

Chapter 17

That morning, all three ponies awoke at once. They had found a small grotto to stay in overnight, out of the wind and the (slight) chill pervading the air. They had laid out Applejack's tarp and both her and Rarity's blankets, cushioning them against the craggy rock below. Then the three of them had bundled together at Rainbow Dash's insistence. The sky-blue pegasus had slept between the white unicorn and the orange earth pony, stretching her wings out over both of them and drawing them close to her. Now, as they woke, all three of them could feel each others' hearts beating almost in unison. Rarity gently drew closer to Dash, while Applejack sighed contentedly. "Y'know," she murmured softly, "part o' me is gonna miss this once we're back in Ponyville."

"There's always sleepovers, I suppose," Rarity said.

"Yeah," Dash said, nuzzling deeper into the blanket below her chin. "Though you girls couldn't make it up to my house- which is too bad, because it's really cool."

"Not unless Twilight cast another cloud-walkin' spell on us," Applejack pointed out.

The mention of the stricken unicorn served to focus Rarity's mind. "Let's not waste too much time," she said, pulling away from Rainbow Dash and rising to her hooves. "I think we can make it to a grove of Beneviolets today, but there's no telling if we'll find one as bright a purple as what we need."

"Right," Applejack concurred, getting to her own hooves and flipping her hat onto her head. "Breakfast first, though."

"Of course," Rarity said.

Dash fluttered her wings and was on her hooves, then trotted over to her saddlebags. She opened it and removed some carrots, half a loaf of bread, and the bundle of leaves containing the deer's food offerings. "So what are you girls hungry for? I'd like some carrots and some of that naan."

"Those pansies were mighty tasty yesterday," Applejack said. "I reckon I'd better not get too attached to 'em, else I'm gonna start nippin' 'em out o' ponies' gardens."

"I'm a little surprised nopony's ever done just that," Rarity said, lifting the bread with her magic and tearing off a piece. "Surely we can't be the first to discover their sweet taste."

"Maybe all the flower-wranglin' ponies just keep it to themselves," Applejack thought, taking up a carrot between her hooves. She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "I might be tempted to do the same."

With a grin, Dash unwrapped the leaf bundle. "Well, I'm gonna have a pansy or two, so you all can have some too or not." She pulled out three of the brightly colored flowers and popped one in her mouth, chewing contentedly.

They busied themselves with eating for few moments, then Rarity said, "Assuming we do find the right Beneviolet today- how shall we proceed on our way back?"

"Well we're definitely gonna go back through the Shimmerwood," Applejack said. "Once we got there, though... I was wonderin' if we couldn't just ask Falalauria to teleport us back to Ponyville, if she can."

"Really?" Rarity asked. She raised an eyebrow. "You... you don't want to go back through Gildedale?"

"Part o' me does," the orange earth pony said, and she lingered in silence for a moment. Then she hardened her green eyes. "But they're plantin' now at Sweet Apple Acres, and I been gone nearly two weeks already. I can't afford to spend any more time away. I got my duty."

"When I think about it," Rarity said, "I've been away so long also. Customers are probably getting desperate for some of my spring fashions. Not to mention Sweetie Belle hasn't seen me in so long. She must be worried sick."

Dash thought about the little fillies that looked up to her, thought about her good friends and

how they missed her, thought about all the jobs she needed to do back in Ponyville. Yet she didn't fill herself with regret. "Y'know..." she began. She hesitated as the others turned their attention toward her. "Duty is a funny thing. We all talk about how we have it to other things and other ponies, but sometimes we forget we've got a duty to ourselves too."

"I never forget that," Rarity said, "but ideally, you must put yourself last. Others come first."

"Well I guess there's that," Dash said, and they expected that to be her final contribution. She went on, however: "They're all connected, though- all our duties, see. You can say that your duties to other ponies come first, but if you neglect yourself, then you won't be able to help other ponies as well as you might. All this trip, all this time... we've been here because of our duty to Twilight, but we've also not avoided the times that have let us take care of ourselves, either. When you spent all that time with Ashtail, Applejack," she pointed at the orange earth pony, "when I went into the Dreaming with the pronghorns, and when Falalauria taught you how to teleport, Rarity, and taught us all about the Elements of Harmony, that was important to each of us, and we needed to do it. But it wasn't just important *for* us- it was important for everypony who might someday need our help. Because we spent some time making ourselves better, we may be able to help other ponies that much more."

Applejack was a bit surprised to hear such wisdom from the freewheeling pegasus. As she looked at her old friend, now covered in swirling dark blue symbols, she could see a kind of bearing that wasn't there before, a kind of nobility. It hadn't come about overnight, so she hadn't noticed it happen- she hadn't been paying attention. Now it stared her in the face. Rainbow Dash was proving her own point by her own subtle, vital transformation. "That's somethin' to think about, sugarcube, for sure," she said. "I reckon even when we get back, we're gonna keep changin' 'cause of this trip."

"I'm sure Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy have changed in their own way as well," Rarity added, "and even Twilight Sparkle, though I wouldn't wish her experiences on anypony. When we're all together again, I suppose, we'll truly be able to tell." She turned to Applejack. "Though, Applejack, what makes you think Lady Falalauria can teleport us back to Ponyville? If she could do that, wouldn't she have offered to teleport us the rest of the way into the mountains?"

Applejack bobbed her head. "Maybe- but I'm not sure. It's like Rainbow's been sayin', y'know? Maybe she figured we had to make the rest of the trip ourselves, for our own good. She seemed real sure that Twilight wasn't gonna die, so maybe she figured we'd keep on learnin' and growin' goin' the rest o' the way up on hoof. She was sure holdin' somethin' back when we talked about comin' back down the mountain, that's for sure."

"Hmmm..." the white unicorn thought for a moment. "You know, you may be right. I don't yet know much about being a Seer, but one thing that seems to be true is that you have to be careful about what you tell ponies. If the future really is built on choices, and those choices come about because of the way our true natures react to circumstances, then I can see the value in sometimes withholding information from a pony. Not because you want her to be hurt, but because if you *do* tell her about her future, it's going to change how she thinks about her choices when it comes time to make them. Perhaps knowing too much about the future is going to change the choices she makes, resulting in a *different* future than what you predicted." She thought privately about Falalauria's choice to let them leave the Shimmerwood. For somepony who could See the future, choosing not to act- to allow events to unfold naturally- was an action in itself. *I shall have to remember that*, she concluded.

Applejack chewed one final pansy carefully. "Knowin' the future... you know Twilight's gonna give you a lecture when you tell her, right?" she said with a smile. "She's never gone in for predictions and prophecies."

"Perhaps I won't tell her- not yet, anyway," Rarity said. "Falalauria said the time was coming when we would all know. Perhaps we should wait until then to mention these things."

"But when will we know?" Dash asked. "It may just be something we'll have to feel."

“Then feel it, Dash, and recognize it when it comes,” the white unicorn said, rising to her hooves. “It’s like when a pony gets their cutie mark- you know the moment when it happens.”

“Everypony has a nose for destiny,” Dash said with a nod. “That’s something Firefly used to say. She *was* usually right.” She stood up. “I think we’d better get going. Twilight’s still in danger.”

“Right on, sugarcube,” Applejack said. “Think you can pack up the food while Rarity and I armor up?”

Dash chuckled. “Now you *both* have armor- it’s so funny!” She began to gather up the remaining bread and carrots. “I never would have pegged you for the warrior type, Rarity.”

Rarity gave her a demure smile as she trotted over to her neatly arranged armor. “You should know by now, Dash, that there’s more to me than first glances suggest. Did you know I took a semester of horn-fencing at finishing school?”

“You? Fencing?” the sky-blue pegasus laughed. “I never would have seen it- well, okay, I can see it now, but not before this trip.”

“Oh, I didn’t like it at first,” said Rarity, levitating the flanchards and the peytral over her head. “By the end of the class, though, I was decent at it. It teaches you to be observant and patient- to look for your moment, to wait for it to arrive, and when it comes,” she tightened the armor around her torso with a pulse of magic, “you strike.”

Applejack tugged her own flanchards on, rolling over to fasten the straps beneath her belly. “Huh- you make it sound like applebuckin’.” That made her think of home again, and of her friends- and then she grinned. “Y’know what’s funny? Pinkie Pie reckoned we’d see all manner o’ terrible critters out here, and except for the komagas, we ain’t met a one.”

“Ha!” Dash laughed. “What were the things she mentioned again?”

“Balrogs an’... somethin’... somethin’...” the orange earth pony mumbled. “I don’t recall, to be honest.”

The earth pony and the unicorn consumed themselves with fastening their respective sets of armor. When they were finished, Rainbow Dash had packed up all the food and even folded up the tarp and the blankets. Putting those away, Applejack and Rarity fastened their saddlebags to their flanks, while Dash wrapped her scarf around her neck. Their effects securely stowed, their equipment snugly strapped, the three ponies walked side-by-side out of the grotto. They were decently high in the Archback Mountains, the air crisp around them, the wind a light but cool breeze. Gildedale shone gold far below them, the sun just rising ahead of them in the east, high above the distant Drackenridge Mountains. “Say, Rainbow,” Applejack asked, “do you wanna go up ahead of us, check for Beneviolets?”

“I did think about it,” Dash said. She grinned. “Tell you what: if we can all make it up into the mountain range in two hours, I’ll stick with you girls.”

“You don’t even have a clock with you,” Rarity said, the sunlight sparkling off the crystal crests on her helmet.

“Trust me, I can tell.”

“All right, then,” Rarity said, turning back up the steep and rocky path. “Shall we?” She launched herself forward at a full gallop, Applejack quick behind her. Dash brought up the rear, rainbow-streaked tail flapping behind her as she pounded her hooves on the dark stone, leading ever higher into the Archbacks.

Twilight Sparkle screamed as another crackling bolt lanced off her horn, striking one of the walls of her bedroom. She thrashed about under the covers, sweat pouring down her face. Her horn was almost totally black. Tears leaked from the corners of her tightly-shut eyes. She wasn’t even thinking, just experiencing, a slave to her blinding, agonizing pain, a pain that none of the available

painkillers could abate.

“She's getting much hotter! More water! More water!” Zecora cried, feeling the lavender unicorn's forehead with the back of her hoof. Apple Bloom dashed out of the bedroom, and the water in the sink was running moments later.

“Oh, oh, I wish Spike were here!” Fluttershy cried, desperately stamping her hooves. They had sent Spike into the Everfree Forest to get some poison joke- Zecora said its body-altering properties made it a strong painkiller, and Spike's scales would protect him from its strange side effects. “I think we need to contact Princess Celestia now!”

“N- AAAHHHH!!!” Twilight screamed. “Nooooo... frrrrieenndsss.....” her voice was slurred, her mind fuzzing.

“They'll make it in time! I know they will!” Pinkie Pie cried, bouncing in place. Each pounding of her hooves on the floor was like the striking of a hammer, or the banging of a drum, and to Fluttershy it seemed like a terrible countdown had begun. “We gotta keep Twilight going just a little longer!”

The butter-yellow pegasus swallowed hard. She had first broached the subject of contacting Princess Celestia five days ago, but both Twilight and Pinkie had disagreed. Twilight's refusal had been unusual, as she was normally so quick to contact her teacher and mentor. The lavender unicorn had explained that she trusted Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash to retrieve the Beneviolet in time, and she had a deep-seated fear that she would be betraying them if she went to Celestia. This was coupled with a strange worry about bothering the princess- as though it would be a bother for her to learn her student was deathly ill! Fluttershy had suspected that the Horn Rot was affecting Twilight's thinking, but her refusal had been adamant, and Pinkie Pie, with her undying faith in the abilities of her friends, had been quick to support her in this. The two of them had succeeded multiple times in overruling Fluttershy, and she cursed herself for her meekness. She should have been demanding, should have been insistent, but they were so heartfelt in their belief that the others would come through.

Now, though, Zecora was here, and Fluttershy knew the zebra was as concerned about Twilight as she was. “Pinkie, I know you have faith in your friends,” she said firmly, “but if we do not act soon, this is where Twilight ends!”

“But I just know- I *know*-” the pink earth pony's eyes were bright. She seemed to have gotten only more cheerful. “I know they'll do it! They'll do it and it'll be *spectacular* and we'll all clop-clop-clop! And Twilight says-”

“Twilight's not thinking right, Pinkie!” Fluttershy shouted, finally raising her voice. “Twilight's going to die and we need to do something *now*!”

Apple Bloom rushed back in with the damp washcloth, which Zecora applied to Twilight's forehead. Suddenly a spark **popped** off the tip of her horn, and her eyes shot open, empty and glowing white. “Beware the beast that girds the Earth! The greatest challenge approaches!” Her eyes shut tightly again, and she arched her back in agony.

“What's that mean?” Apple Bloom asked.

“It means something big is going to happen!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed cheerfully. “And- *whoaaahhhh!!!*” The pink earth pony suddenly lost her footing, some legs going one way, some going another. She toppled over onto the ground, where she rolled onto her back.

“Not *now*, Pinkie Pie!” Fluttershy snapped, an unusual note of *annoyance* crawling into her voice. When she turned towards Pinkie, however, Fluttershy was surprised to see what had befallen her. Pinkie was on her back, and her legs were moving in the air. Her right front leg and her right back leg would move forward, while her left front leg and her left back leg would move back, then her right legs would move back while her left legs moved forward. Right legs forward, left legs back, left legs forward, right legs back, over and over. “A twitch?” she asked.

"Yep!" Pinkie said, smiling. "I just *knew* something big was going to happen!"

"What does that one mean?" Apple Bloom said. "I've never seen it before!"

"One side forward, one side back," Pinkie said. "It means I'm right about something I didn't think I was going to be right about!"

"Really?" Fluttershy said. In spite of the chaos and the deadly danger to Twilight, she couldn't help raise her eyebrows. "And that doesn't happen very often?"

"Not really," Pinkie said cheerfully, "I'm usually spot-on!"

"Yeah, but... I.... I agree with Fluttershy an' Zecora!" Apple Bloom said, stamping her small hoof on the ground much like her sister. "We just gotta keep Twilight from dyin', and if that means contactin' Princess Celestia, it's what we gotta do!"

"But--"

"*Please*, Pinkie," Fluttershy said, pleading in her voice. "*Just in case*. If Applejack and the others are going to save Twilight, they're going to have to do it soon! So either they will, or they won't, and then Princess Celestia can save her, or... or do *something* for her, but only if she *knows*!"

Her twitch abating, the pink earth pony rolled over onto her belly, sprawling her legs out on the floor. She put a hoof to her chin, screwing up her face. "Weeeelllll...." then she grinned at them.

"Okie-dokie! Just to make you all feel better, though! We won't need Princess Celestia, you'll see!"

"All right, then," Fluttershy said. "When Spike gets back, we're sending a message to Celestia, no more argument!"

"**AAARRRGHHHH!!!**" Twilight groaned. Zecora pressed the wet washcloth harder onto her forehead, speaking to the unicorn in her native zebra language.

*If Twilight can even last that long, the butter-yellow pegasus thought grimly. This was it- the next hour or two would be crucial. Even contacting Princess Celestia required Spike to be here, and they had no way of knowing when he would be back. Fluttershy didn't dare leave Twilight's side to find him, none of them did. She felt like she might cry, but she couldn't, not with Apple Bloom here. She needed to be strong, but she felt so helpless. She sank down to the floor, then put her front hooves together. Princess Luna, she thought, I remember what you said to us the day you came back, after the party was over. You told us that you had given up on yourself- that even as Nightmare Moon, you wanted to be appreciated, but you thought there was no hope left for that, so you were focused on making everypony feel pain as revenge. But you said that when we cleansed your spirit, and brought you back to yourself, and everypony in Ponyville **did** want to love you, you realized there had always been hope for you, you and everypony. So you told us that you were going to take on a new divine role: because you had been helped when help seemed impossible, you were going to become the Patroness of Desperate Causes. I pray to that part of you now, and I know- I know I should have prayed sooner, but now things are very desperate, and we need you more than ever, and I know you're probably asleep by now, but please- hear my prayer! Don't let my friend die!*

The path turned sharply, but Rarity merely slid into it, changing direction without losing speed. If she had bothered to think about it, she would probably have been amazed at her physical development: she had been worn out climbing the Drackenridge Mountains almost two weeks ago, but she handled the steep incline now with ease. Her wild green armor flashed in the sun. The wind whipped cold around her, but she found she didn't mind it as she once might have. Behind her, Applejack kept pace, grinning at the swiftness of their ascent. The path was narrower, rockier, higher, but they hadn't slackened their pace. They were going to do it- they were going to be in the midst of the mountains before noon, long before! They could probably find the Beneviolet in no time!

Twilight, we're gonna do it!, she thought. We're gonna save you lickety-split! Then she thought inevitably about what would happen after. Could Falalauria teleport them back? If she could,

Applejack was prepared to ask her for it. Maybe that was why the golden hind had been so hesitant to agree with their statements about the return journey. She would ask for it, even though it would mean not seeing Ashtail again- and here her heart ached. She thought of him by her side, running with her- she knew he would be able to keep pace, so tough and muscled and lean. He would lean against her, breath on her neck, say into her ear: do what you must. He would understand. And she knew she would see him again one day. She knew it in her heart. It wasn't Seeing, it wasn't what Falalauria did, but she knew. *I want him to meet Big Macintosh, and Granny Smith, and I bet Apple Bloom would love him! I bet he'd love the farm, too- I bet he'd love a real honest-to-goodness apple to eat! I shoulda given him some of our apples! We had a few to spare!*

They passed between two great cliffs, and Rarity skidded to a halt. Catching up with her, Applejack and Rainbow Dash found themselves looking down into a great gorge, the path winding widely around the other side of the peak they had just passed. Deep at the bottom, a small stream passed through, and there was a perimeter of grass around it. The orange earth pony traced the stream to the south, where the gorge opened up into a great valley. There was green there- and she could see that it was liberally speckled with *purple*. "There!" she yelled, pointing to it with her hoof. "Those have gotta be Beneviolets!"

"I'll go check it out! You two hurry as fast as you can!" Dash cried, flapping her wings.

"Remember, look for one that's *bright* purple!" Rarity cried as the sky-blue pegasus shot away.

"Right!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"Come on!" Applejack shouted, taking the lead down the path. Rarity followed close behind her. It wound widely around the peak, snaking over arms of the mountain, bending down then rising back up over and over, but they galloped, they almost broke into a full run. This was it! They were here!

Wending their way around a corner, they galloped side by side as the path widened, opening into almost a full road. It curved again, and then descended, bending off to the right into a huge field of green grass. The valley they were in was enormous, easily a mile broad, and it continued for an untold number of miles off to the south. The stream running through it was a glimmer of silver. It was festooned with wildflowers, and most of them were-

"BENEVIOLETS!" Rarity squealed. There were so many of them! Quite apart from her circumstantial joy, the designer in her realized that the flowers were gorgeous. Their petals were broad at the base, narrowing out into what seemed to be true points, five of them making the most delightful star-shape, the very middle jet black, the stoma stretching out colored purest gold, and the petals themselves a rich and deep shade of violet. That made her stop, and pause. Deep. *Too* deep.

Applejack noticed as well. "They're all dark!" she cried. "They been growin' too long!"

"Oh, dear..." Rarity muttered. A nervous puddle was sloshing around her heart.

With a whoosh of wind, Rainbow Dash came to a galloping landing just ahead of them, surging ahead and skidding to a stop before her friends. "They're all too dark!" she said, her features betraying a panic.

"C'mon now, Rainbow, you can't have seen *all* of 'em," Applejack said, though her guts were contracting in terror.

"Yes I did! I flew low over and over and over!"

"We'll have to search on hoof!" Rarity snapped, refusing to despair. "Applejack, you take that side of the stream," she pointed off to her right, "and I'll take this side! Move as quickly as you can, but be *careful*! Dash, fly in a zig-zag over the field! Keep your eyes peeled!"

"But-"

"Do it!" Rarity said with steel in her voice.

Nodding, Dash took to the sky again, starting the flight path the white unicorn had advised.

Applejack galloped through the fields, leaping the stream in a single bound and then setting off, combing the grass, her green eyes surveying as keenly as she could, ever fixed on the ground. Rarity swept her blue eyes from side to side as she galloped. Something in her heart was telling her she had to hurry, that she had to find a properly colored Beneviolet very soon. She crossed from one side of the field to the other, but always moving forward, she galloped, she had no idea how big this valley was. She noted that the ground was unusually soft, even moreso than she was used to on fertile soil.

Almost an hour later, she and Applejack arrived back at the head of the valley. They hadn't gone the whole length of it- it was too big- but they'd seen enough. "Anything?" Rarity asked.

"Not a bright one to be seen!" Applejack said, stomping her hoof.

"I told you!" Rainbow Dash cried, dropping out of the sky in front of them. "But there's gotta be more fields and valleys up here! We need to keep searching! Ugh! I wish we had more pegasi with us!"

"Pega-" Rarity stopped hard. Her eyes widened. And in spite of the dire circumstances, she smiled enormously, *lunging* at Dash. "Oh, Dash, you did it! You did it! No pony even needed to correct you! Why- why- I could just *kiss* you!"

She wrapped her front hooves around Dash's neck. The sky-blue pegasus was taken aback for a moment, then grinned slyly. "Well, if you *want* to..."

Rarity drew back, an uncertain look on her face. Then she made a little noise and planted a soft kiss on Dash's forehead. "Done. Now don't say I never did it."

"All right, that just proves *my* lesson took when yours didn't," Applejack said with a nod. "But we gotta keep focused! We gotta find another field!"

"Say," Rarity said, turning back to the north, "could there be a field at the other end of that gorge?" She squinted, trying to look through the narrow, rocky valley. At the other end of it, some distance away, she thought she could just spy a flash of green. "I think there is!"

"Yeah, I see it!" Dash cried. "I'm gonna go check it out! You girls wait here!" She flapped her wings and was gone in a rainbow streak, her scarf fluttering in the breeze behind her.

As Applejack watched her go, she noticed that the sky had grown dim. Looking up, she watched dark gray clouds rolling silently overhead. The wind was picking up as well and getting colder. "Uh oh," she muttered. "We gotta hurry- I think there's a storm comin'."

"Up here, it's got to be a *snow* storm, I suppose," Rarity muttered. "We'll never find a proper Beneviolet if it gets buried in snow!"

Rainbow Dash flew with all her might. She was going faster than normal- it was as though the wind resistance was nonexistent. *Chalk it up to this handy scarf*, she thought. *I gotta remember to thank Falalauria when I see her again*. In no time she crossed the gorge and was above another valley, this one narrower than the first. It too was filled with wildflowers, and many of them were Beneviolets- but they were all dark purple, just as before. She trained her pegasus eyes, scouring the ground, looking, looking, *looking*. She glanced further ahead. More dark purple, more dark purple.

Then it was there, far off, isolated from the others. It was on a long, low, wide, strangely-shaped hill, at the highest point. A single Beneviolet- but it was such a violent shade of purple it made her blink. She couldn't resist swinging back around and flying toward her friends again. "*I see it!*" she shouted. "I see a Beneviolet! I see one that's the right color!"

"GO GET IT!" Applejack roared at the top of her lungs. "And hurry!" The sky was completely gray now. The wind began to howl. "There's a storm comin'!"

Nodding, Rainbow Dash wheeled about and shot across the gorge a second time, her heart pumping, every hair on her body and every feather in her wings alive. She could feel the Dreaming swirl around her, feel it surge in and out of her like the ocean upon the shore. There was import to this moment- she could feel it. This was the culmination of their long, hard journey. Soaring over the

valley, she flew low, coming down towards the hill. She hit it hard and galloped forward, grass brushing aside as she moved. Snowflakes began to gently descend from the sky. She skidded to a halt near the hill's summit, in a shallow depression of grass. The ground here was extremely soft- she was practically sinking into it. The Beneviolet was less than a hundred feet away. She was so giddy that she just had to shout and jump. "Yes! Yes! YES!!" she yelled, jumping up into the air and slamming her hooves *hard* on the earth when she landed.

The ground began to **rumble**.

Dash's body *trembled* as the earth beneath her shook. The whole valley- the whole mountain range!- **shook**. Her legs began to spread apart beneath her, nearly dragging her to the ground before she flapped her wings and hovered. Grass and dirt peeled away as the earth under her split. Beneath it, growing steadily larger, was a field of bright sea green, strangely slick, almost wet-looking. Whirling around in the air, Dash saw it continue for more than twenty feet the other direction. She spun again, and saw it continue for another twenty feet, still growing bigger. Then she looked just beneath her. Here the green was not, and in its place was thick, empty black. The mountains were still trembling, in fact they were shaking even louder, a rumble growing louder and louder. She flapped her wings backwards, pulling away from the hill. The field of sea-green was brilliant and unnatural, and she realized that the black she had seen was a *line* that neatly bisected the sea green. It was thicker than two ponies side-by-side. The sea-green stopped expanding, now making a strangely ovoid shape of huge size. For a moment, the mountain range was still.

The great black line twitched from side to side, sending Dash's heart into her throat. Then the line **narrowed**.

The hill exploded! Dirt and grass and flowers and rock blew everywhere, filling the air as the very ground beneath her rose. She flew skyward, but it followed her, higher and higher, whole fields' worth of brown dirt falling away, revealing blackness, revealing slickness. Still the bright purple Beneviolet was intact- it seemed to be wedged in a kind of crevice, a ridge taller than Sugarcube Corner. Panicking, she arced back to the south, flying where she knew her friends were, snow now filling the air around her.

Applejack and Rarity were gaping at the sight before them. A whole chunk of the mountain had just risen into the air, and it continued to rise on a titanic column of blackness. The narrow gorge exploded, chunks of stone the size of Applejack's barn- the size of Ponyville's library- flying hundreds of feet skyward every direction, water spraying everywhere as the stream was torn apart. A sky-blue blur was suddenly hurtling towards them, streaking to a stop and suddenly Rainbow Dash hovered and screamed "**RUN!!**"

Applejack and Rarity needed no further encouragement. They turned and galloped, no, they *ran* as fast as their legs could carry them, and it seemed that at their heels the valley shredded, hills of dirt, acres of grass tearing apart and flying away. The mountains were shuddering. They ran and ran for minutes, foam flecking the corners of their mouths, Dash flying right beside them, not wanting to leave them though she was filled with fear. Minutes turned to tens of minutes and *still* they ran, panting, and *still* the mountains shuddered, and *still* when they looked over their shoulder the tower of blackness rose, too thick, filling the horizon, unable to be properly studied.

At last they reached the end of the long valley- a steep decline. They lost their footing and tumbled down it, Rarity having the presence of mind to turn her fall into a sideways roll so the crests on her helmet did not catch on something and break her neck. They tumbled down and down until they reached a barren field of stone, the mountain peaks stretching, curving overhead all around, like an arena, like a stadium. Dash looked ahead and barely glimpsed some crumbling stone structure- a long table, an ancient arch- far off in the middle of the barren vista. Her friends got to their hooves and still ran, running across the bare rock, until finally Rarity's newfound endurance failed her, and she

stumbled to a stop, panting and hacking for breath in the increasingly cold air. Applejack stopped as well, her breath coming out in a fog. Rainbow Dash skidded to a stop before them. “*What?!*” was all she could say, was all she could *think* to say- but she got no further.

A long, low *hiss* pervaded the whole of the air. Fear raced up each pony's spine. They turned slowly around.

It had stopped rising, two miles, four miles, five miles, ten miles or more into the sky. Some of its body- perhaps *most* of its body- still seemed to be submerged in the earth, but what protruded out and up was as broad as the whole of the Everfree Forest. It was jet black all over, even on its vast belly, up and up, craning back their necks to see, until their wandering eyes stopped at its huge head, bigger than Canterlot, shaped like a giant spade. Four blazing green eyes, each one bigger than an Ursa Major, flitted with unholy speed across the world, thick black lines for pupils. It opened its mouth. Fangs the size of Ponyville were a dull bone-white. A long, dull blue tongue, wider than a dragon's wingspan, longer than the distance between Canterlot and Ponyville, lolled out, flicked. Another hiss rose on the wind.

Applejack swallowed hard. Now she remembered what Pinkie had said. “You... you reckon that's a world snake?”

“Yeah,” Dash said, “I reckon.”