

Chapter 5: Gut Feeling

The end of the crowbar edged its way under the lid of the crate. Rainbow Dash shoved against it with all her weight. The cold iron scraped against the wood, finally getting it into place.

"Aaaaand... got it, it's in." Dash backed away from the crowbar. It remained firmly in place, jutting out into the air almost perfectly level.

"Dash, a-are you, um, sure we should be doing this?" Fluttershy looked on, rubbing her hooves together while Dash flicked at the bar.

"Sure I'm sure. I mean, we might as well. So come on, help me. Lean on the back end here."

"Well..." Fluttershy brushed her hair back and joined Dash next to the bar. "Okay, I've got it."

"Pull down as hard as you can on my count, alright? One... two... three!"

The lid of the crate cracked as the crowbar jumped up under the weight of the two pegasi. Nails half-revealed themselves as the lid rose, though they proved long enough to keep it from coming off entirely.

"Yeesh, what're they keeping in this thing?" Dash asked, repositioning the crowbar. "Alright, one more time. On three..."

Another crack, this one louder than the first. Over on the couches, the rest of the group started to stir. Pinkie came to first, tossing and turning on the cushions before rolling onto the floor. Immediately, she hopped back up and glanced around frantically, her head twitching and her eyes wild.

"Whoa, you okay over there Pinkie?" Dash asked. "Sorry, we didn't think this would be so noisy."

"Oh, um... I'm okay. Just a... bad dream," Pinkie said, regaining some of her composure.

"I hear that," Dash muttered. She examined the progress made on the lid. One side was higher, though several nails jammed and prevented it from coming off altogether. The rest of it didn't want to budge any further, no matter how hard Dash leaned on the crowbar.

"I think it's stuck," Fluttershy said. She strained to look into the crate, but it was still too dark inside to make anything out.

“Alright, that’s it. Stand back.” Dash swung around and pivoted onto her front legs. Carefully aiming her rear legs at the open part of the lid, she pulled them in and delivered a powerful kick. Her hooves hit her target square on and the lid burst off with one final crack. Wood splintered as the lid tossed through the air and into the opposing wall, while the crate itself slid back several feet before grinding to a halt.

“Rainbow Dash, do you really need to be makin’ that much of a ruckus this early in the mornin’?” Applejack asked. She yawned and stretched on the couch. Apple Bloom was still slowly waking up next to her.

“It’s not that early,” Dash said. “Besides, aren’t you used to getting up at the crack of dawn?”

“There are times when even I need to get a little more rest,” Applejack replied. She watched Dash poke her head into the crate and rustle through its contents. “Where’d you get a crowbar around here, anyhow?”

“Was over in the kitchen. All sorts of stuff stashed around in there.”

“I’ll bet.” Applejack shook her head and yawned again.

“I guess I’ll get breakfast started,” Pinkie mumbled. She hurried into the kitchen before anypony could stop her.

“I would say somethin’, but even I could use a bite right about now,” Applejack said. She slid off the couch, giving her mane a shake as she stood up.

“Yes, even my appetite is starting to return to me,” Rarity said. “I suppose there’s no sense in starving ourselves, anyway. It’s certainly not going to help matters.”

Applejack nodded. Beside her, Apple Bloom opened her eyes and looked around.

“Good mor—,” Applejack started before catching herself. She leaned in to start comforting her sister. “Hi sugarcube. How are ya feelin’ today?”

Apple Bloom merely shrugged, her eyes still red from the previous night’s crying. Applejack softly stroked her back. “Pinkie will make some breakfast soon. You’re gonna need to eat somethin’.”

“I’m not very hungry,” Apple Bloom said. She turned away, keeping her expression blank.

On the other end of the room, Fluttershy examined the underside of the displaced lid while Dash stuck her head inside the crate. “Rainbow, there’s a note taped on here. I think it’s a

list of what's inside."

"Read it off then," Dash said, her head reemerging. "Gonna need some help to figure out what some of this stuff is anyway."

Applejack approached the crate; tentatively, Apple Bloom got up and trailed alongside her.

"Any particular reason you decided to pop this thing open, Rainbow Dash?" Applejack asked. She snuck a peek inside, frowning as she did. "And what is all this stuff?"

"It's something to do, I guess," Dash said. "Not like it's doing any good just sitting around here now..."

Fluttershy started reading the list aloud as Dash's thought trailed off.

"Um, let's see here... two cases of microscope slides, a box of test tubes, three microscopes—"

"I think we can skip the science stuff," Dash said. She ducked back into the crate and began to shift items around. "Or maybe we can give these to Twilight. If she needs any more of this in there, that is."

"Right. Hang on then." Fluttershy scanned down the list, her eyes brushing past a multitude of basic lab equipment. "Umm... there should be a first aid kit in there."

"Fat lot of good that'll do us now," Dash grumbled. Her hooves brushed over a small white container, a red cross painted onto the side. She sighed and tossed it out; Applejack caught it before it hit the ground.

The aroma of pancake batter wafted through the room. Everypony stopped what they were doing and sniffed the air. The fresh, flaky smell shot a surge of warmth right through every one of them and, for the moment at least, their feelings of homesickness and untimely despair vanished, immediately replaced by intense pangs of hunger.

"Okay, I made plenty and there's more coming, so dig in," Pinkie said, emerging from the kitchen with a towering plate of flapjacks. The others descended upon her. Each grabbed a few and split off to various parts of the room. Dash ate over by the supply crate, while both sets of sisters returned to the table.

"Fluttershy, can you help me get the second batch out here please?" Pinkie asked.

"Oh, sure Pinkie Pie," Fluttershy said. The two disappeared into the kitchen while the

others continued to eat in silence.

Before long, they reemerged, Fluttershy now carrying the full plate. Pinkie stepped past her holding a smaller plate and continued through the room to the entrance to the lab. Just as she reached out to touch it, the door swung open. A disheveled looking Twilight stood before her; large bags were under her eyes and her mane was a stringy mess. She surveyed the assembled group while Pinkie silently slid the pancakes towards her.

"Twilight, can I, uh, talk to you about, um..." Pinkie whispered, glancing around nervously. Twilight stared at her quizzically. Pinkie backed off, scratching her head and quickly returning her attention to making sure the rest of the pancakes were served out.

"Morning Twilight," Dash said, her mouth half-full. "You should have some of these, they're good."

"Twilight." Rarity nodded. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"It wasn't the most productive night, I'm afraid," Twilight said, not noticing Pinkie pushing the plate in her direction. "I basically went in circles for a while trying to figure that thing out. I've been through every note I could find and it's still proving difficult. It seems like Cop— like there wasn't much real research progress made before we arrived. Not much in terms of dealing with a situation like this, at least."

"So that's a no on any kind of test, huh?" Dash asked. She cast a sidelong glance at Rarity and Applejack, both of whom were whispering frantically to one another.

"Nothing at this time, no. I've got some theories, but my real problem right now is there isn't anything I can really test on. I've taken some tissue samples from... from back there, but that's not getting me anywhere. They just look like dead pony cells, and I don't have the equipment to get a more detailed analysis. I might be able to work something out with them in a while, maybe. If they're all I end up having to work with, then I guess I'll have to."

Fluttershy's face perked up. "Wasn't there some of that green stuff in there? Can't you use that for something?"

"I don't know how I would apply that stuff in any sort of controlled fashion," Twilight said. "Besides, I don't know what sort of condition it's even in right now. It had all stopped glowing when I checked on it last night. It seems to be solidifying... just drying up right there in the tube."

"How does that even work?" Dash asked, then shook her head. "No, no, don't tell me... another weird mystery, right?"

"Bingo." Twilight's shoulders drooped. She bee-lined her way to the sofa and flopped

down once she was close enough. She closed her eyes and released a long sigh, running her hoof through her frazzled mane. Various test ideas and procedures flashed through her mind, bouncing back and forth in a hurried haze. She sighed again and rubbed her eyes.

“Twilight?” Fluttershy put her hooves on Twilight’s shoulders. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Huh? What?” Twilight twisted out from under Fluttershy’s hooves, only to slump back down on the sofa. “Yes, sorry, I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Dash asked. “I mean, I was up for a while, and I kept hearing you clink away at something or other in there. You were still at it when I finally went out.”

“Not even a little bit,” Twilight said. “I don’t really feel like sleeping right now, either. Too much to do, way too much to do.”

“You should get at least some rest,” Fluttershy cautioned. “It’ll do you no good to do this to yourself, Twilight.”

“I said I’m fine.” Twilight rose from the sofa. Looking around, she noticed the pillows and blankets scattered around the room. “Did you all sleep in here last night?”

“Uh, yeah,” Dash said. “Rarity brought in the blankets and stuff. Like I said, I didn’t sleep much, and I think the others were waking up a lot, too.”

“Yes, the wind woke me up several times. It... it doesn’t sound much better right now, to be honest.” Fluttershy quivered as she once again acknowledged the fierce storm. As if in response, it brought in another round of its trademarked gusts to rock the building. Fluttershy drew her hooves in and whimpered.

“Don’t worry, Fluttershy. It couldn’t get you before and it won’t get you now,” Dash said, patting her friend on the back.

“Alright, well, that’s good,” Twilight said, mostly to herself. “It’s good we all slept here. Don’t want anypony going off alone right now.”

Twilight sighed again and walked back towards the lab. Applejack and Rarity’s hushed conversation came to an end and Rarity, somewhat spurred by a small elbowing from Applejack, turned to Twilight.

“Say, Twilight, in regards to your research problems,” Rarity said slowly, “don’t you think that you’d be better able to achieve results... somewhere else? Maybe back in your lab at home? I’m sure you’ve got more suitable equipment—”

"What I said last night still stands," Twilight said. She turned and stared hard at Applejack. "I can figure this out. I really can. I just need a little more time."

"Besides—" Twilight motioned out the window "—none of us are going anywhere in this weather, no matter what we try to do."

Rarity tried to think of a way to continue the discussion, but nothing came to her mind. Applejack sat back in her seat and fumed in silence.

Pinkie met Twilight at the lab door, appearing more collected than before. "Uh, Twilight, I've been meaning to ask you," she said quietly. "Have you been having any... weird dreams lately?"

"Have I— Pinkie, what are you talking about?" Twilight asked. She took a step back, eyeing her suspiciously. Pinkie glanced back at the others and grabbed Twilight's leg, pulling her into the corner.

"It's just that I had this weird dream last night, which was the same one that I had the night before, and then I read something that made me worried, so I wanted to know if you were, uh, you know... having any, too?" Pinkie stared at Twilight.

Twilight placed a hoof on Pinkie's shoulder. "Pinkie, right now, that's probably normal. We've all been through a lot, and we're all going to have different ways of reacting to it."

"No, I know that, I do," Pinkie said, ducking around Twilight's outstretched hoof. "What I mean to ask is, um, well, uh..."

Pinkie's head fell and she backed away.

"Uh, never mind," she whimpered. She turned and scurried off to the bookshelf, where her box of paperbacks was resting. Sitting down, she fished more books off the shelf and divided them up into different piles.

Twilight shook her head and turned towards the lab. Behind her, Fluttershy scooped up the cooling plate of pancakes and followed Twilight inside.

"If you're coming in, prop the door open," Twilight said without turning around. "Just keep it all the way open, nice and wide."

"Oh, um, sure..." Fluttershy kicked a spare box in front of the door and looked around the lab. The room had taken on a more frenzied tone since she'd last been there. Those carefully organized stacks of paper were more spread out, some covering entire desktops. The occasional microscope still jutted up, each one surrounded by a small pile of used slides. Petri

dishes and empty test tubes were everywhere. Some of them black and cracked, like they'd been burned.

The pungent stench lingered on. Fluttershy froze as it hit her nose, but forced herself to continue walking in. She sat the plate down on an empty desktop. "You just forgot these, Twilight. If you're not going to sleep, then I really think you should eat something, at least."

"Thank you, Fluttershy." Twilight sighed, pushing some papers around on her desk. Her eyes fell as an absentminded expression took over her face.

"Twilight, I'm... I'm so sorry," Fluttershy said softly.

"I know you are, Fluttershy," Twilight said. "I feel the same way as all of you. Really, I do. I just need to... to figure this out."

Fluttershy's face stayed grim as she studied Twilight carefully. She started to say something, then reconsidered and switched topics. "Are you, um, close to finding out anything?"

Twilight sighed again and read over her notes. "I don't think so. The main problem is that this thing is so... *different*. It's not like some highly mutated changeling, nothing like that. It's something I've never encountered before. I've never even read about it being encountered anywhere else. All the samples I've taken off of— out of the back there, I mean... they're all dead and burned, which means they're very disfigured and hard to study. And even looking at the best, most preserved ones, they still look like ordinary pony cells, even if they came off of some part that no pony actually *has*."

Twilight glanced back and noticed Fluttershy's mortified expression.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to... well, sorry. Anyway, making matters worse, there are these liquid samples, and I don't know what's going on with them."

Twilight pointed over to the mini-fridge on the desk. The door stood open and the vials were still inside. Their contents were vastly changed from the last time Fluttershy had seen them, however. The green glow was completely absent, and they had taken on an ashy gray appearance. It didn't even look like liquid anymore; more like hardening clay, one that was even cracking a few tubes as it solidified in place. Fluttershy gulped nervously.

"I tried to take a few scrapings off the top of that," Twilight said, sounding even more disappointed than before. "But it didn't give me anything at all. It was like staring at a lump of mud. I'm probably going to just burn them all later."

"Are you sure that's the best thing to do with it?" Fluttershy asked, still staring at the fridge.

“Once I’m sure I can’t learn anything from something, I always burn it. Better safe than sorry right now.”

Twilight’s horn glowed, and the plate of food levitated over to her. She took a few bites, letting the fresh pancakes rejuvenate her weary body.

“What I’m just trying to say,” she said, pushing the plate aside, “is that I can’t really study this thing in any kind of productive capacity. I can make theories about it, but can’t get a good way to prove them. If I can’t study it, I can’t find a way to really understand it, and if I can’t understand it, I can’t test for it. I can’t be one hundred percent sure that we’re all okay, and that’s what I’ve got to be before we can all go home.”

“I know what you’re saying, Twilight. I really do. But we’re all wondering, um...” Fluttershy started, unsure of how to finish.

Twilight cocked her head. “Yes?”

Fluttershy took a deep breath and continued. “Well, you know what they’re wondering, Twilight. You can hear Applejack and Rarity talking.”

“I know, Fluttershy,” Twilight said. She took another bite. “But no leaving until I’m sure. If something were to go wrong otherwise... I don’t want to think about that. That... that can’t happen.”

“But if you’re completely out of ideas as to what to do—”

Twilight quickly swallowed and shook her head. Her horn glowed again. “I’m not completely out of ideas.”

A pile of papers rustled behind her. A small metal ring with several keys looped around it popped into the air. It floated overhead and dropped onto the desk in front of Twilight. “I’ve still got one more thing I know I can try out.”

“Are those... are those for what I think they’re for?” Fluttershy turned and faced the mice tanks. The rodents inside hadn’t changed in the slightest; they still acted like any ordinary group of mice would.

Twilight nodded. “I found them in a desk drawer last night. I didn’t want to do anything yet, not until I’d exhausted all my other options. Which, as best I can tell, is right now.”

“Wh-why do you need them?”

“Fluttershy, I’ve read all the notes. I know what Copper was studying and how she was testing it. I’m pretty sure that one or more of those mice—” Twilight pointed to the tanks “—isn’t a mouse at all. The same goes for the vegetables back there.”

Fluttershy gulped. “Well... if you’re sure Twilight, I mean...”

“Fluttershy, I really don’t think this is the time to be—”

Fluttershy turned to face Twilight, her face set and determined. “No, I understand. I won’t complain about this. Not now. Trust me, I... I understand.”

Twilight nodded again. “Thanks. You should go back to join the others now; I’ve still got a lot of work to do. And... it may get a little messy from here on out.”

Fluttershy let slip a small “eep”, but her expression remained the same. Twilight finished off the last pancake and followed Fluttershy back to the common room.

“Whoa, check this out!”

Twilight turned past Fluttershy, her attention drawn to Dash’s shout. The pegasus balanced on the edge of the crate, only her flank and tail visible as her upper half moved something large about inside.

“Rainbow, what are you doing in there?” Twilight asked. “I mean... did you find something?”

“You bet I did. There’s totally a flamethrower down in here!” Dash exclaimed, muffled from behind the wood.

“A *what* now?” Applejack said, startled. Everypony clustered around the crate, each trying to look over and see what Dash had discovered.

“See? Isn’t that what this thing is?” Dash said, pointing to a set of metal canisters at the bottom of the crate. “There’s the fuel, there’s the nozzle, and there’s—”

“There’s nothing like that on the list here,” Fluttershy said, returning to look over the manifest. She drew her hoof down the page, double-checking each line with care. “There are some oxygen tanks, and... let’s see now...”

“Then what do you call... *this*?” Dash said dramatically, pulling herself up. She gripped a long metal tube in her mouth, a nozzle on one end and a rubber tube leading out of the other.

“I call that a pressure washer,” Applejack deadpanned. “I’ve got a few of them back on

the farm. Gets the mud offa the wagon wheels.”

“Oh...” Dash let the device fall from her mouth. It clattered to the floor as she hopped down from the crate. “What’s one of those doing up here?”

“Keep it turned down low and you can water your plants with it,” Applejack said. “My question is, why on Equestria would you be so happy to have a flamethrower?”

Dash shrugged. “They’re cool things to have.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Rainbow, but there’s nothing like it listed here,” Fluttershy said. “Ummm... there’s a few fire extinguishers, though. Is that something?”

“Fluttershy, that’s not quite the same thing.”

“Oh. Well, apart from them, those tanks, and the washer, the rest of the list is just a bunch of lab materials.”

“Well, that’s that then. Apple Bloom, get away from there. Nothin’ here for you to be messin’ around with,” Applejack said. Apple Bloom quickly hopped away from the crate and walked back to sit next to Sweetie Belle.

Applejack returned her attention to Twilight. “Hey Twilight, ain’t you think you should get back to the lab? Sooner you get that test of yours worked out, the sooner we can get out of here.”

Twilight bristled at Applejack’s cold tone. She ducked around a stuttering Pinkie Pie and retreated back into the lab, levitating several more pancakes to follow her in. Pinkie made no effort to stop her, instead looking down at her hooves in an attempt to put her thoughts in order.

“A slight change in direction, Applejack?” Rarity murmured as the lab door swung shut.

“Everythin’ aside, Twilight is right.” Applejack pointed out the window. “Ain’t goin’ nowhere in that mess. I don’t even wanna try. First sign of a break, though... that’s when I’ll be gettin’ her to let us get out of here.”

Rarity sighed and joined Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom back at the table. The two fillies sat close together having a slow, mumbled conversation, the topic of which was indiscernible to the rest of the group.

“So just a big box of science stuff, Fluttershy?” Dash asked.

“It looks like it, yes. Except...” Fluttershy paused, her hoof hovered over one item on the

list. "What's a thermite charge?"

"Thermite charge. A small incendiary device that comes in either a powder or pre-formed putty form. Used mainly for cutting through heavy buildups of ice very quickly. Can be very dangerous if mishandled, but is otherwise a stable explosive." Pinkie said. She sat rigid on the floor. Her voice was calm. It sounded like she was reciting something from memory.

The others stared at her.

"Uh, Pinkie, how do you know *any* of that?" Applejack asked after a moment.

"I... I..." Pinkie shook her head, suddenly snapping out of her stupor. Her cheeks reddened and she brought her head down to the books in front of her. "I read it in a book... somewhere. At least, I think I did... but now I don't remember..."

Applejack brushed her mane, sighing and mumbling to herself. "An' now Pinkie's losin' it... figures."

Dash eyed the box carefully.

"Hey, Applejack... think that stuff could cut through metal?" she asked, keeping her tone casual.

"Cut through— just what are you talkin' about, Rainbow Dash?" Applejack gave the pegasus a questioning look. "How would I know that?"

"I *mean*..." Dash emphasized, gesturing her head at the rebar-blocked door and stepping in close to Applejack, "if things suddenly got more messed up and we needed to do something fast."

Applejack scratched her chin. "Well, now that you mention it... it's an explosive, ain't it? I guess if we really shoved it in there, maybe it could do the trick. If it ever came to that, of course."

"Yeah, right," Dash added quickly. "Only if we really needed to."

"I don't want to be messin' around with that stuff if we don't have to, ya see."

"Neither do I. Just keeping our options open."

"Still, why you askin', Rainbow?" Applejack asked. "I thought you were on Twilight's side right now."

Dash shrugged. "Who's talking about sides? There're no sides here. We're *all* in the same boat, and I only wanna help. Same as you. So I'm just trying to plan ahead a little. This looks to be the only way out of here anyway, unless we want to go back to the front door—"

"I ain't steppin' hoof in that temple again. No way, no how," Applejack cut in. She thought for a moment, before finally nodding her head. "Alright, that's fine. We'll keep that plan on the back burner right now, though, see how things play out."

"Right. Fluttershy, can I have the lid please?" Dash took the piece of wood and placed it back on top of the crate, and shoved the whole thing back into the corner.

"Was there anythin' else in there we could use?" Applejack asked when Dash returned and settled on one of the couches.

"Not unless we need to wash anything or get some extra air," Dash said. "First aid kit's already out, the rest is just science stuff or... yeah. Nothing else in there."

"You're sure about that?"

"Uhh... I think there was some rope tying the tanks together?" Dash said, her eyes wandering the room.

"Hmm..." Applejack stared at the crate.

"So, um, what do we do now?" Fluttershy said. She sat down on the couch next to Dash, nervously rubbing her mane.

"Not much we can do, I guess," Applejack said, walking back to the table. "Just keep an eye out that window an' wait for a break in the storm."

"Pinkie, dear, do you have any more food prepared?" Rarity asked. The plates on the table were bare, licked clean by the hungry group.

"Uh, yeah, there should be some stuff on the counter and in the fridge." Pinkie sat in the corner, several books open in front of her. "Just... just give me a second. I really need to check something."

Pinkie stuck her head down and scanned the pages. Her mouth fluttered as she spoke quietly to herself, her words entirely unintelligible to the others.

"Is everything alright, Pinkie?" Rarity asked, a concerned tone growing in her voice.

Applejack shook her head. "Just let her be for now."

“Probably better this way for now,” Dash muttered. She threw her head back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling, sighing. “She needs a break from all the cooking before we run out of food.”

Applejack rolled her eyes. She put her hoof back on Apple Bloom’s back, with Rarity doing the same to her sister. The four ponies relaxed silently in their seats. All eyes were drawn to the window, watching as the wind continued to whip the snow up into the air.

Hours passed. Each pony in the common room stuck to her seat, either staring out the window or reflecting on the events of the previous 24 hours. Occasionally, these memories led to a new crying fit, although these were considerably quieter and shorter than the ones that came before.

There was little change outside. The wind continued to howl away, sometimes to the point of shifting the entire building, other times receding to a sort of background white noise. The sunlight glowed faintly through the thick clouds, and it was hard to tell if it was even getting lighter outside as the day progressed. Indeed, it took the chiming of the clock on the wall for the group to realize that it was noon.

Applejack stood from her chair and strode over to the window. She stared outside, frowning. “Well, one thing’s for sure. When I get back, no more complain’ about how the Ponyville weather team runs things.”

“At least we know when to take a break.” Rainbow Dash slid off the couch, accidentally knocking into a dozing Fluttershy in the process. Fluttershy’s eyes snapped open, her whole body jolting at being suddenly awakened.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must’ve dozed off.” She yawned. “Did I miss anything?”

“Not one lousy thing.” Applejack paced back and forth in front of the window, constantly looking up to stare outside.

Dash sidled up into a chair around the table, pulling up next to Rarity. Fluttershy wandered over and sat across from them, close to Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom. There was a brief silence as the ponies stared at one another.

“This day’s just dragging on and on, isn’t it?” Dash said, breaking the silence. “Sorta weird how slow time goes when there’s, uh, not much to do.”

No response from the others. Dash scratched her neck and glanced over at Pinkie.

“Hey Pinkie, any chance of some lunch?” Dash asked. “Pinkie?”

“There should still be leftovers, but... but just give me one more minute.” The floor around Pinkie was covered in books. Her entire box had been emptied, each small volume open in front of her. Several more titles had been pulled off the bookshelf. Some were stacked neatly next to her; others had been casually tossed to the side. Pinkie’s head was in constant motion as her eyes darted from page to page, book to book. She murmured softly the whole time.

“Uh, alright then, Pinkie,” Dash turned back, still rubbing her neck. “Anypony hungry?”

The fillies shook their heads.

“I believe we all had our fill this morning, Rainbow Dash,” Rarity said.

Fluttershy leaned towards the fillies and attempted a smile. “Um, how are you two doing today? Are you... are you feeling any better?”

Apple Bloom shrugged, her eyes glued to the tabletop.

“Still holding up at least?” Dash asked. She looked at Sweetie Belle, who returned the look with a small flicker of a smile.

“I guess,” Sweetie Belle said. “I just don’t know what we can do right now.”

“Keep waiting,” Apple Bloom muttered. “That’s what Applejack keeps saying.”

“I’m sure it won’t be too much longer now.” Fluttershy gently patted Apple Bloom on the back. “We’ll all be home soon.”

“Not all of us...” Apple Bloom’s face fell even lower.

“Don’t worry, Apple Bloom,” Sweetie Belle said, placing her hoof next to her friend’s. “It’s... it’s okay. We’ll be alright.”

“Your sis is doing pretty good, Rarity,” Dash said quietly.

Rarity smiled at her sister and turned towards Dash. “Thank you, Rainbow Dash. With everything that’s happened I just don’t... well...”

Rarity suddenly pushed her chair close to Dash. She gave a quick glance to the other ponies. Apple Bloom was still being consoled by Fluttershy and Sweetie Belle. Slowly, the pallor disappeared from her face as her friends worked to cheer her up.

Rarity leaned in close to Dash. "Um, Rainbow..." she whispered. "I was just wondering... that is, I was hoping you could... well, how do you think I'm... doing?"

Dash was somewhat taken aback by the question. "Ummm... what you do mean?" she whispered back.

"Am I... am I holding together well? I think I'm feeling better than yesterday, but for once I find myself remarkably unsure as to... as to how I'm projecting myself. I really want to keep a good... atmosphere for Sweetie Belle, so as not to upset her further, but I don't know..."

Rarity brushed her hair aside and stared intently at Dash.

"So, you're worried about how you're dealing with all this?" Dash stared back. "And you're asking... me?"

"I just want to at least be sure I'm... giving off the right impression."

Dash nearly cracked a smile. "Never did think I'd see the day you wanted my opinion as to how you looked."

"Dash, this is serious," Rarity said, biting her lower lip.

"I know, I know. Look, Rarity... relax." Dash put her hooves on Rarity's shoulders, easing the unicorn's tense body. "You're doing just fine. I mean... how are you feeling? Really."

Rarity's head fell. She rubbed one eye, though no tears appeared. "It's not the best time. But like I said, I think I'm doing better. I think..."

Rarity brought her head back up.

"I'm just asking since you look more... collected right now. I mean, Applejack's being a little too focused to talk to, Twilight's off trying to keep herself together, and Pinkie's... well, I don't know *what's* happening with Pinkie... my point is it seems like it's just you and Fluttershy who are really staying strong."

Dash sighed. "Rarity, I don't know how you think I look, but trust me: I'm not feeling so hot right now. And Fluttershy spent the whole night trying to cry herself to sleep."

Dash leaned back and smiled again. "We're all in a weird place right now. So it's okay if you want to feel down about it. But believe me, you're doing good right now. Really. You and Sweetie Belle. You're both doing as well as anypony could be expected to right now."

Rarity perked up ever so slightly. "Well, thank you, Rainbow." She turned and looked at her sister. Sweetie Belle was talking to Apple Bloom, the other filly in a better mood than before. Fluttershy smiled softly at both of them. "I guess I shouldn't worry so much... I guess."

Rarity pushed her hoof through her mane again, slowly attempting to flatten the few random hairs that were sticking up out of place.

"See? No problem," Dash said. "We're fine. We'll all be fine."

She stood from the table and smiled again at everypony present. She started to say something again, but decided against it. Instead, she turned towards the kitchen, guided by a sudden pang of hunger in the pit of her stomach.

Applejack eventually settled on a pacing routine in front of the window: four and a half cycles in front of the window, pause to stare outside, frown, and repeat. This new habit didn't exactly calm her down, but it at least kept her somewhat occupied, and that was enough for her at the moment. After a while, Apple Bloom walked over to stand under the window. She watched her sister with keen interest. Sweetie Belle attempted to join her, but Rarity kept her in place by the chair, afraid to let her go too far. Sweetie Belle didn't resist.

Applejack scarcely noticed. She was too intent on the world outside; too distracted by her growing feelings of annoyance at a storm that absolutely refused to die down.

As the clock ticked past three, Applejack finally stamped her hoof down, causing a distracted Apple Bloom to jolt up against the wall and slump back down.

"Sorry dear," Applejack said, moving in to pull her sister up. "I didn't mean to do that. I'm just gettin' really steamed with how this weather's playin' out right now."

"It's... it's okay," Apple Bloom said slowly. "What are we gonna do, sis?"

"I... I..." Applejack started. Before she was able to find the words to continue, a small crash suddenly erupted from behind the lab door. The ponies all turned to the door to hear the sound of shattered glass and crunching wood, along with Twilight having a coughing fit.

"Hey Twi! You alright in there?" Dash shouted. She hopped off the couch and sped to the door, throwing it open as soon as she reached it. The others crowded in behind her, Rarity hanging at the back to keep Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom from getting too close.

"What's goin' on in here?" Applejack squeezed in past Dash and surveyed the damage of the lab.

The mice tanks were completely smashed. Glass littered the floor and the interior of the tanks. A small blaze was burning, consuming the various items within the tanks. Included in these were the smoking bodies of the mice themselves. Several were still flopping around, squeaking madly. Across from the tanks, Twilight sat hunched on the floor, looking dazed.

Fluttershy shrieked at the sight of the burning mice. Quickly grabbing a nearby tarp, she dashed over and began to snuff out the flames. Applejack and Dash, meanwhile, hurried over to Twilight to help her back up.

"Whoa, easy there, Twilight. Just stay still" Applejack said, setting Twilight down on a stool.

"I'm okay, don't worry." Twilight brushed her mane aside. Several of the hairs were singed away, but otherwise she was unharmed. "I just used a little too much kerosene in there."

Applejack glanced over the desks behind Twilight. Several more mice were laid out on small metal trays; each had been partially dissected, with several bloodied scalpels strewn about them. Pools of kerosene gathered in each tray, though the mice appeared unburned. At the lab door, Rarity quickly pushed the fillies away from the grisly sight.

"What were you doing in here, Twilight?" Dash asked. She idly kicked the small red canister under the broken tanks. Liquid sloshed around inside. She glanced to the back of the lab at the vegetable tanks; they too had been burned away, albeit not in such a wrecked manner as the mice tanks.

"Disposing of them," Twilight said. The others stared at her as she rose from her stool and walked over to the trays. "I had no other way of being sure. I tried cutting into them to gauge a reaction, but that got no response. As did crossing in some of the burned remains, but those are dead and had no effect. Even when I tried to cross them with something... uncontaminated, nothing happened."

Twilight brushed her hoof over a small bandage on her leg and sighed.

"Twilight, that really doesn't answer our question," Dash said. "What were you doing in here to all these mice?"

"Copper had been testing them, changing them," Twilight said, her tone flat. "If I was able to figure out a way to tell which of them was what, I could figure out a test for the rest of them. However, as best I can tell, all these tested... negative."

"So, Twilight, what do you think that could mean?" Applejack asked, leaning forward slightly.

"Maybe... maybe Copper destroyed the ones she infected afterward." Twilight said, her voice fading as she spoke. She hung her head. "I guess it would make sense for her not to leave them around too long..."

Applejack moved in closer. "Twilight, this is it. You've done enough. You've done your research, you've tried your tests, an' you've come up with nothin'. The time has come for us to get goin'."

"Not yet, not yet," Twilight replied quickly. She tapped her hoof on the desk as she tried to think. "I just... need to think of another angle, something I'm missing. There must be something..."

"Twilight!" Applejack snapped, her frustrations starting to boil over. "What the heck are you talkin' about?"

"Twilight, please," Fluttershy said. She left the tarp over the tanks, partly in an effort to conceal the damage and partly to keep the new smell down. "Don't you think this has gone far enough?"

"Fluttershy," Twilight said, "don't tell me you're feeling for the mice at a time like—"

"Forget the mice!" Applejack cut in. She drew herself to her full height, staring down at Twilight. "Forget this lab, Twilight. You need to stop obsessin' over this. It's gettin' way out of hoof."

"We've got to be *sure*!" Twilight shouted back, slamming a hoof down on the desk. "Why do I need to keep saying that? Don't you all understand how important this is? What this thing could *do* if it got out?"

"That thing is dead, Twilight! Gone! Burned to a crisp," Applejack yelled back. "Twilight, look at us. We're all fine. Just... *look*."

Twilight pressed herself against the desk. The whole group stood before her, staring her down with varying levels of intensity. Behind Fluttershy, Rarity stepped slowly through the doorway.

"Twilight," Rarity said, her voice calm and level. "Please. Applejack is right. We need to work on getting out of here, right now. We can't stay here. Not after what's happened. We need to go home, Twilight. You know that."

"I... I..." Twilight looked into each of her friends' eyes. She glanced down at the fillies, who had silently followed Rarity into the lab. "I... need to do one last thing. I need to talk to

them.”

Twilight approached the lab door, only to be blocked by Applejack stepping in front of her.

“Talk to them about what?” Applejack asked, her eyebrows raised in suspicion.

“About... you know,” Twilight said. She stared down Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, who stood cowering behind Rarity.

“Twilight, that ain’t gonna happen, an’ you know it.” Applejack stood firm in her position, not letting Twilight by.

“Twilight, we all know the same things right now,” Dash spoke up. “We’ve all seen everything that’s happened. You don’t need to single them out right now.”

“Quite right, Twilight,” Rarity said, her tone gaining more of an edge. “And at any rate this is neither the time nor the place for such a line of questioning. Haven’t you been listening to us?”

“They would know best!” Twilight said. Her eyes traveled between every pony present and her voice grew more flustered. “It won’t take long, I just—”

“Twilight, if you say you’ve got to be sure one more time... I don’t know what I’ll do.” Applejack snapped.

“Any little thing would help right now,” Twilight said. She took a step back. “I just need something to work on. Any kind of evidence that... that she was acting funny at all yesterday.”

“Twilight, the only one who’s actin’ funny ‘round here right now is *you*.”

Applejack closed in on Twilight. Dash moved up next to her, her focus traveling between Applejack and Twilight and back again.

“Applejack, back up right now,” Twilight said, her face darkening.

“Twilight, this is the last time I’m gonna repeat myself. This has gone on long enough. We need to leave. All of us.” Applejack and Dash began to box Twilight in between two desks.

“Uh, guys, why are things getting so tense in here?” Pinkie asked from the back of the room. No pony seemed to hear her. “Guys?”

“We are gonna leave, Twilight,” Applejack continued. Her eye twitched.

"Applejack, I'm warning you..." Twilight stared her friend straight in the eye.

"Seriously, guys, can we all just take a deep breath and relax? We don't need to be acting like this," Pinkie said, again to an unobservant crowd. She tapped her hooves together as they started to quiver.

"Twilight, this will be for your own good." Rarity stepped forward. The fillies scurried past her, changing places to hide behind Fluttershy.

"We could use your help to get out of here, Twilight," Applejack said. "But one way or the other, we're gettin' out of here. Right now." Applejack poked Twilight square in the chest.

"Hey, back off Applejack!" Twilight growled. "I've given my reasons for why we're still here, and why we need to stay here. How are you not seeing what's going on?"

"How am I?" Applejack practically screamed. "Twilight, are you even listenin' to yourself right now? Come on!"

Applejack poked Twilight in the chest, harder this time.

"And stop touching me!" Twilight's horn flashed. A small purple wall appeared in front of her. A second, larger wall appeared in front of it and pushed out, slamming into Applejack and sending her sprawling back. The wall continued past her, carrying itself through the lab. It knocked down several of the other ponies, pushed stools over, and scattered lab equipment off of tables and onto the floor.

"Hey, watch out!" Dash called, slipping onto the floor herself.

The magical wall came to the table with the ruined tanks. It pressed into a flame-baked leg, and with a loud CRACK, the leg snapped in two. Sliding glass and fractured metal sounded off as the table fell to the floor, heading straight for Fluttershy and the two fillies.

The three ponies screamed. Apple Bloom rushed forward. She dove out of the way ahead of one of the more intact tanks as it dropped to the floor. The table itself clipped Fluttershy on the way down, shoving her aside and scraping her in the side. Sweetie Belle pushed back, barely avoiding the table itself. She wasn't so lucky with a second burned tank, which fell square on her back. She yelled in pain and fell back under an opposing desk.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack yelled.

"Sweetie Belle!" Rarity yelled.

Rarity shot back up and dashed over to her younger sister. She pulled her out from under the desk to a clear spot on the floor and looked down in horror. A large piece of glass had cut into Sweetie Belle, leaving her with a fairly substantial laceration that zigzagged halfway across her backside. The filly seemed woozy, blinking slowly and having difficulty moving her head. Blood seeped from the wound, dripping onto the floor at a steady pace.

"I'll get the first aid kit!" Pinkie shouted and disappeared into the common room. Fluttershy pulled herself over to Rarity and Sweetie Belle, looking over the injury as best she could.

"What's... what's going on?" Sweetie Belle asked. She sounded faint and scattered.

Rarity looked up at Twilight. Pure fury flashed in her eyes.

"How... **DARE** you!" Rarity's horn flashed. A heavy microscope on the desk in front of her launched up and arced through the air. Before Twilight could react, it sailed over her small barrier and smacked square into her horn. She staggered backward, her purple barriers disappearing into a fine mist.

Seizing the opportunity, Applejack leaped in and held Twilight down.

"What is wrong with you?" Applejack shouted, anger spilling out of her. "What are you tryin' to do to us?"

A bright flash. Applejack flopped onto the floor as Twilight teleported to the other side of the lab. She landed on top of a table, looking down at all of them. A sorrowful expression took over her face.

"I'm sorry!" she said. Her jaw hung open as she searched for the words, her eyes flickering between each of her friends. "I... I didn't mean for that to happen! It was an accident!"

At the door, Pinkie dashed back in, the small white box hanging in her mouth.

"Pinkie, give it here," Fluttershy said. Pinkie slid the box over and Fluttershy quickly popped it open, rooting through it for the appropriate supplies.

"Fluttershy, are you alright?" Pinkie asked, kneeling down next to her. She pulled her hoof over Fluttershy's long scrape, but Fluttershy pulled away.

"I'll be fine," Fluttershy said. "Right now we need to deal with this."

"It's alright, everything will be alright," Rarity whispered into her sister's ear. She hugged around her neck, gently cradling Sweetie Belle's head.

"Twilight, look at us!" Dash shouted. She moved up and stood next to Applejack. The two of them stared at Twilight through flaring nostrils and gritted teeth. "You need to calm down and get over here, right now! Before things get any worse!"

"We can't be hurtin' each other right now, Twilight," Applejack said. "We just need to go!"

Twilight looked over the chaos of the lab. Apple Bloom hopped up and latched onto her sister, tightly hugging around her leg as she started to cry again. In the back, Fluttershy pulled out some gauze, surgical tape, and a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

"Rarity, I need you to keep this gauze in the air over her back," Fluttershy said. Rarity nodded and levitated the roll of white bandage, all the while still hugging Sweetie Belle tightly. She unrolled a long strip in the air while Fluttershy fiddled with the cap of the alcohol.

Dash took a deep breath and relaxed her stance. "Twilight," she said, sounding calmer than before, "we... we need to help each other now. Come on, let's just... let's calm down for a moment. We can work this out without getting mad at each other."

"I..." Twilight started, then sighed. "Okay. You're right. You're all right."

Twilight hopped off the table and approached the others. Applejack took a step back, pushing Apple Bloom behind her. Dash stepped forward.

"I'm... I'm so sorry," Twilight said. Her eyes flickered past a glaring Rarity. "I just don't know what's been happening lately."

"I know, Twilight," Dash said. "But we can do this. We just need to leave."

Gripping the open bottle in her mouth, Fluttershy leaned her head towards the gauze. A few drops spilled out, dropping down onto Sweetie Belle's back. They landed right in the cut and combined with the blood massing there.

A vicious screech pierced the air that made everypony jump. A long seam suddenly appeared on Sweetie Belle's back, going from neck to tail. With a sickening crack, it pulled open, revealing a large set of jaws filled on all sides with razor sharp teeth and a large, flat tongue. It continued to scream a high-pitched wail, one that bounced from wall to wall with a sound that cut right to the core of every pony in the room.