

The Elements of Equestria
Part 16

Fluttershy opened her eyes and looked around. She was back in her cottage on the outskirts of Ponyville, lying in her own bed. She blinked in confusion and sat up, ‘*Why am I here?*’ she wondered, ‘*The last thing I remember is the scary tornado and Twilight encasing us in a bubble.*’ She pulled back her covers and hopped down from the bed onto the floor with a thump.

“Are you awake Fluttershy?” asked a stallion’s voice from downstairs.

The custard colored pegasus’ ears shot back, lying flat against her head, ‘*Somepony is in my house!*’ she thought, panic rising, ‘*A stallion!*’ she realized, ‘*Why is there a stallion in my house?*’ She ran and hid under her bed, shaking with fear as she heard his hoof steps coming up the stairs. She was too afraid to look out from under the bed, she covered her eyes with her hooves, ‘*Please go away! Don’t hurt me!*’

“Fluttershy?” he called from the top of the stairs, “Where are you?”

She could hear him coming closer to the bed and tightened herself into as small a ball as she could. She could hear him walking around the room calling her name again and again.

“There you are.” he said from behind her, “Why are you under the bed? Did you have another bad dream?”

Fluttershy squeaked in terror as the stallion gently pulled her from under the bed by her tail. She whimpered as she felt his grip on her tail vanish, ‘*He found me!*’

“Take anything you want just don’t hurt me!” she cried.

Silence reigned for a few moments before the stallion spoke up, “What?” he asked, “What are you talking about? Why would I take anything?”

She felt him lay down beside her, “Fluttershy, what’s wrong?” he asked, concern in his tone.

She felt a slight pressure against her cheek as he nuzzled her, “That must have been quite a dream.” he said softly, “It’s alright now, I’m here.”

To say that the Element of Kindness was confused would be a drastic understatement. She was as lost as a blind squirrel reaching for a cloud. As he continued nuzzling her affectionately, she slowly lowered her hooves from her eyes and peeked out, a process which felt like it took no less than half an hour. Looking back at her was Valiant. He looked different from what she remembered. His limbs were

tightly chorded with lean muscle as was his neck. His cheeks and eyes no longer looked sunken and gaunt, but full and healthy with solid color. His mane was clean and brushed, shoulder-length and wavy.

She dropped her hooves down to the floor completely, eyes alight with wonder, “Valiant?” she asked.

“Of course.” he said smiling, “Who else would be in your house?”

“But we’ve been looking for you for weeks. We were on our way to Haysburg to find you.” Fluttershy said.

“I’m here now, that’s all that matters.” he said nuzzling her once more.

Fluttershy was even more confused now, ‘*Why is he being so affectionate?*’ she wondered silently.

“Um, why are you doing that?” she asked timidly.

“Doing what?” he asked.

“Um, nuzzling me.” she clarified.

“Because I’m allowed to?” he said questioningly.

“If it’s not too much to ask, would you please stop?” she inquired.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright?” he asked laying a hoof against her forehead.

The situation was becoming more and more uncomfortable for the little yellow pegasus. She rose to her hooves and backed away from the stallion cautiously. Valiant, for his part seemed to take the hint that something was amiss and stayed put on the floor. Fluttershy closed her eyes trying to recall anything important, like rescuing Valiant, actually arriving in Haysburg, anything. She came up empty-hooved.

She opened her eyes and prepared to ask the stallion a question, but the words died on her lips. Where Valiant her been lying was now a creature out of nightmare. Its physical form was the approximate shape of a pony, but the similarities ended there. Its eyes glowed an eerie, unnatural yellow, its mane and tail were ever-flowing wisps of oily, pitch black smoke, its coat was covered with swirling shadows showing the forms of ponies in agony, its legs were that of a predator, each ended in four razor sharp claws, and its muzzle held an array of sharp fangs which poked above and below its jowls. There was a single additional odd thing about the creature, a thing that seemed significant somehow. On its left foreleg, it had a shiny golden band of metal that pulsed with darkness, seeming to swallow all light around it.

Fluttershy took a terrified step back as the beast spoke with Valiant's voice, "What's wrong?"

The poor mare couldn't find her voice, she had never seen such a vile being. She pressed herself against the far wall of her cottage as the creature rose to its clawed feet. It approached her slowly almost as if savoring her fear. Its body shone with wicked power, thick muscles rippled beneath its accursed skin and its eyes seemed to bore into her soul.

She shrank back, pressing herself tighter against the wall and cowered, covering her eyes.

"Fluttershy, wake up!" called a familiar voice.

A gentle hoof shook her by the shoulder. She screamed and leapt to a standing position prepared to bolt, but stopped when she saw Twilight standing next to her.

"Were you having a nightmare?" the lavender unicorn asked, "I know the tornado was pretty scary but it's over now and we need to get moving. We have to find the others."

It was only then that Fluttershy realized just how cold she was. She instantly wrapped her wings around her body as far as they would go and shuddered, fluffing her feathers. It was an old trick, but it sure did work. She felt the bite of the icy breeze taper off almost immediately. Her head, backside, and legs were still frigidly cold but her torso was significantly eased of the shivers the rest of her body was involuntarily inducing.

With a dim constant purple glow about her, Twilight didn't look even the least bit cold, "Are you hurt?" she asked her friend, "That fall was pretty dramatic and potentially traumatic as well."

Fluttershy was sore all over but she was certain nothing was broken, otherwise the shivering would have incapacitated her from the pain of a fracture. The tall grass beside Twilight rustled briefly before spewing forth Lemon Lime, who was levitating a frying pan in front of himself. The smell of cooking potatoes, peppers, and onions assailed the nostrils of the two mares, immediately making them realize just how hungry they were.

The little yellow therapist set the pan down on the flattened grass and levitated a trio of bowls from his saddlebags,

"Breakfast is served." he said with obviously forced cheerfulness.

Fluttershy didn't see any smoke, '*He must have heated up the pan with his magic.*' she thought.

"I seem to have lost the tortillas I had in my bags, so I'm afraid I can't serve breakfast burritos." he said portioning out three helpings for his companions.

"Has there been any sign of the others?" Twilight asked the stallion levitating a bowl in front of her.

“I’m afraid not. I figure Rainbow Dash and Trooper haven’t woken up yet, otherwise I’m sure we would have seen them by now.” he said quietly.

What he left unsaid spoke volumes and nopony needed to expound on the horrible possibility that they would never see either of the two pegasi again.

“I’ll send up a beacon now and another in a little while and we can wait and see if anypony shows up. If we don’t see any sign of them by noon we continue onward. They all know how to get to Haysburg by now so if we don’t see them soon, we can all meet up there.” Twilight said authoritatively.

Her horn lit up in a purple glow as she concentrated on focusing her magic. A small yellow spark leapt up from her horn and sailed high into the sky and out of sight. Seconds later a sharp crack sounded off, accompanied by a brilliant flash of purple, the exact same shade as the unicorn’s coat. Now all they had to do was wait.

An impressively significant distance away, a cyan pegasus mare suddenly awoke to the sound of a very distant, very faint explosion. She knew a sound had taken her from her slumber, but she could only guess at the source. She turned her head, trying to zero in on the source of the sound in case of danger, but to no avail, all she found was a second body on top of her own. Trooper lay on the back of the mare he was sworn to protect, wings outstretched, keeping her warm with the only thing he had available, himself. It would be difficult for the pegasus mare to miss the fact that he had tiny, shining ice crystals in his mane.

“Trooper?” she asked pensively, fearing he had frozen to death during the night.

“Five more minutes if you please Mum.” he mumbled, “Would you be so kind as to close the window? It is dreadfully nippy in here.”

“Get up Trooper.” Dash said flatly.

The royal blue pegasus stallion awoke with a startled cry and very unceremoniously fell off the mare he was sleeping on top of. He picked himself up off the cold hard ground with as much grace as he could muster and stretched, arching his back while furling and unfurling his wings repetitively.

Rainbow Dash tried to follow suite but found she could do little more than stand. Her right wing was horribly sore and she found she couldn’t move the left one at all. She looked back to get a look at her wing and gasped. The joint that joined the wing to her back was sticking down at an unnatural angle, the entire body of the feathered appendage stiff as a board.

“What did you do to my wing!” she accused the stallion.

“I did nothing.” Trooper responded testily, “I have not the medical expertise to relocate a joint and unless you do, I would advise we not try it immediately.”

“I can’t leave it like this!” Dash cried, “You can’t just leave something like this alone and hope it goes away! We have to pop it back in!”

“I realize you are distraught, Rainbow Dash, but I refuse to risk crippling you. Without help and proper know how, we may end up doing more harm than good. If you would be so kind as to wait here, I will have a brief fly around and see if I can locate any of our compatriots.” he responded.

Without further ado, he launched himself into the air. Rainbow Dash grumbled to herself and took another look at her wing, trying to see the best possible way to relocate it. She had previously done so on numerous occasions, such were the hazards of flying at high velocities. Trooper flew straight up for several seconds before leveling off. The sun had been up for some time, he estimated the morning to be half over already. His eyes carefully scanned over the tall grass below, looking for signs of the others. From the air, he could see numerous pieces of debris that had been flung around for leagues in every direction. One mass of green poking out from the grass a couple hundred flaps away looked somewhat like Lemon Lime’s mane. Trooper flew over and landed nearby, hoping not to find a dead body. He pulled back the grass and beheld a small pine tree that had been uprooted the previous evening.

Nearly two dozen more false leads served to extinguish Trooper’s hope of finding anypony else nearby. There was just too much debris scattered around to check every possibility, which left only one choice. Trooper landed several minutes later, his face was downcast.

“I am afraid I cannot locate any of our friends. We shall have to continue on to Haysburg on our own, and given your condition, we will clearly be doing so on hoof. Would you like me to attempt to fashion some type of splint for your wing?” Trooper asked hopefully.

“Nope.” Dash said closing her eyes.

Before Trooper could react, she tipped her injured wing to the ground and used the ensuing increase of pressure to relocate the joint with an audible popping sound. She felt the joint pop back into place as pure fire leapt from her wing onto her whole back and shoulder. Her legs went out from beneath her and she collapsed, nearly passing out. Trooper had already been in motion when he saw Dash fall. He caught her, using his shoulder to support her weight.

“Confound it all Rainbow Dash! Have you no sense!” he hollered, “How can I protect you when you go and do something so idiotic, so foolhardy, so foolish! I pray you have not done any permanent damage to yourself with that!” he chided angrily.

“Since when do you care so much?” Dash asked, slurring through a haze of pain.

“I have always cared, you dolt. My only issue with you is that you are a bully.” he said gently easing her

to the ground.

Dash winced as her body touched the icy hard dirt, “I’m not a bully!” she protested, “I’m just confident, opinionated, and playful. I don’t have a mean bone in my body.”

“Just lay here while I try to find us something to eat.” Trooper said rolling his eyes and turning to leave.

“Hey, don’t you walk away from me when I’m talking to you!” Dash shouted, struggling to rise, but still dizzy from the pain.

Trooper whirled on her and held her down carefully with his front hooves as he shouted into her face,

“You cannot push yourself like this! You are injured and in pain. For your own sake, stay down! I will take care of you for now, Rainbow Dash! Lie still!”

“Let go!” Dash cried, struggling against him.

“You are not going to hurt yourself anymore while I have any say in the matter!” Trooper struggle against the athletic mare.

“I know what my body can and can’t handle! Get off me!” Dash grunted against the stallion.

The struggle increased in intensity slowly becoming a wrestling match with both ponies rolling around on the ground grunting and trying to gain the upper hoof over their opponent. They threw up dust, bits of leftover debris, rolled into the grass, on and on until finally, something happened that had never happened before.

“I . . . I yield!” Rainbow Dash yelled.

All motion from the two ponies ceased. As the dust settled, the picture revealed itself. Rainbow Dash lay on her back in the grass, Trooper on top of her. His forelegs held hers down against the ground above her head. His forelegs pinned hers using the joints to hold hers instead of his actual hooves, making the two of them end up nearly muzzle to muzzle. Trooper held Dash’s hind legs closed, together against his backside with his legs on the outside and crossed behind her own. Her wings were extended but held against their bodies by Trooper’s own, pressed flat and held immobile. She couldn’t move; he had done what was nearly impossible, he had pinned her.

“I’ll stay put.” she confirmed quietly, “You . . . you win.” her voice was a whisper.

Trooper shook his head angrily, “This was never about winning or losing. I never cared about winning against you, I just want to keep you safe and to hell with everything else! Not everything has to be about competition! I could not care less

about winning!”

“You just don’t get it do you!” Dash responded growing angry, “I NEVER lose! I CAN’T lose! The only thing I know how to do is WIN! I win because I’m the fastest and best!”

“It is a fine trait and it speaks well of your determination and dedication, but this is unacceptable! You are going to injure yourself and I will not let you do that! Like it or not, Rainbow Dash, I have a responsibility to you and I will see it done!” Trooper roared.

“It’s called pride you jerk; you wouldn’t understand, you don’t have any! All you know how to do is feel sorry for yourself!” Dash yelled back.

“You are correct, but you at least have something you are good at! Try being a talentless adult! I am good at everything but exceptional at nothing! I apologize for being such a burden about it, but as you said, ‘I would not understand’ the same rings true in reverse!” Trooper countered.

“Oh, shut up and stop with the pity-party! You’re not useless, so stop whining about it! I mean come on, you started molding clouds without any idea of how to do it! You’re good at everything! So what if you’re not exceptional at anything! Do you know how many ponies would love to be good at everything? Think about it! You’re basically second best at everything in the world! You’re the ultimate jack-of-all-trades!” Dash yelled into Trooper’s face.

In the silence that followed the cyan mare’s proclamation, both ponies sought to catch their breath and cool their tempers. Trooper was silently glad that Rainbow Dash thought he was good at everything. Dash, on the other hoof, was slightly impressed that Trooper had been able to pin her. Not a single pony in the world had ever beaten her in a wrestling match. Even so, she could admit that she wasn’t at the top of her game at the moment, formerly dislocated wing and all.

Trooper gave the mare’s statement serious consideration, “I never thought about it like that. I suppose you are right.” he admitted wearing a cheesy grin, “I suppose I am a bit of a jack-of-all-trades.”

A bright flash of light from behind the two ponies made both stop their thoughts instantly, “You have got to be kidding.” Trooper deadpanned.

Two heads swiveled around and set their eyes on the blue stallion’s flank. There it was, big, bold, and beautiful. Trooper’s cutie mark had finally appeared. The culmination of a lifetime of soul-searching, self-loathing, bitterness, and teasing evaporated in an instant, as the symbol of, what he had made to be, the most important aspect of his life flashed into being. He blinked, trying to stave off the tears. He had been waiting his whole life for the literal sign of his greatest ability only to discover that he didn’t have one, but all of them to a lesser degree. Plastered on his flank was a black, sideways ‘8’.

“I have a cutie mark.” he whispered not quite believing it, “I have a cutie mark.”

Dash couldn't help but smile for him, irritated or not,
"So much for you being worthless huh?" she snarked, "I almost hate to say, told you so."

After patiently waiting for several full minutes while Trooper continued to stare at his flank, she had to speak up,
"Hey Troops, get off. You're cutting off the circulation to the tips of my hooves, and we still need to eat."

Trooper blinked and came to his senses, '*Wait a second, I'm on top of . . .*' his brain began working once more, making him realize, for the first time, the compromising position he and Dash were engaged in. His eyes bulged as his face grew red hot while his mouth went dry.

He practically leapt off the mare, blushing furiously and feeling like a complete tool,
"I-need-to-go-find-us-something-to-eat!" he bolted away from her in a flurry of movement, running on the entire sentence as if one word.

What he didn't see was the fact that he was not the only one blushing.

An unhappy Rarity was trying at the best of times, a cold, dirty, sleep and shower deprived Rarity was simply unbearable, as Sea Blue was learning first hoof. The complaining had begun as soon as they had woken up with the sunrise and had been continuing ever since without ceasing or showing any signs of abating. They had been fortunate enough to find a bush that, by some miracle, still had a few blackberries on it, despite the lateness of the season. The berries had been frozen solid and difficult to chew, but they were a piece of heaven compared to what they had to drink.

They stumbled, literally stumbled into a tiny stream, invisible in the tall grass, their hooves breaking open the coat of ice that covered the surface. So it was with freezing cold and wet hooves, the pair lowered their heads and drank from the stream, spitting out small bits of mud afterward.

Rarity spat loudly and made a face as if somepony were offering to feed her back her own mane-clippings,
"Dear heavens!" she exclaimed trying to ignore the grit stuck between her teeth, "How are we supposed to survive out here if we cannot so much as enjoy a simple drink of water without gaging or choking!"

Sea Blue had been doing a primo job of keeping his teeth closed, but he figured it was high time to play a little gamble,
"Do you think I like this?" he snarled, "Not only do I have to suffer through the same thing you do but I have to try to find the solutions for everything you complain about! Try using your head instead of flapping your jaw! Try thinking of a solution instead of stating, restating, and re-restating the problem over and over and over! I can't do everything, you have to help me! How about making this a team effort instead of depending on me to do everything for you! I've seen you work on your own, you even have

your own business! You're not helpless, why are you acting like it?"

The white unicorn was shocked to silence, nopony had ever spoken to her in such a way before. Her ears fell and her posture drooped, but an idea had sunk into her mind. She levitated out a thin, filmy shawl out of her saddlebags and proceeded to scoop up a huge chunk of ice and wrapped it in the shawl. Her horn lit up as she applied heat to the fabric and began melting the ice. She held the shawl over her open mouth and waited as the ice melted and the material filtered out everything that wasn't water. A small trickle of liquid began to spill into her open mouth. She swallowed it greedily.

Once the piece of ice had melted and given the white unicorn mare all the water she wanted she lowered the fabric and spread it out on the tall grass to dry before turning back to the stallion next to her. She was surprised to see him smiling hugely. The sight puzzled her to no end.

"You just proved my point perfectly, Rarity. You have a good mind for solving problems, you think outside the box, it comes naturally for you. Your ingenuity is born of your creativity. Very good idea, by the way; I wish I had thought of it. Shall we continue on?" he asked politely.

The look on the ice white mare's face gave him her answer in no small, uncertain terms. She looked both confused and hurt. Sea Blue knew he had need of absolution, '*Oops.*' he thought, '*I really need to stop with the mind games.*'

"I'm sorry for my earlier outburst. I was playing the part of being angry to hopefully stimulate you into realizing what you were capable of. It worked, but I hurt your feelings in the process. My apologies. Will you forgive me?" he asked humbly.

"It was a boorish thing to do, Sea Blue, but I concede your point and yes I forgive you, darling. Let's not let it get to this point again shall we?" Rarity said openly.

Sea Blue rubbed his neck,
"Yeah, I think we both could have handled that better overall. I'll be more straightforward in the future. No more mind games."

"And for my part, I shall try to be less, shall we say, obtuse about our situation as a whole." Rarity held out a hoof to shake.

Sea Blue shook her offered hoof then gently embraced her,
"You handled my mistake with a good deal more grace than most would have. Thank you."

Applejack had never been in so much prolonged pain in her whole life. Every step down was white hot agony and every step up was a mental struggle not to whimper or cringe. Perspiration beaded on her coat, not from the exertion, but from the pain and trauma. The leg in question was her right foreleg.

She had injured it the previous evening when she and her older brother had been thrown around by the tornado. She knew her leg was in bad shape. It had a lateral laceration going almost all the way from her hoof to her knee. It had stopped bleeding on its own, but she was keenly aware that she could not put any kind of solid pressure on it. It was badly sprained if not broken outright and she knew it. She had been keeping a steady if slow pace, favoring her injured leg. She was fighting a losing battle and she knew it, *'Dang it! Ah can't keep this up much longer. Ah should have just swallowed mah pride and let Big Mac try and set mah leg last night. Ah can't take one more step, Ah got to tell him. It'll slow us down, probably stop us for the day, but Ah can't go on like this.'*

With her mind made up, Applejack stopped and spoke to the open air without turning her head, knowing her older brother behind her would hear, "Ah figure we should stop here for the day, don't you Big Mac?"

"Nope. Ah don't think so at all, but if'n you're ready for me to take a gander at that leg o' yours A.J. That makes it just dandy for me." her older brother said simply.

"You always could read me like a book there Big Mac. Ah hafta' sit down for a few here. Mah leg's hurtin' somethin' fierce." the light orange Earth pony mare said.

She tried to lower herself gently onto the grass, but due to the unusual angle she had her leg in, the limb in question chose that exact moment to give out completely. With an audible crunch, the last solid fragments of bone gave out, slicing through the muscle and flesh and emerging from the young mare's skin. Applejack was never one for dramatics or even being particularly feminine, but some things simply cannot be stopped. The pain was far too great for her to do anything else but scream.

She fell over onto her side, eyes shut tightly and leaking tears, while she held her leg with her other limb and rolled from side to side. The pain was too intense, she couldn't think, she could barely breathe. She began gasping for breath between screams as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Big Macintosh knew he had a tough job ahead of him. He took a deep breath and began trying to formulate how to best aid his agonized sibling while not doing her even more injury. Roughly an hour, and two black eyes later, he had patched his sister up as well as he knew how.

Applejack's leg was elevated on the bundled tent canvas to slow the bleeding, she was lying on her back passed out from the pain. Big Mac had pried her muzzle open and forced her to down the whole jar of the healing potion. He sat next to her keeping an eye on her leg. He had set it to the best of his abilities, having done so for sheep occasionally, but he didn't want to wrap the dirty tent canvas over the injury for fear of infection, potion or not.

A rustling sound behind him made him jump up, *'When it rains, it pours Ah guess. Some predator gone and smelled A.J.'s bleedin' leg and come for an easy meal. Sorry partner, but this here's two ponies you ain't munchin' on.'* he thought. He concentrated and summoned forth his armor, ready to defend his sister with deadly force if it came to it.

The rustling came closer and the stallion figured he should give the creature a chance to get away before he hurt it, in case it was sentient,
“You’d better not be thinkin’ o’ makin’ a meal out o’ mah sister. You just get on up outa’ here and we’ve got no quarrel.”

The rustling ceased for a moment, the silence followed by a high pitched chirpy voice,
“Since when do ponies eat meat, Big Mackie? Applejack’s sweet and all, but I really don’t think that carries over to flavor. Cupcakes are only made of sweets, not meats.”

The massively built stallion’s armor vanished almost instantly,
“Pinkie?” he asked.

“And I as well.” said the disembodied voice of Dr. Mend, “Any doctor is well attuned to the sounds of pain. I could hear Applejack screaming from quite a distance. Apparently we weren’t too far away for her voice to carry and I heard quite the racked coming from over here. Even so, we’ve been walking for nearly an hour. I’d guess we were a good deal more than a league or three from where you landed. Keep talking so we can find you. This grass is a great door, but a lousy window.”

“You’re right on course doc. Just keep headin’ the way you already are, Ah think.A.J,’s hurt pretty bad. Ah don’t know how to help her much.” the stout farm pony said.

Within a few more seconds, the two polar opposite ponies appeared, Pinkie Pie wearing her perpetual smile and Dr. Mend wearing his perpetual grimace. Big Macintosh let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. He knew his sister would be fine now.

Dr. Mend wasted no time. Opening his saddlebags, he got right to work on Applejack with assistance from Big Macintosh. Neither stallion wanted to even think about asking Pinkie Pie to help. With her ‘helping’ she might very well end up wrapping Applejack in a body-wide cast.

A few minutes later a second beacon went off, ignored by the Earth ponies except Pinkie who, as we all know, is easily distracted. Try as she might, she couldn’t see far enough over the tall grass to see where the beacon had come from and just as quickly shrugged the sound off as just being thunder.

Natal was pleased with the morning’s turnout. More than half of Haysburg had shown up to participate. They had no previous experience with fighting of any kind and what Natal knew stemmed from his own ideas. Still things were looking a great deal better. Colossus and Birdie had shown up, no longer shunned quite as much by the residents of the coastal town. They, in particular, had shown a great natural affinity for fighting, Birdie especially.

During the training Natal had been distracted by his dream from the previous night, one that

involved a certain yellow pegasus mare in her cottage. His mind wandered as the participating residents finished up their workout with some stretches. Thoughts of yellow pegasi brought his attention to Birdie. Judging by her wings, she was exactly the same shade of coat that Fluttershy was. His eyes wandered off to the cloaked pegasus and a thought struck him, '*Searcher was supposed to send her off to try to get help from Canterlot.*' That was an issue that had to be addressed immediately.

"You're done." Nativall said loudly to the gathered ponies, "Be back here tomorrow morning for your next lesson."

The ponies of Haysburg began dispersing to go about their business. Nativall approached Birdie before she took wing. The silent pegasus waited patiently as she saw the covered stallion approach. Colossus politely bowed out and went to find Searcher, leaving the two pegasi alone in the town square.

"I told Searcher to have you see if you could reach Canterlot, yet you're still here. I'm sure you know the way." Nativall said bluntly.

Birdie shook her head.

Nativall arched an eyebrow,
"So you don't know the way? Follow the mountains North and East and you will see a huge white city. Fly to the castle there and tell the Princesses that we need help. It's very simple. You should be able to make it in less than a week."

Birdie shook her head and brought up a hoof to her throat.

"Can you speak at all?" Nativall asked.

Birdie nodded slowly.

"Then what's the problem?" Nativall asked hotly.

"The problem is that she almost never speaks, a personal choice you see. Colossus and I respect her enough not to push the issue. I have a written message for her to take to Canterlot." Searcher said walking up casually.

"You should have done this before now." Nativall growled.

"Perhaps, but I doubt any pony would be up to a long hard trek after the fighting the other day. By your own admission, Birdie did quite a lot. She deserved a chance to rest." Searcher responded smoothly.

"What's done is done. She needs to go, now." the concealed pegasus stallion said.

"Birdie, would you please fly this message to Canterlot and give it to the Princesses? I can give you

directions if you wish.” Searcher offered setting the scroll down in front of her.

Birdie nodded and picked up the scroll with her, still unseen muzzle, Searcher continued, “Do your best to get there, but don’t place yourself at too much risk if the gryphons have scouts flying around.”

Birdie nodded and took to the sky, flying off over the swamp.

Natal turned his attention back to Searcher, “We need to fortify Haysburg as much as possible. So far, from what I can tell, the gryphons have come in at ground level, because that’s where the doors are and that strikes me as odd. Why would they use doors when windows are available? They opened up the roof of the orphanage easily enough. Furthermore, why are they only interested in taking foals? You gave me a possible answer, but I think there’s more to this than meets the eye. They’re up to something and I plan on finding out what.”

“How exactly do you intend going about this? Espionage? Spying?” Searcher asked.

“I’m going to head into the swamps and ask the first gryphon I find. Alone, I can handle several and I can go unnoticed until I wish to be seen. I’ll be back before nightfall, but first I need to see how Surf and Tinker are doing.” Natal said over his shoulder as he walked off.

Searcher smiled, ‘*Perfect.*’

The residents of Haysburg had been kind enough to erect an outdoor blacksmith shop for Tinker only a few paces away from the square. The entire affair was composed of a furnace, bellows, an anvil, a hammer, tongs, several barrels of water and an overhang. It was very basic, but it served its purpose. Despite what the pretty blacksmith insinuated, she and Surf hadn’t spent the night together. They had slept in different beds, in different rooms. Tinker had risen early to start her work in the forge. Surf & Turf had gone to visit the unicorn mare to go over sketches and blue-prints with her. Their work was interrupted however when word reached the clinic about how Tinker acted toward the neon colored Earth pony stallion that she was supposed to have a date with.

Surf & Turf and Tinker were having a small issue with Trauma, “I thought we had an agreement, Surf. We were supposed to go out on a date.” the nurse admonished.

“We do, babe. What’s the problem?” Surf responded.

“The problem,” Trauma replied angrily, “Is that you apparently neglected to mention, you were seeing another mare!” she said gesturing to Tinker.

Never one to miss an opportunity to ruffle some feathers, figuratively speaking, Tinker couldn’t

help herself,

“Don’t worry, I can share this gorgeous hunk of stud with you. Maybe we can even enjoy his company together. He can help me teach you a few tricks to please any stallion or a mare.” she purred seductively.

Trauma’s face turned beat red and not just from the steamy implication, “You trollop!” she bellowed, “I would never share a stallion in such a manner! Unlike you, I have a modicum of self-respect and don’t go around offering myself to every handsome stallion I meet. Go and frolic about in any filthy back alley you want, it’s where you belong! I’ll have no part of it! As for you,” she said turning to Surf & Turf, “You can have your damaged goods with her skanky, readily spread . . . “

“What’s going on here?” Natival asked trotting up, “What’s wrong Trauma?”

“It’s private business and it’s over with. I’ve said my peace, and Surf apparently already has his piece.” the distraught nurse turned and began to walk away, fighting tears.

“If you can’t handle the competition, get out of the race!” Tinker spouted coming out from behind her anvil to face the other unicorn.

Trauma stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly, “What is that supposed to mean?” she asked, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Tinker, babe, cool it . . . “ Surf’s words were ignored as the unicorn mares continued exchanging words.

“It means, if you don’t have what it takes, don’t bother trying. Some have it and some don’t. I’ll give you three guesses as to which category you fall under, if you can get it in three.” Tinker said.

Trauma didn’t say a word and before either stallion could stop her, she leapt into the air and tackled Tinker onto the ground. The two mares rolled around in the dirt, hitting each other, biting each other and screaming. Tinker took a deep pull from her cigar and exhaled the acrid smoke right into Trauma’s face. The other unicorn mare coughed harshly and bit down on Tinker’s mane, yanking it back and forth in her teeth. Tinker smacked her right hoof into Trauma’s jaw. The irate nurse let go of her rival’s mane and used her left foreleg to strike Tinker in a leg nerve, giving her a ‘dead-leg’.

The two feuding females separated after a few moments and gained their hooves, ready to go at it again.

“Hold it, babes!” Surf yelled placing himself between the two mares, “Tinker, lay off and tell her the truth! Seriously, you’ve taken this way too far!”

“Hey, she attacked me!” the blacksmith protested.

“Only because you couldn’t keep your stallion-stroking mouth shut!” Trauma spat back.

“STOP IT!” Surf bellowed, “Seriously babes, calm down right now, both of you! Tinker, you went too far and Trauma, you should know better than to let her goad you like that! You’re both at fault, and for Celestia’s sake, stop with the insults! It’s totally uncool!”

The air was silent for several full minutes as both mares concluded that Surf was right.

Tinker’s ears drooped, she had started it and she would make it right,
“Could we have a private moment boys?”

The neon colored Earth pony eyed her suspiciously,
“No more insults or taunting, babe. Your word on it.”

“I promise, Surf. I just want to talk.” Tinker said honestly.

The colorful stallion turned to Trauma,
“What about you, Trauma?”

“If she means it, I’ll talk, but I won’t stand for being insulted.” Trauma said.

“Alright then, but I’m watching you two babes.” Surf said turning to Nativel.

Nativel and Surf began talking, while Tinker motioned Trauma over with a hoof. Trauma was still upset, but she complied and approached blacksmith. The cigar smoking unicorn mare leaned over her anvil and whispered into Trauma’s ear.

“Look, it’s all just in play. I don’t actually mean any of it. Surf and I aren’t together. The most we’ve ever done was when I gave him a peck on the cheek for being nice enough to take me out on one date. We’re not really together, I swear.” Tinker whispered.

Trauma was not entirely convinced,
“But what was all that talk about . . . you know, private, intimate stuff? Why act like it if you don’t mean it?”

Tinker’s gaze fell and she licked her suddenly dry lips,
“It’s um, kind of embarrassing actually. You see, stallions don’t want a mare who’s a blacksmith, but if I make myself out to be desirable, they’re willing notice me and overlook that I’m stronger than they are.” Tinker paused, blushing before she continued, “I’ve never actually, you know, been with anypony before. The most I’ve ever done was the peck I gave Surf. Only thing is, he isn’t interested in me like that. I’m no threat to you dating him, believe me. He just puts up with me better than most and I like feeling wanted, even if it is just in my imagination. I guess that’s why I went so overboard. I won’t stop you from dating him. I’m sorry I got so carried away a few minutes ago. Just promise me, you won’t tell anypony, it would ruin my image.”

The nurse frowned and offered a rare moment of friendly advice, “You don’t need an image like that, Tinker. It paints you in a very negative light. I think you’ll find that the stallion you’re supposed to be with, will be able to appreciate you for being who you are.” Trauma said rubbing her jaw, “You’re right though, you are freakishly strong.”

Tinker smiled and stood erect, “I have to have some way to keep this hotness contained and muscle seems as good a way as any.” she then held out her right foreleg to Trauma, “What do you say scrapper, truce?”

Trauma rolled her eyes but shook the blacksmith’s hoof, “Truce. You said he’s mine, right?”

“He’s all yours.” Tinker replied.

Surf and Natival were still talking when Trauma walked over. She stepped between the two stallions and addressed Surf plainly.

“I’ll be waiting at the clinic tonight at sundown. I’ll see you there.” she said.

Surf smiled and nodded politely, “See you then babe.”

Natival crept low to the ground, keeping to one of the well-worn paths as he traversed through the swamps. His business with Surf had been simple and short, once the issue with Tinker and Trauma had been sorted out. The new gliders would be ready in a couple of days and the nets and hooks, ‘*Blunted hooks,*’ would follow soon after, ‘*The gryphons won’t know what hit them.*’ he thought darkly.

The ninja look-alike continued on his way, senses focused and razor sharp for any sign of gryphons. He wasn’t very far into the swamp, he had taken the long way around, heading back to the road from New Yoke and going East from there so as to be less conspicuous in case the gryphons had posted lookouts. He remembered the paths from his foal hood in Haysburg. He had spent many summer days making Heartfelt sick with worry while he spent a fun day exploring the ancient ruins that still lingered in the swamps, perfectly preserved by the quality of their construction.

The smell of the swamp hadn’t changed and he wrinkled his nose in distaste, but kept sniffing at every breeze, hoping to catch the distinctive scent of gryphons. His nose wasn’t particularly keen even for a pony, but gryphons had a pungent smell that was quite difficult to miss. A stiff breeze blew through the moss-covered trees bringing with it the scent of dead fish and stale viscera. Natival flared his nostrils and took in the scent greedily.

He dropped to the road, hunkering down to keep a low profile and peered around, scanning the

nearby shrubbery for any sign on brown feathers or beak. He raised his eyes to the tree top canopy, searching carefully and slowly.

He spied tell-tale clump of outstretched primary feathers high above him in the trees and crept around, behind the trunk of a different nearby tree to get a better view of the gryphon. It looked young, barely an adult. After several seconds of watching it, the gryphon shifted and looked around before flapping its wings and diving toward the swamp. It dove into the murky water, only to reemerge with a squirming fish in its beak. The gryphon placed the fish on the ground and placed its left forepaw on top of it. The gryphon closed its eyes and whispered something. Then the predatory creature picked the fish back up, raised its head, and swallowed the fish whole, in one gulp.

Natal began creeping up on it as silently as he could. The gryphon turned its attention back to the swamp-water, searching for another fish. True to what he looked like, the pony ninja-ed his way closer. The gryphon caught a second fish in its claws and proceeded to gulp down the squirming aquatic creature, too distracted to notice the stealthy pony creeping up behind it.

With nary a sound, Natal pounced. The gryphon, caught off-guard by the sudden attack, had surprise written all over her face. The two combatants, now engaged in a grapple, tussled around for a few seconds before the stallion pinned her firmly to the soggy ground, held down by her four limbs with his hooves planted on each. She opened her beak and screeched, calling for help. Natal head-butted her in the beak, forcing her head back into the stiff mud with a thump.

“Get off me, dweeb!” she snarled.

“You’re in no position to be making demands! I’ll ask the questions here, got it?” he whispered harshly into her face.

“What do you want punk?” she asked tersely.

“Why are you taking the foals?” he asked harshly.

“You wouldn’t understand, you blind puppet.” she sneered in his face.

“What are you talking about?” Natal ordered.

Her answer was cut off by an ear-piercing screech as six gryphon toms landed in a circle around them,

“Let the molly go!” ordered one gruesomely large gryphon tom.

Natal could see he was badly outnumbered, *‘How did they get here so fast? I might be able to handle four, but not seven. I have to escape.’* his mind was unusually calm, *‘I’ll have to fight my way out. Looks like I’ll be putting Searcher’s enchantments to the test.’*

He let the gryphon up and turned slowly to the tom that had spoken to him,
“Let me go, or know my might.”

“We’ve no cause to harm you, stallion. Come quietly or we’ll take you by force.” the huge tom said evenly.

“I’ll never be a slave.” Natival said quietly; he dug his hoof into the ground and lowered his head.

The huge tom’s eyes narrowed,
“You already are. Take him and put him with the other one!”

The gryphons moved in unison, charging Natival en-masse. The stallion waited for them to get too close to stop. He darted forward in a roll, tumbling between the legs of one of his attackers and came up running. A loud screech behind him told him the gryphons were in hot pursuit. He fled as fast as his legs would carry him, *‘I have to get back to Haysburg!’* he thought furiously.

The sound of wind rushing through feathers told him the gryphons had taken wing, *‘I can’t outrun them on the ground if they’re flying, but I’m more agile. Try to keep up bird-brains!’* He dodged left and right, watching in his peripheral vision as the gryphons dove into the ground on either side of him, missing him completely. A manic laugh escaped his throat, at seeing them fail time and again to capture him.

He had laughed too soon. Natival suddenly felt a heavy weight on his back followed by grasping talons that closed on his chest and stomach. The talons however didn’t pierce his skin, Searcher had spoken true. Natival continued running, hoping to scrape the gryphon off on a shrub or tree. He careened off to his right, right into the claws of a second gryphon. The combined weight of the two heavy toms slowed him significantly, but he refused to give up easily. Two additional gryphons landed in front of him blocking his way. With the weight on his back, he couldn’t turn and buck, but his fore legs were free.

He lashed out and caught one gryphon in the side of the head as it tried to grab him. The second received a stout head-butt which sent him reeling, while the stallion continued to run. He decided to take a moment to try to fight off the two that held him. It was a mistake. The moment he stopped, they all tackled him onto the ground in one huge gryphon-pile. He struggled fiercely, lashing out with his hooves and biting anything he could wrap his jaws around.

The desperate stallion stopped fighting and began to focus his mind on calling forth his armor. The brief lapse of struggling was an opening the gryphons were quick to take advantage of. Within tenth of a second, the biggest tom balled up his claws and punched Natival in the head, knocking him out cold.

Natival’s last fading thoughts were, *‘He said ‘the other one’. They caught Birdie.’* As his conscious mind faded into blackness his final thought was, *‘There’s no help coming from Canterlot. We’re on our own now.’*

The royal blue wingless pegasus stallion awoke to a massive headache. He was laying on his left side on cold, soft mush. He blinked owlshly, trying to orient his vision. Night had fallen and a nearby fire shed shadowy light all around. His gaze settled on a series of close-woven wooden staves, fastened by leather and driven into the soggy ground. The wooden cage was roughly ten paces by ten paces.

Looking outside the cage he could see that Gryphons were everywhere outside the cage. Inside the cage with him was a horribly scarred, custard yellow pegasus who, for once, was not wearing her cloak. Her back was to him inside the large, but crude wooden cage they shared. She too was laying on her left side facing away from him.

He could see the angry swollen bruises on her back and her wings, '*Her poor wings.*' Her wings were a mass of scars, nearly every inch of what he could see of her body was scarred. Some were long and jagged while others were simply circular, like punctures. The punctures were symmetrical, each set, and there were two sets, had four holes in a semi-circular pattern with a single one on the opposite side. Each set was partially in front of her flanks and partially in them, indicating a hold from behind. The thought suddenly struck him that if Birdie had her coverings taken from her, he likely shared her state of undress. A simple look down at his chest confirmed his suspicion.

The gryphons seemed quite content to ignore their prisoners so Valiant slowly inched his way over to his cell-mate,
"Birdie?" he asked quietly, speaking to her back, "Birdie are you awake?"

He received no response, but he could see she was breathing steadily. He decided to inch his way around to her front to see if she had sustained any further injury than the black and purple bruises he had already spotted. He looked up and around to make sure no gryphons had taken notice of his movements. None had, it seemed.

He inched his way around Birdie slowly, checking her as he went, '*Looks like she put up quite a fight, but then again, I suppose that's to be expected.*' he thought. As he moved around the top of her head, he saw more and more bruises, '*Good grief! How many did it take to bring her down? 20, 30?*' the bruises seemed to suggest such numbers. Something struck him as odd. Strangely absent were any cuts or punctures despite the fact that she hadn't been wearing any type of protective barding.

He inched his way around until he could see her face. What he saw shocked him deeply, but he kept checking her over, occasionally glancing back to her face, '*What on Earth happened to you?*' he wondered. He eventually finished checking her and decided that aside from the bruising, she was fine.

"The stallion's awake." one of the gryphons said outside the cage.

Valiant turned and looked to the speaker, who had other gryphons forming around her,
"Why are we in this cage?" he asked shortly.

“So you can’t fight us, of course.” said one young tom.

“What do you plan to do with us?” Valiant asked.

“Only time will tell, stallion.” the voice belonged to the massive tom that had participated in capturing Valiant.

“Are we to be treated the same way she was?” Valiant asked, gesturing to Birdie.

The huge tom ruffled his feathers in indignation,
“Her injuries were only gained from when we captured her. We’ve not laid a talon on her for any other reason.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Valiant snorted.

“Believe what you wish, stallion. I’ll not banter meaningless words with you.” the tom replied.

“Why did you attack Haysburg?” Valiant asked boldly.

“To protect your young.” the tom said simply.

“Protect?” Valiant asked angrily, “Oh yeah, the need protection from their families who love them. Way to go.” he said sarcastically.

“You’ve been blinded, stallion but I’ll try to explain.” the tom said lying down next to the cage,
“Hopefully, the darkness hasn’t robbed you of your senses yet. We harbor no ill will toward you ponies, we’ve been peaceful neighbors since the war ended.”

“You mean the war that began when a gryphon murdered a pony?” Valiant asked hurtfully.

“A horrible incident, by one individual, that my entire people have been trying to repay for hundreds of years. He was insane, mad with hunger. At the time, we were going through a famine. Many gryphons left their homes to hunt for food. I’m not saying that what he did was in any way excusable. I understand fully, the sacred nature of life. We must eat meat to live. Our bodies can’t be sustained by fruits and vegetables and grains alone. Many ponies think us barbaric because of our omnivorous nature. We have a ceremony that we perform when we hunt mammals. Did you know that? We capture the prey and while it’s still alive, we speak to it. We apologize for what we must do and explain that we have need of its flesh to sustain ourselves. When the time comes for the kill, we make it as painless and swift as possible. When we go to eat, we give thanks to its spirit in the sky for its sacrifice.”

“I . . . Didn’t know that.” Valiant said, somewhat surprised.

“You will find there is a great deal you don’t know about us, my friend.” the huge tom cocked his head to the side in curiosity, “Your accent suggests you’re a native of Haysburg, yet you were ignorant of our tradition. Why is that?” the tom asked.

“I’ve been gone for a while.” Valiant responded.

“How specifically vague, and it doesn’t answer the question. The vast majority of Haysburg has significant knowledge of our traditions.” the tom said arching an eyebrow, “Your business is your own though. Back to your inquiry, we ‘attacked’ Haysburg because we wish to protect your young to the best of our abilities. We see the descending darkness that enshrouds your home, but you are blind to it. We attempted to reason with your leader, this Searcher, but we now believe he is the carrier. He is the pawn and master at the same time. We have already sent word to your sovereign, but our messengers are thwarted by a power unseen. They lose their way or return to us by accident. Something is interfering with their navigation. The stars do not align themselves properly, the winds change in direction and ferocity, this is the work of the darkness.” the tom explained.

“You keep referring to this ‘darkness’ but you never describe it.” Valiant ventured.

“How does one describe a feeling or premonition? How does one quantify a thing which shrouds itself within itself. Darkness has many meanings for us, stallion. We have dealt with it in its many forms for time beyond memory, as you ponies have. We gryphons have developed a sense for it. The darkness which now infects the minds of Haysburg is an ancient and vile thing which feeds off something. What it is that it feeds off of remains a mystery to us. We have legends about a similar darkness, in which ponies overcame it. I had thought it a mere legend until I beheld its malignant nature for myself; personified in your Searcher. Our Mystics see things beyond normal sight, some ponies have a similar gift, they see the truth of things. The gift seems to be strongest in those with a handicapped psyche, those who seem slow or simple. Perhaps they see the world in a different light, I don’t know exactly how it works, but it is real. Do not be mistaken stallion, we are not your enemy.” the tom explained.

“How am I supposed to believe you when all you’ve given me is feelings, guesses, and the incompetence of your navigational skills? I’m sorry, but this all sounds like a bunch of hooey to me. I’m not trying to be rude but you’ve got almost no basis for any of this beyond a feeling. I’ve seen gryphons navigate during fierce windstorms flawlessly. Do you honestly expect me to believe that none of you can make your way to Canterlot? This mare in the cage with me was carrying a message to Princess Celestia when you captured her.” Valiant argued.

“Did you actually read the message for yourself, or did you take its contents on blind faith?” the tom asked.

“I didn’t read the scroll, but what else could it have contained?” Valiant countered.

“I have no idea.” the tom admitted, “It was lost when we intercepted the mare. She put up a fierce struggle, and in the ensuing fight, she dropped it into the swamp. We searched for it for hours, but found

nothing. The bog must have swallowed it.”

“How very convenient for you.” Valiant seethed.

“More inconvenient than anything else. That scroll would have been a source of truth for us, we could have used it to prove to you what is actually going on. As it stands we have only unsubstantiated claims to try to convince you, as you already pointed out.” the tom said.

“So what now?” Valiant asked tensely, “Are you going to keep us here? Enslave us?”

The tom’s eyes narrowed and his tone took on a very crisp edge,
“We do not condone slavery or forced servitude in any way, shape, or form. You and the mare will be released as soon as I’ve had a chance to speak to her. She bears the mating-scars of a gryphon molly. This concerns me deeply. I had heard a rumor of a pony being held captive by a gryphon, but never gave it much thought. Not until we caught her, anyway. This is an issue that I wish to address directly. If she has suffered at the claws of one of my kind, it is a crime of the most severe and profound nature and I do not take such things lightly. After the war, any crimes against ponies were considered the most heinous and the most severely dealt with. I do not intend to give anypony reason to rekindle the war, even though your Searcher seems quite content to do just that.” the tom explained.

“Good luck with that.” Valiant said sarcastically, “She doesn’t speak; not to me or anypony else I’ve seen.”

“Indeed,” the tom said rising to a standing position, “We shall see. What is your name stallion?”

“Call me Natival.” the royal blue pegasus said firmly.

The tom quirked an eyebrow,
“Shadow?” he asked, “Very well then, you may call me Patriarch. It is my title. I’ll take my leave of you stallion, but I’ll leave you with something to ponder in case you gain a moment of clarity. Why would I attempt to deceive you with something like this given the evidence? Use your brain and put the pieces together. If you cannot, our only hope is for the fabled Elements of Equestria or the Princess herself to come to our aid. You’ve likely not heard of the Elements I refer to. Few ponies know of them and fewer still of my people have heard the name of the Elements of Harmony, but I digress, notify me when the mare wakes.” Patriarch said walking away casually.

“The joke’s on you, birdbrain.” he retorted, “I’m one of the Elements of Peace.”

Patriarch spun on his heels, eyes wide,
“What?” he asked, “Surely you jest. The Elements of Peace were ponies of great character. The mightiest of warriors, even against we gryphons . . . “ he trailed off, staring over the stallion’s shoulder, “You’re awake.”

Birdie's eyes slowly opened. She was awake yet she remained motionless, quickly closing her eyes once more, feigning unconsciousness. Her mind reeled violently and she felt sick from the dizziness, but she dared not move for fear of discovery. The sound of nearby voices helped to bring her back to her senses completely and her memory came flooding back along with everything else.

She had been flying in the clouds to keep from being seen when she had physically bumped into another creature in the air. She had come face to rump with a patrolling gryphon, the leone backside and tail were a dead giveaway. Reacting quickly, she lashed out with her two fore hooves, opening a pair of wide gashes in the creature's flanks with her sharp steel shoes then darting straight up. She had hoped the gryphon would retreat and land so she could continue her progress.

She could not have seen the mass of gryphons above her, sunning themselves on top of the clouds. She barreled right into one of them and tried to duck back down. She submerged herself in the clouds but it was too late. Cat-like reflexes at the ready and already alerted by the screeches of the one she had already injured, the gryphon had spun and caught onto her tail with one of its claws with an iron grip. Birdie struck out blindly with her hind legs but had missed completely, accidentally dropping the scroll in the process. In a matter of seconds the gryphon had pulled her out of the cloud backward, flinging her into the air above the others, who numbered in the low twenties.

Birdie knew she could easily out fly any of them and so took off as fast as she could go. One of the hunters though had his bolas close at paw. Birdie hadn't seen the hunter move, but the tell-tale clack of wooden balls and the added weight on her left wing told her she had no choice but to try to land. She plowed face-first into the fluff of the clouds and struggled to rise as quickly as she could.

She had gained a standing position by the time the gryphons had reached her and thusly put up a fight worthy of legend. Hers was a struggle born of desperation, fear, and panic. The adrenaline lent strength to her limbs and she dished out punishment to any foe foolish enough to approach. Blood seeped through the clouds all around her as she fought overwhelming odds to a standoff. She felt some little pride that none of the blood was hers. The gryphons however had simple weight of numbers and tools at their disposal while she had only her steel shoes and hate-driven panic.

After the initial onslaught the gryphon's task was a simple one. The hunters readied their bolas while the others kept the pegasus occupied defending herself. After the fourth attack, Birdie's wings and legs were a tangle of rope and wooden balls. The gryphons pounced onto her and had no choice but to render her unconscious, such was the ferocity of her struggle. Their strikes, intended to knock her out in a single blow, kept landing on her torso, back, and flank because of her struggling.

The memory finished playing itself out and Birdie realized in horror she had been captured. Her mind flashed back to the abuse she had suffered because of gryphons. She clenched her eyes shut and tried to force herself to keep from shaking. She could do nothing to abate her fear so she opened her eyes furiously looking for any route of escape, only to realize she was in a cage. Her mind simply snapped,

'Cage! Gryphons! Helpless!' she lost all control of her body as her fight-or-flight instinct kicked in in full force.

A scuffling sound behind Valiant, confirmed what Patriarch said. He turned around only to see the pegasus mare cowering in the farthest corner of the cage, facing outward, eyes streaming tears and face contorted in hatred. Patriarch watched silently as Valiant slowly approached the shaking mare. He stepped lightly and carefully, watching to make sure he didn't startle her.

"Birdie?" he asked, "What's wrong?"

The mare didn't move or acknowledge the stallion's presence. Her eyes were wide and unfocussed, she wasn't seeing him, her mind was elsewhere. Valiant reached out a hoof and lightly touched Birdie on her shoulder. Before he could react, she let out a bloodcurdling scream, leapt into the air and began slamming herself into the walls of the cage with reckless abandon.

Valiant turned to Patriarch,
"Where's her cloak? It might calm her down!" he yelled.

"Fetch the ponies' belongings, quickly!" Patriarch roared to his gryphons.

Within a few seconds of screaming and ramming into the cage walls, their clothes were brought to them and thrown into the cage. Birdie bit her cloak and held it in her muzzle, still in a full-blown panic.

"Open the cage!" the royal blue pegasus stallion shouted to the gryphons.

Patriarch flung the cage door wide open and Birdie soared out right past him low to the ground, into the misty gloom of the swamp and out of sight. Valiant proceeded more slowly, coming to a stop in front of Patriarch while slipping on his clothes and leg ring.

"I'll give you one warning." he said menacingly, "Don't attack Haysburg again. You won't like the results."

"I've already given you a warning Nativ. Heed it well." Patriarch said evenly.

"Then I guess we're destined to be enemies." Nativ said darting into the swamp to try to find Birdie.

Patriarch watched him go as one of his gryphons walked up next to him,
"What do you suppose he meant by his last statement?" the younger gryphon asked.

"I shudder to think. He said he was one of the Elements of Peace. You've heard about them, scholar, do you think it's true? Have they returned?" Patriarch asked.

“If he’s an example of what they’ve become, I certainly hope not. The legends about them from the war tell of the most powerful fighting force ever to walk the face of Equestria, indeed all the world. If they have the Elements of Harmony behind them, they’re nigh on invincible. If the Elements have been corrupted the way he has, I fear for us all.” the younger gryphon said.

“Have faith,” Patriarch said solemnly, “The goddess would not send them unless she was sure of victory. She pulls strings from the shadows like a puppeteer controlling her marionettes. Her intentions have always been noble and merciful though. With her sister returned to her, they will work in tandem to the same end. They know the outcome even now, I suspect.” he turned to the younger gryphon, “For now, we continue on. Nothing has changed. Prepare another raiding party. We need to act while Haysburg’s two best warriors are away. Be sure that the hunters remember not to bring their bolas. The impact could seriously injure a foal”

“We have to cover ourselves with dirt again, don’t we.” Rarity said sourly.

“I’m afraid so. Come on, the dirt won’t warm itself.” Sea Blue said patting the dirt with a shivering hoof.

Rarity gritted her teeth and laid down next to the turquoise stallion. Turning onto her back, she used her magic to pull the grass mats on top of them then proceeded to cover the things with dirt. Sea Blue’s horn lit up and stimulated the air around them into gentle warmth. The strain on him was significant, but the effect was wondrous. Both ponies were warmed and thusly snuggled down deeply into the dirt and each other.

“Do you find it personal to be this close to a mare, darling?” Rarity asked, “Doesn’t it make you even the tiniest little bit self-conscious?”

“Oh believe me, I’m very self-conscious right now, but unless you want it to be personal, it’s completely platonic to me. Right now, we’re just trying to stay warm.” Sea Blue said.

“Not trying to pry darling, but why are you not married? One would think it’s much easier to have a foal with a mare in the picture. Not that I’m complaining, Patch is an absolute doll, mind you. I’m just curious.” Rarity prodded.

“Why are you so concerned about it? I’m perfectly happy with it just being Patch and I. I don’t need to be married to be myself. I find my identity through what I do and through Patch. Beyond that, it’s just icing on the cake.” Sea Blue responded.

“Haven’t you ever wondered what it would be like to, how to put this delicately, BE with a mare?” Rarity asked, “For the longest time, I had my sights set on Prince Blueblood. Things . . . didn’t work out though.”

“I figured that, with you still being single and all.” Sea Blue said shifting to face the white unicorn, “To be honest, yes I have wondered what it would be like. After I adopted Patch though, all my attention was focused on her. I had a responsibility to raise her the right way and any kind of developing romantic relationship might interfere with that responsibility. Don’t get me wrong, I’m as hot-blooded as any stallion and I certainly appreciate mares, but for now I’m just going to make sure I do right by my daughter. She’s the biggest priority in my life. You have no idea how hard it was to leave her behind. I think about her all the time.”

“Well I, for one, applaud your dedication to her. She’s lucky to have a father like you.” Rarity was silent for a little while before continuing, “I’m sorry, darling, but there’s something I feel needs to be addressed. Patch obviously has a wonderful, caring father, but every foal needs two parents. As a psychologist, I would assume you’ve given this some thought.”

“Oh, I have.” Sea Blue responded as he turned onto his back and closed his eyes, “When all this is over, I’m going to ask you if you would be willing to fill that role for her. She needs a strong female figure in her life and I’m not precisely effeminate. There’s plenty of topics that a mare will be able to handle more delicately than I will.”

The bluntness of the statement threw Rarity for a momentary loop before she regained her senses, “So that would make me, what? Her surrogate mother?”

“More like a cool big sister.” Sea Blue said.

“I hate to point this out, darling, but I have enough trouble having Sweetie Belle as a sister. I’d be afraid she would become jealous. I’m not the most ideal mare for this.” the white unicorn mare said honestly.

“You’re not perfect, but then again, nopony is. I’m not exactly drowning in options here. I don’t know that many mares, but you seem like the best choice by far. Twilight is too bookish, Pinkie is way too random and unfocused, Fluttershy seems a bit too timid to keep up with Patch, Rainbow Dash wouldn’t be able to stay on the ground long enough to bond with her, and Applejack is too busy with the farm.” Sea Blue said.

“Why not have all of us take on the roll, then?” Rarity asked.

“It’s not a bad idea, but I wanted to ask you first. You bonded with Patch easily and the two of you seem natural together. If you don’t want to, I can find somepony else to do it.” Sea Blue said.

“You’ll have to forgive me, darling, but it’s a lot to take into consideration. I’ll think about it and give you an answer once this is all over, like you said.” Rarity said curling up next to the stallion, “Good night Sea Blue.”

“Good night Rarity.” he said turning and looping his forelegs around her torso.

They snuggled up close to conserve warmth through the icy night.

“I honestly do not think this a wise idea, Rainbow Dash.” Trooper lamented, “These clouds are, by all accounts, unstable and I for one do not relish the thought of having to brave another tornado.”

“Would you stop whining?!” Dash asked exasperated, “These clouds seem fine. You said your parents slept on them when they were traveling around here, so why can’t we? I can fly just fine now so there’s nothing to keep us from finding the others tomorrow. Clouds are comfy and provide a great vantage point, what’s the drawback? I know you want to keep me safe and everything, but I can handle myself. I’m not a foal.”

“I never said or insinuated that you were, Rainbow Dash. I am simply presenting a valid concern. If you wish to sleep in our lofty position up here then by all means do so. I will be right here with you.” Trooper said flatly.

“Hold on there, Troops. I need my space. Sleeping together on the ground was one thing, but up here the clouds will keep us warm enough. You can have any cloud you want, it’s not like you choice-deprived.” the rainbow manned pegasus mare pointed out.

“I wish to stay as close as possible to you. If you are uncomfortable with it, I will stay on the far side of the cloud, but I insist that we stay close together.” Trooper argued.

Rainbow Dash lowered her head in aggravation, letting out a pent up sigh,
“Fine, just don’t spoon up to me in the middle of the night or anything unless you want a hoof in the face. You’re nice and all, but you’re a bit clingy.”

“I apologize for being ‘clingy’. That is not my intention. I can respect your need for personal space if you can respect my need to do my job the best I can.” Trooper said.

“Whatever you said, Troops. Just go to sleep, it’s cold up here.” Dash said snuggling into the cloud.

“Are you quite sure you do not want to conserve heat by proximity?” Trooper offered.

“For the last time, NO! Good night!” Dash said with finality.

“Good night, Rainbow Dash. Sleep well.” Trooper called as he snuggled down into the wide cloud.

Neither pony had any idea what that night had in store for them.

“Is everypony comfortable?” Dr. Mend asked.

“Snug as a bug in a rug!” Pinkie Pie chirped happily.

“Ayup.” Big Macintosh said.

“ZZZZZZ.” Applejack was already out cold from the pain killers Dr. Mend had administered.

The older black stallion snuggled down next to Pinkie, under the universally useful tent canvas which served as both sheet and cover. Big Macintosh curled his massive body around that of his sister protectively, careful not to jostle her. Dr. Mend and Pinkie finally had enough warmth to forgo the awkward snuggling. They both drifted off to sleep, Pinkie dreaming about various confectioneries and Dr. Mend dreaming about a certain Earth pony doctor back in Canterlot, who, he realized, he owed a date. The memory of the previous night’s discussion with Pinkie brought an interesting question to the older Earth pony’s mind and snapped him wide awake.

“Hey Pinkie?” he asked.

In usual Pinkie form, she popped up in front of him, even though they had been lying back to back,

“Whatcha need Dr. Mendie?”

“I can’t get what you said out of my head. You talked about your ideal stallion, but I just can’t wrap my head around it. It seems so out of character for you. When did you think about it?” Dr. Mend asked.

“It’s kind of hard not to think about it a little bit when I live with the Cakes. They’re married, so why not me too?” Pinkie answered in an answer that revealed little.

“You’re taking that to its lowest common denominator, but I guess it makes sense.” Dr. Mend admitted.

“It’s easy-peasy! Mrs. Cake is really happy with Mr. Cake and I want to be happy too! I mean, I’m happy as is, but why limit yourself to the most simple pleasures in life? You only live once so you gotta make the most out of it! As far as I can see, the only things I’m missing is . . . “ Pinkie didn’t get to finish.

“Yes, I understand that.” Dr. Mend interrupted, “But who do you have in mind?”

“Nopony yet, but we’re going to Haysburg and its got lots of Earth ponies.” Pinkie said excitedly.

“Are you sure you want an Earth pony?” Dr. Mend asked.

“Yepper-depper! He’s going to be just like me, no wings and no magic, all Earthy goodness! Solid and dependable.” Pinkie chirped.

“You can get that from Big Macintosh. Why look further?” Dr. Mend asked bluntly.

“Big Mackie’s a good friend, but he’s not the one. He’s too calm. I need a pony who’s like me. I’ve looked around Ponyville, but he isn’t there. I know I’ll find him someday, I just have to keep looking.” Pinkie explained.

“You sound like you’re in a big hurry to meet him.” Dr. Mend observed.

“I am! I have to have time to get to know him before I know he’s the one. I figure a couple of years is good. We can both mature a bit more and maybe I’ll be a teensy bit less hyper by then. Then we can settle down and all that good stuff.” Pinkie outlined.

“How can you think it will be so organized and orderly? Matters of the heart are rarely neat and clean.” Dr. Mend ventured.

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be plenty messy sometimes, but anything worth having is worth working for and waiting for. I’m not in a hurry to get married or anything, I mean I’m only just barely an adult. I’m only just barely an adult. I need time to branch out on my own and develop my own life to the point where I can think about it all. You know, I never understood why most ponies don’t think about things like that, it just makes sense to me. Oh well, good night Dr. Mendie.” Pinkie said, suddenly back to back with him once more.

“Good night Pinkie Pie. I honestly hope you find what you’re looking for one day.” Dr. Mend said sleepily.

“Ayup.” Big Mac interjected.

“Dinner finished, check. Hole dug, check. Grass to cover us, check.” Twilight ticked through a mental checklist while her two friends waited patiently.

“Um Twilight,” Fluttershy ventured, “I think we have everything ready.”

Fluttershy’s comment cut through the lavender unicorn’s concentration,
“I suppose you’re right. Make room, you two.”

Twilight squeezed in between Lemon Lime and Fluttershy then pulled the grass over the three of them. She felt Fluttershy snuggle up to her back while the shorter unicorn stallion held her tightly in front. A question had been bouncing around inside the unicorn mare’s head for the better part of the day and she could hold it back no longer.

“Lemon Lime, what was it you were trying to say on the hill just before the tornado hit? I couldn’t hear you because of the wind.” she asked.

Lemon Lime stiffened, not expecting the directness of the question,
“Can we talk about this some other time? It’s dark and cold and we’re trying to go to sleep. Can you ask me tomorrow or something, when we’re all awake? I’ll be happy to tell you then, but for now can we just go to sleep?” he machine-gunned.

Twilight was not to be denied,
“I think we’ve danced around this long enough, Lemon Lime. You were spilling your guts to Applejack, and you said some things that intrigued me. I want to know what you meant.”

“Um Twilight,” Fluttershy said softly, “Maybe you should wait until tomorrow, that is if you don’t mind.”

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy, but I need to know and I’m not dropping this either.” Twilight said adamantly.

Lemon Lime couldn’t help himself, he wasn’t good with confrontation,
“I love you Twilight. It’s as simple as that. I met you when you were the Librarian in Canterlot and I liked you right away. You never noticed me and I understand that you have your studies and everything, but I can’t help the way I feel. I had a crush on you when you were in Canterlot, but since I’ve gotten to know you, it’s become something much more. I had crushes before I met you, so I know what those feel like. The thing is that once you moved away from Canterlot I couldn’t get you out of my head. I haven’t had a single crush since I met you.” the yellow physical therapist admitted.

Twilight was very quiet while she processed the confession,
“At least you’ve had a chance to say it now.”

After several minutes of silence, Lemon Lime could take it no longer,
“Do you have any thoughts about what I said?” he asked.

“I’ll have to get back to you on that, Lemon Lime, but for now, let’s go to sleep.” Twilight said, yawning hugely.

Trauma reached up and gave Surf a polite but sweet kiss on his cheek as they sat on the green around the fountain in the center of Haysburg. He had gone for originality and cooked, or tried to cook, a late evening picnic for them to share under a warm blanket. The quiche was too dry, the biscuits were nearly as hard as rocks, and the small cake was still batter in the middle, *‘He tried though. I’m surprised he was able to pull any of this off in a hotel room.’*

They were snuggled up together under the stars, each enjoying the company of the other as they listened to the sound of the wind in the chimes that hung off every building in Haysburg. Trauma liked the

clever little idiosyncrasy of her home town, *'Each building's chimes are made by hoof. When the winds pick up before a tornado, the chimes are a great early-warning system if everypony is asleep.'*

The chimes were jingling quietly in the breeze, there was always a breeze in Haysburg and the residents knew the audible difference between when a tornado was inbound and the normal sounds. Most of the time, the chimes worked like a constant lullaby for the town. As Surf and Trauma sat together under the blanket with just their heads poking out, both ponies had to struggle not to fall asleep. The sound of the chimes made for an idyllic setting and seemed to have a special, secret magic all their own. Surf & Turf still wore his climbing hooks and had been having fun showing off their various uses to his date. Trauma was not particularly impressed by him hooking the cake and dragging over to them when she could have simply used her magic, but she let him have his fun.

Trauma pulled her lips away from the stallion's cheek and he turned to face her, "You know, babe, I was kind of leery of going out with you. You're like, seriously intimidating when you want to be, but this is really nice and everything." he said quietly.

Trauma leaned her head against his neck, only just then realizing how much taller he was and just how short she was compared to other mares. It was an irritating fact about she and her sister that Trauma had never gotten over. She hated being so short, visitors would occasionally mistake her for a filly, which she knew, was exactly why she had developed her domineering attitude.

"I'm sorry I came off like that, Surf. I already told you that I'm blunt, but that's not the end of it. Blunt can only explain so much and you deserve an explanation. It's my own fault that I don't have any stallions eager to go out with me. I have a bit of an attitude because I'm so short. I always feel like I have to put out this persona of being tough all the time so others will take me seriously. I think it's changed my perspective on a lot of things and not always for the better." Trauma admitted softly.

Surf & Turf chuckled quietly, "Yeah, it's kind of hard not to notice babe. Thanks, that does explain some things. I already respect you for what you know about all that medical stuff. It's, like, way beyond me. I definitely take you seriously. Did that have anything to do with why you were so willing to fight Tinker, earlier?"

Trauma nodded, "Yeah, well, that and I kind of have a flash-fire temper."

"That's putting it lightly, babe. You clobbered Tinker, not something I would have done. She's like, seriously strong. She only uses her magic for when the metal's all like, molten and stuff, but she uses her hooves for everything else." Surf said.

Trauma rubbed her still aching jaw, "No kidding . . ." her ears shot straight up suddenly, "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Surf asked puzzled.

“The chimes,” she said swiveling her head, “They’ve grown louder.”

“I can’t tell a difference, babe.” Surf said trying to snuggle back down with her.

Trauma rose to her hooves, leaving Surf to fall over onto his side, she looked into the now cloudy sky with growing anxiety,

“The wind’s growing stronger. If this keeps up, I’ll have to sound the alarm.”

“Is it, like, really all that serious, babe?” Surf asked innocently.

Trauma turned to face the stallion with deadly seriousness,
“I’ve seen ponies come in to the clinic after a tornado with missing limbs, some even decapitated. Triage and I have a chart of every cutie-mark in Haysburg in case we need to identify a body sans a head. Does that sound serious enough for you?”

Surf licked his lips nervously,
“Yeah, that sounds pretty serious. What should we do?”

“I’ll give the wind a few more seconds before I sound the bell. Come on, if we need to sound the bell we can’t waste a single second.” she said heading toward the Mayor’s office.

Surf followed her closely,
“I don’t remember seeing any bell-towers in Haysburg, babe. Where’s this bell you’re talking about?”

“It’s suspended just above the ground in the shed behind the Mayor’s office. It’s so low so anypony can strike it with their hooves. The door never gets locked except for repairs, so everypony has access to it if they need it.” the nurse explained as they rounded the corner of the Mayor’s office.

The wind continued to pick up, it was impossible to miss now,
“How long till something happens, babe?” Surf asked his unicorn companion.

“It’s random. Sometimes the storm just passes us by, sometimes we don’t even have a chance to ring the bell before a tornado hits.” Trauma explained as she pushed on the shed door with her hoof.

The shed door didn’t budge. Without a thought, Trauma turned and bucked the door. It held fast. She lowered her horn and focused her magic into the door, searching quickly for the problem. With a bright flash of light, the nurse’s head snapped back, throwing her over a dozen paces backwards. The entire event was unnaturally silent.

Surf & Turf rushed over to her,
“Trauma!” he cried, “You alright, babe?”

She didn't respond and Surf could see liquid slowly pouring from her nose in the dim light, '*She's hurt, but I have to sound the bell before I can help her.*' He ran back toward the shed at a full sprint. Instead of going for the front door of the shed, Surf targeted one of the planks on the side that stuck out slightly. He extended his climbing hooks and hooked them around the side of the plank then pulled. The board came off easily, under the pressure of his well-toned muscles. With one out of the way, he made for a second one and had it off in a matter of seconds.

The neon colored Earth pony gaped in shock at the enormous crack that split the brass giant in two halves. The sides of the crack were still smoking, obviously from the blast of magic. Surf turned and bucked as hard as he could. His hooves struck the broken bell with a dull thud.

The wind was still picking up in intensity and Surf had no idea what to do, '*The bell is useless now. How do I warn ponies?*' his mind spun as he tried to figure out a solution. He began looking around for possible inspiration, yet nothing popped out to him. The clop of sturdy hooves on the stones of the street alerted Surf to the approach of another pony.

Surf looked up to see the solid form of Miller appear out of the darkness, "I saw a flash, what happened?"

"The wind is picking up, dude. Trauma was going to sound the bell, but the door wouldn't budge so she used her magic and there was this nasty explosion! Trauma's over there, she's hurt, and the bell's broken!"

Miller didn't say a word. Instead, he raced around the Mayor's office building and disappeared around the side. Moments later, the sound of a bell began tolling, the sound echoing off the buildings. Surf inched his hooks under Trauma's back and used them to drag on the ground like a sled, pulling her toward the clinic.

The wind increased in intensity as Miller continued tolling the mystery bell. Surf sped up, pulling Trauma faster and faster toward the clinic doors. He could see evidence of the bell working. Lights began coming on all over Haysburg and the clop of hooves on floors was audible inside every house.

A terrible roaring sound suddenly began to assail Surf's ears. He turned his head to the side to see what the noise was and all the blood drained from his face. A tornado had coalesced right in the middle of Haysburg. The fierce winds took an immediate toll on the Mayor's office, obliterating the whole building. Surf watched, dumbfounded, as the entire structure was simply taken apart right in front of his eyes.

Light briefly reflected off a metallic surface that was flying through the air. Surf's vision seemed to slow to a crawl as his eyes fixed on the half of the bell that was hurtling right toward him. He never even knew anything had happened until it was over.

(NOTE: male felines are called 'tom', and female felines are called 'molly')

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'm back! It took a while but here's the next exciting part in the story. On a personal note, I'm being transferred to a hospital and I may not have as much time to write. Don't worry too much, I'm going to keep writing until this story is complete, it may just take a bit longer than normal. I'll try to get back to my weekly updates. I'll do my best but no promises. As always, I LOVE any and all feedback and welcome you to personally contact me anytime, within reason.