ponyville mare and she was forced to leave Canterlot right now, it had been worth it for this.

"Fine!" Blueblood shouted over the din of the crowd. "Rarity will join me on the royal platform for the launch!" At that the crowd turned back to Blueblood and began to cheer and stomp their hooves in approval. At great cost to his dignity, he had bought back the crowd's attention. Blueblood then turned to a pony standing on the wooden launching platform and nodded, and Rarity heard a loud hissing sound as the balloon began to inflate. "Come now, Miss Rarity," Blueblood practically growled, before turning to stomp toward the wooden ramp that led up to the launching platform.

Rarity turned back to Fancypants before following Blueblood. She wanted to chastise him for using her to get under Blueblood's skin, but in truth she was enjoying the royal's discomfort far too much to complain. "Thank you for the introduction," she said.

“Oh, it was my absolute delight,” Fancy pants replied. “Now go on and follow your prince. I’ll be here when you are finished to take you back into town, and I’ll have another stiff drink waiting for you in the carriage. I expect you’ll need it.”

The crowd gave Rarity her space as she trotted after Blueblood and caught up with him at the bottom of the wooden ramp. “This was not my idea,” she declared loudly.

Blueblood angrily wheeled around to face her. “Of course this wasn’t your idea! Do you think I was born yesterday? You’re just an ignorant country mare, but Fancy pants ... Fancy pants would never miss an opportunity to humiliate me or my royal family.” He then turned to continue up the ramp.

Rarity raced ahead up the ramp and then turned to block Blueblood’s progress. “I suppose at this point I have no reason to be surprised or shocked at how utterly classless a so-called prince can be!” She shouted at him more angrily than she would have liked. “By the by, I’ve recently learned that rumors of your princeliness have been greatly exaggerated, although in retrospect that should have been obvious since Equestria’s only real royalty are the *Princesses*.”

“*You* will call me Prince Blueblood,” the unicorn stallion said in a low voice, brushing past Rarity. “It is my hereditary title.”

“I will call you whatever I please,” Rarity challenged, and shoved Blueblood out of her way. They were now away from the crowd outside, standing in an enclosed chamber that led out to the balcony from which the yacht would be officially launched. “Especially now that I know that Blueblood isn’t even your real name.” The emotional high of seeing Blueblood manipulated so easily by Fancy pants, coupled with the litany of potent potables she had consumed, was making Rarity brash. She felt like she could say anything and get away with it, especially now that they were out of sight of the Canterlotians outside.

Blueblood stretched to his full height and haughtily tilted his chin upward so that he could look down on Rarity. “I know what you’ve been doing here in Canterlot. I hope you realize that as soon as we get out on the platform I will look out over the crowd. Then I will point to you, and I will tell everypony that you are just a simple Ponyville pony who is playing them all for fools. They will laugh you out of Canterlot. I will still be Prince Blueblood, but you’ll be back to being a nopony.”

“Oh please do tell them,” Rarity urged with manic mirthfulness. “In fact, I’ve been counting on you to act like your petty self ever since Fancy pants got it in his head to

force this introduction, and you certainly haven't disappointed so far. Well go ahead, I'm ready to leave here in shame. It'll all have been worth it to see you get pushed around by Fancy pants. Have I mentioned that he's a hundred times the stallion you'll ever be? And one more thing: for a no pony, I certainly have my image on a lot of the Princesses' stained glass in Canterlot Tower. Where's yours?"

Blueblood gaped at her in consternation. Rarity felt utterly euphoric as the crushing weight of spending every minute of the day at the top of her polite and demure society pony game sloughed off, leaving her free to speak her mind.

"How dare you?" Blueblood sputtered, practically whimpering.

"You can't even begin to imagine what I'd dare," Rarity continued, jabbing Blueblood hard in the chest with a hoof.

"Are you ... intoxicated?" Blueblood asked, slowly backing away.

"I've never felt better," Rarity replied truthfully, bearing down on the retreating stallion. "You go ahead and tell the crowd whatever you want about me. But be warned, I'll tell them, and I'll even tell Princess Celestia, and then I'll tell all of Equestria, that you are nothing but a loathsome, spineless, spoiled brat!" She jabbed him again in time with every accusation she listed.

"Get away from my royal person!" Blueblood squeaked. He was backed into a corner, and as she loomed over him, burning with righteous indignation, Rarity was suddenly struck by the thought that Blueblood looked fragile at that moment. His frightened visage with his eyes wide and his blond mane all out of place looked vulnerable. Somehow, he even looked innocent. A strange warmth overtook her as she looked at him.

Before she could even consciously comprehend what she was doing, Rarity leaned in and kissed him, full on the lips, committing to the osculation with an ardor she had never experienced in her life before that moment. Eyes closed, she wrapped her forelegs around him and melted onto his sturdy frame. For his part, Blueblood was completely unresponsive, as if catatonic. It was only when she opened her eyes and saw the look of pure shock on Blueblood's face that the rational part of her brain took control again. Rarity jumped backwards as if struck at by a snake.

"Celestia, what have I done?" she cried.

At that moment, with Blueblood just beginning to pull himself into a normal standing posture, a young unicorn stallion entered the room, wearing a magical communications device on his head and levitating a clipboard. “The balloon is inflated and we’re ready to go ahead with the launching, Your Grace,” the stallion announced. When he saw Rarity and Blueblood staring at each other from opposite sides of the room with horrified expressions, he backed out the way he had come. “Right. We’ll be ready whenever you are.”

“I’m so sorry!” Rarity exclaimed as soon as the stallion had gone. “I don’t know what came over me. I guess I really *did* have too much to drink.” She was mortified. However badly Blueblood had acted at last year’s gala, she had just committed an arguably worse violation. In other circumstances, an action like hers would result in a court hearing, especially if their sexes had been reversed. It was really nothing short of abuse. How could she have done such a thing, and why?

Blueblood then did the only thing that could have surprised Rarity more than her own action. He laughed. It was a genuine, hearty belly laugh. “You’re insane,” he accused, his mood suddenly seeming lighter as he employed his normal haughty tone. “You’re literally crazy.” When Rarity only stared back at him, he was prompted to continue. “I thought you were going to strike my beautiful face, but then you did *that!*”

“It didn’t mean anything! It was a mistake,” Rarity protested. “I would never have done anything so outrageous on purpose!”

“I still hate you too, if it’s any consolation,” Blueblood replied. “But I suppose I must recognize that I am simply cursed with being irresistibly handsome. Now that you’ve gotten that out of your system I propose we call our grudge even.”

“Even?” Rarity asked hesitantly.

“Correct. I can still despise you, and vice versa, but perhaps we can at least be civil about it,” Blueblood said.

“That could work,” Rarity replied, still cautious about this sudden change in Blueblood’s demeanor, and still feeling terribly guilty about what she had done.

There was a rope dangling down into the room through a small hole in the ceiling, and Blueblood yanked on it with his teeth. A bell rang somewhere above, and before Rarity could ponder what was happening the eager young stallion from before had raced into the room.

“Are you ready, Your Grace?” the stallion asked.

“We’re ready,” Blueblood replied. “And for the love of Equestria, please get this mare some water.”

“Right away,” the stallion replied, and disappeared again.

He was gone only seconds before returning with a large flagon of water for Rarity. She gulped it greedily, and was rewarded when she felt a clearer head immediately. “Thank you,” she said to Blueblood, who ignored her.

“We’re going to be launching the most advanced airship ever to sail the skies of Equestria, my new personal pleasure yacht *Sacrebleu*,” Blueblood began. “You will stand there silently while I say a few words. Then, you will toss the ceremonial champagne bottle against the hull, and she will slide down the ramp and into the air. Then, we’ll go our separate ways. If you agree to leave me in peace, I won’t tell Fancypants and his friends that you’re just petite bourgeoisie from Ponyville. Do we have a deal?”

At this point, Rarity just wanted this terrible, humiliating encounter to be over with. “Deal,” she affirmed. She followed Blueblood through a curtain to the balcony. Outside, she saw that the crowd had gathered below them on the meadow. Blueblood’s crew had indeed inflated the balloon and it now provided enough lift to support the airship hull suspended beneath it. Accordingly, they had slid the yacht forward onto the top of the ramp so that it was now directly in front of Rarity and Blueblood on the balcony. Somepony had suspended a bottle of fine champagne from a rope next to the balcony so that it could be swung out to contact the yacht’s hull and officially launch it. At that point Rarity could hardly bear to look at champagne, but at least this bottle was not for drinking.

“Greetings everypony,” Blueblood addressed the crowd, who cheered the royal unicorn.

From atop the launching structure, Blueblood’s assistant spoke into an amplification device. “Ponies of Canterlot, behold your Duke, the 24th Prince Blueblood and Unicorn Royal of Equestria.” When he finished speaking, a brief and somewhat distorted phonograph recording of a fanfare played.

“Yes, my loyal subjects, it is I,” Blueblood continued. “Today we are here to celebrate the official launching of the Royal Yacht *Sacrebleu*, designed and built by Canterlot’s very own North Star Shipwrights. She’s the fastest and most advanced steam yacht in all of Equestria!” He waited for a smattering of applause to die down. “I am also here to make

another announcement, though. As you all know, in two months the *Alicorn's* Cup airship regatta is being held for the first time in twenty-nine years, to celebrate the new era of steam propulsion, and our fair city of Canterlot is hosting the race. This will be the sporting event of the century, with competitors participating from all corners of Equestria, and even from some of the foreign lands.”

Blueblood paused for dramatic effect. “I hereby formally announce that I will be competing in the race with a new airship that will make the one I am launching today seem like a stationary balloon by comparison!”

At that the crowd cheered again, although Rarity could scarcely imagine them being genuinely excited for Blueblood. Perhaps cheering for royalty was simply programmed into the citizens of Canterlot. While Blueblood was speaking, she still dwelt on the kiss. She had never done anything like that before; it was as if she'd been possessed. Of course, she had been drinking, but the old adage said that drink only brought to the surface thoughts and feelings that were normally hidden deep inside. After everything, though, she couldn't possibly feel anything real for Blueblood. Now that her mind was clearer, she only felt repelled by him. No, it must have just been one last manifestation of the schoolfily crush she had clung to for years.

Suddenly she saw that Blueblood was moving for the champagne bottle, and realized that he was going to launch the yacht on his own without even acknowledging her presence. Before he could do so, Rarity sprang into action and grabbed the bottle in her mouth. She tossed her head and let go, and the bottle glided away on its rope to smack against the side of the airship's hull, but did not break. As the bottle impacted, somepony dropped the braces that were holding the yacht in place and it began to slide backward down the ramp. Rarity knew that all sailors, sea and sky, were superstitious, and she wondered whether it meant something if the bottle broke or not. At any rate, the crowd erupted in cheers as the yacht slid out into the open air and floated free. Blueblood glared at her.

“You truly are a cad,” Rarity said, her voice just loud enough for Blueblood to hear over the roar of the crowd.

“Thank Celestia that nopony else cares what you think,” Blueblood replied. “I am royalty in this city, and no crazy mare from Ponyville is going to change that.”

“You're nothing but a royal pain. Everypony here knows that you're not really a prince. They're just playing along with your delusion because it's traditional,” Rarity said while waving politely to the crowd and wearing a forced smile.

“I know, why don’t you come out in two months for the *Alicorn’s* Cup and you’ll see just how much of a winner I am,” Blueblood rejoined. “If I’m not mistaken, your precious Fancypants is fielding a competitive airship as well, so you’ll have somepony to cheer for while I completely outshine the competition.”

Rarity and Blueblood looked contemptuously at each other. “I wouldn’t miss it for all the apples in Equestria,” she said. “It will be my pleasure to watch Fancypants humiliate you again.”

“Perfect. See if you can keep your hooves and lips to yourself this time,” Blueblood said.

“You’re perfectly awful, you know?”

“At least I’m not a punch-soaked lunatic.”

“I loathe you.”

“How sweet.”

Rarity and Blueblood both smiled and waved at the crowd.

"I've known this day was approaching for weeks, but I still can't believe I'm really doing this," Rarity said to Twilight Sparkle between sips of coffee with cream.

"You deserve it. It's such an honor to have the opportunity to actually participate in the *Alicorn's Cup*," the lavender mare replied, at the same time using her magic to pour herself another cup of tea.

The sun was only beginning to cast its rays over the green hills around Ponyville, and the two friends were the first customers of the day in the only café in town. Despite the early hour, Rarity was already wearing a dark purple dress made of overlapping layers of rich fabric, and she had perched a small but elaborate feathered fascinator atop her head. A neat but not insubstantial stack of luggage was arranged next to the café table.

"Participate is far too strong a word," Rarity replied. "I'm the 'fifth' on the team. According to Fancypants, that means my only responsibility is to move from one side of the airship to the other when asked, in order to lean the ship and turn faster around the marker buoys. A lot of the ships are sponsored by big companies, and so a corporate executive usually is the fifth crewpony. Because Fancypants is actually commanding his own airship, though, he invited me to be his team's extra."

"It's going to be so exciting!" Twilight Sparkle enthused. "I know you'll do a great job, no matter what your responsibility is."

"There's just one problem," Rarity confided, resting her head in her forehooves.

"You mean the dinner tonight," Twilight knowingly replied.

"Yes!" Rarity exclaimed breathily. "I'll have to spend hours in the same room as *him*. Tradition says that all the racers have to attend the pre-race banquet, captains and crew, so I can't get out of it."

"Maybe you won't have to interact with Blueblood. Isn't he hosting, after all? He'll probably be too busy to even notice you," Twilight suggested.

"Technically, yes. Because Blueblood is the sponsor of the Royal Yacht Club, which is the official host club for the regatta, he is also hosting the dinner tonight. It's not the same as if you or I or Pinkie were hosting a dinner, though. He'll have staff preparing the meal and coordinating everything," Rarity explained.

“Hmm,” Twilight mused. “I suppose if you really want him to stay away from you, I do have a repel spell that I could—”

“That’s alright,” Rarity interjected. “I’m a grown mare. I’ll have to handle this like an adult.” She sighed. “Really, this is all my fault anyway. If I had just kept away from Blueblood the last time I saw him, none of this would be an issue.”

“Well, I know I don’t usually say things like this,” Twilight began, “but maybe some things happen for a reason. It’s like when we five all saw Rainbow Dash’s sonic rainboom and then got our cutie marks, or like Pinkie Pie’s crazy premonitions. Even I have to admit that sometimes the world works in mysterious ways that I can’t understand. If you hadn’t, you know, jumped all over Prince Blueblood two months ago, then you probably wouldn’t be racing in the *Alicorn’s* Cup. And who knows what other amazing opportunities you might get from being in the race?”

Rarity looked appreciatively at her friend, and placed a grateful hoof over Twilight’s. “You really are the best friend a girl could ask for, Twilight. You always know just what to say.”

“Thanks,” Twilight replied with a bashful smile. “Now go on. You’ve got to catch the morning train to Canterlot.”

“Right!” After the leisurely breakfast, Rarity was left with only minutes before the train was due in Ponyville. She finished her last sip of coffee and pushed back from the table, then levitated all of her belongings in a cloud of luggage that hovered beside her. She raised a foreleg to wave goodbye to Twilight, then began trotting toward the train station.

“Good luck!” Twilight called from behind. “We’ll all be looking up to see you tomorrow!”

Rarity had little time to spare and increased her pace to an easy canter as she made her way to the station. Twilight’s words were reassuring, but she could not shake the little flutter in her belly that accompanied any thoughts of the race or tonight’s banquet. She had come to terms with the fact that she had unresolved issues with Prince Blueblood. Realistically, though, they would never be resolved. She absolutely hated the stallion, yet she had been compelled to kiss him. He was rich and handsome, but Equestria was full of rich, handsome stallions.

Maybe this twisted fascination had something to do with her special talent, which she had discovered when she earned her cutie mark. Her greatest ability was to find the

beautiful in the mundane. She knew which seemingly ordinary rocks hid beautiful gems inside, and how to turn drab fabrics into beautiful outfits. Then again, whom was she kidding? Blueblood's dull exterior hid no gem inside. He was hollow from his coat all the way down to his core. All she had to do was get through this evening and this race, and then she would be free of him forever.

"Hey there fancy lady!" a familiar voice called down from above. Rainbow Dash lightly touched down on the path next to Rarity and matched her pace. "Since you're going to be in a race, and since that is my specialty, I thought I'd stop by and offer a few pointers before you go."

"Thank you, but I'm really just going to be standing there trying not to look foolish," Rarity said to her pegasus friend.

"Pointer number one: focus on your breathing. The air is thinner up there at high altitudes, so be careful not to hyperventilate."

"Thanks, but I'm not going to be exerting myself," Rarity replied.

"Pointer number two: don't pitch up your wings at low speeds, or you might stall."

"This is an airship race," Rarity protested. "There are no wings."

"Pointer number three: keep your eyes on the prize."

"I'm not sure you're clear with respect to my responsibilities in the race," said Rarity, rolling her eyes. "But I'll try to remember these."

"One more thing," Rainbow Dash said, anxiously shifting her gaze back and forth. "If you run into my cousin, don't listen to anything she says about me."

With that Rainbow Dash rocketed skyward and was gone. Before Rarity had time to ponder the pegasus' advice further, she had arrived at the train station, and no sooner had she checked the arrival and departure listings than the Canterlot Express chugged into the station, belching smoke and steam.

Rarity hurriedly bought her ticket, and was surprised when the agent informed her that the train was nearly full. Of course, she realized, there would be many ponies from all over Equestria on their way to Canterlot to watch the start and end of the race. She turned her luggage over to the porter and climbed onto the train as soon as boarding was announced. Though it meant parting with quite a few extra bits, she had paid for a

private booth in the first class coach car. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts for the duration of the trip out into the country and up the mountain to Canterlot. Rarity watched through her window as the train rumbled out of the station, but then pulled down the shade and lay down on the plush bench in her booth.

It had been an uneventful couple of months since her “debut” into high society. In the end, her fabricated identity had fallen apart, and Fancypants and the others had learned that she was just a simple dressmaker from Ponyville. Contrary to expectations, though, Rarity hadn’t been expelled from their circle outright. Instead she had enjoyed a measure of acceptance from Fancypants and his coterie. She still maintained friendly correspondence with a few of the ponies she had met, and she indulged herself to think that she had forged the beginnings of an actual friendship with Fancypants. Despite that, she didn’t really believe that the important ponies in the capital had much time to spare thinking about her, all the way out in the countryside. It had therefore been something of a surprise when invitations began to arrive pertaining to the regatta that, by now, everypony in Equestria was talking about.

Blueblood’s invitation had come first, offering her a box seat to “watch me embarrass you, Fancypants, and anypony else who dares disrespect my royal birthright by winning the *Alicorn’s Cup* in record time.” Even though Rarity had given her oral promise to attend the race, she decided to decline in order to avoid another encounter with Blueblood. Then, just as she was about to deliver her response to the postmare, Fancypants’ letter had been delivered. The stallion had eloquently explained what an “absolute delight” it would be to be “graced” with Rarity’s presence, and implored that “nopony else would do” as his team’s “esteemed guest and honored fifth crewpony.”

This second invitation was impossible to turn down. Not only would she get to spend more time with Fancypants, she would be an actual part of the year’s biggest spectacle in the entire nation. More than just the opportunity to mix and mingle with Canterlot’s high society, this event would bring together the fanciest members of all the world’s nations. Why, there would be ponies, and zebras, and griffons, and Celestia knew what else! All of them would be very important, and Rarity would be one of them, just like she had always dreamed.

Imagining herself as Celestia’s noble envoy, attired in the finest and rarest fabrics and gems of Equestria and travelling to pony cities and foreign courts far and wide in the vital service of diplomacy and good taste, Rarity eventually drifted off to sleep. She didn’t awaken until the locomotive’s whistle signaled that they were pulling into Canterlot Central Station. After startling awake, Rarity magically retrieved her compact from her tote and gave herself a quick inspection. There was scarcely a hair out of place, and she

had arranged herself carefully enough to avoid rumpling her dress. Not a single feather of her ornate fascinator was bent or broken. Her makeup was perfect. She was ready for the capital.

Rarity entered the line of travelers exiting the rail car and lightly stepped off and onto the wide platform. Porters were already unloading suitcases and bags onto waiting trolleys, and she was able to easily locate and collect all of her belongings. She looked upward to find the time.

Rising over the grand train station was a slender clock tower constructed of white marble and gold, as was the fashion for significant buildings in Canterlot. The tower displayed three enormous clock faces in a vertical row. The central face displayed the time in hours, minutes, and seconds. The uppermost clock indicated the month, day, and the current phase of the moon. Finally, the lowest clock had one long needle that pointed to different paintings representing the scheduled weather. Rarity did not know, nor did she particularly care, how the clock operated. All that currently mattered was that it reported the time accurately. She was relieved to see that the train had arrived on schedule.

Rarity followed the influx of ponies crowding through the entrance to the station itself, taking care to maintain her magic so as not to lose any of her luggage. There were so many unicorns at the station that the air was thick with floating bags, boxes, and briefcases, and Rarity had to keep her wits about her just to avoid being walloped. Within the cavernous interior of the station, long lines of ponies queued up to purchase tickets, and hundreds of others were walking, trotting or galloping every which way, depending on the urgency of their need to catch a train. Rarity had never seen the station so busy, and she knew it must have to do with the approach of the *Alicorn's Cup*.

“How I am ever going to find Fancypants in this crowd?” she wondered aloud.

“Perhaps I could find you instead?”

Rarity turned toward the recognizable voice and was rewarded with the sight of Fancypants and his driver, both resting on a bench against the station wall. Fancypants set down the newspaper he was reading and stood up.

“Fancypants!” she exclaimed excitedly, before adding more demurely, “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s splendid to see you again as well, Miss Rarity. It’s felt like a rather long time since I last had the pleasure of your company.”

“The pleasure is mine. I cannot thank you enough for inviting me to join you in the race,” Rarity replied.

“There is no pony whom I would rather have with us,” said Fancypants. “You are a singular mare, Miss Rarity, and not only due to your wit and impeccable taste. I’ll have you know that after you left Canterlot I learned that you are one of the ponies who saved us all from Nightmare Moon and the dreaded Discord. It is truly my honor to have a heroine of Equestria accompanying me in the race for the *Alicorn’s Cup*.”

Rarity could only blush a deep crimson in response. The entire messy “savior of Equestria” business was really Twilight Sparkle’s purview, after all. She was just the other unicorn’s friend, and for whatever reason fate had chosen her to bear one of the Elements of Harmony in times of need.

Apparently sensing her embarrassment, Fancypants spoke again. “Right, well then, let’s get moving. I have some friends whom I would very much like to introduce to you.”

Rarity followed Fancypants and his driver as they weaved a path through the crowds and out the opposite side of the station. Outside, they faced a broad thoroughfare that led to downtown Canterlot, and Fancypants’ steam carriage was waiting at the side of the road. Rarity and Fancypants clambered into the back of the vehicle while the driver stowed Rarity’s things and found his seat at the front.

“To the facility, Coltsworth!” Fancypants called out as his driver worked to start up the noisy steam engine. “Tally-ho!”

“The facility?” Rarity inquired once they were moving. “That sounds entirely mysterious. Might you be taking me to see one of your industrial complexes?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” replied Fancypants. “The facility is a former warehouse where my team is preparing for the race. It’s not posh by any means, and I would ordinarily never invite you someplace so aesthetically challenged, but I would love for you to meet them before the banquet tonight.” He paused. “And in all honesty we still have a great deal of work to finish before my airship is ready.”

“But I thought you were racing in *Fancy Free*,” Rarity pointed out. “She seemed perfect when I flew with you around the mountains.”

“Quite right, my dear. Quite right. I am indeed racing *Fancy Free*, but in order for her to be competitive in this race, we have been making modifications. Everything designed purely for comfort had to be lost in order to save weight. We have replaced the propulsion

fins with propellers, and my team is doing everything it can to improve the output of the steam engine. As you know, I am in the uncomfortable position of racing in a pleasure craft designed and built by a rival company, so we must improve on the original product in order to have a chance.”

Rarity watched through the carriage window as gleaming downtown Canterlot gave way to simpler buildings and homes, and finally to the soot-stained factories and warehouses of the industrial district. The carriage finally stopped in front of one large, boxy, and particularly dilapidated building.

“Is that it?” Rarity asked dubiously, finding it hard to believe that Fancypants would even enter such an eyesore. The building looked like it should have been condemned ages ago.

“I do apologize for taking you to such a misbegotten part of Canterlot, Miss Rarity. I admit the facility isn’t very pleasing to look at from the outside, but we have done a bit of work spiffing up the interior,” Fancypants explained. “Please, follow me.”

He stepped out of the carriage and helped Rarity down before walking briskly toward the warehouse. He used a forehoof to tap a rhythmic sequence on an old steel door barring their way. Rarity recognized the pattern must have been the equivalent of a “secret word” to gain admission to the building. After a moment the door slowly opened inward with the terrible grinding screech of rusted metal on metal.

Completely out of her element and unsure what to expect, Rarity followed her host inside. The sight that greeted her nearly took her breath away. In stark contrast to the wasted exterior of the building, inside everything was clean and contemporary. The walls were painted hospital white and gas lamps provided bright illumination. The space buzzed with the sound of machines: engines whirred, gears clicked, and tanks of clear fluid bubbled energetically. The hull of Fancypants’ yacht rested on wooden supports that looked like giant sawhorses in the center of the space. The airship had been repainted a clean white with red racing trim, and Rarity could easily spot numerous changes to its shape and structure. An earth pony wearing an iron mask to shield his eyes appeared to be using some kind of portable fire to meld an angular piece of metal to the side of the hull.

“As I said, we’ve made some improvements to the interior,” Fancypants said to Rarity. “This building is the secret research and development facility for the company which is sponsoring our ship in the race. And of course, since I own that company, we get to use the building to prepare.”

“Welcome back,” a feminine voice called out from behind Rarity, causing her to jump. She wheeled around to face the speaker and saw a light pink unicorn mare wearing rumpled green coveralls and thick protective boots over her hooves. Despite her workpony’s attire, it was plain to see that this was a young and very attractive mare. Rarity also observed that she had been the pony who opened the door for them. “The last maneuvering stabilizers are being welded in place now, so we’re actually running ahead of schedule.”

“That is wonderful news,” Fancypants replied. “Windlass, this is my dear friend Rarity, Equestria’s greatest young fashion talent. As you know, Rarity will be our fifth for the regatta,” he said by way of introduction. “Rarity, Windlass is the most promising young engineer I’ve ever met. She designed most of the modifications we are implementing on *Fancy Free*, and she will be part of my crew for the race.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Rarity said, inclining her head respectfully in the Canterlot fashion. “I can see you’ve already done quite a lot of work on the airship.”

“Thank you, it’s an honor to meet you as well, Miss Rarity. I’ve heard all about you from the boss,” Windlass replied, smiling. Rarity noticed the other mare seemed to be regarding her appraisingly. “Actually, most of the design is on the inside. We had to turn a heavy luxury cruiser into a racer, so I had to cut out a lot of the original bulkheads and supports, while still keeping the ship structurally sound. It was quite a challenge!”

“Indeed,” Fancypants agreed. “Now, since we are ahead of schedule, Windlass, why don’t you collect the rest of the crew so that we can sit down to a spot of lunch. I, for one, am famished.”

“Aye aye,” Windlass said, her eyes still locked on Rarity, before trotting out into the enormous workspace.

Rarity watched her for a moment, idly wondering how well she would get along with the pretty young unicorn. This lunch would be a good opportunity to meet the rest of the ponies with whom she would be sharing a ship, and it was good timing too. She was extremely hungry, a fact of which Fancypants must have been aware due to the audible growling of her stomach. She marveled that even now, when he needed to be focused on preparing for the *Alicorn’s Cup*, he was playing the good host.

“Windlass is a brilliant engineer with an amazing gift for understanding machines, but she’s not an air sailor,” Fancypants admitted after the mare had departed. “The others,

however, are old hooves at this sort of thing. In fact, my second has been flying practically since he was foaled.” Fancypants said the last with a small smile.

“Perhaps your second is a pegasus?” Rarity guessed.

“Astute as always, my dear!” said Fancypants. “Colonel Tempest is recently retired from a long and distinguished career in Her Highness’ service and has taken on a professorship at Cloudsdale University teaching navigation. He is in charge of our celestial navigation, as well as judging the winds and weather to plot our best course for the race.”

“And that means the other must be the earth pony I saw using that fire tool,” Rarity concluded.

“Correct. Elbow Grease knows steam engines inside and out. It’s his job to get us every bit of horsepower that the engine can give. I would trust nopony else with that job.”

“That leaves me,” Rarity said with a frown. “And I don’t add any value at all. Are you certain you wouldn’t be better off with just the four of you?”

“Nonsense,” Fancypants replied. “The fifth crewpony is perhaps the most important position of all. Not only will you help us shift the weight of the airship when maneuvering, but it’s also a proud *Alicorn’s* Cup tradition to race with five. The fifth crew member is also known as something of a good luck charm; it is said that the right choice can bring favorable winds and fair weather. And most importantly, if I don’t have somepony along with whom I can have a pleasant conversation, I think I shall lose my mind. As it turns out, I have precious little in common with our soldier, junior engineer, and mechanic. You are absolutely not excess baggage, Miss Rarity.”

“Thank you for that,” Rarity replied, mollified. “I promise to do whatever I can to help you win this.”

A pleasant, if simple, lunch was served by Coltsworth, who was apparently more than just a driver. As promised, Rarity had the opportunity to meet her future crewmates. Windlass’ enthusiasm reminded her of Twilight Sparkle, if the latter had been obsessed with studying aerodynamics instead of magic. She did, however, seem a bit more serious and wordly than Rarity’s friend from Ponyville. Tempest was possessed of a solemn quietude that completely belied his given name, but was very much in keeping with his long career in the Guard. Finally, Elbow Grease was a friendly, though somewhat uncomfortably direct, Fillydelphian. He always brought his own lunch, and Rarity

quickly learned not to get between him and his “hoagie,” which was apparently some sort of sandwich.

After the midday repast, Fancypants offered her a tour of the facility. It was brimming with examples of new technology still in development, such as an improved generator for installation at the Celestia Dam near Ponyville, and a sleeker version of the steam carriage that had no enclosed passenger compartment, but instead allowed the driver and passengers together on top. They dawdled as Rarity let her companion wax poetic about the virtues of the coming technological revolution in Equestria, and before she realized it, hours had passed.

“We will have to leave shortly for the reception,” Fancypants noted. “As you know, it’s being hosted by the Duke of Canterlot and his family. After what you told me of your last encounter with him, I wanted to ask whether that will be an issue for you. If you like, I can make arrangements for our team to be seated as far away from the head of the table as possible.”

“Thank you, but it won’t be a problem,” Rarity said. “I can take care of myself.”

“Of course,” Fancypants replied. “I would never purposely imply otherwise. Do you have any questions about the banquet that I can answer?”

“Hmm,” Rarity pondered. “What can you tell me about the other teams? I know that there will be formal introductions, but I’d love to know something in advance. Are they all company teams like yours?”

“Now there’s a good question! Eight teams have been qualified to compete by the committee responsible for administering the regatta. Of those, four are entirely corporate-sponsored teams. Mine, or ours I should say, is one of them. The others are the Duke’s, a team of pegasi sponsored by Skyworks Industries of Cloudsdale, and a team sponsored by something called Everfree Shipping. I’d never heard of the latter before, but they seem to have no shortage of finances. It pains me to make the allegation, but if I had to pin them down, I’d say they seem to be high-value smugglers or even mercenaries. Their captain is a creature called a camel, and hails from a faraway desert nation.”

“Goodness, how exotic!” Rarity exclaimed. “But then who is sponsoring the other teams? Wealthy racing enthusiasts?”

“One team is being sponsored by a consortium of earth pony farmers, if you can believe that. I think the Equestria Citrus Council is looking for publicity by pushing the angle

that earth ponies can do anything anypony else can do. Of course they are right, or would be if they had anyone on their team who knew how to race an airship. My sources tell me that they do not. The other three airships are publicly-sponsored civic endeavors. One is from Fillydelphia, and the other two are the griffon entrants.”

“Oh, so there *are* griffons in the race?” Rarity asked. “The only griffon I’ve ever met was a most unpleasant individual.”

“I’m afraid that you may find a certain standoffishness characteristic of the species. Actually, there is a bit of a border dispute with the griffon clans at the moment regarding rights to the only pass through the Snowmane Mountains. I can only hope that coming together in the interest of peaceful sport will help sort that mess out before the rhetoric on both sides escalates further.”

“Surely the Princesses will help smooth things over,” Rarity said confidently.

“Surely,” Fancypants repeated evenly and without enthusiasm. His tone seemed to Rarity to foreclose upon further conversation about the matter.

The time to depart arrived, and the ponies exited the facility to begin the journey to Blueblood’s estate. The other crew had their own carriage, so Rarity had Fancypants to herself once again. If she was going to have the opportunity to pry further about the prince-who-was-not, this would be her last, best opportunity to do so in privacy.

“I don’t feel quite comfortable asking about this,” Rarity prefaced, “but I have a few more questions about the Duke of Canterlot.”

“Why, go right ahead,” Fancypants replied. “I assure you, though, that stallion is every bit as shallow as he seems.”

“I was just wondering, why does everypony call him Prince Blueblood, if he’s not really a prince?”

“The answer to *that* question is older than Equestria itself,” Fancypants replied. “Since you had the honor of performing in Canterlot’s holiday pageant this year, you must be quite well versed in the story of the first Hearth’s Warming.”

“Yes, it was quite a surprise to receive the invitation from Princess Celestia to perform,” Rarity said, perhaps sounding too pleased with herself. “I portrayed the unicorn Founder, Princess Platinum.”

“Quite so, and may I say that the review in the Canterlot Times was quite complimentary. I believe the words were, ‘deliciously horrible.’ That’s quite a compliment for anypony playing the part of Princess Platinum!” Fancypants chuckled to himself. “Ahem, as I was saying, the story has become somewhat allegorical over the years, but it retains kernels of truth. Before Equestria, there was a unicorn kingdom, and a real Princess Platinum. Her father, the Unicorn King, was called Blueblood.”

“You don’t mean to say that Blueblood traces his ancestry back to the Ancient Kingdom?” Rarity said, eyes wide in surprise.

“Oh yes,” Fancypants replied. “All the blood nobles in Canterlot claim some heritage to olden times. Some claims are more tenuous than others, as is always the case with such petty things, but Blueblood’s genealogy is not in doubt. The Duke is, in fact, the true heir to the Unicorn Kingdom, and the direct descendant of King Blueblood, Princess Platinum, and all the rest.”

“What happened to them?” Rarity asked, intrigued.

“Even I am not entirely clear on just how or when Princess Celestia and Princess Luna came to govern Equestria, but I know that when they came to power, the old royal family became more of a tourist attraction than anything else. Princess Celestia gave them the hereditary title of Duke or Duchess of Canterlot, perhaps to smooth things over, but they’ve been in decline ever since. Now the family may not survive another generation, with no stronger heir than a layabout playpony like Duke Polaris of Canterlot, the self-styled Prince Blueblood the Twenty-Fourth and heir to the Magic Throne of Cornutopia.”

“That’s quite a story. I just can’t believe that I played the part of his many-times great-grandmother in the Hearth’s Warming pageant,” Rarity said, feeling a bit queasy at the thought. “I do see how he could be related to Princess Platinum though.”

“Quite right,” Fancypants said. “But I will say this about the Duke, he is an accomplished aviator and air sailor, and his airship architects are second to none. He means to win the race.”

“He can’t stand a chance against a team like yours, can he?” Rarity asked.

“Of course not,” Fancypants cheerfully replied. “But not only because we are the best. The Duke races alone, with no team. He talks about it being the honorable way to race, but I believe that the truth is that no pony can stand to be around him, or bear taking

orders from him. By himself, it's going to be nearly impossible to even steer at racing speeds, let alone win."

"That's almost sad," Rarity said, but received no reply.

They rode in silence for some time. Eventually the carriage left the buildings of Canterlot behind and instead was surrounded by tall fir trees and tiny, glittering alpine lakes nestled among the peaks outside of the city proper. Without warning, the vehicle made a sharp turn and abruptly stopped. Rarity looked out her window and gaped at the sight of what appeared to be an ancient stone castle, complete with moat, drawbridge, portcullis, and crenellations, standing alone in the forest like something out of a fairy tale.

"He lives *there*?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh yes," Fancy pants replied. "Since before Canterlot as we know it today was founded, the old royal family has lived in that castle, watching it crumble around them."

Rarity and Fancy pants exited the carriage, and Rarity gave the castle closer scrutiny as she waited for the rest of the airship crew to arrive. The flag of Equestria flew from the highest rampart, but next to it, and only slightly lower, fluttered the unicorn head on a purple field of diamonds that represented the ancient kingdom. The past was gone but had not been entirely forgotten by this family, it seemed.

The next instant found Rarity instinctively ducking as a large number of wide-winged shadows flashed past, appearing for all the world like those of enormous predatory birds. Not birds, she realized, glancing skyward. Griffons. Ten of the hybrid creatures were streaking across the sky in a wedge formation, all clad in shining mail and brightly-colored military regalia. The leader emitted a piercing screech from his eagle beak, and the griffons turned as one toward the land below, their tufted lion tails fluttering behind them. They alighted next to Rarity and Fancy pants, and maintaining martial precision, turned to face them.

The lead griffon was a burly male wearing a bronze helmet with a crest of blood-red feathers. The upper and lower portions of his beak didn't quite line up correctly, as if he had suffered a major injury there, and Rarity suppressed a gasp as she could see that one of the talons on his clawed front legs was missing. This griffon was an old warrior. The others, male and female, stood straight and tall like the soldiers they obviously were. One of the griffons standing just behind the leader, a sinewy, grizzled veteran in black mail, seemed to be appraising Rarity almost hungrily. She shuddered involuntarily.

“Esteemed Fancypants,” the lead griffon croaked. His speaking voice brought to Rarity’s mind the image of a dying crow.

“Chancellor Seventalons,” Fancypants acknowledged, lowering his head respectfully.

“We eagerly look forward to our imminent victory over the ponies.”

“In the race, you mean,” Fancypants replied. Rarity saw the two eyeing each other warily.

“Of course!” the griffon exclaimed, punctuating the statement with a ragged cough and an unnatural movement of his twisted beak. Rarity realized that the scarred old griffon had just laughed and smiled. For her part, she remembered what Fancypants had said about the land dispute with the griffon clans, and she wasn’t sure that Seventalons had been referring to the race at all.

The second carriage containing the rest of Fancypants’ team then pulled up, and Tempest, Windlass, and Elbow Grease emerged, all wearing formal attire. Tempest immediately began glowering at the assembled squadron of griffons, and Elbow Grease looked noticeably uncomfortable standing before the mainly-predatory creatures. Windlass, for her part, seemed to be avoiding eye contact with them. Rarity wondered whether they had ever met a griffon before this moment.

The developing staring contest between Fancypants and Seventalons was interrupted as more carriages drove into the castle courtyard, all of these pulled by teams of earth ponies. The first colorful coach was spherical and painted bright orange, and from it stepped five dainty mares, each wearing an ornate gown in a different pastel citrus color. That had to be the team from the Equestria Citrus Council, Rarity realized. The next carriage also deposited earth ponies, but this time the arrivals were five strapping young stallions dressed in dapper blue dinner jackets with gold trim. Rarity recognized the colors of Fillydelphia and knew this must be the city’s sponsored team.

The third carriage to pull up was painted black, and to Rarity’s surprise was pulled by a team of zebras, whom must have been hired at an extravagant rate given their scarcity in Equestria. The cast of characters who emerged from it was no less surprising. First came a male zebra, followed by a muscular earth pony stallion with a umber coat. Next came a female zebra sporting an exotic manestyle of thick coils, with a smaller equine trailing behind her. The smaller one was striped like a zebra in the front, but had a solid coat like a pony from his chest to his hindquarters. Finally, a creature emerged unlike anything Rarity had ever seen before. It was tall and gangly, with a flabby sheep-like face and a great hump upon its matted, golden-haired back. The strange creature wore a patch over

one eye and a long cream-colored scarf around its neck. Were these the smugglers Fancypants had described? What had he called their captain? A camel. That bizarre creature was a camel. Rarity could not imagine what sort of garment it would take to make such an ungainly silhouette look fashionable.

Finally, five pegasi appeared from the clouds and circled the courtyard once before gracefully touching down. Like Tempest, they glared uneasily at the ten razor-clawed griffons in their gleaming helms and mail. Rarity was surprised to see that one of them, a white-coated mare about her own age, had a multicolored mane and tail not unlike Rainbow Dash's. She remembered her friend's words back in Ponyville and realized that this must be the aforementioned cousin.

No pony, or other creature for that matter, seemed willing to be the first to move toward the castle and the banquet waiting therein. Instead, the crowd milled uncertainly about the courtyard, the teams whispering among themselves. Rarity wondered why Blueblood hadn't come out personally to greet them and invite them inside.

The situation was beginning to move past slightly awkward and edge toward uncomfortable when a sleek open-topped phaeton thundered up the path and into the courtyard. The stallions pulling it had clearly galloped some distance at top speed, and they wasted no time in unhitching themselves and collapsing to the ground to catch their breath. The phaeton's lone occupant, wearing a vest, bowtie, and a single red rose pinned to his lapel, hopped lightly to the ground. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair slightly mussed, as if he hadn't slept, but other than that he was his unmistakable self.

"Welcome all free creatures to my royal abode," Blueblood shouted, his voice sounding to Rarity a bit weary. "I believe dinner is being served in the East wing. Please follow me." He trotted past the crowd and through the heavy wooden front door of the castle, as if nothing could be more natural in the world than for the host to show up late to his own important banquet.

The crowd stood stock still for a moment, processing Blueblood's unexpected appearance, before rushing toward the castle door en masse. Rarity and Fancypants were closest to the entrance and moved swiftly to avoid the crush.

"This promises to be a very interesting meal," Fancypants said to Rarity as they entered the castle. "Very interesting indeed."

“Come along, this way,” Blueblood called out. Rarity, Fancy pants, and the other thirty-three dinner guests followed him down a narrow, lamplit stone corridor. As the crowd hurried along, Rarity tried to steal glances at her surroundings, while spending most of her effort on avoiding being trampled.

Faded, threadbare tapestries were hung at indiscriminate intervals along the corridor, and Rarity passed several alcoves set into the stone that displayed statuary or old armor. The feel of the place was positively medieval and the air stagnant and musty. Everything was exactly as one would expect it to be in an ancient castle, if one had only experienced such places through old storybooks and nursery rhymes. This old fortress, however, was no fantasy. Caricature of a castle that it was, somehow Canterlot’s modern and sophisticated pony-about-town, Blueblood, lived here.

Rarity continued to follow him as he turned and led the way into a spacious dining hall that finally gave some relief to her developing claustrophobia. The room was dominated by a long, narrow table, currently bare save a lonely candelabra here and there, and the high-backed chairs flanking it. A dozen candlelit chandeliers, each larger than a full-grown stallion, cast their light upon the cold stone and gave what warmth and life they could to the hall. There was no fireplace, but heat seemed to be seeping in from somewhere, or Rarity was certain the room would have been unbearably cold.

There were four unicorn ponies already seated at the long table. Two were giggling white-coated adolescent fillies not much older than Rarity’s little sister, wearing sea green dresses to match their eyes. An older male about Blueblood’s age was similar in countenance to the royal unicorn, but his slim, almost emaciated build marked a sharp contrast to the other’s robust physique. Finally, at the head of the table slouched a significantly older, gray-coated mare, swimming in a sumptuous but far too voluminous gown of royal purple that was liberally decorated with diamonds and rubies. A high, stiff gem-encrusted collar rose from the garment like a peacock’s fan behind the mare’s head, and her stark white mane fell in a tangle. The gown, Rarity observed, would have been the height of fashion a hundred years ago, but never in the lifetime of any pony present, including the mare. All three females, the mare and the two fillies, wore plain coronets of silver metal atop their heads. Rarity knew at once that they were Blueblood’s heretofore unmentioned family.

“Late. You’re late,” the older mare proclaimed icily from her place at the other end of the dining hall, her voice echoing in the stone chamber. Blueblood ignored her and said nothing, but waited for the remainder of the guests to file into the space.

“Welcome,” he finally said to the assembled group while mustering a cordial smile. “Fillies and gentlecolts, griffons and all the rest. For those of you whom I haven’t met, I am Polaris, the Duke of Canterlot, Prince Blueblood the Twenty-Fourth, bearer of the title Unicorn Royal, et cetera, et cetera. I am also the best air racer in the world, but you will find out all about that starting tomorrow.” Blueblood paused, as if expecting a reaction from the audience. When none was forthcoming, he continued. “This is the year the *Alicorn’s* Cup returns, after a twenty-nine year absence. I was a foal the last time the airships took to the sky.” He scanned his gaze across the group assembled in the dining hall. “Some of you were old enough to race then. Some of you weren’t yet born.”

He paused when his eyes met Rarity’s, and he blinked twice in rapid succession. She realized that he hadn’t known she was coming. Blueblood gave his head a little toss as if to clear his thoughts before continuing.

“The race marks important milestones in history. The last time it was held, it honored a new, closer trading relationship with the griffon folk. The very first *Alicorn’s* Cup, at the time just a nameless contest, was held one hundred and seven years ago, to mark the dawn of airship travel. My great-great grandfather, the twenty-first Prince Blueblood, flew a craft of his own design in that race. He called it the *Alicorn*, in honor of our ageless Celestia, and he won. Though everypony thought it suicide for ponies without wings to fly, he raced through the mountains of Equestria, over the Serpent’s Spine to the barren plains far to the west, then on to the very edge of the endless sea, and back. He had nothing like the steam engines and gyroscopes we know today. He had only a balloon, sails, his wits, and the stars to steer by. The race was given the name of his airship, and this and all future generations will remember it as the *Alicorn’s* Cup. Tomorrow, I will fly a new *Alicorn*, to honor my ancestor’s legacy.” This statement was rewarded with polite applause from a few guests, though it died quickly.

“In the grand tradition of the Cup, the hosting club fêtes the racers on the eve of the race. I am the royal patron and sponsor of the host club, and so here we are. My home and my food are yours for this evening. I invite you to meet my family, though they must remain my own.” Blueblood gestured to the table behind him. “My sisters, Lady Ruthenium and Lady Iridium.” The fillies giggled again as their names were called. “They prefer Ruthie and Iri. My brother, Lord Procyon. My mother, Princess Palladium.” Blueblood turned back to the crowd, his eyes tired and, Rarity thought, something like resignation in his voice, despite his bold words. “Now eat, drink, and boast. I know I will.”

Blueblood stamped a forehoof loudly. Within seconds, a line of identically garbed unicorn servers walked into the dining hall from a side entrance, each levitating a silver tray of hors d’oeuvres. Another group of servers followed carrying trays of champagne

and cocktails. Rarity felt fabrics and feathers brushing by her as guests fanned out in search of food and libations. Then, one of the griffons loudly spoke up.

“Where’s the kitchen?” he shouted above the building murmur of the crowd. Rarity saw that it was one of the oldest, and certainly the fattest, of the group. “I brought food. We griffons have a special diet, you see.” He unslung a large, lumpen sack from his back and held it up with a claw for all to see. Rarity had read of the sorts of things that griffons ate, and she dared not imagine what might be inside. At least, thank Celestia, it did not appear to be moving. Blueblood’s skinny, long-faced brother, Procyon, got up from the table and wordlessly took the griffon aside, presumably to help him find the kitchen staff and smooth over the momentary disruption.

As the crowd swirled around her, Rarity was momentarily at a loss. She had spent her life preparing to be her imagined ideal of a Canterlot pony. Now she was in Canterlot, but in a situation that she had never contemplated. To be sure, some of the ponies around here were the cultured elites she had grown used to. Other ponies, and other *creatures*, were a different story. These were racers, adventurers, warriors, and mysterious strangers. She hadn’t spent a fillyhood reading storybooks about them, nor a burgeoning adulthood striving to become one of them. What should she do?

“Look at this room, my dear,” Fancypants said, forcing Rarity out from under her fears. “Rarely have I ever seen such a menagerie of characters. Everyone here has a story, and everyone wants to trade it for yours. Some probably just want insider information to help win the race tomorrow. Some see this as a business opportunity. For others, this is a time to play politics. Yet others may hold darker secrets.”

“Which are you?” Rarity asked playfully.

“Ha! I’m a bit of all of them, much to my chagrin. Would that the world were a simpler place,” Fancypants said, and punctuated his statement with a theatrical sigh. He then assumed a guilty, apologetic demeanor. “On that note, I’m very sorry about this, but I have matters here to which I must attend that will require free rein to mingle alone. I strongly encourage you to make some new associations yourself. I’m sure you will have heard some fascinating stories before the night is over.”

Before Rarity could protest, he had already turned away and begun navigating a path through the crowd, leaving her standing alone in a sea of strangers. Now what? Fancypants had encouraged her to mingle. Back in Ponyville, or even more recently at the society events in Canterlot, she had learned to become the life of any party. She was a great mingler. Why, she was practically Ponyville’s mingler-in-chief! She had a few

stories of her own to tell, after all. How many of these ponies had faced down a manticore and kicked it square in the nose? How many had calmed a raging sea serpent?

“You can do this, Rarity,” she said to herself.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

Rarity jumped and spun to find the speaker. It was time for the mingling to begin. “Why hello! My name is Rarity. It’s such a pleasure to—” She stood face to face with one of the unicorn servers, who was levitating a tray of champagne flutes. “Oh, right. Thank you.” She levitated a glass away from the tray. One drink could only help facilitate her socializing, after all. It wasn’t as if she would let herself get carried away like the *last* time she was in Canterlot.

As she sipped the bubbly liquid, she surveyed the room, looking for the right place to insert herself into the mix. There was Blueblood having an animated exchange with his mother, Princess Palladium. Off to her left several griffons were quaffing drinks and gesticulating wildly with their talons. Somehow that didn’t seem to Rarity like the place for her to start. She saw Fancypants’ mechanic, Elbow Grease, seated at the dining table. He had somehow found a tankard of ale and had produced another of his odd tubular sandwiches, which he proceeded to bite into. He didn’t seem like he needed any company besides his meal.

Aha! Rarity saw the group of pretty, pastel-wearing earth pony mares who represented the citrus farmers’ team. They were already fending off some initial advances from the Fillydelphian stallions. This was a dynamic she understood, and a crowd she could infiltrate. She walked easily across the room and straight into their circle.

“Well hello my dears,” Rarity began. “I was just standing across the room when I noticed your beautiful dresses, and I had to find out where you acquired them. I’m Rarity, fashion designer for the discriminating mare.”

The five earth ponies made room for her in their circle before one of them, her coat a light yellow and her dress pastel orange, responded. “Miss Rarity, of Carousel Couture?” she asked.

The pony recognized her! Rarity was delighted. Only then did she think to more closely scrutinize the dresses the mares were wearing. She knew that she had never done anything in those particular colors before, but the design was beginning to look awfully familiar. Then it came to her: they were hers. It was her first mass production line, “Full

Spectrum Fashions.” She had created the originals, and then authorized Hoity Toity in Canterlot to source a garment maker to produce more of the dresses, petticoats, hats, and accessories than she could complete herself. She distinctly remembered signing off on these pastel versions.

“Oh my, how embarrassing,” Rarity said, knowing that she was turning crimson. “Those are my label, aren’t they? I promise I didn’t come over to fish for compliments, I only wanted to tell you five that you look simply smashing in them!”

“Thank you *most* sincerely for the compliment,” the orange-wearing pony replied. “And don’t feel any shame for mentioning your work. It’s a great pleasure to meet one of my favorite designers. I’m Clementine Orange, from good old Manehattan.” She indicated the other mares with a hoof. “These are my friends, Lemondrop, Ruby Squeeze, Pomelo Punch, and Key Lime Pie. It’s obvious, of course, but we are from the citrus consortium.”

“We don’t actually work on the farms,” said the pastel red-wearing Ruby Squeeze with a disdainful look. “But our families run the companies that own them.”

“Of course not,” Rarity replied with a knowing smile. She hadn’t realized that some farms weren’t even owned by the ponies who worked on them. She wondered how Applejack would feel about that. “So what made you decide to race in the *Alicorn’s Cup*?” she asked.

Four of the mares turned to look at Clementine, who was apparently their *de facto* leader. “Uh, well,” the citrus pony began. Then she paused and looked Rarity in the eyes. “I’ll be honest with you, since it’s clear that you are a sophisticated lady, and not one of these rough-and-tumble scallywags we’ve been surrounded by lately. The answer is one word: advertising. You see, the citrus business has been hit hard lately. Manehattan is in the middle of a carrot fad. Canterlot has gone absolutely crazy for apples, apples, apples! The story we’ve put out in the media is that we’re doing this to show that earth ponies can keep up with the rest of you lot, even in the air, but the reality is that we have no chance of winning.”

“Oh, no?” Rarity inquired curiously. That matched up with what Fancypants had presupposed.

“No,” Clementine said, shaking her head, and the other citrus ponies mimed her action. “We paid good money for our airship, but we’re not air sailors, or navigators. We’ll follow the course, but at our own speed. The real value is that every pony in Equestria is going to be paying attention to the race, and reading about five brave mares from the

citrus companies. They'll see pictures of our airship, which is of course covered in images of oranges, lemons, grapefruit, kumquats, and all the rest. With any luck, this will turn around our fortunes. Maybe everyone in the lead will suffer a breakdown and we'll do better than we expect, but this is a business venture first and foremost."

"Well I wish you only the best of luck," Rarity said in response. "And let me say that I do enjoy a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice in the mornings."

"Thank you," Clementine said with a demure smile. "Now, perhaps in return for our story you can give us a tip about next season's fashions?"

Rarity was about to eagerly offer her best sartorial prognostications when she felt a hoof lightly tap on her left shoulder. Turning in the direction of the contact she found herself looking into the searching eyes of the rainbow-maned pegasus she had seen earlier. Now that she could see the mare's face along with her hair, Rarity was certain that this was Rainbow Dash's cousin. The mare's cutie mark, a bright rainbow arcing between two gray rainclouds, clinched it.

"Rarity, yes? I very much need to speak with you. It's important," the mare said urgently.

"I'm sorry, Miss," Rarity replied, "you're welcome to join us, but I was just about to exchange some valuable fashion tips with these ladies in return for sharing their story with me."

"Oh, go on ahead with her," Clementine said with a dismissive wave of her hoof. "This sounds important. We'll catch up later."

"Well, if you truly don't mind," said Rarity. She waved farewell to the citrus ponies and followed the beckoning pegasus a short distance away to a quiet corner of the dining hall. She was rather more interested in learning what was so important to the pegasus than in discussing oversized hats at the moment anyway, so she was grateful for Clementine's reprieve. Rarity wondered what the pegasus would say, considering that Rainbow Dash had told her to disregard her cousin's words.

"Rarity. My name is Chroma Prism, from Cloudsdale. You know my—"

"Your cousin, Rainbow Dash," Rarity finished.

Chroma Prism smiled faintly and ran a hoof through her color-streaked mane. It was longer and more carefully brushed than Rainbow Dash's, but there simply couldn't be that many pegasi with hair of that sort. "I suppose it's pretty obvious."

“Just a little,” Rarity replied, matching the other’s smile.

“I was so glad when Rainbow Dash told me you were going to be in the race,” Chroma Prism said. “My cousin doesn’t write very often, so it was a rare treat to hear from her. In fact, I don’t think she writes at all to the others back home, and she never invites visitors. When I learned one of her friends would be here in Canterlot, I knew I had a chance. Now that I can talk to you, I have to beg. You must convince Rainbow Dash to come home.”

“Home?” Rarity repeated. “To Cloudsdale?”

“Yes. We’ve been bombarding her with letters, but she won’t listen to us.”

“Why, what can be so urgent? I know Rainbow Dash goes to Cloudsdale from time to time. In fact, I visited there with her,” Rarity said.

“She’ll come for the Wonderbolts or a flying competition, that’s true,” Chroma Prism went on. “But she won’t come home to see her family. Celestia knows she has her reasons, but now we need her.”

“I’m sorry,” Rarity began somewhat more crossly than she would have liked, “but you really must fill me in on some important details. I’ve never even heard Rainbow Dash talk about her family except for a passing mention here or there, and right now I don’t see how it is my place to intervene in her personal life like that.”

“Of course you’re right,” Chroma Prism replied, a tinge of desperation in her voice. “But this is a uniquely serious matter. Please allow me to explain.” She waited for Rarity to nod before continuing. “I don’t know how much you know already, so let me start with the basics. Her family, well my family too, we own Skyworks Industries. It’s the largest cloud architecture and engineering firm in Equestria. We’ve literally built most of Cloudsdale from the sky down. Rainbow Dash’s father was the wealthiest pegasus in town, and the toast of sky society.”

“Surely you jest,” Rarity interjected, her mouth agape. “This can’t be the same Rainbow Dash?” Her friend, the scion of the wealthiest and most important pegasus in Cloudsdale?

“Oh no, it’s all true. Years ago, when Rainbow Dash was just a tiny foal, the pegasus folk were undergoing the worst structural-quality cloud shortage in history. We needed to build, but we had nothing to build with.”

“I don’t understand,” Rarity said. “I’ve seen the cloud factory in Cloudsdale. If you make your own clouds, then how can you have a shortage?”

“We make *weather* clouds, and basic fluffy cumulus,” Chroma Prism corrected. “Structural clouds, the special stratus kind that we build our cities and houses from, have to be quarried. Just when it looked like we would have to start kicking ponies out of the clouds and down to the earth below, Rainbow Dash’s father found the richest source of structural stratus any pegasus had ever seen, right on the windward side of the Snowmane Mountains. He immediately moved his family, including little Rainbow Dash, and used the family fortune to set up a mining town in the sky. It was a risk, but Stratusburg made the family tenfold richer than we had ever been before, and Rainbow Dash’s father cornered the market on construction in Cloudsdale.”

“I never knew any of that,” Rarity said. “Please go on.”

“The Snowmane Mountains are on the northern border of Equestria. Beyond are some of the largest griffon eyries, and they use the mountains to train and hunt for food. Anyway, I’m sure this will come as no surprise, but as soon as she could get airborne, nopony could get Rainbow Dash back down. Even though she was tiny, she was always out exploring in the mountains, and she eventually became good friends with many of the griffons living there. Even though they were skeptical of ponies and our expansion so close to home, thanks to Rainbow Dash and her father, the ponies and griffons grew closer. Eventually, though, Stratusburg was self-sufficient and Rainbow Dash and her family moved back to Cloudsdale to manage the business.”

“Let me guess, Rainbow Dash didn’t want to move,” Rarity surmised.

“No she did not. She was just a filly barely old enough for flight camp, and she didn’t even have her cutie mark yet. She wasn’t ready for change like that. Eventually, she grew to love the opportunities for advanced flight training she got in Cloudsdale, but she never forgave her family for moving away from her griffon friends and the place where she first learned to fly. Some of the griffons would still come to visit her, and even join us for flying lessons and activities like Junior Speedsters, but it wasn’t the same for Rainbow. Eventually she began to get in trouble in school. One day after she came of age, and after her father had given her a beautiful, amazing cloud home of her very own as a gift, she just left, towing her house away from the city at night. We only found out later than she had gotten a job managing the weather in Ponyville. Now she barely talks to any of us.”

“I’m so sorry that you and Rainbow Dash have grown apart, but what can I do? This seems like a very private matter,” Rarity said.

“Rainbow’s father passed away last year,” Chroma Prism said. “My uncle.”

Rarity didn’t know what to say to that. She could see the bitterness and frustration in Chroma Prism’s expression, but honestly, how could she help?

“Aside from Rainbow Dash, he was the only pony who the Snowmane griffons listened to. Now more ponies are moving out there. Other companies are trying to set up cloud quarries. Earth ponies have dug a mine and are using the pass through the mountains to transport coal. The griffons complain that we are stealing their resources, as well as disrupting the environment and scaring away the animals that they need for food.”

“Well, those sounds like legitimate concerns,” Rarity said hesitantly. It wasn’t as if she knew anything about politics, but it seemed that the groups simply needed to reach an acceptable compromise. “Can’t you work something out?”

Chroma Prism sighed. “Look, the griffons may be right, but we need those clouds. Lately, the situation has been becoming dire. The local griffon clan chief has gone to their high council and petitioned for redress, and now they are claiming both sides of the mountains as griffon territory and are threatening to expel all ponies.”

“This sounds like a matter for Princess Celestia to take up,” Rarity suggested.

“No! They’ll interpret that as a show of force. We need to handle this amicably. We need somepony they trust. We need Rainbow Dash! Please, I implore you, convince her to come home so that we can all go back to Stratusburg and she can help us resolve this mess before it’s too late.” The rainbow-maned pegasus’ face fell and she cast her gaze to the floor. “Otherwise this regatta might mark the end of the accord between the two races.”

“Rainbow Dash is my friend,” Rarity said at last. “I’ll talk to her, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Please, for the sake of Cloudsdale and Stratusburg. No, for the sake of Equestria, just try,” Chroma Prism pleaded. “That’s all I can ask. Thank you, Rarity.” She inclined her head in a show of respect and moved away, melting back into the mass of guests.

Rarity stood in place as the pegasus left her. She finished her first glass of champagne and set the empty flute down on the tray of a passing server. She was beginning to understand what Fancypants had meant about wishing for a simpler world. Now she had information, and she had to decide what to do with it. Would she barge into her friend’s family life and try to convince her what to do? It was most certainly not her place to do

so, but if this was as important as Rainbow Dash's cousin had made it sound, then maybe she had no choice. Rarity sighed. Perhaps it would be better not to seek out any more interesting stories this evening.

"More champagne?" a stallion's voice asked.

"I don't mind if I do." Rarity turned to take the proffered flute with her magic, but immediately lost her concentration and let it fall, yelping in surprise. Fortunately, the stallion caught the glass with his own telekinesis before it impacted the stone floor. It was Blueblood.

"Don't you sneak up on me," Rarity snapped, wrenching the glass away from him with her own magic. She felt a twinge as their spells intersected, and reminded herself not to do that again.

"You declined my invitation, but then here I find you in my house," Blueblood said, glaring back at her. "Now I learn that you are actually going to be in the race. That's a laugh."

"I'll be the fifth crewpony. I'm barely going to be doing anything but trying to stay out of the others' way," Rarity replied. "So don't count on me to ruin things for Fancypants. He'll win the race even with me up there."

"I could have offered to take you along on the race," Blueblood said, frowning. "It doesn't matter to me where you're watching from when I win."

"Now *that's* a laugh," Rarity replied. "Ha!" She took a swig of her champagne.

"I just want to know something," Blueblood began. "Why do you keep coming after me like this?"

"What in Equestria are you talking about?" Rarity asked, her voice escalating in both pitch and volume. "I have done nothing but try to avoid you!"

"You're doing a great job with that," said Blueblood with pointed sarcasm.

"Okay, yes, fine, I'm here," said Rarity. "Because Fancypants invited me, and for no other reason. I didn't know when I accepted that I'd have to go to your ridiculous fairy tale castle. Do you have any other examples?"

“Hearth’s Warming Eve,” Blueblood muttered. “Why, with all the real actresses in Equestria, would you show up at the Royal Palace, dress up in a ridiculous outfit and act like a fool in front of the whole city, just so you could mock me and my family?”

“Mock you? Why is everything about *you*?” Rarity yelled, struggling to keep her voice below the hubbub of the crowd. She gulped more champagne. “Princess Celestia invited me and my friends to perform in the play, and since everypony in Equestria knows that Princess Platinum was a white-coated unicorn mare, guess who among us was nominated to play her? That’s right, the white-coated unicorn mare, me! It had absolutely, positively nothing to do with you! Nothing I do has anything to do with you. In fact, I didn’t even know she was your ancestor.”

“Oh, right. Did you think I’m a Prince because I’m Princess Celestia’s son or something?” Blueblood asked incredulously. “Do you see any wings back there? For the last time, I’m not an idiot.”

Nephew, Rarity didn’t say. She hoped her flushing cheeks wouldn’t give her away.

“I saw you,” Blueblood continued. “I’ve never seen anypony make Platinum look like more of a gem-crazed prissy buffoon than in your version. Thank you for that.”

“I was given a script, I read it, and if I took any artistic license, I assure it you it was for my amusement alone,” Rarity retorted.

“Some artistic license,” Blueblood said angrily. “You know what, I have something I’d like to show you.” Blueblood quickly extended a hoof as if to grab Rarity. She slapped it away before he could come close to touching her.

“I will go nowhere with you under any circumstances,” she hissed.

Blueblood stared back at her, the anger draining from his expression. Once again he looked merely tired, anxious, and beaten down. “Fine. You’re right. It doesn’t matter anyway.” He turned and began walking away. “Go have another drink,” he called out.

Rarity looked and saw that she had polished off her second glass of champagne. How had *that* happened?

“Wait,” she called out after a moment of hesitation. “Just tell me what you’re so worried about,” she asked.

Blueblood turned back. “Worried?” he choked. “I’m not worried about a thing.”

Rarity deposited her champagne glass on a passing tray and walked toward the royal. “Really now, I’ve seen you at your most obnoxiously overconfident, and tonight I’ve seen you looking like you’re scheduled to be banished to the moon. Do you think *I’m* an idiot?”

Blueblood stared at her for a long time. Slowly, his shoulders began to sag and he exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. “If you come with me, just for a few minutes, I’ll tell you. But there’s something you need to see.”

Against her better judgment, something urged Rarity on. “Okay,” she said, and moved to follow Blueblood out of the dining hall.

At the end of another series of narrow corridors was an opening, and after passing through that Rarity found herself in a tall, octagonal room. High on the walls were stained glass windows depicting dozens of different unicorns. The colored glass painted the stone room with muted light in shades of gold, rose, blue, and spring green. Under the windows, up and down the stone walls were bronze placards inscribed with words too small to read at this distance, except in a few places where there was only an empty alcove recessed into the stone. At the far end of the room stood a pedestal, on which was placed the carved marble bust of a mare’s head. A plain metal circlet adorned the sculpture. The center of the room was occupied by a long, low stone bench. No, not a bench, Rarity realized.

“No, this isn’t ... It can’t be.” she stammered, fighting the urge to jump backwards.

“Yes, it most certainly is,” Blueblood replied. “This is the family mausoleum. Before you lies the tomb of Queen Platinum. Over there is her crown. You’ll see that it is not quite so ornate as the costume jewelry you wore for the play.”

“Why would you bring me here?” Rarity demanded.

“I just wanted you to know that it’s here,” Blueblood replied simply. “There was a time when my family was not a punch line. These were real ponies, who did important things, even if it was a long time ago.”

“Oh come on, now,” Rarity said. “It’s not like Platinum discovered Equestria. It was—”

“It was her!” Blueblood shouted. “Look at my flank!”

“Really!” Rarity gasped. “I will not!”

“My cutie mark,” Blueblood clarified. “The compass rose. The greatest talent of the members of the unicorn royal family was always navigation, and exploration, and discovering new, hidden things. It was Platinum’s talent, it was my great-grandfather’s talent, it was my father’s talent, and it’s my special talent too.”

“How can you know what happened well over a thousand years ago?” Rarity asked.

“The records are all here, in this castle,” Blueblood said with a hint of fire in his eyes.

“Oh, fine, you’ve been victimized by history,” Rarity replied, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. “Poor Prince Blueblood, stuck in his giant castle with nothing to do but count his money and fly around Canterlot in his yacht.”

“I’m already sorry I brought you here,” Blueblood said. “I can add unnecessarily sarcastic and cruel to the list of descriptors I have for you.”

“I’m not sorry,” Rarity said immediately. “I’m happy that I learned something about history. Thank you. The thing about history, though, is that unlike somepony else, I don’t wallow in it. I learn from it. If I was as obsessed with my family’s past as you are with yours, I wouldn’t have been able to follow any dreams of my own.”

“What do I have to dream about?” Blueblood asked in annoyance. “I’ve already got everything.” He looked away.

“No you don’t,” Rarity said. “You don’t have the *Alicorn’s* Cup. I can see right through you. This isn’t about Platinum, or me. You’re really just nervous about the race. I saw you dash home, looking as if you had just thrown on your dinner jacket, and now that I am in unfortunately close proximity to you, it’s evident you did not have time to bathe. You were doing something to your airship. You don’t believe you’re going to win. In fact, you are sure to lose, aren’t you?”

“You’re crazier than I ever guessed,” Blueblood huffed, clearly taken aback. “Not only will I win, I’ll do it record time. My *Alicorn* is the fastest airship ever built.”

The more he protested, the more Rarity was sure she had pinpointed Blueblood’s real problem. “You just brought me here hoping that I would participate in a pity party you’re trying to throw for yourself,” she said. “Bravo.” She clapped her forehooves together. “Nice effort. I will admit you had me feeling sorry for you for a moment there. Well, you may wallow in self pity all you want. I, for one, have long since given up on wallowing.” She punctuated her remarks with a harrumph.

Blueblood looked at Rarity and then stared down at his ancestor's tomb for a long moment. Rarity could hear his breathing slowing as he settled something down inside. "Fine," he began, turning to her. "I'll grant you that you did not do the Hearth's Warming Eve play just to irk me. I admit that I am an egomaniac, and I make everything about me. You win. And you're right, since I promised I would tell you what was on my mind, it's true that I've been having problems with the airship all week. I've been working day and night all week to fix the control surfaces and get the instruments to work, and everything is still wrong. If I cannot control the ship or even tell whether it is flying in a straight line, or at what altitude, I cannot very well race it. Especially at night, or in clouds. I doubt I will even be able to be competitive. I'll be an embarrassment to the family name. Now you can go tell Fancypants all about it."

Rarity was surprised. Something in the timbre of his voice had changed, and she was finally certain that Blueblood was being forthright with her. "You're admitting that you've done something wrong?" she asked. "Wait, don't you have a whole company full of engineers to fix that sort of technical thing?"

"Hm, yes, the company," Blueblood replied, screwing up his face as if he was struggling not to laugh. "You would think that, wouldn't you? You should ask your good friend Fancypants about my company, since he owns it now."

"What are you talking about?" Rarity asked.

"Procyon signed the papers yesterday. Fancypants is now the majority shareholder. I couldn't sink any more of our family money into a failing enterprise. My brother showed me the books. We were hemorrhaging bits." Blueblood shrugged.

"I didn't know."

"It is no matter; I will have the last laugh on this one," Blueblood said, smiling wryly. "Fancypants can have our buildings and equipment, but what he really wanted was our technical secrets, and all the talented engineers he thinks I had under wraps. Once he goes through our files, he'll be surprised to find that we have no engineering department, and no blueprints or trade secrets. It was all in here," Blueblood tapped the side of his head with a hoof, "and I won't be working for him."

"Excuse me, but do you expect me to believe that *you* are the brilliant engineer who designs all those airships?" Rarity asked, staring dubiously down her muzzle at Blueblood.

The stallion only shrugged. “Incredibly handsome, incredibly talented, and incredibly brilliant. It *is* pretty incredible, I know. It must be why you kissed me.”

“What is incredible is how you find a way to become less likable with every further interaction,” Rarity replied, glaring at Blueblood. “And I was drunk. I cannot fix your personal problems, or your airship. Now get me out your creepy crypt.”

“Come along, then,” Blueblood said, leading the way out. “I expect the formal dinner is shortly to be served.”

No sooner had she reentered the castle dining hall than Rarity beheld one of the oddest sights she had ever seen. She gasped as Blueblood suddenly winced and began to whimper, bent uncomfortably to one side, and began taking tiny recalcitrant steps away from her as if he were being painfully dragged. Only once she noticed the glow of magic around his left ear did she realize that was exactly what was happening. Princess Palladium, Blueblood's mother, magically tugged her errant son by the ear until he was hunched over before her, looking thoroughly humiliated. Despite the fact that he was at least twice her size, Blueblood cowered before the angry mare.

"Where did you go? What were you doing? Did you know that your dear brother had to entertain the guests while you were gone?" Palladium growled. She released the magical hold on Blueblood and allowed him to stagger upright. "I would say that you're an even bigger failure as a party host than you are as a son, but how could that even be possible?"

Rarity was not sure whether to laugh at the sorry sight or flee the scene before she was dragged into it. Unfortunately, Palladium noticed her before she could make a decision.

"Oh look, did you find a new playmate already?" Palladium asked her eldest son sarcastically. "Were you off showing her your imported silk sheets? I suppose I should be happy that at least this one is a unicorn."

"Now see here!" Rarity spoke up. "I certainly was not shown any sheets!"

The princess ignored her, and instead looked Rarity up and down appraisingly. "Good birthing hips, I must say. She looks like she could at least produce an heir, unlike the bundles of twigs you usually bring back. Maybe you should hang onto this one. Tell me, does she have a royal pedigree?"

Rarity gaped in shock at the elderly princess as she tried to decide whether she was more insulted by the insinuation that she been with Blueblood romantically, or by the elder mare's oblique suggestion that she was carrying a few extra pounds.

"Mother, please be quiet," Blueblood begged, rubbing his ear with a hoof. "There are very distinguished guests in attendance. You wouldn't want to make a scene, would you?"

"A scene? This house is already practically a zoo since you elected to fill it with these air race hooligans. I never thought I'd live to see the day that my own son kept company with such creatures. Griffons? Barbaric. Zebras? Savages. I don't even know what that humped beast is. He does not even have proper hooves. On top of that you disgrace us

with a flock of pegasi and a herd of earth ponies. Did you learn nothing from your father's mistakes? At least if you end up like him, your brother will bear the name and save us from the cloud of shame that you have caused to appear over this castle."

"Mother!" Blueblood was glancing around with a horrified expression, apparently trying to see how many guests could hear his mother's racist and xenophobic diatribe. As far as Rarity could tell, nopony else was paying attention. But she had listened to the ugly words, and she could not let them pass without speaking up.

"I'm sorry, Princess," Rarity began, "but there's simply no place for that kind of talk in Equestria. Even if we don't always understand one another's differences, we mustn't spurn others simply on account of them. Your family traces its line back to the founding of Equestria, so you of all ponies should recognize the dangers of bigotry and prejudice."

Palladium wheeled on Rarity, practically frothing with anger. "And who are you, girl? Tell me the name of the mare who would dare address royalty so disrespectfully?"

"My name is Rarity."

"What?" Palladium's heavy-lidded eyes opened as wide as they could and she backed away a half step. "Rarity? You ..." She stared at Rarity for a full ten seconds, looking her up and down. "For a rarity, you look awfully common," she said at last, then turned back on her son, who cringed involuntarily as if expecting a blow. "Enough! I've had enough of you and your ruffian friends for the evening. I shall retire presently."

Rarity stood watching, still unmoving, as the princess slowly maneuvered her massive gown past Blueblood and shuffled out of the dining hall, nose in the air. Why, she wondered, had the princess been startled by her name, and perhaps her appearance as well?

"What was that all about?" Rarity asked.

"That was fairly tame, actually, by her standards," Blueblood muttered, gathered himself and tried to look nonchalant, as though he had not just been dragged about the room by his elderly mother. "There are no excuses to make, so I make none. My mother is a monster, and she gets worse every year."

"I mean, why did she react like that to my name?" Rarity asked again.

“How should I know?” Blueblood asked defensively, straightening his bowtie. “She could have read the guest announcements, or saw your name in the paper in the review of that awful play. No pony can explain what that mare says or does except her.”

Rarity was far from satisfied by the response, but decided that she had nothing to gain by pressing the matter further. Even assuming Blueblood knew more than he was saying, he wouldn't tell her now. Besides, she had already won a small victory by bearing witness to the stallion's embarrassing ordeal.

Blueblood sighed. “I suppose it would be too much to ask for you to pretend that never happened, and that you saw nothing,” he replied. “So instead, I propose that I just walk away and we avoid each other for the rest of the evening. Perhaps you can find a place setting on the far side of the dining table.”

“Since you are the host of this dinner, you should know what is going on, but allow me to elucidate. I can see from here the servers are setting out place cards,” Rarity said huffily. “The seating would therefore appear to be predetermined. If through some horrible twist of fate my seat is near yours, I demand that you eject someone on the other side of the room from your castle and put me their place.”

Before Blueblood could reply, the clamor of conversation in the hall was drowned out by the clanging of a brass bell. One of the servers, a unicorn stallion more ostentatiously garbed than the others, rang the bell by shaking it back and forth with his magic as he waited for the crowd's attention.

“Ahem,” he cleared his throat. “I am honored to announce that His Grace the Duke of Canterlot, Prince Blueblood the Twenty-Fourth, Unicorn Royal of Equestria, cordially invites all of his esteemed guests to join him for this evening's formal dinner.” The servant's deep, stentorian voice, as well as the promise of a fine meal, easily captured the audience's attention.

Though her gaze had gravitated to the speaker, Rarity observed Blueblood and his siblings quietly move to take up positions at the dining table. The table was narrow, with one tall chair at either end and nineteen on each long side, providing forty places in total. Blueblood took up a position at one of the high-backed end chairs, presumably the head of the table. His brother Lord Procyon stood by the center chair on the long side farthest from Rarity, and his sister Ruthenium faced Procyon on the opposite side. Iridium, the youngest, stood to the right of her elder sister. Rarity noted that no pony stood near the high-backed chair opposite to Blueblood, which had been occupied by his mother when she had arrived.

The server continued with his introduction. “Representing the traditional sigil of the royal family, the compass rose, the Duke and his family shall occupy places of honor representing the cardinal directions.” Blueblood and his siblings took their seats, but Princess Palladium was made conspicuous by her absence. The servant, a consummate professional, did not miss a beat. “Unfortunately Princess Palladium’s delicate health has prevented her from joining in the evening’s feast, and she has retired to her chambers. And now, I have the pleasure of introducing four dignified guests who merit special consideration, and for whom places of honor have been reserved closest to the Duke.”

Rarity wondered who might merit “special consideration.” Certainly the griffon chancellor seemed like an especially important sort, but nearly everypony here was rich, famous, or both. Everypony, that is, excepting Rarity herself. Perhaps Fancyponies, on account of being the wealthiest, most connected pony in the capital, would be one of the four, though Rarity could not imagine Blueblood wanting to be seated closer than necessary to his rival. Then again, his involvement with the guest list was obviously minimal, as he hadn’t known there was assigned seating, or even that she was attending.

“First, and in no order of importance, Prince Khufu of Camelot,” the servant announced. Rarity was shocked to see the one-eyed camel, who stood head and shoulders taller than anyone in the room but whose appearance gave no hint of a royal background, walk through the swiftly-parting crowd with a serene expression on his face. Polite, if awkwardly sporadic, applause followed him. The camel chose the first seat in the long row to Blueblood’s right.

“Second, Chancellor Seventalons of Homespire Eyrrie, Lord of the High Hall.” Seventalons’ name was greeted by shrieks of approval from his kinfolk, and the grim old griffon with the battered beak and missing claw took the first chair on Blueblood’s left, opposite the camel prince. “Third, Elector Graywings of Whiteknife Eyrrie.” Another griffon, who Rarity immediately recognized as the fat one who had taken his mysterious bag to kitchen, took the seat next to the chancellor, accompanied by even louder adulation than his superior.

An elector, Rarity knew, was a clan chief who led one or more eyrries, and had the opportunity to be elected chancellor of the clans when the position was up for a vote. Rarity had heard unsubstantiated rumors that the electors had the right to challenge the chancellor to a fight for his or her position, but she didn’t give much weight to such gossip. She could get the true story from Rainbow Dash when she returned to Ponyville.

That left one more. Who, Rarity wondered, was the fourth special guest, who would have to endure dinner close to not only Blueblood, but also a pair of griffons and the

mysterious camel? The others were either royals or great chieftains, so the fourth should logically fall amongst that cadre. Was one of the Fillydelphians the city's mayor, perhaps?

“And finally,” the servant continued, “Rarity of Ponyville, Wielder of the Elements of Harmony and Twice-Recognized Heroine of Equestria.”

“What!?” Rarity shouted, before throwing a hoof over her mouth in embarrassment. The announcement and her exclamation had drawn the unwanted attention of every pony, and everyone else, in the dining hall, and now all eyes were upon her. This was unbelievable. She clearly did not belong with the other three. She was not royal or famous, and her wealth, though growing, was not on par with the ranks of the truly elite gathered here. She was just a dressmaker, and one in far over her head at that.

What was she to do, Rarity wondered. She couldn't very well make a run for the door. For one thing, she wasn't sure how to escape the circuitous old fortress. She had no choice but to smile, bear it, and then find the pony responsible for putting her in this humiliating position. She had a few choice words in mind already. As the guests continued to stare at her in silence, Rarity's lips parted in a forced, too-wide smile as she tried to look as confident as possible. To her surprise, the awkward quietude was suddenly broken by the sound of applause. There, in front, one of the citrus ponies was stomping her hooves. She was soon joined by another pony, and then another.

“Hey, she saved our town from Nightmare Moon,” one of the stallions from Fillydelphia shouted to his compatriots. “Thank you, Miss Rarity!”

“You stopped Discord! You saved my family!” another pony called out. Rarity saw that it was one of the servers. She knew they weren't supposed to talk out of turn, but no pony seemed inclined to complain. Soon, all the servants were stomping their hooves in appreciation alongside all of the pony guests, and even some of the foreigners were applauding. Rarity flushed a deep crimson. The Canterlot elites may not have been overly preoccupied with the Elements of Harmony and the bearers of their representative spirits, but it seemed that the working class of the capital and many others across Equestria knew the story well enough, and now everyone was cheering together.

Rarity wanted to tell them to stop, that it was not her they should be exalting. She wanted to explain that she wasn't strong like Applejack or Rainbow Dash, irrepressible like Pinkie, self-sacrificing like Fluttershy, or as brave and magical as Twilight Sparkle. Yes, she had been along for the ride, but she wasn't a hero. But how, she wondered, how could she make them understand? Her explanation would ring with the hollowness of false modesty, and she would only appear to be begging to be lavished with more undeserved

praise. Instead of correcting them, she silently walked, eyes downcast and face red, to take the remaining seat of the four closest to Blueblood. Her chair was to the right of Khufu the camel prince, and opposite the fat griffon, Graywings.

As she took her seat, Rarity flashed a furious scowl at Blueblood. “Not me,” he mouthed in response, and shrugged. That did little to soothe Rarity’s anger. She could grant that Blueblood had delegated the seating arrangements and management of the guest list, but that did not change the fact that somepony had decided to make a circus of things by grouping her with actual dignitaries, the net result being what promised to be a very awkward dinner.

“The rest of the guests may find their places,” the head servant continued. “By standing order of His Grace, the remaining seating arrangements have been made to facilitate stimulating conversation, and irrespective of any other considerations. His Grace invites you to enjoy yourselves. The wine shall be poured at once and dinner will be served immediately thereafter.”

Rarity observed the remaining guests scramble to find the folded cards denominating their predetermined seats. She looked at the place setting to her right, and was grateful to read the name of Clementine Orange. She was even more delighted when Fancypants took the seat opposite the citrus pony. Rarity silently thanked Celestia for these small mercies.

As Clementine took her chair next to Rarity with a polite greeting, Rarity continued to watch the remaining guests find their places. Next to Clementine sat another of the griffons. To Rarity’s dismay it was the lean, rapacious-looking one, clad in raven black, who had earlier looked at her as if she might be his next meal. She somewhat rudely leaned behind Clementine to spy his namecard, and saw that he was “General Karroc.” Across from the general sat Fancypants’ second, retired Colonel Tempest of the Guard. The pegasus was already giving his military counterpart on the other side of the table a baleful stare, and once again Rarity was left to wonder what lunacy had inspired these seating arrangements.

Beyond Karroc and Tempest were an earth pony stallion from Fillydelphia and one of the Cloudsdale pegasi, and then Lemondrop from the citrus consortium sat across from the zebra mare. Rarity could see that the smaller half-striped equine was seated at the zebra’s other side, and she decided he must be her son. Beyond them were all the rest of the guests, with only the chair formerly occupied by Princess Palladium remaining empty. The servers were already making their way around the table with crystal decanters of wine. Dinner had officially begun.

“Would madam prefer red or white wine?” a server asked, leaning toward Rarity.

“Well, how can I choose before hearing the menu?” Rarity responded testily. The debacle of her introduction to the crowd had left a sour taste in her mouth, and she was insulted that the server apparently felt she wasn’t sophisticated enough about wine pairings to deserve the opportunity to make an informed decision.

“Ah, I apologize for my presumptuousness,” the server said. “I meant no offense. The soup course is a seasonal carrot parsnip bisque. Next we have a cauliflower gratin with a fine farm fresh cheese from Ponyville. The main course consists of brochettes of forest mushrooms, potatoes, and fennel, over a rustic slaw of greens. To cleanse the palate there will be a salad of seasonal greens, followed by a cheese service and coffee. Does that help madam?”

If nothing else the description helped restore Rarity’s appetite. “I’ll have the red,” she said, only slightly less confidently than she would have preferred. The meal sounded rustic and hearty, and she felt certain that it called for a red wine.

“Excellent choice,” the server said, and commenced with a healthy pour.

Rarity was sure that she could have asked for a coconut with a straw in it and he would have called it an excellent choice, but no matter. She was surrounded by strangers and seated next to a creature the likes of which she had never encountered before in her life. She had just been put on humiliating public display by whoever had decided to call her out for the “Elements of Harmony” business. Then there was the mounting animosity between the griffons and pegasi, who were almost all staring balefully at one another. If she picked up her dinner knife Rarity was sure she could use it to cut the tension hanging thickly in the air around her. She needed to have her wits about her. She then realized she had just gulped nearly half of her glass of wine.

“Again?” she asked aloud, staring at the half-empty glass.

“Well, it *is* delightful vintage,” a low voice said in a thick, unplaceable accent.

Rarity swiveled in her seat to see the one-eyed camel. Prince Khufu, she remembered. His long, vaguely ovine face was covered in golden hair that mirrored the gold of his one remaining eye, and when he smiled Rarity could see real gold in place of several of his teeth. Despite the formality of the dinner, he still wore his white scarf tied tightly around his neck. Even looking as alien to Rarity as he did, his small smile made him seem somehow gentle and nonthreatening. And that, Rarity thought, was probably a

dangerous assumption to make. He was, after all, supposed to be a smuggler or a mercenary. Perhaps it had even been somepony's *last* mistake.

"Is pleasure to meet great hero of pony folk," Khufu continued, in somewhat broken Equestrian, omitting every article.

"The honor is mine, your highness," Rarity courteously replied. "Please disregard all this silly talk about the Elements of Harmony. I am merely a designer of fashionable apparel. I fancy myself good at what I do, but a hero, no. It is merely that sometimes life puts ponies in places they would rather not be, and doesn't give them the option to be someplace else. Anypony could have done the things I did."

"Too modest," Khufu replied. "There is always choice, whatever situation is. You make right choices, not everypony would. Heroes make right choices."

Rarity didn't know how to reply to that, so she merely acknowledged his comment with a small nod. The carrot and parsnip soup arrived, and she used her magic to try an experimental spoonful. It was thick and flavorful, warming her and reminding her of the farms and fields of her hometown at the same time. Good, she needed to remain grounded tonight, and how better than to think of Ponyville?

"Tell me, please, how does a prince become involved with a, um, shipping company?" she asked. She had to be careful not to let on that she had heard Fancypants' suspicions as to the true nature of the camel's business.

"Camels of Camelon, seemed, no longer wanted royals. Asked family to leave, no uncertain terms," Khufu replied enigmatically. "See."

He reached a hairy front foot up to his neck and grasped his scarf. Rarity noticed that he had no hooves, but only small hard nails on the tips of his two toes. Slowly, he pulled the scarf down until he revealed the edge of an old, dark red scar where no hair grew.

"Should have used stronger rope," Khufu finished with a wry expression.

Rarity gasped as she realized that he had survived a hanging. It was the mark of attempted regicide; his own subjects had tried to depose him, permanently. What conditions could have prompted such drastic measures? She could not even conceive of anypony wanting to overthrow a kind and just monarch like Princess Celestia, so what sort of tyrant must Khufu have been?

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "How terrible!"

“Ancient history now,” the camel said. “But still those who remember old Camelon call me ‘prince,’ and it’s hard for me to forget too, even if meaningless now.”

“So how did you come to enter the regatta?” Rarity asked.

“In my business, learned to ride winds of change. Change brought us here. Where change comes, always resistance. Friction. Heat. Sometimes enough for flame. Winds of change fan the fire, and we sell to who fears burning. Griffons see so many ponies; ponies see resources they need. Kindling awaits spark. Much business may wait for us here. We could not pass up this race.”

Rarity was aghast. “Are you saying that you are soldiers of fortune, hoping for some kind of armed conflict? That’s horrible!”

“Too old to fight, and half-blind,” Khufu replied, shaking his head. “I am salesman. My colleagues and I sell that which can stop conflict before it begins, or end it once it does. Zinzi, my zebra mare, is genius with firesticks and burning powders.”

“You’re weapons dealers?” Rarity asked incredulously. She wondered if perhaps Khufu’s subjects hadn’t been onto something when they tried to be rid of him.

Khufu gave a small nod of agreement. “Even your Equestria has its foundries and armories; no need for shock.”

“But no pony would ever seek out conflict, hoping to capitalize on bloodshed and misery!”

“Hope for peace, but recognize that war is good for business,” Khufu replied evenly. “Making both sides fear war, sometimes even better for business.”

Rarity was beginning to understand that the growing conflict between the griffons and ponies in the Snowmanes was becoming quite serious. Already the carrion eaters like Khufu were circling. She resolved to beg Rainbow Dash to go to her family when she got back to Ponyville. If necessary, Rarity would drag her friend there. She would also ask Twilight to talk to Princess Celestia. Clouds and coal were not worth lives, certainly. This would have to wait, though. There was nothing she could do by herself, alone in Canterlot.

She turned away from the camel prince and back to her meal. The servers had just replaced her soup tureen with a small, oval ceramic ramekin, filled with warm cauliflower and bubbling cheese. It smelled amazing. Whatever problems Blueblood’s

family might have, they had selected a fantastic chef. Rarity could not help but note, however, that this dish, unlike the soup which could be gripped by the bowl, presented a problem for those in attendance with hooves and no magic. They could not very well thrust their muzzles into something so piping hot.

While waiting for her dish to cool, she looked up to observe the crowd. The problem of hooves had been resolved by having many of the unicorn servers take a break from their serving duties to spoon feed the guests who could not otherwise enjoy the dish. Perhaps it was slightly demeaning for the servers, and a tad awkward for the eaters, but it was a workable substitute for grasping claws or magic in a pinch. Rarity had even heard of four-star restaurants in Manehattan, largely an earth pony town, where every bite was served in this way.

Meanwhile, most of the griffons were picking at their food. They could eat practically anything, Rarity knew, which was a necessary adaptation for living in the mountains where food was scarce and what little soil existed was inhospitable to agriculture. But despite this capacity for omnivorousness, they preferred meat. On the other hoof, some were not so discriminatory. The fat one seated across from her, Elector Graywings, was gorging on cheese and cauliflower and had even seized Chancellor Seventalons' dish at some point.

Rarity's own food was cool enough to eat now, and she tackled it with relish. While she ate, she listened in on the other conversations that were happening all around her. Blueblood seemed content enough talking with the griffon leader, and the swooping motions of his forehooves told her that they were animatedly discussing the race. Fancypants was making cross-table small talk with Clementine Orange, and Blueblood's brother Procyon was whispering something to the beady-eyed male zebra seated next to him. Far down the long table, the mechanic Elbow Grease seemed to be talking sports with his fellow Fillydelphians. Rarity would recognize the hooves-raised gesture, indicating a hoofball score, at any distance.

Even with his glory days long past, her father still regularly attended the games. Moreover, he would drag her along whenever he could. As such times she lived in constant fear of being spotted by ponies who would be shocked at seeing her engaged in such an unladylike pastime. Thank Celestia for sunglasses and giant hats.

"The servants took care of the seating arrangements." Rarity broke away from eating to see Blueblood speaking to her. Prince Khufu had excused himself from the table for the moment, and the white stallion was taking advantage of the opportunity in order to speak to her.

“Then you should have reviewed them. You let them make a fool out of me,” Rarity snapped.

“Actually it seemed like everypony loved you,” Blueblood observed.

“I don’t want applause for that. It is not who I am,” Rarity huffed.

“You still have to learn: in Canterlot, whoever ponies think you are *is* who you are. At least, that is all that seems to matter. Tonight, you get to be the savior of Equestria, so you may as well enjoy it.”

“The main course is served,” the head servant proclaimed in his impressive basso, breaking up Rarity’s brief conversation with Blueblood. She looked up to see the servers reemerge into the room with silver-domed platters for each guest. Some were oversized, and Rarity noticed that these were placed before the griffons. She was suddenly gripped by the fear that whatever had been in the fat griffon’s bag earlier was now on the dinner table, and she braced herself as the servers ceremoniously whisked the domed lids from their platters.

It was worse than she had imagined. On each of the griffons’ plates, lying on a bed of lettuce, was a plump, gray-furred, and very much deceased animal that looked something like a cross between a short-eared rabbit and a very large hamster. The animals were presented uncooked and uncleaned, and they almost looked like they could have scurried right off of the plates; almost, because each creature’s head was stove in.

Rarity closed her eyes and fought off a wave of nausea. This was one of those times when she envied Fluttershy’s intimacy with the cycle of life. Her friend could catch fish and feed them to the otter she cared for, or feed worms to her birds, and she showed the same compassion for the most vicious predator as she did for the most adorable baby rabbit. She would have understood the griffons’ diet, and accepted it, but Rarity could not get past the idea that eating flesh was horrific.

At least a few of the dinner guests handled the sight considerably more poorly than even Rarity. Many of the earth ponies, especially, looked green in the gills. Clementine Orange, on Rarity’s immediate right, threw her hooves to her mouth and immediately got out of her chair. Before Rarity could ask if she needed any assistance, she was already gone through the nearest doorway. The situation looked dire, and Rarity hoped her recent acquaintance would find a lavatory in time. As one, the griffons each lifted their four-legged entrees and lowered the furry morsels into their gaping beaks. Just like that, the grisly spectacle was over.

“Pikas,” a voice announced in an elegant baritone. “A delicacy from the mountains we call home.” The voice, Rarity quickly ascertained, belonged to General Karroc. He stood up from his chair and leaned forward, grasping the edge of the table with his eagle claws and allowing him to be seen by everyone at the dining table. “I see some uncomfortable faces. I sincerely apologize if our dietary habits have offended any of you,” he continued.

Receiving no response to the apology, Karroc forged ahead with his speech. “It was our comrade Elector Graywings who was kind enough to bring this taste of home for us tonight. You see, we griffons like to be reminded that nothing comes easily to us. We are not so blessed as you pony folk, who can grow as much food as you like. We take what we need from our lands. We hunt it. The pika is a clever little fellow, with sharp eyes and keen ears. A griffon, however, can see him hiding in his little crevice at three leagues, and can be upon him before he can react. When I was newly fledged, our mountains teemed with these creatures, but they have grown scarce over the years. This was a rare treat, so I thank you for indulging us.”

One of the Cloudsdale pegasi pushed back her chair and spoke up. “Nonsense! You scared the animals away yourselves by flying patrols all over the mountainside day and night, in plain view of every creature on the slopes. You’ve been trying to intimidate us for almost two years now. Don’t insinuate that we are to blame for your problems!”

Karroc’s voice remained calm. “I believe there is an old Equestrian proverb; an adage that you all learn in school. It answers the question, ‘where is Equestria?’ *‘Wherever storms are beaten back, wherever beasts are cowed, where sun and moon follow their track, where ponies live unbowed.’* A lovely sentiment, is it not? You think we griffons are barbaric, yet it is you ponies who learn to dominate and enslave from the day you are foaled. You expand until your hoofprints cover the land, and then you bend the world to your will, and you do not stop until the animals, the trees, the clouds, and even the very sun and moon answer to your whims.”

“At least we actually build something of value and don’t just live like caveponies in villages of dirt, rocks, and sticks,” another pegasus shouted.

“You want to know where griffons live?” Karroc asked. “Wherever the world is wild, and where we owe no outsider fealty.” His voice grew lower and more threatening as he continued. “If you wrong us yet further, if you try to take another hectare of our land, you ponies will see that you are *become* the pikas, cowering and shuddering among the rocks. But we will see you, oh yes; you won’t be able to hide.”

“Any pegasus could lick ten griffons!” Colonel Tempest yelled, knocking over his chair as he pushed back from the table. Finally, something had broken through his armor of stoicism and silence, and he looked ready to buck the first griffon that came within range.

Karroc leaned forward across the table, fire in his eyes, and he snapped his beak open and closed so hard it sounded like a firecracker going off in the room.

Rarity wondered who would put a stop to this escalation before it got out of control. Blueblood, for his part, was doing nothing more than watching the unfolding scene with his head resting on a forehoof, looking almost bored with it all. Fancypants was observing with enough genuine concern on his face that she thought he might step in to say something. Though his face was impassive, Rarity imagined that Prince Khufu, next to her, was feeling euphoric as the turmoil between the species threatened to boil over. No pony else made a move to intervene. Finally, to Rarity’s surprise, it was a griffon who prevented a fight from erupting.

“That will be all, General!” Chancellor Seventalons croaked at his subordinate while stretching to his full, impressive height. “Enough! Be seated.” He waited for General Karroc to slowly and quietly slide back into his chair. “We are guests here. It is not the right time nor place.” Rarity noticed that the old griffon looked weary and worn down for the first time this evening. “Now, be still and remember what your role is. I must go for a walk to clear my mind. I have grown too old for such foolishness, and it makes my head swim.” Rarity watched Seventalons stalk away through an open door, his coat of mail jingling with each step.

“Ahem, if I may.” Fancypants broke the uncomfortable silence that reigned with Seventalons’ departure. “Now that we’ve all settled down, I would like to propose a toast. Before we drink, however, an introduction is required. We all know of the present disagreement regarding the Snowmane Mountains.”

“Whiteknife Mountains!” Graywings shouted, interrupting Fancypants.

“Regarding the mountains to the north,” Fancypants finished. “We have seen evidence of these troubles here tonight, but I do not wish to speak of such things. I wish to speak of the future.” He paused and gestured skyward with a hoof. Rarity couldn’t help but notice that it was a far more theatrical gesture than she was used to seeing from Fancypants. He clearly must have had a sip or two of Blueblood’s vintage tonight.

“The future,” Fancypants repeated with gusto, rolling the word around on his tongue. A ways down the table, Rarity saw Windlass, the engineer, come to attention. She stared at Fancypants, eyes shining, hanging on his words. Rarity recognized the look as one she had once worn, when she first came to Canterlot believing Prince Blueblood to be the stallion of her dreams. That explained part of *her* interest in participating in the race. Fancypants finally continued his speech.

“The future is why we are gathered here. As our esteemed host said, the *Alicorn’s* Cup does not come around every year, and this year it celebrates the dawn of the age of steam power. Indeed, we are all perched together at the edge of this new age. Soon, perhaps very soon, old rivalries will become meaningless. Disparities, such as have and have-not, will fade away into distant memory. Magic, which has served us for so long, but which has also divided ponies from one another, and ponies from the rest of the world, will be displaced in large part by technology. Cheap, ubiquitous, and available to everyone, I believe that steam power will light the way to peace, prosperity, and more importantly, equality.”

“But not true equality,” Blueblood said, speaking to the table for the first time since dinner started. “Unicorns will still have magic, pegasi will still fly, earth ponies will grow crops, dragons will breathe fire, zebras will craft potions and powders, and griffons will have talons to grasp. Besides, as long as ponies are individuals, they can’t really be *equal*.”

“No, my good stallion, I believe all of that too will change,” Fancypants said. “They say that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. In the future, clockwork, steam power, and the new biological sciences will allow anypony to fly and crops to be grown through mechanized means, and will turn the alchemy, potions and other quackery of the present day into the bygone relics they should be already. In the future, there will be no want for food, or resources, and no reason for conflict between ponies, or ponies and griffons. All will be made equal through technology. So, in summation, I propose a toast to peace, equality, and the steam engine. To the future!”

Fancypants raised his glass, but before anyone could join him in toasting, a bloodcurdling scream echoed through the dining hall. Several guests dropped their glasses, which shattered on the cold stone, and all looked in the direction the sound had come from.

Rarity saw the empty chair to her right and guessed the source of the horrible shriek: Clementine. It sounded as if something terrible had befallen her, and Rarity didn’t need to be asked to go to her aid. She stood, kicking her chair backwards, and raced through

the open doorway that the citrus mare had exited earlier. She could hear a commotion behind her, and knew the other guests would be hot on her hooves.

On the other side of the door, and through a short passageway, Rarity found herself in an open garden courtyard. With a nearly full moon shining down, she could see tall shrubs and trees surrounding her, but could not find the yellow mare in the orange dress. She raced through the courtyard, looking and listening, when finally the sound of rapid breathing caught her attention. There, behind a dark shrub, knelt Clementine. Mercifully, Rarity saw that she was alive. The scream had sounded like a death knell.

“Clementine, darling, are you hurt?” Rarity asked. “What happened?”

Slowly, Clementine raised a shaking hoof and pointed to a dark shape on the ground before her, which Rarity had previously assumed was just another leafy plant. Those weren’t leaves, she realized; they were feathers.

“Oh, no,” Rarity whispered. Of all the worst things that could happen ... As the rest of the guests found her and gathered around, including a pair of servants carrying gas lanterns, Rarity moved over to the prone form of Chancellor Seventalons and listened for breathing, not knowing what else to do. She felt a pit form in her stomach as she fruitlessly searched for signs of life. After a moment she turned to the assembled group and shook her head. She could tell that her eyes were wide and her pulse was racing.

“Get out of my way!” General Karroc screeched, barreling out of the crowd to crouch beside his fallen leader. “All of you, get away from him!”

Rarity didn’t need to be told twice. She backed off and draped a reassuring hoof over the traumatized Clementine.

“What happened?” Fancypants asked the citrus mare. “What did you see?”

“I ...” Clementine began, “I was sick. I couldn’t find the lavatory in time, so I came out here to the bushes. After I was done being sick, I heard a coughing, wheezing sound. I looked around, but by the time I found him he was ... like that.”

By now all the griffons had formed a circle around their fallen chancellor, and the ponies and others were crowding together a short distance away. Rarity began thinking how she might escape if the situation turned ugly. Perhaps she could guess the way out of the castle, but then there would still be a great stretch of woods between her and Canterlot proper. It was probably best to huddle together with the other equines and hope the griffons calmed down.

“This is an outrage!” General Karroc shouted. “Murderers! You have killed our chancellor!”

“Nopony killed anyone,” Blueblood said, stepping forward. “That’s absurd. Seventalons probably choked on one of your giant rats. Or he simply keeled over. I won’t hear any more baseless accusations in my castle.”

“We need to notify the authorities at once,” Fancypants said.

“I’ll go. I can get to the city in just a few minutes,” Tempest volunteered. Before anyone could object, he had disappeared into the night sky.

“We will not subject ourselves to the mockery that your police would make of this tragedy!” Karroc said vehemently. “I know murder when I see it. I’ll never let you defile the chancellor’s body, just so you can spew more lies. My griffons and I will take our leave, with the chancellor, immediately.”

“Now, let’s not be hasty,” Fancypants said. “There are procedures. I’m sure we can amicably—”

“No!” Karroc screeched. “Graywings, stay with your griffons to represent all of us in the race, and ensure that the truth of what happened here tonight is told. The rest of us are returning to Homespire immediately.”

Graywings looked unsure, and appeared about to protest, when Karroc spoke again.

“Obey me, fat one. You may be an Elector, but you have no chance of being made the new chancellor. Stay here.” He turned back to the rest of the crowd. “Mark my words, ponies, there will be a reckoning, and soon.” Finally he addressed the other griffons. “Go! Take him home!”

As Rarity watched, still holding onto the shivering Clementine, two of the other griffons took hold of Seventalons’ body in their talons, and then pushed off with their lion paws while unfurling their long wings. They scarcely made a sound as they winged skyward with their heavy burden. General Karroc scowled at the other guests one last time before he too lifted off, alongside a female griffon. Rarity watched until their silhouettes blended with the darkness.

In the moonlit courtyard, twenty-four ponies, five griffons, two and a half zebras, and one camel remained, waiting silently, some still in shock, for the authorities to arrive so that they could report the mysterious death of Chancellor Seventalons, leader of all the

griffon clans. They had no body, no cause of death, and no witnesses, save a traumatized mare who had been fumbling around in the darkness looking for a secluded place to empty the contents of her stomach. In the morning all of them were scheduled to embark on a high-speed race through the sky, traversing all the way across the charted world.

The evening replayed itself in Rarity's mind: the ancient, crumbling castle; Rainbow Dash's fretful cousin; the uncomfortable encounter in the mausoleum; Blueblood's spiteful, bigoted mother; the exiled camel prince, looking to sell his deadly wares; the stomach-churning pikas; and now, death. Even after all that happened Rarity could only think that it was still going to be a long night, and about how much she would miss her soft bed back in Ponyville with its fluffy pillows and satin sheets. Perhaps, just perhaps, she was not cut out to be a Canterlot pony after all.

The cocoon of warm blankets encapsulating her, the darkened bedroom, and the muted piano music wafting in through the open door were not presenting a concerted argument for Rarity to get out of bed. Instead, it was the jarring tintinnabulation of the bells in the brass clock on the nightstand that finally convinced her to abandon her somnolent wish to sleep through the morning. The race was still on, she reminded herself, and there were only hours left before the start. She had to get up. With effort, she forced her heavy eyelids open and magically threw back the blankets.

When she had finally been able to collapse into bed, tragically no more than five hours ago, Rarity hadn't had the wherewithal to observe her surroundings very closely. It had been dark, and she had been mentally and physically exhausted. Still lying in bed, now she had the opportunity to look around. Without moving a muscle, she cast her spell about in the darkness, searching for the knob she thought she had noticed by the door when she had first been shown to the room. She found it easily, and soon she heard the whoosh of gas as a dozen sconces lit the bedroom.

Rarity propped her back up against her overstuffed pillows and took in what the light revealed. The first thing she noticed was that she was no longer wearing her dress from the previous day, as it lay draped over a chair in the far corner by the door where she must have thrown it. Though her livelihood as a designer and clothier depended on high society's proclivity toward wearing apparel, Rarity had to admit that it felt good to be free of it at the moment. She could stretch her limbs through their full range of motion, and feel the smooth interaction of her coat with the soft bedsheets. It also felt good to see her beautiful tail again, lustrous and curled, just as she remembered it, and the familiar trio of diamonds that comprised her cutie mark.

The bedroom itself, the only guestroom in Fancypants' downtown pied-à-terre, was opulent without being overstated. All of the furniture was hoof-carved from dark wood and the two wingback chairs in opposing corners were luxuriously upholstered in a painstakingly embroidered sky blue satin with silver trim. A massive armoire stood to the left of the bed and an oversized vanity occupied the other side of the room. The bed was no larger than Rarity's own back in Ponyville, but the mattress gave Rarity a taste of what it must feel like for pegasi who could sleep on clouds. For the short time she had to enjoy it, it had been the most comfortable sleep she had ever had. Getting out of bed would be a terrible sacrifice.

Now that she was awake, however, Rarity was forced to confront the events of the previous night. Colonel Tempest had flown into the city and notified both the civil police

and the Royal Guard of the tragedy at Blueblood's castle, and soon the courtyard where the griffon leader had perished was swarming with investigators. Everyone had answered questions, but with no body present and no evidence of foul play beyond the mutterings of the remaining griffon contingent, the ordeal was surprisingly brief. Rarity saw the investigators take samples from the kitchen and various glasses, plates, and serving vessels on the dining table, and then they left. She could not help but think that the investigators were somewhat intimidated by the sheer star power on display at the castle, or they might not have been so reluctant to impose on the guests.

Of course, there was absolutely no reason to believe that what had happened was anything more than unfortunate timing. The chancellor had been old, and while his appearance proved that he had been through a few scrapes in his day, no one could see how healthy, or unhealthy, he had been on the inside.

Rarity had heard the story of a pony who lived to be older than anypony in Equestria, which he attributed to clean living and hard work. He was invited to Canterlot to celebrate his one hundred fiftieth birthday party with Princess Celestia herself, but upon eating the Princess' rich food, which was so different from the simple raw apples and carrots he normally consumed, he immediately dropped dead. Perhaps the feast, and the stress of the tension between the ponies and griffons, had been too much for the old leader. Whatever the cause, Rarity was sure that it had nothing to do with any of the guests.

After the police and Guard left, the various teams had gathered together to officially decide whether to press on with the race in the morning. Among those who chose not to abstain, the vote was unanimous in favor of sticking to the original schedule. All of Equestria was waiting with bated breath, after all, and it wouldn't do to disappoint. Moreover, Fancypants had pointed out, there was no better time than the present to show the world that griffons and ponies could get along, and demonstrate the values of sportsmanship, mutual trust, and fair play.

Rarity had been one of the abstainers. At this point a large part of her simply wanted to go home. Even if the rest of her simply could not brook disappointing Fancypants and the rest of the elites, it didn't mean she had to actively vote in favor. She sighed. Given that the race was going to begin today, and soon, she decided that it was time to set her hooves on the ground and face the morning. With great effort and not a little regret, she rolled out of bed and walked slowly over to the vanity.

“Okay, Rarity, let us see how you are holding up.”

A quick glance in the mirror confirmed what she had feared. Her mane was disheveled and tangled from the fascinator that had been elaborately pinned in it for an entire day, there were puffy bags under her eyes, and the makeup that she had not had the energy to wash off the night before was crusted and cracked. “Oh my, I look more like Scarity than Rarity,” she muttered. There would be no salvaging her mane and face from this dreadful state. She had to get cleaned up. A check of the clock revealed that she had just enough time left to bathe.

A door within the guestroom led to a private bath, and the instant Rarity stepped inside, she was awestruck. If Fancypants had chosen to decorate the bedroom in a rather subdued fashion, then he had allowed himself to go absolutely wild in the bath. It was a symphony in glass, marble, and polished brass, and though Rarity wasn’t sure the combination was entirely harmonious, it was certainly grand in scope and scale. For one thing, the bathroom was enormous, at least as large as the bedroom itself. One wall was floor to ceiling mirrors, adjacent to which stood carved pedestal sinks in the shape of half-fish, half-pony creatures each holding a bowl in their outstretched forehooves. Mirrored cabinets flanked the sculptures, and more mirrors hung above them. If Rarity had wanted to admire herself, which at this moment she most certainly did not, the setup would have been ideal.

In the middle of the room a door presumably led to the water closet, and the entire remainder of the space was dedicated to bathing. Robes hung on brass hooks and plush towels displaying a monogrammed “F” were neatly folded and stacked. A tub large enough for Rarity to swim a few strokes stood on sturdy cast iron hooves, and even more impressive was the open shower beside it. Shiny brass pipes snaked in and out of the marble, forming a large cage that enclosed three sides of the shower. The pipes were replete with nozzles and jets, dozens of them, far more complicated than anything she had seen even at the spa. She decided immediately that she had to try it. Despite the complexity of the plumbing, there was only one floor-mounted hoof-pedal engraved with the word “ON,” so Rarity stepped into the enclosure and pressed it.

Instantly, she was standing inside the heart of Canterlot Falls, if the Falls were somehow heated to the perfect steamy, cleansing temperature. Water poured, whirled, cascaded, and jetted down, around, and across her body, massaging her and washing away any hint of uncleanness. She felt purified, as if the water were giving her a rebirth and a new beginning as it swept away the previous day’s dirt and tangles. Rarity closed her eyes and let the torrent carry away the unpleasant memories of the prior evening, her embarrassment at being singled out in front of the crowd, and her horror at the chancellor’s death. She was Rarity the unicorn, after all, and she *did* belong here. She *was* a very important pony. She was beautiful, creative, and intelligent. She had the best mane

and tail in Ponyville. She represented the spirit of one of the Elements of Harmony! She could show Fancypants, and the other racers, and all of Equestria, just exactly who she was.

The Rarity that emerged from the shower, her coat sparkling and her normally curly hair wet and limp but free of tangles, was not the same pony who had entered it. This new Rarity was ready to face the day, and all of Equestria. She towed off and floated her case of toiletries and cosmetics in from the bedroom. With a little magic and a judicious amount of hairspray, her hair was soon back to its normal gravity-defying bounce and curl, and careful application of makeup left her looking flawless. “Now *you* look like Rarity,” she said to her reflection in the wall of mirrors.

Reemerging into the bedroom, she checked the wardrobe and was gratified to see that one of Fancypants’ staff had taken the dresses out of her garment bag and hung them on the rack inside. She had so many wonderful choices to select from for her public appearance at the race, but for now she decided to enjoy the freedom of her own skin and coat just a little while longer. She trotted out of the room and down the staircase outside to the living quarters below.

“Good morning, my dear, and may I say that you look as fresh as a daisy,” Fancypants said from his breakfast table seat. “Today is the day we’ve all been waiting for.” Rarity saw that he had several newspapers spread out on the table before him. A phonograph perched on a spindly-legged stand softly played a piano concerto. She also noticed a pot of pressed coffee and an empty cup that Rarity determined must be meant for her.

“I’m ready,” Rarity replied as she took a seat of her own at the table. “And might I thank you most sincerely for allowing me to stay here last night. I was so tired that I barely even remember leaving the castle, let alone how I came to wake up in that fabulous bed.”

“Ah, yes, think nothing of it,” Fancypants said. “I think we were all exhausted by the events of last evening, and I can imagine why you must have had an especially trying experience. My stallion Coltsworth practically had to carry you upstairs.”

“I shall have to thank him, then. I hope I wasn’t too much of a burden for the poor fellow. On another subject, may I ask what you are reading?”

“You may indeed,” said Fancypants. “To no pony’s surprise, word has reached the press of the unfortunate incident at the Duke’s castle, and it’s all over the morning papers. Since there is no story that cannot be sensationalized, the speculations regarding how Chancellor Seventalons perished are rampant. The one thread of truth that I keep

coming across in these stories is that the territorial disagreement with the griffon clans is only going to get worse now.”

“What is going to happen?” Rarity asked.

“No pony can say, I’m afraid. I can tell you one thing that has already happened, though. Tempest stopped by a moment before you came downstairs to tell me that the Cloudsdale airship has officially pulled out of the race. Apparently they felt they needed to be closer to home in case the political situation worsens over the next several days. I cannot say that I blame them.”

“I suggested to one of them last night that the wisest thing to do at this point might be to request that Princess Celestia intervene, but they have no intention of asking for her to do so,” Rarity said. “They’re afraid the griffons might misperceive any overture from the Princess as threatening. I think that if anyone can fix this mess, the Princess can.”

Fancypants looked up from his newspapers. “I’m inclined to agree with the pegasi, my dear, but for my own reasons.” He sighed deeply. “I have as much faith and trust in the Princesses as any pony, but you must understand that as long as we rely on them to get our country out of every uncomfortable situation, we will never advance as a culture. I don’t want ponykind to live like children forever. I must be honest with you, Miss Rarity, I have personally petitioned Princess Celestia to let her subjects handle the griffon problem without her or Princess Luna intervening. We’ve already become so dependent on the Princesses that we forgot long ago how to bring about night and day on our own, and I don’t want Equestria to abdicate all of our diplomatic affairs to them as well.”

“What did Princess Celestia say?” Rarity asked, surprised.

“She agreed with me,” Fancypants replied at once. “She consented to observe passively for the time being, and whole-heartedly supported my plan to use the *Alicorn’s* Cup as a goodwill gesture. We can show every pony that we can fairly and peacefully compete and coexist with griffons, and anyone else as well. After the race, a diplomatic mission can be put together to heal any remaining injuries felt by either side. Despite what the papers say, I assure you that these are not yet desperate times.”

“I hope you’re right,” Rarity said.

“So do I,” Fancypants said somberly. Then, his face lit up with a smile. “At any rate, we still have a race to win. In fact, we need to be moving along if we are going to make the opening ceremony.”

“Oh no! I’m not packed up!” Rarity exclaimed, hopping out of her seat. “I haven’t even picked out my ensemble for today!”

“Ensemble? There’s no need for that!”

Rarity turned toward the voice and saw Windlass walking in through Fancypants’ front door with Elbow Grease following behind. They were both wearing a sort of white zippered jumpsuit with bold red stripes running down the legs. Huge embroidered patches were sewn on over the spot where a pony’s cutie mark would normally be seen, displaying the logo and initials of the Canterlot Steam Engine Company. Windlass used her magic to deposit two bundles of fabric on the breakfast table, and Rarity quickly surmised that they constituted more of the hideous outfits.

“Oh no no no,” Rarity said quickly. “My business depends on my good taste, and I simply can’t be seen in front of all of Canterlot dressed like some sort of maintenance worker.” She turned to Elbow Grease. “No offense.”

“I completely understand your concerns,” Fancypants said.

“Then I don’t have to wear this?”

“Ahem, well, I would consider it a great honor and a personal favor if you would. You see, every team will be racing in uniform. We will appear far more professional if we all dress alike.”

“But surely not everypony will be dressed like *that*,” Rarity complained, gesturing at Windlass and Elbow Grease. “You should have asked me to design something fabulous.”

“Somehow I don’t think big hats and poofy gowns are the most aerodynamic things to wear in a race,” Windlass broke in, sounding annoyed.

“All I can do is say ‘please,’” Fancypants added.

As unfortunate-looking as the outfits were, Rarity had to admit that she was outnumbered by Fancypants and the others, and the proper course of action in such a situation was usually to gracefully admit defeat.

“Fine, I’ll wear it,” she said exasperatedly. “I’ll go upstairs to pack the rest of my things and change, and I will be back in a moment.”

“There’s no need to waste your time packing,” Fancypants said. “We’ll leave as soon as you’re changed, and my staff will see to it that your things are sent along with the rest of our supplies.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you,” Rarity began, “but I’m very particular about my things, and I wouldn’t want to leave anything behind.”

“Have no fear, you have my word as a gentlepony that nothing important will be missed,” Fancypants replied.

“Then I gladly accept your offer,” Rarity said. She took hold of the smaller bundled jumpsuit with her magic and made her way back upstairs to the guest bedroom. Excepting the closest of friends, a lady never changed in front of others; it was inelegant to say the least. Standing in front of the mirrored bathroom wall, she unfolded the jumpsuit, awkwardly squeezed into it, and then zipped herself in from belly to neck. As she had expected, it rendered her lumpen and shapeless, and the stark white color of the garment made her beautiful coat look dull and dingy by comparison.

“I hereby pronounce myself guilty of fashion treason,” she said to her mirror image. “The sentence is public humiliation, to be carried out at once.” She began to walk back to the group, and as she started, it immediately became clear that the stiff, unidentifiable fabric of the garment made an obnoxiously loud sound as it rubbed against itself. “Awful.”

“Splendid!” Fancypants exclaimed as Rarity descended the staircase. He was already wearing his own jumpsuit. The image was so absurd that if he’d been wearing the outfit when she had first met him, Rarity wasn’t sure she would have even recognized the famous mogul from Canterlot. “Now,” he said, “we look like a team.”

“A team of blind ponies,” Rarity whispered, hoping nopony caught her grumbling.

“Colonel Tempest is already moving the ship to the holding area near the start, and so the time has come for us to depart,” Fancypants announced. “Adventure awaits, let us be off!”

With only four, it was technically feasible, if practically uncomfortable, to fit the group in just one of Fancypants’ steam carriages. Moments later, Rarity found herself rumbling toward Canterlot Castle, wearing a ridiculous jumpsuit that accentuated all the wrong parts, and uncomfortably close to Elbow Grease, who smelled intensely of pickles, onions, and sweat. At least it was a beautiful day; the pegasus ponies had seen to that.

“I have a confession to make,” Fancy pants suddenly spoke up. “When I said that nothing important of yours would be left behind, what I should have said was that we can only take that which is vitally necessary. Accordingly, the airship is being packed with the essentials; namely food and basic toiletries.”

Rarity realized that she had been had. She had been cajoled into wearing this abomination, and then tricked into leaving her things back at the pied-à-terre. Fancy pants, the one pony in Canterlot that she could trust, aside from the Princesses of course, had betrayed her. She was furious.

“No! Coltsworth, turn this thing around at once!” she shouted at the top of her lungs, causing the other passengers to cover their ears. Rarity could be persuasive when she had to be, and this was one of those times.

“Belay that!” Fancy pants exclaimed. “Miss Rarity, please, I had to get you out of the house so that we could make the opening ceremony in a timely manner. I’m terribly sorry to have to resort to deception, and I realize that it was most unbecoming of me. I never expected you to bring your entire wardrobe here to Canterlot, but since you did I had to find a way to convince you to leave it behind. I decided that there was simply no way to get you to part with your things willingly, even on a temporary basis.”

“Of course not!” Rarity replied hotly. “I am a *lady*, and I remain so at all times. I cannot simply let myself devolve into some kind of sweaty workpony on account of this race! Now please turn around so that I may get my things.”

“We cannot carry the extra weight and remain competitive,” Fancy pants stated adamantly. Windlass and Elbow Grease remained taciturn, avoiding the fray at all costs.

“Then you shall not carry *my* extra weight,” Rarity said. “Erm, as small an amount as that may be. I’m leaving.”

“Please, Rarity, we absolutely, positively need you with us. Don’t do this for me, but for Equestria,” Fancy pants pleaded. “Remember what I said about how important the Cup is for the future, and for peace.”

Rarity wasn’t completely naïve. After the reaction to her being announced as a “heroine of Equestria” at the dinner last night, she found herself wondering whether Fancy pants wanted her along more for good public relations and marketing than for the pleasure of her company. His insistence that she wear his branded jumpsuit wasn’t helping convince her otherwise. On the other hoof, if there was the chance that her participation in the

regatta could help stave off conflict between ponies and griffons, then that was a worthy reason to continue on. Could it be that the presence of the pony who represented the spirit of the Element of Generosity could make a difference? Rarity's logical mind questioned whether it could be so, but her vanity argued "yes!" There was also the small matter that her name would be on the tongues of every pony in Equestria who followed the race, many of whom might become inclined to peruse her wares, and most of them would never see her unfortunate attire up close.

Rarity sighed. "For Equestria, I'll go along with this." Equestria, peace, and free publicity. If Fancypants could have his unspoken agenda, then so could she. Perhaps she could launch a aeronautical-inspired line for next season, based on her experiences during the race.

"There's the grandstand!" Windlass exclaimed excitedly, gesturing at the carriage window with a hoof.

Rarity looked and saw that the carriage was about to turn onto the grand concourse that led straight to the main entrance of the Princesses' palace. To the right of the concourse, looking toward the palace, were the green hills and fields of the palace grounds. To the left was a steep slope leading to a sheer drop to the valley far below. She remembered walking its length, full of gleeful anticipation, on the night of last year's Grand Galloping Gala. Now the scene was completely changed from that night.

An enormous grandstand, thirty rows deep or more, had been erected on the right side, running the entire length of the concourse from the palace gate to the end of the road, and the stands were already full of ponies. Midway down on the left, Rarity saw a precarious wooden structure of scaffolding, platforms, and stairs, which she recognized as the boarding platform for the teams to take to their airships. The airships themselves were conspicuously absent. A few carriages were parked on the concourse, and Rarity realized these had to belong to the other racers. Opposite the boarding platform, a large brass band was set up directly in front of the grandstand. A great cheer erupted from the crowd as Fancypants' steam carriage made the turn onto the concourse after passing through a checkpoint of unicorn Royal Guards.

By the time the carriage had stopped and Rarity stepped out, the cheering had died down. Suddenly, though, it returned even more enthusiastically than before. As Rarity looked around to spy a reason for the crowd's fervor, dark shadows flashed overhead. When Rarity looked upward, she couldn't stop herself from whooping and cheering along with everypony else.

Princess Celestia and Princess Luna zoomed past, their great wings extended as they flew abreast with what had to be the entire squadron of Wonderbolts; the talented fliers in their sharp blue and gold uniforms flanked the Princesses, six on each side. Rarity had never seen twelve Wonderbolts at once, and had certainly never seen Princess Celestia and her sister flying together under their own wingpower. The Princesses left the formation and gracefully alighted in a large box at the very top of the grandstand, which was already populated by four Royal Guard pegasi.

“The teams are all here, and so are the Princesses,” Fancypants said, pointing out the obvious. “The Opening Ceremony will begin shortly.” His prediction was nearly instantly confirmed.

“Fillies and gentlecolts,” a clear stallion’s voice rang out over the hubbub of the crowd. Rarity knew that it had to be either a unicorn speaking using magical voice amplification, or some other kind of pony using one of the new enchanted “megaphones.” “I’m Golden Pipes, and on behalf of the Royal Yacht Club of Canterlot, the Canterlot Times, Equestria Daily, and of course, our beloved Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, I am pleased to welcome every pony and every visitor from afar to our fair capital city for the fifth ever *Alicorn’s Cup* regatta.”

As the crowd exploded into cheers once again, Rarity saw for the first time that a small slice of the grandstand was occupied by griffons, and there were other creatures sprinkled throughout. There was a donkey or a mule far to her left, and there at the top of the grandstands was a small group of zebras. Three hulking buffalo near the front were impossible to miss, and there were probably other non-ponies that Rarity simply couldn’t pick out.

“And now, let’s all give a cheer for Equestria’s very own Wonderbolts!” As the announcer finished speaking, twelve blue and gold streaks crisscrossed overhead, weaving a tapestry of colored smoke behind them. The crowd cheered and the brass band played a martial tune as the Wonderbolts intersected and then broke apart in all kinds of impossible-seeming patterns, forming stars, diamonds, and even fleur-de-lis patterns in the cloudless sky.

“According to the instructions I received from the organizers, we need to get up to our spot on the platform while the aerial show is going on,” Fancypants announced over the roar of the crowd. “Let’s go.”

As Rarity and the others approached a steep staircase leading up to the top of the boarding platform, she observed the other teams that were present. The remaining

griffon team, still in their mail and helmets and led by the rotund Elector Graywings, flew up to the platform from the ground. Rarity was relieved to see that the other pony squads and Prince Khufu's team wore jumpsuits not unlike her own. As with her own group, one member of each of the other teams was absent, presumably gone to pilot their airship to the boarding platform at the proper time. The Homespire griffons were gone, as were the pegasi from Cloudsdale, having withdrawn. There was also no sign of Blueblood. Rarity wondered whether he had managed to fix the problems with his ship in the few hours available this morning.

The ponies surmounted the stairs and arrived at the top of the platform. The wooden structure was precariously high off the ground and alarmingly narrow, and a fall off any side would surely prove disastrous for the wingless competitors. Rarity made a mental note not to flail about and kick any Wonderbolt who should try to save her if she fell. After her near-death experience in Cloudsdale, when the spell that temporarily gave her wings had failed, she had cajoled Twilight Sparkle into teaching her the enchantment for making clouds become solid beneath her hooves. Today, though, there weren't even any clouds to potentially break her fall. Keeping well clear of the edge, she stood in a line with Fancypants, Windlass, and Elbow Grease, and looked out on the multitudes staring back at her.

A series of thuds reverberated across the platform, and Rarity steadied herself as she looked around. The Wonderbolts had finished their show and had landed at even intervals all along the length of the boarding platform. Rarity had seen the Wonderbolts often enough to recognize several of them on sight. That handsome stallion with the wild dark blue mane and the petite mare, Fleetfoot, took up positions closest to her team.

"And now," Golden Pipes boomed, "the time has come to introduce the six airships that will be competing in this famous race across the world, and their brave crews. First, sponsored by the Canterlot Steam Engine Company, the airship *Fancy Free!*" The band blew a mighty fanfare to punctuate the announcer's proclamation, but Rarity still didn't see any airship. Only when the cheering and stomping of hooves reached a new crescendo did she think to look backwards.

Fancy Free slowly rose from behind the boarding platform, climbing vertically from where it had been holding far below. The balloon, in the form of a hulking oceanic leviathan, looked somewhat menacing as it ascended. Finally, the main hull was lifted into sight, its fresh white paint with red detail work gleaming in the sunlight. Four propellers on short wings added to the sides of the craft were swiveled into a vertical position, allowing the airship much greater vertical control than the movable fins they replaced. Colonel Tempest, clad in a jumpsuit that matched the rest of the team,

occupied the helm. Rarity watched as he swiveled the propellers and carefully turned the ship so that it was abeam of the platform. At that point, the two Wonderbolts standing behind leapt from the platform to help pull the airship the rest of the way in, and secured it with mooring lines. A gangplank was pulled from the platform to rest on the side of the airship, and then secured.

This was it: time to say goodbye to solid ground for a few days and get ready for a trip across Equestria and beyond. Rarity knew that she had had every chance to refuse, turn around, and go home, yet she hadn't. Whether it was her love of the spotlight, her need to impress Fancypants and the elites, or her desire to be a part of something that would potentially only come around once in her lifetime, she had decided to forge ahead. The others were already boarding the airship, so she gave one last enthusiastic wave and blew a kiss to the crowd before turning to follow them.

“The Captain of *Fancy Free* is none other than Canterlot's own Fancypants!” Golden Pipes' amplified voice called out. “With him are Colonel Tempest, retired from the Royal Guard; aeronautical engineer Windlass; technician Elbow Grease; and Rarity, president of Ponyville's Carousel Couture fashion house, personal friend to Princess Celestia, and one of the brave mares who defeated Nightmare Moon and Discord!”

At least they got the fashion designer part first that time. Yesterday Rarity might have been embarrassed by such public acclaim. Today, though, after washing away her doubt in Fancypants' amazing shower, she was ready to embrace this part of her identity. She waved enthusiastically to the applauding crowd.

“Here I am, Equestria, Rarity the unicorn!” she mouthed, inaudibly against the background noise of the engine, propellers, stamping hooves, and raised voices.

The announcer called forth each of the other airships in turn, and one by one the vessels rose from below and were anchored to the platform by a pair of Wonderbolts.

The citrus growers' airship, *Refresh*, was an ungainly box with rotating paddles for propulsion, tethered to a large ovoid balloon shaped something like a fat goldfish, but garishly decorated to look like an enormous orange. Every part of the airship that could be covered with representations of citrus fruit, was.

The Fillydelphia ship, called the *Flyer*, was as traditional as could be. The balloon was a silvery cylinder stabilized by a quartet of fins, and the hull hanging below resembled an old wooden airsailer. Only the large propellers on either side and the steam chimneys revealed it to be of a modern design.

The griffons from the northern peaks flew the airship *Stiletto*, a dagger shaped hull painted red and suspended from sixteen large white balloons roped together in a two-abreast line running parallel to the long axis of the craft. Six small propellers spun on long rotatable wings that emerged near the back of the airship, exactly where the crossguard would be on the ship's namesake knife. To Rarity's untrained eye, the airship looked fast and threatening, but far less stable than some of the other designs.

Finally, the ship from Prince Khufu's apparent front company, Everfree Shipping, was appropriately named the *Everfree*, and was painted in a black and white-striped zebra aesthetic with lightning bolt accents. Though any trace of an aquatic theme was absent, it still bore a superficial resemblance to *Fancy Free*.

"And now I've been informed of an adjustment to the program," Golden Pipes declared. "Ahem. We have a sponsorship change. The final entrant is no longer sponsored by North Star Shipwrights of Canterlot, but is being privately sponsored by its captain. I give you the final competing craft, the airship *Alicorn* flown by His Grace, the Duke of Canterlot!"

Rarity waited, but no ship rose from below to take the last spot on the platform. Had Blueblood simply decided he couldn't compete and given up? At that moment she saw that some of the crowd were pointing to the sky, and she followed their outstretched hooves. There, growing larger by the second, was another airship barreling toward the palace grounds and leaving a trail of white steam billowing in the air behind it. Rarity had never seen anything like it.

The *Alicorn* was somewhat similar in philosophy to *Fancy Free* and Blueblood's identical yacht *Sacrebleu*, but it was worlds different in execution. The balloon was no rounded sea giant, but was instead encased in a beautifully-crafted structural covering that gave it the pointed aerodynamic shape of a speedy and aggressive billfish. The spear-nosed balloon had its own stabilizing fins and tail that allowed it slice effortlessly through the air while maintaining a steady course. The hull suspended beneath was sleek, smaller in every dimension than *Fancy Free* and more sharply curved. The ship's hull was ivory, devoid of any commercial insignia but covered all over in swooping gold accents and curlicues. A sculpted gold alicorn figurehead boldly pointed the way forward from the bow. Unlike *Fancy Free*, from which the steerable fins had been removed in favor of propellers, the *Alicorn* retained two large flipper-like fins on either side of the hull for control. Rarity could see that the airship's primary means of propulsion was a single enormous propeller, wider than the hull itself, that extended directly aft in order to push the ship forward.

Upon reaching the vicinity of the grandstand, the *Alicorn's* control fins all rotated sharply in opposite directions, and the airship canted over into a descending turn so sharp and steep that the hull swung outward on its tethers until it was nearly on its side and completely out from under the balloon. Rarity then watched the beautiful airship slow with what seemed like practiced ease and drop into position with the other competitors. She could see Blueblood standing on the airship's deck, but his face was mostly obscured by thick goggles. He wore no atrocious jumpsuit, but instead a handsomely cut sport jacket. Rarity felt a pang of jealousy.

“The competitors have arrived!” the announcer declared. “But the race cannot begin until the rules are established. The *Alicorn's* Cup is a race across all the known lands, to the very edge of the endless sea and back. The racers will travel a course that will take them through Equestria, over the jungles and swamps in the lands to the south, westward to the ocean shore, and then north to the icy fjords of the northwest. The course then proceeds east to the mountains where the griffons roost, and then straight back here to Canterlot. Most of the race is through Equestria or friendly country, and wherever possible observation balloons have been tethered along the way so that journalists and course monitors can track the progress of the race and the status of the racers. Sometimes, though, the *Alicorn's* Cup will take these brave souls so far afield that they must travel through untamed lands, where there is no weather control, and where there are no towns or havens to seek refuge.”

Golden Pipes paused to let the potential hazards of the race sink in. Rarity knew how the race was structured; Fancy pants hadn't hidden that from her at least. She was convinced that three unicorns, a pegasus, and a technically-inclined earth pony could not get into too much trouble, even far from Equestria. She'd been through worse on the ground than they would encounter from the safety of the air.

“We are fortunate to have the Wonderbolts as course monitors for the regatta. They will fly ahead and position themselves at the observation balloons, and will catalog the time and positions of the racers as they pass predetermined waypoints. This information will be couriered back to Canterlot as fast as the swiftest news pegasus can fly. The Wonderbolts will also watch for rules violations, and can be contacted should any team wish to report an infraction or withdraw for any reason.”

Golden Pipes went on. “The rules are simple. Each team must pass all of the waypoints and collect proof of doing so. The required proof for each waypoint is different, and is included in the instructions that have been provided to each team this morning. Collisions and any other airship-to-airship contact are forbidden, and will result in immediate disqualification. The first airship crew to cross the finish line in Canterlot

with the required evidence of passing each waypoint will be declared the winner, and their names will be forever inscribed on the *Alicorn's Cup*." He paused again before continuing. "Competitors, please release your lines and position your airships in the starting area!"

Rarity hung back as Windlass and the two Wonderbolt escorts untied *Fancy Free* from the platform. Within seconds, the ship was floating in air, completely disconnected from the land below. The deck vibrated as power was increased to the engine, and soon the airship turned and began to move. On either side the other craft were doing the same, and soon they formed a ragged line abreast, each ship pointed south, away from Canterlot. And toward home, Rarity thought.

"And now, before the race begins, we have one final speaker. I present to you, Princess Celestia of Equestria!" The crowd applauded wildly, and then hushed at once as the alicorn stood up in her box and began to speak.

"Hello my little ponies," the Princess began, pouring her mellifluous voice over all assembled. "Welcome guests of all stripes. I want to offer a few final words before the race begins. The *Alicorn's Cup* always ushers in momentous occasions. I remember each one quite well. This year, the race celebrates the spread across all the world of a new technological marvel, the reciprocating steam engine. But we should also remember that the race does more than celebrate what has already been achieved. It also points the way toward the future. It represents the opportunity to showcase the best of us: bold spirits, indomitable hearts, and camaraderie between all free creatures. Difficult and tragic events have recently transpired in Canterlot, and there will doubtless be tense moments ahead. Yet we don't have to let our disagreements define us. I ask you, brave racers, to fly swiftly and fly fairly, and to inspire the world. Show us all that, though the world is changing in ways that even I cannot imagine, it can be change for the better. I expect you to break every record, and for all of you to return home safely."

Even over a distance of hundreds of pony lengths, Rarity felt that the Princess was looking directly at her as she said the last. Well of course she planned to return home safely. There was hardly any reason to worry, given that she was in obviously capable hooves.

"And now," Princess Celestia continued, "I'd like give my sister the honor of starting the race. This is Princess Luna's first *Alicorn's Cup*, so let's make it a good one."

"Miss Rarity." Rarity turned as Fancypants tapped her shoulder with a hoof. "I believe we are about to get under way, and I was wondering if you would like to start us off."

“Why yes!” Rarity affirmed. She had determined to make the most of this adventure at any cost, and what better time to start enjoying herself than right at the beginning?

“Excellent!” Fancypants exclaimed. “When Princess Luna calls for the race to begin, you need to throw that brass lever all the way forward to the stop marked ‘flank speed.’”

“It will be my pleasure, Captain!” Rarity replied, placing a hoof on the thick lever mounted next to the ship’s wheel, which currently rested on a detent marked “idle/full stop.”

“HOW DOTH THIS WORK AGAIN, SISTER?” Princess Luna’s amplified voice boomed across the city of Canterlot, nearly causing Rarity to fall backward in surprise.

“Just say ‘go,’” the elder Princess replied, the conversation fully audible to everypony for miles around.

“INDEED! THE FUN BEGINS IMMEDIATELY! ALL OF YOU, GO AT ONCE!” Princess Luna bellowed gleefully.

“Whahaha!” Rarity gave an excited shout as she thrust the throttle lever all the way forward to its final stop. For the first time in nearly thirty years, the *Alicorn*’s Cup regatta had begun again.

A biting, scouring wind washed over her as the airship accelerated away from the starting area, and as Rarity stared into the wind, her mane flying around her, she thought this might be even better than Fancypants’ marvelous shower. This was living like Rainbow Dash; it was pure unfettered exhilaration. She did not even turn around to look as Canterlot fell away behind her.

The crew of the airship *Fancy Free* clustered together silently on the vessel's wooden deck, each taking a moment to simply savor the excitement of racing. Fancypants magically kept a tight rein on the ship's wheel in order to hold a steady course, while Rarity and the others stood watching the sky and the other airships.

From her limited vantage point near the middle of the deck, Rarity's view of the ground below was completely obscured. That, however, did not mean that the view she did have was boring. On the contrary, the sky around her was all abuzz with movement. Off to the left and right, or rather port and starboard, the other ships plowed through the clear air. Each ship was keeping its distance from one another for the moment, and they were all matching the same pace, waiting to see who would make a move first.

At the same time, the interstices between the airships were filled with pegasi. Dozens, if not over a hundred spectators had poured out of the stands after the start, and now they kept pace with the race. Rarity knew the pegasi would grow tired and head back eventually, but for now the scattered flock of ponies seemed instilled with competitive fire, none wanting to be the first to give in and go home. A number of the Royal Guard and a pair of Wonderbolts also flew alongside, keeping the spectators a safe distance from the airships and their spinning propeller blades. The other Wonderbolts had raced away in different directions, flying to their stations along the race route in order to fulfill their tasks as course monitors.

"We're getting close to cruise speed now," Tempest announced.

"Rarity my dear, would you be so kind as to reduce the throttle one notch?" Fancypants asked.

Rarity was only too happy to appear useful, and she pulled the throttle lever back until the indicator read "ahead full." As she throttled back the power, she felt the vibration caused by the steam engine gradually smooth out until she could barely feel it.

"Done," she reported. "But I don't understand; isn't the point of a race to go as fast as possible?"

"Yeah, sure," Elbow Grease spoke up. "It'd be great to run her flat out all the time, but we'd run outta fuel tomorrow, and probably blow up the boiler. Ya gotta baby an engine like the beauty we got on *Fancy Free* here."

“I see,” Rarity replied, beginning to understand one of the complexities of the regatta. “So part of racing is managing how hard to run the engine in order to go faster, and how much fuel we burn. It’s not just about steering better and flying faster all the time.”

“Precisely my dear,” Fancypants said. “The *Alicorn’s* Cup is a marathon, not a sprint, and it will require the skills of everypony on board to win it. The good colonel will give us our bearings; Miss Windlass designed the modifications that make us competitive and will keep all of our instruments running shipshape; Elbow Grease here will keep the engine happy and healthy, and help give us that last extra bit of power when it truly counts; and you, my dear, can lend your capable hooves wherever they are needed.”

“I’ll do my best,” Rarity offered dubiously, wondering not for the first time whether she might be best suited to scrubbing the deck.

“We haven’t all had the chance to read the briefing materials yet,” Windlass said to Fancypants. “I think we need to have a planning session as soon as possible.”

“So we shall,” Fancypants replied. “Right now, however, we must keep our attention on the race. The first waypoint marker that we have to retrieve as proof of our following the race course will be coming up shortly. According to the dossier, we must obtain a specially-marked apple from Ponyville as proof of having passed the first waypoint, and by my estimate we are now more than halfway to Ponyville already.”

“An apple from Ponyville?” Rarity exclaimed in surprise. “Are we landing then?”

If the teams had to land to get a special apple, then she might be able to see her friends again. In fact it was a near certainty that she would! After all, who in Ponyville would supply apples besides Applejack of Sweet Apple Acres? After yesterday evening’s eventfulness, it would be heartening to see the girls one more time, before she left the security of Equestria completely.

Maybe, Rarity thought, her parents and Sweetie Belle would be there too, and Spike, and maybe Fluttershy would even bring Opalescence to say goodbye before she had to fly away again! She felt a twinge of guilt at leaving her poor cat behind for nearly a week, but at least with Fluttershy she was in capable hooves. Opal surely understood that her mama couldn’t turn down this opportunity, didn’t she? On second thought, Rarity decided that she would be extra mindful of Opal’s claws when she returned home, and probably for sometime thereafter.

“Actually, we shall be remaining aloft for this leg of the race,” Fancypants responded. “The instructions state that the apple in question is to be taken from a race volunteer in a tethered hot air balloon somewhere over the town.”

“Oh,” Rarity said, crestfallen. She would only see her home from high above, and she wouldn’t see her friends until the race was over. Perhaps she could at least watch, and imagine the friendly faces of the ponies below. “I hope it’s no imposition, but would you mind terribly if I just stand at the rail and watch for a moment? I’d love to see the town as we pass over.”

“Not in the slightest,” Fancypants replied cheerfully. “In fact, perhaps you could do us the favor of maintaining a lookout. The rules prevent Colonel Tempest, or any of the griffons for that matter, from flying ahead to scout, so we must search the skies for the marker from on board.”

Rarity nodded, and Fancypants levitated a wood and brass spyglass toward her. She was reluctant to cross spells after her experience with Blueblood, so she took the instrument in her mouth and walked to the very front of the deck, stopping just short of the bowsprit. Here the force of the wind whipping against her face and body was greater, and for the first time Rarity was grateful for the unfashionable jumpsuit she was wearing. Whatever coarse material it was woven from was keeping the wind and its accompanying chill at bay far better than any of her own clothing would have. That still did not mean it wasn’t uncomfortably cold. Suppressing a shiver, Rarity let go of the spyglass and caught it magically. Before putting it to her eye, though, she decided to look down at the world below without its aid.

The wind and the pegasi spectators beginning to struggle to keep up told Rarity that she was traveling quite fast, but distance obscured speed and the panorama below slowly crawled through her field of view. She could see the River Canter winding its way down from the mountains and south, descending through vales and meadows and finally broadening into long and narrow Lake Harmony, which looked like a shiny pane of blue-gray glass from Rarity’s vantage point. Ponyville wasn’t very far away now, she knew, lying just downstream of the far end of the lake.

Lake Harmony was ponymade, created when the Celestia Dam had been erected to harness the Canter’s energy and feed it into the magilectric grid emanating from Canterlot. Without the grid, unicorns in Ponyville and the other cities and towns in the core of Equestria would have to be constantly re-enchanting every magical appliance they used, and everypony else would have to work their machines by hoof. Phonographs would have to be constantly cranked, Rarity would have to go back to a hoof-operated

sewing machine, and Twilight's entire basement full of odd gadgets and manufactures would be rendered inert.

Rarity had been a foal when the dam had been completed, but she still heard the old-timers complain about how it had sapped the flow of the river near town. By the time the Canter trickled past Fluttershy's cottage and into the Everfree Forest, it was little more than a placid stream. Ponyville's grist mill had shut down because there wasn't enough flow to turn the millstone to grind flour anymore. Now Ponyville's flour was carted in from elsewhere in Equestria. That was the price of progress.

From high above, even monumental things that had changed life for ponies forever, like the lake and dam, seemed tiny and almost incidental to the vast landscape of which they were part. It was amazing to Rarity that so much of the land, even this close to Canterlot, consisted of undeveloped fields and forests. She wondered how many ponies it took, working full time, just to care for those forests and the creatures living there. Just how much land, for example, was Fluttershy actually responsible for looking after, and how many creatures therein? What would happen if nopony cared for the trees and animals? Rarity would make a point to ask her friend these questions when she finally returned home.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Fluttershy asked. "I don't usually fly as high as this."

"It's lovely," Rarity agreed. "The altitude certainly gives one a whole new per—wha? Fluttershy?" Rarity lifted her head up to see her pegasus friend flying alongside the airship. "How?"

"How do you think?" Rarity whipped her head in the opposite direction as she turned to see Rainbow Dash winging her way through the air to her left. "Did you forget that somepony knows these guys?" Rainbow Dash indicated the dark blue-maned Wonderbolt stallion flying just a few lengths away from her. "They said we could pay you a quick visit."

"If you don't mind, that is," Fluttershy added.

"Of course not, darling! I've missed you. Both of you," Rarity said, raising her voice to be heard over the wind. "All of you, in fact, and Ponyville too."

"Hey!" Colonel Tempest shouted, galloping forward to the bow of the ship. "Don't let them onboard!" He waved a hoof as if to shoo Rarity's friends away.

“Colonel!” Rarity was taken aback by the normally staid pony’s abrupt harshness. “These are my good friends.”

“It doesn’t matter who they are, if a sixth pony touches down on deck, then by rule we are overcrewed and instantly disqualified. Keep them away from the airship!”

“Hey, easy there big guy,” Rainbow Dash said, maintaining a respectful distance from the side of the craft. “I know the rules. We’re not gonna touch your precious airship.”

“See that you don’t!”

“Oh, Rarity, I hope we didn’t get you into any trouble,” Fluttershy said, barely audibly above the wind. “I would just feel so terribly awful if we got you into trouble.”

“Don’t worry about that, dears,” Rarity replied. “I am close friends with the captain of this vessel, so we needn’t worry too much about the colonel’s temperament. Besides, he’ll get over it.”

“So,” Rainbow Dash began, “I can’t believe Miss Canterlot herself is feeling homesick for boring ol’ Ponyville.”

“If you knew what I’ve been through, Rainbow Dash,” Rarity began before sighing dramatically. “Well, let me just say that it hasn’t exactly been a pleasure cruise.”

“Really? Because it kinda looks like a pleasure cruise,” Rainbow Dash replied with a sardonic grin, gesturing expansively to encompass the air yacht. Rarity glared at her friend for dismissing her troubles so casually.

“Hey girls, we’re almost to Ponyville now,” Fluttershy said, tactfully stopping Rainbow’s line of inquiry. “I’ll bet you can see your boutique from here, Rarity.”

Fluttershy was right. The fields and forests were giving way to plowed fields and dirt roads, and not far beyond was Ponyville. The town seemed so small, no bigger than any one of Canterlot’s many districts. She raised the spyglass to her right eye and closed the other. There was the town square, and if she just traced along Stirrup Street to the west ... yes! There was Carousel Boutique!

Rarity hoped she wasn’t losing out on too much business this week. Should she have hired someone to run the shop while she was gone? But who? Maybe her mother could have taken her place. No, what was she thinking? No pony would buy couture gowns

from a middle-aged mare in trotting pants who sounded like she just got off the carriage from Whinnyapolis!

“Oh my stars,” Rarity suddenly gasped, looking back and forth between her friends and moving the spyglass away from her face. “I completely forgot, I’m supposed to be on lookout duty! There’s a balloon somewhere over the town that has marked apples in it, and we need to collect one to prove that we’re following the race course.” She raised the spyglass again to frantically search for the marker balloon.

“Um, it’s right there,” Rainbow Dash said, stretching a hoof straight out in front of her.

Rarity followed her friend’s outstretched leg toward the horizon until she saw, straight in front of the airship but a fair distance below, a pink hot air balloon floating over the far side of Ponyville.

“You saw that from here?” Rarity asked, surprised. She’d never have been able to pick the balloon out from all of the buildings of the town below, at least not until they were much closer. She could still only just barely see it in her spyglass.

“Well, mostly I just know it’s there ‘cuz Fluttershy and I were over there before we raced over to say hi,” Rainbow Dash replied.

“You see, Applejack, Pinkie, Twilight and Spike are giving out the special apples,” Fluttershy explained. “When the mayor received the instructions from the race committee this morning and asked for volunteers to go up in the balloon, we all thought it would be a great way to see you and cheer you on.”

“Yeah, even though you’re just a slowpoke unicorn, it’s pretty cool that you’re in a flying race,” Rainbow Dash granted.

“Oh, thank you!” Rarity said, surprised and thrilled to have the chance to see all of her closest friends, if only briefly. “You’re all such good friends. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate this. Just wait here for one moment while I tell the others about the balloon.” Happy to be in the company of friends, and so close to home, Rarity trotted merrily back to the steering console, where she proudly announced that she had seen the balloon, and that it was straight ahead, roughly fifty lengths below their current altitude.

“Excellent! We should be there in mere minutes. Do you think you could handle retrieving the marker?” Fancypants asked, checking the flight instruments while he spoke.

“Yes!” Rarity enthusiastically affirmed, already on her way back to the bow where Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were matching the airship’s course and speed.

“Girls,” Rarity said, “I think we’re about to return to the business of racing here, so I shall have to bid you both adieu, but I did want to say one more thing to you, Rainbow Dash.”

“Oh no, this isn’t about Cloudsdale is it?” Rainbow Dash groaned, backing away with a few flaps of her wings and throwing her forelegs out as if to push Rarity away. “You talked to Chroma didn’t you? After I practically *begged* you not to listen to her.”

“Rainbow, please, you must know that I would never try to get involved in a family matter if I wasn’t convinced it was of the utmost importance,” Rarity started, giving her friend an imploring look. “The griffons and ponies are on the verge of fighting over the mountains where you lived when you were a foal. I was there last night when their chancellor passed away, and I have a feeling that there will be those on both sides who wrongly suspect that it was not an accident. He did perish while in the company of ponies, and that looks bad. Princess Celestia is staying out of the whole affair for now, so it’s fallen mainly on your family to try to salvage the situation. Your cousin doesn’t think they can do it without you. I think you should go to them, Rainbow Dash. There, that’s all I’ll say about it.”

“Listen Rarity,” her friend began, crossing her forelegs, narrowing her gaze, and somehow still keeping pace with the ship even though she was essentially flying sideways. “I don’t tell *you* that you should go visit your sister and parents more often, and not always be so focused on your work and your own life, do I? Let *me* handle *my* family, and my life, okay? Good luck in the race. Take care of yourself.” With that, Rainbow Dash dove away, down toward Ponyville.

Rainbow’s response had been a low blow. Perhaps Rarity should spend more time with her family, but what did that have to do with anything? It wasn’t as if *her* relationship with her sister and parents was a matter of national importance. Then again, no matter how important it was, did she really have the right to tell Rainbow Dash what to do? Perhaps just this one time, yes, it was that important. She hoped that Rainbow would eventually forgive her for getting involved, even if her friend couldn’t get up the nerve to do so personally.

“Rainbow Dash has been so very tense lately,” said Fluttershy, wearing a concerned look. “We’ve all noticed it.”

“Now I’ve made it worse,” Rarity sighed. “Fluttershy, dear, please tell her when you see her how much I value her friendship. You know that I’d give anything for my friends. Just don’t tell her that I didn’t mean what I said, because I did.”

“Okay, Rarity. I’ll tell her. Now I guess I’d better be going too. It’s getting hard to keep flying in this thin air, anyway. Good luck, and I promise to keep taking good care of Opal for you.”

“Thank you for coming to see me, it means a lot,” Rarity said with a smile. “I’ll see you at the spa as soon as I return, and you can stick a cupcake in your eye for *that* promise.”

Fluttershy smiled, said a brief goodbye, and then fell back and dropped down out of sight.

Rarity picked up her spyglass again and sighted the balloon where the rest of her friends waited. She could just make out a group of figures in the gondola, but couldn’t yet see detail at this distance. Suddenly there was a terrific roar off to her right as the silver airship from Fillydelphia shot forward and began to dive.

“*Flyer* is making her move on the marker!” Windlass called. Rarity saw that the young mare had taken up a position on the starboard rail.

“Flank speed!” Fancypants called out. “I need precise directions, Colonel. We’ll cut them off. Elbow Grease, my boy, show me what you can coax from that engine.”

“Bearing one-seven-eight, thirty lengths below at two thousand lengths distant!” Colonel Tempest shouted from the port rail.

Rarity wrapped her forelegs around the bow deck rail and held on as *Fancy Free* simultaneously accelerated and entered a shallow dive. All around the other airships were making a move toward the marker at once. They couldn’t all arrive at the same time, could they? Collisions were subject to disqualification, so surely someone would back off. Surely.

The few pegasi who had managed to keep up with the race all the way from Canterlot scattered at the urging of the Wonderbolts and Royal Guard as the airships converged on the balloon hanging in the air before them. Rarity could see that the balloon was tethered to the ground by a number of thick ropes, and now that they were descending she was able to see into the balloon’s gondola. Twilight was there, and there were Applejack and Pinkie and even sweet little Spike peeking out over the rim of the gondola.

“Oh my.” The balloon was getting closer very fast, and so far none of the other airships had backed off. The griffons were closing in on the port side, and even though *Fancy Free* was outpacing the Fillydelphian *Flyer* to starboard, Blueblood’s graceful *Alicorn* was cutting sharply toward the marker from the far outside. Meanwhile, Rarity had to think not about an impending collision, but about getting an apple from her friends.

“Turn starboard three degrees!” Tempest called out. “Steady now!”

Seconds ticked by slowly as the balloon occupied more and more of Rarity’s field of view. Twilight and the others were shouting and waving excitedly to her, but Rarity could not hear their voices over the wind and roaring engines. She also couldn’t wave back, because her forelegs were clamped like vices around the bow rail, and she suspected that the smile she was trying to muster looked more like an expression of the terror she was feeling.

Fancypants would not slow down or give way, but she was beginning to doubt whether Blueblood or the griffons knew that. They were all coming closer, and closer, and Rarity could only wonder how she could get that apple if she couldn’t bear to look. She braced herself for the end.

Many things happened in the next instant. An apple arced through the air, gracefully tossed from Applejack’s outstretched forehoof. The crimson hull of the griffon airship flashed past overhead as it pulled up and away, abandoning an attempt to wedge itself between *Fancy Free* and the marker balloon. Blueblood’s airship bobbed and bucked in the air as he threw the engine and propeller into reverse and veered away at the last moment before colliding. Rarity reflexively used her magic to take hold of the incoming apple, and she watched her friends pass by and disappear behind her as *Fancy Free* surged forward and began climbing away into the open air. They had been cheering and shouting her name, and for that moment all Rarity wanted to do was to turn the airship around and jump from the bow straight into the embrace of her friends. Of course now it was already too late. She had not even managed to wave, but at least she had that apple.

“I’ve got it,” Rarity announced, walking back to Fancypants and the rest of the crew and feeling a strange combination of excitement and melancholy. Rarity levitated the apple for all to see. It was a beautiful bright red specimen, coated in clear wax for preservation’s sake, and hoof painted with the seal of the Royal Pony Sisters.

“Wonderful job, Rarity! I knew you could do it.” Fancypants exclaimed. “That’s one down, and nine markers left to go.”

“The rest of them are a lot farther away than Ponyville, though” Windlass observed. “And I’m guessing they’re a lot more exotic than just an apple.”

“Quite so,” Fancypants agreed. “As soon as we level off and establish a steady cruise, I propose we engage the entire team for a planning briefing. Tempest, what do you expect the winds to be like at two thousand lengths altitude?”

“It should be calm,” the pegasus replied. “I agree that we need to plan, and that we can spare the time. No team is going to risk overburning fuel this early in the race, so we should be able let our guard down for a few hours at least.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Fancypants replied. “I anticipate that we will have ascended to cruising altitude within the next fifteen minutes, so we’ll convene belowdecks then.”

So that was that then, Rarity thought. The race was on, and they had passed Ponyville and were flying south. There were not very many settlements in the far south of Equestria, and those she did know of were tiny. What lay beyond the border was a mystery to her. She did know that there would be no hot baths, no warm fires, and no real food until after they crossed the finish line. Fancypants would be the only familiar face to keep her company, and Rarity had only known him by more than reputation alone for just over two months.

Up here there were no family, no pets, and no old friends. There was no Rainbow Dash to coerce into trying on dresses, no Fluttershy for spa dates, no Pinkie Pie with whom to carouse at night, no Applejack eager to join her for an early morning trot, and no Twilight Sparkle with whom she could trade magic spells and innermost secrets. She would even miss her little Spikey-wikey, with his adorable schoolcolt crush. She had to put all of them aside and focus on the here and now. It would all be worth it when she returned to Canterlot a celebrity. That was the plan, and she had to stick to the plan.

Rarity tried to spend the next few minutes being useful, but there simply didn’t seem to be anything for her to do. Tempest conducted measurements with a sextant and astrolabe while Windlass monitored the various steam and pressure gauges on the console. Elbow Grease worked on the engine below. For her part, Rarity could do little but watch the world pass by and try to stay out of the way. By the time Fancypants was ready to meet, she was aware both that she had no valuable skills when it came to the business of flying a complicated airship, and that she was feeling rather peckish.

“Alright everypony,” Fancypants called, “let us adjourn to the salon. I’ve set the ship to hold its course for the time being.”

Descending belowdecks, Rarity was thrilled to finally escape the biting wind. She was not, however, prepared for the sight that greeted her. Where before *Fancy Free's* cabin had once been the height of spare-no-expense luxury, with an array of posh lounges and bedchambers, now it was a single spartan room lit by a few kerosene lanterns. A low table occupied the center of the room, rows of boxes lined the walls, and four utilitarian beds hung from the ceiling on the far side of the space. A door at the rear Rarity recognized as leading to the engine room, and she was proved correct when Elbow Grease emerged covered in, well, grease. Another door at the far side must have been the lavatory. Actually, Rarity thought, on a spare racing ship like this it would be called the head. Charming.

Fancypants magically unrolled a large map and used pushpins to affix it to the table in the center of the room, while Rarity and the others crowded around.

“This is the known world,” Fancypants said. “We shall fly over twenty-five hundred leagues, and see bits and pieces of quite a lot of it before we return to Canterlot. This morning I received a precise course route, and instructions for retrieving the required markers at each waypoint we pass. It behooves all of us to know where we are going, and what we must do in order to win this competition.”

“I’d like to know who chose the colors for this map. They just clash so much,” Rarity complained.

“That’s so it’s easier to read,” Tempest grumbled.

“Right. Colonel Tempest, you are a trained navigator, and you’ve spent some time outside Equestria over the course of your career, so I hope you’ll be able to elaborate as to certain things I know little about. Now, as everypony knows, we’ve already passed the first waypoint, and thanks to Rarity, we have the first marker. There are nine more.”

Fancypants levitated a pen over the map and began to draw in red ink. He traced a line from Canterlot southward. “From the start line we flew almost due south to Ponyville, and now we are flying southward further still. Our present southeasterly course will take us to the town of Gallopoli, a fishing town at the far southern border of Equestria. The second waypoint is there, and we must retrieve a strand of Gallopolitan freshwater pearls.”

Rarity had heard of Gallopoli and its famous pink pearls before. Legends, probably spread by the Gallopolitans themselves to drive their business, said that if a pony made a wish while throwing one of the luminescent pearls back into the sea, the grateful spirits

of the ocean would grant it. Rarity had never seen Gallopoli, nor one of its pearls, nor even seen the warm southern ocean. It was a shame that she would only get to see it for such a short while.

“After the second waypoint it will already be time to leave Equestria,” Fancypants continued. “The third waypoint is an isolated cottage beyond the border, right at the edge of the Impenetrable Lands. There is a botanist from Canterlot living there, growing and cataloguing jungle orchids. We are to retrieve a rare flower called Badge of Courage from the botanist as the third marker.” Fancypants pulled a drawing of a beautiful scarlet bloom from a folder lying on the table and placed it on the map where he had just finished drawing a connecting line.

“Next, we fly west-northwest, making for the desert west of the plains where the buffalo nations make their homes. There are ancient pictograms there, hundreds of lengths across and apparently carved into the earth itself by some long-lost civilization. Because they are so large, the figures are only visible from high above. We are to produce a drawing of one of these figures as our fourth marker.

“The fifth marker lies on the shore of the Endless Ocean, north of the Haydriatic Sea. Each year, hundreds of large, spiral-shaped shells wash up on the beaches. We simply need to pick one up and take it along.” Fancypants produced a drawing of a strange disc-shaped shell made up of a single spiraling tube as he connected his line to the far shore of the continent.

Rarity knew the western ocean only by reputation. It was known as the Endless because as far as anypony knew, it went on forever. Ponies rarely visited to stare at its infinite gray vastness, and not only because it was a long way from the Equestrian border. The wind and waves were always relentlessly beating up on the land, the water was frigid, and no mariner had ever returned having spotted anything of note.

“Next we’ll fly inland and further north to the wastes, where we will find a forest of ancient trees long ago turned to broken stone. We must bring back a piece of petrified wood as the sixth marker. After that, we will fly a relatively short leg to Ramstein, a remote alpine village of the mountain sheep. Their leader will give us a letter of transit that will serve as our seventh marker. The eighth marker will be colorful ice, or rather water by the time we return, from the Rainbow Glacier in the Frostbite Fjords of the far northwest.” Fancypants added more lines and points to the map. The glacier was practically at the north pole, and Rarity hoped that there were parkas and other warm clothing in the bags and boxes that Fancypants had packed.

“After that, my friends, we will be in the home stretch. We will enter griffon territory and stop in the city of Spearspire Eyrie to obtain a commemorative poem from the griffon poet laureate, Longfeather, for the ninth marker. After that, we make for the pegasus mining town of Stratusburg at Flurryfall Pass to obtain a brick of special cloud. That is the last marker, and accordingly we will burn whatever fuel we have remaining in order to sprint for Canterlot and the finish line.”

“How long until we reach Gallopoli?” Windlass asked, directing her question at Tempest, the navigator.

“If we remain at cruise speed, we should arrive at the waypoint at zero five-hundred hours,” Tempest replied.

“Five in the morning?” Rarity asked. “That’s practically criminal! Don’t we all need our beauty rest?”

“We’ll all get some sleep, but that means somepony has to take watch when the rest are sleeping. Even you,” Windlass said with a hint of acidity in her voice.

“Yes, we must all make sacrifices for the good of the team,” Fancypants said. “Now, we’ve discussed the flight plan. Do you have any questions?”

Nopony had any, least of all Rarity. All they had to do was follow the line on Fancypants’ map, and pick up a few baubles and odd bits along the way. How hard could it be? Suddenly, though, she remembered the one unknown that had been nagging at her.

“I don’t suppose you might know when we should expect dinner?” she asked with trepidation.

“Oh, I thought you’d never ask!” Fancypants replied with a smile. “I am actually quite famished myself. Does that go for the lot of you as well?”

When the others nodded their assent, Fancypants magically opened one of the nondescript boxes positioned against the wall and began extracting various objects. A small kerosene stove emerged, then a large metal pot, wooden bowls, some apples, and finally a large sack of oats. Once Fancypants added water to the pot and set it to boil on the stove, Rarity realized that he was making simple oatmeal.

“Oatmeal for dinner?” she asked incredulously. “You?”

“Oats and apples are nutritious and economical,” Fancypants replied. “We weren’t able to spare the weight to have a full galley on board in which to prepare more complicated comestibles, but we do have a great many bags of oats to work our way through. Think of it as an opportunity to temporarily enjoy a simpler life. I, for one, think that this sort of cuisine is charmingly rustic.”

Charmingly rustic, hm? Rarity remembered that Fancypants had once used that phrase to describe her friends from Ponyville. It was a euphemism for simple, unsophisticated, and naïve. On the other hoof, it meant that her friends were straightforward, reliable, and unpretentious, much like apples and oatmeal. She supposed that she could live with charmingly rustic for a few days.

“Oatmeal and apples it is,” Rarity said.

“I’m gonna go topside for a minute. Check out how we’re flyin’ and whatnot,” Elbow Grease announced, standing up. “Youse guys enjoy that health food though.” Rarity watched him saunter off, pausing only to open a pack and pull out one of his signature sandwiches.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure how he managed to get that aboard,” Tempest apologized to Fancypants.

“It’s quite alright, colonel. It’s for the best if we don’t get between Mr. Grease and his particular cuisine. Moreover, I think I speak for all of us when I say that I could go without being subjected to pickles and onions in these confined quarters,” Fancypants replied.

“Hear, hear,” Rarity chimed in.

“Now, I can’t have you all thinking that this race is going to be all work and no pleasure, so I did pack a few things to make life on board a touch more bearable,” Fancypants said with a smile and a wink. “You see, I recently invested in a small company operating an automated cider press of novel construction, and their management kindly sent me a few bottles from their first batch of apple brandy, or more vulgarly, applejack. It’s quite splendid.” He drew forth a bottle and a few simple wooden cups from the same box he had taken the dinner ingredients from earlier, and began to pour.

Rarity drank applejack from time to time, usually with the pony whose namesake it was. If fresh cider was practically non-alcoholic, and true cider had a bit of a kick, then applejack was like a buck to the face. It was a good way to start off a night out on the

town, or a rowdy evening in. It was not, however, a classy beverage of the type one might expect to see imbibed by a sophisticated Canterlot business mogul. If Fancypants wanted to drink applejack, though, who was Rarity to argue? When in Canterlot, do as the Canterlotians do, the saying went. But not to excess, she reminded herself. Again.

“Here’s to my crew, to *Fancy Free*, and to the *Alicorn’s Cup*,” Fancypants toasted, after delivering a cup to each of the others present.

“Cheers,” Rarity and Windlass said in unison. Tempest mumbled something unintelligible, likely because he was holding his cup with his teeth, and Rarity interpreted it as joining in the toast. She took a sip of the applejack, found it to be among the best she’d ever tasted. Then she took another, and one more after that. It took a bowl of oatmeal and apples, and a second cup of the apple drink, for the group of recent acquaintances to fall into a semblance of an easy conversation.

“So, Colonel Tempest, what was it like being in the Guard? Did you spend much time with Princess Celestia?” Rarity asked.

“I was not part of the personal guard,” the light gray pegasus clarified. “I was a Sky Ranger. We patrolled the border and, if necessary, made excursions outside of Equestria on royal business. It was no cushy palace job.”

“Oh, you must have visited so many interesting places,” Rarity prompted.

“I can’t talk about specific missions. I swore an oath,” Tempest replied tersely.

“Oh, come now, isn’t there one exotic place that stands out? What’s the next yet-to-be discovered vacation hotspot?” Rarity pressed, wagging a hoof tipsily at Tempest.

“Firebird Falls, on the slopes of Mount Fireforge, near the Badlands,” Tempest finally stated. “An endless river of molten lava pours over a sheer cliff, only to fall three thousand pony lengths, hardening into rock by the time it hits the land below. Eventually the new land forming below will reach all the way to the top of the falls, and they will disappear forever, like all beautiful things do. I met my wife there. I was on a team sent to determine if the volcano posed a threat to Equestria, and she was a nephologist with us to study the clouds in the vicinity to determine the effect of such a large amount of rising heat on cloud structure.”

“It sounds amazing,” Rarity said, taking another sip of applejack. “Do you and your wife ever return to visit the spot where you met?” Rarity caught Fancypants subtly shaking his

head out of the corner of her eye, and realized too late that she might have trod into dangerous territory.

“My wife’s dead,” Tempest grunted, and downed the remainder of his third cup. “So no.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rarity began, before Tempest cut her off.

“She got a job as a cloud prospector for Skyworks, so she had to spend a lot of time flying around the Snowmanes looking for new quarry sites. One day, she didn’t come back from her surveying flight. Naturally, the griffons said they didn’t have anything to do with it, but we all knew that they got to her. I don’t know if it was some of the wild ones that live in caves in the mountains, if it was punk kids, or if it was a sanctioned op in order to send a message to the cloud miners, but they got her. We found a few feathers, and that was it. I try not to think about what they must have done to my wife, because then all I can focus on is what I want to do to each and every last griffon. But I can’t think about that, because ponies and griffons, we’re all friends. Even though they’re bloodthirsty meat-eaters, we’re buddies. Isn’t that so Fancypants?” Tempest knocked his empty cup over on the table.

“Yes,” Fancypants replied authoritatively. “The griffons are our good neighbors, and that’s a relationship worth protecting.”

“So you’ve always told me. I’m going to get some air,” Tempest announced, rising a bit unsteadily to his hooves. “I’ll take the first watch tonight, by the way.”

“Are you quite sure you don’t want to get some rest first?” Fancypants asked.

“I’ll be at the helm,” Tempest stated flatly, already ascending the staircase.

“Somepony should have warned you about that,” Windlass said to Rarity once he had gone. “I made that mistake once too. At least now you know.”

“I’ll have to apologize as soon as I have an opportunity,” Rarity said. Windlass only shrugged.

“Now then,” Fancypants interrupted the pause in conversation, “I thank you both for a lovely meal and a most productive planning session. Windlass, dear, if you don’t mind, I would like to have a moment alone for a private conversation with Miss Rarity.”

Rarity wondered what he could possibly want to discuss with her in private, and why he wouldn’t have taken one of the many opportunities he had earlier to talk. Was he upset

with her performance so far in the race? She hadn't been sick yet, despite the constant motion of the ship, the thin air, and the vibration of the engine. What more could Fancypants want from her? It was his fault for inviting her along in the first place. She resolved not to tolerate frivolous, unfair criticism.

"What? Why?" Windlass asked, a mixture of surprise and betrayal on her face. Rarity suddenly remembered that the young mare seemed to fancy her captain, and she imagined what this must look like. She blushed involuntarily.

"Windlass, we are all friends here, but this is a race, and there is a chain of command. Please go see if you can assist the others," Fancypants repeated, sounding a bit sterner than his usual self. "And inform them that we are not to be bothered until I return to the deck."

"Yes sir," Windlass said resignedly, staring daggers at Rarity. Fancypants waited for her to leave before speaking.

"Rarity," he began warmly, "I hope you are becoming acclimated to life as a cross-country airship racer."

"Oh, everything has been peachy keen so far," Rarity replied quickly, shifting nervously in her seat behind the table and still wondering what this could be about. Surely Windlass couldn't have rightly suspected that Fancypants' intentions toward her were something other than pure! Also, who says "peachy keen?" She had to keep it together.

"You're wondering why I'm meeting with you alone, now, when I could have done so at any time before," Fancypants began. He let out a sigh, and magically retrieved a dark gray bottle and two small crystal glasses. He spoke as he poured a measure of a clear, almost shimmering liquid into each glass. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn't more applejack. "You're going to be upset with me for this, I'm afraid, but I am desperate. I wanted a captive audience."

"C-captive?" Rarity stammered, trying not to be obvious as she looked around Fancypants toward the staircase to the upper deck. She was fairly sure that she could get by him if she were truly desperate. More than one pony had underestimated her physicality in their day. Then again, she had a bit of drink in her. She wondered how much Fancypants had drunk.

"Yes, my dear." Fancypants set the two glasses on the table between himself and Rarity. "I'm not entirely sure what this is actually called. I do know, however, that is the most

delightful stuff that I've ever had the pleasure to sip. It's over a thousand years old you see, and it bears the seal of Princess Luna, but there's no name or vintage on the bottle. My family acquired a case of it a long, long time ago, and it must be enchanted because not a single drop has ever gone bad."

"You were explaining why you wanted to meet with me," Rarity prompted, not daring to drink the unknown beverage yet.

"I was," Fancypants said, returning the bottle to its storage place. "Miss Rarity, I don't believe in fate, but if I did, I would say that our first chance encounter must have been predestined. I'd never met a pony with such innate good judgment, who was willing to eschew sycophantism, who stood up to me, and for her friends and what she believed. The fact that you are a sharp businessmare and a creative genius is merely the cherry on top."

"Go on," Rarity said warily, still unsure what Fancypants wanted.

"As of late I've been throwing all of my resources behind a project that involves acquiring a stake in all of Equestria's forward-thinking industries. We've diversified into airships, steam engines, self-propelled carriages, cider presses, railroads, and farm equipment, to name a few. I've done this because I believe everypony deserves a level playing field, and I believe that technology is the great equalizer that magic can't be. In the future, unicorns will be able to be farmers and earth ponies will be able to do the delicate work that we unicorns use magic to accomplish, like surgery or your sewing. Technology will bring us mechanical equipment that can do all of these things, even without magic or digits with which to manipulate."

"But what do I have to do with any of this?" Rarity asked. She was beginning to feel a little better now that it seemed that Fancypants didn't intend to attempt anything improper.

"I want to retire from business," Fancypants said bluntly. "I want to build a new political class in Equestria, with the Princesses' permission of course. Equestria must have democracy."

"Democracy?" Rarity repeated.

"Democracy means that everypony gets a say," Fancypants explained. "Every pony deserves equal access to the structure of government, and a chance to have his or her voice heard. At first, the government will be parliamentary, and answerable to the

Princesses. Someday, though, I envision an Equestria in which Princess Celestia and Princess Luna will simply observe, and not govern, our lives.”

“It sounds like a very interesting idea,” Rarity said. “Honestly, though, ponies trust the Princesses to make decisions that are simply too difficult for us to make, especially since they know so much more than we do about, well, everything.”

“I don’t expect my ideas to take hold immediately. I shall have to spend all of my time and effort championing my vision for a new Equestria. At the same time, my companies will lead the way by showing a future where ponies can be individuals, with their own dreams and ideals, where their fortunes aren’t determined by what symbol appears on their flanks and whether they have wings or a horn.”

“Even though you won’t be running your companies anymore, you plan to work in tandem with them,” Rarity deduced. She finally suspected that she might have a clue as to where this was headed. Fancypants must want her to outfit him in a stylish new wardrobe for his forthcoming political career. Of course she would be most delighted to take on such high-profile work.

“Correct,” Fancypants affirmed. “I must find a replacement. It is my fervent hope that the pony who will accept the mantle of managing the largest and most powerful industrial corporation in Equestria is you, Miss Rarity, and none other. I plan to step down shortly after this race, and I would like you to fill my horseshoes.”

Rarity gasped. This was most assuredly *not* what she had expected. “Fancypants, my goodness, I don’t know what to say!” Feeling completely flabbergasted, she tried in vain to cover her shock. “I wouldn’t know the first thing about any of your businesses. I’m a fashion designer, for Celestia’s sake!”

“I didn’t know anything about them either, until I needed to,” Fancypants replied with a small smile. “You are without question one of the most intelligent ponies I’ve ever met. I fully expect that you would learn faster than I did. Please, Miss Rarity, you do not need to make a decision now, but I want you to think about my offer over the course the race. We can discuss this further at any time you wish, but you should know that I have no second choice in mind.”

It was an unprecedented opportunity. In many ways, Fancypants was offering Rarity everything she had ever wanted. She would truly be, instantly, a very important pony. She would have wealth, status, and power, all at once. She would join the highest echelon of the Canterlot elite. Her decisions would affect thousands of ponies all over Equestria.

On the other hoof, she wouldn't have earned any of it. Did she want to have her dreams handed to her undeservedly?

Didn't she deserve it, though? She always gave so much to others. She represented the spirit of the Element of Generosity itself! How could it be wrong for her to receive a little gift in return? But then, she had to consider what the girls would think. Applejack certainly wouldn't approve of taking anything she hadn't earned with her own hooves and the sweat of her brow. What about the others?

It was both impossible and ludicrous that such an offer had fallen into Rarity's hooves, yet here it was. A strident voice inside of was screaming for her to just say "yes, Yes, YES," but she feared that was only the applejack talking. She couldn't possibly make such a monumental decision this instant. She needed time.

"I will think about it, then," Rarity said at last.

"That's all I ask. Now please, have a drink with me."

Rarity's head was already swimming with new thoughts and possibilities. How much worse could it get with another itty bitty little drink, even if she didn't know what it was she was drinking? She raised the clear glass.

"To whatever the future may hold," Fancypants toasted.

Rarity clinked her glass against his and swallowed a large sip of the mysterious clear liquor. Instantly, a potent mix of taste, smell, and texture threatened to overwhelm her with pleasure as the drink confounded her nose with a tantalizing scent that spoke of desire, teased her palate with flavors indescribably complex, and lovingly caressed her throat. It was the best thing she had ever had.

"Oh my," Rarity whispered, closing her eyes. When she opened them again Fancypants was smiling at her.

"It is a singular drink, is it not? Now that Princess Luna has returned, I plan to beg her someday to tell me what it is, and how I can get more. For now, though, it remains a precious nectar that I imbibe only on the most momentous of occasions, and this is surely one."

"Thank you for sharing it with me, it really is exquisite," Rarity said. She savored another sip, and found herself able to focus on nothing but the drink. It was a relief to give her mind a brief respite. She spent the next several minutes in silence, with Fancypants and

the ambrosia-like drink as her only company. It wasn't until she'd finished the last drop in her glass that another question came to her, one that had been plaguing her since the previous evening.

"There's actually one last thing I'd like to know," Rarity began.

"Anything."

"Blueblood, er, the Duke of Canterlot, told me that you took his company from him in a hostile takeover. At the time, it didn't sound like the Fancypants I've come to know. Can you tell me what really happened?"

"You spoke with the Duke?" Fancypants replied, looking uncomfortable for the first time. "Rarity, whatever the Duke told you, my acquisition of a majority stake in North Star was fully legal, and had been in the works for a long time. The Duke may not have wanted to admit it, but his company was going to fail if I did not step in."

"So you didn't swoop in overnight to steal the company?" Rarity asked.

"Certainly not. I worked with the Duke's brother Lord Procyon for months to finalize the details," Fancypants explained.

Rarity was confused. If the deal had truly been in the works so long, why had Blueblood seemed surprised, and how could Fancypants have never learned the secret of the company's supposed "engineering" department, namely that there wasn't any such department?

"And are you satisfied with the engineering skills and knowledge that North Star will provide to your technological vision? Have you had the chance to review any blueprints or schematics yet?" Rarity pried.

"Ha ha!" Fancypants laughed. "I see you're already cutting to the heart of it. I knew you were the right pony to be a captain of industry for tomorrow! Lord Procyon has been supplying me with bits and pieces for some time, trying to entice me into going through with the buyout. In fact, he even helped me steal Miss Windlass away from North Star so that she could help me get *Fancy Free* ready to race."

Rarity sat bolt upright, her coat standing on end. Now this was a conundrum. Blueblood had said that his company had no engineers besides himself, and no real blueprints or schematics. At the time, Rarity had believed he was telling the truth. Now, Fancypants informed her that he had some of the supposedly nonexistent plans, and even had one of

Blueblood's former engineers working for him right now. Fancypants didn't seem to be lying either. Nevertheless, both stories could not be true. Either Rarity was a much poorer judge of character than she had previously believed, or the lie was located somewhere in the middle. Maybe it was located with the young mare who was currently clip-clopping about on the deck somewhere above her.

She couldn't simply voice her concerns to Fancypants. If he was lying, he would never admit it, and she would risk making an enemy out of a powerful pony who apparently favored her a great deal. The only proper course of action would be to confront Windlass, and get the other unicorn mare's story straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Then, maybe, she would be in a position to raise the issue again.

"Thank you," Rarity said. "I appreciate the chance to hear your side of the story."

"I hope that I assuaged your fears," Fancypants said.

"Oh, I feel much better now," Rarity lied. Now, on top of everything else, she had a mystery on her hooves.

"Wonderful. You should rest now while you can. I believe you'll take the third watch, which begins in four hours."

Rarity needed no further encouragement. After Fancypants returned topside, she crawled into one of the available bunks and immediately passed out, completely oblivious to the rock hard mattress, thin pillow, and coarse blankets.

Rarity soared through the air, tasting the wind rushing around her body and luxuriating in infinite freedom. She stretched her legs out before and behind her, and accelerated. Beating her wings as hard as she could, she left a sparkling contrail of brilliant diamonds in her wake as she tore across the heavens.

Fluffy white clouds dotted the endless blue, and Rarity whisked past their popcorn forms, laughing at the spray of moisture that kicked up around her as she skimmed their surfaces. Traveling ever faster, the giddiness of flight and speed compelled her to launch into exultant aerobatics. With a powerful flap of her feathered wings, she pulled back into a high arcing loop. Higher and higher she flew, pulling back until she was upside down at the apogee of the maneuver. She spared a moment to stare into the cold emptiness above her before she rolled out of the loop and into a graceful spiral, allowing herself to gently spin toward the ground, carefree and drifting like a falling leaf. Before she had lost too much altitude, Rarity decided that she had had enough of letting the wind carry her, and with a joyful yelp she resumed streaking hither and yon, blasting through the sky.

Blue and white, blue and white. How trite and boring. This place needed some pizzazz, Rarity decided. Her horn flared as jets of color shot forth, painting an aurora here, rainbows there, and to top it off she helped a red-gold sunset burst into being.

“That’s more like it,” she said with satisfaction, at the same time flying rings around one her beautiful new rainbows. Rarity was then surprised to feel something smooth and cold against her neck. When she touched the spot with an exploratory hoof she felt a metal necklace and an enormous faceted gem embedded in it. She recognized her Element at once. *Generosity*. Yes, she was a generous mare, Rarity thought proudly. She was veritably, indubitably, the one and only living *spirit* of generosity. She spent all of her time and effort being generous. Now it was her turn to *take*.

Canterlot spread out below her, only it was not the Canterlot Rarity knew. Gone were the delicate spires of marble and gold, and in their place were ornate towers of rich royal purple and dazzling diamonds. This was her Canterlot, the city she was born to rule, for it was surely her own design and will that had created such a fabulous place.

Suddenly, Rarity realized there was another pony nearby. When she glanced to her right Rarity was shocked to see Blueblood flying beside her, plying the skies on powerful snow white wings. He flashed her a cocky smile before lowering his horn and speeding up and away from Rarity and her diamond-encrusted citadel below, as if daring her to give

chase. For a fleeting second, she did just that, putting all her energy into racing after the speeding alicorn. Then her heart caught in her throat as she realized that something wasn't right.

Blueblood didn't have wings, did he? For that matter, since when did *she* have wings?

Of course you have wings, Rarity told herself. Beautiful, *beautiful* wings! To prove the point, she gracefully pirouetted through the air and then performed a series of *entrechats*, fluttering daintily on lacy butterfly wings of gossamer and morning dew. She paused, hovering. Hadn't she had feathers a moment before?

Something felt off. Rarity squinted against the relentless sun that shined in her eyes, and as she turned away from the burning light, an acrid smell filled her nostrils. She tried to flutter away from the sun's penetrating rays, but she found herself unable to control her movements. She was tilting backwards, and could not halt her downward momentum. In an instant Rarity was falling, and as she plummeted she watched the ashen remnants of her burnt wings dissipate into the air around her. The clouds formed into laughing faces, mocking her as she hurtled away from them.

"So provincial, so uncultured. You should have known from the beginning that you never belonged up here with us," mocked a cloud in the shape of Fancypants.

"Who's gonna save you this time?" the puffy white form of Rainbow Dash jeered. "Not me, 'cuz you're not my friend anymore."

"I *am* your friend, Rainbow Dash, I am! Please!" Rarity called back, her voice dying on the wind. The cloud form of her friend was already gone.

"Equestria is burning, Rarity, and it's all your fault," another pegasus cloud chimed in, the voice of Rainbow Dash's cousin Chroma Prism.

"They're coming for you now." Rarity recognized her crewmate Windlass' voice speaking ominous words through a unicorn-shaped cloud.

Now a flock of griffons appeared and began to circle around Rarity as she fell, filling the sky with their blood-curdling shrieks. She knew they would clean up the mess after her forthcoming inevitable meeting with the ground. As Rarity kept falling, the sky grew dark and lightning began to flash around her. The griffons vanished as hail pounded her body and freezing rain chilled her to the bone. Somehow amidst the chaos of the storm, ethereal blue flames burned, licking her with cruel tongues of fire. Rarity screamed and cried, but her voice made no sound. Seconds became an eternity; the ground would be a

welcome release, yet the agony refused to stop. Burned by fire, drenched by rain, buffeted by freezing winds, and falling, ever falling, Rarity closed her eyes and begged the earth to rush up and free her from this impossible torment.

“You’re a mean, sloppy drunk,” Blueblood scolded, appearing beside her again in his alicorn form. “You’ll soon be old and fat and you’ll have added up to nothing more than a punch-soaked never-was. You’ll never touch greatness and you’ll never find the prince you’re looking for; not if you travel to the ends of the world and live to be as old as Celestia.” He sighed. “You should have seen this coming.”

Unable to think of anything better to do, Rarity used what strength she had left to thrust her forelegs out and latch onto the taunting Blueblood. Surprised, he flapped his big wings harder to keep them both aloft in the magical storm. Rarity looked into the stallion’s blue eyes, and through them. She plunged into the cool, clear safety of those blue pools and emerged on the other side.

It was a clear sunny day, and Rarity stood in the town square in Ponyville. A crowd of ponies had gathered around a platform near the town hall. Trying to calm herself after her ordeal, Rarity walked up the crowd and began to push her way through. What were all these ponies doing?

She recognized everypony. Her parents were there, and there was her sister and Sweetie Belle’s little friends too. Friends and acquaintances from town had gathered, and her girls stood closest to the platform. There was Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy, and Pinkie, and Applejack, who had oddly chosen to go hatless for once. They all looked up at the raised platform, where Twilight Sparkle stood with Spike and Ponyville’s mayor.

The crowd was so tightly packed that Rarity could get no closer than halfway to the platform. “What in Equestria is going on?” she asked the mare on her right, but the mint-green unicorn ignored her. Then she saw the painting resting on an easel next to Twilight. It was a portrait of Rarity herself, specifically the one she had commissioned as a gift last year and which now hung in her parents’ hall.

“Oh no.”

Rarity lowered her head and charged through the crowd and toward the platform. They simply couldn’t be having a memorial service for her; she was right here! She had to tell Twilight to stop this madness. Indignant at being eulogized prematurely, Rarity shoved aside the last mourners and leaped up onto the platform right in front of Twilight Sparkle. The lavender unicorn, to Rarity’s surprise, was now wearing the golden tiara

that bore the Element of Magic, and somehow the others had gathered behind Twilight, each wearing their own bejeweled necklace. That made five out of six Elements of Harmony.

“I’m alive, Twilight!” Rarity protested. “Twilight, darling, I’m right here!”

Twilight stared through Rarity and addressed the crowd. “I once wrote to Princess Celestia, that everypony shares a special magical connection with her friends, maybe even before she’s met them. That letter told only half the story, because in truth that magical connection persists forever, even after our friends are gone.”

“But I’m not. I’m not gone!” Rarity shouted.

“The spirits of the Elements of Harmony are connected by unbreakable thread that nothing can truly sever, not time, nor distance, nor even death.” Twilight paused, and Rarity jumped backwards in fright when Twilight suddenly turned and looked her straight in the eyes. When she spoke, Twilight Sparkle’s voice was her own, yet also more, and her words came with the force of a hurricane.

“Where you are, we are. Where you fall, we fall. Fly, Rarity, and let us be the wind holding you aloft.”

“I don’t understand!” Rarity said, placing her forelegs on Twilight’s shoulders. “Please, somepony tell me what’s going on!” Rarity began to shake her friend when Twilight didn’t respond. “Please!”

Twilight Sparkle’s features grew blurry and indistinct until she was unrecognizable. Rarity blinked, trying to resolve the shifting image before her—once, then twice. After the third blink she finally woke up.

“Hey, Miss Rarity, it’s time for youse to go take your watch,” Elbow Grease whispered as he gently nudged Rarity with a forehoof. “Also, could you please lemme go?”

“Mm? Twilight?” Rarity mumbled groggily. Her eyes shot wide open when she realized that both of her forelegs were wrapped around Elbow Grease’s thick neck. She hastily released the mechanic and uttered an embarrassed apology.

Rarity put a hoof to her cheek, and the warmth of the contact told her she was flushed. She felt clammy inside her jumpsuit and realized she had awoken in a cold sweat. It had all been a dream, but she had never dreamt anything so real, nor so strange and terrifying, before. She had been flying, then falling, and then found herself at her own

funeral. Could an experience like that really be nothing more than dreamland drivel? Here, on this airship, she had nopony with whom to even talk about it. She blinked again, trying to force herself fully awake. For the moment, at least, she had to deal with the reality of the pony standing before her. What had he said to her?

“Ah, did you ask me about a watch? Do you want to know what time it is?” Rarity inquired.

“No, miss, it’s your turn up top to watch the ship,” the mechanic explained quietly.

“Oh, right. Yes. I’m awake.” Rarity kept trying to wheedle and coerce her mind and body into action. Unfortunately, some primal animalistic part of her knew full well that it was the middle of the night, a time when Rarity would be fast asleep ninety-nine times out of one hundred, and that part was making it very difficult for her to find the willpower to roll herself out of the uncomfortable bunk. Nevertheless, she forced her hooves over the side and onto the wooden deck below.

The airship’s cabin was nearly dark. The lone lantern hanging above the table burned low, casting only a faint glow barely sufficient for Rarity to fumble around without tripping over her own hooves. She saw that Windlass, Tempest, and Fancypants were sleeping in the other three beds, less than a pony length away. That explained why Elbow Grease had been whispering.

“Wait,” Rarity whispered urgently. “All four of you are going to sleep, and you expect me to fly the ship by myself? Oh, no no no.”

“Don’t worry, miss,” Elbow Grease responded *sotto voce*. “*Fancy Free* flies herself. We’re supposed to be headed pretty much straight south, so just watch the compass for a few hours to make sure we keep flyin’ the right direction.” The stallion yawned, and his onion breath finally woke Rarity up the rest of the way. As he moved past her to try to crawl into the bed she had just vacated, Rarity began to panic.

“No, please! I can’t, I simply *can’t* do it by myself. I beg you, just show me what I need to do and then you can go back to bed!”

“Eh? C’mon, s’easy!” Elbow Grease muttered, still moving to climb into bed. “I gotta get some sleep.”

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and Rarity was not about to take command of a speeding airship without at least a modicum of proper training. Her horn

glowed faintly in the dim room, and a matching aura appeared around Elbow Grease as she magically dragged the hapless mechanic away from the bed.

“You need to help me!” Rarity hissed.

“Whoa, hey, okay Miss, no need to get physical!” Elbow Grease whispered, waving his forelegs in surrender, and prompting Rarity to release her hold on him. “Let’s go topside.”

Rarity, mollified that she wouldn’t be completely abandoned to a responsibility for which she was so wholly and woefully unprepared, followed the mechanic as he walked toward the stairwell. The light grew even dimmer as they moved away from the lantern, and when Elbow Grease stopped short of the stairs she walked right into his backside.

“What is it?” she asked.

Elbow Grease pulled open the door of a small closet between the stairs and the door to the engine room, and he extracted a pair of dark gray raincoats.

“Bit wet out there, and cold,” he said.

“You weren’t even going to tell me that it was raining before?” Rarity asked incredulously.

“I dunno,” Elbow Grease shrugged. “You’re a unicorn, right? Youse ponies just make magical umbrellas and mugs of hot chocolate appear outta thin air, dontcha?”

“Sir, I think you have a lot to learn about unicorns,” Rarity replied, looking in consternation at the mechanic. Then she saw his faint grin and realized that he was simply having a little fun with her. She tried to salvage her sophisticated air by using a bit of magic to slip the rain slicker on over her jumpsuit, and then followed Elbow Grease up the stairs.

Stepping out onto the open deck was akin to a hoofsmack to the side of the face. Cold air rushed at Rarity and a barrage of raindrops quickly wet her mane and splattered against her raincoat. She pulled the hood of the raincoat up over her head and cinched it tight. She was thankful to find that the topmost closure of the coat was high enough that she could pull it up to protect her throat, leaving only her muzzle and eyes exposed. Thus protected, the cold wind and rain were just bearable.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Okay,” Elbow Grease began, peering out of his own raincoat. “Like I said, the ship flies itself, so mostly just don’t touch anything, and we’ll all live to see the morning.” He walked over to the tall console on which the spoked wooden ship’s wheel was mounted. Now that night had fallen, Rarity saw that there were lanterns placed strategically around the deck, and a cluster of three particularly large lamps hung over the console. The light allowed her to see clusters of gauges and instruments lined up in neat rows on either side of the ship’s wheel. She had no idea what any of them signified.

“Look here,” Elbow Grease pointed toward a small glass window in the shape of a horizontal rectangle, in which the letter “S” was prominently displayed just right of center. “This is the compass. ‘S’ means south, which means we’re headin’ in the right direction, south-southeast.”

“I see,” said Rarity. “But how am I to keep us flying south-southeast?”

“Okay, here’s another instrument,” Elbow Grease said, thrusting a hoof at a large circle of glass framed by two concentric brass rings. Under the glass was a small top-down outline of an airship, held on a pin. The edges of the circle around the tiny airship were inscribed with numbers, counting in tens from zero to 360. A small arrow pointing down from the top of the innermost brass ring encircling the instrument currently pointed to the number 175. “This here’s the heading indicator. It’s rigged to a bunch of gyroscopes that keep it accurate, even if we’re getting bucked around by weather. It also lets youse pick a direction and have the ship fly there on its own. I’ll show ya.”

Rarity watched as Elbow Grease touched the tip of his right forehoof to the arrow on the innermost brass ring and spun the ring clockwise until the arrow pointed at two hundred. He then pushed in a circular button mounted just below the heading indicator that was marked with the word “hold.” As soon as the button was pushed, Rarity could feel the deck shifting and the wind change direction as the airship began to turn to the right. As the ship turned, the big ship’s wheel slowly turned to the right, while at the same time the numbered dial of the heading indicator and the brass ring rotated left in synchronicity until the arrow was once again pointing down from the top middle of the instrument. Now, however, the topmost number on the dial was 200 instead of 175.

“There, we just made a right turn. Easy peasy,” said Elbow Grease. “Why don’t you turn us back to our previous heading?”

“I need to make the arrow point to 175 again, right?” Rarity thought she understood how the technology worked.

“That’s all there is to it,” Elbow Grease confirmed.

Rarity rotated the brass ring left until the arrow pointed to 175, and then pushed in the “hold” button. She felt gratified as the ship turned left and the ring rotated right, and in seconds they were back on course. Just as quickly as the sense of accomplishment had come, however, it was replaced by a flood of new worries.

“But what if we start falling out of the sky? Or what if we fly too high? How do I keep us where we need to be?” she asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Elbow Grease replied. “She’s set to fly at two thousand pony lengths, and this part of Equestria is as flat as a hotcake. Even though you can’t see in the dark, I promise there ain’t nothin’ to hit out here. If youse get really worked up about it, there’s a lever right next to the wheel to control altitude.”

“Well, that’s all well and good, but what if something else goes wrong, and I don’t know what to do? What if there’s an emergency and I need to stay here, and I can’t run downstairs to wake you all up?” Rarity demanded.

“Just ring that,” Elbow Grease replied, and indicated the large brass ship’s bell hanging by the door that led belowdecks. A rope hung from the bell with a knot tied in the end to make it easier for a pony to grab with her teeth. “Okay, I’m goin’ back to bed. After two hours are up you can go wake up Miss Windlass. Clock’s on the instrument panel.”

“Wait, one last thing,” Rarity called, before the mechanic stallion could close the door behind him.

“Yeah?”

“Just, thank you, Mr. Grease. I feel much better about this whole affair now. I owe you a drink back in Canterlot.”

“I don’t drink any more, miss,” the stallion replied. “But I’ll let you buy me a sandwich.”

“It’s a deal,” Rarity affirmed, smiling from inside the shadowed interior of her hood.

The door closed, and she was left alone with the dark and the rain and the wet windswept deck of *Fancy Free*. Beyond the railing of the airship’s deck lay only darkness. Whatever lands were passing by far below were left solely to Rarity’s imagination. From the rain and overcast sky it was apparent that the local southron pegasi hadn’t bothered to keep the skies clear for the racers. Rarity knew that life grew harder exponentially as the

distance from the core cities grew, especially for far-flung towns that didn't have a valuable export like Gallopoli's famous pearls. The locals here were probably subsistence farmers, and they needed their rain on time. A bunch of fancy steamships from Canterlot flying overhead wouldn't help their crops to grow. It was just as well that the regatta was passing by at night.

She had two hours to spend pacing the rain-slicked deck and trying to keep the chill off. She needed to occupy her thoughts, but there were so many things to think about that it was difficult to decide where to start. There was Fancypants' incredible offer, which would overnight make her a made mare and a titaness of Equestrian industry. There were her unresolved questions about Blueblood, Windlass, and Fancypants' acquisition of the majority stake in North Star. There was still the brewing trouble between griffons and ponies, involving her friend Rainbow Dash and her family. Finally, Rarity thought with a shiver, there was the bizarre dream from which she had awakened.

At first it had been wonderful. She was flying through the sky, soaring like a pegasus. Then, out of nowhere, Prince Blueblood had invaded her dream. After he appeared she had fallen, and the dream turned into an awful nightmare as her own mind tortured her without mercy. She had borne witness to the bizarre scene of Twilight Sparkle delivering her eulogy, and that final cryptic statement about falling, and wind, and the Elements of Harmony. Rarity was already having a hard time remembering all of the other details of the nightmare, but she recalled laughing faces, fearsome griffons, and Blueblood with wings. Well, she thought, his airship *was* called the *Alicorn*. At least there was some connection to reality.

Maybe none of it was really that mysterious, Rarity thought dismissively. She was sleeping in an airship thousands of pony lengths off the ground, and she had had several recent encounters with Blueblood, and griffons, and probably all of the things she had seen in her dream. It was no more than a composite of recent experiences, coupled with the latent fear of falling that was unavoidable on this airship, and fueled by alcohol and a most uncomfortable sleeping arrangement.

Still, if it came down to such a simple explanation, why had it been so incredibly vivid? She had never been so convinced by a dream of its veracity. Rarity didn't believe in premonitions, fortune-telling, or prophecies, but she did believe that a pony's subconscious sometimes worked in ways that her waking mind couldn't quite grasp. The dream could have been an attempt to tell her something that her rational mind hadn't yet figured out. This was one of those times when Rarity wished Pinkie Pie were here. Pinkie Pie's waking mind worked in ways that nopony else could understand, often including Pinkie herself. If anypony could extract a thread of truth from a snarled knot of a dream,

Pinkie could. Once again, though, Rarity was alone, and there was nopony else to answer her questions, unravel any mysteries, or make the big, potentially life-altering decisions she had to make.

At least the rain had stopped, or more likely the ship had flown far enough away from the farms and fields where the locals had scheduled showers. She unfastened a few of the closures on her raincoat and magically threw back the hood. Breaks in the cloud layer were beginning to appear, offering a peek at the starry night sky above. Far in the distance, on either side, dim lights just above the horizon revealed a few of the other racers. As the race wore on and night had come, the difficulties of celestial navigation had scattered the airships across the sky. They were all headed in generally the same direction, but even slight variances were magnified into enormous differences as leagues of Equestria passed by beneath them.

As Rarity scanned the sky, she was pleased to see that the weather was clearing up even further, and soon she had an unobstructed view of the moon and stars shining down on Equestria. She leaned against the railing and spent a long while just looking up at them.

Rarity didn't study the stars, but she loved them nonetheless. Astronomers and budding scientists like Twilight knew many of them, and all the constellations, by name. Twilight, for that matter, probably knew all sorts of other facts about stars and cosmological trivia of which Rarity had never heard. That was fine. She had no interest in viewing the sky in the way that Twilight did. Where Twilight saw phenomena to be studied, Rarity simply saw twinkling diamonds sewn into fine black velvet. The moon was out too, shining as the brightest gem of them all. Certainly, its face was pockmarked with imperfections, but for all its flaws nothing else in the sky could outshine it. The girls back in Ponyville were asleep now, Rarity knew, but it was comforting to think that she was looking at the same moon and stars here, wherever she was, that were shining down on Twilight and the others back home.

Rarity walked back to the steering console and checked the instruments. *Fancy Free* was still flying on the correct heading, and hadn't gained or lost any altitude. Everything was as it should have been, and she still had another hour to kill before she could sleep again. To keep the unwanted intrusion of questions and anxieties to a minimum, she set about the mind-numbing task of pacing the length and breadth of the deck, over and over again. As a tactic for passing time without involving any higher mental faculties, pacing worked surprisingly well.

While slowly walking the starboard side of the ship for the eleventh time, a flicker of movement in the periphery of Rarity's vision caused her to turn and look back and up

toward the moon's shining face. A long way away, something big was traversing the night sky, its shape partially obscuring her view of the moon as it moved. Whatever it was, it had no lamps or lanterns, or at least none were lit, and it appeared to be moving further away toward the west. The shape was hard to discern, but it didn't make sense for any of the other racing airships to be flying with no lights. It was not only dangerous, but also against the rules.

A flash appeared from the direction where Rarity estimated the mysterious object was now flying, and was shortly followed by two more. It *was* an airship out there, then. Were they signaling for help? Rarity waited to see whether any more lights appeared in the distance, or for any other sign that somepony might be in trouble. She knew that she could use her magic to create a light show that would ignite the night sky if she were in distress, but even non-unicorns should have emergency flares and sirens with which to call for help. The fact that there were no further signs of the unknown ship was proof enough that she did not need to wake the others for an impromptu rescue mission.

"And now I have another mystery to worry about," Rarity grumbled. With any luck, at least this one would have nothing to do with her. It certainly had seemed that whoever was out there had been minding his own business, and in such cases it was often most prudent to let bygones be bygones.

"Whoever you are out there, I don't care," Rarity shouted into empty space. "Just leave me alone!"

"Sorry, it's just me," Windlass announced, appearing behind Rarity and causing her to jump. "It's my turn to take the watch. Actually, it was my turn ten minutes ago, and when you didn't show up I decided to come out on my own and check on you."

"Oh, hello, dear," Rarity replied, startled by the other mare's sudden appearance. "I wasn't shouting at you just now, I was just, well, one does get a bit loopy out here by oneself. I apologize for not waking you. I suppose the time just got away from me."

"It's fine," Windlass said.

"I was watching the stars, you see, and I saw the strangest thing only a moment ago," Rarity continued. "It appeared to be another airship flying without any lamps, and then all of a sudden I saw three flashes of light from its direction. Now it's gone. What do you make of that?"

“Well, maybe one of the other ships ran out of lantern oil, but that wouldn’t explain the three flashes,” Windlass replied. “It could have just been a meteor. Sometimes they appear as a series of brief flashes when they burn up.”

“Yes, maybe,” Rarity said. She was sure what she had seen was no meteor, but she hadn’t considered the possibility that another airship was flying in the dark because the crew had no oil. It could have been something innocuous like that, she supposed.

“I’ll take over from here and you can get some shut-eye,” Windlass offered.

Rarity was about to accept Windlass’ proposal and make her way to the stairs when something made her pause. She had not forgotten that Windlass’ story, as told by Fancypants, was a study in contradictions. Fancypants said she had worked for Blueblood, and Blueblood had said he employed no engineers. At this point, Rarity had too many unanswered questions swimming around in her head to not take the first chance she could to resolve one of them.

“Actually, while it’s just the two of us, I was hoping to ask you a few questions,” Rarity began.

“Oh?” Windlass sounded surprised. Perhaps this was an odd hour for an interrogation, but Rarity simply didn’t know when she might have the other mare alone again.

“You see, I was just wondering how you came to work for Fancypants, and I hoped you would tell me,” Rarity prompted.

Windlass narrowed her eyes and glared suspiciously at Rarity. “We’re not an item, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m not standing in your way or anything.”

“What?” Rarity asked before she was able to stop herself. “No, no,” she said with a forced laugh, “I have no designs of that sort on Fancypants, I promise you.” Rarity hoped she sounded convincing. Windlass would never be cooperative if she saw Rarity as a romantic rival, and she was the only other mare on the ship.

“Please,” Windlass scoffed. “Look, let’s not mince words. I’m well aware of what happens when a stallion and a mare need some ‘time alone.’ You practically hung a ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door to the cabin.”

“Windlass, I promise you that nothing took place between Fancypants and I other than a little business talk,” Rarity said. “In fact, he wanted to offer me a job.”

“Really?” Windlass asked, sounding unconvinced. “As far as I know, Fancypants doesn’t have any hooves in the fashion business. Not to sound skeptical, but why would he offer you a job?” Rarity was beginning to think that the other mare’s interpersonal issues went beyond mere jealousy. This latest question was simply rude.

“He’s offered me a managerial role,” Rarity replied, hoping the vague answer would be satisfactory enough to stave off further inquiry. She certainly wasn’t going to let on that Fancypants had offered her control of his entire business empire. That revelation might send Windlass over the edge against her, and Rarity still hadn’t gotten a bit of new information out of the mare. “It’s not in my chosen field, as you suspected, and I haven’t decided whether or not to accept.”

“Well,” Windlass replied after a long pause, “I’d consider taking the offer. Fancypants is going big places, even more so than where he is now. I’d say you couldn’t go wrong. So, you were asking me how I came to work for him?”

“That’s right.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Windlass began. “I graduated from engineering school and was immediately offered a job at North Star Shipwrights in Canterlot. You probably know that that’s the company that used to be run by Prince Blueblood, or I should say the Duke of Canterlot, until just this past week. I hear that Fancypants is going to be putting new management in charge.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “I’m hoping that if we win this race, he might even consider me for one of the top spots.”

“You must have been quite the student to have gotten a job at a prestigious airship firm like that so quickly,” Rarity said sweetly. “You probably didn’t even have to apply to find a position with Fancypants, did you?”

“That’s right!” Windlass grinned. “North Star was poorly run. The Duke only cared about how shiny his toys were, not how profitable the company was or even whether the ships were airworthy. I realized right away that I was going to need a change, and fast. Imagine my surprise when the Duke’s brother, Lord Procyon, told me that I would be perfect for a position that had opened up with Fancypants’ advanced development team.”

“Weren’t you wary that Lord Procyon was undercutting his own brother and his own company by helping you leave? I would have been very nervous in a situation like that,” Rarity said. “Blueblood is still a powerful pony, and I’d be afraid he would make trouble for me.”

“A job with Fancypants is as good for my resume as a royal stamp of approval from Princess Celestia herself,” Windlass explained simply. “I’m all set now.”

“Well, congratulations, then. That’s wonderful,” Rarity said with a smile. She moved a bit closer to Windlass and leaned toward the younger mare. “Now I have a bit of a funny story to share with you, and I’m sure you will appreciate it. As it so happens, I had occasion to speak with Prince Blueblood shortly before the race began, and he claimed that *he* was responsible for designing all the airships that North Star released, and that he didn’t even employ any other engineers. Can you imagine? That blowhard, an aeronautical engineer? It’s just too much!” Rarity laughed, and soon Windlass joined her, though a bit tentatively.

“That *is* funny,” Windlass replied, somewhat slowly in Rarity’s opinion. “I’m afraid things have been spiraling out of control for the Duke lately, and I’m sure his tall tales are only going to get more unbelievable now that he’s lost control of his business. I assure you that it took several teams of us to put these ships together. I myself was just an aerodynamicist running wind tunnel simulations.”

“Hehe, the very idea of Blueblood drafting blueprints,” Rarity continued on, still trying to encourage Windlass into speaking further.

“You know, given his obvious mental state, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Duke fails to finish the race,” Windlass said, obviously more comfortable now that it didn’t seem that Rarity was questioning her story.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s just that it must be hard enough for a single stallion to fly an airship like this by himself, and this race is sure to put even teams like ours to the test. I don’t see how he’ll be able to cut it.” Windlass paused. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t even make it through the next day.”

“I hope you’re wrong,” Rarity responded, “if only because I stand in favor of spirited competition.” She yawned. “I thank you for your time, Miss Windlass. Now I think I shall retire.”

“Goodnight,” the other mare said. “We’ll be getting close to Gallopoli in just a few more hours, so don’t get too comfortable. I have a feeling that tomorrow will be a very interesting and challenging day, for all of us.”

As she made her way downstairs and to the empty bed lately vacated by Windlass, casting her raincoat into the closet as she went, Rarity pondered her conversation with the engineer mare. Windlass had not buckled when Rarity had mentioned Blueblood's side of the story, and that certainly lent credence to the theory that Blueblood was the liar. That was also the most comfortable theory, because it meant that Rarity did not have one or more crewmates who were taking pains to feed her disinformation, and possibly conspire against her in other ways.

In many ways it did make the most sense for Blueblood to be the one to have made up the whole thing. He was certainly the type who would embellish a tale for his own benefit. It was just that Rarity could not shake the feeling that Blueblood had been honest with her. There were a few other things that gave her pause too. Windlass had seemed eager to dismiss her sighting of the mysterious airship and its flashing light, and the younger mare obviously suspected that Rarity was trying to get in the way of her hopes for a romantic entanglement with Fancy pants.

Perhaps the correct question to ask was not who seemed like a liar, but who had something to gain by lying? Blueblood would have done so to inspire pity in Rarity, while at the same time casting himself as the noble, tormented genius. Superciliousness and self-pity were certainly Blueblood's *modus operandi*, so Rarity supposed he did have sufficient motive to lie, however petty a motive it may be. For the others, the motive would have to be something grander and more sinister, and that thought made her shudder, even as she pulled the lone, hopelessly inadequate blanket tight around her body.

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling while the airship gently rocked, another angle came to mind. Both Windlass and Fancy pants had mentioned Blueblood's brother, Lord Procyon, as the stallion who had facilitated her employment arrangement with Fancy pants. Perhaps he, Fancy pants, and Windlass had worked together to wrest control of Blueblood's company away from him, and now they all shared the same cover story in order to make their business dealings seem less nefarious. If Fancy pants really wanted her to accept his offer, then Rarity could understand the desire to cover up any obvious black marks. If that was all there was to this "conspiracy," then it was really nothing much at all. It was only business. With that as her last thought, she drifted peacefully back to sleep.

The crew of *Fancy Free* had all risen with the dawn, and now the five clustered at the bow rail, taking in a vista of sand and sea as the airship drew near to the southernmost vestige of Equestrian civilization, the coastal city of Gallopoli. Even though the sun was only just clear of the horizon, the tropical air was already warm and thick with moisture and the sweet fragrance of hibiscus.

Any trace of foul weather had been left far behind, and Rarity and the others had doffed their jumpsuits in favor of bare coats. She had particularly relished the chance to use rainwater collected overnight for a quick scrub. For this brief moment in time, steaming over a tropical paradise with the trade winds at her back, she could imagine the race as a vacation. The only things missing were a chaise for lounging and an orchid to place in her mane.

“Behold the Gallopolitan Coast, the most remote, and dare I say most beautiful shoreline in all of Equestria,” Fancypants declared.

Rarity had no basis to disagree, as the seemingly endless white sand beaches stretching toward the horizon were undeniably remarkable. Calm blue waves lapped against the beach below, and inland sand dunes gave way to palms and tropical plants. Signs of civilization were evident in the form of narrow roads, orchards, and fields planted with crops that Rarity couldn’t identify from the air. Perhaps they were something exotic like bananas, coffee, taro, or even pineapples. Whatever the farmers here grew, it was obvious that Rarity was far from the comfortable familiarity of home.

She had never seen the southern ocean or felt a tropical breeze before, but the morning was remarkable for another, more personal reason. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Rarity was out in public without a touch of hairspray or a hint of makeup. No mascara defined and elongated her eyelashes. No eye shadow emphasized the unique almond shape of her eyes. No powder kept her coat a perfectly even shade. Her mane and tail still fell in bouncy coils, but stray hairs sprung here and there as if taking this opportunity to rebel against the normal order.

There wasn’t anything Rarity could do to remedy the situation; her cosmetics bag was back in Canterlot, hundreds of leagues away. Theatrics would get her nowhere, as she was fairly certain that she was not going to be granted shore leave to go shopping, if there even were any cosmetics shops in far southern Equestria. The most absurd and unusual aspect of her situation was that Rarity found herself not caring that her face was naked and her mane was untidy. The only pony anywhere close by whom she cared to impress

was Fancypants, and he had already offered her more than she had ever dared hope. For once in her life, Rarity had nothing to prove. More gratifying still, the others all looked even more unkempt than she. Even Fancypants was dealing with the beginnings of a scruffy beard in the same bluish turquoise as his carefully-groomed moustache.

More than simply feeling uncharacteristically blasé about her appearance, Rarity had awoken to a pervading nonchalance that gave her the confidence to believe that everything was going to be okay. Her alarming nightmare had been no more than a fantasy born of foul weather and fitful sleep, her concerns for the welfare of Equestria were overblown, and her worries about what most likely amounted to nothing more than white lies were merely paranoia taking advantage of her mind being overstimulated by new experiences. Today was a beautiful day, and she was a lucky pony to be here with Fancypants and the others. Equestria would be fine so long as Princess Celestia ruled in Canterlot, and likewise she needn't worry about herself while Fancypants was her captain.

She couldn't pin down exactly why her anxiety had so suddenly disappeared. Perhaps it was simply part of the process of getting her air legs, or perhaps it was this beautiful place over which she had awoken. Regardless, today felt different. Rarity remembered Windlass' words last night, cautioning her that the day would be "interesting." Rarity hoped it would.

"I don't see any of the other airships," Windlass pointed out. "Could they have passed us in the night?"

"No chance," Elbow Grease replied, shaking his head. "We were steamin' strong all night long. If anything, we're so far ahead we lost 'em."

"Well, I see one of them over there," Rarity said, indicating a blue dot several leagues away, inland and south of *Fancy Free's* position. As she stared more closely at the dot, she was fairly certain as to exactly which competitor's airship it was.

"She's right," Tempest confirmed, his naturally superlative pegasus eyesight compensating for Rarity's relative youth and sharp vision. "It looks like the *Alicorn*, and she's at least a league closer to the city than we are."

"Oho," Fancypants began, "we now have a tactical decision to make. We may choose to race the Duke to the second marker, or we may concede that he will receive the pearl strand first and simply continue on our way, intending to make up time and distance later."

“I say fuhgeddaboutit, and let ‘im go. We’ll be the ones with enough coal for our boilers when we’re in the home stretch,” Elbow Grease said.

“I’m inclined to agree with the conservative approach,” Fancypants said.

“Respectfully, I think we should pursue. We don’t know for certain that the *Alicorn* is leading the regatta at the moment, and the more we concede now, the more we must make up later,” Tempest stated.

“I vote we go after him,” Windlass eagerly chimed in. “He’s probably been up all night trying to coax enough speed from his engine to beat us here, and that means he’s tired. We can outfly him.”

“That leaves you, Miss Rarity,” said Fancypants, giving Rarity a warm smile. “Ordinarily, tactical race decisions are the captain’s prerogative, but at this early stage I’ve put it up for a vote. Shall we hold back, or shall we give chase?”

Rarity thought for a brief moment. The sun was shining and the wind smelled of salt and flowers. Seabirds’ raucous calls filled the air. She breathed in tropical beauty and exhaled the worries of days past. She felt alive and free. The world was her oyster and her pearl was just ahead, waiting in Gallopoli.

“We chase,” Rarity replied, beaming a smile that radiated sunshine.

“A pursuit it is, then!” Fancypants exclaimed. “To your stations everypony!”

Elbow Grease rushed down the stairs to the engine room, and Tempest and Windlass took up positions at port and starboard, respectively. Fancypants returned to the helm, and Rarity, not having a specified “station,” followed him.

“How can I help?” she asked.

“I thought you performed splendidly as our spotter back in Ponyville,” Fancypants replied. “Care to try your luck again?”

“I can promise my best effort, at least,” Rarity said, nodding her head in affirmation. She levitated the spyglass from its receptacle on the helm and returned to her position at the bow of the ship.

The ship shuddered and lurched beneath her hooves, but now Rarity was used to the feel of acceleration to the point where she didn’t need to consciously worry about keeping

her balance. Looking through the spyglass, she could clearly see the perciform shape of the *Alicorn*'s balloon in the distance. She couldn't yet tell if *Fancy Free* was closing on the other airship, but a glance at the ground rushing past below made it apparent that she was now flying much faster than a moment ago.

Several leagues beyond Blueblood's *Alicorn*, Rarity thought she could see the city of Gallopoli resolving into focus. The coastline curved inward, forming a deep crescent that looked as if some leviathan had taken a bite out of Equestria. At the center of the half-moon shape, wooden docks and platforms extended out into the water, and Rarity could see thatched roof buildings of varying sizes scattered over the beach and well inland. More surprising was what appeared to be a great pink and gold blister slowly rising from the beach in front of the town. As the object grew and its shape became more defined, it became clear that it was a large hot air balloon in the process of being inflated. At the same time as the balloon was rising, Rarity saw a pair of pegasi fly from the direction of Gallopoli toward Blueblood's airship and apparently go aboard. A moment later, when the pegasi took wing and began flying directly toward her, Rarity was able to recognize them.

"I see two of the Wonderbolts, and they are coming this way," Rarity called out to the rest of the crew. In seconds, the speedy uniformed pegasi had closed the gap between the *Alicorn* and *Fancy Free*, and they landed lightly on the foredeck between Rarity and the helm console where Fancypants stood.

Both of the ponies were mares, wearing the traditional blue and gold bodysuits and sporting wild-looking, wind-tousled manes. One had a brilliant white coat and a mane and tail of sunshine yellow, while the other, the lithe mare called Fleetfoot, was cerulean blue with a white mane and tail. Both wore aviator's goggles that masked their eyes.

"Congratulations," Fleetfoot said, addressing the crew at large. "I'm happy to inform you that you are approaching Gallopoli and the second marker, and that you are currently flying in second place."

"We're here to briefly instruct you on the procedures for recovering the pearl strand marker," the other, yellow-maned Wonderbolt explained.

"You will be required to tether your airship on the beach, and send one representative through a short course to the town square, where you will be presented with the marker by the mayor of Gallopoli," Fleetfoot added.

“The townsfolk will secure your ropes once you descend low enough to throw down your mooring lines.”

“Whoever you choose as your team’s runner must descend to the ground via non-magical means, and that includes a prohibition on the use of pegasus wings.”

“Once you’ve got the pearls, race back to the airship and continue on your way.”

“After Gallopoli, you will be leaving Equestria, but the third marker location is still close enough to the border that we have been able to provide full access for course monitors and members of the press.”

“Any questions?” the white-coated Wonderbolt asked.

“Good,” the other said, without waiting for a response. The two pegasi took to the air in a flurry of beating wings and streaked back toward the town.

“Hm, that was rather brusque,” Fancypants declared after a long pause. “I do believe, however, that we have gotten the gist of it. We must select a runner before we get to Gallopoli. Windlass, you are the youngest of us, so I think the duty to recover the marker should fall to—”

“I’ll do it,” Rarity said firmly, interrupting Fancypants and causing surprised looks to appear on the faces of Tempest and Windlass. Gallopoli was so remote that, despite its incredible beauty, most ponies from the core of Equestria had not even heard a first-hoof account of it, let alone had the opportunity to visit. At this very moment Rarity was sailing over a land of warm sun, palm trees, sweet-smelling flowers, and sandy beaches that she might never see again. She couldn’t simply let the opportunity to feel the sand beneath her hooves slip by. Furthermore, she was fairly confident that if it came down to a race, she could beat Windlass hooves down. The other mare was scrawny where muscles gave definition to Rarity’s curves.

“Fine by me,” said Windlass, shrugging.

“Well, Miss Rarity, that’s settled,” Fancypants declared. “We should be able to make up a considerable amount of time during the mooring process, since there are more of us to help secure the lines. When your hooves touch the ground, it will be up to you to outrace Duke Polaris.”

“And I will,” Rarity said determinedly. For a brief moment she had forgotten that volunteering pitted her against Blueblood. No matter. He was most likely a self-pitying,

delusional liar, and he was most certainly large and slow. She knew she could beat him, and she strongly suspected that she would enjoy doing so. “If you can give me a fair chance, I can beat him.”

“Then we shall have to get you that chance!” Fancypants exclaimed. He leaned over a small mesh grille embedded into the helm console and shouted into it. “Kindly give us more speed, Mr. Grease,” Fancypants demanded.

“There ain’t much more I can give you without overpressurin’ the boiler,” Elbow Grease’s voice emerged from the grille, sounding tinny and far away.

“Give me everything you can, my good stallion,” Fancypants rejoined. “Tally-ho!”

“Tally-ho!” Rarity echoed, leaning out over the bow rail and waving to a crowd of ponies spectating the race from a green field below. She smiled as she realized that it was a makeshift hoofball field. Even this far from home, Equestria was still Equestria.

Fancy Free dove steeply, trading altitude for speed in order to have any chance of making up some of the substantial gap between the two leading airships. A league ahead, the *Alicorn* was slowing as its captain maneuvered it toward an empty stretch of sand. Rarity could see that throngs of earth ponies and unicorns were lining the beaches of Gallopoli to watch the *Alicorn*’s Cup regatta steam into town. Closer to the water’s edge organized groups had assembled, apparently to assist with mooring the airships to the beach. A very small number of pegasi hovered or wheeled about in the air, cheering for the racers. Gallopoli was so close to the edge of Equestria, Rarity realized, that it must be subject to wild weather coming ashore from the ocean or foreign lands. There would be few weather-related jobs for pegasi in a place where the weather could not be controlled.

While the locals cheered on the racers, the now-inflated hot air balloon floated higher, stretching its tethers to their limit. Rarity saw that instead of a hanging gondola, it featured a rigid passenger area that ringed the base of the balloon. The ponies crowded into the balloon wore the current fashions of the core cities, and Rarity realized that these were the journalists, photographers, and record-keepers who had come from all over Equestria to chronicle the regatta.

As the town grew closer, Rarity watched as thick ropes were thrown down from Blueblood’s *Alicorn* and caught by the ponies below. It was slow going, as one end of the airship would begin to drift away even as the ground crew struggled to keep hold of the other. The fact that one pony could not throw all of his ropes down at once was severely hampering Blueblood, who must have been scurrying from one end of his airship to the

other so that he could get it secured. Finally, six sturdy lines held the *Alicorn* in place, and a ladder was let down. The delay had been costly, and *Fancy Free* was steaming over the beach even as Rarity watched Blueblood drop from his ladder and onto the sand below.

“I can catch him!” Rarity declared. “Throw a rope over the side and I shall shimmy down while you secure the airship.”

“You’ll *shimmy*?” Fancypants shouted from the helm. “Do be careful, Miss Rarity. Need I remind you that we have eight-tenths of the race left for catching up to the Duke, and we will be forced to stop if you require medical attention.”

“Windlass, the rope, please,” Rarity shouted, ignoring Fancypants. Perhaps excited at the prospect of watching a needlessly dangerous stunt, Windlass obligingly tossed the port midships mooring line over the side. The beach was getting closer as *Fancy Free* descended.

“I say! Are you sure about this?” Fancypants called out.

Rarity levitated just enough of the dangling rope to loop it around her body and forelegs. She hadn’t felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation quite like this since she had hidden herself in the mud to surprise her sister at Applejack’s Sisterhooves Social.

“I’m not sure about this at all,” she answered. “But sometimes, darling, one simply has to leap!” With that, she used all the strength in her rear legs to spring over the rail and into open space.

Rarity didn’t fall far. The rope was secure, and she found herself pushing off against the side of *Fancy Free*’s hull. She felt a twinge of fear when she realized that the airship’s spinning propellers seemed awfully close and loud from this position. Rarity used magic to loosen the rope enough for her to begin to slip downwards. Slowly moving down the rope, she used her teeth to arrest her descent when she felt her pace was becoming too fast. Once she was clear of the ship, her view was unrestricted and she could see the open beach and waiting ground crew ahead.

Fancy Free was flying no more than ten pony lengths above the surface, but the ship was still too high and too fast for Rarity to drop to the ground below. She waited, watching the propellers rotate to a more vertical alignment to slow the ship, hanging onto the rope with her hooves and teeth as the ship edged closer to its resting place. At that moment, Rarity caught a glimpse of an unmistakable white unicorn stallion galloping away from

the beach and toward the town. This was close enough, she decided. She released the rope.

At the instant her hooves connected with the sandy beach, the lessons of her youth came back to her. Her father had once been a professional athlete, after all, and Rarity had been enrolled in everything from gymnastics to ballet in order to develop her own talents. Eventually it had become apparent to all that her true calling lay in a different direction, but muscle memory was a persistent thing. Instinctively, she bent her legs, rolled to distribute the force of her landing, and came up galloping. If only Applejack could see her now, racing across the beach with her unbrushed mane and tail now gritty with sand. Rarity couldn't stifle a laugh at the thought of it.

The ponies of the ground crew parted before her as she charged, but as she drew closer to the main body of the crowd, Rarity realized she had made one miscalculation. She had thought all the photographers were positioned in the hot air balloon, and that there would be no opportunity for closeups. The first magnesium flashbulb bursting white hot from the front of the crowd proved otherwise. There was no turning back now, she would just have to deal with the fact that every paper from the Canterlot Times to the Ponyville Picayune would publish a most unflattering picture of her. Celestia willing, it would be printed below the fold.

"Try to get my good side," Rarity breathlessly called to the photographers as she galloped past. "Either one will do!"

As she clambered off the sand and onto the packed dirt main street of Gallopoli, she immediately observed several things. First, the stallions and mares who lined either side of the road, all wearing garlands of tropical flowers around their necks, were universally handsome. Something about fair weather and hard work had made the Gallopolitans beautiful. Second, they were obviously excited about, and well-versed on, the race and its competitors, because they specifically cheered her by name as she ran. Third, and most important, Blueblood was not so far ahead that she couldn't catch him. She lowered her head and spurred her legs to give everything they could.

The warm, moist air did her no favors, and Rarity's coat was soon dripping with sweat. She tried not to think about the lack of a shower on *Fancy Free* and focus instead on Blueblood, only a hundred lengths ahead now. Beyond him, she saw the stage that had been erected to present the race markers. She was gaining rapidly on the big, ungainly stallion. Energized by the onlookers' enthusiastic cheering and stomping of hooves, she chased Blueblood down until she was practically breathing down his neck. As she drew

alongside, Blueblood glanced to his left and then comically performed a shocked double-take.

“Tell me, what’s a boorish blowhard like you doing in a nice place like this?” she asked between gulps of air.

“You look familiar,” Blueblood replied, huffing for oxygen. “Let’s see, sweaty, stringy mane, dirty coat ... Didn’t I see you passed out on the stoop of a cantina in the bad part of Canterlot last weekend?”

“Har har,” Rarity replied. “Try to keep your leering to a minimum while I gallop on ahead.”

“Sounds difficult. Your posterior is rather impressive, at least in scope,” Blueblood retorted.

“And now I think I’ve had enough of you,” Rarity said. She drifted just close enough to Blueblood to shove him aside, her lower center of gravity helping to throw him off balance, and then she sprinted onwards. Blueblood stumbled, but didn’t fall. Worse, he had apparently found a second wind, because he managed to gain back the ground he had lost.

The stage was just ahead, and on it Rarity saw a large group of important looking ponies. Earth ponies, pegasi, and unicorns were represented. Most wore decorative raiment of broad leaves tied around their midsections, and the mares had flowers entwined in their manes and tails. At the center of the stage the yellow-maned Wonderbolt stood next to a fat yellow earth pony stallion with a breaking wave as his cutie mark.

The stallion wore something like a crown of vines and white flowers atop his head, but what interested Rarity most was the jewelry encircling his thick neck. A thick necklace, consisting of multiple strands of seashells and black pearls, terminated in a cluster of three enormous pink pearls set in a half oyster shell at the stallion’s throat. The pearls glowed with a mysterious inner light, even in the morning sun.

Rarity and Blueblood simultaneously leaped up the stairs to the stage and skidded to a halt, chests heaving and sweat-drenched. At that moment another flashbulb exploded, and Rarity directed her most menacing glare at the offending photographer.

“Really?” she asked the impertinent journalist, incredulous at his timing. Before she could think of anything truly caustic to say, the fat yellow stallion spoke.

“Welcome to Gallopoli,” he said, his voice deep and warm. “It is an honor to have the *Alicorn’s* Cup pass through. I am Wavewalker, the mayor of this beautiful town. I hope your next visit will be more leisurely, and you will have the opportunity to stay and enjoy our scenery and unparalleled hospitality. Now, I gladly present to you both a treasure from our corner of Equestria, which I am told will serve as proof of your visit.”

“I believe I was here first, so I should get the marker first,” Blueblood pointed out.

“Perhaps in your dreams,” Rarity said. “It was most certainly *I* who arrived on the stage first.”

“Ahem,” the Wonderbolt coughed, immediately capturing the racers’ attention. “I clocked you both in at the same time. Once you have both received your markers, I’ll give you permission to resume racing, together.”

“As I was saying,” Wavewalker carried on, “I have gifts for you.” Rarity noticed the small wooden chest on the floor of the stage at Wavewalker’s hooves. The Gallopolitan mayor kicked open the chest, and Rarity failed to stifle a small gasp at the mound of gorgeous pearl necklaces glowing within. Each necklace consisted of normal cream-colored pearls, with one spectacular pink pearl in the center of the strand.

“Gallopolitan pearls have a bit of magic within them, and can bring good fortune, especially for sailors or those lost at sea,” Wavewalker continued. “As I present you with these gifts, let me also share a few words from a poem passed down from our ancestors. *‘Should you e’er be cast adrift, and haven’t got an oar, the pink pearls of Gallopoli will help steer you to shore.’*”

“That’s a lovely sentiment, but I am in a race,” Blueblood said impatiently.

“Indeed,” the mayor replied, nodding. “Forgive me, Gallopoli is not a hasty town.” He leaned down and reached his muzzle into the chest of pearls, extracting two necklaces with his teeth. Carefully, he slipped one onto Blueblood, and the second he draped around Rarity’s neck. “Hm, it looks better on you,” Wavewalker said to Rarity, and winked, prompting Blueblood to roll his eyes.

“Can we go now?” he asked the Wonderbolt mare.

“On my count,” she said. “Three ... two ... one ... go!”

Rarity needed no additional prompting. Without a second thought, she jumped from the edge of the stage down to the street below and began running. Blueblood sprinted after

her, and she saw that he was keeping up for now. Rarity smiled. Whether Blueblood realized it or not, she had already won this part of the race. He'd never be able to keep up with her all the way back to the ship.

"Prince Blueblood," she called back to him. "Since I'll soon be leaving you behind, I have a question for you."

"I already know what you intend to ask, and the answer is yes, you absolutely do need to bathe, immediately!" he shouted back.

"Actually no," Rarity yelled, ignoring the dig. "Last night I saw a strange airship flying with no lights. Did you perchance see it too?"

Blueblood slowed down, clearly surprised, and Rarity had to slow her own pace to keep from getting too far away from him.

"I saw it," he said. "It looked like griffon construction, but I couldn't be sure. As you said, it was completely dark. I thought I was losing my mind. Flying alone can make you see things."

"I can't speak to your mind, but there was a ship," Rarity replied. "I'm glad to know. So thank you, and ta ta!" She resumed galloping at full speed and quickly left Blueblood behind.

As pleasant as it was to be in this place, she needn't completely give up on gathering information. So Blueblood thought he saw a griffon airship? If it was Graywings' ship, then he would be in violation of the rules and could be reported and penalized. If it was another griffon airship, that would be very strange. The tropics were as far from the griffon homelands as could be imagined, and trade would normally be conducted with the northern cities, not in the far south.

"Speaking of griffons," Rarity muttered. As she approached the beach, one of the female crew from Graywings' ship loped past in the opposite direction without exchanging a word. It was a strange motion, using talons and paws in tandem, but the griffon moved surprisingly quickly and with a predator's sinuous grace. Rarity had wondered whether the griffons would be especially disadvantaged if the race went to the ground, since flying was disallowed, but that did not appear to be the case. The fact that another team was here also meant that the race was still close, and not yet a two-ship affair.

Back on the beach, Rarity kicked up clouds of sand as she made for *Fancy Free*. She could see Fancypants watching her from the deck, and the others were already hauling the mooring lines back onboard for a swift departure.

“Take the last rope!” Tempest called down. “We’ll pull you up!”

As the airship began to drift away, Rarity bit down on the last dangling rope and magically looped it around her body. In seconds she was off the ground and being pulled upward with the rope. When she cleared the rail, Fancypants released the magical hold he had on the rope. Rarity collapsed onto the deck and rolled onto her back.

Finally, she could catch her breath. Temporarily, at least, she was beyond caring whether she looked sufficiently ladylike.

“You got the marker!” Fancypants exclaimed. “Good show, my dear, good show!”

“It’s beautiful,” Windlass noted.

“Tempest, give me a heading toward the third marker’s location if you please,” Fancypants requested.

“Turn starboard, heading two four zero,” Tempest relayed, after quickly consulting his charts. “Toward the Impenetrable Lands.”

Rarity had by now caught her breath enough to ask questions, even if she wasn’t ready to get up off the deck quite yet. “Just what are the Impenetrable Lands?”

“A vast, seemingly endless jungle,” Fancypants answered. “Some ponies call it the dark heart of the world. Many great rivers and streams flow into and out of that jungle, like so many veins and arteries, but no pony has ever gotten far exploring them. Some say there are hostile natives, and others claim that the forest is haunted. Whatever the case may be, the Impenetrable Lands are as alien and uncontrollable as the Everfree Forest near Ponyville, but on a much larger scale.”

“The race doesn’t require us to actually go in there, does it?” Rarity asked. She had already had a lifetime’s worth of traipsing through dark, uncontrollable forests after a single excursion into the Everfree.

“Not at all,” replied Fancypants. “The botanist who possesses the third marker lives outside the jungle, though close to its edge. We shall only view the Impenetrable Lands

from the air. Believe me, I have no more desire to set hoof in that foul and forsaken forest than you do.”

“I’ll be a happy mare if I’m not required to get dirty again today,” Rarity said. “Speaking of which, if we have some time, I’d very much like to wash off.”

“This is one of the shorter legs, but we still have at least four hours before we reach the botanist’s cottage,” Tempest stated.

“Take as much time as you like,” Fancypants said. “After your tremendous effort chasing down Duke Polaris, you’ve earned a respite.”

“Much obliged,” Rarity replied, pulling herself to her hooves. She tried to avoid walking too close to Fancypants as she made her way to the stairs behind him. It was in both of their interests that he not catch a whiff of her at this time.

The lavatory at the front of the ship contained not only the rudimentary toilet, but also a wooden tub barely large enough for a pony to stand. Collected rainwater emptied into a smaller wooden washbasin, and soap, sponges, brushes, and towels were placed nearby. With no heat, and no means of refreshing the water after each pony bathed, the setup was extremely crude and more than a little unsanitary. It was, however, lightweight and efficient, and it would have to do. Rarity elected not to remove her strand of pearls before stepping into the tub.

The cool water was actually refreshing, and after Rarity’s coat, mane, and tail were thoroughly wet, she soaped herself all over and began to scrub vigorously with brush and sponge. As usual, she was grateful that magic allowed her the luxury of using multiple implements at once. Dust and sweat were easy enough to wash away, but sand had a way of clinging persistently that could leave a pony finding gritty grains days later, if she wasn’t meticulous about removing it the first time. Rarity inspected each hoof, and then began to work all the tangles out of her mane and tail. When at last she was satisfied, she wrapped a towel around her body and another around her forehead to draw the water out of her mane.

The next phase of the process carried the potential for disaster. In the warm, humid air, her mane and tail would want to become a big frizzy mess, and with no styling products to fall back on, Rarity was left with a hairbrush and a bit of unicorn magic as her only options. She wouldn’t be able to achieve perfection, but perhaps she could stave off embarrassment. First, she hung the towels back on their hooks to dry. Next, she gave her mane and tail another good brushing, and concentrated on visualizing what she *wanted*

them to look like. She could see the three bouncy twists of her tail, and her sweeping violet mane, draped left and right and ending in graceful curls. A “pop” sounded in the cramped lavatory as she cast her tried and true styling spell. There was no mirror, so Rarity bounced a curl of her mane with a forehoof, then twisted her neck to check her tail. She looked a far cry from fabulous, she decided, but at least a crisis had been averted. Opening the lavatory door, clean and no longer malodorous, Rarity was surprised to be immediately confronted by Windlass.

“Why, hello Miss Windlass, I apologize for monopolizing the facilities. They’re all yours now,” Rarity said. To her surprise, Windlass shook her head and held up a foreleg to stop her.

“Can I ask you something?” Windlass asked, sounding to Rarity’s ears as if she was trying too hard to conceal some anxiety.

“Of course.”

“You and your friends, you stopped Nightmare Moon and Discord in order to save Equestria. You were prepared to do whatever it took to stop them, weren’t you?” Windlass asked.

“Well, yes I suppose so,” Rarity said.

“Even if it meant destroying them?” Windlass pressed.

“Princess Luna is much better now, and Discord is merely a statue again. Neither villain was ‘destroyed,’ *per se*,” Rarity replied, a dubious frown crossing her face.

“But you would have destroyed them, to save everypony else, wouldn’t you? To save Equestria?”

Rarity sighed, wondering what this was all about. “Things were happening very quickly at the time, but yes. When the Elements of Harmony released their power, I understood that Nightmare Moon and Discord might be destroyed. If that was required for Equestria to be safe, then I think we all would have assented to their destruction. Why are you asking me about this?”

“I have a personal choice to make,” Windlass replied. “I need to know that a sufficiently important end can justify the means to that end.”

“I certainly didn’t say anything of the sort,” Rarity immediately stated.

“You said that you would do anything to protect Equestria, and that you would destroy the ones who threatened it,” Windlass said, a searching look in her eyes.

“I merely spoke about two specific circumstances in my life. It wasn’t a generalization,” Rarity clarified.

“You did what you believed was necessary for the greater good,” Windlass said, lifting her intonation on the last word as if the statement was a question.

“I suppose so,” Rarity admitted. “Do you care to tell me about this big decision you have to make? It certainly sounds important, and perhaps you’d feel better if you talked it through.”

“I ... I just want what’s best for Equestria,” Windlass replied haltingly. “Thank you, I’m sure I know what to do now.” With that, she turned away and walked over to one of the piles of supplies, where she began rummaging, perhaps looking for something to eat.

Rarity shook her head at the odd encounter and made her way topside. For a moment, she wondered whether she should worry about the other mare, but then thought better of it. Whatever Windlass’ big decision was, if it was for the good of others Rarity couldn’t see how it could be harmful, except perhaps to Windlass herself. Celestia knew that Rarity had made sacrifices for others’ benefit in her life. How much grander would her business be if she didn’t always feel compelled to design gifts for her friends? For that matter, she would have probably relocated to Canterlot long ago if not for her overpowering need to live close to her parents and sister. Selfishness might have translated into more bits in her bank account, but money couldn’t fill the place in her heart that giving did.

“Rarity, reporting for duty, captain,” she announced to Fancypants with a smile and a mock salute.

“And looking marvelous, if I may be so bold,” Fancypants replied, matching Rarity’s grin. “Now that you are here, I’d like to welcome you off the edge of the map. We’ve just left Equestria.”

“Left Equestria?” Rarity repeated, walking quickly over to the port rail. Below, and extending at least as far as the horizon, lay a carpet of dark green vegetation. “Is that the jungle you spoke of?”

“Quite, though what you see is merely one small outgrowth of one corner of the Impenetrable Lands. Fortunately, our destination lies clear of the foliage.”

“We’re now forty leagues out of Gallopoli,” Tempest reported. “We still have another hundred to go.”

“Do you care to take the helm?” Fancypants asked.

“While I am more than willing to help, I wouldn’t have the first clue about where to point the ship,” Rarity demurred, though flattered by the offer.

“Colonel Tempest there will give you headings. I prefer to steer using the wheel, but I believe you are already familiar with the mechanized helm controls. You need do no more than push a button and rotate a dial,” Fancypants replied.

Rarity saw no polite way to decline. “How can I refuse?” she responded with an easy laugh. She took Fancypants’ position behind the console.

“A course, Colonel?” Rarity asked, attempting to assume a commanding tone of voice.

“Turn port heading two two six,” Tempest called back, and Rarity swiftly worked the heading indicator controls to execute a left turn to a southwest heading of 226°.

“Two two six degrees,” Rarity confirmed, imitating Fancypants’ style of calling back directions.

“Excellent!” Fancypants said. “A natural, as I expected.”

“Imitating proficiency does not equate to competence,” Rarity replied. “Nevertheless, thank you.”

“Captain, we have weather, at least ten leagues distant and straight ahead,” Tempest shouted urgently.

“‘Weather’ is a rather nondescript term, Tempest. What do you see?” Fancypants asked.

“Cumulonimbus, horizon to horizon. It’s a wall of storms,” Tempest replied.

“Wonderful,” Fancypants replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Now, Miss Rarity, we are in for a demonstration showing just why this part of the world has not been claimed by Equestria or any other civilized nation. How is one to live where the weather itself runs rampant? Tempest, I dare not dream that you see a path around the storm, do I?”

“There’s no way around,” the pegasus confirmed. “I don’t see any lightning, though, so if this is merely wind and rain, we should be able to punch through.”

“I shall inform Mr. Grease and Miss Windlass of the situation, and request that the latter report topside,” Fancypants declared. “*Fancy Free* is yours, Rarity.”

“Oh my, are you sure that’s wise?” Rarity asked, but Fancypants was already gone down the stairs. Far in the distance, Rarity could see what looked like a sheet of gray stretching from the ground far into the sky, many times higher than the airship’s present elevation. In fact, the clouds seemed to reach far higher than the tallest mountain she had seen. It obviously would not be possible to pass over the storm. Rarity draped her forehooves over two of the handles extending from the wheel’s rim, and held on tightly.

“Strange place for a storm to pop up, don’t you think?” asked Tempest. “We’re away from water, and I can’t imagine where a cold front would be coming from.”

“How should I know? I’m a fashion designer, not a meteorologist,” Rarity replied testily, focusing on keep the airship flying straight.

“You know, I earned my cutie mark for getting myself and two of my school friends through a terrible gale back home,” Tempest said, gesturing with his head toward the swirling storm clouds on his flank. “Of course, that was a pegasus-made storm, not a wild thing like what we have waiting for us up ahead. It’s hard to say what this will be like.”

“You’re hardly instilling confidence,” Rarity replied.

“I’m not trying to,” Tempest replied with a cold smile. “Wild weather is not something to be trifled with, especially where the rules prevent weather manipulation, either by wings or magic. It could get a little bumpy in there. In fact, a pony could lose her balance and take a spill if she wasn’t paying attention.”

“I’ll be careful,” Rarity said, tightening her hold on the ship’s wheel. It might have been her imagination, but she thought she felt the first shudder of turbulence as the storm drew closer.

“Yes, do. Equestria has no replacements for the ponies who wield the Elements of Harmony.”

“Colonel, I must say that this sort of talk is helping nothing,” Rarity said crossly, attempting to keep the sound of fear from creeping into her voice. “Let’s worry about flying the ship, shall we?” The pegasus shrugged and turned his eyes forward again.

It was a great relief to Rarity when Fancypants returned with Windlass and retook command of the airship. She was only too happy to turn over the wheel after her alarming conversation with the first mate. She walked away from the others and forward to the bow to get a better view of the towering wall of clouds. The storm appeared infinitely tall and wide, and she agreed that there appeared to be no easy way through.

“Company,” Windlass announced. Rarity saw that she was looking aft through the ship’s spyglass. “I can see the *Alicorn* and *Stiletto*, and possibly one other far behind them. We’ll all have to slow down to fly through the weather, but whoever flies craziest may gain some distance.”

“That will assuredly not be us,” Fancypants stated. “My priority is emerging unscathed on the other side.”

As the storm grew larger and its towering clouds loomed overhead, rain began to fall. Fortunately, with the speed reduced the large balloon blocked the worst of it. More alarming was the fact that *Fancy Free* was now shuddering and bucking under Rarity’s hooves. Every few seconds she would feel her stomach float upwards or her legs compress as winds forced the airship down or blew it up into the air. Suddenly, the airship lurched forward and a terrible whining sound filled the air. In other circumstances such a noise might be coming from Rarity herself, but this time she recognized it as the engine. Something was clearly wrong with it.

“Most infelicitous timing,” Fancypants shouted over the increasingly loud wind. “By the sound of things I must take my leave at once to assist Mr. Grease with the engine. Colonel Tempest, you have the ship. Please see that you live up to your cutie mark and get us all through this.”

Tempest took over behind the wheel, and Rarity continued to hang onto the bow railing for dear life. The situation was becoming intolerable, and the ship hadn’t even connected with the thick clouds up ahead yet.

“Colonel,” Rarity yelled backwards. “As a pegasus, won’t you get stuck in the clouds once we fly in?”

“Clouds are only solid to us when we want them to be,” Tempest shouted over the storm. “I’d rather not be stuck in these.”

The sun was already invisible, but now its light was growing dim as the clouds grew thicker. Windlass joined Rarity at the bow of the ship.

“The rules ban weather manipulation, but not light magic. Why don’t you and I see if we can help the Colonel see where he’s flying.” Windlass’ horn glowed faintly, failing to provide much in the way of illumination. Rarity knew she could do much better, and having a mission took her mind off the storm. She stood up, pointed her horn forward, and cast a brilliant white beam in the clouds, forming a shining path extending several hundred pony lengths in front of the ship. Rarity smiled inwardly at her impressive display. At that moment, however, the first bolt of lightning flashed nearby, shortly followed by a deafening thunderclap. Rarity fell to the deck, whimpering, and her beam of light winked out. Meanwhile, the whining of the engine was growing louder and more high-pitched.

“It’s just a little weather, nothing to be alarmed about,” Windlass said, glancing down at Rarity.

“You’ve simply got to be kidding,” Rarity replied. “This is terrifying!”

“I suppose I can see why *you* might think so,” Windlass said. Rarity watched the other mare’s horn glow more brightly for just a moment, and another bolt of lightning followed immediately thereafter. “It’s a bit less frightening for me.” She grinned wickedly down at Rarity.

Rarity gasped. “You’re not casting light at all, are you? You’re guiding the storm with magic. I saw your weathervane cutie mark this morning, but I didn’t think to connect it with a special talent. What in Celestia’s name has gotten into you? You know this is against the rules.”

“Why, you’ve gotten into me, of course!” Windlass replied. “You gave me the courage to decide to do what’s right for Equestria.”

“How could whatever it is you think you’re doing be good for Equestria?” Rarity demanded, clinging to the railing as the wind whipped up even stronger than before.

Windlass ignored her. “Also, I’d like you to know that I’m not merely guiding this storm. I made it. You see, being gifted with wind and air is great for an aeronautical engineer, but what I really like is weather creation. Now, I’m not going to tell you *how* I made this storm, because that would be telling, but let’s just say that a lot of other ponies are going to find out soon enough.”

Rarity put two and two together. “When I didn’t come and get you for your watch on time last night, the ship I saw was flashing signals meant for you. What did those three flashes mean?”

“It meant that today is the day you have to die,” Windlass said flatly, looking away from Rarity.

“Colonel Tempest! Get over here right now!” Rarity shouted, trying not to sound as panicked as she was.

“There’s no need to yell, I’ve been right here,” Tempest said, walking calmly through the rain to stand next to Windlass.

“You thought this was just a race, Rarity, but it’s a mission—*my* mission, and Colonel Tempest is a part of it,” Windlass said. “It’s a mission to save Equestria.”

Icy fear gripped Rarity as the terrible nightmare of the prior night flashed through her brain. “They’re coming for you,” Windlass’ cloud avatar had warned, before a vicious storm had tossed Rarity through the air and left her to hurtle toward the ground. The dream storm had wind, rain, lightning, and even hail; it had been a veritable *tempest*. Something inside her had tried to issue a warning, but she hadn’t understood. She began pondering her options for escape, but the list was frighteningly short. She had essentially nowhere to go, and attempting to run on the slick and windy deck would be foolhardy at best. What she wouldn’t give for Twilight’s skill with teleportation right about now!

“I see you looking toward the stairway,” Tempest said. “Don’t try it. Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be. You seem like a nice enough mare, I’d like this to be quick.”

“Fancypants is going to be awhile longer down there,” Windlass added. “Somepony overtightened the linkages on the centrifugal governor, and it’s causing the engine to overheat. Unfortunately for you, it’s also the last place anypony would look for a problem.”

“So what is this?” Rarity asked, stalling for time. “What are you going to do?”

“It happened like this,” Tempest began, not directly addressing her. “Unfortunately, the storm got so intense that Miss Rarity was knocked from her hooves and slid across the slippery deck.” He walked back to the ship’s wheel. “She stood up, but at that moment a tremendous gust of wind hit us from the side.” He yanked down on the wheel hard, causing it to spin and the ship to begin tilting into a banked turn. “She went over the rail.

I tried to save her, even flying into the storm to try to catch her, but the wind was just too powerful. I lost sight of her.”

“Fancypants won’t let you get away with this,” Rarity shouted. She tried screaming for help, but her voice was easily overpowered by the deafening weather.

“This is for him!” Windlass exclaimed. “He might not understand it, but this is for the bright future that he’s dreaming of, for a free, equal Equestria that is a better place for everypony. We’ll never reach that future as long as the Elements of Harmony stand in the way. The era of magic needs to end.”

“And what about you?” Rarity demanded of Tempest. “You were in the Guard, you should know better than to act so cowardly. You’re dishonoring your oath.”

“I’m here to start a war,” he replied, shrugging. “If Equestria is going to have this bright shiny future, then it’s going to have to be a future without griffons. I’m also being paid.”

So that was it; the conspiracy was laid bare. Rarity thought back to Prince Khufu, who had come to Equestria in the hopes that war would break out. It seemed he would get his wish. She thought of Chancellor Seventalons, whose death was beginning to seem less likely to have been accidental. She thought of the mysterious airship, apparently filled with other conspirators, whose names she would never know. She thought of Blueblood, and wondered whether he too was part of this, and whether he knew she was about to be killed. Finally, she thought of Ponyville: her friends and family. She wondered if Twilight’s eulogy would be like that of her dream. It had been charming, she supposed.

“Fancypants will never love you if he finds out about this,” Rarity said, turning to Windlass to try one last desperate tack.

“Then he’ll never know!” Windlass screeched, lunging forward.

That uncontrolled lunge was what Rarity had hoped for, and she ducked and shifted her weight forward, causing Windlass to trip over her and crash onto the deck behind. Rarity quickly got to her hooves and began dashing for the door to the lower level, but she didn’t get far before she lost contact with the deck completely. Tempest had taken hold of her and pulled her up into the air. He quickly carried over the side of the ship, wings beating furiously to stay aloft in the storm.

“Goodbye,” Tempest said. Rarity fell.

As Rarity plunged through the rain and storm clouds, terrified and screaming, her overriding primal instinct for self preservation fought with the rational part of her that was trying to convince her mind and body to shut down and accept the inevitable. Her panicked brain, casting about for some means of saving itself, flashed through a hundred useless thoughts and images, all in less than a second, before settling on her one chance for survival: *walk on clouds*.

After the Cloudsdale debacle, Rarity had begged Twilight to show her how to cast the spell. She had traded her gem-finding spell for it, and the two unicorns had worked with each other for a long afternoon until Rarity was sure she had learned it. It wasn't a terribly advanced spell, and she'd successfully turned it off and on, practicing on the little tuft of cloud that Rainbow Dash had provided.

She forced herself to stop screaming and turn her fear-addled brain to the business of spell-casting. Rarity concentrated on the image of a cloud becoming tangible beneath her hooves, but hesitated to activate the spell. The moment had to be right, or she might cast it as she passed through a cloud, and she didn't dare imagine what the consequences of such a mistake might be. Eyes opened wide to the stinging wind and rain, she saw open space and the dark roiling surface of a cloud directly below her. If she passed through the remaining cloud layer, there would be nothing but air between her and the ground below. It was now or never. Rarity cast the spell.

It only took a fraction of a second for her to reach the surface of the cloud below, and it greeted Rarity with the painful and gut-wrenching shock of sudden deceleration. It did not, however, completely arrest her fall. Instead, the cloud deformed as Rarity sank down into an ever-deepening depression, stretching thinner and wider until the entire cloud finally burst in an explosion of water droplets and ice crystals. Rarity fell again, screaming, but only for a short moment. The next cloud floated just below the first, and Rarity bounced once, twice, and then came to rest.

She was alive, if windblown, soaking wet, and shivering. The tropical warmth far below did nothing for her at this altitude, in this storm. Glancing upward, she saw no sign of *Fancy Free*. There had to be layers of clouds between her and the airship at this point. Saving herself from falling would be small consolation if there was no pony to rescue her. Either she would perish from hypothermia, or she would simply plummet again once the storm dissipated. That would be an inglorious end after managing to save herself once already. Lightning flashed, forking from cloud to cloud above her and filling the air with the scent of ozone. She wondered what would happen if her own cloud discharged a

lightning bolt. She'd probably end up the same way that Spike liked his hay fries - extra crispy.

Rarity struggled to calm her nerves and keep from hyperventilating in the thin air. Somepony—some *ponies*—had just tried to kill her! She had begun to develop suspicions of Windlass being less than forthright about some things, but Rarity never supposed that the young mare planned to try to murder her, or that Colonel Tempest was her accomplice. She thought she was figuring things out, when in reality she was playing the part of the foolish ingénue, naïvely blundering into the clutches of enemies she didn't even know she had.

“You could have had a nice, safe, pleasant, and long life in Ponyville, if only you'd never dreamed of fame, fortune, and Canterlot,” Rarity muttered. Clinging to the cloud's heaving fluffiness, body shivering and teeth chattering from the cold, she suspected that she was only marking time before the inevitable. She was living her nightmare of falling from the sky, but without a means of waking up and making it all go away.

After a time she began to feel drowsy, and Rarity knew her body was starting to give up the fight against the elements. When a winged golden pony pierced the clouds above her, she wasn't even surprised. She merely felt pleased to see that such a fabulous escort had come to take her to whatever lay beyond this life. She hoped there would be hats.

As the clouds parted behind the golden pony, though, Rarity bolted upright on the cloud top with what strength remained in her. The airship *Alicorn* burst from the storm and into the clear space between clouds, no more than a hundred lengths distant, its golden figurehead leading the way. Rarity was at such an angle that she could even see Blueblood standing at the control column, gripping the wheel to keep a steady course in the high winds. This was either serendipity or cruel misfortune, but Blueblood represented her only chance for salvation. Rarity shouted and screamed for help with every ounce of energy she had left. If she could see Blueblood, then he could see her, if only she could cause him to look in her direction.

Closer and closer the *Alicorn* flew, until she was scarcely a stone's throw from her captain. Rarity could have even sworn that Blueblood turned his begoggled gaze directly toward her. The airship, however, never even slowed down. Rarity stopped shouting for a moment to watch, helplessly, as Blueblood steamed away from her. Then, having no other recourse, she began to rage in the *Alicorn*'s wake.

“You, you monster! You utter lout! You waste of perfectly good hay and oxygen! How dare you leave me? Come back here this instant! I'll ... I'll haunt your dreams after I'm

gone, you overgrown, unmannered, ill-bred schoolcolt! I'll ...” Rarity’s stream of invective trailed off as she watched the *Alicorn* ponderously turn, its hull swinging outward from its large balloon, and began coming back toward her. As it slowed directly over her patch of cloud, a thick rope fell from the ship to dangle in front of her, and Blueblood’s face poked out over the side of the airship.

“That’s not really you, is it?” he called out.

“Who else in Equestria do you think it might be, hmm? Do I look like a cloud sprite? Perhaps a windigo?” Rarity managed, fighting to suppress chattering of her teeth. “Now get me out of here!” She bit down on the rope and did her best to clamp onto it with her legs. Her magic was exhausted, and the cloudwalking spell gave out. Rarity could not afford to let go of the rope, so she clung for dear life as Blueblood used magic, supplemented by the strength of his own jaws and teeth, to haul her aboard. Rarity collapsed to the deck in a sodden heap.

“How?” he asked, walking quickly back to the ship’s wheel. “I thought I was losing my mind, but then I realized that I would never hallucinate something so ridiculous as you, shivering, standing on top of a cloud.”

“B-blanket,” Rarity stammered, shivering.

“What’s that? I’m asking how you came to be standing on that cloud just now.”

“Blanket *now*,” Rarity reiterated.

“Why in Equestria do you think I’m talking about blankets? I’m asking you how you got on that cloud where I found you. Where did you even learn a spell that would allow you to do such a thing?”

“*Get ... me ... a ... blanket!*” Rarity shouted weakly, gritting her teeth and glaring at Blueblood, before flopping pathetically back down onto the deck and huddling in a fetal position.

“Oh,” Blueblood said, finally appearing to comprehend. “Okay.”

Rarity watched as he magically took hold of what appeared to be a jagged piece of board and jammed in between the spokes of the ship’s wheel, effectively preventing it from turning. She idly wondered how the supposedly most advanced airship in the world could lack the automatic steering mechanism that she had learned to operate on *Fancy Free*, and instead be relegated to such a crude solution. Blueblood then opened a hatch

behind the steering console and disappeared out of sight. A short moment later he raised his head out of the hatch and called to her.

“Come down here. It’s dry, and you can warm up. If I am going to be recognized for heroically rescuing you, I can’t have you expire on my ship.”

Rarity attempted to stagger to her hooves, but she was simply too tired and cold. Blueblood waited for a few seconds, but eventually understood that she wasn’t going anywhere under her own power. He emerged from the hatch, shoved his forelegs under Rarity, and lifted her, awkwardly balancing on his hind legs. Careful step by careful step, he descended a folding staircase that led down to the *Alicorn*’s cabin.

Rarity was struck first by the fact that it was toasty warm belowdecks on the *Alicorn*, probably because the ship was substantially smaller than *Fancy Free* and its boiler and steam engine had to be relatively closer to the cabin. Second, the ship was far less spartan than she had become accustomed to since leaving Canterlot. Likely due to the fact that Blueblood flew alone and therefore only needed to carry provisions for one, he had found room for a real bed with a mattress and blankets, a small stove, a tin coffee pot, and a drafting desk which could perform double duty as a table. A sink with faucets appeared to be capable of producing running water, and the fact that a basin of steaming water had been placed at the foot of the bed led credence to this hypothesis. Oddly, the entire area was immaculate, as if nothing in it had been touched. Blueblood was a fussy pony, but not even Rarity herself could keep a room this tidy, especially if nopony was around to see it.

“For me?” Rarity half-whispered, as Blueblood set her down on the bed.

“You are nearly frozen, and half-drowned,” the stallion replied with a shrug. “If you keel over I’ll never learn how you ended up on a cloud in the middle of a thunderstorm.” He paused. “Also, since Fancypants is now disqualified for losing a crewmember, and one of the race markers,” Blueblood indicated the strand of pearls Rarity still wore, “I can take the rest of the race at my leisure. None of the others have a chance of keeping up with the *Alicorn*.” Blueblood disappeared up the stairs to the upper deck, closing the hatch behind him.

Rarity was in no state even to chastise Blueblood for his lack of chivalry in leaving her. Instead, she sat up, pulled all the blankets from the bed and wrapped them tightly around her, and plunged her rear hooves into the basin of hot water. The sudden warmth was sweet relief, and vigor began to spread from her core to her extremities. As a spark of life returned, Rarity reflected on her current situation. Miraculously, she was alive.

Furthermore, the fact that Blueblood had rescued her appeared to be proof positive that he, at least, was not part of the plot to be rid of her. Rid of her! What a thought! The very idea that there were ponies, and perhaps griffons and Celestia knew what else, who had it in their minds to murder her would have been farcical if it weren't a matter of her own life and death. She was just a fashion designer from Ponyville, of all places. Why would she be targeted? It wasn't fair!

It was true that she represented the spirit of the Element of Generosity, but the fact that Twilight Sparkle had showed up in Ponyville and pulled the others along on her mystical mission to recover the Elements wasn't Rarity's doing. The responsibility for helping to save the country from its gravest threats certainly wasn't anything she had asked for, or anything she was capable of attempting on her own. Another ominous thought sent a shiver down Rarity's spine. If she had been targeted on account of her association with the Elements, did that mean that the others were in danger too? If so, she had to convince Blueblood to turn the ship around at once, or request that the Wonderbolts ferry word home, or better still, do both.

Although, if all of her friends were in danger, the attackers could have easily struck at any time back in Ponyville. Most of her friends didn't even lock their doors at night, per the local custom. Rarity only did so in order to protect her wares, but a simple deadbolt could easily be circumvented if one was truly determined to get inside. She and the others could have been attacked at home, but they hadn't been. Instead, Rarity had been singled out while she was alone and abroad.

Could the reason behind her former crewmates' betrayal be unrelated to the Elements of Harmony? What if Windlass had somehow learned that Fancypants planned to have Rarity take over his business operations? Her obsession with the stallion was obvious, and might plausibly drive her to rash behavior. On the other hoof, Tempest had said that he was being paid to start a war. How could Rarity possibly fit into a plan to cause conflict between ponies and griffons, especially when Windlass and Tempest had apparently taken pains to make her demise seem like an accident?

Rarity thought back to the beginning of this misadventure. The griffons, or at least General Karroc and his entourage, appeared eager to blame Equestria for the death of their Chancellor. Yet a mysterious accident at a dinner party was hardly grounds for armed hostilities. There had to be something more, something that would rouse the fighting spirit of a nation of peaceful ponies. Rarity's seemingly accidental death certainly wouldn't accomplish that dreadful goal. Her heart sank as she realized the implication—this was a conspiracy, and it extended beyond Tempest and Windlass. The next horrific machinations must already be in motion, and she had no idea what they could be. She

needed to talk to Blueblood now, and convince him—or force him if need be—to turn back toward Equestria.

Rarity attempted to stand, but an overwhelming wave of dizziness forced her back down onto her haunches. She needed more time to recover her strength, but time was now a precious commodity that she could not spare. She had to force herself to be resilient and bear the discomfort instead. Rarity stood, and this time was able to stay on all four hooves. She extracted her rear legs from the water basin and cast most of Blueblood's blankets back onto the bed in a heap. She still needed something to help stave off the storm outside, though, lest she truly take ill.

The blankets were wool, and therefore impregnated with lanolin, making them naturally water-repellent. Rarity levitated a lone blanket, unfolding it and spreading it fully open in the air in front of her. A simple blanket would be blown off by the wind outside. She imagined the blanket as a basic cape, with a simple closure. There were spare buttons on a coat hanging on a peg in the cabin. Rarity combined the buttons and blanket in her mind, seeing the threads shifting, reweaving, and forming a new pattern.

In a flash of magic the new garment was made. She draped her woolen cloak over her back, pulled up the hood, and buttoned the closure at her throat. Thus equipped, Rarity opened the hatch to the upper deck and climbed up the stairs to find Blueblood. As before, he had his hooves on the *Alicorn's* wooden wheel.

“You must turn this airship around at once and make for Equestria. We can get back to Gallopoli by the end of the day,” Rarity demanded, expending no time or effort on pleasantries.

“I'm sorry, but that's not going to happen,” Blueblood replied, not bothering to turn in her direction. “One of us has *not* been disqualified from this race. When we reach the next marker, you can get off and have the course monitors call for a transport balloon to take you back home.”

“You obviously aren't hearing me,” Rarity began, walking around Blueblood so that she could look him in his eyes, covered though they were by his ridiculous aviator's goggles. “I'm telling you what to do, not asking a favor. Aren't you curious as to how I came to be standing on a cloud in the middle of a thunderstorm? I'll tell you. I was picked up by one of my own teammates and thrown overboard! Two of them tried to murder me, and I'm positive they are planning more terrible things as we speak.”

Blueblood stared at her for just a moment, before doubling over in a fit of laughter. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. If you don’t want to admit that you drank too much contraband hooch and fell over the railing, you don’t have to. I must say that was a nice save with the cloudwalking spell, for a unicorn in your obviously inebriated state.”

“Every word I’m saying is the truth. I don’t know why or how, but this has to do with starting a war between ponies and griffons. We must go back.”

“You know, if I hadn’t come along and deigned to pull you up, it would have been the end of you. I suppose you’re forever in my debt, yet here you are making outrageous demands and telling outrageous stories. What would Fancypants think? I suppose he and the others are grieving for you right now. I’m sure they would feel differently if they could hear the nonsense you’re spouting.”

Rarity’s anger was now beginning to simmer, and if she wasn’t careful it might boil over completely. “Forgive me for my lack of graciousness in failing to prostrate myself before you in thanks for not leaving me out in the storm to die. *My hero*. You truly went above and beyond the call of normal pony decency. Now, you self-absorbed nitwit, I just survived attempted equicide, and I’m not going to let you of all the ponies in this world keep me from getting out a warning that could potentially save lives!”

“Bravo, you’ve almost got me convinced.” Blueblood clapped his forehooves together. “Oh look, your nonsensical ranting has slowed us down enough for Graywings to catch up.” Blueblood pointed a hoof to port, where the dagger-shaped griffon airship had emerged from a break in the storm and was now tracking alongside the *Alicorn*. “Perhaps we can beg *him* to take you back home. Of course, his ship would be disqualified for having six crewmembers, but turning around is tantamount to giving up the race anyway.”

“Blueblood,” Rarity began, before the stallion cut her off.

“I simply cannot believe that you managed to fall out of your airship, and now, after I went out of my way to save your life, you have the gall to—”

“Blueblood!” Rarity yelled. “Turn around and look at the airship. Tell me, who is flying it?” Rarity had been observing the griffon airship since Blueblood had pointed it out, and two things were immediately apparent. First, there was no one standing on its deck, either at watch or behind the steering column. Second, it was steadily drifting closer to the *Alicorn*.

Blueblood turned back to look at the apparently empty griffon airship. Lightning flashed, making plain that no one was flying it. “That doesn’t make any sense. Where is Graywings?”

The griffon airship *Stiletto* was as tapered and slim as its namesake weapon, but it did have room for a small cabin under an elevated portion of the deck at the far aft. One large open window in that cabin was visible to Rarity and Blueblood, and both unicorns jumped when Graywings’ portly body suddenly appeared. He was standing stock-still, staring directly at them through the opening in his ship.

“Captain! You are drifting in the storm!” Blueblood shouted at the top of his lungs, trying to be heard over the howling storm. “Resume control of your ship at once!”

Graywings did not respond, but rather began to tilt forward ponderously. The fat griffon tumbled out of the window and fell, and as he did so his back became visible. Rarity screamed at the sight of it, because what should have nothing but fur and feathers was marred by the thick hilt of a massive knife, protruding from a hideous wound. Graywings, obviously dead, tumbled away into the storm.

“Of all the times when I might get to say ‘I told you so’ to you, it *would* have to be at a time like this,” Rarity said. There had been a time, perhaps even earlier that morning, when she would have fainted at the mere sight of something as horrific as what she had just witnessed, but the events of the day had jaded her. “I assume that now you believe there just *might* be something amiss?”

“This can’t be happening,” Blueblood muttered quietly, lips barely moving and sounding as if he was in shock. “I don’t believe it. This is the *Alicorn’s* Cup! This sort of thing simply doesn’t happen!”

“Perhaps now might be a good time to listen to me and *get us back to Equestria!*” Rarity shouted. “In the off chance that this is not obvious to you, whoever put a knife in Elector Graywings is clearly still on that ship, and, if I were a wagering mare, I would gamble that he or she has wings with which to bridge the gap between that airship and yours.”

“I ... yes. Perhaps now is not the time to bicker further,” Blueblood said at last. “Find something and hold onto it.” He spun the *Alicorn’s* wheel hard to the right, and began manipulating various levers on the control column. The *Alicorn* climbed and yawed away from the uncrewed griffon airship. As the airship accelerated, the force of the storm buffeting it only grew fiercer, and it was all Rarity could do to stay in one place by

keeping low to the wet deck planks and wrapping her forelegs around a metal cleat embedded in the deck.

Rarity peered over the side of the airship, back and below toward the *Stiletto*, and witnessed a solitary griffon female with striking white lion hindquarters and black feathers covering her front half emerge from the ship's cabin, twirling in her talons a knife like that which had been embedded in Graywings' back. She was not one of the regular racers, as Rarity had never seen her before.

After sheathing the weapon, the griffoness took the *Stiletto's* wheel. She acted deliberately, and appeared in no great hurry to chase after the *Alicorn*, though the retreating ship must have been both visible and audible to her. Rarity had decided to assume the worst from this point forward, so if the griffon was not chasing the two witnesses to her crime, that could only mean she didn't believe they would escape. If something was going to prevent Rarity and Blueblood from escaping back to Equestria, then that could only mean the griffon had help in place to stop them.

Rarity came to this realization a fraction of a second before a deafening crack, louder than a thunderclap, rent the air. The *Alicorn* shook and shuddered as if it had collided with a granite wall, and Rarity's teeth rattled from the vibration. The impact sent her sprawling on the deck, and Blueblood barely managed to keep a hold on the ship's wheel. Rarity realized that the *Alicorn* was no longer moving forward, even though the steam engine was whining with exertion. The ship began to tilt, the spinning propeller forcing the bow down since it could no longer convert its thrust into forward momentum.

"What was that?" she asked, turning her head to search for the cause of the impact. "Did you hit something?"

"I most certainly did not!" Blueblood retorted.

Rarity's searching gaze finally came to rest on an enormous rope, as thick as her neck and stretched taut, extending from somewhere on the starboard side of the *Alicorn* out into the storm. Whatever was on the other end of that rope had a secure hold on Blueblood's airship and was not letting go.

"There! Something has taken hold of us!" Rarity shouted, pointing.

Staring toward the unseen end of the mighty rope, Rarity suddenly felt a surge of magic in her horn. It pulled her toward the edge of the *Alicorn*, compelling her forward, and she had to plant her hooves and focus on quelling the nascent spell simply in order to keep

from being dragged overboard. She knew only one spell that activated unconsciously and had this effect on her—the gem-finding spell that had earned her a cutie mark.

This gem-finding magic didn't always activate without warning, but when it did Rarity tended to be in the vicinity of concealed gemstones that were either very close, or very impressive. There had to be a gem of considerable quality and size somewhere in the storm, somewhere near the other end of the rope, but why, and how did it get there?

“This is absurd,” Blueblood exclaimed, standing motionless at the *Alicorn*'s control console. “Who could be doing this to me? It's not fair! I should be winning this race. I was born to win it. I was—”

“Pull yourself together!” Rarity yelled, simultaneously striking Blueblood's cheek with the backside of a forehoof. “I shall go below and try to dislodge whatever is affixing that rope to the ship. You try to fly us free of it.”

Rarity applied enough magic to heave open the hatch to the belowdecks cabin and charged down the stairs without waiting for an acknowledgement. She had improbably survived one attempt on her life today, and she wasn't going to stand idly by now that the villains had come for Blueblood. The lantern had not been knocked from its hook on the ceiling, but nearly everything else in the airship's cabin was in a state of utter disarray.

Papers were strewn about and glass littered the floor. Most strikingly, an enormous three-pronged metal hook, nearly as large as Rarity and probably several times as heavy, protruded into the cabin through a jagged hole in the hull. Rarity could see through the opening that the hook was affixed to the end of a long rod, which was in turn tied to the rope that had been visible from the upper deck. The metal prongs of the hook could not have fit through the opening in the hull, so Rarity surmised they must have sprung open after impact. The thing was like a giant clawed arrow, and now it held the *Alicorn* firmly in its grasp.

Rarity knew immediately that she was not going to be able to budge the hook. Their best hope was that Blueblood would be able to rip it free by overtaxing the steam engine, even though it would take a large portion of the hull with it. She had already turned to go back up the stairs when a rapid series of impacts sounded on the deck above her, and seconds later Blueblood half-galloped, half-fell down the stairs. He quickly used his magic to pull the hatch shut behind him, then slammed it closed. There were wide hoof handles on the bottom of the hatch to enable non-unicorns to open and close it, and Blueblood rapidly shoved part of a broken hull plank through them to bar the cabin's only entrance.

“What’s going on out there?” Rarity demanded.

“You brought this down on me, you know that? You have been nothing but ill fortune from the moment I laid eyes on you, and now you’ve finally done it. We’re dead ponies!”

“Done what? Who is out there?” Rarity jumped as a heavy blow shook the hatch, but the sturdy wood did not seem ready to give way just yet.

“Griffons!” Blueblood yelled, his eyes wild and panic in his voice.

If Rarity was going to survive, she needed to get the other unicorn to calm down. She placed her forelegs on his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “What else did you see?”

Blueblood shook his head and blinked, and Rarity thought he seemed to be pulling himself together. He stood up straighter at least. “They have an airship larger than a cargo lifter, and the three that just landed on my deck are clearly not here to pay a social call. They have firesticks. Flintlock pistols to be precise. I recognize them because Procyon has a brace of them back at the castle. You don’t suppose they’d take you and simply let me be on my way, do you?”

“Feel free to ask them, and then do let me know what they say. I must caution you, however. If they are affiliated with the ponies who threw me overboard, then they believe I am already dead. These griffons are here for you.”

“I suppose the ‘why’ shall have to wait until we survive this,” Blueblood said with a sigh.

“I have a few theories,” said Rarity.

The pounding on the hatch was intensifying, and Rarity thought the griffons might be close to finally breaking through. Once they did, there would be nowhere to run. “Do you, perchance, have a plan?” she inquired.

“Besides cower here until the bloody end?” Blueblood asked. “No. Do you?”

Rarity furiously racked her brain. If even one of the girls were here, she might have a chance in a physical confrontation. Twilight Sparkle could blow the griffons off the ship. Rainbow Dash would burst from the hatch like a tornado, and the griffons would never know what hit them. What was Rarity going to do, knit them a sweater? Sew their feathers together? Sew...

“*I-de-a!*” Rarity exclaimed with an excited smile.

“What’s that now?”

“Why, this hook is no more than an ugly, overgrown sewing needle with a claw instead of a point. It has an eye at one end, through which the rope is threaded to hold it fast. If something can be threaded, then I can unthread it. Don’t you see? I can untie the rope from the hook.”

“That rope is extremely strong, and it’s being held tight by the tension between the two airships,” Blueblood said, sounding dubious. “Even together we couldn’t muster a strong enough telekinesis to untie it.”

“The thickest rope is nothing more than a hundred thinner ropes twisted together, and each of those is made of yet thinner, weaker ropes, and so on until you are left with fibers no stronger than the most delicate thread. I can see them in my mind, and if I have to unwind every fiber then by Celestia’s mane I will do it,” Rarity declared. She then winced as a particularly strong blow from one of the boarders splintered part of the hatch. “You’ll still have to deal with them.”

Blueblood looked around the cabin, obviously unsure of himself, before finally nodding. “Do you remember, back at my castle I told you that the *Alicorn* was not ready, that nothing was working properly? I was telling you the truth. Most of the instruments give faulty readings, and I must constantly hold the wheel to compensate for a misaligned rudder gyroscope that always wants to turn the ship to the right.

“Unfortunately, the automatic systems are built into all of the controls, and cannot be disconnected. I haven’t slept since we left Canterlot, both because I have been working on the problem and because I cannot leave the ship to her own devices for a second. Currently, only a fragment of planking shoved between the spokes of the *Alicorn*’s wheel is preventing us from making a very hard turn to starboard. Should it be removed unexpectedly, one who is not prepared would have a very hard time maintaining his balance.”

“Then have we a plan?” Rarity asked.

“We have.”

Rarity ignored the hammering of the griffons and turned all of her focus to the rope holding the metal hook fast. She let her magic play over it, examining it as she might any fabric or textile. Like most rope it was made of coir, a fiber with which Rarity was quite familiar. As she had told Blueblood, even the thickest rope was no more than a collection

of fibers. This particular rope was made of thousands of them, but the sheer number mattered little to Rarity. She had once unraveled an entire stage curtain and created a dress from its fabric in the blink of eye. Here, she had only to unwind and separate the coarse fibers of an ugly rope. It was foal's play.

At the same instant that Rarity's horn glowed with magic and the rope frayed and fell away into the storm, Blueblood cast his own spell. Many things then happened at once. The airship, no longer encumbered by the rope, shot forward as if from a cannon. Rarity was wholly unprepared for the sudden acceleration and fell backwards onto her rump.

At the same time, the *Alicorn* tilted to starboard as it banked sharply. Blueblood had obviously succeeded in pulling out the plank keeping the ship's wheel locked in place, and the airship's natural turning tendency was as dramatic as advertised. With any luck, chaos would be reigning amongst the intruders on the deck. In any case they would soon find out.

As Rarity staggered upright, Blueblood had already pulled the cracked board that was holding the hatch in place and charged up the stairs. Desperation was the mother of gallantry, it seemed. She hurried to follow him, but by the time she clambered onto the decks the situation had already taken a grim turn. On the positive side, there were now only two griffons. Blueblood must have dealt with one of them somehow. Less fortunate was the fact that both remaining griffons were powerfully built males standing upright on the deck, well-armored, and holding curved agglomerations of wood and metal in their talons. They were pointing the devices at Blueblood's chest. Though Rarity had never seen such things before, she realized the weapons must be the "pistols" that Blueblood had mentioned. The stallion stood unmoving before the intruders.

"What is she doing here?" one of the griffons rasped in Equestrian.

"Doesn't matter. Shoot them both," said the other.

Rarity didn't know what to expect next, but she heard a loud snap of metal on metal as a small hammer sprung forward on top of each pistol. She was a bit surprised, expecting some sort of explosion.

"They won't fire, because the frizzens are wet," Blueblood said, giving Rarity a meaningful look.

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she knew how to seize an opportunity. Rarity lowered her horn and charged. The griffon for whom she was aiming had the

sense to take wing and fly out of her range. His comrade was slower to react, and he absorbed a powerful blow from Blueblood's shoulder that sent him careening over the side of the ship. Rarity's griffon turned and flew away rather than confront the unicorns without a numerical advantage.

Blueblood hurried to take the wheel and stop the ship from turning in circles while Rarity scanned the surrounding storm clouds for more attackers, using flashes of lightning to see through the clouds. There were no griffons, but she could see the hazy outline of an enormous vessel filling the sky behind them. If what Rarity could see was an accurate representation of the enemy airship's size, it was easily one of the largest she had ever seen. A flash of red appeared briefly from the direction of the griffon airship, and Rarity jumped backwards as a spray of splinters flew up from the deck in front of her. The griffons were firing at them from aboard their airship.

"We must get out of here!" Rarity shouted.

"Do you have any reason to believe that's not what I'm trying to do?"

"Watch out!" Rarity shrieked as an enormous steel arrow whistled past overhead, trailing rope behind it. The arrow flew well high of the *Alicorn's* hull, but raked the airship's balloon forward of its tail fin. The missile tore a long gash before falling away.

"Well that's that, then. We're not getting back to Equestria," Blueblood said, looking up to assess the damage.

"But we must!" Rarity protested. "We have to warn the others, and the Princesses!"

"What we *must* do is obey the law of gravity," Blueblood snapped. "Gravity says that we are going to be landing very soon."

"If we land they shall find us!"

"We are flying over the densest jungle in the world. If we can shake their pursuit before we land, I doubt they will have an easy time locating us. At any rate, we have no choice. As we lose more lifting gas the ship will eventually drop like a stone. I have to get her down."

Rarity knelt on the deck, clinging to the control column as Blueblood angled the airship into a steep starboard turning dive. The *Alicorn* gained speed quickly, and soon Rarity could no longer see any sign of the pursuers behind them. Several minutes after beginning its emergency descent, the ship burst through the boundary of the cloud layer

and into clear air, free of the storm at last. As Blueblood had said, below the clouds there was nothing but an endless canopy of thick vegetation as far as Rarity could see in any direction.

Where could they land? The *Alicorn* was an airship, with no equipment for actually landing on the earth's surface. Finally, Rarity noticed a small break in the jungle ahead and to port: a small, narrow lake. Blueblood had apparently seen it as well, because he turned the wheel and the ship sluggishly angled in the appropriate direction. Meanwhile, the carpet of trees below was quickly coming closer.

"We're flying too fast!" Rarity shouted. "We can't land like this."

"We can't *not* land in our present condition, and there's no time to slow down. If we try, we'll have so little lift from the balloon that we'll simply fall out of the air."

"You *have* to slow down!" Rarity insisted. Upon closer inspection, the lake Rarity had seen was more like a modest pond. There was absolutely no chance of coming to a stop in its meager length. On the bright side, no enemy searching for them would rationally believe that the *Alicorn* could have landed on it.

"Find something to brace against!"

There was nothing on the deck that looked more likely to cushion the impending impact than to severely injure her, so Rarity simply continued to kneel on all fours next to Blueblood and watch the jungle quickly grow closer. If this was to be her final experience, then at least she went out fighting and with her eyes open. She only wished she was spending this moment with somepony else. The jungle canopy was only a few lengths below the airship's hull now, and the tiny lake still seemed far away. They weren't going to make it. Rarity wondered if Fluttershy would adopt her cat.

Suddenly she was thrown by a tremendous jolt as the *Alicorn* bounced off the first trees it contacted, and the airship rocked unsteadily as it gained a few precious additional lengths of altitude from the ricochet. By now, however, the ship had lost so much lift from the balloon's deflation that it quickly began to settle back toward the ground.

The *Alicorn* fell, crashing through a final line of trees before sailing clear of the jungle and contacting the surface of the lake. The careering airship did not stop there, but its nautical-inspired hull design kept it from breaking apart on impact. Instead, the *Alicorn* hurtled across the surface of the water, of which there was not nearly enough on which to stop before reaching the opposite bank. Desperate, Rarity searched for something,

anything soft enough to cushion the crash. She threw her forelegs around Blueblood a half-second before the *Alicorn* barreled out of the water and into the jungle beyond. An awful crunching sound filled the air, and the rapidly flashing shapes of trees and greenery occupied Rarity's vision. She had the distinct sensation of flying, no longer by means of airship, before all went dark.

When Rarity came to, she opened her eyes and saw blue sky filtering through tiny openings in a ceiling of broad green leaves. The storm had finally passed, and she was alive. These were welcome revelations. Less welcome was the excruciating pain that she felt in every part of her body. Also unwelcome was the fact that she was lying on her back in a filthy, almost certainly disease-ridden no pony's land hundreds and hundreds of leagues away from home.

Rarity rolled onto her belly, and then painfully pushed off on the decaying matter of the forest floor until she reached a wobbly standing position. She should be grateful that she hadn't broken any bones in the crash, she supposed, but gratitude was a difficult emotion to come by at the moment. She had still managed to batter and bruise herself all over, including places she hadn't previously known were possible to bruise. Inspecting her legs and hooves, she saw that they were unscathed. Her makeshift cloak had been torn away, but amazingly she still wore the Gallopolitan pearl necklace.

Rarity realized that she must have been flung free in the crash, since the wreckage of the *Alicorn* rested some ten pony lengths away, amidst a scene of arboreal carnage. Smashed and splintered trees littered the area. Still, there were so many nearby trees still standing, and their tops were so tall and lush, that there was no significant opening in the jungle canopy through which prying eyes might spy the crashed airship.

Rarity had to find Blueblood. Without him, her chances of survival were zero. With him, they might still be zero, but at least she would have someone with whom to argue. She tried calling his name, but the only responses were the mocking cries of jungle birds. Perhaps he was still on, or inside the *Alicorn*. A fallen tree trunk formed a convenient means of ingress from the forest floor to the upper deck of the ship.

The enormous balloon that had given the airship its lift had completely deflated and now lay in a limp pool of blue fabric partially draped over the deck of the crashed hull, but mainly tangled in the trees beside the wreck. The hull itself was remarkably intact, but there was no sign of Blueblood on the deck. The decimated ship's cabin was likewise unoccupied. As Rarity was about to leave to go search the jungle, she heard a loud bang from somewhere nearby. Of course, she realized, the *Alicorn* had to have an engine room like any other steamship. She found Blueblood beyond a small hatch at the rear of the

ship's cabin, crouched in the ship's cramped and sweltering engine room. Blueblood had cast an illumination spell to light the dark room and was examining a series of gauges on the side of the airship's massive engine.

"Thank you so much for coming to find me while I was lying unconscious in the dirt," Rarity said. Blueblood startled, nearly striking his horn on the room's low ceiling. As the stallion turned toward her, Rarity saw that he had an ugly gash on the side of his head. The wound wasn't currently bleeding, but it nevertheless looked like it needed attention.

"I know how this must appear," Blueblood began, "but I assure you that I was moments away from leaving to search for you. I only just came around myself. I rushed to the engine to ensure that it was completely deactivated, because the one thing that would give us away fastest would be a cloud of smoke and steam."

"How quickly can you get it fixed?" Rarity asked.

"What, the engine? There isn't anything wrong with the engine. The propeller is cracked, but fixable. The hull is in one piece."

"Good, then let's get back to Equestria as soon as possible."

"You seem to have forgotten that this is an airship, which must by definition be lighter than air to fly. Our balloon is completely deflated and ripped to shreds, and unless you know of a source of lifting gas in this jungle, we aren't going to be flying out of here."

"You don't mean to suggest that we are to walk from the middle of this forsaken jungle, a hundred leagues or more back to Equestria, while at the same time being hunted by a giant airship full of murderous griffons?"

"You're forgetting that there are also ponies who are out to kill us," Blueblood replied tiredly. "Or at least, out to kill you. Though you still have to explain to me why."

"I'm sorry, one more time, for clarity's sake. I want to be absolutely sure I am catching your meaning. You are saying that we'll have to *walk*," Rarity drew out the last word, "through this impenetrable jungle, from which it is said no pony has ever returned."

"Unless you happen to know a spell that gives unicorns wings."

After everything, this was the final straw. Rarity fainted.

“Decorum holds that I ought to thank you for saving my life after I was trapped on that cloud,” said Rarity. She rested on the edge of the bed in the *Alicorn*’s ruined cabin, nibbling at a biscuit from the airship’s store of food and fanning herself with one of Blueblood’s folded maps. After recovering from her fainting spell, the first things Rarity had felt were hunger pangs and the discomfort of the jungle’s sweltering wet heat. Meanwhile, Blueblood tramped about the cabin, surveying the extensive crash damage.

“Are you thanking me, then?” Blueblood asked, pausing his inspection and turning toward Rarity.

“Hmm, I’m not sure that decorum actually applies when one is lost in the jungle with little chance of survival. Moreover, you haven’t been particularly forthcoming with gratitude for me.”

“For you?”

“For me! Was it not I who enabled our escape by freeing your ship?”

“Why, you’re right,” Blueblood began. “Thanks *are* in order. Thank you for ruining literally everything important to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Rarity asked, incredulous.

“I could have left you there, you know. I was perilously close to not turning back. I hadn’t slept in over thirty hours, and given how much wakerwort I chewed to stay awake, it didn’t surprise me in the least that I was seeing things. How could you possibly have been stuck on a cloud in a thunderstorm, after all? I was nearly convinced that you were a hallucination, but I turned the ship around to be absolutely certain.” Blueblood spoke quickly, anger and frustration evident in his voice.

“I’m glad you did,” Rarity said quietly, apprehensive of Blueblood’s apparent mood swing.

“I did, and what is the reward for my heroism? To be drenched by the storm of insanity that is hovering over you? To have the *Alicorn*, my magnum opus, the ship I built from the keel up with my own hooves, wrecked? To have the race I spent years of my life organizing and planning lost? To perish here, with you, a thousand leagues from home?” Blueblood’s voice rose in pitch with each question, and he sank to a kneeling position in front of Rarity.

“Really? *Really?*” Rarity rose to her hooves, the better to glare angrily down at the kneeling noble. Blueblood may have been upset, but she would not tolerate his attempt to lay blame for this fiasco on her. “It is I who has been caught up in *your* problems, not the other way around! Did you not observe that flying fortress? Did you not see that griffon, Graywings, murdered? Can you be so dense that you do not now recognize that Chancellor Seventalons was killed in your very castle? This is far bigger than I, and the perpetrators have clearly been planning their game for a very long time. Whatever is happening, it involves you, and your race. Those griffons were after you, and right now you should be thanking me for saving your life!”

“You lie!” Blueblood yelled, standing again and looming over Rarity. He held one hoof to his head as if in pain, pressing on his temple near the ugly wound he had received in the crash. When he spoke, he assumed a haughty air. “I am the Duke of Canterlot, beloved by ponies and friend to all. I have no enemies. No pony would seek to do me harm.”

“Somepony in this room is considering doing you harm right now,” Rarity said through gritted teeth.

“I see what’s happening here,” Blueblood said. “This is a simple succession crisis. When the griffons pick a new chancellor, some blood is almost sure to be spilled. Those marauders killed Graywings to remove him as a possible successor to Seventalons, and I was an unlucky witness. That’s why they attacked. I could just as easily have been safely on my way, if I hadn’t seen anything. Since I wouldn’t have seen anything if I hadn’t gone back for you, I again reach the inescapable conclusion that all of this is your fault.”

“You don’t honestly believe this is just about who is going to replace Chancellor Seventalons, do you? Do you think that the griffons would take the time to set up an ambush during the *Alicorn’s* Cup, the most high-profile sporting event in the world, in order to take out one lone griffon that could have been ambushed a thousand times more easily back among his own people? I may be a dressmaker, but I’m not that naïve.”

“Dressmaker?” Blueblood laughed. “You are an Element Bearer. If anyone is being conspired against, it is you. Any enemy of Equestria would want to destroy the Elements of Harmony. I saved you, and you got me shipwrecked. Those are the inescapable facts.”

“I now see that the passage of time has not improved your attitude or manners in any way. I may have toyed with the idea, once or twice, that beneath your shell of superciliousness, there was more than foalish vanity and shallow self-righteousness. I was utterly mistaken.” If Blueblood continued to test her, Rarity was prepared to drop all

pretense of social grace. She was preparing a few more choice words when she noticed that the stallion was sweating profusely.

Blueblood had said he stayed awake by chewing wakerwort, and Rarity suddenly realized that she was observing the symptoms of acute withdrawal from the stimulant. Wakerwort could keep a pony alert and focused as long as he kept chewing it; it was when one stopped that the user had to confront the root's unfortunate side effects—headaches, emotional swings, a rapid heartbeat, cold sweats, and the overwhelming need for sleep. Rarity knew the misery of wakerwort withdrawal from experience, and that was one reason she preferred the gentler effects of coffee. At this point in the withdrawal process, Blueblood probably was only half aware of what he was saying, and she was unlikely to get anywhere by pressing him further. Not that she was going to let that stop her from making a point.

“You are a fool if you can't see that this conspiracy goes all the way back to Canterlot, to your castle, and to your family,” she said in the most deadly serious monotone she could manage.

“How dare you?” Blueblood shouted, gesticulating wildly with a forehoof. “Are you implying that I am somehow involved? That I crashed my own airship? Why, so that I could have a hot date with you in the jungle? Are you that conceited? I don't even know ...” Blueblood's voice trailed off, and he was left looking confused, as if he had forgotten the conversation entirely. The rapid onset of short-term memory loss was another common side effect of withdrawal.

Rarity observed that Blueblood was breathing rapidly, and still rubbing his temple. It wouldn't be long now. She gave him a gentle push, and Blueblood slowly began moving in the direction of the bed, where he turned and sat down. Based on her experience with wakerwort, he had seconds of consciousness remaining. The likelihood that Blueblood was soon to be unable to respond made this an excellent time to deliver bad news.

“No, it isn't you who is involved,” Rarity said, shaking her head. “It's your brother.”

Blueblood laughed, then grimaced and threw both forehooves to his head. “That is the most ... preposterous ... thing ...” He toppled over onto his side, fast asleep before his head hit the mattress.

“Sweet dreams,” Rarity muttered, rolling her eyes. If she was fortunate, Blueblood would be willing and able to see reason after he awoke. The narcoleptic effect and other symptoms of wakerwort withdrawal would have dissipated, as well as the normal

functional difficulties that accompanied sleep deprivation. It was still going to be difficult to explain to him that she knew his brother was trying to have both of them killed, but she saw no reasoning around the conclusion.

Rarity had been piecing together the facts she had gathered for some time now. Procyon was the pony who had ensconced Windlass in Fancypants' inner circle, after gaining the latter's trust by working to orchestrate the sale of North Star. Why would he go to such great lengths to convince Fancypants that Windlass was a highly-placed engineer in Blueblood's firm, and that he should hire her at once, if he didn't stand to gain from her new position? He was part of the conspiracy. Of course there probably were others involved. Rarity knew of no particular connection between Procyon and Tempest, for example, though somepony was obviously paying the pegasus for his misdeeds.

There were other questions to which Rarity had no answer as well. How would Procyon and Windlass have known ahead of time that Rarity would be participating in the race? What was their connection to the griffons who had attacked the *Alicorn*? Perhaps most importantly, why did anypony want Rarity dead? The only way she would ever find out was by making it back to Equestria alive. Survival had to be her priority. She would have plenty of time for sleuthing and deductive reasoning back home.

She had to get *home*. Was it really possible that she would be bushwhacking her way through the jungle tomorrow? She had heard stories about some of the magical monsters that lived in the tropics. There were the boto that lured explorers into rivers, disguised as beautiful mares, only to reveal their true flesh-eating forms underwater. Giant vampire bats swooped out of the night to drain their victims' blood. There were surely others that Rarity couldn't remember, all equally horrific. Moreover, there were likely to be non-magical predators of all shapes and sizes lurking in the shadows, waiting for easy prey to stumble past. It was a joke to think that she and Blueblood could escape this place.

For now at least, with Blueblood asleep for an indefinite period of time, and a finite number of hours left before nightfall, it was a certainty that no pony would be leaving the *Alicorn* tonight. Perhaps, Rarity thought, she and Blueblood might *never* have to leave the relative security of the downed airship. Here they had provisions to last a few days, and that was enough time for the Princesses and her friends to mount a rescue. Rarity finally felt a glimmer of hope. Why, they might not even have to wait that long! The regatta would surely be suspended when it became known to the course officials that one pony was presumed lost to the storm and two entire airships had gone missing. The remaining teams would then doubtless be pressed into search duty. All Rarity and Blueblood needed to do was wait until a friendly craft appeared overhead.

Still, no rescue would be forthcoming before tomorrow. The only ones likely to be searching for the *Alicorn* tonight were the same griffons who had caused the ship to crash in the first place, and with a raptor's sharp eyes augmented by the feline ability to see in the dark, the griffons could hunt all night long. If the griffons did find them... Rarity shuddered. There were very real reasons why the ponies' neighbors to the north were the subject of so many frightening foals' tales. There had to be something she could do to make the *Alicorn* more difficult to find.

She climbed the folding staircase to the airship's deck and looked around. Far above, the treetop canopy filtered the waning light of day into scattered beams that dappled the understory below. The dominant colors of the jungle were the bright greens of leaves and vines, and the browns of trunks, branches, stems, and the soil below. A rainbow of other colors accented the picture. From her vantage point Rarity could see rows of bright orange bell-shaped flowers hanging from vines draped between the trees like holiday garlands. Enormous bromeliads jutted forth wherever they could find purchase, their thick spiky leaves tinged dark purple at their tips. Cascades of tiny flowers spilled over low-hanging branches and fallen logs like still waterfalls of fuchsia and white.

The verdant scene was not unspoiled; evidence of the *Alicorn's* crash landing was everywhere in the form of splintered trees, broken branches, and deep furrows cut into the earth. Rarity could trace the airship's trail of destruction back at least a hundred lengths to the edge of the small lake on which they had first touched down. Furthermore, the expected cacophony of birds and animals was eerily absent, as if the forest was still absorbing the shock of its injury, and had not yet determined how to react to the invaders.

Despite the devastation on the ground, little evidence of the *Alicorn's* passage could be seen in the treetops above. The tropical trees towered to dizzying heights on slender branchless trunks, only to spread out at the very top into the tangled mat of leaves and thin branches that formed the jungle canopy. The canopy was so thick that the loss of even several trees did little more than create a modest thinning effect over the crash site, allowing a bit more light to filter through. It would be hard for even the sharpest eyes to spot the *Alicorn* through the trees. If the ship were glimpsed, however, its bright colors and reflective golden accents would likely call down unwanted attention. Rarity was struck with an idea that might prevent that from happening.

She couldn't repair the damage from the crash, not without an entire team of unicorns to mend the trees and earth ponies to stamp out the ruts in the forest floor. Instead, Rarity had a solution in mind that she could manage by herself, and which took advantage of her natural talent for decorating. If the *Alicorn's* gleaming paint, gold accents, and

brilliant blue balloon were covered in the same dirt, branches, and leaves that littered Rarity's surroundings, then the crash site would appear from the air to be just another indistinguishable patch of jungle.

Rarity set to work, accomplishing a slow circumnavigation of the *Alicorn's* deck as she maneuvered sticks, leaves, and branches into place, building a superstructure of debris around the downed airship. The framework grew, branch by branch, until it extended up over the sides of the ship and met overhead, creating a rather impressive, if *ad hoc*, bower that covered the entire deck. The deflated balloon, largely tangled and twisted in the nearby trees, was concealed through judicious rearrangement of the local creeping vines. Eventually, after several hours of hard work, the wreck was obscured to Rarity's satisfaction. Its unnatural colors were overwhelmed by forest hues, and its sharp lines were broken up by the organic patterns of foliage and fronds.

"Ta da!" Rarity exclaimed. The effort might not live up to her exacting standards under ordinary circumstances, but it would suffice for her present purposes. It had not been a walk in the park, either. Magic sapped a unicorn's physical energy as well as mental, and she was exhausted and sticky with sweat after her labor. The light filtering through the trees was now dim and diffuse, and Rarity recognized that night was fast approaching. She had barely finished her work before it became too dark to continue, but she had done it, and she was proud of her success in the very face of adversity.

Clambering back down the stairs into the *Alicorn's* cabin, Rarity found Blueblood right where she left him, splayed limply on his bed. A small wet spot on the fitted bedsheet revealed that the self-proclaimed prince tended to drool in his sleep, but at least he didn't snore. That was fortunate for him, if he was planning to spend the night anywhere inside the airship's cabin.

Given the dearth of conscious company, Rarity was unable to indulge her desire for conversation, so she turned to other pressing needs. First, she tried the tap and was delighted to see clear water pour forth. She filled a tin cup and drank the tepid liquid down. Repeating the process two more times sufficiently slaked her thirst. Then, Rarity secured an apple and another hard biscuit from Blueblood's shipboard larder. Finally, she righted a small workbench that had been upended in the crash, and sat down opposite the bed to eat.

Staring at the sleeping stallion, Rarity allowed herself a moment to indulge her curiosity about Blueblood. After Windlass' actions, Rarity had to believe that he truly had devised North Star's novel designs, as he had claimed. This same boorish stallion who could not even successfully feign charm was at the same time a brilliant inventor and engineer. The

two Bluebloods were very difficult to reconcile. What drove him to be so preoccupied with engines, airships, and racing? By all accounts he enjoyed the advantages of his noble station, and of bachelorhood in Canterlot. He could have simply frittered away his days, reveling in wealth, privilege, and libertine debauchery. He could have easily been nothing more than the obnoxious stallion who had ruined her first, and perhaps only, Grand Galloping Gala.

There was no denying that Blueblood was narcissistic, oversensitive, immature, spoiled, and had not one proper idea about how to treat a lady, but in a strange way, he and Rarity shared a kinship. They were both creators. Rarity, for her part, could not imagine life without fashion. Dreaming up designs and bringing them to life with scissors, needle, and thread was as vital and necessary to her as air. Perhaps Blueblood felt similarly about his own passion. They would never be friends, but if she and Blueblood could at least reach a mutual understanding, they might be able to tolerate each other. That would be enough.

She had to admit that it was bizarre how life kept conspiring to throw the two of them together. Pinkie Pie might ascribe some design to the operation of fate, though Rarity knew better. It was simply a series of unfortunate coincidences that kept placing her in close proximity to the stallion. But what if it kept happening, after she returned home? What if some infelicitous star was guiding them, crossing their paths over and over again, and forcing them to experience pivotal moments in their lives together in the interest of cosmic dark comedy? Rarity could feel a tightness in her chest as her heart nearly seized up at the thought. She could at least try harder to get along, Rarity decided. It would require treating Blueblood with velveteen stockings, as the saying went, but she would give it her best effort.

She would start by offering to refer to him by his true name. Informality was a step on the road to friendliness. "Polaris," Rarity uttered quietly, just to feel the sound of the word on her tongue. She was well aware that he had demanded that she never use that name, but that was before they were shipwrecked together. It was a fine name, anyway. Being named for the star that had guided explorers and adventurers for centuries was fitting for a pony with a compass rose cutie mark, who claimed that his special talent was navigation. Perhaps he would live up to his namesake and successfully lead them back to civilization. For some reason, though, Rarity preferred Blueblood. It just seemed more fitting.

"Don't call me that," Blueblood grumbled, his voice muffled by the mattress into which he was speaking.

“You’re awake,” Rarity observed. There was no clock, but she guessed that he had slept for four hours. “Feeling better?”

“I am as well as I could hope to be, under the circumstances,” Blueblood replied. He rolled off the bed and onto his hooves. “I don’t even remember falling asleep.”

Rarity levitated a brown paper bag for Blueblood to see. She had found it while rummaging for food. “You passed out because you stopped chewing this.”

“Ah, right. Yes, I admit I may have chewed an unhealthy amount of wakewort over the past few days. Before you judge, I had a dinner to host and an airship to prepare, repair, and race. I’ll hold onto that bag, if you don’t mind.”

“No. No more chewing.”

“Hoof it over. We may both need to stay awake while we find our way out of here.”

Rarity decided to abandon her efforts to be nicer before they had even commenced. There was only one surefire way to stave off what was sure to be a protracted argument about the merits of wakewort, and it was obvious that there would be no winner of such a row. She dropped the paper bag and stomped on it with a forehoof. She then twisted her hoof, grinding the roots so that their juice spilled onto the floor in a dark brown pool.

“Are you mad?” Blueblood shouted, suddenly wide-eyed. “I need that!”

“No you don’t. We *need* to keep our wits about us. You were more of a wreck than this ship earlier. You were paranoid and hysterical, and I’m afraid of that happening again, whenever you run out of roots to chew. If it happens at the wrong time, you could get us both killed. I refuse to take that chance. No more wakewort.”

“But—”

“It’s already too late,” Rarity said, kicking the flat, soggy bag aside.

“You’re a monster.” Blueblood glared at Rarity for what felt like minutes, before finally heaving an exasperated sigh. “But thank you. I couldn’t have gotten rid of it on my own. Wakewort is a pox on ponies who feel compelled to forgo sleep in favor of work. I often wish every last root could be shipped back to the fetid swamp in Zanzebra where it was pulled out of the muck, but then I chew it for days straight, again and again, whenever a deadline looms.” He sighed again.

“I understand,” Rarity replied gently. “I too have abused it to meet a deadline. Only after my friends and family pointed out how awful I acted when the wakewort wore off did I understand that I needed to stop.”

An awkward silence occupied the space between the two unicorns, until Blueblood finally spoke again. “You did save us both earlier. Thank you for that as well.”

“It was the heat of the moment,” Rarity replied, pleased at the first positive sign that she and Blueblood might not spend the rest of their time together at each other’s throats. This was a breakthrough. There was hope yet for a working relationship. “Anypony would have tried to save herself, as I did.”

“Be that as it may,” Blueblood began, waving a hoof dismissively, “you succeeded, and you saved us. I apologize for my behavior.”

“I accept,” Rarity replied, pleased.

Blueblood’s eyes narrowed. “I will not, however, listen to any more nonsense about my brother, or my family,” he said sternly. “If anypony is to blame for this, it’s Fancypants. He has been out to destroy me since the day we met.”

What? Rarity squeezed her eyes closed, took a deep breath, and struggled very hard to resist the magnetic attraction that had suddenly arisen between her hoof and forehead. She was back to square one, and after such promising signs. “I’m very sorry, I cannot imagine how awful I would feel if my own family turned against me,” she said truthfully. “I also cannot ignore the fact that your brother Procyon is trying to kill me, if not both of us. Please, just hear me out.”

“Rant away,” Blueblood scoffed. He rolled his eyes, flopped onto his back, and stared up at the cabin ceiling. Rarity took that as her cue to continue.

“Listen to me. Fancypants was not one of the ponies who threw me overboard. In fact, the two who did waited until he was out of sight so that they could make it look like an accident and corroborate each other’s stories. Fancypants is no murderer. Procyon, however, may be.”

Rarity waited for Blueblood to interrupt her, but he simply continued to stare at the ceiling in silence. There was barely enough light entering the cabin through the open hatch and the large hole in the side of the hull to see, so Rarity took a moment to relight the gas lantern that had fallen on the floor. Some of the mirrored glass surrounding the

flame had shattered, but the lantern still cast a warm glow in the confined space. She carefully hung it from its hook on the ceiling before continuing.

“One of the ponies who tried to kill me is a unicorn mare named Windlass. She claims to be a trained aeronautical engineer, and she and Fancypants independently explained to me that Fancypants hired her based on a recommendation from your brother. Procyon told Fancypants that she was a top engineer at North Star.”

Blueblood turned his head toward Rarity without moving from his prone position. “You know that cannot be true, because I already informed you that I designed each and every airship produced by North Star alone and without assistance. *Ergo*, you figured out that this Windlass and Procyon misled your hero, Fancypants, in order to get Windlass a job. *That’s* the evidence upon which you would condemn my brother?”

“That’s part of it,” Rarity said.

“I’m guessing this Windlass is young and easy on the eyes. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“She is,” Rarity replied uncertainly.

“Indeed. No stallion would ever lie to curry favor with a pretty girl. Excellent reasoning, counselor. Your logic is infallible. You’ve proven beyond a reasonable doubt that my brother, who I have known since he was a newborn foal, is a monster,” Blueblood said.

“There is more.”

“Do tell.”

“Fancypants told me in confidence that Procyon worked with him for months to orchestrate his buyout of North Star. He was stealing your notes and schematics and turning them over to Fancypants to sweeten the deal,” Rarity said.

“That’s impossible,” Blueblood replied crossly. He rolled over and assumed a kneeling position from which he could look Rarity straight in the eyes. His posture was stiff and awkward, and Rarity could see that Blueblood was agitated. “First of all, Procyon would never go behind my back. Second, I kept no blueprints that he could have stolen. It seems as though your Mr. Fancypants was the one telling lies.”

“You must have had designs on paper,” Rarity prodded. “Otherwise, how would your shipwrights and fabricators even know what to build?”

“Yes, of course,” Blueblood said, sounding exasperated. “I drew up specifications and instructions for each step of the build process, but these were always destroyed after a particular phase of construction was finished, and I never created a complete set of plans. I refuse to design the same way twice, so I don’t want to use my own earlier work as a shortcut.”

“And you personally oversaw the destruction of each of these ‘specifications?’”

“I personally threw them in my wastepaper bin, if that’s what you’re asking. Do you honestly believe that my brother, who cares only for ledgers and bank accounts, was dredging through my refuse looking for engineering diagrams?”

“Yes,” said Rarity. She was absolutely certain of it.

“Then both because you are crazy and because I know my own family far better than you do, we have nothing further to discuss on this matter,” Blueblood huffed.

Rarity was flabbergasted. The evidence of Procyon’s culpability was overwhelming, but Blueblood refused to listen. Certainly, Rarity could understand familial loyalty. She could never believe ill of her own young sister, but that was because Sweetie Belle adored her, sometimes with embarrassing ardor, and furthermore lacked a single malicious bone in her body. Procyon had betrayed Blueblood, and was likely involved in trying to have him killed. Perhaps this revelation merely needed time to sink in. She decided to change the subject for the time being.

“While you were asleep I concealed the airship with leaves and branches. I don’t think the griffons will be able to find us from the air now.”

“Clever,” Blueblood acknowledged. He visibly relaxed now that the topic had shifted away from his family. “I’m sure they will be out hunting all night. However well disguised we are here, though, we can’t stay with the *Alicorn* forever. We have only a few days of provisions for two ponies. We shall have to leave on the morrow and make for the border with all haste.”

“About that,” Rarity began. “It must already be apparent to the other racers, as well as the officials and media at the next waypoint that something has gone terribly awry, and two airships are missing. Even if I am presumed lost with no hope of recovery, Equestria will mount a search and rescue operation for the *Alicorn* and *Stiletto*. By this time tomorrow, the Wonderbolts and the other airships could be rescuing us. I propose we wait here, where we are not completely out of our element.”

“That would be a fine idea, but for the fact that it is a terrible one,” Blueblood said firmly. “First, there is a reason this part of the world is referred to as the Impenetrable Lands. This jungle may be larger than all of Equestria, and nopony has even a vague idea as to where we crashed. Based on a best guess the search area would be, at a minimum, no less than twenty thousand square leagues. It could take weeks, or they might never find us, or the griffons might find us first. Meanwhile, as far as I know neither of us has the kind of botanical knowledge that could tell us what plants are safe to eat. We are very likely to either starve or poison ourselves.”

“We cannot be *that* difficult to find. If we so much as hear a friendly airship I can send up sparks from my horn. Even at a long distance, we shall be seen and rescued,” Rarity countered.

“Thank you for granting me that segue into my next reason why your idea is awful. Somewhere not far from here, most likely taking on fuel as we speak, is an enormous, heavily armed mare-of-war, crewed by marauding griffons whose firesticks are now dry, primed, and ready to fire. If they truly want us dead, they are not going to simply allow us to waltz out of here, even with the Wonderbolts escorting us. No airship can outrun a formation of griffons any more than it could a determined pegasus, at least over a short distance.”

Blueblood was right, Rarity realized. Her heart sunk. Waiting to be rescued would not only add to their own risk, but it stood to put others’ lives in jeopardy as well.

“We are walking, then,” she said quietly.

“Walking,” Blueblood affirmed. “You aren’t going to faint again, are you?”

“I have a hardier constitution than you think,” Rarity replied, her chin raised proudly. “I’m simply concerned about the difficulty inherent in navigating our way through this forest.”

“Don’t concern yourself with that,” Blueblood said, tapping the compass rose on his right flank.

“I’m reserving my confidence until I see your pathfinding skills in action.”

Blueblood did not reply, and both ponies sat quietly for the next few minutes. Rarity tried to think of something to add to the discussion, but none of her arguments had gone the way she intended so far. It was Blueblood who broke the silence first.

“I *would* like to know where the griffons got that airship. I know no factory in Equestria produced it. I monitor every other design firm and shipyard in the country, and there hasn’t been a project of anything close to the scale that it would require to construct such a monstrosity. An airship that size, outfitted with weapons and a full crew, would require incredibly powerful engines to have any hope of flying fast enough to be a credible warship, which would in turn require an enormous amount of fuel for the boilers. I cannot conceive of how a ship of those dimensions could manage to be lighter than air, and yet I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Perhaps your designs are simply not the latest word in engineering,” Rarity offered with an uncaring shrug.

“No, they most certainly are the latest word,” Blueblood quickly replied. “The *Alicorn*, for example, has no boiler. Instead, it is the only airship in the world outfitted with a supercritical steam generator, resulting in dramatically reduced fuel consumption. The surfeit of amenities you see here is only possible because the *Alicorn*’s steam engine consumes half the fuel of a traditional model. Because the steam generator operates at extremely high pressure, there is of course an increased risk of catastrophic failure resulting in an explosion, but I could not think of a better way to field test than to equip it for the *Alicorn*’s Cup.”

“What if the griffons had your ... hypocritical generator, did you say?” Rarity asked. “Could the corresponding weight savings not explain how their airship stays aloft?”

“Nopony has a steam generator but I,” Blueblood said. “I invented it.”

“Assume they do have it,” Rarity pressed.

“Fine. Yes, that would be one explanation,” Blueblood admitted.

“It is the obvious and only explanation!” Rarity exclaimed, throwing her forelegs in the air in frustration. “They have your designs because somepony has stolen them from you, as I’ve been trying to tell you. You simply cannot let the obvious truth penetrate your thick skull!”

“Even if that were the case, then the thief is not my brother,” Blueblood maintained. “Fancypants and that Windlass could be in cahoots with the griffons, and they could have spies in my castle.”

“If you say so,” Rarity said, exasperated. In the end, it didn’t matter whether she convinced Blueblood of her theories or not. She had the ear of Twilight Sparkle and

Princess Celestia, and together with the rest of her friends she would shine the light of day on the villains. All she had to do was get home. It was more important that she be able to coexist with Blueblood than win this argument. She had just one more question that she wanted to ask. “Since we’re on the topic, there was something else strange about that airship. Did you ever, by any chance, invent a component requiring gems? Specifically, a single very large, flawless gem?”

“Never,” Blueblood replied. “Only magical technologies make use of gems, and I do not, as a rule, use magic in my designs. I cannot even guess how one might use gems in aeronautics. Out of sheer curiosity, why do you ask?”

“When the griffons first attacked, and secured the *Alicorn* with that hook, my gem-finding spell cast,” Rarity replied. “That spell is one of my special talents, and it sometimes activates of its own accord in the presence of superlative stones. Given that we were in the midst of a terrible storm, and the distance between the *Alicorn* and the other ship, whatever gem I sensed must have been an incredible specimen. Either that, or there was a dragon’s ransom worth of ordinary gemstones on board. I think the latter unlikely, simply because the spell felt singularly focused to me.”

“You don’t say?” Blueblood ears pricked up and his eyes narrowed. “Does your spell happen to distinguish between gems which have been magically empowered, and gems which are inert?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Rarity began, “but I have very little experience with magical focusing stones and the like. I use gems for bedazzling, not sorcery.”

“Let me ask a different question, then. Did anything about the storm seem unnatural to you?”

“Let’s see,” Rarity began. “How about *everything*? It wasn’t created by pegasi, for starters. I’ll never understand how weather outside Equestria can simply spring into existence of its own accord.”

“That’s not what I meant. Didn’t you find it strange that there was nothing but calm, clear skies in every direction around that storm? There was no wind, and no change in barometric pressure, before the storm appeared. I’ve flown airships far afield enough and long enough to know that isn’t how weather works, even outside of Equestria.”

“Hmm,” Rarity mused. “Windlass claimed that she somehow *made* the storm, but I don’t know what she meant by that. She obviously had some control over winds and lightning,

but the storm was already vast and powerful when we were still far away from it. I think she must be delusional.” Rarity was surprised to see that Blueblood was beginning to look thoroughly alarmed.

“I have one last line of questions,” Blueblood said, his tone low and serious. “I want you to think about this very carefully, and not answer one way or the other unless you are absolutely certain of your response. When I showed you to the crypt at my castle, did your spell alert you to the presence of any gems? If not, would it have done so if there had been a particularly splendid gemstone concealed out of sight?”

“No, and yes, respectively,” Rarity answered without hesitation. “There was nothing there.”

Blueblood promptly slid off the bed, turned around, and flopped face first onto the mattress. He levitated the one available pillow and used his forelegs to grab and pull it over his head. He didn’t move for some time, and Rarity began to fear that he had suffocated himself. She was making a move to check on his welfare when Blueblood turned back to her, eyes wide and bloodshot.

“My own brother!”

“What do you mean?” Rarity asked, startled.

“You were right. You are right about everything. Procyon betrayed me,” Blueblood said, his voice halting and quiet. He looked utterly devastated.

“Well, yes, he did. But how did you come to that realization now?”

Blueblood sighed deeply. “It’s a convoluted story, but the short of it is that I am quite familiar with the particular gem you detected. It should be at home, in my castle, where it has been since long before I was born.”

“I’d like to hear the story,” Rarity prompted.

“It starts a long, long time ago,” Blueblood began. “You see, Princess Platinum was not originally entombed within the crypt that you visited. Her original sepulcher was far simpler, and located in a grove on the castle grounds. Blueblood the Fifteenth was a sentimental sort of pony, and had the present crypt constructed as a mausoleum for his famous ancestor and the Bluebloods who had gone before him. Princess Platinum was reinterred there along with a reliquary containing objects important to her, and to our family’s history. One of these was a diamond of unsurpassed beauty and historical

significance. I imagine even you have heard of it. In Old Equestrian its name was *Adamas Firmamentum*.”

Rarity’s mouth fell open in shock. “You cannot possibly be referring to the Heavenstone?”

“The same.” Blueblood nodded.

“I only know what I learned in grade school,” Rarity said, stunned. “The Heavenstone was a gem that the unicorns of old poured their magic into, so that their ruler could channel the energy of all of them to bring about night and day. It’s supposed to be the largest and most beautiful diamond that ever existed. It cannot be real, can it?”

“It is. The stone has been entombed with Princess Platinum for twelve hundred years now, hidden away after the Princesses freed the unicorns of their responsibility. Even Princess Celestia herself knows not that it has been secretly kept in my family’s possession since her ascent to the throne. It *was* in our possession, at least. If your talent is to be trusted then it is gone.”

“I could detect a gem such as that from a thousand lengths, I should think!” Rarity exclaimed. “Oh!” She threw a hoof to her mouth to cover the shock of her sudden realization. “And I did, there on the griffons’ airship!”

“No pony outside my family knows of the Heavenstone’s final disposition. If it is gone, then one of them is responsible, and I doubt the guilty party is one of my sisters, or my mother. As cruel as she can be, it would be impossible for her to dishonor our family’s legacy in this way. As you may have gathered at the dinner, she abhors commoners, non-unicorns, and non-ponies, in order of increasing disgust. If she knew the stone was in the talons of griffons it would kill her instantly.”

“I don’t understand, though, what would the griffons want with a stone that can be empowered by unicorns to raise and lower the sun and moon?” Rarity asked.

“*Adamas Firmamentum* is not so limited,” Blueblood replied. “According to my family’s lore, it can store magic to be used for any type of spell, and it retains a link to the unicorn who wields it even across vast distances, allowing that pony to cast powerful spells from afar through the stone itself. In ancient times, twin festivals were held on the longest day and longest night of the year, where unicorns would gather to lend their magic to empower the stone. Because everypony participated, these brief empowering ceremonies were sufficient to allow the ruler and the court’s best conjurers to control night and day

through the stone. Given enough time, though, even one unicorn could charge the stone enough to cast some unusually potent spells, especially spells in line with that pony's talent."

"You're suggesting that Windlass did create the storm, by activating the Heavenstone," Rarity said, eyes wide.

"Yes, and the only pony who could have helped her obtain it is Procyon. Now that I think about it, he had been yammering on about some new girl he was seeing, but I never guessed that their dates involved plotting treason and fratricide."

Rarity absorbed this new information and tried to digest it. "One of the ponies who attacked me is a retired pegasus guardspony named Tempest. He said that somepony was paying him to help start a war. You don't think there could actually be a war between ponies and griffons, do you? The Princesses would never let it come to that."

"I can't imagine war," Blueblood replied. "The griffons are a race divided, and the various eyries hardly ever reach consensus. Whoever the griffons hunting us are, they are clearly not being directed by the high council, since it appears that two of the councilmembers are now dead by the conspirators' hooves, or rather claws. No, it would take complete unification of purpose for the griffons to go to war, and that will never happen, even if they all believe that Equestria is responsible for the recent deaths. Furthermore, the idea of Equestria mustering an army is even more laughable."

"What if," Rarity began, trying to think as deviously as possible, "what if everypony believes that griffons killed you and broke up the regatta in order to avenge Seventalons? What if the griffons who attacked us begin striking at the undefended southern reaches of Equestria? There's no Royal Guard presence to protect those ponies this far from the core cities."

"I suppose there could be some trouble," Blueblood conceded.

"But the Princesses would prevent all-out war, wouldn't they?" Rarity asked, pleading with her eyes. "Please say yes."

Blueblood looked thoughtful, apparently considering the question at length. "Princess Celestia would never directly fight. She fears the fate that befell her sister too much to inflict harm on mortal creatures in that way. As for Luna, I do not know. I am sure they would do all they could to reach a diplomatic resolution, but there are millions of ponies in Equestria, and only two royal sisters. The power of the throne is premised on

affection, not on direct mechanisms for enforcing the Princesses' will. If ponies demanded a fight, then the Princesses might not be able to prevent the violence from occurring. Whether the end result would be a true war, or merely disorganized bloody mayhem, I cannot guess. Either way, it would be terrible for both sides."

"Then it is up to us to prevent such horrors from happening," Rarity said with conviction.

"Inspiring!" Blueblood declared, chuckling quietly. "With the fate of the world in *our* hooves, good will surely triumph."

"Well," Rarity began, adopting a mock-offended tone, "I, for one, have already saved the world twice. As they say, the third time is the charm."

"Perfect, I'll let you take the lead in the morning, and maybe you can show me a national heroine in action. You may have to get your hooves dirty."

"Oho, I should think you were enjoying the view rather than my heroics if I let you lag behind," Rarity replied with a sly smile. "I think you'll get your chance to show off your so-called special talent for pathfinding."

"Well, wouldn't I share the same ... oh my Celestia, save us!"

Rarity turned to see what had caused Blueblood's frightened reaction, and shrieked in terror. An intruder had chosen that moment to invade the sanctum of the *Alicorn's* cabin, entering through the hole in the side of the airship. Rarity kicked the bench out from under her and leaped onto the bed, cowering behind Blueblood and protecting her mane with her forelegs. For his part, Blueblood shrank back against the far wall, making his large form as compact as possible.

Rarity half-opened one eye so that she could observe the creature terrorizing them, and shivered in fear as the small brown bat flapped erratically around the space, apparently trying to find some purchase it could cling to.

"Ew! Ew! Ew!" Blueblood exclaimed. "Get that filthy thing out of here!"

"You get it!" Rarity screamed. "It's coming for my hair, I just know it! Do something before it gets tangled in my hair!"

"Use a spell before it drinks my royal blood!" Blueblood shouted.

“I’m not touching it, even with magic!” Rarity hissed.

“Gah! Here it comes!”

Blueblood dove onto the floor as the bat flapped toward him, and Rarity could swear she felt it brush through her hair as it flew past. Her subsequent shriek pierced the humid night air, and a chorus of birds and animals lent their startled noise to the ensuing clamor. The bat, for its part, followed the sound of the scream out the hole through which it had entered. The two unicorns stared at each other.

“My brave prince,” Rarity said dryly.

“I present Miss Rarity, savior of the nation,” Blueblood rejoined.

“We’re doomed, aren’t we?”

“It is not looking good.”

Rarity sighed. “Well, since this is probably my last opportunity to ever sleep in a bed, I claim it for tonight.”

“That’s forward of you, since it’s my bed, and I’ll be in it,” Blueblood said from his position on the floor. He was still looking around the room, apparently not yet convinced of the bat’s departure. “Since it does seem likely that we won’t make it out of here, I suppose I can make it worth your while.”

“That’s disgusting. You’re a pig, so you get to sleep on the floor,” Rarity proclaimed. She suddenly felt the prickly sensation of magic as Blueblood dragged her bodily out of the bed. She fell to the floor as he jumped onto the mattress.

“It’s not that bad down there. I think most of the broken glass is on the other side of the room. Just try to keep still and not roll about, and you should be fine,” Blueblood said, peering over the edge of the bed.

Rarity glared menacingly up at him. “Oh, it is *on*.”

Rarity had been lying awake in bed for what felt like hours when the first rays of dawn cautiously poked their way in through the ragged opening in the *Alicorn's* hull. She kept still for a while, watching the illuminated portion of the room grow as the sun began its ascent. The light reminded her that somewhere, far away, her Princess had raised the glowing disc from its hidden place of rest. Even in this inhospitable place, Rarity was touched by the same radiant aura of warmth and safety that beamed down on Equestria. The sun gave her a small measure of hope. Now it was time to rise along with it.

It had not been an easy night, and what sleep she had gotten had been fitful at best. The jungle creatures had overcome their fear and surprise at the intrusion into their home, and had returned *en masse*, filling the darkness with strange noises: droning insects, birds warbling shrilly, and the seemingly unending ululations of what Rarity guessed were troops of monkeys gathering to bed down for the night.

Twice during the night some creature's piercing screech had caused Rarity's heart to flutter in panic, as the sound conjured the image of a squadron of griffons swooping in for the kill. She still could not say with certainty that the sound had not been a griffon's hunting cry, but the fact that she had survived the night suggested that at the very least the disguised *Alicorn* had not been found.

Turning to her right, Rarity found her snout bumping up against the little wall she had made by rolling up all the available sunflower yellow bedsheets into a long serpentine barrier between herself and Blueblood. Neither of them had been willing to abandon their respective claims to the bed, so she had devised this impromptu means for keeping the peace and preventing contact, inadvertent or otherwise. Even at night it had been too hot and sticky to contemplate using the blankets as designed, but they were effective as a territorial border.

Propping herself up on a foreleg allowed Rarity to see over the blanket wall. Blueblood still slept, quiet and unmoving for the moment. He had tossed and turned for most of the night, and she had briefly contemplated taking him up on his offer of the floor more than once, just to have a better chance at uninterrupted sleep. The bed was designed to barely accommodate two ponies on intimate terms, and was wholly inadequate for a stallion and mare who wanted nothing to do with each other, one of whom could not keep still.

Looking more closely at the sleeping Blueblood, Rarity felt a twinge of concern mixed with revulsion. The gash on his head, just behind his left eye and below his ear, was not looking good. It had formed a greenish-brown crust that was clearly visible under

Blueblood's white coat, and the matted wet hair in the area suggested the wound was still weeping fluid. Rarity had spent enough time taking care of her rambunctious sister to recognize the telltale signs of an infected cut. Worse, a red area in the center of the gash suggested that it was not yet entirely closed, and therefore was still vulnerable to new pathogens. Blueblood would need medical attention if he was unable to deal with the infection on his own. This was just one more reason to get back to civilization as quickly as possible. In the meantime, they would at least have to wash and dress the injury. Rarity resigned herself to the task.

"Wake up," she said loudly, prodding Blueblood's still form. "If we're going to get moving we mustn't sleep in all day. This was your idea, remember?"

"Cream, four sugars," Blueblood mumbled incoherently, blindly fending off Rarity's prodding hoof with his own flailing leg. "Some shaved chocolate would be nice."

"It's time to ... wait, you take *four* sugars in your coffee? No wonder you chew wakewort instead." Rarity was appalled. Blueblood clearly had no idea how to brew a proper cup of coffee, or he would never defile his beverage like that. "It really is time to get out of bed."

Blueblood blinked twice and then opened his eyes. "Oh, right. You. This place. Now I remember. By the way, color me surprised that you prefer bitter to sweet. Coffee was made for sugar."

Rarity rolled out of bed and moved over to the other side of the cabin, where the tiny kitchenette was located and the supplies were kept. Many of the barrels, boxes, and cartons had been strapped to the wall and were still in place. The rest had been knocked asunder when the massive grappling claw impacted the airship.

"Very funny, but correctly brewed coffee is a mix of the right amount of boldness and the right amount of mellow complexity, but it never tastes burned or bitter. Correcting tragic misapprehensions is a favorite pastime of mine, so I trust you'll allow me to demonstrate the error of your ways."

"Now?" Blueblood raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Surely you don't mean for us to sally forth without breakfast?" Rarity asked in mock surprise. "I looked in your larder last night, and you still have more provisions than we can carry with us. We may as well eat our fill now, before we regret not having enough later."

Blueblood shrugged. "Carry on, then. I suppose I haven't eaten a full meal since Canterlot."

"We must take care of another issue first, I'm afraid," Rarity said. "The gash on your head appears to be infected."

Blueblood stood up and frowned. "Fantastic. I shall be the first of my noble line to be struck down by jungle fever. Finally I feel like a true pioneer."

"Already with this melodrama? Surely you have some medical supplies on board."

"I knew I forgot something."

"Well then, do you by any chance have something strong to drink?"

"I think you have a problem." Blueblood screwed up his face in a mixture of surprise and disgust. "You haven't even had anything to eat yet."

"I am asking for your benefit, not mine," Rarity snapped. "The alcohol will help clean out the wound, and there does not seem to be anything better with which to work."

"Oh." Blueblood walked over to a large cloth bag in a corner of the room. Opening it, he extracted a large coconut with a cork inserted into it and set it down on top of a convenient barrel. "One of the stallions taking care of the mooring lines back in Gallopoli threw this to me. He said I looked like I needed to relax, so I presume it is something alcoholic. Feel free to have a nip of it if you simply can't resist."

Rarity held the coconut down with her forehooves and pulled the cork free with her teeth. The unmistakable aroma, a mixture of alcohol, fragrant spices, and cloying sweetness, instantly informed her that the substance inside was rum. Inhaling more deeply left Rarity feeling lightheaded, which left her with the impression that the proof of this particular spirit was quite high.

Rarity set the rum-filled coconut back down and set to work on her next task. She removed the pillowcase from her pillow and levitated it over to where she stood by the sink, before using a combination of magic and her teeth to tear it into strips.

"What are you doing now?" Blueblood asked, the rapidity of his speech evincing surprise and dismay. "I trust you realize that those pillowcases are the finest Camelonian cotton."

“If you would be so kind as to shut up and stand still,” Rarity said. She wet one of the strips and walked over to Blueblood, keeping the remaining dry pieces of fabric floating beside her. Trying not to look too hard at the stallion’s wound, she began dabbing at it with the damp strip and soon had cleaned away the excess pus and fluid. Next, Rarity stuffed the second strip into the opening of the rum-filled coconut, and then turned the whole thing upside down to get the cotton fully saturated with rum. She removed the strip and turned back to Blueblood. A small part of her relished what was about to come next.

“This may sting a bit,” Rarity said. She was prepared for protestation, but not for the earsplitting scream that issued forth as she pressed the rum-soaked strip of cotton onto Blueblood’s injury. There was no question that it would have drawn the attention of the constabulary had they been back in any city or town in Equestria. She hoped it wouldn’t draw any unwanted attention here. It did sound rather more animal than pony in nature.

“What *was* that?” Blueblood finally asked after taking a full minute to simply breathe deeply with his eyes squeezed shut and his jaw clenched.

“Spiced rum,” Rarity replied. “The alcohol should help to clean out your wound and stop any further bleeding. By the smell of it, this is fairly close to medical grade in potency.”

“You’re a regular Nurse Nightingale,” Blueblood said, looking askance at Rarity and raising a hoof to touch the gash on his head. Rarity knocked his foreleg out of the way before it could get close.

“Don’t touch it!” she snarled. “It’s clean now.” She still had a few more dry cotton strips left at her disposal. One was carefully folded to form a small pad, and this she pressed down on top of the wound. She magically joined the remaining two end to end to form a single long strip, and then wrapped it twice around Blueblood’s head and under his blond mane. She tied it tightly behind his head and then stepped back to admire her handiwork.

“Now then, you *might* pull through,” Rarity said with a small smile. In truth, she was more than a little concerned about the infected wound, but there was nothing to be gained by dwelling on it obsessively, and no reason to cause Blueblood to worry as well. Moreover, she had to admit that Blueblood looked rather more roguish with the bandage around his head.

“I look like a mental patient,” Blueblood groused. Rarity could see him checking his reflection in one of the remaining shards of the shattered lavatory mirror. “An unusually handsome mental patient, but still. Thank you for the treatment, I suppose.”

“The pleasure was mine,” Rarity replied. “I, for one, think it adds a certain dangerous charm, as if you were the type of stallion to, say, crash a half-million-bit airship in the middle of an impenetrable jungle, while being pursued by a murderous cabal of warmongering conspirators.”

“Quite an imagination you have,” Blueblood replied with a bemused smirk.

“Indeed. I find it helps in my line of work. You have to have a vision in mind when designing an outfit, you know. I’ve imagined entire worlds for my seasonal lines before. This time, though, I must admit that the story practically wrote itself.”

“Indeed.”

“Breakfast, then?” Rarity prompted.

“Indeed,” Blueblood replied, with a barely perceptible but undeniably real hint of enthusiasm.

“Good. Bring me the coffee and I’ll show you how to brew it properly, and I’ll handle the rest.” Rarity was not particularly inclined to do anything for Blueblood, let alone tend his wounds and cook him breakfast. Circumstances, however, dictated her actions. She could not have him succumbing to infection while they remained far from Equestria, and more importantly, she could not stand idly by while any pony went through life thinking his coffee required *four* sugars. That was the sort of culinary travesty her little sister would commit, or her poor misguided mother, but not the Duke of Canterlot. For shame.

Variety was lacking, as there were only biscuits, apples, hard cheese, oats, and butter, but it was still better than the available fare on *Fancy Free*. Rarity had to give some credit; the weight savings from Blueblood’s lightweight engine solution and from his lack of friends willing to race with him allowed for a higher standard of living than might be had otherwise. She set a small stack of biscuits and a bowl full of apples down on Blueblood’s drafting table, along with a miniature tub of butter. She then levitated Blueblood’s small kerosene stove up and gently set it in place so that it straddled the sink. That would do in the limited amount of space available. She retrieved the coffee pot from where it had fallen on the floor, and set it in place on a burner.

“I only have grounds,” Blueblood said, almost apologetically, as he placed a burlap satchel on a stack of boxes next to Rarity.

“Then that will just have to do.”

Blueblood’s coffee pot was the two-stage design Rarity preferred. She filled the base with water from the tap, inserted the filter above, added the appropriate measure of grounds to the filter, and then used magic to screw on the upper stage, which collected the brewed coffee. This design ensured that even though the water in the lower stage was boiling, its temperature lowered to a point at which it would not burn the coffee grounds as pressure forced it upwards through the grounds and into the upper stage. Rarity lit the stove and left the coffeepot to its ordained task, which would take about five minutes.

Even if nothing else in this place could be right, or lovely, or clean, or organized, then at least there would be good coffee, made the right way—bold, but not bitter. Rarity had tasted Applejack’s coffee once. The farmer simply threw a heaping portion of grounds into a pot of boiling water, and strained the result into cups. It was undrinkable to Rarity, though Applejack happily consumed it black. Even *that* coffee did not deserve four sugars.

“I suppose it would be too much to ask for a porcelain saucer and demitasse,” Rarity said.

“This is a racing yacht, not the Grand Hotel Canterlot,” Blueblood replied. “I have wooden cups.”

“Wooden cups it is.”

Blueblood occupied his too-small bench and Rarity perched on the edge of the bed with the drafting table between them. Blueblood had found a utility knife for use in sundry shipboard tasks and the two unicorns passed it back and forth as they buttered biscuits and sliced apples.

“Tell me about your brother,” Rarity said after swallowing a bite of hard, dry biscuit. “I hate to pry, but he is trying to have us both killed.”

Blueblood turned away, his cheeks flushing. “What is there to say? Procyon and I are both named after stars, but beyond that we have little in common. We have never been as close as brothers are expected to be. Where I had the old family wanderlust and became addicted to airships and exploration, he spent days poring over the family finances, always calculating and tabulating and looking for the next big investment opportunity.

In truth, you could not name a more boring pony in Canterlot. His cutie mark is a compass needle crossed with a slide rule, for Celestia's sake!"

"If he is so concerned with numbers, what could he possibly hope to gain financially from this scheme? Isn't the more obvious goal to usurp your title and become duke?"

"Procyon never even hinted that he wanted my title before, and why would he? It's meaningless, utterly without real responsibility, and entails that I spend an inordinate amount of time before the public. That is the last thing Procyon would want. As for money, while I may have ruined the fortunes of North Star, our family still has wealth enough, with income producing properties scattered across the realm. I honestly cannot fathom his true motivations."

"Perhaps you should consider," Rarity began, "that he may be more jealous of you than you realize. Do not mistake this for a compliment, but you are something of a cultural icon in Equestria. You spend your time building airships, attending parties, and offending the sensibilities of mares. I saw your brother, and I must say that he did not exactly strike me as the type of stallion who would naturally become a household name as a *bon vivant* and heartbreaker. With you gone, he might finally have his day in the sun, as it were."

Blueblood paused, apparently considering this. "Jealousy is not really sufficient reason to forge a conspiracy to plunge Equestria into war, is it? Why not just hire somepony to off me? Why have you attacked? Why sabotage the *Alicorn's Cup*?"

"Those are the questions of the hour, aren't they?" Rarity replied. She stood up and crossed the short distance over to the stove. A delightfully heady aroma and her internal clock said that the coffee was ready. "I suppose the important thing is that we are still alive, and therefore whatever nefarious plan hinges upon our demise may not come to fruition. If we manage somehow to stay alive, that is. Anyway, I want you to try this and then tell me it needs cream and sugar."

"You realize that it isn't even done yet, don't you? One is supposed to wait for the pot to make a gurgling noise, which means that all the water has been taken up."

"Oh you poor creature," Rarity said, shaking her head pityingly. "That sound just means that you have left the coffee too long on the heat. At that point you are burning it." She set two steaming cups down on the table. "Sip this."

Rarity's own first sip was exquisite. The flavor was bold, rich and complex. Even in the heat and humidity, the beverage provided an invigorating kind of internal warmth that gave a spark of promise and excitement to the day's beginning. "Lovely," she said.

Blueblood looked up after his first sip and set his cup back down. "If I did not know this was coffee, I would hardly recognize it."

"Oh come now," Rarity began irritably, "I know that it is good, so you needn't insult it just to try to get a rise out of me."

"No, no, I mean that I never knew what coffee was supposed to taste like before now. This is phenomenal," he said without a trace of sarcasm. "It really is. You must teach my breakfast staff."

"Why thank you," Rarity replied, quite pleased. "You don't really have breakfast staff, do you?"

"Not half as many as Princess Celestia has," Blueblood replied. "My time is valuable. When I am not working I have functions to attend and sleep to catch up on. Somepony else has to feed me."

"Feed you, and groom you, and attire you, I would wager," said Rarity. "It is quite disconcerting that a pony who holds such little responsibility over his own life is now responsible for mine. I've been meaning to ask, how do you intend to lead us back to Equestria? Have you got a spell to point us in the right direction?"

"I have maps and a compass. The fact that I have a talent for navigation does not mean that I use magic to do it. If that were the case, how would earth ponies and pegasi even earn their marks?"

"True. I suppose I should be happy that you at least read maps. That's more than I can say for most stallions."

"Not that this place appears on any maps," Blueblood noted. "I will be making an educated guess as to the correct direction, and the terrain we encounter is likely to alter our course drastically."

"In other words, we may have to walk a much further distance than we would travel by air."

"Count on it."

“Then we should finish here and set off at once,” Rarity concluded. The realization that they were further from home than she had known was unnerving. There was no more time to waste on coffee and idle chitchat.

“I rather liked your original idea of having a nice breakfast,” Blueblood said. “After we’re finished, I shall determine the lay of the land and choose a path out of here. You can pack.”

“Why do I have to pack your supplies?” Rarity huffed. “Just because I made coffee does not mean that I am now your valet.”

“I’m sorry,” Blueblood replied. “I merely thought you would be less likely to forget something critical. My understanding is that you have an eye for detail.”

“Oh,” Rarity said. Flattery did not always work with her, but flattering her most prized skill was more likely than not to succeed. “Yes, that’s true. Go on then and pick a path home, preferably one without monsters, snakes, or griffons, if that isn’t too tall of an order.”

Blueblood nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

The unicorns finished their breakfast in silence. There was enough coffee for a second cup, and Rarity drank hers as quickly as she could while still savoring it. By the time she finished it, Blueblood was done as well. He disappeared up the staircase to begin scouting the surrounding landscape.

“What did you do?” Rarity heard Blueblood shout in surprise. “This is supposed to be an airship, not an exercise in interpretive landscape design!”

“Sorry, did I scratch the paint with a branch?” Rarity called back. “Here I thought the goal was to avoid being discovered by griffons. I do hope any harm I did will blend in with the giant hole in the hull and all the damage from crashing into a forest of trees!”

“Touché,” Blueblood replied. “Thorough job you’ve done, I must say. I can hardly see the forest for all the trees that you pulled down over the top of my ship. I’m sure the effect works equally well in the opposite direction.”

“Cute. Now would you just go? I have work to do.”

Blueblood chuckled and began walking away. Rarity could hear his hoofbeats as he traversed the deck of the *Alicorn*, but the sound disappeared when he clambered onto one of the fallen tree trunks that served as a gangplank down to the forest floor.

“Okay, Rarity, time to pack,” she said aloud. “Nopony is better at packing for trips than you are. At least, nopony is more thorough.” Perhaps the most honest way to put it would be to admit that nopony brought more suitcases filled to the brim with every bit of bric-a-brac that she might conceivably desire to have at some point during a trip. “There are no porters to carry your bags here, Rarity, but that’s no problem. You’ll just have to prioritize.”

It was not much more than a year ago now that Twilight Sparkle had led her and the rest on a quest into the western mountains to convince a slumbering dragon to clear out of Equestria. What had she packed then? Scarves, certainly, on account of the cold. A matching tiara. Now that Rarity thought about it, she hadn’t been very pragmatic at the time. Of course, compared to Pinkie Pie, her packing skills were practically those of a trained survivalist, but then again Pinkie usually had her party cannon as backup. Perhaps she could obtain a fashion cannon. But what would a fashion cannon even do? Whatever it did, Rarity was sure it would be *fabulous*.

Rarity shook her head to clear it. Her internal monologue was being less helpful than usual at the moment. Applejack was a sensible pony. What would she think to take? She would tell Rarity to pack “practical-like.” The most practical things Rarity could think to pack were food, water, something useful for shelter against the elements, perhaps tools, and Blueblood’s maps and navigational aids. Now she was on the right track. Before she could pack anything, however, she needed something in which to pack it.

Rarity began digging through the boxes, cartons, barrels and casks littering the cramped cabin. Finally, the thought occurred to her to look underneath the bed, and there she found a thick cotton saddle pad and an accompanying sturdy canvas pannier. The pannier’s two large bags would rest on either side of a pony while the attached saddle pad distributed the weight across her back. Of course Blueblood could have told her where to find it before he left, but Rarity was too happy to have found something so useful to be truly annoyed.

There were no fabrics in the cabin tough enough for her to make another pannier or saddlebags out of whole cloth, so the one would have to do. She magically lifted the saddle pad and pannier onto her back and cinched the assembly tight around her middle. The pad and bags were oversized for her frame, but they wouldn’t fall off. It was good

that she could wear it, because she had something even bulkier and heavier in mind for Blueblood. The journey would take days, and it would do no good to run out of supplies.

Rarity removed the pannier and began gathering supplies for her next project. Spare rope was always plentiful on airships, and she quickly collected as much as she needed. There were two-gallon casks of water near the rear of the cabin, probably for use in case the complicated plumbing system failed. She lashed four of them together with the rope, weaving and knotting it expertly to form a net that kept the barrels from moving, and which could be draped over a pony's back and secured at the neck. This would be Blueblood's burden.

Finally, she filled one of the pannier bags with as much food as she could fit, prioritizing biscuits and cheese over the more cumbersome and less calorie-rich apples, though she packed plenty of those as well. In the other bag she placed useful equipment: more rope, Blueblood's small knife, a blanket and sheets folded as tightly as she could manage, a small kerosene lantern, and a box of matches. Blueblood had his maps and compass with him, and Rarity decided he could choose which of those to bring on his own. After a moment's hesitation she also packed the rest of the rum and the remaining pillowcase, in case the stallion's injury required additional ministrations.

She tested the pannier again and decided that any more weight would be out of the question. Rarity understood that this modest amount of food and water was unlikely to bring them out of the jungle, but finding more would be a concern for a later time. This was all they could carry. She was pacing back and forth across the cabin, wearing the pannier and trying to assure herself that she could in fact carry it, when Blueblood returned.

"Goodness, I've seen pack mules stagger under less," he remarked. "I assume that pannier is meant for me."

"This is mine, actually," Rarity replied. "Yours is there." She pointed to the tangle of ropes and barrels she had created. "Somepony needs to carry the water."

"I applaud your effort, but have you forgotten that this is a tropical jungle? I'm certain that water will be the least of our worries."

"Really? You already have had one wound become infected overnight, just from being in this place. I, for one, am not going to stake my life on trusting that any water we find or collect here is safe to drink. Pardon my crassness, but a case of the trots could be fatal here with no good way to rest and rehydrate, and I simply refuse to go out that way."

“I see your point,” said Blueblood, looking faintly disgusted, but also slightly amused. “Speaking of water, I am pleased to report that the lake we splashed down on is fed by a river that was hidden by the trees while we were flying overhead. There are distant hills to the northeast, in the direction of Gallopoli, and I strongly suspect the river flows down from them. If we follow it we should be able to stay on the right track and move fairly quickly, compared to attempting to force our way through vegetation. It will also be much more difficult to become lost.”

Rarity was suddenly struck by an idea. “This river, is it deep and wide enough to float the *Alicorn*, if we were able to somehow move it?”

Blueblood shook his head. “I thought of that, but it would take days to patch the holes in the hull, and even then it would not be safe. *If* we could patch the hull and *if* we could somehow find a way to move this entire airship back onto the lake, the river could narrow or become too shallow at any point, and even if that did not happen we might sink. The *Alicorn* was designed to be able to land on water in instances where there was not enough available space on dry land, but not designed to float there indefinitely. The hull is not adequately sealed for days of river travel.”

“Then we go,” Rarity said simply.

“Yes.”

She helped Blueblood slip into the water-carrying harness she had made, and tightened it around his neck and barrel so that it would not slip. Blueblood’s compass was attached to a cloth lanyard which he placed around his neck, and he slipped his folded maps between the mesh of ropes on his back, so that they were held securely against his body.

“Are you going to keep wearing that?” Blueblood indicated the Gallopolitan pearl necklace around Rarity’s neck. “It seems rather pointless now.”

“I like it,” Rarity replied defensively. “Besides, Mayor Wavewalker said these pearls can help ponies in distress, and I am most certainly in distress at the moment.”

“Well, if you won’t give up on such silliness, then allow me this.” Blueblood walked over to the black bag from which he had pulled the coconut earlier that morning, and this time pulled out a shiny red apple. In fact, Rarity saw that it was one of the specially-marked apples that her friends in Ponyville had been tasked with distributing as the first race marker.

“You’re not going to ...” Before Rarity could finish her admonition Blueblood had already taken a huge bite out of the special apple, chewed briefly, and swallowed. “You know that apple is covered in wax, right?”

“Pff, it is only beeswax, and I am making a statement about the futility and fragility of life here, and officially marking the utter failure and demise of the *Alicorn’s* Cup at the same time,” Blueblood replied. “Which I now regret doing.” He made a show of wiping the taste of the wax off his tongue with the outside of a forehoof.

“Why don’t we just get moving,” Rarity suggested.

The two heavily-laden ponies ascended the staircase to the airship’s deck and then cautiously walked single-file down the thickest and most stable fallen tree trunk available, being careful not to snag their packs on any of the branches and foliage Rarity had set in place to disguise the ship.

As they began walking away from the wreck and toward the lake beyond, Blueblood turned back to face the fallen airship for a final time. “I gave you three years of my life, and you gave me not even two days. You never worked properly, and you brought me nothing but trouble. All that aside, you kept me alive, and her too, so I believe I shall call it even. Goodbye, dear *Alicorn*.”

“Quite the tumultuous relationship you two had,” said Rarity. She paused to wait for Blueblood to tear his gaze away from the airship and begin walking again.

“Yet it lasted longer and proved only slightly more hazardous to my health than any of my previous dalliances with mares.”

“I’ll kindly request you not relate any of those sordid affairs,” Rarity said, perhaps too quickly.

“Suit yourself, but I do have some good stories. For example, that skinny pink minx that used to hang all over Fancypants once overturned a bowl of punch on my head at a charity ball on the castle green, for reasons that were only partially my fault. And how could I forget the mare who got cake all over me, causing me to trip and knock over one of Princess Celestia’s priceless golden statues, thus precipitating the entire Grand Galloping Gala falling into chaos.”

“You don’t really want to talk about *that*, do you?” Rarity’s voice was as low and threatening as she could make it. If Blueblood wanted to talk about the Gala, then she

would talk about the Gala, but the conversation wasn't going to be anything to joke about.

"That time was mostly my fault," said Blueblood. "Perhaps exclusively."

Rarity turned to the stallion with one eyebrow raised in surprise. "Is that supposed to be your lackluster version of an apology?"

"Perhaps I merely believe that we would be better served by getting along out here," Blueblood replied.

Rarity sighed. She didn't want to do this, but now the matter had been forced. She had to speak her mind. "I want you to understand something right now, before we go any further on this ill-conceived journey. You and I both know how I felt about you once, and we both remember recent history. To me, you still are, and you always will be, the stallion who led on and humiliated a naïve girl from Ponyville who foolishly believed that she was a lot more worldly than she really was, and for what? For sport? For laughs? Simply because you truly are that much of a self-absorbed lout? I do not forgive you for the way you acted during the Grand Galloping Gala. For that matter, I do not forgive myself for what happened later at the yacht launching. It was shameful behavior, but it was because I let you get under my coat. I am not letting you do that again. Right now, I must rely on you to get back to Equestria, and so we must make nice, and we will. I refuse, however, to absolve you of your past behavior just so that you can feel better about yourself and keep your massive, fragile ego intact."

They walked in silence for a moment, before Blueblood finally spoke up. "You know, I don't think there's any salvaging my ego at this point. It does take the wind out of one's sails to hear one's behavior recounted like that, and it does not help matters when one's own family is trying to kill him."

"Chin up," Rarity replied. "Knowing you, you'll be back to fully believing that you are a tragic hero and a gift to the mares of Equestria in no time, whether or not I accept a half-hearted apology."

"And if I truly was sincere, would that make a difference?"

"Yes, it would," Rarity replied at length. "I am not the type to spurn genuine contrition. The problem is that I have no way to tell the difference, and for your apology to be meaningful you would have to be a different stallion than the one who I know you to be. If you ever did change, it would be your actions that proved it."

“Then I retract my apology, since it was apparently worthless in the first place. I won’t play a game that has no way to win.”

“Your problem is that you think this a game. Also, your retraction is hereby accepted,” said Rarity tersely. “Now let’s move on, shall we?”

“Fine. Look here,” Blueblood swept a foreleg in front of him to encompass the small lake that spread out before the unicorns. “If we follow along the water’s edge to our left, we will soon reach the river I discovered earlier. The banks are broad enough for us to walk without becoming entangled in vegetation.”

“You’re the one with the compass flanks, so lead on,” said Rarity. “Our lives are in your hooves.”

The river was exactly as Blueblood had promised. It was broad enough to be called a river and not a stream, though just barely, and it flowed languidly downstream into the lake. The water was such a dark blue that it was almost black, and no rocks broke the surface. That suggested to Rarity that the river was deeper than its breadth alone indicated. If only it had flowed in the opposite direction, it would have been a relatively simple matter to fashion a raft out of vines and fallen logs and float back toward Equestria. Alas, it did not, and there was nothing to be gained by trying to fight the current without a proper watercraft.

Blueblood, as promised, led the way forward. The banks of the river were narrow shelves of soil compacted onto and in between tangled tree roots that twisted as they snaked toward the water. The supportive roots were all that kept the soil from washing away downstream. Small plants and flowers grew in the thin soil here, but new trees could find no purchase. There was just enough space to walk between the steep drop-off into the water and the greenery that quickly grew impassable on the other side.

Life was everywhere, in all of its myriad forms, strange colors, and raucous voices. Monkeys crowding each other on thick branches chuffed disapprovingly at the ponies passing underneath, and the squawks of parrots alerted the rest of the forest to the interlopers. A rainbow of butterflies fluttered wherever there were flowers, and there were many, many flowers of every shape, color, and size. Fluttershy would be on cloud nine. Rarity merely hoped nothing crawling, slithering, buzzing, or fluttering would land in her mane.

As many clicks, chirps, and clucks as there were filling the air, Rarity did not hear the one sound for which she was keenly listening. She was positive that by now the remaining

airships would already be fanning out over the forest, searching for the missing *Alicorn* and *Stiletto*, but she heard no drone of propellers overhead yet. She was suddenly struck by a horrific notion. What if it was worse than she had feared, and even more of the other ships had been lost than she had seen with her own eyes? What if they had all been attacked by the marauders? That would explain why nopony had found them yet—there was nopony to search.

No, that couldn't be the case. The airships were flying too far apart for the same ship that intercepted Blueblood to have then chased down the others. Moreover, it would have been difficult enough in a storm to pinpoint and track one ship. Chasing down the others would have been impossible. As for *Stiletto*, the more Rarity considered it the more she became convinced that Graywings had been led to his end by one or more of his own crew. It made sense that if the conspirators could assassinate the griffon chancellor, infiltrate Fancypants' team, and field their own warship, then they could have some of Graywings' griffons on their payroll as well.

The others were out there, somewhere. Rarity was sure of it. It was merely that, as Blueblood had said, this forest was unfathomably big, and the swath where the missing airships could have gone down was expansive in its own right. She would just have to put thoughts of rescue out of her mind, and rely on her own four hooves to carry her to salvation. Or rather, she would have to rely on her own hooves, and Blueblood. If he really wanted to apologize to her he could start by leading them back into Equestria, alive and intact.

The day wore on, and Rarity eventually found that she was beginning to feel the strain of her heavy pannier. She wondered how Blueblood was faring. Smatterings of idle conversation had long since given way to determined silence. It was a mindless endeavor, placing one hoof in front of the other while keeping a roving eye out for dangerous creatures and for roots and obstacles that could trip her up. The last thing either of them needed was a broken bone. They had been walking for hours, matching every meandering bend and turn of the river. Perhaps now they could spare a moment to rest. The idea of a drink of water was particularly appealing.

“Down! Be silent!” Blueblood whispered loudly, breaking Rarity's reverie. She immediately knelt low to the ground.

“What is it?” she whispered, daring to creep forward up to Blueblood's side.

“Smoke.” Blueblood gestured upstream with a foreleg.

There, not more than a tenth of a league distant, Rarity could see tendrils of gray smoke curling into the air near the riverbank. Concentrating, she made out a small shelter constructed of leafy green fronds and branches. Seconds later, fear gripped her heart as a large griffon male glided down out of the treetops and alighted next to the structure. Another male appeared from behind it to greet his comrade. If these two discovered Rarity and Blueblood, they would surely have to fight for their lives.

“What should we do?” Rarity asked, petrified.

“I don’t know,” Blueblood whispered back. “This must be a patrol out hunting for us. Right now, we’re downwind of them, but they will smell us after we walk past. At the same time, we must follow the river or risk becoming stranded in the middle of the jungle. I already told you how much I hate no-win scenarios, and this seems like another one of them.”

“Well they must be making a fire for a reason,” Rarity theorized. “Perhaps they are having lunch, and they’ll be so distracted by the smoke and food that they won’t notice us.” She watched as both griffons disappeared from view behind the structure they had built upon the riverbank.

“That leaves entirely too much to chance,” Blueblood replied. “However, what if we don’t try to sneak past? What if we take advantage of the fact that they cannot see or smell us at the moment, and we spring an ambush on *them*?”

“That would be suicidal!” Rarity hissed. “They have talons, and claws, and probably knives and firesticks as well. What do we have?” They would not last three seconds against armed griffons in a direct confrontation, of that she was certain.

“Magic!” Blueblood replied, looking positively exuberant about his insane proposition. “We shall creep closer while they rest in the lean-to, and I will use my magic to push it over on top of them and their campfire. You bash them with rocks while they are down.”

“You’re joking, surely. I will most certainly not be hitting any creature with a rock, griffon or not. Do I look like some kind of paleo pony barbarian to you? Moreover, knocking some branches and leaves over is not going to do anything but alert them to your presence. The leaves are too green to catch fire, if that’s your aim.”

“Doubt my plan all you want,” Blueblood huffed. “Your reticence doesn’t change the fact that we must get past them. You’ll just have to leave everything to me.” Ignoring Rarity’s

whispered protestations, he unfastened his pack of water casks and began slowly creeping toward the griffons' lean-to, keeping his profile low to the ground.

"If you are trying to impress me, getting us killed is not the way to do it!" Rarity hissed, raising her voice as loud as she dared. Blueblood ignored her.

He really was going to go through with this and get them killed, Rarity realized. She was practically frozen with fright, but realistically there were only two legitimate options. First, she could run as fast as she could back the direction whence they had come, all the way to the *Alicorn*, and hope for somepony to miraculously appear to rescue her before the griffons found her. Second, she could try to help.

Neither option seemed promising at the moment. She was certainly not going to hit anyone with a rock, but perhaps there was another way to be useful. Perhaps, Rarity thought, as an idea sprang unbidden to mind, the best way to help would be to make Blueblood's plan superfluous by accomplishing her own first. She unfastened her pannier and opened the compartment with their supplies. Once she had what she needed she immediately galloped headlong into the forest, racing against her own travelling companion.

When Rarity peered out of the trees by the riverbank moments later, she found herself staring straight at a pair of griffons who currently seemed not to have a care in the world. They relaxed at a small table by a roaring fire, over which roasted some small creature on a makeshift spit resting on forked branches. They held playing cards in their talons, and were obviously engrossed in some kind of game. A pair of firesticks, each as long as Rarity's entire body, rested ominously against the outside of the griffons' shelter. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Blueblood, still stealthily creeping closer so that he could put his foolhardy plan into action. She needed to complete her own objective first.

As she had gambled, the griffons were not in a hunter's frame of mind at the moment. They didn't notice the long, thin white serpent that slithered toward them out of the trees where Rarity hid. If they had, they might have noticed that it was not a serpent at all, but a long braided ship's rope outlined by a faint blue glow. Moments later, Rarity herself stepped into plain view.

"Yoo-hoo, boys, over here!" she called out loudly, prancing daintily out of the jungle. Both members of the hunting party immediately jumped up, knocking over their card table and sending a spray of playing cards into the air. "You look like nice young fellows," Rarity continued. "Is there any chance you could show me to the nearest

Equestrian embassy? I was trying to get to Canterlot and it seems I've lost my way. I must have taken that wrong turn at Dodge Junction."

The two griffons looked at each other and squawked something unintelligible before turning back to Rarity. With a mighty flap of their powerful wings, both accelerated toward her. Rarity winced, but the griffons only managed to travel half a length before they fell back to earth with a terrific thump that also brought their entire shelter crashing down.

"Oh!" Rarity exclaimed. "I'm so sorry, I forgot to mention that I roped your tails to your tent poles while you were otherwise preoccupied! Who won the card game, by the way?"

The griffons let Rarity know of their fury via alternating shrieks and roars. Her plan was working, and she only needed to finish tying them up. Rarity magically unwound the second length of rope she had carried over. At that moment, however, she realized the flaw in her plan. Griffons were *strong*. The pair, still tied to the lean-to, began crawling toward her, dragging it behind them. They still had all of their natural offensive weaponry, even handicapped as they were.

"Don't even move another half a hoof," Blueblood said, appearing beside Rarity. Both of the griffons' firesticks floated in the air in front of him, pointing at their owners. Confronted with their own deadly weapons, the griffons lay still, and Rarity swiftly tied them up so that they lay back to back on the ground, wings pinned and claws bound tightly to their sides.

"That was certainly ... something," Blueblood said, after both ponies were certain that the griffons were securely under control.

"It was," Rarity agreed, finally catching her breath. "It worked, did it not?"

"Improbably well," Blueblood replied.

"Yes. Now what?"

"I have absolutely no idea. You?"

"Not in the slightest."

“Would you *please* stop waving that thing around?” Rarity asked. Ever since Blueblood had first picked up the captive griffons’ wood and metal firesticks, he had apparently been entranced. Even now he was still magically spinning one of the tubular weapons around in the air, scrutinizing it carefully from every angle. “Honestly, it’s embarrassing. It looks as though you’re compensating for something.”

Blueblood kept twisting and rotating the firestick, focusing on each detail. “This is very fine crafting, I must say. Whoever designed this musket is nothing less than a fiendish genius. The firing mechanism uses a steel wheel rotating against pyrite to ignite the firepowder, and the flash pan is covered to keep out moisture until the trigger is depressed. I dare say that if the griffons who boarded the *Alicorn* had been equipped with these, they would not have been hindered by the rain and wind.” He turned to Rarity. “And I assure you that I have no need to compensate for anything.”

“I assure *you* that I do not care, and will never find out. I *do* care that we are wasting time that could be spent getting as far away from these ruffians as possible.” The rope-bound griffons, under threat of their own firesticks as wielded by Blueblood, sat back-to-back on their haunches in stone-faced silence, only a few lengths away.

“We can’t leave yet,” said Blueblood. “We haven’t even determined whether there is anything here worth taking. Perhaps these griffons have a map that reveals the timing and locations of their patrols? Even if not, perhaps we can convince them to tell us the safest direction to take, or who they are working for and what they aim to achieve.”

Rarity threw a foreleg around Blueblood and ushered him away from the captives before whispering. “Just how do you plan to do that? You must realize that the more we interact with them, the more likely they are to remember that they are cold-blooded killers and we are merely a pair of ponies who have no business being here in the first place. Do you want them to start screeching for help once they realize we aren’t going to use these ... muskrats, did you say?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I, personally, would be tempted to pull the trigger if they did try to summon aid, if only to find out how these firing mechanisms work in practice. I swear to you that I’ve never seen such a brilliant piece...”

Rarity shot Blueblood her most baleful stare.

“Fine, fine,” Blueblood replied, rearing back and throwing his forelegs up in mock surrender. “You win. We’ll not try our hooves at interrogation, but I still propose that

you rifle through their supplies and determine whether anything useful may be found there. I shall stay here and keep a watch on the prisoners.”

“I’ll do it,” Rarity replied, gritting her teeth.

From the moment the griffons had been subdued she had been on edge, imagining how the pair would escape and turn on their captors, planning to rend them with beak and claw. These griffons did not look like the stately creatures who had signed on to race in the *Alicorn’s Cup*, nor even like Rainbow Dash’s brash and hot-tempered foalhood friend, Gilda. She had been put together, at least. These griffons wore no armor or insignia, their feathers were ruffled, and their fur was shaggy and unkempt. It appeared as though they had been away from civilization for some time, and the murderous look in their eyes was not that of creatures possessed of self-restraint. All Rarity wanted to do was get away from them, as quickly and as far as possible. She had no reason to believe that Blueblood was even capable of using the weapons he seemed to be treating as toys, and she had no idea whether they would actually be effective. She wasn’t even certain what the strange tubes did, that made them so allegedly fearsome.

She hurriedly trotted over to the ruins of the ramshackle shelter the griffon pair had been using. It had initially consisted of a framework of thin logs supporting a thick mat of fronds, leaves, and branches set against the frame at a forty-five degree angle. It hadn’t been much, but it would have provided shelter from the weather. After the griffons had pulled it down due to her little rope trick, the shelter was reduced to nothing more than a jumbled mess of forest detritus. Wisps of smoke still rose where the falling mass of moisture-rich leaves and green wood had smothered the griffons’ fire.

Still, Blueblood might be correct that something useful could be found here. She had seen papers and a few small boxes before the lean-to had been destroyed. As long as Blueblood had the griffons quiet and under control, she supposed that it couldn’t hurt to quickly sift through the jumble to see if there was anything worth requisitioning. Rarity had barely begun carefully lifting branches from the pile and placing them in a neat stack off to the side when she was interrupted by a strangled wheezing sound.

“Come quickly!” Blueblood called, sounding panicked.

Rarity whirled around and raced back to the other pony. The stallion stood frozen in place, mouth agape, as one of the griffons clawed at his throat, gasped pathetically a few final times, and then went still.

“What did you do?” Rarity demanded.

“What did I do? You tied him up! You must have tied him so tightly that he suffocated!”

“Ponies,” the other griffon croaked harshly. It was the first word of Equestrian either of the captives had uttered. “You two did not kill my comrade. He swallowed the poison pill that was affixed to the inside of his upper beak. I have such a pill as well, but I do not wish to die, even though I have been dishonored by my capture. My comrade could not live with that dishonor, but I can.”

“That’s absurd! It wasn’t necessary!” Rarity exclaimed in shock. “We would not have hurt you!”

“Hold on!” Blueblood interjected. “Were you not lecturing me about not telling the prisoners what we would and would not do?”

“We knew,” the griffon stated. “You are but ponies, and therefore would not kill unless it became necessary. You are a prey species, after all. In the end, what you would do matters not. Even if we return from this humiliation, we would be cast out forever, once our shame became known.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rarity said, eyes downcast. “We cannot, however, set you free. Even now.”

“I understand,” the griffon replied sullenly. “I ask only one thing, a small mercy. It is a terrible taboo in my culture to have physical contact with war dead like this, for fear that the taint of their defeat will spread and poison the flock. Please, I beg you to move the body.”

“Absolutely not!” exclaimed Blueblood. “Do you think us so gullible as to untie you?”

“Wait,” said Rarity. “Do you promise not to try to escape if I do this?”

“You have my solemn word,” the griffon croaked.

“You are crazy!” Blueblood said. “You’re a madmare!”

Rarity had to admit he might be right, but it was such a simple request. Perhaps there was still hope, even in light of these tragic circumstances, for a bridge to be formed between captor and captive. Perhaps if she showed the surviving griffon a bit of kindness and generosity, he would willingly help them get home. Her horn glowed blue as the ropes began to untie themselves.

“She is crazy,” Blueblood said, exasperation evident in his tone. He turned to the griffon and leveled a floating musket at the other’s head. “I, however, am not. Make one false move, or twitch those wings, and you will discover that some ‘prey species’ bite back.”

The griffon sat on his haunches, completely still, as Rarity removed the rope from around him and his deceased cohort. As soon as he was no longer supported, the dead griffon collapsed in a limp heap. With great effort, she magically dragged the body a few lengths away and then retied the surviving captive. Rarity was pleased to see that the griffon kept still and silent throughout the entire process.

“Thank you, lady pony,” the griffon said, secure in his bindings. “You have shown great mercy in removing the threat of the taboo.”

“You are most welcome,” Rarity replied. “Perhaps we can find other areas of mutual understanding. I, for one, would be grateful if you would agree not to try to kill us.”

“I do not think so,” the griffon said, cackling. “I am a soldier, and my mission is to find and kill you both.”

“A soldier you say, but for whom are you working?” Blueblood demanded, poking the griffon in the chest with his musket. “Come on, now.”

“Secrecy is also part of my mission,” the griffon replied, shaking his head.

“Ugh, of course,” Blueblood scrunched up his face in frustrated annoyance. “Let’s finish looking through their belongings and then leave this wretched creature.”

Rarity, still in a shocked daze from the first griffon’s untimely end, returned to the ruined lean-to and her previous work. Sorting quickly through the debris, she soon began to uncover the first of the griffons’ possessions. There was a bag of small, crudely formed metal balls, Equestrian bits and other foreign coins she had never seen before, and finally, a satchel gruesomely formed of some animal’s hide and filled with loose documents. Rarity felt a surge of excitement at the idea that the papers might include a map of the area. This might be her best chance for safe and expeditious transit of the jungle! She found a flat, dry spot of dirt and began to examine the documents one by one.

On top were photographs of Blueblood and herself. The fact that the images were in color indicated that the cameras used to capture them were enchanted, and enchanted technology was rare outside of Equestria. This was more circumstantial evidence that these griffons were in league with ponies. More interesting still was the fact that Rarity could easily place the photograph taken of her. It was from Twilight Sparkle’s birthday,

two months ago, when Rarity had been staying in Canterlot. The day prior was when all of this mess had begun, when Rarity had gone yachting with Fancy pants, and when she had lost her wits and kissed Blueblood. This particular photograph showed Rarity, standing with Fancy pants and a particularly rude and pretentious unicorn mare named Upper Crust, in the Canterlot Castle garden green.

As clearly as Rarity remembered the scene, she hadn't remembered her picture being taken. It made sense, of course, that certain members of the press would have been invited to cover such an important society occasion. They must have blended into the crowd.

She had been so on edge at the time, dreading that her Ponyville friends would make a scene in front of the Canterlot elite, that she had hardly been paying attention to anything other than trying to avoid an incident. She *had*, however, scanned the newspapers the next morning for any mention of the kerfuffle that her friends had eventually, and inevitably, caused. There had been nothing. If there had been no story, that meant there had been no official reporters or photographers present, and that in turn meant that the event had not been open to the press after all. The pony who had taken the photograph of Rarity had done so clandestinely. Rarity didn't like the conclusion she was nearing, but it now seemed that a plot against her had been in motion even then.

Blueblood had not made an appearance at the party, or she would have asked him if he had noticed anypony taking photographs. Even the fact of his absence, in retrospect, now seemed strange. Why had he not attended the second most important social function of the year, ranking below only the Grand Galloping Gala? There had to be a noteworthy reason for his failure to appear, but that line of inquiry would have to be wait. There were other papers to review.

Unfortunately, the next few documents were pages filled with writing in Griffon, and Rarity did not know a single word of the language, nor did she know how to pronounce aloud the angular, boldly-stroked script the griffons favored, on the off chance that the writing was merely transliterated Equestrian. Very few ponies learned a second language; their kind were not ordinarily inclined to travel abroad, and if they did, Equestrian was the default for international commerce and political affairs. There were simply far more ponies than anyone else.

The very last document was the one she had been so eagerly seeking. A large piece of parchment had been folded numerous times in order to fit in to the griffons' pouch, and

when she opened it Rarity saw that it was covered with tiny, detailed drawings of trees, rivers, mountains, and all sorts of points of interest, as well as a miniature compass rose.

“Wahaha!” Rarity exclaimed jubilantly. “It’s a map!”

“Let me see!” Blueblood galloped over to her, momentarily abandoning his charge. Rarity didn’t even bother to scold him, as excited she was about possibly finding directions out of this wretched place. The remaining griffon was clearly an honorable sort, at any rate. He had not made a move to escape so far, and she had bound him tightly. “You’re right! This is a detailed depiction of everything within a hundred and fifty leagues of here!”

“Can you use this to find the shortest safe path through the jungle?” Rarity asked.

“I should be able to, yes,” Blueblood said, before frowning and leaning down to stare closely at the map. “What is this?” he asked, pointing a hoof at a tiny drawing of a structure located in the middle of what appeared to be a large number of trees. Writing appeared next to the drawing, but Rarity was unable to read it.

“I assume that is rhetorical question, given that I am utterly lost here and also unable to read Griffon,” she said.

“You don’t need to read the language to read a map. This must be the base from which the griffons are operating, and most likely where they berth that monstrous airship when it isn’t flying,” Blueblood explained. He indicated a serpentine line snaking through drawings of trees, which Rarity surmised represented the jungle. “Here, this must be the river we have been traveling along. According to this, the griffon base is situated on the shore of a large lake further upriver. If we had simply kept following the river, we would have eventually trotted straight into their claws. Now we know that we must find another route.”

“But how will we travel if not along the riverbanks?” Rarity asked. “The jungle is too thick.”

“We have no other choice. After we leave, and that griffon’s patrol fails to report, his friends will eventually come for him. They’ll be able to follow our trail easily if we stay close to the water. We will have to rely on this map to travel through the forest.”

“Is that safe? What if we get lost?” Rarity asked. Deep in the forest, there would be no margin for error. So far, Blueblood had not had to prove his vaunted talent for navigation beyond following the course of a river, but blazing a path where none existed presented an entirely different and greater set of challenges.

So intent was her focus on concerns about traversing the forest that Rarity paid no little mind to a rustling sound behind her, chalking it up to wind and leaves.

“I ... Rarity!”

Blueblood shoved her hard with both forelegs, sending Rarity sprawling face first in the dirt. He, in turn, fell back in the opposite direction. Rarity did not even have time to think about berating the stallion for his unforgivable and ungentlecoltly behavior, because instantly it felt as though a firecracker had gone off inside her skull. Panicking, she pushed off with all four hooves and jumped into a standing position, assessing the situation even though her vision was foggy, and it felt like an enormous bell was ringing in her ears.

A griffon wearing a malicious open-beaked scowl faced her, sitting upright on his leonine rear legs, and holding one of the firesticks in his eagle talons. Sulfurous smoke stung Rarity’s nostrils and clouded the air, partially obscuring everything. Blueblood still lay on the ground, staring up in shock and breathing heavily. Impossibly, Rarity could see the second griffon, still bound, sitting right where Blueblood had left him. Somehow this assailant was the dead one, except he was very much alive. The griffon dropped his spent weapon, fell to all fours, and began to advance toward her.

“You!” Rarity exclaimed. “How dare you? How are you even alive?” Blueblood moaned, and she saw a patch of red staining his side. He was keeping a hoof pressed against the wound to stem the bleeding. Whatever the firestick had done, it was obviously serious. “How dare you betray my trust and generosity? *How dare* you hurt him? What about honor? What about integrity?”

Filled with righteous fury, it did not even occur to Rarity to back away from the approaching griffon, who must have outweighed her by a factor of three. She reared back on her hind legs and assumed a fighting stance with her bent forelegs held defensively out in front. Apparently surprised by her audacity, the griffon paused for a moment.

“This is war,” the griffon croaked. “There is no honor in defeat, as you must know. You tricked us first.” He continued to walk toward Rarity.

“But we didn’t try to hurt or kill you!”

“Good tricks are fatal ones. Harmless tricks are the kind that get the trickster killed, in my homeland. Griffons do not care for tricksters.”

“No more tricks, then,” said Rarity, burning with indignation as she backed down onto all four hooves and stared down the advancing griffon. “Back in *my* homeland, I am quite skilled at finding beautiful, sparkling gems. I’m into fashion, you see. Gems are not much use out here in the jungle, though. Fortunately, sometimes one needs nothing more than big, ugly rocks to deal with a big, ugly brute like you!” Rarity’s horn shone with brilliant intensity as she gritted her teeth in concentration, and a swarm of stones, some nearly the size of her head, rose from the ground and began to swirl and orbit around her like tiny moons.

Rarity was quite skilled at fine telekinesis, as required for the detail work her profession demanded. These rocks, however, were far heavier than needle, thread, and scissors. Despite their size and weight, Rarity in her fury became a magical prodigy. The griffon backed up, surprised and afraid, and made the mistake of unfurling his wings in order to evade her wrath. That only made him a much easier target.

Heavy rocks smashed against the griffon from all sides, and Rarity winced at the snapping sound as one particularly large stone connected with the creature’s left wing. She did not relent, however, until the griffon slumped to the ground, motionless. He was alive, but truly unconscious this time.

Rarity magically summoned her remaining length of rope and bound her foe, cinching the bindings more tightly than absolutely necessary. It was all she could do to stop herself from bucking her fallen adversary in the head. Instead, she used another rock to smash the tiny mechanical metal pieces on the top of both firesticks until she was sure the despicable weapons were rendered useless. Then she galloped to where Blueblood was struggling to pull himself into a standing position, while still contorting one leg to keep pressure on his injury.

“It isn’t as bad as it appears,” he said, grimacing. “I think the ball hit a rib. I’ll live.”

“Of all the things, why in Celestia’s name did you push me out of the way?” Rarity asked, her eyes watering. “You stupid, stupid stallion. I deserved that wound for untying the griffon, when I should have seen that it was a ploy all along. I’m so sorry.”

“For all you know, I was trying to use you as a pony shield again, just like at the Gala,” Blueblood replied with a game smile. “Go deal with the other one, before he tries something too.”

“Not before I find a bandage for that injury,” Rarity replied.

“I’m going to look like a mummy from Camelot before this is over, aren’t I?”

“Better a fashion disaster than dead,” Rarity replied. “In this instance, at least.” She galloped across the open ground at the water’s edge, to where she and Blueblood had left their supplies, and retrieved a cask of water from Blueblood’s pack and a bedsheet from her own. She paused only to tear up the sheet before returning to her stricken companion.

“Here we go again,” said Blueblood.

“Shh, just lie down and hold still.”

In truth, this was nothing like bandaging Blueblood’s head earlier that morning. Now, Rarity was confronted with a serious, still bleeding injury that was far out of her league in terms of severity. Based solely on what she had observed thus far, it appeared that the firestick worked by flinging one of the small metal balls she had seen at a high rate of speed. The ball, or pieces of it, was probably now somewhere inside Blueblood’s body, and she had no way to determine whether he was correct in guessing that nothing vital had been punctured. The only thing she could do would be to clean the wound, compress it, bandage it, and hope for the best.

Rarity moved Blueblood’s obstructing hoof out of the way and poured clean water from the cask she was levitating onto the wound. Rivulets of scarlet-tinted liquid ran down the stallion’s white coat and onto the ground. Satisfied that the fresh wound was clean enough, Rarity then pressed a large folded square of yellow cloth onto it, before wrapping the rest of the sheet completely around Blueblood’s barrel chest and tying it between his shoulders. If the circumstances weren’t so dire, the effect would have been festive, if not comical.

“All done,” she said. She could scarcely believe that she had faced the bloody wound without flinching, and had managed to dress it.

“Now go see to him,” Blueblood said, indicating the conscious griffon with a tilt of his head.

Rarity was already trotting over to the prisoner. Upon reaching him, she simply stared into his intense golden eyes, silently communicating her anger and frustration.

“Well?” the griffon finally asked.

“Well what?”

“Well, don’t you want to know how, and why?”

“What I want right this very moment, very badly, is to hit you over the head with a rock like I did to your friend. I hate myself for that, but that is what I want,” Rarity said.

“It is the truth that we each have poison capsules to end our lives if the situation requires it,” the griffon spoke. “But we also have sleeping capsules containing a tonic made from the bark of the local *catta* tree, the effects of which closely mimic death for a short time. A non-griffon would probably not be able to see through the ruse, as you were not. I did, however, lie to you. There is no taboo in my culture about touching the dead.”

“Nor is there any concept of honor,” Rarity said hotly. “You’re both cowards.”

“On the contrary, we are a noble race, and we are fighting to retain that nobility. Soon my comrades will bring back the golden age of griffons, before we treated with creatures that more rightly belong on our dinner tables. There is no honor to be had by fair dealings with prey.”

“I believe I’ve heard quite enough from you,” Rarity said testily. She roughly shoved a crumpled strip of cloth into the griffon’s open beak before tying the beak completely closed with a second triple-wrapped length. Finally, she blindfolded her captive with a third piece of fabric. She moved to whisper directly into where she believed the griffon’s ear was located.

“When they come for you, tell your leader exactly what happened, if you dare. Tell each of the ponies and griffons who are conspiring against Equestria that they have failed, and that they will always fail, because harmony is something that is bigger than two ponies lost in the woods. Even if you kill us, harmony lives in the hearts of every peace-loving pony and griffon. The real battle is for hearts, and you lost that battle before it began. If I were you, I would leave this place, return to my family, and forget any of this ever happened. When this mess is finally resolved, I don’t believe you will want to be found amongst the company you are presently keeping.”

She left the griffon where he sat and returned to the injured Blueblood. She was pleased to see him already standing and tentatively walking in wide, deliberate circles.

“It would seem that everything is more or less in working order,” he said.

“I’m so very sorry,” Rarity began again. She could feel a pit forming in her stomach as her emotions rapidly shifted from righteous anger to shame and sorrow. Her naïveté had

once again caused her to act like a fool, except this time somepony else had gotten hurt. She was lucky Blueblood hadn't been killed.

"You don't have to apologize. I should not have left the griffons to their own devices. You could not have known that they could play dead like that. I didn't know."

"What do you mean? Are you absolutely certain that you were not hit in the head?" Rarity asked. "You, Blueblood, don't blame me the one time I actually should bear the blame?"

"Perhaps later I shall blame you," Blueblood replied quickly. "For now, we have to leave this place. We do not know how long it will be before these two griffons are missed. I have a map. I shall find us a way."

"Yes. Right. Of course," Rarity said. "What are we waiting for, then?"

Blueblood started to walk back to where their packs were stowed. As he did, Rarity felt the oppressiveness of guilt weighing her down. The stallion stepped gingerly, favoring his left hind leg. It was obvious that he was in pain, and she had no way to help him. For all he had done to her in the past, and for all the animosity between them, the fact was that he had risked his life to save her. It was the one selfless and gallant thing Blueblood had done in the time she had known him, and he had nearly been killed because of it. She watched as Blueblood tried to shoulder the burden of water he had carried previously, then grunted in pain as he collapsed into a kneeling position. Wordlessly, Rarity untied one of the remaining three casks and allowed it to drop to the ground. His burden lightened, Blueblood stood once again.

"Can you carry that much?" Rarity asked.

Blueblood did not answer, but instead raised his chin proudly and looked away. He started to walk into the forest, his horn glowing golden as he held the griffons' map in front of him. "This way," he said.

Rarity followed. Blueblood didn't turn around, and so he never noticed her levitate the dropped water cask and a few biscuits from her pack over toward the still-bound griffon hunters. If it was true that the price for failing their mission was expulsion, they would need to find something to eat once their cohorts discovered them. She did not need to believe that these treacherous creatures would change their ways in order to show them a little generosity. Then again, if Blueblood could find it within him to act heroically, maybe there was hope yet even for the most cruel and mendacious of beings.

As they walked deeper into the jungle, the atmosphere seemed to grow even thicker and more humid, if such a thing were possible. It felt as though Rarity was breathing floral soup. Vines and branches clogged the path, and with nothing to cut them, the ponies were constantly forced to exert their magic to lift vegetation out of the way. It was far more arduous than the clear path afforded by following the river, and Rarity's heavy pannier did not make things any easier. She needed to start a conversation—anything to avoid fixating on her burning and rapidly tiring muscles.

“Blueblood,” Rarity began.

“Yes?” the stallion replied tersely.

“You were brave and selfless back there, and you likely saved my life. I want you to know that I won't forget it.”

“That's nice.”

“You could have focused on saving yourself, but you pushed me out of the line of fire instead.”

“And you want to know why,” Blueblood stated.

“I was surprised,” said Rarity.

“Please, for a moment, imagine yourself in my horseshoes,” Blueblood said. “I have literally no friends. What family I have who are not actively trying to have me killed either would prefer me dead or are too silly to care one way or the other, and I am not deluded enough to believe that Equestria is going to make a great show of mourning my passing. As grating, sanctimonious, and disagreeable as you are, you are also the only pony in the whole world who, thanks to circumstances, is now on my team. The converse of that arrangement is that I, for better or for worse, am on your team.”

“That's it then,” Rarity said with finality. They were teammates now, it seemed.

“I've spent my entire life driving everypony else away, to great success. To my surprise, I find that I rather like having somepony else who cares whether I live or die, if only because I can read a map.”

“And you can carry the water,” Rarity added.

“Less so, now.”

“Some water,” Rarity clarified. “I confess that I don’t have any alternate plans for getting home, so I will be sticking with you until further notice.”

“We have so much more fun to look forward to.”

“I’ll try to get hurt next, if you like.”

Blueblood did not respond. Instead, he dropped to the ground without warning, groaning. He quickly unfastened his pack and leaned up against the trunk of a large tree. “I may have to provide that further notice you mentioned now,” he said.

“Whatever do you mean?” Rarity rushed over to his side, and quickly saw that Blueblood’s face was pale and covered with beads of sweat. Without asking for permission, she touched the side of a hoof to his forehead and immediately ascertained that he was running a high fever.

“It seems I underestimated the severity of my injury,” Blueblood said weakly. He looked bloodless and wan, even accounting for his pure white coat. “In fact, I may have underestimated it by quite a bit. I feel terrible.”

“You are running a fever,” Rarity stated. “I am afraid this may have more to do with your prior injury than the recent one.” She gently touched the bandage she had wrapped around Blueblood’s head. “May I?”

“I could not stop you if I wanted to right now. But by all means.”

Rarity carefully unwound the bandage, conscious of a foul odor that was released as she worked. To her horror, the gash on Blueblood’s head was now almost black, and the infection had worsened. It was likely already spreading throughout his body. Certainly the musket ball wound had not helped his immune system’s ability to fight the infection, but that was now by far the least of Blueblood’s worries. Without medicine, the infection would lead to blood poisoning, and that would kill him. In fact, it *had* killed him now that he was already too sick to carry on. It was only a matter of time. At the rate the infection was progressing, he would likely not see the end of the next day. Rarity felt like vomiting and bursting into tears at the same time. It required a practically alicornian effort to control herself.

“I have seen that face before,” Blueblood said. “When the servants came to tell me my father was dead. What is it?”

There was no hope for a miracle, and no possibility for recovery. Therefore, there was no reason to lie. “Your infection has worsened. Apparently rum is not quite the cure-all I had hoped it would prove to be. I’m so sorry.”

“Ha!” Blueblood laughed loudly, surprising Rarity.

“What could possibly be funny?” she asked.

“Let me tell you a good story. My great-great grandfather Blueblood, the pony who won the first *Alicorn’s* Cup and became a hero, also raced in the second Cup years later. He died! Lightning struck his airship and it fell burning out of the sky. Do you know how my father, Blueblood, died?”

“In an airship race?” Rarity hazarded a guess, unsure whether she should be facilitating this topic.

“Good guess, but no! A winch cable snapped and sliced him right in half as it whipped across the shipyard dock, poor fellow. But it was a winch on the airship he was having built, for the *Alicorn’s* Cup.”

“And now ...”

“Blasted race has got me too! Ha ha!” Blueblood fell into such a fit of laughter that tears welled up at the corners of his eyes. “Mother was right all along!”

“Blueblood,” Rarity began.

“Here’s another funny story. My family has a long history of hiding things from Princess Celestia, you know. Like the Heavenstone, and back taxes. Probably should have told her about that first one before now, all things considered. Also, we’ve let her go on believing all this time that the original *Alicorn* and the *Alicorn’s* Cup were named after her. Ha!” Blueblood shook with mirth. “Wrong, silly filly! My great-great grandfather called his airship the *Alicorn* because of how much he hated Celestia for taking away all that was great and noble about our line, and reducing us to nothing more than curious relics of a bygone age. His airship was called the *Alicorn* because it was the only way he could imagine to give a mere mortal unicorn wings, and show the Princess that the line of Princess Platinum and King Blueblood still *mattered*. That’s all we have ever wanted—to do something meaningful for Equestria, and *matter* again. That’s all I wanted, to make the name Blueblood something more than the joke it has become.”

“Oh, Blueblood,” Rarity began, fighting back tears. “You really are a stupid stallion. Surely you understand that your airships and engines are changing the very face of Equestria. How can you believe that none of that matters?”

“Please, don’t patronize. I was competing in the market with a half-dozen other companies, and obviously not doing a very good job of it. My company failed. I could not even get my greatest and most advanced airship to work properly. Don’t sugarcoat it. The worst part is that now Procyon will become Blueblood, if he hasn’t already asked to be addressed as such. Future generations will remember Blueblood as the name of a traitor to ponykind.”

“You saved my life, twice,” Rarity said. “That matters to me.”

Blueblood sighed. “Just ... would you please stay with me for a bit before you move on? If you’d rather make for Gallopoli, I understand, and I’ll give you clear directions on how to use the map.”

“To even suggest that I would leave!” Rarity exclaimed. “A pride of manticores could not drag me away. I owe you my life, remember? Besides, it is getting dark. I’m certain that your fever will have broken by morning, and your health will be much improved.” That last part was a lie.

“Thank you,” was all Blueblood said.

Rarity slumped down beside him against the tree and turned away so that he could not see her. Tears flowed down the contours of her face, but she made no sound. She was too horrified to truly cry. Blueblood was not merely an arrogant elite, but a stallion so burdened by generations of resentment and inadequacy that he did all he could to eschew the friendships and relationships that might have forced him into the real world, convinced as he was that the world was laughing at him. Behind his skin-deep veneer of ugly conceit, there was a real pony, and *that* Blueblood had intellect, courage, and even a touch of empathy. She would be the only one to ever know that Blueblood had existed. That is, if she managed to survive this awful nightmare. She risked a backwards glance, and saw that Blueblood had fallen asleep.

Rarity gathered herself and stood up. This was a low moment, but it was not the time to give in. She was appalled to observe that in her distress she had not even properly rebandaged Blueblood’s head injury. It was fortunate that the jungle heat made sheets and pillowcases completely unnecessary, because she was rapidly running out of them. She prepared to wash the infected wound out with rum and water again, not caring that

the remedy had already failed to stave off the infection once. There was no harm in continuing to try, and with any luck, her patient would sleep right through the application this time.

He did not. As soon as the rum-soaked cloth touched the wound, Blueblood's eyes shot open. Instead of screaming, to Rarity's surprise he began to mutter incoherently, apparently lost in some fever dream.

"The race! Got to run the race. The flower! The race. The flower. Get the flower!"

"Shh," Rarity whispered, trying to calm the ailing stallion. He stared back at her, and for a moment his eyes focused.

"Not dead yet! We need the flower. Look!" Blueblood raised a hoof and pointed at the pack of water casks that lay on the ground nearby.

"Do you want some water?" Rarity asked.

"The flower!" Blueblood repeated. Rarity had no idea what he the delirious stallion was talking about. When he tried to push off against the tree and stand up, she had to forcibly hold him down. "Look at the papers!" he exclaimed, apparently frustrated.

Rarity blinked in surprise as Blueblood said something lucid and comprehensible. She turned back to Blueblood's pack and noticed the maps and course materials that he had slid into the mesh of rope that she had woven. Those were papers. She quickly retrieved the documents and began looking through them, using magical light from her horn to compensate for the waning light of day. Blueblood had, along with his maps, brought one page from the manual of regulations and race instructions for the *Alicorn's Cup*. It was labeled, "Third Leg: Botanical Research Laboratory, Impenetrable Lands." To Rarity's utter amazement, much of the page was occupied by a single detailed illustration of a beautiful scarlet flower, which was labeled "Badge of Courage." She remembered the phrase from Fancypants' team briefing.

"Yes," Blueblood said.

Rarity read aloud from the page. "The Badge of Courage orchid grows in marshes and swamps on the edge of the Impenetrable Lands, and likely throughout the great jungle itself. This magical blood-red flower cannot be grown outside of its native habitat. If that were possible, however, the implications for modern medicine would be astonishing, because this flower has unique medicinal properties. The Badge of Courage, when consumed, is said to heal any injury or ailment nobly obtained. On less honorable

maladies, it has no effect. Once picked, the orchid quickly begins to lose potency after a period of approximately six hours, making its export to Equestria unfeasible. Dr. Shrinking Violet, formerly of the Canterlot Botanical Gardens, has made it her life's work to find a practicable application for the Badge of Courage. She will provide each team with one of these rare plants as the third marker."

Blueblood nodded weakly as Rarity finished reading.

"Oh my stars!" she exclaimed, throwing her forelegs around the stallion in a hug that was anything but demure and ladylike. "Do you know what this means? If I can find one of these flowers and bring it back, you shall be saved! Well, of course you knew, you were trying to tell me the entire time, weren't you?"

Blueblood grunted affirmatively, though his eyes were once again glazed over and his unfocused gaze was far away.

"I'll do it," Rarity proclaimed, before realizing that Blueblood was once again asleep. "I shall find this rare flower ... somewhere ... in this enormous jungle ...oh dear."

How would she possibly manage to find it? The instructions said it grew in marshes and swamps. Perhaps she would be able to use the griffons' map to find such a place nearby. Yes, that is precisely what she would do. Blueblood had saved her life twice, and she had returned the favor only once. It was time to even the score.

By now, darkness had descended over the forest. In the distance, some nameless beast howled at the moon. She would never find anything in the dark, and casting enough magical illumination to see would bring the griffons down on her in a heartbeat. Moreover, she needed to watch over Blueblood until his fever broke. She would leave in the morning, and then she would save him.

A burning beam of white light stabbed through the gaps in the forest canopy overhead and forced Rarity's heavy eyelids open. Was it morning already? No, that was impossible. The light was shining down from directly overhead, and Rarity knew that she could not have slept straight through to midday. After a few seconds, the beam abruptly pulled away and turned its piercing gaze on another patch of jungle, plunging Rarity back into darkness and confirming that it was still night. As she hurried to chase the fog out of her brain, she became aware of a low thrumming sound, coupled to vibrations powerful enough that she could feel them in her hooves and her teeth. She looked up to find the source of the light and sound. Icy fear gripped her, and she immediately crouched down low in the shadows as she recognized the monstrous griffon airship steaming overhead, its searchlights carving apart the darkness.

It was hunting her.

The griffons must have gone looking for the missing patrol, and found them, learning in the process that she and Blueblood were still alive and trying to find a way back to Equestria. Now they were out in force, scouring the jungle. Was she safe here? Rarity had to believe that even sharp-eyed griffons wouldn't be able to find them amidst the tangled vines and dense foliage. Glancing to her side, she saw Blueblood still resting limply against the tree, fast asleep. In his feverish state, she doubted that she could even wake him if she tried. They would not be able to flee if they were spotted, so the only available course of action would be to keep still while the floating leviathan passed overhead.

Once again a powerful searchlight beam swept over and Rarity froze. She dared to look up at the lumbering battleship for any sign that the hunters were closing in on their prey, but it still appeared that the lights were randomly sweeping the area while the airship slowly plied the night sky. Somewhere along the side of the craft Rarity thought she saw a momentary flash of light; perhaps it had even come from within. She wondered what it might have been.

Even as she contemplated the flash, she began to feel a painful tightness building in her head, like a balloon being overinflated. The pressure continued to increase, and she threw a hoof to her temple to try to massage away the pain, but the sensation only grew worse. She realized that she was now located in a pool of dim blue light, the glow from her horn. She tried to stop the spellcasting, but no amount of concentration seemed to abate the glow, nor could she even figure out what magic she was employing. She ducked further into the shadows and tried to cover her horn with both forelegs, lest the characteristic aura guide the griffons straight to her. Continuing to try to stop the spell

only resulted in agonizing pain, like knives cutting into the base of her horn. She gave up the effort and decided to merely hope against hope that the searchers failed to see her.

Fortunately, the lights above did not turn their focus back to her. Instead, all of the searchlights on the griffon warship suddenly extinguished at once, causing Rarity to blink in surprise. Even more strange was the fact that now, in the absence of the lights, it seemed the entire enormous airship was imbued with a dim glow that outlined its bulk in a diffuse shine. The glowing white light grew steadily in brightness as the pain in Rarity's skull increased in tandem. It felt as though the light was calling to her, and Rarity finally recognized the sensation as a more powerful incarnation of her gem-finding spell than she had ever felt before. She knew of only one gem that could affect her this way.

The Heavenstone was up there, still on that ship, and it was resonating from its reaction to her spell. That magical resonance was what was causing the airship to glow, she was sure of it. More worrisome was the additional fact that something about the connection between her and the legendary gem was causing a magical buildup in her horn, terrifying in intensity and brutally painful. It threatened to overwhelm her; she feared it could even kill her.

Rarity fought against the urge to cry out in pain, but she wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer. Then, for an instant, the griffon airship was lit so brightly that the dark of night was completely washed away and replaced by an otherworldly incandescence. Rarity gave a pathetic squeal and then gasped as all the pressure in her head was released at once. Her horn flared to life with all the radiance of a miniature sun, and a half-second later, the world went dark.

When Rarity opened her eyes she found herself surrounded by darkness again, and lying flat on her back. The ground beneath her felt curiously soft, and it shifted with every slight movement of her body. She sat up with a start, realizing that she was not lying on the forest floor at all, but rather atop a soft mattress covered in blankets. More strange than the unexpected change of scene was the overwhelming sensation of familiarity. She knew this bed, and this place, and the smell of potpourri in the air. She swung her rear legs over the edge of the bed and onto plush carpet. Everything was familiar. It felt like ... *home*. Rarity explored the darkness with her magic, looking for the kerosene lamp that she expected to find on the nightstand beside the bed. It was exactly where it had always been, and she struck a match from the adjacent matchbox to ignite the lamp's wick and bring light to the room.

As the familiar feel of her old quilted blanket and the unchanged placement of the lamp had already told her, she was somehow, incredibly, impossibly, seated on the edge of her

bed in her own bedroom back in Ponyville. It was not her elegant master suite back at Carousel Boutique; this was the room she had grown up in, at her parents' home. There was her little bookcase overflowing with dozens of old *Foalsitters Club* and *Detective Nosy Dare* novels, and a shelf of the grownup romances she had taken to in the last years before she struck out on her own. On top of the bookcase, her prized collection of Equestrian Filly dolls, all wearing outfits that Rarity had designed and created on her own, posed like fashion models putting on their own show.

Her old Cuteceañera dress, which she had been so proud of making, was displayed on the wall in a decorative shadowbox. She had eventually come to realize that adding so many gems that she could barely walk did not necessarily equate to creative brilliance, but the outrageously bedazzled blue dress still held a special place in her heart. Her parents had left the room practically unaltered since after she left, and Sweetie Belle treated it almost like a shrine to her older sister.

All of it seemed so real, right down to the stacks of *Glamare*, *Filly Trend*, and *La Jument* fashion magazines on the nightstand, and the posters of models prancing down catwalks in the *haute couture* of her favorite designers. As much as her heart yearned for home, and as much as she wanted to wrap Sweetie Belle in her forelegs and remind her parents how much she loved them, Rarity knew that this vision was not—could not be—reality. This was a dream, and she needed to wake up so that she could get to safety and find Blueblood the flower he needed to survive. She rapped a hoof lightly against the side of her head to try to snap herself back to the jungle, but nothing changed. A harder tap proved similarly ineffective. What could she do if she couldn't wake up from this fantasy? Rarity paused. Muffled voices could be heard through the closed door. There was no reason not to investigate, as long as she was stuck here.

Rarity slipped out of bed and onto all four legs. She walked over to her old bedroom door and tentatively pushed it open, flooding the room with brighter light from the gas lamps in the upstairs hallway. Oddly, the door glowed with blue light when she opened it, as if she had performed the act with magic, despite the fact that she had physically pushed it with her right foreleg. Out in the hall, it was apparent that the voices were coming from downstairs, and it sounded like somepony was crying miserably as well.

Sweetie Belle! Rarity raced downstairs toward the sound of her sister's cries, only to skid to a halt a scant few hooves before crashing into the backside of a very large pony standing in her parents' kitchen, a backside complete with a flowing ethereal tail of shimmering pastels.

“Princess Celestia!” Rarity exclaimed, shocked, before reflexively dropping into a respectful kneeling bow. She held the pose for several seconds, but stood up when the Princess failed to acknowledge her or even turn around. Confused, Rarity trotted into the middle of the kitchen and took stock of her surroundings. Her father occupied a seat at the kitchen table, his face pointed down and buried in his forehooves. Her mother stood facing Celestia, her hair unkempt and eyes bloodshot. She had been crying, but was clearly struggling to put on a brave face for the Princess. Sweetie Belle rested on their mother’s back, clinging to her with all four hooves, her face buried in the mare’s mane. Rarity’s heart ached upon seeing that her little sister was crying uncontrollably, the sobs punctuated every few seconds by a heartrending wail of grief.

“Sweetie! What is it?” Rarity asked, racing over to her sister. As before, nopony acknowledged her, as if she was not present at all. She wasn’t. She had to get a grip and remember that this was a dream.

“Once again, please accept my deepest condolences,” Princess Celestia said to her mother. “If there is anything that I or my sister can do, any resources that you would like made available during this difficult time, please do not hesitate to ask. I ... I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Rarity’s mother said, and attempted to bow. She was not halfway to the ground when her body spasmed, wracked by anguished gasps. Rarity watched as Princess Celestia awkwardly stepped forward and slowly unfolded one of her majestic, elegant wings, which she then draped over her mother and Sweetie Belle.

“I am always here for you, my little ponies,” she said. “Never forget that.” Rarity could scarcely believe it, but a tear formed in the corner of Celestia’s eye before the Princess quickly blinked it away.

Rarity finally understood what this was. She was having a vision of her family receiving word that she had perished during the race. It was small wonder that she would dream of this scene, for it was very much on her mind. Back in the real world, it was probably about this time that word had made its way back to Canterlot and the core cities and towns about the disaster that had befallen the regatta. The race officials, media, and remaining teams would have spent the first several hours searching before sending word home. Given the long distance, it would have taken well over a full day for the Princess to learn the news and, in this dream at least, she had then gone to personally notify her parents. Rarity chalked that detail up to unconscious vanity.

“Mother, father, darling Sweetie, I’m right here,” she whispered softly, trying not to be overcome with emotion herself. She knew this wasn’t real, and that nopony could hear her, but it felt necessary to say the words, to object to these unnecessary tears. She had to make it back, if not for Equestria’s sake, then for her family’s.

Suddenly, her attention was drawn away by a loud crash and raised voices coming from the den. Rarity would have recognized Rainbow Dash’s brash tone half a league away, but at the moment her friend was much closer. She quickly ran out of the kitchen and through the dining room to find the angry-sounding pegasus. What was Rainbow Dash doing in her parents’ house, anyway? To her surprise, Rarity found not just Rainbow, but all five of her best friends occupying the den.

“This isn’t fair! It isn’t right!” Rainbow Dash shouted, hovering above a wooden rocking chair that she had obviously kicked onto its side. Meanwhile, Twilight Sparkle paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, a glazed look on her face. Pinkie Pie was curled into a fetal position in another rocking chair. The normally bouncy, untamed curls of her mane now hung straight and lifeless, obscuring her face. Fluttershy and Applejack occupied the sofa, with the daffodil yellow pegasus resting her head against the orange-coated farmer’s side. Fluttershy was still quietly crying, and Applejack had one strong foreleg securely wrapped around her.

“Yellin’ and kickin’ over other ponies’ furniture ain’t gonna change anything, Rainbow,” Applejack said sternly. “Settle down now afore ya make things even worse than they already are.”

“Worse?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “How could things possibly get any worse than this? We should have been there! We should never have let her go off with those strange ponies by herself.”

“Rarity was a big girl, Rainbow. She could take care of herself,” said Applejack.

“Except when she couldn’t!” the pegasus yelled. She pounded a hoof against the wall in frustration, causing a small flurry of plaster flakes to rain down.

“I just don’t understand,” Twilight Sparkle said, causing the others to turn in her direction. She continued to pace without looking up, and it was apparent to Rarity that the other unicorn was talking only to herself. She spoke in a rapid, breathless staccato. “Rarity represented the spirit of the Element of Generosity. There are supposed to be six Elements. How can there only be five Elements? It’s impossible, of course. There have to be six, not five—six! With only five Elements, there might as well be zero Elements. If

there are zero Elements, that would mean that we must not be connected to the Elements of Harmony anymore, but I didn't feel my connection to the Elements break? Did you girls? No, of course you didn't, because if I didn't, you didn't. Ha ha."

"Now simmer down, Sally," Applejack began. "We're here for Sweetie and her folks, not to get wrapped up worryin' about the Elements."

"Huh?" Twilight Sparkle stopped pacing and turned toward her friend. "No, you don't understand!" She walked toward Applejack wearing a large and not altogether sane-looking grin. "I think Rarity is still alive."

"Yes! Yes I am!" Rarity exclaimed, thrilled that her friend had figured it out. Of course, nopony so much as glanced in her direction, and of course, all of this was a dream. It was a particularly vivid and complex dream, but still a dream. She had to remember that.

"Oh get real, Twilight," said Rainbow Dash. "You heard Princess Celestia. Rarity fell out of an airship, and unless somepony taught her how to fly and didn't tell me about it, she's gone. G-O-N-E gone."

"I don't think so, girls," Twilight Sparkle replied, shaking her head. "The Elements are all connected, but more than that, I know now that we six shared a connection since long before we met. If Rarity was truly ... gone, then I think we would have felt it."

Pinkie Pie peered out from behind her limp hair. "Well, I didn't want to say, but my tail was twitching all day yesterday, like stuff was falling, but then nothing did. What if my Pinkie Sense was telling me about Rarity?"

"Did you have a double tail twitch, knee pinch, belly-flip, itchy nose, eye-flutter?" Twilight Sparkle asked.

"Nope," Pinkie Pie replied.

"And isn't that your combo that tells you that something really sad is about to happen?"

"Oh. Um, last time I checked?" Pinkie Pie replied questioningly.

"A-ha! That proves it, Rarity is still out there somewhere, alive," Twilight Sparkle proclaimed triumphantly. "You can't argue with science!"

"Now just hold on one pony-pickin' minute!" Applejack said, gently pushing Fluttershy aside and standing up. "I'm just as fond of Rarity as all the rest of y'all, but Pinkie's

twitchin' and your mystical hunches ain't gonna bring her back. Get ahold of yourself, Twilight, and accept that this is really happening."

"I don't know," Fluttershy whispered. "What if Twilight is right?"

"Ugh! Not you too!" exclaimed Rainbow Dash, throwing her forelegs up in the air. "She's dead, okay? Rarity is dead, and we're never going to see her ever again." Rainbow Dash crashed down to the ground in a heap and began to cry. It was truly a pathetic sight, perhaps even sadder for Rarity than seeing her own family in tears. Rainbow Dash simply did not cry.

This was ridiculous. Why wouldn't this vision end? Better to be back amongst the bugs, blood, and griffons than to endure any more of this torment. But how could she return? Nothing she had tried had managed to awaken her yet. Desperate, Rarity walked over to Applejack and tried a gentle touch to get the other mare's attention. Instead, Rarity watched her hoof pass through Applejack's body like it was empty air. She needed to try something else. Absent-mindedly, she magically righted the chair that Rainbow Dash had kicked over. All this disorganized chaos and clutter was making it hard to think straight.

"Whoa Nelly! What just happened?" Applejack asked.

"Th-that was you, right Twilight?" Fluttershy questioned.

"Uh, no, that wasn't me," Twilight Sparkle said, staring suspiciously at the chair.

Rarity's eyes opened wide as she realized the implications of what had just happened. She moved the chair, and they had all seen it happen. What if this was not a dream at all? What if, somehow, her consciousness had magically made the journey to Ponyville and left her body behind? The why and how mattered little, but perhaps it was due to her connection to the Elements, as Twilight had suggested. It explained so much, like why she only seemed able to affect her surroundings with magic and not physical touch. The others couldn't see her, hear her, or feel her, because she was not physically present, but they could observe her magic at work. She only needed to find a quill and some ink, and she could tell them exactly where she was and what had befallen her. They could send help!

A searing pain in her horn forced Rarity to the ground. The pressure was building in her skull again, just as had happened before she appeared in her old bedroom.

“No, no! I can’t go back now! I need more time!” she pleaded. The pain was increasing in intensity even faster than before. She had only seconds now. Ideas and memories raced through her mind as she tried to think of anything to do that could make her friends understand her plight.

“Wow, do you girls feel that?” Twilight Sparkle asked, glancing around the room. “It’s like an intense magical charge is building in here, but I can’t tell where it is.”

Twilight! That was it! Rarity remembered that when Discord had stripped her and her friends of their defining qualities and left them as mirror-image husks of their true selves, Twilight Sparkle had used a memory spell to remind them all of their friendship and bring them back from the brink. She had no idea how to cast mental magic of that sort, but perhaps Twilight would nevertheless understand what she was trying to do. She crossed the distance between herself and Twilight Sparkle in a single bound and lowered her horn to touch the other unicorn’s.

Twilight’s eyes went wide with shock, and Rarity hoped the magical surge building within her did not hurt her friend. This was her only chance.

“Twilight, please, I’m here,” Rarity implored. She focused all of her effort and energy on trying to impart her thoughts to her friend, but she had no idea if anything was happening. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the pain even though it felt like her head was going to explode. How was this ridiculous spell supposed to work?

“Rarity?” Twilight Sparkle whispered, staring straight into her eyes.

Bright light obscured her vision, and then everything went dark again.

“Rarity!” Blueblood said loudly, nudging her shoulder with a forehoof.

“Huh?” She blinked a few times, and found that she was back in the sweltering, infinite jungle, lying against a tree, with Blueblood slouched next to her. The sun was beginning to rise, and the griffon airship was gone. It was a small miracle they hadn’t seen her with the light show her horn had created, though perhaps the glow from the Heavenstone had temporarily blinded them. In any case, she was awake, and still alive.

“You have been practically comatose ever since I awakened. That must have been two hours ago,” Blueblood said. “You haven’t moved a muscle until now, and there were moments where I was convinced you had stopped breathing.”

“Ah yes, well, I am now awake, and I feel perfectly fine, thank you. I must have simply been sleeping very soundly.”

Hours? The bizarre out of body experience had only seemed like a few minutes to her. Perhaps her body had needed the extra time to recover from the sheer intensity of the magical energy that had discharged through her horn. In any case, she did not want to explain the fantastic circumstances of her mental voyage to Ponyville to Blueblood. For one thing, he would not believe her. More importantly, she had no idea whether she had managed to impart anything useful at all to Twilight. There was no point in raising Blueblood’s hopes when that hope was probably a vain one.

“I see that your fever has broken,” she said with a small smile. The stallion was no picture of health, but the fact that he was conscious and apparently lucid was a good sign. Even though the infection was likely still spreading, this recovery from the fever indicated that he had not yet fallen into full-blown sepsis, and the infection had not reached his brain. If it had, he might not be able to recover no matter what medicine was available. In this case, the nearest hospital was hundreds of leagues away, and Rarity was relying on a magical flower and medical knowledge she had learned through idle chitchat at the spa from a pegasus land steward who moonlighted as an unlicensed veterinarian. The fever breaking was a very good thing.

“Yes. Somehow I am still alive, though I have felt better,” Blueblood replied. “Between the weakness, dizziness, and headaches from the infection, and the wound in my side, I won’t be able to walk far. Certainly not back to Equestria. I was only able to make it here yesterday because I was operating on pure adrenaline.”

“I know,” Rarity said.

“Then you are planning to move on alone?”

“What? Do you not remember anything from last night?” Rarity asked in consternation.

“I remember falling asleep in a fog.”

“No,” Rarity shook her head. “The flower. The Badge of Courage orchid.”

“The race marker?”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Really, now. It was your delusional ramblings last night that led me to learn that the Badge of Courage should be able to heal your injuries, if only I can find one.”

Blueblood stared back at her in surprise. “Heal?” He screwed up his eyes as if cogitating hard about something. “Now that I think about it, I do remember reading something about the flower’s medicinal value. Still, there is simply no way that I am going to be able to traipse through the jungle looking for one in my present condition, especially if the reward is just some kind of tropical salve.”

“It should be more than a salve,” Rarity replied. “Based on the description, the Badge of Courage is intensely magical. I believe that if you consume this flower, it will heal your wounds and completely remove the infection.”

Blueblood displayed even more amazement. “Really?” His face fell. “But I still don’t have the strength to search for it.”

“Of course not,” Rarity said. “That is why I am going to do it, while you wait here for my triumphant return.”

The stallion gave her a critical look. “Of course you are,” he said disbelievingly. “Look, I appreciate the attempt to make your leaving easier on me, but I understand what must be done. You must escape to Equestria. I know that. Besides, by staying here, I am carrying on a proud family tradition of perishing prematurely. Perhaps then I might be remembered, if not fondly, then at least not aversely.”

“Oh brother, again with the melodrama?” Rarity rolled her eyes. “It seems you really *are* feeling better. You know, last night you seemed a different pony. Open, honest, and the brave face you wore did not seem to be for show. Then, half-mad with fever, you wanted to live and you told me how to save you. And now ... what? You are playing the poor, unfortunate noblestallion card so that I might feel too guilty to leave you behind? This jungle is only big enough for one drama queen, Your Grace.”

“You needn’t snip. I was merely letting you know that I understand the reality of the situation.”

“The reality is that I mean what I say,” Rarity stated. “I will return with the flower, and then we shall *both* leave this awful jungle.”

“If you mean that, then I must know why,” Blueblood said. “Why would you risk your life searching for some flower, and then backtracking Celestia knows how many leagues to me, so that we can start off again with half the supplies we need.”

Rarity touched the yellow sheet wrapped around the stallion's torso, careful to stay away from the musket wound. "I owe you. You have saved my life twice, and I have returned the favor only once."

"The problem with keeping score on saving each other's lives is that each time one of us gets ahead, we must then be put in mortal peril again for the score to be evened. I'm not sure that it's worth it."

"Then consider saving your life a gift," said Rarity. "Am I not the Bearer of the Element of Generosity?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I always figured that it was some sort of cosmic irony that a businesspony represented generosity. How can one succeed in the marketplace without being driven by self-interest? Perhaps that explains my skepticism."

"Who says that I am not motivated by self-interest?" Rarity rejoined testily. "I am interested in making beautiful things. It is my talent and my passion. Some ponies buy them from me, and others get them as gifts. I receive enough bits to stay in business, and more besides, and I am happy. My self-interest is in happiness and a purposeful life, not money. A lot of ponies confuse the two, much as they confuse generosity and selflessness."

"And you are not a selfless pony."

"Not hardly. I give of myself and my possessions because I want to and because I can."

"And you want to find this flower, for me. Because you can."

"If nothing else, it would seem a shame to allow your brother to inherit the title of Prince Blueblood if it can be avoided," Rarity replied, raising one eyebrow.

"It would at that." Blueblood sighed and smiled faintly. "Let's look at the map, then, shall we?"

She retrieved the map that she had appropriated from the griffons and spread it out on the ground. She now knew how to recognize the iconography depicting the swaths of jungle that had been mapped, and how to find the river where they had been before, but she had no idea where she was currently located, or how to get from here to any other desired point.

“Finally I can find out what that cutie mark of yours is good for,” she said. “Now, tell me where I can find that flower and how to get there. It supposedly grows in marshes and swamps throughout the jungle.”

Blueblood used a forehoof to trace a line a short distance upward from the river. “We are here, or very close. It looks like the griffons have marked swampland with drawings of lily pads, as you see here.” He indicated an area to the right, or east, Rarity reminded herself. It was very close to the depiction of the foreboding structure that Blueblood had guessed was the griffons’ base of operations.

“Um, is there nothing in the opposite direction from those dreadful griffons?”

Blueblood shook his head. “The next closest option would be to head northwest and try to find the botanist who is researching these things. Her cottage, however, is perhaps two full days’ journey from here on hoof, through the jungle. You would be able to reach this swamp in four or five hours.”

“The guide explained that the flower is only potent for six hours after being picked,” Rarity said. She didn’t add that Blueblood had almost no chance of surviving four more days. “It would seem I have no choice but to go toward the griffons.”

“Actually, you have a very easy choice. Go straight northeast and make for Gallopoli and then home. Stop the conspirators. Save the world again.”

“Not alone,” Rarity said. “Not while you are still alive and I can save you.”

Blueblood sighed. “I won’t say that I’m not worth it, but I want to make doubly sure you realize that there’s not much in this for you. I suppose some small monetary award can be arranged, should I survive, but it would seem crass to outright pay you for saving me.”

“Would you stick a hoof in it, already? I already explained why I want to do this, and I won’t do so again. I aim to save your life, whether you like it or not.”

“Simply because you want to.”

“I already said that,” Rarity grumbled. “Are you quite sure that you are all together in there?”

“I am just trying to decipher your motivations. I have not been particularly charming, nor kind to you. I would hesitate to call us friends.”

“That is because we aren’t,” Rarity stated. “Especially not now. You are acting like an insecure schoolcolt, and I would be grateful if you would just get on with helping me figure out how to read the map and find that flower. It is in both of our interests that I leave as soon as possible.”

“Fine. You’ll need this.” Blueblood, wincing from the strain, levitated his compass from around his neck and placed it around Rarity’s. Due to its long cord and her more slender build, the directional instrument hung far down, well past the Gallopolitan pearl strand. As soon as Blueblood released his hold on the device, she used her own magic to suspend it in her field of view. She had seen compasses before, and this one was no different. It displayed cardinal directions, and was graduated with markings for the other degrees of a circle. The red end of the two-sided needle always pointed north. It would be a simple matter to stop moving, rotate the outer bezel so that the red needle pointed to the red “N,” and figure out which direction she was headed based on that information.

Blueblood lowered his horn and tapped it against the compass before Rarity had the presence of mind to drop it, and the confluence of her magic and his sent a shiver down her spine. Crossing spells always did that to her. If Blueblood was affected, he didn’t show it.

“I do know a few spells that are especially useful for orienteering,” he said. “That was a simple ‘Back to the Beginning’ spell. I enchanted the compass so that if you tap it with your hoof it will no longer point north, but rather will point toward its enchanter—me. That way, once you get the flower you can travel straight to me without fear of getting lost. Tap it again to turn it back to its normal functionality.”

“That could be useful, unless it turns out that there is a leech and serpent-infested pond, or a camp of griffons, between us. Your spell could send me straight into danger if I simply followed the needle on a direct path back to you,” Rarity pointed out.

“I never said you wouldn’t have to stay on your hoof-tips. As long as you pay attention to your surroundings, you will be fine. Probably. Actually, I have no idea.”

“Well, thank you for the compass, anyway,” Rarity said. “I plan to return before nightfall, so I should pack and then start off. As for you, try to stay put unless you absolutely have to move. You’ll have a full cask of water and most of the food. If you feel another fever coming on, tie yourself down. The last thing we need is for you to hallucinate and injure yourself even further.”

“You know, nopony has ever risked anything for me before,” Blueblood said.

“Of course I know that. I have seen how you behave,” Rarity replied. “You do not make it easy for one to want to stick her neck out for you. Fortunately, I am the very spirit of Generosity, as I keep reminding you.”

“Are you sure that this is not the spirit of pity talking? Give me one reason that I am worth saving.”

“Ugh, even half dead and you are still fishing for compliments. Incredible. Fortunately for you, you have an entire day ahead of you to come up with your own reasons why you are worth saving. I suggest you find something, because even though you have already survived quite a bit worse than most ponies expect to endure, today might be the most difficult yet, as the infection worsens. I should mention that if I travel all over this jungle, only to return here to find that you have died while I was gone, I will find a way to kill you again.”

Blueblood slumped back against the tree silently, declining to speak further. It was just as well. Lucid, pitiful Blueblood did not generate the same degree of compassion as the feverish but forthright version she had the privilege of meeting last night. If she did save his life, she knew, he would be permanently back to his paradoxical mix of arrogance and self-doubt, narcissism and neurosis. It was best not to dwell on such thoughts.

Rarity began packing for her foray in search of the Badge of Courage. She emptied the remaining blankets and survival supplies from her pannier, as well as most of the food she had been carrying. Instead, she strapped one of the remaining two casks of water on one side, and kept a small amount of food on the other. She had to travel light if she wanted to make respectable time. She levitated the rum-filled coconut over toward Blueblood. It was still half full.

“Use this to clean out your wounds,” she said.

“It’s rather too painful to use as an antiseptic, I’ve found, but I am certain I will find some use for it before the end,” Blueblood replied dryly.

“The topical application would be my preference over the oral, at least in this case. Now, I must go.”

“You know, there is a fairly high probability that we will not see each other again.”

“There is that chance,” Rarity agreed.

“Before you go, I ...” Blueblood paused, looking and sounding unsure of himself.

“What?” Rarity asked. The volume of her speech indicated the frustration the stallion was causing her. She preferred him cocksure and cavalier to this querulous defeatist. “Is there something more you’d like to say? Perhaps some last attempt to convince me to say that you are a wonderful stallion with a beautiful mind and that I absolve you of the mistakes you have made? Because I won’t. If you die here in this jungle it will be without my forgiveness, without restoring meaning to your family name, and without checking your brother’s evil ambitions. How is *that* for a reason to pull yourself together and make it through the day?”

Blueblood blinked twice. “Actually,” he began, drawing out the syllables, “I was going to open up my tiny, fragile little Blueblood heart to you, since I don’t expect to see you again. Fortunately, you’ve made me think better of it. Instead of asking for absolution, what if I merely say that if I had to be stranded in a remote jungle amidst hostile griffons and potential pony-eating beasts, I am grateful to have had a brave and resourceful mare like you with me? It also doesn’t hurt that you are not hard to look at. Anyway, be careful out there.”

Once again, Blueblood had surprised her. “I’ll be careful,” she promised.

“Then I look forward to dining on orchids tonight.”

“Don’t count on salad dressing,” Rarity said after a too-long pause. “Now I need to go.” Without another word, she turned and began walking east.

Carrying a much lighter burden, she was able to cover ground efficiently even though she had no choice but to keep her telekinesis continually engaged. The forest was teeming with life, and she quickly abandoned her preference for not touching strange and creepy creatures, at least as far as touching them with magic was concerned. After an hour of sloggng through the densely vegetated understory, she had completely lost track of how many bug-eyed lizards, torpid green snakes, and shimmering silk spider webs she had magicked out of her way. This experience was so far outside of her comfort zone that she might as well have been on the moon.

More worrisome than the tropical fauna was the niggling fear that she would fail to find the orchid at all. The griffons’ map could be mistaken, the flower could be far more rare than the race materials had indicated, or she could simply wander away from the course she was trying to follow due to her lack of experience. Any of these eventualities would be fatal for Blueblood.

That was another thing. Blueblood had been so infuriatingly suspicious of her motive for wanting to help him. After what they had been through already, how was it possible for him to utterly fail to understand her? It was a given that he had grown used to the idea that ponies did not lend a hoof unless they had something to gain by doing so, but Rarity was not like his family or those Canterlot ponies. What did he want her to say? That she was helping him because she found him appealing? Did he want her to profess that she was smitten by his intellect and fortitude, that his wit and charm had overcome her annoyance and frustration at his previous behavior? His egotism truly knew no bounds if he thought that two days trapped together could earn him a fresh slate.

Rarity understood the art of white lies and half-truths all too well, but she needed to be perfectly honest with herself. She did still feel butterflies in her stomach when she interacted with Blueblood. Her nearly lifelong crush could not be completely extinguished, even by turning the harsh spotlight of reality on him. He was her physical ideal: tall, strong, and regal. He was intelligent, technically if not emotionally. He had even shown hints of the dashing bravery she had always imagined. Opposing his good qualities were his foal-like neediness and his unrelenting obsession with proving himself. No trait was less attractive to Rarity in a stallion than a persecution complex. Regardless of the fact that some ponies actually *were* out to get Blueblood, he seemed to think that all of the world actively disparaged him, when really most ponies simply did not care.

She thought back a year or more, before the Gala, and laughed. She had still believed that Blueblood was a real prince then, and was convinced that she could woo him, marry him, and fulfill her dream of becoming a princess. What an absurd fantasy for a grown mare! Even sillier, what if the Gala had not been a disaster, she and Blueblood were thereafter wed, and she became the Duchess of Canterlot? Would she really have spent a lifetime trying in vain to provide validation for Blueblood? “Woe is me, my airship design isn’t good enough.” “How shall I face the citizenry? They all think my family is a laughingstock.” “Was that good enough for you?” More likely, they would have been divorced within a month.

So why, given all the perfectly good reasons she should never again entertain the idea of being with him, could she not stop doing it? Was there really more than the desire to erase her debt of gratitude driving this expedition?

Rarity brushed aside another massive spider web, this one complete with oversized spider. Now was not the time to be preoccupied with such thoughts. She needed to tackle this quest with the single-minded determination of that treasure hunter heroine in Rainbow Dash’s pulp adventure stories, Daring Do. The heroes and heroines in swashbuckling tales like those did not have the luxury of contemplating personality

quirks and psychological inhibitions; theirs were action stories. They had villains to confront and monsters to defeat. She was in one of those stories now, and she had a prince to save. The rest could wait.

Rarity continued onward, continually referencing the map and compass to reassure herself that she was getting closer to her target. The wonders of the jungle were such that, every so often, she had to will her body forward when a particularly jewel-like butterfly, or bird with ostentatious plumage caught her eye. At the same time as she took in the beauty around her, she was all too aware that she had probably never looked worse. She was sweating profusely and her mane was a rat's nest. Her tail was constantly working to brush off tiny biting flies. She had by now started viewing the heat and humidity as annoyances rather than threats, which she knew was dangerous at the rate she was losing fluids. It took conscious effort to remember to keep drinking from her water cask.

Strangely, the sounds of nature grew quieter as she moved on, and eventually she stopped seeing or hearing large animals like monkeys and parrots altogether. She felt uncomfortable at the change, as if she was drawing near to an evil part of the forest shunned by the rest of its inhabitants. She knew she was getting close to where the swamp should be, and that meant she was also getting close to the griffon base. She kept her ears pricked and her eyes wide open. The air itself began to change, taking on a sweet odor that reminded her of the honeysuckle growing around Sweet Apple Acres back home. It was normally an inviting fragrance, but here the smell was strange and out of place. By the time she pushed two large fern fronds out of the way and stepped into a large clearing, she was surrounded by ominous silence.

Rarity gasped at the sight in front of her. The clearing was almost entirely occupied by a pool of clear water, more than fifty pony lengths across. In the center of the pool was an island of earth approximately ten lengths in diameter, from which rose a thick branchless tree trunk with leathery bark so dark it was almost black, broken up only by blood red flecks. The air was thick with cloying sweetness, and she supposed the tree was the source. The pool and tree were not what had caused her to gasp, though. There was a tall creature standing on the island in the center of the pool next to the tree, wearing the same scarf and eye patch he had been the last time Rarity had encountered him. He stared back at her, mirroring her own look of shocked recognition.

Khufu, deposed prince of Camelot, spoke first. He called out loudly from across the pool. "What I see with my eye is impossible, true, but excellent to see! Lady Rarity lives!" He chortled happily, though the sound was rather emphatic.

“Price Khufu,” Rarity responded, warily. She was trying, and failing, to imagine a scenario in which it made sense for him to be here in the jungle. Was the same thing creating the sweet smell in the air also causing her to see things? Was she already so dehydrated that she was hallucinating? Perhaps if she splashed some water on her face and took a drink. The pool did look awfully clean and refreshing. She took a step forward.

“Do not touch water!” the camel shouted urgently. “Keep back.”

Rarity blinked. Why had she been walking toward the water again? She felt slightly lightheaded. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “And what is in this air? I don’t feel right.”

“I stand here because, once again, followers sentence me to die. Must truly be terrible leader,” Khufu said jovially. “Air smells sweet, yes? Water looks good to drink. Is so because you stand before great Honeytrap tree. Its pollen makes you want to drink of its nectar.”

“Honeytrap?” Rarity repeated.

“Smells like sweet honey, good to drink, but is trap,” Khufu said. “This tree lives on flesh, not sunlight. Eats birds, animals, ponies, griffons, even camel unlucky enough to drink from its nectar pool.”

Rarity recoiled. “A meat-eating tree? How horrifying! But why are you standing next to it?”

“Griffons carry me out here. Their base is not far. I cannot leave without touching the water, and that is death sentence. They leave me to die.”

“But why can you not touch the water? Is it acid?”

“Not at all. I understand is very delicious and sweet to drink, though makes you sleepy and thirsty for more. Tree not kill you, is what lives in tree.”

Rarity took a step back toward the jungle plants behind her, ready to turn tail and flee. “What, pray tell, lives in the tree?”

“Piranhasprite colony,” Khufu replied. “Murderous little beasts. All ravenous appetites and sharp teeth. Piranhasprites symbiotic to Honeytrap. When water disturbed by large animal, tree feels vibrations and shakes branches. Piranhasprites fly down to kill

intruder, and eat what they want. Piranhasprites have no real sense of smell, and cannot see prey that is still, so tree makes it easy for them to find food. When piranhasprites full, remains sink to bottom of pool, and tree absorbs nutrients. So you see, I am stuck here until I starve.”

“Piranhasprites? Are you certain that you don’t mean parasprites?” Rarity asked.

“Ha ha, no, parasprite is vegetarian cousin.”

Rarity shuddered at the idea of a carnivorous parasprite. The creatures had nearly decimated Ponyville in minutes. What was an economic loss for the town could have been a massacre if the voracious insect-like animals had developed a taste for ponies.

“I believe I could carry you safely to the shore with magic,” she said. “But I need to know why you are here, and why these griffons would want you dead. As far as I know, you should be on an airship, not here.”

“I must be with full honesty for you,” Khufu began, butchering Equestrian grammar worse than usual. “My crew and I, we work for griffons. I was best arms merchant in world, could get anything for money. Griffon general want factories in jungle to build weapons and airships, I take monies and have it all built here in secret. They tell me need to preserve technological parity, so ponies do not seize griffon homelands. Had to stop Duke Polaris, who prepares ponies for war with his new innovations.

“I knew they plan to sabotage race to stop Duke, and my crew plan all along to land and rejoin griffons during magical storm. I did not know they all plan to betray me too. I learn that griffons in truth want to make war themselves, commit horrible acts. I learn they kill you, hero Rarity. I wanted out of deal. Worst part, I learn my own lieutenant knew of griffon plan all along, and planned to be rid of me once deal was complete. Rest of my friends were imprisoned then, and I was left here to die slowly. Takes very long time for camel to die of hunger or thirst.”

“General? General Karroc is leading these hooligans?” Rarity asked.

“It is so.”

Rarity’s mind worked furiously. Pieces were clicking into place. Karroc being the leader of these rogue griffons made perfect sense. It explained who was on the mysterious darkened airship that had signaled to Windlass, as Karroc would have needed to race his ship stealthily past the rest of the regatta, skipping the stop in Gallopoli, in order to beat them here and spring his trap. He and his griffons would have been easily able to see to

fly in the dark without lights. He also had the most to gain by removing the griffon chancellor and Elector Graywings. For all Rarity knew, he was now the leader of all the griffon clans, and had turned them against Equestria.

His words at the dinner at Blueblood's castle revealed that he thought of ponies as little more than sporting game, and that attitude was reflected in the two griffons she and Blueblood had captured. She still did not know why he would be working with Procyon, but at least the players were revealed, if not the endgame.

"If I save you, how do I know that I can trust you?" she asked. "I have already made the mistake of trusting someone I should not have trusted, and somepony I care about was nearly killed."

"Save me, and I promise to be staunchest ally," Khufu replied. "I swear on bones of my murdered family, and on lost throne of Camelon that this is so."

He looked and sounded to Rarity to be completely earnest in his declaration. The problem was that everything Khufu said seemed completely earnest, and now Rarity knew that he was stoic enough to sit through a formal dinner right next to Blueblood, at the same time he was involved in a plan to murder him. Still, an enemy of her enemies ...

"I am going to levitate you across the pool. Do not move."

The one-eyed camel nodded once in acknowledgement. Rarity concentrated, and a blue aura enveloped her target. Khufu rose into the air and began to drift slowly above the water. Sweat beaded down her forehead, momentarily obscuring her vision, but she did not lose focus. The floating camel was coming closer to the lip of the pool. She only needed to keep him aloft and moving for a few more seconds. Rarity heaved with what magical strength she had remaining, and the deposed prince fell, landing on solid ground. He quickly rose to his odd, two-toed feet and bowed respectfully to Rarity.

"I am forever in your debt, pony hero Rarity."

Just then, Rarity heard a rustling sound, and looked up to see the dark leaves of the Honeytrap tree shaking, though there was no wind. She looked past Khufu and saw ripples spreading across the surface of the pool. She must have let him fall just enough to skim the surface of the water as he cleared the edge. Khufu turned and saw the ripples as well. His nostrils flared, though his visage remained otherwise impassive. After a few seconds, an eerie, high-pitched whine, almost like an unending scream, filled the air.

"Fabulous," Rarity said. "I take it *that* is the sound of the piranhasprites. Now what?"

Khufu turned his one golden eye toward her and uttered a single word. "Run."

Prince Khufu had said to run. Instead of obeying at once, Rarity stood frozen to the spot where her hooves were planted. It took valuable seconds for the camel's exhortation to even register in her mind, occupied as she was in staring up into the crown of the Honeytrap, searching for the source of the shrill whine that filled the air.

"Do not hesitate, Lady Rarity. Run now!" Khufu turned and instantly broke into a gallop. Before Rarity had moved he was already speeding away on his gangly legs. Rarity wanted to follow him, but it was just so hard to leave this strange tree and its enticing pool of sweet-smelling crystal clear nectar. It was almost intoxicating, and she was so thirsty. How could that camel simply abandon such a lovely place?

Finally, far above, an explosion issued forth from within the depths of the Honeytrap's leafy crown. Rarity blinked in surprise as a swarm of argent spheres, each a hoof's width in diameter, boiled forth and poured down on her like a waterfall of quicksilver. Each creature was ever-so-slightly tinted in a different metallic shade, so that the overall effect was something like a translucent-winged Hearth's Warming tree ornament with bulging black eyes and a hungry maw filled with needles. She had to run! Why weren't her legs moving?

"Oof!" Rarity nearly fell as something heavy impacted her side. Blinking, she saw that Khufu had returned and roughly shoved her. He spoke before she could even open her mouth to berate him for his horrific manners.

"Pollen seems to have much stronger effect on ponies, yes? Now listen to what I say and run!"

Rarity blinked several more times and focused on clearing her head while she reassessed the situation. The piranhasprites were coming, they meant to eat her alive, and they were already nearly upon her. She screamed in terror, even as she kicked up a cloud of dust in her haste to turn and follow Khufu.

The old camel was faster than Rarity would have imagined, racing through the forest on his skinny, knobby legs. Despite his strange two-toed feet, he seemed sure-hooved, not panicked, as he flew along the ground. Surefooted, perhaps was the correct term. Rarity had no idea where he was going, but it was clear that Khufu hadn't chosen the easiest path. Fallen trees and gnarled roots threatened to trip her up with every step, and broad-leaved plants slapped against her as they recoiled from the camel's passage. She tried—and failed—to erect a magical screen in front of her to deflect the whipping branches and

leaves. She would have to simply deal with it. It was far better to be smacked by a stray frond than to be devoured by monstrosities.

The swarm, thousands strong, pursued just behind. She knew that they were collectively waiting for her to make a false step or simply tire of galloping. Every hoofbeat carried with it the danger of impacting an unseen root or stone and sending her tumbling, but she dared not slow her pace for safety's sake; if she did, she would be overtaken in seconds. If she tried to branch off and take an easier path, the piranhasprites would likely follow, as she was the closer target. Rarity had no choice but to continue to race headlong after Khufu, hoping that he was not leading them to a most unpleasant end.

Of all the things that could have happened to her ... this was pretty bad, Rarity decided. The others all could have dealt with the piranhasprites. Twilight Sparkle had her magic, which had been powerful enough to have redirected the appetites of an entire swarm of the similar, though non-carnivorous, parasprites. Rainbow Dash had her wings and unparalleled speed. Pinkie Pie was astonishingly elusive when she wanted to be, and could have vanished without a trace until the creatures tired of the chase. Applejack had her muscular legs and inexhaustible stamina. Fluttershy was perhaps the best suited of all to something like this. She could have faced down the entire swarm with her overpowering "stare" if she truly put her mind to stopping them. Rarity had nothing but adrenaline and the overriding primal urge to stay alive. Why had she had the questionable fortune to encounter Khufu, anyway? Couldn't she have come across somepony having a bad mane day or some problem better suited to *her* talents? There was nothing to be done except to keep pounding her hooves against the earth in hopes of outpacing the swarm.

On every side, the denizens of the jungle screeched and squawked and fled before the onrushing silvery flood of death. Flocks of birds took to the air in disorganized, panic-stricken clouds. Monkeys hurtled pell-mell through the canopy overhead in a mad haste to get away. Rarity supposed that slower animals either relied on their ability to keep still and blend in with their surroundings, or were simply devoured.

"We must reach water," Khufu called back to her, between gasping breaths so labored that Rarity could hear them above the maddening whine of the piranhasprites. "That is where we go. River is ahead! Be safe there."

Safe in the river? Apparently the piranhasprites could not swim. That made sense, Rarity supposed, given their tiny legs and relatively delicate wings. As deadly as these diminutive terrors were, everything had its limitations. Celestia knew that Rarity had hers. Every muscle from her chest to her haunches was burning from exertion, and the

strain of galloping so long made her fear that she would tear an extensor or flexor tendon in her legs. An injury like that could be permanently crippling under the best of circumstances, but now it would mean a quick but gruesome end. She had no choice but to fight the pain and keep galloping.

A sharp stinging sensation jolted her into hyperawareness, and Rarity knew even before quickly glancing backward that she had been bitten. The brief look confirmed it; one of the creatures had caught up to her and sunk its needle-like teeth into her flank. Unless they were poisonous, one piranhasprite would not kill her. The real concern was that if one had caught her, it was apparent that she would not be able to outrun the bulk of the swarm much longer. She swung her hips to the side and smashed the offending creature against a passing tree, leaving nothing behind but thin streams of blood trickling down where she had been bitten. The blood further marred her coat, but Rarity was past caring. She was already a filthy mess.

The piranhasprites closed in on her from the sides and rear, having evidently chosen her as their target. She magically unfastened the straps of Blueblood's excellent pannier, and it fell to the ground along with her food and water. The only things that mattered to her survival now were speed and endurance.

Ahead, Khufu broke out of the forest and into open terrain. Rarity could hear rushing water, and knew that the river had to be close. She tried to take heart that salvation was near, but she could only fear that it was not near enough. To her left and right, the whine of the piranhasprites was reaching such a crescendo that it felt as if her eardrums would burst from the volume of their awful noise. She saw the shimmering creatures approaching in her peripheral vision, expressionless black eyes shining.

She was surrounded on all sides now by a wall of silvery bodies and flashing wings, with only a small window through the swarm directly ahead. If the piranhasprites fully encircled her, she would be finished. It really was a shame that they had such an urge to feed on pony flesh. As baubles or brooches, the metallic creatures would likely be a smashing success back in Canterlot. She made an internal note to memorialize this encounter in jewelry form in the unlikely event she survived.

Khufu galloped on, now no more than six lengths ahead of her. His long legs and wiry build must have made him a natural runner, because Rarity could not otherwise comprehend how his advanced age and obviously diminished lung capacity permitted him to match her pace. She could see the river now through the gap in the teeming mass of hungry mouths. It was a hundred lengths or more across here, far grander than the comparative trickle near the *Alicorn's* crash site. Just ahead, the ground sloped down and

ended in a sheer drop several lengths above the water, with no promise that the river below was deep enough for safe diving. Still, the potential for a painful landing was not much of a risk compared to the near certainty of death from ten thousand vicious bites.

Rarity watched Khufu rise into the air even as the swarm closed in around her, cutting off her view of the outside world completely and trapping her in a rapidly contracting globe of buzzing, whirring, whining death. Pain shot through her body as several of the creatures bit her exploratorily, tasting her in advance of the main attack that was going to come. It was an absolute certainty that the next second would decide whether she lived or died. Blindly, Rarity galloped one more stride and then launched herself skyward with all the fear and adrenaline-enhanced strength that her aching haunches could muster. If she landed on dry land, she would die horribly. If she made it to the water, she might survive. It felt like she hung in the air forever, floating suspended amidst the carnivorous silver cloud of piranhasprites.

In the last instant before touching down the land dropped away beneath her. With no time to prepare her body, she hit the water awkwardly with her belly fully exposed, and plunged gracelessly beneath the opaque gray surface. The jarring impact was sweet, stinging relief. The water cooled her burning muscles, the piranhasprites could not follow her, and the river was deep enough that she had avoided striking the bottom and injuring herself.

Still gripped by fear and operating primarily on instinct, Rarity kicked all four legs and dove down to the river bottom, desperate to put space between her and her hungry winged pursuers. At this juncture, she did not care one iota that the water was clouded with muck, tiny creatures, and decomposition, nor that she was exposing her body to a potential menagerie of disgusting parasites and pathogens. She barely registered that her lungs were already screaming for air. All she could think about was getting away.

She kicked off of the riverbed and churned her legs, hopeful that she was covering a reasonable amount of distance. She could not see more than a few hooves distance in the murky water, despite the sun shining down overhead, and she had no idea where Khufu had gone. She needed to swim up to the surface, breathe, and take stock of her surroundings. She could only hope that the piranhasprites were not waiting for her to do just that. Fighting the powerful urge to inhale while still underwater, Rarity swam up toward the bare hint of daylight filtering down from above.

She had no sooner breached the surface and sucked in a greedy lungful of oxygen than she heard Khufu shouting. She spun around in the water, trying to pinpoint the sound of his voice over the rush of the river. Even as she turned to look for Khufu, something

whisked past her head and she ducked instinctively. A glance upwards confirmed her fears—the piranhasprites formed a noisy, undulating cloud above as they waited for the opportunity to strike.

“Swim here!” Khufu called. “Hurry!” Finally, Rarity spotted the camel a dozen lengths away, treading water next to a massive tree trunk that had fallen into the river, though it was still partially rooted to the shore. Only the top of Khufu’s elongated face broke the surface of the water. “Tree is hollow underneath water. We may hide from piranhasprites inside!”

Rarity sucked in a deep breath as another piranhasprite buzzed past, brushing up against her mane, and she immediately dove beneath the river’s surface. Khufu was upstream, so she would have to fight against the current to reach him. The difficulty of this task was compounded by the fact that her legs and hooves provided little water resistance, and therefore little propulsive power. Normally, ponies who liked to swim strapped on flippers in order to navigate the water faster and with greater control than bare hooves allowed. Rarity did not even like to swim. Since flippers were out, she had to rely on willpower. She churned all four legs like never before, frothing the river in her wake. When she surfaced again, she was amazed to find herself a mere half-length away from Khufu. The whine of the piranhasprites greeted her as well. They were relentless.

“There is pocket of air trapped under tree,” Khufu said. “Follow.” He ducked under and disappeared. Remaining in view of the ravenous piranhasprites was not an option, so Rarity once again slipped beneath the surface to follow him. As before, she could not see anything. Instead, she felt her way beneath the fallen trunk, groping with her forehooves for an opening.

Finally, the tree’s rotten bark crumbled before her and she was able to rise up through the water’s surface and into a hollow space. A few tiny holes in the upper side of the dead tree provided scant illumination and enough ventilation to prevent the oxygen in the hollow trunk from being replaced by unbreathable gases. She immediately noticed that it smelled horrible in the enclosed space. The hidden sanctuary also provided little opportunity to rest, as the riverbed was far enough below that Rarity had to keep swimming to stay buoyant. For all the space’s downsides, at least the piranhasprites would not be able to force their way inside. The creatures buzzed and whined ineffectually as they swarmed about, waiting in vain for their erstwhile prey to emerge.

“Well, you certainly found the foulest-smelling place in which we could hide,” Rarity said, consciously suppressing the urge to gag.

“Ah, I am afraid what you smell is most likely me,” Khufu replied. “It is unfortunate truth that ponies do not tolerate scent of camels well. It required inordinate amount of deodorizing powder to allow me to dine with you back in Canterlot. Now that I am in natural state, in enclosed space, I can only apologize.”

“Oh,” Rarity said, chagrined. It hardly seemed possible that any one creature could reek so powerfully. “Well, how did you know we would find shelter here?”

“I did not,” the camel replied. The hidden space under the hollow tree was so dark that Rarity could not even see his face. “But was hopeful. Fortune chose to smile upon us, yes?”

“For now, it would seem. Will they leave?”

“Yes, creatures will go. They need much energy to sustain chase, and will soon return to nest to recover. We wait until then. Water is fine, no?”

“It had better not take long for them to leave. I’ve already lost valuable time.”

“You cannot leave quite yet,” Khufu said. “Perhaps while we wait, you might tell me how it is you live. Before griffons leave me to die, they tell me you perish.”

Rarity produced enough of a glow from her horn to light the hidden hollow and allow her to see Khufu’s bulbous and elongated head bobbing in the dark water. She still did not particularly trust the deposed camel prince, and did not plan to volunteer the information that Blueblood was injured and waiting for her return. “Rumors of my demise were exaggerated, as you can see.”

“Ah, many thanks for illumination. I see you still wear pearl from Gallopoli. Is very good thing. Waters here safe from piranhasprites, but great fish swim in river. Large enough to eat you and me.”

Rarity’s blood ran cold at the thought of monsters lurking both above and below, and she nervously touched a hoof to her pearl necklace. “What does this have to do with monster fish?”

“How do you not know stories?” Khufu chuckled. “Perhaps it is because I am much older. In my youth, mariners in search of new lands braved oceans in tiny boats, and all who could buy or steal Gallopolitan pearl kept one as talisman. Is said those who carry such pearls will not be harmed by water or its creatures. Is very good idea to keep with you.”

“I don’t plan to part with it,” Rarity said. She could only wonder how much, if anything, of what Khufu said was accurate. Still, the pearl did give her a certain sense of security and well being, and it was undeniably lovely. She needed nothing more to justify wearing it.

“When you crossed my path, you were attempting to flee these lands and return to Equestria, to spread warning about griffons, yes?”

“Yes,” Rarity replied, truthfully. It *was* her eventual goal to return home, she merely needed to make a stop along the way.

“No,” Khufu shook his head. “I catch you in deceit. Is not so. You were too far south. Equestria is north, but you must had been journeying east when you find me, not north. Only river is south of where you found me, and is too wide and swift in center to cross. Be truthful with old camel.”

Rarity was surprised that Khufu had seen through her slight misdirection, and hesitated to respond. If she wanted information from Khufu about the conspiracy, and potentially valuable advice about where to locate the Badge of Courage orchid, then it behooved her to be forthright with him. If he planned to betray her, however, giving anything away could prove fatal. So far, everything she had heard and seen seemed to indicate that he truly had been left for dead by the griffons, but that did not mean that the camel did not want back in their good graces. Betraying her could be just the ticket he needed.

“You know, it strikes me that I no longer hear the sound of the piranhasprites,” Rarity said at last. “Perhaps we should return to dry land before my hooves get too pruney.” It would be easier for her to flee on solid terrain, should it become necessary to do so. She also hated pruney hooves.

“As you wish,” Khufu replied.

Rarity swam out from under the downed tree and quickly paddled over to the riverbank. As she had hoped, the piranhasprites were gone, and she leaned against a warm rock while Khufu clambered out after her. Even though the humidity would keep her coat, mane, and tail from fully drying for hours, the hot sun kept any possibility of a chill at bay.

“If I reveal my secrets to you, I must gain some information in return,” Rarity said coolly, once the old, one-eyed camel stood in front of her again. His sodden scarf now hung limply around his long neck, but at least it mercifully still covered his horrific scar.

“I am only too happy to share with you all that I know,” Khufu replied. “As said before, though, many things I only learn days ago, after we make landfall during storm.”

“I need to know who hired you, why, and what they plan to do,” Rarity stated. “I need to take that information back to Princess Celestia. If you want to thank me for saving you, telling me everything you can should suffice.”

“Of course. I will tell all,” Khufu assented. “Story is not long. As you know, some time after I fled Camelot, I became merchant in business of procuring implements of war. Griffon General Karroc contacted my establishment over year ago. Said ponies crowding out griffons, preparing to drive griffons from their mountain homes. He wanted to have fighting chance, and said money was no object. This is story with which I sympathize. I always believe that best way to prevent war is to assure neither side could survive one, and at time none could doubt that ponies had great advantage of numbers, magic, and mighty weapons.”

“A rather cynical outlook,” Rarity observed.

“Long life has taught me cynicism is just another word for ugly truth. I agreed to help General Karroc. My specialty is having connections, and I entered into many discreet contracts, all with companies outside Equestria, in order to build Karroc his secret base in the jungle. Buffalo, bighorns, diamond dogs, zebras, camels, griffons, and even ponies who had left your country long ago worked on project. So much money it cost, I still do not know where Karroc obtained it all. Seemed to cost more than entire griffon treasury, but he always have payment for work, all in previously circulated Equestrian bits. First we build factory and base, then Karroc supplied schematics and engineering plans for new warship, mightier than any other. I never knew where he found plans, but he has no engineers to design such things himself. Again, though, he had money, so ship was built. To have come so far, you have surely encountered this ship, flying beast he calls *Gromm*.”

“I have indeed,” Rarity said. “It was nearly the death of me, as was the intent.”

“Karroc also has magical weapon to bring storm. He boasted about obtaining for months, though only actually received in time to disrupt *Alicorn*’s Cup. Griffons not magical, so I know he is working with unicorn ponies. I did not understand, since he hates and fears your kind, but I did not ask questions because ...”

“He had the money,” Rarity finished. “But where could he have obtained so much Equestrian currency? Surely it would be noticed if that much money was being sent out of the country.”

“I never found out,” Khufu replied, shaking his head. “Your instincts are good, though. He definitely had source in Equestria. As months passed, became clear that Karroc wanted more than to even odds—he wanted to build grand armada. Factory was expanded and modified to produce smaller airships in great numbers. My own lieutenant designed and created new firestick to work in wet conditions, so that griffons could fight even where ponies controlled weather. Even at this point, I foolishly did not question Karroc’s aims. I believed that peace would be maintained by showing that griffons were strong enough to fight, as he had claimed. I even believed in plan to disrupt race and kill Equestrian duke so he could no longer design new weapons for ponies.”

“That is simply outrageous!” Rarity seethed. “You should have known better than to believe such nonsense. Blueblood never designed weapons.”

“Perhaps or perhaps not, but his airships flew faster and farther than others. He could have turned mind toward nefarious ends.” Khufu paused, and his face fell. “I agreed to all of that, but I never knew Karroc planned for his agents to kill you, Lady Rarity. When I learned you were killed I confronted him. He admitted that true plan was to disable greatest pony weapon, Elements of Harmony, and then strike crippling blow to Equestria, to soften ponies for invasion. This was appalling. I never wanted war, only parity. Truly, I never believed you would be harmed. I and most of my crew repudiated agreement with Karroc, but Zolo, my lieutenant, had already chosen to turn on me. My remaining crew was imprisoned and I was left to die.”

Rarity mulled over the camel’s words, attempting to combine the information he had provided with her own knowledge. Somehow, it seemed that the more she learned about the conspiracy, the less anything made sense. Why would Lord Procyon combine efforts with a griffon bent on destroying Equestria? Procyon was, by all accounts, obsessed with power and money, not blood and glory. She had to believe that embroiling Equestria in a protracted conflict, or worse, a losing war, was not part of his plans.

At the same time, there was no doubt the two were working together. General Karroc had to be getting his bits from somewhere in Equestria, and it only made sense that Procyon of all potential ponies would be able to deliver them.

A startling thought popped into Rarity’s mind. What if Blueblood’s airship company had only been failing on paper? Procyon controlled all the finances. He could have easily ruined the company by funneling all of its financial resources straight to General Karroc. Then, when Fancypants began buying secrets and investing in North Star, Procyon could have diverted that money as well. With the personal and corporate resources of

Blueblood's family, and millions of bits of Fancypants' money as well, Karroc could have afforded to construct his armada.

If Blueblood's brother was in fact bankrolling the conspiracy, that meant that he, not Karroc, was ultimately the leader. Moreover, it required unicorn magic to utilize the Heavenstone. Confusingly, though, these rogue griffons with their warships, deadly weapons, and murderous intent, seemed far too serious a threat for Procyon to have wittingly set the stage for an invasion. Rarity was frustrated and tired of even thinking about this insanity. Why was it so hard to put it all together? All she was accomplishing now was wasting time that she needed to find the Badge of Courage and return to Blueblood before dark.

"Listen to me, Prince Khufu," Rarity said. "I *am* going to return to Equestria to put a stop to this madness, but first I must help a friend." She decided to take a chance. Trusting Khufu might prove to be a terrible mistake, but the risk would pay off handsomely if he could direct her to the object of her quest. He had been operating in this jungle for over a year, so if the flower was nearby, he should be able to point her to it.

"A friend?" Khufu asked, intrigued.

"Prince Blueblood, or Duke Polaris as you know him, still lives. He is currently hiding in a safe place, but he is injured. He needs my help."

"Aha." A spark of recognition shone in the camel's remaining eye. "Is clear why you go east now, you seek healing bloom that grows here."

"Yes!" Rarity exclaimed, hardly believing this stroke of luck. "Do you know where I can find it?"

"Is no problem to *find* it," Khufu said. "Bloodflower, that is griffons' name for it, grows everywhere in swamp near griffon base. Too many even for griffons to keep track. Should be easy for you to take as many as you like."

"Finally some good news," Rarity responded happily. "Thank you, Prince."

Khufu shook his head. "Not all good. Is not problem to find flower, but is big problem to correctly harvest. One cannot simply uproot the orchid, or its magic turns toxic. You must know to sever the stem while keeping the life-giving magic from flowing out."

Rarity felt her spirits sink. "Are you quite certain? The race guide said nothing of the sort. How do you know so much about the Badge of Courage?"

“Most esteemed lady, I know so much because flower is very reason why location for base chosen. Equestria is well aware that pony scientist seeks to create medicine from magic orchid, but not know that griffons want it even more. General Karroc is desperate to brew tonic from Bloodflower so griffons may fight on and on forever, no matter how grievously harmed. Put pony scientist Doctor Shrinking Violet under guard. Forced her to work on potion night and day. She is only one in this part of world who knows how to harvest and use Bloodflower.”

Rarity’s mouth fell open in surprise as the import of the camel’s words hit her. “If Karroc obtains such a tonic, then it will not matter how few griffons fight for him, because they will be unstoppable.”

“It is so, though no certainty that tonic will ever be realized.”

“I must get the orchid to Blueblood today, and it must heal him.” Rarity declared. “Tell me how to do it. There must be a way!”

“Concept is simple,” Khufu said. “Execution may be impossible. Doctor Violet is at griffons’ base even now. Is very close. Rescue her, and she will help you.”

Rarity was aghast. “You’re joking, right? I cannot simply waltz past armed griffons who are all actively looking out for me. I realize that I look absolutely horrid at the moment, but I am a bright-coated pony mare with a horn protruding from my forehead, and no beak, claws, paws, or wings. There is a small chance that I might stand out in a crowd there, don’t you think?”

“It would not be easy,” Khufu agreed. “But it should be possible. When Doctor Violet spends time at base, she is locked in laboratory at edge of swamp. Only few guards, and it is away from main base. You must find her if you want flower to save friend.”

“What about you? What are you going to do now?”

“I cannot accompany you, if that is question. Same odor that so assaults your nose would give me away to the griffons, even at a distance. I am also twice your size, much harder to hide. I can only offer to tell you everything I know, so you might have good chance to succeed.”

“You misunderstand,” Rarity began, “I wanted to know where you plan to go now. Equestria? What about your friends the griffons have taken prisoner?”

“I cannot rescue them,” Khufu said, shaking his head. “Do not know what will become of me, but still life left in old bones. I can start again, again.”

“What if a different opportunity were available, one that could help wipe the slate clean of any responsibility for arming General Karroc, and which might be lucrative as well?”

“Go on,” Khufu prompted.

“I came for the orchid, and I will not give up now. I plan to retrieve Doctor Violet, but if I do not return, Blueblood will need care. If you help him and—if I am captured—return him to Equestria, you will be greatly rewarded.”

“Is intriguing proposition, to which I am not averse. Why trust me, though? If I kill duke and bring body to griffons, maybe we become friends again.”

“I most certainly do not trust you. I believe, however, that the griffons would not welcome you back under any circumstances. If you return to their fold, you must be paid. It is likely that this Zolo has agreed to bargain down the price. Moreover, I believe that you really are as fond of me as you seem to be. If that is so, you will help Blueblood.”

“You are as perceptive as you are lovely, hero Rarity. Indeed, I will help your friend, both because of my fondness for you, and to play part I thought I had all along. If I can prevent war, then perhaps can silence ghosts of past.”

Rarity telekinetically removed Blueblood’s compass from around her neck, and tapped once with a hoof before transferring it to Khufu.

“This compass is enchanted to point directly to Blueblood’s location. Go there and help him, and I shall find you once I have Shrinking Violet and the Badge of Courage. So long as it is not dark, I can retrace my steps without the compass. Blueblood will not trust you unless he believes I asked you to help him, so tell him that I promise to let him have *five* sugars in his coffee without mocking him, if he can hold out until I return.”

“I understand,” Khufu nodded. “Now, allow me to help you.”

Rarity listened patiently as the camel described the base, for which he had overseen the construction and accordingly knew every access point, secret passage, checkpoint, and patrol route. He sketched diagrams in the dirt while he spoke. If she could simply get across a stretch of swamp without being spotted, she would be able to enter Doctor Violet’s laboratory without proceeding any further toward the factories and barracks

where the majority of soldiers and guards were located. If she proceeded northeast away from the river for half a league, she would reach the swamp.

“Good fortune be with you,” Khufu said at last.

“I have already survived the worst these ruffians could throw at me,” Rarity said, attempting to project confidence. “I shall prevail here too.”

“I believe you will, hero Rarity. I truly believe it.” Khufu bowed and turned to walk away.

“I’m choosing to believe in you as well,” Rarity called after him. “Prove that I placed my trust in the right creature for once.” Khufu swung his long neck out and swiveled his head to look at her, even while his body kept walking away in a straight line. He nodded once again, and then resumed his course.

There was no time to waste, and Rarity began walking in the direction of General Karroc’s base. A voice in her head screamed that this was folly, that she had no business attempting something so insane and even idiotic on her own. Even if she could find the botanist, she had no idea how to free her and lead both of them to safety. Thankfully a stronger voice overrode the doubting one. She had made a promise, and she would keep to it, at whatever cost. Even though the odds were long and the stakes were life or death for both her and Blueblood, she had to try.

It seemed like she had been walking only for minutes when she saw her first Badge of Courage. The jungle had given way to a bog-like terrain of ferns and damp soil, and near the base of one large fern, a small, blood red flower grew. The entire plant had a red cast to it, even the leaves and stem, and the small leaves were traced with delicate veins of brilliant crimson. The flower itself was the color of fresh arterial blood, and its overlapping petals dropped down from a long, curved stem, forming a shape like an inverted wine glass. Inside the flower a circle of golden filament-like stamens surrounded a long silver pistil, tipped with red, that thrust from the center of the bloom like a bloody dagger.

It was beautiful, unique, and unmistakably what she had come this far to find. If she had not encountered Khufu she would have plucked the flower at once and returned to Blueblood. Then he would have died, because she would not have known that the flower had to be harvested using any particular special technique. It was truly a stroke of luck after all the misfortune that had found her recently that Khufu had told her of the flower’s secret. She continued on, spotting many more of the scarlet blooms along the way.

As promised, the bog ended at the edge of a large body of water, completely covered in giant lily pads and enormous yellow water lilies. Each thick green pad was easily large enough to accommodate something the size of a pony, even if it could not necessarily support the weight. Directly across the swamp, Rarity could see land. Off to the right, the lily pads gradually disappeared as the swamp gave way to a large lake that fed the river along which she had travelled. She could see buildings on the other side of the swamp, though the architecture was strange. The buildings were all low to the ground, and it appeared that there were plants and even large trees growing on top of them. All of it, she noted, was exactly as Khufu had described.

The base had been constructed with secrecy as the paramount goal. Accordingly, there were no obvious roads or paths, and the buildings were blanketed in vegetation so that anypony flying overhead would never recognize that anything unnatural existed at all. According to Khufu's description, the closest building on the other side of this swamp should be the laboratory. She only had to reach it without being seen.

From her vantage point among the large ferns at the edge of the swamp, Rarity could make out several griffons flying circular patterns in the sky above the base. It did not matter that they flew a thousand lengths or more above her, any visible movement in the open would attract the griffons' eagle eyes in a second. Boldly Rainbow Dash-ing over to the laboratory was an appealingly simple option, but doomed to fail. She needed a more elegant solution, something that called for stealth and subterfuge ... and style!

"*I-de—*" Rarity stifled her mouth with a hoof before she could make any more noise. Finally, after all the trauma and misery to which she had been subjected, she had found a use for the greatest and most fabulous of all her talents—millinery! The key to successfully rescuing Doctor Violet was the same key that unlocked some of the most fashionable venues in Canterlot for her: a stunning, one of a kind, original giant hat! The particular chapeau Rarity now intended to create, however, would not be appropriate at any society occasion, except perhaps a society of frogs. She would take one of the innumerable enormous lily pads covering the surface of the swamp, detach it from its stem, and use it as a covering to conceal her passage through the water. The long hollow stem could be repurposed as a snorkel. It was a brilliant idea, of that Rarity was certain.

Cautiously, she magically hauled one of the heavy pads out of the water and over to her present hiding place, along with a pony length's worth of its stem. The work from this point was easy. The plant's stem was crisp and easy to snap into sections. First, Rarity broke half of the stem down into the fibrous cellulose of which it was comprised. This she magically wove into a series of straps to hold the pad in place on her head. She used a bit of fashion magic to reform the other half into two bent hollow segments, each of

which could serve as a snorkel. The single lily pad was easily large enough to conceal two ponies, but she would need the second snorkel for Doctor Violet. Out of the water, the lily pad was unwearable, too heavy to do anything but drag. It was the most ridiculous “hat” Rarity had ever designed, but it was also her proudest creation in recent memory.

Now, before she could think better of it, was the time to put this crazy plan into action. As quickly as she dared, Rarity crossed the distance to the water’s edge and slipped in. Her hooves sank deep into the mud, and she had to keep moving to prevent the suction each step created from holding her in place. Once she was in deep enough to submerge, she pulled her disguise in after her and affixed it in place atop her head. By breathing through her stem snorkel and pushing the pad no more than an inch or two up out of the water with the tip of her horn, she could see where she was going and, with any luck, remain undetected. She pushed Khufu’s warnings about giant predatory fish to the back of her mind, touched her pearl necklace for good luck, and began to paddle.

The journey across the swamp was slower going than she had anticipated. The lilies grew so thick that it required considerable effort to make room for her own, mobile one, and she had to be careful to leave no wake or telltale splashes that would draw the watchful eyes of the griffons flying above. More than once she felt something unknown and unseen brush against her, but she kept reminding herself that it was nothing more than the stems of the lilies. Eventually, though it felt like she had spent nearly an hour in the water, she drew near to the opposite bank without incident. Rarity could not suppress an underwater smile. After all these years, giant hats had yet to fail her once. Better still, she was mere lengths away from a building that, based on Khufu’s description, had to be Shrinking Violet’s laboratory.

The building, like most of the others she could see, was low and squat, and draped with flowers, thick ropy vines, and greenery of all sorts. It was really a rather lovely effect, all things considered. If she ever decided to engage in a bit of freelance exterior design work, she would have to remember the concept. The only windows in the structure were small, rectangular, and high up on the exterior walls. Even though they were open, they were too small for a pony. A door graced the side of the building most directly facing Rarity, flanked by two griffon females on guard duty. This was her best point of ingress and egress, if only she could remove the guards cleanly and quietly.

Unlike the armorless griffons she and Blueblood had encountered in the forest, these two wore short haubergeons of mail. They also wore belts with daggers, but did not seem to be equipped with firesticks. Rarity could see that one of them had a ring of keys dangling from her belt, one of which almost certainly opened the door the griffons were guarding. Some sort of distraction might convince the guards to abandon their post, but then they

and everyone else at the base would be alert. She would be far better off if everything remained quiet, and she also needed that keyring. She searched the area for anything that might allow her to quietly subdue the guards, but then realized that the solution was directly before her eyes. She would use the building itself.

More accurately, she would use the vegetation covering the building. The dozens of vines snaking down all sides of the laboratory were the perfect means with which to ambush the guards, who would never think to watch for foes above and behind them. It would be something of a test of her ability to use telekinesis on multiple objects at once, but she told herself that it was doable.

She could weave a thousand strands of wool in an instant. She could cut cloth, draw patterns, and operate her sewing machine all at the same time. She had such fine control over her telekinesis that she could write a letter with perfect penmanship without looking at her work, while putting on makeup at her vanity on the other side of the room. She did all of this regularly. She was no Twilight Sparkle, but Rarity was sure she could handle a few vines. The larger challenge would be working quickly enough to prevent the guards from sounding an alarm, and then finding a place to stow them for awhile. Fortunately, the plants growing on the roof were so large and lush that it should be easy for Rarity to conceal her victims, even from the fliers overhead. That is, if everything went according to plan.

From her vantage point in the water, Rarity focused on seven thick green vines draping down from the roof of the building behind the guards, and took hold of them with her telekinesis. The sight made her cringe. If anyone looked closely, the telltale glow of magic would give her away, even in the bright light of day. She probably had no more than a few seconds to do what she needed to do, and she could already tell that it was going to be more difficult than she had anticipated. Even from a dozen lengths away, her control was attenuated enough that her hold on the vines felt clumsy and slippery. Nevertheless, she had to act.

The vines moved in concert like a ballet of serpents. Two snaked out and quickly wrapped tight around the beaks of both guards, preventing them from calling out. Two more trussed each griffon's wings to the side of her body and then pulled the guards onto their backs. The final pair of vines slithered and coiled around each griffon's legs, binding them in place. Rarity used the seventh vine to forcibly wrest the keyring away from one of them, before using all her remaining strength and control to haul the guards up into the mass of vegetation growing on top of the building, where they instantly disappeared into the foliage. It was done. The griffons were tied tight and unable to call for help, and her solid understanding of knots prevented her from having to maintain

the spell. Now nothing stood in the way of her racing over to the door and retrieving the keys.

Rarity waited in the water a few moments longer, until she was certain no griffons were coming to investigate what had befallen their comrades. Then she unfastened her lily pad hat, pulled it up out of the water just far enough to where she was certain it would not drift away, and used her head straps to tie down the pair of makeshift snorkels. Without further ado, she crossed the distance between the edge of the swamp and the laboratory door, pausing only to magically retrieve the guard's keyring from the vine where it dangled. Only one of the three keys on the ring fit the lock, and Rarity turned it excitedly before opening the door and quickly slipping inside. She remained wary, since there was no reason that additional guards might not be posted inside.

To her surprise, the room in which she found herself did not resemble a laboratory at all. Instead, it was clearly a kitchen, one that would not have looked out of place in any average home in Equestria. The room was clearly well-used, and filled with supplies, pots and pans. A dining area with a long wooden table occupied one side of the room, and an entryway led into a hall. Rarity proceeded cautiously, dripping water all the way. She sighed, knowing that she must look ridiculous in her sopping wet and disheveled state. It was hardly the image she wanted to project as a rescuer. She could faintly hear a female voice, speaking Equestrian, emanating from someplace ahead.

As Rarity continued forward, it soon became apparent that this building was a residence, not a laboratory. She passed a series of bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a study as she cautiously advanced. Had she committed a terrible error and picked the wrong building? Her heart was caught in her throat at the thought. Blueblood's life depended on her getting this right. Finally, the hall opened up into a larger living space. Somewhere in there was the source of the voice she had heard. Muscles tensed and magic at the ready, Rarity strode into the room. The first thing she noticed was a dark-haired mare, seated on a sofa and facing away from her.

"Doctor Violet, I presume," Rarity announced, even while simultaneously realizing that she was significantly mistaken.

In fact, there was only one other pony in the room: a large stallion with an umber coat and tawny mane. The dark-haired mare who Rarity had mistaken for Shrinking Violet was not a pony at all. Her mane was actually striped, as Rarity had by now realized, in alternating bands of very dark and very light gray, and bunched into thick coils atop her head. She was a zebra, and a rather elegant-looking one at that. She turned to stare at Rarity, displaying an expression of shock and surprise. A much younger male occupied

another chair. He was striped like a zebra from his head to his chest but with hindquarters a solid pony-like shade of gray-green, not unlike the color of laurel leaves.

This was not a laboratory, and Rarity realized that there was no pony botanist to be found here. These three were Khufu's crew, and she realized with dismay that he had tricked her into rescuing them.

“What the hay is this?”

The big stallion was the first to speak. He abruptly stood, pushing aside the small chair atop which he had been resting. Rarity saw a confrontational look in his eyes, and she guessed that he was accustomed to disputes ending in physicalities. His cutie mark was a length of rope with a loop at the end. A lariat, Rarity thought, or perhaps a noose.

“I recognize you!” the stallion said. “You’re that Rarity.” She noticed that he spoke with a rural twang not unlike the accent she associated with Applejack and her family, but perhaps with a slightly more frontier edge to it.

“Have you lost your head?” the zebra mare scolded her compatriot, also rising from her position on the room’s sofa. Her voice was low and throaty, and thick with the exotic accent that all zebras appeared to share. “Rarity is dead.”

Wonderful, another rhyming zebra.

Rarity had never been fond of the way that Zecora, the potioneer living near Ponyville and the only example of the species Rarity knew personally, spoke solely in rhyming couplets. It was a ridiculous way to communicate. More irritating was the fact that this zebra was exceedingly beautiful: she was lithe and slender without appearing too sinewy. Even the simple act of standing had been accomplished with swift and subtle grace. The mare wore none of the gold rings and bangles that Rarity associated with Zecora, and her striped mane and tail were gathered into long, beautiful coils, a style Rarity was certain no magic would allow her to replicate with her own hair. The mark on this mare’s flanks, dark lines forming broken concentric rings, interspersed with straight lines radiating outward, was very similar to the enigmatic spiral mark Zecora bore. These markings were no doubt very meaningful to zebras, but unlike a pony’s more obvious cutie mark, the elegant mare’s mysterious markings gave Rarity no hint as to her special talent.

“Yeah, and Rarity was a lot prettier than this pony,” the young half-zebra deadpanned. He spoke with no trace of the mare’s accent, and he had made no effort to rhyme his speech.

The youth’s words caused Rarity to bristle and flush with embarrassment, reminding her of how hideous she must appear to the trio before her, especially in comparison to the beautiful zebra mare. In fact, she was fairly certain that if a large mirror were placed in front of her at that moment, she would suffer a nervous breakdown. She was a sopping mess, she knew, and her limp hair had bits of pond scum and stringy green lake plants

stuck in it. Any hint of makeup was long gone, and it was nothing more than a rare stroke of good fortune that she had opted to replace her temporary false eyelashes with semi-permanent ones before leaving for the race. They were the only hint of beauty that remained, however unnatural they might be.

That she seemed to be standing in somepony's living room only made her feel more awkward and out of place. It was one thing to stage a dramatic rescue of an imprisoned scientist in a secured laboratory looking this dreadful, but it was something else entirely to track mud all through a pristine house and wind up dripping wet in a puddle of muck on a rather tasteful Camelonian area rug.

Besides her appearance, Rarity had another reason to feel humiliated. She had been completely and utterly *had* by Prince Khufu. Instead of Shrinking Violet, the one pony who could help her save Blueblood, Khufu had fooled her into seeking out his weapons merchant compatriots. Without Doctor Violet, Blueblood had little chance of survival, and if it turned out that Blueblood died because of this betrayal, nothing would get in the way of her wrath.

She had to say something to these three, but she struggled to formulate an introductory statement. With every second she continued to stand dumbly in place in her growing puddle of swamp water, she was certain she was losing a bit more of their respect and interest.

"I'm pretty sure that's her," the large stallion said. "She—"

"Quiet!" Rarity shouted. "Be quiet! I *am* Rarity."

The beautiful zebra mare muttered something in a language Rarity did not recognize—perhaps a curse—before addressing Rarity in Equestrian. "How can this be true? The griffons' collaborators killed you!"

"They tried, but I survived, and so did your Prince Khufu. He sent me here." All three of the equines that comprised Rarity's audience pricked their ears up at the mention of their employer's name. "He had been left for dead, but I saved his life."

"Khufu, you say?" The big, umber-coated stallion's eyes shined with interest. "Heh, I knew that old so-and-so wouldn't go down easy."

"But how did you come to be here? This is all a trick, I fear," the zebra mare said, eyeing Rarity suspiciously. The younger half-zebra only stared sullenly, his dull expression inscrutable.

“Khufu sent me here to ... rescue you.” That was true enough, Rarity supposed. “I swam across the swamp, as should be plainly obvious. The two guards who were posted outside are tied up on top of the building at the moment, but I imagine that fact will not continue to be true for very much longer.”

The earth pony stallion spoke up again. “Huh. Well, it’s obvious that you’re all wet, but it seems a mite far-fetched that you managed to swim here, what with the jagugars in the water. They’re real quick to bite anything that takes a dip, and you’d look a right tasty morsel to one of them big fish. As it is, you barely got a mark on you, apart from a few bruises.” The stallion scratched his stubble-covered chin with the edge of a hoof. “Add that to the fact that by all accounts you’re supposed to be as dead as a doorstep, and you can begin to see why your story sounds a bit fishy, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

Jagugars? Rarity’s memory flew back to her swim across the swamp, and the feeling of something bumping against her body and legs. She shuddered. Had the fish been present all along, and she had simply been lucky? She remembered the pink pearl dangling from her neck on its strand. Could it truly be a protective charm? She supposed she would have to find out in the process of getting back across the swamp with these three. But first, she needed to know if there was still a chance for Blueblood.

“I am most definitely not dead, and I assure you that I did indeed cross that swamp.” Rarity paused. Why was she even attempting to justify herself to these three? “It matters not a whit whether you believe me, as I have no time to waste convincing you. Just answer me one question, Mr. ...”

“Buckaroo. My friends call me Buck.”

“Alright then, Mr. Buckaroo, the question is this: do you want to leave this place or not?” Rarity looked at the others in turn. “What about the rest of you? The presence of guards outside indicates that you are not exactly honored guests at the moment. I can help you get out, if you tell me what I need to know.”

“Hmm. Well, ever since Zolo turned on us, we’ve been stuck under house arrest in this little tropical chateau,” Buckaroo said. “I reckon they’re just keepin’ us around ‘til they find where Khufu hid the last big payment we received. S’pose they don’t feel like honorin’ their debts no more. Course, Khufu wasn’t gonna tell ‘em where to find the money, so they reckon one of us’ll talk.”

“Though it may give the griffons fits, we know not where Khufu hid the bits,” the zebra added.

“Well, I do not care about your money,” Rarity said. “What *I* need is to find a pony named Shrinking Violet. I was told she would be here.”

“Violet?” Buckaroo repeated, screwing up his face in what Rarity could only perceive to be a mixture of surprise, bemusement, and disgust. “What do ya want with her, and why’d you think she’d be here of all places? That mare’s nutty as a hearthcake. ‘Sides, she’s workin’ for them.”

“What? Working for whom?” Rarity asked, confused.

Buckaroo laughed. “I suppose you really must be on the level if y’all don’t even know about wacky ol’ Violet. Can’t imagine no griffon spy would think to ask about somethin’ like that. She’s workin’ for Karroc and his band of goons. I guess she didn’t feel like she was gettin’ enough support from Canterlot to keep up her research, so she decided to help out these griffons on the sly in return for a better lab. Karroc believes her crazy flower juice is going to make him and his little army unstoppable.”

Rarity was taken aback at the revelation that Doctor Violet was willingly cooperating with the griffons. Khufu must have known this, and sent her here anyway, solely for the benefit of his little rogues gallery here. The camel’s trickery aside, she had no choice now but to find Violet, wherever she may be.

“Traitor or not, I need to find her. She can teach me the secrets that will allow me to use the Badge of Courage orchid to help my injured friend. Please, tell me where she is.” The situation was growing desperate, and the need to find Violet outweighed the danger that these unknown equines would deduce that Blueblood was still alive and try to use that information as a bartering chip.

“There is no trick to the Bloodflower, simply swallow, and enjoy its healing power,” the zebra mare said.

“Come again?” Rarity asked, staring wide-eyed at the other mare. A sinking feeling was rapidly developing in her stomach.

“You just eat ‘em,” Buckaroo flatly stated. “Ain’t no secret.”

Rarity made a small choking sound as she felt her throat close up. “Ahem. Ah, I’m sorry. Could you please clarify this for me.” She paused to cough weakly. “What you are saying is that one merely has to pluck the flower and eat it for the healing effects to manifest.” She could feel an involuntary muscle twitch on the left side of her face.

“You got it,” the pony stallion confirmed. “Just eat it within five or six hours after you pick it, that’s the rule. The thing only works on some kinds of injuries, though. The griffons tried using them to bring back prisoners they tortured, so they could torture them some more, but the flower didn’t work. Maybe the prisoners didn’t want ‘em to work. Magic is strange like that.” He shrugged.

“Simply pluck, chew, and swallow. Nothing more than that,” Rarity said slowly. It was all she could do to keep a cork on the bottled scream of rage that was building up inside her. This entire exercise had been completely pointless. She could have nabbed a flower, trotted back to Blueblood, and been done with the whole business. Silently, she cursed the moment she had ever laid eyes on the humpbacked deceiver who had put her in this predicament. She closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and slowly let it out.

Another thought occurred to her. What if these three were the liars? Her instinct to trust was strong, but recent events had eroded it bit by bit. Anypony with an agenda, it seemed, would not hesitate to lie unflinchingly. She had to stop being a patsy.

“You all just want to escape. How can I be sure you aren’t lying to me now, so that I will forget all about Doctor Violet and help you instead?”

“Pardon me, miss, but we don’t have much reason to lie to you. After all, I’m not sure we even need your help,” Buckaroo said. “We sure ain’t goin’ back across the way you got here. Even if that water weren’t chock full of humongous pony-eatin’ fish, I can’t swim.”

Rarity considered the stallion’s remark. She supposed it could easily be the case that three equines used to dangerous living on the fringes of civilized society might believe themselves more capable on their own than with a bedraggled couturier in tow. Furthermore, now that she did not need to locate Doctor Violet, she could simply rush back to the water and make her way to the opposite shore, and from there back to Blueblood. Buckaroo and his friends would then be left to their own devices, and she to hers. That would be for the best, wouldn’t it? They might even prove to be a helpful distraction, should they be discovered. She was prepared to second the notion of parting ways when the zebra mare spoke again.

“I think a unicorn could be of great use, if we are to succeed in busting loose.”

So much for amicably parting.

“I don’t know why I should help you,” Rarity huffed. “You three were part of this whole mess that nearly got me killed.”

“Hey now, we didn’t have no part in that,” Buckaroo protested. “None us knew that you were involved at all. ’Cept maybe Zolo, but he ain’t here with us.”

Khufu had said much the same thing. Either they were all keeping to the same fabricated story, or they truly were ignorant as to the full extent and purpose of the conspiracy. Rarity had to believe that at least they were nominally on the same team, or the trio would have attempted to subdue her immediately in order to turn her over to the griffons and secure forgiveness. She was still prepared for that to happen; her legs were tensed and ready to launch into a gallop.

“What will you do if I attempt to leave my way,” Rarity asked. “Calling the guards would seem a bit detrimental to your own cause, would it not?”

“So you’re going to abandon us, just like Khufu did.” Rarity was surprised to hear the sullen young half-zebra speak.

“Do not impugn his name!” the zebra mare hissed. “Your rash words bring you shame.”

“Ah, if anything, Khufu must be rather devoted to you, or he would not have ... convinced me to help you. He did not think he would be able to evade the griffons and get to you himself,” Rarity said. “He is rather ... pungent, you see.”

“Hoo-woo, ain’t that the truth!” Buckaroo agreed, laughing. “You’re right that we’d be shootin’ ourselves in the hooves if we stopped you, but now that Zee brings it up I can see the benefit of havin’ you along, and I’m hopin’ that you’ll want to help us out freely. I reckon that there’s a long way between here and, well, anyplace you’d want to be. We know this jungle. We can help you survive here and get you out in one piece.”

Rarity considered the stallion’s point. If she did escape, it could very well be the case that she would truly be on her own. There was no guarantee Blueblood was still alive, and Khufu obviously could not be trusted, if she ever saw him again. She also no longer had Blueblood’s compass to point her in the direction of home.

“Assuming I do help you find a different way out of here, do you actually have a plan that doesn’t require you to swim?” Rarity asked, raising a delicate eyebrow. “I find it hard to believe that there is a different way across all that water.”

“Actually, we were discussin’ this very topic when you barged in on us,” Buckaroo said.

“We plan to try our luck within the griffons’ aqueducts,” the zebra added. “Then away downstream we aim to float, once we commandeer a boat.”

“The aqueducts? Oh no no no!” Rarity protested. “After everything else, I absolutely refuse to sneak around some stinking sewer. Let death claim me before filth!” She raised a hoof to her forehead and dramatically mimed a faint, hoping to drive home the gravity of her revulsion.

Buckaroo shook his head. “Naw, ’tain’t no sewer. We got pipes here for that. The aqueducts just bring clean water to all of the different buildings in the complex. There’s a grate just outside that leads down. We were goin’ to dig our way in, but now there ain’t no time for that. They’ll be lookin’ for us soon as the guard changes and they find the previous shift is missin’.”

“Fine,” Rarity declared. “We shall do this your way and traverse the aqueducts. If I am to be your unwilling accomplice, though, I should at least know all of your names. I’m afraid Khufu did not see fit to give you much of an introduction in advance.”

“Oh, sure,” Buckaroo said. “The lovely lady here is Zinzi, and this chatty little fireball is her kid, Zipinoru. Y’all can call him Zips.”

“You’re part pony,” Rarity observed, turning to Zips, who rolled his eyes at the statement of the obvious. The youth, just barely old enough to be considered a young stallion and no longer a colt, then stared silently back at her. She noticed that he had a pony’s cutie mark on one flank, depicting two arrows, with one embedded in the other and splitting it apart. The other side’s mark was a zebra symbol, all wavy gray lines around two overlapping gray triangles. She wondered if the marks were different in meaning, or if they both symbolized the same talent.

“It is true what you see; his father was a pony,” Zinzi confirmed.

“Before you ask, I ain’t his pappy, and Zinzi and me ain’t a couple,” Buckaroo added, holding up a hoof to forestall the inquiry. “I’m a free stallion, just so’s you know.” He winked, and Rarity stared back in confusion. Was he suggesting ... no, that was impossible. She looked too horrible. Then again, he probably didn’t see a lot of pony mares in his line of work.

“The grate is just outside. Now is the time to hurry and hide,” Zinzi stated, ending the moment.

At some point, Rarity was not going to be able to stand listening to these contrived couplets any longer, but for now she held her tongue.

For some strange reason, after everything she had already been through, she did not feel the sense of dread and anxiety she expected about embarking on yet another mad quest, this time into the heart of a hidden paramilitary installation.

She was already bruised, battered, and bitten, and her hair was an absolute disaster. She had been thrown out of an airship, shot at, survived a horrific crash, and nearly been eaten by ravenous monsters. She had trekked through a jungle infested with venomous creatures and swum across a swamp apparently teeming with pony-eating gars. She was hungry, thirsty, wet, and exhausted, but she continued to struggle on.

Whatever happened next, at this point she would just tally it among the litany of horrors through which she had recently lived. If she didn't make it? Well, at least this nightmare would end. The way things were going, though, she had to believe that they would survive, if only so that she could end up in an even worse scenario next.

"Lead on," she said with a sigh. "And please, let this be quick."

"Then let us away, without any delay," Zinzi said.

"Do you not want to take any supplies?" Rarity asked, gesturing encompassingly with a hoof. "You have an entire house here."

Buckaroo answered. "Nah, the griffons didn't leave us nothing. No food, no rope, nothin' for makin' potions, and they sure as hay didn't leave nothin' sharp for Zips here. Now c'mon, let's git!"

Rarity followed the other equines back through the house to the only door, and waited as Zinzi carefully opened it and peered outside.

"There is cause for cheer, the coast is clear!" she announced.

"The grate that leads down to the aqueduct is mighty heavy," Buckaroo said to Rarity. "I can tear it outta there, but I'd be mighty appreciative if y'all can use some of that magic of yours to keep it from crashin' down once I get it up."

"I'll do my best," Rarity replied.

"Right. Okay then, ready when you are, Zee. Follow us, Miss Rarity."

The zebra nodded once, and then burst into motion. Rarity was astonished at the other mare's athleticism as she flung open the door and leapt at least five lengths from a standing start, disappearing into a cluster of leafy plants opposite the house.

"Go!" Buckaroo shouted. Rarity ceased gawking and galloped after the zebra. She dove headfirst into the thicket where the other hid and crouched low. Buckaroo and Zips followed immediately thereafter.

"I still have the key," Rarity whispered. "If I lock the door, perhaps the next set of guards who arrive will not think to check on you."

"Good thinkin', though I reckon they'll figure out what happened soon enough." Buckaroo nodded his approval. Rarity levitated the guard's keyring back to the door, secured it, and then tossed the keys back into the murky swamp adjacent to the house.

"Looky here." Buckaroo indicated the ground with a hoof. "Care to help me with this?" In the middle of the circle of thick vegetation that now provided the equines cover from the prying eyes of any griffons circling overhead, the earth gave way to a thick steel grate. Rarity could smell moist air wafting up from somewhere below. The metal bars of the grate were obviously far too strong and thick to bend or break, and she doubted her magic was potent enough to levitate the entire grate. What did the big stallion want her to do?

The earth pony began to dig into the wet soil around the grate, until he uncovered enough of one edge to allow him to wedge a rear hoof underneath. He then paused expectantly, and Rarity realized that he meant for her to assist with magic. She hastily cast her telekinesis at the heavy hunk of metal. As she suspected, actually moving the thing was far beyond her capacity. She was, however, able to cause it to jiggle and jostle a bit, shaking loose the earth holding the grate in place. Just as she was beginning to doubt whether the grate could be moved at all, she was surprised to see it slowly begin to lift upward. Buckaroo was big, if not quite the largest stallion she had ever met, and extremely lean with sharply defined muscles. Rarity blushed as she found herself staring appreciatively as his flanks and chest rippled from the strain of exertion.

"Now catch it!" the stallion grunted. With one last push, the side of the steel grate that Buckaroo had lifted flew up into the air, and Rarity realized that it would crash down with a mighty bang on the other side if she wasn't able to somehow arrest its descent. She pushed back with all the magical strength she could muster, but it wasn't nearly enough to stop the grate. Some most unladylike phraseology issued from her lips as the metal fell to the ground, but she was relieved to hear only a dull thud. She had slowed it enough.

“A good show. Now, we must go below,” Zinzi declared. Without another word, she jumped confidently into the mysterious abyss that had just been opened. Her son followed silently thereafter. Rarity instinctively backed away from the hole. She couldn’t simply jump in there! She could break a bone or worse, land in something dreadful. There could be anything down there!

“C’mon, we can’t pull that thing shut behind us, so we need to move.” Buckaroo prodded her from behind with a hoof, and Rarity quickly turned to bat the stallion’s foreleg away.

“Do not presume familiarity and definitely do *not* touch me,” she snapped, a bit too quickly.

“It’s only a couple of lengths,” Buckaroo said, declining to apologize. “I’ll jump with ya. We got to go, though. ‘Sides, don’t you wanna get that flower back to that friend you mentioned?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then turn around and get in there!” The stallion slowly began walking toward her, and Rarity instantly realized that there was no way around him. If she tried to evade him by going through the plants on either side, she would be back out in the open and vulnerable. Behind, there was only the gaping hole.

“Ugh. Very well.” She turned, glanced one more time into the foreboding hole, and cautiously jumped in. As promised, she didn’t fall far, and she landed in swiftly flowing water no more than a quarter pony length deep. Inside the aqueduct, the sunlight from above illuminated the area immediately around the opening into which she had jumped, and she could see the walls and floor were cut from huge blocks of limestone. Providing this source of clean water to the various buildings of the sprawling complex had obviously been a monumental task. She was still pondering the underground aqueduct’s construction when Buckaroo jumped down beside her, drenching her with the splash of his landing.

“Thank you for that,” she said, aiming a baleful glare at the stallion.

“Pardon,” he replied nonchalantly. Rarity saw that Zinzi and her son had known to stand well back of the big pony’s likely landing target, and she could have sworn that she saw the first hint of a smile briefly play across the sullen young half-zebra’s features.

The aqueduct was a relatively narrow tunnel, wide enough for two ponies to comfortably walk abreast, but no wider. Beyond the small area beneath the grate, Rarity could see

only darkness in either direction. She cast a basic illumination spell to remedy that situation. Instead of nothing, now she could see that the tunnel terminated in a series of pipes not far away, but in the other direction it stretched on seemingly without end.

“The docks are all the way on the other side of the base,” Buckaroo said. “This way.” He started down the long passage, and Rarity and the others followed behind, trotting as quickly as the water and confined space allowed.

“We would not have been able to easily flee without your light allowing us to see,” Zinzi said to Rarity as the group hurried along.

Rarity supposed that this was the zebra’s attempt at thanking her. The words also made her think. Of course Khufu would have known exactly how his crew would plan to escape, and he also would have known how her particular skill set would help them. As furious as she was with the treacherous camel, she had to admire his craftiness and apparent loyalty to his remaining faithful employees.

“You are quite welcome,” she replied to the zebra hurrying along beside her. “I hate to pry, and I’m sure you get this all the time, but is it really absolutely necessary to speak entirely in rhyme? Surely it must be difficult, if Equestrian is not your first language.”

“She only does it when she’s stressed out or around new ponies that she doesn’t trust yet,” Zips said from behind Rarity.

“I see,” Rarity said, not seeing at all why stress would cause anypony, or zebra, to speak in rhyming verse. She addressed the mare again. “Does that mean you can speak, um, in a more standard fashion, should you choose?” Even in the modest glow of her illumination spell, Rarity could see the zebra flush, clearly embarrassed.

“It is ... difficult ... to speak as you do,” Zinzi replied haltingly. “Zebran is a lyrical tongue, we speak in rhyme from when we are young. Ah ... excuse me please ... what I mean to say is that it is chiseled into our brains that careful rhyming will make our meaning plain.”

“You realize that last bit also rhymed, right?” Rarity asked, her gaze narrowed.

The mare shook her head sorrowfully. “Again I fail this unending travail! Once the danger we pass through, I will attempt proper speech for you.”

“Oh no, do not agonize any further about your manner of speaking on my account,” said Rarity, waving a dismissive hoof before resuming her rapid gait. “I was merely curious.”

So, according to her uncomfortably forthright offspring, Zinzi did not trust her yet. The feeling was mutual, though for the moment Rarity had no choice but to rely on the others if they really were to escape.

Perhaps they could yet learn to be comfortable around one another. She doubted that she could get over her intimidation at the zebra's beauty, though. At least, not until she had access to a hairbrush, shampoo, and a makeup kit again.

She picked up the pace to move closer to Buckaroo, crowding next to him in the narrow passageway. "So, we're stealing a boat, is that it? Won't the griffons notice and give pursuit? I *would* like to know more about this grand scheme of yours before I throw my life away on it."

"Well, we ain't exactly stealin' it, and it ain't *exactly* a boat, but yeah, that's right," Buckaroo said over his shoulder. "This is Zips' plan, though, maybe y'all ought to ask him."

"Ah, no offense, but he does not exactly seem the most talkative sort."

"Huh? Oh!" the stallion laughed. "I reckon that's so. He's a retirin' young feller, he is." Buckaroo chuckled again. "Alright, I'll fill you in as best I can. This here aqueduct eventually passes under every building in the whole complex. Iffin we follow it all the way, we'll end up at the loading dock at the end of the canal that runs through the base. That's where the water that keeps this place hydrated enters, so that's where the current begins. Now the griffons have this whole system of barges to move stuff from building to building under cover, which makes sense for a hidden factory. They tug 'em upstream to the dock, and then just let 'em float back downstream 'til they get where they was goin'."

"You plan to abscond with a barge then?" Rarity asked. "I don't see how that makes it any less likely that the griffons will chase us down."

"Not one barge, we plan to cut loose *all* the barges, plus make a heap of commotion on the side. With so many of 'em floatin' away downstream, those featherbrains won't be able to pick the one we're hidin' on to tow back."

"All predators are the same," Zips piped up, still sounding bored and disinterested. "Give them too many targets and they can't pick one."

"Though what my son says is right, we will still keep out of sight," Zinzi added.

Rarity had to admit that the plan sounded plausible, if not particularly straightforward or foolproof. “What if they are already looking for us when you cut the barges loose?” she asked. “What if they are already searching for us now?”

“That might not be such a bad thing,” Buckaroo said. “There’s only forty or so griffons managin’ this whole operation, plus another couple dozen to crew that monster airship. The more they’re already dashin’ around helter skelter when we make a break for it, the better.”

“Provided that they do not succeed in finding us,” Rarity pointed out.

“That goes without sayin’, but they won’t look down here. Ain’t ever seen a griffon what would get his fur or feathers damp if he didn’t have to, not to mention that they don’t know their way ‘round down here like we do. Don’t forget that we were here while all of this was bein’ built.”

“I wish I could share your opti—” Rarity stopped mid-sentence as Buckaroo turned his head and held up a hoof in warning. Up ahead, another grate let light in from above, and Rarity could hear loud voices filtering down from the surface.

“How much longer before we can feast on ponies instead of kowtowing to them? If we have to go through this one more time, I may just slit that arrogant pegasus’ throat myself.”

“Just shut up and guard the door, Blacktip. Do you think I like bowing and scraping, pretending that fool is an honored guest? Do you think I like having to speak this filthy language when they visit, so as not to offend their delicate sensibilities? No. But we have a job to do, unless you want to end up in the stockade with Karrk and Kurlew.”

“Those idiots *deserve* to rot for letting a couple of pampered unicorns get the better of them. Say, do you think the General is gonna tell our little pegasus friend that those two are still alive? After all, it’s *his* fault the girl lives.”

“The less Canterlot knows the better. Now be silent and perform your duty. We are still soldiers, no matter how far from home we may be.”

Rarity’s eyes grew wide as she listened to the griffons’ conversation. A pony was visiting the base—a pegasus, who these griffons blamed for failing to kill her. There was only one stallion who fit that description, but what was Colonel Tempest doing here? He should be with Fancypants, probably back in Canterlot by now. How she wished she could be a fly on the wall, and learn how and why Tempest had come!

“I know of whom they speak,” Rarity whispered quietly. “Tempest is the pony who threw me overboard during the storm. If he is here, it must be to meet with General Karroc about the next phase of their plans. We should try to learn more about the meeting.”

“This is not our worry. To escape, we must hurry,” Zinzi whispered back.

Buckaroo held up a hoof again to silence the mares, and beckoned the group forward away from the grate. It would not do, Rarity realized, for the griffons to overhear them.

“This may be my only chance to learn the full scope of the plot against my country,” Rarity said. “I came all this way to free you, the least you could do is help me try to discover what the conspirators are discussing. This aqueduct travels beneath the building those guards are protecting, does it not? I’m positive that Tempest and Karroc are inside there right now.”

“Getting sidetracked is a waste, we must move forward with all haste!” Zinzi said quickly, shaking her head.

“Now hold on, Zee,” Buckaroo began. “You know how upset the boss is about these griffons plannin’ to attack after they promised peace. Now that we know there’s ponies involved, ain’t you a little curious as to what’s really goin’ on? I may be a wanted stallion back in Equestria, but I’m still a pony. I agree with Miss Rarity. We should investigate, so long as we’re down here. Zips?”

The youth shrugged.

“I believe that is another point in my favor,” Rarity announced triumphantly. “Buckaroo, try to find any ventilation openings into this building. If we are lucky, we may be able to overhear something. I promise that this will not take long.”

Not far ahead, the quartet arrived at a fork in the underground aqueduct. Rarity followed behind as Buckaroo turned and led the way down the left branch of the tunnel. The air here tasted stale, and a faint musty smell emanated from somewhere. Whereas before there had been open air above them, Rarity knew that they now walked beneath one of the large buildings scattered about the complex. If Karroc was here, this was likely the griffon general’s headquarters.

The group had walked only a few lengths before Buckaroo pointed out a small vent leading into the building above. There was no grate, but the opening was no more than three hooves wide by one hoof tall; it was far too small for a pony to pass through it. Nothing could be heard from the chamber above other than the muted whir of far-off

machinery. Moving on, the equines passed two more of the tiny vents without incident. Rarity was disappointed. They had to be very close to the far side of the building at this point, and it appeared as though her little venture would prove fruitless.

Then, the unmistakable sound of angry voices echoed in the underground chamber. This was it! Rarity raced ahead, shoving past Buckaroo in her eagerness to reach the next vent. She let the glow from her horn fade, turned toward the opening in the stone wall, and swiveled both ears forward to capture every word being spoken above. There was no question as to the identity of the speakers.

“So, you have failed to beat the drums of war hard enough. Or, your employer is perhaps not the charismatic leader he believes himself to be,” Karroc said, his rich baritone resonating even in the aqueduct below. “Either way, it is not my problem.”

“It’s you worthless crossbreeds who’ve failed,” Tempest furiously retorted. “Again! You were supposed to make it a gruesome and horrifying murder. Instead, all we have is a missing airship, and one Element Bearer dead from a tragic accident, which I took care of myself! This is not exactly the cause for military intervention you promised us, Karroc. For all I and anypony else knows, the Duke may even still be alive!”

“Please. Regardless of the present location of the Duke’s airship, the only reasonable inference to draw from the known facts is that Graywings murdered Blueblood and stole his precious *Alicorn* to deliver the engine back home. My griffons cleaned up Graywings’ ship and left it for your search parties to find, empty.” Karroc sounded dismissive, if not scornful.

“It’s not enough, Karroc. You promised a body. Find the body, so that I can present it to Equestria. Everypony needs to hate you like I do if there is to be war.”

“And if the jungle has claimed the body? What then?” Karroc asked. There was a certainty to his question, as if the answer was foreordained.

“You keep to the plan,” Tempest stated grimly. “Regardless of whether you find Blueblood, you are to use the weapon over Gallopoli. You are to leave nothing standing, and then you are to begin raiding the South. Equestria will have no option but war then, and the griffons will have no choice but to join you. I consulted the stone, and she tells me that it is already being recharged. You can move out on the third day.”

Rarity struggled to stifle a shocked gasp, and nearly missed Karroc’s next words.

“And the Princesses will stand aside, or so you ponies keep saying,” the griffon stated, half-questioningly.

“They won’t fight. They don’t dare, after what happened when Luna gave in to her dark side. Our sources close to Celestia report that she has already made plans to allow mortal ponies to lead in her stead should she be unable to prevent conflict. After all, it is we who must bear the losses of war. It is we who stand to lose, or gain, everything.”

“What if the other seizes power instead?”

“He won’t. We’ll be sure.”

“Good. You must know how eager I am to destroy the hive of idle waste that is Gallopoli,” Karroc stated. “It will be a true joy. And then, pegasus, then I will come for you and yours.”

“Know your place, crossbreed!” Tempest shouted. “Once my lord is king, the war must end one way or the other. Do you forget that we control your great weapon? How do you plan to harness the stone without magic?”

“Then I will enjoy wreaking as much havoc as I can until he seizes the throne,” Karroc said, almost gleefully. “Perhaps I will even force you to try to stop me, even without the weapon under my control.” Rarity could imagine the rapacious look in the griffon’s eyes.

“If you want those concessions at the border, you’ll hold to the deal. If not, then I shall take pleasure in running you through myself. I may not crave fresh meat like you beasts, but my lance thirsts for blood, and it has not tasted griffon in many years.”

“Do not jest, pony. You could never best a griffon, not with an entire squadron of your pitiful ilk.”

“You’re wrong. Let’s see if I can refresh your memory. After all, you were there, all those years ago in the mountains. Perhaps you remember the scandal when a pegasus cloud scientist went missing? Perhaps you also remember a griffon scout disappearing in the wake of that tragedy? The scientist was my wife, and your worthless scout I gutted was just my first taste of revenge. Know that I will not be satisfied until your despicable race is gone from this world forever.”

“I remember,” Karroc said coldly. “The mountain pass was my command. You know, many of the loyal griffons I flew with then are here on this base now. Perhaps I can ask around and find out which of them made a meal of your dear wife, so you can complete

your revenge today? Perhaps it was even ... me. Yes, my little pony, I do recall enjoying a particularly succulent meal of braised mare's leg. Maybe that was just a prisoner of ours, or maybe not. It's been so long, and I've dined on so many deliciously unfortunate ponies." Karroc's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, and Rarity could barely make out the words. "The best part is sucking out the marrow, after you snap the bones. Fortunately, pegasus bones are easy to snap."

"I'll kill you!" Tempest bellowed. "I'll kill all of you!"

Rarity cringed at the sound of a mighty crash that reverberated through the underground tunnel, like heavy furniture being overturned. A series of grunts and exclamations of pain followed, before being replaced by heavy breathing.

"There will be time enough to kill each other later, pony," Karroc rasped, obviously recovering from having had the wind knocked out of him.

"If not during the war, then soon after," Tempest promised between heaving breaths.

Rarity heard the sound of a door opening and a clatter of activity above, as well as the sound of talons skittering across the stone floor.

"General!" a new voice croaked.

"What is it?" Karroc snapped.

"It's Khufu's team. They've escaped!"

Rarity felt a sharp jab. She could just see the angry eyes of a zebra glaring at her in the darkness.

"I should never have listened to Zolo and allowed them to live even one more day," Karroc muttered. "Find them!"

"We think they've gone in the water," the third voice stated. "We found this. It seems to be some kind of makeshift breathing device and a disguise, made from the lily pads in the swamp. I am told that zebra is very crafty. They could have easily created any number of these things to aid in their escape."

"If they've gone in the water, they are fish food by now," Karroc stated. "What did the guards see?"

“We found the guards tied up, but they haven’t been able to explain what happened. They claim they were attacked and disabled by vines growing on the building, of all things!”

“Idiots!” Tempest shouted. “Lily stems do not naturally bend at perfect right angles, and vines do not strike on their own. This is unicorn magic! Blueblood lives, and he was here! Find him now!”

“Do not concern yourself, pony,” Karroc said. “We will find these escapees, and Blueblood, if he is among them. If they live, then we will kill them.”

“Just get it done. Use the stone to inform us when you have the body. No more failures! I need to return to the search party and keep steering them away from here—another task that would not be necessary if you had managed to kill Blueblood and leave the body as we agreed.”

Rarity could hear the sound of a hoof kicking a door closed, just before she nearly fell over from a sharp push on her haunches, which she knew had come from Zinzi. If the zebra was suggesting that now was the time to move, Rarity was not inclined to disagree. Tempest might believe that she was dead, but the griffons knew better; now that they had been alerted to the presence of a unicorn, they would be on the hunt for her. She only hoped that they continued to believe that she had taken Khufu’s crew and swum to safety, and did not find the open grate and think to search beneath them. For now, she saw that Buckaroo had already started off down the aqueduct again, and she hurried after him.

“Because of your foolish delay, we may not survive the day!” Zinzi said reproachfully.

“Hardly foolish!” Rarity shot back. “Why, it was practically a miracle that we were able to learn their plans. Did you not hear? They are going to devastate Gallopoli in order to start a war and allow Lord Procyon to seize power. The entire town, gone! Now that we know, I must get back to Equestria so that the Princesses can stop this insanity!”

“Both of y’all, hush now and argue later,” Buckaroo said firmly. “We’re nearly at the end of tunnel, and if there’s guards on the other side, we sure as hay don’t want ‘em to know we’re in here.”

Indeed, shortly after rounding another corner, Rarity could see a light in the distance. Apparently, the aqueduct terminated not in another series of vents, pipes, or grates, but rather was open to the surface. At the opening, the lower half of the aqueduct consisted

of a metal barrier with a few small holes, each of which was covered by a fine mesh through which water poured in. The upper half above the waterline was completely open to the outside world, and Rarity could see a body of water and a floating wooden dock on the other side.

“Alright, now huddle up and let’s make sure we do this right,” Buckaroo whispered. “Miss Rarity, sidle on up over here next to me and take a gander. If your fancy magic is gonna make this work, you need to see what we’re up against.”

Rarity cautiously moved over to stand next to Buckaroo, close to the tunnel entrance, and looked around, quickly finding herself gaping at the panorama laid out in front of her.

There were so many things to look at, it was nearly impossible to take in the entire scene. Immediately in front of her, a wide circular reservoir of crystal clear water had obviously been dredged out of the earth. This was the source that fed the aqueduct, and it was also where the griffons had located a large and complex system of floating docks. Dozens of wooden barges, each ten pony lengths by five, were moored at the docks, as well as an enormous low-slung steam tug that had to be responsible for pulling the barges against the current. Though several of the barges were empty, many were filled with stacks of boxes or piles of equipment. Some were host to mounds of refuse. A few were covered in dark blue canvas tarps, which Rarity supposed were intended to conceal the barges from the air as they floated to wherever they were needed on the base. Half a dozen griffons were visible, loading and unloading the barges.

To her right and somewhat more distant, Rarity could see the beginnings of the river that fed the lake and swamp, and which coursed through the jungle to the *Alicorn*’s crash site. A tall promontory, completely covered in greenery, loomed over the base less about a quarter league away. The side of the promontory was host to a huge black hole, a cave opening so large that it looked like it could swallow half of Ponyville. A mighty waterfall gushed out of the cave, cascading down to the ground in a spray of foam, and swiftly rushed into and through the griffons’ base. The Heavenstone was in that cave, Rarity knew. Her horn throbbed and ached from simply looking up into the vast opening, as it yearned for the incredible gem. It called to her. With difficulty, she forced herself to look away.

Finally, directly opposite the docks and on the other side of the nascent river, an enormous building was constructed directly on and over the water. It was by far the largest and tallest structure Rarity had seen anywhere on the base, though its size, sloped roof, and thick covering of plants and greenery made it appear more like a large hill than

anything unnatural. Inside the building, Rarity could see a number of vessel hulls floating on the water, all of which bore a startling resemblance to *Fancy Free* and Blueblood's yacht *Sacrebleu*. They were clearly the product of another stolen airship design, even though these floating hulls lacked balloons to carry them.

"Are those ...?" Rarity began.

"Yep," Buckaroo confirmed. "That's the shipyard, and those airship hulls are just waiting to be hooked up to balloons. We recently shipped a huge order of lifting gas here from way out west in Bighorn country, and I reckon the griffons could get those ships in the air as soon as they can pull the crews together. In fact, I think I see a couple of balloons already inflated in the back of the hangar there, all tied down and with nowhere to go."

Rarity could see he was right. It seemed that Karroc was not quite ready to field an army on his own, but rather was counting on the different eyries to join together in support once he had forced Equestria into armed conflict. Then, he would have soldiers enough for all the vessels and weapons he was amassing here. There was still time to prevent any of that from happening, but first they needed to escape.

"If I understand this correctly, the plan is for me to untie as many of the barges as I can with my magic, and for us to hide on one of them as it floats away to safety downstream. Is that right?" Rarity asked.

"That's it," Buckaroo nodded.

"Then I certainly hope you have a significant distraction planned, because there is no way all those griffons out there are simply going to allow us to sneak past unmolested."

"We will indeed make quite a splash, and leave here with a bang and a flash," Zinzi affirmed.

"That tug right there is hauling barrels of firepowder, Zinzi's own special recipe," Buckaroo explained. "Tonight they're planning to haul the whole kit and caboodle up to that big cave in the distance. That's where they keep the Big Girl, as I call her. They've been test-firin' the cannons and burnin' up a lot of powder lately, and if they're gonna take her into combat she needs to be fully stocked."

"We're going to blow up the tug," Zips concluded flatly. "Or I am, anyway."

"You are? But how?" Rarity asked, taken aback by the young stallion's proclamation.

“Looks easy from here. They docked a barge twenty lengths away with everything I need on it.”

“Well then, get to it, my boy! Hya!” Buckaroo shouted.

Before Rarity could even object to the stallion’s unnecessary volume, she gasped as the youth leaped clear over both her and the water gate at the end of the tunnel, landing on the floating dock outside. What in Equestria’s name was he doing?

“They’ll surely stop him!” she exclaimed, fighting off panic.

“Nah,” Buckaroo shrugged. “This is what he does. I hope you didn’t think *I* was the dangerous one. I’m mostly the cook.”

Zips kept his body low to the dock and covered ground swiftly, though without making any discernible noise. Rarity gasped again as he somersaulted through the air and onto the deck of a particularly heavily laden barge. There was no reaction from any of the griffons Rarity could see, who kept toiling away at their dockworker’s tasks. These were not guards keenly alert for anything out of the ordinary, but merely laborers lost in the drudgery of their repetitive jobs. On the barge where Zips had alighted, she could see numerous tubs, canisters, bundles of wooden rods and beams, and tall stacks of folded fabrics.

“That right there is a whole mess of supplies for the officers’ quarters they’re settin’ up. Bits and pieces to build furniture, fancy linens, and plenty of kerosene for the lamps. Sounds flammable, don’t it?” Buckaroo laughed.

Meanwhile, Zips unfolded what appeared to be a large linen blanket from one of the stacks and used his teeth to quickly wrap it around a clay jar. He then pulled a long wooden rod free from a bundle to which it was tied, and again using his strong jaws and teeth, he brought the rod down on the cloth-wrapped jar. The cloth effectively muffled the blow so that Rarity heard nothing above the lapping of water against the docks. Zips then carefully wrapped the cloth around the end of the wooden rod, pausing to look away from his hoofwork and take deep breaths. It must have been a pot of lamp oil that he had broken, she realized. He had made a torch! But how would he light it?

She did not have to wait long to find out. Zips laid the makeshift torch on the deck of the barge and clapped his forehooves together, releasing a shower of sparks that immediately set the torch alight.

“How?” Rarity asked, flabbergasted.

“He wears horseshoes of Khufu’s invention, with a flint on the edge, I should mention,” Zinzi stated.

Rarity could hear an anxious note in the other mare’s voice as she watched her son in action. She understood the maternal concern, but at this point, having watched the solemn young stallion in action, Rarity felt sure Zips knew what he was doing. He grabbed the burning torch in his teeth, leaped back onto the dock, and spun once to build up momentum before letting the flaming missile fly in a high spinning arc. Rarity heard several of the griffons cry out as they watched the torch’s trajectory with beaks agape, having finally realized that something was amiss.

“I saw your son’s cutie mark,” Rarity said to Zinzi. “Might I ask what his special talent is?”

“Accuracy,” Zinzi said simply, not bothering to rhyme. As she spoke the word, the torch landed perfectly amidst the stacked kegs of firepowder on the griffon’s steam tug.

“Yep, that boy’s a deadeye with anything that can be fired or flung,” Buckaroo added. “And ... any second now. Miss Rarity, you may want to think about startin’ to untie those barges.”

At that moment, she was overcome by a deafening explosion and a shockwave that knocked her down and into the water. The blast was so powerful it felt as though it would burst her eardrums, and she flattened her ears to her skull protectively.

Where there had been a large steamboat a moment ago, now there floated a burning hulk and tons of flaming debris. Understandably, the griffon laborers all took to the air in a panic and were now flapping about madly, and a ringing alarm began to sound. The guards who were out searching the waters of the lake would surely be here soon. Though her head was muddled from the blast, Rarity knew she had to act.

She jumped the water gate and landed on the floating dock, with the others not far behind. The barges were all tied to the dock with simple cleat hitches, an extremely basic knot that required mere unwinding rather than complicated untying. Rarity could handle many of these at once. Her horn glowed as she reached out and latched onto as many ropes as she could see, and as each barge lost its connection to the dock, it immediately began floating away with the prevailing current. She kept at it until a small flotilla was on its way downstream. Looking around, she saw that the dock itself was now on fire, and the flames were spreading. There was no more time to tarry.

“Whoa there!” Buckaroo exclaimed. “Leave one for us!”

“That one!” Rarity said determinedly, pointing at one barge that was still covered in its concealing blue tarp. They could hide from the eagle eyes of the guards there. She galloped across the dock and onto the barge before casting off its mooring line. Zinzi and her amazing son followed thereafter, and Buckaroo just made it onboard as the unpowered craft left the burning docks behind. All four then crawled under the tarp and pulled it down behind them. There they waited, and drifted.

Rarity was floating toward freedom, if the escapees turned out to be fortunate enough not to be recaptured, yet she could only feel deeply dissatisfied. She was presently surrounded by equines she barely knew and most assuredly could not trust. She somehow, after everything, still did not have the Badge of Courage flower for Blueblood. Worst of all, these griffons planned to unleash a genocidal massacre against the gentle population of Gallopoli, abetted by traitorous ponies with bloodthirsty ambitions.

All those ponies could lose their homes, or even perish, and there was nopony out here to save them. Thousands of ponies. And then who would check Karroc’s ambition? What if he finally obtained his healing tonic, and Equestria could not stand against his forces? Everypony in Equestria was in mortal danger, but what could she do? Even if she could get the flower and save Blueblood, they would not be able to warn Gallopoli in time! Even with a two day head start they could not outrace Karroc and his evil warship.

Rarity suddenly felt the ends of her lips curl up ever so slightly as a strange, perhaps slightly mad idea took root. It was true that they certainly would not make it to Gallopoli in time on hoof, but what if there was a faster means of travel? What if they could bypass the jungle’s dangerous creatures and treacherous terrain?

What if the *Alicorn* flew again?

The liberated barge floated downstream, its speed and course solely dictated by the river's prevailing current. Hiding on board, under a blue canvas tarp and amidst unmarked wooden crates and pallets of tinned fish, Rarity felt equally at the mercy of outside forces. If the griffons found her here, there was nowhere to flee and no magic spell that would save her. If the escape plan worked, and the explosion and fire at the base proved a sufficient distraction, she would reach freedom, however temporary it might prove to be.

She was still mystified as to how she found herself in this current predicament. Thanks to Khufu's deception, her simple plan to obtain the Badge of Courage orchid had been transformed into a convoluted rescue mission into the heart of Karroc's base. At least this most recent misadventure had not been completely fruitless; not only had she learned valuable information about the conspiracy and gained new traveling companions, albeit of dubious repute, but she had also finally obtained the object of her quest.

In the dim light that sneaked under the edges of the tarp, she stared down at the blood-red bloom lying limply on the deck in front of her. She had risked all of their lives to get it, poking her head out from under the tarp in plain view of any onlooker so that she could use her magic to snatch it from the riverbank as they drifted past. Zinzi had tried to pull her back under, but she had forcefully pushed the zebra away. After everything she had been through, she was not going to return without that flower, even if she doomed them all in the process.

It had been a selfish act, she knew, and not at all appropriate for the mare who purportedly represented the living spirit of the Element of Generosity. Rarity, however, was growing weary of giving, and trusting, and each time being deceived and exploited. Much to her continuing disbelief, the only pony she had encountered since leaving home who had actually proved faithful and true was Blueblood. Even Fancypants, her friend, had secured her participation in the race with an ulterior and highly self-interested motive.

Despite the fact that Blueblood was still needy, whiny, and mostly unlikable, he had risked his life to save her on at least two occasions, and she simply refused to fail him now. She also refused to apologize for the risk she had undertaken in snatching the orchid. Finally, she stubbornly refused to consider acknowledging the possibility that Blueblood's injuries and infection had caught up to him while she was away. He was

waiting for her, and she was keenly aware of her promise to return by nightfall. Already the sun was sinking into the forest.

“It has been long enough. Surely we must be safe,” Rarity ventured to nopony in particular. She could not see well in the darkness, but she knew that Zinzi, Zips, and Buckaroo were there amongst the cargo. “We are clear of the griffons’ base, and we must get to shore before it becomes too dark to do so.”

“How do you intend we get to shore, without a rudder or an oar?” Zinzi asked from somewhere nearby.

“That is no problem at all,” she replied. “I can *make* oars. Mr. Buckaroo, where are you?”

“I’m here, I’m here.” The stallion sounded groggy, as if he had just awoken from a nap. It took a certain kind of pony to nap in the face of mortal danger, Rarity thought.

“Fabulous, now that you’ve had your beauty rest I need you to break one of these crates apart into its individual boards for me.”

“I can’t even see in here, so how’m I gonna do that?” the stallion protested.

“Oh, fine.” Rarity’s horn glowed with bright blue light as she began to peel back the canvas tarp from bow to stern.

“Wait!” Zinzi cried. “That is our only protection! Are you trying to aid the griffons in our detection?”

Rarity ignored the zebra’s protests, and continued to magically haul back the canvas until the barge’s deck was open to the warm air and setting sun. She was, of course, very much aware that there could be unfriendly watchers above, but they could not simply float on forever. She had a promise to keep, and she would have no reference points to find her way back to Blueblood’s resting spot if they went much further. Fortunately, all she could see above the river was a cloudless sunset sky of red, orange, and gold. Either the griffons had given up on the flotilla of loosed barges, or they had never followed.

“There. Now if you would be so kind as to break down one of the large wooden crates.” Packed in along with what had to be thousands of tins of dead fish, the very thought of which turned Rarity’s stomach, were numerous crates. Some were quite small, whereas others were large enough to contain a full-grown stallion. The crates were unmarked, but she did not care what their contents might be. It was the wood comprising them that interested her.

“I’d be a happy pony if you just called me Buck,” the big umber stallion drawled, rising to his hooves on the deck. “Seeing as we’re all friends now.” He flashed a winning smile at Rarity, accompanied by a wink.

Unconsciously, Rarity found herself mirroring the stallion’s smile before she thought better of it. “The crate, Mr. Buckaroo,” she said with urgency, shaking her head to clear it.

“Alright, alright. Everypony stand back.”

Zinzi and Zips hastened to stand next to Rarity, a safe distance away, as Buckaroo chose one of the largest crates, leaned forward to put his weight on his front hooves, and then gave a mighty kick with both back legs. The impact shivered the top half of the crate, smashing one side into fragments, collapsing the top, and causing the other sides to fall away. The crate had been filled with straw as a packing material, and it spilled out over the deck in every direction, exposing some long metal tubes and other mechanical parts that Rarity did not recognize. More importantly, she now had necessary broken boards with which to work.

“Sweet spirits, is that what I think it is?” Buckaroo asked upon turning to see the exposed contents of the crate.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Zips affirmed, walking across the deck to peer at the exposed parts. “The rest of it is probably in the other crates.”

“Looks like what?” Rarity asked. “What is it?”

“I think we just absconded with our former buddy Zolo’s prototype,” Buckaroo replied. “Hehe, this thing has been his life’s work ever since he joined up with Khufu way back when.”

“He called it an Automatic Reloading Cannon. ARC, for short,” said Zips. “No one’s seen it actually work yet.”

“It is a weapon of war most abhorrent, that fires not one bullet at a time, but instead a torrent,” Zinzi explained further.

“I thought it was still just experimental, but they must have been about to cart it up to install it on the Big Girl. Good thing we got it first, because that ship sure as hay don’t need anything else in the way of firepower,” Buckaroo stated.

“It isn’t much good to us, though,” Zips noted. “It’s all in pieces, and it’s too heavy to take along.”

“Then we should push it overboard, into the river,” Rarity declared. “I’ve had enough of cannons and firesticks for a lifetime.”

“Whoa, hey now, not so fast!” Buckaroo stepped between Rarity and the cargo even as her horn began to glow. “Look, I think we’ve all figured out by now that this ‘friend’ of yours is none other than that Canterlot duke Karroc tried to off. Now, I may not be a fan of no entitled noble-types, but I’ve heard that fellow knows his way around a toolbox. If we need to set up camp for a little bit while we decide where to go next, and iffin he can get this thing put together, then it might be just what we need to keep the griffons off our backs. Plus, if that fellow’s really hurt bad, then he might need some time to recover, even with that there flower.”

Rarity was a bit taken aback at the revelation that Buckaroo and others had deduced that her injured companion was Blueblood, but in retrospect she supposed it was the logical inference. She considered the stallion’s suggestion. It was probably true that Blueblood could figure out how to assemble whatever ugly war machine was packed up in these crates, but she had no interest in abetting the use of such a device, even against Karroc’s griffons. There was a good reason she had wrecked the captives’ firesticks the day prior, after all. These hateful devices had no value beyond causing harm, and unlike Blueblood she did not find them the slightest bit interesting or beautiful. She was about to demand that Buckaroo step aside so she could shove the thing into the river, when Zinzi spoke up.

“Look there at the river’s edge! There is somepony standing amongst the sedge!” Rarity whirled around to look, all thoughts of the weapon pushed to the back of her mind.

“Hello, my friends!” Rarity recognized Khufu’s voice, and sure enough, the camel’s long scarf-covered neck protruded from the tall reedy plants and tufts of marsh grass on the river’s edge not more than fifty lengths downstream. What was he doing here? Her heart pounded as she considered the possibilities. She had sent him to care for Blueblood! What did this mean?

“Khufu! It is truly you!” Zinzi exclaimed, looking delighted at the sight of the camel. Her son and Buckaroo appeared equally thrilled to see their employer. Probably, Rarity considered wryly, because he knew where their money was buried.

At that moment, a pony appeared next to Khufu. He was unmistakable, and the mere sight of him filled Rarity with a tingling sensation of delight that she was completely unable to suppress, despite her best efforts. The feeling, she reminded herself, was not due to the identity of the stallion in question, but merely due to the satisfaction of completing her quest.

“You’re alive!” Rarity exclaimed, punctuating the pronouncement with an embarrassingly girlish squeal.

In fact, Blueblood appeared more than merely alive; he looked the very picture of health, which left her to wonder at the mechanism for his abrupt recovery. Khufu’s presence suggested that he had not only gone to Blueblood as she had asked of him, but had also given him the healing flower, which, as it so happened, would have required no special knowledge or preparation on his part.

“Stay there. We are on our way!” she shouted.

Rarity quickly turned and levitated a few of the larger, more intact pieces of wood that had until recently constituted the side of the crate that Buckaroo had smashed. She merely had to perform a simple modification spell. Changing components into beautiful finished products was, magically speaking, her bread and butter. With a flash and a pop, the broken boards were remade into four elegant wooden oars, complete with round hoof-holds for non-unicorns. She let three of the oars clatter to the uneven deck, and kept the last for herself.

“Come on. Help me paddle over to the river bank!” Rarity prompted, and the others swiftly moved to comply. She pulled her oar through the water with magic while the others used the round openings she had crafted for their hooves, and together they began to alter the barge’s course. It was not easy, given the strength of the river’s flow and the squared-off, unhydrodynamic nature of the watercraft, but they finally ran aground and lurched to a stop not far from where Blueblood and Khufu stood watching. While Buckaroo repurposed the cords that had held down the canvas tarp to secure the barge to a thick tree growing near the water’s edge, Rarity wasted no time in bounding off the deck and onto dry land.

“Never in my wildest flights of fancy did I ever think I would be glad to see you,” she said to Blueblood as she trotted over to him. “But I am.” She had to rein in a giddy impulse to hug, reminding herself with whom she was dealing here. Still, she could barely believe that he was standing in front of her looking as hale as any pony lost in a jungle could hope to be.

“Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but I’ll take it. It’s good to see you too,” Blueblood replied.

“You look well,” Rarity continued. “Very well.” Gone were the makeshift bandages she had crafted, and also missing were the ugly wounds they concealed. Only small, nearly indiscernible bumps beneath Blueblood’s coat marked the locations of his festering head injury and deadly bullet wound.

“Of course I do! I always do. And you look as though you’ve been to the lowest level of Tartarus and back,” Blueblood replied with a smile, causing Rarity to flush with embarrassment, suddenly conscious of how she must appear. Blueblood’s blond mane and tail were mussed and unbrushed, and his white coat was marred by dirt, but he looked ready for a royal ball compared to her.

“I know what you’ve been through,” Blueblood added. “The malodorous but charming Khufu here told me everything: how you rescued him, then gave him the flower with instructions to bring it to me, and then forged ahead to the griffons’ base to rescue his companions. I confess that when he told me what you’d done, I was sure that you would never get out of there. Khufu, however, promised that if we waited by the river you would eventually be along, and here you are. Amazing!”

Rarity found herself at a loss for words. Khufu had indeed plucked a flower and taken it to Blueblood, and of course he had also presented Blueblood with an entirely fabricated version of the day’s events. On the one hoof, his version did credit her with saving Blueblood’s life and a large measure of heroism. On the other hoof, it was a total lie. Before she could decide how to respond, Blueblood continued.

“I know that I was ... not at my best, when you left me, and I’m glad that was not the last time we would ever see each other, because then you would always remember me acting like a pathetic foal. I’m ready now to get back to Equestria. I believe we can stop all of this insanity before anything worse happens than an airship race being ruined.”

“Er, hold that thought for a moment, if you will, and excuse me,” Rarity finally managed. “There is something I have to say.” She turned to look at Khufu, who was standing surrounded by his old crewmates and looking, to Rarity’s eye, too pleased with himself.

“*You*,” she said, pushing past Buckaroo to stand squarely in front of Khufu. She tilted her head back so that she could look him directly in his one remaining eye.

“Lady Rarity,” Khufu acknowledged, his mouth turning up in a broad smile that glinted with gold. “I never doubted that you would succeed. You are true hero; it is fact.”

Without saying another word, Rarity reared back on her hind legs so that she could come closer to matching Khufu’s height, and swung her right foreleg at him as hard as she could. The blow left the top of her leg stinging, and the loose skin of the old camel’s face continued to jiggle for a full second after the impact before finally settling back into place.

“What are you doing?” Blueblood asked, obviously horrified.

“Please, stay out of this!” Rarity admonished, before returning her attention to the camel. “You think that you are just that much cleverer than everypony else, that you can lie and finagle others into doing just exactly what you want. Even after I saved your life, you dared to take advantage of me? I could have been killed on account of your fool’s errand! What then? You would move on with your life, selling your murder machines to the next willing buyer. Would you even lose sleep over it? I am very glad that Blueblood is well, and I suppose I am happy for you that you have your crew back, but I shall never believe another word you say, and I will not become another tool of yours ever again.”

“I knew you could save my friends where I could not, and I knew you would not agree to do so if I told you the truth,” Khufu replied calmly.

“You knew nothing!” Rarity shouted. “You are not a soothsayer or a prophet, no matter how good your instincts are, or how smart you think you are. Yes, I helped your friends after you tricked me into thinking I needed secret information to save Blueblood, and yes, you guessed correctly that you would find us here on the river, but by your own admission you never expected Karroc to be planning to go to war, and you never expected your trusted lieutenant to betray you.”

Khufu said nothing.

“Wait, General Karroc is leading these griffons?” Blueblood asked. Rarity ignored him and continued to stare unflinchingly at the camel.

“*All* of this is your fault, do you know that? All of Karroc’s machinations and all his killing machines are your responsibility, and every innocent pony or griffon who suffers because of him is on you. Next time I dearly hope, for the sake of what conscience you have left, that you will have the stomach to risk your own life, because you certainly won’t be fooling me into risking mine again.”

Rarity turned around, chin held high, only to see that everypony else was staring at her open-mouthed.

“You are right about many things, Lady Rarity,” Khufu finally said, a note of melancholy in his voice. “Zolo blinded me with years of friendship, and Karroc blinded me with money and promise of lasting peace. Yet sometimes my eye still sees clearly, and I have seen always that you are true hero, who can save not only my friends, but maybe even everything and everypony else. It is great burden for you to bear, yes, but you might yet make up for so many of my mistakes.”

“I am *not* a hero. I am just a fashion designer, and I have no interest in perishing because of an old camel’s delusions!” Rarity shouted, eyes flashing. Pausing to catch her breath, she considered the rest of Khufu’s words. “What mistakes are you talking about, exactly?”

“It is story for later, I think. Now, perhaps we should cease our discourse and find shelter for the night.”

“Khufu saved your friend the Duke, what did he do to earn this rebuke?” Zinzi asked.

“Lovers’ quarrel,” Zips offered, shrugging.

“Well, somepony oughtta explain what all the fuss is about,” Buckaroo said.

“I should think it was obvious,” Blueblood said angrily, “but then I do not have the simple mind of a common outlaw. Your friend Prince Khufu lied to Rarity in order to get her to rescue you.” He quickly moved to stand next to Rarity, facing the deposed camel prince. Just as quickly, Buckaroo, Zinzi, and Zips moved to stand next to their leader. “If you ask me, the whole lot of you mercenary-types are no longer to be trusted.”

“Your choice of words is poor, unless you want to feel quite sore,” Zinzi threatened. Next to her, Zips glared daggers at Blueblood. It was a small mercy, Rarity thought, that the youth did not have a real dagger.

“Stop it, all of you!” Rarity said. “My quarrel with Khufu is my business, and his. Besides, he is right. We need to find shelter and, ah, hunker down for the night, as it were.”

“Be calm, my friends,” Khufu addressed his subordinates. After another tense moment, the admonitions seemed to take effect.

“Well, if we plan to get away without leaving a trail, the first thing to do is cut this here raft loose. It’s a dead giveaway that you came ashore here,” Blueblood said, still with a hint of an edge to his voice. Rarity had to admit to herself that she took a certain pleasure in the fact that he had been prepared to defend her. Unfortunately, his present idea was out of the question.

“We cannot,” she stated firmly.

“You’re darn right we can’t!” Buckaroo exclaimed. “We need that cannon!”

“We actually need the whole barge,” Rarity said. “I would like to explain why, but my reasons are rather complex. For now, perhaps we can simply throw the tarp back on it and cover the entire thing with dirt and vegetation.”

“Cannon?” Blueblood asked, sounding interested. “What kind of cannon?”

“Can we please worry about that later, and cover the barge now?” Rarity asked impatiently.

“I agree with Lady Rarity,” Khufu volunteered, his words commanding the attention of his crewmates. “My friends and I will help conceal barge.”

With Khufu’s endorsement of the project, the work progressed swiftly. Rarity resecured the tarp over the barge, and then directed the others in spreading plants, dirt, fallen branches, rocks, and debris over the entire vessel, so as to create the appearance of an extension of the riverbank. In the end, she was satisfied that the work would fail to draw the attention of any but the most perceptive griffon scout.

The presence of the barge thus obfuscated, the group adjourned to a secluded spot a fair distance into the jungle proper, and a sense of calm settled over them. Rarity still felt uneasy, but the diminished tensions were a welcome improvement over the standoff at the water’s edge. Blueblood distributed most of what was left of the food and water supply he had retained, and then all decided it was a wise idea to get some sleep.

“Blueblood,” Rarity said, walking up next to the stallion while the others worked on arranging a hollow space under some tree roots for sleeping. “Before, you said that you were ready to get back to Equestria, so that you could stop what your brother and Karroc are trying to do.”

“Yes. I believe I said that just before you treated Prince Khufu to a hoof to the face. I haven’t been so surprised by a pony since, well, probably since the last surprising thing you did.”

“Well, now I am going to need you to surprise me, like you did when you took that bullet.”

“How so?”

“I need you to keep a promise.”

“And keeping a promise would surprise you? How little do you think of me?” Blueblood asked, sounding hurt.

“This is not going to be easy to keep,” Rarity cautioned. “I told Khufu I was not going to let him put me in danger again, but it was the lying I was angry about, more so than the risk. Tomorrow morning I am going to propose a plan that will sound absolutely insane, and absurdly dangerous, but I promise you it is not insane. It is, in fact, exactly what we *must* do. Equestria itself depends on it.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is?” Blueblood asked.

“Tomorrow,” Rarity said, yawning. “Not tonight. I don’t want you to dwell on it. Right now I need you to promise that tomorrow you will support it—that you will support me—no matter how crazy and desperate I sound.”

“But then you will owe me again,” Blueblood pointed out.

“No,” Rarity replied. “I want you to support me ... as a friend this time. That means no score-keeping.” She looked Blueblood in the eyes, which registered complete surprise at her words.

She could barely believe what she was saying herself. If the others had not been here, or if they had been more trustworthy, then she never would have so freely offered Blueblood her friendship. Now, however, she was outnumbered by a group whom she could not trust, and who had no particular loyalty to Equestria. She desperately needed a friend and ally, and if that pony had to be Blueblood, then there was nothing to be done about it.

Blueblood appeared to be tongue-tied; his mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words came out. Rarity wondered if he was going over a series of offensive responses, so

as to choose the best one. “Me, befriend a commoner?” “I suppose I need an entourage, even out here.” “I knew all along you how badly you wanted me.” She was more than prepared to retaliate physically for the second time that day, should circumstances so dictate.

“I promise to support you, insane or not,” he finally said.

Rarity smiled, and it felt like the first genuine one in ages. “I shall hold you to that, because this is going to sound pretty insane.”

She turned and walked over to the nest-like area where the other equines were laying down to sleep. Khufu had found his own spot some distance away. Once she lay down, Rarity was unconscious almost immediately, and that night, her sleep was mercifully dreamless.

She awoke the next morning to the pleasant sensation of resting against something warm and soft, and for the briefest of moments, Rarity imagined that she was curled up in her own plush blankets back home in Ponyville. It was only when she half-opened her eyes and saw that she was staring into something white and hairy that she understood the reality of her present circumstances.

“Gah!” Rarity’s eyes snapped open fully at the realization that she was resting against Blueblood’s chest, with one of her forelegs draped across him. She instantly withdrew the offending limb and rolled over and away from the unicorn stallion.

“Eeee!” Now she found herself nose to nose with Buckaroo, who lay next to her with his mouth agape and tongue lolling out. As she sprang to her hooves, horrified, she knew that the image of being sandwiched between stallions while looking an utter fright would haunt her for the rest of her days. Surely, though, nothing untoward had happened! Of course not!

Upon standing and rapidly backing away, Rarity saw that Zinzi and her son were packed in just as tightly, sleeping next to Buckaroo on his other side. She finally remembered how they had all jammed themselves into this hollow space amidst giant tree roots, and how she had been too tired to care about the identity or proximity of the ponies adjacent to her.

She, however, had certainly not planned to engage in any nocturnal snuggling, and most definitely not with Blueblood! It was a minor miracle that the others were asleep, and

that nopony else had seen her in such a compromising position. Rarity suddenly started, glancing around in every direction. Where was Khufu?

“Early riser, I see, like myself,” the camel said. He was standing directly behind her, of course. She saw that he had gathered a number of bright purple fruits and arranged them on a tree stump. “Though you looked so cozy.”

“You will not speak of anything you saw here again,” Rarity ordered, glaring at the one-eyed camel prince. “Ever.”

“I could give my word, but I do not believe you trust me any longer,” Khufu replied.

“Just keep quiet,” she said through pursed lips.

“Others awaken now.”

Doubtless due to her horrified yelps, Rarity saw that all four of the other equines were now stirring. The group quickly assembled.

“Since you seem to believe you are in charge, perhaps you’ll tell us why we covered the barge?” Zinzi asked.

If the zebra language was really all singsong rhyming, as Zinzi had intimated earlier, Rarity had no idea how they had managed to avoid killing each other off out of sheer annoyance. She rubbed her right temple with a hoof and reminded herself not to say anything culturally insensitive before she began to speak.

“Alright, yes, I owe all of you an explanation. I have a plan, you see, and I think it is a rather good plan at that, but it requires us to go further downstream.”

“Downstream? I thought y’all wanted to get back to ponykind, and that’s exactly the wrong way to get to Equestria,” Buckaroo said.

“Hmm, I suspect your plan is quite bold,” Khufu said. “Perhaps best not to hear on empty stomach. Please, everyone, have some breakfast while lady unicorn explains. Jungle plums are quite succulent this time of year.” He leaned over and took one of the purple fruits in his mouth, and then sat back on his haunches as bright green juice trickled down his chin.

“Yes, it is bold,” Rarity agreed. “Downstream is indeed the wrong way to get to Equestria, or it would be if we planned to walk back. But we do not have time to walk. You see, I

propose we fly.” She paused for dramatic effect and tried to gauge the reactions of her audience. Khufu was inscrutable, while Zinzi, Zips, and Buckaroo appeared confused. Blueblood’s face bore an expression of total disbelief. She hoped that he remembered his promise. “If we continue back downstream, we will eventually reach the crash site of the airship *Alicorn*. I believe that airship can take us home.”

“But why did you not leave before, if your airship is in condition to soar?” Zinzi asked.

“Well, it is not quite airworthy just yet. Blueblood, er, Duke Polaris, whatever, why don’t you explain?”

“M-me?” Blueblood stammered. “Oh. Well, I suppose the ship is mostly in one piece. The balloon is shredded, and the hull has a few large holes in it. The deck is demolished. But, uh, I suppose it still mostly looks like an airship.” He shrugged. “I suppose that if we had time to work on the ship and were able to repair the balloon, and we found a supply of lifting gas, and I got the engine running smoothly, then she could fly again.” The stallion stared at Rarity cockeyed as he spoke, as one would scrutinize an outlandish piece of modern art that one was pretending to appreciate and understand. He obviously had no idea how she planned to accomplish her proposal, but she had to give him credit for playing along.

“Exactly!” she said. “The balloon can be repaired and the hull patched. The only real obstacle is obtaining the lifting gas to get the ship airborne, and I know where we can find all that we need.”

“You mean back at the base?” Buckaroo asked incredulously. “You want to steal it from the griffons? Now *that* is crazy talk. It wouldn’t be like sneakin’ through the aqueduct, you’re talkin’ about thievin’ right out from under their beaks.”

“In fact I do mean to steal from the griffons,” Rarity said. “You said that they only recently received a large shipment of gas. That shipment is our target. The *Alicorn* is not particularly waterproof, I understand, but I believe she can survive a single trip up the river as a boat. Inside the griffon base I saw several airship hulls floating on water without a problem, and all of them were copies of your designs, Blueblood. If these slapdash copies float, then a ship made to your exacting specifications surely should. We shall sail in, get the gas, and lift off.”

“Sounds suicidal,” Zips observed.

“My son is right, we are not prepared to fight,” Zinzi added. “The griffons have firesticks and claws that rend. They will tear our balloon to pieces before we can ascend!”

“That’s *if* they somehow didn’t notice us sailin’ all nonchalant-like up the river, past their checkpoints, and into the base. It ain’t possible!”

“I am certain that she has thought about all of that,” said Blueblood, glancing at Rarity with a pained expression that spoke volumes about what he really thought of her idea. “Now, if you will kindly hear her out.”

“Yes, I have considered your concerns, thank you very much,” Rarity said. “I know it will not be easy, but as I see it we have no other choice. You three,” she indicated Zinzi, Zips, and Buckaroo, “know what is at stake if we cannot at least warn Equestria of what is coming.” Rarity could hear the emotion creeping into her voice as she spoke the last.

“What is it?” asked Blueblood.

“When we were escaping the base, I managed to overhear Karroc’s plans. He’s planning a terrible attack for the day after tomorrow. He is—he’s going to destroy Gallopoli! We cannot simply stand by while this crime is perpetuated, not while there is even the faintest hope that we could save those ponies!”

All the mirth had drained from Khufu’s face as he looked stonily up at Rarity from his seated position. “How?” he asked.

“My brother is going to aid him in using the Heavenstone to call down another storm,” Blueblood guessed, his tone grim.

“He is,” Rarity said. “Karroc will take his airship, with the Heavenstone and I am certain most of his soldiers as well, and fly to Gallopoli. I believe that the stone is more than just a magical gem; it connects with ponies. I am sure it has tried to do so with me every time I have gotten close to it, and I believe that Windlass has made a connection with the stone that can span the continent. Even though she is probably off with Fancypants, she will use her talent with weather to empower the stone and bring forth a storm that will level the town.”

“Dear Celestia ...” Blueblood said softly.

“You see, we *have* to fly out of here. If we try another way, we will have no hope of reaching Gallopoli in time to help those ponies. If we time our arrival at the griffons’ base for soon after Karroc has left, we should be able to make our way past the remaining

garrison, take the lifting gas, and flee. Then, it will simply be a matter of reaching Gallopoli first. The *Alicorn* is a fast airship, so I've heard."

"But why attack Gallopoli?" Blueblood asked. "Those are just ordinary ponies. There isn't even a detachment of the Royal Guard to protect them."

"As if *you* don't know why," Buckaroo snorted. "Seems it's your no-good brother behind the whole thing. He's tryin' to use these griffons to start a war so he can step in and take over when Celestia and Luna don't want to fight, and Karroc's all too happy to oblige. The more heinous the attack, the more likely it is to rile up Equestria into a fightin' spirit."

"I don't understand. I simply cannot imagine my brother being behind something like this. It's unbelievable!"

"Believe it," said Zips.

"If we repair the *Alicorn* we will at least have a chance of alerting the ponies of Gallopoli in time for them to flee, even if we cannot stop Karroc," Rarity said. "There will only be a few griffons left behind, and perhaps we can even elude their detection if we are careful enough. Please, there is no other way. I know you are not all ponies, and it may be that you are not particularly overfond of Equestria, but we all have hearts, do we not?"

A long pause followed Rarity's speech before somepony finally spoke up.

"Hmm, you know, if we got the ARC weapon installed on that airship of yours, we might have a good shot at keepin' the griffons away while we gas up and hightail it outta there," Buckaroo mused.

Rarity seized on the momentum of at least one pony's tenuous support to continue to press her case. "Yes, the arch thing! Do that, if it means you will join me! I do not even care what it is. I will be responsible for repairing all the damage to the airship's balloon. Blueblood, you believe you can get your ship ready to fly if we patch it up, don't you?" She batted her eyelashes, consciously overlooking the fact that the overall effect was probably more ghastly than endearing in her present condition.

"Y-yes, okay," Blueblood said, not at all convincingly. "The propeller is too large to use in this shallow river, and one strike against the rocks would destroy it. If we can get her watertight and floating, though, then I suppose the maneuvering fins could work as paddles, but I cannot be certain they could handle the stress of the paddling motion in

water. The ship is designed to encounter no more resistance than air provides.” Finally, he caught the look Rarity was sending his way. “That is to say, I’m certain it will work.”

“Your wild scheme is all but certain to bring us down, and even if we succeed we cannot save your pony town,” Zinzi said. “I cannot agree to what you plan to do. It is all our doom if we go with you.”

“We might not be able to save the town, but we could at least give those poor ponies a chance to evacuate!” Rarity replied. “Then we will fly straight to the Princesses, and they will be able to have the pony conspirators arrested. Without them, Karroc will be unable to use the Heavenstone, and there will be no war.”

Khufu coughed loudly, causing the others to turn in his direction.

“Will *you* join me?” Rarity asked.

“When first I met Zolo, zebra nations Zanzebra and Zavanna were on verge of war,” Khufu began, causing Rarity to wonder if he’d been paying attention to her at all, or if he had decided this was storytime for some reason. “It was fight over water—who owns rights to Zambezebri river—but it might as well have been over whether zebras light on dark or dark on light; conflict became more important than reason for hating each other. Already fighting had started. Zolo was firesmith in Zavanna, designing cannons and firesticks. I convinced him to make more money by selling to both sides. With each nation equipped with his weapons and able to inflict terrible carnage on other, war never came, and we grew wealthy.”

“We pulled the same trick back in llama country after the rest of us joined up,” Buckaroo noted.

“I thought Zolo understood why I am in business,” Khufu continued, one eye downcast. “He said he created these terrible machines to demonstrate futility of war. Fighting would be too horrible and costly to contemplate. This was my dream, ever since I flee Camelon in shame. Now I know he was after only money.” The camel looked up. “I will join you, my fair lady unicorn. I must. You were right. Ponies who suffer because of Karroc are my responsibility.”

“Thank you, as long as your word is good,” Rarity said. “I choose to believe it is, this time.”

“I’m in if he is,” said Zips. “Mom?”

“It seems you are all in solidarity,” Zinzi stated. “I will go with you, then, Rarity.”

“Wahaha!” Rarity exclaimed triumphantly. “Let us not tarry then. Back to the barge and away we go! We have only two days to ready the *Alicorn*.”

The group quickly devoured the rest of Khufu’s jungle plums and set off. Rarity fell into step beside Blueblood.

“Thank you,” she said. “That must have been difficult, but you kept your promise.”

“A day ago, I would have scoffed and pointed out why your plan is impossible. Two days ago, I would have laughed in your face. Today, I find myself almost excited,” Blueblood said. “The whole world has gone insane, it seems, and by comparison with my brother and the rest of these maniacs, your scheme seems positively mundane. Anyway, you’re right. We cannot give in and do nothing while Gallopoli is blown off the map.”

“Keeping promises, and a promising new attitude to boot,” Rarity said. “Are you quite sure that flower did not affect your mind as well as your body?”

“Maybe it did. When that camel found me, to which I confess he never would have been able if you had not given him my enchanted compass, I was wandering through the jungle completely out of my mind with fever. Khufu said that I was covered in mud, blood, and leeches; where I acquired the latter I do not know. After he jammed that orchid down my throat and I eventually came to my senses, I was able to remember my last lucid thoughts before the fever set in.”

“And those were?”

“You told me before you left that I would have an entire day to come up with reasons why my life was worth saving. I didn’t get a whole day, but still I had enough time. With my own brother out to kill me and my dream of restoring respect to the name Blueblood wrecked along with the regatta, I was ready to give up. Then I thought of you and your friends. You are not descended from royalty, and you are certainly not alicorn Princesses, yet you six represent the spirits of the Elements of Harmony. You are special. What if, I wondered, I could be special too, even apart from my name and my lineage? What if I didn’t need to tie my own destiny to the name Blueblood? I mean, even were I not a prince, I am a pretty amazing stallion.”

“And so modest,” Rarity noted.

"I *never* claimed to be modest," Blueblood continued. "I, however, did come to the conclusion that maybe a pony named Polaris could still add some value to the world, even if the age in which he would have been a true prince among ponies is gone forever. As long as I have a drafting table and a workshop, I thought, maybe I can contribute, even if I never merit my own stained glass window in Canterlot Tower."

"I'm proud of you," Rarity said. "Hearing you talk like that, I no longer feel so bad about my desperation in calling you a friend earlier. I might not even come to regret it. My stars, what is this place doing to us?" She smiled.

"Strange things," Blueblood replied. "Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask, are those bite marks on your flank?"

"Oh, well yes. I suppose the piranhasprites may have gotten in a nibble or two before I escaped them."

"Ah, right. Not camel bites then. I had my suspicions about you and that other prince, all alone out in the jungle."

Rarity did not hesitate a second before giving Blueblood a shove that sent him tumbling to the dirt. She trotted ahead, leaving the stallion to get up and dust himself off. That way, he wouldn't see the little smile playing across her features. Behind her, she could hear Blueblood chuckling.

Back at the river, there were no signs of any griffons in the sky overhead, and the unconcerned calls of the jungle creatures indicated that it was safe to venture out into the open. Rarity quickly ascertained that the hidden barge had survived the night undiscovered and unmolested.

"Huh. I wonder if they gave up lookin'," Buckaroo mused.

"Perhaps your fire caused more damage to the base than we realized," Rarity suggested. "Or perhaps they simply are focused on readying themselves and their airship for war. After all, Karroc may rightly believe that we will have nowhere to escape to once he destroys Gallopoli and begins his campaign of terror against the farming communities in southern Equestria."

"Whatever the case is, I do not fancy meeting any griffons today. We should go," Blueblood said. Rarity was inclined to agree.

With the magic of two unicorns and the physical assistance of the others, the barge was soon uncovered and ready to be set adrift. After rolling back the canvas tarp, Rarity was pleased to confirm that everything was as it had been, right down to the last tin of Osprey's Finest canned minnows. The others then joined her on the barge.

"Here she is," Buckaroo said, tapping a hoof against the exposed surface of the metal part he had uncovered the prior evening. "Just so we're clear, as soon as we come upon your airship, y'all are gonna help me set up this big ol' cannon, right? I mean, y'all wanna be ready if and when the griffons find us, don't you?"

"What is it with you stallions and your firesticks and cannons?" Rarity demanded. "Honestly, you're worse than Blueblood. It's sad."

"Don't you compare me to that sissybritches duke, now," Buckaroo warned.

"Indeed, such a comparison would be most unfavorable to a common ruffian like yourself," Blueblood said with disdain, prompting Buckaroo to take a step toward the unicorn, who held his ground before the big earth pony.

Rarity rolled her eyes as the two devolved into more insults, and she set about untying the knot Buckaroo had used to keep the barge from floating away. After a short burst of magic, they were once again back on the river.

"It seems you have already caused a stir," Zinzi said, appearing next to Rarity. "I foresee trouble may occur."

"Whatever do you mean?" Rarity asked, confused.

"You must see you have caught Buck's attention, and as for the other, I need not even mention. I advise you to end their conflict now, before they have an ugly row."

"Ha ha! That's quite funny!" Rarity replied with a laugh. She certainly wasn't likely to be attracting any romantic interest any time soon. She was a walking disaster on four hooves!

Then again, Buckaroo had shot a few sidelong glances her way, and there *had* been that wink. Whatever relationship she now had with Blueblood was certainly ... complicated. At any rate, it was still impossible for Rarity to believe that anypony would fight over her. On a good day, perhaps, but not in her current disheveled and disgusting state.

“This rivalry is not a joke,” Zinzi warned, “you should heed the warning I spoke. If our cooperation is to hold fast, their antagonism cannot last. One of them you should choose, otherwise we may all lose.”

“Oh come now, those two are just being ... oh dear.” Rarity turned as a spray of water hit her. Blueblood was in the river, clinging onto the side of the barge.

“If you care to mock my accent again, I’m happy to let my hooves do *all* the talkin’ from now on!” Buckaroo shouted as Blueblood clambered back on board. Rarity saw that Zips and Khufu were sitting back and watching the spectacle. Blueblood growled and charged at Buckaroo, while Zinzi turned to Rarity with a knowing look. Rarity cringed, and her left hoof made a beeline for her forehead.

The river narrowed and grew more shallow, and large boulders that broke the surface proliferated as the barge floated toward the resting place of the *Alicorn*.

Rarity stood at the bow of the stolen vessel, wondering how Blueblood's wrecked airship, once it was somehow set upon the water, would ever be able to navigate this treacherous stretch of the river. If they set out at night, as she envisioned, how would they avoid the rocks? How would they keep to the deep water if they could not see? If the ship did run aground, how would they then proceed? Would they be stranded permanently, having come so far, only to end up no closer to returning to Equestria?

These were not idle concerns. If this effort failed, nothing would stand in the way of Karroc massacring the ponies of Gallopoli, and nothing would stop the impending war. With so much on the line, it felt like anything and everything could go wrong. Rarity squeezed her eyes closed and tried to imagine the wind blowing away the dark cloud of doubt that was settling in above her, but it was of no use. Her normally confident inner voice now whispered of folly and failure.

There was also the small matter of the humiliation that would ensue if her audacious and hastily conceived plan did not succeed. The shame might not be quite so public as what she endured after the fashion show debacle in Ponyville's town square last year, but it would have much more dire and far-reaching consequences. This time, moreover, she would have only herself to blame.

As an initial matter, Khufu and his crew would surely never listen to her again. In fact, they would probably insist on going their separate ways when, and if, they finally escaped the Impenetrable Lands alive. She and Blueblood would have to face all of Karroc's military might, as well as whatever forces Procyon could muster, in order to traverse what would quickly become a war zone between the border and Canterlot. Against those odds, they would never make it back alive. Even if they did, Rarity dared not imagine the horrors they would find.

"I still doubt whether this idea of yours is wise. There is much to go wrong before we even take to the skies."

Rarity opened her eyes and turned to the zebra mare standing next to her, fighting back the urge to snap. Zinzi was correct in her assessment, after all, and Rarity was asking much of her. Zinzi was not Equestrian—not even a pony, really—and Rarity was asking her to risk her life, and her son's life, for the sake of a foreign country and its inhabitants.

Moreover, Rarity guessed that idealism did not come naturally to the weapons merchant, or any of her colleagues for that matter. She could not let them see anything other than confidence from her, or she risked losing them.

“I do not doubt the wisdom of my plan,” Rarity replied. “But that is only because I know with certainty that what we are setting out to do is unwise. One, however, cannot always afford to deliberate on the wisest course of action, especially when time is a luxury. Wise or not, I believe we can and will succeed.”

“It is not the idea of flying away that gives me pause, but the matter of avoiding the griffons’ firesticks and claws. If only we could retrieve an intact airship we could slip out faster, and not delay and thereby court disaster.” Zinzi sighed.

“Yes, well, I understand that is not an option. You already told me that the other zebra, Zolo, took your airship. We can’t steal the airship Karroc used to race down here ahead of the regatta either, as it is chained down and kept under guard. That leaves the *Alicorn* as our method of egress from this dreadful place.”

“I did not meant to suggest you would not have my aid, only that of what is to come, I am most afraid.”

Rarity let a sigh of her own escape. “Zinzi, darling, did you not say that you would cease the rhymes after we escaped?”

“I offered that I might be more comfortable speaking as you did, if the situation was less dire,” Zinzi replied, shaking her head as she spoke, “but now I see that we have gone out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

Rarity suppressed a groan, held her tongue, and kept her gaze focused straight ahead, on the river. It was a relief when Zinzi walked back toward the others. Rarity did not stand alone for long, though, as Blueblood quickly replaced the zebra at her side. His appearance was not altogether more welcome than Zinzi’s.

On top of everything else, now she had to think about her relationship with this egocentric, neurotic, emotionally-crippled stallion. Blueblood was so preoccupied with the royal legacy he felt predestined to uphold, and with the knowledge that Canterlot considered his birthright little more than a quaint relic of a bygone era, that he had hardly developed any personality of his own beyond the obnoxious public persona that served to defend his fragile self-image.

Before, all she had known was the petulant stallion who had so cruelly and callously mistreated her at the Gala. That petty, rude, awful pony was still part of Blueblood, but now she had also seen beyond that aspect. He was also brilliant, witty, at times brave, and on at least one notable occasion, selfless. He was trying to divorce himself from the miserable, brutish identity that he had worn like a cloak since foalhood, an identity that Rarity suspected had been forced upon him by his mother, and perhaps others in his family.

Now, Zinzi informed her, Blueblood was starting to see her differently as well. The thought quickened her pulse. No matter how rude he had ever been, the fact was that Blueblood was the near-mythical prince she had fallen for and dreamed about as both a filly and a mare, and he was still the most handsome stallion she had ever met. Her infatuation had for years been as much a part of her life as breathing, sustenance, and fashion. Even bruised, bloodied, and unkempt, she felt drawn to him.

Could it be that he truly was now vying for her affections with the ruggedly handsome Buckaroo, who was as charming, strong, and appealing as any ruffian of questionable background could be? Even at a time like this, in this jungle, could these stallions be quarreling over a mare—over her? With all of the other doubts and concerns swirling about in her mind, the thought of a potential love triangle was enough to make her feel faint.

“We are getting closer,” Blueblood said, snapping Rarity out her muddled introspection. “In fact, we are very close now.”

“We are? You and I? Closer to what?” she asked, suspicious. He was standing awfully near to her, and she felt warm. Then again, this was the tropics.

“The *Alicorn*,” he replied, adopting a quizzical look. “You remember it, I am sure. White, gold, and blue airship? Currently wrecked? The reason we are floating back down this forsaken waterway?”

“Oh, ha ha, right. Of course. The *Alicorn*,” Rarity said, relieved. “How do you know we are close? Is that based on your vaunted cutie mark navigation talent?” She remembered that the river was narrow and relatively shallow near the crash site, but this stretch looked to her the same as any other, and traveling by barge had left her unable to gauge distance. She had passed all of this on shore, walking, the first time.

“It is based on the fact that I can see with my eyes that we’re about to float out onto the lake where we crash-landed. Have a look there, through the trees.” Blueblood raised his right leg to point.

After a moment spent staring intently at another unremarkable patch of jungle, Rarity caught a glimpse through the vegetation and realized that he was right. The current and the judicious use of oars by Buckaroo and Zips guided the barge around a sharp bend, and the river immediately broadened into the marshy little lake where the *Alicorn* had first made contact with the surface. She could not see the airship’s disguised mass yet, hidden on the far bank, but she knew it was there. A twinge of excitement and anxiety shot through her body.

“This is the time, then. We’re really going to do this,” Rarity stated.

“Or perish in the attempt?” Blueblood asked.

“Optimism, please,” Rarity pleaded, expending effort to affect a lighthearted tone. “You are a master engineer, are you not? And am I not skilled with fabric? Do we not have a group of highly capable equines and a clever former prince of camels to assist us?”

“You are even generous with your characterizations,” said Blueblood. “I might note that we have no access to construction equipment or industrial tools, and no mechanic. Instead, we have an airship architect far more comfortable with schematics than engine grease, a fashion designer, a dangerously unstable youngster, a zebra alchemist of questionable repute, a common criminal, and a habitual liar, none of whom have ever previously attempted to repair a heavily damaged airship and somehow convert it into a working riverboat.”

“None of whom have ever *failed* to convert a damaged airship into a riverboat either,” Rarity pointed out. “Besides, you promised to be supportive.”

“So I shall be. That does not mean that I suddenly have any trust or faith in this motley bunch, present company excepted. You do realize that ill-bred stallion, for one, is wanted for murder back in Equestria.”

“Did he tell you that?” Rarity asked, rolling her eyes. “You do realize he is only trying to intimidate you.”

“That bumpkin intimidate me?” Blueblood huffed. “Not possible.”

“Well,” Rarity began, unable to resist an easy opportunity to poke Blueblood in his vulnerable vanity. “He is quite a bit bigger than you. Stronger as well, by the looks of it. I would not fault you if you were intimidated. He’s also rather handsome, if I do say so myself.” She considered her own words as she spoke. While she would have turned and walked away if she came upon Buckaroo in a darkened Canterlot alleyway, his scruffy masculinity did seem rather appealing in a setting such as this.

Blueblood stared aghast back at her. “Him?”

Rarity shrugged. “All I ask is that you try to get along with all of them until this place is but an unpleasant memory. Can you manage that?” She punctuated the sentiment by giving the royal unicorn an encouraging nudge.

Blueblood harrumphed and assumed a scowl, and Rarity found it hard not to laugh. Sometimes stallions were such delicate things. She rather envied Blueblood, though, for being able to occupy himself with something as petty as jealous rivalry. She hoped, for everypony’s sake, that he and Buckaroo could work together well enough to not inadvertently sabotage their joint plans. Perhaps the two could bond over reconstructing the awful cannon that had so-far managed to avoid being pushed into the river, despite her hope that an unexpected wave or rock would give her the opportunity to surreptitiously get rid of it. Suddenly, a shape in the distance caught her eye.

“There! There it is!” Though her work to disguise the airship had apparently kept it hidden from aerial reconnaissance, the evidence of the *Alicorn*’s crash landing was painfully obvious from a vantage point near the surface. The barge was still quite a fair distance away, but Rarity could already see the swath of devastation the ship had left in its wake as it tore through the forest before finally coming to rest. Splintered trees fell to either side of a gap in an otherwise unbroken line of greenery, and in the middle of it all rested the great heap of branches, fronds, and sticks that concealed the wrecked hulk of Blueblood’s airship.

“I’d almost forgotten that you buried her under all of that detritus,” Blueblood observed, somewhat forlornly. “And she is so far from shore. I have no idea how we will even pull her into the water. Perhaps with a score of earth ponies, but with only this lot? It doesn’t seem possible.”

“You are an engineer. Problems like that are exactly the sort of thing somepony like you should be able to solve. I trust you’ll honor that compass mark of yours and find a way.”

“You can’t simply put all the pressure on *me* to perform,” Blueblood protested. “If *you* fail to mend the balloon properly, then even if we do obtain the lifting gas, we won’t become airborne. Better for our journey to end here than in the middle of the griffons’ base, though I suppose any chagrin on your part would be short-lived, as would we.”

“It’s a good thing that I shall *not* fail to mend it properly,” Rarity replied. “Really, I’ll have you know that I’ve been mending fabric since I was a very young filly.”

“This is a bit more complicated than draping fabric over a dressform. Do you understand how to secure the catenary curtain to the main balloon? Do you know how to rig the suspension cables properly?”

Of course, she had no idea what Blueblood was even saying. “I did not claim that I would not need your assistance, Blueblood. For now, let us make a pact. We shall continue to cooperate and avoid bickering for however long it takes to bring this plan to fruition.”

“You may be asking the impossible,” Blueblood replied with a small frown.

“Well, yes, you do have a point. Just the cooperating then. Bickering may continue.”

“Agreed.”

The small lake made for a quick crossing, and only a few short minutes passed before the barge reached the opposite shore. Rarity waited while Zips and Buckaroo abandoned their oars and stepped off into the shallow water. After securing the craft, the big stallion and athletic young zebra hauled it far enough out of the water to allow egress onto dry land, and Rarity lightly stepped down from the barge’s wooden plank deck. It felt good to have solid, unmoving earth beneath her hooves.

“Some mess you made on landing, yes?” Khufu stepped off the barge and stood next to Rarity. “It is difficult to believe anything might be left of airship that landed here, and it does not allay my fear that I see nothing. Where is ship?”

“Hm? Why, it is not far from where you stand now,” Rarity replied, pleased that her makeshift disguise was working so well. “Look there!” She raised a hoof and pointed to the great agglomeration of detritus that concealed the *Alicorn*, nearly a hundred lengths from the water’s edge.

“Y’all are serious?” Buckaroo exclaimed. “There ain’t nothing left to even recognize as bein’ part of a ship. We can’t fix that!”

“You misunderstand. The *Alicorn* is concealed beneath what you are seeing from here. It was necessary to hide her from any griffons who might be searching after the crash.”

“Beneath that mess she is mostly intact,” Blueblood confirmed. “That, however, does not mean this is going to be easy. We should get to work at once.”

“The first thing to do is uncover the ship, to which end everypony can contribute,” Rarity stated. “After that is accomplished, I suggest we collaborate to determine whose skills can best contribute to each of the many other tasks that must be done.”

“Sound counsel,” said Khufu.

“Well, let’s see what we’re up against then.” Buckaroo started forward, and Rarity and the others fell in behind.

Now that Rarity was back at the crash site, the distance from the spot where the airship rested to edge of the lake seemed infinitely greater than the short interval she’d remembered. There had to be some way to move the ship or pull it across the land, but how? She hoped Blueblood would think of something, because no solution was forthcoming in her own mind. In any case, it wasn’t the first problem that needed to be addressed.

“We need to clear all of this away,” she said. Approaching the ship, Rarity paused briefly to appreciate her own crafting skills; the disguise was really quite effective, even if at close range it was obvious there was *something* under there. As proficient as her work was, though, now it was time to dismantle it.

Blueblood chimed in. “Leave the large logs that are bracing the ship in place and allow access to the upper deck. Do not pile any debris behind the ship, and please try not to damage anything more than it already is.”

Rarity stepped forward and began telekinetically removing branches and tree limbs, and the others did not hesitate to join in. As with all things, destruction was easier than creation, and her painstaking work was undone in less than half an hour.

When it was over, she was able to take a step back and examine the *Alicorn* in its present condition. What she saw did not instill confidence. There, as she remembered it, was the gaping hole in the side of the airship’s hull where it had been pierced by the griffon grappling weapon. The massive steel shaft with its barbed point was still there as well. The shredded, unrecognizable remains of the ship’s balloon were crumpled where she had left them. One of the ship’s maneuvering fins hung limply by a few thin cables, its

wooden support spar having completely snapped. Everywhere, the *Alicorn* was battered and scraped. Well, almost everywhere. Somehow the airship's golden figurehead still thrust forward boldly from the prow, her gilded wings and horn miraculously intact. It seemed a sad irony that such a beautiful figurehead now graced an immobile wreck.

"This ain't gonna be easy," Buckaroo said. "What are we all gonna do? I ain't no engineer, but I can help with patchin' up the holes, at least."

"A most excellent idea," Rarity said. She needed everypony to find a role where they could contribute.

"Before we even think about taking flight, we must first make this airship watertight," Zinzi said. "From the sap of a native tree I can produce a coating that should allow us to safely continue floating."

"I understand principles of engines and clockwork instrumentation. I will help Duke Polaris restore working condition to ship," Khufu said, moving to stand next to Blueblood. Rarity could only pity the stallion. Working in close quarters with the rank-smelling camel was bound to be unpleasant at best. She, however, could not deny that Khufu was the right camel to assist with the mechanical issues.

"Zips, what about you?" she asked, turning to the young half-zebra.

"I'll help, *my way*," the youth quietly replied.

"What's that now?" Rarity asked again. Zips stared back at her without replying or, it seemed, blinking.

"Best not to question him," Buckaroo whispered conspiratorially. "He's like to do somethin' useful, anyway. If it comes down to needin' the extra labor, Zinzi and I'll corral him later."

She shivered under Zips' blank stare, and decided it was best to drop the matter. "Right. Zips, you can do ... whatever it is that you are planning to do. I, for my part, will repair the airship's balloon." She turned and stepped backwards in order to better address the entire group. "Now that you all know what to do, we should get started. Together, we can repair the *Alicorn*. I know it."

As the others set about beginning their tasks, Rarity considered where to start her own work. The balloon, now uncovered, was an unrecognizable mess. The blue fabric was

shredded, and nothing in the lumpen mass before her looked anything like the streamlined fish shape that had once defined the *Alicorn*.

The truth was that Rarity knew precious little about airship design. She knew that the fabric skin of the balloon was called the envelope. Here, she could see at least two types of material in the mangled mass before her. One, she recognized as a lovely taffeta-cotton blend—strong, but not necessarily completely impermeable. This was likely the outer sheathing that bound the lifting balloon to the hull and formed the recognizable shape of a predatory fish. Blueblood had called it a catenary curtain, she remembered. The other was a synthetic fabric, rubbery and seemingly airtight. It had to be the skin of the actual balloon that contained the lifting gas.

Repairing the balloon would be no simple matter. For one thing, there was more than just fabric to consider. There were also ropes, metal cables, wires, and rigid supports that all had to be figured in. In theory, all of these were lying in the pile in front of her, but Rarity could only guess as to what mangled bit was what. She felt a flutter of panic in her stomach while the fear of failure held her in its grip. She could not afford to be the weak link in the group. If she could not even repair fabric then what good was she at all?

“You appear flustered.”

Rarity turned to see Blueblood standing next to her.

“Not at all!” She chuckled merrily, though she could not prevent her cheeks from flushing. “I am merely mentally preparing myself. This,” she gestured with a hoof, “is really just a patch job. Hardly a challenge for an artisan such as myself.”

“A patch job. Undoubtedly,” said Blueblood, scanning the ruined mishmash in front of him. “Nevertheless, I just now took the liberty of sketching up a few diagrams so you can more easily see the overall design of the balloon.” He set a parchment depicting the airship’s balloon from multiple viewpoints and in cross-section on the ground beside her. “I thought it might help you. The cables that secure the catenary curtain to the ship’s hull must be sewn into the fabric, and the various structural reinforcements must be precisely incorporated as well. That is before you begin to work on the actual gas balloon itself, which is comprised of a rather novel synthetic fabric created by ...”

“It’s ponyprene, first created last year by Pony Polymers of Manehattan,” Rarity replied quickly. “Such a large amount of it must have cost a small fortune.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Blueblood replied, clearly surprised. “How did you know that? Was Fancypants prattling on to you about another of his buyout targets when he somehow managed to impart something worthwhile in the process?”

“How sad that you still think so little of me. Keeping abreast of developments in fabrics and textiles is absolutely vital for any forward-thinking fashion designer. I’ll kindly thank you not to lecture me about my own chosen profession.” Rarity turned abruptly away from the stallion. “Thank you for the sketches. Now you can go. I’m quite capable of managing this on my own.”

“Of course you are,” Blueblood replied, something like disappointment in his tone. He turned to leave.

Rarity began telekinetically unfolding the crumpled layers of fabric before her, but then paused. “Wait a moment.”

“What is it?” he replied, stopping in his tracks.

“I understand that you were only trying to help. That was generous of you.”

“I would not necessarily say that generosity was a primary motivator,” Blueblood said. “I want you to succeed. I need you to. As insane and implausible as this plan is, I have to believe that there is still hope of returning home and reclaiming my name and some semblance of my old life. You and your plan are all I have.”

“So your interests are purely your own then?”

“You know that I desire to put a stop to this impending conflict as much as you do. Doing so will be to the benefit of everypony.”

“True.”

“And ...” Blueblood began, but hesitated to continue.

“And what?”

“I want you to succeed, because you ... stand for something. I want to be a part of that,” Blueblood said haltingly.

“What do you mean?”

“You are literally a living embodiment of generosity. Together with your friends, you represent harmony. Despite thousands of years of history, all I stand for today is a name, devoid of intrinsic meaning or value. If we do this, then maybe I can begin to stand for something meaningful too.” Blueblood looked at the ground. “At any rate, I should go and begin working on my ship. I don’t trust that camel not to muck things up in my absence.”

“No, wait,” Rarity said.

“What now?”

“I always believed you were a truly awful individual. You really were, if I am being honest.”

“You asked me to wait for this?” Blueblood exclaimed incredulously, his whole frame stiffening defensively.

“As awful as you *were*,” Rarity continued, “you have been acting like a different stallion lately. No matter what happens here, you do stand for something honorable and good, in your own way. Why, when I think about your brother and how he has turned out, you certainly do not suffer by comparison.”

Blueblood visibly relaxed. “Thank you. Though I may never see Canterlot again, I’m glad to know that even one pony does not think entirely ill of me. As for Procyon, I still cannot understand how he truly can be the mastermind behind this plan. He never once in his life displayed ambition on this scale, or the foresight to be a successful schemer.”

“I would not be so sure that your brother isn’t an expert schemer,” Rarity said. “He put a great deal of effort into getting Tempest, Windlass, and me in one place, so that they could kill me. To do that, he not only had to manipulate me, but you and Fancy pants as well.”

“I suppose.”

“You know, I have been thinking for some time now about my place in all of this. Anyone could see why you, the chancellor, and Graywings were targeted: Procyon needed to set about stirring warlike sentiments in Equestria, and needed you out of the way in order to pursue his royal claim. Why me, though?”

“Is it not obvious?” Blueblood asked. “Procyon must have feared that the Elements of Harmony could keep him from taking full advantage of the power of the Heavenstone. Without you, the Elements’ power cannot be harnessed.”

“No, it isn’t obvious at all,” Rarity replied. “Removing *any* of my friends would have accomplished the same goal. Why not Applejack, or Fluttershy? They both live far from Ponyville’s town center, and they could have been cornered, alone, with nopony to help them. It could have been made to look like an accident. When I searched the belongings of the two griffons we captured in the jungle, I found more than merely the map. I also found photographs in their possession. One depicted you, and the other was a photograph of me taken at the Garden Party back in Canterlot. That was months ago, which means that even then somepony had marked me as a target, and I want to know why.”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Blueblood said.

“You did not attend the Garden Party. Why? It’s the second most important social event of the year, surely you were invited.”

“Of course I was.”

“Was it because of me that you declined to show?” Rarity asked, flushing slightly. She felt uncomfortably warm, even more so than she had become accustomed to in the jungle. She was aware of the awkwardness of this line of questioning, but she had to pursue it. “It was held two days after your yacht launching, after we—”

“I know when it was held,” Blueblood said quickly, interrupting Rarity’s sentence. “Are you asking whether I was avoiding you by not making an appearance? How would I have even known you would be in attendance?”

“You would have known that Fancypants would be there, and you knew that he had taken me into his circle at the time. It would have been straightforward to surmise that I, too, would be at the Garden Party.”

“Again, why are you asking me about this, especially now? What does this have to do with your picture being taken?” Blueblood shifted his gaze away. “Besides, if I had been avoiding you, I certainly would have had good reason at the time. The open bar and bottomless punch bowls at the Garden Party are legendary, and seeing you under such circumstances, in light of recent events, would have been soliciting trouble.”

“Indeed, but only because you would have ended up with one of those bowls of punch upended over your head,” Rarity replied crossly. “Just tell me whether I’m right. You did not attend the Garden Party because you did not want to see me, but Procyon was there. Isn’t that right? I keep casting my memory back, and I am becoming more and more certain that I saw him.”

“Yes,” Blueblood admitted after another lengthy pause. “Procyon attended the Garden Party with my ticket. Somehow, again, my sisters, mother, and I received invitations, but Procyon was left out, which infuriated him as usual.”

“I knew it,” Rarity exclaimed. “I remember his gaunt face. He must have taken my photograph. That, however, begs the question ‘why?’” She narrowed her gaze. “What did you tell him about me, that made him determine that I was a threat?”

“N-nothing, of course!” Blueblood stammered, taking a step backward. “I mean, perhaps your name came up in conversation, but I certainly did not say anything to suggest you should be *murdered!*”

“Tell me!” Rarity ordered.

“I hardly think ...”

“Tell me tell me *tell me!*” She stepped forward and fixed a penetrating stare on Blueblood’s eyes.

“Alright! Please!” Blueblood waited for Rarity to back away. “I remember telling Procyon how upset I was that Fancypants ruined my launching, and I mentioned that he seemed to have taken an interest in you.”

“What else?” Rarity demanded.

“I may have also mentioned that even if Fancypants was winning the war in the business area, I was still, um, tops with the ladies, I believe I said. I may have then told a slightly exaggerated version of what happened at the launching.”

“You cad!” Rarity shouted, abruptly stepping forward at the same time Blueblood cringed. She restrained her hoof.

“That’s when that girl with the pink coat, you say her name is Windlass, spoke up. She said that Fancypants had far higher standards than to ever touch a—er—somepony like

you. It was a fairly uncomfortable moment, and that's when I went to bed. I didn't speak to my brother again until after the party."

"You told this to Windlass?" Rarity asked, shocked. "Was she—did she attend the Canterlot Garden Party with Procyon?"

"Oh, I believe so, yes. That was one of the reasons that Procyon was so keen on attending. He finally had a date. She must have been there with him," Blueblood confirmed.

"The liar! She pretended to be meeting me for the first time when I encountered her at Fancypants' facility, but she had been involved from the very beginning. As I said, Blueblood, your brother is clearly more adept at plotting than you think. I suspect he saw me with Fancypants at the Canterlot Garden Party, and was struck with the inspiration of using the race as a pretext to render the Elements of Harmony ineffective."

"I'm sorry," Blueblood said, downcast. "I suppose I should have attended the party. Perhaps then you, at least, would be safe at home now."

"There's no need to apologize. If you had made an appearance, then you and I might very well have done each other in then and there. At least now I have some idea of your brother's motivations."

"I still do not understand how somepony so boring could suddenly turn out to be an evil mastermind," Blueblood mused. "How can you be completely certain that Fancypants is truly innocent? Unlike Procyon, he actually has the knowledge, the connections, the wealth, and the ambition to steer the conspiracy. He has also been present at every step along the way. He attended the Garden Party, and could have put somepony in place to photograph you. He invited you to participate in the race, thus luring you into the manticore's den. He is actually popular enough to make a legitimate try for the throne, despite his lack of royal blood."

"Be careful with your words," Rarity warned in a low voice. "I *know* that Fancypants is not involved, and you should take my word for it. You don't understand his motivations like I do."

"Motivations? That's a laugh!" Blueblood exclaimed. "Fancypants has only one motivation—the accumulation of ever more wealth, power, and prestige. As one of his victims, I know that first-hoof, unlike you. That is, of course, provided he has not purchased your dress shop out from under you. I am sure it's only a matter of time until

all of Equestria, and the sun and the moon as well, are wholly-owned subsidiaries of the Canterlot Steam Engine Company.”

“Your bitterness and jealousy do you no credit,” Rarity said hotly. “Fancypants only took over your company because Procyon was cooking the books in order to make you appear bankrupt. Do you really want to know how I know that Fancypants is not involved?”

“Oh please, this should be good,” Blueblood prompted, rolling his eyes.

“Fancypants *does* want a new form of government in Equestria, but one founded on equality and peace, not war and threats of violence. He plans to abandon the business sector and devote his life to public service. He invited me to assume control of his business interests in his stead.”

“That’s ... that is lunacy! It must have been nothing more than a ruse to entice you to accompany him on the race, so that you would be easy pickings.”

“He didn’t tell me until the race was well underway, and then only in complete confidence. No pony knows of his ambition besides me, and now, regrettably, you,” Rarity said, shaking her head.

“You must be joking, really,” Blueblood went on. “Tell me you are joking.”

“You know,” Rarity mused, a hoof under her chin, “if the offer still stands once we get back to Equestria, and I take him up on it, I suppose I will be the head of North Star, among other enterprises. Perhaps I could hire you back to your old company ... as janitorial staff.”

“Oh, what a laugh. Really, you expect me to believe that the most powerful stallion in Canterlot has offered the reins of the largest megacorporation in Equestria to a ...”

“A what?” Rarity asked, glaring daggers.

Blueblood froze, a guilty look on his face, then sighed. “Never mind. I am sure you are right about Fancypants.”

“Oh, come on now, out with it,” Rarity pressed. “Tell me what you really think of me. Am I a stupid little dressmaker from Ponyville? A fashion-crazed ninny? A naïve mare with hopeless delusions of significance? A stereotypical dumb whitecoat without a lick of business sense? Be a stallion for once and say what is on your mind.”

Blueblood stood silently, rooted in place. His mouth opened and closed once, but no speech emerged.

“Go on and get back to work,” Rarity said, thoroughly aggravated. “I will mend your balloon. At least I am good for sewing. That is, if it pleases Your Grace.”

“You would be most capable and formidable as the leader of a corporation, Miss Rarity,” Blueblood said quietly, before turning to walk away. “Fancypants is a better pony than I for coming to that realization on his own.”

Rarity did not watch him leave. Instead, she returned her concentration to the fabric pile and the momentous task ahead of her. Rather, she attempted to do so. It took all of her effort to keep her breathing regular and not give in to the temptation to tear the balloon apart even further with her magic. How could it be that after everything they had been through, Blueblood still thought of her as an incapable nopony from the countryside? Had she not proved her worth? She had fought through the harsh jungle, past murderous griffons, killer trees, and a swarm of flesh-eating monsters, and because of her Blueblood was still alive to belittle her. What gave him the right? His noble blood was a joke, and he had not even enough sense to see that his own brother was planning his demise. Ungrateful, heartless, swine of a stallion!

Instead of continuing to stew, Rarity channeled her frustration in to her work. Following the diagrams and drawings Blueblood had left, she unfolded the identifiable pieces of balloon and laid them out on the bare earth beside the *Alicorn*, wherever she could find space. Strips and torn pieces that she could not place were piled together for use in patching.

Once the various bits and pieces that had been jumbled together were separated, Rarity set about committing the design and shape of the inner balloon and the outer curtain to memory, as well as the locations of the cables and rigid support structure that underlay that catenary curtain. She could only magically mend and reconstruct the balloon if she could clearly picture it in its entirety in her mind’s eye. This was not a problem for her own designs, which were conceived and born in her brain, but this was somepony else’s work. She fixated on the streamlined shape of the outer shell and the voluminous gas bag underneath, until she could mentally review them from any angle. Now, she was ready to begin work in earnest.

Flashes of light filled the air as Rarity cast one repair spell after the other, while simultaneously using her telekinesis to arrange and rearrange massive sheets of fabric. It was beyond her to lift all of the various pieces into the air at once and thereby obtain an

accurate working model of the final product, so she was limited to working on one section at a time. Even the rigid bill of the outer curtain and the crescent-shaped tail were designed to collapse when the balloon was deflated. Only later, when they attempted to fill the balloon with the stolen lifting gas, would Rarity's work be tested. For now, she dared not dwell on the possibility of failure; her emotional state was too tenuous. Instead, she increased her pace until the air around her was filled with so many spellflashes that it felt as though she was the center of attention at a big fashion show, surrounded by photographers.

Sometime later, Rarity found herself sweat-drenched, her chest heaving with exertion, and covered snout to dock in bites from insects she had been too preoccupied to swat away with her tail. She was taking a moment to catch her breath when she noticed that Buckaroo was standing close by, calling her name.

"How can I help you?" she asked, between gasping breaths.

"Y'all have been at this for hours now, and you sure have gotten a whole heap done. Don't you think it might be high time for a break, before you go and make yourself sick?"

"I shall rest only when this work is done, or I drop dead from exhaustion, whichever occurs first," Rarity replied.

"More'n likely you'll get washed away afore either of those happen. Big storm comin' in. Look up." Buckaroo pointed a hoof skyward.

Indeed, Rarity could see thick dark clouds rolling their direction. "Karroc is calling down the power of the Heavenstone upon us!" she exclaimed frantically. "It's all over!"

"Naw, that's just a regular ol' storm. Where there ain't no pegasus ponies, weather just happens all on its own, you know? Given that this here's a tropical jungle, it tends to rain a lot. In fact, I'd say we're overdue."

"But the ship!" Rarity cried. "All of this dirt will turn to mud in a rainstorm, and the *Alicorn* will sink even deeper into it. We shall never be able to move it!"

"Oh, right. Well, we figgered somethin' out about that. Duke Polaris has been jammin' every kinda log and big stick he could get under the hull, and I've been buckin' 'em down in there real hard. If we're lucky, once it's good and muddy we'll be able to use these to lever her up outta the dirt. Then the Duke thinks we can use more logs to roll her over top of the ground toward the water. I gotta admit, it just might work."

Rarity considered the idea for a moment. “Yes, I suppose that could work. How are the other tasks progressing? Have you patched the hull?”

“We made a good start,” Buckaroo replied. “It took a good amount of work just to clean up the cabin where the animals got in and set up shop, but she’s mostly sealed up now. That big extra window the griffons busted through the side is gonna need a little more attention come mornin’, once the rain lets up, but I’m beginnin’ to believe this ain’t just pie in the sky. I gotta hoof it to ya, Miss Rarity.”

“Thank you, that’s all good news. We should be able to get the ship on the water tomorrow then, provided there is a break in the storm sufficiently long enough to complete the rest of the work.”

“Yeah. Now why don’t you follow me inside where it’ll stay nice and dry. I rustled up some dinner from what little I could find that hadn’t been broken into by critters.”

“Oh no, I can still get more done here before the storm comes,” Rarity said. Even as she spoke, though, she could feel her stomach protesting against her words. She desperately needed to eat. Then, a flash of lightning arced to earth, followed immediately by a rumble of thunder that Rarity felt in her bones. It was close. “On second thought, maybe I will pause and have a bite or two before getting some sleep.”

“That’s the spirit,” Buckaroo said, as the first fat droplets began to fall. With the big stallion’s help, Rarity gathered her project and secured the partially mended balloon above the ground using logs and rocks. She could not afford to lose even one piece. Then she followed Buckaroo up a makeshift ramp to the deck of the *Alicorn* and down through the hatch, which she secured behind them.

As she walked, Rarity could not avoid at least one optimistic thought: the weather would bring pure fresh water to spare, and that meant she would finally be able to get clean. Tomorrow she finally would be able to feel like a pony again, instead of some dirty wild animal.

Inside the now-cramped cabin, all of the others were gathered in a haphazard arrangement, taking up space wherever it could be found. Blueblood, for his part, studiously avoided looking at her. Dinner was a quiet, subdued affair, as everypony was as desperate for rest as Rarity felt. Afterward, at the insistence of all save one silent stallion, she and Zinzi occupied Blueblood’s plush bed while the others found space on the floor. Rarity pulled a light sheet over her head and fell asleep at once to the sound of the storm battering the hull.

When at last she opened her eyes, she felt completely renewed. Gone was any trace of tiredness, and every muscle in her body ached not for relief, but for use. Rarity luxuriated in the cool breeze flowing past her, ruffling the tips of her feathers, as moonlight reflected on her powerful wings.

This time, Rarity *knew* the sensation of flight was a dream, but she didn't care. It felt glorious.

She flew alone, high above the canopy of the endless jungle below. With her boundless energy and broad wings, Rarity could fly straight back to Canterlot if she wanted. In fact, she felt as though she could put a stop to all of this conspiracy business herself. She was a mighty alicorn, was she not? With just the barest amount of magical effort, the night sky exploded in a brilliant display of fireworks all around her. She was the pinnacle of power, majesty, beauty, and sophistication. Why, there was no pony who could compare in all the world! She could be anything, have anything, and do anything she desired. If she wished, she could pull the sun from its resting place and wash away the night!

Rarity concentrated, but despite her effort, the sun would not appear. How dare it taunt her so! Could it be there was magic that she lacked? She circled above the forest, wheeling through the air as she contemplated how she might attain the power that was her destiny. Then, she saw it: far in the distance a twinkling light of purest white beckoned her. Rarity beat her wings, pointed her horn in the direction of the light, and shot toward it like a comet with a tail of glittering sparkles. She had to have it. All that power belonged to her!

As she grew closer to her target, the light grew brighter until it burned her eyes to look at it, yet she could not tear away her gaze. The formerly refreshing breeze now stung her body and buffeted her wings. She could not keep this up forever, but the power was so close now. She could see it—the largest, most perfect diamond in the world. She would have it!

Suddenly, Rarity was hit by a blast of hot air that sent her tumbling backwards. She quickly righted herself and reacquired her target, but this time there was something else. A monstrous winged shape rose out of the darkness behind the diamond until it seemed to occupy half the sky, its wings spanning the horizon. The monstrosity was made of dark metal, with visible pistons and gears accenting its ponderous movement. Smoke belched into the night sky, obscuring the moon and stars, and glowing furnace eyes glared hatefully at Rarity.

She barely managed to dive out of the way as a metal hoof the size of Canterlot Castle swung through the air above her, and the rush of air from its passing sent her tumbling

again. Rarity knew what she had to do. She had to get that gem! If only she could reach it, she could banish this thing to the dark place whence it came. She shot skyward while creating a magical bubble to keep away the sooty smoke billowing from the mechanical monster. High into the night she flew, until even the clockwork beast could not reach her. Then, Rarity turned, tucked her wings in close, and dove. When she burst through the cloud layer, she planned to keep diving straight toward the diamond, faster than the beast could track her. As she penetrated the clouds and her vision cleared, though, she immediately saw that the metal beast was gone.

Rarity touched down lightly on the ground, and found herself face to face with another mare. It was Windlass, but not as Rarity knew her. Instead, a powerful alicorn with a coat of light pink and a mane and tail streaked with shades of blue glared at her. She balanced the Heavenstone on one upturned forehoof.

“You are nothing compared to him,” Windlass sneered. “While you play dress up, I change the world. I am the worthy one! Only I have earned the right to be with him.”

“But I don’t want anything to do with Lord Procyon!” Rarity protested.

“Not him, you ignorant foal! No wonder you were so easy to dispatch. As soon as I saw you fawning over him in Canterlot, I knew you had to die. It’s only a shame that the first time didn’t take. You will *not* get lucky twice!”

“Fancypants!” Rarity gasped. “Of course! You’re in love with him, and you perceived me as a threat after you saw me at the Garden Party. It was you who took the photograph. Targeting me was not strategy, but nothing more than the pettiness of a vindictive, jealous mare! How much of this conspiracy has been your doing, all along? Everything? And all for the unrequited love of a stallion? That is not ambition, but insanity!”

Windlass did not reply.

“At least tell me, is this—this here—is it real? Is that really you with whom I am speaking?”

“The Heavenstone is mine to command,” Windlass replied, nodding once. “Though it seems you too have formed a connection to it, however weak by comparison. That connection is how I have found my way into your mind, and that is how I will destroy you once and for all!”

“No! I won’t let you!” Rarity shouted. She unfurled her wings and reared back, and a brilliant light of righteous fury radiated from her horn.

Windlass unfurled her own wings, and Rarity gasped as she saw that they were made of metal and clockwork, not feathers, bone, and muscle. She raised the Heavenstone above her head and its pure light chased away any remaining hint of night.

“Come!” Windlass cried. “Come to your death!”

“Rarity!” a voice called out. Rarity looked back to see Blueblood. He was wingless - merely a unicorn. He looked so small and frail against the backdrop of this battlefield of titans.

“Please, Rarity, you have to look away! Don’t let the light claim you!”

“I can’t! It’s my destiny!” she called back.

“Perhaps, but not now! For Equestria’s sake, for my sake, wake up!”

“I have to go,” Rarity replied. “Don’t I have to go?”

“No!” Blueblood exclaimed. “I was thoughtless before. I truly believe you are the most capable pony I have ever met, and I am certain that you are the only pony standing between a peaceful Equestria and a war that may consume the world before it is done. Let go of the Heavenstone, please.”

“Come on now, what are you waiting for?” Windlass taunted.

“I ...” Rarity paused. Standing behind Blueblood she could make out the indistinct outlines of five more ponies—her friends. Twilight Sparkle knew that she was alive; she would never give up until Rarity was safe. Now, though, they were counting on her. So was Blueblood. So was everypony! Rarity blinked.

When she opened her eyes, she was surrounded by darkness, and she knew at once that she was falling. Then, as quickly as she had recognized the sensation, it was gone, replaced by the tingling feeling of magic enveloping her body. That too passed, and Rarity realized she was lying limply, draped over a pony’s broad back. She was soaking wet.

As Blueblood opened the hatch to carry her back inside the *Alicorn*’s cabin, Rarity saw a brilliant flash of light in the distance, an instant before everything went dark again.

“Twilight, thank Celestia you’re here!” Rarity exclaimed. Her vision was blurry and her head was swimming, but she knew Twilight Sparkle and the others had come to help her, and they had arrived not a moment too soon. Windlass was here, with the Heavenstone, ready to strike at any moment! “Girls, we must stop her! There is no time to explain! We have to get that diamond! We must get—”

“Be calm, my pony friend.”

Rarity paused mid-sentence, confused. That was not Twilight’s voice. How had Prince Khufu found her here? She had flown so far away from the airship. Without wings, how could the camel have reached her? She tried to look around, but she could not see anything clearly.

Where was Twilight? Where were the others, and Blueblood? Where were Windlass and the Heavenstone? Rarity struggled to sit up, but a wave of nausea forced her down, back onto a plush mattress. She was lying on her back, in bed. This wasn’t right! None of this made sense!

“Calm, please. You are safe inside ship now,” Khufu continued. “Nightmare is over.”

Nightmare? Rarity lay still and focused on the word the camel prince had spoken. Nightmare. After a moment of silent reflection, her rapid breathing slowed and her vision began to clear. She was inside the cabin of the *Alicorn*, the space dimly lit by lantern light. She was a unicorn, and of course she had no wings. Windlass was not present. A camel royal was gazing at her with his one remaining eye. The smell of him brought her back the rest of the way into the waking world.

What had seemed an utterly lucid experience had been no more than a dream—a nightmare. Rarity lay unmoving for what felt like several minutes, attempting to collect her thoughts.

“It seems I was having a bad dream,” she said at last. “I am so sorry for troubling you, I ...” A second attempt to sit upright failed and she fell back onto the bed again. “Oh my, I’m just a little woozy, that’s all. Please, I only need a moment.”

Zinzi appeared next to Khufu and looked down at Rarity. “That was no ordinary nightmare,” she said, her voice full of concern. “You gave us all a terrible scare.”

“More like, she nearly torched the ship and fried us with lightning bolts,” Zips remarked from somewhere in the cabin. Rarity could not see him without moving her head, and she dared not try for fear of the nausea returning with a vengeance.

“What do you mean?” she asked, confused. “I remember seeing Windlass, the mare who tried to kill me, and awful visions besides, but the next thing I remember is waking up here in bed.”

“You ... were not in bed *all* night,” Khufu said with hesitation. “You went for small midnight stroll in middle of storm. We followed you after we heard hatch close.”

“I was sleepwalking?” Rarity asked, surprised. She had never sleepwalked in her life, no matter how vivid her dreams had been. She supposed it was plausible that her mind had been so confused and alarmed by the realism of her nightmare that it convinced her body to get out of bed, but the idea that she managed to climb the stairs, open the hatch, and walk out into a tropical thunderstorm was hard to believe. She touched a hoof to her mane and found that it was dry. If she had been outside, it must have been some time ago that she was brought in, and then somepony had obviously dried her hair and coat. How had she not awoken through all of that?

“You did a lot more than walking,” Zips called out.

“I ... what’s that now? Will somepony *please* tell me what happened?”

“Well,” Buckaroo moved to stand with Khufu and Zinzi, “this is gonna sound a mite hard to believe, iff you really don’t remember nothin’.” His gaze shifted between Rarity and the others. “Before y’all conked out on us, you were floatin’ in the air about fifteen lengths straight up over top of the ship.”

“It was like nothing I have seen in my long years,” said Khufu. “You were glowing with magic, like star brought down from heavens, and your horn flashed with pulse of storm. Lightning was striking earth all around; we feared it would ignite ship. Was like you were somehow calling down fury of storm right on top of us.”

“How can that be?” Rarity asked, shocked. “I cannot control lightning, and I certainly cannot levitate! That doesn’t make any sense!”

A pit formed in her stomach. There *was* one unicorn pony she knew who held power over storms and lightning. But the whole experience had been in her imagination, hadn’t it? She concentrated on the vision she had beheld, and tried to remember what Windlass

had said. It had something to do with a connection they both shared—a connection to the Heavenstone!

The implications forced the breath out of her chest. Had Windlass somehow forced her way into Rarity's mind? Could Windlass have caused her to go outside, and tricked her into casting strange spells that she had never learned, all while causing her to hallucinate? The thought of being invaded, body and mind, was terrifying. Rarity pulled tight the quilted blanket covering her. Her pulse was racing again, and she shivered despite the warmth of the blankets and sheets surrounding her.

"We saw a bright light from the direction whence we came, spearing the night sky with brilliant white flame," Zinzi added. "Finally Duke Polaris cried out to you and the terror ended. The light vanished, and you descended."

"Blueblood!" Rarity exclaimed, realizing that the unicorn was nowhere to be seen. He had been in her dream, and apparently there in reality as well. Maybe he could explain what had happened. "Where is he?" She pushed down on the bed with her forelegs and forced herself upright, ignoring the discomfort the move caused.

"Duke Polaris sleeps now," Khufu said. "He watched you for hours as you rested and recovered."

"I'm awake now. Thank you, Prince." Blueblood stepped close to the side of the bed and looked down at Rarity, his expression a mixture of concern and confusion. "How do you feel?"

"I shall recover," Rarity replied, unsure whether that was the case.

"You're shaking," Blueblood pointed out.

"It's nothing," Rarity said dismissively and too quickly. Her heart was pounding. Could Windlass invade her mind at will? If so, it could happen at any time. How was she to know that the "reality" she now confronted was not merely another projection of the deranged mare's creation? How could she ever trust her own eyes again?

"It isn't 'nothing,'" Blueblood stated. "We can all see that as plain as day."

"Please, do speak candidly with us," Khufu prompted.

Maybe they could help, Rarity supposed. If there was to be any chance of avoiding another awful experience like this one, she would have to be truthful. Honesty was the best policy, as Applejack would say.

“I ...” she half-choked as she tried to speak, before shaking away her doubt and forcing herself to continue. She, however, could not maintain any semblance of stoicism.

“I’m so terrified, and I just don’t know what to do, or even what to believe!” Rarity cried, raising her forehooves in a supplicant gesture before the assembled group. “What happened—I think I was attacked.” Everypony around her stiffened at her pronouncement, and Rarity watched as they exchanged glances with one another. Surely they were wondering whether she had lost her mind.

“Who attacked you?” Blueblood asked. “I saw nopony else.”

“That is because nopony else was present, save for within my mind,” Rarity replied. She leaned forward and massaged both temples with her forehooves before continuing to speak. “It was Windlass. She was inside my head! She has somehow learned that I still live, and she claimed to be using the power of the Heavenstone to invade my dreams. She told me that both she and I were connected to it somehow, and that she was using that connection as a path to get at me. She said she was going to destroy me, and I fear she was controlling my body in an attempt to destroy us all!”

“She broke into your mind?” Buckaroo asked, sounding incredulous. “How in the hay did she do that? And can she do it again? And how did she figure out you’re alive? And what exactly *is* this Heavenstone y’all been mentionin’? I thought it was just some magic weapon Karroc was usin’ for callin’ down storms, but now you’re sayin’ it lets a pony sneak around inside your skull?”

“She was using you as a conduit for her magic,” Blueblood stated. “That’s how she was summoning the lightning strikes through you.”

“Yes! I do not understand how any of that is possible, but I’m certain it is what happened!” Rarity exclaimed. She realized that she sounded nearly hysterical, but she felt so panicky and afraid that she could exert no control over the modulation of her voice. “This thing is your family legacy, Blueblood! Please tell me how she is doing this, and what I can do to stop her!”

Blueblood lowered his gaze. “I believe that I know *what* she is doing, if nothing else. Everyone here knows that Karroc and the pony conspirators have a terrible magical

weapon, and they intend to use it against Gallopoli. That weapon is the Heavenstone, an ancient relic of ponykind, older than Princess Celestia and Equestria itself. It is older than the eldest dragon, and older than even the written word. Since time immemorial it was the birthright of the unicorn royal family—my family. No pony recorded when or how it was obtained, only that it was always there. By using the Heavenstone to focus their collective will and channel their magic so that it could be used by the reigning monarch, the unicorns of old raised the sun and moon.”

“It cannot be that you speak of *Adamas Firmamentum!*” Khufu interjected, sounding truly surprised for the first time since Rarity had met him. “That artifact was lost over millennium ago. It is legend among treasure seekers and historians.” He shook his knobby, elongated head. “To think I did not inquire as to true nature of Karroc’s weapon.”

Blueblood continued. “The same. My family histories explain that the kings and queens of the old kingdom had such complete mastery over the Heavenstone that they could make use of its power no matter how far afield of the stone they traveled. They could control the sun and moon while leagues away from the castle where the Heavenstone was kept, they could transport the Heavenstone itself on a whim to their location, and I have even read that they could use the stone to channel magic through proxies—ponies who had agreed to serve as agents for the power of the crown. In the very ancient times, before even Princess Platinum and the founding of Equestria, the unicorn king would send agents in his stead to the other tribes, in order to demonstrate unicorn power. The king could channel the power of the Heavenstone through these agents, and thus project the appearance that *all* unicorns could control the heavens, all while the reigning monarch was safely ensconced in his fortified castle.”

“So you’re sayin’ that’s what happened to Miss Rarity?” Buckaroo asked. “She got turned into one of these ‘proxies?’”

Blueblood shook his head. “I don’t know. All that I know of the Heavenstone is that its purpose is to embody and focus the collective will of ponydom, and that to do so it channels and stores magic given freely, through ponies who have chosen to make a connection with it. Nothing I have ever read or heard has indicated that the Heavenstone could be used to manipulate or channel magic through an unwilling pony, let alone one who has never touched or even seen the stone itself.”

“Is that it?” Rarity asked softly. “She is using that thing to control me? Am I nothing more than a puppet now?” Despair filled her, but she held back her tears. How could she

save Equestria—how could she be of any use to anypony—if she could not even control her own mind?

“I truly don’t know,” Blueblood responded candidly. “I do not understand how you could be connected to the stone, nor how she could use it to manipulate you.”

“I *do* have a connection to the Heavenstone, though,” Rarity half-whispered. “I am certain of it. I’ve felt its pull since I first was in proximity to the stone, during the attack on the regatta, and it has been growing stronger since. I thought it was nothing more than a manifestation of my gem-finding spell, since it is an amazing gemstone by all accounts, but there must be something more. This was not the first time the stone has caused me to experience strange sensations, or even visions.”

“How do you mean?” Khufu asked.

“It happened before when Blueblood was feverish from infection, when we spent the night in the jungle. The griffon warship passed overhead, and I knew at once the Heavenstone was onboard. It was almost as if it was calling to me, begging me to find and take it. I remember a flash of light, and then it was as though I was miraculously home in Ponyville. I was excited at first, but it was not a happy occasion; I saw my friends and family as they learned of my apparent death during the regatta.”

Rarity paused as a thought occurred to her. “If Windlass entering my mind was real, then it must be the case that the vision of Ponyville I experienced was real as well. I tried to tell my friends that I needed help. Maybe they understood! Perhaps I was able to unconsciously project my mind to Ponyville in the same way that Windlass was able to project herself in my dream.” She paused a second time. “Oh, but what can I do if she tries to enter my mind again? It could happen at any moment!”

“Most likely not,” Blueblood stated firmly. “No further attack has occurred since I brought you inside. If the vision you experienced in the jungle was real, that means you were able to somehow engage with the Heavenstone from a distance and use its power, without ever so much as having laid a hoof on it. You must have connected with it again in your dreams, while Windlass was in the process of charging it with magic for her storm spell. That would have allowed her to learn that you still live, and perhaps provided a path for her to get inside your mind.”

“Oh, fabulous,” Rarity stated flatly. “I cannot go the rest of my life without sleeping or dreaming! Think of the puffiness under the eyes I would have to endure!”

“Well, it looked to me like you pulled yourself outta there right quick once we all came up lookin’ for you and callin’ your name. I wager if she tries it again we’ll all be ready for her. Shoot, maybe y’all can even turn the tables and mess with her mind!” Buckaroo offered.

“Turn the tables? What ever can you mean?” Rarity asked. “Shall I use my ladylike charm to convince her to walk up to Princess Celestia and confess everything?” Her body spasmed once, then twice, causing a jolt of fear to run down her spine, before she realized what was happening—she was laughing in spite of her circumstances. The idea of forcing Windlass to confess! Perhaps she could get to Procyon too, and the griffon conspirators! Bring it on, Windlass, and see what Rarity has in store for you this time! She broke into a full belly laugh. Buckaroo joined in, with apparent trepidation at first, but soon everypony was guffawing.

“Oh my,” Rarity said at last, wiping a tear away with a hoof. “Ha. Well, yes, I suppose it isn’t the worst possible thing, is it? The next time Windlass invades my dreams I shall give her what for! At least, with all of you here in case anything like this happens again, I shan’t despair.”

“Soon, we’ll put a stop to this,” Blueblood said determinedly. “Once the Princesses know what is at stake, and that the Heavenstone is in the hooves of ponies seeking to overthrow the royal government, they will arrest my brother and everypony working with him.”

“Then let me suggest we begin the day, and finish our repairs without delay,” Zinzi suggested. “If we can avoid being shot, we will be heroes in Canterlot.”

“Yes,” Rarity said, swinging her rear legs over the side of the bed, and rolling into a standing position. “She’s right. I cannot simply lie in bed quaking under a blanket with the fate of the world at stake. We have so much to do.”

Suddenly, her left front leg gave out from under her as a painful jolt coursed through her body. She was barely able to shift her weight in time to avoid smashing her face into the wooden deck. Blueblood stepped forward and extended a leg for support, but Rarity declined the proffered appendage. She was fine. She needed to work. They all did.

“It is not yet light,” Blueblood said. “I fear that if we attempt to work outside by lantern light, we will only be advertising our position. Should any griffons spot us by the light of day, we would at least have a fighting chance. Not so during darkness when they have every advantage. I suggest we all rest a spell longer and have some breakfast.”

“Excellent idea!” Khufu said. “Buck will prepare us something to eat, yes?”

“I’m sure I can rustle up somethin’, boss,” the big stallion drawled, before shuffling off toward the *Alicorn*’s tiny galley. Khufu and Zinzi then turned to each other to have a discussion in a tongue Rarity could not recognize. This left her alone with Blueblood.

“You’re not worried about the griffons,” she whispered. “They know we must go through their territory to return home, and so they are not actively searching. If they were, we would have seen some sign of them since we escaped the base. I can only conclude, then, that you are attempting to stall to give me more time to recuperate.”

“Guilty,” Blueblood replied, shrugging slightly. “As a colt I was sent to study magic from the best instructors in Canterlot. Though spellwork was never my talent, I know the signs of toxic magic feedback when I see it. When a unicorn is unexpectedly exposed to spells or magic more powerful than she is prepared to handle, she can experience painful aftershocks for hours, even days. You must have been exposed to a tremendous amount of magic through your connection to the Heavenstone. If you overexert yourself, instead of resting, you’ll only make matters worse.”

“What does it matter if I’m in pain?” Rarity asked. “We all have tasks that must be accomplished. This is no time to lie in bed.”

“If you are in agony and unable to use your magic because you refused to rest, then everything is lost. Without a balloon, the *Alicorn* is just a poorly designed, not very waterproof boat, and we will end up walking again. By the time we return home, if we return home, who can say what havoc the conspirators will have wrought?”

“I appreciate your attempt at kindness,” Rarity whispered. “I honestly do. But since we left Canterlot I’ve come to learn that my limitations are not quite as, well, limiting as I once believed. To prepare this ship to fly again, I’ll push myself as far as I need to push, whatever the personal cost.”

“We won’t survive this with you hurt,” Blueblood responded. “But suit yourself. I clearly cannot make you listen to reason.”

“I promise that I will not let anypony down. Now,” Rarity lowered her voice even further, “there is something else we must discuss, something I gathered from what Windlass said in my dream.”

“What is it?” Blueblood asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You said that you did not understand how your brother could be the mastermind behind this conspiracy. I believe you might have been correct. At least, he is not alone.”

“As I was trying to tell you, clearly Fancypants—”

Rarity cut Blueblood short. “No, not Fancypants. Well, he is involved, but not in the way you suspect.”

“What is it, then?”

“I knew shortly after I met Windlass that she was infatuated with Fancypants. Now I know that she is obsessed with him, and that her obsession verges on madness. She told me in my dream that her reason for attempting to kill me was that she considered me an obstacle in her pursuit of his affections.”

Blueblood leaned back, eyes wide. “You were actually *with* Fancypants?”

“What? No! Focus!” Rarity hissed. “This is about what a jealous madmare believed. While I am certain that part of the conspiracy does involve nullifying the Elements of Harmony, the reasons why I in particular was targeted were entirely personal. I suspect your brother’s efforts to place Windlass in Fancypants’ confidence, and to ensure that she and I ended up on his yacht for the race, were her plan, not his.”

Blueblood looked at her askance. “So Procyon’s girlfriend is secretly in love with Fancypants, and hates you. It’s not particularly shocking that my brother has failed to keep a mare’s affections, but what does that have to do with the conspiracy? It is still Procyon who seeks to take the throne in Canterlot.”

“Is it?” Rarity asked. “You said yourself that Procyon never displayed this kind of ambition. Windlass, on the other hoof, is pure ambition in pony form. It is she, not Procyon, who wields the power of the Heavenstone, and it is she who is obsessed with Fancypants and his idea for a new Equestria. I’m afraid more than ever, now that it seems that both sides of this conspiracy are led by the insane. Karroc wants only carnage and mayhem, and Windlass is an unstable fanatic with the power to cast dangerous spells half-way across the world. They would burn Equestria to ash to get what they want.”

“We are already planning to stop them,” Blueblood pointed out. “What else can we do?”

“We are planning to warn Gallopoli, and then request that the *Princesses* stop them,” Rarity corrected. “But I am worried that it might not be so simple. If Windlass truly has complete mastery over the Heavenstone, as you said, how can we know that even

Princess Celestia and Princess Luna can stop her? What if even the Elements of Harmony cannot? Despite it being your family heirloom, you were unaware that the stone could be used to enter another pony's mind and control her body. What else might she be able to do? You say the Heavenstone was meant to store magic granted by willing ponies. What if Windlass finds a way to *take* magic from the unwilling?"

"That's not possible," Blueblood said quickly. "If the Heavenstone could be abused in such a way, it would have happened before, and there are no records of such a thing. Its power is, and always was, to provide amplification and focus for the mutually agreed-upon will of ponykind, not to siphon magic from unwilling ponies."

"But you said she shouldn't have been able to enter my mind against my will," Rarity said. "Yet she did."

"Whatever she is capable of cannot be anything more than the Princesses can handle. Do not worry needlessly. Soon, we will be back safely in Equestria and we can end this before it gets worse than it already is. The Princesses can handle anything, as they have proven time and again over the centuries. If it was not the case, then the old royalty would not have faded so completely into irrelevance." Blueblood smiled almost imperceptibly.

"I wish I could feel as you do, but what I have seen ..." Rarity shuddered. "In my dream I first beheld a mechanical beast with eyes like furnaces and great metal wings broad enough to shroud all of Equestria in darkness. I saw Windlass, but as a terrible, regal alicorn, looking for all the world like a tyrant queen. Whether these were portents, or merely an attempt on her part to show me her power, or even something from the dark depths of my own mind, I cannot say. Still, I fear there may be more to all that is going on than mere politics and war-mongering, and as long as the Heavenstone is in the hooves of an enemy of Equestria, I will harbor a great deal of fear."

"For now, all we can do is flee."

"I suppose," Rarity conceded.

"It will all turn out alright in the end."

Rarity blinked. "Wait? Is that optimism creeping into your outlook on life, or merely a half-hearted attempt to make me feel better?"

"Perhaps both. It will be good to be in the air once again. As long as I have that to look forward to, I cannot help feeling a little twinge of excitement. Perhaps one could even call that optimism."

“Well, then I’m proud of you.” Rarity smiled.

“Soup’s on, everypony!” Buckaroo called out, his strong voice reverberating throughout the cramped space, causing Rarity and Blueblood to turn in union. The earth pony stallion continued, “Cept of course there ain’t no soup, just applesauce, oatmeal, and coffee. What was left of the butter and cheese was completely spoiled.”

Rarity moved to crowd near the galley space where the others had gathered. The appetizing smell of cooking apples and oats, though devoid of the fragrant spices she was used to at home, was enough to overwhelm even Khufu’s odor. She was chagrined when she realized that her mouth was literally watering, and she quickly found a cloth to dab its corners. The bold aroma of brewed coffee joined the smell of food, and Rarity suddenly felt a pang—not of hunger, but of homesickness. The scent transported her to her own cozy kitchen in Ponyville.

Buckaroo stood hunched over the airship’s tiny kerosene stove, and Khufu sat on his haunches next to him with a stack of wooden bowls, the camel’s great height leaving him unable to stand fully upright in the enclosed space. Zinzi and Zips were engaged in a conversation of their own, and though Rarity could not understand their speech, she could read the motherly expression that the zebra mare wore. All she could think was that this band of hard-bitten weapons merchants now looked positively domestic. If she did not know what Khufu’s scarf concealed, and if she could not see Buckaroo’s grim cutie mark, she could imagine them as a normal, albeit very blended, family.

As she waited for Khufu and Buckaroo to serve the plain meal, she wondered for the first time whom these four who had become her unlikely allies really were, and how they had come to the strange lifestyle they now led. If she was going to rely on them, and especially if they were going to be the ones to help keep her sane in the face of Windlass’ attacks, she needed to know more about them. The only way to find out was to ask. At any rate, she needed something to take her mind off of what had happened, and as much as she hated to admit it, she really could use a break before getting back to work.

“Thank you,” Rarity said, magically taking hold of the steaming bowl that Khufu held out to her, the camel keeping a grip with his odd, two-toed front feet. A wooden cup filled with delicious-smelling coffee followed immediately thereafter. “You know, it strikes me as odd that we all barely know one another, yet we’re about to risk life and limb together,” she declared to the room at large. “I don’t suppose you all would care to chat over breakfast. I promise never to disclose anything incriminating, if you were by some chance to reveal such things.”

“Certainly our work takes us outside official channels, but there is nothing inherently criminal in procuring goods for fair price,” Khufu said, perhaps pretending to sound a bit hurt.

“Actually, I am fairly certain that the sale of military cannons and enormous grappling harpoons, the construction of military compounds, and the building of experimental warships is strictly controlled within Equestria,” said Blueblood, tapping the massive barbed projectile that had still not been removed from the side of the *Alicorn*’s hull.

“Ah, but we operate purely extraterritorially,” Khufu replied, flashing a gold-toothed grin. “Only code that applies to us is one we choose to live by.”

“Convenient,” Blueblood said, before turning to Buckaroo. “What about you?” The big earth pony had just finished dishing out a bowl of oats and apples for himself, and sat down on a chair that was too small for his burly frame. “You claimed that you are a wanted stallion in Equestria. For murder.”

“Yep,” Buckaroo responded between mouthfuls.

“Buck committed no true crime, yet the authorities would sentence him to hard time,” Zinzi said, pulling a seat of her own over near the others. “For what he did he deserves only praise, not to be sent to prison for the rest of his days.”

“Well?” Blueblood prompted. “What did you do?”

“Oh, he killed my dad,” said Zips, moving to stand beside his mother. The half-zebra youth shrugged. “He had it coming.”

“Oh,” said Blueblood, blinking, suddenly seeming to have lost his taste for conversation. Even he could not be so tactless as to pry into a matter so apparently delicate. Rarity, for her part, was shocked at the news. She had not believed Buckaroo was truly capable of killing anypony, despite the fact that his cutie mark appeared to be a hangpony’s noose.

“Well?” Zips spoke up again, looking expectantly at Buckaroo. “I’ll tell them if you won’t, and you tell it so much better.”

The big stallion sighed. “Fine, alright. Yes, I’m wanted in Equestria for murder, for causing the deaths of two lowlifes, names of Sixshot Slim-to-None and Prickly Pear.” He paused to try to find a comfortable position on his comparatively tiny chair. “You see, it wasn’t all that long ago that the wild country south of the core towns was *really* wild. Before the railroad got finished and towns started springin’ up everywhere the tracks

went, 't'used to be the only way to get out into the plains and the desert beyond was to gallop there on your own four hooves. This meant the frontier was filled with two kinds of ponies: brave homesteaders lookin' for a taste of freedom, and desperate ponies lookin' to put plenty of distance between themselves and the law. Then there was me. Somepony had to maintain a semblance of order, and the homesteaders were willin' to pay a good price for peace of mind. I scared and chased off all the bandits and lowlifes I could find, but there were always more comin'. Eventually, the troublemakers learned to work together, and they thought that would get me to leave 'em alone. Didn't work."

"What did you do?" Blueblood asked, leaning forward. Rarity had to stifle a laugh at the sight of him, so quickly having become engrossed in Buckaroo's tale.

"Well, I knew that these two, Prickly Pear and Slim, were a couple of the worst. Not only were they stealin' from the homesteaders, they were diggin' for gold and artifacts in buffalo burial grounds. Rumor was they even snuffed out a lawpony from Canterlot who came down south lookin' for 'em. I figured, if I could make an example of these two, then surely no pony else would come 'round makin' trouble for awhile. After a fair bit of searchin', I finally found their camp."

"It was not technically theirs," Zinzi said, "though I suppose I am splitting hairs."

"That's right," Buckaroo nodded. "I couldn't believe what I was seein', but ol' Prickly and Slim were hiding out in a camp full of zebras, living on the edge of buffalo territory. I didn't know what was going on, and I ain't never even seen a zebra before that. Turned out those two lowlifes were sellin' bones, spices, jewels, rare plants, and any other ill-gotten treasures they could get their hooves on to these zebras."

"We were researchers, all quite young, and had never been to a place so far-flung," Zinzi added, a sad expression on her face. "In order to expand our potion lore, we studied what magic Equestrian ingredients had in store. We never suspected that our suppliers were grave robbers, thieves, and liars."

"I wanted to catch these fellers, so I staked out the path they took through the ponderosa when settin' out each day, and I set trip ropes and snare traps all over the place, hopin' to snag 'em or at least knock 'em down. I always had a fair bit of skill with a rope, but Slim was a unicorn with a fancy six-barrel piece he stole from some wayward and unlucky soul. I was gonna need every advantage I could get in a confrontation."

"So that's your special talent?" Blueblood asked. "Rope tricks and knots? And I had thought it was a noose, ha ha."

Buckaroo looked the unicorn stallion directly in the eyes. “I ain’t never killed no pony when I got my mark,” he said. “But cutie marks have a funny way of predictin’ the future sometimes, don’t they?”

Rarity watched with delight as Blueblood winced. “Oh do go on, darling,” she said. “The story is so interesting.”

Buckaroo shrugged. “Anyhow, the plan worked like a charm, to a point. When I crept outta the brush I had both of those stallions danglin’ from the trees, and I made sure to kick ol’ Slim’s pistol into the creek before he could magic it up off the ground. What I didn’t expect was for this crazy zebra mare to come galloping outta nowhere and knock me over. If y’all can believe it, Zinzi here had fallen for one of them gangsters. That Prickly Pear was a smooth sort of stallion, and she was just as pretty back then as she is now, just a lot less worldly-wise. While I was tryin’ to pick myself up, she set to work untyin’ my snares. Fortunately, there was no way to undo my knots with a pony’s full weight takin’ up the slack in the rope. Less fortunately, Prickly Pear had a knife strapped to his shoulder that I didn’t know about, right where he could reach it with his teeth.”

“When he realized I could not set him free, he pulled me tight and threatened me,” Zinzi affirmed. “Though at the time I already carried his son, he preferred to look out for number one.”

“I wasn’t about to get some poor girl killed just to prove a point, so I was ready to back off and deal with Slim and Prickly another day. That’s when all Tartarus broke loose. Somehow, the local buffalo tribe had gotten wind of what these two had been up to, and they broke over the crest of the ridge in a wall of sound and fury like the comin’ of the end of days. At the same time, a pony posse hired by a different group of homesteaders showed up. Slim and Prickly had no shortage of enemies, as it turned out. Well, Zinzi here had good reflexes, so she broke free just as soon as Prickly Pear turned to look at the buffalo, and I stepped in and knocked the knife away.”

“My goodness,” Rarity exclaimed, herself now completely enthralled by the tale. “What drama! Whatever did you do next?”

“Well, I knew what was comin’, and it wasn’t gonna be pretty. I tried to cut both stallions down before the buffalo could reach ‘em, but they kept squirmin’ and fightin’ me, and before I knew it the whole herd was thundering down on top of us. It was all I could do to get out of there with Zinzi. What happened, I can’t say, but they never found no pieces of either of those two. Of course, the rival posse saw the perfect opportunity to put me outta business, so they claimed I killed Slim and Prickly Pear. Got a royal indictment and

everything. Seeing as there were four of them and only one of me, and one zebra who was in Equestria without papers, I'm sure they coulda put me behind bars somewhere if I'd stuck around."

"So you fled," Blueblood concluded.

"Yep. Zinzi too, since the other zebras had skedaddled as soon as the buffalo showed up. I suspect that a few of the hardier bulls probably chased those poor zebras most of the way back where they had come. Course, they didn't know they were doin' anything wrong grinding pilfered bones and treasures into powders and potions, but the buffalo weren't likely to see it that way."

"By then I did not want to return home. I had an entire world in which to roam."

"So, we took off and didn't look back until Equestria was long gone. Zinzi sold fireworks, powders, and potions, and I took security work when I could find it. It was a mite tricky taking care of a little foal after Zips was born, but all in all we were a good team, and he grew up into a more than capable young feller. We were way out west in the canyons of the Serpent's Spine, where the big donkey settlements are found these days, when Khufu and Zolo flew into town hawkin' engines and plans for a paddlewheel steamship to replace the punts, rafts, and canoes the donkeys had always used on the big Courser. Once they had unloaded their cargo and picked up to leave, we three went with 'em." Buckaroo took a large sip of hot coffee. "That's the whole story."

"In our line of work, I felt that it would not hurt to have added security, nor Zinzi's incomparable knowledge of firepowder, nor Zips' youthful athleticism and skill as markspony," Khufu added. "They became even more valuable, in time, as my good friends."

"Hmmp, well, it is simply an injustice that you stand accused in Equestria," Blueblood said indignantly. He had clearly been quite taken with Buckaroo's story, Rarity realized. Perhaps, she hoped, this marked the end of their rivalry.

"You know, I expect that if we succeed in saving the Gallopolitans and alerting Princess Celestia to the existence of this conspiracy before any further harm is done, it shall be only a small matter to procure a royal pardon," she suggested. "I am on friendly terms with the Princess, after all."

“Well, thank you kindly miss, but it’s been long enough now that I’m not sure I even want to go back, or that there’s anyplace to go back to,” Buckaroo replied. “Sides, I’ve got my own funny little family here now.”

“I think that’s very sweet,” Rarity said. “But you still deserve that pardon, and I’m certain it can be arranged.”

Buckaroo nodded without saying any more, and turned his attention back to his breakfast. Blueblood, for his part, was now staring expectantly at Khufu.

“I suppose you would care to hear my story?” the camel posited, looking at the unicorn stallion with his one golden eye. “Surely you already know of fall of royal family of Camelon, no?”

“I know only as much as any educated pony knows,” Blueblood replied. “But you actually survived the uprising.”

“Well, my pony friend, tell me what you do know, and perhaps I can pick up from there.”

“We are taught that there was a great conflict with a tribe of desert creatures, and the misery the invaders inflicted was so intense that the camels rose up against the royal family, who could not stop the invasion. Though many perished in the fighting, more died in the ensuing violence—royals, officials, and citizens caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Of course, everypony knows that only the mysterious Exile Prince of Camelon survived, to spend the rest of his days indulging in the generosity of those other royal families still left in the world. No pony ever said you had become a traveling weapons merchant, though. That came as a surprise to me.”

“Your schooling was sound, young duke,” Khufu replied, smiling sadly. “Yes, was more than fifty years ago now that jackyll tribes, cruel curs all of them, swarmed out of desert, catching all of Camelon completely unprepared. Their spears were sharp, and their armored warbeetles all but impervious. Half of North Kingdom was sacked, and twenty thousand camels lost, before we could even mount half-hearted defense. What books may not mention—it was all my fault.”

“Your fault?” Rarity repeated. “How could you be responsible? It sounds as though it was those monsters, whatever you called them, who should bear the blame! They attacked you without warning.”

“No, it is I,” Khufu sighed. “Father had months before appointed me to oversee defense of kingdom, in hopes of instilling responsibility and martial spirit in his crown prince.

Instead, I squandered time and money in countless pleasure domes, neglecting to inspect even one garrison. I heeded no warnings about danger brewing in desert. After attack began, I thought only of my own safety, and nothing of our soldiers. I sent waves of good camels to stem tide of jackyll horde, until dunes were stained red and air across kingdom was thick with smoke and cries of widows. My camels were right to blame me, but their ire was shared by my family, and entire government. Even as fighting raged against jackylls, cities far from battle descended into chaos. Even palace guards turned against my family.”

“You were sentenced to execution,” Blueblood stated, gesturing toward the scarf around Khufu’s neck. “Obviously. But somehow you survived.”

“There was no sentence,” Khufu laughed harshly, “only fury of mob. They gouged out my eye, to represent blind eye I turned to their suffering, and hung me from gibbet outside royal palace. They did not drop me so as to break my neck, but instead left me to slowly strangle as rope cut into my flesh. When rope snapped, I had seconds before mob understood what happened, and I raced to safety. Truly it was miracle, but also curse. None else from my family escaped, and Kingdom of Camelon was dead and gone. In decades since, new regimes have come to power and invaders have been expelled, but bitterness persists. I may return home only under pain of death.”

“I am so sorry,” Rarity said with all the sympathy she could pour into her words. “I cannot imagine the pain you must live with each day.”

Khufu sighed. “I became convinced that somehow I could expunge my sins by preventing another one-sided war. No intelligent creatures go to war unless confident odds are in their favor. I have been trading, acquiring, developing, and selling weapons since before any of you were foaled, so that no side could ever gain clear advantage. Since I began, no wars have raged between civilized nations, and no massacres like Camelon have happened. I thought helping Karroc build fighting force was right, to keep ponies from destroying griffons. You are so many, and they so few, after all.”

“Instead, you helped a mad griffon build an armada he plans to use to start a war,” Blueblood wryly observed. “Equestria would never have attacked any of the griffon eyries, but now, if we are unsuccessful in putting a stop to Karroc and my brother, war will be inevitable.”

“I knew ponies would not attack unprovoked,” Khufu said defensively. “Karroc, though, convinced me that constant pony push north would inevitably result in destruction of griffons as sovereign race. You already mine clouds and mountains of their homelands.”

“Real peace is not achieved by both sides of a dispute aiming a cannon at the other,” Blueblood rejoined.

“It is achieved through friendship, trust, and compromise,” Rarity finished.

“You ponies must learn that not all creatures are reasonable,” Khufu replied darkly. “Sometimes having cannons at ready is *only* way for peace.”

“When we return to Equestria, you will see,” Rarity maintained. “Cooler heads will prevail and we will reach a mutual understanding with the griffons. I have every confidence in the Princesses, and I know that not all griffons can be like Karroc and his zealots.”

Khufu did not reply. Silence reigned in the cramped cabin, and Rarity could feel doubt and worry reappearing in the back of her mind. She had to believe that the natural order of the universe was harmony, and that Karroc, Windlass, Procyon, Tempest, and the others who sought conflict were aberrations. After they were dealt with, everything would be right with the world again.

Of course, she reminded herself, it was not long ago that Discord had reappeared after more than a thousand years encased in stone, in order to spread chaos and misery across Equestria. Before him, Nightmare Moon had been released from her lunar prison to resume her vendetta against the day. What awful thing would be next? How many more times in her life would she and the girls find themselves staring down some monster, ready to loose the power of the Elements of Harmony? Could the Elements continue to be Equestria’s salvation forever? Was the true nature of the universe not harmony at all, but rather endless conflict? The thought was almost too depressing to bear.

“For now, it’s probably best we just worry about getting this airship outta the mud,” Buckaroo said, breaking the tension at last.

“Yes,” Rarity agreed quickly.

“Maybe before we do that you can explain how this is all going to go down,” Zips piped up. “You know, the plan. I spent all yesterday making spears and bolas. I want to know when I get to use them.”

“Oh, the plan.” Rarity had anticipated they would want to know the full details of her plan at some point. She had hoped that point would be slightly later in the day, after she had more time to finalize everything in her head. “Of course. I have a plan.”

“We got a repeatin’ cannon, once I get her set up,” Buckaroo said. “Don’t need no more of a plan than that.”

“Oh no. No no no!” Rarity exclaimed. “We cannot simply shoot our way in and hope to escape. An airship is, in the best of scenarios, a rather fragile thing. We would never make it. No, my plan calls for finesse, subterfuge, even skullduggery!”

“Please, my friend, go on,” Khufu prompted, craning his long neck toward her.

It was a good plan, Rarity knew. It *should* work, if everything went perfectly. Still, she couldn’t help but think it overly audacious, even outlandish. How would the others react? She had to convince them to go along, just as she had convinced them to believe in resurrecting the *Alicorn* in the first place. It’s all in the presentation, she reminded herself. She had to sell the plan just as she would any of her greatest designs. She had to project the easy confidence of inevitable success.

“Ahem. As you know, the griffons plan to make for Gallopoli on the morrow, and I expect Karroc and his warship will depart before dawn. In order to maximize our chances, we must make our move immediately after he leaves with the bulk of the griffon forces. Then, we will have the best chance of obtaining the lifting gas, escaping unscathed, and catching up to Karroc using the *Alicorn*’s superior speed.”

“That is all easily understood,” Zinzi remarked. “As you say, ‘so far, so good.’”

“How do we get the gas?” Zips asked.

“As Buckaroo explained to me, the lifting gas is stored in containers inside the airship hangar at the far end of the base. That building is built out over the water so that the airship hulls can be floated and easily moved. There are barges in the area, so if somepony can get inside, it should be possible to float the containers of gas out in the same fashion we originally escaped.”

“Then you do not intend for the *Alicorn* to actually enter the base,” Blueblood noted.

“Right you are,” Rarity said. “We would only be putting ourselves and the ship in needless danger. The *Alicorn* shall be resting at anchor in a defensible position, downstream of the base.”

“But the *Alicorn* has no anchor!”

“Yes it has!” Rarity exclaimed. “Or at least, it will have one.” She moved across the cabin close to Blueblood and rapped a hoof against the cold metal of the griffon harpoon. “Your soon-to-be new anchor!”

“That ... I suppose that could actually work, with a bit of rope,” Blueblood admitted.

“Quite so. And Buckaroo, you will be pleased to learn that I plan to use something with which we absconded on the barge.”

“The ARC cannon! Yeehaw!”

“Nothing so crude, I’m afraid,” Rarity went on, flashing a smile. She really had their interest now. Good, because the next phase of the operation was surely the most unorthodox. “Well, okay, it’s a little crude.”

“What in tarnation does that mean? There wasn’t nothin’ else on there.” Buckaroo scratched his chin with the edge of a forehoof.

“Oh, but there was,” Rarity said.

“Fish,” Zips suddenly exclaimed. “There were crates filled with hundreds of pounds of tinned fish.”

“Precisely!” Rarity confirmed. “Disgusting, horrible, smelly dead fish. Enough fish for a very nice distraction, I should say. There are pilings driven into the river bed as markers near the base. I glimpsed them under the tarp when we made our getaway. We will tow the barge upriver with us, and tie it off on one of the pilings before moving the *Alicorn* a safe distance away. I will be in position on the barge to open the cans of fish and dump them into the river.”

“And what’ll that accomplish?” Buckaroo asked. “That’ll just get the jagugars all riled up.”

“Indeed. Clever,” Khufu said. “Giant fish will become frenzied, and thrash about. Odor and noise will draw attention of remaining guards at base.”

“That’s it!” Rarity nodded. “Once all of the fish is in the water, I will untie the rope and float the barge back downstream to where the ship is waiting. While the griffons are attempting to discern what is going on and are searching for the source of the commotion, several of you, having previously made your way to shore, will enter the base

and make your way to the hangar. Blueblood, Buckaroo, and Zips, retrieving the lifting gas will be your responsibility.”

“I *can't* ‘make my way to shore,’” Buckaroo protested. “I can’t swim, and I’m sure as hay not getting in the water with those monster fish.”

“The others will help you, and you needn’t worry about the fish so long as you have this to protect you.” Rarity touched the pink pearl resting against her neck. “It will keep you safe in the water, as it has me. Blueblood has one exactly like mine, and you will be with him.”

“It is true,” Khufu nodded. “The magic of the pearl does not fail. Stories say it protected ships full of sailors; it can protect three ponies. You will not be harmed in the river.”

“Not afraid of getting your coat wet, are you?” Blueblood asked in a slightly mocking tone. “I suppose I would be happy to acquire the gas and take home all the glory myself.”

“My, that would be most impressive,” Rarity said, taking the opportunity to lean nonchalantly against Blueblood’s shoulder. “I suppose you can wait aboard ship, then, Mr. Buckaroo, while Blueblood and Zips retrieve the gas.”

“Now hold on just one pony pickin’ minute,” Buckaroo said with a snort. “Of course I’ll go. Your prissy friend there’ll just muck everything up.”

“Fabulous! You three will infiltrate the base, secure the gas, and float back to the ship. Khufu, Zinzi, and I will be waiting, ready to inflate the balloon and defend the ship if we are spotted. If it appears that you are in trouble, Blueblood can send up a flare of light from his horn and we will move the ship to help. With any luck, the momentary distraction will have the griffons looking in exactly the wrong place, and you will be able to slip in and out right under their beaks.”

“If we aren’t lucky, at least I’ll get some target practice,” Zips said. Rarity saw him lean his head forward and pick something up in his teeth. He then turned his body and whipped his head back around at the same time. Blueblood gave a high-pitched yelp and she saw him duck for cover. For her part, Rarity barely had time to blink as something whisked past her nose and embedded in the wall of the cabin behind her. She gasped as she realized that it was a short, thin-shafted spear. Turning back to gape at Zips, she saw that he still held some unrecognizable object in his mouth.

“What is wrong with you, child? I did not raise you in the wild!” Zinzi scolded.

Zips spit out the whatever-it-was. “Just making a point.”

“I’ll say!” Rarity exclaimed. “What was that?”

“Spear-thrower,” Zips proudly declared. “My own design. Just a simple thing to give extra leverage, so I can throw harder and farther, just using my teeth. I made a ton of these little spears yesterday, and I dare any griffon to come close and see how well I sharpened them.”

“Well, ah, good work then!” Rarity declared. “But you may want to practice outside.” She turned to address the group. “Now that you all know my plan, I invite your questions.”

“Yes, I have one,” Blueblood said, picking himself off of the floor. “Everything seems sound enough, but we rely entirely on Karroc having already departed with most of the griffons. What if he and his ship and crew remain when we arrive? We cannot face that ship and a whole base full of griffons with firesticks, especially if we cannot even fly ourselves.”

“Simple. If they are still present, we wait until they are not.”

“Why must I wait with the ship?” Zinzi asked. “It makes sense that I should go with Zips.”

“The three stallions are going to get the lifting gas simply because Buckaroo is strong, Zips is quick and stealthy, and Blueblood can perform telekinesis. Here, I need somepony who can steer the ship, and that is Khufu, and I need somepony who can operate that ridiculous cannon Buckaroo is going to install, if worse comes to worse. That certainly is not me.”

“Ha! You do need it!” Buckaroo shouted, as animated as Rarity had seen him. “I knew it!”

“I can operate it if must be done, though I believe Buck would have far more fun,” Zinzi said.

“Then I believe we have a plan,” Rarity said, putting as much confidence into her voice as she was able to muster.

Blueblood peered out the hole in the side of the ship and then pulled his head back inside. “The storm has passed, and dawn is breaking. We should get back to work.”

“Yeah, I reckon. The first thing we need to do is pry her outta the mud and get her up on the rollers,” Buckaroo said, rising to all four hooves. “We’ll need everypony’s help.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Rarity asked enthusiastically, springing to her hooves. After her unpleasant awakening, and the revelations concerning Windlass, it felt wonderful to have a hot meal in her belly and the familiar charge of well-made coffee in her veins, and even better to have gotten through explaining her scheme without any serious protests. Now she was ready to work. If this was to be her last day, then it would be a productive day, without a wasted minute.

She climbed the short set of stairs and heaved open the hatch to the upper deck. As promised, the morning sky was quickly clearing of what few clouds remained, and the sun was beginning to peer over the horizon. The post-storm air was thick with the scent of sweet flowers, and it rang with birdsong. The world said to her, “You can do this.” At least, that is what she chose to hear.

As she walked down the fallen tree that had been left for access, Rarity could see that the weather had not undone her hard work of the previous day. The partially reassembled balloon envelope was still where she had secured it, and aside from pools of water that had collected in its folds, it was not any worse for wear. She stepped onto the ground, and felt herself sink into the wet earth. Turning to the ship, she could see the evidence of Buckaroo’s and Blueblood’s work, as fallen logs had been jammed under the hull at short intervals all around. She hoped they would operate as designed in leveraging the *Alicorn* out of the mud. Something whooshed past, causing her to startle as she wondered if Zips was hurling spears again, before she realized that a rope ladder had been thrown from the upper deck.

“We’re going to have to move this log,” Blueblood called down. “It would be a shame if we forgot to provide for some other means of access to the deck.”

“A shame indeed!” she called back. “Hurry down, won’t you? We have much to do!”

Blueblood and the others quickly made their way to stand beside her, each observing the *Alicorn*, likely contemplating the hard work ahead of them, as Rarity was. She could see the progress that had been made so far, in the various patches to the hull and the sticky translucent film that Zinzi had slathered on every accessible surface. She would only be able to waterproof the bottom of the hull once it was sufficiently raised out of the mud.

“I’ll start buckin’ these posts in deeper,” Buckaroo said. “Duke ...”

“Blueblood is fine.”

“*Blueblood* then,” Buckaroo continued, “why don’t you start gettin’ the rollers in position and making sure the lines are secured. Then everypony can pull and we’ll see if we get anywhere.”

With nothing to do for the moment, Rarity watched as Buckaroo kicked each narrow log, none more than a couple of hooves wide, down into the ground as far as possible, underneath the *Alicorn*’s hull. As each was driven down, she knew a corresponding upward force was being exerted on the bottom of the ship, and the ship was wedged just a little bit more up and out of the earth. With dozens—no, hundreds—of these logs forcing the ship up out of the muck, it almost seemed possible that they would succeed in moving it.

“Rarity!”

She looked up at the sound of her name and saw Blueblood standing on the upper deck. “Get the others and catch these mooring lines as I throw them down. Walk them back toward the water as far as you can.”

Once she had gathered Khufu, Zinzi, and Zips at the rear of the airship, Blueblood cast down the thick ropes. She held fast to the end of her rope with her magic, while the others gripped theirs in their teeth, and the quartet stretched the lines out to their full reach. When she could pull no further, Rarity turned around, and guessed she was standing about thirty lengths behind the ship. She could see more of the others’ work from the day before, where they had hauled twelve or fifteen large fallen tree trunks behind the *Alicorn* and laid them side by side, each separated from the next by no more than two lengths. They would be able to pull the ship up, and then roll it over top of the logs toward the water’s edge, moving new logs into place as the airship progressed.

“She’s up as far as I’m gonna get her,” Buckaroo called out.

“Understood. Rarity, I need you over here!” Blueblood shouted.

She trotted through the mud. “What?”

“You and I are going to maneuver the logs, while the others pull. It will be faster with magic.”

“If I can even lift something so heavy,” Rarity remarked, dubious. She turned at the sound of a reverberating crash, and saw that Buckaroo had kicked away the thick tree

trunk that allowed ingress to the ship. He then trotted quickly over to join the other three with the ropes.

“Ready,” Buckaroo called out. “On three. One.”

Rarity was not ready. What was she even supposed to be doing?

“Two. Three.” Buckaroo reached over and bit down on the end of rope. “Grrmmm!” he mumbled. Rarity supposed that meant “go.”

Indeed it did. Buckaroo, Khufu, Zinzi, and Zips pulled their ropes taut, and Rarity could see muscles straining beneath each of their coats. The ship did not budge.

“Ah, you can do it!” she shouted encouragingly, fighting back panic. What if they could not?”

“What are you doing?” Blueblood grunted. “If you really do not need to rest, then help!”

Rarity saw that the stallion was exerting himself, his horn glowing brilliantly and throwing off golden sparks. He meant for her to help lift the ship, but how could she? It was far too enormous and heavy for her limited telekinesis. Still, the ship had to move.

“Right. Here goes.” She closed her eyes and concentrated, casting her magic until she felt it touch the airship’s hull. She let the spell expand, and as it ballooned outward to encompass the *Alicorn*, she could feel her fine control slipping away. This was a clumsy, oafish spell—the opposite of how she normally employed her magic.

Rarity lifted, knowing full well the exertion would bring back the pain and nausea she had felt earlier. It did, and worse. No matter, the *Alicorn* had to move. She pushed herself harder, even as fire ran through her horn and down her spine, forcing her into a kneeling position. *Move!* Why won’t you move? She focused all of her thought, strength, and magic into one last push, and as she gave the spell everything she had left, she felt something. Even as she blacked out, before she hit the ground, she knew what it was. The ship had moved.

When she came around seconds later, Rarity opened her eyes to a beautiful sight. The *Alicorn* floated, resting atop a line of logs, looking almost as though it was airborne again. They had done it. Her plan was going to work; she was certain of it. It would be smooth sailing from here on out.

There was a deranged mare waiting to invade her mind. Tomorrow morning, she would actively court death. The best case scenario had her immediately thereafter staring down a warship bristling with cannons and teeming with griffons.

Smooth sailing, Rarity, she told herself.

One last effort. One more synergistic combination of physical pull and magical push. In theory, that was all it would take for the *Alicorn* to roll free of its cradle of tree trunks and into the water.

This was, as the saying went, the moment of truth. Once the hull hit the water, it would not take long to determine whether the tremendous effort expended to bring the once proud racing airship back from the dead had been successful. The airship-turned-riverboat was either watertight, and would float, or it would fill with water and sink straight to the bottom.

Rarity was as exhausted as she had ever been, and she looked as worn out as she felt. Her coat was filthy, her mane a tangled, frizzy mess, and her entire body was drenched in sweat mixed with unknown varieties of grime. Worse, she stood pastern-deep in thick mud that sucked her hooves down with each laborious step she took. Though such a state of abject dishevelment would have, under normal circumstances, sent her into conniptions, at this particular moment in time she felt almost giddy. She was eager to see the first part of her wild scheme come to fruition, to stop the griffons, and to never have to fear another attack from Windlass again.

After breakfast, she had worked relentlessly to complete her repair work and patching of the *Alicorn's* balloon, stopping only briefly for water and to address her body's other unignorable demands. The others, too, had worked at a frenzied pace. Once Zips had decided he had a large enough pile of makeshift projectiles, he had joined his mother in slathering sticky resin over the hull. Meanwhile, Khufu and the two stallions had struggled with Blueblood's limited maintenance tools to repair the *Alicorn's* propeller and maneuvering surfaces, reconstruct the ship's clockwork navigational system, and assure themselves that the steam engine would function.

They had even managed to assemble and bolt Buckaroo's monstrous cannon to the starboard hull, near the bow of the airship. Now, the hideous pony-sized agglomeration of dark metal parts and long cylindrical tubes perched like a huge mechanical vulture atop its swiveling wooden base, bolted to the deck. She supposed that the device was meant to propel the small steel cylinders filling the attached hopper, but the method of its operation was not at all clear to her. In any case, she did not really care how it worked, or even if it did. Buckaroo and Blueblood seemed extremely pleased with themselves, and very much into the spirit of competitive cooperation. That could only be a positive.

Yet more projects had been accomplished. The barbed steel missile that had been embedded in the *Alicorn*'s hull now rested on the upper deck, waiting to become the ship's new anchor. The gaping hole the projectile had created was patched with wood cannibalized from the *Alicorn*'s cabin furniture, long iron nails, and copious amounts of Zinzi's sticky resin. It was an ugly scab on the already scarified surface of the once-beautiful alabaster hull, but the patch appeared functional.

Now, as the sun sank low and the brash cacophony of daylight animals was replaced by the mellow chorus of the jungle's crepuscular denizens, it was finally time for the battered, bandaged, and flightless *Alicorn* to take to the water. Rarity could not help but feel a kinship with the poor vessel, formerly so elegant and beautiful, and now reduced to this pitiable state. Both of them, she and the *Alicorn*, their fates now linked, would have to persevere in a state of unmitigated unfabulousity.

"One more good yank ought to do it," Buckaroo called from in front of the ship, where he stood with the Khufu, Zinzi, and Zips. "Y'all ready back there?"

"We are ready," Blueblood replied. "You have only to give the word."

"Alright then, here ..."

"Wait!" Rarity shouted, loudly enough to cause the others to trot out from the other side of the ship and over to her. She was feeling overcome with sentimentality, and she just had to speak up. There absolutely had to be a touch of ceremony for the occasion. The *Alicorn* deserved as much, and so did she.

"I just think she deserves a little something special before she goes into water."

"She?" Blueblood inquired. "You've finally come around to calling the ship 'she'?"

"Yes, I believe I have," Rarity replied primly. "And I want to give her a proper send-off on this voyage. Do you still have the rum?"

"Seriously? Now?" Blueblood asked, eyebrows raised. "You're incredible."

Rarity rolled her eyes in response. "Just tell me if you still have it."

"Ahem. There is rum?" Khufu asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Yeah, why am I just learnin' about this now?" Buckaroo demanded.

“Yes, I have it,” Blueblood said, shrugging. “I was too unwell to even think of using it on my injuries, so I kept it with me. If you really must have a drink, now of all times, it is stowed under the bed with my other effects.”

Rarity did not answer, but instead raced over to the side of the ship. There, she paused. “How in Celestia’s name am I supposed to climb a rope ladder anyway?”

“Try bitin’ down on the rope and then hauling yourself up with your front legs,” Buckaroo suggested.

“What? That is *not* how to climb a ladder,” Blueblood huffed.

“Works for me,” the big earth pony shrugged.

“I am not using my teeth,” Rarity stated flatly. “Any other suggestions?”

“Here.” Blueblood’s horn glowed, and Rarity felt her entire body tingle as he levitated her up onto the deck of the *Alicorn*. “Now hurry up.”

“Thank you.” Rarity hurried down into the cabin, magically retrieved the coconut still half-full of Gallopolitan spiced rum, surmounted the stairs to the upper deck, and then carefully maneuvered over the side of the ship and onto the rope ladder. Descending was far easier and more intuitive than climbing, and she soon hopped lightly down to the muddy earth.

“Ahem, I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words to all of you.” When nopony seemed to be paying attention, Rarity added, “Afterward you can drink the rum.” All eyes now upon her, she thrust a hoof at the *Alicorn* looming behind her, and continued.

“Look behind me, at this ship. Yesterday morning, she was merely a wreck. Unflyable. Immoveable. Useless. After two days, we six have given her a second chance, an opportunity to reclaim a measure of respect from those who put her in this dreadful situation, and to prevent a catastrophe of unimaginable proportion and consequence. Blueblood built this ship, but we all gave her a new life, and now we charge her with the safety of our own lives. Now, look upon me. I too am a dreadful mess, a shell of my former self.”

“Aw, it ain’t so bad,” Buckaroo offered.

“Oh, but it is, darling! It really is.” Rarity placed a foreleg just under her horn and pantomimed a swoon. “I am covered in grime, sweat, muck, dirt, bruises, cuts, insect bites, piranhasprite bites, and my hair, my poor hair—where to even begin? The Rarity of old—last week, to be precise—is gone, wrecked, washed up on the rocks, an absolute lost cause! The pony you see before you is not her, but somepony new, risen from the dirt and mud just like this airship. The new Rarity is somepony who, instead of fretting about accessorizing, is about to navigate a river, at night, in an airship, to steal lifting gas from a fortified installation teeming with soldiers. I will do this because I must, if Equestria and peace are to persist.”

Rarity used a bit of magic to pop the cork of the coconut she was holding aloft, then took an experimental sip of rum. Strong. Piquant. She coughed lightly. “We are all like the *Alicorn*. We have all faced adversity and been given a second chance, and now we all set out together to do something meaningful for the greater good.” She addressed each of them in turn.

“Blueblood, your life has been stolen out from under you. You and I are both dead and gone, so far as Equestria knows. Prince Khufu, your birthright is lost, but now you have a chance to stop a war and absolve your mistake in trusting General Karroc. Buckaroo, if we survive, you will be welcome in Equestria once again. Zinzi and Zips, Equestria is not your home, yet you chose to stay with us. Thank you. Whatever else any of you may have done in the past, this is a noble thing we’re going to attempt. I may be a fashion designer by trade, but I have seen real bravery before, and I see it again now. I believe in us, and I believe that we’ll stop this war from happening!”

“Hear, hear!” Buckaroo proclaimed.

“The words you speak are fine, and prove you have some spine,” Zinzi said, nodding.

“We are with you to bitter end, Lady Rarity,” Khufu said. “I knew when I first saw you, you possessed heart of hero. You have proven it time and again. I remain at your service.” He lowered his long neck and bent his forelegs in a small bow.

“Thank you,” Rarity said with a smile, before taking another swig of rum. She magically swung the coconut against the hull, and was rewarded with a dull thump. “Hm. Not quite the same as a bottle of champagne, but it will have to do in a pinch. To the *Alicorn*. May she carry us home with the dawn.” She then took a third, somewhat larger swig, replaced the stopper, and tossed the coconut to Buckaroo. The stallion reared back and caught the unorthodox drinking vessel between his forehooves. “Cheers.”

“Much obliged!” Buckaroo pulled the cork with his teeth, then tilted the coconut and drank, before resting it on a broad hoof and presenting it to Khufu. The rum was then passed around until all but the last sip was gone. Rarity finished that, before turning to Blueblood with a shrug.

“My apologies, but somepony has to steer the ship,” she said. “Now, are you ready?”

“I was ready before you felt the need for hard liquor and an inspirational monologue,” Blueblood grumbled. “But I admit that this has already gone better than the last time you and I attended a launching.”

“As terrible as we both look, I assure you that you have no need to fear any unwanted advances from me this time,” Rarity said, chuckling. “Oh my, things truly must be getting desperate if I am able to make jokes about that awful occasion.”

“Not desperate enough for your joke to be in good taste,” Blueblood muttered. “And in any case, I have decided that the jungle look works for me. I was always ruggedly handsome, but all these scratches and the dirty coat really showcase my masculinity. Plus, my compass rose really is the perfect cutie mark for this sort of adventure.”

“Really. Shall I call you ‘Daring Blue’ then?” Rarity asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “You do act like somepony out of a children’s story, I’ll give you that.”

“Funny, but I’ll have you know that many perfectly mature adults enjoy the Daring Do novels.”

“Whatever you say,” Rarity smirked. “Be honest, though, you’re looking forward to a warm meal and a hot shower just as much as I am.”

“Perhaps more so,” Blueblood agreed. “Though the shower may come sooner than you think. The *Alicorn*’s water reservoirs are full of clean water from the storm. Once the boiler heats up, you’ll be able to have your hot shower. I would take advantage, since it might be your last.”

Rarity gasped. “A hot shower? Here? Tonight?”

“You never noticed the head has a shower built into the ceiling? Now that we’ll be running the engine, there will be plenty of heat.”

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me?” Rarity demanded, giving Blueblood a small but aggressive shove. “How dare you let me waste all this time? We must get under way at once!”

“I *have* been attempting to do so.”

“We are ready, Your Grace,” Khufu said. “Buck will give the signal.” The camel and his cohorts retreated to the front of the ship. Giddily anticipating the possibility of being clean again, Rarity planted her hooves and gathered her magic for one last big push. Blueblood moved to stand beside her.

“This is it, everypony!” Buckaroo shouted, his baritone voice resonating throughout the clearing. “One ... two ... three ... go!”

Rarity loosed what energy she had managed to gather in a bright flash of blue light, releasing her normally carefully controlled telekinesis in a single blind push, as strong as she could manage. She must still have been suffering the aftereffects of Windlass’ attack, because a jolt of pain shot down her horn and her forelegs buckled, sending her sprawling in the mud. In any case, she disregarded the pain, and felt only elation as she watched the *Alicorn* slide forward into the water with a mighty splash.

“Are you alright?” Blueblood asked, extending a foreleg for support. Rarity accepted the proffered limb, and leveraged herself against it in order to pull herself up.

“I’m fine,” Rarity said, attempting to brush off the worst of the mud. “Better than fine, even. Look! We did it! Isn’t it amazing?”

“It certainly is something that I never expected to see,” Blueblood replied. “I’ll grant you that much.” He turned his attention to the sky above. “The sun has almost set. We should go aboard now so that I can begin testing the modifications that Prince Khufu and I implemented. The sooner we get on board, the sooner we may be able to begin our journey.”

Rarity nodded, and the two unicorns stepped gingerly across the wet earth to the water’s edge. There, Buckaroo was tying ropes: one to secure the *Alicorn* and prevent it from floating away, and one to tow the stolen river barge, complete with its precious cargo of tinned minnows.

“All aboard, then,” Blueblood suggested. He wasted no time before splashing out into the shallow water toward the side of the ship. Rarity watched the other unicorn’s horn glow, and the rope ladder dangling over the side of the hull instantly turned rigid, and

extended outward. Blueblood then simply trotted up the rungs and onto the upper deck, as if the ladder were a flight of stairs. “And that is how a unicorn uses a rope ladder,” he called down.

Rarity had to admit, Blueblood’s method was more elegant than using one’s teeth, or allowing another pony to unceremoniously hoist one’s body into the air. More importantly, it was a very simple spell, one that even she had learned long ago. She splashed into the lake after Blueblood and soon stood next to him on the deck. Together, they helped the others aboard by magically hauling in the ladder each time somepony took hold of it. Soon, the five equines and one camel stood together.

“Now the real fun begins, I reckon,” Buckaroo drawled. He walked a few steps over to the ungainly cannon that marred whatever aesthetic integrity the *Alicorn* might have otherwise maintained, and experimentally swiveled the bundle of metal tubes back and forth.

“Sounds about right to me,” Zips concurred. He had already gathered the miscellaneous weapons he had crafted into neat piles on the deck of the ship, and now the young half-zebra stallion picked up something that looked to Rarity like a tough green vine with hoof-sized rocks lashed to either end. He held one of the rocks in his mouth, and spun the other above his head so fast it was nothing but a blur. When Zips let go, the spinning projectile arced through the air toward shore, where it wrapped tightly around a large tree branch hanging out over the lake. “Bolas,” Zips explained perfunctorily. “Griffons won’t dare get any closer than that.”

“Remember, we are not spoiling for a fight. That is why we travel at night,” Zinzi said sternly.

“Though I suppose it never hurts to be prepared,” Rarity offered.

Blueblood turned to address Khufu. “Prince, will you accompany me to the engine room and help get us under way? It’s now dark enough to hide the smoke from the boiler fire.” The camel nodded, and both disappeared down in the innards of the floating airship.

Zinzi spoke up next. “We should inspect the hull to ensure there are no leaks. If this ship sinks, our chances will be bleak.”

Rarity agreed. It would do them no good to learn of a potentially serious problem halfway up the river toward the griffon base, in the dead of night. She followed the other mare down through the deck hatch, leaving Buckaroo and Zips alone on the upper deck.

As she and the slender zebra worked to pry up decking, searching in vain for any water seeping into the bilge, strange hissing, popping, and metallic clanking sounds issued from the engine room at the aft of the ship. She looked up from her work as Blueblood emerged back into the main part of the cabin.

“The boiler is fired,” he announced. “We have only to wait for sufficient pressure now. It won’t be long, since we won’t be running the engine any harder than idle power.”

“Idle?” Rarity repeated, dismayed. “You must realize that this is a rather urgent matter, do you not?”

“Of course, but *you* must understand that the *Alicorn* was never designed to be a riverboat. The main propeller is sitting almost entirely out of the water, so Prince Khufu and I temporarily decoupled it from the drive shaft. Now, all the engine power is being fed into the maneuvering fins, which I’ve locked into a rotating cycle so they should essentially act like oars. At anything more than idle, I am one hundred percent certain that the fins would break clean off the ship. I suspect they may do so even at minimum power.”

“I do not care how anything on this ship works, so long as we arrive at the base at the proper moment,” Rarity stated. “Will we?”

“I have no idea. We won’t know until she begins to move, if she ever does. It will be another hour before the boiler reaches the supercritical temperature and pressure levels needed to engage the drive.”

Rarity sighed. “I suppose that means I need to wait for that shower you promised.”

“Oh no, by all means, go right ahead. The hot water tank is heated by waste heat from the boiler, so you won’t be slowing anything down by showering now. If only I did not need to monitor the boiler pressure, I would like nothing more than to join you.”

“Blueblood!” Rarity exclaimed, her face instantly turning red.

“No, no, that isn’t what I meant!” Blueblood’s face flushed as well, and he half-turned away. “I meant, I would like a shower as well, not that I wanted to shower together.”

“Yes, yes of course,” Rarity backed away. “I knew what you meant. It was just a little joke. Ha ha.” Of course he had not meant *that*.

Sheepishly, she muttered some quick excuse to get away from Blueblood, and then returned to her work inspecting for leaks. Perhaps she would take a *cold* shower. No, mortifying misinterpretations aside, this truly might be her last chance to get her old self back, and she was going to take full advantage of it. She would boil herself if that was what it took to get clean.

Rarity rushed through the remainder of the search for hull leaks, then hurried into the *Alicorn's* cramped bathroom before anypony else got the idea to try to beat her to the punch. This was her time! She had earned it. She looked around the room, searching for the details that had not previously clued her in to the presence of a shower system.

The small porcelain sink was cracked, and only a few small shards of the shattered mirror remained in place. It was a good thing, Rarity was certain, that she could not see her full-sized reflection. But then, she would soon be a walking disaster no longer!

Looking around more closely, she saw a copper drain in one corner of the floor, and the many pinhole-sized openings in the ceiling overhead that constituted the shower. There was no separate shower area, which she supposed conserved space, but rather only a slight grade to the floor so that the water would drain into the airship's wastewater tank instead of pooling throughout the cabin.

Unlike the ostentatious shower in Fancypants' apartment, or even her own modest bathroom at home, all of the pipes here were concealed within the hull. Only a pair of brass handles protruding from the interior wall provided any outward sign of plumbing. Blueblood's design was elegant, she had to admit. Rarity also found herself grateful for the stallion's vanity, when she found a small basket containing soaps and shampoos lying on its side on the bathroom floor. To her great delight, several of the toiletries inside were the same exclusive Canterlot products she herself used. She filed away the knowledge that Blueblood used beauty products for mares for future use, and concentrated instead on her immediate objective.

She cast her telekinesis, turned both brass handles, and was rewarded with a powerful spray of warm water that issued forth from the ceiling like a tropical monsoon. She adjusted the handles until the temperature was as hot as she could stand it, and then stepped under the steamy, cleansing torrent.

The first sensation she felt was pain, but what glorious, rejuvenating pain! The hot water bit into her innumerable cuts and scratches, scouring them clean. Her coat, matted with sweat and filth, was beginning to look bright again, and this was only the first stage. Rarity levitated soap, shampoo, a brush, and a sea sponge out of the basket and set to

work on herself, building up a lather in her coat, mane, and tail until she was a vaguely pony-shaped sudsy mass.

Brush, brush, brush—scrub, scrub, scrub—it wasn't the spa, but Rarity could not recall feeling better than this. She kept at it, losing track of time as she carefully worked every particle of dirt out of her coat, and ran the brush through her hair until even the most irksome of tangles was gone. If this truly was to be the final curtain call in a fabulous, too-short life, then she intended to look the part of the leading lady.

After she finally felt clean from nose to tail, Rarity cringed at the slurry of dirt and unidentifiable debris at her hooves, and wondered how much more filth had been washed down the drain. She felt pounds lighter, and idly hoped that the *Alicorn's* plumbing would stand up to the dirt and grime that she had worn like a second coat these last few days. Not that she felt even slightly guilty about her shower; storing less water in the tanks would only make the airship lighter when it came time to take flight, right?

Now began the next phase of her personal restoration. There was a snow white towel hanging from a hook, but Rarity hesitated to take it, unsure as to whether it had already been used. Then, she recalled that Blueblood had filled his veins with so much wakewort at the start of the race that he would never have been able to shift his concentration from racing to something so mundane as personal hygiene. Rarity took the fresh towel and wrapped it tightly around her mane, squeezing it with magic until she had gotten out as much water as she could. She repeated the process with her tail, and then gave her body a good once-over.

In the absence of any of her salon-grade hair care tools, magic would have to suffice to restore her hair. She called up her mental image of what she meant to look like, and used a beautification spell to “pop” her mostly-dry mane and tail into what she hoped was a decent semblance of her trademark style.

Turning her head left and right, she could feel the oversized curls of her mane bouncing, and was overjoyed. Excited, she craned her neck and turned to look behind, then lifted her hindquarters and swished her beautifully curled tail back and forth. Pure bliss!

True, she had no makeup. True, her hooves were chipped. True, soap and hot water would not by themselves heal her cuts or take away the bumps and bruises she had suffered. She ignored all of that for now. She was clean. She was fabulous. She was Rarity!

She threw open the door, and, upon stepping out into the *Alicorn*'s main cabin, immediately struck a glamorous pose while loudly and dramatically declaring her return. She was being flamboyantly silly, of course, but she didn't care. As beautiful as she felt in this moment, Rarity actually hoped for an appreciative audience. As luck would have it, though, it had been an audience of one. Zips sat at the drafting table in the cabin, holding a sharp piece of stone in his teeth and whittling something deadly-looking out of a stick.

"Was that for me?" the young stallion asked after spitting out the rock and bolting upright. "I knew you'd eventually see past the age difference."

Rarity blinked twice. "No. No it was not."

What was it with the young ones? She ascended the stairs to the upper deck without another word, and promised herself never to think of the incident again.

Her first observation upon emerging from the hatch was that night had fallen completely, and a fat gibbous moon shined in the sky overhead. Apparently, she had been in the shower longer than she'd thought. She next noticed the feeling of wind rushing against her face and through her mane. Though the sensation was pleasing, it was also surprising. There had been a dead calm before. Now that she thought about it, Rarity could also feel a slight undulation as the deck rocked beneath her.

The *Alicorn* was moving. Blueblood stood at the ship's wheel, while Khufu, Zinzi, and Buckaroo clustered at the bow.

"You're still driftin' right!" Buckaroo called back.

"I am aware!" Blueblood shouted. "If you will call out specific course corrections, instead of merely complaining, we shall be fine."

"We're under way," Rarity observed, moving to stand next to Blueblood.

"Oh, there you are. I was beginning to fear you were actually water soluble, and had simply washed away in the shower. It has been over an hour since you went in there. I ..." Blueblood finally turned his head to look at her. "You ..." He gaped openly at her, and then abruptly snapped his mouth shut. "You look ... clean," he finally managed.

"Yes, it is quite an improvement, if I do say so." Rarity tossed her head playfully. "I, for one, am not going to leave this world looking like some sort of vagabond. To tell you the truth, though, I feel a new sense of confidence about what we're about to do. It really is amazing what a little hair product can do for a girl."

“I’m not sure how being well-coiffed makes this scheme of yours any more likely to succeed, but I’m glad you are in good spirits.”

“Never underestimate the power of good hair,” Rarity replied.

“Or strong rum,” Blueblood added.

“Well, perhaps,” Rarity admitted. “Though I prefer to credit the hair. Now, how long have we been moving?”

“Not more than ten minutes. To my surprise, it seems that the fins are working well as paddles, and we’re making good headway against the current. As long as I can avoid hitting anything, I believe we shall arrive at our destination before morning.”

“Port five degrees, if you so please!”

Blueblood adjusted the wheel pursuant to Zinzi’s instructions and continued speaking. “Not only can I not see what is in front of the ship from back here, I was unable to correct the flaw in the *Alicorn*’s steering mechanism. Even in the water, she wants to veer right.”

“Sakes alive! Is that Miss Rarity back there, shinin’ like a brand new silver twenty bit piece?” Buckaroo shouted back. “I hardly think we even need the moon to steer her by, with you lookin’ like that. Shoot, Princess Luna herself would probably be jealous if she saw you shinin’ so much brighter than her charge.”

“Laying it on a little thick, eh ‘pardner?’” Blueblood shouted back. “Please, just give course corrections.”

“Why, thank you, darling!” Rarity exclaimed, shooting Blueblood a dirty look and walking toward Buckaroo at the bow. “You are simply too kind.”

“I just call it like I see it,” Buckaroo said. “Port ten degrees! And right now, what I see is a durn pretty sight.”

Rarity hoped it was too dark to see her blushing. “What are we looking for?” she asked.

“River is shallow and treacherous,” Khufu said. “There are many rocks. We must ensure ship keeps to deepest part, and away from obstacles.”

“I suppose we dare not risk anything as bright as magical illumination. Still, I would like to do my part to help. I suppose we are to avoid that large boulder directly ahead?”

“Whoa, missed that one!” Buckaroo exclaimed.

“I take that as a yes. Starboard fifteen degrees!” Rarity shouted back to Blueblood.

“Great. Now everypony is telling me what to do,” the unicorn stallion grumbled, turning the wheel right.

“You have good eyes, young Lady Rarity,” Khufu said. “And, I should join chorus in mentioning you look very fair this night.”

“Thank you very much, Prince.”

Rarity settled in amongst the others, and continued to search for and call out obstacles. It was a minor miracle that the night had coincided with a moon that was waxing nearly full, or there would have been no way to see without the giveaway glow of a spell.

As time passed, and the afterglow of her shower—and the rum—wore off, Rarity could feel anxiety begin to gnaw at her confidence. Each minute brought the *Alicorn* closer to the griffons’ claws, but also closer to their potential ticket home. She had been through dire situations before, but always with Twilight and the others, never with Blueblood and a patchwork assortment of ostensibly enlightened outlaws. She would just have to prove that fabulosity and determination were legitimate substitutes for the Elements of Harmony.

At least she did not feel tired. She remained keenly aware of what Windlass could do to her if she fell asleep, and she was not going to allow that to happen again. Rarity steeled herself and focused on the moonlit water ahead.

To conserve energy, the spotters eventually agreed to work in shifts. After Rarity left the bow to Zinzi for a second time, she set about twining together the three remaining mooring lines into one thick and extremely strong rope to secure the *Alicorn*’s new, makeshift anchor. She was putting the finishing touches on her project when she heard a commotion at the front of the ship. Blueblood and Zinzi were conversing about something, and Buckaroo rushed from wherever he had been standing back to the bow.

“We have reached the outer navigational markers the griffons set in place,” Blueblood shouted to her from his position at the ship’s wheel. “It is almost time. Is the anchor ready?”

“Of course.”

“Are *you* ready?” Blueblood asked.

“Look at me,” Rarity called back. “I was born ready.”

“You were born ready to attract a school of giant carnivorous fish?”

“Oh, shut up. I am ready for *whatever* comes next. And you?”

“Not at all,” Blueblood replied. “If I can get that earth pony lug to shore, hopefully he and the unhinged young one can keep me alive long enough to escape with the lifting gas. I’ll do what I must. There’s no point in returning to the Equestria my brother is trying to create.”

“You know, Blueblood, I can hardly believe we are the same ponies we were only a week ago,” Rarity mused. “It seems a shame that all this ...” she made a sweeping gesture with a foreleg, “could be erased in one night. After everything, I find I rather like who we are now. At least, you’ve certainly improved. I, on the other hoof, didn’t have much room for personal betterment in the first instance.”

“I suppose not,” Blueblood said dryly.

“What I’m trying to say is that I just hope we all make it through this. Perhaps, if we do, this new amicability between us may persist.”

Blueblood sighed. “Rarity, I am beginning to learn who I am, and what my place in this world can be. That I am more than a name and the legacy of a fading dynasty. I have many reasons to make it back to the ship tonight. I can help save Equestria, expose a pack of traitors, and set about creating the life I thought was denied to me on account of my family.”

“Good, you ...” Rarity paused as Blueblood cut her off.

“There’s more. This is as fine a time as any to say it. *You* are another reason for me to make it back alive. No matter how you feel about me, no matter what kind of stallion I am and will always be to you, please, be here in one piece when I return.” He smiled weakly. “I would hate to have gotten shot for nothing.”

So there it was. Rarity had listened to Blueblood, but could not find the words to respond. Just as Zinzi had guessed, he really *had* developed feelings for her, and now she would have to deal with them.

Blueblood had changed, to be sure, and had even demonstrated real courage when he took a bullet for her, but he was still Blueblood. There could never be more than cordiality between them, and they had needed to be forced into the absolute worst imaginable circumstances for even that to be possible. Back in Canterlot, he might very well revert to the stallion who had held her bodily and used her as a shield to keep from getting cake on his coat, and who had treated her with nothing but callous disregard.

She had gotten what she had yearned for and dreamed about since she was a filly—the affections of the handsome unicorn prince from Canterlot—but now, strangely, insanely, she dared not return them, or even give him hope. The Blueblood who spoke to her now, even if he was being completely honest in this moment, could at any time disappear, never to return. One did not simply erase decades of being a twit in one week, even a week such as this.

Yet she could see his clear blue eyes shining in the moonlight, and his strong-featured, handsome face framed by a tousled blond mane. He looked at her with such sincerity, and for a fleeting moment, she wanted nothing more than to trot right over and kiss him, as foolishly and uncaringly as she had while drunk in Canterlot.

“I plan to be here,” Rarity said quietly. The words were not what she wanted to say, but they were all she could muster.

Blueblood looked like he was about to say something more in response, but he was not afforded the chance.

“Kill the engine!” Buckaroo hissed, running back from the bow at nearly a full gallop. “We’re almost on top of the inner marker pilings, and if y’all keep steamin’ ahead we’re gonna end up right out in front of that base for the whole world to see.”

Blueblood manipulated the controls in front of him, and Rarity could hear the hum of the engine fade and disappear, to be replaced by still quiet and the gentle sound of waves lapping against the hull.

“Our momentum will carry the ship upstream for only a moment longer before the current starts to push us back,” Blueblood said.

“It really is time for me to go, then,” Rarity said.

“Reckon so,” Buckaroo observed.

Rarity took a deep breath to steel herself. “I’m going to swim over to the barge. When we are close enough to one of the inner marker pilings, I will untie the tow line rope from the *Alicorn*, and tie the barge to the piling. How much time will the three of you stallions need to get in position to swim across to the base?”

“Forever, since I’m headin’ straight for the bottom of the river,” Buckaroo said glumly.

“Ignore him,” Blueblood stated. “It should not take more than thirty minutes to reach the narrowest crossing by hoof, including the time it takes to anchor the ship in one of the hidden inlets along the side of the river.”

“I suppose if that is the best you can do, but remember, it is always rude to keep a lady waiting.” Rarity frowned. It would be terribly lonely on the barge, and more than a little terrifying.

“We will make all haste,” Blueblood promised. “Once we see signs that the griffons have taken the bait and are investigating your distraction, we’ll swim across. With luck, everything will go to plan.”

“We are due some luck, are we not?” Rarity asked, mustering a small smile.

“Overdue, I should say,” Blueblood replied.

“Then let’s get on with it.” Rarity slowly walked over to a gap in the deck rail. She tossed one end of the drawn-up rope ladder overboard with a bit of magic, and it fell all the way down to the featureless black surface of the water with a quiet splash.

There were monsters below, and soon she would be calling them to feed. She touched a hoof to the luminescent pearl resting against her throat. Please, she silently implored, for her sake, and the sake of a peaceful world, let its power be real. It would have to suffice as her only protection. The others gathered behind her as Rarity prepared to disembark.

“I have believed in you all along. Nothing has shaken my faith,” Khufu stated. “Be well, pony friend.”

“Good luck,” offered Zips. “Don’t fall in, and remember, the jagugars like to jump out of the water after their prey, so keep a low profile.”

Rarity shuddered at the thought.

“Be safe, Rarity,” said Zinzi.

“Zinzi, dear, did you not rhyme just now?” Rarity asked, surprised. “What a lovely gesture.”

“Just a little treat from me,” the zebra finished with a wink.

“Oh, you!” Rarity swiped a playful hoof at the other mare.

“Well, I’m probably not gonna make it,” Buckaroo drawled, his words as thick and slow as molasses. “So it’s been a pleasure makin’ your acquaintance, Miss Rarity.”

“Pish posh. You will be fine. Blueblood will have his pearl, and I will have distracted all the pony-eating fish. There really is nothing to swimming. You’ll see.”

“Yes, I will make sure nothing happens to this big oaf,” Blueblood said. “And I shall meet you back at the ship, with the lifting gas and anything else useful we might salvage. All seems quiet, so I suspect General Karroc has already departed. There are likely not many griffons left to guard the stores.”

“And I will be back here onboard when the three of you return,” Rarity repeated, firmly this time. “Farewell, and good luck.” She knelt down and extended her hind legs cautiously, testing the rope ladder. She then quickly descended and, before she could reconsider, dropped into the black water.

Even without the heat of the sun, the river water was comfortably warm. In other circumstances, it would have been most pleasurable to take a dip. As it was, Rarity churned her legs and swam as quickly as possible toward the stern of the *Alicorn* and the barge floating behind. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, enabling her to see adequately well by the light of the moon, and she zeroed in on the barge quickly. It was not long before she was able to pull herself up onto the vessel’s flat deck, where she breathed a deep sigh of relief. Nothing had yet attempted to take a nibble of her.

As intended, the barge was drifting toward a cylindrical wooden post poking up out of the river. Rarity acted quickly, using her magic to untie the knot holding the craft fast to the stern of the *Alicorn*, and then sending the rope snaking through the air and around the piling. It would be more than strong enough to keep her from drifting downriver. Not so for the *Alicorn*. The flightless airship was already drifting back downstream with the current, and would continue to do so until Blueblood restarted the steam engine. Soon, he and the other stallions would be well on their way to sneaking into the base, and they were counting on her to keep the griffons’ claws away from them. She would have to

get to work soon, but not quite yet. Rarity sat down on the deck, its planks wet from being splashed by the *Alicorn*'s wake.

It might have been the last time she would see some of them, just now. Perhaps even all of them. Put another way, it might be the last time any of them would see *her*. All of the confidence she had felt earlier would do her a fat lot of good if something went awry.

She had promised Blueblood she would be there when he returned. Dear Celestia, why? Why had she not been able to get out the words she had meant to say—that she appreciated his sentiment, but could never reciprocate anything more than friendship? Where had the sharp words gone, which she always kept ready at the tip of her tongue? That absurd, awful, terrible, frustrating, vexatious, charming, handsome stallion! What would come of it all?

Rarity pushed aside her emotions and magicked a crate of fish down onto the deck in front of her. Inside, as promised by the stamp on the crate, were dozens of thin, rectangular tin cans full of little dead fish. The entire concept was, in a word, disgusting. She would need at least two more showers when she was through with this, and she was not even planning to touch any of the fish physically.

Each of the cans had a metal pull tab for a griffon to grasp in his talons and pull back the lid, but nothing that could be easily grasped with teeth. No pony could open cans like these without magic. This sort of magic, however, requiring fine control and a fair bit of spell dexterity, was Rarity's forte. She got to work, and quickly determined that she could open half a dozen cans at time without straining her control, and then empty them into the river while working on the next set of six.

She had expected the odor would be difficult to stomach, but the collective smell of the canned fish soon forced her to lean out over the side of the barge. She had little in her belly that could come back up, but merely staring at something other than tightly packed, foul-smelling fish corpses gave her temporary relief.

Suddenly, she jumped backwards and landed hard on her rump. Something had been moving under the water, right in front of her snout, and whatever it was had been huge. Rarity immediately regretted not confirming with one of Khufu's party just how large these jagugar fish really were. She was certain that she had felt them brush past while she was swimming across the swamp, though at the time she had not seen even a ripple on the surface. How large could they really be, to move so stealthily beneath the surface?

Nervously, Rarity backed toward the center of the barge and set to work again, opening cans of fish and dumping them into the river. She needed to pull herself together. The *Alicorn* was long gone now, the others were counting on her, and there was nopony else to do this for her.

Bang! Fear gripped Rarity as a sound like a firestick going off reverberated across the water. *Bang!* Something large flashed in the moonlight in the periphery of her vision, right on the river's surface.

Bang! Suddenly, Rarity saw it. The sound was not a weapon being fired, but the impact of a powerful broad tail slapping the surface of the river. A monstrous knife-shaped fish, three pony lengths from the tip of its tapering head to its wide, fan-shaped tail, leaped high into the midnight air before crashing down again and sending up a geyser of water that rained down on Rarity and everything else in the immediate vicinity.

Dear Celestia! *That* was what lurked in the water? Rarity could not be any further from the edge of the barge than she already was, but she was still far too close to the water for her taste. Another jagugar leaped clear of the water and then fell back with a mighty crash. What if one of them landed on her? What if they collectively decided to knock the barge over in order to get at the rest of the fish, or worse, decided pony was on the menu? She needed to remove any motivation for them to try, by getting the rest of the canned minnows into the water.

Rarity redoubled her efforts, and was soon throwing pounds of fish into what was rapidly becoming a churning maelstrom of horror around the barge. Every so often one of the nightmare fish would bump the underside of the barge, and each time Rarity was absolutely certain that she would tumble into the water. Surely this cacophony of tail-slapping, splashing, snapping mayhem was already attracting the attention of the griffons watching the base! She had to assume so. In any case, she had accomplished what she set out to do—the noise of the jagugars must have been audible for leagues. She levitated the last of the minnows over the edge of the barge, and then turned to focus her magic on the rope keeping her moored in place. It was time to drift away downstream, to safety.

At that moment, Rarity heard a series of sharp thuds on the deck behind her, and a pit of dread instantly formed in her stomach. She recognized the sounds at once, even without turning around to see.

The griffons were already upon her; she had been too slow. Rarity whirled around to face them, and saw three griffons crouched aggressively, no more than two lengths away. All of them were big dark-feathered males. Those on the right and left clutched long

firesticks of the sort she had seen in the jungle, and the center griffon wore a simple metal helm. There was literally nowhere to run, and no way to escape.

The realization that she was not going to survive crashed down over Rarity, knocking her breath away and buckling her legs. The centermost griffon took a step closer to her. “What is this madness with the jagugars?” he snarled in Equestrian. “Where are the others? Where is the other unicorn?”

“Oh, ha ha, look around. You can plainly see there’s no pony else here. Just little old Rarity,” she managed weakly. “You know, out feeding the fish. I do love how they splash about so.” She would not betray her allies, no, her friends.

“You will tell us where they are,” the griffon stated. “General Karroc will see to that, and he will be most pleased with the prize I am about to bring to him.”

“Karroc?” Rarity repeated, shocked. “*Here?* He can’t be here! He should be on his way to Gallopoli!” If Karroc had not yet left, then the base would still be crawling with soldiers. Blueblood and the others would stand little chance of retrieving the vital gas. She had made a terrible miscalculation!

“What?” The griffon stopped moving toward Rarity and eyed her suspiciously. “How could you know that? The ship is preparing to depart now.” He shook his head. “Never mind, you will explain everything to the General!” The griffon advanced, one taloned claw extended. Rarity screamed and backed away, toward the edge of the barge. Behind her, a massive piscine shape burst from the water and flopped back down, spraying everyone on the barge. “As you can see, there is nowhere for you to go,” the griffon rumbled.

If the griffon took hold of her with his talons, Rarity knew that there would be no resisting capture. She would be lofted high into the air in a second, and struggling free would only mean plummeting to her death. She might dodge the initial advance, but the other griffons were right there to snatch her. Before her were sharp talons and certain doom. Behind her was a frothing stew of powerful fins and snapping jaws. Rarity touched a hoof to the pearl gracing her neck, and continued backing away.

“Stop, pony, unless you want to be fish food.” The griffon continued forward, now almost close enough to reach her. His wings unfurled on either side of him, ready to lift them both high into the night sky.

“Ah, you know,” Rarity began, “you griffons really are lovely company, but I’m afraid I am going to have to decline your invitation to meet with General Karroc.” Her next step backward met only air, and Rarity did not resist gravity’s pull. As the griffon swiped his taloned claw where her head had been a half-second previously, Rarity slid into the churning dark water.

As she swam down, she expected to feel the sharp teeth of a monster fish close around her, or to have her bones crushed by the swipe of a tail. There was no realistic hope of survival, but she would not give these griffons the satisfaction of taking her prisoner. Karroc, she did not doubt, would do far worse to her than the jagugars.

She could see nothing in the inky water, but she could feel the rough wooden bottom of the barge above her. She had managed to swim underneath it. Perhaps the schooling predators would not be able to isolate her here, but she could not hold her breath forever. She would have to swim out and to the surface, and there she would be shot, captured by the griffons, eaten, or perhaps some combination of those.

Her lungs were beginning to burn for oxygen, and Rarity decided she had to swim as far and as fast as she could manage, away from the barge, and hope for a miracle. She pushed off and swam down into the all-consuming darkness, thankful that she could not see the spectacle of fins and teeth surrounding her. The pearl would keep her safe in the river, she told herself. That was the point of its magic, after all.

A wall of water suddenly hit her, forcing her down even further and causing her ears to pop as a pressure wave blew past. A jagugar had raced past her, not more than a half length away. Rarity felt something against her hooves, and realized she was touching the bottom of the river. How deep had she been forced down? The need to breathe was becoming desperate, but she was not certain she could even reach the surface now. Fighting panic, she pushed off, cursing her lack of flippers or broad paws to pull her along as she struggled upward. When another surge of current forced her down again, she recognized that she could not fight it any longer. She had to breathe, now, and she had no more strength to swim. This moment was to be the end of her.

Drowning was a rather storied and elegant way to go, she supposed. Rarity let her body drift as she prepared to take in a lungful of murky water. With her last bit of magic, she tore free the useless charlatan pearl strand from around her neck; the pink pearl had betrayed her, and did not deserve to adorn her body in death.

Floating motionless, Rarity opened her mouth and throat and gave herself to the river. To her great surprise, she did not drown.

Rarity drifted motionless, deep beneath the river's surface. She had not been able to hold her breath, and had known with absolute certainty that she would die. Yet, despite her certainty, she was not dead. Instead of water filling her throat and lungs, she had inhaled pure fresh air. This was, of course, impossible, but her continuing respiration confirmed it. Stranger still, she no longer felt wet. It seemed as though she floated inside an air-filled bubble that had appeared miraculously to save her life.

The immediate question that sprang to mind was not how or why this had occurred, but rather what could she do to ensure that whatever was keeping her safe did not cease doing so, leaving her once again at the mercy of the murky water. Rarity was blind in the darkness—unable to move or even determine her direction. She could feel a smooth surface in contact with her hooves, but nothing else.

She began to detect a diffuse pink glow gradually appearing before her, and in seconds the light had brightened enough to allow her to visualize her circumstances. She indeed floated inside a glowing sphere, suspended underwater. The transparent sphere enclosed air, and felt solid against her hooves, yet it appeared as thin and ephemeral as a soap bubble.

It seemed to be clearly magical in nature, but there were no unicorns under the water, she being the lone exception. She, however, could not have created this. She had never learned or even attempted to cast a barrier spell before, let alone one potent enough to contain air and keep out water. For that matter, where had the air come from? It must have been conjured, and conjuring breathable air was magic she had never witnessed even Twilight Sparkle perform. At that moment, Rarity realized that the color of the glowing sphere struck her as somehow familiar.

The pearl! Her Gallopolitan pearl had been the exact same warm shade of pink. This sphere had to be connected to the pearl, which she had only just thrown away. The pearl must have contained even greater power than she had realized. In the old stories she remembered, the legend held that if a pony cast a magic pink pearl into the sea while making a wish, it would be granted. She had thought the story nothing more than an old mares' tale, but there was no doubt that when she had thrown her necklace away she had been wishing fervently to survive.

A faint, soothing hum began to grow louder until it filled her ears. Perhaps the spell was causing vibrations in the water, but then again, the sound was almost melodic, rising and falling like the undulation of waves at sea. She could not see anything in the darkness, so

she could not even look for a source for the sound. As the musical hum reached a crescendo, Rarity gasped in surprise as a soft, lilting feminine voice whispered in her ear.

“It is not time for you to join us in the deep. Return to the sea of sky, and sail with a fair wind. Our gifts will not be yours for long. Use them, and fare well.”

Rarity spun around inside her protective bubble, searching for the source of the whispered words. The voice sounded as though the speaker had been standing right beside her, but she was unquestionably alone. This, like the appearance of the protective bubble itself, was impossible. Pearls, even magical ones, could not talk. Furthermore, what had the voice meant?

Who were the “us” it had referred to? And what “gifts?” How could such strange and powerful magic have been contained in such an innocuous-seeming bit of jewelry? Then again, the Elements of Harmony themselves had been crafted into necklaces and a tiara ...

The glowing bubble pulsed once with a far brighter glow, and instantly everything changed around Rarity. Where there had been only darkness, now an entire aquatic world filled her field of view, and she could barely take in all that was happening around her. This vastly improved vision must have been one of the “gifts” the voice had mentioned! At least fifteen pony lengths above, she could see the dark shape of the barge on the surface of the river, but the watercraft was the least interesting thing around her. Now that her gaze could pierce the murky depths, the awesome magnitude of the jagugars and their feeding frenzy became apparent.

The huge fish were shaped like the blades of daggers, tapering from tail to nose, and they knifed through the water at terrifying speeds. Their bodies were covered in scales as thick as armor plate, mainly a rich golden hue, but interspersed with large irregularly-shaped black spots. The jagugars’ long triangular heads were little more than a pair of shining silver eyes and a collection of jagged teeth. There were at least a dozen of them, each large enough to swallow her in a bite or two. They circled the barge, every so often charging to the surface to leap high into the moonlight, clearly waiting to see if any more food was forthcoming.

If she could ever figure out how to move her bubble, would the motion attract the fish? They had not bitten her when she first fell in the water, though she must have seemed a tempting target. In any case, the voice had said that her gifts would not last long, and that meant that the bubble could collapse around her at any moment. As dangerous as it might be, she needed to get to the surface.

Suddenly, Rarity realized that the barge above her was moving, and doing so against the current. There was no engine to power the vessel, and she saw no sign of oars in the water, so she surmised that the griffons had taken hold of the mooring rope and were flying, relying on their considerable wingpower to tow the barge back to their base.

Another realization struck her: the base was where the stallions had gone! With Karroc and all his griffons still here, if the stallions hadn't already been captured, they surely would be found shortly. Once these scouts alerted their leader about Rarity, Karroc would correctly assume that some sort of plan was in motion, even if he believed she had been eaten by the jagugars. A base full of griffons would surely not fail to spot Blueblood and the others.

Rarity made a decision. She had been given a second chance by the mysterious magic of the pink pearl, and it was her responsibility to use this opportunity to give her companions, as well as Equestria, the same fighting chance she had received. She would simply need to do more, and create such a grand distraction that even an entire base filled with soldiers would have no choice but to attend to it and leave the lifting gas unguarded.

First, though, she needed to determine how to move inside this impermeable sphere, and then she needed to get past the jaws and teeth of the schooling predators. She tried walking, but to no great effect; the bubble merely rotated beneath her hooves. Perhaps she could use magic, then. Rarity attempted to take hold of the glowing sphere with her telekinesis, but that effort too failed. She could not sense anything physically present for her spell to latch onto.

"Oh come on," Rarity grumbled. The barge was moving further away, and she was stuck, floating along with the current. Maybe she could simply ask for instructions. "Ah, excuse me, mysterious voice," she said, as sweetly as possible. "I am ever so grateful for not drowning, but would you please be so kind as to explain how I might use this lovely magical bubble you have so generously provided? You see, my friends are in danger, and I need to follow that barge so that I can help them."

To her surprise, the sphere began to move. Up through the water and toward the barge she raced, as though the enchanted bubble had consciously obeyed her desire. Rarity gasped and involuntarily curled up in fright as she realized that her course was taking her straight through the school of jagugar fish that were blasting to and fro, jaws snapping in the apparent hope they might enclose something edible. The fish, however, slowed and became calm as she approached.

All around her, the river monsters fell into a loose formation, as if they had decided to serve as escorts for the extremely out-of-place unicorn floating along in their midst. Rarity saw their silvery eyes gazing unblinkingly at her as she passed, and she could not help but stare back. Now that she thought about it, they were rather beautiful in their way, with their gleaming coats of armor glinting in the scant moonlight that penetrated the water near the surface. Their streamlined bodies and broad fins bespoke their explosive power and strength. She was more than happy to admire them so long as they continued to treat her as off the menu.

The bubble carried her along swiftly, easily keeping pace with the barge being towed ahead, and she soon passed from the wide, deep main body of the river into the comparatively narrow channel that bisected the griffon base. The jaguars turned back, jetting away into the dark as the river grew shallow, leaving Rarity alone. At least, she would have been alone, had the mysterious voice not whispered in her ear again.

“Our protection must end now, for we are but an echo of what was. Yet know that we do not part forever, for you will find us again someday, and return our small blessing and more.”

“Wait!” Rarity implored. “Who are you? What are you? Please, at least tell me that much.”

The disembodied voice did not reply. Instead, the melodic hum she had heard when the magical bubble first appeared returned, and the pink glow surrounding her body began to dim. Rarity decided that she would have to worry about the identity of her unknown benefactor later, and instead concern herself only with her immediate survival for the time being. She quickly pondered her options, aware that soon she would no longer be able to hide safely beneath the surface.

Indeed, the protective sphere around her imploded seconds later, and she was once again immersed. She decided to cease following the barge, and instead concentrate on getting onto dry land and into a safe hiding place as quickly as possible. As soon as she breached the water’s surface, Rarity inhaled deeply of the moist tropical air, then hastily swam to shore and crawled under a large broad-leaved plant to dry off and plan.

She was truly on her own now. Her pearl was gone forever, and she already found herself missing its familiar and reassuring weight and touch against her coat. She could only begin to fathom its mysteries, and the powerful magic it had contained, but she was certain it had saved her life several times. She could at least begin returning the favor by preventing the destruction of the Equestrian town that had given it to her.

She needed to arrange for a second distraction—something that could get, and keep, the attention of an entire base full of griffons. Whatever it was, she could not do it here. If the second half of her plan was still going accordingly, Blueblood and the other stallions were not far away from her at that very moment. Calling the griffons down on her in this place would only put them in needless jeopardy. Where should she go then? Into the aqueducts again? Without warning, Rarity's horn flared to life with a bright blue glow. She attempted to hide it with her hooves until the light extinguished just as suddenly.

“What is your *problem*, horn?” she mouthed silently. Something then jerked her sharply to one side, and Rarity immediately looked around in panic, expecting to be yanked out of her hiding place by a pair of sharp claws. There was no one else present. When she felt a throbbing ache in the base of her horn, Rarity finally understood. Karroc was still here, and that meant the Heavenstone was still here. It was calling to her again, even physically pulling her toward it. She shook her head to clear her thoughts, but it was little use. The Heavenstone weighed down on her mind, squeezing out everything else. It was practically begging her to come to it.

She could try to resist, but what if ... she gave in to the urge instead? Rarity was struck by an idea, this one perhaps even wilder than her other recent inspirations. It would be the mother of all distractions! In fact, it would be more than a distraction; it could potentially obviate the need for the rest of the plan altogether. She would steal the Heavenstone out from under the griffons' sharp beaks, right now, and prevent Karroc and Windlass from ever using it to hurt anypony again!

High above, but not far away, the mighty cataract that fed the jungle river spilled forth from the center of a mammoth cliffside cavern that had been worn through the rock eons ago. She had seen the falls and the cavern before, when Buckaroo and the others had told her where Karroc berthed his flagship.

Inside, the griffons would be preparing the enormous vessel for departure at this very moment. Moreover, she knew that the Heavenstone was somewhere in there. It did not matter where the stone was secreted, for she knew that her horn would lead her to it. If she could claim it, and spirit it to safety, she would have checkmated the conspiracy in one move. If she were discovered, then the fuss she would create would surely give the others enough cover to complete their mission, even if they had to leave without her.

Rarity began to move, creeping through the nighttime shadows toward the vertiginous cliff, silently wishing she had been born with a darker coat color. Even at a fair distance, she could make out the tiny figures of griffons flying in and out of the enormously wide mouth of the cave, but there did not seem to be many guards patrolling at ground level.

As she drew closer, she saw that the griffons had set up a large lift behind the waterfall. Strong cables ran through a series of pulleys embedded in the cliffside, reaching from a platform just below the mouth of the cavern down to the ground several hundred lengths below.

There, not far from Rarity's present hiding place, a broad wooden platform currently rested next to a large black steam engine that must have been powering the lift. The griffons could fly to and from the cavern, she realized, but they still needed a lift for transferring heavy cargo between the base proper and the cliffside airship hangar. Rarity knew at once that this was her only means of ingress to the cave, and her only chance at reaching the Heavenstone.

A quartet of griffon laborers were currently stacking barrels and crates onto the lift, which Rarity guessed meant that the airship must have needed one more delivery before departing. How could she sneak on without being noticed? She was quite skilled with illusion magic, but her projections trended toward the fantastical and dramatic. What she needed now was to disappear amidst the mundane and ordinary. A giant hat was probably not going to help this time, so where did that leave her?

Aha! Costumery!

Still keeping low and out of the toiling workers' line of sight, she crept closer and closer, walking daintily on the leading edges of her hooves. Could this really work? It never failed in her guilty pleasure adventure novels, but this was reality, and deadly serious. She would simply have to hope. As soon as she was certain none of the griffons were watching, Rarity telekinetically took hold of a barrel and instantly pulled it off the platform and over to her, silently thanking herself for all the months she had spent honing her summoning magic years ago. After all, one never knew when one would need to call forth one's fainting couch from halfway across town. She could scarcely remember how many times *that* spell had come in handy.

Rarity next magically pulled out all the nails holding the bottom of the barrel in place, and allowed its contents—salt, apparently—to spill out onto the dirt. Conscious of what an unladylike image she would have presented to her friends back in Ponyville, but recognizing that there was nothing to be done about it, Rarity reared back on her hind legs, then levitated the barrel up over her head and down. She had taken pains to select a barrel with an open knothole near the top, and she waited once again for the griffons to look away before awkwardly hobbling on two legs back onto the platform. As she had hoped, none of the exhausted laborers noticed anything out of the ordinary. She may

have felt and looked utterly ridiculous, but if hiding inside a barrel got her to the Heavenstone, then it was more than worth it.

The signal to raise the platform finally came, and Rarity heard the steam engine sputter and whine before she felt a small upward acceleration. The lift swayed and bounced in the wind, and frequently jolted to a halt as the engine below choked and seized. Inexorably, though, the lift traveled higher and higher up the side of the cliff until finally slowing to a stop. She did not dare move now. Everything hinged on blending in with the rest of the supplies.

Feathers flashed in her limited field of vision, and then she was briefly lifted into the air. Rarity tucked in her hind legs as much as possible, and braced with her forelegs lest the barrel's open bottom expose her. Seconds later, she was unceremoniously dropped onto another wooden platform, which then began to move.

Rarity supposed it was some sort of cart. Her knothole now faced another wooden barrel, preventing her from having any clue where she was being taken, but her horn assured her that every second brought her closer to the Heavenstone. The cart stopped moving, and once again Rarity was lifted and dropped. This time, she could tell she was in a dark, relatively cold place. It was probably the airship's pantry, the most likely place to find a barrel of salt aboard ship. Soon, all was quiet, and after waiting an extra moment to be certain she was alone, she cast aside the barrel and dropped back to all four hooves.

Rarity gasped. The room in which she found herself was not like any pantry she had ever seen, at least outside her nightmares; it was a house of horrors! In addition to the vegetables and staples she would have expected, dead bodies of all manner of creatures hung from hooks attached to the ceiling. All headless masses of muscle and fat, she could not identify any of them, but certainly some were quadrupedal and uncomfortably close to pony-sized. Not for the first time in the last few hours, she felt sick, and not for the first time, she forced herself to hold everything in. Awful, awful meat-eaters! How could such horrors possibly be appetizing?

She had to get out of here, and she knew her horn would lead the way. The only question was whether it would lead her directly into the clutches of the griffons who were probably already filling the huge airship's corridors and chambers. In any case, she could not stay in this terrible place. There was only one door, and on the other side was the ship's galley, filled with pots, pans, and many sharp knives, but otherwise unoccupied. Unlike the pantry, this room had a small round porthole, and Rarity raced over to look outside in an attempt to get her bearings.

The airship floated in the center of the cavern, tethered by strong ropes. Rarity could see that storage areas and flat plazas had been carved out of the rock on either side of the subterranean river that flowed directly underneath the airship. Uncountable dozens of gas lamps left the cavern brightly illuminated. More importantly, the sight below filled Rarity with hope: General Karroc was there outside the ship, standing in front of several rows of griffon soldiers, and he looked to be delivering a rousing speech. If the griffons were all outside ...

Rarity did not waste another second, but spun in place and raced for the galley door, her horn shining brightly as she stopped resisting her gem-finding spell and gave in to the Heavenstone's pull. She burst out into the wide, windowless, and mercifully empty corridor that must have run the length of the hull. In such close proximity to the Heavenstone, the gem's pull was irresistible, and though she had never been inside the huge airship before, there was never any question that she was going in the right direction. In fact, Rarity suspected that if she stopped the pretense of galloping down the corridor, the spell would have pulled her along anyway.

She blew past uncounted doorways as she raced all the way to the far end of the corridor. Here, the light shining from her horn was nearly blinding, and the throbbing in her head unbearable. Before she could determine what to do, she was jerked hard to her left, and up a curving flight of stairs to a heavy wooden double door. The doors were unlocked, but if they hadn't been, there was no question that she would have smashed them. Nothing could keep her from her prize now. She pushed open the doors and raced into the chamber beyond. Instantly, the glow from her horn faded away and the pain vanished. The gem-finding spell had found its target.

Rarity stood in a spacious room dominated by three large windows that occupied most of the opposite wall, all of which had been partially opened to let fresh air into the stuffy confines of the ship. It could only have been the captain's quarters, and therefore Karroc's personal chambers. Elaborately decorated firesticks, swords, and daggers hung on the walls, and a huge lumpen pillow, much larger than her body, rested on the floor to her left. The circular pillow was rather nest-like, and Rarity assumed that was where the griffon general slept. In the center of the room, a massive wooden desk rested in front of an ornate, high-backed chair. She saw all of this through the periphery of her vision. The only object on which she could truly focus rested on an ornate, four-pronged stand of brilliant platinum atop Karroc's desk.

The grapefruit-sized, flawless white diamond was unlike any gem she had ever seen. She had not formed a preconceived notion of what the Heavenstone should look like, beyond that she expected an object of great beauty. In that aspect it certainly did not disappoint.

Not only did its facets reflect and refract the lamplight in a dazzling array of colors, but it shone as if lit from within by a tiny white-hot sun. It was uniquely beautiful, and more than that, it was irresistible.

Rarity stepped eagerly toward the stone as all logic and rational purpose fled from her mind. Gone were all thoughts of Equestria, of her friends and family, Blueblood, the *Alicorn*, and Gallopoli. Gone was her very sense of self-awareness. As she gazed upon the Heavenstone, its inner fire reached out to burn away her perception of the world until there was only the glowing diamond, and her all-encompassing desire to possess it.

“Mine. It’s *mine*,” Rarity whispered, as she reached out with her magic to take the Heavenstone.

At the instant her telekinesis enveloped the diamond, she felt a sinking feeling, as though she were plummeting from a great height. Then came the pain, agonizing, like somepony was trying to pull her horn out of her skull. Her vision grew blurry, and then Karroc’s chamber and everything in it vanished, replaced by only empty white space above, below, and in every direction.

Rarity gasped and fell to her knees, reeling from the pain and shock of the sudden and inexplicable transition. Where was she? Where was the Heavenstone? Had she been teleported? Had some kind of magical trap been enchanted into the gem?

The surface on which she knelt was hard and smooth, and impossible to distinguish visually from the white sky above. She could not gauge distance either; she could have been inside a compact room or on an endless expanse. There was no visible light source, yet everything seemed brightly illuminated. Rarity observed that she cast no shadow.

She felt a prickly sensation, almost like being enveloped in a spell, but stronger, and much more unpleasant. There was clearly a great deal of magic in this place, wherever it was. At that moment, Rarity realized she was not alone—a slender mare with a light pink coat stood with her amidst the white nothingness, glaring, her attractive young face marred by a look of hatred. Rarity turned to face her.

“You!” Windlass exclaimed, her voice echoing despite the distinct lack of visible walls and surfaces in the blank space. “That’s impossible!” She stamped a hoof soundlessly against the whiteness. “But if you are here, that means your body must be ...” Windlass paused, a cruel smile turning up the corners of her mouth. “Oh, too rich!”

“What is this place?” Rarity asked in a tremulous voice. The sight of Windlass terrified her, after what the other mare had been able to do, and now it was happening again. If Windlass was here, that meant that she must have felt Rarity’s presence when she made contact with the Heavenstone, and the other mare pulled her here to torment and torture her. What would Windlass force her to do now? Surrender herself to the griffons? Plunge one of Karroc’s ornate daggers into her own heart? Rarity shuddered.

“You’re obviously in Karroc’s airship,” Windlass continued. “Which means that you are either his prisoner or you’ve done something very stupid. You didn’t think you could steal the Heavenstone, did you? You do realize that its power is fully under my dominion, and that I could recall it to Canterlot in an instant, should I so desire.”

“But then—then I would still win, because Karroc would not be able to use the stone’s power against Gallopoli!” Rarity boldly proclaimed.

“Ha! You risked your life on the off chance you might manage to merely delay us? Pathetic, especially if you are so naïve as to think I have only one plan in motion. What’s worse, you have absolutely no hope of causing even that much trouble. I am in complete control here. If I so chose, I could trap you in this void forever.”

“Where is here, exactly?” Rarity asked.

Windlass ignored her. “You know,” the other mare continued with a sigh, “I really suppose I should have expected this. I was warned about you, but I didn’t listen. As if a brainless seamstress could so easily attain what took me months of study. And now look—here you are. It almost makes me wonder whether any of the other predictions are true.”

“What are you talking about? What predictions? Who warned you about me?” Rarity’s head was spinning from the pink unicorn’s bizarre ramblings.

“What’s that?” Windlass blinked and refocused her gaze on Rarity. “Oh, well, nothing that concerns you, except insofar as it gives me yet another reason to want you gone, in addition to the fact that you are a lying harlot and a stallion-stealer.”

“Please, I swear to you that I do not, and never did, have any designs on Fancypants, nor he on me!” Rarity began to furtively glance around, desperately looking for a way out of this place. She could see nothing other than herself and Windlass, but if she were trapped in her own mind, as before, then there must be a way to wake up.

“Liar! You are not even good enough to speak his name,” Windlass spat. “You delight in tormenting me and you aim to take what is rightfully mine. First, you had to try to get your hooves on my true prince, and now you seek to usurp my destiny by thieving the Heavenstone from those fool griffons. At least you have now given me the opportunity to finish what *should* have been done when Tempest dropped you over the side of Fancypants’ airship.”

Rarity began slowly backing away, aware that the situation was quickly becoming dire. She needed to keep Windlass talking, while she tried to think of some way out of this mess.

“Does Lord Procyon know of your obsession with Fancypants?” she asked. “He aims to take the throne of Equestria, no? It seems to me that as king, Procyon would not take kindly to his lover giving her heart to another. You’re playing a dangerous game, Windlass.”

“Oh please.” The mare waved a dismissive hoof. “Procyon is in no condition to challenge me, even if he so wished. Moreover, he is completely loyal, willing to give everything for the cause. Why, you did not think I could manage to keep the Heavenstone charged with magic by myself, did you? I would be positively *drained* if I had to do so, little more than a shell of myself.” Windlass flashed a predatory smile.

Rarity gasped, horrified. “Then, do you mean to say that you are taking his magic to power your spells? That is what the Heavenstone does—it absorbs magic from ponies.” The revelation explained why Procyon appeared so gaunt and frail, even for a stallion of his slender frame. “How could you be so cruel?”

“I am not taking anything,” Windlass protested. “He is a willing donor. I suppose it *is* possible that he may not be aware that there is more to my vision than simply installing him on the throne, but what he does not know won’t hurt him. Or maybe it will.” The unicorn shrugged. “In any case, while I need a royal figurehead to smooth the initial transition, there will be no place for Procyon when the time comes for Equestria to be reborn, with Fancypants and I as its progenitors.”

“You are utterly mad,” Rarity said. “Fancypants would *never* want anything to do with somepony like you. When he learns what you really are, you will have to face a harsh reality. You should seek help now, while there is still a chance for forgiveness. If you assist Karroc in using the Heavenstone against Gallopoli, there will be no possibility of atonement for your crimes.”

“And now I am tired of hearing you talk,” Windlass fumed. “I think it’s time to get this over with. Shall we?”

“No, wait, please,” Rarity stalled. “At least tell me what this place is. Are we—are we inside my mind again?”

“Your pathetic mind?” Windlass chortled. “Hardly, though I suppose one could easily mistake this emptiness for the brainless expanse between your ears. I’ve been there and seen that, and really, there wasn’t much to write home about. How often do you have that trite fantasy of flying? I do suppose, though, that it must be discomfiting to know that I could enter your head, bend your dreams, and take control of your body.” She paused, and gestured encompassingly.

“This place is no construct of your tawdry imagination. It is a magical nexus, a bridge between the outside world and the Heavenstone, allowing connections to be maintained at any distance. Our essences are, in a sense, now contained within the Heavenstone, while our physical bodies remain outside. I was asleep in my apartment in Canterlot when the stone summoned my essence here. I imagine your body is passed out in Karroc’s quarters right now. It probably won’t be long until they find your empty husk lying there, after I destroy the rest of you here.

“I almost feel badly for you,” Windlass continued, “so ignorant of your gift. Do you know how much time and effort I spent studying the Heavenstone, trying to unlock its power? You, on the other hoof—you were somehow *given* a connection to the stone. You were able to access this place, and even summon me here, but in the end all for naught. The Heavenstone may only have one mistress, and that’s me. Now, I have the pleasure of finally ending you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Rarity pleaded. “I swear that I truly do not want to take Fancypants from you, and I did not even know that the Heavenstone still existed until you used its power against the *Alicorn’s* Cup racers. It is only my gem-finding spell that draws me to it, nothing more.”

“Enough lies!” Windlass reared back on her hind legs, and her horn began to shine with a burning white light. As Windlass fell back to all four hooves, Rarity saw that the mare’s irises and pupils had vanished, leaving nothing but blank white orbs glowing within her eye sockets. Rarity had seen this before, when Twilight Sparkle had wielded the full force of the Elements of Harmony. Could Windlass possibly have that much power at her disposal? Rarity could feel her coat standing on end, and the air around her crackled with magic. She braced herself, trying not to think about the fact that she was likely about to

be immolated. Reflexively, she attempted to throw up a protective shield in front of her, despite not knowing the technique.

The blast came, and Rarity felt a surge of magic course through her, yet the sensation was one of exhilaration rather than pain. Instead of being incinerated by magical lightning, Rarity watched as the blast from Windlass' horn arced around her on either side, the crackling bolts of electricity flowing around her like a stream parting around a large rock. A faceted enclosure of shining blue light enclosed her body like an enormous gem, protecting her from the attack, and she recognized the perfectly executed barrier spell at once. The divided lightning continued its arc, eventually coming full circle and returning to its caster. Windlass was hurled backwards ten lengths as her own spell hit her with its full force, and the air filled with the acrid smell of ozone and singed hair.

Instinctively, Rarity raced toward the fallen mare, and found her lying on her side, her breathing shallow.

"How?" Windlass croaked.

"I have no idea," Rarity replied truthfully. "I felt so much magic flow through me. It was like nothing I've ever experienced."

"You ... you used the power stored within the Heavenstone. I don't understand," Windlass managed, gasping as she lay on the featureless white surface that covered this strange space. "How? It's mine alone! This isn't fair!"

"Will you be alright?" Rarity asked. "How can I get help?"

"Idiot! You have only injured my magical essence, not my physical body. I only need to recover my strength, and then I *will* destroy you. Then again, I do not have to dispose of you. How long have you been here now? Long enough, I should think. The griffons can have you."

The griffons. She had forgotten how exposed and vulnerable her body was. "Tell me how to get out of here!" Rarity demanded.

"No."

Rarity leaned over Windlass' prone form and glared at the other mare. "Fine. You may choose not to aid me, but understand one thing. Now that I have seen you like this, I know you can be stopped, and I promise that I will stop you."

Windlass laughed, a hoarse, half-choked guffaw.

“What is so funny?”

“I am trying to *save* Equestria from becoming a footnote to history. Don’t you see that the world is leaving us behind? That’s not the really funny thing, though.”

“Then what is?”

“I never believed it, but if the riddle really does refer to you, it is *you* who would be the end of all of us—not just Equestria, but the world itself, should you continue to live.”

“What new nonsense is this?” Rarity demanded, eyes wide. “What riddle?”

“Don’t worry, you will be long dead before you have cause to find out,” Windlass replied. “Give my regards to General Karroc.” She abruptly vanished in a flash of light.

Rarity was alone, and had no idea how to return from this—nexus, Windlass had called it—to her true body. Wishing for it to happen was not helping, and whatever reflex had allowed her to briefly tap into the latent magic around her to defend herself did not appear to be forthcoming a second time. Perhaps she really was doomed to be trapped here. She felt a flutter of panic. What if the griffons did find her real body and destroyed it? Would she simply cease to exist here, or worse, would she be trapped in this featureless purgatory for all eternity?

Just as she was contemplating the various terrible things that were potentially about to happen, the surface beneath her hooves began to rumble and vibrate, as though an earthquake had struck. She felt a sharp pain right on top of her head, and opened her eyes to find herself lying on her side, staring at the base of General Karroc’s enormous wooden desk. The first thing Rarity observed upon finding that she was back in the waking world was a smooth lead ball lying on the floor in front of her. The second thing was that the floor, and in fact the entire room really was shaking and vibrating.

Rarity hauled herself onto her hooves and attempted to discern what was happening. Karroc’s desk was a mess, with papers, quills, and collected souvenirs scattered about, though the Heavenstone still rested on its stand. When she touched a hoof to her head and felt the painful lump developing, she immediately guessed what had transpired.

As she had heedlessly rushed toward the Heavenstone, her consciousness had been spirited away, leaving her unconscious body to fall forward onto Karroc’s desk, scattering office sundries in every direction. The vibration she was feeling had to be from the

airship's engines engaging, and it had been enough to cause a small cannonball paperweight which she had already knocked loose to roll off the desk and onto her head. The blow must have awakened her, in addition to leaving her with what would become an ugly bump.

She was back inside her body, but now she had a new problem. If the airship's engines were on, then it would soon be lifting off, with her onboard. Karroc would likely be wherever he could best oversee the airship's departure, rather than in his chambers, but other griffons likely now patrolled the corridors.

Rarity regretfully decided that she could not steal the Heavenstone; if she so much as touched it again, she feared she would be pulled back into the nexus within the gem, with no way out this time. She would need to find another way to stop the conspirators. Hastily, she used her magic to collect the materials she had knocked off the desk, and rearrange them so that it appeared that nothing had been disturbed.

Then, she steadied herself as she felt the ship lurch forward. They were already moving! She needed to get out at once! She raced back through the open double doors, then skidded to an abrupt halt. There were shadows at the bottom of the stairs leading down from Karroc's chambers, and she could hear the harsh sounds of the griffon language. Not that way!

Rarity ran back into the captain's quarters and hurried over to the large windows at the far wall, and pushed the center window open as far as it would go. Looking down, she felt a lump in her throat. The underground river flowing through cavern hangar was there, but at least fifteen lengths down. Worse, huge spinning propellers protruded from the hull below her. It would take a powerful leap to clear them, and failing to do so would mean being chopped to pieces.

It wasn't as though she had options. The griffons would sniff her out if she tried to hide, and she refused to be their prize—or their meal. There was no time for second thoughts. Rarity hurried over to the other side of the room, turned, and then broke into a gallop. She cleared Karroc's desk with her first leap, and sprang through the open window with her second. As she fell, she felt the powerful wash of the mighty airship's propellers for just an instant, and then she struck the water, forelegs extended.

The impact was jarring, but the frigid water was more of a shock to her system. No sunlight naturally reached the river here, and the water was nearly ice cold. She hurried to fight her way back up to the surface. As her head broke free of the icy water, Rarity quickly looked around. Above her, Karroc's incomprehensibly huge airship plowed

ahead, picking up speed as it passed out into the world beyond. Rarity could finally see the first hint of the morning sun through the cave entrance.

It did not appear as though she had been spotted yet, and she hurriedly swam for the nearest bank before the current pulled her any further toward the precipitous drop on the other side of the mouth of the cave. She pulled herself out of the water amidst a number of tall stacks of wooden crates, and began to contemplate her next move even as she shivered from the cold. Everything was going wrong! Her initial distraction had failed miserably, the griffons had not left when she had expected them to, and now she had been so close to successfully stealing the Heavenstone, but had failed.

She decided to focus on the positive. It was a good sign that the griffon airship had left. Karroc would have known that she had been spotted out on the water, and then presumably had been killed by the jagugars. Either he had decided that she truly had been alone, which was doubtful, or he had decided that it was more important to depart for Gallopoli than to devote his own energy to searching for any remaining infiltrators. After all, what could they hope to do to him without an airship?

If it was at all possible that Blueblood and the others were still out there, attempting to recover the lifting gas, there had to be something further she could do to help them. Even if her successfully rejoining the group was becoming less and less likely, she had to try. Peering out from her hidden vantage point, she saw a small number of griffons still in the cavern. She also saw barrels of kerosene and firepowder, both of which could make for a very nice distraction indeed if they were to be ignited. Perhaps if she could somehow acquire a match, then she ...

Rarity squealed in terror as two massive clawed forelegs dug into her torso and lifted her out of her hiding place.

“What’s this here?” a gruff voice demanded in Equestrian. Rarity quickly determined that the voice belonged to a massive griffon, so big he hardly looked as though he could take flight. “Seems we have a spy!” The griffon then let loose an earsplitting screech in his dissonant native tongue.

“Let me go, you brute!” Rarity shouted, beating her hooves against the griffon to no avail. Ignoring her vain efforts to free herself, he carried her to the broad plaza where she had previously seen Karroc addressing his soldiers. As other griffons flew toward the commotion, Rarity saw one turning a large crank, and immediately a deafeningly loud klaxon began to blare. This was far from an ideal situation, but at least, she thought ruefully, she had managed to cause a scene.

Soon, over a dozen griffons had gathered, and they formed a tight, unbroken circle around her, talons and sharp beaks ready if she tried to flee. Rarity recognized among them the helmed scout who had nearly captured her out on the barge.

“You fell in with the jagugars! How did you survive?” The griffon stalked toward her, pointing an accusatory claw. “How did you get up here?”

“A lady must have her secrets,” Rarity replied, her chin held high. She was barely even afraid at this point. Mostly, she felt pleased with herself. After everything, she had finally managed to cause the stir for which she had hoped. More griffons flew into the cavern from elsewhere around the base. They probably were not even guarding their shipyard at this point.

The griffons squawked amongst themselves for a moment before the scout spoke again. “You must have had help to sneak into the hangar. Tell us who helped you!”

Rarity smiled inwardly. She could not have asked for a better setup line.

“Oh, you don’t have to play coy with me,” she said with a wink. “After all, I’ve been caught, haven’t I? It’s over. We both know it was you who helped me.” As she had hoped, that got the griffons talking, and the scout captain gave his comrades a pained look.

“That is a lie!”

“You said it yourself,” Rarity continued. “I could never have escaped the jagugars on my own. Thankfully, you distracted your colleagues whilst I hid, and then you helped me sneak in here so that I might detonate your store of firepowder. Unfortunately, our plan failed.”

She watched, trying to hide her amusement, as the others focused their attention on one of their own, who withered under the gaze of his fellows. If she was going to make a break for it, this might not be a bad time. She was preparing to spring into action when a new griffon landed amidst the group, this one a lithe and formidable looking female with white lion hindquarters and dark feathers covering her eagle half. Rarity recognized her at once as the griffon who had murdered Elector Graywings and his crew.

“Nice try,” the newcomer said to Rarity. “There is a reason these fools were not picked to accompany the General.”

“And what about you?” Rarity asked.

“I am Major Gilara, adjutant to General Karroc, and commander of this base in his absence. I do not brook such childish trickery.” Gilara jabbed a talon at Rarity’s forehead before she could react, and a few drops of blood began to trickle down the bridge of her snout. “Try such games with me, and you will find yourself eviscerated before you can even comprehend what is happening. Now tell me where the others are. I know that Khufu and his cretinous lackeys are working with you. They must be nearby. Does the unicorn prince live as well?”

Now Rarity *was* afraid. If this griffon did not like the answers she gave, Rarity had no doubt that Major Gilara would not hesitate to kill her on the spot. “Blueblood died of the bullet wound he received, and I do not know where the others are,” she said. “The others forced me to go on this suicide mission, to give them time to escape the jungle. They threatened terrible things if I did not go!” She lapsed into hysterical tears before a hard slap to the face snapped her out of her histrionics.

“Liar,” Gilara said. “As punishment, you shall give me one of your eyes. A shame; they really are lovely.” She turned to one of the others. “Hold her.”

“No!” Rarity wanted to run, but there was no opening, and too many griffons. Even as she desperately looked for some way out, strong claws pinned her forelegs to her side and pulled her up, so that she rested only on her rear legs. The female griffon moved closer and began extending a talon toward her face.

“Last chance, pony, or you and that wretched camel will only have one good pair of eyes between you. Talk.”

“I won’t.” Rarity said softly, resigning herself to what was about to happen. At least this would all be over soon. After she continued to refuse to betray the others, Gilara would soon tire of this and simply kill her.

“Suit yourself.”

The griffon’s single extended talon was so close now. Rarity squeezed her eyes shut, well aware that doing so would offer no protection. When she heard a grunt and felt the grip on her suddenly slacken, though, she immediately snapped her eyes open and jerked backward, away from Gilara’s menacing claw.

As she fell back down onto all fours, Rarity struggled to take in the chaotic scene that was unfolding. A cacophony of confused squawking and screeching filled the cavern, and feathers flew as the griffons began to panic. Turning, Rarity saw the one who had held

her now lay on the ground, quite dead, a slender spear protruding from his neck. Suddenly, a thud resounded next to her, and Rarity saw another griffon fall, similarly skewered. She screamed in horror.

What was happening? Far away, almost at the entrance of the cave, Rarity finally located the source of the projectiles. There stood Zips, launching his hoof-made spears as fast as he could load them into his spear-thrower. Where had *he* come from? Rarity pondered the young stallion's timely arrival while simultaneously acknowledging how fortunate it was that his special talent was uncanny accuracy, or she would have been just as likely as the griffons to be speared. In any case, she needed to get to him, and quickly, if she was going to escape.

At the same time Rarity observed Zips, the griffon major screeched furiously at her subordinates, then unfurled her wings and rose into the air to better direct them. Several griffons raced to secure firesticks, while others regrouped and encircled Rarity once again.

“Not this time, thank you,” she declared. She lowered her horn and gave a most unladylike snort while stamping a forehoof against the stone. As she observed the looming soldiers standing between her and survival, everything her father had ever taught her about the sport of hoofball, instructions long ignored but not quite forgotten, ran unbidden through her mind. She broke into a gallop, straight toward the closest griffon.

First, always maintain a lower center of gravity than your opponent. Rarity ducked under the griffon's clumsy grab, dove under his chest, and easily flipped the soldier over her back. *Second, anticipate your opponent's actions and always try to make the first move.* As another griffon rushed toward her from the side, Rarity extended her foreleg and gave the unexpected assailant a classic stiff-hoof to the side of the head. He fell to the ground and rolled awkwardly as she raced ahead. *Finally, always keep your hooves moving—don't stop!* Rarity jukeed around the next griffon's outstretched claws, and lowered her shoulder into his ribcage with a satisfying crack. She dodged the next griffon, and the next as well. Father would be so proud, if only he could see her now!

A final griffon flew up into the air, avoiding her headlong rush, and descended toward her. This sort of unfair move was exactly why pegasi were not permitted to use their wings in hoofball. Rarity had no counter, and prepared herself for the imminent pain of claws raking across her back. To her great surprise, however, the griffon tumbled away and collapsed in a heap as Zinzi leaped out of the shadows and delivered a powerful flying kick.

“Come now, we must be quick, they are already loading their firesticks,” the zebra mare stated, pushing Rarity along ahead of her. As if to punctuate her statement, a shot rang out and Rarity heard something whoosh past her. Ahead, she saw Zips finally abandon his spear-throwing and break for cover among the pallets and crates scattered about the cavern.

“Here, friends!” a voice called from the shadows, and Rarity and Zinzi abruptly ducked off to the side and out of the line of fire. Khufu stood, hiding his tall frame behind a massive steel water tank.

“What in Celestia’s name is going on?” Rarity asked. “What are you all doing here? You should be chasing after Karroc!”

“Can you truly so lack a clue, that you do not recognize a rescue?” Zinzi asked between deep breaths.

Zips threaded his way through the shadows and appeared next to his mother. “We saw the barge being towed back to port by some griffons. I just assumed you had been thrown to the fish, but the others wanted to try to find you.”

“We were searching not far away when siren sounded,” Khufu added. “We commandeered lift and sneaked into hangar to look for you here.”

“The plan was to get you back quietly, but when we saw you ...” Zips trailed off.

“Decisive action was required,” Khufu finished.

“But what of the *Alicorn*? Did you secure the lifting gas?” Rarity asked, ignoring a shower of splinters from a bullet impacting the crate next to her.

“Well, we stole *something*,” Zips offered. “I sure hope it was lifting gas.”

“Buck and Duke Polaris remained with airship while we went looking,” Khufu explained. “Searching for you was more urgent than waiting to see if balloon would inflate.”

“Those stallions are our means of getting away. They had best arrive without delay,” Zinzi added.

“So we must hold out here, in the possibly fruitless hope that Blueblood and Buckaroo will manage to get the *Alicorn* into the air and then arrive at the perfect moment to get all

of us onboard safely, all while these griffons are shooting at us and the ship,” Rarity summarized.

“Indeed,” Khufu confirmed.

“We could have gone with the stealth approach and waited to save you until after they tore out your eyeball,” Zips noted, before popping up from behind a barrel full of nuts to throw another spear.

“Point taken, and lest I forget, thank you most sincerely for the timely intervention,” Rarity replied. Zips nodded.

“We need to move from this spot. They are positioning for an easy shot,” Zinzi declared urgently, pulling her head back under cover just in time to avoid a fusillade of bullets.

Before any of them could react further, a mass of dark feathers and snow white fur landed gracefully before them. Major Gilara raised a gilded, twin-barreled pistol and pointed it directly between Rarity’s eyes. As she did so, several of the remaining griffon soldiers also landed nearby, brandishing their own firesticks.

“This is the end of the line, little pony. I don’t even have to ask you what your plan is now, or where your friends are, because the fools decided to join our little party of their own volition.”

Rarity’s eyes were wide open as she stared down the polished barrels of the griffon’s weapon. She had been so close to unraveling the conspiracy and escaping the jungle, and now she could only grimace as Major Gilara slowly tightened her claw around the pistol’s trigger.

“No! Never again!” Before the griffon could fully depress the trigger, Khufu charged forward with astonishing speed, barreling into Gilara and knocking her to the cavern floor.

The other griffons were already moving to raise their weapons, and Rarity reacted quickly to prevent them from succeeding where their leader had temporarily failed. Reaching out with her telekinesis, she released the triggers on all of the firesticks at once, before they could be aimed, causing them to be discharged harmlessly into the ground.

“Run!” Khufu shouted, struggling to untangle himself from the furious griffon major. “Make for lift. Others will come.”

Rarity did not need to be told twice. She broke into a gallop, Zinzi and Zips hot on her hooves, and flew across the hangar toward the mouth of the cavern where the lift waited. It wasn't much of a chance for escape, but it was their only chance.

Outside, the sun was finally rising. In Canterlot, Rarity knew, Princess Celestia had raised her charge over Equestria and the entire world. She was reminded once again that she had to survive, for her nation, her Princesses, and her family and friends. She ignored the pops of firesticks behind her, and barreled ahead.

Glancing behind her, she just managed to catch Khufu land a powerful headbutt against the unarmored head of the griffon major, and she at last released her grip on him. The exiled prince dashed after Rarity and the others.

Ahead, just outside the cave entrance, a dark shape began to rise into view, blocking out the early morning sun and throwing the cavern back into shadow. What was it? As she drew closer, Rarity could finally make out the bright blue color of the object, and the ornate designs woven into its fabric. The *Alicorn*! Blueblood!

As the airship ascended fully into view, Rarity could see the two stallions standing on the deck, apparently yelling something. She was not quite close enough to hear them over the roar of the waterfall spilling out of the cavern and over the cliff below.

"What is it?" she shouted. She could neither make out what Blueblood and Buckaroo were trying to tell her, nor could she read their lips, but she assumed they were urging her to hurry. She could see sparks and chips of wood fly as errant bullets from the griffons' firesticks impacted the *Alicorn*'s hull. Doubtless some were tearing tiny holes in the fabric balloon as well. With any luck, they would not cause more damage than could be easily repaired with magic.

"Can't you hear? Get down!" Zips called out, tackling Rarity from behind. As soon as she fell to the rock floor, Rarity witnessed a fearsome sight. Buckaroo had positioned himself behind the cannon mounted on the *Alicorn*'s deck, and now at the earth pony's direction the weapon spewed forth a relentless torrent of destruction. While the griffons seemed to be able to reload and fire twice in a minute, Buckaroo's automatic cannon must have been firing half a dozen times every second. Against such withering firepower, the griffons retreated further into the cave.

"Now giddyup y'all!" Buckaroo shouted as the weapon ceased firing.

Rarity pushed herself off the ground and hurried the short remaining distance to the edge of the cave, while Blueblood carefully maneuvered the *Alicorn* as close as possible, descending so that the ship's deck was just below the cavern floor. It was going to be a long jump, and there was only a small amount of flat stone here between the cavern wall and the raging river pouring out of the mouth of the cave. If she slipped, it would be a long, wet ride to the bottom.

Without allowing herself to dwell on it, Rarity pushed off with her rear legs and leaped into open space. The next second of her life seemed to stretch into an eternity as she watched the edge of the cliff pass below her, and then the several hundred-length drop to the base of the waterfall, until she finally crashed down on the hard wooden planks of the *Alicorn*'s deck. The impact smarted, but she had managed somehow to avoid injuring herself.

"Consider your promise to survive fulfilled," Blueblood called back from where he stood at the airship's helm. "Though you certainly made us all work for it!"

"I can't believe you spent all this time looking for me when you could have been pursuing Karroc. What about Equestria?" Rarity asked.

"What about it?" Blueblood replied. Rarity could only shake her head. She was only one pony, and millions of lives were at stake. Still, she could not deny that she was happy to be alive.

Seconds later, Zinzi and Zips both made the leap onto the airship look easy and graceful, and now only Khufu was left, charging toward the ship. Rarity noticed that he ran awkwardly on three legs, and was leaving a trail of blood in his wake. The camel's left hind leg had been mauled by Gilara's claws.

Now that Buckaroo was no longer firing his cannon, Rarity watched, horrified, as the griffoness quickly emerged from her hiding place, leveled her pistol, and fired at the fleeing camel prince. The first shot from her twin-barreled weapon missed its mark, but the second caused Khufu to stumble. Nonetheless, he continued to stagger forward. He was almost at the edge, but Rarity could tell there was no chance he would be able to complete the jump onto the airship's deck.

Rarity hurried over to the *Alicorn*'s deck rail, her horn glowing brightly as Khufu toppled over the rim of the cave entrance. Instead of falling to the ground far below, his glowing figure was soon deposited on the deck of the *Alicorn*. She rushed over to him even as Buckaroo resumed firing at Gilara and her griffons.

Glancing up, Rarity saw that the griffons had once again taken cover. She blinked in surprise, though, when she realized exactly *where* the griffons were hiding. If her memory from her short time in the cavern served her correctly, they had, apparently unthinkingly, sought refuge behind a large tower of firepowder barrels—barrels which Buckaroo was now firing upon. Rarity winced as her suspicions were shortly confirmed by a deafening explosion and a massive fireball that spewed like dragonflame from the mouth of the cave.

“Whoa, guess they ain’t gonna be followin’ us,” Buckaroo observed. A pall fell over his face as he looked down at Khufu’s prone figure. “Oh no.”

Khufu was badly hurt, that much was immediately apparent. His left hind leg was a shredded mess. Worse, the bullet wound in the left side of his chest was still bleeding copiously. His breathing came in sporadic, ragged gasps.

Zinzi turned toward Rarity and slowly shook her head. Zips looked on in silent shock.

“Rarity, are you there?” Khufu asked, his remaining eye darting this way and that, not focusing on anything.

“I’m here, Prince,” Rarity whispered. She knelt down and rested a foreleg gently against the side of the camel’s face. As she did so, she noticed that the ship was moving, ascending skyward and leaving the jungle far behind. “You should never have come looking for me.”

“Nonsense. Now, listen to me ...” Khufu’s voice trailed off into silence.

“Yes?” Rarity prompted.

“Prove me wrong, Rarity,” the camel whispered hoarsely. “You must prove me wrong.”

“What?”

“Prove harmony can exist without pointing weapons, as you said. That is world I want for you—for my friends. That is world you deserve.” Khufu coughed, and flecks of blood appeared at the corners of his mouth. “That world is not for me, it seems.”

“No, do not speak such nonsense. We can pick another Badge of Courage flower. You’ll be fine!”

“No ... time. Now you must save everyone else ... from this madness.” Khufu laboriously drew in a shallow breath. “Madness ... that I made possible.”

“You have atoned for your mistakes by fighting to stop these conspirators,” Rarity said, a sad smile on her face. “Perhaps you may not always have been the most forthright, nor the most conventional in your approach, but your heart has always been in the right place. You are a hero to me, and very brave.” Khufu’s breathing was now a horrible, wet sucking sound. She knew that his lungs were filling with blood.

“Not me,” he said, “but you proved ... still ... heroes left.” With a final gasp, the exile prince was gone.

The airship was picking up speed, and the tears Rarity shed were immediately blown away by the wind. Silently, she closed Khufu’s eye, and stood up.

“Blueblood, however fast this airship can fly, you need to make it fly faster,” Rarity commanded, as steadily and firmly as she could manage. “We’re going home.”

Rarity stepped away from Khufu's body. She wanted to give his makeshift family a measure of privacy to grieve, but mainly she could not bear to look at him any longer.

"Hero," he had called her. The word hung ponderously in the air, mocking her for being nothing of the sort. She had failed to get the Heavenstone, and worse, her foolishness had prompted the others to risk their lives on her behalf. Khufu had died. They all could have died. She was burdened with regret, and only the ever more fleeting hope that she might reach Gallopoli in time to save its ponies from the worst of Karroc's wrath buoyed her spirits.

At least the *Alicorn's* buoyancy was less in question. The ship was soaring again. Her wild dream of going home was being realized, and it gave her hope enough to avoid feeling completely crushed. Still, she was not completely right. She felt a wobble in her step as she walked the airship's deck, and knew that it was not merely part and parcel of the reacquisition of her air legs. The steely resolve and mental sharpness that fear and adrenaline had granted her were ebbing, and tiredness was rapidly filling the vacuum they left behind. She was drained, and she could not pull her thoughts out of the moribund place where they had become mired. She had escaped death a half dozen times that day, only for it to claim a friend. At least she could try to keep herself occupied, and haranguing Blueblood was a good place to start.

"Did you hear me?" Rarity called out. "I said we must fly faster if we are to have any chance of catching up to the griffons." She carefully placed one hoof in front of the other, mindful of keeping her balance, as she approached the helm where Blueblood stood, piloting the airship through the cloudless sky. The *Alicorn* flew east, into the rising sun, and as Rarity looked ahead she had to squeeze her eyes tightly against the light.

"I heard you," the stallion confirmed, almost shouting to be heard over the rush of air. "And I am very glad to see you too."

"Oho, well, fair enough. Let me rephrase: Prince Blueblood, I am simply delighted to be in your company once again. Now then, you need to coax as much speed out of this ship as you can. I believe it can fly faster."

"The engine hasn't run at anything close to maximum in nearly a week, and I cannot tell you how many components have been disconnected and reconnected in the process of repairing the ship. I don't want to risk any more power until I am certain she can take it."

"If there was ever a time to take a risk, this would be it."

“What?” Blueblood turned toward her, and Rarity saw for the first time that he had retrieved his silly aviator’s goggles from wherever they had been stashed. The lenses had apparently been enchanted to darken in direct sunlight, and they rendered his expression inscrutable.

“We must get to Gallopoli before Karroc. Damaging the engine, if that is what it takes in order to reach the town first, is a risk worth taking.”

“But—”

“I will hold the throttle down myself if I have to,” Rarity threatened, and meant it. Not only was she determined to beat the griffons to the coast, at that particular moment she could have used just about anything to lean against, and the throttle lever would do nicely. She was feeling positively woozy.

“Fine, but it is on your hooves if the boiler explodes or the crankshaft snaps.” Blueblood held up a forehoof in surrender.

He pushed against the throttle with one hoof, slowly moving the indicator forward to the final detent. There was a noticeable vibration in the deck beneath her hooves as the steam engine surged with power, and Rarity could feel an intensification of the force of the wind blowing against her face and whipping her mane. “One can hope for the best, I suppose,” Blueblood concluded.

“Hope is all we have until we reach Canterlot and the Princesses,” Rarity murmured. She squinted and gazed into the bright sunlight ahead, scanning the horizon for any sign of Karroc’s airship. There was none. “In the meantime, it appears that we have some catching up to do.”

“Oh? It was only six hours ago that we saw each other last,” Blueblood quipped. “But I suppose it was a rather eventful span of time.” The jest was amusing enough, but Rarity could not quite manage a laugh.

“We must catch up to Karroc, I meant. Still, I suppose you and I will have some stories to share if we ever have a quiet moment.”

“One would like to think that we shall.”

Rarity was silent. The idea of relaying the day’s experiences only made her feel worse. Sounds and visions swam through her mind: strange voices, snapping jaws filled with

teeth, lightning burning the air around her, sharp claws reaching out for her, and Khufu's final breath.

"Are you feeling alright?" Blueblood asked. "You're trembling."

"Oh, it's just the adrenaline leaving my system. I assure you, I am fine."

Blueblood spared a bit of magic to lift his goggles, and looked at her with an odd expression that was just as difficult to read as if his eyes had still been covered. Suspicion? Concern?

"What? I really am quite alright."

"You can be honest with me. Someone has died ..."

"I'm aware of that!" Rarity snapped. "Do you think this is the first time somepony close to me has passed away? I'm quite well, thank you." Her already wobbly legs chose that moment to give out completely, and she gave a little yelp as she fell. Before she could crash to the hard deck, however, she felt the tingling, enveloping embrace of Blueblood's magic catching hold of her. He gently set her down so that she was resting on her backside, and then knelt down so as not to loom over her.

"Perhaps I *am* crashing a bit harder than I thought."

"Maybe a bit," Blueblood agreed. "Please rest. We're still more than a hundred leagues out of Gallopoli, and the griffons are not yet in sight."

"No, there's no need for that," Rarity replied. She could not be weak now. Whatever she had left of herself, she had to dredge it out and give it up in the name of saving all those ponies. She had to prove that she could do something meaningful—that she had been worth dying for. She struggled to her hooves, pushing off the leg that Blueblood extended once he saw that she would not be persuaded to stay down.

"You do not have anything to prove, to me nor anypony else," Blueblood said, seemingly reading her mind as he stood up to match her. "Without all the mayhem you caused at the base, I am certain we wouldn't have escaped with the lifting gas. I can scarcely imagine the bold actions you must have undertaken."

That was too much. Rarity fell back onto her haunches, tears welling in her eyes. "No! That's just it. I didn't do anything. I failed to guess that Karroc would still be present, I failed to cause a real distraction, and I failed to get the Heavenstone. I was close enough

to touch it, Blueblood! A more capable pony could have snatched it right up and stopped all of this madness then and there, but I failed!”

“What do you mean?” Blueblood asked, surprised.

“I don’t know! I found the stone in Karroc’s ship, but something stopped me from taking it, and then I was someplace else. I cannot explain it, but Windlass was there. She was in Canterlot, and I was inside Karroc’s ship, but we were together in this other place.”

Blueblood looked at her askance.

“Windlass is behind everything—your brother, the griffons, everything! And I could do nothing to stop her, just like I could do nothing to get the Heavenstone away from her and Karroc. All I could do was run straight into the griffons’ claws, and get a friend killed on my account.”

Blueblood regarded her questioningly. “I cannot pretend to understand all of that, but if some unexplained force prevented you from getting the Heavenstone, what could you have done differently?”

“It is not about what I did! Don’t you see? You shouldn’t have come back for me! You should have flown on ahead without me. It was my responsibility to return to the ship, and I didn’t! Rescuing me was the stupidest thing you could have done.” She half-whispered this last, leaning in close to the unicorn stallion in order to be heard over the wind sweeping across the *Alicorn*’s open deck.

“It wasn’t stupid,” Blueblood replied, shaking his head once, and speaking with even certainty.

“How can you say that? One is already dead, and the lives of thousands are more at risk than ever. By any measure it was the wrong decision.”

“No. There was never any question or alternative, so there was no decision to make. We knew we had to find you, or at least find out what happened. You are—and do not bother to try to deny it—the important one among us. You embody an Element of Harmony.”

“I’m just a mare, Blueblood, no more important than anypony else.” Rarity frowned. “You should have convinced them to leave me.”

Blueblood laughed. “They would have thrown me overboard if I had tried.” He paused, his expression softening. “And you know I would never have tried.”

“Yes, I know,” Rarity replied. Her subsequent sigh was rendered inaudible by the wind. “It was still stupid.”

It really had been. She should be back in that cave right now, and the others all safe and far away. She should be enduring unspeakable torment at the merciless claws of Gilara and her soldiers, or she should be dead. Unable to suppress the raw emotion welling up in her chest, the dam burst again. Rarity began to sob, her cries soon turning into body-wracking spasms. Blueblood cautiously draped a foreleg over her shoulder, and she did not push it away. To her own surprise, and no doubt his, she leaned into his shoulder. Only after a long moment did she regain enough control to speak.

“I just feel like an awful pony. How can I represent the Element of Generosity when all I can truly think and feel is how glad I am that you rescued me, despite that Khufu is dead, despite that thousands may die because of this delay? When it comes right down to it, I am nothing but selfish, and I feel so guilty because of that.”

“No.”

“No? What do you mean ‘no?’ How can you say that?”

“No, you are not selfish. There is nothing wrong with feeling glad to be alive.”

“But not at others’ expense! It is only that ... I cannot even bear to tell you the things they would have done to me. The things I saw ...”

Horrifying images from the recent past flashed in Rarity’s mind: sharp knives and flayed carcasses hanging from hooks; the point of a talon, reaching toward her eye; and Karroc’s collection of gilded daggers. Before she could stop herself, Rarity moved forward and pressed her wet cheek against Blueblood’s chest.

“Listen to me, Rarity,” Blueblood said, and she felt his hot breath in her ear. “I have in my life heard many absurd and ridiculous things, the vast majority words I myself spoke, but I have never heard anything so absurd as you denying that you are a generous pony. The fact that you put your life at risk for a self-obsessed ninny like me is proof of that. You chose to fight, and to survive, when it would have been so easy to give up, and there is nothing wrong with that. When we get home, you will have a lifetime ahead of you to share your heart and your gifts with ponies who have done nothing to deserve them, and you will make them into something better than themselves, just as you have with me.” Blueblood paused to take a breath. “We’re going to make it back home, and then everything will be right again.”

She absorbed his words, so strange to hear coming from a pony like Blueblood. Slowly, after a lingering few seconds, Rarity disentangled herself and pushed away from him. She lifted a foreleg and did her best to wipe her face clean, glad for the first time since leaving Canterlot to be wearing no makeup.

“Yes, maybe so. Maybe it will be alright,” she said, mustering with difficulty the faintest of smiles.

Blueblood looked down at her and matched her expression, the corners of his mouth rising tentatively upward. For a moment, she just gazed up at him, marveling at the appearance of genuine warmth in his expression and fighting the urge to lose herself in his clear blue eyes. Finally, Rarity gave her head a vigorous shake and steered her mind away from the dangerous path it had been heading toward.

“You know, Blueblood, everything was far simpler back when you were purely loathsome.”

The stallion nodded. “For both of us.”

“Well, you are not permitted to change back for the sake of convenience,” Rarity warned, prodding the stallion’s shoulder with a hoof and prompting a small chuckle. Buckaroo chose that moment to interpose his oversized frame between the unicorns, and he shot a hostile glare at Blueblood.

“If y’all two are finished canoodlin’, you might recollect that we’re supposed to be chasin’ down those griffons. That’s why my boss’ body is lyin’ on the deck back there, ain’t it? Seems to me that we could be goin’ about this a mite more effectively.”

Rarity took a step backward, chagrined, as Blueblood harshly addressed the other stallion. “If you have a specific concern with how I’m flying the ship, then out with it. You can clearly see that the throttle has been moved past full steam, all the way to flank speed. That is to say, I am already running the engine harder than its designed tolerance for sustained power. There is no faster speed. What would you have me do that I am not already doing?”

“Maybe y’all should be giving the ship your full attention, instead of Miss Rarity here,” Buckaroo grouched.

“Perhaps you should mind your own business and get back to tying knots, or whatever your alleged talent is, and leave me to fly my ship how I choose!”

“Boys!” Rarity broke in. “Please, Celestia knows that this is a stressful situation, but there will be plenty of time for the two of you to compare the size of your egos after we evacuate Gallopoli. In any case, Buckaroo is right.”

“What?” Blueblood exclaimed, wearing a pained look of betrayal.

“We should be focused on the task at hoof,” Rarity went on. “If I had been thinking clearly, it would have been obvious that there is more that can be done to help speed us along. Blueblood, you may correct me if I am mistaken, but I believe you provisioned this airship with the expectation that you would fly alone. Now that there are so many of us onboard, as well as a cannon and a heavy anchor, it would seem to me that the added weight must be slowing us down.”

“Yes, of course, but I was not planning to ask anypony to jump overboard in the hopes of gaining an additional league or two per hour. Moreover, Khufu and I off-loaded what we could while we were waiting for the balloon to inflate.”

“And I sure as hay ain’t gonna let you get rid of poor Daisy May, not after all we’ve been through together!”

“First,” Rarity began, “I’m going to try very hard to forget the fact that you have apparently given that cannon a proper name, Buckaroo. Second, I am certain there are still weight savings to be had, even if we do keep a few of our new additions. Supplies, furniture, fixtures—anything that is not structurally important can be left behind.”

“I admit that we did not have time to break down some of the larger pieces—the bed, for instance. You are welcome to have at it,” Blueblood said with a shrug. “It can all go.”

“Then for starters, I’ll go below and see what all’s left to pitch,” Buckaroo volunteered. He proceeded to trundle down the hatch into the airship’s cabin, pausing briefly to call back a warning not to dare touch Daisy May.

“I should help him,” Rarity said.

“Yes, go ahead.” Blueblood did not look at her.

“Please, Blueblood—what you said to me a moment ago—those were wonderful words. They were exactly the words I needed to hear. I did not mean to diminish them or you in any way by noting that there are other things on which we should focus now. Do not sully them yourself by sulking.”

“I am not sulking! I’m brooding,” Blueblood huffed, still looking away. “You said that we were not thinking clearly, but I was quite lucid, and I meant what I said.”

“I believe I said that *I* was not thinking clearly, and I wasn’t. I feel quite a lot better now, and I thank you for that. Now, however, we must concern ourselves with flying, and catching Karroc. Everything else will wait.”

Rarity turned to walk away, and heard Blueblood heave a sigh behind her. “No sulking!”

“Brooding,” Blueblood corrected. “Stallions brood.”

“Perhaps, but you sulk.”

Rarity went belowdecks and set to work looking for odds and ends they could live without, which was at this point anything not responsible for keeping the ship aloft and moving forward. The desk and chairs were already gone, as were the stove, pots and pans, and dishware. The floor was littered with debris: bits of wood, fragments of glass, apple cores, papers, and other unrecognizable bits that had been ignored in the haste to remove the heaviest things in the cabin. Two barrels marked with red lettering in the griffon language rested in the corner, but the largest object remaining in the space was Blueblood’s elegant wooden bed. Buckaroo had tossed the mattress aside and was now furiously stomping and kicking the wooden frame, smashing it to pieces. He looked half mad, and she was almost afraid to approach him.

“May I help?” she asked sedately. “Perhaps I can stack the broken pieces and carry them away.”

Buckaroo wheeled around to face her, nostrils flaring. “No thanks. If you don’t mind, I could use a little time alone.” He grunted and gave the heavy bed frame another sharp kick from his rear hooves, causing a corner to splinter and break apart. “Sides, you probably want to be up there with your fancy Canterlot friend? Y’all two looked cozy.”

The words stung a bit, the more so because there was an uncomfortable kernel of truth to them. She, however, would not be so easily deterred. “I should be here, helping you to lighten the ship’s load. If you want to address the pain of losing a friend by kicking furniture into splinters, that is well and good, but please do not begrudge me for receiving consolation after my own fashion.”

Buckaroo stopped mid-buck, set all four hooves on the deck, and looked her in the eyes. “Khufu was a good sort,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. He lifted a foreleg and touched his chest. “In here, at least. He deserves a little respect.”

“I know he was. I also know that he wanted to prevent this war from happening. For his sake, we must continue to stand by one another. Please, let me help you.”

Buckaroo did not reply, and Rarity began to wonder whether he was simply ignoring her until she decided to leave. Then she looked at his face, and saw that the ire and bitterness was slowly and steadily draining from his features. Finally, he spoke.

“Alright. I reckon I could use another good quad of hooves down here. All this mess can go over the side, except those two barrels of firepowder we stole along with the gas. I’ll keep breakin’ down what’s left of the furniture if you wanna start tossin’ stuff.”

Rarity nodded, and they proceeded to work in companionable silence. He bucked furniture and fixtures into smithereens, while she gathered the broken wood and other detritus from the cabin, then floated the debris up and overboard. The mattress went, and the light fixtures too. Eventually even the bathroom sink was smashed and the copper pipes torn from the bulkhead. Everything went over the rail. She could only hope that smashing things was cathartic for Buckaroo; she privately had to admit that she rather enjoyed the spectacle.

When there was nothing left to remove that did not appear integral to flying, she walked with Buckaroo up to the deck and into the streaming sunlight. Blueblood still stood at the ship’s wheel, while Zips kept watch at the bow, scanning for any sign of the griffon warship. After a moment of searching, Rarity spotted Zinzi kneeling beside Khufu’s body, mouthing words which Rarity could not hear. She followed Buckaroo as he walked over to the zebra mare.

“What was that, Zee?” Buckaroo asked.

“An old zebra poem for those who die. It is part of our way of saying goodbye.”

“Well, I’m glad you said your piece. Everything that ain’t nailed down has gotta go for the sake of speed, and that means the boss too.” Zinzi looked Buckaroo in the eyes, and then nodded once. The big earth pony proceeded to heft Khufu’s body onto his broad shoulders. It took precious seconds for Rarity to comprehend what she was witnessing. When she finally did, she was appalled.

“Just what do you think you are doing? Put him down at once!”

“Khufu’s dead,” Buckaroo replied. “Deader than a horseshoe nail, and that’s a fact. There ain’t no reason to save an empty sack of flesh that’s just weighin’ us down. It ain’t like

they're gonna need the body for a mausoleum back in Camelon. His only family is right here, and as far as I'm concerned, the funeral's over. Y'all got any last words for him?"

"Come on now, Mr. Buckaroo," Rarity pleaded. "Be reasonable. Surely we cannot ... I mean, he deserves a proper interment. He was your friend."

"He was as true a friend as I ever had," Buckaroo confirmed. "Even when he was bein' a no-good liar, he was lookin' out for me and mine. But it's like you said—the rest of us have gotta stick by each other, and that means castin' off the dead weight."

Intellectually, Rarity knew he was right. Emotionally, she was not prepared for such unceremonious finality. Had it even been an hour since he died? What should she say, if anything? Khufu had lied to her and nearly gotten her killed, but he had also forced herself to see just how capable she really was, and in the end he had died saving her life.

She tried to put her thoughts into words, but it was over before she could even finish gathering her thoughts. Buckaroo shifted, and Khufu's gangly-limbed body spilled over the deck rail and away. With a gasp, Rarity raced to the rail and watched as he disappeared into the thick forest a thousand lengths below.

She continued to stare, long after Zinzi and Buckaroo walked away, and was still shaken when she rejoined the others.

"There you are," Blueblood said.

"Here I am," Rarity confirmed, positioning herself close by his right. It felt good to cling to familiarity at the moment, in whatever form.

"We haven't seen any sign of the griffons, but I can see wisps of engine smoke in the far distance. I imagine they are steaming along ahead, flying the same direct course toward the coast that we are, but I cannot guess how far in front they may be. Your work paid off, though. We are flying nearly as fast I ever managed during the race, and that was with only one pony on board."

"Say, why don't you use your horn to figure out how ahead they are?" Zips piped up, directing his proposal to Rarity. "They have that thing you've been tracking, don't they?"

Rarity blinked in surprise at the unexpected suggestion, which seemed so obvious in retrospect. Her gem-finding spell had been unconsciously locking on to the Heavenstone for days, even at great distances. Surely she could intentionally direct her spell to pinpoint the stone's location, and thus determine where and how far ahead Karroc's

warship flew. At the same time, she could not shake a certain reticence to have anything to do with the mystical gem. How could she be certain she would not lose herself in the Heavenstone's strange magical nexus again, or be forced into another encounter with Windlass? Neither prospect was remotely appealing.

"Seems like a good idea to me," Buckaroo added. "We'll be right here to help you out if anything funny happens."

"Yes, thank you," Rarity said, sighing. "I suppose that it cannot hurt to try."

She grimaced and braced herself as she cast the spell, and was immediately relieved when nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Instead, she felt the familiar gentle tug that indicated the presence of a gemstone, and turned her head until the pulling sensation was straight away. There was only one gem that she could possibly detect in an airship high above the earth. "It's there. I cannot say how far, but I am certain that we are closing the distance. The feeling is getting stronger each second."

Blueblood made a modest course correction to align the *Alicorn* perfectly where the spell indicated, and the chase was on. Long minutes passed, the silence only broken by Rarity's periodic reporting that the ship was most definitely getting closer, and everypony gazed into the rising sun, searching for their quarry.

"There's something," Zips finally murmured, shielding his eyes with a foreleg.

"What is it?" Blueblood shouted from behind.

"Hold on."

"I for one do not understand how anypony could see anything with the sun like that," Rarity complained. "I certainly can't."

"My son's young eyes are sharp and keen. If he claims to see something, then something has been seen," Zinzi said. "Though if ahead something flies, it eludes my humble eyes."

Buckaroo spoke next. "All I know is if the kid says there's somethin' out there, then I better make sure Daisy May is primed and loaded."

"Good," said Zips, lowering his hoof to the ground. "Because that's Karroc, and if I can see his ship, then the griffons saw us five minutes ago."

Rarity could feel her stomach attempting a backflip, and she swallowed involuntarily. “You’re certain?”

“Enormous flying warship—yeah, that’s Karroc,” Zips replied, as he trotted over to the starboard rail. “Six or seven leagues distant.”

“If we are that close we must quickly prepare, doubtless marauders are already in the air!” Zinzi exclaimed, racing toward the bow of the ship and gazing all around, as if anticipating an attack from any direction.

Rarity gasped. “What can we do?” She had not been expecting to come under attack so far from Gallopoli. Of course, she now realized, Karroc would have no reason to politely wait for the *Alicorn* to catch up, and he could not afford to let them escape to warn the Princesses.

“We cannot outmaneuver or outrace a griffon on the wing,” Blueblood stated glumly. “We have no choice but to confront them.”

“Well, I ain’t got the ammunition to waste tryin’ to peg a couple of scouts doin’ loop-the-loops and barrel rolls all around the ship,” Buckaroo said. “And I can’t do a thing if they get wise and swoop down from up top.”

That is exactly what the griffons would do, Rarity realized. The *Alicorn*’s balloon was nothing but a fat, inviting target. It obscured their vision, making it impossible to defend, and it could easily be raked to shreds by sharp claws or blades, sending the ship crashing back to earth. She felt sick at the thought. At that moment, Zips trotted back to the helm, opened his mouth, and dropped the *Alicorn*’s rope ladder at Rarity’s hooves.

“Tie me up,” the young stallion demanded. “Quick.”

“What? Why?” Rarity asked. Everypony else looked on with the same look of bewilderment that she knew she also wore. This was certainly not the time for some kind of awkward fantasy.

“Because you’re the one who can magic this ladder into a length of rope, and then turn that length of rope into a safety harness,” Zips hurriedly explained. “Now do it! They’ll be here any minute!”

“You’re going to go to the top of the balloon,” Rarity stated, finally grasping the young stallion’s intent. Without waiting for confirmation, she set to work at once, magically

deconstructing the twists and knots of the ladder and twining the rope strands back together in a new arrangement.

“Well, yeah,” Zips replied. “This is going to be a short trip if somepony doesn’t keep them off our backs.”

Rarity used her telekinesis to loop the long rope she had created around Zips’ torso, across his chest, and between his legs, cinching it tightly as she worked.

“That is extremely brave of you.”

“Yes it is,” Blueblood added. Zinzi and Buckaroo watched silently as Rarity worked.

“I don’t want Khufu to have died for nothing,” Zips stated, looking Rarity squarely in the eyes.

Rarity blinked. Was Zips’ look accusatory? Was it simply searching? The young half-zebra’s expressions were always difficult to decipher. Now he was offering to shoulder all the responsibility for keeping the rest of them alive, and in doing so become the target of an unknown number of trained soldiers. Whatever he might be thinking, she was certain that his countenance did not bespeak confidence, but rather foolhardy determination. Well, he was not the only one who could make rash, foolish decisions.

“I shall accompany you,” Rarity said, already guiding the rope around her own body and tying it tightly.

“You cannot!” Blueblood shouted, whipping around to look at her. The entire ship lurched and listed as he momentarily lost control of the wheel. “It’s far too dangerous!”

“It is no safer down here than it is up there if the griffons puncture the balloon,” Rarity retorted. “Even if I cannot fight, I can try to shore up any tears in the envelope as they happen. Besides, I’m already harnessed.”

She cast the end of the rope out over the edge of the ship and magically sent it snaking upward. Rarity had become intimately familiar with the construction of the balloon while repairing it, and knew exactly where to find the line of metal rings that secured the suspension cables to the external catenary curtain that comprised the outer envelope. The rope end shot through one of the rings and then made a beeline directly back to her.

“You don’t need to go up there with me,” Zips said, in his customary toneless manner of speaking. It was impossible to tell whether he wanted her to stay behind, or whether he was actually glad that she had volunteered. Regardless, Rarity was going.

“Yes, I do. You will need a unicorn to mend the fabric of the balloon if it is torn, and having a second pair of eyes will not hurt either.” This was her chance to make up for all of the failings that had led to Khufu’s death. She had to go. Rarity turned to Buckaroo. “Now, if you don’t mind, we could use a lift.”

The big stallion looked unsure, and did not take the end of the rope in his mouth.

“This is ridiculous,” Blueblood grumbled. “Not only is what you propose insanely, needlessly risky, that hoist you’ve rigged will only take you halfway to the top of the balloon. How in the world are you going to get all the way up?”

“I know very well how the balloon is secured,” Rarity replied hotly. “Now, Buckaroo, a lift please!” There was no time to argue further.

Buckaroo did not hesitate this time. He clamped his teeth down on the end of the rope and began to pull, walking toward the airship’s stern until all the slack was taken out of the line. Blueblood, having abandoned his protestations, put a hoof down on the rope until Buckaroo could walk back and take the taut line in his teeth. Now, once he pulled, Zips and Rarity would ascend.

“Both of you, please take care, I do not need another scare,” Zinzi offered. She gave her son a quick kiss on the forehead. Zips had gathered a large number of his short, dartlike spears in his mouth, and could only mumble a response. Three of his bolas, constructed of rocks and strong vines, were draped around his neck.

Buckaroo began pulling, and before Rarity could prepare herself, Zips’ hooves were a half length above the deck and she was quickly being pulled after him. She scarcely had time to question the wisdom of volunteering before she found herself dangling over open space. They ascended quickly, until Zips reached the cable attachment ring and they could go no further. She now had to address the tricky business of getting the rest of the way up to the top of the balloon.

Rarity was working out the required maneuvers in her head when, without warning, the *Alicorn* fell into a steep, sharply turning dive. She let out a scream of terror as the balloon rotated and she fell away from the fabric envelope. Only Buckaroo’s grip on the rope, somewhere below, prevented her and Zips both from falling.

The proximate cause of the sudden and extreme maneuver was not hard to ascertain, as the wind carried the shrill predatory shrieks of griffons on the hunt. The timing could not have been worse; if the griffons saw her and Zips dangling helplessly, they would be on top of them in a flash.

Again without warning, the *Alicorn* tilted sharply in the other direction and began ascending, the balloon rolling hard to the left. Now instead of dangling beneath the envelope, the fabric rose up beneath Rarity's hooves. At this angle, in fact, they could simply run up to the top of the balloon without having to climb.

Rarity used her magic to tug hard on the rope, and she felt it slacken as Buckaroo let go. She had to hurry now; if the *Alicorn* turned again before she and Zips reached the top, they would fall. Thankfully, Zips had immediately understood what was happening, and the two of them, bound together, raced up the side of the balloon, reaching the top just as the airship rolled upright and out of the steep maneuver. Rarity wasted no time in tying the rope to a metal anchor ring that protruded directly in front of the balloon's finlike dorsal stabilizer.

"Where are they?" she shouted, frantically searching the skies for the still-unseen griffons. Too late, she realized she had forgotten to look directly above her. Zips tackled her to the springy surface an instant before talons and claws raked the air where her head had been.

The young stallion stood and dropped the bundle of spears he carried, holding them against the balloon's surface with a hoof. "What was that? I can't do anything about them if you're going to be completely oblivious!"

Heart racing, Rarity blurted out an apology while she looked up to see her assailant. Flying a tight circle forty lengths above were four griffons, each gripping a serrated knife in a taloned forelimb. As she had feared and expected, the attackers aimed to destroy the *Alicorn's* balloon.

"Just stay close and don't trip me," Zips yelled. Without hesitating, he fit a spear into the carved groove of his throwing implement and lifted the device with his teeth. Then, with an athletic spin and a whip of his head, he loosed a deadly missile toward the circling griffons. Rarity watched in dismay as the spear failed to connect, passing harmlessly between one griffon's long primary feathers. Reacting to the attack, the quartet formed a line abreast, then folded their wings in tight and dove straight toward the *Alicorn* and its defenders.

“You missed! What have you done?” Rarity screamed. She and Zips were tied to the ship, and each other, and could not even run. The griffons were already nearly upon them.

Zips was unable to reply on account of the stone sphere he held in his mouth, and he was already twirling the bolas around his head at a dizzying speed. The griffons were not more than fifteen lengths away when he finally let go, and this time, his aim was true.

The bolas spun through the air before striking the left wing of the center-right griffon. Upon contact, the strong vine wrapped around the attacker’s wing and the twin stone spheres battered the delicate bone beneath the feathers. Instinctively, the griffon pulled the injured limb in even closer, and the abrupt change in flight configuration sent him banking sharply, straight into a wingmate. The griffons’ skulls collided with a loud report, and a tangle of feathers and fur proceeded to fall silently out of sight. That left two griffons still diving toward the ship, clenching murderous blades and screeching terrifying battle cries.

“Jump back!” Zips yelled. Rarity took her cue from the young stallion, and sprang backwards alongside him just as the griffons dove in for the kill. The rope kept Rarity and Zips from tumbling off the side of the balloon, and the attackers struck only air before impacting and bouncing off the balloon’s surface.

The technical odds were now even, but effectively tilted sharply in the griffons’ favor. Both equines were tied in place and unable to run, and Zips had been forced away from his remaining arsenal. Worse, the griffons did not even need to attack in order to win the confrontation, they merely needed to keep Rarity and Zips at bay while they slashed and rent the *Alicorn*’s balloon.

Confirming her fears, the closest griffon leered at Rarity as he slowly lowered his jagged knife and drew it across the outer envelope, and the taut fabric split apart eagerly under the sharp blade. After cutting a long gash and exposing the inner balloon, he drew back his knife and prepared to plunge it through the thick synthetic material. If nopony stopped him, the hard-won and irreplaceable lifting gas would bleed out and the *Alicorn* would plunge to the ground. The other griffon had focused his attention squarely on Zips, and the two were at a stalemate. The responsibility to act fell to Rarity.

In the split second she was afforded, her mind raced. She had magic at her disposal, but there was nothing to throw, and the only rope present was otherwise occupied. The direct approach would not work either; her telekinesis was not nearly strong enough to hold back a large and determined opponent. She could try to use spells to repair the damage he would inflict, but that was a losing proposition; precious gas would leak even

as she worked. In desperation, she prepared for a nigh-suicidal rush to protect the vulnerable balloon fabric.

Fabric. *Fabric!* What was the airship's outer fabric envelope if not an enormous dress draped over a gigantic bulbous dressform? Fabric was her artistic medium, and she practically had an ocean of it beneath her hooves. Rarity's horn flared to life even as the griffon brought his knife down, and he did not get far. The torn cloth of the outer envelope rose up around him, splitting apart into grasping, limb-like extensions that held the griffon's legs and quickly wound around him, binding him and then wrapping him tightly in the strong material. The griffon only had time to screech once in surprise before being completely covered and bound.

The other griffon, seeing his partner incapacitated, and perhaps sensing that the odds were shifting against him, backed away from Zips, who did not hesitate to take advantage of the retreat. The young stallion immediately dashed ahead, only slowing to take up a spear in his teeth before turning toward Rarity. She watched him leap into the air and land hard on the back of the griffon she had pinned, and when Zips extricated himself, the spear remained embedded in his helpless target. Nothing moved within the tangle of cloth.

Rarity had seen too many horrible things recently to feel truly upset at the sight before her, but the crimson stain spreading across the material left her queasy. She abandoned her enchantment, and gravity took over, allowing the dead griffon's body to roll out of the wrapping and over the far side of the balloon. Mustering her resolve, she magically knit the torn fabric back together, and turned alongside Zips to face the remaining griffon.

"Come on!" Zips taunted him. "Have a go at us, why don't you? Your friends gave it their best shot. What are you waiting for?" The griffon hesitated only a moment, then shot skyward, beating his wings furiously in his rush to get away. He was soon out of sight, leaving the two equines alone. Though difficult for Rarity to believe, it was impossible to deny: she and Zips had bested four armed griffons without suffering a scratch, and the *Alicorn* was none the worse for the encounter.

"We did it!" she exclaimed in jubilation, and proceeded to throw her forelegs around Zips' neck. "You were marvelous, my dear!"

"Thanks," Zips replied, shaking off the unexpected gesture. "Your magic is what saved us, so I guess you were, um, marvelous too."

“Hmm, I’ll grant you fantastic, at least,” Rarity replied, grinning. She felt triumphant, and free of a weight that had been crushing her. She had proved her worth to herself. “Now that we have beaten them once, we shall be ready if they come back.”

“I doubt they will. They’ve seen we have bite, and they’ve probably realized we’re following them and aren’t headed north to Canterlot.”

“So Karroc will think he can destroy us with his airship and the Heavenstone once we both reach Gallopoli, rather than risk any more of his fliers,” Rarity reasoned.

“Yeah.”

“Well, if you’re confident they will not return, we should rejoin the others. Standing up here is not going to do any good against magical weather.”

Zips nodded in agreement, and the two ponies cautiously proceeded to walk backwards down the side of the balloon, still tethered by the safety rope. Getting the rest of the way down was as easy as calling out and allowing Blueblood to gently levitate them, but Rarity did not dare breathe a sigh of relief until all four of her hooves were back on the solid wooden planks of the *Alicorn*’s deck.

“Hoo-woo! Y’all sure took care of them, didn’t you?” Buckaroo exclaimed, punching the air with a hoof. “It looked like it was rainin’ griffons from down here.” As he cheered them on, Zinzi hurried to embrace her son. Rarity, meanwhile, worked her magic to unwind the rope harnesses she had so meticulously tied in place.

“I can’t believe you did that!” Blueblood exclaimed, stepping away from the airship’s wheel and examining her with a critical eye. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, thank you, and so is your ship, oh ye of little faith.” Feeling rather pleased with herself, Rarity flashed him a cocksure smile. “They never touched us, thanks to Mr. Zips here.”

“Thanks to you, you mean,” Zips said.

“Well, I *do* know my way around a bolt of cloth,” Rarity replied with a wink. “In any case, I hope we do not have to go through anything like that again.”

“Karroc ain’t got that many soldiers,” Buckaroo noted. “He ain’t gonna risk any more of ‘em when he’s got a ship with so many cannons it looks like a flyin’ porcupine.”

“I hope not,” Rarity agreed, and addressed Blueblood next. “How close are we to Gallopoli?”

“We cannot be more than thirty leagues distant, which means we must have already crossed the border.”

Rarity gasped. “Are you saying that we are in Equestria, *right now?*” she asked, unbridled excitement pitching her voice into a higher register than it normally occupied.

“I’m certain of it,” Blueblood confirmed.

Rarity let out a girlish squeal, and could not suppress the urge to launch into a joyful little dance, bouncing up and down on the deck. “Home, Blueblood! Everypony, we’re home!”

“Home, perhaps for you, but not home free,” Zinzi said, obviously not sharing Rarity’s enthusiasm. “We must beat Karroc to Gallopoli.”

“We are steadily closing the distance,” Blueblood said. “I think we shall pull ahead no less than fifteen leagues out. But even if we do, we shall have at best only a few minutes to warn the town.”

The sun had climbed high enough that Rarity could look to the horizon without being blinded, and she could see Karroc’s warship hanging like a fat black ponyfly in the blue sky ahead. For the first time, she was able to fully appreciate its monstrous scale. Of course, she had been aboard the ship, and seen it depart its cavernous berth, but then she had only glimpsed parts of it in passing. She had also seen it obscured by storm clouds, and at night, but the full picture, unhidden, was something else entirely.

The warship’s balloon was dark and bulbous, easily large enough to fit the *Alicorn* inside it a half dozen times or more. The hull hanging below had some of the traditional lines of an airgoing vessel, but thick armor plating and numerous cannon platforms protruding like metal blisters from the hull ended the resemblance. The sterncastle had all the charm of an industrial factory, complete with smokestacks and clad entirely in steel, and was the source of the trail of sooty smoke the ship left in its wake. Rarity could only presuppose that the ship was equally as foreboding from other angles as it was from behind, but in any case she would find out soon enough—they were getting closer with each passing minute.

“Stay outta range of those cannons,” Buckaroo warned Blueblood.

“I *am* out of range! If I was *in* range, they would be firing on us, would they not?”

“Maybe they’re just waitin’ for a clear shot!”

“Maybe you have no idea what you are talking about, as usual!”

Rarity kept staring at the griffon’s warship and counted three small puffs of smoke that erupted from its deck. “Ah, pardon me, gentlecolts, but I believe we may indeed want to put a bit more distance between us.”

“Fine, take his side again!” Blueblood said, clearly exasperated. At that moment, a shrill whistle cut through the air, and the crew of the *Alicorn* watched three projectiles zip past, all low but uncomfortably close.

“Oh,” Blueblood muttered, already rotating the ship’s wheel and banking the airship away.

The *Alicorn* raced on, maintaining a safe separation from Karroc’s ship as both craft steamed toward the coast. No more griffons sortied out to harass, nor did Karroc attempt any more potshots at the smaller craft. An impartial observer would not have known that the crews of both vessels were mortal enemies.

Rarity now felt the Heavenstone’s pull even without consciously casting her gem-finding spell. It was getting stronger, and not merely from proximity; the concentration of magical power in the gem was intensifying.

“Look there, the sea!” Blueblood cried out. As the *Alicorn* climbed over a final ridge of coastal peaks, the endless expanse of the southern ocean spread out before them, merging with the sky into a fathomless field of blue. Closer in, pristine white beaches formed a string of pearls decorating the shoreline, and the perfect semicircle of Gallopoli Bay was visible, looking as though it was punched from the coast with a cookie cutter.

“And there is the town!” Rarity chimed in. Gallopoli was apparent only as numerous dark specks littering the beach, but it was there. Her heart ached for those poor ponies, living their lives innocent of the impending horror they faced. She glanced to her right, and saw that the *Alicorn* was pulling ahead of the griffons, just as Blueblood had predicted. They now had fifteen leagues and precious few minutes to put space between them, and get word to the populace to flee for their lives. Zips went below to ensure that the ship’s boiler was fully fueled, and Rarity and the others directed their focus straight ahead, staring fixedly at their destination as if doing so would make it arrive sooner.

There were no more obstructions to clear, and thus no longer any reason to fly so high above the earth. The *Alicorn* descended, accelerating as it traded altitude for airspeed. Then, at ten leagues from the town, a blue, gold, and orange blur suddenly appeared in the periphery of Rarity's vision. Before she could even shout a warning, a uniformed pegasus mare had flown under the *Alicorn*'s balloon and dropped lightly to her hooves, directly in front of the airship's helm. Rarity instantly recognized the fiery orange mane and tail of Spitfire, the renowned captain of the Wonderbolts.

"Sky spirits! Not only Duke Polaris, but Miss Rarity too, alive and well!" the newcomer exclaimed. "We ID'd you through the scope as soon as your ship crested the ridge, but I could barely believe what I was seeing." She turned to Rarity. "Of course, I don't doubt it now; I could never forget the face of the mare who knocked me out with a solid forehoof to the jaw, even without all the crazy makeup on."

Rarity blushed, and for a moment was rendered speechless. She remembered all too well her last encounter with Spitfire, when she had fallen from the Cloudsdale Cloudiseum and the Wonderbolt attempted to save her. Rarity had managed to unintentionally incapacitate Spitfire and two of her best fliers with her terrified flailing, before Rainbow Dash had finally saved them all.

Spitfire took in the other individuals crowding the deck, and whistled. "Looks like it's not only you two, but the crew of the *Everfree* too! Our search teams have been at it for days with nothing to show for it, and then 'poof,' here you all are! It's like some kind of miracle!"

"Pardon my abruptness, Captain, but please listen," Rarity began, pulling herself together. "The large airship trailing us is crewed by a faction of griffons that intends to make war with Equestria. They are the ones who attacked the regatta and left us stranded, and now they are going to attack Gallopoli. You must race back to town at once and evacuate everypony."

"What?" Spitfire's entire demeanor changed in an instant, and the abrupt shift sent a chill down Rarity's spine. This was no longer the friendly pony out to welcome the returnees, but a grave-faced soldier. "I need more information. Quickly. I dispatched two of my ponies to check that thing out, and now you're telling me it's a *hostile*, here in Equestria?"

"Yes!" Rarity exclaimed. Blueblood stood next to her, nodding. "You need to get your pegasi away from there, and get everypony out of Gallopoli!"

“Even if they are planning to attack, it’s just one ship,” Spitfire protested. “I have my entire A Squadron here for search and rescue, plus capable volunteers from the Guard, regional fliers’ clubs, and the local Weather and Rescue patrols. We can handle a few griffons, surely.”

“You don’t understand!” Blueblood broke in. “That ship is covered in heavy weapons, and it is not only claws and cannons with which you must contend. They have a magical artifact, stolen from Canterlot, and they are going to use its magic to summon a storm of colossal force, more powerful than anything you’ve ever dealt with before. You are not going to be able to just flap your wings and make this thing go away.”

“They are going to destroy Gallopoli!” Rarity continued urgently. “Please, you must get everypony as far away from the town and the water as you can.”

At that moment, the thundering rumble of cannon fire reached them, and all aboard the *Alicorn* looked back to see smoke pouring from the numerous batteries on the deck of the griffon warship. The ship was too far away to be firing on the *Alicorn*, and Rarity momentarily wondered what Karroc was intending before realizing that he must be firing on the Wonderbolts sent to investigate. Spitfire uttered a curse and launched herself into the air.

“Hurry!” Rarity shouted. Spitfire, however, was already long gone, leaving only a fiery contrail in her wake, her passage seeming to ignite the sky.

“That was fortuitous,” Blueblood remarked. “Everypony in Equestria knows the Wonderbolts. Not only can she provide the townsfolk an early warning, but they will actually listen to her.”

“I just hope none of them are hurt in all of this. They won’t want to flee,” Rarity said, frowning.

“Shoot, iff in they wanna fight, I say let ‘em,” Buckaroo spoke up. “Sounded to me like she has a whole passel of pegasi back there who can probably give as good as they get. Ol’ Karroc does just have the one ship, even if he’s got a magic rock.”

“Buck, you know not what you say,” Zinzi sharply rebuked her companion. “Think of those who will die if the ponies stay. The outcome is certain to be tragic, if they pit wings and hooves against cannons and magic.”

“I have to agree with Zinzi,” Rarity said. “We need to concentrate on making sure that everypony gets away from the town, and then we must reach Canterlot as quickly as

possible. The Princesses can deal with Karroc, and after this madness is ended Gallopoli can be rebuilt.”

By now, the *Alicorn* was less than five leagues from the edge of town, and the thatched roof architecture of Gallopoli was clearly visible. The simple wood and straw construction, so perfectly befitting the gentle tropical weather the area enjoyed year round, would provide no protection from the coming storm. Blueblood guided the ship even lower, following the contour of the earth as it dipped and gradually flattened toward the shore. There were roads and planted fields below, and modest houses tucked away between the palm trees. Not far ahead, it was easy to see a demarcation between the outlying farmlands and the more tightly packed construction of the town proper. Leaning over the rail, Rarity could see farmhooves in a flooded taro field staring up at the speeding craft.

“You must get away from here!” she shouted. “Take your families and run!” Then she had passed, and was left watching as the farmworkers continue to stand and stare, seeming as rooted to the field as their crop was. This was not going to go well at all if nopony heeded her warnings. She only hoped that Spitfire had hastened back to warn the town, and not stayed to engage Karroc in what would surely be a futile effort.

As the *Alicorn* flew over collections of modest houses at the edge of town, a piercing wail suddenly filled the air. It was obviously some sort of siren, slowly rising and falling in pitch and volume, but the sound seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. Below, she watched as ponies began to emerge from buildings and fields, and they quickly filled the dirt roads in droves.

“It appears she forwarded our warning,” Blueblood observed.

Rarity nodded in agreement. “Thank Celestia! But I’m surprised that there are emergency sirens here. What possible disasters could they have to worry about in a paradise like this? I mean, aside from today’s disaster, of course.”

“I imagine it’s a tidal wave alarm,” Blueblood replied. “Have you noticed that all of the buildings here are built on stilts?”

Of course, destructive waves would not be something the local weather patrol could prevent, and they could pose a serious risk to a seaside community like Gallopoli. It only made sense there would be a mechanism in place for evacuating in the face of such threats, and the ponies here would be conditioned to obey the warning. Rarity had to commend Spitfire for her brilliance in coming up with an effective solution so quickly.

Gallopoli's town square was not far ahead, easily identifiable by the large pavilions and tall rotunda that dominated the space. The emergency sirens were still blaring, and throngs of ponies were everywhere, galloping away from the center of town. Most of them were, at least. Rarity was surprised to see one large group who were all standing stock still.

She was about to ask Blueblood to fly the ship closer, so she could warn them away, when the entire group took to the air en masse. Only then did Rarity notice that Spitfire herself, and nearly a dozen other Wonderbolts in their colorful blue and gold uniforms, were leading the gathering of fliers.

"Look!" Rarity called out to the rest of the crew. "What are they doing? Blueblood, slow us down!"

The pegasi maintained an easy hover as the *Alicorn* slowed and began to circle the town square, and Spitfire raced over to land on the airship's deck once again.

"We've sounded the alarm," she said. "The townsponties are heading for the hills, and there are storm shelters there that should keep them safe. These pegasi have volunteered to stay with me and fight. They all have plenty of flying experience, whether in the Guard or in the various civil air services, and I think we stand a good chance. There is no permanent Guard presence this far south, so if we can't bring those griffons down now, a lot more ponies than just the citizens of Gallopoli will be in danger."

"But you cannot hope to stop them!" Rarity protested. "You have seen their airship, have you not?"

"Yeah, and Soarin' and Gusty nearly got blown out of the air without so much as a warning. The Wonderbolts may be a demonstration team, Miss Rarity, but we're all still active duty Air Guards, and the best fliers in Equestria besides. We don't run from cowards like these."

"If you absolutely must be foolishly stalwart, then at least send the rest of those poor ponies away!"

"They've been told they can leave if they want to," Spitfire replied grimly. "Now then, you all should fly back to Canterlot and warn Princess Celestia. But first, I think you'll be pleased to know that there are some ponies in town who you'll ... wait, what's *that*?"

Rarity turned around to look, and saw the griffon warship barreling toward them. Rather, she saw a roiling mass of black storm clouds that the airship seemed to be

pushing along ahead of it. Now that she looked, the entire sky seemed to be changing, the sunny sky turning gray as clouds coalesced from the moist air. Rarity felt a strange breeze too, blowing in from the wrong direction. Her coat stood on end, as if the air was filled with a static charge. In seconds, the wind began to howl, and rain came pouring down.

“That is what I’ve been warning you about!” Rarity yelled. “The storm is being summoned!”

Windlass was summoning it, in truth. At Karroc’s call she was working her magic through the Heavenstone from wherever she was presently located. Rarity could not help but imagine the deranged mare resting on a sofa, popping bonbons in her mouth while she orchestrated the destruction of a town whose ponies had done her no conceivable wrong. A sudden stabbing pain in the base of her horn caused Rarity to stumble, and she barely managed to wrap her forelegs around the rail before falling to the deck. She could see a brilliant light shining from within the dark cloud that obscured Karroc’s airship—the Heavenstone.

Lightning flashed, and the wall of impenetrable clouds flew away from the griffon warship, merging with the developing storm which already encompassed the whole of Gallopoli. The winds over the center of town were fierce, but not strong enough to endanger the *Alicorn*. Further out, however, towering opaque walls of dark cumulonimbus formed, stretching for leagues from the surface high into the sky. The entire storm system was rotating around the center, its swirling winds gusting with terrible force.

“It’s a full-fledged hurricane!” Spitfire exclaimed. “What kind of magic can create something like that?”

“It would take far too long to explain,” Blueblood said. “You should listen to Rarity and get your ponies away from here. You cannot fight this.”

“You obviously don’t know the Wonderbolts very well,” Spitfire replied determinedly.

“Uh, I hate to be the one to ask,” Buckaroo spoke up, “but how are *we* gonna get out of here? I sure as hay hope we ain’t gonna try to fly through that.”

He had a point, Rarity realized, her heart sinking. The storm covered every possible avenue of escape. They could not fly under it, nor over it, and passing through was likely to tear the ship to pieces. No wonder Karroc had not sent any more of his griffons after them. He knew that Gallopoli would become an inescapable trap.

“I ...” Blueblood spoke, then paused. “I have no idea.”

“Listen, you just keep out of range of that ship, and leave those griffons to us,” Spitfire said. “This is what we train for.”

“And all of those other pegasi?” Rarity could not help but ask.

“Their training starts now,” Spitfire replied, and took off to rejoin her makeshift command.

“They’re all going to die, and so are we,” Zips stated flatly.

Rarity had not even noticed that he had rejoined the group, but now she considered his assertion. There was no escape route, and no means of getting a message out through the storm. If they did perish here, then every effort that had been expended escaping the jungle would have been for naught. Khufu would have died, for naught.

“No,” she said firmly. “If Karroc is going to force us to remain, then he must deal with the consequences. We are going to stop him, here and now.”

“Oh really?” Blueblood asked. “And how, pray tell, are we going to do that?”

“We have a cannon, we have two barrels of firepowder, and we have the best airship crew in Equestria. That will have to be enough.”

“Well, Daisy May and I are ready to go out with a bang,” Buckaroo said, patting the cannon with a hoof.

“Though not the end that I had planned, I am with you for our last stand,” Zinzi added.

“I obviously have nowhere else to be,” Zips said.

“You all realize, of course, that as the captain of this ship *I* decide where she flies,” Blueblood said, then sighed deeply. “And I agree with all of you. We’re stuck here until we can stop the spell that is causing this storm, and the best way I can think of to hasten that eventuality is to take down that warship. Celestia only knows how we shall do it, but we must try.”

Blueblood manipulated the *Alicorn*’s controls and spun the wheel, and the airship rose, turning to face Karroc’s warship. The griffon vessel loomed large, and was surely close to being in range of the cannons that protruded from its armored bow. Not far away,

Spitfire and her pegasi raced toward the gargantuan airship. Rarity could see that while the Wonderbolts carried nothing into battle, other pegasi wielded paddles, nets, and even mesh bags full of coconuts. Almost anything readily available in the town had been pressed into service as a weapon.

Rarity then understood why the warship was currently holding its fire. At least two dozen griffon soldiers, wearing mail and helms, and carrying knives and pistols, had taken flight and were en route to intercept the pegasi.

“I see y’all out there,” Buckaroo muttered. “Just a little bit closer now.”

Rarity flattened her ears as tightly as she could manage as Buckaroo began turning the hoofcrank near the back of the automatic cannon. The weapon responded by erupting with gouts of dark smoke and flashes of fire as it spewed a stream of projectiles at the onrushing flock of griffons. She saw one griffon drop from the sky immediately, and the rest proceeded to break formation and scatter. Buckaroo ceased firing, and seconds later the pegasi arrived. The battle was joined.

“We should help them,” Rarity said.

“We have to put distance between us and that ship,” Blueblood replied, shaking his head. “Until we have a real plan. If we are captured by their harpoon launchers or shot out of the sky we shall be helping nopony.”

The *Alicorn* climbed higher and turned away from the griffon warship. Fierce winds buffeted the airship, causing the deck to shudder and the thick suspension cables to vibrate like guitar strings, while bolts of lightning flashed all around. The sky was as dark as dusk, and the air was tainted by a mixture of acrid smoke and ozone, and filled with the sounds of battle. Shells burst in the air like holiday fireworks, and dozens of firesticks made for a sound like popcorn on the stove.

Everywhere, it seemed, ponies and griffons were locked in deadly combat. Rarity saw a pair of pegasi swoop down on a lone griffon and entangle her in a strong net, then leave her to fall. Another griffon shot a purple coated stallion out of the sky. A Wonderbolt had managed to cling to the back of a brawny griffon, and was pummeling the griffon’s helmet with a forehoof. Those brave pegasi needed their help, but what could they do, here on an airship that could not even get close without inviting target practice from the griffon cannons?

Rarity did not turn to look at the white blur in the periphery of her vision until it was too late. Only when Buckaroo grunted in pain and Zinzi shouted a belated warning did she whirl around. To her shock, Buckaroo lay flat on the deck, his left rear leg badly broken, and a wiry white pegasus stood over him, his right foreleg bent to grip a long spear. Tempest wore an expression of boiling rage.

Immediately, Zips charged the invader, ignoring Rarity's shouted warning to stay back. Tempest sidestepped the half-zebra's kick and dropped him with a single blow to the back of the head, rendering Zips unconscious before he hit the deck. Tempest's eyes told Rarity everything she needed to know about his intent, and it seemed there would be no thwarting his murderous aims unless somepony acted. Her horn sparked to life and she took hold of Buckaroo's cannon with her magic, swinging it around on its pedestal to point at Tempest.

The pegasus, however, did not keep still, but instead leaped forward with a powerful flap of his wings and tackled a stunned Blueblood to the deck. The *Alicorn* rolled to the right and began to dive as soon as Blueblood relinquished control of the ship's wheel, and Zinzi raced forward to right the ship before her unconscious son and the injured Buckaroo could tumble over the rail. A second later, Tempest rose to his hooves. Blueblood was left kneeling on four legs before him, the sharp point of a spear jabbing into the side of his neck.

Tempest stood beside the unicorn, facing Rarity and the others, his back to the *Alicorn*'s bow. Rarity had managed to maintain her spell, and she kept the deck-mounted cannon centered on Tempest, ready to fire.

"Imagine my surprise when I saw your ship flying back to Gallopoli," Tempest said. "After a week spent leading the search parties away and attempting to give those worthless griffons more time to ensure the Duke here was dead, here you are anyway. Of course, I'm hardly shocked that flock of feckless birdbrains could not even manage to kill a pampered powderpuff like Duke Polaris here." He gave Blueblood a sharp poke, and the unicorn stallion cringed, though he was doing his best to keep still. "But you!" Tempest continued, indicating Rarity with a slight nod. "How are you alive? I threw you out of an airship. Did you sprout wings or something?"

"A lady must have her secrets," Rarity growled, glaring back at Tempest. "I cannot believe that I didn't think to suspect you might be hiding amongst those pegasi. But then, I would have expected your yellow belly would have revealed your presence straight away. How can a former Guard fall so low that he resorts to treachery as a matter of course?"

Tempest's nostrils flared and he snorted in anger. "Impugn my honor again, and watch me kill the false prince."

"You will not. If you harm him you destroy yourself. I assure you that my spellcasting is quite sharp, and you will not be able to fly away before I bring you down. And you want to live, Tempest. I know you do. You are consumed by the need to get revenge on Karroc, and by your imbecilic dream of a war between ponies and griffons. You'll never get to avenge your wife if you force me to shoot you."

Tempest was momentarily stunned. "How do you know ... nevermind. Anypony who cannot see that there must be war is a fool! Griffons are born to kill ponies, to tear our flesh and eat it. They are monsters, and we must annihilate them while we have the advantage!"

"Griffons are civilized beings no different from any others. We may have our differences, but that does not mean we cannot coexist in harmony, as we have done for hundreds of years, despite the misguided ideas of extremists like you and Karroc. Give up, Tempest, and you can help us stop this conspiracy, and stop Karroc."

"Bah!" the pegasus spat. "Nopony so weak and naïve as to believe griffons are civilized could ever have it in her to kill. You won't shoot me."

"I beg you not to try me," Rarity replied evenly. "You would shortly find you are mistaken."

Tempest prodded Blueblood again, seemingly considering his options. Rarity continued to stare him down, her expression betraying nothing. He could not be allowed to know how her heart was soaring with joy at that very moment. She merely had to hold it together just a bit longer.

What Tempest had not observed, and what Rarity saw quite clearly, was the huge orange sphere rising behind him, just off to the left of the *Alicorn's* bow. He almost certainly noticed a bright flash of light, but likely assumed it was just another bolt of lightning from the storm raging around them. He certainly did *not* see the pony who had suddenly appeared behind him, and therefore was not at all prepared when that pony delivered a mighty kick to his haunches.

Tempest dropped his spear and awkwardly tumbled end over end, colliding hard with the deck rail before his momentum carried him over, off the ship and out into the storm. Rarity could only hope that was the last she would see of him.

Now, all of her attention was focused on the mare who stood opposite her. Rarity finally allowed her grim expression to break, and a wide, disbelieving smile spread across her face.

“Howdy, Rarity,” Applejack said, grinning broadly.

“Applejack!”

Rarity charged across the deck toward her friend, calling her name as she galloped over the slick planks. After a few steps, though, she froze. Buckaroo and Zips were injured, and Blueblood had nearly been run through by a spear-wielding pegasus seconds earlier. She could not simply disregard her shipmates in her excitement, no matter how great her elation at Applejack’s arrival.

She turned around and saw Buckaroo drag himself upright, leveraging his heavy body against the *Alicorn*’s rail while carefully keeping any weight off his broken left hind leg. Zips had regained consciousness, and now sat upright on the deck recovering his bearings. Rarity found herself unable to do anything but stand in place dumbly, torn between the urge to continue straight over to Applejack and the need to be there for her new friends.

“To their wounds I will attend,” Zinzi shouted, breaking Rarity out of her reverie. The zebra mare stood behind the ship’s wheel, her forehooves holding fast against the spokes. “Now go on and see your friend.”

“Are you certain?”

When Zinzi nodded, Rarity shot the other mare a look of deepest gratitude before moving forward. Even now, however, she could not simply run to Applejack; there was still one other victim of Tempest’s attack, and she would not leave him in his current pitiable state.

Blueblood still kneeled on four bent legs where Tempest had shoved him down, keeping eerily still and wearing a blank expression on his face. Rarity placed a hoof on his shoulder and gave the stallion a gentle nudge. “Hello,” she said. When he did not respond immediately, she called him by name. “Blueblood?”

The unicorn stallion blinked twice before lifting his chin to look at her, his pupils narrowing as he focused his gaze. “Y-yes?”

“Are you alright?”

“Oh. Yes, I’m fine.” Slowly and deliberately he rose to his hooves. “Or least I will be. That pegasus would have killed me if you had not intervened.”

“Well, yes,” Rarity admitted. “Tempest is a bit unhinged, speaking as somepony he tried to kill previously.”

“Then I thank you for saving my life yet again,” Blueblood said. “Well, you and that pony in the ridiculous hat.”

“My friend’s name is Applejack. You’ve met her before.” Rarity narrowed her gaze at the unicorn stallion.

“Alright, yes, I admit it.” Blueblood raised a forehoof in mock surrender. “I remember her from the Gala, and this time I promise to be completely genteel, if we survive. For now, I need to fly the ship through this maelstrom, and your friend looks rather desperate to see you.”

Indeed, Applejack had been waiting patiently all this time, no doubt wondering just what Rarity was doing with all these strange equines, and most especially with Blueblood. He smiled and waved her away with a forehoof, and Rarity briefly nodded her thanks as she dashed to her old friend. With wild abandon, she reared up and threw her forelegs around Applejack’s neck, drawing the orange mare in and squeezing her tightly.

She had so much to say to Applejack, and so many questions to ask, that she had scarcely any idea of where to begin. “I’m so happy to see you” was not very momentous, and did not come close to conveying the joy she felt. “How in the world did you come to be here in Gallopoli?” was relevant, but not an appropriate opener. On second glance, Rarity recognized the other airship, on which Applejack had clearly been conveyed, as the racing craft previously flown by Clementine Orange and her fellow citrus executives during the *Alicorn’s* Cup. The presence of Clementine’s airship, however, only raised more questions.

Who was flying the ship? Who had accompanied Applejack? Did her friends have any knowledge of the plot against Equestria, and the machinations at work in Canterlot? There were so many questions, but ultimately, only one was simply too pressing to delay further.

“Applejack, darling, how in the world are you keeping that hat from blowing away in this horrendous wind?” Rarity asked.

As always, Applejack wore her brown, wide-brimmed stetson over her straw-colored mane. Rarity’s couturier’s eye had been drawn at once to the headgear, which should have been picked up by the powerful wind and carried off in a heartbeat, but which

remained stubbornly in place atop her friend's head. She simply had to know Applejack's secret.

The orange colored farmer leaned back from the embrace the two ponies shared and stared at Rarity with a look of incredulous wonderment. "All of Equestria thinks you're a goner, then we find you out here in the middle of some kinda freaky storm along with that hoity-toity prince from the Gala, squarin' off against a bunch of griffons in a giant airship, and the first thing you think to ask is how my goldurn hat is stayin' on my head? Consarnit Rarity, 'tain't nothin' ever gonna change with you." Applejack then grinned and hugged Rarity even tighter, imperiling her continued breathing. "And I wouldn't have it no other way."

Rarity looked into her friend's green eyes, and the moist film over them shocked her, used as she was to Applejack's normally unshakeable stoicism. The sight was too much, and she burst into tears of her own before burying her snout into Applejack's shoulder.

"Hey now sugarcube, it's all gonna be okay," Applejack said softly, gently stroking Rarity's mane behind her left ear. "We got you back now, and we're not lettin' you get lost again." The two mares held each other in silence for a brief moment, before Applejack spoke again, this time in her normal husky twang. "Oh hay, I almost forgot your silly question. I let Twilight put a stick-to-it spell on my hat, against my better judgment. Only I can take her off now, so she ain't blowin' nowhere. I couldn't just leave her behind, you know."

As Applejack was concluding her explanation, a glowing point of energy suddenly appeared in the air a half length away, and both mares instinctively jumped back as the nascent teleportation spell blossomed into brilliant incandescence. After a loud "pop," Rarity found herself staring at Twilight Sparkle as the lavender unicorn shook her head to clear away the momentary disorientation of teleportation.

"Speakin' of ..." Applejack finished.

"Twilight!" Rarity launched herself at her other friend, and soon all three mares were locked in a tight embrace.

"I knew it!" Twilight Sparkle exclaimed, jubilant and tearful at the same time, and she pressed her wet cheek against Rarity's own. "I knew you were alive! Oh, Rarity, I'm so happy to see you!"

Rarity said nothing, but for a moment simply basked in the warmth of her friends' closeness. She could only afford herself a taste of bliss though—ponies were fighting and dying around her, out in the storm. After allowing as much contentment as she dared, she disentangled herself from the others.

"My darling friends, there are simply no words to describe how happy I am to have you with me. It's almost impossible to believe you are truly here. I only wish this reunion could have been under circumstances more pleasant and less perilous, and I'm certainly sorry that you've been dragged into this mess with me."

"Well I ain't sorry at all," Applejack replied. "We'd have gone after you come Tartarus or torment. You don't know what it was like, losin' you."

"It was so awful, Rarity," Twilight said. "When Princess Celestia told us you..." She choked on her words, unable to continue.

"We all just fell apart after we got the news," Applejack finished. "It was a mess. We were blamin' each other, fightin' for no reason. It felt like my heart got cut out. Then, outta nowhere, this here smart cookie got it in her head that you were still with us, waitin' down here for somepony to come find you." She playfully rubbed a hoof against the top of Twilight's head. "I wouldn't have believed it, but I never saw a pony more sure of herself before, and I'm acquainted with Rainbow Dash."

"Well, it wasn't as though I used the scientific method. In fact, I don't really know how I knew you were alive. I just knew," Twilight said, smiling. "I couldn't have been more certain if you had shown up to tell me yourself."

Rarity had to chuckle at that, given that she *had* relayed the message to Twilight, if not quite in the flesh. "Oh girls, have I ever got a story to share with you!"

"Story time is going to have to wait!" Blueblood shouted from behind the *Alicorn's* wheel. "Right now, just hold on!"

The deck tilted as the *Alicorn* turned sharply to port, and Rarity hurried to cling to the starboard deck rail, beckoning Applejack and Twilight Sparkle to do the same. Her eyes grew wide as she saw the reason for the abrupt maneuver: Karroc's enormous warship was plowing through the storm, barreling directly toward them. Worse, the enormous airship's bow-mounted cannons were already firing.

One shell burst in the air no more than a hundred lengths away in a deafening blast of smoke, flame, and shrapnel, and Rarity realized that it would not take a direct hit to

bring down the *Alicorn*; if the griffons' aim improved even a bit, a closer blast would tear the ship's balloon to ribbons, and perhaps its crew as well. The *Alicorn* continued to turn and climb away, and she could see that the ungainly citrus-themed airship on which Applejack and Twilight had arrived—*Refresh*, she finally remembered it was called—was doing a fair job of matching Blueblood's maneuvers.

"Who is flying that ship?" Rarity asked. "I recognize it from the *Alicorn's* Cup, but surely a skilled pilot like that cannot be one of the businessponies from the citrus consortium." She cringed as another projectile exploded in the air, though this blast was a bit further away than the last. "The rest of the girls are not over there, are they?"

"Nah, it's just me and Twi," Applejack replied, clinging desperately to the railing and looking as though she might be sick at any moment. "We hitched a ride on a produce hauler outta Canterlot, and when we got here, who should we find but my cousin Clementine Orange. She lent us her ship to go lookin' for you—said you'd done her some real kindness, and she owed you one. Even after all her friends flew back home, she stayed down here helpin' out with the search parties."

"But she isn't flying the ship," Twilight said, appearing only slightly more comfortable than Applejack.

"That's right," Applejack confirmed. "Clementine left to find shelter from the storm, but she'd found a nice feller name of Elbow Grease to fly the ship for her. 'Nother friend of yours, turns out."

"Really?" Rarity mused. Applejack and Twilight Sparkle nodded in unison.

This was a bit of a surprising wrinkle. Rarity had already learned that Windlass was back in Canterlot, and presumably Fancypants too. Tempest, on the other hoof, had remained in Gallopoli "helping" the search efforts, and now she had learned that Elbow Grease had stayed behind as well. She hated that she no longer felt the automatic urge to trust, but she could not overlook the fact that Fancypants' engineer could have remained with Tempest because he was working with the treacherous pegasus. The fact, however, was that he had flown her friends up to meet her just in time to stop Tempest from killing Blueblood. For now, she had to trust that he was on her side.

"Everypony!" Blueblood called out. "I cannot avoid that ship forever. The center of the storm is contracting, and soon there won't be anywhere left to fly out of range of those cannons. We must do something!"

Staring out into the storm, Rarity could see at once that Blueblood was correct. The magical cyclone swirling around Gallopoli was growing in intensity, and the impenetrable, towering black cloud walls that prevented the *Alicorn*'s escape were closing in on the town and those still trapped inside. The center of the storm already over the town was rife with lightning, fierce winds, and rain, but for the moment it was still generally survivable. She could not guess as to how much longer that would remain true.

The pegasi and griffons chasing each other through the storm were struggling against the weather just as much as the *Alicorn* and her crew, Rarity knew, and she could only imagine how terrifying it must be for them, zooming around lightning discharges that arced from cloud to cloud, angling for position, and colliding with unchecked ferocity.

Those pegasi were ready to lay down their lives for Equestria, but what hope did they have? Even if they defeated the griffons in the air, Karroc's massive warship seemed immune to the force of the storm as it lumbered through the sky, the griffons on its deck taking aim with their firesticks while its cannons thundered in time with the storm's fury.

As the *Alicorn* passed dangerously close to the griffon warship despite Blueblood doing his best to maneuver and climb away, she could feel in her horn the powerful pulses of magical energy emanating from the Heavenstone. The painful sensation made her groan and grimace, and she lifted one hoof to her forehead while steadying herself with the other to keep from swooning.

"Whoa there!" Applejack moved to help her. "I *thought* you were lookin' a little beat up. You hurtin' somewhere?"

"Thanks for noticing," Rarity replied caustically. "At any rate, I've almost grown used to the discomfort. The spell that is empowering the storm produces a most unpleasant sensation. I imagine it must be especially bad for you, Twilight, given your level of magical ability."

"No," Twilight Sparkle replied, sounding surprised. "I don't feel anything at all. What kind of spell is it? I'm not familiar with elemental magic of this power."

"Yeah, maybe it's time you spare a sec for a quick refresher on just what the hay is goin' on here? We sure didn't expect *this* flyin' down to a resort town on the south coast!"

Rarity was so taken aback by Twilight's admission that she did not feel the malignant aura of the storm spell that it took her a moment to respond. "Well, there is no brief way to explain everything. I'm not really sure where to start."

“Well, gee, I dunno, why don’t you start with all them griffons shootin’ at us, and then get to the part about this confounded hurricane!” Applejack suggested.

“Well, alright, but this may be a lot to take in at once,” Rarity replied. “The griffons on that ship are trying to start a war with Equestria by attacking the undefended southern reaches, and they are working with insiders in Canterlot who plan to use the war as an excuse to topple the Princesses. Worst of all, they have called down this storm by means of a magical diamond stolen from Canterlot.”

Applejack stared at Rarity, apparently processing all of this information. It was Twilight who spoke first.

“I’m sorry, but that can’t be right,” the lavender mare said, shaking her head. “I mean, I can understand the part about the war and the plot against the Princesses, but I know every artifact in the Royal Archives like the front of my foreleg, up to and including the most powerful magical artifacts of all, the Elements of Harmony, and there isn’t anything that could produce a storm like this.”

“That is because this magical gem was not taken from Princess Celestia’s vaults, but from Blueblood’s estate. The artifact is the Heavenstone. You have both heard of it, I’m sure.”

“The Heavenstone?” Twilight Sparkle gasped, the sound audible even over the howling wind. “*Adamas Firmamentum*? But—but it’s been missing for over a thousand years!”

“Whoa, hold on now, even I’ve heard of the Heavenstone,” Applejack said. “But I thought it was just a fairy tale.”

“It’s real, and it *was* missing, at least to some,” Rarity said. “Blueblood’s family kept it hidden from Princess Celestia for all those years, until it was stolen.”

“But this,” Twilight Sparkle gestured to the storm, “this can’t be the work of the Heavenstone. I’ve read everything in the Canterlot library about the old unicorn kingdom, and I know that the Heavenstone could only be used to express the will of all unicorn ponies to carry the sun and moon through the sky. It couldn’t be used by some crazy ponies and griffons to create a hurricane!”

“I do not know what to say, darling, except that it apparently *can* be used in such a way, and it is right now. I have seen the Heavenstone with my own two eyes, and I can feel its power as I stand here. I taught you how to copy my gem-finding spell, why don’t you reach out and sense its presence? Then you will be convinced, I am certain.”

“That’s a great idea,” Twilight replied, and a magenta glow enveloped her horn. After a few seconds, the glow disappeared, and a puzzled expression occupied Twilight’s face.

“And?” Rarity prompted.

“Nothing,” the other unicorn mare replied. “I can’t detect any gems up here at all, which ordinarily wouldn’t be surprising. Since we’re on an airship and all.”

Now it was Rarity’s turn to gasp. “Nothing? I don’t understand. How can you feel nothing even using the gem spell? I can sense the Heavenstone’s presence as plain as day! The raw magical power coursing through it—it is all I can do to not be overwhelmed!”

“I believe you, Rarity,” Twilight said gently, touching Rarity’s shoulder with a forehoof. “Maybe there is something to your spell that I didn’t pick up on when you taught it to me before. For now, if this is being caused by the Heavenstone, then we have a serious problem. You’re talking about the most prized and most magical possession of the old kingdom, with the power to allow regular unicorns to do what only the Princesses can manage today. This is magic far beyond even my understanding or ability.”

“Well, don’t you count us out just yet, Twi,” Applejack piped up. “The three of us have been in and out of some real scrapes before.”

“Incomin’!”

The friends jolted in surprise at Buckaroo’s shouted warning. To Rarity’s dismay, the warship was still firing on them, and she could hear the distinctive whistle of a cannon shell that sounded far too close for comfort. When the shell burst in the air no more than twenty lengths away, she could only squeeze her eyes shut and scream in anticipation of being blown to bits.

When that failed to happen, she opened her eyes.

Twilight Sparkle stood next to her, her horn glowing with such intensity that the normal magenta color of her magical aura was closer to a brilliant pinkish white. Out in the open air, a transparent shield the same color as Twilight’s magic sparkled and shimmered as the last vestiges of the explosion dissipated harmlessly against it. The magical force field was broad enough to form a hemisphere that protected the half of the ship that was exposed to the griffons, but it quickly faded into nothingness as Twilight sucked in a breath and released her spell. Fortunately, they were out of range once again before the griffons could continue their barrage.

“Darling, that was amazing!” Rarity exclaimed. “I have never seen, or even heard of a shield spell that could cover something as large as an airship!”

“Yeah, pretty nifty trick,” Applejack added. “And mighty timely too.”

“Oh, it was nothing, but thank you,” Twilight replied, blushing slightly. It never ceased to amuse Rarity that Twilight was still so bashful about her amazing magical prowess. “I actually learned the force field spell from a pony who is much more talented at it than I am. It’s his special talent, and he can cast barriers and shields that persist even without the constant application of magic. He could cast a force field that would protect the entire ship, and it wouldn’t fade away.”

“Well, your shield was just perfect for this occasion,” Rarity said. “I cannot even imagine how difficult it must be to place a force field around a moving object like that. You saved the ship, and ...” Her voice trailed off as a thought suddenly occurred to her.

“Oh boy, I know that look,” Applejack interjected.

“*I-de-a!*” Rarity declared, a bright smile on her face. “Twilight, if you can cast a force field between us and that warship, we could get close enough to hit it with the *Alicorn*’s cannon.”

Twilight frowned. “I don’t think that would work. Shield spells are impermeable in both directions unless you have an appropriate counterspell to allow for passage, and I couldn’t cast the spell and the counterspell at the same time. Plus, I don’t know if I could even keep up a force field for long against the firepower on that ship. Even the strongest magical shield can only absorb so much force before it shatters.”

“So much for that,” Rarity said, crestfallen. It would do them no good to block incoming fire if Buckaroo could not shoot back.

“Now wait one pony-pickin’ second,” Applejack interjected. “Don’t give up on your idea just like that. Maybe you can’t fire your cannon through one of Twi’s force fields, but it seems to me she doesn’t have to put a force field around *this* airship for your idea to work.”

Rarity’s eyes lit up. “Ooh! If Twilight teleports back to Clementine’s airship, then she can cast a barrier spell in front of that ship.”

“And then I could draw their fire while you fly close enough to do some real damage!” Twilight Sparkle concluded.

“Better yet, have both airships charge straight at ‘em in a line,” said Applejack. “That way you don’t have to risk the griffons not takin’ the bait. Twilight can fly ahead with her shield in front while y’all keep right behind her. You get so close that their cannons can’t point at you, then Twilight breaks away and you tear ‘em up.”

“Applejack, that is rather brilliant!” Rarity declared. “I had no idea you were a tactician.”

“Course I am! Farmin’ is war, Rarity, and don’t you forget it,” Applejack replied, her expression deadly serious. “When you got varmints comin’ at your orchards from every side, and you’re outnumbered a thousand to one, if you ain’t got a plan, you ain’t got a harvest.”

“I suppose so!” Rarity agreed. “Now, let us inform the others so that we can make this work. I believe it is time you met my new friends.” Taking care not to let the bucking and rolling of the ship cost her her balance, she led Applejack and Twilight to the helm of the *Alicorn*, where Blueblood was furiously manipulating the wheel and controls.

“Ah, Applejack, I know you’ve met Prince Blueblood.”

“So I have,” Applejack said evenly, glaring at the unicorn stallion. Blueblood nodded curtly, but kept the majority of his attention focused on piloting the *Alicorn* through the furious storm.

“And Blueblood, this is my dear friend Twilight Sparkle. You may have noticed the barrier spell she cast a moment ago. It most likely saved the ship and all of us as well.”

“Your Grace,” Twilight said, and bowed almost imperceptibly.

“Hm?” Blueblood turned to scrutinize the mare who had referred to him by his official title. “There is no need for formality here, Miss Sparkle. But your good manners and that star mark of yours tell me you hail from Canterlot. If somehow we survive this I look forward to hearing about how the capital has fallen apart in my absence.”

“Just assume that last bit was a joke,” Rarity said quickly. “In truth, Blueblood has been much humbled by recent events, and I assure you he is sometimes passable company.”

“Yeah, sure, and I drink tea with the mayor of Trottingham every Tuesday,” Applejack muttered.

“In any case, Blueblood,” Rarity continued, “my friends and I have formulated a plan that should get us close enough to Karroc’s ship to destroy it, but we will need everypony to work together.”

She quickly gathered Zinzi, Zips, and Buckaroo, who hobbled to the helm on three legs, and hastened to make introductions. Rarity was pleased to see that Twilight and Applejack appeared immediately at ease with her newer companions, but then she was careful to not mention the nature of their joint profession. Buckaroo seemed particularly pleased to make Applejack’s acquaintance, going so far as to compliment her on her hat and offer an inane remark about his fondness for apples. Rarity hoped that this meant she would no longer be the object of animosity between the two adult stallions on the ship. First, though, there was a plan to coordinate.

“The only way for us to make it out of this storm alive is to stop the spell that is controlling it, and the only way to do that is to get to the Heavenstone,” Rarity said, practically shouting in order to be heard. “We cannot hope to board that ship; even with Twilight’s teleportation we would be shot the moment we appeared. Therefore, we must destroy it. The difficulty lies in getting close.”

“Difficulty as in impossibility,” Zips said. “We’ll be blown out of the sky.”

“Not so,” Rarity said. “Twilight will see to our safety. Twilight?”

“I will teleport over there,” Twilight pointed a foreleg to indicate the orange airship flying abreast of the *Alicorn*, “and project a force field in front of the ship. If you fly directly behind, this ship should be safe from harm.”

“Then when y’all get real close, bam!” Applejack added. “Y’all hit ‘em hard and knock ‘em down.”

“That all sounds well and good, but I think you grossly overestimate our firepower,” Blueblood said as he spun the ship’s wheel. “What good is a low caliber cannon against an armored monstrosity like that?”

Rarity frowned. She had no answer prepared for that question. In her mind, a cannon was a cannon, and she had imagined Buckaroo to be able to devastate Karroc’s ship, whether by targeting the balloon or the hull itself. After all, she had seen the damage the *Alicorn*’s automatic cannon had wrought back in the griffons’ jungle hangar.

“Well,” Buckaroo began, “we also got those two barrels of firepowder we stole. Those oughtta pack a wallop.”

“And how do you plan to employ them? Firepowder does not simply explode when dropped, and it is far too dangerous to attempt to create some sort of fuse,” Blueblood pointed out.

“Perhaps what would do the trick,” Zinzi suggested, “is your own unicorn magic. Levitate the barrel toward our foes, then one good shot and up it goes.”

“Oh my, that sounds terribly difficult and dangerous,” Rarity said, uncertainty creeping into her voice. She was fairly certain she lacked the strength and control to move a heavy barrel through the air between two fast-moving airships, through a fearsome storm. And the responsibility would be hers. Blueblood would need to concentrate on flying.

“You can do it, Rarity,” Twilight said encouragingly. “I don’t know any unicorn with better control over her telekinesis than you. I bet you could even teach me a few things.”

“Certainly I have fine control with little things like needle and thread, but not with a heavy barrel full of explosive powder!” Rarity protested. “Perhaps I can lift it, but to levitate it a hundred lengths through this weather is surely beyond me.”

“It’s plausible at least, and better than nothing,” Blueblood said. “And I will help you. We have to stop them, and this is better than flying around in a shrinking shooting gallery, waiting for a lucky shell or a bolt of lightning to find us.”

That was certainly true. It was not as though they had an endless amount of time in which to consider alternative proposals, and every second of delay brought with it heightened danger for themselves and for the brave pegasi out there in the storm.

“I shall do my part,” Rarity finally said. “Now I believe everypony here understands the plan. Twilight, can you convey our strategy to Mr. Elbow Grease?”

“Um, sure. Straight line. Shield. Something about an exploding barrel,” Twilight Sparkle said, sounding uncharacteristically befuddled. “Actually, I’ve mostly been trying to keep from being airsick. Does anypony have something I can write a checklist on?”

“I’ll go with her,” Applejack said. “I’m sure she could use the moral support to face down those griffons. That okay, Rarity?”

“Oh yes, as astounding and wonderful as it has been to see you both, I’ve grown quite accustomed to my friends here. I shall be just fine until we are all reunited again, and of course we will be.”

Applejack nodded. “Yes ma’am, we sure as sugar will. Twi, you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” the unicorn mare replied. “Rarity, I’ll signal you with a flash from my horn when everything’s ready on my end.”

“And I shall signal back to confirm,” Rarity said. “Good luck, both of you, and please do be careful. I simply could not go on if anything dreadful happened to either of you on my account.”

“You too.” Twilight smiled reassuringly, and then disappeared a second later with a pop and a flash, along with Applejack. Instantaneously, both ponies reappeared on the deck of the airship *Refresh*, flying just to port of the *Alicorn*. Now that Rarity could afford to take a closer look, she could see Elbow Grease standing at the airship’s controls, and she watched Twilight and Applejack quickly engage the engineer in conversation. But this was not the time to stand and stare.

“Zips, be a dear and help me retrieve one of the barrels of firepowder from the cabin, won’t you? In case I made that request too politely, the fate of the world depends on your alacrity.”

Zips gave her a sidelong glance, but then wordlessly hurried down the hatch, and Rarity followed. Together, with a bit of muscle and magic, they carefully maneuvered one of the heavy wooden barrels full of explosive powder onto the upper deck and over to the starboard railing.

“Right then. Buckaroo, we shall get your leg fixed soon, but in the meantime I trust you can still operate that cannon with three good legs? Very good. Zinzi, Zips, you and I will maintain a lookout to ensure that the griffons in the air do not get the drop on the ship while we are making our run. Blueblood ...”

“As always, I will fly the ship. Yes, I understand perfectly well.”

“Of course you do. Now then, together, we have overcome obstacles that by all accounts should have prevented us from ever getting out of that jungle. Now, we have just one thing more standing between us and putting a stop to this conspiracy business once and for all, and saving a town full of innocent ponies.”

“The fact that the one thing remaining is an armored airship filled with griffons is beside the point, I suppose,” Blueblood said. “Oh, and they have an immensely powerful magical gemstone. Not that I am dubious of our chances, mind you.”

“Your job is just to fly the ship, as always, or don’t you remember?” Rarity glared at him. Over on the citrus pony airship, she saw three bright flashes from Twilight’s horn, and she signaled back in turn. “It is time. Now Blueblood, follow that airship.”

“Your giving commands is akin to mutiny, you know,” Blueblood grumbled, steering the *Alicorn* into position directly aft of the bright orange airship. “I shall not complain, however, if you will grant me one request. I want to contribute a few words of inspiration for the crew.”

“Oh, please. Do let us hear them,” Rarity prompted, curious as to what sort of self-serving and long-winded remarks the stallion might have in store for them.

“Thank you. Ahem.” Blueblood coughed once to clear his throat. “There is no way out of here except through that warship. To all of you, I say: *Tally-ho!*” He thrust the throttle forward.

“Yee-haw!” Buckaroo shouted, and the others gave a cheer as the *Alicorn* shot forward, trailing just behind the airship carrying Twilight Sparkle and Applejack. Rarity merely smiled.

Karroc’s warship was not much more than a league distant, and someone on board had clearly witnessed the unusual maneuvers of the smaller airships, because the massive vessel turned to expose its port side and the battery of cannons mounted thereon. They were already being loaded, primed, and aimed, Rarity knew. Ahead, a transparent magenta hemisphere shimmered into existence like a giant glowing umbrella in front of Clementine’s airship. The griffons opened fire.

Rarity heard the thunder of the cannons, and watched as Twilight’s magical shield shrugged off the first volley. She could no longer see the griffons clearly, as the boxy airship flying in front of her blocked her forward view, but she knew they would not let up. Twilight’s spell would simply have to hold.

“They’re coming from the side!”

Rarity turned at Zips’ words, and followed the young stallion’s outstretched hoof to a quintet of griffons speeding toward them in a tight wedge formation.

“I see ‘em,” Buckaroo said, swinging his automatic cannon to face the attackers.

“Conserve your ammunition, and do not waste a shot,” Zinzi cautioned. “To attack the warship will require a lot.”

“Sorry, Zee, the ARC ain’t exactly a tack driver, and I can’t let ‘em reach our balloon. It ain’t the time to be stingy.”

Just as Buckaroo prepared to turn the crank that fired the weapon, Rarity used all the magical force she could muster to yank his foreleg back.

“Wait,” she cried. “Look there!”

Six Wonderbolts rocketed out of a cloud bank, zooming upward in a bladelike echelon, their forelegs extended, and they sliced through the oncoming griffon formation with merciless efficiency. The griffons, completely unprepared for the attack, absorbed punishing blows to their bodies and wings. Three of them tumbled from the sky, and the other two immediately turned tail and winged away in a panic.

The threat nullified, the Wonderbolts banked toward the *Alicorn* and took up escort positions, three on each side of the ship. Spitfire had led the attack, and she flew only a few lengths away, close enough to speak to Rarity and be heard over the storm.

“Thank you for the well-timed intervention!” Rarity yelled.

“You look like you’re about to try something dramatic,” the Wonderbolt leader shouted back. “I didn’t want to miss it.”

“Very astute!” Rarity yelled back. “We are going to bring down that airship!”

“Then count us in! I’m losing good ponies trying to fight these griffons hoof and claw, and the weather just keeps getting worse!”

“If you can keep the skies around us clear of griffons, that should be more than enough help!”

Spitfire nodded and waved a hoof in acknowledgement, and maneuvered a few lengths further away.

Onward they flew, bearing down on the warship until its vast bulk became visible again, looming large and dwarfing both the *Alicorn* and *Refresh*. The whistle of cannon shells and the fury of explosions drowned out even the howling storm winds. Only seconds remained before Elbow Grease would break away, and they would have their one chance to act.

Rarity's horn glowed with blue light as she took hold of the barrel of firepowder with her telekinesis. An odd but not unpleasant tingle ran down her horn, and the color of the magical aura surrounding the barrel shifted slightly as Blueblood added his own telekinesis to hers.

"Allow me to help, please."

For the first time, she did not shy away from allowing his magic to commingle with her own. As intimate as it was for unicorns to allow their spells to mix, she truly did need the help, and besides, the feeling of his magic was not a bad sensation, really. Not at all.

"Thank you," she replied. "It's going to be any moment—"

"Now!" Blueblood shouted. Ahead, Rarity saw Clementine's ship climb and turn sharply, angling away and taking Twilight's protective force field with it. The Wonderbolts scattered in every direction as well, and the *Alicorn* was suddenly alone and exposed to the griffon warship and its fearsome weapons. They were no more than a hundred lengths out now, and closing fast, but still not so far away that the griffon cannons could not get off one more volley. There was a loud crack and the *Alicorn* shuddered as one shell impacted the wooden hull and smashed clean through the other side.

"We're too close for the fuses on their shells to have time to detonate!" Blueblood shouted. "The firepowder, now!"

Rarity's heart was racing as she and Blueblood telekinetically lifted the heavy barrel of firepowder and heaved it out into space, pushing it out through the wind and rain and toward the griffons. She was close enough to see them clearly: a dozen or more stood on the other ship's deck, some taking aim with firesticks, others merely staring at the ponies who had charged them so brazenly. Karroc was there too, standing amidships and holding something glowing aloft in a foreclaw. It was the Heavenstone, she knew, sending forth beams of radiance that pierced the darkness of the storm and made her shiver with discomfort. With every bit of control and magical strength she could muster she pushed the firepowder directly toward him.

At the same time, Buckaroo furiously cranked the ARC weapon, and the cannon unleashed a stream of projectiles. Griffons dove for cover as he raked the balloon and deck of the mighty warship, until he finally connected with his target. The barrel of firepowder erupted into an enormous fireball, and Rarity could feel the intense heat of the explosion as the *Alicorn* blew past. She gripped the railing and looked back, hoping to see Karroc's warship on fire and falling to the ground below. Instead, her heart sank.

“Oh no,” she whispered.

“It didn’t work!” Zips moaned.

The deck of the warship was charred, and strips of fabric hung off the gargantuan balloon where it had been riddled by Buckaroo’s cannon, but the scope of the damage was essentially insignificant. Karroc had not even moved, and now he appeared to mock them as they fled. Perhaps the barrel had exploded too far away from the ship, or perhaps the warship was simply too large and heavily armored, but whatever the reason, the end result was that the attack had failed utterly. Griffons were already flying up from the deck to patch the balloon.

Rarity was distracted from her despair by an annoying clicking sound, and turned to see Buckaroo ineffectually attempting to keep firing the automatic cannon.

“I’m out,” he said.

“We are *all* out, of that there is no doubt,” Zinzi said glumly. “That ship is simply far too strong, as should have been clear all along.”

“We are not finished yet,” Blueblood said, almost too quietly to be heard.

“How do you mean?” Rarity asked numbly. “We’ve lost. That ship is invincible. Karroc will destroy Gallopoli, and then war will destroy Equestria, and perhaps the world with it. What can we do now?”

“We can ram the *Alicorn* straight into that monster’s heart,” Blueblood replied, looking directly into her eyes. “That is our final gambit.”

Rarity paused a moment, before realizing that Blueblood’s suggestion was not as imperiling as it sounded. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “Something this large is bound to deal a mortal blow to Karroc’s ship. We can simply set an intercept course, and then Twilight can teleport us all to safety!” She paused.

“We cannot all escape to safety,” Blueblood remarked, a touch of gloom in his voice. “You forget that I was never able to get any of the automated steering and navigational equipment on the ship to work correctly. She’ll have to be piloted in by hoof.”

“Nonsense,” Rarity replied. “If that is so, we can use the other racing ship as the ram and fly out of here on the *Alicorn*. Surely the instruments on that ship are functioning properly.”

“Even if they were, the *Alicorn* is faster, its spars and prow are reinforced with the strongest materials, and the second barrel of firepowder is belowdecks. If this is going to work, it has to be my ship.”

“But ...”

“And I shall fly her in.”

“That’s crazy,” Buckaroo said.

“It may be the only way for us to see another day,” Zinzi pointed out.

“Blueblood, you are not thinking clearly. We must find a different way,” Rarity implored. “If you are trying to convince me that you are not as self-centered as you once were, then you need not resort to such a drastic measure. I’m convinced.”

“It’s not about you,” Blueblood said. “Any of you. This entire tragic situation is the fault of my family, and it is most of all my fault, for being blind to my brother’s ambitions. As captain of the *Alicorn*, I shall pilot her to her end.”

“I forgot, but you’re right. It is not about me. Everything is always about you,” Rarity angrily retorted. “I thought you had gotten over this self-imposed burden of being ‘Blueblood,’ but I was obviously mistaken. Simply because your patrilineal line has seen fit over the years to go out in a blaze of glory as part of some misguided, self-destructive urge to destroy your family before the passage of time can accomplish the same thing, you do not need to follow that same idiotic path. You have your own life, your own dreams. That has to be worth something, Blueblood.”

“It is precisely *because* I have realized that my life can mean something that I must do this.” Blueblood spun the ship’s wheel around and turned the *Alicorn* until it once again pointed toward Karroc’s warship. A fair distance away, Rarity could see flashes of light from the deck of the *Refresh*. No doubt Twilight was trying to find out just what in Equestria was going on. “Now I suggest you signal your friend to come rescue you.”

Rarity did not hesitate, but jumped forward to physically wrest the ship’s wheel out of the grip of Blueblood’s magic, and point the ship in a safer direction. “No! This is moronic, even for you! I will not let you do it!”

“Just save yourself already!” Blueblood shouted back, grunting as he attempted to regain control of the wheel. “Equestria needs you and the other Element Bearers. Go home, and stop Windlass and Procyon, and then you and Fancy pants can be business partners and

change the world. That is how it is meant to be. My line was always meant to end, and now I know it must end here.”

“To think I believed you had gotten over your self-pitying delusions!”

“To think I believed you understood the universal truth that sometimes sacrifices must be made!”

“To think I had forgotten how annoying you truly can be!”

“To think I could have fallen for somepony so absurdly obstinate!”

Rarity let go of the wheel. “I ... what?”

“Whoa!” Buckaroo shouted. “Look out!” Rarity sucked in a breath and turned, wondering what new horrible thing could possibly be happening. She looked just in time to see Tempest, battered but alive, streaking through the air. He was holding a small object between his forehooves, but she could not yet tell what it was. He made straight for Buckaroo.

“Not this time pardner!” the earth pony shouted, and ducked away before Tempest could land a blow on him. The pegasus, however, flew past without making a move toward Buckaroo. Instead, Rarity watched Tempest toss whatever it was he was holding into the open hatch on the *Alicorn*’s deck, and she gasped as a gout of flame blew out through the opening. It had been a glass bottle filled with liquid fire that he had been holding, and now he had doomed them all. Tempest did not slow, but kept flying in an attempt to escape the death trap that the *Alicorn* had instantly become.

“No!” Blueblood bellowed. To Rarity’s surprise, Tempest halted in mid air as the glow of Blueblood’s magic enveloped him, and he was pulled backward against his will and onto the deck of the stricken airship. The unicorn stallion had directed all of his effort into restraining Tempest, and without his input on the wheel the *Alicorn* fell into a turning, shallow dive. “How dare you? You would burn my ship and then just flutter away into the clouds like a coward? I finally dictate the terms of my own life, and you would even take that from me? What gives you the right?” Blueblood snorted and advanced toward the restrained Tempest.

“Uh, we’ve got bigger problems than him!” Buckaroo shouted. “That second barrel of firepowder is still down below, and there’ll be bits and pieces of us scattered to the four winds as soon as it catches.”

Blueblood ignored the warning, and kept his focus squarely on Tempest. “How dare you?” he repeated, practically screaming, his voice trembling with rage. If she had thought about it before, Rarity would have expected an enraged Blueblood to be more amusing than anything else, but the creature before her was frightening, looming over Tempest and practically frothing at the mouth.

“So finally, at the end, the royal worm grows a spine,” Tempest mockingly observed. “You’ve got me. I give up. Enjoy your last seconds in this world, as your precious airship burns around you, knowing that I’ve won and that war is coming.”

Rarity did not have time to pay close attention to the stallions’ exchange. If she could not get Twilight and Applejack to rescue them with all haste, she and everypony else on the *Alicorn* would momentarily be reduced to most unfabulous pony pieces. She ignited her illumination spell, flashed what she hoped was something close to the universal emergency signal she learned as a filly in magic camp, and frantically wished for her friends to comprehend the message.

She whirled around as a loud thud reverberated on the deck behind her, and she saw that Tempest had somehow managed to charge Blueblood and knock him onto his back, and he now held a forehoof against the stallion’s throat.

“Pathetic,” Tempest spat. “At least now you won’t have to witness the death of your friends or your ship, you pampered popinjay.” He raised the hoof, and Rarity watched his lean muscles tense as he prepared to bring it down on Blueblood. Her heart caught in her throat as she anticipated the blow, but then Blueblood mumbled something that gave Tempest pause.

“What?” the pegasus demanded.

“I said,” Blueblood began, his voice straining, “this pampered popinjay just beat you.” Blueblood’s horn glowed with an intensity Rarity had never seen before, and something big hurtled across the deck from the periphery of her vision. The massively heavy steel anchor that had been fashioned from the griffon harpoon flew straight at Tempest, propelled by telekinetic power that could only have been born of adrenaline and abject fury. Time seemed to slow, however, as Tempest reacted more quickly than any stallion of his age should have been able. He reared back, further, and then fell flat as the massive projectile passed over him, crashed through the deck rail, and plummeted into open space.

“Ha! You are still nothing but a national joke,” Tempest growled, and pushed off against the deck to stand. As he was attempting to rise, though, the anchor line expended all of its slack, and the heavy, powerful rope that Rarity had constructed went taut. The rope caught Tempest over his shoulder and slammed him hard to the deck, pinning him there. Rarity heard a sharp crack when Tempest hit the wooden planks, and she knew immediately that something had been broken. The stallion could not move, and his eyes bulged as he struggled to breathe.

“Not a very funny joke,” Blueblood said, glaring down at his stricken opponent. “And now it appears we get to share the pleasure of going down with the ship together.”

“Look at the anchor!” Zips suddenly yelled, and Rarity raced over to join him at an unsmashed section of the deck rail, still mindful that the spreading inferno below meant the *Alicorn* could explode at any moment. She leaned over the rail to look, and realized that descending in a slow, wide spiral, they now found themselves almost directly above Karroc’s warship. The heavy anchor, dangling far below, connected with the huge balloon of the warship and its barb snagged the thick fabric. Strong as it was, the fabric was not stronger than the rope Rarity had engineered, and it could not resist the force of a speeding airship. The *Alicorn* dragged its anchor across the warship’s balloon, opening a terrible gash all the way from one side to the other and spilling precious lifting gas into the sky.

“It’s gonna catch on them supports!” Buckaroo shouted. “Find somethin’ to hang onto, quick!” The anchor traversed across the griffon balloon, straight toward the rigid metal ring that encircled the entirety of it, providing structure and rigidity to the great bulk.

Panicking, Rarity searched frantically, desperately, for anything she could use to secure herself, before realizing that tying herself to an airship about to explode in a million pieces was probably the worst possible thing she could do. Angry flames and thick smoke were pouring from the *Alicorn*’s cabin. It could not be much longer. Where in the world was Twilight?

When the anchor finally caught on the steel support structure, it was as though time itself stopped. The *Alicorn* jolted almost to a halt and the entire ship nosed down dramatically. Rarity, being unsecured, did not slow nearly as abruptly. It was perhaps a blessing in disguise that she was not able to get a foreleg through the deck rail as she passed, because the force of her momentum likely would have torn the limb from her body. Of course, the alternative was hardly better. Rarity was thrown out into open space, and she began to fall. A second later, everything disappeared in a flash of light.

“Gotcha!” Twilight Sparkle jubilantly proclaimed as Rarity crumpled to the deck of the airship *Refresh*. “I saved all of you!”

“All except my ship,” Blueblood lamented.

Rarity turned left and then right, and saw Zips, Zinzi, and Buckaroo next to her, in addition to Blueblood. Without even taking a moment to thank Twilight for the rescue, she jumped up and hurried over to the rail where Blueblood stood watching.

Behind them, the burning *Alicorn* was forced by its snagged anchor into a tight, descending turn, and it was immediately apparent that the airship’s trajectory would shortly bring it directly into contact with the hull of the griffon warship. Moreover, the terrible damage that the *Alicorn*’s anchor had already inflicted on the griffon balloon was clearly fatal. The warship was beginning to fall.

Rarity watched, unable to tear her eyes away, as the golden figurehead of the *Alicorn* speared the thick hull of Karroc’s mighty warship. At the moment of impact, the remaining firepowder on the *Alicorn* ignited in a huge blast that must have caught Karroc’s warship directly in its own powder stores.

The effect was a new sun born amidst the battle over Gallopoli, an expanding orange ball of flame and superheated gas that chased away all shadow for the flicker-long span of its existence. The sound of the blast was enough to shake mountains to their foundations, and the shockwave hit Rarity like an unexpected buck to the chest. When the explosion dissipated, chunks of wood and bits of fabric rained to earth all around, and the sky was filled with glowing embers.

It was patently obvious that no living being could have survived the explosion. Karroc and Tempest were gone, and with them the thirst for blood and old vendettas that had been poised to sweep the world into war. Rarity could not help but appreciate the fact that the bitter foes had perished together in the end. Tempest had even achieved his revenge, in a very literal sense. The victory, however, was not for her to savor just yet.

Nothing living could have survived, but some *thing* had. The Heavenstone was still here, still expelling waves of magic that fed the swirling storm; she could feel its presence as clearly as though nothing had happened. Until the stone was reclaimed, the storm would continue to wreak havoc over Gallopoli.

And there it was. Somehow, the Heavenstone was floating, right where the airship had been a minute before, hanging suspended in the sky and sparkling like the evening star.

The gem began to pulse with a brighter light, and then, suddenly, it shone with blinding radiance. If the explosion of Karroc's airship had appeared like a star, then this was a supernova. The world was filled with white light, and a pain worse than any Rarity had yet felt traveled like lightning down her horn, boring into the base of her skull. With that flash of light the Heavenstone vanished, and that was the last thing she saw. She collapsed to the deck as the world faded to black.

Some time later, as her mind slowly drifted back into a state of awareness, Rarity pondered how long she had been asleep. It must have been a while for her to feel so wonderfully rested and refreshed. In any case, she could feel warm sunshine and a cooling breeze on her coat, and the air smelled fresh and clean. It was a lovely day to be visiting the spa, she reflected. "Mm," she murmured, "I'll have the usual, please!"

"Uh, Rarity, the usual what?"

That harsh twang most certainly did not match the dulcet intonation of either of the darling twins who managed the spa. Rarity fluttered her eyes open to see Applejack staring down at her. Oh, of course. She was not at the spa. Nor was she in Ponyville. Rather, she was a thousand leagues from home, fighting for her life. With difficulty, she rose to sit on her haunches.

"Wha- what happened?"

"You passed out about four hours ago. We were worried at first, but you weren't hurt, and you mumbled something about needing your beauty rest, so we just let you be," a new voice said. Twilight Sparkle. Rarity saw her librarian friend standing beside Applejack, and she noticed that she was no longer onboard the *Alicorn*, but was on some other vessel. Oh, yes of course. The *Alicorn* had been destroyed, and she was on that tacky fruit crate that Clementine and the citrus ponies had flown. She remembered the explosion, and Twilight using her teleportation spell to save them.

"It's all over, finally," Blueblood said, taking up a position beside her Ponyville friends. Blueblood ... she certainly had unfinished business with him. She remembered what he had said to her, before Tempest's second attack. Now, however, was not the time for that discussion.

"Where are we? Is Gallopoli safe?"

"The storm collapsed as soon as the griffons were defeated and the Heavenstone disappeared," Blueblood replied. "The Wonderbolts remained behind to direct recovery

and disaster relief efforts, but the damage to the town is far less than it could have been. We are on our way to Canterlot to confront my brother and his accomplices.”

“The Heavenstone!” Rarity gasped, and jumped to her hooves. How could she have forgotten what had caused her to pass out in the first place? “It disappeared because Windlass recalled it! As long as she possesses it, nothing is over!”

“I know what happened, and I have already told everything about the stone to your friend Twilight.”

“Yes he did, and after I saw it with my own eyes, I knew you were right, Rarity,” the lavender unicorn said. “That gem was a perfect match to the descriptions of the Heavenstone that appeared in the writings of the great sorcerers of the pre-classical and early classical eras. What I still don’t understand is how what I witnessed was possible. His Grace—ah, Blueblood—concur with me: nopony has ever been able to misuse the Heavenstone to exert his or her own will like this. I don’t understand how this Windlass could be doing so.”

“Yet that is exactly what she is doing,” Rarity stated flatly, tired of having to argue what was, from her perspective, a plain and simple truth.

“Other unicorns have tried before,” Twilight went on. “According to the notes of Clover the Clever, during the Neverending Blizzard that predated the migration to Equestria, the original King Blueblood attempted to use the power of the Heavenstone to thaw the snow and ice and bring about spring. Nothing he tried worked, though, since most unicorns only felt bitterness in their hearts, and blamed the other types of ponies for their misfortunes. The unicorns’ desire to see the other ponies suffer was greater than their wish for the snows to melt, and the Heavenstone could not defeat the windigos causing the storm. The king’s attempts to use the power of the Heavenstone without the support of his subjects’ will resulted in a case of magic poisoning that even Clover could not cure, and the king never recovered. The same thing happened when the royal unicorns attempted to use the Heavenstone to stop Discord during his first appearance. He had sapped Equestria of its will to resist, and without that will, the Heavenstone was useless.”

“But,” Rarity countered, “Windlass’ spells are working. You have seen it yourself. She must have enough support to enable her to harness the Heavenstone’s power.”

“I’m not so sure,” Blueblood said. “All she has managed to do is remotely create storms, and weather control is already her special talent. The Heavenstone enabled ponies to

control the heavens themselves in olden times. What she has done, however terrible, represents only a fraction of the power she could wield with the support of Equestria as a whole.”

Rarity paused, pondering the implications of Blueblood’s line of reasoning, and was struck by a terrible insight. “That means that her plan to gin up support for a war ... dear Celestia! If she succeeds in swaying the hearts and minds of Equestria to back her aims, then she could finally unlock the true power of the Heavenstone.”

By now, Zinzi, Zips, Buckaroo, and Elbow Grease had gathered around as well, and all the other equines formed a semicircle facing Rarity.

“But we stopped the war,” Buckaroo said. “It ain’t gonna happen without Karroc and his griffons.”

“Perhaps,” Rarity replied, “but Windlass informed me that she had other plans in motion. Twilight, Applejack, I need to know what is happening back home. How serious have the tensions between Equestria and the griffon eyries become since the disaster of the *Alicorn’s Cup*?”

“It’s pretty bad,” Applejack replied. “That’s why R.D., Pinkie, and Fluttershy couldn’t join us to go lookin’ for you. They’re goin’ with Princess Celestia to the peace summit.”

“Peace summit?” Rarity repeated. “Princess Celestia?”

“Yes,” Twilight confirmed. “The Princess wants to preserve the peace more than anything, and she has offered to meet with the griffon leaders to discuss an amicable solution to each side’s differences. She proposed a grand summit in Stratusburg, right on the border. Rainbow Dash is going to serve as an ambassador of peace, and Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy volunteered to provide moral support.”

“Yeah, after, you know, what happened with you, R.D. felt so bad about not listenin’ to your advice about goin’ back home that she figured she had to go and try to make things right with her family and the griffons. This here summit seemed like the perfect chance to do that. Seems like every bigshot with hooves, feathers, or both is gonna be there.”

“Oh no,” Rarity groaned. “I suppose that means Fancypants and Procyon will be there, as guests of the Princess. That will provide Windlass the perfect opportunity to wreak havoc. She knows that Karroc failed, and she is going to be doubly certain that whatever she is planning next will succeed in providing an irrefutable justification for a war that

will sweep the Princesses from power. Tell me, when is this summit going to take place? Please tell me we have some time.”

“I wish I could,” Twilight said, shaking her head. “But it starts tomorrow, and Stratusburg is all the way at the northern border of Equestria. Everypony is probably already gathered there by now. Princess Luna is still in Canterlot, though. She can help us.”

“No! We cannot stop in Canterlot,” Rarity declared. “We must alter course and make for Stratusburg with all possible speed. If we cannot stop Windlass, then I fear for our friends, and even for the Princess. Whatever Windlass intends, with the Heavenstone in her possession, we cannot presume any limits to what she can do.”

“Then how do you intend for us to make a difference?” Blueblood asked.

“We can expose her,” Rarity replied. “And force her endgame. And if it comes right down to it, I will stop her.”

“You?” Applejack asked. “No offense, sugarcube, but Twilight said that thing’s magic was outside of her abilities, and I just don’t want you gettin’ hurt by bitin’ off more than you can chew.”

“Believe me, I know my limitations,” Rarity replied. “But I also know that somehow, for some reason that I cannot fathom, the Heavenstone has connected with me, and I believe that it does not see Windlass as its master. I have gone over everything I have experienced and learned about that stone a thousand times in my head, and the conclusion I cannot escape is that it is calling to me, that it wants me for something. It does not make a whit of sense, of that I am completely aware, but I can’t shake the suspicion that it is my destiny to confront Windlass for mastery of the Heavenstone.”

At that, Applejack laughed, a boisterous, loud guffaw.

“What could possibly be funny about that?” Rarity asked defensively. “I was being completely serious.”

“No, no, I know it’s serious, but it’s your cutie mark story,” Applejack finally managed. “Don’t you remember? You must have told it to me a dozen times. C’mon, what was it you said when you were a filly and your horn dragged you way out there in the sticks?”

Rarity fixed a blank stare on her friend.

“When you saw that powerful big boulder sittin’ there, about your destiny,” Applejack prompted. “Before you found all them gems inside and got your cutie mark.”

“I’m sure I don’t remember at this particular moment.”

“‘My destiny is a rock!’ you said, and in the end you were right; your destiny really *is* a rock!” Applejack burst out laughing again.

Rarity was not amused.

“So it really was you?” Twilight Sparkle marveled. “I’ve heard of telepathy spells before, but never over such a long distance. That’s absolutely amazing, Rarity.”

The two unicorn mares sat on their haunches, resting on a thin straw mat in the forward cabin of the airship *Refresh*. As with the *Alicorn*, unnecessary furnishings, equipment, and supplies had been left behind for the sake of speed, leaving the space barren. Only the sunlight streaming through circular portholes, and the bulkheads painted in cheerful citrus tones, prevented the airship’s empty interior from feeling sterile. Sitting with a friend, sipping water and nibbling sweet macedamia nut biscuits from Gallopoli, Rarity could almost forget the danger that waited ahead.

At the moment, she and Twilight had the forward cabin all to themselves. Blueblood and Elbow Grease were engrossed in tinkering with the airship’s engine and mechanical systems, trying desperately to coax what extra speed they could out of the ungainly racer. Abovedecks, the others had all found something useful to do. Rarity was not one for tinkering, and she still felt a bit weak; it had not taken much encouraging to convince her to enjoy a brief respite. That, however, did not mean she wanted to be alone. She had been glad when Twilight offered to join her.

“Yes, it really was me!” she responded enthusiastically. “At the time, at least at first, I thought it was a dream, or perhaps a hallucination of some kind. But everything was so real; I could see all of you, hear Sweetie Belle crying, and touch objects in the house. Slowly, I came to realize that what I was experiencing was actually happening back in Ponyville, and that some part of me was present with you in my parents’ home. I decided that I had to make you understand that I was still alive, and needed help, so I reached out to you with my magic. After that, I woke up back in the jungle. I never knew whether you had received the message until I saw you there in Gallopoli.

“I did feel your presence,” Twilight stated. “Even though I couldn’t hear you, it was like these thoughts—thoughts that weren’t my own—suddenly popped up in my mind, and I knew it was you. It’s just—wow, Rarity! I’ve never even read about a spell like that. Then again, I haven’t read many first-hoof accounts of the Heavenstone. I just wish I understood how that kind of magic worked.” Twilight frowned momentarily, but then her expression changed into a broad smile. “This should be worth at least a week of research when I get back to the library! Maybe two! I can’t wait!”

“If anypony can uncover and decipher the Heavenstone’s secrets, you can, darling,” Rarity declared, then sighed. “I just wish we did not have to wait. If I truly am going to

have to confront Windlass, then I would like to know, at the very least, why the Heavenstone has formed this strange connection to me. I certainly did not try to project my consciousness to Ponyville—the stone brought me to you. If the thing were here now, right here in front of us, I would have no idea how to use it. It's as though, this entire time, I've been beholden to its whims and fancies.”

Rarity paused. “I know that is impossible, rationally speaking. A gemstone, no matter how ancient, mystical, and what-have-you, does not have a mind of its own. As batty as it sounds, though, I am convinced that this one does. I'm certain that the Heavenstone wants something from me. If only I knew why.”

“Hm,” Twilight Sparkle mused. Her violet eyes were closed, and she appeared deep in thought. “You said something about that before, about the Heavenstone wanting you for something, but I kind of glossed over it in all the excitement. Can you tell me more about that?”

“Well,” Rarity began, “whenever I have gotten close to it, my gem-finding spell has activated unconsciously, as if the Heavenstone is shouting ‘look at me!’ ‘Here I am!’ I also experience the worst pain in my horn, as though something had taken hold of it and is trying to pull it right out of my skull. This, I now know, is the Heavenstone's means of drawing me to it. On one occasion, after Windlass attacked me, the stone somehow allowed me to create a magical shield and save myself. I have no idea how to cast that spell on purpose, but I think the Heavenstone may have intervened to protect me. Finally, when Windlass recalled the Heavenstone, you saw what happened. It was like my entire sense of being slipped away and all that was left was utter agony. I believe that feeling was coming from the Heavenstone, as if it was crying out in protest. It was too much to bear, and I passed out.”

“*Very* interesting.”

“I am certain it is, Twilight, but what does it all mean?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Twilight Sparkle replied simply, shrugging her shoulders.

Rarity sighed again, and cast her gaze down at the cabin floor. “I was afraid you would say that.”

“Well, I don't know for *certain*,” the other mare went on, “but I do have a suspicion. In fact, it might explain both how you were able to contact me, and how the Heavenstone seems to have a mind of its own. And if I'm right, this could change everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean *everything*,” Twilight replied, her eyes opening wide. “If my suspicions are correct, it would shatter the basic foundations of accepted pony history, and challenge what we believe about the very origins of ponykind.”

“Come again?” Rarity asked. Twilight was no stranger to hyperbole, and she hoped that this was just another example. After all, what could the Heavenstone’s connection to her have to do with the origins of ponykind?

“I’ve been conducting some research on a related subject lately,” Twilight began, speaking rapidly and excitedly. “Do you remember, after Princess Celestia first called us to Canterlot when Discord broke free from his imprisoning spell, why she claimed she needed us to stop him? Why she and Princess Luna could do nothing?”

“As I recall, Princess Celestia stated that she and her sister could no longer wield the power of the Elements of Harmony. If she went into greater detail, I cannot remember it.” Rarity frowned. “I must say, Twilight, it’s not immediately obvious to me how that is a related subject at all.”

“Trust me, it is, and you remember correctly. The Princess didn’t explain further. All Princess Celestia said was that the imprisoning spell was broken because she and Princess Luna were no longer connected to the Elements. I didn’t have time to ask what that meant while the fate of Equestria was at stake, but after Discord was defeated, I finally had time to think about it. What did it mean to be connected to the Elements of Harmony, and why were the Princesses not connected any longer?”

“Do tell,” Rarity prompted.

“According to the old texts, Princess Celestia lost her connection to the Elements after she was forced to seal her sister in the moon. The act of using the Elements to banish Nightmare Moon, who was really Princess Luna and herself an Element Bearer, prevented Princess Celestia from embodying harmony any longer. Afterward, the Elements would no longer respond to her, and the imprisoning spell grew weaker with each passing century, until Discord finally broke free. Presumably, Princess Luna had lost her own connection even earlier, when she first fell to darkness more than a thousand years ago. How, I wondered, did the Elements, inanimate objects, know that the Princesses were no longer embodiments of harmony?”

Rarity thought she finally sensed the common thread with which Twilight was attempting to weave her story. “Something inside the Elements determined that the Princesses were no longer worthy to bear them, just as the Heavenstone has decided that it wants me,” she guessed.

“Yes, that’s it! There must be some form of rudimentary intelligence within the Elements, to decide who can and cannot use their power. Don’t forget, the Elements instantly recognized who among us represented Generosity, Loyalty, Honesty, Laughter, Kindness, and Magic. The gems even took the form of our cutie marks when they manifested. They also refused to work when I tried replacing Rainbow Dash with Spike, the first time we faced Discord. The Elements have some form of decision-making capacity, and I believe the Heavenstone may have a similar form of intelligence.”

“Then, perhaps the Heavenstone and the Elements are related,” Rarity guessed. “Perhaps they even share a common origin.”

“Exactly!” Twilight exclaimed. “But nopony has ever even conjectured that might be the case before, unsurprisingly. The Heavenstone was in possession of the unicorn royal family since before recorded history, but the Elements were discovered much, much later. Not only that, I’ve never read about the Heavenstone displaying any selectivity in its master before. It always responded to whoever sat on the unicorn throne. There was no reason to suspect that it could be connected to the Elements of Harmony in any way.

“Now that I think about it, though, they share so many features in common: the seeming intelligence, the magical connections and summoning ability, and the fact that the Elements and the Heavenstone both manifest in the form of gemstones. I suspect the Heavenstone was able to transmit your essence to Ponyville because you are connected to both the Heavenstone and to the Elements of Harmony, and all of the other Element Bearers were gathered there, in your parents’ house. That may have even been another instance of the Heavenstone attempting to help you.”

“I follow so far,” Rarity said, “but the one thing I fail to see is how the Heavenstone and the Elements being related threatens the foundations of pony knowledge, or whatever it was you said.”

“It means that what every foal learns in Elementary Pony History is wrong!” Twilight exclaimed breathlessly. “You see, the scholarly consensus holds that the Elements were created a few thousand years ago by some powerful unicorn mage. Maybe it was Walnut the Wise, or perhaps one of the great, forgotten wizards of Ancient Ponyland. When I first surmised that the Elements had some kind of built-in intelligence, I supposed that

the pony who had created them had used an incredibly complex memory spell to insert a bit of her own mind, just enough to make decisions about who was worthy to wield them. That kind of magical intelligence cannot be a natural property, after all. Now that we know that the Heavenstone has the same kind of intelligence ...” Twilight paused to take a few deep draws of oxygen.

“The Heavenstone, according to academia, is merely an exceptionally powerful focusing gem, discovered by prehistoric unicorns. That isn’t true. It dates from ancient times, yes, but that was *millennia* before magical theory allowed for spells as complex as permanent memory enchantments. Unicorns were barely telekinetically rubbing two sticks together back then. If the Elements and the Heavenstone share a common origin, then that means two things. First, the Elements are much older than anypony ever guessed. Second—and I can barely believe I am saying this—it means they were both created, not by ponies, but by somepony, or *someone*, else. Someone older! Who, Rarity? And why? These questions challenge our basic assumptions about where we come from, and how we got here.”

“But what does that ...”

“Of course I’ll give you credit when I present my findings to the Royal Academy of Magic,” Twilight continued unabated. “Oh my gosh, Rarity, do you think they’ll give me my own shelf at the Canterlot Library of Magic? I hope it’s next to the Star Swirl the Bearded shelf!” She giggled, and clapped her forehooves together. “Maybe I’ll get my own collection room, or even my own wing!”

“Twilight!” Rarity shouted.

“Yes, Rarity?” Twilight blinked, and folded her forelegs neatly in front of her.

“I find your enthusiasm for magic and ancient history infectious and thoroughly charming, darling, really I do. And as much as I hate to take anything from you and make this about me, well, right now this really *is* about me. Whoever created the Heavenstone, the fact is that it seems to want me. That is what I need to know about. Why, Twilight? Why me, and what do I do now?”

“I’m sorry, Rarity,” Twilight began, chagrined, “I guess I got a little carried away.”

“It’s fine. I certainly did not mean to snap at you just now. I am just so frustrated at being swept up in this mess and not having the foggiest idea why I should have anything to do with it. I am no descendent of the old royal family. I have no designs on moving the sun and moon. For Celestia’s sake, Twilight, I am nothing more than a country mare who

dreamed a silly dream of marrying a prince when she was a filly, who became enamored of making dresses for her dolls and got the crazy notion she could make a career out of it, and who taught herself to fake a Canterlot accent so she could imagine herself special. But I take it all back, Twilight. I don't want to be special anymore." Rarity fell silent and quickly looked away, before her friend could see her fall apart. She shuddered involuntarily as Twilight leaned forward and draped her forelegs over her shoulders.

"I know that you don't mean that," the lavender unicorn said. "You never imagined yourself to be special, for one thing; you *knew* you were special. Your confidence is what I've always admired most about you, Rarity. I've always been desperate for praise and approval, and even Rainbow Dash, for all her bravado, can be insecure. But you—you've always believed in yourself, your abilities, and your good taste. Ponies love your work because it's amazing and beautiful, but also because they see your poise and confidence, and they want that for themselves."

Rarity sniffed and looked into the other mare's eyes. "Thank you for such kind words, darling, but I must disagree in part. I may have confidence in my designs, but confidence in being able to stop a maniac mare with a magical diamond is something else entirely. I have no idea what I am doing here!"

"We'll be there for you," Twilight Sparkle said with earnest certainty. "Applejack, Rainbow, Pinkie, Fluttershy, and I. Connections to magical artifacts may be powerful, but not compared to the special magical connection we all share as friends. If there is one thing I've learned since moving to Ponyville, it's that no magic is stronger than the magic of friendship."

Rarity spent a long moment just basking in her friend's sincerity. Twilight, she knew, believed every word she spoke, and nopony understood magic better than Twilight Sparkle. Surely, with all of her friends together, Rarity had nothing to worry about. Still, she did not feel completely reassured.

"I'm so fortunate to have you as a friend, Twilight dear," Rarity said, offering a wan smile. "I do believe in our friendship, and in all of you girls. As it is, though, I fear that there will be a trial ahead that I must face by myself, one for which I am woefully ill-equipped. It is a shame that we do not have time to retrieve the Elements before Windlass acts."

"There is no way to get to them anyway with Princess Celestia away from Canterlot. Not even Princess Luna can bypass the wards the Princess put in place to safeguard the Elements," Twilight replied. "But there is still the possibility of avoiding a confrontation

entirely. We could divert to Ponyville, and have Spike instantly send a letter to the Princess warning her of the attack. I'm sure she could stop the conspirators, even if they have the Heavenstone." Twilight's thin smile suggested that she was anything but sure of that.

"No," Rarity replied, "we cannot risk it, as much as I would dearly love to see my sweet little Spikey-wikey and let my sister and parents know that I am alive. If Windlass is already planning to stage an attack with Princess Celestia in attendance, and I am absolutely certain that she is, she must be confident that she can prevent the Princess from thwarting her. I am afraid that if Windlass feels threatened, she will simply set her plans in motion at once, long before we arrive. We must continue straight to Stratusburg, and hope to retain the advantage of surprise."

Twilight nodded. "When we get there, we'll stop the conspirators, all of us together." She leaned forward again, forelegs outstretched, and Rarity happily returned the hug.

A few seconds later, the sound of approaching hoofbeats and a quiet cough interrupted the embrace. Blueblood loomed over the two mares.

"Please excuse my interruption," Blueblood said. "Miss Sparkle, Mr. Elbow Grease is asking for your insight as to whether a bit of applied magic might be able to eke a few more leagues per hour from this ship's engine and paddlewheels. Would you mind terribly visiting him in the engine room?"

Twilight jumped to her hooves immediately. "Ooh, he wants my insight? On how to make the airship more efficient?"

"Indeed," Blueblood replied. "He asked for your expertise most emphatically."

"Oh my gosh, Rarity, new discoveries about historical equinology, and now a chance to contribute to the field of magical mechanics in the same day! How could this get any better?"

"I can think of a few ways," Rarity grumbled under her breath.

"This is exciting!" Twilight continued. "I mean, I'm no aeronautical engineer, but I know a few things about physics, after all, and combustion too, and ooh, I have been practicing my come-to-life spells recently. And, well, I do love efficiency! I'd be happy to help!"

"Wonderful. The engine compartment hatch is at the aft of the mess." When Twilight merely stared at Blueblood, he continued. "Just head toward the back of the ship."

“Right! I’ll just go and see what I can do, then. That is, if you don’t mind, Rarity.”

“Oh, not at all, darling,” Rarity replied, a bit more weary-sounding than she intended. She waved a permissive hoof. “Please go on, and we can talk more later.”

“Thanks!”

With that, Twilight Sparkle trotted merrily away. Rarity waited until she was certain the other mare was out of earshot before springing to her hooves and facing Blueblood. There was only one reason he would seek to speak with her alone.

“So,” she began, “you intend for us to have this certain-to-be unmitigatingly awkward conversation now, despite the fact that this is entirely the wrong time to have it. You would go so far as to deceive my friend to get me alone.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Blueblood asked innocently, avoiding eye contact.

“Really?” Rarity asked incredulously. “Elbow Grease and you, a skilled engineer and an aeronautical architect, need Twilight’s consultation? She is the most intelligent and talented pony I know, but that does not change the fact that she is no engineer, and your pretense for getting her to leave was obvious.” She sighed. “You may as well get out what you have to say.”

“You never know, your friend may find a solution we overlooked.” Blueblood cringed under Rarity’s withering glare. “Alright, yes, I’ve seen how enthusiastic she is about science and magic and I needed to speak with you alone, about what I ... let slip.”

“A slip of the tongue, was it?” Rarity inquired. “Then there is all the explanation that is necessary. It was a mistake. What more needs to be said?”

“Is that truly where you want to leave things?”

Rarity considered the question. Blueblood had, in the heat of the moment, confessed his romantic feelings for her. She had already begun to suspect, of course, but words were so much more tangible and permanent than hints and suppositions. They could not be unsaid, and would linger forever, waiting for her to acknowledge them. She had hoped she and Blueblood could be something akin to friends, but not now, not with those weighty words occupying the space between them.

Why not reciprocate, one part of her asked. Why not simply fall into his forelegs, nestle in against his strong chest, and try to forget the misery he had caused her in the past?

Why not accept what had been offered and take what she had wanted since she was a little filly, when all she knew was that there was a handsome young prince who lived in a castle, and all she dreamed was that both would be hers someday? He had changed, hadn't he? He was a better stallion. The feelings he had admitted were surely genuine.

But even if he was honest in that single moment, how long would he remain so? How long could he truly care for her before reverting into a pony who cared for no one but himself. The callous, selfish, whiny Prince Blueblood of the Grand Galloping Gala lived within this new stallion, and always would. What if he reemerged? She would have to live with him. She could not do that to herself. She could not even risk it.

"Yes," Rarity replied. "It is."

"Well, it is not where *I* wish to leave things," Blueblood retorted quickly, glancing downwards and stamping a forehoof in frustration. "I want to know how you feel. I want to know where to go from here."

Rarity sighed. "This is really not the right time."

"No other time would be better."

"Please, Blueblood, at least wait until this unpleasant episode is truly over. Who can say what will transpire in Stratusburg?"

"So, that is it then," Blueblood grouched. "You have not forgiven me, even after everything we have been through together. My conduct on one lone night was too reprehensible for you ever to overlook it."

"Do not attempt to cast yourself as the victim and rewrite the past!"

"I am simply asking you to see beyond who I was, and see who I am now!"

Rarity looked into Blueblood's shining azure eyes for a long, silent moment.

"I can't," she said at last. "Unfortunately, my memory of that night is indelible, and the humiliation I endured is something I refuse to experience again. This, however, is not about punishing you for that night."

"Then what is it about?"

She stepped forward, and gently rested a foreleg atop Blueblood's shoulder. "Can you please let this go, at least for now?"

"I need to hear it. I need to know how I can convince you to give me a second chance. Please tell me how."

"Please, another time," Rarity pleaded.

"Just tell me how I can become the pony you want me to be," Blueblood asked.

"Not now!"

"Please!"

"You can't!" Rarity finally shouted, withdrawing her foreleg. "Here is the ugly truth you seem to want: you will never convince me that you are different, as much as I want to be convinced. I cannot be one hundred percent certain that the stallion from the Gala will never rear his ugly head again, and I cannot be certain that the selfish, foalish, egomaniac with a persecution complex that I knew you to be until just one week ago is really gone, and I will not, *cannot* risk opening my heart to that stallion again."

Rarity gulped in a deep breath, and she realized that her chest was heaving and her whole body was trembling.

Blueblood seemed to shrink before her, and he lost all semblance of the regal poise with which he normally carried himself. "I swear," he slowly spoke, "that I would step on the throat of that horrible stallion you speak of, and cast him from the highest tower of Canterlot Castle. I would do that, were he not me. But he is me, or at least he was me, and I cannot change that fact, no matter what kind of life I lead from now on."

"No," Rarity whispered, blinking back tears. "You cannot. I am sorry. I'm so sorry."

They stood in silence for a full minute before Blueblood finally spoke. "I believe I shall see if I can assist in the engine room, then," he said. "If I might suggest it, perhaps you could use some fresh air. The upper deck is as far away from me as you can possibly be on this ship." He turned and walked away without looking back.

Fresh air. Rarity felt as though a weight were pressing on her chest, leaving her lungs constricted and tight. She had to get out of there. She had to breathe. She raced up the narrow staircase in front of her.

Emerging into the warm afternoon sunshine, Rarity inhaled deeply, desperately, then breathed out slowly, imagining she was expelling all of the awful, unwanted feelings that were weighing on her. She would simply keep her distance from Blueblood. That was all she could do, until this was over and she returned home. For now, there were plenty of other ponies with whom she could hold a conversation. That was the ticket: keeping herself occupied.

Zips stood near the antiquated steering controls of the airship, intently examining the dials on the rudimentary automated navigational equipment that purported to be guiding them in the direction of Stratusburg. Zinzi stood toward the bow, leaning over the starboard rail and silently watching the earth pass beneath. Buckaroo and Applejack faced each other near the opposite rail, engrossed in conversation. Applejack burst out laughing as Buckaroo pantomimed a kick with a foreleg, no doubt reenacting a scene from some past adventure. The big stallion's broken hind leg had been bandaged and splinted. Their intimacy made Rarity suddenly uncomfortable, and she walked in the other direction to talk to Zinzi. Stilted rhymes were preferable to becoming a third wheel.

Rarity offered a friendly hello as she moved to stand beside the zebra mare, and she followed Zinzi's gaze down to a seemingly endless expanse of rolling hills carpeted in deep green woods. "What lovely, verdant country this is. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Lovely indeed, enough to stop and stare," Zinzi replied as she turned to face Rarity. "I believe we are well southwest of Baltimore. I visited these hills long years before, but the ponies here rarely see travelers anymore. What few are left struggle merely to exist, farming grasses and fruit, just enough to subsist."

"What a shame, amidst such beauty. I suppose with the railways being completed, and airships flying direct between the core cities and the southern reaches, the hoof traffic that must have traversed these hills has all but disappeared."

Zinzi nodded. "Progress never comes without a cost. While some places prosper, others become lost."

"You know," Rarity mused, "a dear friend of mine believes that Equestria must strive to progress faster than ever before. He believes that spreading the benefits of new technology to everypony will create a more level playing field for all, and help ponies who might otherwise be limited find their perfect places in the world. I fear, though, that such rapid change will make ponies anything but equal. Communities will vie for resources, and for access to the latest advances. Just as with the railroads, the winners will

grow rich and powerful, and the losers will be lost to the mists of history, like the ponies who lived in these hills. Or worse, inequality may lead to violence.”

“You speak with foresight,” Zinzi replied. “Swift change can even bring friends to fight. Khufu sought to moderate change’s pace, selling advances to both sides to avoid a deadly race.”

“Change itself is not a bad thing,” Rarity posited, “nor is it avoidable. But forcing it upon ponies who are not ready will create a society riven by strife and inequity. I am certain that Windlass knows this, though perhaps she believes that she could unite such a fractured nation under her rule. I, however, want no part of it. In fact, I believe I have an offer to decline when we return home. I dare say, when the pony who made me the offer discerns how his vision has been perverted by Windlass, he will think differently as well.”

“Factiousness in Equestria would engulf all soon, for it is ponies who bring the world the sun and moon. It is better for your pace to be slow and steady, rather than heedlessly embrace that for which you are not ready.”

“You are right, and I ...” Rarity startled as a loud bang sounded, and she had to steady herself as the airship lurched forward and accelerated. “What was that?”

“I admit I do not know,” Zinzi replied, a look of concern playing across her features. “Let us check on your friends below.”

Zinzi and Rarity trotted toward the staircase that led below, accompanied by Applejack, Buckaroo, and Zips. Before they could get close, however, Twilight Sparkle, Blueblood, and Elbow Grease emerged onto the upper deck. The three ponies’ coats were smudged with coal dust, grease, and various shades of grime, but Twilight wore a look of satisfaction that assuaged Rarity’s fears.

“What in tarnation was that?” Applejack asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Twilight replied smugly. “I merely used a new spell that created a temporary relativistic distortion field around the ship’s engine so that we could fly faster than scientifically possible under normal conditions.”

As Rarity and the others looked on incredulously, Elbow Grease held a forehoof in front of his mouth and coughed loudly.

Twilight turned back toward the portly stallion with a bit of a pout. “What? I thought you said liberal exaggeration was the key to success as an airship engineer?”

“I said to stretch the truth, not claim youse went and changed the laws of physics!”

“Oh, fine.” Twilight pouted beneath the caked-on layers of grease obscuring her natural color. “There was a huge buildup of gunk in the exhaust system. We just cleaned out the pipes.”

Blueblood nodded. “It is not hard to see why the citrus consortium is struggling, if this airship represents their usual standard of care. It received little more than a few questionable engine modifications and a fresh coat of paint before being put into service as a ‘racing ship.’ Now that we have corrected those amateurish ‘upgrades’ and cleaned out the exhaust system, even if we continue to run the engine at maximum power, we should reach Stratusburg before anything bursts or breaks down.”

“But no promises,” Elbow Grease added.

“Will we reach the city before the summit begins? That is what matters,” Rarity pressed.

“No chance,” Elbow Grease stated. “We gotta be twenty hours out. Best we can do is hope they get a late start.”

“Then let’s hope Rainbow Dash doesn’t pick tomorrow to be the day she quits sleepin’ in,” Applejack declared.

“At this point, hope is all we have, I suppose,” Rarity said glumly.

“Nah,” Applejack replied, moving closer to Rarity and gently knocking her left forehoof against Rarity’s right. “We also got each other, and more importantly, we got a bushel of apples, a couple coconuts, a tub of sweetened taro paste, a basket full of cookies, plenty of water, and a pony keg full of pineapple wine, courtesy of the fine folks back in Gallopoli. We couldn’t refuse all their hospitality just to spare weight, after all. Now, how about we go down below and get some grub? What the hay, it ain’t cider, but I’ll even share some of that pineapple swill with you.”

Rarity had felt her stomach rumbling the moment Applejack began describing their stores, and it became immediately apparent to her that she was ravenous, not having had a decent meal of moderately fresh food since Blueblood’s feast back in Canterlot.

“Um, Rarity,” Twilight Sparkle opened her mouth and then mimed forcing it closed with a hoof. Mortified, Rarity snapped her jaw shut, turned away from the others, and wiped the drool from her chin as demurely as possible.

“Supper sure sounds wonderful to me,” Buckaroo said, breaking the momentary awkwardness and earning Rarity’s gratitude.

“Yeah, they even packed me up a pineapple and pickled kelp and onion hoagie,” Elbow Grease added. “Those beach ponies are alright.”

Rarity followed the others, refusing to acknowledge a look from Applejack that said the farmer would not forget Rarity’s momentary lapse of decorum. Soon after, though, she was merrily eating and drinking too much, and feeling a great deal the better for it. The meal stretched on as the *Refresh*’s instruments guided the speeding ship toward Stratusburg, and soon the sun was setting.

When Rarity finally settled down to bed, tipsily collapsing on a colorful woolen blanket draped over a thin mat of woven straw, her contented mind was occupied by warm notions of friendship, family, and the safety of hearth and home. Pineapple wine was really not very good, she decided, as she drifted off to sleep. Still, it had worked wonders at chasing away the inevitability of the coming day. Perhaps she would order a case for herself.

Hours later, as the dawn bathed the world in light, it was apparent that the *Refresh* and its crew had reached the northlands. Rarity had awoken to darkness some time earlier, her mind filled with thoughts of the Heavenstone, and even more troubling, of Blueblood. Feeling restless and uncomfortably cold, she had magically rewoven her blanket into a thick poncho that covered her neck, back, and chest, before trotting upstairs to the open upper deck. There, she had offered to relieve a grateful Zips from his watch duty, and now she stood alone on the airship’s deck, chasing away the fog of too much pineapple wine and watching the ascending sun gradually reveal an impressive, imposing panorama ahead.

The Snowmane Mountains jutted from the earth like dragons’ wickedly sharp teeth, jagged lines of white-capped peaks that stretched east to west as far as Rarity could see. Each peak individually was higher and broader than Canterlot’s Mount Royal, and the effect of viewing the entire range at once was to make Rarity feel utterly microscopic. If the Snowmanes could recite the tale of their eons-long existence, the entire history of ponykind would be but a brief footnote to them. Princess Celestia would be a newborn foal. Rarity herself would be but an insignificant flicker, here for an instant and then gone just as quickly.

In these towering mountains, she knew, the griffons built their vertiginous eyries and made their roosts. Somewhere ahead, amidst the thick cloud banks gathered on the

windward side of the mountains, the pegasus city of Stratusburg floated in the sky, marking the current northern border of Equestria. It was that invisible demarcation, so laughably ephemeral compared to mountains that would remain the same a hundred generations into the future, which served as convenient kindling for those who wished to spark the fires of war.

Rarity's thoughts drifted to her sister in Ponyville, and all of the little ponies who would grow up in an unrecognizably scarred Equestria, living in fear of their enemies and of the future, should Windlass succeed in sabotaging the peace summit. Whatever the insane mare planned, and whatever powers she wielded courtesy of the Heavenstone, Rarity resolved to stop her. After that, she resolved, she would prance right into the Ponyville spa, lock the doors, and not come out for a month, or perhaps three.

"The Snowmanes are something else, am I right? We still got hours to go before we get to 'em, and they're already that big. Crazy stuff."

Rarity had somehow missed Elbow Grease appearing next to her. The portly engineer pony proceeded to busy himself with adjusting the steering controls and checking the instruments on the navigational panel. She noticed steam coming from his nostrils as he breathed, and she shivered as she remembered how cold it was, even under her warm poncho.

"Goodness, how do the Stratusburg ponies who live up here stand this wretched cold?" Rarity asked.

"Pegasi don't really feel the cold like we land dwellers," Elbow Grease replied. "I figure they turned out like that 'cos they needed some way of keeping from freezing up in the clouds, since they never really got the hang of making fires or weaving cloth to keep warm. I'm sure youse heard a million bad jokes about pegasi not exactly being big on innovation, but I always liked the one about how the three tribes reacted to discovering fire."

"I believe I know this one," Rarity began. "The practical earth ponies used the fire to feed their families and keep warm during the winter; the curious unicorns decided that they could use their magic to make the fire brighter and more beautiful, and ended up accidentally burning down the entire forest where they lived; and the pegasi simply procured a raincloud and put out the flame, not seeing the point of it."

"Yeah, I heard it told with a little less elegance before, but you got it. I'm hoping that when we get to the city, they'll have put in some extra effort to heat the place up for the

rest of us. I don't even know what they got rigged to allow non-fliers to attend this summit, but if they can manage that, then they sure as hay oughtta be able to manage a few extra degrees of warmth."

"Have you been to Stratusburg before?" Rarity asked, curious.

"Sure," Elbow Grease replied. "I seen it from the air, at least. They're all pegasi, Stratusburg being a cloud city and all, so they import their food, and I worked some of the big haulers that fly out that way. Couldn't walk the streets of course, but even from the air it was an impressive place. Youse could tell the folks in charge were worth oodles of bits. I mean, I heard the ponies who own the cloud mines are worth near as much as Fancypants, except their money's split up among a whole family."

"Yes, I recently learned that a dear friend of mine is one of the heirs to the Skyworks fortune, much to my surprise."

Elbow Grease whistled. "Youse sure do travel in interesting circles, Miss Rarity."

"Yes," Rarity agreed. "I surely do." She paused. "Speaking of which, I was surprised and gratified to see you back in Gallopoli. I certainly owe you a great debt of gratitude for joining my friends and flying to such a timely rescue."

"Aw, I ain't no hero," Elbow Grease replied, shaking his head. "After what happened, Fancypants was real broken up. He practically ordered me to stay back and help Tempest with the search and rescue."

"That is good to hear about Fancypants. After Tempest and Windlass attacked me, I began to doubt whether I could trust anypony."

"Yeah, I woulda never guessed those two were rotten, but I know for sure that old Fancy is on the up and up. No pony can fake bein' as heartbroken as he was. I figure he thinks you're pretty special. He'll be over the moon when he sees you're alive."

"I look forward to seeing him as well."

Pretty special, Elbow Grease had said, but what did that mean? Fancypants certainly viewed Rarity as a valuable gamepiece, a pony in whom he could place his trust while he pursued his political ambitions, but she wondered how deep their friendship truly ran. After all, Fancypants had repaired to Canterlot after the disaster of the *Alicorn's Cup*, leaving underlings behind instead of remaining to help.

Of course, at the time it had been all but certain that Rarity had perished, and he had likely anticipated the damage the incident would cause to the already-precarious relationship between ponies and griffons. He had responsibilities in the capital, and every reason to return home during such a trying time.

Rarity sighed, and wondered how Fancyponies would react when she informed him that she would not accept his offer. She hoped they would remain on friendly terms, if for no other reason than the fact that he was still the most important businesspony in Equestria. His disapproval could mean the end her aspirations in Canterlot.

The clip-clop of hooves on wooden planks drew Rarity's attention away from her musings, and she turned to see everypony else groggily climbing up onto the deck.

"Mornin'," Applejack said with a quick nod, and the others offered greetings as well. All except Blueblood, Rarity noted. The unicorn stallion marched purposefully ahead to take in the view of the looming mountains, then knelt on the deck and unfolded a large paper map.

"Stratusburg is ahead, on the other side of the first ridge of peaks," Blueblood declared. "We can skirt around the mountains, and I believe we should arrive no more than four hours from now."

"Sounds about right, from what I remember," Elbow Grease said.

"Four hours!" Rarity exclaimed. "But the summit could begin any moment now! Surely we can do better, I mean, the mountains are right there in front of us. Can we not simply fly over, rather than all the way around?"

"No, we cannot," Blueblood replied tersely, without looking up from the map. "Those mountains are more than a league tall. We can't fly that high, and even if we could, the air at that altitude is too thin to breathe. I suppose you can get out and pull, if you want to fly faster."

Rarity harrumphed, but did not rise to his bait. She supposed he was entitled to a bit of petulance after what she had said to him.

Applejack walked over to her and gave a reassuring smile. "It'll be fine, sugarcube. We'll get there before you know it, you'll see, and then we'll put an end to this nonsense once and for all."

Rarity hesitantly returned her friend's smile, and pulled her poncho tighter around her shoulders. The airship flew on, and though she spent some time in the cabin below, she primarily occupied herself with standing at the deck rail, watching the mountains loom impossibly large as the *Refresh* drew nearer to them with each passing minute.

The view was breathtaking from the air, and she acquired new insight into why Rainbow Dash so loved to fly. Rarity could imagine a very young Rainbow sneaking out of her home in Stratusburg, flying to the top of the highest mountains, leaping from stratospheric precipices and diving down into the deep chasms between the peaks, zooming through narrow canyons and frolicking with the griffons who lived nearby. Out here on the frontier, among these giant peaks and under an endless sky, this must have been true freedom for a bold young pegasus, especially one whose family wanted for nothing. It was no wonder that Rainbow Dash had resented being taken away from this.

Suddenly, Rarity noticed something strange in the distance, an oddly colorful rectangular shape that appeared to be protruding from a small puffy white cloud. She walked over to Zips, standing nearby, and enlisted his sharp eyes to try to identify it.

"It's a cloud buoy," he said. "Sky harbors put them out to keep airships from flying into restricted areas."

"It looks as though the sign atop the cloud has something written on it," Rarity pointed out.

"Yeah, it says 'caution,' and then some other stuff." Zips turned back to Elbow Grease, who was steering the ship by hoof now that they were so close to the mountains, and pointed to the floating buoy. As the *Refresh* closed the distance, the caution sign's text became visible:

Notice to all airships and fliers—Temporary Interdiction Zone. By order of Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia of Equestria, all airships and individual fliers are to report to a Customs Inspection Cloud for clearance before proceeding to Stratusburg. Violators may face civil and criminal penalties, and may have their vehicles and property subject to seizure.

"Looks like they're taking security seriously," Zips said.

"But we don't have time to report for some kind of inspection!" Rarity complained. "What shall we do?"

"Really?" Zips scoffed. "You think we've never outrun the law before?"

The *Refresh* passed the caution buoy without slowing, and continued toward Stratusburg. Oddly, though they passed several more buoys, Rarity saw no signs of other airships plying the skies, nor any pegasi or griffons. Surely an interdiction zone required patrols to enforce, but no Royal Guard had appeared to challenge them either. She began to feel uneasy, and that sense of discomfort was magnified when the buoys finally led them to a large white cloud with numerous airship tiedown points, and signs proclaiming it as the Royal Equestrian Customs inspection site. The cloud was completely abandoned.

“That can’t be good,” Twilight Sparkle said, anxiety quickening her speech. “Where is everypony? Where are the inspectors, and the guards? Something must have happened to them! The Princess could already be in danger!”

“She’s flying as fast as she can fly,” Elbow Grease growled. “Just hold on. We’re almost there.”

Rarity said nothing, but inside, she was every bit as fearful as Twilight. If the conspirators had been so brazen as to attack the Guard, then surely their endgame was nigh, and they were done hiding, manipulating events from the shadows. Suddenly, she felt a twinge in her horn, and she recognized the sensation at once.

“The Heavenstone!” Rarity exclaimed. “It is here. I can feel it! We must be close!”

The *Refresh* flew past the abandoned inspection site, and began a sweeping turn around a particularly steep rock spire. As the ship cleared the obstruction, yet another ridge of peaks was revealed. These sloped steeply down into a narrow valley that seemed to extend well into the mountain range. There was a hint of a dirt road there, and Rarity realized that this must be the famed pass through the mountains that was presently the subject of dispute. That meant that Stratusburg should be somewhere ...

“There, just to the left of the next peak,” Zinzi declared, pointing with a foreleg, “I believe it is the place we seek.”

Rarity looked where the other mare was pointing, and blinked in amazement. Thick layers of dense clouds had formed against the side of a particularly tall mountain, and smaller puffy clouds were scattered above, below, and on every side of the huge cloudbank. A vast lattice of scaffolding bridged the gaps between many of the smaller clouds, enclosing most of the cloudbank in a colossal skeletal framework. This was the Stratusburg cloud mine. Huge cranes and strange mining machines were everywhere, but none of the equipment was in use at the moment. Most likely, Rarity thought, all of the workers were on leave while the peace summit was taking place.

Stratusburg itself floated just beyond the mine. The city was built on a single broad and mostly flat layer of clouds, in contrast to the ancient pegasus city of Cloudsdale's dense verticality. Modest cloud structures dominated the outer edge of the city, with the homes and buildings growing larger and more elaborate toward the city center. There, a cylindrical cloud tower rose from a wide base, soaring a hundred lengths or more into the sky. The tower was divided into terraced segments, growing narrower toward the top, and numerous waterfalls of pure rainbow poured over the sides of the cloud terraces. It was, Rarity decided at once, the only structure in the city large and grand enough to be hosting the peace summit.

Dozens of airships—perhaps more than a hundred—were anchored around the periphery of the city, and as the *Refresh* drew closer, it became apparent that the sky over Stratusburg was teeming with hundreds of pegasi and griffons. They were not fighting, Rarity noted to her great relief, just flying to and fro, likely going about their business.

“Uh, I kinda figured there was gonna be some land, or at least a floatin’ platform or the like,” Buckaroo said. “How the hay are we gonna set hoof in a city made of clouds?”

“That’s how!” Applejack shouted, pointing to a rapidly approaching cloud buoy, this one also bearing a sign containing a lengthy message.

Twilight read it aloud. “Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia and Mayor Aurora Glow welcome you to Stratusburg, home of the First International Summit for Harmony. Please note that Stratusburg’s cloud structure has been enchanted to allow non-fliers free enjoyment of the city for the duration of the summit. If you are unable to fly, please mind all edges and gaps.”

“Enchanted clouds? I never heard of a magic spell for lettin’ an earth pony walk on clouds,” Buckaroo said with a dubious frown.

“Believe me, it can happen,” Applejack said. “Stick with us Ponyville ponies, Buck, and you’ll see all kinda things you’d swear couldn’t exist.”

“It’s true,” Twilight added with a smile.

“We must get to that tower at the center of town,” Rarity declared. “I’m absolutely certain that is where the summit is taking place, and that is where my horn is telling me we shall find Windlass and the Heavenstone.”

“What is your grand plan this time?” Blueblood asked. “Are we to simply rush the doors, heedless of any traps? Do not forget that something has happened to the ponies who should have been patrolling the city’s airspace.”

“In a word, yes,” Rarity replied. “It is true that we do not know exactly what Windlass and her accomplices are scheming, nor whether she has already set her plan in motion, but we must act swiftly. That said, it makes sense to increase our chances should any of us be stopped. We should split into groups.”

“Makes sense,” Applejack said, and beside her Buckaroo nodded.

“You know this mare better than any of us,” Twilight stated. “I’ll go along with whatever you think is best.”

No pony seemed inclined to object, and Rarity continued. “Twilight, Applejack, Zinzi, and Blueblood should come with me. We shall take the straightforward approach and simply barge in through the main entrance to confront Windlass and Procyon. Zips and Buckaroo, you should watch the exterior of the building and try to find any alternate entrances or hidden places where Windlass may have unpleasant surprises waiting. You can rush in if anything goes wrong with the five of us. Mr. Elbow Grease, it would be most helpful if you would serve as our eyes in the air, in case an attack is forthcoming from above.”

“Aye aye, skipper,” the engineer replied with a forehoof salute. “I’ll blow the horn at the first sign of trouble. Say, I wonder if any of these pegasi flitting around would deliver a sandwich while I wait?”

No guardsponies or local law enforcement appeared to challenge the *Refresh* as the airship crossed the threshold of Stratusburg, on course for the tall tower at the city’s center, and Rarity found the apparently lax security worrying. She did note, however, that the temperature was substantially warmer over the city itself, and she quickly shrugged off her poncho.

“That big building smack in the middle of town is called the Rainbow Palace,” Elbow Grease said. “Not only is it the seat of government, but the upper levels are also the local headquarters for Skyworks. Pretty obvious this is a company town, eh?”

“I still can’t hardly believe that R.D.’s family built this place,” Applejack said. “Who woulda guessed?”

“Built it, and owns most of it, from the sound of things,” Twilight added.

Rarity shushed her friends, and swiveled her ears forward. “Girls, do you hear that?” she whispered. “That music?”

“Sounds like trumpets,” Zips piped up. “A fanfare.”

“Yes!” Rarity declared. “It is a royal fanfare, and that means the summit is likely just beginning! We still have a chance to stop Windlass before she hurts anypony else.”

“You have led us this far, and not yet astray,” Zinzi said, “you will have all of our support this day.”

“You sure as hay got mine,” Buckaroo added.

“There isn’t anything we can’t do, together,” affirmed Twilight, a foreleg draped over a nodding Applejack’s shoulders.

“Let’s you and I officially rejoin the land of the living, then, shall we?” Blueblood suggested to Rarity. “I have a fratricidal sibling I’d like to greet, and besides, the sooner this is over with, the sooner we won’t have to see each other any longer.”

“True,” Rarity replied, glaring back at the stallion and ignoring the confused looks of her shipmates. She would explain to Twilight and Applejack later—or perhaps never—what had passed between her and Blueblood.

She turned to face the engineer currently guiding the ship. “Mr. Elbow Grease,” she began sweetly, “would you be so kind as to quickly set us down in the courtyard adjacent to the Rainbow Palace? Time is of the essence. Just this once, I would prefer not to be fashionably late.”

Rarity took a few tentative steps forward, testing the soft surface of the plaza surrounding the towering Rainbow Palace. Visually, the plaza appeared to be constructed from a single perfect block of blue-white stone, unmarred by cracks or discoloration, and decorated with chiseled sweeping curlicues of a shade just slightly darker than the surface itself. In reality, the plaza, the tower at its center, and every other structure in Stratusburg were all made of clouds, gathered and shaped into useful forms by pegasi cloudmasons.

She attempted to relegate to the back of her mind the knowledge that clouds, in whatever form, were still clouds, and under normal circumstances a unicorn such as herself would plummet straight through them. Instead, Rarity reminded herself of the promise that the city's clouds had been enchanted for non-flying visitors.

Of course, the signs had also promised there would be guards on duty, and those had been nowhere to be seen. She frowned, and continued to test the cloud pavement before committing to each step.

"You know, I didn't much care for standin' on this stuff the last go 'round," Applejack muttered, echoing Rarity's unvoiced concerns. "And that was with Twilight's magic preventin' us from fallin'. I sure as hay ain't feelin' comfortable now that I don't even know what's keepin' the ground solid beneath my hooves."

"There's no need to worry," Twilight Sparkle replied confidently. "I can only think of one pony capable of enchanting an entire cloud city like this, and that's Princess Celestia. The Princess isn't going to let anypony fall."

"Iffin y'all say so," Applejack grumbled, stepping forward gingerly, and conspicuously following in Rarity's already-proven hoofsteps.

Like Applejack, Rarity too could not help but think back to their first foray into the clouds a year ago, when they had gone to cheer on Rainbow Dash at the flying competition in Cloudsdale. Here, just as in the other pegasus city, the pavement was solid enough to tread comfortably, though it yielded to her hooves almost imperceptibly with each step. The sensation was akin to walking on an exceedingly firm mattress with worn-out springs. She hoped that would be the only similarity to the earlier trip—the Cloudsdale excursion had not proven one of her finer moments, to put it mildly.

A dark shadow suddenly passed overhead, and Rarity looked up to see the *Refresh* climbing into the blue sky. The plan was for Elbow Grease to circle the Rainbow Palace, and if the worst occurred, make for Canterlot. At the very least he would be able to

present Princess Luna with a record of what occurred here, and perhaps she could form her own, less foolhardy plan for stopping the conspirators. The airship began a slow turn, keeping a safe distance from the tower.

Looking ahead, Rarity noted that the tall structure was only a few dozen lengths away now. It erupted from the plaza, its pure white exterior shimmering in the sunlight, while its rainbow waterfalls provided striking contrast to the atmospheric blues, whites, and grays that predominated in the city. In the plaza, dozens of ponies of all colors and types, as well as a few representatives of other species, walked, trotted, or flew about, some gawking at the cascading rainbow flowing over the sides of the tower and into decorative pools surrounding it, others merely passing through as they journeyed from one part of Stratusburg to another. A quartet of armored pegasi, Royal Guards in full dress regalia, calmly stood at attention before a pair of tall silvery doors that formed the main entrance to the tower.

Despite the beauty and outward peacefulness of the scene before her, to Rarity it all seemed ominous and foreboding. The Heavenstone was inside, her horn told her that much, and at this distance its pull was so painfully strong that it was all she could do to resist the urge to simply rush forward and begin pounding on the tower doors. She could practically hear a voice, whispering and beckoning her closer, begging her to take the Heavenstone.

Suddenly, she realized that there *was* a voice speaking inside her head.

“Hello,” it said.

Rarity instantly recognized the voice, and frantically looked around for its source. Windlass, however, was nowhere to be seen. She felt a wave of magical energy wash over her, and staggered back a half step.

“I sensed you the second you arrived. Wonderful timing by the way; you made it just in time for the big moment.”

“Are you alright?” Twilight asked, rushing to Rarity’s side.

“I ...” Rarity struggled to form words, and her eyes snapped open wide as she reared back in fright. “She knows, Twilight! Windlass is speaking to me through the Heavenstone. My connection to it has betrayed us!”

“Hmph. If the jig is up then we’d best get a move on,” Buckaroo spoke up.

Rarity stood with her four legs planted, not budging, though she continued to glance nervously in every direction. She had to be prepared for an attack from anywhere, at any moment. What could she even hope to do, against a pony who could get inside her head so easily? She was defenseless!

Moreover, they had lost surprise, their only advantage. The simple truth was that Rarity had no plan for actually taking the stone from Windlass. In fact, she had nothing more than the vague, almost laughably outlandish idea that the Heavenstone wanted her to do it, and would provide her with a way. The more she considered the situation, the more obvious it became that her effort was doomed—nothing more than a foal’s errand, destined for failure. She was walking into a deathtrap, and worse, she was bringing all her friends with her.

Inside the Rainbow Palace, the sound of trumpets rang out again, and Rarity shuddered with fear.

“You’re going to miss it if you don’t hurry. Come, see what I’ve got in store for you.”

“I can’t go in there,” Rarity finally managed to say. “We have nothing—no hope, and I’m frightened out of my wits!”

“Course y’are,” Applejack said at once. “Anypony would be. That’s why you got us with you.”

“And remember, we have friends inside,” Twilight Sparkle added. “Princess Celestia, Rainbow, Pinkie, and Fluttershy.”

Yes, friends inside. Fancypants would be there as well, and perhaps other friends not yet considered. But that only meant that more ponies she cared about would be in danger. She couldn’t save them. Nopony could.

“But she knows everything!” Rarity protested. “She must have anticipated every contingency, and we do not even know the limits of her powers.” She paused, and raised a forehoof to massage her temple, just below her aching horn. “I’m scared and tired, Twilight—so tired. I am simply not cut out for this.”

“Rarity, just try to think clearly,” Twilight said softly. “Windlass is trying to use your connection to the Heavenstone against you, to fill your mind with doubt and fear. In reality she’s the one generating those emotions. She is the one who should be afraid, not you.”

“*She lies,*” Windlass’ voice hissed.

Rarity tried to comprehend Twilight’s words, but she felt weighed down, her senses dulled. Windlass was already defeating her, before she had even set eyes on the other mare. How could she hold out any hope? She sank to her haunches, plopping down onto the cloud surface, and buried her face in her forelegs.

“She’ll destroy us all, Twilight! She is going to destroy everything!”

“*Finally, you see the inevitable truth.*”

“Leave me alone!” Rarity cried out, shaking a forehoof at her unseen antagonist. She turned to Twilight, and then swept her gaze across the others’ faces. “I cannot face her! I’m too weak! It is too great a risk!”

Rarity’s companions quickly formed a protective circle around her, warding off curious bystanders who must have been attracted by the apparently raving mare in the middle of the plaza, and they stood around her in concerned silence.

“I am pathetic!” Rarity wailed.

Zips finally spoke up. “Whatever,” he said dismissively.

Rarity fell silent. “What ... ever?” she softly repeated, and looked up in confusion at the young stallion. What did that mean? Her head was swimming with conflicting thoughts and emotions, her mind drowning in a torrent of dark magic that nopony else could feel or understand.

“He means that your dramatic pronouncements of doom are belied by the reality of the impossible odds we have already overcome,” Blueblood said evenly. He lowered his head to look directly into Rarity’s eyes. “The odds that *you* have already overcome. He also means that you are far stronger than the coward who is whispering lies in your mind, and we all know it. He knows, as I do—as we all do—that you are more than strong enough to fight her off right now if you so choose.”

“Yeah,” Zips said. “That. You should do that.”

Rarity blinked, and tried to concentrate on what was being said, pushing back against the crushing tide of negativity that pressed down on her.

“*You are too weak.*”

Yes, she was. Wasn't she?

Blueblood continued, speaking softly but clearly. "I know that our relationship has deteriorated to its natural state of equilibrium, that being a volatile mixture of aggravation and ongoing disappointment in varying measures, but please listen to me as a friend this one last time. You will find a way to stop that mare; I promise it. We all have seen what you can do when you set a task before yourself, and I am certain, if you will only look within, you will find confidence enough there." He gazed directly into Rarity's eyes, a steely glint shining in his own blue ones. "One does not always have the luxury of knowing exactly what lies ahead, but I have already seen you take great risks, even putting your own life at stake, because you decided that the risk was worth taking. Some risks are."

Rarity stared back, struck by the sincere confidence projected in Blueblood's words, and also by the obvious fact that he was not speaking merely about the present risk of facing Windlass, but about the other, more personal risk he had begged her to take.

It was true; some risks simply *were* worth taking. She had judged it worthwhile to trek through the jungle in search of the flower that could save his life, and had chosen to infiltrate Karroc's base in search of the Heavenstone, when it would have been safer to try to flee back to the *Alicorn*.

"He is nothing. You despise him. His words mean nothing."

In the past, she had risked her career and her entire future as a fashion designer for the sake of her friends, because nothing was more important to her than their friendship. Facing Windlass, for the sake of Equestria and every other free nation, was a risk that had to be taken, whether any of them were prepared for it or not.

Suddenly, the waves of magic were breaking before they reached her, and the pain diminished. Rarity shook her head to clear it.

"The Duke speaks well, and truly," Zinzi pronounced. "Do not give credence to fear unduly."

"Shoot, I mean, how can we lose?" Buckaroo asked with a smile. "We got the pluckiest durn unicorn I ever met, and her friends to boot. Plus you got Zinzi, Zips, and it turns out even a dandy like Blueblood here can pull his weight in a scrap. Maybe I only got three good legs at this particular juncture, but I ain't worried."

“We’re all in this together, and together we can overcome anything,” Twilight Sparkle concluded, as Applejack contributed her own monosyllabic affirmation and a reassuring smile.

Rarity looked at each of them in turn, and saw the clarity of their convictions in their eyes. They truly believed in her. They were her friends, all of them, and soon she would be with Rainbow Dash, and dear Fluttershy, and Pinkie too! She pulled herself off the cloud surface and stood, her head completely clear, save for the dim echo of an indignant cry. In that instant, she knew that Windlass’ pathway into her mind was severed forever.

“Thank you,” Rarity said with a determined smile. “All of you. I feel much better now. It seems I simply needed to clear my mind, and thanks to you I have done so.”

“Yay! I knew you could do it!” Twilight Sparkle reared back and clapped her forehooves together.

“You are right. I—*we*—can do this.” Rarity paused. “Though I might remind Mr. Buckaroo that I am a *lady*, and not a ‘durn unicorn.” She turned toward Blueblood. “And you—allow me to suggest that there will be time enough to aggravate and disappoint each other later. Perhaps, for now, we can continue to speak in a friendly manner for just a bit longer. You do it rather eloquently, and besides, this hornache has dulled my capacity for caustic wit—temporarily, I assure you.”

“I suppose a bit more friendliness is not too great a risk,” Blueblood said, clearly suppressing a smile.

“Indeed,” Rarity replied, and continued. “Now that the jig is up, as you say, we must hurry. Buckaroo, Zips, though we part ways, I am certain that we shall be reunited soon. Good luck.”

“They won’t get anything past us,” Zips declared. Buckaroo nodded and spared a long look and a wink, which Rarity could not help but notice was directed at Applejack. The big earth pony stallion then limped away alongside the young half-zebra, both headed for the far side of the Rainbow Palace and whatever awaited them.

Rarity began walking toward the silvery doors that formed the front entrance of the towering structure, keeping her gait slow and measured, wearing her best innocent smile, and trying to seem nonchalant. Sweet-talking the guards into opening the doors was sure to be more effective and less alarming than attempting to force their way inside. Without slowing, she walked straight up to the sealed entrance, and raised a hoof as if to knock.

“Halt!” shouted a snow-white pegasus guard. “The summit is for dignitaries only, not tourists.”

“Oh my, I didn’t realize,” Rarity began, covering her mouth with a forehoof in feigned surprise. “But surely a handsome fellow like yourself—”

“Hold on, Rarity,” a voice interrupted, and Twilight stepped forward. “I’ve got this.”

“You do?” Rarity asked dubiously.

“I do.” Seemingly out of the blue, the lavender unicorn produced a square of cardstock decorated with gold foil accents and adorned with the seal of the Royal Sisters, and levitated it to be inspected by the Royal Guard. “Twilight Sparkle, and guests! Princess Celestia personally invited me and all of my friends to the summit, you see, and these four ponies are my friends.”

“Um, isn’t she a zebra?” the guard asked, glancing up from the invitation.

“Equines. These four equines are my friends,” Twilight corrected herself, then plastered a wide and somewhat unsettling smile on her face.

The guard’s gaze shifted as he scanned each member of the group in turn, lingering an uncomfortably long time on Blueblood, and then on Rarity herself. “Wait, aren’t you—”

“Look, sir, I’m in kind of a huge rush,” Twilight interjected. “Would you please just let us in? I’ve flown a long way, I have a personal invitation from the Princess, and from the sound of things, the summit is starting!” Rarity could have sworn that a fiery white-hot glow briefly flared into existence behind her friend’s violet eyes as she spoke. “So hurry the hoof up!” Twilight finished.

The armored pegasus gulped audibly. “Ahem, right. Yes of course. Everything appears to be in order here. You may pass, Miss Sparkle.” He launched into the air with a kick from his hind legs and a flap of his feathered white wings. The guard then proceeded to press a forehoof against a colorful carved rainbow set into the tower wall above the door. It looked to Rarity as if the guard was touching the rainbow’s bands of color in a particular order, and after a moment the great doors began to swing open.

“Please proceed directly to the Great Hall,” the guard said. “It’s straight ahead. You can’t miss it.”

Rarity did not waste a moment before trotting through the doors and into a spacious atrium. It was immediately apparent that the building was designed for pegasi, as the atrium was only modestly sized at the ground level, but it reached up a hundred lengths or more inside the building, with openings at each level allowing access for ponies who could fly. Furthermore, it was also clear from the empty vertical space, devoid of beams and support pillars, that pegasus architecture was not bound by the same structural considerations that limited ponies who built with wood and stone.

There was no way to get to the higher levels without being able to fly, but fortunately, they did not need to. A large open doorway directly opposite the entrance was clearly marked as leading to the Great Hall, and Rarity made straight for it. She had moved forward only a few steps, however, before she felt a hoof on her shoulder and Zinzi stopped her.

“Is that not your Princess I hear?” the zebra asked. “Let us stop for a moment and use our ears.”

Rarity pricked up her ears, and immediately realized that Zinzi was correct.

“Princess Celestia!” Twilight whispered, practically vibrating with excitement.

“Shh!” Rarity shushed her friend.

“Fillies and gentlecolts,” the Princess began, her voice muffled but clearly audible, “griffons and griffonesses, gentlefolk of all nations and tribes, it is my great honor and pleasure to welcome you to this gathering, the First International Summit for Harmony.”

“The FISH!” a high-pitched voice piped up enthusiastically. “Cos griffons love fish!”

“That’s Pinkie!” Twilight whispered, only to be shushed by all four of her companions.

“Indeed,” Princess Celestia acknowledged over the chuckling of her audience. “It is good to remember to seek out moments of levity in these solemn times. You all know why we are here. I am sure you have heard in your cities and towns the same things that I have: voices raised in anger, blame assigned without cause, and misguided calls for reprisals.

“I am a Princess of Equestria, and as such I lead my little ponies. Yet I do not impose laws of my own design, nor mete out punishments to suit my whims. I merely give my counsel, tempered by age and experience, just as I can only counsel you proud griffons, and our guests from other lands. I can only plead for calm and reason, and ask you all to

think of your families, and the future you want to give them. I submit that if conflict is your choice, then there will be no future at all.”

Rarity raised a foreleg and motioned toward the entrance to the hall. “She may be speaking for some time. We should go inside while everypony’s attention is on the Princess. If we have a decent vantage point we should be able to spot Windlass and Lord Procyon, and perhaps guess at what she is planning.” The others nodded in acknowledgement, and followed as she led the way.

“I have seen where the path of conflict leads,” Princess Celestia continued. “You all know the stories from a thousand years ago, and from the age of chaos before that. I could spend the rest of the summit regaling you with tales from a past that you are fortunate to not share with me, but I believe that is not the best use of our time. Thankfully, there are those among you who can plead the cause of peace in more eloquent and contemporaneous terms than I.”

A hundred lengths away from the Princess, Rarity found herself standing on a wide platform overlooking a vast chamber filled with ponies, griffons, and other guests. The Great Hall of the Rainbow Palace was semicircular and obviously occupied most of the tower’s hoofprint, rising fifty lengths or more to a vast domed ceiling painted with scenes of pegasi taming storm clouds and cavorting around rainbows.

Near the top of the chamber, large openings on three sides allowed sunlight to flood in, and led out to an outdoor terrace. Rarity could see a trio of dusky unicorns in Royal Guard armor stationed high above on the terrace level, standing behind large telescopes that pointed out at the sky. No doubt they were watching for threats from without, unaware that the true threat was already here within the chamber.

Princess Celestia was of course unmistakable. Standing twice as tall and being several times larger than the average pony, she was clearly visible on a raised stage at the far end of the hall, positioned before dozens of curved rows of seats that radiated outward and filled the space. The imposing alicorn princess was flanked by several pegasus guards, but nopony else shared the stage with her. Rarity could not pick out her friends in the crowd, nor could she spot Windlass. She needed to find a closer location with a better view.

The platform on which Rarity presently stood was positioned several lengths higher than the chamber floor, but it lacked any apparent means of descending. Of course, pegasi had no need for stairs or walkways; the platform was a launching pad, designed so that large numbers of winged ponies could take off and land simultaneously. On the other hoof, all

of the earth ponies, unicorns, and other non-fliers in attendance must have gotten down to the main floor somehow.

Finally, Rarity spotted a narrow ramp to her left. The structure did not match the surrounding architecture, and obviously had been installed as a temporary consideration for flightless guests. She hastened to it, trusting the others to follow, and soon found herself in a narrow corridor encircling the perimeter of the chamber.

“It is a privilege,” Princess Celestia continued, drawing any attention that might otherwise have been directed at the five equines skirting around the edge of the chamber, “and it gives me great joy to introduce our most honored guests, the special ambassadors selected to represent our shared hope for continued peace between Equestria and the griffon eyries. First, please join me in welcoming the griffon ambassador. Representing her nearby home of Whiteknife Eyrie, she is a respected flight trainer who received top marks at the best flight academies in the Eyries and in Equestria. She is also the niece of the venerable Elector Korb Graywings, presumed lost during the tragic events of the recent *Alicorn’s* Cup regatta. She stands for peace in honor of her uncle and the others lost that day. Please welcome Provisional Elector Girigilida Goldenwings!”

“Sup?” a husky female voice called out, the lone syllable echoing throughout the chamber. A smattering of applause, and a few roars of approval from the griffon contingent followed.

“Hey, ain’t that Rainbow’s sourpuss friend Gilda?” Applejack began in a hushed voice.

“Yeah,” Twilight Sparkle confirmed. “Eesh. If she’s the peace ambassador, I hate to imagine how griffons who really don’t like ponies feel. Then again, I guess we already know.”

Indeed, Rarity reflected, Gilda had acted like an utter ruffian when she had visited Ponyville. Still, she and Rainbow Dash had been close childhood friends, and Gilda *had* lived among ponies for a time. It made sense that she and Rainbow Dash should serve as ambassadors together, as a symbol of friendship and cooperation between Equestria and the griffon eyries.

“And now,” Princess Celestia went on, “allow me to introduce the ambassador from Equestria. She spent her earliest years learning to fly in these very mountains, and called many griffons her friends. She is cousin to this town’s Mayor Aurora Glow and to the Lady Chroma Prism of Cloudsdale. She is the reigning winner of the Best Young Flier Award, Chief of Weather for the municipality of Ponyville, and Bearer of the Element of

Loyalty. Sadly, like Ms. Goldenwings, she also suffered the loss of a friend during the *Alicorn's Cup* tragedy. Instead of placing blame for her loss, however, she comes before you to speak in favor of peace and harmony. I give you Miss Rainbow Dash!”

A healthy cheer and the stomping of hooves filled the arena, softened considerably by the fact that the ponies were stomping on solidified clouds. Rarity silently cheered her friend as well. A large opening in the access corridor allowed a relatively unobstructed view of the proceedings, and she paused to watch Rainbow Dash trot up onto the stage. The pegasus was wearing an elegantly simple cream-colored robe with gold trim, and a golden clasp at her throat in the shape of a feather. Rainbow Dash moved to stand next to Gilda, who wore a simple tunic of decorative silver mail.

The hall itself seated many hundreds of delegates and functionaries, with ponies largely occupying one hemisphere and griffons the other. Scattered buffalo, donkeys, and others filled the remaining seats; there was even a pair of camels seated together near the back. Many of the individuals in attendance were ornately garbed, with griffons wearing elaborate armor and plumed helmets, and ponies resplendent in the finest, most current fashions from Canterlot and Manehattan. Rarity fought the urge to search the crowd for examples of her own work, and focused instead on searching for Windlass, Procyon, and anything suspicious.

On the pony side, she noticed that a large contingent of pegasi were wearing the simple tunics and stolae that constituted their ancient hereditary attire, and an entire row of griffons were completely shrouded in thick brown cloaks that covered them from beak to tail, perhaps identifying them as members of some particular sect or monastic order, though that was pure conjecture. Rarity did not yet see Windlass, but she was heartened when she finally picked out Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy seated in the first row, closest to the raised stage.

“There’s Fancypants!” Blueblood whispered. “In the second row on the pony side. A mare is seated beside him, wearing a formal gown.” His voice suddenly became a low hiss. “And my brother is with them, wearing a purple robe—the official robe of the ducal office. He’s already claimed my titles.”

Rarity’s gaze quickly traveled to the spot Blueblood indicated, and fixated on the ponies there. Fancypants was easy enough to identify, sitting erect and wearing a dark, perfectly tailored waistcoat. The thin stallion near him had to be Procyon. Finally, she focused on the pink unicorn mare seated between the two stallions, wearing a voluminous periwinkle gown that matched her elegantly coiffed mane.

Rarity felt the familiar pain surge through her horn, and watched as suddenly, slowly, Windlass turned in her seat. Her heart caught and nearly stopped as other mare stared directly at her from across the Great Hall, smiled wickedly, and winked.

Rarity calmed herself, and refused to be intimidated. She had already proven that she could shut Windlass out of her mind, and she would in moments expose her treachery to all the world. “I am not afraid of you,” she voiced in her mind, and glared at the other mare. Windlass seemed to startle, and then quickly turned away.

“She sees us!” Twilight exclaimed.

“And she’s right behind Pinkie and Fluttershy!” Applejack added. “That can’t be good.”

“No,” Rarity replied steadily. “No, it most certainly cannot. If Windlass has a plan, the time for her to set it in motion is now, before we can reveal her as a traitor. Since we lack surprise, and I do not see anything that might reveal her designs, I believe it’s time for us to act as well.”

“You merely need to lead the way. We will follow you, come what may,” Zinzi declared resolutely.

“Then follow me now,” Rarity said. The opening in the outer passageway led directly to a wide aisle, which bisected the hall into hemispheres respectively populated by ponies and griffons, and which led directly to the stage at the vast chamber’s far end. Wasting no more time, Rarity marched forward, directly into the aisle.

At the same time, Princess Celestia was wrapping up her speech. “Now you have heard enough from me. You will next hear from those who can speak from experience about the possibilities and benefits of a close relationship between our two great societies, and who, despite their youth, have the wisdom to refuse to let fear and anger rule their hearts and minds. I humbly cede the stage to—”

“Rarity?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed as she took to the air in a flurry of wings, letting her robe fall to the stage behind her. “It can’t be. Is that really you?”

As one, every face in the chamber turned to look at the five equines trotting toward the stage, and suddenly the entire hall was alive with gasps, murmuring, whispers, and a few incredulous exclamations.

“It most certainly is,” Rarity replied as she continued forward down the aisle, in a voice she hoped was loud enough for all to hear. “I dare say that it has been a rather difficult

week, and I am ashamed to present myself in such a tragically unglamorous state, but nevertheless, here I am, alive and—well, alive at least.”

At that moment, the hall and the entirety of those assembled within it descended into chaos. Every pony and griffon stood as one and began shouting, demanding explanations, shouting epithets, and making wild accusations. Rainbow Dash, meanwhile, flew at top speed across the hall and was on Rarity in an instant, tackling her to the ground. It required the concerted telekinetic effort of Blueblood and Twilight to pry the pegasus off long enough for Applejack and Zinzi to help Rarity to her hooves.

“You were dead!” Rainbow Dash shouted accusingly, loud enough to be heard over the raucous din.

“Technically speaking, I was not,” Rarity replied. “Though not for lack of effort on the part of a few.”

“Excuse me! Coming through! Ponies on a mission!” Pinkie Pie bounded over, and occasionally on, the heads of clamoring attendees as she made her way across the rows toward Rarity’s group, dragging a frantically apologizing Fluttershy behind her. “Rarity!” the pink earth pony exclaimed. “Wow, Twilight said she and Applejack were going to bring you back and it looks like she did, and you look great! I mean, maybe not as great as you usually look but not bad. I’d say only slightly below average. Are those piranhasprite bite marks? Anyway, everypony was *so* sad because Princess Celestia said you fell off an airship, except for me. I knew you were okay all along, of course, so I just played along because I didn’t want anypony thinking I was some kind of clairvoyant weirdo, because honestly, who wants to live with that hanging over them? Anyway, yay! You’re back!”

“Oh Rarity,” Fluttershy managed, her soft voice barely audible, “I wished so badly to see you again. I couldn’t stop thinking about you, and now I ...” The yellow pegasus abruptly launched herself forward and threw both forelegs around Rarity’s neck as she cried fat wet tears.

Somewhere amidst the hugging and the noise, Rarity thought she could hear Princess Celestia calling for order, and she realized that the situation in the Great Hall was getting out of control. Windlass had the Heavenstone, and with all this commotion the guards present would have their hooves full simply dealing with the crowd. This was the perfect moment for the pink unicorn to strike. A terrible thought occurred to Rarity, namely, that Windlass might have anticipated this very moment, and timed her plan for the chaos that Rarity’s arrival would surely cause.

Rarity had to get to the stage, now. Extricating herself from Fluttershy's forelegs, she saw that the aisle had filled with ponies and griffons who had spilled out of their orderly rows. There was no clear way forward, and no way around, unless ... "Rainbow Dash, be a dear and carry me up to the stage, won't you?"

"Um, yeah! No problem!" the colorful pegasus replied. "I'll have you there in a dash!"

"And Twilight," Rarity continued. "Please follow along with the others as soon as you can find a break in the crowd." When the lavender unicorn nodded in response, Rarity turned her attention back to Rainbow Dash. "Shall we?"

Rainbow Dash beat her wings and rose into the air, before swinging around behind Rarity and descending on top of her in what was truly a most unseemly fashion, then wrapping her forelegs under Rarity's own.

"Yeah, this is more than a little bit awkward," the pegasus mused, before hoisting Rarity skyward with a grunt.

Many in the chamber turned to look as the two ponies rose out of the crowd and slowly flew toward the raised stage at the center of the hall. There, Princess Celestia stood commanding what few guards she had present in an attempt to restore order and calm, and the royal alicorn did not even notice when Rarity was set down beside her.

"How can you be unable to contact Commander Plume?" Princess Celestia asked a cringing pegasus guard. "Find him, wherever he may be, and inform him that he must send an additional security team to the summit immediately! Hurry!"

As the guardspony bowed and hastily flew away, Princess Celestia whirled around toward Rarity. "And you," the frazzled alicorn began, before blinking and shaking her head incredulously as it became clear she was not speaking to another of her Royal Guards. "You ... Rarity ... you're not supposed to be here. You're supposed to be—"

"I have come a very long way to tell my story, Your Highness," Rarity said, bowing respectfully. "To you, and to everyone, if you will permit me."

"I ..." Princess Celestia paused, and composed herself into her normal regal bearing. "What you will say, tell me, will it be harmful to the cause of peace?" She asked the question in a solemn voice, craning her long neck down so as to look Rarity in the eye. "Tell me truly."

"On the contrary, Your Highness, it may be the only chance for it."

“Then you shall speak at once,” Princess Celestia declared, drawing herself upright, her golden regalia gleaming and her long white horn spearing the air as she turned to face the crowd. “I did not want to do this for fear of alarming the attendees, but now is the time it seems. Lay back your ears, Rarity.”

Rarity stepped backwards and obediently flattened her ears to the side of the head just as Princess Celestia opened her mouth to speak.

“BE STILL!” The Princess’ booming voice rattled around the Great Hall like a thunderclap, shaking those present down to their bones. Instantly, the chamber fell silent, save for the muffled clip-clop of hooves on polished wood as Twilight Sparkle and the others marched purposefully through the stupefied crowd and up onto the stage, where they took up positions behind Rarity.

“THIS PONY WILL SPEAK,” Princess Celestia declared, before stepping backward and granting Rarity the floor.

All five of Rarity’s friends from Ponyville were arrayed behind her along with Blueblood, Zinzi, and even Gilda, who stood next to Rainbow Dash with an expression somewhere between confusion and resoluteness.

Rarity scanned her expectant audience. Fancypants stood in front of his seat, looking delighted and shocked at the same time. To Rarity’s surprise, Windlass was still directly beside him, having made no move to flee. Instead, she merely stared back, her expression inscrutable. The pink mare was still very dangerous, perhaps now more so than ever; Rarity’s horn informed her that the Heavenstone was present, probably concealed beneath the folds of Windlass’ gown. She would have to make her point quickly, even though there was so much to explain.

“Hello,” Rarity began, but her voice died in the immense space of the vast chamber. She turned to her right. “Twilight dear, I do not suppose you have a voice amplification spell for me, by any chance?”

“Spell number twenty-two, no problem,” the other unicorn mare replied, and a glowing magenta aura surrounded her horn.

“Thank you,” Rarity said, and this time her voice filled the hall. A low rumble had begun to emanate from the audience; no doubt, many wondered how she would account for her unexpected survival and sudden appearance at the summit. She took a moment to look around before speaking further.

Some in the crowd were still taking their seats, having vacated them during the previous confusion. Most were staring up at her. Oddly, one large griffon among the monk-like berobed contingent was actually making his way out of his row and back up a side aisle, apparently uninterested in what she had to say.

She was also struck by the fact that the three unicorn Royal Guards on the terrace level high above had turned their telescopes around to face the stage. Surely, she understood why they were interested in seeing and hearing what she had to say, but they were abandoning their watch duty by failing to search the sky outside. It seemed there were many problems with the Guard these days, not merely with regard to loyalty.

Most unnerving of all was the fact the Windlass still had not budged, and the pink mare betrayed no sign of emotion—no trace of guilt or anxiety. How could she possibly be so sanguine, just as Rarity was about to reveal her villainy? Procyon’s face, in contrast, was a mess of sweat and fear, as one would have expected. That only reinforced the certainty that Windlass was planning something—but what?

“Ah, hello,” Rarity began again. “My name is Rarity, and by the sound of things most of you know that I am not supposed to be standing before you. The newspapers, I am told, informed you that I fell from an airship during a sudden storm that overtook the *Alicorn’s Cup* airship race. The truth is, I ... really, now? What is it?”

Rarity snapped at Blueblood, who had touched her left shoulder with a forehoof, and was leaning close to whisper in her ear.

“Those guards,” Blueblood whispered.

“Yes, I see them. I am certain they will all receive a demerit for failing to perform their duty. What does it matter?”

“Not that, the telescopes—there is something strange about them. As an airship pilot I’m quite familiar with all manner of scopes, but these are strange to me. It is almost as if there is something familiar about them, but I can’t place my hoof on it.”

“Telescopes? At a time like this, who cares about telescopes?” Rarity whispered back in exasperation.

“He’s right,” Twilight Sparkle added in a low voice, huddling together with Rarity and Blueblood. “I’m familiar with every make and model of pony telescope, and those definitely aren’t Equestrian-made. Royal Guards shouldn’t be equipped with anything like that.”

Rarity looked upward, and scrutinized the unicorn guards again. The three stallions were adjusting the optics on the instruments, and looking through them periodically, perhaps attempting to get a better view. Strangely, they seemed to be looking not at Rarity, but at the griffon section, specifically at the ornately armored dignitaries in the first row. One of the unicorns, she noted, was using his hooves and teeth to adjust the controls, rather than magic, which was also indisputably odd. On a sudden impulse, Rarity glanced down to look at Windlass, and saw that the other mare was also looking up at the guards. Windlass immediately lowered her gaze as soon as she realized Rarity had spotted her, and in that moment Rarity saw the briefest sign of uncertainty flash over the pink unicorn's face. It was enough to give her away.

In that single moment, Rarity comprehended everything.

A spark had ignited in her mind; insights erupted like fireworks as connections were made, and faded memories became as clear as day as they shot to the forefront of her brain. She knew why the Royal Guard had not been patrolling around the city, why the robed griffon had left his seat, and why these unicorns were pointing their telescopes at the crowd. She understood that all of these things were connected, and that Windlass was behind all of them.

Rarity gasped involuntarily, and Windlass, seeing her reaction, immediately raised her left hoof in the air. It was a signal, and in an instant, it was as though the Gates of Tartarus had been opened.

“Rarity, I remember! Those aren't—” Blueblood shouted, before she cut him off.

“Yes I know!” Rarity shouted. “Twilight, cast your shield!” As she spoke, Rarity put all of her strength and ability behind her telekinesis, and as her magic enveloped a very surprised Twilight Sparkle, she pushed, and her friend hurtled off the stage and through the air.

At that same time, a piercing shout filled the Great Hall. “For Equestria!” one of the unicorn guards shouted from his high perch. “Equestria!” all three chorused. “Death to all griffons!”

As one, the guards pulled long handles free from hidden recesses, and began feverishly cranking them. The glass lenses of the false telescopes shattered with a thundering blast and the air filled with smoke and a fusillade of whizzing bullets.

Screams of terror erupted from the crowd, and Rarity could only hope that comprehension had dawned on her swiftly enough. They were not telescopes at all, of course, which should have been obvious given that they were nearly the exact shape and proportions of the prototype cannon Buckaroo and Blueblood had mounted to the deck of the *Alicorn*, with only a few cosmetic details added to complete the disguise.

Thankfully, she saw that a bright magenta sphere had shimmered into existence above the griffon delegation, emanating from the unicorn mare who was now awkwardly seated in the lap of a fat griffon chieftain. The force field appeared to be doing its job, Rarity noted, absorbing the hundreds of bullets slamming into it.

“It’s too much!” Twilight cried out, obliterating Rarity’s temporary feeling of victory. She could hear the strain in her friend’s voice as she fought to maintain her spell against the relentless impacts. “I can’t hold it much longer!”

She likely would not need to, Rarity realized grimly. The frustrated unicorns had halted their attack and were swiveling their cannons, up and toward the stage.

Rarity turned to Princess Celestia, who was still standing behind her at the far end of the stage with a pair of her white-coated pegasus guards. “Your Highness, can you project a shield spell around the stage?”

Princess Celestia shook her head, and when she spoke, it was in an uncharacteristically harried and exasperated tone. “I’ve only just re-energized the solidification enchantment I placed on the city’s clouds, and my power is drained. I have no magic to spare, no idea why these guards are attacking, and I can’t even find my Commander!”

Rarity glanced behind her and upwards to see the unicorns preparing to fire again. “Then might I suggest we all run?” She joined the Princess and the other ponies on the stage in fleeing as the staccato sound of cannon fire reverberated throughout the chamber again. Suddenly, Princess Celestia stopped and turned back.

“No, I will not stand for this,” the alicorn stated firmly.

“Princess!” Rarity shouted, sliding to a stop and turning back. “You have to get out of the way!”

“If this is what a lasting peace requires, then so be it. This is a gesture the griffons will understand. The cloud enchantment will last until non-fliers can be evacuated. No innocent lives will be lost.”

The impacting bullets sent up sprays of water vapor from the cloud surface of the stage, tracing a line toward Princess Celestia, as Rarity lowered her shoulder and slammed into the alicorn's left upper hind leg. Unfortunately, the Princess was far larger and taller than any mere unicorn mare, and outweighed Rarity by an order of magnitude. Princess Celestia barely budged, and the only result was that Rarity rebounded and fell down directly beside her.

She braced herself for the terrible, if brief, pain that she was about to endure, but the cannons unexpectedly fell silent before any bullets found her. In the ensuing quiet, she heard a loud scream, then a dull thud, and she quickly turned around to look.

Up on the terrace, Buckaroo stood alone behind one of the telescope cannons, having apparently shoved its former operator off the edge and down into the crowd below. A second unicorn lay crumpled where Zips had knocked him out with a buck to the helmet. The third cannoneer had apparently just gotten over the surprise of having his comrades attacked, because he was now maneuvering his weapon to point at the interlopers on the terrace. That mistake left him unable to see Rainbow Dash and Gilda leap into the air behind Rarity and streak across the chamber as twin blurs. The treacherous stallion never saw what hit him before he too dropped to the ground unconscious.

Rarity stood and hurried back to the center of the stage, beckoning Twilight to clamber out of the crowd and cast her amplification spell again. She needed to speak quickly, to make sure everyone understood what was happening, and who the culprits truly were.

One of the most elegant-looking griffons, a younger male with golden fur and stark white plumage, wearing a coat of mail painted crimson and a shining steel helm, leaped out of his seat and into the air. Hovering, he pointed an accusatory talon at Rarity.

“What is this madness? How dare you ponies lure us here under the auspices of peace, only to try to have us all murdered? This is an act of war, one which I promise we will meet in kind!”

Princess Celestia, recovered from the shock of nearly being shot, stepped forward to stand next to Rarity. “Please, Elector Kestrik, I assure you that—”

“No more pony lies!” another griffon shouted.

“You encroach on our lands, and now this outrage!” a third yelled. “There must be war!”

“War!” several more griffons took up the cry, and Rarity was dismayed to see a group of ponies, the pegasi who had come wearing the traditional attire of their martial age, take to the air hurling invective of their own.

“Stop it!” Rarity shouted. “Just stop! Stop it right now, all of you, and listen to me! You’re all acting like children.” She looked out at the crowd and waited until quiet reigned again. The elegant griffon, however, spoke before she could continue.

“Then tell us, pony who has mysteriously returned from the grave, what is the meaning of all this? Why have your own Royal Guards attempted to assassinate our leaders?”

Rarity looked at Windlass, who was numbly standing in place, refusing to meet her gaze, and then back at the griffon. “Perhaps it is better if I show you,” she said, and stepped down into the aisle.

With every eye following her, Rarity trotted over to a crowd of bystanders that had gathered around the unicorn Buckaroo had knocked from the terrace. Pushing through the crowd, she saw that he was unconscious but breathing, having after all fallen onto a floor made of clouds.

“Excellent timing, Mr. Buckaroo,” Rarity called out to the stallion standing high above her. “How did you get up there, anyway, if I might inquire?”

“Stairs,” Buckaroo replied. “Out back, for pegasi who ain’t fit to fly. By the way, you know who that is, don’t you?”

“Indeed I do,” Rarity replied. She promptly walked forward and, without hesitating, smashed a forehoof down on the fallen unicorn’s horn, crushing it and snapping it free of his head. The crowd gasped, first in revulsion at her act, and then in shock at the shivers of painted balsa wood beneath Rarity’s hoof, and the exposed striped coat where the horn had been.

“It requires more than a false horn and a third-rate dye job to deceive somepony as practiced in the art of cosmetics as I am,” Rarity said, not mentioning that she had noticed the phony unicorn manipulating the cannon with his teeth, rather than magic.

She turned to address the audience again, her voice amplified courtesy of Twilight’s spell. “You asked about the meaning of these events. Now you see; there are deceivers hiding among us, conspiring to turn ponies and griffons against one another. This is no Royal Guard. For that matter, this stallion is not even a pony. He is a zebra named Zolo, hired to create these weapons and help spark a war.

“You are wondering, I do not doubt, how I know this, and from whence I came to be here after falling from an airship halfway across the world. Again, I’ve found that ‘show, rather than tell,’ is a useful maxim.” Rarity walked back up the aisle, to the fourth row, occupied by the robed and hooded griffons she had noticed before. She had kept an eye on the large griffon who had stood and attempted to walk away before Zolo’s attack, and tracked him as he surreptitiously attempted to return to his seat after the attempted massacre was thwarted. Now she maneuvered down the row to stand before him, and watched as he attempted to pull his hood more tightly around his beaked face.

“I am afraid I am not familiar with your order, sir,” Rarity began, “but I do believe we two have met before, when you wore different attire.”

“Um, the weather clerics don’t talk,” Gilda shouted, still standing on the terrace alongside Rainbow Dash. “Not even to each other. Vow of silence.”

“This one will,” Rarity responded. “You see, Blueblood, er, Duke Polaris and I are the not the only ones to return from the dead today.” She telekinetically threw back the griffon’s hood and tore free a thick scarf covering his beak. “Is that not so, Chancellor?”

As one, the griffon contingent began to squawk and shriek in surprise as Rarity revealed Chancellor Seventalons’ twisted beak and grizzled feathers. Seventalons began to move, but quickly thought better of it as a trio of armored griffons surrounded Rarity and stared him down.

“Everything each of you has heard, every perceived betrayal and backstab that has been used to justify a war between ponies and griffons—they are all lies,” Rarity loudly declared. “But this chicanery ends here and now. I have come all the way from the city of Gallopoli, where a faction of griffons led by your General Karroc attacked the city, attempting to raze it to the ground. Do not bothering denying it, Chancellor, as there are thousands of witnesses. I suspect messenger ponies have already reached Canterlot with the news.

“Karroc hoped to devastate Gallopoli, and then raid the undefended southern reaches of Equestria, forcing our nations into war. But the attack failed,” Rarity stated flatly. “Karroc is dead, his forces are routed, and the survivors are safely in the custody of Captain Spitfire of our Wonderbolts.”

“Aw yeah!” interjected Rainbow Dash, pumping a foreleg in the air.

“Still, I wondered how Karroc would be able to politically position the griffon eyries for the ensuing conflict from a base thousands of leagues away. He needed resources at home, powerful allies who could work behind the scenes, and who had an established base of power.”

“How did you know?” Seventalons croaked.

“I knew Karroc had to have help, but I did not put everything together and realize it was you until now, when I saw you try to flee before the attack,” Rarity said. “Even so, you were not as subtle as you thought, Chancellor. I remember clearly the words you spoke to my dear friend Fancypants when I first encountered you. You said that you looked forward to your imminent victory over the ponies, and at the time it seemed you were speaking of the *Alicorn’s* Cup. But you were not, were you?”

“Even then, I would never have suspected you if not for something I encountered in the Impenetrable Lands, while trying desperately to get home even as your general hunted me like prey. After Blueblood and I escaped Karroc’s first attack, we encountered more of his soldiers in the jungle, who used a potion called *catta* tonic to surprise us. The griffons had discovered a substance that perfectly mimicked death, though the end result was not nearly so permanent.

“Back in Canterlot, when you appeared to be dead, you were really under the effects of this potion. That is why General Karroc spirited you away before any of our Equestrian medical examiners could see you. It was the perfect opening salvo in your scheme to foment distrust and hatred between ponies and griffons, and it allowed you to disappear and continue your scheming outside the public eye. No doubt you planned to eventually install Karroc as leader while secretly retaining the true ruling authority, as the Electors had begun to view you as too old to continue in your position.”

“This—this is insane!” Elector Kestrik cried out.

“The insane thing is that the Chancellor risked exposure by attending the summit,” Rarity said. “I suspect that he had received word that the attack on Gallopoli failed, and wanted to be here to ensure that this final attempt to spark a war did not.”

“Do not listen to this upstart foal!” Seventalons bellowed, finally standing. “Yes, I live, and while I do I am still your Chancellor. Griffons, seize her!”

“Seize yourself, traitor!” Kestrik spat, flying over and landing next to Rarity. “You shame your family, your eyrie, and all griffons. Your time in office shall forever be a black mark on our history.”

“You griffons do not bear the shame alone, Elector,” Rarity said. “Seventalons, at least, wanted to bring glory to your eyries and secure your borders—not evil ends if the ill-chosen means are not considered. Some ponies have done far worse in the name of driving a wedge between our nations. Your Chancellor had allies in Equestria, allies who would gladly have seen untold numbers of ponies and griffons die in order to achieve their mad, shortsighted aims. Chancellor Seventalons was a longtime acquaintance of my dear friend Fancypants, you see, and through him, he met a new business partner; none other than Lord Procyon of Canterlot.”

“My name is Prince Blueblood! The title passed to me when my brother was presumed lost! It can never be taken away! I’m a prince now, and the Duke of Canterlot besides!”

Rarity turned to see that Procyon had stood, his gaunt face sweaty and sallow as he screamed at nopony in particular, and the ponies around him were staring at him in disgust and horror.

“I am hardly lost, you blathering numbskull,” Blueblood said angrily. “To think I defended you when Rarity first named you as a traitor.”

“Fancypants, who I must admit has chosen some very questionable individuals in which to place his trust lately, was conducting business with both Procyon and Seventalons,” Rarity continued, “and he unwittingly introduced them to each other. Together, the new allies hatched a plan most insidious. Procyon raided the finances of his brother’s airship company to make it appear insolvent, thus positioning it for a buyout. He then extracted a tidy fortune from Fancypants in return for selling the company. Procyon funneled that money into building a secret base in the southern jungles, and an armada for General Karroc.

“What happened during the *Alicorn’s* Cup was a preliminary strike, the initial phase of a conspiracy to create a war out of whole cloth—to craft a completely manufactured conflict. The griffons would get a pretext for securing their borders and expelling the ponies from these mountains, and Procyon would get his brother out of the way, as well as an excuse to seize the throne in Equestria, since he knew that the Princesses would refuse to get involved in a military conflict.”

Rarity paused. “Of course, to do that he would need help from within the Royal Guard.” She then turned to Princess Celestia. “Your Highness, have you located your missing Commander?”

“No,” Celestia replied, shaking her head. “Commander Peacock Plume and his regiment have completely disappeared.”

“Unfortunately, I fear you may need to find a new Commander,” Rarity replied. “As this one is in league with the conspirators. When we arrived in Stratusburg, none of the guards who should have been stationed to protect the summit were present. I suspect Commander Plume has ordered all of his guards to muster somewhere nearby, just as I suspect Chancellor Seventalons has stationed a force of griffons in the mountains. The rank and file soldiers surely do not know what is happening, but their leaders are no doubt waiting for a signal that the summit has been attacked, after which they would send their soldiers into retributive battle over the city, thus beginning a terribly costly war. With the attack thwarted, no signal is forthcoming.”

Rarity looked at Procyon. “Did I get that right?” The stallion gave no reply. “Right. Unfortunately, there are other supposedly loyal friends who have betrayed our trust. You see, I did not fall out of an airship during the race. I was thrown out.”

At that, another gasp erupted from the crowd, and Rarity, watching out of the corner of her eye, saw Fancypants jump out of his seat and abruptly move away from Windlass.

“What—what are you saying?” he demanded, moving into the aisle.

“Colonel Tempest was working for the conspirators,” Rarity replied. “His hatred for griffons was so powerful that he longed for war to justify killing them. The Colonel, however, perished at Gallopoli.”

“Then it is all over,” Princess Celestia said, relief in her voice. “The threat is ended.”

“It cannot be,” Fancypants said slowly, continuing to move away from his seat and looking to Rarity. “Because Tempest was not alone with you when you went overboard, was he?”

“No,” Rarity said. “The conspiracy is not ended, nor is the threat we face. I haven’t yet named the pony who masterminded every twist and turn of this foul plot.”

Fancypants turned back to look at Windlass, who gazed back at him searchingly, looking pathetically beautiful in her voluminous blue gown. “You?” Fancypants asked, his voice cracking.

“Her,” Rarity said firmly.

“Guards, arrest that mare!” Princess Celestia shouted.

“No, I don’t think so,” Windlass stated deliberately, speaking aloud for the first time. She telekinetically unfastened the clasps at the front of her gown to reveal a brass breastplate with a large white gem shining in its center. There was a brilliant burst of light and a rush of magic as everypony near Windlass was sent flying, only to crash painfully to the ground or into other attendees several pony lengths away. “All of you, stay away from me if you value your lives!”

“Right, well, I suppose this was inevitable,” Rarity said. “I recommend everypony leave at once. This mare possesses the Heavenstone.”

Another gasp of alarm was heard from the pony side of the Great Hall, and this time Princess Celestia joined in. “No!” the alicorn exclaimed. “It was lost forever!”

“No, it was hidden from *you*, so that you could not steal the last shred of my family’s dignity and history!” Procyon cried, hauling himself to a standing position where he had been thrown by Windlass’ magical blast.

“Windlass my dear,” Fancypants began, cautiously advancing toward the pink unicorn mare. “Whatever is going on here, you mustn’t hurt anypony else. Please, go with the Princess’ guards, and we’ll get this all sorted out back in Canterlot. Everything will be fine.”

“Yes, everything *will* be sorted out in Canterlot,” Windlass hissed. “When I rule with you at my side, and bring your vision of a new Equestria to fruition. No more Princesses, no more predestined misery for ponies who cannot match their talent to their desires, no more foolish shunning of the technology that will allow ponykind to truly enter the modern age. I will make the world you envisioned real, because I have the will to do it! That is what the Heavenstone is, my darling Fancypants, the embodiment of will, of dreams. With it, I can move the stars, I can reshape the world!”

“You have me mistaken,” Fancypants replied, with sadness weighing down his words. “My dream is for an Equestria where all ponies have a say in the government, and in

their own individual futures, not where their destinies are dictated by one mare who thinks she knows best.”

“You will see that I do know best, and that I understand you better than anypony,” Windlass replied. “You will be king, and I will be queen. Queen of everything!”

“What are you talking about?” Procyon piped up. “I am to be king!”

“Back, cur! You’re nothing!” Windlass shouted, and zapped a bolt of magic from her horn that forced Procyon to jump out of the way, whimpering.

Princess Celestia had taken to the air, and now she alighted in front of Windlass. “Surrender now, and turn over that gem,” the alicorn demanded sternly. “There is no escape from this place.”

“No!” Windlass shouted. “I know what you are, spirit! Mirage! Ghost of a dream that has persisted in this world far too long! Neither you nor the thing you call a sister have any power over the Heavenstone, for it is greater than you! Come closer, and I will send you back to the void you hail from!”

Rarity watched Princess Celestia stop and approach no closer to Windlass, though she fixed the mare with a baleful gaze.

“This has gone on long enough, Windlass,” Rarity said. “You’ve lost. You and I both know that the Heavenstone does not consider you its real master.”

“Wrong! This is the Heavenstone, the Stone of Will, and I have the strongest will!” Windlass shouted. “It ... is ... *mine!*” The pink unicorn’s horn glowed with a burning white light, and the air crackled with electricity as she fired a bolt of lightning. The spell, however, dissipated on contact with the force field Twilight Sparkle had just cast around Rarity.

“Insect!” Windlass bellowed, and loosed a second bolt. This time, the impact against the force field sent sparks flying, and the magenta shield glowed brightly before shattering into a million crystalline shards that dissolved in the air.

Rarity watched, horrified, as Twilight was seized by Windlass’ telekinesis and hurled thirty lengths through the air across the chamber. Gilda and Rainbow Dash simultaneously dove from their positions on the terrace, and the griffon caught Twilight in her talons while the pegasus sped directly at Windlass.

“My will is stronger,” Windlass shouted. Rainbow Dash was slammed to the ground, where she skidded awkwardly to a stop in the center aisle. “My power is greater.” She tossed aside Applejack and Pinkie Pie, who had been charging her from behind. Rarity felt her hair stand on end as a great arc of electricity formed above the tip of Windlass’ horn, and the pink mare lowered her head toward Rarity. “Only I have the vision to lead the world forward, and eliminate that which would hold it back!”

Rarity had no idea what to do, and nowhere to run.

“But you do not have the right!” Blueblood shouted, popping up from the row of seats he had used to skulk close to Windlass. He reared back and came down on the mare’s flank with both forelegs, sending her sprawling. The blast that had been meant for Rarity discharged into the air around Windlass, and Rarity looked on in horror as Blueblood staggered away, his face and body badly singed. He appeared to be in shock from the pain of his injuries, and after a few steps, he collapsed to the cloud floor.

Rarity rushed over to kneel beside him, and was relieved to find the stallion breathing and conscious.

“That ... was not much fun,” Blueblood said, moving his mouth into what Rarity guessed was supposed to be a smile, but which appeared more like a pained grimace.

“Not by the looks of things,” she replied softly.

“You can stop her.”

“But how?”

“Believe,” Blueblood replied. “Like I do. The Heavenstone will not obey the will of a madmare. It is yours. It has always been yours.”

Blueblood closed his eyes, though his breathing remained rhythmic and steady. Rarity gently brushed a lock of golden hair, its ends badly burned, out of the stallion’s eyes. Her heart beat with righteous fury as she stood on all four legs.

“Are you finished?” Windlass asked impatiently. “You know, I’ve had more than enough of you. There’s nopony who can save you.”

Rarity stood, and walked purposefully toward the other mare. “You are the one who is finished.”

“Wrong! I’m just getting started!” Windlass replied. The pink unicorn’s eyes flashed white, and Rarity gasped as a bolt of lightning from above struck the cloud floor in front of her. She looked up, and saw that the ceiling was roiling and churning, the painted scenes of weather having been made real. Another bolt of lightning discharged from a dark storm cloud, and Rarity yelped as she felt the heat of its passage. By now, hundreds of attendees were streaming for the exits, giving the conflict a wide berth.

“It’s only a matter of time before I don’t miss,” Windlass noted.

“Then I’ll simply have to come to you, and take the Heavenstone myself,” Rarity said, gritting her teeth. She accelerated toward the other mare even as she saw Windlass readying another lightning bolt. Rarity just had to be faster.

She wasn’t. The blast connected squarely with her chest, and Rarity could feel the power of Windlass’ lightning burn through her, the energy filling her body with heat. For an instant, her body was completely saturated with magic, and she felt its power course through her veins. She wondered if this was merely a temporary euphoria as her body was immolated, but a second passed, and then another, and she finally realized that she was unharmed. Better still, she felt like every imaginable spell, every desire she had ever had, was suddenly at her hooves. It was amazing.

She closed her eyes to concentrate on the feeling, and when she opened them, Rarity saw that she was alone with Windlass, surrounded by empty whiteness. She was again inside the magical nexus of the Heavenstone. This time, however, she felt confident that she was not powerless here. Rather, she felt at home and at peace in this place.

“What?” Windlass demanded. “What happened?”

“By striking me with the Heavenstone’s stored magic, you brought me here and finally completed its connection to me,” Rarity replied. “Your spells can’t harm me, because the magic you wield is not yours to use.”

“We’ll see!” Windlass replied, and again directed a magical blast of electricity. The spell hit home, then fizzled out against Rarity’s coat.

“The Heavenstone rejects you, Windlass,” she continued. “It could never accept as its master one who aims to impose her will on others, for it represents the collective spirit of all ponies, and all our hopes and dreams. That is how the old unicorns moved the sun and moon, not through the hubris of one self-righteous king or queen. Possession of the Heavenstone is a burden, because it makes you beholden to the will of all ponykind, and

you must subordinate your own desires. It represents humbleness and generosity, not individual desire. I understand that, Windlass. That is why the Heavenstone has chosen me, and why you cannot harm me.”

“Impossible!” Windlass spat. “The prophecy cannot be real! I refuse to believe it.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but I must have that diamond,” Rarity replied, and took a step toward Windlass.

“If it is true, if she was right, then you must be destroyed!” Windlass continued, then laughed maniacally. “You would restore the three and bring about the end of the world! That old witch—somehow she knew!”

“Give me the Heavenstone,” Rarity coolly demanded, ignoring Windlass’ nonsensical ranting.

“If I can’t destroy you directly, then I’ll just have to find another way!” Windlass shouted. With a loud pop, she disappeared from before Rarity’s eyes, gone from the nexus. Rarity would not be left behind there a second time. She concentrated, blinked, and found herself back in the Great Hall in Stratusburg.

“Back so soon?” Windlass asked, as Rarity focused her gaze on the pink mare. “Good. Behold.” Windlass’ horn glowed briefly, and her elegant gown was torn off completely and flung aside. Rarity gaped at what was revealed.

Brass rods, gears, and metal plates covered Windlass’ sides and back. Her forelegs were surrounded by an armature of canvas straps and connecting rods, and the whole ensemble was tied into the breastplate she wore, into which the Heavenstone was embedded.

“Tacky,” Rarity declared. “Bizarre clockwork armor is most definitely not in this season.”

“Oh, just wait until you see the *pièce de résistance*!” Windlass retorted. She stomped a forehoof, and the gears and rods surrounding her began to move. She briefly raised each foreleg in turn, pulling on the connecting rods. Dozens of thin brass plates at Windlass’ sides fanned out above her, and unfolded once and then again, forming a pair of broad, shining, metal-feathered wings, the leading edges of which appeared razor sharp. A pair of cylindrical canisters that had been concealed beneath an oversized bustle rose from the mare’s back and then sprang out to either side of her body.

“What is that tragic ensemble supposed to be?” Rarity asked.

“You poor, pathetic, ignorant seamstress,” Windlass said, shaking her head. “Whatever power you think you have is nothing compared to mine. Look on me, Rarity, and see true majesty, for I am greater than your phantom Princesses, and greater than all the kings and mages of the old kingdom, for I will reshape the world. I am your queen! I am an alicorn! I am invincible! Look upon me, and despair!”

Windlass reared back on her hind legs and her great brass wings unfurled to their full span with a metallic twang. The unicorn’s horn began to glow again, and Rarity felt the air in the Great Hall begin to swirl around her, faster and faster, as a windstorm rapidly developed. The wind whipped her mane and tail, but Rarity’s hooves were rooted to the cloud beneath them, and she did not budge. She watched in horrified awe as Windlass slowly rose, the magical wind giving lift to the bladelike feathers of her metal wings.

“Behold your undoing!” Windlass bellowed. “My power is not as limited as you thought, for you failed to comprehend the true power of the Heavenstone! It can do so much more than absorb and store magic freely given; it can also *take!*”

Rarity could do nothing but watch as the Heavenstone, bulging from Windlass’ breastplate, glowed as brightly as the afternoon sun. The white-hot color began to shift, however, first appearing orange, then rose, then finally blood red. Windlass’ eyes glowed intensely crimson as well, and even the color of her magic aura shifted.

At that moment, Rarity realized that all of the ponies and griffons left in the Great Hall had dropped to the floor and were writhing in agony, all except for her. Looking back at Windlass, she could see tendrils of energy extending from each prone figure, curling and wending through the air and terminating at the Heavenstone—Windlass was siphoning the very magical essence of everyone present.

Once again, however, Windlass’ Heavenstone-fueled magic had proven to have no effect on Rarity, yet that did not mean she was safe from harm. She quickly ducked as a steel helmet flew past her head, likely dropped by some griffon in her haste to flee and picked up by the cyclonic vortex inside the Great Hall. She could not simply stand around and wait to be pummeled by debris. She needed to find some way to strike back at Windlass, though that seemed impossible given that the other mare was floating a half dozen lengths above the chamber floor. Suddenly struck by inspiration, she turned and raced to Twilight Sparkle, who lay moaning in pain in the center aisle.

“Yes, flee! Flee before my wrath!” Windlass called after her, her furious voice carrying through the conjured gale.

“Please, you don’t know what you are doing!” Princess Celestia cried out, clearly in a great deal of agony herself. “You cannot use the stone to steal magic! You’ll destroy the city, and every being here! The clouds will lose their coherence, and then we will all fall. Even the pegasi and griffons will not be able to fly without their magic!”

“And you will be destroyed as well,” Windlass spat. “And I shall rule.”

“You will destroy yourself, and perhaps even the Heavenstone with you! You are defiling it with this evil act! Do you even truly know what it is you hold?”

“Silence! I know more than you can imagine!” Windlass fired a bolt from her horn, and the weakened Princess was thrown to the ground in an ungainly sprawl.

“Windlass, stop this madness!” Fancypants shouted through gritted teeth, kneeling on the ground. “You’ll kill me too! You do not want that, surely!”

“I’ll save you! I can save Equestria!” Windlass exclaimed, then let out a bloodcurdling scream. Rarity looked back in horror as a spiderweb of cracks appeared on the pink unicorn’s horn, through which the blood red light poured. “I—I never imagined so much power! I must have more of it! So much more!”

Rarity had reached Twilight, and roughly shook the lavender unicorn by the shoulders to get her attention.

“Twilight, dear, I know you are in pain, but I need you now,” Rarity said. “Please.”

“Wha—? Rarity?” Twilight managed, her body twitching as wisps of magic floated away from her, drawn in by the Heavenstone. “Aagh!”

“I can stop her, Twilight, but I need you to give me wings,” Rarity said. “I need to be able to fly up to her, and take the Heavenstone from her while she is reveling in her new powers.”

“What?”

“The spell you used on me when we traveled to Cloudsdale. Cast it now, before she has absorbed too much of your magic.”

“But—aagh!—those wings were made of gossamer and morning dew! They won’t be any good in this wind,” Twilight paused, her body wracked with spasms, before continuing,

“and definitely not against *that!*” With difficulty, the lavender unicorn raised a hoof and pointed it at the mechanized unicorn hovering in the center of the hall.

“Darling, for the love of Equestria, just do it!” Rarity pleaded, pulling Twilight tightly to her chest. “Believe in me.”

Tears were welling in Twilight Sparkle’s eyes from the pain she was enduring, but she managed to look up at Rarity and form two words. “I believe.”

She pushed Rarity back, and with her face contorted in an expression of sheer torture, her horn glowed brightly, then brighter still, until Rarity felt herself begin floating upwards off of the cloud floor. Sheets of magic were billowing away from Twilight Sparkle now, even as a crawling sensation ran down Rarity’s back. Her body was changing, and finally there was a pop and a bright flash of light. When she could see clearly again, Rarity found herself bobbing up and down in the air with each gentle flap of the iridescent, translucent wings on her back. Twilight was unconscious.

Windlass wasted no time in turning her attention to the hovering unicorn. “Is this some kind of pathetic joke? Are you going to flutter me to death?” she demanded. “I’ll swat you out of the sky, bug!” Windlass manipulated the howling winds and flew higher in the massive chamber. She then performed a graceful loop, her metal wings glinting in the sunlight streaming through the terrace openings, before folding her wings tightly to her sides and streaking down toward Rarity, who barely dodged out of her way.

“I assure you this is not a joke,” Rarity shouted over the wind. “You have time and again completely misapprehended the nature and purpose of the artifact you claim to wield, and that is your undoing. The Heavenstone is the embodiment of will, but not *your* will. Rather, it embodies the will and spirit of all ponykind, and dare I say, all free creatures imbued with the magic that permeates our world. The Heavenstone requires its master to be a servant, to give in to the desires of others for the good of all—that is how its true power can be unlocked, not through the dominion of one mare.”

“More lies! Now die!” Windlass’ entire body seemed to glow with crimson light, and lightning bolts fired from above at the same time as the pink unicorn shot a blast at Rarity from her horn. The bolts connected, and Rarity felt herself covered in a feeling of warmth, like curling up in a thick blanket by the fireplace. “You should be ash! What is this?” Windlass demanded, still firing magic at Rarity.

“You have made yet another terrible mistake, trying to absorb the magic of these ponies and griffons,” Rarity replied, as waves of magic created a coruscating shine around her

body. “You see, my friends and my Princess are among them, and you cannot hurt me with their magic, you cannot even claim to control it, for the magic of friendship is beyond even the Heavenstone.”

Rarity turned to look down on the dozens of ponies and griffons who had chosen to stay, or who had not managed to escape before Windlass began siphoning magic. They were all obviously in pain, and some, like Twilight, had already fallen unconscious. Others, however, looked up at her, and she felt their hope empowering her. “All of you, with what strength you have, resist, and desire her defeat. If you wish it, then so it shall be. That is how the Heavenstone works.”

“Enough!” Windlass continued to increase the intensity of her attack, until it seemed that seams were opening in her very skin, through which the fiendish red light poured. Rarity hungrily drank in the power she was unintentionally being given, as Windlass still failed to comprehend that she was fully connected to the Heavenstone’s magic.

“Indeed, I do believe that is enough,” Rarity replied. So much magic filled her, from the tip of her tail to the tips of her ears, from her hooves to her snout, and in every hair on her body. She was a glowing, living receptacle of magic, and if she desired it, she felt as though she could turn day to night. Surely she could defeat Windlass.

The metal-covered mare ceased her attack and hovered, panting, her face twisted in rage and her eyes glowing red with fury and madness. “Even if I cannot destroy you, I can destroy this city and everypony you care about! Then I will burn your worthless peasant town!”

By now, loud groaning and creaking sounds could be heard emanating from the very structure of the building and the city itself. Windlass was drawing magic even from the clouds. Soon, they would become insubstantial, Stratusburg would dissolve and collapse, and every pony and griffon still alive would fall to their doom.

“You will not,” Rarity replied, “because I will stop you.”

“Stop me? Even if you had the power, you would have no hope of catching me with those flimsy wings.” Windlass increased the intensity of her storm, and flew higher into the chamber.

“Not with these wings, perhaps,” Rarity conceded. “But all I needed was for Twilight to lay the groundwork for what I plan to be a truly bold fashion statement. You see, I don’t

know the spell to create wings, but with the magic you poured into me through the Heavenstone, I can certainly make them *better*.”

Rarity closed her eyes to concentrate, and quickly gathered the massive amount of magic inside her. She then focused on the gossamer wings keeping her aloft, and channeled a spell into them. It was really a simple spell—modification and beautification—no different from turning a bolt of fabric into a shawl, or unruly shrubbery into lovely topiary. The only difference was that this time, she was modifying a pony, specifically, herself. As such, it required a great deal more magic than she could normally muster, but magic was now something she had in wonderful excess. She experienced her body once again changing, though this time the sensation was even more pronounced than when Twilight had created the wings in the first place. She felt sinew and tendons sprouting, muscles and bones growing, and finally, feathers erupting and growing from her skin.

With a final blinding flash and a loud bang, the spell was complete. Floating in the center of the hall there now hovered a unicorn mare with piercing blue eyes, mane and tail of rich purple, and broad, sweeping, pearlescent feathered wings beating the air. The air around her horn crackled with electric blue sparks.

“Oh my,” Rarity exclaimed, turning back to admire her work. “My wings are so pretty.” She turned to look directly at Windlass. “Do you not agree?”

“Wha—what are you?” Windlass asked, her mouth open in shock.

Rarity narrowed her gaze. “I am Rarity, as I have always been, but now I am also the pony who is about to put an end to this nightmare once and for all.” She flapped her powerful wings experimentally, ignoring the magical windstorm whipping around her as though it was a benign zephyr, and flew upward toward the brass-winged mare. Rarity gathered her magic, preparing to wrest the Heavenstone free of the armored breastplate in which it rested, but Windlass fled before she could get close.

Rarity watched, frustrated, as Windlass used her telekinesis to take hold of the pair of steel canisters protruding from her metal armature, and rotated them until they were perpendicular to the floor. With a roar, the canisters shot forth jets of flame, and Windlass blasted upward like a holiday skyrocket. Almost before Rarity could react, she had disappeared through the terrace level opening and out into the world beyond.

On the one hoof, this was a good thing, since Windlass would not be able to continue siphoning magic directly from her friends and from the city superstructure. On a second hoof, she could not afford to let Windlass escape, having apparently lost her mind, and

her body seemingly being torn apart from the inside by her evil misuse of the Heavenstone. Moreover, capturing her and the Heavenstone was perhaps her only hope of restoring the magic that had been stolen, and healing her friends and all the other ponies and griffons Windlass had hurt. Without hesitating further, Rarity flapped her wings and flew after the rocket-propelled unicorn.

It was not difficult to follow the puffy contrail Windlass was leaving in her wake; Rarity saw at once that she was heading for the vast cloud mine adjacent to Stratusburg. She glided after the other mare, soaring through the sky faster than any airship. Amazingly, flying seemed to her as easy and natural as threading a needle, or hemming a skirt, though her only previous experience was with the fragile butterfly wings Twilight had created.

The experience was exactly as it had been in the strange dreams Rarity had experienced under the influence of the Heavenstone. She had been an alicorn there, twirling and looping effortlessly through the sky, adjusting her feathered wings to turn and roll and pitch up and down. Now, it was all real, her wings made flesh. A moment ago, she had thought herself inspired in turning raw magic into powerful wings, but now she could not help but wonder if she was not merely playing a part that had been written for her, and already revealed in her dreams. Had they also revealed her fate? In the first dream Rarity had experienced attending her own funeral. Was that the destiny that awaited her now?

No, surely not—the Heavenstone had protected her so far; if it had granted her the impetus and power to become the winged creature she was, then it had meant for her to succeed. At least, that is what she told herself. She flew on.

Even though Windlass was knifing through the air on bladelike wings, propelled by magic and fiery exhaust, Rarity was gaining. She was less than a hundred lengths behind when Windlass entered the vast latticelike structure of clouds, steel, and heavy mining equipment that formed the cloud mine, hanging in the cold air just off the slope of the nearby mountain range. Unfortunately, by the time Rarity followed her in, the other mare was gone, lost amidst the seemingly infinite platforms and connecting beams. The mine was larger than the entire city of Stratusburg itself, and Windlass could likely hide here indefinitely, if that was her aim.

The massive girder falling from above her, however, told Rarity quite plainly that hiding was not Windlass' only goal. She lowered her right wing and banked out of the path of the onrushing girder, then resumed searching for the other pony. She shook her head as

she remembered that she did not need to use her eyes and ears; as long as Windlass had the Heavenstone, she could not hide from Rarity's horn.

"I know I can't escape you," Windlass' voice called out, though Rarity could not see her. "The Heavenstone has chosen you as its true master, and it is calling to you. I accept that."

"Then give it to me," Rarity shouted, glancing all around as she searched for her quarry. "There is still time to save those you hurt, and perhaps heal whatever damage has been done to you."

"You have it all wrong," Windlass called out from somewhere nearby. "You may be the stone's master *now*, but you can't be connected to the Heavenstone if you're dead!"

Rarity caught the barest glint of sunlight reflecting on brass out of the corner of her eye, and quickly flapped her wings, gaining altitude just as a pair of sharp brass wings sliced past her. She felt a stinging pain in her right thigh, and saw a thin scarlet line traced just below her cutie mark that quickly dyed the surrounding hair red. Fortunately, the wound was shallow.

"Even in this form you still bleed, I see," Windlass called out. "Good to know."

Indeed, even if Windlass could not turn her amplified magic against Rarity, she was clearly just as vulnerable as any other pony to physical harm. She needed to rely on her own magic, and keep the other mare and her metal wings a safe distance away.

Rarity let her horn guide her, even as she banked and swerved through the steel and cloud lattice that comprised the mine. Left, then right, then left again; Windlass was close, and getting closer. Rarity burst out of a cluster of cloud platforms and into open space above the enormous bank of stratus clouds that was the object of the mining operations. The cloud bank itself was festooned with enormous cranes and cutting machines designed to extract blocks of structural-grade clouds. On a hunch, Rarity turned left just in time to see Windlass speeding toward her, brass wings folded in tight. She closed her eyes and reached out with her telekinesis, using all the magic with which she had been imbued to stop the other mare.

When Rarity opened her eyes, Windlass hovered, suspended, only a dozen lengths away. Shining blue coils of magic encircled and bound her, and the pink unicorn screamed with frustration and rage.

"There," Rarity declared. "Now, if you do not mind, I will be appropriating that gem."

“You ... will ... *NOT!*” Windlass gave a defiant cry, and her entire body began to glow and crackle with crimson light, as she fought to take whatever additional power she could from the Heavenstone and from the world around her. The gem was resisting, Rarity knew, but Windlass was clearly willing to completely sacrifice herself and her body in order to destroy her. With a crack that sounded as if the sky had shattered, Rarity was thrown backwards and her spell lost cohesion. When she looked back at her foe, it appeared that what was left of Windlass’ horn had been blown away entirely, leaving only a fiery red torch of dark energy burning atop her forehead. The other unicorn lowered her head and a magical beam lanced forth, severing the boom of an enormous crane and sending it toppling as Rarity barrel-rolled out of the way.

Unsure of what to do and unwilling to be crushed by falling equipment, Rarity flew back into the mazelike mine superstructure. She needed time to gather herself. Her opponent was hardly even a pony at this point, but rather a living, burning embodiment of hatred and megalomania. Even with all the power now at her disposal, what was Rarity to do against such a being? An ominous rumbling filled the air, and Rarity could feel her entire body vibrating.

“What now?” she wondered aloud.

She caught movement in her peripheral vision, and saw one of the innumerable cloud platforms began to move, as if pulled by an unseen tether. Seconds later, another platform was moving, and in an instant the platforms, steel girders, and mining equipment were in motion all around her, as if the entire mine had come alive. With her last, desperate ploy, Windlass had tapped into sufficient power to move an entire city-sized mine.

Rarity dodged a huge pallet of bundled cloud blocks, unsure what an impact with masses of structural clouds would do to her, and she flew away from the prevailing motion of the clouds and equipment hurtling through the air around her. Soon, she was clear, and as she gained distance, it became apparent that the entire mine was collapsing inward; girders, beams, clouds, and mining equipment all coming together in a jumbled mass above the cloud mine. The screeching and groaning of twisting metal filled the air, punctuated by booming cracks as equipment and thick beams were snapped.

In under a minute, the vast cloud mine was no more, replaced by an enormous misshapen sphere of mangled metal hovering above the stratus cloud bank, studded with broken and jagged bits of metal, and steaming from the evaporation of hundreds of cloud platforms. An ominous red light glowed from within the sphere, pulsating rhythmically like an incandescent heart. Whatever this was, Rarity decided that it was

most assuredly not a good thing. After all, Windlass, still drawing in magic through her corruption of the Heavenstone, was at its center.

The uneven surface of the spheroid began to shift and bulge, forming protuberances that became amorphous appendages of metal that expanded outward in a half dozen directions. Rarity watched, transfixed and horrified, as the broken metal began to glow red-hot, melting and changing shape as giant crane booms flattened and were soldered together, and enormous storage containers melted and became incomprehensibly big cogs and gears. A vast figure was starting to take shape, as great metal wings extended, and the oddly-shaped extensions became recognizable legs. Red light flooded out of seams in the thing's surface, and from twin portholes on an armored head.

Rarity knew what it was now, and she finally understood the full measure of how the Heavenstone had been guiding her toward and preparing her for this moment. The steel beast looming before her was the nightmarish titan she had confronted as an alicorn in her dream, the one Windlass had invaded when she peered into Rarity's mind back in the jungle. They had both seen this moment before, and now had realized it together. Perhaps the dream had been a self-fulfilling prophecy, or perhaps it had been merely a glimpse into an immutable future. In any case, Rarity knew what she had to do.

An unfathomably huge metal limb swung through the air, and Rarity was barely able to avoid it. Even the movement of air from its passage, however, was enough to send her spiraling away. She quickly righted herself, beat her wings and flew upward, soaking in the warm sun as she ascended into the heavens, flying faster and higher than the titan could follow.

The air was thick and wet with water vapor, as Windlass' creation seemed to be boiling vast quantities of clouds to fuel its flailing rage, and jets of steam shot high into the air. As she flew higher, Rarity could feel frigid ice crystals forming on the edges of her wings, and it was beginning to be difficult to keep ascending. She finally decided she had reached the zenith of her trajectory, and pitched up, around, and then back down on the opposite side, before folding her wings tightly to her sides. Then she dove.

The dream had not told Rarity what would happen next—perhaps that much of the future had not been written yet. It did not matter. All that did was giving everything she had to stop Windlass, at any cost. She magically gathered as much water vapor as possible as she descended, and tested the limits of her newly acquired power. A cone of visible moisture formed in front of her, then solidified, a spear of ice growing thicker and sharper even as she descended through the atmosphere toward her target. She

compressed the ice, molecule by molecule, until it was as hard and dense as she could make it.

The steel titan, ten thousand times larger than the winged unicorn brashly diving toward it, extended its forelegs and stared up at Rarity with glowing red eyes, eagerly offering itself up in challenge to the gnatlike threat she presented. Her ice lance before her, Rarity closed her eyes, and accelerated into the heart of the monster.

She felt the steel buckle and shatter before her as the monstrosity, forged and bound together by the magic of the Heavenstone, yielded to her as though it was made of paper. Welds failed, connections decoupled, and every part of the thing split apart and fell, where it crashed harmlessly against the mountainside below. A great shockwave radiated outward from the point of impact, vaporizing a large portion of the nearby clouds and forming a rainbow bright and broad enough to be seen for half a hundred leagues or more.

In the middle of it all, Rarity held out her forelegs and caught the unconscious body of a hornless pink unicorn, free of her metal encumbrances save for the breastplate containing the Heavenstone, and bleeding sickly crimson light from a thousand cuts and perforations all over body. Somberly, Rarity ferried her cargo back toward Stratusburg and the Rainbow Palace.

At this point, the entire city was listing to one side, and wisps of cloud were floating away and dissolving all along its edges. Rarity swiftly glided through a terrace opening and into the Great Hall, where her friends and Princess Celestia lay among dozens of ponies and griffons, all of them motionless, barely breathing, and half-sunk into the cloud floor. She set Windlass down in the center of the stage, well aware that she would have to act quickly to save her friends. She prepared to extract the Heavenstone from Windlass' breastplate, then paused as a thought occurred to her.

The Heavenstone was hers now—hers to take and use as she saw fit. Instead of using it for selfish aims, as Windlass had planned, she could use it to generously give of herself, to teach other ponies the proper way to live their lives, and make Equestria a truly beautiful and harmonious place for everypony. She had power now; she even had wings!

What a wise and elegant Princess she would be! It had all been given to her on a silver platter—Celestia was incapacitated, and the meddlesome Twilight Sparkle and her friends were in no position to stop her. Oh, what a gloriously sophisticated future awaited her!

Rarity gasped, suddenly appreciating the twisted turn her thoughts had taken. Without hesitating, she telekinetically wrested the Heavenstone free of Windlass' breastplate. The once perfect white gem now bore a hairline crack, and the light source inside it had taken on a slightly reddish cast. As Princess Celestia had warned, Windlass truly had damaged both herself and defiled the Heavenstone by her actions, and now the magic of the stone itself was selfish and malicious.

In this state, she had to be careful lest it corrupt her too, and it certainly could not restore her friends. They would end up as Discord had warped them, or worse.

"You ..."

Rarity jumped at the ghastly, hissing voice coming from Windlass. The other mare did not move, or generally make any sign that she was conscious, but she had definitely spoken.

"Need to go," Windlass spoke, and her eyes fluttered open, now reduced to dully glowing pupil-less red lamps. "Canterlot. You ... learn ..."

"Learn what?" Rarity asked.

"Prophecy," Windlass replied. "Real ... you ... should know. World ... destroy ... return ..."

"Who in Canterlot knows about this prophecy?"

"Prin ... cess."

"Princess Celestia? Princess Luna?" Rarity demanded.

"Pal ... la ... di ... um," Windlass croaked. Her eyes closed and she was silent again.

Blueblood's boorish mother? Finally, what Windlass had been trying to communicate dawned on Rarity. Palladium was the "witch" Windlass had spoken of, who had introduced her to whatever prophecy possibly pertained to Rarity. Perhaps that explained why Blueblood's mother had reacted so strangely and negatively to her when they had first met, and undoubtedly it meant that the old mare knew quite a lot more about the Heavenstone than she had any right to, given that it had supposedly been buried and lost to history until quite recently. She would need to speak to Princess Palladium.

At the moment, however, she needed to find a way to restore the damaged Heavenstone and save her friends, and the city of Stratusburg. A repair spell might do the trick, she decided. It worked on torn clothing and broken porcelain, so why not an ancient, mystical diamond? Rarity leaned forward, touched her horn to the Heavenstone, and cast the spell.

It did not have the intended effect. Instead, no sooner had Rarity attempted to cast the repair spell than she had been transported to a sensationless, indescribable place, devoid of dimension and utterly disorientating, yet at the same time very clearly non-threatening. This was not the Heavenstone's nexus, she was certain, but someplace stranger and even further removed from her own reality. She had the distinct impression that the space was not empty, but that whoever or whatever was present was utterly beyond her ability to perceive.

She was right. A voice spoke from nowhere, and from everywhere at once.

"Across time and space I hear your call, young one," the voice said. *"You seek to restore one of the gifts."*

"Ah, well, perhaps," Rarity replied uncertainly. "I seek to restore the Heavenstone, to save my friends and others who have been hurt by somepony who misused it."

"I can do this, but answer me, would you give it all back freely? All the power you could want, and more? All that you desire and dream? Would you sacrifice eternity for the sake of this world and its beings?"

In that instant out of time, and that strange place outside of space, Rarity did not think of gems or palaces or princes, or of glamour or popularity. Her response flowed easily and without resistance. "Yes."

"It is done."

"Who are you?" Rarity asked.

"As it was, as it will be, we meet only at the end," the voice replied.

That was certainly enigmatic. "The end of what?" Rarity asked.

"Everything."

As that last word echoed in her mind, Rarity was back in the Great Hall in Stratusburg. Her first thought was that it seemed she really did need to get to Canterlot and ask about that prophecy. Her next thought was rather less able to be plainly articulated. Involuntarily, she let out a surprised yelp as an overwhelming sensation flooded her body, like she was standing under a waterfall, as vast amounts of magic flowed over, around, through, and eventually out of her and into the Heavenstone.

The stone itself glowed brilliantly white, and visible pulses of bright white energy radiated from it, washing over Rarity and the chamber, out into the city, and beyond. The tiny fissure was gone, the Heavenstone restored, and all around her ponies and griffons were quickly regaining consciousness. She could even feel the floor beneath her hooves solidifying, and the city ponderously righting itself. She noted ruefully that her majestic, beautiful wings were gone without a trace, and she was again, as she had always been meant to be, simply Rarity. On the bright side, her coat was pristine and gleaming, and her mane and tail even had their bouncy curls back and in excellent condition. Fabulous.

Windlass, however, remained in the same motionless, pitiable shape. Her body was broken and coming apart, and red light shone through the tears in her coat, from her empty eyes and open mouth, and through the horrible opening where her horn had been. Rarity was not certain whether she was alive or dead, or even whether there could be a distinction at this point.

She stood in place for several minutes, watching as ponies and griffons awoke and took stock of their situation. Every one of them had been rendered unconscious by Windlass' attack, and accordingly none of them had witnessed what came next. Rarity wondered if she would ever be able to relate the tale in its entirety.

She watched as the griffons quickly bound their former Chancellor, and Princess Celestia's loyal guards secured Zolo and his accomplices. Another trio of pegasus guards flew through the terrace opening and into the chamber, carrying a fourth pegasus in a net hanging below them. That had to be the traitorous Commander Plume.

Princess Celestia stood, and immediately looked around the room until her gaze met Rarity's. She then noticed the Heavenstone lying on the floor beside her, and Windlass' crumpled body next to it.

"You can take this thing and lock it in the deepest vault in Canterlot," Rarity said. "Your Highness." She remembered to bow.

“It will be done,” Princess Celestia replied, and then looked at Rarity with a knowing expression. “I look forward to receiving a very interesting letter from you, Rarity. In due time, of course.”

“In due time,” Rarity repeated, exhaling loudly. “Yes.”

The alicorn turned away, and Rarity watched with satisfaction as Princess Celestia moved to stand in the wide center aisle, where the griffon Elector Kestrik and a shaken but uninjured Fancypants had already come together to engage in apparently civil discourse.

Her friends had come around by now too, even Twilight Sparkle, and they gathered together around her. Only Blueblood was too injured to stand, and even he was well enough to wave a hoof at her and smile from his prone position. Physicians from the city had entered the chamber and were already tending to him. Rarity listened to the praise her friends were showering on her, and returned their embraces, but she could not help but feel detached and unsettled.

Too late, she recognized what was bothering her, as she realized she had forgotten to account for one remaining conspirator. Procyon had hidden himself after he came to, and now he dashed into the aisle while magically drawing forth a gilded pistol from behind his shoulderblades, where his purple robe had concealed it. In a flash the weapon was raised and aimed directly at Fancypants’ forehead. It hung in midair there, waiting for Procyon to telekinetically depress its trigger, and Fancypants stared down its barrel in shock.

“You—you did this to her!” Procyon screamed. “You made her like that!” He nodded toward Windlass’ ruined body. “I gave her everything, and in the end all she cared about was your worthless grand vision, and look at her now. Look!” Procyon shuddered, and drew in a deep breath. “If I can’t have her, then you won’t have anything!”

“Fancypants did nothing,” Rarity called out. “I am the one who left Windlass in that condition.”

Procyon’s ears twitched, but he did not turn to look at her, and he kept the pistol steady.

“It was actually entirely her own fault,” Twilight Sparkle pointed out, apparently unable to stop herself.

Rarity’s right front hoof connected with her forehead in disbelief at her friend’s ill-timed words.

“Liar!” Procyon shouted, and turned to look at Twilight.

“And you gave her the Heavenstone,” Twilight added. “You should have known that it couldn’t be used like that.”

“Enough!” Before anypony could speak further, Procyon fired.

As the pistol discharged, Rarity looked on in abject horror alongside everyone else in the chamber. What she witnessed, however, was not at all what she had expected. While she and Twilight had been speaking, she had not noticed the tattered, dimly glowing creature that had been Windlass rise from the floor. Now, in one lurching motion, the broken pony lunged forward, directly in front of Fancypants and into the path of the shot. The bullet impacted, and a blinding red light filled the hall, along with a loud pop. When Rarity’s vision cleared enough for her to see again, Windlass was gone, and thousands of shimmering crimson sparkles filled the air, slowly dissipating one by one as they floated to the ground.

Procyon’s four legs buckled and he silently sank to the floor, even as Princess Celestia ordered her guards to take him into custody.

No pony else spoke for a long moment, as they silently watched the cloud of red sparkles quietly popping and fizzling in the air. Rarity, for one, felt that there was not anything particularly meaningful *to* say.

Finally, Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Huh. Well, you don’t see something like that every day, do you?”

“Nope,” Buckaroo and Applejack pronounced simultaneously.

“Ooh, pretty sparklies!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. She bounded forward and began clapping her forehooves together, attempting to catch one of the last flickering light motes before it disappeared.

“When we get back to Ponyville, I’m going to spend a quiet week at my cottage with my animals,” Fluttershy huffed. “They don’t steal magical gems, or try to take over Equestria, or suck all the magic out of the world, or explode.” She paused. “Oh, I mean, it would be nice if you all could come visit. If you want to, that is.”

“Maybe I will,” Zinzi said. “I could use a vacation.”

Rarity nodded, then quickly turned to stare at the zebra mare.

“What?” Zinzi asked innocently. “I told you I would stop when I was not stressed out any longer.” Rarity continued to gawk, and Zinzi and Zips both visibly suppressed a laugh at her expense.

“Hm, y’know, I reckon I could go in for some downtime,” Buckaroo said, looking down at Applejack, who Rarity noticed beamed moonily back up at him. Finally, she thought with satisfaction, she would have something juicy with which to tease her farmer friend.

“Gilda here’s comin’ back with me,” Rainbow Dash declared, pulling her griffon friend in tight with a foreleg.

“Yippee! We can all have a party!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, and threw herself around Gilda’s feathered neck.

Gilda opened her beak as if to protest, but then simply rolled her eyes. “Alright, alright. Second try’s the charm, eh Dash?”

“So what now?” Twilight Sparkle asked, moving to stand next to Rarity. “There are going to be a lot of questions about all of this in Canterlot. In fact, *I* have a lot of questions. And of course you’ll want to get back home to see your family and let them know you’re okay. So where are you going to go first?”

“Mm?” Rarity asked, not quite focused on the other mare’s words.

“Where do you want to go now?” Twilight repeated. “Ponyville? Canterlot?”

“The spa, of course,” Rarity replied without thinking, then caught herself, and offered a chagrined smile. “Although, perhaps I could squeeze in a few minutes with Sweetie Belle and my parents first. And that reminds me, Fluttershy dear, if you are here with all of us, who is taking care of my sweet Opalescence?”

“That’d be Spike,” Twilight replied.

“Oh that poor dear,” Rarity said, shaking her head.

“Spike or Opal?”

“Which do you think?”

“Um,” Fluttershy piped up, “sorry? He said he had thick scales.” She shrugged helplessly and offered a guilty smile.

“Ya know, folks, I think that’s enough gabbin’,” Applejack declared, then yawned. “I’m not entirely sure what just happened, but I do know that I’m plumb tuckered, and ready for a nap, and a nice, uneventful flight back home.”

“Hear, hear,” Rarity replied. “I believe our ride is still circling the tower.”

“Alright!” Rainbow Dash said. “I’ve had enough of politics for a lifetime.”

As her friends started down the aisle toward the exit, Rarity stopped. “You ponies go ahead. I shall be along presently.”

“Okie dokie!” Pinkie Pie replied, and bounced away, the others following behind her.

Blueblood was still being tended to by a team of pegasi physicians, and she walked over to the cloud stretcher on which he lay. After exchanging a few words with the doctors, she leaned over his stretcher.

“Hello,” Rarity said, looking down at the singed stallion. Even though the tips of his blonde mane were blackened and burned, and patches of his coat had been burned away, his blue eyes were still crystal clear as he looked up at her.

Somehow, this did not seem like the best time to tell him that she needed to speak to his truly awful mother about a prophecy that might or might not involve her, the Heavenstone, a mysterious entity, and the end of the world. She had something more important to say.

“Hello to you,” Blueblood replied.

“Before I go, I wanted to tell you that you do not need to go to such extreme lengths to impress me. Near-fatal injuries seem to be becoming the norm with you, and I’d rather you shied away from those.”

“Then you *were* impressed.”

“Of course. What you did was very brave. And foolhardy.”

“Well, I expect we’ll be leading very separate lives again, so you shan’t have to worry about me risking grievous bodily harm on your account again anytime soon.”

“Oh yes, on that point. I understand you are being taken to Canterlot to meet with the Princesses’ best physicians. I am returning to Ponyville with my friends.”

“Then this is goodbye.”

“In the most technical sense, yes, I am going to have to bid you farewell in a moment. But not in the permanent sense. You see, I have business to attend to in Canterlot soon. I would like to see you then.”

“See me?” Blueblood repeated. “I presume you mean that only in the most technical sense.”

“That is how the encounter will begin, as one does have eyes. I, however, do not so constrain my vocabulary as to limit my words to their plainest meaning.” Rarity smiled. “Which is to say that lately it has seemed prudent to expect the unexpected.”

“Then I shall be prudent and expect to see you,” Blueblood replied.

“Until then,” Rarity said. “Oh, and I expect you to be up on all fours when I arrive. I may decide I feel like taking risks, and it is simply no good to engage in risky ventures with a hobbling invalid.”

“Really?” Blueblood asked, eyes widening. Then he grinned. “Well, I don’t know. The magazines and dailies will be calling, and I’m rather looking forward to cutting a tragic figure. The bandages and wheelchair will only add to ... it was a joke! Rarity?”

“See you soon,” she called back, knowing that she was leaving Blueblood to wonder about the meaning of her words, and not knowing the answer herself.

Whatever happened, she would no doubt learn many things in Canterlot. Right now, though, it was finally time to go home.

“My dear, if you had not declined my offer at this point, I believe I would have to question your good judgment,” Fancypants said, then took a small sip of espresso from his ceramic demitasse.

Rarity sat opposite him at a small bistro table outside her favorite Canterlot café. Two weeks after returning from Stratusburg, she had felt up to visiting the capital once again.

Twilight had come along as well, and was most likely presently engaging the Princesses with her new theories about ancient pony history. Rainbow Dash, having decided to take a few tentative steps toward assuming some responsibility in her family’s business, had joined in on the trip to Canterlot to attend a meeting regarding the rebuilding efforts in Stratusburg. Pinkie was here to support Rainbow Dash, and more likely than not, to have a time of it cavorting about the capital in a highly inappropriate but undeniably entertaining fashion.

“In any case,” Fancypants continued, “I’m afraid I would have had to eliminate the position I offered you, even if you had not so graciously declined. This is not an ideal time for me to pursue any sort of political aspirations, given that my good name is not what it once was.”

“Pish posh,” Rarity declared. “You are still the most highly regarded pony in Canterlot, save Princess Celestia herself. Your entirely innocent association with a few bad actors is not going to change that. Surely you do not think that you have been implicated as responsible for any of their misdeeds? If so, then perish the thought!”

“Even if my good intentions are not in question, I must appear a naïve fool to have so completely surrounded myself with villains, all the while not suspecting a thing. At least, that is how the journalists will portray me—as a chump, a credulous naïf. I shan’t be able to meaningfully advocate for reform of the royal government when I have lived for months in ignorance of a scandal that nearly brought down the entire country. No, my dear, it is far better that I quietly and inconspicuously keep to my business affairs for now, and leave politics to those better suited.”

“But you cannot simply disappear at a time like this,” Rarity protested. “Equestria needs you. I understand that our relationship with the griffons is still not completely repaired, and there is much to be done in terms of undoing the damage the conspirators inflicted on Gallopoli and Stratusburg.”

“Quite right, my dear, but the work you speak of can be accomplished more efficiently from a business perspective, I think. I have acquired the coal mining enterprise that was causing the griffons so much distress, and I am working to move it out of the Flurryfall Pass and well into our own territory. Also, I am already in the process of forming a joint venture with a few Canterlot companies, Skyworks, and a griffon corporation to rebuild the Stratusburg cloud mine. I envision that the way to a lasting accord in the region is to bring the griffons out of the eyries and into our cities, towns, and businesses—peacefully. As for Gallopoli, I understand that recent events have thrust it onto center stage, and ponies from the core cities are booking vacations in droves. It won’t be long before that town is fully rebuilt and inundated with tourists.”

“That is good to hear,” Rarity said. “But I do hope you will not give up on your greater dreams and aspirations. You are a truly good stallion, and not to be blamed for the actions of a few misguided associates. Everypony will suffer for it if you disappear behind your companies.”

“You are far too generous with your sentiments,” Fancypants replied, and smiled. “As I said, we shall see where life takes me. I still believe in getting all ponies involved in the government, but for now I must secure my interests, and throwing myself back into my work is the best way to do that. You need not worry that I shall become boring and staid, though, for there is never merely one iron in the fire as far as Fancypants is concerned.” The stallion softly chuckled, then paused briefly. “I should mention that one business venture with which I am no longer affiliated is airship engineering and construction. I reconveyed all interest in North Star back to Duke Polaris last week, along with a considerable sum of bits as reparations in lieu of a legal action. I have every intention of keeping all four hooves on the ground for a time.”

“Mm,” Rarity managed, before taking a sip from her own coffee cup. “You don’t say?” She made certain that her intonation and facial expression gave away nothing more than the most casual of interests before continuing. “I have heard nothing of the Duke’s affairs since I returned to Ponyville.”

“He is busy—almost frantically so, if my limited interactions with him are any indication. As of three days ago, he seemed almost entirely physically recovered from his ordeal. Of course, I do not know how well he is coping otherwise. I imagine he feels a sense of betrayal even more acutely than I do, after having his own brother turn against him.”

Rarity wondered how Blueblood would react when he learned that Rarity had come to Canterlot in part to confront Princess Palladium, and learn how she might have been involved in the conspiracy. If it turned out that Blueblood’s brother and his only living

parent had both been involved in plotting against him and against Equestria, she could only imagine that the discovery would be devastating.

Yet, she had no choice but to talk to Palladium and try to learn whatever she could about the supposed prophecy, and about the Heavenstone and its connection to her. The stone itself had been turned over to Princess Celestia for safekeeping, but now Rarity was forced to wonder if every innocent dream was in fact some kind of premonition. If she was not going to spend the rest of her life worrying that her destiny was being manipulated by a gemstone locked up in the Royal Archives, she needed answers.

“In any case,” Fancypants continued, “the Duke seemed no fonder of me than usual, and was not entirely receptive to my profuse apologies for the harm done to his business. He still accepted my money, of course. One day, when this past crisis is not so fresh, I should very much like to hear you tell of your exploits in the jungle. It is certainly a testament to your infinite patience that you did not turn the Duke over to the griffons, or use him to distract some jungle monster or other.” The stallion sighed. “I jest, you understand. You must have enjoyed some level of camaraderie with that pony to have accomplished so much, and escaped so many difficult scrapes.”

“It’s alright,” Rarity replied. “He can be an exasperating stallion, even in the best of times. Truly, I ...”

“A-*ha!* There you are!”

Momentarily startled, Rarity quickly set her cup down and turned to greet the bright pink mare bounding toward her. “Hello, Pinkie Pie,” she said.

“Hi Rarity!” Pinkie replied enthusiastically. “Hey Mr. Fancypants, it’s nice to see you again!”

“Good morning, my dear,” Fancypants replied, offering a warm smile.

“Fancypants is such a great name for you,” Pinkie Pie continued. “Your parents must have been geniuses or something. I mean, you’re so fancy, and I bet you have the fanciest darn pants in the whole pants world, and the craziest thing of all is that I’ve never even seen you *wearing* pants! It’s so humble of you not to show off those fancy, fancy pants! Anyway, Mr. Fancypants, I’m so sorry to interrupt, but we’re here for Rarity.”

“Erm, ‘we?’” Rarity inquired.

“Whee!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, leaping joyfully into the air. “Oh, I mean, ‘we,’ as in Dashie and me.”

“Look out below!” a new voice called out. Rarity instinctively threw one protective hoof over her head, and carefully braced her cup against the table with the other. Rainbow Dash, mercifully, avoided causing any property damage as she swooped out of the sky and landed beside Pinkie. “Hey Rarity,” the pegasus said, then turned to Fancypants. “We need to borrow Rarity. Um, please.”

“Rainbow Dash, Pinkie, I am enjoying coffee with a dear friend,” Rarity chided. “Whatever you want, I am absolutely certain it can wait.”

“Oh no, my dear,” Fancypants said. “Please do go on with your friends. Whatever they have in store for you, I suspect shall prove to be most entertaining.”

“It totally will!” Pinkie Pie proclaimed giddily.

Rarity regarded Fancypants uncertainly. “Are you sure you do not mind?”

“Quite sure. There will ample time for the two of us to reconvene later. After all, you are staying in Canterlot for the remainder of the week.”

“Well, alright then.” Rarity took one last sip of coffee and excused herself from the table. She levitated a trio of golden bits from her pannipurse toward the table, but no sooner had she set them down than Fancypants had returned them.

“You have treated me to your delightful company, and thus it is only fair that I should treat you to coffee.” He raised a hoof to forestall any argument on Rarity’s part. “Not another word, I insist. Now please have a lovely time with your friends.”

Rarity said a hasty thank you and extricated herself from her seat, even as Pinkie Pie was pushing and prodding her away from the café. She smiled helplessly and waved goodbye to Fancypants, then allowed the pink earth pony to guide her along. Rainbow Dash kept pace several lengths overhead.

“Really, you two, what is this all about?” Rarity demanded. “You know how much I value what little time I get to spend with Fancypants.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Rainbow Dash called down. “But this is kind of a big deal.”

“And that hunky Prince Handsomeface really wants you to be there,” Pinkie Pie added. “And we promised we’d bring you!”

Rarity planted her hooves and ground to a halt. “Do you mean to say that Blueblood asked you two ponies to collect me?”

“Um, yeah,” Rainbow Dash answered, hovering in place and crossing her forelegs impatiently. “If you want to know why, just follow us, okay?”

“If this is one of your pranks, you are going to regret it, Rainbow Dash,” Rarity threatened, narrowing her gaze. She resumed following a bounding Pinkie Pie.

“Nope! No pranky-panky here,” the pink pony promised. “Oh, hey, would you look at that? We’re here!”

Rarity turned a corner and found herself standing in the broad thoroughfare that was Unicorn Street, only a short distance from the gleaming golden statuary and white marble pavement of Summer Square. The square, surrounded by stately government buildings and the magnificent estates of the Canterlot elite, was packed with ponies, and at the center of them stood Blueblood.

More precisely, he stood at the top of a flight of marble stairs leading to the hanging gardens in the center of the square, and was addressing a throng of onlookers. Many were journalists, carrying pens and stenographer’s pads, and a number of pegasus photographers hovered, great boxy cameras at the ready. Blueblood smiled as he made eye contact with Rarity.

“You all have my sincere gratitude for attending this press conference on such short notice,” Blueblood said, addressing the crowd while looking directly at Rarity. “As you know, I have refused to provide an interview since I returned to Canterlot. You must have thought me mortified, due to my brother’s key involvement with what you have so creatively dubbed ‘the Heavenstone Conspiracy,’ or terribly distressed at his subsequent imprisonment. Of course, I am mortified, and I am distressed. I am also burdened with guilt, as it was centuries of selfishness on the part of my family, including me, which allowed the Heavenstone to be put to nefarious use. Even if nopony could have foreseen that it could be transformed into a weapon, I and each of my ancestors who had the opportunity should have relinquished it to the Royal Archive, where it belongs and where it now rests forever. More than anything, however, I am relieved.

“You see, since my return, I have been attending to the business of recovery—not only physically, but fiscally, with the reacquisition of North Star. Mostly, though, I have recovered my sense of self. Before, I was the Duke of Canterlot, the Twenty-Fourth Prince Blueblood, Unicorn Royal, Heir to the ... you all have heard the litany. I was a series of names, none of which were my own, and I was the culmination of an endless cycle of futility, representing the final flickers of a dying flame, soon to be extinguished. I was a living tribute to the name of ancestors long gone, pursuing their dreams though time has passed them by. In my unquestioning reliance on bygone glory, and an unrelenting need to reinforce my destiny as restorer of greatness to the name Blueblood, I acted like an utter foal, disregarding others and my own country. I was loathsome, and I loathed myself for living each day in denial of my own individual identity apart from the family name and the meaningless honorifics.

“No longer. With Princess Celestia’s consent, I have relinquished my peerage and all titles.” Blueblood paused as a collective gasp emanated from the crowd, and blinked against the photographers’ popping flashbulbs. One of the bulbs burst, and bits of broken glass tinkled against the marble in the quiet following the announcement. Finally, Blueblood spoke again, “As my younger brother is otherwise indisposed, the titles, such as they are, have been conferred instead upon the elder of my younger sisters, now styled Princess Ruthenium, Duchess of Canterlot. I hope that she too will abandon this ancient burden someday, but that is her choice now. The pony standing before you, then, is not Prince Blueblood, nor a duke, nor heir to anything. I am simply a Canterlot stallion named Polaris, and from this day forward, I will be living for my own aspirations, and not the faded dreams of the past. I will care for myself, my friends, and for Equestria—not for a meaningless legacy.”

The moment Blueblood ceased his speech, a number of reporters in the audience began shouting questions.

“Will you be moving out of your castle?”

“So, does this make you a baron now, or a count?”

“Is it true that Fancypants hired a zebra warlock to have you killed?”

“Have you lost weight?”

“Tell us about the rumor that you are really Princess Celestia’s nephew!”

“Are you seeing any special somepony these days? What about your sisters?”

“Is it true that in addition to the Heavenstone, your family is also hiding the mystical Princess Bridle of Dream Valley?”

“Can you confirm that you are planning to grow a goatee?”

Rarity was appalled, not by Blueblood, but by the fact that none of the so-called journalists seemed to have heard a word he had spoken. He had renounced his nobility, sacrificing that which made him significant and gave him notoriety. He had forsaken something that she had yearned for all her life.

“No questions,” Blueblood said firmly. “But there is one final thing. The Princesses have elected to pardon me and the rest of my still-living family, save my brother, for failing to disclose our possession of the Heavenstone over the long span of years. Yet something must be done to atone for the conceit, in this day and age, that we were entitled to secrete away something that was always meant as a gift for all ponykind, not a treasure to be hoarded by a single bloodline. Something must be done about the hubris and ill-manners which I unrepentantly displayed for so long. So, let us get this over with.” Blueblood looked to his left. “Blindfold please.”

Rarity was startled by the sight of Rainbow Dash alighting next to Blueblood, holding in her teeth a pair of goggles with the lenses blacked out. The unicorn stallion quickly levitated the eyewear away from Rainbow Dash and affixed the goggles snugly over his eyes.

“You all may want to keep to a safe distance,” Blueblood said. Rarity was startled a second time as she realized that not only had Rainbow Dash disappeared while she was listening to Blueblood speak, but so had Pinkie Pie. She gasped involuntarily, along with the crowd of onlookers, as she saw her friend wheeling a large-bored, stubby cannon toward Blueblood, its thick barrel painted a bright sunshine yellow.

“Any last words?” Pinkie Pie asked, then continued without pausing. “Nope, didn’t think so.” She snapped the blackout goggles once against Blueblood’s face to make sure they were secure, causing him to wince, and then shoved a large, multicolored lollipop in the stallion’s mouth. “Goodnight, sweet prince,” Pinkie Pie intoned. “Or good afternoon I suppose. Whichever.” She shrugged, then pressed down hard with both hooves on a large red button atop the barrel of the cannon. The weapon immediately issued forth a tremendous blast.

“No! Wait!” Rarity found herself shouting, too late to do any good. She was familiar with Pinkie’s homemade artillery, and had never known the consequences to be dangerous,

but she had also never seen Pinkie fire one of her cannons point blank at another pony before. She watched helplessly as Blueblood took the full force of the impact ... and was completely covered in the crumbly, decadently gooey remains of a large chocolate cake, one which had clearly been liberally slathered with bright pink frosting.

“I officially declare my pastry cannon a success!” Pinkie Pie announced gleefully.

As dozens more flashbulbs went off, the crowd of journalists, tourists, and interested Canterlotians laughed uproariously at the sight of the cake-covered stallion. They had heard, Rarity knew, of the fiasco at the Gala, but only a few select photographers had been allowed inside, and none of them had captured the most humiliating moment. This was what they had been hoping for ever since.

Rarity found herself giggling along with them, but then forced herself back into stoic silence. She knew that Blueblood had choreographed this scene not only to disarm the journalists who might otherwise be asking difficult questions about his family and his own involvement in the events precipitating the conspiracy, but also for her benefit, to try to make up for the Gala by subjecting himself to mockery. Well, if he thought that a cheap trick like that was going to make a difference, not to mention getting her friends in on it ...

Before she could think better of it, Rarity pushed through the crowd and trotted up the marble stairs. She hooked a foreleg under one of Blueblood’s own frosting-coated limbs, and dragged him away from the crowd, while gratefully observing that Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash stepped in to prevent anypony from following.

“What are you thinking, acting like a buffoon in front of the press and the whole city?” she demanded.

“Hey, look, it’s Rarity!” one of the photographers shouted from well behind her, and immediately another dozen flashbulbs popped, dashing Rarity’s hope that they would have run out of bulbs by now. She rolled her eyes.

“I noticed that you made it,” Blueblood said, removing his goggles even as Rarity hauled him down the stairs on the other side of the square. “Thank you.”

“Allowing Pinkie Pie to douse you in dessert in no way cancels out the Gala,” Rarity said. “Spectacular as the gesture might have been.”

“It was also spectacularly delicious,” Blueblood replied, licking clean as much of the area around his snout that his tongue could reach. “But really, this was what you wanted,

wasn't it? Public embarrassment? Those pictures will make the front page of the *Times* tomorrow."

Rarity pulled him around a corner into a quiet alley, then wheeled around on him. "You know full well that I wanted nothing of the sort. Did I not tell you before, back in the jungle, that no successful relationship can be based on keeping tallies and tit for tat?"

Blueblood's sticky face was crestfallen. "Then ..."

"Just stop and listen to me," Rarity continued. "I may have laughed at the sight of you covered in cake frosting just now, but it didn't negate the way you've acted in the past. The other thing you did, though—that was truly remarkable. I can hardly believe you repudiated your titles."

"Oh," Blueblood said, then sighed deeply. "Well, you were right. You told me that I had to live for myself, and not repeat the same mistakes that my father, my grandfather, and Celestia knows how many of my ancestors made. Actually, she probably does know. I could not do that as a duke or as heir to an imaginary throne."

"But you were the most important noble in Equestria, after the Princesses," Rarity protested. "It must have been terribly difficult to give that up."

"It was not as hard as you might think. Now, I can design my ships, run my company, and not spend my days worrying about the decline of my family name and wondering what new insult my mother will have invented to describe my ongoing failure to restore Princess Platinum's line to glory. I refuse to care about any of that. That is why I asked your friends to bring you here, so that you could see that the old Blueblood is gone. The stallion who treated you so badly has been sent out before the firing squad and is no more. The stallion who remains, though he may at present be somewhat stickier and more chocolaty than usual, is and will henceforth remain the stallion who came into being there in the Impenetrable Lands, with you."

"So, you really are sincere," Rarity said, her intonation that of a rhetorical question.

"Look at me," Blueblood said, waving a foreleg to encompass his entire cake-and-frosting-covered body. "Can you imagine I would willingly do this, were I not sincere?"

Rarity sighed, then raised her own right foreleg to his face, and gently brushed away as much of the remaining cake residue as she could. "No, I suppose not. How did you manage to get Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash involved in your little performance, anyway?"

“I was the pony who requested the presence of your pegasus friend in Canterlot in the first place, as well as her cousins on the Skyworks board of directors. I have now invested a rather large amount of money in the rebuilding of the Stratusburg cloud mine, and also pledged sizable charitable sums toward mending other damage suffered in that town, and in Gallopoli as well. In return, I merely asked for a little favor. Miss Pie, I believe, simply wanted to cover somepony in cake.”

“So you’re generous now, too,” Rarity said.

“The money in the cloud mine is an investment, and I suppose it would be fair to say the donations are as well, in their own way—investments in goodwill. Whether they will pay off, I do not know, but I will call it a calculated risk.”

“You are all about calculated risks these days, it seems.”

“Sometimes. In truth, I’ve bet everything on this latest venture, and I have no idea whether it will pay off at all.” Blueblood lifted a foreleg to touch Rarity’s own, at which point she realized that she was still unconsciously brushing his coat and mane.

“Which venture is that?” Rarity asked, slowly withdrawing her limb. She could feel the heat in her cheeks of a betraying blush.

“You, of course,” Blueblood said, flashing a tentative smile. “Do you care to give odds on whether I am likely to see a positive return?”

Rarity hesitated. “Well ...”

“Come now, how can you resist the alluring scent of cake frosting?”

Rarity smiled. “It *is* good to see you,” she said, then leaned forward and rested her cheek against Blueblood’s strong neck. “And I’m proud of the decisions you are making. I would not be averse to continuing to see you from time to time in, you know, a friendly manner.” She continued to rest against him, pondering whether to say anything else, and if she did, what to add. What she was doing was more than friendly, but at the same time, she could not think of a good reason to stop. Suddenly, she remembered why she had come to Canterlot in the first place and abruptly pulled away.

“I’m sorry, Blueblood, but I must be completely honest with you before we get carried away. I should have told you at once, or better, by letter before I arrived, but I am here in Canterlot in large part to see your mother, Princess Palladium. I was planning to arrange a meeting with her for this evening, or tomorrow at the latest, before I asked to see you.”

“My mother?” Blueblood exclaimed in consternation, standing up stock straight. “My mother hates me for abandoning my royal claim, hates you for being a commoner, hates the Princesses, hates the modern world, and is in general a bottomless font of misery and despair. Moreover, she’s been isolated in her chambers ever since Procyon was taken into custody. Why in the name of all that is green and growing do you want to see her?”

Rarity looked away. “I don’t *want* to see her at all, believe me. Nevertheless, I feel that I must. Before Windlass, well, exploded, she told me that your mother knows of a prophecy, and she claimed it somehow involves me.”

Blueblood laughed, which was not at all the reaction Rarity expected. “Oh, well, for a moment there you had me concerned. My mother spends all of her considerable free time reading about our family history and the old unicorn kingdoms, convincing herself over and over again of our supposed superiority. She must have memorized a hundred ancient ‘prophecies,’ not one of which has come true, so far as I know. Do you know that she is not even a blood descendant of Princess Platinum? Her lineage traces back to the royal seers—charlatans the lot of them. Perhaps that is part of the explanation for her fixation on the past, obsession with the future, and refusal to acknowledge the reality of the present. I am sure that when Windlass was in the castle with Procyon mother harangued her about some bit of ancient nonsense or other, and it simply stuck with her.”

“Well, even so,” Rarity began dubiously, “I feel that I must ask her about this.”

“Oh, by all means,” Blueblood said. “We should go there now and see if we can roust her from her depression long enough to convince you there is nothing to any of her so-called prophecies.”

“Alright,” Rarity agreed, “but first, let us become presentable. If I am not mistaken, there’s a ‘Towels and Toboggans’ outlet in the next lane over.”

An hour later, she and Blueblood, their coats clean and dry, stepped out of a well-appointed private carriage and onto the front courtyard of the dreary stone castle that was the stallion’s home. Blueblood thanked and tipped the pair of teamsters pulling the conveyance, and they gaily trotted back toward the city.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?” he proposed, motioning Rarity through the main door. “Mother will be in her chambers on the upper level.”

“I really do hope this is all just nonsense, as you say,” Rarity said.

“Complete codswallop, I promise. Hogwash. Balderd—”

“I get your point,” Rarity said, following Blueblood up a winding stone staircase. “To change the subject, I have a question that has not come up yet. Would you prefer that I refer to you as Polaris now, because I’m rather accustomed to Blueblood at this juncture.”

“When and if Ruthie has a son, he will be called Blueblood, and then it would be cumbersome to have two of us, I think.”

“Yes, well, it is rather presumptuous to think we should even be on friendly terms so far in the future, and besides, I was only making small talk. I am going to call you Blueblood regardless, because I want to.”

“Then I suppose that is what I would prefer. It is always easier to prefer the inevitable. Speaking of which, now it is time to learn about this prophecy that purportedly concerns you. The princess will be in her study.” Blueblood knocked on the centermost of three thick oak doors at the top of the stairs. “Mother! You have a visitor!”

A deep jade aura enveloped the door, and it slowly swung open, revealing a high-ceilinged stone chamber fifteen lengths long and half as many across, lined with towering oak bookshelves that brimmed with thick tomes, yellowed scrolls, and ancient manuscripts. The room was lit only by flickering torchlight. Twilight Sparkle would be in ecstasy here, Rarity thought. To her, it was musty, dark, and more than a little creepy.

On the far side of the room, Princess Palladium sat in a high-backed wooden chair. She wore a black mourning cloak over her gray coat, and her snow white mane spilled carelessly over her shoulders. A black veil half covered her face, and she cradled an obviously ancient, deep-bowled mandolin in her forelegs. Rarity walked tentatively toward her, keeping close to Blueblood.

“A most unwelcome visitor, but not an unexpected one,” Palladium said, her voice echoing in the dark chamber. “I knew you would come, mare.”

“What are you talking about?” Blueblood asked. “And what are you wearing? Procyon is imprisoned, not dead.”

“Be silent!” the old mare shouted. “I am well aware of the pains you have taken to rid yourself of your family obligations. If you are not Prince Blueblood any longer, then you are of no consequence to me. Do you honestly believe a flighty thing like Ruthenium is going to bring us back the throne?”

“I believe she will have the good sense not to try. That empty dream has consumed enough lives,” Blueblood replied crossly.

“Ha! That is why I am in mourning,” Palladium said. “Not for my son, but for our family. You have in one fell swoop destroyed the ancient line of the royal unicorns, after all these thousands of years.”

“There have not *been* any royal unicorns since Celestia took the throne, mother!” Blueblood reported. “And there never will be again! Now, please explain what you meant about expecting Miss Rarity?”

“Yes, how could you have been expecting me?” Rarity asked. “I did not call ahead.”

“You already know how,” Palladium replied tersely. “Think, mare.”

“The Heavenstone,” Rarity replied immediately.

“Correct. I know all about your special bond. I too was briefly connected to the Heavenstone,” Palladium replied. “I feel echoes of its power still. I felt the twisted magic of its corruption, and the death of my former acolyte so many leagues away. After you confronted her, I knew it was only a matter of time before you came to me, seeking answers.”

“Acolyte?” Rarity repeated, wondering if she had heard correctly. “Windlass?”

“I know you cannot be talking about that lunatic mare,” Blueblood stated. “She was of no noble extraction. You of all ponies would have had as little to do with her as possible.”

“She was a great deceiver, Windlass,” Palladium said softly. “She convinced me that her blood was pure, just as she whispered poison into the ears of my sweet boy. While you were out gallivanting and wasting your life, she wormed her way into our home, all in order to steal our great treasure. I enabled her.”

“You taught her the secrets of the Heavenstone,” Rarity surmised. “That is how she was able to master it so quickly.”

“Yes,” Palladium admitted. “To my great shame. I believed that with Procyon’s blood and her ambition, she could convince all of Equestria to return to the old ways, and give the throne back to us. She would have been able to use the Heavenstone to bring forth day and night, and replace the usurper Princesses. The fool stallion now standing before me would have been paid in mares and money to abandon his own claim. I never

suspected that Windlass intended to betray my trust, nor that she had brainwashed poor Procyon into supporting her insane ploy. I supplied the raw materials and the knowledge that fueled her madness.”

“Why?” Blueblood asked, clearly shocked. “I am hardly surprised that you think so little of me, but I cannot believe you could be so completely taken in by a mare who simply appeared out of the blue, that you would desecrate Princess Platinum’s tomb and dig up the Heavenstone for her?”

“No, Blueblood,” Rarity said, shaking her head. “If she was able to teach Windlass the secrets of the Heavenstone, she must have taken it from the crypt long before Windlass sought it.”

“This is why you are a failure, Polaris,” Palladium said to her son. “Even one such as this, whose veins carry not one drop of nobility in them, is cleverer than you.” She turned back to Rarity. “You are right, of course. After my husband was killed, the appointed task of restoring the true monarchy fell to my children, for I am not a direct descendant of the Blueblood line. They would need all the strength of their ancestors.”

“You mean, they would need the Heavenstone,” Rarity said.

“Just so, and in order for them to use it, I had to master it first. I spent years poring over the collections of past princes and princesses, and before them the kings and queens of the old kingdom. I reclaimed the Heavenstone from its resting place, and with the secrets of its former masters and mistresses at my hooves, I learned how to use it to amplify my magic.”

“But without the magic of other ponies on which to draw, the Heavenstone’s power would have been limited to a reflection of your special talent,” Rarity said.

“Again, correct. Do you know where my special talent lies?”

“Is your talent living in the past?” Blueblood offered. “It has always seemed that way.” Palladium ignored him.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Rarity confessed.

“My talent lies in dreams,” Palladium said. “It was my name once, Salvia Dream of the Sage family. All my life I dreamed, first of finding a prince, and then of restoring him to the kingship he was born to hold. I dreamed for my future and my children’s future. You see, mare, I come from a long line of dreamers. I trace my line to Sage Whisper the

Allseer, the royal prophet of the first King Blueblood's court. Unlike my illustrious ancestor, I was never able to see the future as clearly as if it was the waking present, but still I dreamed. Then, finally, the Heavenstone fully awakened my sight. Tell me, mare, did it allow you to glimpse that which has yet to come to pass?"

Rarity thought of the dreams she had experienced, and how they foretold her confrontation in Stratusburg. If not for the Heavenstone preparing her for those moments, she certainly would have perished. "Yes," she quietly replied.

"That is because the magic of the Heavenstone transcends time as we perceive it. So it was that the Heavenstone triggered what of the seer's gift existed in my blood, and allowed me to experience a forgotten prophecy, perhaps the most important prediction ever made."

"Windlass—she said it was a prophecy ... about me," Rarity managed.

"I told her to be wary of you before the race, after I realized what you were, there at the dinner," Palladium said. "But she never truly listened to anything I told her. She was already lost to obsession and her paranoia. She had already chosen to see you as a romantic rival, and a convenient target that would enable her to neutralize the Elements, when the fact is that you represent the greatest threat the world has ever seen. You are the harbinger of the end."

Blueblood guffawed. "A threat, mother? A *harbinger*? You are speaking of a hero, an Element Bearer, as you well know. You do not have to listen to her, Rarity. Let us leave her to her enfeeblement, and not pay her ravings any further mind." He turned to go, but Rarity did not follow.

"Whatever you may have come to believe," she addressed Palladium, "I assure you that I am a fashion designer and independent businessmare from Ponyville, not a sign of the end of days."

"More importantly, there are no real prophecies!" Blueblood exclaimed angrily, returning to Rarity's side as he realized she was not trailing behind him. "Go ahead, mother, let us hear this latest. Here is *my* prediction: it will be vague, unprovable, and sprinkled with just enough recognizable details to lend an air of plausibility. And it will be completely and utterly false."

“There was the prophecy of Nightmare Moon’s return,” Rarity pointed out. “Twilight Sparkle found it in a book in the Royal Library, and it turned out to be true. That book led us to the Elements of Harmony.”

“Yes, many of the predictions of the seers and prophets of old have truth in them,” Palladium said. “Though you will not find this one in any edition of *Predictions and Prophecies*, for it came to me only after I had retrieved the Heavenstone, and gazed upon the eternal fire dancing within it.”

“Oh, even better,” Blueblood said, rolling his eyes. “This one you made up all by yourself.”

Palladium magically tugged on Blueblood’s ear until he yelped in pain. “I am your mother and you *will* respect me.”

“Leave him be,” Rarity said sternly. “He is right, you know. No matter how many predictions have come true, and no matter what visions the Heavenstone may grant, there cannot be any truth to any prophecy which suggests that I am somehow going to do Equestria harm. Tell me what it says, and then let us leave in peace.”

“You will know it soon,” Palladium replied, abandoning her magical hold on Blueblood’s ear. “But first a brief primer on pony history. What do you know of the Adamant Triskelion?”

Rarity started at the unexpected question. “As a designer, I know that a triskelion is a symbol of three elements in symmetry around a central point. As a pony with a bit of a weakness for gems, I can tell you that adamant suggests the finest form of diamond. I, however, have never heard those words used together.”

“Few ponies have who live today,” Palladium said. “The Adamant Triskelion was the symbol of a tribe of ponies who disappeared over fifteen thousand years ago, before even what we now call the paleopony period, and long before any of the history you learned in the classroom. Even by the time of the Great Exodus, the Triskelion, and what it represented, was nothing more than the stuff of a few half-remembered songs and oral legends. Before all knowledge of the Triskelion and what it represented disappeared from the world, one unicorn made it her mission to collect every fleeting scrap of information she could unearth. When Clover the Clever passed away, Princess Platinum carried on the mage’s work in secret, as a lasting tribute. They were lovers, you know. It is all in Platinum’s journals.”

“I most certainly did *not* know,” Rarity replied, blushing. “Nor do I see the relevance. Perhaps you can explain it to me.”

Palladium did not respond immediately, but instead magically strummed a few chords on her mandolin. “Within the bounds of these castle walls, all of Clover’s research on the Adamant Triskelion is safely stored, just as it was maintained by Princess Platinum and generations of my predecessors.”

She hummed several bars of melody before continuing. “Clover the Clever translated this ballad from some obscure and forgotten old dialect into Ancient Unicorn, and I translated it into the ugly earth pony tongue that has come into general parlance today. It was no easy task to keep the rhyme and meter intact.” Palladium proceeded to sing, her voice little more than a rasping whisper, but every note of the elegiac melody was perfectly on key.

*In primal wastes silent and stark
The first one wound the springs of time
And ere she vanished in the dark
She left three gifts for ponykind*

*The first to be a source of might
Together gathering our will
To summon forth the day and night
The Heavenstone we treasure still*

*The second for our darkest hour
When magic fails and strength has died
Its promise faith, and hope, its pow’r
The Hopestone bearing seeds inside*

*The third to grant stability
To save us from chaos’ snare
This wondrous stone of harmony
The Balanestone, beyond compare*

*The three great diamonds shining bright
The relics of the ancient one
Our gift, our symbol, our birthright
The Adamant Triskelion*

“This verse is all that survives of the Ballad of the Three,” Palladium concluded, lowering her mandolin. “The song speaks of the first one, Primordiala in Ancient Unicorn, called Fürstin or Faust in the old earth tongues, and Protalogo by the pegasi—one who was there at the beginning, and according to legend, will be there at the end. The three were her gift to us, or so the song claims, but then somehow they became separated and lost. Whether the first one is real, or not, the three diamonds surely are. Of that, Clover and Platinum were certain.”

“Then, there were three diamonds, each akin to the Heavenstone!” Rarity exclaimed. “My stars! Where are the missing stones now? If the wrong ponies find them, or worse, some beastly creature like Discord, the crisis could be far worse than Windlass’ conspiracy!”

Rarity did not add that she was positive she had encountered the very entity that had created the Heavenstone and the others. It—she—had given Rarity the power to restore the Heavenstone. Did she have some new plan for the world? Was that the substance of the prophecy?

“I know not where the other diamonds rest,” the old mare replied. “Nopony knows. The unicorn royals possessed the Heavenstone, of course, but even they did not remember how or when they obtained it. The civilization that was gifted the three had been gone already for many ages in Platinum’s time. Now, not even the songs of their time remain.”

“Perhaps then, if they are truly gone, there is nothing to fear,” Rarity posited.

“There is everything to fear!” Palladium said hotly, “*You* will seek them out, and gather them, and when you have succeeded in bringing the three together again, their joining will signal the end of the world. *That* is the prophecy—Princess Platinum’s one, only, and final prophecy—revealed to me through the Heavenstone, where she had hidden it so long ago! It is already in motion. When you claimed the Heavenstone’s power and defeated Windlass, you proved that nothing, not even all the magic in the world, can stop it.”

“I will do what?” Rarity asked, staring at Palladium in a state of shock.

“This is too low, even for you, mother!” Blueblood shouted. “This is the single most outrageous, scurrilous, cruel, and most assuredly untrue thing I do believe you have ever come up with. I may have had to endure years of you playing mind games on your own family, but you will not play your games with her!”

Princess Palladium set her mandolin on the floor and stood. Without acknowledging Blueblood, she calmly walked over to the high bookshelves to Rarity's right. The old mare raised a foreleg and pressed it against a particularly thick tome, and then it felt to Rarity as though the entire castle was rumbling and shaking. Several lengths worth of bookshelves, and the stone wall behind them, sunk into the floor to reveal a previously hidden alcove.

"What is this?" Blueblood demanded.

Rarity stepped forward to get a better look, and saw that the alcove was filled with scrolls and loose parchment, as well as bits and pieces of artifacts, the identities of which she could not even begin to guess. The center of the alcove was dominated by a large stone slab, held upright by metal supports embedded in the pedestal on which it rested. A simple design was carved into the surface of the stone, worn but still clearly visible after many millennia.



"That is it, is it not?" Rarity asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Her heart was racing; it felt as though it was hammering against the walls of her chest. "The triskelion design of which you spoke?"

"Yes. This is the only surviving original representation of the Adamant Triskelion, found in the old country, and transported by order of Clover the Clever during the Exodus."

"It's not what you think," Rarity whispered.

"It is exactly what I think. I was assured of the prophecy's verity the instant you stepped hoof in this room and I saw your mark."

"That is not my cutie mark," Rarity protested weakly. "It isn't. My diamonds are arranged vertically, you see, not in symmetry like these. Not a triskelion."

“The precise arrangement matters not, mare,” Palladium said. “The Adamant Triskelion is merely a symbol. It cannot be denied that you bear the mark of the three ancient diamonds, there on your flanks as plain as day, and it cannot be denied that you are the mare of the prophecy. I shall share its riddle with you now.” Platinum stood in front of the pedestal and spoke clearly, the words obviously having been long memorized.

*Once three, now six, and two, and one
And so the world will be undone
A mare will bring us to our fate
Soon to unlock the crystal gate*

*After the encore of nightfall
After the mad king’s curtain call
The mare will bear our crown and name
Though with no rightful royal claim*

*The two, then six, but first the one
Her mark is the triskelion
A rarity, a crystal key, a sun-bereft ancient city
Will forge a bond to mend the three
And hasten forth eternity*

“The mare is you!” Palladium declared. “Everything in the prophecy screams that it is so—there can be no question! ‘Nightfall’ refers to the dark princess’ foretold return. The mad king is Discord, defeated by you and your friends. You made a mockery of Princess Platinum in that despicably plebeian pageant, where you took her crown! Your very name appears in the prophecy, and so it was that I knew what you were there at the dinner. Now that I see your mark there can be no denying it. You, mare, will be the undoing of the world!”

“But that is not my cutie mark,” Rarity managed. “My mark is not a triskelion!” She felt like a force was constricting her body, rendering it difficult to breathe. Princess Platinum could not have made a prediction about her—surely not a prophecy such as this! Yet, there was no denying Palladium’s interpretation of Nightmare Moon, and Discord, and then there was the pageant! “What does it even mean?” she mumbled. “Those numbers—the city—the key. I don’t understand.”

“It means nothing,” Blueblood declared firmly. “Nothing except that my mother is cracking up in her dotage. Numerological gibberish? Vague references to magical knickknacks and mysterious locations? A few recognizable clues scattered amidst a

garbled mishmash of nonsense? You said it yourself—your cutie mark is completely different from that symbol. And the mere presence of a noun which happens to match the letters of your name does not mean this prophecy has anything to do with you.”

“The numbers are clear enough,” Palladium said. “She will claim each of the diamonds, and bring about the end of the world.”

Blueblood continued. “Even setting aside all reason and reality for a moment and assuming that this is a genuine prophecy, now that you know it you are not bound by it. You are never going to cause the world to be undone, whatever that means.”

“Prophecies cannot be so easily circumvented,” Palladium said. “The more you squirm to free yourself from its inevitability, the more fate will conspire to ensure it comes to pass. The failure of all of Windlass’ vile machinations proved that nothing can stop it. This mare will bring about the end!”

The gray unicorn fiddled with something within the alcove and then stepped back into the center of the chamber as the shelves rose from the floor and concealed the secret alcove again. Palladium then returned to her wooden chair, retrieved her mandolin, and began to softly play, humming along with the chords.

Rarity had been standing completely still, unable to move while she struggled to process this new and terrible information. Finally, she turned to Blueblood, and softly spoke. “I want to go. Away. Anywhere. Now, please.”

“Yes, of course,” Blueblood replied hastily. “I know a place far enough from here.”

“Good.”

“You can have him,” Palladium called out, as Rarity and Blueblood exited the chamber. “He is a commoner now, no better than you, mare. Do with him what you will. Soon, it won’t matter anyway.” Rarity hurried down the stone staircase without once looking back.

They walked in silence for a time, out of the castle and through its grounds, finally arriving at a narrow, winding path that climbed the mountainside behind the castle. The path appeared to be poorly maintained, if maintained at all, and little traveled, but it was clear enough for a careful and sure-hooved pony to manage. Blueblood led the way, and Rarity followed numbly behind him, matching his hoofsteps but otherwise paying little attention to her surroundings. He was forced to catch her with his telekinesis twice.

When they arrived at the ordained spot, Rarity was still so distressed that she could barely see straight, and she had no idea where she now stood. It was not until Blueblood raised a forehoof to gently touch her cheek that the unanticipated contact jolted her back into the moment. She shuddered, and he hurriedly withdrew the appendage.

“I’m sorry,” Blueblood said.

“No, no apologies necessary, I simply need a moment to gather myself.”

Rarity finally took in her surroundings. She stood on a narrow grass berm at the edge of a sheer drop, midway up one of the less imposing peaks surrounding the summit of Mount Royal. Canterlot Castle was visible in the distance, cantilevered out from the mountainside, and the alpine forest surrounding Blueblood’s castle lay spread out like a green carpet below her. In the middle distance the city of Canterlot blanketed the slopes, its spires gleaming in the sun. Half a dozen large airships were visible in the skies overhead, approaching and leaving the Skyport, and numerous smaller craft flitted among them. It was too far to see them, but Rarity knew there must be hundreds of pegasi in the air as well. It was a beautiful day for flying.

“What is this place?” she asked Blueblood. “It’s lovely.”

“I would come here when I was younger, when I wanted to be alone. That was fairly often, as you can imagine. It was a good spot to watch the airships and dream of flying away forever.”

“You know, I might have given you more credit in the beginning if I had known your mother all along. Even as atrocious as your manners were, you were not hateful.”

“I claim no excuses,” Blueblood said. He walked close to the edge, not more than two lengths away, and sat on his haunches on the grass. Rarity hesitated just for a moment, wishing for some approximation of a blanket in order to preserve her pristine coat, and then set down her pannipurse and took a seat beside him anyway. “You know,” Blueblood continued, “that prophecy could just as easily have referred to Windlass.”

“I do not want to speak of it,” Rarity said crossly.

“She planned to wear a crown and call herself queen, which is the title Platinum held in the end. She claimed the Heavenstone, and would have gladly seized the other diamonds if she had known of them and could find them, and she may very well have brought about the end of the world if she had been allowed to continue. With her gone, I suspect the prophecy is now meaningless.”

“Yes, but her cutie mark was a weather-vane, not these three miserable diamonds!” Rarity gestured at her right thigh. “Now those words will haunt me day and night, probably forever. What is the meaning of three, six, two and one? There were three gems, three tribes, and three rulers at the time of the Exodus. There are two Princesses today, but one for the last thousand years. There are six Element Bearers and six Elements, and there are probably a hundred more potential meanings to ponder as I lay in bed. Where is the crystal gate? Am I the ‘rarity’ of which she spoke? When will my life cease to be my own, and become merely part of some prediction made before even Princess Celestia lived? It isn’t fair.”

“You should put this prophecy business right out of your mind. If there was ever any truth to it, now that you know of it, you can simply choose to stay away from any mystical, magical gems that come your way.”

“I’m responsible for bearing the Element of Generosity, Blueblood. I am afraid that magical gems are going to be a part of my life for the foreseeable future. Now that it’s clear that there is some intellect within them, and some entity out there who created them, I wonder if someone else has not been steering the course of my life all along. How did I come to be an Element Bearer? How was it that I was in exactly the right place and time to connect with the Heavenstone? Do I have any free will at all, or am I nothing more than somepony’s doll to be played with, acting out a story that has already been written?”

“Of course you have free will. You’ve built a life for yourself using only your wits, talent, and dedication. You found your way into the highest circles in Canterlot, and are thrice a national hero now. How could you doubt that it was you who made that possible?”

“I have diamonds on my flanks,” Rarity said. “You have a compass rose. Who put them there? Why? Do we not deserve an explanation for these marks that adorn us for all the days of our lives, and define our talents? Why create these gems that have so much potential for destruction and give them to ponies who would use them for ill? Is it a game? Are we game pieces? If so, I do not want to play, or be played with.”

“You are important and unique,” Blueblood said. “Just as your name declares. You are nopony’s game piece.”

“The prophecy, whatever it means, will turn out to be true,” Rarity said dejectedly. “Just as the prophecy of Nightmare Moon came to pass, and the Elements manifested, as foretold. Perhaps Windlass was right to lash out against a world in which so much of our lives and experiences are foreordained. She believed that she would be able to replace

cutie marks and destiny with her own mad will, which is not particularly a better outcome, but at least she attempted to fight back. Of course, she lost. Your mother was right—no pony can fight destiny. Once the course of things is set, it can't be changed.”

“You’re wrong. Look at me. I was destined to make the same mistakes as my father and his father, and spend my days absorbed in their hopeless, pointless dreams. I was callow, vainglorious, and generally a miserable twit. Would you have believed that I could change the course of my life? You made it possible for me to do so.”

Rarity felt a chill from the wind blowing against the side of the mountain, and moved closer to Blueblood. She allowed herself to lean against him, and had to admit that it felt wonderful to have somepony else supporting her.

“Cutie marks and prophecies exist in this world,” Blueblood continued. “But they are just parts of lives that are filled with choices left to us to make. I could have been an explorer or a cartographer, but I chose to design airships instead. You could have been a gemologist, a jeweler, or perhaps even a treasure hunter with your skills, yet you chose to become a fashion designer, because it is your passion. You choose to be generous to those who do not deserve your generosity, and I have chosen to be a better stallion.”

Blueblood paused for a moment, and Rarity suddenly realized that he was idly stroking her mane with a forehoof. Had he just begun doing so, or had he been doing it all the while he had been speaking? She could not be sure, but she made no move to stop him.

“Life is really nothing but choices, one after the other,” Blueblood concluded.

“Even if you’re right, how could I prove that I have free will?” Rarity asked, looking up at him. “There is no way to be certain that any thought, any act, is my own and not simply what was meant to be.”

“I suppose that, at that extreme, you must simply beli—”

Blueblood was cut off as Rarity threw her forelegs over his shoulders and pressed her lips against his. She gave the experimental kiss all of the passion and energy she could muster, and when she broke it off seconds later, both ponies were left breathless.

“What was that?” Blueblood gasped.

“Spontaneity,” Rarity replied. “Free will. No intelligent designer of the universe would have expected something so absurd as for me to kiss you.”

“Ah, right. Okay. A true exercise of freedom of expression that was. I wonder, though, perhaps a second—”

Rarity kissed him again, with even more ardor than before, permitting herself to give in to every whim and guilty desire that she had suppressed. Blueblood fell back on the grass and she toppled with him.

“Take that, prophecy,” Blueblood gasped, looking up at her with wide blue eyes.

“Well, I for one refuse to believe that anypony could have predicted this eventuality,” Rarity said.

“In the interest of really sticking it to the mysterious powers that be, would you consider making this a sort of indefinitely continuing protest? Like going on strike against fate.”

“But then it would eventually become predictable,” Rarity pointed out, still pinning him to the grass.

“I suspect I could manage to keep things interesting, if I put my mind to it,” Blueblood replied. He was close enough that Rarity could feel the warmth of his breath on her face, and the warmth of his body merging with her own. It felt wonderful. “I’ll build you a new airship,” he said, “and fly you anywhere you want to go. Or maybe I’ll keep the destination a surprise, in the interest of randomization.”

“Let’s go to Ponyville,” Rarity said.

“Ponyville?” Blueblood asked with a quizzical look.

“Yes. That is where I want to go. You see, there’s a lovely spa there, and I have my darling house in an absolutely charming part of town, and my boutique on the ground floor.”

“Well, it’s not exactly the most exotic destination.”

“My cat is there,” Rarity continued. “She’s a bit like your mother in temperament, though at least Opal’s claws retract on occasion. And my family is there too—my sister and parents. Have you ever visited?”

“Actually, I don’t believe I have.”

“Let’s go then. You are a common pony now, and I am oh-so-common, a simple mare born and bred in the countryside, surely not the sort of pony about whom anypony

would prophesy. And we common folk are hardly Canterlot ponies, am I right? At least, we do not always have to be Canterlot ponies. Right now, I'd rather not be one."

"I suppose a visit could be arranged," Blueblood said.

Rarity sat up immediately. "Wonderful! How quickly can we get to the train station? I will have to send a note to Fancy pants apologizing for leaving town so abruptly, but I am certain he will understand."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Canterlot is too full of big things at the moment, like destiny and ancient, magical gemstones. We might be able to catch a very late supper if we make the Express."

"Ah, are you certain you would rather not retire to my place?" Blueblood asked, gathering himself. "I know of a chamber on the ground level where the mustiness of the air is overpowered by the staleness, and I've always found the draft to be part of the charm."

Rarity only glared at him.

"Right then. To the train station."

Rarity prepared to stand, but then noticed that the sun was beginning to sink low over Mount Royal, and the blue sky was giving way to rich reds, oranges, and pinks that reached out toward her from the horizon. It was beautiful.

"Maybe we can catch the late evening train," she proposed. "I hear they've added a bar car."

"That wouldn't be so bad," Blueblood said, and gently pulled her close. "Be honest. If I go with you, are you sure you will not end up disappointed, now that I am no longer royalty?"

"I *had* really hoped to find myself a prince," Rarity admitted, "and it's true that you no longer fit the bill, as it were."

"I am still rich and famous, if that helps."

"Mm," Rarity mused. "A little."

“And fiendishly handsome.”

“Mm.”

“And terribly clever, and ... *ouch!*” Blueblood looked up, where she had lightly rapped his horn. “I’m surprised I got that far.”

Together, the two ponies watched the sun set behind the mountain. They could use magic to light the way back down the path, and the evening train to Ponyville did not depart for another two hours.

“This is ... good,” Rarity said at last. “Going home will be good. I need to be absolutely certain that I am in control of my—”

She did not notice Blueblood leaning toward her until his lips met her own, but the surprise did not prevent her from closing her eyes and committing wholeheartedly to the kiss. It was an overeager, uncoordinated sort of kiss, but it was nonetheless delightful in every way.

“Well, I suppose I don’t need to control absolutely every aspect of my life,” Rarity said after a breathless moment.

“It might be more fun if you didn’t,” Blueblood offered.

“Yes, well, you know, even if there is no free will, even if all of this is somehow exactly what was meant to happen, tonight I don’t care a whit. Tonight, I’m going to permit myself to be happy just to be alive. I believe I’ve earned it.”

Rarity stood up and brushed a few loose blades of grass from her coat, and then proceeded to give Blueblood one more quick peck on the lips for good measure. “Now let’s go see about that bar car, shall we?”