

The Elements of Equestria  
Part 9

Twilight was warm and comfortable. The heavy blanket over her was pleasantly heated by the warmth of her own body. She shifted and was suddenly wide awake. Some pony was spooning her intimately. The lavender unicorn looked down. A yellow hoof was draped over her chest as she lay on her left side. Twilight turned her head and beheld Lemon Lime sleeping peacefully behind her. As she raised her head she felt a cold wetness on her cheek. Looking down she saw a small puddle of drool on the inflatable pillow underneath her head. She was contemplating how to rid herself of the offending puddle when she heard Rarity's voice ring out in the early dawn light.

"My goodness darling! You should have been named Huge Macintosh! I never knew you cared so much!" Rarity's comment was followed by a loud rustling and the sound of a tent being unzipped hurriedly, and somepony galloping away, followed by the sound of two ponies laughing quietly.

Twilight rolled her eyes, '*Oh good grief! Poor Big Mac.*' she thought. She levitated the heavy blanket off herself and slipped out from under Lemon Lime's hoof. Awkward though it was, Twilight had to admit, having somepony snuggling up to her was assuredly much warmer than the alternative. Twilight covered Lemon Lime back up with the blanket and unzipped their tent. The ground was covered in frost and the air had a stout chill to it. The fire had died down in the night, so she used a stick to rekindle the flames to life and added a little more wood.

Rarity and Sea Blue emerged from their tent, both carrying small shower-kits in their mouths and headed toward the stream in the meadow. Twilight had to strain to keep from snickering, but was surprised her white-coated friend was not more self-conscious. Rarity looked like she had French kissed a light socket. Her mane and tail were in a state of disarray that Twilight was definitely not envious of. Realizing her own state must have been close to matching Rarity's, Twilight dashed back into her tent and retrieved her brush. A distant squeal, told her that Rarity had seen her reflection in the stream.

By the time she re-emerged from the tent, Applejack was already up and sitting by the fire warming her hooves,  
"Mornin' Twilight." she greeted cheerfully, "Did ya sleep well? Ah just put on a pot of coffee. The grounds were in Live Wire's saddle-bags," looking around, Applejack whispered, "Just don't tell Pinkie."

"Don't tell me what?" Pinkie Pie asked suddenly appearing next to Applejack, "Ooh, is that coffee?"

"Ya can't have none Pinkie, sorry." Applejack said firmly.

"That's O.K. Applejack. I packed some hot cocoa." Pinkie said pulling out several packets from

nowhere.

Dr. Mend slowly crawled out of the tent,  
"Did somepony mention the great elixir of life?"

"Huh?" Applejack asked.

"He means the coffee." Twilight supplied.

Pinkie Pie went down into a crouch, tail straight up in the air behind her, and inched her way toward what she had dubbed 'the pegasi tent'. She slowly unzipped the tent flap with her teeth and peeked inside. Unable to resist a look, the others crept up and peered over Pinkie's shoulder. From what they could tell from the shapes under the blankets, Fluttershy was laying on her left side, legs wrapped tightly around Trooper holding him close. Trooper lay on his right, facing the custard colored pegasus. Rainbow Dash took the cake. She not only had both her left hooves draped over Trooper, but had rolled almost completely onto him during the night. She had her head lying on his shoulder and was chewing on his left ear, while mumbling softly to herself in her sleep. She clutched him like he was a cherished stuffed toy. The gathering of ponies looking over Pinkie's shoulder took several steps back, hooves to mouths to keep from laughing out loud.

Pinkie, on the other hoof, sighed and let out a loud,  
"Aww, that's so sweet!"

Fluttershy stirred and cracked open her eyes. She looked around and saw Rainbow Dash. Smiling warmly, she carefully pulled her hooves out from under Rainbow Dash and inched her way out from under the covers then crept out of the tent. She shook herself out and stretched her wings daintily, then headed over to the fire. The other ponies gathered around the fire once more. Applejack picked up the cook pot and carried it off toward the stream.

Dr. Mend shook his head as if clearing something from his mind, then dashed over to the side of the tent where his saddle-bags were. Removing a small bottle, he headed down to the stream leaving Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Twilight alone by the fire. A shuffle from behind her made Twilight look back. Lemon Lime staggered out of the tent and shook himself off, then began stretching in all sorts of odd directions. He finished stretching and lay down on the ground and curled his hind legs up and over his head. Keeping his legs in the same position, he used his front hooves to push himself off the ground, up and down in a repetitive motion. He slowly lowered himself and lay flat on his stomach arching his back down toward the ground as he pushed up with his front hooves with his hind legs stretched out straight behind himself. Straightening his posture he began doing push-ups.

Pinkie Pie suddenly appeared beside him wearing a sports head band and had a whistle around her neck suspended by a red lanyard,  
"1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . "

After Pinkie counted to fifty, Lemon Lime got back up on all four legs and walked around to his saddle-bags.

He returned levitating a small canister and plopped himself down next to the fire, "Good morning everypony. I've got oatmeal here. We can flavor it however you want. Honey, berries, raisins, cinnamon, sugar, saccharin, butter, or plain. Whatever you like. I think we should try to hurry up so we can get moving soon. I figure we should stick to something simple for now, until we get the hang of having breakfast and cleaning up quickly. I mean we could . . . "

"Um, Live Wire." Fluttershy addressed softly.

"If we wanted to, but then . . . " he continued obliviously.

"Hey, Live Wire!" Pinkie Pie chimed in.

"I suppose we could . . . " he continued on.

"Lemon Lime." Twilight addressed softly, placing a hoof on the exuberant unicorn's shoulder.

Lemon Lime clammed up instantly and turned to the purple unicorn, "Yes?"

"It's alright, we get it." Twilight said.

"Oh, okay." he said cheerfully.

Applejack and Dr. Mend returned shortly. The former placed the cook pot on the grill over the fire and let the water heat. Dr. Mend put his bottle back and removed a long-handled, curved brush from his saddle-bags. He clamped his teeth onto the handle, which caused the brush to curl up over his head, and worked his jaw back and forth, brushing out his lengthy mane. Sea Blue returned, looking decidedly more together and put away his shower kit. Rarity was still absent but Big Macintosh returned and sat down next to the fire as the ponies prepared to have breakfast.

Trooper awoke with a start and saw Rainbow Dash lying on top of him.

Keeping his voice quiet, he addressed his multicolored bedmate, "Do get off Rainbow Dash! You look like a foal!" he hissed in a low voice.

Dash stirred and blinked. Seeing Trooper staring at her, with his ear in her mouth, she spit it out, leaving it dripping with gooey spittle. The ear flopped down and hit Trooper's face with a wet splat. Trooper grimaced and whipped his head to the side, dislodging the ear for a moment before gravity took over and it flopped back onto his face once more.

He blew out a breath and looked up at Rainbow Dash with raised eyebrows,

"What exactly are you waiting for, may I ask?"

Rainbow Dash drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, she spoke quietly,  
"What were you thinking yesterday? You could have been killed!"

Trooper quietly harrumphed,  
"As if you care?"

Rainbow Dash didn't budge an inch so Trooper figured she wanted a real answer,  
"If you must know, I was not thinking at all! I reacted, nothing more! In retrospect, I am partly ashamed of myself! I am supposed to guard you and Fluttershy, but I was there and I saw it so I reacted! Are you satisfied?"

Rainbow Dash pursed her lips, but nodded and shifted her weight off the pegasus stallion beneath her. She exited the tent and instantly took to the air, flying around and performing some aerial stunts and tricks to loosen up. Trooper grunted and tried to rise, but he was too weak and the bandages were stiff.

He exhaled heavily and addressed the open air,  
"I could really use some assistance here, anypony?"

"Coming!" yelled Sea Blue.

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Sweetie Belle had never before fully appreciated just how much work Cheerilee did before school even started. She, Patch, and their teacher had arrived at the school house more than an hour early. Cheerilee had opened up the classroom and let the fillies in. Sweetie Belle had never seen the classroom before school. The place was empty and lifeless, with walls blank and lights dim in the early morning. Cheerilee set right to work and had Sweetie Belle and Patch help her set up for the day. They put up posters, changed events on the class calendar, wiped down each desk, and clapped erasers. They finished with ten minutes to spare before the first bell so Cheerilee had Sweetie Belle gather Patch's new books.

Sweetie Belle walked around the classroom pointing out each filly or colt's seat, starting at the back and working her way forward,  
"And in the first row is Archer, Twist, and . . ."

"Hey Sweetie Belle, who's your new friend?" Scootaloo asked walking in.

The little orange pegasus walked up to her desk in the rear of the classroom and began pulling her books out of her saddle-bags and onto the desk top,  
"Come on, what's her name?"

"Scootaloo, this is Patch. Patch, this is my friend Scootaloo. She's one of the Cutie Mark

Crusaders." Sweetie Belle introduced, gesturing to the pegasus filly with her left hoof.

Patch smiled mischievously, Scootaloo had not yet seen her 'blank eye' due to the angle she was standing, she walked behind the other filly and stuck out her right hoof, "Hi Scootaloo."

Scootaloo turned around and began to shake Patch's hoof, then stopped dead, "Whoa," she said surprised, "What happened to your eye?"

"It's a mutation!" Patch said, "I can see right through my eye lid."

Sweetie Belle face-hoofed, "Come on, Patch. Tell her the truth."

"Aww, you're no fun Sweetie Belle." Patch said giggling, "It's just the way I was born. How did you like the line though? I've been practicing it for Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. Sweetie Belle said they were bullies."

Scootaloo's face contorted into the single most mischievous, most devious, most cutely evil expression you could ever imagine, "It's perfect." she purred.

"Thath's tho cool!" Twist said entering the class room.

"What is Twist?" Applebloom asked following the lisping filly.

Patch turned toward the newest filly to enter the room, "My missing eye." she said casually.

"Oh, wow!" Applebloom exclaimed, "That really is cool!"

"I've got an idea!" Sweetie Belle said eyes growing wide, "Quick! Does anypony have a small ball, about the same size as an eye?"

"Ah do!" Applebloom said, reaching into her saddle-bags she removed a baseball.

"Perfect! Does anypony have any markers?" Sweetie Belle continued.

"Yeth, right here." Twist added.

"Perfect!" Sweetie Belle said rubbing her hooves together.

The four other fillies got the idea then got right to work, all giggling conspiratorially.

Class was due to start in two minutes. Everypony had arrived except for the two bullies

who always waited till the last second to come in. Patch had pulled her mane in front of her blank eye and covered up her horn so her magic couldn't be seen, and then had levitated the fake eye underneath Diamond Tiara's seat before class. Only Patch, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, Twist, and Applebloom knew about the plan, the rest of the class was utterly unprepared. Finally the two bullies made their appearance and took their seats. Cheerilee closed the door and began taking roll call.

She cycled through each name, then proceeded with other matters, "Come on up here, Patch." she said.

Patch, acting shy and nervous, slowly walked up to the front of the class room and turned beside Cheerilee, the teacher continued, "Class, this is Patch. She's a new student here and I want you all to treat her like you treat each other."

Silver Spoon blew some quiet raspberries and sighed, "Look, another blank flank." she said out loud.

The whole class heard the comment, but chose to ignore it. Patch smiled when Cheerilee asked her to go around and introduce herself to everypony. She began with the front row, then moved to the second row.

She stopped in front of Silver Spoon and extended her hoof, "Hi, I'm Patch."

Silver Spoon sighed and rolled her eyes, "I heard Cheerilee the first time, you know blank flank."

"And I heard her tell me to introduce myself to everypony, rich witch." Patch said smiling.

The students giggled at the witty jab; Cheerilee's voice rang out softly from the front, "That wasn't very nice Patch. Nor was what you said Silver Spoon. Please behave girls."

Patch continued on to Applebloom then to Diamond Tiara, "Hi . . ." she began extending her hoof.

"You're Patch, yeah I know. I'm not deaf." Diamond Tiara said in a bored tone.

"Diamond Tiara, be nice to Patch." Cheerilee said.

Patch turned to the teacher, "That's alright Miss Cheerilee. I've got this."

"That's good . . . What?" Cheerilee caught what Patch said just as Diamond Tiara spoke again.

"Why are you hiding half your face? Are you really that ugly?" she asked maliciously.

"Nope," Patch said pulling her mane out of her face with a hoof, "I'm just hiding this."

Diamond Tiara's face went pure white, she looked horrified,  
"W . . . what happened to you? Where's your eye?"

"Right here." Patch said levitating the fake eye out from Diamond Tiara's desk and right in front of her face.

Diamond Tiara's eyes focused on the object in front of her in utter disbelief, lips trembling like Jell-O.

Back in the Library, far from the school house, Spike was startled awake by the loudest, most terrified, blood-curdling scream he had ever heard.

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Valiant was convinced that Surf & Turf had an ongoing death wish. He looked up at the line strung across the gorge in front of him and swallowed hard. The line looked too thin and the gorge looked too deep. He wasn't afraid of heights, but he was definitely afraid of being terribly mangled by a long fall onto razor sharp rocks.

Surf & Turf removed a pair of odd looking devices from his saddle bags and passed one to Valiant,  
"It's like destiny was watching out for you or something dude. I have this second roller in case the first one breaks. Just got it made right before I came out here."

Valiant couldn't help but wonder about the intelligence of his companion, '*What use would he have for a second if the first broke?*' he looked over the edge of the gorge, '*He'd be too dead to use it.*'

His thoughts were interrupted by Surf & Turf talking again,  
"Now, I know what you're thinking dude, 'How could I use the second if the first one broke?' right?" he asked before answering his own question, "My hang glider is telescopic. It's this weird looking contraption on my back here. I just press a button and it folds right out, so even if the first roller breaks, in mid line, I'll still be alive enough to use the second one. Well, once I climb all the way back up anyway."

Valiant shook his head, '*Was he reading my mind?*' he wondered.

"Naw dude, I just get impressions sometimes; almost like there's this weirdo bubble above your head that displays your inner monologue. It's just something I do." Surf & Turf said shrugging.

"Ooooookkkkkkaaaaaayyyyyy." Valiant said, feeling a little like his personal space had just

somehow been violated.

"Here dude, let me show you how to use this thing." Surf said, "You put one hoof through each one of these holes here and make sure the roller is above your back. Then you take the roller in your mouth and latch it to the line. Like this bro."

Surf & Turf slipped the first one on and took the roller in his mouth then proceeded to lean up against the tree the zip-line was attached to. He reached his neck up and placed the roller onto the line, then flipped closed a tight-fitting metal panel on a hinge and pulled down on a pivot, securing it.

"See dude, this way, if you get stuck, you just pump your legs up and down, to get you going again. The up and down motion should dislodge the rope and rollers and get you moving. The panel keeps you from knocking yourself off, heh, no pun intended bro. Get it, 'knock yourself off' like suicide and 'knock yourself off' like falling." the neon pony laughed.

Valiant couldn't help but comment,  
"Are you alright in the head? Are you sure your name shouldn't be Death Wish?"

Surf turned to face his new friend and scratched his chin,  
"You know dude, it's amazing how many ponies ask me that." he shrugged, "Oh well," and with that he kicked off and began sliding down the zip-line, screaming, "Cowabunga!"

Valiant watched in amazement, *'That nut actually seems to be enjoying it!'* he thought.

Surf & Turf splayed out his legs and began to spin wildly,  
"Dude! You gotta try this!"

"You're insane." Valiant said under his breath, "And yet I'm following you."

Valiant leaned up on the tree the zip-line was attached to, and connected the roller just like Surf & Turf showed him. He looked back and watched as the neon Earth pony speedily approached the tree which held the other end of the line, rotating all the while like a helicopter blade. Surf & Turf whooped once more just before he hit the tree. Valiant could hear the impact from across the gorge. The neon colored pony's body went slack and he just hung there, like a limp rag-doll.

Valiant waited for any signs of life, but saw none; acting quickly, he kicked off hoping to get to his new friend and help him, if he was still alive,  
"Hold on Surf!" he called hoarsely, "I'm coming!"

As Valiant swung out over the gorge, he forced his mind to empty, focusing on his friend. After a brief moment more, the brightly-colored Earth pony raised his head and looked up. Surf's face registered shock and disbelief as he watched Valiant come zipping toward him. The earth pony rotated and planted his back legs on the ground, then reached up and pulled the roller off



the line as quickly as he could.

Valiant slid right up and smacked into the tree with a resounding thump. The royal blue pegasus was pleasantly surprised to discover that Surf & Turf had attached a thick cushion to the tree trunk. The thing was almost the same color as the bark of the tree and so had been all but invisible from the far side. He squirmed for a minute then planted his hooves and detached himself from the line.

Surf & Turf walked up to Valiant shaking his head,  
"Dude, that was seriously un-cool. You could have hit me. I'm an adrenaline junky and all but, dang! We could have totally broken some serious boneage there bro."

Valiant lowered his front end and eyed his friend oddly,  
"You went all limp when you hit the tree. I thought you had hurt yourself."

"Naw dude, I was just dizzy from all the spinning, which was, by the way, totally wicked. I've had way more than my fair share of busted bones and everything before. I try to play it as safe as possible while still enjoying the rush." Surf said.

"So should I take this harness off or leave it on?" Valiant asked.

Surf & Turf smiled hugely,  
"You should totally leave it on bro; we've got several more lines to zip before the day is done. We're actually making much better time than I had anticipated. At this rate, we should reach New Yoke by sundown tomorrow. Come on dude, we're burning sunlight here."

"What about lunch?" Valiant asked.

Surf began walking and spoke over his shoulder,  
"I generally just skip it dude. You eat more in the evening and sleep better too."

Valiant caught up to the neon colored pony and decided to try to get to know him better,  
"So Surf," he began, "Where did you grow up?"

"On the road dude. My folks were always traveling. I've probably seen more of Equestria at my age than most ponies see their entire lives. We never stayed in one place for long. See, my pops was a traveling minstrel, my moms too. I grew up as poor as dirt, but that gave me a serious appreciation for conveniences and everything. My folks were always trying to find a new or better way to hone their musical talents so they spent the bits they made on their instruments and paying for food and stuff. Since I grew up on the road I got used to living off the land really early on. I didn't really have any toys so I just used my imagination all the time."

"If your parents were so poor, how do you afford to have all these . . . things made? A telescoping hang glider, the hooks, the zip line, where do the bits come from?" Valiant asked.

"I'm an inventor dude. I patent all my inventions and ponies buy them so I make my bits that way. The telescopic glider, my invention, the hooks, my invention, even the zip line harnesses are from my brain. At first I didn't make much, but sure enough, ponies started buying my stuff and eventually extreme sports caught on. Don't get me wrong bro, some of my inventions have been serious flops. Like this one thing I invented, a leg-powered gyrocopter, dude as far as I know, only one pony ever bought one. I'm not rich or anything, but I've been working on an idea that should catch on like wild fire." Surf gushed.

"And what would that be?" Valiant asked.

"O.K. dude. Have you ever wanted to just jump off a bridge but not, you know, hit the rocks or river or whatever at the bottom?" Surf asked.

"Can't say that I have, no." Valiant admitted.

"Well, say you do one day. My invention is a type of harness that attaches to a flexible, springy rope. You jump and get the free fall but the rope catches you slowly and stretches out and pulls you right back up, not all the way but part of the way. That way you don't have to deal with whiplash or any of those nasty side effects like if you had used a regular rope, then you just have a friend pull you back up and you can do it again. There was this other invention I had in mind, but I don't know if it would catch on. Picture a long board that floats. You stand on top of it and ride waves as they come crashing into the shore, you know, pick up some speed and everything, then you could learn to do tricks on it. The only problem is that most ponies just like to swim. Anyway, I commissioned one to be made just before I came out here. It should be done by the time we get back. You can try it out if you want." Surf offered.

Valiant hid a cringe,

"I think I'll pass, but thanks. So, getting back to your parents, what happened with them?"

"They're still out travelling around somewhere bro. Last I heard they were heading off into the country to try their luck with some buffalo. They heard that some ponies made peace with a local tribe and wanted to see if they had any neat or unique musical instruments or anything. What about you dude? I've totally been monopolizing the conversation here, I don't want to seem shallow. Besides I'm sure you've got some seriously gnarly stories yourself." Surf said.

Valiant shrugged,

"I've had some . . . interesting experiences, I guess. Well, I started life in Haysburg . . . "

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Trooper was feeling rather put out and it showed,

"I assure you, my friend, I am most capable of shifting my own weight. Dr. Mend, please, let me fly." he begged, "I am quite sound of body and I loathe being a burden to anypony."

The older medical pony looked back at the pegasus stallion floating in the air behind him.

Trooper was levitated directly above Lemon Lime's head where he stayed, hooves crossed underneath his chin in a prone posture, as if he were laying on his belly. The boisterous pegasus stallion had not ceased complaining since the party had broken camp, whereupon he had been informed of the arrangements of his . . . transportation.

"You need to rest and recover your strength, if nothing else, give your body a chance to heal. Stop whining and be appreciative." Dr. Mend said curtly.

Trooper adopted a look of injured honor,  
"I am certainly appreciative, my good sir! How many ponies can honestly claim to have such good friends? I appreciate the notion to my very soul, but I cannot fathom the enormity of burden I am being right now! Besides, how exactly am I supposed to protect our two pegasi friends, who are flying aloft, if I am unable to be there with them? I am being about as useful as a cancer at the moment!"

"As painful as one too." Sea Blue muttered under his breath, "Look Trooper, just deal with it. You did something really brave and noble. Just think of this as your reward."

"Oh yes," Trooper said indignantly, "My reward is being hoisted around like some kind of invalid! I need to be useful! I finally have a use and now I cannot perform the sacred task! I need to be protecting, guarding the sacred essence of life!"

"Trooper," Lemon Lime addressed from below, "You're being foalish now. I can easily clamp your muzzle shut if I want to. We're doing this for your own good, call it tough love or whatever you want, but this is the way it's going to be. End of story. So either clam up or I'll do it for you. You could try figuring out what your special talent is or something, just stop complaining."

"Maybe his special talent is being a whiney Mc whynerson!" Pinkie Pie chirped.

Applejack snickered quietly to herself,  
"Ah don't rightly think that's his talent Pinkie. Have you ever tried farmin' Trooper?"

"As a matter of fact I have, Applejack, for the better part of a year actually. I did alright at it, but it was clearly not my special talent." Trooper said.

"Don't you have any idea what it might be?" Twilight asked from behind, "I do find it very strange that a full grown stallion doesn't have anything he's good at."

"That, my dear Twilight, is precisely the point. I am 'good' at everything, but 'exceptional' at nothing. I have no identifiable calling except for guarding other ponies, which is exactly why I am being so stubborn about the issue. I need to feel useful. I have felt like a burden all my life. I hate that feeling. In life, I have always felt out of place, like sun-screen on top of a snowy mountain, or an ice-pick in the desert." Trooper said dramatically.

"Well then darling," Rarity offered, "What kinds of things capture your interest? Surely there

must be something."

"Everything captures my interest. Which only adds to the problem. I have spent countless hours learning about every single subject I could get my hooves on, from acting and singing, to simple plumbing. Furthermore, I have attempted each one in turn. I formulated a list and worked my way down from the top." Trooper admitted sourly, "Perhaps when this mess is done with, I shall pay a visit to our dear Princesses and inquire to them about the dilemma. I am not giving up, mind you. I am simply furthering my options. Perhaps there are new possibilities waiting for me in Haysburg."

"We need to stop soon, so I can change out your bandages, Trooper." Dr. Mend said.

"Ayup." Big Macintosh said, "Maybe some food'll make him less cranky."

Twilight raised her head toward the treetops,  
"Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash." she called.

Within moments, the two pegasi drifted down from above and landed, falling in step with the rest of the ponies,  
"What's up gang?" Dash asked.

"We're going to be stopping soon for lunch." Twilight explained, "Why don't we all just stop here, so Dr. Mend can change out Trooper's bandages. I've got a question I wanted to ask everypony before we make camp tonight."

"Do ya want me and Big Mac to scout on ahead for a small clearin' Twilight?" Applejack asked.

"All we need is space enough for everypony to be seated. If you don't find something within one hundred paces, come on back and we'll just stop where we are. Is everypony okay with that?"

None of her comrades argued the notion. Within minutes, Applejack and her brother returned with no sign of an ideal clearing. The group settled down on the rough path and began eating dried fruit as Lemon Lime dished it out while Dr. Mend saw to Trooper. A rustle from behind him and Pinkie Pie emerged from the surrounding foliage humming to herself. Dr. Mend mentally kicked himself for not paying more attention to the younger pink pony's movements, *'I have to be more careful with Pinkie. She's random enough, she might wander off on her own and get lost, if I'm not more alert.'*

Twilight decided the time had come to pose her question to her companions,  
"Alright everypony, do we have any idea what to say to Valiant once we find him?"

"Ooh, ooh!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, "I know! How about 'Why did you leave?'"

"Well that's a start Pinkie, but what do we say to get him to come back and finish his time at the university?" Dr. Mend asked, "He's throwing away a golden opportunity."

"Why do we need to say anything?" Fluttershy asked softly.

All eyes turned to the quiet pegasus, making her feel self-conscious while meekly hiding behind her flowing mane,

"What do you mean, darling?" Rarity asked.

Fluttershy lowered her eyes, but continued, in a barely audible voice,  
"Maybe just seeing us will make him come back. Maybe all he needs is some support."

Dr. Mend tossed his mane, turning his head,  
"I wish. When Valiant and I were in Canterlot, he promised me we would be each other's support. I doubt that support will be all it takes to bring him back."

Sea Blue rubbed his chin with a hoof,  
"Hmm."

"I see wheels turning!" Pinkie Pie said, bouncing around the counselor, "Twirling, whirling, round we go . . ."

Sea Blue looked up,  
"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking."

The other ponies leaned toward the counselor, so he elaborated on his thoughts,  
"Let's go over what we know. I think he's looking for something, but we'll come back to that. The discovery that Evening Star was actually Princess Luna is what started this and I think Trixie's attitude sealed the deal, so to speak. Let's think here, 'What do these two events have in common?'" he asked.

Rainbow Dash spoke up first,  
"You did mention before that he seemed romantically interested in 'Evening Star' right?"

"I believe he was, yes." Sea Blue said nodding.

"Could he be trying to find a marefriend?" Dash offered.

"Possible, I suppose." Sea Blue said.

"Princess Luna and Trixie both did some things that made them outcasts!" Pinkie Pie spouted.

Sea Blue pointed to the pink party pony with his right hoof,  
"Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner! That's my guess too Pinkie. Seeing the results of their actions as well as their respective punishments, may have triggered a response in Valiant. It's the most solid connection between the two. Now, take his note, which strongly hinted at a need for self-discovery and cross-reference that with what I just mentioned. What do we have?"

"An infuriating stallion who wanders off at bad times?" Dr. Mend offered grumpily.

Sea Blue smirked,  
"Aside from that."

Applejack cocked her head,  
"Well, he sure is lookin' for somethin' right?"

"Yes, but what is it?" Sea Blue asked.

Rainbow Dash raised her head from munching on dried fruit,  
"The two pieces are crime and self discovery, right? Crime to remind him of where he came from and what he did, and self discovery to motivate him to seek it out . . ."

Twilight caught on to the direction of her friend's thought,  
"Family, or at least something along those lines. He's an orphan pegasus from an area where there are normally no pegasi right? He and Arabesque were the only pegasi in Haysburg. Maybe he's looking for some kind of connection with somepony aside from friendship."

"Closer." Sea Blue hinted.

"Love?" Fluttershy ventured.

"You nailed it, Fluttershy. At least, that's my best guess. His connection with each of us was plenty strong for friendship, but he needs to feel loved, everypony does. The love of friends is very different than the love of family. It can sometimes be a substitute for a while, but in the end, we all need it. It's part of who we are. Each of us has the love of family in some form or another." Sea Blue paused to let the statement sink in.

The gathering of various ponies all stopped to consider their families.

Sea Blue continued,  
"Without the love of family, without knowing we all belong somewhere, we would feel lost. Part of everypony's identity is their family. Rarity, when you gave him his cutie-mark back, it started the process of him re-discovering who he was. When somepony cut it off him, it was like losing the little bit of his identity he had left. Being declared a Vagabond was a two-hit blow. One, the ponies of Haysburg rejected him, so he lost what family he knew, part of his identity. Two, when he lost his cutie-mark, he lost his identity almost completely. You restored his cutie-mark and thereby half his identity, but he still wasn't whole. He needs the other half of that puzzle to fall into place in order to continue with his life. He needs his 'family' to welcome him back so he feels whole again. If the ponies of Haysburg reject him a second time, it could destroy him without anypony needing to do anything else. I think we have an answer to his problem, and that answer is being re-bandaged as we speak."

Everypony's eyes instantly gravitated toward Trooper,  
"Me? I will admit we do look somewhat similar, but I already had this very discussion with Valiant back in Canterlot. I have almost no living family. Most of them perished in a terrible accident when I was but a foal."

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Which brings me to my idea. Let's get moving again and we'll talk about it while we walk. Dr. Mend, is he good to go?"

"Yes, his injuries are healing quickly. He should be fine by this evening." Dr. Mend said as he packed up his medical effects.

Everypony was eager to hear about Sea Blue's idea. They packed back up and got moving as quickly as possible.

Once everypony was back and walking again, Sea Blue continued his idea,  
"Dr. Mend, what are the chances of two ponies having such similar appearances as Trooper and Valiant do, if they are not related?"

"It's certainly possible. With such a variety of ponies all over Equestria, there's bound to be some occasional matches." Dr. Mend admitted.

"No argument, but what are the chances of the two look-alikes being almost exactly the same age and being the same breed, say pegasi for example?" Sea Blue asked.

Dr. Mend shrugged,  
"It's still possible, a little unlikely, but possible."

Sea Blue nodded,  
"Alright, let's venture a little bit deeper. Some of a pony's personality is a product of their environment. Twilight, can you back me up on this one?"

Twilight cocked her head in thought,  
"That's the generally accepted consensus. That's the theory, but not all of a pony's personality comes from their environment. Some of it is just ingrained, portions of it are genetic, or so I've read." Twilight realized she was suddenly the center of attention, "Just because I don't care too much for psychology doesn't mean I don't know anything about it." she defended.

"Right," Sea Blue said, "I agree with that. True, Trooper and Valiant have their differences to be sure. However, there are several underlying factors I've noticed they have in common. It occurred to me last night when I heard about how Trooper acted to defend Twilight and Rarity." he said turning to the levitating stallion, "Trooper, what was going through your head when you saw the spider?"

"I saw a threat to somepony and I had to act. The same thing happened back in Canterlot, when

my legs got broken. It was simply a reaction. I rather could not help myself. I can assure you, it had next to nothing to do with bravery. It was simply in my nature to do so. Do not get me wrong, I am glad the situation was dealt with but I would have much rather not have been injured in the process. I am no hero. I was there and I was able to do something about it, so I did." Trooper admitted.

"Even so," Sea Blue said, "You put yourself in harm's way to protect others, with no thought to your own safety, furthermore, if I remember correctly, even while injured you stood to protect Twilight and Rarity when you thought there might have been a danger."

"When Lemon Lime came through the bushes, you're right!" Applejack said.

Sea Blue smiled,  
"Sound familiar?"

"Yes!" Twilight exclaimed, "When Valiant . . ." her eyes grew slightly wide, "It's almost identical! They both did something to save others. Valiant rescued ponies from the fire, Trooper fought off the spider. Both were badly injured . . ." Twilight turned to the black stallion walking in front of her, "Dr. Mend, would you say Trooper's injuries were life-threatening?"

"Had he been alone? Without a doubt. The hairs would probably have become infected and he would almost certainly have died." Dr. Mend admitted.

Twilight continued,  
"Both were critically injured yet kept going. Valiant performed his technique and Trooper turned to defend Rarity and I, both despite being in terrible pain; and I think they both declined being named a hero for it."

"I think it's a family trait. I spent the better portion of last night making comparisons, which is why I was so quiet. There are differences, yes, but the similarities far outweigh them. I'll spare you-all the list, but needless to say, I think Trooper and Valiant are related somehow, the only questions are 'How?' and 'How do we prove it?'" Sea Blue said.

"I have no siblings, though." Trooper said.

"Did you ever ask your mother about that?" Sea Blue asked.

"It did come up once, and she assured me that I do not. My father had a brother, but not I." Trooper said.

"An uncle then?" Lemon Lime asked.

"Yes, I do not remember much beyond that though. It was a long time ago. I have not spoken with her about it in years." Trooper said.



"Did she say anything else? Maybe show you a picture or anything like that?" Sea Blue asked.

"I believe she did, but it has been so long, I have forgotten. I do remember her saying that I was there when my father died, but I was only a little foal. I do not remember anything about my father. All I know about that day was that it was a family reunion in a huge field, one day many years ago." Trooper said, "I am sorry, but that is all I have."

"It's a good place to start, Trooper." Sea Blue said, "As we continue, I want you to try to remember anything you can about your family. Anything will help at this point. I am trained in how to put a pony under hypnosis, but I don't like to do it except as a last resort. Take your time and try your very best to remember anything. We have more than two weeks to go, so you should have plenty of time to try. I think this our best bet to help Valiant."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I hope I didn't confuse anyone with all the navel-gazing in this chapter, but it was necessary to move the plot along. As always, I appreciate any and all comments you are willing to provide, even if I don't always understand the critique. Rest assured, I still appreciate you all and I hope you enjoy the chapter. Of note, I will be doing some small time jumps to keep the story from becoming bogged down by repetition and redundancy. The most difficult part of the story for me is quickly approaching. I will have to introduce several new characters and try not to confuse you all. Unfortunately, the new O.C.s are necessary, so please try to bear with me. For those of you who asked about Griffons, keep reading and find out. Some of the upcoming chapters will be action-less by necessity, don't worry there will eventually be more action than you can shake a stick at. For the two readers who asked, 'No, I did not copy Crush from 'Finding Nemo' for Surf & Turf's personality and mannerisms.' I can see why you might think that, but believe me, I did not. Finally, for the seven readers who asked about romantic involvements between the different Elements: yes there will be some, no I will not say who, and no there will be none between Applejack and Big Macintosh or between Pinkie Pie and Dr. Mend! I would think I made that perfectly clear by now.