

The Elements of Equestria  
Part 15

All of Haysburg gathered around the Mayor's office to hear her announcement. Word had spread quickly after the most recent attack and everypony was eager to hear any news. The steps leading up to the Mayor's office made for an ideal stage where a single individual could be seen by all. Valiant, disguised as 'Natal' and Surf & Turf were already inside waiting for the Mayor to call for them to emerge. Valiant rubbed the golden circlet around his left foreleg, *'I'm surprised Searcher could make one of these so quickly. He said he put several protective enchantments on it, I sure hope they work.'*

The Mayor stood on the top steps addressing the ponies of Haysburg, "We have weathered yet another attack on our village and emerged victorious. I'm proud to say that through quick action and decisive determination there have been no injuries and not a single foal has been lost. By now, I'm sure you've all heard of the two strangers who came to our aid several nights ago and saved two fillies. I have spoken with them already; these stallions have pledged themselves to help us continuously until this issue with the gryphons has been resolved. Many of you have already seen them in action today as they helped fight off the most recent attack from the swamps. I present to you, Surf & Turf and Natal."

The Mayor stepped out from in front of the door and the two stallions emerged to rampant cheering and clomping. Surf waved nervously at the immense crowd, smiling as much as he could. He was far out of his element, he didn't much like being the center of attention of a group this size. Valiant, by comparison, didn't move a muscle. He didn't wave, he didn't smile (not that anypony could tell even if he had), he just stood there in shock. He had thought he had prepared himself for the attention, he was wrong. The sight of his entire village now cheering for him made him freeze. His mood instantly went foul, *'What hypocrites.'* he thought, *'You cheer now, but what happens when somepony makes a big enough mistake? You throw them out, disown them, and cut out their identity.'* Valiant ground his teeth quietly.

"Dude, wave or something," Surf said out of the side of his mouth, "You need to respond."

Valiant shook his head, clearing away his thoughts and began walking down the steps, heading toward the crowd. He felt slightly dizzy, like his equilibrium had been disrupted briefly. He descended the steps slowly, to the crowd, he looked like an imposing figure coming down from above in silent judgment. The cheering slowed down as he descended, finally dying out altogether as his sock-covered hooves touched the ground. The ponies backed away, giving him room. Natal looked around at each and every face he could see, looking them all in the eye.

"What we did today and the other night, you can do as well and we're going to see to it that you learn to do so. You who wish to learn, come see Surf or I. We have already seen that you have the 'will' to protect your village, we can offer the 'way'. Surf and I will make ourselves available at the celebration. Don't take this the wrong way, you do have reason to celebrate, many families have been kept whole this day, but where is the recognition for the others who contributed?" he asked loudly, "I can think of several others who deserve recognition as well. Where is the cheer for them?"

"Who are you talking about?" a mare's voice called out from the crowd.

“You already know them, but your eyes chose not to see. You ignore what is in front of you, staring you in the face. If you want to know who to truly thank, thank your neighbor. Thank the pony you see once a week at the market or the bakery. Open your eyes and see what is around you. Who among you has been grateful enough to thank the ponies you don’t even like? Who has thanked the pony from across town who you have a quarrel with? The same pony who may have risked themselves today, fighting to protect your family. I saw Birdie fight off a gryphon on the wing and personally fly the rescued filly to the clinic, after she had dealt with another one already. Who has thanked her?” he asked.

His only response was simple silence.

He shook his head and began walking away toward the Fountain in the center of Haysburg where the party tables and so forth had been set up. The Mayor stepped back up to the top of the steps. All eyes turned to her.

The Mayor cleared her throat,  
“Thank you Natival for those . . . inspired words. There is a celebration to be held around the fountain in honor of our two heroic guests. Go enjoy yourselves, get to know Surf and Natival, but don’t simply stop there; as Natival said, thank your friends and neighbors who fought bravely. This is a time for celebration. We have achieved a distinct victory and hopefully the gryphons have finally learned their lesson and will leave us in peace.”

Even after what Natival had said, the Mayor still managed to coax a rousing cheer from the residents of Haysburg. The citizens dispersed and headed toward the fountain and tables. Several ponies stayed to speak with Surf & Turf personally, while still others approached Natival who was already sitting quietly on a spread blanket on the soft grass by the fountain.

The first pony to approach the covered mysterious hero was none other than Colossus,  
“That was quite a thing to say there, Natival. I’m not sure how you meant it to sound, but you came off more than a bit judgmental.”

Natival gazed into Colossus’ eyes and responded quietly,  
“I suppose it did, but that doesn’t make it any less true. What Haysburg needs is teamwork. There can be no place for division. Under stress, minor unresolved conflicts can become a big problem.”

Colossus shrugged,  
“Maybe so, but you could have been a bit more polite about it. You can’t expect everypony to just get along all the time. There will be disagreements now and then. You shouldn’t alienate yourself from everypony and expect them to want to follow your lead afterward.”

“True enough. I’ll take that into consideration. Thank you.” Natival said bowing his head slightly.

The gathered crowd of ponies began to press in, wanting to speak with Natival.

Colossus turned and addressed the crowd,  
“Form a line please. One at a time.” he turned back to the mystery stallion and nodded, “They’re all yours.

Surf & Turf was having quite a time trying to handle so many questions as the ponies gathered

around him all chattered at once,

“Oh this?” he asked gesturing to the pack in the center of his back, “This gnarly contraption is a glider and these things on my legs are climbing hooks.”

“What are they for?” a mare asked him.

“Um, climbing and gliding?” Surf said.

“Are the hooks sharpened, so you can tear apart your enemies?” one filly asked.

“Good grief no!” Surf exclaimed, “They’re just for grabbing onto things I can’t reach with my hooves.”

“Could you use them as weapons though?” another stallion asked, “I could use something like that the next time the gryphons attack.”

“I suppose you could, dude, but that’s not what they’re for and I won’t let anypony use them like that, seriously not cool.” Surf said repulsed at the notion.

The neon colored Earth pony froze suddenly as a gentle kiss was planted on his cheek, he turned and saw a familiar filly standing next to him,

“I don’t care if they’re not weapons, you saved my life the other night. Keep using them the way you already are. You’re still a hero to me, Surf, and don’t let anypony pressure you into using them differently.” she trotted away quietly while Surf watched, puzzled.

“Thanks little babe.” he mumbled, “My pleasure.”

“Are you seeing anypony?” a mare asked boldly.

Surf rubbed the back of his neck nervously,

“Well I think I’m going to be taking Trauma out on a date soon, but I’m not sure, babe. Honestly, I’m not, like, looking for any kind of a serious relationship or anything right now. I’m just out for some adventure with Nativel.”

An older light brown stallion bowed his head slightly as he approached Nativel, the masked pony shook his head,

“Don’t bow to me, please. I’m no better than you.”

The stallion looked up, surprised,

“Very well. I just wanted to say thank you for coming to our aid the other night and for today as well. We owe you a great deal.”

“Do you?” Nativel asked, “Think about the answer to that question very carefully. As far as I can see, you don’t personally owe me anything, though I do appreciate your thanks. Be sure to thank all the other ponies who fought today as well.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” the stallion said, “I expect the ponies of Haysburg to do their part.”

“I believe one should never take for granted the selfless actions of others. Try to keep that in mind. They

risked injury to themselves, they deserve thanks for their bravery as well.” Nativel said.

“You know, you’re right, thank you.” the stallion said backing away slowly.

The next pony was a teal colored mare,  
“You were so brave!” she gushed, “It was my home you defended this afternoon, I recognize your voice! Thank you so much!”

A smaller filly of the same color piped up next to the mare,  
“You saved me and my sister, Nativel! You’re awesome!”

Nativel nodded slowly,  
“It was no problem, believe me. You should thank your sister too. That was a smart move, locking yourselves in the cellar. I’m going to spread the word that any pony who isn’t capable of fighting, do the same if another attack comes. Your example may well keep many ponies safe in the days to come.”

The mare blushed shyly at the compliment,  
“Thank you, Nativel. If you need a place to stay, we have a spare bedroom.”

“Thank you for the offer. I may take you up on it, just be sure you have your door open in case any other ponies need a place to stay as well.” Nativel said.

“I will.” she said, “By the way, my name is Minty and this is Chamomile.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” Nativel said, “If you’ll excuse me, there are others waiting in line. I may come by later.”

Minty and Chamomile waved good bye and Nativel turned to the next pony in line.

From the clouds above, a pegasus watched the goings on with intense interest, *‘He’s different, but in what way?’* she wondered, *‘Is he really as good as he seems to be, or is it just for show? He asked me if I had a foal. Why did he ask that? Why does he care? Does he care? He doesn’t have any reason to, so why act like it? Does he perhaps feel the same thing for me as I do for him, that we have something in common? No. He could never understand what I’ve been through, no pony could.’* she turned her head and made to leave, but stopped short as a thought struck her, *‘I didn’t think I could trust Searcher or Colossus at first either. I was so scared when they saw me, but they didn’t hurt me. They care, maybe he does too. I already know he’s different, the same way I knew Searcher and Colossus were when I first met them. Maybe,’* she swallowed hard, *‘Maybe I should give him the chance. What if he hurts me though? What if he’s just like the gryphons and only wants to use me?’* she put her shod hooves to either side of her head and shook herself back and forth as the memories came flooding back against her wishes, *‘NO! Don’t touch me! Leave me alone! Stop it! You’re hurting me! Why are you hurting me! All I wanted was someplace to sleep!’* she collapsed onto her side as tears began pouring down her face.

Her whole body shook with uncontrollable sobs as her mind continued replaying the memories. Her vision clouded over and she went back to that night against her will.

She was cold, so cold hiding in the shadows between the stone buildings. The wind seemed to cut straight through the pile of garbage she was using as a wind barrier. She huddled down lower, hoping for

just the tiniest hint of warmth. She shivered so hard her muscles hurt, but that discomfort paled in comparison to the pain of the empty void in her stomach. She was just a filly, barely half grown at eight years old, her body kept small from lack of proper nutrition. She had found a muddy puddle to drink from earlier. The bitter taste still lingered in her mouth.

She could hear the voices of the gryphons inside the tavern as they prepared to close up for the night. She already knew she would get nowhere if she begged, that only got her yelled at or chased or worse. It was a hard lesson to learn, but she had learned it well. They didn't care about one homeless waif begging in the streets. The one gryphon that had claimed to, had taken her in and fed her but demanded she do something for him to repay him. When she heard what he wanted she had tried to run, but he had caught her and held her down. She shivered at the memory as she tried in vain to stave off the tears. She felt so ashamed at what he had forced her to do, so disgusting and filthy, so violated. He had hurt her and he had enjoyed every minute of it. She gritted her teeth and shook her head violently from side to side trying to dislodge the tears and the memory and clear her vision, but to no avail, *'Stop it!'* she told herself, *'You got away from him! Your tears won't get you a place to stay! They don't care! No one cares! I have to look out for myself, I have to be tough! Stop crying you pathetic foal! Stop it or you're going to miss your chance!'*

She heard the door to the alley open as a pair of gryphons stepped out. She could hear them talking while the door leading inside hung open tauntingly.

They were talking about their days at work and their families, "Little Horatio is getting so big now. Before long, I won't be able to give him piggy-back rides anymore. How is Leah doing by the way? Last I heard she was dating that one tom who worked with the Hunters."

The other gryphon chuckled, "He proposed to her three days ago. I tell you, I had no idea Hunters made such good money. The diamond marriage-pendent he gave her had to weigh all of six stones. Get this, he already bought a four-room house and he said he had a Honeymoon cloud ready for her."

The first gryphon whistled, "Wow, he's serious isn't he. Sounds like a keeper."

"You have no idea. He actually came to me first and asked for my blessing. Most youngsters don't bother to do that anymore." the second one said.

Birdie watched carefully and waited until they had their backs to her then darted for the door, hovering just off the ground, sticking to the shadows. She knew she could find some food inside and a warm place to sleep, anything had to be better than sleeping in an alley in the freezing cold. Just as she reached the doorway, one of the gryphons absentmindedly stepped into her way. She was going too fast to stop and she knew it. She tried to change her direction, but to no avail. She crashed into the leg of the gryphon that had stepped into the doorway, putting him off balance and stumbling while she hit the frame of the door with a startled cry and a crunch as her right wing bent at an unnatural angle.

"What was that?" the other gryphon asked, "Look, it's a pegasus."

She heard the words and tried to scramble up onto her hooves and get away before they caught her.

“Hold on there, little filly.” the second one said.

Birdie felt a claw close on her left hind leg. She was in pain, starving, and frightened so she went along with what her instincts told her. She kicked and struggled against the claw that held her, but the gryphon’s grip was solid.

“Hey, calm down! Stop struggling!”

Birdie cried out and redoubled her struggling. The gryphon that had hurt her so badly had said something nearly identical, ‘*NO! He’s going to . . . !*’ she could even finish the thought.

“Help me!” she screamed, “Help me, somebody help!”

She kicked out, as the gryphon tried to grab her other back leg. He missed, his claws breaking open the soft skin on her leg as he tried to close his talons. She screamed again and began flapping her wings, both working and broken, trying to fly away. Pain coursed through her as she flapped, but she forced herself to ignore it, she had to get away.

“Stop fighting me, or I’m going to end up cutting you again!” he said loudly, “Just calm down and stop screaming!”

The scene, in Birdie’s mind, was almost exactly the same as before, except now there were two males to hurt her instead of just one. The memory split open her mind and she began crying, screaming, and struggling with every fiber of her being. She was screaming for help and begging for mercy in a blind panic.

“Don’t hurt me! You can do whatever you want, just don’t hurt me! Let me go! Please stop it! You’re hurting me!”

“Hold still!” the gryphon said, “If you don’t calm down I might end up breaking your other wing!”

“What’s going on here!” called a harsh voice from the mouth of the alley.

Birdie looked up, through her tears and saw a third gryphon approaching, ‘*NO! NOT THREE!*’ she felt the grip on her loosen momentarily. She managed to get her left leg free and took off at a sprint as he grabbed for her again. His grip missed, but his claws didn’t. Fire erupted from her left flank as she bolted down the alley leaving a trail of blood behind as she went.

She ran from the scene as fast as her little legs would carry her. She ran in the cold and the wind. She couldn’t feel the hunger pain anymore, other pain had replaced it with far more intensity. She ran and ran until she could run no more. She collapsed in an alley, exhausted, starving, in pain, and fearing for her life, ‘*He said he would break my other wing! How can they be so cruel? He hurt me, they’ll all hurt me.*’ her sorrow began to change into despair, ‘*They’re all like that, they’ll all hurt me.*’ she began to sob, realizing she had no other choice if she didn’t want to freeze to death or starve, ‘*I have to go back to him.*’ the thought made her feel sick. She swallowed hard and shook her head trying to convince herself it would be for the best, ‘*He hurt me so bad, but at least I had food and a place to sleep. As long as I didn’t struggle and cry he didn’t claw me too badly. Maybe if I just let him do it, he won’t hurt me so much.*’

swallowing the vile taste that rose up in her mouth, she began the process of re-tracing her steps until she eventually found herself in front of a house she swore she would never return to.

The horrible memory ended suddenly and Birdie cried out as she scraped madly at her head, trying to dig out the terrible visions of her past. She scraped off her veil by accident. It settled down on the fluffy cloud, not having enough weight to break through. The moonlight from above, shown down, casting her silhouette onto the cloud. Birdie's eyes saw her outline on the cloud and her movements instantly fell to motionlessness. She frantically scrambled to get the thing back on.

With the veil once more properly obscuring her features, she finally began to calm down, *'No, he wouldn't understand. No pony can, not even Searcher and Colossus. I'll tell him and he'll . . .'* Birdie found that she couldn't finish the thought, which puzzled her. Normally she could easily picture that kinds of things others would do to her, but when she pictured him, for some reason she just couldn't summon up a mental image of the atrocities, *'He's different. I can't deny it anymore.'* she admitted, *'I'll get to know him when he's not around any other ponies then I'll see what he's like. If he tries to hurt me, I'll kill him, but if he can understand . . .'* the thought was so far out of her comprehension she actually smiled, *'If he can understand, that would be wonderful beyond words.'* She leapt off the cloud and began gliding down toward the ground, *'Somehow, thinking about him gives me hope.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Mend sat with Applejack and Big Macintosh on top of a small hill overlooking the plains of rolling grass. They had emerged from the Everfree Forest early in the morning and had had the pleasure of traveling almost the entire day across the fields of rolling grass. The hill provided a perfect vantage point and the three Earth ponies took full advantage of it. They stared up at the stars above in wonder.

"I never took the time to just look." Dr. Mend said quietly, "They really are beautiful."

"Ayup." Big Mac agreed.

"It's our pleasure, Doc." Applejack said, "This here's one of the reasons Ah could never become a city pony. Ah'd miss them stars way too much and all them bright lights just block 'em out."

Dr. Mend chuckled,  
"You're right about that, Applejack. When I lived in Canterlot, there were always lights on. I wonder if that's not the reason the Princesses have the Royal Palace situated so far above the city. The ambient light wouldn't block the stars out at that height."

Among the tents situated down the hill, sat eight more ponies,  
"I'm surprised the sky's so clear out here." Sea Blue ventured, "I would have thought it would be overcast and there'd be snow everywhere."

"I for one, am grateful the weather has stayed so calm. My perfectly styled mane and tail would collect snowflakes like magnets, then they would be all droopy and wet. I would look simply ghastly, darling. Don't go jinxing our good luck pu-lease." Rarity said dramatically.

"I LOVE snow!" Pinkie Pie chirped, "You can have snow-ball fights, and make snow-ponies and

snow-angels. Just remember not to eat the yellow snow unless it comes in a paper cone, otherwise it tastes funny.”

“EEW!” Rainbow Dash said, making a face, “Was that last bit really necessary, Pinkie?”

“No, but it’s still good advice.” Pinkie responded.

Twilight couldn’t argue, but she had other things on her mind, “How are the dream-memories coming along, Trooper?”

Trooper raised his head from his hooves, “I am certain I am getting close now. Last night we had finally landed at the designated meeting place. It had been marked with a bright red flag. I did not recognize the immediate area, but I am certain we are in the same vicinity. I will try to memorize the exact spot if you wish.”

Twilight shrugged, “You can if you want. I don’t know if it will be helpful or not. The big thing is that you get a good look at the foal your aunt and uncle are carrying. If he looks like Valiant, we can be fairly certain it’s him. After that it’s a matter of piecing together what happened.”

Lemon Lime, who was sitting next to Rainbow Dash, yawned and stretched, “I don’t know about you all but I’m going to go to sleep. We have a long day tomorrow and I’m bushed. That practice this morning wore me out. You’re getting better Sea Blue, but you still can’t catch me.”

The counselor snorted, “It’s tough to do, you’re fast.”

“You could predict where Trixie was going to teleport to when we were chasing her. Why can you not predict where Live Wire is going to go too?” Trooper asked.

“I don’t know.” Sea Blue admitted, “Maybe it’s one of those things that only works under stress or perhaps it doesn’t work because I’m trying to use it against one of the Elements of Peace. In either case, I need to be used to functioning without it so it doesn’t become a crutch.”

Twilight’s ears perked and shot forward with intense interest, “What are you two talking about?”

“They’re talkin’ about ‘Inspirational Manifestation’.” Big Macintosh said walking up to the fire with Dr. Mend in tow, “When Princess Luna was disguised as Evenin’ Star, she and Ah read about that. It’s some kind o’ special power the Elements of Peace have.”

“You’ve never talked about it before. What do you remember about it?” Twilight asked levitating a quill and parchment out of her saddlebags next to her and Lemon Lime’s tent.

Big Macintosh scratched his head, one eye closed, trying to remember, “Ifn Ah remember right, it were different for each Element. The Element of Forgiveness could heal, Ah think.”



“That’s Dr. Mend,” Lemon Lime said, “We already knew that, he’s a doctor.”

Big Mac shook his head,  
“Naw, it was more than that, it was some kind of special thing that he could do it with. Yer the Element of Patience, that means you can time things just right. Ah think Ah can calm minds and ease pain and Trooper’s the Element of Perseverance so he can keep goin’ for a long time. Valiant’s the Element of Hope so he can make ponies make good decisions . . .”

“I don’t mean to sound doubtful, darling, but those sound fairly dull to me.” Rarity said, “Good timing, being calm, and making good decisions all sound like fine traits, but what’s so special about them? Anypony can make good decisions and remain calm.”

“Says the queen of panicky drama.” Rainbow Dash commented.

“I’m simply very passionate and animated in everything I do, darling.” Rarity defended.

“Well duh, we’re all animated.” Pinkie Pie said cheerfully.

Twilight arched an eyebrow,  
“Yeah.” she said doubtfully, “Anyway, I’m sure there’s more to it than that, Rarity. Whoever the author of that book was clearly knew something we don’t. I wouldn’t discard what a book says.”

“Twilight, darling, when have you EVER ignored anything a book said?” Rarity asked.

“How about when she overlooked ‘Supernaturals’ because of the title?” Pinkie Pie asked cheerfully.

“Moving on,” Twilight said, obviously embarrassed, “What were the other ones, Big Macintosh?”

“The Element of Discernment could predict what somepony was goin’ to do Ah think. That’s Sea Blue. Ifn Ah remember correctly, the book said we could only use the powers when we do somethin’ that’s along the same lines as our Elements. Ah can’t remember much else, sorry Twilight.” the large Earth pony said.

“So the Elements of Peace gain these special abilities when their actions are aligned with the traits of the names of their Elements?” Twilight asked.

“Ayup.” Big Mac agreed.

“Under the right circumstances, those traits could come in extremely handy. I think we should explore this some more,” Twilight yawned loudly, “In the morning. I’m going to bed.”

Her statement was met with quiet approval. The various ponies began heading off in the different directions of their tents. Rainbow Dash walked slowly over to the tent she shared with Trooper and Fluttershy, the latter had gone to sleep when nopony was paying attention. Dash looked down at her sleeping friend. Fluttershy was curled up, laying on her right side up against the left side of the tent, leaving Dash to sleep next to Trooper. Dash let out a small sigh and lay down next to Fluttershy. The multihued pegasus laid on her back and closed her eyes. Trooper entered the tent moments later and eyed the other two pegasi. Dash peeked out of her left eye, just enough to see without letting Trooper know she

was watching. Trooper leaned his head down and pulled up the dual blankets, covering the two mares. The royal blue stallion turned and zipped the tent closed then lay down and snuggled into the blankets. He shifted a couple of times before coming to rest on his left side, keeping Dash at his back. Within minutes, he was snoring lightly.

Outside the tents, on top of the hill, a lone figure sat, looking up at the sky. Applejack enjoyed a certain level of solitude when the mood took her. She closed her eyes, feeling the breeze shift through her mane. It had begun as a whisper, but had turned into a gentle bluster that blew her mane around her. Her thoughts drifted on the wind, going where they would. She thought about Apple Bloom and Granny Smith back in Ponyville, she thought about Zecora and Caramel keeping the farm of good order while she and her brother were gone. Thinking about Caramel always made her chuckle, *'He's the clumsiest, unluckiest pony Ah've ever known, but he don't let that stop him. He just bounces right back and keeps goin'.* Ah can't give him much, but he sure as sugar is determined.' Her thoughts drifted even farther on the subject of the clumsy stallion, *'Come to think of it, he ain't makin' much out on the farm. Ah wonder why he was so eager to stay and help? Don't he have a life of his own?'* her musings were interrupted by the sound of hooves behind her.

Applejack opened her eyes and turned to see who had joined her on the hill, "Live Wire? Ain't you supposed to be asleep?"

The short yellow therapist jumped, "Sorry Applejack, I didn't see you up here. I can leave you alone if you want."

"Naw, it's fine sugar cube. You must have something hog-sized on your mind to have missed me though. Ah ain't exactly hidin' out up here. You got somethin' you want to talk about?" Applejack offered, patting the ground beside her.

Lemon Lime sighed heavily and sat down next to the friendly farmer, "I was laying there, next to Twilight, and something occurred to me. This is the first time I've ever had so many friends in my entire life. Most ponies can't stand that I talk so much."

"Uh, Ah don't know if you've noticed or not, sugar cube, but you ain't been talkin' a lot here recently. Yall still talk all fast an' everything, but you've been sayin' a lot less." Applejack observed.

"I'm just so grateful, you know? Since meeting Valiant in Canterlot, I've had more and more friends. Most ponies don't know what true loneliness is, but I do. I lived it for years. It's terrible. I lived in one of the most populated cities in all of Equestria, but I was all alone. It's wonderful beyond words, having other ponies I can talk to, that actually care about me." Lemon Lime said.

Applejack detected a crack in the stallion's voice, "It's our pleasure, Live Wire. You're a good guy. Any mare would be lucky to have you."

"How do I tell her, Applejack?" he asked suddenly, "How do I do it?"

"Ah can't tell you that one. You've got to figure it out on your own. She already knows though." Applejack informed him.

"I know," Lemon Lime sighed again, "I heard. It's hard, Applejack, being so close to her at night and not

being able to hold her close.”

“Ah thought you did.” Applejack said.

“Well I do, but it’s not the same. It’s completely platonic between us right now and I want it to be so much more. It’s like . . . I don’t know. I want to be with her, Applejack, not just physically or anything that shallow, but really be with her. I appreciate her for her personality and her mind.” he said wistfully, “I mean she’s beautiful, obviously, but her mind, that’s the best. Oh she’s brilliant! She’s like a shining star among the pitch black of night. Her eyes are crystal clear windows into the most precious of souls. Her voice is smooth, like the gentle song of wind-chimes. Her mane perfectly complements the contours of her gorgeous face, and when she smiles it’s like the sun rising after an icy night. She can put the pieces of any puzzle, question, or equation together as if they had always made perfect sense. When she explains something, it’s like the answer was always right there in front of you but she was the only one to see it.”

He paused for a moment and laid his head on his fore hooves,  
“I could talk to her from morning to night and never be bored for even a moment. She’s amazing, Applejack. Even if we never have a romantic relationship, she’s enriched my life so much. I consider myself fortunate indeed to have had the privilege of knowing her and I consider it a true honor to be able to call her my friend.” he put his hooves over his eyes, “Oh, why can’t I ever say anything like that when she’s around?”

“You just did.” a soft voice answered from behind him.

Lemon Lime jumped up sputtering,  
“Twilight!” he squeaked, “I’m sorry! I wasn’t trying to talk about you behind your back . . . “

Applejack chuckled slightly,  
“She’s been standin’ there since you started talkin’ about her, Ah just didn’t say anythin’.” Applejack rose to her hooves and headed down the hill toward the tents, holding her hat down against the rising wind,  
“Ah’ll leave you to it then, sugar cube. Ah’m goin’ to bed.”

Lemon Lime lowered his head, he couldn’t look at the lavender unicorn mare in front of him,  
“I’m sorry you had to hear that, Twilight.” he said simply.

“But you’re not sorry you said it, are you.” Twilight said quietly.

“Should I be?” Lemon Lime asked.

“That’s not what I asked.” Twilight said.

“Well, you didn’t actually make it sound like a question, it was more like an observation or statement of fact.” he said.

Twilight stifled her reactive response and kept calm, ‘*Odious stallion!*’ she thought,  
“Is that really how you feel though?” Twilight asked directly.

“I never said anything because you have your studies. You don’t have time for romance and I didn’t want to burden you with the way I felt. You have your priorities and obligations and it’s not fair of me to try to

pressure you into feeling something you don't. I'm content enough to love you from a respectful distance . . . “

“Love me?” Twilight asked suddenly.

Lemon Lime hit himself in the head with his right fore hoof,  
“No! I mean yes! I mean . . . “

“So you don't?” Twilight asked, having to raise her voice over the growing wind.

“YES!” he yelled over the rising wind, “Yes! I love you! I love you more than I can say!”

“What?” Twilight yelled back, ‘*What's with this wind?*’ she wondered.

Lemon Lime looked around, finally realizing the intensity of the wind. He looked up and saw the sky was now blank and black, he could no longer see the stars. The two unicorns turned toward the camp below, where the wind was coming from. The plains stretching out below them as their eyes beheld a swath of pure darkness coming toward their hill. The darkness was accompanied by an intense rumbling, roaring sound akin to that of a passing train. The wind increased in its intensity and both ponies realized what was happening.

As one, they turned and bolted back down the hill as fast as their hooves could carry them yelling the same thing over and over,  
“Tornado!”

The intensity of the wind, not their cries, was the dominant factor in rousing their friends. Applejack, having just barely reached her tent, looked up and saw the swirling vortex of inky death surging toward the four flapping canvas structures. Without a moment's hesitation, she bit the flap of the tent and ripped open.

“Aww, Applejack,” Pinkie began, “Why'd you have to . . .”

“Tornado!” the orange farmer bellowed.

Dr. Mend, who had been laying placidly beside his pink counter-Element, shot up to a standing position in the flash of an eye,  
“Pinkie, grab your saddlebags, quickly! We have to run!”

Pinkie, unfazed as ever, hopped out of the tent in one fluid motion, somehow landing right next to her saddlebags,  
“Come on, Dr. Mendie you Pokey Mcpokerson, you're going to get blown away.”

Sea Blue pulled Rarity, tail-first, through the open flap behind himself,  
“I've bot our faddlebavs!” he said levitating the items into the air with his magic, “Come on, Rarify! Ve have to vo!”

Rarity, for her part, looked as if she had just woken up,  
“Let go of my beautiful tail this instant!” she quipped, “I'm perfectly capable of . . . “ she trailed off as

her eyes spotted the funnel cloud, “RUN!” she screamed, now pulling Sea Blue, who still had her tail in his mouth.

Big Macintosh apparently ended up being caught in a tangle of blankets. He tried to get his footing, but he could only get his head out of the opening of the tent. Applejack ran over to help him untangle himself from the mass of covers. Dr. Mend and Pinkie ran over to the pegasi tent just in time to have Rainbow Dash come zipping out through the flap, ripping it in the process.

Dash sized up the oncoming and quickly approaching tornado, “Trooper, Fluttershy move it! We have to get airborne and get away from this thing!”

Trooper leapt out of the tent and turned his head, grabbing Dash’s saddlebags, “Catch!” he yelled, having already thrown the bags into the air.

The cyan pegasus mare caught the bag-strap in her teeth and slung the pouches, haphazardly over her flank then secured them with a firm tug. Trooper wiggled into his own bags then turned back to the mare he was supposed to be protecting. Before he could get a word out, Dash zipped back into the tent. Trooper poked his head into the tent and saw Dash tugging on Fluttershy’s tail.

“Come on!” Dash grunted in frustration.

“I’m too scared!” Fluttershy whimpered.

“Would you rather be scared or dead!” Rainbow Dash yelled into her friend’s laid back ear.

Lemon Lime and Twilight ran over, already wearing their saddlebags, “What’s wrong?” the yellow therapist yelled.

“Oh no!” Twilight gasped, “She’s frozen isn’t she!” the lavender unicorn had to shout over the fierce wind.

“I can’t move her!” Dash yelled back in panic, “You got to help her, Twilight!”

“Take Trooper and get onto the hill! I’ll handle this!” Twilight ordered her friend.

“Screw the hill! I’m not leaving her!” Rainbow yelled back.

Twilight looked around. Applejack was trying to help her brother untangle himself and get out of one tent, Dr. Mend and Pinkie Pie had gained the hill where they stood next to Sea Blue and Rarity. Looking at the tornado, Twilight judged it to be no more than a mere hundred paces away. Her mind sped through hundreds of possible ways to survive until it hit on one that it judged to be the most likely to work.

“Applejack!” she yelled, hoping her friend could hear her over the roar of the wind, “Use your Element! Make a safe bubble and protect you and Big Mac!”

Applejack looked up. Her eyes were wide and her face drained of all color. She locked eyes with Twilight for one brief moment before the tornado ripped the tent up and off the ground, taking both ponies

with it. Turning her eyes back to her friends, Twilight saw Pinkie and Rarity glowing as they created small pockets of safe space for them and their guardians. Twilight turned back to the tent, with milliseconds to spare. She forced her will into her Element and leapt onto Lemon Lime and Fluttershy, encasing them with her. She looked to her side just in time to see Rainbow Dash get sucked up into the vortex. Trooper bellowed something unintelligible and leapt into the windstorm after her.

The purple unicorn's breath caught in her throat, fearing she had just witnessed the deaths of several of her friends. She had no time to think though. The tornado picked up the little sphere of protective magic and pulled it into its spiraling column. The ponies within flew around mercilessly as their sphere twisted and spun in insane and terrifying directions. The repeated impacts of their heads against the walls of the sphere quickly rendered them unconscious and they knew no more.

Outside, two Earth ponies, recently encased in a protective bubble shaped like an apple, planted their hooves against the hooves of the other. Brother and sister forced their backs up against the walls of the bubble to minimize the impacts as they were tossed around, uncaringly, by the violent wind.

Rainbow Dash rarely felt fear of any sort. The thrill of speed generally overpowered the icy grip of fear. As of right now, Rainbow Dash was not afraid, she was terrified. The breath was sucked from her lungs as the force of the wind ripped at every fiber of her being. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't stabilize herself, and pieces of debris kept striking her painfully. The wind blew dust and other particles into her eyes, blinding her painfully. She was being thrown around helplessly. She tried to concentrate on summoning her Element like Twilight had said, but she was beginning to black out. The power slipped away from her.

Suddenly four hooves latched onto her torso, holding her with a death grip. She felt cold metal rub up against her coat and a mouth envelope her whole muzzle, sealing it against the wind. She felt pressure against her nostrils and breathed in deeply. She focused her mind and called out to her Element. Power surged through her. A protective bubble formed over her and the pony holding her almost instantly.

The pressure of the wind ceased and she cracked her eyes open, trying to blink away the debris that obscured her vision. The 'floor' of the bubble was covered with dirt, grass, and sticks. The protective sphere bounced around wildly, whipping her into the other pony. Dash wiped her eyes with a hoof and had a brief moment to stare at the sight before her. Trooper lay limply against the 'floor' of the bubble, armor covering his body. After a brief moment, gravity seemed to vanish.

Dash looked around only to see the ground coming at them at incredible speed as they sailed through the air. Before she could react, the sphere smashed into the grass at a shallow angle. She bounced around inside the sphere like a ragdoll, smacking into Trooper time and time again. The sphere rolled for hundreds, if not thousands of paces before coming to a stop after an eternity of jarring, painful motion. Long before the sphere came to a stop, Rainbow Dash had been rendered unconscious by the force of the impacts.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Whee!" Pinkie Pie squealed in a much higher pitch than normal, "This is fun!"

"Ouch!" Dr. Mend griped as his head rebounded off the side of the bubble again, although the word 'bubble' was subjective at best.

To the older stallion, The ‘bubble’ more resembled a balloon; consequently it had roughly the same level of elasticity, just much more tough, ‘*Did she really have to fill it with helium though?*’ he wondered.

“Isn’t this great, Dr. Mendie?” Pinkie asked, “It’s like being inside a balloon, except a really, really big one!”

“How can you not be worried about the others?” the black stallion asked grumpily, hating the high pitch of his voice.

“They’re fine!” Pinkie said with limitless enthusiasm, “Twilight’s super-duper smart, Applejack’s too stubborn to give up, Rainbow Dash can think really fast when she needs to, and Rarity’s attention to detail is perfect, besides Twilight got to Fluttershy in time. They’ll all be fine, silly! Relax and have some fun!” she paused briefly, placing her hooves against the side of the ‘balloon’, “Look the tornado’s over!”

Dr. Mend looked around and to his astonishment, instead of falling like a rock, their protective, oblong, rubbery, ‘balloon’ was drifting down toward the ground at a gentle pace, “How are we not falling? Helium’s lighter than air, but our weight should easily overpower that.” he asked.

“Silly, we ARE falling! We’re just falling v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y.” Pinkie said elongating the two words then broke off into a fit of giggles, rolling around Dr. Mend’s hooves.

Despite the serious nature of the situation, Dr. Mend couldn’t help but to laugh at Pinkie’s antics, “You’re great, Pinkie Pie, you know that?” he laughed, “We could be dying and you would still be cracking jokes.”

\*\*\*\*\*

An impressively long distance away from the slowly drifting ‘balloon’ two unicorns slowly began the task of dis-entangling themselves from one-another,

“Darling, I appreciate your concern, but could you please remove yourself from on top of me. I’m fine and I assure you I don’t require an equine shield.”

Sea Blue groaned painfully and slowly raised his head, his tone set to ‘maximum snark’, “Just checking for any burrs in your mane, Rarity. I’m proud to say there are none whatsoever. Dirt and leaves, on the other hoof seem to be ‘in’ this season, but I think you’d look better wearing swamp slime.”

He slowly placed his hooves underneath himself and pushed up, “In all seriousness, I didn’t mean to end up on top of you like that, sorry.”

Rarity groaned and pushed herself up off the ‘floor’ of the round-cut gem shaped bubble, “I appreciate the apology, darling, but for future reference, I’ll thank you to refrain from making any comments about me wearing ‘swamp slime’ as you put it.”

“Concern noted, catalogued, and promptly ignored.” Sea Blue said playfully, “It’s a defensive mechanism to ease tension and I find it works well. Now, how do we get out of this thing?” he asked pushing on the

side of the gem shaped bubble with his hooves.

The bubble disintegrated promptly, causing Sea Blue to overbalance, flail his hooves comically, and fall flat on his face.

Rarity smiled at the counselor's supine posture and quipped over her shoulder, "Like that."

An icy wind suddenly blew in, billowing her mane and tail, "We have to find someplace to sleep, darling. This cold will end up freezing us to death."

Sea Blue rose to his hooves once more and looked around, "The tornado threw us a long way from the others and our tents are certainly long gone by now. I've got the fire starting stuff in my saddlebags, but we don't have any wood to burn and this wind would put out any fire in a matter of seconds. The starter logs only burn for a little while and they wouldn't throw off enough heat to make any difference. Do you have anything that might be able to help us right now? Come to think of it, I don't even know what you brought."

"Well," the white unicorn began hesitantly, "I have my personal grooming supplies."

"Please tell me you brought something more than vanity items." Sea Blue deadpanned.

Rarity stuck her nose up into the air with a loud \*humph\*, "I'm not vain, darling, I simply like to look my best at all times."

The sound of hooves scraping the ground caught her attention; Rarity turned around and saw the turquoise unicorn stallion digging his fore hooves into the dirt, "Darling, what are you doing? We need to find someplace to sleep, not dig a hole."

Sea Blue grunted as he continued digging, "I'm doing both. I've heard that dirt is a great insulator. We dig a hole, lay down in it and cover ourselves with dirt. Our natural body heat keeps us warm and the soil keeps us insulated. Come on, help me. Every second we stay out in this wind means one second closer we come to hypothermia, plus the movement will help keep you warm."

"Dirt?" Rarity asked incredulously, "You. Want. Me. To. Cover. Myself. With. DIRT?!"

Sea Blue grunted in frustration, but kept digging, "Would you rather be clean and frozen solid, or dirty and alive?" he asked pragmatically.

"If it's all the same, darling, I'd rather be clean and alive." Rarity said.

"I'm open for suggestions, if you have a better idea." Sea Blue said still digging, "Wait a second, You're a seamstress right? Couldn't you weave some of this grass together and make a couple of make-shift blankets for us? It wouldn't be perfect, but it would probably keep you cleaner."

"Well," Rarity began, "I do make the bird's nests during Winter Wrap Up." she sighed in defeat, "I suppose I can."



\*\*\*\*\*

More than a mile to the South, an Earth pony was busy digging another hole while his sister took stock of what they had to work with, “Ah suppose it’s a good thing you were stuck in that tent, Big Mac. These here blankets sure will come in handy. We can line the bottom with this here shredded tent canvas. It’s long enough to wrap us up completely, then we can have the blankets between us and the canvas then cover the whole thing with dirt.”

“Ayup.” Big Macintosh replied, “Hole’s almost finished. Are you sure you’re goin’ to be alright with that leg o’ yours A.J.? It looks mighty bad to me.”

“Ah’ll be fine.” Applejack assured her brother, “It’s just a scratch and a bump. Ah’ll be right as rain in no time, just you wait and see.”

“Taint no scratch, A.J. It’s laid wide open and you can’t put no pressure on it. Ah think it might be broken.” the red Earth pony replied.

“Ah tells ya it’s fine!” she retorted, “It’s just a tad tender is all. Ah’ve had worse workin’ out on the farm.”

“But then we had Dr. Mend around, he ain’t here this time. Ah think you should drink some o’ that healin’ potion that got left in the tent.” Big Mac said sagely.

“Ah couldn’t, even if mah leg is broke! If the bones ain’t set right, they might heal all wrong-like and then Ah’d never be able to walk right again!” Applejack argued.

“We could always try to set it ourselves then have you drink the potion.” Big Mac suggested.

“We can’t risk nothin’ like that right now. Ah’m sure we’ll find the others tomorrow. We’ll get it taken care of then, alright?” she offered.

“Alright, A.J. Ah trust you, but if that leg starts lookin’ worse by tomorrow afternoon, we ain’t goin’ to have any choice. If’n it gets all red an’ infected-like, you could be in some real trouble. The way Ah understand it, the potion can take care of all o’ that stuff. Now Ah want you to make me a promise here, A.J. Promise me that if your leg don’t look better by tomorrow afternoon you’ll let me try to set it an’ make you a splint then drink that potion.” Big Macintosh said concerned.

“Alright, Ah promise! You happy now?” Applejack said obstinately.

“Ayup. Hole’s done.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A disturbing distance off to the West, two other Earth ponies were doing their level best to prepare to weather the frigid night and wake up alive the following morning, “Why are you cutting the grass with your knife again Pinkie?” Dr. Mend asked.

His bright pink counterpart spat out her kitchen knife and explained jovially, “We need something soft to sleep on, Dr. Mendie. Using the emergency blanket to keep warm was a GREAT idea, but the ground will be super-duper cold, beside the tall grass can be a wind-breaker for us.”

“I can’t argue your logic, Pinkie, but do you think you could start calling me by my real name?” Dr. Mend asked, *‘She acts like a complete flake, but underneath it all she’s hiding a keen mind. I applaud you Pinkie Pie.’*

“Nope!” Pinkie chirped.

*‘Then again, maybe not.’* Dr. Mend thought sourly, “I think you have enough, Pinkie. I’ll help you spread it out on the ground, then we can work on trying to find the others in the morning.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to find them in just one day.” Pinkie replied, “We hardly went anywhere, while the others went zooming off in different directions. The balloon isn’t aerodynamic so the tornado couldn’t throw us very far. I can still see the hill you were sitting on top of earlier, from here.”

With the grass laid out, Dr. Mend removed the emergency blanket and spread it out over Pinkie before slipping in beside her,

“I’m not trying to get personal, Pinkie, but we need to be as close as possible to stay warm.”

Pinkie Pie responded by enveloping the older stallion in a giant hug, “Not a problem! I’ll just imagine I’m laying here on a romantic night with my future husband! I haven’t met him yet, but he’ll LOVE to snuggle!”

“I’m . . . not sure what to make of that statement, Pinkie.” Dr. Mend admitted, “I’m surprised you’ve ever given any thought to that sort of thing though. I always thought you might be, you know, into other mares. I mean, you’re always hanging out with Rainbow Dash.”

“I LOVE my friends, but I couldn’t ever, like, BE with any of them, it would be too awkward! Guys are so much cuter anyway!” Pinkie chirped, “Besides, what filly doesn’t imagine what her ideal guy’s like?”

“So, what do think he’ll be like?” Dr. Mend asked, honestly intrigued.

“He’ll be all, like, super suave and stuff! He’ll tell me that I’m pretty all the time, and he’ll love to snuggle up to me at night, and he’ll be really smart, but silly at the same time! We’ll do all sorts of things together, like play pranks and go out on dates even after we’re married! He’ll be able to appreciate me for just being me! I can’t wait to meet him!” Pinkie rattled off, “What about you, Mendie? What kind of mare do you see yourself with?”

“I never really gave the issue much thought, honestly.” Dr. Mend admitted.

“Well that’s silly!” Pinkie said, “Why not? If you don’t know what you want, how will you know when you meet her?”

Dr. Mend frowned silently, *‘Good point.’* he thought, *‘How can you be so wise, Pinkie?’*,

“We need to get some sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a tough day.”

“Okie dokie lokie! Good night!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Molasses trotted along, behind a group of rowdy fillies and colts. Miss Heartfelt had asked him to watch over them and the chocolate colored colt was determined to do his best. The youngsters dashed this way and that in a wild and random directions, some eating snacks while others wanted to meet the two heroes of Haysburg. Raspberry had wandered off earlier but returned a few minutes later. Molasses herded the younger ponies in the older filly’s direction, *‘Miss Heartfelt always asks her to help out, maybe she knows what to do. She’s smart.’* he thought.

The dark red Earth pony filly spotted Molasses and the little ones coming toward her and met them half way,

“Hi Molasses!” she greeted cheerfully, “What’s up?”

The slow colt raised his gaze to the sky, wondering what she meant, “Clouds?” he ventured shyly.

Raspberry covered her muzzle with her right hoof to hide her giggles, “Silly colt,” she laughed, “I meant to ask if you needed something.”

*‘Then why ask what’s in the sky?’* Molasses wondered, “Miss Heartfelt told me to watch the foals.” he said simply.

“Do you want some help?” Raspberry offered, “I can take half of them, if you want.”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said humbly, *‘I want to be smart too.’*

“Sure thing.” Raspberry said warmly, “Anypony who wants to meet Surf & Turf, follow me. Anypony who wants to stay with Molasses and meet Natival, go with him.”

Almost exactly half the foals went to Raspberry; she smiled and addressed Molasses, “You are going to take them to meet Natival, aren’t you?”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said.

Raspberry pointed with her hoof, “He’s over there. Have fun! We’ll meet back here when you’re done, alright?”

“Yes ma’am.” Molasses said.

Molasses led the energetic foals to the back of the line of ponies waiting to meet Natival, *‘I wonder what Natival is? It sounds like the cough medicine Momma used to give me, but if they want to see that, I’ll take them.’*

The foals quickly became impatient and Molasses was having a tough time keeping them in line

(bad joke, I know),

“Stay quiet when you’re in line and wait your turn. The ponies in front have been waiting longer than you have.” he told them quietly.

To the amazement of the other residents of Haysburg, the younger ponies actually listened to the slow colt. Molasses wasn’t surprised, *‘Miss Heartfelt said to always be patient with the foals and never yell at them, it upsets them and you might hurt their feelings.’* he thought.

From a distance, Heartfelt watched the chocolate colt dealing with the youngsters and smiled. She had been overjoyed to have Molasses to help her at the orphanage, even if she was sad to hear about his ‘Momma’ passing away. She was getting on in years and needed more and more help as the days wore on. Raspberry was a huge help, but Molasses was as reliable as the day was long. He never complained and he was always eager to help out in any way he could, whenever she needed him.

She would never admit it, but she was concerned about what would happen to the orphanage when she was too old to take care of the seemingly endless number of orphaned fillies and colts who came to live with her every year, *‘Molasses tries his best and he’s a wonderful helper, but the poor dear just doesn’t have the mental capacity to take over when I’m gone. I need somepony who can do all the things that need doing. Raspberry’s almost old enough to be declared an adult. She has her own life to live and it isn’t right of me to ask her to give up everything to take over when I’m gone. She’s going to begin her apprenticeship at the bakery this spring, so she won’t have the time to help out anymore.’* Try as she might, Heartfelt just couldn’t think of anypony to take over. The problem had been weighing in her mind for some years, but with no discernable answer in sight. She sighed heavily and turned her attention back to the trestle tables overflowing with food and decided to enjoy the evening and put her worries behind her.

The last pony finished speaking with Nativel and now it was the foals’ turn. They approached the disguised stallion tentatively, looking up at him with puzzlement and awe.

Little Damson happily trotted up to the quiet pegasus and peered sideways at him, “Are you the one who rescued me the other night when that mean gryphon tried to take me away? You sure don’t look like him.”

Nativel only nodded his head silently.

“Why don’t you say anything?” she asked innocently.

Nativel swallowed subtly, *‘Because Molasses has a perfect memory. He’d recognize my voice and call me by my name, then be confused as to why all the other ponies got angry.’* he thought.

He leaned his head over and whispered in the little filly’s ear, “I’ve been talking to ponies all night and my throat hurts. Why don’t you just ask me yes or no questions?” it wasn’t a lie, his throat was a bit sore, even so, he hated to disappoint the filly.

The filly turned to the other orphans, “His throat hurts so we have to ask him yes or no questions, guys.”

Suddenly all the foals swarmed over to him and began bombarding him with questions.

“Why are you dressed like that? Are you a ninja?” one cream colored filly asked.

Natal shook his head.

“I’ll bet you have some awesome battle scars from your fights against monsters!” an orange colt said.

Natal shook his head.

“Have you ever slayed a dragon?” a charcoal grey filly asked.

Again Natal shook his head.

“Have you done anything exciting?” Damson asked.

Natal nodded his head vigorously.

“Like what? Have you ever saved a village before?” the cream colored filly asked.

“He sure has, little babe! This righteous dude, once saved Canterlot from a crazy unicorn mage!” Surf said walking over.

“Woah!” the foals said.

“You got that right! He and his friends had to fight a chimera that the mage summoned!” Surf continued.

“What’s a chamera?” the charcoal colt asked.

“Chimera, little dude, it’s called a chimera. It’s a huge monster with three heads. It’s got a lion head and a goat head on the front and a snake’s head for its tail. The lion head can gobble you up and the goat head can breathe fire! The snake head on the back is all, like, venomous and stuff! I wish I could have seen it, it must have been awesome!” surf enthused.

Natal had broken out in a sweat, *‘Shut up Surf! Molasses heard me tell you all those things! He’ll be able to figure it out in no time!’* Sure enough, as Natal looked over to the chocolate colt, he saw a spark or recognition alight on his features. The only thing Natal could think to do was hold his hoof up in front of his mouth and shush Molasses quietly. Molasses clamped his mouth shut in puzzlement, *‘But Valiant did those things. He isn’t Valiant. He’s shaped like Valiant, but he’s not Valiant.’* Either way, Molasses kept quiet.

Natal looked up and noticed ponies beginning to gather around as Surf & Turf continued to expound his various exploits,  
“He was in Canterlot to study at the University when he first saw the unicorn. It was a dark night . . . “

As Surf continued with the story, all of Haysburg gathered around to listen. Many of the ponies wore awed expressions and some just looked doubtful. Natal had to admit, when Surf told the story, it sounded truly epic. Thankfully, the neon colored Earth pony had enough sense to omit any mention of the Elements of Peace and the pseudo-wings. By the time the story was over, everypony was eager to hear

more. Surf complied and related the story about his friend's fight with the Lupus. Toward the end of that story, plenty of tired yawns were going around.

Natal leaned over and whispered in Surf's ear,  
"I think it's time to say goodnight."

Surf nodded and turned to the gathered ponies,  
"Sorry dudes and babes, but it's, like, seriously late. Everypony needs to get some shuteye before tomorrow. Remember, anypony who wants to learn how to fight, meet here first thing in the morning. We totally understand if you have to work and everything and we're, like, totally willing to work with you if you have odd hours. Goodnight everypony."

A feminine voice hailed him from the back of the crowd,  
"Hey hottie! How about you walk your sexy backside over here and give your main girl a kiss! I've been missing you something fierce!"

Surf's jaw dropped open, he knew that voice well,  
"T . . . Tinker!?"

"Of course! Don't think you can get away without giving me some sugar tonight! I came all the way from New Yoke to see your sweet flank again, and I gotta admit, this place isn't as much of a dump as I'd heard." the voice called.

If there had been any doubt before, it went up in the cloud of smoke that rose above the crowd. The residents of Haysburg parted and sure enough Tinker sauntered up to the two surprised stallions, cigar and all. Surf & Turf ran up to her as quickly as he could. Tinker stopped and puckered her lips, expecting a kiss. What she got was a hoarse whisper in her ear while Surf hugged her.

"That's Valiant in the black outfit there. Don't say anything, babe, he's in disguise. I'll explain later." He whispered.

Tinker's face broke into a mischievous grin,  
"I won't, but you have to kiss me to convince me." she whispered back.

"Later, babe. I promise, just don't say anything." Surf repeated.

"Aw, I missed you too." Tinker cooed out loud, "Don't worry, I'll make it up to you tonight."

Several parents covered their foals' ears.

The Mayor walked out from the crowd and addressed the pair,  
"Do you know this mare?"

Surf let go of Tinker and turned to answer the Mayor,  
"I sure do! This is Tinker, she's the one who made my glider and hooks. She's a little . . . outgoing, but she's really good."

At the mention of her name, Tinker winked at the Mayor,

“That’s me toots! The best blacksmith this side of Canterlot. So,” she blew out a puff of smoke, “What can I call you, wrinkles?”

The Mayor’s face turned a frightening shade of purple,  
“You may address me as the Mayor of Haysburg, young lady. I also happen to be the Judge here in Haysburg.”

Tinker was utterly non-pulsed,  
“Sweet, good to know. Sorry if I offended you, Mayor Judgy-wudgy-pudgy. You’ve got a nice little joint here. Haysburg’s a lot better than the dump I’d heard it to be. You kids in need of a good blacksmith? If so, I’m available in more ways than one. Surf’s my main squeeze, but we’re not exclusive or anything.”

Tinker’s statement was met with such a level of silence, you could swear you heard the grass growing.

Surf leaned over and whispered in Tinker’s ear,  
“Hey babe, they’re a bit more reserved here. You might want to tone it down before you offend somepony.”

Tinker looked around and saw the Mayor’s face beginning to contort in unnatural ways,  
“Uh, sorry miss Mayor.” she said sheepishly, “I don’t mean any insult. I just tend to speak my mind.”

“I think you should speak it a bit more politely in the future and remember who you’re addressing. All that aside, welcome to Haysburg.” the Mayor said, calming down a bit.

The older Earth pony turned to the gathered residents of her village,  
“Let’s get some sleep everypony. We have a big day tomorrow.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Things are beginning to pick up now, don’t worry the dull part is over. As always, I LOVE any and all feedback any of you want to throw my way. It doesn’t matter if you want to tell me how much you like the story, address what you see as problems, or if you just want to tell me to go take a long walk off a short pier. I respect the fact that you take the time out of your lives to post something and I have enough respect for you to do my best to respond. My schedule is going to change so I won’t be able to take any super late calls from you guys who do so. As always though, feel free to shoot me a text or e-mail. If you want to call, I adore it when you guys contact me, but please text me first. My phone number is still the same: 757-779-0385. I’m already working on the next chapter, but I may end up being somewhat delayed in the posting. My wife and I are moving into our apartment soon and things will be hectic for a while, until we get settled. Fear not, I’m still going to keep writing. If I don’t post for a while, I apologize in advance. See you all soon. Truthseeker.

SUBNOTE: If you get bored waiting for the next chapter, here is my reading list recommendation: Past Sins, It’s a Dangerous Business Going Out Your Door, Heart of Gold Feathers of Steel, Macintosh, The Thessalonica Chronicles, Mort Takes a Holiday, The Party Never Ended, The Color You Bleed (horribly underrated, the author is INCREDIBLE), It Takes a Village, The Logical Option (despite the grammatical errors), Giving Love a Helping Hoof , and (if you’re in the mood for something so unrealistic, grammatically retarded, super-macho and over-sexed that it kills more brain cells than smoking a bale of hashish) The Ballad of Sir Spike De Draco.

These are but a few examples of the stories I've grown to love. There are plenty more, go find them, let them enrich your lives and expand your horizons. As a great turtle once said, "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift. That's why they call it 'the present'" or in Latin: *carpe diem* (seize the day)(not to be confused with: *carpayment diem*. Seize the checkbook)