

Spirits of Harmony

By Stormchaser



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Chapter I

Reflections

“We need... *you*.”

Rainbow Dash's heart skipped eight beats. With a yelp of joy, she jumped a good twenty feet in the air and beat her wings furiously. This was everything she'd ever dreamed!

“Sign me up!” she declared gleefully, nearly overcome with excitement – before she remembered what it was that she'd come here to do in the first place. Important details first. “Just let me tie this bridge real quick, and then we have a deal”

Suddenly, the bone-white filly was somehow nose-to-nose with her, a look of outrage writ large on her face. “**NO!**” she cried, “It's them, or us!”

Dash recoiled in shock at this grim ultimatum. She just wasn't sure what to say – what she *could* say to that. Before she had any time to reply, a call came from across the chasm. “Rainbow!” It was Twilight Sparkle, the distant, bookish unicorn she'd met just yesterday. “What's taking so long?”

Rainbow looked away, back to the Shadowbolts. She heard Twilight mumble something, and then cry out fearfully, but she only heard “Don't listen-” before the Shadowbolt leader turned her eyes towards the bridge, and the rest got blotted out, muffled somehow. Dash hung her head dejectedly as the mare turned back to her.

“Well?”

Rainbow shut her eyes, her whole body shaking. This meant everything to her – a chance to be recognised and respected and *envied* all across Equestria, a chance to lead an aerobatics team that would take the world by storm. Finally, a chance to do what she'd dreamed *her whole life* of doing.

It was too good to pass up. She opened her eyes and locked her gaze with the pale mare.

“You,”

The shadowy mare's face lit up with a triumphant smile. It was done.

NO!

Her friends needed her! This wasn't the Rainbow Dash who'd never leave Ponyville hanging! This wasn't the Rainbow Dash that her friends could always rely on! This wasn't Rainbow Dash at all! Her friends, – her best friends, all of them – were relying on her, trusting her to fix that bridge.

Could the Rainbow Dash everyone knew and loved really give up on her friends now – and if she could, did she really want to be that pony?

Her heart felt like it had been wrenched halfway out of her chest, but she managed to plaster a polite, innocent grin across her face as she zipped up to the Shadowbolts.

“Thank you, for the offer, I mean.” she quipped, already moving to tie the bridge off securely, before soaring into the sky to say one last goodbye to her would've-been benefactors. “But... I'm afraid I have to say no.”

And with that, she whipped off into the fog, back across the ravine to her friends. Behind her, she could have sworn she heard some kind of soft puffing noise. As she touched down with a flourish on her friends' side of the bridge, she was greeted by the delighted cheers of her friends, and an especially relieved comment from Twilight.

“Good job, Rainbow!”

She had had her life's dream offered to her on a silver platter, and she had been forced to abandon it for what really mattered. Sure, it hurt, but knowing she'd done the right thing eased the pain.

“See?” she said, with a grin that suggested a lot more happiness than she was actually feeling.

“... I could never abandon my friends, no matter what.”

Wait a second.

That wasn't her voice.

Dash awoke with a start. The first few rays of dawn were just breaking over the horizon. At ground level, they would barely even have been visible, but high above the ground in her little cloud-palace, they were more than enough to light up her room.

She looked up at the mess of Wonderbolts posters plastered across the walls and smiled happily. If it took five years, she'd join the *right* team, the *right* way. Screw those phony “Shadowbolts” that Nightmare Moon had cooked up. She bet they wouldn't have been even half as cool as the Wonderbolts anyway. Sure, she hadn't got to hang out with them all that much at the Gala. Hell, what happened at the Gala was probably best forgotten. But what little time she did get to spend with them, in the Gala, and after the Best Young Flier Competition in Cloudsdale, gave her the impression that they were the real deal.

She'd be a part of them one day, and she wouldn't have to give up her friends to do it. She'd made the right choice, and hey, when it all came down to it, she'd gotten a pretty cool memento from the whole experience.

She turned her head towards the gleaming thunderbolt necklace lying on her trophy rack.

The necklace that was shining like a lantern without any sunlight shining on it.

Dash leapt up off the mattress with a yell of surprise – but when she looked at the necklace again it was just sitting there, polished to a mirror shine and glinting slightly, but perfectly normally, as it always was.

The pegasus massaged her temples gently and grinned. “Relax, Dash. You just woke up. Had a weird dream was all”

“Hey! Rise and shine, Rainbow Dash! Oh, we have so much to do today, I don't know how we'll get it all done if we don't hurry, and then what will we do? We'll have to pull a night-shift, but that doesn't make sense, because how are we going to pull any pranks at night? Anyway, if we pulled a night-shift we'd be sleepy, and then we'll get even more behind tomorrow, and I mean, whoever heard of pranksters pulling a night-shift *anyway*, I mean *really*-!”

“Pinkie!” yelled Dash, interrupting a train of thought that would likely have gone on for twenty minutes had she not forcibly derailed it. “Just give me a couple of seconds, OK? Woke up a *bit* early today”

“Oh! Oh! Well if you woke up early, then that means we can *start* early! Oh, that's even better!”

The bright pink pony as now prancing in circles excitedly on the ground beneath the pegasus' house. Rainbow Dash sighed. Pinkie Pie was a great friend and an absolute riot to have around, but she could not take a hint to save her *life*. So after finishing the last of her apple juice, Dash once again abandoned her dream – of a decent breakfast – and swooped out the door and down onto the ground next to the earth pony.

“OK, Dashie, where first? The market? Oh! Oh! I've had this prank with an inflatable cantaloupe planned for *months*-”

“Pinkie, will y'slow down just a bit? I didn't get as much sleep as I wanted. Had a weird dream...”

“Oh? Weird dreams? I get them all the time!”

Dash smirked smugly. “That... doesn't surprise me.”

“Well duh! What would be fun about normal dreams?”

Rainbow Dash was about to answer, but she stopped when she realised that what her friend had just said made a lot more sense than it had any right to. Pinkie was like that sometimes.

She tilted her head towards the town. “C'mon, let's get going! Like you said, hard day's work to do!”

“Oh boy, do we ever!”

It had been a hard day's work, and the sun was just beginning to set by the time she finished it, but Applejack was perfectly content with that. It wasn't anywhere near harvesting time yet, but orchards needed to be tended all year round to ensure a good, healthy crop, and there were few tasks Applejack enjoyed more than tending to her trees. Besides, as everypony in the Apple family knew, nothing got the appetite up quite like a good day's work – or made you more deserving of the food waiting for you at the end.

As she trotted slowly back towards the homestead, Applejack closed her eyes happily, breathing in the wonderful summer air and sighing delightedly.

“A mighty fine day's work there, if ah do say so m'self.”

“I'll say! You should be proud”

Applejack's eyes snapped open suddenly and she wheeled around, calling out. “Who's there?!”

No-one answered. There was no sound but the quiet rustle of a soft breeze through the orchard, and neither scent nor sight of anypony nearby.

“B-Big Macintosh? Is that you?” she yelled, the vaguest hint of fear edging in.

There was no answer.

“Applebloom? Granny Smith?”

She could have sworn she heard a voice, and more than a voice, a presence. She felt like somepony had been there with her. The feeling had faded, but she'd definitely felt it. It wasn't just a mistake, she was utterly certain of it.

As she reached the barn, Big Macintosh looked up from the hay bundles he was stacking.

“Uh, AJ, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Big Mac, there been anyone else on the farm today?”

“Not since lunchtime. Ditzzy Doo came by lookin' to pick up that basket of apples you promised her, but ain't been no pony but us on the farm since.”

“You're absolutely, positively sure?”

“Eeeeyup”

Applejack shook herself firmly. Big Mac tilted his head.

“You OK, AJ?”

“Ah'm fine, Mac. Just powerful hungry 's'all.”

Big Mac had a brain on him equally big as his body, and he had known Applejack long enough to know instantly when she was lying. But Applejack being Applejack, she wouldn't be persuaded into confessing it. She'd tell him when she was ready.

"Whatever you say, AJ."

Rarity fumbled through her drawers irritably. She'd been at this for nearly twenty minutes now!

"Oh, for crying out loud, where is it?"

She had a dress to complete for tomorrow morning and there were some stitches that needed to be made with *that* silver thread she had saved for this precise type of dress. She began rifling through the third drawer from the top.

"No. No, no, no. No. No, no, no no no no no! Oh, for heaven's sakes, *what did I do with it?!*"

Her voice slowly rose to a frustrated squeal as the drawer turned out to be a dead end, just like the last five. She struck the floor angrily with her hoof. Of course, she could use white thread, or perhaps cream thread, and that would be perfectly acceptable, and odds were that nopony would notice anyway, but she wanted this dress to be absolutely *perfect!* Just "nice" was never enough to give a customer – everything had to be *magnificent!* She just couldn't be happy with giving a customer anything but her absolute best...

"... because I can't bare the thought of seeing ponies unhappy."

Rarity's head whipped around. Her tiny white cat, Opalescence, regarded her curiously. For a moment, Rarity lost her sense of perspective.

"O-Opal? Was that you?"

Opal stared at her and mewed softly. She blinked, and then realised just how ridiculous the thought had been.

"No. No, of course it wasn't you. Ugh, the stress must be getting to me. Ah! *Here* it is!"

She pulled open the top drawer and there it was, sitting exactly where she'd left it the last time she'd used it. She let out a sigh of relief and turned to leave, but out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw something shining brightly. When she turned, all she could see was her Element of Harmony, sitting proudly on the bust she displayed it on; beautiful as ever, of course, but nothing strange about it.

"Stress. Just the stress. Come on, Rarity, finish this dress and *then* you can relax."

But she couldn't help shake the feeling she'd had when she heard that voice: a feeling of indescribable closeness and togetherness she hadn't felt since the moment they had defeated Nightmare Moon.

"Now, remember, just take it easy for a few days, don't carry anything heavy, and you'll be right as rain!"

The sparrow warbled happily and hopped onto Fluttershy's head to give her ear an affectionate nuzzle before flying out the door and off into the night sky. She smiled gently and began to pack her medical tools away. Grabbing the remains of a celery stick she'd been chewing on earlier, she took a bite, and gave the tiniest grimace. In the time it had taken to treat the sparrow, it had gone rather dry, but she finished it off anyway, unwilling to waste it. Munching quietly, she packed the rest of her things back into their bag, and then into her cabinet.

It had been a long day, and yesterday had been hectic too. Animals were popping up all over Ponyville with various ailments, all relating to the sudden storm that the pegasus weather team had been forced to rush out. After various events around the town had once again compelled them to cancel rain several days in a row, Rainbow Dash and the weather team had made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Ponyville *needed a storm*, just like they had the last time this had happened. But the storm had to be put together so quickly that not all of the animals had time to get to safety, so all over Ponyville there were animals who had gotten colds or hypothermia or been blown around by strong winds. There had been one particularly unfortunate squirrel who had gotten badly burnt by lightning striking his tree.

Fluttershy felt a swell of anger. Had Rainbow Dash and her weather team thought about all the animals before they went ahead and whipped up that horrible storm? No, of course not, they'd just gone ahead anyway and let all the poor little animals suffer! It was so inconsiderate, so mean, how could they just—?!

She sighed and felt her anger fade again. No, it wasn't really Rainbow Dash's fault. The weather team were simply doing the job the mayor asked them to do the best way they could, and the mayor was simply looking out for what was best for Ponyville. Nothing was perfect, but they were trying to do the best they could.

"Everypony deserves a chance, no matter where they come from!"

Fluttershy let out a terrified shriek and dived underneath the table, shuddering violently. Someone was in her cottage!

Angel bunny came bounding into the room full tilt. He knew it was probably something minor that had set her off, but to set his mind at rest he needed to see for himself. In his hurry to get to the cowering pegasus, he completely missed that the jewelled butterfly necklace on the shelf above him was shining as bright as the full moon. He threw his forepaws around the pegasus, giving her a tight, reassuring hug, which caused her to squeak softly before she realised who it was.

"Oh, Angel, I was so afraid! I thought I heard somepony in the house with us!" she managed to stammer out.

Angel shook his head reassuringly. There was no-one but them in the house. Hesitantly, the timid pegasus crawled out from under the table, her fear slowly fading away. In fact, she didn't know why she was so afraid of the voice in the first place. It had actually sounded kind of... nice. Kind and gentle, understanding. Far from frightened now, she was actually disappointed she hadn't gotten to meet the pony it belonged to.

Rainbow Dash looked around suddenly as she heard a high-pitched, terrified shrieking from below. Rapidly vanishing into the distance far beneath her were the silhouettes of four ponies tumbling towards the ground. One of them was unmistakably her proud friend Rarity – minus those butterfly wings that had been keeping her in the sky. With a horrible lurch in her stomach, she realised all four ponies were headed straight for the ground miles below at terminal velocity. She wheeled around in the sky.

"Hold on, Rarity!"

Her wings beating like there was no tomorrow, she launched herself downwards, clearing the space between her and the stadium in an instant.

"I'M COMING!"

Soaring after her plummeting friend, she urged her wings to beat even faster. She wasn't catching up to them fast enough! She had to hurry!

Seeing Rainbow Dash making a beeline for her, Rarity began to screech again, flailing even harder. The wind howled in the pegasus' ears, and she began to feel air resistance push against her. That familiar domed wave began to form in front of her hooves as she gained speed, and she heard Rarity gasp. She didn't even realise what was happening. Every fibre of her being now was focused on saving her friend.

Her eyes began to sting, watering from the sheer speed at which she was flying. The air itself was now forming a barrier to her progress. She grunted, unable to keep her eyes open against the strain, turning her head away. It was too much for any normal pony to bare.

She opened her eyes. She wasn't any normal pony.

Pulling her wings back, forcing her body into as aerodynamic a shape as she could possibly manage, she focused, and pushed against the barrier. Sparks flew from her hooves. The barrier gave, bent into a cone...

"No fear."

...and then broke completely.

And then she was flying, flying faster than she'd ever flown before, soaring, diving on wings that felt as quick as light itself. The gap between her and the stricken ponies beneath her closed in seconds, just in the nick of time to stop them from hitting the ground. Pulling a turn tighter than even she had thought possible, she whipped all four of them through the trees beneath Cloudsdale at breakneck speed, soaring up, up, back towards the stadium where they'd be safe.

Looking behind her, she was dimly aware that she was carrying half of the Wonderbolts line-up on her back, dazed, concussed and only barely conscious.

"Woah!"

In the time it had taken her to make this realisation, she also noticed she had overshot the stadium by a good hundred feet. As naturally as breathing, she pulled herself downwards, looping under the floor of the stadium to come up in the centre. The sense of speed slowly faded and exhaustion set in as several of the previous contestants rushed out to help get the ponies she'd rescued to safety. With all that weight finally off her back, she managed to make a graceful landing on the stadium floor.

To be greeted by a thunderous, riotous ovation.

Everyone in the stadium was on their feet pounding their hooves and cheering at the top of their lungs, and in the stands where her best friends were sitting, Fluttershy – timid, quiet little Fluttershy – was jumping up and down, whooping hysterically.

"A SONIC RAINBOOM! WOOOO! YEAH!"

The realisation struck her like a train. That speed, the barrier she'd torn through, that energy she'd felt – she'd finally managed it. Not only had she come through for her friend, she'd finally managed to perform the Sonic Rainboom again. Her heart swelled in her chest and she looked at Rarity, held safely aloft by two pegasi, who was looking at her in awe and teary-eyed gratitude.

"I did it... I did it!" Rainbow yelled, still barely believing it herself.

"You sure did! Oh, thank you Rainbow Dash! You saved my life!"

"Of course I was afraid. I was terrified. But you needed me, and I wasn't going to let fear stop me."

That wasn't her voice!

This time, Dash woke up with a yell. Remembering what had happened yesterday, she looked straight towards her Element, and she wasn't disappointed – dawn hadn't even broken yet, and it was shining like the pole star. Leaping off her bed, she rushed over to the shelf on which it rested, and reached out a hoof to touch it, but just before she could, she hesitated.

"Don't be afraid."

The voice seemed to come from nowhere, echoing from inside Rainbow Dash herself. But somehow, it didn't feel scary any more. It felt comforting. It felt like friends were close by, keeping her safe.

"We're here for you. We're always here for you."

"Who... who are you?" Dash asked aloud, to the empty room around her.

"Unite the Elements again."

"Wait, wait, wait. What do you mean? Who are you? How are you talking to me?"

The Thunderbolt necklace stopped glowing. She finally worked up the nerve to grasp it, rolling it around, staring at it in bewilderment. She didn't know what to make of this, but now, she felt determined to see it through.

"Unite the Elements. Shouldn't be too hard, right?"

She trotted over to her wardrobe, threw on her saddlebags and tucked her Element into them. Then, as she turned to leave via the window, her stomach noisily reminded her that this would likely not be a short undertaking. Dash turned and fluttered downstairs. Uniting the Elements of Harmony could wait. Uniting the elements of a balanced breakfast could not.

"Pinkie!"

Dash tapped loudly on the earth pony's balcony door. It was early, but she had at least waited until the sun had risen to start waking her friends.

"Come on, wake up!"

A shock of pink, fuzzy hair appeared in the window, and the door swung open.

"Oh! Hi Rainbow Dash! You're up early!"

"Yeah. Pinkie Pie, listen. I can't explain everything right now, but we need to go and see Twilight. I've been having the weirdest dreams lately-"

"Oh! That's so weird! You'll never guess, but so did I! I had a weird dream too!"

Rainbow Dash stared curiously at her friend.

"What, really?"

"I bet your weird dream wasn't anywhere near as weird as my weird dream! My dream was the weirdest-weirdy-pants dream *EVER!*"

Dash smirked doubtfully. "Oh, Pinkie Pie, no way was your dream even half as random as my dream was"

"Well, remember the time we were in the Everfree Forest just after we met Twilight and the trees were all like BLEEEEEEEAH! and you were all TOTALLY freaked out and I sung my super-duper-secret song about what Granny Pie told me about how fears can't hurt you and laughter makes them disappear, and I *KNOW* you remember that because I mean that was like the most super-duper exciting thing ever, well, except for that time I met Twilight for the first time and I went-"

Pinkie Pie finally took a look at her friend, who was staring disapprovingly. She coughed, inhaled, and continued.

"So yeah, it was exactly like that in the dream where I'm singing the song and everyone is laughing at all the spooky trees! But then at the end I turn to Twilight and say..."

She put on her best impression of a deep, gravelly stallion's voice which, to Dash, sounded disturbingly like Mr. Turnips, who she would really rather have forgotten.

"I will never let the joy in my heart die."

Rainbow Dash stopped dead.

"Pinkie Pie, yesterday, when you woke me up, I had pretty much the same dream, except it was about when Nightmare Moon tried to trick me with those fake Wonderbolts – and then at the end, I said something completely different to what I remember saying! And it wasn't my voice!"

"Oh! Oh! What did you say?"

Rainbow Dash cleared her throat.

"... I could never abandon my friends, no matter what."

Pinkie Pie smiled approvingly.

"Oh, Dash! Don't worry! Even if it wasn't what you said, it sounds just like you!"

Dash inhaled deeply.

"But Pinkie, last night, I had a dream about the time when I pulled off the Sonic Rainboom in Cloudsdale to save Rarity, and I said something *e/se* I didn't say, in a different voice, and when I woke up, my Element of Harmony was glowing, and I heard more voices that told me I needed to unite the Elements of Harmony!"

Pinkie Pie stared at Rainbow Dash for a second.

“Rainbow Dash, you are so random.”

Twilight Sparkle sat at her table, staring curiously at the ornate tiara that served as the shell for her Element of Harmony. In her honest opinion it was far too pretentious to wear – she envied the elegant but simple necklaces her friends had been given. Even those were a little too heavy to wear on anything but the most formal occasions. As it was, the only time she ever took it off the shelf was to study it. That happened more often than she thought it would, though. Often the curiosity would suddenly grab her and she'd spend hours just staring at it, trying to make sense of it all. So much power packed into something so... *tacky*.

And now the preposterous thing was talking to her in her sleep. How about that.

She concentrated, her horn glowing softly as she gently levitated the tiara in front of her, turning it this way and that. Spread on the table in front of her were more than two dozen books she'd searched out from all over the library: her copy of *Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide*, of course, as well as titles like *The Practical Guide to Artifice*, *The Magic of the Early Kingdom*, *An Advanced Guide to Collaborative Magic*, *Hoof And Fiction: A Sceptic's Guide To Old Mare's Tales* and even *Mythic Arcana And You: Everything You Ever Needed To Know About The Old Magic But Were Afraid To Ask (Because You Might Get Exiled To The Moon Or Something)*. She had hated that book on the ridiculous title alone, but it did actually turn out to have a few useful pointers.

She sighed softly. In addition to the books, she had an untidy sheaf of notes in front of her on which she had jotted down several theories as to why her Element was acting this way. Was her unusually high magical potential causing an unusual reaction? Was the Element's magic reacting to the recent stress she had experienced at the Grand Gala? Was it that stress simply getting to her? Or was it something completely different?

Part of her frustration came from the fact that for all the books she had, none of them had first-hoof information. Not a single one of them had been written by someone who had, at any point in their life, actually had a chance to study the Elements. As far as she knew, she was the first scholar to ever have a chance to *look* at them, let alone *use* them. Assuming the Royal Index or the library at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns didn't have volumes she was missing, she figured that *she* might be the most reliable source of information about them.

But her books, incomplete and insufficient as they were, did have fragments of useful information. The Mare In the Moon wasn't the only

legend the Elements showed up in: they appeared in a number of legends throughout history. Some accounts of the Dry Season, when a terrible, unnatural drought had blighted Equestria claimed the Elements had been used to end it. Rumours also held that they had turned up in Cloudsdale some four centuries ago.

Legends had it that those who wielded the Elements often spoke with wisdom and virtue far beyond their years and could vanquish dangers to the land that even Celestia herself could not. This didn't sound at all far-fetched to Twilight, given that her friends had vanquished Nightmare Moon and redeemed Princess Luna, something even Celestia herself hadn't been able to manage all those years ago. Her friends also often gave her insights into life and friendship that put ponies twice their age to shame.

Her friends! She gasped, a delighted smile spreading across her face. Of course! Her friends were bearers of the Elements of Harmony just like she was! Maybe they could help her unravel this mystery, and even if they couldn't, any excuse to see them delighted her.

"Spike! Make some coffee! I'll be back very soon!"

She galloped straight to the door, and threw it open, only to promptly yelp and frantically dig her hooves in, skidding to a halt just a hair's breadth from Applejack.

"Woah there, sugarcube, settle down – don't wanna hurt nopony, do we?"

It was then that Twilight realised that *all* five of her best friends were standing just outside her house. Nose-to-nose with Applejack, she simply stared bewilderedly for a few seconds. Then, not liking how awkward the silence was getting, she blurted an explanation out.

"Well I was just sleeping the other night when I had a dream about defeating Nightmare Moon, but I said something completely different to what I remember saying-"

"We-"

"-and when I woke up my Element of Harmony was glowing-"

"Sugarcube, we know-"

"-and it started talking to me-"

"Twilight, darling, we know, we all-"

"-and I thought I might be going crazy with all the stress I've had lately, or that something is wrong with the Elements-"

"Um... Twilight... we-"

Twilight's voice began to get slowly more hysterical.

"-or that something else terrible is about to happen, so I've been doing all this research to try and find out what's going on but I don't have

enough data to go on by myself so I was going to find you all to look for help getting answers because I-”

Rainbow Dash finally interjected, a little more loudly and forcefully than she'd really meant to. “**TWILIGHT!**”

Fluttershy squeaked loudly and hid behind Applejack. Rainbow Dash suddenly looked ashamed at how loudly she'd yelled, and shoved her hoof in her mouth. Applejack gave Twilight an affectionate cuddle.

“It's OK, darlin'. You ain't goin' crazy. Or at least, if you're goin' crazy you ain't alone. We've all been havin' weird things happen to us lately, and it all seems to be somethin' to do with our Elements. Dash got us all together early this mornin' 'cause her Element told her to gather all the Elements in one place.”

“Well yeah. It talked to me, and it said “*Unite the Elements again*”. Oh... and, uh, sorry for yelling.”

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't going crazy after all – or, like Applejack said, if she was, they could at least all take that... adventure together. In fact, if *all* of them were experiencing the same thing, then that suddenly made one of her theories a lot more reasonable...

She rushed back inside, beckoning her friends to follow her.

“Spike, make *six* coffees. We won't be going anywhere any time soon!”

Spike looked in from the kitchen and sighed. It was going to be one of *those* days.

Five minutes later, they were all comfortably seated around Twilight's table, after she'd made a little bit of room for everyone to put their coffees – and the Elements of Harmony that they'd brought with them. Pinkie Pie slurped at her mug noisily as Twilight began explaining.

“After my Element started talking to me, I started getting every book I could think of that might have something useful in it.”

Rainbow Dash smirked, looking around the table. “Yeah, Twilight, we kinda guessed that.”

“One of the problems with trying to research into the Elements is that almost nopony has ever seen them, let alone had enough time to study them. Almost every book I have is nothing more than a bunch of rumours, legends and guesswork.”

“So what you're sayin', sugarcube, is that all them fancy-shmancy scholars ain't been any more helpful than Granny Smith's old stories when it comes to the Elements.”

“Not exactly, Applejack. The books are dangerously incomplete, but they do contain just enough useful knowledge for me to come up with a working theory about what's going on.”

“We're all ears, Twilight.”

Rarity nodded demurely. “Indeed.”

Twilight levitated her own Element again, slowly turning the tiara so that everyone got a good look at it.

“This thing – this tiara – this isn't really the Element of Magic. Remember that when we first saw the Elements, they were big spheres of stone, and then they were tiny, multicoloured shards of crystal when Nightmare Moon shattered them. But they were only the physical forms of the Elements, and she couldn't destroy what the Elements really were.”

She smiled warmly and reached out either side of her, joining hooves with Applejack and Rarity. All six mares joined hooves around the table briefly, sharing the moment of togetherness. Twilight continued.

“She couldn't destroy the Elements because, like I said, the spirits of the Elements were right there. I meant it when I said it, but I don't think I realised just how right I was. The books can't tell me *everything* about the Elements, but they told me enough to put my theory together. The Elements are way, way more than this jewellery and they're more than just us.”

“More, how?”

“Remember what it felt like to actually use the Elements together? To me, it felt like there were more ponies than just us and Nightmare Moon in the room.”

Fluttershy's face lit up with recognition. “Wait! I remember that now! It did!”

Rainbow Dash grinned widely. “That's exactly how I felt when I saw my Element glowing! I felt happy, safe... like I was with friends, even though none of you were there!”

Twilight took a deep breath. This was the difficult part.

“The Elements of Harmony are powerful, ancient magic that was old when Princess Celestia was young. They're so powerful, in fact, that even the Princesses fear them. That sort of magic isn't just something you can use idly. All of us forged a deep connection with our element. And I think – this is my theory – that when an Element of Harmony becomes part of you, *you* become part of *it*.”

“Woah, woah, woah” interjected Rainbow Dash, with a frown. “You're saying that the Elements of Harmony *took* something from us?”

"No, Rainbow. We *changed* them. Who we are, what we do, the ponies that we've become – it all gets tied up with the Element so closely that it leaves a permanent mark. But we're not the first ponies to *use* the Elements of Harmony."

Applejack narrowed her eyes. She wasn't at all sure she liked where this was headed.

"Where are you goin' with all this, Twilight? How does this explain all the voices we've been hearin' and the strange feelin's we've been gettin'?"

"If I'm right, the voices we're hearing are... well, the best word I can find for it is *echoes*."

"Echoes?"

"Echoes! Echoes! -choes! -choes! -oes!" All heads turned towards Pinkie Pie. She stared back. "What?"

Twilight blinked, decided to let it go, and continued. "Echoes of past bearers of the Elements of Harmony. Their personalities, their memories – they all get caught up in the Elements when they prove themselves worthy of wielding them."

Fluttershy's eyes snapped wide open. "You mean they're *ghosts*?"

Twilight was torn between the futility of attempting to explain the difference between a ghost and a residual personality imprint and the desire not to scare Fluttershy.

"Not... exactly a ghost."

"But *like* a ghost?"

Twilight sighed. "No. Sort of *like* a ghost, but not a ghost."

"Could we, um, talk to it?"

"I think it... *might* be possible..."

To everyone's lingering surprise, Fluttershy's response was not fear, but excitement.

"Oh, how wonderful! The voice I heard sounded very nice, and I was kind of upset that I didn't get to meet her!"

"Her?"

"She said *“Everypony deserves a chance, no matter where they come from”*, and she just sounded like she cared so much about it! Oh, I was scared at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought how nice she seemed."

Rainbow Dash raised a hoof. "My Element told me to unite them all. Maybe whatever these things are that's inside them has something to do with that?"

Twilight suddenly had that look on her face when she'd had an idea she intended to see right through to the end. "Only one way to find out, girls. Get your Elements!"

She levitated the tiara onto her head, trying to get it as comfortable as possible. The other mares quickly threw their Elements over their heads and around their necks, a couple of them wriggling around to get them settled properly. Twilight reached out either side of her once more, and the ponies joined hooves again.

"Now breathe, focus, and then call on the magic. Using the Elements is a team effort, even if I'm the one who has to shape the spell."

Twilight began to feel that amazing power welling up inside of her, and inside of her five best friends. She closed her eyes tightly, focusing only on the magic, only on the energy. With any magic, absolute concentration was necessary, and an absolutely crystal-clear focus on the intent of the spell had to be maintained, or the spell could go awry, the energy released randomly. On the day of her entry exam at the School for Gifted Unicorns, she had lost control of her magic, and it had turned her parents into potted plants – and that was with the energy a frightened, confused little filly could summon. When the Ursa Minor had attacked Ponyville, the strain of maintaining three extremely powerful and complex spells at once had almost stopped her heart.

The Elements of Harmony allowed her to tap into a power many orders of magnitude stronger than anything she or any unicorn could accomplish on their own, but a single mistake, one mote of energy out of its rightful place and the damage she could do with it would be unimaginable. It was no wonder to her that the keys to that sort of power were divided among six ponies of extraordinary virtue. Misused, this energy could turn a forest to ash in the blink of an eye, crumble mountains, boil oceans.

But surrounding her, reassuring her, buoying her up was the sensation of her five best friends, knowing that they were nearby and they would never let her down – and beyond that, the sensation of these mysterious others, guarding her, looking out for her, even though she didn't know who they were. She knew with all these friends watching over her, she would not fail.

There was still one difficulty, though: she didn't know what exactly the spell she was casting was supposed to do. Whenever you cast magic, you had to have a clear image of what the spell was meant to do in your head. Even if she wasn't going to fumble and lose control of the energy, it was no use having summoned it with no idea where it was supposed to go.

“Don't worry. I was afraid the first time I did this as well. Just reach out to us.”

Then she knew exactly what she had to do. Moving and shaping magical energy didn't really conform to any sense of shape or direction easily describable, but as closely as could be approximated in layman's terms, she tried to split the energy six ways as it formed, looping it back through the Elements themselves, back inwards to merge again, and then finally outwards in every “direction”, to try and draw those voices closer to them.

Her eyes snapped open, shining pure-white with magical energy. She released her grip on the energy, letting it fall into place the way she intended.

She immediately knew the spell had had the desired effect – or close to it. She could feel reality slipping away suddenly, her consciousness drawn out of her body... or not so much *out* of her body but *inward*, somehow. She was not afraid – she felt the presence of her friends as well, and the presence of those she had yet to meet.

Twilight came to in a hazy, surreal world of shifting shadows and colour. She was standing on what appeared to be a perfectly smooth, featureless white floor which seemed to stretch off into infinity in every direction. The “sky” of this place was a psychedelic jumble of swirling, faint aurorae in every colour of the rainbow. Twilight and her friends were standing in a comfortably-sized circle, lit from directly above from an apparently invisible source. Outside the circle was darkness, but not complete darkness – the soft, unthreatening darkness of a moonlit night.

Applejack blinked, casting about warily.

“Twi', where are we?”

Twilight tried to reach out with her magical senses, but received only confusion. This place didn't seem to *be* anywhere. Not only completely off the map, but literally impossible to put on a map, impossible to give a sense of direction or location to. Robbed of her usual ability to discern location by the stars or by her magical senses, she made the most educated guess she could.

“Somewhere “inside” the Elements of Harmony. I'd say the closest thing I could describe this place as is a dream. A dream we're all having, together.”

“Good work, ma'am! It took me months to figure that bit out!”

Twilight whipped around to face the source of the voice. Around them, arranged in a perfect triad, three other columns of light had flared up,

illuminating three other groups of ponies – which Twilight noted, with no small amount of satisfaction, numbered six each.

The voice that had hailed her turned out to be a confident-looking unicorn stallion. A well-groomed mane of shining silver hair cascaded over his broad, light-blue back, and his bright, purple eyes radiated candour and friendliness. He bowed dashingly, and presented a hoof. Slightly taken aback, Twilight shook it firmly.

“Twilight Sparkle, personal student of her Majesty Princess Celestia.”

“Silver Spark, of Saddle Wood, former tutor at the Royal College of Enchantment. It's my utmost honour to meet you, Ms. Sparkle. It is *our* honour, to meet *all* of you.”

There was an enthusiastic murmur of assent from the assembled ponies. Twilight's friends bowed their necks respectfully.

“Now they all elected me spokespony for now, given that they think I'm the best public speaker. Wasn't always the case, let me tell you.”

Another stallion, a truly *gigantic* slate-grey pegasus in the group in which Silver Spark had been standing, chuckled loudly.

“Ain't that the truth!”

Silver Spark closed his eyes and grinned for a moment, and then turned back to Twilight.

“You're probably wondering what it is that you're doing here. I mean, I certainly would be in your position.”

Rainbow Dash flared her wings. “Yeah! You guys told me I should “unite the Elements”, and the Elements are united, and here we are! So what's up?”

“You have the privilege of being bearers of the Elements of Harmony. This is an honour granted only once every few generations, in the hour of greatest need for those who seek them. As you all know, they provide limitless power, but with that power – as I hope you've already guessed – comes a great duty.”

Twilight nodded solemnly. “That power, great or small, must be used only for good, and never for selfish ends. It was the very first thing Celestia ever taught me.”

“We called you here, and you came of your own free will. That's good, because we have a lot to talk about. You need to understand what the Elements actually are, and what they're capable of. What we needed them for, and what we did with them.”

Twilight looked at her friends, and was greeted by a flurry of nods and eager smiles.

“Ain't no work like good work.”

“Oh boy! This is so exciting! And guessing games, too! What are all these ponies called? Oh, I bet that one over there is-”

“The Elements of Harmony represent what's most beautiful in us. What are we, if we deny beauty?”

“Anything that needed the Elements of Harmony to fix it is gonna make for an awesome story!”

“I'm... ready if everyone else is, Twilight.”

Twilight turned back to Silver Spark.

“Lay it on us.”

The whole of Silver Spark's entourage stepped closer to the mares, and the light moved with them, allowing everyone to get a good, clear look at them.

Silver Spark took his place among them. “Well, I've already introduced myself. I'll let my companions introduce themselves”

A deep, midnight-blue earth mare sporting a meticulously groomed black mane with several white streaks stepped forward. “I am Star Gazer, of Hoofington.”

Fluttershy squeaked excitedly. “Oh! I remember you! You're the voice who said-”

Star Gazer smiled, blushing slightly. “That everypony deserves a chance, no matter where they come from. We'll get to that soon enough.”

A sandy taupe earth stallion with neatly tied-back auburn hair stepped forward, holding himself proudly. “I am Cinnamon, of Hoofington.”

Applejack nodded approvingly. “Y'don't seem like a bad sort t'me!”

Another earth stallion, big and strong, with a tan coat and a strawberry as his cutie mark stepped forward next. “Strawberry, of Hoofington.”

A much smaller, jovial earth stallion stepped forward. He was quite a sight – a mint-green coat, with a large flute slung to his side like a sword. He bounded forth, and gave a big, flourishing bow. “Morning Song, of Hoofington, very pleased to be at your service!”

Pinkie Pie pranced excitedly, giving an excited squeal. “Oh, this story's going to be so much fun, I can tell already!”

Lastly, the hulking, slate-grey pegasus stallion lumbered to take centre stage, flaring his wings so his Cutie mark, two gigantic thunderbolts covering almost all of his flank, was visible. “I'm Thunderclap, of Saddle Wood.”

Rainbow Dash said nothing, but her wings flared outwards just a little.

Rarity cocked her head curiously. “You keep saying “of Hoofington”, or “of Saddle Wood”. Why is that?”

The ponies around Silver Spark smiled at each other, and nodded. Morning Song, with a glint on his eye and the biggest grin a pony ever saw on his face, pulled his flute out and played a small, energetic jig on it, before launching into a dramatic tenor that would have put the best showponies in Canterlot to shame.

“All hear now, and all listen t'me! Let me tell you a story of the valley of the Sun Stone, the feud between the two beautiful towns of Hoofington and Saddle Wood, the brave heroes who sought the Elements of Harmony, a tale of strife and friendship, hatred and love. Let me tell you the story of the War That Never Was...”

Chapter II

The Sun Stone

As Morning Song and his friends told the story, scenes began to resolve themselves into view in front of the six mares. Some were clearly fanciful, stylised abstractions of legends and second-hand stories, but others appeared very realistic, as if they were culled straight from memories.

In the distant past, centuries ago, it is said that a great battle was fought between the great and wise Princess of the Sun and her sister, the Princess of the Moon. Bitter and angry that the wonderful night she so dearly loved was shunned by all ponies, even her own sister, the Princess of the Moon was transformed by her isolation and envy into a terrible creature of darkness, Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Moon swore that no pony would ever see the sun again – that night would reign eternal over all the world. Unable to reason with the monster her sister had become, the Princess of the Sun harnessed the greatest, strongest, oldest magic known to ponykind – the Elements of Harmony. With this great and terrible power, she banished her sister to the moon, sealing her there for a thousand years.

But only an instant after the deed, the weight of what she had been forced to do weighed heavily on her, and the great and wise Princess of the Sun wept bitter, lonely tears that shone as brightly as the morning sun, beautiful and so terribly sad. It is said that she cried for a month and a day, inconsolable in her grief, and the sun itself hid behind rain-clouds, ashamed to show itself. Eventually, the wind itself was moved by her aching sorrow, and it blow softly and gently around her face, wiping her tears away. A single Tear blew away with the wind, and travelled far with it until it fell to the ground in a tranquil valley. It shone throughout the valley with the bright, gentle light of the sun on a warm spring day, and lit up the valley day and night. Even the stones in the valley were amazed by its beauty, and they rolled themselves closer to the Tear to protect it from rain and mud. They pulled themselves closer to each other and eventually began to merge into one another, forming an impenetrable stone shell to protect the

beautiful little thing. But its light shone straight through, still illuminating the whole valley with soft sunlight day and night.

Years turned into decades, and decades into centuries, and century piled upon century until near upon seven hundred years had passed since the fateful battle between the two Royal Sisters. The Tear of the Princess lay unburied in the valley, for the soil itself refused to cover such a beautiful thing. It still shone upon the valley night and day, and plants and animals of every colour and kind flocked to the valley, for they were entranced by its beauty, and all wanted to be near it. The valley grew lush with high trees bearing delicious fruits of every description, and crunchy, savoury vegetables and mushrooms grew in every spare patch of soil. Birds sang in the forest canopy. It was a true paradise.

It came to pass that, within a year of each other, two towns sprang up not too far from the valley or from each other. One, Saddle Wood, sprung up north-east of the valley, and earned its keep from its host of talented carpenters and tradesponies. The other, Hoofington, sprung up on the opposite side of the valley, slightly closer to it, and quickly became renowned for the quality of produce its many farmers delivered. It seems scarcely possible, but both towns prospered for nearly fifty years before either of them discovered the Sun Valley even existed. The valley did not lie precisely between the two towns, and there were far quicker routes between them than through the mountain pass that led to it.

One fateful day, a lone prospector from Saddle Wood took the journey up into the mountains to search for iron, as the vein the town had traditionally mined was running short. His journey took far longer than he planned, and he found himself stumbling through the steep hills and rocky mountains deep into the night. Cold, tired and hungry, he thought he saw a light in the distance, and followed a narrow pass to reach it, assuming it was Hoofington, where ponies from Saddle Wood were always welcome.

Instead, he was greeted with a site that moved him to tears.

Lit as if it were early afternoon, a valley teeming with life of every description stretched out below him, lush and plentiful. A waterfall of cool, pure water splashed down into a crystal-clear lake, and at the centre of it all shone the Sun Stone, bathing the whole valley in its light and warmth. Almost as if in a trance, he rushed down the mountain to the centre of the valley, placing a hoof on the magnificent thing to see if it could truly be real. Still nearly convinced he was dreaming, he gorged himself on the valley's fruit, which tasted better than anything he'd ever set his tongue to before, and fell asleep next to the lake.

When he awoke the next morning, he saw that all he thought he had dreamed was true, and he rushed back to Saddle Wood to tell the town of what he'd discovered. Since he had not returned from his journey the previous night, when he arrived back in Saddle Wood, he ran straight into the midst of a search party that was setting out to find him. As he was breathlessly yelling at the top of his lungs about a hidden valley full of every natural delight one could imagine, bathed in perpetual sunlight, everyone assumed for a while that he'd just hit his head. That was everyone except a few traders from Hoofington who had happened to be in town that day. Deciding there was no real harm in checking out the prospector's ramblings, a couple of them broke off from the caravan to check if the valley really existed. When they discovered that not only did it exist, but that there was also a pass the other side of the valley that led to Hoofington, they rushed back to their own town to tell them about it.

When the prospector had calmed down enough to lucidly explain that, yes, he had in fact been to a magical valley where the sun shone eternal, and yes, he could lead them there, the expedition that had originally been set up to rescue him now set out alongside him so that they could see this wondrous place for themselves. It took longer for the Hoofington traders to get an expedition ready once they returned to their town, but the delay while the prospector calmed down and the longer distance to travel from Saddle Wood meant that both expeditions arrived in the valley at just about the same time.

They sat in the centre of the valley, facing each other, standing right next to the Sun Stone that made the valley the beautiful, unique place it was. They were surrounded by absolute tranquillity and natural serenity.

So, of course, that was when things *really* started to go downhill.

"Oh, right. Yeah. Can see how that all might go a mite pear-shaped," interjected Applejack, sighing softly. "My own kin had that sorta problem before."

"Oh, trust me," Thunderclap grimaced as he spoke. "this became *quite* a problem."

A dispute between the two expeditions broke out. To whom did the rightful claim to this valley belong? In terms of legality, agreements drawn up years ago between Hoofington and Saddle Wood placed the valley *just*

inside Hoofington's territory. But those agreements had been signed when neither town had seen any use in the mountains at all. Saddle Wood's mayor would never have signed that agreement if she had known what lay within them. On top of that, Saddle Wood had found it first! That surely counted for something. Neither expedition was willing to concede anything to each other, but neither was willing to get violent about it, so both left the valley in bad spirits.

The dispute moved from the expeditions to the entirety of both towns. Suddenly, waters which had run warm and friendly between the two towns for decades grew cold and treacherous. Friendships chilled, and suspicion and anger set in where trust once lay. Foals that had once played together in the vast meadows and woods separating the two towns were told never to go near each other again, that even the children of the other town were conniving, dishonourable wretches.

Over the course of the next decade, the towns feuded, sniping and biting at each other's heels during national events and the various upper-class parties and dinners their mayors were invited to. That a situation between the two towns existed became public knowledge, and even entered into common slang: to "pull a Hoofington" was to uncouthly disrupt a social event because there was someone there you didn't like. To "go off all Saddle Wood style" was the act of sabotaging a sporting event – not so that you'd win, but so the object of your ire wouldn't. The reputation of both towns suffered greatly because of their petty squabbling, but neither township was willing to back down one inch.

At no point in time was the Princess called upon to intercede. Firstly, neither town wanted to risk getting royalty involved, because neither town wanted to risk a royal judgement being made in favour of the other side. The Princess was a good and kind ruler, but her opinion on things tended to be fairly *final*. Secondly, getting the Princess involved ran the risk of *everyone* finding out about the Sun Valley, including the Princess herself. Both towns feared what she might do if she herself didn't know about it, and they'd been hiding it from her.

Things started to come to a head, however, when the newest mayor of Hoofington, Coriander, announced he was making plans to start clearing farmland in the Sun Valley, and Saddle Wood's claim be damned. This was, of course, a popular decision with Hoofington, but Saddle Wood was utterly outraged. Saddle Wood's current mayor, Scarlet Emerald, personally marched straight to Hoofington – something that had not happened in over ten years – and demanded an explanation from Coriander. Coriander told her that Hoofington rightfully owned the Sun

Valley, and that he wasn't going to sit around idly like his predecessors. Scarlet Emerald warned him, in no uncertain terms, that Saddle Wood was never going to stand for this. He then made the mistake of suggesting that if that was the case, they “sit their flanks down” instead.

Rarity shook her head, looking at the memory of an utterly furious Scarlet Emerald with a wry grin.

“Oh my stars. A *faux pas* for the history books, if ever there was one. You wouldn't need *me* to tell you not to push a pony of such dignity and patience to her limits.”

Cinnamon snorted. “He was occasionally prone to ideas that sounded a lot better in his head.”

Three missing teeth and a large bruise later, he was informed that if Hoofington moved into the Sun Valley, there would be blood. Scarlet Emerald then stormed out of the town, kicking dirt on the threshold of Coriander's house.

Coriander's young colt, Cinnamon, had watched the whole sordid argument unfold, and he knew that Scarlet Emerald's brazen act would simply make his father even more unreasonable and angry. He also knew that trying to reason with him would simply end in a shouting match that would hurt both of them. But he had this horrible gut feeling about what would happen next. His father would push even harder to start settling the Sun Valley, and Scarlet Emerald was right: the proud, stubborn ponies of Saddle Wood would never let that pass. There'd be blood.

In terms of sheer horsepower, Hoofington outnumbered Saddle Wood in able-bodied ponies almost two-to-one, but Hoofington only had four pegasi (one of whom could barely fly) and six unicorns, whereas Saddle Wood had over twenty of each. In a pitched battle, Saddle Wood would have the skies and the power of magic on their side. And while Hoofington were easily the more mobile of the two towns with their fleet of wagons and traders, Saddle Wood were also talented craftsmen. Weapons and armour they arrayed themselves with would be of top quality – at least one Saddle Wood blacksmith made armour for the Royal Pegasus Guard. Hoofington's equipment would be scarce and piecemeal.

Cinnamon had an excellent head for numbers and situations, and he was level-headed enough to make honest, accurate guesses at how things would turn out. He got hunches and gut feelings, and they were rarely

wrong. Most of all, he was never afraid to tell anyone if he thought what they were planning was a terrible idea. His friends grudgingly respected him for it, because truly, it saved them from a heck of a lot of hassle.

He was never afraid to tell anyone their ideas wouldn't work, except, of course, his father. His father wasn't the best with emotions. Well, except for anger. He was good with anger (or bad with it, depending on your perspective). Being the mayor and the leader of Hoofington had always made him a distant father, but when Cinnamon and his sister had lost their mother, he'd hoped the old stallion would at least *try* to fill the gap for them. Instead, Coriander had just focused even more into turning his children into ponies who wouldn't let him down – whether or not that had anything to do with good parenting. Eat your greens, do your homework, hate Saddle Wood, remember the Sun Valley belongs to us.

He was always, *always* being compared to his father, usually unfavourably. He didn't command the respect and admiration his father did, and if his talent for facts and figures (Scroll-shaped Cutie mark and everything! He had been so proud, but his father had barely noticed) was useful, it never did get him as much attention as how little “real work” he did.

He had the absolute worst of hunches about how this situation would unfold. His father would just rumble straight in without much of a plan, whereas Saddle Wood would have carefully plotted every detail of *their* offensive. That was what Saddle Wood did – they improved and refined, then refined their improvements. Still, Hoofington would have numbers, mobility and anger. Innocent ponies would get hurt and killed, and the beautiful, serene valley would be ruined by blood and fighting.

He honestly didn't know what to do. What his father planned was madness, pure madness, but none of the town elders would ever listen to him. Even if they did, his father could just give another one of his grandiose, fiery speeches to whip them up again and that would be that.

But it all came to a head when he crept past the door of the dining room later that night, and heard his father talking with the elders.

“-have plans for all of this. Say what you like about them, Corrie, they may be scum but they're smart scum. They always have a plan.”

“Yes. They always do. You're right. But you forget one important thing. They're slow. That... *mule* took a *week* to show her face in this town after I announced my plans for the valley. They *never* do anything quickly. They've never been *good* at doing anything quickly.”

“What are you saying, Corrie?”

"I'm saying we take them by surprise. They think because it takes *them* a month to get anything important done, it's the same with everyone. Well it isn't. We make a push for the valley in a week."

Cinnamon's blood ran ice cold and all the colour drained from his face.

"A week? Are you joking?"

"It's perfectly possible. If we didn't need to make preparations to *fight* them, we could get the wagons rolling this week. Four days to get the tools and supplies ready and the wagons loaded, and maybe another two days to get there."

"They'll see. They've got two dozen pegasi in that town, and we've known for years that they spy on us from the clouds. They'll see us coming."

"Of course they will, but we can work with that. We keep the wagons in the shops until we're ready to move, so if they just fly by the town they can't see what we're doing. The earliest they'll see us is when we start to move, and by the time they can respond, we'll already have taken the valley. What will they do then?"

"They could go to the Royal Court. Petition the Princess."

"We have the rightful claim to the valley, and once we've settled it, what's the Princess going to do? Kick us out of it? She doesn't have the spine. We stake our claim to the valley *now* and *forever*, like we should have done ten years ago. This is *our* time..."

Cinnamon couldn't bear to hear another word. Stifling a sob, he took to his hooves and rushed out of his father's house, panicking. From between the railings on the stairs, a smaller, younger pony peeked out. She had missed what her father and his cronies had said, but it had to be bad – *very bad* – if it could throw her brother into such a state. Fortunately, she knew just what she had to do.

Cinnamon galloped around the library, tearing books off the shelves and rooting through them desperately to find at least a hint of something useful. The elders wouldn't listen to gut feeling, but if he could find some old battle, some historical precedent that related to this situation, maybe, just *maybe* they might listen to *facts*! He wrenched another book off the shelf, nearly tearing the spine straight off the back of it, not caring. *The Equestrian Tactical Compendium*. Perfect!

"My friend, you'll find much of use in that book for a rational mind, but nothing that will help you make your father see sense."

Cinnamon wheeled around with a yelp, to see his two best friends and his sister standing in the doorway. Morning Song, the loquacious mint-green colt that had just been talking trotted up to him and gave him a friendly hug, which he returned, sighing a little. The stress was a little easier to bear with his friends around. The other stallion, a big, sandy farmhand called Strawberry (his Cutie mark matching his namesake admirably) stepped forward and put a hoof on his shoulder.

"Cinnamon, Star Gazer told us you were all worked up about something. What is it?"

Cinnamon sighed, and began clearing up the books as he unburdened himself to his friends.

"I... I heard dad talking with the other town elders just now. Dad plans... well. He... he wants to catch Saddle Wood off guard and make the move into the Sun Valley just a week from now!"

Morning Song's jaw dropped. "Madness! That's absolute madness!"

"I know, but he thinks if he can take the Sun Valley by surprise before Saddle Wood has a chance to react, they'll just drop it! Let it go!"

Strawberry stamped his foot. "Aw hay, surely even your dad can't be that stupid!"

Morning Song had suddenly lost his usual bounce. "This is bad. This is really bad. This is terrible. If he just up and snatches the Sun Valley, Saddle Wood will spit their bit. You saw what their *mayor* did when your father *back-chatted* her. Imagine what the whole *town* will do! There'll be blood! Ponies will *die*!"

"I know, I know, I *know*! That's why I have to find a way to stop them – something, something in one of these books that'll convince them that this is a terrible idea! At least delay them! Make them think up a better plan! *Something*!"

Morning Song shook his head sadly.

"My friend, your goal here is two things. Admirable, and utterly impossible. And you know it's that way. You know as well as I do they won't let something silly like *common sense* or, I don't know, *reason* get in their way when there's the smell of victory in the air."

Strawberry wrinkled his nose disdainfully. "Victory? Smells like horse apples to me."

"Be that as it may, my dear Berry, our poor friend isn't going to beat any sense into them with books."

"So what do we do? Just let Cinnamon's dad wade in and get dozens of ponies hurt?"

Cinnamon's little sister, Star Gazer, who had been quiet up until this point, suddenly piped up.

"We could write to the Princess! She wouldn't let daddy do something stupid!"

Cinnamon clicked his tongue irritably at his kid sister.

"Don't be stupid, Star! Princess Celestia has a thousand other things to worry about in the kingdom, and on top of that she has to raise the sun every day and the moon every night. Do you really think she's going to read a letter from a few kids?"

Star Gazer huffed irritably, looking very put-out.

Twilight tilted her head. "You know you could probably have saved yourselves a lot of trouble if you *had* written to her, right?"

"Yeah, but we were young," retorted Cinnamon. "Plus, how sad would we have been if we hadn't gotten to go on our life's big adventure?"

Cinnamon's voice started to crack hysterically. "And even *if* we find some way to stop *this* crazy plan, dad is *still* going to try and find some way to take the Sun Valley, and there's *still* going to be fighting, and people are *still* going to get hurt! The only way to fix this for good is finding some way to end all these *stupid* arguments that our town is having with Saddle Wood, and that would take... oh, for hay's sake, I don't know, we'd need a miracle."

Suddenly, Morning Song's expression changed from one of deep concern to... *that look*. Both of his friends were all too familiar with *that look*. It was the one he got when he had an idea. A crazy, stupid, utterly insane and *magnificent* idea. One that usually ended up with them getting in deep, deep trouble with their parents, but an idea that somehow *worked*.

"I think you're right. Maybe a miracle is *just* what we need."

Strawberry huffed exasperatedly. "What the hay are you talking about, Song?"

"My friends, I've always had this little theory of mine, and it goes like this: It's that ponies wouldn't have a concept of miracles if, just *sometimes*, they didn't actually happen. And thinking about that got me thinking something else: that maybe if you're determined enough, if your need is great, you don't just have to wait for a miracle. You can make one happen."

"You've got an idea, Song, so just spit it out."

"There's an old legend about a group of friends whose town was threatened by a terrible dragon, a monster that it was rumoured no pony could defeat. But they were so determined to fight it that they set out to find the Elements of Harmony."

Cinnamon snorted. "The Elements of Harmony. They're nothing more than an old mare's tale."

"People thought the legend of the Valley of Eternal Sunlight was a myth until we found it. Wasn't the most likely of tales, was it? A golden tear of the original Princess of the Sun, falling from her eye as she defeated her sister Nightmare Moon? But there was truth to it. Ponies are ready to die to claim it. Behind every cloud there's sunlight and there's truth behind every myth. And do you know how this particular myth ends?"

"Go on then, Song. How?"

"They defeat the dragon, and bring peace to the land. They go on a lot more adventures, but then they finally decide it's time to leave the Elements behind, for the next time they're needed. And where do they leave them? The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. In the Everfree Forest. Oddly specific for an otherwise vague and hazy legend."

Strawberry's eyes, narrowed with doubt, suddenly widened a little.

"That's up Ponyville way. Ain't more than a few days walk from here."

"Exactly, my friend."

Cinnamon still wasn't convinced. "Tell me more about these Elements. I only know a little bit of the story."

"They appear again and again in myths, legends, old mare's tales. But there are always six of them, even though they take different forms when they need to. Locked inside them is a power strong enough to change the world. The legend, as far as it goes, names five of them Honestly, Loyalty, Generosity, Optimism and Kindness."

"That's five, what's the sixth?"

"No pony knows. It's a mystery. The legends say that when the five are united, a spark will cause the sixth one to reveal itself."

"So what you're saying is, "all" we need to do is hike north, enter the *exceptionally creepy* Everfree Forest, find the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters somehow, find the five Elements of Harmony that we know about, find out what sort of spark works to make the sixth show itself, cart them all back to Hoofington and use them to *magic* our parents into seeing sense?"

"Um, well, when you put it *that way*..."

Strawberry and Cinnamon looked at each other for a moment.

"Horse apples."

"Yeah, horse apples."

"Well, do either of you have any better suggestions? Refine Cinnamon's new "toss everything on the library floor" filing system? Try convincing the town elders they shouldn't settle a feud that's been going on for more than ten years after the mayor of the other town just kicked ours *in the face*? Sit back and watch while two towns tear each other apart over a pretty stone?"

"Chase an old legend into a crazy, haunted forest? Listen to yourself, Song!"

Song hesitated for a second, but he knew what weapon he had to use. He put on a big, triumphant grin.

"I'm going anyway!"

"Oh, no no no, don't do *this* Song!"

"Mind's made up! Can't convince me otherwise!"

"Oh for hay's sake, Song-"

"Going to pack for a trip to the Everfree Forest! See you all in two weeks!"

He trotted off with a big, goofy smile on his face. Strawberry stamped his hoof on the ground in supreme irritation.

"Darn it all! He knows us way too well."

Cinnamon sighed and shook his head resignedly. "I'll meet you at Song's place in twenty minutes. Remember to pack enough food."

They found themselves blocked by Star Gazer. The midnight-blue filly was wiggling excitedly and wearing an eager smile.

"Oh, this is so cool! We're going on a hike! What should I pack?"

Cinnamon didn't have time for this.

"Nothing. You're not coming with us." He began walking, telling himself he could just ignore her objections.

"No fair! You can't just go on a super cool trip and leave me behind!"

"You're not coming. We're not going to have an argument about this."

"I'm sick of you treating me like a foal! I'm only two years younger than you, Cin!"

"We're going chasing off into the hay-darned Everfree Forest on some wild goose chase for the Elements of Harmony because our friend is too stubborn to admit they don't exist. I'm not dragging you along too."

The filly had her own secret weapon.

"If you don't take me, I'll tell dad what you're doing! I'll wake him up and everything!"

Cinnamon sighed and rubbed his temples gingerly. There was, indeed, no reasoning with anyone in his family. Strawberry started to object.

"You're not seriously-"

Cinnamon cut him off. "Go and pack something warm, sis. Strawberry, just... just don't. Go and pack enough food for four of us."

Twenty minutes later, Song trotted joyfully out of his house, smirking victoriously to himself as he saw an irritated Strawberry, an eager Star Gazer and a thoroughly defeated-looking Cinnamon all kitted out with their saddlebags, standing a few yards away.

"Ah, excellent! So you finally saw sense – and we're bringing Star Gazer along too! How *excellent*! The more, the merrier!"

Star Gazer grinned and wiggled again.

Cinnamon grumbled and kicked the dirt dejectedly. "We're not going to find anything out there, Song. This is a waste of everyone's time. You're just dragging us along because you know we won't let you take this trip alone."

"Good times shared with friends will brighten even the darkest of days!" remarked Morning Song jovially. His face then fell a little. "Besides... if this all boils down badly, I... I don't think I want to be anywhere near it."

Strawberry's eyes registered a little less frustration and a little more empathy. "Actually, I can get behind that."

Cinnamon decided if they couldn't avoid this trip, they should at least take it seriously. "They're going to notice we're gone pretty quickly tomorrow, and a search party will move quicker overland than we will."

"Oh, that's a good point. I hadn't really thought of that."

Strawberry weighed in unexpectedly. "The Bulrush Stream isn't too far from here, and it leads straight into the Whitetail Woods. If we make a careful beeline for it, tread lightly and cover our tracks, then move through the shallows, they won't be able to tell which way we went. We can follow the stream all the way into the woods, probably get there before dawn."

"That takes us very close to Saddle Wood land" remarked Cinnamon.

"Exactly. Ain't gonna risk following us too far into it."

"Yes, but ponies from Saddle Wood might."

"Then we'll just have to be careful. It sure beats trying to move straight north across open land. In the forest we'll have cover, and it ain't familiar terrain for a Hoofington search party."

"But it would be familiar terrain for anyone from Saddle Wood."

"Listen, you got any better ideas, I'm all ears! I didn't exactly *leap* forward when this trip was suggested!"

"Fine. Bulrush Stream it is. Come on guys, let's get moving."

Even walking slowly and softly and stepping carefully in each other's tracks to disguise their numbers, it took less than an hour to get to the Bulrush Stream. Strawberry had expected this, but he knew that wasn't going to be anywhere near the hardest part of the trip. Walking through the shallows of the stream slowed them down considerably, and it turned into a cold, hard slog. Strawberry knew if they were going to have any chance of outrunning a search party, they *needed* to make it to the Whitetail Woods before dawn and find themselves a safe place to hide. He was pretty certain they wouldn't follow inside the Woods themselves, but if they didn't make this first, long leg of the journey quickly, they wouldn't be able to make the rest of it.

Why were they even making this journey in the first place? It was a complete foal's errand, and he cursed himself for being so easily manipulated. Morning Song was stubborn, Morning Song was foolish, Morning Song was...

Morning Song was completely right. Even if they didn't find what they were looking for, Strawberry had to admit he would much rather prefer to be here, on an exciting journey with friends, than back home, where all he could do was watch as his father, and his mother, and the mothers and fathers of his friends prepared to fight other ponies. Even if this whole trip was doomed to failure, it wouldn't be a waste of time. He breathed in contentedly and grinned to himself. His friends were here, and that was all that mattered.

He noticed that Star Gazer was flagging badly, obviously far more affected by the mud and the cold than her brother or his friends. She was obviously very tired, but trying to put on a brave face so she wouldn't look like she was slowing everyone down. He hunkered down lower in the water and waited for her to reach him.

"C'mon little missy, hop up."

She looked at him, bleary-eyed and yawning. "Huh?"

"You're dog tired. Rest y'self a spell, you'll feel better."

"I'm OK, it's OK, I can-"

"Won't take no for answer, missy. You should know how *that* is."

Seeing that he, in his own way, was just as unwilling to budge as she had been earlier, she carefully clambered up onto Strawberry's back and closed her eyes, almost instantly drifting off to sleep. He began walking again, careful to keep his balance now that he had the filly balanced on his back.

Cinnamon looked over his shoulder and smiled as his friend caught up, bearing his sister. "You're a fine colt to have around, you know that, Berry?"

"Don't get all sentimental on me, Cin."

"Aw, big tough farm-pony has a soft spot after all" He fluttered his eyelashes demurely. "Carry me if I get tired?"

"I can drop you in the water if you want."

"Point taken."

When Star Gazer awoke, the morning sunlight was pouring through in through dense treetops. Her brother and Strawberry were asleep, but her brother's oddball friend Morning Song was awake. True to his name, he was softly playing snatches of various tunes on his flute and humming to himself in between. He winked at her as she picked herself up and stretched, continuing his tune. She trotted over slowly and sat down next to him.

She took a good look at him. Like a few ponies she knew, his coat was a vibrant colour, a bright, minty green, which stood in sharp contrast to his bright aqua and white hair. His odd appearance was topped off by his bizarre Cutie mark, which seemed to be a musical note with four flags. It looked rather like a comb with a handle.

"It's a hemidemisemiquaver."

Star Gazer never seemed to get all that surprised by people interrupting her train of thought, but the word itself struck her as ridiculous.

"You just made that up!"

"No, honest! It's a note that lasts for one sixty-fourth of a semibreve."

"*That* sounds made up, too!"

"No, no! It's all perfectly real musical notation! A semibreve is a whole note, you see, like this..."

He blew a relatively long note on his flute.

"And in that same space of time, you can fit *just about* sixty-four of these in."

He blew a very fast, complex melody on his flute. To Star Gazer, it looked extremely difficult, but he seemed to pull it off without any effort at all. In fact, he didn't even seem to really notice he was doing it.

"That's *amazing!*"

He blushed slightly, not really expecting the compliment.

"Oh, it's... it's nothing. I do that all the time. Oh, and I mean, sometimes, they're not as fast, it depends on the time signature..."

“But that's really amazing! You don't even seem to think about what you're doing, and yet it still sounds *perfect!*”

Having time to get used to the appreciation, he smirked appreciatively.

“Well, I've always had a talent for music. Just... the rhythm, the notes. Ever since I was the tiniest colt, it just seemed almost... instinctual. Like I could *feel* the music. Any instrument I put my hoof to, I was playing symphonies in a month. But I never found anything as satisfying – or, let's face it, as easy to carry around – as this here flute. I just love this thing. No-one was surprised when I got this here Cutie mark for all my trouble.”

Star Gazer beamed up at the musician. “That's a really nice story. I never knew that about you”

“Always saw me as the goofy joke-loving class clown, huh?” He feigned indignation, but it was clear to her he was joking.

“Well... yeah. Kinda.”

“Ah, well, music isn't the only thing I'm good at. I like entertaining people. Making them smile, or making them laugh. Music isn't the only thing that can do that, it's just what I'm best at. But I can tell jokes, and stories, and old legends too. Tried my hooves at juggling a couple of times, but Strawberry won't let me do it anymore. Something about his heart not being able to take it. So what's the deal with your Cutie mark?”

Star Gazer looked down at her own flank, which bore an odd symbol – a series of white dots connected to one another by a curving line.

“It's a constellation of stars. This one is the Corona Borealis – the Northern Crown. I got it because I love looking at the stars.”

“You're one of the ponies who got your name *after* you got your Cutie Mark, aren't you?”

“How did you guess?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Well, it's not just looking at the stars. I learnt the names of all the constellations you can see in this hemisphere!”

“See? *Hemisphere.*”

She either ignored him, or just didn't really hear him.

“I also taught myself how to work out where I am, what time it is and what direction is north by the positions of the sun and the stars in the sky! No matter how far I go away from home, I always know my way back, just by looking up.”

Song looked at her and chuckled, but not derisively – admiringly. “That's one pretty darn useful trick! I think bringing you along was a pretty good decision, all things considered!”

She looked up at him, taken aback. "You really think so?"

"Of course! I mean, Celestia's wings, if we had to rely on me to navigate, we'd probably end up in a desert, or walking in circles for two weeks. I'm glad we have you and your brother around to help us."

"That's... that's nice of you to say. My father thinks I'm a failure."

Song lost his cheerful grin rather suddenly.

"*What?*"

"He... well, Cinnamon always feels like our father looks down on him, but whenever Cin-Cin isn't around, dad always tells he how he wishes I "had a useful talent like my brother". He says I should "come down to earth and start living like an earth pony", and stop "gazing at the sky like some hoity-toity unicorn". I've never been very useful around Hoofington, there's not really much call for an astronomer. Maybe he's right..."

"Listen to me, Star. If your father can't see past your talent and love you for who you are, he's even more of an irredeemable idiot than he looks. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I... no..." she blushed, curling up on herself. "It's silly"

"Come on. Tell me. I won't laugh."

"No. It's too silly. It'll never happen. But... thank you. For what you said."

"Kindness costs nothing" He winked and grinned.

She smiled back. "I'll have to remember that."

Given that they'd been travelling nearly the whole night, it was nearly noon before either Cinnamon or Strawberry woke up. After a quick carrot brunch, the four earth ponies set off northwards again.

Meanwhile, not so far away, two other ponies were having an equally honest conversation with each other. A massive, slate-grey pegasus lumbered slowly down the well-worn dirt track that led north from Saddle Wood, his heavy hoof-falls echoing gently through the trees. Trailing behind him, having to trot pretty quickly to keep up with what, for the pegasus, amounted to a pretty gentle pace, was a small light-blue unicorn colt. The pegasus looked back, puffed at his long, dark green bangs to get them out of his face, and frowned.

"I still don't know how you talked me into this."

Next to him, the unicorn – who was short for his age – looked positively minuscule.

"I... I know... I'm... I just felt like I need to *do* something, Thunder!"

Thunderclap snorted. "Yeah, well, teaches me to promise to help you with something before I find out what it is."

"I mean, I-I-I appreciate you coming along..."

"That's good. It is nice, at least, to know that."

"I... I really... I didn't mean to be trouble..."

"Relax, Sparky! It's not exactly like I'd let you make this journey on your own, especially not the way things are now. I just think we're gonna go to a lot of trouble and find nothing at the end"

He adjusted his saddlebags and continued plodding along.

"I don't really mind coming along. The change of scenery is nice. I just want you to have... well, I want you to keep your hooves on the ground."

"But I don't even know a flying-"

"No! I mean I want you to keep your expectations realistic! What are you gonna do if we *don't* find them?"

"I... I don't know..."

"See? This is what I mean, Sparky. Always have to think of alternatives."

"I... I just don't want anyone to get hurt!"

"Neither do I, Sparky, neither do I. But you're going to have to work out how you're gonna stop it happening if this plan doesn't work."

The little unicorn stopped, sniffing. The pegasus turned around.

"Oh, what was I even thinking? It was a stupid plan to begin with. How was I ever gonna pull it off?"

Thunderclap started lumbering back towards his friend.

"I'm just a stunt unicorn who's still blank-flank when he's nearly a stallion... ain't even got a special talent... how was I ever-"

He was cut off as a massive wing wrapped around him.

"Now cut that out. I didn't get roped into this just to let you quit at the first hurdle."

"But I don't... I can't-"

"Even if we don't find the Elements of Harmony, we're gonna figure out some way to keep everyone in Saddle Wood safe. Together."

"Together?"

"Of course, together, silly. I'll be with you the whole way, Sparky. I won't ever let you down. And you know what? Don't you worry about your blank-flank. Soon, we're gonna find your Cutie mark, and it'll be even more awesome than mine."

Through watery eyes, the unicorn colt looked up at the bright double-thunderbolt mark on his friend's flank, so large it covered almost all of it.

"You promise?"

Thunderclap looked down with a gentle, reassuring smile, and wrapped his wing a little tighter around his friend.

"I promise."

The four Hoofington ponies had a relatively uneventful journey through the woods until the mid-afternoon, when Morning Song's ears flickered suddenly, and he stopped.

Cinnamon turned to see what the problem was. "What's up?"

"Thought I heard something."

"Are you sure? I didn't hear a thing."

"You know all the songbirds that were singing when you woke up this morning?"

"Yeah?"

"I could pick out individual notes. One of them was singing out of tune. Trust me, I heard something. Now wait here, and don't make a sound."

The three ponies hunkered down as Song prowled off carefully into the undergrowth. Strawberry let out an ill-tempered grumble.

"I like Song better when he's showing off *for* us, not *to* us."

They waited in awkward silence for about five minutes, until Song came stalking back quietly.

"Big problem" he whispered. "Found a road leading north up ahead."

"How is that a problem?" whispered Cinnamon.

"Two ponies on it. They've got Saddle Wood saddlebags. A unicorn colt and a *really* big pegasus. We're talking bigger than Strawberry. Hay alive, he might be bigger than Shortbread."

Shortbread was Strawberry's father, and the largest pony in Hoofington. This definitely gave the four ponies some pause.

"Coming this way?"

"No, travelling the same direction as us."

"Did they see you?"

"Pretty sure they didn't. Didn't show it if they did."

"So, what do we do?"

"They aren't walking all that fast. The big one's having to walk slowly for the little unicorn. Staying behind them's going to slow us down, and I don't think we can just sneak past them. We could take a different route, but that road's the quickest way"

Strawberry frowned. "We should take them out."

"Do *what*?"

"They're Saddle Wood. Can't trust 'em. Could be doing anything. Might already know we're here, might be looking for us. We should trot up, put up and buck 'em down."

"You didn't see the pegasus! He was *enormous*!"

"It's three on two, and we'd have the element of surprise! We can take them!"

Cinnamon considered for a moment. "Saddle Wood *did* start this whole thing, and we don't know if these guys are going to be reasonable. I don't *want* to get into a fight, but we can't take the risk that *they* do"

"Are you guys *crazy*?!" Star Gazer squeaked loudly, before remembering she was supposed to whisper. "You're just going to run in and start a fight? How can you guys be so mean?!"

"It's not a question of being mean, Star! It's a question of being *cautious*."

"*Cautious* is running in and starting a fight?!"

"We can't take the risk that they'll sneak up on *us* later, when we're unprepared – or worse, sneak up on us and then run back and get more Saddle Wood ponies!"

"There's got to be another way!"

"I wish there was, but we have no idea what they're doing here, and we can't take the risk."

"This is *crazy*! Song, tell them this is *crazy*!"

Song shook his head sadly. "Sometimes you have to do crazy things to survive."

Star Gazer looked at her brother and his friends with a mixture of disappointment and shame.

The unicorn looked up as his friend stopped suddenly, his jaw set and his ears swivelling. His left front hoof hovered in mid-air.

"Thunder, what's wrong?"

Thunder wheeled around to face a patch of trees behind them.

"Sparky, get behind me. There's someone coming."

His friend zipped behind him with a speed that would have surprised anyone watching them five minutes ago.

The massive pegasus bared his teeth and called out derisively.

"I heard you the first time you were sneaking around back there– did you really think I wouldn't notice *all* of you?!"

He was greeted in return by a gruff, sarcastic jibe, that curiously didn't seem to be aimed at him.

"Oh, don't worry! They didn't see me! Didn't show it if they did!"

"Well how was I to know if he *didn't give any indication?*"

"Oh, don't worry, Song, because I think he just gave some indication! Maybe you picked up on it"

"Well at least I took matters into my own hooves, Berry! I tried to be pro-active! It's not my fault if I'm not always right! It was *your* crazy idea that we go after them!"

"And it was *your* crazy idea that we're even *in* this forest to begin with!"

The pegasus and the unicorn looked at each other bewilderedly.

"Shouldn't we... um... say something?"

"You know," the pegasus replied, looking back at his friend, "I think they've got that covered."

Emerging from the trees came three angry-looking earth stallions, although whether their anger was centred on the pair or each other was not entirely clear. One of them, a bizarre-looking mint-green pony with a flute slung over his back, leered at the pair.

"Well what do we have here? A blank-flank and a circus freak from Saddle Wood, skulking about deep in a forest!"

The pegasus snorted derisively. "Actually, more like you were the ones skulking. You were pretty terrible at it though. Must be from Hoofington."

The sandy one with the striped red-and-brown hair stepped forward, his voice grating. "I think you better just run back to your precious Saddle Wood before you say something you regret, *freak*."

"And I think if you want to start throwing threats around you better be ready to back them up, *chubby*."

"There's three of us, and only two of you! We'll take you both on."

This, on reflection, had clearly been the wrong thing to say. The pegasus reared up with an ear-splitting neigh, stamping his hooves down with a thunderous thump. He breathed in loudly, and then began bellowing at the three threatening stallions.

"NO! IT'S THREE ON **ONE**, BECAUSE IF YOU LAY ONE **HOOF** ON MY FRIEND I WILL **SNAP IT OFF AND SHOVE IT DOWN YOUR NO-GOOD, DIRTY THROATS!**"

The three stallions back-peddled furiously for a moment, but regained their composure, and moved back into fighting stances. Thunderclap yelled to his friend, who was cowering behind him, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the enemy.

"Sparky, go! Run! Run far away from here!"

The unicorn trembled violently. "I-I won't leave you here alone, Thunder!"

"You need to get away! I'll hold them off!"

The stallions were advancing.

"I can't-"

"GO!"

"STOP!"

Everyone stopped suddenly as a dark-blue filly *appeared* in between the pegasus and the three advancing stallions, facing away from him. She dug her hooves into the ground, glaring angrily at her three companions. The smallest stallion, a tan pony with a long, neat auburn mane, shouted at her.

"Star, what are you *doing*?! Get out of the WAY!"

"No, Cin, I won't! I won't let you fight them!"

Thunderclap briefly considered just bowling straight through the filly and getting the first hits in while they were distracted, but something about her voice – and the thought of how damned dishonourable it would be to smack a filly in the flank – made him hesitate.

"We don't know why they're here, we don't know what they're doing, and this poor pegasus is afraid for his friend! Just like you're all afraid for each other! Just like *we're* all afraid for our *families*!"

"They're from Saddle Wood, they're no damn good!" the largest stallion yelled, reciting a foal's rhyme that Thunderclap and Silver Spark had heard all too often. "You've got your back turned! He's going to-"

"*Look at you!*" she shrieked accusingly, "Look at what you're *doing*! Cinnamon! You always tell me you don't want to turn into daddy, but here you are, acting just like him! You said in the library last night you wanted to end this *stupid* argument between our two towns, and here you are, just keeping it going! And Morning Song! You told me "kindness costs nothing". Kindness costs nothing unless they're from Saddle Wood, right?"

The stallions backed off slightly, shocked and baffled by how aggressive Cinnamon's little sister was being.

"How are we ever going to stop our parents from fighting this stupid battle if we can't stop ourselves from fighting? *Everypony* deserves a chance, no matter where they come from!"

Fluttershy squealed and pranced in place, grinning excitedly. Twilight and the rest of Fluttershy's friends shared looks of eager understanding.

The older versions of Star Gazer and Morning Song smiled knowingly at each other, and then continued their story.

Cinnamon hung his head shamefully.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Star... I..."

Song hung his head as well.

"I... I didn't mean to-"

Even Strawberry seemed shamed by the filly's words, and simply backed off a little, saying nothing. She slowly turned around, revealing a pair of kind, understanding blue eyes. She spoke in a much quieter voice, but it still wavered a little with the emotion of her earlier outburst.

"I'm very sorry that my brother and his friends tried to hurt you. I don't want to see anyone get hurt. My name's Star Gazer."

She offered a hoof, with a look of candour and sincerity in her eyes. Hesitantly, and as gently as possible, Thunderclap took it carefully in his own and shook it.

"I'm Thunderclap, and my friend is Silver Spark."

Silver Spark peeked timidly out from behind the pegasus' back legs.

"... hi"

Star Gazer waved her free hoof eagerly at him.

"Hi!"

He ducked his head back behind Thunder, but smiled a little bit. The filly looked back to Thunderclap.

"We're on a journey that takes us to the north, and we need to use this road. We don't want any trouble, and we won't give you any."

Thunderclap was a little surprised at how fearless and forthright she was in dealing with him, and also how polite a Hoofington resident was being to him. He was still slightly concerned it was all a trick to catch him off-guard. The pegasus fiddled with his bangs awkwardly.

"Uh, yeah... we were... travelling north, too."

"This road is the fastest way to get to where we're going. Is it OK if we use it?"

So now she was actually *asking permission* from a Saddle Wood pony to use a public thoroughfare. This was either the weirdest trick ever, or she was genuine.

"Um, well, road doesn't really belong to me."

"But we don't want to cause trouble, you see."

"Well, I ain't... I'm not gonna lay my hooves on a filly! What sort of monster do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're a monster. I think you're brave, because you stood up for your friend, even though you could have gotten hurt!"

"Oh, yeah, well, that wasn't really all that much of a risk-"

He stopped when he realised she had just vouched for his personality, and bragging probably wouldn't impress her very much.

"I mean, that is- there aren't any risks I wouldn't take for my friend! And hey, you're pretty brave yourself! You stood up to your friends! That takes way more courage!"

She blushed at the compliment.

"Oh, no, that's just my brother, Cinnamon and his friends Morning Song and Strawberry. They're good ponies really, they just get stupid sometimes."

Morning Song grimaced. "Well thank you very much, Star, for the glowing personality reference!"

She smiled sweetly, and then continued talking to the pegasus.

"If we're both going the same way, why don't we walk together for a while?"

Thunderclap's eyebrows raised in shock, and all he could think to say was "What?!", upon the completion of which he realised he'd been joined by every other pony present – the three stallions the filly had talked down, and even his timid unicorn friend. They all looked at her like she was quite mad. She looked at them like it was the most obvious, sensible idea in the world that none of them had come up with yet. Eventually, she broke the awkward silence that followed.

"If we're travelling the same way, we might as well walk together! We'll all be safer that way, and we don't need to worry about us running off to tell our towns about each other! It makes perfect sense!"

Thunderclap placed a hoof on his jaw thoughtfully. "When you put it that way, I guess it does"

Strawberry still looked at Star Gazer as if she'd just started spouting word salad.

"You're seriously suggesting that we-?"

"Yes, I am! That way, you won't have to worry that they're sneaking up on us or running off to tell Saddle Wood that we're here. Plus, if all of us get into trouble, I bet there's nothing you and our new friend Thunderclap here couldn't handle between you!"

"*Friend?!?*"

Cinnamon scratched his head and considered.

“Well, I guess this all makes sense. If they agree not to cause trouble, we won't cause trouble either. If the Saddle Wood pony can keep his word, so can I.”

He spat on his hoof, and then offered it to Thunderclap, who repeated the crude gesture and shook hooves with him. Strawberry glared at the pegasus and his friend, but nodded.

“Long as he understands that if he lays a hoof on me, size or no I'll knock him for six.”

Thunderclap stared at the large stallion, frowning. “Understood, long as you understand that if you lay a hoof on my friend, *your* friend with the flute there will be playing you a funeral dirge.”

They glared at each other for a second, and then turned away.

Morning Song raised his eyebrows sarcastically. “Well, this *is* going to be fun, isn't it.”

Chapter III

The Road to Ponyville

They had been walking in uneasy silence for a while, occasionally casting suspicious glances at each other. Silver Spark was still very wary of the other ponies, and kept very close to his friend and protector, but didn't seem to be terrified of them anymore. Eventually, after a while, Cinnamon's curiosity overcame their mistrust.

"I'm sorry... uh, Thunderclap, is it?"

"Uh huh."

"I can't help noticing, but you're really... huge."

"You work that out all by yourself?"

"I'm just kind of curious. I mean, big strong fellow like you, don't they need you in Saddle Wood?"

"I'm sure they do."

"But you're not in Saddle Wood."

"You're really good at pointing out the obvious, aren't you?"

"What I mean is, why are you travelling up north when they need you in Saddle Wood?"

"Because there's about to be a war with your town, and I don't want any part of it, and neither does my friend."

Cinnamon nodded.

"I can respect that."

"Good."

"But why decide to leave?"

"I didn't."

"But you're here."

"Very perceptive."

"I mean, if you didn't decide to leave, why are you here?"

"Because my friend here decided to leave. I made a promise that I'd come with him." He paused, and allowed himself the smallest of smiles. "But I'd have come anyway."

Silver rubbed his head against the pegasus' flank affectionately.

"You two clearly have a very strong friendship."

Thunderclap managed to restrain himself from making another comment on Cinnamon's extensive appreciation for the obvious.

"Been through a lot together."

"How did that get started?"

"We met at school."

Every pony except for Thunderclap and Silver Spark stopped dead. They stopped soon after so as not to leave the shocked ponies they'd left in their wake behind.

Morning Song spluttered for a moment, and then finally managed to get a disbelieving half-question out. "Wait, you're the *same age*?!"

"Well, no, but I'm only a year older."

"But, but, but... you're *huge*, and he's *tiny*!"

"Does *everypony* from Hoofington love telling people what they already know this much?"

"I just... that's..."

"My parents were very big pegasi, and I went through a growth spurt early in life, OK?"

Cinnamon wanted to ask a stupid question, but thought of a better, more astute observation to make.

"You look after him because he's like the little brother you never had."

Thunderclap turned his head to Cinnamon as he started walking again, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"So you've got something up there after all. Yeah, it's something like that."

"You're definitely closer than me and my little sister."

Star Gazer rolled her eyes. "I'll say."

Thunderclap tilted his head interestedly. "I didn't realise she was your sister until she said so. You don't look very much alike."

Cinnamon smirked smugly. "Now who's stating the obvious?"

"You don't *act* very much alike, either."

"OK, less obvious."

"Not really. She's a lot more mature than she looks."

Star Gazer blushed again. Cinnamon rolled his eyes.

"You caught her on a good day."

"Hey, I'm not joking when I say she *dirtied* all your faces. And mine, just a little bit. I was all ready for a scrap, and here she was, calmly and fearlessly talkin' us all down. Don't see that every day."

"She was very brave. You could have struck her in the back."

Thunderclap turned to Cinnamon again, with a very serious expression.

"No. I couldn't have."

Cinnamon took the hint that this topic was over, and instead moved on.

"So what's north, for the two of you?"

"Something our town needs."

"Can I ask what it is?"

"You can ask."

"What is it?"

"I didn't say I had to answer."

"But are you going to?"

"I'm comfortable sharing the road with you for a spell. I'm not sure I'm comfortable sharing my goal with you."

"Again, I can respect that."

"Good."

There was another brief spell of silence, but they once again began talking, if not on exactly friendly terms, certainly warmer than before. In the company of new acquaintances, much time seemed to pass very quickly, and twilight crept up on them suddenly. Seeing that everypony besides himself and Strawberry were exhausted, and even they were starting to get tired, Thunderclap chose a spot where the the road ran straight through a small, grassy clearing and called a stop. To his lasting surprise, the Hoofington ponies agreed with him, and they each set up their own little camp on opposite sides of the road.

Thunderclap pulled his saddlebags off his back, stamped down an area of grass, and began the work of carefully building a small camp-fire. It took a while to find the twigs and kindling he needed, since he never let himself take his eyes off Spark for more than a split second, lest his suspicions be confirmed and the Hoofington bunch go for him. He would never, ever forgive himself if a poor judgement call got his friend hurt. Finally, after about twenty minutes or so of searching about for twigs in a very small radius from the clearing, he had found enough, and he trotted back to the camp.

He was greeted by an argument from the other side of the clearing. Cinnamon and Strawberry were yelling at each other.

"I told you to pack enough for four ponies!"

"I *did* pack enough for four ponies!"

"Enough food to last us two days at most! There isn't even enough to go around for tonight's meal!"

"I was in a hurry! I packed what was in reach, as much of it as I could find – and you know what? Not gonna lie. You guys eat *a lot*. Not gonna sugar-coat it."

Morning Song started yelling as well. "You knew this journey would take *days*, a week at least, and you didn't bother to pack what we needed to *live*!"

"Hey, it wasn't my idea to come on this damn trip anyway. *His* father got us into this with his stupid decisions, and we insisted on following *you* on this... hare-brained scheme of yours! So I had to come along with the two of you, because otherwise you'd get yourselves into a whole heap of trouble. But I guess the joke's on *me*, now, isn't it, because we're in a whole heap of trouble anyway – cold, hungry and we're campin' straight across the road from the enemy!"

"No. No you aren't."

All four ponies looked up from their argument to see Thunderclap trotting over with his saddlebags messily slung over his back. He trotted over, and then pulled them off his back with his jaws, opening one and spilling all its contents out onto the ground in front of them. There was easily enough food on the ground to feed four ponies for a day and a half – or two ponies who ate sparingly for at least twice as long.

They all looked at Thunderclap, not sure what to do. He smiled at them, meaningfully.

"Please, take it."

They still did nothing. He rolled a big head of lettuce over to Strawberry with his hoof.

"I still don't trust you all. Not quite yet. But we don't have to be enemies. And you don't have to be cold or hungry. Because that's not what I want."

Star Gazer looked up at the huge pegasus with a huge, hopeful grin on her face.

"All through my childhood I've been taught you ponies from Hoofington are nothing but scum, scum who'd gladly stab me between the wings for a few scraps of carrot. But that ain't what I see. All I see are other ponies, just like me, who could have hurt me and my friend, but decided not to. All I see are ponies, just like me, who are tired, and cold, and hungry. And even if I still don't quite trust you, I won't just leave you like that. Share my food, and share our fire, and let's be friends, not enemies."

Cinnamon turned to his sister. Both of them were holding back tears. When they turned to Morning Song, he was doing the same. There was a loud munching sound, and when they turned to Strawberry, he was already chowing on the head of lettuce Thunderclap had given him. Morning Song rolled his eyes and smirked wryly.

"Not scared he's poisoned it, Berry?"

“Aw hay, at least I won't die hungry!”

A few minutes later, they were all sitting around Thunderclap's pile of kindling, giving Spark encouragement as he strained to light it.

“Come on, buddy, you've done this a dozen times before!”

The unicorn concentrated, stray motes of energy crackling from his horn. The various Hoofington ponies also spoke words of encouragement (except for Strawberry, who was only able to give vague, impatient noises around his lettuce). In truth, he *had* done this a dozen times before, but he'd twice now accidentally set fire to something a few feet to the left of what he meant to. Right now, the cute filly who had been so nice to him and Thunder when her friends had wanted to hurt them was in that general area. This didn't help matters.

Thunder placed a reassuring hoof between his shoulders. “Take it slow. Don't rush. We won't freeze to death in the next few minutes, at least.”

“I... I'm sorry, everyone, I just... I'm just not very good with magic...”

Star Gazer leaned in close, and gently spoke to the timid unicorn.

“You probably just need a bit of practice. I bet one day you'll be a great magician.”

There was a great *whoosh*, and the camp-fire lit up spectacularly, almost escaping the fire ring Thunder had built around it. Everyone gasped and jumped a bit, but quickly huddled back towards the merry warmth of the fire.

Thunder chuckled. “Woah-ho-ho! Careful there, Sparky.”

For once, though, Silver Spark didn't immediately get busy apologising. His attention was still riveted on the pretty earth pony filly.

“You really think so?”

She was blushing furiously. “Y-yes. I really think so.”

They sat uneasily for a while, not saying anything. Thunderclap, apparently oblivious, turned to Cinnamon.

“So earlier, you asked me why we aren't in Saddle Wood. Well, not being in Saddle Wood wasn't my idea, exactly, but to be honest I was glad for an excuse to get away from it. We don't want this war, and we don't want any part of it.”

“We set out from Hoofington because we were looking-” Strawberry raised an eyebrow. Cinnamon hesitated a little. “... looking for a way to stop it.”

“Silver Spark, here, he has a big idea about how we're going to stop the war.”

Spark looked very embarrassed. "Well, it wasn't..."

"Yes it was, stop being so afraid to take the credit. I mean, he made me promise I'd come with him before he told me where we were going, though."

Silver Spark piped up, uncertainly.

"I... I had an idea about how to stop the war, but it was stupid..."

"Maybe it was, but I came along anyway. That's what I do."

Cinnamon eyed Morning Song sarcastically. "Can't be any stupider than ours."

Song stuck his tongue out.

Spark hesitantly continued. "I read... something in my parents' books on the Old Magic."

Cinnamon was still looking at Morning Song, but with a completely different expression – an "*oh-there's-no-way-it-can-be*" expression, which Morning Song was returning with his best "*oh-yes-there-darn-well is*" face.

"It was about a thing... a wonderful thing, that has the power to change the world, even when all other hope is lost."

Star Gazer's breath caught in her throat.

"We're... we're looking for the Elements of Harmony."

Everyone stared at each other in shocked silence for a moment. Thunderclap quickly cottoned on as to why this was.

"*You* were going after the Elements of Harmony as well."

Strawberry was the first to recover from the shock, but all he could do was stare disbelievingly.

"No way. Just no way. It's a trick! They listened! Or, or – they were following..."

Morning Song gave him a withering look of disapproval.

"Really, Strawberry? These boys from Saddle Wood followed us all the way *from Hoofington* to trick us into... what? Searching for the Elements of Harmony, which we're *already doing*?"

"I... but... this is..."

Thunderclap shook his head, not quite believing everything himself.

"I didn't believe it myself, but... I promised to come with Silver Spark. I promised to see this through, even though I didn't believe it. And I figured even when we don't find them, it won't be a total loss. We might still find something useful, maybe get help from Ponyville. It'll be a month before anything serious happens, so-"

Cinnamon turned to Strawberry. Strawberry shook his head vigorously.

"Cin, *no!* We still can't trust them! You can't tell them! Think about what they might do if-"

Cinnamon set his jaw, staring angrily back at his friend.

"No, Berry! Not after what they've done for us – not after they shared their food with us, shared their fire with us, not after they told us why they were here! I can't do it! I just can't!"

He looked Thunderclap straight in the eyes, with an expression of heartfelt trust and sadness on his face.

"Thunderclap, no more secrets between us. I'm the son of Coriander, Hoofington's mayor, and... and my dad is going to move into the valley in a week! He thinks if he takes the valley from your people suddenly, they'll just give up! I still don't know if I trust you completely, but... but after what you did for us, I just can't keep that from you! I can't keep that a secret!"

Thunderclap sat down hard, shaking his head, his mouth hanging open in shock. He cradled his head in his hooves.

"Oh, this is bad. This is *really* bad. We've got to *do* something."

Strawberry threw his hooves up in frustration. "I TOLD you this was a bad idea! They're going to run back to Saddle Wood and tell them everything!"

Thunderclap looked at Strawberry with utter confusion.

"What? No! *No!* That's absolutely the *worst* thing we could do?"

"... what?"

"If Saddle Wood thought their claim to the valley was threatened that badly, they'll – they'll just rush in, without a plan! It'll be complete chaos! Everyone will wade in, and... and... we need to get help! We need to go to Ponyville, or Canterlot, we need to tell the Princess to..."

Cinnamon groaned in exasperation. "No! Even if we could get her attention, the Princess couldn't change anything. Neither side is going to let go, even if she tells them to! Both sides will still hate each other, this ridiculous argument will still be there. And skies above help us if she judges in favour of either side, that'll just make the other even *angrier!*"

Their doom-saying was interrupted by Morning Song, who blew a loud note on his flute to get everyone's attention.

"Listen! Listen to me now!"

All faces turned to him.

"I said in the library last night that what we needed was a miracle, and that if you're determined enough, you can *make* a miracle happen. Well look at us. Six ponies from two towns that hate each other, sitting around a fire, sharing food, sharing warmth, sharing friendship and each sharing the same goal, even though they didn't know it. Six ponies, seeking six

Elements of Harmony. A power that can change the world, even when all hope is lost. Does that sound like just coincidence to you, or does that sound like a miracle?

"I'm not doing this just because I wanted to run off on some sill adventure. I truly believe the Elements of Harmony are *real*, some way or another. I want to see them, and after meeting you two, I want to use them to end all the bitterness and hatred between our towns."

Silver Spark sprung forward with unexpected eagerness, grabbing Morning Song's outstretched hoof.

"I believe in them too!"

Thunderclap sprang forth, placing his hoof on top of theirs.

"Whether or not I believe they're real, I'll be there until the end to help my friends find them – old friends, *and* new friends!"

Cinnamon leapt up, placing his hoof in the pile as well.

"Together!"

His sister stood by his side, her hoof on his.

"Together!"

They thought they were going to have to do some real convincing to convince Strawberry, but he was already by their side.

"Together."

All of them clutched each others' hooves tightly. Morning Song looked at all of them, obviously holding back tears again.

"We'll find the Elements of Harmony, and we'll stop our crazy parents having a stupid war, and we'll do it together, as friends, not enemies."

Applejack looked at Cinnamon with a great deal of admiration.

"That was a mighty fine thing y'did there, Cinnamon! Even though you were a mite afraid they might do you over with what y'told 'em..."

Cinnamon nodded with a satisfied smirk. "It's in my nature."

After the joy of the decision to continue their adventure together, everyone except Thunderclap, who volunteered to take first watch, had lain down to sleep. Thunderclap almost never got tired, but when he did, he slept like a log, so first watch worked well for him. After carefully sorting through what remained of both his supplies and those the Hoofington ponies had brought with him (plus a little, careful foraging) he had managed to scrape together just enough food to get them all to Ponyville. He would have to eat less than he wanted to if the other ponies were going to get a

fair share, but that was OK. Then again, he was glad he had packed a good few bits as well, because once they got there, they'd definitely need to stock up properly if they were going to survive the Everfree Forest.

He heard a noise behind him, and saw the quiet, cautious one, Strawberry, moving up behind him.

"Couldn't sleep? Not quite sure you trust me yet?"

"Just couldn't sleep. Wouldn't have let you take first watch if I didn't trust you."

The stallion sat down right next to him, and exhaled heavily.

"Mind if I tell you somethin', wings?"

"Long as you don't keep calling me wings."

"I believe in making this journey. With my friends, I mean. My old friends... and you two, as well"

"But...?"

"But I don't know if we'll find what we're lookin' for."

"Then you're not alone. Neither do I."

"Morning Song just seems so confident that when we reach the end of this road we're walkin', we'll find this mighty magical bauble that'll solve all our problems. He's so in love with all the legends that he wants to be in one himself."

"And you're afraid that if we don't, it'll all have been for nothing."

"Yeah, basically."

"On the road north today, before you guys showed up? I had this same conversation with Sparky. Finding the Elements and ending this feud was his idea, y'know. But he's so set on finding them. I told him he needs to think of what we're going to do if we don't. He didn't react well to that. Blamed himself for going on a fool's errand."

"He certainly doesn't seem to have much confidence, yeah."

"I met him on the third day I was at school. He was bein' picked on by some other foals because he was shy and had no friends. I was pretty big even in that day, and I could have joined in, but instead, I scared 'em all off and played with him. Been friends ever since. No-one ever messes with him while I'm around."

"Yeah. Gonna swallow my pride here and admit that I wasn't exactly *that* eager to scrap with you myself."

Thunderclap smiled. "Well you didn't, so it's all good. You all just made me a... tiny bit angry by threatening him."

"He's lucky to have you."

"Is he, though?"

"What the hay do you mean, is he? Of course he is."

"All his life, he's been treated like he's worth nothing on his own. Sure, bullies at school don't dare go near him when I'm anywhere in sight, 'cause they know what's coming if they do. But, you know, *what if?* They'd swarm on him if they knew I wasn't there to watch his back. And it's not just that. His parents are kind, loving ponies, but they treat him like he's feeble and helpless."

"But... well... he kinda is."

"That's the problem, though! If he's always treated like he's pathetic, always coddled, always treated like he can't get anything done for himself, he'll never start believing in himself. I mean, look at him. He's just about our age and he's not even got his Cutie mark. You know why that is? Because no-one ever pushes him to find out what his talent is."

"I mean think about this. His parents are the only unicorns in town who've ever bothered to try and teach him magic, but they don't ever give him anything challenging to cast because they expect him to fail at it. You know why he was able to light that fire today? It's because that's the first time any pony except me has ever told him they believed he could do it. Think about that. It *still* took someone else to make him believe he was capable of lighting that fire."

"But he did light it. He lit it pretty damn well, in fact." Strawberry grinned and looked back at the glowing embers of the camp-fire.

"That ain't the point! The point is that he's always relying on others to fight his battles for him. His parents, his teacher, the few other friends he has besides me – they're all just holding him back. Because they expect him to fail. They aren't pushing him, aren't letting him stand on his own four hooves."

He sighed deeply.

"And neither am I."

"You're a *wonderful* friend to him. You were willing to fight all of us to protect him."

"And what if I hadn't been there? What if it had just been him? Or what if you had all beaten me? What would he have done then? He relies on me for *everything*, and that just ain't right."

"You're afraid of what will happen if he has to go without you."

"You want the truth? I came along on this trip – even though I don't think we have a butterfly's chance in a spider's nest of really finding the elements – because it was *his idea*. For once in his life, he'd decided on a course of action on his own, and actually gone through with it. He finally had enough of this war between our towns, and even if his idea to end it

was far-fetched, he *had* that idea and he *acted* on it. I'm just so worried that... that if we don't find the Elements..."

"He'll blame himself, and he'll never gain enough self-confidence to stand on his own."

"Yeah."

"And you're worried that being with you all this time has done more harm than good."

"... yeah."

"I don't know you all that well, Thunderclap... hay, I don't know anyone from Saddle Wood all that well, but I know a good friend when I see one. You're right, you might not be what Spark will always need, but you're what he needs *right now*. He needs a good, reliable friend to be there with him while he finds himself."

"You... really mean that?"

"Wouldn't say it if I didn't. You're what he needs now."

"You ain't so bad after all, Strawberry."

"Call me Berry if you want. All my friends do."

Thunder grinned happily. "So we're friends now?"

"Long as you don't go messing up my face"

"Well then, *Berry*, you can call me "Thunder". That's what my friends call me"

"Then it's settled... *Thunder*."

"So how'd you get roped into this?"

"Well, Cinnamon and his little sister got roped into following Morning Song's grand quest to find the Elements, so of course *I* had to come along too. Not going to let my friends get themselves into all this trouble without me bein' there to haul their silly flanks out of it again."

"You're a farmpony, right?"

"What gave it away?"

"I was just thinking. Mayor's son, farmpony and... whatever it is that your friend Song is..."

"We don't rightly know ourselves."

"But yeah, unlikely combination, isn't it?"

"Honestly, I don't think Cinnamon's dad rightly cares about who he hangs out with. Pretty distant father, y'know."

"Cinnamon's quite dignified about that."

"Yeah, but he's *quite dignified* about darn near everything."

"True that."

The ponies were all up well after dawn the next day, clearing the camp-site and sharing a small breakfast. Thunderclap chewed slowly on the one carrot he had allowed himself, trying to make it last.

“Right, if we all eat sparingly, should be just enough food left to get us all to Ponyville, where we can do some shopping and catch our breath before we make a push into the Everfree Forest.”

“Thanks for sharing your food, Thunder. Don't know what we would have done if you hadn't-”

“Just stop thanking me for it. I did it because I just can't bear the thought of seeing ponies unhappy.”

Rarity looked very surprised, her jaw hanging slightly open. “But that's...! So you're the... but I thought you were...”

Thunderclap kicked the ground with a slight blush. “Oh yeah. Was a surprise to me, too.”

The trip to Ponyville was bright, breezy and delightfully free of any troubles or arguments. The new friends chattered to each other idly, and although they were forced to be very frugal with their lunch, it was substantial enough to get everyone through the day without too much hassle.

Early in the afternoon, Star Gazer cantered over close to her brother, and whispered in his ear softly.

“Cin-Cin, can we talk?”

Cinnamon looked at her sideways. “Why are we whispering?”

“It's important!”

“Then why are we whispering?”

“Because it's... *me*-important!”

“Oh. *Oh*. What is it?”

“I need you to keep a secret!”

“Is this the kind of secret that ends up with me getting smacked in the face by dad again?”

“No, no, this is an *important* secret!”

“So was *that* one!”

“Listen, will you just promise to keep this secret for me?”

“Fine. I promise”

“I... I think I kind of like Silver Spark!”

“Oh? Really? That's good! So do I!”

Her jaw dropped open.

"*What?!*"

"Well, he doesn't talk much, not very much self-confidence at all, but he's obviously very important to Thunderclap, and even though he was afraid of us he wouldn't run when Thunder told him to. It looks like with a little bit of application he could be a pretty powerful magician!"

"Oh. No, no, no, I meant I... kind of *like* him"

"Oh... oh. *Oh.*"

"Exactly! What should I do?"

"Well... well... *I've* never had... you know, a special filly! Why are you asking *me* for advice? Morning Song's goofy but all the fillies *love* him because he says all the right things. And Berry! Strawberry's got that big, strong distant thing they seem to go for to. They'd be much better people to ask! Wait, why are you even asking a colt anyway?"

"Well do you see any other fillies around here?"

"... good point, I guess."

"Besides, you're the only one who'll say what you mean! The others'll just say what I want to hear. You've *never* had *that* problem."

Cinnamon grinned sheepishly. She continued.

"So do you think I have a chance? What should I do?"

"I don't know if you have a chance, but... just... be *nice* to him. Get to know him a bit. Don't make any moves yet. He's not very confident, so don't go too fast, and definitely don't make it look like a crush."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think he'll shut down completely if he thinks you've got a crush on him. Just treat him like a friend, see how he reacts."

"Thanks, Cin-Cin."

"And don't tell dad."

She rolled her eyes.

It took some serious forced marching, but they arrived in Ponyville in the late afternoon, while most of the shops were still open.

"Hey, the town looks completely different to *our* Ponyville!" chirped Pinkie Pie, with a hint of disappointment in her voice. "There's no Sugarcube Corner! No library! No spa! And Rarity's shop isn't there either!"

"Well of course it isn't, darling, this is more than two hundred years ago! I won't even be born for another..."

She put her hoof on her chin. Everyone leaned in expectantly. The unicorn noticed them, and frowned disapprovingly.

“... vast majority of it.”

Thunderclap, Cinnamon and Strawberry handled the food purchases for the group so they were sure to have enough for a long trip deep into the Everfree and back. At this time of day, Ponyville market wasn't busy, and the marketeers were just beginning to pack up their produce, but the sight of new customers – hungry, thirsty, tired, customers – got everyone putting their best apples, carrots and celery right back onto their carts. One of the marketeers, a big, tall russet earth pony called out particularly loud.

“Apples! Freshest, tastiest, juiciest, most delicious apples in all of Equestria! C'mon y'all and get your apples!”

The three stallions looked at each other, and then at the apples.

Strawberry licked his lips. “Hey, I could sure go for some apples, actually!”

The marketeer smirked and waved them over. “Then come'n get 'em! Three apples a bit! Freshly bucked from the Apple Family orchard!”

The group trotted over to the cart. Strawberry tossed a bit to the pony and took one of the apples, biting down hard, a big, delighted grin spreading across his face soon after.

“Oh my gosh,” he mumbled, around a mouthful of apple. “These're amazing!”

“You bet your bit they are. Or y'don't! No gamblin' when you buy from the Apple family – always get the best apples! Name's Jonagold, and I'm mighty pleased to see travellers in good ol' Ponyville!”

Strawberry's eyes lit up with recognition. “There's an Apple family orchard in Hoofington – where we're from! The farmer there-”

Jonagold's ears perked up eagerly. “Ol' Ashmead! Him right there, he's my first cousin! How the hay's he doin'?”

“Oh, he's doin'...” Strawberry hesitated, remembering Ashmead and his two sons would probably be on the front lines of Hoofington's push into the valley. “... fine. Just fine.”

Thunderclap looked thoughtful. “Wait, I know an Apple family farmer in Saddle Wood as well!”

“Well kick me in the flank, that'll be my older brother Kingston! Kingston Black! How's the ol' curmudgeon doin'?”

“Oh, you know. Shouting bloody murder at foals pinching his apples, then dropping two big baskets of 'em round the school the next day...”

“Aw, yeah! Always did have a heart three times bigger'n his temper, did ol' Kingston! Why, I remember him and Ashmead, they used to...”

The farmer trailed off, sighing nostalgically. He was obviously trying to hide it, but something pained him.

Cinnamon leaned in towards the farmer a little. “What's wrong, sir?”

“Oh, 'tain't nothin'. 's just... you boys from Hoofington and Saddle Wood remindin' me of those two got me thinkin' 'bout how they used to be. Best of friends, those two were... until...”

Strawberry got an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach, and it wasn't because he was hungry.

“They... they... they fell out, didn't they? Because our towns did?”

Jonagold sighed again, looking very downcast suddenly.

“Kingston and Ashmead, well they used to be darned near inseparable. Ashmead were closer to Kingston than I was – my own brother! They were the ones what convinced me to come up here to Ponyville 'n' all, set up mah own orchard! But after that darned Sun Valley were found, ain't never been a moment of peace 'twixt 'em since. First family reunion after 'twere found, they kicked off somethin' fierce! Took half the stallions in the family to pull 'em apart!”

Cinnamon felt a terrible lurch of guilt, and hung his head in shame. The farmer continued, now in full stride.

“After that all boiled over, if one of them were at an Apple family gatherin', weren't no peace to be had for anypony if t'other was there too. 'ventually it got so bad, we told 'em 'twere better if they both just... stopped comin'. It's 'cause they were always causin' a ruckus, and both 'spectin' the rest of the family to start pickin' sides which we didn't rightly wanna do. So both of them just... didn't talk to any of us no more. Were all a mite painful for the rest of us, if you don't mind me sayin' so.”

The farmer sat silently for a moment, and then suddenly he turned his head to the stallions curiously.

“Say, if you colts are from Saddle Wood *and* Hoofington, shouldn't y'all rightly be buckin' the tar outta each other or somethin'?”

Thunderclap shook his head vigorously.

“We're sick of this stupid little squabble that our towns have gotten into. We came up this way 'cause we're searching for a way to stop it.”

Jonagold's face lit up with admiration.

“Well 'bout hay-pickin' time some young 'uns like y'all saw some darn sense! I tell you what, you pay for those three bundles y'got there, and I'll throw in this one on the house!”

Strawberry looked appalled. "Oh, no, we couldn't! You and your family worked hard for-!"

"I ain't takin' no for an answer! Finally seein' sense from those two towns of yours is worth much more'n a bunch of apples! Y'take care now, y'hear?"

"Now hold on just one apple-buckin' minute!" exclaimed Applejack. "You're sayin' that back in the day, even mah own kin got all caught up in this silly little squabble y'all were havin'?"

Morning Song scuffed the floor with his hoof awkwardly. "Well... yeah"

"That just ain't right! Ain't nothin' as silly as that could tear the Apple family apart so bad!"

Rainbow Dash placed a hoof on her friend's shoulder. "Aw, come on, no-one's perfect, Applejack. You know how easily we get into arguments..."

"Ah know, ah know, but it's just... it's just so hard to hear such harsh things bein' said 'bout mah kin! Thinkin' they'd be stubborn 'n' stupid enough to let some silly squabble that weren't none of their business like this hurt the whole family."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "You know more about the family history than us. Does it fit?"

"Ah *do* remember Jonagold from the ol' family ledger. He was Granny Smith's great-great-grandfather, and it was him who founded Sweet Apple Acres in Ponyville! So... ah guess..."

She looked a little downcast.

"Guess we can all be a mite stupid 'n' stubborn sometimes..."

Cinnamon looked at the mare with an understanding that crossed two centuries.

"They were just standing up for the towns that had welcomed them. They didn't make all the best decisions, certainly, but they were trying."

Her expression softened a little.

"Aw hay, ain't like ah never tussled with Big Macintosh before!"

After the discussion with Jonagold, the group quickly finished their food shopping, and to conserve every bit of what they'd bought for their trip into the Everfree, they ate at the town inn. Star Gazer was animatedly talking about how she, Morning Song and Silver Spark had visited the small library at the town hall to see if they could find anything useful.

“And so I found up-to-date star charts! They're much better than the ones in the library back at Hoofington! This'll make everything so much easier!”

Song grinned as he produced a sheaf of parchment notes. “Maps of as much as the Everfree Forest as anypony in these parts knows. Copies of sheet music and lyrics for ten traditional Ponyville songs, and some notes I made on local customs. Did you know they *don't* use magic to change the seasons here? They do it all by hard work!”

Strawberry grinned curiously, like what he'd just heard was the most bizarre thing in the world. “No way! Do they not have enough unicorns, like us? Why don't they just get that fancy Academy in Canterlot to come out and do it?”

“What, the Canterlot Meteorological Institute? No, they have a whole acre of unicorns here! They're just not allowed to use their magic to change the seasons!”

“And guess what we found for Silver Spark!” Star Gazer chipped in eagerly.

Thunderclap looked excited. “Oh! Awesome, what did you find, Sparky?”

“Um... well... it wasn't anything... very exciting...”

“Oh, come on, Sparky, tell us!”

“Well... we... we, uh, we found a spell book for unicorns...”

Thunderclap wheeled his hooves excitedly. “*Awesome!*”

Silver Spark hunched up on himself a little, startled by his friend's display, but continued.

“It's... all the spells were very complicated...”

“But he managed one!” Star Gazer exclaimed proudly. “Come on, show it to everyone!”

“Yeah, show us!”

“Come on, Spark, let's see some magic!”

“I don't... I'm not sure that...”

Thunderclap put a reassuring hoof on his friend's shoulder.

“Please. For me. I want to see it.”

Spark hesitated for a second, and then closed his eyes, concentrating. A few stray sparks of energy began to crackle around the tip of his horn, slowly building brighter. Face pale and drawn with the effort of maintaining focus on the spell, he opened his eyes, and a bright light began shining from the tip of his horn, illuminating the table around which they were sitting. Everyone around the table clapped and cheered admiringly.

“I... I can make it brighter, or darker by concentrating a little...”

“That's *excellent!*” Morning Song said encouragingly. “Dark, creepy forest – it'll come in handy!”

While everyone else was enjoying themselves, Cinnamon was not his usual talkative self, and sat gloomily, slurping on his grass-and-turnip stew occasionally. Eventually, Morning Song noticed his friend's *dolour*, and tried to break through it.

“Come on, Cin. What's on your mind? You can tell us.”

Cinnamon looked up at his friends.

“Today, we discovered that it isn't just *our* families and friends this feud is hurting. Ponies *all over Equestria* are being hurt by what our towns are doing. Families are being turned against each other. And it's only going to get worse”

“C'mon, it's not that bad, Cin, there's-”

“It IS that bad, Berry! If we can't stop my father and his stupid plan, and more importantly, if we can't stop this *stupid argument*, then it's going to spread. There'll be families outside the towns that'll lose sons, or daughters, or fathers or mothers, and they'll come looking for revenge. The towns will stop pretending it's only right to settle our differences in the valley itself!

“I honestly believe now, more than ever, that we need to find the Elements of Harmony, or... or at least find *something* that can help. We need to stop this before anyone else is hurt by what our towns have done. We've got four days left. We need to hurry, because otherwise this is only going to get worse.”

Chapter IV

Into The Forest

That night found them on their way into the depths of the Everfree Forest. To the ponies, who had spent two days travelling through the uninhabited but still cared-for Whitetail Woods, the Everfree was dark, oppressive and downright creepy. Nothing like the regular, evenly-spaced woodland of Whitetail, the trees crowded in on each other, growing wild and gnarled branches, the base of their trunks obscured in sprawling, choking undergrowth. No clear paths existed through the forest, and visibility was extremely poor. The only useful light, in fact, shone from Silver Spark's horn. He was getting a lot of practice casting the spell: whenever he was startled by a noise (and the Everfree was full of startling noises) he'd lose concentration, the light would go out, and he'd have to cast the spell again. Still, every time he had to relight his horn, he found the spell a little easier.

Light wasn't the only problem, though. What few clear routes there were through the dense tangle of vines, bushes and rocks in between the trees were twisting and maddeningly serpentine. Within a couple of hours, Cinnamon came to an unpleasant realisation.

"I think we might be lost."

Morning Song beckoned Spark over so he could look at the maps he'd copied.

"Ugh, these things aren't very useful once you're *in* the damn forest."

Thunderclap stamped his hooves in frustration.

"Wouldn't matter if we had four days or a hundred, we'll *never* find the Castle at this rate, even if it *does* exist!"

"Well why don't you fly up and look for it yourself?"

"I don't even know which direction north is in all this mess! I'd have to fly away from the forest just to get a sense of all the landmarks, and I don't even know if I could *find* you again once I did! I never *needed* to navigate back in Saddle Wood, I just... knew where everything was!"

Star Gazer poked the frustrated pegasus gently to get his attention..

"Thunder! Do you think you can lift me up?"

The pegasus cocked his head curiously.

"Lift you up? Not a problem. No way you can even weigh as much as Sparky, and I can lift him up no trouble."

“But I need you to lift me straight up, and then straight down, without spinning me round, unless I tell you to. That's important.”

“Still won't be a problem.”

“Then I have a solution! Lift me up!”

Everyone watched eagerly – no-one except Silver Spark had ever gotten the chance to see Thunder fly. Two massive wings unfurled either side of his broad back, and began beating with huge, heavy strokes. With an effortless agility that belied his massive frame, Thunder rose into the air and carefully clamped all four of his hooves around Star Gazer. His wing-beats quickened, and he slowly lifted her off the ground and through the treetops.

Once she had a good vantage point, she scanned the surrounding sky, looking for recognisable stars. It took less than half a minute.

“Quick! Turn me about a quarter-circle to the right!”

Thunder twisted about so he was facing the way the filly wanted him to.

“OK! Now put me down again, but don't spin round!”

Just as carefully as he'd risen, he descended back down through the trees, trying to keep himself facing the direction she'd had him turn in as precisely as possible. He placed her gently on the loamy ground before landing himself.

Cinnamon leaned in expectantly. “So?”

Star Gazer remained riveted, facing in the direction she'd landed. She stuck out her right fore-hoof straight in front of her. “I saw the pole star! That way's north! So from what we saw of those maps in Ponyville, the castle should be roughly...”

She stuck out her left back-hoof off to the left and slightly behind her.

“... that way!”

Thunderclap looked amazed.

“You can tell that just from twenty seconds staring at the sky?”

“It comes naturally! What d'you think my Cutie mark is for?”

Cinnamon grinned proudly at the pegasus. “She has her uses.”

“I'll say!”

They kept walking for another hour or so, but by the time it was up, Silver Spark was nearly dead on his hooves from maintaining his light spell, and everyone, even Thunderclap, was losing their steam. With the amount of foliage on the ground, it was far too dangerous to risk a camp-fire. But without it no-one seemed to be able to sleep soundly. The ponies had been perfectly happy sleeping under the stars in the Whitetail Woods, but the

dense Everfree canopy cut off nearly all light from above, and the forest was full of eerie noise. Worse than the noise, however, every so often there would be a chilling hush, and all noise in the forest would die for minutes on end. Every pony was huddling together, unable to as much as see the hooves in front of their own faces, and unable to catch a wink.

Suddenly, the sound of a flute was heard, and then Morning Song's tenor drowned out the sounds of the forest.

*"Now all you ponies quiet down
Lay to rest your fear
For there's nothing that can hurt us now
That all our friends are near*

*For though we all are frightened
By forest's deepest night
You may all sleep soundly
Until the coming of the light*

*My song won't bring victory
Or set all things right
But I'll sing it anyway
Until dawn is in sight*

*Two ponies from Saddle Wood,
Four from Hoofington.
They set out as enemies
But stand here as one.*

*They said "We see strife a'coming,
We'll step forth on our quest
We'll find the Elements of Harmony
Until then we'll not rest"*

*But a break you must take,
And your strength you must keep
So I will keep a vigil
While you get some sleep."*

His song continued for verse after verse, obviously making up the song on the spot, but always finding the right words to rhyme. With Song's

gentle voice keeping the forest noise away, all the other ponies found themselves drifting off, their dreams free of nightmares.

Dawn brought some relief from the forest's blackness, and they found they could actually see where they were going a little better. The forest was still dark, certainly, but it was no longer utterly lightless. Cinnamon and Thunderclap made sure that everyone's food ration was sparing, but enough to keep everyone satisfied. Given that they'd had enough time in Ponyville to stock up on food properly, there was more than enough to tide them over for at least a week if they all remained frugal.

The trip through the forest wasn't particularly fast, but despite the constant feeling of menace the forest exuded, it wasn't until about midday when they came upon a problem.

It all began when Thunderclap started coughing. There was a dense, unpleasant smell in the air, but it didn't really act as any more than a discomfort for anyone else. The pegasus, however, seemed to be seriously affected by it, and the stronger the smell got, the sicker he started looking. After about ten minutes of it, they found the source – a dense, tepid swamp choked with vegetation and brambles. The source of the smell was obvious: some form of gas was bubbling through the surface of the swamp and into the air.

“Careful, guys.” warned Strawberry. “This water's way deeper than it looks.”

Morning Song leaned in, looking concerned. “Even more dangerous than that, actually. See that fog over the water? That's the marsh gas condensing. If you fall in, your head will be stuck in it, and you won't be able to breathe”

Strawberry turned to his friend, fixing him with a sideways glance. “Y'know, it... kinda creeps me out that you know that.”

Cinnamon turned to Thunderclap. “Thunder, do you think you could fly-” and then stopped suddenly, when he saw what condition the pegasus was in. Thunder's chin was flecked with spittle and his eyes were puffy and bloodshot. His breath came only in throaty wheezes, and every so often his body would seize up as he retched or coughed. Occasionally a bit of liquid came up. He looked incredibly unsteady on his feet. Silver Spark rushed over to his stricken friend with a yelp.

“Oh no! *Thunder!* Are you... why didn't you say anything?!”

Thunder wheezed heavily, trying to give his friend a reassuring nuzzle. “Didn't want you all... to worry...”

Cinnamon cursed under his breath. "Now we're *all* worried, Thunder! Why didn't you *tell* us the swamp gas was affecting you this badly?"

"Slowed... you all down..." he managed, before retching. He brought up a little bit of his breakfast this time.

"It's going to slow us down a darn sight more if you pass out or get too sick to walk!"

Strawberry walked over and placed a hoof on the ailing pegasus' shoulder.

"Listen, no chance you'll be able to make it through the swamp like this. Backtrack until you start feeling well enough to fly, then fly wide of the swamp and meet us on the other side."

Through aching, bloodshot eyes, he looked guiltily at Silver Spark.

"But... Sparky..."

Strawberry stared him straight at Thunder, a solemn, deadly serious look in his eyes.

"Look at me, Thunderclap, look at me. I promise – I *promise* on the honour of my family – that I'll keep Silver Spark safe. I won't let a hair on his head get harmed, you understand me? I promise. Find a way around this swamp, and all of us will meet you on the other side."

Silver Spark placed his hoof on his friend's other shoulder.

"Please, Thunder... please, I'll be OK. Promise me *you'll* be OK, too."

Thunder sighed heavily, looking at the Hoofington ponies.

"You..." he stopped to cough loudly. "You *keep him safe*, you hear me? If any harm comes to him, I'll... I'll..."

With tears in his eyes, he turned to trudge slowly away from the swamp.

Even though the marsh gas didn't affect the other five ponies like it did Thunderclap, the journey was still slow, gruelling and deeply unpleasant. The smell of the gas permeated everything, and it was thick, cloying and highly objectionable. There were only a few solid paths through it, and none of them were straight or simple. Solid ground didn't have all that much differentiation from the blooming algae covering the water, so all too often one of the ponies would put a hoof down and have it sink a good two feet into the water, placing their snout in a cloud of choking gas. Cinnamon walked ahead with a large stick he'd found clamped in his jaws, prodding at ground in front of them to make sure it was stable enough to support their weight. Occasionally, they'd reach a dead end altogether, forcing them to backtrack.

Still, the sheer size of the swamp told them that, for wingless ponies, through was better than around. Bypassing the swamp would probably have been even slower going than their current course, and as unpleasant as it was, they were actually getting somewhere.

After about an hour and a half of meandering through the swamp, the end was finally in sight. A path towards their destination became visible through the haze, but their spirits fell when they saw it was separated from them by a large stretch of water, and there was no obvious way around it.

Cinnamon cursed loudly, startling and shocking his sister.

"DAMN it all!" he cried. "You're telling me we slogged through this sun-forsaken place for *nothing*? We have to go all the way back and go *around*?"

Strawberry's eyes quickly assessed the surroundings.

"Calm down, Cin – think I've spotted us a solution!"

He trotted over to a barren, rotting tree that only barely remained standing. After giving it a thorough inspection, he turned his rump to it and gave it a good, hard whack with his hind legs.

"Ain't no applebucker, but this thing *will* come down if we hit it hard enough! Come help!"

Morning Song and Cinnamon trotted over and started putting their hooves into it too, slamming their powerful back legs on the tree until a satisfying series of cracks was heard.

"Keep going!" yelled Strawberry. "She's almost done!"

He finally launched a particularly strong kick at the tree, and with a groan of splintering wood, it toppled over, falling squarely in the direction Strawberry had intended it to – across the gap and onto the path that led out of the swamp.

"Song, you go first. You've got good balance, so you should make it across just fine."

Song carefully clambered up the stump and onto the trunk of the tree. Gingerly placing one hoof directly in front of the other, he slowly shimmied along the trunk of the tree, hopping off with a sigh of relief. Cinnamon swallowed hard, and then went next. Going was even slower for him, as he was far less sure of his balance, and there were a couple of times when he looked dangerously close to falling. However, he always managed to level himself out, and joined Song on the other side.

Star Gazer elected to take the safest option, and just crawl along the branch on her belly. It took almost five minutes and more than a few splinters, but she managed to get across with no trouble at all. Her brother

gave her an affectionate nuzzle as she hopped off the trunk, not bothering to hide how relieved he was.

Silver Spark hesitated for several minutes next to the stump, despite the encouragement and reassurance of his friends. He kept looking at the narrow log, and then at the water and the swamp gas misting above it. An icy feeling was forming in the pit of his stomach, and the longer he stood there, the worse it got. Eventually, he forced himself onto the log, wobbling precariously as he walked along it. He imagined Thunderclap waiting for him at the other side. Thunderclap. For once it had been his turn to be worried. Thunderclap was usually so strong, but seeing him in a moment of weakness had deeply affected the young unicorn. He thought about how weak and sickly Thunder had looked under the effects of the marsh gas, and not about where his hooves were going. Before he even knew what was happening, he was falling.

Before any of the others could even cry out, there was the sound of Strawberry gasping in air, a blur of red hair and an ear-splitting splash as he hit the water. His powerful legs sending out huge ripples, the stallion bodily seized the smaller unicorn with his jaws and front two hooves and swam desperately for the other side, his lungs heaving from the inhospitable fog drifting around the surface of the water. He tossed the flailing unicorn to safety, but began to falter as he found himself choking on the gas. His nose went under and his body seized up, but he felt himself grabbed by three pairs of hooves and roughly dragged onto solid ground, where he lay gasping in huge lungfuls of stale – but breathable – air.

It had all happened so fast he didn't really have time to process what he'd done, and by the time his head was clear, he found himself lying on damp ground, unsure of exactly what had happened. He found himself staring up at Cinnamon, Morning Song, Star Gazer and Silver Spark, who were all looking terribly worried.

“Wh... what did I just...”

Cinnamon breathed a sigh of relief as the big pony started mumbling.

“Something very stupid, and very, very brave.”

Silver Spark looked at the stallion in awe, spiced with a great deal of gratitude.

“I fell in! I fell in and... and you jumped after me...”

Strawberry smiled awkwardly.

“Made a promise...” he trailed off, coughing up an alarming amount of stagnant water. “Ugh... besides... wouldn't leave a friend behind...”

He chuckled softly, although it turned into a wet, throaty wheeze as he felt a little more of the swamp coming up. Cinnamon shook his head, a look of overwhelming pride on his face.

"Come on, hero of the hour. Let's get you on your feet."

Thunderclap was, true to the plan, waiting for them a little beyond the boundaries of the swamp, where the smell of the gas was barely noticeable. Backtracking and going for a flight had obviously done him the world of good, and apart from a slight redness around his eyes and a soft wheeze, he was looking his usual strong, healthy self. As soon as he saw Silver Spark, he rushed over, and the two ponies embraced tenderly. Thunderclap rubbed his hoof against Silver Spark curiously.

"You're all... wet."

"Yeah... uh... funny story about that..."

About twenty minutes later, after Thunderclap had stopped sobbing soulfully into Strawberry's shoulder about how grateful he was – which Strawberry was still feeling awkward about – they were making good progress again. Morning Song dared to optimistically estimate that at their current rate of travel, they *might* just reach the castle by dusk. After the ordeal of the swamp, even the Everfree Forest seemed to lose its ability to dampen the spirits of the six ponies.

Silver Spark, showing rare courage, approached Morning Song. The larger pony looked over enthusiastically.

"And what can I do for you, my friend?"

"I have a question, and, um, I... figured... you might know a bit about this, um, this kind of thing..."

"Well, do ask! I don't bite."

"What are you supposed to do, if, um... if you really like someone, and... and you can't tell them how you feel?"

Morning Song twigged instantly, and spoke in a low whisper.

"You have eyes for our fair Star Gazer, don't you?"

Silver Spark blushed furiously and recoiled.

"I'm sorry! I didn't-... I don't-!"

Morning Song smiled reassuringly.

"Stop apologising! Love is a wonderful thing, and it can be the start of some of the most beautiful stories ever told."

"But... I don't know. She's so nice to me, but I don't know if she could ever see me in that way..."

"And why in Equestria not?"

"... well, 'cause... I've got no Cutie mark, and 'cause I'm weak-"

"No."

Silver Spark looked confused, until Song continued.

"You're not weak. Stop acting like you're helpless, because you aren't. Look how far you've come from Saddle Wood"

"Only because I had help! I couldn't have-"

"None of us could have gotten this far without each other. You're here. That's what matters. Now do you want my advice?"

"Um... yeah..."

"Now, what you need to do is-"

Morning Song's advice, helpful or not, would never be given, because at that moment, the six ponies found their path blocked by a large, threatening creature. It stood on two thick, muscular legs, and its massive frame towered at least three times as high as Thunderclap. It had an extremely low-set brow and a mouthful of uneven, yellowed teeth. In one gnarled hand, it carried a large, crude club.

Silver Spark immediately shrieked and dashed behind Thunderclap, who dug his hooves into the forest floor and assumed a combat stance. Morning Song backed up a bit, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his friends.

"It's an ogre!"

As Morning Song backed up, the ogre advanced on the ponies.

"Me think pony come into wrong forest! This MY forest! You no can come!"

"OK, legend checks out about his intelligence, at least." commented Song dryly.

Thunderclap sized the massive beast up. "Can we fight him?"

"Risky proposition."

"Outrun him?"

"An extra day on our journey, at least."

The ogre advanced again, waving his club, and the ponies backed off another few steps.

"Me *big* hungry too! No eat pony yet. Maybe try!"

"Any ideas?"

"I have one, yeah"

"Going to tell us what it is?"

"Just play along, OK?"

Morning Song bravely stepped forward, meeting the gaze of the monster with a fearless smirk.

"Well, mister ogre, sir, are you sure you want to fight us? Aren't you at least the tiniest bit... scared?"

Everyone gazed at Song in confusion, including the ogre.

"Scared? Me no scared of you! Why me be scared of tiny pony?"

Song shook his head pityingly.

"Ah, you clearly don't know who we are. For we are the *LEGENDARY* Heroes of the Sun Valley! I am Deathwing Dirge, the legend-keeper for the Royal Grand Army of Celestia! Witness to a thousand victories for ponykind, singing songs of triumph over the funeral pyres of a thousand enemies! Chronicler of the Sun Valley Heroes, singer, fighter, rogue beyond compare!"

The ogre snorted. "You not look that scary to me!"

"Funny," growled Song, with melodramatic menace, "because that's what the last three ogres I killed said."

The ogre paused for a second. "Why me be scared of other ponies? No look so tough!"

Song scooted up to Cinnamon with a massive smirk. "Why, how foolish can you be? This is General Sinister! Commander in chief of the Black Flanks!"

Cinnamon's eyes went wide. "I am?!" Song nudged him very hard in the ribs, and he got the point.

"I AM!" he howled. Song smirked evilly and continued.

"The Black Flanks are the most feared army in all Equestria! When the griffon kingdom tried to invade Equestria, the Black Flanks burned their villages and ate the hearts of their children whole, and General Sinister led them all to ultimate victory as he stood laughing over the corpses of ten of their finest warriors!"

Cinnamon let out his best attempt at maniacal laughter. It seemed to convince the ogre, who took a step back, but Song frowned and leaned towards his friend.

"Work on that a little bit."

The ogre looked at Cinnamon's sister.

"Maybe you and him scary, but why me be scared of little girly pony?!"

Immediately getting the idea, Star Gazer let out an outraged, imperious retort.

"How ***dare*** you *insult* the *feared* and *respected* Dark Star, daughter of Nightmare Moon herself?!"

Song grinned madly and launched straight into his next tirade.

"You would be wise not to anger Dark Star, the greatest assassin in all of Equestria! The only reason she has allowed you to see her is because you *amuse* her! She is merely toying with you! When she tires of

your sport, she will vanish, and the next thing you know of her will be her blades between your ribs!"

The ogre took another step back. Thunderclap capitalised on what his friends were doing, getting an idea of his own. He began shaking his head wildly and babbling dementedly, forcing himself to froth at the mouth. He reared up, pounding at the ground madly and letting out an obscene, ear-splitting holler. Song put on an expression of mock terror, pleading with the ogre.

"Oh no! You've really done it now – you've angered the great and terrible Thunderclap! A horrible murderer, condemned to fight on the front lines of Equestria until his death found him, but no pony or beast has yet been able to overcome his terrifying rage! In his unreasoning hatred, he will destroy both friend and foe with his lust for the blood of the innocent!"

The ogre took another step back. Strawberry took a step forward.

"Wanna know why my hair's red?"

The ogre blanched a little. "No..."

Strawberry growled. "That's for the best."

The ogre began to back off from the ponies. Then – perhaps for the first time in his life – a thought struck him.

"What about tiny pony with silly horn? Why me be scared of him? HE one who look SCARED!"

Morning Song thought for a moment.

"He *is* scared..."

The ogre breathed in to laugh.

"... *of himself.*"

The ogre's breath caught in his throat.

"Huh?"

"For he is the Grand Magus Silver Fire, the most dangerous and tragic of us all! Truly ancient, what you see is only the most recent of the many faces he has taken! He strides across the world, his eldritch power growing with every lifetime! He has turned ponies inside out with merely a wave of his horn, and brought down kingdoms with but a single word! Yet even more awful, he has become so powerful that *he himself cannot control his terrible power!*"

The unicorn tried to shy away, but was given a reassuring nudge by Thunderclap. He swallowed, cleared his throat, and then, haltingly, spoke out.

"Um... uh, YEAH! You better not make me angry!"

"Yes! Do not think to meddle in the affairs of Silver Fire, for in his rage he may set your face on fire! Or freeze your eyeballs solid! Or strike you

with lightning! Or turn the air in your lungs to acid! Or individually remove all your limbs! Or-”

Before Song could finish his flamboyant and unnecessarily vivid list of magical injuries, he noticed the ogre was rapidly fleeing. As soon as he was relatively sure the brute was out of earshot, he let out a loud snort, which turned into a wheezing chuckle, which turned into riotous laughter, which soon spread to all of his friends as well.

“Did! Did, did! Did you see the look on his... on his...!” Cinnamon wheezed, in between gales of mirth. “On his face!”

Thunderclap was doubled up on the ground, almost paralytic with giggles. “The *greatest assassin in all of Equestria*! Oh, that was the best part!”

The normally reserved and timid Silver Spark was pounding the floor and howling with laughter. “Thunderclap, how did you even-” he snorted hard from the memory of his friend’s performance. “How did you even make that *noise*?”

Star Gazer looked over at Song, who was still in hysterics. “Song, you’re some kind of insane genius!”

Although he could barely get any air in his lungs to reply, he managed to gasp in breath between attacks of the giggles.

“I try! I always try!”

If the experience of tricking an ogre into thinking they were the most dangerous ponies in all of Equestria had lifted their spirits, the sight their eyes were greeted with an hour later sent them flying into the sky. The forest gave way to a sheer cliff edge, leading into a yawning abyss whose bottom was hidden by mists. But across a rickety old rope bridge on a mesa that soared out of the chasm beneath, surrounded by unkempt trees, lay the crumbling skeleton of a once-magnificent castle. Drenched in orange hues of the evening sun, ancient stone lay overgrown and discoloured by age. The cracked, shattered remains of towers reached up at the sky, festooned with moss and creeping vines.

“My friends,” whispered Morning Song, the usual bounce in his voice replaced by quiet awe, as they entered the ruin’s grounds, “welcome to the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters”

To the friends who had come so far to be in this place, it was a sight as sad as it was gratifying. Ancient emblems and insignia, writings and inscriptions in Old High Equestrian reminded the ponies of what this place once was. But everything was old, decrepit, and crumbling. Though the place was still beautiful, it was an old, sad beauty, and carried with it a

melancholy air, one of abandonment and isolation. Long ago, in happier times, the Royal Pony Sisters had ruled together from this place, and it must have bustled with the life of a royal court. Now it was almost silent, with very little birdsong or insect noise. The echo of their footsteps through its lifeless halls felt very, very lonely.

But even sadness was washed away when they found the remains of the Royal Library, for although no book survived, there, in the very centre of the room, lay their goal. Five stone spheres rested on an simple orrery. Carefully, ever so gently, Thunderclap flew up and began bringing them down for the others to get a good look at. Each sphere was marked with a slightly different glyph, all taking the form of fairly simple gem-like engravings.

"The Elements of Harmony" Cinnamon reached out a hoof to touch one gently, tears in his eyes. "I scarcely dared hope..."

Star Gazer prodded one herself.

"They're just... stones."

Thunderclap finished bringing the last one down.

"They're not anywhere near heavy enough to be stone all the way through. It's like a stone shell wrapped around something. But they don't feel like they're hollow, either."

Cinnamon recalled the legend his friend had told him – only a few nights ago, but it felt like years.

"Song, you said that when the five were together, a spark would cause the sixth element to be revealed."

"I have a theory about that. Listen, Sparky?"

The timid unicorn popped his head up on the mention of his name. Morning Song shot a meaningful glance at Thunderclap.

"Um... yes?"

"Listen, there's got to be a well around here. Could you find it for me?"

"Uh... I don't know... I don't think I-"

Thunderclap gave his companion a friendly pat on the back.

"Oh, c'mon Sparky! We made it! We actually found the Elements of Harmony! Help Song find this well of his – I bet you can do it in less than five minutes!"

He fixed the unicorn with a pleading glance.

"Please?"

The unicorn got up.

"O-OK. I'll find the well."

He trotted off out of the library. As soon as he was gone, Thunderclap bristled at Song.

"What exactly about finding this spark required sending my best friend away from the only thing in his life he's ever tried to accomplish for himself?"

Song blinked.

"Well isn't it obvious? *He's* the spark."

Everyone stared at him.

"Look guys, how can you not have figured this out already? These empty stone balls are just a *façade*! A *token*! Something to show for what we've done. What we've become."

They were still staring.

"Oh for Equestria's sake, ponies! Honestly, Loyalty, Generosity, Optimism and Kindness! The Elements are *US*!"

Looks of comprehension were starting to dawn. Song turned to Star Gazer.

"Star Gazer, when all we could think about was bitterness and anger, you showed compassion for the two ponies from Saddle Wood, reminding us of what the real purpose of our journey was. If it weren't for your Kindness, we'd never have made our new friends."

Star Gazer's eyes lit up with sympathy, and a very soft glow surrounded one of the spheres. Song turned to the massive grey pegasus who felt like a lifelong friend, even though he'd known him less than a week.

"Thunderclap, you flatly refused to let us go cold or hungry, even though you didn't trust us. You extended a hoof of friendship even though we could have bitten it. Your Generosity is a lesson to us all."

Thunderclap blinked, trying to hide the tear in his eye. Another one of the spheres lit up. Song then turned to his oldest childhood friend.

"Cinnamon. You refused to keep secrets or lie, even to someone you knew could misuse what you told them. You chose to trust them, and you showed that trust through your Honesty. Because you've always been like that. Because you've never let yourself be any less."

They joined hooves for a moment as another sphere began glowing. Strawberry knew what was coming, and waited anxiously.

"Strawberry. You came along on this venture even though you didn't believe a lick of it, because you refused to let your friends make a perilous journey without you by their side. When one of your friends most needed you, you threw yourself into danger without a moment's hesitation. Who else could the Element of Loyalty belong to?"

The fourth sphere lit up. Song placed a hoof on his own chest.

"Now I don't like to brag..."

Strawberry looked at Cinnamon, who was casting a sarcastic gaze at Song.

"Oh c'mon," Berry chuckled. "*He* isn't the Element of Honesty."

"True that."

"... but I think if anyone embodies the Element of Optimism, it's me."

Cinnamon grinned widely. "It's not just your optimism, Song. It's your music, your jokes, your good humour too!"

Strawberry placed a hoof on his friend's shoulder. "Giving inspiring speeches!"

Thunderclap blushed slightly, kicking the ground. "Singing us a lullaby when we needed one."

Star Gazer hopped up and down, giggling. "Scaring away a big mean ogre with *jokes*!"

Morning Song raised a hoof dramatically as the fifth sphere began to glow softly.

"My friends, the five Elements of Harmony are assembled. We are all here. All that is now needed is the sixth element, and for the sixth element, we need a spark. Silver Spark."

Thunderclap's smile faded a little.

"How is he supposed to do that? What is he even supposed to do?"

"It's time for him to stand on his own. He has to become his own pony, prove his own worth as an individual. He has to move out of your shadow, and stand up for himself."

"Even with everything we've been through, he's still as unsure of himself as ever. He thinks that he's only got so far as he did because we did all the work for him. He's the same timid, self-doubting Sparky he always was. How are we supposed to change that in an instant? You can't just throw him in the deep end and expect him to swim, or give him an inspiring speech and expect it to change his life."

Cinnamon frowned. "He's been very brave, all throughout the trip. He's shown as much courage and determination as the rest of us have. Maybe if we told him how we all really feel..."

Song shook his head. "No, Thunderclap is right. I know ponies, I know how to get reactions from ponies – been doing it all my life, after all – and ponies like Sparky, you just can't pull them into gaining their self-confidence. It just won't work."

"So what are we going to do?" moaned Thunderclap, obviously at a loss as to how to help his friend.

A mischievous smile spread across Song's face. "We're going to *trick* him into it."

Silver Spark wandered forlornly among the ruins of the old castle, purposely making his search for the well slow. He knew an excuse when he saw one, and they just wanted him out of the way. As much as it hurt to have come this far and be shooed out of the room at the moment of triumph, he knew, deep down, that it made sense. He'd get just in the way, or mess something up. It was better for him to be somewhere else.

At least now they'd found the Elements, there was some hope that things could change for the better, and their towns might be made to stop fighting. He sighed softly. They would all be heroes, and he would go back to being forgotten little Silver Spark.

His melancholy dramatically interrupted when Star Gazer came tearing out of the library searching for him. As soon as she caught sight of him, she sprinted desperately over to him and started tugging at him.

"Silver! Thank goodness I found you! You have to come quick!"

Taken aback, he could only stammer a short response.

"W-What? What's wrong?"

"We were so close to unlocking the Elements! But Thunderclap started an argument with Strawberry, and now all of them got caught up in it, and they're going to get into a fight for sure! They'll ruin *everything*!"

"I can't-"

"You have to! You have to come and help, somehow!"

He felt his hooves start moving as she pulled at him, and then found himself cantering, and then galloping back towards the library at full tilt. He could hear the raised voices of his friends ringing out through the chamber.

"-should NEVER have trusted you! Should have KNOWN you'd turn on us!"

"I shared my *food* with you, I shared my *fire* with you, I trusted you with my friend's *life*, and *this* is how you pay me back?! How DARE you?!"

"You don't *care* if Hoofington suffers, as long as your precious little Saddle Wood is safe, do you?"

Silver Spark skidded into the room to see Thunderclap a few yards away, staring down the three stallions from Hoofington, expressions of contempt and outrage writ large on all four faces.

"Stop! Please!" he yelled.

"No, Sparky, I won't!" Thunderclap howled, stamping his hooves angrily. "We misplaced our trust! We gotta start thinking about our own homes! Our *own* families!"

"We did this *for both towns!*" yelled Cinnamon. "This power was supposed to *restore* balance, not tip it one way or the other!"

"Restore balance and let your town get away with all that it's done?"

"All *our* town's done?! What about *your* town?!"

"*Your* town started it by trying to take what *we* found!"

"*Your* town started it by trying to take what we *owned!*"

"*We* were there *first!*"

"*First* doesn't mean you *own* it!"

Star Gazer threw up her hooves, wailing slightly too melodramatically. "You have to *do* something, Silver!"

"But... but I don't-!"

"Before it's *too late!*"

Silver looked helplessly between his old friend and his new ones. With Thunder as angry as he was, and squaring off for a scrap, this could only start one way – but with three full-grown stallions up against him, he could see either of two ways it would end, and both were bad.

"Guys, please, stop!" he mumbled uncertainly. They ignored him and continued yelling at each other.

He looked at Thunderclap desperately. Thunderclap was his best friend, who'd been with him through thick and thin, who'd supported him, kept him safe for years on end. No-one could ask for a better friend than loyal, kind Thunderclap, but he had obviously started this argument, and his selfishness risked making the situation even worse. Then he looked to the three stallions squaring off against him. He had only known them a few days, but they'd all showed him a world of kindness in their own special way. Even though they'd grown up being taught to hate his town, they'd chosen a different path. They were obviously the wounded party in this argument, but they were still threatening his friend.

It was an impossible choice. What could he do to help, and whose side should he intervene on? He didn't know who to choose, who to side with. As the argument spiralled rapidly towards violence, he cast about the room, looking from Thunderclap to the three stallions from Hoofington and back again, desperately seeking the answer.

Until his eyes set upon the empty space between the squabbling ponies. Casting aside all doubt, he knew what he had to do. His horn glowed as he stared intently at the space. Thunderclap was advancing, and so were the other stallions. He had only a split second to act. Almost as if he no longer had control of himself, he felt his voice coming out of his throat, not in a hushed, timid mumble, but a throaty, angry *yell*.

"NO!"

He released the spell he'd been trying to cast, and suddenly there was a loud crackle, and a shimmering wall of energy appeared between the squabbling ponies. They all wheeled their hooves backwards desperately to avoid slamming into it. He continued yelling, not even really thinking about it.

"You're ALL my friends!" he howled at them. "AND I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU HURT EACH OTHER!"

Three things happened almost simultaneously.

Firstly, he realised what it was that he'd just done and said.

Secondly, there was a warm, tingling sensation on his flanks.

Lastly, there was a blinding flash.

The other five ponies looked at him, and then looked above him, and all of them let out a gasp in perfect chorus. He looked upwards.

Floating above him was a sixth sphere, glowing as brightly as the evening sun outside. It was marked with a glyph in the form of a six-pointed star, but the most striking thing about it was that he didn't just see it. He *felt* it. He could feel that stone floating above him, as if it were an extension of his body. He could feel the power locked inside of it, waiting to be released, and somehow, he knew in his heart that it lay inside of *him*, too.

Thunderclap beamed at his oldest friend, no longer bothering to hide the tears in his eyes. There were only four words that he could think to say.

"You did it, Sparky."

The unicorn slowly became aware of the magnitude of his actions, and he felt the familiar urge to just slink backwards and hide from it all. But something stopped him. He felt reassured, somehow. Star Gazer was staring at him in awe.

"That's *amazing!*" she murmured.

He looked back up towards the Element of Harmony, still scarcely believing that it had been him – that it had actually been his own effort – to summon it.

"No, no!" she cried, pointing at his flank. "Not even that! Look at your flank!"

That warm itch he'd felt for a second. No. It couldn't be. He craned his neck around to look at his hindquarters.

Thunderclap was wearing the biggest, stupidest, proudest grin a pony could ever have.

"I promised you we'd find your Cutie mark soon, Sparky, and I promised you it'd be even more awesome than mine..."

Spread across his light-blue flank was a silver starburst, one immense, brilliant explosion of energy that sent smaller stars flying off of it.

It was a permanent reminder of his inner talent, an expression of his soul right there, for every pony in the world to see.

And it was the most awesome thing he had ever seen in his life.

Slowly, Silver Spark began to giggle slightly. It was a quiet, almost imperceptible sound at first, but it grew in volume, turning into heart a chuckle that filled the room. Then it turned into deafening gales of laughter as it was joined by the other five ponies, and they all rushed towards each other, embracing each other in a massive, chaotic group hug. The Elements flared to life, bathing the room in blinding light.

The smooth stone orbs vanished and five of the ponies felt added weight around their necks. Dangling from Cinnamon's was a golden, winged necklace, whose centrepiece was a single, glimmering jewel in the shape of a scroll. As he looked about his friends, he noticed they had similar necklaces, whose centrepieces matched their own Cutie marks. But Silver Spark had no necklace – instead, upon his head rested a simple gold circlet, capped with the silver starburst that had appeared on his flank.

All six of them were laughing, crying, clutching each other tightly, sighing with relief. They had found the Elements of Harmony, long thought to be little more than a myth.

Twilight stamped her hoof irritably.

“Oh, come *on*! You get that nice, elegant coronet, and I have to make do with... *this*?!”

She motioned indignantly to the tiara. Silver Spark grinned awkwardly.

“Well, I mean... Elements of Harmony, you know! Can't always please everyone! You know how that goes...”

“I know how it goes, alright...” Twilight grumbled, through gritted teeth.

The ordeal of journeying this far had left the six ponies thoroughly exhausted, and soon after the joy of claiming the Elements faded, they all found themselves falling asleep in the ruins of the library. Even Thunderclap, who tried to stay awake to keep watch, found himself falling deeply asleep. Awaking the next morning, they all – Silver Spark in particular – spent a lot of time checking that they hadn't just dreamed it, but no, it was truly real. Silver Spark's Cutie mark was still there, as were the

brilliant pendants and crown that the Elements had become. This prompted another round of celebration, and every pony in the group ate a little more than they should have according to Cinnamon's rationing. They spent the early morning basking in the joy of having successfully completed this leg of their journey in such style. But the joy dulled a little as realisation set in, and Strawberry's smile was the first to fade.

“Remember why we're here. It wasn't just to find these things. We need to get them back. It took us five nights to reach this place. We've only got two days left...”

Silver Spark suddenly spoke up, trying to keep the momentum of his new-found self-confidence going.

“I have an idea. Thunderclap, could you... find me a cloud?”

Thunderclap looked at his friend with a curious smile.

“It would be my honour, Sparky.”

Chapter V

The War That Never Was

Jonagold had been up at the crack of dawn, as usual, and he was already sweating like a pig. The dog days of summer were approaching, and that was when the trees needed the most care and attention, else the entire crop might be ruined. But, good, hard, honest work was the thing in life that made him the happiest, and out here, tending to his trees, was where his life's true calling was.

Still, by noon, the sun was beating down with a furious intensity, and after a couple of hours work he felt absolutely parched by the heat. He had just decided he'd get the last few trees in this row seen to and then fetch a drink from the homestead when he began to hear a noise in the distance. It was a faint, almost continuous noise that occasionally halted for a split second, but seemed to be getting closer.

The earth pony looked up into the sky to see what he could have sworn was a cloud that was whooping loudly with excitement being pushed by a huge pegasus.

“WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The cloud shot over the farm, propelled by the gigantic stallion's powerful wings, and for a split second, from a certain angle, it looked like there were more ponies sitting on top of it. Jonagold shook his head hard and watched it fade into the distance to the south. Then he turned towards the homestead and started trotting quickly – the heat was *definitely* getting to him.

Twilight's eyes lit up with excitement.

“The spell I used to let us walk in Cloudsdale! You invented it!”

The older Silver Spark nodded appreciatively.

“After I realised I was the sixth element, the magic I had so much trouble with before just seemed to come so easily to me. Although I admit it took the whole morning experimenting...”

“... and more than a few bruises...” remarked Morning Song dryly.

Thunderclap didn't have nearly as much work on his hands as he thought he would at first. After a good few minutes of him pushing, the cloud carrying his friends would move under its own momentum for a while, allowing him to hop onto it and catch his breath. This had allowed them to clear the Everfree Forest in only an hour and a half, and they had buzzed one of Ponyville's southern farms only twenty minutes later. His friends were still amazed by the wonderful view from up in the clouds, and the feel of the wind rushing past their faces. Every so often he would hear a shout as one of the ponies saw some landmark they recognised.

As the sun began to set on the western horizon, he hopped up onto the cloud for one of his rest breaks. He found his five friends deep in the midst of a very serious conversation.

"What's up, guys?" he inquired.

Cinnamon turned to him with a solemn expression.

"We've got the Elements, and with Silver Spark's *awesome* spell..."

Instead of looking timid and embarrassed like everyone expected him to, the unicorn tossed his shining silver hair and beamed proudly. Cinnamon continued.

"... we're making good speed towards the Sun Valley, but I'm... still not sure what to do when we get there"

Thunderclap sat down, panting slightly.

"You're not sure how we're supposed to use the Elements to stop our idiot towns from going to war."

"Basically, yeah."

"What's the problem? We only touched the energy of these things for a moment, but it felt more powerful than a thousand thunderstorms. With that sort of power we could do anything!"

"But when we can do anything, *how* are we supposed to work out what will actually *work*?" moaned Cinnamon exasperatedly. "We have enough power to change the hearts of everyone in both towns, make them stop hating each other. But that wouldn't be right. That would be one of the worst things we could do."

Strawberry frowned a little. "Why not? They'd be happier. No-one would get hurt. This stupid argument would finally be over."

Thunderclap shook his head vigorously. "My father always taught me that no pony ever truly thinks that they're evil. They never think of themselves as wicked villains. The worst they ever think of themselves is that they're doing bad things that must be done to help a good cause. The moment you think you have the right to tell another pony how to think, how

to act, simply because you think it'd be better that way, that's the moment you lose yourself."

Cinnamon nodded. "Each town wants to force their own belief on the other – belief about who the Sun Valley belongs to. If we *force* the ponies of our two towns to stop fighting, that makes us no better than them. And it's worse than that. It wouldn't just be us forcing a belief. We'd be controlling what they *think*. What they *believe*. If that sort of power truly exists, that's awful, and I don't want any part of it."

"But we *do* have that power!"

"And so we can be the better ponies by finding another way."

"OK. OK. We can't force the towns to stop arguing. So what can we do?"

Cinnamon considered, and frowned sadly.

"We could destroy the Sun Stone."

"*What?!*" Strawberry, Star Gazer and Thunderclap exclaimed in chorus.

"The Sun Stone is a powerful artefact, and it's beautiful, but there isn't enough of it to please everyone. Even though it's stupid and all back-to-front, people will get ugly over beauty and fight over tranquillity. But there's enough power in the Elements to tear the Sun Stone apart, or... I don't know, switch it off permanently! If they don't have the Sun Stone to fight over, perhaps they'd just give up on this ridiculous fight."

Silver Spark stood up, obviously outraged.

"We are *not* going to destroy the Sun Stone."

Thunderclap shook his head again.

"It wouldn't *work*, anyway, Cinnamon. The Sun Stone isn't even really important anymore. This argument's been going on for more than ten years. There's so much bitterness, so much bad feeling that they'd just use the destruction of the Sun Stone as yet another thing to squabble about. We need to fix the real cause of this problem, which is that the towns hate each other."

Cinnamon nodded. "I guess you're right."

Morning Song had remained silent throughout the entire discussion. All heads turned towards him when he spoke up.

"Guys, you're going to want to see this!"

Spread out far beneath them was the familiar countryside in which they lived. To the west, in the direction of the setting sun, which had now sunk beneath the horizon, the town lights of Hoofington could be seen. But those were not the only lights – a thin stream of pinprick-small lights meandered away from the town like a glowing snake.

“Oh no!” Cinnamon's breath caught in his throat. “Dad – he's launched the invasion!”

“It's worse!” yelled Thunderclap, looking far to the east. A similar trail of lights was slowly leaving Saddle Wood. “Oh, this is... Scarlet Emerald, she's mobilised the town! She can't have thought of a plan, she's just moving into the valley anyway!”

Cinnamon slapped his head with his hoof.

Thunderclap dived off the back of the cloud, looped around and started pushing it. His eyes were fixed on the southern horizon, where a range of mountains rose up. A faint glow emanated from between them.

“At this rate, they won't make it to the Sun Valley until at least dawn tomorrow. We can make it there in a couple of hours at most! But you all better spend that time thinking up what the hay we're gonna do once we get there”

Coriander surveyed the valley below. The first rays of the real sun were just beginning to brighten the sky above, but the valley needed no such light itself. He'd only been able to set eyes on this place once before, and it was even more beautiful than he remembered it. This was a place where the grass truly was greener, a hidden paradise. It belonged to the ponies of Hoofington, the strongest, toughest ponies around, and on this day, all Equestria would know of it. He cast an even prouder glance across the valley.

His thoughts turned briefly to his son and daughter. He sighed, dearly wishing he could share this day of victory with his children. Along with the sons of two other elders in the town, they had gone missing five days ago, and neither hide nor hair could be found of them. He was utterly certain it was kidnapping – the Saddle Wood ponies obviously knew of his plan, and had taken his children to force his hoof. He would have none of this. The Sun Valley would be Hoofington's, and once that would done, there would be a proper reckoning with them.

And then he saw the ponies of Saddle Wood waiting on the other side of the valley, and the blood in his veins turned to fire.

Across the valley, staring him down, was Scarlet Emerald. This had been the ruin of nearly six months of careful, diligent scheming. Every stage of the plan had been meticulously planned to perfection. Every order had been given to each pony in secret, so that no one spy could uncover the entire plot. Every variable had been calculated to the highest degree of accuracy. And now the idiot Hoofington ponies had ruined it all by moving

so suddenly! But she could still out-think them. Even now, she would prove that the true right to own the Sun Valley laid in the hooves of Saddle Wood.

To add injury to insult, she was missing her strongest flier, Thunderclap. She was utterly certain he had been waylaid by Hoofington ponies to wrong-hoof her, to disrupt her plans. This was it – the final settling of scores between the two towns. On this day she would prove to all the kingdom that Saddle Wood did not give up what it found lightly.

The two towns glared at each other across the valley for what seemed like an eternity.

It wasn't certain which side actually started moving first, but someone spotted movement and started moving themselves. Both towns were now stampeding down into the valley, towards the Sun Stone at its very heart, violence in their eyes. Today, in this place, at this hour, there would be an accounting for all wrongs. Stallions and mares braced themselves – they were nearing the centre of the valley, seconds from each other's throats.

There was a shimmer, and glowing planes of force sprung into life on either side of the Sun Stone, blocking the path of both towns so suddenly many ponies collided with each other in their desperate attempts not to collide with the barriers. A thunderous roar drowned out their surprised, angry yells.

“STOP!”

Thunderclap coughed slightly. He hadn't expected to be able to shout quite that loud, but it had definitely had the desired effect. He, along with his five friends, had positioned themselves around the Sun Stone. He and Silver Spark were facing down the Saddle Wood contingent, while Cinnamon, Strawberry, Morning Song and Star Gazer were blocking their own town's ponies. Thunderclap's echoing shout had briefly silenced the entire valley – birds had fled their trees and animals were hiding. Ponies gazed in confusion and awe.

“Cinnamon!” barked Coriander through gritted teeth, clearly livid with rage, “*What* in the *name* of Equestria are you doing?”

Cinnamon flinched a little at his father's screaming, but did not back down.

“Stopping you from making the biggest mistake of your life, dad!”

“Thunderclap!” screeched Scarlet Emerald, in a barely coherent torrent of outrage, “What is the *meaning* of this?!”

“I and my *friends* are stopping two mobs of complete *idiots* from *ruining* the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my life.”

Scarlet Emerald and Coriander both howled “How *dare* you?!” at precisely the same time, accidentally achieving perfect unison.

Coriander reared up and mashed his hooves straight into the ground, the blood vessels on his forehead popping out visibly.

"You insolent *foa!* How *dare* you do this to me! You and your sister disappear for a week, leaving no word, absolutely no *idea* what might have happened to you, on the eve of the march into our valley-!"

Scarlet Emerald scuffed her hoof on the ground disdainfully. "*Your* valley?!"

"*Shut up, woman!* You abandon Hoofington in its finest hour, and now I find you've been cavorting with the enemy?!"

"As if you cared about us, dad!" spat Star Gazer, with unexpected bile. "You only cared about your stupid war!"

"Quiet, Star-"

"No, dad!" Star Gazer howled back, holding his gaze, drowning him out. "No, dad, I will *not* be quiet! *You* are going to listen to *us* for once!"

An imperious, melodramatic cry rang out from the Saddle Wood mob. "Silver Julius Theodore Spark! *Where* have you been?"

Silver ignored it. Thunderclap turned to the mare, who was rapidly pushing through the crowd – it was Perihelion ("Perry" to her friends), Silver Spark's mother, closely followed by his father, Starfire. Both were wearing expressions of equal anger and concern. Thunderclap gazed at them coldly..

"He's been with me, and with his new friends. Better than being with you right now, I think"

Perihelion's eyes went wide, her words halting with shock and indignation. "You-... Thunderclap, he's my *son!* What gives you the right-..."

She tried to push past the barrier to get at her son, but was repulsed by the barrier.

"Silver, stop this immediately!"

The smaller unicorn ignored her. His father moved in, speaking in a tone of firm reproach.

"Silver, let us through. We're going home *right now.*"

Silver Spark looked up, staring his parents straight in the eye.

"No."

Starfire lowered his head, his horn beginning to glow as he attempted a spell of his own, but there was suddenly a sharp *crack* that made every pony present jump. Without losing concentration on the barriers, Silver sent a bright bolt of purple light lancing at his father, striking his horn. Starfire staggered backwards, his eyes blown wide with utter disbelief. Silver Spark stared resolutely at his parents.

"I'm *not* the helpless little unicorn everyone always thought I was! I'm not afraid of other ponies anymore, I'm not afraid of my magic anymore, I'm not afraid of Hoofington anymore, and I'm not afraid of *you*."

As his parents stepped back, startled by how stridently their son was talking, he whirled on Emerald.

"I was missing too, mayor. Did you care? Did you even *notice*?"

"There-... there were more important things to worry about! Like-"

Thunderclap looked down at her disdainfully. "Like your *war* with Hoofington?"

"They were going to take what we found-"

"What *you* found on *our* land!" Coriander shouted angrily at his opposite number.

"Why, you deceitful, selfish-! Thunderclap, how could you *betray* the town? How could you turn on us and side with *these*!"

"SHUT UP!"

Thunderclap stamped his hooves furiously on the ground. "For once in your lives, *shut the hay up*, and *listen*!"

Cinnamon waved a hoof around the valley, and then pointed it accusingly at his father.

"Look at this place, dad! It's *beautiful*! It's *sacred*!"

The first few cracks in Coriander's superior façade began to appear.

"I know! It's why I wanted to-"

"You wanted to keep it for yourself. Because that's what everyone wants to do with beautiful things."

"It belongs to us! It was on ground *they* gave us!"

"Ground they agreed to give us because they didn't know what lay on it!"

"How can you take their side-"

"I'm not taking anyone's *side*, dad!"

He motioned around the assembled horses, of whom many were decked out for battle.

"Look at what you were about to *do* to this place! How beautiful would it have been once we spilt blood? Once mothers and fathers had to bury their colts here? Would it still have been as beautiful?"

One or two ponies started to look at each other guiltily. Coriander's gruff demeanour faltered again.

"I... it was..."

"You wanted to hoard this place all to yourself."

"For the town! For our future!"

Star Gazer looked at her father, disappointment in her eyes.

“And what kinda future would it have been, dad? Hoofington, the selfish town? Hoofington, the tyrants of the Sun Valley?”

“It *belongs* to us!”

“No, dad” Cinnamon shook his head, a disappointed grimace spreading across his muzzle. “Can't you see that taking it all for ourselves won't make anyone happy?”

“But-”

“After all the smoke had cleared, how much better would this really make our lives?”

Ponies all over the Hoofington mob were shifting uncomfortably, looking increasingly guilt-ridden. Cinnamon pressed onwards.

“What price is too high for this place, dad? Two dozen ponies? A dozen? Six? Four? Two? One? Ponies could have *died* today, dad. Is that what you want?”

Coriander's bravado was failing him. He was being browbeaten by his own son and daughter in front of everyone – his own town, and the town he'd spent years bitterly fighting with – and worst of all he didn't have any answers. He stammered a response, trying to stall for time.

“You have to understand, all I...”

In the harsh light his children were casting on him, his excuses sounded hollow even to him. Cinnamon steeled himself inside, and began moving in for the finisher.

“Think of what you would have done to this town, dad. Think of what you'd have done to our family. We'd be forever known as the people who started the war over the Sun Valley. A tragic waste of life for a few acres of land.”

Coriander had absolutely nothing to say. Almost everyone on the Hoofington side was now looking decidedly less willing to fight than they had been a few minutes ago, and the scene was beginning to affect the ponies from Saddle Wood as well. It was almost done, but Cinnamon knew to drive this home properly, he had to follow Morning Song's advice. He looked at his sister, sadly, and she looked back. It was painful, it was a bit cruel, but it had to be done. But he knew she couldn't do it. Not as the Element of Kindness, she just didn't have it in her. But asking their father the inescapable question? Forcing him to face an uncomfortable truth? He was the Element of Honesty. Who else *could* have it in them?

“Dad, if she were here... if she could see this... what would mom say?”

It was too much. Coriander looked at his hooves, in disgust, almost as if they were foreign to him, and all the scabbed-over hurt that he'd had piling

up inside him began pouring out. He fell to his knees, and then onto the ground, sobbing loudly. Both children rushed to their father, and Silver Spark let the barrier on the Hoofington side fizzle briefly so they could get through. Scarlet Emerald looked on in utter shock – she'd never seen Coriander this vulnerable before.

Not taking the risk that she'd try and capitalise on it, Thunderclap started doing his own pushing.

“And you! What were *you* thinking, mayor?” he demanded, his voice dripping subtle contempt. “You should be better than this”

“We *found* this valley-”

“On land *they* owned. That *we* gave to them. Fair and square. And no-one ever thought to *talk* about it! You always tell the village *we* were wronged, but never did any of us *once* think to try and be the better pony! To *ask* for what we wanted!”

“Ask-?!”

“Yeah! Sit down and *talk* about this! Make a *deal*. *Negotiate*. *Bargain*. Isn't that your *job*, mayor?”

Before she could answer, he thrust his chest out, displaying the dual-thunderbolt crest of his new pendant, and continued.

“I learnt more about Hoofington in the last five days than I learnt for the whole of my life before that. I discovered the kindness, the loyalty, the honesty and...”

He paused ever so briefly. “Optimism” didn't really seem sufficient to describe Morning Song.

“... the *laughter* of these four ponies was more rewarding to me than anything this valley could ever offer. I gave them all I had to give, and they gave it back to me. I'm darn proud to say four of my five best friends are from Hoofington, and the fifth? He was by my side too. And all that we did, we did together.”

He paused for effect.

“And what we did was find a way to stop both of you. A journey we took that I didn't really believe in until we got to the end of it. But it was worth it. Because we found what we were looking for.

“We set out alone, but we both had the same goal, even though we didn't know it until we met. We wanted this stupid feud between our towns to end. We shared happiness and dangers together, and after a long journey we found what we needed, even though a couple of us didn't even believe it existed. And we did it all to stop *this*.”

He gestured out around him.

"Look at this place. It really *is* beautiful. It really *is* sacred. And you were all going to fight over it."

Ponies from both towns started gazing at each other across the divide, no longer with looks of anger, but looks of acceptance, of forgiveness. He looked over at Silver. The unicorn was putting on a brave face, but he wouldn't be able to maintain the barriers much longer. This had to work! He thrust out his chest again.

"Everypony! All of you. You all came here because you wanted to share the beauty of this place with your friends. Why not share it with *everyone*?"

Morning Song stepped forward, bearing his chest as well.

"Why not trade laughter, instead of blows? Don't you remember how our towns grew and prospered *together*?"

The light emanating from Silver's horn began to flicker. He let out a quiet, exhausted sigh, and toppled over. The barriers fizzled, fading from sight. Come on. *Please*.

There was absolute silence as Scarlet Emerald stepped forward, making her way slowly over to where Coriander was sobbing brokenly in the arms of his children. She stood there for what would be the tensest minute in the life of every pony present. Then, tears appeared in her own eyes, and haltingly, she spoke.

"Your... your wife, I... I never knew... I'm... I'm so very sorry..."

Coriander, Cinnamon and Star Gazer looked up. Star Gazer dared clutch only the faintest hope... and then her father spoke.

"She... was everything to me. And when I lost her, I thought I had nothing left."

Scarlet Emerald knelt down in front of him. The tear, jolted free, sank into the ground in front of them.

"I've been so blind."

"I've... been an idiot."

"I've said things I didn't mean."

"I've ignored what was most important to me."

"All this time, if we'd only... if we'd only thought to *talk* to each other, we could have set this all right!"

Coriander stood up, a resolute expression on his face. He offered her his hoof.

"But it's not too late to set it right after all."

She looked up at him, and took the hoof, pulling herself up.

"No, it isn't."

The two mayors turned to their respective towns, tearful smiles on their faces.

“From this day forth, let it be known that the Sun Valley is the property of every pony in Hoofington and Saddle Wood!”

A great cheer of relief and happiness erupted from every pony present. Ponies surged across the divide in both directions. Suddenly, ponies were on top of each other everywhere, but they weren't fighting: they were embracing, shaking hooves, crying into each other's arms. Old childhood friends torn apart by the rift that had formed between the two towns hugged and laughed together once again. Ripe fruit was torn from the valley's trees and shared eagerly by earth ponies, pegasi and unicorns of both towns. It was absolute, wonderful chaos. Everyone was simply so grateful that there would be no fighting, that the long, bitter feud between the towns was finally over and that *everyone* could enjoy the wonders of the valley without fear. Morning Song was already belting out a jig on his flute which several ponies had begun dancing to.

In the middle of it all, two ponies with apples adorning their flanks stood a pace apart, staring at each other, trying to hold back tears.

“Ashmead?”

“Kingston? That you?”

“... that time back at the ol' reunion... ah... ah didn't mean nothin' of what ah said back then...”

“No... no, y'all were completely right... ah was bein' a stubborn ol' mule 'bout this whole business...” Ashmead replied, with a loud snuffle.

“Well, ah mean, sure you were, but 'tweren't right of me to say it...”

“Oh, horse apples. What weren't right was me takin' a kick at you for sayin' it.”

“'twere what ah rightly deserved, spoilin' the whole reunion for the family with what weren't none of their concern.”

“And ah think those swings y'took at me weren't anythin' less than what ah deserved for makin' such a fuss when ah should have just simmered down.”

“Aw, hay, but if we ain't caused the whole family more'n an orchard's worth o' grief... 'tweren't right.”

“Jonagold's new farmstead ain't but two days hike north. What's say when all this is over we go pay him a visit... together?”

“Ah... think ah like the sound of that.”

Coriander sobbed openly into his son's shoulder, who was also crying.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... I..."

"Dad. It's OK."

"I've been a terrible father!"

"You just lost your way."

"When... when she was taken from us..."

"Dad, please-"

"... I just didn't... I couldn't work out how to..."

"Dad."

Cinnamon and Star Gazer held their father tightly.

"Dad, you're here for us now. That's all that matters."

Meanwhile, Silver Spark was still winding down from the awful strain of the spell he'd cast to buy his friends time to calm everyone down. His parents were by his side, helping him recover – and Perihelion gushing enthusiastically over him.

"I've... I've never even *seen* magic so powerful! I never even knew..."

His father was still in utter shock.

"And a perfect counter-spell without even blinking an eye or losing control of your force walls! How did you even manage it?"

Thunderclap looked proudly at his friend.

"He started believing in himself. Something he should have done a long time ago. He was the son of two of Saddle Wood's most competent magicians. What else was he going to be?"

Silver Spark rose unsteadily to his feet, and looked like he was going to fall over, but Thunderclap reached out a hoof and steadied him.

"Woah there! Careful now."

Silver Spark smiled back equally proudly at the hulking pegasus.

"But I haven't got any less grateful for having you around."

Thunderclap shifted himself a little, a few twinges of pain running down his spine.

"On that note, though... next time, *you* can push."

"Deal."

Morning Song was kicking his hooves up gleefully, getting every last mile out of his flute as he and the herd of dancing ponies he was now leading around the valley, jigging and cavorting as they celebrated the battle that was never fought. On his third loop round the valley, he noticed Strawberry, sitting by the lake, looking contemplative and a bit downcast.

Realising that the celebration could manage without him for a little bit, he deftly slipped out of the group, leaving them to make another lap by themselves.

"Why so glum, my friend?"

"So this is it, right? Our big life's journey is over, we made new friends, found what we wanted to find, the war's not going to happen, everyone's happy. Job done."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"I just... I felt like I've missed something. Like there was something more that should happen, and it didn't. We spent all that time, went through all that work trying to find the Elements of Harmony, and we never even used them! How is that supposed to be satisfying?"

Morning Song put an arm around his friend's shoulders.

"But we did, Berry. We did! The Elements aren't just *magical* power. The deeds that made us worthy of the Elements, the lessons we learned from ourselves. I mean, think of it this way. The Elements of Harmony change the things in the world that most need to be changed."

Strawberry turned to Song with a look of understanding.

"That thing was us."

"Exactly! We learnt the true value of the virtues the Elements represent. And we were able to use that knowledge to stop a war. Besides," he remarked, his voice taking on a slightly more serious tone, "you touched that power inside the Elements, like we all did. Isn't it better that we never *had* to use it?"

"That's true, I guess."

"The difference between a hero and a tyrant is that a hero has the strength and the wisdom not to use his power when it isn't needed."

A gentle but authoritative female voice addressed them, echoing across the valley.

"And both towns should be proud to be in the company of five brave heroes – and an equally brave heroine!"

There was a collective gasp from every pony in the valley as a ray of light descended from the sky, illuminating a towering white mare, easily half again as tall as Thunderclap. Her mane and tail flowed out around her, shining with all the colours of the Aurora Borealis, nearly as long each as her own body. Scarlet Emerald, who was still busy making arrangements for a runner to be sent to Saddle Wood to tell them the good news, let out a startled cry.

"Princess Celestia!"

Every pony in the valley suddenly bowed low in deference to royalty, and the princess grinned gently. Walking among the ponies, she reached the Sun Stone, gleaming in the middle of it all. She spoke in a very calm, level voice.

"There was a legend, from olden pony times, about two sisters who were inseparable, but perfect opposites. They were as close to each other as night and day, and as far away as well. Always answering each other, endlessly following one another, a perfect, unbroken circle. But what tore them apart was beauty. One desired a beauty that the other hoarded from her. The other hoarded it because she did not believe her sister was worthy of it. They fought, and in her bitterness, one sister threatened all the family with her actions, and the other was forced to cast her away.

"The sister who was left was neither a hero, nor a tyrant. The use of her power had prevented a greater evil, and yet it was her own actions that had brought them to this tragedy. And the legends say that when she realised this, she wept, and promised herself she would be the Princess that Equestria deserved, because she could not be the sister her sister deserved."

Morning Song inched towards the Sun Stone a little. For the merest fraction of a second, he could have sworn he saw tears in Celestia's eyes, but when he looked again, they had vanished, and no-one else seemed to notice. Shaking off the feeling, he addressed her.

"That's the story of Nightmare Moon."

"Indeed it is."

"And it was *also* the story of our two towns, to a point. And it was *also* the story of why you didn't want to intervene if you didn't have to."

"You are very perceptive, my little pony."

Morning Song grinned manically! A royal compliment! Then a thought struck him.

"Then you knew. You know all along about our towns arguing, and what they were arguing over."

"I'm the Princess of Equestria" remarked Celestia, a playful smile on her lips. "Give me some credit."

"But you didn't want to intervene..."

"Because forcing people to live in peace might prevent some suffering, but it never works for long. True reconciliation, true forgiveness – that must come from within."

Thunderclap lumbered forward a bit.

"But if you knew, and we hadn't... you wouldn't have let-"

"Oh, heavens, no!" exclaimed Celestia, with a look of shock on her face. "What do you take me for? What kind of Princess would I be if I let my subjects maim and kill each other?"

Strawberry looked up, knowing what everyone was going to expect him to say, and throwing them a curve for once.

"But this trip wasn't for nothing. Not at all."

"Of course it wasn't. What you learnt on your journey to find the Elements of Harmony allowed you to solve this problem better than I ever could. I would simply have had to demand you come to some arrangement, but that wouldn't have helped, not in the long run. The solution came from you, to you, all by your own doing, without anyone else having to involve themselves."

Strawberry cocked an eye at her. "So the best form of government is one where you don't have to do much work?"

"No. The best form of government is one where I don't *need* to do much work"

Strawberry conceded the point, nodding.

"So what happens now?"

"Now? Now is a time for celebration. A long argument between two towns has ended, and they have a beautiful place to share with each other. As for me, I have only one other matter to attend to."

She strode over to where Silver Spark was sitting, still recovering from the exhausting ordeal earlier.

"Silver Spark, you have amazing magical ability. With the proper training, you could be one of the most powerful magicians in Equestria."

Silver looked exceptionally timid again, all of a sudden, but Thunderclap put a hoof on his shoulder.

"Of course he is, Princess. He's the *son* of two of the most powerful magicians in Equestria."

"I'd like to offer you a place at my personal School for Gifted Unicorns."

Thunderclap, Silver Spark and his parents all looked utterly dumbfounded. Celestia continued regardless.

"I think no other magical institution in all of Equestria would be challenging enough for one of your obvious talent. I'm..."

She paused for the very briefest of moments. Only Morning Song caught it.

"... not quite ready to have a personal pupil of my own yet, but my academy has the best teachers in all of Equestria. I know they would be honoured to have a unicorn of such obvious ability."

Before his parents had any time to think about it, Silver Spark nodded eagerly.

"I accept!"

Cinnamon leaned in to his sister.

"You have to tell her your dream. Now. You might never get another chance."

Star Gazer blushed furiously.

"No, no... it's... it's stupid, Princess Celestia doesn't need to waste time with it."

"Go on! How can she refuse?"

"She's... it's not important."

"Come on, Star Gazer, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! And I *really* think you should take it!"

"You really think so?"

"Yes! Yes, I really, really think so! Come on, Star, follow your dreams!"

Star Gazer trotted nervously up to the princess, who was still talking with Silver.

"Um... excuse me..."

The princess was very good at knowing who needed her attention, and politely paused her conversation with Silver so she could talk to the filly.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Princess... I've... always had a dream..."

Celestia smiled warmly, and let the filly continue.

"... I... I'm... I have a little bit of talent reading stars-"

Thunderclap objected loudly. "A *little*? Honoured princess, she worked out north by staring at the sky for just twenty seconds, while I was *carrying* her!"

Cinnamon interjected eagerly on her behalf as well. "She knows the name of every constellation in the night sky, and every star you can see without a telescope! By heart!"

Star Gazer began blushing furiously.

"I... I've always wanted..."

Celestia leaned down so she was at eye level with the filly, smiling encouragingly.

"Yes, my dear?"

"I know it's silly... but I've always wanted to work at the Royal Observatory in Canterlot..."

Celestia grinned encouragingly.

"Well, of course, my dear! Astronomers are hard to come by in this day and age, and it's been years since I met any pony with an interest in the night sky."

Star Gazer let out a yelp of delight and started prancing excitedly.

"Oh, thank you, Princess! I promise I'll make you proud!"

"I know you will, dear."

Cinnamon rushed over to give his sister a massive cuddle.

"Told you! I told you you should ask her" His smile faded a little.

"Guess we won't be seeing much of you or Spark from now on, though..."

Coriander looked at the princess with a mischievous grin, the kind that hadn't crossed his face since his wife died. Celestia immediately cottoned on, and grinned straight back.

"Oh, I think you'll have plenty of chances to see them. After all, the mayor of Hoofington will be required to make a lot of visits to Canterlot."

Cinnamon whipped around, dumbstruck.

"M-M-Mayor?! But I'm not-... I mean, I'm not ready, I don't have-"

"You've done more good for this town in five days than I have in the past ten years. I think that's a sign. A sign that it's about time Hoofington had a fresh face to lead it. I'm resigning, and I want you to take my place. Anyone got a problem with that?"

A large cheer went up from the Hoofington brigade.

"But dad, I'm still not ready to run the town, I-"

"Don't worry. It's not exactly like you won't have me around to help you. And I promise I'll try to let you do things your way if you want to, OK?"

"OK, dad. I'll give it a try."

Strawberry looked over at Thunderclap.

"Well I guess this is it, then. All loose ends tied up, everyone's getting their well-deserved big break, and everyone's happy."

"But you're not, otherwise you wouldn't be pointing all this out to me."

"Well what can I say? Victory is... boring."

Thunderclap smiled contemplatively.

"You know I've heard, far to the north, in the Griffon Kingdoms, there's deep caves underneath a mountain where crystal grows like moss."

Strawberry looked over at his new friend, ideas forming in his head.

"I hear that way, way down south, there are creatures like ponies who are striped black-and-white and practice strange, ancient magic that no unicorn can perform."

"Well I hear that if you go all the way across the Everfree to the west, there's a land of creatures three times as big as the biggest earth pony that run in huge herds, trampling everything in their path."

"How about this? They say there's a city somewhere in Equestria called Manehattan where they build houses that touch the sky!"

Thunderclap beamed excitedly.

"You wanna go see some of that?"

"Yeah, actually. I don't have anything planned. What about Silver Spark?"

"He's going to the best unicorn academy in all of Equestria. I think it'll be healthy for him to strike out on his own for a while. Besides, all roads lead to Canterlot. We can visit him and our friends whenever we want."

"So where are we going first, Thunder?"

"You know, actually, I've heard that there's one place a long way to the east where they have *sea serpents*. Can you imagine that? Actual *sea serpents*."

"Sounds mighty dangerous." Berry commented, insincerely.

"For the two biggest, strongest ponies in the Sun Valley? I don't think so."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

"So... what you said about our big life's adventure..."

"Only just begun, Thunder. Only just begun."

Celestia looked over the proceedings in the Sun Valley, seeing old friendships renewed, and new friendships being forged. She smiled to herself, satisfied that everything was in order, and turned to trot away slowly. She was just about to take flight when she became aware of a presence behind her.

"Morning Song, isn't it?" she asked, her voice almost musical.

"Well, everyone is getting their reward. Cinnamon's the new mayor, and he'll do a brilliant job. Star Gazer's following her life's ambition, just like she should. Silver Spark's taking his new-found confidence to the best school of magic in all Equestria. And now, even Strawberry and Thunderclap have got what they wanted – another adventure. But those two, you know, I'm thinking *that* friendship might go a little further than, well, *friendship*..."

Celestia looked around, gazing demurely. "I'm sorry, but... what are you suggesting, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. But my point is, I was just thinking... I haven't gotten what I really wanted."

"Well, what would you like, my little pony? I'm sure it can be arranged."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions. Big, important ones. We might want some privacy."

"That won't be a problem, Morning Song. It's rare indeed that I get a moment like this, but I don't think anypony's all that interested in me right now."

"Ah, you suffer from too much positive attention, don't you?"

"Sometimes," she said, wistfully, "sometimes."

"So that story you told, about the two Sisters, the Princesses of the Sun and Moon. That's your story, isn't it? You *are* the Princess of the Sun."

"There has always been a Princess of the Sun. The nature of Equestria requires it."

"But all the history books – and I've read every one of them I could find, trust me – are notoriously sketchy on matters of succession and heirs."

"No account of history is perfect, my dear."

"It seems to me that they're a little too imperfect... at least when one considers how vividly most ponies remember parties, and how many there *should* have been upon the coronation of a new monarch..."

"What are you implying, Morning Song?"

"That you, Princess Celestia, seemed to have a little more emotional investment in the story of Nightmare Moon than you would if it were simply a story about two ponies that happened nearly a thousand years ago."

"What makes you say that?"

"You were crying when you told us the story."

Celestia stopped. She was wearing a look of shocked surprise, her usual serene composure broken momentarily.

"You... saw that, my dear?"

Morning Song nodded sagely. "When you play for an audience, you learn to read people's reactions in a split second. You're good at hiding your emotions, Princess, but you're not perfect."

She fixed him a steely glare, but it instantly softened a little, and she sighed gently, shaking her head.

"People consider you very intelligent, Morning Song, but even then they underestimate you."

Morning Song blushed deeply once again, and then continued.

"You're the original Princess of the Sun, the sister of the Princess of the Moon who became Nightmare Moon. Or at least, you are the kernel of truth that lies at the heart of that legend."

She tilted her head.

"Far, *far* more intelligent than anyone gives you credit for. I'm not saying you're right, my dear, but I am saying that a wit as sharp as yours is fantastically rare."

"So you're not saying I'm right, but you're not saying I'm wrong, either."

"It isn't a confirmation."

"It wasn't a denial, either."

"This is true."

They continued walking while Morning Song continued his questioning.

"For sake of simplicity, let us say that you are at least intimately familiar with the details of that legend. I'll refrain from implying you were actually there, even though I think you were."

"I won't say that I wasn't."

"All the legends I ever heard put all the fault with the selfishness of the Princess of the Moon. Your version seemed to imply the Princess of the Sun was at fault as well."

Celestia kept her voice entirely level, without any display of emotion. "There is never only one side of guilt. The Princess of the Sun allowed her pride to make her negligent. She had duties to the land, but she also had a duty to her sister, and by failing one, she failed the other."

"She coveted the adoration of her subjects just as much as her sister did."

"Yes. The Princess of the Moon was wrong to refuse to lower the moon, but her jealousy and anger had only been made worse by her sister's neglect. When the Princess of the Sun saw what her thoughtlessness had wrought, it was far too late. There was no reasoning with her."

"And so the Princess of the Sun was forced to use the Elements of Harmony to banish her to the moon."

"Regretting every second of her life from that day forth that a different solution had not been possible."

"And it was her tear that came to rest in this valley, the cause of so much more beauty and strife."

"Yes."

"And all these years later, you're still grieving over her."

"Yes."

Celestia suddenly realised what she'd said, and looked over in shock at Morning Song, who was wearing the biggest, smuggest smirk she'd ever seen on a pony. She glared a little, but he could tell she wasn't really angry.

“Too intelligent for your own good, I think.”

“That's sometimes what they tell me, your highness. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. But if we're being honest with each other, I have some more questions.”

“Ask.”

“Why the secrecy? There are few ponies I know of that have ever been seriously upset with your reign.”

“Because they wouldn't see me as a pony, and perhaps they would be right. Anything that's lived as long as I, seen the passage of as many seasons and ponies as I have... perhaps I don't have a right to count myself among your number anymore. Perhaps I'm something a little different. But if ponies were to see me as something like a goddess, what sort of place would Equestria be? A monarch deserves respect and loyalty, not worship and unthinking obedience. And even though I might be more than just a pony, I am not a goddess. I never want to be. People already trot lightly around me because I'm royalty – it's lonely enough to be a Princess. Imagine how lonely it would be to be a god.”

“You invited Silver Spark to your academy, but you pointed out that you wouldn't take him as a personal protégé, even though it was clear you wanted to.”

Celestia suddenly looked very nostalgic and a little bit sad.

“I had a pupil of my own once, a very, very long time ago. He was as brave as you and your friends, and noble, and kind, and brilliant. I thought he would fill the hole in my heart that Luna left when she became Nightmare Moon. But I let him get too close to me, and I let myself get too close to him.”

“Did you... *love*—”

“No. It was not quite that close. But by the time he had come into his own, he was more than just a pupil. He was a dear friend, a peerless magician and a fearless protector of the weak. By the end he was teaching me as much as I was teaching him. But he was taken from me by tragedy, and it reminded me of what it felt like to lose my sister. I realised even if I *could* find a pony that could soothe the pain of his loss, time would eventually do to them what tragedy might not. I realised that each time the pain would grow worse, and worse. I decided I need to isolate myself from personal attachment, because in the end, it will not bring me happiness.”

“You're wrong, Princess.”

Celestia looked at Morning Song quizzically. He continued, unabashed.

“You're so wrong. The sorrow of loss does *not* rob you of all the happy moments you spent together. He might be gone, but the friendship you had for each other isn't, and as long as you remember that, *he* isn't really gone either. Sometimes we have to say goodbye to friends, but as much as we might miss them, there will always be new friends just *waiting* for you to meet them! Princess, you said you don't want to become so different from ponies – if that's true, then don't detach yourself from friendship. It's through our friends that ponies stay ponies.”

Princess Celestia, leaned down and gave the earth pony an affectionate nuzzle, causing him to break out in the biggest blush yet.

“Morning Song, thank you for your kind words. No pony could hope to have a friend as good as yourself. I'm still not quite ready yet, I don't think, but... I will try, again, in the fullness of time, to find a pupil.”

“Princess Celestia, I have one more question for you. A very serious one.”

“Anything. Ask.”

“The Legend of Nightmare Moon has one last section, one that very few ponies like to talk about, a very unpopular one that they don't like you telling at carnivals or stage shows. But that part is perhaps the most important bit of the entire legend. Now that I know how much truth there is behind legends, I can't help but think about it. The legend says that on the longest day of the thousandth year since her banishment, the stars will aid in her escape, and Nightmare Moon will return to bring about her Kingdom of Everlasting Night.”

Celestia said nothing, stone-faced.

“We had the Summer Sun Celebration just a month ago. All the pony sages said it was the eight-hundred-and-twenty-sixth year of the Celebration. That leaves, by my count, only one hundred and seventy four years before the Thousandth Year Celebration. Upon that day, the legend turns into a prophecy and says your sister will return in all her dark glory. I won't be there to see it – I'll have written my last legend long before that time. But Equestria will still be there. How do you plan to stop her?”

“I...” Celestia stumbled for words, for once utterly at a loss for them. “I... I don't know yet. I haven't decided.”

“Then you have just under two centuries to decide, your highness. I hope, not just for your sake, but for all ponies everywhere, that that's enough time for you to come up with a plan.”

He turned, and walked slowly away from the Princess, leaving her speechless.

In the Royal Observatory, capping the highest tower of the Royal Palace of Canterlot, Star Gazer was making her first observation through the facility's massive telescope. She could barely contain her excitement – she had never seen the moon so close before! She could make out individual craters and lunar seas, just like her books back home had told her. Here there was a famous crater first documented by Gallopleo, and here was another that was named after Tycho Neigh. The lunar seas just looked like black blotches with the naked eye, but up close, they had details of their own, even-

For just a split second, Star Gazer could have sworn she saw a dark blue glint in the Mare Nox – the Sea of Night. When she looked again, it was gone. She shook her head and rubbed her temples softly. It had been only two weeks, and she hadn't gotten used to the sleep schedule of a junior assistant yet. Staying up most of the night and sleeping during the day wasn't something you adjusted to instantly. Still, she could have *sworn* she saw something...

Cinnamon was overseeing the loading of a trade caravan that was about to haul the first harvest of Hoofington's blackberries to Trottingham.

"Now make sure you meet up with the Saddle Wood metalwork caravan on the way, and enter the town together. I sent word to Scarlet Emerald about this, they'll be waiting near the crossroads at Thistlebrush Hill. We need to send a message to the rest of Equestria that we've mended our differences – and more importantly, that neither of us are going to let either ourselves or our friends get swindled. You charge a fair price for those blackberries, and make sure the Saddle Wood ironwork goes for the bits it's worth as well."

The merchant shifted in his harness and gave his cart an experimental tug. "You got it, boss."

Coriander trotted up next to his son and smiled encouragingly.

"So, the town's not going to want for coin this season or the next. Weather's been good so the harvests will produce a good surplus. But I feel your plan goes a little further than that."

"Short-term, we're going to focus on rebuilding the reputation of Hoofington and keeping the town's pocketbook pretty. Long-term... I think we need to branch out. Agriculture and trading work fine for us now, but we can do better. We should start attracting pegasi so we can form our own weather team. We might want to attract some unicorns as well. The world's moving on. More and more enchanted goods turning up for cheaper prices. Breaking into that market would definitely help the town in the long run."

“Unicorns. Fair point. Any unicorns in particular?”

“Oh, you know. I have a couple in mind...”

Silver Spark meditated, entirely focused on his inner self. He inhaled, and let clean, pure magic flow in. He exhaled, and let stale energy out. The image of the spell was utterly clear in his mind.

He opened his eyes. He let the energy relax into the pattern he had set for it. With a shimmer, an exact duplicate of himself appeared standing a few paces from him, facing him exactly. He raised his left front hoof – and his double did the same. He turned his back, and looked behind him, to see his doppelgänger peering at him from over his own flank. Then he turned tail again and charged straight at it, his twin bearing down on him equally fast – and they passed straight through each other, each skidding to a halt in roughly the position in which their opposite had begun.

The other unicorns in the classroom applauded enthusiastically, and the instructor smiled, obviously impressed. No-one in any of his four years of teaching had managed to master the illusory double spell quite so quickly, and maintain it this long upon their third casting. Even most adult unicorns wouldn't have been able to charge straight through their own duplicates without losing concentration. The colt was certainly a prodigy. He was worried, however, that a time would rapidly approach when this class wouldn't challenge the unicorn enough – he wondered how the unicorn would deal with being skipped a grade.

Ah well, he seemed the confident sort. He was making a lot of friends. He couldn't imagine a unicorn this talented had ever had trouble dealing with other people.

A voice hailed Strawberry and Thunderclap from behind.

“Hey! Wait for me, guys!”

Morning Song galloped over to the two larger stallions, quickly catching up with them. He glared at them with mock indignation.

“I cannot *believe* you were about to go on an adventure without me!”

Thunderclap clucked his tongue and swiped at the air with his hoof.

“Ah, you're right! What were we thinking, imagining we could outwit the crafty Deathwing Dirge, Scourge of All Ogres?”

“Quite right. What would happen if you met another ogre?”

Strawberry snorted. “Well it's a good thing I knew you'd tag along and packed extra food for you, little guy. We all know how much you eat.”

“Quite right! The pony who's going to spin all our adventures into mighty legends that'll endure the ages! The pony who'll make sure our

stories are told to foals at night by their parents for generations to come! He *should* get his fair share of treats, you know. A chronicler's job is never easy!"

Thunderclap rolled his eyes. "Oh yes, we all know the *terrible* hardships you have to go through. All that dancing and singing really takes it out of a pony. Those *exhausting* crowds of fillies. I don't know *how* you survive. All those *excruciating* private audiences with the Princess herself..."

"That only happened once!"

Berry cocked his head.

"Hey, Song, about that. You said you wanted to ask her some questions. Did you get the answers you wanted?"

"Well, funny thing about that," he mused with a slight, contemplative sigh, "I didn't get all the answers I thought I wanted, but maybe the answers I wanted weren't the answers I needed."

"So... did you get the answers you needed?"

"I... don't know."

Thunderclap sighed exasperatedly and rolled his eyes again.

"Always riddles with you."

"Ah, but life is a riddle."

"True, that, I guess."

"So, Song."

"Yes, Berry?"

"You said a month ago, just after Celestia left, that you were thinking of a title for when you write the whole story about our quest for the Elements. Thought of one yet?"

"I had a few ideas, yeah."

"Let's hear them, then."

"Well, there was *A Tale of Two Towns*."

Thunderclap shook his head. "Too cliché."

"Yeah, it's been done."

"Alright then. How about *Hoofington and Saddle Wood: A House Divided*?"

"Too clunky," commented Strawberry.

"Doesn't really roll off the tongue."

"Well there was also *Harmony: The Fantastic Tale of Six Friends Against The World, Laden With Insightful Soliloquy and Great Moral Appositeness*."

"... no."

"What does 'appositeness' even *mean*?"

"You two are so *picky*! Alright then, here's my last idea – stick this in your saddlebag and tighten it. How about *The War That Never Was*?"

Strawberry and Thunderclap looked at each other, smiling.

"... I think he's onto a winner with that one, Berry."

The echo chamber was filled with the riotous applause of Twilight and her friends as the story came to its final conclusion, ending on a high note as the three friends journeyed into the unknown for more adventures.

"That was incredible!" Twilight exclaimed in awe.

Applejack drummed her hooves on the ground appreciatively. "Ah'll say! Ah'm so glad everythin' worked out so swell for everypony in the end!"

She paused.

"... and that mah kin saw sense and didn't hurt the family no more."

Fluttershy smiled happily. "I especially liked how supportive Star Gazer was of everypony!"

The older Star Gazer blushed in response. "It was the right thing to do, you know?"

Rarity leaned in. "Speaking of which, darling, did you and Silver Spark ever confess your feelings for one another?"

Silver Spark grinned at Star Gazer happily. "Even with my new-found self-confidence, it took me three whole years before I worked up the courage to ask her on a date."

The mare tossed her hair with a smile. "And it took me ten minutes to work up the courage to say yes. And we never looked back. We were married two years later in the Sun Valley, right beneath the Sun Stone, and over the next decade we had three wonderful foals, all of them unicorns."

Fluttershy seemed ecstatic. "Oh, that's so wonderful!"

"So Cinnamon, how'd bein' mayor turn out for you in the end?" Applejack inquired.

"Oh, it was definitely hard work. Running a town might not take much physical effort, but there was a heck of a lot of thinking and planning involved. I don't think you guys give your town's mayor quite enough credit, even if she is a bit of a busybody."

Twilight nodded, looking a little guilty.

Pinkie Pie bounced a little on her hooves. "Morning Song, you're so incredible! I mean, Rainbow Dash is cool and Applejack is awesome, but it was just so spectacular when you managed to scare away that big mean ogre just by telling jokes!"

Morning Song bowed appreciatively.

Rainbow Dash tossed her mane a little. "I guess that was pretty cool." she commented. Then she smirked slyly at Thunderclap. "So, Thunder, you and Strawberry... you know..."

Thunderclap nodded at Dash. "Oh, yeah, we had a lot more adventures together!"

Strawberry coughed. Dash raised an eyebrow. Thunderclap tilted his head a little.

"What?"

"... nothing."

Morning Song and the rest of his group bowed one and all, before stepping back into their space in the triad, their circle of light following them.

"We've told our story. Now it's time for you to hear another one, from a different time, and a different band of brave ponies."

The ponies from the second circle stepped forth. The first thing that everyone noticed about them was that every single one of them were pegasi. Rainbow Dash looked absolutely ecstatic.

"Oh my gosh, this is going to be so *awesome*!"

Twilight Sparkle, however, tilted her head in confusion and disbelief.

"Wait, you're *all* pegasus ponies? But... but... that doesn't make *sense*!"

One of them, a mare jet-black in both coat and mane with a single streak of silver running through her hair and down her back, stepped forward, her head tilted and her eyebrows raised sardonically. She spoke in a calm, quiet, slightly mystical voice.

"Really, Twilight Sparkle? That's a little... prejudiced of you."

"But... but... none of you can use magic! You don't have *horns*!"

"Like I said, prejudiced."

"But one of the Elements of Harmony is the Element of *Magic*!"

"I would have expected such a curious, scientific pony to be a little more open-minded. Either way, my name's Black Moon."

"I'm... pleased to meet you, Black Moon. I'm sorry, I just..."

"Lot to take in. Don't worry, we know. I'll let the others introduce themselves."

After Black Moon, the first to step forward was a big, strong pegasus stallion, sporting a grey mane and brown coat. His Cutie mark took the form of a fierce, swirling stormcloud. He spoke plainly, with no concession to politeness.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm Hurricane.”

He was joined by an impossibly perky silver-white mare who had an almost blindingly-bright golden mane.

“Hey! My name's Sunbeam!”

Pinkie had visibly already taken a liking to her, and was bouncing and making excited exclamations while the next pony stepped forward. She was a cobalt-blue mare with a striking mane: it was a darker shade of blue than her coat, but it had two bright, perfectly symmetrical aquamarine streaks running through it.

“Hello, everyone. Rain Shadow at your service.”

The next mare was no petite, dainty filly – she was all leg and wing muscle, lithe and athletic. She was carmine red, with a yellow and silver mane that shone almost as brightly as Sunbeam's. Her Cutie Mark depicted a bolt of lightning touching flame. She gave Twilight and her friends a wide, cocky grin.

“Well hi. Name's Heat Lightning, and don't you all forget it!”

The next pony stepped forward, and there was a gasp from Twilight and her friends – but no-one gasped more loudly than Rainbow Dash. This sixth pony, a tall, well-built stallion, sported a spotless white coat, but his most striking feature was his mane, which bore six bright, vivid streaks of colour. It looked, for all the world, identical to Dash's own mane.

“Good to meet you guys. My name's Prism.”

Rainbow Dash let out an uncharacteristic squeal of excitement.

“... gonna be so awesome!”

Applejack gently pushed Rainbow's wings, which had somehow, for some reason, splayed all the way out to their fullest extent, gently to the side.

“So what story d'y'all have?”

Black Moon stepped forward a little further, and the images started to resolve themselves from thin air again.

“In a time more than half a millennium after the banishment of Nightmare Moon, the City of Cloudsdale was a flourishing metropolis, the true home of all pegasus ponies, the jewel of the sky. But an ancient and terrible power threatened to destroy all that we held dear. Far beyond the power of any pony to oppose, it swept in from its ancient resting place and laid waste to the land. This is the story of the time of the Storm Dragon. How it began, and how it was ended...”

Chapter VI

Gathering of the Clouds

In a time when the War of the Sun and Moon was centuries-old history, Cloudsdale was a thriving city, a metropolis of the sky. High above the earth, it was home to thousands of pegasi, and more arrived every day, drawn by the promise of the city's wealth and luxury. In those times, any pegasus with the merest smidgeon of talent could get a job in its vast corps of weatherponies. Cloudsdale didn't make or control each and every individual cloud in the land, but if a town wanted custom-order weather, there was only one place any mayor with sense bothered to send a message to. Bits flowed into the town's coffers, and in the times of peace and prosperity, Cloudsdale experienced a flourishing of artists, scientists and thinkers.

One such artist was a quiet young mare named Black Moon, named partially for her Cutie Mark – a perfect crescent moon – and her jet-black coat and mane. As a mare of an artistic bent in Cloudsdale's growing subculture, she'd tried her hand at everything – poetry, fiction, music – and she'd performed well enough to satisfy her peers, but where she really shined was *painting*. Sure, her trochaic tetrameter was passable and her skill with the violin was enough to impress a layman, but it was in her sketches and her paintings that her life's talent really showed through. She had no real patience or drive for any other art form, but she could watch a sunset, lose herself in it and spend the entire night painting it by only the light of her firefly lamp. Finishing her work by the first rays of dawn. she'd be motivated to paint the sunrise as well.

While she was by no means a master of her craft yet, the skill and beauty of her paintings had made her a fashionable name on the tongues of many ponies. There were many in the city's artistic community who liked to watch the up-and-coming youth for hints of the next great name, some because they genuinely wanted to help them shine, others because they wanted a piece of the glory. There were members of both crowds who often tried to get a word with her at the city's various gatherings and salons, but there was only one person she'd met through the community that she really, truly cared about.

“Hey! Moon!”

Black Moon snapped out of her reverie and turned to her friend, who was sitting with her chin in her hoof, glaring sourly. She blinked and said nothing.

"This guy having the same effect on you? Yeah, don't worry. I understand."

Black Moon was being addressed by her very best friend, Rain Shadow. They'd met barely a year ago, and despite having wildly differing personalities, they'd gotten along exceptionally well. While Black Moon was of the artist type, Rain Shadow was decidedly more of the critical type – heavily so.

"Moon! You're drifting off again. Celestia's wings..."

Rain Shadow stood up, calling out loudly, interrupting the unfortunate stallion's recital mid-word.

"Hey! You! Yeah, of course you on the stage! Who the hay did you think I was talking? Your poetry's sending my friend *to sleep*! This is the mare who can stay up for three days straight painting a landscape! I can't fault the *effort* in your mediocrity, at least!"

There was a roar of laughter from the crowd, leaving the stallion on the stage mortified.

"Come on, Moon, forget this place. Perhaps we'll find some talent *elsewhere*."

Black Moon sighed inwardly. The stallion didn't impress her by any stretch of the imagination, but she hadn't actually fallen asleep – her mind had wandered. It did that often. The stallion certainly wasn't terrible, and certainly didn't deserve to be made a fool of. But she wasn't going to show her friend up by second-guessing her. She certainly wasn't geared up to get into an argument with Rain Shadow this early in the day.

"As you say, Rain."

She followed her friend out of the coffee-house and stepped, blinking, into the blazing morning sunlight.

"You didn't need to traumatise the poor colt, you know."

"Eh, what else was I supposed to say? Pretend I liked it? Tell him he's special when he's not?"

"So, he's hardly the next Samuel Foalridge. Did you really have to be so hard on him?"

Rain Shadow giggled a little.

"Let's face it, he'd need to be on something a lot harder than coffee to be the next Foalridge anyway."

"True, but that's not the point. You ripped into him pretty hard."

"You'd rather I give him false hope? He's never going to get anywhere in Cloudsdale with dross like that."

"You could at least try to be diplomatic about it."

Rain Shadow cocked her head as if to say something, but whatever it was, she never got to say it, because at that very moment, a whooping blur of white flashed in between them, beating wings passing within a hair's breadth of her nose. Both ponies let out shrieks of surprise and leapt backwards, Moon barely keeping her balance, Rain collapsing gracelessly onto the cloud pavement. Soaring into the sky, the speeding blur of white fur and feathers left a multicoloured after-image trailing behind it, along with a brief, shouted apology.

"Woah-ho! Sorry ladies!"

Rain Shadow leapt to her feet, ignoring the hoof her friend had offered to help her up with. "Watch where you're *going*, flank-face!"

Moon dusted herself off, shaking a little. She knew exactly who had just buzzed them, and she knew the apology was hardly sincere – *he* had flown between them entirely on purpose, just to see if he could. This was, of course, the self-proclaimed best flier in all of Cloudsdale, Prism, he of rainbow mane and little modesty. The stallion was cocksure, unapologetically ostentatious and intolerably arrogant –and even more unbearable because he was, unfortunately, quite likely right in his self-assessment. The stunt he'd just pulled was one of the least impressive feats you'd see the smug bastard pull off on the average day.

Rain Shadow's wings shivered irately.

"That complete *flank*!"

"Come on, Rain. Calm down." murmured Moon soothingly, with a sly smile. "Let's find you another bad poet to tear down. You'll feel much better."

"Him and those two *lackeys* of his treat the artist's quarter like it's their own personal *obstacle course*!"

She looked to her friend, looking for agreement. When she received only her friend's regular expression, she added "And somepony should *do* something!"

Moon smirked.

"Like what? Prism and his cronies could outfly half the city guard, and the other half they could outmanoeuvre. Heck, I bet they could do both with a good few."

"They're not even really *artists*! It's all just vanity and showmanship. There's no art in it at all!"

"Well, you tell that to all the ponies who think they're Celestia's personal gift to Cloudsdale."

"Idiots, with no appreciation for real talent. All those fanponies? They should be fawning over *you*, Moon. No, really. Don't look at me like that."

"Even if I could get all that attention, I wouldn't want it."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I want ponies to look at my paintings and appreciate them for what's in them, not for who painted them."

"But the *talent* behind the art is what makes it great! Anypony can *draw* the sunrise. Only a few ponies – ponies like you – can *capture* the sunrise!"

"But it's the beauty of the sunrise that's important, not me."

"Without you, we wouldn't be able to share in the beauty of your work in the first place."

The two mares debated the matter for a while, until they happened upon a large noticeboard placed in one of the quarter's many courtyards. This, like the many other noticeboards in the city, held a copy of the weather schedule. Rain Shadow took a quick look over it.

"Sunny skies for the rest of the morning, and then- oh."

She noticed her friend had started shivering a little – she'd already read the afternoon's weather. Storms scheduled until evening.

Rain Shadow didn't really understand it, but her friend had a terrible, hysterical fear of storms. Thunder and lightning would send her howling for cover, and she considered it no small mercy that the artist's quarter was at the opposite end of the city from the weather factories. Black Moon could paint convincing and terrifying pictures of hydras and manticores and other horrible creatures from legend. These paintings would chill the blood of the strongest-hearted pegasus and yet she wouldn't blink an eye at them, but put her in the rain with a few sparks and she'd curl up and bawl like a newborn foal. Rain Shadow understood something of irrational fear herself, though, so of the many things she occasionally mocked her friend for, her phobia was never one of them.

"Let's go back to your place, Moon. You can show me your latest work. Come on."

Before her friend had time to get panicky, she calmly took her hoof and led her away, back to the safety of her apartment.

Prism cut a swath through the skies over Cloudsdale, dodging between the elaborate, misty spires of the city, going nowhere in particular. Threading the needle between those two pretty mares had been the

highlight of his flight so far, but impressing fillies was just a side benefit to it all. The joy was in the accomplishment itself, and if those two young mares had been bowled over with admiration, well, he wouldn't complain. Pirouetting with effortless grace and skill, Prism dodged through the Grand Archway of the Artist's Quarter on a whim, to astonished gasps from the ponies below.

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt in his mind, that he was the best flier in Cloudsdale – and that made him the best flier in Equestria, no contest. No pony living could match his speed or skill. In his mind, the name proved it – against a sky of any colour, blue, amber, red or grey, he'd beat any pony, hooves down.

He heard the beating of wings, and a voice called out from just above, interrupting his self-serving reverie.

“Hey, darlin' – mind if I join you?”

It was always nice to have a challenge. A pretty challenge, even better.

“Think I'd turn you down, Lightning?”

Heat Lightning was one of the two ponies in Cloudsdale who ever gave Prism a serious run for his money, and of the two of them – both members of Prism's little gang of rogues – she was definitely his favourite. Hay yeah, he picked favourites! With a pretty mare like Lightning, who wouldn't?

“C'mon!” she cheered eagerly. “Let's go find Cane! Race you to the weather factory!”

“You're on!”

Lightning sped off in front of him, deftly weaving through the streets at a breakneck pace. He knew for dead certain he could beat her if he just flew straight ahead, over the rooftops, but he wasn't about to let her brag about him going for all the easy victories. Diving into the thick of the city, he whisked through the terrifying, irregular slalom of shops, houses and apartments, chasing the slipstream of his companion with a single-minded killer instinct.

Buildings and ponies became a blur, a riot of colour and movement and sound all jumbled-together so he couldn't pick out anything individual. All he could make out was the next twist, the next corner, pulling turns so tight he felt the edges of buildings shave the tips of his pinfeathers. He breathed in, then out. In, then out. He could see Heat Lightning only a few yards in front of him. Her body was a blur of red, yellow and silver, but curiously enough, her Cutie Mark – a thin stroke of lightning touching fire – was perfectly clear despite her constant movement.

Her wings kept spreading out to their fullest extent. She could feel him closing in behind her, and was blocking his path either side – too close to her, and she'd knock him flying into the buildings. Too close to the buildings, and he might graze one too hard and go spinning off. Ascending to fly above her would lose him precious seconds and give her the satisfaction of having forced him off the path. Oh, but she wasn't going to win. Oh no. Not today, and not ever.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and held it. Slowly, calmly, almost as if he was outside his body and just watching it, he felt himself beginning to roll – he was at right-angles with the street, and then that captivating, endless sea of blue was the ground beneath him, and the cloudspun street the sky above. His wings beat with the force of a gale, once, twice, and then snapped to his sides. The roll continued, the sky and the street slowly resolving back to their usual places. He felt the street rushing towards him, fast, heart-stoppingly fast. The breath held in his chest caught in his throat...

... and forced its way out in a cry of triumph as he felt himself pass underneath his adversary. Levelling out a hair's breadth from the pavement, he felt his wing-tips graze the very top of the clouds. He rose frantically, but vanishing off behind him he heard Lightning howling curses at him as he sped away. The weather factory loomed large in his field of vision, and from this point on, it was plain sailing. He barely even noticed the rooftops sailing past him as he finished the final leg of the race at what was, for him, a leisurely, almost complacent pace.

His wings, hips and every muscle in his back were burning and he was desperately out of breath by the time Heat Lightning landed. She was sweating like a dog and gasping for air, but just for her, he put on his best show of looking like the race had been barely any effort at all. She grinned ruefully at him.

"Teach me to try 'n' find... somethin' too loony even fer you, eh? Ain't no stunt harebrained enough... that you ain't gonna try... and pull it off!" she grumbled, in between heaving gasps.

"Well you know me." he said, with long-practiced confidence, "No challenge I won't rise to!"

"Don't I know it!" she cried, throwing her hooves up in the air. "Now c'mon, let's see if Cane's off his shift yet."

As they trotted towards the massive factory doors, Prism took a look at the schedule board next to them.

"Huh. Storm this afternoon. Wasn't scheduled yesterday."

"Eh. You know the weatherponies. Always messin' it about."

“Storms take a lot of work, 'specially on short notice. Why'd they just decide to whip one up all of a sudden?”

A deep, gruff voice interrupted them. This was Hurricane, the third member of their clique. Unlike a lot of pegasi, he wasn't a looker – mud-brown coat with a mane the colour of angry storm-clouds – and a personality to match his namesake: no subtlety, no grace and no manners.

“Either of you two lunkheads looked at the horizon? Or were y'both too busy vigorously congratulating each other?”

Prism turned his head to the east. Just visible, far in the distance, was a tall, dark, rolling wall of cloud, occasional flashes peppering it. It wasn't moving very fast, but it was moving, quite visibly, towards Cloudsdale. Hurricane regarded it with unveiled malice.

“Rolled its flank into view during the graveyard shift. Ain't one of ours. Unscheduled.”

Prism cocked his head, snorting dismissively. “Why not just break it up?”

“See, that's the weird thing. We sent out three teams to get rid of the bastard before we had to change up all the schedules. Both came back sayin' it just couldn't be done. Now one team comin' back and saying they couldn't break up a storm? Cowardice. Two teams? Laziness or incompetence. But three? Ain't no storm I ever seen that couldn't be broken up with three whole teams. The next shift is going to throw every pony on station at it. But until then, schedule stays that way. Weird as hay, if you ask me.”

“What d'you mean, they couldn't break it up?”

“Said the clouds wouldn't shift, wouldn't break when they bucked 'em. Now I ain't sayin' they were the best of the best, but they sent Team Four in. There's some solid ponies in there – Rainbarrel, Hightail, and y'all remember Blacksky?”

“Yeah, who'd forget?”

“Now I know those colts wouldn't just give up at the first sign of hard work. Screw the other teams, but if they say this storm ain't normal, I believe 'em.”

“That's weird, that is.” quipped Heat Lightning.

“You're tellin' me, filly.”

Prism turned his head away from the thunderheads on the horizon. “So, shift over?”

“They let us all out early 'cause they might need us back later when it all rolls in.”

“Cool! So whatcha wanna do?”

"Hey, let's catch some airtime and a bite to eat before that mess over there hits us, 'cause I don't want to go back on station with an empty stomach."

"Airtime and food," chirped Lightning with a grin, "It's like y'read my mind."

"Darlin', if I ever start readin' your mind, just drop me off a cloud, right then and there."

"Harsh."

"But fair."

"Hmmpf!", snorted Rarity with a disdainful expression. "What a lout!"

"Hey, filly, I wasn't there for anyone's satisfaction, and I ain't now. So y'know what? Can it and let us tell the story."

Rarity glowered in mute indignation.

Black Moon's apartment was, as always, the very picture of a sensitive artist's refuge: untidy without being dirty, and chaotic without being disorderly. Books of every size and description lay all about the floor, but in fairly neat piles. There was reference material and a couple of unfinished pieces here and there, but a pony still had room to move about. There were a number of books open on the table, but there was still enough room for Rain Shadow to put her saddlebags down. She glanced at one of the open books curiously. A bizarre creature that looked like it combined all the most dangerous elements of bird and mammal stared out at her.

With a baffled expression, she turned to her friend, holding up the book. "What the hay is this?"

"Oh, that? That's an owlbear. I was thinking of painting one. You know, as a part of my legends cycle."

"You're painting nothing *but* your legends cycle nowadays!" Rain Shadow replied, with a vague touch of exasperation in her voice.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"It's all just so... your sunrises and your landscapes, they're your best works! You should do more of *them*!"

"No, my landscapes and sunrises are just the paintings that get the best *reviews*."

"I fail to see the difference!" Rain frustratedly motioned over at *Canterlot At Dawn*, one of Black Moon's originals that she had loved far too much to let the mare sell.

"Look, Moon, *this* over here? This would sell for four hundred bits. That's enough to keep you going for a month. Maybe two... well, if you eat frugally and don't paint all that much."

Moon rolled her eyes. Rain continued, motioning to the unfinished canvas of what was obviously meant to be a painting of the owlbear.

"This? This thing here? You'll only get twenty for this, tops, and it'll probably be from some fan-colt who doesn't even appreciate it, just wants to buy it so he can get close to you. The critics aren't about this abstract, legendary stuff."

"And what, pray tell, if I enjoy the idea of some colt who'd buy my artwork to impress me?"

"What, for twenty bits?"

"If twenty bits at least brings a good conversation with it, then it was worth the effort."

"Twenty-bit work and conversations with insipid fans aren't going to get you anywhere in the scene!"

"That so?"

"You know how harsh, how unforgiving the artistic quarter can be—"

"Mostly through you."

"To get anywhere, you need to go with what's popular!"

"I don't care what's popular. I care what I want to paint."

"But the critics—"

"I don't *paint* for the critics, Rain!"

Rain Shadow stopped dead as Moon raised her voice – something she almost never did.

"I paint because it's something I'm *good* at! Because it's something I *enjoy*! You know what? I've seen enough sunrises and landscapes that sometimes, just *sometimes*, I just want to live in a cave where there's *no sun*, and *no landscapes*!"

She breathed in heavily, and lowered her voice a little.

"But I've never seen an owlbear. Or a manticore. Or an Ursa Major, or a tengu or a zebra or a dragon. No matter how many legends I read or artist's impressions I see, when I'm trying to paint one of them, I always have to *imagine* at least some of it. That's what makes it *special*!"

She moved over to the painting of the owlbear, unfinished brush strokes not quite filling in all the outlines she's sketched out. She reached a hoof out to touch the canvas.

"I don't care if the critics don't like these ones. I'll never be able to paint a landscape or a sunrise as well as I paint these. You think I have all these books on legends memorised just for fun? They're *inspiration*, Rain. Inspiration I just can't get from looking at nature."

Rain was taken aback by how open her friend was being about the joy of her work. Her face softened.

"Moon... I... you're right. I'm sorry. I really am. I really didn't realise how much all this meant to you."

Moon shook her head.

"It's OK. Apology accepted."

Rain smiled a rare smile.

"Tell me more about the owlbears."

Prism and his two companions were just finishing up their lunch when the cloud-gongs started ringing across the city. They rang three times in short succession – this was a general call for every pony in the weather-corps, on-shift or not, to get on station.

"Darn, three shorts? This must be even worse than I thought. Gotta dash, gang."

He leapt into the air, heading for the rapidly advancing storm-front.

"No problem, Cane. Give that storm hell for me!" Lightning yelled after him.

"Will do!"

He sped off into the distance, his wings beating hard and fast against the wind, which was noticeably picking up. Prism looked up uneasily at the roiling mass of black cloud advancing on the city. It looked even more daunting close up, towering thunderheads dwarfing even the tallest of the city's structures, occasionally bridged by blinding arcs of lightning.

And in truth, the more he looked at this storm, the more he got the bizarre, insane, but utterly unshakeable feeling that somehow, the storm was *looking back at him*. He stood there for a moment, stock still, locked in its imaginary gaze.

The spell was shattered by a chirpy, upbeat voice that broke through his concerns. A second after it started speaking, he'd forgotten that odd feeling entirely.

"Hey ponies! Whatcha doin'?"

The voice belonged to a confident-looking silver-white mare with a riot of golden dreadlocks, who practically crackled with unspent energy. This was Sunbeam, not exactly a member of Prism's little clique, but a friend of the three, and a regular figure at their gatherings, at least. In truth,

she was Heat Lightning's friend more than anyone else's, but Prism certainly didn't mind having an extra mare around, and Hurricane tolerated her – just about.

Prism idly raised a hoof in greeting. “Oh, hey, Sunbeam. Nothing much.”

“Killer storm, we're in for, huh, Sunbeam?” remarked Heat Lightning, motioning at the wall of inclement weather pressing down on the city from the east. Sunbeam seemed entirely unconcerned.

“Yeah, but don't worry! Hurricane and the weather corps will chop it down to size. I bet we'll have clear skies again by sunset!”

Her voice was perpetually chirpy, no matter the situation. Some loved it. It grated on others. Some, like Heat Lightning, just didn't care.

“You really think so? Ain't seen a storm this big for years.”

“Oh, c'mon, Heat! No storm too big for Hurricane, am I right?”

Heat Lightning smiled, confident in her friend.

“I guess you're right. That said, y'all wanna get inside? Even if this storm's a passing thing I don't wanna get rained on.”

Prism chuckled. “Yeah, true that. Come on, I could use another sandwich.”

The trio trotted inside, but before he entered the restaurant, Prism cast one last, uneasy glance at the storm. Why did it feel... *different*, somehow?

Nearly two hundred pegasi were standing, sitting, hovering or circling around a weather corps wing commander as he barked out instructions above the rising gale.

“Alright, team leaders, I want every single pony in your team ready to fly in *ten minutes*! Teams one, two, three, four, five and six, I want you cloud-kicking! You will be Black Squad! You need to be pony-on-the-spot with this – start breaking up those thunderheads, because I'm gonna give you twenty minutes before I send in teams seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven and twelve behind you through the centre of the storm to break it up! Teams seven through twelve, you will be Grey Squad! You got that?!”

Both sets of ponies immediately cried out in chorus.

“SIR, YES SIR!”

“Black Squad, your squad leader will be Blacksky! Blacksky, I want those clouds loose enough a foal could break 'em, you understand me?!”

A mottled black-and-grey pegasus with a short white mane threw a sharp salute.

“Yes sir, I gotcha!”

“Good! Grey Squad! Your squad leader will be Hurricane! Hurricane, don't you let me down, son – five minutes after Black Squad go in, I want to see two small storms instead of one big one, you hear me?!”

Hurricane threw no salute.

“Then that's what you're gonna see... sir.”

The wing commander did not have time to lecture.

“You better! Alright, teams thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen! You are Blue Squad! After Grey Squad go in, Black Squad will take the northern half of the storm and push it down and north, like so! You will go in and take the southern half of the storm down and south, this way! Once the storm halves are clear of the city, you will work on breaking them up, before Grey Squad takes another pass from the north, southwards through both storms – from there, I want you to split these clouds up until there's nothing larger than a paperweight! Bring as much as you can back to the factory, stormclouds recycle down real nice – Blue Squad, your leader will be Sweet Water!”

There were a number of whistles from Blue Squad as a tough, no-nonsense mare threw a salute.

“Sir, yes sir!”

“You all have your orders! Black Squad, I want wings skyward in *five minutes!*”

“SIR, YES SIR!”

The cloud-gongs began ringing throughout the city, but this time it was two long notes. That was the storm warning.

At first, many pegasi didn't even understand what the noise meant. Emergency situations happened so rarely in Cloudsdale that the cloud-gongs were almost never rung. The storm warning rang out again, and some ponies finally started remembering what two long notes actually meant. That was an alarm – a storm was coming! Word started to spread. Mares rushed to bring their foals in from play, and shopkeepers began shutting up shop. Anyone caught outside was now rushing home, or failing that, for any cover available to them. One of the few disadvantages to living this high up was that storms were a lot less forgiving on the few occasions that they rolled over the city.

As the storm warning rang out over the city, the colour began to drain from Black Moon's face, and her shivering returned. The paintbrush in her hoof quivered, leaving a smudged, jagged streak of black across an unfinished section of the painting. A low whimper escaped her throat. Rain Shadow rushed over to her friend, wrapping a wing around her protectively.

“Moon, it's OK. I'll close the windows. Come on, the weather corps will deal with it. There's nothing to worry about.”

Moon's body tensed, going a little rigid. Another shudder of fright ran down her spine as her friend dashed away to fling the shutters closed. All across the city, echoes of other ponies doing the same thing could be heard. If the weather corps didn't deal with this one fast, it'd hit the city, and this looked like a big one. As she returned to her friend, she found, to her dismay, that Black Storm had curled up, covering her face with her wings. She heard a low, almost imperceptible sound coming from inside them. Kneeling down, she found she could just make out what she was saying – a mantra, repeated in a halting voice with a clear note of desperation, over and over and over.

“N-no fear.... no f-fear... no f-fear...”

Rain Shadow lay down beside her friend, holding her close.

“It'll be OK. I promise. I promise it'll be OK, Moon.”

Her friend did nothing but continue the litany.

“No fear... n-no fear... n-no f-fear...”

Hurricane barely made out the wing commander's order over the howling gale.

“GREY SQUAD! GO!”

“YOU HEARD THE PONY!”

Hurricane leapt into the air, powerful wings straining against the oncoming wind as he heard the rest of his squad take to the sky behind him. The storm wasn't truly upon the city yet, but the wind was gale-force already and rising, and the rain beat down, slicking his goggles with a thin, blurry film of water. Black Team had completely disappeared into the massive banks of rain and thin mist surrounding the storm. He hoped Blacksky and his squad had done their job right, or *his* job would get a lot harder.

Something about this storm didn't feel right. Three whole teams hadn't been able to even make a dent in it? He'd never heard of any weather formation, big, small, fast, slow – anything that two teams couldn't handle, much less three. Just how tough could it be?

“ALRIGHT!” he howled over the wind and sweeping sheets of rain.
“CLOSE RANKS!”

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw the whole of Grey Squad forming up in ranks of two, and a little further back, three, trailing in a long line behind him. This would give the whole group the spearhead shockwave they needed to split the storm straight down the middle. Turning

back, he gasps as he ploughed straight into a thin wisp of cloud orbiting the main body of the storm, and slammed through it – but it felt... *off*, somehow more solid than clouds should have been, even for a pegasus. He coughed violently, wobbling a little, but remained steady. His ears popped as he hit a stray pocket of high-pressure air.

Suddenly, the main body of the storm drew into sight, and he spotted a few small dots moving about around its surface. Damn, this thing looked *even bigger* up close! His eyes zeroed in on one of those dots which lay pretty much straight in his flightpath. As he soared ever closer to that sheer wall of cloud, he started being able to make out individual limbs and wings on that dot. Lightning flashed between the storm and a smaller nearby cloud, bathing the scene in a stark, eerie glow.

The pony was waving at him. Why would they be waving at him? Didn't they have a job to do? Howling wind battered at him and the squad as they drew closer to the storm.

Then, as he got within thirty seconds flight of the wall, he saw some of the ponies weren't moving. The dot that was waving at him was Blacksky – and he was waving *frantically*, and yelling something that was lost in the roar of the wind. They hadn't broken the clouds up at all. Something was terribly wrong.

Twenty seconds to the wall. Now he could hear what Blacksky was yelling.

“BREAK OFF!” he was screaming, screaming at the top of his lungs and *flailing* his hooves desperately. “***BREAK OFF!***”

Hurricane's stomach turned to ice. Ten seconds from the wall.

“PULL UP!” he screamed desperately.

“***WHAT?!***” the pegasus behind him yelled back.

“PULL UP! PULL UP, YOU IDIOTS, PULL UP RIGHT NOW! FOR CELESTIA'S SAKE, ***PULL UP!***”

With a convulsive effort, Hurricane pulled a ninety-degree turn, racking about twice as many g's as felt healthy. The cries of fright and surprise from his squad were audible as everyone panicked to follow the pony in front of them and not instead plough straight into the storm. Then he heard it: sick, bone-jarring thuds that sounded less like a pony flying into a cloud, and more like a pony flying into a *cliff*.

Rain slashed down from above, destroying visibility and sluicing the weatherponies with freezing-cold water despite the summer heat. There were cries of pain and confusion almost lost in the screaming wind as pegasi desperately swerved in every direction to avoid colliding with each other. Another flash of lightning lit the sky, close enough that Hurricane

could smell the ozone. Galvanized into action, he whipped around and dived after a concussed, tumbling pegasus. Grabbing him out of the sky, he barked orders to the rest of his squad. His ears popped again as he yelled.

“FIND THE INJURED! GET THEM BACK TO THE CITY! I NEED A RUNNER!”

He handed the wounded pegasus off to another member of the squad, and rounded on Blacksky.

“WHAT THE HAY IS GOING ON?!”

Blacksky screamed back over the growing cyclone.

“CAN'T BREAK THE CLOUDS – CAN'T EVEN DENT THEM! THEY'RE LIKE STONE!”

Blacksky slammed a hoof against the cloud, his hoof bouncing off with a resounding thud. He shook his head.

“CAN'T EVEN MAKE A DAMN DENT!”

Another flash of lightning split the sky barely sixty feet away, sending the whole of team twelve scrambling for cover. Hurricane looked around at the disorder.

“WE'VE GOT TO PULL BACK!”

Blacksky looked absolutely flabbergasted.

“**WHAT?!** NO! WE CAN'T JUST LEAVE THE CITY IN THE LURCH! WE GOTTA WAIT FOR BLUE SQUAD, TRY AND PUSH THIS THING OFF COURSE!”

Lightning sliced through the sky again, missing a member of Grey Squad and the injured pony he was carrying by a scant few feet.

“IF WE STAY HERE, **WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE!** WIND'S GUSTING AT AT LEAST THIRTY-FIVE KNOTS! WE'VE GOT LIGHTNING COMING OUT THE FLANK, ZERO VISIBILITY AND HALF YOUR SQUAD'S DOWN! WE'VE GOT TO PULL BACK WHILE WE STILL HAVE PONIES *LEFT!*”

Hurricane's runner, a younger pegasus stallion, turned up. Hurricane waved him off.

“GET BACK TO THE CITY, TELL THEM TO PREPARE FOR CASUALTIES! STOP BLUE SQUAD LAUNCHING! EVERYONE ELSE, GRAB WHO YOU CAN – WE'RE CUTTING OUR LOSSES, PULLING BACK!”

Blacksky tried to get airborne from his tiny ledge of cloud, but let out a cry of pain as he tried to stretch his wings. He must have injured himself in the first assault on the stormfront. Hurricane let out a sigh. He wasn't in the mood for delays, nor for seeing a friend in trouble. He dived underneath the pony, standing up from beneath him.

“C'MON! NO HORSING AROUND!”

Wings beating steadily, he lifted his colleague into the air on his back and made a beeline for the city.

Thunder crashed around the city, the reverberation rattling tables and spilling drinks in the restaurant. Startled patrons jumped up or yelled in fright, some scattering food accidentally. Heat Lightning let out a yelp. Even Prism's near-unshakeable nerves jangled at the ear-splitting noise. Sunbeam's usual jovial conviction had been replaced with growing concern.

“The weather corps will fix all of this! They wouldn't let anything bad happen to the town... right?”

She let out a shriek as another crack of thunder sent some patrons diving under tables.

Prism's jaw set grimly. “I don't think this is a normal storm.”

Wind and rain battered at the doors and shuttered windows of the restaurant, sluicing the streets outside relentlessly. Mothers held onto their crying, terrified foals tightly. It was a terrible irony: even though they were residents of a city renowned throughout Equestria for creating and controlling them, storms (or, indeed, any inclement weather) were so uncommon in Cloudsdale that some pegasi had never even seen them before.

There was yet another crash of thunder, and this time, a flash of bright light crept around the edges of the shutters. The storm was right on top of them. More thunder came, and a blinding burst of light from around the shutters – along with a crackling noise and a sharp smell of ozone in the air.

“Celestia's bit!” yelled one of the patrons, “That hit right outside!”

“Where the hay is the darn weather corps?!” yelled another.

Frantic shouting and crying began to fill the restaurant as panic set in.

“We're trapped! Trapped in here!”

“We need to get to the ground! Get out of the city!”

“Are you *crazy*?! No pony could make it to the ground alive in this weather!”

“QUIET!”

Sunbeam's voice drowned out the frightened yelling, and silence fell, apart from the driving wind and rain outside. Everypony in the room turned to her. She took a deep breath, and spoke boldly, loud enough to be heard over the wrath of the elements.

“The weather corps are gonna fix all this, and everything is gonna be fine! All we need to do is wait for them to get rid of this storm, and *stay calm*, and everything is gonna be alright. *Everything is gonna be alright*, y’hear me?”

She smiled one of her winning Sunbeam smiles, absolutely and totally confident in the words she’d just spoken to the terrified patrons. Prism let the breath he was holding go, and for one, shining moment, he thought everything *just might* turn out alright, just like she said.

Then lightning struck the restaurant itself, and everything descended into complete chaos. The wall split open, exposing the entire restaurant to the shrieking wind and slicing rain. Ponies scrambled over each other, screaming and hollering, shoving each other out of the way to try and grab any cover from the storm they could find. The younger foals in the restaurant began wailing in fear and running aimlessly, their parents desperately trying to calm them.

Heat Lightning leapt into action, grabbing two terrified, storm-battered fillies, shielding them from the wind with her wings and barging into the kitchen, where the walls were still intact.

“Bring the foals in here! Quickly!”

“N-n-n-no f-fear...”

Wind and rain lashed the outer walls of the apartment, slamming against the battered shutters like a pack of rabid wolves. Flashes of lightning split the sky, three, four, sometimes five times in a minute, bringing deafening peals of thunder that shook the whole city. The entire place was in disarray – books strewn everywhere, furniture overturned, canvases splattered with rainwater, paint dripping from upturned cans.

Rain Shadow held the wailing, violently shuddering form of her best friend as tightly as she could, shielding the petrified mare with both wings. Both of them were repeating the mantra now, clinging to those two simple words like they was the only piece of driftwood in a vast ocean.

“N-n-no fear... no f-fear...”

Night fell on Cloudsdale.

The storm took more than an hour to pass, and when it finally did, the moon’s pale light revealed a ravaged, shell-shocked city, sick, battered and reeling from the tragedy that had befallen it. Cloudspun spires lay torn apart, their very substance dissolved into mist, or smashed into fragments of cloud drifting lazily on the night winds. Entire buildings had been cracked clean open or evaporated by bolts of lightning, and those that survived had

rooftops blown away or walls fractured. Pavement clouds lay ripped open by lancing sheets of rain. Entire streets had been literally torn loose from the rest of the city, keeling wildly to one side as they slowly drifted away. The storm had had no mercy, given no quarter – shops, homes and government buildings alike lay shattered.

In the gutted husk of what used to be the weather factory, what few machines were still working were running non-stop pumping out clouds, desperately needed to patch holes in the roofs of living quarters or the city's two infirmaries.

Far worse than any property damage, however, was the pony cost of the disaster. Dozens of ponies were injured. The weatherponies of the Black and Grey squads had been hit the hardest – broken wings, fractured bones, hypothermia, missing feathers – but other residents of Cloudsdale had suffered greatly as well. Both infirmaries were full to capacity with the injured and their worried relatives.

Almost everypony was some flavour of blank, numb or cold. Cloudsdale had never, in all its history, suffered as terrible a misfortune as this, so no-one knew how to cope with it. The streets were alive with activity, though; perhaps to prevent themselves having to think about it too much, every pony old enough to work was pitching in to help keep the city together. Flocks of pegasi were busy ferrying food and clean water to where it was most needed, and every pony who had even the meanest sliver of skill with cloud shaping was patching holes in buildings.

For once, Prism had put aside his vanity and was helping haul supplies with the other couriers – his speed in delivering them was much appreciated by the city's relief effort. Along with Heat Lightning and Sunbeam, his first priority once the storm had passed had been to find Hurricane to see if he was alright. He had nothing to worry about – the weatherpony was beaten and drenched by flying straight into the storm, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

In fact, Cane was a bit of a hero with the weather corps right now – he had made the hard but necessary decision to back out of the storm, and had carried an injured comrade on his back all the way home. Granted, his standard blunt tactlessness was burning up that admiration pretty fast, but for now, there were murmurs of admiration whenever he arrived on scene to help patch up a house.

Sunbeam was, perhaps, the hardest-hit of the four. Her utter certainty that everything would turn out alright had been shattered, along with so much else in the city that she loved. She went about patching rooftops and walls as best she could, but almost all of her natural bounce was gone. It

felt like she was just running on autopilot. She barely talked, barely looked at anyone, her wings feeling like lead. How could it all have gone so wrong?

Dawn brought some relief for the beleaguered city. As soon as the storm had passed, envoys had departed to all the corners of Equestria, and beyond, calling on favours old and new from Cloudsdale's friends. From the north, a majestic flight of nearly twenty griffons arrived to answer an ancient debt that their kingdom owed the city. They instantly set to work retrieving supplies from the ground far beneath. Although their odd, harsh language, morose nature and imposing features made a few ponies uneasy, none dared question their dedication to their work, or their usefulness. They set about their tasks with a single-minded obsession, bearing loads on their backs it would have taken three ponies to lift. A couple turned out to have some skill with cloud-spinning as well, and helped with the repair efforts when there was no lifting to do.

A detachment of pegasi from Fillydelphia arrived not long after the griffons, bringing bandages and bundles of medical herbs. Towards the afternoon, a small shipment of food was flown in from Bridledale, far to the south-east, with the promise of more to come within a week. Pegasi and supplies from all over Equestria began flooding in, and for just a few short hours, it looked like the tragedy would soon be forgotten and Cloudsdale would rebuild, stronger than ever.

Two blows to the heart of the city came just before sunset, not long after each other.

The first was an envoy from the Princess of the Sun herself, giving news that the storm's wrath had touched other places in Equestria, places less able to cope with the strain, and she could not be present to lend her aid directly. The second, far worse, came from weather corps scouts who had been running surveillance far to the east.

Another storm was coming, even bigger than the last one, and this one was "different". That's all that made it out to street level – whatever the scouts had actually seen was, for some reason, being kept strictly confidential. All that anyone knew was that if the authorities were keeping it under wraps at a time like this, it couldn't be anything good.

As night fell, the town's mayor called a gathering in the city plaza. This wasn't a common occurrence; Cloudsdale usually ran pretty smoothly with little intervention from the city officials, and so large-scale meetings were generally neither necessary nor productive. Gatherings were usually

only called to make large announcements or decide a city-wide course of action.

Hundreds of pegasi flooded the square, crowding every available space on the ground, peering out over balconies and rooftops, with dozens more hovering in the sky above. The entire plaza buzzed with anxious chatter, with ponies of every shape and size discussing the recent catastrophe and the rumours of more to come in hushed tones. There was a palpable sense of dread hanging over the proceedings. Everyone knew something terrible was coming, no-one knew what it was, and no-one seemed to have any idea what to do about it.

A hush fell over the assembly as the mayor stepped forward with a solemn face. There was a tense silence.

"Another storm is coming. A bigger one."

There was a hubbub of panicked questions.

"Another one?!"

"We just barely scraped by with our lives!"

"What are we going to *do*?!"

"... barely survived the last one!"

"... aren't gonna have a *city* by the time this is over!"

The mayor raised his hooves to call for calm, which was a long time coming. He continued once there was enough quiet for his voice to be heard.

"The Princess can't lend her aid. Her envoy says that her attention is needed all over Equestria – apparently we weren't the only place this storm hit, and we might not even have been the place it hit the worst. She has her hooves completely full, and there are places that need her more than we do."

He paused again, trying to mentally prepare himself for what he was about to say.

"Celestia's recommendation was that we evacuate Cloudsdale."

There was a massive uproar of indignation and anger at the mayor's words.

"Leave Cloudsdale?!"

"What, just abandon our homes?!"

"... family gave up everything to move here!"

"Celestia's just *abandoning* us?!"

"Just up and leave? Give up because of one storm?!"

"One weather corps screw-up and we *all* have to suffer?!"

The mayor coughed awkwardly.

“At this point, we don't *have* any other options – another storm is coming, and the scouts say it's even bigger and tougher than the last one! If we stay here, we'll perish!”

There were more outcries from the crowd.

“We're *not* leaving Cloudsdale!”

“We *won't* abandon our homes!”

“Where would we *go*?!”

The mayor began losing his patience.

“We *have no other options*! This storm will strike us in two days, three if we're lucky, and the weather corps hasn't come up with a plan for tackling it!”

A deep, female voice, one obviously unaccustomed to public speaking, suddenly shouted above the noise of the crowd.

“What aren't you *telling* us, mayor?”

All eyes turned to Black Moon, who was now looking somewhat sheepish. Her friend nudged her reassuringly. Haltingly, she continued.

“You think a... a storm that a pegasus can't even *touch* would just *happen*? Just come out of *nowhere*? Well *I've* never seen weather a pegasus couldn't handle before!”

This was, indeed, a valid point. Rumbblings of discontent directed towards the mayor began to make themselves heard. Her spirits buoyed by this, she continued.

“Celestia's the Princess of the Sun. She has magical power and knowledge beyond any lesser pony, but she's not helping us? Clouds that pegasi can't touch? Sounds like a *magical* problem to me, and I don't see any unicorns here.” She let the comment dangle for a moment. “Right?”

There was a conspicuous silence from the conspicuously absent unicorns.

“OK, OK.” sighed Twilight, gritting her teeth a little. “I get the point.” Black Moon smiled sweetly.

Prism was quickly becoming irritated with the mare's smugness. In the tone of voice he reserved for biting put-downs, he responded to the know-it-all artist coldly.

“So what are you saying, then? If you've got an idea, tell us.”

“I need to do a little research first. Might go over your head.”

“Oh yeah, *research* is going to help us. Maybe we can draw a few sketches, write a couple of poems? I didn't see you *helping the city* last night!”

Rain Shadow bristled angrily. “Hey, watch your mouth, flank-face! This matter's a little outside your area of expertise – might need double-figure braincells!”

Heat Lightning shot a death glare at the mouthy pegasus. “You wanna fly up here and say that to his *face*, sister?”

“If he needs you to make his threats for him, I don't think it'd be worth the *effort*!”

The mayor stamped his hooves frustratedly.

“Can we *please* get back to the *topic at hoof*?!”

Black Moon grinned confidently.

“Of course, mayor. Be happy to. But you of all ponies should know you're never going to convince Cloudsdale to evacuate. Even with half the town torn to pieces they won't leave.”

She kicked off the floor and began slowly flying away from the crowd, leaving the town to bicker. Prism sneered disdainfully at her, following behind.

“So what do you intend to do about it?”

“I intend to read every single book I have in my collection until I find out *what* this is, *where* it came from and *how* we stop it.”

Hurricane snorted contemptuously. “So you're just gonna *read* while this town crumbles around us?”

“Why don't you join us?” she invited, with obvious insincerity. “Your rock-solid self-assurance tells me you'll have a *lot* to bring to the table.”

“Oh, you are *on*, you arrogant twerp!” blurted Heat Lightning, without thinking.

“What?!” exclaimed Rain Shadow and Prism, in nearly perfect unison.

Black Moon sighed and rubbed her temples. “*Wonderful*.”