

My Little Hangover

By Mousetrap



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Chapter 1

“C’mon, Twilight. It’s a Ponyville tradition. We all went. If’n y’all *really* want to be one of us, you gotta do it,” Applejack had said.

“Oh. My. Gosh. We’re going, Twi. This night only happens once in a pony’s life, and no friend of *mine* is letting it go to waste,” Rainbow had proclaimed, leaving little room for argument.

“Oh, the lights, the glamour, the intoxicating *celebrity* of it all! Just think what all those high-rolling ponies will say when they see *moi* driving up the Strip in my black stretch carriage wearing my new *glistening* summer design,” Rarity had gushed, adding, “Oh, and you too, my dear” with a nervous giggle.

“TwilightbutitsyoureighteenthbirthdayandeveryponygoestherefortheireighteenthandGASPitsbasicallyonegiantpartythatgoesallnightandGASPitllbesomuchfunpleaseohpleaseyouhavetogo,” Pinkie Pie had managed to scream out between bounces.

“Don’t worry, Twilight. It doesn’t have to get too wild for it to be fun. I went for mine, and no pony even drank. We still managed to have a great time,” Fluttershy had reassured her with an innocent smile.

And so it was that, against every instinct, nerve, and logical notion in her mind, Twilight Sparkle agreed to go with her five best friends and celebrate her eighteenth birthday in Las Haygas, the City of Lights, the crossroads of madness and hysteria.

After all, she reassured herself, as long as her friends were around, what could possibly go wrong?

“—and we *have* to go see the fountain show in the Baylagio because the water jumps and leaps and dances in all kinds of crazy formations and oh it’ll be soooo much fun but NO first we have to walk the strip and see all

the shops oh there's probably some delicious donut shops here GASP wait NO *first* let me take you to the dance club where I went last time I was here oh it was soooo much fun Twilight we have to—”

Pinkie Pie was bouncing her way through every surface in their hotel bedroom, pausing only just enough to breathe. She'd been rattling off her own itinerary of what they had to do since they'd boarded the train out of Ponyville the morning before last. Her plans seemed to last only as long as it took her to come up with something else. But at least she seemed to know a lot about Haygas. With three bedrooms in their suite, Twilight wasn't sure if her decision to bunk with Pinkie Pie would end up brilliant or disastrous. Either the party pony would be out dancing until the early morning, or Twilight was in for a completely sleepless night.

She tuned out Pinkie's scheduling long enough to listen in on an argument going on in the common room of the suite. “Not a chance, Rarity,” Applejack said. “I am *not* lettin' you drag me to any sappy, overpriced Stalline Dion concert. That mare's singin' makes my ears wanna bleed.”

Rarity *hmmphed*. “It seems you have failed to grasp true artistry once again, Applejack. Why, Stalline is the very embodiment of grace, beauty, and...” the unicorn sighed a sigh of longing, “romance...”

“Not happenin', Rarity. Although I distinctly remember Big Macintosh tellin' me that if you take a carriage out to the desert, there's an all-you-can-eat buffet and rodeo show that costs half as many bits as a bottle o' water in the Celestia's Palace theater.”

“Stalline Dion? A rodeo? You two are both crazy.” Twilight didn't need to hear the sound of flapping wings to tell her that was Rainbow Dash. “We're in Haygas, baby. Time to let it roll! I'm going downstairs to play a few hooves of blackjack. Anyone wanna come with?”

This time it was Applejack's turn to *hmmph*, though it sounded a lot less like disapproval and a lot more like bitter and caustic disgust. “Really, Rainbow? Throwin' away your hard-earned bits playin' card games? It's like you've never done an honest day's work in yer life.”

“Hey. Nothing wrong with a few rounds of blackjack when you’re in Haygas, as long as we don’t overdo it. Besides, a little gambling is fun when you’re with *me*.”

Twilight sighed. This wasn’t at all what she wanted tonight to be about. Her friends had promised her an unforgettable celebration. They’d see the lights and the glitz, eat some great food, laugh together, and make treasured memories. Maybe, just *maybe*, she’d get a bit adventurous as the night went on. But that wasn’t why she’d come. Too many ponies got drunk in Haygas on their eighteenth birthday, only to wake up in a strange room, or worse, in an alley behind a cheap motel. Too many ponies got captivated by the glittering lights of the casino floor and went home with serious financial troubles. And she certainly didn’t want to spend tonight at a Stalline Dion concert. Or a rodeo show.

No, Twilight simply wanted to celebrate with her five best friends, and have a night they would remember forever.

She stepped out to the common room where the three ponies were arguing and yelled, “*Qui-et!*”

It worked. She got their undivided attention. Even Pinkie Pie was silent when she came out into the common room.

She had to admit, their three-bedroom suite was stunningly luxurious. A circle of fluffy white couches surrounded a wide glass coffee table in the middle of the common room, complete with complimentary drinks and snack bowls. A fully-stocked bar sat in the corner, next to an equally well-stocked kitchenette. The bathrooms (there were two of them) came with adjustable marble jacuzzi pools that Rarity would no doubt find *simply enchanting*. And though there was no balcony, the backwall had been made into one giant glass window, affording a panoramic view of the lights, life, and glitter of Las Haygas.

She took a moment to admire the view. Some of the Strip hotels were grand. Others were wild. Yet others were breathtakingly beautiful. The City of Lights made Ponyville look like a backcountry carriage stop by comparison.

“I have to say, girls, you didn’t have to get such a... fancy place. Any old motel would have done just fine.”

Rarity smiled her usual delighted, closed-eyed smile. “Oh, not to worry, dear. When we all agreed to split the room five ways, it didn’t come out to be so terribly expensive. We’ll have nothing but the best for our soon-to-be grown-up mare. And how could we pass up such a breathtaking view?”

“Besides, have you ever *seen* a Haygas motel?” Rainbow Dash asked, casually lifting herself into the air until she was level with the ceiling. “Yuck. Not happening.”

“And we’re in Celestia’s Palace, which puts us right at the center of the Strip,” Pinkie added. “So we can do *everything*. See the fountain show, go dancing, swim the canals in the Veneightian...”

Applejack scratched her head in confusion. “Uh. I don’t think you’re supposed to swim in the canals, Pinkie. That’s what the boats’re for.”

“Really?” The pink pony blinked. “I guess that makes sense... oh! I know! We should go to a dance club instead! I know this one place that plays nothing but dubtrot, oh it’ll be *so much fun*.”

“I am not going to an establishment that plays that horrible music,” said Rarity with another *hmmph*. “Really, sometimes I can’t tell whether somepony is listening to dubtrot or their radiator is malfunctioning.”

Rainbow Dash let out a chortle. “Nice one, Rares. Just don’t let Vinyl hear you say that.” With a single flap of her wings, the blue pegasus put herself inches away from Twilight’s face. “But tonight is Twilight’s eighteenth birthday, and that means only one thing. Somepony has to get *wasted!*”

“Don’t listen to her, Twi. Y’all ain’t gotta do nothin’ you don’t wanna do. Speakin’ of which, I’m sure you wanna find someplace to eat, so—”

“—If it’s not going to be Stalline, then we must at least attend *some* performance. The Blue Horse Group does a showing at nine, so we’d better buy the tickets quickly before they—”

“—Any of you ever had a *liquid* rainboom? If you’re not slurring your words after your second shot, you’ve got the constitution of a plowhorse—”

“—
but we have to do everything and see everything because it’s so much fun and well in
ever get to
do it again and—”

Fluttershy had entered the common room at some point during the commotion, a bathrobe wrapped around her body and a towel neatly arranged over her hair. She waited patiently until the room was quiet. Then she said, “Tonight is Twilight’s birthday. I think we should let her decide what to do.”

The other four voiced their agreement (though Rainbow Dash grumbled a little bit). Suddenly Twilight felt the pressure come down on her. She knew little and less about Las Haygas, beyond what she’d read in her copy of *Do’s and Don’ts for an Unforgettable Night in the City of Lights*. She had to admit, she didn’t really know where to start. “Well...” she let out a nervous giggle. “We’re already at Celestia’s Palace, so I guess the first thing we should do is check out the casino. Not that I actually condone gambling, of course, but you see, I’ve never actually been to a casino and I’m curious to see one in person.”

Rarity gave a soft little laugh. “No need to explain yourself, Twilight Sparkle. Your wish is our command.”

Everything on the casino floor of Celestia’s Palace looked like it was made of solid gold. This, Twilight quickly realized, was their first method of trickery. The gold, the glitz, and the lights all sent a very clear message: this was a place where ponies got rich. Simple logic said otherwise. A casino, like any business, had to make money to exist. And casinos existed. Therefore, they were making money. Since they didn’t offer any, *ahem*, goods or services for the money, Twilight sensibly concluded that they made their money by taking that of their patrons. The idea that everypony hit it big in a casino was fundamentally irrational. Yet Las Heygas had somehow convinced everypony otherwise.

Their secret, she decided, was in the playing chips. She stood there studying hers with fascination, black and plastic and covered in colorful lettering. She ran the edge of her hoof along the grooves cut into its surface. It was a lot easier to put a little chip down on a single roulette spin or single hoof of poker than it was to drop a hundred bits on the table. And yet the end result was the same: a hundred less bits.

“Gambling is stupid,” Twilight declared. She tossed the ten-bit chip over her shoulder, where Rainbow Dash promptly flew over to catch it. The pegasus stared at it like a precious gem.

“Just let me play one round of blackjack...”

“Not happenin’, Rainbow,” Applejack said sternly. “One round leads to two, and before we know it you’re askin’ to bet away my hat and swearin’ me up and down that yer good for it.”

“Pinkie swearing?” said the term’s messily-maned namesake in an eager little voice. Applejack groaned.

As little sense as gambling made to her, Twilight had to admit that the casino floor was breathtaking. She wondered if all of Ponyville could fit in this single glimmering room. All around her, she heard the electronic buzzing of the machines, broken every so often by the sound of too-many bits pouring out. Ponies of every kind were making an appearance in the casino tonight. Some were well-dressed and reserved. Others were loud and excited, and probably a little drunk already.

She watched one of the poker tables with growing fascination. A copper-coated earth pony with too-tinted sunglasses, a thick brown moustache, and a hat not too dissimilar from Applejack’s lifted a cold iron glare from his cards to his opponents. His cutie mark was an ace of spades, which probably should have been a hint to everypony at the table. He paused just long enough to take a drag of his cigar. “Raise,” he said coolly, throwing a few hundred bits’ worth of chips into the pile with the flick of a hoof. A few moments later, the spade pony’s pool of chips had doubled in size.

“I have an idea, girls,” Twilight said. “The hotel gave us this one complimentary casino chip. I say we put it to good use.”

“Yes!” cheered Rainbow.

But instead of heading for the blackjack tables, Twilight galloped over to an empty roulette wheel. She waited until her friends were behind her, then presented the chip to the croupier.

“Will you be placing a bet?” the croupier asked.

“Yes.” Twilight stared back at her friends and smiled. “Six elements of harmony. Six friends. Ten bits on six, please. Win or lose, may it be the beginning of a night we’ll never forget.”

“Oh, what an *adorable* gesture,” Rarity squealed. “We’re going to lose for sure, but *still isn’t that just the sweetest thing to-*”

“Wait.” Rainbow gestured over to a passing waiter, whispering something in his ear before sending him off. “If we’re going to toast to an unforgettable night, we need to do it with drinks in our hooves.”

She must have seen the unease creep into Twilight’s face, because she trotted over to the purple-coated unicorn, placed a wing on her back, and smiled. “Don’t worry, Twilight. We’re your friends, and we won’t pressure you into doing anything you don’t want to do. But tonight’s a special night, and everypony should try something at least once before deciding it’s not for them. You’re old enough that you won’t even be breaking Equestrian law anymore. And Fluttershy *never* drinks – not since that one time – so if worst comes to worst she’ll be able to get us back to our rooms.”

Rainbow took a step back, falling in with the other four ponies, all of whom showered her with warm, trusting smiles. “Whadda ya say, Twilight? Share a drink with your friends, and toast to a night we’ll never forget?”

It took all her willpower to stop Twilight Sparkle from squealing in joy and pulling them all together for a great big group hug. How could she have forgotten that she was here with her best friends? She thought of all the experiences they’d shared this past year. All the adventures they’d been on

together, and all the rough spots they'd helped dig each other out of. Their friendship had defeated *Nightmare Moon*, for Celestia's sake! How could it not handle a bit of alcohol? She thought of Rainbow Dash's words: *It only happens once in a pony's life, and no friend of mine is letting that night go to waste.*

"Oh... why not? To a night we'll never forget."

As if on cue, the unicorn waiter arrived with five bell-shaped crystal glasses, each one filled with a drink that was seven stratified layers of color. The infamous liquid rainboom, Twilight guessed. The sixth glass, Fluttershy's, carried a golden-brown liquid with three ice cubes chinking against the edge. Sweet tea, by the look of it. The six took their drinks and brought them into the center of their little circle. "To the best night ever," Twilight said.

"To the best night ever!" they all cheered.

After all, what was the worst that could happen to a drunk, sheltered pony in the city of Las Haygas?

Chapter 2

In the beginning, her world was pain.

Time passed. She had no idea how much. Slowly – more through process of elimination than anything else – she became vaguely aware of a few other concepts besides pain. One, she was cold. So cold that she was shivering, in fact. Two, she felt more nauseous than anypony had the right to be. Whatever the contents of her stomach, they wanted out *now*, and she wasn't sure how long she could hold them against their wishes. Three, the world felt like it was spinning out of control. *Uh oh*. Somepony needed to slow it down! Somepony else, though, because she certainly wasn't going to do it. Four, she was thirsty (but again, somepony else needed to fix that problem, because it would not be Twilight Sparkle).

Five, no force in Equestria – not willpower, not pleading, not magic, not hammers, not Applebloom's slay-them-with-cuteness look, not even the threat of Nightmare Moon coming back to plunge the world into eternal night – could make her open her eyes.

Six, (and this one was more important than she initially realized) she was alive. Whatever else there was to say, Twilight most definitely had survived last night. Somewhere in the back of her mind, logic and reason also whispered that the worst was over. The fact that she could think straight enough to come to that conclusion had to be a good sign.

She let more time go by, drifting in and out of sleep. Eventually she took to swaying her legs back and forth on some illusory hope that they'd keep the contents of her stomach down. It didn't help. Eventually everything forced its way out regardless. She tried to stop it, but there was little and less she could do. Biology was in control. Twilight was but a spectator.

Lucky enough that she was lying on marble tile. *Oh!* That was seven, wasn't it? She now knew *seven* things about the world. She was getting smarter every minute.

The road to full consciousness was a rough one, and whether it took minutes, hours, or days she wasn't sure. But eventually, Twilight felt under control enough to start piecing the night together.

We played roulette in Celestia's Palace. That was when we had the first drink. The thought of drinking (indeed the realization that alcohol existed at all) made her want to wretch again, but her stomach was now too empty for even that. *After that, we walked the Strip and got a look at some of the other hotels. The Four Seasons, Baylagio, the Maynn... and the Veneightian. We went to the Veneightian first. Pinkie Pie got thrown out for swimming in the canals. Was that before or after she bought the snowglobes? Wait, why did Pinkie buy snowglobes? Because she's Pinkie, duh.* Oh, it gave her a headache. More of a headache, rather.

Just then, the unthinkable happened. Somepony opened the door.

"Noooo," she croaked. "The light! Keep me away from the light!"

"Up and at 'em, sleepy. It can't be that bad."

Pinkie Pie. Of course it would be Pinkie Pie. Why had fate dealt her such an unlucky hoof? "Please, Pinkie. Close the door. I can't... I just need some time to rest."

Twilight found that when she really put her mind to it, she could slow the spinning world. And as long as the door remained closed and she stayed in her beloved darkness, she could open her eyes without too much difficulty. Standing up was a different story. But for now she was content just to analyze her surroundings. She was in the bathroom back at Celestia's Palace – in the empty marble jacuzzi to be specific. So they had made it back to the room. For that, at least, she could be grateful.

"Drinking," she said to herself. "We can definitely check that off the list of life experiences."

The first order of business would be to clean up her mess. Twilight was an orderly pony (maybe not so much as Rarity, but plenty enough that she thought a pile of vomit on the floor was unacceptable). She gave her eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness, and then searched for a clean

towel. To her dismay, the towel rack was empty. Somepony had tossed them all over the floor. She wondered briefly if that pony had been her.

Well, no matter. The towels were clean, at least. Twilight located the nearest one to the jacuzzi and reached for her magic...

It felt like her horn was being pulled off by an industrial ripper.

Oh, dear. She'd heard of hangovers having all kinds of discomfoting physical effects, but *magical*? Had she drank so much that she'd lost her ability to do magic at all? Could that even happen? Or was it just a bad headache? For now, at least, she was going to have to do everything by hoof.

By the time Twilight finished cleaning the bathroom, re-folding the towels, and picking up all the little bottles of soap and cosmetics spilled over the floor, she felt somewhat better. The headache was still splitting, but the nausea was almost gone. As were the spins. She couldn't quite stand up without wobbling a bit or losing her balance, but at least she could stand.

She was just starting to contemplate opening the door when a scream ripped through the suite, so fearful and shrill that it made her mane stand on edge like a field of reeds.

"Oh no. Rarity!" She had to put the pain behind her. Her friend needed help. With a long, deep breath of equal parts air and apprehension, Twilight Sparkle opened the door.

Stepping out into the light of the common room felt like charging into a brick wall. But Twilight charged anyway. "Rarity?" She took in her surroundings briefly. *Oh, dear.*

The common room was in even worse shape than the bathroom. Feathers, empty wrappers, broken furniture, and more littered the polished wood floor. Half-empty cups lay tossed about on every flat surface. The glass coffee table was broken in three pieces. And to her horror, one of the fluffy white couches was... completely flipped upside down. By Celestia, what could have possibly caused all this? "Rarity, where are you?"

The shriek came again, emanating from the bedroom Rarity was splitting with Fluttershy. Twilight didn't hesitate, or even stop to think. "I'm coming, Rarity!"

She found the unicorn collapsed at the foot of the bed. Rarity was covering her eyes with her hooves, as if she couldn't bear to look upon the world. A magically-lifted damp towelette scrubbed furiously at her back. Rarity let out a wail. "Please work *please* towel get rid of it oh it has to go *now!*"

Twilight blinked, watching in confusion as Rarity scrubbed her haunch to the point of almost tearing skin. The unicorn's room was ordered and clean, especially compared to what lay in wait outside. But where was Fluttershy? "Rarity," Twilight said. "What are you doing?"

Rarity popped open one eye. "Twilight? Oh, Twilight! Thank goodness you're here. I wasn't... I couldn't... Oh, it's horrible, my dear! I want to show you, but I just *can't*. The indignity, the humiliation... how could this happen to anypony? And worse!" Her voice grew very small, and very soft. "It. Happened. To. *Me*."

"What happened to you, Rarity?"

With a soft cry, she magically lifted the towel. And there it sat. Drawn and inked into her haunch, just above her beautiful blue tail. It was a tattoo of a red-and-yellow butterfly.

"Please, Twilight, please don't look at me. I know what you're thinking – she used to be so classy, so elegant. She used to be such a lady. But now it's all over. Now she's..." the unicorn shuddered "...*stamped*."

Somewhere amidst her incredulity, Twilight felt the urge to laugh. "Wow, Rarity," she said between giggles. "How did it happen?"

Rarity sighed the long and heavy sigh of resignation. "That's just it. I... I don't remember. Shameful as it is to admit, I hardly remember anything from last night. We didn't drink *that* much, did we? A lady always knows her limits, and I can't imagine why I would so blatantly surpass mine."

Twilight couldn't remember anything about the night before either. *There was the roulette, and then the Veneightian. Pinkie Pie got thrown out, and...* beyond that, she drew a blank. It didn't make sense. As best she could recall, they'd stopped drinking after the liquid rainboom in Celestia's Palace. How could things have gotten so out of hoof?

Twilight studied the marking on Rarity's haunch, following the lines of the butterfly's wings. Whatever pony did it was a talented artist. "Can't you get that thing removed somehow?"

"Removed? No, I can't get it removed, Twilight, it's not that simple. It is stained in ink. I will bear this scar for the rest of my-" Rarity's eyes widened. "Wait a minute. Why, yes. Yes, I *can* get it removed. Not for good, but perhaps I can bleach over it. Twilight, you're a genius!" She hopped to her hooves and galloped over to the second bathroom, her eyes clearly skirting over the shape of the common room. "Come help me, dear. I'll need a bottle of peroxide, some hoof polish remover, some water for the-" the white unicorn cut her words short the moment she opened the door.

The manticore in the bathroom let out a furious roar.

"Oh, my." Rarity kicked it closed. "Twilight." She blinked. "What was that?"

Just as Twilight prepared to give an answer, the roar came again, harder and fiercer than before. She heard the sound of footsteps on marble floor. The manticore charged. And that was the day Twilight learned that a wooden bathroom door can't stand up to an angry manticore.

Splinters went flying as the door shattered. Twilight and Rarity shielded their faces in unison. The manticore growled and charged at Rarity, but the pony was quicker on her hooves, ducking away at the last possible second. Momentum was conserved, however, and the creature kept charging until it slammed its body into the great back window. For a second he was still. Twilight wondered if it would really be that easy.

But the blow only served to make him angrier. The manticore recovered quickly and spun around. He roared again, stabbing at the air with his tail. This time, his eyes were on Twilight.

She struggled to think. A quick glance to either side gave her nothing. The manticore pawed at the ground, a motion that was obviously meant to threaten. Twilight responded by lowering her head. She spotted the broken coffee table in front of her. Maybe shattered glass in his face would slow him down...

The manticore charged. Twilight reached out for the table with her magic. The splitting, shredding pain returned, but she tried to push past it. She tried as hard as she could, pouring every last drop of willpower she had on the spell. It felt like hammering a thousand nails into her head.

Barely a flicker of light spilled out of her horn.

Rarity tried to help by lifting a glass vase and shattering it on the side of his head, but that didn't even seem to slow him down. "Run, Twilight," she screamed. And then it was too late – the creature leaped over the glass table, and nothing remained between him and Twilight Sparkle but a few feet of empty air. She lowered her horn, shut her eyes, and braced herself for impact.

It never came.

A few seconds later, when she dared herself to open one eye, she saw the manticore's form sprawled across the ground. It took her a moment to realize that his legs had just been lassoed.

"Key to hittin' a movin' target is not to aim at where they are, but to aim at where they're gonna be," Applejack said proudly.

And the next thing the earth pony knew, she was enveloped in the hooves of a very grateful purple unicorn. "Thank you, Applejack, thank you thank you thank you! You just saved my life, I don't know what to-"

Applejack wormed her way out of Twilight's hug. "D-don't mention it, Twi. Now gimme a second, I gotta finish tyin' up ol' charger here."

Twilight stepped back, allowing Applejack space with which to do her ropework. The orange pony's hat was missing. But she didn't seem too concerned about it, which probably meant it was back in her room. "So I'm hung over," Twilight announced. "And Rarity is..."

The white unicorn bawled. "Don't even say it, Twilight, it's too *horrible* to be true!"

"Rarity is... also affected. And neither of us can remember anything about last night." Twilight lowered her eyes, embarrassed. "Can you fill in the gaps, Applejack?"

The earth pony chuckled through the rope in her mouth as she tied a knot around the manticore's jaws. His roars turned into low, throaty growls. "Heh. First drink, first hangover, first blackout, is it? My, but you do work fast, Twilight Sparkle. I got a bit of a headache, but sure, I remember. After Celestia's, Pinkie insisted we go to the fountain show at the Baylagio. But we got sidetracked at - *what else* - a donut shop. Pinkie *had* to try every free sample they was givin' away. So by the time we got to the Baylagio, the last show'd already been done. Then it was off to the Veneightian, where we... where we..."

Her voice drifted off, leaving hanging silence in the air. Twilight leaned in. "Yes, Applejack?"

"Where we... aww, shoot. I can't remember. I can't remember a dang thing!" Applejack let the rope fall from her mouth. "Not a *word* about this to Big Macintosh, y'hear? I will not let it be known that I blacked out from one liquid rainboom... least I think it was just one."

"Err, question," interrupted Rarity. "Where are the others? And also *why is there a manticore in our hotel room?*"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Rainbow Dash is still asleep. How a pony manages to sleep through this here racket y'all made with the manticore is beyond me. Either the poor thing is too sick to move, or she's just so lazy she's gonna sleep till high noon again."

"I saw Pinkie earlier," said Twilight. "She may still be in the bedroom."

When both ponies turned to Rarity, the unicorn's eyes widened. "Wait. Fluttershy wasn't in the room when I woke up. At first I figured she'd just stepped out, but..."

“We don’t need to panic just yet,” Twilight said. “Maybe Pinkie and Fluttershy stepped out for a bite to eat. We’ll find out soon enough. For now, I think we should put our furry friend back in the bathroom, and then wake Rainbow Dash.”

When the three ponies walked into Applejack and Dash’s room, Twilight immediately noticed two problems. First: it was pristine. AJ’s empty bed was a bit messy, which anypony could expect. But the bed upon which Dash was dozing looked like it hadn’t been touched in weeks. Rainbow slept on her stomach, with her head under a perfectly fluffed pillow, and unfurled covers spilling gracefully over her body. That wasn’t normal. Normal Dash twisted, turned, and messed up her blankets until she was comfortable, without a care in the world to how they looked.

Odd. But significantly less odd than problem number two. Sitting next to Rainbow’s bed was nothing less than a two-gallon shopping bag, filled to the brim with chips from the Maynn Hotel and Casino.

No way the pegasus could have been that lucky. After paying for the room, they’d barely had enough bits to buy dinner, let alone gamble their way into a fortune. Rainbow Dash would have had to win every single hand she played to end up with so many chips. There were a dozen other possible reasons why Dash had a few thousand bits’ worth of casino chips, though. And Twilight didn’t like any of them.

She put a hoof on Rainbow Dash’s sleeping form and shook the pegasus gently. “Wake up, Rainbow.”

She heard grumbling come from beneath the pillow. But after a few moments of complaining, Rainbow Dash finally pulled out her head.

Three pairs of eyes blinked, staring. Rainbow Dash turned to face each one individually. “What?”

Twilight said, “Dash, why do you have a rose in your hair?”

Rainbow looked confused for a moment. Then she blushed crimson and yelped, hooves shooting up to her mane and running violently through her hair. She shook until the rose fell out and landed on her pillow. It was a small flower, and a little squished from being slept on all night.

Nonetheless, it was beautiful. Rainbow Dash giggled nervously. "Uh... where did that come from?"

"Please don't tell me you don't remember."

Dash groaned, hooves reaching for her belly. "Please don't tell me I drank too many liquid rainbooms. Ugh. Feels like I did." She turned her head wearily to one side. That was when she spotted the shopping bag. "No way! Did I win all that?"

"Doubtful. And until we know how they got here, we are *not* cashing them in. Those chips could be stolen for all we know." Twilight sighed. "I'm sure you're tired, Rainbow, but you have to get out of bed. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie are missing, and we have to clean up this room before housekeeping gets here, and help remove Rarity's tramp st-"

"Don't. Say it." The unicorn's eyes thinned to slits.

Meanwhile, Applejack was busy scrounging through her own bedsheets. When that failed, she peered below the bed, then quickly opened each of the drawers on her side of the room. "Speakin' of helping friends out... I don't suppose anypony knows where all my bits are? I usually keep 'em right here on the night table." She slid a hoof over her head. "And my hat. Where did I put that dang hat?"

"Maybe it's in the common room?" Rarity suggested.

AJ shook her head. "I already gave it the once-over while we was lassoing the manticore. The bathroom too. Means it has to be somewhere in this room. Bits I can replace, but I just gotta find that hat." For the briefest shadow of a moment, Applejack looked a little sad. "It means... a lot to me."

"Here, let me help you look," said Rainbow as she slid herself out of bed. "Maybe it somehow ended up on my side?" She opened her wings and took flight, giving her half of the room a quick glide-over.

But something had caught Twilight's eyes the moment Rainbow unfurled her wings. Curious, she trotted over to the other side of the bed. "Hold on, Rainbow, I think I saw something drop from under your wing

when you got up.” She found what she was looking for easily enough, picked it up in her mouth, and placed it on the center of the bed.

It was a key. On it was written: *Room 4652, Veneightian Hotel Las Haygas.*

Rainbow glared at the brass object the way one stared at a bloody knife. “That’s not-”

“A rose in yer hair and a room key from another hotel?” Applejack clicked her tongue in mock disapproval. “Now what unladylike thing did *you* go and do last night, Rainbow?”

The pegasus’ eyes widened with slow-dawning horror. “I didn’t-” she stuttered, “I mean, I wouldn’t... *we* didn’t... I *couldn’t*... I haven’t even... you all don’t really think I would...” After a while, she just facehoofed. “Oh, man.”

Twilight placed a comforting hoof on her friend’s shoulder. “Relax, Rainbow. Jumping to conclusions helps nopony. There must be a logical explanation for each and every one of our probl-”

A shrill and singsong voice cut in from the common room. “Who wants breakfast?”

The four ponies jumped and ran out to the common room. Pinkie Pie stood there proudly, with a box of donuts in one hoof and a pitcher of hot tea in her mouth.

“Pinkie! Oh, thank goodness.” She was still thirsty, Twilight realized. Without hesitation, she picked up a teacup from the kitchenette counter and poured herself some tea. She held the pitcher awkwardly in her mouth, and as a result, globs of its contents spilled on the table. Boy, this lack of magic sure was making things difficult.

“My dear, you are a saint,” said Rarity in between mouthfuls of donut. “This makes me feel worlds better.” Dash and Applejack joined in wordlessly, and they ate and drank in silence until all were satisfied.

Once Twilight was full, she asked, “Pinkie, I don’t suppose you remember anything about last night?”

“Nope,” said the party pony with a cheerful grin.

Twilight hesitated. “You... don’t sound terribly bothered by that.”

“Nope,” she said again.

“This isn’t the first time, is it?”

Pinkie Pie just giggled.

Twilight gave an incredulous shake of her head before continuing. “Well, are you alright? You didn’t break any bones, or get your hooves painted, or steal a stretch carriage, or accidentally sign a lease on a condo, or anything like that?”

Pinkie shook her head once for each question. “Nope. Nope. Nope. And... nope. I am A-okay, Twilight Sparkle. Never felt better in my life! The only problem is I can’t remember where I put my snowglobes...” She grinned. “But this room is a mess, and you four don’t look so good. Did something go wrong?”

Twilight gave a nervous laugh and glanced back at her friends. Applejack shrugged. Rarity gave her a look of tragic resignation. Dash just stared at the ground. “Well,” the purple unicorn began, “It’s kind of a long story.”

Pinkie’s eyes popped wide open. “Ooh, ooh, I love stories.”

Twilight sighed. “Let me put it shortly for you – Applejack lost her hat, Rainbow has a room key from the Veneightian, Rarity got her haunch tattooed, I’m too hung over to do magic, we have a bag full of chips that we may or may not have acquired legally, there’s a manticore in the bathroom, this room looks like a buffalo herd just *stampeded* through it... and we can’t find Fluttershy.”

“Wait. There’s a manticore in the bathroom?” Dash said. Twilight couldn’t tell if the pegasus was terrified or impressed.

“Yeah, it’s tied up. Don’t worry about it.”

“More *importantly*, you can’t find Fluttershy.” Pinkie hopped onto the kitchenette counter, suddenly looking dead serious. “Why didn’t you just start with that? All our other problems can wait. We have to find her, girls. She could be lost, or hurt, or scared.”

Oh dear, thought Twilight. Pinkie Pie was right. Their train back to Ponyville left tomorrow morning. But more importantly, Fluttershy might need their help! And she could have been anywhere in Las Haygas by now. A series of terrible images flashed through Twilight’s mind:

...the timid pegasus alone and lost somewhere on the Strip, wondering why her friends had abandoned her...

...tied down to a chair in the maintenance halls of a casino, with an incandescent light shining in her face and a burly, intimidating security pony demanding to know where her cheating friends had gone with all their chips...

...locked in a cell somewhere for crimes *they* had committed...

...in a hospital bed with a cracked hoof or broken leg, alone and in pain...

And that was when Twilight knew exactly what they had to do.

“Pinkie’s right, girls. We have to find Fluttershy. She may need our help. Plus, she didn’t drink last night, so if anything she’ll be able to help us piece the night together. We all seem to remember being at the Veneightian, so I say we start there. That’s how we find Fluttershy: retrace our steps and figure out what happened. Now, hooves to the concrete, everypony!”

Her friends didn’t need any more convincing than that. Wordlessly they went, to piece together a night that they might have been better off forgetting.

Chapter 3

Each of the hotels on the Las Haygas Strip were splendidly unique in architecture, style, and theme. Twilight found it fascinating to observe them all from the outside, silently comparing them to their real-world counterparts. The Baylagio looked just like a certain Italian lakeside villa she'd seen once in a book. The Mirage could have been an ancient palace plucked directly from the Ahaybian sands. And though she'd never been to Veneighce, the hotel that bore its name made her long to see the real thing.

Once they actually stepped inside, however, she realized something new about Las Haygas. Namely, every casino looks pretty much the same.

The same colorful slot machines lined the rows upon rows of the gambling hall. The same poker, blackjack, craps, and roulette tables dotted the floor. It was the same lights, same sounds, same frigid air, tacky glitz, the same distant looks on the croupiers' faces. Even the same crowd as the night before (with, perhaps, a few less drunk ponies). Still, the place was huge. Twilight wasn't really sure where to start.

"Big place," Applejack said, echoing her own thoughts. "Dang. I barely remember even bein' here last night."

Pinkie Pie hopped into their path. "Oh! I do, I do. We came in and I said 'Hey, we should go for a swim in the canals next to the plaza!' But *you* said 'Pinkie, we can't go swimming in the canals. They don't ever filter that water. Plus I think it's illegal.' And then *I* said, 'oh it's not illegal, silly. Just frowned upon. Like sneaking into somepony's house at night and putting spiders in their bed as a practical joke.'"

"Umm... I'm pretty sure that's illegal too."

"It *is*?" Pinkie looked genuinely disappointed. "Maybe after the whole Elements of Harmony thing, when everypony got all sensitive. Thanks a lot, *Nightmare Moon*."

Applejack gave a nervous giggle. "Yeah. Right. I do remember that conversation... vaguely. I also remember those security guard ponies fishin' you out the water and throwin' ya out onto the street, rump first. O' course I went with ya, seein' as I wasn't about to let you wonder the Strip by yourself." The earth pony gave Twilight and the others a glance. "Can't remember where the rest o' y'all were, though."

Twilight hadn't the faintest idea either. Though she'd remembered about Pinkie Pie getting thrown out as early as this morning, which meant the five of them must have somehow regrouped outside the hotel. The only question was what she, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash had done in the meantime.

"Hey," said Applejack, "I got an idea. Maybe somepony else remembers seein' us here last night. We musta been a real sight, after all."

Twilight grinned. "Good thinking. We should ask around, especially to the staff who was working here last night."

"Dang straight! We'll start with the bartender."

Oh my. Just the thought of going *near* a bar made Twilight want to wretch again. All those bottles behind the counter... and that smell. She couldn't even bear to think about it. "I think I'd rather try somewhere else," she said. "After all, we still have Rainbow's room key to investigate."

Rainbow got very quiet after that. In fact, the usually smug and candid pegasus had been largely keeping to herself all morning. Twilight noticed her drooping eyes and instantly regretted bringing up the key. "Don't worry, Rainbow," she said with a grin. "We'll get to the bottom of all this. I'm sure it will all end up being one big misunderstanding."

Rainbow Dash was quiet for about two seconds too long. "Yeah." She sighed. "I'm sure we will."

"Well, girls, why don't we split up?" That was Rarity, who galloped to the front of the pack and spun around to face them. "Twilight and Rainbow Dash can investigate the room key, while the rest of us ask around at the bar and in the shopping plaza." The unicorn had thrown on a simple red-

and-green gown before leaving the hotel, in order to hide the little critter on her haunch.

The others mouthed their agreement. And Twilight quickly found herself riding up the elevator, standing next to a very uneasy pegasus.

She didn't like seeing her friend like this. It was only now starting to hit her just what blacking out meant. However she tried to spin it, the truth was that, for a night, Twilight had *not been in control*. A foreign presence had taken her over, and probably driven her to do things she would never have done willingly. She had once heard the word "gone" used to describe a terribly drunk pony. Now it finally made sense. Last night, Twilight Sparkle had been *gone*. Something else had been in control. Seeing the end result, and realizing just a few of the stupid decisions she'd made, brought with it an almost otherworldly sense of strangeness. It felt like she was piecing together somepony else's night instead of her own. It was... a little scary.

And as uneasy as Twilight felt right now, she knew Rainbow felt worse.

She placed a hoof on her friend's back and smiled her warmest smile. "Don't worry, Rainbow. We'll find out what really happened soon enough. You'll see: the truth won't be half as bad as what your imagination can come up with."

Dash's eyes dropped, and she stared at the floor for several long moments. "Twilight, what if I..." Silence.

"What if you what?"

"Did something really stupid. I mean, I don't think I would..." she tapered off. "But what if I did? It's sure starting to look that way. I wouldn't be able to look in a mirror without cringing. What would I say? What would *you* say? And what about our friends, what would they all think? I'd be so ashamed, and this is not how I wanted... oh man..."

A glint, just the tiniest hint of a tear, appeared beneath the pegasus' eye.

“I can’t even look you in the eye right now, Twilight.”

Without even bothering to think about it, Twilight lowered her neck and forced the pegasus to make eye contact with her. Rainbow shrunk away. It was unsettling. She had *never* seen her so self-confident friend like this before.

“Listen to me, Rainbow,” she began. “Regardless of what happened last night, you’re here with your friends. You’ve got *nothing* to be ashamed about. At least not with us. We are with you no matter what. And if you did do something you regret last night – if you’re really feeling that beat-up about it – then I’ll tell you what to do. You go up to your friends, bow your head, and submit. To a Great. Big. Hug.”

She was impressed at how hard Dash tried to keep the smile off her face. The pegasus lasted three, maybe four seconds. But after that, her willpower broke, and she grinned like a stupid dog. “Th... thanks, Twilight. I should have known not to worry about what you’d say.”

The elevator doors parted then, and they stepped out into the lavish fourth-floor corridor of the Veneightian Hotel and Casino.

“Room 4652,” Dash muttered. “Four six five two. Should be to our left.” As the numbers along the hallway climbed, she seemed to grow more and more tense.

They were there before they knew it. Dash stopped and froze in front of Room 4652. “Oh man.”

Twilight took position beside her. “Remember. Whatever happens, your friends are with you. No matter what.”

“I know, I know, just... Bah. It’s now or never.” A look of steel determination appeared on Rainbow Dash’s face. With a quick glance at Twilight, she knocked on the door.

Ten seconds later, it opened. Slowly. Standing on the other side was a teal-coated pegasus with a neatly cropped, coffee-brown mane. He wore a pair of rimmed glasses very low on his snout, a well-trimmed goatee

under his chin, and a short bathrobe over his chest. Twilight shot a peak at his cutie mark: an open logbook and quill.

The stallion studied Rainbow Dash with equal parts confusion and weary-eyed exhaustion. Rainbow stared back. They shared a long and very awkward pause.

“Umm.” Rainbow dropped her eyes, and took to pawing at the floor. “Hey there.” More silence. All in the span of a few seconds, Rainbow glanced around for a chance to stall, found nothing, and gave up with a heavy sigh of reluctance. “I... don’t suppose you remember me from last night?”

The teal pegasus blinked. “I’ve never seen you in my life.”

“You haven’t?” She sounded far too relieved to hear that. “You sure? I wasn’t here? I mean, you’re completely, one-hundred-percent sure that you don’t remember seeing me here, *at all*?”

“Sorry,” said the pegasus.

Twilight had to admit that she was relieved to hear it as well. The room key had turned into another empty lead to finding Fluttershy, but at least Rainbow Dash didn’t have to worry about making any irreversible mistakes the night before. Twilight wasn’t sure what her friend would have done if this pony *had* remembered her.

She was so busy in her relief that she didn’t notice the teal-colored pegasus turn in her direction. Thus, his words took her completely by surprise.

“I definitely remember you, though, Twilight Sparkle!”

His name was Figure.

He was an accountant out of Fillydelphia. As he explained to Twilight and Dash, he was here with a group of friends, but they’d all ended up spending the night in some other pony’s room. That meant he had the

place to himself. He'd been preparing breakfast when the two of them arrived. The eggs were still in the frying pan when he invited them in, filling the room with the delicious scent of oil and melting cheese. He offered to cook some up for them. Twilight wanted to decline, but Rainbow Dash pounced on the opportunity for free food. He seemed eager to talk about himself as he served them each a steaming plate of scrambled eggs and cheese.

But he was much more eager to talk about Twilight Sparkle.

"My *stars*, but you should have seen it," he said between mouthfuls of egg. "You were tearing up the floor last night as if you were the only one there. Dancing on four hooves, then two, then on the countertop, then on a barstool. You tried to shuffle on the stool... didn't work out so well. You cranked your hooves pretty impressively, though. Then you started asking ponies to teach you how to dougie. And near the end you did this one move where you backed your rump all up over some colt... then next thing I knew, you were doing the same thing with a mare."

Rainbow Dash chortled so hard that bits of chewed-up egg went flying all over Figure's table. If the male pegasus minded, he kept it to himself. Twilight, however, could only absently run a hoof through her plate. All her appetite had left her the moment he started talking. She sighed. "I am... so embarrassed."

"No way, Twilight!" said Figure with a chuckle. "You looked like you were having the time of your life out there. Everypony was watching you. You were crazy, alright, but you were having a blast. Truth be told, I admired you. You were just so... fearless."

They did call it liquid courage for a reason. But it didn't make sense. A single liquid rainboom couldn't have affected her and her friends that badly... could it?

"How much did I drink, exactly?"

"A *lot*." Figure chuckled. "Well, come to think of it I only actually saw you drink two shots. But you were claiming that you'd had twelve, or thirteen... you were actually kind of proud that you'd lost count. Something about how it was exactly what the book told you not to do."

Dash snickered again. "Twilight, off book? I wish I could remember *that!*"

"Still, drunk ponies tend to exaggerate," continued the teal pegasus. "And if you'd actually had twelve or thirteen shots, *well*, I would be bloody impressed to see you standing here right now. I thought for sure that you were passing out when they played *Shots*, and you took one every time Lil' Colt told you to. You were lucky. The bartender was just giving you water shots at that point."

Twilight could only stare at her plate. Dancing on tables, and with *mares*? Making such a spectacle of herself, in public? And she didn't even know what a 'dougie' was! It felt so out of character that she almost doubted it could have really been her. Some other pony had taken her identity. Some other pony had done all those things, just to ruin her reputation. *This* was what the book must have meant by waking up to a morning full of regret...

"I just hope Celestia doesn't hear about this, or I'll get banished for sure," she muttered under her breath.

At that, Figure broke into another fit of laughter. "Oh man. That is so Twilight!"

And that was another thing. It made her feel uncomfortable beyond words to have some pony talking about her as if they were old friends, when for all intents and purposes she'd just met him *this morning*.

She tried her best not to let it slip into her voice. "If you don't mind me asking, how exactly do you know my name?"

"You're kidding?" The teal pegasus chuckled. "I think everypony in this hotel knows your name, considering you climbed onto a barstool and declared yourself Twilight Sparkle, Queen-Beyond-the-Wall. I still have no idea what that means, but it sounds pretty awesome."

Twilight slammed her head against the table. And kept it there.

Rainbow Dash, who'd eagerly wolfed down her second breakfast, was now able to laugh *without* spraying egg all over the room. "Oh, Twilight... I should have known you'd be a crazy drunk. Classic. I have to ask, though, Figure, did you see anypony else there with her last night? We're trying to find our friend, you see."

"Of course," said Figure, pausing for a moment to mull it over. "There were two of them with her. Fluttershy, I think her name was. And Ruby."

At that, Twilight's head shot up. "Wait. You saw Fluttershy?"

"Sure, she was there last night. Sober as a church pony, of course. She didn't dance much. Tried to convince you not to panic, that the roof *wasn't* on fire. I don't think she realized it was part of the song. Once things got out of hand with you, though, it was Fluttershy who convinced you to leave."

So they had definitely left the Veneightian together, at least.

Figure kept going. "Heh, heh. It was pretty funny, actually. You really wanted to stay and finish your, *ahem*... 'magic dance', you called it. Fluttershy and Ruby had to drag you out."

Twilight blinked. "Ruby? Who is that?"

"You know, your other friend who... stars, maybe I'm remembering wrong. Either way, it was Fluttershy who got you out. Didn't see you here again last night."

Twilight started to reason through what he had said. If they left the casino with Fluttershy in tow, then that meant she must have gotten separated at one of the other hotels. Or at least somewhere on the Strip. At least two more drinks in the Veneightian. If they were already that far gone...

Ruby. Who was Ruby? He must have meant Rarity. In a place as loud as a dance floor, it was easy for voices to get drowned out. Still, unless Applejack and the others had managed to find something, it seemed they had exhausted this lead.

And then Twilight remembered why they had come here in the first place. "So," she said, "if I left with my friends, and you never even saw Rainbow Dash, then how did we end up with your room key last night?"

Figure shrugged. "Stars, I don't know. It isn't my key."

"But you just said-"

"I was here in the Veneightian," he started. "But I wasn't staying in this room. My friends and I had a suite on the second floor. Whoever was renting this room checked out early this morning, and the hotel comped us up."

Silence. It took a moment for that to sink in. Then Rainbow Dash's eyes shrunk down to the size of pinpricks. "Wait, what?"

"Whoever gave you that room key must have had it before we did."

And just like that, the cyan pegasus' night became a mystery once again.

"Twilight, we have to check with the front desk," said Rainbow, her voice on the edge of panic. "They've got to have a record of who was here last night. They can tell us who gave me the key. Maybe the pony who did it knows where Fluttershy is."

It was a tempting notion, but Twilight knew it wouldn't work. "The hotel won't give us that kind of information. They have to respect the privacy of their clients."

"Privacy shmivacy. I *have* to know who-"

They ran into Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie almost perfectly on cue as they trotted across the main lobby. "Learn anything?" Applejack asked.

"That I'm an idiot," said Twilight, too quickly. "And that whoever was staying in Room 4653 checked out early this morning. How about you? Did you have better luck than us?"

The earth pony shook her head sadly. "A few dealers remember me and Rainbow playin' some blackjack last night. Losin', mostly. Security asked us to leave after Rainbow shushed me because I was, *ahem*..." she glared at the pegasus. "Makin' her lose count."

Rainbow shrugged. "What? It's a foolproof method."

"We ran into some ponies who remembered me, too!" Pinkie said with a bounce and a cheerful giggle.

"Yeah, the very same colts who threw ya out last night. We gave 'em the slip, though."

"Other than that, nopony remembers seeing us." Rarity glanced knowingly at the purple unicorn. "Though they all seem to remember you, Twilight Sparkle. Did you ever end up learning how to, *ahem*, dougie, my dear?"

Twilight felt her cheeks reddening again. She passed it off with a giggle. "Yeah, let's not talk about that."

They'd come to the Veneightian with a slew of questions. And so far they had managed to answer... well, none of them. They still didn't know where Dash had gotten the key. They still didn't know where the casino chips had come from, and if AJ and Dash had lost all their bits here, it was becoming less and less likely that she'd like the answer when she got it. They still didn't know where Fluttershy was either. And worse, they had no idea where they'd gone to after the Veneightian.

"Well, we have to keep looking," Twilight declared. "There were a few other hotels Pinkie wanted to visit. We probably ended up at some of them last night. The Four Seasons, the Baylagio, the Mirage..." *And the Maynn*. But Twilight wanted to avoid showing their faces in the Maynn, if at all possible.

The others mumbled their agreement, and after a bit more discussion, they decided to head out in the direction of the Baylagio.

The voice stopped them mere inches clear of the door.

“Sonofa...” The voice was male, and a deep baritone, with an accent somewhat similar to Applejack’s, if only a *tad* bit smoother. “Is that...? Shoot, it sure is, clear as the morning sun. It’s Rainbow the Roller. And here I thought I’d never again have the pleasure.”

The five ponies spun around to get a look at the speaker. All except Rainbow Dash, who could only stop short of the door, freezing as her cheeks turned crimson.

Twilight felt the urge to scratch her mane when she saw him. Copper-colored coat, charcoal mane, tinted sunglasses, a moustache, a lit cigar... by the stars, he seemed familiar. And then she got a look at his flank, and it hit her. It was the poker player from last night in Celestia’s Palace! The earth pony with the ace-of-spades cutie mark!

Something else about him was familiar as well. Too familiar.

He was wearing Applejack’s hat.

Chapter 4

“Umm.” A confused blue pegasus blinked once at the ace-of-spades pony, and stared. “Rainbow the what, now?”

“Why, Rainbow the Roller, o’ course! Rainbow Iron-Eyes. The maven of the Maynn. The Queen of Hearts and Spades. Money in her eyes, and ice in ‘er blood.” He chuckled. “You’ll forgive a Haygas native fer bein’ so overly dramatic with the nicknames, won’t ya? We desert ponies tend to favor the hyperbole.”

Dash looked like she was listening to someone speak some kind of offshoot dialect of a dead language she didn’t understand. After a few seconds of gawking, she shook herself and said, “You’re going to have to explain this one to me.”

The ace-of-spades pony chuckled. “Well, deal me a two o’ clubs and tell me at least the sun’s still shinin’... you don’t remember anything, do you?”

That was when Twilight Sparkle decided to step in. She took position in front of Rainbow, pausing to study the copper-coated pony. He had a relatively large frame, though not quite as big as Big Macintosh. His charcoal moustache reminded her of Appleloosa’s sheriff. Come to think of it, the accent sounded similar to Appleloosan as well. Haygas and the settler town were only separated by a few hundred miles of desert, after all. She supposed it made sense.

The jet-black glasses and the cloud of smoke that seemed to follow him around screamed sliminess. Twilight got the feeling that she shouldn’t trust him any further than she would a diamond dog... but she’d learned from Zecora the importance of not judging a book by its cover. And she wasn’t the type to let her own lessons go over her head.

She took in a breath, and smiled. “Maybe you can help us, sir. We’re trying to find our friend, you see. It seems, well... it seems we might have had a bit too much to drink last night, and we can’t remember anything that

happened. But you recognized Rainbow. And you're wearing my friend Applejack's hat, which means you probably-

"Oh, sun *and* sand." He lowered his glasses down the rim of his snout, revealing a pair moss-colored eyes. "Is that AJ over there?"

"Dang straight it is!" came Applejack's angry voice. "And you'd better start 'splainin to me what yer doin' with my hat before I trot on over there and *kick it off o' your smooth-talkin' head.*"

The ace-of-spades pony let out a good long belly laugh. "Yep. That's AJ alright. And Twilight Sparkle, good seein' ya again. *Miss Rarity* – learned my lesson on how to address you last night, sure as the sun comes up. And is that...? Hey, Pinkie Pie."

"Hi!" said Pinkie with a grin and a jump. "Uh... I'm sorry, but I don't know your name. So I'll call you Strange Pony! Hi there, Strange Pony!"

"None of y'all remember me, then? Shoot, this is awkward. Guess I'll just jump on into it." The ace-of-spades pony removed his glasses and clipped them to the band of Applejack's hat. "Name's Lucky Draw. My friends call me Lucky, and any friends of Rainbow the Roller are friends o' mine, so call me Lucky if you so wish. I am a resident of this oasis of pleasure we call Las Haygas, and a bettin' pony by trade. Word 'round town is nopony can stare down Lucky Draw on the poker table. That is, until Rainbow the Roller showed me what's what."

Rainbow, for her part, seemed equal parts confused and overjoyed at what she was hearing. "Hey, Twi. Still think I didn't actually win all those chips back in the hotel?"

Lucky Draw grinned. "Oh, she won 'em fair and square, she did. Made out like a bandit on the sands last... aw, shoot. Y'all will be wantin' to hear the story from the beginning, no doubt. Come, you ladies can buy Lucky Draw a drink and he'll tell you all about it."

Drink...

Oh my.

Twilight stepped back, and felt something lurch deep inside her. She shuddered. Then she quickly turned and angled her head away from the direction of her friends. A moment later, what little scrambled egg she'd managed to eat in Figure's hotel room came pouring out on to the elegant carpet before the Veneightian's main doors.

Lucky *tsked*. "Or not. Don't worry yourselves, my little ponies. A bagel will do just fine."

They sat at a booth made for six in a breezy canal-side café. He finished his bagel first. He ate in slow and careless bites, sat with a foreleg hanging over the side of the bench, and tried his hardest to exude confidence from every pore. Every once in a while he paused for a sip of sweet tea and a glance at the gambling floor across the canal.

Twilight wondered how many pages of this book she'd have to read before deciding that the ink was as slimy as the cover.

"Our tale," he said when he was done, "begins like all good tales of mayhem in Las Haygas – with Lucky, sippin' complimentary whiskey and sitting 'fore a pile of chips higher than a Saguaro cactus on the gambling floor of the Maynn. I was on a particularly impressive hot streak last night, especially after leavin' Celestia's Palace. Now I love the old mare, but her cards don't quite *sing* to me like those of the other-"

Applejack let out a growl. "Get to the point, bucko!"

"Right, right. The point. That'd be y'all." He chuckled. "Actually, first one I met was you, AJ. You came and sat at my poker table somewhere around midnight last night, already deep in yer cups. You didn't have many bits. I might not even 'a noticed you, if it weren't for ya bein' so loud. Every hoof you played was for Granny Smith's new hip."

The orange pony sighed. "I can't believe I gambled all my bits... *stupid*."

"Quite." Lucky gave her a shrug. "I didn't pay much attention to you, I'm afraid. Had my eye on this one plump ol' city mare and her grandiose

pile of chips. Your pot dwindled quickly, though. Only took about twenty minutes for you to go dry. That was when your friend Fluttershy showed up.”

“You saw Fluttershy?” All five ponies spoke at once.

Lucky pulled another cigar from the brim of Applejack’s hat, and began the difficult process of activating a lighter with his mouth. “I take it she’s the missing friend? Pity. She was such a sweetheart...”

Twilight’s patience was quickly growing thin. “What happened after that?”

“Let’s see... Fluttershy tried to get you to leave and rejoin yer friends, AJ, but you wanted to stay. Which was a problem since you had no bits. You asked ‘er to borrow some, swore you were good for it, but she put her hoof down and insisted that it was time to go. That stare o’ hers... you looked like you were about to give in. *Heh*. That was when Rainbow Dash came to the table.”

“Did I now?” The pegasus inflated with pride.

Lucky finally lit his cigar and brought it to his lips, quickly producing another cloud of acrid smoke. “Rainbow had just lost all her bits playin’ blackjack. Said it was time to find a new game. And there I sat thinkin’ you was another foalish little tourist with too much money in her hooves and too much drink in her bloodstream. Celestia’s sun, was I wrong.”

Rainbow grinned the twisted grin of self-satisfaction. “Tell me about it,” she said.

“Lucky is not without his flaws, you see, and one of those flaws is overconfidence. When you came to the table, I figured I could just scare ya into foldin’ like I do most ponies. Lady Luck dealt me a six high the first round... terrible hand, but I raised you anyway. Understand when I tell you this that Lucky Draw’s poker face can intimidate Princess Celestia herself into foldin’ on a spade straight flush. And nopony calls my bluff. *Nopony*.”

Rainbow Dash chuckled. “Nopony until Rainbow the Roller, that is!”

"I don't know what it was," Lucky said with a shake of his head. "Might a' been the alcohol. Might a' been the atmosphere. Maybe you really do have ice in yer blood. But Rainbow Dash, you were the most confident, most *inscrutable* poker player I ever had the misfortune of playin'. First loss I chalked up to overconfidence. Second to bad luck. Somewhere 'round the fifth or sixth, I realized I was in it to my neck and bowed out. A good roller knows when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em, after all."

Rainbow Dash let out a cheer. "Too cool! Who needs card counting when I've got the eyes of ice and steel. So all those chips I won were off of you?"

"Shoot, no," said Lucky. "Like I said, I bowed out. You kept playin', going from table to table until you'd sucked everypony dry. Stars above, you put on a clinic. 'Twas a true privilege to watch. *And* you had the sense to leave while you were ahead."

Twilight had been taking mental notes throughout the conversation. So Fluttershy had been with them here as well. *And* they'd left with her. If they arrived at midnight, then they still had Fluttershy at least an hour later... but where had they gone after the Maynn?

It seemed Applejack had other concerns. "That's all well and good, Rainbow. But Mr. Lucky Draw here still hasn't explained to me what he's doin' with my hat!"

"Right, the hat." The copper pony chuckled. "And please, it's Lucky to my friends."

"Keep talkin', Lucky *Draw*."

"Alright, alright. No need for hostilities." He took a long drag, and blew the smoke cloud out over the canal. "I suppose seein' yer friend's hot streak restored your faith in Lady Luck, AJ, because you stumbled on back to the table and begged to play one more round. Only problem was you were out of chips. I turned you down at first. But then, ya made me an offer I simply couldn't refuse."

Applejack groaned. "Uh oh. Let me guess."

“One hoof,” Lucky said with a grin. “You win and you got back all the chips you lost. I win, and I got to keep this here very stylish hat.” He puffed on his cigar. “I doubt you need yer pesky memory to tell you what came of that.”

Applejack seemed to wither as the gambling pony spoke. “Oh no.” She cupped her head in between her hooves and dropped it on the table. “AJ, how *could you...*” She shut her eyes. “Gamblin’ away your old man’s...” The last word caught in her throat.

Rarity leaned in, and gave the earth pony’s shoulder a nuzzle. “Oh darling, don’t worry. We’ll get it back.” She cast her gaze on Lucky. “How much do you want for it, sir? Rainbow Dash will be happy to pay you in chips.”

“I will?” said Dash.

She shrank under the white unicorn’s glare.

“Yeah. Of course I will. Name your price, Lucky Draw.”

Lucky smirked, and took a long, heavy puff. “I am very sorry, Applejack. But Lucky Draw is not in the habit of sellin’ off his winnings. The only transactions he makes are in chips, and over a green felt table. And it’s Lucky to my friends, Rainbow. We are friends, ain’t we?”

“Oh, we’ll be the best of friends when you *give AJ back that hat.*”

“Tell ya what. I’ll make you a deal.” The copper-coated pony took a sip of sweet tea. “Lucky is not in the habit of sellin’ his winnings, but there’s a habit he *is* in. The habit of the wager.” He chuckled. “And I would love to see Rainbow the Roller in action again.”

Holding a set of playing cards in one’s hooves tended to be problematic. That was why the best casinos in Equestria employed only unicorn dealers, who could levitate the cards in front of their players’ eyes without the players having to worry about handling them. The blue unicorn in charge of the table Dash and Lucky Draw had chosen seemed in enough

command of her magic that she could keep the cards floating without requiring much attention, and simultaneously deal the turn from the top of the deck.

Twilight watched with growing apprehension as the first round of their game began. Each pony had a hand of two cards, and over the course of the round five more community cards would be dealt face-up on the table. The first three were already out: a six of diamonds, jack of clubs, and queen of hearts. The illustration on the heart queen was a *very* familiar white alicorn mare. Celestia was the only queen ponies knew, after all.

Twilight didn't know much about poker, admittedly – she'd skipped that chapter in the book, naïvely thinking that card games would play little part in their night. But she *was* smart enough to know the paramount importance of bluffing, and she knew Rainbow Dash would have a hard time getting a bluff over her wily opponent if the four ponies standing behind her advertised her hand on their faces like four brightly-lit neon signs. So she, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Applejack stood behind the dealer instead, watching the game without a clue as to what Rainbow Dash had in her hoof.

Their chips were worthless, but they played for higher stakes than anypony else in the casino that morning. Lucky Draw's offer had been simple: a hundred chips each, and whoever cleans out the other's kitchen cabinet first would win the game. The stakes were simple as well. AJ's hat, against Rainbow's shopping bag at the hotel, and the several thousand bits' worth of chips inside.

When she first heard the offer, Twilight wanted to scream out loud how ridiculously unbalanced it was. No silly *hat* could be worth that much...

But then she saw the look on Applejack's face. She saw the way her friend's eyes shone just a *bit* more lustrously than usual. She saw Applejack stare at the hat sitting on Lucky Draw's head, eyes thinning in rage as he reached for another cigar nestled underneath the hatband, dropping again as she remembered it was *her* fault that it sat there.

"Rainbow," the orange pony had said, very quietly at first. "It kills me t' have to do this, 'cause you *know* how much I hate askin' fer help. And they're your chips, of course, so do with 'em what you want. And I know it's

a huge gamble for what seems like a pretty inconsequential prize, but..." Applejack blinked and turned her head toward the ground.

"*Please*. You gotta get back that hat."

The matter required no further debate.

So now Rainbow Dash was locked in combat against what might have been the single most skilled, experienced, knowledgeable, veteran poker player in all of Las Haygas.

After all, cutie marks appeared for a reason.

Rainbow brightened as she saw the turn revealed as the queen of spades, illustrated by a black alicorn with a striking resemblance to a certain princess of the night. Dash's grin flashed from ear to ear... and then she seemed to remember that it was called a *poker* face for a reason, and forced the smile away. Lucky Draw, for his part, looked as stoic and uninterested as ever.

"Raise ya by twenty on this one, sweetheart," he said with a long puff of his latest cigar. He nudged the chips into the center of the table a moment later, almost like an afterthought.

Rainbow looked hesitant at first. She snuck a glance at her cards, then at the pot, and then at Lucky Draw's face. Her eyes seemed to grow distant as she thought.

"I don't... I don't know." she frowned. But suddenly red rage gripped her features. "No. You know what? I call you on that. Rainbow the Roller *never* backs down from a challenge!"

Twilight felt a knot materialize in her belly. Whatever ice had been in Rainbow's veins last night was clearly gone now. The pegasus was announcing her hand so loudly that she might as well have been playing with her cards face-up. And worse, Lucky Draw knew exactly how to manipulate her. Dash *hated* losing. A fold would be a dagger stab upon her blasted pride.

With a nod, the dealer magicked forth the final community card from the top of the deck: the river. It was a jack of diamonds. Twilight studied the illustration on the laminated card. It was a creature she'd never seen before, with an elongated snakelike body, and the head of a... a goat, was it? Not quite. He looked like a mishmash of bits and pieces from a dozen different animals. She saw a goat's horn, a horse's mane, a chicken's paw, and more she couldn't recognize. He seemed to be grinning a sly and clever grin.

Some kind of deck, she thought.

Lucky raised Dash another thirty chips. "See if you've got what it takes to play in the big leagues, Rainbow the Roller." He gave her a tight grin, then turned his attention back to his cigar.

Again Rainbow began to buckle and shrink under the pressure. She glanced at her cards and her own dwindling pile of chips, giggling nervously in an attempt to distract from the growing sense of panic in her eyes.

Things did not look good. "*Psst*. Hey, Rarity." Twilight whispered and craned her neck toward her fellow unicorn.

"Yes, dah-ling?"

"Are we allowed to talk to the players during poker games?"

Rarity pondered it. "You know, I'm not sure. I must admit that I know little and less about casino etiquette, shameful as it is to admit. Do you think Rainbow Dash would be mad if we tried to advise-"

"DON'T DO IT, DASHIE!" Pinkie Pie lunged, planting her hooves on the poker table and sending carefully-stacked chips spilling all over the surface.

The dealer glared at her. Lucky Draw just chuckled. Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Relax, Pinkie. It's, *heh*, not like I'm going to lose or anything, right..."

Pinkie placed two hooves on the pegasus' shoulders and *shook*. "Oh sure he may seem like a straight shooter, but he's got those *evil* eyes. He's tricking you, Dashie! He's an evil enchanter! He'll put you in-"

"*Enough!*" Dash yelled, burying her head in her hooves. "It may not be wise, it may not be *smart*... but I call your bluff, Lucky Draw. Thirty chips it is."

The knot in Twilight's stomach tightened.

Lucky Draw just laughed a soft-as-syrup laugh. "Alright, sweetheart," he said. "Time to put this game away all quick-like. I know you ain't got nothin' can beat this hoof of mine." He rose, and nodded at the unicorn dealer.

"All in, Rainbow the Roller."

As the dealer magicked Lucky Draw's pile of chips into the center of the table, Rainbow visibly caved. Her eyes bulged, and a thousand droplets of sweat seemed to pop out of her pores. The pegasus had half her chips locked in that pot already. If she backed out now, she'd be playing at a disadvantage for the rest of the game. But if she called his bluff, and was wrong...

She gave her friends a look of desperation.

"*Come on*, Rainbow," Twilight whispered. "Do the smart thing. Fold. The risk isn't worth the reward."

"Think it over carefully, dear," said Rarity. "Don't let him goad you."

Pinkie leered. "*He's an evil enchanter, he'll trick you with banter...*"

Applejack just gave the pegasus a look heavy with guilt. "I shoulda never asked her to do this..."

But Rainbow Dash ignored them all. "You chose the wrong pony to challenge, Lucky!" She shoved her chips into the center of the table and got to her hooves as well. "All. In."

The knot in Twilight's stomach tightened harder. So tight it almost made her...

Oh, dear.

Luckily there was a trash can within hurling distance.

Things quieted down just in time for Twilight to see what happened next. "Fraid your friends might 'a been right, Rainbow the Roller," said Lucky Draw with a grin. He flipped over his cards with the flick of a hoof. The ponies gasped as the Jacks of Heart and Spade stared back at them, all depicting the same strange figure as the Jack of Clubs. The mix-and-match creatures with their wily grins looked to be... mocking them. Lucky Draw had four of a kind, and they were jacks on top of it.

"Oh..." Rainbow Dash lowered her head, letting her mane spill onto the table. "What a shame. Especially considering that all I have is..." she flipped her own cards.

"Two *queens!*"

Lucky Draw's cigar dropped from his mouth. Fortunately the unicorn dealer magicked it before it hit the floor and became a fire hazard.

"Four of a kind!" Dash dropped to the floor in full-on, side-ripping laughter. "You should see the *look* on your face. You're a laugh, Lucky Draw. Too bad we *won't* be hanging out some more."

"Dang..." said the gambling pony. "Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, though..."

And Rainbow Dash quickly found her front legs full of very happy and very grateful earth pony.

"Oh Dashie thankyouthankyou! Yer the best the best the *best!* I yield – you are the better athlete. You shoulda won the Running of the Leaves *and* the Iron Pony competition. Yer the fastest, smartest, *best* friend a pony could have! How am I ever gonna repay you for this? Anything ye want - *anything* - it's yours."

For the second time that morning, Dash smiled a crooked and self-assured smile. "I may just hold you to that, AJ."

A few minutes later, as the five ponies approached the Veneightan's main doors, the electrically-charged Rainbow Dash continued her postgame analysis. "You should've seen it! Oh wait, that's right, you *did* see it! Wasn't it awesome? Wasn't *I* awesome?"

Twilight giggled softly. "Yes Rainbow. We were there. You were awesome."

"*You* thought I was getting played like a little filly, but I was the one playing *him*! I made him think I was all scared and clueless and making stupid bets, but the whole time – *the whole time* – I was just tricking him into sweetening the pot! Oh man, did you see his face when I revealed my cards? Did you see it?"

"Yes, we saw it."

Dash exploded with laughter. "Priceless!"

"That it was." Lucky Draw followed close behind them, listening to Dash brag with a look of distant amusement on his face. "It seems I weren't wrong in givin' you that nickname last night, Rainbow the Roller. You've lived up to your reputation."

"I did, didn't I?" She grinned. "It was right about when you raised me another thirty chips that I knew I had you beat. Didja like my nervous glances? How about the whole '*Rainbow the Roller never backs down*' thing? I thought I had taken the act too far when I said that. How'd you even manage to fall for it?"

Twilight stepped up behind Rainbow and gave her a soft kick to the shin. "Now Rainbow, don't be rude."

"Aww, hay," said Lucky Draw with a laugh. "No skin off my flank. She's more'n earned the right to brag. I lost, but 'twas worth it to see

Rainbow the Roller in action again. And of course, a gambler always pays his debts.”

The copper-coated pony trotted over to Applejack and lowered his head gracefully. “I believe this belongs to you.”

AJ picked up the hat with her teeth. “*Ssank oou, Ucky ‘Raww.*”

“Please,” said the gambling pony. “Lucky to my friends.”

Twilight was as happy as the rest of them to see her friend reunited with her beloved hat. And Lucky Draw hadn’t been so bad in the end... had he? But the fact remained that they were still no closer to finding Fluttershy. After all, this earth pony had to have *some* idea where they’d gone after the Maynn. “Hey, Lucky?” she asked. “You don’t happen to remember where we went after the casino last night, do you? Did we say anything? Drop any hints as to where we were headed?”

“Well, sure. Y’all went back to your room.”

That couldn’t be right. If they’d gone back to Celestia’s so early, when had they gotten the chance to lose Fluttershy? Or get Rarity’s tattoo? Or the – *gulp* – manticore? And what about Rainbow’s key, and the mysterious inhabitant of Room 4652?

The gambler continued. “Right ‘round one AM or so, Miss Rarity came by with everyone’s keys. I gotta admit I was surprised to learn that y’all were stayin’ in the Maynn Palace Suite. That room goes for ten thousand bits a night.”

“*Huh?*” Twilight blinked. “No, you must be mistaken. We’re staying in Celestia’s Palace.”

“Not last night, you weren’t. Rarity had keys for every one ‘o y’all – you, Rainbow, AJ, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Ruby. Fluttershy got all distraught when she saw ‘em, now that I think on it. She took Rarity off to the side for some intense conversation. But a few minutes later y’all headed up, and that was the last I saw of ya.”

Twilight felt the gears of her mind racing, as slow-dawning horror threatened to bubble up in her belly. "I'm sorry, what did you..." She looked at her friends, all four of whom maintained a face as blank as she. "No, surely you misunder..." She let her eyes gape open. "We couldn't have..."

Oh, dear.

The terror bubble exploded, and a thousand thoughts hit her at once. *We rented a room at the Maynn! Why did we...* Not just any room – the palace suite! *Ten thousand bits. It cost ten THOUSAND bits.* Had Rarity paid for all of it? *Oh dear, what did we do in that room?* How much property damage was awaiting them inside? The palace suite had to have glass and porcelain and expensive art. *No way any of us could afford-* Maybe with Rainbow Dash's winnings they could pay it off. Slowly. With credit lines and interest payments, and maybe a bankruptcy or two. *Whose name did we leave at the front desk? And where are all our keys?* And Ruby. He'd mentioned Ruby again. *Who the HAY is this Ruby?*

And then she realized something that quieted her racing mind once and for all. She turned to her friends.

"We rented a second room. *That's where Fluttershy is!* To the Maynn, everypony!"

Chapter 5

They did not need to walk through the Maynn's front doors to know that trouble was afoot.

A crowd had gathered around this most luxurious of Haygas hotels. Security ponies – a sight unseen in Ponyville, but common as dirt in Las Haygas – had taped closed the parking lot and cordoned off the entrance. Photographers clamored to get a shot of what lay in wait on the other side. Twilight stood on her hind legs and attempted to get a good look at what they were hiding. But she was a little pony, and all she could see beyond the crowd was more heads and bobbing manes.

"I hope we get to see the statue overlooking the lobby," said Rarity, her voice slipping from even speech to dreamy gush. "Steve Maynn is one of my greatest idols. That stallion has it all... money, style, celebrity, success. Oh, it would be such a *dream* to meet him."

"Calm down there, Rares," said Dash with a pointed hoof. "I could care less about any marble statues and rich hotel-owning ponies. I just want to find Fluttershy and settle this whole mess."

Applejack led the pack forth into the hotel's main courtyard. With hat in tow, the earth pony's confidence seemed to have been magically restored. "Hmm. Might be difficult gettin' in."

Twilight approached one of the security guards. "Excuse me, sir, but we'd like to know if-

"Sorry. Only guests are allowed in right now. Somepony committed a... transgression in the hotel last night. We're looking into it further."

"Oh?" Twilight shot her friends a quick and nervous glance, wandering – ever briefly – if the perpetrator of this transgression was about to return to the scene of the crime. "May I ask what happened, exactly?"

The security stallion shook his head. "Sorry, we're keeping it under wraps for now. The press hasn't been given the full details. Steve Maynn is set to give a statement in a little under an hour."

"I see." Twilight smiled a coy little smile. "Well, we *are* guests, so if we could just get by it would be..."

"Room key?"

"I'm sorry?"

The security stallion grunted. "I'm going to need to see your room key before I can let you in."

"Oh. Uh..." Twi looked back at her friends and searched their faces for a hint of what to say next. They gave her nothing. "We don't exactly..."

"No room key, no entry," he said. "Sorry. Just wait out here for now. The hotel will be reopening after Mr. Maynn's press conference."

Defeated, the purple unicorn bowed her head and silently trotted back to where her friends were standing, a few hundred feet away. This was no good! Who knew what Fluttershy was doing in the palace suite? There was no reason for the pink-maned pegasus not to have returned to Celestia's with them... unless something had gone wrong. Fluttershy could be hurt up there. Who knew what chaos they'd unleashed upon the palace suite last night? There was a manticore in their first room. With all that extra space in this one, maybe there was a...

Dragon.

Twilight gulped. "We can't wait around here for them to reopen the hotel. We have to get in *now*. Somepony think of something!"

And somepony did. Rarity the unicorn threw her shimmering indigo mane back over her shoulders, slid out of her plain garment, and grinned proudly. "Stand aside, Twilight," she said. "This is a situation that calls for some feminine charm."

She stepped up to the security line with bright and smiling eyes. “Yoo-hoo. So sorry to bother you, good sir, but it seems I have forgotten my room key. So clumsy, right? Silly, silly me. But I’m sure a handsome security stallion like yourself would be happy to lend a hoof to a lady in distress... If you could be a dear and just let me in, I would be *so thankful*.”

The security pony, who was only half-paying attention, lowered his sunglasses and gave Rarity a quick look-over. His eyes paused over the unicorn’s haunch. “You’re the next shift?”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, sorry. Showmares will have to use the maintenance entrance on the other side of the hotel. Just take your first left, and you’ll be backstage where you can prepare for your shift.”

Rarity’s eye twitched. She took a single and deliberate step back. “I’m sorry. Did you just say...” her voice cracked. “*Showmare?*”

“Yeah, better hurry. You’re on the pole in twenty minutes.”

It took Twilight and Applejack both, with all the strength in their straining neck muscles, to bite Rarity’s tail and hold the unicorn back.

“Let me go this *instant!*” she screamed, her horn lowered for the charge as her friends dragged her away. “That... that *lech!* Did you hear what he called me? *Did you hear it?* A good goring is what he needs – that will teach him to respect a lady.”

“Calm, Rarity,” said Twilight through clenched teeth. They rejoined the pack a few moments later. “We may need a different plan.”

Pinkie bounced in front of her. “Ooh! Ooh! Is it my turn? Is it? *Is it?*”

Twilight gulped. She couldn’t think of a single reason why not.

And so it was that Pinkie Pie donned a Lucky Draw-esque cowboy hat and moustache – where she had been storing those, nopony could say – and, with a long and drawn-out, “Awww *Yeah*,” trotted up to the taped-off line.

The security pony took a deep breath. "Something I can help you with?"

"You reckon there is!" Pinkie said in an Applejack accent so bad that it made Twilight cringe. "*Ahhh'm* a high-roller, and I'm lookin' to drop some chips in this here ol' casino, but *y'all* won't let me through the door. Now that's crazier'n a loose jackrabbit on the sands, dontcha think?"

He sighed. "Look, you and your friends need to stop... wait a minute." He threw his sunglasses off with a flick of his neck. "You look like..."

"Like a pony you need to let into the casino?"

"Like a... here, take off that ridiculous fake moustache." Pinkie did as she was told. "I knew I'd seen you before. You're the one!"

Pinkie's eyes widened. "The... one? Is that a good thing?"

"You're the pony from the security cams," he said. "You're the one who vandalized the statue of Steve Maynn!"

Rarity averted her eyes. "By Celestia! It's..."

Applejack hesitated before responding. "Sure is... something."

"It's..." Twilight stared at it for several long moments, her mind trying and failing to come up with an appropriate adjective. "It's... uh... certainly..."

"It's kinda cool," admitted Rainbow.

The statue of Steve Maynn, billionaire real estate mogul and namesake of the Maynn Hotel and Casino, towered two dozen feet over the lobby atrium. He was a unicorn of impeccable pose. His short-cropped mane hugged close to his head, cascading down the ridge of his neck in elegant flowing locks. He stood with a single glorious hoof upraised, watching over the lobby of the grand hotel like a king over his empire. His

towering skyscraper cutie mark stood as proudly on his flank as the statue itself did on its raised bronze base. With a muscular body made of solid white marble, he looked every bit a somber prince of well-polished rock.

Or he would have, if somepony hadn't taken a graffiti can and drawn a pirate patch over his eye.

"Pinkie," Twilight groaned. "Why would you..."

The party pony shrugged. "Probably because he looked so serious."

"How did you even get up there? That statue is at least twenty feet high. And in the middle of a crowded lobby, with a graffiti can in your mouth? Not to mention plastered out of your-"

"Oh, *Twilight*," said Pinkie with a giggle. "You should know by now that silly things like physics can't get in the way of a good time!"

Of all the pack, it was Applejack who looked the most distraught as two burly security ponies herded them through the Maynn lobby. "Sure hope it was fun for ya last night, because now we're gonna have to pay the price for yer little prank. Off we go to Haygas jail. That's the worst kind o' jail, ya know." She studied the marble statue for a quiet moment. "Can't even imagine how many bits that thing's worth."

"Pinkie, you defiled a *priceless* work of *art*," Rarity said. "Not to mention the marble visage of one of the greatest living builders in Equestria. Steve Maynn owns half the hotels on the strip. The City of Lights wouldn't shine half as bright if it weren't for him. *How could you?*"

Rainbow Dash only gawked. "I'll say it again. I think it looks pretty cool."

"*Ughh*," Twilight sighed, her impatience reaching its breaking point. "Enough, all of you. We *all* made some stupid mistakes last night, and we can't go blaming each other. What happened, happened. We need to stop concentrating on the past and look to our future." She turned to the pair of shades-sporting security ponies escorting them. "Which is what, exactly, sirs?"

The larger of the two security ponies grunted. "You're going to see the boss."

"The boss? Boss of what?" Twilight got a terrifying vision in her head of a huge black security stallion named Bubba tying her down to a chair in some boiler room somewhere, and shining an incandescent lightbulb in her face.

"*The boss*" said her escort. "Mr. Maynn wants to meet the ponies who vandalized his statue in person."

Twi stopped dead in her tracks. Rarity did as well. Both ponies said it simultaneously, though their voices revealed two very different emotions. "*We're going to meet Steve Maynn?*"

"Please step in the elevator," said the security pony, gesturing to the golden doors as they opened. "Mr. Maynn is waiting for you in his penthouse."

Twilight gulped. This didn't make any sense at all. Why would Steve Maynn want to see *them*? Shouldn't somepony just drag them to Las Haygas Municipal Detention Center and be done with it? Or, if the casino wanted to handle them personally, sneak them down to Bubba's boiler room down below and leave them with a few less teeth? As bad as that would be, Twilight could expect it, and she could formulate a plan to get them out. But this? She had no idea what to expect from this.

Rarity, for her part, positively gushed. "Steve Maynn wants to see *us*? Oh my stars, this is like a dream come true! I can see it now – why thank you, Mr. Maynn, I do groom my coat and tail myself. Every day, in fact. Why yes, Mr. Maynn, I would be happy to show you my boutique's exclusive catalog. Why of course, Mr. Maynn, I would *love* to be the lead interior designer on your new hotel. How nice of you to ask."

As they stepped into the elevator, Applejack glared at the white unicorn. "Are you forgettin' that we're bein' sent up for vandalism and destruction of property?"

"Oh. Right. That." Rarity sighed.

The elevator started to rise, and Twilight felt the tension in her chest rise with it. "Alright," she said, "Everyone just smile and be honest and look *really really* sorry. And maybe he'll take pity on us."

Maybe. And what else did they have but hope?

The penthouse office of Steve Maynn, billionaire real estate mogul extraordinaire, glittered from every surface. The floor was made of gold-flaked marble that glistened with sunlight from the huge open window at the end of the room, which gave a panoramic view of Las Haygas at high noon. The walls were done up in glossy beige. The desk – and indeed the rest of the high-priced furniture – were made of the most finely polished wood she'd ever seen.

The stal himself sat with his back to the door on a swiveling leather office chair. His close-cropped black mane fell gracefully as silk from his scalp. And though she couldn't see his face, Twilight could feel his grimace in the very air that she breathed.

"*Ahem,*" she said as they entered. "Mr. Maynn? We're here to, uh..."

He raised a single hoof to command her to silence. "You are the ponies who vandalized my favorite statue." It wasn't even a question. It was a statement of fact.

Twilight gave an uneasy giggle. "Maybe? I mean, yes. Yes we were, but let me just say that we were all somewhat... out of sorts last night, and we are *very sorry*, and we'll do anything you ask to make it up to you. We'll clean, we'll pay, we'll work... anything." She added in a whisper, "Just please don't throw us in a boiler room with a security pony named Bubba."

"And may I just add," said Rarity, "That I am one of your biggest admirers in all of Equestria. Why, the kind of luxury and sophistication you have created with your hotels is nothing short of intoxicating. Las Haygas wouldn't be Las Haygas without Steve Maynn, the very king of-"

"Can it," Steve Maynn said. "I get enough of that crap from the press. Right now, I want to speak to the pony who did... *it.*"

Even the unfazable Pinkie Pie looked nervous as she stepped forth.

“*Umm*,” Pinkie hesitated. “That was me. I guess. But I’m really really sorry and I can’t even remember doing it, but I must’ve thought it would be funny.” She paused. “And it is really funny! I mean, you look all serious and grumpy in that statue, I thought you would maybe appreciate it if I liven it up, right? And what’s funnier than a pirate patch? *Arr!* Everypony loves a good laugh!”

Silence. Steve Maynn brought his hooves together and stared out the window.

Pinkie frowned. “You didn’t find it funny, did you?”

“No, I didn’t find it funny.”

The party pony’s neck sagged, and her eyes disappeared behind her frazzled mane. She looked a positively depressing sight. “I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“I found it *hilarious!*”

The billionaire spun around in his seat and came face-to-face with the five ponies in his office. His mane and yolk-colored coat were as carefully groomed as ever. His hooves shined with polish. His skyscraper cutie mark looked as regal and commanding as it did on the statue downstairs.

And he very proudly wore a black leather patch over his eye.

“You are a public relations genius,” he said through an ear-to-ear grin. “I don’t know who you are or what firm you’re with, but you have managed to completely reinvent my image with a single stroke of the brush! The press. Oh, how I hate the press. All those tabloids have been driving me mad... ‘Steve Maynn, he’s so serious. He’s so rigid and uptight. All his hotels are the same, full of gold-plated Ionic columns and boring old stiffs.’ Ha! Wait until they see the *new* Steve Maynn. It sends the perfect message. Why no, I don’t take myself seriously at all. I like to have fun, and you should come to my casinos and do the same. *Brilliant!* What is your name, my angel of the paparazzi?”

“Pinkie Pie!” she said with unsullied cheer.

“Pinkie. Pie. Oh, that’s good. I’ve been thinking of tearing down the old SnakeEyes hotel and building a new one in its place.” He smirked. “I can see it now: The Hotel *Pinque*. Streamers and balloons and color, color everywhere. Candy bowls in the lobby. Complimentary candy in every hotel room. A dance club with blaring strobes – pink and red and purple. A *chocolate buffet!* You’ve inspired me to do it all.”

Pinkie’s eyes gaped open. “...I think you’re my hero.”

Out the corner of her eye, Twilight could see Rarity’s face contorted in a look of horror and confusion. Luckily the unicorn fashionista was smart enough to keep quiet.

“My press conference today will blow them all away,” Steve Maynn continued. “And I owe it all to you, Pinkie Pie. You and your friends. What can I ever do to repay you?”

“*Build that hotel,*” Pinkie said, much too eagerly.

Twilight stepped forward and took position next to her friend. “Actually Mr. Maynn, there is something you can to help us with. We may have been staying in the palace suite last night, and-”

“Say no more,” he said with the wave of a hoof. “It’s comped. For yesterday, and today, and tomorrow. Why, you can stay there all week if you want. It’s the least I can do.” His eyes shifted. “No more than a week though. I’ve got an Ahaybian sheikh coming in next Friday and he is *loaded.*”

“We also *may* have lost our keys,” added Rainbow Dash.

Steve Maynn clapped his hooves together eagerly. “Replacements will be made immediately!”

At the end, Twilight couldn’t help but feel a bit dazed. Steve Maynn – *the* Steve Maynn – was in their debt.

Maybe their fortune was finally beginning to change.

They approached the door to the palace suite with growing apprehension. The room was all by itself at the end of a long hallway lined with expensive-looking art. The door was rimmed in silver and gold, beneath an archway of Ionic columns. A “Do Not Disturb” marker hung over the doorknob, which only added to Twilight’s confusion.

“Here we are,” she announced as they came to a stop at the end of the corridor. “Now, I don’t know what to expect on the other side of this door. Considering what we did with our last room, it might not be pretty. So let’s be calm and careful about this. No surprises.”

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Just do it, Twilight!”

“Alright, here goes.” With a deep breath, Twilight Sparkle opened the door.

It was...

Pristine.

The Maynn palace suite shone like gold from every conceivable surface. The marble floor sparkled. Sunlight poured in from the open windows. Linens and bathrobes and towels sat perfectly folded on squeaky-clean glass tables. The bowls of complimentary snacks were still full to the brim. Even the wine glasses hadn’t been touched. It was like nopony had been here in weeks.

“This is incredible,” Rarity declared.

Applejack took a long look at her surroundings. “I don’t get it. Looks like we didn’t even come inside last night.”

“What a waste of a perfectly good comp!” said Rainbow Dash, hovering over to the window.

They were right. It made no sense at all. Even the cleanest, most refined pony in Equestria would have left some trace of their being here last night – a used towel, a ruffled pillow, even a half-eaten baby carrot. Had housekeeping already come by and cleaned the place up without saying anything? No, that was impossible. The “Do Not Disturb” card would have stopped them. Had somepony else...

“Fluttershy must have cleaned up after us,” she said, suddenly remembering why they were here in the first place. “Quick, we have to find her. *Fluttershy!*” she called.

The other ponies quickly joined in. “Yoo-hoo, Fluttershy,” Rarity said.

“Fluttershy?” Applejack called. “Where in *tarnation* is that pony?”

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” said Pinkie.

Rainbow Dash started opening doors to the various bedrooms. “You in here? Nope.” She flew over to one of the bathrooms. “Fluttershy, are you here? Nope, empty. Where could she be?”

“Maybe she’s asleep,” said Twilight in a muted voice. The unicorn trotted up to one of the bedroom doors and gently pushed it open with a hoof. The room was dark, but a single lump bulged up from under the covers. Her heart rose. “Fluttershy, are you awake?” Twilight softly walked up to the front of the bed.

It wasn’t Fluttershy.

It wasn’t a pony at all.

“What the *hay* is that?” Applejack said in a dumbfounded voice. Twilight’s friends had gathered at the door and were watching the scene unfold with growing curiosity. The creature looked something like a bear... but it was unlike any bear she’d ever seen before. Its fur alternated between jet black and milky white. Black patches surrounded its eyes and ears, and ran down the length of its legs. It slept soundly.

“It looks positively adorable,” said Rarity with a smile as she approached the foot of the bed.

"I think it's a panda," Twilight said. "I've read about them before. They're related to bears, but they come from a faraway land across the sea. I have no idea what one is doing in Equestria, though. Or how it got into our hotel room."

"That black-and-white patternization is just splendid," Rarity continued, pretty much completely ignoring Twilight. "Oh, it gives me an idea for a fabulous new design." She nudged the panda with a hoof. "Wake up, little *dah-ling*."

A whole lot happened at that very moment.

The panda sprung to life instantly, leaping out of bed with a bloody scream. The comforter ended up draped and tangled over Rarity like a cloak. Twilight staggered back and tripped over a night table, sending an expensive-looking lamp plummeting to its death on the marble floor. Pinkie yelped, and Rainbow Dash took to the air. The panda grabbed the pegasus by the tail and dragged her down, throwing her into a walk-in closet with a ferocious growl and a loud, wood-splitting crash.

At that, Applejack let out a hot breath and charged, but the creature growled again and returned the charge, bringing twice as much mass to bear down on the little earth pony. His tackle sent Applejack flying out of the bedroom, only to crash and shatter a priceless glass coffee table outside. For her part, Pinkie Pie just bailed.

Then the panda stood up on two hind legs and turned his attention to Twilight. "*You gonna buck on me?*"

"What?" Twi stepped back. *It talks?* "No, I'm... nopony's going to buck on you. We're just trying to figure out what you're doing in our hotel room and-"

The panda bear yelled a ferocious, "AAAAEEEEEEEEEOUUUUUUU!" and bolted, dropping to four legs and bounding headfirst out the door. Twilight gulped, and did the only logical thing she could think of.

She went after him.

Chapter 6

Twilight Sparkle ran as fast as her hooves would take her.

She chased the screaming panda down the hallway of the Maynn's penthouse floor, skirting out of the way as an older mare with a face full of heavy cosmetics poked out of her room, looking confused at all the noise.

The bear crashed through the stairwell door and charged down the stairs. Twilight followed close behind. "Wait!" she panted. He was taking the stairs two at a time, and she didn't know how long she could keep up. "Don't run, I just want to talk to you. Can you answer a few questions?" He merely bellowed in response, flinging himself over the guardrail and jumping to the other side of the stairwell.

Is he going to run all the way down to the lobby? This was absurd. How many floors were there in this hotel? At least forty, if her estimate was any good. She couldn't hope to outrun him. Twilight briefly considered reaching for her magic and picking up the panda bear with a telekinetic thrust, but the thought alone of more magic made her stomach want to turn.

Chasing wasn't going to work. She would never catch up to him like this. If only Rainbow Dash were around, she could torpedo down the stairwell gap and cut the bear off down below... but alas, Twilight was here alone. She couldn't afford to lose this panda. Not before finding out what he knew. This was the last lead they had. If she lost it...

Twilight stopped at a random floor and ran out to the hallway. She slammed a hoof onto the elevator call button. For a second she was scared that she'd broken it.

"Stupid machine," she groaned. "Come on, hurry up!" Twilight started pacing up and down the hallway as she waited for the elevator, feeling all but ready to snap. "If this thing takes one more *bucking second*!"

The doors opened at the worst possible moment, and Twi giggled nervously as a dark blue pegasus scrambled to cover her two fillies' ears

with two sweeping wings. Twilight mouthed an apology, but the mother pegasus gave her a death glare nonetheless.

The elevator lowered painfully slow. Twilight backed herself into a corner to avoid the mother pegasus' judging eyes, and planned her next move. If she beat the panda bear down to the lobby, she could cut him off at the door to the stairwell... not that one little purple unicorn could do much to stop a charging, raging bear. But with any luck, the lobby was still crawling with security ponies. They'd stop him in his tracks. Maybe they already had.

After what felt like a thousand years on the moon, the elevator reached its destination, and Twilight watched as the doors parted with agonizing care. She trotted past the mother pegasus and her fillies and quickly took in the scene in front of her. The Maynn front lobby was as empty as it had been this morning. Security ponies were mulling about near the statue and in front of the doors; a few guests were making their way to the casino. The employees had that distant look in their eyes.

Had she beaten him down? She approached a bored-looking earth pony bellhop near the check-in counters. "Excuse me, good sir, but you haven't happened to see a panda bear here recently?"

"Panda? Sure, there was a panda bear here last night." The bellhop threw his head back and laughed. "By Celestia, that guy knew how to party!"

"You saw him here *last night*?"

"I think it was him. Who am I kidding, of course it was him. How many pandas are there in Equestria? He's the only one I've ever seen. Stars, he was messed up last night. He had quite the appetite for gambling and drinking. And, well..." the colt chuckled, raised a hoof to his snout, and made a heavy sniffing sound as he ran his nose in a straight line down the length of his leg. "That stuff. Lots of it."

She didn't understand the gesture. Nor did she care. "What was the last thing you saw him do?"

“Actually, he ran screaming through the lobby a couple minutes ago and had the valet pick up his carriage. You just missed him.”

Twilight’s eyes thinned to narrow slits. “Wait a second. You just had a panda bear run screaming and rampaging through your lobby, and nopony thought to stop him? You don’t even look *concerned!*”

“Not the weirdest thing you see working in a Haygas hotel.”

She tried to hold back the scream of exasperation. She really did. But out it poured anyway, echoing down the marble hallways of the Maynn front lobby. She got to her hind legs and yelled out at the top of her lungs, “*Is there ANYPONY out there who can tell me where to find the panda?*”

She took a breath. The bellhop shied away from her slowly, doing his best not to draw attention to himself. Most of the other ponies in the lobby looked away, sheepish. A few gawked.

Silence.

It felt like someone had blown out the last, flickering candle in the room, and in its absence came a thousand thousand waves of darkness.

“Well, that’s it then,” Twilight whispered to herself. “You’ve lost the panda, and you’ve lost your best friend Fluttershy. She’s missing and alone in the Las Haygas desert.” Her head hung low; her eyes filled with tears. “And you *blew* it.”

It took just under ten minutes for Twilight to make it back upstairs, help clean up the mess left behind by the panda, and explain the situation to her friends. Applejack had a nasty gash along her forehead where the glass had cut her. Rainbow was covered in bruises. Rarity hadn’t even taken the time to straighten her mane after being tangled in the comforter. It was strange. They seemed to still have hope. She barely paid attention as they argued over what to do next.

“Oh stars, Fluttershy,” she said to herself. “Please be alright. We’ll find you. We have to find you.”

If there's anything left to find, said a cold voice in her head. Twilight bit back more tears.

"Alright y'all," Applejack was in the midst of saying, raising her voice to carry over the rest of the group. "Not all of this has been a waste. Think. What do we *know* about last night?"

Rarity was the first to speak. "That Fluttershy definitely left the Veneightian with us, and she definitely came with us to the Maynn."

"That we *didn't* wake up in this hotel room," continued Dash, "which means that we went somewhere else after."

"And that Rarity had to get her tramp stamp some-" Pinkie was swiftly cut off.

"Do *not* put it to words!" Rarity yelled. "But she has a point. Maybe if we checked all the tattoo parlors in town?"

Applejack nodded. "An option. I say that manticore is a better clue, though. Think, ladies. Where in the Haygas desert could we have gotten a manticore from?"

"I remember reading in last month's issue of *Ponies* magazine that a lot of celebrities have second and third homes here in Las Haygas," Rarity said. "They tend to keep exotic pets around. But... surely we didn't break into..." She chuckled before finishing the thought.

"Well, dang. Maybe we oughta get back to the room in Celestia's Palace. Look around for anythin' we may have missed. Who knows? Maybe Fluttershy's fine, and found her own way back. Maybe she's asleep."

"Agreed," Rainbow said. "Not like we have any better options."

"You coming, Twilight?" Pinkie asked as they all started for the door.

The purple unicorn stirred. She'd almost been half-asleep lying on the couch back there. By the stars, she was more tired than she'd realized.

You can sleep when you're dead, Twilight Sparkle. Your friends need you. It's time to move!

"We didn't leave music on, did we?"

That was the first indication that something was wrong as the five ponies approached the door to their Celestia's Palace hotel room. Soft and soulful music was pouring out into the hallway, too low to even hear at first. But as they approached, the drumbeats grew louder, and a strangely familiar melody began to take form. Twilight couldn't quite place it.

"Is that..." Rarity stopped and put an ear to the door. "Filly Collins? Surely none of *you* were listening to that inglorious-"

"Whoa there, watch what you say about Filly Collins. I happen to think he's a very gifted drummer." Applejack began to nudge at the door. "Still, wasn't me who left the record player on."

They opened the door, and all five came to a simultaneous halt.

A familiar blue-maned earth pony was sitting in front of the marble-colored baby grand piano, waving her hooves in slow and soulful rhythm with the music. Beside her stood a massive black-on-black stallion, half again the size of Big Mac. "An' just who are you lot?" Applejack demanded, her voice heated.

Rarity took a single step forward. "*Sapphire Shores?*"

"Quiet! This is my *fay-vor-itte* part!" The pony of pop turned in her seat to face them, proudly wearing Rarity's custom white gown covered in glittering sapphires. She moved her forelegs in tandem with a quick but fierce drum solo, then sung along in her smooth-as-butter voice. "I can feel it coming in the air tonight... *Oh Lord.*"

"What exactly is this-"

Sapphire's booming voice drowned Twilight's out like a tidal wave. "I've been waiting for this moment all my life. *Everybody with me!*"

“*Oh Lord*,” she crooned.

“*Oh Lord*,” they all mouthed, halfhearted and confused. All but Pinkie, who sang with as much enthusiasm as Sapphire Shores herself.

The pop star turned to her gigantic bodyguard. “Punch the rainbow one for me, Elroy.”

Elroy did as he was told. Before Dash could even muster up a taunt, his muscular hoof sent her barreling across the common room, crashing into the minibar on the other side of the room, and taking what sounded like a few hundred bits’ worth of glass bottles with her.

“DASHIE!” Pinkie screamed, running over to tend to her.

Applejack kicked at the floor behind her. “What the *hay* is your problem?”

“Miss Shores would like to know what her pet manticore is doing in your bathroom,” said Elroy. He spoke far more eloquently than any of them would have guessed.

“That manticore is your *pet*?” Twilight couldn’t take much more of this. Something was seriously screwed up with the city of Las Haygas. “All the ponies in this town are *crazy*!”

Rarity stepped forward, eyes wide as dinner plates. “S... Sapphire Shores? Do you... do you...”

“Remember you? Why of course, *Miss Ra-ri-ty*! I recognized you the moment I saw your pretty purple mane on my security cameras, levitating over the fence around my multi-million bit mansion. How else do you think I tracked you ponies down?”

Dash was stirring back to life amidst the broken bottles and spilled drinks. “What the... ow, that stings!”

“You big meanie,” Pinkie growled at Elroy the big black stallion. “She’s all covered in cuts. That was completely uncalled for!”

“So was cat-napping my darling Wallace,” Sapphire crooned. “Now he’s all scared and tied up in a dark little room, poor thing. Not to mention all the other stuff you ponies did to my house last night. Why would you want to steal a tamed manticore anyway?”

“I’m sorry, did you just call that thing *tamed*?” Applejack failed to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

Other stuff? Twilight visibly shrunk. As if they needed more problems than they already had. “Look, Miss Shores, the truth is we don’t remember anything about last night. We were all... *ahem*.”

“City of Lights get to you, did it?” Sapphire Shores chuckled. “Some ponies just can’t handle Haygas.”

“We’re just trying to find our friend. She’s lost, and-”

“The pegasus with the pink mane? I was wondering where she was.” Sapphire traded a knowing look with her bodyguard. “After what she did to my home on the security tapes, that mare is lucky she’s lost. Would you not agree, Elroy?”

“We did find a bunch of yellow feathers in Wallace’s cage this morning,” Elroy responded. “Maybe she’s not so lucky. Remember Driver?”

“Poor Driver,” said Sapphire, pausing for a moment to take off her top hat in a quick gesture of respect.

Twilight ran up to the pop star and grabbed her by the shoulders. “You saw Fluttershy? *She was with us?* And wait... what happened to Driver?”

“Driver is no longer around,” Elroy said, his voice low.

Twilight swallowed the knot that formed at the bottom of her throat. No, she wouldn’t even think about *that*. “Miss Shores, I know we’re not your favorite ponies right now, but would it be alright if we came to your house and looked at some of that security footage? Any help we can get on tracking down our friend would be absolutely invaluable.”

“Answer the girl’s question, Elroy,” said the diva.

Elroy obeyed. “You are most certainly welcome to view the security footage. After you bring back Wallace.”

For a moment, Twilight basked in relief. But then she froze. “What was that about Wallace?”

“Bring him back,” said the stallion, as both he and the blue-haired diva made their way to the front door. “What, you thought we were going to do it for you?” He laughed. Sapphire Shores laughed with him. “You’ve got an hour before sunset. Don’t make us have to come back.”

Shortly after they left, Pinkie and Rainbow Dash emerged from the bathroom. Rainbow was dripping wet. She’d washed off most of the blood, but there were still dozens of tiny cuts covering her body. A large bump the size of a golf ball had swelled over her left eye. “Where is that Sapphire Shores? I’m gonna kick that bi-”

“Language, sugarcube,” Applejack cut her off. “You alright, Rainbow? You look like ya just got run across by Big Macintosh’s plow.”

Dash spat on the floor. “Yeah, I’m fine. At least I will be when I tear that slu-”

“*Enough!*” Twilight half-yelled. “You heard what Sapphire Shores said. Bring the manticore back before sunset, and we can view those security tapes. We already have it tied up, so it shouldn’t be too hard to move it. Applejack, you help me with him. Pinkie, you go downstairs and rent us a carriage. Rarity, find out where Sapphire Shores lives, and give us the quickest route.”

Rainbow Dash flapped her wings once. “I swear, I will drop a tactical rain nuke on that cu-”

“Calm down, Rainbow Dash. We need her help.”

Dash groaned. “But *Twilight!* She *punched* me!”

Applejack opened the door to the bathroom with her mouth. The growl that emerged was loud enough to shake the very glass of the massive back window. AJ kicked it closed again. "Problem," she said. "He's got a rope around his legs, but he still bites."

"Well then tie his snout!" Twilight groaned. Why couldn't anything – *anything* – be easy on this disastrous day?

"I ain't gettin' near that thing. Did Sapphire say it was tamed? *Tamed?* That thing's wilder than a half-starved rodeo bull on a hot day in the middle of mating season. He's like to bite my hoof off if I try to tie up his mouth."

Twilight could feel another headache coming. She raised a hoof to her head and slowly massaged her horn. "Then... then try... oh, *I don't know!*" She was exhausted. She didn't want to think anymore. Fluttershy was gone – probably forever. Everything they tried turned to ruin. She would have to tell Celestia... oh stars, she would be banished for sure! *Stupid alcohol. Stupid Haygas. Why do ponies do this to themselves?* "If Sapphire Shores and that bodyguard of hers want to come back here and kill us after sundown, they're welcome to it. I don't even care anymore."

Exhausted, hurting, and out of options, Twilight dragged herself over to the baby grand piano and started tapping out a simple tune. Applejack and Rarity were arguing again. Dash was cursing. The unicorn didn't care. The lyrics to the ballad came to her thoughtlessly, and she found herself singing it aloud amidst the chaos and raking headache:

*"What do manticores dreams of?
When they take their manticore doze
Do they dream of feasting on sweet pony meat?
Or of a girl with a pretty little manticore nose*

*Don't you worry your pretty lion head
We will get you back to Shores and your cozy lion bed
And then we're gonna find our best friend Fluttershy
And then we're gonna have us a best friend cry
Fluttershy, oh Shy... oh shy, shy Fluttershy*

But if she's been murdered by salt-licking tweakers... well then we're shit outta luck."

Chapter 7

A bottle of bleach is good for more than just keeping one's coat shimmering white.

That's what Rarity had said as she magicked over a towel doused in bleaching chlorine powder, and held it under the growling manticore's nose. Thirty minutes, one massive garbage bag, and two hundred bits for a rented carriage later, and the five ponies were approaching the gate of Sapphire Shores' midtown estate. Wallace the manticore lay sprawled in the back compartment out cold, his wet little nose tinged milk-white.

"Gotta hand it to you, Rarity," said Applejack through a mouthful of reins. As the two least tired, injured, and hungover ponies of the group, the farmpony and the fashionista had volunteered to pull the carriage. "When you took out that bottle of bleach, I dang near split my flanks laughin' at ya. I did *not* expect a single dose of that stuff to take down a big boy like Wallace."

Rarity, for her part, looked absolutely miserable decked in saddle and reins. But she forced a little smile anyway. "You always have to be careful with peroxide, my dear. That stuff is stronger than you think."

They came to a stop at the front of a massive barred gate made of cast bronze, beyond which lay a field of hedges, and a sprawling mansion built in neo-classical Italian and Peloponysian style. A single, shimmering sapphire was embedded in the center of the gate. "Well," said Applejack, "This looks like the place. Now what?"

"I've seen this kind of thing before." Rarity stepped forward slowly. "They had a special on Sapphire's new estate in last month's issue of *Ponies*. I think you have to..." she pressed the fat sapphire with a hoof, and it went down like a button.

A moment later, Sapphire's unmistakable voice flowed out of unseen speakers. "Good *ev-e-ning* ponies! I trust you have my darling Wallace with you?"

“Yeah, yeah, we got your dang cat,” AJ sneered. “You gotta get this thing restrained or somethin’, it’s out of control.”

The gate opened automatically. On the other side of the long hedge garden, they saw Elroy the bodyguard stallion emerge from inside the mansion, accompanied by a half-dozen wordless donkeys.

Rainbow Dash stiffened when she saw the donkeys. “Who are they?”

“Illegals,” Elroy said with a shrug. “What were you expecting? It’s the desert. We’re close to the border here, and they make for good cheap labor.” The bodyguard pony barked out some orders in a language Twilight couldn’t quite place, and the donkeys got to work unloading Wallace from the back of the carriage.

Pinkie observed them, her eyes growing wide. “They look so sad.”

“And you look like a cute little *mamacita!*” one of the donkeys said with a laugh. “Oh yeah. I could make some mules with *you*, pony girl.”

“Can it, Chavez.” Elroy gave him a withering look. “You five, come with me. Miss Shores has something she wants to show you.”

He led them through the door, into a palatial living room alive with marble and gold. If Twilight Sparkle had been in a more observant mood, she would have commented on the neoclassical golden banister along the glass stairway in front of her, or the marble Peloponysian columns that lined the wall. But as it stood, the unicorn was too exhausted and past the point of caring to notice. She’d panicked all she could panic. She’d worried, and fretted, and freaked out. Now, she felt an almost zen-like level of calm, as she came to the realization that she no longer cared what happened next. They were doomed already. There was nothing left to fix.

So instead, it was Applejack who led the pack through Sapphire Shores’ glamorous living room, and Rarity who pointed out every grand architectural feature with wonderment in her eyes. Pinkie Pie devoured some after-dinner mints in a glass bowl by the front door. Rainbow Dash was too bitter to care.

“...and those Veneightian blinds behind the velvet curtain are *just exquisite*, but you know what would make it even better?” Rarity flashed a grin. “Gold thread on the curtain string! Just think of it. On a sunny day it would literally *shine*.”

Ignoring her, Elroy pushed open a nondescript door to his right. “This is the viewing room. Miss Shores is waiting for you inside.”

On the other side was a small office, with at least two dozen glowing monitors, screens, and camera banks staring up from every occupiable surface. They were all set to different channels: one was showing breaking pony news, another an old movie. A third was playing a Sapphire Shores music video. Sapphire herself was completely enthralled in watching her own video, with a look that oozed self-satisfaction.

“Miss Shores?” Elroy offered.

Sapphire yelped, jumped in her seat, and turned off the monitor quickly. “Wallace?”

“He’s here. They’re bringing him back inside.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, my poor baby. I hope he’s not too traumatized by this whole experience.”

“You hope *he* isn’t too traumatized?” AJ glared at the diva. “Yer insane. That has to be it. Absolutely off your rocker crazy, Sapphire Shores. Granny Smith always said that celebrities ‘re all crazy... shoulda listened to her the first time.”

Shores gave the farmpony a withering look, as if to say, *you want my help or not?* Then she stared directly at Twilight. “We went through the security tapes from last night. I’m not sure if they’ll help, but you might as well take a look at them. And if you ever do find that yellow pegasus friend, tell her she’s not welcome in my estate ever again. Nor are any of you. *Un-accept-able!*”

“None of us,” Twilight repeated. “Never again. Promise.”

"I can't believe I'm helping you..." The pop star turned to her enforcer. "Elroy. Press play."

And the five of them watched in speechless awe as the events of last night came alive before their eyes.

Rainbow Dash was flying over the other ponies' heads, as she often did. But she looked so very unsteady on her wings. She was bobbing and stumbling through the air, drifting from side to side like a kite caught in a gust. She looked like she could fall at any moment. And yet, she was laughing so hard she was crying. "Still can't believe you got that tattoo, Rares. You're gonna regret that when you wake up."

If Dash looked unsteady, Rarity looked like the last two seconds before a tower collapse. "Noonshensh! It'sh exactly what I w... wanted. It says: Rarity is one sexy unicorn, and she damn well knowsh it."

Fluttershy was trotting softly beside them, with a look of panic bordering on nausea. "Oh Rarity. Are you sure you made the right decision? Don't you think it... you know... sends the wrong message?"

"And what messhage is that, Fluttershy?"

The yellow pegasus hesitated, her eyes dropping to the ground. "That you're... you know..."

"A TRAMP!" said Dash with a riotous laugh.

In the here and now, the white unicorn looked away, her cheeks turning crimson.

Rarity raised her chin. "Never! Rarity is... is dignified in her... in her... sensuali..." Rarity suddenly grew very quiet. "Anyway, thish is the place. Shapphire Shores' mansion. You know she never paid me for thoshe dresses? Her bill's still sitting in my accounts resh... reshie... reshievable."

"That's true!" the present-Rarity said, too loud. "You never did pay for..." Elroy and Sapphire Shores both glared at her. "...but we can just forget about that, can't we? The amount of publicity those dresses got me

is payment enough. Friends do favors for friends, right?" She giggled nervously.

Rainbow flew up to the gate. "That deadbeat! We'll show her. We should go in there and steal something worth twice as much as those dresses."

Fluttershy yelped, and pulled the other pegasus' tail. "Rainbow, we can't do that!"

"Yeah, that's not nice at all, Dashie." Pinkie Pie bounced, almost high enough to reach Rainbow's eye level. "We should steal something worth exactly the same. Otherwise it's a crime!" She gasped.

"That's not what I-"

"I'm with ya, Rarity," said Applejack.

"Acshually, I shink we should re-con-sider thish." That was Twilight, who looked even worse than Rarity as she stumbled up to the gate and leaned on it for support. She looked up at the sky with distant, glazed-over eyes. "Okay, I reconshidered. Let'sh do it!"

"I really think this is a bad-"

Rainbow Dash glided over the cast bronze gate. "Hah. Some security. Twi, Rarity, get the others over with your magic." No sooner had she said it than Applejack and Pinkie Pie were enveloped in swirling magical membrane, slowly floating through the air and landing safely on the other side of the fence. Twilight and Rarity soon followed, and Fluttershy hovered over behind them, looking absolutely miserable.

"We really really should go back, everyone. We could get in trouble. This is such a crazy thing to-"

"My dear, we are bucked up!" Twilight yelled, "and ponies do stupid things when they're bucked up. So deal with it."

Fluttershy looked around nervously, too scared to even move. "Oh, I wish Ruby were here. She'd know what to do." The pegasus watched her friends run off in four different directions, squealed, and followed them.

The video feed ended, and Sapphire Shores glared at the five of them. "That was from my exterior security cams. Care to see what Camera Bank B picked up?"

But Twilight couldn't stop pondering that name she'd heard Fluttershy say. Ruby. There she was *again*. Everywhere they'd been, this Ruby figure had apparently been with them. But who was she? Did anyone know? Before Twilight could bring it up, Elroy started up the next security clip.

Rainbow Dash broke the surface of the gigantic luxury pool with a tap of a hoof. "Nice and cool," she said. "I like."

"You're going for a swim, now?" Rarity appeared behind her.

"Not exactly." Dash turned around to give the pool her backside, lifted her rainbow-colored tail, and let the contents of her bladder flow free.

Present-Twilight gasped. "Rainbow! Eewww..."

"Not ladylike at all, my dear," said Rarity with a disapproving *hmmph*. "Not at all."

AJ chuckled. "Dang, Rainbow. Real charmin' of ya."

The pegasus reddened. "Come on, guys. When nature calls... sometimes you gotta answer quickly, you know? Sorry about that, Sapphire."

"And now you know why I punched you," Elroy said coolly. "Now shut up and watch the video."

In a completely different section of the backyard, Twilight and Pinkie Pie approached a large, elevated stone platform overlooking the estate. Twilight stood on it. "Hey Pinkie, you shtill have those snowglobes you bought?"

“Sure thing!” Pinkie produced them – six in total – and put them on the floor next to Twilight. “What do you need them for?”

Twilight looked straight at the camera, and pointed at it with a hoof. “See that security cam? She’s watching us. Big Sister is watching us right now. Well watch this, Sapphire Shores!” She levitated one of Pinkie’s snowglobes with a twitch of her neck, bellowed, and launched it like a catapult.

It crashed into the wall and shattered instantly.

“I missed!” Twilight scowled. “Gimme another one.” Her aim did not improve throughout the feed.

It took Twilight a few seconds to realize that Pinkie Pie was glaring at her. “So that’s where my snowglobes went? Nice going, Twilight. Those things were collectibles. They cost me fifty bits!”

Before she could mouth an apology, clip number four began to play.

Applejack and Fluttershy were walking through some kind of garden. There were rows of differently-colored flowers, shrubs, cacti, and other rare flora, neatly arranged along the cobblestone path. “This must be Sapphire’s botanical garden. It’s actually really beautiful,” Fluttershy said.

“Trees. Flowers. Pointy things. Yawn.” AJ trotted ahead. “Let’s go find the others.”

“For once tonight, I agree with something one of you says!” Fluttershy’s eyes darted about wildly. She looked ready to burst from panic. “Oh, this was such a bad idea. How did we ever end up doing this? We have to find the others and get out of here before we get caught.” But suddenly, the pegasus stopped in her tracks. Her eyes widened. “Do you hear that?”

“I think I hear Twilight screamin’,” said Applejack.

“That too. But... do you hear the music?”

The earth pony stopped to listen. "No, but ah can hear the blood pumpin' through my ears! Ain't that crazy?"

Fluttershy ignored her, breaking into a run as she followed the cobblestone pathway. At the end of it was a regal-looking bird with feathers the color of a moonless night, perched on a wooden pole. Fluttershy approached it slowly, humming out a note. The bird repeated it beautifully. Fluttershy smiled, taking a few more quiet steps, until she was close enough to nuzzle its onyx beak with her nose.

The beautiful bird sang out a long, deep, mournful note, that spoke of the darkest depths of night. "You are incredible," Fluttershy whispered.

Suddenly Applejack exploded out of the bushes. "Wuz that?"

The terrified bird tried to fly away, but didn't make it farther than a few inches from its perch. Its foot was tied down with a string. Fluttershy shushed her earth pony friend. "It's a moonlark," she said. "Remember Princess Celestia's pet phoenix? This bird is like its nighttime cousin. I read all about them after the Philomena incident. But they're so rare... even rarer than the phoenix itself. It must have cost Sapphire Shores a fortune."

Applejack studied it. "It looks so sad."

She was right. The moonlark tried to fly again, struggling fiercely against the string that tied it down. It sang a woeful note, and returned to its perch.

"You poor thing. How long has it been since you've stretched your wings? This isn't right at all." Fluttershy glanced at Applejack, as if asking for approval for what she was about to do. But the earth pony had gotten distracted again.

"Hah, there it is again. Sound o' my ears pumpin'. boomBoom, boomBoom, boomBoom. Sounds so weird."

"Oh, forget it. I can't leave you tied up here like this. " Fluttershy let out a breath of steely determination. She bit the rope holding the moonlark down, and gnawed on it until it snapped. "Now, go! Go see the world, and

make new friends. And one day you can come visit me in Ponyville, and tell me all about your adventures."

The moonlark sang out a high triumphant note that spoke of bliss and freedom, of blue skies and a lifetime of adventure. Fluttershy returned it. Then, without waiting about any longer, the night bird took to the sky with a single, graceful flap of its wings.

Sapphire Shores paused the video. "That bird cost me more than this *entire* mansion! And your foalish little friend let it go. Lucky for you I found Wallace. If I'd lost both my little darlings in the same night, Elroy wouldn't have been so talkative when you found him at the hotel. *Mur-der-riffic!*" She stopped. "Murderriffic... write that one down, Elroy. I sense an angry breakup song in that."

"Will do, Miss Shores."

Twilight tried, and failed, to think of something to say. Stealing the manticore... that was bad. She had never expected that it could be worse. Was there no end to their foolishness last night? Was there nothing – *nothing* – too insane or dangerous or stupid for them to try?

Someone should make a movie about our night, she thought. A movie to warn other ponies about the dangers of a crazy drunken night in Las Haygas. That way, nopony would ever do it again!

"This is a clip of you leaving, finally," said Sapphire Shores, as the video began to play again.

The six of them were together. Applejack and Rarity were leading the manticore out by a tan-colored leash. Fluttershy stayed ahead of them, whispering in the creature's ear and softly stroking his mane, keeping him calm. "This is such a bad idea, girls," she said. "In fact, this is the worst idea you've ever had. But we own it now..."

"Aww, calm down, Fluttershy!" Twilight gave the pegasus a soft tail whip. "It's not so bad. We'll give it back tomorrow. After Shores pays Rarity."

Rainbow failed to suppress a laugh. "Hah! If she ever does. You know how those ponies are."

"Those ponies. And just what is that s'posed to mean?" demanded Applejack.

"You know. Celebrities. They're so flaky."

Pinkie Pie giggled, and leapt onto the creature's back, grabbing his hair in her mouth like a pair of reins. "Hey look, guys. I'm going for a pony ride. Giddyup, big guy!" The manticore roared and threw her off with a swipe of his tail, and Fluttershy hurried to calm him down again.

Twilight shook her head. "What a terrible thing to do. We are so sorry about all of this, Miss Shores. I can't... I can't even begin to explain to you how out-of-character this is for us."

"Yeah," said Dash with a sigh, "sorry I peed in your pool."

"Guess I should apologize too," said Applejack, her eyes pointed to the floor.

Rarity smiled a sad smile. "And I am sorry for instigating the whole thing. It was... shameful, to say the least. But you've helped us immensely with these tapes. Now we know that our friend left with us safe and sound at... what's the time stamp on this footage? Three thirty? That leaves us with just a few hours more where we could have lost her."

And we know she didn't get eaten, Twilight thought, without daring to say it. *Not by the manticore anyway.*

Sapphire Shores turned off the monitor and sighed. She hesitated briefly before saying, "I suppose I'm sorry for never paying my bill on those dresses, Rarity. I honestly just forgot. I'll have Elroy send the money to you via the Equestria Mail Service." The pop star turned her head reluctantly to Rainbow Dash. "And I'm sorry I had Elroy punch you. Heat of the moment. It was *de-plora-ble*."

Twilight smiled. "We all did things we regret."

Sapphire nodded her agreement. "I understand. We all do stupid things when we're bucked up."

As they left the diva's mansion behind in their rented carriage and rode into the night, Twilight tried to piece together everything they knew. Fluttershy had been safe and sound at 3:30 last night. The manticore had nothing to do with her disappearance. And it was Fluttershy who was keeping him calm, so she must have returned to the hotel room at some point to leave him there. That left just a three or four hour window for the pegasus to get separated... but what had they done in those three or four hours? The manticore was the last lead. There was literally nothing else to follow.

Except Ruby, she thought to herself. *But who is Ruby?* "Hey! Any of you remember who this Ruby character is that everyone keeps referencing?"

The other four shook their heads, or muttered a quick negative. They were in the middle of another argument, and they barely paid attention to Twilight's question.

The unicorn closed her eyes. *Think, Twilight. Think. There's got to be something else.* Her head hurt too much. She slumped back in her seat, and let out a sigh. There was nothing. No other options left to them. Twilight bowed her head in resignation.

"Girls, I think it's time."

She tried to picture the letter they'd have to send. How to begin it?

Dear Princess Celestia, your faithful student Twilight Sparkle regrets to inform you that she learned a little too much about the magic of intoxication... no, that wouldn't work, it was dripping with sarcasm when she needed to make clear just how serious the situation was. If not, the princess might not send help quick enough.

Princess Celestia, there's been an emergency. We need you to send the royal guard to Las Haygas. A desert-wide ponyhunt must be initiated.

She could never send that. It avoided all responsibility... and they had to make it clear that they were willing to accept the blame.

Sorry, Princess. We got too drunk. Fluttershy's missing. Send help. Love, Twi. Ugh. She sounded like she was *still* messed up in that one.

"I think it's time we admit defeat," she said, her voice heavy with weariness. "I think it's time to tell the prin-"

Twilight was cut off by the sounds of shattering glass and crashing wood. A second carriage, this one painted solid black, had whipped around and cut them off in the middle of the road. A third had just barreled into them at full speed. The ponies' rental went tossing and crashing into a nearby alleyway. The spins alone were enough to make Twilight sick.

A wooden beam came down on the carriage and shook them all into action. Pinkie coughed, and Rainbow Dash scrambled to her feet. Outside, Applejack and Rarity were beginning to stir.

A shadowy figure climbed out of the carriage painted all in black, and disappeared behind it. Four thuggish-looking colts followed close behind.

"Ouch," Twilight said. "Everypony okay? That was... what was that?"

Dash pointed out the window. "Hey, don't we know that guy?"

A face appeared on the other side of the window. A grinning face. Twilight blinked once, hard. It was a bear. A bear with black fur along the rim of his eyes, and a little black nose that, in calmer times, she wouldn't have hesitated to call adorable. It was-

"The panda!" Pinkie Pie shouted. Oh, Pinkie Pie. Such a talent for pointing out the obvious.

He grinned a devious grin. When he spoke, it was with a thick accent that sounded like... well, exactly the kind of accent one would expect a panda to have.

"Wassap, mothabuckers?" he screeched. "My name is Mr. Chow, and the next ten minutes belong to *me*."

Chapter 8

I didn't even know pandas had names.

That was the only thought Twilight Sparkle's mind could process as she surveyed the wreckage. Mr. Chow stood at the window of their shattered carriage... *probably totaled*, she thought, *wonder how much that's going to cost with the rental company?* His three colt thugs stood behind him in a short V formation – one of them had a baseball bat in his mouth, another a sharp, glistening point that she could only assume was a knife. The third, a unicorn, held what was unmistakably a gun the air in front of him. All three glared at the carriage like they were about to eat it for dinner.

Mr. Chow shut his eyes in an exaggerated blink, and took a long time to clear his throat. "Let's make this simple," he said, his words syrupy with that peculiar accent. "I want what I am owed. Give it to me... *now*."

Rainbow Dash stomped a hoof and pushed her head out the window. "What is your problem, you jerk? You just ran us off the road!"

"Oh, stick a pussy in it, fillyfooler."

The pegasus' muscles tightened. "*What* did you just say?"

"Eh? What was that? Mr. Chow can't hear you through the sound of all that candy vag in your mouth. Didn't yo mamma teach you not to talk with your mouth full, fillyfooler?" He giggled, and it sounded absurdly flamboyant.

"That's it." Rainbow Dash's wings flared out, and she puffed, ready to shoot out the window like a bullet. "Nobody calls me *that* and gets away with it!" She looked like she wanted to charge at the panda and tear him apart, flesh and fur ripped away with hooves and teeth. Twilight had seen her friend upset before, but never this... angry. Dash looked like she wanted to kill him.

Twilight bit her tail just before she could take flight. “Rainbow!” She tugged back, and whispered. “*They have weapons.*”

“And they don’t seem nice at all,” said Pinkie.

“I don’t care, I’ll tear those idiots apart.” Her nostrils flared in anger, and she let out a fierce, hot breath. “It’s not true. *Damn it*, Twilight, it’s not true! You gotta believe me.” For a moment Twilight could have sworn she heard a sharp rising panic in her friend’s voice.

She let her mind ponder the implications of Rainbow’s words for half a moment. But then Mr. Chow started giggling again, which snapped her concentration back to him. “Not a gay girl, eh? Tell that to your marefriend from last night. She gon’ be *pissed*.”

Dash’s pupils grew to the size of plates, and Twilight saw her mouth the word *marefriend* through soundless lips, as if bubbling poison were spilling out of her mouth. “You’d better explain yourself right now.”

“Sure thing, *man*.” He drew out that last word for two seconds too long. “But first, you ponies get out of the carriage. Right now.”

“You don’t tell us what to do!” That was Applejack. She and Rarity had gotten to their hooves outside, and slipped off the harnesses on their backs.

Fear. Twilight felt fear bubbling up in her chest, her head pounding. It made her want to wretch again. But she held it in. *Weapons!* Nobody carried weapons in Equestria, especially not guns. Only the Royal Guard and local police forces had access to that kind of equipment. If this panda could bring that much force to bear... “Maybe we should do what he says, guys.”

Twilight stepped out of the carriage, trying – and failing – to keep the fear out of her eyes. She couldn’t make eye contact with the three colts. She could only glance up at Mr. Chow, quickly dropping her eyes when he turned to her. Pinkie Pie followed. They assembled next to AJ and an exhausted, well-lathered Rarity. It took the unicorn a moment to realize that Rainbow Dash wasn’t moving.

“Get out, fillyfooler,” the panda said, his voice a screech.

Dash put a hoof on the crook of her neck, and shot it forward in a surge of motion. It was a gesture even Twilight knew was crude. “Screw you, panda man. You can’t tell me what to do.”

Twilight closed her eyes and sighed. *Rainbow Dash, you’re making this impossible.*

But Mr. Chow didn’t seem that upset. Instead he giggled, an adorable high-pitched little girl sound... *my stars, I know he’s threatening to kill us, but he is just so CUTE!* Twilight forced back a smile as Chow turned to his unicorn thug and said, “Get the homo girl out.”

“You can’t-” Dash was suddenly enveloped in a swirling purple membrane, her body yanked forward and roughly shoved through the window. She roared – yes, the pony *roared* – and struggled, hooves flailing in multiple directions. One whacked Mr. Chow’s adorable little black nose. The panda yelped. He grabbed Rainbow Dash by her back legs, and threw her fifteen feet into the alley, where she crash-landed on two empty trash cans.

“Hey, easy there!” Applejack said, kicking the dirt.

Mr. Chow, giggling throughout, pointed and screeched at the dumbfounded pegasus. “*Hahahaha!* It’s funny because she gay.”

Rainbow shook her feathers. “Everyone wants a piece of me today, huh? I gotta say, getting pretty tired of being thrown into stuff.”

“Alright, enough fooling around.” Mr. Chow shot Rainbow a grin. “Or should I say *fillyfooling* around? *Hahahaha, Chow made funny! Chow made funny!*” He descended into giggles again. Twilight waited patiently. “Okay, serious face now. You gimme back what you stole, and maybe Mr. Chow won’t have to give you a *dick* in the *face*. Got that, little bitches?”

Rarity, her purple mane glued to her neck and back with sweat, cleared her throat and stepped forward. “Easy now. We’re here to help each other, right? And, *language*. Let us all be respectful, and have a civilized conversation. Like adults.”

Mr. Chow sneered. "Okay. Yeah, man. We calm. We civilized. We *cool*. We talk about this like adults... but first, Chow needs a quick bump." He made his way back to his undamaged carriage and procured a glass vial in his hand, filled to the top with something white and powdery. He poured it out in a long, neat row on his arm.

Twilight blinked. "Is that..."

"Salt," AJ said, confused.

"...salt," said Rarity, her voice quiet as a mouse.

"*Salt?*" Rainbow's head perked up. She sounded just a *little* too eager.

"SALT!" Pinkie Pie leaped into the air, grinning. "Ohmanohman, I haven't had salt in *ages*. It's the good stuff, right? Not that iodized junk they sell you back in Ponyville."

The panda raised a fist into the air to silence them. "Shut up. This is Mr. Chow's salt. Let Mr. Chow do his lines in peace. Then we talk. *Okay?*" He grinned in anticipation...

...and snorted the entire line in one grand and cavernous breath...

"*Buck yeah,*" he whispered

Twilight stared at each of her friends. She studied the confused look on Applejack's face, the absolute horror on Rarity's. The curious glint in Rainbow Dash's eyes. The bubbling enthusiasm of Pinkie. Then she looked at Chow, whose furry face was quickly flushing red. "Uh... did I miss something here? What's so special about salt?"

"Don't... don't worry about it, Twilight." Rarity let out a nervous giggle. "It's, *ahem*, nothing."

She pondered it. *Mental note: do some research on the non-culinary properties of salt when we get back to the library. If we get back.*

Then she said, "Look, Mr. Chow, we don't remember anything from last night. You say we stole something from you? We have no idea what you're talking about. Maybe you can help us. Tell us what you remember. I'm sure it's not as bad as it sounds, right?"

"Yeah, man. It's not so bad." He sniffed loudly. "All you did was steal my purse and *twenty thousand bucking bits of Maynn casino chips you assholes I will EAT YOUR LITTLE HEADS AND TURN YOUR HOOVES INTO JELLY AND MAKE A DELICIOUS PEANUT BUTTER SANDWICH.*" He roared, and it took all three of his colt friends to hold him back when he raised his hands and *lunged* at Twilight Sparkle. The unicorn squealed and leaped out of the way.

Twilight curled herself into a ball. "Oh, my."

"You leave Chow hangin'? *You leave Chow hangin'?* I buckin kill you!"

His friends held him in place until his anger subsided.

"Ugh. That was the line talking. Now Chow will talk." He turned to the unicorn with the gun in the air in front of him. "Talk for Chow, Thirty-Eight. I'm too salty right now."

From her pile of trash cans, Rainbow Dash chuckled. "Your name is Thirty-Eight? What kind of a name is that?"

"Name o' the gun that'll cap your rainbow ass if you don't shut up," said Thirty-Eight. Twilight took a second to observe the unicorn now. He was crimson red, almost the same color as Big Mac, with a milk-white mane and tail, both of which were styled into pointed spikes. In the darkness she couldn't quite make out his cutie mark. A coin? A dinner plate? A wheel? Something round, of that much she was sure.

With a grunt, Thirty-Eight began to tell the story. "You all met Mr. Chow at the Maynn Hotel casino last night. He was on a hot streak. Won about twenty thousand bits on the roulette wheel."

“Twenty grand?” Applejack let out a low whistle. “Dang, that’s about what Sweet Apple Acres takes in from the whole crop, and that’s on a good season.”

“When Chow rolls, Chow rolls hard,” said the panda with a shrug.

Thirty-Eight continued. “Mr. Chow headed to the poker tables next. That was where he met you.” He pointed a hoof at Rainbow Dash. “You don’t remember blowing all your chips at the blackjack table?”

The pegasus mumbled something.

“Right. Mr. Chow felt bad for you, so he gave you a few extra chips. You lost those too.”

Chow giggled. “Felt bad? Nah, man. I was trying to get under that filly’s tail... until she started lickin’ up her marefriend ten minutes later.”

“*What* marefriend?” she demanded.

“You know, the cute one with the pink mane.” Chow smacked his lips, and grinned knowingly. “Why so shocked, gay girl? Cat’s outta the bag now. Half the casino saw you shove your tongue down that little filly’s throat.”

Twilight turned her head so fast that her neck muscles cringed. Rainbow Dash stood with mouth hung open, eyes gaping wide. “Are you saying I made out... with Fluttershy?”

“Fluttershy. The pink bitch. Whatever her name was. Yeah, fillyfooler, you best believe you did.”

Rainbow Dash looked frozen in time. Twilight’s own mind raced. *He saw Fluttershy, maybe she’s okay... Rainbow and Fluttershy made out? How did Lucky Draw forget to mention that detail? But they were both drunk, and we all did enough stupid things last night, I guess it’s not that big of a deal. Girls try this stuff out all the time, right? Wait a minute... was Fluttershy drunk? No way, Fluttershy never drinks. Which means if what Mr. Chow says is true, she must really feel that way about...*

OH.

Twilight bit back a gasp.

“Point is,” said Chow, “I gave you some free chips. And how did you repay me? By stealing my purse, that’s how! I went to the men’s room for a quick bump, and when I came back, my shit was gone.”

“How do you know it was us, then?” Rarity asked.

He chuckled, but this time it was too bitter to be cute. “Yeah. Good question, marshmallow. I know because I saw the gay girl dump the contents of my purse onto the poker table. But then when I went to confront her about it like *a civilized, rational adult*,” his voice slipped into mockery with those last words, “some dumb unicorn decided I was sooooo cute that she just had to keep me.”

Rarity looked around, sheepish. “Did I do that?”

“Yeah, marshmallow. You did that.” He squealed. “*Oh he’s simply marvelous with his black and white coat I need to base my next design off it so adorable with that cute little wet nose and those ears he looks like a little baby doll*. I’m not cute, damn it. I’m Chow. I buck up bitches and snort ten lines a day. I am not a toy.”

Rarity said nothing. She looked away.

“So I guess you thought it’d be cool to take me up to your hotel room after that. Palace Suite, huh? Chow is flattered, but you could have at least bought him dinner first, ya know?” He paused, scratching his chin with a sharp nail. “Then... next thing I remember is waking up in that bed with a buncha ponies staring at me. Shit. What you do, marshmallow? You give me a loaded drink?”

“I would *never*...” Rarity gasped. “Maybe I heated up some milk for you. Hmm, yes. That sounds about right. Even you have to admit that a panda drinking milk is the most *adorable* thing.”

Twilight’s curiosity got the best of her. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did Rarity manage to drag you up to that penthouse against your will?”

“Unicorns, man.” Chow shook his head. “That magic is buckin’ crazy. Wish I had that shit sometimes. Could you picture unicorn Chow? *Magic user baby!*”

Twilight could most definitely picture unicorn Chow. And as dangerous as this creature would be with a tank of unicorn magic in his repertoire... by the stars, he’d be adorable!

“Hold on a sec,” said Rainbow Dash, trotting slowly back to rejoin the group. “Something’s off here. You said I stole your purse, but I won all those chips last night fair and square. Lucky Draw said so, remember?”

Point, thought Twilight. Had Lucky Draw lied to them? The gambler would’ve had no reason to do so. None she could think of, anyway. And she found it hard to believe that Mr. Chow would leave all his chips on the table to go to the bathroom. The panda didn’t strike her as particularly smart, but *come on*. Who would be foolish enough to do something like that?

Chow waved a hand over the group. “I don’t care what some other asshole says. You stole those chips from Chow! You gimme back my twenty k, and we can talk about giving back what’s yours.”

“What’s... ours?” Twi’s head perked up like a spooked squirrel.

The panda’s eyes wandered slowly across the group, briefly stopping over each of them. “One, two, three, four... five pony. But where pony number six?” He giggled. “That’s right. *Chow* has her. Chow has the pink bitch.” He gave Thirty-Eight a nod.

The big unicorn kicked at the dirt with his hooves, then bucked Mr. Chow’s carriage *hard*, an impact strong enough to make the vehicle shake on its hinges. And she saw it. Tied down in the back compartment, she saw a pony with a sack over her head, belting out a muffled scream and quivering as the carriage shook.

For a second, *just one*, there was a flash of a silky pink mane, darkened by the shadow of night.

Twilight Sparkle's heart not only jumped, but did a full-on lateral spin with three somersault flips. "You have Fluttershy? You have our friend?" This was it! They'd finally found her. The others cheered, yelled, breathed long sighs of relief. "Oh, thank Celestia you-"

"*Shut up.*" Chow spat. He put a hand to the air to silence them. "You wanna see your marefriend again, gay girls, you bring those twenty g's back. *Quid pro quo*, mothabuckas."

Twilight let out the breath she'd been holding. "You want your money? We still have it back at the hotel room. We'll get it for you. We'll get it right now! That's not going to be a problem... *right, Rainbow?*"

"For Fluttershy? No price is too high." Dash stomped the ground in determination. "Let's go get those chips."

Mr. Chow and his friends quickly loaded back into their carriage, with Thirty-Eight and one of the others pulling. The panda let one furry arm hang out the window. He snapped his fingers, and the two colts brought the carriage back around, putting their boss face-to-face with the five ponies. "Bring money to old abandoned train station near armadillo farm in the desert, tomorrow at dawn," he said, grinning a half-maniacal grin as the carriage took off. "Toodaloo *muthabuckololololololololololol.*"

The wailing of Mr. Chow echoed into the crisp Las Haygas night as the black carriage sped away.

Huh, thought Twilight.

What more was there to say?

Chapter 9

The desert sun burned hardest at dawn.

Five ponies had gathered near the broken remains of what had once been a railroad stop, back before the days of the Strip and the lights and the Haygas real estate boom. They'd been there since early morning, leaving their carriage parked on the side of the road. As Celestia's orange sun burst forth over the distant mountains, they felt the searing heat and dry desert air against their coats, and took refuge in the shade of the old train station.

"You reckon he's gonna show up?" asked Applejack, after they'd waited fifteen long, painful minutes in the shade.

"Of course he'll show up," Rarity said. "It's the money he wants, remember? He'll be here."

Rainbow Dash let out a long, hot breath. "He'd better show up. That punk. I'll teach him to mess with my friends!" She planted a kick against the wall with her back legs, shattering an old wooden post. "Ugh. Can't wait to get this over with."

Pinkie Pie gulped. "I never thought I'd say this, but I really want to get out of Las Haygas."

And Twilight Sparkle heard none of it. The unicorn was outside, pacing back and forth beneath the punishing sun, her mind unable to stop listing all the ways in which this meeting could go wrong. What if Chow didn't show up? What if Fluttershy was hurt? What if he never intended to let her go at all? Twilight clamped her eyes shut. She still couldn't believe this was happening, to *her* of all ponies. This was why she never drank, or partied, or let loose, or let herself be anything less than completely and totally uptight about *everything*. Her entire life, from start to finish, had been built around avoiding a moment exactly like this one.

One night, and everything had gone wrong. Her first time partying and it literally could not have been worse.

If we all get out of this with our manes and hooves intact, I swear to Celestia I will never do something like this again. We'll get back home, and I'll go back to boring old neurotic responsible Twilight Sparkle. Library. Books. Studying. Checklists. These are good things. Alcohol, parties, Haygas, gambling. Pandas – bad.

She saw a carriage approaching in the distance. In the beginning she just pretended that it wasn't really him. She wished she could skip this part... skip the whole transaction, skip ahead to the part where Fluttershy was back and they could all engage in the longest group hug of their lives. And the panda was gone. The panda wouldn't be part of the group hug.

The carriage got closer. Rainbow Dash flew out of the ruined train stop and hovered over it, waiting. Twilight wished she'd go back inside.

"Should we give them a signal?" Dash shouted over.

"A signal?"

"You know. To let them know that the deal's on?"

"And what kind of signal would you give?" Twilight asked.

At that, Pinkie Pie ran out of the station and leapt in the air, getting almost as high as Rainbow Dash. "Over here, Mr. Chow!" she yelled, bouncing, waving her arms around wildly. "We're over here! We brought the money to exchange for the prisoner. The criminal deal is on."

RD rolled her eyes.

Mr. Chow arrived in the same gold-lined black carriage he had appeared in last night, pulled by the same two colts that had flanked him before. The carriage stopped, about a hundred feet away from the structure, directly under the rising sun. Then nothing happened for the longest time. Twilight gulped. Rarity and Applejack joined them outside. The glare of the sun was too intense, and they had to look away. Then, the back door opened. And all she saw was... a crystal staff.

“Huh?”

Mr. Chow emerged from his carriage very slowly, painfully slowly. First all they saw was a white-gloved hand holding the crystal staff. Then, a suited leg. He somehow dragged the process of getting out over the span of a minute and a half – Twilight was counting. This time, he was dressed. In sunglasses and a tuxedo.

Ohmigosh a panda in a tuxedo that is CUTE BEYOND ALL- no Twilight. Focus. He is a dangerous deranged criminal. He kidnapped your friend. He is not cute. Next to her, Rarity was squealing.

“Mr. Chow,” Twilight said, after taking a second to clear her throat. “We brought your money. Twenty thousand bits’ worth of Maynn casino chips.”

The panda very slowly took off his sunglasses. For a moment they caught the glare of the desert sun, and Twilight’s eyes were flooded with light. She closed them hard, blinded. “What, Chow not pretty enough for you, unicorn?”

“*Ahem.* We would like our friend back now please.”

“Money first,” said Chow. “Friend after.”

Then Rainbow Dash flew straight up to his face, so close their noses almost touched. Chow’s colts tensed up behind him. “Oh, no,” said Dash. “You’re gonna show her to us first. You’re gonna prove to us that she’s okay. *Then* you get your money.”

Chow put his sunglasses back on. “Open the window.”

One of the colts – Thirty-Eight, Twilight thought, or maybe she wasn’t remembering correctly – opened the veneightian blinds covering the back window of the carriage. Something inside whimpered. Twilight didn’t see much inside, but she did see a flock of pink mane blowing forth in the wind.

“She’s there guys she’s there just do it do it please,” Twilight said, too fast, too nervous.

"I dunno," Applejack drawled. "Somethin' about this whole thing seems... off."

Chow took off the sunglasses again. "You gonna give me the money? Or am I gonna shoot her, and then shoot *all you motherbuckers*? And then we *take it*. WE TAKE IT!"

"Please just give him the money please," Twilight stammered.

Chow put on his sunglasses again.

Slowly, Rainbow Dash flew back into the ruined train stop. She came out ten seconds later, with two large saddlebags that looked like they were ready to burst open. Doing her best to keep the rising anger out of her face, Rainbow Dash flew over to Chow's carriage and slid the saddlebags off her back. They landed with a *thump* in the sand. One of the colts – the one Twilight thought was Thirty-Eight – walked up to them slowly, opening them with his snout. A few seconds later he said, "It's all there."

No way he could count that fast. I can't count that fast. How did he count that fast? Oh, who cares it's almost over!

Chow slid off the sunglasses. That was five times. Five times he'd taken those things off and on. He stared at the group with a look of cold, calculating disregard, and if he had said at that moment to shoot them, Twilight wouldn't have been surprised. But he said, "Let her go."

The carriage door opened. The wind picked up a curl of pink mane. One of the colts reached in and pulled, and a head covered in a sack poked out the side of the vehicle. Twilight Sparkle prepared for the hardest, longest, most wonderfulest group hug ever. Then the prisoner climbed out.

The first problem was that the mare had no wings.

The second was that her tail, bubblegum-pink as it was, didn't curl like Fluttershy's. Instead it was thick and silky and straight, with a gold line running through the middle.

The third was that she was a unicorn. The cloth bag covered her horn, but it couldn't cover up the spiky bulge of it underneath. This mare had quite a long horn.

The fourth problem was on her flank. Her cutie mark was... a line. That's what it looked like, anyway. A single silver-colored vertical line, about three inches long and a quarter of an inch thick, with a circle at the bottom. The most mundane cutie mark Twilight Sparkle had ever seen.

The fifth problem – and this one should have been first, but it was somehow the last one Twilight noticed – was this mare's coat. This mare's coat was red. Crimson red. The color of a certain... gemstone.

Her heart sank down into her hooves somewhere.

"Wait just one second," Applejack said, stomping the sand once with her front hoof. "That ain't Fluttershy. We've never seen that pony before in our lives. Err... have we?"

The other three responded in the negative. Rainbow Dash flew up high, looking ready to charge.

"What you talkin' bout, special girl? That her!"

"The pony we're looking for is a yellow," said Pinkie.

Rarity added, "A yellow pegasus with a pink mane named Fluttershy. Three butterflies for a cutie mark. Soft voice. Afraid of her own shadow? That is... I have no idea who that is."

Twilight did. Twilight knew exactly who that was. But she didn't say anything. She didn't really know what to say.

"You ponies do a few lines when Chow wasn't looking?" The panda snorted. "That her, man. That's the pink bitch that the gay girl was lickin' up last night."

"Not true!" Rainbow Dash half-yelled. "I've never seen her before in my life. Where's Fluttershy, you jerk?"

The crimson-colored mare was trying to say something, but all that came out were muffled grunts.

“The deal,” said Chow, in a very low voice, “Was twenty grand for the pink bitch. That’s the pink bitch. Maybe it not the *right* pink bitch, but that the pink bitch you get. Chow no care. Deal done.” For the sixth and final time, the panda put on his sunglasses. “So long, crazy ponies.”

And before Rainbow Dash had a chance to deploy a sonic rain-nuke on them, he and his carriage were gone.

Behind her, the other four ponies were arguing. Words were shouted, curses cursed, questions asked, the purity of lineage of a certain panda deeply insulted. Afterwards Twilight could not recall much of what was said. This strange sense of calm settled over her as she approached the bound-and-gagged crimson mare standing in the middle of the desert, alone. All the threads and tangents and every clue they’d found out about last night suddenly came together, all at once, in a brilliant shimmering explosion of clarity. Suddenly, Twilight Sparkle understood. She slipped off the cloth sack. The crimson mare had deep red eyes that matched her coat almost to the thread, a face that could only be described as fiercely, exotically beautiful. She blinked once.

Twilight said, “Hello, Ruby.”

Chapter 10

“Drive.”

That was the first word Ruby said to them when Twilight and the pack assembled around her. After twenty-four hours of searching, after an encounter with a maniac panda, after ransoming her for twenty thousand bits, that’s what she said to them. “Drive.”

“*Oh, no,*” Applejack drawled, beaming at Ruby with fiercely penetrating eyes. “You do *not* get t’ order *us* around, hayseed. Before we take you anywhere, you’ve got some questions to answer.”

Ruby the unicorn was larger than the other five, and slender, even more lithe than Rainbow Dash. Twilight wondered if she was an athlete. Maybe that vertical line on her flank was... a pole vault? Could ponies even pole vault? If not, why had that sport ever been invented? Maybe she would ask Ruby later, but right now there were more important questions to be asked. Like this one: “Where is Fluttershy?”

Ruby closed her eyes hard, took a deep breath. “Listen. I’ll answer all your questions in the carriage. But right now, we need to drive.”

The others started to argue, but Twilight picked up on the urgency in Ruby’s voice, and stomped her hoof on the ground. Yesterday’s hangover was almost gone... she didn’t want to try out any magic yet, but she could if she had to. She said, “Let’s do it.”

And so, wordlessly but with much grumbling, the six ponies galloped back to where they had left their rented carriage. Rarity, AJ, and Pinkie Pie all took pulling duty, so they would be able to move along at full clip. That left Twilight and Rainbow Dash alone with Ruby in the back compartment. “Drive north,” Ruby said. “Due north. You’ll know when to stop.”

Only after the carriage took off did Ruby address them directly. And what she said was, “Do you guys have anything to eat?”

“Excuse me?” Twilight blinked.

“Eat. You know, food. Salad, flowers, hay. *Anything*. I’m starving. Tried to ask the panda for some food, but all he kept giving me was salt. Plates of it. I told him, I told him over and over again. I’m not one of *those*.”

“Who exactly are you, Ruby?” asked Rainbow Dash. Rainbow could be suspicious at times, but now, Twilight noticed, she sounded genuinely curious.

Ruby’s response was to laugh. “Hello to you too, Dashie.”

“Uh...”

“That’s what you told me to call you last night.” Ruby giggled. “Pinkie Pie got mad. She said only she gets to call you Dashie. So Pinkie, right?”

The stunned silence on Dash’s face was painful enough that Twilight could feel it piercing her head. Or maybe that was just a flashback to the hangover. Either way, she cleared her throat and said, “I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here, Ruby. See, we can’t-”

“*Oh*. Of course.” Ruby facehoofed. “You all can’t remember anything from that night. I forgot that part.”

“Wait, how did you know that?”

The unicorn giggled again. Twilight couldn’t help but notice that she had the most innocent little giggle. “Because you cast a spell to make them all forget, of course.”

Twilight’s face got really scrunchy. “I *what*?”

“Fluttershy asked you to do it,” the red unicorn explained. “At first you said no, said it would cost, uh, ‘*too much magicka. Hey, it’s not like I’m under the atronach stone here.*’ I’m not exactly sure what that meant, and you were drunk so maybe you don’t either. Then when Fluttershy *dared* you to do it... ahem, ‘*Twilight is dovakhiin, and does not back down from a challenge.*’”

Twilight looked away. There was no responding to that.

“So you’re telling us that the reason we can’t remember anything from two nights ago... isn’t because we drank too much? It’s because Twilight *magicked* us?” Rainbow Dash glared down at the purple unicorn. “Twilight, what the buck?”

“Fluttershy told me to!” said Twilight without missing a beat, hooves covering her eyes. “At least that’s what Ruby says. Don’t hurt me.”

Dash shook her head. “I don’t get it. Why would Fluttershy want us to not remember?”

“You’ll find that out soon enough,” said Ruby. The lithe unicorn looked out the window, staring at a fast-approaching mountain. “Soon enough.”

“So Fluttershy *is* okay?”

Ruby nodded, sunny grin on her face. “Fluttershy is fine.”

Twilight’s heart rose all the way to Canterlot.

“Or at least she was before yesterday morning, when that insane panda broke into my apartment and kidnapped me. Which reminds me, *food!*”

Someone had grabbed Pinkie’s leftover donuts this morning, apparently. Dash found them in the trunk. Ruby descended on them like a ravenous beast. “Oh sweet bucking Celestia, *the carbs!* It’s been two years since I’ve eaten something so awful... and it *is so good!*”

Twilight watched her put away five donuts, strangely fascinated.

When the crimson unicorn was done, she asked, “So how exactly do you fit into all this, Ruby? We know you were with us at the Veneightian, and at Sapphire Shores’s mansion. Mr. Chow also said you... err...”

Dash was noticeably silent.

“And I’ve also been meaning to ask,” Twilight continued. “Your cutie mark. What is it supposed to be?”

With a bright smile, big innocent red eyes, and a face covered in powdered sugar, Ruby said, “Why, a stripper pole, of course.”

“A stri...”

The back of the carriage was dead quiet for several long seconds.

“I guess I should re-introduce myself. My name is Ruby, and I’m a showmare at the Veneightian Hotel. The best showmare at the Veneightian, that is. Top billing. Best nights. I’ve lived in Las Haygas all my life, and *exotic* dancing... is my special talent.”

Twilight didn’t really know how to respond, so she sat there looking dumb for a few seconds, and then said, “Well, hi, Ruby. I’m, uh, Twilight.”

Rainbow Dash said nothing. The pegasus looked at the floor.

“Yes, hi, Twilight. Anyway, I ran into you six at the Veneightian dance club, just after the end of my shift. Or maybe I should say that *you*, Twilight, ran into *me*.” Ruby gave her a quick giggle, which suddenly didn’t strike Twilight as terribly innocent.

“You did this one move where you backed your rump all up over some colt...” Figure had said. “Then next thing I knew, you were doing the same thing with a mare.” Twilight gulped loudly.

Ruby continued. “It was fun at first. I see ponies get a little crazy in Haygas all the time, but you and your friends were... something else. Later, though, I saw Fluttershy trying to get you all under control. You weren’t being very cooperative. What can I say? I felt bad for the poor sober friend. I decided to help her out. Figured it would make for a fun night. And...” Ruby giggled again. “I wasn’t wrong.

“I helped Fluttershy get you out of the dance club. Then we collected Applejack and Dashie from the casino floor, and managed to stop Rarity from signing up for a zero-down two-thousand bit loan on an original saddlebag by Uni Vuitton. We got back together with Pinkie outside the

hotel. After that... I followed you all to the Maynn, I think. Then I had to go prepare for my next shift."

"Your shift," said Twilight. "As a stripper."

"*Showmare*," Ruby corrected her. "It is an artform, my dear. I would know. I'm pretty good at it. Anyway, a few hours later Fluttershy came running in to find me, something about an emergency, a manicore, they got too drunk and I lost them all, Sapphire Shores, help me help me the world is ending. I signed out early." She beamed. "Did you guys seriously break into Sapphire Shores's mansion?"

Twilight just gulped again.

"Not bad. Anyway, this was after the Shores mansion. Fluttershy and I had to go around town looking for you all. Luckily I know this place like the bottom of my hoof. Twilight, you were passed out in the bathroom of your room at Celestia's Palace, so we decided to leave you there."

"You didn't check in the other bathroom, I'm guessing?"

"No. Why?"

Twilight shook her head. "No reason."

"Anyway, we found Pinkie in a souvenir shop trying to haggle over more snowglobes. Rarity was getting, *ahem*, 'beautified' at a North Haygas tattoo parlor. We were too late to stop that process. Applejack tried to find that all-you-can-eat buffet place out here in the desert on foot. You'll see where we found her soon enough."

"And me?" Those were the first words Rainbow Dash had spoken since Ruby had introduced herself.

"Oh, we didn't have to look for you, Dashie. We knew where you were. You were in the hotel room I rented in the Veneightian."

"I was... *what*?"

Ruby giggled, her eyes shutting as she did so. "Oh, relax, sweetie. After Sapphire Shores's mansion you looked like you were going to pass out, so I rented a room for you at the Veneightian and you slept there a few hours. As a... valued employee, they let me have the rooms they don't rent out for free. It was no trouble."

"Oh." Dash looked noticeably relieved. "Good. Because Chow said something about-"

Ruby cut her off. "Now that panda may be many things, but a liar he is not. He saw right. After you won all those poker chips at the Maynn, you were ecstatic, and drunk, and feeling the energy of Las Haygas, and you kissed me." The crimson unicorn smiled, not innocently. "*You* kissed *me*."

And suddenly Dash was almost as crimson as her.

Ruby shook her head. "Relax, sweetie. You were drunk and high on the sweet feeling of victory. It wasn't the first time that a pony has acted... out of character during a crazy night in Haygas, and it won't be the last. It was a quick bit of fun. That's all." Ruby's wide smile lit up the room.

"Oh man," said Dash, staring straight at the floor, rubbing the back of her neck with her hoof. "That is... good to hear. Out of character. *Hehe*. Yeah. Completely."

Ruby grinned. "All in all, it was one of the best nights I've ever had in this city. And that is saying something." She stared at the empty box of donuts. "That is, until the panda kidnapped me. Still not sure what that was all about."

Twilight opened her mouth to explain, but Ruby raised a hoof. "No, no, Twilight. It's Haygas. Things happen. No need to explain."

Then the carriage stopped. Twilight was about to ask why they were stopping, but she happened to peer out the window.

There, on a small hill on the side of the road, stood Fluttershy, whispering something inaudible to a little armadillo with a bandage tied around its back. There stood Fluttershy. Completely unharmed. Safe. Alive.

The massive group hug that Twilight had wanted went exactly as she envisioned it. The only difference was that there were not six ponies involved, but seven.

About half an hour later, Twilight and her friends sat around an old wooden table at the all-you-can-eat buffet in the middle of the desert – the one Applejack had been trying to find last night. As Fluttershy explained, the pack had gotten separated after leaving Sapphire Shores' mansion, and AJ caught a taxi carriage, intending to find this very place. But somewhere along the way the cabbie must have found out she had no money, because when Ruby and Fluttershy found her, she was alone in the middle of the desert, muttering about playing horseshoes and cursing Las Haygas carriage drivers. "They ain't got no sense of decency," she'd said.

"You were looking for the rodeo," Fluttershy explained. "But you ended up in the middle of an armadillo preserve. Apparently you thought you'd found the right place, though, because you said you were playing a game of horseshoes against somepony named Scotty."

Applejack stared at her food. The farmpony had ordered a steaming apple pie. "Gosh, I don't remember any of this."

"The only problem," Fluttershy said, "was that you didn't have any horseshoes. You, uh... thought you did, though."

"Whaddaya mean, Fluttershy?"

"You were, *um*, you were... using the armadillos as horseshoes."

Applejack's eyes opened wide. "Oh, shoot. Don't tell me that's why you were tendin' to that little guy when we found you."

Fluttershy giggled. "It was nothing, just a cracked shell. He'll be curling up into a little ball again in no time. But when I found him there, I knew I had to stay to make sure he was okay. So Ruby and I took you back to the room, and I had Twilight wipe all your memories so you wouldn't wake up still drunk and come looking for me. Ruby was supposed to wake you up in the morning."

“Ha!” Ruby laughed. “If by morning, you mean three in the afternoon. I’ve seen ponies drink like you five did. It takes more than a few hours of sleep to get through *that*. Unfortunately the panda nabbed me before I could come by.” She ate another forkful of her own apple pie. “*OH CELESTIA, CARBS I HAVE MISSED YOU.*”

“When you didn’t come back, I was so worried,” Fluttershy said. The pegasus had yet to touch her tomato salad. “But I couldn’t leave poor Spike until I knew he was okay.”

Pinkie ate a cupcake in one bite. “You named the armadillo Spike?”

Fluttershy giggled. “He curled up into a little ball and slept fourteen hours. So I named him Spike.”

Twilight got an image of the real Spike back home, waiting for her. She couldn’t wait to see him again.

When the check came, the seven of them looked at it in stunned, wordless silence. Rainbow Dash glared at Applejack. “AJ, I thought you said this place was cheap! What was it, exactly? ‘*Costs half as many bits as a bottle o’ water at Celestia’s Palace.*’”

“Hey, I was just relayin’ what Big Macintosh told me.” Applejack stared at the check, and softly shook her head. “They must’ve upped their prices when the Haygas tourists started coming.”

“Well, I don’t know how we are going to pay for this,” Rarity said. “After all, we also have a completely destroyed suite at Celestia’s Palace to deal with.”

Fluttershy didn’t say anything, but she reached into her saddlebag and laid a small stack of poker chips on the table. Twilight counted them in her head. It was enough to cover the check, plus an *inordinately* generous tip. “Fluttershy, where did that come from?”

“Oh.” The pegasus reddened. “I’m sorry. This is the money Rainbow won last night. She told me to hold onto it for her. I guess I should ask her

before I spend any of it." Fluttershy stared at Rainbow with big, waiting eyes.

"But... we gave the twenty thousand I won to Mr. Chow."

Fluttershy shook her head. "No, that must have been the money you won at the Maynn. *This* is the money you won at the Balyagio."

"When did we go to the... oh, *buck it*, who cares?" Rainbow grinned widely. "How much?"

By the time they made it back to town, they had enough to *buy* the suite they'd trashed. But why bother? They had the Maynn palace suite comped for a week.

Chapter 11

Dear Princess Celestia,

Twilight stared at those three words for a long time, her quill soundlessly levitating over the desk. She wondered if it was a bad idea to send the Princess a letter written on Maynn Hotel and Casino letterhead. She wondered if it was a bad idea to send this letter at all.

The palace suite of the Maynn hotel was alive with activity, as her friends prepared themselves for a night out on the town. She could hear AJ and Rainbow Dash arguing in the kitchen over which casino to start at tonight. “But we did the Maynn last night,” Applejack whined. “And the night before. We need to have some variety, Rainbow.”

“You kidding? I won ten grand off that Ahaybian sheikh last night. Why would I ever leave?” Rainbow laughed, and the laughter carried over the entire suite, bouncing off the glass walls through which Twilight was staring at the bright lights of the city. She’d gone to sleep watching this skyline for several nights now, but it never failed to enchant her.

“This is our last night in Haygas, Rainbow. Tomorrow the comp is over. We ought to do somethin’ different. Somethin’ special.”

I’ve learned quite a bit on my vacation in Las Haygas. I set off on this adventure feeling a bit apprehensive, not completely sure what to expect. But it’s safe to say that it has been an experience I’ll never forget. I’ve learned more than I could have imagined here. About this city, about the world. About myself. And yes, even about friendship.

From the bathroom, Twilight could hear Rarity’s voice echoing up and down marble walls. “Ruby, it’s excellent! It’s like nothing was there at all. When I asked Twilight, she said there was no such thing as a tattoo removal spell, and she knows more about magic than any unicorn I’ve ever met.”

Ruby giggled that innocent little giggle. “Well, she may know about the kind of magic you read about in books. But in the dressing rooms of a cabaret, one studies a different school of magic.”

Twilight smiled to herself. She supposed she should be jealous that Ruby knew a spell she didn't. But for some reason she couldn't quite explain, she felt that Ruby's magic was... not quite Twilight Sparkle's forte. She focused back on her letter.

Las Haygas has taught me that experience is what life is all about. Experience is how we learn. It's how we grow, and change. While studying is always valuable – and I promise you, I will be spending a lot of nights cooped up in the library studying when I get back home – there are some things books can't teach you. There are some things you can only learn by doing.

For example, I've recently learned that alcohol is NOT for me.

I got drunk, Princess Celestia. No, scratch that. I got smashed. I got absolutely and completely wasted. I went out drinking with my friends, without knowing anything about it – what I like, what my limits are, how alcohol affects me. I ended up doing a lot of things I'm embarrassed about. Making a lot of mistakes. I acted completely out of character. And when I woke up the next morning, I was in more pain than I've ever been in my entire life. It can be scary, not remembering. It can also be scary to think – I was not in control last night. The alcohol was. Or the drugs (not that I did any drugs, Princess, I promise promise PROMISE I didn't). I learned you have to be very careful with substances that alter the way you think. They can lead you to do things you wouldn't otherwise do. They can lead to big mistakes. They can ruin your life. But I never would have learned that, if I hadn't tried it.

Mr. Chow's face flashed through her head. “So long, crazy ponies.” She would not be at all upset if that was the last time she ever saw a panda bear in her life. Well, maybe a little. Those little guys are just... too cute to stay mad at.

Pinkie Pie burst into the room then, holding two martini glasses in her mouth. “Hey, Twilight! I'm making us a round of liquid rainbooms to commemorate our last night in Las Haygas. You want one?”

Twilight stared out the window, eyes following the long wave of bright lights that constituted the Haygas Strip. “Sure, Pinkie. But go *light* on the... whatever it is you put in a liquid rainboom.”

I learned something else, though. Drinking, when you do it right, can be a lot of fun. Even though I don't remember much of what happened the night my friends and I went out drinking, the stories we've been told are ones I don't think we'll ever forget. That night... well, that night was epic, Princess Celestia. And despite all the terrible mistakes we made, my friends and I are going to remember that crazy, wild, epic night in Las Haygas, and we're going to tell the stories over and over again throughout the years, and we'll laugh. Though I can assure you that I never plan to drink that much again, I would also be lying to you if I said I regret it.

For a while Twilight watched Pinkie mix drinks, watched her toss around bottles of strange colorful things she didn't recognize, pour layers and layers of different liquids, fill the martini glasses to the brim. Six of them. Pinkie was making six.

Fluttershy walked into the room a few minutes later, mane wrapped in a towel, just as it had been that first night. “You look good, Twilight,” the pegasus said. Twilight had spent the last hour perfecting her hair. She stared at her friend, and no force in Equestria – not willpower, not pleading, not magic, not hammers, not Applebloom's slay-them-with-cuteness look, not even the threat of Nightmare Moon coming back to plunge the world into eternal night – could make her hold back a smile.

“You want a liquid rainboom, Fluttershy?” Pinkie asked. The party pony had an empty martini glass waiting on the bar stool.

Fluttershy giggled. “Oh, no thank you, Pinkie. Some sweet tea would be nice, though.”

Sweet tea. Fluttershy had sweet tea the first night. Twilight remembered that part.

But this is a letter about friendship. And yes, I have most definitely learned a lesson about friendship out here in Las Haygas. I've learned that sometimes, in any group of friends, no matter how close or how careful or

how responsible, there will come a time when disaster strikes. Sometimes it will be nopony's fault. Sometimes it will be everyone's. It may not be as dramatic as life-or-death, but disasters are a part of life, and there will come a time when every group of friends must face one. Quick decisions must be made. Risks must be taken.

I've learned that when the moment comes – when disaster strikes, and you find yourself in a truly terrible situation you don't know how to handle, one you probably can't handle by yourself... there is nobody better to have at your side than your dearest, truest, closest, best friends. You may not be able to get out of the mess you're in scot-free. But when your friends are with you, you are infinitely better off than you would be alone.

Rarity entered the common room a few minutes later, proudly showing off her haunch. "See? That unseemly thing is gone. You can't even see the scar. Ruby is a miracle-worker, Twilight. A *miracle-worker*. You could learn a lot from her."

The crimson showmare exited the bathroom behind her. Twilight and Ruby made brief eye contact. They both giggled, and both shook their heads.

I've made a lot of new friends in this city as well. Friends I would have never expected to make. You meet the most peculiar ponies in Las Haygas. She thought of the many faces they had encountered – Figure the accountant, Lucky Draw the gambler. Steve Maynn. Sapphire Shores and Elroy. Then she glanced over at Ruby again. Though I don't expect to see most of them again, there is one new friend that I really hope we can stay in touch with. Her name is Ruby, and maybe you'll meet her one day. I think you'll like her. Just make sure the royal guards know to keep the paparazzi out of the palace when that day comes. Wouldn't want certain magazines to print certain... rumors.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack joined them in the common room a little later, still arguing over which casino to go to. Twilight didn't want to go to a casino. They'd been to all of them by now. They'd also been to the Stalline Dion show, and the Blue Horse Group, and Penn & Trotter, and Applejack's beloved rodeo. They'd been to every famous restaurant in the city too. Steve Maynn had gotten them reservations. They'd been to Pinkie's dubtrot club, and to the botanical gardens behind the Veneightian, and the massive

tropical aquarium in Maredalay Bay, an amusement park outside of town that Rainbow Dash had recommended, even a solo concert at the Baylagio by the great cellist Octavia. Rarity had insisted on it. Ruby had taken them backstage at the cabaret. Twilight wasn't sure how she felt about that. But Ruby had offered, and after everything she'd done Twilight felt bad turning the showmare down.

They had seen everything Haygas had to offer.

"I don't think we should go anywhere tonight," said Twilight. "I think we should stay right here."

Rainbow Dash looked at her, disappointed. "What do you mean, stay *here*? It's our last night in the City of Lights. We have to live it up! We have to get crazy!"

"I think we got crazy enough for a lifetime already," Twilight said, giggling.

Nobody seemed to like the idea much. Or at least, not until Fluttershy spoke up. The yellow unicorn looked at them with those dinner-plate-wide eyes, that shy, downward stare, and said very softly, "Let's not do that again okay? Let's never do that again. Let's please stay here."

And after all, who could ever say no to Fluttershy?

In the end, Princess Celestia, among all the lessons I've learned over the past week, I think this one is the most important. There's nothing wrong with a few wild nights. There's nothing wrong with drinking. There's nothing wrong with trying new things, or testing the limits of your experience. In fact, it's healthy to go out of your comfort zone every once in a while – as long as you're with ponies you trust. But you don't have to do that every night.

Once they had all agreed to staying in, Pinkie Pie went back to work on the liquid rainbooms. "You know what?" Fluttershy said. The pegasus' voice was loud enough, assertive enough, that the entire room got quiet when they heard it, and everypony turned to face her.

“Make me a liquid rainboom, Pinkie. And don’t go light on the grenadine.”

After all, there is no substitute for a night in with your best friends.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle*

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The End Of  
My Little Hangover  
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Author's Note

Hell yeah, guys! We made it to the very bitter end. This last update took ridiculously long... way too long... and for that, I apologize. Things got a little crazy over the last month (good crazy, not bad), and I didn't have as much time to write as I wanted to. So to make up for it, I decided to go ahead and finish the whole thing before arguing. So if you're here, that means you finished! Which means that you probably maybe kind of liked it (unless you're insane). Which is good. Thanks for reading, everypony! I truly hope you enjoyed!

On a side note, I got an email from a reader recently with a very cool suggestion:

"You are probably familiar with how the credits for Hangover are all pictures from what happened during Doug, Alan, Stu, and Phil's crazy night, with "You spin me" by Flo Rida accompanying it. What if after you finish "My Little Hangover," you start a collab for artists to come together and create scenes from your story using their interpretation to look as if they were taken by a camera? Afterwards, all the pictures could get compiled into one video! Although this is your say, the pictures could be hand drawn, or made on a computer or tablet. If you give the ok for this, I myself would probably contribute too :)"

Guys. Please please PLEASE do this. You not only have my okay, you have my most emphatic support! In fact, if anyone actually chooses to do this, post the artwork on deviantart (my deviant is AscoliRho, go now and gawk at it and look at how sad and empty it is) and message me that you did, and once there are enough posted I will make the video!

As always, contact me at mousetrap9261@gmail.com