



Inkblot

By PerilousPrinny

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Chapter 1

She's crazy. You know that, right? One hundred percent horseapple crazy.

I don't mean it in the sense of somepony who's an unthinking risk-taker: "Did you see how much cider she drank last night? That mare is crazy!" No, she's not like that. Well, come to think of it she might also be like that. In fact, it'd be more acceptable if she indeed was like that. But that's not the definition I'm speaking of. Nor do I mean "crazy" as in eccentric, though I've prayed to Celestia night and day that "eccentric" would be a word that would easily apply to her. Sadly, that's not the case, nor has it been the case for quite some time now.

For as anypony who's spent any amount of time with her nowadays is well aware, there's eccentric... and then there's Pinkie Pie.

"Mrs. Cake?"

The young mare looked around for the proprietor of Sugarcube Corner before locating the bell on the counter and, with slight embarrassment, giving it a solid ring. She hated making visits like this. Why couldn't everything just be done by mail? You send them the paperwork, they send it back signed, there. Done. No problems, less travel, and besides, isn't the postal service reliable enough? Then again, she'd easily concede that it did feel a lot more impersonal without that supposedly vital face-to-face communication, and social interaction is paramount in these sort of business deals. She supposed. Not that it was something to look forward to.

"Be right with you, dearie!"

Mrs. Cake emerged from the back room with a tray of cinnamon buns as well as a warm smile for the mare across the counter from her. A bit tall, a bit thin, and a coat and mane to which the elder mare give a second

glance due to their profound *lack* of color. Not that books should be judged by their cover, of course; it gave no indication toward the pony under the stunningly gray coat being herself so dull, though she had to admit the accounting ledger on her flank (which was itself in black and white) didn't help the cause.

"Sorry for that. Now, how can I help you?"

The young mare cleared her lungs slightly before she began. "Hello, Mrs. Cake. I represent Gravelcreek Farms, and I have some paperwork for you and your husband to sign before our business transactions can be finalized. As I imagine we've said before, we are quite proud to be the new flour supplier for Sugarcube Corner."

Pride nothing; she had never even heard of this place until she was told to come here. But making the place sound like a bigger deal than it has any right to be does wonders for establishing rapport, and a solid rapport gets the deal sealed that much quicker. With that in mind, a healthy dose of truth-embellishing is the only way to go.

"Well we're proud to get such quality flour! It really does make all the difference, you know. You wouldn't fill a pie with rotten apples, so why make the crust out of poor flour?"

"My thoughts exactly, Mrs. Cake. Now then, if my documents are correct, most of the issues have already been settled, so the main thing I need is-"

"Coconut! Of course! It's all so obvious now!"

The gray mare froze at the interruption from the back room. It wasn't. It couldn't. No, she was being ridiculous. It could, and it was. She hadn't heard that voice in years, but it was unmistakably *her*.

"Erm... sorry about that. Now, as I was saying, most of the issues have been settled, so mostly all I need is your signature on these-"

"Papayas! Absolutely! Those would make *great* scones!"

“Um, these... these documents here. Feel free to read them over; you should find that-”

“They’re gonna be delicious! What do you think, Cup?” The gray mare’s eyes went wide as Pinkie Pie entered from the back room. She was right; it was her. She knew her suspicions had to be true, that the voice she heard must have been Pinkie’s, but somewhere deep inside her mind she was hoping that wasn’t the case. She knew Pinkie lived in Ponyville, but with any amount of luck she’d be able to avoid the crazy mare.

And apparently, with any amount of unluck she’d walk right into her place of employment.

“Carrot doesn’t think the coconut and papayas would work in a scone,” Pinkie continued, “but personally I think you really can’t go-”

Whatever Pinkie was going to say was eclipsed by a deafening gasp, one so forceful it likely sucked a significant percentage of the air out of the building as well as propelling Pinkie up to the ceiling. “It’s... it’s...” Pinkie slowly hovered back down only to get her leg tangled on a light fixture. She struggled for a few seconds before it gave out under her weight, causing both the fixture and Pinkie to crash to the floor. At least the latter was unharmed, as she immediately popped up from in front of the counter. One not versed with Pinkie Pie would wonder how she got over to other side so quickly. One well-versed with her would... well, *still* wonder how she got there so quickly, but at least it would make *sense*. Slightly.

“It is! Inky! Oh my gosh oh my gosh I haven’t seen you in *forever!*”

“Pinkie, I-”

“Oh, look at you you’ve gotten so big! When’d you get so tall, huh? Looking a little bony, though. You eating right? Don’t worry; ol’ Pinkie Pie’ll fix that!”

“Pinkie, lis-” she tried to say, but the words wouldn’t come out as a fresh cinnamon roll was literally shoved into her mouth by the pink mare. Spitting it out would be more than rude, so she tried to chew quickly while Pinkie continued.

“Good, huh? Yeah, you sure aren’t gonna starve here! So what’s going on? Whatcha been up to? Oh, we have so much to catch up on and you’re gonna get to meet all my friends and ooh! I can even throw a big party so you can get to know each and every-”

The gray mare swallowed the last of her pastry. “Pinkamena!”

Pinkie stopped mid-word, blinking twice while what seemed to be the sound of a record scratch could clearly be heard, despite a record player being nowhere in sight. “Yeah, sis?” A little trick nearly everypony in Ponyville likely *wished* they knew was that calling the party mare “Pinkamena” was the easiest way to shut her up, temporarily at least.

“Sis?” Mrs. Cake asked. “You mean this is-”

“Yep! Ooh, now I get to introduce you I’m so excited!” Pinkie said, demonstrating that the aforementioned temporary fix was exactly that. “Mrs. Cake, allow me to introduce to you none other than my little sister, Inky Pie!”

Inky sighed. She wasn’t getting out of this. “Pleased to meet you. Now then, Pinkie, I-”

“So what do you want to do first, huh? Huh? Oh, there’s so much to do in Ponyville you wouldn’t even believe it! First thing though is you gotta stop at Sugarcube Corner. Oh wait, we’re already at Sugarcube Corner! Wow, that was fast! You’re speedier than I thought! So what are you gonna get; you want another cinnamon-”

“One is enough, thank you... no offense meant to the establishment, of course.” Inky took in a deep breath before continuing. “Now then, as much as I... *enjoy* seeing you again, Pinkie, our meeting is simply coincidence. I am here strictly on business regarding Sugarcube Corner’s supply contracts. Perhaps after this meeting has concluded we can talk more casually.”

Pinkie put on what anypony who had ever met her would know was quite a rare sight: she frowned. Her eyes even seemed to leak out a bit of a tear. But a split second later, Pinkie’s typical brand of ecstatic happiness was shunted right back into place. “Okay! We’ll talk later, Inky!” With that,

Pinkie bounced back into the kitchen, with Inky wondering where this new strange noise was coming from.

Boing... boing... boing...

If Inky didn't know better, she'd swear Pinkie had springs in her legs. She *did* know better, right? Of course she did, Inky thought, trying her best to reassure herself. There's certainly no way that... you know what? No more thinking about Pinkie for the moment. Back to the business at hand. "I apologize for that outburst, Mrs. Cake; however-"

"Oh, no need to apologize, hon," the elder mare said warmly. "Pinkie was the one who made the outburst, though I can't seem to blame her either. After all, if I had a sister that I hadn't seen in forever come into town unexpected like that, I'd be pretty darn excited too, don't you think?"

"Well... certainly, but in this case-"

"In fact, you should probably go out and spend some time with her! No need to focus so much on these papers, Ms. Pie." The name was spoken with a bit of a sly smile, and although it wasn't intended to embarrass Inky, that's certainly what it did. "You go along and I'll have all this sorted for you when you get back."

"I, um... those signatures have to be personally witnessed."

"Ah, I see. Well then, I better get to it so you can get this business out of your way!"

As Mrs. Cake quickly skimmed over the papers and scribbled the required signatures, Inky's mind was everywhere but that dotted line. Of course Pinkie had to be here; somehow, it just made sense. The exact kind of sense that Pinkie Pie *would* make. The kind that, to the average laypony, doesn't appear to make sense at all.

That was, to put it simply, how Pinkie functioned.

She's crazy. You know that, right? And from the looks of things, she's not getting any better. Pinkie is... blissful, for certain. But to take the old saying, and invert it, bliss is ignorance.

She shouldn't be like this all the time. She can't be like this all the time. It's too much. Eventually, even a so-called perpetual motion machine has to grind to a stop. I can only pray the friction won't be too much for her to bear.

"So Inky, is it later?" Pinkie Pie said, emerging back from within the kitchen. "Pretty sure it's later. Yep, look, five past later. So what do you wanna do, huh? You wanna go out? I think we should go out. Even a place full of such delicious sugary goodness as Sugarcube Corner can get stuffy from time to time. So let's go out, get some fresh air, and maybe then I can show you off to all my friends!"

"Show me off?" Inky was fairly sure Pinkie didn't mean it in such a possessive state; it was merely a poor choice of words. Still worth questioning, however.

"Show you off? Oh, well I don't mean it like that, of course, really I just mean it like how I wanna show all of Ponyville how proud I am of my little sister! I mean, look at you! All grown up and got a job doing... whatever it was you were doing back there."

"Business negotiations, for Gr-" Inky froze. She couldn't dare let Pinkie know of this association. She could only hope Pinkie wouldn't find out, but then again, she didn't seem like the type to bother looking into any of those sort of pressing details. Not anymore, anyway. In any case, saying something that could trigger... whatever Pinkie Pie was bound to do (Celestia only knows, and maybe not even then) wasn't worth the risk. "For... for my job. Though that isn't what I usually do. Mostly it's more of the case of accounting work. Balancing books, things of that nature..."

"Ooh, you get to balance books! No way! I love doing that kind of stuff!"

“You do?” Now *there* was something Inky never expected to hear. Perhaps they really did have more in common than she thought.

“Oh yeah, I balance the books here at Sugarcube Corner all the time. It’s great fun!”

“You don’t say. I’m sorry; I didn’t expect you to be so interested in numbers. What kind of methods do you use?”

“Methods? Oh, I don’t know, I guess I just kind of put one on top of the other until my neck starts to hurt. I don’t really worry about the numbers. Personally, I think it’s the size and weight of the books that matters more.”

“Um... what?”

“Although I guess you do have a point. After all, it is more impressive to be all ‘Hey, I balanced six books on my head!’ than to be all ‘Hey, I balanced one book that was the weight of six books!’ Although that one book would be pretty darn heavy, so maybe that would be impressive in its own right. Also, how does one book weigh six books anyway? Doesn’t a book weigh as much as a book? Or is there some sort of unit of book-measure out there? I don’t know. Maybe I should ask Twilight sometime; I’m sure she has all kinds of units of book-measure she goes by to-”

“Pinkamena!”

“Yes? Oh. I’m just rambling on and on, aren’t I? Well, if you’ve got something to say-”

“Balancing books is an accounting term. It has nothing to do with balancing them on one’s head.”

“Really? Oh. Well, you should really try the good kind of book-balancing sometime! It’s a lot of fun! Unless one of the books slips and lands on your hoof. That’s not very fun. That’s painful. Though you can still look back on it and laugh, so maybe it really *is* fun! Plus it might not even be that painful depending on how many book-weights it was. I still need to learn that unit of measure. Hey! We could go ask Twilight right now! Plus you’ll get to meet Twilight! It’s win-win!”

“Who’s Twilight?”

“Twilight Sparkle! She’s one of my friends! She lives over at the library. Ooh, you know, she’s really smart. Like a big ol’ three eggs overeasy-head brainiac! I bet she knows all about accounting stuff, so you fillies would probably really get along!”

“Really?” The thought of that put a smile on Inky’s face, though it was quickly dismissed by the thoughts of her duty. “I’d love to, but I really need to get back; these papers need to be filed and-”

“Can’t you just mail them back? Then you’d have lots of free time, and you could spend it all with your big sis!”

“I... I was told to deliver this personally.”

“Oh, what, don’t you trust the postal service around here? Well, you don’t have to worry about a thing! Ditzzy Doo is the hardest-working mare in all of Ponyville. She works her hooves to the bone so hard that sometimes it seems like she’s in five places at once! And because of her, we’ve never had a problem with the mail not running on time! So just take these dumb old papers, drop ‘em in the mailbox, and get ready for a relaxing day with Pinkie Pie!”

“I’d... like nothing less.” Which, of course, was to say that Inky would like *no thing less*. But she knew she wasn’t getting out of this. Like an expert lasso-maker, Pinkie had roped her in, and Inky was never very good with knots. “Just let me write a few notes and then I’ll get this mailed. Okay?”

“Okie dokie! Just don’t get distracted by all those *crazy* numbers, alright?”

Inky sighed, sat down, and took out a blank sheet and a quill, staring at it for a few seconds before she began to write.

Papa,

On my business excursion to Ponyville, the variable that we had given a slight concern came true. I have found Pinkie. Or, more to the point, she found me. I certainly didn't go looking. However, she has coerced me into spending the day with her, and as I do not wish to disappoint her I am going to take advantage of her hospitality. Therefore, these documents have been delivered through the postal service, to which point I hope they find you briskly.

Since I know that due to these circumstances you will naturally have wonders and concerns, I shall provide them based on what I imagine your questions must be. Do not worry; Pinkie is well, at least for a specific definition of "well" that likely applies to her and only her. However, she is in good spirits. She is as cheerful as ever, as energetic as ever, and her coat is as blindingly bright as ever. She apparently has many friends, several of which I imagine I am likely to meet once this letter has concluded and my time with her begins in earnest. She is far from destitute, and in fact works at the very confectioner's store to which we are supplying flour. Hopefully this will not become an issue. I will certainly pray against it.

Naturally, I am also aware of the one other thing you would have asked of me, were you able to predict these circumstances. While it discomforts me to do so, I certainly understand your reasons and will abide by them. I can make no promises, and will back down once she becomes overly stubborn on the issue, to which I have no doubt she will, but I will try my hardest.

Inky looked up from her paper, scanning the room for Pinkie, noticing her gaze was affixed somewhere else. Excellent. She could only write for so long while remaining so vague.

May Celestia guide me to bring my big sister home. May she have the will to forgive us.

Love,
Inky Pie

"Alright," Inky said, a lump forming in her throat which she desperately tried to clear. "I'm ready. Let's go."

“Whoo! Alright, so what are we going to do first? Let’s see, we already did Sugarcube Corner, which is first on the list, though it’s probably also on the list two or three more times, but that won’t be until later. Also, who cares about a dumb old list? Let’s do what we want, when we want it, flying by the seat of our pants! Not that we’re actually going to fly, of course; we’re not pegasi or anything. Though I think I was a pegasus once. Maybe that was a dream. I’m not sure. Also, what the hay kind of pony goes around wearing *pants* all the time-”

“Pinkie? You were going to see your friend Twilight?”

“Oh, right! I totally forgot! See, it’s a good thing I have you around to keep my head on straight. Though it would be kind of interesting to have it tilted at a 30-degree angle. Everything would look all slanty!”

Inky grumbled, a knot forming in her stomach as she knew she was going to have to ask the question at some point in the day, and much as it went against every fiber in her being to do it.

Inky still loved her sister, but that love came with a caveat: for Pinkie to, just as she herself would put it, be done with the farm. *Forever*.

Chapter 2

Inky Pie wasn't entirely sure what to expect regarding Ponyville's library, but upon entering the structure she could easily tell that it was, if nothing else, well taken care of. Nothing else could possibly be ascertained from such a cursory first glance; the sheer number of books means nothing toward the library's thoroughness if they are all about the same subject, after all. In order to determine *that*, she would have to come in for a closer, more scrutinizing look. Perhaps she would even find the time.

"Twilight? Hey Twilight, are you here?" Pinkie asked.

A few seconds passed. Perhaps she wasn't there. "Twilight... hmm. Maybe she's out. Or studying. Or asleep because she was up all night studying. You know, she's my friend but I really don't understand her sometimes. I mean, of course sometimes you're going to want to stay up all night; that can be a lot of fun, but why would you want to do it while reading some dusty old *book*? But let's see here; let's just make sure. Hey! Twilight! Wake up!"

The volume of her final few words cause both Inky to turn her head and another figure to emerge from a rear door, albeit not Twilight. Purple enough; but a bit too scaly for the job.

"Keep it down, Pinkie! Twilight's awake, she's just really... what was the word she used... right! Engrossed! She's really engrossed in her studies right now... which actually sounds kind of disgusting, if you ask me."

While Inky could certainly understand Twilight's plight, as she had been there all too many times, she was currently more concerned at the sight of the librarian's assistant. "That... that is a dragon. A very tiny dragon."

"Yep, I'm a dragon! Don't think I could be anything else... Name's Spike. I'm Twilight's assistant around here. So, is there anything I can help you with?"

Inky looked around at all the books. The odds were quite good that there would be something there that would pique her interest. "Actually, if you could locate for me-"

"Nope!" Pinkie interrupted, earning her a glare from her little sister which came and left unseen. "Actually, we need to see Twilight. We need to get everypony together to throw a big party for li'l Inky!"

"You didn't say anything about a party," Inky replied. "Also, didn't you want to ask about units of book measurement?"

"Oh, that's silly. Everypony knows that books are measured in pages!"

"But... but that was the whole reason we-"

"Though I guess some pages are bigger than others. So what are the units of page measurement? Now *there's* a question for the ages! Hey Twilight!"

"Alright, alright, I'm coming!" The voice emerging from the back seemed mildly irritated, which as it turned out, was an accurate assessment. As the lavender-coated mare walked into the library's main hall, her frazzled mane and generally exhausted look indicated that Pinkie's "up all night studying" prediction was likely true. "Pinkie, what do you need that Spike can't- oh. Hey." Despite Twilight's weariness, she managed to flash a smile as she turned to Inky. "Who's this?"

"Just my little sister Inky Pie that I haven't seen in years!"

"Really," Twilight stated, a bit incredulous. She could see a bit of resemblance in the face, but judging by her expressions the gray mare certainly didn't seem to act anything like Pinkie. Then again, Pinkie was clearly one of a kind. Asking Inky to be more like her big sister would be akin to asking a fish to climb a tree. It can try, but no way by Celestia is it coming close. "So... are you just here to show her off, or-"

"She's not 'showing me off'," Inky interjected, punctuating it with a sigh. "She came in here to ask you some kind of book-measure that she apparently already knows, and... well, actually I would be interested to see

if you have a few books I've been looking for." Bury herself in a book, Inky thought. No better way to kill time before informing Pinkie of the dreaded request.

"Oh? Well, sure! I swear, sometimes it seems like I'm the only one around here who ever uses this library... what are you looking for?"

"Hmm... well, I have been interested recently in the technological advances involved in Fillydelphian agriculture. Would have a book dedicated to the history of that?"

Twilight thought for a second. "Actually, I'm not sure. Spike, do you-"

"Don't look at me; I don't have a clue either. I wouldn't be caught dead reading that stuff... unless I had insomnia, maybe."

"Spike! Don't be rude to the patrons." Twilight thought for a few more seconds. There was probably such a book *somewhere* in the library, but she admittedly didn't have a clue where it was. However, a sly smile soon crept onto her face as she realized that there was somepony in this library who likely *did* know where the book was. Not that she knew it.

"Hey, Pinkie?"

"Yeah, Twi?" Pinkie had naturally spent this conversation immersed in her own form of book-balancing, getting up to four before the unicorn's interruption sent them all tumbling to the ground.

"I'm looking for a book on the history of technological advances in Fillydelphian agriculture. Do you think you could find that book for me?"

Pinkie looked around. "I could try. Hmm... Erm..."

"Also, your tail is on fire."

"My WHAT!?" Pinkie began panic and flail around, seemingly oblivious to the fact that her tail wasn't even warm. "Aaaaah! Putitoutputitoutputitoutputit-"

Her voice was ceased only by her head colliding with a bookcase, knocking her senseless for a split second but also causing a single, errantly positioned book to teeter off its shelf, landing atop Pinkie's ears. Twilight trotted over, levitated the book off of Pinkie, and with a bit of a smile and a chuckle, placed it well within Inky's grasp. "Is this what you're looking for?"

"Yeah, it is... how did you- more importantly, how did she-"

"I've been friends with Pinkie for a while now, and while I've come to learn that trying to figure out *why* Pinkie Pie works the way she does can cause... cerebral hemorrhaging, understanding *how* she works can be quite beneficial."

"You've been... friends with her?" Inky's tone seemed curious, but her facial expression bore a bit of worry. "For how long?"

"Ever since I moved here, close to a year ago. Pinkie was actually the first pony from Ponyville I ever met, not that she gave me the greatest first impression in the world..."

"I threw you a 'Welcome to Ponyville' party!" Pinkie replied. "What could possibly be a better first impression than that?"

"I meant the part where you stared at me for a few seconds before gasping and dashing off. Also, not a minute into that party I accidentally drank a glass of hot sauce."

"Accidentally?" Inky asked, skeptical. "Pardon me, but how do you 'accidentally' drink a glass of a liquid such as *hot sauce*?"

"I know, right?" Pinkie replied. "You don't just accidentally pick a sauce of such a fine vintage completely at random. The serrano undertones really had a great presence that year. Perfect for a cupcake, or even a banana nut muffin, though I don't think I'd pair it with a blueberry. Not enough cayenne, and the acidity certainly wouldn't mesh how I'd need it to. Of course, it's also perfectly delicious to simply drink straight, like how Twilight enjoys it-"

"Everything tasted like rubber for two days."

“Yeah, it’s kind of an acquired flavor. You get used to it.”

“I’m supposed to get used to-”

“Ahem. Twilight?” Inky said, trying her hardest to prevent this conversation’s runaway carriage from going over its cliff. “As I was saying, if you’ve been friends with Pinkie for that long...” The gray mare looked over at Pinkie. Any more words she would say about this within her earshot would certainly cause suspicion, which was the last thing she wanted. “...um, and I certainly would want to check out this book! So... Pinkie, do you think you can stay here and occupy yourself while Twilight and I go in the back to *check this book out*?”

“Oh, you don’t need to go in the back,” Pinkie said with an oblivious smile. On the one hand, that was good; Inky wanted her to be oblivious. But on the other... “You can just check it out right here, fast and easy!”

“Yes, but... I’ve never been to this library. I don’t even have a library card. Therefore, *Twilight*, don’t you think we should *go in the back* so I can get all the paperwork filled out for the card? I’m sure there’s a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess there *are* all those boring old papers...” Pinkie mused. “But that’s okay! You can just use my card!”

“I- That- But you don’t have it with you.”

“I don’t need to! That’s ‘cause it’s here!”

“Here? What? How?”

“I don’t like carrying the card around all the time, and you never know when you’re going to need it! So I hid it behind the books in the fiction section under P! For Pinkie Pie!”

“That- it-” Inky took a deep breath, steadying herself mentally. “Listen, Pinkie, I appreciate the sentiment, but I really think it would be for the best if I went ahead and got a library card myself, and that Twilight and I went into the back room to do it. Okay?”

Before Pinkie could even muster a reply Inky had all but shoved Twilight back into her more private quarters. Twilight complied despite being rather bewildered by the situation while Spike followed the two of them in. Pinkie, to her credit, decided not to worry and stayed put. As she crossed the door, Inky closed it shut and let out a relieved sigh. "Finally. Now we can talk."

"Talk about what?" Twilight asked. "What exactly was going on back there?"

"Listen. You said that you've known Pinkie for a while now. So I have to ask you, have you ever seen her hair... straighten?"

"Not that I know of. I honestly can't see Pinkie straightening her hair. I'm pretty sure she likes it poofy like that."

"That is not the question I asked," Inky replied, taking on a more serious tone. "I didn't ask if she ever straightened her hair. I asked if her hair ever *straightened*. On its own. Without any sort of obvious assistance."

"No, I don't think I've ever seen it happen... oh, but I did see the opposite once. Her hair was straight, and then it just poofed back up!"

"That could have been it reverting back," Inky said. "Then again, that could also have simply been an errant try at styling. I want to say it's the latter. I *hope* it's the latter."

"Why? What's the big deal?"

"Wait," Spike said, interjecting with a spark of thought, "do you mean the time you tried to throw her a surprise party? Oh yeah, her hair totally straightened. Deflated just like a balloon. Made the sound too, strangely enough..."

"It did?" Inky replied, suddenly growing tense. "Why? What happened?"

"Well... um... I *might* have told her that her friends were all lying to her because they didn't like her parties and they didn't want to be her friends anymore."

“Spike!” Twilight said, shocked. “Why would you say something like that?”

Spike nervously chuckled a bit before replying. “Because... she told me to? And... gems are delicious?”

“Why would she tell you to? And what does that even mean-”

“So she felt as though her friends had abandoned her,” Inky spoke, quietly and grimly, almost to no one at all. “Makes perfect sense, now that I think about it.”

“Perfect sense?” Considering all that had happened, Twilight was a bit worried, and when she was a bit worried, she liked to understand why. “Inky, if there’s something that we should know-”

“If you even see Pinkie’s hair straighten...” Inky sighed, trying to determine the best course of action for the unicorn. “Don’t blame her for when she gets out of sorts. It’s not her fault. Just... do your best to try and be a good friend.”

“Oh. Well, I think I can do that. I thought you were going to-”

“But at the same time, Twilight, keep an eye on her. I’m not saying she’s going to hurt you. I don’t think she’d hurt a soul. However, between you and me, even when she’s ‘normal’ I worry about her mental well-”

“Are you guys done yet?” Pinkie asked as she swung the door wide open. “Sheesh, how long does a few papers take? No offense, Twi, but being in a library all by yourself is capital B *boring*! It’s like I’m back on the rock farm it’s so dull.”

“Rock... farm?” Inky asked, not entirely sure what she was getting at.

“Yeah, the rock farm. Duh, Inky, it’s only the place we lived and worked since we were both little foals! C’mon, you’re smart enough to know that!”

Inky stared at Pinkie grimly for a split second before taking on a more serious tone. "Pinkie, I understand that you might not have a lot of happy memories about it, but that doesn't give you the right to call the fields our family has tilled since before Granny's granny could trot a 'rock farm.'"

"But that's all it is. Nothing but gloomy skies and dumb old boring rocks."

"Pinkie..."

"Dumb. Old. Boring. Rocks."

Inky sighed. "If you say so."

"So are you getting that book?"

"No. Never mind. I don't need it."

"Nope! Not like you're gonna have any time to read books today! Not when you're spending time with your big sister, Li'l Inky!"

Inky audibly grumbled. "I'm an inch taller than you."

"But let's see..." Pinkie said as she walked out of the library, with Inky a few paces back in tow. "Twilight knows about the party, so that's one down... ooh! We should tell Rainbow Dash next! She's probably off napping on a cloud somewhere..."

"Pegasus, I take it."

"Yep! Only the fastest and best weatherpony around! Actually, no, I think today's her day off, so she's probably at home. Ooh, that's even better!"

"Why is that better?"

"Rainbow Dash lives in a cloud house, up in the sky. Normally you can't get there unless you have some kind of air travel. So this is the perfect chance to use... the Pinkiecopter!"

“The...” Inky desperately tried to wrap her head around the concept of whatever a “Pinkiecopter” was. Nope. Nothing doing. “The what?”

“The Pinkiecopter! C’mon, I’ll show you! I finally got it fixed after this dumb mean lame griffon broke it. And you’re gonna get to be my first passenger! Aren’t you excited? I’d be so excited! I wish I could be my first passenger.”

As the two walked back to Sugarcube Corner, Inky followed her sister behind the building, finding herself gazing upon what could be charitably described as a contraption; one that could, in theory, overcome gravity. In practice... “You can’t be serious.”

“Completely serious! Oh this is going to be so great! I knew someday somepony was going to want to ride this thing with me so I got a second seat installed!”

“This can’t be safe.”

“No, it’s perfectly safe! This series of rotary oscillating feedback levers gives me all the control I need! You just start pedaling, and zoom! Off into the sky!” Pinkie punctuated her “zoom” by taking off from the ground herself, hooves extended, albeit only for a few seconds and a few feet before crashing back down to earth.

“I... I don’t think earth ponies were meant to fly.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I told you, I was a pegasus once. So we’ll be fine!”

“Do you... at least have a helmet I could wear?” *Though I doubt it would do much at a sufficient height...*

“Sure, I guess... if you’re that worried about it.” Pinkie dug around in what appeared to be a box of scraps, chucking away a telescope, a pogo stick, a moldy quiche, and a french horn before finally tossing a helmet to Inky that was almost as bright pink as its owner.

“Alright, then. Ready?”

While Inky herself was never very good with knots, her stomach certainly was, as it contorted itself into a shape that would make both a sailor and a pretzel-maker proud as she gingerly climbed into the passenger seat and clipped the helmet on. "Ready."

"Then let's go!" Pinkie jumped into the front seat and began pedaling. Any doubt in Inky's mind of the contraption's effectiveness was struck clean as they quickly gained altitude.

"Next stop: Dash's place!"

The copter moved forward as it continued to rise with impressive handling. It would have been a beautiful view... had Inky's gaze not transfixed itself horrifyingly at the ground.

Twilight Sparkle. Just minutes ago I had assured you that there was no chance that Pinkie Pie, my sister, would ever in her lifetime hurt a soul.

In the event that I survive this incident I shall offer you a formal apology.

Chapter 3

“How much longer?”

“Almost there!”

Almost isn't almost enough, Inky thought to herself. Pinkie said she'd be safe in this contraption, and desperately wanted to trust her, but given the evidence, how could she? A flurry of thoughts entered her mind, not the least of which was a prediction, years from now having to explain to a psychiatrist why she had a nervous breakdown while attempting a climb a stepladder.

“Isn't there some less... reckless way to get to her house?”

“Well... I suppose if we really wanted to we could've taken a hot air balloon. But where's the fun in that?”

“That really doesn't sound so bad.”

“Oh, it's not *bad*. Floating lazily in the sky, hooves resting solidly in the basket, being able to do nothing but relax and enjoy the scenery... it gets kind of boring, if you ask me.”

“Right now I think I'd rather have boring.”

“Why?” It might have sounded flippant to the untrained ear, but Pinkie was legitimately curious. Why be intentionally boring when you can have fun and get the same things accomplished?

“What do you mean, 'why?' This is absolutely terrifying!”

“Well, Inky, you *know* what Granny used to tell us about fears-”

“Pinkie, for Celestia's sake if you begin to bucking *sing* I will not hesitate to hurl myself from this helicopter.” Inky was bluffing, of course. She imagined she'd die from the fall, and listening to whatever Pinkie would

falsely declare to be “dulcet tones” wasn’t *quite* a fate worse than death. More like the lesser of two evils.

“Aww... oh well! We’re here anyway. Hey Dash!”

The cyan-coated pegasus peeked her head out the door of her cumulus-built home, and to be blunt, wasn’t as surprised as one might imagine. Pinkie did have a knack for showing up unexpected, and while it annoyed her a bit, given that the only other pegasus in her core group of friends wasn’t the biggest fan of heights, she appreciated the company. “Hey, Pinkie! You finally got that copter fixed!”

“Yep! The Pinkiecopter is once again fully operational! Plus I installed a passenger seat so you could even take a ride in it sometime!”

“Um... that’s nice, Pinkie, but... I can fly whenever I want. And I’m certainly faster, more agile, and capable of more acrobatic stunts than *that* contraption... no offense.”

“Please don’t prove her wrong please please please don’t prove her wrong...” Inky muttered in a tone she wished was softer than its true volume. In effect, she said it loud enough to give Rainbow Dash pause.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself a passenger already anyway.” Dash looked over toward the gray-coated mare and frowned slightly. “You okay there? You look... frightened.”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Pinkie replied. “I think she’s just a bit scared of heights. It’ll be alright.”

“It’s not the height so much as the impact upon hitting the ground that I fear.”

“Aww, don’t be such a scaredy-pony. I gave you a helmet.”

“I don’t think it would be very effective...”

Pinkie looked back at her sister, thinking for a few seconds. “Hmm... hey Dash? You got any safety goggles?”

“Safety goggles?” Inky asked, hoping Pinkie wasn’t serious but also aware that hope was likely in vain. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope! See, this one time, Rainbow Dash was tearing down this barn for our friend Applejack- ooh, that reminds me, you’re gonna need to meet Applejack too- and she blew it apart by slamming into the ground at super-high speeds with an enormous rainbow-powered explosion! But she walked away from it without a scratch because she wore her safety goggles! So if we get some for you, I guarantee you’ll be fine!”

“You are making this up.”

“Oh come on, Inky. Would I lie to you?”

“I’m not going to answer that right now.”

“Well, I don’t think they’d make you indestructible or anything,” Rainbow finally admitted, “but I guess they couldn’t hurt. I’ll go get you a pair, um... what’s your name again?”

Inky opened her mouth, but couldn’t get the words out in time. “Inky Pie! She’s none other than my little sister, visiting me for the first time in years! Isn’t it great?”

That’s not at all why I came here, Inky thought. But as far as Pinkie was concerned, it might as well have been. She was far too excited to finally reunite with her little sister that she couldn’t care less why Inky arrived in Ponyville in the first place. Whatever her reasons for coming, Pinkie had quickly and decisively overwritten them. After all, it was beyond doubtful that “Ascend to a cloud house on a homemade helicopter” was on Inky’s agenda for the day.

“Yeah, that’s cool, Pinkie. I didn’t even know you had a sister.”

“I certainly do! I have two of them, in fact. Oh my gosh I can’t believe I forgot to ask you! Inky! How’s Blinky been? Is she still liking those dumb old rocks too?”

“Pinkie, can we talk about this later? Perhaps sometime when I can actually touch the ground with my hooves?”

“Alright, I guess, if it’ll make you more comfortable. Rainbow Dash, can you get those goggles?”

“Sure thing! Be right back.” With that Rainbow Dash zipped off back into her house.

“And be sure to come to the sisterly reunion party we’re throwing tonight! Actually where are we going to throw that? Sugarcube Corner might be a bit crowded tonight... hey! I wonder if Applejack will let me borrow one of her family’s barns! Those are nice wide-open spaces with plenty of room to shake your flank to the beat! I wonder if she’s got one available...”

“Here you go!” Rainbow Dash arrived back at the cloud’s edge with a pair of goggles, fluttering off the cloud a bit as she placed them on the gray mare’s eyes.

“Alright, Inky! Now nothing can hurt you!”

“Actually, Pinkie,” Rainbow Dash said with a bit of trepidation, “it was really more aerial technique that allowed me to emerge uninjured than-”

“Aerial Technique?” Pinkie asked. “Ooh, is that the brand name? Sounds fancy and stylish!”

Rainbow Dash paused for a few seconds before coming up with a satisfactory answer. “Just get her down safe. And walk to Applejack’s; I think she’s been through enough flying for one day.”

“Or the rest of my life...” Inky mumbled.

“Aww, okey dokey! See you later, Dash!” As the pegasus walked back into her house, Pinkie performed a U-turn and began to descend, being back behind Sugarcube Corner within a few minutes’ time.

Touching solid ground was easily one of the greatest feelings Inky had ever experienced. She might never envy a pegasus ever again; flight isn’t a boon, it’s downright terrifying. She pressed her hooves toward the

earth and unashamedly kissed the dirt a few times, never again wanting to leave its stable, solid embrace.

“So! That was fun, wasn’t it?”

Inky glared daggers at her sister at the very word. “Fun? How could you possibly consider that fun? You are crazy, Pinkie. You really are.”

“Sure I’m crazy. Crazy about a good time! So anyway, you never told me about Blinky? What’s she been like? Is she alright? Did she get so tall and skinny like you? Which reminds me, here, have a cupcake!” Pinkie pulled the baked good seemingly out of nowhere, holding it underneath Inky’s nose expectantly.

“Okay, Pinkie. First of all, I’m not *that* skinny, you don’t need to keep trying to stuff my face. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, where did that *come* from?”

“From Sugarcube Corner, duh! I work there, you know, so I get all kinds of discounts! Not to mention the sampling, the taste-testing, the sneaking stuff off the back of the display rack when Mrs. Cake isn’t looking... which I’ve never actually done, by the way!” Pinkie looked from side to side shiftily. “There. Just in case she can hear us, I’m in the clear.”

“No, not that. I mean, physically, where were you keeping that cupcake. You’re not carrying any saddlebags or any other means of transporting-”

“I just had it with me. ‘Cause you never know when you’re gonna get hungry and want something sweet.”

“Yes, but- I’m never getting a good answer out of this, am I?”

“Sure you will! It came from Sugarcube Corner, and I had it with me. Why do you need a better answer than that?”

“I suppose I don’t...”

“Nope! So then, let’s get on to Applejack’s!” Pinkie took the cupcake for herself, eating it in one bite, then heading off, leaving Inky to follow behind.

“Wait,” Inky said, temporarily shifting to a gallop in order to catch up, “didn’t you want to ask about Blinky?”

“Oh yeah! Of course! She likes those dumb rocks, doesn’t she?”

“Well... I wouldn’t put it like that, but actually, yes, she does. She’s away from the farm right now, in school, studying archaeology. I suppose then it isn’t really the rocks she’s interested in but rather the things she finds within them.”

“She left too? Geez, Inky, why can’t you get away from the rock farm?”

“It’s not a rock...” Inky sighed. No way she was getting that through Pinkie’s head. “Why would I get away? It’s my job. I enjoy it.”

“Inky, I love you but you’re so boring sometimes, you know?”

“And you’re so crazy sometimes, but somehow we manage to get along, *don’t we?*”

“Yep, I guess we do! You don’t have to call me crazy though. You’re just like Rainbow Dash! She’s always saying ‘Pinkie Pie, you are so random!’ and I don’t even understand what that means. I mean, it’s not like I do anything at random; I really don’t.”

“You simply think differently than everypony else.”

“Hmm. You know, I never really thought about it like that, but yeah! I guess I *do* think differently than everypony else! That’s a great way of putting it! Thanks, Inky!”

“Don’t thank me, Pinkie. That’s what worries me.”

“Oh, stop worrying! I’m fine, you’re fine, everything and everypony is fine!”

Except it's not fine, Pinkie. Part of me loves you. Part of me hates you. But all of me worries about you. Despite how terrified that flight made me, I know you would never harm me intentionally, nor anypony else. But the way your mind works... Rainbow Dash is incorrect; it's not random, but it is irrational. Maybe it's greedy of me to say this, but... all I want is Pinkie back. The Pinkie I know. The Pinkie that was my best friend from the day I was born. The Pinkie that could put a smile on anypony's face and make even the worst drudgery of farm work legitimately entertaining. The Pinkie that kept us happy.

I know you, Pinkie, and this hyperactive caricature is far from it.

Chapter 4

“Well sure, Pinkie, I guess we could fix up this barn for a party,” Applejack stated with a smile. This certainly was a time for celebration, as far as the orange-coated mare was concerned. She knew in her heart that family was a very important thing, siblings especially. Applejack couldn’t bear to be away from either Big Macintosh or Apple Bloom for a month, much less a year, much less years *plural*. If anything, she couldn’t figure out how Pinkie Pie managed to do it. “It’s gonna be a bit of work clearing this place out, though. You up for it?”

“Of course we are! It can’t possibly be that much, and even if it is, it’ll totally be worth it.”

“How much isn’t that much?” Inky asked, bitterness beginning to leak into her tone. She had clearly been dragged around more than enough for one day, and was starting to show it. Forced away for her business duties and escorted back and forth across Ponyville- no, make that back, forth, and *up*. All due to one chance encounter that for all intents and purposes shouldn’t have happened. Shouldn’t this kind of luck be reserved for ponies with a broken mirror as their cutie mark?

“Oh, just clearing out a lot of the equipment. Shouldn’t take more than, oh, an hour, maybe two, if it’s the three of us. I’d have my own sister help us with all of this, but she’s still off with her friends for the day, doing... oh, what was it this time? Cutie Mark Crusader... Plumbing Installers? Something like that, yeah.”

Inky was curious what exactly she meant by that, but chose to ignore it. “Two hours? Seriously?”

“Don’t worry, lil’ Inky!” Pinkie said cheerfully. “I’ll be sure to make it a fun time!”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Oh come on, Inky, you’ve been such a stick in the mud all day. Don’t you want to throw a big party to celebrate finally getting to see your big sister again?”

Inky paused, scanning her mind over and over for an adequate lie, but it was not to be. Whether by coincidence or fate (though if asked, Inky would most certainly believe in the former), in the presence of the keeper of the Element of Honesty she finally decided to go ahead and speak the truth. “No.”

“No? Come on, Inky, it’s a party-”

“No, it isn’t, Pinkamena. It won’t be, because I want nothing to do with any of your parties. Somehow you failed to recognize this, but I did *not* come here to visit you or even to speak to you. I came here as part of a business contract. Gravelcreek Farms, *our family’s farm*, is supplying flour to Sugarcube Corner. Do you understand that, Pinkie? Flour! Wheat! It’s a *wheat farm*, not a rock farm, Pinkie! Get that into your head!”

Both Applejack and Pinkie Pie remained speechless as Inky ranted, both faces bearing expressions of shock, though Pinkie’s was tainted with a touch of sorrow.

“Furthermore, if I had *any idea* that you worked at Sugarcube Corner, I never would’ve shown up there in the first place! Because... I... can’t... stand you! I can’t! You’ll always be my sister... and I’ll always worry about you, but... you’re here and you’re safe and you’ve got plenty of ponies who *do* care about you and that’s good enough for me!”

Tainted, nothing; Pinkie’s expression was now full-on sorrow, everything she thought she knew about how Inky felt being crushed in an instant.

“Do you have idea what the family’s been like since you’ve been gone, Pinkie? It’s not like it was before. All the fun we used to have has been siphoned away. I’ve been doing all I can managing the business side of the operations, but... it’s not like it used to be, when you were there. But it’s never going to be like that again, is it? Because you wouldn’t listen to reason- you *couldn’t* listen to reason, just like you wouldn’t listen to a word

I've said until right now. You had to take your leave... and brand me a failure because you couldn't wait one more day.

"But as long as we're getting the truth out, do you want to know what the real truth is, Pinkie? Papa forgives you. In fact, he told me when I was about to leave for Ponyville that if I saw you, to tell you that he's sorry for everything, and that he knows you've got a life here now, but he still wants you to come back to the farm to visit every now and again. Mama, Blinky, they feel the same way. They want to be a family again, Pinkie. But *I don't*. As far as I'm concerned, I would rather never see your garish pink hide at the farm *ever again*."

"But... but..." For once, Pinkie had no idea what to say; those two words being all she could manage.

"Ever again!"

"I... I was just trying to make you-"

"EVER AGAIN!"

"...h-happy..." Pinkie spouted waterfalls of tears as she galloped away, her hoofsteps not entirely masking the faint sound of a deflating balloon.

Inky turned around, watching her sister run away. Sure, she wanted to let the truth out, but not like this. Never like this. "I'm... I'm sorry."

"And just what in tarnation was that all about?" Applejack was trying her hardest not to be furious at Inky, but this outburst would at least remain partially suppressed. "Now listen, I don't know what's going on with you and her, or what exactly your deal is, but I don't appreciate you acting that way to one of my friends! And besides, what I *do* know is that sisters just ain't supposed to act that way. Sure, I've been mad at Apple Bloom more than a time or two over the years, but none of that means I never want to see her again!"

"I didn't mean for it to come out like that." Inky's voice was soft and somber with regret; once again she was telling the pure, honest truth. Not that it helped her any.

“Well right now I don’t think it means a lick what you *meant* to do ‘cause you’ve already gone and done what you did. Now Pinkie’s run away to Celestia knows where just ‘cause she was trying to help you.”

“Help me? Help me? If she really wanted to help me she’d leave me alone. I mean, do you have any idea what she’s- oh. No, I guess you don’t.”

“Well, I’m all ears. So shoot.”

Inky lowered her eyes. She wasn’t serious, was she? “Forgive me, but I barely know you.”

“Yeah, and I barely know *you*, but I’m still willing to listen. Don’t worry; I won’t tell nopony you don’t want to know about any of this. I swear on it.”

Inky sighed and hung her head. “Pinkie... she was always cheerful, energetic, enthusiastic... but ever since she got her cutie mark, something in her changed. For a while it wasn’t all bad- in fact, one of her impromptu parties somehow managed to stave off a parasprite infestation that would’ve otherwise crippled us. But as time went on... Pinkie would always have fun while she worked, but now she just wanted to have fun, at the expense of her work and the expense of the farm’s well-being. One of her jobs was finding all the rocks in the soil and digging them out, which we let her do because she seemed to have an almost supernatural sense for figuring out exactly where they be hiding. I’ll be the first to admit it’s dull, tiring work, but she was good at it and she always managed to entertain herself despite the drudgery. However, one year she decided it would be a good idea to dig up all the rocks and replace them with rock candy; don’t ask me where she got that much of it. She thought it was hilarious. Papa didn’t agree. He’d had enough and told Pinkie... that she’d either have to straighten up or she’d have to leave the farm, because we literally couldn’t afford to put up with her nonsense. And as much as I wanted to agree with Papa, I just couldn’t let my best friend have an ultimatum like that. And so... I did the only thing I could think of...”

“Inkaldria Margaret Pie, you come down from the attic this instant!”

Inky ignored her mother’s calls and continued scribbling numbers onto paper. Frustrated, she looked at the numbers again, her expression clear that this wasn’t going to work at all. Gnashing her teeth she tore the paper up, tossing it behind her and began again.

Even as a filly, I’d always had an affinity for numbers and mathematics. You might think that wouldn’t have an enormous amount of relevance in a farming environment, but you’d be wrong. A farm is a business just like any other business, and therefore income and expenditures need to be properly allocated. Not only that, but analyzing these figures and augmenting techniques would allow the farm to run at peak efficiency, maximizing profits and minimizing unnecessary work. I suppose you could consider this my part in making the overall job less of a chore. It might not have been as immediately visible as Pinkie’s, but it was there and appreciated nonetheless.

Inky pulled an abacus over to her, clacking the markers together and apart with impressive speed as she continued to scribble numbers down.

Pinkie’s refusal to do her job at all, however, was throwing a wrench into our plans. As I stated, a farm- even one run by a family- is a business just like any other business, and if someone at any other business was not only refusing to do their own work but actively blocking other ponies from doing theirs, they’d be fired, and rightfully so. However, I couldn’t let that happen to Pinkie. We’d never had all that many visitors on the farm, after all, and so she... she’d not only been the big sister I always looked up to and idolized, but also my best friend. Not only that, but I knew that she simply wasn’t herself. She didn’t need an ultimatum; she needed help. So I had to help her the only way I knew how: crunch numbers.

Inky focused her gaze on the abacus as she performed the equations faster and faster as though she were a filly possessed, and in a way, she was. Nothing was going to stop her from completing her task. She was going to save Pinkie, and save the farm. She had to; there was no other recourse. But despite the pressure mounting on her, she was confident she had the answer to this puzzle. Somehow.

Despite my ideas, I knew the farm wasn't running at anywhere near peak efficiency. There were most certainly ways to lessen expenses and waste that would allow the farm to remain profitable, despite Pinkie making things so difficult. But of course, that would no longer be a problem if she was able to get the help she needs. I knew that somewhere deep down there had to be a solution: I simply wasn't going to accept a scenario in which there wasn't.

Inky grit her teeth down, slamming the markers into the sides of the abacus until finally a side came unhinged and flew off, sending the markers spilling out everywhere. Disappointed but undeterred, Inky simply pulled another abacus out from the desk's drawer and began again.

I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. Every second was focused on the problem and how I could save the family. I was on my third day and my fourth abacus when finally...

"That's it. That's it! I did it! I did it!"

Despite her exhaustion Inky bolted out of the attic and down the stairs, only to find her parents and younger sister sitting around the fire, their expressions grim and somber.

"Everyone, I figured out... how to... what's going on?"

Pinkie was gone. And it wasn't Papa's doing; she left of her own volition. I was aware that she hadn't taken the ultimatum well, but was pitifully unaware of just how unwell she took it. I didn't think anything of it when I saw her with straight hair for the first time in... some time, but... that seemed to be a trigger for something in her to snap, growing bitter with resentment toward how we had treated her. They told me earlier that day, she began spouting nonsense about how the rocks and the flour were her only friends, and they were telling her to leave with dignity instead of being forced out. Pinkie... she didn't need a grand plan to save the farm and the family. She just needed to be consoled, and to let know that there were ponies who cared about her, even through the hard times. But I was too short-sighted and one-dimensional to realize it. I didn't respond to my family's pleas and hollers because I thought I had the better idea.

In time, we learned that Pinkie had settled down in Ponyville. As far as we knew, she was safe, secure, and cheerful, which was really all we could ask for. We tried sending her letters, but no known address made that difficult, and since we never got a reply we had to assume they weren't making it to their destination. Eventually, we simply decided, as much as we... they wanted her back, that it was best just to let her be. She'd be fine. At least that's what we convinced ourselves.

"And why didn't *you* want her back?" Applejack asked, with natural curiosity. "I mean, if she was your big sister, and your best friend, and someone you'd go to those lengths to try to help-"

"Because ever since that day," Inky said softly, craning her head back around to view her flank, where an open book with the telltale grid of an accounting ledger was imprinted for all to see, "I get to look in the mirror and be reminded of how I failed."

For a few seconds, Applejack was silent, walking closer and giving Inky a light, gentle nuzzle, which the gray mare reluctantly accepted. "Sugarcube, I know that's gotta make you feel terrible, but you can't go around blaming yourself for-"

"Myself?" Inky took a step back, out of nuzzle range. "Who said anything about blaming myself? I blame *her*! If she had just been a little more patient... or a little less crazy..."

"Well it ain't healthy to be blaming her either. Sometimes these kinda things just happen to happen, you know, and it ain't nopony's fault. Now, I'll be the first to admit that I don't know you too well. In fact, Pinkie's barely said two words about you. But that don't change the fact that you're no failure. I can tell."

"Of course I'm not a failure," Inky replied, almost embarrassed to show the tiniest pit of pride. "Since Pinkie's gone and Blinky's off in college, it's been our parents and myself handling the administrative duties. And while Papa might know how to raise a barn and Mama how to plant a seed, I know how to run a business. Gravelcreek Farms has been more successful than ever."

"Well, in that case, what's the big problem then?"

Inky frowned. "I just wish it could be fun... like it used to be. But those days are gone."

Pinkie Pie was devastated. Sure, the rest of her family couldn't stand the sight of her, but she'd made peace with that. However, Inky was always her saving grace; the one who stood beside her through thick and thin, and now she had abandoned Pinkie too, and shockingly so at that. She walked back into Sugarcube Corner, figuring a pastry or ten might help to soothe her woes.

"Why hello, Pinkie! How are you doing on this beautiful, sunny day?" It was a familiar voice with a familiar accent that was likely unfamiliar to anyone not within the recesses of Pinkie's mind.

"Oh. Hey there, Madame LeFlour. I haven't seen you in a while." For better or worse, the Cakes were busy upfront with customers, and thus hadn't noticed Pinkie striking up a conversation with the flour sacks back in the kitchen.

"It has been far too long, hasn't it, Pinkie? Oh, there is so much to catch up on! But oh, you look so glum. What is the matter, dear?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just learned that Inky hates me and never wants to see me ever again!"

"But that cannot be right! Why, that is impossible!"

"I thought so too, but she told me as much. Apparently she hates my parties and can't stand talking to me for one second. I don't understand. I really thought she was my friend."

"Well of course she is your friend, Pinkie. And that is precisely why she needs you now more than ever!"

"What do you mean? She hates me!"

"The mademoiselle does not hate you, Pinkie. She has merely been brainwashed by living and working at the rock farm for so long that she no longer knows what to think!"

“Yeah. Yeah, that makes so much more sense!”

“So do you understand now, Pinkie? She requires your assistance! And I know just the plan on how to give it to her...”

She's crazy. They know that, right?

All that time living on a rock farm... of course it's going to change a pony's mind, and not for the better. I know Inkaldria, and she'd never be so angry and bitter at me, especially when I haven't done anything wrong. Clearly she isn't well, and it's all up to me to bring her mind back, since it seems I'm the only one capable of helping her.

Or at least, that's what I think is going on. But hey, when's the last time Madame LeFlour steered me wrong?

Chapter 5

“Now, I understand you got work and business to take care of back home,” Applejack stated, her previous anger having, for the most part, worn off, “but that don’t mean that you gotta be a stranger ‘round these parts. Ponyville’s a great town and it wouldn’t hurt you none to spend a little time here every now and again.”

“Thank you for the offer,” Inky replied, “but with Pinkie still here, I’m not sure if that’s-”

“Well, let me see if I got this straight. You don’t want Pinkie back at the farm ‘cause of all that mess that happened way back, yet you still wanna have fun like how it used to be. Now, I’d imagine that all the fancy mathematics you gotta do probably needs a whole bunch of quiet and concentration, which I know is stuff you ain’t getting with Pinkie around. I think everypony in this town can empathize with that, one way or another. But, if you’re on vacation... what’s it hurt?”

“But Pinkie... she’s so-”

“Hyperactive? That’s the word, ain’t it? Yeah, I agree. But you gotta cut her a little slack. I mean, she saw you by complete surprise for the first time in... how long?”

“Five years.”

“Five years, sheesh. And you weren’t expecting her to be excited? I know I would be. Especially if she hasn’t seen any of her family that whole time! And besides... she’s clearly forgiven you. Why can’t you do the same?”

Inky swallowed, trying to clear the lump in her throat as she figured out what to say. “It’s not that simple.”

“Only ‘cause you’re making it complicated.” Applejack walked out over towards one of the Acres’ orchards, motioning for Inky to follow, which she did after a few seconds.

“Now then,” Applejack said, continuing her train of thought, “deep down, we’re both farm girls, right? Granted, I don’t imagine you know the first thing about bucking, but that’s not the point. Sometimes, when you’re on the farm, you just gotta keep things simple. Making things so complicated that you don’t even know what’s going on is just gonna end up frustrating everypony around. Sometimes you just gotta take a step back and realize that.”

“Not everything can be considered in such concise terms.”

“Oh?” Applejack walked over to one of her trees with a smile. The apples were just about ripe on this one, and buckets had already been placed, marking it prime for bucking. “Then tell me, Miss Efficiency, what’s the most effective way to clear all the apples off of this here tree?”

Inky walked up the tree and thought. And thought. And thought some more. This wasn’t just economics; this was a exploration of physics. Then again, it’s all different forms of mathematics in the end, so with a fair amount of work she should be able to determine the best course of action-

“Stand clear!”

Inky got out of the way just in time for Applejack to slam both hind hooves into the tree’s trunk, within a few seconds causing every apple to break loose, falling off the tree and cascading gently into the prepared buckets. Inky was indeed astonished; this was efficiency the likes of which she had never dreamed. Every last apple from a single buck?

“You... how did... that was... I can’t...”

Applejack let out a slight chuckle seeing her so mesmerized. “Keep it simple, Sugarcube.”

Pinkie Pie watched Inky’s mesmerization, unamused. Flanked by a baby alligator on one side and a flour sack on the other, she stared into the closed-circuit television inches from her face. “Look at her, Gummy. Look at

Inkaldria. Do you know what she's doing? I'll tell you what she's doing! She's applebucking! She hasn't even been gone a day and she's already homesick. She wants life on the farm so bad that she's volunteering for Applejack! I guess it's too bad for her that AJ has the common sense to not buck *rocks, Inkaldria!*"

Pinkie's expression was quickly shunted from anger to sadness after a few seconds of thought. "Then again, all this does is go to show how far gone she is. She really can't consider any other way of living. She really has no idea how much better off I am here... and how much better off she can be here."

"Do you really think this will all be necessary, Pinkie?" asked Madame LeFlour, or more accurately, asked Pinkie herself, providing the high-pitched voice of her flour sack companion.

"You came up with the plan, Madame LeFlour. Are you having second thoughts?"

"Of course not. The mademoiselle requires our assistance! However, what if she does not cooperate? We cannot risk harming the poor girl."

"We won't have to risk it, because she *will* cooperate! She will understand that everything she thinks she knows about me, about this town, about the entire outside world has been ruthlessly poisoned! But it's okay, LeFlour, and do you know why? Because I have the antidote."

"Of course! Oh, you are such a good sister, Madame Pinkie, to be going to all this trouble for the mademoiselle."

"Believe me, it's the least I could do. Now then... ah! She's gone! Gummy, switch to the next camera!"

Gummy simply blinked, unmoving.

"Come on, Gummy! Next camera! I swear, what am I even paying you for? Fine, I'll just do it myself then."

Pinkie fiddled with a switch on the monitor, with each click the screen's view moving to a different scene somewhere within Ponyville.

“Fluttershy’s house, no... Carousel Boutique, no... Town Hall exterior, no... Sugarcube Corner interior upstairs apartment?”

The pink mare stared into the monitor at the sight of her own straightened locks for a few seconds before reacting with a grimace. “Get back to work!” she shouted through the screen, desperate for the attention of the back of her own head.

“Pinkie, madame, perhaps you should try Sweet Apple Acres entrance? If she just got done applebucking then-”

“Oh come on, LeFlour! She’s trying to avoid me, and she’s not stupid. She’s gonna know that’s the first place I’d look! So it’s *not* gonna be the first place I look! You hear that, Inky? Your big sister’s outsmarted you this time! Now then... the Library? Ah-ha! That’s it! That’s her right there! At least... I’m pretty sure that’s her. Come to think of it, everypony kind of looks like Inky.”

“Perhaps you should have paid the extra money for a color monitor?” the flour sack suggested.

“Perhaps I should have paid the extra shut your *face*, *LeFlour*! One more word like that out of you and you’re pancake batter, you hear me?”

“Oui, madame. I am very sorry.”

“You’d better be. Now then, if Inky’s hiding over at Twilight’s place, let’s pay her a little visit.”

“Oh, hey again, Pinkie... Pie?” Twilight wanted to respond cheerfully, but couldn’t help but remember what Inky had told her just a few hours ago.

“If you even see Pinkie’s hair straighten... don’t blame her for when she gets out of sorts. It’s not her fault. Just... do your best to try and be a good friend.”

“Is something wrong?” Twilight asked.

“That depends. Where’s Inkaldria?”

“In-who?”

“You know. Inkaldria? Inky Pie? Lil’ Inky? My sister? Come on, Twi, you know better than this.”

“Oh, right, her. I don’t know; I haven’t seen-”

“You’re a genius, Twilight. A big ol’ three eggs overeas-head brainiac. You know what that means? It means you’re too smart to play dumb!”

“Pinkie, what are you talking about?”

“I saw Inky come into the library, Twilight. You think I haven’t been watching your surveillance cameras?”

Despite being almost as much of a genius as Pinkie claimed, it certainly didn’t render the unicorn immune to being dumbfounded, as Pinkie was unwittingly proving. Surveillance cameras? “Pinkie, seriously. I have no idea what you’re talking about. I certainly don’t have any sort of surveillance cameras.”

“Oh come on, Twilight. You and your fancy magic-pants move into Ponyville, and all of a sudden a whole bunch of magical cameras show up around town? I mean... I don’t have a problem with it, really; I don’t want to interfere with your friendship studies or anything. That’s what it’s about, right?”

“I... That... You know what? If it’ll get you off the subject, sure.”

“See? No sense in lying to me, Twi. Speaking of, where’s Inky?”

“I don’t know. I swear, she didn’t come in here. Are you sure it was her that you, um, saw?”

“It was somepony that looked just like her. I think. It was hard to tell. Madame LeFlour’s right; I totally should’ve sprung for the color monitor.”

“Well, what did she look like?”

“Just like her! Light gray coat, dark gray mane... her mane and tail were a bit different though. They had a big light streak in them.”

“Oh, really...”

“Yeah, and her cutie mark was hard to make out, but that might have been different too.”

“You don’t say.”

“And come to think of it, she might have had a horn, but hey, I figure if I was a pegasus once, Inky might be a unicorn from time to time; I’m not going to judge her for it.”

This puzzle was coming together much easier than Twilight could’ve anticipated. “Pinkie, I’m pretty sure that was just-”

“And she looked like she’d put on some weight too! I mean, I wanted her to get a little meat on her bones, but not quite *that*-”

“Hey! What are you trying to say?”

“What? Why are you getting so defensive, Twi? I mean, it’s not like that was- oh was that you?”

Twilight grumbled. “Yes. Yes, that was me you saw. I went out to get the mail; that’s probably who you saw coming into the library.” *Wait a minute... how did she see me with a camera that doesn’t exist... you know what? It’s Pinkie Pie; just don’t think about it.*

“So... it was you. And not Inky. And you’re not hiding Inky from me, are you?”

“Of course not. Why would I do that?”

“Oh, of course you wouldn’t, Twilight. You’re just too *good* of a *good friend* to do something as *vicious* and *cruel* as hide my own little sister from me when she so desperately needs my help, *aren’t you?*”

Twilight blinked, a bit confused at the apparent veiled accusation.
“Um... yes? Yes, I am?”

“Well, alright. Keep me posted, though, okay? Just wave into the camera if you see anything.” Pinkie gestured with her hoof, pointing to her right at a bookshelf along the wall that appeared to have no camera in sight.

“Sure thing... Pinkie. I’ll do that... where exactly is the camera again?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Twilight. You know better than I do; they’re your cameras, after all.”

The unicorn grumbled, trapped in her own lie. “Right. They are mine. Of course.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your studies. Don’t worry, I’ll find Inky. No doubt about it!” Pinkie left in a hurry, the door slamming shut just as Twilight emitted a sigh of relief.

“What was that all about?” Spike asked.

“I don’t know. And honestly, I don’t think I want to know. Though I guess Inky was right... Pinkie sure does get... ‘out of sorts’ when her hair straightens like that. I hope she’s okay.”

“I don’t know. I mean, she’s Pinkie Pie; she’s always acting weird, but this almost seems like... a different *kind* of weird, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. But I’m sure she’ll come around. She always does.” Twilight paused for a few seconds before craning her neck around to look at herself. “Spike, have I gained weight?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Twilight. I wouldn’t trust a word Pinkie said about all that surveillance stuff.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Spi-”

“Besides, I’m sure Rarity muttering about how she’s going to need to retake your dress measurements the other day was just a coincidence.”

Twilight lowered her eyes. "Thanks, Spike."

"And plus, wasn't there something in one of your books about how lots of ponies put on weight this time of year? Something about insulation to prepare for the winter months?"

Twilight frowned as her eyes went even lower. "Thank you, Spike..."

"And it's not like you've been eating any differently. Well, except for those care packages the Princess has been sending you from Pony Joe's, but those donuts are meant to be shared with your friends, so it's not as bad as if you've just been eating them all yourself-"

"Okay, Spike. You have made your point. I am going for a jog now. Thank you. Goodbye." Twilight grumbled as she headed toward the door, opening it only to find the slender, gray-coated mare in question standing on the other side. "Hey, Inky. You know Pinkie's been looking for you? She had some bad timing; she was just here a minute ago."

"Really?" Inky perked up. Perhaps Pinkie was just being emotional. Perhaps she understood it was just an undesired outburst, despite its veracity. Perhaps she had already forgiven her and wanted to make amends. "Where is she? How is she?"

"She... didn't tell me where she went, actually. And as for how she is, well... her hair's straight."

Inky's eyes went wide. Perhaps she was wrong. Powerfully wrong. "How was she acting?"

"Honestly? Strange. Like, even for her. She was very paranoid about something, enough to come up with all these crazy misconceptions. She told me to wave into the camera if I saw anything," Twilight said with a chuckle.

"Wave into the camera? What camera?"

“The one that’s apparently on that bookshelf that I put over there.” Twilight pointed, smiling a bit as she gave where she thought the camera was supposed to be a gentle wave. “I don’t even want to know.”

“I do,” Inky replied, her tone serious. “What did she ask for me about?”

“She didn’t say. She just wanted to see you. Do you... you warned me about her hair going straight. Do you think she’s alright?”

“‘Alright’ is a subjective term as far as Pinkie is concerned, but... actually, never mind. I came here to get my mind off Pinkie for a second.” Inky walked in, scanning the bookshelf which Pinkie inadvertently headbutted earlier in the day. “I actually would like to check out that book I was talking about earlier, if we can find it without her quote-unquote ‘assistance.’” Inky sighed, shaking her head. Apparently trying to get her mind off Pinkie was only going to bring it right back. “She wasn’t always so hyper, you know. Cheerful, sure. Always smiling, always trying to make the best of a bad situation...”

“That sounds like Pinkie Pie to me.”

“It is. That’s how she still is, but... it’s almost like she’s *more* of herself, like her very essence has been amplified somehow. And she has all these misconstrued ideas as to the way things work... I was really hoping she’d have gotten better by now. I wasn’t expecting it, but I was hoping.”

Twilight frowned. She wasn’t sure what to say. Sure, Pinkie had always marched to the beat of a different drum- a drum that may or may not actually be a kazoo- but she’d never really thought of Pinkie as unwell, like her sister apparently did. Eccentric, absolutely, but nothing so far gone that she actually needed help. If nothing else, Pinkie thinking in a different direction than everypony else was a good thing; it worked wonders for problem-solving. But perhaps these very attributes prevented her from recognizing problems that truly needed solved. “So... I think this is the book we were talking about?” Twilight levitated the book over to Inky, who then sifted through a few pages; it was indeed the retrospective of Fillydelphian agricultural technology that she’d desired.

“Yes, it is. Are... you familiar with Applejack?”

“Yeah, I know her pretty well. What, did Pinkie send you over there, too?”

“She did. And... well, Applejack explained to me that it might not be a bad idea for me to come and visit Ponyville every once in a while. Not to visit Pinkie specifically or anything, but just to visit in general, to get away from the doldrums of the farm for a day or two. So, I figure that if I go ahead and check out this book, that’ll give me an excuse to come back sometime soon, since I certainly wouldn’t want to incur a late fee.”

“Well, my late fees aren’t really that strict. As long as you’re reading and enjoying the book and I get it back, that’s really the important thing.” All in all, Twilight was simply happy to have somepony using the library that wasn’t her. So few around seemed to take advantage of the opportunity to read and learn that the unicorn often wondered if the only reason the place hadn’t been closed down is because she lived there.

“I understand, but I’m looking for an excuse to come back.”

Twilight grinned. “Oh, I see. Well, alright then, I guess I could make them strict on this occasion.”

Inky chuckled a bit, finally able to show something constituting a smile after all this grief. “See to it that you do-”

“Hey Twilight! Thanks for the help!” The door swung open wide as the pink mare bounded in as only she could. “Hello, Inkaldria.”

“Help? What do you mean, help?” Inky asked to Twilight, growing a touch paranoid herself.

“She waved! I might have been stingy on the monitor, but I made sure to pay extra for the Twilight’s Waving In Front of the Library Interior Camera Alarm!”

Twilight pressed a hoof to her forehead, trying to avoid a migraine. “I... What?”

“And it worked like a charm! I would’ve been here sooner, but I had this great idea so I ended up having to stop off at Zecora’s first.”

“But... that’s all the way... and then... but you... and there’s no...”
Twilight began to breathe heavily as she pressed her hoof into her forehead even harder. “It’s okay, calm yourself down, don’t think about it...”

“Pinkie, listen. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, Inkaldria. I know you didn’t mean what you said. That’s why I’m here to help.”

“I’m glad you understand- wait, what did you just say?”

Pinkie pulled a rounded glass flask out from her saddlebags, one that looked more at home in a chemistry lab, half-full of liquid in a bright teal hue. “Just drink this, and you should be okay.”

“What is that and why do you want me to drink it?”

“It’s an elixir of mental clarity. And I want you to drink it ‘cause you’ve obviously been brainwashed by the rock farm!”

Now it was the gray mare’s turn to prevent a migraine. “Pinkie. There is no rock farm- wait. Did you just say that was for mental clarity?”

“That’s what Zecora told me! Although she might have just needed something to rhyme with ‘It’ll cost you ten bits; this isn’t a charity.’ Zecora’s like that sometimes.”

“Alright, Pinkie. I’ll drink this later. Right now I’ve got to-”

“If you’re going to drink it, drink it now, Inky!”

“Um, Pinkie?” Twilight asked, not trying to dispel the tension but doing a good job of it anyway. “If you’re not entirely certain what that is, it might not be safe for her to drink. You don’t want to hurt her, do you?”

“Of course not! This is all to help!”

“Then let me run an analysis. I think I’ve got some books and equipment in here that can figure out just what’s in that flask for you. I’ll um... wave when it’s ready.”

Pinkie was suspicious, but Twilight was right about one thing: if Inky got hurt from drinking that elixir, she’d never be able to forgive herself. She knew those two had to be keeping something from her, but even considering that it still wasn’t worth the risk. “Alright. You win this round, Inkaldria. But don’t worry. You’ll see my way of thinking very soon.” With that, Pinkie left the library, never taking her eyes off her sister as she backstepped out.

“Thank you, Twilight,” Inky said as the door closed. “I guess you figured out my plan as well.”

“There’s a plan?” Twilight asked, legitimately curious. “I was just afraid you’d drink something that might end up being poison.”

“Well... that too, I suppose. Run that analysis anyway. This might just be my sister’s salvation.”

Twilight wondered what that meant for a second, until she realized: *mental clarity*. “You’re... you’re not planning to do what I think you’re planning to do, are you?”

“She needs it, Twilight. Can you argue against that? Whether her hair’s straight or curly, this isn’t her. This isn’t Pinkie Pie. Even if the elixir is only temporary she’ll realize how irrational she’s being, and-”

“I’m not sure if I approve of this. Sure, she gets on my nerves sometimes, but I like Pinkie, both for and despite how she is. I don’t want her to change.”

Inky paused, frowning before taking the flask in her mouth and placing it inside her own saddlebags. “I do.”

Chapter 6

“What am I gonna do, Spike? What am I gonna do?”

“Um... relax and don't worry about it?” Spike had known Twilight for literally his entire life, and understood that while she generally was wise enough to call a molehill a molehill, every once in a while she'd shovel enough dirt on one that anypony couldn't help but pronounce it a mountain. This looked to be one of those times.

“Don't worry about it? I have to worry about it! First we got Pinkie going crazy with all her talk about cameras and paranoia and trying to coerce her sister by drinking some potion that she's not even sure what it is!”

“Yeah, but-”

“And *then*, Inky herself is thinking Pinkie's gone total horseapples and is trying to use that same potion to change her back to whatever it is she wants to change her back to!”

“I know, but-”

“What if Inky does get Pinkie to drink that stuff? What if doesn't work? What if it *does* work? What if Pinkie is changed? What... what if she isn't the Element of Laughter anymore? What then, Spike? *What then?*”

“I don't know! But there's no point in arguing with me about it, alright? Just calm down for a second, sheesh.”

“I can't calm down when the whole fate of Equestria could be at stake over this! We can't just lose an Element! What happens when we lose an Element?”

“I'm not being the new Pinkie Pie,” Spike replied with a grumble.

“Like hay you’re not! You’re going to be the best Pinkie Pie the world has ever seen! All we gotta do is dye you pink, and give you a fake mustache, and get a garbage bag full of confetti, and... and...” Twilight collapsed to the floor with a dejected sigh. “Never mind. That’ll never work.”

“It didn’t work when I was Rainbow Dash either. I’m not attuned to those things like you guys are.”

“I know.” Twilight stared into space for a beat, pondering the reality of Pinkie indeed losing herself due to her sister’s will. “And as far as I know, nopony else is. No *one* else is.”

“I don’t think you could make another Pinkie Pie if you tried. Or another Fluttershy, or another Rainbow Dash... certainly not another Rarity... nothing else in the world could compare to her-”

“Yeah, I get it. So what do we do?”

“I dunno. Hope for the best?”

“It wouldn’t be my first choice,” Twilight said glumly, “but it might be the best idea.”

“Okay, just pour out a little bit, make it look like I drank a few sips... perfect.” Inky Pie walked into Sugarcube Corner with confidence. This was it. The chance to finally fix everything. It might still not be perfect, but it would be as close to perfect as she could feasibly get, which for once was good enough. Feign clarity, gain Pinkie’s trust, make her drink this thing. No problems. No troubles. Nothing of the sort, not that her mind would accept that such difficulties existed. Few do when one is so close to victory.

“Pinkie? Are you here?”

“Of course I’m here, Inkaldria. Why wouldn’t I be?” The voice came from behind the gray mare, which would have been a bit of a surprise if not for the fact that at this point, she was prepared to anticipate anything.

“Pinkie. Twilight ran those tests.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, yeah, she did. And it was that elixir, just like you said. So I drank some of it, and... I can't believe it. You're... you're completely right.”

“Ha! I knew you would come to see reason.”

“Of course, Pinkie. I certainly do, so... is there anything I can do to help you with your work today?”

“Sure, yeah! The Cakes are always looking for somepony to help them out, so just go in the back! I'll tell 'em it's okay, and you can learn how to make some of this good stuff! Just be careful around the sink when you're in there, alright? Somepony managed to clog it up with tree sap while we were out.”

“I'll make sure to do that.”

Inky dashed into the back. It had definitely grown busier since this morning, so the Cakes hadn't yet noticed her, and Pinkie was off doing... whatever it is Pinkie does. Inky didn't know. Inky didn't care. The important thing is, she still had the elixir. Perhaps, just perhaps, it would retain its function if she baked it into something. Was that a crazy plan? Perhaps, but hey, being a little crazy now would in turn save a lot of crazy later, therefore making this plan negative crazy. Or so Inky believed. Was this rational? Once again, Inky didn't know, and Inky didn't care.

Despite Pinkie's premonitions, baking wasn't all that hard for Inky. She was hardly a master of the craft, but it was something she managed to do from time and time and thus could handle herself as she gathered the ingredients together. What to make? Something Pinkie wouldn't suspect, of course; something she'd devour without a second thought. Of course, this being Pinkie Pie, a pony who brought toward many others in town curious concern over both her metabolism and stomach capacity, that could be a lot of things. Not good enough for Inky, though. She needed to come up with a thing. The best thing. The perfect thing.

Cupcakes? No. Too obvious. Danish? No. Not obvious enough. Muffins? Muffins. Perfect. Just gather up the dry ingredients, and, of course, one certain special wet ingredient...

Inky stared into the elixir's translucent hue only to ponder its significance, as well as her own chain of logic. Pinkie wanted to use this on her, and a whole lot of good *that* did. But then again, Pinkie herself wasn't entirely sure if it was what she claimed. Was the elixir potentially doing nothing worth the risk? Perhaps. Was the elixir potentially being poison worth the risk? Perhaps not.

"One sip," Inky whispered to herself. "One sip wouldn't hurt me enough to do anything. One sip, and if I feel sick, I'll reconsider. I'll figure out something else."

Inky took a deep breath before letting a few drops of the fluid settle on her tongue and roll back into her throat.

"Ugh, this is vile! It tastes like... black licorice! And she wanted me to drink this whole-"

Inky could say no more as a flood of thoughts entered her mind, indicative of the fact that Zecora was a lot of things, but a liar was not one of them; this potion worked precisely as advertised. Some were memories, others even less tangible, simply emotions, but all bore one similarity: they were of two fillies.

Pinkamena and Inkaldria Pie.

Worlds apart, yet paradoxically inseparable.

Laughter. Joy. Cheer. Goodwill. Hope. Yet these were fading away, not being erased so much as sloppily painted over.

Fear. Uncertainty. Plight. Melancholy. Shame.

Anger. Above all else, anger. But anger for what? Anger for treachery. For deceit. For abandonment. But which sister abandoned the other? The memories couldn't say. The emotions couldn't say. Inkaldria couldn't say.

If Inkaldria couldn't be certain, how could Pinkamena be certain?

From this question led the simplest answer: she wasn't. No pony was. Thoughts that only became more vivid as her final memories of Pinkie before today came to light. Angry at her parents. Angry at the farm. Angry at the hand she'd been dealt. Yet anger toward either Inky or Blinky never entered the frame.

"She never hated me," Inky said to herself as she slowly left her trance. "She never stopped caring... and she has no idea why I despise her..."

As the memories faded, she looked back at the flask, the few drops she imbibed having given her such a revelation. It was no longer relevant that Pinkie wanted to use this on her; no, it was far more important that *she* was perfectly willing to use this on Pinkie, and desired to hide it in a batch of muffins at that.

"What in Celestia's name am I doing?"

She had to find Pinkie; had to apologize. There was no other recourse. Even if the two could never see eye to eye, that was no excuse for this kind of manipulation. Or treachery, or deceit, or abandonment. For years she'd thought of Pinkie as *that* sister; she wasn't about to let it become herself.

"Pinkie? Pinkie, where'd you go?"

"Up here!" said Pinkie from the top of the stairs. Inky charged up as fast as she could, nearly tripping multiple times in anticipation.

"Pinkie, I gotta tell you; I'm so sorry that-"

"Inkaldria. When I said that you'll see my way of thinking very soon, what did you think I meant?"

"I... I don't understand..." It was then and only then that Inky noticed: Pinkie's mane was still straight. Something was still wrong.

"You don't think I didn't see you? You don't think there aren't cameras back in the kitchen, too?"

“Cameras... Pinkie, I wasn’t-”

“Then what *were* you doing?”

“I was... okay, I admit it. I was trying to get you to drink some of that elixir.”

“I knew it! You just can’t accept who I am, can you?”

“No! No, it’s not like that! I realize that now... I swear. Let me make it up to you, somehow. I swear. You’re you. Please.”

“Oh, there’s something you can do, Inkaldria. There’s certainly something you can do for me alright!”

Anything, Inky began to think, but those thoughts were soon easily superseded by Pinkie’s tone. “What... what is it... I-I don’t... I’m sorry...”

Still with a scowl on her face, Pinkie slowly walked over to a cabinet in her bedroom, opening a drawer and pulling out an envelope. “Open this,” she said, shoving the paper into her sister’s face. “And read it.”

“Read...” Inky studied the envelope. While soft and faded from age, the handwriting was still quite legible. Pinkie Pie. Ponyville, Equestria.

No. This... this couldn’t be...

Her eyes immediately darted to the return address. Clyde Pie. Gravelcreek Farms.

It could, and it was.

“Pinkie... you got our letters. You *saved* our letters...” The brief glimpse of joy turned sour as Inky pulled on the envelope’s flap, the glue still firmly affixed. “You... you didn’t read our letters...”

“Open it and read it!”

“Of course, of course!” Inky tore the envelope open, caring little for the paper’s integrity, almost enough to damage the document inside.
“Pinkie. This is a letter. From Papa.”

“I know that! How dumb do you think I am?”

“Then why did you never-”

“Read it!”

“Dear... Pinkamena. While I most certainly hope this letter reaches you, given that we have sent out over a dozen letters now with no reply, we have to assume that they are not being received as intended. With that in mind, this will be the last letter we send you until a reply is sent back.”

Pinkie’s grimace slowly turned into a frown. All they wanted was a reply? No. That couldn’t be it. They couldn’t stand her. They hated her. They drove her away.

“All has been well, essentially. As I’m not certain which letters you’ve received, if any, I’m not sure how much I should reiterate, but I will try not to bore you with overmuch detail. I know you bore easily, and I’m beginning to see that as less of a fault than as simply an attribute.

As I hope you’ve heard, Blinkavera has taken over your job of locating and digging up the rocks in our fields, and has recently uncovered something astounding. We’re not certain what it is precisely, but it appears to be an fragment of a tool that they say dates back to the Precelestial Era. I’m not sure what to make of it, but she’s been very excited about it, and has been very anxious to learn more about it, as well as the history behind it altogether.”

Pinkie let out a bit of grin. The age difference between her and Blinky meant that the two were never quite as close as her and Inky were, but none of that meant that the oldest sister didn’t think and wonder about Blinky from time to time. And miss. More than from time to time. Still nothing about hatred or anger or never wanting to see Pinkie again, though. Strange, that.

“Inkaldria is...” Inky stopped, scanning the next few lines. Did Papa really write this? “...getting better now. At the very least... she’s... slowly becoming less miserable. She’s still burying herself in her work, however... she’s at least trying to enjoy herself now... despite her insistence that she can’t have fun without you around.”

Her father spoke the truth. Inky hated to make that admission, but she couldn’t help it; she had lied enough for one day. Tears began to well up in the gray mare’s eyes as Pinkie moved a few inches closer. “Go on. Please.”

Inky looked up. Not only was her sister smiling, but her mane was gradually beginning to curl. All this time, misconceptions and grudges had tarnished both of them, and the collective realization was becoming nothing short of bliss.

“She’ll never admit it,” Inky said, finding the will to go on through tears of both sadness and joy, “but she... she desperately wants you to return. We all do. I understand that your life is in Ponyville now, and I respect that. The farm isn’t for everyone; I understand that now. With that in mind, however, we would like nothing more than to welcome you back to the farm, not as an employee, or an associate... but as family...”

“Aww, lil’ Inky! You know I can’t stay mad at you like that!” Pinkie was back: mane, spirit and all. “I just *knew* you wanted to come and hang out with your big sister! Even if you didn’t know you wanted to come and hang out with me.”

“Pinkie... these letters... you got our letters...”

“Well, duh! I told you, Ditzzy Doo’s the best mailmare in all of Equestria! You think she wouldn’t be able to track me down?”

“Then why didn’t you open them?” Inky’s tone bore enough force that Pinkie nearly toppled over backwards, just barely catching and righting herself to bring all four hooves back to the ground. Inky couldn’t be certain whether that performance was genuine or simply done for dramatic effect. For her sanity’s sake, she assumed the latter.

“Well...” Pinkie frowned. “I was scared. Scared you guys really *did* hate me and all that mean old stuff. This isn’t like a monster or a meanie or something I could just laugh at, you know. It was you guys. I was... afraid to open them and... and prove myself right. So I guess I had you do it.”

“Yet you kept them.”

“Well of course I did! ‘Cause, well... when I left, I was so angry at the family. I always thought they- you loved me, and now you wanted me gone? I just couldn’t trust you anymore.”

“And losing a friend’s trust is...” Inky didn’t have to say the rest. She knew Pinkie knew the saying; Mama had taught it to both of them quite well.

“Exactly. So I didn’t bring any photographs, or mementos, or anything. These letters were all I had to remember you by.”

Inky desperately wanted to chastise her sister for not reading them. So much could have been avoided... but now was neither the time nor the place. “They don’t have to be.”

“They don’t? They don’t! Because I can go back? Sometime? Sometime soon? Yeah! Sometime soon!”

“Yeah, and... alright, I’ll admit it. I had fun today.”

Pinkie beamed. “A-ha! See? Sometimes you just gotta learn to kick back and enjoy yourself!

“And to think I wanted to change you... and you wanted to change me.”

“Yeah... I’m sorry about that. I’m not sure what came over me.”

“Stress. Grief. Paranoia. I’m not innocent either, but, erm... can we forgive each other?”

“Of course we can! All this sappy stuff just drags everything down anyway. So I saw you take a sip of that elixir. How was it, anyway?”

“Oh, it was... oh no, it’s still in the kitchen! If that stuff gets into some batter, everypony in town will be gathering epiphanies! Which... might not be the *worst* thing in the world, but it should probably still be something we should-”

“Way ahead of you, Inky!”

Inky looked up at her sister, only to discover she wasn’t there. Inky turned around to find Pinkie had not only somehow managed to get behind her, but did so while having gathered the elixir from downstairs.

“How are you *doing* this?”

“When you live here, you know all the shortcuts. Well anyway, you took a sip and you’re alright, so let’s see how it is!”

Pinkie uncorked the flask with her mouth and proceeded to drink the rest of the elixir, to Inky’s shock.

“Mmm! Black licorice!”

The delight of the flavor soon turned to horror as Pinkie began to tremble uncontrollably, simply shivering at first but soon bouncing around the room, like a superball... or a pony possessed.

“Pinkie? Pinkie! Are you alright?” *And I was going to... no; no time for that now.* “Are you okay?”

“I-I-I... I’m kinda.... dizzy...”

Not a second later, Pinkie skidded to a stop, albeit four feet off the ground, pausing for a few moments before landing, thankfully on her bed. “By Celestia... I can’t believe it!”

“What is it?” Apparently Pinkie *did* have an epiphany through all that, sparking Inky’s curiosity like flint to steel.

“All this time... I had no idea, but it’s all so obvious now...”

“Yes? Yes? What is it?”

“Mrs. Cake totally knows I’ve been swiping pastries off the back of the display rack, and she’s been deducting the cost of them from my paycheck!”

Inky lowered her eyes. “What.”

“That’s how she still is, but... it’s almost like she’s more of herself, like her very essence has been amplified somehow.”

“Amplified...” Twilight couldn’t place it, but there was something about the way Inky had said that which didn’t sit well with her. That word, amplified. It made sense in context, but... there was something else there, and the unicorn went to work at the word as though it were a new horseshoe puzzle for her to solve. Not that they could make ones difficult enough for her anymore.

“Amplified... amplified...” What does one amplify? Sound, of course, but not just that. Essence, apparently, though that wasn’t quite it either. It is the intangible that is amplified. Amplified sounds, amplified concepts, amplified power, amplified magic...

“Amplified magic...” Twilight’s eyes widened. “Spike!”

“Yes! What’s going on?”

“Take a letter to the Princess.”

“Right now?”

“Right now. This is important.”

Chapter 7

Luna had taken over the sky for at least an hour by the time Inky finally made her way home. Her legs were sore from the walk, though for once she didn't mind it. It had been a good day. She didn't need to make any calculations to figure that out.

She opened the door to the house only to find it empty. Strange. The family did generally go to bed early, but not quite this early. "Hello? Mama? Papa?" Silence, aside from her own hoofsteps. "Where is everypony?" No one around, it seemed. Perhaps they were asleep, or out somewhere, for some reason... no matter for now. Time instead to get this paperwork filed; she did originally come to Ponyville to get the Sugarcube Corner contracts settled, after all.

This must have been anticipated, for the filing cabinet came with a note attached: "Meet us in the barn." Curious. Inky left the house, walking out toward the barn pensively, not sure what to make of all this. Hopefully it wasn't a big deal, though. Just because she had ended up having a good day doesn't mean it wasn't also a long one.

The sounds were indicative of something, however, though she wasn't entirely certain of what. No; not just something, but someone. Multiple someones, in fact. Stranger and stranger. However, the best way to find out what was going on was also the simplest.

"Hello-"

"SURPRISE!"

Streamers. Balloons. Confetti. And, of course, Pinkie. Who else would arrange this?

"Happy cuteceañera, lil' Inky!"

"Cutece- Pinkie, I got my cutie mark over five years ago."

“I know! Which means you’re really, really, *really* overdue for your party!”

Inky looked around; Pinkie wasn’t the only one here. Twilight, Spike, Applejack, Rainbow Dash... and a unicorn and a pegasus whom the gray mare couldn’t place. More of Pinkie’s friends, most likely. Her parents were there as well, content to sit out of the way of most of the festivities yet still more cheerful than Inky could recall them being for a long time.

“See, after you left, I read all the rest of the letters that you guys sent me, and that’s how I learned how you got your cutie mark. But then I realized that you guys were all sad and worried when Inky got her cutie mark, so you probably didn’t feel like partying, and if you didn’t feel like partying, that means Inky never got her cuteceañera party, and I still really wanted to have a party to celebrate us reuniting anyway, so that’s when I got the great idea-”

“Pinkamena!”

Pinkie blinked, her mouth coming to a screeching halt that for once wasn’t literal. “Yeah, sis?”

Inky thought for a few seconds. “Actually, never mind. Keep going.”

“Okay, that’s great! So like I was saying, I totally owed you, like, two parties now and I had to figure out what I was going to do when I got the perfect idea that...”

Pinkie continued to ramble on as Twilight approached the mare of the hour. “Hey Inky. Pinkie said we didn’t have to worry about getting you any presents on such short notice or anything, but I got you something anyway.” Twilight telekinetically reached into her saddlebags and pulled out a familiar-looking book. “It’s that agriculture book you kept wanting to check out. I figure since you probably don’t need an excuse to come back to Ponyville anymore, you can go ahead and have it.”

“I can just keep it? ... Are you allowed to do that?”

Twilight smiled sheepishly. “Well... not *technically*... but this particular book has apparently been in the Ponyville Library for six years, and has yet

to be checked out. By anypony. Ever. So... I don't think it'll be missed. Plus, I always like to see a book have a good home."

"So... how'd you guys all get here before me in time to decorate all this anyway?"

"We just-"

"Oh, that's easy!" Pinkie said, interrupting the conversation seemingly as per usual. "I just added a whole bunch more passenger seats to the Pinkiecopter, and we took off!"

Inky came dangerously close to a broken jaw given the speed at which it slammed into the barn floor. "Are you crazy? You had all these ponies ride on that deathtrap? I had never been more scared in my life and you all didn't have any problem with it? I can't believe-"

"Gotcha!"

She didn't have to believe, as Inky blushed once she realized she'd been had. "Don't scare me like that."

"Nah, we just took a hot air balloon. Much easier that way. But now that I think about it, I probably could find room for five extra passenger seats on the copter, and then-"

"Don't. Please. For the sake of my blood pressure."

Inky then turned to her parents, clearly having initiated the surprise portion of the party; only they would know Inky would head straight for the filing cabinet. "So you guys are alright with Pinkie being here then?"

"Of course we are," Clyde stated, his voice stern, yet not imposing, as though he were reading from an encyclopedia. "The important thing is that *you* are."

"Well... I guess I am now." Inky let out a pleasant sigh. "And if it wasn't for the sheer coincidence of me stumbling into where Pinkie works, none of this would've ever happened."

“Well now, I would not be so bold as to chalk it up entirely to coincidence, Inkaldria, as I do have a confession to make. I’ve found multiple leads toward bakeries to sell our flour to in the Ponyville area, and I chose to pursue Sugarcube Corner for a reason. A reason which naturally had nothing to do with their baked goods.”

Inky chuckled. A bit shocked, but also deep down a bit grateful. “You knew.”

“Indeed. I’d heard enough hearsay to pin down Pinkie’s place of employment, and given that it was, luckily enough, a bakery, I knew I had to do my best to have the two businesses cooperate.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

“If I did, would you have gone?”

Inky pondered his words, not entirely wishing to admit the truth, but still doing so. “No. No, I guess I wouldn’t have.”

“Precisely. I apologize for not being forthright with you, but I wasn’t about to sit idly while our family lay broken and there was something that could be done.”

“No, don’t apologize, Papa. You did the right thing. I think... both Pinkie and I learned that... it’s just not worth harboring a grudge, no matter who it is. It won’t make you happy. In the end, all it’ll do is consume you.”

“A valuable lesson to learn indeed,” spoke a mare’s voice from outside, clearly audible through the opening in the door. “Pinkie wrote me something quite similar.”

Inky’s parents looked on in awe, mouths agape, and as Inky turned around, she couldn’t help but follow suit, bowing toward the floor as fast as her legs would allow her. “P-P-P... Princess Celestia...”

“I’m sorry,” the alicorn said with a smirk. “Am I still too early to be fashionably late?”

“Your... your royal highness I am not worthy of such gratitude as your presence, in fact, your very essence encapsulating this area speaks volumes toward your infinite goodwill and benevolent treatment of the common pony, to which we are ever grateful, now and forevermore; in addition, a thousand begs of forgiveness toward my lack of understanding toward your remarkable wisdom, as infinite as the grains of sand on the beaches of all Equestria, for why you have chosen to bless us all with your benevolent presence-”

Inky continued to ramble on with her groveling compliments as Celestia made her way inside. “And here I thought *you* were the talkative one, Pinkie.” As Inky’s speech perpetuated, apparently growing more humble and less worthy by the second, the alicorn chose to give her what she apparently was expecting.

“CEASE!”

Celestia gave Inky a stern look as the earth pony- and, in fact, everypony else in the barn- suddenly went silent, all while maintaining an inner smile. It had been a while since she’d used the Royal Canterlot Voice; she’d forgotten how *fun* it could be. Small wonder why Luna was fond of it.

“It has been over eleven centuries since We, Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia, She Who Brings Forth the Sun to Grant Her Subjects Their Beautiful Day, with the help and guidance of Our sister, usurped the foul spirit of chaos Discord and assumed Our joint role as Monarch of Equestria.

“It has been over ten centuries since We, by the abhorrent virtue of having no other choice, banished that selfsame sister, Her Royal Highness Princess Luna, She Who Casts Forth Darkness to Grant Her Subjects Their Deserved Rest and Respite, to the moon and as such took control of Our full monarchical duties.

“Therefore, given over a millennium of uninterrupted rule, do you know how We feel toward such formal royal customs?”

Celestia bent down toward a visibly trembling Inky and smiled. “They kind of... feel pointless after a while. But don’t tell anypony I said that, okay?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. I mean, your highness. I mean... I mean...”

“Relax, Inky. This is your party. Have fun.”

“I... I... Thank you. Thank you ever so much.”

“So... why *are* you here, Princess?” Twilight asked.

“Well, Twilight, I got your letter speaking about your concern with Pinkie being... amplified, and Pinkie spoke of this party in her own letter, so I imagined I could simply do it here.”

“It?” Inky asked, a bit bewildered. “Your highness, what is it?”

“Inky Pie, today you are not only with an excellent group of friends, but in the presence of the six keepers of the Elements of Harmony. Their magic, as well as their friendship, have already saved Equestria more than once, and I imagine they have not yet seen their last fight. But that’s neither here nor there. Each one of these ponies, upon receiving their cutie mark, had the element residing in their heart grow within them- amplify, to use your term.

“Applejack, for example, realized life in the city wasn’t for her and the only way to be true to herself was to return to the farm. Amplified Honesty.

“Rarity found a large cache of gems, yet was happiest knowing she could use them to decorate other ponies’ outfits. Amplified Generosity.

“Fluttershy was able to not only tame, but befriend a large number of creatures she had never before even seen, all thanks to her docile, benevolent nature. Amplified Kindness.

“Pinkie Pie... well, I’m sure you were there for what she managed, swearing from that day forth to be a thrower of parties and emissary of smiles. Amplified Laughter.

“Rainbow Dash, whose Sonic Rainboom began this entire chain of events? It was all to defend the honor of her good friend Fluttershy, and

going to nigh-impossible lengths to refuse to let anypony treat her poorly. Amplified Loyalty.

“And finally, Twilight Sparkle, my dear pupil. The second the Rainboom hit, an unmitigated explosion of arcane potential erupted from her body, power which she was barely able to control, if she could control it at all. Amplified Magic, I would believe.

“Now. For four of them, these... amplifications, I suppose, were benign, practically unnoticeable. For Twilight, however, it was much more vivid and malignant. For one thing, if I hadn’t been there to calm her down, her parents would have remained polymorphed into-”

“Okay, she gets it,” Twilight said, a bit annoyed by the candidness of her mentor. “Can we move on to Pinkie?”

“Of course. Pinkie, I believe, resides somewhere in between. Normal enough most of the time, but still possesses bouts of wholly irrational behavior. I’m actually somewhat embarrassed I hadn’t noticed this sooner.”

“So, what does this mean?” Inky asked.

“Yeah,” Pinkie said, a bit concerned herself. “You’re not gonna make me all boring and stuff, are you?”

“Of course not,” the Princess replied. “I’m simply going to do with you what I did with Twilight, and dampen that which was amplified.”

“Dampen?” Inky said faintly, practically whispering to herself, pondering its meaning. “No. Please, don’t. Your highness... you don’t understand. Pinkie... she’s not a caricature. She’s not crazy. Well, okay, she’s a little crazy, but it’s a sane level of crazy! I wanted her to change back for so long, but... it wasn’t her that changed. It was my perception of her, and who I wanted her to be. Who she is right now, at this very moment, is Pinkie Pie. Please don’t take that away from her.”

Celestia smiled at Inky, her gaze as warm as her very own sun on a summer afternoon. “I’m glad to hear you say that, but I had no intention of

any drastic alteration. In fact... I might have already performed the dampening in the middle of your plea.”

“You... what?” Inky looked over at her sister. Not a hair out of place, which would almost certainly be the first thing to go. “Are you okay, Pinkie? Do you feel any different?”

“Not... not really. I feel fine. Perfectly fine! And great! I don’t really notice anything unusual...”

“That’s such a relief.”

“Yeah! In fact, I... wait a minute... I *don’t* notice anything unusual. In fact, I don’t notice anything!”

“Come again?”

“The cameras? What happened to the cameras?”

“What cameras, Pinkie? There were never any-”

“All the cameras, everywhere! They’re gone! Everything’s gone! All the people watching us, the people reading about us...”

“Reading? *People*?”

“The iris wipes! Celestia, what did you do? What happened to the iris wipes? I know there was one coming!”

Celestia looked on, stunned, while Inky glared daggers at the alicorn and Pinkie tried her best not to completely freak out.

“Where is everybody!?”