

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Fourteen: Inoculation

Twilight took a long, hard look around the checkpoint's reading room. She took special notice that the walls were lined with books, *real books*, of every size and genre. She shook her head. This was no time to think about books. There were more important things to worry about, such as Fluttershy's condition. The pegasus was laying limp upon the largest of the room's sofas, still in her venom-induced coma, her breathing slow and labored and her face drained of color. Rarity's persistent pacing threatened to wear a hole in the room's only rug. Lockwood stood at the end of the sofa nearest Fluttershy's tail, his face a picture of worry. Only Tick Tock, who kept Fluttershy's head and neck still, seemed perfectly calm.

Pewter entered the room, cantering over to the sofa with a large needle kept aloft in his magic. "Tick Tock, would you assist me in locating the exact point of infection please?" he said as he strode straight over to Fluttershy's side.

Tick Tock nodded and lit up her horn, enshrouding Fluttershy's neck with a dull green glow. Moments later, several neon green trails appeared over the back of Fluttershy's neck, congregating on a single spot. "All set, Pewter," she said.

Pewter took a deep breath and wiped his brow, then lowered the needle tip to meet with the congregating trails before forcing it through. After pushing it down so that the needle was almost an inch deep, he squeezed the plunger, forcing a sickly blue liquid through the syringe. He seemed to be going deliberately slow, only allowing a small dose through every other second.

"So... how exactly does that stuff work anyway?" Twilight asked, pointing at the needle.

Pewter smiled, but did not take his eyes off the needle. "Gargantuan antivenom is complicated. I'm essentially injecting venom laced with anti-magic antibodies that seek out and repair damaged tissue and nerves."

"Anti-magic antibodies..." Twilight murmured, tapping her chin. "So, these antibodies fight off the venom in the same way, say, dispel magic is used to remove magical illnesses? How does that work? Is the venom itself magical?"

"Correct, the venom itself is semi-magical, and in fact is resistant to many major supersetts of magicks, Restomancy included. It takes months to get the antibodies laced properly into a dose much smaller than this, but it's a necessity. The venom inside the patient will immediately resist, so we 'trick' it into thinking there's just more venom being injected. Then, the antibodies can cleanse the venom from the inside out. It works in the same way as a flu shot. I assume you know how those work?"

Twilight sighed and shook her head. "I see... so that's why my magic didn't work."

Pewter finished injecting the antivenom into Fluttershy, and withdrew the needle before placing it in a pouch at his side. "There we are, all finished. She'll regain consciousness in a few hours, but it may take some time before she fully recovers."

Rarity pushed herself in between Twilight and Pewter so that she was next to Fluttershy again. "How long?"

"Luckily, the venom didn't spread upwards into her brain or reach her spinal column. I estimate a full recovery in four, maybe five days if not sooner."

"Whew..." Twilight let out a deep breath, glad to know that everything was going to be okay. "Hear that, Rarity? She's going to be okay."

Rarity nodded and wiped some sweat off her brow. "It's a great relief, to be sure. I was so worried when that... that *thing* attacked her! Such loathsome creatures, these gargantuans."

Twilight turned her head back to the rest of the room, specifically to the rows and rows of books. With Fluttershy's well-being assured, her mind could not help but open itself to the distraction. The shelves were catalogued so precisely that she could see every thick, enticing volume that sat upon them perfectly. The texts seemed to bulge out of the shelves, begging for release, eager to be read, scanned, *perused*. Her mouth watered at the thought. She'd gone so long without a solid reading that she feared she was having withdrawals.

"I'd like to learn more about those creatures," she said, tilting her head just slightly in Pewter's direction. "You wouldn't happen to have a book around here with more information, would you?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes of course." Pewter pointed off towards one of the shelves that was marked *Guidebooks*. "Look in there for a book called *The Wasteland: A Traveler's Primer*. It has just about everything you'd need to know."

Twilight smiled and trotted over to the bookshelf. She scanned along the line of books until she found the one she was looking for, then grabbed it with her magic and pulled it down before returning to the others with it in tow. The book wasn't as thick as she'd have liked, maybe only good for a little bit of light reading. Still, even that would suffice in scratching her reading itch at this point.

"This should do nicely, thank you," she said. She turned back to Rarity.

"Yes, and thank you so much for what you've done for Fluttershy also, Mister Pewter,"

Rarity said. "I don't know what I would have done if dear Fluttershy was like this forever..."

"Don't forget to thank Tick Tock and her improvised barrier magic," Pewter said, turning and giving Tick Tock a beaming smile. Twilight noticed her respond with a small one of her own. "Had the venom spread to any vital areas, your friend here may well have lost control of basic motor skills, or worse, brain function. She'd be alive, but... only just."

Twilight and Rarity each gave Tick Tock a deep nod.

"Thank you, Tick Tock," Twilight said first, stepping forward and offering a hoof to shake. "You've done us all a great—"

Tick Tock dismissed the gesture. "Don't get sentimental on me, Sparkle, I'm just doing my job. If any of you died, things might become... complicated."

"Well... all the same, thank you, darling," Rarity said. "This means a lot to us. Doesn't it, Mister Lockwood? You've been awful quiet, dear. Are you okay?"

Lockwood nodded. "Sorry, I've just been thinking is all. This was all a very close call, you know?" He hesitated for a moment before speaking again. "A... business partner of mine once encountered one of those creatures, and barely escaped with her life. Seeing this all for myself makes me wonder just how close she came. She never told me much."

"Miss Fluttershy just needs a little bed rest now until she wakes up," Pewter said, replacing Lockwood's jacket over Fluttershy's body and tucking her into it. "For now, we wait, and you all can rest. She'll be very weak and may need assistance moving when she does awake. We'll see about finding something to make that easier on you all."

He turned to Lockwood and gave the other stallion a short nod. "You've done a lot for Miss Fluttershy as well, you know? This is your jacket after all, correct? I'll make sure that I get a suitable replacement for your journey, as she's going to need to remain warm until she makes a full recovery."

"You don't need to go through all that," Lockwood said with a smile. "I'd be willing to let her use it for as long as needed, if it will help."

Rarity smiled at the offer. "That is most gracious of you, Mister Lockwood, parting with your jacket like that. Is it special to you? I've yet to see you change out of it."

Lockwood averted his gaze from Rarity's. "It was a gift from a... friend. Same one as I mentioned earlier, in fact. Don't pay it any attention, it's not really *that* big of a deal."

"Come along, everypony, let's leave her to rest," Pewter said as he started towards the

door. "I'll mix up a batch of some gryphonroot stew for her to help accelerate her recovery. She'll be back on her hooves and wings in no time." He gestured for the others to follow. "Your friends have likely gotten the dining room prepared by now, and they may need some assistance in the kitchen."

Twilight followed behind Pewter and Tick Tock, with Rarity right beside her. She noticed that Lockwood was not following at as quick of a pace. "Mister Lockwood? Are you coming?" she asked.

Lockwood sighed and shook his head. "I'm just wondering if somepony should stay with her until she gets up. What if she wakes up and nopony's here?"

"We all want to stay with her," Twilight said, turning back and putting a hoof on his shoulder, "but we're all exhausted, hungry, and need some rest, yourself included."

"Twilight, darling, perhaps Lockwood has a point?" Rarity said, her gaze shifting over to Fluttershy. "I *do* feel terrible leaving her here while we all go downstairs and enjoy ourselves. But... then again, we're all simply *famished*."

"Perhaps we should watch in shifts?" Lockwood said. "I'll volunteer for the first shift. You girls must be hungry and tired, so go ahead and get some food and rest. This wouldn't be the first time I've dealt with the idea of going an entire day without either."

Rarity stood firm, her hoof on her mouth. "I don't know... I think *I* should be the one to take first watch. She is my closest friend, after all. No. In fact, I insist."

"Miss Rarity, I insist that you allow me. You're easily just as exhausted and hungry as the others, whereas I can handle the feeling for a few hours longer." Lockwood sighed and put his hoof on Rarity's shoulder. "Please, let me take this off your hooves? I assure you, I'm not troubled."

"Hmm..." Rarity smiled and nodded. "Very well. I appreciate the offer, Mister Lockwood. However, if *you* take the first shift, then *I* shall relieve you after I've had a good meal... and a hot bath. You could deal with one of each yourself, *especially* the latter," she added with a smile. She turned to Twilight. "Come along, dear, I think Fluttershy is in good hooves with this gallant stallion."

Twilight nodded. "Thank you, Mister Lockwood. We'll bring you something to eat soon."

"You girls can stop with all the 'Mister' nonsense whenever you want, you know?" he said. "We're all friends here, right?"

"I suppose so, *Lockwood*," Rarity replied.

Twilight followed Rarity out the door and into the hall, all the way to the stairwell that led downstairs to the den and the dining area. She stopped when Rarity turned to face her.

“Twilight, darling? I need to speak with you a moment.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Sure thing, Rarity, but can it wait? I’m *starving*. We can talk after—”

Rarity snorted. “I’d prefer if we just get it out of the way now, if we could? *Privately?*”

“Oh... okay. What’s on your mind?”

“Listen, Twilight, I know we already discussed this, but Rainbow Dash was present and frankly I would rather not give her any reason to be upset with *you*.”

Twilight remained silent, but nodded in understanding. She knew if anypony in the group was ready to blow up at any moment, it was Rainbow. The pegasus was not doing an adequate job of hiding her frustration with everything that had happened since they’d left the city.

“You’re lucky that most of her anger is being directed at Tick Tock, darling,” Rarity continued. “I, on the other hoof, do not see fit in blaming all of our problems on her. The fact is, dear, you’ve proven yourself to be extraordinarily gifted in the past, and yet you seem... hesitant to use your gift to help us.”

Twilight sighed and nodded. It would seem as if Starlight’s observation earlier had been spot on, and now Twilight wondered how long it would be before anypony else wanted to have this discussion with her.

“Rarity, please understand that I never wanted any of this,” she said, taking on a careful tone. She didn’t want to say the wrong thing, as the situation was delicate. “I... honestly thought that Fluttershy was in no danger around that *thing*. I didn’t listen to Tick Tock’s warnings when I should have. I’m sorry.”

Rarity huffed. “*Sorry?* Darling, your *gross* underestimating of the situation nearly cost Fluttershy her life. *Sorry* doesn’t cut it.”

“Well, what would you like me to say? That it won’t happen again?”

“That would be a good start, dear.”

Twilight frowned. “Rarity, you know I can’t—”

“*Promise me*, Twilight,” Rarity said, stepping forward and putting her hooves on Twilight’s shoulder. “Look, darling, we all look to you for guidance, we nearly always have.”

“I still would rather you all didn’t act like that,” Twilight said, avoiding Rarity’s gaze. “I haven’t done anything to deserve that kind of position, really. I’m just as important as the rest of you.”

“Darling, it was *you* who rescued us all from a terrible fate under Discord’s magic, was it not? It was *you* who spotted the inconsistencies in your sister-in-law’s actions before her wedding, was it not? We need you, Twilight. Promise me we’ll be safe.”

Twilight remained silent a moment, then nodded. “I promise. I’ll lead us home, and I’ll keep us safe. You have nothing to worry about anymore, Rarity.”

The bright glow from Starlight’s horn lit up the checkpoint’s dining room far better than the dim ceiling lamp above. Objects flew to and fro around the room as she set the dining table. The large checker print tablecloth flawlessly folded around the table corners. Dining plates soared through the air like frisbees, each landing such that they were a precisely-measured distance apart, and that there were enough seats for sixteen ponies; as she did not know for certain how quickly Fluttershy would recover, she considered it good form to assume the best and set a spot for her anyway. Forks, knives, spoons, and napkins danced about, each placing themselves alongside their respective plates. Lastly, she placed the chairs, of which, to her surprise, there were more than enough. Everypony would be sitting rather close, but there would definitely be room for all.

With the last touch of lighting, a few candles along the table’s center, she dimmed her horn and waved a hoof along the display. “This should be satisfactory. What say you, Curaçao?” she asked, turning her head to her left to address the pony standing there.

Curaçao tapped her chin, then circled around the table for a short moment. She shook her head when she reached the other table end. “Ma capitaine, you ‘ave set zee salad forks on zee incorrect side.”

“Like, yeah, the salad forks are *totally* not on the right side?” Insipid said, placing herself at Curaçao’s side and giving one of the forks an accusatory glare. “Wait, Curie, there’s, like, two forks here? Which one’s the salad fork?”

“Zee right one, ma copine.”

Insipid blinked. “Uh, so wait. The fork on the right... isn’t on the right side...” She stopped for a moment before taking a seat at the table. “Nope! Don’t get it.”

Curaçao sighed, then returned her gaze to Starlight. "As I was saying, c'est un agencement inacceptable pour un festin. 'ow peu professionnel."

Starlight's eyebrow twitched. "Would you kindly cease with your insufferable Romantique babble, Curaçao? Communicate in a language I can more clearly comprehend."

"Aww, but *boss*," Insipid whined, "I *like* the fancy talk! Even if I can't understand it! Besides, it's not like anypony can, like, understand anything *you* say?"

Starlight narrowed her eyes. "Are you insinuating that my manner of speech poses the same quandary as Curaçao's bizarre vernacular?"

Insipid stared at Starlight for too long of a moment. "Uh... is that like a... trick question?"

Curaçao coughed into her hoof. "Zis arrangement is not suited for a feast of zee sort ve are to 'ave. Zese sorts of zings need to be done perfectly, non? Zee salad forks go on zee left."

"It is acceptable enough. Given the condition of our recently-acquired traveling companions, I have no doubt that any arrangement would be satisfactory." Starlight snorted and strode around to the seat that she'd assigned herself at the head of the table. "Meanwhile, confirm whether or not dinner preparations are complete. I anticipate Twilight Sparkle and her friends are quite sufficiently famished, so we must not tarry."

Curaçao nodded and started towards the kitchen. She only traveled about halfway across the room before the kitchen door burst open.

"Hot soup, coming through!"

Curaçao leapt aside as Havocwing sailed into the room carrying a large tray with a bowl on top in her hooves. "Hé! Fais attention!"

Havocwing circled around and placed the bowl and tray on the dining table about two seats away from Starlight. "Told ya I was coming through," she said, shooting a quick look at Curaçao. "Gotta get dinner all set up. I'm bucking hungry."

Starlight clapped her hooves. "Ah, how punctual!"

She waved her hoof to shoo Havocwing out of the way, then leaned forward and took a whiff out of the large bowl in front of her. She pulled back only a little, as the scent wafted up into her sinuses, clearing them in seconds. The soup had a brownish-orange color to it, with flecks of red spread throughout. Chunks of tomatoes, sliced mushrooms, and sprigs of some type of leaf floated atop the soupy mixture surrounding a single large pepper in the middle.

“A pleasant aroma, to be sure. Very pungent. It isn’t... spicy, is it?” she asked, giving Havocwing a hard glare. “You are aware that I loathe spicy foods, are you not?”

Havocwing rubbed her neck. “Yeah... well, it is a bit on the spicy side, sure. Not to worry boss! Everypony in there is whipping up something, and I couldn’t resist making something I like, and some of the others in there thought it was good. The two pink nutjobs are making something more your speed.”

Starlight huffed. “I see. So you are accepting requests from them?”

“Uh... well, yeah I guess? I thought we were supposed to be playing all nicey-nice—”

There was a noise from the kitchen. The door opened. Starlight shoved a napkin into Havocwing’s mouth just as Applejack backed into the room, causing the pegasus to sputter and spit it out. She carried a large tray in her mouth, laden with all manner of sliced fruit: bananas, oranges, pears, pineapples, kiwis, and more. They were stacked in a pyramid atop the plate, which Applejack sat upon the center of the table with a loud clang.

“Hoo doggie! I knew I should’ve asked fer some help with that’n,” Applejack said, wiping her brow and rubbing her jaw.

“Ooh là là!” Curaçao said, sidling up to Applejack’s side and gazing at the tray of fruit. “Comme c’est appétissant! Are zese all fresh?”

Applejack scratched the side of her head. “Well I didn’t pick ‘em or nothin’, but they were all in Mister Pewter’s fridge, and he said that kept ‘em fresh fer weeks. They tasted right fresh ta me, I tell ya what. Kinda weird though, they got a funny texture to ‘em, but they sure do taste good.”

“Oh. My. *Stars!* Oranges! My favorite!” Insipid exclaimed, reaching across the table to grab one.

Curaçao slapped Insipid’s hoof away. “Ma copine, wait until zee rest of zee party is seated.”

“But I’m *hungry*, Curie! I want it now!”

Curaçao sighed and sat beside Insipid. “Ma copine, it is impolite to eat food before everypony is seated. To be une bonne dame, you must practice proper table manners, vois-tu?” She sat up straight in her seat, her nose high in the air. “ere, fais comme moi—do as I do.”

Insipid hesitated, then nodded and followed Curaçao’s lead, putting her nose into the air

so far that the back of her head tapped the back of her chair. "Like this?"

"Oui, a good start!"

The kitchen door opened again, and Pinkie and Velvet came striding out, followed by Rainbow and Flathoof, each carrying a large tray of their own. All were set on the table: two platters of assorted breads and a collection of pitchers filled with colored water. Starlight went about serving the latter to everypony with her magic, filling each of their cups to the top.

The presentation was complete.

"Wow, this is quite a setup, Miss Shadow," Flathoof said as he took a seat across from Applejack. "What's with all the silverware? Are we expecting royalty or something?"

"I discovered it in the dining area, and felt it was an appropriate addition," Starlight said. "Presentation and atmosphere comprise of over seventy percent of the enjoyability of a meal."

"Golly, I don't even know where ta start," Applejack said, scratching her head as she glanced around the table. "We didn't even bring a salad, so... do we start with the appetizers, or what? Which one's even the appetizer?"

"avocving's soup vould count as zee appetizer, and vould be zee best place to start," Curaçao said. "Ve are just waiting for zee ozers now, non?"

"I hope Twi and them aren't having problems up there," Rainbow said, taking her seat next to Pinkie, who was seated next to Velvet. "It's been like an hour."

"I'm sure they're fine, Dashie. Mister Pewter seemed like a nice guy, I'm sure he's fixing Fluttershy all up," Pinkie said, leaning forward towards the bowl of soup and taking an exaggerated whiff. "Mmm... spicy! I love spicy!"

Starlight waved her hoof through the air. "If I may alleviate your fears, we did arrive in well under Miss Tock's proposed itinerary. Your worries, while well grounded, are unnecessary."

"I just feel bad bein' down here while they're all up there," Applejack said, slumping back in her seat. "We should be up there helpin'... or somethin'."

"You *are* 'elping, Applejack," Curaçao said, patting Applejack on the shoulder. "Vhen zey come downstairs, I am sure zey vill vant to eat right away, non?"

"I just hope they don't take too long," Velvet said, licking her lips as she stared at the fruit tray. "All this stuff looks good! I mean, it's not my usual fare, but that doesn't mean it doesn't look good, right?"

Grayscale swaggered into the room from the den, taking her seat across from Rainbow. "They're coming downstairs now," she said through a yawn.

"Ah, splendid!" Starlight said.

She gave Applejack and Rainbow a reassuring grin, which they returned after a moment. While her assignment was to focus on Twilight Sparkle alone, Curaçao had suggested building a rapport with the others, as that would make her official assignment that much easier to accomplish. She did admit, having Twilight Sparkle's friends on her side certainly wouldn't be a negative.

A moment later, Pewter and Tick Tock entered the dining room. No pony else was with them.

"Well now, you all got everything set real quick, didn't you?" Pewter said, nodding in approval as he looked out over the table. "Quite a setup you've got here. Hey, you even brought out the family silverware! This looks downright fancy."

"Thank the stars, I'm bleedin' famished," Tick Tock said, taking her seat near the opposite end of the table.

"Where's everypony else?" Rainbow asked.

"Fluttershy needs time to recover," Pewter said, stepping up to the side of the table and grabbing a plate with his magic. "Misses Sparkle and Rarity are on their way down. I think they're having a talk with Mister Lockwood about taking shifts to stay with Fluttershy."

"You mean... they're gonna just leave her up there alone with him?" Rainbow shook her head. "Unbelievable."

"Does that pose some trouble?" Starlight asked.

Rainbow looked at Grayscale a moment, then shook her head. "Not really, no."

Starlight shifted her glance to Grayscale and gave the pegasus a slight nod before turning back to Pewter. "So then, they are choosing to watch over Miss Fluttershy in shifts?"

Pewter shrugged and began loading the plate with small bits of fruit, bread, and a bowl of soup. "Well, I don't know exactly what they're deciding on, but I'm going to bring a plate up to whoever *is* staying up there."

"That would be Lockwood, incidentally," Twilight said from the doorway. She was

carrying a large book with her, which sparked Starlight's curiosity. The other mare was supposedly a scholar of some type, so it was good to see confirmation of that fact.

"Ah, everypony is here at last," Starlight said, beckoning Twilight over to sit by her. "If you would permit us, Mister Pewter, I am sure everypony would prefer we begin eating."

"Go ahead, everypony, I don't mind," Pewter said as he started for the door to the den.

As Pewter left, everypony immediately began loading their own plates with food. Some, such as Pinkie and Rainbow, barely even used their plates and just started eating straight from the trays.

"Man, you guys weren't kidding when you said you haven't eaten anything," Havocwing said as she served herself a bowl of soup.

"Ladies, really, at the very least observe *some* semblance of table manners," Rarity said from her end of the table across from Twilight.

"Y'all're one ta talk," Applejack said through a mouthful of food.

"Yeah, you're scarfing everything down just as much as the rest of us," Rainbow added.

Rarity shot Rainbow a quick glare. "Oh please. I may be eating quickly, but I am certainly not 'scarfing' anything down, Rainbow Dash. I'm offended that you even think I am."

"I'm not used ta seein' y'all eat like that, is all. Any reason fer it?" Applejack asked.

"Well, I simply must finish dinner as quickly as possible, then I can get washed up and relieve Lockwood of his watch."

"Oh yeah, you guys let *him* watch Fluttershy? *Alone*?" Rainbow snorted and shook her head again. "I don't get you guys."

"What's there to get, Rainbow?" Twilight asked, not drawing her attention away from her book or her food. "He's been very helpful so far. It was our collective idea to leave someone with Fluttershy at all times until she recovers, and he offered to go first."

"Hmph. I just don't know if I'd trust him to get first watch." Rainbow gave Rarity a disapproving glance. "I'm just surprised *you* didn't take 'first watch' or whatever, Rarity. Aren't you supposed to be her best friend?"

Rarity frowned. "Well, yes, of course. I asked to have it, but Lockwood seemed insistent and claimed that he wasn't bothered by lack of food or rest. Though with Mister Pewter bringing

up a plate of food for him, I suppose I don't see why I couldn't have stayed with her too..."

"See? You got suckered in—"

Pinkie put her hoof on Rainbow's shoulder. "Dashie, please? We're supposed to be trying to relax here, and you're getting all worked up."

Rainbow snorted and slumped back in her seat. "Fine... whatever." She gave Grayscale a quick glance and a nod, and the other pegasus returned it.

Starlight did not show it, but inside she was smiling. They'd only been in the company of Twilight's party for half a day, and already the seeds of dissent were being sewn. She made an inward note to have a word with Grayscale, who seemed to be making excellent progress.

Pewter returned from downstairs and took his seat at the opposite end of the table from Starlight, next to Tick Tock. His plate had already been filled. "Ah, thank you Tick Tock," he said, giving the other unicorn a smile.

Tick Tock nodded back. "Figured I'd save you some time. These are bloody good eats, I tell you."

"They certainly look like it. I'm glad to see my stores were used for a good purpose. Is this... dragonpepper soup?" He took a spoonful of the soup and tasted it, then nodded his head. "Mmm! It is! Who made this?"

Havocwing raised her hoof. "Yo! You like it?"

Pewter shook his head and took another spoonful. "I haven't met a pony yet that makes a better dragonpepper soup than my dad did, but damn if this doesn't make me second-guess that. How you managed that when you're from Pandemonium is beyond me."

Havocwing rubbed the back of her neck and slinked back into her chair. "Oh, uh... thanks dude. It just sort of comes naturally, I guess."

"Somepony actually likes Havoc's cooking, huh?" Velvet shook her head. "Well, I guess there's a first time for everything. She usually burns everything so much you can't even taste it! Blech!"

"Buck off, Red."

"Yeah Red, ease up," Grayscale said, giving Velvet a disapproving glance and shaking her head. "Havoc's cooking isn't completely terrible for once. You should be proud of her."

“Yeah, thanks Gray.” Havocwing nodded in appreciation and returned to her food.

Velvet shook her head. “One... two...”

Havocwing looked up from her plate and tilted her head towards Grayscale. “Hey... wait a minute!”

“Where do you even get all this?” Flathoof asked, pointing his fork at the array of fruits and vegetables he had stacked up on his plate. “You can’t expect me to believe you walk from here to either Pandemonium or Hope’s Point and lug a ton of food with you.”

“I have it delivered, actually,” Pewter said. “Hope’s Point has a very efficient delivery service, if you have the right connections,” he added as he speared a chunk of pineapple. “My grandfather knew the right ponies, and we have a sort of agreement set up.”

“Huh. I’m going to have to ask Lockwood about that later. He’s got some friends in Hope’s Point, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he knows whoever your delivery pony is.”

Applejack sighed and shook her head. “I still don’t get how y’all got pineapples an’ even named ‘em *pineapples*, but y’all ain’t never heard of an actual apple.”

“What the hell is an ‘apple’?” Havocwing asked.

“It certainly does pose an interesting conundrum,” Starlight said, tapping her chin. A question she’d had since she’d been given her assignment came to her. Now seemed an appropriate time to bring it up. “I have studied all varieties of text, and not once have I encountered anything termed ‘apple’ before. It makes one wonder where you acquired your name.”

Applejack frowned. “Well... uh...”

Rarity coughed into her hoof. “Applejack, darling, perhaps it would be best to drop that subject? Ponies might think it quite odd if you bring up a bizarre *extinct* fruit they’ve never heard of before and that your family just *happened* to name you after, hmm?”

“Yeah... uh, right.” Applejack shook her head. “Anyway, this sure was quite a selection y’all had, Mister Pewter. Ya have more fruits ‘n’ veggies here than I ever seen in one place before.”

“Well, they’re not actually fruits and vegetables, to tell to truth,” Pewter said. “Barring a few things here and there that I personally grow or make, such as the dragonpeppers and the bread, everything here is actually fake.”

“Fake?”

“Dolor products formed to look like and taste like real fruits and vegetables.”

Applejack quirked an eyebrow and stared at her plate. “Y’all mean... this stuff ain’t *real* fruits ‘n’ veggies?” She shook her head and laughed. “Heh, y’all’re just pullin’ my leg, ain’t ya? That’s a good one, Mister Pewter.”

Pewter shrugged and returned to his food.

“It is a welcome adjustment to our usual fare, whatever it may be,” Starlight said with a nod. “And a pleasant change of pace, to have other ponies with which to hold a conversation.”

“Yeah! It’s always good to make new friends!” Pinkie said through another mouthful of food. She leaned over and threw her leg around Velvet in a half hug. “Isn’t that right, Red?”

Velvet’s eyebrow twitched. “Yeah! Always good to make new friends. I am *overjoyed*,” she said, giving Starlight a pleading look and an obviously-forced smile. “Don’t I just look *overjoyed*, boss?”

Starlight ignored Velvet’s complaining and instead turned to Twilight, who was so engrossed in her new book that she was eating slower than anypony else at the table. Starlight would be the first amongst her own group to admit that she enjoyed a good read, but reading at the dinner table was beyond even her understanding.

“Sparkle, what manner of reading is it that has you so distracted?” she asked, leaning over to try and take a peek.

“Hmm? Oh!” Twilight blushed and cleared her throat. “Well, this is a survival guide for the Wastelands. I was interested in finding out more about the dangers out here. I don’t expect you and your sisters to take us all the way to Hope’s Point, so I figured I’d try to prepare myself for whatever’s out there.”

“Ah, an astute decision if there ever was one,” Starlight said, giving Twilight her most pleasant smile. “Precautionary measures would supplement the limited knowledge that your *other* guide has provided you thus far.”

Tick Tock grunted from the other end of the table. “My knowledge has been more than ‘limited’, Miss Shadow. I’ve been traveling the Wastelands alone on a near-weekly basis for the better half of a decade, and I’ve studied under experts much more qualified than I’m sure you are for much longer than that.”

“Far be it from me to call into question your experience, Miss Tock,” Starlight responded,

her mouth curling in a smirk. "I merely claim that from the information I have gleaned, you have yet to provide a complete picture to the ponies you are escorting. Am I mistaken, or have you indeed given them all the information they would require to survive beforehoof?"

"I have provided all the information necessary as it became relevant. There was no need to go into detail on a great deal of things until we encountered them."

"Yeah, and look at all the trouble that got us into," Rainbow said, pointing her fork at Tick Tock. "If you'd told us anything about anything, we could've tried to prevent all this bad stuff that keeps happening."

"Starlight certainly has a point, Tick Tock," Twilight said, still not taking her attention off of her book. "I would have liked to know more about those creatures before we encountered them. It would have prevented a colossal mistake on my part in assuming Fluttershy would be safe around one."

Tick Tock remained silent a moment, then returned to her food. "I suppose I could have been more upfront about certain things. I didn't plan on keeping you all in the dark on everything. Things just got... out of hoof."

"Hmm, what sort of experience do *you* possess, Mister Pewter?" Starlight asked with a wide smile. "Residing in the Wastelands by your lonesome must grant you a multitude of stories to tell. Are you one of the 'experts' that Miss Tock speaks of?"

"I suppose I am, yes. My family's lived off the land out here for generations. What sorts of things would you have liked to know, Miss Sparkle?" Pewter asked, giving a sidelong glance to Tick Tock. "I'm sure Tick Tock and I could fill in anything you have questions about. Isn't that right, Tick Tock?"

"Don't look at me. I'm beginning to doubt that *my* knowledge is wanted at all," Tick Tock muttered as she absently stirred her soup.

"I do have a question, actually. Why is the word 'gargantuan' capitalized here?" Twilight asked, lifting up her book and pointing at a passage on her current page. "You don't capitalize animal names unless it's a breed."

"That's because Gargantuan *is* a breed," Pewter replied.

"It is?"

"Great, and all this time we've been calling them 'gargantuans', lower case," Pinkie said, shaking her head. She tilted her head towards Starlight, who quirked an eyebrow. "Somewhere, an Equine professor is crying, lamenting our abuse of the Equine language."

“You mean... there are *more* things like those creatures out there?” Rarity asked, her eyes wide. “Oh my...”

“Well, there used to be. You won’t find this information in that survival guide there,” Pewter said, pointing his fork at Twilight’s book, “but Gargantuans are a breed of insect called ‘chimera beetles’, which were known for being distinct mixtures of the qualities of many different species of insects, arachnids, and crustaceans. Each breed was named for its defining characteristic: Jumpers, Ironhides, Lurkers, that sort of thing. The ponies that named them weren’t very creative, but they got the point across.”

“You said ‘used to be’,” Twilight said, raising an eyebrow. “What happened to the other breeds?”

“Killed off by the Gargantuan breed, naturally. All the evil magicks in the air around the northern continent warped their minds, and as Gargantuans were the biggest and strongest, their increased aggressive nature made short work of the other breeds. Worse, they mutated over generations to adopt the best qualities of the breeds they killed.”

“They ought to call them ‘Horrors’ for what they really are,” Tick Tock added, stabbing her fork into a slice of strawberry. “Bloody monsters, like I said. But no, let’s let the resident animal expert try and bloody well tame one. Let’s not listen to the pony that’s traveled in the Wastelands and encountered them before. Proper brilliant idea, that one.”

“No need to get defensive, Tick Tock,” Twilight said, with a scowl. “We all feel terrible that we- that / didn’t listen to you when it counted.”

“Monsters, perhaps, but horrors? I disagree,” Starlight said. “As my sisters and I have made apparent, they are not as menacing as their reputation boasts. As long as we accompany you, your safety is assured. What other sorts of information does your new guidebook hold?”

“Well, I haven’t seen anything else that’s particularly worrying just yet, but I’m reading slowly since I’m eating.”

“You really shouldn’t be reading at the dinner table anyway, darling,” Rarity said. “It’s not polite.”

Twilight blushed and made to close her book. “Oh... sorry. It’s just, I haven’t had a chance to read anything for days now, and I don’t think Mister Pewter is going to let me keep this book long enough to read the whole thing... are you?”

Pewter frowned. “I would if I could, Miss Sparkle, but that’s the only copy I have and I need it for other travelers.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Still, darling, you should really be trying to be more sociable, don't you think?"

"I am certain none here would take offense to Sparkle's attempts to educate herself on the hazards of the Wastelands," Starlight said, giving Twilight another smile. "I for one enjoy perusing texts of any subject, and am not bothered in the least by Sparkle's enthusiasm."

"Well-read, huh?" Tick Tock asked as she stabbed a grape. "What sort of books do you enjoy, then?"

Starlight stared at Tick Tock with a blank expression on her face. "Why... I just claimed I enjoy perusing texts of any—"

Tick Tock pressed the question: "But surely you have some sort of favorite?"

Starlight repressed the urge to let her eyebrow twitch. The Chronomancer was infuriating on many levels, not least of which was her intrusive personality.

Curaçao spoke next. "Vhy, ma capitaine adores books about magicks. She is an, 'ow you say, magical scholar? Just zee ozer day ve vere reading about une théorie for teleportation, voyez-vous? I did not understand some of zee more complicated aspects, being un poney de terre, but ma capitaine 'elped explain."

Starlight cleared her throat. "Teleportation is my speciality, and the subject fascinates me so."

"Ooh, teleportation theory? That sounds fascinating," Twilight said, finally tearing her gaze from her book of her own accord. "What sort of theory was it? I hear mass teleportation is the most popular."

"Yes, that is precisely it, Sparkle," Starlight said, giving Twilight another smile. "I have been studying the theory of mass teleportation to assuage my sisters' worries of extended travel times. The ability to travel extraordinary distances in minuscule fractions of time would surely be a great boon to your own party, would it not?"

Tick Tock snorted. "Yeah, if mass teleportation were even possible, sure. That's all it is though: a theory. The amount of magical power you'd need to teleport even one pony a distance greater than fifty miles exceeds that of any known unicorn, present company included. No offense, Sparkle."

Curaçao dabbed her mouth with a napkin. Her plate was empty. "Vell, as interesting as zis discussion 'as become, I must bid you all adieu. Zis vas a most vonderful dinner."

Starlight raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You're done already?" Havocwing asked.

"It 'as been a long day, and I vish to take un bain and zen retire." Curaçao patted Inspid on the shoulder. "I vill try not to be long," she added, glancing over at Rarity before trotting out of the dining room and towards the den.

Inspid waved. "Oh wev are, Curie!"

Havocwing turned to Inspid. "What was all that about? Where's she off to in such a hurry?"

Inspid shrugged. "Like, I dunno? You know how Curie is. She's like, totally into her own thing and junk? *Cha.*"

"She certainly does take great care in her appearance. No wonder she keeps that figure if she doesn't eat anything," Rarity said. Though her voice was pleasant, the glance she was giving the doorway that Curaçao had left through was less so. She turned to Grayscale, and her expression brightened. "Miss Force here certainly keeps in shape as well! I must say, I don't often see a mare with such a broad figure."

Grayscale absently poked one of her peach slices with her fork and placed it in her mouth.

Rarity paused, then cleared her throat and attempted conversation again: "Miss Force, I must say I am impressed with your choice in fashion accessories. Those boots of yours have quite an interesting look. Are those *real* fire rubies?"

Grayscale took her time chewing her mouthful of food, then swallowing, before responding. "Yeah, I guess they are."

"Ah, splendid! Might I ask what purpose they serve?"

Again, Grayscale remained silent, just giving a light shrug. Starlight's eyebrow twitched, and it took her a great deal of effort to resist kicking Grayscale under the table. Why did the pegasus insist on being so unsociable?

"Well duh, Rarity, they look cool," Rainbow said, rolling her eyes.

Starlight turned to Rainbow for half a second before returning her gaze to Grayscale. She could swear she saw Grayscale's mouth curl in a tiny smirk.

Rarity chuckled. "That is one way of putting it, I suppose. I, for one, wouldn't use such rare, splendid gems in any article of clothing I expected to be wearing for extended periods of time, especially in such conditions as this desert."

"Well, they must serve some practical purpose then," Twilight said. "Fire rubies are magical gems, so you wouldn't use them just because they 'look cool'. Maybe for fancy occasions, like Rarity said, but using them in day-to-day clothing seems more of a practical choice to me."

Grayscale shrugged. "Dunno. They just look cool to me."

Starlight interjected. "They serve as the focal point of the enchantment that gives her boots their impact-resistant nature," she said, giving Grayscale an impatient glance. "You witnessed Grayscale's divebomb combat tactics, did you not? Well, her boots absorb any and all exertion of force, thus Grayscale can, so long as she lands hoof-first, impact most any surface without experiencing any physical harm."

"Wow! That's so cool!" Rainbow said. "Boss-looking *and* practical? So. Awesome."

"Though I do question your taste in other attire," Rarity continued, shaking her head. "Those jumpsuits aren't exactly fashionable, you understand. Why do you all wear them anyway? Are they some manner of uniform?"

Starlight paused a moment, racking her brain to think of an excuse. She hated to admit it, but Curaçao was much quicker at coming up with fabrications at a moment's notice. "Ah, we represent an... archaeological research expedition. Hence why we are venturing into the Goldridge Pass."

"Oh, you're all looking to explore the Gryphon Ruins then?" Pewter asked.

Starlight smiled and nodded. "Correct."

"That's quite an enterprise you've got going. Don't meet many folks headed in there, what with all the rumors."

"Rumors? What rumors?" Twilight asked.

"They say the place is haunted," Tick Tock explained, keeping her gaze fixed on Starlight out of the corner of her eye. "Long story short, nopony wants to risk it. Load of rubbish, if you ask me. In my experience there's no such thing as ghosts."

"So you're all members of a research team, then?" Twilight tapped her chin. "That

sounds fascinating. You must all be experts in assorted scientific fields then.”

“Also correct,” Starlight said. She gave a grandstanding presentation of herself, flourishing her hoof through the air. “I serve as our team’s linguistics expert.”

“You don’t say? I couldn’t tell,” Tick Tock said, rolling her eyes. She chuckled and pointed at Insipid. “You’re telling me Miss Insipid here is a *scientist*? I find that difficult to believe.”

“No need to be *rude*, Tick Tock,” Rarity said, shooting Tick Tock a glare. She patted Insipid on the shoulder. “I’m sure Insipid has some sort of *practical* purpose for being brought along, even if she lacks the... expertise her sisters possess.”

“Yeah!” Insipid said, giving Rarity a half-hug. “I *totally* have a practical purpose and junk?”

Starlight stared at Insipid a moment, who was giving her an expectant grin. Through clenched teeth, she said: “Insipid is our... digging specialist.”

“Oh, she’s special, alright,” Havocwing said, barely stifling a laugh.

“Yeah, she’s got special coming out the wazoo!” Velvet added, not bothering to hide her own laugh.

“Aww, thanks girls,” Insipid said, giving the other two ponies a bright smile. “Yup! I’m *totally* super special.”

Grayscale pushed her plate away and got out of her seat without a word.

“Grayscale? You have barely eaten anything,” Starlight said, giving the pegasus a terse glance. “Do you not wish to converse more with our new friends?”

“Nah, I was more tired than hungry anyway,” Grayscale said, with a shrug. “I’m headed upstairs to take a nap.”

Starlight and Grayscale stared at one another a moment, then Starlight waved her off. “Very well, I shall not hinder your desire for repose.”

Rarity pushed her plate away too, before Grayscale could get too far. “I think I should be going as well.”

“You’re done already, Rarity?” Twilight asked.

“I’ve had my fill for now,” Rarity said, trotting off to follow Grayscale. “I want to see if Miss

Curaçao has finished her bath yet. I want to have one of my own before I go relieve Lockwood to watch over Fluttershy.”

“You’re kidding,” Rainbow said. “You’re gonna take a *bath* before you go check and make sure Fluttershy is okay?”

“Certainly, Rainbow Dash. I plan on remaining with her for the remainder of the night, after all, and I simply cannot wait until morning for a proper bath. Lockwood won’t mind waiting, and in fact insisted that I take care to eat and rest before relieving him.”

“Let us know if she needs anything, Rarity,” Twilight said.

“Certainly, darling. I wouldn’t dream otherwise.”

As Rarity left, Rainbow shook her head. “Ridiculous. If that were *my* best friend up there, I wouldn’t have even been down here in the first place.”

“Well then, why ain’t ya?” Applejack asked, giving Rainbow a hard look.

“What?”

“If y’all wanna get on Rarity’s case fer takin’ the time ta eat ‘n’ rest ‘fore she takes over fer Mister Lockwood, then why don’t y’all go do it yerself?”

“I... well I mean, if she trusts Lockwood to take watch, then I guess I don’t have a problem with it. Whatever, nevermind. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Really, Rainbow, you need to just relax,” Twilight said. “According to this guide, that antivenom Mister Pewter gave Fluttershy is gonna let her make a full recovery. She’s fine, okay? It’s okay to be worried—we all are—but there’s not much else we can do right now, and we all need to get some rest ourselves.”

Rainbow snorted, then returned to her food without another word.

Starlight smiled inwardly again. Everything was going according to plan.

For the third night in a row, Applejack couldn’t sleep. She was tired, sure, but it felt strange sleeping in a bed that wasn’t her own. She had barely slept at all back in the city, and in fact got her first decent night’s sleep the night after they’d left. Even then it had been less than what she was used to back at home.

She'd come outside, where it was quiet and she could be alone with her thoughts. Only the soft thumping of the "seismic generators", or whatever Tick Tock had called them, disturbed the otherwise-silent night. It felt good, having real, honest earth beneath her hooves again, rather than the hardened cement of the city or the cold, dead sand of the Wastelands. Together, the thumping and the feel of good earth was enough of a distraction to keep her from focusing much on why she couldn't sleep properly. She couldn't put her hoof on it, but ever since that night at the campfire, there had been a little thought in the back of her head that was bugging her.

"Bit for your thoughts, darling?"

So much for being alone.

Applejack sighed, then turned slightly to face the voice. "Howdy, Rarity. What're y'all doin' out here? I figured ya'd be keepin' watch on Fluttershy by now."

Rarity chuckled and came around Applejack's side so that they were face to face. "Fluttershy's in good hooves for now, I have no doubts about that. I'm just waiting my turn to use the washroom, since Miss Curaçao is certainly taking her time."

"Well shucks, looks like y'all finally met yer match, huh?" Applejack laughed and elbowed Rarity gently in the ribs.

"Yes, well, she can do as she pleases, I won't hold a grudge. What about you, darling? I heard you'd come out here all alone and I was worried."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Who told ya that?"

"Why, Inspid of course. The dear is so eager to earn 'brownie points', as she calls them, that I think she wants to help me with anything. One of my dearest friends being *alone* when the rest of us are building new friendships certainly seems like something I can help with."

"Well ta be frank, Rarity, I don't know how well that Curaçao gal an' me are gonna get along. We're too... different."

Rarity laughed. "Oh pish posh, darling, she's no more different from you than I am. If you can make friends with me, I'm certain she couldn't be so bad."

"I s'pose..."

"So, why are you out here all by yourself?"

"Oh, just thinkin' 'bout a few things, nothin' important."

"I see." Rarity smiled. "Well then, since I have you here, I was wondering if perhaps you couldn't help me with a little problem?"

"Uh... sure, I guess. I don't see what kinda problem y'all could have that *I* could help ya with."

"Well, it involves *you*, for one," Rarity said, leaning in, "and *Captain Flathoof* for two."

Applejack kept a firm face, determined not to betray her surprise. "What d'ya mean?"

Rarity's eyes darted around behind Applejack for a moment, obviously to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. "Well, darling, I've noticed that you've been acting *strange* lately. Around him, I mean. Frankly, dear, your behavior at dinner did you no favors. Staring at somepony can be construed as rude, you understand."

"Ya... ya saw that?" Applejack shook her head and looked away from Rarity, determined not to meet the unicorn's eyes. "I wasn't starin' at anypony. I was just... lookin' 'round is all."

"Is that so?" Rarity's smile widened. "Is there something *going on* between you two?"

Applejack snapped her head back to look at Rarity again, eyebrows narrowed. "I don't think that's any o' yer business."

Rarity backed off a little, but did not lose her smile. "Oh I don't mean to intrude darling, I was just... *curious*, as t'were. I tend to notice these sorts of things. Comes with the territory."

"Didn't y'all learn nothin' from our lil' sisters last Hearts 'n' Hooves Day? Y'all ain't gonna whip out no love potion or nothin' are ya?"

"Love potion? Heavens, Applejack, I'm not trying to force anything, I'm just trying to glean some information, is all. You act as if I don't have more *experience* in these matters," Rarity said with a pout. "Besides, it doesn't take a genius to see the way you were acting around Flathoof. It just leads me to think there's something more there."

Applejack snorted. "And so what if there is? Frankly Rarity, I'd just as soon prefer y'all stay outta my personal matters."

Rarity's smile curled into a knowing smirk. "So there *is* something going on between you two?"

"N-no, I just... shoot, walked right inta that one, didn't I?" Applejack sighed. "Not that it's any o' yer business, but... no, there ain't nothin' goin' on 'tween the two o' us."

"I see." Rarity let out a heavy sigh. "Thank *goodness* for that."

Applejack raised her eyebrow again and fought the urge to scowl. "Now what in the hay is that s'posed to mean?"

"Heavens, Applejack, don't tell me you haven't noticed?"

Applejack just stared forward and shook her head.

Rarity put a hoof to her mouth and gasped. "You *haven't!* Oh, you poor dear. Well, you should be *most* thankful you didn't start up a relationship, then. Things may have gotten... awkward."

Applejack held up a hoof. "Hold on, ya lost me. Awkward? What in the hay're y'all talkin' about?"

Rarity sighed and put her hoof on Applejack's shoulder. "Tell me, does Flathoof *remind you* of anypony in particular?"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Well shucks, ain't that obvious? He's just like me! Hard-workin', honest, strong family ties—"

"Heavens darling, that sounds like most *anypony* in your family, truth be told. Let me be more specific. Does he remind you of anypony more... *masculine*, perhaps?"

Applejack put a hoof to her chin, then nodded. "Well, now that ya mention it, I s'pose he... kinda reminds me of Big Macintosh?"

Rarity smiled and nodded.

"Well, okay. I... guess I can see that. Heck, they even sorta... look alike," Applejack said.

Now that it'd been brought up, she really couldn't help but notice that Rarity had a point. Flathoof and Big Macintosh could almost be twins, if Flathoof were just a few hairs taller. Flathoof was certainly as broad as her brother, and their coat colors were identical. Big Macintosh had a darker mane, though. Still, the resemblance was there.

"So you see where there may be a problem, then?" Rarity asked.

"Uh... no?" Applejack chuckled.

Rarity sighed and shook her head. "Oh Applejack, darling, you have *no* idea, do you?"

Why, just *think* of the implications. Everypony might start getting the wrong idea.”

Applejack narrowed her eyes, more out of curiosity than anger. “What kinda idea would that be?”

Rarity said it so simply it may as well have been assumed as a common fact: “Why, that since you can’t have your *brother* you may as well pick the *next* closest stallion.”

Applejack’s face paled and her jaw dropped. Then, her cheeks flared red, and she stomped a hoof. “Of all the- listen! That there is just the *dumbest* thing I ever did hear! I don’t care what th’ rumors are, th’ Apple Clan don’t practice none o’ that... that hogwash!”

“Well, if you want to make sure those rumors stay rumors and *don’t* turn into news, perhaps it would be best not to give anypony an excuse? I’m not one to fall into that sort of thing, but other ponies? Let’s just say that Rainbow Dash isn’t known for her tact.”

Applejack snorted and looked away. “Well it just so happens that I *don’t* have any o’ those kinda feelin’s fer Flathoof,” she said, her voice cracking. “So there ain’t no worry with thinkin’ I want nopony just ‘cause they’re like my brother, y’hear?”

“Glad to hear it darling,” Rarity said, patting Applejack’s shoulder. “You’re one of my dearest friends, you understand, and I’d hate to see anypony have a lower opinion of you just because of your taste in stallions. Not there’s anything *wrong* with Flathoof or Big Macintosh, but—”

“No more! I don’t wanna hear any more o’ this here nonsense,” Applejack said, raising her voice. “An’... not a word o’ this ta anypony neither. Last thing I need is fer anypony ta go gettin’ ideas. Y’hear me?”

“Of course, darling, I wouldn’t dream of it. Besides, just between you and me?” Rarity whispered as she leaned in. “Even if there *weren’t* any issues with you two getting together, I don’t think it would work out anyway.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Now what the hay is *that* s’posed to mean?”

“Well, I should say that it is in bad form to try and court a stallion who is so *obviously* attracted to somepony else.”

“...what?”

“Let’s just say that I think our dear Flathoof is rather more attracted to *unicorns*.”

Applejack’s jaw dropped. Rarity couldn’t be saying what she thought she was saying, but

that tone in her voice made it abundantly clear. Rarity was, after all, a unicorn who back at home needed to fight the stallions off with a stick.

Applejack fought the urge to spit fire, resorting instead to an angry sputter: "Why ya... ya *double-crossin'*—"

Rarity's eyes widened. "Calm yourself, Applejack," she said, waving a hoof in front of her face. "I wasn't referring to *myself*, of course. He's not really my type anyway, you understand. Good heavens, what *ever* would give you the idea that he and I had eyes for one another?" She laughed, putting her hoof over her mouth. "I mean *really*, darling, you should know me well enough by now. Besides, I think he's more into a mare who's an *intellectual*."

Applejack's anger settled a little bit, but she was upset with herself for possibly blowing her cover. Then, Rarity's last word struck her, and she repeated it out loud: "Intellectual." She let out a heavy sigh. "Well, I s'pose I saw that comin'. The two o' them been on the same side in just 'bout every talk we all had. Shoot... I didn't expect this kind of thing from Twi of all ponies..."

Rarity chuckled and put her hoof on Applejack's shoulder. "No no no, of *course* I'm not referring to Twilight either. The poor dear's head is too full of books and spells. I highly doubt that thoughts of romance have even crossed her mind. I was thinking of somepony more... green?"

The words struck Applejack like a truck. She narrowed her eyes. "Tick Tock?"

Rarity nodded lightly in response.

"Why that... that no good—"

"But what does it matter though, darling? You said you don't like him like that anyway." Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Unless you weren't being entirely truthful, of course."

The hint of doubt in Rarity's voice made Applejack hesitate, and she averted her eyes from Rarity, knowing all too well that her eyes would give her away. "... no, y'all're right, it don't matter. Flathoof can do what he wants."

"Is everything alright, Applejack? You look pale."

"Naw... naw, I'm fine. Listen, if ya don't mind, I—"

"Oh, yes of course, darling. I am sorry I interrupted your 'alone time'. Curaçao should be just about done with her bath by now, so I'll just leave you be."

"Right... y'all go on ahead. Thanks, Rarity... fer not makin' a big ol' deal outta this."

Rarity trotted away.

As soon as Applejack was sure Rarity was out of earshot, she slammed her hoof on a nearby rock. “Dagnabit!”

Applejack began to pace, her mind racing. She was angry with herself for fibbing to Rarity, who she was sure wasn’t fooled. She’d admitted to herself early on that she was attracted to Flathoof, but Rarity’s words rang with a certain terrible truth. She’d noticed the similarities before, but now realized why she felt disturbed when he said or did things that were a little too close for comfort. He really did remind her a little too much of Big Macintosh now that she really thought about it.

Well, she thought, at least she could discount one shared quality: honesty. Here she was, worried about pursuing her feelings because she didn’t know if he had genuine feelings for Snapshot—and he had told her as much—and he’d gone ahead and forged a relationship with somepony else. Worse, he didn’t tell anypony else and apparently had only been caught by Rarity’s keen eye for that sort of thing, so he was a sneak too. It wasn’t that he was in a relationship with somepony else, no. It was that it was with somepony other than herself.

“Applejack? Oh, there you are.”

Applejack didn’t turn to face Flathoof as he came trotting out of the checkpoint door, only just tilting her head.

“I thought for sure you’d be inside with Rainbow checking out Pewter’s exercise room. This place sure is loaded with all sorts of stuff. What are you doing out here all alone?”

“Thinkin’,” Applejack said, deciding to keep her answers short and simple. The less time spent talking, the better

Flathoof laughed. “Ha, I know what you mean. What about?”

“Nothin’. Y’all come out here fer a reason?”

Flathoof raised an eyebrow. “Uh... Tick Tock and Twilight are looking for you. They want to start planning the route through Goldridge with Starlight and Curaçao.”

“Right. Tell Tick Tock I’ll be there in a moment. I’m sure she’d be glad ta hear y’all tell ‘er.”

Flathoof scratched his head. “Is there something wrong, Applejack? You seem upset. Anything you want to talk about?”

She snorted. "Nope, I'm just dandy. If I wanted ta talk 'bout somethin' I'd go lookin' fer somepony ta talk to. Now if y'all'd excuse me?" She turned and stormed past him.

Fluttershy groaned as she came to, trying her best to ignore the burning aches all over her neck and upper back. She couldn't remember much of anything, only small snippets of information: being in the Wastelands; a creature that her friends had injured; trying to tend to the creature; Tick Tock yelling something about getting away and not turning her back. Then her mind went blank.

Thus, when she pried open her eyes, she was confused and a little frightened at the change in surroundings. Where was she? This wasn't the desert; this was a nice, cozy room in some ramshackle building that was hopefully someplace safe from whatever else was out there in the desert. The room had rows and rows of books lining the walls, enough that, for a fleeting moment, she thought she'd see Twilight somewhere nearby gushing about finally having a book to read. Was this the checkpoint?

Her mind raced with a hoard of unanswered questions:

Why couldn't she feel her legs or wings? Why was the only thing she *could* feel a burning pain in her neck? What was causing the burning anyway? What was this heavy thing covering her? It was warm, had a slight musky scent to it that she didn't find unpleasant, and was a familiar shade of brown. Lockwood's jacket? Why was his jacket draped over her like a blanket? If this was his jacket, where was *he*? Better yet, where were her friends? Had something happened? Was everypony okay? Where were they? Why did her-

A quiet snore came from nearby, startling Fluttershy. She made to leap away, but the attempt sent a fire ripping through her veins. She cringed in pain, and elected not to attempt moving quickly again. Instead, she tilted her head to her left so that she could now see the rest of the room, though even this caused her a great deal of pain. She spotted the large, cozy chair directly next to the sofa, and the familiar gray pegasus resting comfortably in it.

Phew, it's only Lockwood.

She let out a quiet sigh of relief, so small that not even she could hear it. Well, she thought, at least *somepony* was there so that she wasn't all alone. Her friends must all still be okay. At least, that's what she hoped. But then, where were they?

Across the room, Fluttershy heard the door creak open. She couldn't help but attempt a smile, but it quickly curled back into a frown as a green unicorn's head poked into the door frame and looked straight at her. Of all the ponies Fluttershy wanted to see, Tick Tock was not at

the top of her list. This other mare was rude and had a temper that made Rainbow Dash look pacifistic. She'd much rather see Rarity, or Twilight, or Pinkie. Well, maybe not Pinkie just yet; she was much too tired to handle her energy, even though she'd appreciate the attempt.

Tick Tock's eyes darted to Lockwood for a brief moment, then she entered the room, shutting the door behind her without a sound; clearly, she did not want to wake the sleeping stallion.

"You're up sooner than I expected. Maybe you're made of tougher stuff than I thought," Tick Tock whispered as she took a seat beside the sofa. "Are you feeling okay?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "I feel like I'm burning all over..."

Tick Tock frowned. "Residual effects from the venom. Blast it all. Hold on, let me see if I can help you with that." She lit up her horn, and Fluttershy could feel the light probing of magic around her. Some of the pain melted away as a tingling, soothing sensation flowed along her neck and back. "There, is that better?"

"Oh... yes, much," Fluttershy said with a nod. "Um... Miss Tock?" she asked, her voice as low as she could get it while still being heard. "W-where am I? Where are the others? Is everypony okay?"

Tick Tock continued her work, her eyes locked onto whatever she was doing, but she answered Fluttershy with a calm, understanding tone: "We're at the checkpoint at Goldridge Pass, a few miles east of the Gargantuan nesting grounds we landed in. Your friends are okay, but right now they're all over the place. Lockwood here insisted on watching you first, I was just coming to check on you."

"Um... w-what happened out there, anyway? Why am I like this?"

"You had a pretty nasty experience." Tick Tock shook her head and stopped using her magic. "Gave us all a bloody fright, I tell you. Do you remember anything?"

Fluttershy thought for a moment. "L-last thing I remember, I... was tending to that c-creature after the other girls attacked it..."

"Well, it's dead, you have no reason to fear it now," Tick Tock said.

Fluttershy's voice cracked. "Oh... oh dear... h-how could they—"

What had her friends done? She had asked them to be gentle. How could they betray her trust like that?

Tick Tock raised an eyebrow. "What's the matter? Oh... ohhh, right, you think- I apologize." She placed a hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. "Your friends didn't kill it or anything like that. It killed itself. See, Gargantuans share a lot of aspects with all sorts of insects. You've seen that they look like a spider shagged a mantis—"

Fluttershy cringed at the mental image.

"If you'll pardon the expression," Tick Tock added. She cleared her throat and continued, "Well, as far as the sting is concerned, it shares qualities with honey bees. When they sting, the stinger dislodges itself and tears out their venom sac. Since the Gargantuan's venom functions as their blood, they only sting as a last resort, because stinging sends them into a shock that outright kills them."

"So... it stung somepony?" Fluttershy frowned. "Oh dear... it was probably just defending itself. Are they okay? Who was hurt?"

"Actually, it stung... you."

Fluttershy shut her eyes and racked her brain, trying to make sense of it. She was helping the creature, and it had responded so kindly to her gesture as well. She said as much to Tick Tock: "Why w-would it sting me after I t-tried to help it? No... t-there *has* to be some m-mistake. No animal would... ever harm me."

Tick Tock breathed a heavy sigh. "Fluttershy, you have to understand that Gargantuans are *not* normal animals. I am led to believe you have some talent in handling beasts at home, but that won't work on something like a Gargantuan."

"I don't believe it," Fluttershy said, her voice as firm as she could manage. "I was just... exhausted, that's all. Yes, I must've... f-fainted from all the excitement. Oh no! T-that means that poor thing is still hurt out there!"

Fluttershy made a futile effort to leave, ignoring the slight pain caused by moving, but Tick Tock put a stop to it by tucking Lockwood's jacket under the folds of the sofa.

"Fluttershy, listen, I'm telling the truth," Tick Tock said as she eased Fluttershy back into her rested position. "That thing attacked you the moment you dropped your guard. It's what they do."

Fluttershy struggled, but the more she fought, the weaker she felt. Eventually, she relented. The story made *some* sense: the pain in her neck, the numbness, the inability to remember any events in between. They all seemed to point to her being stricken with a sudden malady. But from the creature's sting? That still seemed a stretch. What would make this animal strike at her, when no other animal ever had?

Fluttershy sighed. "I... I don't understand. What makes them different?"

"Centuries of exposure to horrible Chaotic magicks and magically-forced mutations have turned Gargantuans into monsters. They've always been big, but centuries ago, they were actually rather docile. Now, they're just heartless, single-minded killing machines. When there's nothing to hunt, they kill each other for food and territorial dominance. When they breed, the males kill each other for mating rights to a female, who is bred, then kills her mate to serve as an incubator for its eggs before she dies. The newborn adolescents then often kill one another out of instinctive territorial behaviors. Killing and eating is all they live for."

Fluttershy's eyes betrayed the horror she felt. No creature she'd ever known, even the fiercest of predators, were that cruel or violent.

Tick Tock frowned, but continued, "Forgive my bluntness, and perhaps too-graphic descriptions of their habits, but you need to understand. These creatures don't know compassion. They are born from violence, they become violent at birth, they never will know a mother's love and will never love their own young. They cannot be tamed or reasoned with. They're monsters, nothing more, nothing less. I just don't want you to do some fool thing like try to tend to one of those things again, should we encounter any in the eastern Wasteland once we've crossed these mountains."

Fluttershy whimpered, but nodded. She'd learned a hard lesson at the Gala so long ago that she couldn't force animals into being her friends, and since had been considerably more patient with all animals. Now, this world seemed to have a new lesson in store for her. Here, the one thing she felt confident she could still contribute to the others was her ability to befriend wild creatures and perhaps keep them out of danger. With that potential stripped from her, what use was she?

"Now then," Tick Tock said as she stood back up, "I do believe that my good friend Pewter has prepared some gryphonroot stew for you. I'll nip down and get it, you just take it easy. You've got a long day ahead of you, and some new ponies to meet."

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "New ponies?"

"Long story," Tick Tock said with a roll of her eyes. "But don't worry, they're... alright, I suppose. Somepony like you won't have any trouble making new friends, which is more than I can say for me."

As Tick Tock began to leave, Fluttershy squeaked to get her attention. "Oh... thank you Miss Tock. Could you tell the others I'm awake? I'd like to see them."

Tick Tock sighed. "You really must get your rest, Fluttershy, and having your troupe all

here might well make a bloody mess of that. They can see you in the morning.”

Fluttershy frowned. “Oh... well... if that’s what’s best...”

“Don’t you worry, Rarity should be in soon,” Tick Tock said, patting Fluttershy on the head. “She agreed to take next watch after Lockwood there, but she’s in the washroom at the moment. I’ll let her know you’re up though.”

Fluttershy smiled and nodded, and Tick Tock silently left the room to fetch the stew she’d mentioned.

A snort from the chair drew her attention back to Lockwood. Had he really been here the whole time? And without his jacket? He must be cold in just that flimsy shirt. Fluttershy felt her cheeks flush. The gesture was touching, and she had to admit it made her feel nice. She recalled Rarity’s words about him, and how they seemed to weigh more now. He didn’t need to do what he was doing.

Lockwood’s eyes blinked open and he gave a loud yawn as he stretched out his legs. “Shoot... must’ve dozed off.” He glanced over at Fluttershy, who was looking right at him. “Oh... you’re awake...” he mumbled. He started to drift back into his sleep, before snapping awake again. “You’re awake!”

“Uh... hi,” Fluttershy peeped.

Lockwood wasted no time in getting out of his chair and making a beeline for the door.

“W-where are you going?”

He turned back and answered: “Rarity asked me to get her as soon as you woke up, so—”

“Oh... well, Tick Tock was already here. She’s getting Rarity, so... y-you don’t have to go. Besides, she said that Rarity’s... in a bath, so...”

Lockwood hesitated a moment near the door, then nodded and trotted over to the sofa. “Very well. At your insistence, I shall stick around until Miss Tock returns with dear Miss Rarity. Anything I can get you?” he said with an exaggerated bow.

Fluttershy shook her head. “No... I’m fine, th-thanks.” She stared at him a moment, and he stared right back. She shifted uncomfortably in place, bothered by the long pause. “I... want to thank you,” she said in an attempt to clear the air. “For w-watching over me, I mean. You didn’t have to...”

He gave her a small smile. "It was my pleasure. Caring for those in need is just something I do. You seemed to be in need of a helping hoof, so there I was. I don't think Flathoof would object to my generosity in this situation. He always gets on my case for giving more than I have."

Fluttershy remembered his jacket. "Oh! Y-you can have your jacket back, if you'd like. You must be cold..."

"For now, it's your blanket," he said, shaking his head. "Pewter said that keeping you warm is important to helping your recovery. It just so happened that my jacket was big and warm enough to do the job, though believe me, Miss Dash certainly tried to insist on loaning hers. Shame we lost those sleeping bags in the volcano. Is it warm enough?"

"It's... very nice." Fluttershy snuggled into the fabric. She wasn't quite sure what it was made out of, but it was indeed warm and comfortable. "I... wouldn't mind using it a little longer. I mean... i-if you don't mind..."

His smile widened considerably, showing off his bright teeth. "I don't mind at all. Anything to help you along your road to recovery."

"Thank you, Mister—"

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "And please, no need to use that 'Mister' moniker anymore. We're friends, right? It makes me feel like I'm an old stallion. You don't think I'm an old stallion, do you? What do you think? Still in my prime?" He flexed a foreleg and flared his wings, giving her a beaming smile. "Maybe not *Studs Monthly* material, of course."

Fluttershy giggled, covering her mouth with a hoof. It was nice having somepony to cheer her up. Rarity was right, this stallion was something special. It wasn't so much that he had a sense of humor so much as he had a sense of moderation about it. Given what she'd heard him joke about before, that he wasn't making those sorts of jokes now was comforting.

"I... don't think many stallions are *Studs Monthly* material, to be honest," Fluttershy said.

Lockwood raised an eyebrow. "Wait, you read that magazine?"

Fluttershy turned pink. "Oh... w-we have that in our world t-too." That made Lockwood's eyebrow raise further. "N-not that there's much to read." Lockwood's eyebrow threatened to disappear into his mane. "Uh... I mean, R-Rarity has a subscription, but she says she only reads it f-for the articles. I may have... g-glanced in them once or twice."

"I see..." Lockwood coughed into his hoof. "Well, uh, since you don't *really* read it, I don't suppose I should be asking you if I'd qualify... should I."

“W-well like I said, I d-don’t read them myself...”

“But you said you’ve at least peeked once or twice, right?” Lockwood winked. “C’mon, you’ve got to be able to tell me I have an impressive... I dunno, wingspan or something.”

She found herself growing redder with every word until she was sure she would explode from sheer embarrassment. Her wings strained to rise out of his jacket, causing some minor pain. She tried desperately to look anywhere but *his* wings.

He chuckled. “Y’know, if you’re trying to figure out what my cutie mark means, it would be quicker to just ask.”

Her eyes widened. *Caught*. “Oh! Oh... I d-didn’t mean to s-stare, I just—”

“Relax, Fluttershy, I’m just teasing. Yes yes, I know, none of you have seen it yet since it’s always under my jacket,” he said, turning just to the side to give her a better look. “Can’t help it if the dang thing’s too big. Perfectly understandable for you to try and figure it out. I know it’s a bit dull, and probably confusing, but there it is.”

Lockwood’s cutie mark was a perfectly ordinary, drab, black umbrella.

“An... umbrella?” she asked.

“It’s actually a long, incredibly boring story. I hear you need some bed rest, so if you want me to help you get to sleep I’d be happy to oblige.”

She smiled. “I’d like to hear it.”

“Well, I grew up in the Outer District, if you’ll recall. Terrible place all around to grow up in, and the state of things bothered me. The foals without parents, food, or schooling. The homeless beggars on every other corner. The astounding crime rates, particularly robbery and murder. I wanted to help make things better, to turn it all around so we could be like the Mid Districts. But I didn’t have the resources, the know-how, or the connections to actually change anything. Then, I made a friend: Flathoof.”

Lockwood laughed and gave a wistful sigh. “He protected me one day from some bullies. I was a bit of a wimp back in school, see. His selflessness inspired me to seek out a way to do the same for others in need. But me, I had no talents. I was weak, and I had nothing to offer. But, I was friendly, so I made more friends. Those friends introduced me to their friends, and they introduced me to their friends, and so on.”

“You sound like you know a lot of ponies...” Fluttershy sighed. “I wish I could be as

outgoing as you..."

"It isn't easy knowing so many ponies, let me tell you," Lockwood said, giving her a look of total exhaustion. "Eventually I realized that I was *really good* at making connections with ponies of any social creed and standing. I don't know if Miss Sparkle told you, but I know ponies from just about everywhere in the city, from entrepreneurs in the high rise skyscrapers of the ritzy Inner District, to the social criminals, like Keeneye, in the Outer District. I formed myself a beautiful little social network that I could use to help ponies in need. My own 'umbrella' if you will. Hence, the cutie mark. Pretty silly, eh?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "Oh... I don't think that's silly at all. It's... nice. You want to... help ponies in need. I thought that little charity service you ran was really... sweet. I... I sort of do something... similar, only with animals instead of ponies."

With a loud slam, the door to the room burst open and a white blur streaked across the room like lightning, shoving Lockwood aside to come to a rest beside the sofa. Rarity wasted no time in cradling Fluttershy in her forelegs and peppering the yellow pegasus with care.

"Oh my dear, *dear, dear* Fluttershy!" Rarity said as she stroked Fluttershy's mane. "You're awake, darling! Oh thank *goodness*." She grabbed the sides of Fluttershy's face and forced the pegasus to stare at her. "Are you alright, sweetie? Do you need anything? Are you warm enough? Are you comfortable, darling? *Please* tell me you're okay."

"I'm fine," Fluttershy peeped. She glanced up and down Rarity's figure, then cleared her throat. "Um... Rarity? Y-your coat and mane are... wet. Did you run straight here from your b-bath?" she asked, darting her eyes towards Lockwood as discreetly as possible, hoping Rarity would catch the hint.

Rarity apparently didn't hear her, she was so focused on Fluttershy's condition. "You're not sore or anything, are you dear? Do you need a pillow? Are you hungry? More blankets?" She glanced down at Lockwood's jacket. "Oh dear, that's it isn't it? Your poor, *delicate* nose isn't used to the stark... *pungency* of stallion sweat. And look at this thing, it's so lumpy! Here, let me get this *rank* thing off—"

Fluttershy tugged the jacket closer, realizing that without it, Rarity would be able to see the compromising state of her wings. "N-no, that's okay. I'd... like to- w-well, Lockwood said I could—"

Rarity brightened and tapped herself on the forehead. "Well, if that's what *you* want, darling, far be it from me to object, even if it does reek of- oh, nevermind." She turned to face Lockwood. "Thank you... so... much?"

Fluttershy followed Rarity's gaze to Lockwood. His face was bright pink, and his wings

flared out to full wingspan. He was biting his lip in an obvious fit of nervousness, and his face was turned to the side, away from the sofa, though his eyes occasionally darted back to it.

“N-n-not... a p-p-problem at all!” he sputtered.

Fluttershy tugged the jacket’s collar up over her face as best she could. She knew what was coming.

Rarity turned pink from her muzzle all the way down to her flank. Her jaw dropped.

“Um... p-p-perhaps I sh-sh-should just leave y-you two... alone...” Lockwood said as he tugged his collar.

“Out!” Rarity shouted, grabbing the entirety of Lockwood’s body in her magic. She pushed him towards the door. “Out out out! Oooh, I never expected such *perversion*, not from you! Why, if I had the same candor as Applejack- *ooh!*”

“H-hey, w-w-wait! Y-you’re the one that just b-b-barged in—” Lockwood pleaded as he tried to avoid being shoved into any myriad furniture. His wings clipped the door. “H-hey! W-watch it now, t-t-those are s-sensitive!”

“Not another word!”

The door slammed shut behind him.

“And it’s n-n-not *my* f-fault you f-forgot your clothes!” his voice called from the other side. “I’m s-sorry!”

“Oh! Of all the excuses! You can just wait out in the hallway until I’m *decent*. Hmph!” Rarity stuck her nose in the air. “Ooh, the *nerve*, and from a pony I did not expect such things from at that. Not that I blame him for wanting to see *my* gorgeous figure, but really, in front of—”

Rarity paused and turned to Fluttershy, her earlier smile returning and her voice lowering to a pleasant demeanor. “I *do* apologize that you had to witness that, darling. I’m sure the poor dear didn’t mean anything by it. I do suppose I *should* have grabbed something to wear on my way out, but I just needed to see you.” She raised her voice so that he could hear her: “But it’s *his* fault for just standing there and *staring* like some hormone-addled school-colt! Have you no *shame?*”

“I said I was sorry!” Lockwood called from the hallway, his voice muffled by the door.

“You didn’t have to chase him out,” Fluttershy said, trying hard to keep a small smile off her face. The spectacle had certainly made her feel better.

“Be that as it may, darling, I just can’t allow such... such *debauchery* to take place in front of you. Why, I imagine if he’d stood a while longer we’d have to sterilize the room! A sensitive lady like you shouldn’t have to see anything so candid. Allow me to get dressed, and I’ll let him back in. Maybe by then he’ll have *calmed down* a little.”

Rarity grabbed up one of the spare blankets that had been provided but had not been used, then dried her mane, coat, and tail before draping it over her back. When she seemed satisfied that the not-at-all fashionable blanket would serve as a temporary covering, she opened the door to let Lockwood back in, but stood firm in the doorway for a moment.

Rarity narrowed her eyes. “*Ahem?*”

Lockwood looked to his sides and saw that his wings were still a little rigid. “Eh heh... r-right. Um...” he muttered as he tried to flatten them against his sides.

“Oh whatever, just *try* and maintain some semblance of tact, darling? Hmm?” Rarity rolled her eyes and let him in, then trotted back to the sofa. “Well then, with *that* little debacle behind us, Tick Tock should be coming up soon with a nice, hot bowl of stew that Mister Pewter was making specifically for you,” she said as she tucked Fluttershy into her jacket blanket. “If it’s *anything* as good as dinner was, you’ll enjoy it a great deal, darling. And complimentary room service as well, how exquisite! It’s like being in a little hotel.”

“That sounds... nice,” Fluttershy said with a smile. “I’m... really hungry.”

“Then it looks like I’ve got perfect timing,” Tick Tock said from the doorway.

“Oh! *Goodness*, Tick Tock,” Rarity exclaimed, “how about a little *warning* next time you come into the room?”

Tick Tock rolled her eyes and cantered into the room. “Yes, well, stew’s here, so let me through and I can—”

Rarity stopped Tick Tock with a raised hoof. Her horn glowed, shrouding the bowl with her own magic to cover Tick Tock’s. “No need for any of *that*, darling. Allow me to take that off your hooves. You’ve done so much already and certainly haven’t had any time to rest yourself, so why don’t you take a load off?”

“Far be it from me to argue the point,” Tick Tock said with a shrug. “Here you are then. Trust me when I say it tastes better than it smells.”

“Yes, thank you darling.” Rarity took the bowl of steaming-hot stew, which had a smell that crinkled Rarity’s nose.

Fluttershy could smell the stew from across the room, and it only got stronger as Rarity brought it over: a pungent aroma, not unlike overcooked cabbage blended with radishes, too much garlic, and too many onions. It was a sickly brown color with a thin, watery texture, loaded with what looked like blackened potato chunks and stringy, leaf-like greens that reminded her of wilted spinach or lemongrass. Did she *really* have to eat this? She was hungry, sure, but this seemed a little much.

"I'll leave you to it then, if you insist on handling it yourself," Tick Tock said. She gave a short wave to Fluttershy and Lockwood. "Night, all. And do try to get some sleep yourselves, eh? And let *her* get some sleep, or you'll just delay her recovery more."

"Of course, of course. Good night, darling, and thank you again," Rarity said in a sing-song voice as Tick Tock left. Rarity shut the door with her magic and turned back to Fluttershy. "Now then, darling, let's get some food in you, hmm?"

Fluttershy took another sniff of the stew, and gave Rarity a weak smile. "Yay..."

Tick Tock flopped down onto the sofa, with all four of her legs hanging off the edges at varying angles. A weak fire crackled in the nearby fireplace, casting a faint orange glow across her face and legs. The gentle warmth crept into her tired body. She felt a sense of comfort that she hadn't had in what felt like weeks. Finally, a chance to take it easy. To help herself relax, she had stripped to just a cotton bathrobe and her bow tie.

Pewter sat beside a desk at the opposite end of the room, his back to Tick Tock. His horn was aglow, wielding a needle and thread with practiced precision to mend the tears in Tick Tock's sweater vest. Her undershirt had already been fixed and lay draped over the desk's overly-large chair.

"How in the hay did you manage to damage your clothes like this Tick Tock?" he asked, shaking his head as he tore off another section of scorched wool. "Not to mention yourself, of course. You look like you've been through Hell and back."

"Close enough," she said, putting her hoof to her temple. "I'm just glad all this is going to be behind me in another week or so. I have a headache the size of the bleedin' moon, and I ache in places I didn't even know I had."

"*I'm* glad that through all this, you didn't get yourself or anypony else killed."

Tick Tock sighed. "Hmph, you sound just like them. It's not *my* fault I seem to be on some bad luck streak lately, but all they've been on about is how much of a bloody idiot I am."

“Smart ponies.”

Tick Tock snapped up and threw her pillow at Pewter, hitting him square in the back of the head.

He laughed it off. “Kidding, kidding. That’s not what I meant. Still, they have a point, Tick Tock. Redblade is dangerous enough by yourself, and you tried to traverse it with a full party? What were you thinking? What if Miss Sparkle hadn’t been able to put up an aura like she did?”

“Then I wouldn’t have even attempted to cross, simple as that. You don’t think I’d try it if I wasn’t confident we could make, do you? How dumb do you think I am?”

Pewter’s silence made Tick Tock frown. Then, he turned his head just to the side so that she could see his small smirk, and passed the pillow back to her.

His smile put her at ease, and she rolled her eyes as she took her pillow back. “I know I’m dumb enough to do a lot of things, Pewter. I’m telling you, everything was going just swimmingly until that bloody earthquake. How could I have predicted that, hmm? You tell me.”

Pewter shook his head. “Nothing you could’ve done about that, no. Truthfully, your route would’ve probably been fine if it hadn’t happened.” He sighed and pouted his lips. “I guess I’m just hurt you were going to skip my checkpoint on your way to Hope’s Point.”

“I would’ve stopped by on my way back, no need to get mopey on me,” she said, closing her eyes and dismissing his pout with a wave of her hoof. She gave him a small glance, seeing that his pleading look hadn’t left his face. “Knock off the puppy eyes, eh? I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, then lifted her sweater vest over the desk chair and laid it over her undershirt. “Good as new!” he said, gesturing towards the fixed clothes with pride. “Difficult work, but I think you’ll find I did a better job than last time I had to fix your stuff up. I think I’m getting better at sewing, which is good if I’m going to fix up all the other clothes by tomorrow.” He scratched his head. “Don’t know why they’re bothering. That law—”

“I know, I know, I told them it doesn’t apply out here, but you know how it is.”

Pewter shook his head. “Well, whatever the case, I’d still like to know why you need to get those mares to Hope’s Point so quickly. They’re certainly an... *odd* group, if you don’t mind my saying. None of them act as if they have the slightest idea what’s going on.”

Tick Tock hesitated, as she recalled protocol. She felt bad that she couldn’t tell Pewter the whole story, especially since Flathoof and Lockwood knew, but the situation hadn’t been in her favor when they had found out. She could make exceptions in unfortunate circumstances,

but this did not qualify.

She sighed. “Well, they’re not exactly from around here, you understand. It’s a long story, so let’s just leave it at that, eh?”

“Ooh, the hush-hush treatment? I assume this is all official Chronomancer business then?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. She nodded. “Then I won’t ask anymore; I know how work is. All that timey-wimey stuff goes right over my head anyway. Always has, always will. At least I understand it better than my father did.”

Tick Tock chuckled, recalling memories of fonder times. “I remember that he used to excuse himself from the room when Master Zenith tried to talk about work at all.” She cleared her throat. “Well, this particular job might just make you reconsider what counts as ‘complicated’, so yes, let’s just leave it alone.”

“Anything you *can* tell me? I’m a good listener, you know,” he offered, stepping over to the sofa and taking a seat on the floor beside Tick Tock.

“Well, I suppose as long as I don’t go into any details.” Tick Tock sighed and rolled over onto her stomach. “This whole week has just been an absolute bleedin’ nightmare. I’ve rubbed elbows with death so many times that I think I’m on his ‘most wanted’ list or something.”

Pewter frowned. “I didn’t think your duties usually included much danger, outside the usual Wastelands problems. You usually don’t seem this riled up about work.”

“Normally no, I don’t deal with anything worse than what you deal with on a daily basis. But ever since those six...” She grunted and buried her face in her pillow. “Nevermind. Let’s just say that I’ve had a tough week, and the sooner I get those six to Utopia and out of my mane, the better off I’ll be.”

“So I take it they’re not your friends?”

Tick Tock snorted and quirked her eyebrow at Pewter, not believing it was a serious question. “Friends? Right. A few of them are friendly enough, but...” She rolled her eyes and flicked her hoof. “What does it matter, anyway? As soon as I get them all to Utopia, I can put this all behind me.”

“I wish you the best of luck then. It sounds like you’re gonna need it.” Pewter gave Tick Tock a bright smile. “I enjoy your visits Tick Tock, even if they’re random and infrequent. I don’t like seeing you upset, though. You’re usually a lot less... grumpy.”

“Yes, well, you try traveling for days with a group of ponies that disagree with everything you say. See how grumpy you are then, eh?”

“Just try to take it easy, okay? Don’t let it get you down. My father always liked your fine spirit. Imagine what he’d think if he saw you all down in the dumps like this.”

“I’m sure he’d give me a bit of a break. Your father always *did* like me better than you anyway,” Tick Tock said with a laugh. “It must be hard, knowing you’ll always play second-fiddle to a little filly like me.”

“Ha! He changed his tune when I killed my first Gargantuan, unlike *some* mares in present company, who still to this day haven’t accomplished the feat.”

She poked him in the chest. “That’s just because I’ve never had to resort to lethal methods to get away from the bloody things, and that’s why you’ll never get one of those bloody needles anywhere near me. I know you can’t say much for yourself. I’ve been keeping a tally on how many times you’ve been stung.”

Pewter laughed. “You have, have you? What am I at now?”

“Hang on, let me...” Tick Tock remembered that she didn’t have her Timekeeper with her. “The tally’s on...” She trailed off, her smile falling into a frown.

“Your... Timekeeper, right?” he completed. He made to continue, then stopped and scratched his head. “Hold on... I didn’t find it in your vest. Don’t you always keep it on you? I thought it was work-related?”

Tick Tock grunted and diverted her attention elsewhere in the room, wishing she’d never brought the situation up. “Don’t remind me. I’d bet a million bits that if I had my Timekeeper, we’d be halfway to Hope’s Point by now. Now we’re stuck in this mess, all because of a bit of damned bad luck and because I lost my only piece of gear like a stupid, *stupid* little foal. I’m such an idiot. I never should’ve set the bloody thing down...”

“Hey, it’s not so bad, is it? You do amazing things all the time, you should be able to get by without it.”

She huffed and turned away from him. “Like what?”

“Well... you deal with Gargantuans better than anypony I’ve ever seen, for one,” Pewter said, breaking into a proud smile. “Dad always said *he* should be taking lessons from *you*.”

Tick Tock smiled. “Yeah... I suppose...” Then, her smile fell again. “But... that’s only because my Timekeeper has a seismic detector. I know more quickly when Gargantuans are coming...”

Pewter's smile faltered for half a second. "Well, nopony else I know would attempt Redblade even if it could shave months off their travel time. If anypony could've gotten those mares through, it was you."

Tick Tock did not smile this time. "And then the bloody earthquake had to go and ruin everything."

"That's not your fault. You couldn't have predicted that."

"Sure, not without proper measurements, and without my Timekeeper I was unable to make those accurately."

She let out a loud sniff and wiped her nose with her hoof, trying not to let Pewter see her do it and failing horribly, since he was looking straight at her. She was surprised that he didn't look away or look disgusted by the gesture. The smile he still wore was almost infectious. Almost.

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm bloody useless without the thing, I see that now..."

Pewter put his hoof on her shoulder. "Come on now, Tick Tock, you know you're not—"

"I am, okay!" Tick Tock blurted, shrugging away from Pewter's hoof. His earlier smile finally fell, and that just made her feel worse. She buried her face in her pillow to hide her tears. "Just ask the mares downstairs! I'm a total screw-up without it, just a bleedin' tour guide with a map! I may as well just have handed them the damned thing and let them go off on their own for all the good I've done them!"

Pewter frowned and remained silent for a long moment, then rose to his hooves with a sigh and trotted into the center of the room, where he began to pace.

Tick Tock pulled her face out of her pillow to look at him. She remembered that Pewter always had a habit of pacing when in thought. What was he thinking about? Every time he circled around towards the sofa, he moved his gaze from the floor, upwards. She followed his gaze and found him looking at the mantelpiece just over the fireplace, at a series of photographs, some of them fairly recent.

She particularly remembered the one on the far right. She'd just been a little filly then, and she remembered how much she had hated the uniform at the time. Master Zenith, an elderly earth pony with impeccable poise, stood behind her, that familiar aloof gaze of his fixed directly at the camera. Pewter stood beside his father Obsidian, a gruff unicorn with bulging muscles. The young colt looked nervous, with his eyes just off to the side in the direction of the Chronomancer and Chronomancer-in-training.

She sunk back into her pillow. That picture always made her sad. It was the first and only time anyone had ever managed to talk Master Zenith into taking a photograph—the old codger was notoriously camera-shy—and thus it was the only thing she had to remember him by. It also reminded her that Obsidian was gone as well, killed in an accident while mining in the Goldridge Pass. It would be another decade after that picture that she underwent the official Chronomancer induction trials and exams, and never saw either of them again.

When she turned her attention back to Pewter, she noticed he was standing still and looking right at the same picture she was, his face brightening. Then, he rushed over to his desk.

Tick Tock watched him, not sure what to think as he rifled through the desk drawers, tossing everything he came across aside: a few bits of shiny metal, some packets of seeds, a pocket-sized pickaxe that matched his cutie mark down to everything but the colors, a small glass case—this one he did not toss aside, instead setting it down on the desk with great care.

Finally, he found the object of his search: a tiny wooden case, not much larger than a slice of bread. He brought it over to the sofa, a coy grin plastered on his face.

Tick Tock wasn't used to seeing him in such an excitable mood and was genuinely curious as to why. "What's got you all chipper for?" she asked, wiping her eyes on her bathrobe. "You made a mess of your room, you dumb git."

He sat beside the sofa again, and presented the box to her. "I remembered something I wanted to give you. Your last visit was such a long time ago that I'd almost forgotten about it. I know it's not much, but... well, take a look." He opened the case.

Tick Tock's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Is... is that what I think it is?"

Inside, laying upon a fold of dark crimson silk, sat a plain-looking golden stopwatch. It looked old, at least a century or so if not more, and was covered in scratches and cuts. The only space on the entire watch that was still in good condition was the center, where there was an engraving of the letter 'Z' in pristine gold. The watch as a whole looked as though someone had attempted to clean it to no avail.

"I know it doesn't look like it's in the best shape," Pewter said, drawing Tick Tock's attention back to him, "but it doesn't respond to many of the restoration attempts I've tried."

"Where did you get this?" Tick Tock asked, her voice soft with wonder as she floated it out of the box, letting its rusted copper chain fall limp. Her eyes were beginning to water up. She knew exactly what it was.

"Found it in one of my father's storage cases while cleaning a few months ago. Please

tell me I didn't get your hopes up. That is what I think it is, right?"

Tick Tock nodded, causing some tears to fall off her face to her pillow. "Master Zenith's Timekeeper. It still looks like it did last time I—" She stopped and brought the watch in close, touching her hoof to it.

Pewter smiled and nodded. "I thought it looked familiar. I remember ol' Zenith pulling this thing out on you all the time, constantly asking you what buttons did what and demanding demonstrations. You were always so ornery about it."

"'Constant vigilance'," Tick Tock said, her smile beginning to return. "The old coot insisted I always know what to do with my Timekeeper in any situation. Sometimes though, I like to think he was going senile and actually was asking me what buttons did what."

"I still remember that time my father and I were walking you two back to the city when that adult Gargantuan showed up." Pewter sighed and shook his head, though he still bore a wide smile. "What did he ask you to do again? Activate the—"

"Barrier scale! Ha ha, yes!" Tick Tock laughed and shook her head. "I was too small to make a barrier of my own then, so he asked me to assist your father in conserving magic."

Pewter joined her laughter. "I kept getting on my father's case the entire way home for letting an old stallion and a little filly tell him what to do. He tanned my hide good when we got back, I tell you. Never got old bringing it up whenever we had our arguments."

Tick Tock hesitated, then hung the watch's chain around her neck. "It's been so long since I've seen this. After he disappeared, I... I felt like I'd lost a part of me. You have no idea how much this means to me, Pewter." She leaned forward and wrapped her legs around his neck in a hug. "Thank you."

Pewter blushed and returned the hug. "I'm glad if it makes you happy, Tick Tock. Can it replace yours though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I figured that maybe... if you didn't have *your* Timekeeper, maybe *his* could... you know, be used instead?"

Tick Tock gave a weak smile. "I can use it, sure. It'll be lacking some features of the newer model, and I'll have to remember the older operation guidelines. I wonder..."

She floated the watch up to eye level and flipped it open. The actual clock was still working, which was a good sign, and still completely accurate. She clicked one of the buttons on

the side, and the clock face flickered a moment before gaining a dim red glow. The light brightened as Tick Tock turned knobs until at last the glow was bright enough to illuminate her face. Then, she twisted the knob on the rear of the watch to the left, then to the right, then back to left. The red light turned green.

The clockface no longer displayed the time, but instead a catalogued series of dated notes. Tick Tock shuffled silently through them, using her magic to navigate the menu. The dating system was as she expected, each note's preface dictating how many days the Chronomancer who owned the Timekeeper had been in service. She marveled at some of the notes that had been taken after she'd first met him. Had the old stallion really been working that long? If that was true, then some of these notes confirmed his age to be over one hundred and fifty. She knew Zenith was old, but this was astounding.

"What are you doing?" Pewter asked.

Tick Tock snapped to attention. She turned red, realizing she'd been so engrossed in the device that she'd been treating Pewter like a piece of furniture, leaning against him but otherwise not paying him any attention. He was looking right at her, that bright smile of his having returned.

"I'm... looking through notes that Master Zenith left," she said, turning her attention back to the watch. "There might be something important in here, some sort of clue."

There'd be plenty of time to wander aimlessly down memory lane later, she thought. Right now, only one note was of any interest to her: the most recent entry. She hoped that maybe, just maybe, she'd learn what had happened to him, what had driven him to leave. After a moment of searching, she found the note, queued it up, and began reading silently to herself.

*"Chronomancer: 5-068 (Zenith)
Service Date: 55,173
Coordinates: 42.31° N, 71.07° W*

Tick Tock,

I have utmost confidence that you have completed your Chronomancer trials and exams, and are reading this now. It took me more than a decade to find a pony with the aptitude and attitude to take the mantle of Chronomancer, and you surpassed all of the expectations I had. If anypony could and should be a member of the Chronomancer family, it is you.

It is my only regret in life that I did not see you return, that I never got a chance to congratulate you, that I did not get to say goodbye. I am sorry for that. I suppose that you think ill of me for leaving, but I assure you that I have my reasons.

The ancient gryphon city of Aeropolis was once the cornerstone of magical study in

Equestria-V, a place of wonder and majesty where even a veteran Chronomancer such as I could hope to learn something. Though the city now lies abandoned, its population decimated and its great stores of magical knowledge long stolen, it has long been a theory of myself, my predecessors, and other astute minds that the ruins still hold untold secrets greater than anything we've seen before. The gryphons were well known for their taciturn nature, after all.

It is now, in my twilight years, that I have finally decided to explore the ruins for myself, to quench my thirst my knowledge and sate my curiosity. My body grows old and frail, and illness has gripped my heart. Though I am loathe to do so, I fear I do not have long for this world. Weeks, perhaps, but more likely days, and so I use my remaining time to travel into the Gryphon Ruins in hopes of gaining some new knowledge before I die. I find it a cruel irony that I, a Chronomancer, wish that I had more time.

I am sorry that I could not see you one last time, Tick Tock. You were like a daughter to me, and one of the only friends I had. Though this comes too late, know that I am proud to have known you, and that I wish the best for you.

*Your mentor,
Zenith'."*

Tick Tock snapped the Timekeeper closed, snuffing out the dull green glow. She fought back the urge to cry, and failed miserably. The visible effort was not missed by Pewter, who leaned down and wrapped her in one-legged hug, pulling her close. She returned it with earnest, wrapping both forelegs around his broad figure, finding a comfort in pressing her face against his chest.

"Thank you, Pewter," she said, her voice hoarse. "This... this is a great gift, far greater than I deserve. You really have no idea how much this means to me..."

Pewter smiled and tightened the hug. "I'm glad I was able to brighten your spirits, Tick Tock. I hate seeing you upset."

"Your father raised you right," she said, looking up and returning his smile. "No pony else would have bothered with my sorry self." She sniffed and returned her face to his chest. "What did I do to deserve a friend like you?"