

# The Truthseeker Saga

The Vagabond

Trials of the Elements

The Elements of Equestria

By Truthseeker



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# The Vagabond

## Chapter 1

A lone figure made its way through the Everfree Forrest, stumbling. As its hoof hit another tree-root it overbalanced and fell muzzle-first onto the dirt. For a few moments it didn't move, then agonizingly slowly, it struggled to rise to its feet. The figure shakily struggled up to a standing position, and began plodding along the path again. A brown, blood-stained bandage was wrapped around its middle, and the smell of infection had set in earlier that day. The figure's saddlebags creaked with each tormented step and it shuddered from the cool breeze. It was emaciated, dehydrated, injured, running a fever, and bleeding- out slowly. In short, the figure was dying. It raised its head and saw through blurry vision, a small hut with a light on inside it. The figure let out a shuddering sigh as tears began flowing down its face. It has smelled a pony-like scent. It turned away from Zecora's hut and headed, unknowingly, toward Ponyville.

Its mind slugged thoughts through its lips, "Can't . . . hurt . . . any . . . pony . . . again." It slowly rasped. The tears were thick and had a muddy consistency, due to the level of extreme dehydration, the figure was suffering from. It stumbled from side to side, swaying almost drunkenly down the path. It kept walking for several more minutes, coming close to cresting the hill that would bring Ponyville into view. A loud rush of wind caused the figure to look around. It saw nothing and so its addled mind began creaking to a semblance of life, 'Wonder what day it is? Is my sentence finally finished?' It was the last conscious thought the figure had. It collapsed onto the dirt. Its eyes closed and it lost consciousness.

The sky's color gradually changed from the bright, excited blue of day, to the calmer, more restful, and peaceful deep blue, almost black of evening. The birds lazily flapped back to their nests to roost for the night, the animals all headed back to their dens, warrens, caves, dreys, or holts to

sleep peacefully through the cool night. Princess Luna gradually brought up the Moon and the land of Equestria began to fall into slumber, once again. Twilight and Spike bedded down in their respective mattresses, covered themselves with their respective sheets/blankets, and rather disrespectfully, began a record-breaking snoring competition in the deep, dark, quiet of the Library.

Pinkie Pie had ceased wolfing down sweets about an hour before and was already heading for the inevitable 'sugar crash' she enjoyed every night. She turned off the lights downstairs and staggered up toward her room, eyes blurring, speech slurring, legs wobbling. She reached her bedroom and flipped the light-switch in passing, took two steps and collapsed into her bed, already asleep before any part of her even touched the pillow.

Rarity lay her head back, onto her pillow just so, so as not to mess up her hair, which was thick with curlers. Every curler had to be perfectly in place. She wondered how Applejack or Rainbow Dash could possibly live with themselves. They took absolutely no steps to prepare their looks for the following day, but then again their lives didn't depend on their sales and that those sales didn't depend on good advertising, which was constantly displayed on their own bodies. Rarity had a responsibility, not only to herself, but to Sweetie Belle, her parents, the business, and more than anything else those who constantly doubted her ideas of fashion, style and personal pride.

Rainbow Dash was having a bit of trouble sleeping. No matter how she flattened, smashed, fluffed, rearranged, or mauled the cloud, she just couldn't get comfortable. She sighed heavily and leapt off the cloud. Perhaps a quick run from the outskirts of Ponyville to the end of the Everfree Forrest and back would tire her out enough to sleep. She sped off against the wind, feeling the resistance against her face, and chest as her wings sliced through the air with scalpel-like precision. She tucked her legs against her undercarriage and lowered her head, level, and in-line with the rest of her body, streamlining her like a missile. Just for fun, she spun, wings making a corkscrew pattern in the clouds, simply enjoying the feel of the SPEED.

Applejack was visiting Fluttershy. Wynona had taken sick, and Applejack didn't want to take her to the Vet. Well, more to the point, she

trusted Fluttershy, first of all and second, she didn't have enough money to pay the Vet for his professional, if very expensive skills. The two girls were sleeping in shifts, watching to make sure Wynona didn't take a turn for the worse. They were both tired and the fact that Angel kept pinning attention didn't help matters much. To placate the bunny, Fluttershy had suggested they sleep with him between their hooves, hopefully it would comfort him. Fluttershy loved him but sometimes he could be a bit of a pain, when he wanted something. It was Fluttershy's turn to sleep. She curled up on her couch and Angel hopped up between her hooves and snuggled down for four more hours of fitful sleep.

Back at Sweet Apple Acres, Big Macintosh was dozing silently. Applejack was always amazed that he didn't snore, he was so big, but it just goes to show, you can never tell. Applebloom was sleep-crusading for her cutie mark, tossing and turning constantly, occasionally growling at some fearsome foe that kept her from it.

Rainbow Dash spotted someone on the path to Zecora's, as she sped past,

"Huh," she wondered out loud, "Who the heck would be heading to Zecora's at this time of night? The only ones who even visit her, are my friends and I. Better take a look." She banked and came around. She saw the figure collapsed on the path and immediately landed,

"Hey," she said nudging the other pony with her hoof. Rainbow Dash received no reply,

"Man! Don't tell me I have to carry you too..." she stopped. 'Where is the nearest place?' she wondered silently. The answer came to her almost instantly, 'Duh, Fluttershy's. I hope she can do something.' Dash nosed the unknown pony over her head and, after a few failures, managed a firepony's carry, right between the wings and neck, a rather tight fit. Under the weight, Rainbow Dash had a great deal of trouble taking to the air, but Rainbow Dash being Rainbow Dash, she kept up until she did. She flew toward Fluttershy's cottage as quickly as she could. The wind had picked up, like it was trying to keep Dash from arriving at Fluttershy's. The wind wasn't cool like the evening was, but swelteringly hot and humid. It blew with a whispered chant,

“Monstermonstermonstermonstermonster . . .” on and on it whispered, never letting up until the moment Rainbow Dash’s hooves touched the dirt outside Fluttershy’s cottage. Rainbow was panting hard from her exertion; sweat dripped off her every follicle of hair, mane, and tail. As she raised a hoof to knock on Fluttershy’s cottage door, a bell tolled out the hour, midnight.

Rainbow Dash flinched, involuntarily, as a peal of lightning and thunder shook the very ground. Rainbow Dash was facing Fluttershy’s cottage when the lightning flashed behind her back. For the briefest instant, Dash thought she could see the silhouette of a dead pony’s face in the panes of glass set into Fluttershy’s front door. The face was that of a light red pony girl, roughly the same age as Pinkie Pie, it was horribly deformed, as if some terrible force had bludgeoned it into a mushy pulp. The eyes had burst, leaving only bloody sockets behind, and the mouth looked like it was moving, even though the lower jaw had nearly been ripped off. Rainbow Dash reared back screaming silently at the terrifying sight. Sound seemed, to Dash, to be cut off for an instant, as she stared at the dead pony’s face. She saw the mouth move and distinctly heard a voice. The voice was sweet, warm, and caring; it calmed Dash almost immediately,

“His punishment is at an end. A new day has dawned. When he is ready, tell him I forgive him.” The dead pony said. Rainbow Dash called out to her, soundlessly,

“Wait, who are you?”

“Arabesque.” The face said. As it spoke the name, the face knit itself back together, revealing a startlingly beautiful Pegasus filly with silver-green mane and tail. Rainbow Dash looked as closely as she could as the Pegasus turned sideways; there, on her flank, were a pair of ballet slippers.

The vision of Arabesque shifted into the face of Applejack, “Rainbow? What in tar . . . Oh my word!” Applejack yelled as she spotted the unconscious pony on Rainbow Dash’s shoulders. “Fluttershy! Come quick! Rainbow’s here with somebody, and he’s hurt bad!” Applejack yelled. Turning back to Dash, Applejack said, “Bring him in here, real easy like. I’ll help ya lay im down here on the couch.”

Fluttershy awoke with a start and gently moved Angel off the couch and onto the floor, where he shot her a dirty look then scampered off. Fluttershy cleared off every pillow from her odd, flat couch, to make room for Applejack and Rainbow Dash, who were carrying the limp form of a pony between them. Fluttershy looked the strange pony up and down, while her friends tried to settle him onto the couch without jostling him too much.

The first thing Fluttershy noticed was that he had been brutally attacked. His middle was wrapped in a rough type of bandage that honestly looked more like a blood-soaked blanket, and he was covered, from ear to flank, with great, deep gashes, all of which were smeared with dried blood, not to mention swollen and puffy with the early stages of infection. He was a royal-blue color in his coat and his mane and tail were light brown. He was caked with mud and dried dirt which had mingled with the blood, making a tough mortar-like substance all over him. His only visible possessions were a pair of saddle-bags which had been damaged, but looked sturdy and still serviceable, if only just. His whole body was malnourished and thin, his hooves were swollen, his mane and tail were in a terrible state, but despite all that, Fluttershy could tell, by the look of his face, he was probably no more than 24 years old. Fluttershy had never seen anything in such a poor condition, well, nothing living anyway.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash set him down on the couch, then stepped back to let Fluttershy take a look at him. The yellow Pegasus slid her mane out of the way with a hoof and flattened her ear against the injured pony's chest, listening. His heart still beat, faintly. Fluttershy looked up,  
"Oh dear, his breathing is oh so very shallow..." she began.

Applejack interrupted her,  
"Good enough! Let's get to work. What do we do first Fluttershy?" the orange earth-pony asked.

Fluttershy didn't really have experience dealing with medical matters pertaining to ponies, just animals, but she decided that best way to begin was probably the same for both,  
"Applejack, will you please get some water from the tap and see if he'll drink. Get a straw too."

Fluttershy turned to Dash,



"I need you to please fill a bucket with warm water and put a sponge and cloth in it. As soon as you're done, you need to go get Dr. Mend."

She turned to the injured mess lying on her couch, "I don't think we can safely move him."

"Right." Rainbow said and sped off.

Applejack came back from the kitchen carrying a pitcher and a small glass with a straw in it. She set it down next to the couch, "Now what?" she asked.

Fluttershy filled the glass with water and held it up to the pony's lips, "Would you hold his head for me Applejack? I don't want him to choke." She said.

Applejack placed her hooves on his head and put firm pressure on him to keep him still. Fluttershy put the straw to his lips to see if he would drink on his own. He didn't respond. Fluttershy turned to Applejack, "Would you please put your chest next to his ear so he can hear your heart beat." She said.

Applejack arched an eyebrow, but complied. Fluttershy waited for a moment before she peeled back his lips and slipped the straw up against his tongue. He twitched, but began drinking.

Applejack made as if to get up, but Fluttershy caught her, "Oh please don't move. I have to keep the cup full." She said refilling the cup with a continuous, slow stream of water.

"Why in the world am ah here, with mah chest against some strange pony's ear?" she asked.

Fluttershy gently shushed her, "Oh Applejack, please keep your voice down for now. The reason you're doing that is so he can hear a heartbeat. The first memory any baby has is of nursing while hearing its mother's heartbeat. It's deeply ingrained."

"So basically we're tricking him into thinking Ah'm his mother and he's nursing from me!?" Applejack asked aghast.

Fluttershy nodded,  
“Yes, that’s the idea.” She said innocently.

Rainbow Dash flew back into the room and paused, staring at Applejack. She slowly put down the bucket, sponge, and cloth, then bolted out the front door, closing it behind her. Applejack raised her head, “Did she REALLY just leave us here to take care of...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt you Applejack, but I asked her to get Dr. Mend.” Fluttershy said.

“Well that’s a mighty fine notion Fluttershy, but whose going to pay for that?” she asked.

“I will if I have to. Look at him Applejack. Don’t you feel bad for him?” Fluttershy said.

“Course ah do, but I ain’t got hardly no money and Dr. Mend ain’t free.” Applejack said.

“I don’t care!” Fluttershy said with conviction. She lowered her head, “I’m sorry Applejack, I didn’t mean to yell.”

“That was barely more than a whisper, Fluttershy. Don’t you worry bout it none.” Applejack looked at the blue pony’s face, “Looks like he’s done. What now?”

“We should try to clean him off, but don’t touch the bandage, he’s still bleeding. If we take it off, he might bleed to death.” Fluttershy said dipping the sponge into the warm water, with her mouth.

Applejack picked up the cloth and joined Fluttershy in cleaning him off,

“We can’t clean up all o’ him by the time Rainbow get’s back with Dr. Mend.”

“Then we need to focus on the parts that sustained the worst injuries; his chest mostly, I think.”

He was positively filthy. Applejack refilled the bucket twice before Rainbow Dash brought Dr. Mend. The two arrived and entered without knocking. Dr. Mend was an older stallion. He was pitch-black in coat, with an ice-white mane, and steel-gray eyes, and he carried a large and heavy black bag.

He came in at a trot and set the bag on the floor next to the couch, "Good grief!" he exclaimed, unzipping the bag, "Take this iodine, go to the sink, and scrub hard. Scrub every nook and cranny, get every particle of dirt, and hurry it up. Go!" he said.

The girls took the bottle and headed for the kitchen. They scrubbed furiously while Dr. Mend used a straight razor and shaved a patch of hair from his patient's left foreleg. He assembled an I.V. bag of saline and hung it above his patient, then inserted the needle. Dr. Mend removed several different tools and set them out for easy reach.

When the girls returned, he had them all take places around him to help,  
"Rainbow Dash, you'll help me cut away and clean the bandage and wounds. Take these scissors, alcohol, and cotton swabs."

He then turned to Applejack,  
"Stand right here and pass me tool as I need them; I'll use simple terms so I won't confuse you with medical jargon."

Finally he focused on Fluttershy,  
"I need you to stand just to my left and use these gauze pads to apply pressure and stop bleeding where you see it."

He then addressed all three of them  
"If any pony sees him bleeding too much from one place that I may have overlooked, let me know. Let's begin."

Dr. Mend decided to tackle the big wrap-bandage first,  
"Dash, cut the . . . blanket above and below where the blood is seeping through." Dr. Mend indicated.

Dash cut away the blanket bandage and Dr. Mend carefully pulled it off the patient,

“Fluttershy, apply pressure here.” he indicated the bleeding lump.

Dr. Mend paused and stared puzzled at the injury now in front of him, “Looks like a bone is protruding.” he said then checked the ribs, “Badly bruised but nothing broken, and the spine is intact . . .” he mumbled, thinking.

Suddenly his eyes bulged,  
“Luna and Celestia!” he breathed, “Applejack pass me the bone-saw.” he said.

Applejack handed over the frightening implement. She shot Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash a concerned look, and then had to perform a double-take. There were tears glistening in Dash’s eyes. Dr. Mend carefully sawed off the jagged bone tip, down to a smooth bump, and then stitched the surrounding flesh back together.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took five bags of saline, 283 stitches, and many hours of work on each side of the wounded pony, but finally Dr. Mend finished, “You can relax now.” he said lowering his fore-hooves down to the ground finally, “Well done every pony. Sit down and try to relax.” he said to Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash.

He turned to Applejack,  
“Make sure they sit down and don’t let them do anything, except sit. I’ll be right back.” he said hurriedly.

Applejack was puzzled. She turned to her two friends,  
“Come on yall, take a load off.” she said sitting down on the floor.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy didn’t move; they simply stood and stared at the now stitched and cared-for pony, oblivious to everything around them. Applejack stood up and carefully eased her two friends away from their ‘guest’ and sat them down. Even sitting, they continued to stare at him.

Applejack became frustrated,  
“What is wrong with yall?” she asked loudly.

“They are in shock. Fluttershy held out better than I would have hoped.” Dr. Mend said sitting down and checking Fluttershy over.

Applejack was still confused,  
“Why are they in shock doc?” she asked.

Dr. Mend lowered his head sadly,  
“That poor pony is a Pegasus.” He said.

Applejack didn’t get it,  
“What? No he ain’t! He ain’t got no . . .” she trailed off as it hit her.

She suddenly realized why Fluttershy and Dash were in shock,  
“Those bones,” she whispered, “They’re wing stubs.”

Dr. Mend nodded silently.

# Chapter 2

For nearly an hour no one spoke. Dr. Mend served the three girls some tea, but they didn't seem to notice. Rainbow Dash was the first one to recover, "What could have done that to him?" she asked no one in particular.

"I would chalk it up to an animal attack, a cougar, perhaps, or maybe a bear." Dr. Mend speculated.

"When will he wake up?" Dash asked.

"He may not. He is, by far, the toughest pony I've ever seen, but he suffered massive physical trauma, and by that, psychological trauma as well. Honestly, it might be a mercy if he just slipped away and never woke up. Loosing something like that can absolutely destroy you. But, as I said, he's tough, so maybe he will recover." Dr. Mend said standing up.

Fluttershy came back to the world as well, "The poor, poor guy." She muttered.

Dr. Mend nodded, packing his bag, "Well, one way or another, you three have been up all night. Get some sleep. I'll leave some pain medicine and care instructions here, on the table by your door Fluttershy. I'll come by tonight if I can. Good day girls." Dr. Mend said closing the door behind him.

The girls fell asleep right where they sat, on the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

All three girls were awakened by Wynona barking loudly at the front door. Applejack raised her head sleepily, "Quiet Wynona." She commanded, then it hit her, "Wynona! You're alright." She yelled, standing up.

The energetic collie kept barking at the door. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were beginning to stir, as Applejack headed to the door to see what had Wynona in such an uproar. She opened the door and there was Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Twilight standing in front of the door expectantly. Applejack stepped back, holding the door for her friends, "Mornin' every pony." She said.

"Don't you mean, good afternoon, Applejack?" Twilight asked dryly.

Every one's attention was diverted when Rarity shrieked, "Fluttershy darling! You have a dead body on your sofa!"

The statement stopped everyone, except Pinkie Pie. Pinkie hopped over to the wingless Pegasus and began playfully poking any spot that remained un-bandaged, "He's not dead, silly, he's still warm. Look he's even waking up."

The pony stallion coughed roughly. His eyes slowly cracked partway open, "Where am I?" he asked. His voice was rough but quiet.

Twilight stepped up to him, "You're in Equestria, in a cottage outside Ponnyville to be exact." She said.

"So, I'm alive?" he chuckled darkly, "The pain hinted at that." he paused then looked around. His expression changed from sleepy to sober, "I apologize for being a burden. I'll leave as soon as I am able." he said.

Fluttershy, being the perfect hostess, flew over to him, "Oh, that's quite alright, you can stay as long as you want." she said.

The pony stallion shook his head, "No, actually I can't." he said.

Applejack shared a concerned look with Twilight, then turned to the wingless Pegasus, "You won't be goin' anywhere for quite a while; a couple o days at least." she said.

Rainbow Dash threw in her two cents,  
“Yeah, you can, like, barely move. You were nearly dead when I found you last night.” she said, then a thought struck her,  
“Hey, what’s your name?” she asked.

The pony stallion settled his face and spoke in a neutral tone,  
“For the last five years, I’ve been called Vagabond.” he said softly, then added, “I wish you hadn’t found me last night.”

Twilight adopted a look of dire concern, but she quickly smoothed it over, fortunately none of her friends seemed to notice. Fluttershy cocked her head to the side inquisitively,  
“What do you mean, Vagabond?” she asked meekly.

Vagabond turned his amethyst-colored eyes to Fluttershy. The yellow Pegasus gasped, the sorrow she saw in those eyes was nigh on unfathomable.

“I should be dead.” he said softly, “I deserve to die.”

Applejack ground her teeth slightly,  
“Well, what in tarnation did ya do? Furthermore, what’s with the pity party thing?” she asked.

Vagabond’s eyes flashed in the afternoon light. He began to laugh mirthlessly. It was the most lifeless and cold thing any of the six friends had ever heard. It wasn’t full of energetic malignancy like Nightmare Moon’s laugh was; this laugh was utterly hollow, devoid of life, feeling, or any emotion,  
“Ask me again, once you’ve killed someone.”

He continued quickly once he saw the looks on the other pony’s faces,  
“Now, don’t misunderstand me,” he laughed even harder. The laughter was becoming more full-bodied, “I’m not a murderer, but the blame is solely on my head.” He continued to laugh, except now the lifeless thing seemed to become bitter as well,  
“I don’t pity myself, and I don’t want it from any of you.”



As suddenly as it began, the laughter stopped dead. Silence filled the air for a moment before Vagabond continued, "It is my punishment." he whispered, "I'm sorry for being a burden." He said laying down his head, seemingly exhausted from the laugh. He closed his eyes, feigning sleep.

The girls were silent for a long while. Minutes ticked by as the words began to sink in.

Finally Twilight turned to Rainbow Dash, "Dash, I need you to come with me to the library. Tell me everything you experienced last night, and don't leave anything out." Twilight and Rainbow Dash headed for the library.

Rarity looked utterly disgusted, "Imagine! A killer among the good ponies of Ponyville! He should be banished immediately." She said haughtily. A tiny motion caught her eye. She whipped her head around and saw Vagabond's ear twitch, "I must return to my shop." she finished heading out the door, '**He heard me and said nothing.**' she thought to herself.

Applejack watched her go. She could only roll her eyes and shake her head, "Wynona and Ah have chores back on the farm, thanks again Fluttershy. If e happens to wake up again, stay out o 'is reach, take to the air." Applejack stopped at the door, a deadly serious look on her honest face, "Know what, Ahm going to send over Big Macintosh. He'll keep Vagabond in line." She said.

"Oh, that's alright Applejack, I'm sure I'll be fine." Fluttershy said softly.

Applejack was decidedly NOT convinced, "Ah ain't playin' Fluttershy. This here's a big deal. Even if ya don't need Big Mac, to protect ya, Vagabond'll need help relieving himself. That ain't a proper thing for any girl to be doin'. Would ya agree?" Applejack asked.

Fluttershy blushed at the mental picture, "I hadn't thought of that. Alright, thank you Applejack." Fluttershy said.

Applejack and Wynona left, leaving Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie alone with Vagabond. Pinkie Pie trotted up to Vagabond and cocked her head to the side, studying him,  
“I know you’re awake, you know.” She said.

Fluttershy gasped and turned quickly as Vagabond raised his head. His eyes snapped open and watched Pinkie Pie like a predator,  
“You’re a very observant girl.” he said quietly, “What’s your name?” he asked.

Pinkie smiled hugely and closed her eyes, bouncing lightly on her hooves,  
“I’m Pinkie Pie, What’s your name?” she asked.

Fluttershy spoke up,  
“He already told us, his name is Vagabond.” She said. Angel bunny hopped up on top of Fluttershy’s head crossed his paws and starred down at Vagabond menacingly, almost as if saying ‘***Don’t even think about it, bub.***’

Pinkie shook her head,  
“Nu-uh. He only told us what he’s been called for the past five years, he never said it was his real name.” she said. Fluttershy blinked, Pinkie Pie was right.

“Unfortunately, I must disappoint you Miss Pie. I cannot tell any pony my name, or answer to it, until my punishment is at an end. I’m sorry.” Vagabond said.

Pinkie Pie, never daunted asked,  
“When will that be?”

Vagabond shifted slightly, possibly in an attempt to shrug,  
“Until the pony, whose death I’m responsible for, tells me from beyond the grave, that I am forgiven. Until that time, I am supposed to stay away from any pony I might hurt. That is why I have to leave as soon as I am able.” He explained.

Pinkie just bounced in place vacantly,  
“How did you lose your wings?” she asked bluntly.

Fluttershy looked absolutely stricken. She put a hoof to her muzzle, “Oh, Pinkie Pie, you shouldn’t ask such things.” Fluttershy said. She then turned to Vagabond and added, “I’m oh so very sorry Vagabond. You don’t have to answer that. It’s probably horribly painful to remember.” She said apologetically.

Vagabond actually seemed to brighten slightly. His eyes were still narrow and unfriendly but not quite so dark, “That is one of the few truly appropriate events I’ve experienced in the last several years.” he said.

Pinkie Pie plopped down in front of him to listen, so Vagabond began, “It happened two days ago. It was early morning and I was walking through that forest where your rainbow-manned friend found me. I came upon a bear that had its back legs trapped beneath a rock-slide. It must have been there for some time, several days at least, and it was hungry and thirsty. I don’t much like bears, they’re dangerous, but I had to do something. I know what it’s like to be responsible for a death; it tears a part of you away, knowing what you’ve done. If I didn’t help the bear I would be responsible for its death. I took out my canteen and poured the water into a bowl that I had, and pushed it toward the bear. The bear lapped up the water, but I had to get its legs free. I maneuvered a fallen branch beneath one of the larger rocks and levered it away. I had to repeat the process to probably a dozen more rocks, but apparently the bear was just too weak to pull its legs free. I had to help it pull its legs free, but I also knew it would attack me if I got close, so I tried to use the branch, but couldn’t wedge it between the rocks and the bear’s legs. I had to do it myself. I know herbs well, so I found some Tartolette mushrooms and mixed those with Merchia flowers I had...”

“But that would make you numb!” Fluttershy interrupted, “Oh I’m sorry Vagabond. I didn’t mean to interrupt you, but why would you do that? It’s dangerous. Any herbalist knows not to use that combination unless you’re in dire need. It will erase all feeling and make your mind addled.”

“You are correct, but that was the effect I wanted. I mixed the mushrooms and flowers with what little water I had left in my canteen, which made about a quart of the potion. I drank it all. It worked well, I couldn’t feel a thing, which I would need when the bear attacked me. I had to be close to

pull its legs out, and I couldn't blame an animal for behaving like an animal. I moved as quickly as I could. I ran in and felt the thumps as the bear attacked me. I just ignored it and concentrated on my work and pulled its leg free, then I ran to its other side and pulled that leg free as well. I tried to take to the sky as soon as I was done, but when I tried to fly, I didn't move. I panicked and ran from the, now free, bear. I looked back over my shoulder to see if the bear was giving chase. My eyes fell upon the bear feasting on my wings. It must have torn them off when I exposed each side of my body to the bear when I pulled its legs free. I stopped and wrapped my blanket around myself before I regained any feeling. I couldn't find a stream or river and my canteen was empty, but I kept walking." Vagabond paused and looked back over his flank, "I am curious. Why did you not remove my saddle bags?" he asked.

Fluttershy looked chagrined,  
"Oh, I'm sorry Vagabond, but Dr. Mend felt around under them and said there were no injuries. Besides we know the normal way of carrying saddlebags. The way you are wearing them is concealing your cutie mark. We didn't want to be rude, if you didn't want anyone to see it, travelers do that sometimes." She said.

Vagabond looked slightly more at ease,  
"Thank you." he said. Turning back to Pinkie Pie, Vagabond continued,  
"Any way, I would have made a poultice for myself, but I couldn't find water or the materials. I was still numb and my head still didn't work right. I just kept walking like a zombie, until your friend found me. Does that make any sense Miss Pie?" Vagabond asked.

Pinkie looked thoughtful for a moment then perked up,  
"I think so." she said, then commented, "At least the bear got to eat."

Fluttershy squeaked in horror,  
"Oh, Pinkie Pie, what a terrible thing to say." Fluttershy scolded.

Vagabond's face was completely impassive for several tense moments.

Slowly a grin split his face and he began to chuckle,  
"That is the funniest thing I've heard in a long time." he said. The chuckles turned into a full-bodied laugh. This laugh though, was rich and full, a thing

which had a flicker of actual life to it. Vagabond winced in pain, but didn't stop,  
"Miss Pie, . . . you have . . . an amazing . . . gift." he said through fits of laughter, when he could get a breath.

Pinkie only smiled and said,  
"Yeah, I get that. You can call me Pinkie by the way. All that 'Miss Pie' stuff was making me feel old." she giggled.

A heavy knock reverberated throughout Fluttershy's house, originating from the front door. Pinkie Pie literally bounced up from a sitting position up to her hooves and from there to the door in two simple motions. Fluttershy rose and trotted into the kitchen, disappearing through the doorway. Pinkie opened the door,  
"Hi Big Macintosh!" she said, stepping aside to let him in.

Vagabond had never seen such a large pony. Big Mac looked more like one of the legendary Clydesdales. Big Mac clopped over to the couch and looked Vagabond up and down appraisingly. Vagabond couldn't help himself,  
"You're huge." he said looking up.

The enormous earth pony chewed a piece of wheat and simply replied,  
"Ayup, and you're injured. Mah sister sent me over here to help ya out, and keep an eye on ya." Big Mac said.

Vagabond nodded,  
"She probably thinks I'll try to hurt Fluttershy."

"Ayup. Any idea why she'd think that?" Big Mac asked.

Pinkie Pie bounced up beside Big Mac waving a hoof,  
"Oh, oh, I know!" she said.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow so Pinkie continued,  
"Vagabond-here-though-that-isn't-his-real-name-and-he-can't-use-his-real-name-until-he's-forgiven-he-hates-himself-for-something-he-did-and-he's-afraid-he'll-accidentally-hurt-someone-again-so-he-laughed-real-evil-and-gave-this-big-scary-speech-about-it-he-acts-like-he's-all-like-tough-and-

stuff-but-I-think-he's-actually-nice-does-that-make-sense-to-you-Big-Mac?"  
Pinkie machine-gunned off without a breath.

Big Mac looked thoughtfully at Vagabond, for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision,  
"Ayup." He said. Pinkie Pie burst into a fit of the giggles.

Vagabond's eyes had gone cross while Pinkie had been chattering, he shook his head and uncrossed his eyes,  
"I hate to impose, but I need to use the bathroom. Would you help me get there?" Vagabond asked, obviously embarrassed.

Big Mac simply said,  
"Ayup."

# Chapter 3

Pinkie Pie trotted into the kitchen where Fluttershy was busy chopping up some fruit,  
“Hi Fluttershy! Whatcha doing?” Pinkie asked.

Fluttershy jumped several inches into the air but managed not to drop the knife,  
“Oh Pinkie, you shouldn’t sneak up on anypony like that.” Fluttershy said setting down the knife, “I know that Vagabond will have to be here for a while; and if he is, then Big Mac will be too, so that will be three ponies I have to feed for a while.” Fluttershy paused to take a breath, “So . . . I thought I should get a head start on the food. Um . . . Pinkie Pie, would you be . . . willing to help me . . . if you don’t mind that is.” Fluttershy asked.

“Sure thing!” Pinkie Pie said bouncing just like always.

Fluttershy passed Pinkie a knife, a bowl, and a pile of fruit. The two friends began cutting, slicing, and chopping every piece of fruit they could get their hooves on.

Big Macintosh carried Vagabond back into Fluttershy’s front room, and set him down gently on the couch. Vagabond was in immense pain. Pain however, was an old friend to him so he tried to just endure it.

Vagabond looked up at the massive red pony,  
“I heard Pinkie call you Big Macintosh. Is that what you like being called or is there something shorter?”

“Big Mac’s fine with me.” he said.

Vagabond nodded,  
“Big Mac it is then.”

“And you’re called Vagabond?” Big Macintosh asked.

"That I am." Vagabond answered uncertainly.

"Do Ah have to worry about ya hurtin' anypony here?" Big Mac asked.

"No." Vagabond said simply.

Big Macintosh looked sternly at the injured blue, former pegasus, "Good. You behave yourself and we'll get along just fine."

Someone was knocking on Flutterhy's door yet again. Big Mac casually walked over and opened the door. Dr. Mend nodded to the massively-built stallion, "Good afternoon, Big Macintosh. Is Fluttershy in? I was hoping I could check up on the patient. He could probably use another dose of pain killers." Dr. Mend said. Big Macintosh stepped aside and let Dr. Mend in.

The Doctor then noticed Vagabond staring at him, "You're awake!?" he asked eyes wide.

"That I am sir." Vagabond responded.

"Don't call me sir. You may address me as Dr. Mend." he said putting his bag down next to the couch, "How do you feel?" Dr. Mend asked shining a light into Vagabond's eyes.

"Lame, very hungry, and in quite a lot of pain." Vagabond responded.

Dr. Mend's eyebrows arched in surprise, "Didn't the girls give you the medicine I left?"

"I have no idea. I haven't had anything since I awoke." Vagabond said almost too evenly.

"I'll give you something after you've eaten." Dr. Mend said, then noticed something odd, "You're sweating. How bad is the pain?"

"Probably close to the worst I've ever felt, physically." Vagabond let himself grunt the words, since Dr. Mend had noticed the perspiration.



“And yet, you are calm?” Dr. Mend asked puzzled.

“I’m used to it, to a point.” Vagabond said.

Dr. Mend was about to ask what Vagabond meant when Pinkie Pie walked in carrying a big bowl of fruit salad on her back, “Hi Dr. Mend!” she greeted in passing.

The older stallion, normally very taciturn, smiled warmly at the pink pony,  
“Oh, hello Pinkie Pie. I didn’t know you were here.”

“Yeah,” she said setting down the bowl on the Front Room table, “I’m helping take care of Vagabond here.” she said heading back into the kitchen.

Dr. Mend smiled at the work pony,  
“Thank you for letting me in Big Macintosh. Would you be so kind as to tell Fluttershy I am in?”

“Ayup.” Big Mac said turning toward the kitchen.

As soon as Big Mac departed Dr. Mend turned and faced Vagabond. Dr. Mend’s face was a thunderhead,  
“You are called Vagabond?” he asked seriously.

Vagabond nodded,  
“I am.”

Dr. Mend narrowed his eyes dangerously,  
“That title is only placed upon those suffering prolonged punishment for the most serious crimes. I’m not legally allowed to ask for specifics, but what was the crime?”

Vagabond clenched his jaw and closed his eyes,  
“Involuntary Unlawful-Act Ponyslaughter.” he said crisply.

“Alright, let me tell you something.” Dr. Mend said getting in Vagabond’s face with gritted teeth, “The filly who has taken you in, is the sweetest pony I’ve ever known and the rest of her friends are close up there. If you so

much as say a harsh WORD to any of them, I'll make sure you receive an injury that will NEVER heal."

Dr. Mend took a deep breath and sat back, his smile was seemingly warm, but there was a diamond edge to his stare, "It's nothing personal, but I won't let anyone hurt a single pony here, especially these fillies. Do we have an understanding . . . Vagabond?" he asked coldly, placing extra emphasis on the last word.

Vagabond's expression went completely blank, all life pulled out of it, "I've NEVER intentionally hurt anypony and I DO NOT plan to start now." he hissed angrily.

"Well that's good!" Pinkie Pie said shoving a large bowl of fruit salad in front of Vagabond's muzzle.

Dr. Mend looked up startled and quickly smoothed over his expression,  
"I didn't see you there, Pinkie Pie."

"Well duh! I mean it's rude to butt in on a conversation, so I just watched until you two looked like you were done." Pinkie said trotting back into the kitchen, "Are you staying for lunch Dr. Mend?" she called.

"Thank you, no." Dr. Mend called back to her. He then stood up slowly and whispered to Vagabond,  
"Remember what I said." Dr. Mend turned to leave and reached for the door. Big Mac held it open for him.

"Oh!" Dr. Mend said surprised, "I didn't hear you return Big Macintosh."

Something on the table by the door caught Dr. Mend's eye and he snatched it away into his black bag, "Thank you. I'll be by tomorrow to change his bandage. Good afternoon." Dr. Mend said and departed.

Big Macintosh closed the door. Vagabond silently noticed Dr. Mend never gave him the pain medication. He gritted his teeth for a brief moment before trying to calm himself down. He shifted slightly and the bandage rubbed against his wing stumps. The pain was intense. Vagabond's eyes watered, the rubbing felt like a cheese grater against his already tender

skin, '**Endure it.**' he concentrated, '**You deserve every second of it.**' his mind began to drift. The pain was bringing with it, a numbing haze. Vagabond's mind recalled the time when others said similar words to him, '**Criminal! Monster! Killer! Suffer! SUFFER AND DIE! DIE SLOWLY AND ALONE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!**' the chant played over and over again; the last moments in his town as he stood before them begging for forgiveness and proclaiming his sorrow for his actions. Vagabond threw up his well-built and well-used emotional wall and steeled his will, '**STOP THAT! Your PATHETIC tears helped nothing then and they'll help nothing now!**' he scolded himself silently, through tightly closed eyes and gritted teeth, '**Suck it up you worthless monster! Show these kind ponies how grateful you are!**' his mind began to slow as the pain receded, '**They are the first to show you any compassion since you killed Arabesque. Don't you DARE throw that in their faces. They have given you more than you deserve and you know it! The care they're giving you should be going to some pony who deserves it, but they chose to help you.**' Vagabond finally focused his thoughts enough to open his eyes.

The bowl of fruit salad on the table smelled heavenly, and the pain had receded somewhat. His mouth began to water, but he noticed that Big Mac had laid down on the floor and was starring at him, "What? Have I done something wrong?" Vagabond asked.

"Not that Ah've seen." Big Mac said simply.

Vagabond was puzzled. It was an odd statement, surprisingly complex for its brevity. Vagabond pondered all the possible connotations and finally settled on an assumption which seemed likely, '**What he means is that he hasn't seen me do anything wrong. I think he's also saying that he is only going to judge me on what he actually sees me do. The whole 'who you are, not who you were' thing.**'

"Big Mac?" Vagabond asked.

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow in response, so Vagabond continued, "T-thank you." Vagabond said stuttering, "Truly. Thank you."

"Ayup."

\* \* \* \* \*

Twilight was getting frustrated,  
“What are you not telling me Rainbow Dash?” she asked.

Rainbow Dash couldn't look her friend in the eye,  
“I'm not leaving anything out!” she said exasperated, “I told you everything  
that happened with Vagabond. What kind of name is that anyway?”  
Rainbow Dash asked changing the subject.

Twilight began to pace as she explained,  
“It's not a name per se, it's a title.”

“A title? You mean he's famous?” Dash asked.

Twilight shook her head,  
“More like infamous. The title ‘Vagabond’ is only placed on somepony who  
committed a serious crime. It doesn't happen often, generally it's only  
bestowed when a death is involved. Vagabond means ‘wanderer’ or more  
specifically ‘one who is without a home’. A pony is named Vagabond then  
exiled from their home and travels continuously, doing everything in their  
power to atone for the crime. Most ponies who commit such a crime, do so  
intentionally and don't much care, until they realize that the spirit of their  
victim is tied to them. The spirit of the victim judges and torments the  
Vagabond constantly until the spirit forgives the one who caused their  
death.”

“When is that normally?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Twilight shuddered slightly,  
“Usually when the Vagabond dies, which tends to happen within a week or  
two. Which is why the Vagabond you found puzzles me. He's been a  
Vagabond for five years, that's really unusual.”

“Why haven't I heard about this before?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“It doesn’t come up often because most ponies die of natural causes. Besides who wants to talk about death and misery when there’s so much life to live?” Twilight said.

“Have any Vagabonds ever been forgiven and lived?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Twilight nodded sagely,  
“Yes, there aer four historically. In every case, once the Vagabond was forgiven, they went on to live out their lives normally. Also in every case, the spirit of the victim tasked a different pony to tell the Vagabond he or she was forgiven. I thought maybe the spirit told you, but it looks like the Vagabond isn’t done with his punishment.”

“Can you tell me anything else about the ponies who had to tell the Vagabonds they were forgiven?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Twilight Sparkle looked askance at her friend,  
“Did you decide to change your story?” she asked.

Rainbow Dash made a rude noise,  
“Psh, no! I’m just curious.

“I’ll have to look it up. I’ll let you know if I find anything.” Twilight said, ‘***Even though I KNOW you’re not telling me everything.***’ she thought.

“Thanks Twilight, I have to go. See you later though.” Dash said flying out the window.

Twilight began her research immediately. Spike was out visiting Rarity again. Twilight decided not to rush him. She needed him to send a message to Princess Celestia , but that could wait, there were books to read.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rarity was feeling very out of sorts, ‘***I never say things like that. Not only is it unladylike but it’s presumptuous and mean. He WAS responsible for a pony’s death but he didn’t seem . . . NO! I simply CANNOT make a judgement call, I don’t know all the details.***

***Remember Rarity, to assume, makes an ass out of you and me.*** she thought quietly to herself as she worked.

Rarity blinked in surprise,  
“That was MOST unladylike.” she said out loud.

“All you did was pin up that hem Rarity.” Spike said.

He stood stock-still, modeling a small tuxedo for the skillful and perfectly groomed pony. Rarity hadn’t realized she had spoken out loud. She put down the pins,  
“I’m sorry Spike. I suppose I’m simply too distracted to work right now. Thank you for modeling for me though.” she said replacing the pin cushion.

Spike began carefully removing the tux,  
“Do you wanna talk about it? Maybe I can help.” Spike offered.

“I shall try. Thank you Spike.” Rarity said taking a couple of deep breaths, “I may have said some rather hurtful things earlier today.”

“That’s easy.” Spike said waving a claw, “Just apologize to the pony you said those things to. I’m sure if they see that you really mean it they’ll forgive you. Anyone who knows you, knows you’re not mean, besides I’m sure you couldn’t have said anything **THAT** hurtful.” Spike said honestly.

Rarity cringed,  
“It was really mean darling.”

“If it really WAS so bad, Rarity, you should give them something.” Spike suggested.

“Spike! I would NEVER try to bribe anypony. The very notion of it is just simply ghastly and ever so tacky.” Rarity said, hurt that Spike would even think of it, ***‘I’ll admit, I do have my shallow moments but I wouldn’t dream of stooping so low. It would be an insult to anyone with even a shred of decent character and I would be debasing myself too.’*** she thought furiously.

“I didn’t mean a bribe. Bribes are shallow. Give them something meaningful, like you put some thought and effort into it.” Spike suggested.

“But how? I don’t even know this pony?” Rarity admitted.

“Then get to know them. All seems pretty simple to me.” Spike said partly under his breath.

Rarity gave the idea earnest thought,  
“You know Spike you’re right! I’m going to march over there right now and get to know him.” Rarity said with genuine conviction.

Spike wilted inwardly, ***‘Him? Aw man. Just when I thought we had a connection.’***

“Would you like to come with me darling?” Rarity asked Spike heading for the door.

Spike hid his emotions so Rarity wouldn’t feel bad,  
“No thanks, I need to get back to the library. Twilight’s probably throwing a fit.” Spike said following Rarity out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rainbow Dash was having problems of her own. She had returned to her cloud-house and was trying, and failing to take a nap. The vision of the dead pony, Arabesque, kept playing over and over in her head. Rainbow Dash grunted in frustration.

“What the hey did she mean, ‘When the time is right?’ When is the right time to tell someone something like that?” Rainbow Dash corrected herself, “No, she said, ‘When he is ready’ How am I suppose to know when he’s ready?” she yelled, “Arg! This is so frustrating!” Rainbow Dash rubbed her head with her hooves and thought out loud, “I shouldn’t have kept Arabesque a secret from Twilight. She’ll help me, she’s great with weird cryptic stuff like this.” Rainbow Dash swallowed her reservations and decided to bite the proverbial bullet. She went back to tell Twilight.

# Chapter 4

“Wow! He might be able to out eat me!” Pinkie Pie said.

Vagabond had devoured three bowls of fruit salad ravenously and was working on a fourth with equal gusto.

Pinkie Pie leaned over and whispered into Big Mac’s ear, “It’s a good thing I’m a baker or else he would eat Fluttershy out of house and home.”

Big Macintosh grinned slightly, “Ayup.”

Vagabond’s ear’s had picked up on the exchange but he carefully hid his reaction. He cringed inside, *‘I’m so hungry.’* he thought, ***‘But I absolutely will not abuse anyponie’s kindness.’*** Vagabond raised his head, maybe a little too quickly, “I’m finished. Thank you Fluttershy.” In truth he was still ravenously hungry, but he refused to misuse Fluttershy’s hospitality, hungry or no.

Vagabond felt bad, “I need to find some way to repay you for everything Fluttershy. Let me see if I have anything in my saddlebags.” he said.

Vagabond knew it would hurt terribly to reach so far, but he was willing to endure it.

“Oh, that’s quite alright Vagabond. You don’t have to give me anything. I’m just glad I could help.” Fluttershy said meekly.

Vagabond couldn’t help but to stare at his hostess, “You’re so kind. I feel I need to do something for you, anything.”

“Just get better. That’s all I want.” Fluttershy said earnestly.



Vagabond was deeply touched. He vowed that if there was anything he could do for Fluttershy, he would do it gladly.

Somepony was knocking on Fluttershy's door yet again.

Pinkie Pie, acting as butler, bounded over to the door and flung it wide,  
"Hi again Rarity!" Pinkie said letting Rarity in.

"Hello again Pinkie darling." Rarity said stepping into Fluttershy's cottage.

Vagabond's memory jogged to the last thing he heard Rarity say, 'Imagine! A killer among the good ponies of Ponyville. He should be banished immediately.'

He remembered Rarity's previous words as he was feigning sleep. Vagabond suppressed his frustration, '***At least she was paying attention. She is Fluttershy's friend and I won't make a scene.***' It was difficult not to say anything. Rarity's words were so similar to those of his own village. That memory would forever be burned into his mind and Vagabond couldn't think of anything that would lessen the pain. He forced his expression into neutrality as Rarity looked him over.

He thought he was doing well until he heard a trio of tiny voices call, "Rarity! Wait up." and three adorable tiny fillies bounded inside the cottage.

"Sweetie Belle!" Rarity scolded, "What are you doing following me? It's dangerous here! Go home at once!" she said dramatically pointing out the door with a hoof.

Vagabond couldn't help it, Rarity's words echoed in his mind, 'It's dangerous here!' 'It's dangerous here!' 'It's dangerous here!'

Vagabond's mind suddenly snapped back to reality when he heard one of the fillies say,  
"Whose that?"

Vagabond opened his eyes and saw the three fillies standing right in front of him, not two feet away.

One of them, a cute little Earth pony wearing an over-sized bow peered up at Vagabond,  
“Are you sick?” she asked.

“No silly he’s hurt.” said a tiny pegasus.

The third, a white unicorn, asked,  
“How did you get hurt? Did you fall down?”

“Girls, I’m sure he’s very tired.” Rarity said with a nervous smile.

Vagabond took the hint and yawned loudly. The three fillies hung their heads and turned to leave.

The tan pegasus suddenly turned around,  
“Can we see his cutie mark before we go?”

Vagabond realized his saddlebags were covering his flank, which was a good thing. He shifted trying to make his flank inaccessible and wound up laying directly on his still-healing wing stump. The pain hit him like a tsunami. He turned his head away. There was no way he could stave off the tears of pain. His body shook slightly with convulsions and he broke out in a sweat almost instantly.

Rarity sent Scootaloo, Applebloom, and Sweetie Belle back to town with Pinkie as quickly as possible. As soon as the door closed, Vagabond rose to his knees to take the pressure off his wing stump. He was panting heavily, his whole coat was covered with the sheen of sweat, tears were streaming down his face, and his whole body began to convulse uncontrollably. He lost control of his legs and collapsed, chest-down, on the couch.

Fluttershy flew over to him,  
“Oh dear!” she said quietly.

Vagabond continued to convulse in agony,  
“P...pain...medicine.” he stuttered between convulsing breaths.

Big Macintosh walked over and held Vagabond still, his expression vaguely unhappy,  
“Dr. Mend didn’t give ‘im no medication earlier.” he said.

Fluttershy gasped,  
“He laid right on one of his wing injuries! And you said Dr. Mend didn’t give him anything? Oh, the poor thing! He must be in absolute agony!” she said flying over to where Dr. Mend had left the perscription bottle, “Rarity would you help me look?” she asked.

Rarity couldn’t help but to glance at the royal blue pony laying on Fluttershy’s couch, ‘**He was a pegasus?**’ she thought, ‘**Tis unimaginable, loosing one’s wings.**’

The two pony’s looked and looked but the medication was nowhere to be found. Fluttershy began to panic.

Fluttershy pushed objects around, even knocked over the table before she finally turned around in a panic,  
“I can’t find it!” she cried frantically, “You don’t think Dr. Mend took it by accident when he left?”

Big Macintosh growled, realizing what had happened,  
“Ayup, he did. He grabbed it right when he left. Ah’m sorry, Ah didn’t think nothin’ of it.”

“I...deserve...it.” Vagabond said through gritted teeth.

Every pony in the cottage just starred at him.

Fluttershy went back to Vagabond’s side,  
“Don’t say that!” she said, eyes tearing up, “No pony deserves this.” she turned to Rarity and Big Macintosh, “We have to do something!” she cried loudly.

“You...have...no...idea...how...much...I...deserve...this...” Vagabond grunted.

The convulsions were making the pain worse. The agony combined with the convulsions plus the overwhelming feelings of helplessness and

the never-ending flood of emotional sorrow finally broke Vagabond's will. Everything came tumbling out like a tidal wave.

Vagabond closed his eyes, the pain was just too intense. His head swam, he felt nauseous and his body ached for relief from the agony. He couldn't stay still, he had to move, had to escape the pain. He struggled against Big Macintosh imposing strength, five years of steady walking had made him incredibly strong for a pegasus.

Big Macintosh fought to maintain his hold, "Stay back! He's in Fight-or-Flight mode an' he's stronger than he looks." Big Mac let go so he wouldn't hurt Vagabond.

Vagabond stood up shakily, gasping, "Let me die!" he screamed, "I can't take it anymore! It's all too much!" he gasped, "I didn't mean to! I DIDN'T MEAN TO! Oh, Celestia! I killed her! She was my only friend. I LOVED HERRRRRRRRRR!" everything overwhelmed Vagabond, utterly.

He collapsed onto the couch. Fluttershy, Rarity, and Big Macintosh were completely dumbstruck. They rushed over to Vagabond. Big Mac settled him gently on the couch, directly on his chest, while Fluttershy and Rarity positioned pillows on either side of him.

"Let me die." Vagabond whispered as the darkness of unconsciousness enveloped him, "Celestia, if you have any mercy, let me die."

Vagabond's words hung in the air. The rest of the cottage was silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend looked up from his desk suddenly. There was shouting coming toward his office, through the clinic.

Fluttershy burst into his office, tears streaming down her normally gentle and serene face, "How dare you!" she cried.

She took to the air charging straight at Dr. Mend. Dr. Mend stood up just as she reached him. Fluttershy reached back and slapped him across the face. the blow was light, like a foal's strike, but the intent was clear.

"What about your oath!" she sniffled, "How could you do such a thing!" she yelled.

"Monster's deserve what they get!" Dr. Mend yelled back.

"Don't you dare, don't you DARE talk to me about monsters!" Fluttershy said emphatically, "Oh ANYONE in Ponyville, I know a monster when I see one, and the only one I've seen in months i just hit." she paused to take a breath, "Give it to me!" she said, "Give me the medication this instant or I'll have you arrested! Give it to me!" she said shaking with anger.

Dr. Mend set his jaw,  
"Fine. Wait here." he said leaving his office.

Fluttershy landed, she couldn't trust her wings right then. She was shaking all over, '***I've never hit anypony before.***' she thought sadly, '***But poor Vagabond. Hasn't he suffered enough? I simply can't imagine how bad I would feel if I was responsible if Applejack or Rarity died because of me. I wonder what happened?***' she thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dear Twilight,*

*That a Vagabond is in Ponyville is somewhat alarming. Use caution, but do not presume to make a judgement call unless you have all the facts. Use discernment and wisdom at all times when interacting with him. Do not become too familiar with him unless he is forgiven. Remember, he has to serve his sentence. I cannot pass judgement on him and neither can you for that is not our place.*

*Be safe my student,  
Princess Celestia*

Spike read the scroll out loud to Twilight.

Twilight nodded from her position, laying on the floor,  
“That makes good sense, I suppose.” she said.

Spike rolled the scroll back up,  
“I didn’t know a Vagabond was here. Aren’t they supposed to be dangerous?” he asked.

“Yes and no. Spike, don’t you remember that class we took in Canterlot about crime and punishment?” Twilight asked.

“Only parts of it, that class was boring.” Spike said dully.

“And that’s why you only got a c+...” Twilight was interrupted by Rainbow Dash walking in boldly.

Dash looked tired,  
“Twilight,” she addressed, “I...I’m sorry.” she hung her head, “I lied to you.” she said sadly, then quickly added, “But I had a good reason.”

“I’m sure you thought you did Rainbow Dash, but there is rarely a good reason to lie to anypony.” Twilight said rising to her hooves, “Don’t worry about it too much, I forgive you. Now, it was about the Vagabond wasn’t it.”

“Yes, you were right, the ghost did speak to me. She said she forgave him, but we can’t tell him yet.” Rainbow Dash said pensively.

Twilight looked dead serious as she said,  
“You need to tell me everything, Dash.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rarity placed a cool, wet cloth on Vagabond’s head,  
“He lost his wings.” she whispered, “How horrible. I simply cannot imagine losing my horn. That would be literally losing a piece of yourself.”

“Ayup. Ah think he lost a piece of himself a long time ago.” Big Macintosh said, Something more important than his wings.”

“I whole-heartedly agree, Big Macintosh, but what can we do?” Rarity asked.

“Don’t know.” Big Mac said simply.

Rarity’s attention was drawn to Vagabond’s saddlebags,  
“Good heavens, those things are filthy! Why hasn’t anypony removed them? They can’t be comfortable to sleep with.”

“Ah don’t think the word ‘comfort’ has been in his life for five years.” Big Macintosh mused.

Rarity looked sideways at Big Mac,  
“If he has to leave when he’s better, we should at least see that his belongings are in good shape. Big Macintosh, darling, would you be so kind as to help me with his saddlebags?” Rarity asked sweetly.

“Nope, Ah don’t touch another pony’s things unless Ah’ve got permission.” Big Mac said.

“But who knows when he’ll wake up. What could it hurt?” Rarity asked.

“Sorry Rarity, Ah don’t compromise mah morals for nopony, an Ah won’t let you touch ‘em either.” Big Mac said.

“I would never dream of asking you to darling. I do have to ask, why are you being so protective of him?” Rarity enquired.

“Do unto others, Rarity,” Big Mac said, “Do unto others.”

# Chapter 5

“So what you’re saying, Rainbow Dash, is that you couldn’t sleep?” Twilight asked, “That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“I know!” Dash exclaimed, “It was like Arabesque was saying it over and over and over. Like she was inside my head! Arg! I can still hear it!” Dash said dramatically placing her hooves on either side of her head.

Twilight’s eye’s unfocused for a few moments, deep in thought, “Almost as if she were still here.” she said distantly, then snapped back to reality, “Spike, where is that book Spirits, Wraiths, and Ghosts?” she asked.

“I’ll get it.” Spike said despondently.

“Dash, what if Arabesque didn’t just give you the message then go to her final rest? What if she’s still around? What if she’s with you now?” Twilight asked interestedly.

“Don’t say that Twilight! It’s just, like, too creepy.” Dash said turning her head away and waving a hoof.

“It’s not THAT creepy Rainbow Dash. Maybe she just wants to make sure the Vagabond knows he’s been forgiven. I mean, it’s not like she’s malignant or anything.” Twilight said walking toward where Spike was searching the shelves of the library.

Rainbow Dash followed her in the air, “Malig- what?” she asked.

“Bad, evil, means to do harm.” Twilight said somewhat patiently.

“She kept me from sleeping!” Rainbow Dash said emphatically.

“We don’t even know for sure if it was even her.” Twilight said, “You could just be suffering from P.T.S.D. for all we know.”



"I DO NOT HAVE S.T.D.s!" Rainbow Dash said, highly offended.

"What? No, it means Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." Twilight explained.

Rainbow Dash arched an eyebrow,  
"What?"

"Ugh!" Twilight grunted in frustration, "It's like being in shock."

"Oh." Dash responded.

"Found it." Spike said climbing down the ladder. He handed Twilight the book, then headed upstairs.

Twilight levitated the book onto her podium and opened it to it's index,  
"Hmm. Ghosts in reference to haunting? Maybe..." she mused, "Aha! Ghosts in reference to Vagabonds. Page 187." she said.

Flipping to the page, she began reading,  
"Here it is." Twilight said clearing her throat, "The Ghosts that torment Vagabonds are the spirits of their victims. The ghosts subtly manipulates the perceptions of their hosts, causing no physical harm but psychological harm instead. Possible effects of the ghost's manipulations include but are not limited to: visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, paranoia, dementia, neurosis, personality disorders, eating disorders, and sleeping disorders."

"See?" Rainbow Dash said.

"There's more." Twilight said and continued reading, "Due to the rarity of Vagabonds, it is entirely possible there are other effects of which we are not aware. In the, even more rare, cases of forgiven Vagabonds the ghost tells another pony and tasks them with informing the Vagabond. It is believed, the ghost inhabits the pony until the message is delivered but, that said, there is not enough information to be certain. There are rumors and tales that non-ponies can also suffer the fate of a Vagabond. Of special interest are the zebras. Some of their masks are said to allow one to

interact with ghosts, but it is not known if this is true.” Twilight looked up from the book, “Looks like we need Zecora’s help.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Applejack secured the cart to her harness,  
“Applebloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo! Come on, we need to hurry.” she bellowed.

The Cutie-mark Crusaders came galloping out of the barn, a whirlwind of energy.

Applejack began walking before they even reached her,  
“Hurry up! This foods gettin’ colder by the minute. Applebloom, did yall get Big Macintosh’s blanket?” she called.

“Got it!” Applebloom beamed up at her older sister.

“Good. Now when we get to Fluttershy’s, steer clear o’ the injured pony on her couch. He’s awful messed up, what with loosin’ his wings and all.” Applejack bit her tongue as realized what she had said.

Eerie silence met her. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. All three fillies had stopped, mouths hanging open. Scootaloo looked back at her own wings then back to Applejack.

Scootaloo’s lip quivered, and her eyes teared up,  
“Th...that’s...that’s just...horrible!” she burst into tears, “Is...isn’t there...some way t...to...get them back?” she asked.

Sweetie Belle and Applebloom began crying as well. Applejack felt terrible, she hadn’t meant to say what she had. She picked up the three crying fillies and set them onto the cart, ‘Well maybe they’ll wear themselves out cryin’. Wonder how Fluttershy’s doin’?

\* \* \* \* \*

Fluttershy had just finished administering the pain medication to Vagabond, who had woken up only a few minutes beforehand,

“Thank you so much Fluttershy.” he said lowering his eyes, “I must apologize for my earlier outburst. You didn’t need to have heard that.”

Fluttershy averted her eyes as she said,  
“You begged Celestia to let you die. I’ve never heard anypony say that. It was just so sad. I know it’s none of my business, but is it really that bad?”

“I truly hope you never have to find out.” Vagabond said, then sighed heavily, “But that doesn’t answer your question does it? You’ve been so kind to me, if you really want to know what happened, I’ll tell you.” he said.

Fluttershy sat down in front of him,  
“Oh, I do want to know.” she said.

Rarity and Big Macintosh were in the kitchen but had stopped what they were doing, and now both of them listened intently at the kitchen doorway as Vagabond began,  
“I was raised in an orphanage. I never knew my parents, but the orphanage wasn’t terrible. I knew all the other colts and fillies, but I only had one real friend. Her name was Arabesque. She was a pegasus like me. She had a coat of light-red and her mane and tail were a shimmering silver-green color. She was beautiful.”

“For as long as I can remember she had studied and practiced ballet. She was a natural. She seemed to be able to fly without using her wings sometimes. She eventually convinced me to try it too. I was terrible at it. My only real talent is with chemicals, especially herbs, roots, and flowers. I became known, in our little village, as a bit of an alchemist. I had a habit of tending to all the cuts, scrapes, and other minor injuries of all the little colts and fillies around our village. Their parents loved it because my potions and salves actually worked and I never charged anything. I was always good with the little ones. Arabesque would help me sometimes, when we got older.”

“Others said we were a cute couple. Eventually I fell in love with her but I could never bring myself to tell her. As far as I know, Arabesque never knew how I felt, she only had eyes for the ballet. Soon after her seventeenth birthday, we heard about a talent scout coming to our village. Apparently, he had heard about Arabesque’s talent and wanted to see for

himself. Arabesque performed for him with me acting as her stage manager, rigging up lights and setting up props. She was perfect.”

“The talent scout took her picture and sent it off to Canterlot with an invitation for a troop to come see her perform and maybe sign a contract. Arabesque was ecstatic when she heard. She began to work on a complex routine that would require me to run myself ragged behind the curtain changing scenes and lights. She began talking incessantly about ‘going away’. I didn’t want her to leave without me, so I asked her if I could go too. The talent scout overheard me and said there were enough riggers in Canterlot and that Arabesque would be fine without me.”

Vagabond hung his head,  
“I was so selfish though. Instead of being happy for her, I was angry. I asked her if she ever planned on marrying. She said she would meet a stallion in Canterlot who was also a dancer; and that they would marry and have several foals. I was so upset I had to walk away, I didn’t even see her until the next day. I had secretly decided to sabotage her performance. I would have the plywood backdrops collapse and distract her. I knew that with her skill there would be other auditions, and I promised myself I would only ruin one performance. I thought that if we had more time together she might come to love me.”

“I didn’t care about anything else, I wanted her, I needed her. I was so engrossed, so focused on my own desires I hadn’t stopped to consider her. I was selfish, greedy; I should have put her needs first, her dreams first.” Vagabond bit his bottom lip and breathed deeply through his nose to calm himself down, “The troop arrived and the whole village turned out to see her dance. I rigged the set to collapse straight down, I didn’t want to hurt her. I knew the exact moment I would collapse it, she would be in the very front of the stage, away from the backdrop...” Vagabond began hyperventilating and shaking.

He stopped and closed his eyes to concentrate on his breathing, “I’m sorry Fluttershy \*huff\* I’m going to \*pant\* have to stop. It’s \*huff\* just too difficult right now.”

Fluttershy stood and reached out a hoof toward him for comfort.

Vagabond’s hoof snapped out, lightening quick, intercepting hers,

"I \*pant\* have no right to accept \*huff\* comfort until I've atoned. Please tell me you \*cough\* understand."

"No I don't." Fluttershy said softly.

Vagabond let go of her hoof,  
"I take it you don't know about Vagabonds, then?" he asked.

"I'd never even heard the word until you came along." Fluttershy said softly.

"When somepony kills another, intentionally or not, the dead pony's spirit inhabits the one responsible and passes judgement on the killer until the spirit either forgives their killer or the killer dies. Arabesque has yet to forgive me, so I must continue my penance." Vagabond explained.

"But you didn't mean for her to be hurt, right?" Fluttershy asked.

Vagabond's face hardened, as he tried to throw up his walls again. His will had returned in full force. He mentally repeated his old chant, '***I am a stone. I feel nothing. I am nothing. Feel the void, the emptiness. Let it consume you. This is your life now, and your suffering will never end. This is justice for what you've done. Suffer until you love it.***' Vagabond repeated the old chant again and again to himself as he tried to snuff out the spark of life that had taken root.

"I would never intentionally hurt anypony," he said, "But that doesn't make Arabesque any more alive now does it?" his voice began growing cold, "She's dead. Dead because of me, because of my actions, my jealousy, my selfishness. I killed her. Accident or not, it didn't matter to anyone then and it doesn't matter now." Vagabond stopped and took several deep breaths, desperately trying to keep tears out of his eyes, "I'm sorry for yelling, Fluttershy. I didn't mean to scare you, but you should be afraid. I'm the monster that dames use to scare their foals into bed with. It is my place to suffer and I won't fight it."

"Oh, Vagabond," Fluttershy said softly, "I don't think you're a monster." she stopped and swallowed, "This all seems so cruel. Why would Arabesque do this to you?" she asked.

Vagabond couldn't figure it out. He couldn't extinguish the spark of life inside himself. The more he tried the brighter it became. He hated himself and had for years, but now something was different. There was the hint of something new, '**Maybe Arabesque will forg...**' he strictly cut off that line of thought, '**I've had that false hope before. It hurts too much to go through it again.**' Vagabond gave way to despair. It was a familiar, old friend, '**There is no redemption for Vagabonds. Just slow suffering for the rest of their lives and dying alone, forever alone. Just like I should be now. Being here won't last, I'll enjoy it while I can.**' he thought.

"It is not our place to judge things like this. The dead pass judgement on their transgressors. No pony can truly know how Arabesque feels about what I did to her, in the same way no pony can ever feel exactly how I feel about it either. I could talk about it from sunrise to sunset and still I would have only scratched the surface. No pony can know the secret thoughts of another and so any judgement call would be in error." Vagabond said.

"That makes sense, I suppose." Fluttershy said.

"I apologize for scaring you Fluttershy. I didn't mean to." Vagabond said.

"I know. I forgive you." she said.

Vagabond's face lit up, enraptured,  
"You have no idea how much those three words mean to me, Fluttershy. Thank you." he said smiling.

Everypony jumped as a knock reverberated through Fluttershy's door.

Big Macintosh and Rarity went back to what they had been doing in the kitchen as Fluttershy walked over and opened the door,  
"Oh, hello Pinkie Pie." Fluttershy greeted, then craned her neck to look over Pinkie's shoulder, "Who is that behind you?"

Pinkie looked over her shoulder as well,  
"Hi Applejack!" she greeted.

Pinkie Pie bounded into Fluttershy's cottage, while Applejack hauled the cart up to Fluttershy's front door,  
"Fluttershy, would you kindly send out Big Macintosh to help unload all this here food?" she asked, then added, "Uh, would ya happen to have anywhere to lay three little fillies what wore themselves out cryin'?"

"Oh dear, why were they crying?" Fluttershy asked.

Applejack looked away embarrassed,  
"Uh, Ah might have let slip about Vagabond's wings." she said.

Rarity appeared at the doorway,  
"Oh, the poor little darlings." she said gently lifting the sleeping form of Sweetie Belle down from the cart.

Every uninjured pony helped bring in the food, while Vagabond watched, ***'I wish she hadn't mentioned anything to the little ones. There is no need to traumatize them with things like that.'*** he felt like it was his fault, ***'All this fuss for me? Why would anypony do this for me? I wish I could pay them back for it all.'***

\* \* \* \* \*

Twilight knocked on the door of Zecora's hut.

Moments later the door opened, revealing the zebra girl,  
"What seems to be the problem this time, only trouble brings you to this house of mine." Zecora said somewhat pointedly.

Twilight wilted inwardly, Zecora had a point,  
"We'll come visit you more often Zecora, I promise. You are right though, we do have a problem." she said.

Zecora smiled knowingly,  
"Come on in and state your request, I will never mistreat a guest." she said leading Twilight, Spoke and Rainbow Dash inside.

Zecora sat down next to her cooking pot,  
"Tell me about this new issue, that you think I can help you through." she said.

“Well I think that maybe Rainbow Dash has a ghost around her. I read in a book that said some Zebras may have special masks that let you speak with spirits. The ghost may be keeping Dash from sleeping and I want to be absolutely sure, one way or the other.” Twilight said pacing lightly.

“And you wish to use such a mask, to aid you in your task?” Zecora asked.

Twilight nodded,  
“Exactly.”

Zecora stood up silently and pulled a wooden box out from underneath her bed. She opened the lid and removed a mask made of clear glass. It had strange carvings on the forehead, chin, and each cheek.

Zecora laid it down in front of Twilight,  
“Using this will indeed allow to see a spirit, but see only, you will not be able to hear it.”

“Huh?” Twilight asked, “Why not?”

“The living cannot hear a spirit’s voice, but perhaps there is another choice.” Zecora said cautiously.

“What would that be?” Twilight asked.

“Put on the mask and enter a trance, I believe that is your best chance.” Zecora said.

“Trance?” Twilight asked, “What kind of trance?”

“I was taught not to use it, lest I be tempted to abuse it. For you I will break this rule, for what is knowledge if not a tool. The trance is similar to being dead, put on the mask and lay in my bed.” Zecora said.

Twilight levitated the mask onto her face, the top stopped just below her horn. She walked over and laid down in Zecora’s bed. It was comfortable. Both soft and firm at the same time. Meanwhile, Zecora walked over to her pantry and began rummaging through it.



Rainbow Dash and Spike walked over to Twilight,  
“Are you sure about this Twilight? I mean, I know Zecora wouldn’t suggest it if it was dangerous and all but isn’t it, like, really scary?” Dash asked.

Twilight shook her head, her face distorted by the mask,  
“Not really. Besides, now I get to know for sure what’s going on, and I can write about about it so others will know too. It’s actually really exciting.”

Rainbow Dash and Spike back-peddled to let Zecora near the bed. The zebra girl carried a jar filled with some sickly-green paste and had a small knife hung around her neck. Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but Zecora held up a hoof for silence and shook her head. Twilight stayed quiet as Zecora opened the jar. She scooped the goop up with the knife and began to fill the grooves in the mask with the stuff. Zecora took great care not to let any of it touch either Twilight or herself. Twilight’s nose twitched, the goop smelled like rotten fruit and was making her drowsy.

Zecora leaned over her and said,  
“Calm yourself and be sure to close your eyes, because part of you now dies.”

Twilight could just barely hear Zecora, her ears were roaring. She closed her eyes and suddenly she was back in Zecora’s hut. Everything was identical except that instead of Zecora, Rainbow Dash, and Spike standing next to the bed, there was a light-red pegasus filly with silver-green mane and tail staring at her.

“Hello Twilight Sparkle.” the pegasus said.

Her voice was nearly as soft as Fluttershy’s but more deep, almost husky like Rainbow Dash. Twilight suddenly became very nervous. The pegasus’ eyes were pure white and seemed to bore into Twilight’s soul.

Twilight finally found her voice,  
“Arabesque.” she whispered.

# Chapter 6

The cart was unloaded and the Cutie-mark Crusaders had woken up with a voracious appetite. Everypony sat down to eat, well almost everypony. Vagabond was already lying down; he wasn't eating, he had fallen asleep. Pinkie Pie wolfed down her plate of apple dumplings and impatiently waited for some pony else to do the same.

After about 10 seconds Pinkie's patience was at its end, "You know, I've thought a lot about what Vagabond said. I mean, I know he needs to be forgiven and all that, but I think he needs to forgive himself first. I think he might be holding himself back or something. I mean it's OBVIOUS he learned his lesson and everything but his self loathing is, like, killing him." Pinkie Pie said without taking a breath. Rarity, Big Macintosh, Fluttershy and Applejack had all stopped eating and just starred at Pinkie Pie silently.

For her part, Pinkie Pie just tilted her head to the side and blinked twice, "What?" she asked innocently.

After several seconds of stunned silence, they resumed eating. Pinkie began humming to herself to pass the time. Applebloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo finished eating at almost the same time.

The three Cutie-mark Crusaders couldn't stay still, "What time is it Rarity?" Sweetie Belle asked.

Rarity was almost finished eating, "It's late darling. Don't worry we'll have you home soon."

"But we never got to see his cutie-mark." Scootaloo said pointing toward Vagabond with a hoof.

"Darlings, let him sleep. You can't just wake him up for that." Rarity responded, "He needs his rest."

“O.K.” the three fillies said sadly, in unison.

Applebloom perked up,  
“Can we see him up close?” she asked.

Rarity glanced over to Vagabond’s sleeping form,  
“I suppose so. Just be quiet and don’t wake him alright?” Rarity turned to Fluttershy, “Where did you run off to this afternoon?”

While the older ponies were busy talking, the Cutie-mark Crusaders were plotting, with Applebloom acting as the mastermind,  
“O.K. they’re distracted. Sweetie Belle, you stand on my back. Scootaloo, you stand on Sweetie Belle’s back and undo the straps to his saddlebags. They’re the only thing covering up his cutie-mark. Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Scootaloo whispered.

“I’m ready.” Sweetie Belle agreed.

“Alright, let’s go.” Applebloom said.

Vagabond was awakened by a strong shift of weight on his flank,  
“NO!” he yelled.

Every pony in the room looked his direction as the saddlebags slid off him onto the floor. Every eye in the room was instantly drawn to his flank. Vagabond saw the looks of disbelief on every pony’s face, and knew what it was they all saw. In the place where his cutie-mark was supposed to be was only a mass of scar tissue.

The three Cutie-mark Crusaders gazed, fixated at Vagabond’s flank,  
“Where’s your cutie-mark?” Sweetie Belle asked.

Vagabond swallowed hard, he hadn’t wanted to show the little ones this,  
“It got scraped off and it hasn’t come back yet, that’s all. Don’t worry it doesn’t hurt. Who knows, it may comeback someday.” he said smiling.

“N...no wings AND no cutie-mark?” Scootaloo asked tearing up.

Big Macintosh laid a gentle hoof on Applejack's shoulder to keep her from rising,  
"Let's just see what he does." he whispered.

Vagabond reached out slowly and wiped Scootaloo's eyes, his voice was gentle and soft,  
"Hey now, it's alright." he said raising her chin, "You just have to look on the bright side. My wings are gone, but I'm still alive. I don't have a cutie-mark but that just means I'm like you three. You shouldn't be sad for me. Do I look sad?" he asked calmly.

"Your eyes do." Applebloom said.

Vagabond had difficulty hiding his reaction,  
"I'll be fine." he said, "Besides isn't it about time for little fillies to go to bed?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Arabesque stood perfectly still like a statue, not a hair in her mane moved. She didn't blink, didn't breathe, and didn't shift her weight casually like a living thing would. Twilight had absolutely no illusions that she was speaking to any kind of living thing. It was extremely disturbing. Twilight was having a great deal trouble speaking or even thinking.

Fortunately, Arabesque solved that problem for her,  
"Ask what you will Twilight Sparkle." she said, voice like a rumbling echo yet crystal clear.

Twilight was still frightened, but there were things she had to know,  
"When will the Vagabond be ready to be told you forgave him?"

"When his tears flow for one, other than himself." Arabesque said.

Twilight's ears lowered in mind disappointment,  
"Can't you be more specific? I can't be around him all the time." she asked.

"You will witness it." Arabesque said.

"Wait, how do you know that?" Twilight asked.

“That is not a thing for mortals to know.” Arabesque said vaguely.

“Can you at least tell me how many days it will be before he is ready?” Twilight asked becoming bolder.

“I cannot tell you. The knowledge would change the future.” Arabesque replied.

“I suppose you can’t tell me anything at all about the future can you?” Twilight assessed.

“No.” Arabesque answered.

Twilight began thinking, ***‘I probably don’t have much time, so I need to focus on the most important aspects. She can’t tell me anything about the future, even though she obviously knows it. I probably shouldn’t try to trick her. I guess I should just move on to the next topic.’***

“Can you tell me anything about the past?” Twilight asked.

“Some.” Arabesque said mysteriously.

“Did the Vagabond intend to kill you or was it an accident?” Twilight asked.

“My death was accidental. Violence of that kind is against his nature.” Arabesque explained.

“Why did you wait until now to forgive him?” Twilight asked.

“He would not have healed or grown.” Arabesque said.

“What do you mean?” Twilight asked curiously.

“The incident involving my death scarred him badly and he ceased maturing both mentally and emotionally. I had to work on him from the inside. He is sincere in his sorrow, but hating himself helps no pony and only hurts him more. Now that he is finally here with the Elements of Harmony, his internal shell is beginning to crack.” Arabesque said.

“Internal shell?” Twilight asked.

“Yes. He doesn’t know it but he pulled darkness into himself. He needs the Elements of Harmony to break the shell or he will die as the bitterness eats him from the inside. It has festered within his heart for a long time. Do not be angered at what he says, Twilight Sparkle, pity him instead. He is kind and brave beneath his pain. His heart is passionate but misdirected, he needs guidance. Do not think him an idiot, though he may often act like one. He is very smart. He just needs the Elements of Harmony to point him in the right direction.” Arabesque explained.

“So he needs all six of us?” Twilight asked.

“And more, much more before his tasks are complete, but I can say little more. Ask your final question, Twilight Sparkle.” Arabesque said.

Without thinking, Twilight asked,  
“Final question, what final question?”

Twilight’s ears began to roar again and she felt like she was falling. Her vision began to fade into a bright light.

The last thing Twilight heard Arabesque say was,  
“That one.”

Twilight felt herself falling upwards at incredible speed. She began hearing voices.

“Zecora!” Spike yelled, “She’s not breathing!”

Zecora held out her hoof toward the baby dragon,  
“Twilight Sparkle will be fine, sit down and do not whine.” she said calmly.

Rainbow Dash ground her teeth but kept quiet. Zecora walked over to Twilight and carefully removed the mask. As soon as the mask was off Twilight’s eyes snapped open and she gasped, breathing again. Her head lolled to one side and all four of her legs kicked out as her heart started circulating blood again. She cried out as her lungs rediscovered air. Rainbow Dash flew over to Twilight and held her still until she calmed.

Rainbow Dash had to hold Twilight tightly,  
“You could have warned us Zecora!” Dash said somewhat heatedly to their zebra hostess.

Zecora gently laid the mask back in its box,  
“Be at peace Rainbow Dash, you came when you saw her thrash. The trance...” Zecora didn't get to finish her statement.

Twilight suddenly yelled,  
“She's real! Rainbow Dash, she's real! Arabesque is real!” she howled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rarity herded the little Cutie-mark Crusaders toward the door,  
“Applebloom wait by the door. Scootaloo, come here this instant and leave Angel alone. Oh, dear.” she said as Angel sprinted under the couch where Vagabond lay with Scootaloo in hot pursuit.

Vagabond's hooves shot out, quick as a striking snake and gently picked up the pegasus filly,  
“Did you hear miss Rarity?” he asked.

Scootaloo's eyes shifted upward and she brought her left hoof up to her mouth, thinking. It was a very cute pose.

After a moment she shook her head,  
“Nope.” she said smiling.

Vagabond set her down gently,  
“You need to listen to her O.K.? It's time for you to go home.” he said.

“Can we come back and see you tomorrow?” Scootaloo asked eyes sad.

“Well I certainly don't mind but I'm not the one you need to convince.”  
Vagabond said indicating Rarity with his hoof, “Do you understand?” he asked.

Scootaloo nodded her little head vigorously,  
“Got it!” she said.

Vagabond smiled, set her down, and kissed her forehead, "Good night Scootaloo." he said as she ran to Rarity.

Rarity had managed to corral Sweetie Belle next to Applebloom and gave Vagabond a grateful look as Scootaloo pranced over to the door, "Thank you. I'll be by tomorrow." she said herding the Cutie-mark Crusaders out the door.

Vagabond settled back with a smile, even though it still hurt a bit to move. He laid his head down on his front hooves and noticed Applejack staring at him.

Vagabond raised his head and addressed the earth-pony, "Did I just sprout an additional ear or something?"

Fluttershy, Big Macintosh, and Pinkie Pie were in the kitchen covering up food and cleaning dishes so only Vagabond and Applejack were in the front room. Applejack had wanted to help, but everypony had insisted she had already done enough and to take it easy.

Applejack's face was a mask of confusion, "Ah don't get you." she said.

"What's not to get? I'm a killer." Vagabond said easily.

Applejack shot up out of her seat pointing at him, "THAT!" she said emphatically, "That's what Ah don't get! Yall come off like some hardened murderer, actin', all mean and crazy and psycho, but when the fillies are around you're the perfect role-model!"

The statement upset Vagabond; he narrowed his eyes, "There's no reason to scare them. I would never hurt one of the little ones." he said quietly.

"But you keep sayin' you're a killer." Applejack said taking a small step forward.

"I am." Vagabond said soberly.



“Are you? Ah mean, are you really? Or did you just make a mistake that cost somepony their life? Cause Ah don't think even you believe what you're sayin'.” Applejack said with brutal honesty.

Vagabond's muscles tensed, his ire rising,  
“It doesn't matter! Arabesque is still just as dead!” he shouted.

“WRONG! It sure as hell does matter! It's the difference between a murderer and somepony why made a mistake!” Applejack said taking another small step.

“But she's dead!” Vagabond yelled.

“Yes, yes she is. Is there anything you can do to change that? Is there?” Applejack asked pressing her advantage.

Vagabond hung his head, the proverbial wind gone out of his sails,  
“I wish there was. I...” he began.

Applejack interrupted him before he could start down that line of thought again,  
“Just answer the question, dag-nabbit!” she yelled harshly.

Vagabond screwed his eyes tightly shut,  
“NO! O.K.?” he screamed, “What do you want me to say?”

Applejack lowered and softened her voice,  
“You just said it.” she said.

Applejack took the final step toward Vagabond and lifted his chin gently with her hoof,  
“You knew her really well, didn't you?” she asked quietly.

Vagabond opened his eyes and looked Applejack square in the face,  
“She was my best friend, my only friend really. I was in love with her.” he said softly.

“Did she care about you at all?” Applejack asked.

“She didn't love me, but yes she did. I like to think she cared a lot.” Vagabond said.

“Ah, know you can't bring her back but you have to think here.” Applejack said mysteriously.

“About what?” Vagabond asked.

“What did you do wrong? Ah mean what was it that caused you to act in poor judgment?” Applejack asked.

“I wanted her to love me.” Vagabond said.

“There's more than that.” Applejack encouraged.

“I guess I wanted it too much. I wanted her to stay with me.” Vagabond said.

“What do your last three sentences have in common?” Applejack asked.

“I focused on myself, I know, I've learned that. I figured that out a couple of years ago.” Vagabond said.

“Then why in the world are you still beatin' yourself up over it?” Applejack asked, “There's nothin' wrong with mournin', but if you've learned then you have to let it go. You've got to move on from your mistake; don't let it ruin what life you have left.”

“What life?” Vagabond asked, “I've been a Vagabond for years.”

“Maybe the reason is BECAUSE you haven't moved on yet. Did you consider that?” Applejack asked, “There's a reason the quote says 'live and learn'. You're still alive, so learn. Let it go and stop living in the past. You're not doin' Arabesque's memory any justice by mopin' all the time. Stop hatin' yourself and others will stop too.”

“I don't know how.” Vagabond confessed.

“Alright then.” Applejack said thinking, “Aha! What will you do after you've been forgiven?”

"I have no idea. I never really considered it a possibility." Vagabond said.

"Well figure it out and work toward it. You're smart, you'll get it. Ah'll be by tomorrow, and Ah want you to tell me what it is you plan to do with the rest of your life. O.K.?" Applejack asked.

"O.K." Vagabond said sourly.

Applejack shook her head,  
"Nuh-uh. Convince me." she ordered.

"I will Applejack." Vagabond said, smiling slightly.

"That's better. Now get some sleep, you've got plenty of thinkin' to do tomorrow." Applejack said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pinkie Pie and Applejack left shortly thereafter, leaving Fluttershy and Big Macintosh alone with Vagabond.

Big Mac never being one to beat around the bush, asked,  
"If it ain't too much to ask, how did you lose your cutie-mark?"

Fluttershy didn't bother to stop Big Macintosh; she was becoming used to the issues.

Vagabond yawned almost bored,  
"As soon as I was exiled I had to leave the village. I had to wait outside the village until dawn the next morning. I was supposed to receive my saddlebags from a couple of colts I knew. I fell asleep during the night. When I woke up the saddlebags were sitting next to me. I looked inside them," he said nosing open one of the saddlebags, "And found these," he pulled out two square patches of . . . Fluttershy felt sick when she realized they were patches of Vagabond's own flank.

Vagabond set the two patches of his own hide back inside the saddlebag,

“Someone took my cutie-mark,” he sighed, “It’s far too late to try to reattach them. I more-or-less got over it. It’s just really embarrassing.”

“Oh Vagabond, you’ve suffered so much. How do you go on?” Fluttershy asked sadly.

The ghost of a smile floated on Vagabond’s face,  
“I have something to look forward to, or I should say I used to.” He said.

“What do you mean?” Big Macintosh asked.

“I used to look forward to dying, so I could be with Arabesque again.”  
Vagabond paused briefly and shook his head, chuckling, “As you know Applejack and I spoke earlier. She made a good point, well several actually. I was upset initially, but now that I’ve given it some thought, you and your friends have given me something I haven’t had in the longest time, hope. I believe Arabesque will forgive me someday and I look forward to it. With or without my cutie-mark, I still have a talent that can help others. I’ve been a fool wallowing in my sorrow. If Arabesque wanted me dead, I think she could have arranged it. I’m still alive and that means I still have a purpose.” Vagabond said smiling.

Suddenly a thought struck him,  
“Fluttershy, I never finished telling you how Arabesque died did I?”

Fluttershy had to restrain her reaction as she realized Vagabond had said, ‘How Arabesque died’ and not, ‘How I killed her’,  
“No you didn’t, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I think I can now. You still deserve to know.” Vagabond said quietly.

He took a deep breath,  
“I had rigged the backdrop to collapse straight down when I pulled on a rope. I waited until the right moment and pulled the rope. The backdrop would take only a few moments to collapse and Arabesque was supposed to stay toward the front of the stage so she should have been safe. Well she tripped and tried to catch herself but she fell and slid close to the backdrop. She would have just flown away but her wings were bound. She always had her wings bound so she could concentrate on the dances she practiced. The backdrop began to collapse, she was right underneath it. I

knew what would happen. I ran toward her calling her name. In that last moment she turned to face me and we locked eyes. She reached out for me to save her. I was looking right at her when a piece of the backdrop fell onto her. I can still see it.” Vagabond drew in a deep, shuddering breath, “I’m sorry, I’m tired, but now you know. If it’s alright Fluttershy, Big Mac, I’d like to try to sleep now.”

“Of course Vagabond,” Fluttershy said yawning, “Will the guest room be O.K. Big Macintosh?” she asked.

“Ayup. Good night Fluttershy, Vagabond.” Big Macintosh said picking up his blanket and heading toward the indicated room.

Fluttershy set the pain medication down, next to Vagabond, “Take some if you need it O.K.?” she said.

Vagabond nodded,  
“Thank you Fluttershy. Good night.”

“Good night Vagabond.” Fluttershy responded from the stairs that lead to her room.

Angel bunny began to hop up the stairs after Fluttershy, but stopped halfway up. He turned and studied Vagabond for a moment with crossed paws, sizing him up. He pursed his lips thinking, not an easy feat for a bunny. He held up a paw and pointed two pads at his eyes then pointed his whole paw at Vagabond; ***‘I’m watching you.’*** he seemed to be saying. Angel then hopped the rest of the way up the stairs after Fluttershy.

Vagabond chuckled to himself at Angel’s antics, and laid his head down to sleep. He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t relax. The scene of Arabesque being crushed to death kept playing over and over in his mind. He had left something out of his tale. Arabesque had fallen underneath the collapsing backdrop and looked up realizing her fate. She had faced him and reached out for him, but she had also said something. Arabesque’s final words echoed in Vagabond’s ears, ***‘I’m sorry.’***

Vagabond steadied his breathing to keep himself calm as the feelings washed over him. For the first time in years he didn’t put up his emotional

walls, '***She knew,***' he thought to himself, '***She knew what had happened. I saw it in her eyes. She knew I caused it.***'

"Oh Arabesque," he whispered, "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to be forgiven. I wanted you with me forever. Please forgive me. You deserve to be at peace, my love."

Vagabond lay his head down to sleep, but he was fully conscious of the bandages wrapped around his body, '***These things are a problem. It will take weeks to heal up enough to even stand, much less travel again.***' he thought. A notion hit Vagabond suddenly. He listened silently for a few moments for any sound of anypony being awake. He heard nothing. He smiled mischievously to himself and opened the small white bottle next to him removing another pain pill, '***Careful, not too many.***' he thought. He swallowed the pill and began to move silently pulling his saddlebags toward himself. Vagabond had remembered a particularly useful potion he had discovered by accident, '***That would be perfect. No pony will be able to believe it.***' he thought, '***Now I just have to stand up. Oh, this is going to hurt.***'

\* \* \* \* \*

The whole of Ponyville was asleep except for one particular unicorn. Rarity was busy working on something special. She finally knew what to give Vagabond to apologize.

# Chapter 7

Morning came in the afternoon for Rainbow Dash. Arabesque had finally let her sleep after she, Twilight and Spike had visited Zecora. Dash could never remember sleeping so soundly in her whole life. She rose with a feeling of refreshment in her body. She was full of energy, even more than normal, and that was saying something for her.

Rainbow Dash opened the front door of her cloud/house and noticed the sun,  
“Aw man!” she groaned, “It’s almost time for me to meet Twilight. I need to hurry.”

Rainbow Dash leapt off the cloud and sped, like a bullet, toward Ponyville. She decided to stop at Sugar Cube Corner to grab a cream-cheese Danish. She smiled to herself, glad that only Pinkie Pie knew about her odd addiction.

Within 1 minute, Rainbow Dash landed outside Sugar Cube Corner,  
“Hey Pinkie, you got anything for me?” Dash asked walking in.

Mrs. Cake greeted Dash,  
“I’m sorry Rainbow Dash but Pinkie Pie just left about 10 minutes ago. She said she was going to visit Fluttershy. Can I get you anything?”

Rainbow Dash tried to be indirect without seeming suspicious,  
“Did she leave anything here for me by chance?”

“I don’t believe so. Was she supposed to?” Mrs. Cake asked.

“Nah. She just does sometimes.” Dash said shrugging, “Thanks anyway.” she said leaving the bakery and heading toward the Library.

Rainbow Dash trotted briskly up to the Library and knocked on the door,  
“Twilight? Are you in there?” she called.

Twilight answered the door after a few moments, "Hi Dash come on in." she said holding the door for her friend, I've been reading more about forgiven Vagabonds, and it looks like I was mistaken. The ones that were forgiven didn't go on to live normal lives, they lived extraordinary lives." Twilight said closing the door.

Twilight lead Rainbow Dash toward her reading podium and pointed to an old book with her hoof, "The first forgiven Vagabond created the Royal guard and became the first Captain of Princess Celestia's Royal Guard. The second founded Fillydelphia. She was the Mayor for over 50 years. The third became an ambassador to the Zebras, and the fourth was the cartographer responsible for all the maps of Equestria we still use today. He died more than 200 years ago, but he was the most recent. They all had other things in common too. They all married, they all traveled a lot after they were forgiven, they all became both famous and important in their times." Twilight explained.

"O.K. so what's your point Twilight?" Rainbow Dash asked raising a hoof.

"My point is, that if this pattern is any indicator, this Vagabond is going to be very important or at least do something important, which means he needs to know he's forgiven." Twilight explained excitedly

"Yeah, I get that Twilight, but remember what Arabesque said." Rainbow Dash reminded her overexcited friend.

"Which was?" Twilight asked, mildly exasperated.

"You told me, Arabesque said we have to see him cry for someone other than himself. We can't rush this, we have to wait for him." Rainbow Dash said sagely.

"I'm not sure you understand how important this is, Rainbow Dash." Twilight said.

"I get that he'll be important, but if we tell him before he's ready, it would be betraying Arabesque. She entrusted this to me and I'm going to do it right." Dash said stomping her front right hoof.



Twilight stopped her ranting for a moment and turned slowly toward her friend,  
“Of all my friends you would be the last I would ever expect to want to wait to do something, Rainbow Dash.”

Dash stomped both her front hooves on the ground and grunted in frustration,  
“I know! And I hate it! But this is the way it has to be. I ... I just ... feel it.”

Twilight’s mind began to spin, and her substantial intellect began working.  
In mere milliseconds she had puzzled through thousands of possibilities and come down to a conclusion,  
“You know Rainbow Dash I think you're right. Arabesque said the Vagabond would need the Elements of Harmony, and your element is loyalty. By refusing to tell the Vagabond he's forgiven prematurely you're being loyal to both Arabesque and the Vagabond. I think we just need to stay nearby the Vagabond and everything will just happen, it's in our natures. We personify the Elements of Harmony by proximity alone.”

Rainbow Dash shook her head, rolling her eyes,  
“You know what I think Twilight? I think you’re way over thinking this.”

Twilight was off in her own world and didn't hear her friend,  
“It's simple, we just...” Twilight stopped mid-sentence as Rainbow Dash shoved her hoof into her muzzle.

“Let's just go visit him O.K.?” Dash asked.

Twilight, with a muzzle full of hoof, nodded apologetically.

\* \* \* \* \*

Applejack was pooped,  
“Ah guess Ah never realized just how much Big Macintosh did 'round here. When he hurt himself during the last Applebuck Season he still did his chores, he just couldn’t buck apples. Whew doggy! I'll be glad when he's back.” Applejack was so busy talking to herself she failed to notice anypony sneaking up on her.

“Hiya sis!” Applebloom shouted.

Applejack jumped nearly four feet straight into the air,  
“Applebloom! Don't sneak up on me like that! Yall near' done gave me a heart attack.”

“Hi Applejack!” Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle shouted from behind Applejack.

Applejack jumped again even higher. She landed awkwardly and overbalanced. She fell forward and landed on her chest, eyes rolling. The three Cutie-mark Crusaders laughed uproariously as Applejack came to her senses and stood up shakily.

“Ha ha, very funny.” Applejack said sarcastically, “Why ain't yall playin' in your tree house?” she asked.

“We want to visit the hurt pony at Fluttershy's” Applebloom said, “Can you take us Applejack, please?”

The three fillies perfectly executed their pleading stare, directing all the intense cuteness straight at Applejack. Few there are who could withstand such an onslaught; Applejack was not among them.

Applejack sighed heavily,  
“Alright girls. Go tell Granny Smith we're headin' out.”

The three fillies galloped away, toward the farmhouse, in a cloud of dust.

\* \* \* \* \*

“He's mean then he's nice,  
He acts cold as ice,  
He's sweet and he's kind,  
Can't tell what's on his mind,  
He is truly good,  
Eats Fluttershy's food . . . No that won't work either.” Pinkie Pie was busy composing a suitable song for Vagabond.

Pinkie trotted along the path to Fluttershy's cottage humming happily, and somewhat vacantly to herself as her saddlebags, filled with baked goods, jostled on her sides. The ground around her seemed to vibrate suddenly. Pinkie Pie turned her head and looked behind her. A small, giggling cloud of dust rushed at her, bypassed her and halted expectantly at the door to Fluttershy's cottage just ahead.

Applejack walked shakily up next to Pinkie Pie,  
“So . . . much . . . energy.” Applejack panted haggardly.

Pinkie Pie put a hoof to her muzzle to stifle a sudden fit of the giggles.

Applejack shot Pinkie Pie a scowl,  
“Ah’d like to see you keep up with those three.”

The statement only caused further merriment from the pink pony. Pinkie Pie looked like she was about ready to explode with laughter. Applejack rolled her eyes, ‘**Whoever can figure out Pinkie Pie is a better pony than me.**’ Applejack thought.

Motion caught Applejack’s eye. She snapped her head up. Fluttershy had opened her door and let the Cutie-mark Crusaders in. Applejack was so relieved seeing Applebloom and her friends safe, she collapsed onto the path with a heavy thump. Pinkie Pie laughed so hard she almost fell over.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Want some help?” Big Macintosh asked.

Vagabond shook his head,  
“No thanks. I need to do this on my own.” he grunted trying to stand.

Vagabond lowered his front hooves onto the floor and flexed his joints down then up several times slowly, testing them. The shifting muscles made the bandage over his wing stumps rub abrasively and painfully. Fluttershy had already given Vagabond his morning dose of pain medication, so the discomfort was manageable, if barely. His forelegs held strong so he inched his way forward at an angle and slowly lowered his left hind leg down. He could easily feel the stiffness as he unfolded the joint. He slowly shifted his weight onto the limb and found it strong as ever.

Feeling confident, he simply pulled his right hind leg off the couch and stood. Vagabond was feeling quite good.

Vagabond shook out his mane loosening himself up, “Ah, to be mobile again.” he said grinning, “I will have to be going soon, tomorrow morning I believe. I should be well enough by then.”

“How are you even able to walk Vagabond?” Fluttershy asked, “Less than two days ago you couldn’t even move.”

“It isn’t natural for anypony to heal this rapidly. I’ll show you how it works before I go.” Vagabond said.

A familiar scent wafted by Angel’s nose as he sat on his almost-constant perch, nestled in Fluttershy’s mane. His ears stood up ramrod straight, he sat up alert, and turned toward the door, just as Applejack and Pinkie Pie walked in.

Vagabond looked toward the door, “I don’t have an answer for you yet Applejack. I’m working on it though.” He said taking the initiative boldly.

Applejack smiled lightly, “That’s alright,” she said, “Long as you’re workin’ on it.”

“Thank you Applejack.” Vagabond said humbly, “You really helped me out a lot. Your honesty was brutal, but I think it was exactly what I needed.”

Applejack blushed, slightly embarrassed, “Aw shucks,” she said, scuffing the floor with her hoof, “Weren’t nothin. Honesty is mah element after all.”

Vagabond cocked his head to the side, puzzled, “Your element?” he asked.

“The Elements of Harmony, silly.” Pinkie Pie piped up, “Applejack is Honesty, Fluttershy is Kindness, I’m Laughter, Rarity is Generosity, Rainbow Dash is Loyalty, and Twilight is Magic. That’s how we defeated Nightmare Moon and restored Princess Luna.”

"I'm afraid I have absolutely no idea what all that means. Could somepony explain it to me?" Vagabond asked quizzically.

Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie and Applejack took turns relating the events centered around Nightmare Moon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rarity had caught up with Rainbow Dash and Twilight on the path to Fluttershy's. Dash and Twilight were glad to see Rarity but the questions she was asking were beginning to make Twilight uncomfortable. Twilight answered Rarity's questions as best she could. The topic was unusual and rarely discussed among average ponies, but Twilight had a firm grasp of the concept.

"Why did you ask me all that Rarity? It's really unusual for anypony to discuss it." Twilight said.

"I know darling, but I want to make sure I get it right." Rarity said.

"Are you thinking about getting one, Rarity?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Heaven's no." Rarity said then sighed, "I suppose an explanation is in order." Rarity drew in a deep breath, "I was horribly rude yesterday and I want Vagabond to know how sorry I am. I'm going to give him one that I shall make for him. I jumped to a conclusion about him at first, but then I went back over to Fluttershy's to see him yesterday and learned that he isn't at all what I thought." Rarity admitted.

"From my understanding, I would think that no Vagabond is what they seem to be." Twilight said sagely, "In fact I have a sort of gift for him myself."

Rainbow Dash and Rarity looked at each other quizzically. Both friends noted that Twilight carried nothing with her.

Rainbow Dash was the first to ask, "Uh Twilight, how can you give Vagabond something if you don't have anything with you?"

“Not all gifts have to be physical Dash. My gift is magical. I stayed up late last night memorizing a spell I asked Princess Celestia for. It actually took a bit of convincing to get her to send me the spell on a scroll. After I had the spell I had to modify it so I could cast it on others. Princess Celestia made me promise not to use it unless she says it’s alright. She said it could be dangerous if it is misused.”

“Well come on darling, what is it?” Rarity asked.

Twilight shook her head,  
“I’m sorry Rarity I can’t discuss the details. I’m only planning on casting it this one time. Don’t worry everypony will be there.”

“I’m glad we’re almost to Fluttershy’s. This suspense is killing me.”  
Rainbow Dash said.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Wow!” Vagabond said, eyes wide, “That is some tale! It sounds like you six are real heroines. I had no idea I was being cared for by living legends.”

“Silly,” Pinkie Pie said, “We’re not legends; we’re just us.”

Vagabond chuckled at Pinkie’s response and was about to say something when somepony knocked at the cottage door.

Pinkie Pie appeared at the door like magic and opened it wide,  
“Hi, Dr. Mend.” she greeted.

Dr. Mend entered the Cottage and set down his bag,  
“Hello Pinkie Pie.” he greeted.

Dr. Mend was about to speak but he spotted Vagabond. The older earth pony’s mouth dropped open,  
“How . . . how can you be standing?” he asked.

Vagabond took a step back, lowering his head defensively and did not answer. Big Macintosh and Fluttershy eyed Dr. Mend warily.

Fortunately, the Cutie-mark Crusaders didn't notice the adults making faces at each other,  
"Hi Dr. Mend!" they chimed in unison.

The three absurdly cute voices shook Dr. Mend out of his shocked state,  
"Oh hello Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Applebloom." He said acknowledging the three, then turned to Applejack and Pinkie Pie, "Would you two girls be kind enough to take the fillies outside to play? I have to change Vagabond's bandages."

Pinkie Pie smiled hugely,  
"Okie-dokie-lokie." she said, "Come on girls, let's go play tag."

Applejack was not fooled one bit. She had immediately seen Fluttershy's expression not to mention that of Big Macintosh and Vagabond's posture on top of that. She decided that Big Mac and Fluttershy would tell her what was up if they felt it was important. She left behind Applebloom and closed the door behind her.

As soon as Applejack closed the door, Dr. Mend opened his bag and began talking,  
"I admit I'm amazed you're standing. You may want to lie down, this will probably be quite uncomfortable. I need to unwrap the bandage and examine the stitches to ensure infection hasn't set in again. I have some steroids for your immune system and some more pain medication. Oh, and by the way," Dr. Mend said looking at Fluttershy, "There will be no charge for my services. I'll leave some spare bandages with you when I go."

Dr. Mend looked up at the stunned expressions of the three ponies around him and stood up straight,  
"I am not so proud as to be unable to admit when I am in the wrong. Yesterday I did something cruel and caused you pain Vagabond. Don't get it into your head that I like you, or like that you are here, but that doesn't change the fact that you are my patient. As my patient, you deserve the best treatment I can provide no matter how I feel about you personally. I had forgotten why I chose this line of work and somepony was nice enough to remind me." Dr. Mend explained, "Now if that is enough, I have work to do."

Vagabond sat down on his haunches, hiding a slight smile,  
“Let’s get this over with then.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Applebloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle were playing a rowdy game of tag while Applejack and Pinkie Pie watched,  
“Ah wonder why Fluttershy and Big Mac were lookin’ at Dr. Mend like that?” Applejack asked.

“Like what?” Rainbow Dash asked landing next to Applejack.

Applejack was so startled, she reared back and fell over onto Pinkie Pie, who was on her other side.

Pinkie Pie, being Pinkie Pie just laughed,  
“Good one Rainbow Dash!” she snorted.

“Thanks Pinkie, but what did you mean Applejack?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Applejack picked herself up off Pinkie Pie, who was still laughing,  
“They were eyeballin’ Dr. Mend somethin’ funny, when we left.”

“Who was?” Twilight asked walking up with Rarity beside her.

Applejack put a hoof over her eyes and sighed, heavily,  
“For the last time, Fluttershy and Big Mac were lookin’ at Dr. Mend real odd-like when Pinkie Pie and Ah brought Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle and Applebloom out here so they wouldn’t have to watch Vagabond’s bandages bein’ changed!” Applejack said more loudly than she meant to.”

“No need to get upset darling, we were just curious.” Rarity said.

Applejack felt bad, she hadn’t meant to yell,  
“Ah’m sorry everypony. Ah guess Ah’m just tired. Ah’m not used to doin’ all the chores by mah self, on the farm.”

“Apology accepted, Applejack.” Rarity said, “I believe I know why they were looking at Dr. Mend so oddly though.”



“So, tell us.” Rainbow Dash said eagerly.

“Well when I was visiting yesterday, apparently Dr. Mend had left some anesthetics for Vagabond when he first treated him, but took them back and didn’t give Vagabond anything for the pain before he left. Vagabond laid on one of his wing stumps and . . . um . . . kind of lost it, before he passed out from the pain.”

Rainbow Dash took to the air angrily,  
“Why that rotten . . . ugh! I’m going to show him pain!”

Applejack reacted first and grabbed Rainbow Dash by the tail with her teeth.

“It’s alright darling.” Rarity said, “It was cruel but Fluttershy went and must have convinced Dr. Mend to recant, because she came back with the pain medication. I’m sure Fluttershy and Big Macintosh will ensure there is not a repeat performance on Dr. Mend’s part.”

Rainbow Dash settled down somewhat and landed,  
“He better not try it again.” she grumbled.

“Applejack, do you think you could take Applebloom and her friends back to the farm for a while? Rarity and I have some things to do that they shouldn’t witness.” Twilight said.

“Like what?” Applejack asked cocking an eyebrow.

“I have a spell that they shouldn’t see. I’m going to cast it for the Vagabond. It’s not dangerous per se, but it’s not something they should be exposed to. I’m afraid I can’t elaborate further. You just have to trust me.” Twilight explained.

“Well, alright then Twilight. Ah’ll just have to ask Granny Smith to watch ‘em.” Applejack said standing.

Applejack drew in a deep breath,  
“Applebloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle! Come ‘ere!”

The three fillies zipped up to Applejack in a flash,

“What’s up sis?” Applebloom asked.

“Ah need yall to come with me back to Sweet Apple Acres.” Applejack said.

Three cute faces put on their most adorable pouty expressions,  
“Aww.”

Applejack suddenly had a thought,  
“Ah’m goin’ to get the cart so we can bring Vagabond to the farm tonight.  
He’s leavin’ in the mornin’ and Ah wanted to make him some for his trip.”

The Cutie-mark Crusaders found the idea acceptable and Applejack  
led them off toward the farm straightaway.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Everything looks, well, remarkably good. I’m amazed at how quickly you  
recover. I would expect most ponies to take two weeks to recover this  
much, not two days.” Dr. Mend said astonished.

Vagabond had been checked, dosed, and freshly bandaged. He was  
feeling refreshed and better than ever. The new bandages were cool and  
comfortable. They rubbed gently on the stumps, lubricated by the ointment  
Dr. Mend had applied. He could move without much pain, if he moved  
slowly and carefully.

Vagabond walked carefully over to his saddlebags and pulled out a  
mortar and pestle,  
“I have a talent for herbal remedies and, I think, alchemy. I snuck out last  
night and found some plants and roots. It was about all I could do but it  
worked. I mixed up a potion that I discovered by accident a long time ago. It  
multiplies the body’s natural healing, and it has no side effects. It continues  
to work for three days. I’d be more than happy to give you the formula, but  
I need you to do something for me before I do.”

“And what would that be?” Dr. Mend asked suspiciously.

Vagabond looked Dr. Mend dead in the eye,  
“Promise me that you won’t ever charge anyone for it.” he said seriously.

Dr. Mend was taken aback, but held his expression,  
“I make enough bits for my regular services. Very well, you have my word Vagabond.”

Vagabond hid a knowing smirk, as he reached into his saddlebags,  
“I took the liberty of making three copies of it. One is for you Fluttershy.”  
Vagabond said passing a sheaf of parchment to Fluttershy.

Vagabond then turned to Dr. Mend,  
“I had originally planned to ask Fluttershy to deliver it to you with the understanding that it should be cost-free, but since you’re here, I can give it to you myself.” Vagabond said giving Dr. Mend two copies of the recipe,  
“Give the other copy to somepony who is good with herbs and natural remedies. Feel free to make copies as you see fit. I have a sample of the ingredients and the potion. There is enough for four doses. Fluttershy, Dr. Mend do you have containers?”

Fluttershy dashed into the kitchen and grabbed a tiny spice jar. Dr. Mend rooted around in his bag and came out with a metal-topped glass jar. Fluttershy and Dr. Mend set down their containers in front of Vagabond.

While Vagabond poured the runny paste into the respective containers, Dr. Mend couldn’t help but to ask,  
“You planned to give me a copy of your potion even before you knew I was willing to help you again, and after what I said and did? I don’t understand.”

Vagabond finished pouring the concoction into the jars and set down the bowl,  
“You said what you did because you wanted to protect Ponyville. You may have been cruel to me, but everypony experiences a lapse of judgment. I figured if the citizens of Ponyville trusted you, it was because you earned it. I decided that the ponies who would do the most good were the trusted doctor and the veterinarian. You and Fluttershy were the only logical choices I could think of, despite any feelings I might have.”

Dr. Mend gingerly placed the jar into his bag,  
“I still don’t like that a Vagabond is here, but . . . uh . . . thanks”

Vagabond bowed his head slightly,  
“So long as you care about your patients, I can live with that.”

Vagabond's words struck home like a knife blade,  
"Well then," Dr. Mend said picking up his bag, "I need to be going. I did leave the steroids and pain medication with you didn't I?" Dr. Mend asked.

Vagabond nodded,  
"I already put the bottles in my saddle bags. Thank you."

"I'll see you around Fluttershy, Big Macintosh." Dr. Mend said to each then turned to Vagabond, "I hope I don't have to see you again, as a Vagabond." Dr. Mend quickly said then closed the door behind him.

"I wonder what he meant by that?" Fluttershy asked.

Big Macintosh smiled knowingly,  
"Ah think Ah'll let Vagabond answer that."

Vagabond turned toward Fluttershy,  
"I think that was his own way of wishing me luck."

Pinkie Pie came back in, followed by Twilight, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity who carried saddle bags as heavily laden as Pinkie's.

"Where is Applejack, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Applebloom?" Fluttershy asked.

"Twilight and I have some things to give Vagabond that we felt the fillies shouldn't be privy to darling." Rarity said.

"I've taken enough. I don't want to impose." Vagabond said yawning loudly,  
"Excuse me, the pain killers are making me sleepy."

"That's quite alright darling. Take a nap. We'll still be here." Rarity said placatingly.

"But . . . " Vagabond began.

Rarity interrupted him,  
"I won't hear another word. We shall discuss it when you wake up."

“I’m sorry,” Vagabond said, yawning again, “The new stuff Dr. Mend gave me is supposed to make me sleepy. I thought I could handle it but I’m just too tired.” he said making his way to the couch.

Vagabond lay down and fell asleep almost instantly.

Rarity took off her saddle bags,  
“Does anypony know what his original cutie-mark looked like?”

“Ayup.” Big Macintosh said, “His cutie-marks are in his saddle bags. He showed Fluttershy and Ah last night.”

“Since he showed you, would it be alright if I saw . . .” Rarity began, then stopped. Her eyes bulged, “How is his cutie-mark IN his saddle bags?”

Fluttershy averted her eyes,  
“Oh Rarity, it was horrible! Vagabond said when he was exiled somepony cut them off him and left them in his saddle bags.” she explained.

Rarity swallowed hard, steeling herself,  
“May I see them?” she asked.

“Why Rarity?” Fluttershy asked.

“I’d rather not say yet.” Rarity said pulling a sketch pad out of her saddle bags.

Rarity reached out and gently shook Vagabond. He didn’t respond so she shook him harder. When he still didn’t respond, Rarity put both hooves against his side and pushed hard, rocking him back and forth.

Vagabond cracked open his eyes and looked at Rarity, barely awake,  
“Huh,” he asked sleepily, “What is it miss Rarity?”

“May I see your cutie-mark please?” Rarity asked.

“Yeah, s . . . sure I guess.” Vagabond said.

Vagabond laid his head back down and almost instantly began snoring again. Rarity cringed as she approached Vagabond’s saddlebags.

Twilight's curiosity was piqued so she opened the saddlebags and levitated out the two patches of Vagabond's hide.

She levitated them over to Rarity,  
"I'll hold them for you Rarity. I think I know what you're planning considering what you asked me about earlier."

"Thank you Twilight." Rarity said picking up a charcoal pencil, and began sketching.

Everypony watched Rarity mimic the design. Vagabond's cutie-mark design was of a mortar and pestle with a mushroom, a root, and a flower inside then a trio of Dock leaves behind it all.

# Chapter 8

"Thanks Granny, Ah really appreciate it. Ah'll be back later tonight."  
Applejack said, thanking her beloved matriarch.

"Hurry back dear. These old bones can't keep up with youngsters the way Ah used to." Granny Smith said.

"Ah will Granny." Applejack said respectfully.

Applejack stepped off the front porch and headed toward the barn. She pulled the canvas off the cart and strapped on the saddle. The cart was old but it was one of those things that was well made and it had withstood the test of time proudly. It was sturdy, made of Black Oak and, as far as Applejack could tell, nigh on unbreakable. The saddle/harness creaked softly, complaining of frequent use. Applejack made a mental note to, ***'Oil up the dang thing.'***

Applejack pulled the cart out of the old barn and stopped several years from the house,  
"Ah'll be back soon girls. Yall behave yourselves for Granny while Ah'm gone." she yelled.

Three adorable faces poked out of the second story, far right window, where Applebloom's room was,  
"Bye Applejack." they said in unison.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vagabond slowly came-to and saw that Applejack had returned; not only that but everypony was sat down on the floor starring right at him,  
"How long was I asleep?"he asked.

Rarity smiled mischievously,  
"Long enough for me to give you your cutie-mark back. For a time at least."  
she said pointing to Vagabond's flank.

Vagabond whipped his head around and stared in awe. There, on his flank, was his cutie-mark. It was back and better than ever. The design was exactly the same except now the rim of the mortar bowl was lined with marquis cut gems; the same formed a circle around the thin center of the pestle.

Vagabond couldn't speak for several moments. The cutie-mark was beautiful. Rarity had obviously put a lot of work into it and it showed. The gems seemed to add a third dimension, making it look like it was going to spring right out at you.

His eyes welled up with tears, but he blinked them away, and found his voice,  
"It's a beautiful painting. Thank you Rarity."

"Do you like it darling?" Rarity asked.

"It's actually better than my old one. I love it. I wish it was permanent."  
Vagabond said, voice cracking.

"Do you really mean that?" Rarity asked rising to her hooves.

"Yes I do." Vagabond said, "I truly do."

"Then hold still." Rarity said.

Vagabond didn't move. Rarity closed her eyes to concentrate as she lowered her horn. Vagabond closed his eyes too, focusing on holding as still as possible. He felt his flanks begin to heat up slowly and poured all his will into not moving. The heat on his flank kept increasing. It became uncomfortable, but he held his posture, not moving a muscle. Seconds ticked by and still the heat intensified. It was all Vagabond could do to stay still. Tiny beads of perspiration formed all over his body, but his will held firm, ***'I won't let Rarity's gift to waste.'*** he thought over and over again.

Finally the heat subsided. As it did Vagabond opened his eyes and found Rarity standing not a foot from him. Her horn still pulsed from the effort and she was breathing heavily.



Rarity raised her right fore hoof and placed it on Vagabond's left one, "It is permanent now darling." Rarity began, "I badly misjudged you Vagabond. I assumed the worst and I was wrong. Whatever you used to be, you are different now. Can you ever forgive me?"

"I already had Rarity." Vagabond said softly.

Rarity removed her hoof from Vagabond and stepped back, "I do believe there is somepony else who wants to give you something." she said indicating Twilight.

Vagabond turned toward Twilight, "No need for introductions. You're Twilight Sparkle, and my savior is Rainbow Dash. Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Applejack told me how you all defeated Nightmare Moon. That's also how I learned your names." Vagabond paused then, thinking, "I can understand everypony else being so nice to me, they've gotten to know me, but you and I haven't even spoken before now. Why give me something if you don't know me? I don't mean to sound unappreciative because I do appreciate the notion. I'm merely curious about your motivation."

Twilight stepped into the very center of the room and starred Vagabond in the eye, "Did they tell you how much I value knowledge Vagabond?" she asked.

"Yes they said you were quite the scholar." Vagabond admitted.

"I did some research and, while you were asleep, I spoke to everypony about you and your situation. Through all that, I made a few discoveries and came to some conclusions." Twilight paused to take a breath before continuing, "From what my friends tell me, you are a good person, you just made a poor decision and you don't want to risk hurting anypony. You've learned your lesson and I believe I can provide you with some relief and a good bit of closure." Twilight paused again, amassing her courage, "If you want, I know a spell that will let you see Arabesque again."

The entire cottage became utterly still and silent, even Pinkie Pie stopped hopping and stood still waiting. Seconds ticked by, becoming minutes. Everypony was shocked at what Twilight had offered. Vagabond's

mind raced at dizzying speed, his thoughts were a maelstrom of conflicting ideas and emotions.

Finally Vagabond found his voice again,  
"How long will the spell last?" he asked.

"The spell is complex and I'll have to concentrate on it the whole time, so not long. I might be able to give you a full minute, but that will be pushing it." Twilight explained.

"Will I be able to talk to her? Will she be able to see me? Will she be able to hear me?" Vagabond asked rapidly.

"Arabesque will be able to see and talk to everypony but me. I have to maintain the spell." Twilight said.

"I'll do anything, ANYTHING to see her again. Please Twilight, let me see her." Vagabond pleaded.

"Do you want to be alone for this Vagabond?" Twilight asked, "It is personal."

Vagabond didn't even pause,  
"No, you all have been here for me. Every one of you has earned the right to be here."

"Ah'm not so sure about that. Ah've hardly done anything." Big Macintosh said.

Vagabond turned to the massively built earth pony,  
"You've been here, listening to me gripe and whine. You've stayed by my side, helping me even though it's been inconvenient. You deserve to be here Big Mac; all of you deserve to be here." Vagabond said then turned to Twilight, "Whenever you're ready Twilight."

Twilight nodded solemnly and took a bracing stance. She lowered her head and breathed evenly, closing her eyes. Twilight's horn began to glow as she cast the spell. The glow of her horn intensified after a moment, changing from a glow to a blinding flare. Sparks of magical energy crawled

and leapt from the tip of her horn. Twilight's horn flashed so blindingly that everypony had to shield their eyes.

As the light receded, every eye in the cottage was drawn to the center of the room. Twilight had vanished. In Twilight's place stood a light red pegasus pony filly with bright yellow mane and tail. Her cutie-mark was a pair of ballet slippers of the purest white, but it was her eyes that drew the most attention. Arabesque's eyes were pupil less and pure white.

Vagabond starred dumbly at the spirit of his long dead love before he remembered the time constraint of the reunion, "Arabesque?" he asked.

"It is I." Arabesque responded.

"Ooh, she's pretty!" Pinkie Pie blurted.

Vagabond remembered the presence of his new friends, "Arabesque, these are my friends. They've . . . " Vagabond began.

Arabesque interrupted him, "I already know. I knew they were here. That's why I led you here. You needed their influence to begin your recovery. Your sorrow and hurt blinded you. You pulled your pain into a shell and used the darkness of despair to harden it. You have to learn to open yourself to others. These ponies gathered here, are all here for you. They care about you."

"I never meant to hurt you Arabesque." Vagabond said.

"Not physically, no. I know my death was not intentional. But you were willing to hurt my dream to obtain what you wished." Arabesque said pointedly.

"I was wrong. Love isn't selfish, it's selfless, it's . . . generous." Vagabond's eyes widened as all the pieces fell into place.

Clarity hit him like a train. Suddenly it all made sense. Vagabond looked at Rarity, then to every face in the room. Vagabond began speaking again.

The words flowed from him like a waterfall,  
"Love doesn't judge or assume. Love is accepting. Love takes things as they are without foregone conclusions." he said looking at Big Macintosh.

Vagabond turned his eyes to Fluttershy,  
"Love isn't heartless, it's caring, no matter the cost to yourself, love is kind."

Vagabond's eyes turned to Pinkie Pie next,  
"Love isn't sad or depressed. It's joyous, laughing, always looking on the bright side."

Vagabond's eyes fell on Applejack next,  
"Love has no secrets. It's open and honest to a fault, even when you may not want to hear it."

Rainbow Dash was the next to feel the weight of Vagabond's gaze,  
"Love never abandons. Love is loyal and steady, always there no matter what comes."

Vagabond shifted his gaze to Rarity,  
"Love isn't greedy or selfish. Love is generous, giving of itself in all things and at all times with gifts both meaningful and thoughtful."

Vagabond looked straight at Arabesque,  
"Love isn't stoppable. Love is magic. Through love all things are possible, love conquers all obstacles." Vagabond took a quick breath and continued,  
"That's why you brought me here, to learn what love really is. Not just to heal, but to learn through example."

Arabesque smiled warmly,  
"Very good." she said.

A bright light flashed and Twilight reappeared. She was breathing hard and sweating heavily. Twilight collapsed onto the floor, her legs lacking the strength to support her. Applejack and Rainbow Dash ran over and helped Twilight up.

Twilight cracked open her eyes, gazing groggily at Vagabond,  
"I'm s . . . sorry I couldn't . . . hold it any . . . longer."

"Don't you dare apologize Twilight." Vagabond said boldly, "I owe you more than I can ever repay." Vagabond took a breath and turned his head to a certain apple-flanked earth pony mare, "Applejack, I have your answer now."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Granny, can you make us somethin'? We're hungry." Applebloom asked, shaking Granny Smith gently awake.

Granny Smith blinked owlshly and looked up from her rocking chair, "Eh, what's that?" she asked.

"Ah'm sorry to wake you Granny but can you cook us up somethin' please?" Applebloom asked sweetly.

Granny Smith smiled warmly at Applebloom, "Oh certainly dear. Applejack made a couple of pies the other day. Ah'll just heat one up and call you when it's ready. Are yall still playin' in your room?" Granny asked.

"Yes ma'am, we are. Thank you Granny." Applebloom said running off.

Granny Smith rose, creaking from her rocking chair on the front porch and slowly made her way inside. The front door lead to the foyer. You could go left, into the Den, or right, into the Front room. Granny Smith turned right. Once in the Front room, she had to turn left sharply and head on into the kitchen which was toward the back of the house. Once in the kitchen, Granny Smith lit one of the burners on the old gas range but kept the flame low.

Everypony in the Apple family knew that though they would try, no single one of them could match Granny Smith in the kitchen. Granny Smith may have been old, the oldest pony in the Apple family, but Celestia help anypony who thought they could match her in culinary skills. The only one who even came close was Applejack.

Granny Smith had to tug hard to break the seal of moisture which had cemented the door of the old ice box. She rooted around for a moment before she found a pie.

She pulled the pie out and examined the bottom, "Ah'll have to use a pan to heat that one up." she said noticing the absence of a bottom she could put safely on the range top.

Granny Smith's mind was still keen even at her advanced age. She set the pie down and grabbed a cast iron pan off the counter top. She put the pie into the pan then set the pan on the counter next to the range. Granny felt a sudden icy sensation hit her back. When she was removing the pie, Granny Smith had brushed the top of her head against the enfrosted roof of the freezer. She shook large chunks of melting frost out of her mane, which splotted noisily as they hit the floor. **'Huh'** she thought, ***'Some of the frost from the ice box must have fallen into mah mane when Ah pulled out the pie. Ah need a towel to wipe that up. Don't want anypony slippin' on it.'*** Granny put the pan onto the range, then went for a towel.

Granny Smith failed to notice one large piece had fallen into her tail as she wiped up the water. The chunk of frost melted and plopped quietly onto the floor behind her. She finished wiping up that water, the towel was soaked. She turned around, toward the washroom but didn't see the reflective sheen of wet linoleum. She slipped on the water, fell back, and hit her head, knocking herself out cold.

\* \* \* \* \*

"My talent is for herbs, herbal remedies, and alchemy. Once I'm forgiven, I'll go to Canterlot and study chemistry, pharmaceuticals, and alchemy. I don't know what will happen after that, but I've been considering getting a wagon and traveling to different cities and towns to give away potions and pamphlets about some of the recipes I know. I want to provide a service to families who don't have much money. I'll also teach a couple of ponies at each stop, how to do the same. I want to leave a legacy to as many as I can. As an ongoing reminder of what has been done for me, I want to provide for those who have a need." Vagabond said, slowly limping his way out of Fluttershy's cottage door.

"And what is it that has been done for you Vagabond?" Twilight asked.

Vagabond smiled at his new friends,  
"You and your friends have sacrificed a great deal for a stranger, a condemned stranger. You have come together to give me the greatest gift of my whole life. That gift is hope. I am going to do my very best to pass that along." Vagabond paused next to the Apple family's cart, "Are you sure you don't want me to walk Big Mac?" he asked.

"Ayup. You need to save your energy for the road tomorrow." Big Mac said.

Applejack couldn't help but to comment,  
"You're a pegasus, yall don't hardly weigh a thing to us earth ponies. Ah've pulled this here apple cart all the way from Sweet Apple Acres to Fluttershy's cottage with it fully loaded down with apples. It's not a big deal, especially for Big Macintosh. Ain't that right big brother?" Applejack asked.

"Ayup." Big Mac replied.

"As long as you're sure. Thank you." Vagabond said slowly crawling up into the back of the apple cart.

Vagabond lay down and nestled between his saddlebags, and the pastries Pinkie Pie had brought, then wrapped himself in Big Macintosh's blanket. He was warm, surrounded by friends who had opened their lives to him, and he loved it. Vagabond felt more at peace in that moment than he had in a long time, ***'I feel at home here, like I'm supposed to be here. It's so perfect here, among friends, among such loving ponies. I love it here in Ponyville. I will come back, I swear.'***

"All set back here Big Mac." Vagabond yelled from the back of the cart.

Applejack, Twilight, Rarity Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie walked behind the cart so they could talk to Vagabond, while Rainbow Dash flew overhead, preferring to be airborne. The procession of friends set out at a casual gait. Night had fallen and they wanted to reach Sweet Apple Acres before it got too late.

"You seem much more cheerful than when you first woke up Vagabond." Pinkie Pie ventured.

"I am Pinkie. Seeing Arabesque again and talking to her, gave me absolute assurance that she will forgive me someday. She indicated that I was starting to recover. I had no idea she had been keeping me a Vagabond for my own good. It would never have occurred to me. I still have to stay a Vagabond, constantly wandering, but now I have hope. I wouldn't have that if not for all of you. Once I'm forgiven and I'm done with my traveling, I would like to come back to Ponyville and live here, if you all will have me."

"We would love that darling." Rarity said.

"I agree." Twilight said, "Your knowledge of plants probably rivals that of our friend Zecora."

"Zecora?" Vagabond asked, "I don't believe I've met her."

Pinkie Pie began humming an odd little tune, which caused her friends to shoot her a series of scowls,  
"What?" Pinkie asked, "It was still a good song, even if Zecora isn't evil."

"Evil?" Vagabond asked.

"It's a long story." Rainbow Dash said from above.

"From my understanding, it's a long trip from here to Sweet Apple Acres too." Vagabond said hopefully.

"Well," Twilight began, "I didn't even know Zecora was even around for a while after I moved here. It had been about two months since we defeated Nightmare Moon . . . " Twilight explained.

The story continued for a little under half an hour, but finally Twilight finished,

"And since then, every shop has been open and available for Zecora anytime she wants." Twilight finished.

Vagabond absently noticed they had entered the orchards of Sweet Apple Acres,

"Wow! A Zebra! I've never met one. They're . . . " Vagabond's sentence was cut off from above.



"Fire! There's a fire at the farm house!" Rainbow Dash cried from above.

Big Macintosh set his jaw and took off at a gallop, yelling, "Come on! Granny Smith and the girls were at the house! Dash take a look!"

"Sweetie Belle!" Rarity shrieked.

Everypony burst into a charge toward the homestead; everypony except Vagabond, who could only hold on for dear life. His injuries screamed as the cart bounced down the path. He let go of the side of the cart and balanced precariously as he opened his saddle bags and took out the pain medication Dr. Mend had given him. The pills spilled as the cart bounced. Vagabond grabbed as many as he could with his muzzle, but the cart bounced again and he accidentally swallowed them. Vagabond had no idea how many he swallowed, ***'I'll have to vomit them up later.'*** he thought.

The cart nicked the side of an apple tree, causing several of the juicy fruit to fall. One struck the side of the cart, splattering its juice all over the back. Vagabond blinked mushy pulp from his eyes. A reflective twinkle caught his attention. Some of the juice from the apple had landed on Big Macintosh's heavy blanket. As Vagabond watched, the blanket absorbed the juice.

"Applebloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle are still inside, but the outside of the room they're in is an inferno! I didn't see Granny Smith either, but Wynona is somewhere inside barking. I think she's with Granny Smith." Rainbow Dash yelled to the galloping friends.

"Dash!" Vagabond yelled, "Could somepony get in on the ground?"

"Only if they were fireproof!" Dash yelled back.

Vagabond turned his attention to Twilight, "Twilight, how long would a building have to burn before it collapsed?"

"Depending on the intensity of the flame and how dry the wood . . . " Twilight began.

Vagabond interrupted her,  
"Just guess!" he yelled.

"Twenty to forty minutes I guess." Twilight said panting.

"We've been traveling that long! Do you think the structure could support an adult pony right now?" Vagabond asked.

"I can't see it! How should I . . . " Twilight began, then made another guess,  
"A pegasus perhaps. But Fluttershy's not strong enough to carry much and Rainbow Dash said you can't get inside."

"Unless you're fireproof!" Vagabond yelled.

A crazy idea had hit him. It was truly insane to even think of, but he knew he had to try.

"Rainbow Dash! I need a bucket of water ready when we get there! Can you do that?" Vagabond asked.

Even as the words left his lips, he began to pray, begging Celestia and Luna to help him.

"I'm on it!" Rainbow Dash yelled and took off like a rocket.

"Rarity, Fluttershy, do you have enough in you to catch a filly in freefall?" Vagabond asked.

"I guess so." Fluttershy said.

"I believe I can, yes." Rarity said.

"Big Mac, Applejack, Pinkie, get ready to spot for them." Vagabond yelled.

"Twilight," Vagabond addressed, "Are you recovered enough to catch something with magic and levitate it down to the ground?"

"Yes. I'm sure I can" Twilight said.

"When we arrive, get ready to do so." Vagabond said, then turned his attention to Applejack, "Applejack, which room would the fillies be in?"

"Second floor, far right door." Applejack yelled.

"And your Granny?" Vagabond asked.

"Um . . . She might be in the kitchen. That's the only place a fire could have started. Applebloom knows not to touch the stove or play with matches. It's on the first floor, to the right and all the way back." Applejack instructed.

"Look!" Big Macintosh said.

The farmhouse had come into view. It was in flames on the right side, but the left side was beginning to catch as well. Over the roar of the flames, over the thunder of galloping hooves, everypony could hear a trio of voices crying for help. Vagabond looked for the window to Applebloom's room and spotted it. Rainbow Dash had been right, nopony could get in that way. Vagabond looked for Rainbow Dash by a well that caught his eye, but she was not there.

"Over here!" Rainbow Dash called from the side of the barn, "These are rain barrels!"

Big Macintosh skidded to a halt and began fighting to unbuckle himself from the saddle/harness. Vagabond's body screamed at him as he leapt out of the back of the cart with Big Macintosh's blanket in his mouth. As he landed, the jarring force and the pain combined to make him nauseous and dizzy. He ran, staggering over to Rainbow Dash and dunked his whole head, blanket and all, into the closest rain barrel.

Vagabond pulled the blanket out and whipped it open, yelling, "Rainbow Dash, can you catch?"

"Like a champ." Dash bragged.

"Good. Hoover outside Applebloom's room window and be ready to catch fillies." he said.

Twilight caught on to the idea,

"I'll dump the rain barrels on the front of the window! Break it to signal me! I'll organize everything out here! GO!"

"You got it Twilight!" Vagabond said.

Vagabond whipped the soaked blanket over his body and pulled it closed in front of his face, with his muzzle. He breathed through his mouth, using the moisture and fabric to filter out the smoke.

"Celestia help me." he whispered and charged the front door.

Vagabond hit the door, shoulder out, with bone jarring force. The door gave way and swung open, the jam broken at the handle. Flame surged forward with the fresh air to fuel it. Vagabond closed his eyes and kept running, straight into the flames. It hurt. By Celestia it hurt. Vagabond smelled burning hair as his eyebrows and eyelashes were singed off. He forced himself not to cry out as his mostly unprotected legs took the full force of the heat and flame. His hooves struck wood and Vagabond opened his eyes. He was at the base of the stairs, stairs which were already on fire. Vagabond gritted his teeth and charged up the stairs as swiftly as he could.

His body raged against his will. His wing stubs hurt to no end, his legs were beginning to blister already, and while the wet blanket held off the fire itself, it also insulated the heat, right up against Vagabond's body. His hooves blistered and smoldered. The agony was nearly overwhelming. He reached the top of the stairs fighting off instinctual fight-or-flight response. Tears streamed out of his eyes but were almost instantly evaporated by the heat. The physical trauma was beginning to take its toll. Vagabond's mind was fuzzy and beginning to go numb, as a result of the pain, trauma, and pills.

Vagabond stumbled down the intensely hot, smoke-filled hallway, mumbling to himself, through the blanket, "Far right door, far right door."

The door was easy to spot. The girly designs on the door were a dead giveaway. The door was closed and Vagabond still had to breathe through his mouth, so he just ran the door down. Vagabond hurt everywhere, his hooves were blistered and charred, his face hurt to move,

and his legs were beginning to feel weak. As he entered the room, he saw a dresser to his left as he closed the door.

He shoved the dresser in front of the door, yelling as the blanket slid off him,  
Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, Applebloom! Where are you?"

Vagabond looked around the room, frantically, for the girls. Motion caught his eye and he looked down. A tiny head with an oversized bow poked out from under the bed, followed by two more.

The three terrified Cutie-mark Crusaders rushed out from under the bed,  
"Help us! We're scared!" they cried holding onto Vagabond for dear life.

Vagabond scanned the room for a pole-like object and immediately settled on a wooden lamp. With the three fillies holding onto him, Vagabond picked up the lamp and threw it out the window. The hot glass broke easily. A split second later, water cascaded down around the window, temporarily extinguishing the flames chewing on it. The water had the wonderful secondary effect of knocking away most of the remaining window glass.

"We're ready out here!" Rainbow Dash yelled through the window.

Vagabond bent down to pick up Applebloom, but stopped short as his vision blurred and he almost fell over from a dizzy spell. The pills were beginning to take effect. Vagabond realized he was now in almost no pain at all. In fact he could barely feel anything.

He shook his head to clear his vision,  
"Curl up tight into a little ball and don't move." he ordered Applebloom.

Applebloom curled up into the fetal position and screwed her tear filled eyes tightly shut. Vagabond picked Applebloom up by the tail and tossed her out the window like a softball. Rainbow Dash caught Applebloom easily and passed her off to Fluttershy who then let go of Applebloom when Rarity levitated her and lowered her onto the ground. Vagabond tossed out Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, both of whom made it out safely.

Vagabond threw out the blanket, yelling, "Get ready Twilight I'm combumum . . ." his mouth felt dry, and his body felt strange.

Vagabond shook his head to clear his vision. It only partially worked. He knew he couldn't wait any longer. He ran for the window, but his legs didn't work right. He tripped and instead of jumping, he hit the window sill and his momentum pushed him. Even in his numbed state, he could feel the pressure of the window frame against his chest. Vagabond grunted and entered freefall for an instant, before Twilight levitated him to the ground safely.

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight yelled, "Go get Dr. Mend, hurry!"

Vagabond leapt into clumsy action as soon as his body felt dirt. He staggered to his hooves and slung the blanket up and over his back, then ran back into the house, ignoring his friends' cries for him to stop. He knew he didn't have but maybe a minute before his mind and body gave in to the drugs.

Vagabond could barely see through the heat. He stumbled several times, but at least the floor hadn't caught fire yet. He followed the sounds of Wynona barking for guidance. He reached the kitchen and saw Granny Smith lying, unmoving on the linoleum floor. Vagabond peeled off the blanket and bent low to avoid the smoke. He picked up Granny Smith by the mane and set her down on the blanket.

Vagabond bit the edge of the blanket, keeping his head low and began pulling Granny Smith toward the front door, backwards. He had only just entered the Front Room when the ceiling of the kitchen groaned loudly. Vagabond didn't hesitate for even a moment. He pulled on the blanket with all his might. Vagabond stumbled and slipped, but Granny Smith was clear of the kitchen. Wynona leapt over Granny's body just as the ceiling collapsed with a thunderous crash, sending glowing embers flying like little molten fireflies.

Vagabond ignored the spectacle and focused his quickly diminishing strength on hauling Granny Smith to safety. He heard sizzling and felt a tingling sensation all over his body. Instinctively, he knew his own skin was

beginning to cook. He gritted his teeth, trying to focus, but his strength was depleted.

Vagabond's vision began to swim and specks of every color danced in front of his eyes, **'I can do this!'** he thought furiously, **'No matter the cost,'** he looked through his swimming vision at Granny Smith, **'You will live!'** his thoughts screamed with muffled determination.

A minuscule ember of strength sparked to life somewhere deep inside Vagabond. He focused his entire being; his whole heart, body, mind, and soul, on the tiny pinprick. Hope surged through him, a cool, calm stream of peace amid the seething, raging inferno of despair.

With a short, but monumental burst of strength and will, Vagabond hauled Granny Smith toward the front door, building up momentum as he went. He moved with speed greater than his own legs could keep up with. He stumbled but still he moved. His body ceased responding and kept moving of its own accord. Vagabond suddenly couldn't breathe. His body began gasping for air involuntarily. His vision unfocused and his mind began to wander. Vagabond was only dimly aware he had cleared the front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Big Macintosh saw Vagabond come running out of the front door backwards, pulling Granny Smith with him. Everypony rushed up to take care of Granny Smith. Vagabond kept pulling, like he didn't know he was clear of the house. Everypony yelled for Vagabond to stop, but it did no good.

Big Mac thought quickly and tripped Vagabond with his hoof, "Take Granny! I'll handle Vagabond!" he yelled ripping the blanket out of Vagabond's muzzle.

Dr. Mend dropped to the ground next to Big Mac, "Pry his mouth open! Shove a stick in between his teeth and make sure he doesn't swallow his tongue! I'll see to Granny!" he ordered.

Big Mac held Vagabond down and shoved a stick between his teeth, then just held him there for a moment. Vagabond began vomiting violently.

Big Macintosh turned him onto his side and cleared his airway,  
"It's O.K. now, ayup. Just calm down and breathe."

Big Macintosh was trying to comfort Vagabond when he heard  
Applejack scream,  
"NO! No no no no no no no no no!"

Big Macintosh turned his head and saw Dr. Mend pull his own blanket  
over Granny Smith's still form, covering her face. Applejack was sobbing  
brokenly over the still form of Granny Smith. Big Macintosh felt his heart  
lurch in agony and his eyes teared up. He hung his head and wept, even as  
Dr. Mend gently, but urgently pushed him out of the way.

Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash kept the little ones  
away from the scene. The fillies were inconsolable. They had seen  
Vagabond cooked, almost to death and had seen Granny Smith  
pronounced dead. The only pony who seemed even remotely calm was  
Twilight, and calm would not have described her accurately. She blinked  
away tears constantly, her whole body shuddering, as she made her way to  
Dr. Mend.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vagabond's world turned sideways and his hearing returned,  
"Twilight hand me my bag, quickly!" Dr. Mend shouted.

Vagabond saw Twilight levitate the bag over to him. Dr. Mend began  
working faster than Vagabond thought possible, when suddenly he  
stopped.

Twilight looked over Dr. Mend's shoulder,  
"What . . ." she sniffed, "What is that?"

"It's a shard of glass, probably from the window he fell through. It's  
punctured his lung." Dr. Mend said.

Twilight's ears dropped completely,  
"Will he live?" she asked.



"I'll make his as comfortable as I can." Dr. Mend said softly.

Vagabond struggled to speak, but it came out only as a gurgling whisper,  
"Granny O.K.?" he asked.

Dr. Mend hung his head sadly,  
"I'm sorry," he said, "I had to declare her, she didn't make it."

Vagabond's eyes widened, brimming with tears,  
"NO!" his scream rivaled Applejacks, "She's going to live!"

Vagabond had nothing left, but his mind burned with white-hot determination. He coughed up frothy blood, but through sheer force of will, managed to stagger to his hooves.

His hooves cracked and began to bleed, his whole body was a mass of blisters and charred skin, and his blood was seeping into his lung, but he wouldn't give up hope,  
"NO!" he shouted, coughing roughly, "She's going to watch Applebloom grow up!" he said taking a step toward Granny's body, "She's going to watch Applejack proudly on her wedding day!" he took another step, "SHE," step, "WILL," step, "LIVE!"

Vagabond took his final step, coming face to face with Applejack,  
"I will save her, I swear."

Vagabond felt pain again. He felt the glass shard dig deeply into his chest as he bent down and pulled the blanket from Granny Smith's still form. He took a deep breath and coughed up more blood, intentionally to clear it out for a moment. He placed his hooves on Granny's chest and pumped five times.

He lowered his head and breathed into her muzzle then pumped five more times,  
"Twilight! Force start her heart! I've seen it done . . . " Vagabond trailed off as a fit of coughing took him.

Twilight blinked away tears,

"She's gone, Vagabond. I . . ."

"DO IT!" Vagabond yelled, interrupting her, "You gave me hope now have some yourself! DO IT!" he cried turning back to Granny, "You will live!" he said tears streaming down his face.

Twilight, moved by Vagabond's actions, pieced together a spell and began casting it repeatedly. Vagabond could actually feel his life slipping away, but he was beyond caring. He would see this done before he died. He would force his body to live until he had resuscitation Granny Smith.

"Though my body be burned and broken, I will see you live!" Vagabond muttered.

"Look!" Big Macintosh said pointing.

Every eye present saw it. It was brief, and it only happened a couple of times, but as Vagabond worked, a bright light flashed behind his back. For the briefest of moments, during each flash the gathered ponies could swear they saw a pair of beautiful golden glowing wings, nearly as long as Celestia's, attached to Vagabond's back.

Vagabond's strength failed him for the last time. He took a deep breath, but his legs gave out and he collapsed chest down onto Granny Smith, driving the shard of glass deep within his body.

Granny Smith gasped loudly as Vagabond hit her chest. Big Macintosh reacted first and hauled Vagabond off Granny Smith. Everypony present gathered around to see the miracle.

"Thank Celestia." Vagabond said. He rolled over onto his back and tried to draw a breath, but found that he couldn't. Vagabond began to thrash his limbs, feebly trying to draw breath.

"Hold him!" Dr. Mend ordered, "He's dying. Try to comfort him, help him pass peacefully."

Big Macintosh held Vagabond's legs, Dr. Mend held his fore hooves, and Rainbow Dash held his head still.

Fluttershy flew over and began whispering into his ear, "There, there." she said, eyes overflowing with tears, "Just stay still and let it happen. It will all be over soon. It's alright. All your friends are here with you. You'll see Arabesque soon. You can be with her now."

Vagabond struggled violently as he slowly suffocated and drowned in his own blood. He couldn't think straight, his vision was going cloudy. He knew he was experiencing his final moments.

Rainbow Dash leaned over and pressed her forehead against Vagabond's, "You are forgiven." she whispered.

It was the last thing Vagabond heard, but it was enough. He stopped struggling, even as his body convulsed trying to breathe. He used his final iota of will to steady his body, as he died. He was at peace finally. His body gave out and his heart stopped beating.

Everypony present was in tears. Even Dr. Mend wept heavily. Dr. Mend reached a hoof out and slowly closed Vagabond's eyes. Dr. Mend tearfully stood up and retrieved the blanket he had formerly pulled over Granny Smith's body.

He laid the blanket solemnly over Vagabond's body, whispering, "Take your final rest, son of Equestria. Be at peace, brave hero, your suffering is over."

# Chapter 9

Arabesque smiled at the figure before her. The colt she knew in life stood before her now, a proud stallion. His body was no longer emaciated and thin, but full and strong, covered with lean muscle from his years of walking. His mane and tail were thick and full, a handsome light brown that flowed down behind his neck and flanks. Gone was the look of suffering and despair. That look had been replaced with a confidence and assurance that spoke of leadership. He was, Arabesque had to admit, a good looking pegasus, if you could get past the missing wings and scar tissue behind his cutie-mark. His amethyst colored eyes shone brightly as he looked upon his oldest friend.

Arabesque smiled,  
"You are whole once again, my friend." she said.

The stallion looked at himself, from hoof to back,  
"As whole as I can ever be I suppose. I'm dead aren't I?" he asked.

Arabesque nodded,  
"Your body could take no more. You barely held together until the end, but you succeeded. You saved the old mare. You died a hero."

The stallion shook his head, mane flowing back and forth,  
"I am no hero, Arabesque, but I couldn't stand idly by while there was something I could do. I was the only one who could have done it, so I did. I didn't have a choice."

Arabesque tilted her head to the side,  
"You could have stayed outside and lived."

The stallion shook his head again,  
"That is not living. To stay put while others suffer? That isn't right. They were helpless, I wasn't."

"You knew it would cost you your life, but you went anyway. That is who you really are. That is the colt I knew in life. It has taken you a long time, but you are him once again. Welcome back." Arabesque said.

The stallion shrugged,  
"So what now? Do I get to learn the secrets of the universe?" he asked.

Arabesque shook her head,  
"No, I'm afraid not."

The stallion raised an eyebrow,  
"You know them. Why can't I?" he asked, "Who am I going to tell? I'm kind of dead here. You know passed on, bought the farm, kicked the bucket. I'm not exactly going to be spreading the secrets all over Equestria now am I?"

Arabesque hadn't laughed in a long time, but she did then,  
"You could tell one of your friends." she said.

"How? I don't plan on haunting anypony." he said.

"What is the duration of your healing potion?" Arabesque asked.

"Three days." the stallion said.

"Did you know it works even after the body has died?" Arabesque asked.

"I do now." the stallion said.

Arabesque nodded,  
"It continues to mend the body post mortem. It even heals scars, if administered in time."

"I fail to see your point Arabesque." the stallion said.

"Your friends removed the piece of glass from your chest and your lungs healed. The doctor noticed that your burns were still healing, when he visited your body in the morgue. He informed your friends of the healing. They pieced everything together and convinced the doctor to give you C.P.R. while Twilight cast the spell you came up with, even though you had been dead for two days. It worked. Your body is alive. In the time you

perceive we've been talking, three months have passed in Ponyville. Your body lives but you are not inhabiting it. You have to go back and live again. You still have much to do before you join me here." Arabesque informed the disbelieving wingless pegasus before her.

The stallion groaned,  
"I don't want to have to die again. It was horrible beyond words. I want to stay here with you. I love you Arabesque."

Arabesque walked up to him and nuzzled his neck affectionately,  
"I loved you as my best friend, and I always will, but I was never meant to be your wife. You have a full life ahead of you. I will be here for you when you return."

The stallion began to fade, slowly becoming transparent,  
"Please, let me stay." he begged.

"I am sorry but you have to live." Arabesque said

The stallion focused his, now impressive, will and actually began to re-solidify, **'I WILL stay with Arabesque.'** he thought, **'I will NEVER abandon her.'** he opened his eyes and faced Arabesque,  
"Never again! Never again will I abandon you." he said.

Arabesque took the stallion's face in her hooves,  
"You are not abandoning me. You have a purpose. You have others to help. Remember what you said about traveling and leaving a legacy? Don't you want to fulfill that? Don't you want to bring relief to those who are suffering? Do you want others to suffer like you did? There are many who can benefit from your potions. If you stay, you will be denying others the chance to have what I lost. You will be responsible for their misery. Do you want that?" she asked softly.

The stallion sighed heavily,  
"I will go, but tell me one thing, first."

"I may be able to tell you." Arabesque said.

"Will I ever know happiness again?" he asked.

"Do your friends not make you happy?" Arabesque asked.

"Of course they do, but I mean, will I ever marry? Will I ever get the chance to have a family?" he asked.

"Does the answer really matter?" Arabesque asked.

The stallion had been about to say something, but he stopped himself. He had to be honest with himself, ***'Does the answer really matter?' he wondered, 'If I can help others, do my desires really matter? I WANT to know, but others NEED my help. It doesn't matter what I want. If I can do something about the pain that others are experiencing, I have a responsibility to do it.'***

The stallion made his decision,  
"No it doesn't." he said, "You have been looking out for me for years. I want you to know I appreciate that."

"I know." Arabesque said, "One last thing before you go." she said as the stallion began to fade, "I cannot tell you what the future holds, but I can tell you this: No matter what you see, no matter what you hear, no matter what you feel, through love all things are possible." she said.

The stallion was fading fast, barely more than a wisp of a shadow, but he heard Arabesque say,  
"Go and bring hope to those who are in despair."

The stallion floated away slowly. Away from where? He could not say, for he did not know. He felt like he was rising, falling, spinning, and twisting all at the same time. He had no concept of time, for he was incapable of being patient or impatient. He felt neither urgent nor casual. He simply existed.

Eventually he perceived a mild disturbance that was both sound and movement at the same time. It was faint at first, but slowly, ever so slowly, the intensity increased. It was being produced by a heart beating. He slowly became aware of his body as the fog in his mind began to fade. His senses slowly began to crawl back under his control and re-created his physical perception.

The first sense to return to him was touch. He felt his body being immersed in warm liquid and the feeling of somepony bathing him with a soft sponge. The second sense was smell. He smelled clean linens, and lilac scented soap. The third sense to return was taste. He tasted celery and radish broth. The fourth sense to return was sight. He slowly cracked open his eyes. His eyes felt heavy, like they were weighted down. He took in his surroundings, but didn't dare to try to turn his head, just moving his eyes wore him out almost immediately. He saw a white ceiling above him and the tops of white curtains around him on all sides. He closed his eyes and decided to try again later.

Finally, his hearing returned in full force. He could hear two ponies talking,  
"I'm sorry Pinkie Pie but visiting hours are over. I have to ask you to leave. You can come back tomorrow morning."

"O.K. I'll just leave this next to his bed." Pinkie chirped, "I don't want him to be hungry when he wakes up."

The other pony, the stallion recognized as Dr. Mend, said  
"Pinkie please, you've left a cake here with him every day for the last three months."

"But he never had a chance to taste one of my cakes." Pinkie pouted.

The thought of a piece of cake woke the stallion up all the way,  
"Cake." he moaned slowly.

Pinkie Pie and Dr. Mend stopped talking. The stallion waited for what seemed like eternity then decided to repeat his request,  
"Cake." he said again more clearly.

Suddenly, there was a high-pitched explosion of sound,  
"HE'S AWAKE!" Pinkie Pie squealed.

Pinkie Pie launched herself into the air, through the curtains, and clobbered the formerly comatose stallion off the bed and right onto the floor, in a giggling tackle. The stallion found himself laughing, despite the discomfort of having a fully-grown earth pony on top of him. He opened his



eyes and beheld the pink pony who was framed by lights that seemed to be way too bright.

Pinkie Pie bent down and enveloped him in a massive hug, eyes streaming with tears,  
"Oh my gosh! I've never been so happy in all my life! We've missed you so much! We all come to visit you every day. We read to you and talk to you and bring you things and . . . and . . . and . . . It's just so good to have you back! Oh, my gosh I have to tell Rainbow Dash, she just left!" Pinkie Pie sprung up off the stallion and disappeared in a cloud of dust which somehow materialized out of thin air.

The stallion couldn't help but to laugh at Pinkie's antics,  
"I've missed you too Pinkie." he whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Big Macintosh plodded steadily against the weight that tried, in vain, to hold him back.

An earth pony about Big Macintosh's age called to him,  
"Can yall hold it there for a minute Big Mac?" the voice belonged to Big Mac's cousin, Red Delicious, or just Red to his family.

"Ayup." Big Mac responded.

The entire Apple family had descended on Sweet Apple Acres, once the news of the fire reached them. Everypony pitched in to rebuild the destroyed house. The barn was filled to overflowing with the extended members of the Apple clan. In three months the new house was nearly completed. The builders were down to tacking on the roof shingles. The new house was even better than the old one. It was twice as big and far more spacious. The day was almost done, and night was falling quickly. The workers could smell the nightly feast of apple related foods that were being prepared for them.

Red called to Big Mac again, after a few minutes,  
"Alright, take a couple of steps back, so we can land this here pallet."

Big Mac backed up three steps and stopped when he felt the tension on the rope slack off. He was facing Ponyville and very much enjoying the sunset, ***'Ah wish he was here with us. He'd love this sunset. He seemed like the kind of pony to be able to appreciate this kind of thing.'*** Big Mac's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a gleam of sunlight reflecting off a cyan blue body that was flying toward him from the direction of Ponyville at reckless speed.

Big Mac threw back his head and bellowed,  
"Incoming! Hit the dirt!"

Everypony within earshot, which meant dozens, instantly ducked and covered their heads with their hooves. A few short seconds later, Rainbow Dash collided headlong with an eight-layer thick weaved canvas with a bulls-eye painted on it. The Apple family had erected the canvas specifically for her, to minimize possible injury, but wanted to take no chances, and thusly were in the habit of ducking when anypony yelled.

Rainbow Dash hit the canvas yelling,  
"He woke up! He's awake! Applejack, Big Mac come quick he's awake!" she yelled laughing.

Big Mac turned his head and yelled up to his cousin,  
"Yall good up there Red?" he asked.

Red looked perplexed,  
"Yeah I'm all set. Hey, Big Mac," he yelled back, "Who woke up?"

Big Mac slipped out of the harness he wore and called back,  
"The pony that saved Applebloom and Granny!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Rainbow Dash sped away from Sweet Apple Acres and pulled to a halt, in mid air, hovering above Ponyville's square. She saw the citizens of Ponyville down below her going about their business, oblivious to what was coming their way.

Rainbow Dash drew in a huge breath and yelled at the top of her lungs,

"STAMPEDE!"

The ground shook under the onslaught of heavy hooves striking the ground. The square cleared out almost instantly as ponies retreated to their homes. A cloud of dust came up over the hill between Sweet Apple Acres and Ponyville as the entire Apple family charged, one and all, toward Dr. Mend's Medical Care Facility. They all wanted to personally thank the brave hero that had saved their relatives.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend could not believe the speed of the former Vagabond's recovery,

"There is positively no reason he should be able to speak at all right now!" he said to the attending nurse, "By all rights he should be starrng off into space, drooling and trying to relearn how to use his eyes! I've never even heard of this! Nopony comes out of a coma with full faculties! He was clinically dead for two full days! He was dead! Now he's acting like he was just taking a nap!"

"I can hear you, you know doctor." the formerly vegetative pony said, smiling.

"THAT!" Dr. Mend said expressively, "IS normal. Hearing is supposed to be the first sense to return, not the last!" he turned to his royal blue coated patient, "How are you speaking in full sentences?" he asked.

Dr. Mend's patient only shrugged,  
"I have no idea. I feel fine though. May I have visitors now?" he asked.

Dr. Mend walked over to the door to his office and tossed his whole clipboard into the trash,  
"I don't see why not. I can't find anything wrong with you." he admitted dejectedly, "I'm going to keep you overnight for observation then discharge you in the morning. Now I have to throw away everything I spent years learning," Dr. Mend ranted, "Twelve years of my life thrown away for nothing." Dr. Mend entered his office and closed the door behind him, still mumbling to himself.

The nurse cast a worried look at Dr. Mend's office door and sighed. She turned and walked toward the double doors leading to the waiting area. She pushed open the doors and starred silently, in awe. A veritable ocean of faces turned ominously in her direction.

The nurse let out a whimper, as the bodies attached to those faces rose from the floor,  
"Oh boy."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Apple family eventually departed, late into the night, leaving eight ponies to talk alone finally.

"But darling you just woke up. You simply cannot leave now!" Rarity argued.

The royal blue stallion shook his head,  
"I have to Rarity. There are ponies all over Equestria in need of the kind of help I can provide. It would be selfish of me to stay here. I consider Ponyville my home now. I will return someday, but the world can benefit from my potions."

Nopony present could argue his words. The eight friends sat on and around the hospital bed silently. Nopony was happy about the former Vagabond having to leave. The double doors leading to the waiting area swung open and Dr. Mend walked in. He stopped a few short feet away from the eight friends and just stood there for a few minutes silently.

"Are you going to go to Canterlot to study?" Dr. Mend asked.

The royal blue stallion nodded,  
"That's my plan. I need to learn more."

"I'm going with you then." Dr. Mend said, "I'm old school and apparently out of touch with recent medical breakthroughs. I can't help anypony with ignorance. I'll do more harm than help if I don't keep up to date, and I can't do that from here. I tenured my resignation to the Mayor just now. She'll see it in the morning. I'll go pack."

Twilight shot up off her haunches,  
"You can't abandon Ponyville!" she shouted.

"I haven't and I won't. I'll be back. I still have foals to deliver and broken bones to set. I just have to be sure I know the correct procedures when lives are at stake. For instance, I had no idea unicorns could force start a heart. That fact alone saved two lives. I intend to save as many lives as I can, it's my passion in life, and it's who I am. I abandoned that once and I refuse to do so again." Dr. Mend said with conviction.

"Actually," the royal blue wingless pegasus said, embarrassed, "I came up with that concept."

Dr. Mend was dumbstruck, so Twilight spoke for him,  
"You said you had seen it done. Did you lie to us?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't have a chance to finish my sentence then, I was dying and kind of in a hurry. What I had meant to say was that I had seen it done in my mind's eye. I had thought of the possibility before and the theory seemed sound enough. I just never had the chance to tell anypony about it before. I never meant to mislead any of you. I apologize." the stallion said.

Dr. Mend found his voice,  
"Then we must travel to Canterlot immediately! Time is of the essence! Countless lives will be saved by The . . ." Dr. Mend trailed off, "The procedure needs a name. As the one who invented it, tradition dictates the procedure have your name on it."

Pinkie Pie bounced up and down excitedly,  
"I'm so excited!" she squealed, "We finally get to learn your name!"

"Ayup."

"Oh, my. I had completely forgotten." Fluttershy said.

"How in the wide world of Equestria did we overlook that?" Twilight asked.

"We can't just let yall go without knowin' your name." Applejack said.

"Well then come on darling, tell us." Rarity urged.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said taking to the air, "We're all, like, dying to know."

The royal blue stallion smiled to his friends,  
"My name is Valiant." he said.

Twilight could only comment,  
"Well that's poetically ironic."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dear Princess Celestia,*  
*I apologize for the late hour of this letter but your urgent attention is requested. A new lifesaving medical breakthrough has been discovered by Valiant, the former Vagabond. The Valiant-Mend procedure has already saved two lives and the sooner word is spread, the more lives it will save. Valiant and Ponyville's doctor Dr. Mend wish to begin teaching the Valiant-Mend procedure as soon as possible and are ready to depart at any time. I await your response.*

*Your Student*  
*Twilight Sparkle.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dear Twilight Sparkle,*  
*"You did right to send the letter. No matter the hour, if lives can be saved by any action, it is our responsibility to take it. I already dispatched a carriage before I began writing this letter. The carriage should arrive within the hour. I look forward to meeting Dr. Mend and Valiant when they arrive.*

*Princess Luna*

*P.S.: Celestia has 1,000 years of sleep to catch up on, so I took the liberty of responding myself since the lives of our subjects hang in the balance.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind whipped Valiant's mane and tail all over the place as the carriage flew, pulled by a pair of white pegasai. He and Dr. Mend were nearly invisible in the moon light, although Dr. Mend's ice white mane and tail did rather stand out. Valiant looked toward his traveling companion and chuckled lightly. Dr. Mend more resembled a flying ghost than anything else.

Dr. Mend, for his part, noticed Valiant's attention and cleared his throat; he had something he needed to say, "I hate it when I have to admit that I'm wrong. But I must apologize for what I did to you Valiant. I misjudged you." the older stallion admitted.

Valiant smiled and said, "That makes two of us."

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## *The End of The Vagabond*

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# Trials of the Elements

## Chapter 1

The chariot landed smoothly in the inner courtyard of the Royal Palace. Valiant helped Dr. Mend unload his suitcase and black doctor's bag. Valiant guessed the hour to be close upon midnight; the chariot had made remarkably good time.

Dr. Mend sighed and looked around, "Canterlot," he sounded relieved, "It has been a long time since I set hoof here." he paused for a moment and looked around as if he was only just realizing where they were, "I wonder why we set down in the Royal Palace?"

Valiant glanced sideways at his companion, Dr. Mend. The good doctor was an older looking jet black Earth pony stallion with ice white mane and tail, both grown to lengths one might think would drag the ground. His mane and tail stood out in the moonlight, making him look more like a ghost than a living, breathing pony and his cutie-mark was that of a stethoscope with a scalpel and tweezers crossed behind it.

For Valiant, on the surface he appeared to be a young Earth pony stallion as well, probably in his late teens to early 20's at a glance. In truth he was 25 years old and a pegasus. He had lost his wings to a hungry bear some months previous. He was royal blue in coat and his mane and tail were light brown and worn long. His cutie-mark had only recently been given back to him by a particularly generous, perfectly groomed, white unicorn. The mark was of a gem rimmed mortar and jewel encrusted pestle with a mushroom, a root, and a flower inside then a trio of Dock leaves behind it.



The night was pleasantly cool and comfortable. The sky overhead was clear of clouds and a gentle wind blew almost constantly, cooling the four stallions in the Inner Courtyard of the Royal Palace.

Valiant surveyed the courtyard. The entire affair was circular, as far as he could tell. From one side to the other, Valiant judged the distance to be roughly 600 paces. Green, healthy plants grew in overabundance covering every wall. Tall trees, blooming flowers, and fruit-bearing plants surrounded the two stallions and their white pegasus escorts. The grass under hoof was soft and lush, like a gentle cushion for them to walk on. Fireflies lit the entire courtyard with a dazzling display of flashing lights while an orchestra of crickets chirped out a hypnotic melody that Valiant could only describe as chaotic, yet utterly melodious.

"It's so beautiful." Valiant said distantly, "Like the perfect dream you never knew you longed for."

"Times have indeed changed since my exile. At least one pony can appreciate the night." said a soft feminine voice from behind the two stallions.

Dr. Mend and Valiant turned slowly toward the voice. Behind them stood a dark blue alicorn with a mane and tail only just barely a few shades lighter. Adorning her hooves were a quartet of opaque crystalline slippers, around her neck hung a shining obsidian-link sash emblazoned with a crescent moon. Crowning her head, around her horn was a simple yet regal onyx tiara. She stood as tall as any adult mare but her voice indicated a young filly, not yet come to maturity. Her folded wings looked abnormally long compared to the rest of her body and her cutie-mark was that of a crescent moon.

Neither stallion harbored a single doubt about who they stood before. They both quickly bowed deeply to Princess Luna, muzzles pressed firmly to their hooves. The courtyard was silent for the briefest of moments before the prostrate stallions heard another set of hooves come running toward their position.

"Rise." the Princess of the Moon said simply.

Both stallions were quick to do as they were told. They saw a bright yellow unicorn mare, with veridian mane and tail setting up a writing table next to Princess Luna. The unicorn worked with precision and speed. In mere seconds she had the table set up with parchment, quill, and ink vial at the ready.

"Topaz, write down every word they say exactly." Princess Luna ordered the unicorn. Turning toward the two silent stallions she nodded, "Describe the Valiant-Mend Procedure and how to perform it in as great a detail as you are able."

Dr. Mend began the description, with Valiant adding bits as needed. Valiant didn't know the proper terms used between medical professionals so he happily allowed Dr. Mend to take the lead. After Dr. Mend had described it as accurately as he could, he asked the unicorn to repeat it back to him so he could make double sure everything was accurate. The entire time, Princess Luna simply stood by watching and listening. Valiant felt nervous, being so close to the Princess.

"Everything sounds good. I believe that's as good as it's going to get." Dr. Mend said after two run-throughs of the directions.

Princess Luna turned her head toward Topaz, "Thank you Topaz. Take the document to the courier's office, have them copy it, and send a copy to every city, town, and village in Equestria with instructions that every medical practitioner is to have a copy by noon today. After you are done with that, have the scribes at the University put it directly into the Medical Curriculum by royal decree."

Topaz bowed deeply to Princess Luna then turned and sped off carrying the document in her mouth.

The Moon Princess turned her head and addressed the two white pegasus escorts who had flown the chariot, "Thank you, you may depart." she said.

The two white escorts took to the air and sped away into the night. Valiant watched them go and longed to be able to fly again. He subconsciously flapped his nearly invisible wing stumps a few times, his body remembering the natural movement. Valiant realized what he was

doing and stopped immediately. He dug at the ground a couple of times and snorted in aggravation, shaking his light brown mane around.

"Don't be rude!" Dr. Mend hissed quietly, "Remember you're in the presence of royalty."

Princess Luna cleared her throat,  
"Ahem. Twilight's letter indicated you both wished to provide personal instruction to the medical community regarding the Valiant/Mend procedure. Is that correct?" she asked.

"That is only part of the reason we are here your majesty." Dr. Mend began, "I can't speak for Valiant, but I'm here to catch up on recent medical breakthroughs."

Princess Luna nodded, apparently accepting Dr. Mend's explanation. She turned her head toward Valiant,  
"I take it you are Valiant? What brings you here?"

"I'm here to learn about pharmaceuticals and alchemic formulas." Valiant said simply so as to not seem braggadocios.

Princess Luna regarded Valiant seriously for a brief moment before asking,  
"To what end do you seek to study at the University?"

"I've made some discoveries about potions and salves and I want to learn more. I want other ponies to be able to benefit from what I've learned. After I've learned enough, I plan to buy a wagon and travel around from city to city to teach other ponies how to make potions for themselves." Valiant explained.

"How do you plan to fund this venture of yours Valiant?" Princess Luna asked.

"I was hoping to get a job at an Apothecary while I was studying at the University." Valiant said.

"Why not a pharmacy? You would make more money." Princess Luna ventured.

Valiant scuffed his right fore-hoof on the ground, his head slightly lowered,  
"I have no formal education and I'm not certified. Besides, not everypony can obtain the types of ingredients needed for pharmaceutical drugs, but anypony can get a hold of apothecaric ingredients."

Princess Luna raised an eyebrow,  
"So you plan to make your fortune selling your potions and knowledge as you travel?" she asked.

"No your majesty," Valiant said, "I plan to provide my wares free of charge."

"Why?" Princess Luna asked.

Valiant took a deep breath,  
"Several ponies, including Dr. Mend here, provided for me when I had nothing. I want to pass that selflessness on to every pony I can."

Princess Luna gave Valiant's words some earnest thought before turning to Dr. Mend,  
"Is he being truthful?" she asked.

Dr. Mend took a small step forward, toward the Moon Princess,  
"I don't know. I can only tell you what I've witnessed from him."

"And what would that be?" Princess Luna asked.

"I've seen him look past his own feelings to do what he believes is right. I've also seen that he is willing to take any action he can, to help others, no matter the cost to himself, and I have personally seen him die to save somepony's life." Dr. Mend explained.

Princess Luna's gasp was nearly silent,  
"He died?"

Dr. Mend nodded solemnly,  
"From injuries he received while saving three little fillies and an older mare from a burning house. He suffered a shard of glass through his left lung and sustained second and third degree burns all over his body."

"You said he died though." Princess Luna repeated.

Dr. Mend nodded,  
"Valiant was dead for a day and a half. A combination of one of his potions and the Valiant/Mend procedure brought him back. I will give him this much, he's a walking testimony to his own skills. He came up with the idea for the Valiant/Mend procedure. His potions work well too. The potion he took before dying, heals the body so effectively he doesn't even have any burn scars."

Princess Luna processed the information for several long minutes before moving on to the next topic,  
"Twilight's letter also mentioned that you used to be a Vagabond yet you use your name freely. I take it you have been forgiven?" she asked.

Valiant nodded,  
"Yes your majesty."

Princess Luna smiled warmly at the two stallions,  
"Excellent. The current semester is half over. Enroll in the upcoming semester. That should give you ample time to get settled in. Your first semester will be paid for out of the royal coffers, also you will be staying in the dormitories. Your lodging, text-books and food will be paid for but only for the first semester as well. In regard to providing personalized instruction on the Valiant/Mend procedure to the medical community at large, I cannot authorize such an arrangement. I have however arranged to have you two speak about the new procedure in a series of sessions which will be held twice a semester. Each session will be four hours long and should provide ample time for you two to demonstrate how it is done and so forth. I've had a dormitory prepared for your arrival. If you will follow me, I'll show you the University." she said trotting away.

Valiant and Dr. Mend scrambled so as to not keep the Moon Princess waiting. They grabbed a bag each and trotted briskly behind the regal alicorn. Princess Luna wound her way through a dizzying series of corridors, hallways and chambers, but finally, the trio emerged onto the drawbridge of the Royal Palace.

Princess Luna indicated a series of buildings in the distance, with her left fore-hoof,  
"The Canterlot University. Home to more than seven thousand students each semester. I have arranged for a carriage for you. It will take you to your dorm room." turning to the two stallions behind her, Princess Luna said, "I'm afraid I must go now. If you ever have need of anything simply request an audience with either Celestia or myself. I may be easier to reach though, Celestia is often busy. Farewell good stallions, may your work bring peace and prosperity to Equestria."

Princess Luna took to the sky with a grace and elegance neither stallion had ever witnessed before. Valiant watched her go, wondering how she could have recovered so quickly from her 1,000 year ordeal as Nightmare Moon.

Dr. Mend nudged Valiant's side gently,  
"Don't go getting any ideas about her Royal Highness now. She has plenty of things much more important than a pair of ordinary ponies like us, to take care of. Come on, let's get settled in."

Valiant reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the sky and followed Dr. Mend down to the carriage waiting for them.

Princess Luna landed on the tallest parapet of the Royal Palace and looked down at the two stallions entering the carriage, far below. She knew of the deeds that former Vagabonds were known for, and hoped she had made the right decision regarding Valiant, but he was not her concern. The jet black stallion Mend worried her to no end. She had seen something deep down in his soul, something she recognized, something she feared. He had a wound deep inside him that had been festering for many years. Something deep and terrible that had eaten away at him for almost his whole life. Mend's issue was old and profound and the wound ran deep, poisoning him to the core of his being. Princess Luna could only hope that Valiant was up to the task before him. Mend needed healing, or his soul would shrivel up and die very soon.

"His pain is already taking its toll on his body. The most powerful magic in Equestria was not made to handle things such as this. The Elements of Harmony cannot save Mend. He needs something more geared toward his type of wound." Princess Luna said leaping from the parapet, "There are

other Elements which need to awaken. It has been 1,000 years and they have slept for far too long. As Twilight is Celestia's champion, so too is Valiant mine." she said, then whispered a prayer to the citizens of Canterlot, "Awaken soon sleepers. I pray you, awaken soon."

# Chapter 2

The carriage pulled up in front of a four story white stone building that was dotted with windows. The front doors were made of solid looking black oak, but seemed welcoming instead of imposing and ominous. There was not a pony in sight, save for Valiant, Dr. Mend and the carriage driver.

Valiant disembarked first,  
"Thank you driver. Did the Princess give you any specifics on which room we were given?" he asked the older, brown coated unicorn stallion who was their driver.

"She sure did. Third floor, room 317. She also gave me two copies of the room keys for you boys." the driver said offering the two keys, "I'm afraid I can't stay and chat, got plenty more work to do."

Valiant took the offered keys and closed the carriage door behind Dr. Mend. The carriage departed swiftly into the night, leaving the two stallions to locate their dorm room. They entered the building and took a look around. Valiant noticed a staircase off to their left and held the door for Dr. Mend. They reached the third floor and found room 317 easily.

Dr. Mend set down his black bag on the bed against the right wall, next to him Valiant set down Mend's own suitcase. The dormitory was of a fair size. Mend judged the dimensions to be 20 paces x 20 paces, plus it had a bathroom and spacious closets for each of them not to mention writing desks with lamps and chairs.

Dr. Mend couldn't help but to voice his opinion,  
"I remember these rooms being much smaller."

Valiant smiled and slipped off his saddlebags,  
"We should try to get some sleep. The sun will be up soon and I want to get an early start."

Dr. Mend looked across the room to his companion,



"A wise idea. You go look for a job and I'll select our courses in the morning. Sound good?"

Valiant sprawled on his bed, against the left wall, it was soft and comfortable,

"Alright, I trust you. Just don't overload me with classes. I'm not used to this and it will take some time for me to get up to speed."

"I know a little secret that should help you out. Get a hold of the course books early and read them from cover to cover at least twice before the courses begin. That way you'll have a head start on the material. With a basic knowledge of the material, you can take on a larger course load and you'll do better than the other students." Dr. Mend said.

Valiant looked up at Dr. Mend from his bed,  
"Ah, is that the voice of experience I hear? Do tell, oh wise one." he said playfully.

Dr. Mend pursed his lips together, but managed not to make a smart retort,

"Another hint for you Valiant. Don't go partying too much. You can get alcohol anywhere on campus. Avoid it like the plague. A hangover will addle your brain and you will miss questions you know by heart. Catch your meals as early as possible. The cafeterias run out of space fast. Don't eat in the cafeterias either. Bring the food back here and eat while you study. It's called multitasking."

Valiant's eyebrows rose almost above his head,  
"I take it you didn't do much partying when you were a student here did you?"

Dr. Mend shook his head,  
"None at all. I was here to study, as I am now. We've been given a great opportunity here. A fully paid semester of courses, lodging, books, and food? You don't come across an offer like that every day?"

Valiant thought about Dr. Mend's words seriously,  
"You're right, but I would like to take a look around tomorrow. I do plan to study hard, but I also want to have some fun. Didn't you ever go to one of Pinkie Pie's parties back in Ponyville?"

Dr. Mend shook his head,  
"I never had the chance. I had a clinic to run. The clinic must stay open at all times so I let my nurses attend the parties. I've even delivered a foal solo. I've been a loner since I can remember. It doesn't bother me too much. I have a purpose and I will serve that purpose until I pass from this life."

Valiant blanched at the notion,  
"But what about a family? What about fun? When was the last time you had fun? Why didn't you ever marry? I'm sure there were tons of fillies and mares who would have loved for you to take them to dinner. I'll bet there still are some."

Dr. Mend regarded Valiant seriously,  
"My life is my business Valiant and I'll thank you to stay out of it." he said frostily.

"Hey now, I never meant to offend you. I'm just concerned. Everypony needs to have fun at least once in a while." Valiant said placatingly.

Dr. Mend laid down on his bed and sighed heavily,  
"It's not that I'm offended Valiant. I didn't mean to come off like that. I'm just socially awkward. I was nearly a recluse back in Ponyville. I only really liked one pony in the whole town enough to talk to, and that was Pinkie Pie. She was the only one who could ever make me smile."

A mischievous smile crept over Valiant's features,  
"Thinking of robbing the cradle are we doc?" he teased.

Dr. Mend shot up out of his bed and was face to face with Valiant in a quarter of a second,  
"Don't even let it into your HEAD that I feel that way about Pinkie! Do you hear me? I have never harbored impure thoughts toward any pony, much less Pinkie Pie. I can tolerate her that's all."

Valiant's eyes were wide with shock,  
"Alright doc. I hear you loud and clear. I was only joking."

Dr. Mend took a step back toward his own bed,

"Sorry, I over reacted. But you hit on one of the only things that can make me violently angry. I do not and will never approve of that kind of thing. Pinkie isn't even old enough to date anyway."

Valiant wisely kept his mouth shut about Dr. Mend's last sentence, "Would you be willing to tell me what the others are, so I don't accidentally offend you later on?"

Dr. Mend laid back down on his bed, "I doubt they'll ever come up. God night Valiant."

Valiant snuggled down in his own blankets, "Good night Dr. Mend."

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning came early for Valiant and Dr. Mend. The two stallions had neglected to close the room's curtain, so the Celestia's bright morning sun woke them. After only having slept for five hours, the two stallions were so bleary-eyed they actually stumbled into each other on their way to the bathroom. Valiant let Dr. Mend go first while he began unpacking his saddlebags.

Valiant opened the buckles and pulled open the bags, then dumped the contents out on his bed. He made a vague mental note of everything he had brought with him. He found his mortar and pestle, his digging trowel, his pruning shears, his canteen, his blanket . . . blanket? Valiant was suddenly fully awake. He flopped the blanket onto his bed and looked at it astonished. It was decidedly not his own blanket, it was far too large, yet it looked familiar somehow. Valiant suddenly realized where he had seen it before. He held it close and sniffed the thick fabric remembering the scent and what it meant to him, 'Thanks Big Mac. I owe you one. You gave me a little piece of home.' he thought.

Valiant spread the blanket on his bed and continued to riffle through his belongings, astonished that his friends seemed to have sent him off prepared. He found a piece of cake in a plastic container, probably from Pinkie Pie. The cake was accompanied by an invitation for Valiant to return and they missed him already.

Next, Valiant found a bejeweled purse filled with paper that had his name on it. Valiant looked inside the purse and was surprised to find around 500 bits worth of bank notes, 'Who in Ponyville has that kind of money?' he wondered. The answer came to him almost immediately, 'Bless you Rarity.' he thought.

Valiant continued his search and found a sealed packet of pencils, quills, ink, and parchment, probably from Twilight. He set them down on his desk neatly and went back to his new belongings.

He looked again and found a worn but very sturdy waterproof hooded cloak, which smelled faintly of apples, 'Applejack, ever pragmatic.' he thought. Valiant tried the cloak on. It was snug but it fit and it was thin and not very heavy.

Continuing his search, Valiant discovered a faux rabbit's foot on a lanyard, 'Courtesy of Fluttershy and Angel I'll bet.' he said. When Valiant set it down on his desk, it clinked slightly. Curious, he examined it closer and found that the top screwed off, revealing a single dose of his very own healing potion. Valiant immediately hung it around his neck.

The final item Valiant found was a small pillow, filled with cyan colored down feathers. Valiant smiled hugely, "Your gift was the most personal Rainbow Dash." he said.

Dr. Mend emerged from the bathroom looking pristine, refreshed, and recently showered, "Your turn Val . . . " Dr. Mend trailed off at the sight of Valiant's new gifts, "Those girls really do like you a lot. Big Mac too. I've never seen him take such a liking to anypony before you. It's good they sent you off prepared, you really needed that stuff."

Valiant sat the pillow down at the head of his bed and sighed, "It feels so different to have ponies who care about you."

Dr. Mend turned his head away, his thoughts flashing back into his past for a brief moment. The jet black stallion shook his head to clear away the thoughts and headed for the door.

"Hey wait!" Valiant said, "I just realized, I don't know your full name."

"Yes you do. It's Mend." Dr. Mend said.

"Is that your first or your last?" Valiant asked.

"It's my only name. Like Fluttershy, or Rarity. Do you have a last name?" Dr. Mend asked.

"Good point. I don't." Valiant admitted.

Dr. Mend made to leave again but Valiant called after him,  
"I'll see you tonight doc."

Dr. Mend peeked back into the room,  
"Call me 'doc' again and I'll call you 'wingless'." he threatened, half playing.

Valiant smiled,  
"Whatever you say . . . 'DOC'."

Dr. Mend sighed lightly,  
"I'll see you tonight 'wingless'."

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant roamed the streets of Canterlot marveling at all the wondrous sights and searching for an apothecary in which to apply for a job. He had grabbed a bite of breakfast from the cafeteria and eaten it on his way out. He was in such a rush, he almost forgot his saddlebags. Valiant wondered how residents of Canterlot found their way around the city. The buildings were closely packed together, 'But they're made of stone so a fire wouldn't be nearly so bad here.' he thought.

Valiant wandered the city for what he judged to be several hours. He found the Tower Library where Twilight had lived, he found several Emergency Medical Clinics as well as some Non-Emergency Care Centers, he found several Pharmacies but was having a good deal of trouble locating an Apothecary. Valiant was becoming somewhat disheartened about finding one, and was wondering around, eyes upward, toward the signs of the various shops.

Valiant heard somepony shout and lowered his eyes just in time to come face to face with a lime-green unicorn colt with bright-yellow mane and tail,  
"Hey! Watch out!"

The colt's warning came too late. Valiant and the unicorn both tumbled down to the ground, limbs sprawled in every direction. Valiant groaned and shook his head trying to figure out exactly why he saw stars.

The unicorn colt struggled, trying to disentangle himself from Valiant, all the while talking at the speed of sound,  
"Ouch! Oh, hey are you O.K.? Sorry about that, I'm always running into things. Is this your hoof? Hehehehehehe. Oops, there we go. Eew, get your tail out of my face. Oh, that's my tail. Wow! You don't weigh much for an Earth pony, do you. Hey, where did you get those scars on your flank? Did it hurt? Huh, huh, huh?"

Valiant grabbed the unicorn and held him still, while he untangled the two of them. The unicorn never stopped speaking,  
"Wow! You sure are strong. Are you a weight-lifter? Are you here for a competition? I didn't know there were any competitions in Canterlot. When is it due to begin? I'd love to come watch and I could cheer for you like, 'That's my friend down there! Woohoo! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!' Wouldn't that be cool? Don't you think? Are you here with a group, or are you here solo? If you're here with a group, I'd love to meet the rest of them. See I don't have many friends here in Canterlot. Everypony says I talk too much, but I don't think I talk too much. My name's Lemon Lime but my family just calls me Live-Wire cause it sounds like Lime-Wire and Lime is part of my name. Does that sound strange to you?"

Valiant stood up and shook himself off. Looking at the Live-Wire, Valiant judged him to be just a touch older than Pinkie Pie,  
"I'm fine, and no, I'm not here for any kind of competition. I'm just a student at the Canterlot University." Valiant said slowly.

"Oh, cool! I went to the University, but I already graduated. I'm a Physical Therapist at the South-East Medical Care Center. What are you studying? Oh yeah, I almost forgot. What's your name?" the unicorn colt spewed out all five sentences in less than four seconds.

Valiant was a bit confused as to which question he should answer first,

"My name is Valiant, and I'm studying Pharmaceuticals and Alchemy. How did you become a Physical Therapist? You don't look old enough or strong enough?"

Live-Wire smiled hugely and launched into another explanation, "I'm too intense to study just one thing at a time so I was taking courses at the University while I was still in school. As I already said, I don't have many friends so I had lots, and lots, and lots of spare time. I don't mean to brag, but I had my four-year degree by the time I finished school. I'm actually 19, I just look super duper young because I always eat healthy it's one of my passions, I'm a health nut. Any way, I use magic to help with my work. I'm not very strong but, I can carry the full weight of an adult Earth pony for several hours at a time, while they learn to use their legs again. It's so, so, so, so, so satisfying to help somepony out like that. I mean everypony needs help once in a while and I'm there to do it. I know it may be hard to believe but I'm actually pretty patient, I just have a condition that makes my brain work about 4 times faster than the average pony's. So basically I just think and talk really, really, really fast. Oh yeah, I get migraines all the time too. It sucks, but meh, it's just who I am. The doctor's say that's also why I'm such a heavy sleeper and my appetite's so big, because I need the energy to keep my brain working. It really hurts my feelings when all the other ponies make fun of me or say I'm on a drug or something. I can't help it, I'm just always this talkative. What about you?"

Valiant shook his head, 'This guy reminds me of Pinkie Pie.' he thought,

"I'm here for at least one semester. I'll have to see if I can afford to stay after that. I'm looking for an Apothecary so I can get a job, but I can't seem to find one. You wouldn't happen to know where one is would you, Live-Wire?"

Live-Wire nodded his head at a normal speed, then started machine-gunning again,

"Well of course I know where one is. I do work in the Medical field after all, and patients and doctors are constantly asking me to make runs to all kinds of places to get things. I know of um, um, um, um, um, five different ones. Don't feel bad they were pretty hard for me to find at first too. The closest

one is let's see eight blocks that way and three blocks that way, oh wait, there was construction going on that way... Why don't I just show you? Would that be O.K.?"

Valiant could only nod. Live-Wire trotted on down the streets chattering away happily, even if he did sound like an auctioneer, with Valiant in tow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Live-Wire, true to his word, lead Valiant right to an Apothecary, "Here it is." he said opening the door for Valiant. It was the least Live-Wire had said in the 30 odd minutes it took for the two to reach the place. Valiant stepped inside and took in the various aromas of the store. He knew for certain, by smell alone, that this was the correct location. The walls were lined with an overabundance of herbs, roots, flowers, berries, and mushrooms in a variety of forms, from pastes to powders to fresh, whole pieces. Each shelf was meticulously labeled with the proper names of the corresponding variations of flora. The store itself was a square affair roughly fifteen paces by fifteen paces with a table in the center for mixing ingredients. In the rear of the store was a counter with a fuchsia coated, middle-aged unicorn mare behind it. The mare had a mane and tail of dark purple, with lilac colored highlights and her cutie-mark was that of a sprig of bright red leaves and berries.

The mare smiled when she saw Live-Wire, "I would have thought you had to be at work by now Live-Wire."

"My appointments all got canceled today so I was trying to figure out what to do when I ran into Valiant here. He's a student at the University and he needs a job. I figured you could use the help Mrs. Soothe. I mean you're always saying you don't have enough time to organize anything and you have to stay here half the night restocking and your husband is always asleep when you get home. I thought Valiant might just solve your problem."

Mrs. Soothe turned her attention to Valiant, "What are you studying?"



"I'm going to be taking courses for Pharmaceuticals and Alchemy. I already know a little bit about how to mix herbs and I also have several potions that can help with a variety of ailments. I need a job to keep studying at the University. I can start tomorrow if I need to. Do you have an application I could fill out?" Valiant asked politely.

Mrs. Soothe bent down, behind the counter and pulled out a piece of parchment,

"I'll need you to fill out as much as you can. I like to get a good idea of who I'm hiring. My last employee decided this line of work was not for him. He made a real effort but, in the end he just wasn't cut out for it. If you could bring this back tomorrow, I will take a look at it. The job will pay twenty-five bits per day, and I have a medical, dental and vision plan. Does that sound alright?" Mrs. Soothe asked.

Valiant nodded politely,  
"That sounds fantastic. I'll be back tomorrow morning with the application. Will I need my own tools?"

"No, you can use the ones I have here in the store. If you have any recipes, bring them with you for me to analyze, so I can get a good idea about your skill, and how much I may have to teach you." Mrs. Soothe said.

Valiant took the application and carefully placed it into his saddlebags,  
"Until tomorrow then, Mrs. Soothe." he said closing the door behind himself.

"So, what do you want to do now? I don't have anything to do today, but since I found you we can hang out, if you want. I can show you around the city. I know all about the landmarks. I can show you the Royal Palace, the Tower Library, the Canterlot Central Park, the Coliseum, the clubs, the best places to eat, the cleanest bars, although most of the bars are pretty clean . . ." Live-Wire continued chattering.

Valiant put a hoof to his face, *'I have to make sure Live-Wire never meets Dr. Mend.'* he thought soberly, *'Mend wouldn't be able to handle half a minute of this.'*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend sat down on a stone bench and set his and Valiant's course schedules on the stone table in front of him, "Hmm, six courses for Valiant and nine for me. That's a good start. He should be able to handle that no-problem. Let's see, at four hours each, twice a week. That's two courses per day and that adds up to eight hours per day for Valiant, plus his job. He should be able to pull that off. For me that's nine courses at 4 hours, twice a week, that's 72 hours per week and about 15 hours per day, plus I'll have to get a job at a hospital or clinic so I don't get rusty. That should be my next priority."

Dr. Mend's thoughts were at peace there, on the concourse of the University. There was a huge, white-marble fountain not forty paces from him. The fountain displayed statues of three ponies, a unicorn, a pegasus, and an Earth pony, each reared back onto their hind legs and spitting water from their mouths in three different directions with a center geyser fountain in the center which sprayed water up and over the statues.

The sound of cascading water, Mend remembered, always helped calm him when had been been at the University before. It was the only place in the entire land of Equestria that could calm him, and he was rarely actually calm. He was constantly at war with himself and his internal turmoil was never-ending and emotionally violent, the results of which, spilled over into his less than cheerful demeanor. At only age 36, Mend was by no means old, but he looked to be in his mid fifties. Although he would never admit it, Mend fervently wished for someone to talk to.

"Oh, to be fifteen again." he said, "The prodigal student returns. Only eleven years after graduating as Valedictorian and I'm out of touch." Mend's frustration grew very quickly, "I should have kept up to date!" he grunted, striking the table, "It was my responsibility! My responsibility to my patients and I failed at it! I won't let that happen again!" he snorted angrily.

"Are you alright professor?" asked a passing unicorn stallion.

Mend looked up, startled. The unicorn was turquoise in his coat, his mane and tail were dark orange with yellowish highlights and his cutie-mark was that of a note book with a pen inside it set on a sofa. The stallion looked to be almost exactly the same age as Valiant, but he had a wizened gleam to his eyes.

"I'm a student, thank you." Mend retorted sharply.

The unicorn looked taken aback,  
"Oh, I had no idea." he said, "A pony can always learn something new, no matter how old they are. You can never know too much, but I'll bet you could teach the other students a thing or two."

Mend was distinctly NOT amused,  
"I'll have you know I'm only 36 and I'm only here for a refresher of what I already know. So, you can take your opinion about my greatly advanced age elsewhere." he said sharply.

The unicorn looked concerned,  
"I apologize. I suppose I assumed a bit too much. I didn't intend to offend you."

Mend took a deep breath and let the sound of the fountain soothe his nerves,  
"You don't need to apologize. I overreacted. You were just stating your mind and I was already frustrated. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"That's very decent of you." the unicorn stallion said.

"No, decent would have been having enough self-control not to be offended. I'm the one who should apologize." Mend admitted trying his hardest to be humble.

"Very well, apology accepted." the unicorn said.

"I never said I WAS apologizing, only that I should." Mend said.

The unicorn stallion chuckled, hoof to his muzzle,  
"Alright then, theorized apology accepted."

Mend couldn't help but to smile,  
"I'm glad your sense of humor is better developed than mine."

The unicorn continued smiling as he said,  
"So am I. I'd hate to be a grumpy as you."

Mend raised an eyebrow, thinking,  
"I suppose I am." he said after a moment's thought.

"So why not be more cheerful?" asked the unicorn.

It's not my personality. I'm grumpy by nature." Mend said.

"Now don't take this the wrong way, but you just gave me an excuse. You control the way you act. You can change it if you really want to. The question is, why do you stay so grumpy?" the unicorn stallion asked.

"Are you a psyche student or something?" Mend asked.

The unicorn smiled,  
"I'm a counselor, and you're changing the subject. That's normally a defensive mechanism."

"I'm happy with who I am." Mend said calmly.

"Then I'll leave you be." the unicorn said laying a card on the table in front of Mend, "If you ever change your mind, here is my card. My address is on it. Feel free to call on me any time day or night. Have a good day." the unicorn said walking away.

Mend grumbled to himself as the unicorn walked away. He picked up the card and looked at the name, 'Sea Blue'. The card also gave an address, presumably the counselor's home address.

Mend grunted,  
"Huh, his parents must have been color-blind or something."

Mend stowed the card and put his head in his hooves. In his heart, Mend knew exactly why he always acted so cantankerous, *'It's safer,'* he thought, *'You can't be hurt if you don't let anypony in.'*

Mend sat and thought for a long while, trying to justify his excuse and find a flaw, any flaw in what Sea Blue had said. He thought, and thought, and then thought some more. Try as he might, Mend couldn't find a single crack in the counselor's argument. His thoughts drifted back to his earlier

yearning for companionship. He wanted, so much, to have somepony there with him, he nearly broke down in tears, *'Why can't I do this? Why is it so hard for me? Am I that bad? Am I that unlovable?'* he thought.

"Still self-centered as always, I see." said a female voice.

Mend tensed but didn't bother to look up, he already knew there was nopony around, *'Oh no! Not again! Oh please not again!'* he thought. Mend knew exactly what was happening, it had happened before. The voice he heard was a voice he knew very well, and it was a voice he had hoped to never hear again, a voice he dreaded more than almost anything, a voice that terrified him by its implications.

"No pony is perfect, mother." Mend said out loud, still not daring to raise his head.

"You've become so lazy!" she shouted, "Your ignorance nearly killed Granny Smith! You should have thought of that procedure long ago! It's a good thing Valiant was there! You failed again, AGAIN!"

Mend put his hooves to his ears and closed his eyes tightly, trying, in vain, to block out the voice,

"Why did you come back?" he whimpered, "You've been gone for so long."

"You've forgotten Mend! You've forgotten what happened! You've forgotten your failure!" she yelled into his covered ears.

Mend's mind flashed back to when he was a young colt, only six years old. His father sat on the bed next to him where he had been crying. He could hear his father's voice as he tried to comfort his son, "She didn't mean it Mend. She just forgot to take her pills. She loves you son. She just wants what's best for you and she doesn't know how to show it."

It was an all too common occurrence. Mend remembered when his mother had been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. His father would go to work and Mend would go to school while his mother would clean the house. She was very industrious. Mend and his father always came home to a pristinely clean house and a hot meal, but oftentimes she would get so caught up in her work that she would forget to take her pills. When she took

her prescription, she was so sweet, so vivacious, so happy, so full of life, so much like Pinkie Pie. When she forgot to take her pills though, she was so mean.

Mend remembered bringing home his first report card and showing his mother excitedly. He had gotten four As, a B+ and a C-. His mother had gone ballistic. Mend remembered cowering in the corner of the kitchen as she ranted and raved about how much of a failure he was.

She stood screaming right in his face,  
"I do not slave away every day in this damned house only to have my son fail! A C-? The B+ was bad enough, but a C-? What were you doing, sleeping? How could you do this? Don't you want to make your father and I proud? Or do you want to be a failure all your life? Because that is exactly where you're going, mister! If You don't turn these grades around I will throw your ass right out into the street! Maybe we should have another son, one who won't fail all the time! Go to your room!"

Mend had run to his room and locked the door. That night, he skipped dinner and stayed up all night studying, but it was all for nought. The paper he turned in was too tear stained to be legible. When he brought home his next report card he had five As and one B-. Mend thought his mother would be proud of him. He had been wrong, he had been very wrong.

The cycle had continued until Mend was in seventh grade. One day he came home from school and found his father waiting for him on the couch. Their house was a mess, which worried the young colt.

He remembered it clearly,  
"Come sit down son." his father had said.

Mend remembered wondering why his father was crying as he took a seat next to the older pony,  
"What's wrong Daddy? Why is the house messy? Where's Mommy? Did Mommy get mad at you too?"

His father had hugged him close. Mend remembered feeling his father's tears on the top of his head as he whispered,  
"Mommy fell today Mend. She fell a long way and she got hurt very badly."

"How did Mommy fall? Did she trip?" Mend had asked.

"She jumped, son. She jumped from the city walls." his father had barely been able to get the words out.

Mend remembered being frightened at the statement,  
"How badly did she get hurt? Will she be O.K.?"

"She got hurt too badly, son. She . . . she died." his father said.

Mend remembered the next part very well,  
"NO! She's O.K.! She has to be!" he had stood up shouting at his father,  
"You're lying! She's fine! She just went away! She went away because I'm not good enough!" he yelled, tears streaming down his face, "I'll be good! I'll make her proud! I won't fail anymore, I promise! I won't fail! Tell her I won't fail! Tell her so she'll come back!" he threw his head back yelling to the different rooms in the house, just in case she was listening, "I'll be good Mommy! I'll make you proud! Please come home! I promise, I'll be good! I won't fail! Please! I'll do everything right! Mommy please come back! I'm sorry, Mommy! I'll do whatever you want, just please come back! I won't fail anymore! I WON'T FAIL YOU ANYMORE!"

Mend had run to his room and locked the door. He remembered his father pleading with him to open the door, to let him in,  
"I WILL MAKE YOU PROUD!" he had cried, shouting over his shoulder at the locked door, "LEAVE ME ALONE! LEAVE ME ALONE! I HAVE TO DO BETTER! GO AWAY AND LEAVE ME ALONE!" Mend was too busy studying, he had to do better so she would come back and he was afraid if he didn't do better his father might leave him too. Mend didn't come out of his room that night, he fell asleep studying.

When he awoke the next morning he heard his Mother's voice, she was angry but it was her. It didn't matter if she was mad, she had come back. Mend had rushed down stairs only to find an empty kitchen. His father was asleep on the couch. Mend looked and looked for his mother. She sounded so close, but he could never find her. She was saying that Mend was still failing, he had to do better, *'If I do better she'll come back. I know she's here, she's just hiding. I have to do better.'* he thought.

Mend fixed his own lunch for the first time that day and went to school, just like normal. The other students and even the teachers kept asking about his mother all day. Mend ignored them and studied all through lunch. He had to do better.

That afternoon, he finally had enough, "Leave me alone! I have to study! Just leave me alone!" he remembered throwing his uneaten lunch at his best friend, Edge.

Everypony had left him alone after that. His father tried talking to him that night, but Mend was too busy studying. He studied all the time, it became his life. He never had time for his friends after that, he didn't have time for anypony. He would go to school then come home and study. His father forced him to go to a Therapist, but Mend would just sit and complain that he had to study the whole time. After two months of going to the Therapist every day, his father just gave up and stopped taking him. Mend was happy with that, he could study. That evening, his father took Mend to stay with his grandparents. The next morning his grandfather had to tell Mend his father had jumped from the same place his Mother had. At that moment Mend's world stopped turning.

He realized he could hear both of his parents yelling at him, "Failure!" they cried, "You failed again! You're worthless and lazy! It's because of you! Your shame! Your failure!"

Mend ran up to his new room and locked the door again, he had to study. He realized his parents were never coming back, physically, but they were there to keep him from killing his grandparents with the shame of his perpetual failure. Mend loved his grandparents, he didn't want them to die too. From when he woke up, till the time he fell asleep studying, the screaming voices of his parents drowned out almost all other sound.

Mend graduated three years early and received a full scholarship to Canterlot University. He didn't want a graduation ceremony, he just wanted his diploma. He remembered how proud his grandparents said they were, but Mend knew better. He could see the shame in their eyes.

"No!" he had yelled, "You say it but, I know the truth! You're lying! I'm still not good enough!" he threw down his diploma and spat on it, "I took too long! It's too late for them, but I can do better! I can do better and I will,



you'll see! I'll give you a real reason to be proud of me!" he remembered his grandfather reaching out a hoof toward him.

He had swatted it away angrily, tearfully,  
"I have to study!" he said galloping up to his room.

Later that evening, Mend heard his grandparents crying and thinking to himself,  
*'NO! Now I'm failing them too! I'll make you proud! I'll make you proud, I swear!'*

While at the University, Mend had literally memorized his text books. He broke every record, had a solid 4.0 grade average every semester, he never missed a single class or question. His internship was positively flawless, even if he had no friends. He became so wrapped up in his studies, he failed to notice that his parents had stopped yelling at him. They were gone. Mend could never remember being so happy, in his while life.

He had finally made them proud and his grandparents were safe. He was overjoyed, but he had pushed himself even harder after that, he had to make sure his loved ones would be safe from any future failures. Shortly thereafter, Mend had moved to Ponyville. That way if he did fail, his grandparents would be safe from his shame.

Mend's mind flashed back to the present,  
"I . . . had forgotten." his eyes widened in abject horror as he realized why his mother had returned, "I've become lazy." he whispered.

He had thought his parents' spirits had gone to their rest. Their return could only mean that he was endangering his grandparents again.

Mend rose to his hooves and picked up his and Valiant's class schedules in his mouth, mumbling,  
"It's not enough. I WILL make you proud."

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant trotted happily back toward the dormitory. His day had been good. He had a job application, and a new, if highly talkative, friend. Celestia's sun was setting and Luna's moon would be out soon. Valiant had

learned his way around Canterlot and felt comfortable taking a few shortcuts back to the dorms. He cut down an alley way behind several shops that had already closed up for the night, *'It's so peaceful.'* he thought.

As Valiant walked, he looked out onto the street at the many ponies going about their business, most probably heading on home from their jobs. Motion caught his eye and he turned his head toward it, just in time to see a dark colored cloak flutter around the side of a building and duck behind the alleyway across the street, *'Odd,'* Valiant thought, *'Ponies don't usually wear clothing except for special occasions. I should go take a look.'*

Valiant sprinted across the street and crept silently up to the corner of the building. He peeked around the corner and saw something that made his blood run cold. A shadowy unicorn in a long, black, hooded cloak stood, horn glowing, levitating an Earth pony high off the ground. Valiant judged the Earth pony to be twenty-five or so paces up, too far for a safe landing.

"Give me your bits and I MIGHT set you down safely." the unicorn said.

The unicorn was obviously a young mare, but her voice had a slur to it, like she couldn't speak properly. The Earth pony was also a young mare. She had a mint-green coat and a mane and tail of cream, streaked with lavender, and she wore saddle bags which concealed her cutie-mark.

The Earth pony's expression was terrified,  
"Please don't drop me!" she pleaded tearfully.

"Your whining just earned you another ten paces." the unicorn scoffed,  
"Drop your bits or I'll drop you. Do it!"

"Please! I don't have any bits. I'm a student, I'm broke." the Earth pony sobbed.

"You're lying!" the unicorn growled, "That's it . . ."

"Wait!" Valiant yelled, "Set her down, please." he said thinking to give the unicorn the bank notes Rarity had given him. Valiant realized he had left the purse in his dorm, *'Oh crud.'* he thought.

The unicorn turned on Valiant,

"Stay out of this!" she commanded, "Mind your own business or you're next!"

Valiant had no bargaining chip to play, so he decided to use fear, "Set her down or you'll regret it." he said calmly.

The unicorn took a step toward Valiant, and thereby into the sunlight coming down the alley. Valiant took an involuntary step back at the sight of the unicorn. Her face was quite pretty, save for her eyes. It took Valiant a moment to realize her entire body and eyes were all the same color: muddy, sickly purple. The unicorn's eyes were solid purple, no pupil, no iris, no whites, just solid disgusting purple.

"What are you going to do eh?" the unicorn asked, "You don't have a horn, so you can't levitate her and you don't have wings to catch her. You have nothing!" the unicorn snarled.

Valiant felt his will strengthening, "Wrong." he replied softly, "I have experience. I'm not just trying to help her, I'm trying to help you."

"I need that money." the unicorn growled,

"I'm not arguing that. But if she dies because of your actions, you will regret it. If her death is your doing, you will become a Vagabond." Valiant said taking a step forward and forcing the unicorn to take a step back, "You will become an outcast. Her spirit will haunt you and torment you until you die." step, "If you kill her, you will be subject to an agony, the likes of which you have never imagined." step, "Forget all your bravado, it would do you no good." step, "No matter how powerful you say you are, at the end of the day you still have only your own thoughts to keep you company." step, "Imagine not being able to trust your eyes, ears, or limbs for fear of your perception being manipulated by the very pony you murdered."

Valiant noticed out of the corner of his eye that the Earth pony was slowly descending, he continued his slow verbal onslaught, taking a step at the end of each sentence, "I speak from experience. For five years of my life, all I knew was the pain of my deed." step, "Through my actions, my best friend, the filly I loved, lost her life." step, "All her dreams, her aspirations, her future, gone." step, "No

more sunrises or moon-rises, no more time with friends or family, no chance to have a family, no finding the love of your life, and n watching your foals grow up." step, "Do you really want to take that away from her and in so doing, loose it yourself?" step, "Are a few bits really worth all that?"

The unicorn took another step away from Valiant, the mist of tears in her eyes,  
"Stay back!" she cried.

Valiant took another step forward,  
"If you need help, I can help you, but I can't do anything until you set her down."

The unicorn backed up yet again, but could go no farther, she was against a wall,  
"Don't come any closer!"

Valiant didn't want to scare her, but he had to take anther step so he could be right underneath the Earth pony,  
"No matter how desperate your situation is, there is always hope. I can help you, miss." he said offering his hoof.

The unicorn closed her eyes cringing,  
"It's too late! Leave me alone!" she cried.

Her horn glowed brightly, and she vanished.

Valiant lowered his hoof slowly,  
"I know despair when I see it." he said quietly.

The Earth pony cried out as she fell the half a dozen or so paces down and directly on to Valiant. Valiant, expecting to have to break her fall, had bent his legs and flexed his muscles. The Earth pony hit Valiant's back and the two fell onto the dirt with a thump. Valiant grunted and gasped as his chest hit the ground. Fortunately, he felt nothing break or sprain. The Earth pony mare screamed, and struggled to rise. She gained her hooves and took off running like she was being chased by a monster.

Valiant picked himself up off the ground and watched her go sadly,

"I didn't mean to frighten you miss," he said to the empty alley, "But I'm glad you're safe."

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant was waiting for Mend when he returned to the dorm. The sun had long set and Luna's moon was bright in the sky when Dr. Mend returned to the dorm. He had spent the day retrieving text books and meeting professors, many of whom remembered him. Valiant had just come straight back to the dorm, the afternoon's encounter having disturbed him somewhat.

Valiant was sitting at his desk with a quill in the corner of his mouth when Mend opened the door. Valiant set down the quill and looked at his friend,  
"Where were you all day? I was worried."

Dr. Mend grunted under the oppressive weight of the text books and flopped his saddle bags down onto his bed,  
"I got our class schedules and text books. Then I met some professors and bought some supplies. Did you find a job?" he asked.

"It took me quite a while to find an Apothecary, but I brought back an application. I just finished filling it out." Valiant said proudly.

"Off you go then," Dr. Mend said, "You need to turn that thing in."

Valiant blinked,  
"But the Apothecary is closed. I'd be wasting my time. I'll just turn it in tomorrow morning."

"Then you can get started studying." Dr. Mend said, "Here, come get your books."

Valiant retrieved the books and set them neatly onto his desk,  
"Our classes don't start for several months, doc." Valiant said playfully, "I was hoping we could just hang out and talk, you know, get to know each other. Don't be a wet blanket."

"Don't you dare tell me what to do!" Dr. Mend snapped, his voice became hoarse almost immediately, "Not everypony has years of their life to waste on pity-parties! Five years of worthlessness! Five years you could have been helping others! You should be ashamed of yourself! How many died because of your stupid, infantile, petty jealousy? You spent years moping while others died because you were too busy with your own problems! How many could have been saved by your potions during those five years? Your potions could have saved hundreds, maybe thousands, but NO, you were too busy with yourself to think about anypony else! Every single one of those deaths are on your head VAGABOND!" Dr. Mend bellowed.

Valiant was completely dumbstruck by Dr. Mend's harsh words.

"Good, you're quiet." Dr. Mend said, opening one of his text books, "Now, stay quiet while I study."

# Chapter 3

Valiant was horrified by Mend's words. Everything he had worked so hard to overcome came crashing back onto him like a tsunami. Valiant shut his eyes tightly and began praying for help from the only source he knew he had with him, *'Arabesque help me. I'm not yet strong enough to handle this on my own.'* he pleaded. The answer seemed to come from the recesses of his own mind, in his own voice, *'Answer with the truth you know. You are forgiven. There is nothing bound to your soul, no guilt, no shame, no sorrow, only hope. Declare what it is you know and be proud. You have nothing to be ashamed or afraid of. Do not be cowed by untrue words. Do not be silent, speak and know the strength and power that is within you.'*

Valiant calmed his mind and took a firm stance, "Arabesque forgave me, Mend." he said quietly.

Mend turned toward Valiant, eyes burning, "That's one out of how many? Huh? How many?"

Valiant refused to be drawn into the type of shouting match Mend seemed to be trying to instigate, yet, "Just one." he said softly, "I cannot be held accountable for any death that may have occurred during my exile. I was incapable of doing anything and nopony is omnipresent, not even the Royal Sisters. I have no idea where all this anger came from, but it isn't healthy. What happened while we were gone?"

"I failed, that's what! I failed again!" Dr. Mend spat venomously.

"How did you fail, my friend?" Valiant asked softly.

"I was named, the most brilliant student ever to come out of Equestria! I failed because I should have figured out your procedure years ago; I just didn't realize that until today! I failed so many who now lay dead. I killed them." Dr. Mend hashed through gritted teeth.

"No pony is perfect Mend. Neither you nor I are to blame. Calm down and think about it. Even if one of us was to blame, there's nothing to do except live and learn. If you are so convinced you are at fault, then forgive yourself, and do something about it." Valiant said calmly.

"I can't forgive myself!" Dr. Mend shouted, "It's my fault! They died because I failed! I'll never fail again! I'll never fail again! I'll never fail again!" Mend screamed himself hoarse and flung open one of his text books.

Mend began reading at a breakneck pace muttering to himself, "No more deaths. I can't fail. Never again, never again. I can't fail. No more deaths." Mend kept up the quiet chant as he seemed to disconnect himself from the idea that Valiant still occupied the same room.

Valiant grabbed his class schedule and saddle bags then slowly and silently inched toward the door, but his ears picked up on a clue as Dr. Mend muttered to himself, "They killed themselves because I failed. I will make you proud."

Valiant watched as Dr. Mend angrily wiped teardrops from the pages of the text book below him. Valiant slipped out of the dorm room quietly and closed the door behind him. He set down his saddle bags and blinked away the forming mist invading his vision.

He placed a gentle hoof on the door,  
"What happened to you, my friend?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant trotted down the deserted streets of Canterlot. He knew something was wrong with Dr. Mend and he couldn't bear to watch his friend hurting like he was. Valiant figured that if he knew more about Dr. Mend he might be able to help him. Valiant needed information and what better place to look than the Tower Library.

"He said he had been named the most brilliant student ever to come out of Equestria. There must be a record of that somewhere." Valiant voiced his thoughts aloud as he ascended the tiers of carved white stone steps up to the double doors of the Tower Library.



Valiant reached the top stairs and knocked politely on the ornate doors. As he waited, Valiant noticed the posted hours of operation were from sunrise to sunset. The hour was close upon midnight and Valiant suddenly wished he had read the posted hours of operation before knocking.

Never the less, the left door opened up revealing a very familiar mint green coated Earth pony mare, who looked like she had been roused from her bed,

"May I hel . . . " she trailed off as she saw Valiant, eyes popping wide.

Valiant swallowed, trying not to look imposing, "Is the Library still open?" he asked.

The mint coated Earth pony began closing the door as she said, "Only University students may use the Library after sunset."

"I'm a student!" Valiant said quickly whipping out his class schedule.

The Earth pony looked doubtful, and still scared of him, "Who are your professors?"

Valiant scanned over his list quickly, "Professor Aloe, for Introduction to Alchemy and Professor . . . it says Rx, but I assume it means Rex, for Introduction to Pharmaceuticals."

The Earth pony mare shuffled her hooves, obviously nervous. Her ears were laid back and her posture was cautious as she let Valiant in. Valiant noticed an open balcony to his left as he entered the ancient repository of knowledge. Books were set in massive shelves, some only accessible by ladder. The only other pony still in the Library was a young, tan coated pegasus mare with sky blue mane and tail and a cutie-mark of a confusingly massive collection of stars set against a pitch black background. She was up on the second level of the Library and was laying down on a bright red, tasseled cushion, quietly reading a book that looked to be more old and worn than Granny Smith. She was situated next to a massive glass window that offered a spectacular view of Canterlot.

Valiant marveled at the huge gold and crystalline hourglass in the middle of the second level of the Library proper, after the foyer, but decided not to waste any time. Valiant began his search by section and eventually found himself pouring over older editions of the Canterlot news paper 'Equestria Daily' on film strips. His search lasted deep into the night but Valiant could not find any mention of Mend anywhere. After two hours of searching, Valiant decided to take a break. Thoughts of the strange unicorn with the frightening eyes kept interrupting his concentration, so he decided to try to find out about that.

Valiant figured the mint coated Earth pony mare might know something since she seemed to be the librarian. Valiant hesitated on searching her out, *'She is obviously scared of me. She probably heard what I said about being a former Vagabond. Heh, I might be scared of me too. It would probably be a good idea to leave her alone for now and not pester her too much, but who else could I ask?'* he wondered.

Valiant looked around and noticed the tan pegasus was still in her same spot reading, 'Ooh, she looks like she's really into her book. I have to ask someone though. She's sure to know more about the Library than I do. It couldn't hurt to ask, I suppose.'

Valiant slowly walked over to her and was about to clear his throat, but she spoke first, without even looking up, "Is there something you need?" her voice was tiny but crisp and it carried like a bell in the silent Library.

Valiant lowered his head to her level to show her proper respect, "I'm sorry to disturb you miss, but . . . do you know where the librarian went?" Valiant hadn't originally intended to ask that particular question, but he felt bad for disturbing the tan pegasus.

The pegasus raised her head; her eyes were a pale yellow, "She probably went to sleep, like most ponies with good sense. I might be able to help you though." she said rising, "I'm Evening Star but you can just call me Star. What do you need help with?"

Valiant swallowed, he had never been particularly comfortable talking to mares, except ones he already knew,

“Um, do you know where I could find a list of diseases, specifically ones that change the color of one's eyes? I'm Valiant by the way.”

Star didn't even have to pause to think,  
“Depending on the color. If the color is yellow or brown, it could be a case of Hemolytic Anemia.” she ventured.

Valiant's eyebrows shot up, and before he could check his mouth, he asked her,  
“Are you a medical student or something?”

Star giggled,  
“No, I just know some things. What color do the eyes change to?”

“Purple, muddy purple in the iris and the whites.” Valiant responded.

Star shook her head,  
“There are no known diseases that cause purple eyes. Perhaps it's a type of infection, like Conjunctivitis or it could be due to a subconjunctival hemorrhage where the blood vessels in the eyes burst.” Star began pacing, talking to nopony in particular, “Nothing seems to fit. Unless . . . Wait!” Star said turning to Valiant suddenly, “Did you see this on a living pony?”

“Yes, I did.” Valiant said curiously.

“Was it a unicorn?” Star asked.

“Yes, she was. How did you know?” Valiant asked.

“I know what it is!” Star said excitedly.

Evening Star took to the air and began searching the books high up on tops of shelves. Within moments she landed in front of Valiant, holding an old book in her muzzle.

Star set the book down in front of Valiant on the floor,  
“Magical & Metaphysical Disorders, page 113.” she said proudly.

Valiant opened the book to page 113 and began reading out loud,

“All unicorns practicing magic on a regular basis should be well aware of their limitations and not push to perform beyond their capabilities or they may suffer from Magical Strain. There are three types of Magical Strain a unicorn may suffer, depending on the amount of magic they use as compared to the amount of magic they use on a regular basis. The most common form of Magical Strain is Magical Fatigue. Magical Fatigue is caused by mild overuse of a unicorn's magic and can physically manifest as a type of Physical Fatigue with corresponding symptoms: panting, perspiring, ect. Once a unicorn begins experiencing Magical Fatigue the unicorn will have some difficulty continuing to use magic and should be encouraged to cease using magic until they are recovered.” Valiant stopped to take a breath before continuing, “The second type of Magical Strain is Magical Exhaustion. Magical Exhaustion is caused by moderate overuse of a unicorn's magic and can physically manifest as a type of Physical Exhaustion with corresponding symptoms: stomach pain, anger, chest pain, fever and insomnia as well as the previously listed symptoms for Magical Fatigue. Once a unicorn begins experiencing Magical Exhaustion the unicorn will have a great deal of difficulty continuing to use magic and should be stopped immediately.” Valiant paused for another breath, “The third type of Magical Strain is called Critical Magical Exhaustive Stress (also known as 'Caster's Stroke'). Critical Magical Exhaustive Stress or C.M.E.S. is caused by extreme overuse of a unicorn's magic. C.M.E.S. can manifest in many ways, such as: dizziness, nausea, migraine headache, and painful hypersensitivity, in mind cases. In more severe cases symptoms may vary widely, such as: projectile vomiting, bleeding from the eyes, nose, or mouth, cracks in the horn, ect. There are also longer lasting effects of C.M.E.S. as well: change in the pigmentation of the skin, eyes, mane, and-or tail. These effects can last for days. Once a unicorn begins experiencing C.M.E.S. the unicorn will find it nearly impossible to continue using magic. If the unicorn continues using magic their life is at risk.” Valiant ceased reading and looked up from the book, “She must have been suffering from Critical Magical Exhaustive Stress then. Why would she push herself so hard if it's dangerous?” he asked.

Star shrugged,  
“Maybe if you put her into the context you encountered her in?” she ventured.

“She was in a back alley levitating the librarian and demanding her bits or the unicorn would drop her. She had the librarian some 30 paces up in the air.” Valiant explained.

Star's eyes bulged and she held her head out toward Valiant, “I've never heard of such a thing!”

Valiant shook his head sadly, “Nor I. The unicorn seemed desperate for the money. I think there was something else going on though. I interfered and talked the unicorn down, but while I was talking to her, I picked up on something else, something that I don't think anypony else would have picked up on. The unicorn was engulfed in the darkness of despair. It was so thick I could almost touch it.”

Evening Star took a small step toward Valiant, her face saddened, “How did you come to know despair so well?” she asked.

Valiant remembered the librarian's reaction when she learned about his formerly outcast status, “I would rather not say. The librarian found out and now she's scared of me.”

Evening Star inched forward, right up next to Valiant, “I won't judge you Valiant. Please tell me.” she asked softly.

Valiant took a deep breath to steel his nerves, “I was a Vagabond for five years.”

Star was silent for a moment before she said, “Then you were alone for five years. I can understand the despair.”

Valiant looked sideways at Evening Star, “I'm surprised you know what a Vagabond is.”

Evening Star couldn't help but to chuckle slightly, “I spend all my free time in a library.” Star's face then changed back to serious, “I know a few things. I know about Vagabonds and their punishment. It must have been very lonely for you.”

Valiant shuddered,

"You don't know the half of it Star." he said lowering his head.

At his side, Evening Star nuzzled him gently,  
"Tell me." she said, voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't want to scare you Star." Valiant said.

"You won't. You have no idea any of the things I've seen in my own lifetime. I promise, Valiant, I won't judge you or be afraid of you. We all have our own demons to face."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had only barely risen over the horizon in Ponyville when Spike belched loudly, a puff of green smoke issuing forth from his mouth and materializing into a scroll. The little purple and green baby dragon covered his mouth to try to keep from laughing. He and Twilight had been eating breakfast when the message arrived. Spike had been chewing a mouthful of his breakfast, a large stack of apple pancakes, and had spewed the contents of his mouth all over Twilight. Twilight, on the other hoof looked rather decidedly un-amused. Her entire face was speckled with bits of partially chewed pancake. She had the reflexes to close her eyes just in time and opened them, blinking away pieces of pancake. Her face was set into patient neutrality, as she levitated a napkin over and wiped her face clear of the offending particles.

"Spike," Twilight addressed calmly, "Would you be so kind as to read the letter?"

Spike put his little hand into his mouth and bit it, trying not to laugh, and failing utterly. Twilight sighed through her nose and waited patiently until her reptilian assistant had finished laughing.

"Spike," Twilight said once again, "Would you be so kind as to read the letter, please?"

Twilight's calm demeanor caused further bouts of merriment from her assistant. Spike laughed so hard he fell out of his chair and onto the floor, clutching his stomach with tears streaming down his face. Twilight couldn't help but to smile to herself, Spike's laughter was rather contagious. Twilight

tried to maintain a straight face but as anypony knows, the harder you try, the funnier it becomes. She allowed herself a couple of audible giggles, before Spike managed to pull himself off the floor of the Library.

“Sorry Twilight.” Spike apologized picking up the scroll, “Ahem. Dear Twilight, Dr. Mend and I arrived in Canterlot safely. We were personally received by Princess Luna. I am sharing a dorm room with Dr. Mend, compliments of the Princess. Our classes begin next semester, but I'm deeply worried about Dr. Mend. Something in him changed, and not for the better. I'm worried he might be having a mental breakdown. Besides our doctor friend, there is another concern troubling me on a different level. I encountered a unicorn mare who was using magic to force ponies to give up their bits or she would drop them from great distance. Her eyes were solid purple, which leads me to believe she was suffering from C.M.E.S. I am at a loss concerning Dr. Mend and the unicorn, and would gladly welcome any advice from anypony (or dragon). Your friend, Valiant.” Spike lowered the letter, “That sounds pretty serious Twilight.”

Twilight began pacing back and forth in front of the table as she explained,  
“It is, Spike. In the past, unicorns who pushed themselves too hard have inadvertently leveled entire towns. If any unicorn continues suffering from C.M.E.S. for an extended period of time, their magic becomes completely uncontrollable. This unicorn sounds like she could be a danger to herself and others. The only method I've ever heard of for stopping a unicorn like that is by another unicorn of greater power. The unicorn suffering from C.M.E.S. has to be held and cared for until the effect of Caster's Stroke wears off, which can take several days. I don't know of any unicorn except one of the Princesses or myself who could perform such a task. Valiant and Dr. Mend have no way to stop this rogue unicorn on their own. In ancient times, C.M.E.S. was more common and each town or city would have unicorns dedicated to subduing a rogue magic user, but that practice has been abandoned for hundreds of years because most unicorns with that much raw potential are sent to the Canterlot School for Gifted Unicorns. The school teaches you iron clad rules for safely practicing magic and drills them into you. This unicorn must have been overlooked somehow. Valiant said she is capable of levitating other ponies, that takes a fair bit of magic and plenty of practice . . . “

“But you levitated that Ursa Minor like it was nothing.” Spike interrupted.

"It wasn't easy, Spike. Remember, how I had to spend a couple of days in bed afterwards? I didn't feel it immediately, except for the basic level of Magic Fatigue. I knew I had to be careful; the effects of C.M.E.S. can creep up on you. The school taught me that, so I was prepared. Imagine what would have happened if I had lost all control of my magic?" Twilight asked.

Spike shuddered,  
"I see what you mean. It would be like what happened when you took your entry test for the school."

Twilight nodded,  
"Exactly, except it would be worse. My magic, right then was only being used for self defense because I was frightened. As a filly, I had no idea about death, so my magic took over and neutralized anything it perceived as a threat, but it can only use what the unicorn knows, so a little filly isn't as much of a threat. A unicorn in a panic won't be able to think clearly or make rational decisions; their magic will take over and identify any living thing as a potential threat. I wasn't suffering from C.M.E.S. I was in a panic, there is a big difference. Imagine all that power channeled only toward destruction. One of the things I learned in my research is that a unicorn suffering from Caster's Stroke becomes paranoid and sees everypony as an enemy trying to harm them. They basically self defense everything to death. Let me give you an example, if Rarity began suffering from C.M.E.S. even with her limited power, she could raise Ponyville to the ground in a matter of minutes."

"But just seeing Princess Celestia brought you right out of the panic." Spike observed.

"Princess Celestia radiates calm and magic just by proximity alone, Spike. It would have been impossible for me to stay in my state with her around. I'm certain Princess Celestia would have done something if she knew about the unicorn, and that worries me. The Princess knows about everything going on in Canterlot, so why hasn't she done something about it yet?" Twilight ceased pacing and turned, sharply, toward Spike, "Spike, take a letter . . ." she began.

\* \* \* \* \*



Valiant woke up late in the afternoon. He stretched and yawned and then looked around the dorm room. Dr. Mend had been lying in his bed reading when Valiant had come back from the Courier's Office that morning. Dr. Mend still lay in the exact same position as he had been when Valiant had gone to sleep. Neither stallion had spoken to the other since Dr. Mend's verbal explosion the previous day. Valiant had spent the rest of the previous night talking to Evening Star. The memory made him smile. Valiant shook his head and cleared his thoughts. He pulled back Big Macintosh's blanket and got out of bed.

Valiant decided to break the silence his roommate had silently imposed,  
"Have you had anything to eat yet today?" he asked quietly.

Dr. Mend never looked up from his book,  
"I'll eat when I have time." he said emotionlessly.

"I'm just trying to look out for you." Valiant said carefully.

"I'm a big colt. I can take care of myself." Dr. Mend replied.

"Would you like me to bring you something from the cafeteria so you can keep reading?" Valiant asked concerned.

"I can take care of myself. Besides, you have plenty to do don't you?" Dr. Mend said testily.

"I'm never too busy to help a friend." Valiant said softly.

"Then help one of the ponies in Equestria who actually needs it. I only need to study." Dr. Mend replied.

Valiant bit back an honest retort,  
"I don't want to start an argument, but don't you need to take a break?"

"I'll have plenty of free time when I'm in the ground. Until then, it's my responsibility to keep others from heading that direction prematurely. I can't do that unless I study." Dr. Mend said raising his head from the book, "So let me study." he said, voice edged with warning.

Valiant took the hint,  
“I'll be at the Tower Library if you need me.”

“I'll remember that.” Dr. Mend said dismissively.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant walked into Mrs. Soothe's Apothecary holding his application in his muzzle,  
“I'm sorry I'm late. I had a late night at the Tower Library.” he said plopping the application down on the counter.

The fuchsia coated, middle-aged unicorn mare, looked over the application carefully,  
“You seem to have no job experience at all. How old are you?”

“I'm 25, Mrs. Soothe.” Valiant explained, cringing internally.

“Hmm. That doesn't bode particularly well for you here Valiant.” She said honestly, “I'm not exactly swamped with applications, but I don't want to hire somepony who might give a customer the wrong ingredients. If you can prove to me that you know your stuff, I'll consider more seriously.” she said looking up.

Valiant opened his saddle bag and removed his mortar and pestle,  
“These are mine and I have a couple of recipes that I invented. The first one is written on here,” Valiant said laying down a piece of parchment on the counter, “It makes the whole body completely numb while allowing you to maintain total control over your motor skills.”

Mrs. Soothe read over the recipe carefully nodding to herself,  
“This one is somewhat basic, but it would get the job done well enough. You said you have had no formal education in the field of alchemy, correct?”

Valiant nodded,  
“That's right. I developed these on my own.”

Mrs. Soothe arched an eyebrow,

“These, plural? You've only given me one.”

Valiant hesitated,  
“I do have another one, but I must ask that if I give it to you, you won't charge money for it.”

“You are here asking for a job, to make money, but you don't want one of your recipes to be sold for money?” Mrs. Soothe asked incredulously.

“Yes, ma'am. I do have a reason for it though.” Valiant responded.

“Alright, let's hear the reason.” Mrs. Soothe said.

“It's potent. So potent, in fact that it could easily be abused. It heals the body of injury at an accelerated rate and can even keep scars from forming. If used properly it can heal a broken bone, once set, in three days.” Valiant explained.

Mrs. Soothe looked highly dubious,  
“I'm sure it's nice, but nothing I've ever heard of can do that. Let's see the recipe.”

Valiant took a deep breath and reached into his saddle bag,  
“I'll do one better. I'll prove it.” he said laying the parchment on the counter.”

Mrs. Soothe began reading the recipe, ignoring Valiant, while she did so. Valiant took a breath and raised a hoof up in front of his mouth and bit down, on his leg, as hard as he could. Valiant felt the pain and took a breath, then bit harder, until he tasted blood. He let go of his leg and set it up on the counter in front of Mrs. Soothe.

Mrs. Soothe saw the bloodied appendage in front of her and reared back,  
“What are you doing?” she asked mortified.

“You see this injury?” Valiant asked, Mrs. Soothe nodded, “By tomorrow I believe it will be gone.”

"If it isn't, I'll report you to the closest psychiatric hospital. If it is, I'll hire you under one condition. Don't EVER do that again." Mrs. Soothe said emphatically.

Valiant removed a small jar from his saddle bag and set it on the counter,  
"I'm going to drink this, then go to a clinic to have the injury documented. I'll come back tomorrow with the document as proof. I apologize for resorting to such drastic measures to prove my point, but this really is the real deal. I'm being completely honest with you." Valiant said, then proceeded to chug the contents of the jar.

Once finished, Valiant screwed the top back onto the jar,  
"I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Soothe."

Mrs. Soothe didn't know if she should fear for her safety or if she should be hopeful, this pony was crazy,  
"I'll be here." she said nervously.

Valiant left the apothecary and went, limping, in search of the closest clinic, 'Sometimes you just have to make a point.' he thought. As he walked, he realized he was drawing a lot of attention to himself, because of his injured leg. He lowered his head and broke into a trot, he didn't want to draw too much attention. He tried to remember where the closest clinic was, but his leg was dulling his concentration.

"Hey Valiant, what's going on?" asked Live Wire trotting up next to Valiant,  
"Wow, what a coincidence running into you like this. I stopped by Mrs. Soothe's apothecary a couple of times today to see if you had turned in your application, but she kept saying she hadn't seen you. I was headed back there now to ask again." He machine gunned off in less than 5 seconds, "Hey why are you limping? WOW! What happened to your leg? Oh my gosh! That looks like it really hurts! Are you going to be O.K.? Are you headed toward a clinic? Because if you are you're heading the wrong direction. The closest clinic is two blocks that way." Live Wire indicated the direction with his hoof, "Here let me help you. You need to be careful. Did you get bit by a stray dog? If you did then you need a shot. It doesn't look like you're in any danger of dying from exsanguination, but all the same you need to get that all patched up. It doesn't look like the injury hit any of your

tendons maybe a muscle, and wow do you have a lot of muscles. Did I tell you that before? You are seriously buffed up. Oh yeah, I did tell you that when we first met, remember I asked you if you were here for a body building competition. You know, not many ponies can stand all my talking. I'm really grateful that you're willing to put up with me. Hey, you know you should try to make some more friends while you're here in Canterlot. I'll bet there are just tons, and tons, and tons, and tons, and tons, and tons of ponies who would like to be friends with you, because you're all strong and smart and everything. Maybe you could help me work out like you do, then I could attract a mare. I'll bet you have the girls falling all over you. I'm sorry if I'm talking too much right now, but I'm trying to keep you distracted so you don't feel the pain, plus it will make the trip seem a whole lot shorter. See, here we are. NURSE!" Live Wire bellowed.

To Valiant's surprise, Live Wire spoke at a normal speed, although it was obviously difficult for him, as he related the injury to one of the nurses. Live Wire stayed with Valiant while he had his self inflicted injury cleaned and bandaged, chattering the whole time of course. The nurses looked at Valiant really oddly when he asked for written documentation of his leg injury, but complied. Valiant and Live Wire left the clinic and headed for the Tower Library, 'I wonder what Evening Star will think of Live Wire?' Valiant wondered as the Tower Library came into view.

# Chapter 4

Valiant led Live Wire toward the Tower Library, with Live Wire chattering the whole time about the history of the structure, “You know, the Tower Library is one of the oldest structures in the whole of Equestria. It was formed straight out of the white marble that forms the bedrock foundation of Canterlot itself. Princess Luna was personally responsible for creating it. Princess Luna created the Tower Library and Princess Celestia created the University. Both structures were originally of the same white marble, seamless and perfect; raised straight out of the rock by magic, no artisans’ tool has ever touched the Tower Library. The original University was destroyed during the struggle between Celestia and Luna when Luna was overcome by Nightmare Moon. No pony even knew that Princess Luna created the Tower Library until recently when Princess Luna returned. Princess Celestia couldn't bear to talk about its history because it brought back too many sad memories, but when Princess Luna returned, Princess Celestia was only too happy to tell everypony who was the founder of the Tower Library. Since her return, Princess Luna has been searching out ancient tomes that had been lost since her banishment and returning them to the Tower Library. She's been reportedly seen there a couple dozen times in the past few months. I wonder if we'll see her there? Oh, I hope we get to, I'd love to meet a Princess! Hmm, maybe that's not such a good idea. I get so nervous around mares I don't know, I just start rambling so much I wouldn't know what to do. When I'm nervous I can ramble on for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours. My mind is running in circles just thinking about it. Hey, speaking of thinking, why are we going to the Tower Library anyway? Do you need to do some studying for your classes? I used to go there all the time, but the old Librarian didn't like me too well, she said I talked too much. She was always real nice about it though, oh she was pretty and incredibly smart too! She was a purple unicorn, but I never caught her name. I was always too embarrassed to talk to her much. Now, I know that may be hard to believe, me not talking much, but I stutter so badly when I'm around pretty mares. Her assistant was nice enough. His name was Spike, he was a dragon. He used to show me where the books were that I needed. He used to say that I helped him memorize the cataloging system. I don't know if that's true or not but he

had trouble finding books at first. After a couple of months, he automatically knew where every single book in the whole Library was . . . “ Live Wire stopped when Valiant interrupted him.

“You knew Spike?” he asked.

Live Wire nodded his head,  
“Yep, I sure did. He . . . “

Valiant interrupted Live Wire again,  
“If you'll wait for a second, I can tell you the former Librarian's name, if you still want to know it.”

Live Wire nodded his head again, staying quiet, so Valiant continued,  
“Her name is Twilight Sparkle. She's Princess Celestia's star pupil, and supposedly one of the most, if not the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria. She's really nice, but I don't get the impression she's particularly interested in romance right now. She seems too interested in her studies and besides, isn't she a bit young for you?”

“I don't know how old she is. I always thought she was close to my age. I figured she just aged well, because nopony I know could be that smart and know so much unless she was at least my age, probably a bit older. Aw shucks, I should have known she was too good to be true.” Live Wire lapsed into silence for the first time since Valiant had met him.

Valiant felt bad for his friend,  
“Hey Lemon, don't put on a sour face . . . “ Valiant stopped speaking as what he had said sunk in.

Valiant tried not to laugh, he didn't want to make Lemon Lime feel worse, but he couldn't help himself. He stifled his laughter, biting his tongue and closing his eyes. He needn't have worried. Lemon Lime began laughing loudly in the most outlandish way imaginable, in hyper speed. The sound reverberated off the surrounding buildings and echoed through the street, making it sound like there was a whole chorus of ponies laughing. The sound was utterly beyond description and so hilarious, every pony on the street began laughing uncontrollably. Valiant couldn't hold his laughter back if his life depended on it. His laughter burst from his mouth, joining the chorus already in motion. The layers of laughter folded on themselves,

perpetually increasing the hilarity until Valiant and Live Wire couldn't even continue walking. Both stallions sat down on the street, tears of mirth streaming down their faces.

Valiant was the first to recover,  
“I, hehehe, I apologize. I never meant to say that, I was trying to encourage you, but it just came out all wrong.”

Live Wire held up a hoof,  
“Stop making me think about it, or I'll get going again. No harm done.”

The two stallions rose to their hooves and began making their way toward the Tower Library again, still chuckling. They climbed the stairs up to the ornate double doors and pushed both open, Valiant on the left and Lemon Lime on the right. The Librarian was sitting behind her desk quietly, but looked up sharply at the sound of a snigger. Upon seeing Valiant, she ignored the sound and focused on the book in front of her.

Valiant was delighted to see Evening Star already in her spot near the window, except this time she wore saddle bags, which she still wore even lying down,  
“Good afternoon Star.” he greeted quietly, “I hadn't expected to see you here so soon, I had hoped too though.”

Evening Star looked up from her book, the same old worn one from the previous night,  
“I come to the Library every chance I get. I'm here every day. I love knowledge. What brings you back here so soon, and who's your friend?” she asked quietly.

“This is Lemon Lime, but he likes to go by Live Wire. Live Wire, this is Evening Star, and she likes to go by just Star.” Valiant introduced his friends.

Live Wire extended his hoof and shook Star's offered one,  
“H . . . hi. I . . . I'm pleased t . . . to m . . . meet you.” Live Wire stuttered.

Evening Star put a hoof to her muzzle, giggling,  
“You don't have to be nervous, Live Wire. I don't bite.”



"I . . . I'm s . . . sure you d . . . don't, but I c . . . can't help i . . . i . . . it. I g . . . get n . . . nervous when I t . . . talk t . . . to p . . . pretty mares." Live Wire stuttered so badly, Evening Star could barely understand him.

"Well, thank you. You're very sweet. I do have a question though. Why are you called 'Live Wire' if you stutter so much?" Star asked.

Live Wire tried to answer but he couldn't get the words out, fortunately Valiant stepped in,  
"He's normally a real chatter-box. He has some kind of condition where his mind and mouth apparently work about four times faster than other ponies. He generally talks so fast he's hard to understand."

"Oh, he has Cerebral-Lingua Accelerari. That's a rare disorder, but it can be beneficial if controlled. Ponies with Cerebral-Lingua Accelerari tend to excel at anything they do, and make fantastic auctioneers." Star informed the two stallions.

Valiant decided to get right to the point, Star had helped him the night before,  
"The reason I'm here, Evening Star, is to try to learn about a friend of mine's history. That's what I was originally looking for last night."

Star looked puzzled,  
"Why? Won't she tell you?"

"He's a he, and no he won't." Valiant replied.

"Then why don't you ask his parents?" Evening Star asked.

"I don't know their names, and I'm afraid to ask him." Valiant said.

"Then why don't you check the Census records? You know his name right?" Star asked.

"Yes, but I have no idea when he was born." Valiant said.

Evening Star shook her head,

“You don't need to. You can cross-reference names with birthdates, breed, coloring, and genealogy. Canterlot updates its Census every year. There's a new copy here in the Library. I'll show you where it is.”

Evening Star rose from her cushion, put her book in her saddle bags, and unfurled her wings. She took to the air and landed up on the second floor mezzanine. By the time Valiant and Live Wire climbed the stairs to the second floor, Star already had a thick book laid out on a reading podium.

She waited patiently until the two stallions reached her, so she wouldn't have to raise her voice,  
“What's your friend's name?” she asked.

“Mend.” Valiant responded.

Star began flipping the pages of the Census book,  
“Hmm, Mend . . . Mend . . . here it is. Earth pony, right?” she asked.

Valiant nodded,  
“Yes, he has a black coat, white mane and tail.”

Evening Star nodded,  
“Yup, that's him.” she said and began reading.

After a moment, Star looked up,  
“Uh oh.” she said sadly.

“What is it?” valiant asked stepping up to the podium.

“His parents are listed as being deceased. It looks like they died when he was little, both suicides. It says like his grandparents raised him after that. His grandparents still seem to be living though.” Star said.

Valiant perked up, this was just what he had been looking for,  
“Where could I find their address?” he asked.

“It's listed here.” Star said reading again, “Looks like they don't live too far away, just a couple of blocks from here.”

Valiant looked over the address, but couldn't figure it out,

“Live Wire, are you good at remembering things?” he asked.

Live Wire seemed to be alright, since Evening Star wasn't addressing him directly,

“Yes, of course. I can remember all kinds of things. Like for instance . . . “

Live Wire was cut off, as Valiant pulled him over to the podium and gently pushed his head toward the Census book,

“Can you memorize this address, and do you know where it is?” he asked pointing to an entry in the book.

“Yeah, I had the whole page memorized before you got done pushing my face toward it. I have a photographic memory. Why, I can even remember . . . “ Live Wire stopped as he realized he was rambling again, “Sorry, I tend to do that.”

Valiant patted his friend on the shoulder,  
“That's alright Live Wire. I apologize for pushing you around like that, but I'm really worried about Mend. Come on, let's go talk to his grandparents. Maybe they can tell me why he went mental.”

Live Wire and Evening Star looked worriedly at each other, then at Valiant,

“How did he go mental?” they asked almost in unison.

Valiant was already heading down the stairs,  
“Come on, I'll tell you on the way.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We would be honored to have such a fantastic mind on staff here Dr. Mend.” said Dr. Avalon.

Dr. Avalon was a dark yellow, middle-aged, Earth pony mare who had a mane and tail of the lightest shades of blue, highlighted with streaks of shining silver. Her cutie-mark was that of a syringe filled with a glowing, golden liquid. Dr. Avalon's mane and tail were luxurious and long, but pulled back into a pair of tight buns. Her voice was smooth but unusually deep for a mare. Dr. Mend knew it was from long hours of yelling orders to interns and nurses. Dr. Mend had come in with his résumé and applied for

a position as an on-call doctor. Dr. Avalon had taken him into her office to interview him. As the chief of the clinic, the responsibility fell to her to interview all potential candidates. She had heard about Mend when she had gone to the University. The two were close to the same age, but Mend had graduated first.

Dr. Mend bowed his head politely,  
“I can start as soon as you need me to, Dr. Avalon.” he said.

Dr. Avalon smiled,  
“Wonderful. I'll put you on the schedule for . . . “

Dr. Avalon was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream that made both ponies jump slightly. Dr. Mend and Dr. Avalon rose from their respective seats in preparation for an emergency call on the intercom. Instead of the intercom, a light gray unicorn mare with light purple mane and tail burst through the door. Her eyes were wide and she looked nervous.

Dr. Avalon took a step toward the unicorn,  
“What's the matter?” she ordered in a commanding tone, there was no hint of a request.

The nurse looked over her shoulder, then back at Dr. Avalon,  
“A pegasus just came in. It looks like all four of his legs are broken in several places.”

Dr. Avalon looked concerned,  
“Immobilize him so he doesn't hurt himself further. I'll be right there.” she said, then turned to Dr. Mend, “Looks like I need you right now Mend. Follow me.” she ordered.

Dr. Mend quietly but quickly followed Dr. Avalon to the scrub basin down the hallway in the clinic. Dr. Avalon turned on the faucet and both ponies began scrubbing.

“No pony since you, has even come close to matching your grades and skills Mend. You'll be a bit of a celebrity to all the interns.” Dr. Avalon said as she pushed down on the iodine dispenser.

Mend utilized a bolted down, dual-sided, scrub brush as he replied, "I hope foalish hero worship won't hinder their performance. If I become a distraction, would you have a few words with them or should I?"

"I'll deal with it, if it becomes a problem." Dr. Avalon said passing a towel to Dr. Mend.

Dr. Mend used the towel to wipe off his hooves, "Let's go see what happened to this poor pegasus."

The two doctors trotted out onto the highly sterilized Emergency Room floor to the sound of agonized wailing. Dr. Avalon assessed the pegasus' condition quickly as she approached the bed he was writhing on. He was royal blue in his coat and his mane and tail were light brown. His bright orange eyes were wide and his pupils were dilated from the pain. All four of his legs were obviously broken. Each limb was puffy and swollen in multiple places with correlating discoloration.

Dr. Avalon went right to work, "He needs to be sedated." she told Dr. Mend over her shoulder.

"Too soon. If he goes into shock, he could slip into a coma. Besides, we need him to tell us if he's allergic to anything." Dr. Mend responded.

Dr. Avalon and Dr. Mend joined the nurses in holding down the agonized pegasus, "Just had to be sure you weren't out of practice." Dr. Avalon said to Mend.

Dr. Mend didn't respond to Dr. Avalon, instead he focused on the pegasus writhing in front of him, "What's your name?" he asked using his hooves to hold the pegasus' head still.

The injured stallion grunted hoarsely, gasping for breath, "Trooper." he rasped.

Dr. Mend lowered his muzzle down, right next to Trooper's ear, "O.K. Trooper, we're going to fix you up but we need to know if you have any allergies. Are you allergic to anything?"

“No.” Trooper grunted, “Please, make it stop!”

Dr. Mend looked up at Dr. Avalon,  
“We need an Anesthesiologist to put him under, then get him X-Rays so we know what we're dealing with, then get him into surgery. Do you confirm?” he asked.

Dr. Avalon nodded,  
“I confirm.” she said, then turned her head toward the light gray unicorn with the light purple mane and tail, “Page the Anesthesiologist and prep the X-Ray machine. Find us a clear surgery bay; we need to have him in surgery within half an hour.”

Dr. Mend thought fast and leaned down to Trooper again,  
“How did you come by your injuries Trooper?”

“Unicorn tried to kill . . . Earth pony . . . saved her . . . unicorn bound my wings . . . magic . . . dropped me.” Trooper grunted.

Dr. Mend's head snapped up at Dr. Avalon, shock written all over his face,  
“Has this ever happened before?” he asked.

Dr. Avalon shook her head vigorously,  
“Not that I've ever heard. He may well be hallucinating from the pain.”

Dr. Mend took a step back as the Anesthesiologist arrived to administer to Trooper. It was only when Mend stood back that he noticed something odd. Trooper looked a great deal like Valiant, '*In fact,*' Mend thought, '*The two are nearly identical. Their only differences are their eyes and . . .*' Mend's vision shifted down to Trooper's flank looking for his cutie-mark. Mend's eyes widened, '*He has no cutie-mark! It wasn't removed, like Valiant's, it looks like it never developed! An adult pegasus with no cutie-mark?*'

Dr. Mend couldn't peel his eyes away from Trooper's perfectly smooth and blank flank.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant, Evening Star and Lemon Lime looked up at the beautiful two-story house that matched the address Lemon Lime had memorized. The house was pure white with sky blue shutters and a covered front porch, upon which sat two well used brown, wooden rocking chairs. The front yard was a good 20 paces deep and roughly 60 paces wide, only 20 paces wider than the house itself. Small, but lush trees provided shade for the entire yard, blooming in colors of orange, white, and pink.

Valiant walked calmly up onto the porch and politely knocked on the front door, flanked by Evening Star and Lemon Lime. After a couple of minutes, the door opened, revealing an ancient Earth pony mare. She had a coat of chocolate brown and a mane and tail of almost pure gray with occasional streaks of light pink showing through.

The old mare adjusted a pair of spectacles on her face, "Yes?" she asked, voice creaking with age.

"I'm sorry to bother you ma'am, but do you have a grandson named Mend?" Valiant asked politely.

The old mare's features fell drastically, "Oh no. What happened?" she asked, hoof to her chest.

"I'm worried about him. He's a friend of mine. We recently came to Canterlot to study at the University . . . " Valiant began.

"And he changed, didn't he." the old mare said, there was no question in her voice.

Valiant's fears were confirmed by her statement, "This has happened before hasn't it." he stated.

The old mare nodded sadly, "And you are?" she asked.

Valiant, Evening Star, and Lemon Lime all lowered their heads respectfully, "I'm Valiant, this is Evening Star, and Lemon Lime." he introduced.

“My name's Goodie, my husband, Obsidian, is in the living room.” the old mare said, “If you're here to try to help Mend you'd better come in.” she said holding the door for the younger ponies, “This will take a while.”

Suddenly and without warning, a sealed letter formed itself into existence in front of Evening Star,  
“Oh,” she said, surprised.

Valiant looked over to her,  
“Where did that come from?” he asked, eyeing the letter oddly.

Star shrugged,  
“Sorry Valiant. This happens to Couriers all the time. I have my duties, you know how it is.”

Lemon Lime looked toward the horizon,  
“It's getting late. The Sun will be setting soon. You need to be careful Star.”

“I've been doing this for a long time, boys. I'll be fine.” Star said.

She picked up the letter in her mouth and took off, waving good bye to Valiant and Lemon Lime. The two stallions watched Evening Star disappear over the tops of the nearby buildings, and vanish from sight.

Turning to the living room, their attention was caught by Goodie as she yelled,  
“Obie! There are some youngsters here about Mend. Put on a pot of tea. This may be what we've been hoping for.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Applejack was highly upset,  
“You can't go, Big Macintosh! Ah know he's your friend, he's mine too, but you've got responsibilities 'round this here orchard. Ah can't do all your chores for long an' Applebloom's too young to help out much.” she scolded her older brother as he stoically continued packing his saddle bags.

“Ah've already asked Caramel to take care of mah chores while Ah'm gone. Give him mah pay while Ah'm away.” the immensely built, red Earth pony said softly.



Applejack blinked back tears of frustration,  
“But why? You've never left before, why leave now?” she demanded.

“Ah can't explain it Applejack. All Ah know is Ah have to go. Valiant needs me. Ah've saved up plenty of money and Ah'll be real careful.” Big Mac said.

“You heard what Twilight said about some crazy unicorn up in Canterlot. You're an Earth pony. How are you goin' to protect yourself? What can an Earth pony do against unicorn magic?” Applejack asked pointedly.

“Ah don't rightly know, but you didn't let that stop you now did you little sis?” Big Mac asked, “Yall defeated Nightmare Moon just fine and two thirds of yall couldn't even use magic.”

“Don't you go usin' your fancy mathematics again!” Applejack roared, “Yall ain't facin' Nightmare Moon!”

Big Macintosh buckled his saddlebags and slid them on,  
“No, we're just goin' to take care of a unicorn, not a diety. Ah'll be fine Applejack. Ah have to go, and you need to accept that.”

“What in tarnation am Ah supposed to tell Applebloom?” Applejack asked, nearly in tears.

“That she can't go with me.” Big Macintosh said, “She was listenin' 'till a minute ago. She, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle just ran to Applebloom's room. Ah think they're packin' to go too.”

Applejack sped out of Big Macintosh's room fast enough to make Rainbow Dash proud, had the cyan pegasus been present. Big Macintosh smiled admiringly at his protective younger sister. He walked over to his antique desk, which had miraculously survived the fire, and pulled open one of the mahogany drawers. Inside the drawer was a pair of envelopes, one was addressed to Granny Smith, Applejack, and Applebloom, the other was addressed to Caramel. He carefully removed the sealed envelopes and set them on his mattress, then quietly crept downstairs while Applejack was still arguing with Applebloom.

As Big Macintosh cleared the front door, he saw a cloth sack sitting on the porch with a paper tag on a thin wire tying the mouth closed. Big Mac peered at the tag and was surprised to find his name on the tag. Looking around, the huge Earth pony saw he was alone on the porch, so he picked up the sack and ran for it with the sack clanking faintly in his teeth.

Granny Smith poked her head out of the barn and smiled, “Go on an' help out that nice young stallion.” she said, “Your grandpa's solid steel shoes should help if anything happens. He don't need 'em anymore anyhow.” her hip creaked as she made her way back to the front porch and into her rocking chair, “When Ah saw you go runnin' off earlier, Ah plum knowed what you were up to. You went to get Caramel so you wouldn't be leavin' your little sisters an' Granny all alone. You never been away before so Ah says to myself, Ah says 'Granny, your grandson's headin' for trouble. He's needin' some plum good help. As much as you can provide.' Make good use o' them shoes and your Daddy's lasso. You best come back safe now, you hear.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant and Lemon Lime sat quietly and listened as Goody and obsidian related the sad story of how Mend lost his parents, “No matter what we said or did, we couldn't convince him of the truth. One day, just before he graduated from the University, we overheard him crying in his room. He spent his days in the University dorms but he kept his things here in our son's old room. He was talking like there was somepony else in the room. He said he was glad 'they' were silent and that he had made 'them' proud. The last thing he said was 'goodbye Mom and Dad'. We never realized he was hearing voices, before then. We told him it wasn't his fault that his mother and our son killed themselves, but he was convinced that he was. In any case, the voices stopped, so we left it alone in the hope that things would stay that way.”

Valiant spoke up, “Why didn't you tell anypony?”

Obsidian replied to Valiant's query, “Like Goody said, we didn't find out until the voices had already stopped. We kept an eye on him but to our knowledge, the voices never returned.

Mend left for Ponyville to open his clinic after he graduated. We wrote him letters every week, but he never responded. We had no idea he was back in Canterlot.”

“He and I are students at the University. Princess Luna was kind enough to have every part of our first semester paid for by she and Celestia.” Valiant said.

“When you see him again, tell him we miss him. We have plenty of room here if you and he would like to stay here after your first semester is over.” Obsidian said.

“It's too early to say for sure, but I'm afraid Mend might be hearing the voices again. Do you have any advice on how to help him?” Valiant asked.

Goody and Obsidian looked at each other then at Valiant and Lemon Lime,

“No, but he needs help. Try bringing him here so we can talk to him. He has to deal with this. We may have to force him to deal with it. We've talked about this and it's for his own good. If he won't seek help he may not be stable enough to practice medicine. If you see what I mean. Please Valiant, bring him to us as soon as you can.” Goody said pleadingly.

Valiant rose from his seat, Lemon Lime followed suit,  
“I'll do everything I can.”

“Thank you so much for talking to us.” Lemon Lime said, unusually somber and quiet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend breathed a sigh of relief. Trooper's surgery had been successful, his bones had been set, with the help of some pins, but he would be months recovering. A thought suddenly struck him, *'Valiant's potions would be ideal for Trooper.'* Dr. Mend exited the O.R. And decided to wait for Dr. Avalon.

Dr. Avalon left the O.R. As the nurse ponies wheeled Trooper into recovery,

"You're as good as rumors say Mend. Trooper's surgery couldn't have gone more smoothly. You've already been a great help." she praised.

Dr. Mend turned his head away, blushing furiously; he was not used to compliments,  
"I uh, have an idea about a way we might be able to speed along Trooper's recovery." he ventured.

Dr. Avalon's ears perked up, highly intrigued,  
"Oh, and what would that be?" she asked.

"I would, of course, need your permission to go ahead with the treatment, but I know a surefire way to have Trooper ambulatory inside a week." Dr. Mend said.

Dr. Avalon's eyebrows shot upward and she took a step toward Dr. Mend,  
"If you're right, this new treatment could save patients weeks of recovery time and hundreds of bits. Are you sure it will work?"

"I've seen it work to lengths you wouldn't imagine. I had a patient who suffered second and third degree burns to his entire body. Through the treatment, he has no scarring whatsoever." Dr. Mend said.

"Why haven't I heard of this before now?" Dr. Avalon asked.

"It was only recently discovered." Dr. Mend said.

Dr. Avalon absolutely beamed,  
"We'll have to ask Trooper if he's willing to undergo the treatment. Is it expensive?"

"It won't cost him one bit. I've been sworn to provide it free of charge." Mend said.

Dr. Avalon looked suspicious,  
"How?"

"It's a simple formula using common herbs in the correct proportions. I'll bring in several doses tomorrow. It's late and I haven't eaten all day." Mend's stomach growled as if on cue, even as the words left his mouth.

"You're free to go anytime you like. My shift ended several hours ago." Dr. Avalon hinted, subtly.

Dr. Mend completely missed the hint, being about as subtle as a peel of thunder,

"Well then far be it for me to keep anypony from their dinner. I need to study tonight. I always eat while I study."

Dr. Avalon's ears fell somewhat,

"Oh, alright. Be sure to bring the treatment medication when you come in. Good night Mend, I'll see you tomorrow."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've been a huge help, Live Wire. You didn't have to get involved, you know. It's my own problem." Valiant said.

Lemon Lime held out a hoof for Valiant to be quiet, before he began machine gunning again,

"You don't owe me a thing Valiant. Any problem you have, I do too. I already told you I don't have many friends, the truth is, I don't have but one, and that's you. No pony can handle everything all by themselves. I'm glad to help. I help ponies every day, it's my job, and it's what comes naturally to me. I like helping others do what they can't, in a way, I protect them. I hate very little, but what I do hate is seeing somepony who can't help themselves, go unnoticed and uncared for by others. I know that feeling. No pony can help me with my disorder, so I give others what I can't have. It's taken me years of practice to be able to levitate a full grown Earth pony, but it's so worth it to see the looks on their faces when they take their first steps without my help. I give them back their lives. You have no idea how damaging it is to a pony, not being able to walk, or feed themselves, or do anything. It's depressing and in time it can destroy you. You may not believe it, but I'm actually very patient, I just talk a lot. You absolutely cannot be impatient with somepony who has to relearn to use their legs again. It can take years and if you try to rush them, you end up hurting them and they can end up even more damaged than before. I have to help.

If not me then who? Who can do it? I have the ability to do something about it and I choose to. I don't generally care if I don't have many friends. If that's the price I have to pay to help others, then so be it. I absolutely refuse to watch anypony suffer needlessly."

Valiant was surprised at the intensity his friend spoke with, "I never knew you felt so strongly about it. Boy, if more ponies could hear that speech, the University would be overflowing with medical students."

Lemon Lime shook his head, "Nothing I say can make anypony do something. I might be inspiring to a small degree, but nothing can force a pony to do something they wouldn't normally do by themselves. It might be inspiring, sure, but they would have had to already been contemplating it on their own. Anyway, I'm starving. Come on, I know a great Bar where they serve the best hay fries in Equestria."

"I'm sorry Live Wire, but I have to go back to the dorm. I need to try to get Mend to agree to visit his grandparents." Valiant said.

Lemon Lime's ears fell, drooping down his head, "Alright." he said, then perked right back up, "Can we hang out tomorrow then?"

Valiant couldn't help but to laugh at his friend's antics, "I'll do my level best, I promise."

Valiant and Lemon Lime parted ways, Valiant heading back to the dorm, and Lemon Lime to the Bar he liked so much.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant trotted up the stairs toward the dorm room, dreading having to talk to Mend. Exiting the stairwell, he headed down the hallway until he reached 317. He halted at the door and took a deep breath before entering. Valiant opened the door and to his surprise, Mend was busy with a mortar and pestle, mixing up some roots, flowers, and berries that Valiant was intimately familiar with. Next to Mend, on his desk, was a large number of small, cork-topped vials.

Mend looked up, spotting Valiant,  
“How much would an average adult pegasus with four broken legs need in order to be completely healed in a week or so?”

Valiant was only too happy to answer,  
“Three doses. One every 2 ½ to 3 days. You already have enough there to last you for two months at the least. Are there any pending natural disasters I should know about?”

“No, but there is some unicorn levitating and dropping ponies in the streets.” Dr. Mend said humorlessly.

“Blast! I'd hoped I had talked her out of that. Is that how the pegasus was injured?” Valiant asked.

“You had a run it with her?” Dr. Mend inquired, he was obviously worried.

“I did. I believe she was suffering from C.M.E.S. Her eyes were solid purple, a muddy disgusting purple.” Valiant said.

“That means her eyes were naturally purple to begin with. I've treated 'Caster's Stroke' before. It happened to Twilight a few times. The unicorn's coat, mane, tail, and their entire eyes change color to match their iris color. Is that what you were researching at the Library?” Dr. Mend asked.

“That was part of it.” Valiant said neutrally.

“She needs to be treated immediately. I'll bet that book didn't tell you that unicorns suffering from C.M.E.S. also experience paranoid delusions did it?” Dr. Mend asked.

Valiant shrugged,  
“It may have. I don't think I read the entire passage.”

“Well if it didn't, that book needs to be updated badly. Unicorns in the throes of C.M.E.S. don't know what they're doing and through that they can end up keeping themselves in a perpetual state of C.M.E.S. until it kills them. They become sporadic, random and dangerous. They will cycle through emotions and moods rapidly, laughing one minute and crying the next. Now, a unicorn's power grows steadily when they push themselves

and they have to push themselves hard when they cast while suffering from C.M.E.S. so you do the math. If somepony doesn't stop her and soon, this is going to be a calamity of epic proportions." Dr. Mend said worriedly.

"Somepony has to stop her." Valiant said.

"Who?" Dr. Mend asked, "You? She'd swat either of us down like a bug. The combined muscle of four Earth ponies might be able to do it, but that would end poorly. In her confused state she would probably kill herself or somepony else or even level a couple of city blocks. I've heard of other unicorns overpowering one who was suffering from C.M.E.S. by cutting them off from their magic, but I've theorized that if the unicorn could be rendered unconscious, say by a drug, she could be subdued that way."

"I'll see what I can do. Hey, um, there's something I wanted . . ." Valiant began.

Dr. Mend interrupted him,  
"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I'm planning to go to the apothecary to see if I got the job." Valiant said.

"I'd like you to come to a nearby clinic, tomorrow morning. I'm going to present your fast-healing potion to the chief there and hopefully administer it to the injured pegasus. Oh, and Valiant?" Dr. Mend baited, "He looks just like you."

Valiant's train of thought vanished,  
"What?" he asked softly.

"His coat, mane, and tail are exactly the same shade as yours; his face is nearly identical too. I only spotted a few differences. His eyes are bright orange, your legs are more defined with muscle, and he has no cutie-mark, as in he never developed one." Dr. Mend explained.

"Is the clinic still open?" Valiant asked.

"He's not going anywhere tonight. He probably hasn't even woken up yet. We had to take him to surgery; he'll be there when we arrive tomorrow.



Now, what was it you were going to say?" Dr. Mend asked, turning back to the desk.

Without thinking, Valiant blurted out,  
"Does your family know you're here?"

Mend froze and stepped slowly back from the desk, he turned his head and looked at Valiant evenly,  
"Why?" he asked sharply.

"I'll go with you tomorrow, if you come with me to visit your grandparents." Valiant said.

Mend's face contorted in anger,  
"How dare you go behind my back!" he bellowed, "How dare you meddle in my life! My life is my business, stay out of it!"

"I'm trying to help you." Valiant said, trying to remain calm.

Mend continued with his raised voice,  
"I don't need any help! Not from you or anypony else!"

*'Time to play my trump card.'* Valiant thought,  
"You're hearing them again aren't you?"

Mend turned his head away, he couldn't lie to Valiant's face,  
"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Whether or not you admit it, you have a serious issue and you have to deal with it. I would never have guessed you were only in your mid thirties. Mend, you look like you're in your fifties! This is killing you!" Valiant said emphatically.

"Leave me alone." Mend said softly.

Valiant had enough,  
"I can't Mend! I refuse to watch you do this to yourself! You're my friend! I've already lost one friend needlessly! You said it was your job to keep other ponies from an early grave, well that's exactly where you're headed!"

Like you, I believe it's my job to keep others from the clutches of death, and that includes you!"

Mend rounded on Valiant,  
"Do you think I like being this way? The only time they ever stopped was when I was the best! I have to make them proud!"

"They're dead Mend . . . " Valiant began.

Mend interrupted him,  
"Because of me! I failed them! The shame of my failure was so great they killed themselves! Do you know what it's like living with that?"

"No! But I do know what it's like carrying the burden of death! It wasn't your fault Mend! Of any pony in all of Equestria, I should know about blame! I want to help you!" Valiant said pouring out his heart.

"You can't help me!" Mend yelled.

"You haven't even tried! I'd do anything to help you! You've already given up hope without even trying! There is always hope, Mend! I'm living proof of that! You've pushed away everypony who wants to help you, except me!" Valiant responded, finally letting his feelings out.

"Leave me alone!" Dr. Mend yelled hoarsely.

"It was NEVER your fault Mend!" Valiant yelled with driving passion, "I don't care whether or not you want to hear it, you need to hear it! You want to talk about failing? You're failing at life by staying like this! Do you honestly think your parents wanted you to work yourself to death before you're forty? Furthermore, what do you have to show for all your obsession? Your grades die with you Mend! You have no family, no wife, and no foals! You have a great talent for medicine which could be passed on! You want to know what failure is? LOOK AT YOUR LIFE! You're robbing untold millions of the benefit of your legacy, because you have none! And it's all because you won't let anypony help you!"

Valiant was out of breath and breathing heavily, but he continued on,  
"Your grandparents love you Mend. Love has nothing to do with accomplishments or lack thereof. They're already proud of you, for just

being you. You're failing them by not seeking help. You're breaking their hearts Mend. They already lost a son, don't make them lose you too." he pleaded.

Mend didn't speak, didn't move a muscle. He stood in place, not moving, like a statue. His ears were empty. There were no voices, there was no yelling, and there was no blame. For a few blessed minutes, the voices had ceased, and Valiant's words had struck with power. Mend starred off into space, and saw it all again: his whole childhood flashed before his eyes, shaded in a new light with a new perspective. The pieces of his life began falling into place, reality began to sink in, but Mend had no way of dealing with it all. As far as emotions went, he was still a foal. Silent tears slipped out of Mend's eyes and spilled down his prematurely-aged face. Mend shook with a grief he had never felt before in his life, it was one he had always been too busy for.

Valiant slowly walked up to his friend, "You have to let us help you, Mend. We want to help you, but we can't if you don't let us." Valiant planted his forehead against Mend's and closed his eyes, "Please," he whispered, "Please, let us help you."

Mend put a heavy hoof around Valiant's shoulder, clinging to his friend like a life-preserver, "They're dead Valiant." he sobbed brokenly. Mend's voice was choked with sorrow, "Oh, Goddess, they're dead!"

Mend closed his eyes and bit his lower lip, he wanted the rare but radiant and gentle comfort of his mother, he wanted the strong, confident, and silent support of his father. Mend realized, for the first time really realized, he would never have that again. He lowered his head against Valiant's chest and began to cry out the first tiny part of the massive burden he had been carrying around for most of his tortured life. His grief came in uncontrollable waves of sobs and Mend found that he could no longer stand. He collapsed. His full weight suddenly too much for his own legs. Strangely, he didn't fall, but the fact only dimly registered in his mind. Mend, almost subconsciously, realized something. Next to him, was a source of strength he had never known, had never acknowledged. Right there, next to him was a stallion who had torn down the walls of Mend's reality, but had stayed right there with him, supporting his full weight

without complaint. Valiant gently lowered Dr. Mend down to the floor, but stayed right where he was, in front of his friend.

Valiant felt the hot tears burn their way down his shoulder as Mend sobbed again,  
“They're dead.”

Valiant wrapped his left hoof around Mend's shoulder, his head followed suit,  
“I know.” he said holding his friend tightly.

Mend seemed to simply fall apart. He clutched at Valiant like he was trying to absorb the other stallion,  
“I can't do this anymore, Valiant!”

“Will you let us help you?” Valiant asked remaining still.

Against Valiant's shoulder, Mend nodded weakly, the nods becoming stronger by the moment,  
“I don't know what to do! Please, help me! I don't want to be alone anymore! I don't want to be alone! Please Valiant! I don't want to be alone!” he cried, his voice becoming a whisper, “I don't want to be alone.”

Mend's cries turned to soft whimpers, as he held onto the only solid thing he knew he had, his friend.

Valiant hugged Mend close, holding onto the first precious signs of recovery, and whispered,  
“You never were, my friend, and you'll never be again.”

Had either Stallion been inclined to raise their head and open their eyes, they would have noticed a beautiful pair of Celestia-sized golden wings resting on Valiant's shoulders, precisely where his wing-stumps were. They didn't stay very long, but they were there, just the same.

# Interlude

Princess Luna sat in Celestia's room, high in the upper levels of the Royal Palace, in the calm, cool of her beautiful night watching over all of Equestria through a huge window. She sat with her eyes closed, in absolute silence, remembering her experience a Nightmare Moon. She remembered back to when the initial change had come over her and shuddered at the memory.

**Her vision shifted, back to that very night.**

Princess Luna stood high on a cloud, overlooking Equestria, it was the same cloud she and Celestia met at, each and every dawn and dusk. She looked down at the ponies sleeping peacefully on the ground beneath her and had to put forth a conscious effort not to openly sneer.

Luna dug her hoof at the cloud, she was agitated, more than agitated, "For hundreds of your lifetimes, I have provided you with a cool, clear night after each day. You relish and play in my sister's day, but you shun and sleep through my beautiful night. You love Celestia and everything she brings, but what about me? Would any of you, even know me if I was to walk among you right now?" she asked the open air.

Princess Luna hung her head, she already knew the answer, "I've heard it with my own ears now, for years. You ask each other and Celestia the same inane questions, '*It sure must be a lot of work to raise both the Sun and Moon every day, when do you sleep?*' You don't even remember me now do you?" Princess Luna stamped her hoof, tearing a large chunk out of the cloud, "Why do I continue on like this? What is the point, when nopony cares? Would an occasional 'thank you' be so much to ask? Without my night, you would never have any time to sleep, and I understand that, but the least you could do is acknowledge me!" the Moon Princess became frustrated, "If only one of you would just look up and see my night sky, even for a moment, it would be enough, some kind of

acknowledgement, **something**. Give me a look, a nod, a simple comment, even if it's just a whisper. Give me something!" she cried loudly.

Down on the Earth below, not a single pony stirred. They did not hear her. She had made her night **too perfect** and every pony slept right on through her cries. The Moon Princess lay down on the cloud and wept bitter tears, *'They don't love me anymore. They don't even remember me now. I've become 'the other one', a waste, useless and unnecessary.'* The Moon Princess wept and wept all through her night. Her sorrow had long ago turned to jealousy, and that night it turned from jealousy into bitterness.

Princess Luna didn't care enough, right then, to stop the emotion from filling her. She had enough, *'I will **MAKE** them see my night. I will keep the Moon up until they see it.'* she thought, making her decision easily.

Princess Celestia called out to her little sister as she ascended toward their cloud,  
"I'm coming Luna," she laughed happily, "Make way for the dawn!"

Princess Celestia landed on the cloud smiling hugely, she pranced a merry little dance on the cloud top, extra happy that morning,  
"Good morning little sister!" she beamed, "Are you ready to lower the Moon? I know you must be tired, I can take over now and you can go to sleep."

Princess Luna despised her big sister's perky morning attitude, it made her even more angry. Luna walked over to the side of the cloud and looked down on the still sleeping ponies below her.

She lowered her head and gritted her teeth, then turned toward Celestia with bitterness in her voice,  
"No." she whispered.

Celestia stopped prancing on the cloud as if she had been stabbed. She turned her head toward her sister slowly, eyes wide and mouth agape, *'What? This must just be a misunderstanding.'* Celestia turned her whole body toward her younger sister and for the first time, noticed the hurt behind Luna's eyes, *'What's going on?'*

Celestia took a careful step toward her younger sister, concern in her eyes, voice, and posture,  
“Luna, what’s wrong?” she asked. Luna turned her head away, but Celestia pursued her, “What happened? Luna, please tell me.”

Princess Luna raised her eyes and looked Celestia in the eyes,  
“I’m not lowering the Moon.” she said, “They’ve forgotten me.” Luna said, eyes beginning to burn, “They’ve forgotten me but I will MAKE them remember! I’ll MAKE them appreciate my night for once! I will not lower the Moon until they love me again!”

Celestia was shocked, Luna sounded nothing like her normal self,  
“Luna please, you can’t stop the cycle of night and day, it isn’t natural . . .”

Luna screamed,  
“Is it natural for me to be unappreciated for all these years! Is it natural for a Princess to be ignored by her own subjects? To receive no respect or acknowledgement for what she does! I’m worthless to them now, Celestia! The only Princess they acknowledge is you! They don’t want me! This is going to end right now! I do just as much for them as you do! They will love me and they will love my night or they will never see the Sun again!” Luna didn’t actually mean her last statement, she was merely venting the bitterness in her soul.

### **Suddenly time seemed to stop.**

The cloud vanished, Celestia vanished, everything vanished. Luna stood in a dark nowhere, there was a little light but no light source, she stood but there was no ground. A figure stood in front of her, one she couldn’t identify, but felt familiar all the same.

Princess Luna addressed the figure,  
“Who are you?” she asked, “Speak! For I am in no mood for games!”

A deep husky voice addressed the Moon Princess,  
“Temper, temper, little Princess. You’re not acting so royal right now. You have been forming me from the most denied, tortured part of your bitter little mind.”

"Who are you?" Luna asked.

"I am the embodiment of your pain and desire. I am the entity formed by your fevered dreams, your nightmare, if you will. I am Nightmare Moon and I have an offer for you. Indulge me for a time, allow me to grasp your power, all of it, and I shall give you what you most desire. I can see into your mind's eye, for it is my prison. You are afraid to take any truly drastic steps to achieve what you yearn for, I however am under no such hindrance." Nightmare Moon's voice seemed to come from right behind Luna, "Think about it, my mistress." she whispered seductively, "Everything you want, everything you've cried yourself to sleep over for the past several thousand years, can be yours. I am your humble servant and I shall do your bidding. I was born of your desire. Every dark urge that you fear to act upon I will do for you. My offer is only for you, my creator. You made me and to that, I am yours and yours alone."

"You can do it? You can get them to love me?" Princess Luna asked hopefully, desperation tinting her voice.

Nightmare Moon laughed,  
"One way or another, they will bow to you." she assured.

"Do it then." Princess Luna knew it was a mistake as soon as the words left her lips.

Nightmare Moon appeared on the cloud, clad in dark shimmering armor, thin and unhealthy, yet with a morbid and vivacious macabre malignancy. Princess Celestia was utterly shocked at the appearance of the mare that manifested where her little sister had been only moments before. From her cloud-top vantage point the dark mare spotted the white stone city beneath her. Nightmare Moon drew a deep breath and exhaled, breathing thick fog down into the city below. Its inhabitants ran out into the streets, drawn by the foggy darkness which heralded the dark one's manifestation. The fog in the continual darkness frightened them, one and all, 'Where is Princess Celestia's day? Where is the Sun? I can't see!'

The evil mare laughed harshly at their plight,



“I will keep them in darkness for a time and then pull the fog away. They will embrace the night. They will love the night for it will be the only light they have! The night will last forever!” inside her, Princess Luna screamed.

The Princess could see through Nightmare Moon's eyes but she was helpless to act. She called out to her captor,  
“No! This isn't what I wanted! Nightmare Moon, you lied to me! They can't live without the Sun! Their crops will die and their skin will pale! They take nourishment from what the Sun provides! I didn't want this! I just wanted to be appreciated as an equal, not as a superior to Celestia! I wanted a longer night, not an eternal one! I just wanted them to see the night, not become prisoners of it! Stop this, please!”

The Princess' words fell on uncaring ears. Nightmare Moon had been born of Princess Luna's bitterness. The Princess had fueled the emotions for years beyond count, giving Nightmare Moon more potency with each passing moment. Nightmare Moon not only took control of Princess Luna's power but her body as well, she needed a physical form. From the deepest depths of her new power she had magically manifested into a creature which represented the truest form of what she was and what she desired. Nightmare Moon chose a form loosely based on that of Princess Luna, but of an equal size to Princess Celestia, whom Luna envied so terribly.

“Luna?” Celestia cried, “Luna, what happened to you?” she took a step toward the new and fearsome mare who now stood in front of her.

“Silence foal!” Nightmare Moon bellowed, “Your pathetic sister has given her power to me now! I am Nightmare Moon, and I will give your sister what she desires! You have ignored her, just like the rest of your subjects, and now you will pay! She would have never been bold enough to confront you like this, so she gave her power to me instead! Now I shall rule Equestria and you will rule nothing! This land is mine now! Be gone!” with her final words, Nightmare Moon lowered her head and issued forth a bolt of magic which struck a shocked Celestia.

The Princess of the Sun was not a creature of violence, nor was Princess Luna. The notion of violence went against their natures. Nightmare Moon had no such restraint. Princess Celestia vanished from sight and Nightmare Moon thought she had won. She laughed long and loud, her victory simple and quick.

Centuries before Nightmare Moon had entered the picture, the two Alicorn sisters had born witness to the types of violence perpetrated upon the ponies by the various creatures which inhabited Equestria. Families were slaughtered, crops were destroyed, and homes were raised to the ground. The land of Equestria, in those days, was a place which bore little resemblance to the Equestria most knew, and the same was applied to its inhabitants. The ponies struggled to survive on a daily basis, and had become ruthless and selfish. The monsters had dominated the ponies and had obtained complete control over them. They forced the ponies to build them a great fortress high up in the mountains with a small city at its base to house their slaves. Within this city, the ponies were subjected to torture, starvation, and death at the whims of their masters.

The prominent characteristics which governed the ponies' actions were based on what they knew at the time:

**Lying**, to conceal their true motives and keep themselves safe,

**Cruelty**, to any creature weaker than themselves and make others fear them,

**Sorrow**, for their lot in life as forced slaves and the torments that it brought,

**Greed**, to keep anything they had because they had so little,

**Betrayal**, they would turn any rebellious ponies over to their masters for safety or food,

**Banality**, the ponies had lost their identities, they simply existed in a state of perpetual existence without meaning, there was no magic and no wonder in them only an empty lack of everything,

**Despair**, for the ponies had lost the desire to strive for something better and saw no possible good in their future,

**Impatience**, for their needs were great and constant,

**Ignorance**, for they grasped at any chance to obtain what they needed without thought to feasibility or likelihood of success,

**Denial**, for they refused to believe there was anything better for them despite their strengths and abilities,

**Laziness**, for they refused to try to better themselves believing it would be useless, and finally,

**Hate**, for the ponies had lost the urge to forgive any misdeed or infraction no matter how minor or accidental.

Neither sister had it within themselves to take up violent action against the marauding creatures, but their subjects, like Nightmare Moon,

had no such innate restraints. A small group of ponies, six mares and six stallions, four of each type of pony, banded together to combat the aggressors. The small group used cunning and strategy, might and main to out-wit the monsters and try to force them out of the ponies' land, but they simply didn't have the power necessary to do so. The small group fought valiantly, but to no effective end. They could use violence, but none of them had the power to make their will widely known and respected. As soon as one ravaging group was dealt with, another simply sprung up to take its place. The ponies fought an unending battle that they knew they would ultimately lose, but still they fought.

The two sisters, seeing the bravery of the twelve ponies, entrusted them with magical gifts, each of which gave them power. To the mares, they gave the Elements of Harmony, to bring back to Equestria what had been taken by their enemies: Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty, and Magic.

To the stallions, they gave the Elements of Peace, to return to Equestria what had led to their inability to free themselves from their oppressors and work together: Hope, Patience, Discernment, Acceptance, Perseverance, and Forgiveness.

The physical forms of the Elements of Harmony were jewelry for the mares, so that other ponies could look upon them and know the beauty of such traits. The mares had been the inspiration and were the true might behind the group. The Elements of Harmony were given the combined power of both Princesses to combat their enemies offensively, each Element represented by a powerful jewel. With their power, the mares could destroy any enemy which threatened Equestria or its citizens.

The physical forms of the Elements of Peace were suits of armor for the stallions, so that other ponies would feel protected and know their safety was not an idea but a physical thing which could be touched and felt. The Elements of Peace were given the strength and resilience of Equestria itself to protect the Elements of Harmony and all of the ponies who needed such protection. They were the defensive line against whose combined might, no force could break through.

The ponies, once free of their captors, had all gathered in one forest for safety. Within this forest was the original home of the Elements of

Peace and Harmony who had named it The Everfree Forrest in honor of their crusade against their oppressors. The ponies built a great city within the deepest reaches of The Everfree Forrest. They also built the Palace of the Pony Sisters for Celestia and Luna, whom they named Princesses, and their rulers. As the years passed, the population of the city grew and overflowed its walls. The ponies knew they could not stay in their beloved forest but remembered the massive fortress their oppressors had built and journeyed, en-masse to rebuild the fortress and make their new city there where they could expand as needed. Celestia and Luna joined them and helped to raise the city walls and formed a new Royal Palace, both right out of the white marble that was the foundation of the original fortress. The two Princesses abandoned their old home and joined their subjects in their new home which they named Canterlot.

Throughout the ages of Equestria, each Element was given back to the Princesses once its bearer passed on. The Elements of Harmony were given back to Princess Celestia and the Elements of Peace were given back to Princess Luna. The Princesses had designed the Elements of Peace and Harmony to metamorphose into small stone spheres so the Princesses could utilize them in a time of need if violence was not called for. If violence was required, the Elements would, invariably be taken up by the descendants of the original twelve ponies, and their true power could be used in full.

Nightmare Moon laughed long and loud, her victory seemingly simple and quick. Her armor was beautiful and dark. Using Princess Luna's knowledge of the Elements, Nightmare Moon had summoned to her and subsequently absorbed the Elements of Peace, forming them into her own armor. Through Luna's knowledge of the Elements of Peace Nightmare Moon knew there was only one thing which could destroy her armor and threaten her, the Elements of Harmony. The previous bearers of the Elements of Harmony had passed away years before and there had been no need of them since, so they remained unused. Nightmare Moon wanted that power.

She launched herself off the cloud and landed down on the ground, right in the center of Canterlot,  
“Bow before me my peasants! I am Nightmare Moon and I am your ruler now!” she laughed.

One tiny Earth pony filly trotted right up to Nightmare Moon, indignantly,  
“We don't bow to anypony except Celestia!” she said punctuating the statement with a kick against Nightmare Moon's armored foreleg.

Nightmare Moon looked down at the brave filly and smiled an evil smile,  
“Well, it looks like my new subjects need an example of what happens to those who defy me.”

Nightmare Moon's horn began to glow. She telekinetically forced the little unicorn filly's face into the dirt on the ground, beginning to smother her,  
“I said bow to me, foal!”

The filly struggled against the power being used against her but could not break free. Nightmare Moon pushed her down harder and heard the telltale snap as the bones in the filly's muzzle broke. She screamed and gasped for air, but Nightmare Moon held her tight, laughing maniacally. A sudden gust of wind broke Nightmare Moon's concentration and nudged her to the side. It was a minor annoyance at most, but the filly was free. Nightmare Moon turned to face the pony who dared to assault her and was faced with a very upset, slightly charred, Princess Celestia.

Nightmare Moon turned to face the Princess,  
“I thought I had destroyed you. No matter, the Elements of Harmony will see to that soon enough.” Nightmare Moon took wing and launched herself into the sky, heading right toward The Palace of the Pony Sisters where the Elements of Harmony were hidden.

Celestia, in her weakened state, could not summon up the magic to summon the Elements of Harmony to her as Nightmare Moon had with the Elements of Peace. Never the less, Celestia took to the sky, not to give chase, but to stall Nightmare Moon until her own power had returned to its full strength.

Nightmare Moon reflexively pulled back as Celestia soared directly in front of her,  
“Return Luna!” she cried, “Return to me, my sister!” Celestia commended.

Nightmare Moon only laughed, "Or what?" she asked, "What can you do? I know everything Luna knows. I know you cannot attack me even if it's to save your own life!" the evil mare punctuated the statement with another blast of her power aimed at Celestia.

The Sun Princess dodged nimbly out of the way. The blast of destructive magical power flew downward and struck the heart of Celestia's prized University. The University buildings began to crumble, the cries of its inhabitants, rising into the air around Nightmare Moon and Celestia. The Princess of the Sun turned in mid air and focused her power, trying desperately to hold the buildings up long enough for the occupants to escape safely. Nightmare Moon took the chance and flew off in the direction of the Elements of Harmony once again.

For the second time, Nightmare Moon had to pull back, mid-flight, as a team of pegasi intercepted her, pummeling her with their hooves. They attacked from every direction in groups of three and four. They did little but harass the evil mare, but it was something, and it was all they could do. They kept up the attack without abating for several minutes. Nightmare Moon aimed blasts of her power at the ponies barring her way, but the pegasi were too quick and the blasts landed within the city destroying large chunks of it with each explosive impact. She snared one pegasus with telekinesis and threw her into another one, like a battering ram. Using this method, Nightmare Moon broke the attack of the pegasi down to nothing. She flung the bodies down toward the ground, smiling. Her smile faltered, as unicorns on the ground began catching the pegasi with their magic and landing them safely, while Earth ponies kicked rocks at her like little missiles. Nightmare Moon turned toward where Celestia had been. The Princess of the Sun was nowhere to be seen, and the University had collapsed.

Nightmare Moon smiled then and laughed as she winged away toward the Elements of Harmony once more. She flew as fast as she could, allowing Luna's memory to guide her to the ancient Palace of the Pony Sisters. She arrived and landed in the old Throne Room, there on a series of pedestals rested the Elements of Harmony. Nightmare Moon laughed haughtily to herself and casually trotted toward her new weapon. Suddenly six pegasi erupted from within the circle of pedestals, each grabbing a sphere, and flew off in a V-formation.

Nightmare Moon reared back and bellowed, "NO!" as she took to the air again.

The pegasi flew in a tight pattern, but Nightmare Moon was faster. She reached the pegasus who was the closest to her and struck the poor stallion's back with her hooves. The stallion fell from the air dazed, injured and dropping the sphere he had been carrying. Nightmare Moon seized the sphere and let the stallion fall, choosing to continue the chase. It had been a mistake. The stallion's rainbow colored mane and tail flared out behind him as he fell, unconscious, toward the hard, unforgiving ground below. He regained consciousness and pulled up swiftly. He looked toward his fellow pegasi and the sight of Nightmare Moon gaining on another pegasus. He felt a surge of strength flow through him and flew with all his might, directly on an intercept course with the space between the dangerous Alicorn and the other pegasi.

He flew as fast and hard as he could, pouring every ounce of speed he had at his disposal into his wing motion. Nightmare Moon reached out her hoof to strike-down another pegasus. The stallion burst between the two and a brilliant flare of rainbow colors exploded out in every direction with a thunderous crack, stunning and blinding Nightmare Moon momentarily. The stallion hit the evil Alicorn and took back the sphere. The six pegasi flew with all their might back toward the Palace of the Pony Sisters where Celestia waited.

Celestia had taken advantage of Nightmare Moon's distraction back in Canterlot and had the six pegasi follow her back to the ruins to provide a distraction while Celestia's power regenerated. The six pegasi carried only round boulders. Celestia had cast an illusion spell on them and hidden the real Elements of Harmony.

Nightmare Moon shook off the effect of the Sonic Rainboom and scouted around for the six pegasi. She spotted them flying back toward the ruins and sped after them, gaining quickly. She may have been evil, but she was no idiot, she had a new weapon in her arsenal, her own version of the Sonic Rainboom. The pegasi, seeing Nightmare Moon gaining on them, dropped down into the Everfree Forrest flying between the trees with much more agility than the evil Alicorn could muster. Nightmare Moon flew down to the forest floor and focused her magic. Instead of using speed to do it,

Nightmare Moon simply used all her magic to cast her own version of the Sonic Rainboom: the Dark Nova.

Malignant darkness spread out around her in every direction, mutating the very fabric of The Everfree Forrest, changing it and warping it. The very dirt changed, every animal, every tree. Nightmare Moon hung her head gasping for breath, the spell had taken almost everything she had, but the Everfree Forrest was her domain now. She heard the cries of the pegasi as the Dark Nova overtook them. Nightmare Moon felt satisfied, they could not escape her power now. She trotted along toward the cries of the fallen pegasi as quickly as she could.

She spotted them laying on the far side of the old bridge, which the ancient ponies had used for defense instead of a wall. Nightmare Moon trotted triumphantly over the bridge and up to the fallen pegasi, "The Elements of Harmony are mine!" she laughed.

A crystal clear voice called out to her from the darkness, "Be bound!"

Nightmare Moon turned just in time to see Celestia standing at the base of the ancient Palace, with the Elements of Harmony floating in the air around her. The evil mare's legs, wings, muzzle, and horn were bound in place by immovable magic.

Celestia gracefully walked up to Nightmare Moon, "You were correct, Nightmare Moon, I cannot destroy you, but I can bind you and I can banish you." Celestia planted her head against the evil mare's face, "Luna, I know you're in there, little sister. I'll find a way to bring you back, I promise." Celestia stepped back, "Nightmare Moon you are hereby banished to the Moon, until the stars align exactly as they are right now, in a thousand years."

A ribbon of rainbow colored light swirled all around Nightmare Moon, enveloping her completely. The light ribbon shot up to the Moon, depositing her there to be imprisoned there for a thousand years. As a reminder of the kind of evil entombed therein, Celestia placed a shadow on the Moon in the shape of a mare's head.



### **Princess Luna returned to the present.**

She shook her head, clearing away the memories. Since her emancipation from Nightmare Moon, Princess Luna had poured herself into all the history of Equestria she could. A thousand years was a lot to catch up on. Celestia eventually decided to form a Royal guard and fashioned their armor after the original armor of the Elements of Peace, since the originals were bound to Nightmare Moon for a thousand years.

Luna smiled to herself remembering when she had asked Celestia about why Nightmare Moon hadn't been able to use the Elements of Harmony against her when she returned,

"I had no way of permanently defeating Nightmare Moon, but I knew that she had a way to eliminate me for good. I kept a close watch on the descendants of the original Elements of Harmony and I determined which fillies displayed the appropriate traits and just made sure they all wound up together. They could destroy Nightmare Moon where I could only imprison her. I hid myself and the Element of Magic with me, so Nightmare Moon couldn't find it. I hid on the Moon after she escaped, it was the one place she would have never looked, and the one place where I could watch and make sure everything went according to plan. I erased all knowledge of the Element of Magic from history books and put the rest of the Elements of Harmony back in the ruins to ensure the battle took place there, away from our subjects. As for the Elements of Peace, that is your domain and I didn't have the heart to subvert you, especially in your absence."

Celestia hung her head sadly,

"I had no idea you felt so abandoned, Luna. I have no excuse for my oversight. I'm your sister, I should have known. I'm so sorry you had to endure for so long alone my sister. I wish there had been another way, but I didn't have time to come up with an alternative." Celestia had lowered her head, nuzzling her little sister, "I love you Luna, I missed you so much."

Princess Luna smiled at the memory, then glanced down at Celestia's sleeping form next to her,

"Don't you worry, big sister. You raised the Moon for me for a thousand years, now I'll raise the Sun for you. Keep your strength and take a well-deserved rest. It's my turn to work now. Sleep tight, Celestia."

# Chapter 5

Big Macintosh finally reached the gates of Canterlot, late in the evening. He had never been to visit a big city before and was thusly awestruck by the sight. He slowly walked up to the gates marveling at them. The gates were massive. The walls flanking the gates were, Big Macintosh judged, thirty paces tall, with the gates themselves close on to twenty paces. The walls were ivory colored, seamless, and gleamed even in the dim light of Luna's Moon. The gates themselves seemed to glow in the pale moonlight, each intricately carved door reflecting golden colored light in every visible direction.

Big Macintosh entered the city and gazed, fixedly at the enormous white-wash colored buildings as he strode past, each one a marvel unto itself. Big Mac's ears picked up the sound of some pony's hooves striking the street in front of him and he quickly sidestepped to avoid running into them. He almost succeeded.

The other pony, a lime green unicorn with a yellow mane and tail flopped back onto his haunches,  
“Ouch!” he said, “Did I run into a brick wall? I don't usually run . . . “ the unicorn spoke quickly, but stopped mid-sentence when he looked up and saw Big Macintosh staring down at him, “Oh uh, I'm sorry.” he said eyes wide, “Are you O.K.?”

“Ayup.” Big Macintosh responded with his usual comment.

Big Mac reached down and picked up the unicorn by the scruff of the neck with his muzzle, and set him down in a standing position.

“Wow, you sure are big. I don't think I've ever seen a pony as big as you. You're solid too, but then again I know a couple of other ponies like that.” the unicorn said, glancing at the red Earth pony's saddle bags.

Big Macintosh shrugged,  
“Ayup.”

The unicorn looked up, his attention drawn away from the saddle bags,

“You don't say much do you?”

“Not unless Ah have somethin' to say.” Big Mac responded.

“Hey, I just noticed your saddle bags, are you new to Canterlot? I've never seen you before. Then again Canterlot is a big place and I can't be expected to know every pony now can I? That would be so cool if I did though, then I could go anywhere and . . . ” the unicorn stopped when he noticed, Big Macintosh was looking around, “I'm rambling aren't I?” he asked.

“Ayup.”

“Are you hungry? You look like you've been on the road for a while. I know a really, really, really, really, really nice bar where they serve the best hay fries. It's funny I bumped into you, I was just headed there myself. I wanted a friend of mine to join me but he had other things to do, so I just decided to go by myself, unless you want to come with me. Would you like to come with me? Oh duh, where are my manners? I'm Lemon Lime but everypony just calls me Live Wire. I never understood why. Oh well, so what's your name? ” the unicorn asked.

“Mah name's Big Macintosh.” the red pony introduced, extending his hoof.

Lemon Lime took it to shake, but ended up being lifted and lowered several times,

“ . . . “ Lemon Lime's eyes were the size of saucers, “ . . . so would like to join me? . . . could use the company.” he said voice cracking.

“Ah am a mite peckish. Ah guess Ah'll join you.” Big Macintosh said smoothly.

“Alright then, follow me. Uh, you don't mind if I talk do you?” Lemon Lime asked.

“Nope.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Big Macintosh followed Lemon Lime to an unassuming place with a sign above the door that simply said 'BAR'. Big Macintosh had heard of bars but he had never had a chance to go to one; there were no bars in Ponyville. Lemon Lime opened the door and Big Macintosh stepped inside. The place was dimly lit but Big Mac could see that it was packed with ponies, more than half were mares and the vast majority were unicorns. Most sat at tables, drinking from mugs, others were watching a pretty unicorn filly in a fancy dress, dance up on a small stage. To his right, he saw a long counter with stools in front of it, and a slightly plump unicorn mare behind the counter cleaning glasses. Her coat was the color of red clay and her mane and tail were a shining silver color. She spoke freely with the ponies seated at the counter, laughing occasionally at some joke or other. The place seemed nice enough and Big Mac had emptied his canteen long before reaching Canterlot so he was both hungry and thirsty, 'It kind of resembles the juice bars Pinkie Pie has at some of her parties.'

Lemon Lime hopped up onto one of the bar stools and patted one right next to him,  
"Come on over."

Big Macintosh walked up to the counter and slid his saddle bags over the seat of the stool, then sat down atop the straps. Lemon Lime held up his hoof and waved the clay colored mare over. She looked up and smiled at seeing him.

She walked over briskly,  
"What can I get you Live Wire?" she asked.

"Give me an order of hay fries and a tall mug of your house special. I'm paying for me friend here. So get him whatever he wants." Lemon Lime said.

The mare looked at Big Macintosh,  
"What can I get for you big fella?" she asked casually.

"You got any sasaparilla, ma'am?" Big Mac asked

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that one. You look like you can handle your stuff, so how about a Colt's Island Iced Tea?" she offered.

"Ayup." Big Mac replied. He didn't know what the Colt's Island part was about, but iced tea sounded good to him.

"Do you want anything from the menu?" the mare asked.

"Ah'll have the same as my friend here." Big Mac replied.

The unicorn mare walked over to the rows of bottles and poured small amounts of liquid from several fancy looking bottles into a tall glass then added some tea, a straw, and ice cubes. Big Macintosh thought it was a strange way to make tea, '*Different strokes for different folks, Ah guess.*' he thought. The mare then took a thick looking mug and pulled on a lever under the counter, filling the mug with a golden colored liquid, then levitated the two over to Big Mac and Lemon Lime.

The mare turned and yelled through a window,  
"Hey Al, we need two orders of hay fries, nice and crispy."

A disembodied, husky stallion's voice answered her from the back,  
"What?"

Lemon Lime levitated his mug up to his mouth and began chugging its contents, draining the mug in less than twenty seconds. Big Macintosh took a sip of his 'Tea' and managed not to gag, '*Boy howdy!*' he thought, '*They sure do like their tea strong 'round here.*'

Somepony tapped Big Mac on the shoulder, none too gently,  
"Hey! That's my seat! Move it!" the speaker was a tall, muscular, unicorn stallion.

Big Macintosh turned his head and looked the unicorn up and down. He had a coat of creamy beige and his mane and tail were rusty red, cut short and straight.

Big Mac opened his muzzle to reply, but the bartender beat him to it,  
"Leave him alone, Cantankerous. He was there first. I don't need you starting any fights in here tonight."

Cantankerous refused to heed the bartender's warning and shoved Big Macintosh hard on the shoulder with his hoof,  
“Hey, did you hear me? I said move it!”

Lemon Lime turned around,  
“Hey, come on 'Tank', he's new around here, don't give him a hard time. There's plenty of stools . . . “

“Was I talking to you Lame Ware?” Cantankerous asked.

“Tank!” the bartender said loudly, “I said cut it out and leave them alone!”

“Ah, don't want no trouble. Ah'll move.” Big Macintosh said hoping to avoid a fight.

As Big Macintosh began to shift, so as to dismount the stool, Cantankerous' horn began glowing and he pulled the stool out from under the peaceful Earth pony. Big Macintosh tried to catch himself but he wasn't quite fast enough. His muzzle hit the counter-top of the bar, nose first. Big Mac's head snapped back, leaving a small trail of blood. He landed on the floor in a sitting position, with a heavy thump.

Lemon Lime slid off his stool as fast a greased lightning,  
“Hold still, Big Macintosh!” he said levitating a cluster of napkins down to his friend's face.

Cantankerous laughed,  
“That'll teach you to move faster, stupid! Come on, hurry up!”

Big Macintosh slowly rose to his hooves and looked over his shoulder at Cantankerous.

The unicorn took it as a challenge,  
“What?” he asked, “You want to fight?”

“Nope,” Big Macintosh said evenly, “But that was rude, and Ah can't abide rudeness.”

“Tank! You're drunk, leave him alone! Just go home and sleep it off!” the bartender yelled, laying down a towel for Big Macintosh.

“Mind your own business fatty!” Cantankerous retorted.

Big Macintosh, calm as always, simply said,  
“You're goin' to apologize to the lady, right now.”

“Or what? You going to make me?” Cantankerous asked.

“Ah'd rather not. Ah'd rather you had the character to do that yourself.” Big Macintosh could have been discussing the weather for all the emotion he put into the statement.

“Buck you.” Cantankerous spouted.

“If yall insist.” Big Mac said.

The puzzled look on Cantankerous' face turned to surprise. Big Macintosh bucked lightly, one hoof on either side of the unicorn's horn. The movement was lightening quick but gentle . . . for Big Macintosh, for Cantankerous it felt anything but gentle. The unicorn flew, in the air, backwards almost ten paces and landed on his back, dazed. The bar went completely silent as all eyes turned to the stunned stallion. Big Macintosh turned around slowly and walked over to the fallen unicorn. Using his mouth, the massive Earth pony bit Cantankerous' tail and dragged him up to the bar.

Big Mac let the unicorn's tail go and lifted his head up onto the counter,  
“Ah think he needs some ice.”

The bartender put some ice into a cloth and tied the top. She brought it over and set it on the counter.

Big Mac picked it up with his muzzle and placed it gently on the rising bumps on Cantankerous' head,  
“Now what do you say?” Big Mac urged politely.

“Thank you.” Cantankerous croaked.

“And?” Lemon Lime asked.

“I’m sorry.” Cantankerous groaned.

“Can Ah get him some water?” Big Macintosh asked.

“Sure thing, sweetie.” the bartender said winking at Big Macintosh.

The other bar patrons turned back to what they had been doing, now that the action was over. Lemon Lime sat back onto his stool and smiled at the heaping platter of hay fries that had appeared like magic. Big Macintosh wrapped his lips around the 'Iced Tea' straw and slurped down the whole thing. He felt better as soon as he was done and ordered another one.

The bartender returned and pushed a pair of glasses over to Big Macintosh and Cantankerous,  
“I tried to warn you 'Tank'. You should have noticed his cutie-mark. He's an apple farmer. They're as strong as they come.” she turned to the red Earth pony, “Let me guess, you're part of the Apple family, right?”

“Ayup.” Big Mac confirmed.

The bartender sighed, shaking her head,  
“You got off easy 'Tank'. This big guy could have knocked you clear through a wall. You're lucky the Apple family is a really nice bunch, and more importantly, almost impossible to irritate, well the stallions anyway. Be double glad it wasn't one of the Apple family mares, they have some pretty bad tempers.” she noticed Big Mac's raised eyebrow and said, “I buy all the expired cider from Sweet Apple Acres to use in my drinks.”

Big Macintosh smiled and looked down at Cantankerous,  
“Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I think so.” the unicorn said rising to his hooves shakily, “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Ah already told you, Ah can't abide rudeness.” Big Mac said simply.

“I uh, didn't actually mean to bust up your nose.” Cantankerous admitted.



“Ayup.” Big Mac replied.

“So you're not mad?” 'Tank' asked.

“I don't think that's his style, 'Tank', and you have to admit that kick was pretty stylish. I mean BAM right on the head! You should have seen yourself 'Tank'. You looked like a pegasus flying upside down and backwards. It was one of the funniest things I've ever seen. I'm not trying to be mean and I'm sure you're sorry for picking on him, but you really kind of deserved that. The barkeeper already told you to leave him alone, but you didn't listen, so you kind of got what was coming to you. I'm glad you're not injured or anything though, because that would be awful, but maybe you should think about not drinking so much. Why did you pull his stool out from under him though? I've never seen you go that far and I've been coming here for years. Why did you pull the stool out from under him?” Lemon Lime asked, speedy as always.

“I don't know.” Cantankerous said quietly, “I guess I went too far huh?”

The bartender, Lemon Lime, and Big Macintosh all said in unison, “Ayup.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant awoke to the sound of Mend talking. Valiant turned his head to the right, quietly. The older stallion lay on his chest, on his bed, with his eyes fixed on a book in front of him, reading out loud.

“Bones have multiple layers . . . “

“Mend, are you alright?” Valiant asked quietly.

Dr. Mend never looked up, “They woke me up Valiant.” he sighed shakily, “I'm trying to drown them out. The outer layer is composed primarily of calcium . . . “ he continued reading out loud.

Valiant was concerned about his friend, “Do you remember last night?”

“Quite clearly, Valiant. I agreed to let you help me, and I will. The marrow produces blood . . . “ Dr. Mend continued reading.

Valiant sighed with relief and began thinking, *'I had hoped the voices would stop, but I don't know much about this kind of thing. A psychologist would be ideal, but they might have to report Mend and he could lose his license. He's not a danger to himself or others. He hears voices, but it doesn't affect his work. His work . . . '* Valiant looked up,

“Mend, do you have anypony you can trust who is a psychologist? Doctors have connections like that right?”

“Different fields Valiant. I don't know a single . . . “ Dr. Mend stopped short and looked up sharply, “My saddle bags.” he said rising swiftly.

Dr. Mend practically jumped out of his bed. He raced over to his saddle bags which were hung over the back of his desk chair. He opened the left bag and reached in with his muzzle. He withdrew a small card and set it down on his desk next to the vials containing the fast-healing potion.

Valiant walked up next to Dr. Mend and peered at the card, “Do you know him?” Valiant asked.

“Not really. We spoke on the concourse briefly and he gave me his card. He said if I ever changed my mind to call on him.” Dr. Mend turned his head toward Valiant, “I suppose I should take him up on his offer huh?”

Valiant put a hoof over Dr. Mend's shoulder, “That sounds like a fantastic idea, my friend. I'll go with you.” Valiant offered.

“To the clinic too?” Dr. Mend asked.

“If you agree to visit your grandparents.” Valiant countered.

Dr. Mend hung his head, “I don't know if I'm ready to face them yet, Valiant. I was terrible to them.”

“They don't care. They love you. Mend you've been denying yourself love for years. It's time to embrace it.” Valiant encouraged.

"It's just too fast, Valiant. Let me get better first." Dr. Mend said, "Please, give me some time. I'll go to this counselor and everything, but don't rush me. How hard would it be for you to face Arabesque right now?"

Valiant's eyebrows rose,  
"How do you know about her? I never told you. I should have, but I hadn't gotten around to it yet."

"Rarity told me when you were in your coma. Speaking of which, I'm sorry for what I said the other day, Valiant. I don't hold you responsible for any deaths and it was completely uncalled for. Will you forgive me?" Dr. Mend asked.

"Of course. But you also need to realize there are things that are completely beyond our control. Do you understand what I mean?" Valiant asked quietly.

"I think so. It's going to take me some time to forgive myself though. I know it doesn't make any sense, but you have to trust me. I've blamed myself for my parents' deaths for more than two decades. That doesn't just go away." Dr. Mend said.

"That ," Valiant said straightening up, "Is something I do understand. I'm still not completely over what happened between Arabesque and I, but I'm trying to move on. I know it's hard, but at least we have each other. If you ever need help or just a shoulder to cry on . . . again, just tell me, O.K.?"

Dr. Mend stuck out his hoof,  
"The same goes for you though. I'm not the only imperfect soul here. We're both damaged goods. I think fate brought us together and I, for one, am grateful for it. We'll be each other's strength, deal?"

Valiant Shook Dr. Mend's hoof firmly,  
"Deal. Now let's go see this Sea Blue guy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend looked both nervous and preoccupied as Valiant knocked on Sea Blue's door,

“What do I say, Valiant? I don't even know this stallion.”

“I'll help you don't worry.” Valiant said supportively.

The white, windowless door in front of Valiant opened, revealing Sea Blue,  
“Good day, may I help you?” he asked cheerfully.

Valiant expected Sea Blue to be . . . well . . . sea blue not turquoise. Sea Blue had bright orange mane and tail with yellow highlights and his eyes were, of all things, neon green. Valiant had also expected Sea Blue to be older, maybe in his thirties or forties. As it was the unicorn stallion looked to be Valiant's age, if not a hair younger.

“Are you Sea Blue?” Valiant asked, thinking he might have the wrong house.

The unicorn stallion chuckled heartily,  
“Not an inch of me, but it is my name. Would you like to set an appointment? I'm free right now actually.” he said cheerfully.

“Not for me,” Valiant said stepping aside, revealing Dr. Mend, “For my friend here.”

Sea Blue's eyes lit up,  
“Ah yes, I'm glad you decided to take me up on my offer. I'm afraid I didn't catch your name last time. Was it Grumpy Guts or Mr. Testy? Bellicose, perhaps?”

Dr. Mend turned to Valiant, eyes dark,  
“I'm going to kill him.”

Sea Blue didn't seem even remotely phased by the comment,  
“Now I remember. It was Psychopath.”

Valiant had to strain not to smile at the obnoxious unicorn's antics,  
“May we come in?”

Sea Blue held the door for the two stallions, seemingly suddenly aware of Dr. Mend's serious expression,

"I apologize if I was offensive. I'm very playful by nature. By all means, come in and have a seat."

The inside of Sea Blue's house was decorated in calming pastel colors. To Dr. Mend's left was a comfortable room with two couches and one chair facing them. A coffee table of light brown wood stood interposed between the couches and chair. The backs of the couches were situated just beneath the sills of a trio of windows which spread vast amounts of light around the room. Directly in front of the front door, a mere six paces back, was a set of stairs.

A tiny voice called out from upstairs,  
"Who is it Daddy?" the voice was followed by a lively unicorn filly.

The filly was eraser pink in her coat and her mane and tail looked like spun gold. She appeared to be around the same age as the Cutie-Mark Crusaders. The aspect of her which stood out the most was that her right eye was missing. Her left eye was a pretty, sparkling, cobalt blue. In the place of where her right eye should have been was a blank, unmarred, patch of smooth skin.

The little filly stopped at the bottom of the stairs,  
"Oh, hello!" she said brightly, "Daddy, has Glamour come by yet? We were supposed to go to the park."

Sea Blue turned all his attention straight to her,  
"I'm sorry Patch, she hasn't. Why don't you go next door and play with Clover and Lucky? I'll come by and pick you up in a little while, then we can go get some ice cream. Does that sound alright?"

"Alright Daddy, see you later." Patch said running past Valiant and Dr. Mend out the door.

Sea Blue watched her go, smiling broadly,  
"That's my girl." he whispered.

Valiant and Dr. Mend sat down on the first couch they came to while Sea Blue closed the door. Looking around, Valiant could see straight ahead of him, into the kitchen where the refrigerator door was covered with

perfectly drawn pictures in crayon. To his left was a doorway leading to another room, presumably the living room.

Sea Blue walked over and sat in the chair across from the two stallions, now all business,  
“What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Valiant took the lead,  
“My very good friend here, Mend, is having trouble coping with the loss of his parents and I have no real idea how to help him.”

Sea Blue turned toward Dr. Mend,  
“Is that the case?”

Dr. Mend nodded,  
“I think that about sums it up.”

Sea Blue leaned back in his chair and put his hooves together,  
“Let me tell you a few things, then let you decide if you want to continue. First, I won't be telling you what to do. I ask questions and make recommendations based on what I know of you and what I studied. Second, I can't help you if you don't want me to. If you don't want help then I won't waste your time. Third, I am not only a counselor, but both a psychologist and a psychiatrist as well. I am certified to provide a clinical diagnosis of all known mental disorders. I do not report any disorders unless you seen unstable and/or dangerous. I occasionally prescribe medication for some disorders, but I tend to do that only in the most extreme cases. How does that strike you?”

“It sounds honest and straight-forward.” Dr. Mend said, slightly surprised by Sea Blue's sudden professionalism.

“Do you wish to continue, Mend?” Sea Blue asked.

“I don't want to, but I think I need to.” Dr. Mend said.

Sea Blue smiled,  
“That sounds honest and straight-forward. Mend, do you feel comfortable talking to me alone?”

"I'm going to have to. Valiant here, has things to do." Dr. Mend said turning to his friend, "I'll catch up with you later at Avalon Medical Care Clinic."

Valiant rose from the couch and headed for the door,  
"I'll be there at 3:00 p.m."

Valiant left Dr. Mend and Sea Blue to talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant ran back to the dorm and grabbed his saddle bags, grateful that Sea Blue's house was close to the University campus, and made his way toward Mrs. Soothe's Apothecary.

Valiant arrived out of breath and opened the door, Mrs. Soothe stood behind the counter,  
"Hello Mrs. Soothe, I'm back, like I said."

Mrs. Soothe visibly paled at the sight of Valiant,  
"Yes, so I see. Did your potion work, or do we need to take a trip to an asylum?"

Valiant smirked as he unwrapped his leg,  
"See for yourself." he said proudly walking up to the counter.

Mrs. Soothe's eyes bulged,  
"Sweet Celestia," she breathed, "You really weren't kidding were you."

Valiant smiled at his completely healed leg,  
"I'm not playing around if I'm willing to do something crazy like that."

Mrs. Soothe couldn't argue,  
"And it was crazy, make no mistake about that. However, I'll admit you certainly know how to make a point. I'm as good as my word, you've got the job. Can you start today?"

"I'm yours till 2:30, boss." Valiant said smiling. Finally things were starting to go right.

# Chapter 6

Big Macintosh stirred on the couch he had slept on. He cracked open his eyes and peered around the room he was in. The room looked to be made out of purple everything. He lay on a purple couch, draped in a purple blanket, with a purple pillow. The coffee table next to him was painted purple, the flowers on the table were purple, even the carpet was purple. Big Macintosh noticed the ceiling and walls were purple, the door leading out of the room was purple, the dang ceiling fan was painted purple, with purple light-bulbs. Big Macintosh closed his eyes and still saw purple.

The massive Earth pony stood up from the couch and wondered where he was. He was unsettled by the room and quickly made his way to the door. Opening the door, the smell of biscuits assailed his nose. Big Macintosh strained his memory as to why he was in somepony's house, *'Ah remember meetin' Live Wire and havin' to whack that 'Tank' feller, then . . . '* Big Macintosh drew a blank on the rest of the night, *'Ah sure hope Ah didn't impose on nopony.'* he thought.

The huge Earth pony walked quietly down the hallway on the other side of the door, toward the smell of food. He could hear somepony talking to themselves rapidly and the sound of splashing water. Big Macintosh reached the end of the hallway and looked around, *'Ayup. This is Live Wire's house all right.'* he thought. The room was decorated with pairs of pictures of Lemon Lime standing next to various ponies. The pictures on the left side of the pair were always of ponies in wheel chairs and various other means of transportation indicating the occupant was lame. The pictures on the right were of Lemon Lime standing next to the same ponies, now able to stand on their own.

Big Macintosh stood in the middle of the room surrounded by Lemon Lime's success stories, *'This is his whole life. So that's why his cutie-mark is a wheelchair.'* He walked up to one set of pictures depicting Lemon Lime standing next to a little egg-shell colored Earth pony filly lying on a stretcher. The picture to the right was of Lemon Lime and the filly jumping in the air and giving each other a high-hoof. The picture on the left was dated three years prior to the one on the right. Big Macintosh just stood



there looking at success story after success story, each one dated and hung with care.

"I see you found my wall, huh?" Lemon Lime said standing at the doorway leading to the kitchen.

Lemon Lime pointed to the picture of him next to the filly in the stretcher, "This is Sky Seeker. She was climbing a tree when she fell right onto a big old rock. The impact shattered her pelvis and Dr. Avalon had to perform three surgeries just to make sure she could have foals when she grew up. She couldn't even move her legs when her parents brought her to me the first time. Two years, ten months, and thirteen days later, she was released; able to walk, run, and as you can see, jump. Her parents moved to Manehattan soon after that and I haven't seen or heard from her since. If you look to the ones right above those, that's old . . . "

"Yall never heard from her again?" Big Macintosh asked incredulously, "Ah woulda' thought that after you helped her walk again, she'd be a friend for life."

Lemon Lime hung his head and flattened his ears; he spoke slowly and quietly,

"That's just the way it is though. They come in lame, I help them, they leave, ambulatory at least, and I never hear from them again." Lemon Lime said with a sigh, "They go on living their lives and forget all about me. That's my job though, and I love doing it. What makes me so sad is that there are always more and more ponies who need my help. I'm just one unicorn; I can't get to every one of them. I wish, so badly, that there was a way for me to keep them from getting hurt in the first place." Lemon Lime blinked rapidly, like he was holding back something as he spoke, "I mean, there's so much pain, they have to endure it every day. Some ponies never even get to me. They give up on life and just stop trying. I want to help them. I want to help them all, but I can't. I can't get to everypony in time and it kills me." Lemon Lime said raising his head, "I'm powerful, Big Macintosh. I have so much magical power but it's not enough to even make a difference. Look at the table in the middle of the room." Lemon Lime said levitating a thin bundle of papers in front of Big Macintosh's face, "These are the names of everypony from around Equestria who needs physical therapy. There are hundreds; seven-hundred and forty-one to be exact. I read this list every morning, I practically have it memorized. Each of these

isn't just a name, each one is an individual pony who is suffering and needs my help. I'd be doing more, but I have to keep my number of patients down to only a few so I don't suffer from 'burn out', but I could do more." Lemon Lime shook his head and his face hardened somewhat, "It's not like I have much else to do with my time." Lemon Lime looked Big Macintosh straight in the eyes, "Aside from you, I have a total of two ponies who can stand me, and I can only see one of you three staying around for longer than the next semester or two, then its back to doing nothing whenever I'm not working." Lemon Lime stomped his hoof on the ground aggravated, "Damn it." he whispered, "If only they would let me take on a higher work-load . . . "

"It ain't your responsibility, Live Wire." Big Mac said calmly, "You can't be expected to help the whole world. You need to accept that you're goin' to do the best you can, but you can't ever get to them all. You said so yourself, you're only one unicorn and you can't get to every one of them. Just think about all the ponies you **have** helped and think about what their lives would be like without you."

Lemon Lime half-smiled and levitated the papers back onto his table, "Yeah, but the little trip from your head to your heart can be a long one. Thanks for the encouragement though, Big Macintosh. Breakfast is ready, come on."

Big Macintosh followed Lemon Lime back through the doorway into his kitchen. It was cozy but a type of cozy that also felt spacious somehow. Walking through the doorway, Big Macintosh looked to his left. The refrigerator, stove range, and sink were all lined up in a neat little row with counter space on the far side, near what looked like a row of glass doors leading out to a balcony. The far side of the room was taken up by an adjoining dining room and a large eight-pony table which looked to be made of mahogany. The right wall had a row of cabinets at the top, a long-flat counter in the middle, and a row of cupboards along the bottom. The space between the right wall and the left wall, Big Macintosh judged, couldn't have been more than six paces, rather cramped but workable.

The big table in the dining room had a tray of steaming biscuits surrounded by a tub of butter and jars of preserves. A large bowl of chopped fruit sat on either end of the table and a tall glass of dark golden colored liquid was set next to each place setting.

Lemon Lime strode toward the table and sat down,  
“Come on, before it gets cold. I have to get to work soon.”

Big Macintosh sat down in the wooden chair at the opposite end as Lemon Lime, the chair creaking under his weight. The huge work pony was surprised by just how much food Lemon Lime seemed to be able to pack away. The smaller unicorn wolfed down amounts that would have made the larger Earth pony sick.

The two stallions ate quietly for a few minutes before Lemon Lime spoke up,

“You never did tell me why you came to Canterlot, although you don’t have to if you don’t want to . . .” Lemon Lime cut himself off when his guest opened his muzzle.

“Ah’m here to help out a friend of mine.” Big Mac explained, “He seems to be havin’ some trouble with a unicorn who’s been levitatin’ Earth ponies and demandin’ their bits. Ah figure he means to do somethin’ about it and Ah aim to help him out.”

Lemon Lime looked up from his bowl of fruit, face worried,  
“I haven’t heard anything about that. This unicorn sounds dangerous. If your friend aims to do something I sure do hope he’s a powerful unicorn. A rogue unicorn can be real trouble, and generally only another, more powerful unicorn can best them. If your friend needs help, tell him I’m willing to lend a hoof.”

“Ah’m sure Valiant would be right grateful for that.” Big Mac said.

Lemon Lime stopped eating and looked at his guest in utter disbelief,  
“Would your friend ‘Valiant’ be a royal blue Earth pony with light brown mane and tail and a cutie-mark of a mortar and pestle?”

“That’s him, but he ain’t no Earth pony. He’s a pegasus who lost his wings.” Big Mac said, refusing to show his own surprise.

“What are the odds of that? I met him just a couple of days ago. I’m going to see him later today after I finish my work. Oh, just wait, he’ll be so sur . . .” Lemon Lime trailed off as Big Mac’s words struck home, “Lost his wings?” he asked eyes huge, “You said he lost his wings?”

“Ayup.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend sat quietly staring at Sea Blue for several minutes after Valiant departed. The older Earth pony had no idea where or how to begin. Sea Blue levitated a pad and pencil up off the coffee table and set the pad down on his lap, the pencil hovering over the pad and just waited.

After several full minutes, Dr. Mend had to say something,  
“So, uh where should we begin?”

Sea Blue raised an eyebrow,  
“Where would you like to begin?”

“I have no clue. I've never done this before. Do I just talk and you respond?” Dr. Mend asked.

“Just say whatever it is you're thinking and we'll go from there.” Sea Blue responded.

Dr. Mend shifted uncomfortably in his seat,  
“I . . . I . . . I have a problem.”

“Yes?” Sea Blue asked.

“I have an obsession with studying all the time. If anypony tries to get me to stop, I get kind of snappy with them.” Dr. Mend admitted honestly.

“So what I'm hearing is that you have an obsession with studying and you become easily irritated when somepony interrupts your studying.” Sea Blue said.

“Yes, I feel like I have to be the best all the time and if I'm not the best then I feel like I'm failing.” Dr. Mend continued.

“So you're saying that you are not so much obsessed with studying but you are more obsessed with being the best and the studying is only the symptom not the root of the problem?” Sea Blue asked.

"Yes. That's it exactly. I'm afraid that if I fail, somepony I love will commit suicide, like my parents did." Dr. Mend said.

"So, you believe your parents killed themselves because you weren't the best, and you feel like it's your fault they died?" Sea Blue asked.

"I know that's why my mother did and I think that's why my father did too." Dr. Mend explained.

"Is there a history of emotional or mental instability in your family?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend averted his eyes,

"Yes, my mother was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. She rarely remembered to take her medication and she would become angry at anything."

Sea Blue wrote some notes in his pad,

"Was your father diagnosed with anything, or was there any indication of instability from him?"

"Nothing particularly comes to mind." Dr. Mend responded.

Sea Blue wrote some more notes in his pad,

"So why are you convinced that your mother killed herself because of you?"

"She would rant and rave about how much of a disgrace I was and that maybe she should have another foal, one who wouldn't be a constant disappointment. She was so mean whenever I did anything wrong. I couldn't be like the other colts; I had to act grown up all the time." Dr. Mend said.

"So in a way, she denied you your foalhood and tried to make you into a stallion before you were ready. Would you say she was a perfectionist?" Sea Blue asked.

"Oh yeah," Dr. Mend agreed, "She would have the house in perfect condition when father and I came home. We couldn't do anything without

being yelled at. Then after she died, I missed her clean nature even if it was over the top.”

“Did you go to her funeral?” Sea Blue asked.

“I don't honestly remember. I think I did but I was not quite right at the time.” Dr. Mend admitted.

“What do you mean you 'weren't quite right at the time'?” Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend had trouble vocalizing what had happened,  
“I . . . She . . . There was . . . Ugh! I don't know how to say it!”

“I have an idea, if you're open to it. I'm going to go get a pillow and put it here in my chair. I want you to talk to the pillow like you would talk to your mother if she were here. How does that sound?” Sea Blue asked.

“That sounds really silly to me.” Dr. Mend said frowning.

Sea Blue rose to his hooves and levitated a couch cushion over into his chair and stepped back,  
“Alright come on, up on your hooves. I want you to face your mother and pretend I'm not here.”

Dr. Mend stood slowly, rolling his eyes, and faced the cushion,  
“Hi mom . . . oh this is silly. You can't hear me, you're not really here and I'm just talking to a couch cushion. I'm talking to a couch cushion because it's supposed to represent you. How can a cushion represent you? You were much livelier, even if you were mean. You weren't just mean you were cruel. You never told me I did a good job, you never paid any attention to me. The house was more important or dinner was more important. Dad was always at work so you were supposed to take care of me. Did you? No. All you did was tell me how worthless I was because I didn't have good grades. As soon as I got home it was off to my room to study. That was my life. Study, study, study all the time. Huh, a whole lot of good that did. You killed yourself anyway. No matter how good I was it was never enough. I was never worth your time. I tried so hard to make you happy so you would love me, but it was all for nothing. You never loved me. I was just another chore to you.” Mend didn't realize it but his voice was beginning to crack,  
“That's all I was, another chore for you to deal with. I'm sorry I never made

you happy. I'm sorry I failed you. I didn't want you to die. Why did you do it? Why? I could have done better! You didn't have to go! Why did you do it! Don't you know what it did to me and dad? You didn't have to go that far! I could have done better! I'm sorry I wasn't better! Why don't you say something! Say you forgive me, say you love me!" Mend was sobbing pitifully by this point, "I need to know! I need to know you love me! Stop telling me how worthless I am and just FUCKING SAY YOU LOVE ME! SAY SOMETHING! SAY SOMETHING! . . . " Dr. Mend began shaking the couch cushion violently, "SAY IT! SAY YOU LOVE ME! SAY IT! FUCKING SAY IT! I'VE BEEN PUTTING MYSELF THROUGH HELL FOR YOU ALL MY LIFE! WHY CAN'T YOU JUST SAY IT! SAY IT! TELL ME I HAVEN'T WASTED MY WHOLE LIFE TRYING TO PLEASE THE VOICES IN MY HEAD! TELL ME! SAY IT! SAY IT! SAY IT! SAY IT! LOVE ME! **SAY IT!**" Mend screamed so loud, he had to break off in a fit of coughing that sent him down to the floor.

Sea Blue had been taking notes furiously during the episode and was beginning to draw a mental picture of Mend's emotional state. It wasn't pretty. The unicorn offered Mend a hoof, but the doctor refused it. Sea Blue levitated the, now throttled, cushion back onto the couch and waited for Dr. Mend to stand again. Sea Blue had easily determined that Mend needed closure with his parents. Apparently he had underestimated how much was needed. Something Mend had said stayed in his head, replaying over and over, *'He said, 'the voices in my head'. We need to talk about that. If he's hearing voices that could mean trouble.'*

Dr. Mend slowly crawled back to the couch and sat back down, still tearful, "Did you know that was going to happen?"

"I had an idea, but I didn't know the extent." Sea Blue said calmly, "I think there is something we need to talk about, if you feel up to it."

"I'm coherent." Dr. Mend said, still breathing heavily.

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Alright, you said you heard voices in your head. Tell me about that."

Dr. Mend looked ashamed,  
"I don't like talking about that."

"I think we need to talk about it. If you want to get better, you need to tell me about this." Sea Blue pushed gently.

Dr. Mend hung his head,  
"I started hearing my mother the day after she died, then I started hearing my father after he died. They stop once in a while, but for the most part, I hear them all the time."

Sea Blue took some notes,  
"Can you hear them right now?"

"Yes." Dr. Mend admitted.

"And what are the voices saying?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath,  
"Why are you wasting your time with this idiot!? You have work to do! Lives depend on you and you are failing again! There is somepony who you could be helping right now and instead you are here sniveling at the feet of some colt whose barely half your age!"

"That's enough." Sea Blue said gently.

Sea Blue sat back and thought for a long while, before speaking again,  
"Do you like having these voices talk to you all the time?"

"No . . . yes . . . I don't know." Dr. Mend said confused.

"What do you mean, Mend? Take your time." Sea Blue encouraged.

"I . . . I love them, because it feels like mom and dad never left. I've heard them almost since I can remember. It's like my family is still with me. I hate being yelled at all the time, but it's what I know. I . . . I'm afraid to lose them. I can't imagine what it would be like to not have them around." Dr. Mend said with great difficulty.

"Do they distract you? Do they keep you from doing the things you like?"  
Sea Blue asked.



"That's just it. I don't know what I like, besides practicing medicine. I've devoted my life to doing what they say." Dr. Mend replied.

Sea Blue's eyebrows shot up,  
"You practice medicine? Your cutie-mark indicated something like that."

"Yes. I'm a doctor. In a way, the voices help me with that. When I'm attending to a patient, they are quiet. It's like a motivation to work harder." Dr. Mend said.

"Hmm," Sea Blue grunted softly, "You previously said you liked having them around, now you said you like it when they are quiet. Which is it?"

"Both. They hound at me when I'm not working, but they shut up when I am." Dr. Mend was a little puzzled himself.

"Have you tried telling them to be quiet?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend was taken aback by the notion,  
"I can't tell my parents to be quiet."

"Mend, the voices you hear are not your parents. The voices are your own mind. You are still blaming yourself for what happened. You need to realize that what happened was never your fault." Sea Blue said.

"Yes it was." Dr. Mend said darkly.

"How did your parents die?" Sea Blue asked.

"They both jumped from buildings, from the same one actually." Dr. Mend said.

"Did you push them with your own hooves?" Sea Blue asked.

"No, of course not." Dr. Mend said testily.

"You don't control the actions of others. The fault is not yours to bear Mend. Stop punishing yourself for something that was beyond your control. The first step to your recovery, I think, is to work beyond the belief that you were

responsible for your parent's deaths. I want you to repeat after me: I can only control myself." Sea Blue encouraged.

"This seems silly to me, but alright. I can only control myself." Dr. Mend parroted.

Sea Blue smiled and sat back in his chair,  
"Good. Say that to yourself every chance you get, I mean it. It will help. Now, for those voices. I want you to try telling them to be silent. Every time you hear them talking, tell them to be silent, and be forceful about it. Try this for two days then come back and see me again. If the voices will not go away, I may have to perform some tests to see if you might have a mental illness. I don't like to try things like that right off the bat and I don't like to drug up my patients unnecessarily, but there is some good to be had in a limited form of medication." Sea Blue said rising from his chair.

The unicorn made his way over to the front door of his house and extended his hoof to Dr. Mend,  
"I truly hope that my insights prove productive."

"How much do I owe you?" Dr. Mend asked reaching for his saddle bags.

"Twenty bits, each session. I am more than willing to work with those of a limited income." Sea Blue said motioning toward a heavy looking metal box built into the door with a slot on the outside, "Pay what you can, when you can. If I'm not at home just place the bits in an envelope and slide it through the door-slot with a note inside detailing how much you are paying. I like to keep it simple."

Dr. Mend counted out twenty bits and passed them to Sea Blue,  
"You're almost as expensive per hour, as I am."

Sea Blue smiled and inclined his head toward Dr. Mend,  
"How much is a series of booster shots, say for a seven year old unicorn filly?"

"About thirty-five bits." Dr. Mend said.

"How about I let you have the next two sessions in exchange for those booster shots?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend nodded,  
“That sounds more than fair. How about I bring the inoculations next session?”

Sea Blue's face lit up,  
“A house call! How could I ever turn that down?”

Dr. Mend and Sea Blue shook hooves to seal the deal. Dr. Mend left Sea Blue's house, heading for the dorm room to collect the vials of the fast-healing potion.

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Big Macintosh carefully examined the map that Lemon Lime had given him. He cross-referenced streets on the map with streets around him trying to locate the Tower Library, where his yellow colored unicorn friend told him he could find a tan pegasus named Evening Star, '*Live Wire said she was right nice.*' The massive Earth pony had nothing better to do so he figured he should meet her, '*You can't have too many friends in a big city.*' he mused.

Big Macintosh followed the directions and eventually saw the tell-tale sign of the Tower Library. The hulking white building was rather difficult to miss as it loomed high above the other buildings, dwarfing them easily. Big Macintosh followed the streets and easily found the steps leading up to the Library entrance. He clomped his way up the stairs and opened the right-side door.

Inside, the Library was eerily quiet. Big Macintosh closed the door behind himself so as not to disturb anypony within. The massive Earth pony looked around, but didn't see a single soul, even at the help desk. He decided to wander around and see if he could spot anypony who matched Lemon Lime's description. He saw a small flight of stairs leading up to the second floor where he could just make out a huge glass window. He climbed the stairs and took a look around.

There was an immense golden hourglass in the center of the floor which looked to be able to rotate in several directions. He stopped to admire the relic with a bit of fascination. A soft sound caught his attention and he

whipped his head toward the sound. It was coming from behind a row of book cases. Big Macintosh slowly walked in the direction of the sound, not sure why he felt the need to be quiet. The sound became clearer as he approached; it was somepony having a quiet conversation.

Big Macintosh strained his ears to hear the whispers,  
“I am very proud of you for doing so much. You have surpassed every expectation I had.” one voice said. The voice belonged to a mare, it was sweet and rich like flowing honey.

A second voice answered,  
“It's the least I could do after what happened.” the second voice belonged to a filly; it was soft and smooth, like the air after a rainstorm.

“I happen to know there are several new books here in the library. Books that had been lost for centuries. Am I correct in assuming that was your doing?” The first voice asked.

“Knowledge is one of the few things that outlives us all. These books are needed, all knowledge is needed. There are very few things which are more valuable.” the second voice said.

“I am troubled though. This unicorn going about the city threatening ponies must be stopped.” the first voice said.

“I agree, but we must wait. There are things in the works that must come to completion.” the second voice answered.

“This is a very slippery slope, you walk on. I will stay my hoof for now, but if things deteriorate to violence I will intercede. I understand your position but I do not like this risk. This problem could be solved in one swift motion. Be sure you do not needlessly play with the lives of the citizens.” the first voice said in a warning tone.

“I would not be doing this if I saw another way, but you know what is coming. They will be needed and swiftly. There is no time for coddling them, they must learn and learn fast. I am not cruel, you know that, but if we do not let this run its course we may have a great deal more than the lives of a single city on the line. You have come to the same conclusion yourself. You are simply playing the opposition to see if there is a crack in

my motives. I appreciate that; I would do the same for you . . . “the conversation cut off abruptly.

Big Macintosh tried sneaking away quietly, but he wasn't quick enough, “Why hello there.” said the first voice, directly behind him.

Big Macintosh was ashamed at having been caught spying, “Ah'm awful sorry about th . . . “ he cut himself off as he beheld the oldest alicorn in Equestria.

Big Mac knelt swiftly before Princess Celestia, his saddle bags clinking on the floor loudly. The regal alicorn looked down at one of the few ponies in the entire kingdom who stood nearly half her height instead of a third. She smiled warmly down at the hard-working Earth pony. Big Macintosh heard hoofstepps coming up from behind him, from the direction of the stairs.

“Rise, stallion.” Princess Celestia said.

Big Macintosh rose to his hooves and looked the Sun Princess in the eyes, “Ah apologize for listenin' in on your conversation, your majesty.” he said earnestly.

From behind him, he heard the other pony call to him, “Hey. I saw you on the floor, are you alright?”

Big Macintosh turned toward the new voice and saw a tan pegasus mare come around the corner of the hour glass. The pegasus stopped in her tracks and knelt down at the sight of Princess Celestia.

“Rise, Evening Star. I would have thought you knew I was here.” Princess Celestia said warmly.

“I'm sorry Princess. Do you have a task for me?” Evening Star asked.

“None, enjoy a day off from your duties. I believe this stallion was looking for something, maybe you could help him first.” Princess Celestia hinted.

“I will do as you command, Princess.” Evening Star said.

“It is not a command. It is simply an observation, nothing more.” Celestia answered.

Hearing Evening Star being so informal with the Sun Princess, emboldened Big Macintosh,

“Ah know it ain't none of mah business, but who was that you were talking to your majesty?”

Princess Celestia looked over her shoulder and her face fell slightly,

“It was my sister, Luna, but she seems to have gone now. Did you have a concern you wanted to voice?”

Big Macintosh remembered the topic of the conversation,

“Ah was wonderin' what you plan to do about that rogue unicorn, if it ain't too much to ask?”

“Of course not. I believe a solution is in the works as we speak. In the past, powerful ponies used to be charged with apprehending unicorns suffering from 'Caster's Stroke' and seal them from their power until they recovered. That ministry needs to be reborn, for Luna and I should not be charged with taking care of problems when citizens are capable of taking care of it themselves. Luna and I may not always be available for every problem, like when Nightmare Moon rose to power briefly. The Elements of Harmony handled the situation very well.” Princess Celestia said.

“Beggin' your majesty's pardon, but Ah'm not one of the Elements of Harmony. Should Ah go and get them?” Big Macintosh asked.

Princess Celestia tilted her head ever so slightly,

“Are you on speaking terms with them?”

“One of them just so happens to be mah sister. The Element of Honesty.” Big Mac replied.

“You seem to have an interest in stopping this unicorn. Why don't you work toward that goal without involving your sister?” Celestia looked out the window, “I'm afraid I have to be going. Duty calls.” and with that, Princess Celestia vanished in a wispy puff of mist, completely silent.

“You must be something else!” Evening Star said, walking up beside Big Macintosh, “I’ve never heard the Princess basically throw a job at anypony she wasn’t intimately familiar with.”

The huge Earth pony blushed as his mind went several directions at once, not all of them useful for polite conversation,  
“Ah was plannin’ to do somethin’ about it anyway.”

Evening Star looked puzzled,  
“How do you even know about it? I only found out a little while ago.”

“Mah friend Valiant sent out a letter detainin’ it and Ah caught wind of it, so Ah figured Ah’d come on out and see if Ah could help out.” Big Macintosh shrugged, “Ain’t no real puzzle to it.”

“Wait, wait,” Evening Star said backing up a few feet, “You know Valiant?”

“Ayup.”

“With that statement, you could only be Big Macintosh!” she nearly squealed, “Oh, I’m so happy to meet you! Valiant’s told me so much about you!” she said reaching out both of her hooves to shake his.

Big Mac extended his hoof and shook hers,  
“Ma’am.” he said giving her a slight nod.

Evening Star seemed to regain her composure after a moment,  
“I’m sorry about that.” she said sheepishly, “I’m usually more reserved.”

“S’ alright, don’t bother me none. Live Wire said you were right nice and all, so Ah just came with an open mind.” Big Macintosh said evenly.

Evening Star smiled hugely,  
“You’ve already met Live Wire?”

“Ayup.”

“Did Valiant introduce you?” Evening Star asked.

“Ah met him last night and he let me sleep at his place. Ah haven't seen Valiant yet.” Big Mac said simply.

“So Valiant doesn't know you're here?” Evening Star asked.

“Nope.”

“We should surprise him.” Evening Star said eagerly.

“Ah don't know where his dorm is.” Big Macintosh replied.

“Nor I, but he mentioned getting a job at an apothecary. I'll bet Live Wire knows where that is.” Evening Star said.

“Live Wire's at work. He'll be off in four hours. 'Till then Ah've got nothin' to do so Ah figured Ah'd hang out with you, if'n you don't mind, miss Evening Star.” Big Macintosh said.

“Do you like to read?” Evening Star asked.

“Ah've been known to pick up a book now and again. Anythin' in particular you had in mind?” Big Mac asked.

Evening Star's eyes lit up,  
“The Librarian just finished cataloging a new book! It's positively ancient!” she spun in place to show her delight, “The Princess just brought it in.”

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow inquisitively,  
“Ah thought you didn't know Princess Celestia was here.”

Evening Star just laughed,  
“Silly, it's Princess Luna whose been bringing in ancient books.”

“So you knew Princess Luna was here, and you didn't think Princess Celestia would be here too?” Big Mac asked.

“What average pony can claim to know the mindset of an alicorn?” Evening Star asked.

Big Macintosh pondered the statement for a moment,



“Ah can't argue that.” he said, turning toward the much smaller pegasus,  
“So what's in this book that has you so worked up?”

“It's an ancient tome about the Elements! You said your sister was one of the Elements of Harmony, right?” Evening Star asked.

“Ayup.”

“Don't you want to know more about them? Maybe there are hidden facts about them that have been lost or forgotten. They **are** the most powerful magic in all of Equestria. Don't you think you should know as much as you can in case they're ever needed again? You could tell your sister.” Evening Star hinted without a trace of subtlety.

Big Macintosh didn't need to ponder his answer in the least,  
“Ayup.”

# Chapter 7

Evening Star and Big Macintosh lay side by side in the Tower Library, reading the ancient book labeled The Elements of Equestria. The book was a reference guide for the Elements and detailed their workings. The two ponies sat in awe of the original bearers of the Elements. Their deeds were astonishing and their sacrifices and suffering even more so. They would periodically take a break and discuss what they had discovered. Evening Star finished the part they were on and raised her head, silently waiting for Big Macintosh to finish as well.

Big Mac finished a few minutes later and raised his head, looking straight at Evening Star,  
“Ah just can't believe all this.”

“I know! It's amazing! Princess Celestia and Princess Luna **made** the Elements, and not just that, from what this book says, they sacrificed a permanent part of their own power to make them. From what I've gathered, it looks like your sister can wield a small part of a Goddess' power.”  
Evening Star said.

Big Macintosh shrugged,  
“Ah was referrin' to the Elements of Peace.”

“Yeah,” Evening Star said eye wide, “I can't believe nopony's ever heard of them! I mean a whole other set of Elements? The book seems to indicate they were the opposite of the Elements of Harmony. While the Elements of Harmony were 'offensive' the Elements of Peace were 'defensive'. The Elements of Harmony seem to have always been mares, and the Elements of Peace seem to have always been stallions. I suppose that makes sense actually. It takes a stallion and a mare to make a family, right?”

“Depends on your definition of family Ah suppose.” Big Macintosh said sagely.

“Yeah good point.” Evening Star admitted, “This day and age you have stallions with stallions and mares with mares and they just adopt. But for the time, it looks like it was symbolic of a perfect pairing. It says that each of the Elements had synergy with their counterpart. See here?” she said pointing to a picture in the book, “It says that the Element of Honesty and the Element of Acceptance were a matched pair because they were so much alike. That would indicate that each Element, once paired, could seemingly operate independently from the others of their type. Like a Royal Guard and a Princess, like a husband and wife, or like . . .” Evening Star trailed off as a thought hit her.

Big Macintosh didn't quite follow her,  
“Did you think of somethin' else?”

“Or like brother and sister.” Evening Star said turning to the huge Earth pony, “You said you sister was the Element of Honesty, right?”

“Ayup.”

“What if . . . What if you are the Element of Acceptance?” Evening Star said.

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow,  
“Ah don't think so. Ah'm nothin' special, just a work pony.”

“Did your sister think she was special?” Evening Star asked.

“Ah don't think she ever gave it much thought, and Ah don't think any of us even knew about the Elements of Harmony until Twilight came along.” Big Mac said openly.

“So why is it impossible for you to be an Element as well? It would make sense. The book says that the Elements passed on generationally but always stayed with a family. Logic would dictate that somepony in your family is the counterpart to Honesty. Why can't it be you?” Evening Star asked.

“Ah just don't think it's likely. It was a pretty nice coincidence that Twilight just happened to make friends with the Elements of Harmony, but that's all

it was. Besides, if Ah was the Element of Acceptance, Ah wouldn't be arguin' with you about it now would Ah?" Big Macintosh said logically.

Evening Star deflated slightly,  
"Yeah, good point. I just don't quite believe that this is all coincidence. It's **too** coincidental; it's **too** perfect. There must be a reason for this. Let's read some more, maybe we'll find out something else."

"Mah eyes hurt, but Ah do want to hear more. Could you read it out loud?"  
Big Macintosh asked, laying his head down.

"Sure thing." Evening Star said turning back to the book, "The Elements of Harmony are by far the more powerful of the set but the Elements of Peace are just as vital. The two groups must often work together to solve problems, but therein lies the dilemma of independence. The Elements of Harmony do wield awesome power but they take time to come to full power, like a unicorn casting a spell. The simplest terms are that of pregnancy and foaling. The Elements of Harmony are 'pregnant' with power but take time to come to fruition, like a mare who is with foal. While the magic, like a foal, is growing, it and its 'vessle' must be protected. The Elements of Harmony are like pregnant mares who embody and hold the magic until it is time for them to 'deliver' the magic to an end. While the magic is growing, the Elements of Peace, like a stallion, must protect the mare while she is vulnerable. Yet again, we see the reference to a family unit. The symbolism is profound and yet simple in its complexity. It has been theorized that a great many answers to questions regarding the Elements of Equestria can be solved through intimate knowledge of a family unit and its inner workings."

"Sounds . . . simple." Big Mac said smiling slightly.

"Right, on to the next part. The Elements of Harmony." Evening Star cleared her throat, "The Elements of Harmony are the power beyond power, limited only by the bearer's imaginations. As such, they represent a great risk and a greater responsibility to whatever pony wields them. Princess Celestia created the Elements of Harmony to be the ultimate power for solving problems where she and Princess Luna were not able. The Elements of Harmony are Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty, and Magic after the original six mares who personified the needed personality traits to bring harmony to Equestria. They have generally been

used only in a time of great need, but when invoked can harness the power of creation itself. For a mare bearing an Element of Harmony to invoke it, she must focus on her Element. For example: for a mare bearing the Element of Laughter to invoke her Element she must focus on every memory she has had which involved Laughter like births, marriages, parties ect. As the bearer of each Element gains more memories that coincide with their Element, the Element becomes more powerful and the bearer more able to wield it. The bearers of the Elements continue to grow in power until their deaths. Some of the bearers of the Elements of Harmony have gone so far as to be able to do, by themselves, what would have at first been only possible through a group effort by all the Elements together. A bearer of an Element of Harmony need not concern themselves with permanent physical impairments such as dismemberment. The Elements of Harmony, when invoked, will manifest powerful pseudo-members of their bearer's bodies to aid them in whatever task they undertake even if the task does not directly concern the use of said members. In the cases of minor things such as loss of mane or tail the missing part will be re-grown as if it had never been missing at all. The Elements of Harmony physically manifest as pieces of jewelry so that other ponies can look upon them and know the beauty of such traits. The Element of Magic is the 'leader' of the Elements of Harmony, or more accurately, the catalyst. Without the Element of Magic to call them out, the other Elements often fail to manifest the first time they are used, and only the Element of Magic can combine all the Elements and produce what is known as the 'Rainbow of Light' The 'Rainbow of Light' is the manifestation of the combined might of the Elements of Harmony when guided by the collective efforts of the bearers. When using the 'Rainbow of Light' the Elements of Harmony are at their most powerful and can produce results which in the past have been simply astonishing. There has been some speculation as to why the 'Rainbow of Light' is referred to as such. Ancient legends say there was such a thing as a 'Rainbow of Darkness' but any significant facts regarding it have been lost to the dust of time and no current knowledge exists that reference it. The power of the Elements of Harmony has, throughout history, been a testament to the determination of ponies everywhere and will be for generations to come." Evening Star finished and turned the page.

"It sounds like an awful lot of power for anypony to wield. Ah don't know if Ah would want that kind of responsibility. Ah'd be afraid to misuse it." Big Macintosh observed.

“Would you like to hear about the Elements of Peace next?” Evening Star asked.

“Ayup.”

“The Elements of Peace are the opposites of the Elements of Harmony yet perfectly compliment them in every way. The Elements of Peace are the ultimate bulwark against any foe that would threaten pony kind. Princess Luna created the Elements of Peace to provide protection and as a physical deterrent. The Elements of Peace bring to bear, the strength and resiliency of Equestria herself. The bearers of the Elements of Peace are stallions who use might and body to accomplish the lesser tasks to which the more powerful Elements of Harmony are ill suited, such as physical battle. The Elements of Peace are: Acceptance, Forgiveness, Patience, Discernment, Perseverance, and Hope after the six stallions who personified the needed personality traits to bring peace to Equestria. The Elements of Peace have been called upon for lesser tasks and are slightly better known than the fearsome Elements of Harmony.” Evening Star stopped reading and looked over to Big Macintosh, “If the Elements of Peace were better known, why hasn't anypony today heard of them?”

“How should Ah know? Maybe Equestria hasn't needed any of the Elements for a long time.” Big Macintosh responded.

“But there should still be legends and folklore. This doesn't make any sense. I don't get it.” Evening Star pondered the possible reasons for a few minutes until Big Macintosh came up with a reasonable answer.

He raised his head and regarded her simply for a moment before speaking,

“Ah guess out of sight means out of mind. If you spent a month away from the Library because you were too busy with issues in your life then you wouldn't remember what book you were reading would you?”

“I don't know about that. I love my books.” Evening Star countered.

“Did you know about Princess Luna before she came back?” Big Macintosh asked.

“Well no, I don't think anypony did.” Evening Star admitted.

“Well then how could anypony not know about her? There should be tales and so forth for her too, but nopony remembered.” Big Macintosh explained.

“You do have a point there. But by that comparison, then the Elements would have to have fallen out of service, if you will, about the same time Princess Luna was banished. That's a thousand years ago.” Evening Star referenced.

“Is there anything else about the Elements of Peace?” Big Macintosh asked.

Evening Star shook her head to clear it, “Oh duh, yes. I'm sorry.” she turned her attention back to the book, “For a stallion bearing an Element of Peace to invoke, it he must focus on his Element. For example: for a stallion bearing the Element of Forgiveness to invoke it he must actively focus on his Element, remembering every action concerning his Element like coming to terms with a pony who has wronged him in some way. As the bearer of each Element gains more memories that coincide with their Element, the Element becomes more powerful and the bearer more able to wield it. The bearers of the Elements continue to grow in power until their deaths. The notion of bearers of the Elements becoming more physically powerful as they age has been in question for hundreds of years but it does indeed seem to be the case. The bearers of the Elements of Peace never suffer the ill effects of aging, but do continue to age as per the normal cycle of life. Eventually they grow old and pass on, but in near perfect health. In short they simply pass on in their sleep. This is not to say that they are invulnerable, indeed some bearers of the Elements of Peace have been gravely wounded in battle and some even killed, but these are rare occasions in which the bearer was generally alone and was overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. A bearer of an Element of Peace need not concern themselves with permanent physical impairments such as dismemberment. The Elements of Peace, when invoked, will manifest powerful pseudo-members of their bearer's bodies to aid them in whatever task they undertake even if the task does not directly concern the use of said members. In the cases of minor things such as loss of mane or tail the missing part will be re-grown as if it had never been missing at all. The Elements of Peace physically manifest as suits of armor so that other ponies can look upon them and know they were not simply an ideal but a

physical representation of protection. Unlike the Elements of Harmony, the Elements of Peace do not have a 'leader' but they do have a catalyst of sorts. The bearer of the first Element to recognize who and what they are **must** call them out in order for them to physically manifest the armors, while the pseudo-members, for any bearer who is physically impaired, may be used without invoking the armor and may simply appear when the bearer personifies his Element. When acting in accordance with their Elements, the bearers of the Elements of Peace have the ability to invoke what has been named 'Inspirational Manifestation'. When invoking 'Inspirational Manifestation' the bearers of the Elements of Peace gain special abilities which directly link to their Element. These have been carefully recorded and catalogued according to each Element. The 'Inspirational Manifestation' for the Element of Perseverance is the ability to continue acting after logic would dictate the bearer would normally falter or fail. One recorded instance when this occurred was during the Great Griffon War. The bearer of the Element of Perseverance fought for two days straight and held a battle line by himself until the other Elements of Peace arrived with the Elements of Harmony. That particular battle was won with no loss of life, but plenty of injuries. The bearer of the Element of Forgiveness can heal grievous injuries to themselves or others either in battle or in the aftermath. The bearer of the Element of Discernment can gauge the actions and intentions of any being within the range of their perceptive senses providing knowledge of wounds or enemy actions. The bearer of the Element of Patience can calculate perfect timing for any actions whether in battle or in negotiating peace. The bearer of the Element of Acceptance brings peace to troubled bodies and minds and calm emotions and feelings; easing pain and soothing fear. The bearer of the Element of Hope can inspire others to act as they should even in the face of overwhelming odds or the most taxing and difficult tasks. A cautionary note to any bearers of the Elements of Peace: do not hesitate to do battle but do not fall prey to bloodlust. The taking of a life should be the absolute last resort and should never be perpetrated against another sentient being; there is no excuse for it. Broken bones can mend but all life is precious and death cannot be mended. The Elements of Peace are, above all, guardians of life. The Elements of Peace are well renowned for being powerful but it should be noted that the power of a single Element of Harmony could easily overpower the combined might of the Elements of Peace." Evening Star finished and huffed out a breath.



Big Macintosh was deep in thought; something was itching in his mind,  
“Read the part about them pseudo-thingies again.”

Evening flipped pages for a moment then began reading,  
“A bearer of an Element of Peace need not concern themselves with permanent physical impairments such as dismemberment. The Elements of Peace, when invoked, will manifest powerful pseudo-members of their bearer's bodies to aid them in whatever task they undertake even if the task does not directly concern the use of said members. The Elements of Peace physically manifest as suits of armor so that other ponies could look upon them and know they were not simply an ideal but a physical representation of protection. Unlike the Elements of Harmony, the Elements of Peace do not have a 'leader' but they do have a catalyst of sorts. The bearer of the first Element to recognize who and what they are **must** call them out in order for them to physically manifest the armors, while the pseudo-members, for any bearer who is physically impaired, may be used without invoking the armor and may simply appear when the bearer personifies his Element.” Evening Star looked up at Big Macintosh, “Why did you want me to read that part again?”

“Well Ah'll be. Ah knew Ah wasn't seein' things.” the massive Earth pony said slapping his leg with a flat hoof, “Valiant's got to be one of them Elements of Peace.”

Evening Star cocked her head, puzzled,  
“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Did Valiant tell you about how he saved four ponies from a fire?” Big Macintosh asked.

“Yes. He told me, but he said he didn't remember much; he said it was all pretty blurry.” Evening Star admitted.

“He got burnt up pretty bad, and he was dyin' but he didn't let that stop him. When he heard mah Granny had died from the smoke, he forced himself up and managed to get her heart goin' again. When he was doin that Ah know Ah saw a pair of pretty, gold wings on his shoulders where his original wings ought to be. It only happened for a moment, but it was there.

Does the book say anythin' else about these pseudo-thingies?" Big Macintosh asked.

Evening Star turned to the index at the front of the book, "Pseudo-members page 209." She flipped through the pages quickly and found the entry, "It says, pseudo-members are magical representations of the bearer's true form, for only the physical body is injured but the spirit is whole and untouched. The Elements and their bearers are a combination of spiritual and physical representation, merged into one and able to access their power through that merger. In this way the Elements take the imperfections of the bearer's body and makes them whole again so as to aid in any given task in which the missing members may be vital. One case reports that the Element of Kindness allowed a disabled bearer to speak after she was born mute; another allowed a paraplegic to walk again after an accident rendered him unable to use his back legs. These pseudo-members are only temporary and will disappear after a time, leaving the bearer disabled until the next instance of manifestation. The pseudo-members have been recorded to impart additional gifts when they manifest. The above reference to the bearer of the Element of Kindness could articulate perfectly even having had no prior experience speaking at all and could sing so beautifully as to bring the most hardened heart to tears within moments. The second reference mentioned above allowed the bearer to run and jump to great heights well above the limit of normal ponies. There have been precious few instances where a pseudo-member has come into play but when it has occurred, it has been greatly to the benefit of the bearer. As yet there are but five recorded instances of pseudo-members being imparted to bearers of Elements." Evening Star raised her head, "Are you sure of what you saw Big Macintosh?"

"Ayup."

"If Valiant is the bearer of an Element, which one do you think he is?" Evening Star asked.

"Ah have no idea." Big Mac responded.

"Oh, come on think about. You know him better than I do. Surely you must have some idea." Evening Star said pressing for a response.

“He don't fit none of the Elements to well. He's always in a hurry so Ah don't think he's Patience and he's about as discerning as a pinecone so he don't fit Discernment to well either. He sure knows how to hold a grudge against himself so he doesn't seem like Forgiveness, and when Ah first met him he was over his head in despair, so Ah don't think he's Hope neither. He . . . “ Big Macintosh was interrupted by his newest friend.

“Maybe it's something he's worked past. I've heard the story about how each of the Elements of Harmony had to work past certain trials to demonstrate and bring out their Elements. Maybe it's something he's worked past. What is the biggest thing he's worked past?” Evening Star asked.

Big Macintosh gave it some earnest thought,  
“Ah just can't think of what it could be. Ah know Ah ain't Discernment at least.” he chuckled, “Let's not worry about it for now.”

“Why's that?” Evening Star asked.

Big Macintosh looked out the gaping window up at the sky,  
“Because it's about time for Live Wire to get off work.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Valiant sighed happily as he slid his saddle-bags over his flank. The time was 2:15 and he had to meet Dr. Mend at the clinic.

Valiant turned to Mrs. Soothe,  
“What time should I come in tomorrow?” he asked cheerfully.

“I open the store at 8:00 a.m. be here at 7:45. I do hope you can stay longer tomorrow.” Mrs. Soothe said.

“I'll be here from sun up to sun down if that's what you need. But once the new semester starts I'll have to get back to you on that. I might have to cut down on the hours. I have to make sure I do well in my classes and all that.” Valiant said heading for the door.

“Let me know as soon as possible. I do need help still.” Mrs. Soothe called as Valiant opened the door.

“Will do . . . “

“Boo!” a voice yelled from above Valiant.

Valiant startled, stumbled, and fell right onto his posterior,  
“Who the . . . “ he began.

Looking up, Valiant saw Evening Star leaning far over the edge of the roof of the apothecary. She was smiling hugely. The sun shone bright behind her feathers, outlining them and their owner like a celestial being. Her mane and tail wafted gently in the breeze; she almost seemed to be sparkling. Valiant smiled, *'I do miss you Arabesque, but I think I might be falling for another filly already.'* he thought. Evening Star covered her mouth with a hoof, stifling a fit of the giggles. Valiant's smile widened as he stood up, only to bump his head against something as solid as a rock. He fell back onto his backside, rubbing his head, *'That's what I get for not paying attention.'* he thought. Turning his head he beheld a red wall in front of him and looked up puzzled.

Valiant shot to his hooves as he recognized Big Macintosh,  
“Hey! What are you doing here?” he asked hugging his unusually large friend.

Big Macintosh hugged him back,  
“Ah was wonderin' if a friend of mine could use a little help with a unicorn problem he's been havin'.”

The reminder sobered Valiant up immediately, washing away any good feelings he was entertaining,  
“Yeah. I've been wondering about that myself. Do you have any ideas?”

“Nope.” Big Macintosh said gesturing over his shoulder, “But he might.”

Valiant craned his neck to look over the massive Earth pony, but decided to simply look underneath instead, it was closer,  
“Hey, Live Wire. Is everypony I know coming to see me today?” he asked the citrus colored unicorn standing behind Big Macintosh.

"I don't think so, but that would be nice wouldn't it. Big Mac and Evening Star came to see me when I got off work. I wanted to scare you, but Evening Star won the bit-toss, so she got to do it. I think we should all go do something since you're off work now. You sure did get off work early. We were expecting to be here for a while and I was hoping Evening Star would get bored and let me scare you, but you got off work early so that's gone, but at least now we have more time to hang out right? I mean, now that I actually have friends and all, I want to spend as much time with you guys, and girl, as I can. I've never been able to hang out with friends much cause I didn't have any; so what is it that friends do all the time? Should we go off and get something at the park? They always have nice snack-carts out and everything. Or maybe we should go to the roller-skating rink . . . "

"Live Wire . . . " Big Macintosh said.

"Or there's that awesome night-club that's open until all hours of the night. I've heard they have the greatest D.J. Of all time! I think she's called Scratch or something like that . . . "

"Live Wire . . . " Valiant said slightly louder than Big Macintosh.

"Oh, I know! We could go watch the Wonderbolts practice! Those pegasi are amazing! Their aerial stunts . . . "

"Live Wire . . . " Evening Star addressed raising her voice.

Lemon Lime continued on, he hadn't heard a thing. Valiant looked at his other two friends and mouthed, '*One . . . Two . . . Three.*'

"***LIVE WIRE!***" the three ponies yelled in unison.

Lemon Lime stopped mid-sentence and looked up, blinking owlshly, "Did you say something?"

The three ponies, all burst into gales of laughter at their machine-gun-mouthed friend.

Lemon Lime was puzzled for a brief moment, then he figured it out and was slightly hurt,

"It's not **that** funny." he said sourly, ears low, "I'm sorry if I got off on a tangent, but you don't need to laugh at me. I'm just excited that's all."

Big Macintosh was the first to recover, and he did so quickly, "Ah'm sorry Live Wire. We just thought the situation was funny. We weren't laughing at you. Well, we were, but not in a bad way."

"Yeah," Evening Star interjected, "We just thought it was funny that's all. Besides you're kind of endearing."

"Don't take it personally Live Wire. Some things are just funny, and the fact that you didn't even know we were all calling for you just made it even funnier." Valiant finished.

Lemon Lime was quiet for a long moment as he digested the statements, then perked right back up, "So what do **you** want to do?"

"I have to meet Dr. Mend at some clinic so he can administer the healing potion to a pegasus who was injured by our resident mentally unstable unicorn." Valiant began, "After that I'm free."

"Hey Valiant," Lemon Lime addressed, "You never did tell me how you hurt your leg, and it looks like it's completely healed. I take it, that's your potion at work?"

Valiant smiled proudly, "I bit myself to prove that the healing potion really works."

Lemon Lime was floored, "WHAT!" he exclaimed, "Valiant, that is not healthy! What made you think to bite yourself? What kind of a pony does that?"

Evening Star landed beside Valiant, "He's right. That's not healthy behavior at all. No pony would even think about biting themselves and draw blood."

"Ah agree. Are you feelin' alright Valiant?" Big Macintosh added.

“Yeah, I'm fine. It's no big deal. I just did it to prove a point.” Valiant defended.

“It is a big deal Valiant!” Lemon Lime said emphatically, “I've only seen suicidal ponies do something like that. Self-mutilation is not alright, and it is most definitely a big deal.”

“Okay!” Valiant said defensively, “If it's that big of an issue I won't do it again. Yeesh!”

Lemon Lime narrowed his eyes at Valiant, and took a step toward the wingless pegasus, head low,  
“Don't you 'yeesh' me Valiant.” he said softly, “I know what I'm talking about and I'm not going to let any pony hurt themselves while I have something to say about it.”

Valiant had to admit that when the smaller unicorn was determined he could be pretty intimidating,  
“Alright, alright.” he said calmly, “I apologize. I didn't know you felt so strongly about it.”

Lemon Lime took another step forward, posture unchanged,  
“I've seen ponies waste away, I've seen ponies mutilate themselves, and I've seen ponies that I've tried to help, end up killing themselves. They all had that same attitude, and I won't stand for it. Do. Not. 'Yeesh'. Me. Or I will levitate your backside to a psychologist so fast you won't be able to get your bearings until you're already doped up on medication. That isn't a hollow threat, I've done it. And so help me I'll do it again if I have to. This is serious matter and you will treat it as such.”

Big Macintosh held out a leg, halting Lemon Lime,  
“Ah think he gets the point, Live Wire.”

Lemon Lime seemed to come out of a trance; he shook his head and banged a hoof on his left temple, just in front of his ear,  
“Ooh.” he groaned, “I do not like doing that.” he looked up at his friends and smiled sheepishly, “Sorry, but when I get onto a subject that I'm passionate about I get kind of . . . intense.”

Evening Star shot Valiant a perturbed look,

"That's fine. I agree with what you said Live Wire. Maybe a visit to a 'shrink' is in order if this happens again. Hint, hint. As in, it had better not happen again."

Valiant sighed dejectedly,  
"Alright. I get the point. I promise I won't do it again."

"But do you understand why you shouldn't do it again?" Big Macintosh asked.

"Because it's self-destructive, I guess." Valiant said.

Big Macintosh nodded,  
"Ah've seen you do enough self-destructive things to last me a lifetime, and Ah don't want to see it anymore. Or do I need to get mah sister to give you another talkin'-to?"

Valiant stood up ram-rod straight,  
"No need for that. Message received loud and clear."

Evening Star broke the tension,  
"Well if that's all cleared up, why don't we go with you and see this miracle stuff ourselves?"

The suggestion was well-received. The four friends turned and headed for the predesignated meeting place. Valiant smiled to himself, *'I may not have a family, but this is probably as close as I'll ever get.'* he thought to himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Mend gently pushed along a supply cart in front of him while Dr. Avalon trotted next to him, examining the unassuming vials which lay on top. Mend was dreading going back to the dormitory. He could feel the voices in the back of his mind buzzing like a hive of bees. He knew once he got back, they would start up again. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Dr. Avalon took note of Mend's actions,  
"Nervous?" she asked.



Dr. Mend shook his head,  
“Just have a lot on my mind. I already know this will work.”

“Then what's bothering you?” Dr. Avalon asked.

Dr. Mend straightened up and pushed the cart a bit faster,  
“I have some . . . personal issues that I need to deal with. Don't worry, I won't let it affect my performance.”

Dr. Avalon smiled warmly,  
“Well, if you ever want to talk about it let me know.” she invited.

“I wouldn't want to burden you, Dr. Avalon.” Dr. Mend responded.

Dr. Avalon placed a gentle hoof on the cart and brought it and Dr. Mend to a halt,  
“It's not a burden, if I offered. I mean it. If you want to talk about it, I'm here.” she said looking Dr. Mend directly in the eyes.

Dr. Mend didn't really know what to say,  
“I . . . Well, thank you. I appreciate that.” he finally said pushing the cart into motion again.

“Take a left here.” Dr. Avalon said, guiding Dr. Mend toward Trooper's room.

“Has Trooper woken up yet?” Dr. Mend asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Avalon responded, “He woke up earlier and I spoke with him about the treatment. He's eager to give it a try. I brought him the waver and he signed it without delay.”

Dr. Mend smiled, actually smiled,  
“Did you give him the whole 'shpeel' about inherent risks and so forth?”

Dr. Avalon shot Dr. Mend a playfully pouty look,  
“Really! Do you honestly think I would neglect that kind of a detail? You don't think much of me at all do you?”

The playfulness was both lost and wasted on the serious stallion, "No! That's not what I meant!" he said frantically, "I just wanted to double check. I'm so used to running my own clinic it's a habit to double check everything. I meant no offense Avalon, I do trust you. You're a fantastic doctor and I never meant to insinuate you were otherwise."

"Whoa there," Dr. Avalon said, surprised, "I was only playing. I know you didn't mean it that way, I was teasing you. You know, sarcasm."

Dr. Mend felt like a heel,  
"Oops. I guess I was a bit too serious huh?"

"You think? And since when have we decided to dispense with proper titles?" Dr. Avalon asked, poking Dr. Mend in his side playfully.

Dr. Mend blushed furiously,  
"I apologize Dr. Avalon. I had no intention of pressuring you to over familiarity. It was merely a slip of the tongue."

Dr. Avalon decided to cease with any hints and subtle messages,  
"I never said I didn't like it, now did I?" she asked.

Dr. Mend was being particularly dense at the moment,  
"Well no. But if you didn't mind then why mention it?"

Dr. Avalon had never wished for a pillow to scream into, so much in her life,  
"Never mind." she mumbled moodily.

"What was that?" Dr. Mend asked absent-mindedly.

Dr. Avalon decided to change the subject,  
"Isn't your friend supposed to be here when Trooper begins treatment?"

"Yes, he is. I don't know why he's late. But I suppose that's my fault, I didn't tell him where to meet me. He's probably in the waiting room." Dr. Mend said.

"I'll go get him. What does he look like?" Dr. Avalon asked.

“His coat is royal blue and his mane and tail are light brown. His cutie-mark is a mortar and pestle with some herbal ingredients in it. He's a pegasus, but he looks like an Earth pony.” Dr. Mend described.

Dr. Avalon turned her head toward Dr. Mend, unsure about the description,  
“He's a pegasus but he looks like an Earth pony?” she asked, hinting at clarification.

“He lost his wings. I should know, I had to saw off the remainder of the bones.” Dr. Mend said.

“Accident?” Dr. Avalon asked.

“Animal attack.” Dr. Mend clarified.

“Take your next right and Trooper's room is number 23. I'll be there in a minute or two.” Dr. Avalon said heading off to the waiting room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trooper had never felt so helpless. All four of his legs were slung up above him in traction, forcing him to lie on his back and press the full weight of his body against his wings, which were sure to be sore after he recovered. His tail lay straight out behind him and drooped off the edge of the bed exposing his backside to the open air. As if all that weren't enough, his legs itched fiercely and the slightest movement of his torso sent flashes of pain shooting all through his whole body which was absolutely slathered in ugly bruises and bumps. He detested having to ask anypony to do things for him and now his independence was completely non-existent. He never once uttered a single complaint, but oh how he wanted to.

Trooper began grumbling to himself to pass the time,  
“Of course this would not have happened had it not been for that detestable unicorn. So then, here comes Trooper to selflessly save the day. And what do I get for my bravery? Not one, not two, not even three, but **four** broken legs!” he griped, “I shall save you! The hero called out to the frightened mare. He swooped down and deftly caught her, mere moments before she would have fallen to her death. As he set her down gently, the wicked unicorn laughed brazenly, taunting him 'I will have that money!' The intrepid

hero stood up to her boldly, 'Nay,' he said, 'You shall not harm a hair on her lovely head, for you now face the bravest of heroes, Trooper the Magnificent. Be gone from here wretch!' His words hung in the air like golden motes, glimmering in the afternoon light, bringing hope to all of Equestria." Trooper's imagination was having a field-day, "He took to the air in his immaculate glory and swooped down toward the evil unicorn, 'Prepare thyself, fiend! For your doom is at hoof! I shall vanquish you without breaking a sweat!' he dove down toward her valiantly." Trooper flopped his head back in frustration, "But instead of fleeing, she wrapped up his wings and flung him into the air only to fall onto the ground like a sack of potatoes." he sighed irritably, "Thank Celestia, that only my legs were shattered. It could have just as easily been my whole body. I can see it now. My mother weeping brokenly over my headstone. My epitaph would be 'Here lies Trooper, best known for his impression of a pancake.' I do hope the doctor returns soon. I need to be out of this bed."

Dr. Mend opened the door to Trooper's room and pushed the cart in, "Hello Trooper, how are you feeling?"

"As well as I can I suppose, all circumstances considered." Trooper responded honestly, "I could be doing much worse. And hopefully you are here to help me with my recovery? With some radical new treatment I heard about?"

Dr. Mend pushed the cart up along the left side Trooper's bed and locked the wheels with his hoof, "Correct. All we're waiting on is for the pony who found this new treatment to arrive."

Trooper looked toward the ceiling, face enraptured, "I can just imagine her now. She must be an older white unicorn mare with a shining silver mane and tail who exudes a matronly air of tenderness to all she encounters. The very embodiment of a caring matriarch."

Dr. Mend shook his head, quite amused, "You couldn't be more wrong. **He** is a young, pegasus stallion about your age . . . " Dr. Mend was cut off as the door to Trooper's room opened.

Evening Star, Lemon Lime, Big Macintosh, Valiant, and Dr. Avalon entered the room, making it seem quite cramped. Dr. Mend's face

brightened significantly when he noticed the large, red Earth pony farmer. Big Macintosh, similarly cracked a smile and nodded to Dr. Mend.

Trooper's eyes bulged at the sight of Valiant,  
“Doctor, were I not in traction, I should have to accuse you of showing me a mirror. This fellow and I seem to favor each other in a most distinctive way.”

Valiant analyzed Trooper carefully, *'His mane and tail are the exact same shade as mine, his coat too. Our faces are nearly identical as well. I've only ever heard Rarity talk like that though.'* Valiant's eyes drifted down to Trooper's flank, his brow wrinkling in confusion, *'Hmm, he doesn't have a cutie mark either.'* he thought to himself.

Trooper looked at each pony in turn and finally settled on Evening Star, since she was the only pegasus in evidence.

Trooper craned his neck over toward Dr. Mend and whispered,  
“I say, he seems to be a bit on the effeminate side.”

Dr. Mend, for all his seriousness, couldn't help but to laugh at Trooper's poorly informed statement,  
“No, no, no.” he chuckled, “Valiant is the one who looks like you.”

“But you said he was a pegasus around my age. There is only one pegasus in the room.” Trooper said confused.

Dr. Mend finished laughing and resumed his serious expression,  
“He **is** a pegasus, he lost his wings.”

Dr. Avalon cleared her throat loudly,  
“Ahem. I believe we are all here.”

Trooper caught on easily,  
“Ah yes, much to do, much to do. Making medical history and all that.” he raised his head, as much as he could, “The proverbial test subject is ready whenever you fine ponies are.”

Dr. Mend picked up a vial carefully with his hooves and pulled out the cork with his mouth,  
“Open up.” he said spitting out the cork.

Trooper opened his mouth and rested his head as far back as he could, so as to minimize the chance of any of the potion spilling. Dr. Mend held up the vial in his hooves and gently bit onto the side of it with his mouth, careful not to shatter it. He tilted his head and poured the contents down Trooper's throat.

Trooper swallowed hard and made a face, whipping his head back and forth,  
“Bwa! Beastly, vile-tasting stuff!” he scraped his tongue against his teeth several times, then closed his mouth and adopted a look of thoughtfulness,  
“Hmm, I do rather like the hint of mint and sage though. So, when should I expect to be mobile again?”

“If you take regular doses every three days, about a week and a half.”  
Valiant provided.

Trooper brightened up like a flash,  
“I say, absolutely top-hole! If this stuff works like you say I could be back out saving damsels in distress in no time at all!”

The collective ponies looked at each other, but Evening Star beat everypony to the punch,  
“Yes, about that. What can you tell us?”

“Ah . . . yes. About that,” Trooper's good mood evaporated like vapor in the summer sun, “Well it is all quite simple really. As much as I would love to portray myself as the brave hero, I am afraid that I am not.” Trooper's ears fell and he shrunk back into the bed as if he was trying to hide, “I was flying along, minding my own business, when motion in an alleyway caught my eye. I banked and came around and . . . Well I would have had to be blind to miss what was going on. A unicorn in a dark cloak was levitating an Earth pony filly right up above the surrounding buildings. The filly was scared to death, she was crying her eyes out, but the unicorn simply ignored that and kept demanding the filly drop her bits. Any pony could see the poor thing was not wearing saddle-bags. Where was she supposed to be hiding a bit-purse?” Trooper sighed, “Well the unicorn clearly did not care a whit about that fact and simply dropped the poor thing. Now, I am not a genius, but neither am I a fool. That unicorn meant to **kill** that poor filly. I never had a chance to think, I just acted,” Trooper snorted in a half-

laugh, "I acted like an idiot. I caught the filly and, like a moron, I set her down right in the same alley as the unicorn. The unicorn bound my wings to my sides and flung me right up into the air, then teleported away. I thought I was going to die and that has to be the strangest thing. As I was falling, the only thing I was thinking was that I was glad the unicorn had let the filly go." Trooper sighed again, "I do not even recall when the spell binding my wings ended or even how I arrived here. I hope that has been helpful."

Dr. Mend and Dr. Avalon looked at each other and nodded, "I'm afraid we have rounds to make, but you four are free to stay and visit Trooper for a while. I'll come back when visiting hours are over." Dr. Avalon said.

The two doctors left the room, taking the cart with them, and closed the door, leaving five ponies to stay and chat. Trooper couldn't help but notice that the yellow and green unicorn was staring at his backside. He chose to ignore it for the moment and turned his attention to the other ponies in the room, none of which he knew well.

"If it is not too much to ask, Valiant was it? Yes um, how is it that we look so much alike and how, in the name of Equestria, did you lose your wings? I am simply dying to know." Trooper ventured boldly.

Valiant was surprised by the salvo of inquiry but he had some questions of his own, "How about a trade? Information for information, you scratch my back I'll scratch yours."

Trooper gave the notion some thought, "Sounds reasonable enough. You first."

"Back at you. How **do** we look so much alike? I don't have any relatives that I know of. Do you have a missing twin brother or something like that?" Valiant asked.

Trooper shook his head, "Sorry, afraid not. I was the only foal my mother ever had. My parents married young and my father died when I was quite young. I do not even recall what he looks like. My turn. How did you lose your wings?"

“Do you want the long version or the short one?” Valiant asked.

“I believe I will take the short one.” Trooper replied.

“I was helping a bear whose back legs were trapped under some fallen rocks. I had to get close and the bear made a meal out of my wings.” Valiant said.

Trooper pursed his lips,  
“I was honest with you my good stallion. I will thank you to be honest with me.” he said frostily.

Valiant opened his mouth to speak, but Big Macintosh beat him to it,  
“Valiant don't lie to nopony. He's tellin' the truth.”

Trooper hadn't heard Big Macintosh, he was distracted by Lemon Lime, who was still staring intently at his posterior,  
“What is it exactly about that particular region of my backside do you find so incredibly enthralling?”

Lemon Lime looked up sharply,  
“I . . . I uh . . . “

Trooper settled down a bit and took on a softer tone,  
“If you are compelled to look, feel free to do so, but I will ask you not to touch without my permission. And just to save any embarrassment, my tastes run to the mares.”

Lemon Lime's eyes were as large as saucers and his face instantly turned beet-red,  
“No . . . no. I was . . . it's just that . . . “

“Oh come now. Do not be ashamed of who you are. I take it as a compliment and I am well aware of the modern age in which we live. I am as accepting as the next pony and I certainly cannot judge you for your preference. If it pleases you to look then look. So long as you do not invade my personal space, I have no issue with it.” Trooper said.

“But . . . it's not . . . I mean . . . “ Lemon Lime was stuttering more than he had when first meeting Evening Star.



“Good Heavens!” Trooper exclaimed, “It is not the end of the world! If you see something you like then fine! If it is that much of a big deal, I have some friends who . . .” Trooper was interrupted by Lemon Lime.

“You don't have a cutie-mark.” the unicorn said quietly.

Trooper stopped mid-sentence, mouth still open,  
“Oh that. Yes well, you see, I simply never developed one. I do not have a special talent that I am aware of.” Trooper's ears fell, “Oh my. I apologize profusely if I embarrassed you. I seem to have made an ass out of myself in regard to my ass. My mistake, but my statement still stands.”

The tension in the air was so thick, the assembled ponies could almost taste it. It was the awkward silence to end all awkward silences. After a full minute of loud crickets, Big Macintosh cleared his throat.

“Ah think we need to talk about this rogue unicorn and what we're goin' to do about her.” the massive Earth pony initiated.

Lemon Lime, glad for the subject change, piped up quickly,  
“I have an idea!”

The other ponies waited for him to expound on the notion, after a moment, the short unicorn got the picture,  
“I think we should ask the Elements of Harmony to deal with her.”

Evening Star shook her head,  
“Can't. Big Macintosh already hinted at that to Princess Celestia. She said we should try to solve it on our own. She seemed inclined to think that Big Macintosh would be in on it though.”

Valiant turned a surprised eye to his huge, red friend,  
“Really? When did you get an audience with Princess Celestia?”

Big Macintosh shrugged,  
“Ah didn't do it on purpose. Live Wire told me to find Evenin' Star while he was at work. Ah went to the Library and overheard a conversation. Ah tried to sneak away, but the Princess caught me, so Ah just said what was on mah mind.”

Trooper was surprised to say the least,  
“Do you mean to say, that you were, essentially, privileged with a private audience with the dominant ruler of Equestria?”

“Ayup.”

“Had I known that, I would have been keeping the company of work-ponies from day one.” Trooper said magnanimously.

Big Macintosh ignored the statement and focused on the topic at hoof,  
“We still need some kind o' plan. Any other ideas?”

Every ear in the room instantly swerved toward Evening Star when she said,  
“I think we should try to find the Elements of Peace.”

“We have already discussed the Elements of Harmony.” Trooper reminded.

“No, the Elements of Peace, the other set of Elements, the other half of the Elements of Harmony.” Evening Star said emphatically.

Valiant rubbed his head with his hooves,  
“Look everypony, Elements or no Elements, we still need a solution. I don't think we have time to seek out another set of Elements even if they do exist. I'm not saying I don't believe you Evening Star, but we need a solution right now. This unicorn is suffering from 'Caster's Stroke' and she isn't going to stop on her own. She's accelerating and next time there may not be anypony around to save her next victim. Mend and I discussed this briefly, and he had an idea. What if we could manage to get this unicorn to ingest an elixir that would knock her out, put her to sleep?”

Lemon Lime caught the direction of his wingless friend's thought pattern,  
“Then we could keep giving her doses of it until the C.M.E.S. wears off. We would have to care for her while this is going on, but that's no problem. I have plenty of room in my house and more than enough money to pay for her food and such. But the question is: how do we get her to ingest it? If we could put it into a syringe, I could administer it to her that way, but the

chemical makeup would have to be different. If all we have to work with is a compound that has to be ingested, then somepony would have to hold her still, somepony would have to pry open her mouth, and while all that's going on, a unicorn would have to cut her off from her power to make sure she didn't teleport away." Lemon Lime put a hoof to his chin and began muttering calculations quietly to himself.

Trooper opened his mouth to speak, but Evening Star hovered over to him with a hoof to her lips,  
"Shh. Let him work. He has Cerebral-Lingua Accelerari; his mind works four times faster than any of ours could." she whispered.

After what Big Macintosh counted out to be three minutes and twelve seconds, Lemon Lime looked up,  
"I've run the numbers. Thank Celestia I work as a physical therapist or I wouldn't know this. The average pony's reflexive time scale is roughly 2.6 seconds when their adrenaline is pumping, with a variable of .4 seconds to account for the C.M.E.S. . . . " Lemon Lime began, but Evening Star cut him off.

"Is it possible, Live Wire? Can we do it?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes. I believe we can do it, but we need to be organized. Let's go over what we have available. We need to know who is going to be participating in this, then write up a list of our strengths so we can utilize every advantage while minimizing our weaknesses and be able to act with the most efficient effort and keep the possibility of injury to as small a percentage as possible." Lemon Lime said.

"Let's start with who's going to be doing this." Valiant said, "I'm in."

"So am Ah." Big Macintosh said next.

"I have to be there. I'm the only one who could match her in strength, besides I can catch a pony in a heart-beat." Lemon Lime interjected.

"I will go as well." Evening Star said, "If she's suffering from 'Caster's Stroke', being confronted by a bunch of stallions in a dark alley way could send her into a true panic. I think I can calm her down."

“I shall be glad to help as soon as I am recovered.” Trooper volunteered, “I can scout around for her. I am no hero, but I can be your eyes.”

“I’m pretty sure Mend would want to be there too.” Valiant said, “If for no other reason, than to be present to provide his expertise if somepony gets injured. That’s six so far. How many do you estimate we need Live Wire?”

“I’d say, with the sheer amount of variables we have working against us. We will need a minimum of seven, preferably eight, but we could pull it off with seven.” Lemon Lime estimated.

“O.K. So who else can we ask to help us?” Valiant asked.

Lemon Lime and Big Macintosh looked at each other, seeming to think the same thing,

“Danger and possible violence . . .” Lemon Lime began.

“Physical strength and boldness . . .” Big Macintosh continued the thought.

“Cantankerous.” The two stallions said in unison.

\* \* \* \* \*

Across the capital city of Equestria, away from the clinic, a unicorn stallion and his daughter trotted toward home after a fun-filled afternoon at the park. Father and daughter trotted along happily underneath Princess Luna’s waxing Moon. The night had begun to take on a slight chill, soft breezes began drifting in, out of the West and the temperature was dropping steadily. They walked along a familiar back-road, certain of their safety. Patch was pleasantly fatigued from her rambunctious playing with all the other Fillies and colts at the park and could proudly boast she was named the ‘tag queen’ of the day. The two unicorns were beginning to pick up the pace. The temperature was dropping more quickly than they had first thought and they longed to be back in their own home. Little did they know that in the growing obscurity of the evening a living shadow had detached from the darkness and was following them. The figure looked out from underneath her hood and her muddy purple eyes focused on the oblivious pair.

The turquoise unicorn stallion heard a rock clack in the darkness of an alley way behind he and his daughter and turned his head to the deepening shadows. He turned, quick as a flash, his hoof shot out to the tiny unicorn filly next to him, keeping her still. Patch froze, almost instantly, fear beginning to creep into her thoughts.

“What is it Daddy?” little Patch asked.

“Quiet, baby.” he whispered tensely.

His ears twitched this way and that, trying to focus on any possible threat, his eyes searching the ever-growing layers of gloom for whatever had made the noise. Sea Blue stood still as a statue for several full minutes, reaching out with his senses into the pitch black of the surrounding alley ways. Patch was frightened and held as still as her father. Neither pony dared to move a muscle. The night continued to cool, the temperature dropping more quickly. The two ponies could see their breath in front of their faces, but still they dared not move.

Sea Blue knew he had heard something and began gathering his magic for a 'Light' spell. It was one he had learned when he had taken a self-defense course. He focused on hiding the glow of his horn so as to have the element of surprise. Sea Blue had fervently hoped he would never have to actually use the spells, but ‘better have it and not need it, than need it and not have it’; and now life seemed to be indicating that he needed it. He took a deep breath and began calming himself, clearing his mind and opening himself to the full spectrum of his admittedly limited magical power. He sent up a silent prayer to Princess Luna, whose night it was, and asked for what every parent would want, the ability to protect his daughter.

“Close your eye, Patch.” Sea Blue whispered to the little filly.

In a blindingly brilliant flash of sudden light, Sea Blue finished casting his spell. He closed his eyes for a brief moment so as to not be blinded, as was the spell's intended use. He opened his eyes quickly and took in the surrounding area, illuminated by the spell. Eight paces to his left stood the wall of a pottery house, the heat from the kiln in the back wall still sending trace amounts of warmth into the night. Six paces to his right stood the abandoned bulk of an old textile factory, spooky enough in the first place.

Directly behind him a good 23 paces, was the main road, a place he suddenly wished he and Patch had stayed on. Directly in front of him, illuminated by his spell, Sea Blue discerned the silhouette of a cloaked pony, not ten paces away. Sea Blue could not make out any particularly identifying characteristics in the darkness, which made the phantom pony so much more terrifying. Sea Blue took an involuntary step back, eyes hardening, preparing to fight. For several solid minutes, the phantom pony stood stock-still. Sea Blue thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, the wind was blowing, but in the outline he saw, the other pony's cloak was still as a tomb-stone. Not a single piece of the phantom seemed lively, the mane hung loosely, the tail still as a stone, it didn't hardly seem to even breathe.

With a sudden, terrifying explosion of motion the cloaked pony charged, forward, horn glowing brightly in the darkness.

"Run!" Sea Blue yelled to Patch, "Run Patch! Run home and don't stop till you get there!"

The tiny filly took off like a shot while her father braced himself and began gathering his magic for another defensive spell, "STOP!" he bellowed, "Don't take another step!"

The cloaked pony only increased her speed. She flashed out of Sea Blue's sight and re-appeared right in front of him. Sea Blue realized what was happening and had to decide between dodging and casting his incomplete spell. He decided to throw up his incomplete spell, hoping it would be enough to stop his apparent enemy. The spell was too weak. Sea Blue seemed to see the world in slow motion. He saw the flash of his own spell illuminate his enemy, her muddy purple eyes now dimly glowing in the night. Her head was low, using her natural weapon as unicorns had been want to do in ages past. Sea Blue tensed his body, preparing for an impact he was certain would come close to, if not outright pierce his heart. The unicorn's horn pierced his chest, the impact throwing him to the ground.

Sea Blue felt a white-hot pain seared through his whole body, and to his infinite surprise, he felt a second wave of agony shoot throughout his body as his enemy delivered a spell, right past his natural defenses. The spell wracked his body with the fiery intensity of a thousand white-hot Suns. His muscles locked tightly then seemed to short-circuit, leaving him to fall

limply onto the ground like a rag-doll. Sea Blue cried out in pain, and to his horror, he heard the scream of little Patch as well.

Sea Blue struggled to rise to his hooves, but the impact had left him winded and his muscles felt like jelly. His sanguine life essence began to slowly spill out of the open hole in his chest, staining the ground. Sea Blue focused his remaining strength and just barely managed to turn his head toward where he heard Patch's cry. The unicorn stallion's fears were confirmed, coming to terrifying proportions. The cloaked pony stood in front of his daughter. Patch was shaking, frozen with fear. The blindness was only supposed to last for a few brief moments and Sea Blue wasn't even sure it had been effective at all.

The figure held up a hoof, underneath Patch's chin, lifting her head. The terrified filly complied tearfully. The unicorn examined Patch's missing eye and turned swiftly to Sea Blue, "This is your doing! How dare you!" she accused.

Patch came to her senses, and kicked the cloaked unicorn with a front hoof, "No!" she cried, "Leave Daddy alone!"

The cloaked pony's hoof shot out and snaked around Patch's shoulders, "Come with me, little one. I'll keep you safe. No pony will ever hurt you again."

Sea Blue's blood ran cold, all color draining from his body. He struggled to stand; he struggled with all his might. He focused his will and slowly forced his senseless legs to comply. The unicorn turned back to Sea Blue, and for the first time, he managed to get a good look at her expression: she was shocked.

"What!" she cried, "Impossible! No pony can shake off my 'Paralysis' spell!" she sneered, "It doesn't matter! You will never hurt her again!"

With a bright flash of magic, both the unicorn and little Patch were gone, leaving Sea Blue alone on the street.

"Patch?" he called out weakly to the darkness.

Sea Blue's call met only the dreaded silence of night, and his heart shattered,  
“no,” he whispered, “Oh baby no, no, no, **no, no, nO, NO, NO!**” he began frantically trying to force his body to respond, “**NO!**” he cried, “No baby, you can't be gone! NO!” it was no use, his body wouldn't respond fast enough. He managed to get his front hooves underneath him but his equilibrium was shot and he pitched over onto his side, throwing up a small cloud of dust, “Not her! NO CELESTIA, LUNA NO! Not her!” he cried furiously, “NO, PLEASE NOT HER! **PLEASE! I BEG YOU! NOT HER! NO!**”

Sea Blue used his front hooves to drag himself toward where he last saw her,  
“No baby, no. You can't be gone. No. No. No. No.” each word was whispered as he drug himself inch-by-inch closer to where she had vanished, his voice croaked through his sobs, “I can't lose you.” he whispered, “Please Patch, come back. Bring her back. Don't do this. Don't take her away from me.”

Sea Blue reached the spot and looked around frantically for his precious daughter, his mind, unwilling to accept that she was gone, “Where is she?” he asked the darkness, “Where is she? I have to find her. Where is she? Patch?” he called, “Patch? Come back baby. Daddy's alright, it's O.K. to come out now. Patch? Patch!” he cried.

Reality finally sunk in to the poor unicorn's tortured psyche. Sea Blue collapsed onto the ground and cried, expressing a pain that only a parent could ever know. In that moment, the playful counselor wanted to die.

Sea Blue's mind began to fade away, his vision leaving him cold in the street,  
“Patch . . . ” the name of his daughter was the last whisper come out of his mouth that night.



# Chapter 8

Patch couldn't stop crying. She lay on a thin blanket on the cold, hard floor of a dark room. She could just make out the wall next to her; it was made of brown stone and was as cold as the rest of the room. The air smelled stale and old just like the blanket she lay on. Her head lay resting on her forehooves as her tears streamed down her face; it was the only warmth she had. She was afraid to move a muscle for fear of what the scary unicorn who had foalnapped her would do. She closed her eye and wished, not for the first time, she was back home, nestled in her bed with her Daddy reading her a bedtime story. She sniffed loudly as fresh tears began forming in her eye.

The unicorn mare who had taken Patch paced back and forth somewhere in the darkness nearby. Patch could hear her hooves clapping around, somewhere between her and the doorway. The room, Patch guessed, was fifteen paces wide and twenty paces long. Patch was against the far wall from the door, which she could just barely make out in the darkness.

The unicorn mare stopped her pacing when she heard Patch sniffle, "It's alright little filly," she said from the darkness, "STOP CRYING!"

Patch shrunk back from the harsh voice. The unicorn would speak softly then suddenly explode for no apparent reason. Patch was deathly afraid of her.

"I wanna go home!" the little unicorn cried.

Patch could hear the unicorn approaching her, "You are home, away from that terrible stallion who took your pretty eye. I'LL KEEP YOU SAFE! Now why don't you try to get some sleep? We're safe here. This is my home. DO YOU LIKE IT? Settle down now." she lay down next to Patch and snuggled up against the little filly, "The day is dead. Let us die too and be born anew with the dawn."

Patch had no idea what the unicorn was talking about. She hoped that her Daddy would come for her soon. She tried to crawl away from her

foalnapper, but the unicorn held tightly onto her and escape was impossible. The unicorn wrapped her hooves around Patch and seemed to fall asleep almost instantly. Patch was too frightened to sleep. She lay her head down on the hoof that was tucked under her chin and wept silently.

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Dr. Mend shook himself as he stepped out of the shower, his mood was dark. Just as he feared, the voices had begun their ranting once again when he and Valiant had returned to the dorm. Dr. Mend closed his eyes and concentrated on his mind, '*Be quiet!*' he thought. The voices didn't even pause, '*Shut up, shut up, shut up!*' he mentally yelled. The voices just wouldn't abate, they kept rambling on and on about how much of a failure he was. Dr. Mend put his front hooves over his ears, vainly trying to block out the sound. He knew it wouldn't work, but he had to do something.

Dr. Mend lay down on the floor of the bathroom and screwed his eyes tightly shut, his jaw grinding, '*Leave me alone!*' he mentally yelled to the voices, '*What do you want from me?*' He had no idea how long he spent in that posture, but after a time, he woke up.

Dr. Mend opened his eyes, realizing he had fallen asleep in a very painful position. He raised his head and sucked in a breath, his neck hurt terribly. The voices were there already, yammering away again, like always. Dr. Mend stood up stiffly; a wave of nausea hit him like a freight train. He lurched over to the toilet tried to throw up the absent contents of his empty stomach. He only vomited yellow foam. He stayed in his bent over position for several long minutes, until the nausea subsided. He felt horrible.

Somepony knocked on the bathroom door, rudely bringing the black stallion out of his stupor,  
"Mend, are you alright?" Dr. Mend recognized the voice as belonging to Valiant.

"Yeah, I'm alright." Dr. Mend replied, breathing heavily, "Just some stomach trouble. I'll be out in a minute."

The white manned Earth pony struggled to his hooves and wobbled to the door. He unlocked the old wooden door and opened it to find Valiant standing just beyond with a worried look on his face. Mend held up a hoof,

forestalling any questions, and lumbered over to his bed. Dr. Mend was only dimly aware that the voices he heard in his head were different from those of the other ponies in the room. He didn't care, he just needed more sleep.

Valiant watched his friend crawl into bed and pull the covers up over himself. The younger, wingless pegasus bit his lip but decided to hold his tongue, '*Mend's dealing with enough right now. I'll tell him what we decide in the morning.*' he thought. Valiant walked back over to his bed, where his friends sat with quills and paper.

"Hey Valiant?" Evening Star addressed, whispering, "Should we go somewhere else, so he can sleep?" she asked, indicating Dr. Mend.

Valiant nodded,  
"That's probably a good idea. He needs his rest. Does anypony know a quiet place where we can get some food and continue on with all this planning?" he asked, continuing the whisper.

Lemon Lime, unsurprisingly, had an idea,  
"We could get some take-out and head on over to the Tower Library. The Librarian never locks the door and we could all sit out on the balcony. There's plenty of tables and chairs."

Valiant raised a hoof,  
"All in favor?" he asked.

A tree-trunk thick red hoof and a tan stream-lined thin one both rose, Big Macintosh and Evening Star giving their approval.

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The four friends congregated on the balcony of the Tower Library, each carrying their respective take-out containers. The night had turned cold in a snap, but none of them seemed to mind. Lemon Lime had opted for spicy zebra food, but the others had no taste for the sphincter melting stuff. They had all gone separate directions to acquire their meals. Big Macintosh, not wanting for anything fancy, settled on picking up a big head of broccoli and four avocados from the closest grocery store. Valiant had purchased a spinach quiche and Evening Star had grabbed a loaf of bread, some red

grapes, and a small block of Havarti cheese. The friends all sat on the balcony eating and discussing their plans.

Valiant had been thinking about something since they had been talking with Trooper,

“Star, you mentioned some new Elements earlier. What did you mean when you said we should find them? How could they help?”

Evening Star broke off a piece of the bread and popped it into her mouth before answering,

“Big Macintosh and I spent the better part of the day reading this old book that Princess Luna brought in. It talked about the fact that there are in fact two sets of Elements; the Elements of Harmony and the Elements of Peace. The Elements of Harmony are always female and the Elements of Peace are always male. We already know the Elements of Harmony have bearers, but I've never heard of any stallion being able to do what the book describes the Elements of Peace are able to do. It mentioned several things about the two sets of Elements and one thing, in particular, stuck out to Big Macintosh. He believes that you are actually one of them, but he couldn't figure out which.” she explained.

Big Macintosh nodded,

“Ayup. Ah saw it back on the farm during the fire when you were tryin' to revive Granny Smith. It only happened for a few seconds, but Ah know Ah saw a pair of golden wings on you.”

Evening Star continued with the explanation,

“The book describes what it refers to as 'pseudo-members' for bearers of the Elements who were disabled in some way. Honestly, I can't think of any other possible reason for you to have manifested wings like that.”

Valiant wasn't so sure,

“I don't remember anything like that, but then again they would have been on my back. I'm not saying I don't believe you Big Mac, but there was a lot of confusion that night. Is it possible you just mistook what you saw?”

Lemon Lime pulled his head up from the platter of noodles in front of him; his breath reeked of Ghost Chillies,

“Why would it be Valiant in the first place?” he asked, “I mean no offense Valiant, but wouldn't the bearers of this set of Elements be special? The bearers of the Elements of Harmony were special, weren't they?”

“Ah think Valiant's plenty special.” Big Mac said, “There ain't been no forgiven Vagabonds in a long time. Ah'm not tryin' to throw a rock under your cart there Live Wire, but Valiant's done lost his wings, been forgiven from beyond the grave, saved the lives of four ponies, and discovered a new medical breakthrough. How much more special could you get?”

“Let me go get the book. I'll be right back.” Evening Star said taking to the air.

The tan pegasus returned after only a few seconds and laid a thick old tome on the table,

“This is the one.” she said flipping through the pages, “Here, the Elements of Peace. Read that Valiant.”

Valiant carefully read the entire dissertation, then looked up, questioningly a few minutes later,

“Actually, now that I've read this, it seems to me the pony most likely to be one of the Elements of Peace would be you, Big Mac.” Valiant said directing his gaze to the massive Earth pony.

Big Macintosh shook his head,

“Evenin' Star already tried that. She said she thought Ah was the Element of Acceptance, but Ah don't think so.”

Valiant's eyebrows arched,

“Really? That's the same one I would have picked. Why do think you aren't?”

Big Macintosh shrugged,

“Ah just don't see it. Besides Ah'm nothin' special. Ifn Ah was the bearer of Acceptance, Ah wouldn't be arguin' about it.”

“Hmm, that is a good point.” Valiant had to admit.

“It would make sense though. Each of the Elements of Harmony has an Element of Peace that compliments it. Honesty is paired with Acceptance,

Kindness is paired with Hope, Laughter and Forgiveness are another match, Loyalty and Perseverance, Generosity and Discernment, and finally Magic and Patience. The book also said that the bearers of all the Elements would be determined by ancestry. It makes a comparison to a family, husband and wife, or maybe brother and sister.” Evening Star explained.

Lemon Lime had finished with his spicy noodles and was listening to the conversation with rapt attention,

“It seems to me that the bearer of Acceptance wouldn't be willing to unthinkingly believe everything he hears, that's just dumb. You're all thinking in linear and literal terms. Take a step back and look at the whole montage, not just one photo. To counter my earlier statement, it would make sense that no bearer of any Element would think of themselves as such. I think the description leans more to a character trait. Big Mac, have you ever called anypony a liar?”

“Nope. Ah've been duped a couple of times though.” Big Macintosh admitted.

Evening Star caught on to what Lemon Lime was saying,

“Like when you met Valiant for the first time, you accepted him for who he was.” Evening Star turned to Valiant, “You told me that when Twilight cast her spell to let you see and talk to Arabesque again, you named each pony present as having one of the traits of love. Which one did you say Big Mac represented?”

Valiant's face lit up with recognition,

“Love doesn't judge or assume. Love is accepting. Love takes things as they are without foregone conclusions!” he was becoming excited, “I think you're right! Big Mac, even your most commonly used statement oozes acceptance. What could be more unassuming or accepting than 'Ayup'? It, in itself, is a statement of accepting the world as it is.”

Big Macintosh pursed his lips, deep in thought, as his friends continued naming events where the huge Earth pony had displayed the character trait,

“Like when Cantankerous said he didn't mean to bust up your nose. I would have been royally pissed, but you just took him at his word. You two got to

be friends, even in the short amount of time we were in the bar.” Lemon Lime said.

“You didn't act oddly when Princess Celestia addressed you like a normal pony. Most ponies scrape and bow all the time, but you just acted like you were having a normal conversation with a neighbor. She addressed you as one regular pony to another and you accepted that and spoke with her the same way.” Evening Star pointed out.

Valiant turned his attention back to the book,  
“It says here that to invoke an Element, the bearer has to focus on their memories of times where they personified their Element.” Valiant looked up to Big Macintosh, “Would you feel comfortable giving it a try, Big Mac?”

Big Macintosh shrugged, rising to his hooves,  
“Ah don't like bein' the center of attention, but if it'll make yall happy then I'll give it a try. Ah still don't think Ah'm one of the Elements though.”

The huge Earth pony took a couple of steps back and squared his shoulders. The other three ponies leaned forward on the table eyes glued to the muscular red stallion. Big Macintosh closed his eyes and concentrated. The three friends leaned even closer, hearts beating rapidly in anticipation, eyes fixated on their friend. Big Macintosh took a couple of deep breaths and seemed to be trying to calm himself. He lowered his head and steadied his stance.

Nothing happened.

The massive Earth pony looked up after a few minutes and shrugged,  
“Ah guess it was worth a try.”

The other three ponies sat back in their chairs greatly disappointed by the lack of their friend's manifestation. Big Macintosh sat back down in his chair and took a big bite out of his head of broccoli. Lemon Lime was disappointed but he was as eager as ever to move on to something new. He stood up and put his plate in a nearby trash can by the balcony entrance, then moved to Valiant's saddle-bags. He pulled out his quill and parchment and settled back down, dipping the quill into the ink jar.

“We've wasted enough time on this. We can't wait any longer. Let's sum up what our strengths and weakness are. For simplicity sake, let's start with me. You all tell me what my strengths are then we'll move on to my weaknesses. We'll move on to you next, Evening Star. Does that sound good to everypony?” he asked.

Big Macintosh started,  
“Well, you sure are good at thinkin' fast.”

“No argument there.” Valiant agreed.

“You could use your mind to plan out our methods of searching. You know this city better than any of us. I only know it from the air; you know the history behind almost every building, which could be useful if we get into a chase.” Evening Star added.

“So, we have quick thinking and knowledge of the geography. What's next?” Lemon Lime asked taking notes.

“You said yourself, that you were probably the only pony who could match the unicorn at physical manipulation. You might be able to best her in a one-on-one fight.” Evening Star noted.

“I would need to learn some more spells but I suppose we all need some training before we launch into this.” Lemon Lime said.

“As far as weaknesses go, you talk, a lot. We will have to be quiet if we're to take the unicorn by surprise. You'll have to learn to keep quiet, that and you aren't very physically imposing. I'm not sure you could keep up with the rest of us if we have to give chase.” Valiant observed.

Lemon Lime grimaced, but wrote down Valiant's observation faithfully,  
“Is there anything else?” he asked.

“Nope.” Big Macintosh said.

“Then I guess it's my turn then.” Evening Star said taking to the air, “Lay it on me guys.” she offered smirking mischievously.

Valiant began,



"You already mentioned you are a mare and that you might be able to calm the unicorn down if she thinks we mean to act . . . poorly toward her."

"You've got wings, and you're fast. You know the city from the air and you're used to bein' up at all hours of the night, bein' a courier and all." Big Macintosh observed.

"You're pretty." Valiant said absent-mindedly.

The three other ponies stopped what they were doing and just stared at Valiant. Valiant had no idea he had spoken aloud. It took him a minute or two to notice the silence from his friends. He looked from one face to another innocently several times before it hit him. The royal blue wingless pegasus turned bright purple and sank into his chair as if he were trying to hide from the gazes of his friends.

Valiant cleared his throat and sat up, after a moment, "What? It could help us. Most ponies wouldn't figure on an attractive mare being evil, now would they?"

Lemon Lime dipped his quill into the ink and continued to write, "Anything else?" he asked.

"Ah can't think of anything else." Big Mac said.

"Me neither." Valiant lied. In truth he could think of plenty of good things, but he didn't want to embarrass himself any further.

"Right then, weaknesses. You're a pegasus, you're light-weight, fragile, and you could be thrown around like a rag-doll, if the unicorn chooses to turn her magic on you. You should stay out of the physical aspect of the whole ordeal and let the larger stallions handle it. Hey, don't feel bad I'm in the same boat." Lemon Lime said.

"If it came right down to it, could you catch one of us if you had to?" Valiant asked.

Evening Star pondered the answer for several seconds,

"Maybe you or Live Wire. There is no possible way I could catch Dr. Mend or Big Macintosh, and if Cantankerous is as big as you say Live Wire, I doubt I could catch him either."

Lemon Lime wrote down every word,

"O.K. Valiant, your turn. I'd say you have an advantage in that you are really strong for a pegasus."

"Yeah, but I'm ground-bound. If I were an Earth pony I would be only a little bit above average. Would you agree Big Mac?" Valiant asked.

"Ayup. You do have your potions though, and that's definitely an advantage." the big Earth pony said, "How many do you think you could carry in your saddle-bags and still move as fast?"

"I think I could probably have them full up and not be encumbered. That would be due to the five years of walking constantly." Valiant admitted.

"You are pretty much as light as me and just as fragile, plus you don't have your wings anymore. In addition to that, the unicorn has already seen you, so she will be extra nervous. You should probably hang back, out of sight, so you don't antagonize her with your presence. Your disadvantages outweigh your advantages." Evening star noted.

"Good point," Valiant admitted, "I hadn't thought of that. Anything else?"

"Nothing I can think of." Lemon Lime said, "Your turn Big Macintosh. You are strong. I mean freakishly strong. You pulled your buck and still managed to knock Cantankerous ten paces away and onto his back. I happen to know that it's pretty difficult to teleport with another pony touching you. If you can tackle the unicorn, I think she won't be able to teleport. That and she won't be able to levitate you without levitating herself, which is nearly impossible to begin with."

"Not to mention, you're used to hours of physical labor, so your stamina should be well above ours. You're also tough. If it comes down to a physical fight, you could probably take a lot of punishment." Valiant said.

"Ah don't want to be hurtin' nopony ifn Ah don't have to." Big Mac said.

"We know that, but we may not have a choice. If push comes to shove, you may have to break one of the unicorn's legs. I know you don't like the idea, but we may find ourselves backed into a corner or out of options. If it's for her own good, can you do that Big Mac?" Evening Star asked.

Big Macintosh looked unhappy at the prospect, but he nodded, "Ah guess Ah can, but Ah ain't goin' to be happy about it."

"Alright weaknesses," Lemon Lime said, "Umm . . . uh . . . well . . . aside from not having wings or magic I can't think of any."

"Reluctance." Valiant said, "Big Mac's not a violent type. No offense, my friend, but you have to admit that if you had to buck a mare, on purpose, to injure her, you would have trouble doing that wouldn't you?"

"Ah might. Ah was taught to never even raise mah voice to a filly or mare, much less hurt one on purpose." Big Macintosh admitted.

"Alright, good point Valiant." Lemon Lime said, "Is that everything?"

"Well, I do know Mend pretty well. I could probably give you a rundown of his advantages and disadvantages." Valiant offered.

"Alright then, go for it." Lemon Lime said dipping the quill again.

"He knows all about medicine and he can do field work without a problem. He's resourceful and clever. He doesn't shy away from . . . messy things and he won't flinch if he has to get physical. If we can find a way to inject the unicorn with a strong sedative, Mend should be the one to do it. If anypony gets injured, he can provide triage on the spot. He'll be indispensable." Valiant said seriously, "On the flip side, he is actually a gentle pony. He CAN get physical, but I seriously doubt he'll WANT to. He's dedicated his life to helping ponies recover from injuries, not causing them. I'm fairly certain that things get down to the grind, he'll be able to do what's best, but again, we face the issue of reluctance. He also isn't in particularly great shape. He's only in his thirties but, well, you all already know how old he looks. He is an Earth pony, so he'll be a little bit stronger than most of the rest of us, tougher too. I think that about sums it up."

"Alright, tomorrow we need to find Cantankerous and get him to come to Trooper's room. Once everypony is there, we can discuss a strategy for tracking this unicorn. Remember, as yet we have no idea where she's staying. Assuming she's staying in Canterlot in the first place; she could be anywhere." Lemon Lime observed.

"Let's go over what we have to work with. What supplies do we have available to us right now and what do we need to get?" Evening Star asked.

"Ah've got a lasso and some steel shoes, plus plenty of bits." Big Macintosh offered.

Evening Star's eyes bulged at the statement, "Steel shoes?" she asked incredulously, "Whoo! You mean business don't you."

"Ifn it comes to a pony's life Ah'll be savin' by hurtin' somepony else, Ah'll do what Ah have to and make it count. Ah may not like it none, but if it's what's got to be done then that's that, and Ah'll try not to hesitate." Big Mac said slowly, as if the words hurt.

"I have my mortar and pestle, plus all the ingredients I could need." Valiant hesitated before saying more, "I don't know if she can help, but I'll ask Arabesque what she can do, or I'll try to at least. I'm not sure I can get in contact with her, but I'll try."

Lemon Lime ceased writing and looked up at his friend slowly, "I think we should let her rest Valiant. We shouldn't try to dabble with ghosts and spirits. This concern is for the living. We should handle it by ourselves. Let her go. You need to be on your own now."

"It's easier said than done, Live Wire." Valiant said stiffly, "She's lived with me for a long time . . . " Valiant cut himself off as his own words sunk in, "I mean, I've lived with her for a long time. It's not easy to let go."

"Tell me about it." Lemon Lime said under his breath, then raised his voice, "Valiant, my point is still valid. We were never meant to rely on the departed. We were meant to rely on each other, the living. You need to do this yourself." Lemon Lime turned to Evening Star, "What do you have at your disposal?"

The tan pegasus shrugged her shoulders,  
“Maps, that’s about it. I could call in a few favors, but my requests would have to be specific, and I don’t know how reliable they would be.”

The yellow unicorn wrote it all down before adding his own possessions to the meager list,

“I have my home and a lot of bits, plus my home’s resources. I guess I’m the strongest contributor in that regard. I’ve saved almost three-hundred-thousand bits since I started my job.”

“Holy cow!” Valiant exclaimed, “You are now officially my new best friend.” he said teasingly.

Lemon Lime smiled,

“So what we need to do now is figure out how we are going to get this mystery sedative into the unicorn. Valiant, do you think you can come up with something that can be injected? It would probably be easier than trying to get her to swallow anything.”

“That’s not my area of expertise. I make potions to be swallowed, but I do have my pharmaceuticals text and I’ve got Mend. I’m sure I can figure something out, but it will take time.” Valiant said.

“Couldn’t you just use some of the sedatives they have in the clinic where Dr. Mend works?” Big Macintosh asked.

Valiant shook his head vigorously,

“Nope, not an option. That stuff’ is tightly regulated and no clinic would sell it. Mend could steal some, but I’m certain he wouldn’t be at all happy with that thought. We’ll probably have to make do with something I create from scratch, plus I’ll need somepony to test it out on. We really don’t have any other option.”

Evening Star landed next to Valiant,

“If you have to test it out on somepony, we should make sure it’s somepony who is about the same size and type. Would you say the unicorn mare is about my size?”

“Roughly, but she's a unicorn, and you're a pegasus. Your metabolism is a lot higher than hers. We need a twenty something unicorn mare who is a bit under average height. Do any of you know somepony like that?” Valiant asked.

Big Macintosh looked a bit sick mentioning it,  
“Twilight might do.”

Valiant shook his head,  
“No, she's a bit too young. She's what, sixteen?”

“Ah don't make it a habit of askin' fillies their age, but that sounds about right.” Big Macintosh said.

“Yeah, she's too young, besides it could be dangerous.” Valiant explained.

“So you would put another mare's life in danger just because you don't know her?” Lemon Lime asked.

Valiant groaned,  
“No, you know that's not what I meant.” he sighed heavily, “Look, it's getting late. Let's wrap this up and continue tomorrow evening.”

“Sounds good to me.” Big Macintosh said.

“I second the motion.” Evening Star said.

“Yeah, I have to work tomorrow anyway.” Lemon Lime said capping the ink jar.

“Do you have somewhere to sleep tonight Big Macintosh?” Valiant asked.

The huge Earth pony turned to Lemon Lime,  
“Can Ah crash at your place again tonight?”

“Sure. Stay as long as you like.” Lemon Lime replied happily.

“Let's meet up again in Trooper's room tomorrow evening and be sure to bring Cantankerous. What time is good for you all?” Valiant asked.

“Around seven in the evening.” Lemon Lime said.

“Ah'm free all day.” Big Mac said.

“I'll be there as soon as I can, but I may have to catch up on some of my work tomorrow.” Evening Star explained.

“Sounds good.” Valiant said slipping on his saddle-bags, “I'll see you tomorrow.”

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The group of friends went their separate ways with Lemon Lime and Big Macintosh heading off towards the former's home. Evening Star took to the sky and Valiant trotted back to the dorm, wary of back alleys and deep shadows.

It didn't take long for the wingless pegasus to figure out that somepony was following him. Valiant slowed his pace and listened carefully. The pony trailing him didn't; hooves clacking on the cobble stones toward him. Valiant mentally braced himself and spun around, raising his front right hoof to strike out if he was attacked. He met Evening Star's startled face.

Valiant lowered his hoof, feeling ridiculous,  
“Evening Star, why are you following me?” he asked.

“I need to talk to you, silly.” Evening Star said smiling pleasantly.

Valiant tensed up slightly, but forced himself to go back to his normal trot,  
“Is something wrong?”

Evening Star trotted up beside Valiant and left the silence between them stretch for a moment before she answered,  
“Earlier you said I was pretty. What did you mean by that? What did you really mean?”

Valiant swallowed hard and kept his eyes forward,  
“I uh, meant I think you're pretty. It's a fairly simple statement.”

"Come on Valiant, I'm not dumb. And it's not simple at all; it's far more complex than you make it sound." Evening Star said looking up at the royal blue stallion.

The two walked in silence for a few minutes longer before Evening Star broke the silence again,  
"Are you attracted to me?" she asked quietly.

Valiant stumbled on a cobblestone, nearly falling onto his face,  
"That's a bold question, but I have to ask a counter question. Would my answer change the way you see me or treat me?"

Evening Star was silent for several long minutes before she answered,  
"Yes, it would."

Valiant had another question prepared,  
"Why?" he asked in as neutral a tone as he could.

"Because it would mean that you see me as something other than just a friend." Evening Star replied.

Valiant swallowed again, this was the hard question, he didn't know if he even wanted to know the answer,  
"Would that be a bad thing?"

"It would mean that things have changed between us. Have I led you to believe that I want anything more than to just be friends?" the tan pegasus asked.

"No you haven't." Valiant said grimly.

Evening Star grew more vocal,  
"Don't be angry. You're a wonderful friend, but I don't have the luxury of becoming attached to you."

"He's a very lucky stallion." Valiant said quietly.

"No, it isn't like that. I don't have anypony, I can't afford to." Evening Star said plainly, "Valiant, please understand. There is another mare out there waiting for you, don't disappoint her just because you can't be with me."



"I don't want another mare." Valiant said keeping his voice even, only with great difficulty.

Evening Star kept her voice neutral,  
"Listen to me Valiant. You have to understand . . ." she said.

Valiant whipped around in the blink of an eye and caught the tan pegasus' left fore-hoof to his muzzle. He had planned on kissing her, but she saw through it. Valiant's eyes merged on the hoof pressed up against his mouth, crossing them comically.

Evening Star giggled,  
"That was so cliché, Valiant. I could have seen that coming if I was blind." she lowered her hoof, "Don't be so dramatic. This doesn't have to be a big deal unless you make it one."

"I apologize." Valiant said quietly, "I was out of line."

"Yes you were." Evening Star agreed, "But it's not the end of the world. Let me put this into perspective for you. Did you ever think you would get over Arabesque?"

"Yes, but not for a while. I was really surprised when I found myself attracted to you." Valiant said blushing.

"And that's after knowing me for, what three days? Valiant there are plenty of other mares out there. As of right now, you have a crush on me, that's all. Don't make it something it's not supposed to be. Right now we need to focus on dealing with this rogue unicorn, alright? And don't be so serious all the time. Life is meant to be enjoyed and savored, not rushed and remembered. Let things unfold as they will and don't push the issue when you find the right girl for you." Evening Star preached.

Valiant felt sheepish,  
"I'm just really awkward around girls, especially pretty ones."

"At least you're not as bad as Live Wire. That poor guy couldn't pull off any one-liners if his life depended on it." Evening Star giggled.

Valiant couldn't help but to smile,  
“No kidding. When he first met you, I thought he was going to implode. He's a really nice stallion though, even if he is really intense sometimes.”

Evening Star rolled her eyes,  
“He did get a bit too serious earlier. I thought he was going to clobber you on the spot. He did have a good point though. I think you still have some issues to work through before you're ready to settle down. By your own account, you've been denied five years of life experience. Along those lines, how did you stay sane all that time, with nopony to talk to?”

Valiant stopped walking and turned his head to the night sky,  
“Luna helped me.” he said dreamily, “I would look up at the moon, even though I didn't know she was up there, but the symbol of another pony on the Moon gave me peace. I used to talk to the Moon at night, as if there was somepony up there who could hear me. I didn't feel so alone at night; and besides it's not like I never encountered anypony else in five whole years. It was a rare occurrence, but it did happen. I just helped out wherever I could, even if I couldn't say pretty much anything.”

Valiant looked up and realized they had reached the dorm, “I guess this is my stop. I'll see you later Evening Star.”

Evening Star nodded and turned to leave,  
“I hope you feel better Valiant, and remember what I said.”

The tan pegasus mare took to the sky and flew off over the buildings.  
Valiant watched her go, yearning to be flying next to her.

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Pain seared through his body as he was jostled up and down rapidly, like he was being borne on a wagon. His whole world was excruciating pain, exquisite in its intensity. He groaned quietly, not even realizing he was still alive.

As he lay in place, still bouncing, he began hearing voices,  
“We need to hurry! He's lost a lot of blood, I don't know if he'll make it!” a filly's voice said.

"I can't run any faster," a second voice responded panting heavily, "I'm putting everything I have into it already!" the second voice belonged to a young stallion

"Take this right!" the filly shouted suddenly.

Sea Blue's body jerked to the side, sliding on a flat surface. He felt the weight of somepony holding him down but sliding as well. After a moment, the rattling stopped. In a matter of moments Sea Blue felt himself being lifted by strong hooves. His closed eyes registered light beyond his eyelids. He heard some yelling and then he felt himself laid gently down on a soft surface. He felt like he was moving again but this time it was smooth as silk.

He heard new voices, all mares asking questions rapidly, "What caused his injury?" one mare asked quickly.

The stallion he had heard before responded, "I have no idea. We were getting an early start and we found him in an alley. There was nopony else around so we put him in the back of the wagon. That's why he smells so bad."

The mare's voice answered him, "You laid a unicorn with an open, bleeding wound in the bed of a garbage wagon? Please tell me you put something under him."

"We didn't have time." the filly answered, "We had to get him here as soon as possible."

Sudden, incredible pain lanced through Sea Blue's body, causing him to groan. The pain ceased after a moment. He sensed the presence of another pony close to his face.

"Can you hear me?" the mare asked loudly in his ear.

Sea Blue's mind was swimming in agony, but his thoughts were n only one thing, "My daughter." he whispered.

Sea Blue heard the nurse's shocked voice address the other two ponies,

“Did you see a filly out there?”

“No, we didn't. There was no sign of anypony else. There weren't a lot of places to hide, either.” the filly replied.

“I saw him first. I came around the corner and for a second, I thought I saw a dark shape standing over him. It was light that drew me over. It looked like a tall unicorn with a really long horn glowing. My first impression was that Princess Luna was in the alley, but when I looked again, there was nopony there.” the stallion said.

“Took her.” Sea Blue mumbled.

“Somepony took your daughter?” the nurse asked, leaning down to the unicorn stallion again.

“Unicorn.” Sea Blue whispered.

“Get Dr. Avalon in here! I don't care if you have to wake her, do it!” the nurse said emphatically.

Sea Blue vaguely heard a pony's hooves run off. Sea Blue felt a pin-prick against his skin and the world went mercifully blank.

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Sea Blue became aware of voices around him. He felt wonderful. The absence of pain was like a balm on his mind. He focused on the voices around him.

“He should have been long dead when those two garbage collectors brought him in. He needed fifteen quarts of blood to stabilize him. There is no way he should be alive, none. The only thing I can think of is that he used magic to keep himself going. He was nearly dry of blood, his arteries and veins had collapsed. The nurses had to put an I.V. directly into his left ventricle.” the voice belonged to a mare.

A second voice, one that Sea Blue recognized, responded, “Did you give him the potion?” the voice belonged to Mend.

“As soon as we had him stitched up. I'm not certain it was wise to wake him up so soon after he got out of surgery.” the mare said.

“We need to know what happened. You said he came in alone?” Mend asked.

“That's what the nurses told me. He was coherent enough to tell them his daughter had been taken.” the mare informed.

“That's why we need him awake. If I'm right, then the rogue unicorn who mangled Trooper up is the same one who attacked him. If that's the case, we need to move fast. That unicorn is suffering from C.M.E.S. there's no telling what she could do to a little filly.” Mend said.

Sea Blue shifted painfully in his bed and mumbled,  
“Was a unicorn.”

He heard Mend approach the bed and felt the other stallion's breath on his ear,

“What happened?” Mend asked quietly.

“She gored me with her horn . . . took Patch. Teleported.” Sea Blue whispered as clearly as he could.

“We'll find her, Sea Blue. I promise.” Mend whispered.

Sea Blue tensed his muscles and tried to rise from his bed,  
“Got to . . . find her.” he grunted.

Mend put his front hooves on the determined unicorn,  
“Don't you dare move!” he whispered tensely, “You'll have her back, but you must rest now.”

“I can find her . . . lost foal spell.” Sea Blue grunted.

“That's great, but for now you have to be still. You're in no shape to use magic. Sleep now, I'll be back later to check on you. You can try the spell then. Alright?” Mend said.

“Have to . . . find her.” Sea Blue mumbled.

"You won't do her any good if you die from over exertion. Go to sleep. Doctor's orders." Mend said sternly.

Sea Blue relaxed and stopped moving. Within moments he was asleep.

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Valiant got off work late. It was seven fifteen when he closed up Mrs. Soothe's apothecary. He had an experimental form of a sleeping potion in his saddle-bags. Mrs. Soothe had a recipe for a sleeping potion and Valiant had spent his free time pouring over his text books trying to figure out how to strengthen it. The jar clinked inside his saddle-bags as he galloped toward the clinic to meet his friends.

Valiant burst through the door of Trooper's room at seven twenty-three, startling his friends,  
"Sorry I'm late. I had to close up shop. Mrs. Soothe went home early." he panted.

Valiant took stock of the occupants of the room. Dr. Mend stood next to Trooper's bed, both looking at Valiant like he was nuts. Evening Star, Lemon Lime, and Big Macintosh were huddled around a table and looked to have been studying something on a piece of parchment.

"I would invite you in, but it looks as if you have already invited yourself." Trooper said smirking, "At least we know you are not a vampire."

"Vampire ponies?" Dr. Mend asked.

"With all the magic floating around Equestria, I would not doubt it." Trooper defended.

"Let's get serious here." Lemon Lime said eyeing Trooper sourly, "We have a lot to discuss. I'm afraid we have some bad news Valiant. The unicorn struck again. This time she took a filly away from her father. She ran him through, with her horn. She almost killed him."

Valiant clenched his jaw,

"She's developing a pattern. Let's figure out what the victims have in common. We have to do something soon."

"She chooses isolated victims. A lone pony, or a lone adult at least. It's always in an alley too." Evening Star observed.

"It's always near after sundown and it's always ponies who can't fly, at least for her original victims." Big Macintosh added.

"The location!" Lemon Lime yelled suddenly, "All of the incidents have been near the same area. I'll bet it's close to her hide out. Unicorns can't teleport very far, maybe a couple of hundred paces at most. Evening Star you mentioned you have maps. Could you go get one that shows all of Canterlot?"

"Sure thing." she said heading out the door.

Valiant turned a questioning eye to Lemon Lime,  
"How do know where the attacks happened?" he asked.

"I asked Trooper where he saw the unicorn and Dr. Mend told me where the latest victim was found." he said proudly.

Big Macintosh cleared his throat,  
"Hey uh Dr. Mend? How long can a filly go without food or water?"

Dr. Mend looked stricken at the question and its implications,  
"I'd say no more than two days. Less if she's crying, which is a safe bet. She'll be dehydrated already by now."

Trooper craned his neck up to speak,  
"Is it out of the question to leave food and water in the area where this rogue unicorn seems to stay? She may be crazy, but she has obviously been eating and drinking. Even if we do manage to capture her, she will be too out of it to tell us anything helpful. She has taken a filly so she has at least some brain still working, she might have enough sense to feed the little one."

Valiant nodded,  
"Good idea. It's the best we have to go on right now."

Dr. Mend addressed Valiant,  
“Actually, we have more than that. Sea Blue claims to know a spell that should lead us right to Patch.”

Valiant's ears stood up ram-rod straight,  
“Sea Blue was the one injured?”

Dr. Mend nodded,  
“Yes. In all truth he should have died, but he managed to pull through. He might be well enough to cast the spell. We can use Evening Star's map. By the way, I introduced myself while we were waiting.”

Valiant turned to Lemon Lime,  
“I thought you were going to bring along your friend Cantankerous.”

Lemon Lime's ears wilted,  
“Big Macintosh and I went to find him, but he didn't go to the bar tonight, which is really weird, he always goes there. We waited and asked around and waited some more but he never showed up. It's strange, he's always there. Even the barkeeper was concerned. I feel bad for letting you down Valiant. I hate letting my friends down, especially now that I actually have them.”

Valiant's expression softened,  
“It's alright Live Wire. We'll just have to try again tomorrow.”

Evening Star opened the door and came into the room carrying a thick map in her mouth. She laid it down on the floor and opened it up, displaying the whole of Canterlot. Big Macintosh stepped on two corners of the map to keep it down.

Valiant looked over the map carefully, noting landmarks,  
“There,” he pointed with his hoof, “That's where I encountered her. Live Wire can you put a dot of ink right there? I've got the quill and ink jar from last night in my saddle-bags”

Lemon Lime reached into Valiant's saddle-bags and retrieved the ink and quill. He set them down and levitated the quill, dipping it into the ink then proceeded to put a thick dot on the map, where Valiant had indicated. The



short yellow unicorn studied the map for a few more minutes and places two more dots on two other locations, making a semicircle, almost in the center of Canterlot.

Valiant pointed to a large clump of buildings near the center of the semicircle,  
“What are these buildings?”

Lemon Lime scratched his chin,  
“Those are old condemned warehouses. There's a cluster of them that have been boarded up because they were deemed unsafe. They're due to be demolished within the week, and new ones are scheduled to be raised from the ground by Celestia and Luna. These particular buildings were made about eighty years ago. Back then there was a company that wanted to stand out in Canterlot and decided to build their warehouses out of brown stone instead of white-marble. The problem was that it's unstable and the rate of decay was greatly increased because of poor materials. The company went under after only about a decade, and the warehouses were left alone. No pony wanted to use such ugly buildings, especially in the capital of Equestria. I agree, it's the wrong way to stand out.”

“Circle those buildings. I'll bet that's where she is. Let's leave food and water, here, here, here, here, and here.” Valiant said indicating five places in a rough circle around the warehouses, “We don't have enough ponies to even attempt a rescue, right now. We need to wait and hope for the best.”

Trooper frowned,  
“There must be more we can do than that. Hope is good and all, but we need something solid to go on. For all we know, we might be looking at the wrong area. I say we ask the father of the filly to cast his tracking spell and try to correlate it on the map. There should be a way to do that.”

Lemon Lime nodded,  
“There is, but we'd need an arcane connection, a personal item that the filly kept close and interacted with on a regular basis. Something like a favorite toy or an article of clothing. The best thing would be a strand off her mane or tail or better yet, a drop of blood, but it would have to be fresh, less than three days old. Valiant, you and Dr. Mend know Sea Blue right? Why don't you go to his house and grab a couple of things for us to work with? While you're gone, we can gather in Sea Blue's room. We can try to get Dr.

Avalon to put Trooper and Sea Blue in the same room or at least close by. I think it's a given that Sea Blue will be willing to help us get Patch back. With him we'll have our full complement of ponies necessary to pull off both the rescue and capture the unicorn. We'll have two Earth ponies: Big Macintosh and Dr. Mend, three pegasi: Evening Star, Valiant, and Trooper, and two unicorns: Sea Blue and I. It's a good balance of skills and strengths."

"We'll have to get Sea Blue's permission to go into his house, but I think we can handle that. Come on Valiant." Dr. Mend said.

Valiant followed Dr. Mend out of the room quietly, while the other ponies gathered up the map, ink jar and quill.

"Pardon me, but what am I supposed to do?" Trooper asked from his bed.

"You just wait here and think positive thoughts." Evening Star said as the three other ponies left the room.

"I'm positively sure there is something I can be doing to help!" Trooper yelled at the retreating flanks.

Big Macintosh felt sorry for the lame pegasus,  
"Ah'll stay here with him." he offered.

Evening Star and Lemon Lime nodded and left the room.

The door closed and Trooper sighed heavily,  
"A great lot of good I shall be doing, laying here on my back. Positive thoughts. Bah! I can still fly, even with my legs bandaged up like this. I could be trying to get my cutie-mark." he sighed heavily, calming down, "As if I have anything left to try. I will have you know, I have worked for every business in Canterlot. Literally, every business! I have found plenty of things I am good at, but nothing that I am spectacular with. Nothing that drives me, with the exception of finding that unicorn so she will be unable to hurt anypony else. Obviously, stopping a single individual is nothing worthy of a cutie-mark, so I am, yet again, left to stew in my morass of self pity." he stopped to take a breath, "Fear not my muscular compatriot! I will not wallow for long. I shall do what I have always done, pick myself back up and continue on. I will not rest, except in this bed, until my flank is filled with

the symbol of the driving force in my life, my passion, if you will. Yes, I can feel it! The day is coming where I will finally achieve my lifelong goal of finding out who I am, and what I am meant to be!"

"Ayup." Big Macintosh commented blandly.

Trooper looked sidelong at the huge Earth pony,  
"Are you mocking me sir?" he asked.

"Nope. Ah was just agreein' with you." Big Macintosh informed.

Trooper began ranting again,  
"Such an encouraging companion, I have never encountered. I should like to shake your hoof, but that might prove difficult."

Big Macintosh smirked and put his right fore hoof on the side of Trooper's head and shook vigorously.

"Steady on there, large lad!" Trooper bellowed, eyes rolling, "I am not yet hale of health. Do you mean to give me a concussion, good sir? I believe you may have gelatinized my brain."

Big Macintosh had to stifle a laugh,  
"Ayup."

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Valiant and Dr. Mend returned with Valiant's saddle-bags full to bursting and entered Sea Blue's room, which was likewise filled to bursting. Trooper's bed sat next to Sea Blue's, with Big Macintosh, Lemon Lime and Evening Star standing around the base-boards of each bed. The map had been laid out on a rolling counter next to Sea Blue's bed. Sea Blue himself looked to be doing better, even if he still looked pale and weak.

Sea Blue addressed the two stallions,  
"Did you find it?" he asked weakly.

"Yes. We found her brush and brought the toys you said she liked the most." Dr. Mend said removing each article, brush first.

Lemon Lime levitated up the brush and plucked off a single strand with another spell,  
“This should do. I've explained the plan to Sea Blue so we should be ready.”

Lemon Lime used his magic to tie the strand to a small rock while he explained,  
“I have a fair grasp of magical theory. I've modified the spell to channel through the strand and use the rock as a plum bob. Sea Blue will cast the spell into the strand while I levitate the tip of the hair and the rock will guide us to the location of his daughter on the map.”

“I'm ready.” Sea Blue grunted.

The turquoise unicorn settled back and closed his eyes. His horn began glowing dimly as Sea Blue broke out in a sweat almost immediately. He clenched his eyes tighter pouring his concentration into the spell. He began breathing heavily, but his horn glowed all the brighter. The strand of hair Lemon Lime was levitating over the map began glowing a dim brown color. The rock moved toward the set of buildings and Lemon Lime moved the hair with it. It took some maneuvering but finally it settled right dead center of the old warehouses.

Lemon Lime levitated the quill over and marked the spot,  
“That's it!” he said excitedly, “We've got her location!”

Sea Blue opened his eyes and stared blearily at the marked spot on the map,  
“That's where Patch is?” he asked.

Dr. Mend used a cloth to wipe off Sea Blue's face,  
“We can't move yet. You and Trooper need to get better first.”

Sea Blue looked stricken,  
“You can't be serious!” he yelled weakly, “We can't wait that long! I'll be weeks recovering in here! I will not let my little girl stay with that monster one second longer than necessary!”

Evening Star had an idea,  
“Can't you get an idea of how she's doing with a spell?”

Sea Blue shook his head,  
“No. That's advanced magic, like Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns advanced. I'm nowhere near powerful enough to cast that, besides I don't know the spell.”

“I do.” Lemon Lime said in a quiet voice.

Every eye in the room turned to the short unicorn, Lemon Lime explained,  
“I use it to see exactly how much progress my patients are making and if I should increase or decrease the regimen. The version I know is for touch though. Doing something like that would be a serious strain. If it's too much I could go right into 'Caster's Stroke' in a matter of seconds. I mean I could try it, but I'd need to have a safety in place to render me helpless if I do. The best thing would be to get close to the warehouses. The longer the distance the more of a strain it is.”

Big Macintosh stepped forward,  
“Ah think Valiant, Evenin' Star and Ah should go with you and take some food and water along to leave nearby.”

“I'll go too. I know what to look for to diagnose C.M.E.S. plus I've dealt with it before.” Dr. Mend offered sagely.

“Then let's go, but remember, at the first sign of trouble we bolt. We can't risk an open confrontation with the rogue yet.” Valiant said.

Nopony argued the point.

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The four intrepid friends approached the old warehouses as quietly as they could. The darkness surrounded them like a cloak, making it difficult to see. They were in sight of the decrepit buildings when Valiant called a halt. Valiant carried the food and water in his saddle-bags.

“We're close now. Evening Star, would you be willing to fly up and scout around for us? Take a look and guide us in the most direct and dark path. Make sure you aren't seen.” the wingless pegasus directed.

“Sure thing.” she said taking to the air.

Valiant turned to the other ponies,

“Big Macintosh, you're the strongest. If the rogue spots us, I want you to pick up Live Wire and carry him away as fast as you can. Mend tie up your mane and tail in buns. They will stand out like beacons in this gloom. Live Wire, do you have any idea which part of the complex Patch is in?”

The short yellow unicorn shook his head,

“Sorry I don't. I'll stay quiet from here on out. I'll use gestures.” he said.

Each of the ponies was nervous and all but Big Macintosh showed it. The stalwart stallion simply stood nearby watching every shadow he could.

Valiant took a deep breath and let out a quiet sigh,

“Be on your guards, everypony. She seems to go out at night the most, so we stand a good chance of running into her. Let's keep that chance to a minimum. Stick to shadows and walls where you can, only move across open ground if you're sure the coast is clear. All the buildings between us and the warehouses are white-marble and will make you easy to spot even in the shadows. Stay close to the ground when you're not moving.” Valiant looked toward the cluster of warehouses then back to his friends, “I estimate the distance to be close to seven-hundred paces to the walls of the warehouse complex. Follow Evening Star as closely as you can. I'll take the front. Give me a fifty pace lead then follow behind. Watch for my signals. You all know the hoof signals for 'stop' and 'come' right?” he asked.

The other three ponies nodded silently, Valiant continued,

“Good. Let's get in and out as fast as possible.”

The royal blue, wingless pegasus turned around and took a couple of deep breaths,

“Princesses protect us.” he whispered to himself.

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Valiant had the only experience sneaking around. When you spend five years outside of the protection of any town and in the wilderness, you learn how to keep from being noticed by anything that would make a meal of you. Valiant crept from shadow to shadow and from cover to cover making

hardly a sound. He was a ghost. Sadly, the same could not be said for his friends. Big Macintosh, Lemon Lime and Dr. Mend stuck close together in a tightly packed group and often tripped over each other with many a loud 'shush' from each stallion when, said tripping occurred.

Valiant knew they were getting close. The dark mass of buildings took up most of his vision. He stood at the shadowy corner of a building with a twenty pace gap in front of him that was swathed in moonlight. He looked up and saw Evening Star's silhouette directly above him. She pointed straight ahead, across the gap. He turned and motioned for his friends to come to him. They came as quietly as they could, which equaled about the same amount of noise a small flock of birds would make, just with less chirping. Less, not none. They reached Valiant and plastered themselves to the wall of the building.

Valiant turned to his friends and whispered, "I'll go first. Mend, you follow next. Live Wire, you come after Mend. Big Mac, bring up the rear. Wait for me to signal you. Now when we get across, spread out a little. You guys make a lot of noise when you're all bunched up. Follow nose to tail, not side-by-side. Ready?"

The three stallions nodded silently. Valiant made a point to look left and right, in front and behind, hoping his friends would get the idea. Seeing the coast was clear, he lowered himself close to the ground and crept across the gap, barely lifting his hooves so as to minimize the sound he made. Valiant reached the deep embrace of the shadows, turned and looked around again. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he motioned for Mend to come. The black stallion mimicked the younger pegasus and crossed the gap, joining Valiant in the shadows. Moments later Lemon Lime and Big Macintosh followed. They were all nearly silent.

Valiant looked up, searching for Evening Star. He spotted her directly above their position. She was pointing around the left side of the building and toward the warehouses. Valiant crept around to the corner of the building and scanned the area. He saw nothing unusual. Motioning for his friends to follow him, he continued on down the length of the building. The warehouses were straight ahead of them with only a single large gap separating them from the walls of the condemned buildings.

Valiant looked up, again searching for Evening Star. Dependable as always, she was directly above them, pointing across the gap. Valiant gauged the distance to be close to thirty-five paces of moon-lit open ground. He looked around once again and stealthfully crossed the gap. The shadows were deep next to the warehouses and Valiant breathed a sigh of relief, '*Even Mend will be all but invisible in this.*' he thought. He motioned for his friends to cross the gap, realizing afterward that he had neglected to look around. He nearly panicked, looking in every direction at once. He saw nothing.

Dr. Mend, Lemon Lime, and Big Macintosh crossed the gap quickly and hugged the warehouse wall, looking greatly relieved. Valiant didn't waste a second. He nosed open his saddle-bags and withdrew Patch's brush. Placing it on the ground, he stepped back, allowing Lemon Lime room to work. The unicorn lowered his head and plucked a single strand from the brush.

Valiant leaned toward Big Macintosh and Dr. Mend, "Keep an eye out while he casts the spell. His horn will shine like a beacon out here. I'll look left, Big Mac, you look back the way we came, Mend, look right. If you see something, don't say a word, just tap Live Wire. Live Wire, if you get tapped stop the spell immediately. If anypony spots something, Live Wire's horn will stop glowing. If that happens, lower yourself to the ground, lay back your ears and tuck your head between your hooves. Don't make a sound. With some luck we should look like nothing more than debris." he whispered.

Each stallion took their place and waited. Lemon Lime gripped the hair in his lips and focused his magic through it. The young unicorn could feel that the hair he had chosen was an older one, it didn't have nearly as much life left in it as the other one had. Undeterred, the unicorn focused all the more, his horn glowing brightly in the darkness. He closed his eyes and allowed his magic to interpret what it felt through his own senses. The strain was intense and began draining him quickly. The coil of arcane power penetrated the stone of the building, led by the hair to act as a guiding force to its origin. Lemon Lime became suddenly aware of Patch. She was in there for sure. The young unicorn filly felt exhausted, thirsty, and hungry, but she was alive and as well as she could be.



Lemon Lime stretched out his magic even farther, trying to tap into her senses so he could get a feel for the area around her. It was an entirely unorthodox use of the spell but he poured every drop of his reserves into it. The strain was incredible. Lemon Lime could feel himself sweating from the exertion. He pushed his magic so far it hurt. He could feel himself shaking, he was losing the spell. For the briefest of instants he was rewarded with a momentary flash from Patch's sight. Darkness all around. A room, twenty paces by fifteen paces with a doorway set into the far wall, barely discernable through the darkness. A dark unicorn staring right at him out of the shadows.

Lemon Lime's eyes shot open,  
"She knows we're here! We have to go!" he whispered harshly.

Valiant lowered himself to the ground with the others following suite. He quickly opened his saddle-bags and removed the food and water. He set the five bottles of water out in a row with small plastic bags of food in front of each. He stood back up and waved to Evening Star. The pegasus winged down to the four stallions quietly.

"What's up?" she whispered.

"We've been detected. Can you fly around and leave one of these at each corner of the complex? Leave the last one right in front of the main door if there is one. Be careful. If you're spotted high-tail it away. We'll meet you back where we started." Valiant whispered.

Evening Star picked up one bottle and bag in her mouth and took off quietly, winging away over the warehouse complex.

Valiant rose to a standing position and addressed the other three stallions, "Follow me quickly and quietly as you can. We have to move, now. Come on." he whispered.

The four stallions sprinted quietly back the same they had come, still keeping to the shadows. They arrived back where they started and hunkered down in the deep shadows panting for breath. They had only just settled down when Lemon Lime began shaking and a cold sweat rose on his skin. Dr. Mend noticed and put a hoof to the younger unicorn's inner-

thigh, taking his pulse. Big Macintosh and Valiant looked on worriedly as Dr. Mend raised his head.

“He's going into shock.” the medical pony informed calmly, “The strain from his magic and the running is getting to him. He needs to rest. It's not serious but we need to keep him awake for now. He needs to get away from here. The stress will make him worse.”

Big Macintosh shifted his position so his flank was to the smaller unicorn. Dr. Mend nudged Lemon Lime to a shaky standing position and maneuvered him over Big Mac's back, then carefully lowered him down onto the huge Earth pony.

Big Macintosh stood up easily and turned to the other two stallions, “Do you think you need to come with me Doc?” he asked quietly.

Dr. Mend nodded and joined the other two ponies, “Wait here for Evening Star. If she's not back soon, come get us. We'll be back at the clinic.”

Valiant nodded, “Thanks guys. I'll join you as soon as I can.”

Valiant watched as the three stallions headed back to the clinic. The wingless pegasus laid his head back down onto his hooves and waited. A slight sound echoed in the darkness. Valiant became instantly alert. He quietly shuffled back against the wall of the building he was next to doing his level best to make himself invisible. He heard the noise again and moved his eyes toward the source of the sound, keeping the rest of himself as still as a stone.

Valiant waited for eternal seconds as his heart raced, *'I'm completely vulnerable out here. I have no way to defend myself if the rogue attacks.'* he thought. Fear raced through his veins, making it nearly impossible to keep still. His eyes searched frantically through every shadow, every dark corner. He came up with nothing, but still he looked. Suddenly, movement nearby caught his eye. It was faint, mostly concealed by the darkness, but Valiant focused his eyes on the spot. As he focused on penetrating the shadow, his vision began to pick out a form, just barely distinguishable from the enveloping shadows. She was there, not five paces from him. She was

looking around with her eyes, moving nothing else. Valiant could see the faint reflection of light on her glazed-over eyes. She was so close, Valiant could smell her scent. It was as ugly as her eyes, tainted and muddy, like an icy wind coming off a mound of festering garbage.

Valiant's breath caught in his throat when he noticed Evening Star leaning over the edge of a nearby building. She didn't give any sign that she had seen the rogue. Even so, she seemed to have the sense to stay still. The situation turned into a waiting game from there. Valiant's nerves were on a razor's edge. His fear swelled up and made him feel sick. He felt a bubble of gas crawling up his throat and swallowed it. He felt even worse after that. The rogue still didn't move, and Valiant feared Evening Star would get impatient and be spotted. The gas bubble came up again. This time Valiant closed his mouth and constricted his throat, making a nearly silent burp in his mouth. He blew out the foul stench silently and angled it toward the rogue unicorn.

The rogue's nostrils flared and she cringed back,  
"Ugh! Smells like dead rats. I hate rats!" she yelled to the darkness.

She turned and skulked away into the shadows silently.

Valiant waited for what seemed like hours. He looked up to where he had seen Evening Star. She was gone. Valiant determined to wait until he was sure the danger had passed.

Suddenly, Evening Star landed right in front of him,  
"Come on! Let's get out of here!" she whispered tensely.

Valiant ran as fast as he could, while Evening Star flew overhead.

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"You're sure she's alright?" Sea Blue asked for the um-teenth time.

Lemon Lime lay stretched out on the floor between the two beds, barely coherent,  
"I'm sure." he grunted.

Dr. Mend had kept the plucky unicorn stable but Lemon Lime was making a slow recovery. Lemon Lime had been suffering from Stage One C.M.E.S. when they had returned, but Dr. Mend was certain he was not mentally impaired.

“She's fine.” Dr. Mend said moodily, “Stop stressing about it. There's nothing more we can do right now. You'll impede your recovery if your body is stressed. Help Patch by helping yourself. We've done all we can for tonight.”

“You couldn't understand unless you had foals of your own. Any parent would be upset.” Sea Blue countered.

Evening Star opened the door with Valiant following behind her, “That was closer than I would have liked.” Evening Star said sitting down on the floor, “She nearly had Valiant there for a minute.”

Valiant smirked,  
“How are you doing over there Live Wire?”

Lemon Lime raised a hoof into the air,  
“Splitting headache and blurry vision. I'm doing great. If the room would stop spinning I would come over there and smack you. How can that rogue stand it? This is torture.”

“I think we need to revamp our list of strengths and weaknesses.” Evening Star laughed, “Valiant here, is a regular old biological weapon. You should have smelled what he let out! Whew! It was foul! I'll wager you could knock out Princess Celestia with that.”

Valiant blushed, embarrassed,  
“Well . . . it worked didn't it?”

“Where did you grow up to have a digestive system that developed to emit that kind of smell?” Evening Star laughed, rolling on the floor.

Valiant smiled,  
“I grew up in Haysburg. I doubt you've ever heard of it.”

The statement drew a great deal of attention; Valiant had never spoken of his hometown before,

"It's a little village far to the East, near where the White River flows out into the Eldritch Basin. Most of the immediate area is a boggy swamp, but outside of that are leagues and leagues of plains. It's thick with bugs in the summer, but in winter you can walk right across entire portions of the swamp on the ice. Haysburg is on the western bank of the Eldritch Basin, that's where the swamps are. On the other side of the Basin is the Razor Wing mountain range which separates Equestria from Gryphonvale."

Big Macintosh cocked his head,

"Ah would have never guesses you used to live so close to the kingdom of the Gryphons. Did you meet a lot of them growin' up?"

"A couple of them would regularly come visit us. They always caused minor problems, but they aren't too bad. They almost never brought any younger gryphons with them because of the weather trouble." Valiant explained.

"What kind of weather trouble?" Evening Star asked.

"Tornados. A lot of tornados. They happened all the time out on the plains. The swamp stopped most of them, but once in a while one would start out in the basin and work its way toward the shore. Every house in Haysburg has what we call 'swimming cellars'. The water table is only about four paces below the ground, so every cellar fills with water, up to about mid-chest. It takes a lot of effort to keep the water fresh and you need it to be fresh all the time so that when a tornado comes you don't have to hunker down in nasty, brackish water." Valiant explained.

"But why don't your pegasi just keep the tornados at bay?" Evening Star asked.

"Pegasi hate Haysburg. We're so light-weight we get picked up and thrown around all the time. There's always a wind there and we would never have a chance to rest if we tried to control the weather. Any cloud-home we could build would be torn apart within a week. Trust me, I tried. It's a combination of constant wind and never-ending challenge for every pegasus family that moves there. Arabesque and I were the only two resident pegasi and we were only there because we were orphans. The vast majority of the population is Earth ponies. The few unicorns that live

there tend to keep to themselves deep in the swamp where they can practice their magic. Arabesque and I really had no choice but to bond, we were alone.” Valiant said.

Trooper grunted,

“I dare say, it sounds like a right old mess. Why would tornados pop up all the time? Furthermore why would anypony want to live in such a place?”

“The Everfree Forrest is huge. It spans from Ponyville to the plains and swamps around Haysburg. The weather it makes tends to drift right over the plains to the basin, and Haysburg is smack-dab in between. As to why anypony would want to live there, I can answer that without even thinking. The place is incredibly rich in ancient ruins and relics and the constant water is a perfect environment to grow rice.” Valiant explained.

Valiant's statement was met with a plethora of curious stares,  
“What's rice?” asked Sea Blue.

Evening Star popped up from her sitting position to explain,

“Rice is a type of grain that has to have a lot of water to grow. It's sweet, like corn and full of starch. It's a delicacy here. I've had it once. It is really good. I'll bet there's no other place in all of Equestria that can grow it. Am I right?”

Valiant nodded,

“As far as I know. Haysburg sells its rice to neighboring communities and the gryphons buy it for a premium.”

“Why did you mention ancient ruins and relics as one of the reasons to live there?” Dr. Mend asked.

“Oh that, it's easy. Archeologists from all over Equestria go there to nose around the ruins, but they have to pay Haysburg to go and they have to pay a high price to take any relics or artifacts back to wherever they came from.” Valiant smiled, “I'd have to say that Haysburg is one of the few places in Equestria where ancient history is common knowledge. I can tell you all kinds of things about what's in those ruins. Haysburg actually has a storehouse filled with relics and artifacts that archeologists have left because they couldn't pay to take them. The unicorns who live in the swamps were constantly begging Haysburg to let them have a look at the

storehouse. Princess Celestia occasionally sends a unicorn to Haysburg once in a while to make sure the storehouse doesn't hold anything magical." Valiant said.

Out of the blue, Lemon Lime said,  
"You really miss it don't you, Valiant?"

Valiant nodded,  
"Yeah I do. But I can't ever really go back to Haysburg, now can I?"

"Ah don't see why not." Big Macintosh ventured, "You've been forgiven and all."

"I doubt they would see it that way. All they would probably see is a murderer, and I don't want to stir up trouble if I don't have to." Valiant said in a low voice, "Remember, somepony carved out my cutie-mark. I don't want to think about what would happen if that pony saw me again. There might be another Vagabond running around before too long."

Trooper expressed himself loudly,  
"What in the name of the Goddess is a Vagathingie?"

Valiant sighed heavily and said,  
"It's a long story."

"Well, I happen to have a lot of free time on my hooves at the moment." Trooper said.

"I'd like to know too." Lemon Lime said from the floor.

"As would I." Sea Blue chimed in.

"I'll tell you all tomorrow night. I have to get to bed." Valiant said evenly.

Everypony agreed. It had been a long day.

# Chapter 9

Valiant and Dr. Mend walked back toward their shared dorm room watching every alley and shadow nervously.

They were nearly back to the dorm when Valiant cleared his throat, "We've been so busy lately, I haven't had the chance to ask you how your appointment with Sea Blue went. Do you want to talk about it?" he asked cautiously.

Mend drew in a shallow, shuddering breath, then exhaled it slowly, "He showed me exactly how much resentment I have toward my mother. We didn't even start on my father or me yet. I had no idea I was so bitter. He told me to tell the voices in my head to stop whenever they pipe up. I've been trying all day. It hasn't made a bit of difference. I got sick last night when I was in the bathroom and I've been feeling sick all day. I don't know why."

"When was the last time you ate anything?" Valiant asked.

Mend gave it some thought before answering, "Come to think of it, it was yesterday morning." Mend chuckled harshly, "I guess that explains the stomach problems. I've just been so busy I forgot to eat."

Valiant looked squarely at his friend, "I don't think it's just that though. I think it's stress too. When was the last time you had a vacation?"

"I don't take vacations Valiant. I don't . . ." Mend cut himself off and took a deep breath, "Maybe I do need a break." he said realizing his voice had started to rise.

Valiant was internally pleased at the effort Mend was making, "Yeah you do." he agreed quietly, "So, take a break tomorrow. How many bits did you bring with you?"



“A couple hundred, why?” Mend asked.

“Go into the clinic tomorrow and tell your boss you can't come in. Explain only as much as you have to. Afterward go do something that is nothing like work or work related. Go see a show, go to the park, go to the library, have a nice dinner at a fancy restaurant, go sight-seeing. There's a whole city here at your disposal. We're in the capital of Equestria for crying out loud. Have you even taken time to just enjoy it?” Valiant asked.

“Well no. I've always been too busy.” Mend admitted.

“You have every opportunity to be free for several months. Take advantage of that. Go do whatever you want. Have fun.” Valiant encouraged.

Mend gave the idea some serious thought,  
“I only just started at the clinic. It wouldn't look good if I asked for vacation so soon.”

“Do what your heart tells you to do. I won't ask you to compromise your morals, but you need some time for yourself. Focus on Mend. What does Mend WANT to do? What did you find fun when you were little?” Valiant asked.

“I honestly don't remember.” Mend said sadly.

“Then this is the perfect time to find out what you like! Try new things. A wise pony once told me that life is meant to be savored and enjoyed, not rushed and remembered. Big Macintosh doesn't have anything to do tomorrow. Why don't you go with him and see what Canterlot has to offer?” Valiant asked.

Mend's face seemed a little brighter,  
“You know what? I will. I'll need you to show me where Live Wire lives before you go to work tomorrow though.”

Valiant smiled hugely,  
“That's the spirit!” he said noticing they had arrived at their dorm building,  
“Live Wire told me the address, I'll write it down for you. Now, let's get some rest and tomorrow you get to start your vacation”

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Mend found Lemon Lime's house easily the next morning. He and Valiant had walked to the younger stallion's work-place and Mend went on alone from there. Dr. Mend wore his saddle-bags in case he decided to buy something. Lemon Lime's home was nice. It was a large apartment set nearly against the very walls of Canterlot. Mend made his way up the stairs to the seventh floor where the smaller unicorn's apartment was and knocked on the door to number 7b. Lemon Lime opened the door looking like a house-wife. The yellow unicorn wore an apron with a mixing bowl floating in the air next to him.

Lemon Lime's face lit up when he saw Mend, "Good morning doctor!" he piped, "Come on in." he said opening the door for Mend.

Dr. Mend stepped in and took notice of the color-coated front room, "Is Big Macintosh awake yet?" he asked his host.

"Nope. He wakes up on his own. I think he has an internal alarm-clock or something. I can't do it. I need the loudest alarm I can get. I'm a really heavy sleeper and a big eater. I always make a huge breakfast. Would you like some coffee? I just made a pot. It's good and strong, but I could make another pot if you like it weak. Breakfast will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Do you like biscuits? I love biscuits! I make a huge batch every morning. Did you know there are more than seventy-seven types of biscuits? Oh yeah, I also make a huge batch of fruit salad every evening for breakfast the following morning. I let it sit in a honey-based syrup overnight. That way, even if I end up with under-ripe fruit it's still sweet. Sometimes I make oatmeal too. I have some dry cereals as well if you want. My rule is, when you're here you're family. So if you see something you like, go for it, just make sure you tell me so I can get more if you use the last of it. Come take a look in my kitchen and tell me what you want. I'll make it in a jiffy." Lemon Lime said in a matter of seconds.

Dr. Mend's eye twitched slightly, "I see now, why everypony calls you Live Wire. I could hardly keep up with you." he said pleasantly, strained, but pleasantly.

“Oh, no. That's because of my condition. I tend to go off on tangents all the time, but that's just because my mind works so much faster than a normal pony.” Lemon Lime explained.

Dr. Mend arched an eyebrow,  
“I wasn't aware you had a mental condition. You don't seem to let it bug you too much.”

“It used to. I didn't have any friends until I ran into Valiant. I mean I literally ran into him. Since we've met, I've made a lot more friends. Evening Star, Big Macintosh, you, and maybe Trooper; I have plenty of friends now. I just have to learn how to interact without being overbearing.” Lemon Lime machine-gunned off.

“And maybe a little patience too.” Mend offered.

Lemon Lime shot the doctor a sidelong look,  
“Why does everypony say that? I'm actually very patient. Do you know how patient you have to be to be a physical therapist? I mean really! Sometimes you have to work with a patient for years before they're healed. I have to be patient. You can't rush therapy, no matter what type it is. Injuries take time to heal, especially really deep ones. You have to be willing to give everypony time to work out at their own pace. I don't rush it, I can't afford to. For an example, take a pony who has broken their leg and needs therapy because they've been bed-ridden for weeks. Minor muscle atrophy sets in and they don't need too long before they're ready to go. Now on the other hoof, if somepony came out a coma after several years, they would need a lot of time. They would need help learning how to use every muscle again, and that can take years in itself, not to mention the exercise so their muscles are strong enough to work normally. Then to top it all off, they will need time to learn how to interact with others properly. The mind is a muscle of sorts too. Patience is a must, when dealing with any type of therapy. Some heal fast, others take a long time. It all depends on the individual.”

Dr. Mend was amazed at the depth of knowledge Lemon Lime had in regard to his work,  
“You seem to be an expert in the field. I'll bet your boss loves you.”

Lemon Lime winked,

“Oh yeah. Dr. Avalon says I'm her favorite.”

“You work with Avalon?” Dr. Mend asked, following Lemon Lime into the kitchen.

Lemon Lime smiled over his shoulder as he plopped balls of dough onto a cookie sheet,

“Of course! Why else do you think she never pestered us about how late we were at the clinic last night?”

“I thought it was because I work there.” Mend admitted.

“Oh, so you're the new guy who has her tail all twisted huh?” Lemon Lime blurted without thinking.

Dr. Mend's ears stood up on his head, ram-rod straight and facing forward, listening intently,

“Really? What did I do wrong?” he asked concerned, “She never said anything to me.”

Lemon Lime blushed deep orange,  
“I shouldn't have said anything. It isn't my business.” he said hurriedly, which for him really meant something.

Dr. Mend pressed for answers,  
“Please tell me.” he asked, “I had no idea she was upset.”

Lemon Lime sighed, sliding the cookie-sheet into the oven,  
“She isn't upset, per-SE. See, she mentioned to me that there's this new doctor at the clinic who's a real genius. She's hot-to-trot for him. She's dropped several hints, but apparently he isn't interested. I was wondering who it was. I've never seen her go for anypony before. I always assumed she wasn't interested in a relationship. I guess she just has certain standards . . . “

“I had no idea.” Mend said quietly, “I have no experience with mares. I mean, none at all. What should I do?”

“Well, are you interested in her?” Lemon Lime asked.

Mend had to give the question some serious thought,  
“I . . . I don't know.” he said honestly, “She's smart and she's really good at what she does, but it would be a violation for me to date her. She's technically my boss.”

Lemon Lime blew out an exasperated breath,  
“That's not the question. The question is: Are you interested in her? Do you have a romantic interest with her or not?”

“I have no idea. Until recently, I didn't have an interest in anything except being the best a medicine.” Mend admitted.

Lemon Lime raised an eyebrow, as he leaned against the counter next to his fridge,  
“I hope that wasn't your motivation.” he said evenly, “Competition is probably the worst reason to get into the medical field. You should do it because you want to help injured and sick ponies, not for your own ego.”

“You've known me for a day and you're already passing judgment on me?” Mend asked becoming defensive.

“Not at all.” Lemon Lime said, unperturbed, “What I'm saying is that it's a poor reason to get into it. I'm not accusing you of it, I'm just saying that maybe you missed your true talent. There are so many specialties in medicine you might have missed your real talent and just ended up settling for something else for the wrong reason. It's just a possibility. Look, we're getting off track here. Do you, or do you not have an interest in Dr. Avalon?”

“I need time to answer that.” Dr. Mend admitted honestly.

Lemon Lime smiled,  
“Good answer.” he said opening the oven and removing the cookie-sheet,  
“Breakfast is ready. Take a look around, see if anything strikes your interest.” he offered.

“Ah wasn't expectin' to see you here doc.” Big Macintosh said from the kitchen doorway.

“Until last night, neither was I.” Dr. Mend said rummaging through Lemon Lime's fridge, “Big Macintosh, how do you feel about going with me today. I'm taking a day off and I could use some company. I've never had a vacation and I'm sure I could use some pointers, besides I don't hate your company.”

“Ah guess Ah could go with you doc. Ah didn't have any other plans.” Big Macintosh replied.

Dr. Mend opened one of Lemon Lime's cabinets and looked around until he found something that caught his eye, “Cream of Wheat!” he said excitedly, “My mother used to make this all the time! I haven't had it in years. Could you show me how to make it Live Wire?” he asked.

Lemon Lime smiled hugely,  
“Sure thing doc.”

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Dr. Mend was acting nothing like his normal self, as he and Big Macintosh sat down for lunch at an outdoor cafe. The two stallions had gone to take a tour of the Royal Palace and had even seen Princess Celestia holding court. They had walked around Canterlot until Dr. Mend spotted something that caught his eye. In one of the many groups of shops, they had found a bookstore. On a whim, they had gone in and taken a look around. They perused the selections slowly until Dr. Mend had found a section that caught his interest: Romance novels. The pictures on the covers drew his immediate interest. Images of beautiful mares locked in the intimate embrace of studly stallions made his mind go places it had never previously gone. His imagination began to churn out potential situations and scenarios that made him blush like a school-filly. With his interest piqued, he cracked open one of the books and began to read. It contained a type of adventure he had only ever rarely dreamed of. Dr. Mend purchased the book and noticed Big Macintosh waiting for him with a thick book of his own.

The two had decided to take lunch at the closest café, which happened to be across the street. Dr. Mend had been surprised to discover that the book his huge friend had, was an adventure novel. The two of them

ordered their meals and enjoyed a pleasant late morning reading quietly. Dr. Mend tore into his book with reckless abandon, finding himself drawn to the main character. She was a seamstress who had devoted her life to her work, never taking time to look for a love interest. She was awkward and uncomfortable in social situations. Dr. Mend sympathized with her.

Despite the book's cover, Dr. Mend found it not so much steamy as heartwarming. Her love interest was a poor potato vender who had been attacked one day. She had taken him into her home and helped him recover. Dr. Mend easily realized the author had no idea what they were talking about regarding medicine, but the story was engaging and sweet. The two had an attraction for each other but both were too unsure to say something about it. The situation caused a lot of angst and unnecessary awkward moments. Eventually the stallion admitted his attraction and the two had begun an elegant courtship. Dr. Mend was in the middle of a particularly intimate scene when he heard Big Macintosh clear his throat.

Dr. Mend looked up from his book, face flushed,  
“Did you say something?”

“Are you alright over there doc? You look like you're about to start sweatin'.” the huge Earth pony pointed out.

“Yes!” Mend said a bit louder than he had planned, “Yes, I'm fine. Thank you for asking.”

“Did you tell your boss you wouldn't be in today?” Big Mac asked.

Dr. Mend shot up, out of his chair like he had sat on a tack,  
“Shoot! No, I didn't. I completely forgot!”

“Might be a good idea. You run along, Ah'll get the tab. Ah'll wait for you here.” Big Macintosh offered.

Dr. Mend laid his book on the table and took off like a shot, heading for Dr. Avalon's clinic. He arrived, completely out of breath. The nurse at the check-in desk stood up quickly, throwing him a worried look. Dr. Mend held up a hoof to forestall any questions or concerns, while he regained his breath.

Dr. Mend finally caught his breath and trotted up to the nurse, he couldn't remember her name,  
“Is Dr. Avalon in?” he asked.

The nurse nodded,  
“She came in a few minutes ago. Do you need me to page her, Dr. Mend?”

Dr. Mend shook his head,  
“No, I'll find her, if that's alright.”

The nurse smiled warmly,  
“Sure, go on in.”

Dr. Mend pushed open the doors to the examination rooms where Dr. Avalon received her appointments. He glanced at a clipboard hanging up behind the first nurse's station. Dr. Avalon was scheduled to see a patient in exam room 4, for a regular checkup. Dr. Mend left her a note that he was waiting in her office when she finished with the patient. He headed toward her office and sat down in the same chair he had before. He estimated he had half an hour to wait before she joined him.

His mind began turning. He realized the voices were absent. He wasn't working, but they were gone for the moment, *'Maybe it's hospitals and clinics that keep them away.'* he thought to himself, *'That book was a nice change. I had no clue, ponies wrote about romance. Reading it was like a dream.'* he began to imagine the story in his mind, piece by piece until he reached the scene where the two characters were sharing their first kiss. Without realizing it, he began imagining the mare was Dr. Avalon and the stallion was himself. The mental picture was . . . interesting. Dr. Mend found himself enjoying the scene playing out in his head quite pleasantly. He imagined the feel of Dr. Avalon's coat brushing up against his own, the caress of his lips on her neck . . .

The door opened suddenly, snapping Dr. Mend out of his day-dream. Dr. Avalon entered her office and looked Mend up and down, frowning somewhat.

She took a seat behind her desk and folded her hooves politely,  
“Was there something you needed to talk to me about Dr. Mend?”



Dr. Mend cleared his throat, licking his lips nervously,  
“Yes, there is.” he began, “I'm afraid I won't be coming in today.”

Dr. Avalon's face fell, her expression worried,  
“Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing's wrong. I just realized I've never taken a vacation. I'm . . .” he trailed off as his brain snapped a decision into place, almost without his permission, “I'm afraid I have to tenure my resignation. I can't work here anymore.”

Dr. Avalon held her expression, but her voice gave away her concern,  
“Why?” it sounded choked.

Dr. Mend sat up and decided he would continue the route he was already following,  
“If I continue my employment here, I won't be able to date you without violating policy. Would you like to join me for dinner, once all this mess with the rogue unicorn is over?” the whole thing spilled out in a rush.

Dr. Avalon's face went from hurt to puzzled to delighted in a matter of seconds,  
“Very well.” she said, regaining her composure, “You can still volunteer your time here, you know. And yes, I would be delighted to go with you.” she said, cracking a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Big Macintosh watched Dr. Mend approach the cafe with the world's biggest grim plastered all over his normally dour face. Big Mac decided he liked seeing Dr. Mend happy. The older Earth pony sat down across from Big Macintosh and picked his book back up without saying a word.

Big Macintosh leaned over the table, toward Dr. Mend,  
“Are you alright there doc?” he asked.

Dr. Mend looked up from his book,  
“Oh yes, I'm fine. I quit my job.” Big Mac's jaw hit the table, Dr. Mend continued on, “Avalon and I are going out on a date whenever we finish

with this whole issue with the crazy unicorn.” Dr. Mend said it all like it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Big Macintosh blinked several times before he sat back in his chair, closing his mouth,  
“Ah have to admit, Ah didn't see this commin' but Ah'm glad for you.” Big Mac cleared his throat and continued on, this was new territory for him, “Ifn it ain't too much to ask, what kind of traits should a feller look for in a mare? What was it that made Dr. Avalon attractive to you?”

Dr. Mend was surprised by the unusual question,  
“As of yet, I have no idea. I haven't taken the opportunity to get to know her outside of work. I may not end up having an attraction to her, but I realized . . . recently, that I have to take that chance or else I'll never know.” Dr. Mend sighed and scratched the back of his head with his right hoof, “If I had more sense in regard to romantic matters I would probably have been married a long time ago. I suppose the best answer I can give you is that I don't know anything about Avalon except that she's a brilliant doctor. Nothing ventured, nothing gained; just trial and error I guess.”

The massive Earth pony mulled over Mend's words for several quiet minutes before he spoke again,  
“Ah'm wantin' to get to know a couple of fillies around Ponyville. Do you know anypony who has experience with love? Ah can't stand the idea of rejectin' a filly before Ah've given her a chance and there's been plenty who seemed interested.” he said bluntly.

“I can only think of one. Sea Blue has a daughter, he's sure to know more than I do, but he's never mentioned his wife. It might be painful for him. You could try asking your Granny Smith, she obviously has good experience.” Mend offered.

Big Macintosh nodded,  
“That there's a good idea, Ah should have thought of it mahself. Speakin' of family, didn't you grow up here in Canterlot?”

All color drained from Dr. Mend's face,  
“You know what Big Mac, there's somepony I need to visit. I'm sorry to cut out on you like this but I really have to go. I'll make it up to you, remind me. I'll meet you in Sea Blue's room at seven.”

Big Macintosh was puzzled, but he could always go back to the Tower Library and take another look at the tome about the Elements, "Well then, Ah guess Ah'll see you later doc." he said pleasantly.

Dr. Mend left twenty bits on the table and was gone in a flash, stuffing his book into his saddle-bags.

\* \* \* \* \*

He ran hard and fast, remembering the location of his destination more clearly with each turn. The way had been burned into his memory long ago. He knew the way by heart. He was following his heart, letting it guide his hooves. He moved like the wind, with every step he became more and more aware of how much he needed to arrive. His heart beat hard and fast, his thoughts raced, memories rushing back to the forefront of his mind. He realized he was crying. He needed to be there. He had never realized how much he needed it. Tears flew off in the wind as he came around the final corner, bringing his destination into sight. He never slowed down, if anything his pace quickened. He was desperate, frantic. Thirty paces to his destination. He could make out every detail, it made his heart ache all the more. He called out to his destination, crying out in earnest, desperate to be received. Twenty paces, it hurt to see, but it was a hurt his spirit yearned for like his body yearned for breath. Ten paces, his senses were overwhelmed with memories. His whole body shook, he felt weak.

Mend stood, frozen in place, weeping silently, trying in vain to blink away the tears. His chest felt tight and his mouth felt dry. His mind began bombarding him with memories. Each subtle color, every scent refreshed his memory, making the memories come alive. The reminders of the past tore through him like a hot knife through butter. Regret and pain washed over him like a tsunami, tearing away every barrier and hard place he had worked so hard to erect over the years. The wave of raw emotion subsided, leaving behind a wonderful sensation. It was an emotion he had kept at bay, actively working against accepting its embrace. He felt lighter, as if years of accumulated dirt and grime had been washed away. For a brief moment Mend had no name for the foreign, but now welcome, intruder in his heart. Its presence opened the floodgates of his soul.

Mend collapsed, his hooves giving out beneath him, and sobbed brokenly. How could he have never come back? How could he have neglected to return to a place that meant so much to him? Mend slowly became aware of being touched. A presence surrounded him, holding him like he was no more than an illusion, a phantom in danger of dissipating in the wind. He weakly called out, his voice choked by tears. Years of anger fell away, leaving him feeling naked and vulnerable, like a newborn foal. He reached out, grasping the only solid thing around him. He held on tightly. He never wanted to let go ever again.

Mend had no way of knowing how long he stayed there. It could have been seconds or days for all he knew. He didn't care, nothing else mattered. He looked up at his anchor, his refuge. His vision slowly cleared. There, holding him on the porch were his grandparents. For the first time in his life, Mend saw through his misgivings and read the expressions accurately. There it was, shining like a beacon in the darkness, just like in his heart. He saw it and embraced it with all his soul, holding his grandparents tightly. What he saw was something he had missed terribly. Love.

The two older ponies held their grandson, once though lost to them. He felt whole. For the first time in his life for as long as he could remember, he felt whole. Mend heard a voice. It was a voice that could have come from a divine being. The voice was soft and choked with tears, but Mend heard it as clearly as the ringing of silver bells, "Welcome home."

# Chapter 10

Sea Blue was relieved. Trooper had been wheeled away earlier and had returned in his bed asleep, *'Good grief!' he thought, 'I never thought any pony could be so dramatic.'* He settled himself down against the pillow beneath his head and worked on formulating multiple possible plans for rescuing Patch. The very thought of his daughter nearly made him tear up. He gritted his teeth angrily, *'How can I lay here while she's out there? What kind of father am I?'* without thinking about it, he automatically began his breathing exercises. Long hours of dealing with other the issues of other ponies had taught him to practice stress-relief on a subconscious level. He calmed himself and refocused his mind, *'There is always a solution. You just have to be able to determine what it is.'*

Sea Blue's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the room's door, which was followed by Dr. Mend's face,  
"I . . . need to talk to you Sea Blue." he said quietly.

Sea Blue's mind automatically began picking out details about Mend, *'It isn't time for everypony to meet here, and the nurses were just here checking up on Trooper and I. He's here for something personal. He's been crying, his eyes are red. His posture is slightly slumped. He's nervous and unsure. He's preparing to do or say something he's uncomfortable with. He stuttered. That means it's something he's going to say. He's unsure about something, and it's something that has him doing something he's uncomfortable with, something that scares him. The intonation of his question indicates that he's going to ask me something that has to do with our sessions and he doesn't mind if Trooper overhears, yet he's uncomfortable with the question itself. It's either important or urgent.'* Sea Blue's mind performed the observation in milliseconds.

"Sure, come on in, but keep it down. Trooper's asleep." Sea Blue said.

Dr. Mend entered and closed the door behind himself, and took a deep breath,

"I need you to test me for mental illness." he said bluntly.

"I'm not sure that we need to go quite that far yet. Have you tried what I said, about telling the voices to stop?" the counselor asked.

Dr. Mend nodded solemnly,  
"Several dozen times throughout the past two days. It hasn't worked once. They only go away if I'm actively doing something that takes my full attention and even then they're like a buzzing in the back of my mind. I . . . think I may need some medication . . . like my mother had."

Sea Blue could easily see the words were difficult for the stallion to admit,  
"This isn't really the place. Trooper might end up hearing some of this."

"I don't care." Dr. Mend said flatly, "I can't risk doing what my mother did. I don't care who hears this, it needs to be done." his voice wavered slightly.

Sea Blue nodded,  
"As you wish. I'm going to ask you a series of questions and I need you to answer them as honestly as you can. If you aren't willing to answer honestly, the tests will be useless."

Dr. Mend laid down on the floor of the room and took a deep, shuddering breath,  
"I'm ready."

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Lemon Lime handed a sheet of paper to his supervisor,  
"I'm sorry this is such short notice but I really do need this. It's really important and again I'm sorry this is such short notice, but you know I haven't asked for this before. I've been a loyal employee for years and this shouldn't be too much of a problem, right? I mean . . ."

"Live Wire, slow down. Let me answer before you start explaining." the older mare said. She was a deep, dark brown unicorn with an eggshell white mane and tail pulled back into a tight bun.

She read the piece of paper carefully several times, then set it down on the counter behind her,

"I'm surprised you didn't give me more notice, but I can deal with this easily. You've been my star therapist for years now. It's no problem. You don't have to explain yourself. Alright?"

Lemon Lime smiled hugely,

"Thanks, this means a lot to me. I have to go. See you around." he said as he walked away toward the doors of the therapy center.

Lemon Lime left the therapy center and headed straight for Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, *'First things first. I need a spell to cut off a unicorn from her magic, one for teleporting, one for marking and tracking, and I need to memorize them as fast as I can.'* he thought even before he had taken a single step, *'I wonder what it's like living outside of Canterlot. I have more than enough money to move somewhere else, and now that I have friends I have a reason to move. The only problem is that Valiant, Big Macintosh and Dr. Mend all live in Ponyville. I can't abandon any ponies who need therapy, but I don't really have any friends here except Evening Star and I don't go to the library very often. I wonder if Dr. Mend's clinic needs a physical therapist. I need to stop before I begin going in circles. Maybe I'm spending too much time with my job. I make way more than enough money to provide for myself. Heck, I could provide for probably eight ponies even if I only worked for three days a week. Let's see, I generally spend 53 bits a month on food, 51 on utilities, 18 for Medical insurance, and 120 for rent. That's 242 bits per month to survive. The rate for physical therapy per hour is 25 bits, that's 10 for the use of the facility and 15 for the therapist. If I move away, I'll probably have to run the center out of my own home so I can lower the cost to 17 bits per hour, 15 for me but only 2 for the wear and tear on the equipment. That way more ponies can afford it, and I can work with limited incomes. So if I take the cost of living, 242 and divide it by 17 . . . that's 14.23529411764706 round that to 15 for a margin of error. That means I only have to work for fifteen hours per month. Wow! I can afford that easily.'* he chuckled to himself, *'So then even if ponies only occasionally need therapy, I should be able to live there, but what about all the ponies who need therapy? I'd be abandoning them, I can't do that.'* his heart ached for the names on his list and his mind ran in circles as he stepped off the curb in front of the therapy center.

Lemon Lime made his way to the Spell Conservatory of the School for Gifted Unicorns and began his search for suitable spells, making careful calculations along the way.

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To say that Sea Blue, Trooper, and Lemon Lime were shocked at Valiant's revelation of what a Vagabond was, as well as his personal experience, would be a drastic understatement. The ponies met that evening and Valiant, true to his word, provided the explanation. Sea Blue was understanding and offered to council Valiant, nearly for free. Lemon Lime, being the sensitive type, burst into tears and hugged Valiant for nearly an hour. The younger unicorn had known about Arabesque's spirit having been with Valiant, but Valiant had left out the details of how she died as well as his personal feelings about her at the time. Trooper, by far, had the most animated response, even if he couldn't move any of his legs very well yet. Even so, the other stallions were willing to accept Valiant for who he was, sordid past or not. They had met him and gotten to know him before they knew about his history and had a sound basis to gauge his character.

Sea Blue and Trooper's room became the impromptu base of operations for the group. They met there the following night before going to check on little Patch.

The room was filled to capacity with ponies, Lemon Lime began, "I've found the spell we need to keep the rogue from using her magic. It's pretty easy but the limits are on a one-to-one basis regarding sheer magical strength. I have to be the more powerful of us to pull it off. It would be best if we take her by surprise. I've taken time off until we have this problem solved, don't worry, I have a lot of vacation time saved up. So, what else do we have that's new?"

Dr. Mend looked at the clock on the wall, "Excuse me." he said heading out of the room.

"Where's he going?" Evening Star asked.

"I'll let him tell you if he wants. It's not my business to spread that around." Valiant said, "On my end, Dr. Mend and I have the sleeping potion, in both forms." he said proudly.

Sea Blue looked ecstatic, "Wonderful! How did you manage that?"



"We needed some help. My boss's business is booming right now, since ponies discovered the healing potion, so we asked her to help. We managed to come up with a sleeping potion that's potent enough to knock me out but mild enough to be taken regularly without becoming habit-forming. I should have asked her in the first place. She already had something she developed for fillies and colts. All we had to do was amp it up a bit. We tested it on me this afternoon. It kept me down for four hours and my boss said there should be absolutely no risk for a unicorn mare. For the intravenous form, I'll let Mend explain that one. How about you Evening Star?" Valiant asked.

Evening Star had saddle-bags next to her on the floor,  
"I solved the problem of you boys not being sneaky enough." she said nosing open one of the bags, "I have a friend who is a seamstress. She made clothes that are black, form-fitting, and they cover you from head to hoof." she said bringing out one such garment and laying it on the ground, "Try it on, Live Wire." she encouraged.

The yellow unicorn slipped on the suit easily,  
"Wow! It really is black! We'll be nearly invisible!" he said admiring himself.

"And that's not all." Evening Star said nosing back around in her bag,  
"These," she said laying a quartet of leggings on the floor, "Have rubber soles to keep you quiet and still provide traction. My friend designs the uniforms for the Wonderbolts. She just used the same design and added the socks."

Big Macintosh walked around Lemon Lime, admiring the outfit,  
"These must have cost you a fortune." he ventured, "Ah woulda' been willin' to help you out ifn' you would have told me."

The tan pegasus held up a hoof,  
"They didn't cost me a thing. My friend owed me a favor. It's no problem, really. I have one for each of you. The material stretches so one size fits all, except you, Big Mac. I had her make one extra big for you."

Sea Blue had news of his own,

"I have something to show you all." he said rising from his bed, "I realized earlier this evening that I couldn't feel the wound in my chest so I took a peep. Live Wire, would you help me with this?" he asked.

Between them, the two unwrapped Sea Blue from his bandage, revealing the distinctive absence of any injury,  
"It's completely healed. That potion of yours works wonders Valiant. Now I'm as fit as I ever was."

Trooper smiled hugely,  
"Did you happen to notice today when Dr. Avalon came in and wheeled me away? I was asleep when they brought me back in, remember?" he asked.

Sea Blue nodded, so Trooper continued,  
"She removed the pins in my legs." he lifted his legs out of the traction slings and rolled out of his bed, right onto the floor in a standing position,  
"Ta da! I am fit as a fiddle and frisky as a flea!" he snickered, "I simply wanted to wait for the opportune moment to show off. I still had to stay in bed for the day, but I am good to go now. Dr. Avalon gave me another dose and told me to wait for another day to be sure, but I'm sure right now."

Dr. Mend re-entered the room and stopped mid-stride,  
"Aww! I missed it! I wanted to see the looks on your faces." he said with admittedly very little disappointment, "Valiant, your potion works even faster than even you thought. Now we have documented proof. Avalon is presenting the successful cases to the medical-board in the morning."

Evening Star still had her one question in the back of her mind,  
"Why did you leave the room a moment ago?"

Dr. Mend licked his lips and took a deep breath,  
"Can everypony here promise not to judge me on what I'm about to say?" he asked.

He met a chorus of nods, so he plowed on,  
"Sea Blue is my psychologist. I came to him because I've been hearing voices for most of my life. I tried to get rid of the voices but nothing worked, so I asked him to perform a battery of tests to see if I have any mental disorders. My mother had one so there was a good chance I would too. I took the tests earlier today and Sea Blue had another licensed psychologist

confirm the findings.” Mend took another deep breath to steady himself and continued, “I have schizophrenia. The reason I left the room and the reason I’ve been carrying saddle-bags around today, is so I can keep my Lithium with me all the time. I saw what happened when my mother didn’t take her medication and I don’t want to make the same mistake. I left the room to take the pills. Don’t worry, I’m stable. I . . . had to inform the medical board of my condition, but they said as long as I keep taking my medication, I can keep my license.”

“Would you like to tell them about how we came to . . . 'acquire' an intravenous sedative? Or do you want to keep that a secret?” Valiant asked his friend.

Dr. Mend stood up, straight and proud,  
“I approached Avalon with our 'predicament' and asked if she would let us have a single bottle for apprehending the rogue unicorn. She presented the issue to the medical board, here in Canterlot, and we have a single bottle open for us to use. I have to keep it on me at all times and I also have to vouch for its uses, but we have it.”

“Splendid!” Trooper shouted, “It looks as if we have everything we need to take this menace of a unicorn down tonight!”

“Hold on there, Trooper.” Big Macintosh said, “We need a plan on how to get her out into the open first. We’ve been lucky she hasn’t done anything today, but we can’t just go off half-cocked.”

Trooper grinned hugely,  
“Capital idea old thing! In fact, Sea Blue and I have been spending our time doing just that!” he said turning to the turquoise unicorn, “Would you like to do the honors, good sir? Most of it did come from your brain-box after all.” Sea Blue nodded and began to explain,  
“The rogue seems to only attack a single victim at a time. We can use that to bait her out into the open, while the rest of us hide nearby. It’s really simple. All we need is for somepony to be willing to be the bait. Once we have her, I can use my tracking spell to find Patch. Quick and easy.”

“Ah don’t know if Ah like the idea of usin’ one of mah friends as bait for some crazy unicorn who’s already done nearly killed two ponies.” Big Macintosh said sternly.

Valiant laid a gentle hoof on his friend,  
“It's the best plan we have, but does anypony else have a better idea?”

“I have something to add to that.” Lemon Lime ventured, “We need a way to monitor her movements, so we can engage her on our terms, not hers. We need every advantage and, more importantly, we need to be absolutely sure what everypony can do.”

Trooper volunteered,  
“I am aerial reconnaissance, plain and simple.”

“I'll be the one holding the potion and syringe and I have to administer them. I need to stay out of the way until she's magically and physically subdued. I'd be no good in a regular fight.” Dr. Mend explained.

“Ah'm the one who's got to get her down on the ground as fast as possible. Ah need to be nearby when the time comes.” Big Macintosh said.

“I have to cut her off from her magic and I have to be close to do that too.” Lemon Lime said.

“I can watch her movements and gauge her intentions by her facial expressions and body language. I don't have the simple strength to be a combatant, but I can guide your efforts. I would have ended up in better condition if I hadn't second-guessed myself the first time I encountered her.” Sea Blue explained.

Trooper patted the turquoise unicorn on the shoulder,  
“Right on! Who better than a psychologist to perceive the enemy's intentions? The very guiding force behind our efforts! The general, if you will.”

Valiant's ears flattened against his lowered head,  
“Drat. That means I'm the bait.” he mumbled.

Evening Star put her hoof over his shoulder comfortingly,  
“I'll watch out for you. You carry the food and water, in case we don't succeed. Live Wire needs to be able to focus on the rogue. You can act like she caught you in the act of dropping it off.” inspiration suddenly struck her,

"That's it! We can go tonight! Valiant, you can just walk right on in there and have her chase you out! Drop the food for Patch and get her to come out. Be loud so we know where to be. We get the drop on her, I'll talk to her to distract her while everypony else goes after her."

"I say, hold hard there!" Trooper exclaimed, "That leaves me utterly useless!"

"No it don't." Big Mac said placatingly, "You can help catch anypony she drops. You've already done caught a full-grown Earth pony all by yourself. Evenin' Star's not strong enough to catch most of us. Ifn she gets away from us you can watch her from the sky. We can even call you 'Sky-Stalker' if you want."

Trooper immediately brightened at the idea, explosively expressing himself as always,

"Oh I say, capital idea there Big Mac-athingie! I shall be your eyes in the skies, the stallion of spying, the very embodiment of observation; swooping to the rescue of my brave comrades. No rogue unicorn will be free to perpetrate her misdeeds while the fearsome Sky-Stalker is about. We cannot all be warriors now can we? Very well, I acquiesce to your idea!"

"It's settled then, we go tonight. Let's get ready. Everypony put on your . . . uh outfits, I guess." Valiant said.

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The seven brave ponies left the clinic looking for all the world like ninjas, except Evening Star who hadn't bothered to get one for herself. She figured she wouldn't need it since she would either be airborne or trying to talk to the unicorn. In either case she wouldn't need to conceal herself.

They headed toward the cluster of derelict warehouses, each trying to calm their nerves and all failing utterly to do so. Big Macintosh was surprised at how quiet he was when wearing the outfit. He couldn't hear his hooves, no matter how much he tried and his friends were all but impossible to spot in the darkness. He had put on his steel shoes and had the lasso hanging off his saddle-bags.

Lemon Lime had been calculating and recalculating their chances of success since they had left. He figured they stood an eighty-seven percent chance of success, if everything went according to plan. He was having trouble not chattering the whole way but he was well aware of what was at stake. He went over the new spells again and again and again in his mind. He knew he couldn't afford any mistakes tonight. Almost everything rode on his shoulders. If he couldn't cut the unicorn off from her magic they stood no chance against her.

Sea Blue couldn't pull his thoughts from his daughter. He ground his teeth and shook his head, snorting in irritation. He would help his friends stop the unicorn, but his highest priority was Patch. He would rescue her tonight no matter what else happened. She was his whole world; he would die for her if he needed to, no question about it.

Dr. Mend felt uncomfortable with the mass of his mane and tail stuffed inside the outfit, but as he walked he had to admit he probably was effectively invisible. He smiled to himself at the thought and thanked his lucky stars the voices were absent. His mind was quiet and he was relishing it. He could think clearly for the first time in many years. The two sedatives rested comfortably in his saddle-bags, with wadded up old medical forms to keep them safe. In his other saddle-bag he carried the contents of his black bag in case it was needed.

Trooper was beginning to regret not waiting another day to heal up all the way, but he was there and time was of the essence, besides there was a little one waiting for her daddy to rescue her. He would never dream of holding back such a reunion. His legs hurt more with each step, but he kept up a stiff upper lip and plodded along, knowing he would soon be in the sky using his wings not his legs. He swore to himself that if he had to catch somepony he would hold on even if it killed him. His will was set, as was his jaw.

Valiant was thinking about all the things that could go wrong. He would have liked to wait a couple more days to prepare better, but he had to think about others. For each day they waited, more ponies would likely be injured or worse and he hated the thought of little Patch in the clutches of the mad unicorn. He sent a silent prayer to the two Princesses for good fortunes and a speedy resolution. It all came down to tonight.

The group stopped near the same place they had before and went over their plan one last time,  
“Trooper and I will scout ahead and find you the darkest and most direct route. We'll guide you from the roof-tops. Follow Valiant's lead and remember the hoof-signals. Stay to the shadows and don't bunch up,”  
Evening Star held a hoof to her muzzle, stifling a giggle, “We remember how that turned out last time. If we have to chase her, watch for Trooper and I, we'll guide you. Once the fight begins, be vocal, talk to each other so we can coordinate our efforts. Everypony ready?” she asked.

Her question was met with silence and determined eyes,  
“Let's go.” she said.

Evening Star and Trooper took to the air in a flutter of feathers. Sea Blue had to admit, Trooper really was essentially invisible from the ground. The five stallions waited patiently for several long minutes before Trooper landed quietly in front of their hiding spot. He landed so quietly and was so obscured in the darkness that it took the other stallions several seconds to register him.

Dr. Mend jumped,  
“Geez!” he whispered, “Warn us next time.”

“I truly hope there will not need to be a next time for all of this.” Trooper said in a normal voice, “Evening Star and I just witnessed her walking into one of the doors of the warehouses. I'll take you straight there. Evening Star said she would watch the door and find us if the rogue came back out. Come on chaps, quick is the word and sharp is the action.”

The five stallions galloped, almost silently, following Trooper from the ground. They wound their way through the maze of corners, streets, alleys and walls until they came to a stop as Trooper landed in front of them once more.

The area ahead was practically made for an ambush. Trooper indicated a doorway with his hoof and the rest of the stallions began analyzing the surrounding area. The alley was covered in shadows, and piles of old debris littered the walls on either side of the alley. The doorway thrust out two paces into the alley leaving ample room for a pony to hide on either

side. Directly above the doorway was a stone overhang that looked sturdy enough to support the weight of a full-grown pony.

Sea Blue took in the whole scene in a split second and spoke first, "Live Wire, you could stand on that overhang and surprise her just like you wanted. Big Macintosh and Dr. Mend can hide on either side of the doorway and take care of business nice and quick. I'll be over on the side, hidden next to some debris while Trooper and Evening Star stay overhead. Sound good?"

The others nodded their approval and moved to take their positions, while Valiant spoke to Sea Blue, "I'll come out that door and flatten myself against the far wall. Make sure everypony gets going quickly so she won't have a chance to literally flatten me into the wall." he joked.

Sea Blue chuckled quietly, "Will do. Be careful Valiant."

Sea Blue and the others took their places and Valiant entered the doorway. The inside of the building was eerily quiet and almost completely black. Valiant slunk from shadow to shadow, an incorporeal wraith in the darkness. He could see another door way leading to another alley on the far side of the warehouse. He could just barely make out that he was in a long hallway lined with doorways. He kept to the right side of the hallway where the shadows were thickest. He had to stop a few paces in and wait for his eyes to adjust to the absence of illumination. The process was slow and his imagination worked overtime to conjure up images of terrifying specters that could come screaming out of every corner and unlit doorway. He took a deep breath and steadied his nerves.

A sudden shuffling sound nearby made the breath catch in Valiant's throat. He froze, willing his body to be still. He swiveled his ears in various directions trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. His nostrils flared, trying to catch the scent of decay he had associated with the unicorn rogue. He closed his eyes and focused on his other senses. He heard the sound again and pinpointed it, up ahead on the same side of the hallway he was traversing, inside a nearby doorway.



Valiant cracked open his eyes and had to stifle a yell. The rogue unicorn stood, not two paces from him, facing him directly. Valiant didn't dare to breathe. With his eyes adjusted to the darkness he finally got a good look at her. She was younger than he had gauged at first, maybe nineteen at best. She no longer wore her cloak. Her mane and tail were in terrible need of washing and her hooves were cracked and split. He could make out her ribs, sticking out against her skin; her belly was raggedly thin and seemed to almost meld with her spine. Her face was filthy and the bones in her muzzle protruded frighteningly. Valiant was reminded of himself when he had arrived in Ponyville. Her horn was thick and pointed, like she had sharpened it. Her neck looked frail enough to break in a stiff wind, and her eyes were sunken far more than when Valiant had seen her before. He guessed she hadn't eaten since he had encountered her. He was silently thankful they were going to take care of her, she would certainly die of malnutrition in a matter days, and he could only imagine what she had done to little Patch.

As if on cue, the little unicorn filly spoke out of the darkness, somewhere behind the unicorn,

"Can I please go home now?" she sounded like she was ready to cry.

The unicorn spoke to Patch without turning her head,

"NO! No little one. YOU'RE SAFE HERE! I have to keep you safe from ponies who would HURT YOU! I may have died, but I CAN STILL keep you safe."

Patch fell silent and Valiant kept his eyes glued to the unicorn,

"Why are you here ghost? ARE YOU MY SHATTERED spirit come to haunt me? OR ARE YOU some specter I need to HAVE my champion KILL?" she asked.

Valiant felt as if he'd had his soul pierced, her voice was unstable but even so she sounded desperate. Like she was trying to be brave in the face of death. Her eyes began leaking, sorrow finding no purchase on her face, as stony as ever. Her breathing was shallow and her speech sounded slurred like she was dehydrated. She eyes him with a mixture of fear and anger. Valiant had to weigh his options quickly. She had obviously seen him, *'I should have known! She can see because of my outline against the light from the doorway I came through. What do I do?'* he wondered.

Valiant finally settled on sticking to the original plan, "I'm just here to leave some food and water for the filly." he said reaching his head into his left saddle-bag.

The unicorn's eyes bulged, "NO!" she screamed, "You stay away from her!" her horn began to glow.

Valiant turned and broke into an all out gallop back to the doorway. A bright light flared to life behind him and suddenly he felt the impact of incredible pressure against his flank. The force turned into sweltering heat as an explosion rocked the decrepit building. The sound was deafening. Valiant was flung into the air, spinning like a top, legs flying in every direction. He saw ceiling, wall, floor, wall, ceiling, wall, floor, wall, ceiling and then he hit the ceiling with a bone-jarring impact, striking his head solidly. Stars exploded into his vision and his ears rang. He felt weightlessness and his pegasus instincts kicked in. He twisted wildly in mid air and almost managed to land on his hooves. He landed hard on the floor and his hooves gave out beneath him. He felt the jab of something blunt striking his stomach. He didn't feel the mystery thing pierce his body and tried to get his bearings. He had been flash-blinded by the explosion and had hit his head soundly; in the darkness afterward his adjusted vision evaporated he couldn't see a thing. He rose to his hooves and began running with his right shoulder against the closest wall.

Valiant felt the bump of a door frame, took two steps and pressed his shoulder against the wall again. He had to repeat the motion several more times before he felt the wall vanish. He skidded to a halt and felt the light bump of a wall in front of him. He had done his part, now he just had to wait for the others. He cried out in pain as his body belatedly relayed to his addled brain that his backside had been scorched badly. His vision began returning and he looked around frantically for his friends. He began picking out the details of his surroundings and immediately realized he was in trouble. He couldn't see Big Mac or Dr. Mend on either side of the doorway, nor could he see Lemon Lime above the doorway. The alley looked wrong too. There was no debris here and the doorway he had come through was flush with the surrounding walls. He was in the wrong alley.

He looked back down the hallway he had come through and could see through to the other side where Lemon Lime was peeking down from above the other doorway. The rogue unicorn was walking steadily toward him,

horn glowing menacingly and thankfully oblivious to the other ponies watching her from behind. She kept her pace slow and menacing. Valiant saw his friends suddenly vanish from the doorway, '*They're on their way. I have to stall her.*' he thought.

Valiant stood up as straight as he could and faced the unicorn boldly, "I'm not here to hurt you or the filly. I just want to help." he yelled to her.

The unicorn's face cracked in a sneer, "Help?" she laughed, "YOU CAN'T even help yourself. WHAT CAN YOU DO?"

"You're suffering from 'Caster's Stroke'. You don't know what you're doing, but I can help you. That unicorn filly's father is worried sick about her, you have to let her go." Valiant said as calmly as he could.

Valiant kept his eyes glued to the unicorn but saw Trooper in his peripheral vision. Trooper set Lemon Lime down in the alleyway to Valiant's right, then hovered above the doorway, waiting. The unicorn was still several paces down the hallway and didn't notice several silent figures sneaking up behind her slowly.

Valiant kept buying time, "Do you even know what you've done? You've nearly killed two other ponies. You've foalnapped a filly and you've been threatening ponies for their bits."

"I need THE BITS FOR food! The filly's FATHER took her eye! I HAD TO survive!" the unicorn yelled, switching from one subject to another.

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Sea Blue searched in the dark for his daughter, Evening Star was with him, "Patch?" he called, "Patch? Are you here baby?"

A tiny form leapt up in the darkness and attached herself to her father's right fore leg, "Daddy!" she cried holding onto him, "Daddy, I want to go home!"

Sea Blue shushed his daughter quietly,

“Shh, quiet sweetie. This nice pegasus is going to take you home. I'll be there as soon as I can. You be good for Ms. Evening Star, alright?”

“No!” Patch cried, “I want you to take me home!”

Sea Blue hated seeing his daughter like that,  
“I know you do sweetie, but I'll be home as soon as I can.” he passed his daughter to Evening Star, “Take her home, she knows the way. Keep her quiet. We can't risk her being taken again.”

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Lemon Lime pressed himself up against a wall and began casting his spell, preparing for the unicorn to step into the light. Trooper looked terrified, but he held his position. Valiant was greatly relieved to see his friends. Big Macintosh and Dr. Mend were less than fifteen paces behind the unicorn and Sea Blue was moving quickly to catch up.

Valiant tried again to reason with the rogue,  
“You must stop this!” he cried, “We just want to help you!”

The unicorn's horn began glowing more brightly,  
“Always the SAME PRATTLE! NOPONY CAN help me!”

The unicorn cast her spell as she stepped out of the door. Valiant saw a pea-sized sphere of whiter light shoot out of her horn and come streaking towards him. His pupils shrank to pin points. He leapt to his left as quickly as he could. He was a bit too slow. The pea exploded into a ball of expanding kinetic force that threw him, rag-dolling, several dozen paces away and toward another wall, away from Lemon Lime. Valiant kept his head and made sure to keep his muscles limp to keep himself from fracturing anything. He hit the wall and once again struck his head on the wall.

Instead of falling onto the ground, Valiant felt strong hooves catch him gently,  
“You need to stop hitting your head there, old boy. That noggin of yours may be tough but you should not push your luck. Even diamonds are not impervious.” Trooper whispered in his ear.

Lemon Lime saw the unicorn step out of the doorway and quickly finished casting his own spell. It settled around the rogue and the battle of wills began. The material world fell away and the two combatants found themselves fighting in an immaterial world conjured by their own imaginations. The unicorn rogue erected defensive stone walls that were as solid as they would be in the material world. Lemon Lime suddenly 'felt' the rules of combat. He had to reach her and touch her to win. They could form the world into anything they wished, limited only by their creativity.

Lemon Lime smiled, this was a game he could play. He turned himself into a Taurus Minor and charged the wall protecting the rogue. He shattered the wall and met a wall of fire raging high into the air. Lemon Lime shifted forms and became a salamander wading through the fire without being hurt by the flames. He could have turned into something to fly above the flames, but that would take time, instead he chose to go through in a simple all out attack. The rogue unicorn fought on the defensive, retreating a bit with each new defense. Lemon Lime kept her on the defensive always attacking, always trying to gain the advantage. She was agile and clever, her finesse was outstanding. Lemon Lime was better. He was weaker in sheer power but he was quick as greased lightning and could slither, sometimes literally, through the tiniest cracks in her defenses and find ways around them. The rogue began to grow weary and, in a panic, formed a stone maze. Lemon Lime smiled and transformed into a minotaur. He charged through the maze allowing the instincts of his new form guide him.

Lemon Lime knew the unicorn was beginning to tire from her exertion and he plowed on further and further. He knew he was close. He rounded a corner and found himself face-to-beak with a cockatrice. The creature stared him dead in the eye and Lemon Lime was powerless to look away. He had made fantastic headway but he had lost.

He opened his eyes and he was back in his body. The unicorn stood in her same place, horn still glowing, Valiant being lowered to the ground by Trooper. No time had passed.

Lemon Lime felt the spell still in place and grasped at it with his will. He felt magic surge through him, foreign and powerful. He gasped as he realized that in his panic, he had cast the spell wrong. He hadn't cut her off, he now had control of a portion of her magic. He grinned wickedly, *'I'll smash her to pieces with this power! She'll be no more than a bug under a strong hoof!*

*Ah, feel the power! It's exhilarating, intoxicating; I can do anything now! I don't need the others, they'll just get in my way. I don't need anypony. I can do anything I want!*

Lemon Lime pulled the power into his body and felt it strengthen him, transforming him into an archon of power. He saw Big Macintosh come leaping out of the doorway and take down the unicorn in a rolling tackle. The sight of his friend snapped Lemon Lime out of his twisted mindset, '*I have her power AND her madness! It's tainted her magic! I have to let it go and find another way to bring her down.*' Lemon Lime let the spell go before it could warp his thinking again. As the magic left him, he felt small, like he could crawl under a rock; he realized just how much he was over classed and swallowed hard, '*Do we really have ANY chance of pulling this off?*' he wondered.

Big Macintosh held on grimly. The two of them were locked in a struggling heap on the ground. She was no match for the huge Earth pony's size and strength. She knew she had been physically drawn down to the ground. Images of her body being violated and used against her will flashed through her mind and she panicked. She felt her magic return to her in full force, even as Dr. Mend rushed toward her.

"Just calm down now, there little lady." Big Macintosh said trying to sooth her, "We ain't goin' to hurt you none."

She did calm down; she also willed another pea-sized ball of pure force into existence,  
"Let me go!" she screamed, "You can't have me! I'll KILL US BOTH FIRST!"

Dr. Mend saw the ball of light and stopped more than a dozen paces back. Sea Blue came up behind and tried to go around, but Dr. Mend held out his hoof to stop the councilor. Sea Blue took in the scene at a glance. In his mind's eye he saw he launching the tiny sphere toward he and Dr. Mend and collapsing the building in the resulting explosion.

"She's going to detonate it!" he yelled.

Big Macintosh saw the tiny sphere coalesce into being in front of her horn. He pulled one hoof off the struggling unicorn beneath him and raised it into the air. At such a close proximity he had no idea how badly he or the rogue

might be injured. He closed his eyes and curled his body around the unicorn rogue to protect her from the blast. He swatted the sphere out of the air. It flew a few paces away and detonated on the road. The force of the exploding sphere threw the huge Earth pony several paces into the air. The force was too great for him to keep his hold on the unicorn beneath him. Big Macintosh opened his eyes and saw the road rushing toward him at an alarming rate.

Big Macintosh braced himself for the impact; an impact that never came. He felt a gentle force cupping his body and looked up. Lemon Lime, horn glowing, had caught him. Lemon Lime set Big Macintosh down on the ground gently, just as Trooper flew past him down the alley. Big Macintosh looked around and failed to spot the rogue. Lemon Lime, Dr. Mend, and Sea Blue darted past him heading down the alley. Big Mac turned and saw the fleeing form of the unicorn heading away from her pursuers. He turned and broke into a gallop, bending his head down to pick up Valiant from the road in passing. His teeth bit down on the saddle-bags of his friend and Big Mac proceeded to carry Valiant as he ran.

Valiant regained his senses and shouted up to Big Mac,  
“Thanks Big Mac! Put me down, I can run!”

Big Macintosh let go and Valiant stumbled for a few seconds while he regained his balance, then joined his friends in pursuit of the unicorn. Valiant and Big Mac caught up to Sea Blue, Dr. Mend, and Lemon Lime within a few seconds. Trooper had risen up above the surrounding buildings. The unicorn rogue was steadily pulling away from the group, unusually quick for a pony so malnourished.

Valiant caught up to Dr. Mend and grumbled to his friend,  
“She tried to kill me! This wasn't like the other times she injured somepony!”  
Valiant yelled, forgetting about the incident with Sea Blue and Patch, “This was intentional! She burnt me! We're just trying to help!”

“You have to understand, Valiant!” Dr. Mend panted, “She doesn't know what she's doing! You can't hold that against her! No matter what injuries we suffer, we have to forgive her!”

Valiant considered his older friend for a moment as they ran,  
“Since when did you become more forgiving than me?” he asked.

Dr. Mend smirked,

"Maybe it was when I realized that a lack of forgiveness was what was holding me back. I had to forgive my mother for belittling me all the time and for leaving me! I had to forgive my father for giving up on me and his life, but most of all I had to forgive myself! I had been blaming everything on myself whether it was my fault or not! I had been missing something for years but, I found it, on my grandparent's porch! You were right! Celestia, but you were so right! It's wonderful Valiant! I feel so free now! I know it sounds crazy, but it's true! I feel lighter!"

"Then pick up the pace! We're losing her!" Valiant said, noticing the growing gap between them and the rogue.

Sea Blue addressed his fellow unicorn as he ran,  
"Live Wire, can you stop her so we can catch up?" he called out.

Lemon Lime was falling behind,  
"I can't do anything that requires finesse while I'm running! I could trip her but I'm afraid at this speed she could break her neck! We have to wait for the right moment! We'll get an opening!"

The rogue's horn began glowing as she turned a corner. Sea Blue saw a ghost image in his mind's eye. He saw her disappearing from in front of them and reappearing in a nearby side-street, throwing them off of her trail and losing them, '*She's going to teleport!*'

"She's going to teleport!" he called to his friends.

"How do you know?" asked Dr. Mend as they rounded the corner behind her.

Sure enough, in a flash of light she vanished. Sea Blue kept his momentum and took the corner at a dead run. His rubber-coated hooves skidded in the ground and he had to throw his shoulder into the left side of the alley wall, but he kept on with the chase. The other stallions followed him as quickly as they could. They were still too slow to catch up to her. She was headed straight toward a stone wall that had to be fifteen paces high. Sea Blue saw another ghost image: she would use her magic to teleport beyond the wall and lose them. He had no counter for that particular move.



“She's going to teleport beyond that wall, we'll lose her!” he shouted.

Sea Blue called it again. She teleported through the wall and vanished from sight.

“Grab onto my mane or tail!” Lemon Lime yelled.

Dr. Mend, Big Macintosh and Sea Blue chomped down on the smaller unicorn's indicated parts. Trooper swooped down from above and grabbed Valiant from behind. Trooper pumped his wings, legs aching terribly and lifted Valiant over the wall. Lemon Lime's horn began glowing brightly, as he and his friends charged the wall. Lemon Lime closed his eyes and concentrated, he knew if he failed it would end very badly. He drew in every ounce of magic he had available, straining himself to his absolute limits. The simple amount of power he called upon made his stomach lurch. His head pounded like a drum, every heartbeat echoing in his ears painfully. The three other stallions were having trouble keeping a grip while running.

The smaller yellow unicorn increased his pace, eyes cracking open to judge the distance, screaming as the wall came closer and closer, “Aaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrroooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaoooooooooooo!” he felt his horn tip touch the wall.

He let his spell go and all four of them teleported in a flash of brilliant light, to the other side of the wall. Lemon Lime felt dizzy. His vision swam furiously. A loud yelp of surprise behind him, caught his attention. It took his eyes a moment to decipher what he saw. Dr. Mend had been the one holding onto his tail. Apparently Lemon Lime hadn't calculated the distance quite right and Dr. Mend's tail tip had rematerialized inside the wall. The older stallion had kept running and pulled out several of the hairs in his tail.

Trooper set Valiant down and the five stallions took up the chase once more. The rogue unicorn was far ahead of them and still going. They had emerged onto a main road lined with shops. The road was much wider than the alleys, but it was also better lit. The pursuing stallions had no trouble spotting their target.

Lemon Lime looked around and recognized the area,

“Ha!” he laughed, panting hard, “This road . . . doesn't have any . . . side streets for her to . . . go down. It dead-ends . . . up ahead!” he yelled between breaths.

As the chase continued the stallions heard a whoop from up in the air, as Trooper dove down and addressed his friends,  
“Our roguish unicorn friend is coming up to a dead end and she looks to be wearing out on the physical side and all that. I am under the impression she plans to duke it out in the middle of the street. I think we should be prepared for a fight.”

Trooper flew back up above the buildings, but stayed where the five ground-bound stallions could see him.

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The rogue unicorn mare stopped and turned around facing the open street. She had come to a dead end and could go no further. She was physically exhausted and could not run any more if her life depended on it, which in her mind, it did. The street was a good forty paces wide. She stood, flank against the wall of a building, panting and sweating heavily. Her eyes were wide open in terror, fearing for her physical safety and her virtue. She feared what would happen to her at the hooves of so many stallions; how they would brutalize her if she didn't cooperate, how they would force themselves on her, hurt her, and use her body violently, perhaps even leave her to die. She squared her stance and focused her magic. Her adrenaline was pumping good and hard. It gave her an extra boost of magic, she would need it to use her most powerful spell.

Evening Star landed in the street twenty paces in front of the terrified, delusional unicorn. She had left little Patch with Dr. Avalon and flown back to help her friends. They had been easy to spot by the glow of Trooper's teleportation. She had flown ahead and found the unicorn in the street.

Evening Star knew she would be frightened out of her mind,  
“Hey, it's alright.” she soothed in a quiet voice, “No pony is going to hurt you.”

To the panicked unicorn, her voice sounded wicked and maniacal. The unicorn backed up against the wall behind her, tears streaming down her

face in terror. Her mind spun in so many different directions, she rarely knew what was going on. She was confused and frightened. She had managed to get away once before but she knew it had been by sheer luck and nothing more. She had to make her stand and make it count.

She braced her legs and began channeling every ounce of magic she had at her disposal. Her horn began glowing, dimly at first; it built up to a brilliant light, cinders of excess magic sparked off the end of her horn and fell to the ground. The surrounding buildings and store fronts lit up like the sun had prematurely risen.

Evening Star backed up several steps and took to the air again. There was no reasoning with this unicorn. She saw Trooper leading the others on a direct intercept course with the rogue, '*It's all up to you now.*' she thought.

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The stallions all stopped and watched the unicorn mare at the far end of the street, already casting a spell. They knew they couldn't give her too much time or else she might run again.

"We should try to approach her quickly." Sea Blue said, "She's already casting a spell. We have to be quick or she could kill herself if she uses too much magic. On the count of three, charge." he turned his head forward again and they began walking down the alley in a line.

"One." they quickened to a canter.

"Two." they sped up to a trot.

"Three!" the five stallions broke into a charge, straight down the middle of the street.

The unicorn rogue was waiting for them. She had finished her spell. She cast it out into the open night air. The formidable magic began to take form. The massive amount of power filled the entire street. Her will formed the raw magical power into a great beast, one that very few, if any ponies could ever hope to vanquish with physical might. The creature's heads began to form, the left one like a goat, the right one like a great cat, and one like a snake. The snake-like head emerged from the creature's backside like a

tail would have. Its body took up almost the whole street, its four powerful legs all ended in razor sharp claws, each paw easily large enough to flatten even Big Macintosh in a single blow. The great beast's body fully came into being, in a flash of a color which could only be described as an absence of light.

The stallions came to a screeching halt at the sight of the colossal beast. It stood nearly thirty paces tall and just as wide. It almost looked cramped in the confines of the street. The creature didn't move, its eyes were muddy purple; there was no life in the thing, it was borne of pure magic.

Lemon Lime's eyes threatened to fall out of their sockets; he recognized the beast instantly, and alerted his friends in a screeching yell, "CHIMERA!"

"Defend ME!" the unicorn mare commended, "KILL THEM!"

The magical beast surged forward, instantly in a berserker rage. Five stallions dodged out of the way as it swiped one of its massive paws at them. Big Macintosh and Lemon Lime went left; Sea Blue and Valiant went right, while Dr. Mend scrambled backward.

Sea Blue hadn't been close enough to the rogue to see the summoning coming. His mind began observing the creature's every movement even as it swiped its enormous paw at them again. Lemon Lime caught sight of the unicorn rogue as he huddled against glass window, *'This spell is taking all of her magic to maintain! I don't need to cut her off now; she's gone and done it herself. If we can get to her she'll go down easy. The only question is how do we get to her?'*

"It's a construct of pure magic!" Lemon Lime hollered, dodging out of the way as another paw came for the yellow unicorn, shattering the window behind him, "It's not alive! Fight it like you mean to kill it! You can't actually kill something that's not alive but you can destroy it!"

Sea Blue caught on to what the smaller unicorn was saying, "If we destroy it, the magical backlash will leave her disoriented for a few moments! It's our only hope, fight it!"

Dr. Mend, seemingly the only one to realize a simple truth yelled back, from across the street,  
“HOW? How do we fight THAT?!”

Dr. Mend had no idea how to fight anything, much less a colossal construct of pure magic conjured up from the demented mind of a delusional unicorn. He stood as far back away from the thing as he could and looked on in awe.

Valiant lowered his head and charged in, under the titan's swiping paw and whipped around, presenting, to it, his backside. He leaned forward and kicked out with his hind legs, bucking as hard as he could, aiming for the one leg not being used to attack.

The creature didn't even seem bothered by Valiant's attack, but it did take notice of him. The wingless pegasus sped away from the enormous jaws that came snapping after him. Big Macintosh, spurred on by Valiant's bravery, launched his whole body at the beast's head as its jaws closed, mere centimeters behind his friend's flank. He decided that his lasso would be utterly useless against such a beast, but his steel shoes might help. His legs were the strongest of the group by far. He skidded to a halt on the right side of the beast's jaw and lifted his right fore hoof. The big Earth pony lashed out with his limb and struck the thing squarely on its muzzle. The blow hardly broke skin.

Big Macintosh failed to see the goat head above him, begin descending to crush him with its flat head. The large Earth pony was suddenly knocked out of the way by a royal blue body connected to a light brown mane and tail. The goat head descended onto the road, its target long gone. Big Macintosh rolled on the ground twice and came up on his hooves. He quickly dodged out of the way of another head-butt from the goat head and turned, intending to thank Valiant for saving him. Instead of Valiant, his eyes met Trooper. The pegasus landed a blow, with his rear hooves, to the neck of the goat head then took off again into the sky.

Sea Blue took a trick from his previous encounter with the rogue. He charged, head down and speared his horn into the front right leg of the chimera. The impact vibrated his head making him dizzy. He stumbled back several paces, vision blurry. Sea Blue received a flying tackle from his

left and rolled limply with the other pony, on the assumption that he was being rescued from some terrible fate.

Dr. Mend disentangled himself from the turquoise unicorn and ventured a glance at the injury Sea Blue had caused. It was small, but there it was. His horn had penetrated into the magical flesh of the chimera. The injury sluggishly leaked tiny amounts muddy purple liquid down the creature's leg and onto the ground. Dr. Mend's heart fell. Even with Sea Blue being able to injure it, the chimera would need only one single solid hit to kill one of his friends. Dr. Mend realized that no matter how long or hard they fought, they wouldn't be able to bring the thing down.

Lemon Lime was weary; the multi-pony teleport had drained him severely. He could feel his magic slowly returning, but it would never be enough to challenge a monster the size of the beast attacking his friends. He looked around. Valiant had already been injured by the rogue earlier; he looked tired and was limping heavily. Sea Blue had injured the thing, but the blow had rattled his brain. The poor councilor was still stumbling around, he couldn't even rise to his hooves. Dr. Mend had already admitted he had no idea how to fight the chimera and was trying to drag Sea Blue away from the thing. Trooper, even though he said he wouldn't engage in any fighting, was holding his own for the moment, but Lemon Lime knew the pegasus was flagging. He had been flying and lifting quite a bit. Big Macintosh seemed to be the only one able to stand up to the monster, but even the massive Earth pony seemed to be losing heart.

Lemon Lime shifted his weight away from the wall he had been leaning against and proceeded to back away from the fight. He would have attempted to run between the chimera's legs and take on the unicorn himself, but the creature's snake-tail would be biting at him the whole time. He had managed to get several paces away before a massive paw swatted at him. Too tired to dodge any more, the exhausted unicorn stallion simply allowed his legs to fold beneath him and fell to the ground. The paw swept over his body but connected with his head. Lemon Lime felt one of the huge claws connect with the back of his head, piercing his skin. The blow sent the helpless unicorn flying through the glass window of a nearby ice-cream parlor, leaving a trail of blood behind him, following him in the night air. He hit the floor inside and bounced limply like he was no more than a pile of wet, yellow, fuzzy, dough. Glass, blood, chairs, and small round tables went flying in every direction.

Valiant saw Lemon Lime take the hit and called out to the other stallions, "Live Wire's been hurt!" he yelled, limping toward the smashed window as quickly as he could, "Big Mac, keep that thing away from the shop while I get him out!"

Big Macintosh heard Valiant and began attacking the chimera from a different angle, keeping its attention away from the ice cream parlor. The big Earth pony looked around sadly. Dr. Mend had dragged Sea Blue away from the beast and though they looked recovered enough, neither was really equipped for any type of battle nor physically capable of doing much damage. Valiant was trying to, first of all find, then tend to Lemon Lime, if the little unicorn was even still alive. Trooper was his only capable ally, but Big Macintosh knew with certainty, there was no way the two of them alone could possibly threaten, much less bring down such a powerful creature.

The situation was desperate to say the least. Big Macintosh's mind turned to an old truth 'desperate times, call for desperate measures'. He gritted his teeth and charged the chimers, pouring on the speed. He aimed for its lowered leone head, intending to knock the creature silly and give his friends a chance to recover through simple, strength and momentum. He gritted his teeth, this was sure to hurt, it might even kill him, but they didn't have any other clear option. He calmed his mind and accepted what would come. They had to succeed, there was no alternative, and he would do everything he could to make that happen. He thought of Applejack, Applebloom, and Granny Smith. Would he ever see them again? He had no idea. He could only try to make himself comfortable and accept what he had to do to ensure their success. He accepted the possible consequences of his actions and floated in a sea of peace. He had an epiphany, Peace! That was it!

He closed his eyes and focused his thoughts on every time he had accepted the world as it was. There were A LOT of examples. He felt dizzy, like he was falling, spinning, and twisting all at the same time. Time stopped as he came to an absolution with himself, *'If Ah am one of the Elements of Peace, Ah need it. Ah have to help mah friends. Ah accept the responsibility and the gift, if it's there for me to have.'*

The three other stallions, outside the ice-cream shop, were nearly blinded by a bright flash of golden light emanating from just in front of Big

Macintosh. The space in front of the large Earth pony seemed to rend, like it had been torn open. The light swept gently over his whole body, from head to hoof, almost as if the world moved in slow-motion. Each place the light touched, it left a glowing outline of something which shimmered as he moved. His form disappeared for a brief moment in a blinding flash as the light reached the tip of his tail, then he reappeared.

His black outfit had been replaced; he was clothed in regal, golden armor. His head was covered with a full helm which enclosed his entire head, save for his mouth and eyes. A broom-crest sat above his head like the Royal Guard had, except his seemed to be made of spun gold. He had an emblem of his cutie mark on a slightly raised dais in the center of his forehead and his mane flowed out of the back of the helm through a hole. His neck, both front and back, was covered in interlocking plates that shifted when he moved. His chest, shoulders, sides, legs, and flank were covered with more of the interlocking plates and his tail flared out behind him, poking through the armor through a hole in the backside, while his underbelly and the backs of his legs were open and uncovered. His hooves were shod with thick, golden shoes which clanged metallically against the road. The armor was inscribed with flowing vine-like etchings which glowed dimly with red eldritch power. Compared to him, the armor of the Royal Guard looked like a paltry, poorly fabricated knock off.

Big Macintosh's whole body bulged with thick muscles and sinews, which rippled beneath his skin, where it was visible. His legs looked more like tree-trunks than appendages made for mobility. His speed increased fivefold, muscles straining for even more velocity. Big Macintosh felt incredible power flowing through his veins. He snorted and charged on ahead. His mind echoed around him and suddenly he understood, *'Ah couldn't use it before 'cause Ah didn't accept it!'* he realized. He lowered his head and turned to the side, throwing his shoulder into the monster's leone head.

The entire creature's body shook from the impact. The head Big Mac had hit, whipped back with a sharp crack. Just as he had intended, the creature fell to the ground, for a few moments at least.

A new revelation flashed into his mind, *'Two Earth ponies, two unicorns, and two pegasi! It's all of us! Fate must have brought us together! Ah have to call out each of them mahself in order for them to manifest!'*



Big Macintosh focused his attention on Lemon Lime who was in the greatest need. The, now outlandishly well built, Earth pony considered his friend, '*What character traits does Live Wire have that fit?*' he wondered. Big Macintosh thought on all of the times Lemon Lime had spoken of his patients, how he had to be willing to take it slow so they could recover. Everypony considered him impatient because he spoke so quickly but he was actually just excitable. Big Macintosh's mouth flew open as he realized which Element Lemon Lime represented.

He threw back his head and called out into the wind, hoping Lemon Lime could hear,

"Live Wire! You had to temper your excitable nature to help your patients recover! You're careful and calculating! You never act without thinking it through! You are the Element of Patience!"

Every stallion's attention was drawn to the ice cream shop. Valiant had just limped to the window when Big Macintosh had manifested. He had watched in awe as his friend became the Element of Acceptance. He turned his head back to the inside of the parlor. Its internal walls were illuminated by a bright glow. The stallions saw Lemon Lime's limp body lifted by some unseen force into the air. Lemon Lime was glowing like the sun. Lemon Lime floated back down to the floor in a standing position. The small unicorn's eyes were closed; Valiant couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

In a flash of green light, golden armor appeared around the little yellow unicorn's body, his cutie-mark adorned the helmet just below his horn. The armor was different from Big Mac's. It looked thinner, more streamlined; the armor was form-fitting, it hugged tightly against his coat. Lemon Lime's armor was embedded with crystals in various shapes and sizes, the largest of these adorned his chest, just below his neck, each glowing a dim yellow. Lemon Lime's body, instead of the massive bulk that Big Mac carried, was covered in lean muscle, sleek and toned. His horn crackled with unspent magic, sparks slithering up and down its length. His hooves carried not shoes, but metallic boots that matched the rest of the armor. Lemon Lime still didn't move, '*Is the armor the only thing holding him up?*' Valiant wondered.

Lemon Lime's eyes popped open and he drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Lemon Lime's eyes were narrowed and intense, his small body

now slightly larger from the new layers of muscle underneath. Valiant had to admit, the little guy was kind of intimidating in his armor. A hail of splintered chair and table fragments suddenly exploded outward as Lemon Lime streaked past Valiant. The smaller unicorn's legs were a blur of motion, he moved almost at the speed of thought, which for him was significant. The size of his body no longer mattered, he had the muscles to run at any speed he wished and the stamina to keep it up for quite a while. Lemon Lime charged the chimera but before he reached it, he just stopped. He stopped and took a ready stance.

Lemon Lime addressed Big Macintosh without turning his head, "I'll keep it distracted while you call out the others. I doubt I'm powerful enough to take it on by myself."

Big Macintosh focused his mind on Sea Blue next, *'Which one could he be? He knows how to read ponies. He's perceptive and observant. He's a councilor so he has to be able to . . .'* Big Macintosh cut himself off. The answer was staring him right in the face.

The red Earth pony called out to the two stallions behind him, "Sea Blue! You can tell what a pony's thinking by their body language alone. You are clever and perceptive! You can read ponies like a book! You are the Element of Discernment!"

Dr. Mend looked over to the unicorn stallion next to him and watched in awe as he transformed from a simple counselor into an Element of Peace. Sea Blue closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He reared back on his hind legs and threw back his head, hooves raking the air repeatedly. His front legs descended and struck the ground. A bright purple light sprung to life, at his hooves, like the first trickles of a new spring. The light slowly climbed up all four of his legs and washed up over him, bathing his entire body from the ground up. Sea Blue's armor was also different. Dizzying swirling patterns were carved up his legs, on his sides, and around his eyes, all glowing a dim purple. His horn was covered in a spiraling strip that looked to be made of a single piece of metal. His legs, chest, back, flank, and neck were completely enclosed by layered bands of golden metal. His hooves sported thick metal shoes which emitted a slight purple light from the bottoms. His cutie-mark was set into the plate across his head. His mane, tail, and eye color perfectly complimented the inscribed armor. The unicorn stallion's body had thickened, stretching out over his new muscle definition.

The councilor's eyes smoldered, literally looked like they were burning under his helmet.

The chimera shuddered and rose to its paws, glaring around in fury. Lemon Lime took a fighting stance, as intense as his gaze. The chimera whipped its heads back and forth, roaring loudly and raised one of its massive paws to swipe at the little unicorn.

Lemon Lime broke into a run, zigzagging in front of the great beast in a flurry of motion. The chimera seemed to go mad. It slammed its paws down furiously, trying and failing, to flatten the impetuous stallion. Sea Blue shot forward and joined Lemon Lime in his game of keep away. The chimera brought its jaws into play and began to try to bite the two unicorns. The key word being 'try'. It couldn't touch them.

Big Macintosh turned his attention to the medical pony with the black coat and white mane and tail, *'Dr. Mend is a tougher one. There are only three Elements left: Hope, Perseverance, and Forgiveness. He heals ponies and cures illness. What was it he was sayin' earlier when Valiant was complainin' to him?'* Big Mac's mouth curled up into a smile, the answer was simple, Dr. Mend had said it himself.

Big Macintosh roared loudly,  
“MEND! You had to learn to let go of your bitterness! You had hated yourself needlessly and it was killing you! You found your forgiveness and that's your Element. You are the Element of Forgiveness!”

The simple word rang in Dr. Mend's ears: Forgiveness. It was a solid truth to him now. It was what he had been missing all his life. Now that he had it, he felt like it was his world. So much could be accomplished through forgiveness. Mend lowered his head and focused on the picture of his grandparents holding him on their porch. The memory was the happiest one he had. It had already warmed his heart and now it gave might to his limbs.

Mend's mane and tail lit up like the sun, bathing him in white light. His mane and tail elongated and snaked around his whole body, encircling him completely. The two elongated embodiments of light withdrew, leaving behind his armor. Mend's armor looked like the layered scales of a dragon. Scales covered his legs, chest, back, and flank. White light seemed to want

to escape from between the scales, a dim glow came from behind each one. His neck was open in the front, while the back of his neck was covered with more of the shining scales. His head was enclosed by a plate helmet which sprouted his mane out of the top of his head in the back. His mane was pulled up into a tight knot which flowed down onto his shoulders. Mend felt, within himself, a strength and endurance the likes of which he had never imagined. He felt like he could cross the span of Equestria in one long run. He could see the edges of the helmet in the corners of his eyes; he knew his cutie mark was on his forehead.

Dr. Mend raised his head, a single tear ran down from his left eye, but he was smiling. The smile was a visual representation of what he felt inside. His world had changed. Valiant had brought him hope for the future, that there could be something better. Lemon Lime had shown him that time can heal wounds if you only had the strength of character to try. Sea Blue had seen past his cold exterior to the crying foal underneath, and had helped him see beyond his own perceived failings to the truth of the matter. Trooper had demonstrated how to never give up no matter how tough life can be, with enough determination you can do anything. Big Macintosh had shown him how to accept the love that was already there for him, provided by his family and friends. He owed them everything and he knew it.

"I owe you my new life." he whispered, "None can take that away."

Dr. Mend, sworn by oath to never offer harm to another pony, made his decision. He charged, bellowing a war cry, and launched himself bodily at the great beast arrayed against him and his friends. He galloped boldly into the fray. Sea Blue suffered an unfortunate blow to his side. The councilor's armor absorbed the hit and turned away the claws, but the laws of physics were unfeeling. Sea Blue flew, uncontrolled, straight toward a nearby white marble wall. Dr. Mend saw the blow land and altered his course. Dr. Mend knew he could never make the jump to catch Sea Blue so he decided to try something crazy. He changed his direction, pumping his legs harder, faster. He lowered his body closer to the ground and ran right up the wall. He took seven steps and launched himself off the wall aiming right at Sea Blue. The turquoise councilor looked up in awe. Mend caught Sea Blue's body against his undercarriage. Mend's momentum was overcome by Sea Blue's, throwing both stallions back toward the wall, but at a greatly reduced velocity. The two stallions hit the ground. Dr. Mend curled his body and rolled like a wheel, protecting the councilor. His armor seemed to

conform to any movement he made. The energy propelling them died off and Dr. Mend came up in a crouch with Sea Blue right next to him. The two stallions wasted not a moment and charged back into the fray.

Big Macintosh continued; the words came unbidden to his lips, "Trooper! You never gave up on finding your cutie-mark! You kept on, even when others would have quit trying! You were so determined you took up jobs at every place you could! You may never find your cutie-mark but you don't let that stop you! You don't allow yourself to give up! You are the Element of Perseverance!"

Above the other stallions, in the air, Trooper's wings flashed brightly, enveloped in cyan light. His feathers glowed as if seen from under water. The glow slowly seeped from his wing tips into the rest of his body, spreading like luminescent oil. It covered his wings then began spreading to his legs, back, chest, and flanks. His head was the last to take on the glow; the light slowly seeped up his neck and converged right between his eyes. In a blinding flash of cyan light, his armor formed over his body, it even covered the fronts of his wings in a layer of jointed plate. The front of his neck, his undercarriage, and the backs of his legs were set with lengths of tightly woven thin chains. The plates covering most of his body looked paper thin and light-weight, but supple and willowy; the perfect dichotomy of flexible and tough. The plates were shallowly etched with archaic hieroglyphs which continuously emitted a dim cyan glow. Instead of his cutie-mark, since he had none, a glowing infinity symbol adorned the forehead of his helmet. His hooves were shod with a quartet of dull spiked shoes. His body was thick with chorded muscle, the webs of flesh where his wings met his body were nearly as thick as his muzzle, and his neck was thick with sloping tendons and sinews.

Trooper whooped and dove down toward the chimera at incredible speed. He turned at the last moment and swept his hind legs down, keeping his momentum. He landed on the titan's goat head with an audible crunch and leapt back into the sky.

The chimera roared once again, drawing Big Mac's attention away from his last friend. The goat head reared back, drawing a deep breath. The head came down, quick as a striking snake, aimed at the only pony in its line of sight, upon which it could take out its wrath, Valiant.

Valiant had limped out to the middle of the street to gain a better view of the fight between his friends and the chimera. He had been keeping his weight shifted forward to take pressure off his injured hind legs. He had figured he was a safe distance away. He had figured wrong. He looked up just in time to see a gout of flame come spewing forth, out of the goat head's mouth, directly at him. Valiant acted as quickly as he could. He bolted toward the ice cream parlor, hoping to leap through the broken window and use the inside for cover. His injured back legs couldn't take the sudden strain and he tripped. He fell back, onto his injured flank and legs and had to try to drag himself to safety. He knew he could never make it in time. The other stallions were too far away to get to him.

Valiant closed his eyes and struggled to make his fore legs move faster. It was hopeless, he could never make it in time. Valiant felt a sudden, incredible impact on his flank, which was accompanied by a hefty grunt. Valiant's body surged forward into the air. He flew into the window of the ice cream parlor, safe. He turned his head just in time to see Evening Star. She was laying on the road, having fallen from where she shoved him. In half a second, their eyes locked. In the other half a second, she was engulfed by the flames.

Valiant watched as the flames died away, leaving behind melted rocks and the still, blackened form of what looked vaguely like a pony.

Valiant couldn't feel a thing, he was numb. He was only dimly aware that his friends had subsequently engaged the chimera in a battle that would have been worthy of legends. He didn't care. He drug himself out of the window, toward the body lying in the street. He didn't care that the still hot rocks were singing away the coat on his legs. It didn't matter to him. He drug himself over the roadway and up to the body in the middle of the street.

Valiant leaned down, nudging the still form with his muzzle, "Evening Star, get up." he urged, voice cracking, "You have to get up. You're not safe here. You have to go." he realized he was crying only because he left wet spots on the still smoking body, "Come on, get up. You have to fly away. It's dangerous." no matter what he said, she didn't get up.

Valiant's heart didn't break, breaking indicates being whole in the first place.

His heart didn't break.

It shattered into dust.

He let the tears come. He nuzzled the body underneath him in a way he had never dared to nuzzle any mare. He tilted his head and kissed her forehead tenderly, the singed hairs of her coat crumbling under his lips. He didn't want to leave her, should she awaken. His mind screamed at him to move, that he was in danger. He silenced the voice with extreme prejudice. He would have his one moment with her. He had missed any chance to be with Arabesque when she passed, he would be with Evening Star now, *'No pony should ever die alone.'* He sighed heavily, wanting to stay with her forever. He knew there was still a battle to be fought, still ponies to save. He would never give up hope, it was his life. He just wanted his one moment with his friend.

He nuzzled her body again,  
"There's a friend waiting for you Evening Star. Go to her. Go and rest." he whispered.

Valiant felt reason stir within himself, *'My friends still need me.'* he thought stoically, *'There is still hope for many more. I have to finish what I began.'* Valiant saw a golden light behind himself. It cast his shadow onto the ground. He turned his head. There they were, just like Big Macintosh had said.

His wings were back. They were long and beautiful beyond words. Valiant stretched them out experimentally. They complied, opening to an impressive span; more than triple the length of his old wings. He flexed the muscles in his shoulders. The wings complied, flapping swiftly. A surge of hope flared within Valiant's chest, *'My legs might be useless, but my wings are more than capable of compensating.'*

Valiant flapped his wings hard. He lifted off the ground easily. The wings were powerful, very powerful. He lifted into the air and turned to face the thing which threatened not only his friends, but innumerable ponies all over Canterlot. His eyes narrowed. He took off at the great beast in a flash of light, wings a blur behind him. Valiant flew like the wind, spurred on by

Evening Star's sacrifice. He gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes, a hoarse battle cry shredding its way out of his throat.

The cry was in ancient Equestrian, a language he had learned in Haysburg, “**VICORO AUT MORTUS!**” which, when translated, means 'victory or death'.

Big Macintosh turned and saw Valiant, wings and all, come charging toward the chimera,

“Valiant! You never gave up hope! You had hope that Dr. Mend would see what was right when you gave him the recipe for the potion! You had hope that you could rescue the fillies! You had hope, even after you were burnt and bleeding, that you could rescue Granny Smith! You had hope, even as you lay dying, that she could live! You never gave up hope, no matter what was arrayed against you! **YOU VALIANT ARE THE ELEMENT OF HOPE!**”

Valiant sailed past Big Macintosh on a direct course with the chimera. The chimera raised a paw to swat at the new threat. Valiant never changed direction. The two met with a resounding crack. The world stopped for the briefest of moments. The five Elements of Peace saw Valiant with his right wing extended over his head defensively, a mouth still opened bellowing in his cry, eyes narrowed dangerously. The chimera's paw, claws extended, was pressed down against the magical wing. Energy exploded outward, momentarily blinding the chimera in a nova of viridian light. The surrounding stallions watched as Valiant's armor formed itself around his body with an audible clang.

Valiant's armor was of tiny, tightly woven rings of the purest viridian (a mixture of light green and silver). The armor covered his chest, back, flanks, and neck; it clung onto his body tightly. Valiant's body had previously been athletically muscular, if a bit on the thin side, now it was like looking at a professional athlete. His chest and shoulders were thick with muscle definition, his flanks were chorded with sinews, and his back rippled with every movement. His wings were completely unadorned, they needed nothing. His legs were stilted in long, slender, jointed plates of viridian that left his hooves shod in prismatic shoes. His head was adorned with a streamlined helm, also viridian, made of hinged plates which left only his eyes visible. His cutie-mark crested the middle of his forehead, etched into the plates. None of his armor emitted any kind of a glow, instead it reflected the lights coming off his comrades.



Time returned to normal. Valiant turned in mid air, wings out flat and spun, delivering a sharp kick to the chimera's leone jaw. The blow landed with a small crunch of broken magical teeth.

The battle was joined.

The six Elements of Peace began attacking in a flurry of motion. Dr. Mend rushed in and turned, lashing out with his right hind leg. He slammed it into the titan's left paw, knocking out from under the great beast. Lemon Lime channeled magic into his horn and cast an illusory spell. Suddenly there were four Lemon Limes attacking the great beast, each acting independently. Each injury the chimera sustained from the illusion's hooves was small but numerous; more importantly, the injuries were real. The illusions seemed to be not so much illusions but simple extensions of Lemon Lime himself. It was a marvelous distraction and an effective tactic. Trooper flew up to the leone head and turned in mid air. Using his momentum to aid him, he placed his fore hooves on the leone head's muzzle and bucked out with both hind legs. This blow landed one hoof in each of its eyes. The chimera shrieked at the blow, throwing its head back. Valiant flew up into the air and dove down, fore hooves extended. As his fore hooves touched its muzzle he brought his hind legs up and compounded the blow, smashing the leone head into the road below with the terrible impact. Big Macintosh leapt onto the muzzle of the downed head and reared back on his hind legs. He brought down the full weight of his size and impressive muscle on his fore hooves. His hooves smashed into the top of the thing's skull sending out a small shockwave rippling through the surrounding road. The head cracked and muddy purple magic oozed from the cracks. The head didn't move again. Sea Blue lowered his horn and focused his magic. A lance of white-hot light appeared from the tip of his horn extending three feet. He gored the massive beast through its chest, nudging it back several paces. He pulled away, leaving a gaping hole in its chest which gushed out more muddy purple magic.

The chimera stumbled and fell onto its chest.

“One head is down! Focus on the goat head!” Sea Blue yelled.

Lemon Lime added to his statement,

“The goat head is tougher on its crown! Hit it from beneath and on the sides!”

Dr. Mend sprinted over to the goat head from the right and leapt into the air, somersaulted, and landed both his back hooves on the thing's jaw as his weight and muscle struck with a small thunderclap. His fore hooves made contact and he launched himself back onto the ground, landing, already at a gallop. Trooper flew in from the opposite side, angled down. He landed on his fore hooves and in the same movement launched himself back up, upside down. He hit the goat head's throat with a juicy crunch. Trooper pushed off and swooped out from underneath the head. Valiant came in right at the titan's muzzle and hovered in mid air. He lashed out with all four of his legs, raining down a long series of punishing blows on its muzzle tip. Liquid purple magic flew with each strike. Valiant retreated back as the goat head inhaled to breathe fire again. The breath took quite a bit longer than before, Trooper's hit had been sound. Lemon Lime saw the opening and dismissed the illusions, then focused on a new use for an old spell. The goat head opened its mouth and exhaled its fire. The fire struck an invisible barrier and curled back around, dousing the goat head in its own flame. It lowered its head to escape the fire and two ponies charged toward it at the same time from opposite directions.

Big Mac and Sea Blue darted in and bucked simultaneously from each side. The beast's lower jaw cracked loudly just as Trooper and Valiant crashed down onto the top of its head, driving it into the road with a sickening crunch. Lemon Lime released his former spell and closed his eyes, focusing his magic on a new spell, one he had just conceived. The little unicorn began to glow bright green. He opened his eyes and finished the spell. He appeared to the left of the goat head's muzzle tip and struck out with his left fore hoof, the impact sending the head to the right. Lemon Lime appeared on the right and lashed out with his right fore hoof, snapping the head back to the left. Lemon Lime appeared back in front of the thing's muzzle. Dr. Mend joined him in his final move. Together they bucked with both hind legs. The head jerked back into the air with a violent snap. The head seemed to go limp and fell forward slowly, ugly purple magic nearly spraying into the air.

“Get under the head! Buck when it gets close! Live Wire call it!” Sea Blue yelled.

The six Elements of Peace gathered in a group on the ground in front of the descending head,  
“Wait for it!” Lemon Lime said.

The head descended slowly, picking up speed as it neared the ground,  
“Wait for it!”

The head picked up speed, falling almost too fast to see, it was so close now,  
“Now!” Lemon Lime called.

Six powerful stallions bucked as one. Twelve hooves struck the titanic head in one swift motion. The head jerked back with a sound similar to that of a whip cracking. The magical flesh on the underside of the neck split, spilling muddy magic all over the ground. The chimera shimmered and dissipated in the fading glow of the rogue's power. After a moment, it was gone.

The rogue screamed as if she had her mind ripped in two. She clasped both of her hooves to her head and collapsed onto the ground shaking and sobbing. She was still screaming, even as Big Macintosh held her and Dr. Mend injected the sedative into her thigh. The prick of the needle didn't seem to register with her, she just screamed. The rogue screamed for only seconds after the sedative was in her blood-stream. She quickly succumbed to the potent nature of the chemicals and lay unmoving on the road, breathing evenly.

As soon as the rogue was down, the stallions slowly plodded back over to where a blackened body lay in the middle of the street, Valiant in the lead. Valiant's wings vanished back into oblivion as did the rest of the stallions' armors. No pony spoke a single word, they didn't have to. Dr. Mend, more out of habit than any necessity he felt, began taking Evening Star's vitals. The other five stallions watched silently and waited.

Dr. Mend reached for her inner thigh to take her pulse and his head snapped up,  
“She's alive!” he yelled, “Not only that, her pulse is strong . . . really strong.” he checked her breathing, “She's breathing just fine!” he said shocked, “She should be dead. Her pulse should be low and her breathing shallow in any case.” he shook his head puzzled, “I don't get it. She just seems like she's sleeping.”

"If she were sleeping, she would have been awakened by the sounds of our fight." Lemon Lime observed.

Valiant peered closely at the form in front of him, '*Something's different. Something's out of place.*' he knew it was true but he just couldn't put his hoof on it.

Realization struck him like a freight train,  
"Her mane and tail are starting to grow back!" he exclaimed.

The six stallions watched as her mane and tail did indeed regrow. They regenerated at an astounding rate, the stallions could actually see it happening. Inch by inch her mane and tail regrew, not in Evening Star's normal color, but is deep dark blue. The mane grew right up over her head obscuring it. Dr. Mend reached out a tentative hoof and brushed away her mane from her face. His hoof brushed away flakes of charred skin and coat, revealing a thick, lush, sable coat underneath, gleaming richly in the moonlight. On an impulse, Dr. Mend reached out again and cleared away her entire mane from her face and forehead. His hoof encountered something solid. Mend pushed back the mane and found himself staring at a long, black horn.

Lemon Lime's mind began piecing different things together; his eyes shot open,  
"Get back now!" he yelled suddenly.

The other stallions scooted back several paces,  
"Trooper, whip up a whirlwind around her, quickly!" Lemon Lime commanded.

Trooper took to the wing and flew in tight circles around Evening Star's body. He pulled up a small whirlwind in a few moments. Dust and ash flew in all directions, obscuring all sight of Evening Star. Trooper maintained his whirlwind for a few moments more then let it subside. He landed beside his friends as she whirlwind vanished into normal air. The six stallions looked on in awe, shock engrained into every face.

There, on the ground, lay Princess Luna.

# Chapter 11

The door to Lemon Lime's apartment cracked open slowly revealing the large frame of an impressively built Earth pony. Big Macintosh held the door for his smaller friend. The yellow unicorn backed through the doorway levitating the rogue in the air behind him. Big Macintosh quietly closed the door as the little physical therapist set the rogue down on his couch gently. Big Macintosh unbuckled his saddle-bags and slipped them off, several bottles of Valiant's sleeping potion clanked quietly inside.

"I wonder how long it will take for her to recover? I have no experience with this kind of thing. I mean, I've heard of C.M.E.S. and I know about it, but only in a basic sense." Lemon Lime sighed, "Having her summoned construct destroyed may have had an adverse effect on her total magic potential. If she retains all her power, I'm no match for her. Before the fight I thought I was, but I was wrong, very wrong. I am to her, in magical ability, what a mouse is to you, in strength. In all my calculations I'd forgotten to take one big factor into account. When a unicorn is suffering from stage 3 'Caster's Stroke' it's nearly impossible to keep casting spells. She was not only able to keep using it but to do so with more raw power than I have in total. While she was suffering from C.M.E.S. her magical power kept increasing every single time she used it. I'm not sure I'm making myself clear here. She's phenomenal. I've never heard of a unicorn this powerful except in ancient Equestrian legends. At least she's asleep now." Lemon Lime paused and turned his head toward Big Macintosh, "Any idea what Dr. Mend, Valiant, Trooper, and Sea Blue are going to do with Princess Luna?"

The huge earth pony just shook his head, "Nope." the random change of subject no longer disoriented the larger work pony.

Lemon Lime blew out an exasperated breath, "I'll put a pot of coffee on so I can stay awake and keep an eye on her. You can get some sleep if you want. I'll wake you up when I need to go to sleep. Sound good?"

Big Macintosh yawned hugely,  
"Ayup." he said over his shoulder as he made his way to Lemon Lime's  
back bedroom.

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Princess Luna felt her senses return to her slowly. She felt slightly cool from a gentle breeze, it was getting along toward winter after all. She felt a tiny bit fatigued. Her subconscious had taken over her magic when she had been engulfed by the chimera's flame. Her instinct had hardened the outermost layer of her skin and protected her easily from the intense heat. She had never been in any real danger. Even a dragon could little to harm an alicorn aside from making her look like she had been in an oven way too long. She opened her eyes and was greeted with three questioning faces, *'Guess the secret is out.'* she thought sourly, *'Might as well explain.'*

The Moon Princess raised her head slowly. Trooper lent her a leg as she rose to her hooves. Sea Blue was nowhere to be seen. Dr. Mend and Trooper bowed respectfully, but Valiant simply stood in place. He had a disbelieving look smeared so far through his face, it might have been natural. Princess Luna opened her mouth to speak, but Valiant rudely held up a hoof. He turned around and began walking away without a single word.

The Moon Princess was flabbergasted, nopony silenced her,  
"Stop." she commanded.

Her voice held an air of command which nopony could easily deny. She was one of only two alicorns in Equestria; hers was a power not to be trifled with. She knew her station and even though she rarely used it to force her will, she did so then. Valiant was far out of line in even thinking to silence her, *'Who does he think he is?'* Princess Luna thought to herself, *'I'll have to be careful with him. He had NO RIGHT to try to silence me, but he does deserve answers.'* she took a deep breath and let it out slowly, *'Remember Luna, patience is key. He's not whole yet, you know that. Be firm but don't be overbearing. Balance and restraint, always balance and restraint.'*

Valiant obediently halted, but did not turn around. He was angry and he didn't wish to risk snapping disrespectfully at a Princess; especially the Princess who had been so kind to he and Mend when they first arrived in Canterlot. He sighed curtly, still refusing to turn around. He felt a hurricane of emotions and feelings boiling inside himself. In his mind, Evening Star was dead. He couldn't be frank and open with a Princess; he couldn't be friends with her either. It was improper to even think such a thing, *'She's an alicorn, a Princess of Equestria. She's seen countless generations come and go. We are nothing more than the blink of an eye to them.'* Even if there was no romantic connection between them, his friend was gone. He hated himself for not figuring it out earlier, *'She never actually said she was a courier. She had insinuated it and let me draw my own conclusions. I should have seen it!'* he thought, *'Everything was just too perfect. Her knowledge, her experience, she knew too much. Why didn't I see it? She said she didn't have any friends, she mentioned her duty. How could I have been so blind?'* the answer came to him almost immediately, *'Because I trusted her.'* he thought bitterly, *'I trusted her. Should I expect the same thing from Celestia too?'*

Princess Luna spoke again disrupting his thoughts, "Look at me Valiant." she ordered quietly.

Valiant turned his head toward her, "Yes, your majesty?" he asked in the most neutral tone he could muster.

Princess Luna took a step toward him, "I had to ensure you would discover the truth. I felt it within you and Mend when we first met. I knew what you were, even if you did not. I did what I did for the good of Equestria. There are many things you do not yet understand. If I hadn't shown you the book, you would have never figured it out; none of you would have. Celestia had Twilight's entire lifetime to mold her mind and set her in the proper direction to discover the Elements of Harmony. I had a couple of days."

She took another step and stopped, "I cannot see the future, but I can sense souls and spirits. It is one of the fundamental differences between Celestia and I. She works indirectly, from the background. I intervene on a personal level, even if it happens to be in disguise. Our personality differences are reflected in the Elements we created. The Elements of Harmony are subtle and have far-reaching

effects; the Elements of Peace are obvious and direct. The perfect balance, one to compliment the other. No pony can deny their nature. I don't blame you for being upset, but have the strength of character to look past your feelings and think. How else could I have manipulated events to this end?" she asked.

Valiant remained silent so she continued,  
"Do you presume to know better than I? Celestia and I ruled for centuries before you were born. We will continue to do so after your descendents have passed on. Ten, twenty generations is but a breath to us, however the smallest of events can have lasting effects on Equestria. We ensure that Equestria survives by whatever means necessary. Sometimes that means misleading, sometimes that means manipulating; I can assure you it is never done in malice. This is your time to decide. Do you run and hide or do you stand and face reality? Do you harden your heart, or do you look past your feelings and work toward the greater good despite how you feel?"

Valiant turned his whole body toward Princess Luna and bowed stiffly,  
"I need time to think, your majesty."

Princess Luna nodded,  
"Very well. When you are ready, you know where to find me." turning back to Dr. Mend and Trooper she said, "You all have done very well. When the rogue awakens send word to the Royal Palace. If you need me, you can find me in my Tower Library. Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again."

With those final words Princess Luna took to the sky and soared off toward the Royal Palace.

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Sea Blue burst through the doors of Avalon's clinic. He had been to his home and not found his daughter. Logic dictated that the only other possible place for Ev . . . Princess Luna to take her would be the clinic so she could be given a clean bill of health since her ordeal was over.

Sea Blue galloped up to the receptionist's desk and leaned over it,  
"Was a little, pink unicorn filly brought in here earlier?" he asked.



The receptionist leaned her head back away from Sea Blue since his muzzle was a mere inch from her own,  
"Yes. She's with Dr. Avalon right now . . ."

"Take me to her. I'm her father." Sea Blue interrupted.

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Dr. Avalon had never been particularly comfortable with youngsters, but Patch was easy to deal with. Dr. Avalon had given her a checkup and checked her records, then decided to give the pink little unicorn her booster shots. Most fillies and colts cried and screamed when they saw a syringe, Patch just sat there quietly. She hadn't said much and had gone to sleep in Dr. Avalon's office within ten minutes.

Dr. Avalon was sitting quietly at her desk when Sea Blue burst through the door. He scanned the room and spotted his daughter sleeping peacefully on Dr. Avalon's visitor chair. He snuck over to her and knelt down in front of the chair. He leaned over and brushed her mane out of her face with his left fore hoof. The little filly stirred and cracked her eyes open. She smiled and leaned over, hugging her father.

Sea Blue hugged her back, holding her tightly,  
"I missed you baby." he whispered, eyes leaking.

"She's fine, Sea Blue. You're both free to go home." Dr. Avalon said quietly.

Sea Blue turned his head toward the Earth pony mare,  
"Thank you."

Dr. Avalon nodded uncomfortably,  
"It's fine. Go on home." she said in a quiet voice.

Patch eased back on the hug and regarded her father, smiling,  
"Come on Daddy. Let's go home."

Sea Blue couldn't agree more,  
"Right," he said kissing her forehead, "Let's go home."

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Valiant closed up Mrs. Soothe's apothecary and locked the door. He turned up the street and headed toward Lemon Lime's apartment. He thought to himself as he walked, *'I'm glad the owner of the ice cream parlor got compensated for the damage to her shop. I'm surprised the fight two weeks ago wasn't talked about in Equestria Daily. That news paper scoops up every possible story around here. I wonder if Princess Luna had something to do with that?'* the thought of the Moon Princess set his nerves on edge, *'Stop thinking about her!'* he scolded himself, *'She didn't actually lie to us, but it's a slim difference either way. She wasn't truthful with us in any case. She deceived us! I can't say she doesn't care, she did save my life. I thought she was our friend. She was just maneuvering us into doing what she wanted. She was using us. Why didn't she just order us to do it? We would have done it. Why didn't she just go after the rogue herself with the Royal Guards instead of us? I have to find out. First though, it's time to deal with a long-term problem.'*

Valiant climbed the stairs to Lemon Lime's apartment and knocked on the door politely. Big Macintosh opened it and let the royal blue pegasus in. Valiant's eyes went straight to the other ponies already in the front room. Trooper and Dr. Mend stood on either side of the couch, keeping watch over the rogue. Sea Blue lay in front of the couch with a pad and paper in front of him. Lemon Lime stood in the doorway that led into the kitchen leaning on the frame casually and Big Macintosh walked calmly over and stood right in front of the couch. They were preparing for the rogue to wake up.

The six stallions had discussed the scenario in great detail. They had prepared for every likely possibility. Lemon Lime had already cast a warding against powerful magic over the whole apartment complex. Simple spells would be easy to do but anything more than a minor levitation of less than five pounds would be impossible by any save for one of the Princesses. Lemon Lime had Sea Blue try several spells just to make sure. Lemon Lime had learned a new spell to gauge her power while she was asleep and had confirmed his suspicion. The backlash from having the chimera destroyed had damaged her magical potential to one fourth of what she originally had at the time. Lemon Lime estimated that he would be almost an even match for her but still didn't want to take any chances. They had discussed having a mare present to make the rogue perhaps more

comfortable, but had decided against it. They didn't have Evening Star around anymore and Dr. Avalon had to work.

Valiant was in a bit of a foul mood,  
"Is everypony ready?" he asked curtly.

"Ayup." Big Mac said.

"I am indeed." Trooper acknowledged.

"Yeah." Dr. Mend sighed.

"Let's get to the bottom of this." Sea Blue said.

"Get on with it." Lemon Lime said, apparently in a mood also.

Valiant nodded to Dr. Mend. Mend pulled out a syringe and injected the contents into the rogue's thigh. He removed the needle and capped the tip then put it back into his saddle-bags. The six stallions waited. They had already checked her eyes. The rogue's coloring had been back to normal for three days, they wanted a margin for error.

The rogue no longer looked emaciated, just thin. Her coat was light blue, her eyes were purple, and her mane and tail were such a light shade of blue as to almost look white. The six stallions had been taking turns keeping an eye on her. They had fed her well and she was filling back out nicely. The vast majority of the time after the first day they had been monitoring her in pairs for accountability sake. They had Dr. Avalon come in and check up on her and bathe her every couple of days. Dr. Avalon was only too happy to help.

The rogue stirred and moaned quietly. She raised her right fore hoof and rubbed at her eyes. The stallions stayed utterly silent so as not to startle her. She cracked her eyes open, wincing at the light. She blinked several times and opened her eyes completely. The first thing she did was to look around. Six grim, serious faces starred at her in silence. Sea Blue cleared his throat quietly but the rogue spoke first.

Her tone was haughty and snide,  
"The Great and Powerful Trixie demands to know what she is doing here."

Trooper pursed his lips and addressed her in a direct manner, "You would do well to keep a civil tongue right now. We are going to ask you some questions and you are going to answer them in a straight forward manner. Do I make myself clear?"

"Who are you to dare to speak to the Great and Powerful Trixie in such a way!?" she asked.

Trooper's face darkened significantly, "My name is Trooper. You broke all four of my legs when I saved an Earth pony mare you were levitating and threatening for her bits." Trooper pointed to Sea Blue, "You foalnapped his daughter after you gored him with your horn." Trooper then gestured to every stallion in the room, "You summoned a chimera and nearly killed us all. You were suffering from Critical Magical Exhaustive Stress. We risked our lives because of your irresponsibility! So, I reiterate. Mind. Your. Tongue!" he spat.

The so called 'Great and Powerful Trixie' kept her tone haughty but her eyes gave away her fear, "What is it you want to know?" she asked.

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"So you came to Canterlot to gain more power and learn forbidden spells just to humiliate Twilight, but you pushed yourself too hard and ended up with 'Caster's Stroke'?" Valiant asked angrily, "We nearly died because of your ego! Your wounded pride and lack of self control damn near murdered us! You've traumatized a filly, stabbed her father, caused severe injury to several ponies, AND almost destroyed half the city! What the hell is wrong with you! What were you thinking?" the wingless pegasus stomped his hooves on the floor angrily, "Are you crazy or just stupid! What kind of a unicorn are you? Unicorns are supposed to help other ponies with their magic not torment them with it! Good grief! A blind goose in a hailstorm would have more sense than you! We risked our lives to help a halfwit, idiotic, self-absorbed, egomaniac!"

Trixie opened her mouth to give a retort, but Valiant rounded on her first,

"DON'T!" he snarled, "Don't say anything! You've done enough already." he stopped and took a deep breath, "I'm leaving. I can't stay in the same room with this pathetic excuse for a unicorn anymore. She knows what she did and still doesn't care about who she hurt in the process! I'll see you back at the dorm Mend."

Valiant was furious. He felt himself welling up with rage. He knew he needed to leave or risk losing control. He had never wanted to hit something so badly in his life, *'How can she be so callous! We saved her from becoming a Vagabond and she doesn't even care! I did what I did by accident and I lost five years of my life!'* Valiant broke into a gallop. He didn't know where he was going and he didn't care. He needed to let off some steam before he really lost his temper. He ran until he was exhausted.

Valiant stopped to catch his breath and looked around, *'Oh great.'* he thought sarcastically, *'Exactly where I don't want to be.'* He looked up at the Tower Library and snorted angrily. He blew out a heavy breath, *'You know what? Fine. Let's do this!'* he thought.

Valiant walked up the stairs into the Library and shoved the right-side door open roughly. The librarian looked over at him and shushed him. Valiant motioned that she could stuff her notion of 'quiet' into an impolite place. The irate pegasus took the steps to the second floor two at a time. He spotted 'Evening Star' sitting in her usual spot next to the window. He strode up to her boldly and plopped himself down in front of her.

"Yes?" Princess Luna asked quietly without looking up.

"Since you look like Evening Star, should I address you like Evening Star or as Princess Luna?" Valiant asked shortly.

"Address me as you see me." she responded.

Valiant chuckled humorlessly,  
"If I were to do that, I would say quite a number of things I would never say to either a Princess or a friend."

Princess Luna set her book down and closed it, starring at Valiant levelly,

"The way others treat you never dictates how you have to respond. That decision is yours alone. I never said you had to stop treating me like a friend. You assumed that yourself and this time I didn't mislead you in the slightest. If you can't be civil, then I don't have to listen to you."

"Go ahead then, run away. That's your option as a Princess." Valiant retorted bitterly.

Princess Luna in disguise rose to her hooves,  
"I do not have to explain myself to you, nor do I require your approval. I would have thought that as one outcast to another we would have a common ground. We can still be friends Valiant, but I refuse to take insult from you or anypony else. You can treat me as an equal or as a Princess, I don't care which."

Princess Luna stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to address Valiant one last time,  
"Ask yourself this question though: why are you angry?"

The Moon Princess departed, leaving Valiant alone with his thoughts.

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Dr. Mend opened the door to the dorm room and stuffed the key back into his saddle-bags,  
"Valiant?" he called.

The room was silent and the hour was late. The five stallions had spent the remainder of the day dealing with Trixie and the official paperwork which was included in the event of turning her over to Princess Celestia. Celestia had explained that she and Luna had discussed the whole issue with the rogue over the course of a week and Celestia had eventually agreed to keep the news from the Royal Guards. Said Guards were not happy to find out they had been left out of the loop but refrained from treating the stallions poorly. They had taken Trixie into custody and departed quickly after all the paperwork had been completed, *'Who knew Celestia already had official forms for the apprehension of dangerous ponies?'* Mend wondered, *'Hmm, I don't see Valiant . . .'* he stopped as he noticed Valiant's belongings were missing.

Mend stopped dead in his tracks and looked around the dorm room. Valiant's bed had been made neatly and his desk was devoid of any personal effects. Mend saw a piece of parchment on his own bed and walked over to it. The paper was not rolled or sealed. Mend read the parchment, eyes growing wide. He turned and galloped off back to Lemon Lime's apartment with the note held in his muzzle.

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Mend read the note aloud to the gathered stallions in the apartment, "To Mend, Live Wire, Big Macintosh, Trooper, and Sea Blue: I spoke with 'Evening Star' in the Library after I left the apartment. She presented a question to me that I hadn't the mind to think of myself. I'm furious, but I don't know why. I spent several hours in the Library trying to figure it out but I came up with nothing. I feel this is something I have to figure out on my own. Please don't be upset with me. I just need some time to think. I won't say where I'm going and please don't come looking for me. Don't worry, I'll be back when I figure this out. I simply need some time for 'me' right now. I know it's selfish but this is something I need to do. I'll come back and do the courses when I'm done. If you speak to Princess Luna, tell her I'm not sorry for being upset, but I do apologize for being rude.

Best Wishes,  
Valiant"

Sea Blue's eyebrows furrowed together in thought; he began pacing, giving voice to his thoughts, "He repeats himself in different words several times. He's trying to convince himself, not us. He feels like he's been robbed of several years of his life because of a mistake, while Trixie seems to have gotten off free for everything she's done, even though he has no idea what her punishment is. He was looking for a reason to be angry. He probably realized that, and he doesn't want to risk taking it out on us by mistake. He feels betrayed by Princess Luna and doesn't know how to deal with it. He doesn't want to be angry with her but he still feels angry in general and she's the only one who he can be upset with right now. He's got a lot of bitterness pent up inside him, but instead of staying here where we can help him, he runs away. He feels inadequate and doesn't feel worthy of the effort. He's been acting like he has confidence, but it's all been an act so we wouldn't worry."

Sea Blue paused and turned to the rest of the stallions,  
"So we have two issues here. One, he doesn't want to risk exploding on us because he's angry, he wants to protect us. Two, he doesn't feel that he's worth the effort of us helping him. I think there's one more aspect here; the root of the problem is his identity. He's been helping everypony else around him, like he's good to go but in reality he's been balancing on the edge of a knife this whole time. He spent so much time hating himself he lost his own identity. He lost it until he did something right. Once he succeeded at something, he found a temporary sense of it. He thought he was alright and wanted everypony to think that as well. He went off only partially healed and went back into the world until he encountered a big let-down . . . "

Sea Blue looked up quickly,  
"He was in love with Evening Star!" he said suddenly, "No, he was in love with the thought of having somepony to love. He needed to feel loved so he could find out who he was. If foals have a solid support system they can find themselves, it's like getting your cutie-mark, but on a more profound level. He used Arabesque as his support system, but when she died, he lost that. When he met 'Evening Star', he found it once more. When she turned out not to be real, his false support system came tumbling down around him. He realized, on some level at least, that he'd been lying to everypony, himself included. The realization caused a chain-reaction of anger that he unknowingly projected outward at everypony around him who did something he saw as wrong. He knows what happened; he's out trying to find his support system again."

"But why not just use us and his friends back in Ponyville?" Mend asked,  
"We're here for him too."

Lemon Lime's eyes popped open wide,  
"If he feels that he can't trust the pony he loved then maybe he thinks he can't rely on us either. In his mind we might let him down just like she did."

Sea Blue nodded and continued,  
"That makes sense. He lost his identity when he became a Vagabond. When somepony took his cutie-mark, that compounded the issue. He got a small part it back when Rarity tattooed it back on him, but he's still missing something. He has no sense of his original identity because nopony here has a true sense of who that was. A type of love is what destroyed him in the first place. He wants love, but a type that he doesn't think we can give



him. He wants the love of a family. He's only known one family in his whole life . . . Haysburg! He's gone back to Haysburg to find the love that he lost! The whole village was his 'family' and they rejected him! He wants that back! Instead of using us to find that love and support, he went back to the first ponies he saw as family! That's it, it has to be! They loved him for . . . what, fifteen, twenty years? He has a stronger connection with them than he does with us! The disappointment may have been greater, but one instance vs. two decades of acceptance is a big difference."

Big Mac's face drained of all color,  
"Ah don't see that reunion ending well."

Trooper agreed,  
"Neither do I. If they treat him poorly though, wouldn't he come back to us because we didn't abandon him?"

Sea Blue shook his head,  
"Nope. Not if he doesn't trust us. What we need to do is gather everypony who cares about him and find him. We have to convince him that he can use us as his support system. We have to show him that we're his family now. Once he sees that he's already loved, he'll be able to come around."

Lemon Lime was the first one to break the silence,  
"I have to go pack."

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Trooper landed on the draw bridge of the Royal Palace, it was considered extremely rude to fly over the threshold. Earth ponies and unicorns had to go in on hoof so equal treatment dictated that pegasi do the same. Trooper trotted up to the two Royal Guards who stood flanking the huge wooden doors leading into the Royal Palace.

Trooper cleared his throat,  
"I would like to request an audience with Princess Luna as soon as possible."

The two white pegasi in golden armor didn't move a muscle so Trooper repeated himself,

"Excuse me. I would like to request an audience with Princess Luna please."

The two guards remained still as statues.

Trooper bristled,  
"Look, she knows me. Just tell her that Trooper is here to see her. She said we could visit her. This is important."

The two guards still didn't move.

Trooper was starting to become rather upset,  
"I say, you two blighters are not the least bit helpful at all are you?" Trooper sighed heavily, "Look gents' I am one of the bearers of the Elements of Peace and I need to speak with Princess Luna immediately."

The guard on the right of the door suddenly spoke,  
"We're not stopping you."

Trooper blinked, dumbfounded, and strode right up to the doors. He looked left and right. The guards hadn't moved. Trooper shrugged and pushed the doors open and strode inside closing the doors behind himself.

Trooper marveled at the interior of the Royal Palace. It was beautiful. High vaulted archways made for wide open corridors, all made of white marble or covered with gold leaf. Trooper had no idea where to go so he just kept going in a straight line. Up ahead of him was another pair of double doors, these seemingly made of solid gold and inset with extravagant patterns of jewels. Trooper pushed open the doors and entered a massive throne room. Princess Luna sat on the throne on a raised dais at the far end of the chamber.

Trooper trotted up to the base of the throne and observed the two Royal Guards standing motionless on either side of the stairs leading up to the throne. He opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly realized that Princess Luna had descended to meet him face to face.

Trooper bowed deeply and waited to be acknowledged,  
"Rise Trooper. What is it you wish to talk about?" she asked.

Trooper rose and addressed her politely,  
"Your majesty, what is the proper manner with which to address you?"

Princess Luna chuckled lightly with a wing to her mouth,  
"You may be informal since we are already friends."

Trooper nodded politely,  
"Valiant's gone. We think he went back to Haysburg."

"I knew he would. I saw it in him when we last spoke. I must change the subject though. Tell me Trooper, why do you still consider me a friend?" Princess Luna asked.

Trooper gave the question some serious thought before answering,  
"In all truth, it is rather difficult to consider you a friend. I first knew you as . . . somepony else, then I discover you are in fact . . . who you are. It makes it difficult to relate to you."

Princess Luna cocked her head,  
"What do you mean? I've never treated you differently nor have asked for you to treat me differently. You have to learn to take me at my word. I may mislead sometimes, but I do not lie. I don't want any of you to treat me any differently then when you knew me by another name. Do you understand what I mean?"

Trooper nodded,  
"It is still difficult to think of you as anything other than a Princess. The simple fact is that there is a difference now. You are an alicorn. Not a single pony knows the lifespan of an alicorn; leastwise not that I have ever heard. That fact alone makes it nearly impossible to relate to you. You have nearly infinite magic and you have wings. You can suffer the most terrible injuries and apparently shrug them off as if they were nothing. You are a goddess for all intents and purposes. How can a mortal possibly relate to an immortal?"

"Neither Celestia or I are immortal, but I'll thank you to keep that to yourself. Trooper, we share the same needs as regular ponies: air, food, water, sunlight, and a place to live. The only real difference is that we have a few more natural gifts and we chose to watch over regular ponies."

Princess Luna paused briefly, "I initially thought you were here to ask about what Celestia and I did with 'the Great and Powerful Trixie'"

Trooper scratched his head,  
"Now that you mention it, I have been wondering."

Princess Luna smiled mischievously,  
"We decided that a large dose of the proverbial 'humble pie' would do her some good. We set her to work as a janitor cleaning the entirety of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. She is free to leave at any time but we placed a nullifier collar on her horn to limit the amount of magic she has access to. If she faithfully works in the school for one full year we will review her progress and consider lifting the collar off her horn. She knows that if she tries to remove it by herself or have somepony else do so it will nullify her magic entirely until one of us restores it to her. I think she'll do well and I see her having it off in one year. She's not nearly as confident as she acts. She feels the need to belittle other ponies to make herself feel better when she's actually quite talented. I have to admit she developed a great deal of finesse and control over what magic she was born with and her current potential is quite good. She'll never equal Twilight but neither will Live Wire and he deals with it just fine."

"So what should we do about Valiant?" Trooper asked.

Princess Luna put her right wing over Trooper's shoulder,  
"You already know the answer, you're just second-guessing yourself. Have some faith, Trooper. Follow your heart, as cliché as that sounds. You've followed your heart thus far in life and while you don't have your cutie-mark yet, you will find it. You did the right thing when you saved that mare from Trixie and you will do the right thing now."

Trooper nodded as if he had been expecting her answer,  
"Thank you Pri. . . Thank you Luna. Till next we meet." he finished with a flourishing bow.

"Till next we meet Trooper." Princess Luna said, inclining her head slightly.

As Trooper galloped out of the throne room, Princess Luna sat back down on the throne,

"And good luck to you Valiant. We will meet again someday, my champion." she whispered.

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*Dear Twilight Sparkle,  
I am afraid I have yet to make your acquaintance, but rest assured I am a friend and we also share a mutual friend. Valiant has disappeared but we think we know where to find him. I am of the belief that we should meet in Ponyville as we have much to discuss, not the least of which is the location of our, afore mentioned, friend. I am being accompanied by four stallions and one filly all of which, I believe, will end up taking up residency in Ponyville on a long-term basis. We will arrive in seven days and we wish to meet you and the other Elements of Harmony as soon as possible afterward. We look forward to meeting you in person.*

*Sincerely yours,  
Trooper*

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## The End of Trials of the Elements

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# Elements of Equestria

## Chapter 1

Six mares sat on the floor of the Ponyville Library listening to a baby dragon read from a scroll,  
"Dear Twilight Sparkle,  
*I am afraid I have yet to make your acquaintance, but rest assured I am a friend and we also share a mutual friend. Valiant has disappeared but we think we know where to find him. I am of the belief that we should meet in Ponyville as we have much to discuss, not the least of which is the location of our, afore mentioned, friend. I am being accompanied by four stallions and one filly all of which, I believe, will end up taking up residency in Ponyville on a long-term basis. We will arrive in seven days and we wish to meet you and the other Elements of Harmony as soon as possible afterward. We look forward to meeting you in person. Sincerely yours, Trooper"*

"Who the heck is this Trooper guy?" Applejack asked, "Ah ain't never heard of him."

"Neither have I, Applejack." Twilight added, "But he seems to know Valiant, so I think it would be wise to hear him out."

Rarity's lips pursed, thinking,  
"What I would like to know is how he knows we're the Elements of Harmony, darling. We don't precisely make that a well-known fact, now do we?"

Rainbow Dash took to the air, as she was apt to do,  
"Why is he bringing four stallions and a filly with him? And what did he mean 'on a long-term basis'? Does he mean they plan on living here or something?"

"Ooh ooh ooh! Does that mean . . . " Pinkie Pie began.

Twilight turned her head quickly,  
"Not right now Pinkie. We love your parties, but this sounds serious."

The resident party pony didn't seem fazed in the slightest,  
"O.K. That just means I have more time to plan for it!"

A small voice spoke up in the midst of the commotion,  
"I wonder why Valiant ran away? What could have happened to make him do that?" Fluttershy asked.

Twilight rose to her hooves,  
"I don't know, Fluttershy, but we need to be ready to receive them. They'll need a place to stay and Ponyville doesn't have any hotels."

Rarity cleared her throat,  
"Ahem. I have enough floor-space inside my boutique for a couple of them at least."

"We've got some room in our new house and the barn too." Applejack volunteered.

"Thank you, girls. The boutique, the farm, and the Library here, should be enough room to house them until they get settled in . . . " Twilight was interrupted by Spike belching out another scroll.

The little assistant caught the scroll and unrolled it,  
"It's from Big Macintosh! Can I read it, Applejack?" Spike asked.

"That's 'May I read it, Applejack'" Twilight corrected her assistant.

"Sure thing Spike." Applejack replied.

Spike cleared his throat,  
*"Dear Applejack, I'm on my way home with some friends. If Twilight hasn't already told you, we have a problem with Valiant and we need someplace for our new friends to sleep. I promise I'll explain when I get home. Something big has happened. I can't explain it to you except in person. See you soon sis, Macintosh. P.S. Tell Applebloom and Granny Smith hi for me."*

Applejack's face contorted in confusion,  
"Now what the hay is that supposed to mean?" she asked nopony in particular.

Twilight turned and addressed the assembled mares,  
"I guess we'll have to wait and see. We have seven days to prepare so let's get t it."

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Rainbow Dash flew down to where her friends were waiting in front of the Ponyville Library,  
"I see them! They've got Big Mac and Dr. Mend with them and they're pulling a huge cart full of stuff."

Twilight addressed her airborne friend,  
"How far away are they?"

Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her mouth and stuck out her tongue to the side,  
"I'd say ten minutes, twenty at most. Should I go introduce myself?"

Rarity spoke loudly to the cyan pegasus,



"We don't want to overwhelm them, Rainbow Dash. Why don't we just let them come to us?"

"Um, *question*." Dash said bluntly, "How are they supposed to know where to meet us, huh? No pony bothered to make *that* arrangement."

Twilight blinked, Rainbow Dash had a point,  
"Let's go meet them together. That way there won't be any misunderstandings." Twilight looked around, "Has anypony seen Pinkie Pie?"

Applejack and Rarity looked at each other worriedly,  
"Uh oh." they said in unison.

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Patch had been very sad to have to leave her friends in Canterlot. She rode on her father's back moping. Big Macintosh had offered to pull the cart holding Lemon Lime, Sea Blue, and Patch's belongings. Trooper flew overhead carrying his meager possessions in his saddle-bags. Dr. Mend led the way in front with Lemon Lime right behind him. Sea Blue walked beside Big Mac so they could talk.

Patch had kept quiet, that is until a bright pink pony's head with a frizzy mane poked out from underneath the canopy of the cart Big Macintosh was pulling,  
"Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie! Are you one of Valiant's friends?" she asked cheerfully.

Patch was so startled she nearly fell off her father's back,  
"I'm Patch. I don't know Valiant very well yet. Are you one of his friends?"

"Who are you talking to sweetie?" Sea Blue asked turning his head.

He saw Pinkie's head sticking out of the covered cart and almost tripped himself,

"Oh hello."

"Pinkie Pie," Big Macintosh addressed without looking, "Why don't you come on out and say hi like a normal pony?"

Pinkie blew playful raspberries in the red stallion's direction, "Because that's no fun! Normal is so booooooooooring! And I'm all about having fun!"

"You'll have to excuse Pinkie." Big Mac said to Sea Blue, "She's uh, a bit random."

"I like her!" Patch said excitedly.

Pinkie took the statement as encouragement, "Ooh! Do you like parties? I love parties! I mean, there's nothing like a good party to make you smile! And you looked so sad when I first saw you. I wanted to throw a biiiiiiiiiiig party to welcome you to Ponyville but Twilight said I had to wait and I said that was fine because then I could plan for it more and more! Ooh you should see what I have in mind! It's going to be the biggest, most awesomest party ever! Normally I only throw a party for one pony, but now I get to throw a party for FOUR new ponies, and that means I need four times the cake and four times the decorations and four times the games! It's going to be the most epic party ever! Wow! I never thought I'd use that word! I've been meaning to for a while now but I never had the chance to! Haha! Epic, epic, epic, epic, epiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiic!" Pinkie had thrown her fore hooves up in the air for the last part and subsequently over balanced and fell out of the cart.

Not missing a beat she sprung back up onto her hooves giggling, "Hehehehehehehehe! Oops! I do that sometimes!"

Sea Blue looked like he had no idea how to handle the pink ball of energy, Patch loved her, "You sound like Live Wire." she giggled.

Pinkie cocked her head to the side,  
"Live Wire? Which one is he?" Pinkie asked bouncing along with the small procession.

Patch pointed to Lemon Lime,  
"He's the unicorn with the yellow coat and green mane and tail talking to Dr. Mend."

Pinkie vanished right before Patch's eye only to suddenly and impossibly appear out of a bush right next to Lemon Lime,  
"Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie!" she greeted energetically.

Lemon Lime was stricken, fortunately Dr. Mend saved him by enveloping Pinkie in a big hug,  
"Pinkie Pie! I've missed you, you ball of fun!" he said uncharacteristically.

Pinkie was stunned, Dr. Mend never hugged anypony,  
"Um, are you feeling alright Dr. Mend?" she asked cautiously.

The black Earth pony smiled back at her,  
"I'm fine Pinkie Pie." Dr. Mend said turning to Lemon Lime, "This is Pinkie Pie, she's the Element of Laughter."

Trooper flew down to join the conversation,  
"She is one of the Elements of Harmony? Wahoo, talk about opposites!" he chuckled, "Wait, if she is the Element of Laughter then that means you are her . . ."

Dr. Mend made a zipping motion with his hoof across his mouth,  
"Let's wait until we're there first, then we can explain."

Pinkie Pie wriggled out of Dr. Mend's grip and bounced in place,  
"Is it a guessing game? I love guessing manes! You're my . . . friend? No I already know that. Are you my . . . agent? No that doesn't make any sense.

Are you my . . . " she continued on making wild and unfounded guesses until the procession reached the northern entrance to Ponyville where five mares and one baby dragon waited for them.

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Dr. Mend, Lemon Lime, Trooper, Big Macintosh, Patch, and Sea Blue came to a halt several paces from Twilight, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy with Pinkie Pie bouncing up and down between the two groups. Trooper had to time his landing so he and Pinkie wouldn't collide.

The royal blue pegasus performed an elegant, flourishing bow to the gathering of mares,  
"I am Trooper." he introduced, "Whom do I have the distinctive honor of addressing ladies?"

Fluttershy squeaked and huddled behind Applejack's tail. Applejack, on the other hoof, just rolled her eyes at the dramatic pegasus. Rainbow Dash stared in utter disbelief while Twilight blinked several times in rapid succession. Rarity, seeing the state of her friends decided to break the ice and stepped forward.

The fashion designer cleared her throat and held out a perfectly manicured hoof toward Trooper,  
"You may call me Rarity sir. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Trooper stepped up to the white unicorn and politely kissed her offered hoof,  
"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you."

Rarity blushed but couldn't help to overhear Rainbow Dash whisper,  
"Aw great, not another one!"

Trooper seemed to take notice of the comment,

"Pardon me miss Rarity."

Trooper took to the air and faced Rainbow Dash face to face,  
somehow bowing in mid-air,

"The famous Rainbow Dash I presume."

"Don't even think about kissing me!" she said defensively.

Trooper looked offended but decided to repay tit-for-tat,  
"No indeed. I only plant these lips where they are wanted and the hoof of a lady is offered. Thus far, I have only been introduced to a single *lady*."

The minor insult was not lost on Rainbow Dash,  
"What the hay is that supposed to mean?"

Trooper smiled mischievously,  
"Beauty is as beauty does, nothing more."

Rainbow Dash bristled at the insinuation,  
"Are you calling me ugly?"

Trooper waved a hoof in her general direction while turning his head,  
"Not in the least! In point of fact, I find you to be the very epitome of lovely. I am merely insinuating that if you wish to be treated like a lady you should act like one and not like an over-amped track star with something to prove. It is never a poor thing to utilize manners when making a first impression, and might I add that your first impression was not so courteous nor particularly welcoming."

Rarity leaned over to Twilight and whispered,  
"I think I'm in love!"

Spike, upon hearing the comment addressed Trooper,  
"Hey! Why not come on down here and meet the rest of us?"

Twilight turned he head and whispered to her passenger,  
"Spike! That was rude!"

Trooper landed in front of Twilight,  
"You would be Twilight Sparkle, would you not?"

Twilight shook he head,  
"Uh, yes I am. It's a pleasure to meet you Trooper. Now if you and your friends would care to join us, we'll take you to the Ponyville Library so we can all make proper introductions."

Trooper brightened at the idea instantly,  
"A capital notion! However I must consult my compatriots. I am not in any kind of position to make decisions for them."

Trooper turned to head back to the others but had to step out of the way as Big Macintosh casually walked past him,  
"Let's meet at the Library like Twilight said."

The others were already moving along behind the huge Earth pony.

Trooper shrugged and turned back to the waiting mares,  
"It seems as though the decision is unanimous. Lead the way miss Twilight!"

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Lemon Lime was a shaking, stuttering mess. He had never been around so many pretty mares before, not to mention that one of them was a former crush of his. The twelve ponies and one baby dragon gathered on the floor of the Library.

Once everypony was seated, Twilight took charge,  
"Introductions first. We already know Dr. Mend, Big Macintosh. Trooper why don't you finish your introduction?"

Trooper rose to his hooves and inclined his head to Twilight,  
"A delightful idea. How about for each of us, somepony meet us in the middle so all can hear?"

Applejack rose to her hooves and trotted up to Trooper,  
"Mah name's Applejack. Pleased to meet ya Trooper. You wouldn't be offended if'n Ah just wanted to shake hooves instead of a kiss would ya?"

Trooper bowed his head,  
"Not at all. Even the prerogative of a gentlecolt to bend to the wishes of a pretty mare." he said shaking Applejack's hoof.

Pinkie Pie bounced up next as Applejack sat back down,  
"Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie!" she said extending her hoof.

Trooper closed his eyes and bent down to kiss her hoof politely. Trooper's lips met something metallic. He opened his eyes just in time to see an electric buzzer in front of his muzzle. The gathered ponies shielded their eyes as Trooper's entire body lit up like a light pole. His legs and torso flew up into the air and his mane and tail frizzed out as his skeleton shone through his skin. Pinkie Pie withdrew her hoof and giggled. Trooper lay on the floor with smoke rising from his mane and tail. Rainbow Dash and Sea Blue laughed uproariously at the sight.

Pinkie bounced away with a simple comment thrown over her shoulder,  
"You shouldn't always be so proper. Not everypony understands it. Lighten up and have some fun."

Trooper groaned and sat up slowly, *'Mark one point for Pinkie Pie. She was defending Rainbow Dash and that threat, while playful, was still pretty obvious. That filly could be dangerous if she put her mind to it. I need to make sure I stay on her good side.'* he thought. In truth Pinkie meant no

threat at all, threats were not her style, but Trooper had no way of knowing that.

Trooper rose to his hooves and looked around, waiting for one more mare to come forward. He looked around but only saw five mares. After a moment of silence a mass of pink mane and custard colored body slowly inched her way out from behind Applejack and shuffled her way forward. Trooper remembered Valiant saying that Fluttershy was very timid. He laid down on the floor and lowered his head a bit to seem less intimidating.

Fluttershy finally reached him and laid down next to him, "I'm Fluttershy." she said quietly.

Trooper raised his head slightly, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Fluttershy. My name is Trooper. I will let you rise first so I do not startle you."

Fluttershy rose and hid back behind Applejack. Trooper rose to his hooves and sat back down with the other stallions, nudging Sea Blue on the way. Sea Blue rose with Patch and trotted to the center of the room. Patch slid off her father's shoulders and landed on the floor.

Twilight approached the pair first, "My name is Twilight Sparkle. I'm the Librarian here in Ponyville. This," she said indicating the purple and green baby dragon sitting glumly on the stairs, "Is Spike. Pleased to meet you Sea Blue." she said extending her hoof.

Sea Blue shook her hoof, "I'm Sea Blue and this is my daughter Patch." he said shaking Twilight's hoof.

Little Patch looked up at Twilight, eyes wide, "Are you one of the Elements of Harmony?" she asked.



Twilight's eyebrows arched,  
"Yes I am. All of us are. I'm the Elements of Magic. How did you know that?"

"My daddy and the other guys talk about the Elements of Harmony all the time." Patch said turning to her father, "Is she the one Daddy?"

Sea Blue smiled down at his daughter,  
"No, sorry sweetie."

Twilight's interest had been piqued,  
"Am I the one, what?"

Sea Blue smiled knowingly,  
"We'll explain it after the introductions are over. I promise."

Twilight was not to be denied,  
"There's something fishy going on here." she said suspiciously, "You already know the rest of our names and I don't think Fluttershy can take too many more introductions today. Why don't you just tell us about yourself?"

Sea Blue shrugged as Twilight sat back down,  
"I'm Sea Blue and this is my daughter Patch. We're from Canterlot. I'm a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, and councilor." he turned to his daughter, "Would you like to add anything sweetie?"

Patch just waved at the gathered mares happily,  
"Hi!"

Patch received several waves back then the pair walked back to the line of stallions. Sea Blue nudged Lemon Lime to head on to the center of the room. The poor yellow unicorn was practically shaking with fear. He stood up and walked to the center of the floor with his head down.

Lemon Lime raised his head, pupils the size of pinpoints, and tried to speak,  
"H . . . h . . . hello. M . . . my . . . nam . . . name's . . . Lemon . . . Lime." he sputtered then bolted back to the other stallions.

Twilight felt like she knew him from somewhere, but other things were already pressing on her mind,  
"Now that the introductions are finished, would somepony please tell me what is going on? Specifically, why Patch asked you if I was 'the one'?"

Sea Blue smiled, he loved being elusive,  
"She was asking if you were the one I'm supposed to protect. The answer is 'no'."

Twilight was not pleased with the vague answer,  
"Protect?" she asked openly.

Dr. Mend sighed heavily and rose to his hooves. He strode to the middle of the room and planted himself squarely,  
"Each of us is supposed to safe-guard one of you, one of the Elements of Harmony. We have the responsibility to keep you safe from anything that might threaten your safety. We only recently became aware of this responsibility when we had to subdue and capture a rogue unicorn who was suffering from stage three 'Caster's Stroke'. We formulated a plan to engage her but she was . . . resistant. We managed to back her into a corner but she summoned a chimera and put it on the offensive against us . . ."

Twilight interrupted Dr. Mend,  
"A chimera!" she shouted, "She summoned a chimera? That's forbidden magic, how did she know the spell? I don't even know that spell!"

"She learned it specifically to use against you, Twilight. I hadn't seen her before, because I was in my clinic for the 'Ursa Minor incident' but I saw the

aftermath. Her name was Trixie. We managed to defeat the chimera and subdue her with a great deal of teamwork."

Twilight was dumbstruck,  
"How! How did you defeat a chimera!?" she nearly shrieked.

Dr. Mend turned and looked back to his friends, motioning for them to join him. Big Macintosh, Sea Blue, Lemon Lime, and Trooper joined Dr. Mend forming a line facing the Elements of Harmony.

Dr. Mend continued,  
"We are the Elements of Peace." he said simply.

Twilight was utterly confused,  
"Elements of Peace? What are you talking about?"

"Yeah!" Rainbow Dash said taking to the air angrily, "What kind of prank is this? There's only one set of Elements and that's us! The Elements of Harmony!"

"Big Macintosh, what kind of foolishness is this?" Applejack addressed her brother.

"Tain't no foolishness, sis. We're the real deal." Big Mac said openly.

Lemon Lime didn't want to waste any more time hearing everypony arguing. He closed his eyes and focused his mind. He had never tried to voluntarily call his Element out before, 'Remember focus on memories of patience.' he thought. He felt the power slowly beginning to build inside himself as the argument around him became more and more heated.

"We are telling you the truth!" Trooper bellowed.

"I must say, I find this incredibly difficult to believe. How can there be two sets of Elements?" Rarity asked.

"Princess Celestia made the Elements of Harmony and Princess Luna made the Elements of Peace." Sea Blue responded.

Twilight noticed Lemon Lime's posture,  
"What's he doing?"

The simple question stopped every argument in the room. All eyes turned to Lemon Lime.

"He's glowing!" Rarity shouted.

"He's trying to manifest his Element voluntarily." Sea Blue said.

Lemon Lime concentrated harder. A sweat broke out on his body, but he kept trying. The room fell completely silent. Everypony backed away from the little yellow unicorn. The glow around him intensified steadily as he poured on more and more concentration. In a bright flash of light, his armor formed itself around his body with a sound akin to wind chimes ringing.

Lemon Lime opened his eyes and surveyed the room, settling on Twilight,  
"I'm the Element of Patience, guardian of the Element of Magic. I'm at your service Twilight Sparkle" he said in a deep bow.

Lemon Lime was overjoyed that he hadn't stuttered, *'Maybe the armor gives me more confidence?'*

Twilight couldn't believe her eyes. The yellow unicorn, who had previously been only the slightest bit taller than her and just as thin, now looked to be the very picture of a muscular warrior. Twilight approached him slowly, examining every inch of the armor. She circled him from front to back and completed the circuit. The very sight of him made her feel . . . comforted, safe. She figured she should feel afraid of him, but she felt the opposite.

The one pony in the room to finally break the silence was a surprising one,

"There's only five of you." Fluttershy said quietly, "Valiant's the other one isn't he?"

Dr. Mend nodded,

"And your guardian, Fluttershy. We have to find him."

# Chapter 2

Caramel bucked away against tree after tree, sweat pouring off him like a waterfall. He didn't mind it in the least, it gave him a chance to think, *'I wonder if Big Macintosh will dismiss me when he gets back? I sure hope not. I like the farm,'* he chuckled to himself, *'Who am I kidding; I love the farm,'* his thoughts drifted, *'that's not the only thing I love out here either. It's too soon though; I can't let her know yet. I'll have to work for a long time to be able to afford to pay for a . . . Would she want a house of her own or would she want to live in her family's generational home?'* he shook his head to clear it, *'I never thought I'd be considering anything like this. I've watched her for years, but I've never worked up the courage to say anything. When Big Mac came to me and asked me to help out on the farm I thought I was going to die. I wonder if he knows? He's smart, real smart; I wouldn't put it past him. Why would he be alright with me courting Applejack though? What do I have to give her? I'm clumsy, forgetful, and my job at the post office isn't the most lucrative thing in the world, besides I'm sure she wouldn't want to even think about my medical bills.'* he stopped bucking the tree, having noticed that baskets were full.

He picked one up with his teeth and carefully carried it over to the old cart. His coordination had improved significantly since Big Macintosh had left. He had asked Applejack about it, but all she had said was that it was because of all the hard work. Caramel had secretly noticed that his bad luck seemed to be at its height when Applejack was around. He had turned back to go get the other one, when he heard voices coming from the direction of the path which led up to the farmhouse, *'Is he back already?'*

Caramel took off at a trot toward the path, hearing the voices coming closer. Caramel listened as closely as he could. His hooves made hearing difficult. He detected Applejack's voice and his heart fell as he picked up her older brother's distinctive drawl. Caramel stopped and listened as the two farm ponies approached.

Applejack's voice was the first one Caramel picked up on, "Ah know he needs our help, Ah ain't arguin' that. Ah am sayin' that we ain't got no ponies who can run the farm while we're both gone. Havin' you away

was manageable, Caramel's been workin' his hooves to the bone out here, but between the two of us it was doable. If both you and Ah left there's no way he could manage it on his own. Besides we ain't got no idea how long we'd be gone for anyhow. There's just nopony else we can ask to help out. Ah mean who'd run the finances? Who knows our rotation ratio? And Heaven forbid there's another stampede, Ponyville would be doomed! Unless we manage to find somepony who is knowledgeable 'bout stuff like that we're stuck here and there's just no way around it. End of story."

"Ah ain't arguin' with you sis. It's one humdinger of a problem and no mistake. Ah'll take a gander around town and see what Ah can come up with. You did forget one thing though. If we do get somepony out here to run things, they'd have to be able to get along with Granny Smith and Applebloom would have to respect 'em enough to listen to 'em." Big Macintosh responded.

*Caramel's mind spun, 'Now they're BOTH leaving? I guess I could try running the farm, but Applejack's right, one pony isn't enough, not by any stretch of the imagination. One of the few things I am pretty good with is numbers so I might be able to handle the money side of things. As far as crop rotation goes, I've got nothing; beside Applebloom thinks of me as a friend, not an authority figure. I wonder who could possibly do this with me?'*

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"So tell me, why is it that we need guardians in the first place? We seem to do well enough on our own." Twilight asked as she hooked yet another electrode to Lemon Lime's body.

The poor yellow unicorn was still nervous being around Twilight, "As f . . . far as I know, t . . . the Elements of Harmony and the Elements of Peace a . . . are supposed to c . . . complement each other. The Elements of Harmony are the more powerful of the pair b . . . but they have to be protected w . . . while they focus their power. The example I saw used the example of a family as a good point of reference. The Elements of Peace are the husband side of the equation and the Elements of Harmony are the wife side. According to the book, both sets were created by the Princesses long ago. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna made the Elements of

Equestria because the alicorns were incapable of harming any living thing and apparently that was what was needed."

Lemon Lime noticed that as he continued to speak he stuttered less and less,

"I have to admit that I'm glad I ended up being paired with you Twilight. At least you're somepony I know."

Twilight's head snapped up sharply,  
"I thought I recognized you from somewhere. I just can't place it."

"You were the Librarian when I was attending the University. I was in there all the time. I just never caught your name until now." Lemon Lime admitted softly.

Twilight shrugged,  
"If you say so. I sure don't remember you. What were you studying?"

Lemon Lime was crestfallen at hearing Twilight dismiss the memory so casually,  
"I'm a physical therapist."

Twilight stopped and took a step back looking the little unicorn over carefully,  
"You're not exactly built for it. How did you help your patients?"

"I use my magic. I can keep the weight of a full grown pony levitated for up to four hours at a time without any real strain. The longest I've ever gone is seven hours but that was kind of tough and she was a special case." Lemon Lime admitted.

Twilight's eyebrows furrowed together as she cocked her head to the left,  
"Four hours? That's not easy. I'm not sure I could do that."

Lemon Lime rubbed the back of his neck nervously,  
"From what I heard you're no slouch in the magic department either. You subdued an Ursa Minor all by yourself. If I had that much raw potential the chimera wouldn't have been any kind of real problem at all. Believe me that was no picnic."



Twilight pulled the toggle on her machine. The contraption began beeping and spewing out a long line of readout paper. Lemon Lime had no idea what the thing was for but he was willing to cooperate. Twilight seemed interested and that was enough for him.

The purple unicorn turned her attention back to her subject, "Alright, try to manifest your Element again."

Lemon Lime swallowed, "I'll try."

He closed his eyes and began concentrating. He focused on memories of when he had to be patient. They seemed more slippery this time, like they were intentionally trying to be elusive. The yellow physical therapist chased after the memories; one-by-one snaring them into the forefront of his mind. The task was difficult to say the least. Several minutes passed and Lemon Lime began to glow dimly.

A loud explosion and the clank of flying pieces of machinery brought Lemon Lime's concentration to a screeching halt. Upon coming back to himself, his nose filled with smoke and his eyes burned. Lemon Lime couldn't see a thing except the machine in front of him burning brightly, '*What is there to burn inside a machine?*' he wondered.

Lemon Lime dropped to the floor and looked around for Twilight. His vision was blurry from tears caused by the smoke. He saw a purple blur backed into the corner of the basement, horn glowing. Out of habit, Lemon Lime analyzed the spell Twilight was casting. The spell had the components of Fire and Destruction, '*She's trying to put out the fire.*' he thought. The fire went out almost immediately, but there was still smoke everywhere.

Lemon Lime crawled over to Twilight, who was coughing and hacking from the smoke. He focused his magic into a spell containing the components of Air, Earth, Healing, Controlling, and Sustaining. It was a spontaneous spell he developed on the spot from his imagination. The spell's purpose was to filter out the air around he and Twilight which would stay active for a long duration without him having to concentrate to maintain

it. The spell fell into place and Twilight ceased coughing almost immediately.

Twilight looked around at the small sphere of clean air around her and Lemon Lime, analyzing the other unicorn's spell. She closed her eyes and cast another spell of her own. Lemon Lime analyzed it and realized Twilight was effectively casting the spell he had, just on a much larger scale. She was casting it on the whole basement.

The smoke cleared out in a matter of seconds. Lemon Lime was impressed. Twilight's spell would have been a fair bit outside his own power limitations, *'She didn't use Sustaining in the spell so she had to maintain it. The lack of Sustaining made it easier to cast, she just had to keep using her magic to maintain it. Very clever.'*

Twilight rose to her hooves and walked over to the eviscerated machine,  
"Well this thing's a complete loss. The data readout is just ash now."

Lemon Lime walked up next to the disappointed unicorn,  
"Maybe some things aren't meant to be analyzed and understood."

Twilight just rolled her eyes,  
"Yeah," she sighed, "I guess I should have learned that when I tried to analyze Pinkie Pie's 'Pinkie Sense'.

"Pinkie Sense?" Lemon Lime asked.

"It's a long story." Twilight replied.

Lemon Lime shrugged,  
"I don't exactly have a whole lot else to do right now. We can't leave until Applejack and Big Mac figure out what to do about the farm."

Lemon Lime felt distinctly disappointed, *'I'd been hoping she would be glad to see me. She doesn't even seem to care.'*

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Fluttershy and Rarity watched Patch in the Mayor's reception area while Sea Blue was discussing buying one of the houses for sale in town with the Mayor herself. Rarity was still trying to cope with the fact that Sea Blue was supposed to be her 'guardian', *'The last thing I need is some strange stallion following me around all the time. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. It's not as if we go gallivanting off into danger all the time. The dragon was a single isolated incident. I'm sure if the stallions had been there they would have done like Rainbow Dash and tried to attack him instead of trying to reason with him. What was Princess Celestia thinking? He seems like a prankster like Pinkie Pie or Rainbow Dash. He doesn't seem to have a single bit of refinement to him, unlike that Trooper. If only Trooper were a unicorn, we would be a perfect match. With Sea Blue . . . What kind of a name is that for a unicorn who is obviously turquoise anyway? We have not a single interest in common. What would a fabulous fashion designer have in common with a psychologist? Oh I hope he finds a house for he and Patch. Patch, now there's a filly with some spirit, and I have to admit, a fair eye for fashion too. Missing eye or no, she definitely has good taste in color matching. I wonder what the story behind her and Sea Blue is?'*

Fluttershy had been getting to know Patch while Rarity was thinking, "So what do you like to do, Patch? What's your favorite thing in the world?" the custard colored pegagus asked softly.

Patch sat next to Fluttershy explaining sadly, "My most favorite thing is playing with my friends, but I don't have any here. I had to leave them all behind in Canterlot. I don't even know why we had to come here. Daddy and the other stallions talked about it a lot. They said they had 'an obliteration', whatever that means. Daddy says I'll be safe here so I don't get foalnapped again. That unicorn lady was scary."

Fluttershy covered her heart with her hoof at hearing the little pink unicorn's statement, "Oh my! That must have been really scary! How did that happen?"

Rarity's attention was piqued; she listened as Patch explained, "Daddy and I were walking home from the park. It was really dark but we know all the alleys between our house and the park. Daddy had me memorize them so I could find my way home if I ever got lost. Anyway I guess Daddy heard something behind us. He stopped and told me to stay

quiet. He kept staring into the shadows for a long time. He cast a really bright spell and we saw the unicorn lady standing just a couple of paces away. She was scary looking. She had this cape thing that covered her head. Daddy told me to run, but I couldn't leave him. The unicorn lady used her horn to hurt Daddy and he couldn't move. She came up to me and looked at my eye then she yelled some mean things to Daddy. Her horn glowed and she teleported us somewhere really dark. She kept me there for a long time. Eventually Daddy and the other nice stallions came to rescue me. Daddy had to help Live Wire and Trooper and Dr. Mend and Big Macintosh and Valiant fight the scary unicorn lady so he had miss Evening Star fly me to see Dr. Mend's friend Dr. Avalon. Daddy came and got me later."

Fluttershy gave Patch a big hug,  
"Poor thing. You were really brave. I'll bet your Father's really proud of you."

"Um Patch," Rarity addressed, "Are you comfortable talking about your eye darling?"

"Sure." Patch responded seemingly not bothered in the least, "Some of the fillies and colts at school used to tease me about it. They stopped after I bucked one colt's teeth out. I got in a lot of trouble for that. Daddy was upset but he understood. He talked with the teacher about it. After that it never happened again."

"Well, I think you should have dealt with it differently darling. Words are one thing but that poor colt lost his teeth." Rarity said.

Patch shook her head,  
"Daddy says words are really powerful miss Rarity. He says that we carry life and death in our words, so we should be careful about what we say. He has this saying, 'Stick and stones may break your bones, but words can hurt you even more'. Daddy says that if more ponies were careful with their words there would be less misunderstandings and less fighting. Well, that and he thinks everypony should have more fun and be less serious."

"I'm sorry darling. What I meant to ask, if you're comfortable with it, is what happened to your other eye? Did you have an accident?" Rarity asked more bluntly than she intended.

Patch shook her head once again,  
"I was born this way. I only have one eye. Miss Morning Glory at the orphanage said I had to have surgery otherwise I would have to wear an eye patch all the time. That's how I got my name."

Fluttershy and Rarity exchanged a surprised look, Rarity spoke first,  
"You mean Sea Blue adopted you darling? I thought he had been married."

"Nope, it's just him and me. Daddy talks about getting me a Mommy someday though. I hope she's nice like you miss Fluttershy." Patch said.

The sound of a door closing, caught the attention of the two mares and filly. The Mayor walked out first followed by Sea Blue. Sea Blue was levitating a piece of parchment in the air in front of him. The two ponies shook hooves smiling. Sea Blue turned toward his daughter and winked with his left eye. Patch scrunched the skin of her missing eye, seemingly winking back at him.

Sea Blue motioned for Patch to join him in front of the Mayor,  
"Patch, I would like you to meet the Mayor of Ponyville. She just sold us our new home and for a very reasonable price."

Patch looked up at the older mare in eye large,  
"Thank you for our new house. Are you like the Princess for Ponyville?"

The Mayor laughed at the silly question,  
"No dear, I just make sure things in Ponyville run smoothly so the Princess doesn't have to worry about us down here. Now go on and see your new home."

Sea Blue inclined his head to the Mayor once more,  
"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, thank you."

The Mayor waved a hoof in his direction,  
"Think nothing of it. That house has been empty for absolute ages. It needed to go to a good family. Your neighbors are our mail-mare Ditzzy Doo, and the school teacher Cheerilee. The house may need a little bit of work but I'm sure you'll love it. I hope I don't seem rude but with winter coming there's a lot to plan for. Have a good day Sea Blue. You too Patch."

The Mayor headed back into her office, closing the door behind her. Fluttershy and Rarity rose to their hooves expectantly. Sea Blue ushered Patch out of the reception area and out the front doors with Fluttershy and Rarity in their wake.

Once outside, Sea Blue turned to the two mares,  
"Thank you for keeping an eye on Patch for me. I don't want to keep you from whatever you need to be doing, but you can come with us if you want. I wouldn't mind the company, and I'm sure Patch wouldn't mind either."

"I'll come with you." Fluttershy volunteered, "I've already fed all the animals so they should be fine until tonight."

Sea Blue hitched himself up to the cart as Patch peppered Fluttershy with questions,  
"What kind of animals do you take care of? Do you have any opossums?"

Patch and Fluttershy discussed the pegasus' animals while they walked alongside the cart. Sea Blue noticed that Rarity was being very quiet. As was his nature, he began noting every little detail about her, trying to piece together a solid mental image of what she might be thinking, *'Hmm, she's being quiet; that means she's obviously deep in thought. Her ears and drooping just a little bit, she feels bad for something, maybe guilty? She keeps stealing glances at Patch and occasionally at me when she thinks I'm not looking. So she feels a little bad about something that has to do with Patch and I and she's giving it a lot of thought. Her interest in Patch could be an indicator that she feels for her because of her eyes, except she's not focusing on her eye. The two of them don't seem to have hit it off unusually well . . . Maybe Rarity has a daughter she's thinking about, perhaps a little brother or sister. Alright then, time to do some subtle probing.'*

Sea Blue cleared his throat,  
"Hey Rarity, do you think Patch will have any trouble making friends and fitting in at school? I'm asking your opinion because you seem to be a pony who would have a solid knowledge of how things go around here."

Rarity looked up, startled,

"Oh um, no I don't think she'll have any trouble at all. Unless of course somepony is mean enough to tease her about her eye. She mentioned what happened the last time that occurred. Did that colt need surgery?"

Sea Blue laughed,  
"Hehehehehehe, no he didn't. He sure learned his lesson though. I had a little talk with Patch's teacher. She assured me, there would not be a repeat performance. The colt's parents wanted to press charges but, I managed to talk them out of it. Words are a powerful thing in their own right, if used correctly."

Rarity nodded,  
"I whole-heartedly agree. Violence is never the answer."

Sea Blue pursed his lips,  
"I mostly agree with you. I would say that violence is rarely the answer. There are some, and thankfully rare, occurrences where you have no other option except to get physical. Sometimes a pony just won't listen to reason, like what happened with Trixie. She wasn't thinking clearly, she had an excuse. Some ponies however won't listen to any other voice than their own, those are the dangerous ones. I find that sometimes a good solid poke in the nose is just what the doctor ordered, maybe knock some sense into them."

Sea Blue noticed that Rarity was not smiling at his joke,  
"I was only kidding, by the way. I don't actually make it a regular practice of mine to go around striking other ponies who are being bull-headed." a thought suddenly struck Sea Blue, *'I wonder why I feel the need to have her accept me? Is it because I have to protect both her and Patch now, or is it something more? Good grief, I REALLY hope I'm not attracted to HER! Erg, what a thought! She's way to shallow for me to even be thinking THAT! Besides she's probably way too young for me. She looks like she's only in her mid teens.'*

"I have to admit, Rarity, I'm impressed that you own your own business. You must have a real talent for what you do. By the way, you wouldn't happen to be the same Rarity that Hoity-Toity has featured in all his shows recently would you?" Sea Blue asked.

Rarity batted her long eyelashes at Sea Blue,

"Why yes I am. I just happen to be the next up-and-coming fashion designer. I would never have guessed you had an interest in fashion. Most stallions don't go for things like that."

"The designs seem to indicate a mature sense of style as opposed to a filly's love of short-term fads and flashy nonsense, yet you still look to be a filly yourself. How can such a young pony have the kind of fashion sense you seem to have cultured?" Sea Blue asked, *'Little does she know, I used to be Hoity-Toity's psychologist. Heh, I must have shocked the snot out of her with that one. That poor stallion. I never would have guessed the fashion world was so high-stress and such a cut-throat business.'*

Rarity blushed with pleasure at the compliment,  
"I'm not as young as I look. This beauty comes from weekly sessions at the local spa and hours upon hours of delicate work every morning plus a strict diet and a rigorous exercise regimen. I certainly don't look twenty-two now do I?"

Sea Blue smiled,  
"Not a day over sixteen."

*'Hook, line, and sinker. Zing!' Sea Blue laughed to himself, 'She's so self-absorbed! That was too easy! How in the world can SHE of all ponies be the Element of Generosity? I hope Patch never becomes that vain. A little bit of humility now and again wouldn't hurt you know RARITY. Oh well, I have my responsibility. If she needs to be protected then I'll do it. I don't like it, but I'll do it.'*

Sea Blue used his magic to unroll the parchment he still levitated in front of him, which was also the deed the house,  
"Let's see here. 67 Baker Street . . . " he paused as he looked around and realized they had almost reached it, "Next house on the right!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Patch ran up next to him looking where her father pointed, her face fell,  
"Eew! What kind of a pony paints their house candy apple red? And with lime green shutters too! Blech!"



The house was a spacious two story affair with, unfortunately, candy apple red siding and lime green shutters.

Sea Blue chuckled at the cute statement,  
"Well then we'll just have to paint over it. It'll be good practice. You can 'brush up' on your magic."

Patch pursed her lips and turned to face her father,  
"Bad pun Daddy." she said flatly.

Sea Blue smiled sheepishly,  
"Sorry sweetie. I thought it was funny." Sea Blue turned toward Rarity and Fluttershy probing yet again, "Didn't you two think it was funny? Or am I really that bad with jokes?"

Fluttershy hid partially behind her mane,  
"It was . . . nice." she responded vaguely.

Rarity, on the other hoof, seemed to put some real thought into her answer,  
"It wasn't *too* bad. At least Patch didn't give you the old 'brush off' so to speak."

Sea Blue chuckled at Rarity's counter pun,  
"It's a good thing I have two fashionable ponies with me. I'm terrible with colors . . . "

"Is that a family trait?" Rarity interrupted playfully.

The joke on his coloring as opposed to his name was not lost on Sea Blue,  
"If it is, then I'm sure glad that it seems to have missed my daughter." Sea Blue said smiling.

Sea Blue still didn't particularly like Rarity but he had to admit, at least she had a sense of humor and a sharp wit.

He pulled the cart up to the curb in front of the house and noticed the lawn was in dire need of maintenance,

"Stay out of the grass Patch. I don't want you to get lost in there. This stuff is nearly as tall as I am!"

Sea Blue slipped the front door key from its place, taped the back of the deed and headed toward the invisible front door, "Patch, stay with Rarity and Fluttershy. I'll be right back."

Sea Blue made his way through the tall grass until he bumped, literally, into the front door. He levitated the key into the hole and turned it. The door swung open smoothly and Sea Blue was greeted with the first glance at the inside of his new house. Sea Blue walked around inside, inspecting every little detail his eyes found. There was plenty of dust and more than a few cob webs, but no signs of vermin habitation, insect or mammal. The walls, doors and counters all looked to be in good condition and thankfully absent of rust. It had three regular bedrooms upstairs which all shared a bathroom plus a master bedroom with its own private bathroom. Sea Blue specifically looked for any signs of water damage on the ceiling. There were none. All-in-all a sturdy and functional, if ugly, house.

"Well," Sea Blue said to himself, "Time to move in."

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Trooper was not having a good day. Having discovered that Rainbow Dash was the Element of Loyalty, and thereby under his protection, set his teeth on edge. She did not like him in the least, and the sentiment was more than returned in kind. Trooper, being a pegasus, had very few personal possessions, a family trait that had been passed on to him by his mother. Being effectively poor and having no vocation either, he had no way of affording a home on the ground so he opted to build himself a simple cloud house like Rainbow Dash had done.

Unfortunately Trooper had no idea where to begin. He had never learned how to mold clouds into a permanent, cohesive shape. His first attempt ended with an accidental downpour over Ponyville Park. His second attempt ended with the clouds being blown away by an errant breeze. He finally managed to get a solid, if only just, floor for a foundation on his third attempt. He walked around on it several times and even braved

a couple of jumps. The cloud was flimsy as a green twig but it held all the same.

Trooper was feeling pretty good about himself until a brash voice called to him from above,  
"What, are you kidding? THAT's what you call a floor? That thing's going to evaporate the second the sunlight hits it directly."

As if on cue, the clouds above Trooper cleared, letting the sunlight through  
"I would have shown you sooner but this is just too much fun to watch, plus we're scheduled for a storm later today." Rainbow Dash laughed.

The cloud beneath his hooves began evaporating slowly in the sunlight. Trooper drew in a deep breath to calm his rising ire, *'Mom always said I had too much of a temper for my own good. Just ignore her and hopefully she will become bored and go away.'* he thought. Trooper was beginning to feel fatigued. He still carried his saddle-bags on his sides. He didn't want to leave them on the ground where somepony might go rummaging through them. They were heavy and hovering in place was not as easy as soaring through the air at high speeds with updrafts to help keep you aloft. Trooper was perspiring from the effort. The basics of how to make a cloud house, he knew, the actual execution of such he didn't. There seemed to be quite a number of little details he was missing and Rainbow Dash's heckling was not helping matters any.

Trooper tried again, *'Alright now, gather the clouds carefully. Now weave the wisps together like a braid. Not too thick, you do not want another downpour and not too thin or else it will just blow away. Hmm, what if I added a second layer of clouds to the first and interweaved them all to each other like a multi-layered quilt, just like the tailor showed me when I worked there.'* Trooper brought in a second layer of clouds and weaved them together carefully. It was tedious work, but the result seemed solid enough, even if it took him an additional hour.

By the time Trooper had finished weaving the second layer with the first, Rainbow Dash had another comment for him,  
"You know, you could have saved yourself some time by tripling the weave and just made the clouds thicker. Then you wouldn't have a floor that's SO

thick. I mean, look at that thing! It looks like one of Pinkie Pie's triple-decker cakes!" she chortled.

Trooper's anger flashed, but he held it at bay, barely, *'She could have told me sooner and saved me the time in the first place! It may not look pretty but I need someplace to sleep tonight. This will have to do for now. All I need are walls and a roof and I can call it quits for the day, it is getting late anyway. I wonder how long ago it was that I last ate something.'* he wondered.

Trooper ignored his empty stomach and decided to take Rainbow Dash's belated advice and put it to use on the walls and roof. The work was exhausting but Trooper had to admit the walls and roof were just as sturdy as the floor, if not more so. He put the finishing touches on and attached the roof to the rest of the house. He flew back several dozen paces and admired his work. It wasn't pretty but it was functional. Trooper smiled to himself and lazily flew up to the door of his new house, just as a flight of pegasi blasted through his house demolishing it completely.

Rainbow Dash laughed so hard she almost fell off her cloud, "You know," she said as soon as she could form a coherent sentence, "It's generally a good idea to build your house somewhere other than the very middle of the 'Open Air Colt and Filly Practicing Zone'. It tends to have a more staying power anyway!"

Trooper was absolutely furious; he couldn't take any more, "You venomous wretch!" Trooper was so angry he actually trilled the 'r' sound in wretch, "Would it have been so terribly difficult to warn me BEFORE my house was demolished? Nine hours of work for NOTHING! Now it is far too late in the day to attempt to build a second one. I shall have to go door-to-door begging for a place to stay! Good day to you!"

Rainbow Dash called out after Trooper's descending form, "Hey! Don't be like that! If you wanted help you should have asked for it!"

Trooper spun in mid air, his face was a thunderhead, "Were you so inclined to assist, one would imagine you would have had the decency to offer it as such instead of laughing at me for my ignorance! So for the last time today, I say to you: GOOD DAY!"

Rainbow Dash called after him again, but Trooper wasn't interested in hearing it. He had other things on his mind, '*I do so hope Rarity has some room in her home. I hate to be a burden, but my options, at the moment are limited.*'

Trooper flew off muttering darkly to himself, "How in Equestria am I *ever* supposed to be able to respect somepony like Rainbow Dash. Guardian? Bah! What she needs is a good sound spanking and one heaping portion of humility!"

# Chapter 3

Valiant leapt high into the air, front end high, spinning counter-clockwise in a pirouette motion. He tucked both of his left legs tightly against his body and struck out with his right ones. The two limbs slammed against his target solidly. Whipping his left legs out, he pushed off his target and set himself into a roll as his body hit the ground. Rising, already on the move, he spun around and struck out thrice with his hind legs in rapid succession. Each blow landed solidly against his target. Valiant planted his hind legs against the seemingly solid target and pushed off. He ducked his head in an awkward front roll and came back up charging his target. He reared back on his hind legs and lashed out with his front hooves raining down a hail of blows against the object of his attack.

Tree bark flew off in every imaginable direction as Valiant continued the practice session that had become his morning and evening ritual. Today he had decided to focus on rolling and dodging, though with an inanimate partner it was a tricky proposition at best. His daily warm-ups consisted of a long series of stretches he had learned in school, one hundred full crouches and rises, five full counts of twenty seconds of holding each of his legs straight out (he really felt the burn when he did those) and as much yoga as he could remember (which was admittedly pretty minimalistic).

Every morning when he woke up and every evening before he went to sleep he practiced until he could hardly move. He finished with his practice and plopped down on the forest floor, *'It's not like I'm pressed for time too much.'* he thought to himself, *'I've got several months before the semester starts up again. If need be, I'll just work at Mrs. Soothe's apothecary again. I really wish I could have given her more notice before I left.'* he sighed heavily and continued his thought, *'Oh well, there was nothing for it. I had to get out of Canterlot as soon as possible.'*

Valiant had the sense to set up camp next to a stream. He crawled over to the bank and lowered his head into the icy water drinking deeply as the current cooled him. There had been a hint of frost on the ground when he had awoken that morning and the temperature of the stream confirmed

what he had noticed. The royal blue wingless pegasus was extremely grateful for the suit Princess Luna had given him, back when she had been in disguise. The material was warm yet breathy; he slept in it, practiced in it, and walked in it every day. As much as he didn't want to admit it, it was great stuff. The rubber pads in the bottom of the leggings were a lifesaver. He knew from experience that his poor hooves would have been cracked and swollen after the first day of solid walking.

He stripped the outfit off and dunked it into the running water to rinse off the sweat and grime. He used his hooves and vigorously rubbed the material to get any remaining dirt and dead skin and loose hairs from his coat off. He pulled the garment out of the water and hung it out to dry. The material was freezing cold and dripping wet. Valiant went back to his tent and retrieved the small bottle of camp-soap then dunked himself in the stream and bathed. The frigid water shocked him so badly he almost became dizzy. He knew to be careful, lest he put himself into shock. Valiant finished bathing and walked up out of the stream. He shook himself off to dry and get warmed up then headed back to his little camp to pack up and move on.

Before he left Canterlot he had taken a trip to a nearby outdoors sporting store. He had purchased two canteens, a compass, a bedroll, a small tent, flint and steel, dried fruit and nuts, one small cast iron cooking pot, environmentally safe soap, and, for those times he needed to drink brackish water, a pouch full of iodine tabs. Camping like he had been doing, brought back sour memories of when he had been a Vagabond, '*Life is so much better with proper equipment.*' he thought.

Valiant folded his blanket, rolled up his bedroll, then collapsed the tent down into its pouch, ready for that night. He turned to the smoldering remains of his campfire and kicked up a mound of dirt on top of it then stomped it down several times for good measure, '*Never leave any signs you were here. It's the only way to keep the forest beautiful for everypony.*'

Valiant double checked his saddle-bags then headed back over to the stream to refill his canteens. That done, he reached into the left side bag and removed his compass. He had been traveling due south, through the Everfree Forrest. He knew he had already bypassed Ponyville several days earlier. At one point he was actually able to make out the top of the clock-tower in the center of town. He had ignored it though and continued on his

way. That had been four days ago. He knew that if he kept going south he would eventually come to the ocean. From there he would turn to the East and keep going until he reached the port city of New Yoke and then north to Haysburg. He had never been to New Yoke, but by all accounts it was a thriving metropolis. Valiant figured he could resupply there and head on to Haysburg within a day. By his calculations, he would reach Haysburg in just under two months. Valiant had decided to go this particular route so he wouldn't have to deal with the constant dangers of the plains that lay to the west of Haysburg, and the tornados which were ever-prevalent there, not to mention he could avoid most of the swamps too. Once winter was in full swing, he could make his way across the plains without needing to worry about any tornados, but until winter hit in full it was still a danger.

Valiant checked the compass once more and headed off toward the ocean.

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Dr. Mend previously had no idea just how much the citizens of Ponyville relied on him to tend to their needs. Upon stepping back into his clinic, after sleeping back in his house the previous night, nurse Redheart had pleaded with him to examine a mare who might have been having complications with her pregnancy. The mare had refused to allow anypony except Dr. Mend to see her. Mend squared his shoulders and set off toward the wash basin to scrub.

Three hours and a lot of examining later Dr. Mend was glad to tell the poor mare that her pregnancy was going well and there was nothing to worry about. She had been overjoyed when he had told her she only had a minor urinary tract infection and gave her a prescription that would take care of it.

He made his way back to his old office and frowned immediately upon seeing the stack of papers on his desk. He sighed heavily and plopped himself down to read. The papers were notes of all kinds of minor medical problems the nurses had treated in his absence: Caramel had come down with Conjunctivitis due to swine manure in his face but had made a swift recovery, Pinkie Pie had come in with to a stomach ache due to a new recipe that involved potatoes and persimmons in a pie, Scootaloo



had come in with a sprained wing due to trying to fly by leaping off the second story of a house . . . the list went on.

Dr. Mend didn't let himself get too comfortable, they had to leave as soon as possible to find Valiant and bring him back, *'He told me we would be each other's support! Why didn't he come to me? I would have been there for you Valiant, you know that!'* Dr. Mend rose and began pacing in his office, *'This waiting is killing me! Valiant's out there right now! He could be in danger! None of us know how the ponies of Haysburg might respond to seeing him again! We need to convince the girls and leave right now!'*

Dr. Mend closed the door of his office behind him and headed over to Sugar Cube Corner.

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Pinkie Pie was trying out a new recipe 'Turnip and Tater and Beet Root Pie'. It didn't call for any type of sugar or sweet filling; apparently it was meant to be savory, like a quiche, instead of sweet. She had washed and cut up the various vegetables then dumped the whole amalgamation into a ten gallon stock-pot of boiling water. She was working on the crusts, having already greased the five pie pans she would need for the filling. She rolled the dough in a scattering of flour, kneading it with her hooves until it obtained a 'springy' consistency.

The front door jingled open then closed. Pinkie could hear Mr. Cake talking to somepony who had a deep voice. Pinkie recognized the voice as belonging to Dr. Mend, *'I never realized it before, but Dr. Mend has a voice much younger than he looks. I bet he could really belt out a good song if he ever decided to try it. I'll bet he'd be super-duper popular with the older mares if he did. Maybe I should see if I can get him to try it?'* Pinkie wondered.

"Hey uh, Pinkie Pie. Can I talk to you for a minute?" Mend asked as he entered the kitchen.

Pinkie turned her head so she could see the older stallion, "Sure thing Dr. Mendie!" she gushed, knowing full well just how much he hated her name for him, *'He really needs to learn to have some fun! He*

*sure was acting funny when he first saw me after he came back from Canterlot. Maybe if I keep calling him that, he'll lighten up some more.'*

To Pinkie Pie's surprise, the older black stallion just chuckled and shook his head,  
"I don't much care for that name, but I can't expect you to change. I wouldn't want you to either." Dr. Mend took a deep breath and continued, "You remember Valiant don't you Pinkie Pie?"

Pinkie bounced in place excitedly,  
"Of course I do! He was all doomy and gloomy when he first got here, but he lightened up and turned out to be a really nice pony! I remember when Applejack's house burned down. I was really sad to see him die like that, but it all turned out alright because he came back to life! I remember Twilight saying something about how you guys were here because of him but we kind of skipped over that yesterday. I thought I heard Applejack talking to her brother about it but I didn't want to be a rude nosy-pants and listen in on their conversation."

"That's what I want to talk to you about Pinkie Pie." Dr. Mend explained, "Valiant's gone. Sea Blue thinks he went back to his hometown in Haysburg . . . "

Pinkie's eyes bulged, her jaw going slack,  
"Haysburg! He never said he was from Haysburg! That is the most awesomest, excitingest . . . Do you know what the ponies in Haysburg grow Dr. Mendie? They grow rice and soy beans and sesame! Do you have any idea how many wonderful, delicious, spectacular things you can make from just rice?! Rice cakes, rice balls, rice pudding, rice flour . . . I love rice flour! You don't have to add sugar or anything; it's sweet all on its own!"

Dr. Mend was dumbfounded,  
"Wait, how do you know about rice? I'd never even heard of it until Valiant told me about it."

"Mr. and Mrs. Cake took a trip to Haysburg a couple of years ago. They brought back three whole big bags of rice plus two big bags of rice flour! We only use it for REALLY special occasions, like when Princess Celestia came to have lunch with us that one time. That's why I was so super-duper, ultrarifickly excited that day! Mr. and Mrs. Cake used the rice flour to make

almost all the food that day! I mean I feel bad for eating right off Princess Celestia's plate but all of Sugar Cube Corner was filled with rice-treats! I'd ask Mr. and Mrs. Cake if I could make a batch of cupcakes for everypony using the rice flour but I'm not allowed to touch it since they hid it from me . . . Wait. You said Valiant's gone! Why did he go?" Pinkie asked.

Dr. Mend shook his head to uncross his eyes and continued soberly, "I'll explain soon. For now, would you be willing to round up Applejack and Big Macintosh and bring them to the Library?"

Pinkie Pie's face fell,  
"But I'm in the middle of baking something. Can I do it right afterwards?"

Dr. Mend could no more disappoint Pinkie than he could keep the sun from rising,  
"Alright, I'll go and get them. Come to the Library as soon as you're done. Alright?"

"Super trendy doctor Mendie! I'll be there!" Pinkie rhymed.

Dr. Mend couldn't help but to smile,  
"Thanks Pinkie Pie. I'll see you there."

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Trooper blinked drearily as he slowly came awake. Rarity had been generous enough to let him sleep in the den which was situated in the rear of Carousel Boutique. Trooper had fallen asleep on the white unicorn's sofa almost immediately. He had been exhausted. He raised his head and looked around. The sunlight streaming in from the windows around him shone at a steep angle and Trooper realized the time was probably approaching noon.

He slipped off the couch and stretched, yawning loudly. He decided to leave his saddle-bags behind the sofa, *'Hopefully I can actually finish my cloud house today. Then we can discuss what to do about Valiant. I really hope Rainbow Dash does not decide to watch me again today. I sure could use her expertise but she seems to enjoy watching me fail and laughing about it rather than actually helping me not look like a complete moron. If we are to work together I need her to respect me, in some way at least. I*

*already respect her. She is athletic, attractive, and highly skilled at what she does. I on the other hoof have nothing to be proud of. This would be so much more simple if I only had my cutie-mark. I must admit, I am certainly surprised she has yet to mention its absence. Perhaps she failed to notice it?' he wondered, 'That must be it. Had she noticed it, she would have been teasing me mercilessly all day about it.'* Trooper retrieved his saddle-bags from behind the sofa and buckled them back on to hide his blank flank, *'I shall finish my cloud house without any foalish teasing from an immature pegasus regarding my personal shortcomings in life.'*

Trooper trotted quietly out into the fitting area of the boutique but didn't see Rarity. He shrugged and headed outside then took to the air in hopes of finishing his new home.

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Big Macintosh was wracking his brain trying to figure out who could possibly run the farm in he and his sister's absence. Try as he might, he couldn't come up with a single pony who fit the bill. Daisy, Rose, and Lilly had their flower shop to run so they were out. Mr. and Mrs. Cake had their bakery to run and with Pinkie Pie gone things would be tight enough already plus Big Mac was quite sure they didn't know a whole lot, if anything about farming. Caramel had already volunteered to stay on for as long as he was needed but he just didn't have the necessary experience to run the place by himself. Big Macintosh groaned and rolled his eyes at the problem. He let his neck go limp and flattened his face squarely against the rippled grain of the dining room table. He stayed like that for several full minutes until he heard a knock at the front door.

The huge work pony rose from his slumped posture and headed for the offending noisy portal. Big Macintosh opened the door and was somewhat surprised to see Dr. Mend standing on the porch. The large red stallion pushed the door open all the way and stood aside to let his friend in.

Dr. Mend only shook his head,  
"Thank you for the invitation, but I'm just here to ask you and Applejack to meet everypony at the Library as soon as possible." the older stallion quirked his right eyebrow in puzzlement, "Did I wake you Big Mac?"

"Nope. Why do ya' ask?" Big Macintosh responded.

"I couldn't help but notice your face is all lined, like you fell asleep on a really grainy piece of wood. I thought maybe you had slept oddly up against your bed post. To be truthful your face kind of reminds me of Zecora with all those lines and such." Dr. Mend said.

Big Mac's pupils dilated as his older friend mentioned the zebra,  
"Ah'll tell Applejack, but Ah'm goin' to be a bit late gettin' there."

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Lemon Lime felt as out of place as a pork chop at a kosher wedding. He had decided to visit to local gym and see what kind of equipment was widely available for when he finally settled down in Ponyville. The only place that seemed to fit the bill was a place named 'Buck No-Horse's Dojo'. The proprietor, assumingly Buck No-horse, was a well built middle to late 40's Earth pony who wore a thick, if short, beard and a Gi with a black belt tied around his middle, plus one totally out of place article of clothing, a cowpony hat. He was a bark brown pony with a grey mane and tail, his eyes were penetratingly brown and his cutie-mark was of a pony lying on the ground with Xs over its eyes.

Lemon Lime walked in and noticed the place was empty save for the one bearded pony,  
"Uh, hello?" he called, "I'm looking for information on where to buy exercise equipment."

In the blink of an eye, literally, the bearded pony stood in front of one very startled yellow unicorn,  
"Well you certainly came to the right place. I have an invention of my very own that does it all. I call it the 'Total Gym'. The 'Total Gym' does it all."  
(The redundancy council of redundancy will now see you now, they will.)

Lemon Lime was skeptical,  
"Could I see it please? I'm a physical therapist and my patients often have need of very specialized equipment."

Buck scratched his bearded chin for a few moments,

"I see what you mean. Let's go take a look, then you can tell me if you need me to build you some of this specialized equipment. You'll have to give me the specifics though."

Lemon Lime followed Buck into the back room of the 'dojo'. Buck pulled back a curtain, revealing the so-called 'Total Gym'. Lemon Lime had to admit it did look pretty versatile. The little physical therapist circled around the contraption examining each weld and bar carefully. It looked alright but Lemon Lime wanted to be certain. He lowered his head and focused his magic into a probing spell, searching for any sign of even the slightest weakness.

To Lemon Lime's slight surprise, Buck's confidence in the device seemed to be well founded. The 'Total Gym' looked to be sturdy and solid piece of equipment. Lemon Lime knew he would need more equipment but the 'Total Gym' would clearly fit the bill of a great number of uses.

Lemon Lime walked back up to the taller stallion,  
"Looks alright. You said you made this yourself?"

Buck nodded,  
"I sure did. Forged the metal, triple welded the joints, the whole she-bang. Will it be enough or do you need me to make you some different things?"

"It's a good solid start, but what if it breaks? My patients need all their equipment to be fully functional all the time. Do you have any kind of a warranty?" Lemon Lime asked.

Buck smiled and tipped back his hat,  
"Lifetime warranty. If any of it breaks, I'll fix it myself at no extra charge."

"What kind of price are we talking about here?" Lemon Lime asked.

Buck put his right fore hoof to his chin,  
"How about you make me an offer then we can haggle it from there?"

"I'll start with two hundred bits for the 'Total Gym' and between forty and eighty for each additional piece I may need. Throw in the warranties and you've got yourself a deal." Lemon Lime said openly.

Buck gave the price quote earnest thought before replying,  
"I can't argue that. Deal. I didn't catch your name." he said extending his hoof.

Lemon Lime shook the offered hoof,  
"My name is Lemon Lime but my friends call me Live Wire."

"Tell me Live Wire, did you ever get picked on as a colt?" Buck asked.

"Without end. I've always been small. Most ponies don't mess with me anymore. Why do you ask?" Lemon Lime inquired.

"How would you like to learn martial arts? The next time some brute tries flirting with your colt friend you can show him what-for." Buck said.

Lemon Lime arched an eyebrow,  
"I don't tend to fight. I just use my magic. I prefer mares by the way."

Buck held up a hoof,  
"My apologies. But wouldn't it be nice to be able to be on even ground with a larger pony without having to rely on your magic? The mares like a buff stallion, trust me."

"I might be interested. Tell me more." Lemon Lime said smiling.

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Sea Blue looked out over his front lawn with satisfaction. It had taken half the day and he had worked up a thick lather of sweat, but it was worth it. He had stumbled upon a small bird bath while he had been clearing the loads and loads of grass. The front lawn was neat and clean at long last. The absence of trees bugged him greatly and he silently vowed to have some planted as soon as possible.

The turquoise stallion decided to head inside and see what improvements had been made with the interior of the house. The counselor had been surprised that Rarity had shown up first thing in the morning, saddle-bags filled to bursting with who knew what. She had offered to help Patch organize and decorate the inside of the house. Sea Blue had tried to decline but Rarity had been politely insistent and he couldn't turn her down

without being rude so he let her come in and do her thing. Sea Blue fervently hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake by giving the white unicorn free reign of the interior decorating.

He opened the door and his jaw immediately hit the floor. He had been afraid of poufy, girly decorations all over the place. What he saw was the perfect picture of an idyllic family home. The perfection was mind boggling. The front room of his old house had been perfectly replicated, every piece of furniture situated in exacting detail with the exception of a vase of brightly colored flowers sitting on the coffee table. Sea Blue wandered into the kitchen. It had been rearranged but rearranged well. The small dining room table sat off to the right side of the room, still leaving ample room for four chairs. On the far side of the kitchen sat the counter tops, oven, and electric range. Each burner on the range had a neat little stainless-steel cover and a small white timer sat on the back, above the range knobs. The refrigerator sat to the left of the counters and already had Patch's drawings stuck to it with colorful letter magnets. Sea Blue's antique wooden bread box sat to the right of the range with paper towels on a vertical roll on the right side and pot holders arranged neatly on the left side; within easy reach of the range and oven. To the right of that was the back door.

Sea Blue walked up to the back door and looked outside, stunned. Arranged on the covered back porch were the wicker chairs and glass-topped table he had bought the same year he had adopted Patch. The entire porch had been lined with a bug-screen, tacked up in such a way so as to be easy for ponies to pull back and step through yet inaccessible to irritating insects. Seated on the two wicker chairs were Rarity and Patch, both sipping from glasses filled with what looked like iced tea. A third glass had been set out, apparently meant for Sea Blue. Rarity and Patch were talking and laughing just like old friends.

The amazed counselor was already reaching for the door handle when he heard a knock on the front door. Sea Blue reluctantly turned away from the scene of perfection on his back porch and headed for the front door. An incredible surge of emotion tore through Sea Blue's chest, threatening to leak a tear from his eye, *'She turned a dusty old house into a home. Our home. She did it of her own volition and didn't ask for a thing in return. This is what we've been missing. This feels more like home than Canterlot did.'* Sea Blue thought. The word in his mind left him with a



pleasant warm feeling. A contented smile spread itself across his face, 'Yes,' he thought, *'We're home.'* his smile faded for a moment, *'I misjudged you Rarity. I misjudged you badly.'*

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Trooper was having an even harder time than he had the previous day. Rainbow Dash had cleared out all the remaining clouds from the previous night's rain and the sky was as clear as fresh water for miles around. To Trooper's chagrin, the only clouds he could see nearby were those that composed the home of a certain rainbow-maned pegasus mare. Trooper had to fly all the way to the Everfree Forrest to locate any clouds at all. The clouds over the eerie wild forest were wild and seemed almost as if they were actively trying to resist his intervention. Undaunted, he took his time and triple weaved them together, just like Dash had said, then pushed the mass to a point that was roughly halfway between a small cottage on top of a little hill and the main body of Ponyville.

Trooper remembered how his house had been demolished the previous day and decided to fly down and ask whoever it was who lived in the little cottage, where safe airspace was around Ponyville. He didn't want to ask Rainbow Dash, *'For all I know, she might just tell me somewhere else that is not safe.'* As Trooper came in for a landing, he noticed the large number of animals that seemed to make their homes around the cozy little dwelling, *'Wait a second.'* he thought, *'Valiant mentioned that Fluttershy took care of animals and her place was outside of Ponyville. This is probably where she lives then. I shall have to be careful since she is so meek. I would hate to frighten her.'* Trooper raised his right fore hoof and knocked gently on the front door then took several steps back so as not to seem to imposing.

The door opened a few seconds later, revealing not the shy custard colored pegasus but a small white rabbit with the meanest, most suspicious glare in his eyes Trooper had ever seen. Trooper couldn't help but wonder, *'How in the world does he reach the handle?'* Trooper took a single step forward. The rabbit suddenly held a long metal tube with a wide wooden back in his paws. He held the mysterious device with both paws and slid a small wooden grip down the tube then back up with an ominous chucking noise.

Trooper cleared his throat and addressed the rabbit,  
"I am looking for Fluttershy. Is she available?"

The rabbit peered suspiciously at Trooper for a long minute then abruptly slammed the door shut. Trooper didn't know what to think. He began debating whether or not he should leave. The door opened again, a few seconds later, revealing Fluttershy standing in the doorway.

"I am sorry to bother you Fluttershy, but I was wondering if you would happen to know if the foundation of my cloud house is in a safe area of airspace. Apparently I built my previous one in a section above Ponyville that was reserved for colts and fillies to practice their flying in." Trooper explained.

Fluttershy looked all around in the air but couldn't seem to locate the cloud formation Trooper was referring to. Trooper turned his head and raised his hoof to point it out for her. His eyes met only open, clear sky. His cloud was nowhere to be seen. Trooper slowly lowered his hoof and gritted his teeth.

"Um, I'm sorry but I don't see any clouds." Fluttershy said softly.

Trooper turned back toward the shy pegasus,  
"Hmm, neither do I. It seems to have blown away. I apologize for disturbing you."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all. I can tell you where the colts and fillies practice, if you still want to know that is." Fluttershy said quietly.

"I would very much appreciate it, if you would." Trooper replied.

"It's right above the park so they can try to land in the trees instead of on the ground when they fall." Fluttershy explained.

Trooper bowed to the soft spoken pegasus,  
"Thank you very much Fluttershy. Is there, by chance anywhere else where it would be unwise to build a cloud house?"

"Not that I can think of. Ponyville airspace is pretty much free for all pegasi." Fluttershy said.

"Then I shall trouble you no more. Thanks again for the information."  
Trooper said politely.

He took to the air and scanned in every direction, looking for the foundation he had built. Trooper spotted it way out over the tree top canopy of the Everfree Forrest. Trooper grumbled and flew off toward the mass. A cyan blur suddenly blocked his path. Trooper reversed his direction and stared, unsurprised, at the rainbow-maned pegasus mare who blocked his way.

Rainbow Dash had her fore hooves crossed over her chest in an authoritative manner,  
"What do you think you're doing?" she asked bluntly.

Trooper was in no mood to deal with being picked on,  
"Mind you, I do not make a habit out of ordering ponies around, but I am presently in no mood for this. Out of courtesy, I shall say this once. Get. Out. Of. My. Way. Rainbow Dash." without bothering to wait for her to think it over, Trooper charged right toward her.

Rainbow Dash dodged out of the way yelling,  
"Hey! Come back here!" and flew off after him.

Trooper looked back and saw Dash gaining on him at an alarming rate. He turned his eyes forward and pumped his wings as fast and hard as he could, *'At high speed, I have only a single advantage over her. She is faster than I by . . . well there is no comparison. There is no comparison in THAT regard, but I am willing to bet she does not have my maneuverability. I would have thought she had more character than to pick on the new pegasus. I suppose I should not have been so blunt when we first met, but she is taking this way too far now. I have never allowed myself to be bullied and I refuse to start now.'*

Just as Trooper guessed, Rainbow Dash shot past him and stopped in his path barring him from his destination. Trooper twitched his wings and dodged nimbly around to her left. Rainbow Dash was fast, so fast she almost blocked him completely. They came so close to one another he could feel his wingtips brush by hers. Trooper grinned, but his reprieve was short lived.

Rainbow Dash flew up beside Trooper in a matter of moments, "Would you give it up already?" she yelled.

Trooper turned his head and decided to stop holding his tongue, "Madam, with all due respect, shut up! I have had it up to here," he indicated above his head with a hoof, "With you! Leave! Me! Alone! I shall fail quite enough on my own without you there to sabotage my efforts! Now let me get to my cloud foundation and leave me be!"

Trooper immediately spun off to his right and flew low, just over the tree tops. Rainbow Dash made to block his way again and Trooper made to dodge. Rainbow Dash anticipated a dodge and moved with him. Trooper feigned to the right and dodged under her instead, albeit just barely, but then again it's difficult to dodge when you're hovering upright. Trooper heard Rainbow Dash grunt in frustration behind him, 'Good.' he thought, 'Maybe you will give up now.' It was too much to hope for.

Rainbow Dash flew up alongside Trooper again, "Would you stop? I'm trying to . . . "

Trooper interrupted her, "I already know what it is you are trying to do! I have dealt with it all my life! I have never let myself be cowed by bullies and I absolutely will not start now! They could not stop me and neither will you!"

Trooper ducked down into the trees of the Everfree Forrest and heard Rainbow Dash call after him, "Are you crazy? Get out of there!"

Trooper ignored her, he had to use all his concentration to safely navigate between the trees. Rainbow Dash grew silent and he lost sight of her. He flew under the canopy for a few seconds, which seemed like hours at that speed, then rose back up above the tree tops. Rainbow Dash hit him from the left side in a tackle. The two pegasi grappled in the air for a few seconds before Trooper managed to extricate himself from the wiry mare. He had to be careful not to strike her. He would never be able to live with himself if he ever hit a mare, bully or no.

Trooper wheeled away from Rainbow Dash and just barely managed to gain control of himself before he took what would surely be a deadly plunge into the trees below,  
"LEAVE ME ALONE!" he bellowed, "LEAVE ME THE HELL AL . . .  
"Trooper trailed off as his eyes caught sight of something.

Rainbow Dash was holding Trooper's saddle-bags in her hooves. The strap had broken. Trooper realized he was perpendicular to Rainbow Dash, she had an unobstructed view of his blank flank and was steadily staring at it, fixated. Trooper let out a bellowing roar and charged her.

He pulled around at the last second and grabbed the saddle-bags with his hooves,  
"Give me those!" he snarled.

Rainbow Dash held the saddle-bags tightly, even as he pulled. The jarring motion caused both pegasi to lose their grip. The saddle-bags tumbled down into the Everfree Forrest below. Trooper had to fight the urge to spit in Rainbow Dash's face.

Instead he flew off after his belongings with her calling after him,  
"Hey wait!"

Trooper lost control of his tongue for the first time in a very, very long time and said something he never thought he would ever say to any pony, much less a mare,  
**"FUCK OFF!"**

He managed to catch his possessions before they hit the ground. Rainbow Dash didn't follow him. Trooper landed on the forest floor panting heavily, *'I shall stay in here the rest of the day if I have to!'* Trooper thought furiously, *'I. Will. Not. Be. A. Victim.'* he looked up at the forest canopy and sneered, *'I will protect you because I have to, but do not even THINK for a MOMENT that I want to! I shall keep you alive, nothing more! I never shirk my responsibilities, but I am sorely tempted to do so now. You want to be enemies Rainbow Dash? Fine! Your wish is granted! I will have my cloud house out where you shall never find it. I never give up! You will not stop me!'*

# Chapter 4

Trooper carried his saddle-bags in his mouth as he attempted to navigate his way through the dreaded Everfree Forrest. He was still fuming over his confrontation with Rainbow Dash, *'What is her problem with me?'* he wondered angrily, *'All I wish to do is have a home away from home. Is that so much of a crime? She is the bearer of the Element of Loyalty. How is such a dissenting and rude pony possibly one of the Elements of Harmony? She is far from harmonious. If anything, she is quite probably the most un-harmonious pony I have ever met. Still, I should not have used such coarse language with her. There was no excuse for that. I know better than that, and no excuse I make can change that fact, but I refuse to be picked on. I will guard her from death but I will not submit to her abusing me. I suppose I cannot be on good terms with every pony I meet. I will simply stay away from her. If she tries speaking to me, I will turn a deaf ear to her. I will take any necessary steps to let her know I refuse to be around her until she apologizes to me for what she did. If that means never, then so be it.'* Trooper looked around trying to gauge his direction. He could make out the sun through the canopy of trees and chose to head due West, *'This should lead me back to Ponyville . . . I hope.'*

The greenery was closely packed; Trooper could barely see ten paces. The royal blue pegasus eventually stumbled onto a well-worn path that led in the general direction of Ponyville and decided to follow it. He kept to the path nervously; the Everfree Forrest was a spooky place. Trooper kept looking over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed. Up ahead he saw a split in the path and the brighter light that seemed to hint that he was leaving the Everfree Forrest at last. The path split to the right and left. To the left was the brighter light, to the right, led deeper into the forest. Spurred by the sight of the light, Trooper began trotting faster. As his speed increased, he heard a new sound. Something else was nearby and it sounded close. Trooper swallowed hard and sped up to a gallop. The other sound sped up as well, it sounded like it was getting closer. It sounded like something was hunting him. Trooper upped the ante and ran as fast as his legs could go. The sound was so close now; and it was getting closer. Trooper looked over his shoulder but saw nothing, which was even spookier.

His blood pumped, he was close to the edge of the forest. Just a little farther and he would be safe. He reached the split in the path and reared back as something huge suddenly blocked his way. In a reflexive action, he swung his right hoof at his perceived assailant. His hoof felt like it struck solid steel, his whole leg throbbed terribly. Trooper looked up and found Big Macintosh's wide-eyed face looking back at him, hoof connected with Trooper's own.

The two stallions stared at each other for a few moments before they regained their senses and lowered their hooves,

"My most sincere apologies, Big Macintosh. I heard something in the forest and believed it to be after me. I suppose you heard the same thing and reacted in a similar manner?"

Big Mac's face betrayed nothing,  
"Ayup."

"Then let us rejoin the rest of Ponyville shall we? What were you doing all the way out here anyway?" Trooper inquired.

"Ah was meetin' with Zecora." Big Mac replied.

"Ah yes, the zebra. Valiant mentioned she lived out here. He said he was sad to have never had the chance to meet her. What is she like?" Trooper asked.

Big Macintosh shrugged,  
"She's a good soul. She sure knows a whole lot about plants and the like. Ah was askin' her if she'd be willin' to watch the farm while Applejack and Ah were away."

Trooper cocked his head to the left as the two stallions turned toward the light of day shining through the Forrest ahead of them,

"An odd choice." Trooper mused, "Were there no other ponies with the viable know-how available? Perhaps one who lives a touch closer to Ponyville? Seems to me she shall have to travel for quite a while each and every day just to reach the old farmstead, not to mention the return trip."

"Ah done offered for her to stay at the farm while we're gone." Big Mac replied.

Trooper shrugged his shoulders,  
"Well, if it works, don't knock it. I suppose she agreed to keep an eye on the farm for you?"

"Ayup. In so many confusin' words, anyway." Big Macintosh admitted.

Trooper quirked an eyebrow and an ear,  
"Confusing words?" he asked, "Does she speak in riddles?"

"Eeyup."

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The Elements of Equestria gathered in the Ponyville Library. Everypony sat on the floor; mares on the left, stallions on the right, except for Trooper who sat perched on the top of one of the bookshelves. Trooper specifically kept from looking at Rainbow Dash. She had tried to approach him when he first arrived with Big Macintosh, but Trooper had ignored her completely. The two groups were having no small amount of difficulty integrating. The only true common ground they all shared was one royal blue wingless pegasus, who was presently missing. Sea Blue had Patch come with him since he couldn't very well leave her alone by herself. She played happily with Angel, who had decided to join Fluttershy. For once Angel had found a pony he could actually stand and played with Patch, as happy as anything.

Dr. Mend, being the one to have called the meeting, began speaking,  
"We need to address the issue which brought us all here. Valiant is still missing and we need to find him. The sooner the better."

"See that's all well an' good, for ponies that can spare the time. Not all of us can just pick up an' go galavantin' off into the sunset any time we want. Some of us got responsibilities." Applejack expressed.

Dr. Mend nodded politely,



"I understand Applejack. I know your family situation, and I'm well aware of your responsibilities. I'm just saying that we need to get going on a solution to the problems with taking an extended leave to look for Valiant."

"Why do we need to look for him anyway?" Rainbow Dash asked, "He's a big-colt, he can take care of himself. I'm not saying we shouldn't go help him if he needs it, but how do we know he even needs it and we wouldn't be wasting our time? He's not a Vagabond anymore and even when he was, he took care of himself. Well, most of the time anyway. The bear incident happened after five years, that means he went four-plus years safely. He should be good to go."

Twilight was surprised to find that she could find no significant faults with Dash's logic,

"Rainbow Dash has a point. Let's go over what we know and decide from there."

Dr. Mend removed Valiant's note from his saddle-bags and set it on the ground in front of him. He proceeded to read the note, out loud, to the assembled ponies. The older medical pony finished reading and looked up, only to be met with several skeptical-looking faces.

"Please tell me there is more than one dumb old note." Rainbow Dash said rubbing her eyes.

Dr. Mend nodded to Sea Blue,

"Sea Blue has a theory about where Valiant's headed . . ."

"A theory?" Twilight interrupted, "Excuse me for interrupting you Dr. Mend, but we need more than vague notes and theories to go on. We need facts . . ."

Twilight was interrupted by Rarity rising to her hooves,

"Excuse me darling but, something in that note . . . seems off to me. I for one, would like to hear the theory."

"Why's that Rarity?" Applejack asked.

"I have more than just an eye for details, Applejack. I think there's more to this than meets the ear. Besides Sea Blue's talent is psychology. We trust

your talent pertaining to farming the same way we trust Fluttershy's talent with animals, and Twilight's talent for all things magical. It would be the very height of foolishness to make a decision without having all the . . . information available. Solid facts or no, everypony's opinion matters and they deserve to be heard-out even if we don't agree with them. All I'm asking is for you to have an open mind."

"Um," squeaked a quiet voice from the corner of the room, "I'd like to hear it too. If there's even the possibility of Valiant being in trouble, we should be willing to help him. Even if it is inconvenient." Fluttershy said meekly.

"Boy, that's an understatement." Spike groused from his spot on the stairs, "Princess Celestia told Twilight and me to *stay here* to learn about friendship. We'd need her permission before we went anywhere. Besides, who'd run the Library while we're gone? I can't do it alone even if I did stay here."

Twilight raised her voice,  
"Alright everypony, settle down." she said turning to Sea Blue, "Let's hear your theory."

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Valiant began looking for a suitable place to make camp for the night, '*I think I made some good progress today.*' he thought as he looked around, '*I wonder why it took me five years to get to Ponyville from Haysburg? I ran into other cities but I don't know the names, or even where they are on the map. Could I have traveled up as far as Manehatten or Fillydelphia? Perhaps as far west as Trottingham?*' he shrugged to himself, '*Oh well, it doesn't matter now.*'

Valiant spent the next half hour contemplating, before he spotted what he judged to be a suitable place to set up camp for the night. Up ahead of him, he saw a small clearing and heard the soft sounds of a gurgling stream. It was about as ideal as he could have hoped for out there. The Everfree Forrest held only a minimal amount of uncertainty for him. He was used to dealing with strange animals and spooky surroundings. He had survived an encounter with a bear and survived, even if it had been with a heavy loss.

Valiant arrived at the bank of the stream and looked carefully at the water, *'You can't afford to be so relaxed when it comes to the water you're going to drink. Dysentery is the last thing you want to have to worry about on a hike like this. You drink brackish water and before you know it you're going to the bathroom so much you're dehydrated. So then you drink more and it messes up your stomach even more. Eventually you can end up dead from dehydration. Not fun.'* Valiant reached into his saddle-bags and pulled out his mortar and pestle. He set them down on the river bank and reached back unbuckling the bags.

Valiant set the bags down and looked around for three specific plants. He spotted one of them almost immediately. Walking over, he carefully plucked off six leaves from the small plant and set them aside to dry on a small rock. He began searching the surrounding area for the two other plants he would need for a specific formula; a formula which would be able to tell him whether or not the water was drinkable. After a few minutes of searching, he found the second plant. He used his hooves to dig up the roots then carried them, in his muzzle, over to the stream to wash them off. The water flowed gently around the earthen stems, cleaning them beautifully. Valiant was careful not to get any of the water in his mouth.

He carried the roots over and set them on the same rock the leaves were drying on, and then went in search of the final plant. The sun was beginning to set by the time he found the last plant. He plucked off two of the bright blue flowers and set them next to the leaves and roots to dry, *'I'll use the old ones while the new ones dry out.'* Valiant turned and walked back to the stream bank, where his saddle-bags still lay. Nosing around in the bags he came out with a small pouch of finely ground plant matter. He set the pouch down on the forest floor and went back and removed a small, thickly walled, glass vial and wedged it between two small rocks. Valiant then removed a small piece of parchment and shaped it into a funnel. Placing the funnel into the mouth of the vial, he opened the pouch and carefully poured a small amount of the finely ground plant material into the vial. He closed the bag, removed the funnel, and put them back into his saddle-bags.

Valiant removed a small ladle from his bag and dipped it into the stream then poured a tiny amount of the water into the vial. The method was a bit 'hard-and-fast' but it worked. Valiant set the ladle back inside his bag and

watched the vial. The contents of the vial mixed easily and began changing color to a light brown. Valiant smiled, light brown meant the water was safe to drink while really dark brown was not safe to drink. The difference was easy to tell, Valiant knew he was safe.

He rinsed out the vial and placed it carefully back into his saddle-bags. Turning back to the little clearing, he began scraping away a clear spot from the leaves and the typical forest debris. He scouted around and found a fair amount of dried sticks and, better yet, dried moss. He nosed the nearby rocks into a small circle which saw only darkening sky above, *'Have to be careful of what's above. Leaves can catch fire from hot enough smoke. Now the question is what the hay am I going to eat tonight?'* he wondered.

Valiant took some of the smallest sticks and moss, and dropped them into the mortar bowl. He held the bowl between his back hooves and used his fore-hooves and mouth to manipulate the pestle and grind the pieces inside. The sticks were tough but the moss was simple to grind. When he had an acceptably fine grind, he took and poured the mess into the small fire pit and set some slightly larger sticks in it as well. Satisfied, he pulled out his flint and steel and proceeded to build his fire.

A short time later, Valiant sighed happily and settled back onto his haunches, admiring his work. The fire burned merrily and his dinner, mushroom, carrot, and leek soup was cooking away in his tiny cast iron cook pot. Valiant figured he had a fair while before the food was ready, so he decided to practice, *'What to focus on this evening? Maybe mobility again?'*

Valiant rose to his hooves and began pacing around the fire while he thought. A glint of reflected light caught his eye from the far side of the stream. Valiant's head snapped up, alert for danger, for he of all ponies knew that animals' eyes often reflected light in the dark. He searched the shadows for any sign of life, and saw the glint of light again. Zeroing in on it, he saw the reflection was not coming from any animal's eyes, but an object lying on the ground.

Valiant couldn't make out the object, but he locked his eyes on it and carefully made his way over to it across the stream. There was a large mound of leaves covering the object. He lowered his head and nosed

several leaves away from it. He pulled his muzzle back suddenly and nearly tripped over his own hooves.

"Sweet Goddess!" he yelled.

Lying in front of him on the ground was a disturbingly lifelike statue. The reflection Valiant had seen was coming from a jewel encrusted helmet the statue wore. What had startled him was the statue's face. The statue depicted a canine face, like Wynona's, except the head was larger than a pony's. The statue's teeth were bared in a vicious looking snarl. The entire face was terrifying in how lifelike it was.

Valiant caught his breath and walked back over to the statue curiously, "Why is there a statue out here? Who would even carve such a hideous thing in the first place?"

Valiant continued clearing off the statue and eventually uncovered the entire thing, *'Odd, it doesn't have a base, yet it's completely intact.'* he looked around, feeling for its base, probing into the leaves with his hooves. His left fore hoof impacted something solid and he proceeded to dig it out. It was another statue, carved almost identical to the first one, *'Two statues toppled and without bases?' he thought, 'Alright then I'll just mosey around a bit and see if I can find either one.'*

An hour and a half later, Valiant stood back and surveyed what he had discovered, *'Am entire garden of statues, all toppled and hideous. Why are they out here? There are no pony settlements in the area.'* he counted the statues one-by-one and came up with a final number, *'Thirty seven? The work involved in making thirty-seven statues would be incredible. So why are they out here?'*

Valiant wondered around each one, noting the comparisons and contrasts of each as compared to the other pieces of the set, *'Each one is snarling, like it's angry, each is wearing armor and carrying weapons, like they were going off to war and they were all carved to look as if they were in motion. Aside from that, they each have a unique facial and body structure plus their armor seems unique to each individual as well as their weaponry. The statues and both male and female, yet I have never seen or even heard of a species that has this kind of appearance. The only truly strange thing is that the jewels and gems adorning each piece of armor are real, whereas*

*everything else is solid stone. Who would spend so many bits to buy these kinds of materials and put in the effort to carve the statues, yet not bother to use them in a place where they could be seen?' as much as Valiant puzzled over the fact he couldn't figure out a single answer.*

Valiant finally gave up and decided to go eat his dinner back at camp, *'I'll figure it out tomorrow.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

Sea Blue finally finished his exhaustive explanation of his theory about Valiant's motivations and destination, and waited for one of the mares to comment. Patch had eventually played herself out and had fallen asleep with Angel Bunny sleeping next to her peacefully. The two were adorable, sleeping as though they had always been the best of friends.

Twilight cleared her throat,  
"Your theory is plausible, Sea Blue. However, psychology is still in its infant stages by all accounts in the scientific community. I'm not trying to be rude but your theory seems weak at best."

Sea Blue wasn't fazed in the least,  
"Alright, let's say I'm wrong. What's the worst that can happen?"

"That's a very pessimistic attitude, Sea Blue." Rarity said curtly.

Sea Blue smiled at the perfectly groomed unicorn,  
"I plan for the worst and hope for the best, that way, every surprise is a pleasant one. My mindset is like my theory, it's not perfect, but then again nothing is. It's simply the best I can do. Believe me, we wouldn't have wasted our time or yours, if we didn't believe Valiant was in danger. We haven't done all this lightly. I had a solid practice back in Canterlot and my daughter had plenty of friends there. We had two reasons for coming to Ponyville: one, we are the bearers of the Elements of Peace and as such we have an obligation to protect the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, two, we are worried about our friend and we came to you six for help. You know him better than the rest of us so we figured maybe you would have a better idea of how to help him."

Twilight shook her head,

"Honestly, I think you're blowing this whole thing out of proportion. Maybe Valiant just needed some space to clear his head."

Sea Blue nodded,

"It's a possibility, but I think it's a slim one. I've spent my entire life learning how to read ponies and I'm pretty good at it. Test me if you want. You'll find that I'm not often wrong." his eyes wandered to Rarity briefly, then back to Twilight, "It's true, no system is flawless, but my ratio of correct vs. incorrect is very sound. I'm as certain as I can be that Valiant is headed to Haysburg, as I am likewise certain he'll be in trouble when he gets there if not in actual danger. Let me put it like this: wouldn't you rather have me be wrong and we go off and find him for nothing, than find out later on that Valiant has been killed when there was something we could have done about it? Which mistake would be easier to live with?"

Rainbow Dash flopped her head down on her hooves and rolled her eyes, "He's right Twilight. It's definitely not *my* idea of a good time, but there's too many 'ifs' here for us not to go."

Fluttershy's voice was barely discernable, even in the quiet of the Library, "Um Twilight, if there's even a little chance that Valiant needs our help, he deserves it. We wouldn't be very good friends if we didn't at least try."

"Ah'm in, hooves down." Applejack said loudly, "Valiant's done saved two members of our family and that pretty much makes him family right there. We Apples stick together. If he needs me Ah'm there, no questions asked. It ain't ideal for Big Macintosh and me, but ifn' it needs to be done we'll do it."

"Twilight," Rarity addressed rising to her hooves, "May I have a word with you in private please darling?"

"Sure Rarity." Twilight said, likewise rising to her hooves.

The two mares walked into the Library's kitchen and Rarity closed the door,

"What is ever wrong with you darling?" she asked the purple unicorn quietly, "Sea Blue has a good point and you know it. Why are you resisting what the rest of us have already agreed on? If I didn't know any better, I would think you had something against him?"

"It's not that Rarity." Twilight responded also whispering, "It's just that this is too much to take in. I haven't had time to process it all in my head yet."

Rarity crossed her fore hooves sternly,  
"That's a weak excuse Twilight Sparkle. You had one tenth the time to process the events around Nightmare Moon and you coped with it just fine. What is the real reason you don't want to go, and don't tell me it's because they're new either. We were new to you and you dealt with that just as well. No more excuses."

Twilight's ears lowered,  
"The truth is," Twilight began hesitantly, "The truth is, I feel cheated. We're the Elements of Harmony. We are supposed to be the ones who protect Equestria, the only ones, not one half of a group. I feel like I've been insulted. I feel, I don't know, useless I guess."

Rarity's expression softened upon hearing her friend's feelings,  
"Twilight, have you even taken the time to talk to Lemon Lime?" she asked, "From what I've gathered from Patch, darling they practically worship us. They think of themselves like Princess Celestia's Royal Guards and we're the Princesses. They're only here to protect us; they came to us **for** help and **to** help. We *are* the ones who protect Equestria, but we do it with them. I've spoken to Sea Blue about all this. He told me the way it all works. The Elements of Peace keep the Elements of Harmony safe while we build up our power. They're the front-line muscle, we're still the precise, powerful, magic. And even if that wasn't the case, why should it matter? They've come to us for help. Why would you deny anypony help just because you may feel a little cheated? It's a poor reason and I know you well enough to know you're not that shallow; you'll eventually say yes. Let's save ourselves, and them, some time and just help them now."

Rarity nudged twilight playfully:  
"Besides, I think Lemon Lime looks rather dashing in his armor, wouldn't you agree?"

Twilight raised her head, a smile floating around the corners of her mouth,  
"You're right, thanks Rarity."

Twilight and Rarity emerged from the kitchen,



"Let's figure out what needs to be set in motion before we go." Twilight said to the gathered ponies.

Pinkie Pie leapt up into a standing position, bobbing her head left and right as she broke out into song,

"Saddle up you poni-ies, we've got a trail to blaze, oh-oh-oh-oh, through the wild blue yonder under the sun's brilliant ray-ays, lets follow Twilight into the glorious unknown, this is a life like no other, oh-oh, this is the great adventure . . . " she sang it at decibels not meant to be reached by pony vocal chords, but then again, it was Pinkie Pie.

# Chapter 5

Twilight had finally come around to the idea of going off to find Valiant. She had Spike send a message to Princess Celestia asking for a leave of absence. Big Macintosh told Applejack about his idea for asking Zecora to run the farm with Caramel while they were gone. Applejack was not too keen on the idea but she did have to admit, her brother had chosen the only available individual capable of pulling the feat off. Zecora had a solid knowledge of plants and Applebloom respected her. It was the best solution either sibling could have hoped for. The two farm ponies headed back to Sweet Apple Acres to break the news to Granny Smith and Applebloom. Rarity and Sea Blue had a problem: what to do with Sweetie Belle and Patch? They departed, heading back to Rarity's boutique to try to brainstorm the problem out. Trooper politely asked Twilight if he could stay the night in the Library. Lemon Lime stopped the conversation and had Trooper follow him to the Mayor's office, hoping to catch her before she went home for the day. Dr. Mend and Pinkie Pie headed off to their separate homes for the night, leaving Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy alone with Twilight to talk. The group was supposed to come back together the next morning to sort out the issues and plan out their route.

Rainbow Dash waited until the door closed behind Pinkie Pie before turning to Twilight and Fluttershy,  
"Girls, I've got a problem."

Twilight sighed in her mind, but decided to hear her friend out,  
"We all have problems right now, Rainbow Dash. Do you think WE can solve it?"

Rainbow Dash bit her lip pensively,  
"I uh," she began, "I kind of had a bad run-in with Trooper earlier. He thinks I'm bullying him. He even cussed at me."

Fluttershy cocked her head to the right questioningly,  
"Why would he think that?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged,

"I don't know." she said, then rubbed the back of her neck with her hoof, "Well, maybe he thinks that because of what happened yesterday. See, he was trying to build a cloud house," Rainbow Dash snickered, "He's a total amateur. You should have seen it. It was hilarious. I watched him for a while and he just didn't get it, so I threw him a hint about how to weave clouds. He got all upset and fussed at me for not saying something sooner. How was I supposed to know he wanted help? I always learn things for myself; I thought he'd want to do it too."

Twilight pursed her lips,  
"How long were you watching him, Rainbow Dash?"

"I don't know, a couple of hours, I guess." Dash said shrugging, "Look that's not the point. So he finally gets a good foundation down, finally, and then a bunch of colts and fillies flies right through his foundation. They totally demolished it, there wasn't anything left. I forgot to mention

he'd made it in the middle of the practicing area, its common knowledge. Anyway his face was priceless, I couldn't help but laugh. So he gets all upset and storms off."

"Hmm, well I can see where the two of you could have had a miscommunication there. Try saying to him about it a little sooner next time." Twilight suggested.

"Honestly Twilight," Dash said, "I really don't think there's going to be a next time. Things got worse today. I was watching him try to build another cloud house again today. I forgot about him earlier and cleared out all the clouds above Ponyville. He couldn't find any clouds nearby so he tried to use some from above the Everfree Forrest. I couldn't believe it! He was actually doing it!" Rainbow Dash said, voice rising, "He was using clouds from the Everfree Forrest! I mean how stupid can you get! Those things would have dissipated in a matter of hours and maybe even dropped him right into the forest itself. He was only starting to weave them when I remembered I had to ask Applejack something and by the time I got back he was nowhere to be seen so I just pushed the clouds back over to where they belong. All of a sudden I see him flying back toward them so I stopped him and asked what he was doing. He gets all huffy and charges at me telling me to get out of his way."

Rainbow Dash stopped to take a breath before continuing,  
"I kept trying to explain about the clouds to him, but he wouldn't listen. He accused me of bullying him and then he goes and dives down into the Everfree Forrest and he keeps flying! I couldn't see him so I flew off and looked around. He comes back out of the trees, so I tackled him to keep him out of there. He's new; he doesn't know how dangerous that place is! So we're wrestling around and he pushes off me. His saddlebags tore when he pushed off, which I totally didn't mean to happen. Then he cusses at me and tells me to leave him alone then he tries to grab the saddle-bags from me. He surprised me and I didn't have time to let go, so we both ended up dropping them into 'you know where'. He flies down into the Everfree Forrest again and stays there. I hung around for a minute or two trying to find him, but the way I figure, if he thinks I'm picking on him he might not come back up until I left, so I left. Then when I see him here, earlier, I tried to explain everything to him, but he just ignored me."

Rainbow Dash specifically didn't mention Trooper's absent cutie-mark. She had seen it as clear as day, but she didn't feel right spreading the news around. She wasn't that insensitive.

"He was out of line with the cussing, that's for sure." Twilight said, "But he should have been willing to listen to you. If he's going to be like that, just ignore him. He's being immature and foalish. When he feels like being mature about everything, he'll come and talk to you. Until then you'll just be wasting your time."

"Yeah, I'd thought about that, but I really don't want him to have the wrong idea about me."

Rainbow Dash admitted.

Fluttershy picked up something out of place,  
"Why is his opinion of you so important?"

"It's not." Rainbow Dash said, "It's not like I need his approval or anything. It's just that we're supposedly linked by our Elements. I figure we're supposed to get along and everything, right?"

Twilight rolled her eyes,

"Not necessarily. Lemon Lime and I don't get along particularly well. He's wimpy and he's short. How's he supposed to 'protect me' if he can't even

take care of himself? He looks like he might be worth something in his armor, but he's really annoying and he never shuts up. He talks so much I can hardly hear myself think. Honestly, I can't stand him. I just ignore him most of the time. He's supposed to be the Element of Patience but I sure don't see it. He's probably the most impatient pony I've ever met."

"I think they're nice." Fluttershy said.

Her two friends looked at her like she was crazy, but she continued, "We already know Dr. Mend and Big Macintosh are nice, right? Rarity seems to be getting along with Sea Blue well enough and we all got along with Valiant. Maybe we just need time to get to know them. Maybe they're just rough around the edges like Valiant was when we first met him."

"Speaking of which, Twilight," Rainbow Dash said, "Isn't it kind of weird having a stallion staying with you? Doesn't it get awkward having him in the Library at night?"

"No. Why would it? As I said, I just ignore him." Twilight said obliviously.

"Um, don't you know Twilight?" Fluttershy asked.

"Don't I know what? What are you girls getting at?" Twilight asked, confused.

"Lemon Lime's sweet on you, Twilight. It's in his eyes every time he looks at you. He totally adores you." Rainbow Dash said, "You two are all alone here at night, I'm surprised he hasn't tried making any moves on you."

"I think it's kind of sweet." Fluttershy added, "He probably hasn't said anything because he doesn't want to make you feel uncomfortable. He seems like a nice stallion though."

Twilight was about to respond when she heard a knock on her door, "Come in." she called.

Lemon Lime opened the door and entered, Trooper followed him, "The Mayor's office was closed. I'll have to try tomorrow. Hey Twilight, do you happen to know which houses are for sale? I'd like to get a look before I buy one. I need a big house so I can run my appointments out of it, but it needs to be close to the center of town so my patients don't have to go too

far either. Would you be willing to show me which ones are for sale? I'd really, really, really, really appreciate it if you would. I know I'm new and everything but I could really use the help from somepony who has lived here for a while. I completely understand if you have something else you have to do, but if you have the time I'd really like to." Lemon Lime machine-gunned.

Spike belched loudly from his bed upstairs. A few moments later, the baby dragon wobbled down the stairs and handed the scroll off to Twilight, then went back upstairs to bed.

Twilight levitated the scroll with her magic and read the message out loud,

*My most faithful student,*

*You have my full permission to go search for Valiant. This might be a valuable lesson in the magic of friendship. Write me back with any problems you or your friends may have in regard to your absences and I will see to it that everything is taken care of.*

*Princess Celestia.*

Twilight telekinetically rolled the scroll back up and rose to her hooves levitating it in front of her. She walked over to her writing podium and levitated a piece of parchment and ink vial over. She used her magic and dipped the quill into the ink.

Keeping her head facing forward, she addressed Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash,

"Fluttershy, do you have anypony to take care of your animals while you're gone?"

"No Twilight, I don't. I'm not sure I could trust anypony to care for the animals. They wouldn't know about all the specific things I do for them. Each one is a special case. A regular veterinarian wouldn't know where to even begin with Angel Bunny." Fluttershy admitted.

Twilight blew out a quiet breath,

"You can trust that Princess Celestia will have her best vet out here caring for the animals while you're gone. She has to have somepony look after

Philomena, even you didn't know how to do that. I'm sure the pony she sends will be just fine."

Fluttershy lowered her head,  
"Oh, alright. If you think so, I trust you."

"What about you Rainbow Dash?" Twilight asked, "Do you have somepony to take care of the weather while you're gone?"

"No problem." Rainbow Dash replied, "I already asked Cloud Kicker to take care of it."

Twilight nodded,  
"Good to hear. Now I just need to finish this off and send it."

"Live Wire?" Trooper asked, "Are we staying here tonight?"

"I'm not sure." the smaller unicorn stallion responded, "I'll ask Twilight if it's alright after she's done with the letter. I don't want to be a distraction while she's doing something . . ."

Lemon Lime trailed off as Twilight shot him a look that plainly said he was already being a distraction. The little therapist clammed up as quickly as he could. He felt bad, he hadn't meant to be a distraction, but he always seemed to upset Twilight, 'Why can't I do anything right? I hate being a problem. Maybe she'll like me if I just shut up. Then maybe she'll actually talk to me instead of ignoring me all the time.' he thought, 'Starting right now, no more rambling. Simple questions, simple answers. I've just got to get her to talk to me. She's so smart! There's so much we could talk about and she's so pretty! Arg! This is torture! Why can't I just tell her how I feel? I know why, because she won't even say two words to me unless she's using me for an experiment. Why can't she see me as a pony and not a 'test subject'? I just have to stay quiet, and then maybe she'll notice me. Obviously being myself doesn't work, new tactic.'

Trooper's mind was likewise working, 'Yes, Rainbow Dash, I know I am a freak. Yes, Rainbow Dash, I know you are there. You can stop sneaking looks at me. I see you just fine. Just ignore me and we will get along just fine.' he thought petulantly, 'Would you please stop looking at me. I do not know what you are thinking, but I am certain it does not require you to stare

at me. I have just as much right to be here as you do, thank you very much, and I will not be intimidated by your body language, so you can just stop it.'

Rainbow Dash had her own thought pattern, 'I wonder what it's like to grow up without your cutie-mark? Is that why he's so moody all the time? Because he doesn't know what his special talent is? He's supposed to be the Element of Perseverance? He sure did give up talking to me pretty quick. Maybe Twilight's right, maybe I should just ignore him and let him come to me first.'

Fluttershy's mind was working on a totally different pattern, 'Oh I hope Valiant's alright. He's been gone for over a week now. I wonder how far away Haysburg is? Is it dangerous there? I hope he's safe.'

Twilight was having trouble concentrating on the letter, 'He's got a crush on me? Great,' she thought sarcastically, 'Just what I need. Some short, wimpy, chatterbox staring at me with stars in his eyes. And he's been sleeping in the Library with me too. Who knows what he's been doing at night while I'm asleep. I hope he doesn't watch me sleep. That's just too creepy. I'm not interested in romance and even if I was, I'm sure I could do better than HIM. He doesn't even look old enough to have a job yet.'

Twilight thought back to her experience with being judgmental, 'It's not like with Zecora where looks don't matter. It's not that at all,' she was trying to convince herself more than anything else, 'It's just that he's so annoying. It's like he's socially deprived or something.'

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Rarity had been surprised to see Sweetie Belle awake when she arrived back at the boutique. The little unicorn filly was overjoyed upon hearing about the new filly at school, but became more than a little hesitant when she saw Patch's eye, or more specifically, her lack thereof. Patch, on the other hoof, had woken up and been ecstatic when she saw Sweetie Belle. Sea Blue and Rarity sat down discussing possible arrangements while Patch and Sweetie Belle were on the floor.

Patch decided to be the bold one and started the introductions, "I'm Patch. What's your name?" she asked sitting right in front of Sweetie Belle.



"Your name is Patch?" Sweetie Belle asked, disbelieving.

"Yep! What's your name?" the pink filly asked again.

"I'm Sweetie Belle. What's with your eye?" the little white unicorn asked bluntly.

"I'm a pirate! Arrrr!" Patch said playfully, "Sorry," she giggled, "It's just the way I was born."

"Does it hurt?" Sweetie Belle asked.

Patch shook her head,  
"Nope, it just looks funny, that's all."

"It looks kind of gross." Sweetie Belle said.

"Yeah, it really does! It doesn't feel gross though. Want to touch it?" Patch offered.

Sweetie Belle was grossed out but curious,  
"Won't I hurt you if I do?"

Patch responded by stuffing her left forehoof into the socket and rubbing it around,  
"Hmm, nope. Not unless you really press hard."

Sweetie Belle stood up and slowly inched her hoof toward Patch's blank eye. Patch held still as the white unicorn filly touched the skin hesitantly at first,  
"Hey, you're right. It doesn't feel gross!" an idea struck her and she smiled mischievously, "Hey Patch, do you ever have to deal with bullies?"

"Sometimes, why?" Patch asked.

"There's this really mean pair of bullies at school who are always picking on Scootaloo, Applebloom, and me because we don't have our cutie-marks yet. I was just thinking, we could really gross them out if you wore an eye patch to school the first day then took it off and touched it in front of them." Sweetie Belle said.

Patch's eye lit up,  
"You don't have your cutie-mark either?"

# Chapter 6

Twilight was awakened by a loud knocking on the Library's front door. The formerly slumbering unicorn cracked open her eyes and blearily looked out the window close to her bed in the loft. The sun hadn't even risen yet. Spike mumbled incoherently at the base of her bed then turned over and went back to sleep. Twilight grumbled quietly to herself and pulled back her blanket, '*Who would be visiting this early?*' The studious unicorn blinked owlishly several times and tried to slip out of her bed. Her hooves betrayed her and she flopped out of bed onto the floor with a resounding thump. She vaguely heard somepony open the front door quietly.

"May I help you?" said a quiet stallion's voice.

Twilight recognized the voice,  
"Lemon Lime?" she asked, voice sounding like a croak.

Another voice responded, it was a mare who sounded happy, jovial, and loud,  
"Good morning! I'm here at the request of Princess Celestia. I'm supposed to meet with Twilight Sparkle in regard to taking care of some local animals."

"Please, keep your voice down. Twilight's still asleep, she had a long night. We weren't expecting you until morning, as in, after the sun comes up." Lemon Lime replied.

"Well the light was on, so I figured it would be alright. I'm sorry for disturbing you so early. Would you like me to come back later?" the mare asked.

"Yes please. Around nine-thirty would probably be good." Lemon Lime said.

"Alrighty then! I'll be back! See you later!" the mare responded.

Twilight heard the door close, and heard Lemon Lime quietly say,

"Hopefully I'll be done with breakfast by then."

Twilight crawled back into her bed, '*Breakfast? He's making breakfast this early? Oh forget it. I'm going back to sleep.*'

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Sea Blue stirred in his bed and rolled over,  
"Ouch! Daddy watch out!"

Sea Blue's eyes popped open, he sat up startled,  
"Patch?" he asked, "Sweetie, what are you doing in my room? You know the rule, always knock and wait to be acknowledged. I thought we were past this."

Patch sat up, head drooping,  
"I'm sorry," she mumbled sadly, "But I just wanted to spend as much time with you as I could, before you left. You already said you didn't know how long you would be gone."

Sea Blue felt bad, he nuzzled his daughter affectionately,  
"Believe me Patch, I wish I didn't have to go, but I do. I don't want to be away from you either." he hugged his daughter closely; "You know I'll be thinking about you the whole time. Come on, let's make a big breakfast, then we can spend the whole day together. Wouldn't you like to see your new school? I heard your teacher is our next door neighbor. Would you like to meet her?"

"I guess so." Patch responded, still saddened.

"Come on, kiddo." Sea Blue said lifting Patch off his tall bed, "Whatever you want for breakfast, just name it."

Patch deeply contemplated the question while her father carried her downstairs,  
"I liked Live Wire's cooking while we were on our way here. Can we go have breakfast with him and Twilight and Spike?"

Sea Blue smiled as he set his little daughter down at the base of the stairs,

"I don't know for sure, but it can't hurt to ask. I didn't realize you liked his cooking so much."

"Well, it sure beats yours Daddy. You always over spice everything and you put too much sugar in and you always leave it in the oven too long and . . ."

"Alright Patch," Sea Blue said laughing lightly, "I get the idea. Live Wire it is then."

Sea Blue pushed open the front door for his daughter and locked it behind himself,

"You know Patch; I'm really surprised you don't feel awkward around Live Wire, Dr. Mend, Big Macintosh, and Trooper."

Patch turned her head and looked at her father strangely,  
"Why would I feel awkward? I love being the center of attention. Here I am, one little filly around all these grown-ups; everypony spoils me."

Sea Blue nearly tripped,  
"Did I ever tell you; maybe you're a little too honest sweetie?"

"Daddy, you always say 'honesty is the best policy'. I'm just being honest. Isn't it a good thing to be honest?" Patch asked innocently.

"Well, of course it is. Don't get too used to the constant attention though." Sea Blue replied.

"I won't." Patch quipped, "I figured I was getting special treatment because we were moving. I didn't want to go, but I didn't have a choice, so I'm just enjoying it while it lasts."

Sea Blue shook his head,  
"When did you get so grown up? What happened to the little filly I'm raising? I want my carefree, playful daughter back!" he whined playfully, stomping his hooves on the ground, throwing a mock temper tantrum.

Patch giggled,  
"I'm right here Daddy. I'm just using my head like you taught me."

"So, what did you think of Sweetie Belle?" Sea Blue asked, changing the subject and suddenly acting perfectly normal once again.

Patch perked up,  
"I like her! She says there are two more fillies that don't have their cutie-marks either! They call themselves the Cutie-Mark Crusaders! Sweetie Belle said she'd ask the other two fillies if I can be a Cutie-Mark Crusader too!"

Sea Blue rolled the phrase around on his tongue for a moment,  
"The Cutie-Mark Crusaders, huh? I don't know Patch; the name makes them sound a little rambunctious. I don't want you doing anything dangerous."

Patch hid a mischievous grin away from her father and batted her eyelashes innocently,  
"Aww, come on Dad, please? How much trouble can four little fillies get into?"

"Well, I guess you're right. Sure, go for it."

Sea Blue had no idea exactly how much he would come to regret those words.

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Fluttershy was up with the sun, like always, feeding her animals. Her chickens were her only true source of income since she rarely charged for her veterinary skills. She quietly gathered the eggs from under her hens and held each one up to the light of the sun, looking carefully for any sign of fertilization. She had made that mistake once and only once, she had cried for over a week afterward. After examining each egg, she gently placed them in a linen lined wicker basket. The Cakes paid well for the hen-fruit and she needed the bits. She grew most of her own food, but having the bits was helpful for emergencies, which seemed to occur with disturbing frequency as of late. She had saved all the bits she earned as a model, and

it was quite a substantial sum, but she knew every little bit helped. (Bad joke, I know.)

Most of the ponies in Ponyville thought she was poor, she certainly lived like it. What they didn't realize was that Fluttershy had all she needed and wasn't greedy. She was a simple mare with simple needs. She had her animals and her friends. The only thing she occasionally yearned for was companionship. Her animals were great company and Angel Bunny was as protective as anything she could ever need or even imagine for that matter, but she wanted somepony to talk to every day. Her friends were wonderful and she was grateful for them on a daily basis, but she had to travel for a fair distance to visit them.

She picked up the basket of eggs and headed off toward Ponyville to sell them to the Cakes, '*I wonder if Princess Celestia sent the veterinarian yet?*' Fluttershy continued walking to Sugar Cube Corner, humming to herself all the way.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pinkie Pie's alarm clock rang out loudly in the upper room of Sugar Cube Corner. A bright pink hoof slowly snaked its way out from under the covers of a neon pink canopy bed and smashed the nightstand on either side of the offending noise-maker before slamming down against the top of the badly dented alarm bells. The clock stopped ringing and the hoof stretched out to grab vaguely at the drawer of the nightstand. The hoof pulled the drawer open and slunk inside, retrieving a hoof-full of multicolored marshmallows. The hoof ominously retracted back under the covers, to the sound of loud munching.

Were anypony standing in the room, here is how the next few seconds would play out. You would hear the ominous sound of a disembodied heartbeat. It would start off softly and gradually grow louder. The camera would zoom in to the canopy bed slowly while the heart beat grew louder and louder. You would see the pink hoof reach out a second time and procure a second hoof-full of marshmallows then drag them back under the covers, once again to the sound of loud munching. Suddenly the covers would explode upward, as a high-pitched squeal rang out loudly. A bright pink blur would shoot out from under the covers and streak down the stairs leaving a pink ribbon-trail behind it. The bed covers would land

perfectly, already flat and straight, while a pair of pink hooves trailed back up the stairs and grabbed a toothless baby alligator from where it slumbered next to the bed, unseen until this moment. That is, if anypony had been in the room watching.

Pinkie Pie had a new treat waiting for her this morning. She had gone shopping and had discovered something new the previous day. She had been so excited she had bought a full bag of the 'mix' and the machine to go with it. She had read the instructions the previous night, after Mr. and Mrs. Cake had left for the day, so they had no idea what the pink pony had acquired.

Pinkie Pie carried Gummy around on her back talking to the little reptile,  
"As soon as the espresso's done, we'll go see Twilight and Spike and Live Wire and Dashie and Trooper and Rarity and Sea Blue and Patch and Big Mac and Applejack and Fluttershy and Dr. Mendie so we can get ready for our next adventure! Aren't you excited Gummy! . . . "

May Celestia curse the fool who sold Pinkie Pie an espresso machine.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Mend always kept his windows open so the sun could wake him. It was an old habit and it always worked for him. His house was a very modest little thing, barely big enough for a bachelor stallion living by himself. He had a ten-pace by ten-pace bedroom with a tiny closet, one mirror, and not a single decoration on any of the walls. He had a tiny kitchenette with a mini-fridge, a sink, and a single range burner for cooking. His bathroom was likewise miniscule with barely enough room to turn around. He had a front room, of sorts. It was, like his bedroom, ten-paces by ten-paces with a single couch and coffee table. The entire house was sterile white and utterly devoid of any sort of decorations whatsoever. Mend had always hated his house; even though he could never admit it to himself until he came back from Canterlot.

"How did I ever live here?" he asked himself out loud.



The stirrings of a voice from the deep, dark recesses of his mind prompted Mend to race to the kitchenette and nearly lunge for a small orange pill bottle he purposely left on the counter. He washed the pill down with a long series of gulps of water, straight from the faucet of his sink. He pulled his head out of the sink and turned off the faucet.

"Whew," he said greatly relieved, "Can't let that happen. Your mistake Mother, not mine. Now breakfast."

The older medical pony opened the door of his mini-fridge and his face fell,  
"Drat. I need to go shopping. I wonder if Live Wire is making breakfast yet? I'm sure he'll have some leftovers, if not, I'll just grab something from Sugar Cube Corner."

The notion that he spoke to himself had bothered him at first, but Sea Blue had assured him it was perfectly alright. Dr. Mend replayed his psychologist's answer in his mind, *'It's O.K. to talk to yourself, it's even O.K. to answer yourself. The problems begin when you get into an argument with yourself over an answer and have to buy yourself dinner to make peace with yourself at a fast-food joint because you know you're a cheap date.'* Dr. Mend chuckled at his friend's explanation and decided to head on over to the Library.

\*\*\*\*\*

Applejack and Big Macintosh were up and about as the first rays of the sun peeked up over the horizon. To their surprise, Caramel was already awake and had done almost half the chores before they even managed to get out the front door. They joined him and together they finished the chores in half the normal time. They headed inside for the morning meeting and breakfast and sat around the table.

Big Macintosh set a pot of oatmeal on the range then made the three some hot chocolate and distributed the steaming mugs as he sat down, "What do we have to do today?"

Applejack spoke up first,  
"What time is Zecora supposed to get here?"

Caramel almost choked on his cocoa,  
"Zecora?" he asked.

"Ayup." Big Macintosh replied.

Applejack eyed Caramel suspiciously,  
"Is that goin' to be a problem Caramel?"

The unlucky Earth pony waved his hooves in front of himself,  
"No! No not at all. I'm just surprised is all. I wouldn't have expected her to be willing to do this. I don't know her very well, but she seems to like her solitude. What did you say to make her agree to help?"

"Alls Ah did was ask her nicely and offer her a place to stay while we're gone." Big Macintosh explained.

"Um, Big Mac?" Applejack prodded, "Does Granny Smith know Zecora's commin' to stay at the farm?"

"Ayup." her brother responded.

"When did ya tell her?" Applejack was not convinced.

"When we got home from Twilight's last night." Big Mac informed his inquisitive sister.

"And she was okay with that?" Applejack asked.

"Ayup. Said she knew a Zebra family once a long time ago. Said they was some o' the nicest folks a pony could meet, even if they did talk awful funny." Big Macintosh said.

The tell-tale sound of bubbling oatmeal alerted the three Earth ponies that breakfast was ready. They ate their breakfast in silence, as farmers are apt to do. Caramel collected the bowls and began the dishes while Applejack and Big Macintosh finished their cocoa.

"Well then, Ah guess we should be headin' over to Twilight's here soon. If Zecora gets here before we get back, Ah want you to be real nice to her Caramel. She's benden' over backwards for us here. Get to know her some and give her a tour of the farm so she knows her way 'round. Yall two are goin' to be runnin' Sweet Apple Acres while Big Mac and Ah are gone. Ya hear?" Applejack said authoritatively.

Caramel turned his head away from the sink and nodded,  
"Sure thing Applejack."

"We'd best get goin' now Big Macintosh." Applejack said rising from her seat.

"Ayup."

\*\*\*\*\*

Rarity sat quietly with Sweetie Belle at their kitchen table sipping tea, "I have to go to the Library for a meeting today. I have to go away for a little while here soon and I want you be on your best behavior for Cheerilee while I'm gone. Do you have your things packed yet?" she asked.

Sweetie Belle didn't answer her,  
"Sweetie Belle, did you hear me?"

Sweetie Belle looked up slowly from her tea, her little face was sad, "I'm going to miss you Rarity." she said, voice cracking.

"Sweetie Belle darling, it's not as if I'm never coming back. I'll just be gone for a little while. I have to go make sure Valiant's going to be alright. We owe him a great deal. He did save your life. I don't know what I would have done had I lost you in that fire." Rarity stated. "Valiant is a friend and you do what you can to make sure a friend is alright, you would do the same for Applebloom or Scootaloo wouldn't you?" She asked.

"Of course I would, they're my best friends!" Sweetie Belle gushed.

"Speaking of friends did you talk to them about Patch?"

"No not yet," she said innocently shuffling her hooves, "I want them to meet her first. Scootaloo will probably think her missing eye is cool. I like Patch and I think the others will too. Though I hope her eye freaks out Silverspoon and Diamond Tiara." said Sweetie Belle with a hint of a mischievous smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"Sweetie Belle! As funny as you might think it is, do you think it right to use Patch like that? It's not a very polite thing to do to a new friend darling." Rarity chastened.

"I know." Sweetie Belle replied bowing her head. "*I still think it will be funny.*" Sweetie thought.

"Well let's go Sweetie Belle, come along, we both have things to do." Rarity said as she got up from her seat and washed their tea cups.

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### ***In the skies above Ponyville:***

"Ah me, I never would have gotten to used to the blasted cloud house anyway, we are just leaving again." Trooper started looking around the sky, "Hmm, where to get breakfast?"

The sight of a thin trail of smoke emanating from the chimney of the Library gave him an idea. Trooper licked his lips remembering Lemon Lime's cooking, '*Not much to debate there. Live Wire makes a mean spot of breakers. Looks like the Library is where I shall find my morning repast.*' Trooper flew off toward the Library thinking, '*I do so hate to mooch off everypony like this. I will have to look into finding some manner of employment. I certainly cannot spend the rest of my life asking a friend whenever I need to find a place to tuck in.*'

Trooper flew in low over the various homes in Ponyville and caught sight of a rooster-trail of dust heading off toward Canterlot, '*Huh? Is that Rainbow Dash?*' he pondered, '*No she would be flying. I wonder who that is?*' He flew up high and used his right fore hoof to shield his eyes, squinting, '*Odd. For a moment there I thought I saw a flash of pink. Oh well,*

*breakfast waits for nopony.*' he thought as he swooped down for a landing in front of the Library.

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Rainbow Dash snorted loudly and turned over in her bed. She opened her eyes and squinted out her window. The sun had just risen. While the multi-hued pegasus was definitively not an early riser, she knew there was much that had to be done and subsequently decided to try to force her still sleepy body out of bed. She grunted and groaned and fussed around under the cloud blanket then finally managed to slip her left hind hoof out from under the covers. Her hoof met the soft and fluffy but solid cloud which made up her floor. She eased her other hind hoof out and slowly rocked her weight off the bed and onto her floor with a plush whomping sound. The floor being made of cloud, like her bed, was just as comfortable. Rainbow Dash had to fight to keep from falling back to sleep on her floor.

She shakily rose to her hooves and head-butted the door of her room open. She attempted to descend the stairs but in her groggy state she overbalanced and rolled down the stairs. Rainbow Dash lay at the base of the stairs for a few moments before righting herself, it took a couple of attempts. She plodded over to her front door and managed to find the handle after four failed attempts. She walked out over her porch and simply stepped off the edge.

The feeling of freefall brought her instantly awake. She opened her wings and glided for a minute before shaking her head and dashing off toward Ponyville. Rainbow Dash saw Applejack and Big Macintosh on the road to Ponyville and swooped in over them.

"Applejack, Big Mac, can I talk to you guys for a minute?" Rainbow called from the air above the two Earth ponies.

"You get another speedin' ticket sugar cube?" Apple Jack said playfully. "Are you ever going to leave me alone about that AJ?" Rainbow Dash asked the farm pony.

"Nah, it's too much fun messin' with ya about it" Applejack replied still smiling.

"I've never been traveling before and um . . . Well, I kind of don't know what I should bring. I don't even own a pair of saddle bags." Rainbow Dash admitted.

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Valiant woke up as soon as the first rays of Celestia's sun crept through the foliage of the trees. The mystery of the statues had haunted his dreams. He crawled out of the tent and looked the macabre display across the stream. The statues hadn't moved, but their life-like appearance was accentuated in the early morning light, even if they were still lying down on the ground. Valiant was still full from his dinner the previous night, so he decided to get going on the mystery of the statues.

He hopped across the stream and took another look at the lost art. In the brighter light he could make out even more details. Every follicle of fur was clearly identifiable, the detail was positively mind-boggling. One thing he hadn't realized was that the statues hadn't worn with age. The stone looked like it had only just been carved. He walked around the statues and carefully examined each one in turn. One particular depiction caught his eye. A single statue lay on the ground, but it looked like it was meant to be there. The creature depicted was lying on its back, the contents of its strange saddle bags seeming to have been in the process of falling out as if it had been frozen in the middle of landing on the ground. Valiant stepped toward this statue for a better look.

His right fore hoof caught against something next to the statue. Valiant lowered his head and nosed away the dirt revealing a badly worn, but thickly rimmed, small porcelain bowl. Valiant picked up the bowl with his teeth and set it on top of the statue. He nosed away the remainder of the dirt and took a good long look at the bowl, *'Maybe this belonged to the artist who carved the statues. I wonder if the artist's signature is on it somewhere?'*

Valiant turned the bowl over and examined the bottom. He could just barely make out some letters on the bottom. The words were in Ancient Equestrian, but Valiant could understand a little of the archaic language, *'To punish and enslave.'* Valiant raised a hoof and scratched his head, *'That doesn't make any sense. What pony would write that? Wait a minute. To punish and enslave, to punish and enslave. I know I've heard that before.'* Valiant wracked his brain, repeating the phrase over and over until it clicked, *'To punish and enslave! That was on one of the old tablets the archeologists in Haysburg uncovered. There was more to the quote, 'To punish and enslave, the strong will rule the weak. From the cradle to the grave, their lives are ours to keep.' The archeologists said it was even older than our earliest histories. I'll admit the rhyme isn't particularly good and it's dark, but if these statues are that o . . .'* Valiant trailed off as something on the statue before him caught his eye.

The contents of the statue's strange bags held a second, identical bowl. The bottom was clearly visible in the light. The words, *'To punish and enslave.'* were clearly visible on the bottom, even more visible than on the bowl Valiant had found. He realized the two bowls were utterly identical, *'Why would this creature have an identical bowl? The writing is in Ancient Equestrian . . . unless . . .'* Valiant quickly began searching the other statues for any sign of more writing. A second statue had an inscription etched into the side of its shield. The words were in Ancient Equestrian, *'For the glory of the Diamond Dog Empire.'*

Valiant couldn't understand it, the inscriptions made no sense. He wandered back to the first statue he uncovered and examined it again, specifically the kopesh. The blade had chips in it almost as if it had been struck against something else metallic. Valiant just couldn't figure out the purpose of the statues. He scuffed his right hind hoof against the ground. Instead of striking soft dirt and loam, his hoof clunked against something else solid.

Valiant turned around and used his hooves to dig around the new object and clear off the top. He uncovered a stone plaque written in Ancient Equestrian, *'Here on this patch of ground, lay the first enemies to fall to the Elements of Harmony and the Elements of Peace. These are the petrified remains of the 'Dirge Hounds' a military force of the Diamond Dog Empire. These cruel beings are forever encased in stone as a reminder to all to*

*respect the ponies of Equestria. For their vile massacre of two-hundred helpless ponies, may they never know their final rest.'*

Valiant's mouth went dry,  
"Dear Goddesses." he whispered.

Valiant looked out over the gathering of frozen 'Diamond Dogs' and felt his legs turn to jelly, '*I'm not staying here another minute!*' he turned tail and leapt back across the stream. Valiant had never broken camp so quickly, but he was loathe to stay around what was, effectively, the dead bodies of a band of murderers. He was on the move again in less than an hour.

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Lemon Lime was overwhelmed. Instead of two ponies and a baby dragon to feed, he suddenly had nine ponies and a baby dragon. Fortunately Applejack and Big Macintosh had already had breakfast and nopony had seen Pinkie Pie all morning. The poor yellow unicorn had cooked himself into a state of exhaustion. Lemon Lime lay on the floor of the kitchen listening to the sounds of chewing emanating from the main room. Lemon Lime smiled weakly and groaned, trying to push himself into a standing position.

A pink blur suddenly burst through the door of the Library and made a complete circuit of the ponies enjoying their breakfasts. Each surprised face received a millisecond's long 'good morning' then the blur left back out the door, the door slamming closed behind it. The entire scene took less than half a second to play out.

"Ah smell coffee. Hey Live Wire, did you make coffee?" Applejack asked sniffing the air.

"No, sorry. I didn't." Lemon Lime panted on the kitchen floor, "I think that was Pinkie. She's the one that smelled like . . ." Lemon Lime's voice trailed off and his pupils shrunk to pinpoints as he slowly said, "Like coffee."



The statement lingered in the air, causing the entire Library to lapse into silence while the implications set in. As one, the entire group surged to their hooves and stampeded toward the front door yelling, "PINKIE!"

Twilight took charge,  
"Applejack, Big Macintosh, get your lassos! Rarity, Sea Blue, Lemon Lime, and I can contain her with our magic . . . I hope! Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Trooper you fly up and tell us where she is!"

Dr. Mend broke in,  
"I'll have a sedative ready when you bring her in!"

# Chapter 7

The Elements of Equestria re-gathered in the main room of the Library after heavily dosing Pinkie Pie with a strong sedative and muscle relaxant; even so she still shook in place like a pink earthquake, but could sit still (figuratively speaking of course). Lemon Lime had cleaned up the remains of breakfast and the gathering could finally sit down to discuss business.

Twilight took the lead,  
"Everything's set for us to go, we just have to pack and solidify our route. I've pulled a map of Equestria and charted out the most direct path." she said obviously pleased with herself, "I don't have the most experience with outdoor-type . . . stuff. What should we all bring with us? The floor is open for any and all input. I'll make a list of each item everypony names. We should start off by listing anything we might need; all ideas are acceptable for this part. Next we discuss the usefulness of each item, cross referencing its usefulness with our weight capacities." Twilight looked up to see how her idea was accepted.

A small ocean of confused looks was her only response from the others; Applejack spoke up,  
"Ah thinks it's a good idea. Twilight's the one who organized the last Winter Wrap Up and saved us a whole mess of time. Let's give it a try."

The idea was met with reluctant approval. Three hours later, Twilight had, what every pony could only hope was, an acceptable list of items to bring for a prolonged trip. Rarity had initially opted to bring along plenty of bits and gems to buy food with or to trade. Applejack countered that everypony should keep their saddle bags as light as possible so they wouldn't be too weighed down. Rarity conceded to only bring bank notes instead. Pinkie Pie wanted to bring as much food as she could carry. Twilight countered that food would go bad quickly and said they should bring a field guide and rely on Applejack and Big Macintosh to find adequate and safe sources of food, since they would know what to look for better than most. Sea Blue brought up a sound point that Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Trooper all being pegasi, would not be able to carry

nearly as much and wouldn't need to use a tent either. Rainbow Dash was willing to go with the idea except that clouds over the Everfree Forrest tended to dissipate almost at random, so they would need to sleep on the ground occasionally at least. Trooper brought up the idea of the three pegasi using hammocks to sleep in at night. Fluttershy brought up the point that if it rains they would still be exposed to the elements, so they should bring tarps to cover the hammocks and have them all lined up above each other so as to minimize the load.

Eventually they settled on each pony bringing certain items then the group using them collectively. Applejack and Big Macintosh elected to tote the cookware and tents respectively. Dr. Mend was the obvious choice for carrying the first aid equipment and other such items. Pinkie Pie was chosen to carry nonperishables (and subsequently unbreakables) and sanitary goods. Twilight was to gather and bring along the maps, compass, and any field guides she deemed 'necessary' (the notion of which caused a great number of rolled eyes). Sea Blue was selected to carry essentials for dealing with a camp fire and plenty of blankets. Lemon Lime was to carry the appropriate food as they found it as well as the initial amount of food they were bringing with them. Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and Trooper simply brought the hammocks they would need and a blanket for each. Everypony carried a single canteen and some snacks, which Lemon Lime insisted be made up of only nuts and dried fruit.

The group dispersed to gather the proposed items and was to meet back at the Library the following morning to depart. Fluttershy met and showed around the vet from Canterlot. Angel was not very pleased but went along with it. Sea Blue met with Cheerilee and they came to an agreement about Patch, and Sweetie Belle both of whom the teacher was going to take care of in the absence of their normal parental figures. Applejack, Big Macintosh, Granny Smith, Applebloom, Caramel, and Zecora sat down to a lively discussion about how the farm was to be run. Twilight gave Spike instructions on how to run the Library in her absence and even left written instructions (in triplicate). Dr. Mend gave the nurses the news and promised to pay them extra for taking care of the clinic in his absence. Rainbow Dash went with Lemon Lime to buy a pair of saddle bags and other such things (in truth, the little yellow unicorn fronted the funds for the entire trip almost by himself). As the day came to a close, each pony sat down to a quiet dinner with their available loved ones and prepared to set off the following morning.

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Valiant had discarded the route he had intended to follow and simply made a bee line for New Yoke through the middle of the Everfree Forrest. Since leaving the site of the petrified Diamond Dogs he had felt like he was being followed. He constantly looked over his shoulder but never saw any sign of pursuit. He had narrowly avoided having a run-in with a bobcat but had not stopped for anything since that morning. His fear had caused him to travel the whole day at a brisk trot instead of the casual walk he had been maintaining before. It was well after dark when he finally stopped to make camp. The area was not ideal but it was in the middle of a thirty pace diameter clearing. There was no stream nearby for him to refill his first canteen but his second canteen remained untouched. He hastily made camp and had his dinner cooking in a matter of minutes. The sky was unlit by the moon, the heavy cloud cover keeping the reflected light of Luna's celestial body at bay (no unnecessary comments about 'Luna's body' thank you very much).

Valiant plopped himself down in front of his tent and idly watched the fire as it softened the cauliflower he had been fortunate enough to run across. He sat thinking about what he had seen, *'I can't believe there was a whole garden of creatures that had been turned to stone. The stone marker said the Diamond Dogs were murderers. What kind of world was Equestria back then? Massacres, battles, weapons, and if the inscriptions on the bowls was true, slavery. It's crazy, I can't imagine living in a world like that. I shudder to think what it would be like being turned to stone forever...'* Valiant's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a snapping twig behind his tent.

The wingless pegasus stood up quickly and turned to face the darkness,  
"Show yourself!" he shouted.

A loud growl met his challenge. Valiant stepped back and put the fire between himself and the creature that made the noise. He watched as a single maned-wolf crept out from behind his tent. The wolf was auburn colored and extremely thin. The creature looked as if it had run afoul of a much larger predator. It had dried blood covering the vast majority of its left side, the blood matting its fur plastered against its body. Valiant could see

its ribs poking out through its side and its eyes were sunken and haunted. The wolf was a huge specimen; it stood just a bit taller than Valiant himself did.

Valiant only knew enough about the wolf to identify it, but he figured it was the smell of the cauliflower that had drawn it close to the fire since most wild animals were instinctively afraid of the bright flames. He also knew wolves were omnivorous and sincerely hoped that it was not inclined to make a meal of pony since the cauliflower was not available. Considering the wolf's appearance, Valiant guessed that he was probably in mortal danger. His mind raced as he and the wolf circled each other and was very glad the fire was interposed between them.

Valiant considered picking up a stick from the fire and trying to use it to frighten off the wolf, but the fire had already begun doing its little dance on every piece of wood. In the light of the fire, Valiant noticed the wolf was foaming at the mouth. His mouth went dry, *'It's rabid! Not good, I won't be able to chase it away at all now. There's no cure for rabies either. You just have to let the animal die or . . .'* Valiant swallowed hard, *'Kill it.'*

The thought of taking another creature's life was positively repulsive to Valiant, especially after his ordeal being a Vagabond and the cause of it. The wolf began pacing around the fire faster and faster, Valiant had to match the wolf's speed, his mind whirled, *'I can't just kill it, but if it bites me, I'm doomed! What do I do? Rabid animals don't feel pain or fear . . .'* Valiant's time for debate came to an abrupt end as the wolf sped up to a full run, chasing him around the fire. Valiant knew he couldn't out run an adult wolf and indeed the creature was gaining on him. The wingless pegasus knew he had a matter of seconds before the wolf caught him. He had run out of time and options.

In as quick a motion as he could, Valiant reared forward, planted his fore hooves on the ground, and bucked, straining every muscle in his body into the effort. His hooves connected with the tip of the wolf's muzzle to the sound of a sickening crunch. Valiant felt the pressure on his legs and pushed off using the momentum to roll forward awkwardly. He came up facing the wolf with his right fore hoof raised and struck out instinctively, swinging from right to left across the front of his body. The wolf's head came within a hair's breadth of Valiant's face as the stallion struck it aside.

The wolf's entire body followed the course of its head, revealing an opening which Valiant exploited.

He spun quickly, muscles burning, and bucked the wolf's ribs. A second crunch echoed through Valiant's ears and he realized there were already tears streaming down his face. This wasn't like fighting the chimera, this creature was flesh and blood. Valiant stopped for a moment and gazed at the wolf, heart aching. The creature's lower jaw was dripping its diseased blood onto the ground; broken teeth lay in its mouth hanging on loosely by their roots. The ribs Valiant had bucked were concave against the wolf's body and shifted under the creature's skin. Valiant felt sick, *'I did this!'* his mind screamed, *'This isn't right, this isn't natural! Ponies aren't meant to kill!'* his mind coalesced for a brief moment, *'How is it still standing? It should be on the ground! It should be incapacitated shouldn't it? What is going on?'*

As if to answer him, the light of the moon suddenly shown through the clearing as the clouds above opened for a few moments. The wolf's body took on a state of semi-transparency, the images of stars glowing dimly from its form, its coat changing to a night sky blue. Valiant took several steps back realizing what the wolf actually was, *'Dear Luna! It's a Lupus! How do you defeat a celestial creature?'* he wondered in a panic. The answer came to him and he hated himself for it, *'The armor. That's the only thing powerful enough to stop it.'* he thought bitterly. Valiant hated the idea of using the power of his element to kill another creature but he had no other option.

With tears filling his eyes, Valiant began concentrating on his memories while dodging the rabid celestial beast. Valiant's mind was distracted by the sight of the Lupus and the intensity of the engagement. As a result he found his concentration slipping away time and time again. The Lupus lunged for him. He barely avoided it, dancing out of the way as he carefully maneuvered himself directly in front of a stout tree. The Lupus lunged again and Valiant dodged low and to the left. The celestial beast's powerful lunge sent it head first into the tree, knocking it senseless for a few moments.

Valiant didn't let the reprieve go to waste, he refocused his mind and sought out his memories of hope. He felt a stirring from deep down in his body and grasped at it prematurely. He held onto it like a lifeline, struggling

to control it, to guide it to his bidding. It was like trying to wrestle a writhing snake that was covered in slick oil. His vision blurred under the stress and the power slipped away again. Valiant panicked, he knew that if he couldn't manifest his armor, he didn't have a prayer against such a powerful creature.

Valiant's vision returned just in time to see the jaws of the Lupus closing around his head. He ducked and heard the beast's jaws snap shut just above his head. His relief was short lived though. The Lupus began to thrash its head back and forth, worrying Valiant like a ragdoll. Valiant realized in a panic that the Lupus had his mane in its mouth. The battered pegasus tightened the muscles in his neck and immediately realized it was a mistake. The tensed muscles couldn't take the force of the motion and Valiant heard a snapping sound as several of the muscles tore. His neck suddenly lit up in an inferno of agony. Valiant cried out as the Lupus continued worrying him.

Valiant struggled to relax the muscles in his neck to prevent further injury. It was hard, by the Goddesses it was hard. He couldn't do it. The muscles had seized. Valiant feared that the Lupus would break his neck before long. His mind began to cloud as his body released natural endorphins to ease his suffering from the trauma. Valiant knew he couldn't hold on for much longer. He closed his eyes and focused his mind, his very being, into a tight little ball of concentration and sought out his memories yet again.

Valiant remembered his hope that Arabesque would come to love him, his hope that he would eventually be forgiven, his hope that he could save the bear, his hope that his pain would end as he lay on Fluttershy's couch, his hope that he could save Applebloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Granny Smith, his hope that Granny Smith would live . . . On and on the memories flowed, like the breaking of a dam. Power surged through Valiant's body and he felt the armor, his armor form around him. He felt the strength of all of Equestria flow into him, filling him with raw, primal might. He felt the endurance of the land flow up through his hooves, rejuvenating him.

Valiant's eyes snapped open with renewed hope, a fire behind his pupils lighting its way through to his very soul. Valiant felt his wings form on his back and flexed them up and around like a pair of hammers, dealing the

Lupus a solid blow to either side of its head with the edges of each. The celestial beast released the armored pegasus and shook its head, throwing loose teeth around in the process. Valiant took a single step back and turned revealing his armored flank to the rabid creature. In a lightning quick motion his hooves connected with the great beast's head snapping it back in a shower of broken teeth.

The Lupus swung its head back down and snapped its jaws at Valiant's backside. Valiant hoped forward and swung his left rear hoof in a circular arch hitting the Lupus in the lower jaw with a solid thump. Continuing his motion, Valiant swung out his left wing and his left fore hoof, both striking the beast in the jaw again with each. The wingless pegasus reared back, leapt into the air, brought his hooves together above his head, and swung both together in a downward arch. His hooves slammed down onto the great creature's head with a loud crunch. The Lupus' eyes rolled up into its head, it let out a shuddering breath, and collapsed onto the ground.

Valiant stopped moving and blinked away the salty liquid obscuring his vision. The Lupus breathed out a death rattle and was still. As Valiant watched, the Lupus' body dissolved into bright yellow glowing motes and blew away on a non-existent breeze, leaving behind only a single panting wingless pegasus stallion. Valiant panted heavily and breathed out a shuddering sigh of relief. His armor vanished from his body leaving him exhausted and drained both physically and emotionally.

Valiant sorrowfully tromped back to his dinner, which was a soggy mess, and pulled the pot off the fire to let it cool. He sat down in front of his fire and hung his head, '*I killed it.*' he thought, tears streaming down his face, '*What have I done?*' As the night wore on, Valiant cried himself to sleep without even touching his dinner.

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Celestia's sun rose, breaking over Ponyville with resplendent glory as the citizens began their day.

Unsurprisingly Applejack and Big Macintosh were the first to arrive at the Library. Applejack knocked on the door and Lemon Lime let the two Earth ponies in. The small physical therapist was up and about having already started breakfast.



Lemon Lime gestured for the two farmers to set their packs down in the middle of the common room,

"Come on in and take a load off. I'll have breakfast done in a few minutes. I want to let Twilight sleep for as long as possible. I went out yesterday and bought a ton of food for Spike to eat while we're gone. I also left him some money; do you think ten-thousand bits will be enough? I sure hope it's enough. Should I leave him more or do you think it's enough?"

Applejack's eyes had gone crossed from Lemon Lime's machine-gunning, she shook her head clearing them,

"Ah think it'll be more than enough, Live Wire. Ah take it we're the first ones here?"

"Huh?" Lemon Lime asked pulling his head out of the kitchen pantry, "Oh yeah. You two are the first ones, except for Twilight, Spike, and I of course. I don't want to make too much of a mess for Spike to clean up, so are cinnamon rolls alright? If not then I can make something else it's really no problem at all. So if you want something else just tell me and I'll fix it . . . "

"Live Wire." Big Macintosh said.

"But then I'd be leaving an even bigger mess for . . . " Lemon Lime continued obliviously.

"Live Wire." Applejack said.

"And that just wouldn't be fair to him, so now that I think about . . . " Lemon Lime continued, still oblivious.

"Live Wire." Dr. Mend addressed walking in.

"I figure just because one pony doesn't like . . . " Lemon Lime continued.

"LEMON LIME!" Twilight yelled from her bedroom loft.

Silence reigned in the Library following the unicorn's outburst. The librarian groggily made her way down the stairs. Her mane was a mess, her tail was in a thick tangle, and her eyes were baggy and bloodshot. She stumbled as she reached the base of the stairs but caught herself before

she fell onto her face. She peered around the common room and pinpointed Lemon Lime, fixing him with a fierce glare. The small unicorn stallion laid his ears back and lowered his head submissively, backing into the kitchen silently.

"Thank you." Twilight said simply.

A thunderous crash into the wall of the Library ominously foretold of the arrival of a certain rainbow maned pegasus who was definitely not a morning pony. A rapid series of knocks assailed the door followed by a bright pink load of energy dragging Rainbow Dash who still had stars circling her head. Before anypony could move to close the door, Rarity and Trooper trotted in, the latter sporting newly mended saddle bags which bulged suspiciously. The sounds of furious clanging in the kitchen alluded to a subdued, "Ouch." from within that followed shortly thereafter.

Twilight headed back up the stairs to her loft and began brushing out her mane and tail, still trying to wake up completely. Spike stirred in his bed and turned over mumbling something about 'three diamonds on a canvas of the purest white' and went back to sleep. Twilight smiled down at her assistant and began planning, *'Alright then. Lemon Lime will finish breakfast and we can set off right after that. The shortest route to Haysburg is straight through the Everfree Forrest. We can handle that; we already have a couple of times. I calculated out the time it will take to make it through there . . . what was it . . . two weeks, that's right. After we make it through there, we have simple flatlands after that for one week and two days if we push it, better make it three. Then the swamp that runs along the river until we reach Haysburg. The swamp might give us some trouble but I figure three days should do it. Let's see that's twenty-seven days total there and probably twenty-six for the way back since we'll know the terrain a bit better. Woo, that's more than fifty days, fifty-three to be exact. I sure hope Spike will be alright while I'm gone.'*

Twilight decided to rouse her assistant so he could join everypony else for breakfast before they left, "Spike." she said prodding the young reptile with her hoof, "Spike, wake up."

Spike responded by waving her hoof away with a small claw and rolling over again,

"It's too early, Twilight." he whined.

Twilight leaned her head down and bit the end of Spike's blanket, pulling it off him and tossing it onto the floor,  
"Come on, Spike. We're going to be leaving soon, don't you want to say goodbye to everypony?"

Spike waved his claw once more, sleepily saying,  
"Goodbye to everypony."

Twilight pursed her lips and nudged the baby dragon from his bed with a gentle push of her muzzle,  
"Oh no, you're not getting off that easy. Come on get up." she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Lemon Lime is making breakfast."

Spike finally raised his head,  
"Don't you mean 'Live Wire'?" he asked.

Twilight sighed heavily,  
"His name is Lemon Lime. When have you ever heard me call any pony by a nick name?"

"You call me your 'number one assistant'." Spike pointed out.

Twilight shook her head,  
"That's a title, Spike. I've never called Applejack 'A.J.' have I?"

Spike blew out an exasperated breath,  
"Yeah I guess so, but he likes being called Live Wire. He said it's what his friends call him right?"

"True," Twilight admitted, "But it's not proper. If I called him Live Wire, it would sound like I'm too familiar with him."

"Since when did you care so much about being proper? I thought that was Rarity's department. Everypony else calls him Live Wire." Spike said coming more awake, "Do you not like him or something, Twilight?"

"I 'like' him just fine, Spike, but I wouldn't say he's my favorite pony. Maybe it'll just take time for me to warm up to him. You have to admit he does talk a lot." Twilight said neutrally.

"Well yeah, but he's got that mental condition. Actually he kind of reminds me of Pinkie Pie, besides he's a great cook. I've never had food as good as his that wasn't gems. Is it because he's got a crush on you?" Spike asked.

"Why does everypony keep saying that?" Twilight asked rhetorically, "Even if he does have a crush on me, I don't like him like that. It's like with you and Rarity."

"There IS a difference there, Twilight. Rarity doesn't know I have a crush on her. Why not give him a chance?" Spike pointed out.

Twilight stomped a hoof on the floor, somewhat overdramatic for her, "I just don't like him like that! I'm not a romantically minded mare! I have my studies and my obligations to Princess Celestia!" once she began speaking, she couldn't stop, the floodgates had opened so to speak, "When am I supposed to have time for some brain-damaged, vertically challenged, underweight, love sick stallion whose only redeeming quality is that he can cook!" Twilight regretted the words even as they left her muzzle, '*I didn't mean that.*' she thought, '*Why did I say that?*'

Spike waved his claws in front of her, "Shh! They'll hear you. This IS a loft after all."

Twilight suddenly realized just how quiet the Library had gone, "Oops." she said quietly, then sighed heavily, "Looks like I need to go on down and do some damage control."

Spike peeked his head over the rails and looked down. Everypony had been staring up at the loft, but suddenly noticed a variety of other things that seemed to require their immediate attention. Spike looked around but fortunately didn't see Lemon Lime anywhere. He leaned back over the rails and wiped a claw over his forehead.

Spike turned a confused eye to Twilight, "I've never heard you say anything like that before, Twilight. Are you feeling alright? This doesn't seem like you to be so . . . I don't know, fussy I guess."

Twilight hated to admit it but, Spike was right,  
"I . . . I don't know, Spike."

"You know," Spike said scratching his chin, "You've been acting kind of weird ever since the guys showed up, come to think of it."

Twilight gave the observation some thought, but came up with nothing solid,  
"That's true, I was the most objective one when we dealt with Zecora for the first time, but what does it mean?"

Spike shrugged,  
"You got me. All I know is that you need to be more careful of what you say. Maybe you're worried about Valiant?"

"I am worried about him a little, but I'm certain that's not the problem. I never acted like this when I was worried about Applejack. It has to be something else." Twilight said thoughtfully.

Spike cradled his chin in his right claw,  
"Hmm," he grunted in thought, an idea popped into his head, "Let's try something here. What do you think of Sea Blue?"

Twilight shrugged,  
"He seems nice enough but, I don't agree with most his ideas. He seems like a bit of a snobby 'know it all'."

"What about Trooper?" Spike asked.

"He's as dramatic as Rarity, if not more so, and his problem with Rainbow Dash is nothing short of ridiculous. He seems to be balanced on a razor's edge with fury on one side and dramatic exuberance on the other. Honestly I'm not very fond of him." Twilight said sourly.

"What about Dr. Mend?" Spike asked.

"He has his quirks, but he knows his business and he's smart. I trust him." Twilight answered.

"O.K. how about Big Macintosh?" Spike inquired.

"He's quiet but from what I've seen, he works as hard as three ponies. He cares about his family and he went out on a limb to help Valiant. He seems as reliable as Applejack." Twilight said.

"What do you think of Live Wire?" Spike asked and quickly added, "Objectively."

Twilight rolled her eyes but answered,  
"He doesn't seem to be a **total** idiot, but I wouldn't call him brilliant either. He's almost as random as Pinkie Pie and talks even faster. He **does** cook a good breakfast, I'll give him that. He's moved into the Library like he owns it and besides his cooking, he hasn't contributed anything to Ponyville; Dr. Mend and Big Macintosh at least have jobs that are necessary. I can't think of anypony who needs physical therapy. He seems, I don't know, superfluous I guess."

Spike arched an eyebrow,  
"Super . . . what?"

"Unnecessary." Twilight said in simple terms.

Spike lowered his claw and nodded his head as if coming to a conclusion,  
"I HAVE seen you act like this once before; and I have an idea about why you're so touchy right now. Remember the first night we came to Ponyville? You said 'all the ponies in this town are crazy' but then after you spent a whole night with them, you were best friends. I think you were overwhelmed and that's what's wrong now. You don't always adjust to change very well, Twilight. Did you notice, you didn't say anything negative about Dr. Mend or Big Macintosh, but you found reasons not to like Sea Blue, Trooper, and Live Wire? If you think about it, it does kind of make sense. You're alright with ponies you already know but you don't like the new ones."

Twilight nodded her head reluctantly,  
"It's possible." she admitted quietly, "You know me better than anypony. So what do I do? I don't want to seem like I have P.M.S. all the time."

"P.M.S.?" Spike asked.

"Don't worry about it Spike, it just means Prickly Mare Syndrome." Twilight fibbed, thinking quickly.

"That's easy, just give them the benefit of the doubt until you get to know them better. Don't try to analyze everything all the time, try trusting them. Live Wire, Trooper, and Sea Blue haven't done anything wrong so don't treat them like it. Think of them in different terms." Spike peered over the railing, gently dragging Twilight's head with him, "Look at Trooper," he said pointing with a claw, "Think of him like an actor who's out of work." Spike shifted his pointing claw to Lemon Lime who had just emerged from the kitchen, "Think of Live Wire as a guy version of Pinkie Pie. Do think you can do that, Twilight?"

Twilight rested her head on the railing,  
"That might work, Spike. I'll try." she looked down and sighed, "We need to go down there. We'll be leaving soon."

Down below, a short yellow unicorn gazed up at the loft,  
"I'm not brain-damaged." he choked out, blinking back a forming mist from his eyes.

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Everypony ate a group breakfast, chatting amiably while they ate. Nopony seemed to notice that there was zero conversation coming from the little cook. Cheerilee had shown up with Sea Blue so she could take the two fillies with her when their guardians left. Patch and Sweetie Belle stuck to Sea Blue and Rarity (respectively) like glue. The combined groups of Elements finished their meal and began assisting each other with strapping on their saddle-bags.

They readied themselves and grouped together just outside the Library for a final rundown of one of Twilight's famous check lists, "Applejack," she began, "Pots, pans, plates, cups, and bowls."

"Check." Applejack said.

"Big Macintosh," Twilight continued, "Four large tents, capable of sleeping three ponies each."

"Ayup." Big Macintosh replied with his most common comment.

"Dr. Mend, medical supplies; as much as you can carry." Twilight said.

"Got it, Twilight." Dr. Mend said.

"Pinkie Pie, did you follow the list I gave you?" Twilight asked.

"Yup!" Pinkie said pulling the list out of her saddle-bags, "Ith righ her!"

Twilight levitated the list out of Pinkie's mouth,  
"Did you put the things I wrote on the list, in your bags?"

"Yep! I can show you if you want." Pinkie offered.

"Applejack, would you please?" Twilight asked.

"Sure thing, Twilight." the farm pony agreed.

Twilight moved on to the next pony,  
"Sea Blue, what did you bring?"

"I've got plenty of napalm and c-4. Good to go." the counselor said smiling.

Twilight's eye twitched several times in rapid succession, Sea Blue dismissed the facade,  
"I've got two dozen magnesium sticks, fire-starter logs, matches, a bucket for dirt and sand, a shovel, and nearly a dozen blankets."

Twilight grimaced,  
"Thank you." she said curtly.

"Lemon Lime," Twilight sighed, "Do you have the food?"

"Yeah, I have it." Lemon Lime said quietly.

"Good." Twilight said.



"Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Trooper, do you have your hammocks and blankets?"

"Um, yes." Fluttershy said almost whispering.

"Sure do." Rainbow Dash said.

"But of course." Trooper said.

"Does everypony have their canteens and snacks?" Twilight asked universally.

The purple unicorn's question was met with a chorus of affirmative type answers, she nodded,  
"Alright everypony, say your goodbyes and let's get moving."

Spike, Patch, and Sweetie Belle said their goodbyes, mostly without tears . . . mostly. There were a few tears but Sea Blue and Rarity finally extricated themselves when Cheerilee came over and rounded up the distressed fillies. Twilight pulled out her map and read over it one more time, then pointed toward the Everfree Forrest and set out levitating the map in front of her. Everypony followed her into the ominous forest and toward unknown danger.

# Chapter 8

Caramel was not overly fond of milking cows. Doing so with his mouth, being the only option, he had no choice. It didn't help matters that the cows kept continuously commenting about his technique, '*Believe me ladies, this isn't the most fun thing in the world for me either.*' he thought. While Big Macintosh had been away, Applejack had always milked the cows to save Caramel the embarrassment. With her gone, he was the only experienced, working-age pony available, there was no clear alternative since the cows didn't know Zecora. The cows were endlessly heckling him about the fact that he was a stallion and plenty of them seemed to enjoy the many possible connotations and likewise saying so, much to the blushing stallion's chagrin. He couldn't help but feel like he was cheating on Applejack somehow. Having his lips wrapped around a female creature's teat was not a common experience for him, to say the least.

Zecora, however didn't seem to be having any problems adjusting to life on the farm. She already had a solid background with plants and herbs, so she just fit right in, like she had always been there. She sang songs in her native language continuously while she worked, providing an atmosphere of ease and casuality. Winter was fast approaching, with the first snowfall scheduled to be in just a few days. The pony and zebra had their work cut out for them. The cows bedding needed to be insulated, the overhang for the pigs needed to be checked for structural integrity, the barn needed to be cleaned up, and the cellar needed to be organized, not to mention emptying out all the water pipes to keep them from bursting, cleaning the gutters of the house and barn . . . the list went on.

The morning routine was the easy part; it was the afternoon tasks which loomed ominously. Zecora and Caramel finished with the morning chores, which took till 2:00 to complete, then met together on the front porch to eat lunch and discuss what to tackle in the afternoon. The day was surprisingly warm, for being so close to winter, even so 67 degrees while sweating isn't the healthiest thing in the world. Granny Smith ordered the two impromptu farm workers to towel off before starting lunch. Zecora was surprisingly dry even before toweling off; Caramel by comparison was lathered in a sheen of sweat and took several minutes to dry. Granny Smith

had left a pair of steaming bowls of apple-dumplings on the front porch for them.

Zecora and Caramel dug in happily and planned while they ate, "I think insulating the cow's bedding would be a good place to start." Caramel began, "We could be done quickly if we work together and still have enough time to take care of checking the overhang for the pigs. What do you think, Zecora?"

The zebra raised her head from her bowl and swallowed her mouthful of dumpling, "I believe cleaning the barn should be first, if we don't know the location of the tools we need, a situation could go from rough to worst."

Caramel nodded, "True, the barn does need to be cleaned and organized and I certainly agree with you that we need to know where the tools are if and when we need them. I think this comes down to priorities and logic. We need tools to do most of the other tasks, right?"

Zecora nodded so Caramel continued, "What say, we organize the barn as quickly as we can then see if we have enough time to insulate the cow's bedding. Sound good?"

"This compromise you suggest leaves me pleased; with teamwork each of the tasks for us will be greatly eased." Zecora said.

"Alright then. How about I take care of moving things and you just tell me where to put them? Then we can both work on clearing out any unnecessary debris. Besides, we need the barn floor cleaned if we're going to get to the bedding in the loft. Good idea Zecora." Caramel said smiling.

Zecora beamed, "With experience on a farm I don't have a lot, but we have to work with what we've got. I'm surprised you didn't consider the barn a higher priority, then I could have saved myself this entire oratory. We must hurry, we waste time on this porch, daylight doesn't wait, we'll soon need a torch."

Caramel looked up. The sun was already well past its zenith. Night would be falling before too long, '*She's got a point, we do need to hurry.*'

Caramel thought. The two new farmers left their unfinished lunches on the porch and got right to work on the barn.

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"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight called up into the sky for her friend.

The multihued pegasus came swooping in a few moments later and stopped, hovering in front of the purple unicorn,  
"What's up, Twilight?"

"It's getting dark. Take Fluttershy and Trooper and see if you can spot anyplace for us to make camp. A clearing would be ideal, but we need a source of water for sure. Most of our canteens have been empty for a while now. How are you three doing up there?" Twilight asked.

"We're fine. Flying is easy as pie. If we need a break, we just stop and rest on a cloud for a minute or two. I made sure to mention how the clouds over the Everfree Forrest tend to dissipate and drop you, so we never stop for very long. We could have made it a lot farther but we didn't want to lose you." Dash responded.

Twilight almost hated to ask her next question,  
"Has Trooper given you any more trouble?"

Dash shrugged,  
"He hasn't said much, but he's constantly flying. I don't think I've seen him stop for more than a few seconds since we set out. I think he's keeping watch or patrolling or something. I mean, it's not like me or Fluttershy are going to be hurt by a breeze. What about you? Has Live Wire been giving you trouble?"

Twilight put her left hoof to her chin in thought,  
"Now that you mention it, I haven't heard him say much all day."

"Maybe you hurt his feelings. You did call him brain-damaged." Rainbow Dash pointed out.

Twilight adopted an embarrassed expression,  
"I was hoping nopony heard me this morning."

"It's kind of hard not to hear, the Library has great acoustics for a tree."  
Dash said.

Twilight quirked an eyebrow,  
"No offense Rainbow Dash, but I didn't think you even knew that word."

Dash waved a hoof in the air in front of her,  
"Come on Twilight, there's not much I ***don't*** know; especially if it has to do with anything involving the air. Sound travels in the air and the tree bounces it off, kind of like a rubber ball."

Twilight put a hoof to her mouth to keep from chuckling,  
"Sound waves do travel in the air and they do reverberate off of solid objects, but sound itself is just vibrations that our ears translate into a recognizable format for our brains to process. You've got the right concept though."

Rainbow Dash shrugged and ascended back into the sky, singing something about 'good vibrations'. Twilight heard a rustle in the bushes behind her and turned to see Rarity trotting back out onto the path they were following. The white unicorn had excused herself for a 'nature call' and Twilight had volunteered to stay on the path facing the correct direction so she wouldn't get lost when she came back.

The two picked up the pace so they could catch up to the rest of the group,  
"I must admit, Twilight, it's positively ghastly trying to relieve one's self in the woods like a common animal. I have never wished for a bidet more in my life, and my hooves are positively filthy. How long did you say we would be traveling like this?" Rarity asked.

"At least twenty-two more days. You'll just have to get used to it, Rarity."  
Twilight said.

Rarity hung her head,  
"Oh dear, I may have gone in over my head with this trip." turning to Twilight she said, "Oh Twilight, how will I ever survive out here in this wilderness? I've seen bugs; actual insects, Twilight! What do I do if they

attack me? I'm no fighting mare, what if the repellent I packed isn't enough?"

Twilight rolled her eyes at her dramatic friend and spoke over her shoulder,  
"I don't know," she said sarcastically, "Step on them? You're twenty times bigger than any bug, Rarity. What are they going to do to you?" Twilight stopped and turned back to Rarity, who had also stopped, "Rarity it's not such a big deal. Didn't you have spiders back in your boutique?"

Raising her right fore hoof shakily, Rarity pointed behind Twilight,  
"None **THAT** big!"

Twilight got that oh so familiar feeling of a huge presence behind her and turned around slowly. Behind her stood a monstrous spider, nearly six paces tall. It was pitch black and covered in thousands of long, stiff, creepy hairs. Its chelicerae dripped venom, each nearly half the size of a unicorn's horn. The creature rubbed its front legs together, dislodging dozens of hairs and began to stalk toward the two terrified mares.

Rarity shrieked in an ear piercing volume and turned to flee, but stopped as she heard somepony bellow,  
"Blood and vinegar!"

Trooper appeared from the tree tops and collided with the spider with reckless abandon. The two toppled and rolled for several paces in a writhing tangle of limbs and hooves. Trooper dislodged himself and sped off to the spider's left as it leaned down to bite. Its fangs encountered only soil. The spider had an almost surprised look on its face as it met dirt. Trooper appeared from the left and bucked with both hind legs. The spider's head snapped to the right and Trooper was gone again in a flash. The spider shook its head as if to clear its senses and looked to its left. It should have looked behind. With a loud thump, Trooper bucked upwards from below its backside, sending its face into the dirt once more. The spider rose and began to turn only to have its body enveloped by a lavender glow. The arachnid flailed wildly as Twilight levitated it up against its will.

The powerful unicorn brought its hideous face up to her own; her eyes were narrowed angrily,  
"Go away." she said simply.

The spider made a whimpering noise, then was violently thrown up through the forest canopy, disappearing into the distance. Twilight let the glow of her horn subside and turned back to Rarity. Rarity, for her part was simply standing behind Twilight with an unbelieving look plastered on her face.

Twilight smirked and trotted back to her friend proudly, "You also have magic. If something is particularly large, it tends to be slower too. It's like a trade: size and strength for mobility and agility. Come on Rarity . . . " she stopped as Trooper limped back to the two mares.

"Spiders also have hairs. Rather nasty hairs that work like porcupine quills and break off easily so they stay in your skin. Ouch." Trooper said quietly.

Twilight looked at the pegasus with pity. He had the needle like hairs sticking out of nearly every inch of his body save for his eyes and mouth, everything else was punctured. As Trooper limped, he left behind small spots of blood on the leaves wherever he stepped. He was obviously in a great deal of pain. The sound of rustling leaves brought the three ponies to attention. Twilight took a ready stance with Rarity behind her, while Trooper stood in front of them bracing himself, his head held low. He shook from the pain but he was determined to keep the mares safe.

Lemon Lime appeared, jumping from the foliage and landing in a crouch. The little yellow therapist looked around swiftly, eyes sharp for any signs of danger. Seeing nothing, he looked to the other ponies. His eyes fell on Trooper and the state the pegasus was in.

His face immediately fell,  
"What happened?" he asked curtly

"We were attacked by a huge spider. Trooper distracted it and I flung it off over the forest." Twilight said, unsure as to why Lemon Lime was acting so aggressive suddenly.

Lemon Lime walked up to Trooper and examined the hairs, then widened his stance and said,  
"Hold still."

The yellow unicorn's horn began glowing and Twilight analyzed the spell out of habit. The components were of Controlling and Flesh. With an uneasy feeling, Twilight realized, '*He's going to try to pull the hairs out. We should let Dr. Mend tend to Trooper.*' Twilight's horn erupted in its own glow as she countered Lemon Lime's magic, blocking him. The short unicorn stallion shifted his gaze to Twilight and narrowed his eyes.

Maintaining his concentration, Lemon Lime spoke to Twilight, "These things are hurting him. They need to come out."

"No, we need to wait for Dr. Mend. Trooper needs real medical help." Twilight didn't like how Lemon Lime's expression shifted.

"I've got this, Twilight Sparkle. Stop blocking me or I'll break your block." Lemon Lime said, "I've got plenty of reserves and stamina from practice. Let me handle this. We might need Dr. Mend's help later on for something more serious."

Twilight wasn't about to back down, "I said let Dr. Mend handle this. We've got plenty of supplies for later and . . ."

"You're not the one who's in pain, Twilight!" Lemon Lime spat, "I've seen ponies in pain before, and Trooper is dealing with a lot of it right now. Let. Me. Do. This."

Twilight didn't release her magic block, "Listen to me! You might hurt him even more!"

"Let me try just one, then decide. I'm not clumsy when it comes to magic." Lemon Lime said sharply.

"No! It could get infected!" Twilight said growing angry, "Would you just listen to me! I'm trying to help him!"

"**STOP IT, BOTH OF YOU!**" Rarity cried, "Twilight, let him try one and see what happens! Live Wire, she's only trying to look out for him! If it doesn't work, then let it be. If it does work then only do one at a time. Please."



Both unicorns looked ashamed and let their magic fade. Rarity was right, arguing wasn't helping Trooper.

Twilight spoke first,  
"Just work on one, alright?"

"Fine, then let me concentrate." Lemon Lime responded tersely.

The yellow therapist focused his magic, his horn lit up dimly. One hair on Trooper's face became enveloped by a yellow glow and began slowly sliding out of the pegasus skin. The pain was excruciating but Trooper didn't dare move. The hair was about an inch inside Trooper's skin. It slid out, and Lemon Lime levitated it over to his face to examine it, *'Let's see. No poison or venom, just a lot of barbs and a sharp tip. I'll have to be careful. The molecular structure looks like it would break off easily. From the angle of the barbs, it looks like it's made to work its way in deeper as the victim moves. We need to keep Trooper still to keep the hairs from going deeper.'*

"Twilight, can you immobilize Trooper? The hairs have barbs to inch their way in when he moves. We have to keep him still." Lemon Lime said levitating the hair off the path and dropping it into the surrounding bushes.

Twilight did not look pleased,  
"I still don't think this is a good idea." she said sourly.

Her horn lit up as she concentrated. Trooper became stiff as a board. Lemon Lime began pulling hairs out of the tormented pegasus carefully. He struggled to maintain his concentration as the bushes behind him rustled. Big Macintosh, Applejack, Sea Blue, Pinkie Pie, and Dr. Mend burst through the shrubbery behind him. Rarity immediately shushed them and gestured toward Lemon Lime and Twilight. The gathering became quiet as the two unicorns worked. Rarity noticed Trooper was starting to turn blue, even more blue than normal, especially in the lips.

"Um Twilight, darling, Trooper does need to breathe." Rarity said, "Twilight? Twilight! Twilight, Trooper is suffocating! Let him go!"

Twilight blinked and let her horn's glow go out. Trooper gasped for air, panting heavily. Twilight re-engaged her horn and simply held Trooper

still, not immobile, just still. Lemon Lime continued working on removing the hairs from Trooper. Dr. Mend set down his saddle-bags and began removing different objects with which to see to the injured pegasus. Lemon Lime continued working steadily. Hair after hair emerged from Trooper's body leaving behind a small hole, each of which oozed blood slowly. Dr. Mend laid a clean sheet of thick fabric on the ground and placed a series of prepared bandages out on it, ready for when Lemon Lime finished with his friend. Trooper held his eyes clenched tightly closed, the pain was nearly unbearable. He felt a mixture of agony as each hair pulled at his flesh, and relief that they were being removed. He began sweating; the physical trauma was getting to him.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy descended through the forest canopy a few minutes later and landed quietly, seemingly somewhat aware of the need for silence. Rarity walked over and filled them in on what had occurred. Fluttershy looked stricken while Rainbow Dash looked pensive.

Dash leaned over to Rarity,  
"Twilight asked us to see if we could find a good place to camp tonight. We've got a big field to the," Dash looked up at the setting sun, "South-West and it's got a river running right through the middle of it. I'll take everypony there and we'll set up camp for the night and leave Fluttershy here since she knows the way. If we get done soon enough, I'll come back for you guys."

Rarity nodded,  
"Ask around and see who's willing to go set up, but please darling be quiet about it. Live Wire needs to concentrate."

Rainbow Dash quietly trotted over to the rest of the group and spread the word, while Rarity spoke to Fluttershy. Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Big Macintosh, Sea Blue, and Rainbow Dash left a few short minutes later to go set up camp, while everypony else stayed. Time seemed to fade out of existence for Lemon Lime as he continued to work. Twilight had a much easier time of it since she only had to keep Trooper from moving while the hairs were extracted. Fluttershy and Dr. Mend kept watch quietly.

Finally after three solid hours, Lemon Lime extinguished the glow from his horn,

"That's as many as I can get," he said relaxing his stance, "There's a few more, but they broke off inside his body. Dr. Mend, you'll have to get them out. I'm not steady enough right now to take care of the kind of fine movements it would require."

Dr. Mend stepped up to Trooper and began inspecting the hundreds of oozing holes,  
"Where are they?"

Lemon Lime illuminated each one with his magic,  
"I can keep them lit up if you can get them out. Careful, they break off really easily."

Dr. Mend reached his head back and fished around inside his saddlebags for a moment, then came out with a long, thin-pointed pair of tweezers held between his teeth. Once again, Trooper was subjected to torturous pain as the cold tweezers slipped into his skin, and in some cases muscle, to pull out sharp, thin hairs which felt as though they were spreading fire throughout his body. The barbs on every hair pulled and scraped his tender, agitated flesh as they were removed. The process had to be done slowly to ensure no more hairs broke off. Trooper couldn't sweat any more; he had dehydrated himself already from perspiring so much. His mouth was dry and his body hurt like nothing else, but he kept still, willing his muscles to stay relaxed so they wouldn't pinch against the barbs as they slid out.

After more than twenty minutes, Dr. Mend finished removing the final hair. He dropped it off to his side and slid the pile away from himself, off into the shrubbery. Twilight let the glow of her horn go and relaxed. Trooper wordlessly limped over to the blanket Dr. Mend had set out and flopped down on it moaning piteously. The sky had gone completely dark by this time, so Lemon Lime lit up his horn for illumination and walked over to Trooper.

The little yellow unicorn stallion examined Trooper carefully while Dr. Mend began cleaning his wounds,  
"Problem." Lemon Lime said simply.

Twilight and Fluttershy trotted over to see what he had discovered. Looking down at Trooper, the issue was obvious. There were dozens of

broken off hairs sticking out of the bottoms of his hooves, *'He got those from bucking the spider.'* Twilight realized, *'That's how he knew they broke off. I can't imagine how much it must have hurt standing on them for hours.'*

"Twilight, can you keep a light going while I take care of these?" Lemon Lime asked, "Dr. Mend is busy."

"Those are inside his body." Twilight said, exasperated, "I thought you said you couldn't get to them."

"I don't have much of a choice right now. It's dark and getting colder. Trooper has lost a fair bit of blood and he is dehydrated and exhausted. Dr. Mend is patching him up so somepony has to do this." Lemon Lime turned to the purple unicorn, "Do you think you can do it? I can keep up a light for you."

Twilight squared her shoulders,  
"I'll try."

"Fluttershy, you have to hold him down while Twilight pulls the hairs out." Dr. Mend chimed in, "The bottoms of a pony's hooves are very tender and there are a lot of muscles and tendons. Put your full weight on him and hold him still. I can't give him anything to numb the pain right now so it's going to hurt. Talk to him and try to keep him calm." the older Earth pony stroked a hoof against Trooper's mane, "I'm sorry Trooper, but this is going to hurt a lot. Try to stay as still as you can. The more you move, the longer it will take and the more it will hurt."

Trooper grunted as Fluttershy leaned on him and put her hooves around his face,  
"Just hold still now alright?"

Trooper nodded his head and closed his eyes, dreading what was to come. Lemon Lime's horn lit up brightly and Twilight used her magic to latch onto the first hair. Fluttershy heard Trooper's sharp intake of breath and felt his muscles tense. The pegasus stallion whimpered and bit his lower lip, clenching his eyes as tears began seeping down from them. Fluttershy leaned over and began whispering soothingly to him trying to hold him still.

Nearly ten minutes of pure, fiery agony later, Twilight pulled the final hair from Trooper and let the glow of her horn fade. Trooper relaxed and let out a shuddering breath. Fluttershy stayed put while Dr. Mend saw to his hooves. The older medical pony wrapped Trooper's hooves in thick bandages then set to work on turning him over and cleaning the other side, the side that had congealed with the blanket. Trooper didn't move an inch, he just lay there breathing. Dr. Mend leaned over and pulled back one of the stallion's eyelids. Trooper had passed out.

Twilight spoke up, whispering quietly to the older, black stallion, "Will he be able to walk to the camp?"

Dr. Mend shook his head, "I don't want to wake him. How far away is it?"

Twilight turned to Fluttershy, "Fluttershy, how far away is the camp site you and Rainbow Dash found?"

"Um, about nine-hundred flaps." Fluttershy said timidly.

"So roughly two-thousand, seven-hundred paces. That's a long way." Twilight said.

"Too long. He needs to stay off his hooves until they've had time to heal. He should be able to fly well enough, but his injuries will heal quickly. They're numerous but small. I'd say if we use some of Valiant's healing potion, we're looking at a day and a half." Dr. Mend said then turned to Fluttershy, "Would you please administer a dose of the healing potion to Trooper please, Fluttershy? I have some in my saddle-bags."

While Fluttershy saw to Trooper, Twilight continued talking, "Well then how are we going to get him to the camp? Maybe I could levitate him up to Rainbow Dash and she could carry him."

Dr. Mend nodded, "That sounds good but what about tomorrow? Are we going to keep moving or wait here for a day?" he asked openly.

"I'll carry him." Lemon Lime volunteered.

"You're already loaded down with food, how can you carry him?" Twilight asked.

"I'll levitate him. I've held up the weight of a pony for hours before and I can do it again." Lemon Lime looked like he wanted to say more, but with a force of will, he clamped his teeth shut.

"I'm not sure anypony could do what you're talking about, Lemon Lime . . . " Twilight was cut off by the yellow unicorn.

"Much less me." he finished bluntly, "That's what you were going to say, wasn't it."

Twilight's ears flattened back against her head, "No, I was going to say that even if it were possible, the unicorn who did it would be exhausted by night fall. You might even be suffering from 'Caster's Stroke' by that time."

"I know my limits, Twilight Sparkle." Lemon Lime said tersely, "I'm not as brain-damaged as you might think."

"I didn't mean that!" Twilight defended.

"Yet you said it." Lemon said slowly.

"And why are you talking so weird? You've been talking weird all day." Twilight asked.

"I'm trying to be less annoying for you." he clarified crossly, "Less words, less annoyance. This conversation is over."

"You can't just end a conversation whenever you feel like it!" Twilight yelled.

"I'm stopping before I say something I don't mean. Some ponies have that kind of restraint." Lemon said.

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?" Twilight asked.

"You haven't said it once yet, actually." Lemon said quietly.

Twilight blinked several times, then spoke calmly, from her heart, "Well then, I'm sorry. I apologize for saying all those things. I honestly didn't mean what I said. I never meant to hurt your feelings. I don't think you're brain-damaged or anything like that."

Lemon Lime stood still, absorbing Twilight's words, "I forgive you, Twilight," he said slowly, "But you really do need to have faith in me. If I say I can do something, that means I'm sure I can. If I say I'll try, that means I'm not certain. It's a thing I picked up while attending The University." he stepped up to Twilight, "I'm sorry too. I'm not trying to be annoying all the time, but it's really hard to speak at a normal rate when my mind is constantly processing and calculating. I guess I'm just trying to impress you. You're powerful and smart. You're Princess Celestia's personal student, that means something. I'm just trying to get you to treat me like an equal." he hung his head, "I'm sorry for pestering you."

Twilight lowered her head so she could look the yellow stallion in the eyes,

"But we are equals, just in different ways. Tossing that giant spider was easy. I didn't have to worry about keeping it particularly safe. Pulling the hairs out of Trooper's hooves was nearly impossible compared to tossing the spider. It took a lot of care and finesse not to break them. You had no trouble with them at all." Twilight smiled, "I'm still not so sure you could have broken through my block though. I've been told it's like trying to peg down a cloud in a wind storm."

Twilight blushed as Lemon Lime nuzzled her once, "Let's just call it even, alright?" he said.

The purple unicorn stepped back and cleared her throat, "Don't get too friendly there. I respect you enough, but don't push your luck."

Lemon Lime had to hide a pleased smile, "Deal." he said out loud, but as Twilight turned away from him, he whispered, "For now."

Rainbow Dash landed abruptly on the pathway from above, "Hey, are you guys going to come to camp or what?"

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Valiant munched on wild onion and rhubarb soup, thinking about how sour it was. He shifted his weight to get closer to the fire. The night was a cool one and getting progressively colder. His fight with the Lupus had been replaying through his mind the entire day. In retrospect he decided it had been a necessary evil and self preservation besides. The fact that he killed something still hung heavily in his mind but he was starting to come to terms with it. The Lupus was effectively dying in the first place, *'I suppose it could be considered an act of mercy. From what I know about rabies, the creature's mind and whatever personality it had were essentially gone, like it was already dead, just going through very prolonged death-throws.'* he thought.

Feeling better about his deed, Valiant finished off the rest of the soup and set his bowl down. He ran through the day's events and made a small mental checklist, *'Woke up, exercised, ate breakfast, broke camp, and walked. Then in the evening, I set up camp, refilled my canteens, started dinner, exercised, and ate dinner. I guess its bedtime now, right after I clean out the pot and bowl.'*

The pegasus stallion took the pot and bowl to the nearby stream and rinsed them out thoroughly. He set the pair down on the stream bank and lowered his head to take a drink. As his nose neared the gently rippling water, he smelled a scent which startled him, *'Huh?'* he thought. He inched his nose closer to the stream and sniffed again, more carefully. The scent was unmistakable, *'That's the smell of pony. I'm still days from New Yoke. What's another pony doing out here?'* Valiant looked upstream and saw the flicker of a campfire off a distance through the trees. He gauged the distance to be maybe three-hundred paces and decided to follow the stream and perhaps say 'hi' to the other pony, *'I haven't spoken with another pony in a while.'* he thought

Valiant followed up the stream, creeping quietly so as not to disturb the other pony if they were sleeping. He counted the paces and much to his surprise, the distance was not three-hundred paces, but a mere two-hundred and thirty-three instead. He kept his eyes peeled as he crossed the stream in a leap, landing on the opposite side of the bank, where the other camp was.



The camp looked rather like his own. One lone tent stood seven paces back from a merry campfire that had a cook pot suspended over it. The pot was steaming, but Valiant saw no sign of the inhabitant, *'It's dangerous to leave a pot over a fire if you're not watching it.'*

Valiant's thoughts were interrupted as a brash voice echoed over to him from the far side of the campfire, close to the tree line, "Yo stallion, what's up? I wasn't expecting to see another pony way out here. What gives Earth-bro? You out camping too? Dumb question huh?"

Valiant searched the edge of the forest for any sign of the other pony, who was obviously a stallion, "Where are you? I can't see you." he called.

The other stallion's laugh sounded like a bark, "**Dude**, I'm up here! The trees bro, the trees!"

Valiant adjusted his gaze and spotted the other stallion. He was suspended from a tree branch that had to be no less than twenty paces from the ground. He was hanging from a quartet of hooks that were linked to a shoulder and flank harness. From the distance and with poor lighting, Valiant couldn't make out the other pony's coloration or cutie-mark. As the surprised wingless pegasus watched, the other stallion swung himself from one branch to another, using the hooks to hold on. He swung, flipping from branch to branch, lowering himself slowly and finally landed on the ground in a proud pose.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed, "Bet you've never seen anything like that before have you bro?" he approached Valiant, "My name is Dare Devil!" he spouted in a fake accent, bowing deeply.

Valiant was about to speak when the other stallion spoke up again, "If you believe that one, I'll tell you another! Sorry, my actual name is Surf & Turf." he said smiling, "I was **totally** not expecting to run into another pony out here though dude. Are you an extreme sports enthusiast too?"

"Uh, no sorry. I'm Valiant. I saw your fire from downstream and, well, I haven't had any other pony to talk to for a while." he admitted sheepishly.

"It's all cool bro. Conversation withdrawal **sucks**. I was getting wicked lonely out here too. I'm heading back to New Yoke first thing tomorrow. The wilderness is nice and all but, there's less dangers in the city and a lot more ponies. No offense bro, but when I first spotted you way on the other side of the stream, I was **totally** hoping you were a hot filly or something. I **so** miss all the pretty girls at the beach."

Surf & Turf was finally close enough to the fire for Valiant to make out his appearance. The royal blue pegasus stallion wondered how he EVER missed Surf & Turf. He was an Earth pony with all neon colors. His coat was bright neon orange and his mane and tail were bright neon green with bright neon pink highlights that looked natural. Everything about him was BRIGHT. His cutie-mark was of a hang glider crossing paths with a quartet of roller blades and a climbing rope suspended in the center between the two with a cliff-side as the background. It took Valiant a moment to make out Surf & Turf's eye color. His eyes were white with only the very center being black, giving him the look of a pony who was perpetually fascinated or amazed. By contrast, his eyelids seemed to be stuck only half open making him look sleepy at the same time.

"New Yoke?" Valiant asked, "I'm headed that way too. I won't be staying long though; I'm just going to buy a few things from there. As soon as I'm done, I'm heading to my hometown, Haysburg."

"Haysburg!" Surf & Turf exclaimed, "Dude that's **awesome**! You must have traveled for, like months to get way out here! That's some **serious** extreme camping right there! I've always wanted to go to Haysburg! I heard there's some **wickedly** hot Earth fillies there! Aw dude, I am **so** down with that! Oh dude! I want to see some Griffons, and hike some swamps, and check out some of the ruins, and oh **SO** totally check out some fillies! This is going to be just **righteous**!"

Valiant had to hide a smile,  
"Well, it's not all smiles and pretty girls you know. Haysburg gets a ton of tornados and the Griffons aren't always friendly."

"Dude, like I care?" Surf & Turf said, "It's an adventure! I'm psyching myself up for it! I mean, dude, it's not like New Yoke is my home or anything. I'm just hanging there till something else catches my interest." the boisterous stallion's tone shifted to a serious one, "See the thing is dude, I don't have

a home. I've been looking around all over the place for somewhere to settle down and everything, but not many places have what I need. New Yoke is nice, but there's no mountains or anything. I need to live somewhere that I can climb mountains, go camping, go rafting, hang glide, and all that stuff. So far no place has what I need. I've been to Stalliongrad. It's got the mountains, and forests, but it's way too cold and the winds are all crazy and stuff."

Valiant shrugged,  
"You can come with me; I'm not going to stop you. I'm just giving you a warning. I would be glad of the company though."

Surf & Turf perked right up,  
"Dude, it's settled then! We hike our flaks back to New Yoke, then make our way to Haysburg! I know the fastest path to New Yoke! We can make it in just three days!"

Valiant's jaw dropped,  
"Three days?" he asked, "I thought I was more than a week away, closer to two weeks."

"Naw bro," Surf & Turf said waving a hoof, "Just three days. I set up this wicked series of zip lines on the way here. See you would normally have to hike valleys and gorges to get to New Yoke, but with the zip lines, dude, it takes days off the trip. You aren't afraid of heights are you? Some Earth ponies are."

"I'm a pegasus actually." Valiant said smoothly.

Surf & Turf looked at Valiant's back for a moment before the truth hit him,  
"Aw dude," he said sympathetically, "I am **SO** sorry! That sucks Ursa toes! I **TOTALLY** understand if you don't want to talk about it!"

"That's alright, don't worry about it. To answer your question, no I'm not afraid of heights." Valiant said.

"Alright then dude. Do you want to meet up here at my camp or should I come to you?" Surf asked.

"I'll come to you in the morning, if that's alright." Valiant offered.

"It's all good bro. Whatever works. I got to get some shut eye if we're going to do this tomorrow though. Not trying to be rude or anything dude, but I'm sure you do too." Surf said.

"Good idea. I'll see you tomorrow morning the Surf & Turf." Valiant said turning to leave.

"Dude, just call me Surf -or- Turf. There's no need for both." the other stallion said pulling the pot off the fire.

"Well then, good night Surf." Valiant called over his shoulder.

He headed back to his camp and snuggled down into his blanket. The night had just warmed up a bit.

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Rainbow Dash called to the camp below,  
"Hey, I need somepony to set out a blanket for Trooper. Dr. Mend says I can't put him on the bare ground."

Sea Blue dashed into his tent and brought out a thin white sheet then proceeded to throw it out, spreading it out on the ground,  
"Put him down here."

Rainbow Dash set Trooper down on the ground gently. Pinkie Pie and Sea Blue sat on their haunches on either side of the wounded pegasus to keep him warm. He was much cooler than he should have been and the night's temperature had been continuously dropping since nightfall.

Every pony had been busy. Big Mac had unloaded the tents while Rarity organized in Twilight's stead. The white unicorn had asked Sea Blue to help her set up the tents while Big Macintosh and Applejack went looking for something to eat and Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash refilled everypony's canteens. They had all accomplished their tasks without much quarreling and soon the campsite had a fire dancing happily inside a ring of stones with a large cook pot on top of a metal grill. The two farm ponies had found a patch of carrots and potatoes for dinner, a lucky find. Pinkie Pie,

Applejack, and Rarity set to peeling the vegetables while Rainbow Dash flew the cook pot over to the stream, not river like she had claimed, and filled it with water to boil out. She had left shortly thereafter to find the others. By the time she returned, there was a delicious smell of cooking vegetables coming from the pot, which was boiling animatedly.

Dr. Mend, Twilight, Fluttershy, and Lemon Lime trotted into camp several minutes after Dash set Trooper down. Twilight was pleasantly surprised to see that the camp was arranged almost exactly as she would have done. The four tents were set with their backs facing the four cardinal directions, like a compass, with the fire in the middle, and yet still a safe distance away from each tent. Each pony's saddle-bags were set up on one side of each tent and covered with a tarp.

Twilight broke away from the others and trotted up the fire, "Who organized this? It's fantastic!" she gushed.

"Yours truly!" Rarity chimed musically, raising her right hoof into the air.

"Ah was afraid A'd have to get her to ignore the small stuff and deal with what's important again, but she did plum well for herself. Ah got to say Ah'm impressed with ya Rarity." Applejack praised.

Rarity fluttered her eyelashes at the compliment, "But of course, darling. Did you expect anything else? I can learn my lessons just as much as any other pony can. Why, by the time this little outing is over I'm quite sure I'll be a regular old Damsel Boon." she said haughtily.

The gathered ponies all rolled their eyes, but decided not to say anything. In his unconscious state, Trooper suddenly yelled, "Look out for the spider!"

Rarity screeched and leapt into Big Macintosh's hooves trembling, "Spider! Where?! Oh save me Big Mac!"

"Ain't no spider Rarity. Just Trooper talkin' in his sleep." Big Macintosh said with a bored expression.

The gathered ponies all burst into fits of laughter.

Dr. Mend, being arguably the most pragmatic pony present voiced a concern,

"For tonight, I think it would be best for everypony to sleep in a tent. Trooper needs to be kept warm. Somepony will have to sleep on either side of him, use your body heat. Pegasi have the highest body temperature because of their metabolism. Rainbow Dash, you and Fluttershy keep him warm tonight. Lay facing him. The underside of your body is the warmest, especially the inside of the legs where the blood-vessels flow close to the surface of the skin. Reach over him and press your legs over him, both front and back, also try to keep your bellies pressed to him. There's a lot of warmth there too. If anypony gets cold, snuggle up to your tent-mates to conserve heat. We'll probably have to do this more and more as winter progresses. Remember to be mature, we're all adults here. It's nothing personal or private, so don't go groping or doing anything immature."

Twilight nodded in agreement,  
"Let's discuss sleeping arrangements."

Pinkie Pie bounced up and down waving her left hoof,  
"Ooh pick me, pick me!"

"Sure Pinkie," Twilight acknowledged, "Go ahead."

"I think we should all sleep as close to our 'co-Elements'," she somehow managed to use her hooves to air quote, "As we can. Obviously we can't all do that, there isn't enough room, so let's divide up. Every tent, other than the 'pegasi tent'," she air quoted again, "Should have two matched Elements in it. Let's put Dr. Mendie, Applejack and me in one, Rarity, Sea Blue, and Big Macintosh in another then Twilight and Live Wire in the third."

Twilight face instantly heated up in flames at the thought of sleeping in a tent with only Lemon Lime,

"That's an odd arrangement Pinkie Pie. Don't you think a different arrangement would work better?"

Pinkie Pie just shook her head smiling,  
"Nope! See, this way if any tent is attacked by some monster," Pinkie held up her hooves in what she assumed was an imposing fashion to illustrate the point, "Or something, there's a fighting pony already there, who can

protect the others. Rainbow Dash for the first tent, since Trooper's out of it, Applejack is really strong, so is Big Macintosh, and you and Live Wire wield enough power to toss around just about anything that comes your way. It's perfect!"

Twilight HATED to admit it, but Pinkie Pie had a point. The chance of a creature of some sort was not particularly likely, but she didn't want to take the chance, especially in the Everfree Forrest.

Twilight conceded to Pinkie's suggestion, "Very well. Is the arrangement acceptable to everypony?" she asked hoping for some point of contention.

"Yeah!" Rainbow Dash bellowed, "I'm not comfortable sleeping so close to a stallion. What if he gets that morning thing that stallions get in the morning?"

"I can sleep in front of him if that makes you feel better." Fluttershy said quietly, "Remember it's nothing personal."

Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her forehead, "Fluttershy, how much more personal can you get than that?"

"Oh just deal with it Dashie." Pinkie chirped merrily, "It's no big deal. Gee whiz, I never thought I'd see the day when I was more mature than you." she giggled.

"Oh fine." Rainbow Dash huffed, crossing her fore-hooves.

"Now then," Lemon Lime said, "Let's eat. I'm starving."

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Back in Ponyville, Patch and Sweetie Belle snuggled down next to each other, already good friends. Each needed the other, having had to part with their parental figures. Cheerilee was a wonderful sitter and teacher, but there was no true substitute for family, so the two fillies made do with each other.

"Good night Sweetie Belle. Good night Patch. Remember you have school in the morning. I'll come wake you up for breakfast. Sleep well." Cheerilee said closing the door most of the way, but leaving a crack so the hallway light could filter in without becoming overbearing.

Patch turned to Sweetie Belle,  
"What's school here like?"

Sweetie Belle shrugged,  
"It's okay, I guess. The best part is having Applebloom and Scootaloo around. Just watch out for Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. They're mean to every new pony. If they act like they want to be your friends, don't believe it. Trust me, if they're nice to you, they have something planned, and I guarantee it'll be something mean. All the other colts and fillies are nice though. You'll like it. Come on, Patch. Let's get some sleep."

Patch pulled the warm blanket up to her chin, whispering,  
"Good night Daddy. I miss you."

Next to her, Sweetie Belle clenched her eyes shut and sniffled quietly,  
"Good night big sis. I miss you too."

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Out at Sweet Apple Acres, Caramel collapsed onto Big Macintosh's bed, asleep almost instantly. He and Zecora had just finished insulating the cow's bedding. Both were weary to the bone. Zecora settled down on Applejack's bed, still uneasy about the notion, *'Do not ever sleep in another's bed, it is an insult to them unless they are dead.'* she thought remembering what her mother had taught her. Equestrian pony traditions were very different than that of her own people, but Applejack had seemed insulted that she had suggested **NOT** sleeping in the Earth pony's own bed. Zecora put the issue out of her mind and settled down to try to get some sleep.

The door to the bedroom cracked open, revealing the small frame of a young Earth pony filly,  
"I had a bad dream. Can I sleep with you tonight Zecora?" Applebloom asked.



Zecora smiled,  
"Of course you can Applebloom, in this bed there is too much room."

As Applebloom crawled into bed with the zebra, Zecora smirked knowingly,  
"Was it really a scary nightmare my little friend? Or was it perhaps an excuse, something that's just pretend?"

Applebloom snuggled up against Zecora,  
"I miss Applejack and Big Macintosh." she whispered.

"It is completely natural to miss one's family young filly. If you did not, I would think your head is quite silly. I too miss my family often, but time allows the hurt to soften. For now, this is simply what must be, you will be reunited with them soon, you'll see."

Applebloom yawned hugely,  
"Thanks Zecora. You're a good friend."

"Remember little Applebloom, you and your family are all sleeping under the same moon." Zecora said softly, "Just I am with my own, although they are all back home."

The pony and zebra fell asleep, both missing their families, but both united by the absence as well.

The night passed, growing colder and colder, heralding the quick approach of winter. Ponies all over Equestria slept peacefully throughout the land. All watched over by the ever-present orb in the night sky, and a certain dark blue alicorn princess, who loved them all, standing as a silent sentinel against various dangers beyond comprehension. She knew she could not hold back the storm forever, but for now she did her best. When the time came, it would all be up to them.

"Rest now, my little ponies. The coming storm will test you beyond anything before. Your ancestors will be proud once all is said and done. Sleep is a precious gift. In time you will long for it as you do the very breath in your lungs. A great many lives rest on your decisions. We have faith in you,

prove us right." he voice dropped to a whisper, "I pray, by all that is Equestria, prove us right."

# Chapter 9

Twilight was warm and comfortable. The heavy blanket over her was pleasantly heated by the warmth of her own body. She shifted and was suddenly wide awake. Some pony was spooning her intimately. The lavender unicorn looked down. A yellow hoof was draped over her chest as she lay on her left side. Twilight turned her head and beheld Lemon Lime sleeping peacefully behind her. As she raised her head she felt a cold wetness on her cheek. Looking down she saw a small puddle of drool on the inflatable pillow underneath her head. She was contemplating how to rid herself of the offending puddle when she heard Rarity's voice ring out in the early dawn light.

"My goodness darling! You should have been named Huge Macintosh! I never knew you cared so much!" Rarity's comment was followed by a loud rustling and the sound of a tent being unzipped hurriedly, and somepony galloping away, followed by the sound of two ponies laughing quietly.

Twilight rolled her eyes, '*Oh good grief! Poor Big Mac.*' she thought. She levitated the heavy blanket off herself and slipped out from under Lemon Lime's hoof. Awkward though it was, Twilight had to admit, having somepony snuggling up to her was assuredly much warmer than the alternative. Twilight covered Lemon Lime back up with the blanket and unzipped their tent. The ground was covered in frost and the air had a stout chill to it. The fire had died down in the night, so she used a stick to rekindle the flames to life and added a little more wood.

Rarity and Sea Blue emerged from their tent, both carrying small shower-kits in their mouths and headed toward the stream in the meadow. Twilight had to strain to keep from snickering, but was surprised her white-coated friend was not more self-conscious. Rarity looked like she had French kissed a light socket. Her mane and tail were in a state of disarray that Twilight was definitely not envious of. Realizing her own state must have been close to matching Rarity's, Twilight dashed back into her tent and retrieved her brush. A distant squeal, told her that Rarity had seen her reflection in the stream.

By the time she re-emerged from the tent, Applejack was already up and sitting by the fire warming her hooves, "Mornin' Twilight." she greeted cheerfully, "Did ya sleep well? Ah just put on a pot of coffee. The grounds were in Live Wire's saddle-bags," looking around, Applejack whispered, "Just don't tell Pinkie."

"Don't tell me what?" Pinkie Pie asked suddenly appearing next to Applejack, "Ooh, is that coffee?"

"Ya can't have none Pinkie, sorry." Applejack said firmly.

"That's O.K. Applejack. I packed some hot cocoa." Pinkie said pulling out several packets from nowhere.

Dr. Mend slowly crawled out of the tent, "Did somepony mention the great elixir of life?"

"Huh?" Applejack asked.

"He means the coffee." Twilight supplied.

Pinkie Pie went down into a crouch, tail straight up in the air behind her, and inched her way toward what she had dubbed 'the pegasi tent'. She slowly unzipped the tent flap with her teeth and peeked inside. Unable to resist a look, the others crept up and peered over Pinkie's shoulder. From what they could tell from the shapes under the blankets, Fluttershy was laying on her left side, legs wrapped tightly around Trooper holding him close. Trooper lay on his right, facing the custard colored pegasus. Rainbow Dash took the cake. She not only had both her left hooves draped over Trooper, but had rolled almost completely onto him during the night. She had her head lying on his shoulder and was chewing on his left ear, while mumbling softly to herself in her sleep. She clutched him like he was a cherished stuffed toy. The gathering of ponies looking over Pinkie's shoulder took several steps back, hooves to mouths to keep from laughing out loud.

Pinkie, on the other hoof, sighed and let out a loud, "Aww, that's so sweet!"

Fluttershy stirred and cracked open her eyes. She looked around and saw Rainbow Dash. Smiling warmly, she carefully pulled her hooves out from under Rainbow Dash and inched her way out from under the covers then crept out of the tent. She shook herself out and stretched her wings daintily, then headed over to the fire. The other ponies gathered around the fire once more. Applejack picked up the cook pot and carried it off toward the stream.

Dr. Mend shook his head as if clearing something from his mind, then dashed over to the side of the tent where his saddle-bags were. Removing a small bottle, he headed down to the stream leaving Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Twilight alone by the fire. A shuffle from behind her made Twilight look back. Lemon Lime staggered out of the tent and shook himself off, then began stretching in all sorts of odd directions. He finished stretching and lay down on the ground and curled his hind legs up and over his head. Keeping his legs in the same position, he used his front hooves to push himself off the ground, up and down in a repetitive motion. He slowly lowered himself and lay flat on his stomach arching his back down toward the ground as he pushed up with his front hooves with his hind legs stretched out straight behind himself. Straightening his posture he began doing push-ups.

Pinkie Pie suddenly appeared beside him wearing a sports head band and had a whistle around her neck suspended by a red lanyard, "1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . "

After Pinkie counted to fifty, Lemon Lime got back up on all four legs and walked around to his saddle-bags.

He returned levitating a small canister and plopped himself down next to the fire,  
"Good morning everypony. I've got oatmeal here. We can flavor it however you want. Honey, berries, raisins, cinnamon, sugar, saccharin, butter, or plain. Whatever you like. I think we should try to hurry up so we can get moving soon. I figure we should stick to something simple for now, until we get the hang of having breakfast and cleaning up quickly. I mean we could . . . "

"Um, Live Wire." Fluttershy addressed softly.

"If we wanted to, but then . . . " he continued obliviously.

"Hey, Live Wire!" Pinkie Pie chimed in.

"I suppose we could . . . " he continued on.

"Lemon Lime." Twilight addressed softly, placing a hoof on the exuberant unicorn's shoulder.

Lemon Lime clammed up instantly and turned to the purple unicorn, "Yes?"

"It's alright, we get it." Twilight said.

"Oh, okay." he said cheerfully.

Applejack and Dr. Mend returned shortly. The former placed the cook pot on the grill over the fire and let the water heat. Dr. Mend put his bottle back and removed a long-handled, curved brush from his saddle-bags. He clamped his teeth onto the handle, which caused the brush to curl up over his head, and worked his jaw back and forth, brushing out his lengthy mane. Sea Blue returned, looking decidedly more together and put away his shower kit. Rarity was still absent but Big Macintosh returned and sat down next to the fire as the ponies prepared to have breakfast.

Trooper awoke with a start and saw Rainbow Dash lying on top of him.

Keeping his voice quiet, he addressed his multicolored bedmate, "Do get off Rainbow Dash! You look like a foal!" he hissed in a low voice.

Dash stirred and blinked. Seeing Trooper starring at her, with his ear in her mouth, she spit it out, leaving it dripping with gooey spittle. The ear flopped down and hit Trooper's face with a wet splat. Trooper grimaced and whipped his head to the side, dislodging the ear for a moment before gravity took over and it flopped back onto his face once more.

He blew out a breath and looked up at Rainbow Dash with raised eyebrows,

"What exactly are you waiting for, may I ask?"

Rainbow Dash drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, she spoke quietly,  
"What were you thinking yesterday? You could have been killed!"

Trooper quietly harrumphed,  
"As if you care?"

Rainbow Dash didn't budge an inch so Trooper figured she wanted a real answer,  
"If you must know, I was not thinking at all! I reacted, nothing more! In retrospect, I am partly ashamed of myself! I am supposed to guard you and Fluttershy, but I was there and I saw it so I reacted! Are you satisfied?"

Rainbow Dash pursed her lips, but nodded and shifted her weight off the pegasus stallion beneath her. She exited the tent and instantly took to the air, flying around and performing some aerial stunts and tricks to loosen up. Trooper grunted and tried to rise, but he was too weak and the bandages were stiff.

He exhaled heavily and addressed the open air,  
"I could really use some assistance here, anypony?"

"Coming!" yelled Sea Blue.

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Sweetie Belle had never before fully appreciated just how much work Cheerilee did before school even started. She, Patch, and their teacher had arrived at the school house more than an hour early. Cheerilee had opened up the classroom and let the fillies in. Sweetie Belle had never seen the classroom before school. The place was empty and lifeless, with walls blank and lights dim in the early morning. Cheerilee set right to work and had Sweetie Belle and Patch help her set up for the day. They put up posters, changed events on the class calendar, wiped down each desk, and clapped erasers. They finished with ten minutes to spare before the first bell so Cheerilee had Sweetie Belle gather Patch's new books.

Sweetie Belle walked around the classroom pointing out each filly or colt's seat, starting at the back and working her way forward,

"And in the first row is Archer, Twist, and . . . "

"Hey Sweetie Belle, who's your new friend?" Scootaloo asked walking in.

The little orange pegasus walked up to her desk in the rear of the classroom and began pulling her books out of her saddle-bags and onto the desk top,

"Come on, what's her name?"

"Scootaloo, this is Patch. Patch, this is my friend Scootaloo. She's one of the Cutie Mark Crusaders." Sweetie Belle introduced, gesturing to the pegasus filly with her left hoof.

Patch smiled mischievously, Scootaloo had not yet seen her 'blank eye' due to the angle she was standing, she walked behind the other filly and stuck out her right hoof,

"Hi Scootaloo."

Scootaloo turned around and began to shake Patch's hoof, then stopped dead,

"Whoa," she said surprised, "What happened to your eye?"

"It's a mutation!" Patch said, "I can see right through my eye lid."

Sweetie Belle face-hoofed,  
"Come on, Patch. Tell her the truth."

"Aww, you're no fun Sweetie Belle." Patch said giggling, "It's just the way I was born. How did you like the line though? I've been practicing it for Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. Sweetie Belle said they were bullies."

Scootaloo's face contorted into the single most mischievous, most devious, most cutely evil expression you could ever imagine,  
"It's perfect." she purred.

"Thath's tho cool!" Twist said entering the class room.

"What is Twist?" Applebloom asked following the lisping filly.

Patch turned toward the newest filly to enter the room,



"My missing eye." she said casually.

"Oh, wow!" Applebloom exclaimed, "That really is cool!"

"I've got an idea!" Sweetie Belle said eyes growing wide, "Quick! Does anypony have a small ball, about the same size as an eye?"

"Ah do!" Applebloom said, reaching into her saddle-bags she removed a baseball.

"Perfect! Does anypony have any markers?" Sweetie Belle continued.

"Yeth, right here." Twist added.

"Perfect!" Sweetie Belle said rubbing her hooves together.

The four other fillies got the idea then got right to work, all giggling conspiratorially.

Class was due to start in two minutes. Everypony had arrived except for the two bullies who always waited till the last second to come in. Patch had pulled her mane in front of her blank eye and covered up her horn so her magic couldn't be seen, and then had levitated the fake eye underneath Diamond Tiara's seat before class. Only Patch, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, Twist, and Applebloom knew about the plan, the rest of the class was utterly unprepared. Finally the two bullies made their appearance and took their seats. Cheerilee closed the door and began taking roll call.

She cycled through each name, then proceeded with other matters, "Come on up here, Patch." she said.

Patch, acting shy and nervous, slowly walked up to the front of the class room and turned beside Cheerilee, the teacher continued, "Class, this is Patch. She's a new student here and I want you all to treat her like you treat each other."

Silver Spoon blew some quiet raspberries and sighed, "Look, another blank flank." she said out loud.

The whole class heard the comment, but chose to ignore it. Patch smiled when Cheerilee asked her to go around and introduce herself to everypony. She began with the front row, then moved to the second row.

She stopped in front of Silver Spoon and extended her hoof, "Hi, I'm Patch."

Silver Spoon sighed and rolled her eyes, "I heard Cheerilee the first time, you know blank flank."

"And I heard her tell me to introduce myself to everypony, rich witch." Patch said smiling.

The students giggled at the witty jab; Cheerilee's voice rang out softly from the front, "That wasn't very nice Patch. Nor was what you said Silver Spoon. Please behave girls."

Patch continued on to Applebloom then to Diamond Tiara, "Hi . . ." she began extending her hoof.

"You're Patch, yeah I know. I'm not deaf." Diamond Tiara said in a bored tone.

"Diamond Tiara, be nice to Patch." Cheerilee said.

Patch turned to the teacher, "That's alright Miss Cheerilee. I've got this."

"That's good . . . What?" Cheerilee caught what Patch said just as Diamond Tiara spoke again.

"Why are you hiding half your face? Are you really that ugly?" she asked maliciously.

"Nope," Patch said pulling her mane out of her face with a hoof, "I'm just hiding this."

Diamond Tiara's face went pure white, she looked horrified, "W . . . what happened to you? Where's your eye?"

"Right here." Patch said levitating the fake eye out from Diamond Tiara's desk and right in front of her face.

Diamond Tiara's eyes focused on the object in front of her in utter disbelief, lips trembling like Jell-O.

Back in the Library, far from the school house, Spike was startled awake by the loudest, most terrified, blood-curdling scream he had ever heard.

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Valiant was convinced that Surf & Turf had an ongoing death wish. He looked up at the line strung across the gorge in front of him and swallowed hard. The line looked too thin and the gorge looked too deep. He wasn't afraid of heights, but he was definitely afraid of being terribly mangled by a long fall onto razor sharp rocks.

Surf & Turf removed a pair of odd looking devices from his saddle bags and passed one to Valiant,  
"It's like destiny was watching out for you or something dude. I have this second roller in case the first one breaks. Just got it made right before I came out here."

Valiant couldn't help but wonder about the intelligence of his companion, '*What use would he have for a second if the first broke?*' he looked over the edge of the gorge, '*He'd be too dead to use it.*'

His thoughts were interrupted by Surf & Turf talking again,  
"Now, I know what you're thinking dude, 'How could I use the second if the first one broke?' right?" he asked before answering his own question, "My hang glider is telescopic. It's this weird looking contraption on my back here. I just press a button and it folds right out, so even if the first roller breaks, in mid line, I'll still be alive enough to use the second one. Well, once I climb all the way back up anyway."

Valiant shook his head, '*Was he reading my mind?*' he wondered.

"Naw dude, I just get impressions sometimes; almost like there's this weirdo bubble above your head that displays your inner monologue. It's just something I do." Surf & Turf said shrugging.

"Oooooookkkkkkaaaaaayyyyyy." Valiant said, feeling a little like his personal space had just somehow been violated.

"Here dude, let me show you how to use this thing." Surf said, "You put one hoof through each one of these holes here and make sure the roller is above your back. Then you take the roller in your mouth and latch it to the line. Like this bro."

Surf & Turf slipped the first one on and took the roller in his mouth then proceeded to lean up against the tree the zip-line was attached to. He reached his neck up and placed the roller onto the line, then flipped closed a tight-fitting metal panel on a hinge and pulled down on a pivot, securing it.

"See dude, this way, if you get stuck, you just pump your legs up and down, to get you going again. The up and down motion should dislodge the rope and rollers and get you moving. The panel keeps you from knocking yourself off, heh, no pun intended bro. Get it, 'knock yourself off' like suicide and 'knock yourself off' like falling." the neon pony laughed.

Valiant couldn't help but comment,  
"Are you alright in the head? Are you sure your name shouldn't be Death Wish?"

Surf turned to face his new friend and scratched his chin,  
"You know dude, it's amazing how many ponies ask me that." he shrugged, "Oh well," and with that he kicked off and began sliding down the zip-line, screaming, "Cowabunga!"

Valiant watched in amazement, '*That nut actually seems to be enjoying it!*' he thought.

Surf & Turf splayed out his legs and began to spin wildly,  
"Dude! You gotta try this!"

"You're insane." Valiant said under his breath, "And yet I'm following you."

Valiant leaned up on the tree the zip-line was attached to, and connected the roller just like Surf & Turf showed him. He looked back and watched as the neon Earth pony speedily approached the tree which held the other end of the line, rotating all the while like a helicopter blade. Surf & Turf whooped once more just before he hit the tree. Valiant could hear the impact from across the gorge. The neon colored pony's body went slack and he just hung there, like a limp rag-doll.

Valiant waited for any signs of life, but saw none; acting quickly, he kicked off hoping to get to his new friend and help him, if he was still alive, "Hold on Surf!" he called hoarsely, "I'm coming!"

As Valiant swung out over the gorge, he forced his mind to empty, focusing on his friend. After a brief moment more, the brightly-colored Earth pony raised his head and looked up. Surf's face registered shock and disbelief as he watched Valiant come zipping toward him. The earth pony rotated and planted his back legs on the ground, then reached up and pulled the roller off the line as quickly as he could.

Valiant slid right up and smacked into the tree with a resounding thump. The royal blue pegasus was pleasantly surprised to discover that Surf & Turf had attached a thick cushion to the tree trunk. The thing was almost the same color as the bark of the tree and so had been all but invisible from the far side. He squirmed for a minute then planted his hooves and detached himself from the line.

Surf & Turf walked up to Valiant shaking his head, "Dude, that was seriously un-cool. You could have hit me. I'm an adrenaline junky and all but, dang! We could have totally broken some serious boneage there bro."

Valiant lowered his front end and eyed his friend oddly, "You went all limp when you hit the tree. I thought you had hurt yourself."

"Naw dude, I was just dizzy from all the spinning, which was, by the way, totally wicked. I've had way more than my fair share of busted bones and everything before. I try to play it as safe as possible while still enjoying the rush." Surf said.

"So should I take this harness off or leave it on?" Valiant asked.

Surf & Turf smiled hugely,  
"You should totally leave it on bro; we've got several more lines to zip before the day is done. We're actually making much better time than I had anticipated. At this rate, we should reach New Yoke by sundown tomorrow. Come on dude, we're burning sunlight here."

"What about lunch?" Valiant asked.

Surf began walking and spoke over his shoulder,  
"I generally just skip it dude. You eat more in the evening and sleep better too."

Valiant caught up to the neon colored pony and decided to try to get to know him better,  
"So Surf," he began, "Where did you grow up?"

"On the road dude. My folks were always traveling. I've probably seen more of Equestria at my age than most ponies see their entire lives. We never stayed in one place for long. See, my pops was a traveling minstrel, my moms too. I grew up as poor as dirt, but that gave me a serious appreciation for conveniences and everything. My folks were always trying to find a new or better way to hone their musical talents so they spent the bits they made on their instruments and paying for food and stuff. Since I grew up on the road I got used to living off the land really early on. I didn't really have any toys so I just used my imagination all the time."

"If your parents were so poor, how do you afford to have all these . . . things made? A telescoping hang glider, the hooks, the zip line, where do the bits come from?" Valiant asked.

"I'm an inventor dude. I patent all my inventions and ponies buy them so I make my bits that way. The telescopic glider, my invention, the hooks, my invention, even the zip line harnesses are from my brain. At first I didn't make much, but sure enough, ponies started buying my stuff and eventually extreme sports caught on. Don't get me wrong bro, some of my inventions have been serious flops. Like this one thing I invented, a leg-powered gyrocopter, dude as far as I know, only one pony ever bought one. I'm not rich or anything, but I've been working on an idea that should catch on like wild fire." Surf gushed.

"And what would that be?" Valiant asked.

"O.K. dude. Have you ever wanted to just jump off a bridge but not, you know, hit the rocks or river or whatever at the bottom?" Surf asked.

"Can't say that I have, no." Valiant admitted.

"Well, say you do one day. My invention is a type of harness that attaches to a flexible, springy rope. You jump and get the free fall but the rope catches you slowly and stretches out and pulls you right back up, not all the way but part of the way. That way you don't have to deal with whiplash or any of those nasty side effects like if you had used a regular rope, then you just have a friend pull you back up and you can do it again. There was this other invention I had in mind, but I don't know if it would catch on. Picture a long board that floats. You stand on top of it and ride waves as they come crashing into the shore, you know, pick up some speed and everything, then you could learn to do tricks on it. The only problem is that most ponies just like to swim. Anyway, I commissioned one to be made just before I came out here. It should be done by the time we get back. You can try it out if you want." Surf offered.

Valiant hid a cringe,  
"I think I'll pass, but thanks. So, getting back to your parents, what happened with them?"

"They're still out travelling around somewhere bro. Last I heard they were heading off into the country to try their luck with some buffalo. They heard that some ponies made peace with a local tribe and wanted to see if they had any neat or unique musical instruments or anything. What about you dude? I've totally been monopolizing the conversation here, I don't want to seem shallow. Besides I'm sure you've got some seriously gnarly stories yourself." Surf said.

Valiant shrugged,  
"I've had some . . . interesting experiences, I guess. Well, I started life in Haysburg . . ."

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Trooper was feeling rather put out and it showed,  
"I assure you, my friend, I am most capable of shifting my own weight. Dr. Mend, please, let me fly." he begged, "I am quite sound of body and I loathe being a burden to anypony."

The older medical pony looked back at the pegasus stallion floating in the air behind him. Trooper was levitated directly above Lemon Lime's head where he stayed, hooves crossed underneath his chin in a prone posture, as if he were laying on his belly. The boisterous pegasus stallion had not ceased complaining since the party had broken camp, whereupon he had been informed of the arrangements of his . . . transportation.

"You need to rest and recover your strength, if nothing else, give your body a chance to heal. Stop whining and be appreciative." Dr. Mend said curtly.

Trooper adopted a look of injured honor,  
"I am certainly appreciative, my good sir! How many ponies can honestly claim to have such good friends? I appreciate the notion to my very soul, but I cannot fathom the enormity of burden I am being right now! Besides, how exactly am I supposed to protect our two pegasi friends, who are flying aloft, if I am unable to be there with them? I am being about as useful as a cancer at the moment!"

"As painful as one too." Sea Blue muttered under his breath, "Look Trooper, just deal with it. You did something really brave and noble. Just think of this as your reward."

"Oh yes," Trooper said indignantly, "My reward is being hoisted around like some kind of invalid! I need to be useful! I finally have a use and now I cannot perform the sacred task! I need to be protecting, guarding the sacred essence of life!"

"Trooper," Lemon Lime addressed from below, "You're being foalish now. I can easily clamp your muzzle shut if I want to. We're doing this for your own good, call it tough love or whatever you want, but this is the way it's going to be. End of story. So either clam up or I'll do it for you. You could try figuring out what your special talent is or something, just stop complaining."



"Maybe his special talent is being a whiney Mc whynerson!" Pinkie Pie chirped.

Applejack snickered quietly to herself,  
"Ah don't rightly think that's his talent Pinkie. Have you ever tried farmin' Trooper?"

"As a matter of fact I have, Applejack, for the better part of a year actually. I did alright at it, but it was clearly not my special talent." Trooper said.

"Don't you have any idea what it might be?" Twilight asked from behind, "I do find it very strange that a full grown stallion doesn't have anything he's good at."

"That, my dear Twilight, is precisely the point. I am 'good' at everything, but 'exceptional' at nothing. I have no identifiable calling except for guarding other ponies, which is exactly why I am being so stubborn about the issue. I need to feel useful. I have felt like a burden all my life. I hate that feeling. In life, I have always felt out of place, like sun-screen on top of a snowy mountain, or an ice-pick in the desert." Trooper said dramatically.

"Well then darling," Rarity offered, "What kinds of things capture your interest? Surely there must be something."

"Everything captures my interest. Which only adds to the problem. I have spent countless hours learning about every single subject I could get my hooves on, from acting and singing, to simple plumbing. Furthermore, I have attempted each one in turn. I formulated a list and worked my way down from the top." Trooper admitted sourly, "Perhaps when this mess is done with, I shall pay a visit to our dear Princesses and inquire to them about the dilemma. I am not giving up, mind you. I am simply furthering my options. Perhaps there are new possibilities waiting for me in Haysburg."

"We need to stop soon, so I can change out your bandages, Trooper." Dr. Mend said.

"Ayup." Big Macintosh said, "Maybe some food'll make him less cranky."

Twilight raised her head toward the treetops,  
"Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash." she called.

Within moments, the two pegasi drifted down from above and landed, falling in step with the rest of the ponies,  
"What's up gang?" Dash asked.

"We're going to be stopping soon for lunch." Twilight explained, "Why don't we all just stop here, so Dr. Mend can change out Trooper's bandages. I've got a question I wanted to ask everypony before we make camp tonight."

"Do ya want me and Big Mac to scout on ahead for a small clearin' Twilight?" Applejack asked.

"All we need is space enough for everypony to be seated. If you don't find something within one hundred paces, come on back and we'll just stop where we are. Is everypony okay with that?"

None of her comrades argued the notion. Within minutes, Applejack and her brother returned with no sign of an ideal clearing. The group settled down on the rough path and began eating dried fruit as Lemon Lime dished it out while Dr. Mend saw to Trooper. A rustle from behind him and Pinkie Pie emerged from the surrounding foliage humming to herself. Dr. Mend mentally kicked himself for not paying more attention to the younger pink pony's movements, *'I have to be more careful with Pinkie. She's random enough, she might wander off on her own and get lost, if I'm not more alert.'*

Twilight decided the time had come to pose her question to her companions,  
"Alright everypony, do we have any idea what to say to Valiant once we find him?"

"Ooh, ooh!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, "I know! How about 'Why did you leave?'"

"Well that's a start Pinkie, but what do we say to get him to come back and finish his time at the university?" Dr. Mend asked, "He's throwing away a golden opportunity."

"Why do we need to say anything?" Fluttershy asked softly.

All eyes turned to the quiet pegasus, making her feel self conscious while meekly hiding behind her flowing mane,  
"What do you mean, darling?" Rarity asked.

Fluttershy lowered her eyes, but continued, in a barely audible voice,  
"Maybe just seeing us will make him come back. Maybe all he needs is some support."

Dr. Mend tossed his mane, turning his head,  
"I wish. When Valiant and I were in Canterlot, he promised me we would be each other's support. I doubt that support will be all it takes to bring him back."

Sea Blue rubbed his chin with a hoof,  
"Hmm."

"I see wheels turning!" Pinkie Pie said, bouncing around the counselor,  
"Twirling, whirling, round we go . . ."

Sea Blue looked up,  
"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking."

The other ponies leaned toward the counselor, so he elaborated on his thoughts,  
"Let's go over what we know. I think he's looking for something, but we'll come back to that. The discovery that Evening Star was actually Princess Luna is what started this and I think Trixie's attitude sealed the deal, so to speak. Let's think here, 'What do these two events have in common?'" he asked.

Rainbow Dash spoke up first,  
"You did mention before that he seemed romantically interested in 'Evening Star' right?"

"I believe he was, yes." Sea Blue said nodding.

"Could he be trying to find a marefriend?" Dash offered.

"Possible, I suppose." Sea Blue said.

"Princess Luna and Trixie both did some things that made them outcasts!" Pinkie Pie spouted.

Sea Blue pointed to the pink party pony with his right hoof,  
"Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner! That's my guess too Pinkie. Seeing the results of their actions as well as their respective punishments, may have triggered a response in Valiant. It's the most solid connection between the two. Now, take his note, which strongly hinted at a need for self-discovery and cross reference that with what I just mentioned. What do we have?"

"An infuriating stallion who wanders off at bad times?" Dr. Mend offered grumpily.

Sea Blue smirked,  
"Aside from that."

Applejack cocked her head,  
"Well, he sure is lookin' for somethin' right?"

"Yes, but what is it?" Sea Blue asked.

Rainbow Dash raised her head from munching on dried fruit,  
"The two pieces are crime and self discovery, right? Crime to remind him of where he came from and what he did, and self discovery to motivate him to seek it out . . . "

Twilight caught on to the direction of her friend's thought,  
"Family, or at least something along those lines. He's an orphan pegasus from an area where there are normally no pegasi right? He and Arabesque were the only pegasi in Haysburg. Maybe he's looking for some kind of connection with somepony aside from friendship."

"Closer." Sea Blue hinted.

"Love?" Fluttershy ventured.

"You nailed it, Fluttershy. At least, that's my best guess. His connection with each of us was plenty strong for friendship, but he needs to feel loved, everypony does. The love of friends is very different than the love of family.

It can sometimes be a substitute for a while, but in the end, we all need it. It's part of who we are. Each of us has the love of family in some form or another." Sea Blue paused to let the statement sink in.

The gathering of various ponies all stopped to consider their families.

Sea Blue continued,  
"Without the love of family, without knowing we all belong somewhere, we would feel lost. Part of everypony's identity is their family. Rarity, when you gave him his cutie-mark back, it started the process of him re-discovering who he was. When somepony cut it off him, it was like losing the little bit of his identity he had left. Being declared a Vagabond was a two-hit blow. One, the ponies of Haysburg rejected him, so he lost what family he knew, part of his identity. Two, when he lost his cutie-mark, he lost his identity almost completely. You restored his cutie-mark and thereby half his identity, but he still wasn't whole. He needs the other half of that puzzle to fall into place in order to continue with his life. He needs his 'family' to welcome him back so he feels whole again. If the ponies of Haysburg reject him a second time, it could destroy him without anypony needing to do anything else. I think we have an answer to his problem, and that answer is being re-bandaged as we speak."

Everypony's eyes instantly gravitated toward Trooper,  
"Me? I will admit we do look somewhat similar, but I already had this very discussion with Valiant back in Canterlot. I have almost no living family. Most of them perished in a terrible accident when I was but a foal."

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Which brings me to my idea. Let's get moving again and we'll talk about it while we walk. Dr. Mend, is he good to go?"

"Yes, his injuries are healing quickly. He should be fine by this evening." Dr. Mend said as he packed up his medical effects.

Everypony was eager to hear about Sea Blue's idea. They packed back up and got moving as quickly as possible.

Once everypony was back and walking again, Sea Blue continued his idea,

"Dr. Mend, what are the chances of two ponies having such similar appearances as Trooper and Valiant do, if they are not related?"

"It's certainly possible. With such a variety of ponies all over Equestria, there's bound to be some occasional matches." Dr. Mend admitted.

"No argument, but what are the chances of the two look-alikes being almost exactly the same age and being the same breed, say pegasi for example?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend shrugged,  
"It's still possible, a little unlikely, but possible."

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Alright, let's venture a little bit deeper. Some of a pony's personality is a product of their environment. Twilight, can you back me up on this one?"

Twilight cocked her head in thought,  
"That's the generally accepted consensus. That's the theory, but not all of a pony's personality comes from their environment. Some of it is just ingrained, portions of it are genetic, or so I've read." Twilight realized she was suddenly the center of attention, "Just because I don't care too much for psychology doesn't mean I don't know anything about it." she defended.

"Right," Sea Blue said, "I agree with that. True, Trooper and Valiant have their differences to be sure. However, there are several underlying factors I've noticed they have in common. It occurred to me last night when I heard about how Trooper acted to defend Twilight and Rarity." he said turning to the levitating stallion, "Trooper, what was going through your head when you saw the spider?"

"I saw a threat to somepony and I had to act. The same thing happened back in Canterlot, when my legs got broken. It was simply a reaction. I rather could not help myself. I can assure you, it had next to nothing to do with bravery. It was simply in my nature to do so. Do not get me wrong, I am glad the situation was dealt with but I would have much rather not have been injured in the process. I am no hero. I was there and I was able to do something about it, so I did." Trooper admitted.

"Even so," Sea Blue said, "You put yourself in harm's way to protect others, with no thought to your own safety, furthermore, if I remember correctly, even while injured you stood to protect Twilight and Rarity when you thought there might have been a danger."

"When Lemon Lime came through the bushes, you're right!" Applejack said.

Sea Blue smiled,  
"Sound familiar?"

"Yes!" Twilight exclaimed, "When Valiant . . . " her eyes grew slightly wide, "It's almost identical! They both did something to save others. Valiant rescued ponies from the fire, Trooper fought off the spider. Both were badly injured . . . " Twilight turned to the black stallion walking in front of her, "Dr. Mend, would you say Trooper's injuries were life-threatening?"

"Had he been alone? Without a doubt. The hairs would probably have become infected and he would almost certainly have died." Dr. Mend admitted.

Twilight continued,  
"Both were critically injured yet kept going. Valiant performed his technique and Trooper turned to defend Rarity and I, both despite being in terrible pain; and I think they both declined being named a hero for it."

"I think it's a family trait. I spent the better portion of last night making comparisons, which is why I was so quiet. There are differences, yes, but the similarities far outweigh them. I'll spare you-all the list, but needless to say, I think Trooper and Valiant are related somehow, the only questions are 'How?' and 'How do we prove it?'" Sea Blue said.

"I have no siblings, though." Trooper said.

"Did you ever ask your mother about that?" Sea Blue asked.

"It did come up once, and she assured me that I do not. My father had a brother, but not I." Trooper said.

"An uncle then?" Lemon Lime asked.

"Yes, I do not remember much beyond that though. It was a long time ago. I have not spoken with her about it in years." Trooper said.

"Did she say anything else? Maybe show you a picture or anything like that?" Sea Blue asked.

"I believe she did, but it has been so long, I have forgotten. I do remember her saying that I was there when my father died, but I was only a little foal. I do not remember anything about my father. All I know about that day was that it was a family reunion in a huge field, one day many years ago." Trooper said, "I am sorry, but that is all I have."

"It's a good place to start, Trooper." Sea Blue said, "As we continue, I want you to try to remember anything you can about your family. Anything will help at this point. I am trained in how to put a pony under hypnosis, but I don't like to do it except as a last resort. Take your time and try your very best to remember anything. We have more than two weeks to go, so you should have plenty of time to try. I think this our best bet to help Valiant."



# Chapter 10

“There she is dude, New Yoke. She’s the brightest lady in Equestria, outside of Canterlot, and a fine looking one too.” Surf & Turf said gesturing down toward the mass of tall buildings in the distance.

Valiant gazed down from their spot on top of the hill and couldn’t help but be a little bit intimidated by the sight of the massive city. It had to be the better part of an hour away, by hoof, but the sight was not diminished in the slightest even at so great a distance. Steel, stone, and glass rose for hundreds of paces into the air, overshadowing smaller buildings nestled deep into the recessed streets flowing between their colossal brethren on all sides. Each behemoth stood as a solid representation and testament to the industrial nature of the residents. From his vantage point, Valiant could make out the mind-boggling number of ponies walking together in the streets, masses flowing like blood in the veins of the city. The vast ocean sat, framing the port city, a backdrop of the bluest blue. Ships meandered around a huge dock section which bordered on and extended out over the water, while crews of ponies scrambled around on board each vessel, trying to offload their freight and make room for the next ship in line. The pegasus stallion marveled at the intimate proximity the city shared with the surrounding forest. The forest came up to within a mere one hundred paces of the city’s outermost buildings.

There seemed to be a distinctive lack of farms around the city itself, which puzzled Valiant, “Where are all the farms? Where does the food for the city come from?” he asked his neon colored friend.

“It’s all imported bro. The city gets all its food from other towns, like Ponyville, Trottingham, and Haysburg. The food gets imported by ships and offloaded at the docks, then distributed through the city. Come on dude, we need to get moving.” Surf said adjusting his saddle-bags, “I have to empty out my bank account and tell my inventor friend what percent of the profits she gets to keep for herself while I’m static.”

Surf & Turf broke into a trot, setting a brisk pace toward New Yoke; Valiant followed behind.

Within an hour, they had reached the city proper. Valiant noticed right away that there was no wall surrounding the city. There were, by contrast, a large number of armored guards patrolling the streets. Surf & Turf wound his way through the tightly packed crowds of ponies like a snake could wind through tall grass, Valiant could barely keep up. He had never seen so many ponies in one place before, even Canterlot didn't boast the population New Yoke apparently had. The brightly colored Earth pony, however was not blind to his companion's difficulty and politely slowed down whenever he saw Valiant begin lagging behind. They squeezed their way through crowds and crowds, Valiant was completely lost.

Eventually Surf & Turf veered off to one side of the street and waved to Valiant over the heads of the crowd. Valiant slowly made his way to the neon pony. Surf was standing in front of an old brick building which sported a sign that read, 'Tinker's Emporium'. The sign looked to be as old as the building itself, decrepit and saggy with faded paint.

Surf & Turf waited until Valiant was next to him, "Alright dude, this is the place. My friend Tinker is the owner. She's uh, well she's kind of flirty with me," he laughed nervously, "Me and every other stallion in the city. She may come on kind of strong at first but she's a really sweet mare. You just have to take everything she says in stride bro, fair warning and all. I'll go in first, you know, soften the blow and everything. If she flirts with you just flirt back, she doesn't mean anything by it, it's just her own special way of being friendly."

Surf turned and pushed open the wooden door to the small business calling, "Yo Tinker! Are you in here, or do I need to find some other pretty girl to hang out with?"

Valiant took a moment to look around the dim shop. The 'Emporium' had to be at least sixty paces from front to back and probably eighty paces from left to right, but walking space was apparently at a premium. Metallic contraptions of every imaginable variety littered the entire shop, sometimes from floor to ceiling. There were tables filled with half-finished gadgets and tools all over the place. The air smelled strongly of hot metal and acrid

smoke filled the shop, making Valiant want to sneeze. At the far end of the room, opposite the door, stood a stout wooden counter with an open door behind it leading into the back of the shop. The sound of clanging metal echoed from beyond.

The ringing of metal on metal ceased and Surf's challenge was answered by a voice that could only have belonged to some kind of angel, even if the words were less than angelic,  
"Is that my little sweet-flank calling to me? I wasn't expecting you for another couple of days, stud."

Valiant's jaw dropped. The voice was followed by one of the prettiest unicorn mares he had ever seen, doing something that was arguably the most unattractive thing any mare could do. Tinker was smoking a cigar. Valiant found it impossible to make out most of Tinker's features. She was liberally covered in black grease and had her mane and tail pulled up into a mass on top of her head and flank, both clumps were covered with dirty rags and tied tightly in place. Tinker's face though was a wonder to behold. Her cheek bones were slim and petite, her lips full and bright red, like she was wearing lipstick, and her eyes were like two glowing amber almonds shielded behind long full lashes. Her cutie-mark was of a ballpeen hammer smashing against a lump of metal.

Tinker sauntered up to the counter and batted her long lashes at the two stallions,  
"Sweet Celestia! Two handsome stallions in my little shop, what IS a girl to do?" she levitated the smoldering cigar out of her mouth and blew out a cloud of smoke, "Are you boys here to show a girl a nice night out on the town? I know plenty of clubs we could hit, then find a nice cozy little booth all to ourselves."

Valiant felt himself blushing at Tinker's provocative words, fortunately, Surf stepped in quickly,  
"You know full well, I don't like sharing you, babe. Besides, I'm here for business. Tinker, this is Valiant; Valiant meet Tinker."

Surf & Turf led Valiant up toward the counter, while Tinker took another hit from her cigar, watching the two stallions with keen interest.

Valiant walked up to the counter and extended his right hoof,

“A pleasure to meet you Tinker.”

Tinker levitated the cigar away and blew out more smoke, “The pleasure’s all mine, and sometimes Surf’s too.” she purred, shaking Valiant’s hoof, “If you hang around here long enough, maybe you’ll get to find out exactly what I mean, big guy.”

“I’m off to Haysburg here soon babe; got mountains to climb and thermals to glide. You can keep selling the inventions while I’m gone. Feel free to keep eighty-nine percent of the profits for yourself. As for the rest, if you could deposit the bits in the bank for me, I’d really appreciate it. You know the drill.” Surf said.

Tinker’s mouth fell to an incredibly sultry pout, “Aww, Surf!” she whined, “You still owe me that date, remember? That was the deal for the first run of your inventions.”

Surf rubbed the back of his head with his left hoof, “I know babe, but when the wind calls, I have to answer. Tell you what, we’ll go out tonight, before I leave in the morning. Your call, anywhere you want.”

Tinker’s eyes sparkled, “Anywhere?” she said quietly, “How about ‘Crash-Course’?”

Surf’s eyes popped open wide, “Uh, I don’t know about that babe. Isn’t there somewhere nicer you want to chill at?”

Tinker leaned over the counter once more, “Tell you what stud.” she said seductively, “Bring your friend and I’ll go anywhere you want, uptown or downtown.”

Valiant’s ears felt as if they were about to burst into flames at the insinuation, “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable just going with Surf & Turf?” he asked nervously.

Tinker looked Valiant up and down as if appraising him,

“Oh, I’m quite sure. Perhaps I could convince you to part with your namesake for a night, huh?” turning back to Surf, she said, “Pick me up here at seven. I’ll show you boys a night you’ll never forget.”

Valiant politely bowed his head and excused himself from the shop, walking as quickly as proper etiquette allowed. Outside the door, he leaned against the wall trying to force himself to be calm. Surf & Turf stayed inside a little while longer then joined Valiant outside.

The neon pony shook himself out vigorously,  
“Sorry about that dude. She was really laying it on thick.”

“What’s with her?” Valiant asked, “Is she really . . . like that?”

Surf shrugged,  
“It’s just the way she is bro. She talks like that all the time, but she doesn’t mean a word of it. “

The two stallions stepped away from the ‘Emporium’, heading down the street.

“Then why does she act like that?” Valiant asked.

Surf shrugged again,  
“Don’t know, Valiant. I think maybe she just wants to feel pretty.”

Valiant’s eyebrows shot up nearly merging with his mane,  
“Pretty?” he asked, “She’s gorgeous! The cigars don’t help, but she really is beautiful.”

“Not my call bro; anyway the bank isn’t far. What say we go hit the beach for a while, soak up some sun, munch on some caramel-corn, watch the girls . . . “ Surf was cut by his companion.

“Why are you so obsessed with mares anyway?” Valiant asked curiously.

“What’s not to like dude? I like to look at beauty in all its forms. Watching girls is like standing in a room filled with gem-stones, or watching every sunrise and sunset that ever happened. No two are alike, and all have their own kind of beauty. Each one is precious and unique and deserves to be

cared for like the works of art they are. I marvel at the kaleidoscope of colors and variety and just think how lucky I am to be able to be here to see it, even if nopony else does. I take it all in and thank Celestia for every second of it. I know it probably sounds all creepy and stuff, but it's not like I go and hit on every mare I see." Surf swallowed and continued, "Honestly, bro, I'm kind of nervous about tonight. I've never been out on a date before."

Valiant didn't know what to say, *'I guess there's more to this guy than I thought.'*

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Valiant and Surf & Turf arrived back at 'Tinker's Emporium' at seven o'clock sharp. Tinker met them outside, ready to go. Valiant didn't know about Surf, but he had trouble not staring at the unicorn mare. Gone were the rags that held her mane and tail and gone was the grease on her coat in fact, gone was the rough looking mare he had met earlier. In her place, stood a divinely beautiful female specimen of the unicorn persuasion. Her mane and tail were charcoal grey with pitch black highlights and her cobalt coat shone with a type of gloss that could only have come from hours and hours of delicate care. Her mane cascaded down her shoulders, partly obscuring her lovely face and giving her a mysterious air, while her tail draped down behind her back legs flowing like a waterfall. Lacy stockings sheathed her well-defined legs from hoof to shoulder and flank. The dark mascara around her eyes made her formerly pronounced orbs of amber, now seem to leap out boldly in the dim light. Valiant snapped out of his trance when he saw her pull a cigar out from its hiding spot, carefully concealed behind her right ear.

Tinker eyed the two stallions coyly,  
"Punctual, I see boys. I like that. Lead on sugar, momma's got a sweet-tooth."

Valiant had to strain to keep from rolling his eyes, *'Doesn't she ever quit?'* he wondered.

Tinker turned her backside to the two stallions and sauntered seductively down the road, looking over her shoulder,

“Come on boys. It’s time to party. Show a girl how to have a good time.” she said, tail swishing behind her.

Valiant heard Surf & Turf gulp audibly,  
“Coming babe!” he called trotting up next to her.

Valiant fell into step beside the two, on the other side of Tinker, thinking about the day he had shared with his new friend, *‘Surf said he wasn’t rich, boy he meant it! He only has just over three hundred bits to his name. I hope the hotel room we rented for the night didn’t set him back too much. He didn’t let me pay for part of it either. I wonder why. I do have to admit though, he’s a lot deeper than I originally thought. He comes off like an adrenaline-crazed air-head, but in reality he’s an adventurous poet more than anything else.’*

Valiant’s thoughts were interrupted by Surf & Turf speaking,  
“This is it babe, we’re here.”

Valiant looked around. The building they stood in front of was average and boring in every sense of the word. It looked like an old rusty tin warehouse, except there was a line of ponies waiting outside a single door which was being guarded by a pair of well-built pegasi. Valiant became aware of a deep bass rhythm vibrating the walls of the old building from within. The beat sounded fast-paced energetic. It was obviously a club of some kind. The other ponies in line were about as under-dressed as Valiant could have ever imagined. Most looked rough and dirty, like they had just finished with the day’s work and come straight there without venturing home to freshen up. Not one sported any type of apparel save for the occasional neckerchief or bandana.

As they stood there waiting for the line to move, a pair of older unicorn stallions walked up behind them and joined in line behind Valiant, Surf, and Tinker, also waiting. Surf and Tinker were absorbed in their own conversation, but Valiant couldn’t help to hear the conversation of the two unicorns behind them.

“Ouch! Look at that pretty little thing!” one said, “Hey beautiful, why don’t you ditch these two and come party with some real stallions?”

Valiant took in the sight of the two unicorns out of the corner of his eye. They were a quite bit more muscular than average, but not particularly tall. Their manes and tails were cut short and identical in their upkeep. Valiant guessed they were two city guards who were off duty. The one who had spoken, had a cream-colored coat and dark red mane and tail; his cutie-mark was of a hoof stomping the ground with cracks spreading out from the point of impact. The other one had a coffee colored coat and yellow mane and tail with a cutie-mark of a pony with a black eye and swollen lip.

Tinker ignored the comment and continued chatting with Surf, apparently much to the displeasure of the second unicorn behind them, "What's so cool about these guys anyway? You know what they say, 'No horn, no fun.' Come on, what do you say, legs?"

Tinker turned around and batted her extraordinarily long eyelashes at the two, "If it's all the same boys, I think I'll just stay here with my friends. They're plenty of fun. Why don't you two big stallions just enjoy the evening without me. Everypony's here to have a good time, let's not ruin it, okay?"

The unicorns didn't seem to take the rejection with even an ounce of grace, "What makes these two bums better than us?" the cream colored one asked.

"I didn't say they were, stud. I'm just not interested." Tinker said over her shoulder.

Another unicorn mare had come up to stand in line behind the two off-duty guards, "Hey guys, she said she's not interested. I think you should leave her alone."

The coffee colored one turned to the newcomer and shoved her against the wall with a hoof, "I don't care what you think, tiny. I think you should butt out and mind your own business."



Valiant looked the newcomer over. She was a young unicorn with an egg shell colored coat and dark green mane and tail. Her cutie-mark was of a compass star in front of a large body of water. She wasn't outstandingly lovely, but she had a sturdy look to her, like a pony who exercised regularly.

The coffee colored unicorn stallion leaned in close and sniffed her mane rudely,

"Hey, she smells nice. Like a morning breeze . . . "

"Which just so happens to be my name, you oaf! Let go of me!" the mare said boldly.

"Hey, we're just trying to have a good night here. Why don't you come with us and show us how you have fun? There's plenty of other clubs around." the cream colored one suggested.

Valiant had heard enough, he turned around and confronted the two unicorns,

"You know, you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. Why not try being nice and having some character? You can make a good start by letting her go. I doubt your superiors would appreciate hearing about you harassing a mare, now would they?"

Valiant's words didn't have the desired effect, both unicorns turned on him,

"You looking to make something out of it?" the coffee colored one asked.

Valiant didn't back down,

"No, I was saying that you should try being polite to the ladies if you want a positive response. Why be rude? It doesn't make anypony like you better, it just makes you look like jerks. It's called karma guys, you get back what you put out."

"You're awfully preachy there, bub. Maybe you need a lesson about being polite yourself?" the cream colored one said raising a hoof.

Valiant subtly shifted his stance,

"If I came off as rude, I apologize, but there's no need for things to get nasty."

"I'll show you rude! Come on, put em up!" the cream colored one said, swinging his hoof at Valiant's head.

The royal blue pegasus danced aside, away from the wall, the swing missing him easily,  
"No need for violence guys. Why don't we just call it a night?"

"Fancy hoof-work there, you a fighter?" the coffee colored one asked, turning to face Valiant.

Valiant lowered his head slightly, preparing for a fight if it came to it, "I'd rather not fight you, if it's all the same. Why don't you just calm down and go home? You look like you've had a long day and I'm sure you don't want to do anything you might regret in the morning."

"The only thing I'll regret is letting an insect like you snark away at us!" the cream colored one said as the two unicorns began advancing on Valiant together.

The sound of concerned murmurs caught Valiant's attention. He turned his head and looked at the crowd of ponies waiting to go into the club. He came to the conclusion that he had the attention of every pony waiting in line. The two pegasi by the door looked like they were more than willing to step in, except they had a job to do.

"Look out dude!" Surf & Turf called from the line.

Valiant turned back toward the two unicorns just in time to catch a hoof to the side of his head. He saw stars and suddenly gravity lost its hold of the world, turning sideways. He felt weightless for a brief moment, then came a heavy impact as he hit the dirt. Valiant opened his eyes and shook his head. He was lying on his left side in the middle of the street and his head was throbbing. He had no idea which of the two unicorns had hit him, but he did know they were now both laughing at him.

"Was that polite enough for you? Come on, show us what you've got!" the coffee colored one jeered.

Valiant slowly regained his hooves and stared down the two bullies fearlessly,  
“As a matter of fact, I believe, that was the rudest thing anypony has ever done to me. I can demonstrate polite for you if you wish.”

The two unicorn stallions charged the lone pegasus with reckless abandon. Valiant smiled as they approached him, ready to swing at him again. He waited until the last possible second then, in a blur of motion, he rolled forward, right between them. Caught by surprise, the two unicorn stallions tried to correct their swings, only to discover the other's hoof in their face. They fell, sprawling onto the ground and came up rubbing their faces ruefully.

Valiant came up from his roll and spun like a top, facing the two stunned brutes,  
“See I was polite enough not to hit you. I'm afraid I can't say the same for either of you. That was very rude to hit your friend like that. Now, if you've had enough, let's go our separate ways and try to have a pleasant night, shall we?”

The two unicorns stood up and Surf called to them from the line,  
“Trust me dudes, you don't want to make him fight for real. He'll re-arrange your faces. He's tougher than he looks. He's not an Earth pony; he's a pegasus who lost his wings. You seriously don't want to fight him.”

Surf's statement caused the two unicorns to stop in their tracks, the coffee colored one turned his head to the neon colored Earth pony,  
“Say what?”

The other unicorn shook his head,  
“Crud!” he said angrily, turning to Valiant, “You lucked out. We don't fight cripples.”

“Yet, you were willing to gang up on me when you thought I was an Earth pony. Lots of honor there, oh yeah.” Valiant retorted sarcastically.

“Hey,” the coffee colored one said, “Earth ponies are strong. That's why we didn't use our magic on you. Two unicorns against one Earth pony is a fair fight as long as no magic is involved.”

“Bring it on, hot-shot.” Valiant said, briefly losing control his temper, “I’ll put you both in the hospital.”

“No way.” the coffee colored one said shaking his head, “Don’t bother, this fight’s over.”

“Yeah,” the cream colored one said, “We’re done here. We’ll pick on an equal, but even we have standards. Have fun, wingless.”

Valiant watched in confusion as the two unicorns walked away down the street. He didn’t want special treatment, and their actions aggravated him to no end, ‘*Still,*’ he thought, ‘*That could have turned out much worse. I’ll have to thank Surf for stepping in.*’ He walked back over to Surf and Tinker and resumed his place in line next to them. The feeling of a gentle hoof on his shoulder made Valiant turn around.

The egg shell colored unicorn mare stood behind him, “Thanks for the help.” she said softly.

Valiant inclined his head towards the mare, “Always a stallion’s prerogative, miss.”

“If you want some company, my friends couldn’t make it tonight.” Morning Breeze offered.

“I’d be honored.” Valiant said nodding.

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Surf & Turf collapsed onto the rented bed. He was exhausted. He, Tinker, Morning Breeze, and Valiant had stayed out quite late. Surf didn’t see a clock in the room but his guess put the time close on to two in the morning. Valiant lay on the one other bed in the room, remembering the fun night. He had never danced or drank before and the resulting combination of both left him feeling giddy. The impromptu double-date had ended on a high note with both he and Surf receiving a kiss on the cheek from their respective mares while their dates thanked them for a wonderful evening. It was, Valiant decided, a good night after all, even if there was no chance for long-term romance between either of the couples. As the two stallions drifted off to sleep, Valiant couldn’t help but to think of another mare, one

that was particularly dear to his heart. Little did he know she was likewise thinking of him at precisely the same time, far away in the Everfree Forest where she and her friends had stopped to sleep for the night.

Valiant and Surf woke up late in the day, but never the less headed out, going north along the road toward Haysburg. The road leading north was fairly wide so they could walk side by side. The river was on their right, running alongside the road and providing a source of fairly fresh water for them on a daily basis. The forest bordered in on the left side of the road providing ample possibilities to forage for food if the need arose. The day passed without any incidents of note; they passed few other travelers on the road. They made camp for the night then continued on the next morning.

The farther from New Yoke they travelled, the fewer ponies they encountered. Valiant kept up his morning routine of practice and exercise and was pleased to discover Surf & Turf showing an interest in joining him. Valiant hadn't told his companion about his experience being a Vagabond or how he was one of the Elements of Peace, but Surf seemed content not to pry. The two friends began practicing every morning and evening, using each other to help with their own routines. Valiant tended to focus on combat-oriented exercises while Surf concentrated on his strength and agility. The Earth pony had a knack for climbing trees with the strange hooks he generally had attached to his legs, and was also surprisingly good at using the height from the trees he climbed to assist with his hang gliding launches.

The monotonous days began to merge together as the two friends continued their journey. Valiant lost count after day five, the two friends simply content to travel without any particular time restraint. Slowly but surely Valiant began to recognize a change in the atmosphere as they progressed. The air became steadily more humid as they continued northward. The ground began to turn soggy and puddles dotted the road. The nights became all the more cold from the introduction of humidity, as the two stallions ventured farther and farther toward their destination.

Valiant knew they were getting close to Haysburg, he could feel it. The familiar climate called to his memory in a way that set him on edge. His most recent memories of Haysburg were nothing short of nightmare material and his temperament began to adjust to the change. It began

slowly, nothing notable except a tiny bit of crankiness here and a little bit more exhaustion there. Eventually he began having trouble sleeping, his appetite dwindled down to one single meal a day, and he started to become morose.

Surf & Turf stayed silent for a while, but eventually he felt he needed to say something. One night after their practice, Surf decided the time had come to vocalize his concerns. They were sitting by their camp fire enjoying the warmth from the flames. Valiant had found a dry patch of ground for them to set up their tents and dinner was almost done. The day had been chilly, but bearable. The night was quickly growing bitterly cold.

Surf sat across the fire from his wingless friend, "Hey Valiant, dude." he addressed, "I'm seriously not trying to upset you or anything, but you've been acting kind of weird recently. You barely eat, except for dinner and I've heard you talking in your sleep. Look bro, if there's something wrong, you should tell me. Maybe I can help. I'm getting, like, wicked concerned over here."

Valiant raised his head from the spot he had been staring at in the fire, "I'm acting weird?" he asked, "I hadn't noticed anything."

Surf hid a chortle, "No offense or anything dude, but duh. If you had noticed something you would have corrected it by now. I'm just saying."

Valiant smiled at his friend, "Yeah, I would have; you're right." he ran his right hoof through his mane, "I guess I'm just nervous about seeing Haysburg again. I don't mean to be taking anything out on you Surf."

Surf waved his left hoof, "No biggie, dude, but I have to ask, why would you be nervous about seeing your home again? Did your friends do you wrong or something? I know you said you were an orphan, but you never told me why you left."

Valiant sighed heavily,

“It’s hard to talk about sometimes. My past isn’t very pretty, but I’ll tell you if you really want to know . . . “ Valiant trailed off as his ears picked up a sound from the nearby forest.

Surf swiveled his ears in time with Valiant, both alert to the sound that had startled them. Both ponies stood up and looked toward the forest. The night was deeply dark and, up until that point, had been eerily quiet. The two friends stood on either side of the fire, listening intently for the sound to repeat itself, ears turning this way and that, searching for any possible direction of origin. Their muscles were tense, ready for anything that presented itself. Valiant’s ears picked up the sound again. It was faint and far off, but distinguishable. Surf & Turf turned his head toward his companion questioningly. Without a word, Valiant suddenly sprung forward into the forest, at an all-out run. Surf shot off after Valiant, the other stallion’s trail easy to follow even in the nearly absent light of Luna’s waxing, crescent moon.

Valiant galloped through the trees as fast as he could, heart pumping, *‘That was the sound of somepony crying.’* he thought. The trees and thick bushes surrounding him made his balance precarious to say the least. He stumbled several times, but kept going, spurred on by the distinctive sounds of sorrow. Valiant realized passively that his running made almost no sound at all, *‘Must be from all the years of keeping quiet and avoiding animals.’* he figured.

The wingless pegasus saw a clearing up ahead of him, he could hear Surf close behind in case he needed help. Valiant reached the clearing first, by a matter of seconds. The area was small, but blessedly devoid of trees, giving him a clear view of the cause of the crying. A hugely thick mass of a dark color was bent over the prone form of an absolutely ancient Earth pony mare. At first, Valiant thought the mass was an animal which had attacked the oldster, but as he watched, the mass reached out a ridiculously thick limb and stroked the mare’s mane, caressing it tenderly before it broke down once more into a fit of deep sobs.

Surf & Turf arrived loudly and stopped next to Valiant, panting lightly. The huge mass raised its head and turned, facing the two friends, regarding them with huge sorrowful brown eyes. The mass was a pony. Valiant had to take a moment to recognize the fact. The pony was an older colt, just shy of being a stallion, by the sound of his voice, but he was far,

far more massive than any pony Valiant had ever seen before. Most of the colt's mass was not muscle either.

The colt rose to his hooves slowly and turned his whole body toward Valiant and Surf. He was of average height, but he was bigger around than most four ponies Valiant had ever seen, combined. He braced himself as if ready to fight, standing over the ancient mare.

Valiant took a tentative step out from the cover of the forest speaking quietly,  
“Hey there, young fella, is something wrong with your friend?”

The colt didn't respond except to look back to the mare on the ground behind him then back at Valiant. The colt's face was thick and flabby, with a soft layer of marshmallow padding every inch, partially obscuring his features. Valiant guessed his coat was a chocolate color or maybe a touch darker and his mane and tail were cut short, both an auburn color. If the colt had a cutie-mark, it was completely obscured by the darkness. He didn't say a word. The dim light of the moon caught his face, reflecting off a steady stream of tears flowing down his pudgy cheeks.

The colt seemed familiar. Valiant remembered seeing him around the orphanage when he was younger. He was really quiet and always followed around an older mare who liked to stop in and visit with Miss Heartfelt, the mare who ran the orphanage. He wracked his memory, but jst couldn't remember the colt's name.

Without any other options, Valiant took another step toward the colt, “I'm not going to hurt you, but I need to make sure the mare is alright.”

The colt seemed to consider Valiant's words for a moment, then stepped aside, allowing the pegasus access to the ancient mare. He moved up to the mare slowly, careful not to startle the huge colt. The mare was older than old, Valiant guessed her to be nearly twice Granny Smith's age. She had a forest green coat and her mane and tail were pure white. Her cutie-mark was of a ladle dipped into a wooden bucket. Valiant reached her and put his ear to her chest, listening for a heartbeat. There was none, and her body was already cold and stiff.

Surf & Turf slowly padded up next to his friend,



“How is she, dude?”

Valiant hung his head slightly and touched his forehead to the old mare's,

“She's gone, Surf. There's nothing we can do for her.”

Behind them, the colt began crying once more. Valiant and Surf had no idea what to do. They were unprepared for dealing with a deceased pony. They stood back up and Valiant opened his mouth to ask the colt a question, but stopped short. The colt strode past the two friends and picked up the mare's body, maneuvering her onto his hugely wide shoulders and started off, deeper into the forest. Valiant and Surf followed the colt, keeping a respectful distance.

The colt followed a well-worn trail, eventually coming to an tiny, old, rundown log cabin. The cabin had a light coming from inside and Valiant's ears picked up the crackle of a fire from within. The colt pushed open the door and made his way inside, he still had not spoken a single syllable. Valiant and Surf looked at each other then followed the colt to see what he would do.

As they stepped through the door, Valiant's nose was suddenly flooded with an intense sweet smell. The cabin was barely large enough to hold the ponies, even just standing as they were. A pair of beds took up the walls both ahead and to the right of the front door, which was the only door. A small square table with a chess board on top, took up most of the rest of the room. Two chairs sat on either side of the table, both thick and sturdy. Set into the left wall was a fireplace which burned merrily despite the sad events of the evening. A small pot hung over the top of the fire, the source of the smell.

The colt lay the ancient mare's body down on one of the two beds then simply knelt down next to her. He lay his head next to hers and closed his eyes, tears still flowing freely. Valiant felt sorry for the poor colt, massive as he was. He slowly walked over and placed a gentle hoof on the back colt's head, stroking his mane. Surf walked over as well and mimicked Valiant's gesture, both trying to comfort the young fellow.

The two friends had no idea how long they stood there, but eventually, the colt raised his head to look at the two stallions. Saying

nothing, he reached his colossal head underneath the mare's mattress and produced a folded piece of parchment, which he presented to Valiant.

"Is that for me?" he asked the colt.

The colt nodded his head, so Valiant took the parchment over to the table,

"May I sit down?" he asked the colt.

"Yes sir." the colt responded quietly.

Valiant unfolded the piece and began reading out loud,  
"To whoever receives this paper, this the last will and testament of Mable Maple. I'm an old mare who looks like she has more wrinkles than this piece of paper, if there's any confusion. Hopefully my little guy, Molasses, gave you this thing. If he didn't then either you're here to rob us or we both keeled over for some reason and you found this. Poor Molasses has less brain power than lean muscle, if you know what I mean. He's a really sweet little guy though, I call him little because he's younger than me, not because he's small. He's sweet but about as smart as a pinecone, he works hard though. He knows how to do the kind of work we do out here. We're both sweet-sauce makers of a sort. I make the maple syrup and he makes, guess what, molasses. He knows his business and he's darn good at it, but he needs somepony to take care of him. I already told him that when my time comes, he's to go find somepony and show them this letter, hopefully that's you. It's my last wish that you take care of Molasses now that I'm gone. He can more than pay for himself if he gets the chance to work. If you can't take care of him, I ask that you take him to an old friend of mine so he can live there with her and her family. She lives in Haysburg and will recognize Molasses on sight. To cover the cost of taking him, or as thanks for taking him in, there's a couple hundred bits worth of bank notes inside my mattress. If you're a robber, don't you dare take that money! You'll be stealing from a wrinkly old mare and a sweet, fat retard, what's wrong with you! If I'm dead, just leave me here in this old cabin so I can decompose with it. Tell Molasses that I love him, since I may not get the chance. He calls me Momma, but he's not mine. He might as well be though. He knows the story if you can get him to tell you. Please take good care of him.

With thanks and plenty of money

Mable Maple”

Valiant refolded the letter and regarded the colt seriously,  
“Is that your name, Molasses?” he asked.

The colt turned to face Valiant,  
“Slow but sweet. Yes sir.” he said quietly.

“She asked to be left here and that you come with us. We happen to be heading to Haysburg so we’ll take you along. Do you have anything you want to bring with you?” Valiant asked.

“Did Momma go away?” Molasses asked quietly.

Valiant mentally kicked himself for being so insensitive to the slow colt,  
“Yes she did, I’m sorry. Do you want to take some time to say goodbye?”

Molasses nuzzled the old mare for a moment then raised his head,  
“Say goodbye, every day, because you might not wake up in the morning.”  
Molasses said blinking back tears once more, turning back to the old mare, he nuzzled her one last time, “I miss you Momma.”

Surf wiped a hoof under his nose and turned away, feigning a cough and sniffing,  
“Hey bro,” he addressed Valiant, “I don’t mean to be pushy or anything, but we need to head back to camp before somepony decides we abandoned our stuff.”

“I know Surf.” Valiant replied, “Molasses, do you know how far away Haysburg is?”

“One full day, with the sun on your right in the morning and left in the evening. Turn right when you reach the swamps and go until you hear the bells.” Molasses sounded like he was reciting something he had been forced to memorize, “Follow the bells to Haysburg. When you reach the town, don’t talk to strangers. Just follow Momma to the sweet shop and wait like a good colt, and maybe the nice mare with the brown mane will give you a cup of hot cocoa. When Momma’s done, follow her to Miss Heartfelt’s Orphanage. You can play with the foals, but be gentle, they are

still small. If any fillies or colts try to talk to you, be polite but go find Momma and ask her if you can play with them. Follow Momma back home, only she knows the way. If you get lost, sit down and call for help and Momma will find you.”

Valiant now had an idea of exactly how handicapped the colt was, he adjusted his tone accordingly, “Molasses,” he addressed softly, “Your Momma said it was alright for you to come with us. We’re taking you to Haysburg, alright?”

“Yes sir. I heard Momma say so. If I stop moving for a long time and get really cold Molasses, go find somepony and give them the note under my mattress. It’s alright to cry, when that happens. Momma has to go away someday, but I’ll always love you. When I go away, it’s alright to go with the pony you gave the note to. They’ll take care of you or take you to live with Miss Heartfelt. If they do take you to Miss Heartfelt, listen to her and help her out as much as you can. Remember to always be gentle with foals, you’re bigger than they are, you don’t want to hurt them. If the pony takes you with them, be sure to listen to them very carefully and be polite. Make your molasses for them and help them whenever they ask you to. If it’s a mare, always say, ‘yes ma’am’ if it’s a stallion, always say ‘yes sir’. If you can’t find a pony, go to Haysburg and tell Miss Heartfelt that I stopped moving and got cold.” Molasses may have been slow, but his memory seemed as sharp as a tack.

The two stallions watch as Molasses rose to his hooves and shambled over to the only other bed in the cabin. The huge colt reached his head underneath his mattress and removed a pair of saddlebags then proceeded to fill them while reciting something else to himself.

“When Momma goes away, take your blanket, so you’ll be warm. Take your canteen, remember to boil the water first. Take the cauldron so you can make your molasses. Put them all in your saddlebags. Take anything else you want, then tell the pony you are ready to go.” Molasses recited, from memory.

He gathered his blanket, canteen, and cauldron, then looked around as if deciding what else to bring. He stuffed his pillow into his saddlebags, followed by the chessboard from the table. Valiant found the last addition odd, but didn’t say anything.

Molasses looked around once more then turned to Valiant,  
“I’m ready to go sir.”

Valiant debated to himself, whether or not to take the offered banknotes and decided he would, but that they belonged to Molasses. The process of finding the opening in Maple’s mattress while the deceased mare lay on top of it was disquieting. He finally managed to open the mattress and beheld a wad of rolled banknotes. He pulled the wad out and saw a second behind the first, so he removed that one too. The banknotes went into Molasses’ saddlebags. Valiant estimated the wads to be around one hundred bits worth each, more than enough to keep Molasses for a while.

Valiant addressed the slow colt softly,  
“Do you need anything else before we go, Molasses?”

“Yes sir. Fires burn, never leave the fire going if you’re not here to keep an eye on it. Use the bucket of water next to the fireplace to put it out. Make sure it stops smoking.” Molasses recited.

Valiant and Surf wondered why the slow colt had left the fire going when they had found him earlier. Molasses picked up the bucket with his mouth and doused the fire, emptying the whole thing in one go. He sat the bucket down and watched until the ashes stopped smoking. Molasses sat in front of the fire as if deep in thought.

Valiant quietly cleared his throat,  
“Molasses, are you ready to go now?”

The colt looked toward Valiant with a sad face,  
“Momma’s never coming back is she?”

“I’m sorry, Molasses, but no she isn’t.” Surf said quietly.

The slow colt turned to the two stallions,  
“Momma told me, I need to tell other ponies my name and get theirs whenever I meet them. I’m Molasses, what are your names?”

"I'm Surf & Turf, but you don't have to call me 'sir', just call me 'Surf'." the neon Earth pony said.

"I'm Valiant . . . " he began.

"No you're not, sir." Molasses said quietly, "Valiant was a mean pony who killed Miss Arabesque, the ballet dancer. He was a pegasus and they have wings. You aren't him, sir."

Valiant heard Surf gasp loudly beside him,  
"Dude, seriously, tell me he's just confused." the neon pony said.

"I can't, Surf. He's right." Valiant sighed heavily, "He's right on both accounts."

"Dude, we seriously need to talk. As in, right now." Surf said.

"Do you trust me, Surf?" Valiant asked.

"I . . . I don't know if I can bro. I did before, but now . . . I don't know." Surf & Turf said honestly.

Valiant lowered his gaze,  
"I don't blame you, Surf. I should have told you before . . . "

He was interrupted by Molasses,  
"But you're not that Valiant. Momma always said I could tell good ponies from bad ones. Trust your feelings, Molasses. If you think a pony's nice, they're nice and if you think a pony's mean, they're mean. I think you're nice, so you're nice."

Valiant couldn't help but to smile at the slow colt's words,  
"I like his answer better."

Surf snorted,  
"How about you use some of your own words bro? I need some serious reasons and clarification here."

Turning to his friend and becoming serious once more, Valiant tried to explain,

"I'm sorry, Surf. I should have told you. It was an accident, but yes, my actions led to the death of another pony. That's why I was acting all weird. I'm going back to Haysburg to . . . to see if they'll forgive me for what I did. I swear to you, I'm not that pony anymore. Do you know what a Vagabond is?"

Surf shook his head,  
"No dude, never heard it before."

"Then I guess I have a lot of explaining to do. Think about it Surf. If I'm going back to Haysburg to face them, doesn't that mean anything?" Valiant asked.

"Only that you have a death wish, dude." Surf said.

"When I . . . when Arabesque died, I became a Vagabond. A Vagabond is a pony who's done something really terrible. The spirit of the victim haunts the Vagabond, until either the Vagabond dies, or they do enough so that the victim's spirit forgives them. A Vagabond loses their home and their name. They can't answer to any other name than Vagabond until they're forgiven. I've been forgiven, Surf. I'm trying to make everything right again. I never meant to hurt Arabesque, we were best friends. You have to believe me." Valiant explained.

Surf turned to Molasses,  
"You said he was nice, big dude?"

Molasses smiled in his simple way,  
"He's the good Valiant, not the bad Valiant, sir."

Surf & Turf shook his head,  
"Alright dude, I believe you. You need to be straight with me from now on, though. Is there anything else I should know about you?"

Valiant bit his lower lip and chuckled nervously,  
"There might be a thing or two, I could tell you about. Let's walk and talk, it's getting late."

"Sounds good to me, dude. Come on Molasses." Surf said walking out of the quickly cooling cabin.

Valiant waited until Molasses had caught up to them before beginning his explanation,

“Hey surf?” he asked his friend, “Have you ever heard of the Elements of Harmony?”

“Oh, dude! You mean those mares who knocked the socks off Nightmare Moon and brought Princess Luna back? They’re awesome, bro! I’ve heard that Princess Celestia herself trained them to be, like, the most wicked bunch of fighting ponies ever to set hoof on Equestrian soil, dude! I’ve heard they’re all, like, the most beautiful and fearless ponies ever born!” Surf gushed, eyes widening, “Don’t tell me you’ve actually met them! Oh, dude, that would be so awesome! Hey, what do they look like?”

Valiant smiled as he recalled something he had heard Fluttershy and Rarity talking about once,

“Do you ever read fashion magazines, Surf?”

“Of course I have, dude. I have an eye for the girls remember?” Surf said.

“Do you remember one model named Fluttershy? She was a yellow pegasus . . .” Valiant began.

“Her mane and tail were soft pink, and she had a trio of butterflies as her cutie-mark. Of course I remember her dude! She was one of the hottest models I’ve ever seen! She was all, like, shy and demure and everything! Totally gorgeous mare, dude; she was a complete knockout!” Surf said excitedly.

“She’s the Element of Kindness.” Valiant said bluntly.

Surf & Turf fell right onto his face in midstride, mumbling from the dirt, “Dude, I think I’m in love.”



# Chapter 11

Twilight figured she and the rest of the group were only three days away from the edge of the Everfree Forest. Trooper had made a full and easy recovery, save for all the complaining. Everypony had been calling it 'whining' for a while but Rarity assured them, with no small amount of certainty, he had only been complaining. The offer of an illustration on her part had been politely turned down, albeit in a great many decibels and in the form of many voices responding simultaneously.

Try as he might, Trooper had thus far been unable to recall any more information regarding his family. The issue had been weighing on his mind since Sea Blue had brought it to his attention. Every night Trooper would go to sleep thinking about what his mother had told him, and wake up in the morning only that much more frustrated for his inability. The only thing that kept him from becoming a, as Pinkie Pie called it, 'whiney Mcwhinerson' was the fact that every night he had the rather distinguished privilege of sleeping in a tent with two pretty mares, even if he wasn't on particularly good terms with one of them. Dr. Mend had been absolutely insistent that the sleeping arrangement was for everypony's good because the weather was too cold for the hammocks. After the third night the weather became so cold that any further complaints were swallowed in very short order.

Fortunately there had been no further encounters with the less friendly denizens of the Everfree. Pinkie Pie claimed it was because the giant spider had spread the word, once it had landed. The group had initially dismissed the notion, but Fluttershy assured them that indeed the creatures could communicate with each other in a limited way, so they conceded to her expertise.

Applejack and Big Macintosh had begun a routine for the group's food. Every day as they walked, the two Earth ponies would keep their eyes peeled for any signs of edible food and dig it up, or pick it as soon as they spotted it. Being that they were the 'trail masters' as Applejack called it, the responsibility didn't hamper the group's travel time or progress at all.

They had gathered a rather odd assembly of edibles that day which Lemon Lime commented that evening as they gathered around the fire, “Wild onions, fennel, turnips, a small basket of . . . plums, I think, and a large pumpkin?” the small therapist scratched his head, “I’m going to have to get REALLY creative with all this. Do you still have your knife Pinkie? . . . Pinkie?” he asked looking around.

Without any preamble, Pinkie Pie appeared behind Lemon Lime with her large knife already in her mouth. Lemon Lime suddenly looked over his shoulder and fell over onto his back turning to face the pink ninja in stark terror. Pinkie giggled and set the knife down on a rock next to the small yellow unicorn stallion.

“Where do you even keep that thing?” Lemon Lime asked regaining his hooves.

Pinkie Pie pulled her mane out of the way with her right hoof and gestured to a small hard plastic sheath hanging from her shoulder on a series of fabric straps in easy reach of her mouth, “I keep it right here silly.” she said, “You never know when you might need it to cut a vine or something.”

“Where did you get a customized, hard plastic sheath for a cooking knife on a shoulder rig?” Dr. Mend asked curiously.

Pinkie giggled,  
“I made it. It just seemed like a good idea.”

“How did you . . .” Sea Blue began.

Rarity raised a hoof in front of his muzzle,  
“Trust me darling, don’t ask. We all just say ‘it’s Pinkie’ and move on. You’ll go crazy trying to figure it out.”

“Figure out what?” Pinkie asked popping up between the two unicorns.

Dr. Mend cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the gathered ponies,

“I think it would be a good idea for most of us to start getting some exercise.”

The statement caused instant silence from the camp.

“Exercise?” Rarity asked, “Darling, what do you think we’ve been doing for the past few weeks; lounging and sunbathing perhaps?”

Dr. Mend actually laughed lightly, a rare sight, “I suppose I do need to be more specific.” he said walking away from the fire a few paces into the cold night so he could face everypony, “The Elements of Peace are meant to be physical guardians for the Elements of Harmony, right?”

The rest of the group nodded while Lemon Lime began carving out the pumpkin, so Dr. Mend continued, “When we fought the chimera, we had our flanks kicked, before Big Mac called out our armor. I don’t know about the rest of you guys, but I pulled several muscles in that fight. I didn’t feel it at the time, but I sure felt it the next day. We had some time to react when fighting the chimera and I think we were lucky. We can’t just assume every opponent is going to fight honorably. Look at what happened with the spider. If Trooper hadn’t already been on his way back to talk to Rarity, things could have gone south real quick. Twilight, you were shocked by the spider’s appearance right? You were still trying to process what was going on?” he asked.

Twilight was loathe to admit it but Dr. Mend was right, kind of, “I was surprised, yes, but I think I could have handled it by myself.”

“I’m sure you could have, Twilight. Please don’t think I’m disputing your skill with magic. I’m simply pointing out that we, as guardians, had an oversight that could have cost Everypony dearly. We didn’t leave any of the Elements of Peace with you. All of us share the blame for that mistake, myself included. I’ve been thinking that from now on, each stallion and mare in each set of Elements, should try to stick together as much as possible. That way if something else does happen we can all be ready. I’m not saying that you girls are helpless, far from it, the fact is that we have a responsibility to you to keep you safe. When we fought the chimera we didn’t have to worry about protecting you. If we ever get into another fight we should focus on keeping you safe in case a second or, Celestia forbid, a third threat rears its ugly head, or heads in some cases. With that in mind, I bring up my second observation. We, as guardians, aren’t used to the

confusion that seems to happen in a fight. We think on our hooves, yes, but we're reckless; case in point, Trooper's fight with the spider."

Dr. Mend paused for a breath and continued, "He really didn't have to even make any physical contact with it. All he actually needed to do was to distract it long enough for Twilight to deal with it. He could have saved himself quite a lot of discomfort and pain if he had."

"That would have been nice." Trooper interjected.

"My point is this, we've been slacking. We can't just go along our merry way and hope everything turns out alright in the end. We need to be smart about this. It's a serious situation and we need to treat it as such. While the encounter with the spider ended with no deaths, it could have just as easily gone the other way too. That spider wasn't going to play nice and just take hostages, it was out to eat, it meant to kill." Dr. Mend said seriously.

"Well what do ya propose to do about it there Doc?" Applejack asked.

"Exactly as I said, exercise. We need to exercise our minds and bodies so we're prepared when a fight comes to us. I don't have any experience in martial combat though, so we need to figure it out on our own." Dr. Mend said.

"I've got a book about fighting." Lemon Lime offered, "I picked it up just before we left from Ponyville. I bought it from this stallion named Buck Nohorse . . . "

"I used to train with him a little bit," Rainbow Dash interjected, "That's where I took Applebloom when I was trying to help her get her cutie mark. He's one of Princess Celestia's retired guards, so he knows how to fight."

"I took a unicorn's self-defense class back in Canterlot." Sea Blue added, "It focuses on using your magic to disorient your attacker so you can get away, but I think it should still be applicable here too."

"When would we have time to do all this, Dr. Mend?" Twilight asked, "All our time, right now, is being spent walking."

“Point,” Dr. Mend said gesturing to Twilight, “We don’t have an abundance of time on our hooves right now, so we make time for it. We already know that the ponies in Haysburg might react badly, even violently, to Valiant’s appearance so we need to be ready in case we have to pull off a rescue. I would like to recommend that we practice for a little while every morning. The moving around should help to wake everypony up and help keep you active during the day. Live Wire already knows how to stretch, so he can lead us for that. Twilight, you’re probably the fastest reader by far, so why don’t you take a look at the book tonight then teach us what it says to do and Rainbow Dash has already trained so she can help you. Sea Blue can instruct the unicorns on how to use their magic in a fight and Big Macintosh and Applejack are already well-versed in how to wrangle cattle, that should prove at least somewhat useful. Rainbow Dash and Trooper can tutor Fluttershy on speed and maneuverability. No offense Fluttershy but you’re probably the least combative pony here. How does that sound to everypony?”

“Eureka!” Lemon Lime yelled, “A pumpkin stew with onions, fennel, and turnips mixed in with candied plums for desert! Haha! I am good!” the little therapist began dancing merrily at his ingenious culinary contrivance which was already beginning to cook.

“Woo! Break it down Live Wire!” Pinkie Pie cheered dancing next to him.

“Ah think it’s a right fine idea Doc!” Applejack enthused, “Shoot, when Big Macintosh and Ah work during the winter, we’re never bothered by the cold after about the first ten minutes or so. Yer body makes its own heat when you’re movin’ your muscles and strainin’ hard. Besides, Ah’ve got a thing or two to settle with mah brother over a wrestlin’ bet we made a while back. He says he won, but Ah say it were a draw.”

“Nope.” Big Mac said smiling, “You just let your pride get in the way sis. Ah won fair and square.”

“Well Ah never . . . “ Applejack sputtered.

Trooper leaned over to Sea Blue whispering,  
“You said you knew how to use hypnosis?”

Sea Blue kept his eyes straight ahead,

“Yes I do, but I don’t really like to use it except as a last resort.”

“I dare say, I believe I am at that point right now. I simply cannot remember anything else. When can we get going on that?” Trooper asked.

Sea Blue sighed lightly,  
“Very well, we can begin tonight. I’ll hypnotize you just before you go to sleep. You’ll start remembering things as dreams. It’s a special type of hypnosis used by unicorns.”

“Sounds good old chap.” Trooper said.

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The pumpkin stew was an unequaled success, everypony ate their fill with thankfully very little in the way of leftovers. As per the norm, Trooper flew the leftovers far away from the campsite so as not to attract any dangerous wild animals. The ponies all began heading towards their tents to sleep. It had taken multiple apologies on Rarity’s part to convince Big Macintosh to be willing to sleep in the same tent as the gregarious unicorn after the embarrassing morning comment on her part several weeks prior.

Sea Blue excused himself from Rarity and Big Macintosh and headed over to the ‘pegasi tent’ as it was now officially named. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were already curled up and laying down on the left side of the tent while Trooper sat up waiting for his friend to hypnotize him.

“I’m not sure I could ever hurt any creature no matter what the reason,” Fluttershy said softly, “Just the thought of causing pain makes me feel sick.”

“The idea isn’t to cause pain . . . “ Rainbow Dash began, but thought about her statement and corrected herself, “Oh, alright it is. But you can learn to defend yourself without causing an injury. You can just learn to dodge and wear your attacker out that way. As long as you can keep yourself from being hurt you’ve done it right. The idea for dodging is to use as little energy as possible while making your opponent use as much as possible. When they collapse from fatigue you can get away.”

Fluttershy seemed to brighten at the idea,

“That sounds like something I can do, but I’m such a weak flier and I’m not very strong . . . “

Trooper piped up,  
“You do not have to be quick, Fluttershy. I did not want to mention it before but I too have taken a self-defense course; it was one that focused more on, blocking, dodging, and evading than fighting back. Speed helps, but timing counts for far more than speed. You can be as quick as Rainbow Dash but if your timing is off then it will not matter at all.”

“For once, I agree with you Troops.” Dash said shortening Trooper’s name; the stallion grimaced, but Dash ignored it and continued, “When I first started training with Buck, I thought my speed was all I needed. He showed me how to fight conservatively. The first thing he taught me is that fighting wears you out quick. Within a couple of minutes I was completely out of breath while he hadn’t even broken a sweat. He had barely moved at all while I was flying around like a hummingbird.”

A stomped hoof outside their tent alerted the three pegasi to another pony’s presence,  
“May I come in?” Sea Blue asked politely.

Trooper unzipped the tent with his mouth and stepped back to let the unicorn in,  
“What do I need to do?” he asked eagerly.

Sea Blue looked unusually serious as he sat down in the cramped tent,  
“I want to make myself very clear here Trooper. I don’t much care for using hypnosis, but I can’t stop you. Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“Yes.” Trooper said nodding, “I need to remember everything I can. Are there any dangers?”

“Very few,” Sea Blue said, “I don’t like using it because I believe in doing things for one’s self. To me hypnosis is like a short cut. I wouldn’t have even suggested it but we may not have the time for you to do it the hard way. Hypnosis is sure to work, but it may end up being vary startling. You will remember things in your dreams as if you were living them at the time.

It's been known to cause some side effects like occasional instances where you might end up waking up in a sweat or talking in your sleep if the memories are intense or traumatic. In some very rare cases you might suffer from night terrors. I've heard of some ponies waking up screaming. Do you still want to go through with this?"

"Yes, I feel that I have to. I am ready when you are Sea Blue." Trooper said.

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Alright then, lay down, get comfortable, and look up at me."

Trooper did as indicated with Fluttershy on his right and Rainbow Dash on the far side, all facing the front of the tent, Sea Blue began, "You are feeling very relaxed. The muscles in your legs are going numb with the relaxation of sleep . . ."

Within minutes Sea Blue left the tent, leaving three sleeping pegasi inside; he zipped the tent closed and walked back to his own tent, "Good luck Trooper." he said quietly to himself.

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Trooper was aware of himself being carried around in a small papoose and seeing the world around him whizzing by at high speed as he clung to his mother's chest. He felt the rush of air, the feeling of speed against his tiny body; he was flying, or more specifically being flown.

"It's perfect!" a stallion's voice called from somewhere to his right, "It's a perfect day! I can't wait to see Vector again! I heard he got married and has a foal, a little colt almost the same age as our little guy." Trooper looked toward the voice.

He felt his breath catch in his throat, the stallion speaking was his father. He had never known his father and now here he was flying right next to him. Trooper could almost reach out and touch him. He was a solid looking pegasus stallion with a storm cloud with lightning through it as his cutie mark. He was dark blue almost black in his coat and his mane and tail were an almost yellow shade of light brown. He flew along zipping all over the place like a hyper wasp. The sheer amount of joy he exuded was nearly



palpable; he was excited to see his brother again. The older stallion was wearing a pair of saddlebags that looked to be stuffed full to bursting.

Trooper looked up his mother in awe. He had only known her as a mare who looked older than she actually was, worn and tired all the time. This new version of his mother was a wonder to behold. Her coloration was a perfect opposite of Dr. Mend. Her coat was ice white and her mane and tail were jet black, her cutie mark was the same though, a circular piece of pink candy known by her own name since she invented it, Sugar Tart. She was smiling as they flew toward their unknown destination.

"I cannot wait to meet them!" Sugar Tart said enthusiastically, "You said he looks just like you; right Storm Bolt? You two are identical."

"He's the spitting image of yours truly, Sugar. From the way he described his wife, I'd say she looks quite a bit like you too. Ha! Wouldn't that be great! When we all get our pictures taken it will look like there's a double exposure! What a conversation piece!" Storm Bolt said.

"Where is this special place you found?" Sugar Tart asked.

"I didn't find it, sorry to disappoint you Sugar. I heard about it from a friend on the weather patrol. She said it was the best place to have a party. She said she'd never seen anything like it before." Storm boasted.

"Does it have to be so far away? We have been flying for hours now. I am growing tired carrying Trooper around, and it does not help that it is almost his lunch time." Sugar complained good naturedly.

"I told you before we left, it takes a full day and a half of flying to get there, but it's supposed to be worth it. We have to meet Vector half way. He and his wife live in New Yoke. If you need to stop, just say so, love." Storm said flying over and nuzzling his wife.

Trooper reached out and bit his father's mane in his little muzzle. Trooper had not meant to do that but he knew these were just memories and he had no control, he was just along for the ride, in more ways than one.

Storm Bolt tried to pull away, but his head caught, he looked down at his tiny son fondly,  
“You want some love too, little guy?” he asked as he nuzzled Trooper gently, “Come on now, you have to let go of Daddy’s mane.” he tried to pull away but Trooper hung on gamely, “I think he’s got your jaws Sugar.” Storm said causing his wife to blush.

“You said you would not bring that up again. It was only one time and it was an accident. I was caught up in the moment.” she defended.

Trooper tried not to gag at the insinuation.

Storm Bolt smiled mischievously and turned upside down looking at his wife,  
“Am I really that good, Sugar?”

Sugar Tart pointed down to Trooper,  
“Does this answer your question, husband?” she asked with mock seriousness.

Storm let out a hearty laugh and finally pulled away from his son’s vice like jaws,  
“Intentional or not, I wouldn’t trade either of you for all the bits in Equestria. I’m the luckiest stallion alive and we both know it. I’m willing to bet that you wouldn’t either, would you?”

Sugar reached her head down and nuzzled Trooper,  
“Not you, that is for certain. As for your father, sometimes I do not know.” she said it loud so Storm was sure to hear.

“Hey! I’m right here, you know!” Storm said.

Sugar Tart smiled, tilted her body, and began to descend towards the ground,  
“We are breaking for lunch. Are you coming Storm Bolt?”

“I couldn’t leave my two most valuable gems by themselves now could I?” Storm said following his wife.

Fluttershy wondered what Trooper was dreaming about. He had bit onto her mane for a minute before and had just turned onto his back. All four of his hooves were up in the air like he was holding something while he pursed his lips and looked to be trying to kiss the air. The demure pegasus shook her head and went back to sleep.

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The next morning was quite a change for Fluttershy. She had no trouble following along with Lemon Lime as he showed the group how to stretch as a warm up exercise. The day dawned with frost covering the ground. The air was cold enough for Fluttershy to see her breath in front of her face. The only pony who seemed to have trouble with the stretching was Dr. Mend. Fluttershy had figured that Big Macintosh would have had difficulty with the exercises due to his huge size, but the farm pony seemed as limber as any of them. The hard part for the shy pegasus came when she had to listen to Twilight describe the maneuvers for fighting and the kinds of injuries they could cause.

“Strike out hard with your left fore hoof and aim for the jaw where it connects with the rest of the head, right at the hinge-point where it joins with the upper mandible. This can disorient your opponent and possibly break their jaw. Most creatures and ponies are right hooved and won’t be expecting a swing from the left the first time you use it. Be careful not to use it too much or your opponent will learn to anticipate it and use it against you . . . “ Twilight read from the book while Rainbow Dash demonstrated on Lemon Lime in slow motion.

Twilight closed the book and addressed the group, “Let’s break up into teams and practice what we’ve learned. The book says that you should try not to injure your sparring partner, but make the blows hurt a little bit, so that pain becomes an incentive to get better. Sea Blue, can you show Lemon Lime, Rarity, and I what spells you were taught in your self-defense course?”

“Sure thing Twilight,” Sea Blue said as the groups broke off according to breed, leaving the unicorns alone, “The first one I learned was the easiest one. It’s the one I used when I tried to fight off Trixie. The spell is called ‘Solar Flare’. It was invented by Princess Celestia in case she had to ever defend herself. It’s designed to blind your opponent for about twenty

seconds, but cause no permanent damage. Watch and analyze the components of the spell so you can replicate it.”

Sea Blue lowered his head and began casting the spell slowly. After a few seconds of allowing the spell to build, he finished and cast it out. Rarity, Twilight, and Lemon Lime all cried out as the light struck their eyes, overloading their optic nerves for a few seconds. Sea Blue waited patiently until their vision returned.

“I think I’ve got it, darling.” Rarity said rubbing her eyes with her left hoof.

“Go ahead, as soon as you can see.” Sea Blue said.

Rarity lowered her hoof after a few more seconds, then lowered her head, focusing on her magic; the other unicorns analyzed the spell as she did so. Sea Blue nodded, *‘She caught right on to it. Not bad. I’m a bit surprised.’* Rarity finished with the spell in a matter of milliseconds. A blinding flash of light erupted from her horn. Cries were heard from all directions, even beyond the unicorns.

“Land sakes!” Applejack yelled, “Ah can’t see nothin’! What did yall do over there? Yall need to turn it down a bit!”

“Ooh!” Pinkie Pie said, “Is this what it’s like being blind?” she asked, “We should use this in case we ever get blinded in a fight.”

If anypony could have seen, they would have witnessed Pinkie lean down on her fore hooves with her flank and tail sticking straight up. Her Ears were facing forward and erect, waiting for any sound.

“Uh, Pinkie,” Big Macintosh said, “Ah’m not sure that’s such a . . . “ he was cut off as Pinkie glomped onto him in a pink tackle.

She hung onto him, pulling for everything she was worth, trying to dislodge or unbalance him,

“Grr,” she grunted, “Come on Big Macie. You’re supposed to fall over.”

“Ayup.” he said, “Ah will if’n you can do it. Ah don’t let nopony win just for the effort.”

Using his hoof to feel his pink attacker out, the massive Earth pony reached his mouth around and bit onto Pinkie's mane. The pink ball of energy squeaked and flew through the air, landing softly on the ground nearby, on her bottom. In the blink of an eye she was up on her hooves once more, ready to go. Fortunately, everypony's sight was finally coming back to them.

Twilight rubbed her eyes with her right hoof,  
"I think you over did it a little bit Rarity."

"I'd say she did it perfectly." Sea Blue said, "The idea is to disorient your opponent after all. I was pretty disoriented. How about you try it next Twilight. I'll keep my eyes open, everypony else close your eyes." Sea Blue said it loudly so everypony would hear the warning.

Every pair of eyes in the whole field was closed, save for Sea Blue's. Twilight lowered her head and focused on her magic. Trooper, who was the farthest away from the purple unicorn, saw the flash of light through his closed eyelids. The flash was followed almost immediately by a deafening boom.

Sea Blue cried out in pain,  
"Gah!"

Lemon Lime rushed over to the counselor, his ears were ringing,  
"What?"

"I modified it." Twilight yelled over her own ringing ears, "I think it works. I'll call it the 'Flash Bang'. It's supposed to both blind and deafen."

"I think it works." Dr. Mend yelled in her ear.

"What?" Twilight asked wagging a hoof in her ear.

High above the unicorns and Earth ponies, the pegasi were having troubles of their own,  
"Fluttershy, how are you supposed to get better? We're not going to injure you, but we need it to hurt a little. I barely touched you."

Fluttershy rubbed his shoulder ruefully,

“But it still hurts.” she said wincing as she continued to rub the spot.

“There’s not even a mark!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

“Perhaps if we give her a demonstration?” Trooper suggested.

“Oh, alright fine!” Rainbow Dash sighed.

“I will defend and you attack.” Trooper said.

Rainbow Dash smiled an evil grin,  
“Fine by me.” she had secretly been hoping to have a go at Trooper for a while, to gauge how good he was.

Rainbow Dash flew several flaps away and righted herself,  
“Ready?”

Trooper righted himself in the air and held his hooves in front of his body joints bent, looking over the tops of each,  
“Ready.”

In a flash of movement, Rainbow Dash was to and past Trooper. Trooper grunted and held his left side, but kept upright. Rainbow Dash turned in the air and faced him, looking smug. Trooper released his side and squared off again. Rainbow Dash smiled and licked her lips, head down. In a second flash of movement the two pegasi collided again. This time it was Rainbow Dash who grunted. She spun out of control, flapping wildly. Trooper flew over and reached her in a quick second. He reached out and stabilized the spinning, twisting pegasus mare.

“What’s the big idea?” Rainbow Dash yelled regaining her balance.

“What are you talking about?” Trooper asked, “I blocked. You tried to hit me with your wing and I blocked it.”

“We’re supposed to be teaching Fluttershy how to dodge, not block, you blockhead!” Rainbow Dash snorted.

Trooper was the perfect picture of innocence,  
“Sorry, I forgot. I shall dodge this time.”

“Yeah I’ll bet.” Dash mumbled moodily.

The boisterous pegasus mare flew off again then turned, waiting for Trooper,

“Come on already!” she groaned quietly to herself.

“Watch carefully, Fluttershy. Watch the way your opponent moves and try to guess how they will attack. Keep an eye out for small muscle movements that might indicate a precursor to an attack, it is called ‘broadcasting’.” Trooper said.

Fluttershy nodded and stayed close so she could watch Rainbow Dash. The two blue colored pegasi squared off once more. Rainbow Dash charged again a little more slowly. Even so, she was still almost a blur. As she neared, Fluttershy caught sight of a slight twitch from Rainbow Dash’s right fore leg. In her peripheral vision, she noticed Trooper tense up, *‘Is that what he was talking about?’* she wondered.

Rainbow Dash came closer and closer. Fluttershy wanted to move, but Trooper stayed put. When Dash was a mere flap away from him, Trooper flapped his wings once and simply glided out of the way. Dash missed him completely.

Trooper turned to Fluttershy,  
“Your knowledge of how the body works should give you an edge. Look for muscle movements. It is as simple as that. Wait until the last possible second and use only as much energy as you need to, to dodge. If your opponent is close enough, they will not be able to correct their course. Above all, try to remain calm. It will be hard, but if you stay calm, you can think better and make more sound judgments. I made that mistake when I fought the spider. I was not calm and I ended up far more injured than was strictly necessary.”

“Give it a try Fluttershy!” Rainbow Dash called from behind Trooper,  
“You’ve seen it done, now it’s time to do it yourself.”

“Alright.” The custard pegasus responded.

Trooper moved out of the way and hovered behind Fluttershy so he could position her hooves the right way, "Are you left or right hooved?" he asked.

Fluttershy held up her right hoof demurely. Trooper glided in close and began positioning her fore hooves. He put her left one out in front, joint bent so she could look over the top of her shoe. Her right one followed behind the left, both aligned in front of her body. Trooper flew back several flaps and examined Fluttershy's stance.

"Why are you having me put my hooves up?" she asked.

"This is for when you learn to block. It is called putting up your guard. You need to get used to it, trust me." Trooper said, then looked over to Dash, "She is ready." he called.

"I'm scared." Fluttershy whimpered.

Trooper noticed she was starting to shake; he flew up above her and lowered his head to whisper in her ear, "You have to learn to ignore it. Focus on your opponent as a whole, watch for any sign of a broadcast."

Fluttershy gulped audibly, but maintained her pose. Rainbow Dash waited for a brief moment then, in a burst of speed, charged her shy friend. Everything happened in slow motion for the learning pegasus. She watched every flap of Dash's wings and noted every muscle that moved when she did so, dedicating every movement to memory. As Dash approached, Fluttershy noticed the rainbow hued pegasus twitch ever so slightly in her right fore leg. Her instincts screamed for her to get away, now that she had seen the warning sign of the attack, but she held her ground (figuratively of course) and waited. Dash flew closer and closer with every breath. Fluttershy could feel her heart speeding up as she approached and time slowed down even more. To Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash looked like she was moving as slowly as a slug. She waited until she was sure Dash was too close, then flapped her wings once and glided off to the left. Rainbow Dash sped by Fluttershy and stopped on the far side of the demure pegasus. Fluttershy blinked and looked around, '*Where is she?*' she wondered.



Trooper cheered loudly, yelling encouragement to the shy pegasus, "Nicely done! Nicely done indeed, Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy looked around and spotted Rainbow Dash a ways away. Dash had her fore legs crossed in front of her smiling broadly and nodding her head, '*Not bad Fluttershy. We'll make a fighter out of you yet.*' she thought.

Trooper flew over and patted the, still shaking, pegasus gently on her back, "Well done Fluttershy! I could not have done it any better myself! By all that is magic, I dare say you are a natural! What say we give it another go?"

"Um, that's alright. I think I'll just watch you two for now." Fluttershy said trying to steady her breathing.

"As you wish, my lovely compatriot." Trooper said turning to Rainbow Dash, "How about it there old Rain-a-thingy? Feel like taking on a more seasoned opponent?"

"I hope you don't expect me to hold back as much as I did with Fluttershy, Trooper." Dash said lowering her head.

Trooper raised his snout to the sky, "Perish the thought!" he said haughtily, "Indeed, I expect you to, as the saying goes, hit me with your best shot, as it were!"

Rainbow Dash flew in but didn't bypass Trooper. Instead she barrelled into him with her shoulder. Trooper quickly realized that for once, the multi-hued pegasus mare had been understating her skills. Rainbow Dash was preternaturally fast. She threw out strikes almost faster than Trooper could see. He dodged the ones he could, but after dodging thirty-something hits and taking close to the tenth one, he began both blocking and dodging. The two of them were moving like a blur, hooves flying away at every angle and direction, '*Just how long did she train for?*' Trooper wondered. He could see that Rainbow's technique was sloppy but she made up for it with her ludicrous speed.

Rainbow Dash smiled, feeling cocky, and lashed out with another fore hoof,

“What say we take this up a notch. Full-contact sparring.”

Trooper didn't get the chance to answer. She attacked him with everything she had. Trooper was pressed to simply defend himself, much less land a blow of his own with any frequency. Trooper struck out with a hind leg only to have it intercepted by Rainbow Dash's own leg in a block while she counter-attacked with a swift uppercut which Trooper dodged nimbly. The two pegasi continued on like that for several solid minutes, sweat dripping off them as they fought. Rainbow Dash rained down blow after blow onto Trooper, who bore them with as much grace as he could muster. Trooper pulled his punches (so to speak), on the rare occasions they landed, he wasn't so sure about his sparring partner. His ribs and belly were hurting terribly, still he couldn't bring himself to hit Rainbow Dash with all his strength. He'd had mares as sparring partners before, but none of them ever hit like Dash did. She was brutal. In a lightning quick move, Dash stopped flapping her wings, for a brief moment, and brought them up. She boxed Trooper's ears with the edges of her wings, surprising him and knocking him silly for a moment. She saw her opening and went for it. She lowered her head and charged in, under his raised fore hooves and began pummeling his ribs with reckless abandon.

Trooper grunted and tried to block the blows, but he was beginning to weaken, his movements becoming sluggish, “Dash stop! Break! Break!” he yelled.

Rainbow Dash didn't seem to hear him. She just kept up her attack. Trooper had no choice. He flapped once, hard, and pushed his attacker back with his burning chest, then swatted the aggressive mare between the shoulder blades with his left hoof, his weak one. Trooper hadn't struck with all his strength, he knew the move well and didn't want to hurt Dash too badly. The move was one of the few attacks he had learned and it worked perfectly. Dash's wings instantly froze up and she began to fall. In a split second Trooper grabbed her and held her aloft. He hurt everywhere, his ribcage felt like an inferno, and his left hind leg was numb from one particularly solid blow from his opponent. He was honestly having trouble holding Rainbow Dash up.

“Let us get back to the ground.” Trooper grunted to Fluttershy.

The pegasi fluttered downward to their waiting friends. Trooper set Rainbow Dash down on her hooves. She wobbled for a moment then regained her balance and shook herself.

The braggadocios pegasus starred at the stallion with a curious gaze, "How," she panted, "How did you do that?"

"I struck the tendon between your wings and caused it to seize, like a muscle spasm." Trooper said.

Dr. Mend went right to work, examining Rainbow Dash, "Nothing broken, nothing sprained, you'll have plenty of bruises though, Rainbow Dash. You said you had trained, but I never expected to see anything like that."

"Boy howdy!" Applejack exclaimed, "How about we go a round tomorrow Dash? You look like you'd be a good challenge for me."

"Good grief," Dr. Mend said sourly, "Trooper, you've got five bruised ribs and I think your left hind leg is sprained."

"I would say," Trooper grunted, "My partner decided not to hold back. It is nowhere near as bad as the spider hairs though."

"You sprained his leg?" Twilight asked, "We're supposed to be exercising, not tenderizing!"

Dash shrugged,  
"He blocked it."

"Yes, but you sprained his leg!" Twilight repeated.

"Pain is weakness leaving the body." Trooper grunted, "Like the book said, it is an incentive to get better. I would say it is a rather convincing incentive."

Dr. Mend sighed,  
"The sprain isn't too bad, but you should probably stay off it for a while. Can you fly the rest of the day?"

“Not an issue doctor.” Trooper said.

“Breakfast is ready!” Lemon Lime called to the group of friends.

As everypony trotted, or limped in some cases, over to the fire for breakfast, Rainbow Dash stopped in front of Trooper, “That wasn’t bad.” she said as if she were talking to a student, “With my help, you’ll be the best fighter in Equestria. Be ready, tomorrow I’m REALLY going to go all out. Just stop hitting like a filly alright?”

Trooper watched the flaunting mare walk away and narrowed his eyes, “You will never know how hard I can hit, Rainbow Dash. Taunt me all you wish, I shall never put my full strength into any swing against you. I will protect you till my dying breath, but I shall NEVER hurt you.” he whispered.

# Chapter 12

Molasses had slept fitfully in Valiant's tent while he and Surf had shared the other. Surf seemed slightly ill at ease being around Valiant, but the royal blue, wingless pegasus had expected as much and didn't mention anything. At breakfast, the two friends had been expecting the chocolate colored colt to eat according to his size. To their surprise, Molasses took no more food than either of them did. They had broken camp early and started on the road as soon as their practice was complete. Molasses had watched with seeming fascination as the two ponies had run, jumped, spun, and twisted in various acrobatic maneuvers. Valiant and Surf had expected Molasses to slow them down because of his girth, again to their surprise, the slow colt had no difficulty keeping up with the two much more trim ponies.

As soon as the three were traveling again, Valiant began asking Molasses about Haysburg,  
“How long has it been since you've been to Haysburg, Molasses?”

The colt looked up to the sky and scrunched his face, sticking out his tongue at a comical angle as he tried to articulate his thoughts,  
“We go sell the sweet-sauces when the seasons change sir.”

“So it's been a while then?” Valiant prodded gently.

Molasses didn't respond, *‘Maybe he doesn't know what to say.’* Valiant thought, *‘Poor guy. Being around him makes me grateful that I'm not handicapped.’* Following the colt's lead, the three continued on in silence until the sun was directly overhead. Molasses was the one to instigate their break for lunch. He simply stopped in the middle of the road and sat down on his haunches as if waiting for something.

Valiant and Surf stopped as soon as they saw the younger colt stop,  
“What's up dude? Are you hungry?”

Molasses nodded, still saying nothing. Valiant and Surf walked the few paces back to the chocolate colt and sat down on either side of him.

Surf & Turf opened his saddlebags and removed a small sack of dried fruit he had bought in New Yoke, while Valiant headed off into the nearby trees to forage for other things to eat.

“Is there some reason you’ve been so quiet today dude? You seemed happy to talk away last night.” Surf asked.

Molasses chewed on his mouthful of dried fruit in silence, swallowing before he responded,

“Don’t repeat yourself Molasses, it makes you sound silly. It’s better to stay quiet and be thought a foal, than open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

“Whoa, heavy stuff there dude.” Surf said, surprised with the depth of the colt’s response, “Did your Momma tell you that?”

Molasses nodded as he dug his head back into the bag of fruit, his voice came muffled from the intervening fabric,

“Momma said it was a smart thing to do. I want you to be smart, Molasses.” he said as he pulled his head from the bag, mouth empty, “Don’t let anypony tell you you’re stupid. You’re smart in your own special way.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did you bring the chess board with you bro? Do you know how to play?” Surf asked.

Molasses nodded and dug into his saddlebags, assumingly looking for the board and pieces. Surf was amazed that he could reach them at all. His head re-emerged from the pouches holding the chess board in his mouth. Molasses set the board down then laid out all the pieces in their proper order. Surf decided to humor the colt and the two began playing, Surf & Turf was white and Molasses was red.

Valiant re-emerged from the trees just in time to heard his neon colored friend say,

“Checkmate, good game dude.”

Valiant walked over and examined the scene. Surf & Turf was playing against Molasses in chess and the colt had unfortunately lost. Even though he lost, Molasses didn’t seem fazed at all by the outcome, almost as if he were used to it. As the wingless pegasus walked over, the two opponents shook hooves. Valiant sat down and distributed out his find; a pouch full of

raspberries, among himself and the other two ponies. They ate then waited for molasses to put the chess board and pieces away then continued on toward Haysburg.

The sun began to cast long shadows on the ground, but they still hadn't reached Haysburg. The anticipation was wearing on Valiant's nerves, he was becoming anxious. The smell of swamps told him they were very close. He had spotted several wide watery fields of rice but he still couldn't make out any buildings from the village. The sun sank behind the tree line and the night began to grow cold. Valiant looked to his right and saw the Razor Wing mountain range that signaled the border between Equestria and Gryphonvale.

He kept his eyes trained on the mountains, almost hypnotized by the sight. The Razor Wings ran from South to North along the far side of the Eldritch Basin that the White River flowed both into and out of. Valiant took a good long look at the forever snowcapped mountains, remembering the particular, unique patterns of the peaks that he could recall from the village square of Haysburg. His gaze lingered on the sight for longer than was necessary, but eventually movement caught his eye and he stopped cold. A number of shapes rose up from the mountains, flying fast in their general direction. Valiant squinted his eyes, trying to make out any details.

"What's up bro? Is something wrong?" Surf asked beside him.

Valiant kept his gaze fixed on the mountains as he responded, "I thought I saw gryphons up there, but maybe it's just the light playing tricks on me . . . wait . . . look!" he pointed with his hoof, "There! Flying just above the tallest peak! Do you see them?"

"Be careful with the lion-birds, Molasses. They can be nice, but some only want to pick on you." the colt mumbled from beside Valiant.

"Are they dangerous dude?" Surf asked.

"Generally, no. I've seen a few scuffles between gryphons and ponies though. They have to be careful not to use their claws because they can open you up like an over ripe melon. Normally gryphons don't bring their chicks anywhere near Haysburg due to the tornadoes, but one family did and there was trouble. The youngest gryphon chick got into a play-fight

with a filly and ended up putting her in the hospital. She had to have ninety-odd stitches. The chick's parents volunteered to pay for the filly's surgery and then some, but relations were strained for a while after that anyway. When I last left, the relations between ponies and gryphons were fine. Somehow, I don't think that's the case now though." Valiant explained.

Surf & Turf turned to watch Valiant. The royal blue stallion's lips were moving. Surf guessed he was counting. After a moment, Valiant's words hit home. Surf's eyes widened at the hint.

"Huh?" Surf asked, "Why are you counting dude? What's wrong?"

Valiant swallowed hard and kept counting as he answered, "Gryphons are nocturnal hunters. They never stay around after dark because they have to eat. They're omnivores but they do need their meat. Their hunting parties generally consist of three to five adults. They have a lot of trouble with wild creatures attacking their settlements so they've learned to fight in groups. They call the fighting groups 'war-parties'. A war-party generally consists of fifteen to twenty-five adults." he turned to his two companions, "There are twenty up there."

"And that group of gryphons is heading right for Haysburg isn't it?" Surf said, voice cracking.

Valiant broke into an all-out run as he called over his shoulder, "A group of gryphons on the wing is called a 'flight of gryphons' and yes they are. Come on! We have to warn Haysburg!"

Molasses shambled behind Valiant, fairly light on his hooves despite his size. He was lagging behind, but was obviously trying his best to keep up.

Surf & Turf stopped and slipped on his climbing hooks then checked his hang glider and took off after Valiant and Molasses, "Please tell me this isn't the start of another Gryphon War." he panted.

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The three friends galloped as fast as their legs would carry them. Valiant tried manifesting his wings so he could fly, but he was too distracted



by the thoughts of what might have been happening to his village, his first home. He pushed himself as hard as he could, summoning every ounce of strength and speed to lend might to his body. He could hear the ring of Haysbrg's bells as the flight of gryphons came closer. Over the beating of his heart and the pounding of his hooves Valiant could hear the cries of the ponies as they scurried around trying to get to safety.

One voice, a stallion, rose above the others,  
"The beasts are attacking again! Guard the orphanage! Hurry, protect the foals!"

The words rang in Valiant's ears, '*They're targeting foals!*',  
"Surf, Molasses," he called behind him, "Get to the orphanage! The gryphons are attacking the orphanage!"

Valiant ran with a speed he never knew he had, '*Not my village! YOU WILL NOT HAVE MY VILLAGE!*' the blood pumped in his ears as he ran. Valiant heard the cries of the gryphons and the sound of splintering wood followed by the screams and cries of colts and fillies intermingled with the distinctive sounds of hooves striking flesh. His vision narrowed and time seemed to slow. He rounded a bend in the road and took his first step into Haysburg in more than five years.

Valiant saw the outlying homes of the ponies he had grown up with. The road carved a straight path through to the center of the village. Ponies he recognized were running everywhere in a blind panic. He saw the bakery, where Glaze and his daughter Sprinkle lived and worked. He saw the Mayor's office building where town-meetings were held. He saw the tailor shop, the apothecary, the blacksmith, and all the places he remembered, right where they ought to be. With his memories driving him, Valiant instantly headed toward where he remembered Miss Heartfelt's orphanage to be.

He took the corner that led to the orphanage and stopped in his tracks, eyes widening, pupils shrinking to pinpoints. Earth ponies fought with gryphons that had been brought down in nets in front of the door of the orphanage, while still more gryphons crawled through a massive hole in the roof of the two story building. The orphanage was the only place that was under attack strangely enough. One gryphon emerged from the hole in the roof of the orphanage gripping a sobbing mauve coated filly with a bright

blue mane and tail in its claws and launched into the sky, or more accurately, it tried to. The gryphon, for all its strength, was having trouble carrying the filly. The truth of the situation hit Valiant like a ray of light, *'She's an Earth pony. She's too heavy for it to fly correctly!'*

The filly, fearful for her life, was putting up a mighty struggle for something so small. She wiggled and bit and screamed and cried and bit some more, determined not to be taken by the much larger gryphon. The gryphon couldn't seem to gain the altitude it needed and so had to soar between the houses, down the road in the middle of the street heading for the village square. The gryphon was well out of reach for the stouter and heavier Earth ponies to jump and grab, but it was still below the rooftops.

Valiant took off running towards the village square ahead of the gryphon. He spotted a narrow alleyway between two single story buildings and gritted his teeth heading toward it, *'Goddesses give me strength!'* He leapt up as high as his legs would carry him and planted his hooves against one wall then tensed his muscles and launched off as hard as he could in the opposite direction, twisting in the air as much as his body allowed. His lower stomach hit the wall of the opposite building but his top half made it onto the rooftop. He pulled himself up onto the roof, fore hooves scrabbling on the tiles lining the surface, and broke into another run. Valiant chanced a sideways look and saw the gryphon flying almost even with him. He picked up speed and leapt out over the road, *'There is always hope!'*

Valiant flew through the air, heading straight for the gryphon's head. He collided with the great predator in the air in a tangle of blunt hooves and wickedly sharp talons. The gryphon screeched and tried to fight off its assailant while still holding onto the filly. Valiant grappled with the gryphon, his fore hooves wrapped around its neck, kicking at its belly. The filly was clutched firmly in its front talons and Valiant curled his body up and around her as best he could, hoping the gryphon wouldn't decide to let go of her and attack his exposed underbelly. In a matter of seconds Valiant felt the road scrape painfully against his back, shredding off layer upon layer of skin. His added weight was too much for the gryphon to hold aloft.

Valiant grunted, his world going white from the pain, he heard a gravelly voice speak next to his ear, "Idiot pony! You'll be killed!"

The gryphon suddenly dipped its right wing and turned over, trying to push Valiant away as the gryphon himself began sliding on his back on the road. Valiant's world was going dark and his ears roared like a waterfall, he had just enough of his mind left to curl his whole body around the filly. The gryphon tried to maintain his grip, but finally let go. Valiant, still holding the filly, rolled away, his momentum and curled body making him roll like a wheel right into the wall of a nearby building. Valiant felt more that heard a loud thump and his world became blackness.

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Surf & Turf had never seen a battle before, but he knew right away that he never wanted to see another. He and Molasses followed Valiant through Haysburg until they saw him stop. Ponies and gryphons were fighting all around the door to a two story building. The gryphons had consolidated their efforts and were working in teams, some to keep the ponies at bay, while others freed their grounded brethren from their entangling nets.

Surf saw a gryphon carrying a filly, heading toward what seemed to be the center of the village. Valiant took off running in front of the thing. Surf & Turf saw Valiant veer into an alley and emerge on the roof of a building then take a flying leap and tackle the gryphon in mid-air. The fight didn't last long, the gryphon was obviously weighed down by the extra weight. In a flash of movement, the gryphon turned onto its back and sent Valiant and the filly rolling away before righting itself and launching into the air, flying away over the rooftops. Valiant slammed into a brick building, hitting his head. Surf shrugged out of his glider-pack and started heading toward Valiant, but a terrified scream caught his attention.

Surf turned his head and watched as another gryphon took to the air holding another filly in its claws, it looked much more weighed down; the filly was older and the gryphon was smaller. Surf narrowed his eyes and made his decision. The lithe and limber neon colored Earth pony turned and galloped along the road heading the same direction as the gryphon, waiting for it to get over his head. He looked over his shoulder and saw the gryphon coming up on him fast. With a twist of his body and a mighty leap, Surf turned toward the gryphon and raised his fore hooves, extending his climbing hooks in the motion. His judgment proved to be accurate. The blunt hooks slid over the gryphon's wings where they attached to its torso

and it came tumbling down, grounded by the combined weight of two Earth ponies. Surf & Turf, like Valiant, scraped his back against the road, but had the presence of mind to kick the gryphon's talons where the limbs attacked to its body.

The gryphon screeched in shock and pain and released its grip, the filly spilling down onto Surf's stomach with a startled cry. The combined weight of the two ponies combined with the friction from that pressure on the street below brought the gryphon to a halt in mid-air and it slammed face-first onto the road. Surf felt the wind knocked out of him and his fore legs shuddered as the gryphon escaped from the hooks and took off.

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Molasses watched as the two big colts did things that made his tummy twist. They did some running and some jumping and some tumbling, it all looked very dangerous. The loud noises and the panicked confusion scared the simple-minded colt. The sound of yelling caught his ear, breaking through his haze, and Molasses turned toward Miss Heartfelt's orphanage, *'I bet Momma would want me to see if Miss Heartfelt needs help with the foals. Remember to always be gentle with foals, you're bigger than they are, you don't want to hurt them.'*

Molasses trotted up to the battle on the ground and pushed bodily past the Earth ponies, who were too busy to notice the upper levels of the orphanage had been breached. Molasses pushed open the front door, *'Miss Heartfelt always said Momma and me were like family and I don't knock on the door at home.'* Molasses recognized the figure of Miss Heartfelt immediately. The older Earth pony mare was trying to go up the stairs to her orphans, but a gryphon blocked her way, swiping its claws and clacking its beak menacingly, *'That's not nice. Miss Heartfelt always says to hug the foals when they're scared. They sound scared so she needs to go hug them, but she can't get to them.'* Molasses thought.

He pushed past the panicked, agonized, and tearful orphanage patroness and confronted the gryphon, "You're being naughty." he said simply.

The gryphon was so taken aback by the huge colt's boldness that it literally stopped and blinked in confusion. It lowered its talons and stopped

clacking its beak, in awe of the sheer audacity of the immense pony. Molasses, in his forever simple mind, took it as a sign of submission. He reached up and took the gryphon by the scruff of the neck with his mouth and hauled it outside. Miss Heartfelt was so shocked by the sudden development she just stood in place watching in disbelief as the scene unfolded before her.

The gryphon screeched and struggled wildly as the huge pudgy colt dragged it outside and set it down,  
“You’re in a time out for . . . “ Molasses stopped to think, *‘How long do you go into time out?’*

The gryphon didn’t wait for the slow colt to finish. It took off, and hovered for a moment. The creature threw back its head and let out a long loud screech. The other gryphons on the ground fighting the ponies, ceased their struggle and took to the air as well.

Molasses thought it was especially naughty that the lion-bird didn’t stay in time out, but certainly did enjoy the hug Miss Heartfelt gave him, even if he didn’t know why she was crying.

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Within minutes, Haysburg was free of the presence of the gryphons. Surf & Turf groaned as the filly continued clinging to his stomach, sobbing pitifully.

“Do you mind, little dudette?” he croaked, trying to crack a smile, “I’m, like, totally trying to pull off the while ‘injured hero’ thing here.” Surf’s words were joking, but his tone spoke volumes, *‘Well on the plus side, it doesn’t hurt as much as it probably should. I guess I just got, like, super lucky and landed on soft dirt or something.’*

“Get up off him, missy. You’re going to crush your rescuer.” a gruff voice said.

The filly was gently pulled off Surf, giving him a view of the new pony. He was an Earth pony stallion, his coat was the color of red clay and his mane and tail were a dusty shade of grey. His cutie-mark was of what

looked like a trio of wheat sprigs bound together at the centers but pointing in three different directions, one left, one right, and one straight up. He had a rugged look to him and seemed well-built, like a farmer.

Surf took the stallion's offered hoof and hoisted himself up, immediately regretting it. His back felt like it had been dipped into molten lava. Surf arched his back screaming in pain as tears sprung to his eyes. He fell back onto his spine, where the massive injury was, and contorted in blinding agony as the nerve endings fired up sending an overwhelming signal to the pain receptors in his brain. Surf & Turf had received his fair share of injuries in his career of extreme sports, but this one left them all in the dust.

"Miller, turn him onto his stomach, quickly!" a mare's voice called from Haysburg's clinic, which was fortunately close by.

"Alright, nurse Trauma, alright." Mill Treader, or 'Miller' as most ponies called him grumbled over Surf's screaming, "Your mother sure did give you an appropriate name now didn't she." he said rolling the writhing neon Earth pony onto his stomach, "You caused her plenty of trauma on the way out and you haven't stopped sin . . . " Mill Treader stopped short as he finally saw Surf's back, "Trauma, get over here! Bring your sister, Triage! This guy's dealing with some serious hurt!"

The two nurses came running out. They were two of the few unicorns who lived in Haysburg proper. They were twins, but not identical. Trauma was bright green with her mane and tail a drab brown with white highlights. Her sister Triage was dark yellow; her mane and tail were fluorescent orange. Trauma's cutie-mark was of a pony in traction lying on a hospital bed, while Triage's cutie-mark was of a pair of tossed away splints and bandages.

"Oh no!" Trauma said, "I'll levitate him inside! Triage, ask around and see if anypony else needs help!"

Trauma levitated the wailing, writhing neon colored Earth pony into the clinic while her sister searched around, "Miller," she addressed, "Did you see anypony else who got injured?"

Mill Treader nodded,

“Yeah, I did. Saw this one crazy pony jump from a rooftop and tackle one of the gryphons then bring it down. Darn stupidest thing I ever saw. Brave, no doubt, but royally stupid.” Mill Treader looked around and spotted Valiant laying limply against the wall of the Arcane Repository, “There he is!”

Both ponies galloped up to Valiant’s still form,  
“What the . . . He’s still hanging on to a filly!” Mill Treader tried to pry the filly from Valiant’s hooves, “Boy! This guy’s as strong as an ox!” the burly Earth pony pulled with all of his, not inconsiderable, strength and finally freed the filly from Valiant’s grip, “Come here missy.” he said holding the sobbing filly, “Your safe now.” turning back to Triage, Mill Treader asked, “How is he? Is he going to survive?”

Triage shook her head,  
“I need to get him patched up as soon as possible. With the Vagabond’s potion, he should pull through.” Triage laughed mirthlessly, remembering the sad story of the pony who had been an acquaintance of both herself and Mill Treader, and her sister.

Triage levitated Valiant up into the air as gently as she could. Mill Treader spotted something and held out his hoof, halting the nurse. Triage stopped and looked at the Earth pony like he was crazy. Mill Treader lifted a shaking hoof and pointed to Valiant’s, now exposed, flank, eyes the size of saucers, jaw hanging open.

Triage turned her head trying to spot what could have affected Miller so; her eyes gravitated to it immediately, she starred in absolute disbelief, “Impossible.” she whispered.

“May Celestia have mercy on us all.” Mill Treader said, “He’s come back.” shifting his eyes, the red clay colored pony looked to Valiant’s back, “What happened to his wings?”

Triage shook her head, clearing her thoughts,  
“It doesn’t matter who he is. He’s not going to last long if we don’t help him.”

“You do realize what might happen when everypony finds out.” Miller said, “Look everypony knew him, but he’s cursed, an outcast, a Va . . .” the Earth pony’s mouth snapped shut with a glowing aura around it.

“I don’t care.” Triage hissed, “He’s injured and he got his injuries saving a filly. Don’t you dare breathe a word of this to anypony. Do you hear me, Miller? Not. One. Word. We can find out the truth later, after he’s recovered, but for now, my job is to ensure he does so. Do I make myself clear?”

Mill Treader nodded silently. Triage turned and let go of the Earth pony’s muzzle, levitating Valiant toward the clinic at a trot.

Miller shook his head, still trying to sooth the filly,  
“I sure hope your heart’s not bigger than your head, Triage, or you’re going to have a riot on your hooves.”



# Chapter 13

Surf & Turf awoke to his right eye itching. He tried to raise his hoof to scratch away the nuisance, but found the limb unresponsive. His eyes snapped open and he looked around, puzzled, '*Where am I?*' he wondered not recognizing the location. Looking down, he saw that his fore legs were strapped securely to a hospital bed, '*Dude! Why am I strapped down?*' Surf looked around, surveying the room he occupied. The only wall he could identify was the one his bed was pushed up against, other than that there didn't seem to be any actual walls, just sky blue curtains in three directions.

"Hello?" he called, "Is there, like, anypony there? I'm kind of tied up here dudes."

Surf heard two feminine voices approaching, they were speaking to each other as their hooves clopped on the floor,  
"Look, I already told Miller not to say anything about . . . him. He's in pretty rough condition as it is. He doesn't need to be bombarded by an angry mob right now." one voice said.

"He's a killer, Triage. I know he saved a filly, but he killed another. The town deserves to know." the other voice answered.

"I agree, they do deserve to know, but not yet. He needs time to recover. You helped me clean him up, you know how badly he's hurt." the first voice said.

"You should tell them." the second voice said sounding irritated, "You aren't suffering from multiple skull fractures and so forth, so you don't have an excuse."

"Should I need an excuse to keep a patient safe? This is our job, Trauma. The way I see it, he took a huge risk coming back, and an even bigger one rescuing little Damson. He deserves a break." the first voice said.

"It's not our place to decide these things, the same way we didn't decide what his punishment was for killing Arabesque." the second voice replied.

“There are still too many hard feelings about that and too many angry minds. You know full well if we tell everypony, they’ll go crazy. Maybe he’s been forgiven, for all we know that’s why he came back.” the first voice argued.

“It’s not likely, but it’s possible, I’ll give you that. So what now? Everypony’s going to want to thank him and his friend for helping. All they know is that two strangers saved a pair of fillies and were injured in the process. How are we supposed to keep his identity a secret?” the second voice asked.

“We don’t have to worry about that. His head is all wrapped up so they won’t be able to see his face clearly and most of his body is covered with a sheet right now, so they won’t be able to see his cutie-mark. Speaking of which, did you notice? His cutie-mark changed.” she first voice said.

“Yo, babes!” Surf yelled, “Can a mysterious hero get some help here? My eye is itching something fierce and I can’t scratch it because someone tied me down.”

Trauma pulled back the curtain from in front of Surf and walked up to his bed,

“Mysterious hero?” she asked eyebrow quirked, “I’d say more like a reckless, brave, idiot. You scraped off nearly eighty percent of the epidermis on your back. You’re restrained so you won’t tear open your back, say trying to scratch an itch.”

“Ease off Trauma.” Triage said walking up beside her sister, “He is a hero.” she gently scolded her sister before turning to Surf, “You’ll have to forgive my sister. She’s very pragmatic. Where does it itch? I’ll scratch it for you.”

“Right eye, babe, scratch away.” Surf said smiling broadly.

Triage rose up on her hind legs and leaned over Surf, extending her hoof to scratch his eye. Surf closed his eyes, trying to hide a blush. He was not used to being so close to a mare; ditto since he was restrained.

Triage gently scratched Surf’s eye then fell back onto all fours, “Better?”

“Oh yeah.” Surf said breathing a sigh of relief, “So, what should I call you two babes?” he asked, pouring on what he thought was charm.

“I’m Triage and this is my sister Trauma.” Triage said gesturing to her sister.

“The name’s Surf & Turf, but you girls can just call me Surf.” he said, “Um, not trying to be, like, nosey or anything, but do you know what happened to my friends?”

Trauma’s ears shifted forward,  
“Friends? As in plural?” she asked, “We only saw you and . . . the other one.”

“Who Valiant?” Surf asked.

The two sisters looked at each other then back at the neon Earth pony,  
“You know his name?” Trauma asked, “He’s not supposed to use it. He isn’t even supposed to be traveling with anypony either. What exactly do you know about him?” she asked tersely.

“What’s with the hostile attitude babe?” Surf asked, “I heard you and your sister all, like, talking about him, so you obviously know what he did, but from what I know about him, he’s one of the coolest ponies I’ve ever met.”

“He’s a Vagabond.” Trauma said simply.

“Not anymore, babe. He’s a totally forgiven dude now. He said he had to wait to either die or for this one girl named Arabesque to forgive him. Apparently she did. He came back to try to make peace with everypony here in Haysburg. From what I’m seeing, he’s totally got his work cut out for him.” Surf explained sourly.

Trauma narrowed her eyes, turned, and began walking away, calling over her shoulder,  
“We shall see, Surf & Turf, we shall see.”

Triage sighed, watching her sister go,  
“She’s so easily distracted. You said there were more than two of you?”

“You heard right, babe. It was me, Valiant, and Molasses. Do you happen to know, like, where the big guy went or anything? We’re supposed to be taking care of him; either that or take him to some mare named Heartfelt, I don’t know what the plan was. We found him two nights ago all, like, broken up over his Momma passing away; totally understandable.” Surf said.

Triage held a hoof up to her muzzle,  
“Oh, poor Molasses,” she said, “He’s so sweet too. I’m sorry Surf, I’ve got no idea where he could be.”

“Aw dang it! Come on, let me up, please. I, like, totally need to find him. If Valiant’s in the shape you said, that means I’ve got to take care of him, for now.” Surf said wiggling against the restraints.

“I’m sorry Surf & Turf, but you have to stay still until you’re all healed.” Triage explained, “I’ll ask around and see if anypony’s spotted him, alright?”

Surf relaxed his struggling,  
“Alright then, just please make sure he’s okay. I’d hate for something to happen to him. Hey, speaking of ‘things happening’, like, why are there gryphons attacking Haysburg and why were they going after the orphans?”

Triage shook her head,  
“I don’t know. It all started just after The Searcher came back from the ruins and told the gryphons to leave.”

“Who’s this ‘Searcher’ pony and why did she tell the gryphons to leave.” Surf asked.

“We call him The Searcher, no pony knows his real name. He’s been trying to bring the ponies of Haysburg together for a while now. The incident with Arabesque’s death really tore the village apart. He says he’s trying to take the anger out of our lives, to ‘show us the light’. He’s kind of preachy and I was really skeptical at first, but he does make some good points. I’ve taken the time to listen to him and it’s changed my life. That’s why I’m willing to give . . . him, the benefit of the doubt. As to why he told the gryphons to leave, he had a disagreement with one of them; Searcher said it was

something about how they would have killed one of their own that had killed another. He said he argued that they would become a killer themselves and it went from there. I think the situation might have gotten worse if Birdie and Colossus hadn't been there; then again, Birdie might have been part of the problem. I don't know why the gryphons have begun attacking though and I can't believe a single disagreement would provoke something like this." Triage informed.

"That sucks," Surf said, "I bet you and your sister have had to pull some serious overtime to patch up all the ponies who've been injured in the attacks; that is, I hope nopony's been killed or anything."

Triage cocked her head in thought, "Huh," she said after a moment, "You know, come to think of it, aside from a lot of bruises and minor cuts, there haven't been any injuries at all until you and your friend showed up. I can assure you, there haven't been any deaths yet, thank the light."

"That IS weird. Valiant said that gryphons have to be careful because they have, like, all their talons and beaks and stuff and they're natural born predators." Surf mused, "Wait, you mention something about Birdie and Colossus. Who are they?"

"Colossus is big, I mean BIG. He's the biggest Earth pony I've ever seen. He's like a walking mountain of muscle. He's really friendly though, and he'll talk your ear off about his adventures with The Searcher. Birdie, though," Triage shuddered, "She scares me. She scares me on several levels. She's a pegasus, a very small pegasus, but from the way she looks and acts, you'd think she was a mute, psychotic gryphon. I asked The Searcher about her once. It took a lot of convincing to get him to tell me, but according to what he said, he thinks that Birdie grew up in Gryphonvale. I have no idea how she ended up there; he wouldn't say. He did tell me that she's badly disfigured, though he wouldn't say much about that either. He did tell me that she calls herself what the gryphons called her; Birdie, because she's a pegasus. She's aggressive and she'll fight without a thought or warning. One pony got angry at The Searcher and got too close to him, that didn't end well."

Triage shuddered again then took a deep breath,

“Colossus had to pull Birdie off him before she beat him senseless. He needed more than a hundred stitches after she was through with him. If you’re wondering what she looks like, your guess is as good as mine. She wears a long hooded cloak covering her body except for her yellow wings, I don’t know what her cutie-mark looks like. She keeps her face covered with a veil all the time too; you can only see her eyes and her wings. Trust me, that’s all you’ll need to see. Her wings are severely scarred and they still work, but her eyes are the worst. One look in her eyes and you won’t want to go near her. It’s like she’s just waiting to fight, like she hates everything. Actually, I’m surprised The Searcher hasn’t come to see you and . . . your friend yet.”

Surf & Turf yawned hugely,  
“I’m sorry Triage, but I’m getting, like, really sleepy.”

Triage smiled,  
“That’s alright Surf. You get some rest. I’ll go look around for Molasses for you, you just stay there and heal up. You should be good to go in two days.”

Surf’s eyes popped open,  
“Uh, I’m not, like, trying to tell you how to do your job or anything, but I’ve had plenty of injuries and I can tell you, I’m going to be here a while. My back was majorly torn up.”

Triage smiled again,  
“I’ve given you a dose of a special healing potion. Trust me, you’ll be walking by noon tomorrow. We’ll keep you here for observation for one more day then discharge you. Before the incident where Arabesque was killed, we here in Haysburg had a very respected up-and-coming alchemist. Thank your friend, he invented it.”

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The sound of a myriad of voices woke Surf & Turf back up. It sounded like fifty ponies were all talking at once. Surf raised his head, what little he could, and looked toward the sound, getting his first real look at the ward he was in. The place was stark white, just like most medical facilities. The room looked to be a square, roughly forty paces, by forty paces. He could see the far side of the room where another bed sat. The curtains

around that bed were pulled back and the bed was neat and clean, ready and waiting for a patient. Other beds with their curtains pulled back sat all around the perimeter of the room. Surf seemed to be the only patient.

Trauma appeared from a doorway set against the far right wall of the ward, the Earth pony tried to shrink down into his bed at the sight of her, “You have visitors, Surf & Turf. Do you think you are up for company?”

Surf nodded his head,  
“Uh sure. You aren’t still mad are you?” he asked.

“I was never angry in the first place.” Trauma said crisply, “I simply have very strong feelings and opinions about certain issues and I’m not afraid to say so. You may think of me as being angry if you wish, light knows most others do, but I assure you I harbor no ill feelings toward you. To that end, I find you somewhat charming and I wouldn’t be completely adverse to going out on a date with you sometime, should you ask me. Just something to think about while you’re being swarmed with praises and ‘thank-yous’.”

Surf didn’t know to respond,  
“Uh sure.”

Trauma smiled,  
“Good, I’ll remind you when you’re feeling better. It’s been a while since a stallion took me out on a date.”

Trauma walked away before Surf could process what she had just said,  
“What? Oh wait! I didn’t mean . . . “ his voice was drowned out as a crowd of Earth ponies flooded both his bed and the ward.

Within the span of just a few minutes the poor neon colored Earth pony was introduced to more ponies than he had ever known in his whole life. He forgot every pony’s name almost instantly as another pushed their way in to introduce themselves and thank him. Surf was completely overwhelmed until a sharp whistle assailed his ears. Suddenly and without warning, every pony backed away from Surf’s bed, the ward instantly silent. Surf heard the slow clop of hooves approaching his bed and craned his neck to see the pony who commanded such respect.

The pony he saw was a light yellow, almost off-white unicorn stallion. His mane and tail were fiery red and his cutie-mark was of an ancient looking tome, open to the center with a red bookmark lying along the spine. Surf noticed a black heart-shaped locket hanging around his neck. Surf's interest was piqued as his eyes focused on the thing. The heart was upside down. Flanking the unicorn were two other ponies. One was a hugely immense, dark purple Earth pony who's mane and tail were bright blue with grey highlights. His cutie-mark was that of a tower made of square stones. He was almost twice the height of the other ponies and built like a brick outhouse. The other pony was a small, almost filly sized pegasus. She was covered with a long bright yellow cloak and veil. Her wings were a slightly more subdued custard yellow but shone with so many scars she looked like somepony had stuck her in a blender and hit puree. Surf couldn't tell what color her mane and tail were; they were completely hidden beneath the cloak and veil. Her face was completely obscured except for her eyes. Her eyes were a merciless grey, expressing a pony who was constantly watching everything as if ready to attack. Even when walking she seemed to stay completely still, like a statue. Surf saw a glint of reflected light from the bottom of her cloak and peered down, straining against the restraints. Sharp, steel shoes adorned her hooves, making her steps on the tiled floor somehow sound like a funeral dirge.

The unicorn stopped beside Surf's bed smiling, it was a sincere smile and his eyes shone with appreciation, "You must be one of the brave souls I've heard about who came to our aid last night when those beasts attacked. On behalf of the ponies of Haysburg, I thank you. You have shown great bravery and kindness to us and we are deeply in your debt. Your actions saved the life of a young filly, a cause that I'm glad to see you are not blind to. I am sorry you were injured in the process, but such is often the sacrifice of the brave. I'm called The Searcher, but the 'The' part is merely a formality, you may call me Searcher, if you feel comfortable doing so. What is your name, brave pony, so that I might thank you on a more personal level?" Searcher's voice was a silky smooth tenor.

"Dude, totally not a problem and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. My proper name's Surf & Turf, but you can just call me Surf." the neon Earth pony said.



“It’s always a pleasure to meet a true hero, Surf. You needn’t worry about the cost of your medical treatment; I’ve paid it in full. It’s the least I can do for one such as yourself. Oh,” Searcher said smacking himself in the head with his hoof, “Where are my manners? Surf, this is Colossus and Birdie.”

Colossus took a step forward grinning, “It’s nice to meet you Surf.” his voice was a deep, rumbling bass that practically vibrated Surf’s bed, “Thanks for helping out last night. We really appreciate it. Don’t feel too bad if Birdie doesn’t say anything, she tends to keep to herself.”

“You are one huge dude, Earth bro. Your name totally suits you.” Surf said looking up at Colossus.

Colossus smiled a big toothy grin and stepped back, Searcher spoke again as he did so, “I’m afraid we haven’t yet met your friend. I understand he suffered more serious injuries. I don’t mean to be rude but we must be going. There are a lot of repairs to be done since the beasts shredded the roof of the orphanage. Please come and see me once you recover Surf. I believe we have much to discuss.”

Surf nodded his head, as best he could, given the restraints, and watched Searcher, Colossus, and Birdie leave, preparing himself for the returning onslaught of grateful ponies. Mere moments later, his preparation proved appropriate.

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“Good.” Rainbow Dash said panting as she stood on the ground, “Again.”

Fluttershy was panting too, a thing she was not used to, “R-ready.” she stuttered.

Her muscles were sore and she was tired, but she kept going, *‘If the others think this is so important, I really should do my best, no matter how tired I am. They’re just trying to keep me safe.’* she thought. Rainbow Dash dug at the ground with her hoof and charged at the custard colored pegasus. Fluttershy watched Dash’s movements carefully, waiting for any sign of a broadcast. Her keen eyes caught the twitch and she dodged out

of the way in a motion so fluid it would look, to anypony watching, like she was dancing. That is, if anypony had been watching.

The others were paired off, exercising and practicing. Sea Blue and Dr. Mend were facing off against Big Macintosh while Trooper and Applejack were off trying to see who could pin the other. Twilight and Rarity were engaged in a match of their own. Twilight had been initially surprised that Rarity was so willing to learn how to fight, *'In retrospect, I should have known. She was the first to attack the manticore after all.'* Twilight hopped back as Rarity turned and bucked at her. Twilight's horn lit up, throwing a blast of telekinetic magic toward the white unicorn. Rarity swiftly ducked down on her stomach and rolled to the right on the icy grass and came back up on her hooves, *'Oh dear!' she thought, 'My coat is going to be green by the time we're done! Oh I'm going to look an absolute mess!'* Rarity's vain inner monologue distracted her long enough for Twilight to get the drop on her. The lavender unicorn swept her right hoof beneath Rarity's front legs, tripping her friend.

Lemon Lime was having trouble with Pinkie Pie. His pink opponent was wily, clever, and cunning despite her constantly vacant expressions and mannerisms. She seemed to have an endless supply of random party-oriented favors which she used freely in their practice and to great effect. Lemon Lime leapt forward toward Pinkie only for her to dance to the side and evade him. His left fore hoof came down and made a rude flatulent noise as it contacted the ground. Lemon Lime looked down only to see a whoopee cushion had been strategically placed where Pinkie had been only moments before. Pinkie used her distraction to tackle the yellow therapist, pinning him to the cold ground. She tapped him once on the head then hopped away once more. Lemon Lime got up and squared off with Pinkie again. Pinkie took the initiative and hopped around the small unicorn stallion, bouncing like a rubber ball. Lemon Lime turned in-time with the bouncing, keeping Pinkie in front of him. On one of her hops, Pinkie landed oddly then fell to the ground holding her right hind leg. Lemon Lime rushed over to see if she had hurt herself only to have the pink tactician raise her head and blow on a loaded kazoo, sending colorful confetti into his face. Lemon Lime shook his head to clear his vision. He suddenly felt the cold wet grass on his back as Pinkie tackled him again.

"Where do you keep all this stuff?" Lemon Lime asked from underneath his pink attacker.

“Haven’t you ever heard of pockets, Live Wire?” Pinkie asked.

“Pinkie you don’t have any pockets.” Lemon Lime said sourly.

“Not that you know of, silly. I can’t give away all my secrets now can I? I use the elements of surprise.” Pinkie chirped giggling.

“Over and over and over and over again. Why don’t you fight the normal way Pinkie?” Lemon Lime asked annoyed.

“Because I don’t want to actually hurt anypony, duh! I mean, what’s the point of it all anyway? I can play ‘keep away’ all day and not have a scratch on me. I’d feel bad if I ended up hurting anypony. Granted, I could throw them a get-well party if I did, but I just don’t like causing pain.” Pinkie said as she helped the yellow unicorn up off the ground.

“Somehow, I can see that working for you.” Lemon Lime mumbled, “Alright, breakfast should be ready by now.” raising his voice, he called out over the small field, “Come and get it!”

Trooper and Applejack both looked up simultaneously, hitting each other in the jaw as they did so. Rainbow Dash was mid-charge when she heard the camp cook call for breakfast and veered off, away from Fluttershy who was close to passing out from fatigue. Twilight quickly let the glow of her horn go out and Rarity wiped her brow in relief, *‘I’m going to need to freshen up before anything else. Oh dear, that water is so cold in the mornings.’*

Big Macintosh came walking over to the camp fire slowly, as Dr. Mend and Sea Blue clung to him, trying valiantly to disrupt the work pony’s center of balance,

“This is so embarrassing!” Dr. Mend said grunting from the exertion; Sea Blue had to agree, “I’m so glad you’re on our side Big Macintosh. I’d hate to go up against you in a real fight.”

The bulky farmer simply smiled,  
“Ayup.”

“So what’s for breakfast today?” Dr. Mend asked sliding off the red Earth pony.

“Oatmeal.” Lemon Lime said leaning over the pot.

“Not again.” Rainbow Dash grumbled, “We’ve been having oatmeal for three days straight.”

“Oatmeal, are you crazy?” Pinkie asked, “Come on Live Wire, you need to change it up every now and again. I think I’ve got some applesauce in my saddlebag somewhere, just try not to burn it.”

“Please!” Rarity said heading off to ‘freshen up’, “Burnt applesauce is the worst. Believe me, darling, if you’ve never had it, let me give you some advice, don’t.”

“We should reach the edge of the Everfree Forest sometime around noon today. “Twilight said levitating a bowl of oatmeal over to herself, “We’ve been lucky to find a field or clearing of some sort almost every night. Thanks to our scouts. Once we’re out in the open we should have a much easier time and make much more swift progress.”

“Speakin’ of progress,” Applejack interjected, “How’s the whole memory thing been goin’ there Trooper? Have ya remembered anythin’ that might suggest you and Valiant are relations yet?”

“It is coming back slowly.” Trooper said between bites of oatmeal, “I can remember my father, which is an immense blessing in the first place. The memories seem to be centered around a family reunion of some kind that my parents were taking me to when I was just a foal.” Trooper blushed and stole a sideways glance at Fluttershy, “Apparently it was back when I was still fed from a bottle. Last night they had almost reached the spot where the reunion was going to have been held. I believe it was actually somewhere close to where we are in fact. I heard my parents mention New Yoke several times. They said that my uncle, Vector and his wife lived there with a foal of their own, a colt who was supposed to be around my age. My parents used to live in Stalliongrad, my father was apparently on the weather patrol there.”

Twilight raised her head from her bowl,

“Really?” she asked, “Hold on for a minute there Trooper.” her horn lit up and she levitated her map out from her saddlebags, “I’ll bet if you draw a straight line on the map from Stalliongard to New Yoke, you’ll find the middle ground is in the plains region we’re about to head into.”

The other ponies gathered around the perceptive unicorn as she used her magic to set a fold into the map,  
“There,” she said, pleased with herself, “Just as I thought. The plains are almost exactly in the center. You know Trooper, if we’re lucky, we just might find the exact spot where your parents had their family reunion.”

Trooper closed his eyes and went as still as a statue, ‘*That is where my father died, in a tornado . . .*’ Trooper looked up sharply,  
“Tornados.” he whispered, “Valiant said something about tornados occurring around Haysburg. My father was killed in a tornado. What if . . .” Trooper began pacing talking out loud, “Tornados . . . tornados . . . Dr. Mend, could a foal survive the winds of a tornado if they were sucked in?”

“I highly doubt it. The foal might survive a fall from great height, but the winds would cause serious injury.” Dr. Mend said solidly.

Trooper continued to pace,  
“What if the parents of the foal were holding onto it. You know, clutching it between themselves, like a hug. The parents might be killed but is it possible for the foal to survive?”

Dr. Mend scratched his chin,  
“I see where you’re going with this, Trooper, but it’s a bit of a stretch.”

Trooper turned to the one pony who might know more,  
“Rainbow Dash, you are on the weather team for Ponyville, right?”

“I’m in charge of it too you know.” Dash replied, cocky as ever.

Trooper stomped his right hind leg firmly,  
“Please, I am trying to piece my shattered family back together here, Rainbow Dash! Be serious!”

Dash blew out an exasperated breath,  
“Yes, I’m on the weather team.”

"I need your honest opinion here," Trooper pleaded, "Are you strong enough and skilled enough to fly inside a tornado and survive?"

"I might be able to," Dash said, "I can make some small ones. What's your point?"

"Alright how about a really big tornado? One with winds strong enough to kill a pony?" Trooper asked.

Rainbow Dash gave the matter some serious thought before answering,  
"Maybe," She finally said, "But only if I was well away from the center of the vortex. I might be able to use the wind speed to shoot me off like an arrow, if the G-forces didn't make me black out or the power of the wind didn't suck the air right out of my lungs and I didn't accidentally fly right into one of the mini-vortexes that occur sometimes." Rainbow Dash said becoming unusually serious, "Weather teams are trained on how to deal with tornados. You get a team of five or more then fly in the opposite direction of the vortex. You start far away from the tornado itself and slowly work your way in, each member of the team flying at least fifteen flaps behind the others. The wind generated by the team should be enough to break up the power of the vortex, but it's risky. See I can break up clouds easy as pie. I've faced a tornado once when I was in training. You can't break it up like a cloud. The debris will end up turning you into a pin-cushion and suffocate you. It's possible, but it's risky. I'm the only pegasus who can pull off a Sonic Rainboom, but even I wouldn't tackle a tornado lightly or without some serious backup."

Trooper turned to the two living calculators,  
"Twilight, Live Wire," he addressed softly, "If they were skillful enough to stay out of the main body of the vortex and only be thrown around by the exterior winds. Is it possible for a foal to survive if it was separated from its parents?"

Almost as one, the two unicorns nodded, Twilight took the lead,  
"It should be possible. I can definitely see where a pegasus could lose their life trying to break up a tornado though."

Lemon Lime continued Twilight's thought in much more detail,

“If you take the average pounds per square inch required to rip a pony limb-from-limb then cross-reference that against the power and velocity it would take to pierce a piece of debris through the average skin of a pegasus, then take that common factor and pit it against the average wind speed of a tornado . . . ” Lemon Lime stopped and turned to Twilight, “What’s the average wind speed of a tornado?”

“The winds of tornados have been estimated to be between one-hundred and ten and three hundred miles per hour, so estimate about two-hundred and five.” Twilight said.

Lemon Lime continued his calculations, mumbling to himself, “Okay then, take the common factor and . . . then use that average to . . . with the weight and general flexibility of your stereotypical newborn foal . . . ” he finally looked up, “I’d say the probability factor is close to thirty-seven point three percent chance of survival. If we take protective actions of parents into consideration . . . I’d say, that factor should probably double the foal’s chances, so then we have a final number of roughly seventy-four point six percent chance of survival. If you round it up, that comes to seventy-five percent chance. It’s possible, bordering on likely.”

“That seems to be the likely answer then.” Trooper said, “Follow along with me. The family reunion happens, all the family members arrive and everypony is having a great time, then a tornado forms in the very field they are in. The mares panic and try to protect their foals while the fathers try to break up the tornado. One of the mares who is carrying her foal is sucked up into the tornado and thrown off, away from the others. She curls her body around that of her foal to protect him so the debris does not kill him. She is killed by the impact of the fall when she hits the ground and the foal is found by ponies of a nearby village and placed into the local orphanage.” Trooper stopped pacing and turned to his friends, “What do you think?”

The assembly was quiet for a while, everypony was busy eating and thinking.

Finally Dr. Mend spoke up, “It’s possible, although that exact scenario is questionable. I do see it as a possibility. There seems to be two little pieces of the puzzle missing though. If the ponies of Haysburg found Valiant, how did he get his name if

his mother was already dead? For one, and for two, why didn't he mention anypony telling him how he was found?"

Trooper shrugged,  
"Since I do not yet know the exact details, I cannot be certain, but this does seem to be the most likely scenario. I suppose we shall have to wait and see what I remember as we continue on."

"Speaking of continuing," Sea Blue spoke up, "We need to get moving."

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Triage wandered around Haysburg, asking every pony she knew if they had seen Molasses or what had become of him. Thus far, she had met very limited success. She decided to head on over to the orphanage and ask Miss Heartfelt about the slow colt. As she approached the two story building, Triage got her first good look at the damage it had sustained the previous night. The slanted tile roof had been ripped open with a large enough hole that a full grown pony could easily fit through without touching the sides. There were already ponies working on fixing the roof but the danger remained, the gryphons could return and attack again.

There had already been two other attacks; each time the gryphons tried to take fillies or colts. The possible reasons for the predators wanting the young ponies made Triage shudder. They had already lost two colts and five fillies to the gryphons and none of the youngsters had been heard from since. The nets that the ponies had used the previous night had been Searcher's idea and they worked well, just not well enough. The fact was, the ponies of Haysburg were not prepared to handle any kind of attack. Triage arrived at the front door of the orphanage and knocked politely.

Moments later, a chocolate colored colt answered the door with little Damson bouncing playfully on his broad shoulders, Triage smiled at having finally located the rotund young Earth pony,  
"There you are, Molasses. Your friend Surf was wondering what happened to you."

"Who is it, Molasses?" asked an older mare's voice from within the building.

Molasses turned his head and answered her, but Damson spoke first,



“It’s Tree-age from the clinic, Miss Heartfelt!”

Molasses smiled and stepped back, holding the door for Triage, “Always be polite to mares. Hold the door for them and offer your seat if they’re standing.” he said quietly.

Triage entered the orphanage, calling for Heartfelt, “I need to speak to you as soon as possible, Heartfelt. Some things have happened that I think you should know about.”

Molasses quietly closed the front door while Triage waited for Heartfelt. Triage looked around, remembering where everything was. The front door led to the long foyer, which had two doors lining each wall, on either side. Straight back from the front door was the stairway leading up to the different rooms for the various ages and genders of the orphans. The first door on the left was Heartfelt’s office and the small library she kept for the orphans. The second door was Heartfelt’s bedroom and the nursery for when newborn foals came to the orphanage. The first door on the right was the room where prospective parents would get to know the filly or colt they were thinking of adopting. The second door on the right was the kitchen for the orphanage.

Going up the stairs, there were four more doors, two set against each wall just like the first floor. The stairs went straight up the middle of the broad hallway on the second floor, dividing each side of the second floor according to gender; the left side was for fillies and the right side was for the colts. The first doors on either side were for the older orphans since they needed more space, while the second doors were the rooms for the younger ones.

Triage sighed sadly at the necessity of such an establishment, but the frequent tornados made for an unfortunately large number of fillies and colts who lost their parents each year. Heartfelt was arguably the most well-known and well-liked pony in Haysburg. Every family spent time helping her with the orphans. Their reasons for doing this were two-fold. One, every family knew the parents of at least one filly or colt who currently resided under Heartfelt’s care. Two, it was always a good idea to get to know the mare who might, at some unfortunate point in your foal’s life, end up taking care of them because you had been killed in a tornado. The end result was that Heartfelt’s orphanage was more of a village common-house

for caring for fillies and colts, and it was likewise well-funded and received frequent donations from every family in Haysburg.

Triage watched the interaction between Damson and Molasses while she waited for Heartfelt to arrive. Damson continued jumping on the pudgy colt's back as he slowly walked into the kitchen. Molasses didn't seem to mind in the least and even looked like he was walking very steadily so as not to dislodge the filly playing on his back. Damson for her part seemed to have recovered from the previous night's ordeal, none the worse for wear. Triage automatically looked the mauve filly over, looking for any possibly hidden injuries. After a brief moment, Triage decided that Damson seemed to be in perfect health aside from her tan colored mane and tail needing a good washing.

"Triage?" Heartfelt said descending the stairs, "Oh dear. Please don't tell me I have more orphans coming here after last night's attack."

Heartfelt was an older sand colored Earth pony mare. Her mane and tail were peach colored and her cutie-mark was of a foal, bundled up and left on a doorstep.

Triage shook her head,  
"Thank the light, no. There were only two injuries sustained last night, both of which were received saving one of your orphans. I'm here because the two stallions who were injured were the ones who found Molasses two days ago. They were already on their way here."

"Oh," Heartfelt fussed, "I'm sorry I haven't had the time to go visit them, but I've been busy here tending to the orphans. I promise I'll come by later on."

"I'm afraid you'll only be able to see one of them. The other one sustained serious injuries. He's suffering from multiple skull fractures and almost all the skin on his back was peeled away on the road. I'm really hoping he didn't suffer much muscle damage. He's still asleep right now." Triage reported.

"I do hope he makes it. Is there anything I can do?" Heartfelt asked.

"I need to talk to you in your office, Heartfelt. It's important." Triage said seriously.

Heartfelt's face registered puzzlement, but she led Triage into her small office/library and closed the door behind Triage, "What's wrong, Triage?" she asked.

Triage drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, "Before I say anything else, I need you to promise me you won't say or do anything after I've told you."

"Alright, Triage, I promise. Now, what's all this about?" Heartfelt asked.

"It's about one of the stallions, the one who's suffering from the skull fractures . . . He's royal blue with a light brown mane and tail." Triage said carefully.

Heartfelt was quiet for a moment; suddenly her eyes went wide as she held her right hoof to her chest, "Vagabond." she whispered, "I . . . Are you sure? I mean really, really sure, Triage?"

Triage swallowed and nodded, "Yes. I'm certain. It's him."

Heartfelt lapsed into silence, staring off into space, so Triage continued, "His wings are gone and his cutie-mark has changed, but it's him. By the light, it's him."

Heartfelt's head snapped up, focusing on the unicorn, "Who else knows?"

"Of the ponies from Haysburg, only Mill Treader and my sister know. The other stallion, Surf & Turf knows and I think Molasses knows too. Surf & Turf used his name. He said that Vagabond has been forgiven, that he was coming back here to try to make things right by asking for forgiveness." Triage related.

"He's been forgiven?" Heartfelt asked, "After what happened to Arabesque? She forgave him?"

Triage nodded solemnly,  
“That’s the story so far.”

“Take me to him.” Heartfelt ordered, “For the sake of all that’s good, Triage, take me to him! I have to see him!”

“Please calm down, Heartfelt . . .” Triage began.

“You don’t understand!” Heartfelt cried, “I know him! He never meant to hurt Arabesque! He was in love with her, he’d never do such a thing on purpose! Please, Triage!” she begged tearfully, “Let me see him! Oh, please let me see him before everypony knows! They’ll kill him!”

Triage’s horn lit up, closing the older mare’s mouth gently,  
“Not so loud!” she whispered hoarsely, “I’ve been keeping this quiet, don’t blow it now! Just calm down and listen to me.”

Heartfelt’s eyes continued to water, but she nodded in acquiescence; Triage released the older mare’s muzzle and continued,  
“Just stay calm for the moment. No pony can see him right now, he’s still in critical condition. Even if they did, they wouldn’t be able to tell it’s him. His head is bandaged, his flank is covered, and his wings are gone, not a single soul would be able to recognize him. I’ll come and get you the moment he wakes up, but for now, you’re just going to have to trust me. I’m headed over to talk to Searcher right after I leave here. He’s been talking about forgiveness and this can’t be a coincidence that Vagabond’s come back now. The timing is just too perfect. If I can get Searcher on our side, he’ll probably have Colossus and Birdie watch over . . . him until he heals. I don’t like Birdie, but no pony is going to go near him if she’s there.”

“I don’t like Birdie, but Searcher and Colossus seem to have good hearts. I agree, Triage, I think it’s his best chance right now.” Heartfelt admitted,  
“Even if you do convince Searcher to help, there’s no way even Birdie and Colossus could handle two-thirds of Haysburg. If it comes to a physical struggle, which side do you think Miller and your sister will take? No pony would dare to injure either you or Trauma. You’re the only two medically trained ponies the village has.”

“Miller would probably be willing to stand for him. Trauma on the other hoof,” Triage shrugged, “I don’t know. She feels very strongly about what

happened. If I had to make a guess, I'd say she would probably choose to remain neutral and just stay out of the whole thing. You're forgetting several other ponies though. Surf & Turf has already shown that he's willing to go all the way for what he believes is right. You'll stand up for him, I know you will, no matter what the odds are; and I don't think we should count out Molasses either. Most of the ponies know and like him, especially the colts and fillies."

"Triage, please," Heartfelt said, "I'll stand up for him, but I can't put myself in danger. Too many little lives depend on me here. I can't sacrifice one at the expense of the others, it's like asking a mother to choose which of her foals will die. You can't ask me to do that."

Triage nodded,  
"I understand. I need to go find Searcher now. Please keep this to yourself for now. Light knows there will be a point where we can't hide him any longer. Thank you for listening to me, though."

Heartfelt opened the door, ushering Triage out of her office,  
"Any time, Triage. You can always come to me, you know that."

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Birdie strode into the Haysburg clinic and headed straight back to the Intensive Care Unit, Trauma saw her,  
"Stop right there!" she ordered rising from her seat, "What do you think you're doing?" she asked boldly, "No pony is allowed back there! The patient needs his rest!"

Birdie stopped and turned her head toward the unicorn nurse,  
Trauma walked right up to the silent pegasus,  
"You don't scare me! Lay a single hoof on me and you'll have all of Haysburg come down on top of you like a ton of bricks! You are not, I repeat not, going back there, do you hear me Birdie?"

Birdie remained silent and utterly motionless beneath her cloak and veil, Trauma couldn't decide whether she was being challenged or ignored,  
"Excuse me?" she asked petulantly, "Did you hear me under there? Do I need to repeat myself? Maybe I need to be more specific? You are free to visit the other patient if you wish, or you can wander around anywhere

there isn't a sign that says 'clinic personnel only', but you can't go into the Intensive Care Unit!"

"Sounds like nopony told you yet Trauma." Colossus said starting down the hallway, a big goofy grin plastered all over his face, "Searcher asked Birdie and I to keep an eye on the stallion in the I.C.U. and make sure he isn't disturbed. We're not going to be jumping on him or anything so take it easy. We're perfectly willing to wash up or wear scrubs or whatever you feel necessary, but we really do need to be in there with him." Colossus stopped in front of Trauma and chuckled, "From the look on your face, I'd say I don't need to be any more specific about the details."

Trauma gritted her teeth,  
"I don't know what you're talking about, Colossus."

Colossus smiled down at the much smaller unicorn mare,  
"Triage told Searcher about the story behind the stallion in the I.C.U. She also said that you and Mill Treader knew about him too. I'd rather not have to spell it out in public. I know you know what I'm talking about."

Trauma frowned deeply, but nodded,  
"I don't like this, but I agree that he does need some form of protection." she turned and began walking down toward the I.C.U., "You're going to need to wash up before you go inside. The I.C.U. is a 'clean room' so if you leave, you need to wash up again before you go back inside . . ."

Trauma continued talking as Birdie and Colossus followed her back toward the I.C.U. where Valiant slept.

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"I'm surprised he isn't in the Morgue." Colossus said as he stared at Valiant, "From what Trauma said, he's lucky to be alive." turning to his compatriot, Colossus mused, "I'd say he's almost as tough as you, Birdie."

Birdie cast a narrow-eyed look at the immense Earth pony, but said nothing; Colossus spoke for her, as he often did,  
"I know, I know," he said, "You'd normally mangle anypony who said that to you. I'm not making fun of you though, Birdie. You know I don't do that. I know you're tough and I'm not arguing that fact, but I'm worried about you."

I've known you long enough to be able to tell when something's bothering you. If you want to talk about it, you know I'll listen."

Birdie remained silent, but her gaze softened; Colossus knew it to be a sign that it was alright to pry but she probably wouldn't speak, "Are you upset about the gryphon attack? Look, I know you wanted to be there, but Searcher needed us to act as scouts last night and you're the only pony with wings in Haysburg. I would say you were the only pegasus, but we have to take this guy into account."

Birdie turned and looked back to Valiant's sleeping form; a light went off in Colossus' mind, "Wait a minute here. You're not thinking about this guy are you?" he asked, "Come on Birdie, you've got enough troubles without worrying about him . . . "

"Common ground." Birdie said quietly.

Colossus carefully hid his immense surprise; Birdie had a beautiful, sweet, soft voice, but he had only heard her speak a few times since he'd met her and Searcher three years previous.

"Why is he THAT important to you?" Colossus asked, "You don't know him, besides I don't see that you two have that much in common. Is it because he's a pegasus?"

Birdie remained quiet, so Colossus knew that wasn't the right answer, "Is it because he's a killer?"

Faster than the eye could see, Birdie's hoof slammed into Colossus' right shoulder, leaving a semi-circle of blood behind in the shape of her shoe, "Ouch!" Colossus cried, "Blast it, Birdie! That hurt! What did you do that for?"

Birdie shot Colossus an angry look, but said nothing.

Colossus rubbed his shoulder ruefully, "O.K. so he's not a killer. Is it because he's been maimed like you have?"

Birdie didn't move a muscle.

"Oh forget it Birdie." Colossus said, "I'm not angry, but when you actually want to talk about it, let me know. I need to go to the bathroom and get this cleaned up. Make sure he doesn't go anywhere while I'm gone alright?"

Birdie never even so much as twitched an eyelash.

Colossus left the I.C.U. leaving Birdie alone with Valiant.

As he walked around, trying to find Trauma, so she could clean up his shoulder, Colossus's mind returned to when he had first heard Birdie speak. He thought about his friend, she was aggressive, she was impulsive, she was introverted to an extreme, but underneath her fierce, quiet exterior, Colossus had gotten to know who she truly was. Colossus had seen her without her cloak.

Birdie's speed had saved Searcher's life once when they had been exploring some of the ruins to the north of Haysburg. A cave-in began right above Searcher. It would have crushed him, but Birdie launched herself into him and shoved him out of the way. She had been struck with several large rocks and had been knocked unconscious. Searcher and Colossus had to remove her cloak and veil to check her for injuries. Neither stallion had been prepared for what they saw. Colossus' mind replayed the events as he walked.

(Begin Flashback)

"Come on, Colossus! We have to make sure she's alright!" Searcher said frantically.

His horn lit up. He lifted the cloak and veil from Birdie's limp body and tossed them aside.

Colossus' breath caught in his throat as his eyes fell on Birdie's body. Neither pony could find the mental fortitude to utter a single syllable. They just stared. Time seemed to vanish as their eyes took in the sight before them. Neither stallion had any idea how long they stared for, but Birdie eventually stirred. Both stallions tried to scramble to put Birdie's cloak and



veil back on, but it was too late. Birdie's eyes snapped open, her gaze freezing Colossus and Searcher where they stood.

She looked around and spotted her veil and cloak off to the side. Her eyes widened in horror, tears instantly spilling from the grey orbs. She whipped her head back to Colossus and Searcher, expression terrified. Before either stallion could utter a single word, Birdie let out a heart-rending cry and sprung from her prone position on the floor. She winged straight into the darkest corner of the area, where two walls met, and curled up as if trying to shield herself.

Searcher was the first to recover from his shock, "Birdie?" he called softly, "Are you alright?"

Birdie didn't respond.

Searcher took a few steps toward the sobbing pegasus, "Birdie, I need to know that you're alright."

The pegasus only sobbed harder.

"Birdie, it's alright." Searcher said soothingly, "We're just worried about you . . ."

"I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU COME ANY CLOSER!" Birdie snarled tearfully, "I WON'T LET YOU HURT ME!"

"Birdie," Searcher said taking another step, "We're not going to hurt you . . ."

"LIAR!" she cried, "THEY ALL SAY THAT AND THEY ALL LIED! STAY BACK!"

Searcher took another slow step toward the hysterical pegasus.

In a flash of motion, Birdie took to the air, hovering above the two stallions, back pressed to the ceiling, "NO! STAY BACK!" she screamed.

"Birdie, it's alright." Colossus said soothingly.

“NO!” she screamed.

Birdie’s voice was becoming hoarse; her screams lowered to pitiful sobs,

“Please,” she begged, “Just leave me alone.”

“The only thing we’re thinking is that you might be hurt. We just want to be sure you’re alright.” Searcher said.

“Liar,” she sobbed, “You don’t want me to be alright. No one ever does, not gryphons, not ponies, no one. Just leave me alone.”

“We can’t, Birdie.” Colossus said, “We care about you.”

“Birdie,” Searcher said cautiously, “I’m going to make sure you’re not injured, one way or the other. I’ll bring you down with my magic if I have to. I don’t want to, but I’m not going to stop until you’re down here.”

Birdie let out a choked sob,  
“Please,” she begged quietly, “Please don’t.”

“I have to.” Searcher said, “I’ll ask you one last time. Trust us, come down here so we can make sure you’re alright.”

“Never.” Birdie sobbed, “I’d rather die.”

“Then I’m sorry for this.” Searcher said softly.

The unicorn stallion’s horn lit up with a soft yellow aura; an identical aura enveloped the obscured form of Birdie. The pegasus seemed to just give up. Her whole body went limp as she continued to sob, crying like she had just been given a death-sentence. Searcher slowly lowered her down to the ground and set the weeping pegasus down gently. Birdie merely covered her face with her hooves and continued to cry.

Colossus slowly approached her,  
“Birdie,” he said as softly as he could, “I’m going to touch you. Just tell me if anywhere hurts, alright?”

“Do what you want to me,” Birdie whispered, “They all do. I won’t fight you.”

Colossus reached out his hoof and gently touched Birdie’s shoulder, where a rock had struck her,  
“Does it hurt here?” he asked.

Birdie flinched, but said nothing. Becoming more bold, Colossus laid down next to the pegasus and began slowly and carefully prodding the different areas of Birdie’s body, where appropriate, doing his best to feel out any broken bones. He couldn’t figure out if anything was broken or not. At a complete loss, Colossus rose to his hooves. Birdie flinched, but said nothing. Colossus motioned toward Birdie’s cloak and veil. Searcher levitated the two items over to Colossus.

The immense Earth pony gently draped the cloak over the sobbing pegasus,  
“Here’s your cloak back, Birdie. We only took it off to see if you were alright. I’m sorry if we upset you, we didn’t mean to.”

Birdie never moved a muscle.

Searcher walked up and levitated the veil up and over Birdie’s face, moving her hooves gently away,  
“We’ll never hurt you Birdie. You’re our friend, we care about you.”

Colossus gingerly helped Birdie to her hooves,  
“Birdie, we don’t care what you look like.”

Birdie hadn’t spoken more than two words since then, but she stayed with Searcher and Colossus, so they figured she must have believed them.

(End Flashback)

“Colossus?” Trauma asked, approaching the gigantic Earth pony, “What happened to your shoulder? Did Birdie do that? I’m going to show that little psychopath a thing or two!” the nurse said heading back toward the I.C.U.

“I fell.” Colossus said.

Trauma stopped and turned around slowly,

“What could you have possibly fallen onto that just happens to look exactly like one of Birdie’s steel shoes?”

Colossus sighed,  
“Will you please just help me clean this thing?”

Trauma pursed her lips,  
“I don’t like this, Colossus. I don’t like it one bit, but if you don’t want to do anything about it I can’t make you. I’ll tell you one thing though, if I ever see another injury like this again, I’m going to . . . “

“I said something really stupid and hurtful to her. She was justified, trust me.” Colossus said.

“I still don’t like it Colossus.” Trauma said, “Well come on, I’ll get you cleaned up.”

Colossus followed the nurse down the hallway, still holding his shoulder.

# Chapter 14

“O.K. let’s recap,” Rainbow Dash said, “Move your hooves and body, so you can use your opponent’s momentum against them.”

“Do not try to force anything.” Trooper added, “Gently guide and redirect their movements away from yourself. Imagine it is a dance, where the pony or creature trying to hurt you is your dance partner, you just have to move quickly. Think of it as you trying to help them by guiding them, gently push them farther in the direction they are already headed.”

“I . . . think I understand.” Fluttershy said nervously, “But couldn’t I hurt somepony if I move them around like that?”

“Not if you do it carefully. As long as you can redirect them correctly, the only thing that might happen would be that they trip and fall. Watch, Rainbow Dash is going to attack me and I am going to redirect her movements.” Trooper said.

The pegasi had decided to conduct their ongoing practice sessions on the ground since Fluttershy was such a weak flier. Trooper and Rainbow Dash stood several paces apart, facing each other, both in a prepared stance. Dash darted forward in a charge. She was coming in with her head down, charging like a bull. As she approached she thrust out her left shoulder and turned her head so as to strike him and throw him back with that side of her body. Trooper waited until she was close, then acted. He lowered his head and leaned to the side, stepping out to his right and bracing. Dash’s momentum sped her right into him. The royal blue pegasus used his head and shoulder to guide Rainbow’s body around and off to his left while he adjusted his flank and hind legs, turning to keep her in front of him. Dash slid against Trooper’s side and found herself still charging off, away from him.

Rainbow Dash stopped and turned around,  
“See, Fluttershy, nothing to it.”

“You are a reed in the wind,” Trooper said, “That is what my instructor always said. You bend and sway, gently bending so as not to break. You know how there are never any jagged rocks in a stream? The rocks have been worn away by the water leaving only smooth rounded edges so that the water can flow smoothly around them. Come on over here and I will show you.”

Fluttershy gulped quietly and timidly approached the larger stallion then took her ready stance, Trooper began, “I am going to move as if I am about to hit you. Do not worry, I will not, but the action is what counts. Use what you already know to read any broadcasts I give off and then redirect the blow away from yourself.”

Fluttershy nodded nervously. Trooper was standing right in front of her, she was not used to dodging in such close proximity and without as much time to prepare. She watched Trooper carefully, studying every inch of him that she could see. The slightest twitch of movement caught her eye, *‘Left side, muscles above his leg and on his knee. He’s going to pull it up in a . . . what was it . . . a hook.’* the thoughts sped through her mind in a millisecond, *‘Use the momentum,’* she thought. Her mind sped up and Trooper’s movements became sluggish, *‘Trooper saw which direction Rainbow Dash was going and kept her directed that way, but away from himself. I should be able to do the same.’*

Fluttershy ducked her head under and around the swing then stepped to the left, turning the rest of her body as she did. She raised her left leg and gently pushed Trooper’s hoof farther in the direction it was already heading, then stepped back still facing him. Trooper over-extended and stumbled forward, his balance thrown off.

Trooper took several steps and regained his balance then turned back to the custard pegasus mare, “Exactly right, Fluttershy. Were you inclined to be the fighting type, I would say you have a natural gift for it. Unfortunately, I cannot use such gentle movements. I have to be a physical barrier and so I have to block and strike instead of dodging and redirecting all the time. If you will excuse us, Rainbow Dash and I need to get in some practice ourselves before breakfast.”

Fluttershy nodded and stepped back to watch the two blue hued pegasi face off. Rainbow Dash and Trooper squared off, this time already in close quarters. Dash began with a jab of her right leg. Trooper raised his left hoof and angled the blow away from himself then, using his right leg, he grabbed Dash by the same leg she swung at him and twisted his body. Dash stumbled to the side, but used the momentum to continue the movement until her flank was exposed to Trooper's face. Dash kicked out with her left hind leg. Trooper held up his hooves and blocked the kick then held onto the leg with his fore hooves and spun again in the opposite direction, using his side and flank to push Dash to the side. His balance was precarious and Dash took advantage of it. She lifted her other hind leg and used the weight of her body to pull Trooper forward. Trooper fell forward, landing on his face then turned and rolled away from Dash, just as she spun around to face him once more.

They squared off again, *'For a mare I am supposed to be protecting, she certainly does attack a lot. She needs to know how to defend herself too, but how am I supposed to make her learn if I do not attack back? Perhaps I should let Applejack have a go at her.'* Trooper thought. Trooper took several steps back and motioned for a halt.

Rainbow Dash relaxed her stance and raised her head, "What's up Troops?" she asked.

"I believe we are too evenly matched, Rainbow Dash. Neither of us can get any better unless we switch opponents. I think Applejack expressed an interest in challenging you, did she not?" Trooper hinted.

The cyan pegasus smirked, "Yeah she did. Good idea there Troops."

Trooper watched Dash fly off to where Applejack was sparring with Dr. Mend. The two Earth ponies stopped and spoke with Dash for a few moments before she and Applejack faced off.

Dr. Mend trotted over to Trooper, "I guess that means you and me, huh?"

"I suppose it does." Trooper said smiling to himself, *'Mission accomplished.'*

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Valiant stirred and slowly awoke, '*I really need to stop hitting my head.*' he thought. He cracked open his eyes and looked around, blinking owlshly, moving only his eyes. He easily recognized the inside of a medical facility as being his current surroundings. He tried to raise his head but found it securely strapped down. He tried moving his hooves but found they were likewise held immobile.

"Hello?" he called, "Is anypony there?"

"Hey there buddy!" an immensely deep voice called from somewhere nearby, "Glad to see you're awake. Did you sleep well?"

"Is the filly alright?" Valiant asked, knowing where his priorities lay.

Colossus answered as he approached Valiant's bed,  
"She's fine. You got pretty messed up saving her though. Are you feeling alright?"

Valiant was puzzled, the voice sounded not only friendly but cheerful,  
"I guess so, but where are you and why am I strapped down?"

A heavily muscled, mountain of an Earth pony strode up to the side of his bed,  
"Heh," he chuckled, "Sorry about that. You're strapped down because the nurses said you had to be, so you wouldn't hurt yourself further. Sorry, but I can't unbuckle you till the nurses say it's O.K."

"How long have I been out?" Valiant asked.

"This is the morning of day three for you here in Haysburg." Colossus said.

"Who runs the clinic now?" Valiant asked.

"Triage and Trauma, they're a pair of unicorns." Colossus explained.

Valiant chuckled softly,



“Not only that, they’re also sisters. Is Trauma still so . . . outspoken?” he asked, not realizing that a quick mind would easily catch on to the fact that he wasn’t a newcomer.

His mind was blurry and he still couldn’t think straight. Fortunately Colossus wasn’t the type to use it against him.

Colossus burst out laughing,  
“Oh yeah! You should hear her sometime! I think she’s got a permanent chip on her shoulder or something!”

“Believe me, I know; I grew up with her and Triage. My name’s Valiant, by the way.” he introduced.

“I’m Colossus. You can’t see her, but there’s another pony here too, her name’s Birdie. Don’t expect her to say much. She prefers to stay quiet.” Colossus explained.

Valiant quirked an eyebrow,  
“Birdie? That’s a pretty unusual name.”

“She’s an unusual girl, but it’s not my place to talk about that. I’ll let her tell you if she feels like it.” Colossus said.

“Could you run and get Triage for me, Colossus? I’d rather talk to her than Trauma right now.” Valiant asked.

“Sure thing.” Colossus said, “I’ll be right back so don’t go anywhere.”

Valiant smiled at the playful jab,  
“I’ll think about it.”

Valiant heard Colossus’ heavy hooves leading away from his bed, then the sound of a swinging door closing. He blinked a few times trying to clear his head. The entire room was completely silent, *‘Colossus sure was friendly. I guess he doesn’t know about me or something. Triage and Trauma have to know by now though. Wow, how stupid can you get? I was blabbing like I’ve lived here all my life. Colossus has to be really dense or something, any other pony would have picked right up on everything I said. I wonder, does anypony still talk about what happened? Maybe that’s why*

*Colossus didn't seem to be in the know. Wait a second, why are there two ponies in here with me? Colossus said there was another pony in here, but I can't even hear any breathing.'*

"Your name's Birdie right?" he asked.

After receiving no response, he tried again,  
"Uh could you come over to where I can see you?" he asked.

Valiant heard the slow, distinctive sounds of metal-shod hooves clanking on the tile floor. His ears guided his eyes. A yellow veil came into view, followed by a pair of eyes that made Valiant's blood run cold. The eyes were emotionless grey, deep and focused; penetrating almost as if she were looking straight into your soul, judging you. Behind those eyes though, was what truly frightened him, Valiant perceived a depth of raw emotion that ran straight to the soul. It was carefully concealed behind the emotionless mask, but he could sense it just the same. The waves and waves of emotional and mental agony sent shudders through his body. Never before had he ever seen anything so deep and profound; it was like looking at a pony who wanted to die, but refused to give up. The sight made the pegasus stallion feel queasy.

"Sweet mercy," he whispered before thinking about the words.

Birdie's eyes narrowed. She turned and clanked away from the side of his bed, still maintaining her silence.

"Wait!" Valiant called, "Please wait!"

He could no longer see her, but her steps had stopped,  
"I'm sorry," he apologized, "Please come back."

The steps came back and soon Valiant could see her veil once more, Birdie's eyes were still narrowed,  
"I'm sorry for saying that."

Birdie didn't respond in any fashion, so Valiant continued,  
"It's just your eyes; they're so startling. I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings."

Birdie's eyes softened slightly.

"If you don't mind me asking," Valiant began, "Why are you and Colossus in here with me?"

Birdie didn't say a word.

"Alright then. Colossus did say you didn't talk much. Would you be willing to nod your head if I ask you some questions?" Valiant asked.

Birdie nodded once very slightly, it could have almost been Valiant's imagination.

"Do you know about me?" he asked.

Birdie nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Does the rest of Haysburg know?" he continued.

Birdie shook her head slightly.

In a flash of movement, Birdie disappeared from Valiant's field of view. Seconds later, he heard the doors to the room swing open followed by several sets of hooves.

Colossus came back into Valiant's view,  
"Yep, he's still awake."

*'This is it.'* Triage thought, steeling her nerves, *'I still can't believe he came back after everything that happened with Arabesque.'* the thought of the Arabesque's death still upset her, *'Heartfelt said he was in love with her. Valiant, what were you thinking?'*

Triage walked into Valiant's view, on his left, her expression was empty,  
"Have you been forgiven?" she asked sternly, "I need to know, right now. Have you been forgiven for what you did?"

Valiant nodded,  
"I have, Triage. After five years, Arabesque forgave me. I had to die to do it, but yes she did."

Triage's face showed no emotion,  
"Don't play games with me." she said, "I'm risking my neck for you. I need to know for sure. Trauma and I have heard of the Valiant-Mend Technique, but I have to be certain."

"I swear to you, I'm not playing any games. It's true. How do you think I'm alive after I already said I died? I'm living proof that it works. I was dead for two days before I was revived." Valiant explained.

Triage carefully examined Valiant's face for any sign of dishonesty. She found nothing but open honesty, *'He's not lying.'* she thought, *'As hard as it may be to believe, he's telling the truth.'*

"I believe you." she said softly, her face showing the ghost of a smile,  
"Welcome back Valiant."

"You could welcome me back better if I wasn't tied down like this." Valiant said hinting at the obvious.

Triage shook her head,  
"Sorry, but you have to stay like that for a little while longer. I'm going to go get Trauma so we can change your bandages. Then we can see if we can let you up." Triage said.

"If you need help lifting him," Colossus began, "I can do it."

"I know you can, Colossus, but he needs a unicorn to lift him evenly so his back doesn't bend, it could break open his injury." Triage said.

"Do you need us to leave?" Colossus asked.

"Trauma would probably be happier if you did, just don't go very far. Could you run and get her for me please? Oh and send Heartfelt in when she arrives." Triage asked quietly so Valiant wouldn't hear.

"No problem," Colossus said turning to leave, "Come on Birdie, time to go terrorize Trauma some more."

Triage watched the two friends leave, then turned back to Valiant, the silence was awkward,  
“How have you been?” she asked, not able to think of anything else to say.

“I’ve been a lot worse.” Valiant said smiling.

Triage walked a few paces away and began preparing fresh bandages from a cart,  
“I’ll bet. How in the world did you lose your wings?”

Valiant smiled ruefully,  
“Let’s just say a bear enjoyed a full tummy after I freed him from an avalanche.”

Triage’s head snapped up,  
“How did you manage to stave off total hypovolemia? You were obviously exsanguinating from the injuries.”

Valiant rolled his eyes,  
“Still using the big words from that medical training seminar, huh? It’s a good thing I was there too, otherwise I would have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. Why don’t we just stick to simple terms, my brain is still a little foggy.”

“Fine then,” Triage said, “How did you keep from bleeding to death?”

Valiant thanked his lucky stars for the reprieve from the medical jargon and answered candidly,  
“I wrapped myself up in my blanket. Unfortunately the injuries got infected and I didn’t have any water or any of my healing potion. I was delirious by the time I reached Ponyville. I got lucky, a pegasus mare found me. She took me to a friend’s home and they had the local doctor patch me up.”

“Sounds fun.” Triage said sarcastically, “That doctor did a good job though, the stumps are barely visible.”

“You might have heard of him. He’s the other one that the Valiant-Mend Technique was named for. Doesn’t the name Mend ring any bells?” Valiant said.

"I think so . . . " Triage was interrupted by the sound of the doors swinging open.

Heartfelt walked in hurriedly, right up to Valiant's bedside, then stopped when she saw his face,  
"So it is you." she whispered, "You've come back to us."

Valiant's heart lurched in his chest,  
"How's the orphanage?" he asked, voice cracking.

Growing up, Heartfelt had been the closest thing to a 'mother figure' Valiant had. Seeing her again, nearly brought him to tears. He struggled to keep his emotions in check, but the battle was a tough one and he couldn't keep his voice from cracking.

Heartfelt smiled and leaned over to nuzzle one of the, now grown, colts she thought of as her own,  
"Is it true?" she asked, whispering in his ear, "Have you been forgiven?"

Valiant smiled,  
"Yes ma'am. That's the only reason I'd come back."

Heartfelt knew she was crying, her tears soaked Valiant's mane,  
"Five years, Valiant," she said, "Five years of not knowing what happened to you. I felt like I lost two of my own foals that day. Don't you ever do that to me again."

Valiant smiled warmly, fervently wishing he could nuzzle back his matron,  
"I never meant for it to happen in the first place. You don't have to worry anymore. I'm home."

Heartfelt laughed through her tears,  
"I know you are, Valiant." she sniffed, "I'm sorry but I can't stay for long. Molasses can watch the orphans for a little while, but the poor dear gets confused so easily."

Valiant had been concerned about what had happened to Molasses. Hearing Heartfelt say he was alright, made him feel a great deal better.

The older Earth pony mare lifted her head, wiping her eyes with a hoof,

“Come by when you can, alright? I know you’re going to have problems dealing with the rest of the village, but I’m sure it’ll work out. I have to go.” she said turning toward the doors, “I love you, Valiant. I’m so glad you’re back.”

Valiant watched her go in silence, *‘I should have known she, of all ponies, would welcome me back. Maybe this will work out after all.’* he thought.

“So,” Trauma said as she walked through the swinging doors, “He’s awake is he? Come on, out with it sister. I know you’ve been dying to ask. Has he been forgiven?”

“Same old Trauma, huh?” Valiant asked.

“I was not talking to you, thank you very much.” Trauma said, “I don’t have the right to address you directly until I know.”

“I’ve been forgiven, Trauma. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t.” Valiant said.

Trauma walked over and peered down at the royal blue pegasus stallion,

“Ballsy move, Valiant. Good luck getting the rest of the village to accept the story. Most of them like you about as much as they like tornados.”

“You never did dance around the difficult topics did you?” Valiant asked smirking.

Trauma shrugged,

“If something needs to be addressed, I address it. There’s no point in being secretive if you’re going to be talking about it.”

“How about being sensitive?” Valiant asked.

“I’m not insensitive, Valiant, I’m practical. I haven’t said a single harsh word to you yet have I? I’m blunt and to the point, I always have been, you know that. I’m sorry if it’s a painful topic for you though.” Trauma said, face softening.

"I'm just glad I have tough skin." Valiant said pouting playfully.

Trauma chuckled dryly,  
"Seems to me, the road is a bit tougher. Just ask your back. Your friend Surf was holding a heavier filly and he's not half as bad off as you are."

Valiant's ears shot forward,  
"Surf got hurt?"

"He's fine, Valiant." Trauma sighed, "That neon colored charmer was released yesterday afternoon. He's staying at the Inn right now. You and Surf did a good thing, saving those fillies, but you need to be more careful. You were almost killed."

"Better me than a filly." Valiant said.

"I don't judge one life to be more important than another. If one dies and one lives there's still the same number of ponies in the world." Trauma said.

Triage walked over, pulling a cart with her,  
"Almost ready."

"I see a difference, Trauma." Valiant said, "A filly is young. She has a full life ahead of her. She can grow up, have a great job, get married, have a family, there's no end to the possibilities."

"And that's different from you in what way?" Trauma asked, eyebrows rising, "You can invent countless potions that might save hundreds of lives. You can still get married and have a family too, you know. You always de-valued yourself, Valiant. It used to drive me crazy. You need to wake up and realize you're not worthless. If I thought you were, I wouldn't be here tending to you. Now hold still. We need to change your bandages."

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"Bloody, fast-healing pegasus." Trauma grumbled as she walked out of the I.C.U.



Searcher, Colossus, and Birdie were standing just outside the swinging doors,  
“Can we go in now?” Searcher asked.

“When did you get here?” Trauma asked Searcher.

“Birdie came and got me when Colossus was fetching you.” Searcher said.

“Yes, yes.” Trauma said waving a hoof, “I’m heading out to get his discharge papers in order. You’re going to have your work cut out for you. When he steps out of this clinic, all of Haysburg is going to have a conniption fit. Maybe I should start on a death certificate while I’m at it.”

Searcher led Colossus and Birdie through the doors to the I.C.U. Triage was wrapping fresh bandages around Valiant’s mid-riff and head, but the stallion was standing on his own. The unicorn mare was having a slow time of it. Valiant’s back had begun healing quickly and most of his skull fractures had almost completely mended, but the scabs on his back might still break open. The two unicorn sisters both agreed he could be discharged, but with certain conditions applied; conditions such as fresh bandages for several more days.

Triage didn’t notice the three visitors and Valiant had his eyes closed, “That potion of yours works wonders, Valiant. Trauma and I found a way to condense it so that it works more intensely, but I never thought it could do something like this. Then again, we don’t tend to have a plethora of extreme cases. When a tornado hits, we get either cold bodies or minor injuries. There’s no middle ground with a tornado, you’re either dead or you’re barely hurt.”

“It is indeed an impressive elixir.” Searcher said politely, “I take it this is the stallion who invented it?”

Triage turned her head and motioned the three ponies over, while she continued to work.

“I only discovered it, but yes. Who are you?” Valiant asked wincing slightly as Triage wrapped the bandage a little too tightly in a sensitive place on his back.

“Forgive me, young hero.” the unicorn said bowing, “I am called Searcher. I wanted to meet the pony who caused such an . . . episode and then had the gumption to come back and save a resident of a town that hates him. That takes a lot of guts.”

Valiant smiled mirthlessly,  
“Yeah, and they were nearly spilled out all over the road when I did it.”

“You’re too modest, forgiven one. You have character and a lot of it, to be willing to do what you did.” Searcher said.

“You obviously know about my past then.” Valiant stated, cracking open his left eye to take a look at Searcher.

Searcher nodded,  
“Indeed I do. I would have used your name but you haven’t told it to me yet.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard it by now.” Valiant said dryly, “Why the games?”

Searcher held up a hoof,  
“No games. It’s just my way of being respectful.”

“Call me Valiant, then. What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Actually, I think I can do something for you.” Searcher said approaching Valiant, “But first, I need to ask you a question. Why did you return?”

Valiant was caught off-guard by the blunt question but quickly recovered,  
“I suppose, I want to be forgiven.”

“But you already have been, haven’t you?” Searcher asked wryly.

“I mean I want to try to make things right, here is Haysburg.” Valiant said.

“You’re off to a good start then.” Searcher said walking around Valiant, “Unfortunately, I sincerely doubt that most of Haysburg’s residents would be willing to just let go of grudges they’ve been carrying around for five

years. Bluntly, dear Valiant, you need to do more to win their approval once again. To that end, I propose an idea: be seen, without being recognized.”

Searcher carefully tested the thickness of Valiant’s legs and chest, nodding to himself, *‘He’s built like an athlete. He’s got strong muscles, yet he’s still wiry and flexible. I’d say he’s a pony who knows how to handle himself, if the stories about the other night were any indication. Exactly as I thought, he can do it; he can lead Haysburg.’*

Valiant quirked an eyebrow,  
“How do you mean?” he asked.

“It’s quite simple, really. Use a disguise to hide your identity while you work in front of the public’s eye. Become the heroic icon that Haysburg needs in this time of crisis. You’ve already shown yourself to be capable, daring, and willing to do whatever it takes to protect your home. Why not continue working toward their forgiveness and getting the recognition you deserve while boosting the village’s morale while you’re at it. Colossus and Birdie are both capable in their own right and my mind is keen, not to mention your friend has his clever devices and methods. He thinks outside the box, as do you; you’ve shown that to be true already. Between all of us, we can save the village and fight off this menace to Equestria. Haysburg needs a strategist, I can fill that role easily enough, but the ponies need a leader, someone they look up to. Birdie, Colossus, and I have already shown ourselves to be useful, but not everypony trusts us. I’ve been talking about the light for a while now, but darkness still festers in far too many hearts for my words to reach them and have any discernable effect. They need reassurance and strong leadership. You and your friend can give them exactly that. You’ll need to use a different name of course; something symbolic and powerful, while still seeming to be accessible.” Searcher paused for dramatic effect, “What say you, Natival?”

“Natal?” Valiant asked, “That’s ancient Equestrian for ‘shadow’. Are you sure that’s appropriate?”

“Absolutely,” Searcher enthused, “Without light there can be no shadows and to have a shadow, something or somepony, has to be standing with light at their back. That’s how Haysburg will see you, as a hero, silhouetted in light, defending them from the beasts from beyond the mountains. What better way to make you sound both approachable and still heroic? Every

pony casts a shadow, giving you an air of familiarity, something they can identify with, yet the name makes you sound mysterious.” Searcher chuckled, “Plus, it’s rather ironic that all the letters in your real name just happen to be in ‘Natal’ as well.”

“What kind of a disguise am I supposed to wear anyway?” Valiant asked.

“Surely you have something with you; a cloak, a poncho, something. I can make you an enchanted leg ring to hold the disguise for when you need to don it quickly. I need to stay as anonymous as possible though. If it became widely known that I helped you, it would taint you in the eyes of my opposition.” Searcher said.

Valiant’s thoughts turned to the suite that Eve . . . Luna had her friend custom make for he and the other stallions,  
“I do have something, but my face, mane, and tail will be visible. If I could get some black cloth, I could probably tie up and cover my mane and tail. I suppose I could wrap the cloth around my face too.”

“That,” Searcher said, “I can get a hold of easily enough. I can start work on the enchanted leg ring for you today. If you wish, I can even throw some protective enchantments onto it.”

“What do you get out of all this?” Valiant asked suspiciously, “You’re willing to go through a lot of trouble for a former Vagabond.”

“I won’t lie, my motives are somewhat selfish. I’m an archeologist, by trade. If the gryphons take Haysburg, I will have no good place to ferret out the ancient secrets of Equestria. I’ll lose access to the most powerful artifacts and ancient knowledge to be found in all of Equestria. I do care about the ponies of Haysburg though, so don’t think I’m completely self-centered.” Searcher explained.

“Speaking of which, why are the gryphons attacking Haysburg? In the time I lived here, there were never any incidents that even came close to what happened the other night. What changed?” Valiant asked.

Searcher looked boldly at the pegasus stallion,  
“Do you have any idea what they’re capable of, Valiant?” Searcher asked.

“Ask Birdie sometime. She’ll tell you what they’re capable of: cruelty, torture, starvation, all manner of depravity you have nightmares about. I called one of them out. I asked it what it would do if one gryphon killed another, even by accident. Do you know what it told me? It said they would kill the killer, thereby becoming a killer themselves. I know my history, Valiant. Do you know what caused the Gryphon War? A gryphon killed a mare while it was out hunting and the mare’s husband witnessed the whole thing. It was no accident either. The gryphon intentionally hunted a pony for food. They eat us, Valiant! They may act civilized on the outside, but on the inside, they’re animals! What kind of monster eats meat anyway? Beasts! Eating meat is bad enough, but murdering an innocent pony, a sentient being who thinks and feels, who has hopes and dreams? Unforgivable!” Searcher spat.

Calming himself somewhat, Searcher continued, “It’s not my place to give you specifics, but I’ll tell you this. Four years ago, I was doing research in the Razor Wing Mountains. I was inside a cave which led to an ancient, abandoned pony settlement inside one mountain when I heard a scream from the mouth of the cave. I went to investigate and stumbled upon a scene which will haunt me till the end of my days. A gryphon had chased Birdie into the cave and the two of them were struggling violently. I couldn’t make her out very well, but her veil and cloak were torn in several places and heavily stained with blood. The gryphon was scrabbling after her like a possessed beast, while Birdie bravely tried to fight the fiend off. I managed to reach her and teleport both of us away. The gryphon flew all around the mountain, screeching something I couldn’t make out. Do you know what emotion that screech sounded of? Sorrow. It was sad to have lost its slave. We had to hide while we snuck away through the mountains. It took days and I lost all of the equipment I had at the time. We nearly died from exposure to the elements, but I would do it all over again. Birdie won’t tell me exactly what happened, but I respect her enough not to pry. I never saw what she looked like until she saved my life. When I tell you they abused her, I’m making such an understatement, you wouldn’t believe! She’s been through more hardships than most twenty ponies I’ve ever heard of. Gryphons are vile, Valiant. They can’t be trusted. I don’t know about everypony else, but I know I don’t go around eating my neighbors. Why do you think they’ve begun taking fillies and colts? The meat is more tender, and younger slaves will last longer! That’s why! I swear by the Light, they will not have Haysburg! No pony else will have to

suffer like Birdie has as long as we can help it. This ends here! WE stop it RIGHT HERE!"

Valiant felt Searcher's words stir something inside of him, "You make a sound argument Searcher, but there's one more thing you need to know about me. I don't kill. What happened with Arabesque was an accident and I won't do it again, nor will I allow anypony I see, to do it either."

Searcher nodded, "I can understand that, I suppose, but these beasts need to be taught a lesson."

"They can't learn anything if they're dead, can they?" Valiant countered.

"Others will see and learn . . . " Searcher began.

Valiant cut him off, "NO!" he said boldly, "No killing! I've seen enough of it! You have no idea what it does to you! I had to kill a rabid Lupus once and it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. My soul shattered when Arabesque died because of me. It's a dark path from which there is little, if any hope of redemption. No killing. I'm not going to bend on this, Searcher, and that's final."

Searcher's mind recoiled, *'He killed a Lupus? What kind of a warrior is he?'*

"Alright then," Searcher conceded, "No killing."

"I'll do it then." Valiant said, "I'll stand with you."

"You aren't alone, dude." Surf said from the doorway, "Trauma came and got me. I totally heard the whole thing bro and I'm with you. Next time they attack, we'll be ready. Teach me how to fight, Valiant. I've seen the kinds of things you can do."

"You're right Surf, but you're thinking on too small a scale. We need to train every pony in Haysburg how to fight. With a whole village of trained,

fighting ponies to contend with, those gryphons won't know what hit them, especially if they're as strong and tough as Earth ponies." Valiant said.

"Our weakness remains the same, though." Searcher pointed out, "Gryphons can fly."

"True enough," Valiant admitted, "But I'd like to see any gryphon try to deal with an Earth pony that can fly and drop weighted nets onto them."

Surf & Turf leapt into the air,  
"Dude! That is an awesome idea!"

Valiant looked squarely at the small gathering of ponies,  
"From now on, call me Natival." he said smiling, "Where are my saddlebags?"

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Mill Treader watched from a narrow alleyway as Searcher, Colossus, and Birdie left the clinic,  
"What were THEY doing there?" the red clay pony asked himself, "Do they know?"

Miller watched as Searcher led his two 'minions' into the tailor shop. Mill Treader had dubbed Colossus and Birdie 'minions' after Birdie had beat him and forced him to get over a hundred stitches in their confrontation some weeks prior. He hated the cloaked pegasus with fiery passion. He wasn't prejudiced against pegasi, but Birdie had over-reacted when he challenged Searcher and he wasn't the type to let something like that go easily. He kept up his vigil until the three re-emerged from the tailor shop. Searcher passed something dark to Colossus, then he and Birdie walked off toward the Mayor's office. Colossus entered the clinic and came back out a few minutes later then headed to the Mayor's office as well.

Mill Treader waited for another minute before venturing out of his hiding place and toward the clinic. Something strange was going on and he wanted to know what it was. Ever since Searcher and his minions showed up, Miller had been getting a bad vibe from the trio, especially Searcher. There was just something about him the Earth pony stallion couldn't identify, that just set his nerves on edge. The problems with the gryphons

hadn't started until Searcher showed up, but Miller seemed to be the only pony capable of realizing it. He saw Searcher as a threat to his home and the ponies he loved. His home was threatened and he felt he had to do something about it. He had some friends who disagreed with Searcher for their own reasons, but their combined mistrust made them able to work as a group. At all times, at least one pony was to be watching Searcher and his minions to see what they were up to.

Miller walked into the clinic and spotted Triage at the reception desk, "Hello Miller," she greeted, "How are you today?"

"I'm doing just fine, Triage." he said leaning up against the desk, "How is our mystery stallion doing?"

Triage looked left and right down the hallway then leaned over whispering,  
"He's been forgiven, Miller. Isn't that great?"

"That's a load off my back. I was worried there for a while." he answered.

In truth Mill Treader wasn't lying, he had been concerned, but for different reasons that Triage thought,  
"So what now? Is he just going to walk out and announce himself to the public? I don't know about you, but I can't see that ending particularly well for either him or you; or your sister for that matter."

"He's going to announce himself alright, but he's going to be doing it while in disguise. He's going to help protect the village and let everypony see him do it for a while so they can watch and understand that he's changed. He'll reveal himself after a long enough time and hope for the best. I think it's got a good chance of working." Triage said excitedly.

Mill Treader chewed his lip, this was a problem. He wasn't one of the ponies who hated Valiant, but he didn't entirely trust him either. Granted, he did save a filly at a steep cost to himself and everypony deserved a chance to redeem themselves, but Miller remembered what had happened with Arabesque too, *'A wise pony doesn't forget the past. You can learn a great deal from it. Forgiveness is divine, but don't subject yourself to unnecessary risk.'* he thought, *'Valiant deserves a chance and I couldn't live with myself if I ended up sabotaging his efforts. If Searcher is helping*



*him though, that can't be a good thing. Blast it all! That unicorn is a clever one. I can't call him out because Valiant would be caught in the blast. I'd have to reveal what I saw and end up destroying whatever chance he has at being accepted again in the process. What if I misjudged Searcher though? Maybe he is on the level and just wants to help. No, that's not it. If that were the case, he wouldn't need to be so secretive about what he's doing. Triage never mentioned that Searcher was helping Valiant, but the dark thing from the tailor shop had to be something to help with the disguise. He's helping Valiant alright, but to what end? What is his game?*

"Are you alright, Miller?" Triage asked, concerned.

Mill Treader shook his head,  
"Yeah, I'm fine; just thinking about some things. These past couples of weeks have been crazy and I get the feeling it's just going to get worse."

Triage patted her friend's muscular hoof,  
"It's going to be alright, Miller. The village is going to be fine, you'll see."

Miller's head snapped up and his ears shot forward in intense interest as the Mayor walked through the clinic's doors. The Mayor was an older, slightly pudgy, dull orange Earth pony mare. Her mane and tail were faded gold and her cutie-mark was a set of balanced scales. She was not only Haysburg's Mayor, but its Judge as well. She had started off as just a Judge, but when the previous Mayor had passed away from a stroke, she had been elected to the task.

Triage smiled and greeted her respectfully,  
"Good day Mayor. Is there something you needed?"

"Yes, Triage. I've heard that this other mystery stallion is ready to be released. I would like to speak with him if that's alright." the Mayor asked.

*'So Searcher asked the Mayor to do something. This can't be good; if he's got her wrapped around his hoof, who knows who else he's influencing.'* Miller thought.

"I'll go see if he's presentable." Triage said rising from the desk, "I'll be right back."

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Valiant walked out of the I.C.U. wearing his new disguise. Triage had told him the Mayor wanted to speak with him and he figured this was his chance to begin his secret crusade in the public eye. His mane and tail were wrapped in the black fabric Colossus had brought and his muzzle was covered with a piece that wrapped around the back of his head, obscuring the bandages. The black suit and socks, covered the rest of his body. The rubber soles of the socks made his steps completely silent and where the fabric of the suit rubbed together, it made no sound. In his disguise, he was completely unidentifiable save for his voice and the skin around his eyes and neck, but he figured that few if any would make the connection. They would be looking for a pegasus, not an Earth pony, if they were even looking. He truly looked like a pony ninja. At his side walked Surf & Turf. The neon colored Earth pony wore his hooks and hang glider, like he was ready to try out some new extreme sport.

The Mayor was waiting for him in the middle of the hallway. Over her shoulder, Valiant spotted Mill Treader standing next to the reception desk, ‘*Good old Miller.*’ he thought, ‘*He looks like he’s done well for himself.*’

Valiant walked up to the Mayor and bowed deeply, “How may I be of service?” he asked deepening his voice.

The Mayor cocked her head to the right, sizing up the mysterious hero, “Are you the stallions who saved the two fillies three nights ago?”

Surf & Turf smiled and stepped forward, “We sure are babe, and we’re ready to do it again anytime you need us.”

“I’m the Mayor of Haysburg and you may address me as such. What should I call the two of you?” she asked.

“The name’s Surf & Turf, but you can just call me Surf.” the extreme sports enthusiast chirped.

“You may call me Natival, lady Mayor. Surf and I are at your service. Anything we can do to help, will be at your disposal.” Valiant said.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Natival, why are you wearing that suit? Searcher said he met you, but he failed to give me any kind of description.” the Mayor ventured.

“I have scars, Mayor. I also have significant disfiguring to my body and I wish for them to remain hidden for the time being. I may eventually reveal myself, but for the moment, I would like to keep my anonymity intact. I sincerely hope this won’t become a problem.” Valiant explained.

“I would very much like to know the identity of both the stallions to whom we owe our thanks. I will be blunt with you, Natival. I don’t like having masked ponies running around my village. If something happens, say something is stolen perhaps, I will be looking in your direction first. We here in Haysburg are not the types to go about harshly judging others based solely upon their appearance. I won’t stop you if you wish to help, nor will I intentionally make your time here any more difficult than it needs to be, but let me make myself clear. Birdie has already caused no small measure of trouble and a second masked pony may not go over well with the village.” the Mayor said honestly, “Now with that out of the way, let me say, thank you, Natival for saving little Damson; and thank you, Surf for saving Raspberry. Those fillies owe you their lives and such brave deeds do not go unnoticed in Haysburg. I have arranged for a small celebration to be held this evening, in your honor and to welcome you to our humble village. The celebration is to be held in the village square at six. Can I expect you both to attend?”

“You bet babe!” Surf exclaimed, “I LOVE parties!”

The Mayor eyed Surf in annoyance,  
“My name is not ‘babe’, Surf & Turf and I will thank you not to refer to me as such.”

“Uh, sorry Mayor.” Surf said apologetically.

“I’ll be there madam Mayor. You can count on that. I plan to stick around Haysburg for as long as I need to.” Valiant said.

The Mayor smiled and turned to leave,  
“I’ll see you then, Surf, Natival. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some things to take care of for this evening.”

The Mayor left without another word, heading back in the direction of her office. Surf and Valiant walked up to the reception desk. Mill Treader eyed Valiant, smirking.

Surf recognized red clay colored Earth pony immediately, “Hey, you’re the dude who tried to help me up the other night. I’m glad you were there and everything.”

Miller nodded, “Not a problem, Surf. You did what I couldn’t and for the right reasons. It was my pleasure.” Miller then turned to Valiant, “As for you, Natival was it? That’s a very interesting name. It’s not any name I would associate with most ponies, although one does come to mind and it just so happens that his name has all the same letters, plus he’s royal blue too. You wouldn’t happen to know who he is now would you?”

“Oh stop it Miller.” Triage said, “He knows, Valiant, but he’s also agreed not to say anything. Isn’t that right, Miller?”

“Not a peep to anypony who doesn’t already know. By my count, that’s Triage, Trauma, and Surf obviously. Am I missing anypony?” Mill Treader asked.

“Molasses and Miss Heartfelt know too.” Valiant said.

“Is that everypony then?” Miller prodded.

“The whole village may know eventually.” Valiant said evading the question.

“Yes, I heard that, but are there any other ponies who know who you really are?” Miller said trying to squeeze the answer out of Valiant.

“What’s your problem, Miller?” Triage asked, “You act like you don’t trust him.”

“Can you really blame me, Triage? All this secrecy doesn’t sit well with me. I’m all for letting him help out, Celestia knows we need it right now, but I like straight answers.” Miller said.

“Dude, he hasn’t lied to you about anything.” Surf said.

“No, but he did evade the question when I asked if anypony else knew who he was and I also noticed that you two did as well. What is everypony hiding?” Miller asked directly.

“It’s none of your business, Miller.” Triage said pleadingly, “Please, this is supposed to be a happy time. Valiant’s come home and he’s going to try to help us. Why are you so set against him?”

“I’m not against him, missy. If I was, I would have spilled the beans by now and there would be an angry mob waiting right outside these doors. I’m not against anypony per se, but I am worried about Haysburg. We didn’t have any problems with the gryphons until Searcher and his minions showed up. Since then, it’s been everything but a pitched battle on our doorstep. If he really cared so much, then why doesn’t he want us contacting Canterlot for help? That fiend of his, Birdie, could reach the Princesses in just a couple of days. He doesn’t want Celestia or Luna to know about what’s happening here and I want to know why. We’ve let him waltz right on in here and practically take over the village and I don’t like it. He’s got the only pegasus with wings, for miles in any direction yet he’s not having her send for help. If he doesn’t send word to Canterlot by the next time we’re attacked, I’m going to do it myself.” Mill Treader said.

Triage sighed,  
“Miller, you’re blowing this all out of proportion. Searcher doesn’t want to send word because he thinks we can handle this ourselves . . . “

“We’ve already lost seven foals to the gryphons! I’d say we’re not handling it very well!” Miller yelled, “The only reason I’ve waited this long is because I’ve grown up around the gryphons, we all have. I can’t see them harming the foals and I’m hoping they’re going to contact us soon and explain everything. I’m not kidding, Triage, I’ll be gone by the time the air clears after the next attack. I’m going to go visit Princess Celestia personally and explain what’s going on.”

Miller turned back to Valiant,  
“Here’s what I was getting at. I saw Searcher and his minions leave here then go to the tailor shop. They come back out and Searcher passes a

piece of dark fabric off to Colossus then he and Birdie head on over to the Mayor's office. Colossus brings it in here then I see you wearing it afterward. Searcher, Birdie, and Colossus know, don't they? That's what you three were trying to hide. I was asking in the hope that somepony would come clean about it so I would know who I could trust. Apparently, I can't trust anypony anymore!"

Mill Treader turned and stormed out of the front doors of the clinic with Triage calling after him. The red clay Earth pony ignored her, *'He's got them brain-washed, all of them!'* Miller stopped and looked around at his home town sadly, *'If I don't do something soon it might be too late. I won't let my home be destroyed by some silver-tongued manipulator and his cronies!'* with those thoughts running through his mind, Miller ran back toward his home to pack.

Back in the clinic, Triage watched her friend storm off in a huff, "Poor Miller." she said, "He's convinced that Searcher is some kind of monster."

"Uh Triage," Valiant addressed, "Miller's got a good point though. I wasn't aware that there hasn't been any word sent out to Canterlot yet. Princess Celestia has dealt with the gryphons for far longer than any of us have been alive. Notifying her should have been your first priority. Furthermore, he's right on a second point, Birdie could get there the fastest We might already have the full strength of Celestia's Royal Guard out here by now, not to mention she would very likely be out here herself to talk to the gryphons. We need to send a messenger to Canterlot right away."

"Valiant, it's not necessary," Triage said trying to placate the disguised stallion, "I can't explain it well. Go talk to Searcher, he can do a much better job of it that I can. He's got Haysburg's best interest at heart, you'll see. Why don't you go talk to him right now?"

Valiant nodded, "Alright I will. Come on Surf, we need some answers." Valiant looked around for his friend, "Surf?"

"Over here dude," Surf waved from the front doors, "I'm, like, totally ahead of you there, buddy."

Valiant turned back to Triage,  
“Where can I find Searcher?” he asked.

“He likes to hang out in the village square most of the time.” she said  
waving to the two stallions already on their way out.

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“Attack!” the call went out loud and clear, “From the swamps! They’re  
attacking from the swamps!”

Valiant and Surf had only just stepped out of the clinic when the call  
went up. Ponies who had stopped to stare at the two stallions now took off  
at a dead run, heading toward the swamp side of Haysburg which was not  
that far from the orphanage. Surf & Turf followed Valiant’s lead, but he  
could have done without it. Everypony was heading in the same direction  
already. The swamps bordered on the Western side of the village with  
rolling hills to the North, the Eldritch Basin to the East, and the road to New  
Yoke off to the South. The sky was overcast, as it often was given the  
location, and the afternoon was quickly fading toward evening.

Surf mentally prepared himself for a second bout of pain from  
rescuing another colt or filly. Valiant ran as fast as he could, legs pumping  
against the road almost silently. A screech heralded their ears as Birdie  
zipped past them, heading straight toward the swamps. Colossus and  
Searcher came up from behind them, falling into step.

“Come on boys!” Colossus yelled, “We’ve got some feathers to ruffle!”

Valiant turned his head and addressed Searcher harshly,  
“Why didn’t you send a messenger to Canterlot when all this began!?” he  
yelled, “We could have backup by this point! If the gryphons are hiding out  
in the swamps now, any hope he had of sending a message to Canterlot is  
probably lost! What have you done!?”

Searcher was obviously not used to much physical strain, even being  
an archeologist who worked in the field,  
“I’m sorry my friend!” he called between breaths, “I truly am! I fear my  
foolish pride may have cost us dearly! You’re right, I should have sent word

sooner! When this battle is over, I'll see if Birdie can get through! They gryphons will probably be watching the ground more than anything else!"

Valiant let the issue be, for the moment, there were more pressing matters to attend to. The four stallions rounded a corner, bringing the orphanage into view. At a glance, it was obviously not the primary target this time. A great number of the homes along the sides of the road had their doors broken down while a sentinel gryphon stood guard outside each one. The sounds of banging and clanging came from within each home accompanied by the sounds of screaming, crying, and fighting. The fastest ponies had already reached the closest gryphons and were engaged in a fierce struggle against the brawny creatures.

Valiant quickly estimated that the ponies engaging the closest gryphons, would win out by sheer weight of numbers, "They've got this, come on!" he yelled.

Farther down the street, Valiant saw Birdie fighting with a gryphon. The scene was one that burned itself into his mind. She had apparently tackled the thing head on. The gryphon flapped its one exposed wing wildly as it lay on its side, trying in vain to shield its head with its front claws while its back claws kicked at the enraged pegasus mare. Birdie was situated on top of the gryphon pounding away at its shoulders and torso with her shod hooves. She had the side of its neck in her, still veiled, mouth and was holding on and thrashing away mercilessly while it screeched in agony. Birdie's shoes grew more and more red with every strike.

The gryphon suddenly cried out, "I yield! I yield! Don't kill me!"

The gryphon's cries fell on deaf ears. Birdie thrashed her head back and forth, worrying the pleading creature while she continued stomping at it.

The gryphon screeched in terror, "Stop it! I surrender! Please!"

Birdie was relentless. If anything, she redoubled her efforts. Her hooves flew up and down pummeling the gryphon in a flurry of strikes. Her hooves were a blur as the gryphon's blood flew in all directions.



Valiant began to veer off toward the scene when Surf cut in front of him,  
“I got this bro! Go handle something else!”

Valiant decided to trust his friend and continued on to the next house. Colossus and Searcher took to the opposite side of the street, each heading toward a different gryphon guarding a different house. The charging pegasus stallion peered at the gryphon guarding the house in front of him. The creature widened its stance and turned to meet its challenger head-on. Valiant lowered his head, looking like he was planning to ram it. The gryphon put out its shoulder so as to brace and Valiant jumped. The gryphon had no time to react at such close quarters.

The disguised stallion soared through the air and landed behind the gryphon, in the doorway of the home. He instantly bucked his back legs and sent the gryphon flying onto its face in the street. Valiant looked around and spotted the other half-leone home invader instantly. The gryphon was trying its best to pull open a wooden trap door set into the floor. Valiant smiled, *‘Every home in Haysburg has one of those for when the tornados come. They have three deadbolts on the inside. Pull all you want, you’re not opening that.’*

Valiant held the element of surprise, the gryphon hadn’t noticed him yet. He charged straight at it and threw his shoulder into its side, knocking it away and into the back wall of the first floor. The gryphon shook its head and turned to face . . . a pair of hooves. Valiant bucked, hard. The gryphon’s head flew back, smacking against the wall.

The royal blue stallion took several steps back opening the way through to the front door,  
“Get out.” he ordered narrowing his eyes dangerously.

The gryphon seemed to contemplate trying to fight once more, but thought better of it and bolted through the door in a streak of drab feathers.

Valiant headed back to the entrance to the house, calling over his shoulder to the trap door,  
“Stay in there! I’ll come get you when it’s all over!”

He headed outside just in time to see two gryphons come flying out of the door of the house Colossus had entered. The two creatures took to the sky screeching as they went. Looking farther down the street, Valiant saw one gryphon lying on the ground wiping its eyes. From the doorway behind it came the sounds of grunting and angry gryphon calls. Suddenly, with a puffing sound, smoke came billowing out of every window and door. Moments later, a gryphon stumbled out into the street coughing and hacking as it held onto the door frame with one claw. It coughed several more times before its partner, who had finished wiping its eyes, grabbed it and yelled something into its ear. Valiant couldn't hear the words, but both gryphons took wing almost immediately, heading out over the swamps.

A thunderous herd of Earth ponies descended on the three houses remaining on the street, tackling every gryphon they saw. Valiant watched to see how they handled themselves. The ponies fought with plenty of zeal, but their movements were awkward and jerky. When they tried to buck, most of the time they missed. The gryphons however were obviously outnumbered and began a fighting retreat back toward the swamps. Valiant noticed one gryphon was holding a squirming brown coated colt in its grip. It tried to take off, but couldn't seem to stabilize in the air and was quickly brought down by the residents of Haysburg. It pulled itself out of the swarming mass of ponies and took wing easily. A second gryphon came darting out of a home carrying bright red filly who hung limply in its claws. This second gryphon took to the air easily, even as Valiant charged at it, *'That's why the gryphons the other night could gain any altitude!'* he realized, *'The struggling motions of the fillies kept them from stabilizing so they could go higher!'*

The gryphon rose well above the houses and began winging its way back toward the swamps. Valiant cursed his inaction and watched helplessly as it continued rising into the air, well out of reach. A blur of custard yellow darted past him, screaming a battle cry. Valiant had only a split second to register the sight, *'Birdie?'*

She soared straight into the gryphon in mid-air, beginning a fierce struggle on the wing. Valiant watched in awe as a beak, feathers, hooves, wings, and claws flew in every imaginable direction. For all intents and purposes, it looked as if the two had physically and violently merged. In a matter of seconds, the two parted. The gryphon screeched and flew off, trailing blood behind it. Birdie turned and flew back toward the mass of

gathered ponies. Valiant's eyes spotted the filly, Birdie held the young red Earth pony in her muzzle.

Birdie didn't land though, she flew right over everypony's head, angled toward somewhere deeper in Haysburg. Valiant ran off in the same direction. The fighting was over, but he wanted to make sure the filly was alright and he had no idea what Birdie might do with her. Birdie flapped over businesses and homes, still holding tightly to her tiny, limp burden.

Valiant's eyes tracked her movements and directions, he could almost keep up with her. The cloaked and veiled pegasus mare landed right in front of the clinic and darted inside. Valiant was relieved but still followed out of sheer curiosity.

He entered the clinic's doors to a scene which confused him deeply. Trauma and Birdie were both in front of the reception desk. Birdie sat on her haunches rocking back and forth, she still held the filly in her muzzle and Trauma looked decidedly unhappy. The nurse had a rolling bed beside her, indicating she wanted to put the filly on it, but Birdie still held on to her, making her inaccessible to the nurse.

Trauma was standing directly in front of Birdie, "Set her down this instant, Birdie!" Trauma yelled.

Birdie didn't seem to register Trauma's presence, she just kept rocking back and forth, eyes glazed over.

"So help me, if you don't set her down right now I'll pry your jaws apart and take her!" Trauma yelled.

"Let me do this." Valiant said as he approached the two mares.

Trauma looked over to him and grimaced, but stepped back.

Valiant walked up to the still rocking pegasus and stopped in front of her, "Birdie," he addressed calmly, "You did well in saving her from that gryphon and I know you brought her here for a reason, but Trauma can't take a look at her while you're holding her. You need to set her down now."

Birdie's eyes flickered and swung around to focus on the black clothed stallion. Valiant met her eyes and instantly understood, *'On some level, she knows the filly's safe, but she doesn't trust anypony not to hurt her. This isn't an instinctive reaction, it's something that's been formed over time. She wants to help, but she doesn't know how because she's too scared.'*

"Birdie," he said again, "She's going to be alright. Trauma just wants to make sure she's okay. Nopony's going to hurt her. Isn't that right, Trauma." he hinted to the nurse.

Trauma seemed to get the picture, "That's right," she said softly, "I just want to do my job and check her out. I have to know she's not injured, I'm not going to hurt her, Birdie."

Birdie's eyes fixed on the unicorn mare and narrowed, but she stopped rocking. She slowly rose to her hooves and set the filly down on the floor gently then backed away, keeping her eyes trained on Trauma. The nurse didn't waste an instant. She darted over and levitated her onto the bed then began examining the filly, nosing her over from one side to the other gently, searching for injuries. Valiant could see the little red Earth pony was breathing softly and let out a relaxed sigh.

Trauma looked up quickly, "Was the gryphon holding this filly in its beak?"

"No," Valiant answered, "I saw the whole thing. She was held in its claws. As far as I saw, it never reached for her with its beak, why?"

Trauma pointed to the filly's ribs with her horn, "She's got some indentations on her ribs that will probably end up bruising at least, if they're not broken outright. She might have internal bleeding."

Trauma lowered her head toward the filly and closed her eyes. Her horn began to glow and an aura of magic surrounded her patient as well.

After a moment, Trauma let her magic go, "She's not bleeding internally." she said breathing a sigh of relief, "Wait here. I'll go get some smelling salts to wake her up. If her parents show up don't let them take her anywhere. I'll be right back."

Valiant watched Trauma walk away then turned to Birdie, "I saw what you did to the gryphon in front of that house. You looked like you were going to kill him."

Birdie's eyes narrowed at Valiant and she nodded once.

"You meant to kill him?" Valiant asked, "There's no need for that, he surrendered. Why didn't you just let him go? Was he one of the ones who hurt you?"

Birdie shook her head.

"Birdie, you can't hold every gryphon responsible for what happened to you, it isn't right. Besides, they didn't kill you. What you were planning to do would have been worse." Valiant said.

Birdie shook her head once more.

"Are you saying it wouldn't have been worse?" Valiant asked.

Birdie nodded.

"How would it have been better to kill him? Tell me that?" Valiant snarled, "I've seen death up close on two occasions, or have you forgotten? I caused both of them, maybe not intentionally, but the responsibility still falls on my shoulders! I've seen it, I've felt it! It shreds your soul, like something is tearing you apart on the inside! Do you know what that's like?"

Birdie nodded; her eyes were full of sadness.

Valiant was taken aback,  
"You've killed something before?"

Birdie shook her head, her eyes were watering now.

"Then how do you know?" the disguised stallion asked more calmly.

Birdie blinked as tears began spilling from her eyes; her gaze shifted to the filly lying on the bed. A glimmer of understanding struck Valiant like lightning. He dreaded the answer to his next question.

“Did . . . did you have a foal once?” he asked quietly.

Birdie shook her head and slumped to the ground weeping silently.

“I don’t understand,” Valiant admitted, “What happened?”

Birdie didn’t answer. Instead she just curled up into a little ball on the floor and continued to cry quietly.

The sound of Trauma’s hooves echoed down the hallway. Valiant turned his head toward the sound. A scrambling sound caught his attention and he whipped his head back around, following the noise. His eyes caught sight of Birdie’s cloak disappearing out of the front doors of the clinic. As she ran, he heard the her let out a choked sob before the doors closed behind her.

Valiant instinctively turned and raised his right hoof to call out to her, but she was already gone,  
“What happened to you?” he whispered.

# Chapter 15

All of Haysburg gathered around the Mayor's office to hear her announcement. Word had spread quickly after the most recent attack and everypony was eager to hear any news. The steps leading up to the Mayor's office made for an ideal stage where a single individual could be seen by all. Valiant, disguised as 'Natal' and Surf & Turf were already inside waiting for the Mayor to call for them to emerge. Valiant rubbed the golden circlet around his left foreleg, *'I'm surprised Searcher could make one of these so quickly. He said he put several protective enchantments on it, I sure hope they work.'*

The Mayor stood on the top steps addressing the ponies of Haysburg,  
"We have weathered yet another attack on our village and emerged victorious. I'm proud to say that through quick action and decisive determination there have been no injuries and not a single foal has been lost. By now, I'm sure you've all heard of the two strangers who came to our aid several nights ago and saved two fillies. I have spoken with them already; these stallions have pledged themselves to help us continuously until this issue with the gryphons has been resolved. Many of you have already seen them in action today as they helped fight off the most recent attack from the swamps. I present to you, Surf & Turf and Natal."

The Mayor stepped out from in front of the door and the two stallions emerged to rampant cheering and clomping. Surf waved nervously at the immense crowd, smiling as much as he could. He was far out of his element, he didn't much like being the center of attention of a group this size. Valiant, by comparison, didn't move a muscle. He didn't wave, he didn't smile (not that anypony could tell even if he had), he just stood there in shock. He had thought he had prepared himself for the attention, he was wrong. The sight of his entire village now cheering for him made him freeze. His mood instantly went foul, *'What hypocrites.'* he thought, *'You cheer now, but what happens when somepony makes a big enough mistake? You throw them out, disown them, and cut out their identity.'* Valiant ground his teeth quietly.

“Dude, wave or something,” Surf said out of the side of his mouth, “You need to respond.”

Valiant shook his head, clearing away his thoughts and began walking down the steps, heading toward the crowd. He felt slightly dizzy, like his equilibrium had been disrupted briefly. He descended the steps slowly, to the crowd, he looked like an imposing figure coming down from above in silent judgment. The cheering slowed down as he descended, finally dying out altogether as his sock-covered hooves touched the ground. The ponies backed away, giving him room. Nativel looked around at each and every face he could see, looking them all in the eye.

“What we did today and the other night, you can do as well and we’re going to see to it that you learn to do so. You who wish to learn, come see Surf or I. We have already seen that you have the ‘will’ to protect your village, we can offer the ‘way’. Surf and I will make ourselves available at the celebration. Don’t take this the wrong way, you do have reason to celebrate, many families have been kept whole this day, but where is the recognition for the others who contributed?” he asked loudly, “I can think of several others who deserve recognition as well. Where is the cheer for them?”

“Who are you talking about?” a mare’s voice called out from the crowd.

“You already know them, but your eyes chose not to see. You ignore what is in front of you, staring you in the face. If you want to know who to truly thank, thank your neighbor. Thank the pony you see once a week at the market or the bakery. Open your eyes and see what is around you. Who among you has been grateful enough to thank the ponies you don’t even like? Who has thanked the pony from across town who you have a quarrel with? The same pony who may have risked themselves today, fighting to protect your family. I saw Birdie fight off a gryphon on the wing and personally fly the rescued filly to the clinic, after she had dealt with another one already. Who has thanked her?” he asked.

His only response was simple silence.

He shook his head and began walking away toward the Fountain in the center of Haysburg where the party tables and so forth had been set



up. The Mayor stepped back up to the top of the steps. All eyes turned to her.

The Mayor cleared her throat,  
“Thank you Nativel for those . . . inspired words. There is a celebration to be held around the fountain in honor of our two heroic guests. Go enjoy yourselves, get to know Surf and Nativel, but don’t simply stop there; as Nativel said, thank your friends and neighbors who fought bravely. This is a time for celebration. We have achieved a distinct victory and hopefully the gryphons have finally learned their lesson and will leave us in peace.”

Even after what Nativel had said, the Mayor still managed to coax a rousing cheer from the residents of Haysburg. The citizens dispersed and headed toward the fountain and tables. Several ponies stayed to speak with Surf & Turf personally, while still others approached Nativel who was already sitting quietly on a spread blanket on the soft grass by the fountain.

The first pony to approach the covered mysterious hero was none other than Colossus,  
“That was quite a thing to say there, Nativel. I’m not sure how you meant it to sound, but you came off more than a bit judgmental.”

Nativel gazed into Colossus’ eyes and responded quietly,  
“I suppose it did, but that doesn’t make it any less true. What Haysburg needs is teamwork. There can be no place for division. Under stress, minor unresolved conflicts can become a big problem.”

Colossus shrugged,  
“Maybe so, but you could have been a bit more polite about it. You can’t expect everypony to just get along all the time. There will be disagreements now and then. You shouldn’t alienate yourself from everypony and expect them to want to follow your lead afterward.”

“True enough. I’ll take that into consideration. Thank you.” Nativel said bowing his head slightly.

The gathered crowd of ponies began to press in, wanting to speak with Nativel.

Colossus turned and addressed the crowd,

“Form a line please. One at a time.” he turned back to the mystery stallion and nodded, “They’re all yours.

Surf & Turf was having quite a time trying to handle so many questions as the ponies gathered around him all chattered at once, “Oh this?” he asked gesturing to the pack in the center of his back, “This gnarly contraption is a glider and these things on my legs are climbing hooks.”

“What are they for?” a mare asked him.

“Um, climbing and gliding?” Surf said.

“Are the hooks sharpened, so you can tear apart your enemies?” one filly asked.

“Good grief no!” Surf exclaimed, “They’re just for grabbing onto things I can’t reach with my hooves.”

“Could you use them as weapons though?” another stallion asked, “I could use something like that the next time the gryphons attack.”

“I suppose you could, dude, but that’s not what they’re for and I won’t let anypony use them like that, seriously not cool.” Surf said repulsed at the notion.

The neon colored Earth pony froze suddenly as a gentle kiss was planted on his cheek, he turned and saw a familiar filly standing next to him,

“I don’t care if they’re not weapons, you saved my life the other night. Keep using them the way you already are. You’re still a hero to me, Surf, and don’t let anypony pressure you into using them differently.” she trotted away quietly while Surf watched, puzzled.

“Thanks little babe.” he mumbled, “My pleasure.”

“Are you seeing anypony?” a mare asked boldly.

Surf rubbed the back of his neck nervously,

“Well I think I’m going to be taking Trauma out on a date soon, but I’m not sure, babe. Honestly, I’m not, like, looking for any kind of a serious relationship or anything right now. I’m just out for some adventure with Nativel.”

An older light brown stallion bowed his head slightly as he approached Nativel, the masked pony shook his head,  
“Don’t bow to me, please. I’m no better than you.”

The stallion looked up, surprised,  
“Very well. I just wanted to say thank you for coming to our aid the other night and for today as well. We owe you a great deal.”

“Do you?” Nativel asked, “Think about the answer to that question very carefully. As far as I can see, you don’t personally owe me anything, though I do appreciate your thanks. Be sure to thank all the other ponies who fought today as well.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” the stallion said, “I expect the ponies of Haysburg to do their part.”

“I believe one should never take for granted the selfless actions of others. Try to keep that in mind. They risked injury to themselves, they deserve thanks for their bravery as well.” Nativel said.

“You know, you’re right, thank you.” the stallion said backing away slowly.

The next pony was a teal colored mare,  
“You were so brave!” she gushed, “It was my home you defended this afternoon, I recognize your voice! Thank you so much!”

A smaller filly of the same color piped up next to the mare,  
“You saved me and my sister, Nativel! You’re awesome!”

Nativel nodded slowly,  
“It was no problem, believe me. You should thank your sister too. That was a smart move, locking yourselves in the cellar. I’m going to spread the word that any pony who isn’t capable of fighting, do the same if another attack comes. Your example may well keep many ponies safe in the days to come.”

The mare blushed shyly at the compliment,  
“Thank you, Nativel. If you need a place to stay, we have a spare bedroom.”

“Thank you for the offer. I may take you up on it, just be sure you have your door open in case any other ponies need a place to stay as well.” Nativel said.

“I will.” she said, “By the way, my name is Minty and this is Chamomile.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” Nativel said, “If you’ll excuse me, there are others waiting in line. I may come by later.”

Minty and Chamomile waved good bye and Nativel turned to the next pony in line.

From the clouds above, a pegasus watched the goings on with intense interest, *‘He’s different, but in what way?’* she wondered, *‘Is he really as good as he seems to be, or is it just for show? He asked me if I had a foal. Why did he ask that? Why does he care? Does he care? He doesn’t have any reason to, so why act like it? Does he perhaps feel the same thing for me as I do for him, that we have something in common? No. He could never understand what I’ve been through, nopony could.’* she turned her head and made to leave, but stopped short as a thought struck her, *‘I didn’t think I could trust Searcher or Colossus at first either. I was so scared when they saw me, but they didn’t hurt me. They care, maybe he does too. I already know he’s different, the same way I knew Searcher and Colossus were when I first met them. Maybe,’* she swallowed hard, *‘Maybe I should give him the chance. What if he hurts me though? What if he’s just like the gryphons and only wants to use me?’* she put her shod hooves to either side of her head and shook herself back and forth as the memories came flooding back against her wishes, *‘NO! Don’t touch me! Leave me alone! Stop it! You’re hurting me! Why are you hurting me! All I wanted was someplace to sleep!’* she collapsed onto her side as tears began pouring down her face.

Her whole body shook with uncontrollable sobs as her mind continued replaying the memories. Her vision clouded over and she went back to that night against her will.

She was cold, so cold hiding in the shadows between the stone buildings. The wind seemed to cut straight through the pile of garbage she was using as a wind barrier. She huddled down lower, hoping for just the tiniest hint of warmth. She shivered so hard her muscles hurt, but that discomfort paled in comparison to the pain of the empty void in her stomach. She was just a filly, barely half grown at eight years old, her body kept small from lack of proper nutrition. She had found a muddy puddle to drink from earlier. The bitter taste still lingered in her mouth.

She could hear the voices of the gryphons inside the tavern as they prepared to close up for the night. She already knew she would get nowhere if she begged, that only got her yelled at or chased or worse . It was a hard lesson to learn, but she had learned it well. They didn't care about one homeless waif begging in the streets. The one gryphon that had claimed to, had taken her in and fed her but demanded she do something for him to repay him. When she heard what he wanted she had tried to run, but he had caught her and held her down. She shivered at the memory as she tried in vain to stave off the tears. She felt so ashamed at what he had forced her to do, so disgusting and filthy, so violated. He had hurt her and he had enjoyed every minute of it. She gritted her teeth and shook her head violently from side to side trying to dislodge the tears and the memory and clear her vision, but to no avail, *'Stop it!' she told herself, 'You got away from him! Your tears won't get you a place to stay! They don't care! No one cares! I have to look out for myself, I have to be tough! Stop crying you pathetic foal! Stop it or you're going to miss your chance!'*

She heard the door to the alley open as a pair of gryphons stepped out. She could hear them talking while the door leading inside hung open tauntingly.

They were talking about their days at work and their families, "Little Horatio is getting so big now. Before long, I won't be able to give him piggy-back rides anymore. How is Leah doing by the way? Last I heard she was dating that one tom who worked with the Hunters."

The other gryphon chuckled, "He proposed to her three days ago. I tell you, I had no idea Hunters made such good money. The diamond marriage-pendent he gave her had to

weigh all of six stones. Get this, he already bought a four-room house and he said he had a Honeymoon cloud ready for her.”

The first gryphon whistled,  
“Wow, he’s serious isn’t he. Sounds like a keeper.”

“You have no idea. He actually came to me first and asked for my blessing. Most youngsters don’t bother to do that anymore.” the second one said.

Birdie watched carefully and waited until they had their backs to her then darted for the door, hovering just off the ground, sticking to the shadows. She knew she could find some food inside and a warm place to sleep, anything had to be better than sleeping in an alley in the freezing cold. Just as she reached the doorway, one of the gryphons absentmindedly stepped into her way. She was going too fast to stop and she knew it. She tried to change her direction, but to no avail. She crashed into the leg of the gryphon that had stepped into the doorway, putting him off balance and stumbling while she hit the frame of the door with a startled cry and a crunch as her right wing bent at an unnatural angle.

“What was that?” the other gryphon asked, “Look, it’s a pegasus.”

She heard the words and tried to scramble up onto her hooves and get away before they caught her.

“Hold on there, little filly.” the second one said.

Birdie felt a claw close on her left hind leg. She was in pain, starving, and frightened so she went along with what her instincts told her. She kicked and struggled against the claw that held her, but the gryphon’s grip was solid.

“Hey, calm down! Stop struggling!”

Birdie cried out and redoubled her struggling. The gryphon that had hurt her so badly had said something nearly identical, ‘*NO! He’s going to . . . !*’ she could even finish the thought.

“Help me!” she screamed, “Help me, somebody help!”

She kicked out, as the gryphon tried to grab her other back leg. He missed, his claws breaking open the soft skin on her leg as he tried to close his talons. She screamed again and began flapping her wings, both working and broken, trying to fly away. Pain coursed through her as she flapped, but she forced herself to ignore it, she had to get away.

“Stop fighting me, or I’m going to end up cutting you again!” he said loudly, “Just calm down and stop screaming!”

The scene, in Birdie’s mind, was almost exactly the same as before, except now there were two males to hurt her instead of just one. The memory split open her mind and she began crying, screaming, and struggling with every fiber of her being. She was screaming for help and begging for mercy in a blind panic.

“Don’t hurt me! You can do whatever you want, just don’t hurt me! Let me go! Please stop it! You’re hurting me!”

“Hold still!” the gryphon said, “If you don’t calm down I might end up breaking your other wing!”

“What’s going on here!” called a harsh voice from the mouth of the alley.

Birdie looked up, through her tears and saw a third gryphon approaching, ‘*NO! NOT THREE!*’ she felt the grip on her loosen momentarily. She managed to get her left leg free and took off at a sprint as he grabbed for her again. His grip missed, but his claws didn’t. Fire erupted from her left flank as she bolted down the alley leaving a trail of blood behind as she went.

She ran from the scene as fast as her little legs would carry her. She ran in the cold and the wind. She couldn’t feel the hunger pain anymore, other pain had replaced it with far more intensity. She ran and ran until she could run no more. She collapsed in an alley, exhausted, starving, in pain, and fearing for her life, ‘*He said he would break my other wing! How can they be so cruel? He hurt me, they’ll all hurt me.*’ her sorrow began to change into despair, ‘*They’re all like that, they’ll all hurt me.*’ she began to sob, realizing she had no other choice if she didn’t want to freeze to death or starve, ‘*I have to go back to him.*’ the thought made her feel sick. She swallowed hard and shook her head trying to convince herself it would be

for the best, *'He hurt me so bad, but at least I had food and a place to sleep. As long as I didn't struggle and cry he didn't claw me too badly. Maybe if I just let him do it, he won't hurt me so much.'* swallowing the vile taste that rose up in her mouth, she began the process of re-tracing her steps until she eventually found herself in front of a house she swore she would never return to.

The horrible memory ended suddenly and Birdie cried out as she scraped madly at her head, trying to dig out the terrible visions of her past. She scraped off her veil by accident. It settled down on the fluffy cloud, not having enough weight to break through. The moonlight from above, shown down, casting her silhouette onto the cloud. Birdie's eyes saw her outline on the cloud and her movements instantly fell to motionlessness. She frantically scrambled to get the thing back on.

With the veil once more properly obscuring her features, she finally began to calm down, *'No, he wouldn't understand. No pony can, not even Searcher and Colossus. I'll tell him and he'll . . .'* Birdie found that she couldn't finish the thought, which puzzled her. Normally she could easily picture that kinds of things others would do to her, but when she pictured him, for some reason she just couldn't summon up a mental image of the atrocities, *'He's different. I can't deny it anymore.'* she admitted, *'I'll get to know him when he's not around any other ponies then I'll see what he's like. If he tries to hurt me, I'll kill him, but if he can understand . . .'* the thought was so far out of her comprehension she actually smiled, *'If he can understand, that would be wonderful beyond words.'* She leapt off the cloud and began gliding down toward the ground, *'Somehow, thinking about him gives me hope.'*

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Dr. Mend sat with Applejack and Big Macintosh on top of a small hill overlooking the plains of rolling grass. They had emerged from the Everfree Forest early in the morning and had had the pleasure of traveling almost the entire day across the fields of rolling grass. The hill provided a perfect vantage point and the three Earth ponies took full advantage of it. They starred up at the stars above in wonder.



"I never took the time to just look." Dr. Mend said quietly, "They really are beautiful."

"Ayup." Big Mac agreed.

"It's our pleasure, Doc." Applejack said, "This here's one of the reasons Ah could never become a city pony. Ah'd miss them stars way too much and all them bright lights just block 'em out."

Dr. Mend chuckled,  
"You're right about that, Applejack. When I lived in Canterlot, there were always lights on. I wonder if that's not the reason the Princesses have the Royal Palace situated so far above the city. The ambient light wouldn't block the stars out at that height."

Among the tents situated down the hill, sat eight more ponies,  
"I'm surprised the sky's so clear out here." Sea Blue ventured, "I would have thought it would be overcast and there'd be snow everywhere."

"I for one, am grateful the weather has stayed so calm. My perfectly styled mane and tail would collect snowflakes like magnets, then they would be all droopy and wet. I would look simply ghastly, darling. Don't go jinxing our good luck pu-lease." Rarity said dramatically.

"I LOVE snow!" Pinkie Pie chirped, "You can have snow-ball fights, and make snow-ponies and snow-angels. Just remember not to eat the yellow snow unless it comes in a paper cone, otherwise it tastes funny."

"EEW!" Rainbow Dash said, making a face, "Was that last bit really necessary, Pinkie?"

"No, but it's still good advice." Pinkie responded.

Twilight couldn't argue, but she had other things on her mind,  
"How are the dream-memories coming along, Trooper?"

Trooper raised his head from his hooves,  
"I am certain I am getting close now. Last night we had finally landed at the designated meeting place. It had been marked with a bright red flag. I did

not recognize the immediate area, but I am certain we are in the same vicinity. I will try to memorize the exact spot if you wish.”

Twilight shrugged,  
“You can if you want. I don’t know if it will be helpful or not. The big thing is that you get a good look at the foal your aunt and uncle are carrying. If he looks like Valiant, we can be fairly certain it’s him. After that it’s a matter of piecing together what happened.”

Lemon Lime, who was sitting next to Rainbow Dash, yawned and stretched,  
“I don’t know about you all but I’m going to go to sleep. We have a long day tomorrow and I’m bushed. That practice this morning wore me out. You’re getting better Sea Blue, but you still can’t catch me.”

The counselor snorted,  
“It’s tough to do, you’re fast.”

“You could predict where Trixie was going to teleport to when we were chasing her. Why can you not predict where Live Wire is going to go too?” Trooper asked.

“I don’t know.” Sea Blue admitted, “Maybe it’s one of those things that only works under stress or perhaps it doesn’t work because I’m trying to use it against one of the Elements of Peace. In either case, I need to be used to functioning without it so it doesn’t become a crutch.”

Twilight’s ears perked and shot forward with intense interest,  
“What are you two talking about?”

“They’re talkin’ about ‘Inspirational Manifestation’.” Big Macintosh said walking up to the fire with Dr. Mend in tow, “When Princess Luna was disguised as Evenin’ Star, she and Ah read about that. It’s some kind o’ special power the Elements of Peace have.”

“You’ve never talked about it before. What do you remember about it?” Twilight asked levitating a quill and parchment out of her saddlebags next to her and Lemon Lime’s tent.

Big Macintosh scratched his head, one eye closed, trying to remember,  
“Ifn Ah remember right, it were different for each Element. The Element of Forgiveness could heal, Ah think.”

“That’s Dr. Mend,” Lemon Lime said, “We already knew that, he’s a doctor.”

Big Mac shook his head,  
“Naw, it was more than that, it was some kind of special thing that he could do it with. Yer the Element of Patience, that means you can time things just right. Ah think Ah can calm minds and ease pain and Trooper’s the Element of Perseverance so he can keep goin’ for a long time. Valiant’s the Element of Hope so he can make ponies make good decisions . . .”

“I don’t mean to sound doubtful, darling, but those sound fairly dull to me.” Rarity said, “Good timing, being calm, and making good decisions all sound like fine traits, but what’s so special about them? Anypony can make good decisions and remain calm.”

“Says the queen of panicky drama.” Rainbow Dash commented.

“I’m simply very passionate and animated in everything I do, darling.” Rarity defended.

“Well duh, we’re all animated.” Pinkie Pie said cheerfully.

Twilight arched an eyebrow,  
“Yeah.” she said doubtfully, “Anyway, I’m sure there’s more to it than that, Rarity. Whoever the author of that book was clearly knew something we don’t. I wouldn’t discard what a book says.”

“Twilight, darling, when have you EVER ignored anything a book said?” Rarity asked.

“How about when she overlooked ‘Supernaturals’ because of the title?” Pinkie Pie asked cheerfully.

“Moving on,” Twilight said, obviously embarrassed, “What were the other ones, Big Macintosh?”

“The Element of Discernment could predict what somepony was goin’ to do Ah think. That’s Sea Blue. Ifn Ah remember correctly, the book said we could only use the powers when we do somethin’ that’s along the same lines as our Elements. Ah can’t remember much else, sorry Twilight.” the large Earth pony said.

“So the Elements of Peace gain these special abilities when their actions are aligned with the traits of the names of their Elements?” Twilight asked.

“Ayup.” Big Mac agreed.

“Under the right circumstances, those traits could come in extremely handy. I think we should explore this some more,” Twilight yawned loudly, “In the morning. I’m going to bed.”

Her statement was met with quiet approval. The various ponies began heading off in the different directions of their tents. Rainbow Dash walked slowly over to the tent she shared with Trooper and Fluttershy, the latter had gone to sleep when nopony was paying attention. Dash looked down at her sleeping friend. Fluttershy was curled up, laying on her right side up against the left side of the tent, leaving Dash to sleep next to Trooper. Dash let out a small sigh and lay down next to Fluttershy. The multihued pegasus laid on her back and closed her eyes. Trooper entered the tent moments later and eyed the other two pegasi. Dash peeked out of her left eye, just enough to see without letting Trooper know she was watching. Trooper leaned his head down and pulled up the dual blankets, covering the two mares. The royal blue stallion turned and zipped the tent closed then lay down and snuggled into the blankets. He shifted a couple of times before coming to rest on his left side, keeping Dash at his back. Within minutes, he was snoring lightly.

Outside the tents, on top of the hill, a lone figure sat, looking up at the sky. Applejack enjoyed a certain level of solitude when the mood took her. She closed her eyes, feeling the breeze shift through her mane. It had begun as a whisper, but had turned into a gentle bluster that blew her mane around her. Her thoughts drifted on the wind, going where they would. She thought about Apple Bloom and Granny Smith back in Ponyville, she thought about Zecora and Caramel keeping the farm of good order while she and her brother were gone. Thinking about Caramel always made her chuckle, *‘He’s the clumsiest, unluckiest pony Ah’ve ever known,*

*but he don't let that stop him. He just bounces right back and keeps goin'. Ah can't give him much, but he sure as sugar is determined.'* Her thoughts drifted even farther on the subject of the clumsy stallion, *'Come to think of it, he ain't makin' much out on the farm. Ah wonder why he was so eager to stay and help? Don't he have a life of his own?'* her musings were interrupted by the sound of hooves behind her.

Applejack opened her eyes and turned to see who had joined her on the hill,  
"Live Wire? Ain't you supposed to be asleep?"

The short yellow therapist jumped,  
"Sorry Applejack, I didn't see you up here. I can leave you alone if you want."

"Naw, it's fine sugar cube. You must have something hog-sized on your mind to have missed me though. Ah ain't exactly hidin' out up here. You got somethin' you want to talk about?" Applejack offered, patting the ground beside her.

Lemon Lime sighed heavily and sat down next to the friendly farmer,  
"I was laying there, next to Twilight, and something occurred to me. This is the first time I've ever had so many friends in my entire life. Most ponies can't stand that I talk so much."

"Uh, Ah don't know if you've noticed or not, sugar cube, but you ain't been talkin' a lot here recently. Yall still talk all fast an' everything, but you've been sayin' a lot less." Applejack observed.

"I'm just so grateful, you know? Since meeting Valiant in Canterlot, I've had more and more friends. Most ponies don't know what true loneliness is, but I do. I lived it for years. It's terrible. I lived in one of the most populated cities in all of Equestria, but I was all alone. It's wonderful beyond words, having other ponies I can talk to, that actually care about me." Lemon Lime said.

Applejack detected a crack in the stallion's voice,  
"It's our pleasure, Live Wire. You're a good guy. Any mare would be lucky to have you."

“How do I tell her, Applejack?” he asked suddenly, “How do I do it?”

“Ah can’t tell you that one. You’ve got to figure it out on your own. She already knows though.” Applejack informed him.

“I know,” Lemon Lime sighed again, “I heard. It’s hard, Applejack, being so close to her at night and not being able to hold her close.”

“Ah thought you did.” Applejack said.

“Well I do, but it’s not the same. It’s completely platonic between us right now and I want it to be so much more. It’s like . . . I don’t know. I want to be with her, Applejack, not just physically or anything that shallow, but really be with her. I appreciate her for her personality and her mind.” he said wistfully, “I mean she’s beautiful, obviously, but her mind, that’s the best. Oh she’s brilliant! She’s like a shining star among the pitch black of night. Her eyes are crystal clear windows into the most precious of souls. Her voice is smooth, like the gentle song of wind-chimes. Her mane perfectly complements the contours of her gorgeous face, and when she smiles it’s like the sun rising after an icy night. She can put the pieces of any puzzle, question, or equation together as if they had always made perfect sense. When she explains something, it’s like the answer was always right there in front of you but she was the only one to see it.”

He paused for a moment and laid his head on his fore hooves, “I could talk to her from morning to night and never be bored for even a moment. She’s amazing, Applejack. Even if we never have a romantic relationship, she’s enriched my life so much. I consider myself fortunate indeed to have had the privilege of knowing her and I consider it a true honor to be able to call her my friend.” he put his hooves over his eyes, “Oh, why can’t I ever say anything like that when she’s around?”

“You just did.” a soft voice answered from behind him.

Lemon Lime jumped up sputtering, “Twilight!” he squeaked, “I’m sorry! I wasn’t trying to talk about you behind your back . . . “

Applejack chuckled slightly,

“She’s been standin’ there since you started talkin’ about her, Ah just didn’t say anythin’.” Applejack rose to her hooves and headed down the hill toward the tents, holding her hat down against the rising wind, “Ah’ll leave you to it then, sugar cube. Ah’m goin’ to bed.”

Lemon Lime lowered his head, he couldn’t look at the lavender unicorn mare in front of him,  
“I’m sorry you had to hear that, Twilight.” he said simply.

“But you’re not sorry you said it, are you.” Twilight said quietly.

“Should I be?” Lemon Lime asked.

“That’s not what I asked.” Twilight said.

“Well, you didn’t actually make it sound like a question, it was more like an observation or statement of fact.” he said.

Twilight stifled her reactive response and kept calm, ‘*Odious stallion!*’ she thought,  
“Is that really how you feel though?” Twilight asked directly.

“I never said anything because you have your studies. You don’t have time for romance and I didn’t want to burden you with the way I felt. You have your priorities and obligations and it’s not fair of me to try to pressure you into feeling something you don’t. I’m content enough to love you from a respectful distance . . . “

“Love me?” Twilight asked suddenly.

Lemon Lime hit himself in the head with his right fore hoof,  
“No! I mean yes! I mean . . . “

“So you don’t?” Twilight asked, having to raise her voice over the growing wind.

“YES!” he yelled over the rising wind, “Yes! I love you! I love you more than I can say!”

“What?” Twilight yelled back, ‘*What’s with this wind?*’ she wondered.

Lemon Lime looked around, finally realizing the intensity of the wind. He looked up and saw the sky was now blank and black, he could no longer see the stars. The two unicorns turned toward the camp below, where the wind was coming from. The plains stretching out below them as their eyes beheld a swath of pure darkness coming toward their hill. The darkness was accompanied by an intense rumbling, roaring sound akin to that of a passing train. The wind increased in its intensity and both ponies realized what was happening.

As one, they turned and bolted back down the hill as fast as their hooves could carry them yelling the same thing over and over, "Tornado!"

The intensity of the wind, not their cries, was the dominant factor in rousing their friends. Applejack, having just barely reached her tent, looked up and saw the swirling vortex of inky death surging toward the four flapping canvas structures. Without a moment's hesitation, she bit the flap of the tent and ripped open.

"Aww, Applejack," Pinkie began, "Why'd you have to . . ."

"Tornado!" the orange farmer bellowed.

Dr. Mend, who had been laying placidly beside his pink counter-Element, shot up to a standing position in the flash of an eye, "Pinkie, grab your saddlebags, quickly! We have to run!"

Pinkie, unfazed as ever, hopped out of the tent in one fluid motion, somehow landing right next to her saddlebags, "Come on, Dr. Mendie you Pokey Mcpokerson, you're going to get blown away."

Sea Blue pulled Rarity, tail-first, through the open flap behind himself, "I've bot our faddlebavs!" he said levitating the items into the air with his magic, "Come on, Rarify! Ve have to vo!"

Rarity, for her part, looked as if she had just woken up,



“Let go of my beautiful tail this instant!” she quipped, “I’m perfectly capable of . . .” she trailed off as her eyes spotted the funnel cloud, “RUN!” she screamed, now pulling Sea Blue, who still had her tail in his mouth.

Big Macintosh apparently ended up being caught in a tangle of blankets. He tried to get his footing, but he could only get his head out of the opening of the tent. Applejack ran over to help him untangle himself from the mass of covers. Dr. Mend and Pinkie ran over to the pegasi tent just in time to have Rainbow Dash come zipping out through the flap, ripping it in the process.

Dash sized up the oncoming and quickly approaching tornado, “Trooper, Fluttershy move it! We have to get airborne and get away from this thing!”

Trooper leapt out of the tent and turned his head, grabbing Dash’s saddlebags, “Catch!” he yelled, having already thrown the bags into the air.

The cyan pegasus mare caught the bag-strap in her teeth and slung the pouches, haphazardly over her flank then secured them with a firm tug. Trooper wiggled into his own bags then turned back to the mare he was supposed to be protecting. Before he could get a word out, Dash zipped back into the tent. Trooper poked his head into the tent and saw Dash tugging on Fluttershy’s tail.

“Come on!” Dash grunted in frustration.

“I’m too scared!” Fluttershy whimpered.

“Would you rather be scared or dead!” Rainbow Dash yelled into her friend’s laid back ear.

Lemon Lime and Twilight ran over, already wearing their saddlebags, “What’s wrong?” the yellow therapist yelled.

“Oh no!” Twilight gasped, “She’s frozen isn’t she!” the lavender unicorn had to shout over the fierce wind.

"I can't move her!" Dash yelled back in panic, "You got to help her, Twilight!"

"Take Trooper and get onto the hill! I'll handle this!" Twilight ordered her friend.

"Screw the hill! I'm not leaving her!" Rainbow yelled back.

Twilight looked around. Applejack was trying to help her brother untangle himself and get out of one tent, Dr. Mend and Pinkie Pie had gained the hill where they stood next to Sea Blue and Rarity. Looking at the tornado, Twilight judged it to be no more than a mere hundred paces away. Her mind sped through hundreds of possible ways to survive until it hit on one that it judged to be the most likely to work.

"Applejack!" she yelled, hoping her friend could hear her over the roar of the wind, "Use your Element! Make a safe bubble and protect you and Big Mac!"

Applejack looked up. Her eyes were wide and her face drained of all color. She locked eyes with Twilight for one brief moment before the tornado ripped the tent up and off the ground, taking both ponies with it. Turning her eyes back to her friends, Twilight saw Pinkie and Rarity glowing as they created small pockets of safe space for them and their guardians. Twilight turned back to the tent, with milliseconds to spare. She forced her will into her Element and leapt onto Lemon Lime and Fluttershy, encasing them with her. She looked to her side just in time to see Rainbow Dash get sucked up into the vortex. Trooper bellowed something unintelligible and leapt into the windstorm after her.

The purple unicorn's breath caught in her throat, fearing she had just witnessed the deaths of several of her friends. She had no time to think though. The tornado picked up the little sphere of protective magic and pulled it into its spiraling column. The ponies within flew around mercilessly as their sphere twisted and spun in insane and terrifying directions. The repeated impacts of their heads against the walls of the sphere quickly rendered them unconscious and they knew no more.

Outside, two Earth ponies, recently encased in a protective bubble shaped like an apple, planted their hooves against the hooves of the other.

Brother and sister forced their backs up against the walls of the bubble to minimize the impacts as they were tossed around, uncaringly, by the violent wind.

Rainbow Dash rarely felt fear of any sort. The thrill of speed generally overpowered the icy grip of fear. As of right now, Rainbow Dash was not afraid, she was terrified. The breath was sucked from her lungs as the force of the wind ripped at every fiber of her being. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't stabilize herself, and pieces of debris kept striking her painfully. The wind blew dust and other particles into her eyes, blinding her painfully. She was being thrown around helplessly. She tried to concentrate on summoning her Element like Twilight had said, but she was beginning to black out. The power slipped away from her.

Suddenly four hooves latched onto her torso, holding her with a death grip. She felt cold metal rub up against her coat and a mouth envelope her whole muzzle, sealing it against the wind. She felt pressure against her nostrils and breathed in deeply. She focused her mind and called out to her Element. Power surged through her. A protective bubble formed over her and the pony holding her almost instantly.

The pressure of the wind ceased and she cracked her eyes open, trying to blink away the debris that obscured her vision. The 'floor' of the bubble was covered with dirt, grass, and sticks. The protective sphere bounced around wildly, whipping her into the other pony. Dash wiped her eyes with a hoof and had a brief moment to stare at the sight before her. Trooper lay limply against the 'floor' of the bubble, armor covering his body. After a brief moment, gravity seemed to vanish.

Dash looked around only to see the ground coming at them at incredible speed as they sailed through the air. Before she could react, the sphere smashed into the grass at a shallow angle. She bounced around inside the sphere like a ragdoll, smacking into Trooper time and time again. The sphere rolled for hundreds, if not thousands of paces before coming to a stop after an eternity of jarring, painful motion. Long before the sphere came to a stop, Rainbow Dash had been rendered unconscious by the force of the impacts.

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“Whee!” Pinkie Pie squealed in a much higher pitch than normal, “This is fun!”

“Ouch!” Dr. Mend griped as his head rebounded off the side of the bubble again, although the word ‘bubble’ was subjective at best.

To the older stallion, The ‘bubble’ more resembled a balloon; consequently it had roughly the same level of elasticity, just much more tough, ‘*Did she really have to fill it with helium though?*’ he wondered.

“Isn’t this great, Dr. Mendie?” Pinkie asked, “It’s like being inside a balloon, except a really, really big one!”

“How can you not be worried about the others?” the black stallion asked grumpily, hating the high pitch of his voice.

“They’re fine!” Pinkie said with limitless enthusiasm, “Twilight’s super-duper smart, Applejack’s too stubborn to give up, Rainbow Dash can think really fast when she needs to, and Rarity’s attention to detail is perfect, besides Twilight got to Fluttershy in time. They’ll all be fine, silly! Relax and have some fun!” she paused briefly, placing her hooves against the side of the ‘balloon, “Look the tornado’s over!”

Dr. Mend looked around and to his astonishment, instead of falling like a rock, their protective, oblong, rubbery, ‘balloon’ was drifting down toward the ground at a gentle pace,  
“How are we not falling? Helium’s lighter than air, but our weight should easily overpower that.” he asked.

“Silly, we ARE falling! We’re just falling v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y.” Pinkie said elongating the two words then broke off into a fit of giggles, rolling around Dr. Mend’s hooves.

Despite the serious nature of the situation, Dr. Mend couldn’t help but to laugh at Pinkie’s antics,  
“You’re great, Pinkie Pie, you know that?” he laughed, “We could be dying and you would still be cracking jokes.”

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An impressively long distance away from the slowly drifting 'balloon' two unicorns slowly began the task of dis-entangling themselves from one-another,

"Darling, I appreciate your concern, but could you please remove yourself from on top of me. I'm fine and I assure you I don't require an equine shield."

Sea Blue groaned painfully and slowly raised his head, his tone set to 'maximum snark',

"Just checking for any burrs in your mane, Rarity. I'm proud to say there are none whatsoever. Dirt and leaves, on the other hoof seem to be 'in' this season, but I think you'd look better wearing swamp slime."

He slowly placed his hooves underneath himself and pushed up, "In all seriousness, I didn't mean to end up on top of you like that, sorry."

Rarity groaned and pushed herself up off the 'floor' of the round-cut gem shaped bubble,

"I appreciate the apology, darling, but for future reference, I'll thank you to refrain from making any comments about me wearing 'swamp slime' as you put it."

"Concern noted, catalogued, and promptly ignored." Sea Blue said playfully, "It's a defensive mechanism to ease tension and I find it works well. Now, how do we get out of this thing?" he asked pushing on the side of the gem shaped bubble with his hooves.

The bubble disintegrated promptly, causing Sea Blue to overbalance, flail his hooves comically, and fall flat on his face.

Rarity smiled at the counselor's supine posture and quipped over her shoulder,

"Like that."

An icy wind suddenly blew in, billowing her mane and tail, "We have to find someplace to sleep, darling. This cold will end up freezing us to death."

Sea Blue rose to his hooves once more and looked around,

“The tornado threw us a long way from the others and our tents are certainly long gone by now. I’ve got the fire starting stuff in my saddlebags, but we don’t have any wood to burn and this wind would put out any fire in a matter of seconds. The starter logs only burn for a little while and they wouldn’t throw off enough heat to make any difference. Do you have anything that might be able to help us right now? Come to think of it, I don’t even know what you brought.”

“Well,” the white unicorn began hesitantly, “I have my personal grooming supplies.”

“Please tell me you brought something more than vanity items.” Sea Blue deadpanned.

Rarity stuck her nose up into the air with a loud \*humph\*,  
“I’m not vain, darling, I simply like to look my best at all times.”

The sound of hooves scraping the ground caught her attention; Rarity turned around and saw the turquoise unicorn stallion digging his fore hooves into the dirt,  
“Darling, what are you doing? We need to find someplace to sleep, not dig a hole.”

Sea Blue grunted as he continued digging,  
“I’m doing both. I’ve heard that dirt is a great insulator. We dig a hole, lay down in it and cover ourselves with dirt. Our natural body heat keeps us warm and the soil keeps us insulated. Come on, help me. Every second we stay out in this wind means one second closer we come to hypothermia, plus the movement will help keep you warm.”

“Dirt?” Rarity asked incredulously, “You. Want. Me. To. Cover. Myself. With. DIRT?!”

Sea Blue grunted in frustration, but kept digging,  
“Would you rather be clean and frozen solid, or dirty and alive?” he asked pragmatically.

“If it’s all the same, darling, I’d rather be clean and alive.” Rarity said.

"I'm open for suggestions, if you have a better idea." Sea Blue said still digging, "Wait a second, You're a seamstress right? Couldn't you weave some of this grass together and make a couple of make-shift blankets for us? It wouldn't be perfect, but it would probably keep you cleaner."

"Well," Rarity began, "I do make the bird's nests during Winter Wrap Up." she sighed in defeat, "I suppose I can."

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More than a mile to the South, an Earth pony was busy digging another hole while his sister took stock of what they had to work with, "Ah suppose it's a good thing you were stuck in that tent, Big Mac. These here blankets sure will come in handy. We can line the bottom with this here shredded tent canvas. It's long enough to wrap us up completely, then we can have the blankets between us and the canvas then cover the whole thing with dirt."

"Ayup." Big Macintosh replied, "Hole's almost finished. Are you sure you're goin' to be alright with that leg o' yours A.J.? It looks mighty bad to me."

"Ah'll be fine." Applejack assured her brother, "It's just a scratch and a bump. Ah'll be right as rain in no time, just you wait and see."

"Taint no scratch, A.J. It's laid wide open and you can't put no pressure on it. Ah think it might be broken." the red Earth pony replied.

"Ah tells ya it's fine!" she retorted, "It's just a tad tender is all. Ah've had worse workin' out on the farm."

"But then we had Dr. Mend around, he ain't here this time. Ah think you should drink some o' that healin' potion that got left in the tent." Big Mac said sagely.

"Ah couldn't, even if mah leg is broke! If the bones ain't set right, they might heal all wrong-like and then Ah'd never be able to walk right again!" Applejack argued.

"We could always try to set it ourselves then have you drink the potion." Big Mac suggested.

"We can't risk nothin' like that right now. Ah'm sure we'll find the others tomorrow. We'll get it taken care of then, alright?" she offered.

"Alright, A.J. Ah trust you, but if that leg starts lookin' worse by tomorrow afternoon, we ain't goin' to have any choice. If'n it gets all red an' infected-like, you could be in some real trouble. The way Ah understand it, the potion can take care of all o' that stuff. Now Ah want you to make me a promise here, A.J. Promise me that if your leg don't look better by tomorrow afternoon you'll let me try to set it an' make you a splint then drink that potion." Big Macintosh said concerned.

"Alright, Ah promise! You happy now?" Applejack said obstinately.

"Ayup. Hole's done."

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A disturbing distance off to the West, two other Earth ponies were doing their level best to prepare to weather the frigid night and wake up alive the following morning,

"Why are you cutting the grass with your knife again Pinkie?" Dr. Mend asked.

His bright pink counterpart spat out her kitchen knife and explained jovially,

"We need something soft to sleep on, Dr. Mendie. Using the emergency blanket to keep warm was a GREAT idea, but the ground will be super-duper cold, beside the tall grass can be a wind-breaker for us."

"I can't argue your logic, Pinkie, but do you think you could start calling me by my real name?" Dr. Mend asked, *'She acts like a complete flake, but underneath it all she's hiding a keen mind. I applaud you Pinkie Pie.'*

"Nope!" Pinkie chirped.

*'Then again, maybe not.'* Dr. Mend thought sourly,  
"I think you have enough, Pinkie. I'll help you spread it out on the ground, then we can work on trying to find the others in the morning."



"I don't think we'll be able to find them in just one day." Pinkie replied, "We hardly went anywhere, while the others went zooming off in different directions. The balloon isn't aerodynamic so the tornado couldn't throw us very far. I can still see the hill you were sitting on top of earlier, from here."

With the grass laid out, Dr. Mend removed the emergency blanket and spread it out over Pinkie before slipping in beside her, "I'm not trying to get personal, Pinkie, but we need to be as close as possible to stay warm."

Pinkie Pie responded by enveloping the older stallion in a giant hug, "Not a problem! I'll just imagine I'm laying here on a romantic night with my future husband! I haven't met him yet, but he'll LOVE to snuggle!"

"I'm . . . not sure what to make of that statement, Pinkie." Dr. Mend admitted, "I'm surprised you've ever given any thought to that sort of thing though. I always thought you might be, you know, into other mares. I mean, you're always hanging out with Rainbow Dash."

"I LOVE my friends, but I couldn't ever, like, BE with any of them, it would be too awkward! Guys are so much cuter anyway!" Pinkie chirped, "Besides, what filly doesn't imagine what her ideal guy's like?"

"So, what do think he'll be like?" Dr. Mend asked, honestly intrigued.

"He'll be all, like, super suave and stuff! He'll tell me that I'm pretty all the time, and he'll love to snuggle up to me at night, and he'll be really smart, but silly at the same time! We'll do all sorts of things together, like play pranks and go out on dates even after we're married! He'll be able to appreciate me for just being me! I can't wait to meet him!" Pinkie rattled off, "What about you, Mendie? What kind of mare do you see yourself with?"

"I never really gave the issue much thought, honestly." Dr. Mend admitted.

"Well that's silly!" Pinkie said, "Why not? If you don't know what you want, how will you know when you meet her?"

Dr. Mend frowned silently, '*Good point.*' he thought, '*How can you be so wise, Pinkie?*'

"We need to get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a tough day."

“Okie dokie lokie! Good night!”

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Molasses trotted along, behind a group of rowdy fillies and colts. Miss Heartfelt had asked him to watch over them and the chocolate colored colt was determined to do his best. The youngsters dashed this way and that in a wild and random directions, some eating snacks while others wanted to meet the two heroes of Haysburg. Raspberry had wandered off earlier but returned a few minutes later. Molasses herded the younger ponies in the older filly’s direction, *‘Miss Heartfelt always asks her to help out, maybe she knows what to do. She’s smart.’* he thought.

The dark red Earth pony filly spotted Molasses and the little ones coming toward her and met them half way,  
“Hi Molasses!” she greeted cheerfully, “What’s up?”

The slow colt raised his gaze to the sky, wondering what she meant,  
“Clouds?” he ventured shyly.

Raspberry covered her muzzle with her right hoof to hide her giggles,  
“Silly colt,” she laughed, “I meant to ask if you needed something.”

*‘Then why ask what’s in the sky?’* Molasses wondered,  
“Miss Heartfelt told me to watch the foals.” he said simply.

“Do you want some help?” Raspberry offered, “I can take half of them, if you want.”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said humbly, *‘I want to be smart too.’*

“Sure thing.” Raspberry said warmly, “Anypony who wants to meet Surf & Turf, follow me. Anypony who wants to stay with Molasses and meet Nativel, go with him.”

Almost exactly half the foals went to Raspberry; she smiled and addressed Molasses,  
“You are going to take them to meet Nativel, aren’t you?”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said.

Raspberry pointed with her hoof,  
“He’s over there. Have fun! We’ll meet back here when you’re done, alright?”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said.

Molasses led the energetic foals to the back of the line of ponies waiting to meet Natival, *‘I wonder what Navitol is? It sounds like the cough medicine Momma used to give me, but if they want to see that, I’ll take them.’*

The foals quickly became impatient and Molasses was having a tough time keeping them in line (bad joke, I know),  
“Stay quiet when you’re in line and wait your turn. The ponies in front have been waiting longer than you have.” he told them quietly.

To the amazement of the other residents of Haysburg, the younger ponies actually listened to the slow colt. Molasses wasn’t surprised, *‘Miss Heartfelt said to always be patient with the foals and never yell at them, it upsets them and you might hurt their feelings.’* he thought.

From a distance, Heartfelt watched the chocolate colt dealing with the youngsters and smiled. She had been overjoyed to have Molasses to help her at the orphanage, even if she was sad to hear about his ‘Momma’ passing away. She was getting on in years and needed more and more help as the days wore on. Raspberry was a huge help, but Molasses was as reliable as the day was long. He never complained and he was always eager to help out in any way he could, whenever she needed him.

She would never admit it, but she was concerned about what would happen to the orphanage when she was too old to take care of the seemingly endless number of orphaned fillies and colts who came to live with her every year, *‘Molasses tries his best and he’s a wonderful helper, but the poor dear just doesn’t have the mental capacity to take over when I’m gone. I need somepony who can do all the things that need doing. Raspberry’s almost old enough to be declared an adult. She has her own life to live and it isn’t right of me to ask her to give up everything to take over when I’m gone. She’s going to begin her apprenticeship at the bakery*

*this spring, so she won't have the time to help out anymore.'* Try as she might, Heartfelt just couldn't think of anypony to take over. The problem had been weighing in her mind for some years, but with no discernable answer in sight. She sighed heavily and turned her attention back to the trestle tables overflowing with food and decided to enjoy the evening and put her worries behind her.

The last pony finished speaking with Natival and now it was the foals' turn. They approached the disguised stallion tentatively, looking up at him with puzzlement and awe.

Little Damson happily trotted up to the quiet pegasus and peered sideways at him,  
"Are you the one who rescued me the other night when that mean gryphon tried to take me away? You sure don't look like him."

Nativel only nodded his head silently.

"Why don't you say anything?" she asked innocently.

Nativel swallowed subtly, *'Because Molasses has a perfect memory. He'd recognize my voice and call me by my name, then be confused as to why all the other ponies got angry.'* he thought.

He leaned his head over and whispered in the little filly's ear,  
"I've been talking to ponies all night and my throat hurts. Why don't you just ask me yes or no questions?" it wasn't a lie, his throat was a bit sore, even so, he hated to disappoint the filly.

The filly turned to the other orphans,  
"His throat hurts so we have to ask him yes or no questions, guys."

Suddenly all the foals swarmed over to him and began bombarding him with questions.

"Why are you dressed like that? Are you a ninja?" one cream colored filly asked.

Nativel shook his head.

"I'll bet you have some awesome battle scars from your fights against monsters!" an orange colt said.

Natal shook his head.

"Have you ever slayed a dragon?" a charcoal grey filly asked.

Again Natal shook his head.

"Have you done anything exciting?" Damson asked.

Natal nodded his head vigorously.

"Like what? Have you ever saved a village before?" the cream colored filly asked.

"He sure has, little babe! This righteous dude, once saved Canterlot from a crazy unicorn mage!" Surf said walking over.

"Woah!" the foals said.

"You got that right! He and his friends had to fight a chimera that the mage summoned!" Surf continued.

"What's a chimera?" the charcoal colt asked.

"Chimera, little dude, it's called a chimera. It's a huge monster with three heads. It's got a lion head and a goat head on the front and a snake's head for its tail. The lion head can gobble you up and the goat head can breathe fire! The snake head on the back is all, like, venomous and stuff! I wish I could have seen it, it must have been awesome!" surf enthused.

Natal had broken out in a sweat, *'Shut up Surf! Molasses heard me tell you all those things! He'll be able to figure it out in no time!'* Sure enough, as Natal looked over to the chocolate colt, he saw a spark or recognition alight on his features. The only thing Natal could think to do was hold his hoof up in front of his mouth and shush Molasses quietly. Molasses clamped his mouth shut in puzzlement, *'But Valiant did those things. He isn't Valiant. He's shaped like Valiant, but he's not Valiant.'* Either way, Molasses kept quiet.

Natal looked up and noticed ponies beginning to gather around as Surf & Turf continued to expound his various exploits, "He was in Canterlot to study at the University when he first saw the unicorn. It was a dark night . . . "

As Surf continued with the story, all of Haysburg gathered around to listen. Many of the ponies wore awed expressions and some just looked doubtful. Natal had to admit, when Surf told the story, it sounded truly epic. Thankfully, the neon colored Earth pony had enough sense to omit any mention of the Elements of Peace and the pseudo-wings. By the time the story was over, everypony was eager to hear more. Surf complied and related the story about his friend's fight with the Lupus. Toward the end of that story, plenty of tired yawns were going around.

Natal leaned over and whispered in Surf's ear, "I think it's time to say goodnight."

Surf nodded and turned to the gathered ponies, "Sorry dudes and babes, but it's, like, seriously late. Everypony needs to get some shuteye before tomorrow. Remember, anypony who wants to learn how to fight, meet here first thing in the morning. We totally understand if you have to work and everything and we're, like, totally willing to work with you if you have odd hours. Goodnight everypony."

A feminine voice hailed him from the back of the crowd, "Hey hottie! How about you walk your sexy backside over here and give your main girl a kiss! I've been missing you something fierce!"

Surf's jaw dropped open, he knew that voice well, "T . . . Tinker!?"

"Of course! Don't think you can get away without giving me some sugar tonight! I came all the way from New Yoke to see your sweet flank again, and I gotta admit, this place isn't as much of a dump as I'd heard." the voice called.

If there had been any doubt before, it went up in the cloud of smoke that rose above the crowd. The residents of Haysburg parted and sure enough Tinker sauntered up to the two surprised stallions, cigar and all.

Surf & Turf ran up to her as quickly as he could. Tinker stopped and puckered her lips, expecting a kiss. What she got was a hoarse whisper in her ear while Surf hugged her.

“That’s Valiant in the black outfit there. Don’t say anything, babe, he’s in disguise. I’ll explain later.” He whispered.

Tinker’s face broke into a mischievous grin,  
“I won’t, but you have to kiss me to convince me.” she whispered back.

“Later, babe. I promise, just don’t say anything.” Surf repeated.

“Aw, I missed you too.” Tinker cooed out loud, “Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you tonight.”

Several parents covered their foals’ ears.

The Mayor walked out from the crowd and addressed the pair,  
“Do you know this mare?”

Surf let go of Tinker and turned to answer the Mayor,  
“I sure do! This is Tinker, she’s the one who made my glider and hooks. She’s a little . . . outgoing, but she’s really good.”

At the mention of her name, Tinker winked at the Mayor,  
“That’s me toots! The best blacksmith this side of Canterlot. So,” she blew out a puff of smoke, “What can I call you, wrinkles?”

The Mayor’s face turned a frightening shade of purple,  
“You may address me as the Mayor of Haysburg, young lady. I also happen to be the Judge here in Haysburg.”

Tinker was utterly non-pulsed,  
“Sweet, good to know. Sorry if I offended you, Mayor Judgy-wudgy-pudgy. You’ve got a nice little joint here. Haysburg’s a lot better than the dump I’d heard it to be. You kids in need of a good blacksmith? If so, I’m available in more ways than one. Surf’s my main squeeze, but we’re not exclusive or anything.”

Tinker's statement was met with such a level of silence, you could swear you heard the grass growing.

Surf leaned over and whispered in Tinker's ear, "Hey babe, they're a bit more reserved here. You might want to tone it down before you offend somepony."

Tinker looked around and saw the Mayor's face beginning to contort in unnatural ways, "Uh, sorry miss Mayor." she said sheepishly, "I don't mean any insult. I just tend to speak my mind."

"I think you should speak it a bit more politely in the future and remember who you're addressing. All that aside, welcome to Haysburg." the Mayor said, calming down a bit.

The older Earth pony turned to the gathered residents of her village, "Let's get some sleep everypony. We have a big day tomorrow."