



Newsworthy

Lead Reporter: Medicshy

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# Newsworthy

## Chapter 1

### The Scoop

The letter arrived early in the morning, marked with the N.E. insignia and stamped with 'URGENT'. The recipient, a parchment furred pegasus with a short mane the deep blue of ink and a long tail of the same color, opened the envelope. Inside were six photos and a letter from the Editor In Chief herself. It read:

*Ink Well,*

*Last night was the Grand Galloping Gala, and rumors say it was ruined by six ponies from Ponyville. I have provided you with Film Reel's photos, each with the appropriate rumor on the back. Four were identified, including Celestia's own prized protege, Twilight Sparkle. The scandal alone will sell a million copies, Ink Well, so get your flank to Ponyville and dig up that dirt. Do well, and your future is brighter than the sun. Failing us will have severe consequences. You have three days before the magazine goes out. Get to it.*

*Photoshop, Editor in*

*Chief*

Ink Well dropped the letter on his desk and grinned. "Looks like I've got an in with the higher ups if they're entrusting this to me." He looked at the golden ink pot sitting on his desk, the one that, along with a blue fountain pen, graced his flank as his cutie mark. Closing his eyes and smiling to himself, he recited the engraving on the bottom. "'One source, endless possibilities.' Ink Well, you've finally got your second chance." He grabbed his bag, notebook, and pen, put away the pictures, and donned his brown fedora and lanyard containing his journalist identification with the National Equirer. Supplies ready, he left his house and took wing to Ponyville.

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Ink Well landed at the edge of Ponyville under the bright midday sun and looked once more at the photos. "Let's see... Rarity, rumor: assaulting Prince Blueblood. Rainbow Dash, rumor: destroying the dance hall. Fluttershy, rumor: starting a stampede throughout the castle. Twilight Sparkle, rumor: harboring the others. Rumor for the pink one is causing a ruckus in the dance hall, and the orange one was rumored selling tainted food." He put away the pictures and smirked. "This'll be a piece of cake. I'll have my story ready by tonight."

Ink Well made his way into town. Many townsponies went about their business, enjoying the beautiful day given to them. Ink Well picked a random pony and, stopping her, held up his journalist lanyard. "Excuse me miss. Ink Well, National Equirer. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

The rose-maned pony's eyes lit up. "The Equirer! I love that magazine! I read every issue!"

"Oh? Well thank you. Always glad to know we have a dedicated reader. Would you like to help, 'cause I just need a little bit of information on the ponies in these pictures." Ink Well showed her the pictures. "Could you tell me where I could find them, and the names of the two earth ponies?"

"Of course! Those are Twilight's friends!" The pony pulled Ink Well close and whispered conspiratorially in his ear. "Why? Did they do something embarrassing?"

Ink Well forced himself out of her grasp. "Maybe. I'm just here to get their side of the story. Strange rumors flying around the Gala, just need to see if they're true."

"Ooh! The Gala? Interesting... Well Applejack is the orange one, and Pinkie Pie is the pink one. AJ is probably at the marketplace selling apples today, and Pinkie is working for Mr. and Mrs. Cake at Sugarcube Corner, if I had to guess."

“How about the others?”

“Rainbow is on weather patrol I think, and there's a note on the Library door saying that Twilight went into the Everfree Forest and will be back tonight, though anypony who goes in there willingly is crazy if you ask me. I guess Fluttershy's at her cottage, but I don't really know, she's always so seclusive. And Rarity is probably at her boutique over there.”

Ink Well took down notes on the pictures as she pointed out directions to where each pony would be. “Thank you! Your help is greatly appreciated, miss?”

“Rose. And glad I could help such a neat magazine. Feel free to mention me in the article! Oh, I can't wait to tell Daisy and Lily!”

“Thank you Rose. Have a nice day.” Ink Well tipped his hat to the pony and walked down the street. Behind him, he heard a squeal as Rose ran off excitedly. “That was easier than I thought. This'll be a walk in the park.” Cutting through the park, he made his way to the nearest place, the Carousel Boutique.

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Ink Well walked up to the door. Seeing the 'Open' sign, he entered the shop to the tinkle of a bell. From inside the shop, a voice called “Just a minute!” He looked around the shop at the many dresser's dummies decked in amazing clothing. Whoever worked here really knew a thing or two about fashion.

Something brushed against his leg. Hearing a purring, he looked down at a white Persian cat with a purple bow stroking against him. He leaned closer to it and nuzzled it with his nose. “Hello there kitty. Aren't you a friendly one?” In one swift motion the cat's claws were out and the paw streaked through the air. Ink Well jumped back staring at the cat as it smiled smugly at him. His eyes focused on his nose, where three claw marks slowly drew blood into his fur. “Why you little-”

“Hello! Welcome to Carousel Boutique! May I interest you in... Opalescence! Don't attack the customers!” A beautiful white furred unicorn with purple mane came from the back, matching the stunning photo of

Rarity perfectly. She seemed to glide into the room before settling in a way that set her mane and cutie mark, three diamonds, perfectly catching the light. "I'm so sorry about Opalescence, she really is a bad kitty. Would you like a bandage?"

Ink Well rubbed his nose. "No, don't worry. It's alright."

"Well if there's anything I can-" Rarity gasped, running to Ink Well's side. "Oh my! That hat! It does not go with your fur at all! And its so out of style! Where did you get this from? A bargain bin? I have something I simply MUST show you, wait here." Rarity disappeared into a back room of her shop. "No... no, oh, that simply won't do. No... where is it?... AHAH!" She reappeared holding a large black top hat with green flowery trimming. "Try this on, you'll look fabulous in it!" She floated it with her magic to put it on him, floating his off of his head.

Ink Well dodged the top hat, grabbing his fedora from the air and jamming it back on. "What? Ma'am, no. While that is a very nice hat, you of all ponies should know that fedoras are always in style." Rarity looked at him as though he was completely insane, a shocked disgust spreading across her face. Ink Well continued on unfazed. "I'm not actually here to buy anything." He flipped open the lanyard around his neck. "Ink Well, National Equirer. I'd just like to ask you a few questions about-"

"The National Equirer? No wonder you have such atrocious fashion sense! Out! Out of my beautiful store!" Rarity pushed him towards the door.

"Hey! I just want to ask you a few questions about-"

"Not after that scandalous story you wrote about my costumes for Sapphire Shores. I did NOT steal those gems and I won't have you slinging any more mud on the name of my store!" She shoved him through the door. "Now get out!"

"Hey, listen! I didn't write anything on Sapphire Shores. That's Pincushion's depa-!" The store's door slammed into Ink Well's nose. He stumbled grabbing his nose and landed on his back outside. "Ow! See if I send you any customers. Your service stinks! And that cat should be de-clawed!" Woozy and rubbing his sore nose, he walked away from the store.

---

Ink Well decided to take a moment to care for his scratches and bumps in the center of town. He sat down, enjoying the beautiful skies overhead and letting the sun ease the soreness out. As he did, he spotted a blue streak flying among the few clouds, clearing them, a rainbow trailing behind it. He marveled at the speed of the flying figure above. The figure looped and swirled, rolling and banking expertly before landing on a cloud above him, resolving into the form of a pegasus from his picture, Rainbow Dash in all her glory.

Ink Well called up to the filly alighted on the cloud above. "That was some flying you did there!"

The rainbow-maned head popped over the side of the cloud. "Oh! You were watching, were ya? Yeah, I've got some moves. No biggie."

"No biggie? That was awesome! You MUST be Rainbow Dash, right? Winner of the Best Young Flyers competition?"

"Yeah. That's me. What about it?"

Ink Well pulled out his notebook and fountain pen. "Well, my name is Ink Well, and I'm doing a story for the National Equirer. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

"Wait wait wait. The Equirer? Those lame brains? They said the Rainboom I did was a fake! They said I cheated right in front of the Princess and the Wonderbolts!" Ink Well's heart dropped as Rainbow Dash reared up and lifted her hooves for a fight. How could he have forgotten about that one? Of course she'd be sore... "The townsponies bugged me about it for a month! Did you write that?"

"No! It wasn't me!"

"You did, didn't you!"

"No! It was... oh gosh, who was on that story... um..."

"Why I oughta-" Rainbow Dash shot from the cloud.

"I... oh geez." Ink Well flew as fast as his wings could carry him, pounding them furiously to keep ahead of Dash, who gained with each passing second.

"When I catch you I'm gonna kick you so hard you won't fly straight for a week!"

"It wasn't me I swear!" Ink Well ducked and weaved, flying through an open window and past a family of confused ponies. "Sorry!" he yelled to them as he flew through the door, Rainbow Dash right behind. He shot skyward, looping back and heading towards town hall, but was cut short as Rainbow Dash popped up before him. Banking beneath her, he turned towards the outskirts of town, weaving between branches and through bushes. Rainbow maintained her tail, gaining ground with every wing beat. Despite his best efforts, Ink Well was outmaneuvered at every move. Frantic, he tumbled left and crashed through a bush. Rainbow Dash followed, appearing over a river.

Ink Well was nowhere to be seen. "Darn it! Where'd he go?" Rainbow Dash hovered, scanning around her, until she spotted a broken branch swinging in the wind, leading her towards the nearby hills. "Aha! You won't get away from me!" Rainbow streaked off, following the lead she'd spotted.

A few seconds later, Ink Well's sopping hat surfaced on the river. Beside it, Ink Well burst from the water gasping for breath. His head darted around, frightened eyes scanning the skies for Rainbow Dash. When it was clear she was gone, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Swimming to the shore and dragging himself out, he shuddered. "That... is not something I want to do again. It's a good thing my bag's waterproof." Looking at his surroundings, he found he was well out of town, but near where Rose had said Fluttershy's cottage was. "Guess I'll go there next." Having made his decision, he wrung the water from his hat and set off.

---

Slowly drip-drying, Ink Well wandered through the trees until he found the path, then followed it away from town. Making his way to Fluttershy's Cottage, a thought hit him. "Why do I recognize that name? Was she... She was that model! The one discovered by Photo Finish! She was everywhere,



how did I not recognize her picture? She was such a good model too, it was such a shame she quit...”

A few minutes later, Ink Well found Fluttershy's cottage. Amid the chirping of birds and the scurrying of small animals he noticed the many birdhouses, warrens, and animal houses around the main house, which was built into a huge tree. He examined one of the birdhouses in detail, pleased at the careful work that went into it. “So she likes animals. That's good to know.”

A voice like the whisper of an angel came from behind him. “Oh. Um. Excuse me. Could you... Could you not stand there? I'm trying to, um, feed the birds...”

“Oh. Sorry. Let me move.” Ink Well stepped aside, letting the owner of the voice pass by. A beautiful yellow furred pegasus with a flowing pink mane and tail flew past him, three pink butterflies adorning her flank. She was definitely the pony in the picture, the graceful model he remembered, Fluttershy. She tipped a bag of bird seed and filled a small feeding tray before she moved on to the other houses. Ink Well followed her as she fed the birds, apparently oblivious to her surroundings. After a few minutes of watching her work, Ink Well asked her a question. “Do you care for all of these animals?”

The pegasus jumped and with a scared squeak flew into a nearby tree. Ink Well followed. “I'm sorry! I didn't mean to frighten you. I was just wondering if you took care of all of these animals around here or just fed the birds.” The yellow pegasus floated down to the ground and started digging her hoof in the dirt. They stood there for a few seconds in silence, Ink Well smiling awkwardly. “Well, um, I only ask because I rather like animals, though they don't ever seem to much like me...” He rubbed his nose, which still bore the scratches of earlier. Again they stood there in silence, the other pegasus continuing to dig at the dirt. “Well this has been an interesting conversation, but I actually came all the way out here for a reason. Are you Fluttershy?” The smallest of nods was her response. Ink Well took out his notebook and grabbed his pen between his teeth, preparing to write. While slightly muffled, the words were still understandable. “Right, well, my name is Ink Well and I write for the National Equirer and I-” A squeak and she was gone, the door to her house shutting behind her.

Ink Well walked up and knocked on the door. "I'm sorry, was it something I said?"

No response. The inside of the house was silent.

"Did I scare you or something? I was just hoping I could ask you a few questions about the Gala and what happened there, if it's no big... deal..." He smacked his forehead with his hoof. "We wrote a story about you, didn't we? I promise, I had nothing to do with it, and if you want, I'll gladly help you file a complaint." There was a rustling above, followed by the appearance of a white bunny, which scowled and bounced a rock off of his head. He looked up and shook a hoof at it. In return it threw another rock. Ink Well shook his head and returned his attention to the door. "I guess I'll just leave then. Again, I'm sorry to have worried you or anything. Shouldn't have even come over and bothered you." He put away the pen and, noticing a motion at the window, tipped his hat towards it. "Have a nice day miss Fluttershy. Glad to have met you outside of the magazines."

---

Walking dejectedly back to town, Ink Well sighed to himself. "Okay Inky, it's clear that your current tactic isn't working. The Equirer name just has too much reputation, and these ponies seem the type to attract its attention. You're just gonna have to work around that." He smiled to himself, trying to pep himself up. "You can do that! No problem! You were a fiction writer before this whole journalist gig. You can figure this out. You've just got to believe in yourself! Nothing can go wrong, no sir."

"There he is!"

"Oh geez, not again!" Ink Well leaped into a bush on the side of the road and scanned the skies worriedly for rainbows. "I swear! I didn't do it! It wasn't me!"

"Whoa there! Who are you talking to?" Ink Well stopped his frantic scanning and looked down into the faces of Rose and two other smiling ponies. Rose took a step forward. "It's me, you remember, Rose? I brought a few friends to meet you. And... why are you cowering in a bush?"

“Cowering? Who's cowering? I was just... um...” Ink Well scrambled his way out of the bush. “I was just going incognito. Normal methods weren't working.” He took a step forward, feeling a tug as his bag snagged on a branch. He smiled as he pulled at the strap. “Who are these nice fillies?”

“Oh, this is Lily, and this is Daisy! See girls! This is the colt from the Equirer!”

Ink Well nodded to the girls, still tugging at his bag. “Very nice to meet you, now if you'll excuse me, I-”

Daisy took a step closer to him. “So do you really work for the Equirer? What's that like?”

Lily then stepped herself between Ink Well and Daisy. “It must be exciting. Could you put me in a story in the next issue? I've always wanted to be in the magazines.”

Ink Well felt crowded as he worked to free his bag. “Uh, well, I don't know... I'm just kind of given the assignments, like the one I'm on now... Could I talk to you later?”

“On assignment? What about?”

“I already told you Lily, he's doing a story on the Twilight Sparkle and her friends!” Rose shoved Lily out of the way. “Do you need any more information? I'd be more than glad to help.”

“No! Let me help! I'm way better than her at hearing gossip.”

Lily confronted her friends. “Shut up Daisy, you are not!”

“Am too!” The three ladies started bickering and shoving, Ink Well caught in the middle. He tugged hard on the bag, freeing it and stumbling out of the scuffle. Using the convenient distraction, he fled the scene, leaving the fighting fillies behind.

---

Running into the center of town, Ink Well ducked into a house to blend in with the crowd. The inside was bustling with activity. Ink Well slunk his way through the crowds, the gingerbread looking walls, and the baked goods displays, working his way to a shop counter. As he got there, he rang the service bell. After a short wait an amber furred colt in a red and white hat and bow tie walked up to the counter. "Sorry, we're a little busy today. Welcome to Sugarcube Corner, can I help you?"

Ink Well looked surprised. "Did you say Sugarcube Corner? Are you Mr. Cake?"

"Indeed I am sonny, what can I do for ya?"

"Oh, hold on..." Ink Well took out the picture of the pink pony and looked at the notes he scribbled on it. "Yes, I was looking for a... Pinkie Pie. Does she work here?"

Mr. Cake looked at him strangely. "'A Pinkie Pie'? Are you new in town or something?"

Ink Well hesitated, trying to think of the best way to bring up why he was here. "Yes... I'm doing a story with a magazine about the Grand Galloping Gala and she's a person of interest. Just a few questions on a small town pony's thoughts on the party. Is she here?" Ink Well flashed his badge. Flashing an I.D. always seemed to give a claim credence, even if the pony seeing it can't read it in time.

Mr. Cake eyed him suspiciously. "Yes... well, she's in the back making cupcakes. You can talk to her, but please don't distract her too much. We can't afford to fall behind, all these Gala after parties..." He smiled briefly at him as he went to tend to another customer. "Please think of Sugarcube Corner for all your future catering needs."

Ink Well maneuvered his way behind the counter and into the kitchen. Inside was a sweltering heat and a pink pony bouncing around between the ovens. "Hello? Pinkie Pie?"

The pony turned, frizzy pink mane bouncing around the face immediately recognized as the Pinky Pie from the picture, three balloons on

her flank. She smiled brightly at him. "Hi! Are you that pony from the Equirer?"

Ink Well took a step back. "Err, yeah. How did you hear about that?"

"Oh silly, everypony has been talking about you! Besides, I know everypony in town. Even the ones just visiting!" Pinkie Pie pulled a tray of cupcakes out of an oven and put in another one. "I love the Equirer! Did you know that Celestia was dating the hydra from Froggy Bottom Bog? I never would have guessed!" She began to hum as she spread frosting on the latest batch of sweets.

"Oh? Is she? I don't actually have much time to read what the other writers are working on. I'm normally on an assignment, like I am now."

Pinkie Pie bounced over. "You wanted to know about the Gala right?"

Ink Well raised an eyebrow, surprised at how easy this was going. "Uh... yeah. Let's see, the rumor was..." Ink Well took out the picture to check the facts. "Ah, you made quite a ruckus in the dance hall. Could you tell me about that?"

"Sure I could! But, I'm kind of busy right now... I know! You should come back here later tonight! There's going to be a fun party here and I would love to talk about it then!"

"Won't you be busy working the party?"

"Working? Silly pony, I'm going to be throwing it! Come on by! It'll be fun!"

Ink Well shrugged. "I don't know... I don't do well at social gatherings."

Pinkie Pie tapped him on the nose. "Don't you worry! There won't be a lot of ponies there, but it'll still be the most fun you've ever had! Think of it as a welcome party!"

"Well... alright. But we'll talk about the Gala at it right?"

“Sure! Whatever you want!”

“Okay... Well then, thank you for the invitation Ms. Pie. I'll see you then.”

“Okie Dokie Lokie! See you tonight!”

---

Ink Well wandered from Sugarcube Corner and into the mid-afternoon marketplace. There he was surrounded by the sounds of the many merchants selling their wares. He moved between the flower stalls, herb stands, and various knickknacks of everyday life until his ears were perked by a boisterous voice piercing the air. “Come 'n get some fresh apples! Just picked today! Most delicious apple you've ever tasted or your money back!”

Ink Well followed the voice to its owner, an orange pony the spitting image of the one in the picture. She stood with her hooves crossed at her apple stall wearing a white apron and a cowpony's hat, three apples marking her flank. He looked at the apples in the cart around her, fuller and shinier and redder than any apples he'd seen before. “Those look much too good to be true. They have to be altered somehow. I need to investigate this further.”

Ink Well walked up to the stall owner. She gave him a huge smile and nodded to him. “Howdy sir! Can I interest you in anything?”

“Why yes, I'd like an apple please.”

“Alright, just one? It's one bit for five.”

“That's quite a lot cheaper than they sell for in Cloudsdale.”

“Course it is! We grow 'em fresh here. I'll betcha it's a might better tasting than one too. Here, try one.” Applejack tossed him an apple. “Go ahead and take a bite. I'll give it to you free if it ain't the best apple you ever tasted.”

“Thank you kindly, miss...?”

“Applejack.”

“Thank you miss Applejack.” Ink Well looked funnily at the apple before carefully taking a bite. Pure ecstasy overtook his face as flavor exploded across his tongue. He ate the rest voraciously, reveling in the taste. “That's the best apple I've ever had! You grew that?”

“Yes I did, thank ya kindly. You paying for that?”

“Of course! Give me four more.” Ink Well pulled out a coin and tossed it to Applejack, who handed back four apples. Ink Well put them in his pack. “Hey, when do you get off of work?”

Applejack gave him a funny look. “What, are you trying to ask me out or somethin'? Don't you think that's a might sudden?”

“What? No. See I'm...” Ink Well frowned as he struggled for a good lie. He flashed his journalist lanyard for a fraction of a second. “I'm a food critic for the Daily Apple in Cloudsdale and I'm thinking of writing you a referral. I just need to know more about your farm and yourself to make it an interesting read. Once word gets out on your apples, you'll have orders coming in from all over Cloudsdale, if not all of Equestria.”

“Well why didn't you say so?! I was about to close up shop anyway. If'n you'll help, I'd be mighty grateful, and then we could start on that story.” Applejack pulled a cord on the canopy of the stall, collapsing it into a covered cart of apples.

“Uh... alright. I suppose I could help. What do you need?”

Applejack moved behind her stall and pulled out a cart full of empty barrels. “Well, I brought in two apple carts, and if'n you pulled the empty one back to Sweet Apple Acres, I could get back to the farm in one trip, and I could start off your story on the way there! Whadya say to that?”

Ink Well looked at the cart, worry crossing his features. “Well, I don't know... I'm not exactly the strongest pony in the herd.”

“Do you want yer story or not?”

“Shouldn't I be asking you that?” Ink Well looked at the empty cart, then at Applejack, then pulled out his empty notebook. After a few moments of looking at the blank pages, he sighed. “Fine. I'll help you out.”

Applejack slapped the harness onto Ink Well. “Yeehaw! And don' worry, You won't even feel the cart.”

---

On the path to Sweet Apple Acres, Ink Well pulled and strained in his harness. He found himself many lengths behind Applejack, who breezed ahead with her full apple cart. “You won't even feel the cart. Yeah... right... She must be the strongest pony,” Ink Well collapsed, panting onto the ground, “in all of Equestria to think this is light...”

Applejack called back at him. “Hey back there! What's taking so long? Don't you want your story?”

“Yeah... yeah... I'm coming...” Ink Well struggled up, tugging on his cart again. “I swear you had better have the dirtiest dirt ever or this story is not worth the effort.”

It took him until the sun was nearing the treeline before Ink Well managed to struggle the cart into Applejack's barn. Exhausted, he dragged himself from the barn, clawing at the dirt. As he sat there gasping and working his pained lungs, Applejack walked up with a bottle of apple juice. “You alright there Mr. Daily Apple? Sorry to work you so hard, but most colts around here are the strong silent type. You ready to do that interview?”

Ink Well nodded, chest heaving for air. “Yeah... yeah... I'll just... whew... could you put the juice... on the ground? I can't stand right now.” Applejack put down the juice as Ink Well pulled out his notebook and pen. He took a long gulp, emptying the bottle in one go. Once that was done, he stood on wobbly legs, readying his notebook. “Ah. Much better. Thank you kindly. Now then, miss Applejack, I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your apples and Sweet Apple Acres.”

“Sure thing Mr... hey, what is your name anyway?”



“Oh, it's Ink Well. Now, if you'll just...” Ink Well froze at the puzzled look on Applejack's face. Inside he kicked himself for saying his real name. 'How could you let it just slip out like that? It'll ruin everything you idiot!' Outside, he smiled to the blonde, freckle faced pony. “I'm sorry, is something the matter?”

Applejack frowned, tapping her hoof against the ground. “Ink Well... Ink Well... Why's that name ringin' a bell?”

“Well, it's actually a surprisingly common name. But I shouldn't be confused with the budding artist in Fillydelphia. Nope, just a simple journalist.” ‘Shut up Ink Well, you're digging yourself a hole here.’

“No... it ain't an artist... Where'd you say you were from? Can I see that I.D. again?”

Ink Well backed away from Applejack, forcing a smile. “No need, I'm from The Daily Apple in Cloudsdale. It's a relatively small newspaper that specializes on food, nothing too spectacular.”

Applejack looked at him, suspicious of his new found smiley personality. “If it's nothin', then give me the I.D.”

Ink Well kept smiling and backing away. “You don't need that. Now let's get started on the story, shall we? How do you grow your apples? Anything special?”

Applejack advanced on him. “I ain't answering nothin' 'till you let me see that I.D. Now put it here.”

“Oh, do I really have to-”

“In my hoof, now.” Ink Well sighed, putting away his pen and moving the lanyard from around his neck. As he offered it to Applejack, he kept the strap in his teeth. He tried to pull it away as she flipped it open, but she held fast. Getting a good look at the lanyard, her eyes narrowed. “So tell me Mr. Daily Apple, why's it say here that you work for the National Equirer?”

Ink Well tugged on the strap as he tried to talk around it. "Well, you see, I find it helps me get into places that don't let small papers in..." With his hooves and wings he manipulated the notebook back into his bag.

Applejack stared him down as he tugged, unnerving him with her glare. "Well then, Mr. Ink Well. Did you know that there was a colt at the Equirer going by that name that wrote a story on my cousin Braeburn? It had some bad whisperings about his orchard in Appaloosa. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would ya?"

Ink Well yanked as hard as he could, finally managing to free the lanyard from her iron grip and flip it back around his neck. He talked quickly as he backed along the barn wall, Applejack advancing like a predator stalking her prey. "Well, it was very nice talking to you Miss Applejack, and I really am interested in your Apple Farm here, but I'm afraid I just remembered that I really have somewhere I have to be and... well..." Ink Well turned and fled, sprinting as fast as he could. He could hear Applejack's hooves pounding the ground just behind him. He leaped into the air, spreading his wings, and stalled as he felt a tug on his tail.

"Whoa there scrawny, you ain't getting away from me." Applejack yanked on Ink Well's tail, slamming him into the ground. As he crashed into the dirt, he rolled sideways and dodged under Applejack's kick. He felt the air rush past his nose and could feel the power radiating from behind those hooves. He gulped, beating his wings against the ground to pull him away as her front legs reared up and slammed where he had just been. He scrambled up, leaping into the air again and mustering everything he could into his wings. Applejack leaped after him, just missing his tail yet again with her teeth. She landed next to an apple bushel, knocking a few apples off of the top. As Ink Well flew away, apples pelted into his rump, speeding his flight with their strong impacts. He turned back to look at the source and got an apple right in his eye.

As he crossed out of the boundaries of the Acres and back onto the road to town, he heard Applejack's voice yelling behind him. "And if'n I see you around here again, I'll do much more'n that!" With that thought spurring him, Ink Well flew down the long road back to town.

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Ink Well trotted slowly into Ponyville as the sunset hit full force. He sighed, trudging along with his tired hooves, his wings dragging on the ground behind him. "Oh, what's the point Ink Well, much more of this and you'll be run ragged. There's got to be a line of work with better benefits than this... or at least hazard pay..." Looking up to see where he was, he saw for the first time the circle of excited, smiling ponies that had formed around him. He looked from smiling face to smiling face, worried by all of the attention. "Um... can I help you?"

A pale pony with a navy blue and pink mane stepped forward. "Are you the pony from the Equirer?" Ink Well could feel the stares of the ponies settling on him.

"I guess so... yeah, that's me."

A cacophony burst around him as the ponies all rushed in excitedly and started talking to him and asking him questions. "Is it fun at the magazine?" "Bon Bon! You're on my tail! Move aside!" "Can I be in an article?" "Do you need anything at all?" "Is it true about Spitfire?" "Are you alright Ink Well?" "Why would Celestia date a Hydra?" "How do you get all your information?" "Stand back everypony! Let me talk to him!" "Do you need any snacks while you work?" "Would you like a flower?" "So how did Luna stop the ninjas?" "Ink Well! Over here!"

Ink Well stood amazed in the center of these pushing ponies, overwhelmed by the many questions flying at him. He looked around for a familiar face, anyone that could be a haven in this storm. In the back he saw Rose bouncing up and down and waving at him. He pushed his way through the reaching hooves and pressing bodies until he eventually reached her. He had to yell to be heard over the crowd. "Rose! What's going on?"

"Oh! These ponies wanted to talk to you! They're all fans of the magazine!"

Ink Well looked over the crowd, eyes wide in shock. "All of these? This has to be half of Ponyville!"

"It's more than that! The Equirer is the favorite read of most of Ponyville! It's a big source of news here." Rose gasped. "Ink Well! What happened to your eye?"

Ink Well reached up, poking with his hoof to discover a black eye. "What? This? Oh, I was doing some- OW! Err... undercover work and was found out. Nothing big."

"No! This is a big deal! I know just where to go to make you feel better!" Rose moved behind him and pushed him through the crowd and into a shop just as the owner was about to flip over the 'OPEN' sign.

A blue filly with well styled pink mane walked up to them. "I'm sorry, we were about to close the spa."

"Lotus, this is an emergency. This colt is from the Equirer and he needs pampering STAT!"

Ink Well shook his head. "No. No need, really. I'll be fine. It's just a black eye... and sore hooves... and wings, nothing new."

"The Equirer?! Oh, you must come in!" Lotus pulled Ink Well to a table next to which stood a pink pony with a blue mane. "Let my sister Aloe ease your aches while I prepare the bath." Lotus moved swiftly from the room as Aloe pulled Ink Well onto the massage table.

"No, really, I'm alright. I don't need a massa-AH!" Ink Well tried to push himself up and grimaced in pain.

Aloe shook her head. "No, no, no this will not do. Now you just lay there and let me take away the hurt." Despite Ink Well's feeble struggles, Aloe began her massage, kneading and working his muscles. He lay there, slowly melting as the knots and aches just flowed from under her talented hooves. He let out a contented sigh. "You feel better now, no?"

"Oh, you really need to stop... a colt could get used to this." Ink Well looked over from the table and to the spa door where pony faces crowded the glass in the diminishing light. Rose sat inside, a copy of the last Equirer in her hooves, smiling as she read. She waved at him, and he nodded

back. He frowned as a thought struck him. "I've got somewhere I need to go... a meeting later tonight."

Aloe stood in front of his view. "It can wait a few minutes, don't you think? We wouldn't like you writing a bad review for not being treated well, would we?" Aloe flipped him over, starting to massage his stomach. He eyed her suspiciously.

"You're not just treating me so nice for a story, are you?"

Aloe smiled, closing those big blue eyes. "No! No, of course not. We just love the Equirer and want to make its writers feel special. If they want to write a kind review of Ponyville and its spa, then that's their own decision."

Lotus peeked her head in. "Come now, your bath awaits. It is a special remedy that will cure your bruises and ease your weary wings."

Ink Well let himself be led into the tub room. "I dunno, there's not much more to fix after that massage. And I really should be getting back out in the field."

"Do not fuss. The story will be there when you are done. What you need now is a good soak and to let out everything worrying you."

Ink Well smiled. "You are too kind, really. Especially since you're expecting nothing in return."

"I don't know about nothing... but that is mere curiosity and hopes."

"I get it, I get it, but I can't give out information on my article. The higher ups get mad." He removed his things and climbed into the tub. "But I am not one to be against a bit of gift giving. And I will repay the favor." He sighed as the heat soaked through his entire body. "This is heavenly..." He sunk, submerging his entirety into the tub and feeling every last ache leave him. He held his breath, letting the warmth engulf him for as long as possible before reemerging.

There was a horrible ruckus around him. Every pony in Ponyville seemed to be fighting, and over his items no less, pulling them between

them and trying furiously to unclasp his bag. Magazines flew and potted plants were being overturned left and right. He looked over this scene, rage quickly undoing the work the bath had done. "Hey! Hey! What are you doing with my stuff?"

Lotus and Aloe ran around the crowd trying to push them out. "No! Please, we are closed! Stop this! This is very rude! BE CAREFUL, PLEASE!"

Ink Well pulled himself out of the water and grabbed his hat from the head of an orange maned orange furred pony, smashing it onto his head. He caught his lanyard as it was flung through the air, and his pen holster was acquired from the ground as he dodged legs and hooves to grab it. Luckily, both pen and ink were not spilled. Finally he pushed his way into the throng that crowded around his bag. "You! All of you! Let my things go!" He grabbed the bag's flap and pulled against the five ponies already fighting over its contents. In the struggle the flap flew open, causing Ink Well's grip to slip. Growling to himself, he reached into the opened bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "You want a story? There it goes!" He wound up the throw and tossed the bundle high into the air. Simultaneously all eyes focused on the flying papers.

Ponies dived and flew beneath the story, desperately reaching for a bit of the magazine they loved. The sheaf flew over the tub, plummeting towards the water. At the last second a grey pegasus with blonde hair and crossed eyes caught the precious bundle triumphantly. "I got your letters, Mr. Ink Well!"

"Keep 'em!" He yelled as he flew from the spa, disappearing into the Ponyville evening and leaving the whole mess behind him.

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Darkness fell in Ponyville as a reinvigorated Ink Well walked to Sugarcube Corner. He could hear the music outside and saw shadows moving within. "Do I really want to do this?" He thought about the letter sitting on his writing desk at home and the severe consequences it promised. He sighed, walking up to the door. He hesitated before knocking, deciding instead to look into the window. He gasped as he saw the party's attendees. Within were the six target ponies, each laughing and dancing

and enjoying the festivities. Even Twilight Sparkle was there, the unicorn's purple fur and navy blue mane with pink and purple highlights immediately recognizable from her picture. There they all were, smiling and talking all together, like it was meant to be!

Ink Well pressed himself against the wall next to the window. "This is my chance! I can see how they all act at a party, extrapolate that to the scale of the Gala, throw in the rumors and have that story done tonight!" He flew as quietly as he could up to a higher window and looked down on the partying ponies, ready to note down any dirt they could possibly shovel onto themselves.

He watched the scene for a few minutes, taking notes on what these ponies possibly could have done that was that bad. He looked down the list he'd gathered. "Dancing, party games, chatting, eating sweets... Pinkie stuck an alligator in the chocolate fountain, that could have caused an uproar at the Gala... but I think it was her pet anyway, and it was Fluttershy that caused the stampede. I need the facts if I want to get the story straight. If only they'd talk to me..."

"Of course they'll talk to you! It IS a party, silly!" Ink Well yelped and flew away from the window. Pinkie had appeared there, her front hooves hanging over the edge. Ink Well just stared at her, mouth moving but no words forming. Pinkie smiled at him. "What are you doing out here? The party is INSIDE the building!"

"Oh, well I-" A thought overrode the first he'd had. "How did you get up into this window? It's twenty feet in the air!"

"Never mind that! Come on in while the party is still strong!" Pinkie reached out and grabbed Ink Well, pulling him through the window and into the middle of the ponies within. The music stopped, all eyes focusing on the newcomer.

Ink Well looked from face to face, a forced smile meeting the concentrated rage and confusion of the five non-pink ponies. "Uh, Hi there... This isn't going to end well, is it?"

Applejack glared at him. "No. It ain't." Four of the other five ponies were not looking much happier.

He cowered away from them, smashing himself into a corner. “Oh geez...”

## Chapter 2

### The Truth

Ink Well cowered under the gaze of the five ponies. Applejack and Rainbow Dash advanced on him menacingly, a cold anger in their eyes. He closed his eyes, prepared for the thrashing he was about to receive. Pinkie Pie bounced in front of the fillies. “Hey! Have you guys met Ink Well? He's from the Equirer!”

“Yeah, we know Pinkie, We've met him.” Applejack took a step forward. “Now step aside, I got a score to settle about Braeburn.”

“And I've got to kick his rump for the lies about the Rainboom!” said Rainbow Dash, rearing up and jabbing her hooves forward.

Pinkie Pie looked at them, confused. “Why? You got to be featured in a huge magazine! I'd love to be in the Equirer, whatever the reason!”

Rarity had the most exquisitely puzzled look on her features. “But the Equirer printed lies about my shop! How can you think I'd want that kind of publicity?”

Twilight Sparkle stepped in front of the others. “Girls, girls, calm down! Why are you all so angry at him?”

Applejack said, “He's from the Equirer, and they've been printin' lies about us for months! Now I don't know 'bout you, but I wanna teach him a lesson about lyin'!”

Twilight pointed to Ink Well. “Why are you so angry at him, though? Did he actually write all those things? Did you even let him tell you why he wanted to talk to you?”



Rainbow flustered where she was flying. "Well... no, but I- he- He's from that magazine! He must be here to write SOMETHING bad!"

"Maybe not. We don't know until we ask." Twilight Sparkle turned to Ink Well, her pink six-pointed star cutie mark confirming her identity. She smiled at him, offering a hoof up. "Hello there, sorry about the girls. They can be a bit... aggressive. Why are you here?"

Nervously accepting the hoof, Ink Well stood. "I'm on an assignment from the... er... National Equirer to ask you six about the events at the Grand Galloping Gala last night."

Twilight went rigid. "You want to know about what?"

"The... err... Grand Galloping Gala. I just want to know if what was said was true... some, um, bad rumors running around and... uh..." Ink Well stammered to a halt as he looked past Twilight. "If Rainbow Dash could just stop glowering at me I might be a bit more... um... comfortable."

Twilight looked at the scowl on Rainbow's face, then back to Ink Well, a matching scowl on hers. "You know, I'm tempted to just get out of her way. I don't want anything printed about Princess Celestia."

Rainbow Dash lunged forward, barely held back by Twilight Sparkle. "Yeah! Let me at him!"

Fluttershy stood in the back of the pack, trying to get the attention of the others. "But he didn't do it."

"Quiet sugar cube. He's got a mess of trouble coming his way. And I wanna be the one to give it to him." said Applejack as she stepped forward, prepping herself to kick.

Ink Well held up his hooves defensively. "Wait! I didn't write a story on any of you! I swear! The only one I wrote was on Braeburn, and I was given the facts and told to 'make it an interesting read'. It wasn't my fault. Really. If you just had the articles, I'd show you, but-"

“Oh! I can help there!” Pinkie disappeared up the back stairs of Sugarcube Corner, only to reappear a few seconds later with a pile of National Equirers. “Here you go! This is all of the issues for the last year!”

Ink Well grinned in relief as she put down the magazines. “Great! Start with the one on the Rainboom.”

Pinkie tossed one magazine seemingly at random off the pile. “Page 7, 'The Sonic Scam!’”

Ink Well flipped the magazine to the page. “Here! Right here! 'The Sonic Scam.' Lead reporter: Cool Star. See, not me!” He showed the magazine to all of them. “Now, Pinkie, do you know where Rarity's story is?”

“Yup! 'Sapphire's Wardrobe Fiasco,' Page 5.” Pinkie Pie held up the magazine.

“Rarity, read the name of the reporter.”

Rarity magicked over the magazine and flipped to the page. “Pinny Cushion, fashion desk... Oh... hmm.”

Ink Well held up his hooves calmly. “Honest mistake, you all made it. How about Fluttershy's piece?”

Fluttershy raised her hoof. “Um... It was called 'Lies on the Runway', it was written by Papermoon. I already knew that...”

Ink Well looked at her, puzzled. “Then why'd you run when I tried to talk to you earlier?”

She padded at the floor. “I panicked... I didn't want another bad story about me...”

The six ponies all looked at her, then at Ink Well, anger slowly draining from their faces. That is, for all except Applejack. She took a threatening step forward. “But that don't change the lie you wrote 'bout Braeburn!”

Ink Well sighed. "I did write that. And I'm sorry. I didn't even know what it was about! I was just given some notes on Appaloosa and told to write an interesting story, just like the rest of these writers. I mean, these stories are all so obviously fake! The Equirer's a rag, a giant gossip piece writing spectacle stories just to get readers! It's not like any of it is supposed to be... taken... seriously..." Ink Well's ranting stalled as his brain made the connections. He thought about how he was received all around town. The pampering at the spa, the excitement behind his arrival, the mob that fought over his things... "Oh my gosh. The whole town believed them, didn't they?"

Rarity nodded. "I had ponies coming into my shop all the way from Manehattan to ask me about that story! No pony would buy my dresses for a month! It was a nightmare!"

"And I couldn't hardly fly around town without somepony asking if I'd faked it! That Rainboom story was not cool. Ponies still ask me about it!" said Rainbow Dash.

"Heck," said Applejack, "Braeburn's still sending me letters askin' fer help stoppin' the protesters in Appaloosa. He hasn't had a single visitor since that ain't asked about that story. It's drivin' him plum crazy!"

Ink Well stared at them in disbelief. "I am so sorry. I... I didn't know the kind of impact the Equirer had! I mean, all those ponies believing the words of a bunch of fiction writers." He laughed, a short, mirthless laugh. "It's amazing what ponies will believe... A greedy pony would take advantage of it." His face hardened. "But I am not a greedy pony. Look, I'm sorry. I am so very very sorry. I came to get a story on you six not even thinking about the impact it would have on you. It's not right to go on like that."

Twilight put her hoof on his shoulder. "It's alright. You didn't know, and it was your job. I'm sure we can forgive you for it, right?" The ponies nodded, all except for Rainbow Dash, who kept an angry look on her face. Twilight glared at her until she nodded too. "See, it's fine."

Ink Well shook his head. "It's not fine. I need to do something for you, to make up for what happened... And to thank you for not killing me." He paced to the side, thinking on it. A few moments later, the idea struck, and

he turned to the other ponies. "I know! This problem was caused by the Equirer, it can be solved with it!"

Twilight looked at him, confused. "How?"

"Easy! Instead of writing a story about you at the Gala, I'll write a correction story ones written about you! If I explain it to Photoshop, I'm sure she'll agree that what we did was wrong and let the corrections go to print. Then ponies will stop bugging you and the Equirer will have it's story!" Ink Well smiled at the group. "It's a win-win!"

Twilight gave him a skeptical look. "Don't you think that's a little optimistic? Do you think you can actually do it?"

Ink Well's smile quickly fell. "I have no clue... but I know that I can try! I'll meet with you each tomorrow to get your sides on the story, and that'll give me just enough time to write it before the deadline. What do you all say?"

"Sounds like a plan to me, scrawny." said Applejack.

"Seems like a good idea." said Twilight.

"Sounds divine." said Rarity.

"Aw yeah!" said Pinkie Pie.

"Um. Okay." said Fluttershy

"I still don't see why we don't just beat him up!" said Rainbow Dash.

Applejack gave her a stern look. "What?" The other ponies joined Applejack in glaring at Rainbow Dash. She sighed, crossing her front hooves as she hovered in the air. "Fine. We'll do it the lame way."

Ink Well bowed to them. "Thank you. I promise I'll do my best to make it up to you."

"And with that," said Pinkie, moving the needle of the record player back onto the disk. "It's time to PARTY!" The music started right back up, and Pinkie started dancing immediately. Fairly soon the others joined in, and they all started to enjoy themselves once more. Ink Well stayed at the edges of the party, watching the others dance and have fun as he nibbled on the various party sweets. The others stayed away from him, giving him strange looks and whispering between themselves at they partied. With all of the negative attention, he couldn't help but feel uneasy.

After a half hour of him on the sidelines, Pinkie Pie bounced over. "Come on! Don't you want to party? At least dance or talk or something! You look like you're not having any fun."

Ink Well shook his head. "No, I'm having a great time. I'm just not very good at parties, especially with ponies I don't know that well."

"How can you not be good at parties? All you have to do is have fun! It's okay, really, we don't bite." Pinkie stopped for a moment, considering what she just said. "Well, actually, we do bite, but we don't bite ponies, 'cus that would hurt, and it wouldn't be any fun at all."

Ink Well stared at her, surprised at the sincerity behind what she just said. "No... no it probably wouldn't be fun. By the way, these cupcakes are delicious! What's your secret?"

"Secret? I don't have a secret. I'm good at keeping them though! Do you have a secret?"

"Uh... no, what? Never mind. You throw a great party." Pinkie smiled and sprang back onto the dance floor. Ink Well looked around the party, seeing where he could try to insert himself into the festivities. Rainbow Dash and Applejack were off to the side playing Twister with Twilight Sparkle calling out the moves. Dash had managed to tie herself into a pretzel, while Applejack seemed to be balancing on the edges of her hooves. On the other side of the room, Rarity and Fluttershy were deeply engrossed in conversation, talking in a way that suggested gossip more than friendly banter. Ink Well wondered what they could be talking about.

As he made a move to hear their conversation, Rainbow Dash collapsed laughing onto Applejack, pulling all attention to her. "Hey! No fair! You were tickling me with your mane!"

"Ticklin' you? How? My head's all the way over here! 'Sides, you were the one who kept hittin' me with yer wings."

"I was just off balance. I want a rematch! Twilight, spin that spinner!"

Applejack untangled herself from Rainbow Dash and brushed herself off. "Not now, sugar. I gotta get in on that dancin' while the music's goin' strong. Maybe in a bit."

"Aw, c'mon! I need to beat SOMEPONY at this!" Rainbow scanned the room, eyes locking onto Ink Well. "Hey! You! Up for a round of Twister?"

Ink Well backed away from the gaze. "What? No. Not me."

Rainbow Dash flew over to him, staring him down. "Why not? You scared or something?"

Ink Well met her gaze, slightly uneasy. "No. I'm not scared, I was just thinking of heading out."

"What?!" Without her seeming to pass through any of the space in between, Pinkie Pie appeared next to him from the dance floor. "No! You can't leave already, the party's just getting started!"

Ink Well was aware that everyone was looking at him. "I'm really sorry, but it's a long flight home, and I'm coming back tomorrow..."

"Yes, but there won't be a party tomorrow! And this is a time to have fun and celebrate friendship! Please stay?" Pinkie Pie started circling around him. "Please please please please please please please-"

Ink Well tried to maintain eye contact as he talked. "Well, yeah, but I'm not really your friend yet, am I? More of an acquaintance."

"-please please please please please please-"

"And I'm just bringing the party down by being here, and-"

"-please please please please please please-"

"-you're not going to stop until I say I'll stay, are you?"

"-nope please please please please please please please-"

Ink Well gave in. "Fine! Fine, I'll stay. I'll play a round of Twister. Just please stop doing that."

Pinkie Pie froze mid-jump, falling to the floor. "YAY! So glad you can stay!" Pinkie skipped back to the dance floor, joining Applejack.

Rainbow Dash grabbed Ink Well and pulled him over to the Twister mat. "Alright Twilight, spin that thing!" She grinned at Ink Well. "Try not to fall all over the place."

Ink Well returned a competitive smile. "I'll do my best. One question, are wings allowed?"

"No. Applejack always insists no wings, and we're gonna go by her rules." She looked at him strangely. "Aren't you going to take off your bag and stuff?"

"No. I'd rather not if it's all the same. I had a bad experience putting it down before."

Twilight spun the spinner. "Front right, green." Both ponies moved their hooves to a green spot. "Back right, green." Ink Well turned himself around so that green was on his right side as he put his hoof down. Rainbow Dash kept herself oriented the other way. "Front left, red." Ink Well simply reached across the mat, while Rainbow Dash flipped herself over, facing her back to the mat. "Back left, blue." Both ponies placed their hooves accordingly.

The moves continued for many spinnings, both ponies slowly working their way into a more comfortable position. As the game continued on and on, the whole party ended up spectating, enjoying the battle raging on the mat. This would have been just fine in Ink Well's mind if only Rainbow Dash wasn't currently located under him, having had to reach far beneath him to put her third hoof on red. This put both ponies in a strange balancing act, and Ink Well found his bag threatening to topple him over. Rainbow looked up into the face of Ink Well, who was sweating nervously. She stuck her tongue out at him. "You ready to give up yet?"

He shook his head, smiling determinedly. "Not yet. I'm going to do my best to give you a run for your money." He looked down at her, wondering how the others would react if he fell on their friend.

The dreaded spinner sounded again. "Front left, green."

The spectators collectively held their breath, seeing the difficulty of the move. Both ponies looked to the spots far to their right, worry on their faces. Rainbow Dash moved first, pushing herself up as she reached her hoof over herself, determined not to lose. She closed her eyes in the effort, causing her not to notice her face slowly getting closer to Ink Well's. He stared down, flustered as his vision rapidly filled with Rainbow Dash's face.

Madly blushing, his wings kicked into gear, pulling him away from her, and off of the Twister mat. "I give! I give. You win." He backed up and into a corner, trying to check his embarrassment as the spectator ponies raised up Rainbow Dash, congratulating her.

"Yeah! I knew I'd win! I am the greatest!" She flew overhead, celebrating and showboating. "Take that, Ink Well! No pony can beat me!"

He stood up, forcing a smile for her victory. "Nope. No pony can. You sure showed me." He tapped his hoof on the floor, annoyed at the manner of his losing.

Applejack walked up to him, a sly smile on her face. "Nice playin' there, scrawny. And good move stoppin' before it went too far."

Ink Well started blushing again as he explained himself. "I swear I didn't mean for it to even look like anything! It was just the way we were positioned! I-"

Applejack held up her hooves. "Whoa there lover boy. I know, I know. I'm just messin' with ya'. Can't you take a joke?"

"Yeah. A joke. Ha." Applejack walked away, moving over to the rest of the ponies. Ink Well stood alone again when he heard the clock tower tolling, marking ten o'clock. "Is it really that late? Dang, I've got to get moving." He quickly moved to the door. Turning back to the party, he saw that the other ponies had gone to the dance floor, enjoying themselves and grooving to the music. Taking his chance, he quietly pulled open the door and slipped out into the night.

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A few minutes after ten, Fluttershy was talking to Rarity, who was dominating the conversation. "...and I simply can't think WHY somepony from something as fashionable as a magazine would wear something as atrocious as that fedora! It was so worn and threadbare! Doesn't he know that they haven't been in style for years now? Almost as long as he's been beating on it, the state its in. And that bag! All those rips and tears, you'd think he never took care of the thing. I just can't believe that Pinkie would invite such a crime against fabulousness to her party!"

"Oh... I don't know about that. He looked nice, and he did have a certain style to him." Fluttershy looked around the party. "But, where is he? Wasn't he just here?"

Rarity scanned the party. "Yeah, you're right! Where did he go? He must have just gone and sneaked off. And good riddance too. I for one can't wait to get the corrections done and have that magazine out of my mane!"

Fluttershy's ears pressed against her head. "Oh... yeah... Me too..."

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The next day at midday, a very tired Ink Well walked into Sugarcube Corner. The party decorations were gone, the place set up to once more be a sweets shop in all it's gingerbread house goodness. He walked to the counter and rang the bell, Mr. Cake arriving a few seconds later. "Hello, welcome to Sugarcube Corner, how can I help you? Hey, you're the colt from yesterday, aren't you? Did you get what you needed from Pinkie?"

"Sort of. Is she around? I need to ask a couple follow ups." Ink Well tried to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"No she's not, I'm afraid. I think she said that she was going to the park." Ink Well yawned. Mr. Cake raised an eyebrow. "You okay son?"

"Yeah! Yeah. Just a bit tired from last night. Got home really late, had to fly out early. Anyway, thank you for the information." Ink Well turned and left. A few steps away from the counter, he turned around. "Actually, do you have any cookies? I need something with a lot of sugar if I'm going to keep going."

“Yes, we do. It's two bits for one, or ten for a half dozen.”

Ink Well dug around in his bag. “Um... I guess give me one.” He pulled two coins from the bottom of his bag and placed them on the counter. In return he was given a cookie with pink sprinkles. “Thank you.” He took a bite. “Mmm. So very sweet, that's nice. Did Pinkie bake it?”

“Yes. These are some leftovers from yesterday.”

“Still good. Thank you again. Have a nice day!” Ink Well finished the cookie and walked outside. It was yet another beautiful day, the sun shining and the few clouds in the sky decorating it perfectly. Taking in the sunlight, he trotted to the park. There, smelling flowers next to the path was Pinkie Pie, humming to herself without a care in the world. Ink Well walked up to her. “Hello there Ms. Pinkie Pie. You threw a wonderful party last night.”

“Hi Ink Well! Call me Pinkie. You left so early, and so quietly! Why didn't you say goodbye?”

“I'm sorry. If I didn't go, I would have only made it home in time to leave again. I needed to get some sleep.” He yawned. “I kinda failed at that, but oh well. Anyway, I came to find you first hoping that you'd be the easiest to get notes down on.” Ink Well took out his notebook, ready to write. “Do you have any story you want a correction on?”

Pinkie Pie looked at him with her giant blue eyes and a smile on her face. “Nope! Not a thing! I'd have loved to be in the Equirer though, whatever they wrote! All their stories are fun!”

Ink Well closed his book. “Ah, well then. I guess that's that. Thank you for your time!” He tipped his hat to her and began to leave, then stopped. He pulled his book open once more. “Actually, I do have another question. Knowing the magazine, if I want to get the corrections printed, I'm going to have to write about the Gala and hide the corrections in there. So could you tell me what happened at the Gala?”

“Huh? Oh sure! No problem at all! What do you want to know?”

“Well,” said Ink Well, checking his notes, “the rumor was that you made a ruckus at the Gala, which disturbed a lot of ponies.”

“A ruckus? Me? I just tried to make it into a party! I'm the best pony when it comes to parties! All of those snooty ponies were just standing there not having any fun. So I just sang a song and played some music. But they were all so angry, refusing to dance or sing or anything. It was so boring. I just livened it up!”

Ink Well finished his notes. “Just livening it up, eh? No nefarious plots to ruin the dance or anything?”

“Plots? Me? Do I look like a pony who could plot?” Pinkie Pie smiled at him, a huge, lovable smile. Ink Well shook his head.

“No. No you don't. Just figured I should ask.” Ink Well snapped his book closed again. “So, do you know where Rarity is? I think I'll ask for her side next.”

“Rarity's at her shop! At least, I think she's at her shop. I know she would be at her shop normally. But she might be in the Everfree Forest! Or the Library! Or Canterlot! Or maybe she's nowhere at all. Ooh, that would be frightening!” Pinkie looked him in the eyes, genuine fear in hers. “How would you know where you are if you were nowhere?” She shuddered.

Ink Well watched her reaction to her thoughts, trying to make sense of them. “I don't know...” The ponies sat pondering this for a moment. Eventually he started talking again, having finished his train of thought. “If I were nowhere, I'd look for landmarks, and if there weren't any, then I'd know I was nowhere, and would no longer be afraid, 'cus I know exactly where I am.”

Pinkie gasped, eyes widening in admiration. “Oh wow, I would have never thought of that. They hire some smart ponies at that magazine of yours!”

Ink Well smiled, digging his hoof into the ground. “I don't know about that.. But I like to think of myself as clever.” He tipped his hat to her. “Thank you for your time, Pinkie. I'll chat with you later.” He turned and trotted down the path, leaving her to frolic in the flowers again.

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Ink Well walked up to the Carousel Boutique just as Rarity was closing the front door. She was wearing a flowing blue dress and matching feathered hat. Ink Well stopped, admiring the beautiful way the light shone off of her clothing. "Hello Rarity, are you ready to make your corrections?"

Rarity turned around, dress swirling around her perfectly. She looked at him, a flicker of disgust on her face before she smiled. "Ah! Ink Well... still wearing that hat I see. Well, I was actually stepping out for lunch. I hope you don't mind."

'I still don't see what's so wrong with the hat.' Ink Well muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

Ink Well smiled. "Just going to lunch? You look like you're going to a ball dressed like that."

"Well why not? A lady must look her best at all times, and if I can advertise my store at the same time, why wouldn't I?" She began to walk away, revealing the matching heels that went with her dress.

Ink Well hurried to catch up to her. "Well, I could join you for lunch. I could get your story over food, if you'd like." She looked at him like he was crazy, and he just grinned in return. "It will only take a small portion of your time, and then I'll be on my way. Would that be acceptable?"

She looked him up and down. "Oh... fine, but you do mind your manners, will you? I won't be seen eating with anypony who doesn't understand proper etiquette."

"I shall do my best, Ms. Rarity. Lead the way." Rarity led Ink Well to a large, green trimmed cream building with a thatched roof. A sign out front read: Garden Cafe. Outside, purple and white tables spotted like mushrooms were scattered before the front of the building. A cream colored pony with slicked back blue hair and wearing a white tuxedo

walked between tables with an aloof air, observing the customer's satisfaction with their meals.

Rarity walked to the waiter, a stunning smile on her flawless face. "Table for two, please, Horte." The waiter led them to an open table far from the door, near the edge of the outside eating area. As they were seated, Rarity was provided with a gold laced purple pillow to sit upon, while Ink Well sat on a provided pile of hay. After they were seated, the waiter bowed to Rarity and walked away. "Ah, there are privileges to being a pony of class. Now then, what would you like for your story, Ink Well."

Ink Well pulled out his notebook, placing it on the table. "Yes, well, first off, your corrections. Tell me about the story they printed and what actually happened, and I'll take notes as best I can."

"Oh, well it's just the funniest thing. They said that since there was a bank robbery that happened in Manehattan a few days before Sapphire got her dresses, I had stolen gems from that bank and used them! Isn't that absurd? Just the day before I had won the gems from a pack of diamond dogs outside of town. I worked hard for those, getting kidnapped and saved and pulling the carts back to the shop. It simply wasn't right for such slander to be thrown against me." Rarity thanked the waiter as he brought the menu. He placed another one before Ink Well, a condescending look on his face. "Thank you Horte." The waiter walked away. Rarity opened the menu, holding it up before her. "Of course, the attention of all those ponies asking how I broke in was exciting, but nopony wanted to buy dresses! It was terrible for business."

"Ink Well! What are you doing at the Cafe?" Ink Well put down his pen and turned around. There, just out of the dining area, stood Rose waving. "I thought you'd be long out of town once you had your story. What brings you back?"

Ink Well looked at Rarity. She sighed. "Oh very well, go talk to her. But remember it isn't polite to keep a lady waiting." Ink Well nodded and slipped away from the table.

He walked over to Rose. "Hello there! Nice seeing you again. Things didn't quite go according to plan, so I'm doing my interviews today. What brings you by here?"

“I was heading back to the shop. You're eating at the Cafe? You must be rolling in money to be doing an interview here.”

“Oh, well she was already coming here for lunch, and I just sort of tagged along...” Ink Well looked over to Rarity, sitting alone at the table. “I really should be getting back. 'It's not polite to keep a lady waiting.' Is it alright if I talk to you later?”

“Sure thing! Have a nice lunch, moneybags!” Rose trotted on her way and Ink Well went back to his table.

He opened the menu and browsed over it, color draining from his face as he looked at the prices. As he tried not to show his shock, the waiter came back. “May I take your orders?”

Rarity put down her menu. “Yes, can I have the rose hip salad? And some ice water with a lemon twist, if you could.”

“Of course Miss. And you?”

Ink Well slowly put down the menu. “I'll just have water, thank you. Plain, ordinary nothing in it water.” The waiter almost sneered at him as he picked up the menus. Rarity watched the color return to Ink Well's face as he prepared to take notes again. “Um... diamond dogs, you were saying? A pack of them? How did you manage to escape?”

“Now now, Ink Well. As a lady I won't bore you with the details. Suffice it to say they found me very persuasive when negotiating for my release.”

“Uh huh...” He could feel that she was avoiding his questions, but he was thrown off guard from the dreamy look she was giving him. “Yes, well, there is one more thing I need to ask you about. I would like to know what happened at the Grand Galloping Gala.”

Rarity waved the topic away dismissively. “Why would you want to know about that? I thought you were going to write corrections, not a story.”

"Oh no, I'm not, don't worry. It's just that I have a feeling that the Equirer won't run a story on corrections when they wanted a story on the Gala. Therefore I'll need details on the Gala to hide the other story in, and perhaps I can quell the rumors that popped up. Is that alright?"

"I suppose so. Well then, tell me what you wish to know."

Ink Well checked his notes. "Right, well the rumor is that you assaulted Prince Blueblood, injuring him quite badly."

Rarity looked as though she had been attacked. "What? No no no! I spent a... memorable evening with the prince, and when, over the course of the evening he proved to be an," he could hear the venom in her voice as she spat out the next words, "unchivalrous narcissist, I may have... raised my voice at him. But I did not touch him. The only thing that I could have injured was his pride. And my beautiful dress, getting cake stains all over it. I shall never be able to wear it again..."

"Cake stains?"

"Yes. He hid behind me when a cake projected itself through the air, causing my beautiful dress and hair to be covered in frosting while he walked away clean. I... lost my temper at this, and may have covered him in cake, but I did not assault him." Rarity looked worried. "Oh dear, could you promise me not to print all of that? It would be so very embarrassing. Just make it clear that I didn't assault him."

Ink Well took down notes on all of it, a smirk on his face. "I promise no more of this will be printed than needs to be to make the story clear." As he wrote down the last of her story, the orders arrived. A large, beautifully garnished salad with rose petals spread around the bowl was placed in front of Rarity, with a decorative pink glass of water with lemon slices floating in it placed alongside. In front of Ink Well was placed a small, blank glass of water. Ink well put away his notebook while Rarity delicately unfolded her napkin and got ready to eat. He could hear his stomach grumbling as he looked at his glass of water, which he drank down in one quick gulp. It was warm. "Well... this has been pleasant, but I really should be moving on." Ink Well moved to stand up.

Rarity floated her napkin in front of him, stopping his exit. "You can't leave! You haven't paid your bill, and a true gentlecolt would wait until his companion finished eating."

Ink Well was incredulous. "What bill? I got a glass of water. And yes, a gentlecolt would, but you're not my 'companion.' I was a tag along you didn't even want here." Rarity looked shocked, but Ink Well kept going. "Yeah, I got the hint. I'm leaving before the waiter comes back and sneers at me again." Pushing away the floating napkin, he stormed away from the table. A few feet away, he turned and tipped his hat to her. "I hope you have a nice lunch, Ms. Rarity." With that, he left the restaurant.

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Ink Well hurried into the marketplace, looking around for Applejack and her stall. Walking through the area it soon became clear that she wasn't there today, that pleasant accent of hers missing from the ambient noise. He puttered around until he caught the smell of flowers on the breeze. He turned to a nearby shop, a green and ivy building with a thatched roof and pink trimming on the doors. A sign hung above the door with blue and white daisies on it. There were flowers in stalls in front of the building. Beautiful, fresh and newly picked flowers filling the air with a wonderful aroma.

Ink Well stood outside, enjoying the smell of the flower shop. "Can I help you?" Ink Well turned to the source of the voice, a pink pony with a blonde mane. She had a lily in her hair. "Oh! It's you! Ink Well, what are you doing here? Do you still need help with your story?"

Ink Well shook his head. "Oh, no. I don't. I'm sorry... Lily, wasn't it? Is Rose here?"

"Rose? No. Why does everypony think she works here? She's at the shop across the street. 'Daisy's' is run by Daisy and me. She runs 'Rosewater,' the perfume store." Lily the walked over to the flower stall. "Would you like some flowers?"

Ink Well shrugged. "Sorry, don't have any money on me..." He looked into his bag. "You up for a trade? Because I've got some apples."



“Sure, I'll trade. What flower?”

“Hmm... a rose, yellow, if you have it.” Ink Well gave her an apple, getting a rose back. As he walked away, he tipped his hat to her. “Tell Daisy I said 'Hi.’” He went into Rosewater, looking quizzically at a small watermelon stall outside. Within the air heavy with the smell of flowers, oils, and watermelon. “Hello? Anypony here?”

Rose perked up behind the counter, face lighting up. “Ink Well! What brings you to my shop?”

“Oh, nothing major. I said I'd talk to you later, and it's later. So what's up?”

Rose leaned against the counter. “Nothing much. Slow day.”

“Well that's too bad.” Ink Well pulled the rose out of his bag. “I brought you a flower, maybe that could make things better?”

“Aww, thank you! That's very kind.” Rose accepted the rose, placing it behind her ear.

As she did that, Ink Well motioned to the stall outside. “So, what's with the watermelons?”

“Watermelon is a very popular scent lately, but I kind of overstocked. Just selling the excess. Not a lot of ponies needing perfume these days, but sales were good before the Gala, so it's to be expected.” She moved her hooves, showing the flower in her mane. “How do I look?”

“Very nice. I should have gone with red though, it would have matched your mane much better.”

She smiled. “Oh well, it's the thought that counts. So how was the cafe? Is the food actually any good?”

“I don't know. I didn't actually have any. After looking at the menu, it was all waaaaay out of my price range.” He pulled an apple out of his bag. “Besides, I'm sure that Applejack's apples are better than anything they cook there. You want one?” Rose shook her head. “Oh well. They're good.”

He bit into the apple, glad to be eating after sitting at the cafe. "I had to get away from that cafe. Rarity was just so... snobby. Spent the whole time talking about how ladylike she was and how she had to be so classy. It was getting on my nerves. And that waiter just wouldn't stop sneering at me like I was some street rat. I just can't stand ponies like that."

Rose frowned at him. "You shouldn't be so down on her. She's not actually so bad once you get to know her. She's really generous, and she's normally very kind, she just focuses on the details and the aesthetics more than the big picture. She made dresses for all of her friends for free, and made team vests for everyone for the last Winter Wrap Up. She likes to dress and act high class, but she's truly a kind pony. You just need to give her a chance."

"Then why does she treat me so oddly?"

Rose looked him up and down. "It's probably your clothes."

Ink Well glared at her. "What? Are you going to start talking about my hat too?"

"No. Don't get me wrong, it's very stylish in it's own way, but it's not exactly fashionable. I think she thought somepony from something as trendy as a magazine would be dressed in the latest fashions. And even you have to admit that that hat has seen better days."

"Hey now, I've had this for years! I love this hat. The only way I'm losing this is if it's the hat or my life!"

Rose laughed at his reaction. "Alright, alright. Nothing wrong with that." Rose smiled at him. "Do you have any time to hang around? I could show you around town, if you like."

Ink Well shook his head. "Thank you for the offer, but I've got to get going. A lot of interviews to do."

Rose looked slightly disheartened. "Of course. You've got your story to write. Good luck with it!"

Ink Well tipped his hat as he left. "Thank you. Have a great day, Ms. Rose."

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Ink Well walked from Rosewater to the library, a very large tree growing at the edge of town with many windows and a door set into it. He knocked on the door, confused as to why the design on it was a candle and not, say, a book. "Hello? Twilight? Are you here?" After a brief wait the door swung open, revealing a small purple dragon with green spines.

The dragon looked at him inquisitively. "Twilight's inside. Who's asking?"

Ink Well stared at him in amazement. "A... are you a dragon?"

The dragon's eyes rolled. "Wow, good guess Sherlock. Yes, I'm a dragon. Now why are you asking for Twilight?"

Ink Well ducked down, bringing his face onto the same level as the dragon's. "That is so cool! Twilight has a baby dragon? How was this never mentioned before? And you talk! Can you breathe fire?"

The dragon pushed him away. "Hey! I'm Twilight's assistant, thank you. And you're going to find out the answer to the fire question really soon if you don't tell me why you're here."

From within the library a door swung open and Twilight's head peaked out. "Spike! Who's at the door?"

"Some weird pegasus in a hat!" Spike yelled to her. "Should I send him away?"

"Oh! That's Ink Well. Bring him down to the basement, I'm just finishing up preparations, the timing couldn't be better." Twilight's head disappeared back into the door, which closed behind her.

Spike turned back to Ink Well, who was still staring at him excitedly. "Alright, you heard Twilight. Come on in." Spike led Ink Well to the door, swinging it back open.

Ink Well talked as he walked through the doors and into the basement. "Oh wow, a dragon! I've always wanted to see one, but there's only ever the old stories and the museum pieces, and those look so fake compared to the real thing. I mean, look at you! You're adorable! And you look like you could get hit by a train and walk out fine! Those scales look tough. How fantastic, dragons. Such majestic and powerful creatures." He was led down the stairs and over to a small table in the center of the basement.

Twilight called down from a balcony running around the room. "Please place your front legs on the table."

Ink Well did so, jumping slightly as metal rings snapped around his legs. For the first time he looked around the basement, the small hearts painted on the stairs very out of place with the hanging roots above. All around the room ran roots and wires and strange machines blinking and spilling paper into awaiting bins. A tape reel spun on one side of the room, a large microphone hanging over the room the only thing wired into it. Against another wall bubbled beakers and test tubes filled with various liquids running from container to container. Electricity crackled around a Tesla coil and up a Jacob's ladder placed near the beakers. Ink Well gulped anxiously as Twilight Sparkle walked towards him dressed in a white lab coat and floating a large helmet covered in lights, switches and antennae with her magic. She placed it over his hat, clicking a chin strap into place. "Uh... Twilight? You seem to be hooking me up to a... rather ominous looking machine, if I may say so. Um... Any reason for it?" A spark flew from the helmet as she plugged a curled green wire into it.

"Oh yes. This is a lie detector. I just want to know what you know and what you don't before I go giving away compromising information." She held up a red wire and a blue one, looking at a book floating next to her. "Now was it red on the right or the left that caused the short? Don't want another charred pony on my conscious." She looked at the pure fear that was plastered onto Ink Well's face. "Don't worry, she's just fine! It was years ago when that happened, I was so much less experienced than I am now. No major damage apart from her eyes going a little silly and a slight IQ decrease. But that's why we record our mistakes." She closed the book and plugged the blue wire into the right side of the helmet, where it clicked

into place, then moved the red wire to the left side. Ink Well shut his eyes tight, preparing himself for the worst.

\*Click\* “There! Good! All set!” Ink Well sighed, glad to still have his mental faculties. Twilight trotted to a giant knife switch set into a wall of machines. “Now then, time for answers!” She threw the switch, causing electricity to crackle and surge through the room. Ink Well trembled in his bonds as lights blinked and dials rose. Then, slowly, everything quieted down, culminating in a hum that filled the room. Twilight walked over to the machine that was spewing paper from it, a jagged ink line running along the middle of it. “Mr. Ink Well, tell me, do you know who keeps writing the stories on Princess Celestia?”

Ink Well started to shake, suddenly feeling far, far out of his element with these ponies. “I... um...” He took in a deep breath. ‘Easy there. Just cooperate, it’ll get you out of here faster.’ “The stories are each written by different writers.”

Twilight watched the lines carefully, not taking her eyes far off of the readings. “And who decides what each one is written about? Where do they get their ‘information?’”

“The stories are written based on whatever rumors are floating around, though if I had to guess I’d say that many of them originate from the magazine and are just invented for sales. What little information is ‘factual’ comes from anonymous sources.”

Twilight nodded as she observed her subject. “Indeed. Well, do you know who wrote the lies about her stealing from the treasury, dating a hydra, and torturing innocent ponies in her dungeons?”

“They wrote all of that? Wow... Um, no. No, I have no idea who wrote the articles. I actually don’t really know any of the other writers at the Equirer. I only know that it wasn’t me.”

Twilight’s eyes narrowed as she scrutinized Ink Well. He began to sweat under her cold gaze, praying internally for it all to end. She then returned to the paper readouts, carefully following the line with her hoof. After what seemed like an eternity, she put the paper down. “Alright. One more question. What are you going to do with the information you get from

us? Will you actually print the corrections, or are you going to just turn us into another spectacle piece?"

Ink Well could feel the sweat dripping down his face from under the helmet. He locked eyes with Twilight, who had no emotion in her gaze, only keenest observation. "I will write the correction piece, though I will need to use some other information to hide it. I will not write anything more than what is needed for the story, and whether or not anything goes to print is truly out of my hooves." Twilight held his gaze forever, watching for any hint of deception. Ink Well felt another drop of sweat slowly roll down his forehead and into his eye. He jumped in his restraints, trying to rub his eye futilely. "Ah! Ow, that stings..." Ink Well held that eye closed and looked back to Twilight, who was looking at the readings on the paper.

After a few seconds, Twilight turned back around. "Thank you! You've been very helpful. Sorry to scare you with the lie detector, but you can't be too careful." She swung the knife switch back up and pulled the wires from Ink Well's helmet. The machinery around the room all slowed to a stop with an audible whir. The helmet floated off of Ink Well's head, his hat springing back a bit worse for wear. She then tapped a button on the wall, releasing Ink Well's legs.

He quickly pulled his hooves away, flying himself to the wall behind him and far away from where he'd been held. "I am going to need some sort of therapy once this story is done. Between this whole set up and being mobbed by fans, I'm going to have nightmares... The ponies in this town are crazy."

Twilight tilted her head when he said this. "That's odd. That's the first thing I said when I got here. I think it's something in the water, but all my readings are negative. Anyway, what do you need for your story? Just the corrections, right?"

Ink Well slowly got into writer mode, pulling out his notebook and pen automatically. "Right. Just the truth on the stories you want corrected, as well as your take on events at the Gala. Now the only rumor on you at the Gala was that you were harboring the other ponies and helped them get in and escape, but I'd still like your take on it, if you could." He could feel himself returning to normal, the fright of the experience leaving him.

Twilight smiled, an alarmingly cute smile considering what she had just been doing. "Of course. That's easy. I just want it printed that Princess Celestia isn't stealing from the treasury, isn't torturing anypony, doesn't even have dungeons, and is not dating a hydra! She isn't dating anything. She is just being a kind and caring ruler, and all of these rumors are pure nonsense! There are hundreds of those stories, and they are doing nothing but making her tired of ruling. Even she can get overwhelmed when all she hears are degrading rumors." She sighed, looking pensive as she removed her lab coat. "She only invited all of us to the Gala in the first place to liven it up and brighten her day. And she spent the whole evening welcoming guests for hours on end, keeping herself formal and smiling despite her want to be elsewhere. And when she finally got to enjoy her own party, all she could do was help us leave before things turned more sour." She turned to Ink Well, motioning to him that they should go upstairs. "It was her that brought all of us together, her that even let us attend the Gala, her that keeps the sun rising each day and the seasons going in their turn, and her that helped us escape even after ruining her palace instead of punishing us. Don't you think she should be given some more recognition and love than she gets?"

Ink Well wrote down his notes, but even within his writing the sad tone was bleeding through. "She deserves the unending love of a nation, not just her student." He put away his pen and notebook, walking with Twilight up the stairs. At the top he looked around the library, a well kept place with shelves upon shelves of book, and stairs and doors leading to many balconies and an upper level. He could feel the knowledge of centuries lining the walls around him. "Twilight... I was just wondering, do you read for fun, or just to study?"

"Mostly to study, I don't have time to read made up stories when the world is such a complex place. Though I do find studying very fun. Why?"

Ink Well lowered his hat over his eyes. "Oh, nothing. Doesn't matter now..." He walked to the door. "Thank you very much for your insight, Ms. Sparkle. Hopefully things will only get better from here." He walked outside, stopping as he went to close the door. "Oh, and apologize to Spike for me. I think I freaked him out, and I didn't mean to." He left, making his way out into the early afternoon air.

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As he walked through the center of town Ink Well could feel the stares of the townsponies following him. The hype around him seemed to have fallen considerably, since they weren't mobbing him like the day before, but there was still interest. "Well, at least I got some peace. Now if only they'd stop staring..." He sighed. "Oh well, I can survive a few days of fame." He looked up into the skies, trying to catch sight of Rainbow Dash as he made his way to Sweet Apple Acres, and almost walked into the grey pegasus that had landed in front of him. "Oh! Sorry. Almost ran into you there." The pony looked at him with slightly skewed golden eyes. "Um, are you alright?"

The blonde maned pegasus nodded. "Yes Mister Ink Well, I'm alright. I was just wondering if you would like your story back. You dropped it last night at the spa, and I thought you might miss it." She pulled a bundle of papers from the carrier's bag she had on and dropped it at his feet. "I didn't read it. I didn't think you'd want me to before it was printed."

"That's very kind of you. I'd forgotten I'd thrown that. It would have been inconvenient to find it gone." As he moved to pick it up, he looked up to find the pegasus staring at him expectantly. "I'm sorry, what was your name?"

The pony smiled. "My name's Ditzy Doo, but all my friends call me Derpy."

Ink Well looked at her watching him with her big crossed eyes. "Is it because of your eyes? Because, honestly, I see nothing wrong with them. They're sweet." He thought about it for a second, then laughed as an idea struck him. "Ditzy, tell me, do you know a unicorn named Twilight Sparkle?"

"Twilight? Yeah, she lives near here! She has a lot of friends! Though I knew her in Canterlot before. She was nice there too." Ink Well's smile faded, slightly shocked as his personal joke proved itself true. Ditzy kept talking, oblivious. "She didn't have a lot of friends there though... Kept all of her time on her studies." She looked down at the papers still at her feet. "Don't you want your story Mister Ink Well?"

He looked down at the bundle at his feet, feeling bad for laughing. "You know what, you keep it Ditzy. One day I'm going to be a famous



writer, and then you'll be the only one with a memento. The Equirer never wanted to print it anyway..." He looked up at the sky, watching the sun slowly sink towards the horizon. "I'm sorry, but I need to cut this conversation a bit short. I still have a few interviews I have to do today. But I'll say 'Hi' if I see you around, okay?"

Derpy happily grabbed up the story and put it back in her bag. "Thank you mister Ink Well! Thank you so much! Dinky will love this! She likes the Equirer's stories a lot."

He tipped his hat to her as he flew away. "My pleasure. Enjoy it, and have a pleasant evening, Ms. Doo."

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Ink Well flew to Sweet Apple Acres, landing just outside of the barn. Applejack exited it with two empty buckets on her back and waved at him as he landed. "Howdy there Ink Well. You're only now turnin' up? I thought you'd be by a might sooner."

"I'm sorry. It's a longer flight than I remembered to get here, and I got a late start on the day." He pulled out his notebook. "So, are you ready to work on the corrections?"

Applejack shook her head. "I've got a bit more work to do. Just a few dozen more trees to buck today, then I'll be done. Can you wait 'till after that?"

"I can, but I really would like to be home in time to actually write this thing. I'll just go interview the others while you do your work." He closed his notebook. "Do you know where Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are?"

"Sorry hun. Ain't seen 'em all day. Twi said Fluttershy ain't even at her cottage, left a note sayin' she was goin' somewhere, won't be back 'til late."

Ink Well kicked a rock across the ground. "Drat. I'm gonna have to come back. That's gonna be a pain..." He looked at Applejack preparing to go back into the fields and sighed. He walked over to her. "I know I'm going to regret this, but would you like help?"

“Well sure! If you help me, I'll be done a lot faster. And I'll be able to yammer my story out at you, if'n you think you can take notes while working.” She hurried into the barn, an empty harness with two buckets flying out at him soon after.

He looked at it, smiling uneasily. “Sure. I can multitask. Been known to do it before.”

Applejack walked back out of the barn, huge grin on her face. “Then let's get goin'!”

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Ink Well dragged the full bushels of apples behind him, the harness having slipped down his back when he couldn't keep it off the ground. “How is this thing so heavy? They're just apples!”

“Apple buckin' ain't easy. No pony would say it is. But I ain't ever seen any pony struggle as much as you with these! All my friends could carry two easy. Heck, even Applebloom can pull the empty cart without as much trouble as you go through!”

“Hey! I'm no work pony. I'm a writer. I don't carry around anything heavier than my bag if I can avoid it. All I've got going for me is endurance, and that's only 'cus I've spent a lot of time running from crazy readers.” He fixed his hat, then tugged on the harness, dragging it another few feet. “No offense.”

Applejack looked down on him, carrying her harness without any sign of strain. “Ain't my fault your magazine makes us crazy. You're the one writin' for it. But you'd better build up some muscles, scrawny, if you wanna keep helpin' me out. They way you kicked that tree, it looked like it was winnin' the fight.”

“I'm not going to make a habit out of working for you, so that won't be an issue.” He pulled the harness again, getting just enough momentum to keep the bushels moving. “Alright, we need to talk about something else, keep my mind off of the work. Yell at me about, who was it, Braeburn? I'll take mental notes.”

“Right. I'd plum forgot why you were around.” Applejack looked back at him as she walked. “The Equirer said that Braeburn went an' planted his apple orchard on a buffalo burial ground. It also said that doin' this caused the spirits of the buffalo to rise outta the ground an' attack Appaloosa. But you know that, you wrote it.”

Ink Well strained against the harness. “I remember that. All I was given was that the buffalo had attacked Appaloosa because of a land dispute over an apple orchard, and I was told to make this into an interesting story. What was it actually about?”

“There was a land dispute, but it was over the buffalo's stampeding grounds. And there was a fight, but it was resolved with sharing, not an exorcist.”

“Sharing?”

“The buffalo let Braeburn keep his orchard, and he cut down a path for them to stampede through and gave 'em apple pies when they wanted 'em.” Applejack smiled back at him. “Amazin' what a good pie can do.”

“Yeah... Speaking of which, there was a rumor that you were selling tainted food at the Gala. Now I've tasted your apples, and they're fresh as can be, so I'm guessing it's a lie, right?”

“You're darn sure it's a lie! Everythin' I had there was the finest food the Apple family can cook! I even went and made a cake when them ponies were all high an' mighty about my 'carnival fare.' Woulda blown their socks off if they'd tasted it. But it got flung across the room 'fore anyone could even get a bite. A real shame there.” Applejack swung open the barn door, a frown on her face. “Now how'd you go an' get me to talk about that. You better not do anythin' I wouldn't like with what I just said.”

Ink Well pulled the bushels into the barn and walked out, legs aching from the work he just did. “Don't worry. Ponies just talk to me. I've got a trust-able face. And what you said isn't going very far. I don't even have it written down.” He tipped his hat to her. “Thank you for the information, and please don't take it personally when I say I hope I never have to work on your farm again.”

“Oh, quit your complainin' scrawny. You'll be fine. Now get outta here.” She tipped her hat in return as Ink Well flew away.

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Ink well landed at Fluttershy's cottage to the frightened fluttering of many animals. Birds flew, rabbits ran, and squirrels squirreled in every direction from his landing. He watched in dismay as the critters scattered from him. “Oh no! I'm sorry! No, don't run. I don't want to hurt you.” He followed one of the bunnies towards the cottage. “Please don't run. I'm really very kind to animals. I just want to know if Fluttershy is here. Do you know?” He skid to a halt as the rabbit bolted through a hole in the door. “All I wanted was...” He sighed. “I'm talking to a bunny... I've gone crazy.” The rabbit appeared within the leaves above the door, throwing the end of a carrot at Ink Well. He glared up at it, only then noticing the note pinned to the door.

'Gone to Manehattan to help relocate mice after flood. Won't be back until late. Please don't touch anything, and don't scare the animals.

-

Fluttershy'

Ink Well looked at the many hiding animals around him. “Well... Looks like I didn't manage that one. I didn't mean to break the rules...” Hanging his head, he took to the sky.

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Ink Well landed in front of the Library as the sun was setting and knocked on the door. Spike opened it and rolled his eyes. “Twilight! It's Ink Well again!”

Twilight walked up to the door. “Hello. Back again? Did you forget anything?”

“No, I was just wondering if you knew where Rainbow Dash was?”

“Oh, no. I think she left. Some sort of emergency in Cloudsdale. They called in all the weather ponies to stop a large storm that was coming in. It

was big enough to send Cloudsdale from the sky, and they're being kept through for most of the night. Why?"

"I never got her story. Fluttershy's either. And I can't stick around until all hours of the night to wait for them, and I really can't fly back here tomorrow. I'll never get the story written in time if I do that." He leaned against the door frame. "I guess... can you give them a message when they get back?"

"Sure! What's the message?"

Ink Well took out his notebook and quickly jotted something down. He then tore out the paper and handed it to her. "Here, I'm giving you a set of directions. It's to my house. Tell them that if they want their corrections written, they're going to have to come to me. Just tell them any time tomorrow and I'll be ready." He held it out to her.

She looked at him suspiciously. "You're not going to try anything, are you?"

Ink Well looked like he'd just been stung. "Ouch. Your accusations pain me, Ms. Sparkle." He placed a hoof over his heart. "I promise that nothing bad will happen to either of them. You have, for what it's worth, my word as a writer." He noticed the disbelieving look on Twilight's face. "Look, I just gave you my address. If I'm lying, my house is on the ground. You and whoever you want to bring with you can personally come and kick my flank."

Twilight still looked at him strangely, but took the note. "Okay. I'll give them the message tomorrow."

"Thank you so much." He hopped into the air, then turned back to Twilight. "Oh, and please tell them that I'm sorry to make them fly all the way out there. I wouldn't if I could avoid it."

"I'm sure they'll understand." Ink Well nodded to her, then began his long flight home.

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The next day Ink Well spent the entire morning at his small cottage beneath Cloudsdale, examining his notes, planning out how the story would go. He arranged them, rearranged them, and wrote down what he thought the best possible story would be, but there were two glaring holes he needed filled. As noon passed he ate the last of Applejack's apples, still marveling at just how wonderful they were. "That girl sure can grow 'em."

His lunch over, Ink Well looked at the many paper piles and bundles scattered around his house and covering every seat and surface. "This is no state for the house to be with visitors approaching. I should probably-" A knock came at the door. Ink Well put on his hat and flew over to it, pushing aside papers along his path. "Oh shoot. Maybe I can just hurry up and clear off a few seats before-"

The knock came again, more agitated this time. Ink Well moved a few more papers, hearing talking outside. "Maybe he's not home..."

"Don't be stupid! Of course he's home! Come on Ink Well!"

"We should go... We probably have the wrong house. We don't want to disturb them..."

Ink Well flew over to the door and pulled it open. "Hello! Sorry, didn't me-"

"Yeah, yeah, don't you go apologizing, just hurry up and get to the writing." Rainbow Dash flew past him, knocking him into a pile of papers as she knocked another off of a chair and sat down. As Ink Well pushed the papers off himself, Fluttershy walked into the house.

"Um. Hello Ink Well."

"Hi Fluttershy. Just... uh, sit anywhere." He brushed himself off and moved over to his writing table on the far side of the room. "So then, about your-"

Rainbow flew right up to his face. "Now you sit there and write why that Rainboom was real, because it was! I trained so hard, and I'm the only pegasus ever to do it! Anypony at the competition could tell you it was real!"

“Ms. Dash, please, calm down.” Ink Well pushed her back from his seat. “I believe you. I never doubted for a minute that it wasn't clouds and fireworks and mirrors, because I'd felt it. I was here, and that Rainboom went off just over the next hill. Almost broke my windows, and the light... every color streaming solid through my house.” He shook his head, clearing away the memory. “But I would like to know what made you do it, what it took for you to actually make it happen. What was going through your head?”

“What? My feelings?” Rainbow Dash rubbed her mane. “I don't know. I just HAD to do it. Rarity was falling and the Wonderbolts were in danger and there was the whole Cloudiseum with all my friends watching and... I just focused on moving fast enough to catch Rarity and it happened!”

“Wait. Rarity was in Cloudsdale? How did a unicorn get up there?”

Fluttershy spoke from her seat, carefully perched between three stacks of papers. “Twilight cast a magic spell that gave Rarity wings. She also found one to let earth ponies stand on clouds. All of our friends were there.”

“Wow. Way to go Twilight.” Ink Well noted down what she said. “Now then, I do actually have one more question, and it's about what happened at the Gala.” He held up a hoof, stopping Dash's rush towards him. “Before you ask, I'm doing it to hide the correction story in, because otherwise it'll get just flat rejected, and I can get corrections on what happened there too. Now, the rumor is that you destroyed the dance hall. What actually happened?”

“I didn't destroy anything! I caught that statue when it fell! I would've had it too, if it hadn't moved. I lost my balance and it crashed into the pillars. That's what destroyed the hall!” Rainbow flew around the room, circling in the air and kicking papers everywhere. “I caught it! It was my one chance! The Wonderbolts said we were going to hang! I'd saved Soarin's pie and Spitfire's life, and we were SO going to hang at the Gala! But no, everypony else was hogging them. I just wanted to hang! So I went and caught the statue as it fell, and that just ruined everything!” She flew to the door. “I need to fly. Fluttershy, are you coming?”

Fluttershy shifted, tipping over one of the stacks. She quickly grabbed it and stabilized it again. "I still have to do my story."

Rainbow circled by the door, causing a small flurry of papers to flit outside. "Can't you just hurry that up? I need to fly! I just can't stand staying still anymore!"

Ink Well stood, trying to calm the paper storm in his house. "Why don't you go and fly around for a bit, and I'll get Fluttershy's story. We'll be done by the time you get back." Fluttershy shook her head. "Don't worry. I just want the interview, and she'll only be gone for a few minutes. Nothing will happen, I swear."

"Cool! Awesome. Back in a flash!" Rainbow Dash shot from the room, soaring up and quickly disappearing into the sky, leaving behind a rainbow trail and papers slowly drifting to the ground.

Ink Well turned to Fluttershy, who sat quietly in the same place. "Now that we don't have a tornado in here, what corrections do you need, Ms. Fluttershy?" Again she didn't talk, merely sitting quietly. Ink Well frowned. "Now now, none of this. If you just sit there then this whole flight out was for nothing." She looked at him, still carefully keeping herself from knocking the papers around her over. "Just pretend like I'm one of your friends. Just talk to me like you're talking to Twilight or Rarity. I won't bite. That wouldn't be fun for anypony."

Fluttershy shifted uneasily. "Okay... I'll try."

Ink Well smiled. "There we are! Good going! Nice to hear you talking to me, not just near me. Now then, tell me about the story. What did the Equirer print about you?"

She started slowly, but picked up speed as she eased into talking with her airy, angelic voice. "Well, they said that the only reason that I was liked so much as a model was because I was a creation of magic, and that I had magical enhancements to both my beauty and my grace, and that my disappearance was because Photo Finish had angered the unicorn that made the illusion." She stood up. "But I wasn't magic. There was never any magic involved except for Twilight's intervention, and even that didn't do what we wanted..." She stomped down a hoof in anger, which barely



caused a ripple in the papers around it. "I'm not just an invention of magic! I am a real pony!" She looked up and into Ink Well's face, a determined expression on hers. She then hopped back, ears folding against her head. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so angry..."

"No! No, it's fine. Really. And I can attest to your existence. Your grace has shown in everything I've seen you do, so that story is not true, and I'll get right on correcting it."

Fluttershy sat down, blushing. "Thank you."

Ink Well nodded. "Don't mention it. Now then, last bit of business. The rumor at the Gala was that you started a stampede, but after meeting you and seeing you with the animals at your cottage I find that incredibly hard to believe. So what really happened there?"

"Actually... um..." Fluttershy drew little circles on the floor with her hoof. "That IS what happened."

Ink Well laughed. "No, you're pulling my wing." He looked at Fluttershy, who stared at the floor. Her expression didn't change. "You're serious?" She nodded. "But, how? The animals in Ponyville love you! I went to your house yesterday and they all fled without you there."

"I know. It's my special talent. That's what confused me at the Gala. The animals in the garden all just ran away when I got near, no matter what I tried. I tried begging, and pleading, and beseeching, and being kind and nothing was working! It was infuriating, so I tried giving gifts, and setting traps, and chasing them, and... I don't know what came over me... I was just so angry that the animals wouldn't love me that I just... I'm just so embarrassed that I lost control like that, and they just sort of... ended up in the dance hall..."

Ink Well sat at his desk, a huge grin refusing to leave his face. "Wow... just wow. There's more to you than looks would tell."

Fluttershy flew over to him. "Oh, please don't print the story on that. Just write that I'm really sorry for ruining their party... I didn't mean to."

Ink Well put down his pen. "Fine. I won't write any of it."

"You have to promise me. You have to Pinkie Pie swear." She backed up, landing and leaning into the floor. "Um... if you could."

Ink Well shrugged. "Uh, I don't know the Pinkie Pie swear."

Fluttershy acted out the motions. "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." She looked at Ink Well's confused expression. "Please say it..."

Ink Well repeated the motions and the swear exactly as Fluttershy did it. "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!"

Fluttershy sighed in relief. "Thank you." She went over to the door and looked up into the sky. "I wonder what's taking Rainbow so long..."

"I'm sure she's around somewhere." He walked back to his desk. "If you want to leave, don't let me keep you."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I need to wait until she comes back." She looked around his house, a rather small room cluttered with paper. She didn't see any other doors. "Is this your whole house?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Sorry. How rude. Would you like a quick tour of the house?" Fluttershy nodded. He gestured to the room. "This is the foyer, study, kitchen, writing room, guest bedroom, dining room, and living room." He gestured to the piles of papers along the left wall. "Over there are old stories and articles. Over on the right are the abandoned and half-planned stories. On the table are current projects, and by the door is the pile of rejection letters."

"Oh... my. Why do you keep all of those letters around?"

"They keep me from getting a swelled head. Remind me I'm not some big fancy writer, no matter how much luck I had at the beginning... Which actually brings me to the last part of the tour. Upstairs, if I'd been able to afford stairs, is my bedroom. Boring place really. Just a bed and my unused paper."

Fluttershy flew over to his writing table, looking at the golden ink pot and the fountain pen sitting on the desk. "Well these are very nice, and they match your cutie mark. Where did you get them from?"

Ink Well flew over as well, looking fondly on the ink pot. "I won them in a competition back when I was just a little colt. I entered the New Equestrian Writer's Competition with a short story, just trying to see if anypony would like my work. I won the junior division, which got me the pen, and then I managed to take the whole competition, which won me the ink pot. Only nice thing I have in this house..." His fond look turned wistful. "One source, endless possibilities.' I believed that... Took it to heart. I got my cutie mark when I got those. After I won the competition, I went and wrote a book, trying to use my special talent, you know? The publisher took it on because I'd won, a fiction book, just a story to entertain. 'Of Wings and Horn,' a story of two friends." He sighed. "No pony bought it. Who wants to read a work of fiction when the world's such a complex place? Shot down my writing career, leaving me with just the pen and the well. All I could do with that was journalism, and the only place that'd hire me was the Equirer. They always need bad fiction writers. It was a perfect fit..."

He turned to Fluttershy, who was looking at him sadly. "Now Fluttershy, please don't go telling everyone that. I won't make you promise, 'cus I've no reason not to trust you, but I don't want everypony knowing about my failure."

"No. You're no failure. I-"

Rainbow burst in the door, causing a small whirlwind of paper around her. "Hey there Fluttershy. Ready to head out?"

Fluttershy looked at her, then back at Ink Well. He nodded. "You go on back home then. It's a long flight." He tipped his hat to both pegasi. "Thank you fillies for your time. The story should be printed in the next edition of the Equirer." Rainbow Dash went back outside and took off. Fluttershy followed, but stopped in the doorway.

"Thank you for doing this for us Ink Well. It means a lot."

He smiled at her. "Of course. Thank you for talking to me Miss Fluttershy. Have a good day." Fluttershy smiled back before leaving. Ink

Well turned back to his notes, penning in the missing information. He looked to the side, seeing the warning on the Equirer's letter. "Severe consequences... Well, the Equirer wanted a story. Time I gave 'em one."

# Chapter 3

## Corrections

The next day, as early morning passed and mid morning began, Fluttershy landed gently outside of Ink Well's shack, a small basket full of vegetables in her mouth. She placed the basket on the ground and walked to the door, carefully reaching out a hoof to knock. "Hello. Ink Well? Are you there?" She listened against the door, hearing nothing, as a white rabbit pulled itself out of her basket and hopped next to her. She knocked softly on the door again. "Are you home? Anypony there?" She stayed by the door, waiting patiently for a response. While she did, the bunny paced near the door. After Fluttershy stood unmoving for almost a minute waiting for the door, the bunny shook his head and hopped up to a window, looking inside. Seeing only papers, he pushed himself up on his back feet and tiptoed as best he could. Doing so he was able to see inside, though all he saw were more piles of papers and the writing desk, the ink pot there but the pen missing.

The bunny hopped down from the window, ran over to Fluttershy and tapped her leg. She looked down. "Oh, Angel, what is it?" He pointed inside, shaking his head. "He isn't home? Oh... Maybe it's for the best really. I'll just drop off the gift and be on my way." She moved to put down the basket as Angel jumped on the door, swinging it open. Fluttershy hurried inside to swing the door back closed. "Oh no Angel, you can't just go in his house." As she closed the door, she saw that inside was just as messy as the day before. She frowned at the state of the house. "This is no way for a pony to live..." She perked up, smiling. "I know! I can give him two gifts." She whistled a few lilting notes. From nearby bushes and trees flew a small band of birds, fluttering and chirping gaily around her. "Hello, animal friends! How are you today?" The birds twittered merrily and landed on her, showing her how they felt. "That's good to hear. Could I ask your help with something? The pony here doesn't keep his house very tidy, and I would like to surprise him. Could you help me?" The birds nodded at her, and she smiled in return. "Oh, thank you so much!" She nuzzled the nearest bird, a bluejay, which chirped joyfully and flew inside to join the others.

Fluttershy walked inside, watching the birds tidy papers, move bundles, and straighten scrolls. Unfortunately there wasn't much room in the tiny house to move things to, so the various stories and papers just ended up in neater piles. Fluttershy opened a cupboard, only to squeak in surprise as more papers fell out at her. All of it was covered in writing from top to bottom, sometimes with many different lines written over and between each other. She opened another to find more paper crumpled and tossed in haphazardly. She smoothed one out and found the beginnings of a story about a dragon threatening a small town and the brave unicorn preparing to fight it, but most of it was scribbled out and blotted with ink. She actually felt sad about it, since the story had been looking good so far. She put the paper back, sighing. "I guess I can at least make the house nicer..."

Fluttershy turned to see the birds clearing the surfaces around the house. It was surprising how few there were, not even a counter or any appliances that would suggest a kitchen. All that managed to unearth itself from the papers were a poorly padded couch, a well worn chair, a dinged and stained coffee table, and a dusty wall clock, solemnly ticking away the time. Disheartened by the lack of... anything suggesting a home, Fluttershy flew upstairs. The room was as Ink Well had described it, a tiny, tidy room with only a bed and a few pieces of paper hanging from the walls. The bed was small, barely large enough for one pony, but made of the softest clouds forced to the ground. Around his bed were five pieces of paper, two framed in wood and one in a gilt frame. Fluttershy looked at the papers, wondering what he'd keep so near to him as he slept.

Those that hung framed were reward certificates, both for the New Equestrian Writer's competition, one for the foal division, and the other for the entire competition, both given to Ink Well for his story 'A Rainbow Rounds the Sun.' The bare papers pinned to the wall were two letters, one from a printing company announcing the printing of 'Of Wings and Horn,' and the other proudly announcing his acceptance into the National Equirer. In the center, prominent in the room and sitting within a gold lined frame, was a short story. It was written on many sheets of paper, each placed in numerical order, spanning from the low ceiling to the floor; the title: 'A Rainbow Rounds the Sun.' Fluttershy started reading, instantly gripped by.. something. She wasn't sure if it was the beautiful imagery or the feeling of the artist behind the words or the story itself, but Fluttershy found herself mesmerized by the tale unfolding before her.

A few pages into the story a crumpled paper bounced off of her head. She turned around, looking for the source. Below, Angel stood on the desk, waving for her attention. Around him were the birds, all looking worriedly at something. Fluttershy glided down to the floor below, landing next to the writing table. "Yes? What is it?" Angel pointed to an article sitting on the desk. The title said it all: 'Gala Ruined! A Ponyville Fiasco.' Fluttershy quickly scanned the article, shocked at it's contents. Every detail of what her and her friends had done at the Grand Galloping Gala was inked in full, embarrassing detail. Not a line had been cut, no corrections were hidden amongst them, just the scandalous stories in detail more grandiose and vivid than they had been told in. "No..." She reread the piece, tears blurring her vision as they welled in her eyes, but despite her best efforts to will the story away, it remained a fact. The most damning detail, the one that hurt the most, was what was written just below the title, seemingly penned with no hesitation: 'Lead Reporter: Ink Well.'

Fluttershy backed away from the table, shaking her head. "No... How could he? He Pinkie swore!" The birds flew around her, trying their best to console her with their saddened twittering. Angel stomped, grabbing the article and running over to Fluttershy. "Oh, put it away Angel. I don't want to see it." Tears dropped from her eyes and onto Angel's head as he kicked her hoof. She looked down at him, confused. He held up the story, then six fingers, then mimed reading it. It took a beat, but understanding dawned on Fluttershy. "Oh, you're right Angel, the others should know. But... they won't like it." She picked Angel up and placed him on her back. Then, with a sad look at the half-cleaned room around her, flew from the house, fighting away the hurt tears that threatened to fall.

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As the afternoon took a strong hold on the day, Ink Well landed outside Fluttershy's cottage in his usual garb, minus his journalist's lanyard. He held her basket in his mouth. He walked up to the door, knocking gently on it and putting down the basket. "Fluttershy, are you here?" He waited, hearing nothing. Again he knocked on the door. "Fluttershy? You left your basket. At least, I'm pretty sure it's yours. It's the same yellow and pink that you are, and the butterflies on the side are a dead giveaway. Do you want it back?" Again hearing no response, he looked in a window, seeing no

movement inside. In fact... Ink Well turned around, looking over the area. There wasn't any movement, not a single animal anywhere near her house.

“That's odd. Something should have been thrown at me by now. Even when she was gone the animals were here.” He pushed the basket closer to the door, troubled by the quiet around him. He called into the house. “I'm leaving it by the door! Thank you for the veggies, and I'm guessing the house cleaning was you, so thank you for that too!” He backed away, waiting for some sort of reaction from the cottage, but it sat resolute and silent. With one final look back, he flew from the cottage, curious as to where Fluttershy had gone.

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Ink Well made his way into town. He had gone by Sweet Apple Acres to ask Applejack and heard that she'd been called to the library, so he decided to look there for Fluttershy. The library seemed to have an inordinate amount of animals hanging around it, looking inside intently but worriedly, as though trying to help something within the building. As he neared the door, he could hear a muffled conversation from inside. It seemed to be rather heated over something. Without hoping to disturb, he knocked on the door. The voices inside remained spirited, appearing not to have heard the knocking. As he moved to knock again, the door opened, revealing Fluttershy behind the door and the rest talking further within. Ink Well smiled at her. “Hey, I was lo-”

“Eep!” The door swung shut, slamming in front of his nose. He tilted his head, puzzled by what had just happened.

“I'm sorry, did I surprise you?” The door remained shut, the voices continuing inside. “Was it something I said? Did I offend yesterday?” He could hear a pause in the conversation and he knocked again. “Hello? I've got some news for everypony, if-”

The door flew open, smacking him backwards. Immediately after he was barreled into by a rainbow blur, causing him to tumble end over end, landing pinned to the ground under Rainbow Dash outside. Head spinning, he was picked up and slammed against the ground. “You've got a lot of nerve showing your face here again!”



Ink Well looked up into Rainbow's glaring face. "What did I-?"

"No more talking! You lied to us at least twice already! I'm not letting you lie again!" Rainbow picked him up and dragged him into the library, where Rarity closed the door behind them. Ink Well found himself in the middle of a circle of ponies, each one with a look of hurt rage on their face.

He turned to Twilight, taking a step forward. "What's going on he-?"

She stepped accusingly towards him. "How could you write those things about us? You promised you wouldn't! And how did you fool the lie detector?"

Ink Well backed away from her gaze. "What did I write? The story hasn't even-" He bumped into Rarity.

She pushed him into the center, anger marring her features. "All of those embarrassing things! All of those scandalous details! How could you deceive us with that silver tongue of yours?"

"I didn't deceive anyone! If you'd just tell me what-" Pinkie appeared behind him, throwing a hoof over his shoulder and pulling him close.

"Ink Well, I'm disappointed in you. I can take a bad story, but how could you write such mean things about my friends? And we were getting along so well. I'm sorry, but I just can't be friends with a meany two-wings like you."

Ink Well pulled back from her. "I don't know what you're talking about, I didn't write anything bad!" He turned to Applejack, who had the least angry expression on. "You look like you're still sane. Why are you all so-" His question was cut off as he dodged, barely managing to turn the kick aimed at his face into a grazing blow. He stumbled back, holding his cheek. "What was that for?!"

Applejack stepped forward, turning to get a strong kick in. "I poisoned nothin', you snake in the grass! I knew I shoulda kicked your scrawny flank when I had the chance! Braeburn'll be happy to know I gave you a good whuppin'!"

Ink Well ducked and weaved, barely dodging the kicks aimed at him. "Please! Just tell me what happened! I don't know what you're talking about, but if you'll let me-" A blow connected, knocking him on his back and causing blood to stream from his nose. His hat flew off, rolling into the ring of angry pony around him. Ink Well groggily pushed himself up, reaching for his hat. Just as his was about to grab it, Rarity's hoof came down, smashing it before him. He looked up into the circle of angry faces, nose bleeding and trying to look as pathetic as possible. He looked into Fluttershy's eyes, which looked like they contained the most worry in their cyan depths. "Please... I'm sorry... just tell me what I did."

Fluttershy backed up, unable to keep looking at the emerald eyes beneath her. A paper bundle landed next to his head, dropped by Twilight. "You know what you did! You submitted this article on us ruining the Gala, no corrections at all! In fact, you came up with even more lies! With all you promised, how could you do this?"

Ink Well pulled the paper over, trying not to drip blood onto it. After reading the title, his ears flattened against his head. "Oh... you found this..."

Fluttershy stood over him, looking truly hurt. "How could you? How could you send this to print?"

"I didn't. This story will never print." He sighed. "You were never supposed to find this. It was never supposed to leave my house. It was a moment of weakness."

Twilight stomped next to his head. "This? Three pages of story a 'moment' of weakness?"

Ink Well sorely pulled himself up to his feet. "Okay, a few hours of weakness. Whatever. The Equirer wanted their story, and thinking about the consequences, I just couldn't bring myself not to write it." He ripped off a strip of paper from the bottom of the article, rolling it up and jamming it in his nose to stem the bleeding. "But this is wrong, it's trash. If this was the one I submitted, why was it sitting at my house? No, I wrote another one, and that's the one I took to the Equirer." He reached into his bag and pulled out a bundle of papers with red ink slathered all over it. He placed it down before Twilight. "You can read it if you want. I tried to get your corrections in, I tried to call them out on it all, but, well... editing."

Twilight magicked up the papers, reading through the red ink. "The Gala, a True Story..."

"Yeah. Read to your heart's content." He walked over to Rarity, grabbing his crushed hat from beneath her hoof and placing it on his head. "I'm going to be around town for a while. I've got nothing better to do now." He put a hoof to his cheek, wincing from the pain, then pushed past the ponies and walked to the door. They all just watched him move across the room, looks varying between curiosity, anger, and sadness. He turned back to them, tipping his crushed hat to the room. "Have a nice read, ladies." He then pushed open the door and walked out into the afternoon light.

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Ink Well slowly meandered around town, not entirely sure what to do. After quite a while of wandering he found himself in Rosewater, standing before the empty counter and just enjoying the smells around him. He looked around the store, noting the glass displays around the shop filled with liquids of varying colors for the first time. The whole building was painted in a soft pink with a dark wood trim around the edges. It wasn't exactly high scale, but it was a very nice building.

After wandering around the shop for a few minutes he turned to leave. "Ink Well, when did you get here?" Rose came through a door in the rear of the shop carrying a box on her back, which she placed behind the counter. Ink Well turned back when she called, revealing his bloodied nose and bruised cheek. Rose gasped at the sight. "My gosh! Are you okay?"

Ink Well jumped back when she gasped. "Huh? Oh, yeah, the face. I'm fine. Just a misunderstanding, that's all." He took off his hat, pushing it roughly back into shape with his hoof. As he did so, he spotted his reflection in a display near the counter. "Didn't realize just how bad I look... I must have been scaring ponies all around town."

Rose looked worried. "A misunderstanding? Were you in a fight? What was it over?"

Ink Well shrugged. "The article. Just... huge misunderstanding. Doesn't even matter anymore." He looked at Rose, who was looking

extremely worried for him. "Hey now. Don't look so down. It's alright. I've been around long enough I know how to take a kick." He walked over to her, smiling. "We just need to get off of this unhappy subject. What have you been up to? Anything fun happen today?"

Rose gave a hesitant smile, looking at his beat up face. "No, not really. I had a couple of sales, but that was it. Spent the rest of the day rearranging the back of the shop. I really need to change the hours of the store, I'm just wasting time in here." She opened the door to the back room. "Um, would you like to clean up your face or anything?"

"Yeah... That's probably not a bad idea." He walked around the counter and into the back room. There was a distillery in the back, with a large variety of scents, primarily floral, bubbling and steaming within it. Across a table were arranged woods and flowers and fruits, each throwing it's own scent into the air. Next to them was a bucket of water and a rag, presumably for cleaning up after dealing with sticky saps. Tossing away the paper strips from his nose, he cleaned the blood off of his face with the rag, then pressed it against his cheek in a poor attempt to stop it from aching. After he did that, he looked at the brass stills and extractors that made the distillery, appreciating the great detail that went into each.

Rose walked up behind him. "Do you like them? I made them myself."

Ink Well turned back to her, impressed. "Really? They are very nice. I don't really know much about them, to be honest, but they look well made."

"Oh, stop. The ones I based them on in Canterlot are a lot nicer, and more efficient. They actually made the entire thing out of silver, so that it wouldn't react with anything at all in the process." She turned off the burner on one of the stills, stopping the bubbling within. "It's not needed, silver doesn't help the process at all, but it does make the entire distillery so beautiful to look at."

"I'll bet it does." Ink Well looked at Rose, standing there with her ivy green eyes reflecting the brass light off of the still, and smiled. "Hey... I know it's a few days late, and I'm sure you've got a lot of work to do, but if you'd like, I'd love to be shown around the town."

Rose looked at him slyly. "What, your third time in town and you still don't know your way around?"

Ink Well nervously rubbed his mane. "Well, I figured out my way around. But I would like to be shown around by a local, if you have the time."

Rose looked at the battered pegasus looking so sheepishly hopeful and laughed. "Yeah. Why not? nopony will notice if the shop closes a little early today."

Ink Well perked up. "Really?"

"Sure. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't show you around town? Just give me a few minutes to close up and I'll meet you out front."

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Ink Well and Rose spent the next hour walking around town talking. They visited the parks, window shopped throughout the town, visited the farms around town and generally enjoyed Ponyville. They also chatted, light talk about ponies around town, about writing and perfumery, upcoming events and the differences between them here and in Cloudsdale... Whatever came to mind. Ink Well started feeling better, even putting to the back of his mind the misfortunes of the day. They were there, sure, but it was more important to enjoy this moment than go on worrying about them.

At the end of the hour amidst the setting sun they found themselves enjoying a pleasant walk along the edge of Whitetail Wood, the light filtering through the trees and giving everything an amber glow. Ink Well stopped, looking at the foliage around him, and smiled. Rose stopped next to him. "Something wrong?"

He looked at her, then back to the wood. "No. Just... this town is beautiful. Never really had time to notice before."

Rose smirked at him, walking over and nudging him. "That's such a sappy line."

“Hey now, I'm a writer, a romantic who believes in happy endings, things turning out well, and the strength of words.” As he said this he held himself like an actor on the stage, pontificating for an endearing crowd, and raised a hoof to punctuate the point. He held that pose for a second, then dropped his hoof and smiled playfully. “What did you expect of me?”

“True. Shouldn't expect much from a writer, especially not one that deals in fiction.” She looked out into the wood as well, her face softening. “It is nice though, isn't it? You get used to it living here...” They stood gazing into the trees for a few minutes in silence, the wind the only sound as it rustled the leaves above. At the end of the time, Rose turned to Ink Well. “So, did you ever write anything not for a magazine? I mean, you call yourself a writer, but most would call you a journalist.”

“Well, I did write a book a few years back. It was a flop, but I was proud of it. And I still write short stories and the occasional poem, but nopony's ever interested in them.”

“A book, huh? What was it called? I might have read it.”

“Doubtful. It was called 'Of Wing and Horn,' but I think when I last checked only twenty copies had actually sold, and ten of them were for libraries around Equestria.” He sighed. “Nopony was interested in fiction. Why search for fantasy in a book when there's so much in real life?”

Rose frowned as he said this. “That doesn't sound right at all. The magic of a good book is in containing a world so fantastic that it draws the reader in and makes them feel like it could happen. It's to let us experience things we wouldn't get to otherwise, and tell a tale that inspires us to keep going.”

Ink Well smirked at her. “Now who's the one talking in sappy lines?”

“Oh shut up.” Rose and Ink Well laughed at each other as they made their way out of the forest and back towards town. Soon after they left the woods, a call came from the sky above.

“Hey! Ink Well! There you are!” Rainbow Dash bolted from the sky, landing swiftly next to them. “I've been looking everywhere for you! The

others have something they wanted to say to you, and they want to talk with you about your story.”

Ink Well raised his eyebrow. “Just the others? You don't have anything you want to say?”

“Yes. No! I mean... not in front of Rose, okay? I'll tell you back at the library.” Rose giggled at Rainbow's reaction, causing her to pout. “Look, we're waiting for you back there. Just hurry over.” Rainbow leaped into the air and took off like a shot, leaving a prismatic trail behind her.

Ink Well turned to Rose, still smiling after getting Dash all flustered. “I guess I shouldn't keep them waiting.”

Rose smiled back. “It's okay, you go on. Might be able to get the whole misunderstanding behind you.”

“Hopefully.” He tipped his beaten hat to Rose as he started to walk away. “It's been a pleasure, Rose. I'll be sure to visit the next time I'm in town.”

Rose waved him on his way. “Of course! Glad to show you around. Take care of yourself, alright?”

“I will, thanks.” Ink Well hopped into the air and headed towards the library.

---

Ink Well pushed open the library door to reveal six very sorry faces. Twilight walked over to him, looking ashamed. “I'm so sorry we jumped to conclusions like that. This piece had everything we had asked for, and even some things we'd only hinted at. We shouldn't have gotten so mad without talking to you.” Various iterations of “we're sorry” came from the array of ponies behind her. She used her magic to float his story to him, putting it back in his bag. “Can you ever forgive us?”

Ink Well looked seriously at the group. Every one of them, even Rainbow Dash, was looking truly remorseful for their actions earlier. He smiled at them. “Don't worry. I have no hard feelings. I would've probably

reacted the same way if it happened to me. Granted, I wouldn't have hit as hard." He rubbed his cheek, visibly swollen and bruised from earlier.

Applejack laughed nervously. "Yeah, sorry 'bout that. I reckon my temper mighta gone and got the better of me. But I'm real sorry about it! Really I am!"

Ink Well waved away her apologizing. "It's fine, really. If I'd really held a grudge I would've gone back and turned in the other story, seen if they'd have given me back my job. But I knew you were all acting without thinking. I did some things I'm not too proud of either."

Rarity looked at him, shocked. "You lost your job? They fired you over the story? But it was just corrections!"

Ink Well shrugged. "It wasn't what they wanted, so I'm off of their payroll as of noon. They even took away my lanyard. But... it's not like I'm the only pony to ever lose a job before. Besides, who wants to work for a magazine that can't admit it made a mistake?"

Fluttershy spoke up from the back, images of his house in her head. "But you can't just go on without any money! And after we treated you so badly... What will you do?"

"Oh, I'll be fine. I've got a bit saved up, and I'm sure there are other magazines who'd be willing to hire me. There are so many out there, and so many are the same. I'm just sorry your corrections aren't going to get printed."

Rainbow floated above the rest, laying back as she flew. "Eh, who needs 'em? At least they won't have anything else to say about us."

Pinkie Pie stood to the side, frowning. "Awww, we aren't going to be in the magazine? But how will they know about my awesome parties?"

Twilight looked at her, dead pan. "Pinkie, don't you think there are more important matters here?"

Pinkie shot back a serious look. "Twilight, there is nothing more important than a good party when you are down. You should know that by



now.” She shrugged. “Oh well, guess they'll just have to come and find out for themselves!”

Twilight shook her head, turning back to Ink Well. “Anyway, we're very sorry about the misunderstanding. If you ever need anything from us, I'm sure we'd be willing to thank you for the work you've done.”

Ink Well nodded to her. “Don't mention it, I was glad to help.” He looked out of the window, noticing the sky darkening outside. “Now if you will excuse me, I should probably start heading back home.”

Rarity stepped forwards. “Wouldn't you like to stay for a little while? I'm sure one of us would be more than willing to let you spend the night and save you from that long flight home. It's the least we could do.”

Ink Well shook his head. “Thank you for the offer, but no. I've been in your manes for long enough. Thank you all for tolerating me, and I hope to see you under much happier circumstances in the future.” To a chorus of goodbyes Ink Well tipped his hat and departed, flying off into the early night sky.

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The next day Ink Well awoke early, not particularly sure of what to do with himself. He ate breakfast out of the gift Fluttershy had left him the day before, then sat at his writing table, pen in mouth and no inspiration coming. After about an hour of staring at an empty page he put the pen away in its holster on his bag. He then looked at his bag, shook his head, and moved the pen into its home on his writing desk within the golden ink well. He looked at the clock hanging from his wall, surprised to find it still there, let alone ticking after he had last seen it buried in paper. It was only nine in the morning.

Sighing and walking away from his desk, his mind wandered to Fluttershy and the gang and what they were up to. He considered flying to Ponyville, but felt like he'd just seem like some weird clingy pony to fly back there on his first day free from the shackles of work. Instead he turned to the piles of unfinished stories, seeing if perhaps he could lessen their massive volume.

He read through his stories, slowly becoming more dissatisfied with his own writing the deeper into the pile he went. None of these were any good, and the few that had some potential just lacked the spark of a truly great story, though it probably didn't help that he found himself in no mood to write. Even so, his mind did find a train of thought to jump on. 'Ditzy would probably love these though. I mean, she was ecstatic over the story I gave her, and that was turned down four separate times. What was that other name she said? Dinky? Was that a friend or a sister or what?' Ink Well analyzed what he was thinking about, face completely dead pan. 'I'm inner monologuing about a pony I met once. What is wrong with me?'

He pushed aside the unfinished stories, deciding instead to finally get to work on that second book he'd always been dreaming about writing. He started trying to think about the plot and what the major points would be. Characters, setting, tone, anything at all that might help him create his next book. Instead he found his mind wandering over his tour with Rose and the sights of Ponyville. He had been so happy during that, just letting his mind go. He'd had four story ideas pop into his head in just the last ten minutes of that walk, and now he couldn't think of one.

He stared at the ink pot on his desk, gleaming brightly at him despite how annoyed he was feeling. "One source, endless possibilities.' And I can't even think of one..." He smacked his hooves against his head, trying to jump start his brain. "No! C'mon Ink Well! You can do this! Just get your mind off of Ponyville and back on the matter at hand." He picked up his pen, excited and peppy and ready to write!

Five minutes later, all he had managed to do was doodle a poorly drawn pegasus in the corner of the paper. He snorted, smacking his hoof on the desk and angrily putting away his pen. He paced around the house, rage quickly boiling up inside him at how little he was accomplishing. He looked up at the wall clock again.

Nine-thirty. Sighing, he flew up to his room, getting into his cloud bed. It had been the one luxury he had allowed himself on his meager salary, a bed that would quickly carry him off to dreamland, where inspiration flowed like water and the greatest of things was just a thought away. It cost a fortune to get clouds to maintain this close to the ground, but it was so worth it. He snuggled into the cloud, trying to calm himself and drift away

into a nice nap. Maybe he'd just gotten up too early. A few more minutes of sleep would definitely help.

He sat awake in bed for twenty minutes, slowly getting more and more frustrated as each new comfortable position failed to stop his mind from running wild. He couldn't stop thinking, not on anything in particular, just a constant stream of useless thoughts that wouldn't go away. He sat up, smacking his face with a hoof and yelping in pain as he hit his still-bruised cheek. "Smooth one, Inky." He rubbed his face as he got out of bed. Maybe a quick flight would clear his head.

He flew quickly down from his bedroom and to the door, wrenching it open and ready to fly. As he was about to take off, he spotted that the little flag on his mailbox was up. He walked over to it, ready for just about anything to take his mind from the spirals it was making on its own. Inside the mailbox was just one thing, a magazine folded up so that it would fit. Ink Well gave an angered snort at it. "Must've forgotten I didn't actually write anything for this one, sent me my complimentary copy anyway." He unfolded the magazine, revealing the National Equirer logo emblazoned on the front just above their main story's headline.

He glanced at it once as he walked to the trashcan, then froze mid-step as what he saw registered. "No..." He looked at the cover, jaw dropping as he read the title of the story. "Oh they are not going to like this." He tossed aside the magazine, dashing inside to grab his hat and his bag. He re-holstered his pen, and his hoof swiped past where his journalist's lanyard had been hung, habit making the motion for him. Once he had his things, he galloped out of the door, mind deadly focused for the first time that day, and took off at full speed to Ponyville.

Back at his house, the magazine fluttered in the breeze, the front page proudly displaying the title: 'Ponyville 6 Attack GGG!'

# Chapter 4

## Rejections

Ink Well flew over Ponyville at high noon, having made much better time than previous flights due to his distress. He scanned the town, heart drooping at what he saw. There were three very large crowds, one around Sugarcube Corner, another around Carousel Boutique, and a third larger one around the Library. Ink Well banked, spiraling down towards the Library and landing on the edge of the crowd swarming the door.

National Equirers were being waved left and right accompanied by what must have been a hundred voices calling inside for attention. Ink Well tried to muscle his way to the door, but found himself pushed to the outside edge no matter what he did. He tried asking the ponies on the edge to let him in, but either they couldn't hear him over the yelling or they just ignored him. Finally, fed up, he backed up, pulling a random scroll from his bag. He cleared his throat, then yelled in the loudest voice he had. "EVERYPONY MOVE!"

The cry rang around the building, causing the crowd's heads all to turn as one and look at him. He waved the parchment in the air, keeping his voice authoritative and making sure nopony got a good look at the scroll in his hand. "Everypony, out of the way." He flashed the scroll at those around him. "Ink Well, Fire Inspector. This is far too many ponies for this building, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He tried to wave the crowd away, but they mostly just looked at him, confused. He kept his voice confident. "Come on! Move it! Am I going to have to start fining ponies? I said move!" The crowd reluctantly dispersed, clearing a path to the door. They didn't go far though, generally milling about along the street outside.

He walked up to the door, knocking on it and giving stern looks to anypony who got too close. After a few minutes of silence he knocked again, harder this time, and called inside. "Hello? This is Ink Well, open up!" The top of the door squeaked open, just the slightest of cracks, and from behind it peeked the fearful violet eye of Twilight Sparkle. He tipped his hat to the crack, maintaining the voice and air of authority as he stole quick

glances around him. "Ms. Sparkle, this is the Fire Inspector. Please open the door." He held up the scroll, letting her read the contents, a story blotted out and scribbled over with a shopping list. She looked up at him, noticing the urging behind his eyes.

The door to the library swung open quickly, letting Ink Well inside before shutting immediately behind him. Twilight pulled him over to the side. "How did you do that?"

His eyebrow raised. "Do what?"

Twilight gestured outside. "How did you get past all of those ponies and get them to back off from the library? I've been trying to get them to leave for hours!"

"Oh, old trick I picked up from my dad." He could tell that Twilight was going to inquire deeper and held up a hoof. "It's not important. Where are the others?"

"I saw Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy running towards Rarity's, a crowd at their tails. Pinkie is probably in Sugarcube Corner. Why?"

Ink Well looked at her, remorse on his face. "I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't think any of this would happen. I want to help. I'm going to go get Pinkie and then meet up with the rest of you. Can you make it to the boutique?"

Twilight nodded. "I can try. I'm sure I can find a spell."

"Good. Thank you. I'll be there in a few minutes." He walked over to the door. "Wish me luck." He pulled it open, delving into the crowd of ponies outside once more and snapping it shut behind him.

Twilight stared at the door as the noise from before slowly resumed, the lack of an 'inspector' causing the ponies to immediately resume mobbing the library. She turned and called into the main part of the library. "Spike! I need my notes on the teleport spell! Quickly!"

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Ink Well walked calmly from the library to Sugarcube Corner, again pulling out the scroll. "Fire Inspector! Yes, the one from the Library. I am here too. How many times must I tell you that this many ponies in one place is a fire hazard? Now move it!" The ponies again moved aside with a lot of grumbling and complaining. A few demanded to see the scroll, causing him to have to do some quick flourishes to keep them from reading it. Eventually he made his way inside, pushing out the ponies jammed in there. After the last pony had exited the building, he closed the door, tossing aside the old shopping list and muttering to himself. "That isn't going to work again. Twice was already pushing it."

He turned around to find Pinkie Pie bouncing into the store from the kitchen with a pile of trays balanced carefully on her back. Muffins, cakes, cupcakes, cookies and pies teetered on her as she made her way across the store. "I'm sorry everypony, I wasn't expecting a party! Such a good surprise you even got the host! But the snacks are ready!" She placed down the snacks on a table and turned to the store, seeing only Ink Well looking at her very strangely. She tilted her head. "Where did everypony go? Did something happen?"

Ink Well shrugged. "Nothing big. The ponies had to leave, something about a fire hazard." He looked into her innocent, smiling face and raised an eyebrow. "You seem awfully cheerful. Have you read the Equirer article?"

Pinkie nodded. "Yeah! Why?"

"Why are you so happy about it?"

Pinkie bounced around him. "It was an Equirer article! And I was in it! And now that everypony knows about my parties, imagine the bashes I'll be able to throw! It'll be amazing! Would you like to come? One's happening now!" She moved over to the door, looking outside. "Doesn't seem like much of a party, but I'm sure it'll be great once the guests come inside! Why? Did you read the story?"

Ink Well's head reeled from the whiplash topic transition and her 'logic.' "Um... no. I didn't..." He coughed nervously. "Can I borrow your copy?"

“Sure!” She tossed him the magazine. He looked at her, confused as to where she had been hiding it. She just smiled at him. “I’ve got to go greet the guests! I’ll see you later!” She bounced from the room as Ink Well moved to the kitchen to find a quiet place to read.

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Ink Well walked from the kitchen, enraged by what he had read. Inside the store front all the ponies from outside crowded among the streamers and balloons that had sprung up. The music was blaring, signaling loud and clear a Pinkie Pie party. He pushed his way through the party, eventually finding her near a punch bowl, a cup in her hoof and surrounded by ponies asking about the article. With some effort he sidled up to her, being pushed in by all sides. “Pinkie, can I talk to you?”

She smiled at him. “Sure, silly! It’s a party! You can talk to anypony!”

He shook his head angrily. “How can you be throwing a party? You were angry at me yesterday for much less than this... slander! How are you not mad?”

She giggled at him. “Oh, they didn’t write anything too bad...”

“They said you assaulted half of the attendees and burned down the castle with your wild partying! Those are blatant lies! And your story was the mildest. They accused half of you for trying to assassinate the royals and the other half for trying to destroy the castle like some crazed revolutionaries! Even if you aren’t mad, how can you not feel bad for your friends?”

She shrugged. “I do, but I invited them to the party to make it up to them! Once they have fun they’ll brighten up. It’ll be okay.”

“No! It’s not okay! I...” Ink Well shook his head at her. “I don’t get you Pinkie Pie. You just have your party. I’ll be with the others at the boutique.” He huffed as he shoved his way out of the party, jostled by the ponies trying to get to Pinkie Pie. As he reached the door, he looked back at her smiling and chatting it up, shook his head, and left.

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Ink Well walked out of Sugarcube Corner fuming and headed to the Carousel Boutique. The crowd was huge, pushing and jamming against the doors. Among the ponies with the magazine were a few with cameras, flashing pictures frantically of windows with drawn curtains and doors hung with a 'Closed' sign. Ink Well scanned the crowd, frowning as he recognized ponies from the Library. He talked to himself under his breath. "I'm going to have to sneak in here. Too many of these are from the other crowds, they'll get suspicious." As he turned to leave, Ink Well recognized a rosy mane near the back of the crowd. He walked over, hesitantly tapping the pony on the shoulder. She turned, her ivy green eyes and rose cutie mark confirming what he'd feared. "Rose! What are you doing here?"

"Ink Well! Did you hear what they did at the Gala? Oh, the scandal! It's so juicy, isn't it? I never knew you could write like that!"

Ink Well's face hardened. "You think I wrote that..? You think that I wrote such blatant lies about these ponies?" He glared at her. "Do you even realize what you're saying? They're your friends! Your fellow townsponies! Not three days ago you were praising Rarity, and today you stand before her door looking for dirt."

Rose looked at him, confused. "But isn't that what you do? Didn't you fake most of those stories?"

Ink Well's look could shoot daggers. "I always talked to them. I got the facts. I bent the truth, maybe full circle, but the truth was there. When I wrote a story on somepony, it was to entertain, not to declare war!"

Rose backed away from him, scared by the frightful look on his face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

He advanced on her, attracting the attention of the ponies around them "To what? To enjoy the shame of others? To accuse me of writing it? To not even read the name of the reporter on the article? To believe in a story over what you know of your own neighbors?" He looked around at the ponies staring at him, realizing that he had been shouting, then he looked into the trembling eyes of Rose. He backed up, doubt tracing over his features. He sighed, looking at Rose sadly. "I'm sorry... I guess I just



thought higher of you.” He trotted away to the side of the building. Rose looked at him, then down at the magazine in her hoof. After a brief time of contemplation she dropped it and walked away, the only one to leave the crowd.

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Rarity, Fluttershy, Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Twilight all sat huddled in the back room of the boutique, windows drawn and ponies in various states of unease. Dash and Applejack were pacing angrily by the door, while Twilight was trying to comfort Fluttershy, who was weeping gently in the corner. Rarity was laying on her bed, ranting. “Oh the scandal! The humiliation! How can I go on like this? I shall die of shame if I walk out of here again! Oh what is a pony to do?”

Applejack stomped her hoof. “I can't believe that darn magazine! They print lies about us, and then when somepony finally does sumthin', they fire him and print the lies anyway! If I could just get my hooves on 'em!”

Rainbow reared up, smacking her hooves down. “We should fly out to the Equirer and burst into their offices hit 'em all if they don't take it back!”

Twilight frowned at her. “Rainbow, just calm down. Attacking them will do nothing. We just need to wait, it'll all blow over. It did last time... Besides, Ink Well is coming, and he's going to try to help us.”

Rainbow crossed her front hooves, pouting. “Yeah, that's helped so much so far...”

Fluttershy curled into a ball. “I just wanted to be their friends... I didn't mean to do anything at the Gala... Everypony thinks I'm just awful...”

Twilight hugged her. “There, there. It's alright. No pony thinks you're awful.”

Rarity threw herself back on her bed. “Oh, woe is me! We will have to go into exile! Luckily, I packed the last time, just in case of an emergency. We will all live marvelously, even in a foreign land!”

Fluttershy wiped away the tears, looking at Twilight. "I don't want to leave all my friends. What will the animals do when I'm gone?"

Applejack came over, calming down from her own anger. "It's okay sugar cube. It'll all be alright. We'll make it through this, somehow. And none of us will have to go away or nuthin'."

A tap came at the window, drawing the fearful attention of all the ponies. It tapped again, slightly quicker this time. Everypony within the room looked at each other, trying to figure out who should go check it or if they should at all. A third tap came, rattling the windows behind the curtain. Fluttershy turned her head away, curling into a tighter ball and drawing back the attention of Applejack and Twilight. Rarity nodded towards Rainbow Dash, then tilted her head at the window.

Rainbow crept over, working very hard to move silently. She crawled beneath the curtain, looking up at it worriedly. The tapping came again, slightly more frantic. From outside Dash could hear a voice whispering, but couldn't make out the words. She slowly lifted herself up, sticking her head under the curtain so that she could see outside.

Peeking in from the side of the window was Ink Well, his back pressed against the wall to minimize his profile. He looked at Rainbow, who herself was peeking from the bottom of the window, and smiled. Rainbow popped up, pushing the window open, letting Ink Well shoot inside, closing the window behind him and swirling around the curtain, holding it with a hoof to stop it's movement. When he turned around, Rarity jumped up, pulling her covers over herself. "My! A colt in my bedroom, uninvited! How improper!"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Not now Rarity!" Rarity pouted at her, but Applejack ignored her, walking over to Ink Well. "Twi said you wanna help us. Now, I'm all for that, but the first thing I wanna know is why the story ran. I thought you got kicked for it."

Ink Well took out the magazine, flipping to the article. "I think the whole thing was written blind. I think..." He checked the magazine for the author, "this 'Checkers' was just given the rumors and the information known and told to write a story. They didn't get you or Pinkie by name, so they can't have actually gathered any information." He shrugged. "They did

the same thing when I wrote the Appaloosa story. But this guy was just... crazy. This is the kind of story from an international intrigue novel, not a Gala gossip piece.”

Fluttershy sniffled in the corner. “How could they write all of those horrible things?”

Ink Well sighed. “I don't know.” He walked over to her and knelt down next to her, placing his hoof on her shoulder. “But I vow that I will do everything in my power to clear your name. All of you. You have my word that your corrections will be printed and this slander will be set right.”

She looked up at him, tears at the edges on her eyes. “Really? You mean it?”

He nodded. “Yup. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye.” A gasp came from the rest of the room, but Fluttershy's face broke into a smile. Ink Well smiled back, then stood up and turned back to the other ponies, who looked at him with shocked expressions. Ink Well coughed nervously. “Was it something I said?”

Rainbow Dash shot over to him, smacking him on the back. “No way! How do you know the Pinkie Swear? You know it's unbreakable, right?”

Ink Well looked offended. “I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it.”

Twilight looked around, finally noticing something. “Hey! Where is Pinkie? Weren't you going to bring her with you?”

“She's at Sugarcube Corner, throwing a party. I think we're all invited, but there's quite a lot of Equirer fans there. I have no clue what she's thinking... seems insensitive.”

Applejack shook her head at him. “It's not as bad as all that. It's just how she is. She just always wants to see us happy, and how she does is with parties. She really means well.”

Ink Well shrugged. “Whatever you say. I still don't get it, but then I guess I don't have to.” He walked towards the window, pushing it open. “I'm

going to get out of here, get to reworking the correction piece. I'll check in with you after I send something, alright?"

Twilight nodded to him. "Alright Ink Well. And thank you."

He tipped his hat to them. "Of course. It's the least I can do." He looked around outside, seeing the path clear of ponies. "I think if you hurry you might be able to slip away. Good luck out there." Ink Well took off out of the window, flying into the sky and back to his house.

---

Ink Well spent the afternoon analyzing the story, trying to determine the best angle to use to incorporate this article into the rest of his corrections. He looked over his notes and his edit-ridden story, and with a little work determined the best way to denounce the 'revolutionary activities' of the 'Ponyville 6'. As night fell, he lit a candle on his desk before continuing his work. Around him danced the shadows of stories long written and tales long forgotten, edging their way into the writer's mind and trying to sap his focus. But he remained resolute, concentrating solely on the task at hoof, preparing a story that anypony would read, and more importantly, one that contained only the truth. He heard the clock chime the hours, ticking away the night until all that remained was that silent stillness before dawn.

He yawned, the fountain pen falling from his mouth as he raised his hooves and stretched. He looked down at the discarded pen, then up to the clock, then to his paper. The words stared at him, urging him onwards towards completion. He blinked the sleep from his eyes, then picked up the pen once more. "No time to rest yet," he said around the pen. "They'll be plenty of time to sleep when it's done." He returned to writing, the clock forlornly marking the time behind him.

---

A gentle knock on the door roused him from his sleep. The sun gleamed in the windows from a high angle. He looked at the puddle of candle wax staining the corner of the desk, it having burned out long ago. His pen sat at the bottom lip of the desk where it had rolled as he slept. He picked his head up, dry ink sticking the paper to his fur for just a moment

before it drifted back to the desk. He looked down at the paper, frowning at the sentence stalled mid-stroke. "Shoot, how long was I out?"

The knock happened again, so soft as to be barely heard. Ink Well's attention turned to the door, thoughts on his story now behind him. He walked over slowly, moving carefully to unknot his muscles before reaching the door. He swung it open, shielding his eyes with a hoof as the midday sun tried to blind him. Standing outside was a figure, though Ink Well couldn't make out detail while he squinted in the light. "Hello? Can I help you?"

The figure took a step back. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is this a bad time?" Ink Well blinked to aid his eye's adjustment to the light. The figure before him quickly resolved into the form of Fluttershy.

Ink Well perked up immediately, rubbing a hoof through his mane in a failed attempt to straighten the tangle atop his head. "Fluttershy! No, it's not a bad time. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting a visit."

Sheepishly she kicked at the ground. "Should I come back later? I don't want to bother you."

Ink Well stepped aside, smiling awkwardly. "No! No, it's fine. Come in, take a seat." She walked into the house, which hadn't changed at all since she'd last seen it. "Sorry I didn't clean up or anything, though I suppose you've seen it in worse shape."

"Oh, no. It's fine. Really." Fluttershy walked to the sofa, moving a pile of papers from one side and trying to get comfortable on the wafer thin padding.

Ink Well walked over to the writing table, the only seat in his house that he ever took. He smiled at her. "So, what brings you all the way out here?"

"I had to get away. There were just so many ponies visiting my house to ask me questions." She shuddered in place on the couch. "It was scaring the animals. They'd be better off if I weren't there right now."

Ink Well shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder about those reader ponies, scaring innocent creatures. It's not right."

Fluttershy stared into the paper veneer on the floor. "I couldn't handle it anymore. All around town ponies just keep hounding me, so I flew out here. At least the only pony here knows the truth."

Ink Well smiled at her. "Well you're welcome any time, but I can't promise much in the way of hospitality. I don't have a lot in the way of food or drink and I'm kind of focused on fixing that story right now."

Fluttershy giggled. "I can see that." Ink Well looked at her, confused. She pointed at his cheek, where words had clearly dried on his fur. He looked around until he spotted his reflection in the metal of the sink. Frowning, he began to wash the words from his face. "Did you fall asleep while writing?"

Ink Well smiled nervously at her. "Yeah... I guess I just wasn't paying attention to the time, woke up just before you got here." He pointed to the paper sitting on his desk. "But at least I have the layout all finished. I just have to dress it up for the magazines I'm going to submit it to and all will be well. Getting that first layout was really the hardest part." He turned off the sink. "Well, that and getting it published, but that part's always difficult." He turned around, finding Fluttershy reading over one of the papers on the stack next to her. "Enjoying your read?"

Fluttershy jumped, trying for a second to look as nonchalant as possible. She looked at his face, then sighed, resigning. "Oh, I'm sorry... I was just curious. What little I read while cleaning was great! Even better than everything you did for the Equirer."

Ink Well tilted his head at her. "Really? You read the Equirer? I thought you just got humiliated by it."

She looked down while she was talking. "Um... well, I always liked the stories. They were written so well, even though they were fake. I didn't take it seriously, but it was fun to read! It's only the few rare times that it was hurtful..."

“Yeah... well...” Ink Well smiled at her. “At least you enjoyed the story. That's the attitude I wish more ponies took with it. But instead, well... you know how they react.” He walked back to his writing desk and sat getting ready to write. As he did, he looked back at Fluttershy, who was reading the story next to her again. He smiled. “Hey, I'm going to be working on the article for 'Ponies Magazine,' but if you like my writing so much, feel free to read whatever you want.”

Fluttershy smiled, taking the first story off of the stack and placing it in an easier place to read, diving right into it. Ink Well pulled out a fresh piece of paper, picking up his pen and starting to write. Behind him he heard Fluttershy humming quietly to herself. He smiled as he wrote, glad to have the company.

---

Fluttershy stayed until sunset, reading all of the stories in the pile next to her, as well as a few around the room. She looked outside, seeing the reddening sky. “Oh no! It's so late! I need to go.”

“Wait!” Ink Well wrote quickly, the pen dancing across the paper beneath him. “Hold on... hold on... Finished!” He plunked the pen into the ink pot on his desk, then grabbed the story and held it to Fluttershy. “Before you go, could you read over this? I just want to make sure it's up to your standard before I send it off.”

“Oh... alright.” Fluttershy took the story, setting it down on the couch and settling down to read it. While she read the story, Ink Well cleaned up the melted wax on his desk, tossing its remains in the trash outside before placing a new one on his desk. He set up a few pieces of paper on the desk, sitting and readying himself to write when Fluttershy finished the story.

“This is perfect. Exactly what we were all asking for.” She gave him back the story. “Thank you.”

Ink Well smiled. “No problem. I'm glad I got it right.”

“No, I mean... thank you for doing all of this. Writing our corrections, trying so hard to get them all printed, even after losing your job... It means a lot.” She smiled at him, a very warm smile.

Ink Well looked at her, surprised by the compliment. “Oh. Well... It wasn't right what they were doing, you know? Somepony had to do something.”

Fluttershy smiled at him. “Well then thank you for being the pony to do it.” She walked to the door, looking at her flight path. She looked back, seeing Ink Well sitting at his writing desk once more. “Um... would it be alright if I visited again? I don't want to impose.”

Ink Well looked at her. “Of course! It's no imposition. To be honest, I like the company. Especially when they like my stories. Feel free to come by any time you want.”

She looked very happy to hear him say that. “Okay. Thank you again. Have a nice evening!”

Ink Well smiled. “You too! Fly safely!” Fluttershy took off, flapping her wings and jumping into the air without hardly disturbing anything around her. After she had gone, Ink Well turned to the story and readied his pen. “That's one down. Just a half dozen to go!” He placed pen to paper, setting about another night of work.

---

Ink Well spent the next few nights writing, starting at dusk and working into the wee hours of the morning. He worked diligently, readying the spin for whichever magazine he was writing, and waking at his desk the next day, work nearly finished before him. He would spend the day writing the cover letter for it, as well as preparing the envelope for mailing. In the afternoon he's place the letter in the mailbox, flipping up the little flag so it would be picked up the next day. Then the cycle was repeated.

Fluttershy visited again three days after her initial visit, bringing along her bunny, Angel. She again woke Ink Well with her knocking, who gave her the story he'd written the night before to begin with. “This one is going to 'The New Republic.' It's another gossip magazine, most of the ones on



the list are, but since you're here, I'd like you to make sure I'm still writing to your standards." Fluttershy agreed, reading the story as Ink Well wrote the cover letter.

As he finished it, Fluttershy placed the story on his desk. "Just as good as last time, Ink Well. It's good to print."

Ink Well spent the day writing again, this time with Angel sitting on his desk, watching him work. After a few hours of writing, Ink Well looked at Angel, then reached out a hoof hesitantly. The rabbit looked at him dourly. After a moment more of hesitation, Ink Well put his hoof down. "Alright Angel. You don't have to like me yet. I won't force the issue." He turned back to his work, and Angel bounced over to Fluttershy.

She looked at the distasteful look on the bunny's face and frowned. "Oh Angel, he just wants to be friends! You don't have to be so mean about it." Angel stuck his tongue out at her. "Well fine. You go play outside then. I'm going to stay in here."

Fluttershy finished his completed stories over the course of that day, placing the last one in the finished group just before sunset. She looked sad as she did, sitting quietly for a few minutes. As Ink Well noticed the quiet, he turned to her, noticing her expression. "Are you alright?" She nodded, still looking down. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, well, that was the last of your stories. I was really enjoying these visits." She sighed, heading to the door. "I guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah. I guess." As Fluttershy was about to fly off, Ink Well walked over. "Well, if you like my writing so much, you could read my book. I don't think anypony else has, you could be the first!"

Fluttershy turned to him, a sad look in her eye as she heard him talk like that. "Don't say that. I'm sure lots of ponies read your book. It was great."

"Oh, yeah, well I didn't think you'd-" Ink Well's jaw dropped, registering what had been said. "What?"

She smiled at him. "I said your book was great."

Ink Well looked at her as though she had suddenly sprouted another head. "You've read my book?"

"Yes. I got it a few days after it came out." Ink Well placed a hoof on her shoulder, which was quickly smacked by Angel. He then stared at her, examining what he must have thought of as an impossibility. She backed away from his gaze, starting to feel uneasy. "Is something wrong?"

"No... Nothing is wrong." His face changed from an analytical look to one of sheer joy. He hugged her, catching her off guard and unsteady. "I had to make sure you were real, and you are! You really are!" He released his hug, flying joyfully around his house. "Somepony who read my book! I never thought this day would come!"

She looked at him, disbelieving. "You mean nopony had complimented your book before?"

The grin slowly faded from his face. "No. Not a one. I told you, it didn't sell. I made no money from commissions on the book. So far as I know the only ones that went into circulation went to the libraries, lost among the ages of reality written down within... I'd thought it was trash, a complete waste of time..." He looked back at her, the grin plastering itself on his face once more. "Oh, thank you Fluttershy."

She looked confused. "What did I do?"

"You liked my book. That's more than anypony's ever done before." He looked outside at the ever darkening sky. "Oh, geez, look at the time. You should probably be heading home. I've held you up too long."

Fluttershy smiled. "It's alright. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yeah. Of course. Have a nice flight." Ink Well paced around the room, beaming at everything around him as Fluttershy quietly took off, gliding into the dark. After a few moments, Ink Well realized that Fluttershy had gone and dashed out the door. He caught up to her a few dozen yards outside. "Wait. Um, well... If you want to come visit again, I don't have much in the way of food or anything, but if you'd like you could read my

incomplete stories. I could use some input on them..." He rubbed his mane sheepishly, "if you want."

Fluttershy smiled at him, marveling at how he was so far from his house without his usual accessories. "Sure, I'd like that. I'll see you soon Ink Well."

Ink Well's grin grew even wider. "Yeah. Fly safely!" He flew back to his door, dancing on air all the way back.

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Ink Well sent off the last of the correction stories the next day, having written three over the course of the night. He hadn't fallen asleep at his desk, being much too excited while writing, only waiting until after he sent the letters to go to bed. With a content smile, he lay his head wearily on his cloud pillow. Dreams came unbidden, a vivid wonderland that no words could describe, though he would definitely attempt when he next wrote.

Ink Well's eyelids rose cheerfully with the morning sun. He smiled, having for once actually slept through the night, a relatively unknown experience to him. He got up from his bed and stretched before looking around the room. It may have been just a bed, a few hanging papers and a low roof, but it was the best looking place in the world this morning. He fluttered happily into the bulk of his house, the writing desk clean and tidy, the stack of read stories still sitting neatly on the couch. He moved them aside, clearing the couch. He stood back, taking in the sagging green couch cushions that he hadn't seen in... "Huh, when did I last see that thing clear?" He looked around the house, seeing pile after pile of papers and scrolls, bundles and sheaves, and frowned. "This place is a mess!"

Ink Well started to straighten piles into stacks, consolidating the mess into a reasonable area. From there, he organized the stacks, moving them into the corners and out of the way places around the house. He even tidied up the pile of rejection letters, collecting the crumpled balls of paper into a bin until a mountain was sticking out of it. It was amazing how much of the scuffed wood floor was revealed when the papers were organized, and it was suffocating how much dust flew into the air. After an hour of rearranging his house, Ink Well threw the front door open, coughing and sputtering for breath. "I really need to clean this place more often." He

walked from the door, letting the dust settle, and found the flag on his mailbox to be raised. Pulling open the cover, he found two letters within, both with the magazine's logos on the front.

Excited, he ripped open the envelope from 'Ponies' magazine, dumping the letter onto the grass. He ducked down, reading it where it had landed. "Ink Well, we are happy for your submission... yada yada yada... your story was very well written, but..." He slowed down, scanning the rest of the letter slowly, wings drooping. "Rejected." He picked up the paper, crumpling it with his hooves. "Welp, that's why you sent it to more than one magazine!" He was more careful with the envelope from 'Solar,' keeping his pace slow and his emotions calm. No need to work himself up about the contents, it certainly wouldn't change them. He pulled out that letter, reading it expectantly despite himself. "Ink Well, we thank you for your... get to the good bit... but..." He sighed, crumpling up the other letter. "Figures."

He picked up the compacted letters, taking them within the house and tossing them towards the bin of rejection. They bounced off of the mountain, causing a small avalanche which scattered paper balls around the room. Ink Well sighed, blowing away a swirl of dust before him. After a few seconds, he frowned. "C'mon Ink Well! Just one bad day, nothing to get so down about!" He walked to the door, smiling as the wind blew through his mane. "Today shouldn't be spent in the house. It's a day for flight!" He walked inside, grabbing his hat and putting on his bag, placing his pen from the ink pot into its holster. He then trotted outside, closing the door behind him, and took off.

Ink Well glided around the valley, enjoying the wind under his wings and the sun on his back. He flew up to Cloudsdale, walking among the clouds and taking in the beautiful architecture. He'd always liked the design of this city, the columns and statues made of solidified cloud having an aesthetic impossible to replicate on the ground. He still marveled at the Cloudiseum every time he saw it, and the weather factory on the edge of town made such a striking silhouette against the sky. He spent the entire day enjoying the sights and sounds of the glorious city in the sky. Window shopping, the floating park, touring the weather factory, just experiencing the town for all it had to offer.

The final part of his day in Cloudsdale brought him to the National Equirer's office at sunset. He glared at the building, hating how its boxy design contrasted with the ornate pillars and decorative nature of the buildings around it. It was so out of place, sitting on its own cloud, refusing to share either space or design with its neighbors. It was like some cheap Manhattan building flung into the wonder of the clouds. It just... didn't fit.

Ink Well watched the building for a few minutes, not really sure what to make of himself. Eventually he turned away and took off, spiraling from Cloudsdale back to his home in the valley below. As he walked in the door, wings weary and mind full, he decided to go to bed early, welcoming the change of pace his waiting life had.

That night, his sleep was uneasy, tossing and turning through the night, dreams dark and foreboding, centering around accusations of him and the Equirer. He awoke mid morning when he tumbled out of bed, his hair an absolute mess. He gingerly made his way outside, seeing the small mailbox flag up again. He walked over, opening it to find two letters, each emblazoned with their own logo. He flipped open the first, from 'Night,' hoping for good news. "Ink Well... blah blah blah... Ah, there it is, but..." He dropped the spent envelope, turning his attention to the other. "Ah, 'Canterlot Weekly.'" He flipped it open, jumping half way down the page.

There it was, that tiny three letter word that marked its fate. He dropped the letter to the ground, walking forlornly back inside. "What did you expect? Everything would suddenly change? Just getting your hopes up Ink Well." He closed the door with a soft 'thunk' that knocked over the rejection bin, scattering papers across the floor. He then trudged over to the writing desk, kicking away papers as the energy drained from him, the bad news taking a toll. He picked up his pen, pulled out a sheet of paper, and just started writing. He filled the page with ramblings and notes, scribbles and doodles, nothing of real substance, just sitting and writing to clear his head.

Without him realizing the passage of time, shadows fell on the room. He shook his head, noticing the darkness around him. He looked down at the papers spread around his desk, half a dozen sheets covered in rambling. He sighed. "What a waste of a day." He lit the candle sitting on the edge of his desk and pulled out a new sheet of paper, pen moving

slowly back to writing position. He sat in the lone candle's light, the darkness slowly swallowing the room.

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A gentle knock came at the door, rousing Ink Well from his slumber. He got up, bleary eyed, from his desk, and looked down at the paper. Doodles of ponies, mostly a familiar pegasus and earth pony, covered the sheet. He pushed it from the desk, groggily heaving himself away from the desk and dragging his weary wings to the door. He pulled it open slowly. "Hello?"

"Hello. I- Eep!" Outside the door Fluttershy jumped back, surprised by the vision before her. "Ink Well! Are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh! Fluttershy!" He straightened up trying to look cheerful despite the bags under his eyes. "How are you? Long time no see. What time is it, by the way?"

"It's almost noon. Did you stay up all night writing again?"

Ink Well looked back at the papers thrown haphazardly to the floor. "Something like that..."

Fluttershy sighed, shaking her head. "Oh Ink Well, you need to treat yourself better..." She walked inside, noticing the crumpled papers scattered throughout the room and the wax sculpture dripping from the desk. Ink Well watched her examining his room and tried with little success to straighten his mussy mane. After a few seconds he noticed Fluttershy looking at him, smiling. Ink Well quickly brought down his hoof and smiled nervously back. "Oh!" Fluttershy reached into the small bag she had with her and pulled out an envelope. "I almost forgot why I was here! Rose asked me to deliver a letter to you."

Ink Well tilted his head in confusion. "From Rose? Did she say what she wanted?"

"No. She just walked up to my door yesterday and said that she was sorry for how she'd acted when the article came out. I thanked her, and as she was walking off she said something about mailing a letter to you." She

kicked one of the paper balls at her feet. "I'd kind of been wanting to visit anyway, so I offered to deliver it."

Ink Well smiled, accepting the letter. "Thank you. That was very kind."

Fluttershy smiled. "It was really no problem." She looked around the room, pointing to a stack of papers. "Are these your unfinished ones?"

Ink Well paused mid envelope rip to look. "Yeah, those ones. Help yourself." He opened the letter, leaning against a wall as he read it:

'Dear Ink Well,

I'm sorry for what I said the other day. After seeing you outside of Carousel Boutique, I went home and read your old articles in the Equirer, and you're right. You have an element of truth in them that this writer just didn't have. In fact, your words were more believable because they were true, something that it seems none of the other writers at the Equirer understand. It made me realize how foolish I was for being taken in by such obvious lies, and I could tell I lost your trust with my actions. I just...

I'm sorry. From the bottom of my heart, I wish that I had realized my folly before you had to yell it at me, and I wish that the others in town could see theirs. It was silly and stupid and it was hurtful for those on the receiving end. But I guess that isn't the main point of this letter. I want to invite you to my shop the next time you're in town, just to talk. I feel that I said and did some things that could really stifle our friendship, and I don't want it thrown away over something as silly as an article.

Hope to see you soon!  
Roseluck'

Ink Well put down the letter on his desk, looking at it sadly. "Yeah... I said some things I shouldn't have either." He folded it away carefully, placing it on the edge of his writing desk. He turned around to find Fluttershy looking at him as though she wanted to ask him something. "Yes Fluttershy?"

“Oh, um, well... When I was cleaning your house all those days ago, I went into your room and I saw your story on the wall. I was wondering, if it's okay with you, if it would be alright for me to read it.”

Ink Well looked surprised that she even had to ask. “Go ahead! You've earned it, my only reader! Enjoy.”

“Oh! Thank you.” Fluttershy hovered up to the room above, leaving Ink Well alone with his stories. He walked to the door, letting a slight breeze into his stuffy house. Outside he could see the mailbox, flag raised and announcing mail.

Ink Well thought about just closing the door, but shook his head. “Not reading it isn't going to change the result.” He walked slowly outside, pulled open the mailbox, and took out the three letters sitting within. He then walked calmly back into the house, sitting down at his writing desk before even thinking about opening them. He held them up, the responses from 'The New Republic', 'The Inquisitor', and 'The Times' all looking at him. “Maybe if I just open all three at once, it won't sting as badly.” He opened each envelope, careful not to catch a glimpse of the letters before he laid them out side by side. Then in one motion he flipped them all open, scanning down into them to see what they held.

His wings dropped, his ears flattening against his head. “Rejected. All of them.” With a defeated sigh his head dropped, forehead colliding loudly, though not painfully, with the desk. He pushed his chair back so that his body was slumped over the divide, hooves splayed across the rejections before him. “Congratulations, Ink Well! You just failed a week of work AND your new friends! Tell us how you feel.” He brought up his head a few inches, just to let it drop once more painfully into the desk. “You really thought you could help them, didn't you? You thought you could fix everything with a pen and ink and a dream.” He banged his head against the table again, this time causing his forehead to throb with the impact. “You really got yourself worked up, didn't you? Just a stupid writer whose only good piece of work was years ago. You're a hack Ink Well!”

He raised up his head again, winding up to bring it down hard, when a hoof was placed gently on his forehead. He opened his eyes to see Fluttershy hovering above him, sadness filling her eyes. “Don't. Please. You don't deserve it. You have been doing a wonderful job, and you write



so well. These magazines don't know what they're talking about." Fluttershy removed her hoof from his head, letting him straighten his neck. She then landed softly next to him. "I finished the story."

"Yeah? And how was my crowning achievement?" Ink Well didn't mean to, but disdain dripped into his voice. "Spectacular right? Best thing I've ever written? Yeah, I know. It was all down hill from there." His head hung low, no emotion bothering to come to his face.

Fluttershy frowned at him. "It was a wonderful story, but it's not better than your current work."

He slumped forward onto his writing desk. "Then how come everything I write gets rejected? It can't be because it's good."

Fluttershy shook her head, rubbing his back with her hoof. "There there. I know you're upset right now, but it's alright. I don't know why other ponies don't like your work. I think it's wonderful. All of it. You've only been improving as a writer, Ink Well, it's just your attitude that's deteriorated so."

Ink Well gestured to the pile of stories Fluttershy had read. "But none of those had the spark!" His hoof rounded the room, pointing out the unfinished works and the articles. "Not one of them was inspired like that first one! They were just come across as my mind rambled. Nothing special, just words on a paper."

"Ink Well, that's all any writing is. Letters, books, magazines, stories, they are all just words on paper. It is up to the author and the reader to make them more." She walked around him, picking up the letters on the desk. "These rejections are from ponies who don't get it. They don't want a story with feeling poured into each word. They don't want a world to come alive in front of them. They want words so simple anypony will read them and want to know more, and they do that by taking horrible private things and making them news." She placed the letters face down in a stack in the corner. "You have a great gift Ink Well. You need to realize that. Don't let rejection stop it from coming out."

Ink Well sulked at his desk, looking at the rejections sitting face down next to him. He sat up, looking past Fluttershy to the pile of rejections by

the door. His eyes drifted down to the rejections carpeting the floor. How could he go on against odds like that?

Then he looked at Fluttershy. She looked at him compassionately, trying her best to make him feel better, but he could tell she meant every word she said. She believed in him, even though he didn't believe in himself. He smiled. "Well. If you insist, I'll give it another shot." He spun around in his chair, facing himself back to his writing desk. Behind him, Fluttershy smiled, glad to see him active again. He flipped over the rejections, reading over them individually. "Let's see what they actually have against the article."

After he looked them all over, his brain registered something. A thought, fleeting, but... He held up two of the letters, examining them closely side by side, then slowly running one behind the other. "Interesting." He did this with the other letter, then tossed it to the side. "Hmm..." Fluttershy watched him, confused.

"What?"

Ink Well quickly put down the letters, turning to her. "Fluttershy, on the floor around here are two recent letters from 'Ponies' and 'Solar'. See if you can find them, and if you can, smooth them out on the desk." Ink Well hopped from his chair and trotted outside, looking around for any sign of the two letters he'd dropped out here the day before. After a minute of searching, he found them snagged under a nearby bush. He untangled them, trying not to rip them too badly, and ran back inside. As he reentered Fluttershy was smoothing out the letters on his desk.

Ink Well placed his two torn letters next to the creased ones and the ones from today, looking between them all carefully. He then rearranged them, mixing up their order. "Huh... Very interesting." He held up one letter from each category, trying to back light them from a nearby window. "Would you look at that..."

Fluttershy watched him doing all of this from a few steps away, questions about his sanity popping into her head. "Ink Well? What are you doing?"

Ink Well placed down the papers and motioned her over. "You have to see this. Come here, look at these all carefully. I can't believe I didn't notice it before." Fluttershy walked over, looking at the six form letters in various states of distress. After a few seconds of analysis, she looked over to Ink Well, confused.

"What is it? What am I looking for?"

"Look at the writing, both how they're written and the wording used." Fluttershy turned her attention back to the papers, not sure what she was looking for. She sat reading them for almost a minute in silence, about to give up, when she noticed it.

"Wait." She read over the letters again, shock slowly creeping over her face. "No. That's so odd."

"Ah! You saw it!" Ink Well held up the letters to the window again, letting Fluttershy look over his shoulder. "There, in the corner, do you see that too?"

Fluttershy stepped back, covering her mouth with her hooves. "No!"

Ink Well smiled at her, a suspicious, playful smile. "Oh yes! This is the kind of thing that really sparks a mystery!" He held up all of the letters. "What do you think? Think the others will want to know?"

Fluttershy nodded. "That's just so strange. We have to show them."

Ink Well picked up the letter he'd tossed aside, as well as the other six, and placed them in his bag. He swung his bag over his shoulder, placed his hat on his head and grabbed his pen from its ink pot and placed it in its holster. "This just got a whole lot more interesting."

# Chapter 5

## Digging Deeper

“Ink Well, what are we looking at?” Twilight magicked two of the rejection letters in front of her, looking at each closely. Around the library the other ponies from the original story were each looking at other rejection letters, all in varying states of confusion. She put them down, frowning. “I don't know what you expect us to see.”

Ink Well walked over, pushing the papers towards her again. “Don't give up. It's important.” Fluttershy walked over, bursting to tell her friend where to look, but Ink Well held up a hoof, silencing her. “No, they have to see it for themselves.”

Rainbow Dash flew upside down, staring at the letter on the floor above her for a new angle on it. “There's nothing to see! It's just a letter.”

Ink Well pulled her down, gently nudging her towards Applejack. “You two look at them together. Maybe seeing more than one will help.”

Rainbow pushed back against his nudging. “I don't see why you're playing games with us!”

Ink Well smiled slyly at her. “Just trust me. You will be amazed.”

Applejack looked at her letter next to Rainbow's. “I reckon he's trying to mess with us. Show us how hard he's worked for us.” She looked up. “Look, I'm mighty appreciative, but you don't need to shove 'em in our faces.”

Rarity had long abandoned reading the letter, simply staring confused at Ink Well. “I don't see why you have to be so coy about it. Just tell us what's going on.”

Pinkie bounced over, keeping her letter afloat before her by blowing on it as it fluttered down. “Oh, silly, he's not being koi! He's not a fish.” She

landed beside Ink Well, the paper floating down to cover her face. “So why did you give us six of the same letter?”

Ink Well looked surprised for just a moment, staring at the pink pony, then smiling. “Good job Pinkie, somehow I thought it might be you.”

Twilight looked at the two letters carefully, reading each line for line. “Hey, she's right! They say exactly the same thing!” She squinted at them, inspecting them carefully. “They even look like they were written by the same pony.”

Ink Well jumped up happily, pointing at her. “Exactly! They're the same letter, written six times. Fluttershy, when did you see it?”

Fluttershy looked at him, surprised to be called on like that. “Um, I was reading one, and I transferred to the one next to it by accident and the letter made sense, like not a word had been missed.”

Ink Well pulled out another letter from his bag, tossing it in the middle of the other ponies. “This one is from 'The Times,' the only magazine I tossed an article to that wasn't a gossip rag. They of course rejected it, not their kind of story, but look at it.” He held it up for all to see. “The ink color's changed, the pen work is different, it has a different tone and different words. About the only thing they kept the same was the 'but' that signals the fate of all articles.” He held it up to a window, examining the paper in the late evening light. The paper turned a light peach color, stained by the sun's last light. “It also has no watermark.”

The other ponies almost simultaneously held up their own papers to the windows, letting the light shine through them. In the bottom right hand corner of each, a deep orange in the light, appeared a small symbol, the letters 'NE' superimposed on a rectangular cloud. It perfectly matched the Equirer's logo. Ink Well smirked as a collective gasp came from the room. “Yeah, that's about my reaction too. Almost seems too easy to spot, doesn't it?”

Applejack threw the letter to the ground. “Why those no good snakes in the grass! How'd they pull that one off? Goin' through the mail and rippin' out stories against 'em?”

“I think they're all just the same company under different names!”  
Said Rarity. “Think of the money they could rake in with a set up like that!”

Pinkie popped up in the middle of the group. “I think somepony stole all the articles up, making a big shrine collection! And they're the ones that sent these fake letters back to keep us off of their trail!”

Rainbow reared up, blowing the letters away from the ponies with her wings and swirling them across the ground in a mini tornado. “I think we should break into the Equirer's office and make them tell us what's going on!”

Ink Well put his hoof on her shoulder, calming her down. “Close Rainbow. Going in hooves kicking will just be asking for trouble. I was thinking something a bit more... subtle.”

Twilight looked at him seriously. “Ink Well. What are you planning?”

He shrugged at her. “Well writing didn't work, and you've tried being straight forward before.” He walked over to the door, looking into the early night sky. “I think we should take a more direct approach. Rainbow, how good are you at stealth?”

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Rainbow Dash and Ink Well glided quietly into Cloudsdale, the buildings shining coldly in the dim moonlight. They flew through the city, sole sources of motion in the chilly night air. The entire city was sleeping, perfect for what was being planned.

The pegasi made their way through the floating metropolis until they found the Equirer's headquarters. Rainbow and Ink Well landed on a small cloud floating nearby, scouting the place. The building was dark, lifeless, and foreboding. Outside the front door stood two guard pegasi, looking grim in their dark grey uniforms. Rainbow stood up, getting ready to charge them when Ink Well grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back onto the cloud. “No. We're not rushing the front. We aren't here to draw attention to ourselves.” He looked over at the rainbow mane of the pegasus beside him and shook his head. “No matter our color scheme. Follow me.”

He took off from the cloud and circled the building high and wide. As he did, he spotted three more pegasi on the roof and lights moving within. Satisfied, Ink Well dove beneath the cloud holding the office, Rainbow Dash quickly joining him in the shadow of the building. She hovered next to him, crossing her front hooves before her chest. "Why are we just flying around? How are we going to get in from down here?"

Ink Well gestured to the white fluffiness above them. "It's a cloud." He moved grabbed a small bit of it, pulling it away and creating a small hole above him before waving the chunk away into wisps that dissipated around him. He then dug into the cloud, tunneling through the softness with Rainbow following close behind. After a few seconds, he ran into something he couldn't move.

Rainbow bumped into him when he stopped, pushing him against the blockage. "What's the hold up?"

He tapped his hoof against the solidified cloud above him. "I hit the floor. I can't get through."

Rainbow squeezed past him, pushing him into the cloud surrounding them. "Move aside scrawny! I got this." She braced herself against the wall of the tunnel, winding up a kick.

In one lightning-fast motion her hoof shot forward. The cloud dissipated, her hoof continuing through into wood, which split and showered splinters into the building above. She jumped back, surprised by the loud crack. "Geez, I thought it was just cloudstruction!"

Ink Well shushed her, looking fearfully through the hole above him. Steps could be heard resounding off of the wood above, growing closer, then stopping. A light played over the wall above scanning from left to right just above floor level. A gruff voice filtered down. "Huh... must be hearing things." After a few moments of breathless silence, the steps backed away, quieting until they could no longer be heard.

Ink Well let out his held breath in a relieved sigh. He then tuned to Rainbow Dash, talking in a quiet whisper. "Looks like they don't know we're here yet. Lucky us." He climbed up into the building, pushing aside debris

and weakened paneling before holding down a hoof to help up Rainbow. "Come on up!"

She grabbed his hoof, pulling herself up into a dark wood floored hallway. Ink Well held a hoof in front of his mouth, flapping his wings to hover just above the floor. Rainbow did the same, fluttering behind him and talking in a hoarse whisper. "What's with all the wood? Are they just trying to be fancy?"

"No, they don't just have pegasi up here. I know they've got at least three unicorns and a couple earth ponies working here, and the wood lets them do so safely." Ink Well took out a small candle from his bag, lighting it and listening carefully for hoof beats. Rainbow Dash stayed close to the tiny light balanced in Ink Well's hooves.

"How do they even get the earth ponies up here? Seems like a lot of work for a magazine."

"Hey, gossip is a big business these days, it takes all that your can get. They've probably got a shuttle they keep up or something." He moved the light from door to door along the green walls, holding up the light to see the signs next to them. "Printing... Reception... Offices... Stairs... Records!" He tried the door, the handle turning under hoof. He smiled and pushed the door open on well oiled hinges. He gestured to Rainbow, signaling her into the records room. Inside were rows upon rows of filing cabinets, no markings of any kind on them.

Rainbow looked angrily at the room. "Oh great! This is going to take forever to search!" She glided across the room, landing gently next to a row of cabinets on the far wall, faint moon light filtering in from the windows. After a few moments her hushed voice floated from the pale light. "What are we even looking for?"

"Anything suspicious, anything that connects them to the other magazines, anything they obviously don't want us to see." He looked at the cabinets, pulling the top drawer of the nearest one open. "Just look around, call me over if you find anything." He put down the candle, pulling papers out and looking at them. It was a list of facts and figures on stories and authors writing for the Equirer. Near the bottom he saw a line with 'Gala story' written on it. Next to it, his name was crossed off and replaced with



'Checkers'. He put the paper down, moving over to another set of cabinets and pulling open a drawer. This one contained payrolls for the last few months.

He examined the paperwork, looking for anything odd. As he kept going, there was one section that caught his eye with its rapid increases. The guard payroll for the latest month had almost a hundred names on it, while the next largest section was distribution at fourteen. Ink Well looked it over, frowning. "Why isn't distribution larger? This big a magazine, it should be by far the largest section, but it's tiny. And why are there so many guards? There's not even ten around tonight."

Rainbow's voice drifted to his ears through the darkness. "Ink Well! There's a locked drawer over here! Only one on this side of the room." Ink Well put the latest payroll page in his bag, then moved hurriedly to the other side of the room. Every single filing cabinet was wide open, papers flung around the area.

Ink Well looked at the scene, despairing slightly. "No way they aren't going to know somepony's been here... So much for stealth." In the far corner stood Rainbow Dash wrestling with the top drawer of the last filing cabinet, which remained firmly shut despite her efforts. Ink Well examined it, a key hole in the front. "Interesting..." He looked around, seeing every other cabinet drawer with no lock even built in to them. "Huh. Let me help."

Rainbow looked at him, impressed. "What? You gonna pick the lock?"

"Me? No. No good at that sort of thing. Grab it, I'll pull too." Rainbow bit hard on the handle of the cabinet, then Ink Well bit down onto Rainbow's tail. "Awigh'. On the 'oun of 'ee'. Un. Foo. Ee!" Ink Well and Rainbow Dash both pulled with all their strength, the drawer refusing to budge. They jerked and yanked, causing the cabinet to slowly rock back and forth. Ink Well let go, looking worriedly at the wavering cabinet. "Rainbow, careful!" Rainbow gave a final tug, causing the handle to fly off in her mouth and the cabinet to tip forward with an ominous creak. Rainbow skidded backwards into the cabinets behind her. The rocking one continued forward under its own weight creating a horrid noise. With a hideous tearing crunch that echoed around the room, it smashed into the ground, splitting the wood beneath it. The top drawer popped open, flying out of the cabinet and rending out of shape. A single folder flew out, spilling papers that spread across the floor.

From the floor above came the sound of angered voices and running hooves. Rainbow hopped up, racing out the door. "Hurry up! We have to get out of here!" Ink Well scrambled after the papers on the floor, hurriedly pulling them back together in the folder and placing it in his bag. He then sprinted from the room and into the hallway. Rainbow Dash was already in the entrance tunnel, her head popping out and her hoof urging him over. "Come on!" He ran down the hall, home free.

A door was flung open in front of him, a burly guard in uniform stepping into the hallway. The guard stood between Ink Well and his exit raising a hoof in alarm. "Hey! You! Stop!"

Ink Well vaulted the guard, kicking the colt to force him back down the hall as he did. "Like that ever works!" He flapped his wings once, giving him just enough of a boost to land in the hole. He popped his head out and turned back around, tipping his hat to the guard. The guard glared at him furiously, recovering his balance. Ink Well shot down the hole, running into Rainbow Dash at the bottom.

"Did you get what you need?"

"No clue, but I was definitely a little too cocky there." He looked back to see the guard looking down the hole at them. His ears flattened against his head, worry hitting his face like a bag of bricks. "We should fly." He and Dash flew off, moving as fast as they could away from the building and into the bulk of Cloudsdale. As they exited from under the building, two guards jumped from the roof to join the initial guard in pursuit. Ink Well looked back at the trio chasing them, then to Rainbow Dash. He flashed a nervous smile at her. "A chase! Hope you like to fly fast!"

Rainbow smiled back, not worried at all. "They don't call me Dash for nothing! Try to keep up!" Ink Well nodded, almost missing Rainbow bank, cutting around a cloud and over a shop. Ink Well followed, pounding his wings to keep up but slowly falling behind. Behind him the three guards gave chase; strong, fast fliers that were quickly picking up ground. The five figures twirled through the Cloudsdale night, avoiding buildings, weaving and spiraling in what would have been a spectacular air show were the lighting better. Eventually, Rainbow slowed her pace to match Ink Well. "They're right on us! You've got to speed up!"

He shook his head, sweat flying into the breeze as he kept up the pace. "I'm not that fast! I can't outrun them, I can't even hold this up much longer..." He sighed, his wings burning from the effort. "Split up! I'll try to outmaneuver them and meet you in Ponyville!"

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. "You sure?" Ink Well just glanced worriedly at her, his look radiating 'No, but do it anyway.' She read his eyes and nodded. "Whatever you say. See you there! And you better not keep me waiting!" The pair rounded a corner, Ink Well sharply gaining altitude while Rainbow sped off in a straight line, accelerating much faster than they'd been going. Two guards chased the rainbow trail while the third banked up, following Ink Well.

Ink Well slowed his pace to something he could keep up, trying instead to weave through narrow alleys and tricky dives to lose his tail. The guard followed relentlessly, muscling his way through buildings and clouds alike to match Ink Well's every bank and roll. Ink Well quickly grew desperate, ducking under buildings and around statues, weaving between columns of the fancier structures, and pulling out every turn and trick he knew to stay ahead of the guard. "I should have stuck with flight camp!" he said, looking back at the pursuit now almost within reach. He kicked his wings into overdrive, managing just to inch his tail away from the grasping teeth behind him.

In a final desperation measure he closed his wings, tumbling suddenly from the sky and into a building-less cloud, leaving a pony shaped hole. The guard swerved, diving to follow, and spotted Ink Well's hat pop up on the far side of the cloud, sitting near the edge. Just before the colt entered the mist, he pulled up, diving through the fluff longways as he thought Ink Well must have done. He burst out of the cloud under Ink Well's hat, looking around frantically for his chase.

Ink Well was nowhere to be seen. The guard flew above the cloud, circling it and searching the night sky both above and below for his prey. When he saw nothing, he flew to where the hat sat, kicking the cloud into small pieces to make sure Ink Well wasn't there. The cloud was empty, floating apart in many tiny wisps and a few small chunks. The guard followed the piece with the hat, landing on it and scanning the skies for any sign of movement. He picked up the tattered brown fedora from his perch,

spinning it around and examining it carefully. After a few minutes he tossed it aside and took off, flying back to report to the Equirer.

The fedora fluttered and spun in the night air, tumbling with the breeze. It danced, swirling through the sky until an updraft brought it next to the bit of cloud it had originated from. Ink Well rapidly unfurled, dissipating the thin cocoon of mist he had wrapped around himself to snatch the hat's brim in his teeth. He flapped his wings, stopping his free fall before it could start, and looked around for his pursuer. Relieved to see no movement, he smirked, standing on a tiny bit of fluff hanging around and placing his hat back on his head. He then hopped from the cloud, disappearing into the shadow of Cloudsdale.

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Ink Well flew with the sinking moon, landing at the library in the early morning light. He walked quietly to the door, smiling. "My, won't they be happy to see their returning hero." He pulled it open, slipping inside with hardly a noise. He turned to the bulk of the library, smiling widely.

Nopony was there. His smile wavered. "Huh, not the welcome I expected..." He padded softly around the building, listening for some sort of noise. A loud snoring came from a back part of the library, assaulting his ears. Following the noise, he came upon the prone figure of Rainbow Dash, snoring with a smile on her face. He snorted, kicking the pillow she was laying on. She started, rolling over and onto her hooves defensively.

When she saw it was Ink Well, she frowned at him. "What was that for?"

Ink Well looked indignant. "What, couldn't even wait for me to get back? Where is everypony?"

She waved a hoof dismissively. "They left hours ago. We told them not to wait up or anything. Owlowski was the only one up when I got back, but I figured I'd wait for your slow flank to get here. And it's about time!"

“Well I'm sorry I'm not as fast as you Miss Dash, but I'm not a racer.” His face screwed up as he went over what she said in his head. “Who's Owlowsious?”

“You don't know him? He's Twilight's night assistant.” She pointed to the side of the room, where a perch held a sleeping horned owl, his light grey feathered chest gently rising and falling with his breathing. “He's a cool guy. Not much for conversation though.”

Ink Well looked envious. “She has a dragon AND an owl assistant? That's just too cool.”

It was at this time that a bleary eyes Twilight walked down the stairs from her room. “Ugh, what's going on down here?” She saw Rainbow and Ink Well looking at her and frowned. “Do you have to be so noisy? My door is wide open.”

Rainbow rubbed her mane. “Sorry Twi, didn't think you could hear us. Ink Well's back and he brought the info.” She looked at him. “You did bring it, right?”

Ink Well pulled out the folder and the payroll sheet, throwing them onto a nearby table. “Of course! Got it right here. I wouldn't go through all that flying for nothing.” He watched Twilight walk down the stairs slowly, giving her a large smile when she looked at him. “Late night studying?”

Twilight nodded. “I got engrossed in a text about the ancient gryphon civilizations, it wasn't the best thing to read before going to bed. Much too exciting.” She yawned, shaking the sleep from her head before perking up a bit. As she walked to the folder, flipping it open and inspecting its contents, the yawn spread across the room, infecting Ink Well and causing him to yawn in return, his wings drooping at his sides. She ignored him, reading through the papers quickly, amazed by the words before her. “Ink Well, did you read any of this?”

“No, didn't really have a time to what with the chase and all.”

Twilight shot him a serious look. “You got chased?”

Rainbow tapped her on the back. "Yeah, just a couple guards, nothing huge."

Twilight shook her head. "Wait, wait. You got chased by guards? What did you two do?"

"Nothing! We didn't do anything." Twilight glared at her, staring her down. In the face of that, Rainbow backed down, ears folding against her head. "Okay, we might've broken in."

"What?!" Twilight dropped the folder, backing away from it. "I can't read this! It was gotten illegally! We need to give this back! Oh no, no, no, no, NO! I read it already. I need to forget it."

Twilight ran over to the shelves, pulling out books with her magic and tossing them aside after a quick glance at the cover. Ink Well followed her, shocked at her reaction. "I asked Rainbow if she was good at stealth! What did you think we were going to do?"

"I thought you were going to find ponies to listen to or something. I didn't think you'd break the law!" She pulled out a dusty tome, blowing off its veneer and reading the title. "Ah, memory erasure spells! Perfect!" She flipped it open, hurriedly scanning the pages within.

Ink Well stopped her, pushing the book away from her eyes to attempt to reason with her. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Look, the Equirer did horrible things to pry into the lives of you, your friends, and your Princess. They have been spreading lies and slander, and nopony has been calling them out on it. The most that they could do was open the front door and complain, which did nothing. Yes, this folder was taken under illegal means, but far less than anything they have done to others."

Twilight looked at him, worried. "That is not an excuse to break the law! That just means that we're stooping to their level. That's even worse!"

"No, WE aren't. I am stooping to their level, and I was one of their own people. They're the one to teach me to do stuff like this, so..." Twilight lifted up the book again, scanning through the pages. Ink Well stood next to it at the edge of her vision. "Twilight, this is our one chance to stop them from hurting anypony else. If you could do one bad thing to stop a hundred

more from happening, wouldn't you do it?" Twilight looked doubtful. "If it worries you that much, we'll just find out what it says, and then we'll decide whether to give them back the folder. Your spell will work just as well before the reading as after. Is that acceptable?"

After a few moments of hesitation, Twilight nodded. "Alright. But we're going to give it right back after. We read it, then zap, no more memory, got it?"

"We'll see." Ink Well walked over to the folder, scanning the papers it contained. "What did you read?"

Twilight put down the book, daring to show interest once again in the folder's contents. "It looked like the Equirer was in charge of the other magazines. The first page is the minutes of a meeting between the heads of them, and the Equirer spokespony was definitely taking the lead."

Ink Well looked at the first page suspiciously. "Well, isn't that convenient? It's even got the names of the ponies there noted at the top. We've got the executives of Ponies, Solar, The Inquisitor... and about a half dozen more gossip magazines all fully represented, indeed with the Equirer at the head." Ink Well put down the paper slowly, mulling it over.

Twilight had floating in front of her multiple papers from the file, switching between them excitedly, her doubt having disappeared. "Look at all of this! Records on which stories to run and silence, staging of inter-magazine fighting, detailed records of money transfers for the past ten years." She put the papers down, turning bright eyes to Ink Well. "This is everything we could ever hope for to take them down, in story or in court!"

Ink Well frowned at all of this. "And it was all in the only folder in the only locked filing cabinet of the records room, sitting far in the back in a failed attempt to be innocuous." He held up his hooves, shrugging. "This is either the work of an idiot, an obvious trap, or somepony who followed all of the rules in the Super Villain How-to Guide. Either way, I don't like it."

Rainbow pushed him on the shoulder. "Lighten up, slow poke! Even if it's all lies, you'll totally be able to ruin all of these magazines! You've seen how their readers react to lies, it'll be fine!"

Ink Well wasn't satisfied. "I dunno... let me look it over for a bit. I might be more excited when I've gone over it all." He grabbed the papers from Twilight, taking the folder into a quiet corner of the library to look through its contents. He went over each page with a fine tooth comb, his writer's mind thinking about the best way to present them in a story, but... It just didn't make sense. This was all too... easy. It was like it was being handed to them on a silver platter. Heck, every single paper was typed on Equirer letterhead, watermark included. All it was missing was a notarized statement from the pony in charge and a pre-addressed envelope to send it to the Royal Guard.

Ink Well kept focused on the facts, taking in as much as he cared to before throwing down the folder and rubbing his tired eyes. He shook his head, trying to clear it, and walked into the main part of the library. "Alright, I need to take a break. Too much time spent up in a row's gotten me paranoid. I'm gonna... I dunno, clear my head outside." He looked around, noticing a change in the lighting and a lack of cyan ponies. "Where'd Rainbow go?"

Twilight looked up from the book on psychology in front of her and shrugged. "She went out about an hour ago. Said she was getting bored waiting for you." She flipped over the page, continuing her reading. "Probably for the best. She was getting late for her patrol."

"An hour?" Ink Well looked outside, seeing the morning sun bright and strong. "Huh... Losing track of time. I didn't think I'd taken that long." He walked to the door, opening it and blinking back the bright light. "Feel free to go over the folder on your own. I'm just gonna go out. I might be back later... I dunno." He yawned as he left, heading towards the center of town.

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Ink Well walked contemplatively through the marketplace, wings dragging on the ground as he tried to let the sun's energy reinvigorate him to little effect. He moved deep in thought past the flower shop, waving absentmindedly at Lily when she called out a 'Hello' to him. After taking a few more distracted steps, he stomped down a hoof. "Oh! Shoot, Rose wanted to talk to me, didn't she?" He walked over to the perfume shop, pushing the door open and entering the almost physical wall of scent that hung within.



Among the flower and citrus smells sitting in the air a couple of ponies were perusing the store. There was a small queue in front of the counter, with Rose smiling and talking business with the pink furred pony at the front. As she rang up her customer, she looked over and noticed Ink Well standing at the door. She waved him over as the customer walked off, holding up the line for a moment. "Hey there! Did you get my letter?"

"Yeah." Ink Well looked at the queue of impatient ponies angrily eying him and hung a few feet back from the counter. "Are you busy? Because I can come back later."

Rose shook her head. "No need to leave. Once I clear out the shop I'm going on my lunch break. We can talk then." She saw him nervously look around the shop and smiled at him. "You can wait in the back if you want. It'll only be a few minutes."

Ink Well nodded, relieved. "Thank you." He moved quickly behind the counter and into the back room, trying to deflect the attention of the shopping ponies as Rose greeted her next customer.

In the back room the scents were much more potent, mixing with the various woods and herbs awaiting extraction to create a strong but soothing aroma. Ink Well walked next to one of the bubbling distilleries, taking a seat at the work table set up there. His eyes meandered over the meticulously detailed brass stills, while his mind fell back into the file at the Library and the work that went into obtaining it. Apart from the chase, even the break in had been so simple. It was a plan any moron should have guarded for, so why would they just leave all that laying out practically begging to be taken? Put it in the one locked cabinet in the entire place? It almost had the air of a challenge, a dare to anypony brave enough to just try to take the information.

His eyelids drew together as he thought, the light from the fires beneath the still creating shadows on his closed eyes. He tried to picture the papers in the folder, going over every detail to see if something didn't fit. Yet despite the obvious collection of damning evidence, nothing seemed out of place.

Maybe it was planted. Somepony was trying to frame the Equirer, and they'd planted the folder there. And intercepted all of his letters... and wrote back with the letterhead... Or maybe the Equirer just has a fastidious secretary that just noted everything down. But you don't let a secretary in on a master plan... maybe it was...

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Ink Well awoke with a start as the extractor next to him buzzed loudly, signaling the completion of its run. He got up from the work table, looking around to try to find out what time it was in the windowless distillery. As he moved, a soft burgundy blanket slid from his shoulders, landing with a gentle noise on the ground. He looked at it, then at an apple that was sitting unobtrusively next to where his head had been. He picked it up, turning it over and around in his hoof. As he did so, Rose walked in from the shop to check on the still.

“Oh! Ink Well, you're up. And I see you found the apple.”

Ink Well looked at her sidelong. “Yeah... is it for me?”

Rose threw him a playful look. “No, it's for the still. The brass looked hungry. Yes it's for you, you slept right through lunch time, so I thought I'd leave you something for when you got up.”

Ink Well turned on her, disgruntled. “You just let me sleep? Why would you do that?”

She stepped away, taken aback by his reaction. “You'd looked tired when you walked in. And seeing you sitting there, I just couldn't bring myself to waking you up.” She walked over to the still, turning a valve to stop the bubbling inside before she moved to a tap on the side. She placed a container beneath the tap, then ran the contents of the still into it. The room exploded with the scent of roses. “I guess the still did, though...”

Ink Well shook his head to clear away the fog that entered with the rose smell. “No. Well, yeah, but...” He placed down the apple, angered. “I shouldn't have snapped, but I really shouldn't have fallen asleep like that. I have too much work to do... Darn all night flight.”

Rose looked at him, worry touching the edges of her face. "All night flight? No wonder you were tired. What were you doing?"

Ink Well sat at the table. "Just getting a little information. I was trying to send corrections, but none of the magazines were accepting. I went out to Cloudsdale to find out why, and things got a little... interesting."

Rose tilted her head. "Corrections? But I thought you'd gotten fired."

Ink Well looked surprised. "Really? How'd you hear about that?"

Rose smiled slyly. "I guessed. Doesn't take a lot to realize something was up with you. And after that reaction with the last article, I kind of connected the dots."

Ink Well frowned, annoyed at having been played so easily. "Huh, good deduction then." He shrugged. "Yeah, I got fired after I didn't come through on the Gala article. I was trying to correct their previous stuff and stop that mess they printed from happening, they didn't like that, I got canned..." He sighed a tired sigh. "Spent the last week trying to send corrections to the other mags to lower the interest on Fluttershy's friends, but that fell through."

Rose looked disheartened. "Oh... I'm sorry to hear that. I've been trying to shoo off interest in them myself, but the draw to see the 'Ponyville Six' really has been amazingly good for business." She backed down slightly, trying to duck away from Ink Well's possible anger.

He just gave her a tired smile. "Hey, you've got to work with what you've got." The smile dropped from his face as he leaned back on the table, staring at the ceiling. "Things have just been so complicated since I started writing journalistically... I miss the good old days of fiction, back when all the great plots and hurt ponies were simply words on a page."

Rose perked up when he said this. "Yeah, well you'd know a thing or two about that, wouldn't you?" Ink Well's head bobbed back up, confusion on his face. She just smiled at him. "Don't give me that look, I borrowed your book from the Library."

Ink Well raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah. It's very well written. Beautiful compared to your Equirer stuff. I don't understand how it didn't sell." She looked him in the eyes, excitement sparking in hers. "Something in the way you write made me wish I could experience it. The way you described North Wind's first flight, that exhilarating joy, I could feel it radiating off of the page. And the way that Southern Storm's tower rose from the ground, rending it apart and into the air with its magic, I could see it all in vivid detail! And I haven't actually gotten very far in the book, but what I read was so fantastic!" She took a step back, blushing softly. "But you probably hear that kind of thing all the time."

Ink Well smiled kindly at her. "Oddly enough it has been coming up a lot more recently. Then again, anything looks like a huge increase when previously there was nothing."

"See, that's the thing. You said something similar when you first mentioned the book, and while I was reading, all I could think of was that I knew the pony that wrote this. I had met and talked to a creator of such wonder and he was, well..." She looked at him sadly.

Ink Well looked at her, confused. "Well... what?"

"Never mind. It's not important." She looked away from him and through the door into the main shop. Seeing nopony within, she closed the door. "What I'd really wanted to talk about was the whole magazine thing. I didn't realize how stressing we must have been on the others, hounding them like that, and ever since I've been trying to keep others from following them too much. And I'm sorry that I said you wrote that piece. You're not like that and even implying you were was an insult."

Ink Well shrugged. "Eh, I've been accused of worse. Honestly, once you get past the ridiculousness of the argument, it was an interesting angle to attack a story from. If it wasn't aimed at real ponies it would have made a good book. And you not realizing the effect you had on the ponies when following them, well, I didn't know the effect writing the stories was having. I was probably more guilty than you, so holding a grudge about that wouldn't be fair at all." He smiled at her. "Besides, at least you're trying to do something to fix it. That seems to be all I've been doing lately."

Rose smiled back at him. "I'm sure you're doing your best."

He stared at the apple sitting on the table next to him and frowned. "I dunno. There's one last lead to look into, and it's very interesting, but I don't fully trust it. It's all come so easily and so conveniently that it almost feels like a trap."

Rose shrugged. "So it's a trap. What's the worst that can happen? If it were up to me, I'd go for it."

Ink Well nodded. "You know? You're right. I'm just being paranoid. I mean, worst case scenario, what am I going to do? Lose my job? Already gone. Lose credibility? Went out the window when I started writing for the Equirer. Heck, writing the story will only cost me ink and paper. Might as well go for it."

Rose nodded. "Might as well, right? So, um, what exactly are you going for?"

Ink Well shook his head. "Oh no, I'm not dragging any more ponies into this mess just in case it blows up in my face. It involves why my corrections didn't print, and that's all I'm going to say for now apart from thank you for your time and your workroom. It's been very nice talking to you."

"Yeah. You too." Ink Well moved into the main part of the shop, getting ready to leave when Rose noticed the apple sitting on the desk. "Hold on! Don't forget your lunch!" She tossed it to him, landing it right in his bag.

He tipped his hat to her. "Thank you Miss Roseluck. Have a wonderful day, and I hope to see you again soon." He walked to the shop entrance, flying through the market and trailing the scents of the shop behind him on his way back to the library.

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Ink Well landed at the library, pushing open the door to find Fluttershy and Twilight going over the folder. Twilight looked up at him as he entered,

a frown on her face. "Where have you been? It's been hours. I'd thought you'd gone home or something."

Ink Well shook his head. "No, I was about to though. Just thought I'd give the folder a once over to see if I'd missed anything." He walked next to Fluttershy, who was engrossed in the papers before her. "Interesting read, isn't it?"

Fluttershy looked up, a fearful look in her eyes. "I had no idea the Equirer was this... big. It makes you wonder why anypony would go up against it."

"It makes me wonder why nopony has tried before, especially if I could get my hooves on this so easily. But I won't be letting their size get to me. Equestria has to know about this one." He looked over to Twilight, who was examining the payroll paper. "Speaking of their size, what do you make of that many guards on the pay? I only counted maybe ten when I was there last night."

Twilight shrugged. "I don't know what to make of it. Could just be they want to be really secure, or it could be an oversight. I really can't say with what I've read."

Ink Well shrugged. "I guess we won't find out by talking. I'm heading home, I've got some writing to do."

"Oh, then you'll need this. Here, I'll just..." Fluttershy hurriedly closed the folder, prepping it for him. He placed a hoof on it as she worked.

"No need. I've got everything I need to know memorized. I'm just going to go straight home and write it anyway."

Twilight looked unconvinced. "Are you sure? Because it's not like we need to have this floating around here, and flying all the way back because you forgot it would just waste your time."

Ink Well shook his head. "It's fine. I know what I'm going to write, and I was going to come back here to confirm it before I sent it off anyhow. You just keep those folders safe, and I'll be back in a few days."

Twilight shrugged. "Alright. Whatever you say Ink Well."

Ink Well walked to the exit, tipping his hat back at the room. "Have a good read you two."

"Fly safely, and good luck with your story." said Fluttershy.

Ink Well nodded to her. "I will. I'll see you both soon." Then he opened his wings, taking off into the mid afternoon sky.

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Ink Well flew from the Library to his house, eating the apple early in his flight and mentally thanking Rose for the first food he'd had in two days. Happier than when he left, he landed gently by his mailbox just as the sun was sinking into the horizon. He walked inside his house, taking off his bag and hanging it up on its stand near the writing desk. As he turned towards the desk, he felt a shift in the air behind him.

A sharp pain exploded across the back of his head, stars and darkness filling his vision. He landed roughly on the ground, his hat rolling off under his desk. From the shadows of a stack of papers stepped a well kept unicorn pony with dark green fur, an emerald mane with a golden streak along the bottom, and bright red eyes. She stood poised over the prone figure of Ink Well, blackjack floating near her head with a faint red aura around it. "My, my, Ink Well, it seems you've fallen into something that somepony doesn't want you having your hooves on." She moved over to his bag, carefully rummaging through its contents.

As she dug through his bag, slowly a frown appeared on her face. After a few moments, she flipped the bag over with her magic, dumping its across the floor. Papers mixed into the thin layer already there, his pen clattered from its holster and rolling to the side, the ink reservoir it sat in splattering across the floor. The unicorn looked displeased at everything falling out, her eyes narrowing into a glare that she directed at Ink Well's body, which was slowly struggling towards his hat. "You already got rid of it, didn't you? Why must you make it so difficult for us?" She watched him crawl across the floor, a cruel smile slowly forming on her face. "Shame. Looks like I'll just have more work to do. But first, I think it would be only fair to let you know that evidence disposal is my favorite part of the job." She

brought down the blackjack again, ceasing the movements of the form beneath her. Her smile grew slightly manic as she looked at him. “Now then, what shall we do with you?”



# Chapter 6

## Consequences

A smack across the face brought Ink Well from his darkened stupor. He immediately tried to move his hoof to hit back, but found it bound in place. He looked back at his bonds, discovering himself in his writing chair, but in the upper part of his house. On the floor near the hole to the rest of the house a candle burned, dimly illuminating the room, and primarily illuminating his unicorn assailant. She smiled warmly at him. "Ah! Now that I have your attention, where did you take the file?"

Ink Well glared coldly at her, noting the bright red scarf she had on and the businesslike way she held herself. She just frowned at him. "Come now, don't be that way. I've been sent to retrieve the information and I tried searching your house despite the mess the whole place is in, but it just isn't here. Now tell me where it is and we can both be on our way." He held his glare at her. In response she stomped, glaring back at him. "And why do you have no stairs? It's very inconvenient to get up here without wings." Ink Well was taken aback, but held his level gaze. He wasn't going to let her get to him. When he didn't talk, she walked around the room, examining the papers on his wall. "You know, you caught the attention of a very powerful pony when you took that folder. One little pony asking you questions is really the least of your worries." After another brief silence she sighed, looking calmly into his eyes. "It will just make everything easier if you cooperate. I won't have to work nearly as hard, and tell you what, I'll even let you go!" She smiled sickeningly sweetly at him. "Isn't that nice? It's a win-win for both of us!"

Ink Well snorted at her, disbelieving. "Yeah, like I'd really tell you. We both know you're just going to get rid of me once you get it. What makes you think I'd talk?"

The unicorn frowned. "Oh, you are a clever one, aren't you?" Her horn began to glow, floating a dark green belt from a hidden corner of the room and attaching it around her waist. From this belt two vicious looking daggers slid from their sheathes, surrounded by the red aura of her magic, and floated towards him in a vaguely threatening manner. "Well if you don't

want to cooperate I could just torture you slowly." She saw fear enter his eyes and smiled cruelly. "Yeah, now you have a reason to talk, don't you?" She brought one of the knives closer, hovering it right between his eyes. "Now you're going to tell me what I want to know, or I'll make you wish you'd never been born."

Ink Well leaned his head away from the point floating in front of him, talking quickly. "Well, see, torture, yeah, that's a very" he swallowed, trying to fix his suddenly dry throat, "very bad idea you have there. Sounds messy, really painful, waste of everypony's time."

Her smile deepened, becoming truly sinister. "Only if they don't enjoy it. For you it will be a waste of time and blood. For me, it will be a relaxing evening." The dagger floated slowly lower on Ink Well, focusing its point on a much more tender area.

Ink Well's heart leaped to his throat as he tried to wiggle the chair as far from the knife as possible. "Yeah, well, instead of that unseemly mess, you could let me go!" He saw her eyes narrow, feeling the point come sharply into focus upon his body. He started to sweat nervously, forcing a smile and talking even faster. "Hear me out! I could lead you to the folder. Then you wouldn't have to do anything here, you could just get me and anypony who may or may not know about it there in one go. Less work for you, less pain for me, it's a win-win!"

The blade still hovering around his head sliced finely through the air, drawing a thin line down Ink Well's cheek. He winced, feeling blood slowly bead on his face and stain his fur. "Don't think me a fool, Ink Well, you aren't as sly as you think. However, if I may say so, you should be applauded. After ten years, only three attempts have been made to break into the Equirer offices, and only one succeeded at getting out. They have very good guards. The ponies in charge had been starting to wonder if the Enforcers were even worth maintaining anymore." She idly brought the other dagger up from its tenuous position, pulling it up to his face and drawing a slow, painful curve on his other cheek. "The budget was about to be cut, but you kept them necessary. Thank you. I do love this job so much."

Ink Well could feel the warm blood moving down his face, mind racing on how to get out. He could think of only one, and for that he had to keep the

unicorn talking. "Who doesn't love their job? But, the Enforcers, huh? Never heard of them. Who are they? And who are you? You're in my house and I don't even know your name."

The unicorn smiled. "The Enforcers are a force to be reckoned with. That's all you need to know. And since it is your final request, I will tell you my name." She bowed low, turning slightly to show off her cutie mark: a snake coiled around a red apple. "I am Viper, and I shall be your dispatcher from this world." The daggers hung nonchalantly over his head, slowly edging in.

He ducked as best he could in his bindings, lowering away from the blades. "Well, dispatcher, huh? That's nice, very kind of you. But daggers? Really? Won't it be a little too obvious if I'm found lying in a pool of my blood in my house? Or even worse, tied in a chair? Somepony would think that suspicious."

Viper shrugged. "True, but I already thought of that. There are plenty of ways to dispose of a body. It's almost easier than information. Although..." The daggers floated away, one of them slotting itself back into its sheath. "You didn't help me, did you? Why should I let you die so quickly as by knife? No... you need something more punishing." The second dagger twirled itself in the air as Viper made her way near the hole to the lower floor. "I've heard that fire is an excruciating way to die, and it would remove all the evidence so well. And look at all this fuel..." She tipped the candle over, watching it tumble to the floor below. The paper veneer quickly went alight, smoke trailing up almost instantly. "Oops. Another house fire caused by an inattentive pony."

Viper smiled as the fire spread. "Ooh, yes, this will be perfect. Slow, painful, quite deadly... Yet, I'm afraid this means I can't stay around to make sure the deed's done right." The second dagger ceased its swirling, plunging itself into Ink Well's left side. He cried out as it sank in, twisting and pulling at his flesh. Viper's smile widened, taking on a wicked, manic overtone in the dim red light. "Much better. Now even if you're freed, how far could you possibly go?" The dagger pulled out along his side, creating a gash from which blood flowed. As a final insult, the blade wiped itself off on his fur before sliding back in Viper's belt. "Keep your cool, Ink Well. It will all be over soon." With an almost stereotypically evil laugh she hopped down the hole, leaving Ink Well to his fate.

As soon as she was gone Ink Well looked around the room for a way out of the ropes. Smoke was already starting to amass in the low ceiling, stinging his eyes. Across the room, reflected off of the glass containing his short story, was the fire, rapidly spreading throughout his house. Ink Well struggled in his bonds, feeling blood trickle from his side into the ropes, making them sticky and damp. The smoke level lowered, further filling the room and causing him to wincing in pain with each cough forced from his lungs.

"If I only could get through these ropes..." He looked up again, seeing the reflection of the fire as it spread to his worn bag. He watched it, despairing silently as the flames engulfed his work. After a few moments of staring at the reflection, despair gave way to a smile which slowly spread across his face. "The glass." He rocked back and forth, managing to tip the chair enough to place his rear hooves on the floor. Then, carrying the chair like a turtle shell on his back, he teetered forward. He waddled laboriously, blood dripping behind him as he edged around the hole in the floor. He pushed through his cloud bed, which was bubbling and dissipating in the heat rising from below, and placed down the chair before his story's golden frame. He pulled his head back, then brought it forward hard into the glass. All he managed to do was hurt his forehead, causing him to instinctively jerk back, tipping the chair backwards over the pit. The chair hovered right at its center of gravity, hanging in midair while Ink Well looked at the inferno crackling beneath him. His ears jammed against his head as he felt the chair slowly move past its balance point. "No. No, no, no, no!" Despite his protests he tumbled back, falling into the flames.

The chair crashed into the burning floor beneath him, shattering on impact. Ink Well landed hard on his side, the stab wound throbbing in the air and his right wing tweaking beneath him. He rolled off of his side, shaking away the ropes and painfully pushing himself up amidst the blazing floorboards. Fire briefly caught on the edges of his wings and mane, but he kept moving to put them out. He stumbled coughing through the thick smoke and ash to the door. Just as he was about to force it open he noticed a figure outside, barely visible in the firelight. Watching the flames with rapt attention was Viper, keeping an eye open for an escape attempt. Ink Well backed up, not wanting to burst free just to land back in captivity, and looked for another exit. His eyes ran over his hat burning furiously beneath his writing desk. "Aw... I loved that hat..." He jumped up, hooves stinging in the intense heat of the flames, and took to hovering on injured wings, fanning the fire

beneath him as he maneuvered to the upper level. Just as he was about to pass through the hole a golden glint caught his eye. Upon his burning desk sat the golden ink pot stained red in the firelight, a beacon in the smokey blaze around him. Next to the desk was another glint of metal, his pen sitting pleadingly in the ash. Without thinking, he landed, reaching into the flames to grab the pen and ink pot in his teeth. There was a slight sizzle as the heated metal scorched his mouth and fire burned the fur from his chin, but Ink Well didn't seem to notice.

He jumped back into the air, flapping his protesting wings hard and scrabbling his hooves on the floor to pull himself into the upper room. The fire had spread here, though it was hard to tell through the thick smoke. He coughed and sputtered from the air burning his straining lungs, cursing himself for not having a window in the upper part of his house. His head turned foggy as the air thinned, his vision slowly fading. He lowered himself to the floor of the upper story, holding his hooves before his mouth as a makeshift filter, when a horrible creak came from above him. He had just enough time to look up before the beam split, the roof rushing to meet him.

Outside Viper admired her work, the flames quickly rushing through the house. She smiled grimly as the roof collapsed, smoke pouring out of it in a large cloud that slowly dispersed on the night winds. Fire billowed from the new hole in the roof, signaling a complete conflagration within. She saluted the collapsing building solemnly. "Goodbye, Ink Well. It was certainly heartwarming to have met you." She smiled smugly after the remark, walking through the ash and smoke and disappearing among the shadows of the surrounding hills.

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The smoke drifted with the breeze in the general direction of Ponyville, though it was still far from that destination. It floated gently, its calm nature not suggesting anything sinister. A few hills from the fire that was its source, as the smoke spread thin enough to see the early night moon shining through it, a figure plummeted from the cloud, sputtering and coughing and trailing licks of flame behind it. It half flapped its wings, trying to stop its free fall but only managing to bob and jerk up a few times pitifully before ultimately crashing hard into a bush, a golden ink pot and a blue fountain pen bouncing out onto the surrounding grass.

A singed and bloodied Ink Well pulled himself free of the snags and snarls, coughing and wheezing in the cool night air. He smiled maniacally, chuckling to himself between coughs. "I made it out. No more fire for-" He collapsed on the ground, his fitful laughter pausing as he hacked up a wet black and red lump. Trying to focus on it with blurry eyes, he shook his head, his smile turning unsteady. "That's bad... that's definitely not good..." He moved a hoof down to his side, pressing gently against it. He winced, smile dropping completely as he pulled back his hoof to examine it. What fur remained on the end of his leg was painted crimson, the rest charred short or missing entirely, the skin beneath bright red even in the steely moonlight. He put his hoof down, looking to his side. Blood was smeared across his whole side and dripping to the ground, the area around the gash stained black with ash and smoke. Ink Well quickly looked away, instead pushing himself up shakily. "That's a lot... of my blood." He took a step forward and fell as his left front hoof collapsed beneath him, pain shooting all the way through his leg and side.

He rolled over, staring up at the star filled sky. The moon shone coldly down on him, the smoke from his cottage drifting lonesomely in front of it. His eyes slowly closed, head flopping against the cool grass as he felt a stiffness steadily replacing the soreness within him. He felt chilled, as though cool water were running through his veins, and an accompanying tiredness that refused to yield. Maybe he could just sleep for a little while... a quick nap to take the pain away...

His eyes shot open and he pushed himself up unsteadily. "No. It's not gonna stop here..." He stood on very shaky legs, hobbling over to collect his pen and ink pot, then stretched out his wings. He flapped once, yelling out at the pain as his right wing fell uselessly at his side. He looked at it, disbelieving, then looked at the moon, pleading silently. When his wing remained lame, his look fell from the moon, focusing instead on the ground in front of him. He began to walk determinedly, following the moon in its path through the skies.

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As the moon sank low in the sky and the first pink hints of morning light edged the horizon, Ponyville slept soundly. All the shops were closed, the windows dark and streets silent. The only motion came from a single figure as it pulled itself through the town, stumbling down the streets with a glint of



gold between its teeth. It made its way to the marketplace, stopping once it arrived to lean against a building. Wiping the sweat from its eyes, the figure smiled as it saw the simple sign near the door reading 'Rosewater.' It stumbled up to the door, sliding along the wall and leaving a streak of dark blood across the white paint. Standing on shaky legs, it knocked on the door three times before falling heavily against it, continuing to knock an unsteady rhythm as it trailed blood down the door. After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened. The figure slumped with the motion, falling inside and landing unmoving on the floor.

Rose gasped at the prone body on her floor, immediately awakened by the surprise of the sight. She stared in silent horror at the figure, finding her voice only when she realized she recognized it. "Ink Well?! What happened to you?"

Ink Well's eye forced itself half open, his head barely turning to face her as he talked around the ink pot in his teeth. "Rose... Fire ...forcers... Rainbow..." He went limp, the dented ink pot and pen rolling out onto the floor.

Rose leaned down, shaking his shoulder. "Ink Well? Ink Well! Stay with me! Just hold on, I'll get the nurse!" She jumped over his body, galloping down the street to the nurse's medical tent. Ink Well lay on her cold floor, unmoving, his ragged breathing slowing with time.

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Soft evening light filtered into the room, the dusty rose walls and light wood flooring glowing gently in the light. The scents of flowers and citrus rose from the floor, conflicting harshly with the smells of medicine and sterilizers within. Overhanging everything was the strong smell of smoke and ash, its source easily traceable to the form laying in a downy bed in the corner.

Ink Well lay in the center of the single-pony bed, bandages adorning much of his body. He had two across his cheeks, one wrapped around his head, another wrapped around his midsection and blotched with a deep red. One of his wings was braced tightly to his side, the bulk of it wrapped in gauze. The edge of both of his wings were singed black, his mane and tail mostly patchy and burned short where it remained. Near his hooves on all legs were bandages stained a sickly orange from the results of the burns. His

left front leg was supported with a frame, a metal brace holding a cast on the bottom and top halves. The rest of his body was its normal off-white color, the same as a scroll of parchment, though spots were raw and red where his fur was missing. His chest rose and fell shallowly, his breathing still ragged and strained as he shook his head and mumbled quietly.

Within the room an earth pony roamed, taking careful care of the pegasus on the bed. She walked over to it, pulling up the burgundy blanket that had fallen down his body. Her snow white hooves ran up to his head, her brow furrowing at the fever he ran before she stood up, moving to her bag sitting in a different part of the room. The bag was decorated with the same red cross that was on her flank, though it was missing the four hearts in the angles. From her bag she pulled out a needle, tapping it gently to remove air before walking back to the prone figure. Ink Well groaned quietly as the needle entered, but was otherwise unresponsive to the nurse above him.

The medical scene felt out of place in the studio room as the rest of it contained many simple flower vases upon various surfaces and a few homely pictures hanging on the walls. There was a kitchen in one of the corners of the room with cactus green counter tops running around it. In the center of the room was a simple green table, one matching chair sitting next to it. Between the windows along one wall was a small bookshelf, a single reading chair next to that. The room was well decorated, though not lavish, and well lived in, neither being hallmarks of a hospital or medical tent.

The nurse packed up her needle and a few other supplies and headed towards some stairs to a lower level that ran along the far wall. The room sat still for a long while, the only noise the shallow breathing and mumblings of the unconscious writer. The light in the room slowly faded, taking on a peach and eventually rusty hue as evening turned into night. Rose walked up from her shop and into her house, turning on the electric lights above. An incandescent glow washed over the room, wiping away the shading from the windows. As soon as the lights came on her eyes fell on Ink Well, breathing uneasily on her bed. A pain shot through her to see him like that, tears edging her worried eyes as she walked over. "Oh Ink Well, what happened to you?" His only response was his quiet mumbling and the movement of his chest, which did little to comfort her.

After watching him for a while she walked into the kitchen, preparing herself



a simple dinner. She ate it quietly at her table, moving her chair over so that she could see Ink Well where he lay. When she finished, she washed the plate and put it away. She then walked over to Ink Well solemnly, checking that his bandages were secure and clean. None of them were particularly saturated, so she walked to her bookcase, picking up her borrowed copy of Of Wing and Horn and sitting in the comfortable reading chair beside it. The sky outside darkened as Rose read, the only sounds in the room the slow breathing of the injured writer and the occasional rustle of the pages of his book.

This continued as the lights of town one by one darkened, leaving only the top of the perfume shop shining in the night. Rose kept vigil, one eye on the pages and the other on her ward. The moon had passed its zenith and was mid way to the horizon before Rose stopped, yawning deeply as she marked her page and put down her book. She moved over to the bed, checking that the still and silent Ink Well was alright before walking to a small closet in the corner. From it she pulled a few cream colored sheets which she piled a few feet from the bed. She pulled off the cushion from her reading chair, setting up a second makeshift bed on the wood floor. She then flicked off the lights, finding her way back with the help of the cool moonlight and Ink Well's breathing. With one more glance towards the bed, she lay her head to rest, pulling a blanket over her. "Goodnight Ink Well."

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Rose was awakened in the early morning by the pained sounds coming from Ink Well. He was rolling and shaking his head violently, as though in the throws of a nightmare. He called out, quietly and raggedly but with understandable words. "Fire... Rainbow... Enforcers..." With every motion he made, a little more blood seeped from his side into his bandages and limbs held in place with braces were tweaked out of position.

Rose stiffly leaped up from her hard bed and ran over to him, stroking his mane and trying to calm him. "Shh! It's alright Ink Well." Despite her soft words, Ink Well continued to call out and thrash, eyes shut tight and hooves and wings flailing dangerously. Rose tried keeping him from hurting himself by pinning his front hooves to the bed. Ink Well yelled out as the pressure on his hooves caused pus to ooze through his bandages. He shot up in the bed with eyes wide open. He looked around, eyes slightly glazed over and highly confused, but infinitely calmer than he had been despite the heaving

of his chest saying otherwise. Eventually his eyes drifted to Rose's face, trying to focus but still not quite there. She looked into his eyes, wondering how well he was. "Ink Well?"

With a scratchy shade of his original voice he responded. "Rose?"

Rose nodded at him, smiling. "Yeah Ink Well, it's me."

"Did you warn Rainbow?"

It was Rose's turn to look confused. "What?"

Ink Well's look became determined and worried behind the bandages. "Rainbow Dash... she isn't safe. I need to wa- Ah!" Ink Well moved to get up, pushing off with his left front hoof, which quickly collapsed under him. He fell back onto the bed, wincing as his burned back collided with the downy covering.

Rose tried to ease him off of his injuries, shifting him to a more comfortable position on the bed. "No you don't, mister. Nurse Redheart said you weren't even going to wake up for a few days, so you aren't going anywhere."

Ink Well shook his head feebly on the bed, pushing weakly against Rose's hooves. "I can't stay here. They knew about me, they'll know about her. I have to warn her about the Enforcers..."

Rose patted him on the shoulder, pulling the blanket back up from where it had been moved. "Don't worry. I'll warn her for you, you just keep resting." She frowned at his hooves as they continued to leak pus. "I should really fix those bandages..."

"No... don't waste the time. I'll be fine... Just hurry. Warn her." Ink Well was fighting to keep himself awake on the bed, his outburst sapping what little energy he'd had. "Tell her... to be careful when she goes home... Whatever she does... be safe..." His head flopped back into the pillow as he passed out, worry knitting his brow.

Rose looked worriedly at him. "Ink Well?" He started to breathe calmly, murmuring under his breath. She considered changing his bandages, but left to fulfill his wishes despite her reservations about leaving him. Quickly

she went down the stairs and into the awakening town, hoping to finish her task as quickly as possible.

From her shop she went straight to Nurse Redheart's medical tent, keeping one eye on the sky for the blue pegasus she was supposed to find. She walked inside, walking in on the white pony preparing for the day. The nurse looked up at her. "Ah, Roseluck, do you need anything?"

Rose shook her head. "No, I'm fine. But I came over because Ink Well woke up. Just for a little bit, he was sleeping when I left. I was wondering if you'd like to check on him."

Nurse Redheart looked surprised. "He woke up?! Wow. I didn't expect him to do anything but sleep for days with those injuries." She packed up a few supplies into a house call bag. "I'll visit him once Tenderheart comes in for the day."

Rose smiled gratefully. "Thank you. I'll see you later then." She left the tent, leaving Nurse Redheart to get back to work. She walked from the tent, walking out to the park to see if she could spot Rainbow Dash flying.

After an hour of searching futilely she found herself unsure what to do. Rainbow Dash was a celebrity around town, heck, around Equestria, and everypony knew her, but her and Rose weren't exactly friends. She didn't even know where to start looking apart from the sky... She decided to get help, starting off at Lily and Daisy's shop. She hurried there, and as she went to push the door open, Lily backed out with a basket full of flowers for the front display, bumping into Rose's outstretched hoof. She jumped, spilling a few petunias from the basket to the ground. "Oh! Rose, what brings you by?"

Rose collected the flowers on the ground, cleaning up the mess she made. "Hey Lily, do you know how to get in touch with Rainbow Dash? I need to tell her something."

Lily placed down the basket, getting ready to arrange the flowers. "No, I don't, sorry. She was always lazing around town before, but she's been a lot more secretive ever since that article warned us about her revolutionary activities."

Rose shook her head. "I can't believe you still think she did that. Has she ever seemed like a revolutionary to you? Her best friend is the student of the Princess!"

Lily stopped her arranging, talking proudly to Rose. "Exactly! No pony would expect it from her! Never seemed one, fronting trying to get into the Wonderbolts, but she was secretly plotting their downfall. It's always the ones you don't expect." She went back to rearranging, smiling to herself. "Besides, why would the Equirer lie to us? They never have before."

Rose sighed. "Oh, never mind. I'm not going to change your mind." She walked inside, the bell signaling her arrival and stopping Daisy's flower watering. "Hey there Daisy."

Daisy smiled at her. "Hello Rose! Do you need something? You can't be needing a new order already."

Rose shook her head. "No, I'm good on flowers. Though... I could use some lavender, if you have any extra. Got a special need I wasn't foreseeing... But that's not why I'm here. Do you know how to get in contact with Rainbow Dash?"

Daisy shook her head. "No, sorry. Normally I'd say scan the skies, but she's been really slacking on her weather patrol lately. The clouds have been slowing down my sunflower production, and right before the rush too..."

Rose frowned. "Huh. That makes things tricky."

Daisy shrugged, returning to watering her flowers. "Well, you could always try talking to Rainbow Dash's friends. There's Pinkie Pie at Sugarcube Corner, though there's something off about that filly... Or there's Twilight Sparkle. She never comes out of her Library unless it's important, so you could probably find her there."

"Oh, duh, Why didn't I think of that?" Rose started out, but paused by the door. "You don't still believe that Equirer article on them, do you?"

Daisy smiled as she watered. "No, not at all. No pony would attack the Gala. They were probably just scouting." She put down her watering pail, frowning. "Has Lily been talking about it again?"

Rose looked slightly disappointed at her friend. "Yeah... She's a bit enthusiastic about the whole thing."

"Oh, she's just being silly. I'll talk to her later, don't worry about it. See you later Rose."

"Bye Daisy." Rose left the shop, walking towards the edge of town and the Library. Even over a week after the story printed, and even though it was still early, there were still a few miscellaneous ponies hanging around hoping for something interesting to happen. Rose went inside, waiting near the door for somepony to greet her.

Eventually Spike walked in from a back section of the building, feather duster in hand. "Hello?"

Rose tried not to laugh at the sight of the purple dragon with a duster as large as himself. "Uh, hi. Is Twilight Sparkle around? I need to ask her a question."

Spike frowned, looking at her suspiciously. "Yeah, well I think Twilight's a little busy. Maybe if you came back later she'll be available."

"Busy, but..." Rose held up a hoof trying to shake away suspicion. "Oh, no, it's not about that. Ink Well asked me to warn Rainbow Dash about something, but I don't know how to contact her, so I was going to ask Twilight for help."

Spike raised an eyebrow, questioning the story, but turned to the section he'd just come from. "Twilight! Somepony here about something important!" He walked back into the back of the library, leaving Rose feeling awkward by the door. After a few moments, Twilight Sparkle came out from the back area looking slightly perturbed.

"Yes, err... Rose, right? What do you want?"

Rose was taken aback. "Um, I was wondering if you could get a message to Rainbow Dash."

Twilight's eyebrow raised. "Oh? What is it?"

"It was... oh what was the direct quote... 'Be careful when you go home, and whatever you do, be safe.'" Rose looked slightly embarrassed as she said it. "That sounds a bit weird, doesn't it?"

Twilight nodded, looking confused. "Yes. Yes it does. Who asked you to send this?"

"It was Ink Well. He said he wanted to warn her."

"Really? Why didn't he deliver the message himself?"

Rose hesitated, not sure how much should be said. Too much attention probably wouldn't help his health at all right now. "He wanted to, but he's a little... busy right now."

Twilight raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "Right... Well, thank you, your message has been delivered, I'll get it to Rainbow Dash as fast as I can. Now if that was it, I've still got a little bit of work to do. Thank you for coming by, have a nice day." As she talked, a pile of books was magicked in front of Rose, herding her out the door, which then slammed itself in her face.

Rose stood outside, staring incredulously at the door. "Well. This is why I don't hang out with them." She turned, walking back to her shop to check on Ink Well, confident her mission was complete.

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Twilight stayed in the back of her library reading up on law books. She'd spent the day before working on a strong legal case against the Equirer and was continuing her work today while Spike took care of the library. Unfortunately there wasn't much precedent against them, and while what was going on was shady, it wasn't actually illegal apart from slander. While she was working she remembered the visit from Rose and what she said. Not particularly worried, she put it to the back of her mind, deciding to send Owlowiscious out with a written message for Rainbow Dash.

Almost an hour after Owlowiscious took flight, he returned playing vanguard to a slightly battered Rainbow Dash, a large bruise on her cheek. Upon seeing the state of her friend, Twilight jumped up. "Rainbow! What

happened to you?"

Rainbow Dash threw up her hooves in anger. "I was jumped! I went out for a morning flight and when I got back home there were two big colts waiting for me." She kicked out angrily at a small statue in the library, which only survived because of Twilight's quick reaction time with her magic. "They freaking knocked me out! They were starting to ask me all sorts of weird questions when Owlowiscious showed up. Only thanks to him that I got out. He distracted them while I kicked 'em out on their flank."

Twilight heard her friend's account of what happened, feeling slightly ashamed that she'd taken as long as she did to get the message out. "Wow, maybe I should have taken Rose more seriously. I only sent Owlowiscious because she came by with a warning from Ink Well. Though I guess it already came late."

"Where is Ink Well? It's his fault those guys jumped me! They said they were after the Equirer information."

Twilight looked concerned. "Well, he'd gone back to write a story, but then that message came from Rose... Fluttershy went out to visit him this morning, so we'll probably hear something when she gets back."

Almost on cue Fluttershy ran through the front door, looking extremely worried with ash in her mane and staining her face and hooves. "Twilight! Ink Well is..." She saw Twilight and Dash talking and skidded to a halt, looking at them anxiously. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to- Rainbow? Are you okay? What happened?"

Rainbow nodded. "I'm fine Fluttershy, just a little roughed up. What's this about Ink Well?"

Fluttershy looked between them, looking on the verge of panic. "I flew out to Ink Well's house and it was all burned down! There was just ash and scorched wood... Do you think he's...?"

Twilight shook her head. "No, he's alright. He has to be. Rose came by earlier today with a message from him. I'm sure he made it out just fine."

Fluttershy looked a little happier as she heard this, but still worried. "Rose?"



The perfumer? So then, where's Ink Well?"

Twilight shrugged. "I don't know. She said he was busy right now."

Fluttershy looked at the ground. "That doesn't sound right..."

Rainbow frowned. "Sounds like she's hiding something to me. We should go get Rose to tell us what's going on!"

Twilight held out a hoof. "Cool your jets Rainbow. Let's just get the others and go ask her. I'm sure he's fine."

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Rose was sitting in her chair reading when she heard the knock at the door. When she had returned, Nurse Redheart had already swapped Ink Well's bandages. He was laying completely still as she worked, breathing raggedly and with a furrowed brow. Rose had walked next to him and told him calmly that Rainbow had gotten her message, and almost immediately his face softened and his breathing calmed. Now he was still sleeping deeply, the nurse having long departed. Rose replaced her bookmark, a thin strip of fragrant rosewood, and walked through her quiet distillery and darkened shop. She opened the door, smiling brightly to the pony outside. "I'm sorry, we're closed today." She opened her eyes, her face faltering for a moment as she saw who was there.

Twilight stood outside with her five friends, all of them looking expectantly at the cream pony in the doorway. She wasn't smiling. "Hello Rose, we were wondering if you knew what happened to Ink Well. We can't seem to find him anywhere."

Rose took a step back, trying to close the door slightly. "Well, see, he's not available right now. He's a little under the weather."

Pinkie smiled brightly. "We're all under the weather! But it's a bright and sunny day, what's he doing inside?"

"He's not feeling well, and I don't think visitors are going to help him feel any better."



Rainbow moved forward, staring down Rose in the doorway. "What are you hiding? Why won't you let us see him? Why didn't he come to warn me? What are you doing to him?"

Applejack pulled on Rainbow's tail, landing her forcefully. "Easy there. Don't badger the poor girl."

Rose noticed Rainbow's bruise, shock touching the edges of her features. "I'm not doing anything. He really wanted to warn you, but he just... couldn't. You need to come back later. I'll tell you as soon as he's awake."

Twilight took a step forward. "Awake? What does that mean?" Rose looked back into her shop, worry obvious on her face. As she turned back, Applejack had a hoof on the door.

"Looky here sugar, I know you're trying to keep 'im safe, but we're his friends! You worryin' about him ain't easin' our minds one bit. Now I know we're not exactly friends, but we'd be mighty grateful if you let us in."

Rose looked down at the floor. "I dunno..."

Fluttershy's face appeared beside Applejack's, ash still in her hair and looking worried. "Please Rose..."

Rose looked up to six worried faces asking her for entrance. After a few seconds, she nodded. "Alright, you can come in. But you have to be quiet, Nurse Redheart says he needs his rest." She opened the door and led the other ponies up to the second floor of her shop. A collective gasp came from the group as they saw him.

Fluttershy took a few steps closer, looking over the unconscious Pony with nothing but worry. "Ink Well..." She ended up right next to the bed, reaching out a trembling hoof to touch him. At the last moment she pulled it away, tears spilling from her eyes, and ran back to the others. Applejack and Rarity immediately started trying to comfort her.

Rainbow Dash stared at him, shocked at the state he was in. "What happened to him?!" Rose and Fluttershy shushed her, causing her to look slightly embarrassed. "I mean, how'd he end up like this?"

Rose shrugged. "I don't know. He just turned up yesterday morning like this. Nurse Redheart said that apart from the burns he suffered from smoke inhalation and exhaustion, which was probably from the trek. But what I'm most worried about are the broken limbs and the stab wound..."

All eyes were on her. "Stab wound?"

"The big bandage around his middle is covering the stitches." She walked over next to him, watching him sleep calmly. "He hasn't woken up except the one time, and all he did was ask me to warn Rainbow about going home." She smiled weakly at Rainbow. "I guess I came too late, didn't I?"

Fluttershy let out a quiet sob as she continued to cry on her friend's shoulder. Rainbow looked over at her, then to Rose and Ink Well. "No, it's fine. Nothing big..." She looked at the floor, shaking slightly.

The room sat in silence for a few minutes, the only noises the shallow breathing of Ink Well and the occasional sob from Fluttershy. As the silence became deafening, Rainbow stomped down a hoof, shaking her head. "I can't stand looking at him! How could anypony do this? I won't stand for this!" She reared in the air, kicking her front hooves forward. "Who did it? Where are they? Let me at 'em!"

Applejack held out a hoof, poking Rainbow's bruised cheek. Rainbow winced and pulled away, falling over sideways, and Applejack leaned over her, crossing her hooves beneath her. "Now you know who did it, and you know what they're gonna do to ya if'n you go chargin' in there! I feel for the colt too, but you gotta think this through."

Rainbow frowned at her. "But we've got to do something! Look at him..."

Pinkie Pie jumped between them. "He looks like a mummy! With a robot hoof! Do you think it shoots lasers? Like that one story? Remember? With the aliens?" She held up her own hoof, pointing it at the other ponies. "Pew! Pew! Pew!"

Rose looked slightly offended, while the others started giggling warmly at their friend. In a cool voice she said "I think you should leave. All of this attention can't be good for his health."

Twilight looked over, and seeing the look on Rose's face, stopped her friend's laughing. "Sorry Rose. This isn't the place... Come on girls." She led the precession down the stairs, the other ponies each looking sorry as they left.

The last pony lingering in the room was Fluttershy, her eyes still red from her crying. She walked over to Rose, who was looking down at Ink Well sadly. "Um... Rose?"

Rose jumped, surprised to hear the soft voice behind her. "Yes Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy smiled at her. "Don't be too worried, I'm sure he'll pull through..."

Rose smiled back, playfully. "Hey, I wasn't the one crying." She looked back to the sleeping writer. "It's just..."

"I know... But he got all the way here looking worse than he does now. He's not going to let this stop him..."

Rose nodded. "Yeah... He's stronger than he looks." She looked over to Fluttershy, who was walking away. She noticed the traces of ash in her mane and tail. "Hey, Fluttershy?"

The yellow pegasus turned back. "Hmm?"

"Thank you." Fluttershy looked confused. "I mean, for delivering the letter, and for visiting Ink Well after the article. I don't know what you did, but even though he was tired, when he came back to visit he moved so much more... assuredly. "

Fluttershy smiled. "He just needed a friend, and I happened to be the pony there."

"Yeah, well..." Rose smiled at Fluttershy. "You can visit him any time you like. I think if there's anypony he'd like to see when he wakes up, it's you."

"If that's the case, then why did he come here?" Rose looked down to the writer, considering the thought, as Fluttershy walked to the door, smiling knowingly. "Thank you Rose. Have a nice day."

"You too. I'll let you know when he wakes up." Fluttershy left, hurrying to catch up with her friends. Rose remained behind, looking quite confused at Ink Well. After a few moments, she smiled, walking to her reading chair and resuming the book, one eye kept on the writer sleeping soundly on her bed.

# Chapter 7

## Revisions

Ink Well's eyes slowly crept open in the mid-afternoon light. He tried to sit up, groaning from the effort of it and the stiffness in his body. On his second try, he managed to prop himself up in the bed, taking in the unfamiliar room around him with a confused air; the dusty-rose walls, the vases of flowers, the scents that swirled through the air, the simple paintings, the pile of sheets in the corner, and finally the end table next to his bed. Sitting on the table was his golden ink pot, dented far from its original round shape, and his blue pen, scratches all along its surface and nib bent and broken. He picked up the ink pot, examining it with a weak smile on his face.

It was then that he noticed the state of his hoof. He put the ink pot back down, careful not to knock over a stick of incense that was burning with the pleasant scent of an ocean breeze, and looked over the bandages on his hoof. He brought it close, a faint, soothing lavender smell wafting off of them, hiding the ashen smell beneath. He looked at his other front hoof, finding it bound in a cast and supported by a metal brace. He tried to flex both legs, surprised as no more than a dull throb came from the one in the cast as the brace caught before it bent too far. He then tried to flap his wings, the left spreading out with some stiffness, but the right singing out in pain as it strained against the bandages holding it down. He stopped working against them, shrugging. "Guess I'm grounded for a while."

Just as he was working up the courage to get out of bed, a yellow and pink head crested the stairs against the wall. Fluttershy turned, walking a few steps into the room before she noticed Ink Well's movements. Her face lit up as she ran over to him, embracing him in a tight hug. "Ink Well! You're awake! I was so worried when I found your house burned down, and then I when I saw how hurt you were, I just didn't know what to do! Oh, I'm so glad you're alright."

Ink Well grimaced in her hooves. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Though if you could loosen your grip..."

"Oh, sorry..." Fluttershy took a step back, letting Ink Well go to a sigh of relief. There was a muted joy in her eyes. "I guess I was a little too excited..."

"No, it's fine. I'm glad to... see you... too..." Ink Well's train of thought derailed as he coughed, frowning at the wraith like sound of his voice. "Is that me? That horrible scratchy thing is my voice?"

Fluttershy placed a hoof on his bed. "That doesn't matter. The important thing is that you're okay."

Concern flashed onto Ink Well's features. "Rainbow Dash is okay, right? Nothing happened to her?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Yes, she's fine. There was a minor problem, but your warning came just in time, and nothing has been tried since."

Ink Well leaned back in the bed, relieved. "Oh good. I couldn't have lived with myself if she'd been hurt..." He looked around the room again. "Is this your house?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "Oh, no. This is Rose's home, above her shop. She said you turned up here four days ago. Don't you remember?"

Ink Well's brow furrowed as he tried to recall. "Not... really... After I crashed from the smokescreen I only remember that I needed to get to Ponyville. The rest is a blur..." He shook his head, trying to jog his memory.

Fluttershy waved her question away. "It's alright. You don't need to worry about that. You just need to take care of yourself."

Ink Well nodded. "Yeah... Where's Rose?"

"She's downstairs. She had to open up her shop again. I'll go tell her you're up."

Ink Well held up a hoof. "You don't have to. I don't want to bother her if she's busy working."

Fluttershy shook her head, smiling. "Nonsense. She'll be happy to see you."

"I'll be right back." The yellow pegasus trotted from the room, leaving Ink Well alone in the burgundy bed. He sat alone for a few minutes, tapping his hooves on the bed and taking in the many varied scents around him. Just as he was getting bored and was thinking of trying to get out of bed again, Rose's mane appeared at the top of the stairs, followed soon by the pony herself.

"Ink Well? Are you really awake?" He waved at her, habitually trying first with his left hoof before the cast proved too cumbersome and he swapped to his right. She walked over, standing next to his bed. "Oh, I'm glad to see you up again. Do you need anything? Are you comfortable?"

Ink Well shook his head, smiling. "No, I'm fine. I'm wonderful."

She still looked worried. "Are you sure? Because if you're in pain I could go get Nurse Redheart. Or if you don't like the scents in the room I could switch out the flowers. I was going for calming, but I'm sure I've enough to pull up an energetic mix. Or if you need a drink-"

"No, no, really, I'm fine." Ink Well raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you alright? You're getting worked up into quite the tizzy."

She took a step back. "Well sorry for being worried. A friend collapses in your doorway and you try to help and he just gives you lip." She sat down next to the bed, looking out the window. "Everypony was so worried about you. Nurse Redheart wasn't even sure you would pull through."

Ink Well shook his head. "Wow... You were that worried about little ol' me? I'm nothing special..."

"Don't say that. You're an amazing writer..." She tilted her head to a book sitting on a small bookshelf near the window. "I finished your book last night. I didn't want it to end, I felt so much like I was in it... But I'd decided I was going to reopen the shop when either you woke up or the book ended... Sorry I wasn't here sooner."

Ink Well smiled. "It's no biggie. I've been in worse..." He stopped, looking at himself. "That's a lie. I've never been in worse shape. But you've already done a lot, four days and all... I can't be monopolizing your attention. I'll be fine, if you need to get back to your shop."

"Fluttershy agreed to watch the shop for a while, so I'm here for you if you need anything."

"No, I don't need-" His stomach rumbled. Rose smiled smugly as Ink Well looked down, blushing as it contradicted what he was going to say. "Well, I guess I'm a little hungry..."

"No problem." She walked over to the kitchen, preparing a quick salad. "So, what happened to you? When you came in you were in horrible shape..."

Ink Well stared at the bed. "I don't want to talk about it... I think it was the National Equirer getting back at me. Didn't think it would go that far..."

"The Equirer did this to you?" She brought over the salad, placing it on the bed in front of him. "Are you sure?"

Ink Well shrugged. "I'd guess so. The Enforcer was looking for the file I'd stolen from the Equirer, so I'd assume so, but I can't prove it..."

Rose looked shocked. "You stole from the Equirer?"

"Eh, not the first time I'd snuck into a place. Didn't think they'd react so harshly about it..." He leaned forward nibbling slightly on the leaves.

Rose looked at him strangely. "I can't believe you'd do that. You don't seem the type." Ink Well was eating ravenously, stopping when she looked at him and gulping down what was in his mouth. He smiled nervously. "Enjoying that?"

"Yeah..." He put down the empty bowl, placing it over to the side of the bed. As he did, a thought occurred. "Oh geez, I'm in your bed aren't I?" He made a move to get up.

"No you don't." Rose held him back with one hoof. "You're staying right there. Nurse Redheart doesn't even want you moving until the end of the week. Though she said your wing should be working again by then if you don't hurt it anymore."

Ink Well looked relieved. "Oh good. Not sure how long I could take being



land locked."

Rose looked interested, though she seemed to be trying not to. "Oh what's so special about flying? Many of us get along just fine without it."

Ink Well looked appalled at the idea. "I don't know how you do. Flying is just... amazing. It's impossible to describe the exhilaration as the wind catches your wings and the cool air flows through your mane, the shine of the moon on the ground below..." He looked over at her, rubbing his bandaged head with his hoof. "You read the book, I tried to capture it there... That's about as much justice as I can do it, and it's so weak when compared to the real thing. I wish you could experience it, then maybe it'd make more sense."

Rose sighed. "No use dreaming. The description in the book was such an image..." She stood up, heading towards the stairs. "I'll just have to be content with that."

Ink Well looked at her, confused. "Where you going?"

"I need to let Fluttershy go. We've been talking for a while. When the day finishes I'll be back, alright?"

Ink Well nodded, smiling. "Sure. See you then."

Rose walked downstairs and into the main shop to find Fluttershy just finishing up with a customer. "Thank you for shopping at Rosewater. Have a good day." Fluttershy turned around, smiling at Rose. "Hello. How is he?"

Rose frowned. "He's fine. Actively refusing help, but fine. Why do you think he's being so difficult?"

Fluttershy shrugged. "He probably wants to look strong. The animals try it all the time when they're sick. If I were you, I'd make sure he knows that you're doing it to help him. That always makes the bunnies calm down."

Rose shook her head. "He's not a bunny, Fluttershy. You can't treat him like some animal. He's a pony!" She walked around the counter, looking at the displays around the shop. Many little bottles were missing. "Wow. You sold a lot while I was gone. How'd you manage that?"

"Just a little bit of kindness, pointing them towards scents they might like." She walked over to a small, empty display. "You need more wood based options, by the way. I had difficulty once those sold out."

"Wow? The woods sold out? There were only two customers when I left."

"They had big orders."

Rose looked at her suspiciously, nodding slowly. "Okay then. Well, I've got a grip on things here if you want to leave or go upstairs or anything."

Fluttershy shook her head. "No, I'll stay around. When do you close?"

Rose looked out towards the clock tower just as it started to toll. "Oh, only an hour... You want to keep running the shop? I'll start work on restocking the wood bases." Fluttershy nodded, and Rose walked into her distillery, setting rosewood in the vat to begin the maceration process.

As that soaked, she moved over to a separate distillery, pulling a flask from the steamer. During the brief period the flask was opened, the room flooded with the scent of lilacs. Somewhere she'd read that something distilled from lilacs was useful on burns. Now she wasn't a medical pony, so she did her best with what she had at hoof. She took the full flask to some clean bandages, dripping the liquid inside across them until it soaked through. As they dried, she reset the steamer with some fresh flowers and an empty flask.

Soon after the clock in the room alarmed, signaling the end of the work day. Rose walked back to the main shop just as Fluttershy was closing the door behind the last customer. Rose took inventory while Fluttershy went to check on Ink Well. A few minutes later, Fluttershy came back smiling. "He's asleep again. I was going to ask about bringing the others by, but..."

Rose led her to the door opening it and letting her out. "You just bring them by tomorrow, I'll make sure everything's ready. Thank you for watching him and the shop today."

Fluttershy nodded. "Of course. It was fun. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yup. Have a safe flight home." She watched Fluttershy fly away, then finished inventory and cleaned up the shop. She checked on the wood scent, leaving it overnight before heading upstairs. Ink Well was indeed asleep, so Rose quietly checked that his bandages were good for the day, took a book from her bookshelf. She read for a few hours, keeping an eye on Ink Well's sound sleeping before laying herself down for bed.

The last thing she did was look up at him, sleeping comfortably and animated, not like his previous unconscious motionlessness. She smiled from her vantage point at the floor. "Goodnight Ink Well."

"Goodnight Rose." It had come as barely a murmur, and Rose had to shake her head to be sure she'd heard it, but it was clear. Her smile grew as she nuzzled into her makeshift bed, drifting off to sleep.

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The next morning Rose awoke with the early morning sun falling on her face. She got up, stretching to remove the stiffness from laying on those the blankets, and looked over at Ink Well, glad to see him still sleeping peacefully. After she walked downstairs, going into her shop to get ready for the work day. She made sure everything was clean, then turned on the distilleries to prepare to create her aromatic concoctions.

As she finished up she went to the front door, opening the shop for the day. As she did, she noticed the pile of mail on the floor, the top of which was covered with what was labeled as a 'Special Edition' copy of the National Equirer, touting news 'Too important to wait for the end of the month!' She brought it inside, flipping open to the table of contents while she waited for customers. The list of stories contained the usual subjects, with titles like 'Hoity Toity, Fraud?' and 'The Great and Powerful Trixie's Battle with Horn Rot' and 'Conspiracies in Canterlot', but at the bottom, almost insignificant and hidden away with smaller type, 'We Remember a Writer: Ink Well'.

She flipped to it, the last story in the magazine and just one page long, half of which was dominated by Ink Well's head, with his confidant smile and his old beat up hat. Next to it was a picture of his burned down house, merely the skeleton of a house and a scorched spot, and a list of stories he'd written. Rose began to read. "Earlier this week Ink Well, a prolific writer for the Equirer, was tragically killed in a devastating house fire. It is assumed

that a candle ignited the blaze as he fell asleep at his work desk..." The story went on to talk about how he was always such a diligent writer and that he would be missed. It almost seemed mellow the story, none of the grandiose rumors or conspiracy theories, just simple, if wrong, facts spiced up with flowery descriptions. And, of course, they didn't bother to mention anything he did outside of the Equirer or did for fun or his book or anything about him other than 'a writer.' She reached the end of the piece, frowning and tossing the magazine aside. "It's like they didn't even know him."

As she steamed over the article, Lily burst into the shop. "Rose! Rose! What are you doing still sitting around here?"

Rose rounded the counter, confusion on her face from the sudden appearance. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you get the new Equirer?" Rose nodded. "Read the 'Conspiracies in Canterlot' article, you'll see what I mean. Daisy and I'll try to save you a spot!" Lily bounded from the room, running over to Daisy before they both galloped down the street. Rose looked puzzled, running over to the discarded magazine and flipping to the story.

Her heart dropped as she saw the image on the first page. "Oh no..." Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity stood on the front page, each looking very mean in the heavily altered pictures, the red under-lighting and the fiery background not lending itself to positive interpretation. Below them ran the title 'Conspiracies in Canterlot: Ponyville Six Plots Revealed!' Rose's ears drooped sadly as she scanned through the article. "Ink Well isn't going to like this." She grabbed the magazine, running upstairs to where Ink Well was still sleeping soundly, unaware that anything was wrong. She pushed against him, shaking him awake.

He started in the bed, scrambling back against the wall before looking at Rose with sleepy eyes. "What?! Who? I... Rose? What's going-?" She tossed the magazine down on the bed, flipping it open to the article. Just one look at it and his eyes narrowed. "They didn't..." He skimmed through the article, his look turning to shock and anger as he read through the four pages of slander, rumor and lies. Everything from poisoning to assassination attempts, not just hinted at or said, but laid out blatantly before him. As he neared the end of the article, he flipped the magazine to

the front page. "Special edition?' What the hay is this? Why won't they just let it die?" He put it down on the bed. "No pony can possibly believe this stuff, right?" Rose looked down, kicking the floorboards and avoiding the question. Ink Well looked absolutely disappointed. "Don't tell me. There are already crowds."

Rose looked out the window, seeing a rush of ponies past her shop. "I learned about it when Lily burst in. She was rushing out already."

Ink Well was furious. "Help me up. I need to get to the others."

Rose held up a hoof. "Hold on Ink Well, Nurse Redheart said you shouldn't move for at least a week."

He shook his head, pushing himself past her hoof and up and out of the bed to stand unsteadily on the floor. "I can't stay here. I can't let this rest. I need to get to them."

Rose took a step back, ready in case something happened. "Why? What'll you do out there? What'll you accomplish?"

Ink Well started limping towards the stairs, Rose shadowing him to make sure he was safe. "I don't know. More than I can in here. Maybe I can get the crowds to leave. Maybe I can convince them these are all lies. Maybe I can at least comfort them in a moment of need." He stopped, turning back to her and looking at her with saddened eyes. "I have to do something." He stepped down onto the first step, wincing as his oozing hoof took the brunt of the weight. As he took his next step, his leg brace caught on the floor, causing him yell as he tipped forward and tumbled down the rest of the stairway. He tried to flap his wings futilely to keep balance, tweaking them further as he landed at the bottom with a loud crash, groaning in pain as every part of his body protested.

"Ink Well!" Rose hurried down after him, pulling him from the mass of lavender flowers he'd landed in and supporting him as he stood. "Are you alright?" He nodded weakly, taking a step forward before his leg gave out beneath him. Rose caught him, helping him over to the work table and sitting him down. "You don't need to do this. You're not proving anything! You need to rest." He started to shake his head, and Rose glared him down, not anger but worry in her eyes.

He sighed. "Alright... I'll stay here." Rose smiled, relieved that she had won. "But I still need to know what's happening out there. I'll go crazy if I just sit here."

"I'll go out and see what I can do. Just tell me what you want."

He turned to the desk, scanning over it with blank eyes as his mind ran. "I'd like to talk to them, if I can, ask them what they want me to do. But I can't talk if the place is swarming, so I hate to ask it, but, can you sneak them here? Or at least ask them to make their own way here? I know it's a lot to ask..."

Rose nodded. "I'm on it. I'll do my best." She started to walk from the room when Ink Well called her.

"Wait, do you have a pen or a quill and some paper? I'd feel better if I could start writing."

Rose thought about it for a moment. "I have a pencil in the drawer on the work table, and... ah!" She walked into the store, coming back with a notepad. "Here you go, spare receipt pad." She placed it down on the desk next to him as he found the pencil.

Ink Well smiled at her, pencil already in mouth and poised to write. "Thank you. Be careful out there."

Rose nodded, returning his smile. "I will. I'll be back as fast as I can."

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Not five steps from her shop Rose found herself on the edge of a large crowd of ponies. She circled the crowd, squeezing through alleyways and around buildings just to see where it was focused, as the wall of bodies was much too thick to try to push into. After three different streets were packed with ponies, it seemed to her to be centered around Sugarcube Corner. On the fourth street she tried, there seemed to be a weakness in the barricade of flanks, so she tried to edge her way in, sliding between ponies and doing her best to avoid bumping or shoving. After just a few feet, however, she was bumped into by a shifting pony and accidentally



bumped against a blue colt, who swung around and glared at her. "Hey! Quit your shoving! You aren't getting to Pinkie's Party before I am!"

The crowd surrounding her started to focus on her, murmurs and talking springing up around. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Have you been cutting your way in line?" A chorus of disgruntled voices rose around her, the attention turning angry.

"Cutting?"

"Who's cutting?"

"Can I just get to my house? My groceries will go bad."

"They need to wait like the rest of us!"

"Pinkie's Party isn't going anywhere, relax everypony!"

"Wait? This is around Pinkie's house? Which crowd for Fluttershy?"

"Cutters can't get in faster!"

"Back of the line with her!"

Rose found herself in a mass of bodies and hooves, shoving her back to the edge before the ponies turned their attention back towards the middle, completely ignoring her to listen to the music now pounding from the house.

Rose walked away, brushing herself off with her tail and frowning. "Looks like I'm not getting in there. But it sounds like a party, so she can't be too worried." She left to check the homes of the other ponies, since that seemed the most likely place to find the rest of them.

First was the library, it's normal dark but friendly exterior hurt by all of the windows being dark. There was a crowd surrounding it, but it was not a solid ball, but rather a few hunting parties spreading from the source. Following their lead, she left to check somewhere else, stopping in on Rarity's boutique to find a similar even occurring there, the carousel apparently being closed for business. After that, she gave up on the Ponyville houses, searching instead for crowds, as a wall of ponies like that near Pinkie would be where the rumored ponies would be found. She started down the road to the Everfree Forest, hesitant to go farther than she had to towards that dark place, but it was soon apparent that there weren't many admirers at all along the road, and the few that were were searching as intently as those back in town. Stopping herself from going

much further, she cut across the fields, making a bee line towards Sweet Apple Acres.

From her position in the fields the rainbow river of ponies was prevalent on the path; all of the earthbound ponies formed a solid line right to the gate while the pegasi flew excitedly, criss-crossing the skies and crowding the airspace above the entrance to the farm. Where Rose was she could hardly tell what was going on, but the size of the crowd could only mean that Twilight and her friends would be found there. But how to get in? She paced back and forth, the living obstruction in front of the gate not going anywhere. She glanced up at the pegasi flying freely above. How much easier this would be with wings...

After a while, Rose let the simple thought become the dominant one. Why just sneak out? Rose looked at the commotion by the gate. Everypony was there, and apart from the circling pegasi, who themselves didn't seem to wander too far from the gate, nopony at all could be seen inside. From her place in the fields she circles the farm, trying to keep attention from herself. Not that difficult considering how nopony wanted to take their eyes from the possible show.

Once she was out of sight of the crowd and far from the patrolling pegasi above, she found a promising section of fence. Moving up to it and seeing the gaps too small to squeeze through, she tried to climb the fence, hooves faltering for a grip on the rounded wood. They slipped, landing her hard on her rump. Sore from the landing, she tried again, leaping up to grab onto the top beam of the fence. She managed to hook her legs over it, but slowly slid down the side again, hooves scrabbling for grip on the wood. Despite her best efforts, she eventually did slide off, falling onto her back and knocking the wind out of her. From the ground she glared up at the fencing. "Why did they make this thing so high? Do apples try to escape or something?"

Ready for one more try, she picked herself up, taking a few steps back for a running start. She counted down in her head, then sprinted towards the barrier before launching herself into the air. Her front hooves easily cleared it, but her back legs nicked the top, causing her to tumble head over hooves into the apple orchard. Dizzy and dirty, she pushed herself up, smiling. "I'm in!" She placed a hoof over her own mouth, running up to the nearest tree, a skinny sapling that offered little cover, and placed her back



against it. After a moment of tension, she peeked around. There was nopony in the orchard and nothing to suggest that anypony was alerted to her presence. Still, she walked cautiously towards the house, initially hiding under each tree, but gradually just trotting as it was obvious nopony was looking her way.

As she neared the edge of the grove she slowed her pace again, hiding behind the last tree before the house. From this vantage point she could clearly see the crowd looming at the gate, held up by a couple of overturned wagons guarded by the old green-furred Granny Smith and her grandson Big Mac. Granny had a pitchfork in her mouth and was stabbing it at ponies as they got too close, while Big Mac's size alone created a buffer away from the barricade. Granny Smith jabbed the pitchfork up, barely missing a yellow pegasus that flew right above her. "Get away from here you varmint! You ain't gettin' Applejack 'n her friends! She didn't do none of those things, and you ain't bothering her with your lies! Now git!"

Being careful to be as silent as possible, Rose ducked around behind the barn, creeping low along the ground on her way to the house. On her way there, she heard a noise come from within the big red building. It was quiet, like the coo of a dove, almost impossible to hear behind the roar of the crowd. She crawled over to one of the shuttered windows, pulling it ever so slightly open.

Inside were the five ponies, Twilight, Rainbow, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Rarity. Rainbow Dash was pacing the edge of the barn, wings extended and hooves stomping the ground with every step. Twilight was reading over the magazine with Rarity, while Applejack sat with Fluttershy, a hoof around her shoulder. Fluttershy herself was sitting, shaking and trying not to cry, to little effect. Every so often a small hic would escape from her, a heart melting sound. Applejack tapped her back again. "It's okay sugar. They're just bein' mean. They don't know what they're doin'. We'll be free and clear in no time. I'm sure Ink Well's already working on sumthin'."

Rainbow stomped the ground again. "It's no time for writing! It's time for action! We need to get up there and kick their flank!"

Rarity yawned from the barrel she sat on, kicking a small pile of hay. "You'd think that they'd be bored of this sort of thing by now. Scandal around us is becoming almost common with this magazine's help."

Twilight closed the magazine angrily. "That settles it. I've finished the preparations for the trial, I'm sending the letter to the Princess as soon as I can get back to the library."

A gust of wind pushed against the shutter, causing it to creak and drawing everypony's attention. Rose tried to duck away, but the flash of red hair caused Rainbow to shoot over, grabbing Rose and yanking her in the window. She raised a hoof to strike the intruder, but dropped it when she saw who it was. "Rose?"

Fluttershy looked up at the mention of the name. "W-What are you doing here?"

Rose pushed herself up from where she'd fallen gracelessly. "Ink Well sent me. He wants to talk to you, get your opinion on what to do. I'm supposed to get you back to my shop without anypony seeing you, if you can believe that." She shook her head. "But there's a huge crowd out there. You can hear it from here. The only way I got through was because they aren't looking for me. Between the scanning pegasi and the bevy of rumor lovers I doubt we'd even make it out of the barn."

Twilight smiled. "Luckily, I have a spell for just such an occasion. Mass teleport, it'll get us there in a flash. It's going to take me some time to prepare, though."

Rarity looked over at her, annoyed. "And when were you going to mention you could do that? We've been in this dusty old barn for hours!"

"I had to make sure I remembered everything, and ideally have everything ready. I didn't want everypony getting excited and then letting you down." She got up, walking to the side and thinking it over. "It's going to take me a little while to get the energy needed, but I'm sure I could get us to your shop. Are you coming along Rose, or can you make it back on your own?"

Rose shook her head. "I'll walk. They don't seem to much care about me. I'm sure Ink Well will be glad to see you when you get there. Travel safely!"

"You too. I'll see you back at the shop." Rose hopped back out of the window, hurrying back to the cover of the apple trees and quickly making

her way back to the shop.

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Rose trotted back into her shop and right into the back room, proud of a job completed. "Hey Ink Well, I got to the others. They're going to try to teleport in." Ink Well didn't respond, the sound of the pencil scraping across the paper the only noise, interrupted by the sound of wood hitting wood as it dropped to the table. Rose walked up behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Everything alright?" Ink Well leaned down, grabbing the pencil in his mouth again and continuing his writing. Rose glanced down at the paper, eyes widening as she looked upon his work.

The notepad itself was much thinner, the workspace littered with papers, balled up and torn and thrown aside, each with wet, dark red stains on them. The page Ink Well had beneath him was covered with wavy scribbles going every which way, small red drips and wet spots punctuating them and soaking the paper through. As she watched, the pencil in his mouth slipped once more, slapping into the paper and leaving a red line across it that spread into the fibers. He leaned forward slowly, moving shakily as he gripped the pencil in red stained teeth. Halfway from the page, the pencil slipped, landing once more with a wet slap as a few thick red drips chased it.

Ink Well's head drooped forward, shoulders shaking as he gazed upon the paper. Rose reached out a hoof carefully, placing it gently on his shoulder. "Ink Well? Are you okay?"

His shoulders stilled, the shaking transferring to his head. "No..." A grim smile spread across his face, revealing his stained teeth once more. "I'm not okay." He laughed mirthlessly, head popping up to look at her with red rimmed eyes and bloodstained lips. "Do you know what's going on?" Rose shook her head, scared of the manic smile in front of her. "It's the smallest thing, the silliest thing, really..."

He coughed, drops of blood splattering out on the table before him. He stared at it, eyes hardening at the sight and tears welling beneath them. "What are you talking about?" Rose took a step back, looking towards the door. Would Redheart be available?

He smiled, tears now dropping freely from his eyes. "I can't write." He grabbed the paper on the pad, ripping it up and tossing it aside. It landed on the floor with a wet splat, stained dark where he'd bitten it. "My mouth... I burned my freaking mouth!" He started laughing again, tipping backwards in his chair so far that Rose feared he'd tip. Then, suddenly, he shot forward, smacking his forehead against the table. Rose jumped after him, trying to catch him. "Stupid!" He dodged her try, bringing his head into the table once more. "Idiot!" He sat up again, threatening to attack the desk once more, blood trickling down his forehead. Instead he started giggling, slumping forward onto the table, tears falling as he muttered to himself. "Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

A flash of light streamed from the stairs, shining into the darkened workroom before slowly fading. Hoof steps were heard, accompanied by the voices of Twilight and most of her friends. Rose look to the stairs, then back to Ink Well. "Should I send them away?"

Ink Well shook his head, not rising from the table. "No, no... Bring them down. I'm ready for them."

Rose gave him one final worried look as she ascended the stairs into the room above. The five ponies from the barn were assembled around the room, looking disoriented and confused. Fluttershy was the first to notice her. "Rose, where's Ink Well?"

Rose's eyes betrayed her worry as she talked. "He's below, but he's not really... himself. It might be better if you waited a little before talking to him."

Rainbow Dash pushed past her, flying down the stairs. "No way. He's going to answer for this one now."

Fluttershy reached futilely after her. "Rainbow, don't be too harsh. He only woke up yesterday." The others followed Rainbow down the stairs, running into her at the bottom. She was staring at Ink Well, slightly shocked to see him smiling so calmly, blood trickling seemingly unnoticed down his face and staining his lips and teeth.

"Hello everypony." He said, his smile not wavering, unnerving in its steadiness. "Are you alright? I trust you read the article."

Rainbow shook away her shock, taking a step forward. "Yeah! I thought you were going to stop that from happening! What the hay?"

Ink Well nodded. "Yes, I was going to stop that. In fact, I started writing something to send to them..." His eyes drifted to the many papers laying around the work area, the other ponies unable to help following his gaze over them.

Twilight cleared her throat, pulling Rainbow back and taking her place at the front of the group. "I started a legal case against them. All I need to do is send it to the Princess and she'll investigate and call them in. If you were to testify about what they did to you and what you found, we could shut them down completely."

Ink Well stood up and paced, wincing every time his brace collided with the ground. "Yeah, we could... but don't you think they might get past that? They are a giant, powerful organization with millions of bits to throw around on lawyers, while we are seven meaningless little ponies."

The group looked confused, Twilight voicing their thought. "What are you-?"

Ink Well held up a hoof, wincing again as more pressure fell on his broken leg. "Let me finish. When this all started, I was on the magazine, and you all were suffering from one story. Since I got involved, since I started trying to fight them, I lost my job, you all have been the target of a second article, Rainbow was attacked in her own home, and all we have to show for it is a file that, while damning, isn't even entirely illegal." He stopped pacing, looking each of them individually with tired eyes. "I don't know about you, but I think we might as well quit before we fall any further behind. We haven't helped anything. We've only accomplished the opposite of our goals and..." He sat down on the spot, back to the others. "... I'm done."

Rainbow looked furious. "So after everything you did, after everything they did to you, you want to turn tail and run? They attacked us! Doesn't that mean anything?"

Ink Well waved it away, refusing to turn back around. "A secret organization attacked us, and while the connection is obvious, we can't prove anything."

Rainbow took another angry step forward. "A pony working for them

attacked you! Attacked me!"

Ink Well turned, tear-rimmed eyes furious. "Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I'm acutely aware of what happened? Do you think that makes it any easier?" He took a step for them, pain flashing on his face as he put weight on the cast. "I've done everything I could! I put everything on the line to help six ponies I didn't even KNOW until I started what was supposed to be a simple article, and I lost it. I lost more than that... Everything my pen graces is destroyed, everything I work on abandoned or torn to shreds... Even the pinnacle of my work is an abject failure... Perhaps it was for the best that I lost my ability to write, now nopony else can get hurt for my dumb mistakes..." He sat again, head hanging as tears splashed on the floor. "I have nopony to blame but myself, and nopony but myself should suffer for it. It was more than I could possibly hope to accomplish, taking them on, and I'm tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of writing. Tired of failing... I've already failed you all, let me just take that and hide in shame."

Fluttershy sat in the back, sadness over all her features. "But... you Pinkie swore..."

Ink Well hung his head lower. "I did. An unbreakable oath from an unreliable pony... Bring me the cupcake if you want, my eye is ready. Otherwise, leave me be..." He started to limp slowly to the stairs, walking between the other ponies, who stared at him as he walked with emotions ranging from barely contained anger to barely contained tears. As he struggled up the stairs, he stopped a few steps up, looking over the group. "I have no place to ask this of her, but Rose, would it be alright if they hid out here for a while? At least until it's safe for them to head home?"

The eyes in the room swiveled onto her. Surprised, she nodded. "O-of course. It's no problem."

Ink Well nodded solemnly. "Thank you." He took the rest of the stairs slowly, each step a struggle, with the rest of the room still staring after him, not quite sure how to react. Eventually he disappeared from the steps, the sound of his brace slowly dampening as it clinked across the floor above.

As the sound of the brace faded, the faces in the room turned to each other. Rose took a nervous step forward. "Uh, well, make yourselves



comfortable. You can stay here as long as you-"

"He chickened out!" Rainbow paced angrily, stopping Rose's sentence in its tracks. "He's running away! How can he let us down like that?" She looked over the rest, each of them avoiding her eyes. She snorted, stomping a hoof on the ground. "I'm not giving this up! I'm going to fly out to Cloudsdale and take this into my own hooves!"

Twilight shook her head. "No Rainbow. Don't do that, you already know what's going to happen. I'm working on the legal case, and I'm not letting this end here. He's already done enough for us. We can take it from here."

"Well this trip was a waste of time." Said Rarity, walking towards the door to the shop. "Can I leave? The combination of smells is giving me a headache."

Rose piped up from behind her machines. "I could turn on the fans if you-"

Applejack ran past Rarity, pushing her from the door and closing it. "No way sugar. There are way too many crazy ponies out there. Besides, how can you even think about leavin' when Ink Well's so down? We've got to do somethin' to help!"

Rarity frowned at her. "What do you want me to do? I'm not Pinkie Pie. Unless a suit is going to cheer him up I'm afraid I don't know what to do."

Applejack nudged her. "Nuts Rarity. How can you be so mean?"

Rarity took a step back, offended. "Mean?! Look here you! I care about quite a lot! But we have bigger problems right now than a depressed writer. I have orders to finish at my shop, and I simply can't keep them waiting." She walked past the earth pony and over to her unicorn friend. "Twilight? Can you do one of those teleports on another pony? I would be so appreciative if you could get me to my boutique."

Twilight looked up from where she was staring hard at the floor. "Huh? Oh. Yes, just give me a few minutes to concentrate and I can get us all home."

Applejack looked disappointed at her. "Not you too, Twi! We can't just leave him here. He's a friend."

Twilight shrugged. "He doesn't want us here. He'll be fine. We should focus on our own problems."

Applejack stomped a hoof in disgust. "I can't believe you two bein' so pig headed about this! Sure, this attention ain't no walk in the park, but we can spend some of our time helpin' a friend who ain't us, right?" The unicorns looked unimpressed, Fluttershy just watching the scene from the side, looking depressed. Applejack shook her head. "Oh, come on. You're with me, aren't ya Rainbow?" There was a silence that hung in the room. "Rainbow?"

The ponies in the room looked around for the missing pegasus, nowhere to be found. The door to the shop hung slightly open. Applejack ran over, peeking her head out to see the main shop door swinging open as well. "Consarn it, Rainbow! Why'd she go an' do a thing like that?" She was about to go out the door when she stopped, closing it in front of her. "Ah, she'll be fine. She can outrun 'em, and she knows better to go after the Equirer again."

Rarity fixed her hair with a shake of her head. "So, what, you have time to worry about Ink Well but not your friends?"

Applejack's eyes narrowed as she looked back at the white unicorn. "What're you trying to say?"

Rarity blinked, looking surprised. "Me? I'm not saying anything. I was just noticing how Ink Well's state seems to worry you but Rainbow's doesn't."

Applejack walked over to her, staring her down. "No, yer sayin' somethin' Rarity. Do you think I don't care about Rainbow?"

Rarity just looked at her, smiling radiantly. "Not at all. I think your obsession on your colt friend is rather amusing."

Applejack scowled at her. "Colt friend? You best not be starting rumors about me too."

Rarity's smile turned smug. "Rumors? With all the time he spent at your farm before, helping you out, pulling your cart, I thought it was common



knowledge."

"Why you-!" Applejack reared up, ready to kick her.

Rose stepped between the two, pushing them apart. "Now, I'm sorry, I may not be in the right to say this, but you shouldn't be fighting amongst yourselves, don't you think?" The two ponies still looked angry, but backed down from each other. With that defused, Rose smiled at the group. "Feel free to make yourselves at home. I'll be upstairs if you need me."

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Rose walked up into the house portion of her shop, leaving the others below to their own devices. Upstairs she found Ink Well laying in the bed, back to the world and shoulders shaking. Rose took a few tentative steps forward.

"Go away." A hoof raised from the bed, waiving her off. "I've put in my two bits. I'm done."

Rose tapped a hoof on the floor. "You can't shoo me from my own house, Ink Well."

He turned over, revealing his red eyes and tear stained face. "Oh. Rose. It's you..." He flipped back over, facing the wall again. "Leave me alone. I'm not worth talking to right now."

Rose walked over, sitting on the bed. "Ink Well, I want to help, just talk to me." The two sat in silence. After a brief pause, Rose spoke. "Well?"

Ink Well rose a hoof, quieting her and pointing to the floor. Heated voices called out at each other, raising to a din before the dimming once more. Ink Well let out a long held sigh. "It's all my fault."

Rose looked confused at him. "How is this your fault?"

He sat up on the bed, staring on the bed sheet. "I let them down. I wasn't good enough... I couldn't write their corrections, couldn't stop that darn magazine from targeting them..."

"You can't control the magazines! How could you have stopped them?"

"It doesn't matter how, I promised I would. I Pinkie swore! I gave them my word, an oath, hope... I might as well have kicked them in the teeth for all the good I did. All I ended up was a burden on you and a tumor on their happiness." He paused for a moment as another yell came from below, accompanied by a sad, high pitched coo that tugged at the heart strings. He shook his head, staring at the floorboards. "I even got them fighting among themselves... I'm the worst..."

"Ink Well, you did everything you could. You gave everything for them. Your job, your house, and you kept fighting. What more could you do?" She saw him still staring at the floor, sadness permeable around him. Rose frowned at it. "Ink Well, when you got here you had a broken leg, two bruised ribs, a badly sprained wing, burns all over your body AND a stab wound, and the first thing you did was ask if Rainbow was alright. Today, you read that they were targeted again and you jumped out of bed despite the nurse's and my own wishes, fell down the stairs refusing help and wrote until your mouth was bleeding in an attempt to help them!" She lifted his face to look into his desperate eyes. "You've done enough. It's okay that you think about yourself for once. They have no right to ask you for more." As she spoke, a cacophony slowly rose below, growing almost understandable before being abruptly cut off with a loud 'Enough!' and a splash of blinding light spilling up the stairs.

Silence rang throughout the building for a few moments, the two ponies just sitting there and listening. Eventually Rose smiled at him, wiping the blood from his forehead. "There, you see? They're gone. Everything will be alright, even if you take a break." Ink Well looked at her for a moment, the desperation in his eyes gone and a smile edging his face before he broke out into a deep yawn. Rose smiled once more. "You must be beat. Get some rest. It'll all be better in the morning."

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Clink. Rose heard the noise, out of place as she soared over the open valleys. She moved it to the back of her head. Clink, tap, clink, tap, clink, tap, clink, tap... She alighted on a cloud, looking around for the sound. At least it had stopped... Thunk! Tap, Thunk! Tap, Thunk! Ugh! That racket! The cloud beneath her shook, the world fading and tearing. Eventually the

noise stopped, but the damage was done. The world around her faded to black to the faint sound of a bell.

Rose's eyes slowly dragged open, blinking blearily in the dark room. Moonlight came into the room from a low angle, the sky outside the window deep blue tinted pink. She looked around, wondering where the noise had come from until her eyes fell on the bed. There was a form in the bed, but it wasn't moving, wasn't breathing. This was a solid, lifeless lump. She got up, walking over to the blanket covered body and pulled it back. The pillows of her bed were arranged in pony shape, Ink Well nowhere to be seen.

Now wide awake, she ran to the stairs, hurrying into the dark room below. She flicked on the light, the pipes and machines gleaming in the clean electric light and casting strange shadows where the bulb's glow didn't fall. Amid the shapes and shadows nopony moved. She weaved between the distillers, pushing open the shop door and seeing her front door hanging slightly ajar, the bell tinkling lightly in the cool breeze flowing into the room. She ran from her shop, closing the door behind her as she went into the early morning air of Ponyville.

She started by scanning the sleeping streets around the area. Unfortunately, due to the hubbub surrounding the 'Ponyville 6,' there were multiple ponies already moving around the streets, with dozens more laying in doorways or on the ground. Rose stood stock still as she scanned the streets, still amazed at the amount of sway one article had.

When none of the ponies in the dim moonlight appeared to be the proper injured one, she took off, picking a road at random to begin her search. She moved methodically, street by street looking down all of the little alleyways and into hiding spaces for Ink Well's bandaged flank. As the moon sank and the sun slowly rose on the day, Rose's searching area widened, including the entire market and residential areas. Even after searching those, he was nowhere to be found.

"How can one injured pony move so fast?" She said as her search further expanded to the park. The morning was now in full swing, and there were townsponties and visitors alike wandering the pathways. She moved between them, asking around for the parchment furred pegasus that had wandered off, but nopony seemed to have seen him. She sat down on one of the benches, serious worry threatening to overtake her. To calm herself

she breathed deeply, taking in the smell of grass and wild flowers. "Easy girl. He's a strong pony. He'll be fine. Sure he's not in the best shape, but he got all the way to your house in worse shape than this." She took another breath, running over who she could ask for help searching in her head. "He can't have gone too far down a leg and a wing. If you just organize a search party, you can probably..."

Her thoughts trailed off as the faint scent of lilacs floated past her. She sniffed the air, looking around to see the source of the familiar smell. The flowers in the park were daisies, dandelions and tulips, so it wasn't coming from them, and nopony had walked by recently, so it wasn't a perfume or cologne. Yet the smell still hung in the air. She got up, following it off the path and through the trees, eventually coming to a bush which reeked of the flower, with just the subtlest hint of ash beneath.

Excited, she pushed a clump of leaves aside, revealing Ink Well curled up around the trunk, his bandages all askew and a pained expression on his sleeping face. Letting out a sigh of relief, she shook his shoulder. He started, his wing straining under the bandage and his brace bouncing against the ground as he tried to push himself up. Rose shook her head, trying to stop him with a hoof. "What's with you and hiding in bushes?"

After a few moments of confusion, he looked up at Rose, recognition dawning as his gaze dropped to the ground. "Oh... Hello Rose."

Rose looked at him sternly. "What the hay were you thinking, sneaking off like that?"

Ink Well looked away from her, purposefully avoiding her gaze. "Oh geez, I worried you didn't I? I was hoping I could just disappear and stop burdening you..."

Rose's look softened. "Ink Well, you're no burden, and I don't know where that talk of coming from! Sure, maybe it wasn't fun cleaning up your bandages and keeping an eye on you, but that's because you're hurt, and that's the part I don't want to see. And why wouldn't I be worried about you? Plenty of ponies are!"

Ink Well shook his head. "Were. The others don't need me anymore now that I'm not helping them."

"Are. They may be a bit distracted now with their own problems, but that doesn't mean they like seeing you all injured and beating yourself up. Come on! You're better than this." She took a step back, offering a hoof. "Now get up. A bush in the park is no place for a conversation." After a few moments, Ink Well took her hoof, and with her help got up to standing and eventually out of the bush, though not without a few snags and scrapes. Once he was out he let go of Rose's hoof, taking a few steps away and still looking ashamed. Rose just smiled at him. "There. Much better. Now let's get back home and fix you up." She looked him up and down, frowning. "You really look a mess."

Ink Well limped ahead. "Yeah, thanks. You really know how to make a guy feel better."

Rose gave an exasperated sigh, nudging him on his way as they headed from the park. "You really need to snap out of this funk you're in Ink Well. So you can't write. There's more to life than one thing! Even if it is your special talent, a few days off of it won't hurt anything, will it?"

Ink Well shook his head. "It's not just that, it's everything. I mean, I'm just useless now, I lost so much, I can't even help the other ponies out after I swore I would, and even once I'm fully healed I've got nothing to return to... And all this focus on me. You, the others, the article... I'm just some little pony, I'm not important. Why all the attention?"

Rose shook her head. "Oh, you saw the one for you? And I thought it would cheer you up. You, sir, suffer from a poor self image. It wasn't just drawing attention to you or anything, it was a memorial from the ponies that remembered you and were sad you were gone. Granted, I'm pretty sure no pony bothered to actually talk to any of them when writing the piece, but it wasn't meant at all in hatred or in spite. And yes, you lost a lot, but there's nothing to be done about that. At least you have your life! You can't return to anything, but you can start over, a fresh start without all the issues you used to have."

He nodded slowly. "Sure, sure, but that still doesn't explain you or the others."

Rose stepped in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. "Darn it Ink Well,

we care about you, isn't that enough?" She turned around, stomping off with a huff.

Ink Well was shocked, standing stock still for a few moments before he remembered that they were walking somewhere. As he started walking again, he shook his head. "Good going Ink Well. Said the wrong thing there." He followed Rose, lagging a fair bit behind. When he rounded the next street corner he saw Rose talking with Daisy and Lily, and he hung back behind the wall, listening in to their conversation despite himself.

"... yesterday? We thought you'd have been around the Library or something. Didn't you read the article?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "Yes Lily, I read the article. I just don't think that gossip is that big a thing. Besides, I was a bit busy with my own problems while that was going on."

Daisy gave an exaggerated gasp. "You not caring about gossip? Something must be wrong with you girl! Weren't you the one dragging us around those few weeks ago?"

"No Daisy, that was Lily. I was just the one that introduced you to the writer. You remember Ink Well, don't you?" She gestured behind her, only then realizing that Ink Well wasn't right behind her.

Lily tapped a hoof against her head as she thought, not noticing Rose's confusion. "Ink Well... Ink Well... Oh!" Her face saddened a bit. "He was the one they wrote about, wasn't he? I'm sorry. He was your friend, wasn't he?"

"Is. He's fine, they were wrong about him dieing. I already told you not to trust them." She looked around again, still not seeing the bandaged pony. "If he'd stop hiding, I'd prove it to you." She wandered away, trying to look down the street ahead of her. As she did so, the other ponies gave each other a look.

Lily walked up to her, placing a hoof on her shoulder. "Sure Rose, sure. We believe you."

Rose looked at her, completely confused. "Huh?"



Daisy walked up too, smiling. "Yeah. When I lost Granny Dandelion, I used to see her all the time as well. You remember that, don't you Lily?" Lily nodded, and realization began to dawn on Rose. "If you want, we were just going to Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie is throwing a party and answering questions and I'm sure that would really cheer you up."

Rose pulled away, scowling at them. "No! I'm not imagining this! I'm not grieving! He's just a little slow on his feet since the fire. Here, follow me." She walked back down the street, rounding the corner to find Ink Well leaning against the wall nonchalantly. "There, see?" As the other two rounded the corner, he waved at them.

They took one look at his ripped and pus stained bandages, the burned skin and charred fur beneath, the blood stains on his head, around his mouth and in his smile, and ran, screaming. "Ghost! Undead writer pony! Everypony run for the hills!" They galloped off, a few ponies nearby panicking as well and running in terror.

Ink Well raised a hoof, trying to call them back. "Wait! I'm not..." The street around them was cleared. Ink Well dropped his hoof. "Dead..." He looked back at himself, the burned flesh and bandages, and sighed. "Though I sure do look it... No wonder your friends ran."

Rose shrugged. "Between you and me, they've always been excitable." She looked at him, still frowning from her conversation earlier. "We heading back to the shop or what? It's already way past opening..."

Ink Well nodded. "Yeah. Let's get going." They slowly made their way back to the shop, both of them quiet the entire walk. As he walked up to the door, he looked over at Rose, who'd checked her pace to match his but was otherwise lost in thought. She seemed... troubled. "Roseluck? Something on your mind?"

She looked over at him, slightly miffed. "Please, Rose. Roseluck's the name on my bills." She walked past him, opening the door.

He ducked through it. "Sorry... didn't mean to bring something up..."

Rose shook her head as she went past him, opening the door to the workroom. "No. Sorry. I don't mean to snap. I just... I used to be so close to

Lily and Daisy, but," she sighed, "I guess I changed or something... We're just not so friendly."

Ink Well shrugged, slowly making his way to the work table. "Everypony changes. Sometimes it's a way of thinking, sometimes it's just circumstance, but nothing stays the same." Bloodstained papers were still scattered around the area. As he got himself seated, Rose walked up, placing down a bowl of water and bringing over the clean bandages.

"Maybe you should take your own advice, Inky." She smiled at him, then moved behind him, removing the old pus and bloodstained bandages from his side, head and hooves. As she did, Ink Well washed himself off, feeling uncomfortable for the attention being given him. As she removed the last bandage from around his wing, revealing the straps holding it steady and the stitches along his side, her thoughts took over again. "It hasn't just been happening lately, though the Equirer issue was the final straw. It started a while ago. Ever since they became all... intimate a few months back. I've just become a third wheel."

Ink Well frowned, examining his burned flesh worriedly. "You seemed friendly enough when I met you three." He moved to stand and Rose kept him sitting, beginning to bandage his hooves.

Rose shrugged, continuing her task. "It's not like we're not still friends. I've known them forever. It's other stuff getting in the way..."

Ink Well's hung dropped. "It's me isn't it. I'm taking up all your time and keeping you from your friends..." He winced as the bandage tightened, then relaxed as the lilac smell hit him.

Rose moved to the next hoof, continuing her work. "No, no, not at all. This has been going on for years, ever since they started getting all lovey-dovey. I was jealous and felt left out, and they tried to solve it by asking me to get in on it and, well, I just don't swing that way, so I had to decline, but that caused some uncomfortable times..." She tightened the bandage, moving to the last one. "And it's hard being a single filly in this town. There's, like, six colts, four of which are taken, one who just isn't interested, and one who'd be more interested in you than me. There just isn't a date to be found." She tightened the bandage to a slight yelp, blushing slightly as she loosened her grip. "I'm sorry, I went way too far there, didn't I?"



Ink Well shook his head as he waved the pain out of his hoof. "No. It actually answered a question or two I had." He stood up, letting Rose get to work on fixing the bandages around his midsection and wing. As she did, Ink Well kept talking. "And I get where you're coming from, though not for the same reason. Relationships just never work out for me. Not that I went searching, but I always got distracted with a story or a deadline or some manuscript I was working on... Not conducive to filly friends." Rose tightened the bandage, setting it into place, tapping him on the back and smiling at him. Ink Well smiled back. "Thank you. And there, now we're even in embarrassing revealed facts."

Rose motioned him to lower his head. "Sure." She fixed the bandage, glad to see his mane trying to grow back in already. As she finished it, she looked up to the clock in the room. It was well past noon. "Oh well, much too late to open the shop..." She looked at him, all spiffy in his new bandages, and smiled. "Looks like it's going to be a slow day today. You cause me a lot of trouble, you know."

Ink Well rubbed the new bandages on his head with his good hoof. "I know. I'll make it up to you." He put his hoof down, walking to the stairs, and turned back as he reached the bottom of them. "I promise."

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The next morning Rose woke up to see Ink Well sitting on the side of the room, touching his front hooves to his lower hooves and stretching side to side. Unfortunately, every time he moved the hoof in a cast it fell lower than the other one, the brace clinking against the wood floor. Despite this, Ink Well was smiling. Rose got up, stretching herself to remove the kinks before walking over to him. "Well somepony's happy. Why are you up so early, and what are you doing?"

Ink Well looked at her, smiling. "Oh, just limbering up. Today's flight day, isn't it? Got to make sure I don't pull anything and get grounded again."

Rose tapped a hoof against her forehead. "Right! Your wings are free today aren't they? You sure you're ready for this, because the nurse said that waiting before flying wouldn't be a bad thing."

Ink Well shook his head. "No way. I am so tired of being grounded. I haven't been on the ground this long since I pulled a wing in mom's dance class, and that was because I didn't stretch beforehoof. But this time I'm ready." He stopped stretching, placing down his braced leg and pushing himself to standing. "Let's do this."

"Alright." Rose walked over, untying the bandages around his right wing and removing what held it down. As soon as she stepped back, Ink Well tested the wing, moving it up and down and wiggling the singed feathers. "Anything wrong?"

Ink Well tried it once, smiled, and then pushed himself into the air with his good legs and flapped hard. He sprung into the air, making a quick lap around the room before hovering before Rose, a giant grin on his face. "Nope, everything's fine! My, I'd missed this..." He flew out the window, carefully the first few feet into the open air, but soon zipping out into the sky and circling the building, laughing the whole time.

Rose watched him spiral through the sky and couldn't help but smile herself, but something about watching him zip and turn around her building caused her heart to sting. Oh what she would give to be up there with him... "Be realistic girl. It just isn't going to happen." Ink Well flew back through the window, fluttering to a soft landing in the middle of the room. He turned, smiling a smile that seemed to proclaim to the world that nothing could go wrong. Rose smiled back, unable to fight the joy radiating from him. It was the happiest she'd ever seen him since his second visit, and yet her heart twinged again...

She ignored it, walking over and bumping against him playfully. "Now that you've had your fun, it's time for you to make it up to me."

Ink Well looked at her, smile not fading at all. "Oh? And what do you wish of me, Miss Rose?"

Rose shrugged. "Nothing big. Just helping me restock the shop. Yesterday I lost a lot of time looking for you when you ran off, I wasn't even able to open. I'm running behind on my perfume making, so I need you out front running the store."

Ink Well's smile faltered. "You sure about that? You saw what happened

when your friends saw me. How do you know I won't go scaring them off with my looks?"

Rose looked him up and down. "True, you look a mess, but at least today it's a clean, newly bandaged mess. You'll be behind the counter most of the time anyway, ideally they'll only see the one on your head."

Ink Well raised an eyebrow. "Well what if somepony needs help or something? I don't know anything about perfumes."

Rose smiled smugly. "You aren't getting out of it for that. You honestly don't need to know much. It's all their preference, you just facilitate." Ink Well looked unimpressed with her response. "Look, don't worry about it. If you really need help, I'll be in the back and you can come get me, alright? Please?" He still wasn't convinced. "You promised."

Ink Well looked at her asking him and, after a moment, smiled. "Okay, I'll do it. I did promise, and I do kind of owe you a lot."

Rose nodded. "Thank you. I'll open up and everything, you just get set up behind the counter, alright? It's not like I'm expecting any big rush. It'll probably be a quiet, boring day."

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It most certainly was not a quiet, boring day. Within minutes of the shop opening Ink Well had his first customer, and while the customer did not run screaming, she was put off by Ink Well's injured look. But, in spite of this, she made a purchase and was on her way with no trouble at all. However, how he looked didn't seem to be a problem at all, as within an hour there was a small crowd within the shop, and by midday Ink Well was well overrun. Customers were flocking in with requests and purchases and questions to the point that Ink Well just couldn't take it, so he ducked into the back room. There Rose was working overtime to keep the front stocked.

He closed the door quickly against the sound of dozens of customers asking questions, putting his back against it to keep the noise out. "What the hay Rose, I thought there wouldn't be a rush!"

Rose ran between two machines, adjusting one with a back hoof as she read the dials on another. "Look, I have no clue what happened, is there some big day I don't know about?"

Ink Well backed slowly away from the door, watching it for any sudden moves. "I don't know, but I think it's about now I should tell you I don't really do well in crowds."

"Tough hoof beats, that's how it is today. Geez, even the Gala rush wasn't this bad!" She finished capping a row of glass bottles, arranging them carefully in the box before jamming it and the half-dozen under it into Ink Well's hooves. "Here, these are the florals, back row, go get 'em."

Ink Well hovered back towards the door, braced hoof making carrying the tower of boxes difficult. "Are you sure you don't want to help me out there? I could really use it."

"Sorry I can't be more helpful, but I've got two more batches coming out for most of the scent bases. If we sell out of those, we're done for the day, alright? Now go!" Before Ink Well could answer, Rose pushed him through the door, shutting it on the sound that flooded in. She cringed slightly at the loud clinks of glass that came after her action, but was relieved to hear no breaking.

Ink Well was just happy he didn't have to balance the boxes long, as before he'd hardly flown over the counter the bottles began to empty from the boxes, quite the queue forming before the register. By the time he got to where the perfume belonged, there were only two containers left, both snatched away right under his nose. With a huff, he flew through the nearly barren aisle ways, attending to the mob before the register as fast as he could.

Another few frantic hours passed before the crowd thinned, not due to a lack of demand but due to lack of supply. Rose brought out her newest batches, not fully confident in their quality due to their rushed nature, but the ponies ate them up and they disappeared as quickly as anything. It took both Rose and Ink Well behind the counter to take care of everypony there, and even then it took another fifteen minutes after closing time before the last satisfied pony left, flying into deepening afternoon light, 'Rosewater' bag held gladly in her teeth. "Thank you! Come again!" Rose called after

the pegasus before closing the door and flipping the sign to 'Closed.' She sighed, leaning against the wall. "Wow, who would have thought that was going to happen? I normally have enough stock for everyone in Ponyville four times over, and I ran out!" She laughed. "Did you catch why they were buying so rabidly?"

Ink Well flew from aisle to aisle with broom and dust pan in hoof cleaning broken glass. A million mixed scents clogged the air from the test sprays and spills of all the ponies. Between two aisles he paused, answering her. "I think one of them mentioned something about getting close to Rarity, but that was hours ago." He dumped the glass shards from the pan into a trash bin with a horrible crash, then landed next to it, visibly tired. He looked over at Rose, the bandage on his head soaked with sweat and the others on him disheveled, and smiled. "Slow day, huh?"

Rose smiled back. "So I was wrong. At least it's not all bad. With the haul that came in I think I can finally afford that compressor I wanted." She pulled herself off of the wall, stretching out before gesturing to the door. "Would you like to go get something to eat? I'm buying."

Ink Well shook his head. "It's wonderful offer, but right now I sort of want to spread my wings. Being locked in here all day really was kind of anticlimactic after they were freed, you know?" He looked at the injured look on her face and frowned. "Sorry, is that alright?"

Rose's expression softened, but the previous look burned itself on Ink Well's mind. "Yeah, of course it is. Who am I to stop you? You get out there and fly."

Ink Well took a hesitant step forward. "Are you sure? It's not like it's-"

Rose cut him off. "No, no, it's fine. You go have fun soaring. I'll just... go start on restocking or something." She walked from the front door to the back one, opening it. "I really shouldn't stop working just because I had a good day."

Ink Well walked after her, frowning. "I didn't mean it like-"

"I know you didn't. Now you go out and fly. Have a good time." The door slammed shut, leaving him alone in the shop.

Ink Well looked at the door, a puzzled and sad look on his face. "Good job Ink Well, wrong words again..." He walked out of the front door, closing it behind him to the slight tinkle of the shop bell. After a few steps, his face lit up and he stomped down a hoof. "I know! That's it! That'll be perfect!" He lifted off, flying quickly into the rapidly dimming light.

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As evening turned to night Ink Well hobbled upstairs, smiling playfully. Rose looked at him suspiciously. "Ink Well, what did you do?"

Ink Well looked hurt. "Now why would I do anything? I know I touched a sore nerve earlier, and I just thought of a wonderful gift to make it up to you. But if you don't want it..."

Rose raised an eyebrow. "Gift? I don't see a gift."

Ink Well smiled. "Of course not. It's too special to have me fumble it up the stairs. Come on down, it's waiting in the shop." He hovered in the air for a moment, grin only spreading before disappearing into the workroom. Rose followed, curiosity getting the better of her. She walked downstairs through the long quiet distillery, opening the door to her shop.

Behind the door stood Ink Well and a slightly annoyed Twilight Sparkle. As Rose entered the room, Twilight circled her, seeming to size her up. After a few moments of silent scrutiny, Twilight nodded. "Yes, I think I can do it. But I'm only doing this once."

Ink Well landed next to her, shaking her hoof. "Thank you so much. It means a lot."

Twilight let go of his hoof. "Just stick to your end of the bargain and everything will be fine."

Ink Well nodded. "Of course, of course. I'll be a witness against them in your trial."

"Good. Glad we're all clear." She looked at Rose. "You ready?"

Rose looked confusedly between the two ponies. "Um, ready for what? What are you two planning?"

Twilight braced herself on the floor. "Alright. This is going to feel a little weird, but you need to stay relaxed, okay? This takes a lot of energy and we only get one shot."

Confusion turned to worry on Rose's face. "One shot at what? What are you planning?"

Ink Well moved next to her, still smiling. "Don't worry. It's a surprise, and you're going to love it. Just close your eyes, everything will be alright."

"But-"

He placed hoof on her shoulder. "Trust me."

Rose looked into his eyes, drawing strength from his assurance. She nodded. "Alright go for it."

Ink Well smiled. "You won't regret it." He took a few steps away as Twilight's horn began to glow. Rose closed her eyes, trying to breathe deeply and keep calm as a tickle ran through her body, a bright light bleeding through her eyelids.

Ink Well's smile faded to awe as he watched the power emanating from Twilight's horn. Bright blue tendrils surrounded Rose, radiating light as they slowly enveloped her in a cocoon. The tendrils lifted her in the air, brightening as Twilight redoubled her efforts to maintain the spell. As he watched, the light brightened further, blinding him as he tried to look upon it, then to a point where it burned through his eye lids.

A flash, shooting almost solid beams of light from the windows and far into the Ponyville night. Ink Well opened his eyes, blinking as they slowly adjusted back to the normal lighting of the room. Twilight stood in the same place looking shaky and tired. Across from her, standing and blinking as her own eyes adjusted, was Rose, two magnificent butterfly wings adorning her back. They glittered spectacularly in the dim light, cream bodied with rose colored patches within and ivy green trim along the edges.



Everypony in the room was stunned with the beauty of the wings, including Rose herself. She tested them out carefully and giggling with glee as she rose in the air. "Oh, wow! This... this is amazing!" She fluttered over to Twilight. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Twilight shook her head, woozy. "Don't worry about it. But be careful, those are made of gossamer and morning dew, so they aren't very durable. But the spell lasts for three days, so enjoy them while you have them."

"I will!" As Twilight left, Rose flew around the room, glee on her face as she spun and danced in the air.

Ink Well stood at the door, watching her joyful flight. "Hey, I know you're having fun in this shop, but wouldn't you rather feel the wind in your mane?"

Rose came to a stop, hovering just before Ink Well. "What? Now? But it's dark out."

"That's the best time to fly. No pony else in the skies, cool air rushing past, stars above and clouds below..." He held out his hoof, smiling. "There's a storm over the Everfree Forest, and I was wondering if you'd give me the honor of your first flight."

Rose hesitated. The wings were one thing, but flying at night, especially over a storm, having never flown before... And over the Everfree Forest no less... But there was that smile Ink Well had on. It said that everything would be okay, if you just gave him a chance to make it so. Against that... what could a pony do?

She put her hoof in his, letting him lead her out of the door and into the street. The streets themselves were beautiful, bathed in the cool light of the moon and sparkling as the last of the magic seeped from the air. The lights of the houses in town painted warm mosaics on the land, turning even the most mundane aspect of the sight into a work of art. In this dark wonderland, Ink Well's wings slowly flapped, lifting him into the air for Rose to follow. A gentle breeze blew from the Everfree, rustling against her wings as she flapped them tentatively, slowly hovering from the ground. Slowly, gently, the two light ponies took to the skies, drifting against the currents of the air.



The wind carried the sound of thunder to the two ponies, causing Rose to grab Ink Well's hoof more tightly. Ink Well pulled his hoof away, flying slightly ahead and urging her onward. "Don't be scared, it's just a signal of rainfall to come. We have much bigger plans, a little thunder can't stall us now." He spun away before her, laughing and prompting her to join. She soon followed, the duo spinning and twirling through the skies of the outskirts of town.

Ink Well had been right, and Rose had no real words to describe what she was feeling now. Exhilarating was really the best word for it, just an unbridled joy that extended all around as the world opened up above and below, curving away to lands far beyond. Even though she wasn't moving fast, she felt like she could reach the stars from here, or just keep going forever, seeing everything the planet had to offer... It was wonderful, the urge to just go, the freedom given to her as the wind picked her up... Breathtaking...

The pair danced over treetops, pulling higher as the rains began to fall to weave and hop between the clouds. The moon moved slowly above them, a multitude of stars guiding its path. Amid it's light they came upon the roiling sea of fluff that made up the storm, lightning jumping between the clouds. Without a hint of reservation Ink Well came in close, landing on the moving wisps. Rose landed beside, careful as her hooves slowly sunk into the plush vapor beneath her, relieved to feel the odd sensation of the cloud holding her weight.

She marveled at the crispness of the stars twinkling above her, her breath glistening as it crystallized in the high altitude air. She turned to find Ink Well limping along the cloud ocean as though he were looking for something. She followed curiously as he disappeared down a slope, part of a basin in the clouds. A hole was formed beneath, giving a clear view of the untamed wilds of the Everfree forest as lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the treetops below.

Ink Well flew to a small cloud in the center of the basin, motioning for Rose to join him. As they stood, there, the storm winds increased, whipping about them in every way. Rose was worried, the rain whipping against her and stinging. But Ink Well held her steady with a wing, shielding the rain until the wind changed once more. Rain drops were pushed upwards,

swirling just above them before freezing and drifting around them in perfect snowflakes. The water splashed at their hooves and fur, quickly covering them with a thin layer of ice as the frost around them swirled with the air. At the center of the flurry of activity, the moonlight shone down through the ice crystals, breaking into a rainbow that surrounded them on all sides.

The earth pony stood enraptured, not willing to move lest the spell be broken. "This is beautiful... Far more so than I ever could have imagined..."

The pegasus beside her just nodded slightly, watching the clouds shift and the snow cease its movement, falling below the cloud layer once more. "This is what I'm challenged with getting across in ink. One moment that only a third of the ponies who ever live will be able to see, if they are lucky, and in the right place, and even then only if they really look..." He stood, the moon glistening off the frost what little there was of his mane. "I try to build in words a memory so strong that ponies across time will be able to experience it... And I don't think I'll ever truly succeed."

Rose turned to him, finding him looking down at her, a sadness in his eyes. As they stood in that moment, piercing winds blew from the clouds around them, chilling her to the bone. She took a step closer, moving against him as she shivered in the cold. "Thank you for giving me the chance to experience it."

His right wing folded around her, shielding her from the wind and knocking off part of the sheen of ice that had formed on her mane. "I couldn't let you not." He gave her a smile, the sadness in his eyes edged with a hope that hadn't been there before. "Everypony deserves a chance to fly." Their eyes locked, a common thought passing between them for just a moment. Ink Well leaned in...

And was caught off balance as the cloud dissipated beneath his cast. He slipped, tumbling into a shower of ice rain falling beneath. He pulled himself up from his dive, getting soaked as he made his way back up through the hole in the clouds and onto the moonlit mass above. Rose flew over to him, worry first on her face for the fall, but leaving quickly as she stifled a laugh. Ink Well stood shivering, soaked to the skin with all of his fur and what had grown back of his mane and tail pulled by the flight and frozen out behind him. As she laughed, he flew over, bumping her playfully with his side and crackling some of the ice from himself. "Yeah, yeah. Very funny. Now let's

get back to the house before I shiver apart the storm."

She nudged him back, a warmth seeming to emanate from within as she looked upon his frosted face. "Whatever you say, Ink Fell." Ink Well started laughing at himself before he'd even taken off, and the two ponies sailed back to Ponyville that night amidst the constant reverberations of mirth.

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Twilight awoke the next day to the sound of things being moved downstairs. "Spike sure is being loud this morning." She grumbled as she got up in the early morning light, brushing her hair and getting ready for the day.

A loud crash from below pulled her from her preparations. "What is he doing down there?" She went out the door to her room and down to the main area of the library, annoyed at her assistant. She turned into the room and said, "Spike, what's going on?"

As her eyes fell over the room and her jaw dropped. It was a mess, the books and decorations flung every which way, with the door to the basement ajar and papers trailing across the ground. The drawer on her desk was sitting upside-down in the center of the room, even the ink pot and quill thrown aside and spilled. She ran to the back room, seeing it in a similar state, the wood horse statue overturned and thrown next to two bundles of rope that sat in the corner.

At the very back of the room tossing books left and right were two strongly-built earth ponies with red masks over their mouths. As Twilight entered, they looked at her, startled by her presence. One of them made a move at her with a length of rope. While caught off guard by the aggressiveness, she reacted quickly, magicking the rope back around on him. As she did so, the partner tossed the book he was holding, hitting her on the head. As she was stunned, the two ponies bolted, shattering a window as they made their escape to the streets below. Twilight ran after them, looking out of the shattered window with a mixture of anger and confusion. "What was that all about?"

A muffled noise came from the two rope bundles in the corner. Twilight walked over, seeing green spines poking out of one. Worried, she untied

the bundles, releasing Spike and Owlowiscious from their bonds. Spike jumped up, hugging her tightly as Owlowiscious returned to his perch. "Oh Twilight! It was terrible! They came in while I was trying to make your breakfast and they just started ransacking the place! There wasn't anything I could do!"

Twilight hugged him back, shushing him. "There there, Spike, everything's okay now. Did you get any information from them? Who they are? Where they're from?"

Spike shook his head. "Nothing. I heard one of them say something about a file, but that's it."

Twilight stiffened where she stood. "A file?" Spike nodded. Twilight trembled with anger. "That is it! I'm not waiting any longer. Those ponies are getting what's coming to them!" She ran over to the writing desk, levitating a piece of parchment, a quill, and a new bottle of ink from where they were strewn around the room.

She put quill to parchment, preparing to write when the door opened, Rainbow Dash flying in. "They came back! Those ponies tried to attack me again!" Behind Rainbow walked in all of Twilight's friends, each looking equally angry.

"I found those meanies in the bakery! There was frosting everywhere! It was a waste of good sugar!"

"All of the animals warned me about them. I asked one of the bears to lead them away."

"My Boutique was in shambles! All of those dresses, torn and strewn about. It was the worst possible thing to ever happen!"

"They almost pinned us down at the Acres! Big Mac had to come in and show 'em what for! I tied 'em up, but they got out somehow."

Twilight frowned at her friends. "Yeah, they were rummaging through my house too. This is the last straw. I'm sending my letter to Princess Celestia. The Equirer is going to have the royal guard to deal with." The quill whipped across the paper, the letter forming rapidly beneath it. "With all of us testifying they're going to be shut down immediately. The Princess won't possibly let them continue even for a day after attacking her student!" The quill tapped the final punctuation in place, then the parchment folded itself

up and sealed itself. "Spike! Send it!"

Spike grabbed the paper, torching it with his fire breath and sending it out in a flurry of green fire and ash. "It's on its way!"

Twilight smiled to the rest of the ponies. "There we go! It looks like this is all finally over."

Pinkie bounced next to her. "I hope so! It's getting hard to stock all of these parties! So many ponies to feed!"

Rarity looked at her funnily. "Really? That's where your complaint came from? Not the mobs or the rumors, but the food?"

Pinkie looked at her like she was crazy. "The Equirer is a good magazine! Why would I be angry with its fans?"

Rarity looked about to let loose a storm when Applejack put a hoof on her shoulder. "Don't bother Rare. You know she's a few apples short of a bushel."

"Ow!" Pinkie jumped up, looking at her left front hoof. "Ow ow ow ow stop stop stop owwwwwww!" She hopped around the room holding up the hoof.

Fluttershy hovered behind her, worried. "Pinkie? What's wrong?"

She hopped in place, spinning round and round. "My knee is pinchy! My knee is really really pinchy! Owwww!"

Applejack's ears dropped. "Pinchy knee? Now? Here? Where's it at? When?"

Twilight raised an eyebrow at her friend. "Applejack, why are you so worried?"

Applejack grabbed a book and dropped down to the ground, holding it over her head. "A pinchy knee means there's a fright comin'! Don't you remember yer Pinkie senses?" The other ponies all looked worried as they recalled.

Twilight walked over to Pinkie, stopping her hopping with a hoof. "Pinkie, when is this scary thing going to happen?"

Pinkie concentrated for a moment, slowly moving her leg up and down and testing her knee. "Tonight, right near nightfall." She pulled her knee up again, keeping weight off of it. "And it's a big one!"

Twilight pushed the issue. "Who's it happening to? Where will it be?"

Pinkie shook her head. "I don't know! I can't figure out the center of it!"

Spike belched to the side of the room, a scroll forming from the spout of green fire that came out. Twilight floated it over, opening it. "It's from the Princess! 'Twilight, I have read your letter, and these are very serious accusations. We can not close them down just on your rumors unsubstantiated, so I sent the head of the Equirer a letter detailing yours and your six friend's complaints and letting them know that they will be under guard investigation until proven innocent or guilty. They sent back a letter saying they would try to settle your grievances with them on their own. I will contact you again when a decision has been made.'" She dropped the letter, looking worriedly at it. "That was not what I expected."

Applejack looked puzzled. "Wait, your six friends? Who's the sixth?"

"Ink Well." Said Twilight and Pinkie in unison. Twilight looked at her, confused. "How did you know it was him?"

Pinkie shook her head. "No! That's where the feeling is centered from! Something scary is going to happen to Ink Well!"

Twilight looked at Pinkie, then at the letter. After a few moments, she folded it up. "Looks like it's time for us to help him."

# Chapter 8

## Final Print

The sudden explosion of noise woke Rose and Ink Well from their slumber, causing each to fall from, and in Rose's case through, their bed. One moment the only noise was the breathing of the two ponies on their separate beds, Ink Well on the burgundy sheets and Rose on a brand new bed formed of the softest cloud, and the next moment held the flash and bang of magic and the chattering of seven voices all talking at once. Rose pulled herself up, her wings unfolding from where they'd crumpled beneath her and silencing the room with their beauty. As the other five ponies and the dragon in the room stared at Rose's wings, Ink Well turned to Twilight, yawning widely. "Good morning Ms. Sparkle. What brings you by so early?"

Twilight looked flustered from her effort. "Early? We've been trying to get here for hours, but the fanponies swarmed us when we tried to walk here, and losing them was difficult."

Ink Well examined her and the others, all of them a little worse for wear apart from Rarity, who managed to look pristine, and Fluttershy, who managed to somehow pull off the 'chased by fans' look. "Well you don't look too bad. But that doesn't answer my question."

Pinkie Pie was the first to snap out of the charm of the magic wings, appearing at Ink Well's side. "You need to watch out! My knee is pinchy!" She picked it up and showed it to him, waving her knee before his eyes.

Ink Well watched the leg move, no clue as to what was going on. "Um... I'm sorry?"

Pinkie put down her leg, jamming her face into his. "No! But you will be! Tonight, here!"

He backed up, removing himself from the cotton candy pink pony and nodding. "Uh-huh..." He looked towards the other ponies in the room, reaching for a lifeline. "Can somepony translate? I seem to be missing the important bit."

Pinkie jumped to his side, grabbing him and pulling him close. "You are! You need to get out of here now, before the knee strikes!" Ink Well strained under the vice like grip of Pinkie's hoof, his ribs aching from the pressure.

Applejack was his savior, pulling Pinkie off of him. "What she's tryin' to say is her Pinkie sense is goin' off, and it's goin' wild around you."

Ink Well rubbed his side. "Pinkie sense? What's a Pinkie sense?"

Twilight stepped next to him. "It's a supernatural reaction unique to Pinkie that can foresee the future. The pinchy knee variant indicated that something 'scary' is going to happen." He gave her a puzzled look, and she just shook her head. "Don't question it, it works too often to be coincidence."

Ink Well looked skeptical. "I see.. so why's it going off around me?"

Twilight took a step away, nervously kicking at the floor. "I may have caused it... Ponies broke into our home this morning, and since I finished my preparations I sent the Princess my list of complaints and my formal request for a trial and the closure of the Equirer. Here's the response." She magicked a scroll with the royal seal before him.

Carefully he unfurled it, curious eyes running over the Princess's writing. Halfway through he groaned, speaking to the paper. "Oh, don't send them a letter..." He looked up at Twilight. "Great, they know I'm here now, don't they?" Twilight nodded. "Didn't you send her your files? Some sort of proof?"

Twilight shook her head. "It's customary to send the information after the guards complete their investigation, so as not to bias them. It is important that the suspect is thought innocent until proven guilty."

Ink Well's brow furrowed. "What idiot came up with that rule? We have the proof! They ARE guilty!" He sighed. "Okay, some of the damage is done, but maybe we can close them down before whatever it is happens. Can you send them the proof from here?"



Twilight nodded. "I suppose I could... Spike, did you bring the file?"

Spike ran up behind her, holding the file in one hand and saluting with the other. "Yes ma'am! I kept it in my possession at all times, just as you asked!"

"Good, take a letter." Spike pulled out a quill and piece of parchment, preparing to write as Twilight dictated. "Dear Princess Celestia, though it goes against the customs of investigation, I am afraid that I must send you the information for the case now and ask that you take it into consideration that you close down the National Equirer's offices. If what I have found is true, then it is dangerous to allow them to continue to operate, even under Royal Guard watch. I eagerly await your response. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle." She watched Spike write down the last few words, looking to her for further instruction. She in turn turned to Ink Well. "Was that acceptable?"

Ink Well nodded. "Sounded good enough to me."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at him. "And are you sure about this? It's fairly severe to go against the customs of the court."

Ink Well shrugged. "It'd be more severe were something to happen. Send the file and let's get it over with."

Applejack looked at him worriedly. "That's all yer gonna do about this? A letter? You ain't preparing of freakin' out or nuthin'?"

Ink Well turned to her, a smirk on his face. "What am I going to prepare for? I have no clue what they'd try, if they were to try anything. And the last thing you want to do is panic. That never solves anything. Twilight, send that letter."

"You heard the colt, Spike." Twilight nodded to her assistant, who took the letter and the file and vaporized them with his dragon flame. The smoke remaining swirled from the room through a window, flying quickly towards Canterlot. "There we go. Message sent. If I weren't her student I don't think I'd be able to get away with this, I'll have you know."

Ink Well smiled. "I'm willing to take that risk. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go downstairs and work on some things. I'll be there if you need me." He limped over to the stairs, taking them carefully down and out of the sight of the other ponies, most of whom stared at him in disbelief.

Rarity was the first to say something. "Is he crazy? We come here with a warning and he just brushes it off like it's nothing. He doesn't even have the decency to be scared at the right time."

Rainbow hovered above her, looking a bit happier with the turn of events. "Hey, at least he has the right idea. Instead of waiting around for the guards, we push a little and get results! That's more like it!"

Applejack pushed up her hat, looking up at Rainbow, then eyeing the stairwell. "Yeah, well, you weren't one to go against bending the rules. I think he's pushin' things."

Pinkie sat on the floor, thinking. "He didn't listen to my warning..." She popped into the air. "Oh! Maybe I should have come of with a song! That always gets everypony's attention!" She then spent the next few minutes hopping around and trying out lyrics. "They're coming to get you! It's gonna be a zoo! And if I were you, running is what I'd do! No, too many Oo's, needs more Ee's..."

Twilight and Fluttershy both looked at the stairs, Twilight in continued disbelief and Fluttershy in concern. "Oh, he really should take this more seriously..."

Twilight huffed. "After all the trouble to get here, he goes and asks me to blow off Canterlot Court tradition. Oh, the Princess is going to kill me..."

Rose watched the assembled ponies for a little while, apparently forgotten in the room once again, before clearing her throat, drawing their attention. "Since you are all here, feel free to make yourselves at home. Again. I've got to get to work restocking from the big rush yesterday, but I don't think you need me up here, do you?" The girls each shook their heads, apart from Pinkie who was far too distracted with her lyrics to notice Rose had asked a question. "Alright. Have a good time. If you need anything, you know where I'll be." With considerably less attitude than Ink

Well had managed to put into his limping, Rose made her own way down the stairs, leaving the six ponies and dragon to their own devices.

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Ink Well sat at the work desk, pencil in mouth and an unsure look on his face. Beneath him was a piece of paper, the pencil wavering slowly above it. Rose walked in, seeing him concentrating, and was about to ask about it before stopping herself. With the concentration going into this, it had to be important. Carefully the pencil hit the paper, pressing in and dragging over it. Ink Well looked down at the page, a smile edging his mouth as he repeated the process, faster this time. When that was successful, he continued, writing across the page at an ever increasing pace until he flew down the page, filling it in mere moments.

When he hit the bottom, he looked up to see Rose watching him, a smile on her face. He put down the pencil and held up the paper, grinning widely. "Would you look at that? I'm back! Just needed a few days to toughen up, I guess."

Rose read down the paper. The writing was messy and shaky, but it was definitely there. "You just push yourself too hard." She walked into the room, starting up the machines halfheartedly. "Ugh, there always seems to be a problem, doesn't there? And when the bed was so comfy too..."

Ink Well nodded, leaning back in the chair. "Ah, cloud beds... they've got me through many a bad time, and inspired me to quite a few stories. It really is a shame you only have three days with those beauties on your back, there's so much more to wings than flight, it's going to be hard cramming that in."

Rose sighed. "Especially if today is going to be taken up by something scary. Though I've already experienced so much more than I ever thought I would..." She looked over at Ink Well, whose smile had faded. "You're not worried about the knee, are you?"

Ink Well's head jerked towards her, like he'd forgotten she was there. "What? Oh! Nah, not in the least. We're taking care of it, no problems here, no way. I mean, it's just Pinkie Pie. She's just being weird, she does that. I haven't known her for long and I already know that."

Rose shrugged as she prepped a machine. "I don't know. Her Pinkie Sense seems to be fairly accurate from what I can tell. It's one of those things that you learn to follow when you live out here."

Ink Well laughed, brushing it off. "Well, yeah, but it's a superstition thing. It's not real, right?" His smile started to look forced, a little uncertainty in his eyes. "...right?"

As they flew last night, Rose felt a confidence returning to Ink Well that had been missing since the accident, but now it was waning. He was trying to put up a strong front, but he needed support or it was going to crumble again. She nodded. "Right. Not real at all. Nothing to worry about. You've already got this taken care of with your challenging the system." She smiled playfully as she said this, waving her hooves around like she was telling a ghost story. "You're shaking the very foundations of society! It's the end of an era! Run, you weak-willed ponyfolk, from the change caused by the mighty Ink Well! It will be anarchy under his pen!"

Ink Well walked over to her, bumping her with a hoof. "Knock it off. I'm no world shaker, just a pony with a bit of common sense. You'd be amazed how rare that is."

Rose nodded, going over in her head the moment when she'd first acquired it in front of Rarity's Boutique. "It's a gift, given out by those who have it and only then to those who listen." She looked over at Ink Well, seeing him thinking deeply about something, a worried expression on his face. She decided to change the subject. "Hey, how about instead of moping over there you do something useful? I could use a hoof setting up the stills."

Ink Well looked puzzled. "Isn't restocking the store what you were doing when I left yesterday?"

Rose shook her head. "Nah, I wasn't in the right mood. Any scent I made would have come out a little sour. I was reading just before you came in."

"Ah." Ink Well's eyes glanced at the paper on his desk, then the stairs of the room before returning to her standing by the big ornate brass

machine, his emerald eyes taking in the options. He shrugged. "Sure, why not? Never hurts to learn something new."

Rose's smile brightened. "Excellent. Let's get started."

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The two of them worked downstairs, Rose putting Ink Well through the ropes of how the machines worked and how perfumes were made, and for his part Ink Well was very interested, taking in what she said and trying his best to operate them when prompted. After her perfume finished, Rose offered to let Ink Well try a hoof at making his own, letting him put it together while she finished the final touches on what she'd created.

Upstairs the other ponies entertained themselves, Rarity and Pinkie finding a few board games in a cupboard and playing those while Applejack kept the antsy Rainbow busy with small physical challenges. Twilight went over Rose's bookcase, not finding anything she hadn't read but still finding something to take her mind off the rest of the world. Fluttershy came downstairs for a little while, but seeing Ink Well and Rose busy, went back up, instead spending her time talking with Spike, who seemed rather bored.

As the afternoon began to deepen, Ink Well stood next to the mixer, waiting for the machine to finish. He watched the timer ticking away, unable to help but tap a hoof excitedly on the ground. "Huh, I never knew waiting for a machine could be so agonizing! How do you do it?"

Rose smiled. "You just have to be patient. You can't rush the machine, especially at this stage. Combine them too fast and the scent will dissipate, too slowly and the notes will be all wrong. Just let it do its work. It's only a few minutes from completion."

"A few minutes? It feels like I've been by this brass beast for hours." He looked at the still, a random thought sparking in his head. "Did you know that brass is a special metal when it comes to magic?"

Rose raised an eyebrow. "Oh? How so?"

“It acts like a mirror, rebounding magical energies off of it. I learned about it when I did a story about UFOs far in the north. I went out to this monastery where unicorn monks sat inside a giant cone of brass pointed to the sky, searching for thaumatergical readings on other planets.” He tapped the machine, smiling at his golden reflection. “It’s not something most ponies think about, but unicorns actually have a lot of trouble with trinkets or instruments with too much of the metal in them, often needing a different focal point all together if they want to use magic.”

Rose tilted her head, thinking about it. “Huh. You know, that probably explains why the Canterlot stills are all silver. I think the entire place was run by unicorns.”

“Makes sense to me.” Ink Well turned around, seeing her fit perfectly in her surroundings of pipes and brass fixtures between these machines, lights reflecting and playing strangely off of them and giving everything a warm glow despite their harsh nature. As he waited, a question came to mind. “So how did you end up a perfumer? Why do you do it?”

Rose looked stumped when the question hit her, like it was something she hadn’t considered before. “How did I end up...? Well... I always liked flowers and stuff, but it didn’t really hit me until the class trip to Canterlot. While the others all went off to play in the flower garden, I found myself drawn from the smells emanating from the Royal Perfumery. As I wandered between the giant silver distilleries with their intricate, beautiful designs, one particular scent swirled around me... To this day, I remember it, so beautiful, but with such subtleties and hidden notes that its complexity still astounds me.” She stared at her distillery, smiling as she was enraptured by the memory. “I was entranced, just stuck sniffing the air like a dog... Next thing I knew a Royal Guard was escorting me outside, still lost in my own world. I was led to everypony else in the garden, the whole class laughing at me when I showed up under watch, and I was told not to wander off again. I tried to enjoy the flowers myself, but... I couldn’t anymore. Their scent was nothing compared to what I’d just experienced. And it was then that it hit me. Flowers are beautiful, but they are temporary. Two days, a week tops, then the flowers wilt and the smell is gone. But smell is such a strong sense! That scent from the perfumery will be with me forever. Every truly powerful memory a pony has is linked to every sense, smell included, so I’m trying to give ponies a memory they’ll have forever.” She finished her story, returning to the real world slowly a smile on her

face. She looked over at Ink Well, blushing when she saw him smirking at her. "What?"

"And you said I was the corny one." A buzzer on the machine went off, the blending of the scents complete. Excited, Ink Well slipped over to the hatch, flipping it open and hurriedly removing the beaker full of his concoction. As it was moved from the collector and into the open air, a stench resembling rusty oranges seeped in moss exploded forth, stunning the two occupants of the room. Ink Well found himself trying to run, throwing the container into the air where it tumbled in slow motion. Thinking quickly, Rose leaped forward, barely managing to stop it from shattering on the stone floor. She flew over to the stoppers, corking the vial and freeing the room from extended exposure to the stench.

Her eyes watering she ran over to the ventilation fans, tuning them on and opening the vents as wide as possible. Slowly the room cleared while she walked over to the stairs, coughing away the smell that still burned her nose. "Geez! What did you put in there?"

Ink Well extricated himself from the tangle of pipes he'd hid behind to avoid the smell, his own eyes watering. When he was finally free he turned to Rose looking embarrassed. "Well... I was trying to make it smell like the storm over the Everfree, so there was a rusty nail for that metallic smell from the lightning strike, citrus for the energy from it, and the mustiest chunk of wood I could find for the forest. I thought it was just as easy as putting them all together..."

Rose looked worriedly from the murky bottle to her machines, starting to realize the work that would have to go into cleaning them. With that description she was surprised he she hadn't heard more banging from them. She sighed. "That's an... interesting way of thinking about it, but it's not quite that simple. The subtleties of smell are powerful, and getting all the notes correct would be... Well, I'm not even sure I could do that!" She looked at him looking down at the floor like a wounded puppy and stopped. "But that was a valiant first try! If I went for that on my first go, I wouldn't have done any better. I had to start a lot easier: just a simple floral base. I'll let you take a wild stab at the flower." Ink Well still didn't look too happy, so she decided to change the subject, putting down the offending beaker. "Hey, we'll try again, and I'll help you out this time. It'll turn out great!"

Ink Well shook his head, distracted. "No, I'd just mess it up again. Thanks for the offer. I'm not thinking straight anyway... Maybe I should..." He limped quickly to the stairs, looking sadly up them, then back at her.

Rose shooed him off with a hoof, turning back to the machines. "Go on. You've every right to be worried."

Ink Well nodded thankfully before hobbling up the stairs, finding the six ponies above huddled around a scroll Twilight was floating between them. She glanced at him, smiling and motioning him over. "Ink Well, I think your plan worked." She floated the letter over to him, letting him read it himself.

"My Dearest Twilight,

Though what I read troubles me, you were right in going against tradition to send this. My only question is why did you not send it sooner?" He smiled. "What'd I tell ya? 'At your suggestion we shall indeed be shutting down the National Equirer's offices. By the time you get this, they are to cease operating pending further investigation. Hopefully this will put your mind at ease.'" He moved from the letter, sidling next to Pinkie. "Hey, is your knee still pinching?"

Pinkie lifted up her left leg, moving it around and testing it, then jumped up, placing every hoof bur the front left in the air and balancing carefully. From here, she shook her head, limbs still sticking in all directions. "Nope. Not a bit!"

All the ponies looked relieved, none more than Ink Well. He grinned happily. "There, everything will turn out all right. Just a touch of damage mitigation and all is well."

Pinkie hopped up from where she was balancing, landing in a cartwheel that traveled across the floor. "Whee! You know what this calls for? A PARTY! Meet me at Sugarcube Corner in five minutes!"

Ink Well looked at her, confused. "Five minutes? Like from right now?"

"Yup! Had to give myself some set up time!" She rolled down the stairs, disappearing below.



Rainbow Dash shrugged as Pinkie left. "Yeah, I could go for a party."

Twilight stopped her. "Hold on, we're going to teleport. We don't want the town down on us, right?"

Rainbow looked annoyed. "Come on! Pinkie just strolled out of here! Why can't we? They'll all be at the party anyway!"

Fluttershy looked nervous at the thought. "She wouldn't do that, would she?" She looked at her friend's faces and saw their blank looks. "She would..."

Twilight sighed, exasperated. "Fine. We'll walk. I didn't have any plans today anyway. Spike, go help Owlowiscious clean up, then both of you come over, okay?"

Spike looked disappointed, but gave a half-hearted salute anyway. "You got it." With that, he too exited down the stairs.

Rarity watched him go, frowning. "Twilight, darling, you treat him too hard. Let him come to the party. He shouldn't be left out."

Twilight waved it off. "He's not being left out, he's letting Owlowiscious join in. The clean up should be done by now anyway." She walked over to the stairs, the others following her, leaving Ink Well grinning stupidly by himself in the center of the room.

Fluttershy, the tail of the group, stopped at the top of the stairs. "Are you coming Ink Well?"

He nodded. "Sure thing, I'll swing by soon. Start it without me." She smiled, then went down, passing Rose as she walked up.

Rose watched Fluttershy walk past. "Where is everypony off to?"

"Pinkie is throwing a party. You're welcome to come by." Fluttershy continued out of the shop, leaving Rose and Ink Well together.

Rose walked up next to him, crossing her hooves and leaning against the table, her wings spreading effortlessly behind her. "So, I take it the news went well if they're throwing a party for it."

Ink Well nodded, still grinning. "Yep. The Equirer's officially shut down. Nothing bad is going to happen today."

Rose smiled herself at the news. "That's great! You gonna join the party?"

"Yeah, in a moment. I'm just... I'm going to enjoy the moment. I was a little worried."

Rose raised an eyebrow, smiling playfully. "Oh? I couldn't tell."

He hopped onto the cloud bed, breathing in deeply the light floral scent hiding in the room. "But now I'm walking on air! Life is good."

He turned around to see Rose smiling too, relief on her own face. Unfortunately, his eye was drawn rather quickly from this by the red smoke appearing in the air, a piece of paper fluttering to the ground. Puzzled, he flew over to it, picking it up. It was clean and businesslike, a note with writing not fancy, not flourishing, merely crisp and clear.

As he read it, Ink Well's face went from soft and relieved to cold and hard, the paper slipping back to the floor where he stood. Rose walked up, reading the note where it sat on the floor. 'You've disturbed the serpent's nest, and she is angry.' Rose looked over at Ink Well, whose face was locked in fear. "Ink Well? You okay?"

He shook his head slowly, not looking at her. "No, no I'm not. I'm not sure whether to run or throw up..." His visibly shook where he stood, causing Rose to slowly raise a hoof to calm him down. As it connected with his shoulder, Ink Well's gaze shot to the stairs. "We have to warn the others. I've made a terrible mistake."

"What? What do you mean? You stopped the Equirer, didn't you?"

“Well yeah, but so what if I stopped the face? The shadow moves freely either way, and that shadow is going to strike here! I'm the reason the knee was pinchy, not Twilight! I made it worse.”

Rose put herself in front of his face, trying to calm him down. “What are you talking about? What shadow? Why are you so freaked?”

“The Enforcers! Viper is leading them back here. 'The serpent's nest'?” He pointed to his stitches, then to the bandages and burns on him. “They did this to me, I don't want her anywhere near Ponyville. We have to warn the others. We have to warn everypony...”

Rose saw both the fear in his eyes and how serious he was, and nodded. “Okay. Let's go.”

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As soon as they exited the shop they found the town in chaos. Panicked ponies ran in every direction, screaming in fright. Ink Well and Rose were buffeted by the crowd as they made their way against the flow to Sugarcube Corner, meeting the others out front. Rose walked up to Twilight, yelling to be heard over the screams around them. “What's going on?”

Twilight shook her head. “I don't know! We just heard the screaming and came out!”

Fluttershy pointed to the center of town. “That might be why.” Spiraling slowly towards the sky was thick black smoke, completely out of place in the beautiful blue sky. Everypony hurried off towards it, those that could fly by wing and the rest by hoof. Rainbow was the first to find the source, pointing the others to it: the Town Hall. The entire building was an inferno, smoke and flames billowing from all the windows.

As it came into sight for Ink Well, memories flooded unbidden to his head of his own home collapsing around him, the heat and the ash burning his lungs once more. He froze in mid air, falling from the sky. Air rushed past him and he urged his wings to flap, but nothing would move, muscles locked despite the rapidly approaching ground and mind miles from the scene.

His fall suddenly stopped, Rose catching him mere feet from the hard ground. "Ink Well, are you okay? Snap out of it!" He couldn't respond, still staring at the building, the fear on his face impossible to miss. She landed him nearby, trying to shake him out of it.

In front of the Hall, a tan earth pony with a grey mane and yellow glasses ran back and forth, calling to the ponies running away. "Please! Don't panic everypony! We need to stop the fire before it spreads!"

As she called out, Twilight and the others ran up, watching the inferno above. "Mayor! We're here! How can we help?"

The Mayor looked at her, relief on her panic stricken face. "Oh thank goodness Twilight. We need all the water we can get and nopony has been listening, they're all too scared."

Twilight nodded, looking determined. "Don't worry Mayor, I'm on it." She turned around, horn glowing and causing a similar glow to appear around her throat. When she spoke, her voice was amplified, bouncing from building to building and throughout town. "Everypony listen up! It's not going to do you any good to run! We need to get organized! Weather ponies! You go with Rainbow and get as much rain as you can, douse the fire from above. Everypony else follow Applejack and Pinkie Pie, create a bucket chain from the river and the lake." Ponies stopped in the street, their fear momentarily overtaken by their confusion. Twilight let out an exasperated sigh. "Let's move it ponies, time is of the essence!"

Slowly the ponies mobilized, a leader and a task pushing them from panic into action. As the others went off to douse the fire, Twilight ran over to Rose and Ink Well, taking the break to talk to them. "Come on, we need your help too. We need everypony's help at this."

Ink Well remained locked in place, just slowly shaking his head as the rest of his body trembled in terror. Rose looked at her, shrugging. "I don't know what happened. He just froze up. I think the fire's getting to him." She tapped him on the shoulder again, seeming to get no response.

Twilight watched him for a little while, worry showing on her face as she weighed the effort and the pony before her. She sighed. "Okay, take

him somewhere else, there's not a lot I can do for him right now. When I see Nurse Redheart I'll send her your way." A loud crack came from within the building, fire pouring from a hole that appeared in the roof. Twilight spun back around, seeing the water buckets already arriving and a few small clouds forming. She ran back over, directing the flow of water and leaving Rose and Ink Well alone again.

Slowly Rose stood Ink Well up, pushing him and guiding him through the rushing ponies with buckets and watering cans and away from the noise of the fire and the brigade springing up to stop it. As they turned the corner and headed into a guarded alleyway, a group of unicorns ran up the street past them, each levitating a garden hose that trailed and snaked behind them. Mid way through the alley Ink Well locked up, refusing to move any further despite Rose's urging and nudging. Unable to get him to go, she sat him down, brow furrowed as she thought of ways to wake him up. "Come on Ink Well, come back to me. I don't know what unhappy place you've gone to in your head, but you need to walk out of it."

Ink Well still remained in his stupor, worrying Rose beyond belief as she heard yells coming from the Town Hall. "Umm... Um... Hey, once this is all over, we're going to go for a nice flight, alright? That storm is still swirling over the Everfree and last night was just so magical, I would love to see if we could top it tonight. But you have to snap out of it, okay?" She grabbed Ink Well's face, forcing him to look her in the eyes. Still the look was glazed, his mind not at all with the rest of him. Angrily, Rose let go, stomping down the alley. "I don't know if you think that this is your fault or you're in the building or what, but you have to snap out of it! Our fellow ponies are out there risking their flanks to keep that building standing, and you're just sitting here out of it. Come to your senses!" Even this did not work, Ink Well still trembling in whatever world he was in.

Disheartened, Rose drooped to the ground, sitting dejectedly before him. "Come on Ink Well... It isn't real. This isn't like you... It's very selfish what you're doing here, and I know you don't intend to, but we need you... I need you..." She sat there looking at him, pained that nothing she did was working, and ran over what to do next. The nurse was nowhere to be seen, and Ink Well obviously needed some sort of help, but it seemed to be out of her reach, and in the distance she could hear more voices calling out, more pegasi rushing overhead with each passing minute. Right here was safe,

the alley at least still and shielded. But she couldn't just leave him here in this state... Something had to be done. She had to help out.

She made up her mind. With a sigh of resignation, Rose stood up. "I'm sorry, but the other ponies need me." She looked at where he was, trembling and frightened and lost of his senses in an alleyway, and couldn't keep the tears from her eyes. "I know you'll be alright, I'll tell the nurse where you are, and I'll come back as soon as everything is done. Please be safe. Please come back... You can fight this. I'm waiting for you." Before she left, she tried to set him up to be as comfortable as possible, the few things in the alley further keeping him safe from any possible intrusion or falling ash. She then stood up, flying out to join the others in stopping the flames.

---

Fire billowed around him, smoke clouding his vision, its dark thickness and heat burning his lungs on every inhale. He tried to move, struggling as he found his hooves bound behind him, each tug against the bonds sending pain shooting through a fresh wound in his side. Slowly the swirls in the smoke caused it to thin, allowing him to recognize his own bedroom as the conflagration spread. His mind raced, one thing on it. 'Escape.'

Slowly he repeated the process from before, rocking the chair back and forth until he could stand on his own two hooves. But the chair seemed made of lead, the rocking doing little but straining his muscles. Part of him demanded he give up, but a small voice, barely a smoky whisper in his head kept urging him on. 'Come on you coward, run. Move.' With a herculean effort, Ink Well managed to tip the chair forward, balancing on his lower hooves as the first obstacle was passed.

'Go! You must be free!' Urged the voice, Ink Well carrying the weight behind him as he trudged forward, legs buckling from the pressure. The flames slowly rose, licking at his hooves.

---

Rose landed at the Town Hall to find the chains working surprisingly well. Despite all the different ponies working, almost half of them not actual

members of Ponyville, Twilight managed to whip them into a cohesive team. Still, she seemed to be highly stressed as she ran between groups, talking to whoever the spokespony was at the time. Rose landed behind her, the heat and the breeze from the fire drying out her magical wings. "Twilight! How can I help?"

Twilight turned around, hair a mess as she looked over a clipboard that floated in front of her. She sat down in the middle of the street, smacking her forehead with a hoof. "No! No! NO! The numbers aren't adding up! We should have almost a third more ponies here if the whole town and all the visitors helped! Where are the others?" She looked up to see Rose landing and smiled. "Oh good! One more off the list. Did Redheart ever meet you? Or Tenderheart?"

Rose shook her head. "No, nopony came, but I had to help out. What can I do?"

Twilight looked at her, assessing her in an instant before making her decision. "You need to join in with the lake chain. There's a fair bit of difficult terrain that we really need fliers to speed up."

Rose nodded, taking to the skies and following the trail of ponies toward the lake.

Twilight looked at her clipboard, flipping over the pages and getting increasingly agitated. "That's another two ponies missing from the chain that's unaccounted for! Where are they all going? Spike! Can you and Owlow..." She looked around, only noticing that her assistant was still missing in all of the commotion. "Darn it Spike, not you too! Where are you?"

---

The walk from one end of the low-ceilinged room to the other had never felt this long before. Perhaps it was the weight, or the smoke, or the blood slipping from his side and splattering the chains around his waist, but Ink Well was ready to collapse, and the frame on the wall seemed no closer than it had been a hundred steps ago. Flames licked at his hooves and fur, burning deeply every time they did and slowly creeping up his legs. Despite the tears in his eyes from the smoke, he could see his off-white fur being

rapidly replaced by the crimson red of burned flesh. His body quaked with wooziness and fatigue, wanting above all else to collapse and end it all.

And still inside came the little voice, a wraith-like growl now stronger than before. 'Fly! Escape! The flames are nothing for the darkness that follows them! You are a coward! Flee! Never stop!' With each yell of a whisper the voice gave him power, driving him to continue though his body wanted to give way. Under its suggestion he made it to the hole in the floor, teetering as he looked into the roiling inferno below. 'Go! Fly free!' Urged the voice.

\*It isn't real.\* came another, much softer voice, the sweet tones inaudible over the roar of the fire and the words of the other. Ink Well's ear flicked just for a moment, confusion touching his brow for just a second.

'Jump!' The command was yelled through his head, his hoof acting of its own accord and stepping into the pit, sending him tumbling into the fires below.

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Twilight ran between the pegasi, calling up to the skies. "Can you move the water any faster? Just a little more and we could keep the roof from reigniting! Get that done and the rest will be a snap!"

Rainbow zoomed down, hovering before her. "We're going as fast as we can, but ponies keep turning up missing. I'm already running triple time trying to cover the others!"

Twilight frowned, quill ready to mark down the change on her clipboard. "Missing? Who is? Where are they going?"

Rainbow shook her head, visibly angry. "I don't know, but I'm going to kick their flank when I find out! We're only at a third our normal numbers and dropping fast. Wherever those chickens are going, they better hope I don't find them." With that she shot back into the sky, rainbow trail evaporating behind her in the heat.



Twilight looked down at her clipboard, noting the ever increasing amount of missing ponies, now almost half the town. "This isn't good. Whatever is going on, it needs to stop and fast."

---

Ink Well landed hard on the floor below, the crushing weight of the chair and chains pinning him to the ground. Through the ring of fire slowly encroaching on him he could see the front door. He feebly tried to reach out a hoof, but all was still chained, the chair intact despite the fall. His vision weakened as he sat there, smoke and heat and weight finally getting to him.

Now a roar, the burnt voice in his head urged on. 'Move! Up! Go! Escape!' it chanted, and with each word a little more energy flowed into him. Unknown sources of power unlocked within his muscles, causing him to slowly crawl himself from the pile of weight and chains. He wrenched himself free, chains slipping off and chafing, pulling at his burned body before simply falling away. As the chant reached a fever pitch he was freed, landing in a heap among the burned floorboards of his house.

\*We need you.\* The other voice came again, speaking steadily and ringing around him with its tone. As he heard it, Ink Well pushed himself from the floor, a soothing calm seeming to wash over him amidst the fire and fear within. He stood up, the fires seeming not to touch him as he stood within his collapsing house. \*I need you.\* The fatigue seemed to leave his body as he walked towards the door, the fire's roar barely a murmur in his ears. As he reached the door, he looked outside. \*Just walk out of there.\* A pony stood, waiting, inviting, offering him a hoof in support.

A strong updraft brightened the flames, illuminating Viper before the house, a twisted, wicked grin on her face. All at once the fire returned, burning him once more to his waist and still spreading. With it returned the dark voice, a scream in his head. 'Run! She is too strong!' Ink Well placed his hooves to his ears, trying to dampen the noise engulfing him, his head throbbing from the screams. 'Move! Escape! Run! Death!' One hoof to his head and fire catching on every hair on his body, he tried to turn back into the house.

A horrible crash, falling debris, and the house was gone.

---

Part of the roof collapsed on the Town Hall, causing a couple ponies to scatter from within the building. Most of the fire was gone from outside, but within there were still large problem pockets that had to be solved by the bucket chains working at double speed. "Is everypony alright? Did we all get out?" A quick head count confirmed that nopony had been trapped inside and the buckets resumed their motions. Twilight looked haggard, but was glad that it was almost over.

As she moved to check on the other side of the building, Pinkie galloped up to her. "Twilight! We've got a problem!" Seeing that Pinkie wasn't bouncing, Twilight knew it had to be important. "What? What is it?"

"We've got four ponies missing from the chain! They were here all the way through and now they're just gone! All at the same time!"

"What? Four? Were they all together?"

"No, they were all in different areas. Do you think something got them?"

"I'm starting to think so... Just try to fill in the holes as best as you can. We're almost done." Pinkie ran back off to her group, leaving Twilight to look at her list. The numbers were starting to look dismal. She turned back to the burning building, the smoke much thinner than it had been to start, and frowned. "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

---

All was fire. Everything around and including Ink Well was completely engulfed in flames. With every breath, his throat burned a little more, shortly making it impossible to even breathe. He knelt before the door, the only recognizable thing, wings outspread, seemingly unburnt by sheer force of will. Screaming in his head came the dark voice, so loud it seemed it would burst from its confines. 'DEATH! RUN YOU IDIOT! ESCAPE!' He tried to remove a hoof, reaching for the door to open it. As he did, the voice's strength redoubled, sending him back to the floor with its cries. 'DANGER! TOO WEAK! RUN!'

Ink Well's hooves squeezed his head tightly, trying to keep the voice out. As the agony built up until all he could do was scream himself.

\*You can fight this\* Came the other voice, resonating throughout him. As it did, the pain dulled once more, everything but him and the door disappearing. His resolve strengthened, allowing him to stand. When he did, he looked out the window to see Viper waiting once more.

His resolve failed. "I can't. She's too strong." Everything came back, the noise deafening and the fire engulfing him completely, only the tips of his wings remaining somehow untouched. Still the fire pushed on him further, sucking the very air from him with its heat.

\*Come to your senses. This is not real.\* Ink Well felt the fires, felt the burning, the cut in his side, the fatigue from the chains... they all weighed on him, every sensation purely real. He shook his head, trying to focus on the soothing voice even as everything screamed at him. Just a hint, just a hope that this was fake! He collapsed to the floor, unable to take it any longer.

Lilacs. As he curled up on the ground, the soothing smell of lilacs touched his nose, completely foreign in the swirling fires. Slowly the pain dissipated, the noises fading to nothing. The fire receded, first his wings, then his body, and finally his surroundings slowly became hospitable, the charred rubble cool and dead. As the fire left, he stood, his injuries changing from the burns of his mind to the bandages of reality, and he found himself staring through a doorway once more. No longer did it lead to his old lawn, but instead it was Ponyville, with Rose outside offering a hoof, a smile on her face.

Smiling back, Ink Well accepted, walking with her into the Ponyville air. As he did, the land faded, leaving only Ink Well and Rose floating in a sea of clouds. The soothing voice returned, coming from the pony before him, its original source. "Now snap out of it. I'm waiting for you."

Ink Well found himself laying in the alleyway, nose pressed to his hoof where the strong smell of lilacs still imbued the bandages. He pushed himself up, finding it surprisingly easy after the ordeal he'd just experienced, his body full of energy and his mind sharp. He could see the

last vestiges of smoke coming from the Town Hall, so he took to the air, finally ready to do his part.

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When Ink Well landed, the fire was put out, the few smoldering embers that remained being kicked aside and carefully doused. The Town Hall was scorched and charred, but most of it stood, just two large chunks missing from the ceiling. In front of the building the Mayor was avidly shaking Twilight's hoof, thanking her for her skills in getting the fire taken care of. Twilight herself looked a bit frazzled, but was otherwise happily accepting her thanks. Around them was a ring of ponies, each with small bits of ash in their fur and each glad at mostly preserving the building. Ink Well landed to the edge of the crowd next to a beautiful pair of butterfly wings. He tapped the owner on the shoulder, causing the tired Rose to turn. He smiled at her. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

Rose smiled back, joy radiating from her eyes. "Not at all. You're right on time."

They both turned to the front as the last ember was put out, Rainbow Dash waving down to Twilight, who pulled her hoof from the Mayor's and turned to the crowd. "Well done everypony! The town is saved! Now if you could, in an orderly fashion kindly-"

"Twi! Twi! Where's Redheart, we got an emergency!" Applejack galloped through the crowd, making her way to her friend. "Big Mac's hurt!"

Twilight's head snapped to Applejack, disbelief on her features. "What?!"

"Me 'n Big Mac were pullin' together a few more buckets a water for safety when we got jumped by some ponies with red scarves! We managed to fight 'em off, but Big Mac was hit bad. You seen Redheart?"

"No, I haven't. I haven't seen her since-"

"Is there a doctor in town?!" A silver furred unicorn ran into the crowd, panic and worry wreathing his features. A murmur ran through the crowd,

with him at the center. "There are four ponies that look like they got beat up real bad in a house back there! Does anypony know where the doctor is?"

Twilight turned to face the stallion, trying to keep him calm. "She appears to be missing right now, but as soon as we find her we'll be sure to-

"Eek!" Yelped Fluttershy as she backpedaled from the door of a nearby building. She bolted behind Twilight, putting her friend between her and the offending opening.

Twilight looked down at her hiding friend. "What happened?"

"I heard some groaning, so I looked inside the house and I... I... I think I found the nurses." Twilight ran through the crowd, a path opening up so that she could look inside the building. A pile of ponies lay within, most of the quiet or moaning slightly, all of them showing bruises and wounds as though their heads had been struck. Laying in the center of them were the nurses Redheart and Tenderheart, completely still apart from their breathing.

Twilight turned back to see the crowd of ponies trying to peer into the house, seeing curiosity turning to fear on the more forward faces. "Uh... Applejack, why don't you-?"

"FIRE!" From the other side of the Town Hall came the cry, Lily and Daisy running away, pointing behind them. "The residential section is on fire! Help! It's going to spread!"

The crowd began to panic, a chaotic tangle of bodies as they tried to stampede in every direction at once. Twilight and her friends stood in the center, trying to calm everypony down to little effect. Fear was setting back in, and with the fatigue from their previous efforts, nopony was willing to stop or listen.

Amid the cacophony of screams and running hooves, a metallic banging went up, loud and steady and piercing over the entire crowd. Slowly it drew their attention, all eyes turning to the source of the sound. Standing at the front doors to the town hall, braced hoof banging against a metal fastener, was Ink Well. He had on a serious look, causing those who

looked at him to quiet down. When the noise was low enough, he began to speak, voice projecting clearly over the amassed crowd.

“Calm down everypony and think clearly! Panicking will not solve anything, it's exactly what they want us to do. Ponyville is under attack.” He could feel the crowd getting restless, mouths opening to ask for answers, and he cut them off. “They are called the Enforcers, and all I can say for sure is they mark themselves with red kerchiefs to mask their faces. They are a highly trained force, and I know that I am the reason they are attacking.” He could feel the anger surging through the crowd and again cut them off before they could go too far. “You may do whatever you want to me after tonight. Run me out on a rail, banish me, beat me, I don't care, but right now, we need to work together or the whole town is going to be destroyed.”

“But we're not from this town!” Came an enraged call from the mob. “Why would they attack us?”

“Because you're here. They don't care who gets hurt at this point. They made that abundantly clear when they burned the Town Hall and knocked out the ponies as they worked. And I'm sure they have plans to do much worse, which is why we have to work together! Just band with me until the fighting is over, then you may all go your separate ways. Now the rules are easy. One: nopony is ever alone. A solitary pony is a target. Two: nopony panics. Panic is the enemy, it makes us not think straight and plays into their hooves. Three: nopony dies. You are to survive at all costs, you hear me, and you aren't to kill them unless you have no other option. So far they have done us the same courtesy. Everypony got that?” A grudging acceptance came from the crowd, laced with fear and a disdain targeted towards Ink Well.

He felt it wash over him, accepting the blame as well as the leadership role. He sighed. “Good. We ARE going to get through this, I swear it. Now anypony who still has water in their bucket get on that new fire. Groups of no less than three, got that? Applejack will make sure you're all safe. Anypony with medical experience, go with Fluttershy and care for the wounded. The medical tent should still be up and empty right now. All you weather ponies and any other pegasi who can help, there's a storm over the Everfree, if we move it over town then the fire is guaranteed not to spread and attacks are less likely. Nopony wants to be out in the rain.

When all of this is down, get yourself to defendable houses and keep yourselves safe. Now let's go, ponies! The fire isn't going to stop itself!" The crowds began to split, ponies heading to their tasks in fearful clumps.

Before they could get too far, Ink Well called over Twilight and Rainbow Dash. "Twilight, we're going to need the Royal Guards in here. I need you to write a letter to the Princess requesting their help. It's urgent."

Twilight shook her head. "I can't send the message. Spike's been missing since I sent him off. Oh, I never should have..."

"Twilight, no time for that. I'm sure he'll be fine. Just write the letter, we've got the fastest pony in Equestria to deliver it." Twilight still looked worried, but got to work writing on her clipboard anyway. As she did, Ink Well turned to Rainbow. "How fast can you get to Canterlot?"

Rainbow looked over at the mountain where Canterlot stood silhouetted against the sky, far in the distance. "Ten minutes going my fastest."

Ink Well nodded. "Okay, then we only have to hold up for about an hour before the guards get here, if everything goes well. I need you to fly there, deliver the letter, and get back as fast as you can. You'll be needed here."

As Twilight wrote, Rose came up the steps. "Ink Well, where should I go? Who should I help?"

Ink Well pointed her towards the stormy clouds, thunder rumbling low at this distance. "Go help the weather ponies with the Everfree. You're probably the only one that will be willing to fly over it with Rainbow gone, and they're going to need a brave face." Rose nodded, flapping her wings and taking off. As she turned to leave, Ink Well tapped her hoof. "Be safe out there. Whatever you do, don't get hurt."

Rose smiled at him. "I won't. But don't you go ignoring your own advice." She hurried off, well on her way as Twilight finished the letter, rolling it up with her magic and flying it to Rainbow. She grabbed it in her mouth, saluted, and took off, a rainbow streak across the sky.

As soon as she was gone, Ink Well turned to Twilight. "You keep in charge of the others. You did a wonderful job of that before, and I don't think I can do any better than you."

"What are you talking about? You played that crowd like a violin! How'd you do it?"

Ink Well sighed. "I just told them the truth. They hate me. They'll need a leader they can like. That will be your job."

Twilight looked confused. "What about you? What will you be doing?"

Ink Well shook his head. "I've got a bad feeling about Rosewater right now. They knew I was there, I need to make sure it's still standing."

Twilight stomped a hoof in front of him. "By yourself? No way. I'm coming with you. Applejack can keep in charge until I get back."

"But-"

"You said it yourself. No going off alone. Now lead the way." Reluctantly Ink Well and Twilight moved from the Town Hall, keeping a keen eye out for movement and possible attack positions, yet nothing came during the short walk, not a hint of strife or a single sight from the corner of the eye. Ink Well spent the entire time looking around, a feeling in the back of his mind like he was being watched, but in the end the pair arrived safely at the shop door. Behind them, storm clouds rolled in, shepherded by the weather ponies into position over the town.

As Ink Well opened the door amidst a light drizzle, two pegasi descended rapidly towards them, a red gleam shining on their chests. Ink Well ducked quickly through the door, peeking out and signaling Twilight to follow. She just shook her head, laughing at him. "Don't worry, it's the Royal Guard!" As the pair of pegasi landed, pristine white coats, their gleaming gold armor with the red crystal armor latches catching the remaining sunlight, Ink Well stepped back outside, his fear dampened.

They both landed strongly, the blue tails and plumes on their helmets waving in the breeze, a stark contrast to the grim looks on their faces. They both stepped forward in unison, walking towards the two on the stairs, and



the one on the right spoke. "Miss Sparkle, come with us. We need to know what you want us to do."

Twilight quickly stepped towards them, Ink Well stopping her at the top of the steps. "Hold on, what are you two doing here? We didn't call for anypony."

Twilight turned on him, surprised. "What are you-?" Ink Well placed a hoof on her mouth, silencing her and giving her a serious look.

The guard's face didn't move. "We were in the area and ran into Rainbow Dash as she went to Canterlot. She said that our help was needed in Ponyville. Is that not the case?"

Twilight removed Ink Well's hoof from her mouth, glaring at him before walking over the the guards. "No sirs, we do need you, Ink Well is just being paranoid. Most of the town is attending to a burning buildings right now, and if you could make sure they were safe that would be most appreciated."

The guard nodded. "Of course madam. Could you show us the way? With the coming storm and not knowing the town we don't want to get lost."

Twilight looked at them, then back at Ink Well. "Can you not follow the smoke?" She looked back at the town, the cloud cover and light rain cutting vision too far away. She looked nervously from Ink Well to the guards. "I could point you out the way, but I don't want to leave Ink Well alone. A lone pony is in danger right now."

The other guard stepped forward, saluting. "I will stand guard with him, if you would like. He can then lead me in the correct direction when he is done with what he is doing."

Twilight looked up at Ink Well, herself not seeming fully convinced with the situation. "Is this alright, Ink Well?"

Ink Well looked at the two guards, attributing his uneasy feeling to paranoia like Twilight said. "I suppose. I really don't need a guard, I'm just taking a look around. If anything happens, you'll know. I'm not sticking around for it."

Twilight nodded. "Alright, you and he will stay here while I show the other the way." She walked off with the guard, heading in the direction of the residential sector. As she went to turn a corner, she called back. "Be careful Ink Well! Don't go off alone!"

"I won't!" Called back Ink Well, watching her disappear as the storm kicked in, rain pouring from the sky and soaking him where he stood. He turned to the guard left with him, who remained saluting in the middle of the street and the rain, and shouted over it. "What's your name?"

The guard remained motionless under the rain as it splashed from his helmet. "Aqueous, sir."

Ink Well nodded. "Aqueous, you're going to stand guard while I make sure everything is locked down, right?"

The pegasus saluted again. "Yes, sir." Ink Well turned back to the door, heading inside. Aqueous stood at attention before the door, rain splashing off of him in torrents. Ink Well was about to offer that the guard come inside, but stopped. Aqueous looked like a clever pony, he didn't need to be told his job.

Ink Well shut the door behind him, the solid walls muting the sound outside to a low background rumble. He quickly scanned over the shop, glad to see it unscathed, before walking through the dim shop to the workroom door, a trail of water forming behind him.

He raised his hoof to open the door and stopped, feeling a sudden, menacing change in the air behind him. He ducked, spinning to the side as a dagger implanted itself in the door where his head had been moments before. A red aura formed around the grip, wrenching it from the door and floating it back to the figure that stood calmly before the counter.

Fear shot through his heart as he saw her, the pony that had haunted his dreams. Her dark green fur and her red eyes had not changed in the time, and neither had her perfectly coiffed mane and sharply tied scarf that accentuated everything. She had a cruel, businesslike air about her body and a sadistic look in her eyes. She smiled at him as he glared at her. "Very good Ink Well! You've learned since the last time we met." Her smug

smiled slowly turned into a sneer. "You know you've really become a thorn in my side."

Ink Well forced a smirk of his own despite his heart jumping in his chest from the initial surprise. "I'm so sorry Viper, but the Equirer turned me into a journalist, and one thing they have to do is ensure the story gets out."

Viper slowly turned the blade before her, examining it in the glow of her horn. "It is true that you were supposed to investigate, Ink Well, but you were supposed to have the common sense to die. Imagine my shock when I sat in my office and got a letter from the Princess herself saying you were not only alive but that you were filing a complaint! Now that was no big problem, I mobilized my team and here I am, but then to go and get her to shut down my empire using evidence that was supposed to burn in your house... now that's just low. Imagine the lengths I'd go to to get revenge on the pony responsible. Think what horrors I would be willing to commit to his friends. Just think of what I'd do once I had that pony in my clutches... Come on. You're a creative one. It shouldn't be too hard." With a flick of her eyes, the dagger shot towards Ink Well, forcing him to roll to the side to dodge. As he moved, a glimmer at the corner of his sight caught his attention, making him jump over the counter as another knife impacted, quivering in it. Viper frowned, her horn glowing more brightly as the daggers returned to an orbit around her head. "My, you are a sharp one."

Ink Well forced his smile to maintain despite his aching leg and the adrenaline running through his veins. He crept slowly towards the door, ready to move with all the extra space around him. "Not as sharp as those, I'm afraid. But if I were to imagine what you said, just for an instant, that would place you as far more important than just the head of the Enforcers, wouldn't it?"

Viper smiled cruelly. "Very good! Yes, that would make me the Equirer's head, the power behind the throne, as it were." The daggers reoriented themselves, pointing towards him as they floated.

Ink Well crept closer to the door, feeling it almost in range. "I'm honored, such a powerful pony taking the time to come kill me. Shouldn't you have underlings for that?"

“Oh, I do, but if you want to be big in business you must be willing to get your hooves dirty. Besides, I find that ponies much prefer the personal touch.” The daggers sailed towards him, imbedding in the wall as jumped for the door. He turned the knob, pulling on the door to find it unmoving.

He pulled again, confirming the door's refusal to open despite the lock being visually undone. He yelled at the door as the daggers freed themselves, floating in the air once more. “Aqueous! Open this door and get in here!” The knives flew, whirling at two heights towards him. He flapped hard with his wings, pushing off the door and flying over an aisle divider. He landed hard behind it, scrambling to his hooves but keeping low as his ribs screamed at him.

Through the air of the shop rang a maniacal laugh. “Water forms to the container, Ink Well, not the other way around. I needed you all alone to truly enjoy this.” Ink Well crept between the aisles, wincing every time his brace 'tinked' lightly on the ground. He moved a few bottles from the shelving, trying to get an eye on his attacker. She was still by the counter, eyes closed and horn glowing brightly, devilish smile on her face. A bottle next to him reflected a dim red glow just briefly. Ink Well dove to the side as one dagger plunged into the shelf, smashing the glass bottles as the other knife whizzed above Ink Well's head, cutting a few hairs from his regrowing mane. He scrambled around the shelf, ducking into another aisle and slightly closer to the unicorn. “You can't hide from me Ink Well, despite how you keep trying. I have the edge.” Her words cut the air around him, followed by a knife descending on either side. He leaped into the air, vaulting over the shelving, his leg complaining strongly as he did.

His mind ran as he darted through the air, the blades quickly closing in. He circled the room, watching as Viper followed him precisely with her head, her eyes never opening and her horn glowing brightly. As he ducked a tossed knife, realization dawned. He had to level the playing field. He pulled up his legs, back flipping as the knives shot under him and into the wall. Kicking off the wall, he shot directly at Viper as the daggers freed themselves, following him. He swerved around her, skidding over the counter and through the workroom door in one fluid swoop, slamming it behind him. The blades swirled around her, placing themselves in the sheathes at Viper's side. Slowly she turned around, opening her eyes and growling at the door. “Running again Ink Well? Your tenacity is really starting to get on my nerves...”

She moved through the door, opening it slowly to the distillery. Within the room was bright, the light on and causing shadows to slice across every surface and cluster in the corners. Viper looked over the room, the mass and tangle of piping, machines, and boilers masking view of far too much of it. She listened carefully, nothing but the faintest thrumming of rain outside to be heard. Walking slowly into the center of the room, she smiled grimly. "Another game of hide and seek? I thought you were better than this. I had such high hopes for you..." She closed her eyes, horn glowing as magic spread over the room... and gleamed back at her twice as bright. The whole room lit up, readings scattered and confused. Viper's face contorted with rage. "What? What is this?"

Reverberating from every side of the room, a metallic tone to each word, came the scratchy voice of Ink Well. "Brass fixtures, a devil for magic users, but I hope it doesn't cause you too much trouble. It wouldn't be interesting then, would it?" The knives swirled around Viper angrily, futilely trying to pinpoint the speaker. Meanwhile the unicorn herself gritted her teeth, eyes afire as she peered into the many shadows. There was a dart of movement behind her, one dagger flinging that way to bounce harmlessly on some piping. Another flicker before her, a blur changing the air for a mere moment, only to be stirred again by the glowing dagger passing through it and sticking into the wood wall.

Viper's eyes glowed red, her magic loosed by her anger. "This is no time for games Ink Well! It is time for action! Come out and face me like a stallion!" She called to the room, her voice echoing off the pipes, dissipating in the dry air. She grimaced as her eyes darted around, daggers swarming above her and ready to strike. Then, suddenly, they stopped, her face breaking into a sadistic grin. "Fine. If you refuse to face me, maybe this will get a rise out of you."

Slowly a match rose into the air, striking itself so that the flame flared. Viper's spoke again, her voice far sweeter than her smile, but the sinister tone unmistakable. "Are you aware just how flammable a distillery is, Ink Well? They are notorious for unfortunate explosions. Now, while perfume stills aren't known to be quite as volatile, I'm still sure the reaction would be quite impressive." The door to the maceration vat opened slowly, an unmistakably alcoholic smell filling the room instantly. Then the match

floated lazily towards it, bobbing nonchalantly as it slowly reached the source of the smell.

The crack of glass was matched by the 'fwip!' of dagger cutting through air, a yelp coming from where it landed. The match winked out as it was hit out of the air, tumbling towards Viper along with its assaulter, a clear beaker filled with a murky liquid, cracks running along its side. The other dagger came up to defend, shattering the glass on impact and releasing its contents, which splashed over Viper, covering her with an odor like moldy, rusted oranges. Her eyes watered immediately, irritated from the liquid that touched her fur and further from the intense scent. She covered her nose with a hoof, coughing as she tried to remove the smell covering her.

The knife was tossed back into the center of the room, dripping crimson from its tip that gleamed darkly in the the light. Then the lights shut off, the room plunging into darkness. The enraged glow from Viper's eyes and horn bathed the area around her in a dim red, while the rest of the room was completely encased in shadow, textured slightly by the dim light seeping from under the door and up the stairs. Viper blinked tears from her eyes as she scanned the room once more magically, the results equally as scattered and distorted. As her vision and coughing cleared, the scent still stuck strongly to her, but no longer blinding in its intensity, she gazed into the darkness around her. "Ink Well! That's quite the dirty trick!"

The voice floated from the darkness, seeming closer and yet still emanating from all sides. "Just being an opportunist. I thought you knew that about me. I did a lot with what your company gave me."

Viper twirled where she stood, daggers making slow forays into the darkness, acting like makeshift torches in the lack of light. "What my empire gave you, Ink Well. Please use the proper term. Though really, that was all my doing." One dagger sliced at a retreating shadow, connecting only with the air.

"You? You seem smarter than to leave something so damning laying about. How'd you leave such prime evidence so easily taken?" The voice seemed to come from behind her, but when the dagger flew, there was nothing but shadow.

“Hah! You say it as though it were an accident. No, that file was there on purpose for anypony brave enough to face me, meticulously updated with tender love and care.”

“But why? You seem to have some grand master plan and a belief that your company cannot be defeated. Why leave a paper trail?”

Viper smiled cruelly, the red lighting making it seem all the more sinister. “So somepony knows my genius. That file has been gone for on three separate occasions, and two of them were silenced. The first was an employee I had thoughtfully given the key, as she was in charge of the room. Of course, the curiosity was far too much for her, the forbidden filing cabinet being too tempting, and once she read it, she was so kind as to bring the discrepancy to my attention.” Her smile deepened. “I had to get a new rug after that one. A pity, the poor filly had such a lovely blue coat.” She whirled around, looking at the room from a new angle and probing the darkness once more with her daggers.

“The second was an activist, a foolish old pegasus with delusions that he could ‘the corporate machine.’ He barged in all on his lonesome, grabbed it, and hightailed it from the guards and immediately to his home, a squalid affair with revolutionary posters and peaceful slogans galore.” One of the daggers jabbed forward, twisting slowly in air once the motion was complete. “I thought it very ironic when he was found mysteriously impaled upon the trees below, apparently having fallen from his home, the old treehugger. And after that fall, well, one laceration looked as natural as the next, even the one cleanly through his neck.”

She turned once more, gazing into a particularly thick shadow behind a mass of pipes. “And then there's you. You planned ahead, came in with backup, went where nopony expected you to, and most importantly, left the file elsewhere.” Her tone became laced in sarcasm. “Whatever shall I do? How can my empire survive with the information out? How will I deal with this interloper?” She smiled, staring at the shadow that seemed to stare back, unmoving. “You know, it's almost like I'd planned ahead. Let Celestia investigate, she will find nothing to corroborate, nopony willing to back the story up, and her only witnesses mysteriously killed in a fire that swept through their town. It's too bad I'll have to decimate her guards to do so, some of them are really good spies, but you just had to keep dragging ponies in.”

A drop of blood splashed on the floor behind, causing her to slowly turn. The hoof flew out of the darkness, catching her on the cheek and, despite its low impact, staggered her. Ink Well landed before her, kicking again with his newly injured right front hoof. "You leave them out of this you monster." A knife whizzed from where it hovered, flying between the two ponies before Ink Well leaped back, disappearing into the shadows. The knife chased, nothing but blackness to pursue.

Viper straightened back up, her sadistic smile plastered to her face. "It won't end here, Ink Well. This is merely the beginning, a launching point for my empire to take the next logical step. From a company to a nation in one long motion, all sparked because of you." The darkness clanged, metal banging metal, followed immediately by the dim glow as a knife flew, nicking the retreating form. "Don't lose your head now! I was just starting to have fun!"

Thunder rolled through the building as the storm outside picked up strength once more, the dull drilling of the water on the distant roof the only sound in the dim room. Viper's smile remained solid as she turned slowly in place, her daggers keeping their own dim watch as they circled on their own paths. Yet the pegasus did not slip up again, and so they waited, neither wanting to make the first move.

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Rose landed on her empty doorstep, confused to see the door tied in place with some sort of rope. She looked back at the storming city, flinching as lightning speared down to the ground, crashing within the city and shaking the windows. She looked back at the rope, wondering why anypony would put it there. That wasn't security, it wasn't smart, it would keep nopony out, just slow them down. Whoever was using her shop as a safe base obviously wasn't thinking clearly. Though how would they have gotten in afterward?

Something wasn't right here. She quickly untied it, fluttering her gossamer wings as they drooped to the ground, waterlogged from the flight. She hurriedly pulled the door open, entering the room to find it silent and empty.



She tilted her head, listening to the air. The silence was unnatural, a weighty, expectant silence, not the quiet of an empty building. She looked down, seeing the small trail of drips leading away from the front door. Curious, she followed, adding to the water on the floor as she dripped dry. She reached the counter, seeing the front display askew, and walked around, shaking her wings one more time to remove the excess water weight. Reaching for the handle a faint whiff came from the room, the strong scent of the molding oranges seeping under the door. That was the final straw. She pulled open the door and flicked on the lights inside.

The glimmer of cold steel flying towards her greeted her entrance.

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Ink Well watched in blinded horror as the knives flew, Rose flinching back and shielding herself with hoof and wing. The blades pierced the wings, pinning them to either side of the entrance and leaving Rose trembling in surprise. Viper looked around the room once for a possible assault, but Ink Well remained where he was hidden amongst the piping, trying to clear his eyes and rethink his strategy. Seeing no danger, Viper slowly walked towards the pinned butterfly wings, watching with interest as a glowing blue powder seeped from the wounds and dissipated in the air. "Hmm. Magical wings. Very beautiful. It almost pains me to damage them." She smiled cruelly. "Almost."

Her horn glowed, the daggers sliding down from where they'd inserted and slowly closing in on Rose's body. She kept close attention to Rose's face as they moved, seeming to become disappointed as Rose stared at her, shock keeping her from reacting. Viper frowned and stepped back. "It doesn't hurt? At all? Aww... it's no fun when the victim doesn't respond." Her horn's glow changed shades, the daggers stopping as something made its way into the room. From the shop floated a long sheathe which traveled over Rose's head, a green and red grip sticking out and a gold snake theme running down it. It hovered slowly in front of Rose, who had regained her composure and was now watching the moving object with interest.

Seeing this, Viper lowered it before her face, causing Rose's ivy eyes to meet Viper's crimson ones. "Oh, you like this? It's a very special blade. You see, I've never used it before, and I thought that this would be the

perfect time to oil it properly.” She slowly unsheathed it, the slight curve of the blade causing the light in the room to shine on it perfectly. Inch by cold inch the sword slid out, slicing the air once before settling next to Viper, the sheathe placed lightly against the wall. The sword floated just an inch off of the ground, standing up Viper's nose where it was. “This blade, you see, comes custom ordered from the greatest sword maker in Equestria. Perfectly balanced and of the strongest steel, able to cut through just about anything. And the best thing to oil a new sword, truth be told, is blood.” Rose's face dropped, curiosity turning to fear as she pulled away from the unicorn before her only to be held back by the knives. Viper smiled. “Ah, I see that got a reaction out of you.” She turned the sword with her magic, placing the grip before her mouth. “I had meant to use this for the final blow against Ink Well to really settle the deal, but since he insists on being a coward, I'll just have to kill you with it. Nothing personal, you were going to die today anyway, but you weren't on my personal list. Now just stand there and keep struggling. I want this to hurt.”

Viper grabbed the sword in mouth, glow fading completely from her horn as she analyzed Rose's form for the best point of attack. She then turned her head, preparing the strike.

She spun around, blocking Ink Well's braced hoof as it smashed down from above. She then pushed him off, slashing back at him and cutting along his cast, breaking one of its connections with the brace. “Ink Well!” Rose pulled against the doorway, kicking uselessly at Viper. “Get me out of here! I can help!” She pulled again, the knives slipping further along the wing and more of the dust floating into the air.

Ink Well moved to signal her to stop, but had to pull back his bleeding hoof as the sword swung at him once again. “I'm coming! Stay there!” He ducked back, the sword slashing over his head and pushing him into the work table. Viper's eyes stayed on him the entire time, rage, focus and enjoyment all swirling within them. She swung again, going low and making him hop over the table. As he moved, his brace shifted at the knee, abandoning some much needed support on his leg and making it cry in pain. He ignored it, ducking under a slash over the table

Viper jumped over the table, eyes streaming rage as she brought down the sword in a powerful chop. Ink Well stumbled, forced to block with his brace. The metal held, but the angle of the sword caused the tip to slide

past, slicing cleanly through the cast and into his leg. He whimpered, pulling away as Viper swung again, cruel smile appearing around the grip as he scrambled away from her.

Rose saw this and took action, hooves falling on the knives pinning her wings to the walls and yanking them free. Holding them she pushed herself forward on rear legs and wings, the glowing blue dust flowed behind her, slowly draining from the wings as the edges became less substantial. She ran around the table, bringing the blades down on the distracted unicorn. Just before they connected, the red glow reappeared around them, yanking the metal from Rose's hooves and throwing her off balance. The knives then twitched, swirling around Viper as she struck at Ink Well.

He did his best to duck and dive as the trio of blades danced around him, trying to get his own hit in where he could, only to be deflected by the blades. The daggers struck forward rapidly before returning to the cyclone around the unicorn, forcing him to squeeze between blades as the sword swung wildly. A blade shot at his side and he twisted away before yelping in pain, blood suddenly rushing from his other side as the stitches tore. It flowed freely, running down his legs to join the trickles from the myriad of small nicks and long gashes along them.

Rose stood behind Viper, her own strikes riposted by the whirlwind of metal before her. Every kick of her hoof was met by a blade holding it back and another slashing towards her. These she blocked with her wings as best as she could, but even then her legs were starting to flush red, drips flying off with each motion to join the incandescent dust that seeped from her wings.

As the blade swung Ink Well pushed off of his braced leg once more, feeling it sing with pain as jagged metal from his brace not only failed to support the bones within, but jabbed into the wrecked cast. He jumped forward, wings propelling him as he tried to hit the assailant once more only to be scared off by the whirling daggers flying by. They had to be gotten rid of. Looking past the unicorn he saw Rose recoiling from her own attack. She was having the same thought, wondering how to stop the onslaught. She too looked past the unicorn, eyes locking onto Ink Well's own. For a moment they thought as one, a plan silently forming in the midst of battle. All the while both dodged and weaved from the attacks of Viper, who was unaware of the transmission of information past her. She brought down her

sword, magical glow streaming from her eyes and horn as it stuck into the floor.

In unison the duo nodded, Ink Well stomping on the blade and swinging forward with a hoof. Viper didn't dodge, the daggers instead swirling from where they'd been stationed, above her head to block. During the split second when both were still, Rose jumped forward, flapping her wings once for the slight boost in height as they failed, the magic that made them swirling around her. She soared like a comet through the air, tumbling over the glowing horn. She was able to grab the red bathed knives, rolling across the floor with the flats of their blades hugged tightly to her chest.

Ink Well's punch connected, sending Viper recoiling back, her grip still solid on her sword. Ink Well pressured forward again while Viper was disoriented, hoof colliding with her cheek and making her stagger further. Viper's magic flared, coating the room in a bright red, the dagger against Rose's chest suddenly thrashing against their restraint. Rose turned over, smashing the tips of the knives in the floor and kicking them further with her hoof. Meanwhile the sword swung for Ink Well once more, forcing him to the center of the room. Viper's eyes narrowed, glaring at the pair facing her, before turning around and running up the back stairs.

Both ponies moved to follow, Rose only managing a few steps before collapsing to the ground. Ink Well heard this, hobbling next to her immediately when she fell. "Rose! Are you alright?"

Rose nodded, feebly pushing up against the floor. "I'm fine. Just... drained. I think it had to do with the spell failing." Her hoof slipped, Ink Well catching her before she hit the floor again.

He let her down carefully, trying his best not to get blood or broken metal in her mane. "You stay here, I'm going to go take care of Viper."

Rose struggled against him, pushing to stand once more. "No! Don't go in there alone. You won't make it."

Ink Well looked at his hooves, smiling slightly as he could feel the blood leaving him. "Yep, I look and feel a mess, but it's time I stop running and end this." He stood up, walking away from the pony stuck on the floor.

Rose reached out to him, fighting the fatigue in her muscles. "What if something happens to you? I don't think I could live with that... You have to let me help."

Ink Well smiled at her. "You are helping. Keep those knives down here. I'm coming back, I can't leave you like this."

Rose looked into his eyes, seeing both determination and confidence, though unable to share the same feeling. "You promise?"

Ink Well nodded. "I promise. Cross my heart and hope to fly." He crossed his heart with his hoof, then turned, limping up the stairs to the final battle.

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Ink Well slowly hobbled up the stairs, a thin trail of blood following him as he turned to face his assailant. Viper stood waiting, sword hovering before her and bruises forming on her cheek and side. Viper smiled, her eyes still glowing from the magic within. She looked completely out of place amidst the green and sandy interior of Rose's home, the homely paintings and the neat dining table not exactly screaming 'battle.' Still Viper managed to look menacing, sadistic smile gleaming as Ink Well made his way in. "Ink Well! You followed. Oh good. I hoped you'd realize the importance of this fight."

Ink Well braced himself on the ground, the cold wind flying in the window from the storm cooling the blood to his fur. He nodded. "It is. I may not fully know your plan, but I know it has to be stopped."

Viper looked disappointed. "You haven't figured it out yet? And I thought you were clever." She smiled maniacally. "It's the end of an era, Ink Well. Equestria as we know it is at an end."

"What are you talking about? Your magazine is shut down! Your company has fallen! It's finished."

"No! One magazine is stopped. But I don't own one magazine, I own them all. And their readers. When the news gets out that our beloved Queen unfairly shut down their favorite magazine, when she was unable to

save Ponyville, when the scandal that her student and her friends were killed by the guards to stop their insurrection, even when there was no proof, is read, what do you think the ponies will do? They will react! They will get angry! They will revolt, and I will be at the head.”

Ink Well smirked, laughing to himself. “You’re mad. You’re absolutely insane! No pony’s going to follow you to war! No pony would believe you!”

“They already have, and they already do. Nothing in these rags is truth, yet think about it.” Viper pointed a hoof to the window. “All of those ponies out there were the start, mobs flocking here just on a rumor. You’ve seen it first hoof, you know it’s true. They’ll believe everything I feed them. When Enforcers dressed as guards start attacking them, what will they report? When all they read is propaganda what will they believe?” She laughed, staring out into the rain as lightning crashed nearby, thunder rolling through the building. “I’m playing Overthrow the God Queen, Ink Well, and I have all the pieces! Who’s going to stop me?”

Ink Well stared at her, slowly shaking his head. “You actually think you can do it. Build an empire on lies and get the world to follow you. You’ll get us all killed!” He stared at the psychotic smile she gave him, disbelieving. “And I’m the only one that knows. You wanted to make sure I knew before we fought... You’re sick.” She stood firm, staring his opponent down. “I’m going to stop you. You know that, right?”

The sword turned where it floated, sitting in the air before Viper’s mouth. “Let’s see you try.” She bit down on it, manic smile and crazy eyes searing into Ink Well. He held up his hooves, preparing a defensive pose. The two stood facing each other for a moment, no sound to be heard but the storm outside.

A flash of light, the crash of thunder, the two ponies surged towards each other. Ink Well vaulted the low sweeping blade, bringing down a hoof that was sidestepped with ease by Viper. She spun back around, sword pulling upwards and catching the tip of one of his wings, shortening a feather. Ink Well solidly placed his front hooves, throwing a kick that went wide as his braced leg gave out beneath him. The returning slash missed by a hair’s breadth.

Ink Well hobbled away, rolling under the table as Viper's sword flew down once more. He crouched low, a red glow causing him to scramble away. The sword shot under the table, catching the back of Ink Well's back left leg before boomeranging around and replacing itself in Viper's mouth. Ink Well flapped his wings, taking to hovering as one good leg couldn't possibly give enough maneuverability if he stayed on the floor. Viper slashed up at him as he dived and rolled above her, kicking down at her and succeeding in a blow or two against her back. He skirted over one more swing, managing a kick against Viper's horn that left her disoriented, shaking her head.

As she did the fire in her eyes doubled before dieing down, forming around her horn instead. The sword flew off, piercing the air and forcing Ink Well to dodge lower to the ground. As he got lower he felt a weight clamp onto his leg, Viper pulling him down. Not expecting the weight his wings did not react in time, letting Viper toss him to the ground with ease. The air rushed from his lungs at impact, more blood oozing from his wounds. He could see his vision getting fuzzy, blood loss starting to take a toll. As he moved to get off of his back, Viper landed on his stomach, pinning him down as the sword flew itself to her outstretched hoof. She brought the sword up, her terrible eyes shining with glee as she then swung it down.

Ink Well brought up his cast at the last moment, catching the blade on the thickest part of the brace around it. Viper's joy turned immediately to anger, eyes flaring up once more as she rained blows against Ink Well's brace. He could feel it rattling and breaking up, each shock of pain going down his leg reminding him that it was only a matter of time before both shattered under the pressure. He kicked up with his rear leg, knocking Viper forward and giving him just enough time to get to his feet again. He spun around, rushing towards the dark unicorn.

Blood flew from the tip of the sword, the light furred pegasus spinning with the blade and falling to the floor, hooves splayed apart from the one that landed beneath him. From his neck a small puddle of blood formed, spreading out across the wood planks beneath him. Viper's eyes calmed down, the magic disappearing as she looked at the motionless form beneath her. She stuck her sword in the floor near his head and walked around him once, taking in her work. "Oh. It's over... Pity, it was almost getting exciting there. A real battle, for once." When she reached his head once more she picked up the sword, tilting her own head and preparing the

coup de grace to ensure her victory. The sword raised high, a flash of lightning being caught reflected in the surface of the tower of metal. Viper closed her eyes during the final moment of preparation, the sword dropping swiftly and surely, imbedding in floor. Blood splashed as it landed, staining the blade.

None of it new. Realizing the lack of resistance, Viper's eyes shot open, her head turning slowly up to the room. Thunder boomed as Ink Well's brace connected full force, a sucker punch meeting her cheek mid turn. Viper's head spun the other way, lights fading in her eyes as she dropped to the floor like a brick, sword falling useless beside her.

Heavily sucking in breath, Ink Well took a step closer, poking her with his hoof. The form didn't respond. Poking her once more, he watched her carefully for any reaction. Viper did not move, only the slow rise and fall of her chest continuing as she breathed. With a heavy sigh Ink Well walked to the stairs, looking back at the unconscious figure as he reached them. Despite his worries, motionless she remained.

Gingerly he limped down the stairs, taking as much weight from his broken leg as possible while he limped on two of his other three. Eventually though he did make it down, turning at the landing to find Rose standing shakily before him, tears in her eyes and a smile on her face. At least, he thought it was a smile. His vision wasn't cooperating too well, but he could probably pick out that pony anywhere by now. She walked forward, hugging his injured form with her own cut legs, and he just smiled. "I promised I'd come back."

Rose nodded, hugging him tighter, tears dripping into his coat. "And you never really break your promises."

After a moment more he pulled away, staggering through the work shop towards the shop door. Rose followed, unsteady steps of her own still keeping pace with Ink Well. "Where are you going now?"

Ink Well kept his eyes forward, all his energy going into moving. "Viper is knocked out upstairs, but there's still a battle raging on outside, if her words are anything to go by. I need to try to stop them. You make sure she doesn't get away, alright? I've got just one more job to do."



Rose stopped where she was, the words she heard making her legs wobbly. "You're going out there? You'll-"

Ink Well shook his head, continuing on his path. "Don't. You can't stop me. Go upstairs, I'll see you soon."

"But-"

Ink Well turned at the door, looking back at her with fuzzy eyes. "I've come this far, done this much... I'm not falling here." With that he turned back around, heading into the main shop. The door closed behind him with a solid thump, leaving Rose alone in the work room once more.

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Ink Well staggered from Rosewater, the pouring rain immediately drenching him and washing the red from his fur. Through the curtain of rain he beheld a war zone, smoke rising from many buildings as ponies scattered left and right, small groups clashing in the streets as the relentless rain turned everything from the streets to the battles to a brown mush. Lightning flashed at various points around the town, pegasi rushing back and forth with clouds to bombard the forces below. He looked over the mess with determined eyes, one pony in particular his target right now.

From down the street came what he was searching for, a bright purple glow. He moved as quickly as he could, what held together of the brace sticking and sucking in the mud, more pieces falling off every time it was freed. Ponies ran every which way, one frightened chase bowling him over and sending mud and blood flying into the air. The remains of the bandages fell away, releasing a great waterlogged weight as they trailed behind him in a pink, soggy line. He pushed himself up, the last vestiges of metal around his front hoof falling away, leaving the cut and cracked cast to slip and move with each step. Still he soldiered on, the fighting purple unicorn his last destination tonight.

A small crate raised up, surrounded by a purple glow, shooting from an alley and flying towards the broken and muddied pegasus. He clenched his eyes, turning his shoulder to it as he braced for an impact that never came. "Ink Well?!" The box splashed to the ground, water hitting him in the

face as the source of the magic ran over. "In Celestia's name what happened to you? Are you going to make it?"

He lifted his eyes to the unicorn, her mane glued to her head and her uninjured face radiating worry for him. He shook his head, as much to dismiss the question as to clear his rapidly dimming vision. "Not important. I need to your magic. Everypony must hear what I have to say." Twilight started to look puzzled and Ink Well cut her off. "Now, it's urgent."

Surprised by his tone, Twilight nodded. "Okay, hold on." She closed her eyes, her magic focusing on the tip of her horn in a bright orb.

Behind her a yellow pegasus descended from the sky, charging straight towards them, his red bandana attached to his face from the damp. As the distance between them closed, Ink Well stepped around Twilight, putting himself between her and the attacker. At the last possible second, Ink Well sidestepped, raising his cast encased hoof to clothesline the attacker, whose legs slid past in the mud, placing him unconsciously staring up at the sky. Accompanying the attacker's fall was a horrible snap, Ink Well feeling immediately sick as his cast shattered away and his leg fell limp at a position it never should. All he could feel was pain, his vision going full black as he teetered on the edge of shock.

He was about to tip over when he felt a faint tickle focus on his throat, followed by Twilight Sparkle's voice sounding as though it were a million miles away. Using the energy now flowing through his throat he planted all four hooves solidly, the pain rocketing up and down his left front hoof just driving him to stand firm. He spoke, his voice crystal clear in his head and booming over the town. "Ponies of the Enforcers! We have your leader." He forced his voice to be firm and direct, with no possibility that it could be wrong or disobeyed. There was a purpose behind each word, which was far more than he was feeling during the pause. Within his foggy head the sound resonated strangely, coming from all sides as well as inside and like a muffled yell from forever away, and among that clutter he was trying to find the right words.

After a moment or two of thought he continued, formulations abandoned. "The Royal Canterlot Guard will be here in less than five minutes. There is no point to continuing your attack. Instead I give you two

choices: Stop now and give yourselves up peacefully. We will not hurt you and we will be lenient in your sentencing.

If that doesn't suit you, you can Leave. Run, move as fast as you can! We know who you are, you will be found, but who knows? You might get lucky and escape. The clock is ticking.” He nodded to the direction he thought Twilight was, feeling the magic leave him, its extra energy draining with every raindrop that hit him. He smirked, legs staying beneath him like lead weights. “Hopefully that'll scare them off.”

With one final touch from the breeze Ink Well collapsed to the ground, mud splashing around him when he landed. Twilight stood over him, trying to block the rain as best as she could and visibly shaken, calling to him with a voice he couldn't hear. Ink Well's eye cracked open, the last of his will going into one word. “Rose...” His head dropped, unconscious even before it splashed into the mud.

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Ink Well shot up in bed, immediately regretting the decision as pain lanced through his side and firmly braced leg. The soft morning light shone brightly in the familiar room, the nicks and stains from last evening's fight removed. Despite his better judgment he moved to get up, swinging his hooves from the burgundy bed to land on the floor with a soft 'clink'. His brace had been repaired, but gone was the light maneuverable frame of before. This new one was one solid cage of metal, probably for the best considering the shape it had ended up in. Carefully he pulled himself off of the bed, noting the tightness where new bandages had been administered to his side and legs. He stretched out his wings, relieved to feel them both moving and only superfluously injured.

His shoulder ached as he walked across the room, not used to taking the full brunt of the weight for his leg, and he made his way to the spot where Viper had fallen. There was a divot in the floor from her sword, but otherwise the room was unchanged, the battle a thing of the past. As he stood examining the floor, Rose walked up the stairs, stopping suddenly when she noticed he was there. “Ink Well! You're up!”

He smiled, nodding to the floor. “Yeah, only just though. I was looking at the fight scene. For some reason I thought it would be... messier.” He

looked at her, noting the smile on her face despite the bandages covering her legs and shoulders.

She shrugged, taking a few steps closer. "Yeah. Downstairs was a little worse. Some collateral damage, lots of small stains here and there... and yet nothing hugely telling. It's weird, isn't it? It's like it never happened."

"Oh, no... it happened." He turned away, wings drooping and heart sinking to see her injured. "I'm sorry about, well, everything. I'm sure you're going to get a lot of flack for keeping me around after yesterday."

Rose gasped, looking surprised. "Oh! That's right, I was coming to get you!" Ink Well looked confused, fear grasping at him as he worried about being kicked out or banished for the mess he caused. Rose just smiled at him, pushing him towards the stairs. "Go downstairs! There's a surprise waiting for you in the main shop." Her smile widened as she zipped down before him, disappearing into the workshop below.

Ink Well followed, and despite his curiosity, took the stairs slowly, one leg at a time until he got used to his motions. By then he was at the bottom, walking through the silent distillery. The brass machines stood quiet, glimmering in the light. Here and there dings and scratches were apparent where blows had missed. In the corner a pipe was misaligned, one that he had perched on when Viper first entered the room. And yet, these were the only signs of any conflict. Life just kept going on.

He made his way slowly to the door, pausing a moment before swinging it open.

Within the small shop stood Princess Celestia herself, the graceful alicorn regally towering over the room and seeming to radiate light. Her pink blue and green mane flowed in an unseen wind, her gold crown and necklace with the gleaming purple gems completing the rest of the alabaster picture stunningly. Around her stood the six friends, Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash, all looking excited and joyful. To the side of the room stood Rose, smiling hugely at the shock on Ink Well's face. Crowded into the rest of the shop behind a line of guards, their blue armor clasps apparent, were dozens of ponies of every color and variety, a rainbow clustered into one room and spilling out

the door and into the streets outside where even more peered in the small windows.

Stunned momentarily by the sight, as soon as he recovered her knelt before the Princess, his front leg's stiffness making the motion awkward and the final position sub par. He heard a chuckle come in a velvety voice. "Stand, my little pony, we have a lot to discuss."

With as much trouble as he had getting down Ink Well pulled himself up, shifting uneasily in the gaze of the Princess. "Princess Celestia, I am so sorry for everything I did. I had no clue that things were going to escalate that far or that all those ponies would get hurt or the town would be attacked. It's all my fault and I know I deserve the worst, I just-" He was stopped by a quick nudge from Applejack.

"Woah there scrawny, yer gettin' ahead of her now. Hear the Princess out." Behind her Fluttershy giggled as Ink Well blushed, still avoiding the Princess's eyes.

Celestia spoke again, smiling gently at him. "Ink Well, you need not to blame yourself for everything. Yes, what happened was unfortunate, but you are to be commended for what you did. You resolved a potentially horrific conflict peacefully, stopped a corrupt and powerful monopoly, ended an attempt to overthrow myself before it even began, and did it all without a single pony getting seriously hurt. Even now there are guards heading to each of the monopolized magazines, getting ready to shut them down for good, and there are ponies standing in this room that, without you, could have perished last night."

Ink Well looked up at her, brow furrowed and head slightly tilted. "I did all of that?"

Twilight stepped forward, standing next to him as she explained. "After your announcement, most of the Enforcers either fled or gave up, allowing themselves to be captured. When the guards actually showed up twenty minutes later with Rainbow at the head, it was just a matter of rounding up who remained and handing them over. Some of them even started incriminating other ponies that had fled and jobs the Enforcers had done before. The loudest of them all was Viper as she screamed and hollered about how Equestria would be hers and her empire could not fall."

She hovered over a scroll, unfurling it before him. "Here is a list of all of the ponies captured, what they are charged with, and the likely punishment."

As Ink Well went over the list, Fluttershy piped up from where she stood, her soft voice happy as she talked. "Once the Enforcers gave up, the ponies who helped me on the medical team searched all of Ponyville for injured ponies. Once everypony followed your plan and found a fortified position, only a few of them got injured, most of them able to hold off attack until help arrived. A few are still in treatment at the medical tent, but everypony should make a full recovery."

Ink Well looked from the list to the ponies around him, words not coming to his mouth as thoughts struggled in his head. Eventually he looked to the Princess, whose warm smile still fell upon him. "That was all me? It can't be."

The Princess nodded. "Indeed it was Ink Well. And as lead investigator for this case and the savior of this town, I have a question for you. Is there a punishment you wish to see set upon the attackers or their companies? I could take it into consideration, if you so choose."

Ink Well stared at the serious face of the Princess, mind reeling from the implications. He could get back at all of those Equirer ponies, banish every one of the minions who dared attack his friends. He could get his own company, or demand payment, or request that the head of it all was sent to the moon for her crimes... A dark smile spread across his face. Oh if he were an evil pony, just think of what he could do...

He shook his head, smile waning to a smirk. "Just go easy on them. To most of them it was just a job, they just got into the wrong line of work. And I'm pretty sure most of the ponies in the companies were in the dark about the whole monopoly thing. Anypony in that first file and anypony who might know should be taken in, but the companies shouldn't be closed down, not even the Equirer. Let the magazines run, each under a new leader."

Celestia's face didn't change. "Are you sure that is all you want?"

Ink Well nodded. "Of course. I can't take away all those ponies' jobs, they were just writing for a magazine. And I can't take away what all these

ponies outside read every month. That would just be cruel. I just want the magazines to run clean and honest, making sure to get the facts first even if they still want to just print gossip. However, I do have one request.”

“And that is?”

“I would like the magazines, all of the ones under Viper's hold, to print a story that I write for them in two weeks on their next printing. It will contain the details of last night, the nature of what they were before the switch, and corrections on a few lies printed beforehoof. I also want them each to print an apology to their readers and a vow not to return to the slanderous mudslinging of old.” He looked around the semicircle of friends, each of them beaming as he detailed it. As his gaze returned to the Princess, he spotted Rose out of the corner of his eye. “Oh, and I want them to pay me like they would a writer on their team for the story. I have a few favors I need to pay back.”

Princess Celestia smiled at Ink Well, nodding to him. “Very well, I'm sure they would be willing to agree to that.” She took a step forward, leaning in close to whisper in his ear. “From how you wrote your book, I expected nothing less from you. Though I would like to see another from you, with all this experience, your style can only have been improved since then.” She stepped back, leaving Ink Well's mouth agape as his mind registered what she said. She smiled at him, closing his jaw gently with her hoof. “Now that I have your input on the matter, I am afraid there is much that awaits me in Canterlot. But before I go, I wish to remind you that we are all grateful for your efforts Ink Well.”

Ink Well rubbed his mane with his hoof, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “I couldn't have done it without everypony else. I'm just one pony.”

Princess Celestia turned away, facing her guards. “All it takes is one pony in the right place at the right time to change the world.” She looked back, smiling warmly again. “Farewell everypony.” With that she left, her retinue on either side leading her to the carriage before hooking themselves up to it, pulling it into the air, their destination gleaming far in the distance.

Back in the shop Ink Well was beset upon by the crowds, thanks and questions and congratulations coming from all sides. Despite feeling the affections of the crowd, Ink Well slowly backed away, slipping into the work room when the first possibility presented himself. Already in the room was Fluttershy, having hidden as soon as the crowd had gotten too rowdy again. When she saw him, her face perked up. "Ink Well, is what you said true? Are you really going to write the corrections?"

Ink Well nodded. "That I am."

Fluttershy ran up to him, hugging him. "Oh thank you! But why the change of heart?"

Ink Well hugged her back. "I promised. I can't give up on a Pinkie Pie Swear, it's unbreakable, and deep down I am a colt of my word." He pulled away from her, looking into her shining eyes and smiling sincerely. "Think of everything I said a few days ago as just a dip in the road. My pen might destroy, but it can create too, works that even royalty enjoys. If it's able to do that... well, why should I keep it locked away?"

He walked to the work table, pulling out a pencil and a sheet of paper. As he did, Fluttershy looked over his shoulder. "Getting started already? This early in the morning?"

Ink Well shrugged. "Uh huh. I've got an article to write, and this time it is going to be perfect. Just you wait."

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Two weeks later there was a party held at Sugar Cube Corner celebrating the printing of the under-new-management magazines. The celebrations started in the evening and continued late into the night. Every single magazine had agreed to the terms set forth by Ink Well, ten identical copies of his article sat in ten different magazines on the table. It was a twelve page story, almost half the magazine in these rags, complete with corrections on old stories, the details of the Equirer's empire, an account of what was being called the 'Battle of Ponyville,' and, most notably, almost no mention of the author's involvement in any of it.



When Twilight finished reading aloud the article to the partygoers, consisting of her friends, Ink Well, and Rose, Applejack walked over to Ink Well, pushing his shoulder playfully. "Why'd you write yer piece like that, scrawny? It's almost like you didn't do anything!"

Ink Well was knocked off balance, the strong metal brace still locked on his leg, though the other bandages had disappeared. Around the base of his hooves the fur was slightly darker than the rest, the only remaining tell of the terrible fire a month ago and the trials he'd gone through since. It gave his parchment colored fur the look of an old map, time wearing the edges but the center unchanged. Catching his balance again he shook his head. "I didn't. Most of it was you. I took down one pony and gave a speech, both of which with the help of somepony else. Why should I take credit for it?"

Pinkie popped up in front of him, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Because you're a hero! And you could have been a super hero!" She moved around, posing and running in time with what she said. "Fighting crimes and zipping off to other places like whoooooosh! Zoom! And everypony would recognize the Inky Avenger as the colt that won the Battle of Ponyville!" She struck a heroic pose, tail waving in the air behind her like a cape catching a breeze.

Ink Well just laughed. "No way. Not a hero, I'm not doing the fame thing. I just want to tell a good story."

Rarity laughed at him, pulling a large beautifully wrapped gift from somewhere. "Oh are you sure you don't want to be a hero? It will make this present mean so much less."

"A present? For me? You shouldn't have!"

Rarity waved away the comment. "Nonsense! You have done so much for us, especially with this article, so we decided to show our appreciation. It's from all of us." The pristine rainbow-wrapped package did indeed have a small tag proclaiming it from the group, and after some encouragement Ink Well was made to open it. Within was a brown fedora and messenger bag like the ones he'd had when he first came to town, though upgraded with cutie mark latches and an overall more stylish design. Rarity saw the look on his face and smiled at him. "Oh I just knew

you'd love it! A proper hero's costume. I made them myself in the boutique, though Fluttershy insisted I didn't decorate them too heavily. But your look needed an upgrade, don't you think? And Twilight even suggested just the most darling addition to the side!" She magicked open a small pouch on the side of the bag. "It's a holster for your pen and ink, and it can be closed or capped or open as the need arises!"

Ink Well put on the gifts, the bag fitting superbly and the hat perfectly tailored. Standing again in his outfit his old habits came back instantly, tipping his hat with his hoof to the girls with a smirk on his face. "Oh this is fantastic! I had missed these so much after the fire... I just didn't feel right without them. Although... there is one thing missing."

"I think I might have that covered." Rose produced a much smaller box of her own, wrapped plainly in some clear cellophane. "I'm not nearly as good at the presentation as Rarity, but I tried my best with what Daisy and Lily had at hoof."

Ink Well slowly opened the plastic wrapping, opening the box with curiosity as to what could be inside. As soon as caught a glimpse, his jaw dropped. "No way..." From within the small box he pulled out a small writing set, a wooden piece carved with an indent for an ink pot and a small golden holster for a pen. Within both of these receptacles sat what caught Ink Well's eyes. His blue metallic fountain pen shined in the light of the shop, revealing once unsheathed a golden nib free of dents or flaws. The body of the pen had no ash, no scratches, not a hint of the turmoil it went through. Sitting next to it was his golden ink pot, returned to its perfectly round shape and gleaming brighter than it ever had before. This he turned over and over in his hooves, examining every inch from the stopper in the top to the tiniest curve at the bottom. The engraving even survived on the bottom, not changing in script or content: 'One source, endless possibilities.' Ink Well looked from the pot to Rose, stunned by the wonderful gift. "How did you...? When did you...?"

"I thought about it when I saw you having so much trouble writing, but with everything going on I was only able to get them repaired over the last two weeks. Sorry it took so long to get to you." Ink Well looked up at Rose, whose head was actually lowered with remorse from her gift.

He shook his head. "No... These are perfect. I just..." He stopped, shaking the ink pot slightly where he held it. "Is there something in it?"

Rose perked up. "Yep! While you were working on the article I tried a little experiment with scented inks, thinking I could capture the memory from a page with the memory of a smell. Unfortunately the scents don't last very long, but I figured I'd try something new anyway. I call it Rose Ink. You'll never guess what scent the first batch is in..." Ink Well unstopped the ink pot, the gentle scent of lilacs rising in the air, completely masking the smell of the ink underneath. Everypony smiled as the scent reached them, the entire room enjoying the smell of fresh flowers.

He returned the stopper, placing both the ink pot and the pen in the holster on his bag. "You ponies are so amazing. All of you. You deserve so much more than my thanks and a dinky little story in a magazine." Everypony in the room politely declined the compliment in their own way, apart from Rainbow Dash who reveled in it. As their reactions ended, Ink Well spoke again. "So, I have a question. During my time in Ponyville I heard an amazing story about you six and Nightmare Moon... Would it be alright if I wrote something about it? I think it has the makings of a play."

Twilight's eyebrow raised. "Nightmare Moon? Isn't that story already a legend even though it was less than a year ago?"

Ink Well nodded. "Exactly. It's a legend. It already has the status of an old mare's tale. I want ponies to know what happened, who did it, to maybe learn something from all of it. To me that just screams a play."

Rainbow looked unconvinced. "You mean like on a stage? Are you crazy? Who'd want to watch that?"

"I don't know, making ponies want to watch it would be my job. But the material is there, if you just want to..." He could tell that none of the six were particularly enthused with the idea of a story of them getting out, and so he backed off. "Never mind. It's not important. Just give it a good think over and a yes or no. It was just a silly idea."

An awkward silence filled the room for a few seconds before Pinkie piped up. "Why are we all sitting here quiet? Silly ideas deserve laughter, and if they won't get them, I know what will! It's time to paaaartay!" She

bumped the needle on the record player, music instantly filling the void. Everypony loosened up, slowly starting to dance and talk amongst each other. Eventually even Ink Well got into it, finding himself in another game of Twister with Rainbow Dash. He lost hooves down, but with that the party officially kicked into high gear.

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As the party continued late into the night Ink Well gravitated towards the edge, watching the others having fun dancing and talking and playing games, all of them looking so happy. Scanning the scene he happened to catch a glimpse of red going out the door, the bell ringing quietly and unheard over the music and the laughter. Concerned, Ink Well followed, walking around the room so as not to make a scene before exiting.

Outside Rose stood alone, staring up at the night sky. The moon was big and bright with few clouds blocking it, allowing it to cast a steely glow over the dark landscape. An out-of-place mist hung near the ground, little swirls and eddies in its flow making it seem like she was standing on a cloud. Ink Well's heart dropped when he looked at her, remembering the night he shared with her soaring over the stormy skies. Slowly he walked up next to her, his brace clinking with the final step as he joined her in looking at the heavens.

After a few moments in silence, Rose spoke. "I always find the night sky so calming. Just the thought of the world sleeping soundly putting my mind at ease."

Ink Well smiled to himself, nodding. "Yeah... Sometimes I wonder when I write if I'm somehow tapping into the dreams of a thousand sleeping ponies or if all the words on the paper are truly my own..."

Rose smirked at him sidelong. "Are you kidding? Stealing their dreams? Oh no, those words are you. Only you can be that sappy and sincere."

"Well, guess that solves that conundrum, doesn't it?" The two ponies looked at each other, breaking into laughter as their eyes caught the others. When the moment had passed, Ink Well took a step closer. "So why'd you leave the party?"

Rose sighed, shrugging. "I don't know. Despite how friendly they all are, I just don't think I fit in with their group, you know? Like I'm an outsider barging into their space. I was never exactly a huge fan of parties anyway..." She took a step towards him, eyebrow raised. "So why did you follow me? Isn't this party for you?"

Ink Well tipped his hat down, looking into the mist around his hooves. "I don't exactly like parties either. I'm sure you've realized, but I don't like to be the center of attention." He looked back into the gingerbread house holding the party, the six within oblivious to the talk outside. "I know what you mean though. They just work so well together, that group. It'd be a crime to split them up or muscle in on it. It'd probably be best if I left quietly." He looked at Rose, sadness on his face. "And not just the party. I really should be moving on..."

Rose looked concerned, but there was a playful edge to her face. "And where will you go Mr. Famous Journalist? Do you have a plan?"

Ink Well kicked a hoof against the dirt, the mist swirling around to conceal it once more. "Well there's that play idea I pitched inside that I still think could be interesting, but with no house, no back up, and currently no income I'm going to have to get a job again. Find an apartment with the money I have, hope that some sort of offer comes in after all of this. If I ever write that second novel I promised myself I might be able to afford another house one day." Despite what he said, he smiled at her. "Eh, I'm not too worried. Everything will be fine, whatever happens."

Rose nodded, turning to look back to the sky. "Oh, I believe you. But that doesn't sound like a very solid plan..." She looked at him as if in passing. "If you would like, I'm sure I could let you stay at my house a few nights more, until your hooves are on the ground."

Ink Well shook his head, waving his unbraced hoof before him. "Oh no. You've already done too much for me. Taking care of me when I was injured, reminding me to eat the entire time I was writing, multiple instances of waking up at the work table with the blanket around my shoulders, all the pain I caused you, the running around town, the injuries..."

Rose picked up the list as he petered out. "... the joys, the sky, a new way of thinking, a new me, that reassuring smile, the great conversations, the moments of laughter..."

Ink Well kept going, less sure in his argument than he was before. "I've far outstayed my welcome, no matter how much I wish I hadn't." His hoof shot to his mouth, the words slipping out before he could stop himself.

Rose didn't even respond, still looking up at the sky. "You keep talking about it like it's a burden. Even after your victories against the Equirer and the end of the slump in your career, you still talk as though you're just this huge weight everypony has to carry around. You have GOT to work on that self esteem problem." She turned around, ivy eyes shining in the moonlight. "It would be a pleasure, Ink Well, if you were to stay here with me."

Ink Well looked excited, eager for this to be true but apprehensive that he might jinx it. "Are you sure? Because I really don't want you to dislike me for staying too-" His stammering was broken off by Rose's kiss, his wings extending in shock before he slowly melted into it, eyes closing and savoring the moment. He even leaned forward after her as she pulled back, both of them blushing as they looked at each other.

"I'm sure. Let's head home." Inside the party continued, ponies laughing and playing in the warm electric lights. But out in the cool night air the couple moved, skipping across the cloud tops and soaring of their own accord, all the joy they needed in each other's company.

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## The End of Newsworthy

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# Source Material

## Chapter 1

### Overture

The tan furred pegasus leaped back, dodging the swinging blade and landing lightly on the wood floor. Before him stood the dark green unicorn, a cold look in her eyes and a glow around her horn. Between them floated the blade, long and gleaming in the dim light, a green glow around the gilded snake-themed grip. She smiled cruelly. "Come, come, Ink Well! Don't tell me you're giving up already. Where's all of the bravado from earlier? Weren't you going to stop me?"

The pegasus snarled at the smug unicorn. "I will defeat you Viper! I will not let your evil spread any further!"

The green unicorn laughed. "Evil? No! Celestia is just such a boring ruler, it's time for a change! And I'll be the one to bring it."

"Not if I can help it!" The pegasus jumped forward, swinging wildly with a hoof that was easily sidestepped by the unicorn. He swung again, this time with the brace that wrapped his right front leg, and was parried by the sword. The sword swung around, scything the air and connecting with the pegasi's wing, a red splash appearing on it.

The pegasus stepped back, staring at the unicorn with a wounded look on his face. "Hey! What was that for? Be careful with that thing!"

A frustrated sigh came from the darkness surrounding them. "Ugh! Lights!" Light flashed on in the room, revealing a large proscenium arch, the two ponies standing center stage. Not five feet away stood a silver furred unicorn in a black beret, a golden glow surrounding the megaphone floating before him. He walked over to the pegasus, megaphone filling the

space between the unicorn's mouth and the pegasus's ear. "WHAT IS IT THIS TIME, SPOTLIGHT?"

The pegasus recoiled away, his blond mane flowing behind him and his blue eyes looking pained. "What are you yelling at me for? Center Stage was the one who messed things up!" Upon his flank shone a golden star for a cutie mark.

The green furred unicorn shook her head, her orange eyes glaring at Spotlight. Upon her flank was a stage, the red curtains flung wide. "I did not! You're supposed to get hit there! Maybe if you learned the choreography..."

The pegasus rounded on her. "Oh so now it's *my* fault? You're the one swinging wildly!"

The two ran at each other, held back by the silver furred unicorn with the megaphone cutie mark. "Ponies! We don't have time for bickering! In less than a week it will be the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Alliance, and we don't have time for mess ups like this! They will be expecting a perfect show at the celebration, and we can not disappoint!" He sighed, tapping a hoof as he turned to the empty house behind them, hundreds of white cushioned seats staring back at him. "Nearly three quarters of a century ago the pony you portray, Spotlight, opened his first show in this very theater. He had so much from his own life to pull on and would gain so much more, and instead he told the legend of the Elements of Harmony's return in his famous play, Night's Wrath. He was a great writer, a humble stallion of unlimited potential, and a shining example amongst ponies. And it is down to us to tell his story."

The directory turned around, an angry look in his eye as he advanced towards the pegasus, megaphone slowly being placed to amplify his words. "So if you think that this selfish diva attitude is going to get *things done*, you *can just* STAY HERE AND PRACTICE ALL NIGHT! I WILL NOT TOLERATE ANYTHING BUT PERFECTION! **GOT THAT?**" The pegasus recoiled again, the megaphone amplified past the norm with a boost from the director's magic. The director waited until Spotlight's head stopped reeling before continuing. "You are going to channel him, get in tune with his spirit. Run your lines, practice your choreography, and do NOT leave this building! I expect a marked improvement by tomorrow or I shall be



looking for a new Ink Well. Got that?" The director's chin rose, snubbing his nose at Spotlight. "Center Stage, we go! Let us leave him to his studies."

The two unicorns left the stage and walked the long walk through the house, the green unicorn giving Spotlight a smug smirk and a victory huff before proceeding through the door, the silver one on her heels. Soon after they left the house lights dimmed, leaving Spotlight alone in a pool of white light on the open stage.

He kicked a floorboard, muttering quietly to himself. "If you love the old colt so much why aren't you doing that show instead of this piece of trash. 'Get in tune with him' he says. 'You're being a diva' he says." He frowned at the ground, stomping hard on the wooden floor. "Oh I'll show him I'm no diva! I'll be the most accurate, most perfect, most humble actor he's ever seen!" He stood up proudly, a hoof over his heart and a fire in his eyes. He smiled vindictively. "That'll teach him not to recognize true talent."

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"No Princess!" Spotlight swept a hoof through the air in front of him, conviction in the motion. "Be not so hard on the poor ponies of the magazines! They knew not what they did. Instead, allow them to pay penance with their printings. Let an apology be written, along with the truth in print for all to see!" He completed the final swoop of his leg and stopped, face contorting as he looked back at the script sitting at the edge of the light. "That can't be right. This can't have been written that badly..." He hovered over the book, scanning the page with a disbelieving frown. "Wow... I guess it can. Humble pony my flank." He kicked it closed, the pages fluttering shut before him.

As he walked into the pool of light once more, muscles at the ready for dramatic posing, a sound drifted from the dark auditorium to his ears. Footsteps clacked down the aisle of the theater, slowly approaching the stage and oddly loud considering the muffling effect of the carpeted floor. Spotlight smirked, seething quietly as he stared into the wall of darkness. "So, had a change of heart, have you? Saw my magnificence and realized your error?" No response came, the steps echoing loudly in the empty building. Spotlight's brow twitched once, a saccharine smile masking his annoyance as he spoke in a singsong voice. "I am as kind and friendly as can be, ready to work with my fellow actress and be truly humble. Isn't that

nice?" The clanking stopped, a silent presence visible at the stage's edge, staring at him. The two stood there for almost a minute, the figure motionless, Spotlight's smile slowly fading as he awaited a response.

Spotlight's lip curled, sneering at the silent figure, indignation spilling out. "Well? That's what you wanted, isn't it?" He walked closer to the silent figure, anger showing with each step. "Come on! What's all this teasing? Speak up!" He flew from the light, circling the dark figure once before landing in front of it roughly. A hood concealed the owner of the form, an impenetrable darkness leaving it invisible, which only enraged Spotlight further. "Quit with the games and tell me what you want!"

The hooded figure did not move, did not acknowledge him, but from the hood came a faint whirring noise, followed at the end by a loud 'click'. "I am here for the source." The response was cold and mechanical, each word sharp, ringing with a metallic tone.

Spotlight took a step back, confusion adding to the creases of rage on his features. "What is this? Who are you?"

The figure was still, the whirring and click happening again before the response. "I came for the source." A differently pitched whir came from the hood and Spotlight felt as though he was being evaluated through and through, all the way to his bones. After a few moments of this the whirring stopped, replaced by the original tone, cut off once more by the click. "You are not the source."

Spotlight sputtered for a moment, shaking his head and giving the figure a look reserved for a lunatic. "Of course I'm not 'the source'! Don't you know who I am? I'm Spotlight, greatest actor in Manehattan! Who do you think you are just barging in here? Doesn't this place have security? This is it! This is the final straw. I am walking!" He stormed past the figure, bumping against its shoulder in an attempt to push it aside, but the form was surprisingly solid, causing him to rebound off and fall against the seats. He wheeled on the immobile figure. "Hey! Watch where you're going bud!"

The sound of metal sliding on metal caught his attention, followed by a menacing 'snick!' that forced his vision to the front of the cloaked form. Its leg was raised, a long, light blade seeming to extend from the base of its hoof. The figure turned rigidly, the blade catching the light from the stage,

gleaming coolly. The pegasus backed up, all rage replaced with fear as he tried to placate the form. "Hey, hey. We don't have to go that far. Just a misunderstanding, right buddy?"

The figure faced him, hood still hiding the pony within. Whirrrr. Click! "Copies must be removed." It took a step forward, leg swiveling to point the blade at Spotlight's neck.

The pegasus's eyes stayed locked on it as he slowly backed away, quickly running once more into the seats behind him. He stared frightfully at the cold steel. "No! What are you doing? I didn't mean it!" He sank into the seat, legs locking and wings trying to form a barrier between the two. "Stop! No!" He let out a scream as the blade raised, cowering into the chair.

The leg fell, the screaming suddenly silenced.

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Within four dusty rose walls stood a parchment furred pegasus, the ends of his legs capped with darker patches, like paper licked by a flame. Upon his flank gleamed a golden ink pot, a blue fountain pen leaning against it. He was rummaging through a brown messenger bag with a clasp that matched his cutie mark, his emerald eyes going over each and every item in detail. "Ink, pen, paper, money, ticket, train ticket, directions to the theater, directions to the hotel..." He turned around, grabbing a matching brown fedora off of a peg at the top of the stairs, affixing it upon his inky blue-black mane. "Hat! That should be everything." He slung the bag over his back, feeling its weight settle on his left side as he went down from the living room and into the room below.

Darkly painted walls surrounded the windowless room, the area within dominated by the many varied brass beasts, large carefully decorated tanks and vats with similarly plated piping snaking off of them and going every which way. Most would not know what possible purpose this room could hold, marveling at the intricate machinery, but the pegasus entered the perfumery without a second glance, used to the sight of the stills. He had, after all, been living here for eight months, though the telltale signs of it were limited to the cloud bed upstairs positioned next to the down filled one and the state of the worktable in the distillery: half of it occupied by flowers, woods, and fruits and the other half matted with an

array of papers covered in writing and scratchings. Even though he'd been here so long, and despite his girlfriend's insistence, he still thought of it as 'her' house. That said, it was certainly growing on him.

He went through the door at the other end of the distillery, the only exit other than the stairs, and ended up behind the counter of the Rosewater perfume shop. Rows upon rows of displays were filled with glass perfume bottles, each filled with a slightly differing colored liquid from the ones around them. A small display on the counter held jet black bottles labeled 'Rose Ink', not a single bottle missing from it.

Near the center of the shop stood a cream colored earth pony, her bobbed rose-and-pink bi-colored mane framing her face as she gazed intently at the worn brown suitcase beneath her. As the pegasus rounded the counter she looked up with her ivy eyes, smiling at him. "Hey there Ink Well! Got everything you need?"

Ink Well tipped his hat at her, then nodded to the bag at his side. "Yep. Everything I could possibly need."

The earth pony frowned. "Let me guess, nothing but writing supplies, right?" The look on Ink Well's face answered her question for her. "We're going to Manehattan for just two nights, what'll you have time to write about?"

He looked offended by her statement. "Hey! You never know! Perhaps inspiration will strike for my next novel, and then where will I be? Better to be prepared than regretful."

"Uh huh." She walked over to him, noting the hat on his head and the playful smile that had worked its way onto his face. "You're just going to wear that to the opening, aren't you?"

He looked confused, hesitating to respond. "...Yeah?"

She bumped him with her shoulder, snatching the hat off of his head while he regained his balance. "You wear that every day! Don't you have something better?"

He looked at his hat and bag. "What's wrong with these? Fedoras are cool!"

"Cool, yes, but not acceptable!" She placed the fedora on her own head, looking at him from under its brim. "This is a big occasion Ink Well, it calls for a special outfit."

He smirked at her. "Special outfit? You'd be amazed how many fancy parties I got into with shabbier than this."

She walked over to him, tapping his nose with her hoof. "Yes, but you were just a scruffy journalist back then, Inky. Now you're a big Broadway playwright, and you're going to have to look the part!"

Ink Well waved his hoof dismissively. "Ah, Rose, you know I'm no big time pony. Dressing up wouldn't be me."

Rose tapped a hoof on the floor, shaking her head. "I'm not hearing it. We've got fifteen minutes before the train leaves." She moved behind him, pushing him gently towards the door. "You run to the Boutique and see if Rarity can fix you up with something. I need to go finish packing, so far my suitcase is just samples, but I'm sure I'll find a buyer for that ink line, I can feel it!"

Ink Well turned around at the exit, smiling playfully. "Oh, you're always thinking about sales, Rosy. Come on! Enjoy it! It's a free trip to the big city!"

Rose tipped Ink Well's hat at him. "I will Inky, don't you worry, but I can work and have fun at the same time." She tossed him his hat, which he caught with ease, placing it back on his head. "Now get moving, I'll meet you at the station." She picked up her suitcase, walking towards the back room of the shop as Ink Well went through the front door. Once outside he inhaled deeply, taking in the fresh Ponyville air before leaping up high, extending his wings banking towards the Carousel Boutique.

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Ink Well entered the store a minute later to the jingle of a silver bell and a call of "Just a moment please!" He took a few steps into the highly

decorated building, with dress forms in beautiful outfits next to the grand purple curtains that lined the walls, and waited for further instruction. After a moment a blue glow surrounded a screen on the central stage, whipping it to the side to reveal Rarity herself with her pristine white coat and flawlessly curled purple mane. She looked over her small red glasses, playing with the tape measure around her neck before her face lit up with recognition. "Ah! Ink Well, come in! I'm just going to finish up with Twilight and then I'll be right with you." Ink Well walked further into the shop, peering around a curtain to see Twilight also on the center stage on a small raised area, a brilliant deep blue dress with a night sky motif complementing her purple fur perfectly. Rarity was leaning in close, magically placed a few pins and fixing the hem while Twilight waved at Ink Well.

"Hello Ink Well. It was so kind of your to invite us to the opening of your play. I know it'll be amazing."

Ink Well shook his head, like what Twilight said was absurd. "Of course I'd invite you, it's your story! All I did was write it down."

Twilight smiled. "There you go deflecting compliments again. Still, it means a lot to us. Rarity even made us all dresses for the occasion!"

Ink Well looked at the dress she had on and marveled. "She does some amazing work, I must say. Are you going to be on the upcoming train too?"

Twilight shook her head. "Oh no. I'd be at the train station already if that were the case. All of us decided to take the later one."

Rarity stood up from where she'd knelt down, a joyous look on her face. "There! Perfect. You're done now Twilight, I'll have it ready with the others when we leave." Twilight nodded, heading off to the changing area while Rarity turned to Ink Well. "And what brings you in, Ink Well?"

He stated his purpose dismissively, waving a hoof lazily. "Oh, Rose insists that I get some nicer clothes for the opening, but I don't-"

Rarity gasped, running over to him. "You were going to go to the opening in this?! Oh no no no no! Rose is right! Luckily, when she came by

she thought something like this might happen, and I was prepared!" One of the dress forms flew over from the side of the room, this one in a black tuxedo and top hat with emerald green bow tie and accents. "Understated, yet with the class necessary, a simple jacket that just beams 'important'. Do you like it?"

Ink Well looked it over as Rarity's magic rotated it before him, nodding in approval. "Wow, very nice. It's perfect except for just one thing..."

Rarity looked disheartened. "And what is that?"

"There's no way to carry anything."

Rarity looked at him like he was insane. "Carry anything? This is formal attire, darling! It's for looking good, not for lugging around items. What could you possibly want with you?"

Ink Well kicked the floor sheepishly. "Well, call me crazy, but I like to have my writing supplies on me at all times. You never know when something is going to happen. I'm still kicking myself that I lost my notes on the Discord debacle just because I only had the one piece of paper and the pencil. Granted the way they turned into a whale and a potted plant respectively while I was flying over Ponyville was an interesting story in itself, but if I'd had my notepad with me maybe the day wouldn't be relegated to memory of the sticky red confetti that accompanied the whale's impact..." He noticed the horrified look on her face and just smiled. "Yeah, well, long story short, could you incorporate a bag into this somehow?"

Rarity's look of horror slowly faded, replaced by an unsure affirmative nod. "Y-yes. I could do that. When are you leaving? I'll have it ready by then!"

Ink Well looked out a nearby window to the clock tower of the school. "About... ten minutes."

Ink Well could have sworn he saw her mane frizz in front of him, a faint twitch appearing under her eye for just a second. "Ten minutes..." She composed herself remarkably from the shock, fixing her mane with a quick shake of her head and her smile returning in an instant. "I don't think I can

manage a bag that fast, but I could whip you up some pockets. I'm afraid those will have to do."

He nodded. "Of course, whatever you can manage would be amazing. Thank you Rarity. Sorry for the extra work."

"Not at all!" She was already magicking over a sewing machine and the needed materials, and in a short eight minutes two outside pockets and an interior one had been added, all fitting the overall look and form of before without a hint of alteration. After that she folded it all and wrapped it in a neat bundle for him, which he placed in his bag. "There you are!"

"This is wonderful. How much do I owe you?"

Rarity thought for a moment, then smiled brightly at him. "Consider it a gift for the upcoming show! Just be sure to tell anypony who asks who made it for you!"

Ink Well looked at her, stunned by her generosity. "Of course, but are you sure? It doesn't feel quite right to-"

Rarity nudged him towards the door with her horn. "We can talk about right and wrong later, Ink Well, right now you need to be on your way or you'll miss your train!"

Ink Well snapped to attention at the word. "Oh inkblots you're right." Wings flew open as he ran towards the door, calling once more behind him before he took off. "Sorry to run, but thanks again! I'll see you tonight!" Rarity went to the door to wave him off, but he was already long gone, just a pair of flapping wings and retreating legs skimming over the rooftops.

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Ink Well ran into the train station just as the whistle was blowing, steam billowing out of the engine as it rared to go. Through its swirls he saw Rose arguing with the conductor to hold the train just a little longer. He ran up behind them, ticket already in mouth for inspection and breathing heavily from the sudden sprint, having made it across town in a time Rainbow Dash would have found impressive. Rose rolled her eyes, getting on the train as the unicorn in the blue uniform took the ticket snappily,



glaring at both him and it before returning it and letting him on. "Next time try to be here *before* we leave, will you?" Ink Well gave him a sheepish grin and an apology before jumping on the train, hearing the whistle blow its farewell and feeling the train move beneath him almost immediately.

He caught up with Rose in the private cars, finding the cabin that matched their ticket number within and hurrying inside. Along one of the red wood paneled walls was a long plush red seat with gold trimming sitting perpendicular to the window, the red curtains drawn aside so they could see the countryside already beginning to rush past. Across from the seats was an equally plush double bed, the red and gold motif continuing here, and a small wood cupboard for luggage. Beneath their hooves was red carpeting that they seemed to sink into, with swirls of gold creating an intricate fire pattern on the floor.

Both stood for a few moments admiring the room, Ink Well in slight shock with it all. He was only broken from his stupor as Rose moved past, placing her bag within the cupboard and taking a place on the seat. He moved slowly into the room, attention now drawn to the hills rushing past outside. "Are all trains like this?"

Rose arched an eyebrow at him from her seat. "Surely you've been on a train before? It must have been part of the job."

He shook his head, eyes not moving from the hurrying landscape. "No. I always had to fly everywhere, and that's nothing like this. I mean, we're going so fast! All without having to flap or run or anything!" He turned around, jumping up onto the bed and feeling the mattress absorb his feet. "And this room! This bed's competing with clouds for softness, and all the gold trimming..." He flopped down on the bed, messing up the comforter as he snuggled into it. "If this is what all trains are like I'm never winging it again!"

Rose laughed at the pegasus as he scrunched himself into the sheets, rapidly becoming a ball of fabric with a brown fedora sitting on top. "Enjoy it while it lasts. The general sections of these aren't nearly as posh." She moved herself slightly on the seat, sinking into an even more comfortable position with a contented sigh. "Or as plush. They must really like you to be shelling out these kinds of bits. Last time I was able to afford

a train ride all I got was a hard wooden bench and a window. Then again, it was the class trip, we weren't exactly buying for luxury."

Just then the door opened, the conductor walking inside. "Tickets please." As he noticed the occupants of the room his neutral demeanor turned slightly sour. Rose offered hers as Ink Well slowly extricated himself from the sheets. He offered his ticket once more, garnering a confused sneer from the conductor who obviously thought him unworthy of the cabin. The unicorn punched a hole in the tickets before returning them with a lackluster "Enjoy your trip." He then exited, leaving the two alone in the cabin once more.

Ink Well looked over at Rose, nervously running hoof over the back of his neck. "I don't think the conductor likes me..."

Rose looked back at him, shaking her head slowly. "I don't think he does either. But at least he let you on! Another thirty seconds and I think you'd have been left at the station."

He kicked reluctantly at the carpeting. "That's all my fault for wanting Rarity to modify that tux... I'm sorry."

She smiled at him as she returned to her seat by the window. "Hey, don't worry about it! I shouldn't have let it go to last minute like that. But it's all in the past now. Just be glad I was there to stall for time."

Ink Well nodded as he took of his bag, placing it in the storage area. "Oh I'm glad for that. And for sending me out for that spiffy outfit..." He turned back towards her and sat down, starting an invisible tally as his list continued. "...and making sure I was eating when I was focused on the writing, and your smiling face in the mornings, and for taking me in after that whole mess last year..."

Rose sighed at him. "If you're going to keep bringing *that* up we're never going to be on even footing. I already told you I was more than happy to."

"Yeah, I know, but it was kind of a big thing." He walked over, sitting down next to her and smiling. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Rose looked back at him, slightly annoyed. "Well you seem to have been making a good go of it these last few months. Barely seen you with all your last minute flights to these rehearsals."

Ink Well's smile faded as he saw the look on her face. "Oh... I'm sorry Rosy. I wasn't even supposed to be involved once the script was turned over, but Blues had me running notes to the musical director and the producer just insisted that I keep getting called in so that 'it would be just as I envisioned it' and then they wanted that extra song added and character work..." He scooted closer on the seat and threw a wing over her, hugging her close to him. "I promise I'll make it up to you, alright? When this is over we'll go on a getaway, just the two of us, whatever you like."

Her look didn't change. "Promises promises."

Ink Well looked hurt. "I always keep my promises."

She looked into his eyes, annoyance slowly turning to a smile. "You do." She sighed worriedly, smile sinking into sadness. "But we can't afford a getaway Ink Well. And with the Gala coming up it's getting near the big rush, I can't go leaving anyway... But I don't want to go anywhere. I just want our paths to converge a little more often."

Ink Well nuzzled her softly. "They will." She continued to look disheartened, mind elsewhere as she looked at him. To pull her from her state he leaned in close, kissing her lightly on the nose. "I love you Rose."

She smiled warmly, returning the kiss before snuggling closer to him. "I love you too."

The couple sat together the entire train ride, talking and laughing and catching up with each other. The train rocked and clacked around them, the world whizzed past the window, and passengers walked down the length of the train to get out of their hard seats and stretch their legs, but within the red wood walls the two ponies were oblivious, focused entirely on their companion as they made up for lost time.

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Five hours later the couple was stretching their legs in the afternoon Manhattan air, the bright sun shining down and baking the tall concrete buildings that surrounded them. Rose gazed upwards, instantly entranced by the buildings above, the sky scrapers far taller than even the spires of Canterlot. Ink Well on the other hoof was focused on the ground, taking out the directions to the hotel and looking for street signs. Getting his bearings from the nearest intersection he walked back to collect Rose and begin their travels when he was stopped by a sky blue earth pony in a sharp light grey uniform that matched her mane. "Excuse me, are you Ink Well?"

Ink Well nodded, curiosity trumping trepidation. "Yeah, that's me."

The pony smiled, her orchid eyes beaming friendliness as she tipped her hat to him. "The name's Shoeshine. The company sent me to drive you to the hotel. Is she your plus one?" She pointed to Rose, whose gaze had traveled down from the sky and to the large crowds moving along the streets.

Ink Well nodded. "Yeah, that's Rose. But you were sent to drive me?"

Shoeshine nodded. "Yes sir!" She whistled loudly, looking down the street. As Ink Well turned to look, he saw a shiny black stretch carriage being pulled down the street by two gleaming white stallions. It pulled up next to them, gliding to a halt on the cobbles. Ink Well was looking over the magnificent vehicle when Shoeshine popped up behind him. "Here we are! Your ride."

"Wait, this?" Ink Well was embarrassed as he looked back at the large black vehicle, the tinted windows and the gold trimming setting this a league apart from most carriages. He looked over at the street sign nervously. "I don't think we need to be driven... it's only a few block away."

The pony shook her hoof at him. "Ah ah ah! Yours is not to question, but to enjoy the ride." She pulled open the carriage door to reveal a blue velvet interior, which despite his hesitance drew Ink Well in with its comfy appearance. Inside was a pair of seats facing each other, a small ice chest with sparkling cider and glasses, and cool crisp air that washed over him, drawing his hooves unconsciously closer. Shoeshine smiled as he stepped inside. "I'll just let you get acquainted while I get your friend."

By the time Rose was led to the carriage and the door was closing behind her Ink Well was sprawled on his back across the backwards facing seat, a blissful smile on his face. She sunk into the seat opposite, sighing joyfully as the seat cradled her. A moment later the vehicle was on it's way, the cobbles beneath slowly rolling by. Ink Well sighed contentedly from his seat, looking out at the buildings sliding away. "So soft... I could get used to this."

Rose smiled as she reached out for a cider bottle. "They sure are treating you nicely. There has to be a catch for all of this."

Ink Well flipped over, looking slightly worried. "I don't think there's a catch, but... it's just a play. I don't think we needed the paid train tickets or the private carriage... And I'm starting to fear what the hotel will look like. It's not that long or tiring of a flight... I don't deserve all of this."

Rose gave him an annoyed smirk, popping the cork on the bottle and pouring a glass for each of them. "Maybe they were thinking about me. Not all of us are graced with those lovely wings, Ink Well, and the trek by foot takes nearly a day." Ink Well looked at the floor, slightly embarrassed, while Rose's smile warmed. "But I see what you're saying. They certainly went overboard." She gave him his glass, raising her own slightly before sipping from it, feeling the cool tingling apple taste spread out. This was high end, even better than Applejack had to offer. She looked up to see Ink Well just staring at the glass worriedly, unwilling to take a drink. She smiled at him, trying to get him from his funk. "Hey! It's a vacation, remember? A free trip to the big city? If they want to pamper us, I say we enjoy it while it lasts."

Ink Well nodded. "You're right. I just need to stop worrying. If they feel I deserve this, who am I to question it?"

Rose smiled, reaching over to top off her glass. "Exactly! It's a compliment! They aren't all bad like you seem to think."

As she poured the carriage came to a gently stop, the door soon after opening to the beaming face of Shoeshine. "Here we are! The Shetland Hotel. Please watch your step as you exit the carriage." She noted the bottle in Rose's mouth, mid pour. "And feel free to take that with you. It would just go flat in here." She offered a hoof to help Rose and Ink Well from the vehicle, Rose's suitcase waiting for her as she exited. Rose

thanked Shoeshine and walked inside to check on the reservations while Ink Well stayed behind.

Ink Well turned to Shoeshine, tipping his hat. "Thank you very much for the ride."

She smiled, shaking her head. "Not at all! It is my job after all." She looked at a watch on her foreleg. "Huh. Three o' clock. Bit later than I thought... Well, I'll be back at five to pick you up again, alright?"

Ink Well furrowed his brow. "Five? The show starts at half past seven, why would we want to get there so early?"

Shoeshine shrugged. "Dunno. That's what the company said, and I don't ask them questions. It's simpler that way." She looked at him like he wasn't thinking straight.. "But don't you want to get a good seat? It's a Broadway play! I'd give my left hoof to get into one of them!"

Ink Well rubbed his neck nervously. "I've already got a seat waiting for me. And I dunno, maybe I'm jaded on the whole prospect, but I really don't want to have to mingle too much beforehoof... Not much of a ponies pony, ya know?"

Shoeshine nodded knowingly. "Ah. Gotcha. How's about... oh let's cut it close! Seven good for you?"

Ink Well nodded. "That would actually be amazing, but won't you get in trouble?"

She waved it away. "Don't worry about it. You're the ride, after all. What you say goes. Besides, the boys'll appreciate the extra time off." She climbed up onto the front of the carriage, grabbing the reigns and waving as it started to move. "Have a good one!"

Ink Well waved back. "You too!" When the carriage turned the corner, Ink Well turned around, walking up the grand red carpet into the Shetland Hotel.

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Just before seven Ink Well stood in the penthouse suite dressed in his tuxedo and top hat, mane and tail brushed and overall cleaned up quite nicely. While he'd not tried on the jacket before, it was tailored perfectly, as expected, with both his notepad and pen fitting in without distorting the coat. It was almost like Rarity had known he'd ask ahead of time, not rushed them in ten minutes. He smirked at the thought as he crossed the marble floor from the giant green and gold double bed and knocked on the bathroom door. "Come on Rose! How long does it take to get ready? We're going to be later than our already delayed arrival!"

"Just a moment more! I'm trying to look my best. Though I would have liked it if you asked me about showing up later. I would have agreed." Came the response from behind the door.

The pegasus sighed on the other side. "Yeah... I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking... Just... do hurry." He paced into the center of the room, looking over the space they'd been given for the weekend and feeling inadequate in the space suited for royalty. Between the jade statues, the potted plants, the chandelier, the green and gold carpeting, the beautifully papered walls, the stunning vision of most of the city from the high vantage point, the lights twinkling far below... It was all way too much. Too large, too grand... it could never be a home. And he knew he didn't deserve this nice a treatment, no matter how much they liked his work...

Behind him the door swung open, the sound of a hoof landing on stone coming behind it. "Here I am Ink Well, how do I look?"

Ink Well's jaw dropped when he saw her. She was a stunning vision in an ivy evening gown, a simple vine pattern running down it, culminating in a rose clasp at the shoulder. Her feet were adorned with delicate green slippers with ribbons that wound up and around her legs. Her hair was styled no differently, but seemed to shine with a light of its own, accentuating her perfectly made up face: not too much, but just enough to bring out her beauty.

After a few moments in stunned silence Rose smiled. "I take it that's good?"

Ink Well shook his head, putting his mind back in order. "Oh yes. You look, well, stunning. Shall we?" He offered her a leg to thread her own

through, which she did, and together they walked through the door and down to the front of the hotel. Waiting out front was the carriage, the door already open, and Shoeshine, a smile on her face as she readied to drive. Ink Well helped Rose up before climbing in himself, closing the door to their blue velvet box as the vehicle began to roll.

A few brief luxurious minutes later the carriage pulled up to the front of the theater, the Trottington Grand. Marble columns adorned the corners and the entryway to the three story behemoth, the exterior painted and carved to look as though made of clouds in the Ancient Pegasus fashion. A red carpet lined the sidewalk from the twin double-doors, the empty ticket booth sitting prominently between them. Lines of ponies ran down the block on either side of the entrance, straining behind the red velvet ropes that kept them at bay. Ink Well and Rose were led down the carpet by Shoeshine, both somewhat nervous under the attentions of the ponies gazing raptly at them. Halfway down the runway they were greeted by a whirlwind of a silver unicorn, her jade green mane overly styled and her lime eyeshadow much too obtrusive, matching her gaudy lime dress. "Ink Well! Darling! Where have you been? You were supposed to arrive almost two hours ago!" She turned to Shoeshine, who was standing unobtrusively to the side. "Why were you running so late, huh? What do we pay you for?"

Ink Well held up a hoof, trying to calm the unicorn. "Now now Marquee, it wasn't her fault. We had a slight wardrobe problem and it took longer than expected to fix it. But we're here now, so let's just send our lovely Ms. Shoeshine on her way and leave making a scene to the show."

The unicorn breathed deeply, stretching out a hoof and calming herself. "You're right, you're absolutely right. Come, let's go." The new trio of ponies entered the theater while the fourth backed away, returning to her carriage. Marquee continued talking the entire way to the door. "Now you've missed all of the pre-show festivities, including the arrival of the Princesses and the Very Important Ponies, as we are asking everypony to take their seats now. It was all very tactless, you know." She shot a glare at Ink Well, causing him to lower the brim of his top hat with his wing, shielding him from the evil eye. "But I'm sure you will be able to make it up to them all with the post-show speech at the after party."

Ink Well tilted his head at her. "Speech? What speech?"



Marquee opened the doors, showing off an intricate fresco that adorned every wall and the ceiling, bright electric lights set high above to resemble the sun as pegasi of old flew and danced and spun around it, frozen forever in the painted cloud city. Unfortunately it did not have much time to be appreciated as she hurriedly led them up one of the grand side staircases and onto the upper landing. "Your speech to the opening crowd! It's become a tradition that the director make a speech before the show, which you missed, and the writer make one after, which you won't." She continued to walk quickly, causing both ponies behind to have to canter to keep up as she hurried down the hallway past the cherubic baby pegasi on either side frolicking through the clouded garden in the walls.

Her mouth moved faster than her legs, which is good or Ink Well and Rose would never have kept up. "It's mostly thanking them all for attending, particularly the royals, and things like what inspired you and how you'd like to thank the actors for their hard work. Nothing too impressive. However, you should know that you have written one of the most popular shows to open on Broadway in years! For the next two months not a seat in this house will be empty, so your speech better live up to that, you got it?" Punctuating the question was her sudden stop as she pulled aside a white curtain, signaling the two to enter the private viewing box.

Ink Well nodded dumbly. "Got it. Inspiring speech after the show."

Marquee smiled sickeningly sweetly at him. "Good. Enjoy your work!" With that she closed the curtain, leaving Rose and Ink Well to ponder their surroundings.

The viewing box was set into the right wall of the building near the stage, giving a fairly poor angle from which to view the show when the cloud themed curtain finally raised, but a wonderful one for viewing the audience. Looking down Ink Well could see straight into the orchestra pit, the many musicians warming up. However the sound of their instruments was drowned out by the sounds of conversation coming from the veritable sea of ponies of all types and colors, all dressed in their very best, which flooded the raked ground seating area as well as both of the balcony levels. In the center on the same level as him, in the very best seats in the house, were both of the alicorn Princesses, Celestia's white coat and golden accessories contrasting Luna's deep blue coat and even deeper blue crown. Seated to Celestia's left were all six bearers of the Elements of

Harmony: Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Applejack, each looking excited for the show, though Applejack and Rainbow were decidedly less excited about their voluminous attire. The dresses they all wore were rather flashy, it had to be said, but they pulled them off amazingly. Next to their excitement Princess Celestia seemed to radiate a calm happiness that could be felt just by looking at her, her pink blue purple and green mane flowing magically in an unfelt wind. However, next to her, Princess Luna looked positively glum, her magical starry night mane hardly moving at all.

Ink Well sat on one of the provided cushions, white and fluffy to match the rest of the décor, his own face showing a hint of worry. Rose sat next to him, immediately picking up on his distress. "Inky? What's wrong? You should be excited! Your show is about to open!"

Ink Well nodded. "I know, it's just... Two months of ponies booking this show? What if they don't like it? What if it isn't good enough? And, even worse, what if one of the Princesses or Fluttershy or her friends don't like the way they were portrayed? It's going to be running for a long time, years if all goes well! I don't want anypony to hate me for it..."

Rose smiled at him. "They aren't going to hate you! You interviewed them beforehoof, got their story on what happened and only wrote down the honest truth. You even wrote a letter to the Princesses asking about it and clearing it with them! You went above and beyond, Ink Well, I think they'll be alright with a little embellishing for the sake of story." She shrugged. "Besides, I'd be more worried for Blues and his songs. There's no way all of those happened." She leaned over the balcony, scanning the audience with her ivy eyes. "Say, where is the guy? Isn't he coming to opening night?"

Ink Well smiled back at her, shaking his head. "You're looking in the wrong place. After I collaborated with him on the music, they asked him to conduct the same time they asked me to direct. Now I'm no director, but he jumped on the chance to get out of the farmer's life." He moved up next to her, pointing down at the big blue stallion standing before the orchestra. "He's down there now. I also heard he joined up with... oh what was their name... The Heartstrings Quintet, I think, and is going by the name Noteworthy."

Rose laughed. "Some ponies, one bit of fame and they get a swelled head. Meanwhile here I am with you, a pony trying to avoid fame like the Cutie Pox."

Ink Well shrugged, taking off his hat and placing it on the floor next to his seat. "I learned my lesson long ago. Don't need a repeat of it."

The lights in the theater dimmed, the audience growing quiet. Slowly, quietly, music began to flow from the orchestra pit, permeating the building as it grew to a slow throb. It was serene, flowing, like a brook through a quiet town. The overture continued as the curtain drew away to reveal Ponyville in miniature, sets almost indistinguishable from the houses of the town, and a purple unicorn arriving on her lonesome, accompanied musically by a single violin. She sang about the town, about Canterlot, about her studies, about her mentor and the evil portents she'd uncovered, neatly setting the stage for the play in the first song with a voice so lyrical and a melody so soothing it entranced the audience, taking them all mentally to the quiet little town. Even far in the back of the theater Princess Luna was hooked, enjoyment plastered on her face. Despite the many repetitions in rehearsals and being on the team that wrote it, Ink Well could do nothing more than shake his head and smile appreciatively. "His head may be swelled, but he is good."

The song ended. Eliciting applause from the crowd as the unicorn went on her way, beginning her quick mission to check on preparation for the next day's celebration. Behind her ran a small filly in a purple and green dragon costume, keeping tabs on the pony and offering smart responses to what she said. First the unicorn met a pink earth pony, with mane frizzy like cotton candy, who, despite the swelling of the music beneath her, gasped and ran, preempting the upcoming song. But with a change in lights and a set swap so smooth it was hard to notice the unicorn was in an orchard, meeting an orange earth pony with blonde hair and a friendly southern accent. And while she weren't one fer' singin' on her own, a multitude of ponies came to join her, her family springing from the woodwork and all introduced in a flurry of melody. Amid another round of applause she sent her new unicorn friend on her way.

And so went the show, the characters revealed, happy songs sung, the one-sided friendships budding with each new character until the six main characters had all been introduced. And soon enough came the party,

a fifteen minute dance of whirling ponies, confetti and cupcakes on the stage within the narrow library set. But as it neared its end, the sun preparing to fail to rise, movement stole Ink Well's attention from the show. Rose was standing up, carefully moving towards the exit curtain. Whispering despite his non-proximity to other patrons, Ink Well called to her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm sorry, I've got to use the restroom." Came the quiet response.

Ink Well looked shocked. "What, now? Can't you hold it? The act one finale is coming up and, if I may say so, it is not something to miss!"

Rose just looked at him blankly. "I know what happens, I was at the actual event, but I'm afraid it's not going to wait any longer."

Ink Well rolled his eyes. "What were you doing that whole time at the hotel?"

"Getting ready." She pouted at him. "Don't give me that look, it's a very delicate process that didn't leave time for business."

"Well, try to get back before it starts." Rose exited, leaving Ink Well to abandon disbelief once more and let himself be absorbed by the show.

Only moments later the curtain opened again, hoof steps entering the private box with a soft 'clack'. They moved in time with the dramatic underscoring of Celestia's disappearance being found out, the steps stopping behind Ink Well as he watched. He could feel somepony hovering behind him, and when the music lulled he whispered over his shoulder, "Well that was fast! Nightmare Moon is about to make her grand entrance! Come on and sit down."

"Don't mind if I do." Came the response, not in a whisper but in a bright male's voice, a hint of a northern accent slipping into it. Confused, Ink Well turned just in time to see a brown earth pony with short, messy chestnut hair and bright blue eyes plop down next to him, munching away happily at a bag of popcorn. Ink Well just stared at the intruder, who adjusted his green tie before placing another hoofful of popcorn in his mouth. The pony smiled, giving a friendly wave before pointing at the

stage. "Ah! I love this part! Smashing effects on this one and just brilliant writing for her dialogue. Fairly close to what she actually said too."

When finally Ink Well was able to wrap his mind around the pony sitting next to him he asked the first thing on his mind. "What are you doing here?" The stallion just looked at him, not seeming to comprehend the question, so Ink Well tried again. "Why are you in my private box?"

Understanding dawned on the interloper. "Ah! Right! Almost forgot. I'm here to tell you to duck."

"What?"

"Duck!" Ink Well felt the air shift behind him and, following the advice of the mysterious pony, dropped to the ground. Thunder clapped on stage, lighting flashing as above him swung a cloaked hoof, occupying where his head had been just a moment before. He looked up at the cloaked figure assaulting him, dramatic music fitting as he stared at the shrouded face. Cymbals crashed, lighting flashing once more on stage as the raised hoof sparked above him, electricity arcing over it. It was raised high, preparing to smash down on him amidst a blare of trumpets.

A hoof wrapped around his own, pulling him out of the way as the sparking leg descended, discharging into the floor. "Run!" Came the advice of his saviour, and next thing he knew Ink Well found himself whisked outside of the curtain, running down the hall as it narrowed to a door that read 'Stageponies only! Do not enter!' Ignoring the sign the brown stallion pulled the parchment pegasus through, slamming it behind him. He then pulled out a strange metallic pen with a blue light at the end, which whined with an unearthly noise. Just audible over the noise of the pen and the sounds of the orchestra came a soft 'click' from the door's lock. That sound caused the earth pony to sigh, replacing the pen and leaning against the door. "Well that could have gone better."

It was then that Ink Well's brain caught up with him, questions flooding to his mouth all at once. "Who was that?"

The earth pony smiled. "Try what."

Ink Well tried again. "What was that?"

The earth pony just shook his head, still looking excited by the whole thing rather than the startled Ink Well felt. "I have no idea. Fun, innit?"

Ink Well's confusion just deepened. "What's going on here?"

The earth pony looked over the railing next to them, able to see far below onto the stage. "I believe it's a show, but I have been known to make that mistake before."

Ink Well's first question from the box finally caught up, the only question his brain could form in its addled state. "Who are you?"

The earth pony stood. "Ah! Now that's an easy one!" He smiled, giving off a childish grin. "I'm the Doctor."