

Chapter 1: Making Tracks

Twilight Sparkle hurried down Ponyville's main street. Ducking past several fruit carts and their long lines of customers, she did her best not to run into anypony as she threaded through the crowd. Ordinarily she would've preferred to go a little slower, to take in the day's warm sunshine, to savor the delicious aroma coming out of the bakery, and to chat with any one of the many ponies who were wandering around. At the moment, however, she simply didn't have the time to spare, and so continued along at a quick pace.

It had been a very busy day for her so far. She'd been over at Fluttershy's house since before dawn, helping her catalog all the local animals that would be going into their winter hibernations the next day. While Twilight was more than happy to help, it was slow work, and they weren't finished until well into the afternoon. Now she was running behind schedule and had many more things to do today. Complicating matters was that she had just heard that there was an important letter from the Princess waiting for her back at the library. Twilight hurried back as fast as she could to read it and see what else needed her attention. Why Spike didn't just bring the letter to her like he always did, Twilight had no idea.

Where could Spike have wandered off to? she thought as she passed through the town square. She dodged past a few more fruit carts as she headed towards the street that would take her to her tree. *It's not like him to skip on getting me something like this. Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen him all day. He knows how busy this week is and he's been so helpful so far. I wonder what he could be—*

A thick smell penetrated her thoughts and brought her back to the world: smoke. A lot of it. She looked up and saw that it was covering the sky. It hung in the air, a thick overcast that cast a shadow over the town. It was originating from somewhere around the next corner and going wherever the wind would take it. Twilight stared at it, seemingly the only pony around to do so. All the others went about their daily lives, totally oblivious to the black cloud overhead. Twilight sniffed and smelled something burning very close by. She became aware of the air getting warmer around her, along with small tufts of ash falling out of the sky. Quickly running down the street and around a corner, Twilight found herself face to face with the smoke's origin.

The library was on fire. As Twilight stared in horror, flames consumed the tree from the front door all the way to the highest branch. The shelves inside fell over as their supports burned away, the books quickly lighting up into small bricks of flame. A small breeze went through the air, sending more smoke and a volley of ash over Twilight's head. She ran towards the inferno. The heat grew more and more intense as she approached, until it became too overwhelming to move any closer.

"Help! Somepony, anypony, help me!" she cried out as loud as she could, looking desperately around. The ponies around her ignored both her and the fire, not even so much as glancing at it. They acted like they didn't even know it was there. Tears streamed down

Twilight's face as she searched frantically for something she could use on the blaze. She tried to summon the nearby water tower, create a waterfall overhead, bring in buckets, anything... but try as she might, her horn just sputtered. Nothing was working. She tried to think, but the sheer amount of heat washing over her made it difficult to concentrate.

Without warning, a large fireball crashed through the top half of the tree. An upper window had cracked open, causing an enormous backdraft to shoot out. The force of it covered Twilight in soot and sent her sprawling backwards. She rolled several times before managing to steady herself. She shook her head as she stood back up. The whole tree was lit up now, shining brightly against the smoke covered sky. Twilight looked around and found the street completely deserted. She was alone. The nearby buildings began to look very gray in color; Twilight first thought it might be ash covering them, but it seemed more like they were simply fading away. She shouted out once more to no avail. There wasn't anypony around to hear her calls, no pony to come to her aid.

A loud crack sounded out as the front door violently flew open. It detached from its hinges and shot through the air, just barely missing Twilight's head as she ducked out of the way. A dark figure stood in the doorway, outlined by the bright light behind him. Twilight squinted in his direction and thought she could make out his face. He stood unbothered by the flames, looking square in Twilight's direction. He started to approach her. Twilight tried to back up, but found that she couldn't move. She was stuck in place, completely paralyzed from head to toe and unable to even speak. The figure grew closer and closer, a trail of fire following his every step and spreading out all around him. The air got hotter and hotter all around. As he drew near, Twilight slowly made out parts of his face. His piercing blue eyes stared at her over a wide grin-

"Are you alright, Twilight?" Fluttershy's question was the first thing Twilight heard when she opened her eyes. She was crumpled in the corner of her bed, breathing heavily. She blinked as a view of reality returned to her. The others were looking at her from their sleeping bunks. The late-afternoon sun shone through the windows, while the rest of the world rushed by as the train moved steadily along. The motion of the traincar and the clicking sound of the tracks provided further foundation for the scene.

"Uh..." was all Twilight managed to get out at first. A few shakes of her head brought back some of her composure. "Uh, yeah. I'm fine. Just a bit of a bad dream I guess."

"Bit nothing. My dear, you look as if you've had quite a shock," Rarity said with concern. "That's certainly no way to begin a vacation."

"Thanks, but believe me, I'm fine," Twilight said reassuringly. She did feel much better. The fright from the dream was wearing off, as was her memory of it. She looked around at the

others and smiled. "I think I just overworked myself getting ready for the trip."

"Twilight, if you got bad dreams every time you overworked yourself, you'd never sleep at all," Rarity said. She floated a small, monogrammed towel over to Twilight's forehead to wipe away the remaining beads of sweat.

Rainbow Dash laughed from her bunk. "You're one to talk, Rarity. Twilight probably just let the mystery of this whole whatchamacallit go to her head. I think we'd all do better on this thing if we knew more about it first."

"Now hush Rainbow Dash, no sense in complainin' about that." Applejack's voice came up from a bunk at the end of the car. "Twilight explained things nice an' easy, an' you had your say on whether or not you wanted to come. We're all headed out to take a break from all the hard work we did cleanin' up for the new season, an' to give this pony some much-needed company."

Pinkie, her nose stuck deep in a book, looked up.

"Nice exposition, Applejack!" she said cheerfully, then stuck her head back down.

"Uh, thanks," Applejack responded after a moment. "Anyway, we're already this far out there, an' you'll enjoy yourself once you get there."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I was just saying, is all," Dash replied. "Twilight probably just got tired from having to pack everything up herself because Rarity took Spike."

"He offered to help me." Rarity shrugged and gave a sly grin. "Besides, who am I to refuse the services of such a polite little gentleman?"

"How about when that little gentleman needs to help me locate the books I need for this trip?" Twilight asked.

"Really, Twilight, you've been in that tree for ages now. If you haven't gotten your act together and learned how to locate your own books by now, then I'm afraid you're simply hopeless. Right, Spike?" Rarity glanced over her shoulder for a reply and was met with a loud snore. Spike was bundled up as tight as he could manage under his blankets. For once, not even the girls' chatter could keep him up.

Rarity sighed. "Oh, such a dear."

"Yeah, having to lug four trunks' worth of coats onto the train would tire anypony out," Dash said, tossing an extra pillow Spike's way. It landed just short of him. Almost instinctively, a small purple claw shot out to grab it and tuck it under the ones he already had. He rolled over

and let loose another snore. The girls all giggled.

“Anyway,” Rarity said, “you seem to have managed yourself just fine, Twilight. Why, you got this little box of books here all by yourself.”

Rarity nudged the small container, which was stuffed full of paperbacks.

“Actually, those aren’t mine. Mine are all in the back with the rest of the bags.” Twilight looked over at the box. “I’m not sure who these belong to.”

“Ooh! Those are mine!” A pink hoof materialized and snatched the box away. The owner of the hoof poked her head out of her bunk, one of the paperbacks open in front of her. “I’m going through them pretty quick and didn’t want to have to hop between the cars every time I needed another one.”

“Pinkie?” Twilight asked, somewhat incredulously. “You brought all those?”

“Of course, Twilight! Between the exploring and partying and fun stuff we’re going to do when we get there, I might find myself with nothing much to do. I mean, I can’t start pranking this new pony yet until I really get to know her, and that could take a whole day! Plus I don’t know how much room or supplies I’ll have for baking, so I don’t know how often I’ll be able to throw a party, and I know everypony wants some time to relax after all they’ve been doing so I should give them at least an hour for that and—”

“Alright, alright, Pinkie, I hear you. I just didn’t take you for much of a reader.” Twilight paused and glanced down at one of the titles that had slipped out of Pinkie’s box. “Particularly of books like *The Hoof’s End Horror*.”

“Oh, Twilight,” Pinkie giggled. “Everypony loves a good spooky story every once in a while, you know that. And I’ve been really hooked on this author lately! He does such good work, I can’t put them down!”

Pinkie suddenly leaned out and gave Twilight an odd look.

“Do you read Sugar Cane?” she asked plainly.

“Uh, not that I’m aware of,” Twilight said, backing up into her bunk. “But I’ll be sure to give him a look sometime.”

“Okie-dokie-lokie!” Pinkie said cheerfully. With that, her nose went straight back between the pages, the outside world shut off to her once more. The rest of the group stared at her.

“Um... what?” Fluttershy asked, more than a little confused.

Applejack tilted her head. "Now there's a sight I thought I'd never see. You feelin' okay over there, Pinkie?"

Pinkie hummed happily to herself as she read and gave no reply.

"Certainly an unusual sight," Rarity said. "Although I think I saw her like this the other day as well."

"I know what happened," Dash said firmly.

"You do?" asked Twilight, for she was just as mystified at Pinkie's behavior as any of them. She didn't recall Pinkie ever even sitting this still this long before.

"Isn't it obvious? Pinkie's just swapped minds with you," Dash said. She leaned back with a satisfied look on her face.

"Oh really?" Twilight rolled her eyes. "I think I would have noticed that."

"Maybe you have!" Dash leaned in and gave Twilight an inquisitive look. "Any parties or candy in that dream of yours? Maybe that's why you were so weird when you woke up. Your mind was trying to get the hang of Pinkie's Pinkiness."

"I don't recall anything like that," Twilight said. "Besides, how exactly would this mind swap have occurred?"

"You got me. Pinkie's the egghead now, ask her."

The group all looked at Pinkie again. The pink pony didn't notice at first, though eventually she looked up and stared back at them.

"What?" she asked innocently. The others glanced at each other for a moment, and then burst out laughing. Pinkie shrugged and joined in, her high-pitched chortles somewhat reassuring the others.

"It's looking really gloomy outside." Fluttershy's somewhat distracted comment came as they were all calming down. Everypony looked out their window. The sun from earlier was now masked by a thick layer of gray overcast. It covered the sky as far as they could see. As they headed further north it seemed to be getting darker and grayer. Judging by the trees that peppered the landscape, the wind was picking up as well.

"I think we're in the Wastes now," Dash said after a moment.

“How can you tell?” Applejack asked.

“The weather’s really weird up here. Not all of it is pony made, a lot of it just... happens.”

“Oh, my,” Fluttershy said. Her worried eyes scanned the darkening sky. “This sounds like a very dangerous place.”

Up in the sky, the girls could see a group of pegasi dragging a cloud into place. It was a large one, even grayer and bleaker than the rest.

“The weather ponies here seem to be managing alright,” Twilight noted.

Dash let out a small laugh. “The weather ponies up here are *nuts*. They keep trying to outdo the stuff that appears on its own, even though there aren’t even close to enough of them to keep up. This first week is hectic enough for everypony everywhere, but here... even I might have trouble. At first. Then I’d have to show them how it’s done.”

“That an offer to go an’ help?” Applejack grinned.

“Hey, I’ve been working on getting the cloud formations right for the last month. I think it’s high time I had a break,” Dash shot back, pride leaking through her voice. “Besides, I don’t see you offering to go help the train ponies with pulling us. Can’t imagine this bucket is easy to drag along on a day like this.”

Applejack looked somewhat indignant at the comment. “Why, I’d be happy to go out an’ help!”

A sudden gust of wind shook the whole car, bringing with it a great roar that made everypony freeze for a moment.

“...On the return trip! You know, after I’ve had a good long week to rest up an’ get my strength back.” Applejack kept a brave face as she drew herself up into her bed a little more.

Following the gust, the weather took a swift turn for the worse. Snow fell lightly at first before morphing into something more substantial. The wind picked up, whipping the flakes around even more and causing the visibility to plummet. Off in the distance, the weather ponies continued to do their jobs, though even from the train the girls could see that they were struggling against the uncontrollable elements. They dropped a few more clouds into place before finally conceding and heading home. It wasn’t long before they disappeared into the white flurry.

At the same time, the train increased in speed; the pullers had a long night ahead of them. Even stopping to swap with the other railway workers at the various break points along

the line, it wasn't going to be easy. The sooner they got to where they were going, the better for all involved.

The light in the sky finally faded to black. All that could be gathered from outside the window was the howl of the wind.

"In the thick of it now," Applejack noted. She yawned. "Oof, time to hit the hay. Hope things are lookin' a mite purtier in the mornin'..."

She trailed off as her face hit the pillow.

"Yeah, I'm out for the night too," Dash said. "Just thinking about the weather makes me tired from work."

"I think it's a good time for all of us to get some sleep," Twilight said.

Everypony collected themselves in their beds as Twilight reached over for the gas lamp switch. With one quick turn, darkness filled the car, followed shortly thereafter by the shallow breathing of five sleeping ponies and the light snoring of one sleeping baby dragon.

Sometime later, the candle in Pinkie's berth finally went out. The book she was reading dropped onto the floor, and before long the sound of sleep throughout the car was complete. All that could be heard was the wind howling outside and, if one were to listen really closely, some shuffling and bumping coming from somewhere inside the baggage car.

The train sped swiftly along through the night. The heavy weather from earlier had abated, but the temperature continued to plummet. The farther down it went, the cozier the car's interior grew. All of its occupants were bundled up in their beds, fast asleep. Warm, secure, and blissfully ignorant of the frigid exterior that surrounded them, they all slept calmly under the covers.

With the exception of one. Up in her bunk, Twilight was tossing and turning. She kicked at the covers, muttering incomprehensible things under her breath. Her face was scrunched up, and she seemed to wince a few times at some unseen blows. She continued like this for some time before her leg gave a sudden, unusual twitch and her eyes shot open.

Twilight sat straight up, soundlessly but with great force. So great that she immediately banged her head on the roof of the train car. She fell back down onto her pillow, rubbing her forehead and muttering a steady stream of "Ow, ow, ow" under her breath. She looked around, with only the darkness of the car around to meet her. One of the exterior lamps of the train had been lit and was letting some light in, so she could just make out where she was. No pony so much as stirred at Twilight's abrupt awakening. She stared for what seemed like ages, looking

for the slightest imperfection, any hint of something amiss. All was well.

She turned and looked out the window. The lantern spread a pale orange glow out into the foreground, one that was quickly sucked up by the dark void that was the night sky. Not a star could be seen, nothing beyond the small ball of light that was speeding along the ground. All that was visible were some white flecks of snow falling gently down. The wind had died down sometime earlier. All Twilight could hear was the sound of the cars moving along the track. She shivered and realized how cold she was. Her blanket had been kicked to the end of her bed and she was covered in sweat. She also realized she was breathing very, very fast.

She pulled the blanket up and took in a few deep breaths.

“Okay Twilight, just relax and stay calm,” she said quietly to herself in the most reassuring tone she could manage, “it was just another nightmare. You’ve had them before, you get them when you’re overly stressed, you have them and you move on.”

Slowly but steadily, she calmed down. Her forehead stopped aching and she eased from her tense position. She was slightly more concerned than she was willing to admit, however. It was true she had had nightmares in the past, some of them fierce enough to wake her up, like the ones she had today. It had been years since that happened, though, and two of them in the same day? That was a new one on her. As for stress causing it, she had admittedly been quite stressed these past few days. Getting ready for the end of the season, followed by packing up for this surprise trip Celestia introduced to her, had taken a lot out of her. But these didn’t seem related to any of that, and they bore little resemblance to stress-related nightmares she’d had before. These must’ve been caused by something else.

Still, it was nothing she couldn’t handle, right? Right?

“Right, of course. No need to fret Twilight,” she continued to mutter as she got comfortable once again. “You’re a big girl, and you’re not about to be denied a full night’s rest because your brain decided to throw a few spooks at you. Even spooks like... like...”

She strained to remember the dreams, the ones that felt so impossibly real. Nothing came to mind. Faint images of fires and shadows flickered through her head and then faded away. In a flash, it was all gone; the only evidence of it ever happening at all was the small red spot on her forehead.

“There, see? It couldn’t have been anything important. Quit acting like a little filly, and get some rest.”

Twilight stared out the window as she adjusted her head on her pillow. The snowfall was almost hypnotic in how peaceful it was, not even the speed of the train could hurry them along. She felt her eyelids growing heavy again. It didn’t take long before she was asleep once more.

The train continued forward, heading straight through the darkness that was all around. The snow was barely dropping at this point. The flakes seemed to just hover in midair. Like ash from a fire.

The sky was still overcast at the final station, now matching the fresh layer of snow on the ground. Thankfully, the wind was still absent. Only the very light snowfall remained of the previous evening's harsh conditions as the girls prepared to depart from the train onto the platform. Ahead of them, the train pullers barely waited to take off their reins before making an unsteady beeline for the worker's barracks and the glowing, inviting fireplace within.

Applejack, first one up as always, glanced out the window to check out the surroundings. Around the train station for as far as she could see was a vast plain of rolling hills. The snow covered every square inch of the ground, smooth and undisturbed in every direction. Some rays of light managed to break through the clouds, bouncing off the snow and creating a glare that made Applejack blink.

She shook it off and opened the door. Stepping out, she shivered almost immediately. The temperature was considerably colder than the Ponyville they had all left behind and leagues colder than the warm train car.

"Whoa now," she said, a small cloud appearing in front of her mouth. "That's somethin' to wake you up in the mornin'. Easy now girls, we best bundle up before—"

"Cannonball!"

A pink blur sailed past Applejack's head as Pinkie leapt from the train, headed straight for the nearest snowdrift. She landed with a soft thump that sent a white splash up into the air. She laughed loudly as she hopped around in the powder, leaving large craters with each landing.

"First fresh snow of the season guys!" she cheered out, "Come and enjoy it!"

Applejack shivered again in response and opted instead to duck back inside the car. Twilight, fully clad in her winter coat and boots, stepped out to take her place. She heard hoofsteps nearby and turned to see their source.

A stallion was approaching on the platform. He was wearing a thick, woolly coat, bright yellow in color, his hooves covered in similarly constructed boots. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark goggles. A small emblem in the shape of a white star, with small green dots between each point, was stitched on the coat. He got to the train door and turned to stare at Pinkie as she continued to play in the snow.

“That normal?” he asked. His voice perfectly matched the parts of a grey, grizzled mane that could be seen sticking out from under the coat.

“That’s actually the most normal thing she’s done recently, all things considered,” Twilight replied, also watching Pinkie.

“Huh. Well, I’d recommend she put on something a little more substantial. Doesn’t take much out here to freeze up without the proper gear. I see you’ve found the time to dress a bit more sensibly.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Twilight nodded in agreement. “I think her coat’s just hanging inside here—”

“I got her covered.” Applejack re-appeared, now fully dressed for the weather outside. She grabbed Pinkie’s coat in her teeth and headed down to the snow to adorn her now shivering friend. That task accomplished, a spontaneous snowball fight broke out amongst the two, to the general amusement of those back on the platform.

“Still normal?” the stallion asked, a smile breaking through what could be seen of his face.

“Yes, definitely.” Twilight grinned. “I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Twilight Sparkle.”

“Glad to hear that, Miss Sparkle; you’re just the pony I’ve been told to find. Folks around here call me Hawks. I’m the local ranger for these parts of the Wastes. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Back inside the train, the others also went about getting their winter apparel on. It wasn’t long before everypony was all suited up and ready to face the elements. Even if they all weren’t quite pleased about it.

“Ugh, Twilight, don’t you think you could have found something a little more form fitting for me?” Spike asked as he stepped out. His outfit was substantially thicker than the others and on his small body it had the effect of rounding him out into the shape of a small ball. The others giggled at the sight.

“I don’t want my assistant catching a cold on me,” Twilight said, smiling at him.

“I don’t think I’d mind a cold if it would let me move a bit. I can barely stand up in this thing! Not to mention the design... bleh.”

“He’s turning back into an egg before our eyes,” Fluttershy said. “And I think those polka dots look wonderful on you, Spike.”

Dash fluttered out of the car, pausing overhead to stretch her wings. “No need to complain, Spike. Rarity can probably fix you right up later on, get you something flashier.”

“I guess I could try something with it,” Rarity said, giving the small dragon’s circular coat a look-over. “Fluttershy does have a point, I will admit. It’s a rare breed indeed that can pull that look off.”

“You really think so, Rarity?” Spike asked elatedly, his previous complaints momentarily forgotten.

Twilight laughed and gave Spike a little pat on the back. He wobbled a few times and tipped over. Hawks quickly stepped in as he started to roll down towards the snow, stopping him with a hoof. Everypony burst out into laughter. Spike, still lost in a Rarity daydream, didn’t seem to notice.

Several of the train ponies managed to pry themselves from the warmth of the fire and headed back to the luggage car to start unloading the girls’ trunks and suitcases. Applejack and Pinkie concluded their little skirmish (as best they could tell it was a draw) and headed up to help them. The rest of the group wandered over to help as well, while Twilight hung back with Spike and Hawks.

“Quite a bunch you’ve brought together here, miss,” Hawks said as he watched the other girls go. “I’m sure the good Dr. Star will be most entertained this week.”

“Copper Star? You know her?” Twilight inquired.

“Indeed. We have been in the good doctor’s company a number of times, if not much recently. Anyway, according to a message I received on some very fancy looking letterhead, I’m supposed to check in with you girls. Me and my team will be taking you out to her research site at the temple as soon as we’ve loaded all your bags onto the carriage.”

Hawks motioned to a large carriage parked to the side of the station platform. It was a large contraption, big enough for all the girls and their luggage to fit inside. It took no shame in its plain aesthetic, with a thick wooden shell to trap heat inside and plenty of windows to look out. The cabin rested simply upon four large wheels, while a harness had already been strapped to the front. Spots for four ponies were all laid out and ready for the pullers to take their positions.

“Wait, what? We’re going to a temple now?” Spike asked, his thoughts somewhat back in reality now. Hawks shrugged.

“Frankly, I’m not sure what to call it. You’ll see what I mean when we get there.” He cast a look over at the horizon. “Speaking of which, we should get moving soon. It’s a bit of a journey, and we gotta try and stay ahead of the storm. You lot get yourselves gathered and we’ll head out.”

“Storm? What storm?” Twilight asked, but Hawks had already moved past her towards the other girls and the large stack of luggage. A rather sizable trunk that Twilight guessed belonged to Rarity seemed to be giving them trouble. He gathered up some workers to lend them a helping hoof and before long things were moving again. Twilight looked over at the horizon in the direction Hawks had indicated, but could only see a few specks of gray gathering over the otherwise plain white sky.

“Uh, Twilight?” Spike looked up at her. “Is it just me, or are we walking blindly into something right now? Somepony we’ve never met, out in the middle of nowhere, big storm apparently coming in, stuck out there for a week, Pinkie stuck there with us...”

Twilight smiled, carefully guiding him over to the others. They were loading the luggage inside the carriage while a large supply crate was strapped to the roof.

“Spike, relax. We’re just having a little social visit to one of Celestia’s older students who’s been on her own for a while. You and I know better than anypony what that’s like, and at least I had you for company. We just need to relax, be friendly, and enjoy ourselves. In fact, I think this will be a very pleasant week for all of us.”

The road, if you could really call it that, was a long and winding one that would’ve been tricky to navigate in optimal conditions. The recent snowfall made things particularly hazardous, as did the wind that was picking up once more. Hawks and his three teammates managed to keep a steady speed pulling the carriage along through it, though, and the group was making good time. Hill after hill they went, the only visible object of any sort for miles around. Save, that is, for Rainbow Dash, who had elected to follow them in the air overhead.

“Hey Rainbow Dash! How long you plannin’ on keeping that up?” Applejack shouted, head leaning out the window. “Can’t imagine it being too comfy out there!”

“Are you kidding? Th-this is great! P-p-perfect way to get some e-endurance t-training in!” Dash shouted back happily, working through a stammer as the cold wind whipped by her.

Applejack sighed and brought her head back in the carriage. “Guess it takes a fully hollerin’ storm to keep that pony under a roof.”

“She’d better watch out then, since apparently one is coming soon,” Twilight said, checking the horizon again. The specks of gray had come together and were beginning to increase in size now.

“Does that mean we’ll be stuck inside some more?” Spike groaned. “I don’t know how much more I can take of that. I was hoping to play in the snow a bit.”

“Don’t worry Spike, I’m sure it won’t last long,” Twilight said. “And you should have plenty to occupy yourself with once we get there. Celestia said the site Copper is working on is quite large, so there’s sure to be lots of places to explore.”

“I find that a bit hard to believe.” Rarity said, glancing out at their deserted surroundings. “This place already seems to be a complete, empty bore.”

“Now, Rarity, don’t start—” Applejack began before Rarity cut her off.

“Relax, Applejack. I have no intention of being any sort of downer on this trip. Why, I sympathize with this poor girl. I can’t imagine what it would be like to be stuck out here alone. I can hardly stand it and I’ve only just arrived. We’ll all have to do our best to keep her in good spirits.”

“I guess all the animals around here are already sleeping for the winter,” Fluttershy said. “I haven’t seen anything at all since we’ve arrived.”

“I think that’s actually because there really isn’t anything out here, Fluttershy,” Twilight replied. “I read up a little on this place before we left—”

“Little is right,” Spike cut in. “The book on this place was probably the smallest in the library. No wonder somepony’s out here trying to learn more about it.”

“—and there seems to be very little by way of wildlife.” Twilight continued on. “It’s just a big, empty desert with mostly naturally occurring weather.”

“Is it always like this then?” Fluttershy asked, gazing around the landscape rushing past the window. An ocean of white was all she could make out.

Twilight looked through her window, taking in the same sight. “Pretty much. It’s always got some amount of snow up here, though naturally that gets much heavier in the winter. With all the wild weather, there wasn’t much of a chance for anything complex to develop.”

Applejack whistled. “Just a whole lotta’ nuthin’ then? Huh.”

“See?” Rarity said. “A total bore.”

“All the more reason to make some fun!” Pinkie chirped. “We can make this place into a super swell place to be! I packed my big recipe book and ingredient-travel-kit so I can get some sweets together. Rarity, you think you could whip up some design ideas for decorations?”

“Well, it would be a nice change from the coats I’ve had to work on for the past month.” Rarity thought back for a moment and shuddered. “Honestly, the ponies in town were so far behind on the current fashions. I don’t know how I kept up with it all. At any rate, I’d be delighted to do it. I could use some assistance in making something up for this, though.”

“Ooh, ooh!” Spike raised his claw eagerly. A bump in the road caused him to lose his balance once more and he rolled onto the floor. This had happened a few times now, since while somepony had been smart enough to install some hefty shocks with the carriage wheels, it still didn’t take much for Spike to slide off his seat.

“Fluttershy, do you think you’d be interested?” Rarity asked.

“Oh, I’d be delighted to help.” Fluttershy said sweetly. Spike’s groan went unnoticed as he struggled to right himself.

“That’s the spirit girls!” Pinkie said with growing excitement. “This pony won’t know what hit her. Applejack, Twilight, you can help too! And we can get Rainbow Dash to do something cool and then we can play games and…”

As Pinkie went on with the party plans, Twilight’s mind started to wander. She really wanted to talk to Hawks a bit more to see what he knew. As confident as she was feeling about the coming week, Spike was right; they were going in mostly blind.

Such is the nature of last minute requests, Twilight thought. Straightening Spike back up onto his seat, she excused herself from the conversation. She threaded herself around the luggage separating the ponies from the front of the carriage and cracked open one of the forward windows.

Immediately, the wind chilled her face. Pulling her coat’s hood over her ears, Twilight squeezed out onto the small bench that was attached to the carriage’s exterior. She quickly shut the window before too much heat leaked out and huddled up as best she could. There wasn’t much room, but she was able to fit alright. Her position put her just next to Hawks in the rearmost position of the pull team, and while she wouldn’t be able to stay for long, her coat would keep her warm enough for at least a brief conversation

“You girls doing okay back there?” he shouted out. Twilight guessed he heard her open the window, though she had no idea how he managed to do it over the sound of the elements.

“Yes, thank you! We’re all doing fine.” The wind took a momentary break, allowing their words to break through to each other a little easier.

“And your friend buzzing around?” Hawks asked.

“She’s crazy, but that’s normal, so she’s also doing fine.” Twilight replied, smiling to herself.

“She’s a tough one, I’ll give her that much.” Hawks chuckled. “We’re getting close now. That’s it straight up ahead.”

Hawks had predicted Twilight’s next question. She looked out and squinted. A little black spot was barely discernible in the distance. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon the sky was starting to darken from all the clouds. It was tricky to keep focused on the horizon, but something was definitely there. Hawks muttered something to the rest of the team, and their pace increased slightly.

“It shouldn’t be too much longer. When we get there we won’t have much time to unload before we have to turn around and head back. We don’t want to be stuck in the storm in the middle of this road.”

“We’ll do our best to help you guys when we get there,” Twilight said. She hesitated, not sure if now was the best time to really strike up a conversation. Hawks and his team looked very determined as they pulled the carriage along. Still, by the sound of things this would be the only chance she had to talk to him, and it would be somewhat moot to wait until they arrived.

She went ahead and asked “So, you said you know Copper Star?”

“Yup,” Hawks replied. His casual behavior gave no indication he minded the chat. “Helped her get out there and set up when she first arrived. We also do supply runs to her every few months, along with picking up the occasional batch of mail she needs to send out.”

“What’s she like?” Twilight asked.

“Oh, nice enough sort of pony.” Hawks gave a small smile Twilight couldn’t see. “Gets a little lost in her thoughts sometimes, especially when she really gets focused on something.”

“I know the type.” Twilight breathed easy. It sounded like Copper was just the sort of pony she could relate to. “I hope she won’t mind us barging in on her unannounced.”

“I don’t reckon she will,” Hawks said. “She never minded when we did. We would have sent a letter ahead in this case, but that would’ve taken too long. This time of year all the pegasi stick to the outskirts to help try and manage the weather. No point in keeping them out here for

that, after all.”

“I thought ponies could still control some of the weather up here?” Twilight asked.

“Not this far into the Wastes.” Hawks paused for a moment to murmur something to the pony next to him, and then continued. “Here, it’s just the land and the sky doing their thing, and we don’t have any sort of say as to what they decide to throw at us. We’ve only got a few fliers out here for mail delivery most of the year. Rest of the time, it’s just us Earth ponies trying to scrape by.”

“Sounds rough,” Twilight said, now a little more nervous about the growing storm. The gray specks in the distance from earlier had since blown up in size. They now swallowed up the whole edge of the sky in a very imposing display.

Hawks chuckled. “You get used to it, miss. Frankly, I’ve been out here so long I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s solid living out here, something real.”

The lead pony said something Twilight couldn’t make out. Whatever it was it made the rest of the team laugh. Hawks smiled and shook his head as he glanced at the gathering clouds. His smile turned to a grimace. He said something and again the team increased in speed. The black spot up ahead became larger and larger. At this point, Twilight could make out that it was actually several buildings gathered in a small cluster.

“Anyway,” Hawks went on, “we’ve dropped in on Dr. Star a couple of times, outside the usual supply shipments, just to make sure she’s doing alright. She’s always happy to have us. I’m glad you girls are headed out there now, in fact; it’s been a while since we’ve been out and we can’t spare the extra time right now for anything. Got too much work to do back at the station and along the border towns. Shoot, only reason we could even come out here to take you lot is also because it was time for us to bring the doctor another supply load.”

The wind picked up again, back with a vengeance now. Stinging bits of ice from the ground started to reach Twilight’s face. She winced as she looked around to see how Dash was holding up. The pegasus was doing loops overhead, totally oblivious to the weather changes around her.

“You might want to get your friend back in!” Hawks shouted, “Once this picks up it probably won’t let back down for a while! The longer she waits the harder it will be!”

“I imagine she’d like the challenge!” Twilight shouted back, though by now the wind had grown so much she wasn’t sure he heard her.

Still, he’s right. Twilight looked back up at Dash. Not even bothering to try shouting, she concentrated hard for a moment. Her horn began to glow. High above four sparkling letters

suddenly appeared in the sky.

S T O P

The sudden appearance of the floating word caught Dash off-guard, causing her aerial acrobatics to falter. After a small fall, she regained her composure and looked down. Twilight motioned at her, and Dash descended back down towards the ground. Around them, snow continued to come down. It was just small flakes, but the wind made it seem like so much more.

“W-why’d ya stop m-me, T-Twilight? I c-could’ve lasted w-w-way l-longer.” Dash said when she landed on the roof of the carriage. She was visibly shivering, even in her thick coat, though she was trying not to show it.

Twilight couldn’t help but roll her eyes and smile.

“Rainbow, there will be time for that when the storm settles. Right now is not a good time for a pony to be out. Come on, get inside. Hawks said it’s only going to get worse right now. We’re almost there anyway.”

Somewhat begrudgingly, Dash hovered down and popped the window open to squeeze through. Twilight gave one last look at the pull team, who didn’t even seem to notice the weather at the rate they were dashing through the snow, and followed Dash into the carriage. Pulling the window shut, the heat inside immediately washed over them. They both let out a contented sigh as they warmed up before moving past the luggage to rejoin their friends. Up ahead, the buildings could be made out even more clearly, even through the snow in the air. The sky around them continued darkening while the wind picked up to a howl.

The storm was nearly upon them.