

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Twenty-Two: Indignation

Things always get worse before they get better. Tick Tock hated the adage with a passion, partly because it was impossibly vague, partly because it was logically impossible. Mostly, though, she hated it because it was laughably optimistic. Things never get better; they just get worse and worse and worse, until they're so bad that any sane pony would wonder why they should bother going on. If things did manage to improve after getting worse, they'd only manage to be *less bad*. Miracles that could turn a bad situation into a net gain were as rare as an albino dragon, and no rational pony ever held out for a miracle. Why anypony would give the saying any merit was beyond her understanding.

Tonight, Tick Tock had been given a responsibility nopony wanted, least of all her. Two responsibilities, actually, and it was difficult to decide which of the two she wanted least. At least, she thought, it was easy to decide which of the two was the priority; Lockwood wasn't getting better—getting worse was more accurate—but Twilight had a problem Tick Tock could at least diagnose.

Twilight lay before Tick Tock, fast asleep. She wasn't sleeping soundly; the look of pain on her face concerned Tick Tock immensely. The dim light of a natural campfire played across her features, highlighting blemishes brought about by days without rest or food, and recently inflicted injuries. Tick Tock could scarcely believe a pony filled with such spunk could be reduced to such a state. It was rather sobering.

"Is she going to be okay, Tick Tock?" Rarity asked.

Tick Tock dimmed her horn's glow and turned to Rarity, who had silently come up behind her. The campsite was large enough that Tick Tock was able to isolate herself and Twilight from the others, all the better to focus her attention, so she hadn't even noticed the other unicorn.

"I've got some good news and some bad news," she replied. "The good news is, Twilight suffered only minor physical injuries in her altercation with Shadow. Apart from the same malnutrition that we all share, she has nothing more than a few bumps and bruises."

Rarity frowned. "If that's the case, then what's wrong with her? The poor dear's been out of it for *hours*." She stepped forward and put a hoof to her friend's forehead; her frown deepened. "She's got a dreadful fever! Her head feels like it's on fire. Oh, Twilight..."

Tick Tock sighed and wiped her brow with her kerchief; the poor piece of cloth was so caked with dried sweat by now that it just made Tick Tock's face dirtier.

"That would be the bad news," she said. "While I am no expert on Restomancy, I am..."

well-acquainted with the ailment known as a 'Ley Line Fracture'. Have you ever heard of it?"

"Can't say that I have."

"The ailment is a severe strain on the unicorn's Ley Line, the conduit inside the horn that directs energy from the brain into magical output. Fracturing the Ley Line drains the unicorn entirely of their ability to use magic. It's caused by extreme overuse of magic, to the point of exhaustion."

"Oh... my," Rarity muttered. She put her hoof upon Twilight's. "Twilight... you poor dear. Unable to use magic..." She turned to Tick Tock. "How could she have possibly used so much magic as to exhaust herself? I've seen Twilight do extraordinary things with her magic before we ever came here, and at worst she was out of breath."

"Twilight mentioned a quality of her 'Arcane' magical source," Tick Tock explained. "It reacts in odd ways when exposed to Void magicks, correct?"

Rarity nodded. "That is what Mister Gilderoy explained to us, yes."

"Well, Shadow appeared to have suffered the same ailment when her and Twilight's magicks collided. The hostile reaction is the likely culprit." Tick Tock cracked a small smile. "At the very least, we can take solace in the fact that Shadow is temporarily out of the picture. They won't be pursuing us any time soon, not with two injured players on their team."

"But at what cost, Tick Tock?" Rarity sighed. "I don't like seeing her like this. Twilight shouldn't... oh dear..."

Tick Tock frowned. "Chin up, mate. I'm doing all I can, even if I can't do much. She'll recover, so long as she gets some good rest and plenty to eat..."

Her stomach groaned at the mention of eating. She put a hoof to her belly to calm it down, but the hungry beast only cried louder. She could scarcely remember the last time she had something edible pass her lips. They were days from the old gryphon reservoir, and still had more to go before they reached Hope's Point. How much longer could she and the others go without food? It had gotten to the point that Rainbow had to drag Pinkie away from the camp's scant pile of firewood before she could eat any of it.

"Well, at the very least she'll have some rest," Rarity said. She sighed. "I do hope you're right about Starlight and her sisters not coming after us again. With Twilight injured, I... I don't like our chances, even if they have injured of their own."

"I hope I'm right, too." Tick Tock shook her head, then turned to the other side of the camp. Lockwood lay on the other side of the campfire under the care of Fluttershy and Flathoof.

“In the meantime, I should really try and do a check up on Lockwood. Stupid git isn’t getting any better, and hell if I know what to do to fix him any more than Twilight did. But, as the only unicorn here with any knowledge of this sort of thing—no offense—I suppose it’s my job.”

Rarity put her hoof on Tick Tock’s shoulder. “Please, allow me, darling. Fluttershy and Flathoof are taking as good care of him as possible, so there’s no need to draw you away. You’d do more good helping Twilight however you can.”

Tick Tock hesitated. “Are you sure? I don’t know if I’m doing any more for Twilight than I could for Lockwood.”

“Just knowing somepony here knows what they’re doing and is trying to help puts me at ease, Tick Tock.”

Tick Tock didn’t know what to say. Rarity was putting her trust in her to do whatever she could for Twilight, even when she’d admitted to having no idea what to do. She turned to look at Twilight, and stared at the other unicorn for a long moment. Twilight Sparkle was many things: she was wielder of the Element of Magic; she was the prized pupil of Princess Celestia; she was a mare from another world so different from Tick Tock’s that it frightened her.

But most importantly, Tick Tock thought, Twilight was the mare who had saved her life, and she’d put herself at great risk to do it.

“Very well, Rarity,” she said, “you can go check up on Lockwood. I’ll keep watch over Twilight. I promise you, I will do everything it takes to help her recover.”

She meant every word.

Applejack huffed and puffed as she pushed her way through layer upon layer of solid rock, circling around a central point. She dug deeper as she circled inward, smoothing the edges of the hole as she went. When she reached the center, she stopped and looked around to admire her work. It had taken less than a minute to make the perfect funnel-shaped hole—her fastest one yet—and she was mighty proud of it. She climbed up the smooth wall and hopped over the rim without so much as tarnishing the craftsmanship. Then, she asked the earth to cover the hole with a thin, weak sheet of rock that was indistinguishable from the otherwise solid ground beneath her.

This had been the fiftieth or so in a series of identical holes encircling the campsite. Each was two ponies wide, two ponies deep, not enough to stop a unicorn or pegasus from escaping, and only enough to slow down any earth pony worth their salt. That wasn’t the intention, though. Each hole was hoof-crafted by Applejack herself, and each would alert her the instant anypony

stumbled into one. They were far enough away from the camp that she'd have ample time to prepare everypony for another ambush.

Assuming their attackers came on the ground, of course. Applejack knew the other possibilities sullied the entire effort, but she didn't have anything else to do with her time. There wasn't an ounce of food around these parts, no matter how hard she looked. The soil was dry and barren, completely incapable of supporting any plant Applejack had ever known. Heck, even cacti grew in better conditions than this. The trees in the region were long dead and so dried out that they could barely even be used for firewood.

Just thinking about food made Applejack's stomach roar. She'd give anything for a way to distract her from those thoughts.

A crack of thunder in the air provided all the distraction she needed. A voice followed it. "What are you doing?"

Applejack turned to Rainbow, who hovered above her, a bewildered expression on her face. "Diggin' holes," she said with a smile. "What's it look like I'm doin'?"

Rainbow rolled her eyes and landed next to Applejack. "You know what I meant. *Why* are you digging holes? Rarity rope you into gem hunting or something?"

"Ha! She wishes. Nah, I'm layin' traps for those no-good mares, if'n they decide they wanna come after us so soon." Applejack explained her plan to Rainbow, making sure every detail was covered in depth, though she glossed over the fact that her whole plan depended on the other mares traveling by ground.

"Huh... okay, I see where you're going with this," Rainbow said, stroking her chin. "I dunno, though... a bunch of holes around the camp might not be the best idea. What if somepony heads off for a bathroom break and falls in? False alarm *and* somepony's stuck in a hole."

Applejack chuckled and clapped Rainbow on the back. "Don't you worry 'bout that none, Dash. If anypony needs ta take a leak, there's a tree near the camp nowhere near the perimeter. Somepony'd have to want an awful lot o' privacy ta go any further than that."

"Hmm... okay, guess that angle's covered." Rainbow shook her head. "Still, you really think they'd try to come on the ground? They know about your earth magic, so they'd have to think you'd put up defenses."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Well, they know 'bout yer weather powers, too, so who says they're comin' by air?"

"I'm not saying they are. In fact, that's my point: they ambushed us out of nowhere using teleports before, who says they won't do it again?"

"Well, fer one, Starlight got injured pretty bad too, same as Twilight, didn't she?"

"Yeah, and I saw Insipid teleport them away just as well."

Applejack cracked a smile. "C'mon, y'all tellin' me ya think *she* can coordinate an ambush as well as Starlight can?"

"Well... when you put it that way..." Rainbow sighed. "I don't know. I'm just... this is a lot a horseapples, y'know? We shouldn't even *be* in this mess, worried about an ambush, setting up perimeters, hoping Twilight is okay. We should be worried about getting *home*, and nothing more." She grunted, annoyed. "We *wouldn't* be in this mess either, but *somepony* went and changed the route."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Beg pardon? Y'all remember that Tick Tock 'n' I *both* planned out the routes, right?"

"Yeah, actually, I do. That's why I'm talking to you about it. Are you some sort of idiot, AJ? Why'd you go changing the route back to Curaçao's? This is the same route we'd originally planned out back when we were traveling with those nutjobs. You changed it before, but now you changed it back. Why?"

"It's safer, that's why."

"Which is why Curaçao planned it out. She wanted us to have the fastest, easiest route, because it would get us to trust her. Now that we know we *can't* trust her, why'd you change it back? You diverted from it before, why stop? Just because it's safer?"

"Yes, Dash, just because it's safer. I'd think you of all ponies would appreciate speed."

Rainbow snorted. "Not when it puts us right on the path those guys figured we'd take. That's why they were able to ambush us. I don't even get know what it's supposedly 'safer' than."

"It just is, Dash. Trust me, you'll see. If the map is as accurate as it has been, you'll see by tomorrow night. We gotta head near the original route before divertin' anyway."

Rainbow hesitated, then shook her head. "So you say it's safer, then. Fine. If that's the case, I get *why* you changed it, but that still doesn't excuse putting us in perfect position to get ambushed. We could have deviated from the route somewhere, couldn't we?"

“Not by enough ta make much difference. An’ besides, we weren’t expectin’ them ta attack us out here in th’ open. Tick Tock figured they’d attack in the canyon, which was on the original route, an’ *that* we *did* try ‘n’ figure a way ‘round.”

Rainbow snorted. “Great idea, AJ, listen to the advice of a pony that has time and time again proven to have a terrible understanding of the region, dumb luck or no. Anypony could’ve seen that ambush coming. Oh, wow, imagine that: the ambush came when we least expected it.”

Applejack narrowed her eyes. “So *you* knew they were gonna attack then ‘n’ there, is that it?”

Rainbow frowned. “Well... no, but—”

“Then how’s this fer a good idea Rainbow? Keep yer danged trap shut,” Applejack spat. “Y’all didn’t know any more than anypony else ‘bout gettin’ ambushed. Y’all didn’t speak up when we was plannin’ out the route. So, way I see it, ya lost yer chance ta complain. It ain’t helpin’ nopony gettin’ yer jimmies all rustled.”

“Who’s rustling whose jimmies?”

Applejack and Rainbow turned to Pinkie, who had popped into their midst without so much as a peep.

“Oh, hey Pinkie,” Applejack said. “Y’all done wit’ yer rounds?”

Pinkie lifted her helmet’s face shield, wiped her brow, and took a seat in the dirt. “I sure hope so, AJ. Doing rounds is exhausting work! You got all your traps done?”

“I should be done after a few more, yeah. Ya made sure ya couldn’t see ‘em, right? I know ya didn’t fall into any, but that don’t mean nothin’. So? What’s yer verdict?”

“They’re just perfect, AJ! If I didn’t know what to look for, I probably would’ve fallen into every single one. I bet even Rarity couldn’t notice ‘em!” Pinkie’s mouth curled in a mischievous grin, and she rubbed her hooves together. “Ha! They won’t even know what hit ‘em. That’ll show ‘em not to try and ambush us again.”

Then, her expression turned serious, and she glanced between Rainbow and Applejack. “Anyway, don’t try to change the subject. I heard something about rustling jimmies. Now, I *know* you guys weren’t talking about chocolate sprinkles, because neither of you is from northeast Equestria.”

Rainbow and Applejack gave Pinkie blank looks.

"Y'know, jimmies? Chocolate sprinkles? Like you put on ice cream? Or cake, or cupcakes, or—" Pinkie's stomach rumbled loudly, interrupting her. She frowned and rubbed her belly. "Right. No talking about food. Sorry. Anyway *anyway*, those weren't the jimmies you were talking about, so you were talking about somepony getting upset. Were you two arguing? We really shouldn't be arguing right now, you guys. We've got more important things to worry about."

"Tell that to Dash, then," Applejack said, shooting Rainbow a look. "She's over here straight accusin' me of bein' the reason we got ambushed today."

"Excuse me, but that's not what I said," Rainbow interjected. "I said that I disagreed with the decision to return to the original route that Curaçao planned for us, which Tick Tock told Twilight was a joint decision. She's as much to blame as anypony."

"I was the other half o' that decision, Rainbow, so y'all're sayin' I share the blame with Tick Tock."

Pinkie rolled her eyes. "Dashie, nopony's to blame for the ambush. Nopony could have possibly known exactly where and when we'd get attacked. For all we know, they could've attacked us even if we *did* go a different way."

"That's just what I said," Applejack agreed. She turned to Rainbow and shook her head. "There ain't no tellin' if they would've found us anyway. We all were expectin' an attack, it was just a matter o' when."

Rainbow huffed. "But by taking Curaçao's route, you probably increased the chances of us getting found. That's all I'm saying, AJ, okay? I'm not saying it's like you lead them straight to us or told them where we were." She shrugged. "Still, there just *has* to be a fast route to the coast without relying on Curaçao's. Maybe *I* should take over as navigator. I don't even need a stinking map, I can just use my wings and eyes."

"Dash, let's be honest here. Y'all'd get lost in a paper bag if'n ya didn't have a solid map ta look at," Applejack said. "Yer sense o' direction is as useless as ice skates in summer. Remember that time ya took over Derpy's shift fer a day when she hurt her wing 'cause y'all crashed inta her? Y'all forgot where half the ponies in Ponyville lived!"

"Hey, it's not *my* fault almost all the houses in Ponyville look the same," Rainbow said. "It's not like there were any mix-ups. Everypony got their mail just fine. Heck, you got your mail first thing in the morning, just like always."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Well shoot, I'd be *real* worried 'bout ya if ya forgot where *I* live, Dash. That don't mean nothin'. Half the ponies in Ponyville got their mail late."

"She got my mail to me just fine too, AJ," Pinkie added.

"I'd be even *more* worried if she forgot where *you* live, Pinkie. That'd be like forgettin' her own address. She spends dang near every other night at your place."

"I hardly think I spend *that* many nights with Pinkie, AJ, but thanks for assuming that I have a healthy sex life. I can't decide if I should be offended or not." Rainbow huffed and adjusted her goggles over her eyes. "Whatever. I guess just a little address mix-up means I'd be just a *terrible* navigator. I don't get a second chance to prove myself, no sir. Well, since I can tell I'm not wanted, I'm gonna get back to work."

Just before Rainbow darted off, Pinkie reached up and grabbed Rainbow's tail with her teeth.

"C'mon, Dashie, don't be like that," Pinkie said, Rainbow's tail muffling her voice. She released Rainbow; Rainbow hovered in place but looked ready to fly off at any second. "Hey, maybe when you're done, the three of us can hang out and talk and stuff. Forget about all this grumpy-grouchy stuff and try to have some fun. Huh? How 'bout it?"

Rainbow hesitated, then shook her head. "Sorry, Pinks. I've had a real bad feeling lately, and this afternoon only made it worse. I've felt like we're being watched ever since we left the Blood Mire." She cracked her neck and beat her wings a few times, prepping for takeoff. "I'm gonna do a few more rounds. Later."

"But Dashie—"

Rainbow blasted off like a rocket, leaving a dejected Pinkie in her wake.

Pinkie sighed. "This isn't working out at all..."

Applejack snorted, annoyed that she'd lost a lot of time working on her perimeter defenses by talking to Rainbow and Pinkie without really getting anything out of it. Anything except an accusation from Rainbow, of course. "Y'all need ta talk some sense inta that filly, Pinkie," she said, turning back towards her ring of holes. "She gettin' on my nerves mighty fierce. Not just me, either, but everypony else, too. I don't know what's gotten inta her, thinkin' she knows better'n the rest o' us 'bout how ta do everythin'."

Pinkie frowned. "I'll try my best, AJ. I don't like seeing everypony arguing any more than you do. We're all best friends, remember? I know friends argue sometimes, but... but this seems to be more than just arguing over who gets the last slice of pizza, you know?" She sighed and shook her head. "Anyway, yeah, I'll see what I can do. See you later, AJ."

"Yeah, see ya later."

As Pinkie left, Applejack's thoughts wandered.

'More than just arguin', ' huh? Maybe you're right, Pinkie. Somethin' ain't right... but what?

Fluttershy fought with all her might to rein in her tears, but this proved a losing battle. Things had gone from bad to worse and showed no signs of stopping; was there any end to the torment she and her friends had to go through? She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried so much over anything. Twilight was hurt in a way she didn't understand, and Lockwood's condition was steadily degrading. She wished she could do something for the ponies who'd been hurt, but knew there was nothing more she could offer other than support.

Lockwood lay between her and Flathoof on the ground, just awake enough to keep a weak smile on his face. His heavy, labored breathing betrayed any pretense of wellness. How the stallion could even stay awake was a mystery to Fluttershy; were she in his place, she doubted she'd still be alive. Just thinking about that made things worse. How much longer did he have? Twilight had never given an exact timeline, and she couldn't very well do it now.

Rarity put a hoof to Fluttershy's shoulder. "Are you alright, Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy jumped; she hadn't even heard Rarity approach. "Oh, hi, Rarity," she said, her voice cracking. "I'm okay, I suppose. Is... is Twilight going to be okay?"

She turned to her friend, and Rarity barely stifled a gasp. Fluttershy looked down at herself; her hooves were caked in dried blood. She wiped her eyes too, for good measure; they were surely puffy and red by now with all the crying she'd been doing.

Rarity recovered her composure with a cough. "Oh, of *course* she is, darling," she said. "Twilight is made of much tougher stuff than you or I, I'd like to think. Tick Tock is doing everything she can, and she assures me that a little rest will do Twilight *wonders*."

"Oh, thank goodness," Fluttershy breathed, managing a small smile.

"How are you three holding up over here, though? Captain Flathoof? I do hope spending all that time in that *dreadful* little ditch didn't cause any harm."

"I'm holding up okay," Flathoof said with a nod. "Thanks for asking."

"And Lockwood? How are things faring?"

Fluttershy's smile melted back into a deep frown. "Um... w-well, Lockwood..." She sighed, and gestured for Rarity to look for herself.

Rarity glanced over Fluttershy's shoulder, and this time, she could not stifle her gasp.

Lockwood's wound had gotten worse, not better. It looked nothing like a normal wound. The color had gone from a dark red to a sickly green. Thick, bulging veins of the same green color spread outwards from the gash along his side and up his wing. His feathers had molted at an astounding pace; he was down to his last dozen or so.

Lockwood himself was sweating profusely, leaving his mane, tail, and coat greasy and matted. He was shaking like a leaf in a breeze, as though he were freezing in the dry desert heat. The bleeding had stopped, despite the wound being open, and had become clotted with blood of an unnatural, languid red. Blood had thoroughly soaked the portion of Rarity's dress she'd used to dress his wound; they'd discarded the tattered scrap of dress hours ago, knowing it served no more purpose.

"By Celestia," Rarity murmured. She looked like she was trying her hardest not to retch.

"That bad, huh?" Lockwood muttered, giving Rarity a slightly bigger smile. "Really now... all of you... there's no need... to fuss."

"There's plenty of need for me to fuss, Lockwood," Fluttershy said, putting her hoof on his shoulder. "It's *my* fault you got hurt, after all."

"Please... stop blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault... Fluttershy." Lockwood sighed, weakly putting his hoof to hers. "You've done so much... already. Don't you fret... over me..."

"Well, at least let me give you back your jacket," Fluttershy said. She started to slide it off. "You've been trembling all night. You must be cold."

Lockwood hastily shook his head. "N-no, that's... that's quite... alright."

Flathoof put his hoof to Lockwood's forehead, then sighed. "You really should take her up on it, Lockwood. You're freezing."

"I respectfully... refuse," Lockwood said. "I'm not about to have... Fluttershy traipse about... in the nude... because of me."

"Always the gentlecolt, huh?"

"I'm just glad... I don't have to listen... to everypony telling me... that I need to eat

something. I don't think... I could hold anything down... even if we had anything."

"Aha! I have an idea that might just help Lockwood feel a little better," Rarity said.

Fluttershy turned to Rarity immediately. "You do? What is it?"

"Lockwood was able to take your aches and pains away, wasn't he? And, I do believe we discussed the possibility of him passing on his own pain to others. Well, why don't we all chip in and help alleviate Lockwood's suffering? Why, I could even boost the magic so that it's more efficient."

Flathoof hummed and nodded his head. "Say now, that's an interesting idea. Why didn't I think of that?"

"No," Lockwood grunted.

Rarity frowned. "Oh, but why not, darling?"

"Because... inflicting pain... on any of you... isn't right. I got myself... into this mess... so I'm... gonna deal with it."

"So don't give it to any of the mares," Flathoof interjected. "Give whatever you can to me. I can take it. Super endurance and strength, remember?"

"That's... not the point."

"Please, Lockwood?" Fluttershy murmured, putting both her hooves on his own. "If it'll make you feel better, I'd gladly do whatever it takes."

"Which would just... defeat the purpose... of me taking your pain away... in the first place." Lockwood sighed and shook his head. "Look, it's not... the pain I'm worried about... spreading. It's this... 'curse', or... whatever it is Twilight says... I have. What if it spreads... to somepony?"

Fluttershy frowned. "Oh... well, that's a good point..."

"And a moot point as well," Rarity interjected. "Surely, even if we *were* affected, there'd be a cure waiting for us at Hope's Point, same as there is for you. So please, enough of this 'white knight' routine, hmm?"

"I said, 'no'," Lockwood said. "If everypony... caught this thing... because of me... who's to say... we'd even *make it* to the coast?"

"But—"

"Rarity, please, enough," Fluttershy said. She rose to her hooves and put a hoof on Rarity's shoulder. "He doesn't want to do it. Even if it might help... we can't force him to do it."

"Fluttershy, dear, you can't seriously tell me that you think this is a good idea. The poor stallion is... well, you know. He's getting worse. As his friends, we should be doing everything we can to help him."

"And we are, Rarity. We are. But we are *not* going to force him to do something he doesn't want to do."

Rarity frowned. "Darling, please, I'm not suggesting we *force* anypony to do anything. I merely want to convince Lockwood that it's in his best interests to go along with this."

"What's in his best interests is what *he* wants to do, Rarity."

"It sounds to me as if it's what *you* want to do that's important."

Fluttershy paused, then narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

Rarity put her hoof to her mouth. "Oh... um... F-Fluttershy, darling, I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. Is that what you think, Rarity? That I *want* him to suffer like this?"

"That's not what I meant. I just meant that... that you're putting an awful lot of effort into going along with what he's saying, even if it's not the best course of action."

"Are you a doctor, Rarity? How do *you* know it's the best course of action, huh?" Fluttershy huffed. "That's right, you don't. You just *think* it's the best thing to do. Even if I think it's a good idea too, that doesn't give us the right to decide for him. Even a doctor wouldn't *force* him to take treatment."

Rarity flustered. "F-Fluttershy, I'm just trying to help—"

"You can help by leaving him alone!" Fluttershy shouted. "His mind is made up! He said his piece, so just drop it!"

Rarity made to retort, but decided against it. She shook her head and sighed. "Fine. You've got your minds set on this. If you do change your minds, though... you know I'll be more than willing to help. In the meantime, I'm going to see how the others are faring."

She turned and trotted away from the trio, and away from the campsite in general.

"She has a point, you know," Flathoof murmured.

Fluttershy turned to the former police captain. "If he doesn't want to do it—"

"I know, I know; it's not right to force him." Flathoof sighed, and patted his friend on the shoulder. "I just wish you'd let us do something more for you, buddy. Actually, I'd rather you tell us what you'd like us to *do*. Anypony in your condition would be at least asking for *something*."

"Well, what would you... like me to do? Cry and moan about... how I feel?" Lockwood grunted. "I don't want... anypony's... pity."

"Pity? That's what you think this is about?" Fluttershy huffed. "I'm not doing this because I *pity* you, Lockwood. I'm doing it because I... b-because you're my friend." She stayed silent a moment, then sighed and shook her head. "I just want you to get better. You don't deserve this..."

"Can we just... lay off the sympathy... for a bit?" Lockwood murmured. "Come on now... let's think of something... to take all our... minds off this... miserable business."

Flathoof hummed in thought, then perked up. "Say, you could always tell us the story of how you got your cutie mark. That should be enough to put us *all* to sleep." He chuckled.

Lockwood attempted to join Flathoof in laughter, but stopped and winced after only a second. "Nope... still can't... laugh."

"Lockwood already told me that story," Fluttershy said.

Flathoof raised an eyebrow. "Did he now? When?"

"When he was caring for me while I was sick." Fluttershy shook her head suddenly. "N-not that I wouldn't listen to it again! I d-didn't mean—"

"No, let's not," Lockwood groaned. "Actually, I'd... rather not be the one... talking."

"Oh... oh, r-right."

"Maybe you could tell us a story about yourself," Flathoof suggested.

Fluttershy shook her head and hid behind her mane. "Oh... b-but I can't think of anything interesting."

"Nonsense. I'm sure you... could think of something... marvelous," Lockwood said. "I've

heard... little snippets... here and there about your... adventures... back at home. Surely... one of those stories... would be fascinating... to hear.”

Fluttershy hesitated. “I... I don’t know. I was never the best story-teller. That’s more Twilight or Rainbow’s thing.”

“Come on, Fluttershy, I’m sure there’s something you can tell us,” Flathoof said.

Fluttershy hesitated again, for longer this time. “Well, I... I guess I could tell you how I got *my* cutie mark, since Lockwood told me about his.”

“That sounds... marvelous indeed,” Lockwood said with a smile.

“Yes, it certainly does,” Flathoof agreed. “I’d like to learn more about the world you all come from. It sounds like a nice place... much better than here, at any rate.”

Fluttershy gave a weak smile. “Well, okay then, if you insist.” She cleared her throat. “It all started when I was just a filly at summer flight camp. I... was never a good flier.”

Lockwood nodded in understanding. “I... know the feeling. I wasn’t... very skilled... either. Never needed it. You’re better now, though... right?”

“I suppose I can handle myself okay now, yes, but I’m nothing special.” Fluttershy shook her head. “Back then, though, I could barely fly at all. The other fillies and colts always teased me and called me names. I didn’t have any friends...” Her mouth curled in a small smile. “One day, some bullies were being really mean to me. Then, somepony stood up for me: Rainbow Dash.”

“I didn’t know you and Rainbow were that close,” Flathoof said, scratching his head. “I thought Rarity was your best friend.”

“I’ve known Rainbow the longest, certainly, but... until Ponyville, I don’t think the two of us ever considered each other ‘close’,” Fluttershy murmured. “She and I were just... incompatible. Rainbow’s so fast, and strong, and loud. Me? I’m... slow, weak, and quiet.”

“I don’t think... you’re weak, Fluttershy,” Lockwood said with a small smile. “You’re strong... in your own way.”

Fluttershy blushed, and averted her eyes. “Th-thanks...”

“So, what happened? Did Rainbow beat those bullies up?” Flathoof asked. “It seems like the kind of thing she’d do. It’s what I would’ve done at that age, too. Heck, that’s what I *did* do to get my cutie mark: defend this little wuss right here,” he added, ruffling Lockwood’s mane. “*After*

school, of course. No sense in getting in trouble, too, y'know."

"H-heh, come now... let Fluttershy... tell her story," Lockwood said.

Fluttershy shook her head. "No, she didn't fight them. She'd have been kicked out of flight school if she did. Instead, she challenged them to a race."

"A race?"

"Yes. For my... honor, I suppose."

Flathoof scratched his head. "Pegasi sure are strange. I can't say I would've challenged those colts to a race for your honor, Lockwood."

"You would've been... my knight... in shining armor," Lockwood swooned.

Flathoof rolled his eyes and grunted. "Yes, well, I suppose that's just a pegasus thing. Our two worlds don't sound all that much different, honestly. At any rate, please continue, Fluttershy."

"Well, they started their race," Fluttershy said, "but when they started, I... I sort of... fell. From Cloudsdale. Which is really high up."

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing. You're a pegasus. You can fly... oh. Ohhh, right. Poor flier." Flathoof scratched his chin. "Well, obviously you survived."

"Obviously," Lockwood muttered.

"So, what happened? Did Rainbow see you fall and come save you or something?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "No, she was too busy racing. I don't think she even saw me fall; she's never mentioned anything about it, and she talks about that race all the time. It's how she got *her* cutie mark too, you know. No, I was saved by a swarm of butterflies."

Flathoof balked. "B-butterflies? You're kidding. We're talking about the same butterflies, right? Little insects, pretty wings?"

Fluttershy nodded in confirmation.

"That... that doesn't seem possible."

Lockwood chuckled lightly, then winced immediately after. "No, just... improbable. Pegasus magic... is a strange thing."

“What happened next, after these butterflies saved you?”

Fluttershy smiled. “Well, they set me safely on the ground, and when I opened my eyes, I was entranced by the beautiful colors, fuzzy animals, bright flowers, and, well, *everything*. I’d never seen so many wonders before. I... got into kind of a singing mood. I don’t know what came over me.” She blushed.

Lockwood grinned. “I bet you have... a beautiful... singing voice.”

Fluttershy’s blush deepened. “W-well, moments later, just as I was finishing my song, there was a *huge* explosion. A giant burst of light shining with every color of the rainbow reached across the sky as far as I could see. It was... beautiful, but terrifying at the same time.”

She smiled. “I didn’t find out that it was a Sonic Rainboom for many years, when Rainbow told us all how she got *her* cutie mark. She created the Rainboom for the very first time during the race that day. It stretched so far across the sky that ponies saw it all over Equestria... specifically our other friends. The Rainboom triggered events that led to them getting *their* cutie marks, too.”

“You... you *all* got your cutie marks because of Rainbow Dash and this Sonic Rainboom of hers?” Flathoof asked. He shook his head. “Things just seem so... fantastical in your world. I know things aren’t always bright and cheery—this ‘Discord’ character I’ve heard mention of sounds worse than anypony I’ve ever met—but it’s all so... nice.”

“You make it... sound... so much better than here,” Lockwood added. “I’d love to... hear the other stories... you all... have to share.”

“As would I. What sorts of laws do you have there, for example?”

Fluttershy gave Flathoof a blank stare. “L-laws? Um... I don’t really know too much about that. Rainbow might, because... um... w-well, she got in trouble a lot as a filly, so she only really knows the rules because she’s broken them.”

“Ah... I see.” Flathoof cleared his throat. “Uh... sorry for interrupting. Again.”

“Anyway, the noise scared all the little animals, and I helped to calm them down and come out of hiding. They all listened to me, and that made me really, really happy. That’s when I realized that I had a gift for dealing with animals. That’s when I got my cutie mark.”

To emphasize the story’s end, Ophanim popped out of Fluttershy’s bracelet and happily circled around her head.

Lockwood yawned. "Such a... beautiful story. I wish mine had been... even half as... interesting."

Fluttershy patted Lockwood's shoulder. "Your story was plenty interesting, Lockwood."

Lockwood yawned again, long and hard. "I think it's time... I got some sleep. Good night... everypony."

He dropped his head to the ground and began snoring immediately.

Fluttershy and Flathoof each breathed a sigh of relief.

"That really was a nice story, Fluttershy," Flathoof said, keeping his voice low. "Thank you, for all of this."

"Don't mention it," Fluttershy said. "He did the same for me. He deserves to have the same." She frowned. "Why is he so unwilling to accept anypony's help, though? Even... even mine? Did... did I do something wrong?"

Flathoof shook his head. "It's not like that at all. He accepts help all the time, what with all the favor-trading I'm sure he explained to you. It's just that he hates being coddled. I know that's not your intent," he added before Fluttershy could interject, "but that's how he perceives it. It's not your fault, it's just how he is. He loves to *give* charity, not receive it."

"That's not even close to how I feel about all this," Fluttershy murmured. "Why is he so adamant to think like that, though?"

Flathoof stayed silent for a long moment. When at last he spoke, he did so in little more than a whisper. "Seeing as we're in a storytelling mood... would you like to hear one about Lockwood and I? It might just help you understand him a little better."

"Oh, yes, very much," Fluttershy said with a nod.

Flathoof smiled. "Well, okay then." He cleared his throat. "First, just a forewarning that I'm embarrassed about some of this stuff. You see, not a lot of ponies know this, but Lockwood and I are a *lot* closer than just best friends."

Fluttershy's jaw dropped. "You... you mean... oh. Oh my... I... I didn't think... you two were... oh..." She frowned and hid behind her mane. "I... I see..."

"What that hay are you—" Flathoof paused. Then, he blushed. "Oh. No. No no no. No. No. We are *not* like that. Not even close."

"You're... not?" Her mouth curled into a hopeful smile.

"No. Stars no." Flathoof cleared his throat rather too loudly. "Look, perhaps it's best if I start from the beginning."

"Yes... yes, that sounds like a good idea."

"Well, first, Lockwood and I were born in the Outer District. That's where we lived throughout our youth. We didn't move into Mid-North until just after I entered the Academy. Anyway, the point is that you've met my family. My mother, my father, my sister, and my two brothers. You've heard me talk about them lots of times. But, have you ever heard Lockwood talk about *his* family?"

"Can't say that I have," Fluttershy murmured. She shook her head. "But I can't hold that against him. I never talk about *my* family, and neither does Rainbow, even amongst our other friends. We just... don't. I figured Lockwood was the same."

"Well, I don't know what reasons you and Rainbow have for not bringing up family, and I won't pry either. I will tell you, though, that Lockwood is more like me than you think." Flathoof shifted his gaze to Lockwood briefly, checking that he was still fast asleep. "Now, what I'm about to tell you I want you to keep to yourself, okay?" he whispered. "Don't tell anypony. Don't tell any of your other friends. Don't even tell Lockwood that I told you. Okay?"

Fluttershy nodded, excited and a little scared about what sort of secret this could be. "I promise not to tell anypony."

"Well then, let's continue." Flathoof double-checked that Lockwood was still asleep, then resumed his story. "Lockwood was born in one of the worst sections of the district, to a single mother who could barely put food on the table. He never knew his father. According to his mother, his father died before he was born. He suspects otherwise."

"Oh my, that's... terrible."

"Trust me, it gets worse. Now, this is all second-hoof information, but I trust Lockwood not to embellish or exaggerate his past. His mom was... obsessed. She was devoted to the stallion that had fathered her foal. It developed into a very... unhealthy obsession, too, because Lockwood apparently was the spitting image of his father. She even named him after the guy. So, her devotion to his father became a devotion to him."

"Well, all mothers care for their foals, don't they?" Fluttershy murmured. "He should be glad that his mom cared so much about him."

"But that's the thing. She didn't so much care about *him*, so much as she cared about

how much he was like his father. She complimented him on how much he looked like his father, she styled his mane and tail to look just like his father's, she made him wear clothes that resembled his father's, etc. Until the day she died, she never even told Lockwood she loved him, just told him how much she loved his father and wanted him to grow up to be just like him. She passed away when he was only a few years old."

Fluttershy frowned. "Oh dear... he was orphaned at such a young age."

"Well, Lockwood wouldn't want you to worry about that," Flathoof added. "It might sound cruel, but he says the best thing his mother ever did for him was die. I never really understood why he'd say something like that, but he reminds me that she was very obsessed with his father, and that he was his spitting image. I won't go into it, but I understood what he was implying."

"No. No, she wouldn't... would she?"

"Anyway," Flathoof continued, "upon her death, Lockwood was placed into a foster home." He snorted in disgust. "I'll be brief about how much I loathe New Pandemonium's foster care system. Basically, it's the most morally corrupt institution in the city's bureaucracy. Foster foals are treated like goods, and can be bought, sold, or traded like you would a table lamp. Foster families get tax breaks based on the number of foster foals they own. Worst of all, there are no rules in place to ensure the little fillies and colts are actually cared for, only that they're alive and living at the proper residence."

Fluttershy's jaw dropped. She couldn't think of anything to say to express her utter repulsion with the idea of innocent little fillies and colts living in such conditions, growing up in unloving, greed-driven homes. Was Lockwood truly raised in an environment like that?

"But I digress," Flathoof continued. "You're probably wondering where I come in, right?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Y-yes."

"Well, he and I met in school, and we became friends. He hadn't brought a lunch to school that day—or any day, according to him—so I shared some of mine with him; he was a scrawny little thing back then, and I was worried he'd keel over and die. Anyway, one day, he asked if he could come over after school, and he got to meet my family. Everypony loved him; even back then he was a social butterfly, able to make friends with just about anypony. My mom adores him, my father enjoys his sense of humor, both my brothers look up to him, and my sister—" Flathoof hesitated. "Well, she tolerates him. They're like oil and water, those two... but they don't hate each other. My mom still thinks they'd make a cute couple, no matter how many times we say it'll never work."

"Now, this went on for years, all the way through school. He was practically part of the family. So I guess at some point, Lockwood got the crazy idea to make it official, and worked out

a favor with a friend of ours that had gotten a job working in New Pandemonium Social Services. One day, Lockwood showed up at our doorstep with a few documents to sign, and he'd already taken care of every other step necessary. My mother and father signed the forms and, just like that, we'd adopted Lockwood."

"What?!" Fluttershy exclaimed.

"Shhh!" Flathoof said, putting a hoof to his lips. "Yeah, it's weird, right? He worked through all the documentation to make it look like my parents had *bought* him and then paid the bits to make him a legal part of the family. That way, he could do all the things that family members are allowed to do, but that fosters can't. Things like file our tax forms to exploit loopholes.

"See, he did it because he considered us his family as much as we considered him a part of ours. He knew we were going through rough times, and that without some serious help, none of us would be able to do what we wanted to do. I wanted to enter the police academy and join the NPPD; Lockwood bribed a clerk to approve my application without the entry fee. Pattycake wanted to go to culinary school and become a real chef; Lockwood happened to know the head chef at a fancy restaurant and got her an apprenticeship. My mother was pregnant with Shorthoof at the time; Lockwood knew an excellent doctor and got her the best care she could ask for."

Fluttershy smiled. "It sounds like *he* adopted all of *you*."

Flathoof laughed. "I guess you could say that, yeah. However, I don't like to go around advertising it. He's legally a part of the family, and that legally makes me his older brother, but I *hate* when he calls me that."

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't you want him calling you his brother?"

"It's an... awkward story. See, when I graduated from the academy, Lockwood threw a big party to celebrate. All my academy buddies were there, and so was my dad, so it was really just a bunch of stallions out for a great time. I can't say I was surprised when the strippers jumped out of the cake." Flathoof sank. "Twin sisters." He sank further and hung his head. "Twin sisters that said they'd always wanted..." He cleared his throat. "Well, let's just say that I feel very awkward calling Lockwood 'brother' after that party."

Fluttershy opened her mouth to ask what these twins wanted—she had no idea what a "stripper" was—but decided against it. Whatever had happened must have truly been awkward indeed.

"Anyway, enough of that. I suppose I should get to the point and tell you what this has to do with why Lockwood doesn't want to accept anypony's help right now." Flathoof sighed. "He

did everything he did for me and my family because he loves us dearly. He has never, to this day, asked us for anything in return. He doesn't ask anypony for help with anything, actually—not for himself at any rate. I think the reason why—and this is just my theory—is because of his mother.”

“His mother? What does she have to do with it?”

“Well, she gave up everything for him. Her intentions may have been misplaced, but she really did care for Lockwood until the day she died. Lockwood... interprets it differently. He thinks of himself as taking advantage of her love for his father against his own will. He says he'd have rathered she hadn't coddled him at every opportunity, because then she might still be alive; she neglected her own health to ensure that Lockwood was healthy. It's... an awkward sense of self-loathing he has.”

“But... but I don't see how these things are connected,” Fluttershy said. “He's hurt because he tried to help me. If he doesn't accept our help, he might...”

“I know him well enough to know that he thinks he'll get better on his own, receiving professional help that he himself seeks out. Heck, I think it's a miracle that he's even letting me carry him to Hope's Point! I was so sure he'd insist on walking himself.” Flathoof shook his head. “He doesn't like to accept help from those that he loves, be they friends or family. That's just how he is. He doesn't want to be a burden. He doesn't want to feel that he's taken advantage of anypony. He just smiles and carries on.”

Fluttershy frowned, but nodded in understanding. “Okay... I see your point. I just... I just wish there was some way we could help him without him dismissing it, or—”

“Enough of that,” Flathoof said. “He's a stubborn fool if there ever was one, but that's what I love about the guy. Just let it go. Okay?”

“Okay,” Fluttershy yawned.

Flathoof smiled. “Now, as for you, you need to get some sleep too. You've had a long day, and Lockwood would kill me if I didn't make sure you got some rest.”

Pinkie needed the time to ponder the day's events, so she took her time making her way back towards the dim glow of the campfire. Their situation had certainly taken a nosedive in a hurry: Twilight was injured, afflicted with some condition that deprived her of her magic and energy; Lockwood was getting worse every day, and without Twilight to at least try to slow it down, there was no telling how long he had; Starlight and her sisters had made their presence in the eastern Wastelands known, and even with injured of their own there was no assurance

they wouldn't attempt another sneak attack soon. If their time constraint was tough before, it was downright harsh now.

When Pinkie arrived at camp, she took a moment to see how everypony was doing, hoping to find somepony to talk to since Applejack and Rainbow were likely to be busy for a while. On one side of the campfire, Lockwood, Flathoof, and Fluttershy were all fast asleep, lying against one another for warmth. Seeing the trio resting so calmly warmed Pinkie's heart; she was glad Lockwood was being cared for by two ponies that cared for him so deeply. To Pinkie's surprise, Rarity was not nearby. Perhaps she'd gone to answer the call of nature?

Then, she noticed Rarity off a ways from the camp, resting on a flat rock. Pinkie headed towards Rarity at a bouncy pace, eager for a chance to talk with Rarity one-on-one for the first time in what felt like ages.

"Hey, Rarity!" Pinkie said as she got closer.

Rarity turned, and let out a small sigh when she saw Pinkie approaching. She put on a smile almost immediately afterwards though; Pinkie recognized it as Rarity's patented polite smile, the kind used when she wasn't very happy but wanted others to think she was. The unicorn had definitely been pretty mopey before Pinkie had come along. Pinkie could see it in her eyes.

"Hello, Pinkie Pie," she said. "I take it you're all done with your perimeter check?"

Pinkie smiled and nodded. "Yup! I finished my rounds, and now I'm just waiting for AJ and Dashie to finish theirs. Until then, you look like you need somepony to talk to. So, here I am!"

Rarity's smile quirked ever-so-slightly. "Yes. Here you are."

Pinkie smiled back, glad to see she'd raised her friend's spirits a little. "Yup! So, what are you doing over here all by yourself, huh? It's no fun being all alone like this. I expected to find you in camp with Fluttershy."

Rarity grunted and turned her gaze back to the empty expanse of sand in front of her. "Yes, well, I'm not needed right now. Fluttershy is *certain* she knows how best to help Lockwood, so she doesn't need me butting in and trying to convince anypony otherwise. I wouldn't want to *intrude*."

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. "Intrude? Rarity, that's just silly. You could never intrude on Fluttershy. You two are like the bestest best of friends in all of Equestria!"

Rarity frowned. "I know, darling... but right now, she's rather out of sorts. She blames

herself for Lockwood's condition, so she's going to extremes to help and protect him."

"Poor Fluttershy," Pinkie said. "It must be hard, thinking you're responsible for something like that. She shouldn't be so hard on herself."

"I wish I could say I don't share any blame myself. It is my fault, after all, that they've become so close in the first place," Rarity murmured.

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. "Playing matchmaker, huh? You do know that we're going home eventually, right?"

"Well, yes, but... but I just thought I'd try to help Fluttershy open up a little. She's a beautiful, graceful young mare; a wonderful pony. I just wanted to help her see it for herself."

Rarity shook her head. "But this is no time for regret, or for throwing about blame for events beyond our control. I've had enough of that lately without doing it myself."

Pinkie sighed. "So you've noticed it too, huh?"

"How could I *not*? To think, when we left those musty old ruins, we were all in the best spirits we've been in since we arrived in this world. We were all filled with so much confidence and focus that, even after dear Lockwood got hurt, we still moved forward, united. Then *those mares* showed up, so now here we are, back to arguing amongst ourselves about whose fault it is and what we should be doing and what we're doing wrong." Rarity shook her head in disgust. "Honestly, it's as though just being around those dreadful ponies brings out the worst in us."

"I know what you mean," Pinkie said, her shoulders drooping. "I mean, you're over here moping because you and Fluttershy got into an argument, right? That *never* happens. And even when it does, you and Fluttershy patch things up in, like, seconds. So what makes this different?"

"I can't say for certain, but something about her just seems... off. This is different than that whole incident with Iron Will, I think. I don't know if you've noticed that she's more assertive, but I've never seen her be so... angry."

"She's not the only one, either. Dashie's worse than ever!" Pinkie slumped to the ground beside Rarity. "She's just... she's just so *mad* that things are getting so bad. I think she's just worried about everypony, but... I dunno, something seems off. I've never seen Dashie get so mad before. She's convinced that nopony's listening to her."

Rarity nodded in agreement. "I've gathered as much. I do wish Rainbow Dash wouldn't take it so personally. When we're all traveling together like this, it works best to either have a majority vote or to nominate a leader."

"That's what I told her. We're all in this together, so we shouldn't be so upset about not getting our way."

Rarity shook her head. "But what does it matter *why* she's upset? Whatever seems to have Rainbow Dash in such a fit won't be an issue after we reach Hope's Point... I hope."

"I hope so too, Rarity." Pinkie sighed and rolled onto her back. "What about Applejack? She's been kinda ornery lately, too, but I have no idea why."

"Well, it might be—" Rarity stopped herself and cleared her throat. "I mean, why are you asking me?"

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. "Huh? I wasn't asking you specifically, I was just kinda throwing the thought out there. Why, do you know something?"

"W-well, I can't exactly say, darling. It's a matter just between Applejack and I, and I'd prefer to keep it that way. I'm sure Applejack would as well."

"Are you *sure* you can't tell me? Maybe I can help!"

"I'm afraid I've already said too much on the matter, darling," Rarity said, turning away from Pinkie. "I'd ask you not to let anypony else know about it, either, if you could."

Pinkie crossed her legs over her chest. "Trusting a friend with a secret is a big deal, Rarity. You know I won't ask you to spill. It's the fastest way to lose a friend forever."

"I know you won't, darling. If it ever comes to it, I'm sure Applejack would prefer we get it out in the open." Rarity sighed. "Hopefully we can solve it before it comes to that, though. It's certainly driving a wedge between her and Fluttershy—" She caught herself and cleared her throat. "Er, between her and *other ponies*. But listen to me ramble!" she added with a laugh.

"It's okay, Rarity! There's nothing wrong with a good ramble every now and again," Pinkie said with a smile. "I'm just glad to have somepony to chat with. Say, though, we should go check on Tick Tock, shouldn't we?" She started to get up. "We've been over here for quite a while, haven't we?"

"Fifty-two minutes, give or take a few seconds," Tick Tock said.

Rarity and Pinkie turned to the other unicorn, who had come up behind them without a sound. She looked downright exhausted.

"Oh, hello Tick Tock," Rarity said. She gasped. "Is Twilight alright? You didn't come for

help, did you?"

"No no, Twilight is quite alright, relatively speaking," Tick Tock assured her. She took a seat between the two, then took her kerchief from her pocket and dabbed her forehead before continuing, "Her condition hasn't improved in any way, but I did everything I could to ease the stress on her body. She's sleeping soundly. Our priority is still getting her and Lockwood to Hope's Point as quickly as possible, though. There's only so much I can do."

"Don't fret about it, darling," Rarity said, patting Tick Tock's shoulder. "You're doing everything you can, and we're all thankful for it."

"Don't fret' is right," Pinkie added. "Moping about because of how bad things are doesn't solve anything."

"My thoughts exactly, Pinkie Pie. We should be focused on lessening everypony's worries, not sulking. Let Applejack deal with all the navigation issues. Let Rainbow worry about perimeters and scouting. We should be making sure that everypony gets along and stops arguing all the time."

Tick Tock sighed. "Everypony else is so bloody focused on the how and the why for getting to the coast that they've forgotten they're supposed to be traveling *together*." She shook her head in disgust. "Sometimes, I forget that you're all supposed to be friends. Forgive me if that sounds harsh."

"I can understand your reasoning, Tick Tock," Rarity said. "Lately, I find it hard to believe myself... but I digress! That's what we're supposed to be fixing, yes? We're all friends here; let's start acting like it."

"I knew I picked the right two mares to talk to," Tick Tock said with a smile. "You know, you two are probably the only ponies left in the group that haven't once been hostile with me. Not that I know of, at any rate."

"Well, why would we, darling? You've done nothing but try to help since this whole 'adventure' started."

"Yeah! And you've been a big help, too, no matter what anypony says," Pinkie added. "You don't think we're the only two that like you, though... do you?"

Tick Tock grunted. "The only other ponies I'd seek conversation with are Twilight, who's in no shape for a chat, or Fluttershy, who's too busy with Lockwood. I just don't... mesh well, with the others." She shook her head. "You two, though, are on the level. Even if you *are* a posh fashionista and a wild and crazy party animal. You're just more accepting of my... personality."

Pinkie put her hoof on Tick Tock's shoulder. "Hey, don't be so hard on yourself, Tick Tock. I know the others get all Grumpy Gus with you sometimes, now more than usual, but it's just the stress talking. They're all so worried about everything going wrong at any moment that they're lashing out. I bet if we were all to have met back in our world, under normal circumstances, we'd all be the best of friends!"

"I couldn't agree more, darling," Rarity said with a smile. "You're not a bad pony at all, Tick Tock."

"Thanks," Tick Tock muttered. She dabbed her forehead again, then put her kerchief away. "I am trying, you know? Not to be so abrasive all the time, that is. I don't mean to get on anypony's nerves, and I am sorry for some of the things I've said and done along the way."

"We know, dear, we know. Never fear, Pinkie and I are here for you if you need somepony to talk to. Right now, though, we need to talk to *you*." Rarity cleared her throat. "Now then, to business. Do you have some sort of idea that might help us improve everypony's mood?"

"Besides asking me to yank food out of nowhere," Pinkie huffed.

"Yes, and no," Tick Tock said. She slumped on the ground and took a deep breath. "Honestly, the only things that I think will help everypony calm down at this point are just a little good fortune and a good night's rest. Aside from that, I'm afraid things will just get worse the longer we're out here."

"However, I am beginning to develop a theory for what's truly at fault for everypony acting like a tosser lately. Say what you will about hunger, but I've noticed a change since we arrived at the checkpoint. Before then, actually. Sure, there was a bit of back-and-forth here and there before, but nowhere near what I saw afterwards, and nothing like what's happening now. I suspect the introduction of Starlight Shadow and her sisters was the catalyst, and I'm sure you've noticed the same thing."

Rarity and Pinkie shared glances with each other, then turned back to Tick Tock and nodded. "I was saying much the same thing to Pinkie earlier, darling. You really think those mares are at fault here?"

Tick Tock nodded. "Possibly. I've noticed similarities to your encounter with Discord back in your world. Twilight told me about it," she added in response to Rarity and Pinkie's confused looks. "She was a bit scant on details, though, and could only give her own perspective. So, if you could enlighten me as to what *you* went through, I might be able to see the connection more clearly."

"Well, to be brief, he... he did *something* to us. Changed us somehow." Rarity shook her

head and shuddered. “Everything I said and did during that time under his influence felt *right*, but I know it was all wrong. Just thinking about it makes my skin crawl.”

“Chaos magicks—or ‘Dark’, as Twilight so insists—have a corrupting effect,” Tick Tock explained. “Twilight told me that Discord corrupted you with his power. How, exactly, were you corrupted?”

“He corrupted our Elements of Harmony, mostly, twisting them into total opposites. Whereas I am normally the most generous pony one could ever hope to meet, I became a greedy, selfish lout. The others were corrupted in similar fashions.”

“Applejack became dishonest as all get-out, but was really, *really* bad at it,” Pinkie added. “Dashie stopped being loyal to us, choosing loyalty to ‘Cloudsdale’ over her friends. Fluttershy was downright mean to everypony, and even dumped a bucket of water on Twilight’s head!” She shuddered. “And me? *Me*? The happiest, laughingest, partyingest party animal around? I stopped liking everything fun—laughing, games, parties, *everything*—and turned into the biggest Grumpy Gus in the *history* of Grumpy Guses!” She paused. “Gussi. Geese? Whatever the plural for Gus would be.”

Tick Tock remained silent for a long time, deep in thought. When at last she spoke, she did so in little more than a whisper. “I don’t like this one bloody bit. This is more serious than I thought.”

“What’s on your mind, Tick Tock?” Rarity asked.

“Your gryphon friend posited that those six mares may be agents of Nihila, did he not?”

Rarity nodded. “He did. I think we can all accept that that’s the case at this point. Is there something more to it than that?”

“I fear that there may be, yes.” Tick Tock shook her head. “Until I have more information, I can’t be so certain, but I’ll tell you one thing: I know we haven’t seen the last of Starlight Shadow and her sisters. Not by a long shot.”

Lockwood awoke to a pain unlike anything he’d felt before shooting through him. Every fiber of his being felt like it was on fire. He tried to cry out in agony, but no sound came; he tried to move, but his body would not respond. He felt weaker than he’d ever felt, as though he’d gone months without food or rest rather than days. Despite the searing pain, everything felt cold. His mind raced, and for a moment he was afraid, terrified of what was happening to him. He felt like he was dying.

Then, as though a switch had been tripped, it all stopped. There was no pain. There was no hunger. There was no cold. There was nothing. He couldn't understand it. One moment, he felt like he was knocking on death's door; the next, he couldn't feel anything at all. Was that what death felt like? Was he dead?

A moment later, his head turned. Lockwood immediately went into a panic. This was very, *very* wrong.

His head had turned itself.

He was now looking to his right, where Flathoof lay asleep at his side. The feeling was surreal. It didn't feel like he was looking at Flathoof with his own two eyes, but rather like he was looking through a window. He felt trapped within his own body, unable to control its movements but able to clearly see them. Worse, he could feel what his body was feeling and sense what his body was thinking, and he did not like it one bit.

Hunger.

Meat.

Kill.

Lockwood's mind raced to figure out what his body was doing. He knew what the words meant. "Hungry" meant exactly that; the raging hunger surging through his body was undeniable, insatiable, and terrifying. "Meat" referred to Flathoof, who, despite his own several-day fast didn't look any worse for wear, appeared to Lockwood's body like a veritable smorgasbord. "Kill" was self-explanatory. Lockwood put the thoughts together. He knew what his body was going to do, so he made an attempt to stop it.

Hunger.

Lockwood's body resisted his attempts to wrest control, and slowly and silently rose to its hooves. Lockwood felt a weight slide off his slide and slump to the ground; he figured it was Fluttershy. His body knew it too, though it did not assign her a name and only considered her more meat.

Meat.

Lockwood wracked his brain thinking of some way to wrestle control of his body back. He tried to turn his head to look elsewhere, tried to raise his hoof to shake Flathoof's side, and even tried to fly. The intense hunger his body felt, the same hunger he could feel, made it difficult to focus. Where before he'd felt like it had been months since his last meal, his body's hunger made it feel more like years. He tried to scream, hoping the noise would awaken

Flathoof, but he did not make a sound. His body did open its mouth, however, but not to scream.

Kill.

Lockwood couldn't watch what his body was about to do, but he could not close his mind's eye to what his body could see. He was forced to witness the atrocity his treacherous body committed through his own eyes. His body lunged forward and sunk its teeth into Flathoof's neck, ripping into the flesh and meeting bone. The taste of blood and flesh ran across his tongue. Lockwood wished he could vomit, but his body was too thoroughly pleased by the taste of fresh meat.

Flathoof managed to utter some sort of noise, but Lockwood couldn't make sense of it. It only lasted about a second though, before Lockwood's body twisted its vice-like bite and snapped Flathoof's neck. Flathoof fell silent.

Lockwood's world spiraled out of control. He screamed and raged from inside his prison, but his body didn't react or even acknowledge him. It just kept eating.

Then, his body turned towards a light that appeared nearby. The light was around a large rock as big as his head. Said rock was hurtling towards him. His body reacted in time to avoid having its head smashed in; he wished it hadn't.

Rarity lifted another rock with her magic. She shouted something, but Lockwood couldn't make out what she was saying; it only registered to him as white noise, like static.

She flung the second rock at Lockwood, and this time managed to strike him in the wing. The pain was intolerable for him—from within his prison, he howled in pain—but, for his body, it was merely unacceptable. His body was angry. His body was in pain, and it was *angry*.

Kill. Kill.

Lockwood demanded his body to stay put, to let Rarity destroy him whether it took just one more rock or one thousand. He would gladly endure the pain until his body was a gooey mass in the dirt.

His body would not listen. *Kill.* It sprung towards her, mouth agape; she tried to leap aside, but was not fast enough. *Kill.* His teeth latched onto her leg and, with one swift motion, crippled Rarity for life. His hooves crashed against her side, crushing ribs and ripping through flesh. *Kill.*

Then, a noise behind Lockwood drew his body's attention. His body turned to face it, and there was Fluttershy. Her face lit up in terror, and she screamed; again, it only sounded like white noise to Lockwood. His body only contemplated for a second, but quickly decided that

going after Fluttershy would be a better use of time and effort than finishing off the mangled mess that was Rarity.

Lockwood pleaded for his body not to do anything to Fluttershy. He begged his body to leave her alone. She had suffered enough because of him; she did not deserve to suffer more; she did not deserve to die.

His body disagreed.

Meat. Kill.

His body charged towards the horrified pegasus, hungry for blood. A bright flash nearby signaled Ophanim's appearance. Lockwood's body noticed it too, and too easily avoided the great spirit wolf's lunge; it was as though his body was expecting the familiar to make an appearance. It closed the distance to Fluttershy quickly, and tackled her to the ground.

Ophanim turned and pounced, but did not make it in time.

There was a sickening crunch. Ophanim's light evaporated instantly. All Lockwood could see was blood.

There was another noise behind Lockwood. His body turned, and was struck in the face by a white-hot blast of magic.

Pain.

Lockwood shot awake, his body writhing in pain. "Auughhh!"

Everypony in camp shot to attention.

Flathoof leapt to his hooves and spun round. "What's going on?!"

"Are we under attack?!" Applejack shouted, rushing over to their end of the camp.

"Oh no, it's Lockwood!" Fluttershy exclaimed.

Lockwood ignored everypony's shouting. His body felt weaker than ever. An intense pain burned throughout his body, and his head felt like somepony was striking it with a jackhammer. It hurt to move. It hurt to think. It hurt to breathe. Despite all of this, his mind was set on one thing, and one thing only: getting away. He struggled upright and started lurching away from the rest of the group without a second thought.

Flathoof stopped him before he got more than a few paces away. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, buddy. Where do you think you're going?"

"Get away!" Lockwood snapped, trying to shake Flathoof away from him. He failed miserably; Flathoof held fast. "Get away from me!"

"Lockwood, calm down. What's wrong?"

"Get away!" Lockwood pushed Flathoof away and attempted to move again.

Flathoof held him still. "Lockwood! I don't know what's come over you, but you're not fit to be moving!"

"Oh, please be careful with him," Fluttershy said.

"Don't you worry, Fluttershy, I'll be gentle," Flathoof assured her. With a grunt, he added, "If he stops squirming!"

"Get off of me!" Lockwood pleaded. "I don't want to hurt you!"

Flathoof laughed. "Hurt me? *You*? Something *must* be wrong with you if you think—"

"It's not funny!" Lockwood buried his face in his hooves. "Blood! There was so much blood!"

"Oh dear. What is he talking about?" Fluttershy asked.

"That's what *we're* all wondering," said Tick Tock. She, Rarity, Rainbow, and Pinkie had joined Applejack nearby; Twilight hadn't been roused. "We bloody well thought we were under attack! What's all this rubbish?"

"Is he alright?" Rarity asked, a hoof to her mouth.

"Stay back! All of you!" Lockwood shouted as he attempted to wrestle out of Flathoof's hold again. "I'm one of those... those *things*!"

"What things?" Tick Tock asked.

"Just let me go before I- auughh!" The pain tore through his body worse than ever before, sending him into a spastic fit. "It's h-happening! G-g-get away!"

"Lockwood, what in blue blazes are you going on about?" Flathoof asked, his voice

awash with concern. He put more weight into his hold to keep Lockwood still.

Rainbow grimaced. "Oh man, what's wrong with his eye?"

Lockwood couldn't see it, but the white of his left eye had flooded with a bright red color, and his iris had turned totally black. In a panic, he reached his hoof up to his eye and prodded the area nearby. "Oh no. I have to get out of here." Again, he tried to wrestle out of Flathoof's hold to no avail; in his weakened state, he didn't have a chance. "Flathoof, let me go! I need to get away from you all before I get worse!"

"What the bloody hell is wrong with him?" Tick Tock muttered. She stepped forward and lit up her horn, attempting to diagnose the problem. Lockwood flailed his limbs and wings, trying to get out of Flathoof's hold, and whacked Tick Tock in the face with his good wing. She spit out a few small feathers. "Dammit, would you *please* keep him still?!" she snapped at Flathoof.

"I'm trying, but he's squirming way too much!" Flathoof snapped back. "I don't want to hurt him!"

"Outta the way," Applejack grunted. She pushed Flathoof off of Lockwood easily.

Lockwood scrambled upright and started running again, but only made it another few steps before Applejack gently pushed him back to the ground; he was so light and weak that a stiff breeze could have knocked him over. She carefully pinned him with the entirety of her body, so fully that Lockwood couldn't move an inch.

"There," she huffed, shooting Flathoof an impatient glance. "See? Let somepony who knows how ta deal with a fidgety critter deal with this."

Lockwood panicked. "Applejack! Stop! I might hurt you! I could change at any moment!"

"I don't know what y'all're talkin' 'bout, but what I *do* know is that y'all ain't gettin' through me," Applejack said into his ear. She waved her hoof in front of his eyes; it was made of solid rock. "Whatever y'all're afraid o' doin' ta everypony, ya ain't gonna be able ta do ta me. Just calm down, okay?"

Lockwood tried to get out from under her, but her hold was even tighter than Flathoof's. "Please! Applejack, you must let me go!"

Tick Tock stepped forward and resumed her examination. After a moment, her horn's dull green glow intensified to a bright blue. "I don't know what's going on, but he's getting worse, fast! It's like the curse is reacting to something!"

"What could it be—" Flathoof started to say. He paused, and his eyes widened. "He's

afraid of something. You don't think it's reacting to his fear, do you?"

"Do I *look like* an expert on curses? I don't bloody know!" Tick Tock shook her head. "But if it *is*, we need him to relax."

"Ya hear that, Lockwood? Y'all need ta calm down, okay?" Applejack said. "Just calm. Down. Y'all're just makin' this harder on yourself."

"I'm one of those damned abominations!" Lockwood shouted. He still struggled against Applejack despite his lack of progress thus far. "Please, just let me go! I don't want to hurt any of you! Let me go... p-please... just... just let me go. Let me go!"

Applejack groaned. "It's no use. He ain't gonna relax at this rate."

"Maybe we should knock him out?" Rainbow suggested.

"Rainbow Dash!" Rarity huffed. "Really, there's no need for that sort of action."

"Well I don't see anypony else giving any ideas!"

"I have an idea," Fluttershy interjected.

She stepped towards Applejack and Lockwood, and circled around so that she was in front of them; the others watched in surprise as she took a seat.

Lockwood panicked. "Fluttershy, please! G-get away from me, I don't want to hurt you!"

"You need to relax, Lockwood. All this stress is getting to you," she said. She placed her hoof to his forehead, and shook her head in worry. "Your fever is worse than ever. You need to get some sleep."

"Fluttershy, please, get away from me while you can!"

Fluttershy leaned in and gave Lockwood a tender hug, cradling his head in her hooves; Applejack hesitated, but let Fluttershy go about her business.

*"♪ Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to lay your sleepy head.
Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to go to bed."*

Lockwood struggled, but found it harder than ever to muster up the energy. He felt more exhausted than ever; his eyes drooped. He fought to stay awake, desperate to distance himself

from innocent ponies.

Fluttershy ran her hoof through Lockwood's mane and pressed his head against her chest.

*“♪ Drifting off to sleep,
Exciting day behind you.
Drifting off to sleep,
Let the joy of dreamland find you.”*

Lockwood's breathing slowed. His struggling dwindled to nothing more than weak shifting, but he still fought to stay awake. Applejack had released him entirely now; only Fluttershy stood between him and freedom.

*“♪ Tomorrow waits 'till morning breaks,
But now it's time to go to sleep.
Tomorrow waits 'till morning breaks,
So 'till then, count some sheep.”*

At last, Lockwood stopped struggling. He stopped moving entirely, and leaned into Fluttershy's warmth. His eyes slowly began to close, but he still tried to keep them open.

*“♪ Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to lay your sleepy head.
Hush now, quiet now,
It's time to go to bed. ♪”*

Everypony remained silent.

Flathoof turned to Tick Tock, and whispered, “Did it work?”

Lockwood let out a loud snore.

“It worked,” Tick Tock grunted.

Rainbow let out a loud yawn. “Okay... everypony back to bed...”

While the others all returned to their spots around the camp, Flathoof returned to Fluttershy's side and took a seat next to her. “Thank you, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy remained quiet for several minutes. Then, she broke down and cried harder than she'd ever cried before.

The next day went about as smoothly as Rainbow had expected: not at all. The others had managed to get themselves organized as best they could, then started south. They moved along at a slow, steady pace—*much* too slow for Rainbow's liking—and traveled along the flattest stretch of land possible so as not to aggravate Lockwood or Twilight's conditions. Both incapacitated ponies lay draped over Flathoof's back, as he was the only pony capable of carrying both of them for extended periods of time; Fluttershy ensured both of them remained steady, while Tick Tock continued to monitor them both for any changes. This left Applejack to navigate entirely on her own, and to Rainbow, it was clearer now more than ever that it wasn't a difficult job at all.

Make fun of my sense of direction all you want, AJ. I know which way south is.

The miles stretched on and on, taking hours upon hours to cross at the grueling pace they were traveling. There was nothing but flat, arid wasteland in all directions for as far as the eye could see; it was like being back in the western Wastelands, where the terrain was just endless expanses of sand. There were no rocks of any size; no trees, living or dead; no hills or valleys. Just flat, arid wasteland that seemed to go on forever.

Morning lazily turned into afternoon, and afternoon slowly gave way to evening. It wasn't until the late evening—Rainbow could only trust Tick Tock's word on the matter for the time—that there was a change in the approaching terrain. Rainbow, being high in the air scouting about and watching for any signs of trouble, saw it first; she informed the others immediately, and everypony increased their pace just a little bit. The barren, cracked rock became darker, smoother, and harder as the group moved further south. In under an hour, the Wastelands were totally, completely, and *finally* behind them.

The rocky earth was still lifeless and tough, but it at least had some variety. There were dips and bumps, rocks of all sizes strewn about, and even a few dead trees here and there. If any part of the northern continent looked nearly as alive as the Goldridge Pass, it was this place. According to Tick Tock's map, it had no proper name; as far as the group was concerned, it deserved something inspirational. Everypony's spirits raised just knowing they were that much closer to their destination.

Then, they came across a welcome sight: a cliff. The cliff itself was nothing special, certainly, but what they could see beyond it was.

"Now *that* is a sight for sore eyes," Rainbow said.

"Ain't nopony gonna disagree with that, Dash," Applejack said, fanning herself with her hat.

Off in the distance, they could just barely make out a thin line of blue along the horizon, a thin, blue beacon of hope: the ocean. It was still untold miles away, but it was close enough that they could see it and that was all that mattered. Seeing it served no purpose other than letting them know they were close without having to look at a map; nothing could replace the sensation of seeing it with their own eyes. It was so close.

Another sight, though, dampened their spirits. At the bottom of the cliff, between them and their destination, lay a great expanse of sand and rock. Climbing down the cliff wouldn't prove too difficult, and neither would traversing the remaining distance. However, it was what occupied the area that worried everypony.

"Gargantuans," Applejack grumbled. "Shoot."

In the valley below there were several dozen of the creatures, each as large if not larger than the one they'd encountered over a week ago in the western Wasteland. Nearly all of them were fighting amongst themselves for seemingly no reason at all. Massive scythe-like claws and gigantic barbed tails tore through armored exoskeleton with ease. The beasts let loose great shrieks of pain and roars of triumph, shaking the very cliffside.

"Oh my," Rarity murmured. "How horribly gruesome. Don't tell me we're planning on going through all those creatures."

Tick Tock smirked. "Well, it *is* the fastest route from here to the coast."

Rainbow pumped a hoof. "All right! We're finally doing things right. About time you guys got your heads together."

"Don't go gettin' too excited, Dash," Applejack said. "It may be the faster route, but it ain't the one we're takin'."

Rainbow stopped cold and stared at Applejack. The words that had come from the earth pony's mouth sounded like total gibberish. They made no sense. "What do you mean, 'it ain't the one we're taking'? It the fastest way through!"

"Maybe, but it ain't the route we're takin'," Applejack repeated. "I got us an alternate route all planned out. Take a look-see."

She unfurled Tick Tock's map until it was large enough for everypony to see. She pointed to a spot several miles west of their current position, where there was a canyon. It wound down through the rocky region until it reached the coastline. They would then travel east along the beach until they reached Hope's Point. Altogether it was the easier route, as getting to the beach only required them to travel down a gentle slope. It was also obviously the safer route, as it was completely Gargantuan-free; the canyon was more than a mile from the westernmost

edge of the valley that held the creatures. However, traveling the extra miles to avoid the valley would take almost an entire extra day.

Rainbow groaned, aggravated by the continued lack of perception on Applejack's part. "This is gonna take forever. We don't have time for all these detours, AJ. Do you have any idea how slowly we've been traveling? We're practically *snails*. I can *walk* faster than we've been moving, in my sleep!"

"So what? You want us ta risk gettin' Lockwood or Twi injured tryin' to hustle across the valley? I know we're in a hurry, Rainbow, but—"

"But nothing," Rainbow snorted. "If we're gonna get any help for anypony, be it food or medicine, we need to stop wasting time and get a move on!" She gestured towards the map, specifically a route that had been planned across the valley but had since been abandoned. "Look at what your map says. If we cross the valley, we'll be at Hope's Point by late tomorrow morning. That's barely half a day. If we take *your* route, we'll be there by nightfall—"

"Well that doesn't sound *too* bad," Flathoof said.

"*Two days from now*," Rainbow completed. "Four times as long! We'll starve before we even hit the beach!"

"First of all, Dash, the route y'all're pointin' to wasn't perfected," Applejack huffed, "and it sure don't account fer recent changes. We made that route way back when we got outta that Blood Mire."

"So?"

"So, the reason it didn't take much time is 'cause the valley ain't more than a few miles across. Twilight could've teleported us across. If'n we're walkin', we're lookin' at more than doublin' the time it takes ta cross. We'd be there by tomorrow night, if we were lucky."

"So it's one day compared to two? Still sounds like the better route to me," Rainbow said. She crossed her hooves over her chest and grunted. "Then again, I guess I can't expect you to understand math. One is less than two, AJ."

"Why you smart-aleck—"

"If I may?" Tick Tock interjected.

Rainbow turned in the unicorn's direction, expecting another argument. "Oh good, the 'expert'," she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Tick Tock ignored the comment. “I must remind you, Dash, that the reason this path was good before but is bloody awful now is that we have to contend with those Gargantuans,” she said with a calm—almost cordial—tone. “Our original plan was to skip right past the lot of them, or at least the greatest concentration.”

“Those things are what we’re worried about? Seriously? We’ve got superpowers now! We can take ‘em.”

“Okay, maybe we could handle one,” Tick Tock said with a nod. “Or two, or three. How many are out there, though? Dozens, yes? Do you intend to fight them *all*?”

“Well... no. We’d blaze past the majority of them, and hold off any that chase us,” Rainbow said. “We don’t fight to win, we fight to buy distance and time. Like we did crossing the Blood Mire. That worked out pretty—” She paused, glanced at Lockwood, and reconsidered. “It worked out... better than it could have, even if it wasn’t perfect. And besides, we’ve got a better understanding of our powers since that lousy place.”

“A fair argument,” Tick Tock said. She shook her head. “However, you’re missing a key factor in the equation that I can’t blame you for not knowing about. Tell me, Dash, what are those Gargantuans doing?”

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just humor me.”

Rainbow glanced out over the cliff, then turned back to Tick Tock. “They’re fighting. Tearing each other apart, more like. Should make it even easier to sneak past them if they’re all busy trying to kill each other.”

“Again, fair point. But, do you know *why* they’re fighting?”

“Uh... no?”

“They’re fighting over a mate. Rather, *the* mate.” Tick Tock pointed at her map, specifically the name of the region, *Gargantuan Breeding Grounds*. “There is precisely one female Gargantuan per horde, and the adult males fight for the right to breed. The female stays hidden until then, but may decide to come out if she smells food—i.e. us.”

“So?”

“So, an adult female Gargantuan makes the males look downright scrawny. She’s roughly twice the size, her armor is triple the thickness, her claws and tail are strong enough to dent some of the toughest materials known to ponykind, and she’s even able to spit her lethal

venom. On that last point, I bring up the fact that adult male venom is highly corrosive and can melt steel; the female's can melt through triple-thick durasteel in under ten seconds. You do not want to know what it does to ponies. It would be the equivalent to giving a shark a gun."

"Or a frickin' *laser* beam," Pinkie added.

Rainbow grunted. "Right. Sharks. Guns. Thanks for the riveting analogy there, Tick Tock." She crossed her hooves over her chest. "Fine then, we don't go hoof-to-hoof... claw, whatever. We don't fight her directly. Applejack could take us underground and we avoid them altogether."

"Uh, did y'all forget those things live underground?" Applejack asked.

"Oh... yeah." Rainbow frowned, then brightened a second later. "Okay, how about I fly us over one at a time? It might take a while since I can't fly top speed, and I'll have to take my time with Twilight and Lockwood, but it'd work. I'll just drop everypony off at the coast. Piece of cake."

"Were that only an option," Tick Tock said, shaking her head. "The coast is full of threats, too. Having never been to Hope's Point myself, I'm not completely certain where would be a safe place to drop everypony off, if there even is one. All I know is the type of creatures they are, and aside from Applejack, I don't know if anypony here can really handle them by themselves. Certainly you could take Applejack over first, but I don't think it would be safe to assume she can handle herself alone. No offense."

"None taken," Applejack grunted.

"Why can't I fly over first to scout out a landing site?" Rainbow asked.

"Because of the possibility that those mares are spying on us and just waiting for an opportunity. We're not going to bloody well just *give* them a perfect chance to attack while half the group is on the coast and the other half is here. Furthermore, the creatures on the coast aren't likely to attack *you*, since you're in the air. You'd have to give them an opportunity."

"So we're just giving up, is that it?" Rainbow asked, disappointed. "What happened to us taking the fastest route home, huh? And another thing: didn't you say that you expected Starlight's crew to ambush us in the canyon?"

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

Rainbow shook her head, mouth agape, completely bewildered by what she was hearing. "So wait, you're worried that those jerks would most likely try to ambush us while we're going through the canyon. You and Tick Tock predicted this? It's the most likely thing you can expect? I just want to make sure I'm clear."

Applejack grunted. "Yeah, that's what I said."

"So what I understand is, you're taking us straight into the path where you figure they're *most likely* to show up? Am I hearing this right?"

Applejack's mouth curled, and her eyes narrowed. "Listen, Rainbow, we gave them a right whuppin' yesterday. Since they didn't show up last night, and they ain't attackin' us right now when we're just standin' 'round talkin', I think it's safe ta assume that they're still recoverin'. If we hurry through the canyon, we should be fine."

"How can you be so sure?" Rainbow spat, getting back in Applejack's face. "You could just be walking us into another trap! Plus, if they're recovering, who's to say that they don't pull a *worse* ambush on us to compensate? That's why we should be taking the fastest way through!"

Applejack pushed Rainbow back. "I'd rather risk dealin' with Starlight's crew, where I *know* what I'm gettin' into, than go against them Gargantuans or whatever's on the beach, where I *don't*."

Rainbow groaned. She was so sure her plans would work, and here again, not only was she being shot down for boneheaded reasons, but everypony had already agreed to take a boneheaded alternate route. How could they all agree to go along with this? Things weren't like this back home. Applejack was always ready to act first and worry about questions later, just like Rainbow. But, she was also practical and well-grounded in her reason. She'd never willingly walk anypony into a trap. Couldn't she see it was making things worse?

"I *just said* that you have no idea what those mares could be planning! None of us do! Why doesn't anypony *listen to me?*!" She wheeled around to face everypony. They needed to hear what she had to say. "If everypony had listened to me in the first place, we'd have never gotten into all this mess! We'd have never met those nutjobs! Fluttershy never would've gotten hurt! We'd be at Hope's Point by now! We wouldn't need to wait around for them to fix whatever's wrong with Lockwood, because he'd have never gotten hurt either! We'd be getting ready to leave for Utopia right now!"

"Dashie, we don't know that for sure," Pinkie said, concerned.

"I know it would've been better than *this*! Look at all we've put up with this whole week because of all these stupid decisions! Look at what it's doing to you!"

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Doin' ta *me*?"

"Yeah! You've been acting kinda fishy lately, like you're hiding something. Not to mention you've been acting like a jerk lately, too."

Applejack snorted and adjusted her hat. "Dash, I think ya better calm down 'n' take a good at *yerself* before y'all start tellin' me *I'm* acting like a jerk."

Rainbow wheeled around and glared at Applejack. "Calm down? *Calm down?!*"

Applejack stood firm. "You heard me. Y'all're makin' th' others upset with the way y'all're actin'."

"The others? *I'm* upsetting the others? Don't act like you even *care* about what anypony else is feeling!" Rainbow spat.

"Care ta run that by me again?"

Rainbow huffed and got in Applejack's face. "You say you care what anypony else is feeling, but you're full of it. What, you thought I'd forget you and Flathoof arguing the other day?"

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "Don't go there, Dash."

"Why not? Afraid I might be right?" Rainbow snorted and crossed her hooves over her chest. "You two used to be super chatty, but now you're all cold shoulder with him. Everypony's noticed it, but nopony wants to talk about it. Well, let's talk! What the big deal with you two, huh?! You say you care how everypony's feeling, so what about Flathoof?"

Flathoof grunted. "I'm curious about it myself."

"I... w-well, uh..." Applejack stuttered. "I... um... I..."

"You think you're so high and mighty!" Rainbow snapped. "You think you're so much better than me! You act like nothing's wrong, but everypony here has asked you what's going on and all you do is change the subject! Whatever happened to getting an honest answer out of you, huh?" She snorted in disgust. "Element of Honesty... ha! What a load."

"All of this is irrelevant as to how good of a navigator Applejack is," Tick Tock said, stepping up alongside Applejack. "Applejack is a superb navigator. Her routes haven't done anything to get us in trouble by themselves, it's not *her* fault those six psychos showed up. If you want to blame anypony for that, blame them."

Rainbow turned to Tick Tock and grunted. "Hey now, look who's here! It's Tick Tock, the best guide ever! You know, the same idiot that led us into an active volcano that nearly got us killed, and pissed off a super-powered unicorn that nearly vaporized all of us and is likely just chasing us down out of *spite*! Your opinion on who is or isn't a good navigator doesn't count for much. And, I know who to blame for those wackos coming after us now: *you*."

Tick Tock narrowed her eyes. "First, the earthquake at the volcano was a fluke. Second, I think it's been made clear Shadow's crew isn't after *me*, they're after *you* and your friends."

"Oh sure, great excuse." Rainbow huffed and turned to the others. "And none of you are making this any better, either!"

"Us?" Rarity asked, aghast. "I don't see what it is that anypony else is doing to make things worse."

Rainbow grunted. "Well, you're not making things *better*, that's for sure." She turned and pointed at Fluttershy. "*She's* definitely making things worse, though."

Fluttershy pointed at herself. "Me? Wh-what did I do?"

"You're so blind to Lockwood's attempts at getting a pity lay that you're getting into stupid arguments with your best friend, that's what."

Fluttershy's jaw dropped. "Wh-*what?*!"

"You... you heard that?" Rarity asked.

"Yeah, I did! You guys think I don't notice this stuff, but I do! I saw you just trying to help, but Fluttershy here is so determined to play protector for that wimp that she shut you down, even though your idea was probably for the best. She doesn't *want* your help, because *she* wants to be the one to help him, because she's been suckered!"

"Are you insinuating that Lockwood would even *think* of doing such a thing?" Flathoof huffed.

"Yeah, I am," Rainbow huffed.

"You take that back, Rainbow!" Fluttershy snapped. "Lockwood isn't trying to... to get a 'pity lay', whatever that is! He's a good pony, and he got hurt trying to keep me safe!"

"I don't buy it, not one bit. *You*, though, bought it hook, line, and sinker." Rainbow shook her head. "Flathoof is the only pony allowed anywhere near him, and that's because they're best friends. You'll keep *him* around because if you're nice to *him*, it'll look better to Lockwood. But Rarity, oh no, don't let her help, even if her idea is the best option! That's exactly what you guys have all been doing to me! Unbelievable!"

"Rainbow Dash, really, there's no need to go accusing anypony of anything like that," Rarity interjected. "The poor dear was hurt trying to keep Fluttershy safe. Why would you even

think—"

"Who cares *why* I think it, and who cares if it's true or not?!" Rainbow snapped. "What matters is that Fluttershy's acting like a jerk to you because of it! You're part of the problem too, Rarity, because you kept trying to play matchmaker; if it's anypony's fault that Fluttershy fell for all of Lockwood's garbage, it's because you pushed her into it in the first place! All of your attempts to help now look like they're because you feel guilty! You *know* it's your fault!"

Rarity frowned and stared at the ground, but didn't say a word.

"Then," Rainbow continued, "we've got Applejack acting like she cares about anypony when she doesn't, and we've got Fluttershy acting like a jerk towards ponies just trying to help. Twilight's hurt because of a bunch of nutjob mares keep attacking us, because she's no better than any of you, either!"

"Twilight was hurt protecting *me*, Dash," Tick Tock huffed. "If anypony's to blame for her injury, I am. Leave her out of this."

Rainbow snorted. "Oh, she's plenty at fault for even getting into that situation in the first place. She nominated you and Applejack to be our sole navigators, completely ignoring me telling her we should all make the decision together! If she'd listened to me, we might have gone a different way, and never got ambushed, and she'd have never gotten hurt!"

She turned to the others. "Hooves up! Who thinks Twilight's been doing a fantastic job leading us? C'mon, don't be shy!" No pony moved a muscle. "Just what I thought. Twilight's supposed to know what she's doing, but we keep getting delayed, sidetracked, and hurt because *no pony* knows what they're doing and no pony listens!"

She spat on the ground. "I knew when we started on this stupid trip that we'd be changed mares when it was through. What I didn't know, is that you'd all change for the *worse*. All any of you do is ignore me and tell me I don't know what I'm talking about. None of you care *one bit* how *I* feel, like I don't *matter*!"

"Dashie, please... calm down," Pinkie pleaded. She stepped forward and put her hoof on Rainbow's shoulder. "You're scaring me."

Rainbow ignored Pinkie. "I'm sick of no pony listening to me! I'm sick of everypony telling me nothing's wrong, when *everything* is wrong! But if that's how you guys wanna do it, then fine, you do things *your* way. I'll do things *my* way from now on! We'll see whose way is right!"

She turned towards the cliff and spread her wings. Lightning crackled through her feathers, shooting through the air with every step she took.

Pinkie rushed over and barred Rainbow's way. "Dashie, what are you doing? You can't go off by yourself."

Rainbow blinked in surprise. "By myself? Pinks, you thought I wasn't going to offer you a ride?" She laughed. "Hop on. We'll get to Hope's Point in less than an hour, then send some rescue ponies to help these guys. No problem!"

"That's your plan, then, is it?" Tick Tock interjected. She shook her head. "Question: how do you plan to pay those ponies to help? Hope's Point's services aren't *free*, you know."

Rainbow sneered. "How did *you* plan on paying them to help? I'll figure something out! That's what I do best: think on the fly!" She turned and offered her hoof to Pinkie. "Come on, Pinks, we're getting out of here."

Pinkie hesitated, then slowly lifted her hoof towards Rainbow's. She stopped just inches away.

"Pinkie?"

Pinkie frowned, and dropped her hoof back to the ground. She shook her head slowly. "Dashie, it... it isn't right to leave everypony by themselves. What if something happens and they need you? What if *I* need you?"

Rainbow paused, narrowed her eyes, and lowered her own hoof to the ground as well. "I'm fast enough to get there, get help, and be back by nightfall. There won't be any time for anything to happen if everypony stays right here. So come on, let's go." She offered her hoof again.

Pinkie frowned and shook her head once more. "Dashie, I'm not leaving them by themselves. I can't. They need us. They need *you*. Come on." She smiled, reaching a hoof for Rainbow's shoulder. "Stop acting like a big meanie."

Rainbow jerked away. She wanted to scream; she wanted to cry. Even *Pinkie* was against her? That couldn't be possible. She clenched her teeth, angrier than she'd ever been before. Her wings flared wider, barely holding her powers in check; lightning stirred the air around her, cracking the rocky ground beneath her hooves; the wind picked up, whipping through the other ponies' manes.

"So that's what you think, huh? That I'm a 'meanie'? That I'm just some jerk who doesn't care about her friends?"

"Dashie, that's not—"

“That’s what you *all* think, isn’t it?!” Rainbow screamed. “You all think I’m just some total jerkwad! I’m trying to *help* you, but none of you ever listen! You all think you’re better than me! You all think I don’t know what I’m talking about, and that I don’t care! But it’s all of *you* who don’t seem to care!” She stomped her hooves on the ground; lightning tore through the air, ripping the nearby rock to shreds. “*FINE!* If that’s what you guys think, then buck *all of you*. I’ll make things right all by myself, because that’s what *friends* do!”

She took to the air and darted south. The take-off alone cratered the ground beneath her.

“Wait! Dashie!” Pinkie called.

Rainbow’s trail warped into lightning, and with a great burst of speed, she reached Rainboom speeds; a great ring of light spread across the sky, followed by a loud explosion. An incredible blast of wind and lightning, brought about by Rainbow’s intense anger, blasted through the air and tore apart rock in the valley below, driving the Gargantuans back for a moment.

“Dashie!” Pinkie rushed forward to the edge of the cliff, stopping just before falling off. She reached out a hoof after Rainbow, but the pegasus was well out of sight. “Dashie...”