

Mort Takes a Holiday

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Chapter 1

From Terry Trotchett's *A Concise History of Equestria*:

If you were to ask some ponies what they thought of Equestria, there would typically be one of three responses.

Most would happily go on about how it's one of, if not the, most beautiful land they've ever laid eyes on. (Even if it's the only land they've ever laid eyes on, which is quite an impressive feat.) When its lush, sprawling forests aren't meeting you at every turn, you're instead walking through flat, green plains that are punctuated with fields of flowers both unique and sweetly fragrant. The animals, use to the care of the equine inhabitants, are incredibly friendly and would like nothing more than to nuzzle up against some passerby. Not to mention that, for the most part, the citizens are a friendly and hospitable lot.

And Celestia's nice, too.

The second, and far more uncommon, response, is that Equestria is more than a little dangerous, with its habit of attracting not just the sweet, woodland creatures, but also the more dangerous, and often predatory, monsters that tower over your average pony, and just as often sporting a mouth big enough to swallow them whole. That they're mostly cooped up in the Everfree Forest is of little comfort, as the practically organic environment seems to envelop a little more of Equestria each year, and there's a disturbing trend of them coming out for one reason or another to incite panic, destroy both private and public property, and cause general mayhem. (Particularly on Fridays.) The equine citizens are still nice, though are looked at as being in denial of just how terrifying the land really is.

And Celestia's nice, though they think she should be a little more proactive in monster control.

The third response, even more uncommon than the second one, is that Equestria is lazy at best, manipulative at worst. After all, they'll tell you, just about everything about it has to be done by some other pony. The passage

of night and day, the weather, the seasons, even the animals are dictated when to hibernate and when to head south. In their opinion, Equestria is more-than-capable of doing any of these things on its own, but at some point decided to shove the responsibilities onto its brightly-colored, (some would say even marketable) inhabitants. They would argue that if ponykind simply stopped picking up for its slack, Equestria might rise up and move its own celestial objects, change its own seasons, make its own weather, and if they're lucky, do the dishes.

Also, Celestia's nice, but she's suffering terribly from "beaten dam" syndrome, the poor thing.

While the third responders are the source of much derision and ridicule (because how could a world ever make its own wind without ridiculously huge wings?), they do bring up a key feature (though, again, some would call it a "bug") about Equestria: virtually everything about it is moderated by some other, sentient creature.

*There is not one, natural process that does not have some being overlooking its operations. Not the sun, not the moon, not the weather, not the passage of seasons, not even the process that Hoofster described as "that uncomfortable thing that will eventually happen to you, that involves the cessation of breath, vital organs, and having your relatives explain to your foals that you're either sleeping, going on a trip, or taking up a long-term job that involves examining a coffin from the inside. While buried." Or as many others know it, death.**

**For more information about the cessation of breath and vital organs, uncomfortable explanations, etc etc, and all it entails, please turn to page 1,267.*

The moon hung in the night sky, its sickle shape still able to bask the land below it in an eerie glow. A land that was, at the moment, enthralled in an almost barbaric ritual of screaming ponies, lurid dancing, and liquid concoctions of questionable taste, all surrounding a giant altar of wood and metal, where there would blare blasphemous words and unequine melodies from gaudy, perverse idols.

Yes, in spite of protests from some neighboring cults, "Hoovestock: An Equestrian Exposition," was in full swing.

Within the kaleidoscopic vortex of cheering fans and stomping hooves, there was one pony who was making slow, but gradual, progress towards the stage. He weaved through the crowd with meticulous care, attempting to avoid any pony as he went towards his destination.

On first sight, he looked like any, normal pony. He definitely had an equine shape that could be barely made out from the black cloak around his body, a cloak that didn't so much hang as it poured. And the horn that jutted through the top of his hood could easily belong to any unicorn, even if it were moderately scythe-shaped and, upon closer inspection, sharper than any blade that could possibly be forged, whether by earthly or mystical means.

He even looked like a pony under his hood, so long as one ignored the fact that normal ponies would have the decency of wearing skin, blood and muscle over their skeletal heads, and use normal, jelly eyes instead of burning, red dots that could be mistaken for fire pits from a distance.

For right now, though, no one could mistake him for a pony. Or anything else, really. That would require them to see him in the first place.

Every so often, though, some equine would stumble in their euphoria, and as a result graze him. The stumblers, almost immediately, would have the sudden feeling they were being watched, question just what their purpose was in the universe, and suffer from an inescapable feeling of dread. Then their friends would come over, tell them to loosen up, and they would escape that dread anyway in the roaring of the crowd, before forgetting about it all a moment later.

The cloaked pony, for his part, would utter a quick apology (that they wouldn't hear anyway), and continue on his way.

After what could be argued to be a treacherous journey through a writhing sea of high-on-life ponies (while avoiding the occasional steeped-in-alcohol vomit), he came to a stop in front of the stage, just as the Bareback Mares finished and begun to leave. It would be his last destination for the night, and the final destination for one, particularly

unfortunate, pony.

As soon as the last member, Music Page, had left the stage, the lights suddenly darkened. A sudden hush came over the crowd as several thousand sets of eyes turned towards the stage.

The silence was broken by the hissing of machines, billowing plumes of smoke across the stage, so much that it floated down and into the front rows of ponies, causing them to go into hacking fits. (The cloaked pony, having no lungs, wasn't as affected.) A murmur of excited whispers begun to sweep through the crowd.

The stage lights suddenly shot back on, and this time were pointed into the air. Their came a chorus of awed gasps as a huge, stallion skull begun to descend from above, slowing descended towards the stage below. The tacky prop, made of heavy plastic and weaved with iron bars, was almost able to hide the magical glow surrounding it within the smoke on stage.

But as soon as it came to a stop, resting upon iron support beams secretly erected as it made its appearance, there came a sudden explosion of noise (some would argue music) that sent the smoke fleeing through the crowds, revealing a group of ponies who stood beneath the skull.

The most prominent one, standing in front, wearing a white shirt and brown vest combo, with an unruly, blond mane, was the lead singer, Saint Hug 'Ems (who to this day still had trouble living down his name). To his left, wearing a leopard-spotted vest and sporting a long, dark mane, was his long time friend and lead guitarist, Tough Nail. To Hug 'Ems left, wearing a black vest decorated with gold rings, and wearing a rather dashing mustache, was the lead bassists, Smalls.

And in the back, doing the best a pony could do to be conspicuous while manning a large set of drums underneath a ludicrously, large skull, was the band drummer, Red Shrimp, wearing a black vest and packer hat. His desire to stay hidden wasn't completely warrant-less, given the band's history with their drummers.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," a voice boomed over the speakers, "the moment you've been waiting for. This! Is! SPINAL CLOP!"

There came a thunderous applause as jets of flame shot across the stage, illuminating the rock band and flinging sparks across the wooden structure, which had to be quickly extinguished by stage hooves.

Stamping out a little fire that had grown on his mane, St. Hug 'Ems took to the center of the stage, grasping the microphone with his inarticulate hoof.

"HOOVESTOCK!" he shouted, with an accent that even casual listeners could discern as fake. "Are you ready to rock?!"

The response was a cacophony of noise, enough to make the cloak pony wince, and almost lose his concentration on one of the iron supports that was, unbeknownst to others, buckling.

"I didn't quite catch that," Hug 'Ems said, cupping his ears, "I asked are you ready TO ROCK?!"

"YES!"

"What was that?!"

"YES!" The cloaked pony kept his attention towards the support rod, noticing that every scream made it bend just a little more.

"ALRIGHT THEN!" St. Hug 'Ems stood back, his band mates prepping their instruments as they prepared to play their first song. "Let's hit them with everything we got, boys! ONE, TWO, THREE-"

The sound that followed was not the strum of a guitar, the bang of a drum or the off-key notes of a singer. It was instead the sound of an iron bar snapping in two as the rear support for the giant skull finally gave way, causing it fall backwards.

Red Shrimp didn't have time to contemplate what had happened before the giant skull came crashing down on top of him, sending a quake across the stage, send St. Hug 'Ems and Smalls to the stage floor, and causing one floor board to catapult Tough Nail off the stage and into the crowd, where he was caught by ecstatic fanfillies.

Back on stage, St. Hug 'Ems recovered, unstrapping the shattered guitar

that had broken his fall, and looked behind him to see a giant, plastic skull where their drummer used to be.

"Oh horse apples," he said, without the accent.

And while security tried to stop a hoard of ponies from hopping onto the stage, the cloaked pony simply floated onto it from the ground, going around the despondent lead singer and towards where the hapless Red Shrimp had been. As soon as he got close, a bright, emerald-green aura covered his horn, and from it there came an ethereal scythe that floated over his head. Without moving his head, the magical blade swung through where Spinal Clop's fourth drummer had been.

A moment later the spirit of Red Shrimp crawled out (or rather, through) the wreckage, shaking his head.

"Wow, that was close," he said, relieved. "For a minute there I thought I was a goner!" He finally took notice of the cloaked pony, who stood motionless in front of him. "Oh, uh, hey. How's it goin'? You get that from a bit-store or something?" He pointed at the cloaked pony's face. "I mean, it's not bad or anythin', but that mask could be way more realistic..."

"Oh, hey, Hug 'Ems!" Red Shrimp turned his attention away from the cloaked pony, looking towards the blond stallion as he spoke to some security guards. "I'm fine, dude! All's cool! Let's just get this cleaned up and get on with the show, okay?"

Red Shrimp waited for St. Hug 'Ems to say something, but the bereft singer simply kept his head down as he continued speaking to the guards, as stage hooves made their way towards them.

"Hey, why's he ignoring me?" Red Shrimp scratched the back of his head, taken aback. "I mean, it's not like it's my fault the whole thing fell down. And I was the one that almost got squashed, anyway."

"He's not ignoring you."

The small, almost nasal voice, came from the cloaked pony behind the drummer, who turned to shoot him a confused look.

"Huh? What are you talking about? He's not even looking at me!"

"Because he can't see or hear you now," the cloaked pony stated. "As for 'almost' being squashed..."

He pointed a bony hoof towards where the giant prop hand landed. Red Shrimp followed it and saw, sticking out between the white plastic and splintered floor boards, a leg that looked remarkably like his own.

Red Shrimp looked at the leg, then back at the cloaked pony, then back at the leg, then once again at the cloaked pony. He stared at the skull 'mask' underneath the hood, and understanding begun to take hold. His eyes begun to widen in shock.

"Y-You mean...?" Red Shrimp took a hoof to his throat, and mimicked a slicing motion and sound.

"Afraid so," the cloaked pony responded.

"And...you...?"

"Yup," he said with an affirmative nod.

Red Shrimp's mouth dropped open. "But, but...awwww...but, but...awwwwww...but...awwwwww." The former drummer slumped back on his rear, his head hung low as the information sunk in, his eyes watering and his ears flattening against his skull.

"...If it means anything," the cloaked pony said, after a moments silence, "you did last a bit longer then the past drummers."

Red Shrimp sniffed, looking up at him. "Y-yeah?"

"Oh, definitely," he replied, nodding. "I would know. I was there for them too."

"All of them?"

"Uh huh."

Red Shrimp scratched at the stage floor (or tried to, given he was incorporeal now), and asked, "So, uh, the first drummer, how did that gardening equipment...?"

"You don't want to know," the cloaked pony said quickly. "I've seen just about every, possible way a pony could die, and trust me on this, you *don't want to know*."

"Alright, alright! I was just askin'..." The ex-drummer shot his mortal coil a forlorn look, before suddenly perking up. "Hey, wait, I'm dead, right?"

The cloaked pony tilted his head. "Uh, yes?"

"Oh, dude, do you know what that means?!" he asked excitedly, the gloominess from before disappearing in an instant. "My stuff's going to be worth a fortune now! Ha ha! There's my spare drum set, my vests, my hairbands, and I think I still got a half-eaten donut in our trailer!"

The cloaked pony, with a skeletal head, somehow managed a disgusted face. "I really don't know if that'll be worth anything..."

"Of course it will, dude! And just wait until everypony hears about this! I'm goin' to go down as the most famous drummer ever! Who can top being squished by a giant skull? They're goin' to be writing books about this! Maybe the guys will write a song about it...!"

As the drummer continued, he didn't notice that he was beginning to float higher and higher away from the stage, his body taking on a shimmering luminescence as he ascended. The cloaked pony watched silently, his red eyes capturing everything.

Red Shrimp stopped in the middle of his rambling, and gave a shout when he saw what was happening. "H-hey, what's going on?!"

"Nothing," the cloaked pony said calmly, "the more you feel fulfilled about your life, the quicker you ascend and move on. It's perfectly normal."

Fear flashed through Red Shrimp's face. "Move on?! W-where do I go? What's next?!"

"No idea," the cloaked pony said with a shrug. "Maybe you'll get a reunion with the other drummers."

The look of fear quickly vanished to be replaced with excitement. "Oh, that would be so awesome! I can't wait to tell them what happened! Then we're goin' to rock out, and drink, and style our hair, and drink, and-"

"Wait!"

Red Shrimp stopped in the air, his body practically a shining beacon, and gave the cloaked pony a bewildered look. The skeletal equine's horn glowed, and from the depths of his cloak came a inked quill and a piece of parchment, both of which floated up to the ascended drummer.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"An autograph," the cloaked pony said, scratching the back of his hood in an embarrassed fashion. "It's, uh, just something I do."

"Oh, sure. I guess everypony needs a hobby." The drummer quickly wrote something on the parchment, and once done, the quill and paper were pulled back towards the cloaked pony, who nodded satisfactorily upon seeing the signature.

"Thank you," he said, stuffing quill and paper back inside his cloak. "It was pleasure meeting you, Red Shrimp."

"Yeah! Same to you, uh..." Red Shrimp scratched his head, his body almost bursting with light now. "What's your name?"

"Mort."

Red Shrimp blinked in an almost dumb fashion. "*Mort?*"

In a disbelieving tone, that was Red Shrimp's last word as his body suddenly became brighter than any star in the sky, before dwindling into a tiny point, and disappearing all together.

Congratulating himself on a job well done, Mort walked away, moving past a growing crowd of ponies as they pried the giant skull off of Red Shrimp's

body. He was still humming "Gimme Some Bits" when the skull rolled over, eliciting a wail of shock and horror from all those nearby.

When Mort was satisfied that none of the Spinal Clop fans would suffer surprise heart attacks, or have the sudden impulse to kill themselves (one pegasus tried, by flying as high as the clouds and dropping, but she lost her nerve halfway and floated the rest of the way down), he took his leave of Hoovestock and proceeded into the grassy fields nearby.

Things had become remarkably quiet in a short period of time. As Mort moved across the plains, he could hear the chirping of crickets hiding within the grass, and the small buzz of fireflies as they floated to-and-throe in the night air. He could feel the tingle of life that existed in each blade of grass he moved through, what had become one of his favorite sensations.

He finally came to a halt atop a small, round hill, and laid down on top of it, giving himself quite the view: the moon cast a soft, serene glow on the fields, with every constellation glimmering in the cloudless night. The herds at Hoovestock begun to dwindle as the ponies begun to leave, either to homes nearby, or to spend a night under the stars. The passing of Spinal Clop's drummer was doubtlessly a damper on what had otherwise been a great night for many of them, but he was sure they would find ways to cheer themselves up. Maybe some songs. Maybe some stories. Probably lots of booze.

Mort did his best to enjoy the moment. Red Shrimp was, for the time being, his last stop, though in a little bit he would have to peer ahead and see what lied in store for him. After which his day would be once again filled with visiting ponies who either reached the end of their long journeys, or who were discovering that they*really* should've went to the doctors more often.

Laying there, amidst the sounds of insects and the soft wind, he felt the sudden compulsion to "stretch," and in a moment small, bony wings broke through his cloak as if it were mere miasma, spreading wide before disappearing back within the black mass covering him.

"What a night," he sighed, contentedly. He did think it a shame that giant,

fake skull couldn't stay up just a little longer. He really wanted to hear "Gemhenge."

As he begun to hum the first lyrics, his ethereal senses picked movement up from nearby. Spinning his head, he saw what looked like a black, oozing puddle hover over the grass, seemingly sloshing over itself as it rolled past him, towards a patch of trees behind the hill. A shade.

"Oh, hey there!" Mort got up from his spot, watching the Shade as it swam through the air like an inky jellyfish. He'd seen them before, of course, going about their own business, but it wasn't often he had the time to talk to one. "Nice night, isn't it?"

The Shade didn't respond, continuing its journey towards the trees and shrubbery.

"Uh..." Mort watched the shade move a little farther away before trotting after him. "So, you got a name?" He paused, waiting for a response, and continued when none seemed forthcoming. "They call me Mort. Er, well, I call *myself* Mort, most of the other ponies have a bunch of different names for me, really. Y'know, like the 'Pale Pony,' the 'Skull Stallion,' sometimes the 'Rogue Reaper' and the 'Grim Galloper.' Heh, they sure love their alliterations, don't they?"

The shade continued to say nothing. The pair of them got closer to the batch of woods, every step making Mort feel more and more awkward.

"Er, anyway, I prefer Mort," he said again, shaking off his apprehension. "I mean, sure, I guess it's not as 'grand' sounding like the other names, but it's...well, *me*, you know? It's just so much me, I...uh, don't really know how else to describe. But, well, it's more than that. The princesses gave it to me a long, looong time ago, before Luna's whole 'evil' phase. It's just, really...really special to me, you know? Kinda like a gift. Er, not that I'm bragging or anything, of course..."

Mort watched the shade, straining his senses in the search for some, for *any* response. He was so focused that he bumped into the shade when it came to a sudden halt.

"Whoops!" He pulled back his forelegs, the shade filling where his legs had

been like water pouring back into a bowl. Looking from behind it, Mort saw what the shade had been seeking out: the emaciated body of some rabbit, that had probably breathed its last just recently. It still look relatively young (Mort could tell these sort of things), causing Mort to chalk it up to some sickness that prevented the creature from keeping food down.

"Hm, starvation. Definitely not one of the best ways to go," he said casually, wondering if he could use their jobs to spark some sort of conversation.

"So, I take it you're the shade who takes care of rabbits? That must be rough. I mean, they're always multiplying everywhere they go, and there's sure to be a bunch of other animals who think they're tasty."

The shade's body begun to ripple, and for a moment Mort felt a surge of hope that something had gotten through. But the hope came crashing down as, instead, a sickish-green magical field grew out from the shade's mass, forming a crude, ethereal blade. It swung the blade, lacking any sort of elegance Mort tried to put into his swings, but it still got the job done.

As soon as the crude, jagged blade had soared through the rabbit, its spirit rose up, looking as if it had never lost wait at all, and maybe had a trip to the spa. The rabbit looked between the two of them, shooting looks that were a mixture of fear, confusion, curiosity, and perhaps expectation.

A moment later (it always happened faster in animals, Mort noticed) the rabbit's body begun to sparkle, before vanishing into the night air much like Red Shrimp barely half-an-hour ago.

"Well, at least he's in a better place. I think." Mort rubbed his chin, looking at where the rabbit had been. "Say, have you ever wondered what happens *after* they vanish like that? I mean, do they go to valley in the sky? Their own little paradise? Or do you think they just...y'know, disappear? Poof, gone, just like that? It's just I kinda told my last pony he could hang out with his predecessors, but I'd feel like a jerk if, well, this was *it* it. You follow me...?"

Mort's voice trailed off as he finally noticed that the shade had left. In fact, the shade had left even before he started to speak, gauging by how far away it was now, traveling deeper into the woods.

"A-alright then!" he called, fighting a surge of bitter disappointment. "I know

you're probably busy, so, uh, maybe we can chat later? I'll just be doin' my thing...alone...like always..."

The shade vanished into the foliage, and Mort slumped to the ground, hanging his head. That content feeling he had before may as well have vanished like the rabbit's spirit. Left in its place was a gnawing loneliness that seem to dig a little deeper every year.

There were thousands upon thousands of ponies in Equestria, and every day he had to move from one end of the world to the other, reaping one soul here, another there, leaving so little time for anything else. And even if it did, no one really knew of him (and for reasons he understood). And even if they *did*, well, his job wasn't exactly one that came with a lot of reverence.

Only two ponies in all of Equestria knew him, and even that'd be fine, but the brief reprieves he had were never long enough to do anything meaningful with them, and almost always came at times when they were in the middle of something else.

It was in these bad times he wished he was a normal shade again. It'd be awful, of course, relying solely on instinct, with no awareness for anything but his duty, but at least he'd be too stupid to know otherwise.

He gave a morose sigh, and shook off his misgivings. If his internal "clock" was right (and it often was), he was reaching the end of his personal time. He arched his body upward, the green glow from his horn illuminating him.

Earlier he had seen up to half-an-hour after Red Shrimp to see no deaths forthcoming. Now it was time to look even further ahead into tomorrow night to who was next.

As they moved about their business, Mort and the countless shades would absorb, like a sponge, a boundless amount of information. The thoughts, feelings and plans of its inhabitants, the current state of every natural and artificial structure, the movements of every animal and monster, the flow of the wind, sea, and air, even the action of every atom...as midnight passed, the many shades and Mort would have mapped all of Equestria within their collective subconscious, from the largest mountain to the smallest molecule.

More importantly, it was from this "map" that they could predict events that could happen as far as a day ahead. Just as Celestia and Luna knew subconsciously how to raise the sun and moon, Mort and the shades knew how to calculate future events. And as the future came closer-and-closer to the "present," probability fields would narrow and merge until only a few possibilities were left. There was the occasional deviation, as chance could always move in a way even they couldn't predict, but for a large part, it was almost miraculously accurate.

It was through this that Mort and the shades knew where and when to go every day. It was through this they could formulate plans and schedules that took them to every passing on time. It was this their very existence revolved around.

But tonight, something was different.

The glow around Mort's horn died, and the cloaked pony stared into space, confused. He concentrated, his horn glowing once again to make sure of something.

And once again, the results were the same. His next words were barely a whisper.

"Oh no."

It was, as always, a quiet night in the castle. Gentle moonlight filtered in through the giant windows that adorned Celestia's chamber, a display she knew her sister would be proud of. Laying comfortably atop a bed adorned with fluffed pillows and silken sheets, Celestia's eyes meticulously scanned another document under candlelight, feeling tired, yet accomplished.

It had been one of her more hectic days, when nearly everything that needed to be done fell upon her all at once. She had been halfway across Equestria most of the day, helping unveil a new library that would not just be one of the largest constructed, but also serve as a intellectual hub for all the bordering nations. Even before the official opening, rare and important documents had been pouring in from every corner of the world.

That would have been enough, but by the time she had gotten home, ready to set the sun, one of the castle staff had rushed to her, explaining through numerous apologies that their had been a mix up with the mail, and a number of letters and documents meant for her had been nearly forgotten for several days.

She wasn't really angry; mistakes happened, after all, and she ended up spending a few minutes assuring the messenger that there wasn't going to be any significant punishment, much less divine wrath.

Still, after seeing the pile of letters and packages that could have easily hidden her, she wondered if she should've also emphasized the importance of avoiding it in the future.

Most of it ended up being letters simply informing her of events both current and forthcoming, sometimes asking for her advice on what to do. The rest ended up being gifts of some sort from the diplomats she knew, a few invites to special dinners in their respective nations, and the occasional request to build a road here or a school there.

Complicating tonight even more was that, just recently, her little sister had suddenly flown to the castle in tears, locking herself in her room. And every time she tried to approach her, the younger princess would wail to be left alone. Celestia didn't want to leave her alone, but she also didn't want to intrude against her will. With nothing else to do, she had simply gone back to finishing the letters, hoping she would be calm down when she was done.

She levitated her now-worn quill and a blank, piece of parchment towards her, writing a short response to the griffon diplomat, agreeing to a dinner with him in a couple days. She signed her name, rolled the parchment up, wrapped her seal around it, and dropped it onto a neatly stacked pile of similar scrolls at the foot of her bed, all due to be sent out by tomorrow morning.

By now her eyes were heavy, and she wanted nothing more then to fall asleep. But as she was preparing to blow her candle out, her eyes caught an unopened scroll, laying right next to one of her pillows. With a small start, she realized it was Twilight Sparkle's latest "friendship report."

It had dropped in on her in the middle of reading a pass-due report on the Hoovestock preparations. (She had been throwing her weight a little in getting more late-night activities going for Luna's benefit.) She had promised herself to read it next, but soon got distracted by the more extravagant items in the Hoovestock report (all from Spinal Clop, of course) and only got more lost in everything after that.

She briefly considered leaving it for tomorrow, but found that she really couldn't help herself. She was so happy that after so many years, her student had finally found good friends, and always felt a spark of joy when she read her reports.

She removed the seal, unfurled the document, and begun reading it quietly:

Dear Princess Celestia,

Today I learned-

Before she could read any further, there came the sound of something shattering.

Snapping her head up, she looked towards the source. Outside a pair of large, glass doors, leading out to her balcony, she could just make out a flower pot that had fallen off the marble rails, and now laid in a broken heap, the flowers buried underneath the dark soil and pottery.

Celestia huffed, wondering if she was going to get any time to read her student's report. Setting the scroll aside, she got up from her bed (taking a good, long stretch as she did), and headed towards the balcony. She would have to put the plants in another pot for the time being, clean up the mess that was left, see if they could get her a new flower pot...

When she was halfway towards the doors, there came several, sharp banging noises from the outside, and she gasped as the doors suddenly flew open, letting loose an intense wind that almost made her reel. She covered her face with a wing, trying to look towards the balcony.

And when she did, she could've sworn she saw something, or rather, somepony, standing outside. But before she could discern anymore, the

candles in her room blew out, plunging the room into darkness.

When the wind died down, Celestia looked towards the moon-lit balcony to see who was there, but found the balcony bare of everything but the broken flower pot. Scanning her room, she found the once inviting chamber was now steeped in malevolent shadows that stretched across the floor and walls.

She heard something *whoosh* beside her, and in the time it took for her to look, the same sound was heard again, from the opposite side of the room. It repeated itself, again and again, all over the room, knocking over stacked books, bottles on her nightstand, and even causing the chandelier to jingle.

"Who's there?" she demanded, her horn beginning to glow bright. "Reveal yourself!" She heard the sound once more, right behind her, and this time she spun herself around, her horn radiating like a miniature sun.

In the light, she found herself mere inches away from a bleached, pony skull, its sockets home to what could have been burning, red stars that seemed to pierce her very soul. The stars shrunk into pinpricks, and she and the skeleton both gave a startled shout.

Celestia quickly backed away, her eyes on the cloaked, skeletal pony as he stumbled back, shaking his head furiously.

"Augh, Celestia! Not so bright!" Mort said in his small, even scrawny, voice. He finally stilled his head, shooting what could have been an annoyed look (it's hard to tell, given his lack of a face). "I mean, geeze, you scared me for a moment!"

"I scared you?" she snapped, stomping one hoof. "You're the one who snuck into my room late at night, Mort! What have I told you about this sort of thing?"

"That when I want to come in, I should knock before I enter," he said, distractedly, as he moved across the room with his glowing horn held high. "Which I did. I knocked on the doors, and came in."

"You're forgot that you're supposed to *ask* if you could come in." Celestia sighed, slightly exasperated. "So, why are you here tonight? You seem to

be in quite a-

"PRINCESS CELESTIA!"

The princess cringed as the doors to her chamber burst open, soon followed by a parade of hoofs as half-a-dozen pegasi, clad in gold-plated armor, rushed into the room.

"Oh, um..." Celestia shot the head pegasus an embarrassed look, her cheeks flushing. "Captain Storm Rider, what brings you here, tonight?"

"We heard you from just down the hall, princess! Are you okay?" The lead pegasus, with fur and feathers as gray as stone (and seeming just as hard), stepped further into the room, scrutinizing the chamber. "Is there a vile intruder to be dealt with?"

"Oh, no, captain, no one's here," she said, reassuringly. She glanced to her left, and was relieved to see Mort, though now looking quite a bit more transparent. He seemed to haven't even noticed the sudden intrusion, as he continued to parade around, though at least in this state he wasn't knocking anything over.

"Hey, this is the highest room in the castle, right? Or at least the most magical one?" Celestia watched as Mort stood on his hind legs, then on one foreleg, then floated upside down, sounding more and more frustrated. "Darn it, I think they're causing interference. Could you make them leave already?"

Celestia sighed. With the exception of her and Luna, no one was capable of seeing Mort like this. Sufficiently powerful unicorns came close, but even then Mort was no more than a shadow in the corner of their eye. "I'll try," she said.

Storm Rider gave the princess a confused look. "Try what, princess?"

"Oh, uh..." Celestia coughed politely. "It's nothing. Captain, I appreciate your hard work, but I am feeling awfully tired right now."

"I completely understand, princess!" the pegasus said with a courteous bow.

She nodded approvingly. "Good, that's very-"

"We'll stand guard here tonight, and insure you have pleasant dreams."

Celestia blinked in surprise. Keeping her tone cordial, she said, "Really, captain, I appreciate the offer, but I am quite capable of sleeping. By myself. *Alone*."

"Absolutely," he said.

"Good, then-"

"We can stand guard around the chamber to make sure no one disturbs you."

Celestia stared levelly at Storm Rider, who looked back at her, oblivious. Subtlety wasn't the strong suit of her guards.

One of the guards gasped suddenly, and Celestia looked over to see Mort walking through the other guards in his directionless trot around the room. Each guard he passed almost immediately came down with a bad case of shivers, each one shooting fearful looks around the room.

Mort finally walked through Storm Rider, and even the stoic captain became as pale as a sheet.

"Oh, are you okay, captain?" she asked, concerned. She couldn't help but feel a little guilty about what happened.

"I-I don't know," the captain said, his voice almost breaking, as his armor rattled from his shivering, "i-it just feels very cold all of a s-sudden."

She knew if that she ever wanted to be alone tonight, this was her chance. "Well, I do like to sleep with a few windows open," she said, patting the captain on top of his head with a wing. "Of course, I'm still comfortable with my covers and everything, but I can't imagine you doing too well with all that armor. It does get cold easily, doesn't it?"

"I-I suppose..."

"How about this," she said, soothingly. "You go back to your original posts, where it's warm. If anything does happen, I can't have my best guards suffering from hypothermia."

"W-well..." The captain looked back at the other guards, who were all as shaken as he was. Swallowing, the captain looked at the princess and said, reluctantly, "I-if that's what you think is best..."

"I'm sure," she said, ushering them out as quickly as she could. "Just keep watch as you always do. Thank you very much, captain."

Storm Rider muttered something, and the doors gently shut behind him. Celestia breathed a sigh of relief.

"Finally! Now Mort, what were you...Mort?"

As she was getting the guards out, Mort had suddenly vanished from sight. Celestia stood where she was, watching the room to see where he would reappear.

Her eyes widened as *something* moved through her mane, and she looked up to see Mort's head sticking out of the auroral hair, his horn mere inches from hers.

Mort caught her looking at him. "Magical resonance," he said, matter-of-factly. "If your horn is nearby, it might make the signal clearer."

"Signal?" she asked.

Mort said nothing. His horn begun to shine a green light, as the red pits within his skull seemed to narrow in concentration. Celestia watched patiently, ignoring a buzzing that seemed to be coming from within her mind. And then, as quick as blowing out a candle, the glow died.

Once it did, Mort blinked, and seemed to slump forward in Celestia's hair.

"Mort?"

Mort was silent, and lost all form as he became a black cloud that

seemingly flowed out of her mane to pool onto the floor, before reforming himself. The cloaked pony slowly moved towards the center of the room, and then collapsed, where he proceeded to sob.

"Oh no. What's wrong?" Celestia cantered over, concerned and feeling just a little fearful. She remembered only a couple occasions where he was distressed in anyway, and they had always involved her sister...

"I-it's awful, Celestia," the reaper moaned between sobs. "I-I don't...I can't..." He spun around, holding his front hooves out dramatically, and wailed in despair, "I can't see anyone DIEING tomorrow!"

There was a beat. Celestia looked at him blankly, feeling even more lost then before. "I'm...sorry?" she said, half-apology, half-question.

"This is so, so bad!" Mort got back up on all four hooves, and begun to pace in a circle. "I mean this has *never* happened before! What changed? What's wrong with me? Maybe my horn's broke? No, wait, the horn's just a projection of myself! Then that means *I'm* broke! How could this happen?! I was getting the information same as always! Why can't I get it now?!"

Celestia begun to put the pieces together, and she finally understood what was upsetting him so much. "Mort," she asked, "am I to understand you don't see any ponies...passing away, in the near future?"

Mort nodded briskly, keeping his head down.

"And you think it's because something's wrong with you?"

"Well what else could it be?!" Mort sat down, holding his head between his hooves. (Not literally, mind you. Not this time.) "Oh, what do they even do to us when we break? Do we get fixed? Is there a replacement? Do we get demoted to do something else in that case? What if they just get rid of us? Oh no, what if I get turned into astral glue?!"

She wasn't even sure what "astral glue" was, but Celestia had to stop him before he became more hysterical. She raised a hoof and placed it reassuringly on his shoulder, calming the panicked reaper, if only slightly.

"*Mort.*" She said his name with a gentle firmness that broke the reaper from

his babbling, causing him to look at her. "I have another idea about what's going on."

"Huh?"

"And I admit," she said, somewhat teasingly, "*maybe* I'm going out on a limb..."

"Okay?" He was now staring at her, expectantly, as if ready to be told a great secret.

"Isn't it possible...?"

"Yes?"

"Just...slightly possible...?"

"Yes?"

"That nopony is *supposed* to die tomorrow?"

A silence hung in the air, broken only by soft, gusts of wind from the open balcony. Mort stared at her, his red eyes growing a little larger.

He started pacing again with even more fervor, swinging his scythe-like horn in the air desperately. "Gah, it's gotta be here somewhere! I'm not broke! I'm not broke! I'm not-"

"For heaven's sake, Mort," she said, shaking her head. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I did, actually," he said, somewhat irritably, "and it's silly. Sure, that *might* have been possible ages ago when there weren't so many ponies, but they're practically tripping over each other now! I mean, what are the odds?"

"I see," she said, "so it's more likely that your powers, which have worked flawlessly for over a thousand years, have just decided to fail you today, completely and utterly, for no reason what-so-ever?"

Mort stopped in his tracks immediately, the glow from his horn slowly going out. "W-well..." He sheepishly dug at the floor, looking contemplative. "Uh, I guess when you put it like *that*..."

She smiled, glad to have finally calmed the frantic reaper. She walked over beside him, wrapping a reassuring wing around him, shivering slightly at the coolness of his "cloak." "Mort," she started, "I know it might be hard to believe, but I find it much easier to believe than the idea of you just 'breaking' all of a sudden."

"I-I suppose..." Mort heaved a great sigh, leaning against her. A normal creature would have felt an icy cold from within, followed by an almost overwhelming feeling of terror; a subconscious reaction to being in contact with something that should only be there during death. Celestia and Luna, however, as familiar as they were with him, felt more of a comforting coolness, like being wrapped in a cold blanket that would eventually warm.

"So, uh..." Mort, sounding a little embarrassed, scratched the back of his hood. "Assuming you're right...and uh, I guess that's pretty likely...what now?"

She gave him a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean..." Mort tapped one hoof on the floor, impatiently. "It's just...I can't remember the last time something like this ever happened. I didn't think it *could* happen. Usually my days would just be spent collecting all the ponies who expired. But if I'm not going to do that, what am I going to do?"

Celestia gave a delighted gasp as she realized what was being said. "Mort, don't you know what this means?!"

Mort looked at her, somewhat startled. "I, uh...n-no, tell me."

"You have the *day off*, Mort!" She grabbed his hooves with her own (an impressive feat, considering they were hooves). "For the first time, after so many years, you can spend the day how you want to spend it! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh. I-I mean, oh!" His eyes widened as the words sunk in. "Y-you're right! I don't have to collect any ponies! I don't have to follow a schedule! I, I

actually...oh wow!" Mort started hop in place, excited. "I can do whatever I want now! No time frames, no appointments, just me, me, me!"

Celestia nodded vigorously. "That's right! Your own, little holiday! So, what are you going to do?"

"Oh, uh, well..." Mort scratched his chin in deep thought. "Well, first, I'm going to spend about ten minutes looking at the stars."

Celestia nodded. "Okay, that sounds nice."

"Then, I'll spend another ten minutes admiring the landscape. Maybe some fireflies too, if they're around..."

"Alright..."

"And, finally, I'll spend another ten minutes relaxing."

Mort nodded his head in satisfaction, and said nothing more. Celestia watched him, patiently, but the silence only lengthened.

"And then what?" she asked, somewhat awkwardly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, that was about half-an-hour," she said, slowly. "What about the other 23 hours in the day?"

Mort looked at her blankly, and then his eyes shrunk to pinpoints. "Oh my gosh *I have no idea*." He sat down, staring into space. "I don't think I've barely had more than an hour of free time all-together in one day. I don't know how to fill that up!"

"That is a problem..." Celestia scratched her chin, thinking. "I wish I could do something with you, Mort, but my schedule tomorrow is completely packed." She gestured towards the pile of scrolls near her bed. "And that's really no way to spend your day off."

"I guess not..." He made a circular motion in the floor, thinking. "What about Luna?"

"Oh, I'm afraid not," she said with a shake of her head. "She actually stormed in a little while ago. She seemed awful upset..."

"Oh, that's too bad..." The reaper perked up, and he withdrew from his cloak a parchment, which he gave Celestia. "Hey, maybe this can cheer her up? I have it on good word it might be worth a fortune."

"Oh, really?" She unfurled the scroll, seeing a hastily scribbled, line: *To my final fan, Red Shrimp.*

Celestia stared at the paper, and felt her heart skip a beat. "Um, this is...?"

"Spinal Clop's latest ex-drummer," Mort said.

"Ex-drummer," she said slowly. "As in...?"

Mort shrugged. "How else would I get it?"

Celestia nodded, trying to keep a straight face. Spinal Clop would be the band that Luna loved to talk about, the band that she practically had Hoovestock set up for. And if Mort had this, it certainly explained why her little sister had been so inconsolable.

Celestia sighed, the excitement from before beginning to flee. She now had two problems: comforting her sister in-light of a pony's death, and trying to find something for Mort to do. She might be able to talk to Luna, now that she knew what was going on, but Mort? He could do something by himself tomorrow, but she wasn't even sure if he knew how to have a good time, and he probably didn't have any...

"Oh!" Celestia's horn glowed, and she lifted Twilight Sparkle's report from her bedside. Pulling it close to her, she started to read again:

Dear Princess Celestia,

Today I learned that just because somepony may look or sound different, doesn't mean you should treat them any differently. Ponyville's resident mailpony might have a few quirks, but they're the things that make her who she is, and underneath it all lies the spirit of a true friend who deserves the

love and respect we would give anypony...

"Mort," she said, a smile growing on her face, "I know *exactly* how you can spend your day off."

Chapter 2

Twilight Sparkle looked at the pendulum clock that hung on the wall, the hands showing that the night was getting late. Stifling a yawn, she rubbed the bags from under her eyes and returned her attention to the matter at hoof; her friends had become involved in a dangerous, high-stakes, winner-take-all game. One that, at any moment, could send any one of them tumbling into an abyss that was virtually impossible to escape. Success or failure, it all rode on a little strategy, some negotiation skills, and a lot of luck.

She shut her eyes tight, feeling the arcane energy flowing through her horn as she levitated the luck-based artifacts. She gave a silent prayer to Celestia, shook them in the air, and threw them.

The dice rolled across the cardboard *Ponopoly* game board, until one and two dots came up on the two die.

Twilight Sparkle moaned miserably as she moved her tiara game piece three spaces, landing on one of the more nefarious squares: *GO TO JAIL*.

"Aw, better luck next time, sugar cube," Applejack said, patting her back sympathetically.

Twilight floated her game piece from one end of the board to the other, where there was a picture of a jail. All along the sides of the board were squares of varying color named after streets in Shetlantic City, railroad stations or utilities. All her friends sat around the board: Applejack sat right next to her, on the left side of the board was Rarity and Fluttershy, the pegasus tending to the play-bits as a banker, and opposite of them was Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. Applejack and Pinkie Pie had respectable piles of play-bits, but Rainbow Dash's pile and her own (*especially* her own) were dwindling rather fast.

Just as she had finished putting her game piece down, Pinkie Pie dropped over her head a miniature, plastic cage that wobbled because of her horn.

"Do I *have* to wear this every time?" she asked, shooting a dirty look at the pink pony.

"Come on, Twilight, it's all in good fun!" Pinkie Pie gathered up the die and begun to shake them, their plastic molds knocking against her hooves. "When we get to jail, we'll have to put it on too!"

"You mean *if* you go to jail," she replied, sourly. "I don't think I've even 'Passed Go' once since we started."

"Now, now, Twi', it's just a bit of bad luck," Applejack said reassuringly. "It's just a matter of time before you catch a break, Ah'm sure of it!"

Pinkie Pie let the die fly, and they rolled until they stopped with five dots showing. The pink pony moved her horseshoe game piece onto a 'Chance' square. She picked a card from the center of the board, looked over it and squealed.

"Your donation drive awards you 100 bits! Woo hoo! Lay it on me, Fluttershy!"

"Oh, yes! Here you go." The yellow pegasus gave a gentle smile, took some play-bits into her mouth, and plopped them onto Pinkie Pie's pile. "Don't go spending it all at once, now."

"Or at all, like Rarity," Rainbow Dash snickered.

Rarity, sitting next to Fluttershy, shot the young flier a heated look. "Pardon me? Was that supposed to be a jab at me, Rainbow Dash?"

"Hey, all I'm saying is the point of the game is to, you know *buy things*." She shrugged. "Heck, if I landed on even half the stuff you did, I'd be doing a lot better!"

"Hmph. Unlike you, I've actually been to Shetlantic City," she said disdainfully, flipping her mane.

"I don't know *why* they would make Boardtrot so expensive, it was a complete dump when I was there! I would never want to waste any bits on that."

Twilight Sparkle stifled a giggle. Rarity had been one of the first ones eliminated, if only because she had completely refused to buy any of the properties she landed on, losing them all to the other players. (According to Rarity, Ponyvania Avenue had more in common with rats than ponies, Coltic Avenue had a terrible view, Lope Railroad was never on time, etc.) Eventually the picky unicorn had lost all her money to bad cards, or by landing on owned property.

The librarian's luck had been the completely opposite: she had somehow always managed to roll a number that lead her back to jail, or to get a card that stole away her play-bits. Fluttershy had eventually just decided to give her play-bits to the lavender unicorn, half out of pity, half out of wanting to get out of the game. (Fluttershy had picked a card stating in no uncertain terms she had gained 200 bits by selling off an animal preserve to a logging company. She hadn't been very happy.)

Rainbow Dash scooped up the die in her hooves. "Whatever, it's time for me to get back in the lead! Make way for the Dash Deluxe Die Doubles Drop!"

She shook her hooves, faster and faster until they were a blue in front of everyone, and forcing Fluttershy to use her hooves to keep the cards from flying everywhere. Finally, Rainbow Dash's hooves opened and the die shot out at lightening speed, ricocheting off the board and around the room. Everyone yelped and squeaked as the cubes shot around the bottom floor, bouncing off walls, books, vases, and even Rarity's horn. The unicorn was about to snap something at Rainbow Dash, but had to duck to avoid the other die.

Both die finally came crashing back down onto the board, twirling on their corners before finally coming to a rest. Rainbow Dash took an eager look at them, only for that looked to be replaced with despair. Shuddering, she covered her face with one hoof, and used the other hoof to move her Wonderbolt game piece towards its destination.

Applejack looked to see where Rainbow Dash was, and winced. She took her hat and held it in front of her in mourning. "Ooh, Rodeo Place with a couple o' hotels, too. Looks like yer out, Dash."

The cyan pegasus, with a huff, shoved her remaining play-bits over to who

had been the most successful player the entire game by far. She turned her back to the player, her forelegs crossed in a pout.

"There you go," she grumbled sourly.

"Hoo."

"You."

"Hoo."

"You!"

"Hoo."

Rainbow Dash fumed. *"I just said-"*

"Rainbow Dash?" Twilight Sparkle interrupted, flatly. "That's, uh, just what he says, on account of being an owl."

"I knew that," she said, though the hot streak across her cheeks said otherwise. She glared daggers at Owlowiscious, Twilight Sparkle's nighttime assistant, as it perched on a neat stack of play-bits. "How does he even know how to play?!"

Twilight Sparkle shrugged. "Oh, this is nothing. You should watch him play chess."

"Don' you worry none, Dash, there ain't no shame in losin' to a good player." Applejack took the die up and sent them rolling across the board, and moved her wagon game piece appropriately. "It's too bad Ditzzy couldn't stick around for this late night get-together, Twi."

The unicorn nodded, the plastic cage rattling. "Well, delivering the mail can be a pretty tough job, not to mention she has her own responsibilities at home."

"It was very noble of you to stick up for her like you did, darling," Rarity said with an appreciative smile. "I think it meant the world to her."

Pinkie Pie clopped her hoofs together. "Oh, definitely! You're really becoming the super-best-friendship pony in Ponyville, Twilight!"

"Oh, come on, it's not that big a deal," the student replied with a blush. The gray mailpegasus had been a staple of Ponyville, but also a target for derisive names and remarks, mostly aimed at her eyes and habitual quirks. After spending a couple days with the pegasus, Twilight Sparkle had finally rose to her defense earlier that day to remind everyone what a good pony she was deep down. "I still have a lot to learn about friendship. I just hope Celestia likes the report I sent."

"Aw, I'm sure she'll find it fine-and-dandy like always," Applejack said, collecting 100 play-bits from Fluttershy. "Don' think you'll be hearin' anythin' 'til tomorrow, though, late as it is."

Twilight Sparkle grinned sheepishly. "I did send the report a little later then normal, didn't I? Well, I'm sure she'll have plenty of time to read it-"

Before she could finish, everypony (and owl) jumped at the sound of a large belch upstairs, followed by the telltale smell of smoke tinged with sulfur.

Groaning tiredly, Spike hobbled down the stairs, his eyes practically closed from exhaustion. He rubbed at his eyes with one claw, as the other held a wrapped parchment with a horseshoe seal.

"Twilight," the baby dragon yawned, "I think the princess sent you something."

"Huh? Now?" Twilight Sparkle got up from her position and walked over to Spike, levitating the scroll from his claws. The dragon gave a big yawn and curled up in front of the stairs, mumbling.

Fluttershy looked at the scroll quizzically. "Why would she send you something so late at night?"

"It's not an emergency, is it?" Rarity asked with an edge of concern. "There's not another hoodlum dragon in the mountains, is there?"

"Give me a second." Twilight unwrapped the scroll, but stopped when she

realized the plastic cage was still on her head. With a level look, she floated the cage off her head and plopped it on the gameboard.

"Hey, you just broke of jail!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, pointing an accusing hoof at her.

"I've been royally pardoned," the unicorn replied flatly. With that said, she cleared her throat and begun to read from the parchment out loud. "Dear Twilight Sparkle, my most faithful student," she started, with a hint of pride in her voice. "My sincerest apologies to you and your assistant for sending this at such a late hour."

"If she was sorry she would've sent gems," the baby dragon mumbled quietly.

"Shh! 'My student, I feel that ever since you've come to Ponyville, you've learned a great deal about the magic of friendship. Your weekly reports have shown that you are making incredible progress in your studies, and it brings me joy to know what wonderful bonds you're forming with your closest friends. It is for this reason I feel confident in passing onto you a new assignment.'" She stopped, and silently read the sentence again. "A new assignment? Now?"

"All right!" Rainbow Dash smacked Twilight Sparkle's back, causing the latter to grunt. "That's our Twilight! Movin' on up at breakneck speed!"

Rarity nodded with a smile. "Indeed! Oh, I'm so happy for you, Twilight! Few ponies get to work with Celestia so closely."

"It is a mighty big honor," Applejack said.

"It really is nice," Fluttershy chimed.

Twilight Sparkled felt her cheeks turn red at the praise. "Everyone, please! You're embarrassing me."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Pinkie Pie asked, hopping in place. "Keep reading! Keep reading!"

Twilight Sparkled nodded, and did so: "In this world there are many ponies

who have important responsibilities, responsibilities that can't easily be shifted or shared. Even if it is their true calling, these can be an incredible burden to them. Thankfully, many have friends and family who they can return to at the end of each day, to find comfort, warmth and joy.

"However, there are a few ponies who are not granted this precious reprieve. Some, in fact, must dedicate nearly every, waking moment to their duties, as they are too important to leave unattended, and so unique that no other can perform them."

"How sad," Fluttershy said, her face morose.

"Yeesh," Applejack added, "even Big Mac and Ah can get some sort o' break in the winter."

"They can't do anything? No partying? No singing?!" Pinkie Pie was reeling from the idea of another pony never having any fun, as if she was just told that ice could burn. (Or, perhaps in Pinkie Pie's case, that gumdrops weren't sweet.) "How's that even possible?"

Twilight Sparkle ignored her, intending to get to the bottom of it: "One off these ponies, Twilight Sparkle, I leave in your capable hooves. This pony, Mort, is very dear to me, and as long as I've known him, he has barely been able to get so much as an hour to himself every day, if even that. As such, he has never had the time or opportunity to makes friends. I would go so far as to say he has never *lived* a day in his life."

"My goodness," Rarity said, pityingly, "what do you have to be doing to be so tied up like that?"

"Maybe he's a super, secret agent," Rainbow Dash said, a hint of excitement in her voice. She got low to the ground, her eyes darting left and right. "Somepony who's behind enemy lines, blending in with bad guys, who has to watch his back at every turn, or risk being caught!"

Fluttershy looked both fearful and unconvinced. "Would Celestia really uses spies...?"

Applejack scratched her chin in thought. "Maybe he's one o' them fancy aristercats or somethin'? A prince, maybe?"

Rarity huffed. "After what I saw in Canterlot? I sincerely doubt it!"

"Maybe he's a chef!" The ponies, owl and dragon all turned towards Pinkie Pie, who looked at them blankly. "What?" she said, defensively. "They're super-magical princesses who switch shifts! That's a super-metabolism twenty-four-seven!"

"Of course," Twilight Sparkle said slowly, though she had to admit it was more than what she could come up with. In fact, so far the letter was reading very oddly to her, though she couldn't figure out why, exactly.

She shook the thoughts from her mind, and kept reading: "Fortune has finally decided to smile on Mort, because for the first time in many years, he has found himself with one day where he is free to spend it however he wishes. While he is excited at the prospect of a holiday, I'm afraid he doesn't know how to make the best of it. Nor does he know anypony to spend it with. That's where you come in! My assignment, Twilight Sparkle, is for you to show Mort the wonders of friendship, and make it a day he'll never forget."

"Woo hoo! New ponies to be friends with!" Pinkie Pie bounced. "We can play games, party, eat cake, party! Isn't it great, Twilight?!"

Twilight Sparkle bit her lip. "Um, yeah! Great, really great..." She forced a smile, trying to hide the sudden apprehension she felt. Judging by the odd look everypony gave her, she knew she hadn't hidden it as well as she liked.

"Are you okay, Twilight?" Fluttershy moved closer, her face concerned.

"Well..." She opened her mouth, but couldn't bring forth any words.

"I thought you'd be more excited about something like this, dear," Rarity said, standing next to Fluttershy. "I mean, it's a new assignment, and you're going to be spending a day with somepony close to Celestia!"

"But that's just it," Twilight Sparkle said, doubtfully. "If this pony is so close to Celestia, why is this the first time I've ever heard of him?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Maybe she just never had the time to bring him up?"

"Celestia and I used to talk about everything when I was studying under her," Twilight Sparkle said, "including the friends she had. And I definitely don't remember her talking about this one."

Applejack scratched her head. "Okay, so the princess never brought 'im up. Is that th' only thing botherin' you?"

The student shook her head. "No, actually. The other thing is...she's being so *vague* about him. I mean, she tells us he's so busy, but never actually says what it is!" She sighed. "I don't know, if I didn't know better, I'd say she was trying to hide something."

"Oh, stop being such a worry wort about sorry Mort!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "Celestia probably just wants you to make more friends! It's not like she's making you take a test or anything!"

Twilight Sparkle's gasped. "No, wait! That's it! That's *exactly* what this is!"

Applejack cocked her head. "Come again, sugar cube?"

"It's obvious!" she said, and she couldn't believe she didn't see it before. "It's a test! You don't *just* study something and write reports on it, you've got to be able to apply it too! I'm not going to learn about friendship this time, I'm going to teach it to another pony!"

"I don't know," Fluttershy said, softly. "I mean, you're already friends with us, and she must have gotten that report about what you did earlier today."

"She's right, dear," Rarity said, sounding skeptical. "Why test you on something you're obviously good at already?"

Twilight Sparkle felt her earlier conviction fade. "I...I don't know. Maybe there's something special about him? Maybe he's really difficult to be with? Or maybe something about his appearance scares others?"

"I still think Celestia just wants a friend for him," Pinkie Pie added.

"No reason it can't be both," Applejack said. "But we won't know what's special 'bout 'im 'til he gets here."

"Speaking of which, when *is* he getting here?" Rarity asked.

"Oh, uh..." Twilight Sparkle took another look at the scroll, and noticed that the bottom of it was still curled up. She straightened it, and begun to read: "Mort will meet you at the library tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. I have the utmost faith in you. Sincerely, your teach-' *TOMORROW?!'*"

Twilight Sparkle's scream caused them all to leap back, staring at her. The unicorn's eyes had grown to the size of saucers, the scroll floating to the ground.

"He's coming over *tomorrow?!'* But it's...I don't...tomorrow's just...!" The unicorn begun to hyperventilate on the spot, panic surging through her body.

"T-Twilight?" Fluttershy took a step back, a look of fear on her face. "Are you okay?"

She whipped her head around to look at them, suddenly feeling very claustrophobic. "You need to go," she said, hurriedly, her horn glowing as she quickly packed up the *Ponopoly* board before all-but throwing it back onto a shelf. "I'm sorry, but I need peace, quiet and a lot of time to study! We'll try this again sometime! I promise!"

"But Twilight-"

"Go!" Her horn glowed, gathering up all her friends into one spot, and she begun to shove them out the library door. "Go-go-go-go-go!"

Before her friends could utter another word, she slammed the door shut behind them, and spun back around. Spike was still sleeping in front of the steps, and the clock was ticking away, each swing of the pendulum bringing tomorrow a little closer. She had only one thought on her mind then: study.

"Owlowiscious! Bring me copies of the friendship reports I sent the princess! Also..." She looked at the foot of steps, where next to them laid a

curled dragon who was already far into dreamland. "Uh, put Spike to bed, please."

The owl hooted, swooped down and grabbed the dragon by its fins. In one, graceful motion the owl flew into the second room, and in a moment came back, holding scrolls in its feet. It dropped them on top of a reading table, flew back upstairs, and came back with more. Twilight Sparkle unwrapped one of the scrolls and scan its contents, her eyes focused on every letter that had been written.

She only had less than a night to study for her most important day yet.

The pony shade and sun princess moved down the halls, the marble floor covered in a royal red carpet that silenced Celestia's hooves. Mort had made himself intangible again, gliding across the carpet beside her. Guards roamed the halls and stood at key rooms, and while they would turn at the sight of their princess walking in the middle of the night, it would be nothing more than a look before they returned to their stoic forms.

They passed a number of paintings and sculptors, all considered masterpieces, all created centuries ago, many considered only "good" or "mediocre" in their time, and more than a few done by artists who had, in some form or another, killed themselves. Mort always felt a little wary when coming for an artist; the few that were depressing were *unbelievably* depressing. (Franz Kafka, a bovine writer, almost drove Mort to suicide, until the shade remembered he had no idea on how to kill himself in the first place.)

His thoughts were rather tumultuous. When Celestia had suggested the idea of spending a day with Twilight Sparkle, he was initially excited; after all, she was one of the ponies that helped save Luna nearly a year ago, a fact he was forever grateful for. Not to mention she wasn't a *complete* stranger, given how much Celestia liked to talk about her whenever he visited. He even got to see her a few times in the middle of a magic lesson with the princess. (A little to Celestia's chagrin, as the alicorn would later admit that whenever Mort came on those days, she was afraid some magic lesson would fatally backfire on her student.) And Twilight Sparkle's friends also seemed nice, at least from what little he gathered from their occasional near-death experiences.

Still, it wasn't long before a host of doubts begun to rise up in him. Aside from the sisters, he had never spent a significant amount of time with anypony, even in death. Most would only stay long enough to find out what had happened, reflect on the situation, then depart to whatever came next. Not to mention half of them were understandably upset to see him. It wasn't a great way to build confidence, much less social skills.

It wasn't long before what excitement he had dried up into a pit of dread. He had wanted to voice his thoughts, but by then Celestia was almost done writing, and had just looked so *excited* about all of it. In the end he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

Going to Ponyville wasn't the only thing weighing heavily on him. To the left of him, there were giant windows that took up entire walls, and in the sky shone a moon that brought with its light guilt and anxiety. Celestia, in the process of writing Twilight Sparkle the letter, had explained to him what was probably making her sister so upset that night. They both knew Mort had no choice in the matter, but that did little to sooth him.

All in all, the night had been a roller coaster of emotions, and Mort wanted desperately to get off and demand his bits back.

And there was one more thing bugging him:

"Did you really have to throw that line in there?" he asked, suddenly.

Celestia turned to him, raising a questioning brow. "What do you mean?"

"He has never *lived* a day in his life?' Are you trying to clue them in or something?"

Celestia rolled her eyes in good humor. "Oh, I'm doing no such thing."

"You italicized 'lived!' That's, like, 'nudge-nudge, wink-wink' or something!" He shook his head, exasperated. "Might as well have just wrote, 'He's *dying* to meet you.'"

"Last I checked, you're hardly dying." Celestia brushed a wing through Mort's form, and he could feel the warm, radiant *life* that existed in each of

those feathers, each one boosting his spirits and making sparks fly within his being. He believed if she did a couple more times, he might start to feel only slightly anxious.

She suddenly stopped, and Mort scrambled to a halt when he found himself in front of a pair of giant, oak doors. A pegasus guard stood at each side of the door, both who bowed deeply in Celestia's presence. "Has princess Luna left her room yet?"

"No, your majesty," one of them intoned.

"Alright, then. Could you two leave for a moment? I need a little private time with my sister." The guards simply nodded, and trotted away from the door, soon disappearing from sight. Mort watched them go, then turned back towards the doors, looking more ominous with each passing moment.

He waited. And waited. As the seconds ticked by he looked at Celestia, his head tilted in a questioning manner. Celestia, in response, gestured at the door with her head, making it clear she wasn't going to be the one talking. He sighed, and tried to remember the instructions Celestia gave him when visiting her.

He turned tangible, and with an audible gulp he lifted a hoof up and knocked on the door three times. "L-Luna?" he started, his voice wavering. "It's, uh, m-me. Mort. Um, look, I'm really sorry about what happened tonight and everything. He just...I-I mean, you know how it is, right? Um..." He dug at the floor and looked at Celestia pleadingly, who only smiled back at him. He couldn't help but feel a little aggravated at the moment.

"A-anyway," he continued, "Celestia told me what happened, and I just wanted to, er, m-make sure you were okay. So, I was, uh, kinda wondering if I could come in...?" He paused for a moment, then quickly added, "But you know if you don't want to, that's fine! I know you're upset and everything so..."

The door creaked open, cutting him off. Mort stood rigidly at the spot, watching the door expectantly, trying not to shake. Within the tiny space, a single, teal eye looked out, regarding him. Mort felt like the eye was staring *through* him.

"Come in," a soft voice said from the other side. The eye disappeared, and the door swung open the rest of the way, revealing a darkened room that was basking in moonlight.

"Uh..." Mort stood at the doorway, trying to remember how the ponies usually did this. He stepped away, performing what he believed was a courteous gesture with one hoof. "Mares first? No, wait, was it 'fillies?' Am I even using the right hoof...?"

"You're fine," the taller princess said, humored, and strode past him, with Mort following afterward.

It was Mort's first time in Luna's room., since she had been sealed away all those years ago, anyway. Standing inside felt like standing in the past. There was polished furniture that had gone out of style centuries ago, its carpenters long gone in the tide of history. Not just the furniture, but also the fireplace, the vases, the bedsheets, even the wallpaper. Combs, brushes, perfume bottles, books, and even the stuffed animals...everything that had been here a thousand years ago was here tonight, meticulously restored to their prime condition.

It was virtually no different from how it was a thousand years ago. It was incredibly nostalgic, and though Mort would never admit aloud, also somewhat eerie. He turned in slow circles, taking everything in, until his eye rested on Celestia, lightly nuzzling Luna.

"Um, Luna..." He struggled for words, but couldn't find any. The princess turned to look at him, and even in the darkness, Mort could see her eyes were red from crying. Despite having no organs, his insides felt twisted. "I...I-like I said..."

"Mort," she said, shooting him a disarming smile, "you can calm down. It's okay, I understood a thousand years ago, and I still understand today." She walked over to him, and gently nuzzled his hood. Whereas Celestia's touch would be warm and radiant like the sun she raised, Luna's was incredibly cool and peaceful, a calm that you wanted to be carried away in. The life of every pony was always different, no two feeling exactly the same.

And right now he was incredibly relieved that Luna still hadn't held anything against him. The room wasn't the only thing that was nostalgic.

Luna pulled away, and gave him an apprehensive look. "I-I just...I have to know. Did Red Shrimp...suffer?"

"Oh, nah," he said casually, feeling much better already, "when that giant skull came down the first thing it did was shatter his...uh..." Luna's eyes had grown wide, and looking behind her, Mort could spot Celestia frantically shaking her head, and made a zipping motion across her mouth. "Um...no, no he didn't suffer."

"Well, at least there's that," she said, relieved. Her eyes became inquisitive again, and she asked, "Did he say anything before he...you know, left?"

"Ah, not really," he said, scratching the back of his hood. "Most of them follow the threes 'ohs.' 'Oh, I'm dead,' 'oh no, I'm dead,' and 'oh well, I'm dead.' Realization, angst, and acceptance, basically. Oh!"

"There's four 'ohs?'"

"No, I just remembered something! Uh, wait, where is..." Mort's horn glowed, and from within his hood the autograph floated out, where it unfurled in front of Luna. "As I was saying, I did get that guy's autograph before he passed on. Um...y'know, I have a bunch of these already, so if you really want...?"

Luna smiled joyfully, and the autograph glowed a velvet blue as she levitated it towards her desk. It was stacked high with books, documents, plus one abacus that looked ancient enough to belong in a museum. The wall it sat in front of had a bulletin board crowded with pictures of her after her return, letters addressed to her, and a few photos of the various bands she had taken a shine to. She stuck the autograph beneath them, sticking it with a tack.

"You know, I think this is the longest time you've been able to stand still since I got back," she said, looking at him curiously. "Slow night?"

"Yeah, it's pretty dead," he said, then inwardly groaned at the unintended pun. "Uh, actually, that's why I came all the way here in the first place."

"As it just so happens," Celestia said, cutting in, "Mort doesn't have any

appointments in the near future."

"No appointments? Then..." She gasped delightfully. "No pony is supposed to die? That's wonderful!"

"And not just that," Celestia said, patting Mort on the back. "It also means Mort here can finally have some time to himself."

"That's great! What are you going to do, Mort?" Luna closed the gap between them, looking at him expectantly. "You must have been planning something in case this happened."

Mort laughed sheepishly. "Uh, ha ha, uh, funny you should say that, because...uh..."

Luna blinked, looking confused. "What is it? You...do have something in mind, don't you?"

"Um...not really," he admitted, lamely.

"I actually just got finished writing a letter to Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said. "Tomorrow morning, Mort will come by and spend a day with her. If they can make the Gala interesting in a few hours, I'm sure my student and her friends can think of something if they have all day. "

Luna clapped her hooves excitedly. "That's great! You must be so excited, Mort!"

"Y-yeah, excited," he said, more halfheartedly than he would've liked. The moment Celestia had started talking about the letter, all his self-doubts reared their ugly heads, gnawing away at the inside.

Luna cocked an eyebrow, and then positioned herself directly in front of him, staring straight into his eyes. Mort couldn't help but squirm a little under that gaze.

"Are you excited?" she asked, slowly.

Mort gulped, his knees wobbly. "O-of course I am..." he muttered weakly, feeling smaller and smaller as Luna continued to stare at him.

She gasped. "You're *lying*!" she exclaimed scandalously.

Mort felt a sudden heat up inside him. "Okay, you got me! I'm not excited, I'm kinda*freaking out*, okay?!" His shout caused both sisters to take a few steps away from him. Their shocked expressions caused the earlier anger to simmer immediately. "I...I mean..." Unable to find the words, he sighed miserably, his body sunken.

"But, Mort..." Celestia stepped forward, her expression one of concern. "You seemed fine with it just a while ago..."

"I-I know, but..." He sighed again. That's how the night was starting to feel, like one, big *sigh*. "Listen, I appreciate what you're doing, I do, but...I've never mingled with other ponies like that before. And I mean *actually* mingle, not move around while invisible, intangible, inaudible and in...uh, ineverything, I guess. I don't know what I would do, or even talk about! This," he said, tapping at his horn, "is practically all I do know!"

"You're too hard on yourself," Luna said, reassuringly. "You get along fine with us."

"Yeah, and it took me a *really* long time to get that far."

"Luna's right," Celestia said with a warm smile. "You'll have to adapt a little, but being with them shouldn't be that much different from being with us."

"But I *know* you," he said, helplessly. "I hardly know anything about them!"

Celestia shrugged. "Twilight Sparkle didn't know Applejack, Fluttershy, or the others very well when she met them, either. That didn't stop them from forming bonds. Don't think of it as a hindrance...think of it as an opportunity. You can only discover a pony once, after all."

Luna came forward, her face sober. "Please give them a chance, Mort. Everything my sister's told me says they're good ponies, and I'm sure they'll be happy to have you. I know you're lonely sometimes. I know how awful that can be, so...I really think this is something that can help you."

Mort looked between the sisters, his thoughts drifting back to a few hours

before, when the only conversation he had was with an ex-drummer that had moved on rather quickly, and a fellow shade that, like all the others, seemed to ignore everything except the creatures they reaped. His thoughts lingered on the ponies who partied with their friends, singing, dancing, but more than anything, just being happy.

"I...okay," he said, reluctantly. "Maybe you're right. I mean, this could be my only chance to try a day as a 'normal' pony, right? It'd be a nice change of pace. And they *do* seem like nice fillies. Still..."

His eyes landed on a mirror near the wall, and he approached it. Staring out of the reflection was a bleached, skeletal pony with bright, burning eyes, wearing a cloak that would make the color black look pale. A horn jutted out the top of the hood, gleaming in the moonlight, and looking sharp enough to cut right through it.

"I'm not an expert," he said, "but I'm pretty sure this would attract a lot of bad attention."

"You don't have to look like that, though," Celestia reminded him. "You could look like anything you want, can't you?"

"That's right!" Luna added. "I know your earlier attempts weren't too...successful, but you must've had a lot of practice since then?"

Mort shuddered. He didn't like thinking about those first, few attempts to look like a flesh-and-blood pony. He had decided on the skeletal form because it was the closest he could get to looking like a pony, while not looking deformed at the same time. Bones were relatively easy. Muscle and tissue, on the other hoof...

"I-I guess I could give it another shot." He lowered his head to the ground, and begun to concentrate, forming the image of a pony in his mind. His body, in response, begun to shift and churn from within. His legs begun to feel fatter and his abdomen more bloated as he focused on the bulbous waistline of the ponies. (This part was hard, because in the process he would imagine walking around with wet, water filled organs bouncing around in his body, creeping him out.)

Once he was satisfied with the general shape, he begun to create the fur

and skin, mimicking them as best as he could. The long mane came next, flowing from his head down into his cloak. Finally the horn begun to twist in circles until it had elongated and thinned, forming a regular, if long, unicorn horn. In his sockets he formed spheres, and begun to make them reflective, forming rings of color to mimic the iris, and filling the center with black to make a pupil.

He put on the finishing touches, adding fur and hair where he thought it needed to be. Finally he was finished, and though it had taken a lot of work, he felt that it really might be his best attempt yet. There was only one way for him to know.

"What do you think?" he asked, and raised his head to look at them.

There was no reaction at first. Then Luna's eyes widened in what could only be mortal horror, and with a squeal of fright she buried her head in Celestia's wings, her body wracked with terrified sobs. Celestia's stared at him with wide eyes, her eyes twitching as the color seem to drain from her mane.

Mort was a little taken aback. "It's...that bad?"

There was another squeal of terror from Luna, and Celestia nodded in a slow, deliberate manner.

"Seriously? I could've sworn..." He turned to look in the mirror, and was face-to-face with what could only have been an eldritch creature. It almost looked like a pony, but its head was swelled to enormous and lumpy proportions, balancing atop a tiny neck that seemed ready to snap in two. The creature's hooves could be seen peeking out from underneath the cloak, and by their size, obviously stolen from some unfortunate, baby elephant. Most frightening of all, however, were the giant eyes that could only stare, glassy and soulless, ready to swallow all who looked into its depths...

With a yelp of fright, Mort shook himself furiously, and the abomination vanished in a black mist, leaving behind a skeletal pony, who was still shaking from the earlier sight.

"Um, alright, it looks like I've only gotten worse at this," he said, his voice

small. "Um, it's okay to look now."

Luna took a quick peek, then pulled her head back, wiping away tears. "I-I'm sorry," she said, "it's just...I think we need to go with something else."

"Right, something else. Hmm...how about..." An idea formed in his head, and he did the opposite of concentrating; his skull head faded out of sight, taking with it the eyes as well. He looked to the mirror, and was pleased to see that there was only complete darkness in the hood.

"How about this?" He trotted over to the sister, walking in circles as he showed off his empty hood. "I mean, really, the head and everything's mostly cosmetic. I can see perfectly fine without them, and this way no one sees a pony skull."

"True," Celestia said, some color returning to her mane, "but I don't think it's possible for a hood to hide so much so well."

"I don't even think it looks dark. Just empty." As Mort was walking near her, Luna suddenly stuck her head within the hood. "Hello!" she called, her voice echoing within his hood, and in turn, his head.

Mort stumbled back a way, shaking his hooded head before finally reforming the pony skull and eyes. He groaned in annoyance, stomping his hooves on the ground.

"Alright," he said, annoyed, "I look even creepier trying to look like a normal pony, but getting rid of my head altogether looks wrong too. So how do I go around Ponyville without scaring all of them?"

"Hmm..." Luna's horn glowed, and from a bookshelf there came a thick tome, floating over to her. She flipped the book open, and begun to flip through the pages with her magic, her eyes looking at the paper intently.

Celestia looked over her shoulder. "What are you looking for, Luna?"

"Wait a moment. Let's see, I could've sworn...ah ha!" The pages came to a sudden halt, and Luna brought a hoof to the words, trailing under each line.

"What is it?" Mort tried to take a look, but finding his vision blocked by

Luna's outstretched leg, formed a pair of skeletal wings and floated up until his head was level with Celestia's.

"I remember how a long time ago, unicorns were struggling to find ways to turn themselves invisible," Luna said, her eyes focused on the pages in front of her. "But they faced many obstacles, such as finding a way to bend the light with their magic, while also still being able to see. Even if they could get around both, their remained the problem of how much magic such a spell would use."

"Um, alright," Mort said, slowly. "I can turn invisible pretty easily, but I don't think they'd be easy to hang out with if they couldn't see me."

"That's not what I'm getting at," she said, her eyes now focused on one, particular passage. "Before they could make ponies invisible, they used other methods. One spell, in particular, could make those nearby remember only the vaguest of details about a pony's appearance. A face in the crowd, basically. Some ponies used this spell to walk in broad daylight, and not be noticed in the slightest."

Celestia nodded her head, a grin beginning to form. "Could this spell hide *anything*?"

"Kinda," the moon princess said hesitantly. "The spell is not without downsides. The spell can only blur the details, not hide them outright. Mild scars and facial features could be hidden, but anything significant, like an eyepatch or the color of the caster's coat, could still be seen. Looking hard enough for a length of time could be enough to see through it as well."

"I believe," Luna said, closing the book, "that if Mort could darken his hood just a little, the spell would be enough to hide the skull. Somepony looking at him could just assume he has a white coat, and maybe a little thin."

"Keyword being 'believe,'" Mort said, feeling unsure of the plan.

Luna shrugged. "I think it's the best shot you have of fitting in right now. Anything more may draw more attention than needed." She levitated the tome onto the foot of her bed. "Besides, I was always pretty good at magical theory, and I'm confident it should be enough." She smiled at him. "Have a little faith in me."

Mort looked at her smile, and like that, he felt his insecurities drifting away. "Well, if you really think so..."

Celestia, at that point, let out a great yawn, her wings stretching to their full length. "Oh my goodness," she said, a hoof to her lips in embarrassment. "Excuse me, I don't know what came over me."

Luna stared at her, then looking at a mantel clock above the fireplace. "Oh my goodness," she exclaimed, "Celestia, you should really go to bed! You have a lot going on tomorrow, don't you?"

"I really do," the older sister said, thoughtfully. "Still, I could probably stay up another hour or two and help-"

"Nuh huh," the darker sister said, beginning to push her sibling towards the door. "You need all the sleep you can get! I'll help Mort from here. You just go to bed."

Celestia giggled, and glanced at Mort with an amused grin. "Good luck tomorrow, Mort."

"Oh, uh, thanks," he said. "Have a good night."

As Celestia was pushed past the doorway, the princess turned and nuzzled her sister one more time, wishing her a good night. Luna closed and locked the door, and quickly trotted over to the bed.

"Mort," she asked, "how much practice have you had with magic?"

"Well," he said, scratching the back of his hood, "there's the levitation thing, my scythe, turning intangible, but I think that last one's more physiology than magic..."

"Well then," she said, opening the tome again, "we have until sunrise to get this spell memorized. After that we can go over some etiquette and manners, just in case. And if we have any time left..." She tapped her hooves together, smiling. "Maybe we could play a board game?"

Mort considered for a moment. "...Did Celestia save the *Candy*

Mountain game?"

Luna's horn glowed, and from underneath the bed came a box, its cover portraying two, ecstatic unicorns alongside an obviously grumpy unicorn as they trotted around a mountain cover in candy canes, lollipops and chocolate.

"Um, I don't suppose we could play that first?" he asked, hopefully.

"Lessons first," she said, putting the board game next to her, "*Candy Mountain* later."

Mort resigned himself to the lesson, and was soon following Luna's instructions as he tried to cast the spell. Despite the considerable magic that had to flow through him, he was manipulating the arcane arts in ways he had never done before. It would take a little time and practice before he would be able to use it on his own. After which Luna would teach him how to act around other ponies, as others were going to see and hear him now, meaning greater importance on what, where and when to say something. Not to mention great consideration of his surroundings, as he simply couldn't pass through them anymore.

Outside, the moon shone down on a small town, situated near the Everfree Forest. The town's librarian poured over books and scrolls while jotting down her own notes, preparing herself for a pony that could be coming from anywhere in Equestria.

Into the night, the pale pony and the lavender unicorn prepared themselves for their future encounter.

Chapter 3

The clock seem to tick very slowly in the quiet bedroom. Mort risked one glance—confirming it was almost time for the sunrise—before returning his focus towards the spell book in front of him. He read the instructions for the illusion spell over and over again, mentally going over each step.

The *Candy Mountain* game board was laid out next to the bed, its cards scattered on both sides, filled with descriptions that were both saccharine and lurid, written by a bored princess and an indifferent pony shade a thousand years ago. He briefly looked over the top of the book, seeing Luna looking at him with eyes that were patient, eager and drowsy.

The two of them had been going over the same spell nearly all night, having to break the sessions up with little breaks to get his mind off magic for a moment to focus on other things, such as simple manners and how to act while tangible. Mort had never been with more than two ponies at a time, much less while keeping his real nature secret. There were things he couldn't do not just because it would be rude, but also because it would draw attention he didn't need. He couldn't, for instance, move through a group of ponies while they spoke to one another, but at the same time he couldn't simply float over them, either.

General movement, in Mort's opinion, was going to be hard to keep in check; he was so used to gliding and floating everywhere, that it would take actual effort to stick close to the ground. He had suggested that he just keep his wings out, but Luna then reminded him that it would mean losing his horn, and as a result not be allowed to use magic. There were only two alicorns in Equestria, she reminded him. Not to mention getting his wings to look properly organic would take time they didn't have. Ultimately, he decided that it'd be better to use a little magic and no flying then vice versa.

The other difficulty would be staying completely solid. He had a habit of becoming amorphous when he wanted to go somewhere quickly, and his thoughts and moods would occasionally alter his very shape. Something the very physical ponies didn't experience. It wouldn't be as difficult as "normal" movement, but if he tripped or lost his concentration, there could be problems.

Mort cleared his head of those thoughts, focusing on the problem at hoof; the illusion spell hadn't been going well. It had taken a couple hours just to attempt it, but the previous attempts thus far hadn't been too successful. The trickiest part was wrapping the magical field around his head, one that hid the details of his face. Most of his other attempts had failed, some rather miserably. (One attempt ended with him sporting a rainbow-colored afro, and not even Luna could explain why.)

"Okay..." At his voice, Luna perked up, watching intently. Controlling his nervousness, he concentrated, feeling the magical energy form inside him. He tempered that magic, forging it into a spell that, if properly realized, would subconsciously dissuade anypony from remembering anything but the most basic of details.

With the spell formed, he began to carefully control the flow and amount of magic released into his horn. Too little and the spell would fizzle, too much and the magical energy could explode. The latter had happened more than once, as Mort soon realized that the magic needed was significantly more than the telekinetic magic, but at the same time much less than what his scythe required. Finding the proper balance was arduous, and he likened it to getting an exact cup of water from a fire hose, without spilling a drop in the process.

He felt his spirits rise as the magic stabilized in his horn, and steeled himself for the next, trickiest part. Now that the magic had been formed, it had to be unwound like a ball of yarn, and woven around Mort's face. The magic would then begin to flow across Mort's head, his horn providing the extra charge needed to keep the magical current flowing. For normal unicorns, the spells duration could leave them feeling lightheaded and drained, the illusion getting weaker over time. Luna, though, seemed confident he could keep the spell going with little, if any, side-effects.

He unwound the magical energy, weaving it around his head. He watched it as it crossed his eyesight, looking like a green, translucent fabric, brimming with sparks of light. But as the magic begun to bend and waver, he realized he was getting distracted, and redoubled his efforts to maintain it, correcting its shape and movement.

Soon, it seemed like a green, sparkling filter had been placed over the

entire world, and just as Mort was wondering if he was almost done, the world suddenly grew brighter than any sun, before the glow dissipated. As it did, he saw that the green magic had gone, and he was looking straight at a gawking Luna.

"D-did I do it?" he asked, tentatively. Luna scratched her chin, looking curious, and leaned forward, her horn glowing. Mort fidgeted as he waited, wondering if simply nothing had happened. He certainly didn't feel all that much different. If it hadn't worked, he had no idea what he'd do.

As he wondered if Twilight Sparkle would buy a story of him really, really liking skull masks, Luna broke into a wide smile, jumped off the bed and hugged him with her forelegs.

"You did it!" she squealed jubilantly, twirling the two of them. "You did it! You really did it!"

"I-I did?" Luna let go, and Mort had to regain his balance before tumbling over. He felt so many emotions at once he couldn't decide how to feel. He finally settled on a very simple one: happy. "I-I mean, yes! I did it! Woo! Yeah! Heck, that wasn't too bad! I'm..." He trailed off as his eyes landed on the mirror, seeing his face stare back. His red-eyed, skull face. "...I'm not any different from before," he deadpanned.

"Well of course you'll be able to see yourself," Luna said, walking next to him. "You know who you are. And your mind isn't like a pony's anyway."

"Oh, okay," he said, a little relieved. "What do you see?"

She gave him a tentative look. "It's...not quite that effective on me," she admitted. "The spell blurs details, but I know that's you under the hood, so my mind fills in most of the gaps anyway."

That wasn't the answer he was hoping for. "How do you know if it even worked, then?" he anxiously asked.

She tapped one hoof on her horn. "I can feel the spell wrapped around you, Mort. You did a great job on it!" She rubbed his back with a wing reassuringly. "It'll be fine. Trust me."

Mort breathed deeply, a habit he picked up from watching other ponies doing it. "Okay, well, you *are* the expert here."

The top of the mirror shined brightly, and Mort turned to see it was from the first rays of sun, peeking out from behind the mountains. It rose steadily, lighting up the landscape as it ascended.

"It's dawn," Luna said. She gave a quick look at the clock. "You should probably get going, Mort."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I mean, it wouldn't take that long for me to fly over there. We can probably finish up *Candy Mountain*, I could tell you about the more interesting ponies I met, uh..." He trailed off as he noticed Luna shaking her head, her midnight hair swinging back and forth.

"I'd love to, Mort, really," she said apologetically, "but you need this time to practice walking. *Real* walking, I mean."

"Oh..." Mort was used to walking, in the sense he moved four legs in a locomotive fashion. He wasn't, however, used to walking while his cloak was completely physical, and not something that could part against his hoofs if they moved too far out. Nor had he ever focused on making sure each hoof touch the ground with actual weight, and not just float a little above it.

"Don't worry," she said, "we'll finish that game someday soon. I can keep it out until then." She bounded up onto her bed, blinking her eyes tiredly. "I'm..." She gave a big yawn, her wings stretching out. "I'm...sure you'll be fine. You're a nice pony deep down. I'm sure they'll see that."

"If you say so..." He looked out one of the windows in the room. The sunlight was just now reaching a particular small town, situated almost precariously close to the Everfree forest. "Though, I'm not really a 'pony.' I mean, I can sorta look like one, sorta act like one, maybe sorta talk like one, but...I-I don't know, what if they just kinda sense something wrong? What if..."

He stopped himself, shook his head and steeled his eyes. "Y-you know what, no. No! This isn't a time to be negative. I just gotta be confident! If I can collect dozens of souls, on time, twenty-four-seven, I can definitely

have a good time with a few ponies! I mean, a lot of them do it every day! It can't be that hard. I can do this. I can DO this! I CAN-"

His speech was interrupted by a gentle snore. Mort silenced himself immediately, and turned around. Luna had curled up near her pillows, fast asleep.

"...I can do this more quietly," he finished. He silently moved towards the bed, his horn glowing. A few pillows were moved underneath Luna's head, a some more under her body. The alicorn snuggled against them comfortably, murmuring softly.

Mort watched her contently for a moment, then used his horn to draw the curtains across the windows, darkening the room. "Have a good day, Luna," he whispered. "Sleep tight."

Without saying another word, his body became intangible, and he shot through the curtains and windows, towards the outside, where he saw the rest of Canterlot, it's roofs glimmering in the morning sun. The sight of the sun tempted him to see Celestia for perhaps a last minute pep talk, but he felt that if he didn't get going now, he might not go at all.

He did a little backflip in the air, and then rocketed straight down, his form going straight through the castle, passing through brick and mortar walls, marble columns, water pipes and the very foundations of the castle itself. Soon the castle was behind him, and he was then flying through Canterlot, seeing its citizens waking from their beds as he passed through their homes, before twisting himself around to fly through the very mountain that Canterlot was built on. On an impulse, he begun to corkscrew through the mountain, for no other reason than he thought it could be fun.

After traveling through almost half-a-mile of solid rock, he finally swerved himself upward as he reached the base of the mountain. A moment later he sprouted from the ground, and lowered himself onto a level, dirt road. He glanced behind himself, and saw the city of Canterlot high above, hanging over the mountain side. He had always questioned the reason behind such a construction, but at the same time, the sight always made him look at it in awe. And perhaps, he sometimes thought, that was reason enough.

"Okay, let's get moving..." He took his gaze away from the city, and looked

down the dirt road, where some distance away lay Ponyville. He concentrated, becoming tangible again, and then went further. His cloak became completely solid, and his hooves settled on the ground. Despite some earlier practice, it still felt incredibly unusual for him, and even clunky. Still, he knew he had to fit in, and only hoped he would grow used to it.

"A wise pony," he begun, sagely, "once said, 'The journey of a thousand miles, begins with a single step.'" Holding his head high, Mort put one hoof forward.

Almost immediately, it got caught in the cloak, and Mort cried out as he fell, practically burying his face in the ground. Groaning, he got back up on his hoofs, and righted himself with a sigh. He shot a disdainful look at the long cloak.

"Wise ponies must not wear cloaks," he muttered.

Spike let out a battle cry. His fists flew at lightning speeds, landing hundreds of blows in the blink of an eye. Scores of diamond dogs howled and whined as they were flung into the air, the lucky ones landing in dazed heaps, the others propelled into great, wooden pillars and stone statues.

With the last diamond dog down, Spike observed his handy work: an entire regiment of diamond dogs littered the throne room, their armor battered, their weapons broken, and their spirits crushed. He dusted off his orange gi, bearing the symbol of his master's school, and looked towards his ultimate goal.

In the center of the throne room, surrounded by pillars bearing dragon carvings, sat the most beautiful unicorn in the world, her baby-blue eyes looking at him sadly behind a luxurious, violet mane, her fur as white and flawless as alabaster. She wore a kimono that was the color of sakura flowers and lotus petals.

His heart begun to pound, and he felt it would burst at any moment. "Rarity! You're safe!" He dashed towards the golden throne, weaving around the mounds of diamond dogs.

"Not one step closer, fool!" a snobbish voice rang out from behind the throne.

Spike slid to a halt, his spines bristling. "You!"

From behind the throne that Rarity sat on, another unicorn appeared, giving the dragon warrior a haughty look. He wore a kimono that was a gaudy array of bright colors, his filed horn jutting out of a golden mane that had a closer relation to cosmetics than actual hair. He levitated a fan over his face, waving it briskly.

"Blueblood!" Spike shouted, his fists clenching in anger.

"My oh my, you certainly take your time, Dragon Warrior," he said, haughtily. "For a minute there I thought you would never show up."

He pointed accusingly at him. "Prepare yourself, Blueblood! Tonight you will pay for kidnapping Rarity, for hurting my master, Twilight Sparkle, and for hording all the gems in the kingdom!"

The stallion chuckled, an irritatingly high-pitched noise. "Oh, you misunderstand, Spike! It is not me you'll be fighting, but my apprentice!" He closed the fan dramatically, and as it snapped shut, a dark figure dropped to the ground, landing between the dragon and unicorn.

Spike's eyes narrowed. "Trixie!"

"That's The GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie to you, lizard!" the unicorn declared. She was wrapped in a lavender, star-spangled ninja outfit, her silver man tied back into a ponytail.

Blueblood laughed again. "Oh, you've finally met your match now, Spike. Trix-I'm sorry, The Great and Powerful Trixie, has studied every martial art known to pony! She can counter any move you make! Even you don't stand a chance against her!"

Spike crossed his arms, a cocky grin on his face. "Oh, is that a fact?"

"Do not doubt my skills, gecko!" Trixie performed a series of kicks and punches, smiling self-assuredly at the dragon. "This fight will be over before

you can throw even a single punch!"

Not bothering to wait for a response, the boastful unicorn leaped into the air, did a somersault, and somehow managed to rocket downwards, one leg extended. "Take this! Trixie's Flying Crescent Ki-"

Her next words were drowned out as a blinding, burst of flame erupted from Spike's mouth, enveloping the unicorn. When the fire died, Trixie was still in midair, her uniform crumbling to ash before she herself fell the ground in a sizzled heap. Up near the throne, Rarity squealed in delight as Blueblood gaped in horror.

Spike strode forward, wetting his fingers to put out a little flame on Trixie's tail. "Well, looks like you were right! I didn't throw a single punch! Guess they should've taught how to counter dragon fire." He dusted his hands, then looked at Blueblood.

Blueblood shrieked, the fan in his hooves snapping in two. "W-wait! Let's be reasonable here! S-sure I kidnapped your lover, hurt your master, stole your gems, shut down the doughnut shops just to spite you..."

Spike gasped. "You did that?!"

The unicorn clapped his mouth shut, his eyes wide in fear.

"Oh, that is it! I was thinkin' of going easy on you, just because you're so, sopathetic, but shutting down Pony Joe?! That's just too much!" Spike tightened the belt on his gi, rolled back invisible sleeves and cracked his knuckles, focusing his eyes on Blueblood's quickly draining face. He raised one, tiny fist, its scales beginning to glow in what could only be a holy light. "Take this! My love, my anger, and all of my HUNGER!"

The dragon shot forward like a cannon ball, his fist aimed at the shrieking unicorn's face, closer and closer until—

"Spike!"

Spike's eyes shot open, the dream quickly fading. No longer was in the fortress of the nefarious Blueblood, but inside the Ponyville library. It was morning, if the low sunlight was any indication. And Twilight Sparkle was

looking down at him with a pair of agitated eyes. It didn't take long for the dragon to figure out why.

He pulled his fingers out of her nose, and wrung his hands together, smiling sheepishly. "Um, sorry. I was trying to save Rarity."

"By picking my nose," she said, flatly.

"What? Ew, no!" He jumped to his feet, teetering as the last of his drowsiness left him. "I was totally doing a, uh...Draco Meteor Barrage! Hee YAH!" He punched at an invisible opponent, and then raised his leg to land a kick, only to quickly lose his balance. After some futile hops, he rolled backwards head over tail, stopping at the librarian's hoofs. He smiled at her, face flushed. "Uh, it's still a move in progress."

Twilight Sparkle rolled her eyes. "Fine, just go wash your hands, and help me get everything put away before Mort gets here."

"Mort?" Spike looked at her blankly. His eyes then caught something behind her, and he gaped at the sight of a table, overflowing with scrolls that had been unwrapped. "Holy guacamole! Are these all the friendship reports you've done?"

Twilight Sparkle nodded, her horn levitating the scrolls one by one as they were rolled up. "Yep, I've been studying them ever since we got that letter from the princess. Spike, your hands!"

"Oh, right..." He pulled his hands away from the scrolls, and walked to the sink, hopping on the stool in front of it. Washing his hands, Spike begun to recall the events of last night. He could only clearly remember being woken up by late night letter, after which things became a blur. He had curled up to sleep just as the first words of the letter were being said.

He hopped off the stool and went back to the table. "So, uh, run by me again what's happening?"

"Celestia has a special assignment for me," Twilight Sparkle said, distractedly, as she dropped the scrolls into Spike arms, almost causing him to fall over. "She's sending a pony here to teach him all about friendship."

"Wow, you must be pretty excited!"

"Uh, right, excited. Of course I am!" She laughed, at a pitch much higher than usual. "After all, it's a special assignment from the princess!"

"Uh huh..." Spike walked towards the stairs, struggling with his balance as he looked suspiciously at her.

Twilight Sparkle continued, pacing in one spot as her voice grew more frantic, the words almost tripping over themselves: "And not just any assignment, but an assignment to a *special* friend! A special friend who needs to be taught about friendship by me, who's only been studying friendship for less than a year! Who doesn't know a thing about this special pony, or what he likes, or what he's even like, but that's okay because I only need to teach him everything that it's taken me months and months and *months* to learn in a single day, and I can do that no problem! No problem! No..!"

Spike cried out as all the scrolls were suddenly torn from his grip, causing him to unceremoniously trip and roll down the stairs, landing in a heap. He rubbed his aching spikes, and glared at the unicorn as all the scrolls were once again unraveled across the table. It was then he truly began to note the sorry state of the ground floor: books had been pulled out and piled up in front of every bookshelf, piles of notes laid everywhere, and a trashcan was overflowing with crumpled pieces of paper. A lavender cyclone had gone through the place.

"Uh, Twilight...?" As the dragon moved towards the table, he also began to notice things about his caretaker. Things like her disheveled hair, her unkempt fur, and the baggy eyes that were scanning over the reports. "Have you slept at all?" he asked, timidly.

"Oh gosh, I did!" she distressed, floating several scrolls in front of her all at once. "What if I forgot everything I read last night?! Maybe I should read them all one more time, no, two more times, no! Maybe if I rewrite all of them it'll help me remember-"

"Twilight!" The librarian looked at her assistant, and Spike took that moment to jump up, grab her by the ears, and pull her head down until her

eyes were level with his. The shock of the sudden movement caused every, floating scroll to drop the floor. "*Breath*," he commanded.

She blinked in surprise, inhaled deeply, then breathed out. Spike gagged, waving away the odoriferous air. "Ew, morning breath!"

"Sorry..." Twilight Sparkle sighed, and slumped on her hindquarters, look dejectedly at the ground.

Spike scratched his head, uncomfortable. "Oh, uh, it's not *that* bad, I'm sure a quick brush can clear it right up."

"That's not it, Spike." Twilight Sparkle looked back up at him, her eyes tired and communicating a deep anxiety. It was enough to make the dragon a little fearful, and he unconsciously reached for his own tail, squeezing it.

"Twilight...?" He walked over and plopped down beside her. "Seriously, what's gotten into you? I mean, I know you always get a little frantic when Celestia's involved, but...you looked really scared this time."

She looked at him guiltily. "Oh, I'm so sorry Spike. I didn't mean to worry you or anything, it's just..."

"It's just...?"

She sighed again, and got up, levitating the scrolls that had rolled out across the floor. "I don't really know. I mean, the way she just *had* to send a letter last night, the fact she hasn't told us anything about this pony...I feel like she's trying to test me, and the more I think about it, the more worried I get."

Spike half-shrugged. "What's there to worry about, you just gotta help the guy make some friends. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal?! Spike, this might be my one chance to prove to Celestia I can apply everything I've been taught! What if I screw it up? What if I can't help him make friends? What if..." She bit her lower lip, and blinked away moisture. "What if Celestia thinks it's all been a waste of time and makes me come back?"

The thought of being recalled back to Canterlot shook Spike, and a single look at the unicorn told him just how badly the thought was affecting her.

"Oh Twilight," he whispered. He put the scrolls on a nearby shelf, and scampered over, enveloping a leg in a tight hug. He peeked an eye up at her. "Come on, don't worry so much! I mean, who helped beat Nightmare Moon and save Luna?"

"Well, I did," she said. "But I couldn't have done it alone."

"Uh huh. And who helped get Winter Wrap Up done right on schedule?"

A small grin crept up on her face. "I...guess I did help out there. A little."

He crossed his arms proudly. "And who's friends with the five, most awesome ponies in Ponyville?"

The grin grew in a smile. "The are pretty awesome, aren't they?"

"Darn tootin'! You're brave, bright and have made some of the best friends ever! If any pony in this world's going to help this guy make friends, it's going to be you!"

Twilight Sparkle sniffed, and suddenly scooped the baby dragon up in a hug. "Oh, you're the best, Spike! What would I do without you?"

He smiled cheekily at her. "Clean up the library?"

"You're so awful!" she laughed. She put the dragon down and got back on her hooves. "And so right! So what if I don't know anything about him? I didn't know anything about Applejack or Pinkie Pie or everyone else, and that didn't stop us! This is going to be a piece of cake!" She struck a daring pose, holding her head up high. "I am ready for *anything*!"

And no sooner had she said that, there came a sudden knock from the door.

"Oh my gosh! He's here!" The brave unicorn from before crumbled into a terrified filly. Twilight Sparkle rushed towards the door, then towards the stairs, then towards the door. "What do I do what do I do what do I do?!"

Spike watched her pace back and forth, crossing his arms impatiently. There came three more knocks on the door, none of which the panicking unicorn seemed to hear.

He face palmed, groaning in annoyance. "Ugh, I'll get it!" he said, loudly.

Twilight Sparkle stopped dead in her tracks, and looked at him with wide, fearful eyes. "What?! Wait! The library's a mess, I'm a mess, if you open that door then-"

Spike ignored her. He reached for the door knob, and swung it open. "Hey there! How's it going...Applejack?"

The apple farmer stood in the doorway, bowing her head politely. "Mornin' Spike. Mind if Ah come in?"

"Huh? Oh, sure!" Spike stood back, and the orange earth pony strode in, taking in the state of the bottom floor.

Twilight Sparkle, her face turning red, smiled uncomfortably. "Oh, uh, good morning Applejack! I was just...uh..." She glanced around the room, too embarrassed to continue.

Applejack tsked. "Welp, looks like Ah was right. Awright, everypony, get on in here!"

"My goodness, Twilight!" Spike's heart nearly jumped out of his throat as Rarity trotted in, looking at the room with a mixture of shock and disapproval. "Just look at this place! I'm glad we came when we did!" Her eyes landed on Twilight Sparkle, and the fashionista recoiled. "And you look absolutely dreadful, dear! Did you get any sleep last night?"

"W-wait," the librarian stuttered, "why are you and Applejack-"

"Don't forget me! I'm here too!" Pinkie Pie bounded in right behind Rarity, and giggled as she looked around. "Wow, Twilight, did you have a party while we were away? What's with all the books?"

"Er, well, I was thinking that Mort could be from anywhere, so I was trying to study up on different cultures, customs, languages...wait." Twilight

Sparkle stopped and looked at her friends questioningly. "Why are all of you right now?"

"Well, not quite all of us," Rarity said. "We're still waiting for Fluttershy to come back with Rainbow Dash!"

"I'm right here!" Spike had to duck as Fluttershy flew in, pulling something behind her. For a moment Spike thought it was a giant marshmallow with rainbow filling. Then he rubbed his eyes and realized it was actually a small cloud, with Rainbow Dash lounging on top of it, asleep.

Fluttershy gently landed on the floor, and spat Rainbow Dash's tail out. "I'm sorry, I keep trying to wake her up, but nothing's working!" She tried to shake the sleeping pegasus awake, and on a good day, it may have rattled a tea cup.

"Don' worry none, Fluttershy. Let me show you how we get them lazy bones up on the farm!" Applejack walked up to the sleeping pegasus, and turned her back towards her. "Rise 'n shine, sleepy head!" She bucked out with one leg, and the cloud burst on contact, sending the cyan pegasus to the floor with a yelp.

"Ow, hey! What's the big idea?!" The pegasus groggily got up to her hooves, and took one look around at her friends and the library. Recognition dawned on her face. "Oh, right! Uh, morning Twilight. Guess I slept in."

"Um, morning," the unicorn replied, a little perplexed. "Now, can somepony tell me what's going on?"

"Well isn't it obvious?" Rarity asked, cheerfully. "We're here to help you out today!"

Applejack nodded affirmatively. "Yep! We saw how nervous ya were last night, and we all know how strung up you get when Celestia's involved..."

"So we decided to come here before Mort, and help you out anyway we can!" Pinkie Pie poked one of the book stacks, and the literary tower toppled to the ground, sending notes everywhere. One paper landed on top of her head, and she blew it off. "And I think you need all the help you can

get!"

Twilight Sparkle blushed again. "Um, sorry about all that last night. I didn't know Celestia would be sending him over soon, and, well..."

"Don't worry about it!" Rainbow Dash leaped into the air, and in one swoop, scooped up several books in her hooves. She flew up to a bookshelf and begun to slide them back in. Applejack and Pinkie Pie begun to do the same, putting books away and gathering up the papers on the ground.

Spike hopped onto Twilight Sparkle's back, and leaned towards her ear. "See?" he whispered. "Awesome friends." The librarian nodded, and it looked to the dragon her spirits were finally returning.

"Thank you, everyone," she said, graciously. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"Compliments later my dear, you look in dire need of a bath." Rarity walked forward and begun to usher the other unicorn towards the bathroom. "Fluttershy, be a dear and help me, won't you? We've got less than an hour to make Twilight here presentable." She then took a moment to look at Spike, fluttering her eyelids at him. "Also, Spike, would you be so kind as to help the others clean up? I would oh, so appreciate it."

His heart begun to pound in his chest, his body tingling all over. "Whatever you say, Rarity..." He dropped off Twilight Sparkle's back, and watched the three of them ascend the stairs towards the second floor. His thoughts were on the *divineway* Rarity looked at him, fluttering those gorgeous eyes and...

A hoof poked him on the back, shaking him from his daydreams. He looked to see Applejack looking at him with a sly smile. "Come on, Rodeo. We got work to do."

With a blush, Spike walked towards the sink to find the cleaning supplies.

Mort half-walked, half-stumbled towards Ponyville, mumbling under his breath. It had been nearly an hour since he started, and actual walking

hadn't gotten much easier. It wasn't just his cloak giving him problems, there still came the issue of balancing himself, and moving the hooves in a way that actually moved him forward and kept him upright. He even had to "cheat" a few times, gliding a mile at a time, just so he wouldn't spend all day on the road.

He thought it so silly that simply moving a few limbs could be so perplexingly *hard*. "Stupid walking," he muttered. "Whatever happened to floating? Why couldn't the ponies just float? It's a lot easier than this. You're not tripping over yourself, or your cloak, or rocks, or holes, or-"

"Howdy, stranger," a deep voice said.

"Oh, howdy. Anyway, yeah, walking is completely overrated, I should just..." Mort quickly went silent as the previous few seconds replayed in his mind. He risked a glance to his left, and saw a tall and muscular earth pony pulling a wagon, filled to the brim with apples as red as the pony's fur coat. The pony gave a friendly smile.

Mort yelped in fright and snapped his head away, looking straight ahead. "Y-y-you can see me?" he stuttered, feeling silly after asking it.

The earth pony chuckled good-naturedly. "Well, you ain't exactly conspicuous with that get-up of yers." The earth pony slowed to a stop, and raised a hoof in greeting. "Anyways, th' name's Big McIntosh, though you can call me Big Mac if ya like."

"Oh, uh..." Mort kept his head down, trying to avoid the pony's gaze. "Uh, n-nice to meet you." He cautiously extended his own hoof in greeting.

"Same 'ere!" Mort gasped as the larger, earth pony suddenly grasped his outstretched hoof with both forelegs, shaking him so much that Mort was practically swinging in the air. When Big Mac had let go, the shade fell into a heap, his whole body feeling discombobulated.

"Heh heh, woops. Sorry 'bout that, Ah sometimes ferget my own strength." The earth pony extended another hoof, and Mort used it to raise himself back up, trying to gather himself.

"I-it's alright, really. Just remember not everypony's not as big as...uh..."

Mort felt his voice leave him when he realized he was starting straight into Big Mac's face, and most assuredly giving the red pony a clear look at his own.

The red pony cocked an eyebrow, his eyes straining to see something. "Yer, uh...well..."

Mort felt himself tremble, wondering if this was how it was going to end, with him not even getting one hoof into Ponyville proper. "I-is something wrong?" he asked, his voice small.

"Huh?" The larger pony blinked as if in a daze, and shook his head. "O-oh! Oh, no! Ah'm sorry, Ah didn't mean to stare or nothin'. Ya just look a little pale, is all."

"Pale? You think I'm...uh..." It took Mort a moment to realize the earth pony hadn't seen through him. Luna was right after all. "I-I mean, yeah! Yeah, uh, the sun and me don't have the best of relationships. I mean, I'd be the shade and I get sunburned!"

"Yeah, o' course." Big Mac scratched his the back of his head, embarrassed. "Look, Ah'm might sorry 'bout starin' and everything. That was plain rude o' me. Granny taught us all better than that."

Mort shrugged, glad the first pony he met would be this hospitable. "Oh, well, don't worry about it! I guess I do look *kinda* unusual..."

"Nah, don' matter. Manners are manners. Here!" Big Mac shrugged off the harness, and walked over to the back of the wagon. He bit one of the apples at the stem, and brought it over to Mort. "Ere!" Mort looked at the apple, then at Big Mac, confused. "'Ake it!" the earth pony said.

"Huh? Oh!" Mort's horn glowed, and the apple floated away from Big Mac and over to Mort. "Uh, wow! Thanks a lot!"

"That there's on the house, to make up for earlier," he said, with a respectful bow. "Aside from that, you look like you could stand to gain a couple pounds. Yer practically skin 'n bones!"

Mort resisted a quip about how he didn't even have that, and looked at the

apple. It was large, gleamed in the sun, and still held a little spark of life from the tree it was plucked from. "It's a very nice looking apple," he said.

"Eyup," Big Mac drawled, "'course it's even tastier than it looks. Go on ahead, give it a bite!"

"Oh, uh..." Mort stared at the apple, suddenly realizing that of all the things Luna taught him, she never spoke a word about eating.

"Somethin' wrong?" Big Mac asked doubtfully. "I mean, I could give ya a couple more, or-"

"Oh, no!" Mort shook his head, now suddenly worried he'd hurt the other pony's feelings. "It's great! I just need to, uh..." Not wanting to insult the first pony he met today, Mort tossed the apple into the air, lifted his head, and swallowed the fruit whole. It flowed through his being to join all the other souvenirs he had collected over the centuries.

"Hmm, delicious!" he said enthusiastically, rubbing where he thought the stomach should be. "I mean, those are definitely some tasty apples! Yum! Nice and, uh...crunchy." He looked at Big Mac, and noticed with some trepidation that the earth pony was gawking at him, the stalk in his mouth almost falling out. "Uh...it was good?"

Big Mac closed his mouth, still looking a little shocked. "Land's sake, you really were hungry, weren't you? You even ate today?"

"Well, no," he replied.

"Well, yer gonna need more than an apple to fill that appetite! Promise you'll treat yerself to some food soon."

"Um...I promise?"

"Good!" Big Mac moved back to the front of the wagon, shouldering the harness again. "How 'bout you walk wit' me 'til we get to the fork. What's yer name?"

"Oh, uh, Mort," he said, suddenly feeling self conscious. "My name's Mort."

"Well Mort, how 'bout ya tell me about yerself?"

"Oh...um, well..." Mort shifted his gaze away, thinking of how to respond.
"Well...I have a job."

Big Mac chuckled. "Well, everyone needs a job. What do ya do?"

"Oh, uh, you know, public services and the like." His mind raced on how to build on that. "I pretty much have to be anywhere at anytime. It's kinda important."

Big Mac whistled. "Sounds rough."

"You have no idea," he said, with an exhausted sigh. "Somedays I find myself having to go to one end of Equestria and be back at the other end before nightfall."

"Wow," he said, his voice in awe. "How's one pony manage that?"

"Oh, well, I just fl...uh..." His mind race, realizing what he had also said. "Walk. Yeah, I walk."

"Walk?" he asked, with a hint of skepticism. "From one end off Equestria to the other?"

He gulped. "O-okay, I guess it's more of a 'sprint' then anything. I can run pretty fast, you know."

"That a fact?"

"Uh, yep! In fact, once I really get going, my hooves hardly even touch the ground!" He chuckled nervously, double checking to make sure his hooves were firmly hitting the road.

Big Mac cocked his eye at him before breaking into another smile. "That's pretty dang fast, Mort. You a courier or somethin'?"

"Oh, well, sorta" he said, hesitantly. "It's more like I collect stuff to, well, send away."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Oh, you know, uh...one-of-a-kind stuff," Mort replied. "Stuff that can be here and gone in the blink of an eye."

"Sounds interestin'," Bic Mac said. "You must get paid a lot to do it."

"Nah, not really," he said, absently. "Don't get paid at all, actually."

"What?!" Big Mac came to a sudden stop, staring at Mort. "You get sent all across Equestria and you don't even get paid?"

Mort tensed, knowing he had just slipped up. "I-it's fine! Really! Uh, I don't really need the money."

"But what about yer home?" the earth pony asked. "How do you pay for it?"

"Oh, I don't have a home," he said, then quickly clopped his mouth shut.

Big Mac stared at him, stunned. "That's...that's just downright unfair!" he said, stomping one hoof. "Don't they give you anything?!"

"W-well, technically today counts as a vacation," he said, meekly.

"Uh huh. When was your last one?"

"Um..." Mort scratched the back of his hood. "I...don't know," he admitted.

Big Mac shook his head in disgust. "Now that's just ridiculous! I don't mean any offense, but it sounds like yer getting' a raw deal out of that gig."

"I-it's not that bad," he said quietly. "I-I mean, it's something to do..."

"Don't matter, no pony should have to put up with that treatment! You should just get another one."

"I-I can't..."

"Sure you can," Big Mac said. "I'm sure plenty of places would need a fast pony to help 'em out. And actually pay you."

"Look, it's not that simple," Mort said, with an edge in his voice.

"Sure it is!"

"No, it's not!" he said, defensively. He darted in front of Big Mac, looking up at him. "I mean, this job is important, okay? And it's *my* job!"

"But it doesn't have to be!"

"Yes it does!"

"Why? I'm sure-"

"It's the only thing I can do!" he shouted, glaring daggers at Big Mac. The outburst caused the larger earth pony to take a step back, staring at the shade in shock. Realizing what he just did, the heat Mort felt cooled immediately, and his body sagged. "I-I'm sorry..."

"Uh..." Big Mac cleared his throat. "You okay?"

"I..." Mort moaned, turning away. "I don't know." He kicked at the ground, watching a rock roll across the road miserably. "Look, I'll just be on my way. Sorry for bothering you..."

Mort felt two, sudden pats on his back, and with it felt a life that was slow, but meticulous, tempered by bearing hardships and supporting others, with a dash of an easy-going nature. He glanced up to see the large, earth pony smiling sympathetically.

"C'mon now," he said. "Chin up. I'm sorry 'bout all that, I didn't mean to rile you up or anythin'."

Mort sighed. "No, it's alright. Just...my job's kind of a complex subject."

"Wanna talk 'bout it?" Big Mac asked.

"Not...really," Mort said, slowly. "I kinda came out here to get away from it. At least for today."

Instead of prodding him further, Big Mac only nodded. "Fair 'nough." Big Mac proceeded to walk again, and after a moment Mort followed silently, unsure of what to say.

"Uh, Mort," Big Mac started, glancing back at him. "I know you don' want to talk 'bout it, and Ah respect that. Ah also respect if you wanna stick with it for yer own reasons. But Ah'm just saying you need more to yer life then yer job.

"Take me for instance," he said, tilting his head towards his flank, where there was an inside view of a big, green apple. "Now, when Ah got my cutie mark, my first thought was Ah had to do everything to live up to it. Y'know, buck apples day in an' day out. Ah did that for a couple weeks, an' just 'bout rebuffed everythin' Ah used to do, like goin' to school, helpin' with the chores, an' even hangin' out with my friends.

"It was that last one that really got my pop sore with me. He told me he was proud of my cutie mark, and that I should be proud of it too, but not so much I put off everythin' else I had. He told me how all our foresires had made the mistake of dedicatin' every bit of their life to the apple orchards. Even their time with their sons and daughters was spent teachin' them how to buck apples and run the farm when they passed.

"He didn't think that was any sort of life for me or my sisters. He said that I should let my cutie mark guide me, *not* control me. An' that Ah gotta keep my life open for everythin' else it offers. He taught that to me, an' Ah made sure my sisters learned the same thing.

"Sorry for ramblin' like that," he said, laughing. "Point is, yer life's gotta be more than just yer job, y'know? You need some room for friends an' family. You got any family, Mort?"

"Kinda..." Mort thought of the multitude of shades that were scattered across the Equestria, never so much as even acknowledging his existence. "They're not the most...receptive bunch."

"How 'bout friends?"

"A couple," he said, "though they're busy most of the time."

"Even a couple's better than nothin'," Big Mac said. "Maybe you can arrange to get some more time off?"

"It's not that easy," Mort said, shaking his head. "I'm not even sure when I'll get another day like that after tonight."

Big Mac looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, and then turned his eyes back to the road, saying nothing.

The further they walked, the more Mort noticed the apple trees that surrounded them, their ripened fruit hanging over the road. It wasn't long before the road split, and off in the distance on the right road, Mort could make out a barn house and white, picket fences.

"Welp, this is here where I get off," Big Mac said, steering towards the barn house.

"Oh, okay," Mort said, a little disappointed. "Well, I'm sure you're really busy, what with all the apples."

"Well, once I get these all put away, I got the afternoon off." The earth pony turned to look at him, giving a warm smile. "In fact, how 'bout you swing by our place when you get the chance? Someponys gotta put a little meat on them bones."

"S-swing by?" the shade asked, taken aback. "Y-you mean, like...you're inviting me over?"

Big Mac grinned. "You seem to be friendly enough, and we Ponyville folk are a mighty hospitable lot. Pride ourselves on it, even!" He patted where his heart would be. "Ain't no problem at all."

"Oh, uh, wow! I-I mean, thanks! Really!" Mort almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had been shouting at him only a few minutes ago, and he was already be invited over to their home. "I'll definitely consider coming over some time! I-I mean I kinda got things to do and everything, but-"

"Now, now, don' fret none. You just come on over when ya can. No worries." Big Mac turned back to walk towards the barn, waving back at him. "Try not to work too hard 'ere on out, okay? Remember, it's *your* life!"

"Y-yeah, definitely! Thank you!" he said, waving furiously at him. "Good luck with all those apples! I'll try to buy a few next time!" Mort kept waving at him at him, and finally stopped himself when he realized Big Mac wasn't looking back anymore. The little bit of embarrassment he felt had no effect on his spirits, though.

He proceeded down the road, a skip in his step. There was no longer any uncertainty in his movements, his hooves moving as if he had walked like this his entire life. Everything had gone so much better than he thought it would. Big Mac hadn't suspected a thing, and Mort didn't feel all that uncomfortable around him when they were talking with each other. If the rest of them were even half as friendly...

"I've been offered an apple and got invited to their house! And that was just *onepony*! I can't wait to see what'll happen when I get there!" Another impulse came to him, and instead of just walking, he began to prance up and down in excitement, wondering how the day could get better.

He was so entranced about what awaited him he almost didn't see the tall, black mare that passed him by. "Howdy, stranger!" he said, imitating Big Mac's drawl with a giggle.

"Be wary of the path you tread, shade," the mare replied coolly.

"No worries! I finally got this walking thing down, and the roads are really-"

He gasped, his body stiffened, and Mort dropped to the ground like a lead brick. He spun around, only to see that the road was devoid of anything, except himself. His eyes darted into the trees that lined the road, but he couldn't see even a hint of movement. Not even the sky held anything in it, except the occasional cloud.

The mare's words echoed in his mind, sending shivers across his body. He shuffled backwards, keeping his eyes on the road, before finally turning around to continue on his way.

He was having trouble walking again.

When Twilight Sparkle had come out of the bathroom, the disaster area that was her bottom floor had been restored to its pristine state. The books were shelved, the papers gathered and thrown out when appropriate, and the wooden surfaces had a shine to them from some prodigious polishing. Some of the books were in the wrong spots, but she wasn't going to nitpick.

She was also feeling much better. Her mane and coat had been combed expertly by Rarity, and Fluttershy had given her a small massage, using techniques she had picked up from the Lotus sisters. All the tension she had before had been melted away, replaced with renewed vigor.

It also helped that her friends had decided to stay with her until Mort arrived. Pinkie Pie had brought over a tray of pastries after they finished cleaning, and they spent the rest of their time snacking, and also strategizing on what to do.

"So, 'ere's what we figured, sugar cube," Applejack started, swallowing a cupcake. "This Mort feller don' have many friends, right? He's been strung up with these 'duties' an' the like, whatever they are. So Celestia's sendin' 'im here to help 'im get out more an' make some friends."

"Remind of you of anypony?" Rarity asked, with a knowing grin.

Twilight Sparkle merely nodded, already seeing what they were getting at.

Applejack grinned. "Well now, way Ah see it, if we just show this pony 'round town, the same way we did you, he'll be learnin' 'bout friendship lickity split."

"It's going to be so much fun!" Pinkie Pie gushed. "Rarity's going to dress him up, Rainbow Dash is going to show off her killer moves, Applejack will take him to the farm, Fluttershy is going to show him all her cute, cuddly animal friends and at the end of the day, I throw him a PARTY!" She threw her forelegs in the air, so hard that she lost her balance and fell back with a giggle.

Twilight Sparkle was both impressed and grateful that her friends had thought things out so much. She had been so caught up on preparing for who Mort was, she didn't even think about what they would've done.

"Maybe...maybe I could show him around the library," she said, clopping her hooves together. "He might be an avid reader! Or have a scholarly side to him!"

"Oh yeah, books," Spike said sarcastically, with a roll of his eyes. "That'll be an ice breaker."

"Well, you never know," Fluttershy said, quietly. "I mean, if his job's dangerous, maybe some quiet time would be nice."

"Or you could talk to him about Celestia!" Rarity added excitedly. "Just think about all the things he could know!"

"Oh no," the librarian said, with a dismissive wave of her hoof. "I mean, it'd be nice to hear some stories, but I wouldn't want to pry or any-"

"HEADS UP!"

The ponies in the room instinctively ducked as Rainbow Dash flew in from the window, circling once before landing on the ground. Her hair was in disarray from the wind (though it was always in disarray) and she was panting fast.

"Just saw somepony walkin' towards Ponyville!" she said, breathlessly. "Should be here in ten, fifteen minutes top!"

"Is it Mort?" Rarity asked. "What did he look like? What kind of pony was he?" She paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Was he handsome?"

"Uh, not sure on all of those," Rainbow Dash replied, giving the unicorn a look. "Guy was wearing this black cloak all over him. I think he had a horn, but I couldn't get too close. Still, he's definitely the only pony I saw coming here!"

"A cloak?" Applejack took one look out the window, where the sun was shining down almost unimpeded. "That colt must be sweatin' up a storm by now!"

"We'll ask him about his clothes later," Twilight Sparkle said, getting up

from the floor. "Places, everypony! We're going to give Mort a day he won't forget!"

Ponyville wasn't a town Mort had been too familiar with. While he visited most town several times a week, it was rare for him to visit Ponyville more than a couple times a month, mostly for older ponies who had lived their entire lives in the quaint town, or the occasional illness. As it was, while a number of ponies grew up in Ponyville, many of them would often move away to pursue future endeavors and dreams. Ponyville was simply a very peaceful, little town.

Well, not *quite* peaceful, he knew. It was next to the Everfree forest, which had its fair share of monsters and denizens that would be happy to make a snack out of a pony. In spite of that, no pony in the town had ever died because of the Everfree creatures. More than a few close calls, but nothing fatal.

As he passed into the town limits, his mind was still lingering on the black mare, and the words she spoke. He knew she said "shade," but he had no idea how she could possibly know what he was. Shades weren't well known creatures, even in the most obscure circles. And even the stories that did speak of them usually described them as ghosts, ghouls or even demons.

What bothered him even more was that he could barely remember a thing about the mare. Her voice and her coat, of course, but everything else was a blur. Even when he thought back to that moment, dissecting the information his body naturally collected, he was disturbed to find not even a hint of the mare. As far as the data was concerned, he had spoken to and heard *nothing*.

He tried to remember a time when he hallucinated of ponies and other creatures that weren't there, but came up empty.

"I don't need this!" he moaned. "I've got enough going on, I don't need to be going crazy, too!" He breathed. "Okay, just calm down, Mort. You can worry about the creepy mare later. Right now you need to find the-"

He came to a sudden stop, and he swung his head up with a jolt, feeling his

horn cut through something. He stared at a picture of an open book, a fresh cut carved into one of the pages. He glanced beyond it, seeing a large tree that had a door, windows and even a couple balconies, with a beehive buzzing away in a tree branch.

"Library." Mort gulped, the thoughts of the mystery mare fleeing immediately. His horn glowed, and from the cloak a stack of yellow note cards came. Luna had him write down a list of things to say when meeting Twilight Sparkle. Big Mac had been good practice, but he wanted this first meeting to be perfect.

"Okay, let's see," he started, looking at them. "Step one, be tangible." He glanced at a hoof, stomping on the ground. "Check. Step two, knock three times." He looked at the door, with its candle engraving, and after a moments hesitation, knocked on the door three times.

From behind the door, a voice wrang out, "Come in!"

"Uh, okay. Check." He breathed, his horn wrapping the doorknob in a green glow. "It's only Twilight Sparkle. She's only Celestia's most precious student, Luna's savior, and all-around nice pony. It'll be okay.

"Don't choke, don't choke, don't choke, don't...!"

He opened the door.

"Come in!" Twilight Sparkle stood tall in the center of her friends. They had all lined up on the bottom floor, looking at the door expectantly. Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy on her left, with Rarity and Pinkie Pie on her right. Spike stood in front of her, straightening his head fins.

"Everypony ready?" Applejack asked.

"You bet!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, pounding her hooves together.

"Let operation Mort's Best Day Ever commence!" Pinkie Pie giggled, hopping up and down.

"Shh, here he comes!" Fluttershy pointed at the doorknob, which was starting to turn.

"Okay, fillies," Rairty started, "on the count of three, 'Welcome to Ponyville!' One, two, three...!"

The door opened.

Twilight Sparkle opened her mouth to shout the greeting, but her voice died when her eyes fell on the doorway. For a moment it looked like an empty void had taken up the entrance, and it was a moment later it was merely a cloak. Possibly the blackest cloak she ever laid eyes on.

The pony's face could be seen under the hood, and Twilight Sparkle had to squint her eyes to see a thin, pale face with eyes that were either a dark pink or a light red. Virtually everything else about the pony was obscured, save the unusual horn that stuck out from the top of the hood, looking vaguely like a blade.

It was one thing for Rainbow Dash to describe him. But with the pony here, directly in front of them, blocking the only exit (and she had no idea why she suddenly thought of it as an "exit"), the room suddenly felt very cold, and small.

Twilight Sparkle heard a squeak, and she glanced to her left to see Fluttershy edging away from the mystery pony, and behind Applejack. The apple farmer was nervously scratching at the ground, and Rainbow Dash's wings were outstretched in a vaguely intimidating fashion. On her left, Rarity seemed perturbed, and even Pinkie Pie was staring wide eyed at the cloaked pony.

"H-hello?" Twilight Sparkle gulped audibly, an unusual dread creeping into her.

The cloaked pony regarded them, frozen in the doorway. Moments passed, seconds stretching into minutes. Twilight Sparkle felt her heart beginning to beat faster, as the cold from before begun to claw its way throughout the rest of her body.

Finally, there came an almost ghastly, green glow from the cloaked

unicorn's horn, and she found her body tensing up, just as it did when she saw the manticore and the hydra. Spike hugged Twilight Sparkle's leg, staring wide eyed at the cloaked pony.

Something enveloped in that same glow appeared within the depths of the pony's hood, and it slowly floated out of the darkness to stop in front of the pony's head.

The cloaked unicorn positioned the note cards in front of him, studying their contents. He cleared his throat.

"Uh," he started, "s-step one, become tang...no, wait. Step two, knock...n-no, uh..." He flipped through the note cards, giving one a brief glance before moving to the next one. He chuckled nervously, bringing to mind the scrawny, meek students that she saw all the time at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns.

The cold fear she felt before vanished as quickly as it came, to be replaced with incredible confusion. She looked at her friends and Spike, seeing similar, befuddled looks.

"O-oh, here we go." The cloaked pony settled on one card, cleared his throat, and begun to speak in a mechanical tone: "Hello, Twilight Sparkle. My name is Mort. It is a pleasure to-"

It was at that point that Mort took a step forward, got caught up the long robes covering him, and fell to the ground, the note cards scattering all over the place.

"Gah! Oh no oh no!" His horn glowed, grabbing each note card, bringing them down to him one at a time. "Uh, 'I am intrigued by your...' no, that's not it. 'I hope we can be...' no, I was saving that for the end! Why the heck didn't I number these things...?!"

Twilight Sparkle bit her lip, her eyes catching Spike, who seemed to be struggling to not break into laughter. The rest of her friends were sharing awkward looks.

"Okay, this goes here, no, wait, yes! No! Uh, maybe..." Mort's horn glowed brighter, and the cards suddenly stopped dead in space, before instantly

reforming into a stack. A stack Mort proceeded to read through. *Quickly.*

"Hello Twilight Sparkle it is a pleasure to meet you Princess Celestia has told me all about you I am intrigued by your accomplishments and I wish to learn all I can from you and I hope we can be the *BEST OF FRIENDS!*" The cards suddenly exploded, their ashes settling onto the floor. Mort looked at the ashes, then at Twilight Sparkle, giving a little, nervous laugh.

She felt a tug at her leg, and looked down to see Spike giving her an exasperated look. "This is going to be a long day, isn't it?"

Chapter 4

It wasn't a great start.

When Mort had walked into the library, he had prepared himself to be face-to-face with Twilight Sparkle, and perhaps her dragon assistant as well. He had went through the note cards over and over, planning to recite them from memory, because he was fairly certain ponies didn't read note cards when introducing themselves. It was just him, introducing himself to her, alone, in private, to serve the extra benefit as practice for the others. Because surely somepony who was once socially awkward herself could understand if he had a little trouble with it.

But when he opened the door and found himself face-to-face with *all* of the unicorn's friends, his mind went completely blank. He felt nervous enough around one pony he didn't know. It was altogether worse when presented with six ponies he wanted to make a good, first impression on. And first impressions, according to Luna, were important.

It also didn't help that the looks he garnered were those of confusion, suspicion, agitation, and worse of all, fear. He knew his presence always had a disquieting effect on other ponies, and guessed it might be worse if he were tangible, but he didn't know he'd get so many, strong reactions from just *standing* there.

Then he started reading from the cards, because it seemed better then just standing there. And when he did that, they stopped looking at him as if he were some ominous, foreboding creature, and more like he was just *weird*. And for some reason, that felt worse.

And then, because he wanted to try to look a little more dynamic, he tried to step towards them.

As the fall proved, that was a mistake.

One rushed, almost incomprehensible introduction later, Mort was now looking at the six ponies and one dragon from the floor, the note cards reduced to ashes. The looks he got now were now ones of pity,

embarrassment, and perplexity. He really wanted to fade into the ground, pop up outside the library, and get away as fast as he could.

A voice broke the silence, one that tried to be discrete, but didn't try too hard. "This is going to be a long day, isn't it?" The tone alone said everything about what the dragon thought.

"Spike!" Twilight Sparkle scolded, causing the dragon to roll his eyes. The unicorn ignored it and walked over to him, offering an apologetic smile. He was a little relieved to see she was looking more receptive than when he first arrived. "I'm sorry about that, Spike's a good dragon, he just has a tendency to run his mouth a little." She put a hoof forward. "Welcome to Ponyville, Mort. I'm Twilight Sparkle, and it's nice to meet you."

"Oh, uh, thanks," he said, taking her hoof and getting back up. For a moment he felt a inquisitive, curious spirit, but also felt a little shiver run through his limb. He let go as soon as he was back up, not wanting a repeat of the last few minutes. "I'm Mort, and it's nice to meet you, too." He paused a moment. "W-wait, I already introduced myself, didn't I? Uh, it's just nice to meet you, then."

Twilight Sparkle giggled. "There's no reason to be nervous, Mort. We're all friends here. *Best* friends, even. *Right*, fillies?" There was a cacophony of agreement from the others. It sounded unusually quick and loud to him. "Yes," Twilight Sparkled enthused, her smile going even wider, "we're just about the *friendliest* ponies in Ponyville, and we can't wait to be *your* friend."

Mort shifted his hooves uncomfortably, as Twilight Sparkle continued to give him a wide, bright smile. He'd only seen her a few times, but he had never seen her act like this. "Uh, thanks...?"

"Let me introduce you to everypony," she said, leading him over to where the others were. "First we have-"

"HI!" Mort gave a startled jump as the pink pony with a frizzy mane suddenly sprung forward, her large eyes plastered on him. "It's great to finally meet you, Mort! I'm Pinkie Pie, by the way! It's not everyday we meet a friend of Celestia, actually the only time we had a day like that was when Twilight came to town, and that felt like such a long, long time ago, so it's

really exciting to have you here now! Hey! That's a funny little cloak you got! Did you get it from Zecora? She's a zebra that lives in the Everfree forest and at first we thought she was kinda creepy but then we got covered in Poison Joke and..."

Pinkie Pie bounced around in circles around Mort, her words soon fading into obscurity as he tried to follow her movements. Though there wasn't any contact, he could still feel the bountiful and bubbly energy that seemed to emanate from each bounce she made, energy that swelled with joy. And he swore at one point he saw her move to his right, only to come bounding out of his left. It felt like the only way to watch her was to keep an eye at every corner in the room, and even that might not be enough.

He was even more confused when he tried to focus on her words again. "...and when that happened my dad looked really, really mad because I put red dye in his shampoo bottle because he used to have a red mane but then I remembered we're covered in fur so *duh*, of course he'd use it on his coat too, and I was really scared but then he started laughing really hard and – eep!" Pinky Pie squeaked as Applejack suddenly pulled on her tail in mid-bounce, and grounded her. The pink pony gave the orange pony a curious, and still quite cheerful, look.

"Now jus' calm down fer a sec, sugarcube," Applejack said. "I think the fella needs a little time to digest all that."

"W-wait," Mort asked, thinking back on Pinkie Pie's speech. "She was talking about zebras and ended with...shampoo dye?"

"Uh, that's our Pinkie Pie," Twilight Sparkle said with a forced, nervous laugh. "You just, uh, never know what she's going to do next! *Anyway!* Next we have-"

"Let me handle this, Twilight," the cyan pegasus said coolly, strutting forward. She whipped her rainbow mane back, and shot him a cocky look. "The name's Rainbow Dash, *fastest flier* in Equestria!" She stuck a hoof out in greeting, holding her head in pride. "I'm sure you've heard all about me."

"Oh, y-yeah, I definitely remember you!" he said, excitedly, shaking her hoof, and feeling a proud, almost electric pulse laced with intense commitment. "You're the one who pulled off the Sonic Rainboom, weren't

you? That was just really, *really* awesome!"

Like Twilight Sparkle, he could see her smile crack ever so slightly, but his compliment smoothed it over completely. "Oh yeah, I know. I'm just awesome in general."

"It was just...I-I don't know, so *exciting*! When I saw you break through the barrier and just *zoom* all the way down to catch Rarity and the Wonderbolts, I was just—"

"You saw me?" Rainbow Dash raised a confused eyebrow. "How? Where were you?"

"Oh, I...uh..." Mort went silent, realizing that it wouldn't be best to tell her he was actually on the ground, right below them, on the significant chance that she wouldn't have pulled up in time and plowed them all messily into the dirt. "Uh...I was...in a shop. R-reading an article about it..."

"Huh, I thought they didn't get pictures of it?"

"Oh, uh, no! Of course they didn't, I...uh..." He mentally berated himself for running his mouth again, and wracked his mind for an answer that was at least half-way believable. "I just...uh, imagined it."

The answer earned a queer look from Rainbow Dash, who tilted her head to one side.

"Y-you know," he continued, "in my mind. With...imagination...?"

Rainbow Dash continued to stare at him, before snickering to herself. "Well, Mort, imagination's nice, but it's got nothin' on reality!" In an instant the pegasus was already in the air, shooting him a daring look. "When I show my moves off later, I'm gonna move so fast your head will spin!" She suddenly dived past him, and the force of it sent him spinning around in circles. He tried to steady himself, but only succeeded in getting his bony hooves tangled with his cloak again ready to topple over.

"Oh!" Mort felt a pony get right beside him, keeping him from tipping over completely. In that moment he felt a spirit that was refined and elegant, with heavy doses of generosity and a pinch of obsessive compulsiveness. He

glanced to his left to see the pretty, white unicorn had stopped his fall. "Honestly, Rainbow Dash! Use your *inside* flying." Her horn glowed, and Mort felt himself lifted up as a magical force went to work on the cloak, untangling it from his hooves and even straightening it out for him.

"There we go!" she said, depositing him gracefully on the ground. "Is that better, dear?" she asked, with a charming smile.

"Um, o-oh, yeah, thank you very much," he said, tentatively swinging one hoof around. "You're very good at, uh, untangling things."

"You're very welcome, Mort, and thank you. I get a lot of practice from untangling my sister from my fabrics." She flipped her mane to one side while fluttering her eyes. "And might I say it's a *pleasure* to meet you!"

"Y-you too..." The look she was giving him was beginning to make him feel uncomfortable. He wasn't sure of the last time somepony had looked at him like *that*, if ever.

There was a polite cough, and Twilight Sparkle came in between them. "Uh, so, yeah! Mort, this is Rarity. She runs a boutique in Ponyville, and has made some really amazing dresses."

"Oh, but I am certainly capable of making suits as well!" Rarity giggled excitedly. "In fact, I've just put the finishing touches on one this morning, and I'm sure you would looking absolutely *dashing* in it!"

Mort tried to look anywhere but Rarity's half-closed eyes. Every time his eyes met hers he felt his insides twist in knots. His eyes caught Spike, who was shooting him a dirty, and distinctly jealous, look. If he were capable of sweating, he was sure Twilight Sparkle would need a mop to clean it. "I...uh...um...uh..."

"Wow, that's so *generous* of you, Rarity." Twilight Sparkle suddenly slid up close to him, nudging his shoulder. "A whole new outfit, just for you, Mort! Isn't that great?"

Mort recalled seeing a lot of suits in his travels. Some snazzy, many tacky, and all of them lacking in darkened hoods. "Y-yeah," he murmured quietly, "that's, uh, great..."

Twilight Sparkle's smile seemed to grow even wider, and noticeably more strained. "*Glad* to hear it! Now, next I want you to meet...Fluttershy?"

Mort was looking Applejack, who looked back with a sheepish grin. The earth pony side-stepped out of the way, revealing the yellow pegasus that had been hiding behind her. Fluttershy squeaked in surprise as her cover left her, and she shrunk back, most of her face hiding behind the pink mane that seemed to flow across it.

"Hel...hel...hello," the pegasus whispered, more silent than a gentle breeze.

"Hi..."

The two of them stood their silently. Mort awkwardly scratched at the floor, as Fluttershy seemed to take interest in many, nonexistent things in the room, always managing to keep most of her face hidden. Mort felt the strangest compulsion to dash forward and squeeze her, half-expecting an adorable *squeak* to be emitted.

In fact, as he looked at her pink mane and yellow coat, and his eyes wandered over to the butterflies that decorated Fluttershy's flank, distant memories came to his mind's forefront. "You haven't fallen off any clouds recently, have you?"

"Huh?"

"O-oh, nothing," he said quickly, berating himself. He needed to learn to keep his mouth shut. To think he had been annoyed just last night by Celestia's *italics*...

Twilight Sparkle looked between the two of them, her smile growing noticeably more strained by the minute. "So, Fluttershy," she asked, a little loudly, "why don't you tell Mort what you do?"

"Oh, uh, I watch over the animals at my cottage," she said, her voice still barely audible. "I feed them, clean them, make sure they get along with each other..."

"Oh, animals..." Mort thought back to another tip Luna had given him: talk

about the other pony's interests. "That must be a lot of work."

"Sometimes," the pegasus said, a little louder, "but it's all worth it. They're really friendly and I love to take care of them."

"Uh huh." Mort wished he knew more about animals himself, but for the most part he saw them as a workload he didn't have to shoulder. Thinking back to the night before, he asked, "So, what do you think about...rabbits?"

"Rabbits?" In an instant the pegasus seemed to perk up, a gleam in her eye. "Oh, they're wonderful! They're small, fluffy, and oh so *cute*!"

"Really?" He gave a silent thanks to the rabbit shade. "So, like, they're your favorite?"

"Oh, I could never pick a favorite," she said, with a shake of her long mane. "I like them all for lots of different reasons, though...I do have a special rabbit friend named Angel. Actually, later today I'm hoping to, well...introduce you to him and all the others."

"Oh, um, sounds fun," he said. Animals were unfamiliar territory to Mort. Most of them did look cute and cuddly, but with him being an intangible shade most of the time, actually petting one had been impossible. He was curious what it'd be like.

There was a relieved breath from Twilight Sparkle. "Well, I'm glad you think so, Mort. Now over here we have-"

"Howdy there, Mort! Name's Applejack!" Mort looked to his right just in time to find the orange, earth pony shaking his other hoof with both of hers. Mort jittered on the spot, feeling a suspiciously similar spirit to the one Big Mac had, if more down-to-earth and a little motherly.

But before he could dwell on it further, the earth pony had let him go, shivering a little herself. "Hoo wee, Mort, you feel awful cold! Wouldn't think so with that getup of yers. You feelin' alright, sugarcube?"

"Huh? O-oh, of course! I'm just not too...uh, warm blooded, I guess." His eyes traveled along her side, spotting the trio of apples decorating her flank. That, her accent and what he felt from her made him wonder of a

possible connection. "Uh, Applejack, you wouldn't happen to work on an apple farm or something nearby, would you?"

"Well shewt, how'd ya guess?" the orange pony asked with playful sarcasm, tipping her hat back. "Bet you probably saw it on the way over 'ere. Hope all them apples got yer stomach rumblin', 'cause we're gonna be diggin' into them later today."

"Funny you should mention that, because..." But before he could continue, his eyes caught a green fin that was near the edge of his vision. He glanced down, and saw the baby dragon looking at him inquisitively while rubbing his chin. "Um...c-can I help you?"

"Hmm..." Spike peered at him with one eye, a frown forming on his face. Mort could see his spines bristling just slightly. "You look kinda...weird."

"W-w-weird?" he stuttered, followed by a nervous laugh. His mind flashed back to when Luna told him the spell would work well enough on ponies, but had never said a thing about how it would look to anything else. A wave of fear washed through his body at the possibility of his disguise being discovered so soon. "I-I-I don't know what you mean!"

"Neither do I!" Twilight Sparkle was at Spike's side in an instant, flinging him up by his tail onto her back. "Uh, this is Spike. He's my number one assistant!" She shot a stink eye at him. "Though his *manners* could use a little work."

"Oh come on! I'm just saying-"

"Is a certain dragon *volunteering* to stay at the library today?" she asked him, tersely.

"No," he grumbled sourly, crossing his arms.

"Good." She looked back at Mort, and in an instant the unnatural smile from before was back. "So, that's everypony, Mort! As you can see we got a really big day planned out for you!"

"Uh, yeah, no kidding. So, what are you..." Before he could finish, Twilight Sparkle was already tugging at his cloak and leading him towards the door.

He felt a jolt of despair. "Huh? W-where are we going? I didn't say something wrong, did it?"

"Oh, no! Nothing!" Twilight Sparkled assured quickly. "You were fine, the fillies and I just need a little time to, y'know, 'powder our noses?'"

"Why would you need powder on your nose?"

"Ha ha, oh Mort, you're *hilarious*." The door opened and Mort found himself walking onto the doorstep. "Give us just a few minutes, and then we'll be taking you around Ponyville before you know it!"

"Well, if you say-"

The door slammed, drowning out the rest of his sentence. He looked at the door, fidgeting where he stood. He could hear Twilight Sparkle's voice inside, clearly discussing something with the others. He wondered if it concerned him. He had an urge to stick just enough of himself inside to listen in, but fought it off. It would just be rude.

It hadn't ended badly at all, he decided. Embarrassing himself like he did might have even alleviated whatever anxieties they were having when he appeared. It'd explain why Big Mac hadn't acted like that; the big pony had probably seen him grumbling and tripping over his own legs before he had spoken to him. The idea of being foolish to dispel whatever ill feelings other ponies had didn't excite him too much, but it would be better than having them all scared of him.

But then there was Spike. The illusion spell was definitely not working on the dragon as well as the other ponies. He had to avoid giving Spike a view of his face as much as possible. Dragons were incredibly protective of not just territory and possessions, but also creatures that were dear to them, and he didn't want to be on the receiving end of his fire or claws. He had seen what they did to other ponies, and while he didn't know how effective they'd be on a tangible shade, he wasn't eager to find out.

Sighing, he begun to lay down, before spotting the obvious gash he had made in the library sign. He felt a twinge of panic, imagining what Twilight Sparkle would think that he had vandalized her own library and home. His horn glowed, a green aura surrounding the hole.

"Don't panic, you cut things all the time," he assured himself. "Putting them back together is just...the opposite, right? You can conjure an illusion spell, for goodness sake. This should be-"

The sign cracked as the hole became a little smaller, at the expense of the wood surrounding it splitting apart as it was pulled in to seal the hole. The gash from before disappeared, to be replaced by two, larger cracks around where it was.

A feeling of dread washed over him. "Oh no."

As soon as the door was closed, Twilight Sparkle breathed a sigh of relief, and trotted back into the room. "Okay," she said, with a determined smirk, "Stage 1: Introductions is now complete! Good job, everypony!" There was a small cheer from her friends.

She walked up to Pinkie Pie. "Very friendly as always, Pinkie, but tone it down just a little bit. We don't want the poor guy feeling overwhelmed. Or confused."

The pink pony shrugged absently. "I don't see what was so confusing about it! I was just telling him how I got my cutie mark!"

"Oh. Well, of course..." Twilight Sparkle resisted a strong urge to question that point, and instead left Pinkie Pie with a forced grin. She moved on to the next pony "Rainbow Dash, I'm glad you found yourself another fan already, but *please* be more careful when you're flying around him! You nearly knocked him off his hooves."

"Hey, I'm the epitome of cool! It's what I do." The pegasus grinned cockily, but it wilted quickly under Twilight Sparkle's stare. "Okay, okay," she said briskly, "I'll be more careful next time. Geeze."

"Don't try to take it the wrong way, Dash. I just don't want to explain any scrapes or bruises to the princess, and I take it neither do you." The pegasus' eyes widened at the latter possibility, and nodded nervously. "Rarity, you were great, but...I'm sorry, you weren't *flirting* with him, were

you?"

The white unicorn smiled coyly. "Well, I think 'flirting' is a little strong, Twilight. I just wanted to make the best, possible impression. Improve his self esteem, as it were. What better way than to draw the eyes of a very fair and *fabulous* mare?"

"You over Blueblood already, Rarity?" Rainbow Dash teased.

Rarity sniffed. "My feelings about that...that *brute* were swept away in a tide of buttercream frosting and apple filling. Believe me when I say I am *done* fantasizing about my ideal stallion."

"Ooh, I know it was rotten, nasty thing for that snobby prince to do, but having a cake thrown at you sounds like so much fun!" Pinkie Pie licked her lips at the idea. "Winner's whoever can eat most of the cake!"

"Focus, fillies," Twilight Sparkle interjected. "Rarity, I understand what you're going for, but...well, be careful. The guy doesn't get out much. You might intimidate him."

"Me? Intimidating? Oh, perish the thought, Twilight," Rarity dismissed with a wave of her hoof.

Twilight Sparkle didn't feel Blueblood or the diamond dogs would agree. She moved on to Applejack. "Applejack, great job, just remember not everypony has the legs you got."

The farmer chuckled. "We're all 'bout strong impression's, Twi'. But Ah'll keep it in mind, feller almost felt like a twig!"

"Great, and Fluttershy..."

"Nooo!" Fluttershy covered her head with both forelegs, looking pleadingly at the shocked librarian. "Please don't scold me, Twilight! I can't take it! I'll try harder next time, really!"

Twilight Sparkle stared perplexedly at the pegasus. "Uh, actually, Fluttershy, all I was going to say was that you shouldn't act so scared around him. I know you're, well, shy," she said, lamely, "but you seemed

really frightened this time. And Rarity's right, Mort needs to feel good about himself if he's going to enjoy today."

"Oh, um, okay..." The pegasus blushed, then got back on her hooves. "Well, it's just...I don't know, Twilight, before he started talking he just seemed really scary."

"Oh Fluttershy," Twilight Sparkle said gently, with a roll of her eyes. "What's so scary about him?"

"Now to be fair, Twi', Ah kinda felt somethin' too." Applejack shrugged her shoulders. "Ah mean, Ah wouldn't say Ah was *scared*, but Ah did feel a wee on-edge."

Rainbow Dash scratched her chin. "Y'know, I guess he did look a little spooky. Not that I was spooked or anything," she added quickly.

Pinkie Pie fidgeted. "Usually I feel like hopping when I meet new ponies, but this time I felt...floppy? Ploppy...?" The pink pony shook her head, quietly murmuring words to herself.

"That dreary cloak of his didn't help," Rarity remarked. "I can't wait to get him out of those sheets into something *much* more cheerful."

"Oh come on," Twilight Sparkle said dismissively. "He tripped on the way in! How's that 'scary?'"

Rainbow Dash considered for a moment, then snickered. "Okay, yeah, that was kinda funny."

"So you didn't feel anythin' like that, sugarcube?" Applejack shot her a questioning look. "You were hunky-dory the moment he got here?"

"Well..." The unicorn hesitated. She had felt something when Mort had appeared. She couldn't put a hoof on what it was, exactly. She had felt unusually anxious, and for some reason there was a feeling of utter inevitability. A disquieting powerlessness.

Then again, she *was* taking on an important assignment. The pony was a friend of Celestia's, and she was always afraid of disappointing the

princess. "It's nothing I haven't felt before," she stated with a casual shrug.

"I *told* you he was weird," a voice grumbled.

Twilight Sparkle frowned and turned to Spike. "Alright, you *definitely* need a scolding, mister!" She stomped her hoof for emphasize. "What were you thinking, saying something like that in front of him?!"

"I couldn't help it!" he said defensively. "I mean, just...just look at him! How many ponies have you seen that look like that?"

"What'cha mean, Spike?" Applejack asked quizzically. "Sure, the feller were a bit pale..."

"And kinda thin," Rarity added.

"He didn't look too terribly healthy," Fluttershy said quietly.

Spike groaned in frustration. "I'm talkin' about the eyes! How many ponies are there with *red* eyes?"

"Oh Spike," Twilight Sparkled sighed, "his eyes aren't red. They're..." She stopped, and found herself unable to remember. Which was bizarre, she could've sworn she had looked at his face enough times to see it.

"Um...what color were his eyes?" she asked her friends, sheepishly.

"Ooh, ooh! Pink! They were pink!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, waving her hoof in the air like a filly in school. "Really, *really* pink!"

"Pink eyes? Pale..." Rarity tapped her chin in deep thought. "You fillies don't suppose Mort is some sort of albino, do you?"

"I wasn't even sure there was such thing as an albino pony," Fluttershy whispered. "Albinos are pretty sensitive to sunlight, though."

Applejack nodded affirmatively. "Well, that'd explain the cloak, alright."

Spike groaned in frustration. "It's not just the eyes! His horn's...I never saw a unicorn horn all sharp or curved like that!"

"It didn't look *that* weird, Spike, and sometimes horns will develop differently!" Twilight Sparkled gave an exasperated sigh. "Okay, look. Spike, your opinion is duly noted, but it shouldn't even matter what a pony looks like! I could've sworn I raised you better than to judge another pony based on his appearance!"

"But Twilight, I..." The dragon moaned miserably. "He just...I don't know, he rubs me the wrong way! It's like dragon instincts or something." He closed his palms together, and to her shock, gave her a pleading look. "Come on, Twilight. I'm not trying to be mean or anything, I just...he doesn't feel good. I know that sounds lame, but...the others felt that way too, right? Doesn't that mean something?"

"It's not fair to judge a pony on gut instinct alone, Spike. It's why so many ponies avoided Zecora, and you saw how nice she turned out to be. As for me and the others..." She shrugged. "Well, I think we all had a very different idea of what he'd be like. It was just a little surprising. And just because we felt like that, doesn't make us right. Besides, this is Celestia's friend! Doesn't *that* mean something?"

"I guess," he muttered quietly.

"Look, just give him a chance, okay?" Twilight Sparkled lowered her head until she was eye-level with Spike. "You warmed up to Owlowski just fine, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but he's a owl," he grumbled. "This guy's..." He searched for the words, before quitting and returning to his pout.

"Come on," she implored, "it's just for a day. Give him a chance. For Celestia? *For me?*"

He glanced at her, his eyes contemplative. She gave him the biggest puppy eyes she could muster, usually when she wanted him to help with a lot of chores. The dragon struggled internally, his eyes darting to and away from her eyes, sweating beading down his face, before finally sagging in defeat. "Fine," he sighed, "but I'm keeping my eyes on him, okay?"

"So long as it's just your eyes." She used her head to scoop him up, and he plopped down on her back. "Okay, I think we've been in here long enough.

You fillies ready?" There was a chorus of agreement, and she felt it embolden her. "Alright then! First stop, Rarity's boutique!"

"Woo hoo!" Pinkie Pie cheered. "Stage 2: Makeover!"

In a moment, Twilight Sparkle and her friends were outside the library, and saw Mort standing in front of the library sign, his back turned to them. "Sorry about that, Mort, you ready-"

"*Ididn'tdoit!*" Twilight Sparkle took a step back, the cloaked pony spinning around on the spot to look at her with wide eyes. Seeing her, the pony took a few looks around, backing up until he was practically pressing up against the sign. "Uh...uh, I-I mean...good. Good."

"Yeah...good." She took a mental note not to sneak up on Mort in the future. "So, are you ready?"

"Uh, o-oh, yeah!" He nodded his head vigorously. "Just, uh...lead the way, Twilight! And Applejack and...um, all of you, really..."

"Sure..." She took to the path, watching Mort rotate in place, looking nervously at her. Her friends followed suit, and it wasn't until Mort was alone that he decided to join them. As unusual as the behavior was, she just shrugged it off as another quirk.

It wasn't long before all of them were moving through the center of town. Shops and restaurants were opening their doors, and the citizens of Ponyville were now going about their daily routine. They were picking up groceries for their homes, getting back from dropping their foals off at school, and as always, many of them were simply spending their time together.

Mort by then had moved slightly ahead, so that he was in the center of their group, and he seemed to be anxiously looking around.

"Are you okay, Mort?" she asked, concerned.

"Huh? O-oh, yeah, I'm fine. Just...there's a lot more ponies here than I thought..." He gulped. "Um, a-are they all looking at me?"

Twilight Sparkle glanced around. They were drawing quite a few stares, some stopping what they were doing just to look. Looking back at Mort, she saw him nervously looking back and forth, trying to avoid eye contact.

"Ponyville's a small town, Mort," she stated. "They know when they get visitors."

"Not to mention you're in the company of practical celebrities, darling," Rarity chimed in. "I don't mean to brag, but each of us have made headlines, one way or another. For better...or worse." She said the last two words with an embarrassed blush.

"But mostly better!" Rainbow Dash jumped and floated in the air, doing a little twirl. "I keep telling the mayor she should just start advertising us! You know, like..." She threw her forearms up in a grandiose fashion. "'Ponyville: Home of Rainbow Dash, Winner of Young Fliers Competition!'"

"As Ah recall," Applejack said candidly, "when you proposed that to the mayor, she said that if yer head got any bigger, there wouldn't be room for the town!"

There was a chorus of giggles from the others, causing the athletic pegasus to fume. "Hey, come on, Applejack! I brought up you guys too! 'Ponyville: Home of Twilight Sparkle, Hero of Equestria!' 'Ponyville: Home of Ex-Super Model Fluttershy!' 'Ponyville: Home of-'"

"Wait, wait," Mort cut in, his tone one of disbelief. "Did you say 'ex-super model Fluttershy?' Fluttershy was a model?!"

Fluttershy seemed to glow red. "Um, yes, but just for a little while. I couldn't take the pressure or the attention."

"You're not one for crowds, huh?" Mort nodded sagely. "I mean, I've been through crowds before, but I've never been the center of attention either. Now when I got all these eyes on me..."

Fluttershy nodded sympathetically. "It's terrible, isn't it? You feel like you have no privacy, you can't get a moment's peace..."

"And that the moment you mess up everypony's going to run you out of

town and never want to be near you again," Mort said, his voice tense.

Twilight Sparkle stopped and stared at him, as did the rest of her friends. Mort avoided their eyes, scratching at the ground. An awkward silence descended upon the group.

"Um...maybe not *that* bad," Fluttershy whispered.

Pinkie Pie hopped up next to Mort, suddenly hugging him. "Aw, you don't need to be worried about a thing, Morty!"

Mort blinked. "Morty...?"

"Ponyville's one of the friendliest places in Equestria! Heck, even the meanies leave on their own!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "You would have to do something really, really, really, *really* bad for something like that to happen!"

"I-if you say so," he mumbled, not sounding convinced.

Twilight Sparkle's ears drooped in disbelief. Celestia had told them he hadn't gotten out much, but that statement had been downright cynical. She briefly imagined him having a black hole from which no confidence or optimism could escape.

She changed the subject quickly. "So, Mort! You know what we do, but I've been really curious about your work...?"

"Oh, yeah!" Rainbow Dash came in closer, looking at him eagerly. "Come on, spill the beans, Mort! What's the one thing you can do that no other pony can? Are you like a secret agent or something? Is it a 'I could tell you but then I would have to kill you' thing?"

"What? Oh, no! No! I could never kill anything!" Mort shook his head furiously, sounding horrified. "That, that'd just be...*brr*, I get shivers just thinking about it!"

"Whoah, calm down, Mort! It was only a joke," Rainbow Dash reassured.

"It's just we've been mighty curious about the stuff you do," Applejack said.

"Celestia made it sound all important like."

"Oh, well, it's definitely important, I'm...uh..." Mort paused, scratching at his chin. "Uh...a *courier*. Yeah, that's it..."

"A courier?" Rarity asked, confused. "But...I don't understand, dear, couldn't any pony do that?"

"Uh, well...not the things I deliver," Mort explained, reluctantly. "It's...the stuff I deliver is very, *very* valuable, and I have to do it all across Equestria. I can't really afford not to do it."

Applejack whistled. "All 'cross Equestria, huh? Must be pretty excitin', though. Different sights, different sounds, and you get to see lots of different ponies and what not."

"Every pony, really," Mort added. "Uh...w-well, that's what it feels like sometimes, at least."

"What do you carry around?" Fluttershy asked. "Are they ancient artifacts or something?"

"Uh, well...sometimes they're ancient," he said. "Sometimes they're not. I, uh...really can't go into details about it, to be honest."

"Yes!" Rainbow Dash pumped her forelegs in the air. "Secret agent stuff! I knew it!"

"I'm not a secret agent," Mort said, slightly annoyed. "Really."

"Of course not, Mort, of course not." Rainbow Dash winked knowingly at him. "You're a 'courier.'"

Twilight Sparkle rolled her eyes, though she had to admit that Mort's reluctance to talk about it was unusual. What could a pony deliver that's too secret to talk about, too important to leave to more than one pony, so demanding it would take all their time to do it, and would be something Celestia would know about? A couple ideas came to mind, ones that forced her to remind herself that Celestia wasn't like that.

"Okay, I think that's all for right now," Twilight Sparkle said. "If he can't go into details, he can't go into details."

"Yes, more time out here is less time for him to try out that outfit I have." Rarity clopped her hooves together, squealing in delight. "Oh Mort, I know you're going to love it! You'll be the first one to try it on!"

"A-about that," he started, timidly, "would it be alright if I just...uh, look at it? I mean, suits aren't really my *thing*, you see..."

"Oh, but I insist, Mort!" Rarity fluttered her eyes at him again, moving her face close to his. Twilight Sparkle heard Spike growling behind her, and was afraid he'd been digging some very sharp claws into her back. Mort looked nervously at Twilight Sparkle, and the librarian could only smile back.

The cloaked pony finally sighed, and said, "Okay, but...could I try it on in private?"

Rarity looked at him in surprise. "Private? But dear, the point of any outfit is-"

"Please?"

"And I assure you I honestly don't care how you look or-"

"*Please?*" he pleaded again, looking into her eyes.

Rarity bit her lip, conflicted, and after a moments consideration, said, "Well...if that's what you really want, Mort."

Mort smiled at her, and Twilight Sparkle felt a wave of relief. That was the first time she saw him smile since he got here.

Funnily enough, that was the only facial expression she could remember since he arrived.

Almost half-an-hour later, they were standing inside Rarity's boutique, with Mort already inside a private room, trying Rarity's outfit on. The suit had been expertly woven with blue and white fabrics, bore golden cuts, and

typical of Rarity's style, a number of gems. Despite Rarity's insistence, Mort had gone in alone, and said he would come out after trying the suit on.

Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were looking at some spare dresses Rarity had hanging out, while Rainbow Dash flipped through an old *Canterlot Times* with a bored expression on her face. Twilight Sparkle and Applejack were both watching Rarity with a bit of unease. The white unicorn was pacing in circles, shooting anxious looks at the door Mort had walked through.

"I wonder how it fits him? Was it too tight? Is the fabric comfortable? Maybe I used too many gems, or too few..." She looked at the librarian and apple farmer. "The suit *was* fine, wasn't it?"

Twilight Sparkle sighed. "For the third time, Rarity, yes, I think it was fine."

"I'd definitely wear it if it came in my size," Spike said, gnawing on a ruby Rarity had given him.

"Why you so worked up 'bout this, anyway?" Applejack asked.

"I can't help it!" she said, shaking her head. "This is the first outfit I've woven with a stallion in mind, and the whole dynamic is just completely different! I really wanted to make sure what I made is actually up to my standards." She sighed. "Not only that, but did you hear what he said? Once he's done, he just wants to take it off all over again!"

"He probably just doesn't want to get it dirty," Twilight Sparkle said.

"Or he probably doesn't want to be seen in it!" Rarity stomped her hoofs, moaning miserably. "Oh, what doesn't he want us to see? What sort of stallion is hiding underneath that cloak of his? Is he a handsome pony with no confidence in himself? A gentlecolt with a disfiguring scar from some past tragedy? Maybe...maybe he's a prince who's just trying to get away from it all and..." Her eyes widened, and she facehoofed in frustration. "Oh my goodness, I'm *fantasizing again*."

"Yep," Twilight Sparkle said, slowly, "and we all know how that turned out."

"Ooh, I can't help it, Twilight! He's a mysterious friend of the princess, with

a duty he won't talk about and with a face he won't let us see! It's like the beginning of some grand, romantic story, don't you think?"

"Ah dunno," Applejack said. "Ah don't read too many of them trashy books, but Ah'd think that kind of pony wouldn't be readin' from note cards, or getting' all nervous like every time somepony looks at him."

"Trashy? Hmph!" Rarity looked down, a calculating and determined look on her face. "I'm going in."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her in surprise, and shook her head. "No, Rarity, we have to respect his privacy!" Her proclamation caught the attention of the others, who turned to watch.

"It would just be a peek, Twilight, and I'm sure...no, I *know* Mort is just being far too hard on himself." She smiled playfully. "Besides, it's like you said, we can't judge a pony based on their appearance, so we shouldn't let Mort think any less of himself because of his own, right?"

"Well...no, but-"

"I say go for it!" Spike swallowed the last of the ruby, rubbing his stomach in satisfaction. "We might help him look normal for a change!"

"Spike!" Twilight Sparkle scolded, glaring at the dragon. She opened her mouth to speak again, but instead found that Rarity had already moved over to the door. She gaped, and rushed forward.

"Mort, I'm sorry dear, but I need something out of that room!" she said loudly.

"What do you need?" Mort asked from the other side. "Maybe I can slip it under the door or something."

"Oh, no, I'm afraid it wouldn't fit," she said, grinning playfully. "I'll just come in real quick and get it, okay?"

"What?! W-wait, I'm not out of the suit yet!"

"Oh, that's fine, dear! I'm sure you look wonderful!"

"Rarity!" Mort's voice was practically a shout, sounding genuinely panicked.
"Please, just give me a little more time-"

"Here I come!" she said, shooting a wink at the others. Before Twilight Sparkle could do anything else, Rarity was already walking through the door. She bit her lip.

Next to her, Applejack groaned. "I hope she knows what she's doin', because this sounds like nothin' but-"

But before Applejack could finish, the air was cut by Rarity's terror-stricken scream.

Chapter 5

Mort quietly shut the door behind him, Rarity's suit draped over his back. The dressing room was larger than he thought it'd be, and just as frilly as the rest of the boutique. A light-purple wallpaper covered the walls, walls that at one end had a rack of dresses neatly hung up, and at the other end a number of pictures and paintings of mares in dresses. And at the far end of the room, there was a long, ruby-colored dresser with white carvings, reminiscent of vines. A large, oval mirror stood in the center of the dresser, and in front of the mirror were dozens of bottles, brushes, eyeliners, lipsticks and other make-up that Mort had never paid attention to.

And there he was, covered in an all-encompassing black cloak (that technically *wasn't* a cloak but a manifestation of his ethereal body) whose best attempt at looking like a "normal" pony was imitating their skeletal structure. He was a shade that reaped the souls of dead ponies, he was almost as old as the princesses themselves, and his body was so alien in comparison to any other creature, one would find a closer relationship between apples and mollusks.

He had never felt more out-of-place than now.

He made his way over to the dresser, levitating the suit off his back and in front of him, unfolding it. The suit was an ocean blue on the outside, with the inside threading a dull white. Gold thread was intertwined along the hems of the sleeves and coat, in complex patterns that must have taken incredible concentration. The vent extended as far as the flank, and split down the center. Gold tassels adorned where the shoulders would be, and the coat would close using a series of diamond-studded buttons. The left lapel had a single, large ruby, oval in shape.

He levitated the suit right in front of him, and looked at the resulting reflection. "Hmm..." He glanced around the room one last time to be sure that no eyes were on him, and in an instant all solidness left his body. He came an amorphous, black haze that snaked its way within the suit, carefully extending parts of itself through each sleeve and the collar. Satisfied, he reformed.

Mort looked at himself in the mirror again. The suit was now worn by naked skeleton, hanging limply on his understandably thin body. Humming in dissatisfaction, he willed some of his ether to flow across his skeletal form, inflating the suit until it seemed like it was being worn by a muscular stallion.

"Now that's more like it!" He turned to the left ("Nice."), then to the right ("Nice!"), watching his reflection. He then turned his back to the mirror, and spun his head 180 degrees. "Very nice."

He spun himself back around until he was facing forward again. He trotted around the room watching how he looked as he moved about, sometimes breaking into a march, or even a saunter. After a couple minutes of this, he came to a stop in front of the mirror, scratching his chin in contemplation. Staring at his reflection again, he felt that something was missing, he just couldn't put a hoof on what...

"Of course!" Thin, black ether streamed out of where his nostrils would be, twisting themselves until they created a very good imitation of a long and thing mustache. "Ahem! Good evening, miss Luna! Fine night for a spot of tea, don't you think? Wot wot!" He snickered quietly to himself. "Top of the mornin', chap! I'm afraid you shouldn't have tried to cram so many peanuts into your mouth all at once! Why, yes, I *am* the Pale Pony of Death! What gave it away?" He snorted, doing everything he could to remain in control, fits of laughter threatening to explode from his mouth. "What do you mean 'since when did you dress like that?' I've always been a skeleton with a snazzy outfit, a silly accent and a stylish mustaaahahahahaha!"

Mort rolled to the ground, holding his sides as the tide of mirth finally escaped in uproarious laughter. After calming down, he rolled back onto his hoofs and stood back up, suppressing the occasional giggle.

"Okay," he told himself, "I am *definitely* going to try that on Luna." In fact, even as he considering the thought, he was already wondering what it'd be like to do something like this with the ponies he met. At least half of them were fearful or melancholy when they realized who he was, and it did bother him a little that some would go feeling like that. Maybe wearing something cheery or even absurd would loosen them up. And their expressions would be worth it, too.

Then again, when you keep a certain look for over a thousand years, it's hard not to get attached to it. And for all he knew, it would be the only meeting he would have. If they had to go knowing him, he'd like it if they went knowing, well, *him*.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door, followed by Rarity's voice: "Mort, I'm sorry dear, but I need something out of that room!"

"What do you need?" Mort straightened out the suit, his eyes scanning over the dresser top. "Maybe I can slip it under the door or something."

"Oh, no, I'm afraid it wouldn't fit," she said, a hint of mischief in her voice. "I'll just come in real quick and get it, okay?"

Mort froze, watching his eyes widen in the mirror. "What?! W-wait, I'm not out of the suit yet!"

"Oh, that's fine, dear! I'm sure you look wonderful!"

Mort's mind returned to when he had first arrived. He recalled how insistent Rarity had been in helping him try it on, the reluctance in her voice when she mentioned a private dressing room. The unicorn had wanted to see what was under the cloak, and was barely hiding her intentions.

"Rarity!" he shouted, his voice full of panic. "Please, just give me a little more time-"

"Here I come!" she called in a sing-song voice.

At the twist of the doorknob, Mort quickly became amorphous, but in his haste had accidentally done the same to the suit, resulting in no change when he became solid again. At the creak of the door hinge he tried again, leaving the suit alone, but when he solidified he found the suit still on him, but backwards, the tailbone sticking of the collar. With mounting fear he saw Rarity strut in, her eyes still closed. In a last, desperate attempt, he shut his eyes and visualized his cloak, and the black ether erupted from his body, wrapping around himself.

Then Rarity screamed.

Mort opened his eyes, and saw Rarity staring at him with wide eyes, the pupils shrunk to pinpoints. A horrified expression was frozen on her face.

"W-what...." she stuttered, her lips quivering. "W-what...what...!"

"R-Rarity..." He searched for words, but couldn't find any. As much as he was afraid of them finding out, he realized he had never even planned on what to do if they did. An instant later the other ponies were rushing in, all staring at him in shock. "I-I can explain..."

"What did you *do to it?!'*" Rarity shrieked.

"I'm really a..." Mort stopped himself, and shot Rarity an incredulous look. "W-wait, what do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What do I *mean?!'*" Rarity point an accusing hoof, not at Mort, but at the floor. Following it, Mort saw himself surrounded by a ring of ripped, blue fabric and gold thread. It took him a moment to realize it was the remains of the suit, destroyed almost beyond recognition when he summoned his cloak. The speed at which it came back had torn Rarity's work into pretty rags.

For a moment he felt relief that they hadn't seen him after all, but that relief quickly withered away when he saw Rarity coming towards him, still staring in wide-eyed shock.

"What could *possibly* possess you to do such a thing?!" she cried, scooping up one of the shoulder pads. "Do you know how hard I worked on this?!"

Mort gulped, shrinking under her gaze. "I-I'm sorry, I-"

"Was it *that* awful?" she choked, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Were...were you so ashamed that you couldn't bear to be seen in it? Is that it?!"

"That's not it at all!" he shot back, desperately. "I said I didn't want to be seen-"

"Well I'm *sorry!'*" she wailed. "But did that really call for doing...*this?'*" She

collapsed to the ground, burying her head in her hoofs as she choked back sobs. "Everypony just gooo," she moaned, pitifully.

Watching the pretty unicorn sink into misery made him feel lower than he has felt in a long, long time. He began to cautiously reach a hoof out, in an attempt to comfort her, but was stopped by an orange hoof. He looked up to see Applejack, giving him an unreadable look. She shook her head, guiding his hoof away.

A moment later Twilight Sparkle was next to him. "We need to go, Mort," she whispered.

"B-but..." He looked between Twilight Sparkle and Rarity, giving the former a pleading look. Like the Applejack, she merely shook her head, and motioned towards the door. On her back, Spike was glaring daggers at him, and he could have sworn there was smoke beginning to billow from his nostrils.

He sighed in defeat, and let the others lead him out, leaving the brokenhearted Rarity.

Twilight Sparkle closed the door of the boutique behind them, shooting a concerned look at the door. She could still just barely hear Rarity crying within. A large part of her wanted to stay and comfort Rarity, but she also knew that the white unicorn typically wanted to be alone at these times. For what reason, she never knew; Rarity just had a penchant for being melodramatic.

When she looked back at the others, she found that Mort had separated himself from the rest of them, standing to the side. He shuffled his hooves, keeping his eyes towards the ground. He almost looked like a foal that had been found with its hoof in the cookie jar.

She took an uneasy breath. "Okay, Mort, can you tell us-"

"Why would you even *do that*, you jerk?!" Twilight Sparkled cringed as Spike leapt from her back, almost forgetting he was there. The baby dragon landed in front of Mort, pointing an accusing finger at him. "She made that

suit, all for you, and you just went and ripped it up!"

"I-it was an accident," he whimpered. "S-she surprised me, I panicked-"

"Oh come on!" Spike shouted, with angry disbelief. "How could you 'accidentally' destroy anything like that?! You're just a big, mean-"

"*Spike!*" Twilight Sparkle marched over, looking disapprovingly at him. "Not another word, mister!"

"But, Twilight...!"

"Not. Another. Word." The baby dragon looked at her, seemingly ready to argue, but thankfully he relented and marched over to where the others would, fuming. She couldn't bring herself to be too angry; she understood how Spike felt, and to be honest, she was a little frustrated about what happened as well. She wasn't going to get meaningful answers by screaming, though.

She looked back at Mort, who seemed to be even smaller than before. She took another breath. "Mort," she said, pausing to see if there would be more interruptions, and thankfully, didn't hear any. "Can you please tell me what happened in there?"

"I..." The cloaked pony sighed, sounding weary. "I-I'm sorry, Twilight. I *liked* the suit, I really did! But when Rarity was coming in, I got so worked up trying to get my cloak back on, her suit...well..." He trailed off, avoiding her eyes. "I-I mean it's not *that* bad, is it? It's not like...it wasn't made of rare materials or anything, wasn't it?"

"It's not a matter of whether or not it can be replaced, Mort," she started, gently, "it's about the fact that she gave you a gift—a gift she worked very hard on—and it was completely destroyed." He raised his head again, looking at her remorsefully. (Or at least, she thought so; it was unusually difficult to make out his expression.)

"Um, Mort?" Fluttershy approached him, with an expression both curious and concerned. "Is it really so bad if we...um, see you?"

"Yes!" he said quickly, nodding his head. "I'm really...I have..." The cloaked

pony was silent for a moment, looking at his hoofs. When he raised his head again, his voice took on a completely different tone: "It's...really, really complicated, okay? I just can't have anypony getting a good look at me. You just have to trust me when I say it's better you don't."

The last sentence was spoken with such gravity that Twilight Sparkle was almost spooked by it, sending small shivers up her spine. It was spoken as if Mort was revealing something of life-or-death importance. She had assumed his secrecy had something to do with his confidence, like Rarity suggested, but now she was beginning to wonder if there really was more to it...

Rainbow Dash floated next to her, whispering in her ear, "What'd I tell ya? This is *super* secret agent stuff!"

Rainbow Dash's words brought her back to her senses, and she merely rolled her eyes at the idea. Maybe Mort was being secretive for more reasons than she thought, but they were probably understandable. And not nearly as ridiculous as being a secret agent.

"This isn't right." Having regained his composure, Mort began to walk to the boutique. "Look, maybe if I go in and say I'm sorry, she-"

"Oh no!" Spike quickly slid in front of the door, holding his arms out to block the door that dwarfed him. "You are *not* getting anywhere near her right now!"

"But-"

"It's nothin' personal, Mort," Applejack said, walking up next to him. "Ah'm sure yer mighty sorry 'bout what happened, but Rarity...well, she does have a thing for bein' overly dramatic, bless 'er heart."

"Oh, you have no idea!" Pinkie Pie chimed in, bounding over to them. "One time she was at Sugarcube Corner, and I gave her a new brownie sample, and she liked it so much she asked for another one, then another, then I kinda teased her about eating too many brownies, and she said, 'Oh no, I'm turning into a blimp!' and ran all the way home and we had to convince her that she wasn't fat and it wouldn't matter if she was and..." Pinkie Pie took a deep breath, her cheeks bulging out, before deflating to normal. "So yeah,

she's kinda sensitive about that sort of stuff!"

"Uh, yeah. Thanks Pinkie." Rainbow Dash glided over and landed in front of Mort, causing Spike to continually attempt to peek around her, not wanting to lose sight of the cloaked pony. "Anyway, what they're *trying* to say is that when stuff like this happens, you generally gotta let her cool off first. You saw it, she had the whole 'woe is me' thing going."

Mort didn't say anything at first. He looked between the three ponies surrounding him before turning back to look at Twilight Sparkle. "Um, do you want to wait for her to...well, 'cool off?'"

She bit her lip, conflicted. It could be hours before Rarity was ready to talk again, and that would eat into the schedule they had spent so much time on. But there was no way she could just leave Rarity alone. 'Overly dramatic' or not, the dress designer was clearly upset, and for a good reason. She needed somepony to be with her...

Her internal struggles may not have been as internal as she like, as Applejack then said, "No need to get yer bridle in a twist, Twi'. Y'all can get a move on, if ya like. Ah can stick around and talk her out 'ere."

"Are you sure?" she asked, reluctantly. "I mean, I'm sure if we need to-"

"Nope, won't hear nothin' of it." Applejack came over and threw a foreleg over her shoulder. "Ah don't think Rarity would want somethin' like this to get in the way of everythin' today, Twi'. Trust me, she'll come 'round, an' be all understandin' like."

Twilight Sparkle still hesitated for a moment, torn about what to do, but the confidence in Applejack's voice and smile eventually won her over. "Well, if you're that sure, Applejack..."

"Ooh, ooh!" Spike suddenly climbed up Rainbow Dash and begun to bounce up and down on her head, waving his hand in the air, much to the pegasus' chagrin. "I can stay, too! Rarity definitely needs all the support she can get." The dragon yelped as Rainbow Dash flung her head up, sending the dragon through the air a short distance to land on Twilight Sparkle's back.

"Sorry, Spike," she said, "but I think it'd be better if you came with us. I'll feel better showing Mort around if my *number one assistant* is with me." In truth, she was mostly concerned that if Spike stuck around, he'd only make things worse between Mort and Rarity; he was still acting unusually hostile around Mort, and she didn't want him feeding Rarity the idea that Mort had destroyed the suit intentionally.

Judging by Spike's expression, even the extra smothering of praise in her last statement did little to convince him. None the less, the baby dragon twisted himself around, keeping his back towards her. She had the idea of scolding him for the attitude, but decided to let it go for once; just like Rarity, Spike sometimes just needed to stew as well.

Applejack left her side and went over to Mort, giving him a playful punch of the shoulder. "Don' you worry too much, Mort. You can apologize to her all ya like once she comes out. It'll work out, you'll see."

Mort nodded gratefully. Giving them another confident smile, Applejack walked back into the boutique alone. When the door closed behind her, Mort turned to look at the rest them, apprehensively scratching at the ground.

"So," he asked, drawing the word out, "what's next?"

Angel loved Fluttershy. He sometimes gave her a hard time, teased her, and, admittedly, acted like a brat, but he really did love her. The pegasus had raised him since he was little, feeding him, housing him, making sure the larger rabbits didn't pick on him, tending to any wound he would get. Fluttershy was very, very close to being a mother for him.

And like all mothers, they had an annoying tendency to rope them into things. Especially if they involved "cute" outfits.

He tugged at the collar of the conductor suit that Fluttershy had him wear today, the clothing making him feel even hotter then he normally would. A tiny music stand stood in front of him, with equally tiny pages of music, with a tiny conductor baton laying across them. He couldn't read it, and he didn't know how to conduct; Fluttershy just told him to "wave the stick around"

because, of course, it would be cute.

Not far from him, sitting in a tree, where a flock of restless birds. Blue Jays, robins and finches were perched on the branches, grooming themselves, while at the base of the tree were ferrets with drums, a pair of rattlesnakes, a pair of garden snakes with rattles so they wouldn't feel left out, and a porcupine with a xylophone.

The park was just beginning to bustle with ponies, friends and family meeting with each other under shady trees or on a park bench. A couple times there would be foals, too young for school, excitedly running around the impromptu concert, before their parents would come and drag them away. At the bottom of a small hill, not from him, was a pond where some ponies were spending time together in little paddle boats. Wanting to throw himself in the pond was another urge he had to resist.

He looked at the stop watch he had set down, noting the time. He still had at least another half-hour before Fluttershy was due to arrive, along with some pony he never heard of, but who was supposed to be a big deal because of his relationship with that sun princess. Of course it would happen on one of the hottest days of the year. He wasn't sure if the extra carrots Fluttershy promised him were worth this.

Just as he was contemplating the consequences of simply heading home, he heard hoofsteps coming his way. Ready to drive away yet another solicitor, he was surprised to find it was actually Fluttershy, looking anxious.

"Oh, Angel! I'm sorry I'm so early, but something came up at Rarity's. We need to move the concert schedule up. Um, if you don't, that is..."

Angel wanted to breathe a sigh of relief more than anything, but he held back, and instead furrowed his brows, as if in deep thought. Fluttershy watched him nervously, as if expecting him to say that he needed more time. A lot more time, even.

That couldn't be any further from the truth, of course. He wanted to get out of the sun and this stupid suit as quickly as possible, but he did get a certain amount of satisfaction from making Fluttershy squirm, if only as a little payback for being dragged out here for some pony he probably

wouldn't even like.

Finally, he gave a slow and deliberate nod, and the pegasus pony clopped her hooves together in joy. "Oh, thank you, Angel!" She reached down and squeezed him in a hug. He struggled in her hooves, his face flushing with embarrassment, hearing some chuckles from the birds and ferrets. He wished she didn't do this in front of the other animals. In private was another thing entirely, but not in public with so many watching.

She finally released him, letting him down gently on the ground. "Okay, Angel, you and the others get ready, and I'll bring everypony over, okay?" With that she took off into the air, flying towards the other side of the park.

Not long after, she came back, and with her were three of her friends—the loud-mouth pegasus, the reality-defying earth pony, and the eggheaded unicorn—as well the latter's pompous assistant and...

Angel blinked, rubbing at his eyes. The final member of her group was a unicorn, or at least he thought so, wearing a black cloak that was darker than any raven, and with a horn that seemed bent. His face could barely be seen, save for eyes that seemed unusually red.

He shivered, feeling goose bumps across his body. Something seemed off about that pony. Very off. But before he could think about it further, his thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched squeal from the pink pony.

"Oh my gosh, Fluttershy! He's so cute in that itty, bitty, suit of his! He's even got a teeny bow tie!" The pink pony giggled delightfully, and Angel felt his humiliation increase ten-fold.

"I'm glad you liked it! I sewed it myself." Fluttershy walked over to the cloaked pony, presenting him. "Angel Bunny, this is Mort, that friend I was telling you about last night. We're hoping to give him a fun time today."

"Wow, Fluttershy, you didn't tell me it was a concert," the purple unicorn said, evidently awed. "How did you set this up in such a short amount of time?"

"Oh, it wasn't that hard," Fluttershy said, modestly. "To be honest, I was wanting to do something like this for the next Summer Sun Celebration. It's

still a work in progress, because I want to get as many animals as I can to play something."

"I...guess, that's kinda cool," the cyan pegasus said, obviously unconvinced. Angel shot a dirty look at her, but the rainbow-maned pony didn't seem to notice.

The cloaked pony, meanwhile, just shrugged. "Well," he started, in a small voice that conflicted heavily with the ill feelings Angel had, "if it's good enough for the Summer Sun Celebration, let's hear it!"

Fluttershy smiled appreciatively, and gave a nod towards Angel. Angel nodded back, and straightened his pose. He licked his palm and slicked his ears back. He then picked up the conductor baton, tapping the music stand. He didn't have to like it, but that didn't mean he couldn't look good doing it, either.

Each music piece was relatively short, some lasting as few as thirty seconds, some going on for almost two minutes. He wasn't sure where, exactly, Fluttershy had got the tunes, whether she had made them herself or had read them from somewhere else. Still, he had to admit, some were quite catchy.

He looked behind him to see their reactions. Fluttershy, of course, was smiling in pride. The pink pony was dancing in place, singing lyrics to herself. The cyan pegasus looked bored, though he could still spot her hoof tapping to the rhythm occasionally. The purple unicorn and her dragon assistant were nodding along, pleasant smiles on their faces.

The most surprising reaction, though, was from the cloaked pony, who was not only tapping his hooves to the beat, but also swaying his body side-to-side, sometimes spinning in a little circle. It was, for lack of a better term, *dorkish*. The mere sight of it almost made him forget about that he was getting the creeps from him earlier.

Not long after, the miniature concert ended with a musical climax from every animal performer there. Hot, sweaty and exhausted, Angel turned on the spot, and did a little bow. All the ponies and the baby dragon gave a round of applause, with some whistling from the pink pony. He was simply glad it was over.

"That was *amazing!*" Angel looked up to see the cloaked pony coming forward, his pale face becoming visible. "I mean, I've heard birds sing before and everything but that was...and the snakes, and the drums and...wow!"

Fluttershy held her hooves up to her face, grinning. "Y-you liked it?"

"I loved it!" he said. "I can't even imagine what this would be like once you get even more animals on board!"

"O-oh, well, um, thank you very much, Mort." Fluttershy's smile grew wider, her face turning beat red. "If you like, I could take you over to my cottage to see all the others. They love visitors!"

"I'd like that, but...um..." Mort scratched the back of his hood, bashfully. "Well...any chance for an...'encore,' was it? Yeah, an encore?"

Angel went stiff. He did not, could not, *would not*, stand out here anymore. He had finished his side of the bargain, and had sweated perhaps more today than he had ever all summer. He crossed his arms, glaring at the cloaked pony.

"Oh, Angel, don't be like that." Fluttershy gently lifted him up, giving him an imploring look. "Mort is a very special guest, couldn't you do it one more time? For him?"

He *humphed*, looking away from her. He really doubted she'd use the Stare, but he didn't want to take any chances.

"Oh dear," she said, disheartened. "Please, Angel Bunny? Can you really say no to him?"

"Um, F-Fluttershy, I really don't think...uh..."

Angel peeked out one eye, but what he saw was enough to send both wide open. He was looking directly into the hood of the cloaked pony, his face unnaturally thin, and his eyes practically glowing. He blinked once, and the pony's face seemed to get even thinner, what fur there was disappearing and revealing something smooth underneath. The eyes seemed to grow

brighter, and he noticed the lack of pupils, or irises, or even the actual *eyeball*.

He blinked again, and this time his blood went ice cold as he was staring not at a pony face, but a pony *skull*, perpetually grinning at him with eyes that were not really eyes, but burning, points of light. He had sudden flashes of memory, of animals dying from age, disease, or predators from the Everfree Forest.

He blinked again. And again. And again. And no matter how many times he did it the skull didn't go away, and if anything looked even more real.

The skull coughed nervously. "Uh, e-everything okay, little guy?"

Angel screamed, and threw the baton straight at the monster's face, causing it to step back in surprise. A moment later Angel was dropped unceremoniously on the ground, his rear breaking his fall. Rubbing his bruised rump, he watched in horror as Fluttershy actually *went to* the monster, barraging it with apologies and asking if it was alright.

For a moment he thought he made a mistake, and saw something that wasn't there. When he looked at the other animals, though, he could see it in their terrified eyes and the way they quivered on the spot. They saw the same thing too.

When he turned back around to check on Fluttershy, she was already marching towards him, her eyes narrowed in disapproval. "Angel, what's gotten into you?! That's no way to treat a guest!"

Angel opened his mouth and prepared his paws, wondering how he could pantomime the fact that she was *next to a monster*. But before he could dwell on it further, his eyes were drawn to the monster that had recollected itself, and was approaching Fluttershy from behind, his curved and *very sharp* horn gleaming in the sunlight.

His heart stopped. His terror-wracked brain imagined dozens of scenarios involving that horn and Fluttershy. He briefly imagined life without her tucking him into bed, or nuzzling him when he did a good job, or nursing him when he was sick, or comforting him after he screwed up. A life without her wasn't a life he wanted.

He whistled for the other animals, breaking them out of their trances, and pointed at the monster, barking an order.

All at once, they attacked.

Twilight Sparkle gasped as Angel threw the baton straight at Mort's face, sending the cloaked pony tumbling back in surprise. She moved in quickly, using her body to keep him from tumbling over as he seemed prone to, feeling a chill in her body as she did so. How could he manage to feel so cool in this weather?

"Oh my gosh!" Fluttershy was over in an instant, a look of mortification on her face. "Oh, Mort, I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry! That's never happened before! You're not hurt, are you?"

"I-I'm fine," he said, unsteadily getting back to his hooves, and the chill Twilight Sparkle felt left just as quickly. "It's not a big deal, I-I mean, I probably just spooked him. It's not his fault."

"No!" Fluttershy's mouth curved into a scowl. "There's no excuse for doing something like that!" The yellow pegasus spun around, marching towards the white rabbit. "Angel, what's gotten into you? That's no way to treat a guest!"

Mort came up behind her, stuttering. "L-look, it's not a big deal. I'm sure we can just-"

Before he could say anything else, there came a small (and almost adorable) battle cry from Angel, who seemed to regard Mort with nothing short of utmost contempt. A moment later, the birds that had been perched in the tree took off, flying into the sky before dive bombing towards Mort. Mort yelped in fright, and ducked just in time to miss getting pecked.

In his distraction, though, he didn't see the rattlesnakes, ferrets and porcupine charging at him. Twilight Sparkle watched in terror as the ferrets leaped onto Mort's hood, scratching and biting, causing him to rear back in panic. In that panic, the two snakes slid up and wrapped themselves

around his legs, biting into the thick cloak. The porcupine, meanwhile, was ramming him from all sides, with each strike leaving more quills in his cloak.

Mort acted as well as could have: he ran around like a mad pony, screaming in fright as the animals continued their assault, the birds diving back down to peck at whatever wasn't being attack already.

"Oh, no! *No!* Stop it!" The horrified Fluttershy flew towards Mort, doing her best to drag some of the animals off, but it was nearly impossible to do with Mort running as he was. And whenever she did somehow manage to pry one of them off, they would merely squirm out of her grasp and latch back onto Mort. "Stop it! Stop it, all of you!" she cried, sounding on the brink of tears.

"Sleeper hold, Mort!" Rainbow Dash hollered, cupping her mouth. "Use your sleeper hold!"

"I don't have a 'sleeper hold!'" he shouted back.

"Pfft, what kind of secret agent are you?"

"*I'm not a secret agent!*" He stopped to deliver that declaration, and in that window the snakes slithered up his cloak and inside his hood. His eyes turned to pinpricks. "*They're INSIDE me! Sweet, merciful death, get them out!*"

Twilight Sparkled gawked at the scene, unable to organize her scattered, panicked thoughts into a coherent idea. She had never seen Fluttershy's animals act so violent, and was still trying to formulate a way to get them off without ending up like Fluttershy's attempts.

Even Pinkie Pie's bubbly attitude had disappeared, to be replaced with grim anxiety. "Uh, Fluttershy drains the venom from all her snakes, right?"

"I-I think so," Twilight Sparkle said, with more uncertainty than she wanted.

"Oh, well, that's good. So what happened to the other snakes?"

"What other snakes?"

As soon as she said that, she saw them, the pair of garden snakes that had been holding the rattles from before. They had done away with the instruments, and were waiting on top of the hill, where Mort was stumbling towards. The garden snakes shared a knowing look, tied their tails together, and then stretched themselves out. Coming up behind Mort, unseen since it all started, was Angel, bearing the baton like a sword.

It was very clear what was going to happen. "Mort!" she shouted. "Stop! Don't go that way, it's-"

It was too late. Angel gave a victorious squeak and struck Mort with the baton, snapping it in two and sending the cloaked pony forward, just enough to be tripped by the garden snakes. The animals abandoned him as he tumbled down the hill, before finally crashing into the pond, sending water everywhere.

Twilight Sparkle's jaw nearly unhinged, and she galloped towards the pond, passing through the cheering animals. By the time she got the pond's edge, she could see a shadow in the water making its way towards shore. She rushed over to its destination, arriving just as Mort broke through the surface, water pouring down his cloak. Twilight Sparkle stuck her hoofs out, pulling him out of the pond.

He begun to sputter broken words. "Terrible, rotten...cute, but still...wouldn't get off me...poking around my insides...oh goodness, I feel so *unclean*..."

"You're not hurt, are you?" she asked, remembering the bites and quills. "Maybe we should get you to the nurse!"

"I'm not hurt," he grumbled. "Just...*aggravated*. And wet." He shook his body like a dog, and she had to step back to avoid getting drenched. By the time he finished, the librarian was surprised to see that his cloak was completely dry again, and somehow missing the holes and tears that should have come from the animals.

Before she could wonder about it further, there came a distressed beating of wings. "Mort!" Fluttershy called, hovering just a short distance from them, concerned etched all over her. "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry, they never, ever acted like that before! Are you okay?"

"Okay? Okay?!" He spun his head around, and Twilight Sparkle stepped back as a furious tone took hold of Mort's voice, his eyes darkening. "I was pecked by birds, bit by ferrets, poked by porcupines, constricted by snakes and sent into a pond! I am just *peachy*!"

Fluttershy recoiled as if struck. Her lip quivered and tears begun to stream down her cheeks. "I-I'm sorry..." she choked.

Mort's eyes widened. "W-wait," he said, his tone now regretful, "I-I didn't mean to..."

Fluttershy flew away before he could finish, sobbing quietly to herself. She made a shaky landing back where her animals were, attempting to gather them together. Mort's shoulders sagged, and he begun to walk in the opposite direction, his head bowed low.

"Wait, Mort, it's..." She searched for the words, but couldn't find them. Everything she could say sounded so feeble at the moment. She could only stand there as he sulked away.

She heard a fluttering of wings, and looked up, hoping it was Fluttershy. Instead, she saw Rainbow Dash flying towards them, skidding to a halt in front of her. The pegasus grinned nervously.

"Sooo," the young flier begun, hesitantly, "what happened?"

"Mort bit Fluttershy's head off," Spike deadpanned.

"Spike," Twilight Sparkle sighed, unable to even muster a scolding tone.

"Aw geeze..." Rainbow Dash facehoofed, sighing to herself. "Well, after what happened, I guess he'd be a little sore..."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her pleadingly. "Rainbow Dash, could you...?"

"Way ahead of ya, Twilight. I'll see you guys later." She gave a short salute, then took off in a rainbow blur, chasing after Fluttershy.

Nothing was said for a moment. Twilight Sparkle lay down, staring out

across the pond, feeling tired and frustrated. The day had started promising, and had quickly spiraled into chaos. Reality, it seemed, had a fondness for beating her with Murphy's Law. Especially whenever Celestia was involved.

Speaking of Celestia, how was she going to react to this? She'd been given a personal assignment from the princess herself, to help a friend of hers have fun, and so far it was looking like a "day he'd never forget" under the worst of terms.

"What am I going to do, Spike?" she moaned, miserably, resting her head on her forelegs. "It's like one disaster after another today."

"I don't know," he said, sliding off her. "The guy's like a major bad luck magnet, or something! At the rate we're going, he's going to end up in the emergency room just by *watching* Rainbow Dash."

"If she ever gets a chance," she said, glumly. "Who knows how long it'll take to calm Rarity and Fluttershy down after all this?"

Spike scratched his head, deep in thought. "Maybe you could do something with him while waiting for the others? Maybe...favorite books or something?"

"Because books are *such* an icebreaker," she said, bitterly.

"Oh, come on!" he said, indignantly. "I was only teasing that time! I'm really trying to help, Twilight!"

She raised a brow suspiciously. "Spike, you haven't stopped talking about how much you *don't* like him."

"Well...okay, yeah," he admitted. "I still *really* hate what he did to Rarity, and he still kinda gives me the creeps, but..." His demeanor changed, going from irate to sullen. "But I don't like seeing you like this either. And, well, with what could be at stake and everything..."

She felt her heart chill as she recalled that conversation. The idea that failing would not just disappoint Celestia, but also tear her away from Ponyville, which was already as much a home as Canterlot was. A home

that had some of the best friends she had ever made, as well as the happiest memories she's ever had.

As she dwelled on that possibility, the hopelessness she felt before begun to give way to a surge of determination. The day was not even half-over yet, after all. She still had until nightfall to make it work. She *would* make it work. She had yet to let the princess down before, and this was going to be no different.

Something splashed in the pond, and Twilight Sparkle shot to her hooves with a startled yelp. "Pinkie Pie?!"

The earth pony's head was sticking out of the water, staring at her with a grim expression. She saluted Twilight Sparkle, her voice a serious monotone.

"Sergeant Sparkle! Operation Mort's Best Day Ever has completed Stage 3: Cuddly Critters, but with heavy losses! Our forces are down to forty-two percent, and the target has run off to mope somewhere! Should we fall back?"

Twilight Sparkle was initially bewildered, but couldn't hide her grin. "Negative, Private Pinkie Pie! I will access the target, then we'll regroup and continue the operation!"

"Sergeant, may I suggest we rendezvous at Sugar Cube Corner?"

Twilight Sparkle could barely suppress her giggles. "That sounds perfect, Private! I'll see you in half-an-hour."

The serious expression on Pinkie Pie's face lasted a moment longer, before dissolving into a huge smile. "Okie dokey, pokey pony!" She pinched her nose with a hoof, and dived back down into the water.

Spike scratched his head. "'Pokey pony,' now?"

"Come on, Spike," she said, lifting him up onto her back. "We got a pony to cheer up."

Chapter 6

It didn't take the two of them long to find him. He hadn't gone very far, settling down on a grassy slope, in the shade of a tree. The slope looked over the hub of the park, which consisted of a dirt path circling a fountain, surrounded by benches and several paths leading elsewhere into the park and into Ponyville. More ponies were beginning to show up, planning on enjoying the bright, clear day.

Mort didn't seem to register her until she was practically on top of him. He looked up at her with pink eyes, looking pitiful.

She gave him a comforting smile. "How's it going, Mort?"

He shrugged, murmuring something under his breath, before turning his gaze back to fountain.

Not to be discouraged, she asked "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm okay," he stated, simply. Hearing nothing else, Twilight Sparkle settled down next to him, keeping some space between them. She looked out at the park along with him, watching as Ponyville's citizens went about their activities. Friends were gossiping with each other, a couple were throwing bits into the fountain for good luck, and an ice cream vendor was beginning to set up his cart.

He muttered something. "What was that?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to snap at her, I..." He sighed. "It wasn't her fault."

"She'll be okay," she reassured him. "Rainbow Dash is with her, and Fluttershy's a tougher pony than she looks. Trust me, she'll be fine."

"I guess," he said, sounding unconvinced. There was another awkward pause, before he said, "I'm making a mess of things, aren't I?"

"No! Well...okay, there have been a couple bumps in the road," she admitted, "but that's pretty normal, all things considered. I mean, when I first came here, I ended up getting covered in mud, drenched and drinking hot sauce of all things." She giggled at the memory.

"You didn't bring any of them to tears though, did you?" he muttered miserably.

Twilight Sparkle frowned. "Well...no..."

"Twilight, I...really appreciate what you were trying to do," he said, morosely. "But with the way things are going...maybe I should just go before anything else happens."

She felt her spirits falter. "Oh, no, Mort..."

"I mean, it's not just about destroying that suit or getting attacked or anything, I really...well..." He shuffled his hooves, giving an air of embarrassment. "I really wanted to make a good impression on all of you, you know? After everything you did for Celestia and...well, I just..." He trailed off, resting his head on his forelegs, and seemingly trying his best to sink into the earth. "Now, two of them probably don't want to look at me. I'm...I just don't think I'm cut out for this sort of thing."

Twilight Sparkle felt a knot in her stomach. She recalled Celestia's letter, and how it said Mort had few friends to call his own. And now that he was given perhaps his best chance to make them...she found herself not so much as dreading Celestia would think, but dreading what it would do to Mort. The only thing worse than having few friends, is believing you would never be able to have them. And she couldn't let him go thinking that. No pony, no creature, deserved that.

"Oh, come *on*, Mort." Spike slid off Twilight Sparkle's back, landing between the two of them. "It's not *that* bad."

"What makes you say that?" he muttered. Twilight Sparkle resisted an urge to say something; she just kept her eyes on Spike, a little voice in her head telling her to let him speak.

"Oh, well..." Spike scratched his head, thinking. "Um, look...you're sorry

about what happened, right?"

Mort lifted his head, looking sharply at the dragon. "Of course I am!"

"Okay, and...um, you did all that stuff on *accident*, right?"

"Well, yeah," the cloaked pony said, slowly.

"Well...then, what's the problem?" Spike shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, yeah, sometimes mistakes happen. It could be...tearing up a suit," he said, forcing his tone to remain even, "or, destroying a book on accident." He glanced back at the librarian, and she returned a reassuring smile.

"Anyway, Rarity and Fluttershy are, like, two of the nicest ponies I know, and...if you're really sorry about what you did, then I'm sure they'll be okay with it. Also because..." Spike squeezed his tail, strained his face, made a couple attempts to speak, before he finally took a breath and said all at once, "Because I can give you another chance and if I can do it then so can the others."

The dragon breathed out, wiping some sweat from his brow as he plopped down on his rear, as if completing some herculean task. Mort tilted his head to one side, giving the dragon a contemplating look.

A moment later a relaxed chuckle escaped his hood, and he patted Spike on top of his head. "You're a good kid, Spike. I bet Twilight's really proud of you."

"Oh, um, yeah, of course she is," he said, feigning indifference. "And, uh...thanks."

Twilight Sparkle felt her spirits rise again, watching the scene. Pride swelled up from inside, watching Spike conquer his own misgivings to say what needed to be said. She leaned down, nuzzling him on the cheek, causing the dragon to blush and sputter.

"Ugh, come on! Not in public, Twilight!" This only prompted her to do it more, causing the dragon fall flailing on his back. "Ew, no, stop! Get help, Mort! Augh!"

The cloaked pony broke into mirthful laughter, watching the scene unfold. "Try to show him a little mercy, Twilight! I don't think his *machoism* can take it."

Twilight Sparkle finally relented, and the dragon got back to his feet, dusting grass off his knees. "*Finally*," he breathed. He glanced towards the fountain, his eyes catching the ice cream vendor. "Hey, how about we get some ice cream? What do you want, Twilight?"

"Get me a rocky road. How about you, Mort?"

"Oh, I'm not really...well..." He considered for a moment. "Get me a strawberry." He paused for a moment. "With sprinkles."

Spike gave a thumbs up, and ran off to the vendor, leaving the two alone. Mort watched the dragon scramble up to the cart, where he struggled to get himself noticed by the significantly taller stallion, before finally deciding to climb up to the top, surprising the vendor.

"Celestia really has a lot of faith in you," Mort said.

Twilight Sparkle smiled modestly. "Well, yeah, finding the Elements of Harmony and defeating Nightmare Moon would do that."

He shook his head. "No, she had a lot of faith in you before that, if Spike's anything to go by."

She arched an eyebrow. "Why? Because I hatched him?"

"Because you're *raising* him," he empathized. "Think about, Twilight, he's a *dragon*. Dragons are...well, *jerks*, most of the time! A lot of them can't see anything beyond their treasure or territory. And you don't want to know what the really nasty ones would do to trespassers."

"But Spike...everything you say to him, everything you do with him, everything you teach him...that could stick with him for the rest of his life, and shape the kind of dragon he turns into. He's cute and cuddly now, but he's going to be big and powerful when he grows up. And he'll live a long time, much longer than most other creatures. He's going to act and live according to how you raised him...and that's going to affect a lot of ponies

for a couple centuries, at *least*. And that might affect how *they* grow up, and how they raise their offspring, and so on and so forth.

"He's not just an assistant or a friend, he's...you could be giving Equestria a real gift, when you think about it. And of all the ponies in the world, Celestia entrusted that gift to you. And I think you're doing a really good job so far."

Twilight Sparkle stared at him, gawking, then pivoted her head to spot Spike grabbing two ice cream cones and balancing an ice cream cup on his head. She had always seen Spike as her faithful assistant and dear friend. She never considered what he'd be like when he grew up, never imagined the ramifications of her raising.

"I...never thought of it that way," she said, solemnly. "I mean, I wanted to raise him to be a good dragon, but...it never occurred to me how important that would be."

"Well, it *is* kind of a 'big picture' perspective," Mort admitted with a shrug. "I don't think too many ponies grasp how significant everything they do, everything they say, is. Every action creates a ripple that can affect so many, and for years and years to come. I learned that from experience."

"Huh," she said, intrigued, "I never figured that being a courier could teach you that."

Mort seemed to hesitate. "Uh...w-well, yeah. I-I mean, I also talk to Celestia a lot, so she's kinda like, um, experience, you know?" He laughed, and to her ears it sounded strangely nervous.

Spike came back, passing to her the rocky road cone, and to Mort the strawberry cone with sprinkles. Spike took the ice cream cup off his head, showing scoops of Neighapolitan ice cream, drizzled in chocolate syrup.

"Thanks a lot, Spike!" Twilight Sparkle stuck her tongue out to lick, but stopped when a thought occurred to her. "Uh, Spike? How did you pay for these, again?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I just told him you were showing the princess' friend around Ponyville, and he said it was on the house."

"Spike," she chided, gently, "I rather your didn't use our relation with the princess to get free stuff."

"Aw, come on! He was just being nice, Twilight." He dug up a spoonful of ice cream, cramming it in his mouth. "If it really bothers you, I guess you could try to pay later, though I don't think he'd take it."

"Probably not," she admitted reluctantly. "Just don't make a habit of it, okay?"

Spike mumbled something, his mouth too full of ice cream to answer. Mort seemed to stare quizzically at his own cone, observing it from all angles as he levitated it over him.

"Something wrong, Mort?" she asked.

"Huh? O-oh, nothing, uh..." Mort stared at his cone a moment longer, occasioanlly glancing at her and Spike, before the whole thing disappeared inside his hood with a very audible *gulp*. Twilight Sparkle felt her jaw drop, and she could see Spike frozen in mid-bite, ice cream slowly dripping off his spoon.

"Hmm, hmm!" Mort said, nodding vigorously. "Good stuff! Really! Yum yum!" The enthusiasm soon left his voice, as he realized the stares he received. "Um...thank you?"

"No wonder you weren't hurt," Spike whispered in awe. "Even your brain's made of iron!"

"I'm glad you really liked it," Twilight Sparkle giggled. "But, uh, next time, maybe you should take a couple bites *before* swallowing the whole thing."

"Heh heh, uh, I'll keep that in mind," he agreed.

The three of them sat in silence. It was not an awkward silence, like before; it was calm and relaxing, quiet not because they couldn't think of anything to say, but because there was simply nothing *to* say. A breeze had picked up, and together with the shade, it made the hot afternoon feel like a comfortable day in early spring.

The park was quickly filling up; friends were meeting and gossiping with each other by the fountain, families were settling down under other, shady trees to unpack their lunches or books. Some had brought kites, ready to take advantage of the sudden wind.

"This is nice," Mort finally said, his voice peaceful. "I'm usually on the move, no matter where I am. I can't really stick around to watch stuff like this too often. But when I do, it's...nice."

"It really is," she said, finishing the last of her ice cream and eating the cone. "One of the nice things about a small town, you get to know everypony, sooner or later."

"Really?" His eyes turned towards a bench, where a mint green unicorn and a creamy earth pony were sitting, the former in an awkward position that Twilight Sparkle could never figure out. "You know those two?"

"Oh, yeah! That's Lyra and Bon-Bon," Twilight Sparkle explained. "Lyra, as you can guess, likes playing the lyre, and Bon-Bon can make some really good sweets. Pinkie Pie sometimes invites her to help at Sugarcube Corner."

"Are they friends?"

"I've never seen them apart."

"Huh. Do you think they're...well..."

"What?"

"Uh, nevermind," he finished, quickly. "How about that mare over there? With the picnic basket?"

Twilight Sparkle looked over his shoulder, spotting a plum-colored pony, with a grape and strawberry cutie mark, digging her head inside a picnic basket.

"Oh, that's Berry Punch. She brews up and sells a lot of grape juice in Ponyville. Kinda overprotective, but she means well."

"Huh...that's a *lot* of juice to bring for one pony," Mort commented, as the mare across the park brought out several bottles and cups.

Twilight Sparkle giggled. "She can have pretty exquisite tastes. But trust me, she's only a social drinker."

"And that's the Flower Trio over there," Spike said, pointing to a trio of earth ponies, playing with kites, each bearing a different flower-based cutie mark. "I think Lily's still getting over her bunnyphobia."

"Bunnyphobia?" Mort asked.

"From a bunny stampede," Spike stated.

"Bunny *stampede*?"

"It's a long story, Mort. And the correct term is *Leporiphobia*, Spike."

Mort chuckled. "Wow, I should've swung by this town more. Now how about...huh?"

"What is it?" she asked.

"Uh, that guy," Mort pointed to a brown earth pony trotting down the path, a hourglass cutie mark on his flank. "Is he here often?"

"Oh, yeah, I've seen him around town a few times. He's...um...I'm not actually sure," she admitted, with an embarrassed chuckle. "Do you remember, Spike?"

The baby dragon shrugged, gulping down a spoonful of ice cream. "Nah, I just know he's a doctor of...something, I don't know. Maybe clocks."

"You've seen him before, Mort?" she asked him.

"Ten times, at least," he said.

"Wow, I never knew he got around so much!"

Mort sighed, as if the thought made him exhausted. "You have *no* idea."

"You know, there's one other pony I think you'd like to see," she suggested. "I actually wrote my last friendship report about her."

Mort gave her an inquiring look. "Really? Who is it?"

"Well, she's probably in the middle of her route, but-" Before she could finish, a brown muffin suddenly fell from the sky and impaled itself on Mort's horn. The cloaked pony jumped in surprise, and cautiously reached up and grabbed the baked good skewered on his horn, cutting it cleanly in two as he pulled it off. He grabbed each half of the muffin, looking at them bewildered.

"What," he deadpanned.

"Oh, no! Sorry about that!" Twilight Sparkle watched and giggled as a grey blur flew down from the sky and stopped just above the three of them, looking at Mort in mortified embarrassment. "Are you okay, sir?" the blond pegasus asked, clutching at her mailbag nervously.

"Uh, yeah," he said, slowly, as if not quite sure to believe what happened.

Spike snorted, almost choking on his ice cream. "Nice aim, Ditzzy!"

"She does have an uncanny aiming," Twilight Sparkled recalled, and rubbed the top of her head as she remembered her first, painful encounter with that fact.

Ditzzy Doo blushed, her face turning crimson. "Um, anyway, you can keep the muffin if you like. Think of it as an apology, uh...uh..."

"Mort," he answered, still sounding confused. "I'm visiting."

"He's a friend of Celestia's, Ditzzy," Twilight Sparkle added. "I'm actually in the middle of showing him around town."

"Oh wow, that's so cool!" the mailpony squealed, landing on the ground. One eye stared straight at Mort, as the other staring at some, unseen corner. "I'm Ditzzy Doo! Ponyville's number one mailpony! It's a pleasure to meet you, sir!" She shook his hoof excitedly for a few seconds, causing the

cloak pony to soon grab his head. Ditzzy Doo let go, and asked, "Oh, are you okay? I didn't shake you too hard, did I?"

"N-no, I just got a little, uh, dizzy..." Mort shook his head, and for a moment Twilight Sparkle swore he looked as walleyed as Ditzzy Doo. "Um...say, uh...hm...well, how do I ask...?"

"You wanna know why my eyes look funny?" she asked, with nonchalant smile.

Mort's eyes shrunk, and his body stiffened. "Oh, no! I-I mean, yes, but I wouldn't say they're...um...oh, shoot..." He looked shamefully at his front hoofs.

Ditzzy Doo giggled. "It's okay! I'm not really worried about what anypony thinks of them, really. Not anymore." She trotted next to Twilight Sparkle, wrapping a foreleg over her shoulder. "You can thank Twilight for that," she said, appreciatively.

Twilight Sparkle nodded, and begun to explain: "Ditzzy Doo's been Ponyville's mailpony for years. She's actually pretty good, but her eyes can make depth perception a little challenging."

"I don't always reach far enough for the stuff I'm supposed to grab, or reach too far and knock stuff off," Ditzzy Doo continued, releasing Twilight Sparkle from her hug. "I mean, it didn't happen a *lot*, but when it did, everypony noticed. It go so bad a lot of ponies were callin' me a bunch of names. Butter Hooves, Ditzzy Dope, Derpy Hooves..."

"I, uh, kinda started that last one," Spike admitted, before bringing his palms together in a pleading fashion. "And I'm still really, *really*, sorry! I wasn't trying to be mean or anything."

Ditzzy Doo shrugged. "It's okay, you told me that yesterday too, and at least you're learning." Her smile seemed to deflate a little. "I could understand foals and baby dragons saying stuff like that. But when the 'adults' get in on it..."

"Well, after yesterday, I really doubt anypony will do it again," Twilight Sparkle threw in, in an attempt to comfort the pegasus.

"Oh, you should've seen it, Mort!" Spike exclaimed, almost gleeful. "Twilight pretty much shamed all the ponies makin' fun of Ditzzy, and went to town on all the little messes they made everyday too."

"But the important thing," the librarian interjected, "was that afterwards, they were sorry, and a lot of them came up to Ditzzy Doo to apologize." She turned to the mailpony, and asked, "Have you met them today yet, Ditzzy?"

"A few of them, actually," the pegasus replied, her bright smile returning. "A couple are even wanting to have lunch with me sometime! I think they're trying really hard to make up for everything. And it wouldn't be happening if it weren't for you, Twilight."

Twilight Sparkle smiled, feeling her heart swell. "Hey, anything for a friend, right?"

Ditzzy Doo nodded happily, and readjusted the mailbag onto her other shoulder. "Well," she said, beginning to take to the air, "I gotta get back to my route. I'll try and see you later, Twilight! And nice seeing you too, Spike." She then dove back down, shaking Mort's hoof one more time. "And you're really lucky to have Twilight showing you around, Mort. I hope you enjoy your stay here."

"Me too, Ditzzy. And, uh...thanks for the muffin," he said, floating the two halves into his cloak.

Ditzzy Doo waved at the three of them, and without another word, flew back into the sky, envelopes trailing behind her.

Twilight Sparkle watched her go for a moment, and then noticed Mort looking at her. "What is it, Mort?"

"Oh, it's nothing," he said, with a shake of his hood. "Just...it's nice seeing you creating some positive ripples."

The conversation they had came back to her, and she found herself thinking about the minds she changed that day, and how they affected one pegasus' life. She thought further, thinking what could happen if she could make friends with those ponies who used to make fun of her, and the

possibilities that could result...

"Huh, shouldn't she be carrying these?" Spike questioned, picking up some envelopes. "I mean, you'd think she-"

The dragon gave a startled shout as the mailpony appeared again in an instant, her landing sending the baby dragon rolling backwards.

"Oh, I can't believe I keep doing that!" she said, stuffing them back into her bag. "I really can be a silly filly sometimes..." As she refastened the bag, she once again begun to wave a farewell to them, but stopped short when she saw Mort. "Oh, I almost forgot!"

"What?" he wondered.

"I wanted to say that's a *really* good skull mask." Without another word, she took off again, this time no pieces of mail escaping her.

Twilight Sparkle arched an eyebrow, and looked at Mort. Celestia's friend was frozen in place, his eyes seemingly even smaller than when the snakes invaded his cloak.

"Skull Mask?" she questioned, curiously.

"Um..." Mort reached up to his hood, and somehow managed to pull it even further down. "J-just some slang for guys who, y-you know, paint their faces, uh, white, um, heh heh, kinda s-silly that she thought I...uh..." He cleared his throat loudly, and quickly said, "Anyway! Where to next?"

"Oh, uh..." She dwelled on Ditzzy Doo's comment a moment longer, before pushing it aside briefly. "We're going to Sugarcube Corner next. I'm hoping we can get all my friends back together and plan something to do."

"Sounds great!" he said, hurriedly. "So, what are we waiting for? Let's get trottin'!" He rushed past her, getting onto the path and heading back towards town, sometimes tripping a little on his robes.

Spike climbed on top of her, resting his arms on her neck. "Uh, Twilight? Why do I feel like I'm missing something?"

"I'll let you know when I figure it out myself," she answered, strangely unable to get Ditzzy Doo's comment out of her head.

It was near noon when the three of them decided to head back into town. Spike rode on her back, with Mort taking the lead, for once. The cloaked pony would sometimes glance back them, give a brief look, then quickly face forward again.

Ignoring this for the moment, she rolled her eyes towards her passenger. "Spike? I just want to tell you I'm really, really proud of you today. And thank you."

The baby dragon shrugged casually. "Yeah, well...everyone makes mistakes, and if you're willing to give them a second chance, I just kinda figured that...well, I could too. And he seemed sorry enough." She craned her head back, just enough to rub against his cheek. "Oh, Twilight, not again! There's even more ponies here than the park!"

Twilight Sparkle stopped, and noticed for the first time that the streets were surprisingly deserted. At this time of day the ponies would be in the middle of their errands.

She pushed the thought aside, and cantered up to Mort. "So, Mort," she said, slowing so she could be beside him, "are you feeling better?"

The cloaked pony seem to stiffen in her presence, but once he turned his eyes to look at her, his walking relaxed and gave a slow nod.

"Uh, yeah," he said, "I'm feeling a lot better, actually. Thank you very much."

"No thanks necessary," she replied with a grin.

Mort looked at her a moment longer, before his horn glowed and the muffin halves floated from out of his cloak. He focused his attention on the halves, enveloping them in a similar, green glow as he brought them together. When he did, the muffins squeezed and flaked, before coming apart again. Mort hummed to himself, and tried again, but met with similar results.

"Uh, what are you doing, Mort?" Spike asked, leaning on one arm.

"Trying to put this together," he said, distractedly. "I don't know, I got this idea I should be able to put stuff together, and it won't leave my head." He tried again, and this time larger pieces of the muffin fell apart and landed on the ground. Mort sighed in frustration.

"It's actually a kinda difficult to do," Twilight Sparkle informed him. "Especially with something like a muffin. You basically have to create new, molecular bonds between the broken pieces to keep them together. It's a lot easier with something relatively solid like wood, but, well, 'squishy' stuff can be problematic.

"Of course, the other problem is that when you're putting something broken back together, pieces of it might already be gone, and you'd have little way of getting them back. So you would have to draw on the material of the broken pieces to form those new bonds. But! The reconstructed material could end up being weaker, or looked slightly warped. I've read that professionals like to focus on cracks and the like a centimeter at the time so they could get it absolutely perfect, or as perfect as a pony can get anyway. I actually have some books..."

She finally noticed Mort staring at her, an unreadable expression on his face. She felt herself flush, and cleared her throat. "Uh, sorry about that, I kinda get carried away when I get into science like that. I didn't mean to bore you or anything."

"Um, actually, that all sounded pretty interesting." He took a look at the muffin pieces, which had since he started turn into doughy clumps. "Maybe I should read those books before I try this again. Want a muffin?"

"I'll take them!" Spike offered. Mort floated the pieces over, and inserted them into the baby dragon's mouth, who began to chew on them greedily. "Hmm! I gotta tell Pinkie Pie about these! These would be great with some baked worms."

Twilight Sparkle blanched at the thought. "Anyway," she said, trying not to get sick, "if you want, you could even check them out. It's a library, after all."

"Really?" he asked, sounding surprised. "I-I mean, I don't know when I'd be

able to give them back, I'm kinda all over the place..."

"I'm sure we could arrange something," she said. "Speaking of what you want...is there anything in particular you want to do?"

"Oh, um, I can't really decide," he said, uncertainly. "Um, I did like how things were in the park. Maybe something...small and personal? Definitely relaxing." He nodded, sounding more sure of himself. "Yeah, something that isn't too hectic, not too loud or anything. Would that be alright?"

She paused for a moment, thinking about what they had planned. "So, nothing with too many ponies?"

"Uh, not right now." He shook his head. "I'm still trying to get used to so many...um, noticing me, I guess."

Twilight Sparkle nodded, though at the same time thought about how Pinkie Pie had wanted to throw a 'huge party' for Mort. She might be a little disappointed, but then again, the pink pony might just be as happy, anyway. She was happy enough when it's just her friends. She could probably arrange something smaller no problem.

"Oh, here we are!" Sugarcube Corner came into view, with its iconic gingerbread roof and cupcake tower looming over them. Twilight Sparkle was struck by how desolate the place was; usually there would at least be some ponies eating their food at the tables outside, but these were completely barren.

Mort whistled, impressed. "They did a pretty good job. That's not, uh...real food it's made of, right?"

"Um, yeah," she replied, still bothered by the lack of ponies. "Spike found that out the hard way."

"Twilight!" he whined. "You said you'd never tell!"

"Sorry," she said, still distracted. "Where is everypony? It's usually a lot busier than this."

"Maybe they're all inside?" Mort walked up the bubblegum pink steps,

knocking on the door three times. "Hello? Anypony there?"

Twilight Sparkle looked at the windows of the shop, noticing how the drapes were pulled, preventing anyone from looking in. The silence emanating from the store was unnatural, the sort that had to be...

There was a click, and the door to the shop opened. "Oh, thanks!" Mort said, and walked in.

Realization struck Twilight Sparkle like a hammer, and she rushed after him. "Mort, wait!"

"What is it?" he asked, standing in the darkened room. "Say, is it always this dark?"

"Mort, you don't understand," she said, coming through the door, barely noticing it shutting behind her. "I think Pinkie Pie-"

"*SURPRISE!*"

The lights came on in an instant, and Twilight Sparkle found out why the streets looked so deserted: because every, single pony had crammed themselves into the shop. Tables were laid out with wrapped gifts, punch bowls, and plates piled with cupcakes, cookies, and other confectionery. Draped across the ceiling was a single banner, saying *Welcome to Ponyville, Mort!*

Mort voiced her thoughts well. "Oh no," he whispered.

"HEY, MORT!" Pinkie Pie bounded on over to him, squeezing him in a tight hug. "I'm so glad you and Twilight could make it! I got about half of Ponyville here today, just so they could meet you and party with you!"

"H-half of Ponyville?" he stuttered, fright creeping up into his voice. "*Here?*"

"Yep! It wasn't that hard at all, really! I mean, yeah, it's way, way short notice, but I figured, hey, you're worth it, so I zoomed around Ponyville, grabbed as many ponies as I could, and here we are! Ready to knock your hooves off with the biggest, most*exciting* party EVER!"

Mort's eyes darted around the room, looking like a sheep in a den of wolves. "I...I...I..."

"Oh, you're speechless!" Pinkie Pie quickly got behind him, and begun to shove him towards a group of ponies. "Here, let me introduce you to everypony! Oh, we're going to have so much *fun!*"

Twilight Sparkle watched powerlessly as Pinkie Pie pushed the terrified pony over to the others, finding it remarkably similar to how she felt about her chances for the day going well, as well as her long-term future.

"Spike," she droned.

"Yeah?" he replied, in a similar tone.

"I'm going to miss Ponyville."

Chapter 7

Rarity sat huddled on the dressing room floor, sniffing as she beheld the task before her. On one side of her were the shoulder pads with their frayed tassels, the diamond-studded buttons and a single, chipped ruby. With them were over two dozen pieces of torn fabric, sewed together and arranged in a way that they were beginning to resemble a sleeve. Rarity found some solace in the fact the gold thread helped her know where to start, like the round edges of a jigsaw puzzle.

But it was of little comfort, as the other side of her showed; there lay the rest of the suit, haphazardly piled. She levitated two pieces from the pile and brought them in front of her, bringing them together. She looked at them intently (or as well as she could, given her eyes would water still), swapping their positions, rotating them in place, going through every possible combination. When it became clear they didn't fit with one another, she groaned in a small, miserable voice, and threw one of the pieces back into the pile, before choosing another torn fabric that might fit.

It had been half-an-hour since Mort had come and gone from the boutique, leaving behind an absolutely crushed spirit. Rarity could handle clients who were disappointed with her designs. Even when her friends had a lukewarm reaction to their Gala dresses, she was able to take it mostly in stride, and work on "improving" them. While that had almost been a career-killing disaster, the point was she could handle criticism. And even if the clients didn't like a dress, *she* could; she had yet to sew anything she did not absolutely adore. (Five, particular dresses aside, that she wished everyday would disappear into the pages of fashion history and become little more than an urban myth.)

What she couldn't handle, though, was the sight of her work—a product of much study, effort and heart—being torn to utter shreds, and mere minutes after being displayed for the first time. Seeing Mort encircled in the remains of the suit was like watching her heart get torn out and stomped on, over and over again. Looking at the remains once everypony left, she couldn't bear to throw it all away, and instead went about trying to restore it.

A small, rational voice in the back of her mind was telling her that she should stop. That even if she could manage to find the exact location that each shred would need to be, and somehow sew it all back together, the result would never be satisfactory, nor worth all the time and effort required. But every time she even thought of stopping, she would remember how pristine the suit looked, how proud and sure she was of it, and then go right back to trying to repair it, unable to part with something she had worked so hard on.

Making matters worse, she couldn't stop thinking about *why* it happened, and it lead to her getting distracted from her current task constantly. Sneaking in like she did was cheeky and, she admitted, rude of her, but did it really call for doing *this*? Wrinkling it, maybe ripping a sleeve to get it off...but destroying it so utterly? Part of her couldn't stop thinking that it wasn't an accident from hiding his appearance; that instead, he had felt so disgusted by the suit he couldn't even bear to look at it, much less be seen in it. Or that it was some sort of punishment for trying to get a peek at him.

It would be incredibly cruel, if true, but it wasn't an image she could reconcile with what she knew of Mort, as little as it was. And Celestia certainly couldn't be friends with a pony of such brutish behavior. But how could such destruction possibly be anything but intentional...?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the dressing room door. "Uh, Rarity? Are ya doin' okay in there?" a voice drawled.

Rarity sighed, and took a moment to collect herself, wiping away fresh moisture from her eyes. Putting the fabrics down, she got up and strode towards the dressing room door. She stopped just in front of it, and used her horn to crack it open. She was met with Applejack's green eyes, staring leveling at her.

"Well?" the orange mare asked, arching a brow.

Rarity *hmped*. "I am just *fine*, Applejack, just as I've told you every, other time you asked! I must insist that you leave me in peace."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Rarity, you gone and locked yerself up for nearly an hour now! You ain't plannin' on stayin' inside all day, now are you?"

"No! Well, maybe...I-I just don't know!" she admitted lamely. "It...just depends on how long this will take."

"How long *what* will take?" Applejack's eyes glanced away from Rarity, trying to look behind the unicorn. Rarity slid to block her view, and continued to maneuver herself to keep the apple farmer from looking in.

After a minute of this, Applejack groaned and facehoofed. "Rarity, what in tarnation are ya doin' in there?"

"It's none of your business!" Rarity said, curtly, flipping her mane with a wave of her head. "And I doubt you'd understand, anyway."

Without taking her eyes off her, the farmer deadpanned, "Yer stitchin' that suit back together, ain't ya?"

Rarity let out a tight, little gasp. "How did you know?!"

"Ah know ya a bit better then ya might think, missy." Applejack shrugged, and with a smirk said, "Not to mention ya just told me, anyway."

Rarity bristled slightly, her face flushing with embarrassment. Utterly foalish, and she fell for it.

"Now can Ah come in?" the earth pony asked, sounding exasperated.

Rarity thought of shooing her back outside, but she didn't see the point. If she kept her out, Applejack would just keep pounding on the door while berating about what she was doing, and the farmer could easily be heard from behind the door if she wanted to. If she let her in, though, Applejack wouldn't have to keep raising her voice, she wouldn't have a door to pound on, and she *might* give Rarity a little silence if she saw how concentrated the fashionista was.

She sighed tiredly, and stood back, opening the door the rest of the way. Applejack gave her a courteous nod, and wasted no time trotting in, making a beeline for where the remains of the suit were. Rarity felt her fur stand on end as Applejack got closer to her work, and in an instant was across the room, barring the earth pony from going any further.

"Ah ah ah! Not one step further, Applejack!" she admonished. "You're going to disturb some very delicate work here!"

Applejack glanced down at the work area, and shook her head. "As it is, Rarity, Ah don't I could do much more to that get up than what's been done already." She sighed, and Rarity couldn't help but feel a little irritated by it. "For pity's sake, Rarity, yer goin' to be in here forever trying to make somethin' from all that! You barely got a sleeve!"

"For your information, I'm confident I'll be piecing a shoulder together very soon!" It took a moment for her rash reply to sink in, and Rarity's face turned even redder than before. Seething between her teeth, she said, "Just let me do this, Applejack! The act of dress making—or in this case, suit making," she said, under her breath, "is an *art*! How could I so callously abandon something I've put my very heart and *soul* into?" She couldn't help but add the theatrical flare at the end.

"Well, it's mighty easy, actually!" Applejack responded, simply. She walked around the bewildered beauty and took the sewn sleeve into her mouth. "All ya godda do is—"

"Applejack, you spit that sleeve out right this minute!" In a flash Rarity bit down on the frayed end, trying to pull it away from the earth pony, but Applejack simply tugged in the opposite direction. Rarity responded in kind, and soon the two of them were involved in a tug-of-war using a tattered sleeve.

"Et go 'is insan!" Rarity mumbled through the fabric, glaring daggers at the farmer. She should have known Applejack would pull something something like this.

"Es a 'aste o' 'ime!" Applejack responded in kind, almost dragging the unicorn with each tug.

The two of them kept at it, rotating in circles as they tried to get the upper hoof. Applejack may have been one of the strongest ponies in the town, but Rarity wasn't a pushover by any means, and she wasn't about to let Applejack get her way. For every gain Applejack got from sheer force, Rarity got it back by pulling in a direction that almost made the earth pony

stumble.

She wasn't going to find out which of them would give, though, because the sleeve gave first.

With a mighty rip the stitches finally gave out, and the two of them went rolling in opposite directions. Applejack collided with a rack of dresses, tipping it over on top of herself and bringing with it nearly a dozen hat boxes that were stacked on top.

Rarity didn't have time to feel mortified about what happened to those dresses. She was too preoccupied with the lancing pain she felt when her flank landed right on top of her pin cushion. She squealed in pain, and sat up quickly, shooting a smoldering look at the pin cushion that clung to her like a prickly seed. Her horn flared and she pried it off, gritting her teeth as she did so. She dropped it on the ground, and rubbed her sore flank.

Her eyes fell on the sleeve that was now how it was when she started: torn to pieces. She barely suppressed a growl as she floated the remains to her eyes. She shot a withering glare at the topsized clothes rack.

"Well, I hope you're happy!" she snapped, marching towards it. "Now I have to start all over again! You could be so...so *uncouth*, Applejack!"

She stood there, waiting for the apple farmer to rise from the now wrinkled and maybe torn dresses, offering a similar retort. Instead the pile of clothes remained motionless, with not the faintest hint of movement going on underneath.

"Applejack?" Rarity bit her lip, feeling her earlier anger drain. Now that she thought about it, those racks could be awful heavy sometimes, and as many dresses as there were, they all weren't too thick. They wouldn't offer too much protection from something heavy falling down.

"A-Applejack?" Concern made its way into her voice, and she got closer to the pile, getting more anxious as time went by with no sound from the farmer. "Are you okay, dear?" She reached out tentative hoof. "C-come now, say something al-

She scooted back in fright as the clothes suddenly erupted upward,

sending dresses every which way. Something crawled out from the garment pile, and the sight of it made Rarity's jaw drop.

It was Applejack, but it was Applejack in one of Rarity's most bombastically frilly, jewel encrusted, ribbon covered, flowery and *yellow* gowns. It hid nearly every aspect of Applejack, save her forelegs and her head, the latter of which that was also sporting a large, wide brimmed hat that was practically overrun with flowers on top.

The earth pony wobbled on her hooves in a daze, before clearing the stars out of her head with a shake. Her eyes rolled up, finally taking notice of the hat's rim that nearly shadowed her face, and was soon discovering what else she wore. She let out a little yelp in shock, staring at the frilly dress in utter bafflement, before turning to look at Rarity.

The sight of Applejack in the dress, and her reaction to it, had an immediate effect. Rarity's earlier shock was quickly replaced by an uncontrollable mirth. A snort grew into a snicker, which then grew into full blow laughter as the unicorn collapsed on her knees, barely able to catch her breath.

"A-A-Applejack," she gasped out, barely able to get a word out, "o-oh my goodness! You're s-so...so..." Rarity tried to suppress another round of laughter, but only succeeded in holding back a moment longer before succumbing again, tears beginning to trickle down her cheeks.

She caught sight of the farmer glaring daggers at her, and for a moment she felt a pang of guilt about the earlier guffaw. But a moment later Applejack's face softened, and she smiled back.

"Heh." Applejack smiled in embarrassment. "Ah guess I look a little ridiculous, huh...?"

"A I-little," Rarity replied, finally bringing herself back up under control as she got back on her hooves. Yellow just wasn't a good color with that fur, and there plenty of other styles that worked so much better with her.

Applejack whipped the large hat off, and scrounged through the pile of clothing until she found her farmer's hat, which she put on with evident relief. She looked down at where she had dug it up, and her eyes caught

something. She reached down and used a hoof to scoop up one half of the torn sleeve.

"Welp, Ah guess that makes two of us, huh?" she retorted, slyly.

Rarity felt a momentary flare of indignation, but the earlier mirth she felt had cleared her mind and wafted away the bit of misery she had been feeling until then. Looking at the torn cloth made her reevaluate just what she had been doing until now.

"I guess it does," she conceded with a sigh, and returned her own embarrassed smile. "I'm so sorry about all that, Applejack. When it comes to my work I tend to...well, lose my head."

"Happens to the best of us, Rarity," Applejack said, with a dismissive hoof wave. "Ah'm just glad we didn't have to get Opal in a tree this time."

Rarity giggled at the memory. Her horn lit up as she lifted the torn sleeve off of Applejack's hoof, and threw it behind her, towards where the rest lay. Watching it flutter to the ground, she again felt a longing to see the suit back to its pristine state, but it wasn't as strong as before.

"So," she started, trotting up to where the torn fabric was, "what am I to do with you now?"

"Only thing you can do." Applejack moved towards the corner of the room, her teeth grasping something that had been leaning against it. She came back to Rarity, pushing across the floor a small trashcan, with a brush and dustpan held in her mouth. She stopped in front of Rarity, dropped the cleaning supplies in front of the unicorn, then nudged them forward with her snout. She stood back up to give Rarity a knowing look.

Rarity bit her lip, her eyes switching between the trash can and the remains of the suit. With reluctance, she levitated the brush and dustpan over to where the scraps of cloth were, and begun to sweep the remains up, each stroke of the brush carrying the same hesitation she felt when digging in the diamond dog mines.

A few, agonizing moments later, everything save the diamonds and jewels were piled high in the dustpan. She hovered it near the trashcan, and

couldn't help but look pleadingly at Applejack, hoping perhaps the earth pony would change her mind, or encourage her to do something else. The farmer simply gave a firm shake of her head.

Swallowing hard, she moved it the final, few inches needed to get it over the can's mouth, and with a little whinny, she tilted it, the torn rags tumbling out and into the trashcan.

Releasing a shaky breath, Rarity returned the cleaning utensils and trashcan to where they were, and offered a weak smile to Applejack. The farmed nodded approvingly.

"Feelin' better?" she asked.

Rarity considered telling her she wasn't, but as she looked at the now clean floor, and the corner of the room where she put everything away, she realized that a weight she didn't realize she had wasn't there anymore.

"I...actually do," she said, somewhat astonished, and very relieved.

Applejack winked at her. "There, ya see? Ah know how ya are with yer dresses and everythin', Rarity, but they ain't nothin' to get so worked up over. Heck, you could probably sew something twice as good in half the time from scratch, now that ya got a stab at makin' them in the first place."

"Hmm..." Rarity tapped her chin in thought. "Well, to be honest I *did* have a couple of ideas-"

"That can wait until *after* today," Applejack interjected, quickly. "We still gotta be helpin' Twilight show Mort 'round, remember?"

Rarity gasped, suddenly remembering what had started the whole chain of event. "Oh my goodness, don't tell me they've all been waiting this entire time?"

"Nah, nah, don' worry, Ah had them go on ahead of us." She fidgeted in the gown, looking at it uncomfortably. "A good thing too, Ah think."

"Yes, I'd hate for these self-pity sessions of mine to put a halt to everyone's fun. We should..." She stopped herself, the image of Mort, surrounded by

tatters, stuck in her head. "Uh...that is, you should go on ahead. I can just stay here and tidy up. Don't wait on my account."

Applejack tilted her head quizzically. "What about you?"

"Oh, well...I mean..." She tried to think of a good excuse, but the way Applejack bore into her made such a thing nearly impossible to do. Even the smallest fib would sound utterly weak under those eyes. She sighed in defeat, her head slumping forward. "I'm sorry, Applejack. I'm afraid my presence would only give rise to some...tension, with our guest."

"What, ya mean Mort?" Rarity nodded, and Applejack gave a little *pfft* in response. "You kiddin' me? That feller looked sorrier than Wino a when I catch her in my duds. He actually wanted to stick around 'cause of what happened."

"Really?" she said, in disbelief. "But...I mean, after what I did, and after what he did to my suit, I would think..."

"Come on, now, Ah hardly think he meant to do anything like that. Ah just think ya just spooked the poor guy when ya came bargin' in. Unicorn magic can be a might crazy, after all."

Rarity stomped one hoof indignantly, feeling a little insulted. "Really, Applejack! We unicorns do have more than a modicum control over our magic! It's hardly 'crazy,' as you put it!"

"Now, now, Ah didn't mean anything by it!" Applejack said hastily, trying to simmer the unicorn. "Ah'm just sayin' it can sometimes be a bit, well, unpredictable. You 'member Twi' and Spike just poppin' out of thin air that one time in the library, right? After bein' chased all over town?"

"So you think it was just an accident?" Rarity considered the possibility briefly. Unicorn magic was usually at its most uncontrollable in early foalhood, and as unicorns grew older, their magic begun to stabilize more and more, and by then even the most frightening situations would barely elicit a spark.

Still, Applejack had a point: even Twilight Sparkle had exhibited uncontrolled spurts of magic at least a couple times, gifted as she was, and

Mort seemed to be a rather panicky sort. He had so many issues to start with, poor horn control wouldn't be that hard to believe.

"I...suppose that makes sense," she said, finally. "Well, if that *is* the case, the best thing to do would be to apologize, wouldn't it? Staying here certainly wouldn't help."

"Now that's what Ah'm talkin' about!" Applejack got beside her and pattered her shoulder lightly. "So, how 'bout we head on out o' here and try to catch up? Ah think Fluttershy was goin' to take him over to her cottage later."

"Absolutely!" she said, getting ready to march on, but she was given pause as her eyes caught the rack that was still laying on the ground, along with a pile of dresses and a number of boxes and hats. "Uh, but first...I think we should clean up." She looked at Applejack, and barely stifled a giggle before adding, "And get you out of that gown!"

Applejack's eyes widened in realization, her hooves traveling over the gown to reaffirm its existence. Her cheeks went red, and she proceeded to take the gown off as Rarity started to hang the other dresses back up.

It had taken a while, if only because Rarity had to make sure the dresses and hats were properly organized by size and style, but eventually all had been put away. Rarity's attempts to have Applejack try on a sleeveless, blue dress she had found was met with strong, though not unexpected, resistance.

"We don't got time to be playin' dress up, Rarity," Applejack huffed as she walked out the front door of the boutique.

"Oh, but it wouldn't even take ten minutes, dear!" she called ahead, closing the boutique door behind her before chasing after Applejack. "It's quite a simple dress, not really all that 'frou-frou,' and I really think you could pull it off nicely. Orange and blue do make for a rather striking contrast."

"Contrast schmonstrast, far as Ah'm concerned that get up I had filled out my dress quota for the month."

"I'm being serious, Applejack, you could really turn some-"

"HEADS UP!"

The two of them turned to the source, and heeded the warning just in time as a lavender pegasus with a golden yellow mane swooped over them, missing by a wingspan. The sudden gust took off Applejack's hat and disheveled Rarity's mane. The two of them shot a dirty look at the pegasus, and Rarity spotted the partially clouded sun that adorned the perpetrator's flank.

"Cloud Kicker!" she yelled up at her, bristling, "you should know better than to fly so close! Just look what you did to me!" Her horn flared, and she attempted to straighten her mane and tail back out as best she could. She would need to run back inside for a comb if she couldn't get it untangled.

"I'm sorry, Rarity!" the weatherpony replied regretfully, descending towards them and lowering her voice as she did so. "I was just in a hurry. Swoops like that help you go places, you know? I, uh, kinda overdid it this time and almost flew into that big tree over there. You're not hurt, are you?"

"Just a little frazzled, Kicker," Applejack told her, a hint of annoyance in her voice. She picked her hat back up, giving it a quick dust off before putting it back on. "Why you in such a rush, anyway?"

"Oh, well, I'm always in a rush when it comes to Pinkie Pie's parties," the pegasus replied with a smile.

The two friends looked at each other, sharing the same, anxious look. "Uh, Cloud Kicker," Rarity begun, trying to keep her voice level, "did you find out, er, *why* Pinkie Pie's throwing a party now?"

"Like she ever needed a real reason? Although..." The pegasus scratched her chin, her eyes looking upward in thought. "I'm *pretty* sure it had something to do with a new pony in town. I think it was something like...Wort? Tort? Port?"

"Mort," the two of them said, dejectedly.

"Oh, yeah! That's it!" Cloud Kicker exclaimed. "Anyway, Pinkie Pie's 'Welcome' parties are always the best! You two should swing by! See ya there!" Without another word, the pegasus took off, leaving the two of them

in a heavy silence.

"She's...throwing the party?" she said finally in disbelief. "Now?"

"Er, Rarity?" Applejack asked, slowly. "Correct me if Ah'm wrong, but...weren't that party supposed to be later? Say, *much* later? To give the feller time to get used to everypony an' all that?"

"Oh, this is terrible!" Rarity exclaimed, clapping her cheeks. "Something must have gone terribly wrong for Pinkie Pie to do it now! I...I don't even want to think about what could've moved things up so quickly!" After Rarity, the schedule was to have Fluttershy introduce her animals, have lunch at Applejack's farm, let Rainbow Dash perform her aerial stunts, and *then* throw a party to finish it off. Applejack's part obviously couldn't be done with her at the boutique, but that still left Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash. Something had to have happened with the two of them, but she couldn't imagine what in such a short time frame.

And that wasn't all. If Mort's magic had a tendency to destroy objects within his vicinity in a panic, she didn't want to think what sort of chaos might occur with dozens of ponies, tables, presents and foodstuffs surrounding him.

Applejack stomped her hoofs, frustration hanging on her every word. "Great! So Pinkie Pie's throwin' a party fer a pony that'll probably panic and go plum loco in the place! That's just *perfect!*"

Rarity's thoughts about the consequences were momentarily derailed, and she cocked an eyebrow at the earth pony. "I never knew you were one for alliteration, Applejack."

"Allita-what?"

Rainbow Dash strained her eyes as she looked at the winding trails and green foliage below. She was flying at a pace that was, for her, agonizingly slow, but she had little choice in the matter. What she was searching for wasn't easy to find when moving at breakneck speeds. (Breakneck for non-

pegasi, anyway.) And she definitely wasn't going to return to Fluttershy empty hoofed.

Fluttershy's mood had undergone a major shift between when Rainbow Dash talked to Twilight Sparkle, and when she caught up to the caretaker. She had thought the other pegasus was upset, but by the time they got to the cottage, that had been replaced by something bordering on anger and fear.

When Fluttershy had returned to her cottage with her decidedly less antagonistic, furry orchestra in tow, she had ordered them all to march inside. (Rainbow Dash could only remember a couple times Fluttershy had ordered *anything*. Even the red dragon from what seemed to be so long ago had received what was more of a severe scolding than actual commands.) After that she had proceeded, for some reason, to gather up all the animals she could, even the ones that had their own, little homes or pins outside, and place them indoors.

Fluttershy then told Rainbow Dash to go around and gather some of the further strays, and though Rainbow Dash was confused as to why she wanted to do so, the hard, almost desperate look she got from the pegasus had squashed any notion of questioning. Like a machine, she had zoomed across the woods, finding each and every critter Fluttershy requested, and depositing them on the cottage doorstep, where Fluttershy would usher them inside. Rainbow Dash had found each woodlander in the span of a few seconds.

Save one. And considering *what* it was, she was starting to get very irritated at her inability to find it.

Rather conveniently, her expository, mental recap of events had ended just as she found her quarry, racing across the dirt path below at a speed of 0.2 miles per hour. Smirking in triumph, she dropped out of the sky like a stone, and landed on all fours directly in front of her target, wanting to make an impression.

"Got ya!" she brayed loudly, smirking triumphantly at the creature.

The freshwater turtle stopped, one foot hovering off the ground, and took a moment to regard her with a blank, almost bored, expression. It blinked

both eyes at her once, then went back to walking, this time altering course just enough that it would take him around the pegasus with the least amount of effort.

Rainbow Dash was a little taken back by the lukewarm response, and furrowing her brows, she leaped again in front of the turtle. "I said *got ya!*" she exclaimed again, a little louder.

After she came down, it inched itself a little to the right. The turtle didn't look at her, nor did it even pause. She frowned, feeling indignant that she was being ignored, though a moment later it turned into a little grin. She snickered, and inched to her left, bringing her head down low enough to be almost level with the turtle.

"You think you're hot stuff, huh?" she said, and with a hoof gently twirled the turtle until it was facing the opposite direction. It craned its neck around to give her what might have been a disgruntled look. It surprised her, and she grinned apologetically at him.

"Aw, don't be like that," she cooed, then used both hoofs to lift the turtle up. She laid on her back, adjusting her wings to be comfortable, and held the turtle up above her. The turtle gave a cursory look around, and begun to move its legs like it was trying to walk. Or fly.

Rainbow Dash's grin grew wider. When she was looking for the hard shelled reptile, she kept imagining what it'd be like to be so slow, not to mention flightless. It would be a dull existence, and anything that lived like that would have to be pretty dull too, or so she thought. Watching the turtle persist in walking while hanging in the air was probably one of the cutest and most endearing things she had ever seen.

"Yer alright, squirt," she said, affectionately. Sitting back up, she carefully balanced the turtle on top of her rainbow-colored head, until it was laying flat against her skull. "Hey, how 'bout I give you a ride back to Fluttershy's? Just don't, y'know, pee on me."

The turtle, of course, didn't respond. Getting back on all four hooves, Rainbow Dash trotted leisurely back to Fluttershy's cottage, making sure to keep her head steady so the turtle wouldn't fall. One day, though, she wanted to show it *real* speed.

Fluttershy's cottage was quiet. Although far from a noisy place, given its curator, on any other day, one could still hear the chirping of its birds, or the squeaks of its smaller animals. At the very least one could hear the sound of splashing water from the occasional, bathing woodlander, or the rustling of leaves or bushes as some creature moved through them.

Now, however, there wasn't a peep from anything. The animal haven had gone deathly silent, and it was beginning to give Rainbow Dash the creeps as she approached it. Not even the chickens had made a peep from their little hen house.

Approaching the front door cautiously, Rainbow Dash gave a few, quick knocks. "Fluttershy?" she called. She waited for a response, but heard nothing from the other side. She pressed an ear to the door, but could only make out an occasional chirp from some animal inside. Feeling more nervous than she thought she ought to be, she opened the door and walked in, but stopped in the doorway to stare at the scene before her.

Nearly every, square inch of Fluttershy's ground floor had been taken by one of the animals. A family of rabbits had taken to the couch, huddled together, sharing it with some ferrets, weasels and a couple skunks. Underneath the couch were some of the snakes, coiled around each other to make room for the porcupines. Birds were crowding around the birdhouses that hung from the ceilings, and the chipmunks and squirrels were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder along the tiny, flight of steps that spiraled towards their holes in the ceiling.

There were also chickens, racoons, possums, foxes, moles, mice, rats, a couple badgers and a plethora of other creatures that Rainbow Dash had no hope of picking out or distinguishing from their seemingly superficial cousins.

Most striking of all, of course, was the complete lack of Fluttershy.

She took the turtle from her head and lay him on the floor, never taking her eyes off the collection of animals all staring at her solemnly. The atmosphere of the room was subdued, and Rainbow Dash couldn't help but feel her own mood dampened at the same time.

"So, uh hey," she started, looking at the other occupants, "would any of you happen to know where Fluttershy is?"

There was silence. Then, a quiet, muffled sobbed was heard from above. Across the room, several dozen pairs of eyes glanced up towards the ceiling, where Fluttershy's bedroom would be.

"Yeah, I was afraid of that." Swallowing, Rainbow Dash made her way towards the staircase, the animals shuffling to the sides to form a makeshift path for her.

She went up the stairs, and at the top of the steps saw Angel. The was rabbit hiding behind one of the railings, peeking his head around to anxiously look at something in the room. Rainbow Dash had a good idea of what—or rather, who—it was.

When the rabbit took notice of her, he immediately hopped to the center of the top step, holding his arms out in an attempt to bar any entry into the room. He shot Rainbow Dash a fierce look (or at least, fierce for a bunny), and pointed back down the stairs where she came from.

Rainbow Dash frowned. The rabbit was crazy if he thought he was going to order the pegasus around, especially when he was the cause of this whole mess in the first place. She narrowed her eyes and took on a more rigid posture, making it clear she wasn't going anywhere.

The stand off between the two was broken by another sob from the bedroom. Angel looked towards the source, then back to Rainbow Dash, who continued to stare at him patiently. Angel balled his little fists, trying to outstare the young flier, but his composure kept faltering as his eyes kept darting between Rainbow Dash and the bedroom.

There was another choked sob, and that was it: the rabbit sagged in defeat, his ears flopping over his face, and moved aside, gesturing for the other pegasus to come in. Rainbow Dash gave a curt nod and walked up the rest of the stairway.

Unlike the ground level, the bedroom was completely devoid of any animal, and that was most likely because of the room's owner. Fluttershy lay curled up on the bed, her head buried in a large pillow that was getting wet with

tears. Occasionally there would be a wheeze and more crying, and the yellow pegasus would hug the pillow tighter, as if to silence the sound.

It was a hard to watch, and Rainbow Dash felt her insides twisting around as the pegasus kept crying. This was something that she would never get used to. Swallowing nervously, she slowly approached the bed, and made sure to keep her voice low as she tried to speak.

"Uh..." Rainbow Dash cleared her throat. "Fluttershy? Are you okay?" The weatherpony winced slightly at her own question, knowing her friend was obviously not "okay." "What's wrong?"

Fluttershy lifted her head from the pillow, and wailed, "She's going to take them awaaay..." She shoved her face back into the pillow, crying with even more vigor.

Rainbow Dash forced a smile, and asked, "What are you talking about?" She hopped on Fluttershy's bed, and carefully sat on the foot of the bed. "Who's going to take who away?"

There was some sniffing, and Fluttershy pushed herself up, still clutching the pillow tightly between her forelegs. Her wings were hanging limply on her back and her normally straight mane was in complete disarray. Her eyes were red and puffy, the surrounding fur matted with moisture.

Choking back some sobs, she said, "C-Celestia. W-when she finds out what happened, she'll...s-she'll move all the animals out of Ponyville, o-or lock them in cages, or maybe make them go into to the Ever...free..." A fresh batch of tears pooled in her eyes and she brought the pillow up to her face, unleashing another round of sobs. "S-she just can't, Rainbow!" the yellow pegasus cried. "C-Coils and Rattle get cold so easily, Jennifur has to take special vitamins every night, Poe still has a bad wing..."

Fluttershy continued on about why the animals couldn't leave, citing everything from medical complications to social awkwardness. The rainbow pegasus scratched the back of her head, feeling more uncomfortable and lost with every passing moment. She was used to making ponies feeling better with tricks, stunts or standing up to their would be oppressors. There were no bullies this time, though, and what happened wasn't going to be swept away by her aerial feats. Fluttershy needed somepony to cheer her

up, and Rainbow Dash felt completely out of her element.

Didn't mean she couldn't try, though.

She tentatively raised one foreleg, and wrapped it around Fluttershy in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. She rubbed back and forth over Fluttershy's shoulders, and after a few moments of this, it seemed to have the intended effect of calming her. She started to lean on Rainbow Dash, her crying becoming softer until it was just a few sniffles.

She looked up from her pillow again, sniffled, and offered a weak smile. "Thank you," she wheezed.

"Hey, no sweat," Rainbow Dash boasted, feeling she was on firmer ground than before. "That's what friends are for, right?" She cleared her throat. "Uh, you...feeling better?"

"Um...not really," she admitted, shaking Rainbow Dash's earlier confidence. She wiped some tears from her puffy eyes. "I-I mean, I'm glad you're here, and I feel a teensy bit better but..." Her body quivered, and she choked out, "I'm just so *scared*."

"Hey, come on," she started, enforcing an assured tone, "you keep making it sound like it's the end of the world or something. Thing's will be okay. Really!"

Fluttershy gave her a doubtful look, a frown permeating her face.

Not ready to give up yet, Rainbow Dash pushed on. "I mean, it's not like they hurt Mort all that much. He wasn't even limping the last time I saw him."

"It doesn't matter if he wasn't," Fluttershy mumbled miserably. "They attacked him, and it was just...*awful*. He didn't even do anything, Rainbow! Nothing I did was stopping them, and..." Fluttershy whimpered pitifully, and once again there seemed to be a fresh line of moisture building in her eyes.

Determined not to let Fluttershy become even more miserable, Rainbow Dash quickly tried to think of something else to say. Her mind reeled all the way back to the original attack, remembering how the rabbit had acted

when he was brought close to Mort. Now that she thought about it, he looked...

"Um, hey!" she said, quickly. "I just had a thought! Maybe, uh...maybe they only attacked him because they were really...scared of him, or something!"

"Scared?" Fluttershy whispered, just short of crying again.

"Y-yeah, scared!" the flier answered, now just starting to see where she wanted to go. "Think about it! It's not like they went after him because they went mean or anything, they just got freaked out!"

"A-and...?"

"Well...I mean, it's kinda important if they were just scared," Rainbow Dash asked, hiding her own uncertainty. "You can't blame them if they did something because they got spooked or anything. The mayor didn't do anything to the rabbits that one time they stampeded, right?"

"Um, no," Fluttershy conceded, looking a little calmer than before. "I...I just told her that they got frightened by Applejack and Winona."

"Exactly!" Rainbow Dash interjected. "And...well, yeah, they were just baby rabbits, but they still ate a lot of food and tore up a bunch of gardens and the like. But they never came down on you at all for that."

"I...guess so," Fluttershy said, slowly.

"So what about Angel and the others? They were kinda scared too, right?"

"Um..." Fluttershy tilted forward to look around Rainbow Dash. The cyan pegasus leaned back and followed her eyes, seeing Angel standing by the stairway, keeping his own eyes locked on his feet. "I...did try to ask Angel what had happened, but I had a hard time understanding him. He did sound a little scared."

"Well, there you have it," Rainbow Dash confirmed.

"But I don't see why...?"

"Well, Mort just...comes off like that," Rainbow Dash said, after a pause. "Remember when he got here? I...er, I mean, *you* were kinda scared too, right?" she asked, hoping Fluttershy didn't notice her verbal slip.

"Uh...yes," Fluttershy said, embarrassed. Although she sounded meek as always, she at least didn't sound like she was on the verge of breaking down again. Rainbow Dash felt a little relief at the progress she was making. "But...he's really not that scary."

"Well, yeah, we know that because we've been hanging out with him." Not to mention watching him stumble around in his robe and with his words. He was as awkward as Fluttershy was all that time ago in flight camp. "But they've never seen him before. Maybe they were just nervous because of how he looked. Or because he was a colt."

"Why would that matter?" she asked, honestly curious.

"Well, y'know, maybe they thought he was gonna steal 'momma' Fluttershy away." She opened her mouth to explain, when a better idea sprung to mind. Something that might lighten the mood enough to break her out of this. Shooting Fluttershy a playful look, she dramatically cleared her throat, and begun to imitate Mort's scrawny voice.

"Ooh, I am Mort!" she started menacingly (or as menacingly as one could with a voice like that), drawing a small grin from the other pegasus. "I'm hear to take Fluttershy away from ALL you mangy animals and do all sorts of unspeakable things! Like, like..." She feigned uncertainty and begun to dig her hooves around her body in mid air, as if searching for something. "Oh, where did those cards go? I know I had them somewh-*oof!*" She lost her balance and fell forward on her chin, eliciting a startled gasp from Fluttershy. Thinking quickly, and trying to ignore the soreness in her own chin, Rainbow Dash quickly added, "Oh, dumb cloak! Why did I make you so long?"

Fluttershy looked at blankly, and Rainbow Dash feared she might have taken it too far, but then the yellow pegasus broke into a smile and begun to laugh, trying to muffle the sound with her pillow.

"R-Rainbow, that's just mean!" she said, before breaking into giggles. "Y-you shoudn't talk like that about ponies behind their b-back..."

"Aw, come on, it's just a bit of fun," Rainbow Dash said, getting back on her hooves. She glanced at Angel, and saw the rabbit giving her an incredibly sour look, obviously unamused. "And I couldn't help myself! Now imagine Mort doing that, but with a long, curly mustache."

Fluttershy broke into even bigger laughter, and Rainbow Dash followed suit shortly after, the image of Mort evilly twirling a long, black mustache taking up her imagination.

"W-with..." Fluttershy abandoned the pillow, trying to suppress the chuckles and giggles forcing their way out. "M-maybe, if he did it with a big, top hat..."

"Oh geeze, that's *perfect!*" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, losing control and rolling on the floor, her eyes tearing up. She begun to belt out laugh after laugh, and Fluttershy followed in her own, graceful manner.

It kept going like this for a few minutes, though to Rainbow Dash it felt much longer. By the time she became to breathless to laugh, she pulled herself up and looked expectantly at Fluttershy. Like she hoped, Fluttershy was looking much happier, and any tears she had were from the earlier, ludicrous images.

"So, like I was saying," she said, after taking a deep breath, "you shouldn't have to worry so much. I mean, okay, so what if Celestia *did* find out? She's pretty cool! Think of all the times we did something that we thought for *sure* was going to get us banished or thrown in some dingy, old dungeon. And every single time, we barely ruffled one feather on her!"

She walked over to a dresser, searching for and finding a lone hairbrush that she grabbed in her teeth and brought back over to the bed. "Inne'ay..." Rainbow Dash grumbled and spat the brush out next to Fluttershy.

"Anyway, I bet the princess is a good judge of character. If she likes a pony, they have to be cool, right? So Mort's cool!" Though obviously not in the manner Rainbow Dash was most familiar with. "I bet he's over it already."

"I don't know," she said, uncertainly. Eying the hairbrush, Fluttershy grasped Rainbow Dash's intent and bent down grab it in her mouth, where

she proceeded to brush her disheveled mane. "'E in't 'ook oo ha'y..."

"*Well*," Rainbow Dash started, drawing the word out, "if he *isn't* happy, then somepony's gotta set the record straight about Angel and the others, right?"

"Oh, yes!" Fluttershy dropped the brush onto the bed and slid off. "I don't want him getting the wrong idea or anything! They're really sweet!"

"Right! It's just a little misunderstanding. I'm sure he'll understand. Especially if you're the one who explains it to him."

"I...yes, I think you're right!" Fluttershy said, excitedly. "So what are we waiting for? I have to get this all cleared up and make it up to him somehow!"

Rainbow Dash breathed a sigh of relief, the knots she felt inside finally loosening up. It was the same sort of relief she felt whenever she had completed any sort of high-stakes race or competition. It felt liberating, and cheering up Fluttershy gave it a pleasant tingling as well.

"Okay!" she said, a spring in her step as she trotted towards the stairs. "Let's find everypony and meet up with them. After that, you can talk to Mort and we can-"

There was a scrabbling of paws, and Rainbow Dash saw with some disdain that Angel had moved himself in front of the steps again, his arms spread wide in another attempt to bar them.

"Oh for crying out loud! Get out of the way, Angel!" She poked his stomach, but Angel stood firm, his steely gaze making it clear he wasn't going to move this time. "What's yer problem?!"

"Angel Bunny," Fluttershy said, coming up beside Rainbow Dash, her tone soft but firm, "I don't know what's gotten into you all of a sudden, but *I* have to leave and explain that it was all a misunderstanding. I'm doing it for all our sakes."

The rabbit shook his head fiercely, and to Rainbow Dash's shock, he got on its knees and shot a pleadingly, desperate look at Fluttershy, his black eyes

wavering.

Fluttershy was taken back by the action. "Angel, I don't understand. Is it really that bad if I go?" The rabbit nodded quickly. "Are you still upset with Mort?" Another nod, even more intense than the last.

The cyan pegasus groaned, rolling her eyes. "Alright, let's hear it straight from the rabbit's mouth. *Why* shouldn't we go?"

Angel suddenly dashed from his spot, racing towards a desk on the other side of the room, where he began to dig through its numerous drawers. Rainbow Dash had half a mind to take advantage of the distraction and head downstairs, but she was curious as to what had been driving the snowy animal so crazy the past hour.

When Angel came back, he was carrying a piece of paper and a pencil. Slapping the paper down, he began to scribble, one eye winked close as the lead raced over the page. A moment later, he put the pencil down and lifted the paper up.

Rainbow Dash had to tilt her head and squint her eyes at the dark splotch, unable to decipher what the rabbit was trying to draw.

"Oh, is that supposed to be Mort?" Fluttershy asked. Rainbow Dash blinked, and realized that, given the shape, the picture could be the cloaked pony, though incredibly simplified given the artist.

The rabbit nodded quickly, and brought the paper down to draw on it even more. Not long after he put the pencil down again and showed the same picture, but this time with a cartoonish, pony skull off to the side, and an arrow coming from it to the dark splotch that was Mort.

"Uh..." Rainbow Dash scratched her head, momentarily confused. "Mort's...bad?" Angel nodded his head, looking pleased. "Uh, okay, but *why* is he bad?"

Angel looked at her like she grew two heads, slapped his face, then brought the pencil out, drawing something quick. When he pulled the paper out, the cartoon skull had been amended with crude crossbones, and even more arrows.

"Uh...he's *really* bad?" Fluttershy ventured, doubtfully.

Angel gritted his teeth, steam almost coming out of his ears, and he drew several circles around the skull and crossbones, using the pencil to tap between the two drawings repeatedly.

"Ugh," Rainbow Dash muttered with a roll of her eyes, reaching the limit of what little patience she already had. "Just forget it, Fluttershy. He's just being paranoid now. Come on."

Angel threw and pencil and paper away, and once again held his tiny arms out in an attempt to stop her. Rainbow Dash circumvented him the way she should've done in the first place: by stepping over him. She shot a satisfied smirk at the stunned rabbit and proceeded down the stairs, with Fluttershy following her lead.

Once they were halfway down the steps, every pair of eyes in the room turned to look at Fluttershy. The yellow pegasus was startled for a moment, but then smiled bashfully, her cheeks turning pink.

"O-oh, I'm so sorry, everyone," she said. "I didn't mean to worry you all like that. Anyway, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. Everything's going to be okay now!"

No sooner had she said that, Angel suddenly bounded down the stairs underneath the pegasi, and once at the bottom, he begun to hop up and down, emitting a stream of panicked squeaks.

The effect was instantaneous: a cacophony of animal sounds erupted from across the room, and the once still animals suddenly rushed in, crowding all around and forming a fuzzy, impeding wall.

"What the hay!" Rainbow Dash shouted, ducking to avoid several birds who were chirping madly around Fluttershy's head. "What the heck did he say to them?!"

"I-I don't know! Oh, e-everyone please calm down. Ow! Elizabeak, I see you just fine! Hissy, you're squeezing my leg too tight, oh, ooh..."
Fluttershy's words descended into indistinguishable mumbling, her eyes

darting from one animal to the other.

Rainbow Dash couldn't help but take a few steps back, her wings beginning to unfurl out of anxiety. Subconscious instinct was telling her to fly out of there and take Fluttershy with her, but all the flying creatures had clouded up the airspace. As the noise grew, sweat began to bead down her forehead, and the animals only came closer and closer...

"ENOUGH!"

Her head snapped towards Fluttershy, and she felt her blood go cold when she caught a glimpse of two wide and pitiless eyes. Even when one wasn't looking at them directly, Fluttershy's "Stare" had the power to make one feel like a little foal, whose hoof had just been caught in the cookie jar.

Every animal in the hut went dead silent, their eyes locked on Fluttershy's own. Anything that was flying quickly landed on any available furniture or animal body. Anything that had been clutching to Fluttershy had retreated back into the crowd, unable to look away from her.

"I am sorry," she said, sternly. "I hate to raise my voice like that, but I have to go now because you might have hurt a pony, and I need to make sure he's okay. I also need to explain what happened so he understands that you're *not* bad animals. So be good, and let me and Rainbow Dash leave."

Nothing happened at first, but then with great reluctance, the animals began to back away, forming a path not unlike the one they made for Rainbow Dash. Even then, Fluttershy kept her Stare going, making sure she had eye contact with as many animals as she could as she walked towards the door.

"Come on, Rainbow Dash," she said, and the young flier realized she had been crouched into a ball the entire time, too scared to move.

"Y-yes ma'am!" she squeaked, and quickly followed Fluttershy, watching the despaired looks she got from the other animals as she passed. It created an uneasy feeling in her in her gut, and she kept wondering what Angel had said to make them all so terrified.

As she neared the door with Fluttershy, Angel suddenly sprung forward,

clutching his caretaker's tail in his paws, and tugged as if to pull her back in. Fluttershy turned the Stare on Angel, and while the rabbit flinched under it, his quaking paws were still wrapped in Fluttershy's tail.

"Angel Bunny," she said, in a soft voice that was edged with steel, "I'm glad you want to look out for me, but I'm a grown mare, and I'm free to make friends with who I want. I'm sorry you don't like Mort. I'd like you to be friends with him, but I can't force you. Just like you can't force me *not* to be friends with him."

Angel gulped audibly, his body shaking as he struggled to keep a hold on their tail, and to Rainbow Dash it looked as if he was close to tears.

"I'm only going to ask once," Fluttershy told him, and if it were possible, the Stare only intensified even further, to the point Rainbow Dash half-expected heat to leap out of her pupils. "Please. Let. Go."

The rabbit choked back a sob and, unable to resist any further, released the tail, his little body slumping over, looking absolutely pitiful. Fluttershy blinked once, and like that the Stare was gone, replaced with her usual, gentle eyes.

"That's a good bunny," she said, patting him on the head. The rabbit only moaned miserably in response. Fluttershy smiled sympathetically, and turned her eyes towards the rest of the defeated looking animals. "I'll back in a few hours, everyone. When you want to go back out, just ask Angel here."

With those last words, Fluttershy walked out the door, and Rainbow Dash followed, glancing one last time at the animals in the hut. Utter despair seemed to have claimed them, and more than a few seemed to be on the brink of tears. As if they thought this would be the last time they'd ever see them again.

Rainbow Dash had that uneasy feeling again, and for reason her mind went back to the skull that Angel drew. The more she thought about it, the more it bothered her. It felt like she was close to remembering something important, but it couldn't be anything more than a feeling.

Tired of the whole situation, she gave her head a good shake and focused

again on the day ahead. They had lost time to make up for. She only hoped that Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie were fairing better than the others. In fact, so long as the two of them were together, they *should* be able to keep each other in balance without Mort getting too bored or terrified.

She closed the door behind her, stopping next to Fluttershy, who took a deep breath of the fresh air. She looked more and more like her old self again, practically emitting an aura of calm and gentleness.

Her smile broke briefly, and she asked, "You don't think I was too hard on them or anything, do you?"

"Nah, they'll be fine," Rainbow Dash assured her, confidently. "I'm sure they'll feel pretty silly when you come back safe and sound."

Fluttershy considered her words briefly, then nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I think you're right."

"Of course I'm right!" Rainbow Dash spread her wings, and with a single flap she was up in the air, looking down on a small-looking Fluttershy. "Come on! They shouldn't be that hard to find!"

In a few moments (that looked painfully slow to Rainbow Dash), Fluttershy was floating right next to her. Satisfied, Rainbow Dash took off towards Ponyville, making sure she moved just slow enough for Fluttershy to keep up.

It wasn't long before the bulk of Ponyville was beneath them, and Rainbow Dash began to search for her friends, scanning the barren streets. "Huh."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, well, nothing. I just thought Mort would stand out like an ink stain or something," Rainbow Dash answered. "And you'd think he'd be easy to spot without everypony being around."

"That's strange," Fluttershy commented. "It's almost noon, isn't it? Shouldn't everypony be going out for lunch?"

Rainbow Dash nodded in agreement, realizing her friend was right. The roads should be filled with ponies going to and from the various restaurants. But nearly everywhere she knew of was empty of everything, save the tables or bored waiters.

"Weird," she said, "usually it's only this quiet when..." She trailed off as something caught her ears. The sound was rhythmic, kinda catchy, and was coming from...

"Oh *no*!" The sound, actually music, was coming from Sugarcube Corner, where even now a few ponies were trotting over to its entrance. Confetti and streamers would fly out the door every time it was opened, and the music would briefly get louder before the door closed again.

"Pinkie Pie's throwing a party?" Fluttershy asked, confused. "But, wasn't she supposed to be with Mort?"

"That's just it!" Rainbow Dash said, dragging down on her mane (which was the closest a pony could come to pulling at their hair, considering a lack of fingers). "I think she's throwing the party *for* Mort!"

"Huh? But...o-oh dear, I thought we were saving that for last?"

"Something must have gone really, *really* wrong while we were gone," Rainbow Dash despaired, imagining several scenarios involving Twilight Sparkle and some sort of chaotic, magical mishap. And now Mort was in a small, doubtlessly packed building, when just this morning he was nervous about being in comparatively open and less populated streets.

She looked at the pegasus next to her. "Alright, Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash said seriously, barely hiding her own nervousness, "if you were Mort, and you suddenly found yourself surrounded by just about every pony in Ponyville, what would you do?"

"*Eep*."

Fluttershy's eyes shrunk, and her wings froze rigidly in place. She fell wordlessly, forcing the cyan pegasus to rush after her in a panic.

A moment later, Rainbow Dash was flying towards Sugarcube Corner, her

passenger still in shock from the imagined scenario.

"S-sorry about that," the yellow pegasus whispered, draped across Rainbow Dash's back.

"Don't worry about it," she replied, resisting a quip about Fluttershy's weight. She needed to fly more. "Just hang tight and we'll be there in a jiffy!" She spread her wings and begun to glide towards the confectionery shop, careful to avoid any maneuvers that might dislodge the pegasus on her back.

"Y-you don't think anything bad will happen, do you?" Fluttershy asked worriedly.

Rainbow Dash bit her lip. She could think of a dozen ways that things could go wrong, because that seemed to be the norm for today.

"Hey, you never know," she said, more to reassure herself than her friend. "They say third time's the charm, right...?"

Chapter 8

Mort's reasoning for avoiding crowds was two-fold. For starters, he didn't feel comfortable in crowds, or rather, he didn't feel comfortable being *visible* in crowds. Plagues or fires were one thing, as there was a clear goal in what he had to do, and the recently departed almost always asked the same questions every time. They had become, more or less, a predictable affair.

Living crowds, on the other hoof, he had no idea on where to even begin. There was no clear cut purpose, no specific goal. Some ponies stood to the sidelines, enjoying the beverages and treats, some sought out particular ponies, some jumped in conversations in progress, and some just moved through the crowds, hoping somepony else would speak with them. It was terribly disorganized, and for someone who had lived according to a strict schedule for his whole existence, he had a hard time seeing how one could enjoy it.

Parties, concerts, celebrations, festivals, carnivals...it was one thing to watch them. It was quiet another to actually be apart of. In some ways it was akin to watching a trainwreck, only with less bloodshed. Mostly.

The other reason, that had come up just a little while ago, was that he was starting to doubt just how successful his masking spell was. Spike and Fluttershy's animals were somewhat expected, but now that the mailpony from before had seen through it *completely*, he was beginning to worry that there were other ponies who could see through it too. He knew creatures could build up resistances to diseases, so he didn't see why they couldn't build up resistances to certain magics. All creatures had some spark of magic, and some more than others, like the magic that helped pegasi fly and stand on clouds, or the magic that allowed dragons to breath fire and not collapse under their own weight.

Of course, just as he was having these doubts, he would then be plopped in clear sight of several dozen ponies. All who were now looking at him.

Before he could dwell on the circumstances further, Pinkie Pie was already

pushing him across the floor, babbling on about the games they could play, and getting sidetracked on each one when she remembered some humorous and embarrassing story they reminded her of. Mort would have appreciated the stories more if he didn't feel like he was going to be another story for her to tell very soon.

"—and then I said, 'No, silly! You're supposed to put candy *in* the pinata, not make the pinata out of candy!' But I still thought it was a really neat idea, but it's just too bad that then you'd have to be breaking all the candy you're supposed to eat, but I guess if you make the candy pieces break off each other easily then—OH! Hi guys!"

The two of them finally came to a stop in front of a small group of ponies, consisting mostly of mares. (The male-to-female ratio in Ponyville was firmly in favor of the latter, for reasons Mort never investigated.) The colorful ponies were all wearing bright, friendly smiles, which meant that he hadn't run into another pony like Ditzy Doo. Not *yet*, anyway.

Pinkie Pie patted Mort on the back, and wrapped the foreleg around his shoulders. "Everyone, this is Mort!" she said excitedly, gesturing with her free hoof towards him. "He's the new pony I was telling you about. Poor Morty here has been kinda having rough day today, so I'm hoping our Ponyville cheer could rub off on him!"

If Mort had them, he would have arched an eyebrow at that statement. "*Morty?*"

She ignored it, and instead dragged him even closer, raising one of his hoofs with her own. "Anyway, what are you waiting for, Mort? This here's Colgate..." A blue unicorn with a white streak in her mane shook his hoof. He didn't have time to get a feel for her spirit before Pinkie Pie moved him to the pony next to her. "And this is Carrot Top..." He shook her hoof, and while there was a slight flinch, the yellow and orange earth pony kept her smile going. "And this is Wintergreen—"

"Pinkie!" The interjection came from Twilight Sparkle, who had finally caught up with them. She looked like a lifeline in a sea of ponies. "Are we really—oh, excuse me, it's nice to meet you," she said, giving a quick shake to the white pegasus with mint hair, "—but are we really going to be doing this for everypony? I feel like half the town's here!"

"Uh, y-yeah, she's got a point!" he said, with a hint of desperation. The less ponies that had a good look at him, the better. "There are just so *many* ponies here, I couldn't possibly say hi to all of them!"

Pinkie Pie rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Gee, you're right, Twilight! I guess that's why you're the smart one!"

Mort breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, of course. I guess that means—"

Pinkie Pie grabbed his shoulders and looked at him so intently, he was afraid the spell would fail. "It means it's time to put this into OVERDRIVE!" she cried, pumping one foreleg.

"Overdrive?! Wha-augh!" Pinkie Pie suddenly grabbed hold of him, and an instant later he was almost gliding over the floor as he was pulled along by the party pony. A second later he found himself in front of a startled, blue mare.

"This is Blueberry," Pinkie Pie babbled.

"H-hello th—" Mort yelped the world blurred, and the mare disappeared, to be replaced by an equally, startled pair of ponies.

"This is Salt and Pepper," Pinkie Pie said, just as quickly as before. But before he could utter a greeting, the world became a colored blur again, and the pair were gone in place of a yello unicorn. "And Daisy Chain, and I can't forget—"

It went on like this for sometime. As soon as a name had left Pinkie Pie's lips, Mort was being pulled across the floor at speeds he didn't think were possible for an earth pony. Pinkie Pie, for her part, never missed a beat when it came to naming the ponies, and from what he could see never even took a breath during the whole ordeal.

"—then we have Snapshot, Ace, Romana, Honeybunch, Oat Seed, Broadside, Lemon Hearts, Lucky Swirl, Pepperdance, Rosebud, Regalia, Minty, Root Canal—"

Pinkie Pie continued like this, pushing Mort in front of more and more

ponies, his vision becoming a series of colors and symbols that were beginning to bleed into each other. It became so bad he could have sworn he was meeting a few ponies over and over again, with just slightly different cutie marks, if even that.

"—Water Works, Large Ham, Eye See, Celery Stick, PB and J, Rocker, Twilight Sparkle, Spike and Pinkie Pie!" Mort suddenly snapped back to reality, and saw himself shaking hoofs with the pink earth pony, who appeared startled for a moment, along with both Twilight Sparkle and Spike.

"Whoops! We already met, didn't we?" Mort snapped his head around towards the voice, seeing Pinkie Pie just behind him, like she had been the whole time. He turned his head back, and found he was trying to shake hoofs with thin air.

"What? But..." He pointed between between the two spots, trying to come to grips with what he had just experienced. "You were...I was...but then you...how...?!"

"You can sound so silly sometimes, Mort!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "Not that there's anything wrong with it. It's a great way to put a smile on a pony's face! There was this one time—" Before she could get started on another story, her ears perked up as she caught sight of something behind him, and she gasped in delight. "Ooh, ooh! I haven't introduced you to Mr. and Mrs. Cake yet! Wait here, Mort! I'll be back before you say 'cupcakes!'"

With that she was off like a rocket, kicking up dust and leave a pink blue behind her. Mort watched her go, and saw her speaking to a pair of earth ponies who were carrying trays of sweets. One was a stout and blue mare with a pink mane, and the other was a lanky and yellow stallion with a short, red mane. Both, unsurprisingly, had some sort of cake on their flanks, and were wearing aprons.

"Um, are you alright, Mort?" Twilight Sparkle asked, trotting up beside him.

The past thirty seconds played out again in his mind, and it may have made even less sense. "Twilight, was...was I shaking hoofs with—"

"Yes," she said, with a knowing nod.

"Even though she was—"

"Yes," she said again, this time a little exasperated.

"How?" he asked, incredulously.

She avoided his eyes, smiling uneasily. "Well...she's...um..."

"She's Pinkie Pie!" Spike threw in, helpfully.

Twilight Sparkle sighed, and with a moderately defeated tone, said, "Yeah, I think that's really the best way to explain it."

Mort groaned. "This is just...*nuts*. You can't walk anywhere without bumping into somepony, they're all talking and staring and...and I don't even know where to start!" He scanned the room again, saying, "Do I eat something first? Play a game? Talk to somepony? Open a gift? Where's the timetable? Where's the scheduling?! Is there a proper order to this or—"

"Mort!" His name jolted shade was jolted out his panic attack. Twilight Sparkle put a comforting hoof on his shoulder, and gave him a reassuring smile. "Just calm down, okay? It's just a party. All you have to do is enjoy yourself."

Spike nodded sagely. "Seriously, it's nothing to get so worked up about. Have you never been to a party or something?"

"Um...well..." Mort avoided Spike's curious gaze, and scratched the floor uneasily. He technically *had* been to parties before, or at least he thought they were. He was never the guest of honor, of course, and he rarely stayed longer than a few minutes. And obviously, if he *had* to be there, chances were good there wasn't going to be a lot of partying anyway. "I've...never had a lot of time for actual partying."

"Seriously?" Spike asked, in disbelief. "I mean, they throw some wild celebrations around Equestria, I'd figured you'd go to one at least, or even—"

"That's enough, Spike. It's not that weird," Twilight Sparkle said, and Mort

found himself once again grateful for the librarian. "Heck, I've only been to a couple myself before I came to Ponyville. It's normal if he feels a little nervous. When Pinkie threw one for me I didn't really know what to do either."

"She did this to you, too?!" He collapsed on his knees, and held his hoofs up pleadingly. "Twilight, please, you gotta tell me what to do here! What did you do when Pinkie did that? Give me some direction! *Please!*"

"Well..." She avoided his eyes, looking uncomfortable as her cheeks took on a rosy tint. "I sorta...went to my room."

Mort continued to stare at her, waiting for elaboration, but it wasn't forthcoming. "Was their...something going on up there?" he asked, hopefully.

"Uh, no," she said, looking more embarrassed. "I just...went to bed."

"Oh," he said, unable to hide his disappointment. "So you just left."

"I didn't *leave*," she said, defensively, "I just...well, went into another room! That's all"

"It's too bad, too," Spike said, his look one of recollection. "If you'd stuck around, you might've seen AJ and Rainbow trying to see who could drink the most hot sauce! Rainbow Dash was flappin' her wings the whole time and Applejack was looking as red as Big—"

"Wait, wait!" Mort interrupted, a thought suddenly occurring to him. "That's it! I can do that!"

Spike scratched his head. "Uh, I don't see how drinking hot sauce could make you more relaxed, but hey, whatever floats your boat."

"No, no, not that! I can just *leave!*" he told them, clopping his hoofs excitedly. "It's so simple it's *brilliant!*"

Twilight Sparkled looked at him in surprise, and her tone became worried. "Mort, you can't just leave! I mean, I know I kinda-sorta did that—"

"And she's still your best friend, right?" he interjected, knowingly. "She must not have minded that much then, right? And it's not like she'd notice if one pony was gone, *right?*"

"I dunno," Spike remarked, skeptically. "You're kinda hard to miss."

Mort did a quick scan of the room. There were precisely zero ponies who were wearing a cloak. There weren't even ponies that had a dark coat. It was times like this he wished more ponies had retained their more earthy colors from ages ago. He hardly saw any pony with a black coat these days.

"Well, you can just tell her I'm in the bathroom or something," he said, edging towards the door. "If I go now, she probably won't even notice. She's been gone a really long time anyway, I bet—"

"HEY MORT!" Mort gave a short scream as Pinkie Pie suddenly appeared in front of him, wrapping him a hug, the sheer energy that existed in her spirit almost overwhelming his senses. "Miss me?"

"Almost," he mumbled, wearily, wiggling out of her forelegs. "I had plenty of time to say 'cupcakes,' you know."

"So did you?"

"I...uh..." Mort went quiet as he silently realized that Pinkie Pie was, technically, right. He groaned and slumped his head forward, halfway between indignant smoldering and embarrassed stupification. A small part of him was convinced that Pinkie Pie was doing this on purpose, somehow.

An upwards glance was what it took for him to notice the other, two ponies that were with her. They had warm smiles, and wore them in that special way that made others feel like they were always welcome. It was a wonder that Pinkie Pie *wasn't* related to them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cake, I presume?" he asked, trying to force some sense of cheer into his voice.

"Ones and only," Mr. Cake replied, tilting his diner cap in greeting. "Always

a pleasure to be meeting new ponies, Mort. I hope you're having fun."

"Well, uh...you've certainly gone all out," he said, carefully.

Mrs. Cake chortled, her plump form and swirling mane jiggling. "Well, you can thank Pinkie Pie for that! The filly can do just about anything when she puts her mind to it!"

"It is kinda amazing what she can do in half-an-hour," Twilight Sparkle commented, looking nervously at Mort.

"It's no biggie, Twilight! I've been doing parties for so long I can practically get it down to a science! Maybe I should write a book about it! Ooh, ooh, *you* should help me, Twilight! With my experience and your know-how, I bet we could make the best guide for any kind of party! Tea parties, birthday parties, welcome parties, goodbye parties—well maybe not goodbye parties, I haven't done any of those yet. Oh, I really hope I never have to! It'd be so sad and—"

"Honey," Mrs. Cake said, poking Pinkie Pie in the ribs gently, "we have guests, remember?"

"Oh, duh! Like I ever forget that!" she chirped. She suddenly got much closer to Mort, so much so their faces were almost touching. Her bright, round eyes looking at him expectantly. "So what do you think, Mort? Isn't this one of the best parties you've ever been to?"

"Oh, er..." He gulped, perhaps a bit too audibly, and tugged at the edge of his collar—another bad habit he had picked up from ponies. "W-well, about that..."

The smiles on the Cakes slowly vanished at his tone, and the two shared worried looks with one another. Pinkie Pie kept her smile going, though there was the faintest of flickers across it.

"Well?" she urged, cheerfully.

"Um, well...it's just, uh, this party is...uh..." He shot a pleading look at Twilight Sparkle, hoping for support.

The librarian bit her lip, and briefly glanced at Pinkie Pie, then back at him. "Just...tell them what you really think, Mort," she said.

It was clear he wasn't going to coax anything else out of her. Turning to look back at Pinkie Pie, he felt a twist of panic when he saw that the huge smile had shrunk just a little, and now seemed more uncertain.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, the cheer sounding just a little more forced.

"W-well, it's just...uh...this party...t-this party is..." There were a lot of ways he could describe the party: intimidating, overwhelming, not his scene, kinda frightening...and every time he ran the words through his mind, they would always come out sounding mean spirited. Even "uncomfortable" sounded too harsh a word in front of Pinkie Pie.

Then it finally happened: her smile, agonizingly, begun to drip, little by little, until it was little more than a frown. A tiny frown on any other pony, but on her, even for the incredibly short time he knew her, it was the equivalent of watching an apple deciding to turn blue, or watching a candle freeze its wax. It just wasn't *right*. Even the mane seemed a little deflated, somehow.

When she spoke again, there was an element of concern and, most distressingly, a tremor of sadness. "You...don't like the party?" she asked, softly.

Mort had sudden flashes of Rarity and Fluttershy, both of which were left in tears due to his own carelessness with his actions and words. Thinking of that made his next words come very easily to him.

"This...this is, without a doubt, the *best party* I've ever been to!" he cheered, injecting as much enthusiasm into his voice as possible. "It's just so...uh, colorful, and happy, and...uh, partyrific?"

For a moment, Pinkie Pie looked at him blankly. Then in an instant, the smile returned, even wider than before, and Mort could swear she seemed a brighter shade of pink as well. She squealed in delight and wrapped him in a massive hug again.

"Oh, I knew you'd like it, Morty! I'm going to make this a party you'll

never, *ever* forget!" She zipped away, the speed of it causing the shade to spin in place. Twilight Sparkle quickly came over and grabbed him, bringing him to a sudden halt.

"Well, me and my hubby need to get back and put the finishing touches on a few things. You just go and enjoy yourself, dear." Mrs. Cake gently nuzzled the side of Mort's cloak, and Mr. Cake gave him a friendly pat on the back, before the two of them begun to head back towards the kitchen.

Twilight Sparkle put on a small smile. "Mort, I'm glad you're going to try and stick around." The smile faltered ever so slightly, and she let an edge of concern slip in when he asked, "You *are* going to be okay, right...?"

"I...uh, I really hope so," he said, uncertainly. "I can always ask you two for help if I need it, right?"

"Definitely! I'm something of a party animal myself," Spike bragged. "Maybe not as much as Pinkie is, but you've any doubts, I'm the guy to turn to."

"And I still know most of the ponies here," Twilight Sparkled added. "If they want to talk to you, I can help you out if you really need it."

Mort nodded appreciatively, feeling more at ease, if only a little. "Thank you so much, you two. You have no idea how much this means."

"Geeze, there's no need to get dramatic," Spike said, slightly embarrassed. "Like we said, it's just a party. It's not going to be a big deal or anything."

"If you say so..." Mort did another scan of the room, each corner seeming to hold something different to do. "So, uh, if you're the closest I have to an expert—besides Pinkie Pie, anyway—what's the best way to start?"

Spike scratched his chin, thinking. "Well, we could always start with a game. Pinkie Pie always has a lot of games for us to play. Musical Chairs, Pin the Tail on the Pony, Charades, a bunch of board games of course..."

"I *do* like board games," he said, fondly remembering the games he and Luna played in her room.

"Well there you go," Twilight Sparkle said, grinning. "We'll let Pinkie Pie

know, and—"

"Make way, everypony!" Pinkie Pie's bubbly voice rose above the noise in the room, and the earth pony came trotting back with something long and white rolled up in her mouth. With a flourish, the fabric was unfurled in mid-air, Pinkie Pie biting down on just a tiny bit to keep it from sailing across the room. It floated down towards the floor, and Pinkie Pie went to work flattening out the last few wrinkles.

He stared at, both confused and intrigued. It was a large, square mat, decorated with four rows of dots, with each row consisting of a single color, which were either red, blue, yellow, or green. Not far from the mat was a spinner, each quarter of the spinner taken up by a picture of a hoof, a couple of words ("Left Forehoof," "Right Hindhoof," etc.) and an array of colors matching the dots on the mat.

"What is that?" he asked no one in particular.

The question prompted a startled gasp from Pinkie Pie. "You don't know what game this is?"

"Oh, uh...well..." He turned his eyes to the ground, feeling a little foolish all of a sudden.

"Oh, no! It's okay if you don't, Morty. I just thought *everypony* played this game at least once!" She patted him on the head, careful to avoid his horn, and hopped over to the spinner. "It's a really simply game! All you do is spin this thingy here..." She twirled the spinner, watching it intently until it slowed to a stop on "Right Forehoof," the arrow pointing at a yellow dot.

"Then," she said, walking onto the mat, "you put your hoof on any dot that matches the color it's pointing at!" She demonstrated by choosing a yellow dot near the center, sitting her right forehoof on top of it. "And all you gotta do is keep it there until you're told otherwise! Easy peasy!"

"Huh. Okay..." He scratched his head, not so much confused by the rules, as much as the actual game itself. "I...guess that could be fun. But it seems a little easy, doesn't it?"

Pinkie Pie giggled knowingly. "Sure, it doesn't *sound* hard, but just wait until

you actually play it!" She suddenly raised a foreleg, and announced, "Alright, everypony! Who wants to take on the reigning champion first?"

Excited chattering broke out among the crowd, ponies looking to their friends and neighbors to see if they would be the ones to get first. Mort studied their faces, seeing quite a few shaking their heads in a declining manner. Some were rubbing their legs or backs in a sympathetic manner, as if remembering something painful.

From somewhere in a crowd, there came a string of protests from what sounded like a young stallion, and a moment later the crowd parted, allowing a couple of ponies to push forward a light brown earth pony. The protesting pony suddenly went quiet when he realized where he was, and looked around nervously.

"Ooh, Caramel!" Pinkie Pie hopped over right next to him, leering playfully. "I don't remember playing this with *you*."

"Whoah, whoah, hold on," he said, glancing back at the ponies who pushed him up front. "I think there was a—"

"Let's get stretchin'!" Pinkie Pie hopped onto the map, and a moment later Caramel rolled his eyes and followed her, a few ponies giggling at his expense. "Spike, can you do the honors?"

"Sure thing!" Spike climbed off of Twilight Sparkle and hurried over to the spinner, an eager look in his eye.

"Am I missing something?" he asked the librarian, as the two ponies took up positions on the mat, one obviously more excited than the other. "He doesn't look too excited. Is Pinkie...not good at this, or something?"

"Oh, no, quite the opposite," Twilight Sparkle said, smiling. "She's the best, really."

"Oh. So what's the problem?"

"Um...you'll see," she said, enigmatically.

He gave her a queer look, then turned his attention back towards the mat.

Pinkie Pie was hopping from hoof to hoof, and Caramel was stretching himself, looking strangely determined. Both were on opposite sides of the mat, standing within its boundaries. Spike cracked his fingers, rotated his shoulders, and then held a single digit on the spinner.

"Ready when you are!" he announced.

"I'm ready!" Pinkie Pie bubbled, planting her right hindhoof on a green dot.

Caramel snorted as he put his own hoof down on a red dot. "I guess I'm ready, too."

"Here we go!" Spike grabbed the tip of the spinner, and gave it a swift tug. It spun in place, the tip of it a blur, before it finally slowed to a stop: "Left forehoof, blue!"

"Aw, that's no fun!" Pinkie Pie simply moved her left forehoof to a blue dot, firmly placing a hoof down on top of it. "Go on, Caramel!"

Caramel nodded, and did the same, putting his own hoof on a blue dot right next to his other one. Spike spun the spinner again, and this time it stopped on right forehoof, red. Caramel merely had to slide his hoof over to the dot.

"So...it doesn't look too bad," Mort commented, as the spinner landed on a green square for the right forehoof.

"Just give it a little time," Twilight Sparkle told him.

For the first few spins, the two ponies simply moved around the mat, placing their hoofs where they were told, and Mort was failing to see the appeal of the game. Most games, he knew, were supposed to be challenging, or at the very least fun. Moving hoofs around a dotted mat didn't look to be either.

Soon, both ponies had all four hooves bound to a particular dot, and as Mort soon found out, they couldn't pick a dot the other pony had already chosen, nor could they lift a hoof for any reason. This led to situations where one or the other had to stretch a leg to a far out dot, since the closer ones were either taken or being blocked by a limb.

As the game went on, Mort began to see how easily the game could get complicated for the players. As the two ponies moved their hoofs around according to the spinner, they were gradually moving into each others space, trying to occupy the closest dots. At the same time, they were moving into more and more awkward positions to stay in the game. Right and left legs were pulled in opposite direction, limbs were either so stretched out or so pulled in that balancing would be difficult even without another pony being in the way.

Caramel was sweating up a storm as he struggled to keep himself balanced. Pinkie Pie, on the other hoof, looked to be having the time of her life. She was a complete natural, flipping and twisting her body in ways Mort didn't think were possible. There wasn't any position for her that seemed too difficult to pull off.

Finally, the spinner had landed on "Left hindhoof, red," for Caramel. The earth pony looked at a red dot on the left side of the mat, then looked back at his left hindhoof, which was planted on the opposite side on green. His right hindhoof had been planted on a yellow dot, and his front forhooves were planted on the same side as well.

"Ooh, that's not good," Twilight Sparkle said, sympathetically.

Caramel looked between where his hoof was, and where it was supposed to go. "I can't do that!" he said, somewhat indignantly.

"Don't give up!" Pinkie Pie cheered, who had at that point had turned herself upside down, face red from the blood that was rushing through her skin. "You can do it! Just believe in yourself."

Caramel rolled his eyes with a sigh, and proceeded to attempt the maneuver. Taking a breath, he lifted his hoof begun to cross it underneath him, towards the opposite side of the mat. Sweat was beading off his brow as his body begun to tilt, in an attempt to keep himself balanced. There were some awed gasps from the guests as Caramel's leg stretched further and further, and for a moment it looked like he was going to complete it.

It didn't last long. Just as the tip of his hoof touched the red dot, his opposite hindleg suddenly slipped out in the opposite direction. The earth pony gave a strangled cry as the weight of his body came down on his

crossed legs, causing his eyeballs to bulge out before the rest of his body floundered onto the mat.

There was a chorus of disappointed and sympathetic moans. A pair of stallions pulled their friend from the mat, and helped walked the dazed earth pony towards a table in the back. Pinkie Pie flipped right-side up again, shaking her mane out of her eyes.

"Great game, Caramel! You just rest those legs up for next time!" Pinkie Pie sat down in the center of the mat, and looked at the crowd expectantly. "So, who's next? Who thinks they can take on the Pinkster?"

Pinkie Pie's head swiveled around, her eyes scanning the room like a turret looking for a targets. Most of the ponies Mort saw were either shaking their heads or paying attention to what could have been an interesting corner in the room. A couple pegasi had squeaked in mock horror and hid themselves behind their wings. Mort was a little disappointed that none had stepped forward. It was certainly fun to watch.

When he looked at Pinkie Pie again to see if she had spotted anyone, he was surprised to see her staring in their direction. He looked over his shoulders, but found the space behind him unusually barren. If no pony was there, then what was she...

"Oh," he said, realizing it finally.

Chapter 9

A huge grin appeared on Pinkie Pie's face. "Morty~," she said, in a sing-song voice. It wasn't just her who was looking at him now, it was every pony in the room. Quite a few of them were barely holding back their laughter.

He gulped, trying to back away. "Uh, heh heh, I-I don't know, Pinkie, I've never done this before and there are probably *tons* of more skilled ponies here, so I'll just—"

There was a sudden shove from behind, and he found himself stumbling forward, stopping just a few inches from Pinkie Pie's beaming face. He twisted his head around to see who had done it, but only had time to see Twilight Sparkle's own confused face before he was grabbed by Pinkie Pie.

"Yay!" she said, spinning him around like they were in a dance. "I just knew you couldn't resist! We're going to have so much *fun*!" She let go of him, and he twirled across the mat until he stopped at a corner. Not coincidentally, he was in the exact spot needed for him to play. Around him, ponies were hooting and whistling.

Pinkie Pie took her place on the opposite end, wiggling her tail excitedly and looking like she was ready to pounce. "You ready?" she asked.

He was *not* ready. He did not want to be the center of attention right now. He didn't want to end up like Caramel, or even worse, revealing more of himself on accident. The masking spell worked when his features were vague enough for other ponies to fill in the rest. There was nothing vague at all about a skeleton. He would just have to decline and—

"Go Mort!"

Mort froze for a moment, puzzled. The voice didn't come from Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle, or even Spike. In fact, it was a pony he hadn't heard at all before. He tried to look for the source, but before he could find it, another pony voiced the same thing. Then another. And another. Soon enough,

words of encouragement seemed to be coming from every other pony in the room.

The encouragement made him feel warm. It reverberated within his being, dulling whatever anxieties he was having then. A spark of excitement was beginning to grow inside him, the sort one might get when about to jump off a high ledge into some water below for the first time. A sea of uncertainty that also offered a unique thrill within its waves.

He steadied himself and cleared his throat. "I-I guess I am," he stuttered. This was followed by a few, loud whoops, and the sounds of hooves clopping on the wood floor. If he had skin, he would have probably blushed. "At least I hope," he whispered to himself, willing his cloak to cling to his legs. No need to go showing off too much bone.

"Awwwright! Spin that crazy thang, Spike!" Pinkie Pie shouted, pointing a hoof at Spike.

Spike did a little salute, spun the spinner, and the game was on. Much like Pinkie Pie's match with Caramel, it started off a little slow, the first spins being used just to get their hooves planted on some dot on the mat. And much like the last game, it was after this that things begun to get interesting. The two of them, when feasible, started planting hooves down in the others space, to make any movements as difficult as possible.

Pinkie Pie, for a pony that seemed to go on about eating sweets, was incredibly flexible, and at times Mort believed she was picking a dot for no reason, other than she'd standing in a funny way. While Mort thought he'd have an easier go at it (no muscles to strain, after all), there was still the issue of balance. Gravity was a harsh mistress, as he had learned the hard way on his trip to Ponyville, and he had to balance himself without the crutch of floating. Being that he had rarely *not* floated, in any way, this was difficult.

The game had already gone on longer than it had before, and Mort was finding himself standing in more precarious stances just to stay in. However, it was also starting to take a toll on Pinkie Pie, who was beginning to show the first signs of sweat.

Spike was readying to spin again. By then, the two players had been forced

to the edge of the mat. Mort's right limbs were spread out and practically opposite of each other, and his left limbs were side-by-side on different color, but much closer. Pinkie Pie, who was splayed out beneath him, had her limbs spread out across the mat and making it awkward to step anywhere without tripping over her somehow.

Pinkie Pie grimaced slightly, and grunted, "How you holding up, Mort?"

"J-just fine, thank you," he replied, struggling to maintain his balance. He turned to look at Spike, and urged him with a nod to spin. It was his turn, and he was hoping for better footing.

Spike spun the spinner, watching it twirl, until it came to a stop. The dragon winced when he saw it. "Uh, left hindhoof, red."

Mort flinched himself, taking a look at the mat. His left forehoof took up on red dot already, but the dot behind and in front of it was occupied by Pinkie Pie's hindhooves. As close as they were to the edge, Mort would have no choice but to extend the hindleg all the way up the mat.

Pinkie Pie rotated her head like an owl, and grimaced. "Um, are you sure you want to try that, Mort? That's even farther than what Caramel tried, and it looks *really* painful."

Mort took a quick look around. Most of the ponies didn't look convinced that he could do it, and some seemed to be wincing at the thought. He took another wary look at the dot, then back at his own hoof. It would be really difficult, but maybe...

He braced himself, then began to move his left hindhoof forward. He strained the boney limb farther and farther, inching towards the dot. A hush fell on the crowd as he got closer and closer, until finally...

Pop.

His eyes shot wide at the sound, just as his hoof finally touched down on the dot. There was a quiet gasp from the crowd, though all of their attention seemed drawn to the fact he had touched the dot. And not, as he feared, the sound of his femur popping out of his pelvis. He could feel it suspended inside him, just an inch from his pelvis. If he hadn't willed it from dropping at

the last moment, the ponies would have been starting at a skeletal leg rolling out from underneath him.

"Are...are you okay, Mort?" Twilight Sparkle asked him, staring between him and where he had put his hoof down.

"Oh, uh, I'm fine! Just fine," he said, hurriedly, finding it very difficult to keep himself upright. "So, uh, you're turn, Pinkie Pie?"

Pinkie Pie was speechless for a moment, her eyes narrowing. "Ooh, you're good," she said. She brightened an instant later, and said, "Okey dokey! Go ahead and give it another go, Spike!"

Spike nodded. He spun the spinner again, watching the arrow. "Okay, right forehoof, red!"

The crowd gasped, and it was easy to see why; there were only two, red dots left on the mat, and they were on the opposite side of Pinkie Pie. Mort could move his hoof up, but no matter which one he chose, Pinkie Pie would have to stretch across nearly the entire mat just to make it.

Mort placed his hoof down, where it was, quietly popping his femur back in at the same time. He shot a worried look back at Pinkie Pie, who had yet to move.

"Um...are you okay?" he asked her. Pinkie Pie's face was unreadable. She was simply staring into space, her mouth a thin line. Then, her face scrunched into one of fierce determination.

Spike dropped next to Pinkie Pie's head, pointing out the location on the spinner. "Uh, Pinkie Pie? Maybe you should...um...y'know..."

"Nu huh," she said, with a shake of her mane. "Pinkamina Diane Pie *never* quits a game when it's half-finished! Uh, except if everypony gets really sick. Or we're late for a party. Or if there's a fire. *Maybe* if there's a fire, but that's it!"

Spike covered his eyes as Pinkie Pie lifted her hoof, and began to reach underneath her, towards the dot on the opposite end of the mat. Mort lifted himself a few inches to give her more room, and watched in awe as the

Pink Pony begun to inch herself closer and closer to the red dot. Sweat was pouring off her brow, and she was gritting her teeth in pure effort as her face went from a bright pink to a dark red.

"Al...most...there..." She groaned as her foreleg begun to extended even further, beyond what Mort thought a pony was capable of doing, and he was starting to believe that she could actually do it. At the same time, however, he noticed the rest of her limbs were also beginning to stretch, in an attempt to give her more leeway without leaving the mat completely. Almost like a rubber band.

A rubber band. He looked at each dot that had Pinkie Pie's hooves, and his horn glowed faintly. Just enough to peel some data off. Like how the friction between her hooves and mat were reaching a critical point. "Oh no."

"I...got...." Pinkie Pie squealed as her foreleg seemed to stretch the last few inches. And before Mort could voice a warning to her, friction finally gave up the ghost. In the next instant there was a almost rubbery *snap*sound, and Mort found himself rolling in circle before finally being propelled into midair, and crashing down to the ground.

He picked himself up, making sure to keep himself properly concealed, and almost let his jaw literally drop at what he found: Pinkie Pie and the mat had somehow been twisted into a little ball, the earth pony's legs sticking out at random spots. It almost looked like the mat had been rolled into a ball, and bits of Pinkie Pie were haphazardly tucked in at random.

"Oh my gosh!" he shouted, rushing to her, along with several others. "Are you okay?! Say something!"

Pinkie Pie shook the stars from her head, and took a look at her predicament. "Ooh," she moaned, slightly dazed, "I always wanted to know what a pretzel felt like. Good game, Morty..."

Mort watched as a pair of mares rolled Pinkie Pie away towards a corner. He couldn't help but feel a little guilty about what happened to her, and was ready to follow when a pony (Carrot Top, he soon recalled) appeared in front of him, beaming at him.

"I can't believe it!" she gushed. "No pony's ever beaten Pinkie Pie at that

game before! You know how incredible that is?"

"Not...really?" he replied, unsure. More ponies begun to join in, drawing in closer towards him, all of them speaking at once. Many of them seemed to be awe at winning the game, but some of the others were asking to make sure he hadn't pulled something. There were so many speaking, he had no idea who to respond to first, if any of them. His nervousness begun to go through the roof as they came closer and closer, forming a tight circle around him. He felt like a sheep in the center of a pack of wolves. Wolves with party hats and streamers.

"Alright, everypony! Give him some room to breathe!" Twilight Sparkle pushed her way through the crowd, gently nudging away the quickly formed crowd. "Yes, it's really exciting, but Mort needs some space! Come on, come on..." In mere moments, the crowd had been dispersed almost completely, the ponies breaking into little groups to meet at the food tables or to check on Pinkie Pie, who was still being untangled.

He bowed his head at her. "Thank you," he breathed, gratefully.

"Not a problem, Mort," she said, with a gentle smile. "And nice job out there! You really are the first one to ever win against Pinkie Pie, and not a lot of ponies get out of there without pulling something. Speaking of which..." She tilted her head sideways, and he realized with some panic she was looking at where his legs would be. "Are you okay? I mean, Pinkie's one thing, but doing that last move back there looked...well, painful."

"Oh, it's nothing, really. I'm fine," he said, quickly. "What about Pinkie Pie? Is she going to be okay? She's...not going to be mad or anything about what happened, is she?"

"Pfft, Pinkie Pie? Angry? She'll be fine. Maybe a *little* sore, in the physical sense, but that's it." She turned around, and motioned for him to follow. "Come on, let's get you cooled off already. That must've been a doozy for you."

"Oh, um, definitely," he said, following her to a little table at the other end of the room. It was round in shape, and had in the center of it a juice bowl brimming with ice, and a couple ladles sticking out and leaning on the rims.

Surrounding it were stacks of upside-down plastic cups. Twilight Sparkle's horn flared as she took a cup, and poured some juice into before floating it near Mort.

"Thanks, Twilight!" Before Mort could take the juice, a scaly hand suddenly shot out from underneath, grabbing the cup. Spike took a swig of the juice, wiping away what wasn't swallowed with his arm. "Boy, you have no idea how strenuous that game can be!"

"I'm sure," Twilight Sparkle said dryly, giving Mort an apologetic look. Mort simply shrugged, nonplussed. Shades didn't sweat, or even thirst for that matter. In that way, Spike really did need it more than him. He didn't refuse the next cup offered to him, however, and he floated it near him, swirling the iced juice inside.

It was while he was doing this that he noticed a pair of purple eyes staring at him, from the table. They belonged to a baby alligator, who was slowly swishing his tail back and forth, his eyes never blinking once.

"Uh...is that a baby alligator?" he asked, looking at Twilight Sparkle.

"Oh, that's just Gummy," the librarian informed him, pouring some juice for herself. "Don't worry, he doesn't have any teeth or anything."

"Well, that's good." He turned to look back at Gummy, thinking back to how the other animals reacted in his presence. Gummy, contrary to them, seemed content enough to just look at him, though Mort swore he saw Gummy's eyelids closing just the tiniest bit. Like he was trying to narrow his eyes, while using the least amount of effort possible. Ultimately, Gummy simply spun around and stared at the wall instead.

"Mort, was it? That was simply *incredible*, dear." Mort followed the soothing voice towards a rose pink, earth mare with a light blue mane, held in place by a white band. Her cutie mark was a white lotus in blue outlines. Beside her was another mare, looking exactly the same, but whose colors were swapped around. It was easy to see the two were related

"Oh, Aloe, Lotus! So nice you two were able to be here." Twilight Sparkle gave the two of them a quick hug before turning back to Mort. "Mort, this is Aloe and Lotus. They run the beauty spa in town, and they're

just *incredible* with their work."

"I have to say, Mort, we rarely see a pony as flexible as you," Lotus said, her azure eyes twinkling. "How do you do it? Is there a special, meditative practice you use?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know. Just comes naturally to me, I guess." Having a complete lack of muscle and sinew also helped, though they didn't need to know that. "Exercising doesn't hurt, either. Not to mention it helps you live longer, in my experience."

"You certainly get a lot of that, from what I hear." Another new, cheerful voice came from an earth mare with a fuchsia coat, sporting a trio of daises for a cutie mark and a curled, rose pink mane. "I'm Cheerilee, by the way. Pinkie Pie was saying something about you being a delivery colt or something...?"

"Courier, to be exact," Twilight Sparkle said, using a ladle to pour juice into a pair of cups, one of which she passed to Mort using her magic. "Mort," she said, after taking a sip, "Cheerilee here is a teach at the school house in Ponyville. You taking it easy today, Cheerilee?"

"Oh, I wish," she sighed, but not without humor. "I was grading yesterday's tests this morning, but wouldn't you know it? My red marker ran out."

Twilight Sparkle *oohed* sympathetically. "Well, that doesn't sound good..."

"Oh no, no, I had it for a while. My students are a *little* better than that," the teacher said with a wink. "Still, I needed an excuse to get out and take a little break. And when I heard about this little *shindig*, well..." She shrugged her shoulders, giggling in an embarrassed fashion. "Not quite model behavior for a teacher, is it?"

"Hey, everypony needs to unwind now and again. Especially you," Twilight Sparkle said, pouring another cup of juice and passing it to Cheerilee.

"We would know," Lotus said, with a knowing smile. "You'd be surprised what sort of knots we'd find in her back."

"Now, now, sister," Aloe chided gently. "Remember, client confidentiality."

"Oh, it's okay!" Cheerilee said with a dismissive wave of her hoof, soon using it to balance the cup the unicorn passed to her. "It's not a big deal. And she's right, anyway. Hunching over all those papers for so long can really get to you. How's the juice, by the way?"

Mort was so absorbed in the conversation, it took him a moment to realize Cheerilee was talking to him. "Uh, w-what was that?"

"The juice. Is it okay?"

"Oh, uh..." He looked at the cup he was still levitating, and took an experimental sip. It slipped through the teeth, and flowed into his body, where he formed into a little sphere that could be poured out later. He wasn't sure how to respond; it was definitely a grape juice (Neighagara grapes, to be exact), but he wouldn't know what the "taste" was. Sweet, sour, tart and so many other descriptors were outside the realm of his experience when it came to biological senses.

"Um...it's...grapey," he hazard, finally, swishing the cup around, bracing for an odd stare.

Cheerilee did look at him oddly, but only for a moment before bursting into giggles. "Grapey! Of course! Well, that's good enough for me!" She bit at the edge of the cup and tilted it up, sipping for a few seconds before bringing it back down. She sat it on the table, licked her lips, and said, "Yep, definitely grapey!"

The ponies nearby laughed. Mort shuffled his hooves, not sure how to take it. Was she being serious? Did she think it was funny? If it was, was it funny like a joke, or funny because it seemed so foolish? Should he laugh too? Apologize? Maybe he shouldn't say anything...

He was so preoccupied with how to respond, he almost did notice a slightly guilty look crossing Cheerilee's face. "Oh, Mort, I'm only kidding around! You're fine, really!"

"Oh! Um, good, that's good! Yeah, uh, good..." He tried to think of more to say. Anything to say. He thought back again to Luna telling him to talk about interests. Looking at Cheerilee, one thing was standing out more

than others. "So, um, a teacher? What kind of age group?"

"Oh, it's mostly foals," she replied, a warm smile on her face. "They're the most fun to teach, if you want my opinion. They're just brimming with so much curiosity and imagination, and I love how even the simplest things can be so amazing for them at that age. And you get to know all of them and watch them grow up..." She sighed in content. "There's just really nothing else like it."

Mort nodded along, thinking of his own experiences with them. The innocence and simple joy they radiated always gave him a nice, tingling sensation, always making him feel more upbeat when they were nearby. It also felt unusually pleasant to see them throughout the years, as they slowly grew into adults with their own lives and families.

On the other side of the coin, however, there were the times he had to collect them. He dreaded reaping foals more than most other ponies. It wasn't because they took it any worse; if anything, a surprising number of them had accepted their fates quicker, or at least better, than older ponies. The latter had a habit of getting angry and going into denial before believing it. Foals, for some reason, didn't have that same issue as much. It might have had something to do with that innocence of theirs again, or perhaps they were just too immature to fully grasp the gravity of what happened, making it that much easier for them to pass on.

No, what really got to him was that when he came across them, he couldn't help but feel the world had somehow become even more empty than it should have. There was so much they could have done, so many they could have met, a literal lifetime of potential experiences just gone. It was akin to finding the trunk of a mere sapling, with the full knowledge that it could have grown in a large oak. Only the void it could have filled was all that more obvious.

He was certain the universe wasn't cruel, just largely apathetic. He supposed that made the universe "fair," in the sense it didn't have a conscious part in anything good or ill. Still, he couldn't help but feel something was intrinsically *unfair* about foals dying. In fact, there were quite a few situations where he felt...

He quietly squashed that line of thought. A shade doesn't judge. The only

thing that mattered about death was simply whether or not it actually happened. Whether or not it was "fair" was unimportant, and changed nothing about it.

"Mort?"

Mort cleared his head, and saw that Twilight Sparkle and the others were now staring at him. Cheerilee herself looked concerned, and it took a moment for him to realize that it was her that said his name.

"Are you alright?" she asked, coming closer. "You kinda spaced out a minute ago."

"Oh, sorry. I'm alright, just...y'know, thinking," he said, trying to appear unconcerned. "Um, anyway, I think what you do is pretty amazing, Cheerilee. Not everypony can handle a couple foals, much less a whole class of them. I can only imagine what that's like."

Cheerilee's cheeks colored, and she giggled in embarrassment. "Oh, it's not *that* big a deal. And I'm sure a nice stallion like yourself will have a chance to raise his own little colt or filly someday."

"Not really. I can't have foals," he stated, simply.

Once again, he had said something without thinking, and came to regret it. As soon as his words sunk in, the others were looking at him with curious eyes. It was a more subdued version of the reaction he got from Big Mac when he said he didn't get paid.

"You can't have children?" Aloe asked, with a sad twinge in her voice. "Why not? Did something happen?"

"Um...w-well..." He looked between the gathered ponies, and took another sip of his juice, thinking desperately of a way to explain it. There were probably dozen reasons why a pony couldn't have children: vows of celibacy, past trauma, birth defects, injuries, maybe a phobia even. Which would be the easiest to use without creating even more holes, though?

Sipping a now empty cup, its ice and juice coalescing within his body, his eyes darted around the room for anything that might help. They caught a

pinata hanging from the wall, yet to be busted. It was a rainbow of colors, with a short little tail and two horns on its head. A bull.

"It was...an accident," he said, slowly, forming the story in his head. "I was...uh, making a delivery out near the town of Maredrid during their own winter wrap-up. Uh, you know, when *they* want to wake up the hibernating animals, they have the bulls go running everywhere to wake them up."

"Ooh, I heard about that!" Twilight Sparkle gushed with a scholarly glint in her eye. "I love how every town has their own way of changing the seasons! You wouldn't believe the ways they come up—"

"Yeah, yeah," Spike said, interrupting her lecture. "That's interesting, but what does that have to do..." Spike trailed off his, his eyes widening in horror. "No way! Don't tell me your 'accident' was..."

"Well," he started, indifferently, "when I was there, I had just finished dropping off a package, and was looking for a shortcut out of the city. *That* was a big mistake, because the next thing I know, I have an army of bulls charging down the street towards me. I panicked and tried to outrun instead of ducking into a house or something, and one of the bulls behind me had his horns *really* low and—"

"No more, no more!" Spike cried, sounding pained as he covered his ears.

"That's...that's so awful!" Lotus said, looking horrified, as did the others. "It's a miracle you're even alive!"

"Oh yeah, I know, trust me. I mean, it could've been a lot worse." He said that part with absolute conviction. He had reason to be there during the bull runs, after all, though it sometimes amazed him that a pony would explicitly die from it only once or twice a decade. "But, you know, I recovered well enough, so it all worked out."

"Yeah, but still..." Spike winced again, gritting his teeth. The reaction made Mort feel a tad guilty. Maybe he should've went with something less graphic...

"Well, you have my deepest sympathies, Mort," Cheerilee said, placing a comforting hoof on his shoulder. "I really hope that didn't sour your feelings

about Maredrid. I hear it's such a gorgeous city!"

"You've been to Maredrid?" Another, new voice entered the fold, this one coming from a pegasus mare with a sandy coat and pink mane, with a trio of twisters on her flank. "Oh, I love it there! Me and my friends try to go there at least once a year, if we can."

"Really? That's nice to hear...uh..." He looked at the pony, recognizing her but briefly forgetting her name.

Twilight Sparkle came to his rescue, and whispered, "Dizzy Twister."

"Dizzy Twister!" he said, quickly. "Uh, right! Yes, it really can be a nice city. I was just telling them—"

"No more," Spike begged from atop his companions head, his hands held together in a pleading fashion. "*Please*, anything but that again."

"Well, I'm sure Mort's been to tons of places," Twilight Sparkle said, giving Mort an expectant look. "Maybe you could tell us a few...uh, less painful, stories?"

More ponies were beginning to circle around them, their eyes on him. Mort felt his insides twisting into nervous knots, but at the same time realized that the ponies around him were legitimately interested in what he had to say. He did like telling Luna stories about the things he saw, but had felt he couldn't do that in Ponyville, lest he let something about his true nature slip. Then again, he had made up the Maredrid story well enough...

"Well..." He paused to clear his throat, and also to think of another experience he had. "There was this one time I had to go to Hoofton. You know, all the way down south? One of their hottest summers ever. You could turn a faucet on and it's evaporate before it even hit the sink..."

It wasn't as hard as he feared. He had collected souls for thousands of years, visiting the largest and most famous cities countless times. There had always been something going on that seemed curious or funny to him. And he was relieved to see that the crowd thought so as well, more often than not.

What was better, the story didn't even have to be funny. It could just be him relating his visit to some famous landmark, and telling them what it was like. Of course, he didn't tell what really brought him to those places most of the time, but had still seen enough to apparently enthrall his audience.

Sometimes, he would risk relating a story about a pony who was going to die, but due to sheer luck was able to beat the odds and survive, sometimes completely unscathed. (While he is happy when this happens, it can be aggravating when it renders a cross-country trip utterly pointless.) The more ridiculous the circumstances, the better.

He was now telling them a story of one of his trips to Manehattan. The nervousness he had felt before then was almost completely gone now, and he was now, in fact, enjoying the attention.

"—and so, this fire? It was getting out of control. Spreading from the kitchen and through the rest of the restaurant. Everypony had gotten out, of course, and firefighters were on the way, but this one guy, uh, an earth pony, he had to run back in. He was going to meet up with his fillyfriend there, you see. He had this ring and everything picked out and was going to propose to her. But he had left the ring inside." He paused for dramatic effect, seeing a roomful of eyes hanging on his every word.

"So," he continued, "he ran back inside, to get it, right? Everypony saw it, but they didn't want to run in after him because, well, there's a *fire* going on! So finally the firefighters get there, they start getting the hoses ready when, all of a sudden, the restaurant practically *explodes*, busting every remaining window and everything. Everypony thought the guy was done for. His fillyfriend was even there, and she was going into hysterics."

There was utter silence in the room. Everypony stared at him, waiting with bated breath. What came next was his favorite part:

"So, just as they finally get the hoses going, guess what happens? That pony from before? He comes stumbling out of the building, covered in ash and burns, but one-hundred percent alive. Do you know what saved him? He liked to go around with this silly, top hat of his—well, it's Manehattan, so it wasn't silly for them—all the time. And on his way out, it dropped off his head and rolled in front of this overturned table. The guy, ignoring *every survivalist instinct in his body*, went after it out of pure habit. The moment

he crouched down to pick it up, that explosion happened, and that table was able to block most of the heat and fire. If he had actually kept running out, like he 'ought' have, it would have fried him!

And that's still nothing compared to what happened next. The first thing he does, the *very first thing* he does? He shows his fillyfriend that ring he ran in for, and proposes for her right there." The end of the story was met with cheers and clapping from the ponies in the room, and Mort himself felt a little giddy as he recalled the memory. The pony really was supposed to die that day, but at the last moment, some neuron had misfired and the pony had thought about getting his hat, rather than to keep running. It was those instances, those million-to-one chances, that sometimes meant the difference between life and death.

He glanced to the side, and saw that Spike was wiping a tear from his eye, and Twilight Sparkle was floating him a napkin to use as a makeshift tissue. "It was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen," he said, taking a sip from his cup of juice. "The guy made the front page and everything, they were calling him the luckiest stallion in Manehattan. Though, back then they called it Amsterdame, but y'know, same difference." He took another sip and glanced back at Twilight Sparkle again, though this time she had her head tilted to one side, giving him a confused look.

"Mort!" Before he could contemplate it further, Pinkie Pie suddenly came rushing out of nowhere, a thin piece of cloth draped over her snout. "That was one of the best, most romantic stories I ever heard! Wow! I hope they went on to have lots and lots of bitty, bouncy foals after something like that!"

"Me too," he agreed. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Oh yeah, loads better! That was one of the funnest games I've ever played! We should play again sometime!" Pinkie Pie started to bounce around him in circles, the cloth flapping around. "Anyway, the Cakes are finishing up your extra special cake, and we still have time for one more game before they bring it out!"

"And you're okay with that?" he asked, cautiously. "I mean, this won't anypony getting tied in knots...right?"

"Nope, but it's still tons of fun!" He stopped himself from asking how becoming a pony pretzel would be fun, and let her lead him over to a wall, where other ponies were gathering. Hanging on it was a poster of a pony, though it omitted the tail completely. "My favorite game, Pin the Tail on the Pony!"

"Pin the...oh, right! Yeah, that's what it is." This, at least, was a game he was a little familiar with. He had never actually played it, of course, but he had seen it from time to time, and it was easy to see the goal of the game. And he wouldn't have to worry about his limbs being in places they couldn't.

"Let's get started!" Pinkie Pie reached out to a table near the poster, and scooped up a mock tail with a pin stuck through it. "Now, you go ahead and grab this, Mort. Magic's fine, of course."

Mort nodded, and summoned an aura around the fake tail, taking it from Pinkie Pie's hoof. "It's a nice shade of blue."

"Thanks! It's the same shade of blue as one of my balloons. Can you help get this tied around his eyes, Twilight?" Pinkie Pie blew through her nostrils, and the fabric strip on her nose flew up. At its height, it was caught in Twilight Sparkle's magical aura, who floated it near Mort.

He looked between the cloth and the unicorn. "Um, I don't have to pull my hood down or anything, right?"

"Don't worry about a thing. If I slide it through here, then..." The fabric stretched out in front of Mort, and drifted forward until it was pressed against his eyes. The ends of the blindfold were then wrapped around the rest of his skull, until they were tied up in a knot.

There was a quiet moan from Twilight Sparkle. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Huh? Oh, yeah," she said, distractedly. "Just got a little headache all of a sudden. You have some unusual, magical buildup near your horn, Mort."

"I, uh, couldn't imagine what that'd be," he said, trying to keep his voice steady and uninterested. "Certainly not a magical spell or anything like that!"

Twilight Sparkle raised a bemused brow. "Uh..."

"There's some aspirin in the bathroom if ya need any, Twilight!" Pinkie Pie slapped both forehoofs on Mort's shoulders, looking at him with a wide smile on her face. "Are you ready, Mort?"

"Uh, just one second..." Even with his eyes blindfolded, Mort could still technically "see." His body was always collecting a mass of data from the room and ponies, and it was far more informative than simple sight. However, since being blind was part of the game, he had to work to block those senses. Or at least the ones that made the posters' location obvious.

He concentrated, trying to parse the myriad of information his body was gathering. There was the molecular make-up of every living and nonliving thing in his vicinity. There was the sources of heat, and how much was actually being emitted. There was how everything in the electromagnetic spectrum reacted to everything else, whether it was being absorbed or reflected. There was the flow of air and change in atmosphere from being moved around or occupied by something much more solid. There was also the thoughts of the ponies around him, though he learned how to ignore those bits a long time ago. It was an invasion of privacy, Luna had told him, and pretty rude, too.

He willed himself to stop paying attention to all of it, one by one, until finally all that remained was sound, and even that had to be reigned in to prevent accidental echolocation. By the time he was through, the world had become an empty void, with a little background chatter.

He was proud of himself for a few moments, feeling somewhat smug for having so much control over his senses, though a moment later another thought began to take hold. Even in the most pitch black nights, or inside the deepest tunnels or mines in Equestria, he always knew exactly what was around him. He never had a fear of the dark, because the "dark" never existed for him. Light wasn't something he used to see, it was just another aspect of a world that was laid bare before him.

Now, for the first time in his existence, he was completely blind. He no longer had a solid idea where anything was. The world was, from his perspective, utterly gone.

It was a little frightening, to say the least.

"Ready now?" Pinkie Pie asked, sounding unable to hold her excitement.

He jumped a little, not knowing that Pinkie Pie had moved so quickly behind him. He felt his body shake as he struggled to both remain calm, and to keep himself solid. (Was he solid? He couldn't see anypony's reaction anymore. They weren't literally seeing through him, were they?) He really, really didn't like this. Not one bit.

"A-actually—"

"Then he were *go!*" Mort couldn't utter a protest before Pinkie Pie wrapped her hooves around him, and gave a strong pull that sent him spiraling. He yelped in terror as he felt the world spinning around him, his bones feeling like jelly. He was half-afraid a limb would accidentally fly out as ethereal goop.

Just as suddenly as it began, it stopped as a pair of surprisingly, strong hooves grabbed his shoulders. He was just able to stop his own head from spinning a couple more times. When he was certain his head was facing the right way (mostly because he hadn't heard any horrified sounds from the others), he asked aloud, "What was that for?!"

"Sorry! I just love that part of the game!" Who he assumed was Pinkie Pie began to enthusiastically lead him forward, and Mort had to work to stop himself from tripping over his robes. "You just feel like your whole brain is spinning! Isn't it fun?"

"Sure, fun," he muttered dourly. "How am I supposed to know where the pony is now?"

"Oh, you're never spun *away* from the pony. That'd just be unfair. And kinda dangerous, too. You might slip on some cake and crash in the kitchen. Like Gilda. Ooh! Did we tell you about Gilda yet? She was this griffon—"

"Uh, Pinkie Pie, let's just let him play the game, okay?" Twilight Sparkle's voice drifted close, then drifted away, their hooves clopping on the wooden

floors, leaving Mort to stand alone.

He heard the excited chatter and encouragement from the crowd around him, and he couldn't help but turn where it became loudest, hoping their might be some sort of clue as to where to go. One pony said, "Dead ahead," another said, "A little to your right," and others were giggling that he was looking the wrong way.

After a few more turns, it suddenly dawned on him that he was gradually losing focus on where Pinkie Pie had pointed him in the first place. He tried to right himself back to where he was, but felt he had gone too far, and tried turning in the other direction. The more he tried to correct himself, the more lost he felt.

He had half a mind to simply switch a few of his sense back on and finish the whole thing. He remembered how the others had looked at him when he tripped in the library. He imagined how foolish he looked. He couldn't bear to do something like that again in front of so many more.

And yet another part was reminding him that he was a *The Pale Pony of Death*. Yes, the other ponies didn't know that, and all but a few shades would even care what happened, but still, if he could traverse the entire world several times over to collect souls on time, he could surely complete this game without having to resort to cheating. Part of this experience was about being able to fit in with the ponies, and that's what he was going to do, even if it meant pinning the tail on the pony's nostrils.

"Over here, Mort!" Twilight Sparkle's voice was like a beacon in the dark, and he instantly turned towards her voice. "It's over here!"

"Woo! You can do it, Morty!" Pinkie Pie cheered. "Pin that pony! Show it who's boss!"

"Y-yeah." Then, again with more feeling, "Yeah!" Floating the tail in front of him, he followed their voices, hearing the voices of others growing louder and more excited.

He could almost envision it: ponies crowding around the poster, where up front there would be Pinkie Pie, standing next to Twilight Sparkle. And beside them would be the poster of a prancing pony, one that looked awful

happy about the prospects of getting pinned.

"You're almost there!" Pinkie Pie elated. "Just a few more feet, and—ooh!"

"What is it, Pinkie?" her lavender friend asked.

"My eyebrows are bouncing!" Mort was a little distracted by the sudden change in conversation, but then refocused his thoughts on the game. The two of them were getting louder now, and that could only mean he was getting closer. He could practically feel the poster board coming up.

"Um, what do bouncing eyebrows mean?" Spike asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

"I dunno," Pinkie Pie answered, sounding curious herself. Mort had a feeling he was missing something, but he could ask them after he pinned the tail. He raised the tail, visualizing his target...

Pinkie Pie hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe it means—"

"*Hiiyah!*" he cried, thrusting forward. He felt it struck something, and heard a collective gasp from everypony in the room. He hurriedly reached for the blindfold, getting the tip of his hoof under it, and at the same time begun to will his senses back into being. "Did I get it? How did IAHHHH!"

As it turned out, he *had* pinned a pony, but the one on the poster board was as bare as it was before. The pink, earth pony next to it, however, was now sporting a pair of tails, one made of curly hair, and the other of flat paper.

Pinkie Pie's eyes darted to the tail pinned to one of the balloons on her cutie mark, then back to a gawking Twilight Sparkle and Spike. "*Oh,*" she said, in realization, "so that's what it means! Good to know." She nodded approvingly, seeming satisfied.

Then a moment later her pupils shrunk to pinpoints, and she leaped high into the air, her hair spazzing out in all directions as she shrieked in pain. The other ponies watched in fascinated horror as the party pony hopped around the floor, every landing followed by an agonized mantra.

"There's a pin in my butt there's a pin in my butt *there's a pin in my BUTT!*" She landed close to Caramel, who on reflex took several, wobbly steps away. Still recovering from the earlier game, he lost his balance, and the back of his head came down on the rounded edge of a small, drink table behind him. It was enough to turn the furniture into an impromptu catapult, launching its contents through the air.

Several ponies were unfortunate enough to be standing nearby, and many of the cups splattered across them, sending grape juice everywhere. Aloe, more unfortunate than the others, got a face-full of alligator as Gummy flew towards, biting down on the mare's snout. Teeth or no teeth, it still frightened Aloe into hysterics and she dashed across the room screaming, with the baby reptile hanging on by his gums. Her sister chased after her, fruitlessly telling the sibling to stop.

Mort stood stock still, watching Pinkie Pie and Aloe knock down ponies and furniture alike, as others slipped on the splattered sweets and spilled juice on the ground. The juice bowl had spilled near his feet, soaking them and sending ice cubes everywhere.

He couldn't believe he had caused this. Part of him was sick over the fact that he had caused tangible, physical harm to another pony, a first in many, many centuries. To cause no harm to another, living creature was a fundamental law among shades, and he might have been the first one to ever break it.

And he would feel more awful about it, too, if the rest of him wasn't reeling over the chaos it had caused. Food was getting splattered and strewn across the floor every time Pinkie Pie landed, each bounce punctuated by something or somepony getting knocked over. Those trying to avoid her would run into each other or slip on something on the ground, colliding with the wall, furniture, or just collapsing in a heap.

One act of violence—unintended violence, at that—should not cause this much mayhem. (Unless it was against archdukes. Those never turned out well in his experience.) He was not a paranoid individual, but he honestly felt that this had been set up by something. And it was laughing at him.

He barely noticed Twilight Sparkle walking up beside him with Spike, both of them gaping at the scene as well. "What have I done?!" he lamented,

collapsing to his knees.

"You pinned Pinkie Pie!" Spike said, still staring at the spectacle.

"I know *that!*" he snapped.

Twilight Sparkle watched Pinkie Pie, her eyes following every bounce. Her horn flared, and the party banner on the ceiling glowed with a purple light as it was torn from its anchors. As Pinkie Pie came down from another hop, Twilight Sparkle moved the banner underneath. Pinkie Pie landed in it, her legs dangling over the sides of the banner as she continued to squeak in pain.

Mort took another look around the room, feeling his spirits sink lower and lower: the bakery looked as if a tornado had gone through, sparing almost nothing. The floor and even parts of the wall were stained with confectioneries and juice, and some tables were overturned. Ponies picked themselves up, groaning from their newly acquired bumps and bruises, and those that weren't were still covered in crushed, sticky treats.

"Is it over?" he asked, cautiously.

No sooner than he did, Pinkie Pie seized her squeaking as her tail suddenly began to shake fiercely, spraying crumbs and drops of juice. The pink pony watched it a moment, her eyes widening in terror. "Twitchy tail! Twitchy tail!"

"What?! But...!" Mort watched perplexedly as Twilight Sparkle, Spike and several, other ponies began to looking towards the ceiling fearfully, some dashing under one of the few tables that hadn't been toppled.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking up as well, surmising it was a well built, but still unremarkable, ceiling. "What's that mean?"

"*What* is going on out there?!" The kitchen doors swung open, making way for a simple, serving trolley that was carrying a large cake, made of smaller layers stacked on top of one another. It was covered in white frosting, with blue and green frosting decorating the perimeter of each layers. The smallest, top layer was lined with freshly lit candles.

Mrs. Cake followed after it, looking slightly frazzled. "I know it's a party, but there's no need for the racket we just—"

She was interrupted by the muffle screams of Aloe, who in her ongoing panic, didn't notice the stout pony, or the cake she just brought out. The Lotus sister collided with the old mare, sending the two of them floundering towards the ground, and in their fall, shoving the trolley forward.

Caramel was just beginning to recover when he saw the trolley barreling towards him. He gasped and dove towards the ground, shielding his face and leaving his rear exposed. The trolley came to a sudden stop as it hit him, but not its frosted passenger, as the large cake was catapulted into the air, and flying towards a speechless, lavender unicorn.

Time seemed to slow for Mort. The four layer cake was plummeting towards Twilight Sparkle like a wayward comet, leaving a buttercream tail in its wake. The unicorn and her assistant were frozen in place, staring agape at what may as well been their frost-covered doom. Mort briefly wondered how he could explain to Celestia that he had, inadvertently, caused her most prized and faithful student get buried in a large cake.

The answer: he couldn't.

Acting quickly, he summoned his own magic, his horn glowing a bright green. He focused on the cake, poured his will and intent into his horn, and reached out for it.

By then, the cake was only a couple seconds away from landing on the librarian. Twilight Sparkle and Spike braced themselves for the impact. At the final moment, with the cake only a few inches away, a green aura enveloped the frosted desert. The cake came to a sudden halt in the air, mere inches from its victims.

Twilight Sparkle opened one eye, and her assistant peeked through his fingers, the two of them seeing the cake frozen in place above them. They simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was way too close," Spike said, wiping sweat from his brow.

"No kidding," Mort said, feeling similar relief washing over him. He glanced

away from the two to look at the others, and almost wished he hadn't: almost every pair of eyes were on him, and not too many looked very pleased, wearing either a scowl or just glaring through soaked manes.

He righted the cake in midair, raising it above and away from Twilight Sparkle. Forcing his voice to remain steady, he said, "Okay, um, things are kind of a mess right now, but, uh, at least I saved the—"

He took one step forward.

In one instant, his hoof was transmitting the following information: he had stepped on a small, cubical block of frozen water, that was currently experiencing zero friction between itself and the floor, and was now experiencing a strong force that was pushing it in one direction. More concisely, he had just stepped on a slippery ice cube.

The next instant he was falling face first into the floor, landing with a solid *thump*. A second later, that was followed by a *splat* where Twilight Sparkle and Spike were. Mort flinched immediately, knowing exactly what had happened. He slowly raised his face from the ground, and looked to see the large cake standing tall on the floor, virtually undisturbed.

The cake jiggled, and then the second-topmost layer of the cake rose up from the main body, supporting by the head of a steaming unicorn, who draped her forelegs over the body of the cake. The layer on top of that one then rose above, balancing on the head of a baby dragon, looking a little red in the face as well.

A low growl escaped Twilight Sparkle's lips. "*Mort...*"

"Uh...T-Twilight, um..." He gulped, shaking under her smoldering stare. Literal steam seemed to be rising from her mane. "You...uh, okay?"

"Okay?" The unicorn climbed out of the cake, and stomped towards the shade, still somehow balancing the smaller cake layers on her head. "Do I *look* okay to you?!"

"I didn't...I-I mean, I wasn't...I...I..." Given a few minutes, Mort would be able to determine the atomic make-up of every object and creature inside the room, but given a lifetime, he would still have no idea what to say to

Twilight Sparkle at that moment. Discouraged, embarrassed and anxious, he did the only thing he could think of doing then.

He quickly spun around, and without another word, rushed towards the door, focused only on escaping. Seeing the solid barrier, his body began to shift into an intangible state, completely forgetting that normal ponies didn't walk through doors...

"We made it!" Applejack exclaimed, slowing to catch her breath as Sugarcube Corner's entrance became visible. The moment she and Rarity found out about Pinkie Pie's surprise party, the two of them wasted no time trying to get to Sugarcube Corner. A number of worst-case scenarios had been running through Applejack's mind, and while she wrote most of them off as being a bit too pessimistic, there was still a bit of lingering doubt.

Rarity soon slowed towards a trot behind her, sweating harder than the farm pony, but none-the-less was able to recover enough to look as dignified as ever. Applejack had to admit that for a pony who was cooped up most days, the mare was in remarkable shape and was able to keep up better than most ponies.

Rarity swiveled her ears, a look of concern crossing her face. "Oh dear, I don't hear anything. Since when does that happen at Pinkie Pie's parties?"

"Happens 'bout as often as Big Mac wearin' a dress," Applejack said, looking to the windows for any idea of what was going on. Her view was obscured by the ponies inside, and it was clear there were a *lot* of ponies. "Welp, let's see what's goin' on in there."

"Hey, AJ!" The two of them looked up, seeing a familiar, cyan pegasus drifting towards them, though at an unusually slow (or rather, slower) pace. The reason became apparent as Rainbow Dash came in for a landing, revealing the yellow pegasus draped over her back.

"Fluttershy!" Rarity moved towards the meek pegasus as she carefully climbed off Rainbow Dash's back. "Gracious dear, did something happen?"

"Oh, um, well..." Fluttershy blushed, avoiding Rarity's inquiring look.

"I'll explain later," Rainbow Dash interjected quickly, and fixed Applejack with a serious look. "Did anything bad go down while we were gone?"

"Don't know, sug'. We just got here ourselves." She started towards the door, with Rainbow Dash catching up beside her. "Only thing Ah can tell is that it's too darn quiet."

"No kidding." The two of them reached the door, and Rainbow Dash reached out to open it. "What do you think's going on in—"

Just as the door was pushed open, the two of them shouted in surprise as something black came rushing out the door, obscuring everything. Applejack lost her balance and fell on her back, her body feeling like it had just been run through with frigid ice, and an unusual metallic taste in her mouth. For a moment, she found herself thinking about family and friends she had known, but could never see again, and felt more fragile than she ever had before.

Just as quickly, the feeling passed, and she was left staring into the clear sky. Blinking away unexpected tears, she got back on her hooves, and saw Rainbow Dash doing the same. The flier got back on her unsteady hooves, looking towards where the black thing had run off.

"What the hay was that?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Are you two okay?!" Rarity and Fluttershy ran up to them. Rarity reached down to grab Applejack's hat in her teeth, and laid it on the farmer's head. "What happened?"

"That's what Ah want to know," Applejack said, as feeling begun to return to her limbs. "Was that Mort or somethin'?" It was the only conclusion she could come to. He was the only pony approaching "black" in the town, and she could imagine his cloak billowing out like that.

Still, whatever came out did not seem to be draped in cloth. It certainly didn't feel like it. And what she did feel didn't brush past her, but go *around* her, like smoke, vapor, or...

"Applejack? Is that you?" Applejack was shaken from her thoughts when

she heard Twilight Sparkle's voice coming from the doorway. She spun around, ready to ask what had happened, but her voice got caught in her throat when the librarian actually walked out. The unicorn seemed to be wearing what was left of a cake, bits of it falling off with every step she took. Spike, sulking on top of her, wore a small cake on his head, decorated with candles that were still lit.

"Goodness, Twilight!" Rarity gasped, looking her up and down. "You look like somepony dropped a cake on you!"

"Gee, you think?" the unicorn replied, sarcastically.

"Wow, what'd we miss?" Rainbow Dash hovered above them, blowing out the candles on top of Spike's head. "Do we even want to know?"

"The party got crashed," a melancholy voice said in response, and from the door Pinkie Pie slowly trotted out, her head hung low. "I thought that didn't happen if everypony was invited."

"Um, Pinkie Pie?" Fluttershy asked, sounding uncertain. "Why do you have two tails?"

Applejack gave a start, noticing the paper tail hanging from Pinkie Pie's flank. The pink pony winced, and simply said, "Pin the Tail on the Pony isn't so much fun for the pony after all. Owchies."

Twilight Sparkle sighed, sounding a little irritated. "Did anypony see where Mort went to?"

"So that was Mort?" Rarity asked, looking behind her. "I'm sorry dear, we saw him come out, but he was gone so quickly!"

Rainbow Dash whistled. "Wow, he can really move if he wants to, huh?"

"Well now we got to find him and...I don't know, do *something*!" Twilight Sparkle groaned in frustration, stopping her front hooves. "I don't get it! This was supposed to be easy! Why is it so hard all of a sudden?!"

"We'll find him, Twi'. Don' you worry none," Applejack assured her, patting her shoulders. "But before we do, Ah think the two of you need to get

cleaned up." She glanced at the paper tail stilled pin to Pinkie Pie's flank.
"Uh, Ah reckon a first aid kit wouldn't be a bad idea either."