

# CRISIS: Equestria

## Chapter Eight: Impasse

*I can't believe she's gone. Why did she have to get tangled up in this? I should have never gotten involved...*

"Ow! Cripes, ma, could ya' take it easy?"

Flathoof winced when the heavysset earth pony mare in front of him flicked his ear.

"Now is that any way to talk to your mother, hmm?" Shortcake tutted, dabbing another cotton ball in a big bottle of rubbing alcohol. She shook her head. "Oh, you boys are all alike! You come home crying and whining about this and that and something-or-other. 'Oh mama I got hurt at work today. Can you kiss it and make it feel better?' And you just expect *me* to do everything."

She shook the wet cotton ball in his face, making him flinch. "See? See? Things like *this* are why your father and I didn't want you getting into the police business in the first place! You remember what your father said? Hmm? About his hoof and certain unmentionable areas?"

Flathoof rolled his eyes. "Like it was yesterday. C'mon ma, this was a pretty uncommon—"

"Don't interrupt!" she interrupted, flicking his ear again.

Shortcake dabbed the alcohol-soaked cotton ball at one of the many cuts on Flathoof's chest, paying extra attention to the particularly deep one where his badge normally rested. She discarded the cotton ball, then wiped the alcohol on her hoof off on her apron before grabbing another. She blew her damp mane out of her face and returned to work.

"*Ooh*, tomorrow morning I am going to have so many *words* with that little unicorn, and I tell you now Flathoof, your mama is gonna be using some language that she don't want you ever taking out of this household, understand?"

She took a few deep, rapid breaths. "Dragging my boy into danger like he's some kind of... *danger-facer*. The nerve! Why, if Lockwood weren't so keen on treating her nice I'd—"

"Now ma, she didn't drag me anywhere." Flathoof sighed. "I'm the one who took her to Snapshot's place."

Shortcake's expression soured. "Oh, please don't mention that poor girl, Flathoof. That poor dear..." She sniffed loudly, wiping the tissue she had in one hoof to her eyes. "Such a

sweet mare. Your sister was so fond of her, and your father was too, and you know how hard he is to please. Thickhoof wanted her to come over for the holidays again. I was so certain she'd be a part of the family sooner or later."

"I ain't interruptin' nothin', am I?"

Flathoof nearly jumped out of his seat, completely taken by surprise as Applejack made her presence in the doorway known. He turned pink in the cheeks, realizing he was not only out of uniform, but not wearing any clothes at all.

"Oh geez!" he blurted. He reached over to the bed stand and grabbed his cap, using it to hide his indecency. "Ma! Would it kill you to close the door, huh?"

Shortcake flicked her son's ear again. He winced. "Hush! We are in a private residence, so that fool Dress Code doesn't apply in here. And mind your manners, talking to your mother like that in front of company. What would your *father* say?"

"Ma, I am *naked* here and there is a *girl* standing in *my room*."

Shortcake chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. "And about time too, if I do say so—"

"Ma!"

Applejack stepped back. "Um... I can come back at another time, if—"

Shortcake turned to the doorway and gestured for Applejack to enter the room. "Oh don't mind him, he's a bit of a stick in the mud sometimes when it comes to *those* kinds of things."

"M-ma! Come on, at least let me put a shirt on!"

"It's alright, really," Applejack said, adjusting her hat. "Ta be honest, back where me 'n' my friends come from, we don't usually wear clothes anyway. Ain't nothin' ta be ashamed of."

Shortcake tapped her chin. "You were... Applejack? Yes?"

Applejack nodded. "That's right, ma'am. I was just checkin' in, seein' if everythin' was okay. Twilight wanted ta know if y'all needed her help mendin' him up any."

Shortcake smiled and patted Applejack's shoulder. "Oh I think I'm done fixing the big lunk up for now. He's a tough cookie, I'll give him that."

She yawned. "I'm going to hit the hay myself, pretty soon. It's been a *long* night. My boy's going with you on this little adventure, is that right?"

“Yes ma’am, that’s what I hear. We’re right glad ta have him along.”

“Keep an eye on him for me, will you? I get the feeling I can trust you to do that.” She put her hoof on Applejack’s shoulder and gestured towards Flathoof. “Oh, and be a dear and help the big lunk get dressed? If you say you’re not nervous about my son being naked, *well...*” She winked.

Applejack turned as red as Flathoof. “R-right. Sure thing, ma’am.”

Shortcake left the room, shutting the door behind her. Applejack trotted over to Flathoof’s side. He busied himself trying to get a clean, plain white shirt on, but the gauze wrapped around his shoulder gave him trouble.

“Do ya need any help?” she asked.

Flathoof fumbled his foreleg through a sleeve. “No, I’m perfectly fine. Is everything okay out there? How’s Miss Tock?”

Applejack laughed and rubbed the back of her neck. “Well, she’s got enough energy ta argue with Twilight ‘bout this ‘n’ that, so I reckon she’ll be right as rain soon enough. I tell ya, Twilight’s magic impresses me more ‘n’ more every time I see it. She fixed that girl’s leg up real quick like, with some help from Fluttershy, o’ course.”

She coughed into her hoof. “How about you though, are y’all gonna be okay? Do ya need anythin’?”

“I’ll manage. I’ve had worse. All in a day’s work for one of New Pandemonium’s finest.”

Mentioning the department reminded him that Snapshot was gone. He took his cap and stared at the New Pandemonium emblem on the brim for a moment, then tossed the cap aside, sighed, and layed back on his bed.

An awkward silence lingered for a moment.

Applejack rubbed the back of her head. “I’m... I’m sorry ta hear ‘bout yer friend.”

He shook his head and kept staring at the ceiling. “I feel like a terrible pony, Applejack.”

“C’mon now, sugar, it ain’t your fault she’s gone. That there crazy pegasus is the one ta blame, y’hear? Not you.”

Flathoof tilted his head and saw her forcing a smile. “That’s not what I meant. I meant...

about everything.” He sighed. “If I’d just been honest with her from the start, with *myself*, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. I don’t know...”

Applejack spoke slowly. “She was... more ta y’all than just a friend... wasn’t she?”

“Not like that, if that’s what you’re asking. My brother’s the one who really liked her. I suppose I may have felt something too, but that might just be the grief talking.”

He sat up and dejectedly picked his cap back up. “I always told myself I’d find out one day, but I kept telling myself the time wasn’t right. That there’d always be another day. I’m such a coward.” He sighed. “I feel so... empty.”

Applejack sat next to him on his bed. “That’s what it feels like ta lose someone ya hold close ta yer heart. I know that feelin’, sugar.” She looked away and removed her hat, placing it over her heart. “I know how hard it is ta get the news and deal with the loss. The feelin’ that ya couldn’t stop it. That ya never had a chance ta say goodbye.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

She put a hoof on his un-banded shoulder and turned back to him. “If y’all need somepony ta talk to, I’m here for ya, y’hear?”

He smiled and leaned into her. “Thank you, Applejack. I really do appreciate it. This isn’t my first time dealing with loss, but... it still hurts.”

Another awkward silence came between them.

Applejack shifted and got up, adjusting her hat back on her head. “C’mon, let’s go see if Tick Tock is gettin’ along better now, yeah? Get yer mind off all this. The last thing y’all need is ta beat yerself up over it. She wouldn’t like ta see y’all in a rut.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” Flathoof said. He got up as well and smoothed his shirt, then placed his cap on the nightstand.

“I suppose after dealing with my mother, she’s not going to be very stable,” he added. “She’s going to need some checking up on.”

Flathoof opened the door, and the pair headed out into the hall.

A young colt was waiting for them, and gave Flathoof a big hug. “Big bro! You’re okay! Mom said you got hurt and—”

Flathoof scowled at the little pony. “Shorthoof! What in the wide world of Equestria are

you doing up at this unwholesome hour? You have school in the morning. What were you doing, hiding outside in the hall? Does ma know you're still up?"

The small, butter-colored pony sniffed and gave Flathoof a pleading look. "I just wanted to see if you were okay, big bro..."

Flathoof sighed, and leaned down to give the little one a hug. "Aww, don't you worry about me, little guy. Your big bro is invincible, got that? Nothing's gonna put me in my place just yet." He ruffled the colt's cherry-red mane. "Now you get off to bed, okay? I don't want to hear nothing about you doing poorly in school because you were up all night."

"Okay big bro, I will." Shorthoof's glance shifted sideways to Applejack. He flinched. "Oh! S-sorry miss, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Applejack laughed. "It's alright, lil' guy. Why, I've got a lil' sis just like y'all back at home. I reckon she'd be just as worried 'bout me if she were in yer horseshoes."

"You have a weird accent, miss."

"Shorthoof!" Flathoof stomped a hoof and pointed at Applejack. "You apologize to Applejack right—"

"It's okay, he didn't mean nothin' by it." Applejack leaned down and patted the little earth pony on the head. "I reckon I do sound awful strange 'round these parts anyhow. Heck, even back home there ain't many ponies that sound much like us Apple Clan folk."

Shorthoof nervously stepped away. "W-well, it's been nice talking to you, but my big bro'll scold me some more if I don't get to bed. Night, big bro. Night, Miss Applejack."

"Good night, little guy." Flathoof sighed as he shooed Shorthoof away.

He chuckled as the colt rounded the corner back towards his own room. "I think he likes you."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"Shorthoof's not exactly the most sociable pony in our family." Flathoof circled his hoof around dismissively in the air. "I deal with the public, my ma and sister love to gossip, pa is a foreman at the Foundry, and Thickhoof's at home all the time now, so I think ma and Pattycake are starting to rub off on him."

He sighed and rubbed his neck. "Shorthoof though, he tends to stick to himself. He mostly does a lot of reading, and I don't think he wants to take after the family line. Doesn't have

many friends either.” He patted Applejack on the shoulder. “But you? He actually talked to you all on his own, even having just met you. I think it took him a week to even talk to Lockwood without us telling him to.”

Applejack smiled. “He’s a cute lil’ guy. Really does remind me o’ my lil’ sis. Even looks alike, minus the bow.” She stepped down the hall and waved for Flathoof to follow. “C’mon, let’s go see how Tick Tock’s doin’.”

The pair headed down the hall towards the den. The den was nearly twice the size of the one back in Room eighty-four and five. Though with two couches, a dining table with room for ten, a bookshelf, a small entertainment center, and several cabinets, it was significantly more cluttered. The television on the entertainment center was on but had been muted. A few of the cabinets had been opened to get to the box of first-aid supplies, which was big enough to take up all the room in one of the cabinets by itself.

Only three ponies occupied the den. Tick Tock rested on one of the couches while Twilight tended to her injuries, a small frown on her face as she was concentrating on the healing spell. Busy in his own world, Lockwood gathered the assorted medical supplies that had been scattered about the room and busied himself putting them back in their box.

Tick Tock looked a mess, though thankfully she'd gotten proper care more quickly this time, so her injuries had already mostly healed. A sling kept her leg still, and both it and her leg were enshrouded by a light pink aura that matched the one around Twilight's horn.

“Well, don't you look a sight,” Flathoof said. “You’ve seen better days, Miss Tock, that’s for sure.”

“You're one to talk.” Tick Tock frowned and looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry about what happened to your friend. That bloody maniac used her to get to you, since you were with me...”

Tick Tock's sullen expression deepened when Flathoof didn't reply.

“Is her leg gonna be okay, Twi?” Applejack asked.

“It wouldn't be, if you hadn't gotten here as quickly as you did,” Twilight said, continuing her work. “Restomancy, or healing magic, is not an easy field to work in. Very delicate stuff; there's so much that can go wrong if just a little something is even slightly off. It was just a fracture, but if she tries to move it too much it won't heal properly, and she might break it next time she tries to walk. She'll be okay for now, though.”

Flathoof shook his head. “If only a pony like you had been around when my brother had his accident.”

"It's not your fault that procedure costs so much, Flathoof. Come now, don't look so downtrodden," Lockwood said, sliding the large box of supplies back into the cabinet. "I know you've lost a lot today, but if this little errand of ours is going to go well, we should try and start it in high spirits." He snapped his head up. "N-not that I'm trying to rush your grieving," he added. "I *am* sor—"

Flathoof held up a hoof to dissuade Lockwood from continuing. "Don't worry about it, I know what you mean. If I'm going to get through this, I should keep myself active, not lay about and mope and weep." He stomped a hoof on the carpet. "So, I stand by my decision: I'm going to try to ensure these girls get home safe and sound, and that *you* don't get yourself killed out there. It's the least I could do."

He turned to Tick Tock. "So I assume, then, that our plan remains unchanged?"

"If by that you mean, 'are we still going to the Gate to use those ruddy fake passports?' then yes, the plan is the same," Tick Tock muttered. "Bloody well can't change it now, not that I can think of any reason why we'd need to. I don't think I'm in any condition to try and climb over the Outer Wall, at any rate. I really wish we didn't have to delay it on my account. We're pressed for time, and every day counts."

Twilight jerked her head up. "Say, that reminds me! I had a pressing question about this whole situation. More specifically, what exactly our role in our world entails."

Tick Tock rolled her eyes. "Great, *this* again. *Now* what are you going to argue about?"

"Why is it so imperative that *we* get home so quickly?"

Applejack's jaw dropped. "The *hay's* the matter with you, Twilight? Don't y'all wanna go home?"

Twilight shook her head. "That's not what I meant. Of course I want to go home, Applejack. What I mean is, is that really the only solution? Getting home in three weeks?"

Tick Tock raised an eyebrow. "I don't follow."

"Well, couldn't Princess Celestia try and find new bearers of the Elements of Harmony? That way, they'd be ready to combat Discord immediately, right? I mean, I don't feel right putting that kind of responsibility into someone else's hooves, but it sounds less dangerous that way.

"Considering the injuries you two have sustained," she added, pointing at Tick Tock and Flathoof, "I just wonder if perhaps we should reconsider our options, especially if outside the city is more dangerous than inside. I don't want anypony getting hurt, or worse, on our account."

Tick Tock moved to speak, then stopped a moment. “Hmm... that *is* an interesting theory,” she said. “It certainly would ease things on our end a great deal.”

She shook her head and sighed. “But we'd have no way of contacting Time Turner to inform him, and hoping he has that same theory himself is too risky. Considering how our last conversation ended, he likely would be considering other solutions. But, I have no idea what he might think of. He's not an easy pony to predict. A proper good idea, Sparkle, but not something that's in the cards for us, sad to say.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said Chronomancers can contact one another?”

Tick Tock chuckled and tugged her collar. “Well... I'm afraid that that is not possible. I made a grave error in my first encounter with that *maniac*, and left my Timekeeper in my T.A.R.D.I.S. I'm such a bleedin' idiot.

“What's rule number one Tick Tock?” she said to herself, her tone condescending. “Always keep your Timekeeper on you, Tick Tock. Easiest bloody rule in the book and I broke it like I'm some sort of stupid *foal*.”

Twilight frowned. “I assume that it's important?”

“‘Important’ is putting it lightly,” Tick Tock sighed. “A Timekeeper is everything a Chronomancer needs to do anything and everything their job entails. It's how we open our T.A.R.D.I.S., control and destroy Void portals, and it carries multiple tools for running quick, accurate calculations for just about any mathematical or magical problem. I'd go into it, but...”

She buried her face in the couch's cushions. “Oh, what's the point? It's not like I'm gonna get to show it off. I left it on my desk when I entered the T.A.R.D.I.S., because I wasn't thinking. I was just eager to take a rest for a little bit after walking around the bleedin' city all day, and when that brute attacked I never got a chance to pick it up.”

“Couldn't we go back for it?” Flathoof asked. “It sounds like this thing is *really* important. Won't you need it to send these girls home?”

“Luckily, no.” Tick Tock said. “But you're making the assumption that that psychopath didn't lay a trap for me if I came back for it, or that it's even still there. The T.A.R.D.I.S. door was left wide open. He could have easily gone back and nicked what he could. I wouldn't put it past him.

“Besides, we didn't find a body, and that worries me,” she continued, glancing at the door. “I've already taken a chance against that bleedin' lunatic twice, and I've come out on top



by the skin of my teeth. I don't think I have the heart to try my luck a third time."

Twilight sighed. "Well shoot, there goes my idea. I was hoping to avoid the risk of something happening to somepony, or the possibility of delays. We may as well follow through with your plan then, if that's the only viable option."

"Good. Glad to hear we finally agree on something." Tick Tock yawned. "Now if you don't mind, I need some shut-eye. I've had an exhausting day, and I'm bloody knackered."

Twilight turned to the others, and gestured for them to follow her out of the den, giving Tick Tock her peace.

"I'm glad she's okay," Twilight said once they were in the hallway. "Her attitude may be disagreeable, but she seems to know more about the outside of the city than either of you." She looked at both Flathoof and Lockwood. "She sounds like she's our best chance at getting out of here. No offense."

Lockwood chuckled. "Well, I wouldn't say I don't know *anything* about outside the city walls, I just lack the personal experience. I know a few ponies that have been outside the city on many occasions."

"So, I assume the plan is settled?" Twilight asked. "We'll head for the Gate tomorrow morning, and try to get as much distance between us and the city as we can before nightfall?"

"Sounds reasonable enough," Flathoof said. "We can decide on the route we want to take to Hope's Point when Miss Tock is awake again. She might have a better suggestion than just hoofing it across the Wasteland. There's gotta be a safer route, and if anypony here knows it, it's her."

Twilight yawned. "Right. Let's all get some rest then, hmm? We've got a big day ahead of us. Come along Applejack."

Applejack nodded and began to follow Twilight. "Nighty night, y'all."

"Goodnight, Applejack," Flathoof said. "And thanks again."

"Don't mention it, sugar. Just keep in mind what I said, y'hear?"

As the two mares rounded the opposite corner, Lockwood gave Flathoof a playful jab in the side.

Flathoof grunted. "Hey! What was that for?"

“Oh, nothing *sugar*,” Lockwood said, laughing into his hoof. “Glad to see you’re not letting things get you *too* down. I don’t want to be the only one with a positive outlook on things. Come on, we should get some rest too. I guess I’m bunking with you tonight. I’m letting Fluttershy and Rarity use the room usually reserved for me. Poor girls looked like they needed a good, soft bed to rest on.”

Flathoof caught a certain glimmer in Lockwood’s eye. He laughed. “Glad to see you’re still the same ol’ Lockwood.”

“That’s right, I—” He stopped and raised an eyebrow. “Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Flathoof slapped Lockwood on the back. “Nothing. Come on, let’s get some shut-eye.”

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The distinctness of the Gate District, compared to the rest of the Outer District, surprised Twilight. Even the Mid Districts could not compare to how neat and tidy everything looked. Their surroundings were high-tech and clean, which gave the place an eerie, sinister feel, for lack of a better description, as nothing she’d seen of the city thus far came even close to being this organized.

Iron walkways replaced concrete sidewalks. Silver and black buildings of sleek, shiny metals replaced the dingy, rusty browns and reds of the rest of the city. There weren’t any shops, restaurants, or leisure locations as far as Twilight could tell, just domicile complexes. She had to call them that, because that’s what they had listed above their doorways, each followed by a letter and a number.

While the rest of the city had a distinct smoky smell to it that stung Twilight’s nostrils and eyes, here that odor was very faint. Instead, the scent of freshly-cleaned linens hung in the air, concentrated the most around dull metal grates located on every street corner. A group of pegasi colts played near one, and whenever they leapt over it, they’d spread their wings and try to stay airborne in the air currents. It marked the first time Twilight had seen anypony in this city actually having fun.

Twilight figured it made sense, in a way. The pleasant atmosphere put both her and the rest her friends in a better mood. Everything was clean and neat to an unnatural level, almost sterile.

“This place is so clean, it makes *Rarity’s* place look like a dump,” Rainbow said. She looked skyward, where even the air itself was clean, completely free of smog.

“Well I wouldn’t go *that* far, dear,” Rarity said. She stole a glance towards a couple who

casually strolled past them, each wearing elaborate matching ensembles and discussing something that was drowned out by the chatter of the crowd. “Hmph... at least the ponies here have a sense of style. Oh my, I feel *terribly* underdressed.”

Twilight tapped her chin. “Well if those passport prices are accurate, I guess you’d have to be pretty wealthy to afford one of those *and* an airship ticket.”

All of the other ponies in the area wore classy, luxurious outfits, jaunting to wherever their destinations might be. Twilight wondered how many, if any, of these ponies were secretly using fake passes. Most of them were walking back towards the city, carrying sagging satchels of souvenirs they’d brought back with them. The saddlebags she and her friends carried and had filled with supplies did not look even remotely as full.

Twilight could just barely make out pieces of conversations as she and her friends cantered by these posh ponies.

“Oh I *know*, darling, I just *can’t* wait to tell Seabreeze how *exquisite* Utopian cuisine really is!”

“And like, oh. My. Stars. Did you *see* the muscles on that one at the ranch?”

“We shall perhaps wisely consider selling our cherry shares and investing in grapes before they go into season, hmm?”

“Hasn’t anypony down there ever heard of ‘chic’? Maybe next time we’ll just take the trip around to Hope’s Point. Ugh, *so* much better than here at least. Just look at those ponies over there? Are they part of a circus?”

Twilight noticed these ponies all shared a certain tone of voice: refined, perhaps haughty. It felt like being back in Canterlot. Almost.

“The ponies here are so different from the ponies in the rest of the city,” Twilight said, shaking her head. “Actually, I’m more surprised at how organized everything is here. It’s like a completely different city.”

“You can say that again, darling,” Rarity said. “I *am* glad to see that at least one place in this dreadful city has a certain degree of consideration for its appearance. Even the *hospital* wasn’t this clean, which I find quite disturbing if I do say so myself.”

“Everything here is kept under constant maintenance,” Flathoof explained from the front of the group. “After all, what good would it do if one day everything broke down? From what I hear, the Gate requires tons of power to run. It’s what generates the shield that fortifies the Outer Wall, after all.”

Twilight looked around, hoping to see some of this “constant maintenance”, but couldn’t see anypony that looked like they were actually working. “Hmm...” she mused. “Well then, where are all the maintenance crews that should be doing that kind of work? The only ponies I’ve seen so far look like mostly tourists and business ponies.”

“Rumor is they all work underground,” Lockwood said, dramatically pointing his wings downwards. “Worse, that they’re all *mutants*, conscripted into service by the government in exchange for safety and peace of mind.”

Applejack scratched her head. “Mutants’? What in tarnation is a mutant?”

Lockwood hesitated. “Well, I guess the best way to describe them would be ‘deformed ponies’.”

“Oh m-m-my...” Fluttershy huddled in even closer to Rarity than she had been before.

“Deformities?” Rarity asked. “Good heavens, how *dreadful*. How does that sort of thing happen?”

Lockwood waved his hoof through the air. “Well, rumor is that its all that orange gunk in the sky. It’s supposed to be radiation or something.” He patted his stomach. “And rumor also goes that whatever’s in Dolor’s foods counteracts it. Yup, even Dolor Brown. Worse, out there, you’re exposed to more of it.”

“It’s like I said when you all first got here,” Flathoof said. “If anypony thought you were from the Wasteland instead of Utopia, they’d think you had some kind of mutation. Albeit in your case, one that was a little more... subtle.” He shuddered and rubbed his leg. “I’ve seen case files of some of the more transformative mutations and I tell you, they’re not pretty. Let’s just leave it at that. Trust me.”

“Ooh, what kind of mutations we talkin’ about?” Pinkie asked. “Like, are we talking about *laser vision*? Because that’s one of my favorite ones! I wish I could shoot laser beams out of my eyes.” She set one hoof to the side of her head, and used the other to imitate shooting out of her eyes. “Pchew! Pchew!”

A passing, wide-eyed filly stared up at Pinkie's hoof from the shadow of her father. She tugged on the stallion's tail. “Daddy—”

“It’s not polite to point at the mentally handicapped, dear,” her father replied.

“It’s not a handicap, it’s a benefit!” Pinkie called after them, rising up onto the tips of her back hooves in her effort. She lost her balance and pinwheeled to the ground, plopping onto her

face in a huff.

“That’s not the kind of mutations we’re talking about,” Lockwood said. “Seriously, *what?*”

“Yeah, we’re talking more about *real* deformities,” Flathoof added. “Like extra bits. Or missing bits. Not something you’d probably really get excited for. Well, I hope that you wouldn’t get excited for, anyway.”

Twilight gulped. “Sounds serious. You don’t think something like that could happen to us out there, could it?”

Tick Tock patted Twilight on the shoulder and chuckled. “Relax, Sparkle. The whole mutation thing is just a silly old piece of rubbish the government likes to spread about to dissuade ponies from leaving on hoof, so they have to buy the ludicrously overpriced airship tickets. Why, if something like that could happen, I must be the luckiest pony alive, because I’m immune to it. I spend plenty of time outside the city gates, and I don’t have any bleedin’ mutations.”

Pinkie hopped over and gave Tick Tock a scrutinous gaze. “Are you *suuure?*”

“Quite sure,” Tick Tock said. She warily stepped back as Pinkie moved in closer, her gaze trying to pierce the veil that wasn’t there. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Just checking!” Pinkie said with a sing-song voice. “Wouldn’t want to be traveling around and have you get all mad at Twilight for asking a question. You’d say something like, ‘You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry!’ and then get all big and green—” She paused. “Well, you’re already green. But your clothes would rip and you’d yell, ‘Tick Tock *SMASH!*’”

Pinkie turned when a gaggle of young mares nearby started giggling madly at her. She waved, causing them to laugh harder and canter away.

“Seriously, where the bloody hell does she get all these ridiculous ideas?” Tick Tock asked the others. “Laser vision? Shapeshifting? Please tell me the rest of you think she’s bonkers too.”

Twilight, and all the others, shrugged. “She confuses the rest of us just as much most of the time. I wouldn’t question it too much if I were you, Tick Tock. That’s just Pinkie being Pinkie.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Pffh, I say this all the time, but you all *really* need to get with the times. C’mon, Dashie, you’ve seen my comic book collection. You know what I’m talking about.”

Rainbow chuckled. “I’ll be honest, Pinkie, when I’m in your room the last thing on my mind is your weird hobbies.”

Pinkie wiggled her eyebrows.

“Action figures!” Rainbow blurted. “I like your action figures!”

“Anyway,” Flathoof said. “Time to focus, ladies. We’re almost to the check-in station. Get your passports ready.”

The group rounded the next corner, and at last the Gate loomed into view. They had yet to see it as, despite its size, the buildings, awnings, and tunnels they had to walk by and through obscured it. The gigantic door stood twice as tall as the rest of the Outer Wall, and even that was large enough to force an Ursa Major to climb over.

“Why is it so big?” Twilight asked. “Why would it need to be so big if it’s just supposed to be keeping ponies in and out?”

Lockwood laughed. “Well, you haven’t heard of some of the predators out there in the Wastelands, have you? From what I hear, the only one that really still exists is called a ‘gargantuan’.” He shuddered. “Never seen one myself, but I’ve heard stories. Oh, I’ve heard *stories*.”

“Proper monsters, they are,” Tick Tock added. She gestured towards the top of the walls. “The Outer Wall was made so tall to keep the adults out. Trust me when I say that they’re big. Very big. That’s why we’re taking a route that will skip past the areas the adults tend to occupy. The adolescents aren’t too much trouble except in big numbers, and we won’t encounter many of them if any at all.”

“Okay, that explains the wall then,” Twilight said. She scratched her head and stared upwards at the Gate, which stood about half as tall as Dragon Mountain back home. “Doesn’t explain the Gate itself. Why is *that* so tall?”

“Well that’s more of a statement than anything, I think,” Lockwood said. “The Wall is big to keep out threats. The Gate is big to intimidate those coming in and out of the city. The only thing bigger is Pandora Tower, the capitol building.”

“I don’t see how it’s that big of a deal,” Rainbow muttered, lazily floating by. “I mean, can’t pegasi just fly over the walls?”

Tick Tock laughed. “The Outer Wall doesn’t keep things in and out just by being tall. If you want to risk getting shot, be my guest. The NPAF’s anti-air weaponry would love to get a piece of you.”

The group approached the Gate entrance, passports in hoof. A large divider separated

the two sides of the Gate's door. Crowds of ponies entered through the left side, which was wide open. All of them were dressed as high-class as the other ponies they'd seen on the walk here.

Markings on the walkway beneath, marked *Exit*, led them towards the right side, which was closed. Apart from themselves, the pathway on the exit side was completely unoccupied.

"Shouldn't there be more ponies here?" Rainbow asked, looking around. "It seems a little, I dunno, deserted?"

"Well, it *is* the winter quarter," Lockwood explained. "Very few ponies leave for the Utopian continent this time of year, so most of these ponies are probably coming back from their autumn vacations. Utopia is popular almost every other time of the year, mostly the summer. I hear the Utopian beaches are extremely hot tourist traps."

"You really have been planning a trip, haven't you?" Flathoof laughed. "You're making me actually look forward to this. Stop it."

Rainbow grunted and fluttered back down to the ground. "Still seems a little odd. You'd think you'd see at least one pony going this way."

"Maybe it's just a bad day of the week?" Twilight said.

Pinkie chuckled, patting Rainbow's back. "C'mon, Dashie, lighten up a little. This isn't like you, being all grumpy all the time. Where's that *big* Dashie smile? Huh? *Huh?*" She used her hooves to draw a smile on her own face.

Rainbow gave Pinkie an uncomfortably-large grin in return.

Pinkie hugged Rainbow tight. "There, that's better."

"Sorry, Pinks. I'm just trying to look out for everypony, that's all." Rainbow said.

The check-in station, made up of a series of machines in a row, waited ahead. Each machine was a tall, silver column, bearing a large blue screen with several silver buttons on either side. A slot beneath the monitor read, *Insert Passport Here*, and included a picture to demonstrate the proper method of inserting one's own.

Flathoof approached one, stepping onto the hoof-shaped markings on the ground that read, *Please Stand Here*. He fished his passport from the pocket of his shirt and inserted it into the slot as directed. The column beeped several times, then its monitor turned green and displayed the words, *Performing Identity Confirmation*. Twilight and her friends each took a cautious step back when the silver buttons on the sides of the monitors opened up and revealed a set of faintly-glowing, needle-like attachments.

Twilight saw faint traces of magic flowing out of these attachments. Machinery that could simulate magic? Curious, indeed. Most of the city disturbed her greatly, namely the disorganized way things were run, the quality of life, and the sociability of the ponies living here. Their technology, on the other hoof, fascinated her more and more every time she saw it in action. If not for their haste to get home, she would love the chance to research how it all worked.

The machine beeped again, and the appendages sunk back inside. The screen returned to blue, and Flathoof slid his passport out of the slot.

“There we go, all done, Flathoof,” Lockwood said. He stepped forward, and presented his own passport. “As an act of good faith, allow me to demonstrate that the passports you lovely young ladies are using will work just as well as Flathoof’s.”

He inserted his card as Flathoof had done, and the machine repeated the approval process. Once he was approved, he slid his card out of the slot and replaced it in his jacket pocket.

He laughed. “See? No problem at all. I am nothing if not dependable, if I do say so myself.”

Twilight stepped forward next. “Well then, let’s get to it, girls. Time to get out of this crazy city and start getting back home.”

She inserted her card. The process repeated itself. She took her card.

“See, Rainbow? Everything’s fine. No trouble. Pinkie’s right, you really need—”

“Yeah yeah, I get it,” Rainbow grumbled. She stepped in next and used hers. Approved. “All of this just seems too convenient if you ask me.”

The other Ponyville natives stepped in and used their passes too. All of them were approved, and now they were ready to move through the Gate.

At last, Tick Tock stepped in and readied her own passport. She looked at the screen rather nervously, glanced back to the card, then back to the screen again.

“Something the matter, Tick Tock?” Twilight asked. “You’ve done this dozens of times before, right? What’s up?”

Tick Tock shook her head. “Sorry, I guess I’m just a little cautious. I’ve dealt with a load of bollocks these past two days, and I just get a strange feeling that everything I do is going to end in horrible disaster.”



“Don’t fret over it, darling,” Rarity said, patting Tick Tock on the back. “We’re all here *together* now.”

“Yeah, if anythin’ or anypony tries ta give y’all any trouble, they’ll be in fer a load o’ trouble back from *us*, y’hear?” Applejack added, stomping her hoof.

Pinkie bounced up on her hind legs and started boxing her fore hooves about. “Yeah! We’ll give ‘em the ol’ what-for! Or maybe even the what-*five*! That’s like, the next level! Hey! This gives me a great idea! Ahem...”

Both Twilight and Rainbow groaned. “Oh no...”

*“♪ Oh we’re all in this together  
Nothing’s gonna keep us down.”*

“Oh come on, you guys got her singing again!” Rainbow complained, fluttering over to Rarity, Applejack, and Tick Tock.

*“♪ ‘Cause we’re all in this together  
Gotta get on out of this smelly town.”*

“Seriously Pinkie, we don’t have time for this,” Twilight grumbled, putting a hoof to her face.

*“♪ Gonna cross the land, the sea, the sky  
And it’ll be a blast with Pinkie Pie!*

“That’s me!”

“Was that a tuba?” Lockwood asked.

*“♪ ‘Cause we’re all in this together  
And Friendship makes the world go rooound!”*

Tick Tock’s jaw dropped. She rubbed her eyes. “What. In the bloody hell. Was that?”

Twilight chuckled. “Pinkie likes to sing. It’s just something you have to get used to.”

“Good luck with that,” Flathoof added.

“What in Equestria have I signed up for?” Tick Tock muttered. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Tick Tock took a deep breath and inserted her card into the slot. The process repeated. Her card was presented like all the others.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Finally, things are looking up. Maybe I *am* just paranoid."

"See? Nothing to worry about," Twilight said. "You just need to *relax*. Take it easy. If you get all stressed out, this journey might get the better of you."

Tick Tock rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks."

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The group proceeded to the Gate door itself, and the ground beneath them glowed as they walked across it. Before they even reached the door, it began emitting loud hisses as the multiple clamps and latches opened. The door opened next, leading into a long, foreboding hallway that stretched off into the distance. No light at the end of the tunnel marked any sort of exit. Dark reds and blacks decorated the interior walls.

Rarity felt it all to be rather drab and unnecessarily foreboding. "Considering this hall is leading *out* of this dreadful city, you'd think it would be more uplifting."

Fluttershy huddled in close to Rarity. "Um... Rarity? Do you think that... everything will be okay?"

Rarity gave a comforting smile. "Oh of *course*, sweetheart. If we all stick together, there's nothing to fear."

"I'm j-just so... anxious. I don't know where we are, or what we're doing, or where we're going, or how we're going to get there. I'm s-scared, Rarity."

Rarity grinned and pat Fluttershy on the shoulder. "Well, do you think *maybe* if you knew a little more about what's ahead, you'd feel a little better? Hmm?"

"I... suppose so."

"Well then, what say we go have a little talk with somepony that knows quite a lot more than we do about this world? Doesn't that sound nice?"

Fluttershy tilted her head. "Oh? Um... I don't—"

"No need to be bashful, darling. Come on, let's go have a little chat with him."

“Oh... o-okay if you—” Fluttershy paused. “W-wait... ‘him’? W-we’re not going to t-talk to Miss Tock? I th-thought she was the authority on—”

Rarity giggled. “*Heavens* no, darling. As much as I’m sure she knows, that dear young lady has *much* too much on her mind at the moment, I think. And, as you can see, she seems to already be having a little *discourse* with somepony else.” She gestured to where Tick Tock was busy talking, or rather, arguing, with Twilight Sparkle.

“Oh...” Fluttershy murmured.

Rarity smoothed Fluttershy’s mane out of her eyes. “Come now, Mister Lockwood should be *more* than adequate, if I do say so myself. He really *is* a wonderful stallion.” Rarity winked at Fluttershy.

Fluttershy tilted her head. “Um... w-well, okay then Rarity...”

Rarity trotted ahead in the formation with Fluttershy at her side. “Hellooo, Mister Lockwood?” she called in her sing-song voice. “May we speak with you a moment?”

He tilted his head to face her. “Oh, certainly Miss Rarity.”

Rarity sidled up beside him, drawing Fluttershy up alongside her. “First of all, thank you so much for letting us use your room last night. Your bed was simply *marvelous*. We certainly were surprised that you have your own room reserved at Captain Flathoof’s home.”

“Oh, that was no trouble at all, Miss Rarity,” Lockwood said. “I understand you take a deal of pride in your appearance and poise, and I sympathize. It simply wouldn’t do to let you use anything but the best.”

He tilted his head to look at Fluttershy and added. “And Miss Fluttershy as well, of course. Such a nice young lady. Since you two are such close friends, I didn’t want to separate you.”

Rarity smiled and winked at Fluttershy again. “Such a *gentlecolt*. I was wondering if you would be willing to keep my dear friend Fluttershy and I a little bit of company, for the time being? The poor dear is so *delicate*, you understand. She could use the assurance of *somepony* with a little knowledge of the area.”

Lockwood nodded, tipping his hat. “Certainly! I’m not one to turn down a request from a lady. Bit of a habit of mine.”

“Splendid! Come now, Fluttershy, you can ask Mister Lockwood *anything* you want, if it will make you feel better.”

“Oh... a-alright...” Fluttershy squeaked. “Um... I know you’ve never been... outside the city before, but... is... is it scary out there?”

Lockwood smiled. “Well, I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t. But, we do have a knowledgeable guide in Miss Tock, and if what she says is true, we’ll only be traveling for a few days. Once we get to Hope’s Point, everything will be fine. Trust me.”

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Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash watched the whole spectacle with disdain. “I don’t like any of this,” she whispered to Pinkie Pie. “Everypony’s getting a bit too buddy-buddy with those three, especially *him*. It’s all a bit shady, if you ask me.”

Pinkie squinted and looked skyward. “I don’t know if smog counts as shade, Dashie.”

Rainbow gave her an annoyed look.

“Kidding!” Pinkie giggled. “Just kidding, I’m not a dummy. I know you’re worried about trusting them.”

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. “You do?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Uh *duh*, I mean it’s only obvious. You’re super duper suspicious about ‘em. Especially Mister Lockwood, you *really* don’t seem to like him. I don’t know why though.”

Rainbow blinked, and laughed. “Wow, that’s really observant of you. I didn’t think you were paying any attention.”

Pinkie pulled a magnifying glass and a pipe out of her mane. “It’s elementary, my dear Dashie! Sherlock Pie doesn’t miss anyth—”

She tripped over her roller skates.

Rainbow stifled another laugh. “You okay there, Pinks?”

Pinkie bounced to her hooves and rolled in a circle around Rainbow. “Yup! Just took a little trip.”

Rainbow gave her a cautious look. “Your... knee isn’t pinchy, is it?”

Pinkie shook her head. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t a ‘Pinkie Sense’ trip like last time. Just a

'Clumsy Pinkie' trip." She giggled and stuck her pipe in her mouth, sending up a stream of bubbles.

"Right..." Rainbow turned serious again. "But seriously, Pinks, just promise me one thing?"

Pinkie nodded enthusiastically.

"No matter what happens, you stick by me, okay?"

"Pfh, as if that's a hard promise to keep," Pinkie said. "I'm practically glued to you as it is. For you, Dashie, you get better than a Pinkie Pie Swear *or* a Pinkie Promise. You get my super secret Pinkie Vow! I'll always stick by you, Dashie."

She leaned in and nuzzled Rainbow's neck.

Rainbow blushed and brushed Pinkie with a wing. "Thanks Pinkie."

Pinkie stopped dead in her tracks. "Uh-oh."

Rainbow blinked. "What's the matter?"

"I feel a combo coming on."

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"I don't know, Tick Tock, I'm still skeptical about the whole thing," Twilight said. "I understand what you're saying, but—"

"Sparkle, you say you understand, but honestly I don't think you do," Tick Tock muttered. "If Law and Chaos aren't the two forces of magic, then what are, hmm?"

"Well from what I've learned, I suppose the most direct terms would be 'Good' and 'Evil' magic. Take Restomancy for example. That's definitely Good magic - it helps ponies recover from injuries."

Tick Tock shook her head. "If Restomancy were solely 'Good', then evil ponies couldn't use it. Are you trying to suggest to me that a bad pony couldn't use that sort of magic to heal herself?"

"Well that's not exactly what I said, but—" Twilight paused. "Huh. Fair point." She smiled and pointed accusingly at Tick Tock. "Well, by that logic, if Restomancy were Law magic, then chaotic ponies couldn't use it. Explain that then."

“That’s because magic is magic,” Tick Tock said, sticking her nose in the air. “Anypony can use any spell, but the source of their magic is derived from either Law, or Chaos. Certain spells are stronger when used by certain forces, but—”

“Hey Twi! We got a live one over here!” Rainbow called from the rear of the group.

“Uh-oh,” Twilight muttered. “Come on, we’d better go see what’s up.”

Twilight trotted over with Tick Tock in tow. “What’s the problem, Rainbow?”

“Pinkie Sense time, Twi,” Rainbow explained. “She said it was a combo.”

“Oh no, more of that bloody nonsense?” Tick Tock said.

Pinkie bounced rapidly in place. “Ooh, here it comes!”

“Eye-flutter. Knee-twitch. Ear-flop.” Twilight tapped her chin. “Hmm... interesting.”

Pinkie stopped moving and scratched her head. “Huh? That’s weird. A new one? I don’t remember that one at all.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve seen that combo before either. What’s it mean?” Rainbow asked.

“Well how would I know, Dashie, it’s *new*,” Pinkie said. “I’m not psychic, y’know? Ooh! See, now *that* would be a cool mutation—”

Rainbow sighed. “Nevermind.”

Twilight snapped a hoof up, and her face brightened. “Aha! I’ve got it! I knew it seemed familiar enough. It’s the reverse of her ‘watch out for opening doors’ combo.”

Rainbow threw her hooves in the air. “Well what the hay does *that* mean? Watch out for *closing* doors? In case you haven’t noticed Twi, we’re in the middle of a really long hallway with *no* doors or windows or anything at all.”

Twilight tapped her chin for a moment, then paused. Her head snapped up and her eyes widened. “Oh dear.” She turned to the others and shouted, “Everypony! We need to move! *Now!*”

She didn’t leave time for questions, and immediately began galloping at full speed towards the light of the exit ahead.

Rainbow flew up alongside her. “Whoa whoa *whoa*, what the hay, Twi? What’s up?”

“Don’t you get it? A *gate* is a kind of door! The Gate is going to—”

A siren blared loudly, and red and yellow lights sprung to life along the Gate corridor. The glowing floor panels beneath them changed from soothing blues to angry reds.

*“Attention! Unauthorized citizens have been detected in Gateway Sector Nine.”* The loud, mechanical voice came from everywhere at once. *“All citizens currently in Sectors Ten and Eight are advised to clear the area. All citizens in Sector Nine, please remain where you are and await further instructions. Sector Nine will be sealed off in sixty seconds. Repeat: All citizens in Sectors Ten—”*

“Aw horseapples,” Applejack said. She increased her pace, catching up to Twilight and Rainbow. “Come on, everypony! Y’all heard the... whatever that was! We gotta vacate!”

Tick Tock shouted, “This is *exactly* what I bloody well knew would happen! Bugger this whole damn city!”

The group galloped as fast as they could, but their hearts sank when the Gate walls ahead of them started closing in. Even though they were getting closer to the light of the exit, it was getting smaller and smaller.

Twilight chanced a glance behind her. She saw the Gate walls far behind them closing too. “They’re trying to seal us in!”

“Come on, everypony!” Rainbow yelled. “Move move move!”

“Oh dear, we’ll never make it!” Rarity cried.

The Gate closed with a loud crunch, forcing Rainbow to screech to a halt.

They were trapped.

Rainbow stomped a hoof, then fluttered back to the others who were still several dozens of yards behind. “Well, shoot. Now what are we gonna do?”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Lockwood said. He furiously tapped his head. “No, this isn’t right at all. If we were unauthorized, the authorities would have been alerted immediately when we tried to use the passports in the first place. They’d have never even allowed us in. This looks like a technical issue.”

“I knew this was all too good to be true!” Rainbow spat, glaring at Lockwood. “I bet those

stupid passes are to blame for this.”

“They are not! I swear, I’ve used mine before, they work flawlessly. This is all just a malfunction somewhere. One of the authorization panels we’ve been walking on must’ve been faulty.”

“What should we do, Lockwood?” Flathoof asked. “You’re the expert here. Well, you and Miss Tock.”

Tick Tock shrugged. “Perhaps we should turn back and ask a Gate Technician to clear us?”

Lockwood nodded. “That might be the best idea. The NPPD is notoriously slow, so we might be here for hours if we wait for them. It would take less time than that to just walk back, find a Tech, fix this, and walk back again.”

“Uh, I don’t think we’ll be waitin’ that long,” Applejack said, pointing towards the corridor behind them.

Flathoof scratched his head. “Huh. I’m not used to the NPPD being so quick on things. Must really be a slow day.”

“Them ponies don’t look like they’re wearin’ the same uniform y’all usually do.”

Flathoof squinted and looked at the collection of ponies approaching them. His eyes widened. “What the- this isn’t right.”

“Now what’s the matter?” Rainbow asked.

Lockwood shook his head and stepped to Flathoof’s side. “What is it, Flathoof? You look positively spooked.”

Flathoof turned Lockwood’s head towards the approaching ponies and pointed. “We’re right about the NPPD taking their sweet time, but the *military* is a different story.”

Lockwood squinted to see the ponies. He leapt back in surprise. “Oh dear! This isn’t right at all!”

Tick Tock stepped in between them and squinted, then shook her head. “Bloody hell, what’s the military doing here? This isn’t their jurisdiction.” She glared at Lockwood. “You posh tosser, what’d you get us into?”

“Yeah, well, they’re sure are making a beeline right for us,” Flathoof noted.



Applejack gulped. "I've got a bad feelin' 'bout this."

"Not to worry, I'll see if I can get us out of this," Lockwood said, stepping ahead of the others. "I know a lieutenant in the NPAF. Maybe we're lucky and it's him, or whoever this is knows him."

"Right, let's see you use that fancy mouth of yours to get us out of trouble," Rainbow said. "It's sure seemed to work so far hasn't it?"

Lockwood gave Rainbow a dejected frown. "Really now, this isn't my fault. Just a misunderstanding, I'm sure."

"Misunderstanding, right."

"I don't like the look of this," Twilight said, shaking her head. "I'm with Applejack. I've got a bad feeling."

Flathoof put his hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Relax, Miss Sparkle, I'm sure Lockwood will think of something."

Twilight could make out the group of approaching ponies clearly now. There were five ponies total. The four at the front wore sleek, black armored uniforms covering them from head to hoof, and red visors on their helmets hid their faces. All four of them were tall, thick earth ponies, built with enough muscle that Twilight was certain any one of them could give even Big Macintosh a run for his money.

The fifth, a pegasus, wore the same uniform as the other four, though he did not wear a helmet as they did. Scars dotted his face, his jawline was square, and his leaner build barely filled out his uniform. His position in the center made it obvious he was the squad leader, and when they approached the other ponies, he took position at the front of the formation.

He removed a small electronic device from his pocket and examined it briefly, then turned back to his men. "Prepare to take the unauthorized citizens into custody."

"See? Totally called it." Rainbow glared at Lockwood. "This is all *your* fault."

Lockwood coughed into his hoof. "Yes, well... pardon me, my good—"

"This is not open to negotiation," the squad leader said. "I have my orders, and I'm to take in nine unauthorized ponies."

"Wait, nine?" Lockwood asked. "Shouldn't that number be smaller?"

“Yeah, hang on a tick, you’re saying *my* passport is unauthorized?” Tick Tock huffed. “I just used it three weeks ago! I’ve been using it for years. Passports don’t *expire*.”

“I’m a captain in the NPPD, so my passport is perfectly valid too,” Flathoof said, stepping forward. “These mares are here with me under my authority. Surely we can work something out?”

“I’m afraid that passports do, in fact, expire under extraneous circumstances.” The squad leader presented his device, and pointed at Tick Tock with one wing. “According to my information, Miss Tock’s passport expired two days ago.” He then pointed his wing at Flathoof. “And Mister Flathoof’s expired last night. Very strange that the check-in station didn’t catch those. Hmm. Must be a technical problem.”

“It’s *Captain* Flathoof,” Flathoof said, snorting through his nose.

The pegasus sneered at Flathoof, sizing him up. “I’d watch your tone, *Mister* Flathoof. You’re out of uniform, you’ll notice? And besides, it says here that I’m also to take you into custody for the murder of one Officer Snapshot.”

Flathoof turned white. “Ex-excuse me?”

“I don’t like involving myself in NPPD affairs, but orders are orders so there you have it. Terrible shame, one corrupt cop killing another.”

Flathoof stomped both hooves on the ground and took a few steps towards the pegasus. “How *dare* you! I saw the pony responsible for it, and I tried to take him in! I informed the station of it while I was—”

“Fleeing from the scene, according to them,” the pegasus dismissed. “And now here you are, trying to leave the city. Awfully suspicious circumstances, you see. Now, I’ll say this again: I have my orders, you’re all coming with me, and that’s the end of it.”

Flathoof glared. “Under whose authority?”

“And who exactly *are* you?” Tick Tock asked.

“Commander Jetstream, New Pandemonium Armed Forces Special Ops Unit Omega. Under whose authority is none of your concern.” He turned back to his men. “Enough chatter. Take them in.”

One of the soldiers stepped towards Flathoof, until a bright purple glow unceremoniously lifted the soldier off his hooves into the air. The soldier dangled in the air and flailed his limbs.

Twilight stepped forward, her horn glowing bright. “No.”

Jetstream raised an eyebrow. “No? You don’t seem to understand the gravity of the situation here, Miss Sparkle. You’re under arrest, and right now, you’re resisting arrest. That will make things very difficult on you and your friends.”

“I said, *no*,” she said. “My friends and I have gotten too far to stop now. We’re too close to getting out of this city once and for all to care about your rules and regulations anymore. We’re not going anywhere. Not as long as I have anything to say about it.”

The commander’s expression soured. “So be it.” He turned to his men again. “Remember your orders. Targets one through six are to be taken in *alive*.”

The other three soldiers stepped forward, but Twilight stared them down, her face a mask of unflinching resolve. Flathoof stood firmly beside her, and was joined by Applejack and Rainbow.

Rainbow chuckled and spread her wings proudly, scuffing at the metal ground beneath and snapping her goggles over her eyes. “About time we get to playing by *my* kind of rules. I never knew you had it in you, Twi.”

Twilight smiled. “I just figured, ‘what would a brave pony like Rainbow Dash do?’ It wouldn’t be the first time it got me out of trouble.”

Applejack cracked her neck, adjusted her hat, and licked her lips. “C’mon, Rainbow, let’s see what kinda fight y’all got in ya’. Fifty bits says I take down more than y’all.”

Rainbow laughed. “You’re on, AJ.”

Twilight’s horn ceased glowing, letting the hapless soldier drop and fall into its squadmates. Applejack and Rainbow leapt into the fray as Twilight galloped back towards the Gate wall. “You guys keep them busy, *I’m* going to open the Gate back up.”

“Oh no you don’t!” yelled Jetstream. He flapped his wings and took off after Twilight like a bullet.

Flathoof leapt up and tackled Jetstream in mid-air. “Not so fast, flyboy!”

“Stupid police *dog!*”

Jetstream reached for his sidearm. Just as he reached it, Flathoof stomped on his leg, causing him to jerk it to the side several yards away.

“Aw buck me.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” Flathoof turned to his side and called, “Go on, Miss Sparkle! We’ve got this covered!”

“Rarity! Tick Tock! Come with me! We've got a Gate to open!” Twilight commanded as she sprinted past the other ponies.

The other two unicorns nodded and galloped off behind Twilight. Lockwood followed them closely, desperately trying to bring Fluttershy, who was clinging to his leg, to safety. Pinkie Pie, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen; Twilight was deeply concerned, and hoped it was just Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie, ready to pop out of nowhere when needed.

They came further down the corridor and reached the massive Gate door. Twilight surveyed the Gate, seeking out some manner of weakpoint.

Finding none, she turned to Rarity. “Rarity, do you remember that spell you cast with Tick Tock the other day, to assist her with her shield?”

Rarity nodded. “Of course, darling. A surprisingly simple spell, after the fact.”

“Well, I need you two to use it on me, to reinforce my magic so I can try to pry this thing open.” Twilight planted her hooves and lit up her horn.

Rarity stepped forward and did the same. “Certainly, dear, that’s—”

“Not going to work,” Tick Tock interrupted, stepping in between the two and pushing them apart.

Twilight balked. She shook her head and narrowed her eyes at Tick Tock. “Excuse me?”

“It won't work, simple as that.” Tick Tock shrugged. “You’re in over your head, Sparkle.”

Twilight smirked, though she was curious about why Tick Tock was disagreeing with her. “Um, hello? Element of Magic here? I know the Gate looks heavy Tick Tock, but—”

Tick Tock rolled her eyes. “*Weight* has nothing to do with it. You’ve shown you’re bloody well more powerful than any other unicorn I know, and I'm certain you'd get it to budge if we all chipped in. But, the problem is that the Gate is protected by an anti-magic field. If a particularly powerful spell could just tear the Gate open, it would be pretty ineffective as a protective measure, would it not?”

Twilight smiled and took another step forward. “Oh, is that the problem? I happen to know a few spells that should break through any enchantments on the Gate. I think a little dispel magic will do the trick.”

“Use magic, on an anti-magic field, to remove the magic-resistance from the thing its protecting, so that you can cast magic on it. Yup, sounds bloody brilliant. A real cracker, that one. I should be taking notes.”

Twilight stomped a hoof. “What is *with* you? Why is every idea I have so stupid to you, huh? I don’t see *you* coming up with any ideas. In fact, all of *this*—” She gestured around her. “Wasn’t even *your* plan in the first place, it was Lockwood’s and Flathoof’s! And getting us out of the world was Doctor Time Turner’s idea, not yours.”

Tick Tock glared. “Cute. You want a bloody idea? Here’s one: take that, ‘oh I’m the Element of Magic and I’m so special’ crap, and shove it right up your—”

“*Ahem!*” Rarity interrupted. “Ladies *please*, this is no time to bicker and argue. We need to get *out* of this mess, and quickly, so if I *may* suggest that you two put your differences aside for a moment? I’m certain the others, who are busy risking themselves back there, would *not* appreciate us wasting time.”

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Applejack wrestled one of the soldiers to the ground. She brought a hoof down into his visor. Once. Twice.

His partner, whom she’d managed to take down earlier, tackled Applejack from behind. They rolled, and he pinned her. He lifted a hoof to punch her. She grabbed his other hoof and twisted, knocking him aside, then rolled away to get some distance.

Every time she managed to get one of the two out of the action for a moment, he’d be back up in no time at all.

“Don’t y’all *ever* run outta energy?” She panted, staring them down. “Golly, all that military trainin’ must be pretty dang good.”

The two soldiers wordlessly advanced on her, flanking her.

“Huh. Quiet too. Don’t y’all say anythin’ either?”

No response. The left soldier galloped forward to attack.

\*\*\*

Rainbow took advantage of being able to fly. The only advantage it provided was being able to put distance between herself and her opponents and get a chance to breathe. She couldn't rest long, though. One of her two opponents decided that she wasn't worth his trouble, and turned and began cantering off towards Applejack.

"Oh no you don't!" she called, sweeping down and kicking the soldier in the back of the head.

The soldier tripped over and slammed hard into the metal floor.

Rainbow went to continue her assault. The other soldier leapt at her. She rolled out of the way and swept her leg around to kick him in the face. He stumbled back, then came in again.

"Man, you guys don't mess around." Rainbow fluttered up out of his reach. "That kick should've done some real damage." She rubbed her hoof and winced as she touched a sore spot. "Sure did damage to me. The hay is that armor made out of?"

The soldier turned away from her and galloped off towards Applejack, so she swept down and kicked him in the side. He tumbled over. She turned in time to avoid getting tackled by the other soldier, swooping back into the air again.

She groaned. "Dealing with you two at once bites. Where in the *hay* is Pinkie Pie?!"

\*\*\*

Twilight grunted. "Hmph. Perhaps there's a way to open the Gate without magic?"

"I was getting to that," Tick Tock explained. She started looking around. "If we can find the maintenance panel, I suppose I could try to hack it. I'm no expert, but I can improvise."

"Hack?" Twilight asked, tilting her head. "As in, with an axe? We don't have an axe, Tick Tock."

Tick Tock sighed and held the bridge of her nose. "I really wish I wasn't the only pony here with any knowledge of techno-magic. Come on, just help me find the bloody panel. It should be nearby."

"Is this it?" asked Pinkie.

The earth pony stood near the wall, pointing at a point on it.

Tick Tock did a double take. "Pinkie Pie? Where in the—" She shook her head. "Nevermind. No, Pinkie, that's not it."

Pinkie tilted her head. "It isn't?"

"No, that's just a blank wall," Tick Tock said.

Pinkie's head tilted further, until it was nearly upside-down. "It is?"

Tick Tock groaned. "I really don't have time for this. Look, if you're not going to bloody help, just—"

"Are you *sure* this isn't it?" Pinkie asked, putting her hooves on her hips. "Because, when I touch it, it does *this*."

She touched it. The wall hissed loudly, then slid to the side to reveal a hidden panel filled with an assortment of buttons and wires.

"See? I thought it was weird that the wall would slide out and show off all sorts of techie stuff, and then you went and said something about a panel. So hey! This looked like a panel to me!"

Tick Tock's eyes widened, and she hustled over. She looked into the panel, rapidly examining everything. "This is it, you found it! But when did you... where did... how are... *what?*"

"Guess that just leaves 'why' and 'who', doesn't it?" Pinkie giggled, batting Tick Tock's nose. "Like I said to Dashie, *nothing* gets past Sherlock Pie! Speaking of Dashie, I'd better get back to helping her out. She's a little overwhelmed at the moment. Glad I could help you guys too, though! Toodles!"

The pink party pony was off in a blur back towards the scuffle behind them.

Tick Tock's face contorted in confusion. "What in the bloody *hell* just happened?" She shook her head. "Whatever. I think I'm going to just stop questioning how that ridiculous pony works."

She leaned in to examine the various wires and switches. "Hmm..." she mused. "This shouldn't be too difficult. Sparkle! Over here!"

"Yes, O Knowledgeable One?" Twilight asked. "How may I be of assistance?"

Tick Tock ignored Twilight's tone. "I'm detecting a number of magical energy conduits here, but I can't tell them apart from the electrical ones. I'm guessing there's a proper potent veil

spell on them, but you should be able to pierce it. Do you know a tracer spell?"

Twilight puffed out her chest. "A tracer spell? That's a piece of cake, I learned that in—"

"A simple 'yes' or 'no' will do."

Twilight deflated, and breathed in sharply through her nostrils. "Yes. I know one."

"Good. Your magic is stronger than mine, so it should be able to identify which is which. Highlight them for me, so I can redirect the magic elsewhere and try to lower the anti-magic field."

"Ohhh, so *that's* why my dispel wouldn't work. The barrier is being kept constantly refreshed by machinery? Fascinating stuff..." Twilight mused, squeezing herself in next to Tick Tock. "I'd love a chance to study—"

Tick Tock rolled her eyes. "Sparkle."

"Yes?"

"Tracer spell, please."

Twilight turned red. "Oh... right. Sorry."

Twilight's horn glowed bright pink, and her magic wrapped around all the wires inside the panel. Several of the once black wires stayed black, while others gained either a red, blue, or yellow glow.

"There we go," Tick Tock said, lighting up her own horn. "Time to get to work."

Rarity came up behind them. "Well then, if you ladies are ready to act *civil* and don't need my assistance, it might be best if I returned to the others. They could likely use some help."

"That's fine Rarity, we've got it covered here," Twilight said. "Please, be careful?"

"*Darling*, if there's one thing I'm good at, it's being careful," Rarity said. "Try not to strangle one another before you're finished, hmm?"

\*\*\*

Rarity galloped towards the scuffle. She could see Rainbow and Pinkie each handling two of the soldiers on their own just fine, but Applejack was still dealing with two by herself.



Applejack took heavy breaths after kicking one of the two away, only to be assaulted by the other from the rear.

“Hang on, Applejack, darling!” Rarity shouted.

Rarity latched her magic onto the rear hoof of the soldier who’d just tackled Applejack, and yanked him sharply backwards. She took a sharp breath as she tried to keep him up.

Applejack saw the opportunity and took it, bucking the soldier in the chest. He flew out of Rarity’s magical grip and slammed into the wall.

Applejack took a deep breath. “Phew...” She trotted over to Rarity. “Thanks, Rarity. I appreciate it.”

“Ugh, all this roughhousing is just so... *uncouth*,” Rarity said, sticking out her tongue. “Ech. I really don’t agree with any of this.”

Applejack chuckled. “Well, y’all be sure ya let that soldier fella know ya don’t like fightin’.”

\*\*\*

Pinkie bounced excitedly over to the soldier Rainbow had just slammed into the wall.

“Need a hoof?” she asked, offering him a hoof to help him get up.

He took it, then spasmed violently as an electrical surge shot through his body.

Pinkie giggled and showed her hoof to the pony as he slumped to the ground. “Oopsie! Forgot to take my joy buzzer off. My bad!” She waited for the soldier to get back up.

He failed to do so. Instead, the joints in his armor started emitting puffs of smoke.

“Um... uh-oh...” Pinkie gulped, backing away. “I’m just gonna... let you rest, okay? Bye!”

She streaked off in the opposite direction, and saw Rainbow flutter away from one of the other soldiers. A perfect opportunity to help.

She pounced on his back, grabbing onto his head and putting her hooves over his visor.

“Guess who?!” she cheered. “Go on, Dashie! I’ve got ‘im! *Grrr!*”

Rainbow smirked, swept around, and delivered a swift kick to the soldier’s midsection.

Said midsection catapulted several meters away. His head remained tight in Pinkie's grip, and she fell to the ground with it in her hooves.

Pinkie looked at it, then looked at Rainbow.

Rainbow looked at it, then looked at Pinkie.

"Aaaahhh!" they both screamed.

Pinkie starting shaking the head in Rainbow's face. "Dashie! What did you do?! Look what you did! What did you do?!"

"Me?!" Rainbow blurted, stepping away nervously. "Y-you were the one holding his head!"

"I was?" Pinkie asked.

She blinked, and looked again at what she was holding.

"Oh! I was! Ahhh! I'm holding a head!" she yelled. "Get it away, get it away!"

She shook it violently, then chucked it as hard as she could away from her.

It hit Rarity square in the face. "Oof!"

The unicorn lost control of her magic, flinging the soldier she was holding with her magic into the wall. He smashed into it head-first, crumbling to the ground, his face shield shattered.

Rarity shuffled her hooves around in a panic and quickly put them over her mouth. "By Celestia! Pinkie Pie!" she yelled, wheeling around and glaring at the earth pony. "*What* did you *do?! And look what you made me do!*"

"I swear, it was self defense!" Rainbow exclaimed. "You all saw it! I didn't do nothin'!"

"We're innocent, we swear!" Pinkie wailed, putting her hooves together and planting herself at Rarity's hooves.

Applejack grunted as she shouldered one of the other two soldiers in the face. "If y'all have time ta chat, maybe y'all have time to *help!*"

"R-right!" Rainbow swept around in a circle and zipped towards the other soldier that Applejack was dealing with.

Rarity did a double take as she looked down at the head of the soldier. "Hold on a moment." She lifted it up with her magic, examining it. "Wires? How odd. They look like the same kind in that maintenance panel back there."

"Wires?" Pinkie asked, popping up from behind Rarity. "That's silly. Ponies don't have *wires* in their necks. That's silly. You're silly, Rarity."

"Look," Rarity said, holding up the head so Pinkie could see. "There, see? Wires."

"Zombie! Zombie pony!" Pinkie screeched, grabbing Rarity's face and pointing rapidly at the pony she and Rainbow had just dealt with.

The headless pony slowly rose to its hooves, and immediately bolted off towards Rainbow's back.

"Dashie! Look out!"

"Huh?" Rainbow turned in time. "Holy—" She zipped upwards.

The headless pony sailed underneath her and crashed into the soldier Rainbow had been dealing with.

Pinkie scratched her head. "Wait a second, that's not a zombie. Zombies die if you remove their heads. That's like, Rule One in *every* zombie movie. That, and zombies don't have wires. They have guts, blood, rotten flesh—"

"Pinkie *please*." Rarity continued looking at the head she held in her magic. "Wires, hmm? I suppose it's some sort of machine, and it runs on this 'techno-magic', like the gadgetry Twilight and Tick Tock are fiddling around with back there." She huffed and canceled her spell, dropping the head to the ground. "They're not living, breathing ponies, that much is for certain."

Pinkie bit her tongue and tapped her head for a moment. Then, she slapped her hooves together. "Aha! *That's* why my shock buzzer made that other pony act all weird! These ponies aren't ponies at all! They're robots! Cyborgs! Androids!"

Rainbow chuckled darkly. "Oh man. This is gonna be *fun*."

Rarity leapt in surprise and wheeled on the pegasus that had snuck up behind her. "Rainbow! Heavens, dear, you scared me half to *death*! Don't surprise me like that."

She cleared her throat. "But seriously, darling, fun? This is *combat* we're talking about here. Try and take this a little seriously, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow laughed. "Oh, I'm taking it seriously, I promise. Yo AJ!"

"A lil' busy!" Applejack shouted. She shifted her weight to get underneath the soldier she was grappling.

"These ponies aren't real ponies! They're robots or something! You know what that means?!"

Applejack turned to face Rainbow, then turned back to her opponent. "Well, I reckon it means I ain't need ta worry 'bout hurtin' no pony just tryin' ta do their job."

"That's what I'm talking about!" Rainbow cheered, barreling forward. "Time for me to *really* dish out the damage! Heads up!"

Applejack ducked. Rainbow tackled the earth pony's former opponent, using her velocity to sweep it up into the air.

Rainbow released it. The machine sailed for several dozen yards through the air, then crashed to the ground, snapping its legs clean off.

"Whoa nelly, y'all pegasi sure do fight dirty," Applejack blanched. "Remind me never ta pick a real fight with any o' y'all, yeah? I like my legs."

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Flathoof shifted his weight to get out of Jetstream's stranglehold, flipping the pegasus up and over him and slamming him on the ground.

Jetstream twisted his hind legs up and clamped them on Flathoof's neck. He reached off to the side, scrambling to put his hoof on his sidearm.

Then, his eyes widened and his grip loosened.

Flathoof turned his head up to look. He saw one of Jetstream's soldiers sail over his head, landing behind him. Its legs snapped clean off.

"Well now, I completely forgot about that," Flathoof said. "You NPAF folk use mechanical troops as frontline soldiers, don't you? I don't suppose *you're* a robot too?"

He headbutted Jetstream in the face while the pegasus was distracted.

"Son of a—" Jetstream swore, flinching as blood splattered from his nostril.

Flathoof laughed. "Guess not."

\*\*\*

Twilight watched anxiously as Tick Tock fiddled with one of the blue-highlighted wires in the main panel.

"Are you sure you can do this?" she asked.

Tick Tock huffed and wiped her brow with a hoof. "Relax, Sparkle. This isn't my first time sodding about with techno-magic."

She twisted the blue wire and connected it to one of the red ones, causing the stream to start turning a bright purple. The wire sparkled and hissed, emitting multi-colored sparks.

"Got it!" she cheered. "I think I got it!"

The Gate walls made a resounding screeching noise, so loud that Twilight and Tick Tock had to hold their ears. When the screeching stopped, a loud clang was heard, followed by a low whirring noise. The walls started moving inwards.

A siren blared and alarm lights lit up all along the corridor, filling it with red and orange lights.

*"Attention! Sector Nine trash compactor process has been activated. All citizens in Sectors Eight and Ten are advised to remain clear of Sector Nine. Those in Sector Nine are advised to vacate the area immediately. Repeat—"*

"Uh... I don't got it," Tick Tock muttered. "Oh bugger."

Twilight glared daggers. "Some idea *this* was! You're gonna get us all killed!"

"This is no time to panic, Sparkle!"

"I heard the word 'compactor', and the walls are closing in!" Twilight grabbed the sides of Tick Tock's face. "This is the perfect time to panic!"

Tick Tock slapped Twilight's hooves away. "Just keep that Tracer on, I can fix this!"

Tick Tock licked her lips. She twisted a red wire into an empty slot that was leaking blue magic. She connected a yellow wire to a red one, then sliced another red one and attached one half into a blue slot, the other into a yellow slot.

Nothing seemed to be happening at all.

“Why isn’t this sodding thing working?!” Tick Tock spat.

“Is it okay if I panic now?”

“Dammit *dammit dammit!* This bloody piece of *junk!*”

She slammed her hoof down hard on the panel’s rear wall.

It whirred loudly, and all the wires that had been mixed immediately reacted. They glowed brighter than ever, and the colors intermingled until the entire light spectrum exploded out of the panel box.

All of the alarm lights turned bright blue.

*“Warning! Warning! Attention maintenance staff. The anti-magic field on the Sector Nine Gate has suffered a catastrophic mechanical malfunction. Immediate attention is required. Repeat—”*

“Aha! Ha ha *ha!* That did it! I’m a bloody genius!” Tick Tock cheered. She grabbed Twilight’s hoof and dragged her towards the Gate door, which had lost its subtle purple glow. “Come along then, Sparkle, it’s time to crack this thing open!”

“About time. Let’s get this show on the road,” Twilight said. She looked around and gulped when she noticed the walls were still closing in. “Oh dear. You didn’t shut off the trash compactor?”

Tick Tock chortled. “Stars no. It’ll buy us time after we escape. They’ll have to re-open the whole corridor to chase us, so we’ll only have to break through any soldiers outside.”

“Fantastic. Pressure’s on then.” Twilight took a deep breath. “Rarity!” she called behind her. “We’re gonna need a little help over here!”

Rarity turned and called back, “*Com-ing*. Let me just put this *down* first.”

Rarity canceled her spell, letting another of the struggling mechanical ponies fall several yards to the ground where it was set upon by a ferocious Pinkie Pie.

The pink party pony gleefully jabbed her joy buzzer into the back of the machine’s head, and held it there until the thing started to smoke.

Rarity trotted over to Twilight and Tick Tock’s position, settling in on Twilight’s left. “Okay

then, darlings, I'm ready whenever you are."

Tick Tock nodded and steeled herself on Twilight's right. "Right. Let's get this done proper, and we'll be out of this bleedin' city in no time."

Twilight stomped a hoof. "Okay then, on three. One."

Twilight lit her horn. Tick Tock and Rarity followed suit.

"Two."

A bright purple light flared up from in between them and flowed outward to illuminate the entire corridor.

"Three!"

Twilight fired a bolt of magical light directly at the Gate door, striking it in dead center. The light expanded out further and further, enshrouding the entire door in a light purple glow.

The Gate door groaned loudly, and the entire corridor trembled. Twilight's face contorted as she strained to push the two halves of the door apart in the middle. Beads of sweat streamed down her face, and her horn haphazardly shot off sparks in all direction. Tick Tock's and Rarity's horns did the same, until a bright light enveloped all three unicorns. Twilight opened her eyes to gauge her progress, and her eyes flared with magic of the purest white.

Twilight turned towards the others when the door had been cracked open wide enough to fit a few ponies safely through. "Everypony! Through the Gate! *Now!*"

Applejack bucked the remaining mechanical soldier away from her, slamming it into the wall. "Y'all heard Twilight, time ta mosey on outta here!" She started galloping towards the opening door. "C'mon Rainbow, let's get a move on!"

"C'mon, Dashie! Let's go!" Pinkie called, galloping off after Applejack.

Rainbow swept down and slammed the soldier back into the wall before it could get up. "I'll cover your back, you guys get going!"

Applejack and Pinkie corralled Lockwood and Fluttershy ahead of them towards the Gate door.

Applejack called back, "Flathoof! C'mon!"

Flathoof had Jetstream pinned on the ground. At Applejack's shouting, he shifted his

weight and brought his hoof down hard into the side of Jetstream's head, then turned and started galloping off towards the others.

Jetstream tripped him. "You're not going anywhere!"

He scrambled for his sidearm again, reached it, and slipped it over his hoof. His mouth split in a wide smile. He rolled over, aimed his weapon at Flathoof's retreating form.

"Booyah!"

Rainbow swept in and kicked him in the side of the head. He fired wildly as the gun was flung off his hoof. The bullet ricocheted off the wall and into the air. She swept over to it, snagging the brace in her teeth and circling off.

Jetstream sneered at Rainbow's trailing form, then turned back towards the three unicorns. He took flight and raced towards them.

"Hey! Don't you ever learn?" Rainbow struck him in the back with a kick. "You're not getting anywhere *near* Twilight, bucko."

Twilight struggled to keep the Gate open, but knew they needed to get moving. She turned behind her. "Okay girls, your turns next. I'll keep the Gate open so you two can get through."

Tick Tock panted. "Are you off your trolley? We can barely keep this bloody thing open as a *team*. What makes you—"

"Just do it! I'll hold it long enough for you all to get out, just *go!*"

"But—"

"It's best *not* to argue when she gets confident like that," Rarity said, dropping her spell. "Come along, Miss Tock, we need to get going."

Tick Tock nodded, dropped her spell, and followed close behind.

"Rainbow Dash! *Go!*" Twilight yelled.

Rainbow called back, "Had to keep you covered, Twi!"

The lightning-quick pegasus looped off the ground, dropping Jetstream's gun beside her in the process, and raced towards the Gate



Twilight's magic gave in, and the Gate screeched as metal slid against metal.

"Rainbow!" Twilight exclaimed, her magic faltering and her horn losing its glow. "I can't keep the Gate open!"

Rainbow scooped Twilight up in her hooves and bolted for the opening.

"We're gonna beat it Twi, don't worry!"

The door started to close in on them as they entered it.

"No!" Jetstream called, struggling to his hooves and into the air.

"Hurry, Rainbow!"

"I've got this!"

"We're not gonna make it!"

"We'll make it!"

"It's closing!"

"We're gonna—"

The Gate door slammed closed, flinging about shrapnel and debris as the halves struck together in a way they were never meant to.

Twilight and Rainbow crashed and tumbled into the metal ground on the other side.

Jetstream slammed face-first into the Gate. He worked to his hooves again, glaring upwards at the massive obstacle in his way. "Dammit! *Dammit!*" He slammed a hoof into the metal door.

He realized that the compactor system was still underway, and hustled over to the maintenance panel. He popped open a smaller panel inside it, then entered a code into the numerical pad there. Sector Nine's walls stopped moving in and began to move back out.

He stared back upwards at the obstacle. The gate doors had been slammed closed unnaturally and now stood slightly askew. He couldn't fit in the opening, and by the time he flew up and over, his targets would have gained too much distance for him to be of any use. His only hope was that the exterior security forces would stop them.

He slumped against the wall, trembling. "I am in so much trouble..."