

## Chapter 16

Rainbow Dash's eyes shot open, and she sat up, looking around. Rarity and Applejack were beginning to stir as well, the latter's eyes slowly creaking open as Dash looked at her. "Mornin'," the orange earth pony said, stifling a yawn.

"Morning," the sky-blue pegasus said, shaking her head a bit. Her dreams had been vivid, pulsing with the colors of the Dreaming. She wondered if that would be the case from now on when she dreamed. She looked at the dark blue sigils wrapped around her front hooves, still a little surprised every time she saw them. She closed her eyes, relaxed her spirit, and let the lightning in, not much, just gently, until she could feel the tiny tendrils of sparks curling around her heart and bones. As she had suspected, it was an excellent pick-me-up, banishing whatever lingering tiredness had hounded the corners of her eyes.

Rarity rose to a sitting position. "Good morning, everypony," she said brightly, her horn shimmering. One of her saddlebags opened, and her small mirror and brush swirled out of it; she levitated the former in front of her while she brushed at her violet mane with the latter. "I hope you all slept wonderfully."

"Somepony's in a good mood," Applejack said, reaching around for her hat. She found it and put it on her head.

"Just had a very restful... and very rewarding... night," said Rarity. There was a kind of twinkle in her voice, the shimmer of mystery that set Applejack's eyebrow rising. It hadn't been a lie, but it had certainly been cryptic. However, it was yet another thing the orange earth pony felt no need to pry into.

A bell began to ring softly just outside the bower. Crawling forward, Dash grabbed the curtain with her mouth and pulled it to the left. Ines was standing on the ground, a ringing bell floating in the air between her antlers. "Good morning!" the scarlet-eyed doe said brightly. "I trust you all slept well!"

"We sure did!" Dash exclaimed, hopping out of the bower with a flutter of her wings. "I didn't think a flat pad and a sheet on top of *crystal* could be so comfy."

"Simplicity is often the most relaxing thing, at least that's what I've found," Ines replied. The bell between her antlers vanished. "Come, breakfast is ready. You will once more be dining with Our Lady."

"Just a moment..." Rarity said, holding out a hoof. She had worked her way to the end of her mane, giving the ringleted violet hair another curling brush. "There we are, right as rain." The brush and mirror retreated into the white velvet saddlebag. "Now, you were saying something about breakfast, dear?"

"Yes," Ines said. Rarity hopped onto the ground, followed by Applejack. "Lady Falalauria desires your company at her morning meal. If you'll follow me."

"Ain't it the same place as before?" Applejack asked.

"No, not this morning," the deer said. "Come, I'll show you." She turned and began to walk through the trees, the three ponies following in her wake, Rarity in the lead, then Applejack, and lastly Rainbow Dash. They passed several other bowers hanging at various heights off the ground. Dash followed one up into the trees with her eyes and was startled to realize- "Hey! The lights are white now!"

The pinpoints of light hovering at the top of the forest canopy had changed color; where before they had been gold, they were now silvery-white, casting a bright and clean radiance down to the forest below. Ines nodded. "They change color according to the time of day," she explained. "They begin the morning silver, and gradually fade to gold as the day wears on. They are fullest gold at midnight, and from there gradually lighten to silver as dawn approaches. It helps us keep our day and night

cycles straight.”

*It couldn't have been much past midnight when I talked with Falalauria, then,* Rarity thought, remembering how very gold the lights had been. Then she recalled the way they had pulsed and strobed... She suppressed a shudder. She had very much believed Falalauria when she had said she was deciding whether to kill them or not. Was Rarity's speech to her the only thing that had kept her and her friends alive? The white unicorn felt the wet tingle of averted disaster flood her body. She hadn't given any thought to what she had been saying, that speech about faith; she had spoken from her heart.

They passed out of grove filled with crystal bowers and into a small thicket, where they wended their way around smaller trees and bushes. In short while they emerged into a clearing, the silver lights casting a gleam like daybreak across the open space. A waterfall was thundering down into a pool at the clearing's center, and on the right bank a table had been laid out, crystal atop a wooden platform as before. Falalauria stood beside the table, wearing a streamer of golden silk between her antlers and a crystal diadem upon her head. Approaching her, Ines bowed, prompting the ponies to do the same. The doe spoke to the golden hind briefly- in Laewtil, Rarity realized- then nodded at them and left. “Good morning, my friends,” Falalauria said gently. “I trust you all slept well?”

“Like a foal,” Applejack replied.

“Good,” said the golden hind. “Breakfast will be ready momentarily, but first, I thought you all might wish to take a bath.” She looked toward the clear pool.

“Oh, yes!” Rarity cried happily, trotting to the water and stepping carefully into it. It was lukewarm, not hot but not cold.

“A bath sounds mighty nice, I must admit,” Applejack said.

“Do I have to?” Dash said with a squint.

“For Celestia's sake, Dash,” Rarity called, “when was the last time you had a bath?”

“Um...” the sky-blue pegasus thought. Had she taken a bath in Gildedale? She could swear she had just once. She couldn't remember it very well, though. “The last time for *sure* I had a bath? Um...”

“That settles it,” Rarity said flatly. “Come on, the water's fine!” She used her magic to tug on Dash's front legs, pushing her to walk forward.

“Okay, okay!” Dash laughed, fluttering over to Rarity. She tucked in her wings and dropped into the pool, splashing the white unicorn. “Anything for you, Rares.”

“I don't suppose y'all got any soap?” Applejack asked. Falalauria responded with a shimmer of her antlers, causing three bars of herbal soap to appear by the shore of the pool. Rarity gave a squeal of delight and rushed for a bar, grabbing it between her hooves and quickly working up a lather.

Laughing, the orange earth pony removed her hat and carefully entered the water.

“Hold still, Dash, I'll get your wings,” Rarity said, rubbing lather through Dash's matted feathers. Dash stifled a laugh at the sensation. Rarity grinned. “Oh, I didn't know you were *ticklish* here,” she said slyly, running her hooves all through Dash's feathers. The pegasus laughed giddily, twisting and writhing away from the unicorn in the water.

Applejack chuckled. It was nice to see Rarity in a playful mood, so improper for once. She reached for her own soap and began to scrub under her forelegs. She found the soap worked nicely as a shampoo as well, so she gave her blond mane and tail a much-needed scrub. When she dunked her head for the final time, she lifted it and saw plates waiting for them at the table. “C'mon, y'all, breakfast is on,” she said, stepping out of the water. Falalauria was already reclining at table, waiting for them.

“I don't suppose you have any towels, My Lady?” Rarity asked as the three dripping ponies approached.

Falalauria shook her head. "We have little need of them here, because we can do *this*," and her antlers shimmered. A warm wind seemed to scrape over every inch of their bodies, and in a second the three of them were fully dry. She smiled. "Now come, there's celery and spring rolls waiting for you. We have also prepared some tea."

"Sounds good!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, fluttering to a place at the right of the golden hind. She picked up a teacup between her hooves and began to sip it. "Ooo, this is good stuff."

"Dash, I didn't know you liked tea!" Rarity said, settling down across the table from her. "You simply must join me for tea sometime."

"Well, I don't drink it *too* often," the sky-blue pegasus admitted, "but I do like it when I can get it."

"Then we will have to set something up," Rarity said firmly.

"Y'all can keep yer tea, thank ye kindly," Applejack said, settling down beside Rarity. "M'lady, I don't suppose you'd have some coffee, or somethin' along those lines?"

"I think I can work something out," Falalauria said, her antlers shimmering again. An earthen mug of dark black liquid appeared in front of Applejack's place, eliciting a smile from the earth pony. Not even the Daleponies had had coffee! She took a long pull, relishing the bitterness and the high temperature.

"Oh, er, sorry, m'lady," Applejack said when she realized Falalauria had not blessed their meal. "I didn't mean to start before grace."

"That's all right," Falalauria said. "It's just us this morning. I typically take my breakfasts alone, so you're free to bless or not bless your own meals."

"Thank you again for all your hospitality," said Rarity, levitating a spring roll with her magic. "It has been... revelatory, staying in your midst."

"I can say the same," Falalauria said, her cryptic speech setting off Applejack's senses again. Rarity had as well, just a moment before. But she chose to ignore both warnings.

*I'm gonna have to get used to ignorin' it, she thought, if I wanna use it. Everypony tells lil' white lies sometime.* She hoped that when they were away from the Shimmerwood and its magic, her truth sense would at least be less urgent. She took another gulp of her coffee, while Dash and Rarity sipped their tea.

"Since we are alone, free from the ears of my white-tails, you may ask me any further questions you wish about your Elements of Harmony and their gifts," Falalauria said. "I would prefer not to speak of them in the company of the other deer. I trust them, but your status as Bearers of the Elements is not well known, and I know Celestia wishes to keep it that way, so the fewer that know the better."

"Fine by me," Applejack said. "I don't much feel like spreadin' it around either."

"Hey, Falalauria," Dash asked, "did you find out anything more about the Element of Loyalty? I was just wondering..."

"As a matter of fact, I did," Falalauria said. "I can tell you privately, if you wish."

"Nah," said the sky-blue pegasus, "I don't have a problem with my friends knowing."

"Very well," said the golden hind. "The Element of Loyalty grants those aligned with it the gift of inspiration and strengthening."

"Inspiration?" Dash repeated. "You mean I give them ideas?"

"After a fashion," Falalauria said. "Because you are so loyal to your friends, your home, and the causes you believe in, you can inspire others to feel the same degree of loyalty to their own causes—or to your causes, or any cause you choose. Moreover, you can inspire them to move forward in the face of daunting challenges. If their courage is failing, you can restore it. If their strength leaves them, you can help them find more. If their spirits are broken, you can mend them. I suppose a better way of putting it is that the Element of Loyalty grants those aligned with it powers of leadership."

“Well, I guess I get that part,” Dash said. She put a hoof to her chin. “I never have been good at following orders... so it would be weird if I had *following* powers,” she said with a chuckle. “And I have always done my own thing...”

“And others have followed you, have they not?”

“I don't really take the lead in anything, though,” Dash admitted sheepishly.

“What're you talkin' about, Rainbow?” Applejack said. “Half the ponies in town think you're the coolest thing ever. All the foals look up to you- even Apple Bloom thinks you're amazin'.”

“But that's not really the same as *leading*,” Dash protested, a note of uncertainty in her voice. “No pony ever wants to go where I lead them when I actually try to lead.”

“You have yet to come fully into your gift,” Falalauria said. “In time, if you choose to develop your talents, you could have great powers of leadership- and you could build beyond that to a general talent at persuasion. You are not ungifted with that, I think.”

Dash had to admit she was good at goading others into action. Even the toughest and most stoic of ponies in Ponyville could be moved to act by her taunting and her needling. She didn't really equate that with leadership, but she supposed they were sort of following her lead. Then there was Applejack's point about the children of Ponyville. She had of course noticed their hero worship. Nearly every little filly or colt that met her went home to their parents that evening proclaiming that they wanted to be just like Rainbow Dash- even the ones that weren't pegasi. In fact, Twilight Sparkle had told Dash that she had inspired her to be more brave and less meek in the face of danger. All of that was well and good, but did it count as a supernatural power?

“Dash, every time you've given a speech or taken a stand, you've gotten followers,” Rarity told her, seeing the doubt on her face. “You even caused me to rethink you, just by your proclamations. Getting me to reconsider my judgments is no small thing.”

“I guess... so,” Dash said, thinking that in fact she had never expected Rarity to consider being as close a friend to her as she had become. This sent a chill up her spine. “Hey,” she said, turning to Falalauria, “does that mean I'll never be able to tell when somepony really agrees with me and when somepony is just *made* to agree with me?” Her rose eyes wavered. “C-can I have real friends?”

“Of course you can,” the golden hind said, smiling gently at her. “Being a leader and being a friend are different degrees of relations. You may be able to compel others to follow you, but that doesn't make them your friends- and any real friends you make will not be so because you forced them to be.”

“Rainbow, I been your friend a good while,” Applejack said with a kind look, “and I never once felt like I had to be. Believe me, if I did, I wouldn'ta liked it near as much.”

“I really am your friend, Dash,” Rarity said reassuringly, “and no amount of magic could have forced it.”

“Well...” Dash felt her insides stewing. She opened herself up, felt the lightning come in, let it tingle inside her. *I am a leaf on the wind*. The friendships she'd made had come to her- she hadn't forced them on anypony. She never tried to- if a pony (or a griffin or any creature) wouldn't put up with her, she just left them to their business. “I think you girls may be right.” She let her doubts wash away, opened herself up to the movements of the world- but wasn't that following? Her good vibes were abruptly halted. How could she lead and be a leaf on the wind at the same time? “But being a leader... I think... means knowing when to lead and when to follow... right?” She looked around the table at them. She thought more. “Sometimes I take the lead in things- a lot of times. But now... after what the pronghorns taught me, I've realized that sometimes you need to open yourself up to other influences. You can't just charge at whatever you want doing things your own way. You have to let yourself be led sometimes, even if you're meant to be a leader.”

Falalauria's starry eyes squinted from her smile. “Spoken like the wisest Kings and Queens of

the Elk,” she said. “You will be a fine leader, Rainbow Dash- you already are, more so than you think.”

“I sure hope I can be,” the sky-blue pegasus said, unable to fully shake her uncertainty. “I’d hate to lead anypony astray.”

“All right, that’s two Elements down,” Applejack said, gently taking command of the conversation, “one to go, right? What about Rarity?”

“Yeah,” Dash said, “she has the Element of Generosity- what’s *her* special power?”

Falalauria gently glanced at Rarity from the corner of her eye. The white unicorn in turn gave the tiniest of nods. “I informed Rarity of her gift last night,” she said, “but if you are curious yourselves, the Element of Generosity grants those aligned with it the ability to perceive the needs of others at great distances in space and time. They can see those in need from far away. They can also look into a creature’s past and see what needs they might have as a result of their life’s circumstances. Furthermore, they can look into a creature’s future, to see what needs they will eventually have.”

Applejack’s front hooves pounded the table as she stared at Rarity on her left. “You can see the future? You?!”

“Surprise,” Rarity said meekly, grinning.

“So you’re just like Falalauria!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “That’s so cool!”

“Not completely like me,” Falalauria said. “Rarity does not have my ability to detect truth, so she cannot be certain which of the futures she sees is the correct one. But yes, she does possess a talent much like mine.”

“I just hope I can manage it,” Rarity said. “I confess I spoke with Lady Falalauria last night about it, and she made it sound quite daunting.”

“It is a great burden, if you allow it to be,” said Falalauria, levitating her teacup with her magic. “All of your gifts can become burdens if they weigh too heavily on you- if you do not control them. Keep in mind, my friends, that these gifts were given to you for you to use. Do not let *them* use *you*. I once made that mistake,” she said. The three ponies leaned towards her. “I once felt compelled to look into the past and the future of everything I thought of or saw or heard about. I grew a bit... obsessed with the details of things.”

“Sounds familiar,” Applejack whispered in Rarity’s ear.

“It reached the point that, one day, I tried to See *everything*. I tried to See all times and all places at once- I tried to achieve true omniscience.”

“What happened?” Rarity asked.

“I did it- for less than a second,” Falalauria said. “Then the strain shattered my mind. I went completely mad, and was not able to recover for a very long time.” She looked down and spoke more quietly. “I learned to love my white-tails even more then. They and their truth sense helped me return to myself, and they maintained the Shimmerwood in my invalidity.”

Rarity was trembling. Applejack leaned against her.

“That’s another lesson, by the way,” Falalauria said. “Do not bear your Elements and their gifts alone. There are six Elements of Harmony for a reason. They are meant to support and strengthen each other, for they are different aspects of one friendship. In the same way, you three, as well as your three other friends, are all parts of a whole, meant to combine to form something far greater than you could be on your own.”

“What *are* the other three gifts?” Rarity asked. “What about the gifts for the Elements of Kindness, Laughter, and Magic?”

“I would prefer to tell the Bearers of those Elements themselves,” Falalauria said. “In this I follow Celestia’s lead, as well as the lead of the Deer Elders. They thought it prudent to keep a creature’s alignment with one of the Elements a private affair until such time as the creature chose to reveal it herself. I will say that, from what I have seen, your three other friends are already aware of

their gifts, and already use them, whether they know the full meaning behind them or not.” Falalauria nodded firmly. “And I See the day coming when all six of you will be informed of each others' full potential. Wait for that day- and when it comes, be prepared to lean on each other.”

Applejack pulled away from Rarity, satisfied that the white unicorn's fear had abated. “We already do that plenty, m'lady,” she said, “and by golly, Rarity and Rainbow and I have done it a lot on this trip, too.”

“I think this journey has been good for all three of you,” Falalauria said. “It has made you stronger and firmer friends, and it has revealed great truths about each one of you. The three of you did not know your Elements of Harmony as well as your friends, so your experiences have been helpfully illuminating. Now, though, you are reaching the journey's close,” she said. “So I would ask you to eat your breakfasts. The end of your traveling is almost at hand.”

“Except for the trip back to Ponyville, I guess,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Ah, yes,” Falalauria said absent-mindedly, “I *suppose* there is that as well...”

Applejack arched an eyebrow, but said nothing. She resumed nibbling on a celery stalk she had started earlier, then took another drink of her coffee. Beside her, Rarity took careful bites of a spring roll, chewing neatly and quietly. Dash, as usual, was displaying horrible table manners, but Rarity either did not notice or did not mind. They ate the rest of their meal in silence, and in little time the food was gone.

“Now, I and my morning party shall escort you through the remainder of the Shimmerwood,” Falalauria said, rising to her hooves. “It's not terribly far, and our western border runs into the foothills of the Archback Mountains.”

“Beg pardon, m'lady,” Applejack said, “but we gotta go back and get our stuff.”

“Did you unpack anything last night?” the golden hind asked.

“Well, no...”

Falalauria's great antlers shimmered. Instantly, Rarity and Rainbow Dash were wearing their saddlebags. With a ripple of leather, Applejack's armor appeared firmly fastened on her body. A moment later, her own saddlebags were buckled to her flanks. Rarity put some telekinetic pressure on her right saddlebag; the book was still inside. “Come with me,” the golden hind said, turning and leading them further towards the waterfall.

“Hey, I've got another question,” Dash said, flapping her wings and fluttering beside Falalauria.

“Yes?”

“You say we've got the Elements of Harmony inside us,” said the sky-blue pegasus, “but what about those necklaces we got when we first used them on Nightmare Moon? You know, the ones with our cutie marks on them?”

“Necklaces...” the golden hind murmured, sliding her eyelids partially closed. A moment later her eyes opened fully. “They are foci. They are meant to concentrate both your own inner magic and the magic from the surrounding world into your spirits where the Elements of Harmony reside. Wearing them will provide a temporary strengthening of your Elements and their corresponding gifts. Over the long term, wearing them will slowly build your gifts' permanent power. Exercising the gifts is still the best way to strengthen them, but if you want even more assistance, wearing your necklaces is a good idea.”

They turned to the right and headed into the trees, passing through brush and fallen branches. Dash dropped to the ground and walked beside Applejack, with Rarity on Applejack's other side. In a short while they emerged onto a clear, grassy path, the trees pulling back around it. Ines and seven other deer in full armor were waiting for them, and bowed at Falalauria's arrival. Falalauria nodded her head at them. “This is our party for the day,” she said brightly, turning to the three ponies. “Right now we are near the center of the Shimmerwood. It's less than half a day's journey to the western border,

and we need not rush. I allow you all to set the pace- travel as quickly or slowly as you desire.”

The Equestrian ponies regarded each other. “We oughta at least keep up a trot,” Applejack said.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Rarity said. “I would like to be in the mountains by nightfall.”

“So let's go!” said Rainbow Dash, heading down the path at a brisk trot. Applejack fell into step beside her. Rarity came behind them, Falalauria beside her, the golden hind's long legs permitting her to keep up with them at a walk. The eight deer followed close behind, and the whole party set off down the grassy avenue.

As they moved, deer emerged from the trees on either side, some of them even standing up in the branches overhead. They all bowed low at Falalauria's passing, and she nodded her head each time. Does, bucks, and fawns of varying ages all watched them eagerly, but usually darted back into the trees after they had gone by. “How many deer live in the Shimmerwood?” Rarity asked Falalauria. “I seem to have seen a great number of them.”

“How many at any one time is difficult to say,” Falalauria admitted. “The Shimmerwood's magic is great, so it has a stretching effect on those who live in its borders.”

“Stretching?” Dash repeated. “What's that mean?”

“It means that those who are, are a bit more in the Shimmerwood,” Falalauria said. “Some deer who are not yet born occasionally walk in the woods, and some deer who have already died can nevertheless be found here, at least for a while.”

“In the Dreaming, I learned that being never stops,” Dash said, “and I wonder if it ever starts, either.” Her brows knitted in thought. “Do we all just... exist forever? Is the world just a place we are for a while, before going on to something else?”

“Such has been the question of many philosophers from the antlerkin, the ponyfolk, the camels, and countless other species,” Falalauria said. “The magic of existence itself is a thing each creature must explore in their own way. Of all the species I have encountered, the pronghorns are the most knowledgeable about such things, though the wisdom they would impart is often difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, for all they experience in the Dreaming, their dispositions are almost uniformly sunny.” Falalauria smiled to herself. “If they can confront the mysteries of Being so frequently and maintain a perpetually cheery mood, then what they've learned can't be too bad.”

The conversation died out for a while, the ponies content to think their own thoughts. Applejack was anxious now that they were on the move. She wished she could go faster, but Falalauria did not seem in the mood for swift travel, and Applejack didn't know the way out. She assumed if she followed their current path she would reach the Archback Mountains, but there was no guarantee of that, not after everything she'd been told about the Shimmerwood. To prove the point, they came to a place where the road forked in two. The rightward fork led slightly upwards, making it the natural choice in the orange earth pony's mind; but Falalauria indicated they should take the left fork, which sloped downwards. Applejack was in no position to argue, so they headed to the left. All the way to the left of the path, the ground dropped off into a vale filled with trees. The orange earth pony realized that they had been slowly ascending all the while. *I really don't know where I'm goin'*, she thought to herself. Then she wondered if she could have used her truth sense to pick the proper path. At first Applejack didn't think much of the idea, but the more she considered it, the more she realized it was a distinct possibility. Falalauria had said that her gift was determining truth, and didn't that include finding true paths to her destination? In fact, Falalauria's own truth sense allowed her to see a creature's true nature. Could Applejack do it also? She was the Element of Honesty, after all. *For ponies, true nature means cutie mark*, she thought. It made a grin spread across her face. Maybe she could tell Apple Bloom what her cutie mark would be.

“You know, as long as you're still answering questions...” Rainbow Dash asked over her

shoulder.

“Yes?” Falalauria asked.

“Well, I've kinda got a small one in mind,” she said. “Or I guess it's not so small, but it's not really a big deal. Still, if you know the answer, I'd love to hear it.”

“Ask,” said Falalauria.

“What's the deal with the weather out here?” the sky-blue pegasus asked. “I mean, in both the Shimmerwood and Gildedale, you've got to get rain sometime, right? And the season change, don't they?” Falalauria nodded. “But how? I mean, I guess you deer make weather with your magic, but what about Gildedale? How do they get their weather?”

“They get it from Equestria,” said Falalauria, eliciting surprised looks from all three ponies. “As do we in the Shimmerwood. We do shape some of the weather around the forest with our magic, but we get most of our weather from the actions of pegasus ponies in Equestria, and Gildedale gets nearly all their weather thusly.”

“That doesn't make any sense!” Dash cried, stopping and causing a halt to the party. “There aren't any pegasuses-”

“Pega-” Rarity began, but Applejack suddenly pushed her back.

“No!” the orange earth pony snapped. “I've had enough! I'm **sick** o' hearin' this! I heard it all the blasted way here and I **won't** hear it no more!” She turned to Rarity and glared at her, causing the white unicorn to retreat a few paces. “Rarity, no more correctin' Rainbow!” Then she wheeled on the sky-blue pegasus and began to stalk towards her. Dash's ears flattened against her head at the furious approach. “And **you**, Rainbow, you're gonna get it right once and for all! It ain't 'pegasuses'! It's 'pegasi'! You hear me! You got that?! It's PEGASI. PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI PEGASI!!!” she was shouting right into Dash's face. Dash's pupils had grown to the size of saucers. Her bottom lip was trembling.

“O... okay...” she said quietly. “Pegasi. Got it.” She swallowed hard.

A sound like ice in a goblet gradually rose into their ears. Both Dash and Applejack turned their heads sharply to the side. Falalauria was *laughing*, a melodious sound, yet not dainty, for it grew quite loud quite quickly. Rarity began to chuckle, at first trying to stifle it, then giving up and breaking into fits of laughter. Several of the deer behind them also began to laugh. Applejack bit her lip, trying to remain cross. Dash grinned hugely, a few giggles rising in her throat. Soon she too was laughing. Applejack screwed up her face, resisting with all her might, but finally unable to stop a sharp guffaw from breaking through her composure. She gave in, laughing heartily, and finally the whole party was taken up with laughter, echoing through the trees.

By slow degrees the laughing subsided. “Oh, my,” Falalauria murmured, then paused to stifle a chuckle. “I've been waiting for that the whole morning. Seeing it in my mind wasn't nearly as funny as watching it actually happen.”

“Happy to be of service,” Dash said smartly, throwing up a hoof in salute. “So like I was saying...”

“There are no pegasi in Gildedale, I believe you were saying.”

“Right! And we never go there! At least I never hear of Equestrian pegasu- *pegasi* going over the mountains. So what do you mean they get their weather from us?”

“Most of the world gets its weather from Equestria- indirectly,” the golden hind said. “The weather you create for Equestria alters temperature, pressure, and air currents in the atmosphere above it, and those alterations spread out from Equestria's borders, where they interact with existing atmospheric conditions and bring about changes. These changes spread out across the world, forming weather patterns and temperature changes, and even seasonal shifts, far beyond your country. There are other creatures in other nations that can manipulate the weather, like the pronghorns you've already



met. They help regulate global weather as they travel by altering the energy in the atmosphere through their lightning. But the pegasi and unicorns and even the earth ponies of Equestria do much of the work making weather for the whole world.”

“That's amazing!” Dash said. “No pony ever told me I was helping make the world's weather!”

“It's incredible!” Rarity agreed.

“Incredible, and quite true,” Falalauria said. “You ponies and your country are more important than you realize. Much life and strength flows out of Equestria, and it touches places far removed from any pony's normal life.”

“What about places like the Everfree Forest?” Rarity asked. “Weather there seems to happen on its own, without any guidance. Is that a ripple effect of pegasus weather too?”

“Some of it is, because weather naturally moves through the whole of the sky,” the golden hind said. “However, the Everfree Forest is one of a small number of places around the world where the ambient magic is strong enough that nature can keep its own order. It's a self-sufficient environment, with the plants feeding the weather and the animals, the weather supplying the animals and the plants, and the animals helping manage the plants and even the weather. The Everfree Forest is very old, and it has been a font of powerful magic since its earliest days. That is why its ability to manage itself has endured. Believe it or not, nature used to control itself all over the world.”

“Hold up, now, really?!” Applejack exclaimed.

“But that's impossible!” Rarity cried.

“It... is it?” Dash said, prompting the other two to look at her. “I mean, we just found out Equestria makes the world's weather. Is it more impossible than that?”

“But plants and animals and weather lookin' after themselves the whole wide world over...” Applejack trailed off. She stomped her hoof on the ground. “It ain't right! It don't make no sense!”

“It is the truth,” Falalauria said. By now, everyone had stopped walking, and the three ponies were turned together to face her. “The whole world used to once be like the Everfree Forest, self-managing and independent of intelligent control.”

“All right,” Applejack said, still some skepticism in her voice, “let's say you're right, and the whole world *was* once like the Everfree Forest. Why ain't it like that now?”

Falalauria's expression grew dark. She lowered her head. Behind her, the ponies saw the deer escorting them suddenly looking sad and ashamed. Falalauria sighed. “I'm afraid that is *our* fault,” she finally said. “Well, not specifically the fault of us present... but the fault of the deerfolk, the fault of our war. The magic we used in battle grew more and more powerful as the years progressed. Eventually, our spells grew so strong that casting them did irreparable harm to nature all over the world. The movement of the weather, the growth of the plants, the instinctive behavior of the unintelligent animals- all of it was disrupted by the war. By the end, the whole natural order had been shattered, and it has never been restored. Now we thinking, magical creatures must do the work that nature once did itself, you ponies most of all.” She smiled sadly at them. “I hope you do not think too ill of us. We have saddled you with a great burden and never even apologized. You ponies must manage nature because we deer *broke* it.”

Applejack stared intently at Falalauria for a moment; Rarity and Rainbow Dash waited to see what she would say. Her green eyes bored into slices of night sky between the great hind's eyelids, but found them inscrutable. “You said you weren't around for the war, right?” she finally said. “That you were born after, right?”

“Yes,” Falalauria said.

“And all your white-tails, they were born after the war, too?”

“That's right,” Falalauria said.

“Then there's nothin' to forgive,” Applejack said. “It wasn't y'all that done anythin'. I won't

hold the actions o' past deer against y'all. What's done is done."

"Thank you," Falalauria said. "For all the regret the Elders espoused, I am not sure they were ever able to ask for forgiveness... so I wanted to do so once I had the opportunity."

"Think nothin' of it," the orange earth pony said. "Shoot, I think it turned out all right in the long run. If I didn't have to look after the plants and the critters, I'd have nothin' to do!"

"Yeah!" Dash chimed in. "If the weather made itself I'd be out of the job! I mean, I guess I could make a living as a stuntpony, but that doesn't pay like weather work."

"I suppose you're right," Falalauria admitted with a smile. "Things do have a way of working out for good, even in the face of much destruction. I must remember to have *faith* in the workings of the Wills." Rarity gave her a tiny smile.

Yet the white unicorn could not stop thinking about what Falalauria had shared. It dwelt at the forefront of her mind as they resumed their journey, moving briskly, but not at a run, through the forest. She barely noticed when they began to ascend pointedly, the path sloping determinedly upwards and curving slightly to the right. *Magic so powerful it can break the natural order*, she thought. So nowadays ponies administered the order that nature had previously maintained on its own. It was a crazy thought, and any of the old and purportedly wise ponies she could ask about it would scoff at her. Yet how would they know? Old as they were, they could not match Falalauria's wisdom, gleaned from more than a millennium of life- and she was not even as old as the war. Falalauria had not, to her knowledge, lied to them when it came to matters of history and exposition, so Rarity had to assume that she was telling the truth here. It daunted her, thinking of spells so strong they disrupted the functioning of nature. It would take such power... perhaps even on the scale of what Princess Celestia herself had. That made her recall Falalauria's proclamation during her outburst last night: that she was close to the princess in power. Being a near-match for the Goddess of the Sun was no small feat. She looked back over her shoulder, catching Falalauria looking ahead. Those eyes... they didn't even seem to be self-contained. It was like there was an infinity of stars *behind* Falalauria's eyes, and onlookers only ever glimpsed portions of it at a time. *She said she achieved omniscience*, Rarity pondered. *She did it for less than a second, but she said she did succeed. And she thinks I could have more powerful Sight than her?* It made Rarity feel small and strange. What would it be like, to See everything ever? Could her mind take the strain any better than Falalauria's? She thought of the Element of Generosity she'd met in her dreams. Could *she* handle omniscience?

The Shimmerwood's overhead lighting remained bright and silver. It was some time later that Rainbow Dash noticed a *spot* in the middle of their path. It wasn't silver, it was whitish-gold, and when she passed through it, she felt something she had not felt accompanying any of the lights in the wood: heat. She glanced up briefly. Just before it passed out of sight, she caught, high above, a swatch of blue sky. They were coming out of the forest! It made her quicken her pace. Applejack, sensing her good mood, decided to trot faster also, and Rarity for once did not hesitate to join in. Falalauria and the rest of the deer behind them trotted a bit faster as well. Dash glanced behind her, behind Falalauria, to the white-tail deer lined up so obediently behind their mistress. She grinned. They hadn't said anything the whole trip. With a flutter of her wings, she whirled around and flew past Falalauria, then dropped abruptly into their line. They scattered nervously at her arrival, and she laughed. "You guys have been awfully quiet back here!"

"Ah- ah- oh, right," a buck with sea-green eyes said, stammering.

"They speak!" Dash exclaimed. This elicited nervous chuckles from the assembled deer. "So now that I know you *can* talk, I wanna hear you do it! Tell me your names!" Her rainbow lightning bolt cutie mark flickered.

"Ah," the sea-green-eyed buck began. He seemed terribly shy. "I'm... my name is Diogo, ma'am."

“Ma'am is my mom's name!” Dash said with a dazzling grin. “Call me Rainbow Dash, or just Dash if you're feeling friendly.” She arched an eyebrow. “You do wanna feel friendly, right?”

“Sure!” a doe with golden eyes said, her spirits perking up. “My name is Hermínia, and it's a great treat to meet you! We've never seen a pegasus pony before.”

“I guess you wouldn't have, would you? Can't be too many pegasus ponies in Gildedale. Trust me, most of them aren't nearly as cool as me. I'm about as good as it gets.”

Ines laughed. “What you told me over dinner certainly sets you as a gem among pegasi. Mastering lightning like the pronghorns is very powerful magic, and takes great strength of will.”

“It does take will,” Dash admitted, “but like I said the other night, what it really takes is the will to let go of your control. You have to let the lightning come to you, and you have to accept it when it arrives.”

“That is what we learn when we first master magic,” Diogo said, confidence creeping into his voice. “We learn that all magic is give and take- magic enters us and leaves us. Our bodies must breathe magic just as they must breathe air.”

“I bet you deer learn some pretty cool magic,” Dash said with a smile. “I've got a friend who's a unicorn and she's all *about* cool magic. She'd love to see some of your stuff, I bet!”

“W-well,” Diogo stammered, his sea-green eyes wavering.

“Come *ooonnnn*,” the sky-blue pegasus raised her eyebrows.

“Well, I have gotten rather good at creating echoes of myself,” the buck admitted. “It's not magic that every deer masters, but I can do it!”

“You mean like doubles?” Dash asked. “Duplicates?”

“That's it exactly,” Ines said with a nod. “Diogo can do them very well.”

The way she talked about him... “You're *new*, aren't you?” Dash said, leaning her head towards Diogo.

“Ah... yes, I am,” Diogo admitted. “This is my first week on the Periphery Guard. I didn't know I would be meeting ponies from Equestria, especially not special guests of Our Lady.”

“Then it's been a great week, hasn't it?” Dash said with a grin, nudging him in the side with her right front knee.

Diogo smiled at her. “It really has.”

Falalauria glanced over her shoulder as Rainbow Dash continued to chat with the escorting white-tails. She smiled, walking closer to the other ponies. She leaned her head forward. “And she says she's no leader,” she whispered. “She certainly has charisma.”

“She does at that,” Rarity said. “She's inspired us on plenty of occasions.”

“Still... I reckon learnin' leadership was her special gift sobered her up a bit,” Applejack said, “along with what the pronghorns did to her. Rainbow can talk the talk and walk the walk, but not always at the same time.”

Rainbow Dash continued to hold court amid the white-tails for the next hour, as the branches overhead were broken more and more by splotches of sunlight. Finally, they rounded a bend in the road, and suddenly the path before them opened up. There was no more forest ahead- just a small road stretching away before them, with a wall of mighty brown rock rising up on their right side.

Falalauria said, “Behold: the Archback Mountains!”

Dash was so excited that she flapped her wings and flew, soaring out from the cover of the trees and basking in the warmth of the full sun. Applejack and Rarity followed her out at a gallop. All three ponies rejoiced at seeing the sky again, Dash most of all. It was a moment later, however, that Applejack looked up and saw where the sun was- right overhead. It was just now noon! “Hey now,” she turned back to Falalauria, “how's it only noon? We been walkin' for hours, and we got a late start this mornin', didn't we?”

“Time passes differently inside the Shimmerwood than outside it, according to our collective will” the golden hind said. “Don't worry, it hasn't affected anything major. We merely wished to give you plenty of time to climb the mountains before sundown. Time you now have- and enough, I hope, to join us for one final meal.”

Rarity looked at Applejack- but Applejack looked at Rarity, and so did Rainbow Dash. The white unicorn met their eyes for a moment, then nodded. “I believe that's all right,” she said, turning to Falalauria. “You were the one who said Twilight wouldn't die.”

“And she still will not,” Falalauria said with a nod. “You can afford to eat with us, I See. And just around here...” she turned back to the white-tails and spoke to them in Laewtil. They scattered, their long necks bent downward, their noses toward the ground. Falalauria turned away from the ponies and joined them, her snout raised just off the ground.

The three ponies exchanged glances, glances that grew increasingly long and desperate. Finally, Dash turned back toward the probing deer. “Uh... what are you all looking for?”

“The plot should be nearby,” Falalauria muttered, half to herself. She lifted her head and sniffed for a moment. “There,” she said, walking off into the trees just before the forest ended. The other deer followed her intently. Curious, the three ponies trotted after them, passing between two oaks and through a small grove. They eventually emerged in a small clearing, open to the sky above, where many wildflowers were blooming. At the center of the clearing, at the top of a small hill, were...

“Pansies?” Applejack said with some surprise. A huge plot of pansies bloomed in the middle of the clearing: yellow, red, blue, pink, violet, white. The deer had clustered eagerly around it, and though they stood facing the Equestrians, they seemed almost impatient.

“Pansies are a great delicacy for deerfolk,” Falalauria explained, standing in the midst of the plot. “Unfortunately for us, they do not grow deep in the forest, and they do not respond well to our magical lights. They're mostly found at the edges of the Shimmerwood, and particularly up here, where the altitude mitigates the heat from the sun.”

“You *eat* pansies?” Rarity said with some surprise. She had only ever known pansies as garden flowers, cute, colorful blossoms well-suited to neat arrangements and horticultural displays. “I thought you just used them as garnishes, like you did last night.”

“We garnish with them because we cannot grow them in the forest, so we only have them infrequently,” Falalauria said. “It's not often we send deer up here- I can monitor the barrier around the Archbacks from my tower, and it's been a very long time since any creature came down this road into the wood.”

“Well, we'll be coming back down once we get the Beneviolet,” Rarity said. “You'll be able to meet us here and get as many pansies as you like.”

“Hmmm...” Falalauria said, her voice surprisingly unsure. “I *suppose* you're right...”

“What?” Dash asked.

“Nothing,” the golden hind said. “Come, have a bite. You'll find them quite tasty, if you've never partaken of them before.”

The three ponies cautiously stepped forward, Applejack taking the lead. She had never been much for trying new things before, but after everything she had experienced on this incredible journey, she was much less frightened by the strange and the novel. She approached a pansy, bent down, and bit off the flower, chewing it thoughtfully for a moment. “Hmmm...” the orange earth pony murmured between grinding teeth, “kinda sweet... juicy. Like an overripe apple.”

Dash bit up a mouthful. “I like it!” she exclaimed, her open mouth revealing half-masticated flowers.

“Dash, please, don't talk with your mouth full,” Rarity said before bending her neck and nipping off a flower.

“All right, mom,” the sky-blue pegasus said cheerfully, reaching down for another gobble.

The deer, for all their cheerfulness, seemed to sense the urgency in each pony's chest. They made no conversation, and for the next few minutes there was only the enthusiastic chewing and biting and swallowing of the assembled hoof-folk. It left Rainbow Dash time to ponder her time chatting with the white-tails. She had learned a great deal about them: their names- Manoela, Teodoro, Tereza, Livia, and Abel, in addition to Ines, Diogo, and Hermínia- along with some details about their studies- some of them were still learning the basics of magic- and some aspects of culture in the Shimmerwood- for example, mothers chose names for their sons, while fathers named their daughters. It just made her want to know more, though. They hadn't had time to get to know the deer the way they had the Daleponies, but what Dash had seen of them fascinated her. She had changed her opinion of them, at least in part. She still thought they were strange, but that was to be expected, being so different from ponies. They were helpful and generous and kind- just like her own friends. *I wanna come back here someday*, she thought. She reflected that they were now just a lightning bolt away from Ponyville.

When the meal was finished, Falalauria stepped out of the midst of the pansies. The three ponies followed her back through the trees, then up the path the short distance separating them from the open sky. The eight white-tails followed behind her. When she was standing fully outside of the forest, the blue sky and the stone of the mountains behind her, she turned and faced the travelers. “Now comes the hour in which we must part ways,” she said, “though I do not think it will be the last time our paths will cross.”

“We cannot thank you enough for all you've provided,” Rarity said. She bowed, prompting Applejack and Rainbow Dash to do the same. “We shall of course relay news of your kindness to Princess Celestia when we get the opportunity.”

“I don't doubt it,” Falalauria said, “and when you do, please give Tia my love. But as to what we've provided, we are not quite finished in that regard.” The three ponies looked curiously at her. Ines walked up beside them, carrying a bundle of wrapped leaves in her mouth; she set it beside them. “There is naan and pansies there, enough to carry you through the rest of your journey when accompanied by the other food you have packed. Additionally, we have prepared distinct gifts for the three of you.” She looked at Applejack. “Applejack.”

“Yes'm?” Applejack said promptly. Rainbow Dash stuffed the bundle of food into a saddlebag.

“I kept my eye on you from the time you entered Gildedale,” said Falalauria. “I heard you complain to the heavens for want of many practical things, but there was one desire that stood out, and here I grant it.” Her antlers shimmered, and then floating in the air in front of her there was-

“**ROPE!!**” the orange earth pony exclaimed, practically lunging for the floating coil of woven rope; it was grayish-green and looked very sturdy despite its thinness.

“Rope indeed,” Falalauria said. “Spit on it, please.”

Applejack stopped in her tracks. “Wha?” she muttered. “Hold on now-”

“If you please, spit on it.” Rarity and Dash were as surprised as Applejack.

“Hold on, now, m'lady,” Applejack said, “I don't go in for spittin', it's a filthy habit.”

“That I understand,” Falalauria said, “and I agree with you. But here and now, indulge me. I promise I won't be offended.”

Applejack glanced sidelong at the golden hind, arching an eyebrow. Falalauria remained eagerly calm. Narrowing her eyes, Applejack grimaced at the rope for a moment. “Well...” she finally said, “all right.” Trotting up to the floating coil, she worked her mouth for a moment, then with a rough sputter emitted a glob of saliva from her mouth. It splattered against the rope, but to her surprise it suddenly stretched all across the coils, making them briefly slick with spit; an instant later, the rope was dry, as though it had never been besmirched.

“Now that the rope has tasted you, it knows you,” Falalauria said. “It is magically enchanted to

be owned by you. No one can use it save by your leave, and if you lose it, it will always come back to you, no matter what.”

“Huh,” Applejack said, eyeing the rope with newfound approval. She cautiously took it up in her mouth, felt the brief tingle of magic, then held plain rope, albeit very well-woven plain rope. She bent back and hooked it over the lasso notch on the belt of her saddlebags.

“For you, Rainbow Dash,” Falalauria said, turning to the sky-blue pegasus, “something to aid in your flight, whether powered by wings or driven by lightning.” Her antlers shimmered, and a scarf appeared floating in the air. It was dull gray, yet it had an odd luster to it, as though there was metal woven into it.

Dash stepped forward and reached out a hoof for it, slinging it over her withers. “Uh, thanks,” she said, “but I don't really need a scarf. I don't get cold when I fly.”

“I know,” Falalauria said, “but there is more to it than that. The scarf is enchanted to part the air ahead of it, opening up less restrictive corridors of space. It should help you navigate difficult wind currents and rough atmospheric events.”

“Oooo,” Dash cooed, sitting back on her haunches and holding the scarf on her hooves; it felt slick and clean, like the surface of a playground slide. She wrapped it around her neck and tied it firmly in place, then stood again; its tails dangled down between her front legs.

“And for Rarity...” Falalauria looked at the white unicorn. She smiled warmly. “You have given me so much, Rarity. You have given me back a sense of trust in the good of things, which until this day I had not realized I had lost. I shall cherish your lessons. I hope you will remember mine, such as they are beneficial. The hard part of your journey is nearly over- however, you may yet encounter peril and chaos. I would not have you do so unprepared.” Her antlers shimmered, and several dark shapes wavered into existence, solidifying rapidly into...

Rarity's eyebrows rose. It was a set of armor, the same wild green steel she'd seen on all the deerfolk, but the proportions were all wrong. The helmet was elegantly shaped, with two forward-pointing crests of crystal, and metal cheek plates that stretched and curved around. The flanchard swept gracefully back against where the shoulders would be, thin lines of crystal set into it like the veins on a leaf; the peytral was attached to it firmly, with no visible joints, making the whole torso set look like a single piece of steel. Four greaves floated in the air, shaped like long, thin leaves meant to wrap around the lower legs. Yet, again, the proportions weren't right for a deer. It was too short, and too broad, more akin to the body shape of a- Rarity gasped. “For me?”

Falalauria nodded. “I had my smiths craft it overnight,” she said. “It is as light and as sturdy as the armor my white-tails wear. The crystal embedded in the steel is enchanted with light barrier spells, enhancing its protection, while the crystal crests on the helmet will help amplify the spells from your horn. I believe you will find it a perfect fit.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” Rarity exclaimed. “It's beautiful!” She used her magic to take the armor from Falalauria and levitate it around her own body. She raised first one front leg, then the other, then one back leg, then the other, sliding the greaves on each leg in turn. At first she was confused, because the greaves were large on her, slipping down to the ground. Yet the steel seemed to be speaking to her, so she channeled a burst of magic through the four greaves, and they instantly tightened, fitting her exactly. She ducked her neck through the hole for it in the torso piece, allowing the peytral to bump against her collarbone; the flanchards settled against her flanks and sides. Another burst of magic tightened them just as snugly as the greaves. Finally, she put the helmet on her head, sliding her horn through the convenient hole in the helmet's peak. The nose guard slid down her face. One final pulse of magic made the helmet snug on her head, not even needing a chin strap. She pranced around in a circle. The armor was incredibly light. She used her magic to slide her saddlebags out from under the flanchards and then refasten them against the wild green steel.

“It's so cool!” Dash exclaimed, stamping her hooves in delight. “Now we've *all* got cool stuff!”

Rarity glanced at her friends, and realized Dash was right: between Applejack's Gildedale armor, Dash's pronghorn sigils, and now her own deerish armor, all three of them had been quite impressively outfitted. She nodded at Falalauria. “Thank you so much, My Lady,” she said.

Falalauria nodded in turn. “As I said, Rarity: thank *you*.” She walked around them, headed towards the Shimmerwood; they briefly turned with her, watching her move back under the shadow of the trees. “You should search for the Beneviolet in the vales between the mountain peaks,” she said. “It should be growing plentifully this time of year. Remember, only a bright, violently purple flower will have enough magical power to save Twilight Sparkle, and you must use your dragonfire on it as quickly as you can.”

“Sure enough,” Applejack said with a nod. “Thank you, thank y'all all so very much!”

“Thanks again!” Rainbow Dash cried, flying up and waving with her front hoof. “We'll see you on the way back!”

“Of course you will!” Falalauria said, and was there a laugh in her voice? “Farewell, Applejack! Farewell, Rarity! Farewell, Rainbow Dash!”

“Bye Diogo!” Dash cried. “I wanna see you make those echoes sometime, so keep practicing!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

“Goodbye, Lady Falalauria!” Rarity cried, sitting back on her haunches and waving her front hooves. “Goodbye, and thank you for everything!” They stayed and waved goodbye for a good minute. Presently, Rarity stopped waving and got to her hooves. She began to walk up the path, then stopped, realizing neither Applejack nor Rainbow Dash had moved ahead of her. She looked back over her shoulder. The orange earth pony and the sky-blue pegasus were both following her, the former smiling gently at her and nodding. Rarity drew in a breath and held herself a little higher. “Come along, now,” she said, turning back to the path. “Let's see how quickly we can make this climb!” She surged forward at a swift trot, oblivious to the rocky path and the steep incline. The others followed swift behind her.

“Oh!” Falalauria's voice yelled from behind them. “And try not to be too disappointed by what happens at the Gala!”

The three ponies stopped dead in their tracks. “The Gala?!” Applejack repeated in shock.

“You don't think she meant the Grand Galloping Gala, do you?” Rarity asked.

“**Hey!**” Dash cried, turning around with the other two. “What do you know about the Grand Galloping Ga-” she stopped. Falalauria and the other deer had vanished. Dash rolled her eyes. “Okay, they're nice, they're kind, they helped us out a lot, but you know what? Deer are *still* weird.”

“I'm sure they appreciate the sentiment very much,” Rarity said gently. “Now come on, let's get going.” Dash shrugged her shoulders. Applejack laughed, turning back up the path. Dash did as well, and the three of them set off into the towering mountains.