

The Monster Mash

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Table of Contents:

Fluttershy	The Curse of the Night	3
Rarity	Blood and Water	29
Rainbow	The Big Battle	49
Pinkie Pie	Gallows Humor	71
Applejack	One of the Herd	98
Twilight	The Case of Wild Clover the Warder	119

Fluttershy

Curse of the Night

Everfree Forest was a scary place even at the best of times. The land of Equestria had been tamed so thoroughly and for so long that the ponies who lived there had come to think of their world as the natural order of things, that everything from plants to animals to the very air itself needed their guiding hooves. Only Everfree stood as a reminder of ancient times and ancient magic, the rhythm of the seasons, the relentless pulse of life, the savagery of nature. Ponies who ventured there did so at their own peril, for while the forest was not as malevolent as some said, it was no cradle to coddle and protect.

Fluttershy was not in the forest at the best of times. She ran through the grasping trees, eyes wide, breath heaving, mane and tail snarled with twigs and leaves, desperate to find a way out. Somewhere above, she knew, the moon shone down on Equestria, but the trees hid its light away, leaving her only the slightest glow to see by. In the darkness, her mind, desperate to find the path to safety, conjured all manner of beasts and bogeymen, lurking, waiting to devour her.

Imagined bogeymen were preferable to the real thing. Her ears strained to hear some sign of the beast behind her, whether it had truly lost her scent or was just waiting for her to slow and tire. It had ambushed them when she stopped to gather the moonflowers that had been her reason for visiting Everfree Forest in the first place. Poor, brave Rainbow Dash had stood up to the beast, only to be swatted away like an annoying gnat. She hoped the plucky mare would be all right. At least her own flight had drawn it away.

If she'd been less frightened, she might have had more time to wonder at the beast attacking her at all. Laelaps were strong, swift hunters, but they weren't savage; she wouldn't have expected that kind of ferocity unless a mother had found her holding its cub, and even then it would have stopped chasing her once she was far enough away. It hadn't responded at all to her faltering efforts to soothe it before Dash leapt into the fray, either. Then there were the physical differences. It had been bigger than a typical

laelap, with sharper claws, longer fangs, and terrible green eyes. Was it sick? Was it under a spell? She had no way to know, and at the moment she didn't care.

At last, her legs gave out, sending her pitching to the forest floor, sliding a foot or so before coming to rest. She gasped desperately for breath, her whole body trembling with exhaustion, hoping—praying—she'd been able to do enough.

She hadn't.

It burst from the undergrowth, silent as it had been since the chase began, and latched onto her with all four paws, teeth seeking her throat. Her own panicked scream stuck there as she tried to roll, to protect herself from the beast, but while she escaped instant death, it was only by substituting a leg for her neck. It latched on with a grip like a vice, tearing at her body with its claws, and she screamed again, this time an honest wail, as it opened long bloody stripes on her sides and belly. She fought and kicked and struggled, and all the time she knew she was only delaying the inevitable, that she was going to die in the Everfree without ever seeing her friends again, not Rarity or Applejack or—

—or a sky-blue pegasus pony who suddenly burst through the trees, twisting at the last second to deliver a high-speed kick to the laelap's side. It released her leg as it tumbled, crashing into a tree some distance away, and struggled to rise as Rainbow Dash crouched nearby.

"I'm not sticking around for that thing to go another round!" the fellow pegasus said, kneeling next to her and forcing her upward, her body unable to offer more than token assistance. "Get on!" Fluttershy did her best, but ultimately it was Rainbow Dash who arranged her on her back, getting her settled in as quickly as possible as the laelap found its feet.

"Next stop, the sky," Dash said, crouching, then leaping in a great rush of color. Fluttershy squeaked and closed her eyes; leaving aside her own fear of heights, trying to fly here was a dangerous proposition, the trees growing close together like a net. She felt the branches and leaves claw at her as they rose, slapping her wounds and bringing new levels of pain... but it only lasted a second, and then they were clear, the blessed light of the moon bathing her, the smell of the air fresh and clean.

"Hold on just a little longer, 'Shy," Dash said, leveling out, speeding toward Ponyville as quickly as she dared with a passenger. "I'll have you at Nurse Redheart's before you know it!"

Which was true, though not in the way Rainbow Dash had meant it. Fluttershy passed out before they even reached Ponyville.

Consciousness returned slowly, soothingly. She blinked awake, looking around, and found herself resting in one of the nurse's beds, the open-air building well lit by the noon sun. Cautiously, she shifted her body, discovering that her wounds had been carefully bandaged; thankfully, they didn't hurt nearly as much as she'd expected them to.

"You're awake!" cried a familiar voice. "Hey, everypony! Fluttershy's awake!"

"Shhh!" another voice said, and Fluttershy turned to see Pinkie Pie shushing Applejack. "Can't you see she's trying to rest?" That was sweet of her, Fluttershy thought. It would have been sweeter if her voice hadn't been louder than the farm pony's, though.

"Oh, Fluttershy," Applejack said, as Twilight Sparkle and Nurse Redheart made their way over to her bed. "You sure had us worried. Rainbow Dash was up all night makin' sure you were okay."

"Are you feeling all right?" Twilight wondered. "Dash said you were attacked by a monster, but I couldn't find what she described in any of my books."

"Yes, I'm fine," Fluttershy replied timidly. "It was... a laelap. But it was... bigger. And meaner. And..." She shivered at the memory, and Applejack moved to place a hoof on her forehead.

"Well, don't you worry none," she said. "That varmint's back in the Everfree, and you're home where you belong."

Home. "Oh no!" Fluttershy squeaked, sitting bolt upright despite the pain. "Angel bunny! He's sick with greenlung! That's why I went into the forest in the first place! I have to take him his medicine!" She tried to get out of bed, but Nurse Redheart interposed a hoof.

"You're not going anywhere until I take a look at your injuries, young filly," she said, her voice stern but caring, and the butter-yellow pegasus sank back. "This is going to sting a bit, but I'll be as gentle as I can." Fluttershy sat quietly, if anxiously, as the nurse carefully peeled away the largest of the bandages, exposing the wound beneath.

Fluttershy found her attention drawn to the others; Applejack looked relieved, Pinkie Pie looked curious, and Twilight looked... puzzled. So did Nurse Redheart, for just a moment, before smiling. "Well! I have to say, you're healing quite nicely," she said, and Fluttershy looked down as the nurse began removing the other bandages.

She was healing quite nicely. Surprisingly so, in fact. She'd expected large, angry-looking gouges, but instead it looked like she'd had days of recovery overnight, cuts well scabbed over, nicks gone altogether. In fact, only half of the bandages Redheart took off needed to be replaced at all. "I don't know how you've managed to recover so well!" the nurse said, looking mystified, but grateful.

Fluttershy wasn't sure what to say, so she just smiled hesitantly. "Does that mean I can go take care of Angel?" she wondered.

"I think that'll be all right," Nurse Redheart said. "Just be sure to take it easy for the next few days, change your bandages regularly, and let me know if anything starts feeling wrong." Fluttershy nodded, the gesture short but firm, and eased herself out of bed, smiling again as she settled on her hooves.

"Thank you all so much for taking care of me," she said to the assembled ponies. "And tell Rainbow Dash to come see me so I can thank her too. But I really must be getting home. Oh, I hope he's all right!" With that, she hurried from the building, steps a bit stiff at first, but swiftly gaining strength as she headed toward the road leading to her little cottage.

Twilight Sparkle watched her go, tuning out Pinkie's excited babbling about

turning a 'get better Fluttershy' party into a 'got better Fluttershy' party. Nurse Redheart was right; the injuries Rainbow Dash had described to her should have taken much longer to heal.

"Something's not right," she said to herself, before turning and heading for home.

Fluttershy had never been so glad to be home before.

Greenlung wasn't a common ailment, thankfully, and neither was it fatal, but the thick green phlegm for which the disease was named wasn't pleasant, and Angel's little lungs seemed to have an endless supply. There wasn't a lot, besides rest and fluids, that Fluttershy could do for him, but moonflower tea would both soothe a throat sore from coughing and make the liquid thinner and easier to clear. He'd fussed and squirmed when she tried to give it to him—probably upset about making her worry, the poor thing—but eventually he'd drank it, and she'd been able to relax, drink some of her own tea, and putter about the house for a bit.

She really was feeling much better now. The wounds had been incredibly itchy, but she'd dutifully resisted the urge to scratch—much—and the itching had finally subsided. Her aches and pains seemed to have faded away too, and if it weren't for the bandages still on her sides and belly, she'd wonder if she'd somehow dreamt the whole thing.

She kept thinking back to the attack, but not how she'd expected to. Oh, at first she'd felt what she'd expected—the fear, the trembling, the sight of it lurking in her eyelids, waiting for it to blink—but mostly she felt annoyed. Annoyed at herself for not being strong enough to stand up to the laelap, for needing to be rescued. Again. It wasn't a very nice thing to feel, but she couldn't seem to chase the feeling away. She hoped she'd feel better soon.

The light outside was changing, she noticed; it was almost time to take Angel some more tea. Thinking of this reminded her that it was time to change her bandages as well, so she sat down on the couch and gingerly peeled away the largest of the bandages, bracing herself for the sight

ahead.

She blinked.

Reaching down with a hoof, she gently brushed at where the claw marks had been, and now only a crumbly sort of scab was visible. The crumbles stuck to tiny hairs, but a moment's patience removed them, revealing unmarked skin beneath. There wasn't even a scar.

Trying to make sense of this, she almost missed the knock on the door, despite it being delivered in a sharp, staccato beat. She couldn't have missed the followup, however. "Hey, Fluttershy, lemme in! It's gonna get dark out here in a second!"

Rolling to her hooves, she made her way to the door, opening it to see Rainbow Dash standing in the light of the setting sun. "Oh, hello, Rainbow Dash," she said softly. "Won't you come in?" Dash walked in, plonked herself on the couch, and grinned as Fluttershy closed the door and made her own way back to the couch. It struck Fluttershy as a teensy bit rude, and for once it wasn't as easy to dismiss the thought.

"I heard you wanted to have a word with the Dash," her guest said as she sat down. "Gonna thank me for saving your life, huh? It's no prob. I'm just sorry you got hurt in the first place. Course, it wouldn't have happened if that thing hadn't got the jump on me." Rainbow Dash frowned at the memory, while Fluttershy frowned as well, for a different reason. Had Dash really come out here just to stroke her own ego?

"I mean, you saw it!" Dash continued, oblivious to Fluttershy's growing irritation. "That thing was huge! Well, okay, not huge huge, but it was strong. And sneaky! If you hadn't screamed, I might not have found you in time. It's too bad, too. I was looking forward to going another round with that thing! I'd have been, whoosh!" She moved her forehooves as if navigating treacherous obstacles. "Where am I? I'm in the trees! I'm over here! Whoop, I'm over there! And then bam!" She swung one hoof up in a punch. "Right in the jaw! And it'd be all 'rar', and I'd be all, too slow!" Another punch. "Bam! Down you go! Oh, you wanna get up? Well, too bad, 'cause this is 'Rainbow Dash Says', and Rainbow Dash says—"

"Will you please shut up!?"

Rainbow Dash fell silent, staring at Fluttershy in shock. The pony was... seething. The last time she'd seen Fluttershy seethe was when she lost it at the Gala, and that had been a bad night for everypony involved. And there was something else, something she thought she'd never experience.

Fluttershy was... scaring her.

"Fluttershy... are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," Fluttershy replied, staring at Rainbow Dash, who couldn't help but wonder if this was *the* Stare. "I've never felt better. Oh wait. I did feel better that one time. When was it? Oh yes, it was before a certain annoying pony came over to brag about how strong and brave she is, and isn't it a good thing she was there to rescue poor helpless Fluttershy?"

"Shy, you're kinda creeping me out here." It was an understatement. Rainbow Dash's skin was crawling. Fluttershy was acting like she was under Discord's spell again, only then she'd just been an obnoxious jerk. Now Dash felt like Fluttershy might actually hurt her.

"Well, too bad!" Fluttershy barked, and Rainbow Dash jerked back. "Because I'm tired of everypony treating me like I'm some delicate little flower. Oh, look at poor Fluttershy, afraid of her own shadow! Isn't it sad, a pegasus that can't even fly? You don't even laugh. I'm too pathetic to laugh at. Up in your big dumb cloud house, thinking flying is so awesome, and too bad Fluttershy's such a weenie—"

"Fluttershy, that's not true!" Dash protested, jolted out of her trance of fear. "I would never think anything bad about you!" She paused, looking Fluttershy over with a more critical eye, noticing the tension in her body, the slight wobble in the focus of her eyes, the sweat on her brow. "Ohmigosh, you must be, like, hallucinating or something! You just stay right here, I'm gonna go get Nurse Redheart—"

"I don't need a doctor!" Fluttershy screamed. "I've never. Felt. Better!"

Dash's pupils shrank to pinpricks. Freaking out was one thing. Snarling at

her... with visible canines... was another.

She scrambled off the couch and back towards the door, unable to take her eyes off Fluttershy as she changed. Her body was getting leaner, more muscular. Her mane and tail were going wild and ragged. Her hooves were larger, and their edges seemed to be sharpening by the second. Her teeth were terrifyingly pronounced, not just the canines but all of them, and the image of those teeth clamping onto flesh and never letting go sprung to mind unbidden.

Worst of all were the eyes. Fluttershy had wide, innocent eyes, the color reminding Dash of nothing more than shallow water at the world's best beach. Now they were a neon green, a color she'd seen just last night—

—in the beast that attacked them.

Fluttershy snarled and leapt.

Rainbow Dash screamed.

The trouble with working on a farm, Applejack groggily reflected, is that when you went to sleep, you needed that sleep. There was a lot of hard work on the farm, and she was only too happy to do it, but she couldn't just stay up on a whim to watch the stars or read a book or whatever other ponies got up to at night. She lay down, she went to sleep, and she woke up in the morning full of the energy she'd need for a new day.

At least, that was the plan.

The scream came again, and Applejack only then realized that was what had woken her the first time, a weird scream, first higher, then lower, then higher again. As she stumbled to the window, she reflected that it sounded an awful lot like—

"Applejaaaaaaaaaaaaack!" Rainbow Dash screamed, blurring past her window. She blinked.

"Rainbow Dash, what's the matter with you? Some of us are trying to—"

A pink and yellow blur nearly sucked her out the window.

"—sleep." Had that been Fluttershy? Chasing Rainbow Dash? And keeping up?

"Fluttershy's—gone—crazy!" Rainbow Dash yelled, circling the farmhouse, one word per revolution. "Monster—bit—teeth! Help!" Applejack boggled for a moment, then shook it off.

"I'll be there in a sec, sugarcube!" she yelled, hoping Dash heard her, then ran out of her bedroom to get what she'd need.

This was crazy, Rainbow Dash thought. This was impossible! Even if Fluttershy were so feverish that she'd forget her fears and attack her best friend, the sky was Dash's element! No pony was faster than her, and even if Fluttershy somehow managed to push herself to match her, she'd never be able to hold the speed, not in this condition.

Risking a glance back, she realized Fluttershy wasn't holding the speed at all.

She was gaining.

"Applejack, now would be a good time!" she yelled.

"I'm ready!" came a welcome cry from the ground, as Applejack burst out of the farmhouse, lasso already spinning. Rainbow Dash gave the house a few more circles, dipping as close to the ground as she dared, counting off the spins as she passed.

"Three... two... one... now!" With that, she shot off in a straight line, nearly colliding with a fence before pulling up, letting gravity bleed off her velocity. If Applejack had screwed up, she'd know the instant Fluttershy rammed her from behind.

Nothing. She hung in the air, wings reflexively putting her into a hover, and looked down. Descending carefully, she saw that Applejack had successfully wrangled Fluttershy, hogtying the pegasus neat as a

present. The earth pony looked shocked as she got a good look at Fluttershy for the first time, then looked up at Rainbow Dash.

"What happened to her face?"

"What happened to her everything?" Dash retorted. "She looks like that thing that got her in the forest!"

"It must be contagious," Applejack replied. "Go get Twilight. I'll keep an eye on her until you get back."

Rainbow Dash shot off a sloppy salute. "I'm on it!" she replied, darting off.

Applejack sat down slowly, gazing sadly at the snarling, rabid Fluttershy, still trying to break loose. Applejack had to double-rope everything to keep her from breaking free—her! Fluttershy! Wouldn't hurt a bug! But whatever had happened to her had made her strong, stronger than Applejack, and only her focus on Rainbow Dash had given the farmer the chance to bring her down. Taking a deep breath, feeling janky from the aftermath of it all, she spoke softly and sadly.

"What in tarnation happened to you?"

Fluttershy's second visit to Nurse Redheart's was less pleasant than her first. Groggily, she opened her eyes, staring uncomprehendingly at the horizon for a moment before trying to sit up—and finding herself practically hogtied to the bed, lying on her belly and barely able to move.

"Oh my!" she breathed. "Where am I? What's going on?"

"Wha—Fluttershy?" It was Rainbow Dash's voice, and she turned her head, with some difficulty, to see the pegasus pony push to her hooves, only to pause halfway and stare at her. "You're back to normal!"

"I am?" Fluttershy echoed, looking confused. Back to normal from what? But before she could muster the words, Rainbow Dash was hurrying to tell the others the news. Unable to turn her head far enough to see,

Fluttershy sighed and returned it to a more or less comfortable position, albeit one that left her squinting in the morning sun.

"Fluttershy." She turned again, this time seeing Twilight Sparkle, a book held in her magical grip and looking serious. "What do you remember about last night?" Confused by the question, Fluttershy thought back.

"Well, Rainbow Dash and I were going into the forest for some moonflowers... no, that was the night before," she said, looking confused. "Um, I was at home, and I was going to get Angel his tea. Then Rainbow Dash came over..." And she was incredibly rude, couldn't she see how bad Fluttershy felt, why did she have to go on and on about—"...I don't remember," she finished weakly. "Did I pass out? I'm so sorry."

Twilight shook her head slowly, looking grim. "It's worse than that," she said. "You... you changed into some sort of... horse monster. You attacked Rainbow Dash!"

Fluttershy gasped. "Is she all right?"

"Yeah, like you could catch me," Dash declared with her familiar bravado as she returned. "You sure gave me a workout, though! Applejack wound up trussing you up like a turkey, and we brought you here."

"Oh my! I'm sorry to have been a bother."

"No sweat," Rainbow Dash replied. "And I mean that. You said some stuff before... y'know..." She fidgeted a bit. "And I just want you to know, I'm there for you. Just like you're there for me when I need it." She stared at Fluttershy with an odd intensity, and after a moment the yellow pegasus nodded.

"So... can you let me go?" she asked hopefully. Twilight looked pensive. "I mean, if... that's okay..."

"I don't think this was an isolated incident," Twilight said. "For your own safety, I think we should keep you restrained."

"C'mon, Twilight," Rainbow Dash said, surprising Fluttershy. "I mean, yeah, we don't want her biting anypony, but do we really need her to be

tied up like this? Can't we just... lock her up or something?"

Twilight considered this, then nodded. "All right. Fluttershy, until we figure out what's going on, I'd like you to stay in my basement. I can rig up some space so you'll be comfortable without risking you hurting anypony."

"You wanna lock her up underground?" Rainbow Dash protested, flaring her wings in shock. "Are you trying to make her go crazy?"

"It's the safest place I know!" Twilight replied, looking briefly frustrated. "Besides, she's not as..." She searched for a diplomatic way to put it. "...into the air as you. Can you take care of Fluttershy's animals until we figure this out?"

Rainbow Dash hesitated, then nodded. "Don't worry about a thing, Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash is on the case!" Fluttershy wasn't so sure about the idea herself, but she had to admit, she didn't want to hurt Angel or any of the other animals that needed her care. Hesitantly, she offered a smile.

"Don't worry about a thing," Twilight said. "I'm sure I've read about your symptoms before. I'll have a cure figured out in no time!"

"This is gonna take forever," Twilight groaned, head sinking into her book.

Setting up somewhere to keep Fluttershy had been the easy part. She'd just had to clear out some of the junk she'd used in her ill-fated Pinkie Pie perusal, get some books and bedding set up, and make sure to lock the door. Fluttershy had been quietly accepting of her fate, settling in without complaint to read, eat the meals Spike brought her, and wait patiently while Twilight searched through her books or tried one of a dozen possible cures.

Unfortunately, the reference Twilight half-remembered was proving elusive. She'd found any number of references to some of the symptoms, but not the entire package. Worse, some of the diseases that sounded something like what Fluttershy had were incurable once they'd progressed this far, something that made a heavy weight settle in her stomach. And none of them mentioned the patient returning to normal, which Fluttershy

had... at least for the day.

As the evening grew near, though, Fluttershy had begun showing warning signs: increased irritability, restless energy, tensing and flexing her wings. She'd knocked her dinner out of Spike's hands and started eating it right off the floor, which Spike had considered reason enough to run upstairs and Twilight enough reason to lock the door. Then had come pleading to be let go, and then threats, and then violence—directed first at the door, then, when it refused to give, at anything she could get her hooves on. Twilight had already moved anything fragile or dangerous out of the basement, but she still cringed at the crashing and banging, and it didn't exactly help her study.

"Any luck?"

Sighing, Twilight turned to Spike. "Not really. I don't understand it! I've tried everything short of a stake to the heart, and nothing's worked! It's not a spell, it's not a disease... I don't know what it is!"

"Maybe you just need to take a break," Spike suggested. "You missed lunch and dinner." He looked accusingly at her, and she sighed softly, remembering the pride he took in his cooking.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "I just can't help but feel like I'm missing something important." She got up from the stack of books she'd been going through and started to follow Spike to the kitchen.

Then she stopped. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Spike asked, pausing and twitching his fins.

"Exactly," Twilight said, dashing over to the door to the basement. "Lock the front door. Be ready for anything." Carefully, trying to make as little sound as possible, Twilight opened the door, stepped inside... and gasped.

"She's gone!"

The flaw in Twilight's plan lay before the assembled ponies, a great earthen tunnel, large enough for a pony to work her way out through and leading right down to her basement. Piles of dirt were scattered all around, and hoofprints led only a short distance from the hole before vanishing into the grass.

"How could I have been so careless?" Twilight lamented. "I should have used chains! Or bars! Or chains and bars! Now she's loose, and it's all my fault!"

"At least she didn't stick around and get all bitey," Pinkie Pie consoled, or tried to. "Oooh, but what if she did? What if she bit me? Would we be fighty, or would it be like zombies? Zombies don't bite other zombies, right? She could bite every pony, and then we could have a meanie pony party! Oh wait, that's bad."

"I wouldn't blame yourself, dear," Rarity said. She'd been looking around the scene of the crime, so to speak, and now approached Twilight with a frown on her delicate features.

"Well, I can't blame Fluttershy!" Twilight protested. "She's sick, or possessed, or something! Why else would she dig her way out?"

"She didn't," Rarity said, and pointed with a hoof. Twilight looked blankly at the mound of dirt Rarity was pointing at... then started in shock.

"Somepony dug in!" She turned to the hoofprints, looking at them with a fresh eye, no longer distracted by shame. "Too many tracks... more than one pony. They took her... but how? And where?"

"I dunno about the how," Applejack said, having been doing some investigating of her own, "but I reckon I can find the where. They're good at hiding their trail, but not that good, and Fluttershy's hardly trying. Just lemme grab Winona and we'll have 'em tracked in two shakes."

Twilight nodded. "You do that. Rainbow Dash, you see if you can spot them from the air." The pegasus nodded and took off. "Rarity, Pinkie Pie, you get what you need to go after them." She glanced up at the cloudless sky. "At least the moon's full tonight. We shouldn't have any trouble..."

Spike blinked, looking over at Twilight, as she stopped talking and stared into space. The other ponies followed Spike's lead.

"...the moon! Of course! But I thought that was wiped out centuries ago!" Her eyes darted back and forth in a way he'd seen before, as if she were reading her own thoughts as they sped past her brain. "If it's true, that means..." She fell silent again, but just as Pinkie Pie, peering puzzledly at the purple pony, opened her mouth, Twilight spoke four familiar words—though they were words they weren't expecting to hear.

"Spike! Take a letter."

She ran.

There was no anger, no fear, no thought. Just the light of the moon, the soft grass underfoot, the warmth of the herd all around her.

There had been fear before, and anger, in the dark place, underground. Her herd had betrayed her, isolated her, punished her. She had struck out again and again, striving for freedom, achieving only destruction. Then she heard the sound... hooves scraping at dirt, stones flying, roots snapping. Fear had gripped her, leaving her helpless as she watched the unfamiliar ponies tear through the wall, like her yet not like her.

She had tried to fight, tried to break through and escape, but the leader had stopped her. They had fought, but only briefly, his strength and skill so much greater than her own that he was able to defeat her without so much as a mark on her skin. She understood, and knelt, and he accepted her submission, made her part of the herd.

Now she ran. She didn't know where they were running to. She didn't need to know. He knew, and she would follow him. He would keep her safe and protect her. Everything would be all right.

Suddenly, a shot of color pierced the darkened sky. It flew overhead, the wind whipping manes and rustling grass, leaving the herd confused and

uncertain. He calmed them with a dozen tiny gestures, ordered them to protect her with the slightest of sounds, and when the light came again, they stood their ground, lashing out with hooves and teeth, denying the predator its prize.

It screamed at them, its voice setting her ears back despite his presence. She knew it, she suddenly realized. It had been there, in the pain and darkness. Protecting her. It... she... was part of the old herd, the one who saved her, the one who wanted her to be free. For a moment, she yearned to join her, spread her wings the tiniest fraction... but she had a new herd now. She couldn't leave, not while they were fighting to protect her.

The brave pony screamed again.

"Twilight! I found them!"

Fluttershy had covered a surprising amount of ground, especially considering she'd been running, not flying. Twilight was gasping for breath by the time they reached Rainbow Dash, and Rarity looked ready to pass out. Applejack was fresher, despite the late hour, but even she was showing the strain. Only Pinkie Pie looked unaffected, and Twilight suspected she'd continue to look unaffected right until she keeled over and fell asleep on the spot.

There were six of them, she realized, including Fluttershy, all the rest of them earth ponies... or at least, earth ponies at the core. They were changed as well, but a different sort of change, one that made them heavier, more solid, shifting like stone. Even the smallest of them looked like Big Mac, and the leader was frighteningly large.

His teeth were even more formidable than Fluttershy's, looking like they could bite through wood, through stone, and each hoof looked heavy enough to crush gravel, with an edge she'd be hard-pressed to give a knife. There was cruelty in his every line, a power that waited only for the chance to hurt and kill. The only thing that didn't look dangerous was his cutie mark, three blue horseshoes... and with a shock, she realized she'd

seen it before.

It was Applejack who spoke. "Caramel?"

Then Twilight got another shock. "No. But I know him." The voice was rough, deep and dark, but clear nonetheless, and his green eyes had the spark of intelligence.

"You can talk!" she blurted, then cringed. "Way to go, Twilight," she added under her breath, but not quietly enough to avoid the stallion's notice, and he smirked.

"Yes. I can talk," he replied. "I have learned the ways of the Curse of the Night, as have all of my herd." The other ponies were watching her now, eyes sharp and savage, but aware. Only Fluttershy continued to look like a wild animal, held in place by something Twilight didn't understand.

"I don't care if you've mastered synchronized spitting!" Rainbow Dash demanded. "You give Fluttershy back!" The wild stallion glanced up at the pegasus, then snorted dismissively, returning his attention to Twilight.

"The Curse of the Night is dangerous," he said. "It drives us to hunt, to kill, to feed. You cannot fight it, not if you want to survive. It cannot be mastered by force. But it can be tamed."

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" Dash protested, looking ready to dart in and clip the stallion's nose, but Twilight looked up and glared.

"Not now, Rainbow Dash!" She returned her attention to the stallion, who seemed amused again.

"You understand the role of a leader," he said. "Good. Then understand this. No harm will come to her. I have taught others the ways of the Curse of the Night. I will teach her how to let the beast run free and how to call it back. She will learn to accept its strength without losing her will. She will have a new home, a new family, one she need not fear harming should she lose herself."

"She already has a family!" Applejack protested. "And I don't care what kind of mumbo jumbo you've got going on in her head, she's still our

Fluttershy!"

The stallion's lip curled nastily. "You would do well to remember your place."

"She knows her place," Twilight spoke, surprising even herself. "It's by the side of her friends. All of her friends." She met the stallion's gaze, felt the strength of everypony supporting her: Rainbow Dash's ferocity, Applejack's determination, Rarity's will, Pinkie Pie's joy. She could feel the gap where Fluttershy's reassuring gentleness should be, feel it reaching out and calling to the pegasus.

Fluttershy's wings trembled.

"So be it," the stallion replied. "If you think yourself a better leader than me..." He took a step forward, then another, with the inevitability of continental drift. "...then you can prove it."

Rainbow Dash frowned. What did he think he was trying to pull? She'd pulled some pretty boneheaded stunts in her time—and if she was brutally honest, 'her time' hadn't exactly come to an end—but challenging Twilight Sparkle to some sort of... of macho-off? Like they could solve the whole problem by smacking their heads together? No way. There was no way the smartest pony she knew was going to get involved in something as idiotic as oh gosh Twilight was stepping forward.

"Twilight, no!" she yelled, and the unicorn turned to her.

"I have to, Dash. They're bigger and stronger than us, and somepony could get seriously hurt if we fought."

"Somepony is gonna get seriously hurt!" Dash protested. "You don't know the first thing about fighting! Let me do it! I'll smack him silly!"

"It has to be me," Twilight replied, her voice calm but firm.

"But—"

"Rainbow Dash, promise me that you won't interfere. This has to be between him and me." Her gaze was unfaltering, her voice steady. In the face of that expression, what could the pegasus say?

"You'd better be right," she replied, hovering over to the other ponies, then landing and slouching sullenly. Applejack reached over with a hoof, touching her reassuringly. Rarity looked like she was choking on something, and Pinkie Pie's eyes were wide as saucers.

"I am," Twilight said, turning to face her opponent... then quailing as the sheer magnitude of her task sank in. "...I hope."

The stallion stood still, waiting for her to make the first move. For a moment, she wasn't even sure what to do; how could she fight somepony that big and strong? She'd only read about fighting in books! How was she supposed to—

A stray thought occurred to her. He hadn't said she had to beat him with her hooves, now had he? She crouched, focusing her will, and her horn flared violet.

"What are you—" the stallion began, then started as a matching glow surrounded his body, lifting off the ground. "What is this?"

"It's called magic," Twilight replied, the effort of levitating him leaving her feeling a touch snarky. "You may have heard of it."

"A trick," the stallion replied. "I know how to deal with tricks." He lashed out with one hoof—and incredibly, impossibly, cut the magic with that sharpened edge. Caught in the backlash of her own spell breaking, she could only stare in shock as he hopped to the ground, wisps of magic fading around him.

"My turn," he said, and charged her, incredibly fast, faster than a pony his size should be. Still off-balance, she was thrown backwards, landing on her back and sliding several feet before coming to a stop. Worse still, he was on top of her now, one hoof pressed against her chest, driving her into the earth.

"Twilight!" Applejack screamed, the ponies looking horrified. Twilight struggled to push that hoof off of her, but it might as well have been made of stone.

"It needn't end this way," the stallion rumbled, practically in her ear. "Your loyalty is admirable. Submit. The Curse of the Night can be shared. Join the herd, and you can be with your friend once more."

Twilight gritted her teeth, staring defiantly up at the stallion. "I won't... submit... to you!" she replied, her horn glowing again... then vanished. He stumbled, hoof sinking into the ground where she had been, and she appeared a short distance away, bruised but intact.

"Woo hoo!" Pinkie Pie yelled, having gotten a banner with Twilight's face on it from... somewhere. "Way to go, Sparkle!"

"You're only delaying the end!" the stallion roared, charging Twilight even as she rolled to her hooves. She stood her ground until the last possible second, horn lowered as if to gouge his chest—then leapt sideways, rolling once and finding her hooves again. The stallion was quicker than he should be, but not quite quick enough to match her move.

Twilight watched him set up for another charge, bracing herself to dodge again. She'd have to wear him out somehow, keep him making those wild charges until he couldn't move fast enough to keep her from hitting him back. She didn't want to hurt him, but if that was the only thing he'd understand—

He rushed her again, and she rolled—realizing too late that it was a feint. He drew himself up short as she moved to the side, then rolled to *his* side, crushing her again under his sheer bulk. Thankfully he didn't stay there, completing the roll and getting to his hooves, but the cold ground had offered little cushioning, and she staggered upright only with difficulty.

"You big jerk!" Rainbow Dash yelled. "How about you pick on someone your own size?"

"Not very likely," Twilight mumbled, trying to focus. The stallion was coming at her again, slower, but not nearly slowly enough for her

liking. She needed something, anything to throw at him.

Then she looked down.

Her horn flaring again was the only warning the stallion got before the ground in front of him flung itself into his eyes, leaving him to stagger back with a roar of anger. She ran at him, horn lowered and still glowing, only to disappear just before she reached him—reappearing above him, facing down. The assembled ponies gaped as she crashed into his back like a violet missile, driving him to his knees and bouncing off like a rubber ball.

"Well done, Twilight!" Rarity enthused. The barrier spell Twilight had used was meant to protect a pony, but the unicorn had flawlessly and elegantly combined it with an improvised alteration of her own teleport spell in a way her own humble skills could not begin to match.

Twilight was feeling a little giddy after the success of her gambit, beginning to think she might win this after all. She doubted the stallion would fall for the same trick twice, though; she needed something else. Concentrating, she poured her magic into the ground beneath him, and was gratified to hear him bellow in protest as he sank up to his ankles in dirt before it froze solid. "Stay down!" she said, electing to charge him with the barrier in front of her, then leap and hit him in the head.

Then, before her disbelieving eyes, he tore free, bringing his hooves up just as she was about to hit him, blocking her leap... and carrying her to the ground. The barrier absorbed most of the impact, but was unable to take the full force, popping like a soap bubble and leaving her pinned beneath him. Panicking, barely able to breathe, she tried to teleport out again, but lost her focus when sharp teeth cradled her neck.

As the ponies looked on, four of them in shock, four of them in silent approval, and one of them torn between loyalties old and new, the stallion spoke. "Submit."

Twilight struggled, but it was useless; if she even started casting a spell, he could tear out her throat, and she was just no match for him physically. She knew what was coming, and she squeezed her eyes shut... but nonetheless she opened her mouth to say

"No."

Twilight blinked. That hadn't been her voice.

There was a sudden rush of motion, and the pressure was taken off her body. Confused, she looked up to see the stallion staring in shock, not at her, but at—Princess Luna?

The alicorn looked different than Twilight had seen her look before, not the dark reflection of Princess Celestia that was Nightmare Moon, nor the smaller form, timid as a foal, that she had taken after being purged by the Elements of Harmony. She was tall and slender and beautiful, yet strong and sure and terrible, standing under the light of the full moon and glowing with her birthright.

Twilight's friends looked on in amazement, even Pinkie Pie's face curved in an 'ooh', but the effect on the stallion and his herd was even more dramatic. They were cringing as if the moonlight burned them, staring at the princess with expressions mixing fear and desire, unable to move a step.

"You will not kill in my name." With that, the glow surrounding Princess Luna rose to an almost painful intensity, and with it, the light of the moon above turned night into day. Twilight's eyes were watering, but the effect on her was nothing compared to that on the cursed stallions, who screamed and writhed in the light—no, they remained still, but their shadows writhed and hissed and fought until they could withstand it no longer, tearing free. They were drawn to Luna like moths to a flame (or like moths to the moon, some analytical part of Twilight's mind reminded her), pulled into that light and destroyed utterly.

After a long moment, the light faded, first to a glow, then to a glimmer. As Twilight's eyes strained to adjust, she could see the silhouette of Luna shrink and fade, becoming once more the smaller of the two princesses. The light hadn't completely gone away, however, for next to Luna stood—

"Princess Celestia!" Forgetting her own pain and injuries, Twilight struggled to her hooves and hurried forward, her friends following her example. Celestia smiled gently, turning her eyes to Twilight, her voice

soothing and warm.

"My faithful student. Did you think I wouldn't come?"

"I—" Twilight began, then realized she didn't know where she was going from there. "What did you—what did she—what happened?"

"The Curse of the Night is a terrible thing," Celestia replied, her expression turning somber. "The strength and speed it grants is only good for bringing violence and pain. That these ponies have lived with it and done so little harm is to be commended." Twilight noticed the ponies approaching, heads downcast, bodies humble. "But I had thought I had seen the last of its victims so long ago."

"We went into hiding," the stallion said, and Twilight realized that he had changed, if subtly. He was still bigger than any stallion she had ever seen, all the strength of the earth in each step, but no longer was it a cruel strength. His hooves and teeth had lost their deformities, and his eyes had changed from a dangerous green to a warm silver.

"Those of us who could control it," he continued, and the four ponies with him completed the circle that Twilight and her friends had unconsciously formed. "We learned how to keep from hurting the ones we cared about... how to hold the beast in and when to let it run. We put our ears in every village, listening for the signs that another had fallen victim to the curse. Forgive me," he said, turning to Twilight. "When you did not back down, I... let the beast take me. I am glad I did not hurt you."

"Um," a small voice asked, and Twilight turned to Fluttershy—and gasped. Before, she had been a swift and dangerous predator, held in check only by the charisma of the cursed herd's leader. Now, her body was light but not delicate, an energy almost like dance suffusing her steps. Her mane and tail were still wild, but it was the joyous energy of Rainbow Dash's mane, not some snarled and ragged thing. (Rainbow Dash found herself wondering if she could make the long-haired look work.) Even her eyes had changed, returned to innocence and wonder... but silver, not green.

For a moment, Twilight felt the urge to look for a horn on Fluttershy's brow.

"If you don't mind me asking," Fluttershy wondered, pushing through the circle to stand in its center, "how come we still look like... this?" She dipped her head slightly, indicating the changes still present in her and in the other ponies.

The answer came not from Princess Celestia but from her sister. "The Curse of the Night had another name, long ago," Princess Luna spoke, looking slowly around the circle. "When Equestria was still wild and free, before you little ponies claimed it for your own. Before my madness." She inclined her head, but only briefly, lifting it again to look each pony in the eye before speaking.

"It was called the Blessing of the Moon."

Fluttershy sighed softly, sipping her tea, wriggling a little as she sunk into the warmth of her couch. It had been a hectic week, but at last it was done and behind her. The strange ponies who had come to 'rescue' her that night had helped to repair the damage done to Twilight Sparkle's tree, then left the way they came, speaking hopefully of reuniting with former friends and family. One had stayed, a face she'd seen around town before but never spoken to, keeping their network alive.

Princess Luna was using that network to find the other cursed ponies, freeing them of the burden of Nightmare Moon's taint on her power. In time, she had said, she hoped there would never be another to face that burden. Princess Celestia had personally gone to the Everfree, using her light to purge the darkness; the animals living there had no need of Luna's blessing and would be happiest returning to their own kind.

Pinkie Pie had thrown a party, of course. Fluttershy had enjoyed herself immensely, especially when she was able to get through the whole thing without having a panic attack or finding somewhere to hide. She didn't think she'd ever be as outgoing as that party pony, but she'd found a new, quiet strength to help her carry on.

The others had each dealt with what had happened in their own ways. Twilight had insisted on closely examining her, taking copious notes

and comparing them to ancient texts on loan from the Canterlot library. Rarity had hinted at elegant, tasteful evening wear, and though Fluttershy had ultimately declined, she did let the unicorn take her measurements... just in case. Applejack had brought her enough apple-based treats to keep her well-fed while Angel recovered from greenlung, saving her trips into town. As for Rainbow Dash, she'd apparently been working on some special, night-time acrobatics routines, and Fluttershy was expecting the cajoling to join her in the sky sooner rather than later.

She glanced up from the couch, feeling a restless tingling in her body, and stood. It was a shame that Princess Luna seemed to feel there wasn't a place in Equestria for the Blessing of the Moon. It was a sorrow she carried, not the shame of madness past but the vague yearning of the explorer reaching the end of the world, a regret at savage beauty having been replaced with well-tended peace. Fluttershy wasn't sure what could be done for the princess, or even if there was anything to do, but she'd resolved to find a way to help.

But that could wait. For now, Fluttershy ventured to the door on legs that seemed less willing to touch the ground with each step, pausing just before venturing outside to turn to Angel.

"Now, you be good while I'm out, okay, Angel?" she said. The rabbit nodded, then gave her a thumbs-up, watching from the window as she ventured onto the cobbles in front of her cottage. She took a moment to admire it as day gave way to night, especially the newest addition: a wide stretch of land which she'd planted with every grass and bush and moss she could find in the Everfree. She didn't know what would live and what would die; ultimately that would be up to it, to thrive or wither, as she simply watched and waited.

Just as it used to happen, so long ago.

She felt the ache in her bones and knew it was time. Her body grew taller and slenderer. Her mane and tail sprung free from their neat and tidy combing. Her wings stretched, flapping once in anticipation. She looked up at the moon, and her eyes caught and held its light.

Then, with a delicate spring, she let her thoughts fade...

...and flew.

Rarity

Blood and Water

Ponyville was silent tonight, as it was almost every night. Though some ponies were still up looking at the stars, reading a favorite book, or trying to get important work done before the morrow, as a whole the little ponies preferred to be in bed before midnight.

Which suited Count Drache perfectly. The stallion moved through the night like a shadow, his deep red coat and silver mane strangely hidden in the darkness. By his side, another earth pony moved, some commoner who'd tarried too long in the marketplace. He'd been simplicity itself to transfix with a gaze, and now he would serve the most important, and last, duty of his life: a first meal for Drache's chosen bride.

Drache's eyes saw better at night than they did in the day, easily picking out his target: the Ponyville Cemetery. It was a small plot, for Ponyville was a happy place seldom visited by the specter of death, and ill-fitting his treasure. Indeed, the entire town was entirely too provincial for his tastes, in more than one sense. No matter. Once his business was concluded, he and she would be far away from here, in much more fertile hunting grounds.

As he approached the grave in question, his sensitive ears could already hear the sound of hooves scrabbling, supernatural strength tearing apart oak like paper. The ground sank as dirt filled the coffin, shifted as the form beneath pushed through it as easily as water, surfacing at last to gaze on the world with hungry eyes. As she pulled the rest of her body free from the earth, he took a moment just to marvel at her transformation.

She was... perfect. Just as she had hoped. Even with the earth of the grave dusting her coat, her body was flawlessly radiant, shining like a jewel under the moonlit sky. Her violet mane, though disheveled and dirty, still managed to look better than that of any of the yokels she'd been wasting her beauty on in Ponyville. And her eyes! Blazing with hunger, yet still as gorgeous as when he first saw her. A stallion could die happy looking into those eyes.

Speaking of, she'd swiftly spotted his offering. Without a sound, she pounced, bearing the local to the ground, sinking her teeth into his broad neck. He whinnied once as Drache's hold broke, then fell silent as her own power washed over him. It was intoxicating to watch.

A pony cried, "Now!"

And night turned to day.

Roaring as the light of the sun reached over the mountains impossibly early, Drache looked around blindly for a moment, then turned to focus on the source of the voice. From behind a pile of stacked wood, a lavender unicorn emerged, gazing defiantly at him, her body tense with anger. His powers were greatly diminished during the day, but nonetheless he tried to grip her mind with his own eyes—only to slide uselessly off as he glimpsed the object she levitated before her.

Seriously? *A framed portrait of Celestia* was her holy symbol?

He turned to run, only to be confronted by another pony, this one an orange earth pony draped with long strands of garlic. She was watching him without meeting his gaze, a lasso already spinning, no doubt to pin him while the other struck. Two pegasi emerged to block the sky, not that he could reach it under this accursed light, one pushing a raincloud that sparkled in a way he didn't like the look of, the other meeting his gaze with one that forced him to turn away.

Backing up, he stumbled against the grave, finding his bride and her feast still locked together, ignorant of the danger. "Back!" he shouted. "Back, all of you, if you want your friend to survive this night!" He saw them stop advancing and permitted himself to preen. The situation was dangerous, yes, but he might still escape, returning to the relative safety of—

He never even saw the pink pony burst from the grave behind him, holding a wooden stake and an impossibly large mallet. He merely felt the sharp pain as the stake burst through his chest.

"Oh, horse—" was all he had time to say before he burned to ash.

The assembled ponies, and one other, gathered swiftly at the grave, Applejack pulling a dazed Big Macintosh away from an equally confused Rarity.

"Thank you, Princess Celestia," Twilight Sparkle said, a look of relief on her face. "I don't know if we could have done it without you."

"You're welcome, my faithful student," Celestia replied, her body relaxing as the sun reversed its motion and sank below the horizon again. "You know that I am there for you and all your friends... especially against such a vile creature." She stepped up to the pile of ash and kicked it, dispersing it further with a swift flutter of her wings.

"I just wish I'd believed you sooner," Twilight added, looking at Pinkie Pie and very carefully not thinking about how the pony had jumped out of Rarity's grave. "Maybe we could have avoided all this."

"It's okay, Twilight!" Pinkie said, cheery as usual. "I got to practice my staking technique. Rrr. Whack!" She drove her stake into thin air demonstratively.

"I knew that pony was no good the moment I saw him," Applejack spit, looking up from Big Macintosh, having satisfied herself that her brother would live through the experience, if weakened. "I never thought he'd be an actual bloodsucker, though. Why'd you have to get involved?" This last was directed at Big Macintosh, who was still too out of it to answer.

"I'm just glad all of this is over," Fluttershy murmured, hooves clasped in front of her in the air, while Rainbow Dash tried to figure out the proper way to dispose of a raincloud blessed by Celestia herself.

"I do hate to interrupt..."

All eyes turned to Rarity, who'd managed to regain her composure as much as possible under the circumstances. Running her tongue over her teeth wasn't the most elegant of gestures, but it served to illustrate her point... or rather, her points.

"...but it seems you all have neglected a small detail."

"Oh crud," Twilight said, speaking for all assembled.

Rarity's 'welcome back' party was much better received than her funeral.

Pinkie Pie, oddly enough, had planned both, and even reused some of the decorations. Black balloons dangled everywhere, along with black streamers, black-frosted cupcakes, and black punch. (Pinkie Pie insisted it was made from a secret blend of fruit juices, but Applejack had spilled some on the tablecloth and found the pattern bleached when she mopped it up. She was quietly staying away from the punch.) The only decoration that wasn't in some way black was a big white and purple banner that said 'NOT QUITE DEAD YET' in sloppy but legible letters.

Rarity, naturally, was the focus of conversation. In an elegant evening gown (which she'd made herself, equally naturally), she entertained the attentions of well-wishers, answered the questions of those curious about the experience, and treated her own fallibility with humorous grace.

"I don't know what I was thinking," she said to yet another pony. "I mean, 'Count Drache'? The way he always insisted on meeting at night? That *cape*? Oh, I should have known better, but... I suppose it was the allure of it all, that old-fashioned charm. And it could have turned out much worse, all things considered—"

"Hi, Rarity!" Pinkie Pie said, popping up next to her. "More punch?"

Rarity looked down at her own glass, shaped differently than every other cup at the party and filled with a deep red fluid. "—then again, it could have turned out better." She sipped ruefully at the beverage, which was at least tolerably warm. "No thank you, dear."

"Okay! You just lemme know!" Pinkie said, heading off to mingle. "There's plenty more where that came from!"

Very carefully not thinking about that, Rarity returned her attention to the guests, only to be interrupted again, this time by Twilight Sparkle.

"Hey, Rarity. Princess Celestia said the only thing she could do for you is... put you to rest. But she's going to have everything that might help me find a cure sent over as soon as possible. I'm sorry the whole killing the siring vampire thing didn't work out." She fidgeted nervously, and Rarity put on a smile to reassure her.

"It's quite all right, Twilight," she replied. "Without your efforts, I'm afraid Count Drache and I would be swept into the alleys of Manehattan, lurking like vultures and hurting who knows how many other ponies. You've done your very best."

Twilight didn't look entirely reassured. "Well, I promise to keep doing my best until you're back to normal," she said. Rarity inclined her head slowly, and Twilight mixed back into the crowd, only to be replaced by Spike.

"Rarity, I just want you to know, if there's *anything* you need, just—" he began, only to be levitated into the air by Twilight. "What? Hey! Twilight! I wasn't gonna let her suck my blood! Well, okay, maybe just a little, but—Twiliiiiight!" Rarity watched as the baby dragon was dragged backward through the crowd, then sighed softly.

"So what's it like?" Rainbow Dash wondered, avoiding the assembled ponies by the simple expedient of hovering above them and dropping into place.

"Well, my senses are sharper," Rarity replied. "At night, at least. I feel stronger and faster, and my magic is more delicate than ever before. I've been having trouble staying up during the day, though. And while I can eat, well, it doesn't... satisfy." She looked at her 'punch' again, the glass held in magic that glowed a deeper, redder violet than she was used to, and took another sip. "And I've had to re-coordinate my entire wardrobe," she lamented. "Violet is hard enough to work with, but violet and red?" Her eyes lacked the glow of her first hunger, but they were still blood red, and her cutie mark had darkened and reddened as well. At least her coat was still pale and perfect, and her mane was, if anything, more lustrous than before.

"Um, don't forget Angel bunny," Fluttershy said, having somehow found a gap in the crowd to walk into. Rarity sighed.

"How can I forget? The little monst—uh, I mean, the poor thing was driven into a rage at the very sight of me!" Rarity said, absently touching her face with a hoof. The scratches had healed, but the memory lingered. "I don't think I'm going to be sitting for your animals any time soon."

"At least Winona still likes you," Applejack interjected, taking the spot Rainbow Dash had vacated as soon as Rarity started talking fashion. Rarity didn't quite have the heart to tell her that Winona had been just as vicious as Angel until she stared the dog down, and since then Winona had been almost embarrassingly glad to see her. She suspected she'd used some power over animals by accident.

Speaking of acting strange, Big Macintosh had come up beside his sister, and the look he was giving her was a touch more intense than she was used to getting from the seldom-spoken stallion. "Are you feeling all right, miss Rarity?" he said.

"Yes, of course," she said, tipping her head slightly. "I should be asking that of you, I think."

"I'm fine," he replied, reaching up to absently rub at a mark on the side of his neck. She hadn't been exactly graceful on her first feeding, but the wound had healed a lot better than it had any right to. "A big pony like me's got lotsa blood. You don't need to worry none; I know you didn't mean anything by it."

Rarity nodded. "That's very kind of you. Thank you." She made to turn to one of the other partygoers, but Big Macintosh's gaze never left her, and she was drawn back. "Is there something else?"

Big Macintosh fidgeted. "Uh. No, ma'am," he said, but he didn't look away.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Well, all right, then," she said, turning after a moment and walking away herself. She could feel his eyes on her as she lost herself in the crowd.

Rarity's awakening felt like a switch had been flipped. One second, she was off; the next, she was on, lifting her head from the table and looking about confusedly. Only when she looked out the window and saw the faint glow of the just-set sun did she realize what had happened.

"I slept again!" she groaned, hitting the table with both hooves. At first, she'd assumed that, as long as she turned in early, she'd get her sleep schedule back to normal; then, when that proved impossible, she'd tried staying up late to wear herself out. Neither had worked. She could be awake during the day, even if she felt somewhat... lessened... but she couldn't seem to stay awake for more than a few hours before falling nearly comatose, only the disappearance of Celestia's sun releasing her.

"This just can't go on," she said, sliding to a standing position and beginning to pace. Opalescence, who'd been entirely indifferent to her transformation, stretched briefly, then dozed back off, as she passed. "The whole point of having a boutique is that nothing is off the rack! I need to measure customers, spend time with them, discern that inner beauty that my designs can bring to life!" She glanced out the window again. "Maybe I can switch to night hours? No, that will never work. I must have *somepony* around during the day. An assistant? Oh, but who could I possibly get? Who else in Ponyville knows anything about..."

As she finished the sentence, Rarity trailed to a halt. "...sewing." After a moment, she started pacing again. "But that would never do. Fluttershy can't handle the demands of working with the public. If *somepony* were to be too loud, or worse, criticized her... Not to mention that she'd never leave her animals untended!"

She spun around suddenly. "Oh, but I simply must! She's the only pony with even half my talent! She can take measurements, and I can do design work at night. I'd miss seeing the finished effect... no, they can come by at sunset for their final fitting. Yes, that should work nicely. If only I can convince her!"

She paused again, thinking about it carefully. "Maybe I can get someone else to watch over her animals during the afternoon. But who? I'd need someone dependable, someone she can trust. Someone good with animals. Someone who owes me a favor—"

The sound of hoofsteps disrupted her train of thought. "Now who could that be?" she wondered, heading out of the back room and putting her best face forward. "Welcome to the Carousel Boutique, where—Big Macintosh?" He was quite possibly the last pony she expected to see here, just behind Rainbow Dash, but there he was, standing just inside the doorway.

"Eeyup," he replied, once more his usual taciturn self. Rarity raised an eyebrow.

"Well, not that you aren't welcome here, darling, but what brings you by?" she asked. Oddly, he didn't answer, just shuffling his hooves. She cast about for the reason he might be silent. "You needn't worry if it's anything... embarrassing. I can keep matters in the strictest of confidence." Still nothing. "Big Macintosh, I'm not a mind reader. Are you here to pick something up? I don't believe Applejack has placed any..."

Rarity trailed off, defeated by the silence. She could feel her temper growing; she was upset with herself at once again having failed to keep the shop open, and she was hungry to boot, as Twilight Sparkle had insisted she stay on a minimal diet while the studious unicorn tried different spells and potions over the last few days in an unsuccessful effort to rid her of her curse.

"Big Macintosh, look at me," she demanded, and the surprised stallion met her gaze. "I demand that you tell me what this is about this instant!"

"Well, I've been thinkin' about when we were in the graveyard and you bit me," he said, his voice his own yet somehow distant. "It hurt at first, but then it started feelin' really good. I know you've been gettin' blood from Pinkie Pie, but I reckon it ain't the same. So I thought maybe, if I hung around..."

Rarity looked shocked for multiple reasons. One was that she had a strong suspicion she knew what she had just done. Her novels had been far from silent on the compelling gaze of the vampire, and while Twilight's research had been focused on some way to undo the change without killing Rarity, she'd alluded to 'unique magical powers' in the middle of one of their sessions.

The other was that Big Macintosh was right. She could still enjoy a fine grape juice or a delicate biscuit, but they didn't satisfy her hunger. The blood that Pinkie Pie delivered from... someone or other, she'd never actually gotten the details... filled her belly, but it had a horrid chemical taste, and she could only get it lukewarm at best. Add to that her starvation at Twilight's hooves, and...

She ran her tongue over her lips absently. Big Macintosh seemed mesmerized by the sight. It would be so easy to—

No. She closed her eyes, shook her head, and heard him stumble back half a step. But the thought remained. "Big Macintosh," she said carefully, "you... you're only saying that because I'm... influencing you. It wouldn't be proper. I won't... I can't ask that of you."

The boutique was quiet for a long moment, the only sound in Rarity's mind the argument between selflessness and hunger. Then the stallion spoke again. "Yer right. You did do something to me, I think. But you're hurting right now, and... well, it just don't sit right with me, leaving you like that. You can do it without... y'know, anything permanent... can't you?"

Twilight Sparkle had very carefully measured her intake, and she'd seen a chart in Twilight's notes, the rate at which different ponies naturally replaced their blood. She didn't need much. A big, healthy stallion like Big Macintosh...

"Are you sure about this?" she asked. Silence answered her, and it occurred to her that, if he said no at this point, it would be very difficult to let him leave. She had to be strong, though, no matter how much it hurt. She couldn't be the element of Generosity if she were to greedily snatch at—

"Eeyup."

She wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly, but she risked opening her eyes, looking at him sideways so as to not risk doing what she'd done again. He looked nervous, even hesitant... but he took a step forward anyway.

"Well," she said, not sure what else to say. "Well. I suppose you'd better

come in, then."

And so he did.

They'd had to tell Applejack, of course.

They'd worked out a plan, afterward, while he rested and she plied him with tea, feeling shame at her weakness, yet feeling alive in a way she hadn't since that dreadful night. In the afternoon, Big Macintosh would set off from the farm to Fluttershy's, and she would, in turn, come to the Boutique, taking measurements and careful notes on the customers' desires. She would be difficult to convince, but Rarity was certain that, in the end, Fluttershy would be unable to deny her need, and she would make it quite plain that anypony who gave Fluttershy the least bit of trouble would have to answer to her. Rarity could then spend the evening designing and tailoring, able to relax and enjoy herself fully for the first time in weeks.

No plan ever survives contact with the enemy. Applejack had been furious, both at Rarity and at Big Macintosh, when Rarity told her what the two had done. She'd only been more upset when Winona had taken Rarity's side, barking and growling at the earth pony when she threatened to run Rarity off the farm. Add to that Big Macintosh asking to take time off from farming to help Rarity, and the sometimes bristly earth pony had very nearly gotten violent with the both of them. Rarity could understand her concerns, but it hurt all the same.

It didn't help any to hear it all again from Twilight when she got back to Ponyville at the break of dawn, already beginning to feel the effects of the sun. At least Twilight had been easier to deal with. The studious unicorn felt too bad about her own failure to find a solution to dig too deeply into Rarity's hide, and at any rate her connection to the situation wasn't nearly so intimate. She'd also been intrigued by Rarity's confirmation of at least part of the lore she'd been studying, and shifted her focus from finding a cure to determining the extent of Rarity's powers and limitations.

Which was why Rarity was, at the moment, sitting in Twilight Sparkle's basement, enduring various indignities. She'd answered several questions

more or less automatically over the past few weeks. Yes, she still had a reflection and a shadow. No, she didn't become grotesque when preparing to feed. Yes, the day weakened her, but no, she didn't go up in a bonfire in direct sunlight.

Twilight had many more questions where those came from, though. She'd had silver pressed against her skin (no effect), been force-fed garlic (vomiting, but no lingering damage), had holy symbols wielded against her (effective, but only when Twilight was actively using them to hold her at bay, and they didn't seem to work for any other pony), and been tested against running water, entering private residences, and even having rice flung at her feet (no effect, except an annoyed Twilight and an apologetic Pinkie Pie).

In return, her senses, at least at night, had become incredibly keen; she could hear tiny sounds without everything around her seeming like a roar, and even the faintest speck of light was enough for her to read easily. She'd lifted an entire bank of delicate measuring equipment without even breaking a sweat and snatched a bit off a table before Twilight saw her hoof move. She'd also known her magic had gained a new, more delicate touch, but how delicate she hadn't realized until she'd scratched her name in a copper plate in writing so small Twilight needed a magnifying glass to read it.

Twilight removed the hoof cuffs from Rarity's forelegs—had those really been necessary to study her horn?—and said, "Well, I can't think of anything else to test tonight." Twilight stifled a yawn. "We can look into transformations tomorrow."

"Transformations?" Rarity wondered, tilting her head just so. "You mean, turning into a wolf or a bat or some dreadful thing?"

Twilight shrugged. "You never know. You might need it someday. Besides, I thought you'd be interested in another chance to fly."

Rarity pondered that as she made her way out of the lab and library. Fluttering into the sky in the form of some leather-winged rodent was hardly the majestic ascent she'd been capable of in Cloudsdale. On the other hoof, that hubris had led to a quite literal fall from grace, and she hadn't even considered having the spell cast again since. This would be a

more modest way to take to the skies... and there was a certain appeal to the idea.

She couldn't just wing off willy-nilly, though; she had work to do, work she'd been putting off to deal with Twilight's investigations, and by the time she'd finished with everything that needed doing, it was only an hour until dawn. She briefly considered waiting until the next night, but the idea had been gnawing at the back of her head for hours. She could at least test it. Yes, a quick loop around Ponyville, and then straight back to the shop to rest.

She stepped out onto the street in front of her shop, looked around, and pondered how exactly vampires went about transforming, presuming that wasn't an old mare's tale in the first place. Did she need to think batty thoughts? Was it a spell she should cast? Would jumping off of something give her extra motivation or just lead to an undignified flop on the ground?

She closed her eyes, attempting to meditate and simply will flight to happen, and after a moment she felt an odd rush of energy inside her. Could this be it? She struggled to hold herself in that state, to let the energy flow—

—and then the world turned into a blur of motion and sound.

She was flying, she vaguely realized, flying incredibly quickly, but she couldn't quite tell where. Her vision was blurred, images doubling despite her best efforts, colors and angles weird. Sounds pulsed at her head from all directions, and when she cried out that only made it worse, the echos seeming to rub against her as if she were actually hitting what they were echoing off of. Her body was all wrong, and if she tried to think too hard about it, she completely lost control, but if she didn't think about it she was only giving suggestions anyway.

She wondered vaguely if bats could vomit. Fluttershy would know. Oddly enough, she thought she could see something that resembled Fluttershy's cottage now, but she couldn't possibly have traveled that far that qui—

"Never again," Rarity snarled, stalking into the Carousel Boutique.

She'd learned several important lessons today, she reflected. One, a vampiric constitution was insufficient protection against ramming into the side of a building at Rainbow Dash's average cruising speed. Two, the break of day did not mean that she was forced into her natural form but that she was trapped in whatever form she had taken until sunset. Three, Fluttershy really did have an uncanny knack for understanding animal communication, even if the animal in question wasn't technically an animal at all. Four, that wouldn't stop Fluttershy from pampering her like any other injured animal for *the entire morning*. Angel's smugness had been palpable. At least Big Macintosh had shown up right on cue and given her time and space to scrape up her dignity.

She'd learned something else important when she was able to return to normal. Flying took a lot out of her, and the hunger that had gnawed at her all day roared to life, driving her to take him by the throat before she was even aware she'd changed back. When she'd been able to release him, she'd been horrified by the results; he was pale and cold, and she feared he might pass out or worse.

In desperation, she'd brought her hoof to her mouth, drawn her teeth across her fetlock, and cut herself badly, pressing the hoof to Big Macintosh's lips and forcing him to drink. The results were as immediate as they were gratifying; while he remained worryingly pale, drinking her blood swiftly returned his strength, and he'd looked almost normal by the time he finished.

She slumped on her bed, closing her eyes and sighing. So far being a vampire had entirely failed to live up to the romance and glamor she'd been promised. She missed being out and about in Ponyville during the day, listening to gossip or being roped into some adventure with her friends. She missed spending time with Sweetie Belle, who she now only saw awake for an hour or so in the morning and a few hours at night. She even missed Applejack; they'd never been close friends, precisely, but there was something about their friendship, something she was hard-pressed to define, that was important to her, and she felt its absence keenly.

A gentle nuzzling drew her from her self-pity, and she looked puzzledly up at Big Macintosh. She hadn't even realized he'd followed her home.

"If, uh, there's anything I can do to make you feel better... anything at all..." He let the statement hang, looking at her with the same dumb happiness she'd most recently seen in Winona's eyes.

She couldn't cope. She groaned, slid her forelegs over her head, and prayed she'd wake up and this would all be a horrible nightmare.

She hadn't woken up yet.

Applejack had been even more furious, at Rarity and at Big Macintosh, when she found out what had happened. She'd told her brother in no uncertain terms that Rarity was not welcome near her, the farm, or any of her clan, and that the only reason she wasn't kicking him out as well was that he was family. Then she'd thrown her hooves around him and cried herself sick.

Her other friends had been making an effort to make things easier for her, despite their reservations. Fluttershy had been looking after Sweetie Belle in the afternoon after school in addition to her duties as the Carousel Boutique's assistant manager. Rainbow Dash would stop by sometimes in the evenings to share news of the day (inevitably centered on her own exploits, but it was better than nothing). Pinkie Pie had come up with something she called a portable personal party package, which seemed to involve coming over, redecorating Rarity's bedroom in gaudy colors, setting out a tray of nocturnal-themed snacks, and talking her ear off in a rambling stream-of-consciousness session.

Only Twilight Sparkle declined to visit her, instead extending an open invitation to visit her at the library, stargazing or reading or 'whatever you like'. Rarity had taken her up on the offer a few times, but it had proven awkward. Twilight's increasing frustration at her inability to keep her promise kept distracting her, and she would inevitably wind up with her nose in yet another esoteric tome, searching for an answer. Rarity was starting to worry about her; the latest shipment of books from Canterlot had

come with two royal guards posted in the basement, and Rarity hadn't liked the look of the books at all. Even if Twilight found an answer there, Rarity feared the price would be too high.

Rarity felt the weight of responsibility for Big Macintosh, and she was determined to treat him as well as possible. She'd been giving him a little of her own blood each night, and the effect on his health was remarkable. He'd doubled his productivity on the farm, and the last time she'd dared to ask, he'd rated Applejack's attitude toward the whole mess as 'hot as a stove when you've just done cooking', which she supposed was an improvement over 'madder than a chicken with her feathers plucked'.

Unfortunately, the process was not without side effects. The strange feelings she had awoken in him with her first feeding had only intensified when she'd let him taste her blood, and he'd begun treating her downright affectionately, finding excuses to linger at the boutique after her evening 'meal', listening raptly as she talked to him about the latest styles and her struggles with design, encouraging her to lean on him as she vented her frustrations. Much as she knew these feelings were a byproduct of her own power—or perhaps more accurately the direct result of them, with his increased health and strength a bonus—she had to admit, it felt good to be appreciated, even if he wasn't quite the stallion of her dreams.

"And look how well that went," she muttered, finishing a seam. Still, things were settling into a routine at last. Big Macintosh's increased strength and stamina let him get his daily chores done in the morning, leaving him free to relieve Fluttershy without regret. Fluttershy was handling working at the boutique better than Rarity had dared hope, and she was finally able to attend properly to her design work.

Lifting the dress from the sewing machine, she studied it carefully, then nodded, satisfied. Careful not to wake Sweetie Belle, she moved it to a mannequin, pulling gently on the fabric with her magic to arrange it just so, then imagining it over the customer's body. Perfect as always. She'd have Fluttershy let the customer know to come by tomorrow evening for the final fitting, and then—

There was a sharp rap on the door. "Now who could that be?" she grumbled, walking into the front of the store and opening the door. Then

blinking and staring.

It was the most abysmally-dressed stallion she had ever seen. He was wearing some sort of wide-brimmed hat, a long cloak, and leggings that covered his entire belly, all made of pressed, waterproof wool of a dismal gray hue that largely hid his blue coat and brown mane. As if that weren't bad enough, he had a large, golden pendant around his neck that she found almost physically painful to look at for its gaudiness, and a broad band of—was that leather?—around his throat. For a moment, she felt like laughing at the ridiculousness of it all.

"I'm sorry, sir, but much as you are in dire need of my services, you really should come by in the afternoon," she said.

The stallion snorted. "Actually, I was just hoping you might answer a question for me. Would you mind taking a look at this?" He raised one hoof, displaying a silver medallion with an unusual design.

"I'm a dress-maker, not an antique dealer," Rarity replied, but nonetheless reached out with her magic to take the medallion. "I'm not sure what you... want me to..."

She couldn't get a grip on it. Her magic was just sliding off...

...like it had when she'd attempted to take Twilight Sparkle's portrait of Celestia away. She looked up at the stallion, who was looking quite fiercely at her now, but not quite meeting her gaze.

"That's all I needed to know," he said, crouching, bringing the other foreleg up and revealing a strange device of wood and metal strapped to it. Ponies had little use for bows, but she'd read about them in novels of distant lands, and the device resembled a bow of sorts. Furthermore, it was armed with not an arrow but a short, broad stake, which he was pointing directly at her.

"You can't be serious," she said, voice calm despite her nerves, and reached out with her magic to disarm the contraption—only to find her power sliding off it, her gaze drawn to the pendant. Perhaps it wasn't simply unfashionable after all.

"You have terrorized this town for your last night, vampyri!" he declared,

stepping forward as she began to scramble back from the door.

"I'm afraid you're terribly misinformed," Rarity began to babble, wondering if she could talk her way out of this. "You're the only one doing any terrorizing here, and I must insist you leave my shop at once!"

"Don't bother to deny your true nature, vampyri—"

"I do wish you would stop calling me that; it sounds rather vulgar—"

"—for what else..." he said, twisting his leg and exposing something on its underside, some sort of pipe with a tube running up into his outfit. For some reason, Rarity found herself thinking of Pinkie Pie.

"...would do this!" As he finished the sentence, the stallion slapped his chest with his other forehoof, and a spray of clear liquid shot out of the tube and hit Rarity in the face.

The scream echoed through all of Ponyville. Rarity flung herself away from the hunter, hooves beating uselessly against the floorboards as she fell on her side, legs moving too late to cover her head. It burnt like nothing she had felt before, like fire and acid and cold and knives all rolled into one concoction of hell.

As the pain began to fade, she realized she could hear Sweetie Belle crying out in her bedroom. "Oh no," she whispered, a terror greater than her fear for her own life rising in her heart. "Oh, Sweetie Belle, please don't come out, please, I don't want you to see this..."

She could hear the hunter approaching, tried to will away the pain and rise to her hooves, but she was too scared and too hurt to concentrate. All she could do was scrabble backwards, into the sewing room, the stallion relentlessly matching her pace, forcing her to retreat with his damnable holy symbol. As she backed up against the wall, she found herself staring at him as he moved stoically into place, refusing to meet her gaze, all of his attention focused on the point his stake-thrower was aiming at, filled with malice for someone he didn't even know.

"Time to rid the world of another monster," he said.

She blinked away tears of pain and sorrow, speaking her final words. "I only see one monster here."

He scowled, moving his forehoof to another spot on his chest. Rarity refused to look away.

Which is why she was the first to see the rope as it sailed over the hunter's head.

"What—?" he cried as it dropped over his neck, then tightened, yanking him back. His hoof hit his chest, but his aim was spoiled, the heavy bolt sinking into the door that had just begun to open behind her. Sweetie Belle screamed and slammed it.

"Y'all better back off afore I do some damage!" Applejack said, wrestling the stallion back into the main part of the shop. Glaring at her, he twisted and charged her, but she stepped aside—leaving Big Macintosh to fill the gap. He rose up on his hind legs and brought his hooves down, and while the hunter dodged that, he did it at the cost of giving up momentum, which gave Applejack the chance to take up the slack on her lasso. After that, it was all over but the shouting, as the two wrestled him to the ground, hogtying him before Rarity's disbelieving eyes.

"Fools! Imbeciles! Do you know what you're doing?" the hunter raved, thrashing uselessly against the ropes. "Do you know what manner of beast you harbor in your midst?" Lights were turning on now, ponies coming out into the street and wondering what the ruckus was about. His attention turned to Big Macintosh, and his eyes widened a little further. "Useless servants! Bound by blood! Your master cares not for you!"

The kick came not from Big Macintosh, but from Applejack. It hit the hunter in the chin, dazing him. "You hold on there a sec!" she said, glaring at him. "I ain't let a drop of her blood anywhere near my veins, and I'm standing up for her. Because she's my *friend*. Because she ain't never hurt a pony in her life, not and meant it. And because even if she does, she deserves better than the likes of you!"

Rarity staggered to her hooves, the pain forgotten, as the local constabulary turned up, stood and watched in shock as Applejack turned the raving madman over to them. Assault with a deadly weapon. Did it

count as attempted murder if she was already dead? Nothing so serious had ever happened in Ponyville before; they'd have to take him out of town just to have a trial. That didn't really matter to her, though. Nothing mattered but the sight of Applejack standing in her store, waiting only long enough to be sure the hunter was being carted off safely before walking over to her.

"Why?" she said, her voice raw.

Applejack fidgeted a little. "...aw, shucks, Rarity. Y'heard why. I've been awful mad at you lately, and I can't say as I'm exactly offerin' a vein myself. But nopony deserves that, least of all you. You didn't try to hide what you were doing, and that's worth a lot. Plus you're... well, you're my friend. I may have lost sight of that, but it's still true."

Rarity blinked, feeling tears in her eyes again. "I mean... why are you here, at this time of night?"

Applejack looked up, then looked away. "I was just gonna... nah, it's not important now. Maybe you're lucky I got here when I did." Rarity sensed the double meaning and said nothing as Applejack started walking toward the door; Big Macintosh started walking past Applejack, headed toward her. Then Applejack paused, and Big Macintosh did too.

"Listen, Rarity," Applejack said, not looking back. "You, uh... you oughta drop by the house sometime. We're gonna be done with the harvesting soon, and I'll have some time to stay up and look at the stars. Maybe we can talk... y'know, about what you've been missing in town. I know how you like your gossip."

"I'd like that," Rarity said, closing her eyes. "I'd like that very much."

There was a moment's silence. "I gotta get back to the farm. Big Macintosh, you get back afore the rooster, okay? We've got another big day tomorrow."

"Yup," Big Macintosh replied, stepping quietly to Rarity's side, reaching up to rub the tears from her eyes. "I reckon we do."

The front door closed, and then the back door opened, and Rarity found

herself overwhelmed by Sweetie Belle, who gasped when she saw the burns over her big sister's face and neck and forgot everything else, clutching her tight. Big Macintosh backed off to give her room, but stood close, watching over her.

"I must look awful," Rarity gasped.

"You've looked better," Big Macintosh allowed, and Rarity couldn't help but laugh. If he'd tried some corny line about her looking just the same to him, she'd have known she really had enslaved the poor fellow.

"It doesn't matter," she assured him, Sweetie Belle, and herself. "It's just skin. There are more important things in life."

There was a short, awkward silence.

"I wonder if masks will be in this season?" she added.

Big Macintosh and Sweetie Belle laughed, and Rarity laughed too, and when she cried the tears washed her pain away.

Rainbow Dash

The Big Battle

The Manehattan docks. Dawn. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the city that never slept, two ponies worked to unload a sensitive cargo from one of the ships in the harbor onto a sturdy cart.

"So what's in these barrels, anyway?" one of the two, a lime-green pony with a pink mane, wondered, reaching for a lid. The other pony, yellow with a sea-blue mane, swiftly moved his own hoof to intercept the gesture.

"Don't open that, newbie! You want your hooves to melt off?" He glared at the first pony, who drew his hoof back with a wounded expression.

The younger pony protested, "I wasn't gonna open it! I just wanna know what's in it. I've never seen so many warning stickers!"

"You know that whole mess we had with Discord getting loose and running around a month ago?" the older, and senior, pony said as he took hold of the barrel. His trainee took the hint, grabbed the other side, and helped him push it into the cart.

"How could I miss it?" the younger pony replied. "That was one crazy day! Or week. Or whatever."

"Well, this is a little parting gift from his ugliness," the veteran teamster said. "A bunch of chaos goop they scraped off the bottom of who knows where."

The younger worker nearly dropped his end of the next barrel in shock. "I-I thought the Elements of Harmony got rid of all of that!"

"Almost all of that," his supervisor corrected him. "They've been finding little puddles of the stuff all over the place. Real nasty, too. We have to move it by hoof because it does crazy things if a unicorn so much as sneezes on it."

"Why are we even touching the stuff, then?" The green pony was handling his end of the barrel like it would explode at the slightest nudge. "Why are we shipping it into the middle of Manehattan?"

"The Elements have better things to do than find every little ditch that's got some of this stuff in it," the yellow pony replied, muscling the barrel into place on the cart with no such care. "We've been gathering the stuff up for weeks, putting it all in one place. The Elements come into town, they can do their rainbow magic thing, clean it all up at once, and go do whatever they do when they aren't saving our flanks."

The rookie shook his head disbelievingly, pushing another barrel closer to the cart. "This is nuts," he said. "I can't even imagine how bad this could go."

The veteran chuckled dryly. "Best not to think about it too hard, kid. Besides, this is just about the last batch. By this time tomorrow, it'll all be done and dusted. Now c'mon, let's get this over with."

The two fell silent, then, focusing on loading the cart, but the younger pony couldn't help but frown. He just couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen, like one of the barrels falling off the cart or leaking or something. And he was seldom wrong about feelings like that, as his cutie mark, a bright yellow hard hat, could attest. He just hoped it wouldn't wind up being his fault somehow.

On a small island far from Manehattan Harbor, charted only because it presented a hazard to shipping and populated largely by birds and lizards, a curious set of tracks led out of a deep rock crevice. At first, they were just little three-toed tracks, slight indentations in the dirt and soil around the rock. As they progressed, however, they began to grow and deepen, twice their former size, five times, ten times. They were headed in an unusual direction as well, straight as an arrow into the sea... and pointed at the heart of Manehattan.

Rainbow Dash was in good spirits as she and her friends got their first sight of the city of Manehattan. It was huge! Not just horizontally, but vertically, with buildings that practically scraped the sky! Not that she'd trade life in Ponyville for anything, but the idea of trying some high-speed maneuvers at height with actual obstacles was making her wings twitch. How did the weather here even work? She'd have to hook up with the local weather patrol and ask some questions.

Granted, it wasn't a leisure trip. Princess Celestia had asked all of them to come to the city to deal with the leftovers of Discord's... discordiness. The weight of the necklace around her neck was reminder enough of that. Still, how long could that take? They'd go to whatever warehouse the stuff was locked up in, do their super cool light show, and send the junk back where it belonged. Then she could get some flying in, maybe check out the local restaurants. The others all had sights they wanted to see, so it shouldn't be a problem.

"Hey, AJ, you know any good places to eat around here?" she wondered, looking at her fellow passenger. (That was the only downside of the trip in her opinion, having to sit in a chariot instead of getting to wing there herself.)

"Well, I didn't stay here too long," Applejack replied, running a hoof nervously along the side of the chariot; she wasn't exactly thrilled to be this high up, but she was handling it like a trooper in Dash's not-so-modest opinion. "And it was a long time ago. You could ask Uncle Orange if he knows a good spot."

"Nah, I'll just look around myself," Dash said, waving off the idea. Hang out with Applejack's folks when there was flying to do? No thanks. "Twilight, what's the schedule again?"

Twilight Sparkle looked up from a carefully planned itinerary designed to maximize her opportunity to take in the important locations of Manehattan, like the library, the museum, and the Hall of Magical Science. "We're going to land around 10:15 at the holding facility," she replied, raising her voice so Rainbow Dash could hear her from the next chariot over. "They should have confirmation of the last delivery by 11:00, but I've allowed thirty minutes in case of delay. We've got a fifteen-minute block to use the

Elements of Harmony and recover, and then I'm going to get lunch at—"

"Bored now," Dash replied, turning away from Twilight and Fluttershy (well, she assumed Fluttershy was still in there somewhere) and looking over at the chariot on the other side, where Rarity and Pinkie Pie were sitting. Rarity looked as bored as Dash felt, slumped over the side of the chariot, mane fluttering in the breeze yet somehow not misplacing a strand. She was probably eager to get her hooves in one of those fancy froo-froo shops she'd been talking about when they'd been planning the trip. Or maybe she was just tired of sharing a carriage with Pinkie Pie, who, as far as Rainbow Dash could tell, hadn't actually stopped talking since they lifted off.

Just as Rainbow Dash was about to turn her attention back to the city, she saw something that jolted her awake instantly. Pinkie Pie had started vibrating worse than that time she'd been a little too enthusiastic about a bottle of syrup labeled 'shake well' and bounced herself halfway across Ponyville. As there wasn't a bottle of syrup anywhere in sight, that could only mean one thing.

"Twilight!" she bellowed, turning to face the unicorn and pointing in the other direction. "Looks like we've got a doozy!"

It didn't take long to locate the 'doozy'.

Ponies screamed, running in all directions, as a giant lizard hauled itself up on the docks, knocking barrels and boxes into the water and sending birds scattering. It was at least fifty feet long, but other than that, Rainbow Dash didn't think it looked so tough; it was really spindly, looking more like a snake that someone had stuck skinny legs to, and those legs ended in rounded, harmless-looking toes. Its face featured huge bulging eyes and a long slit of a mouth that almost looked smiling. Okay, it had pointy teeth, but they were pretty short; it probably ate bugs or something. Really big bugs.

"Oh dear!" Fluttershy shouted, which was to say Rainbow Dash could hear her, even as the chariots raced to the scene. "That's a moss-backed

salamander!" Dash could see why it was called that; it was mottled green and black, rather like a mossy rock. "They're extremely rare. I've never seen one before!"

"What's it doing here, then?" Dash demanded. Fluttershy shook her head.

"I don't know! And I don't know why it's so... big."

"I think I know," Twilight Sparkle said, frowning at the sight. The creature's slick, wet hide was covered with a strange sheen, like a thin coat of liquid rainbow, but it was shifting and moving in disturbing ways.

"It doesn't matter what it's doing here," Applejack said, hitting the chariot's railing with a hoof. "What matters is, what're we gonna do about it?"

"Land us there!" Twilight replied, calling to the pegasi pulling the chariots and pointing to the spot where the wharf transitioned to the city. "We'll figure something out!"

The chariots had some difficulty landing because of all the panicked ponies—Rainbow Dash saw a strangely familiar pony yelling, "The horror! The horror!"—but managed it somehow. The six jumped out, and the pegasi immediately took off again, headed back toward the center of the city.

Twilight watched the giant creature as it began to plow through stacked crates, having cleared the dock and getting into the waterfront. "Okay. Fluttershy, you see if you can get it to turn around and go home. Rainbow Dash, go with her; if that doesn't work, maybe you can distract it. Rarity, let's try making a big net to catch it with. Applejack, you make sure nopony gets hurt."

"Ooo! Ooo! What do I get to do, Twilight?" Pinkie Pie interjected, hopping up and down. Twilight turned her serious look on the party pony.

"Pinkie Pie, you do... whatever it is you do." She wasn't sure Pinkie could make a difference, but she'd been surprised many times before.

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pinkie responded, hopping off.

Rainbow Dash grinned, crouching in preparation for takeoff. "You heard her, Fluttershy! Let's tell that big lizard to go home!"

"Um, actually, it's an amphibian—" Fluttershy began to say, but Dash didn't hear it; she was already in the sky.

Operation Big Lizard Go Home started well. Fluttershy eventually joined Rainbow Dash in the air, fluttering forward to look it in one of its bulbous eyes as Dash hung back a bit to watch for trouble.

"Um, excuse me, mister salamander—" she began, then choked as that bulbous eye blinked, her distorted reflection showing in the fluid coating its eye. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to go on, reminding herself that no matter how big it was, it was just an amphibian at heart, far from home, probably scared. "You can't go this way. There's an awful lot of ponies here, and things that might hurt you. Maybe you could show me where you came from, and—"

The salamander, as it turned out, was incapable of hearing a sound so quiet. It began to advance again, and Fluttershy squeaked and locked up, only not falling because Rainbow Dash darted in and caught her.

"I don't think the subtle approach is working, 'Shy!" she said. "Lemme give it a try. You!" She pointed at the 'lizard' with a hoof. "Yeah, you! Listen up!" It came to a stop again, tilting its head to peer at her.

On the ground below, Applejack paused to look up. "Rainbow Dash, what do you think you're doing?" she said to herself. Then a pony screamed, and she resumed herding the frightened ponies down side streets, away from the line of the salamander's advance. "Hold on! I'm coming!"

Twilight Sparkle was running around too, frantically gathering anything that might serve her purpose: netting, tarp, fabric if it was strong enough, looting destroyed crates and intact storehouses. Rarity was right behind her, stitching the hovering fabric together as swiftly as she could. "Oh, these seams look terrible!" she lamented.

"They just need to be strong!" Twilight shouted back. Where was Pinkie Pie? She hoped the pony didn't wind up making things worse, like in Appleloosa.

Then Twilight saw something that gave her a new surge of hope. Royal guards were making their way down the street toward her group, earth ponies in tight formation, pegasi flying overhead, unicorns in the rear. She hoped it wouldn't come to that, but if Fluttershy couldn't persuade the beast to turn back, they could help keep things under control while she and Rarity caught it.

Rainbow Dash continued her diplomatic approach. "You can't just walk in here like you own the place! Don't you have a big rock to lay on somewhere?"

"Actually, uh, this particular salamander only lives in shady rock crevices in cliffs and other—" Fluttershy tried to interrupt.

"Go on, shoo! Go bother somepony else! There aren't any bugs here for you to eat!"

"No pony really knows what they eat, though small invertebrates are the most likely—"

"Are you even listening to me! Hey! Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

"I think it is looking at us, Rainbow Dash—"

Then the salamander opened its mouth and snapped at them. Rainbow Dash darted backward, Fluttershy squeaking in fright, half at the bite, half at the sudden maneuver, and throwing her forelegs around Dash's neck. The bright blue pegasus started to choke, drifting away from the salamander as she did.

"Too... tight..." she protested, wriggling to try to get Fluttershy to loosen her grip.

Twilight and Rarity were hurrying back along the waterfront, their improvised net largely completed. "You're doing great, Rarity," Twilight said, glancing up at the salamander, which was advancing again, but more

slowly. "Just a few more pieces, and we should be ready to—"

"The civilians are clear!" a voice barked; Twilight looked ahead, seeing a burly earth pony at the lead of the royal guardsmen. "Let 'em have it, boys!" Twilight looked confused, then gaped as she saw the unicorns stepping forward, focusing their attention on the salamander, horns glowing bright.

There was a reason she'd planned on using a big net rather than casting a levitation spell.

"No, don't! It's been exposed to Discord!" she shouted, but she wasn't close enough, or they didn't listen. A flare of magical energy appeared around the salamander.

Then the flare seemed to suck itself into the salamander's skin, which began to glow with a sickly rainbow light. "Oh, this can't be good," Twilight said.

It wasn't.

The salamander immediately began to grow even further, skin bulging with new muscle. Frills and fins sprouted on its body, giving it a more lizard-like appearance. Its toes swelled up, then burst like pimples, revealing long, jagged claws. Its mouth lost its smiling appearance, hanging open, displaying sharper, longer teeth. Its eyes sunk into its body, becoming fierce and predatory.

It lunged at the royal guards, scattering them and forcing them to fall back, then grabbed hold of the buildings on either side of the street they'd come down and hauled itself upright, crushing handholds into them in the process. Twilight gaped as she looked up; she hadn't gotten a real feel for its size before, and now it seemed ten times the size.

It was small comfort to realize that, based on the buildings next to it, it was probably only a bit over a hundred feet tall.

The royal guards immediately set to work again, the earth ponies rounding up civilians, the unicorns protecting them from falling rubble, the pegasi flying at the beast and trying to either drive it back or lure it away. It roared

and snapped at them, but continued to advance, smashing its way down a street just barely wide enough for it.

Applejack, relieved of her duty, ran up to Twilight and Rarity. "I don't think there's a lasso big enough to corral that beast!" she called, eyes wide.

Twilight let the giant net drop somewhere out of the way, frowning as she looked at Applejack. Then brightening as she saw the necklace the earth pony wore. "Of course! The Elements of Harmony! We'll purge Discord's influence and turn it back to normal!" She turned to the sky, where Rainbow Dash had regained breath and stability. "Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, new plan! Get down here! Pinkie Pie!" She paused, realizing the obvious. "Pinkie Pie, where are you? We need to use the Elements of Harmony!"

"Awww," a familiar voice cried, "and I just finished the frosting!" Rarity, Applejack, and Twilight Sparkle turned to look at what looked for all the world like the world's largest cupcake. With tank treads. And Pinkie Pie sticking her head out of a hatch with a giant cherry on top.

"How did you—never mind," Twilight said, shaking her head as Rainbow Dash landed nearby, easing Fluttershy to the ground. "Just come here! We need to purify that thing!" She turned to look, only to be surprised that it had dipped behind the nearby building already; she could still hear its footsteps, but they were farther away than she had expected them to be.

"We've got to get ahead of it!" she decided, looking around and spotting the nearest parallel street. "Hurry!" She and the rest of the little ponies galloped off.

It was headed straight toward the warehouse. Of course.

General Ironside frowned as he watched the great lizard work its way down the street. The pegasi had begun whipping it with winds, and one had even gathered together a great thundercloud and hit it with a bolt of lightning. That just made its dorsal fins start glowing. The unicorns had

been gathering up the rubble and hurling it at the beast. That just got it mad. And the earth ponies were too busy evacuating buildings and clearing panicked civilians to do anything else.

Suddenly he noticed a commotion at the edge of the perimeter, a group of ponies trying to get into the street and being held back by his guards; recognizing one of the faces, he headed in that direction, face stern.

"For your own safety," his lieutenant was saying, "we need all ponies to clear this street!"

"We're the Elements of Harmony!" the frustrated unicorn he'd recognized replied. "Let us through!"

"Step aside, son," General Ironside barked, smirking inwardly as the lieutenant jumped before quickly backing out of the way. "Don't you recognize national heroes when you see them? I hope you have a plan, miss Sparkle, because we're running out of ideas."

Twilight Sparkle nodded confidently, leading the other five ponies to the center of the street, facing the enraged monster. "All right, girls, let's do this," she said, taking her stance, feeling the magic of friendship beginning to fill her heart.

General Ironside watched intently (though at a safe distance) as, one by one, Twilight Sparkle's friends began to glow with color-coded energy. He was distracted, however, when the lieutenant yelled, "Sir, the monster's reacting!"

Turning to see what his lieutenant meant, he gaped. The big lizard had stopped in its advance, mouth open, filled with flame. Even as he cried, "Look out!" the fireball became a lance of flame, shooting down the street, bursting windows with the shockwave, forcing his troops to the ground or out of the street entirely... and impacting directly where the Elements of Harmony stood. For a moment, he could see a shimmering soap bubble holding the energy back—and then it burst, thankfully only a second before the flame blast stopped as well.

The six ponies were scattered across the street, burnt and battered, in a shallow crater the force of the blast had created. Slowly they struggled to

their feet, looking around groggily. All but one.

"Oh no!" Pinkie Pie said, rushing to Fluttershy's side, nudging her urgently. "Fluttershy, wake up!"

"Without her," Twilight said, her stomach sinking, "we can't use the Elements of Harmony!"

Rainbow Dash looked from her fallen friend to the monster, which was once again moving down the street, then to Twilight. Her thoughts raced. How were they supposed to beat that thing? If it kept going the way it was going, it'd be at the warehouse, with all that Discord gunk, in no time, and who knew what would happen if it got its slimy paws on more of the stuff?

An idea popped into her head. It was a horrible, suicidal, insane idea.

Just the kind she liked.

"Try to hold it back!" she told Twilight, her liftoff a touch wobbly, but good enough. "I've got an idea!"

"What idea?" Twilight said, turning to look at Rainbow Dash—or rather, at the rainbow trail where the pegasus had been. "Wait, Rainbow Dash!" But she was already gone.

A window shattering startled Professor Zeta, the unicorn overseeing the workers at the warehouse where the toxic Discordium (as he'd named the stuff in his latest paper) was stored, causing him to lose his magical grip on his clipboard and drop it off the catwalk he stood on. He turned to see a vaguely familiar pegasus with a violently colored mane shake glass off her body, then move to hover next to him with an alarming suddenness.

"Is this the stuff?" she yelled at him, pointing a hoof at one of the many barrels. He nodded, unable to speak.

"How do you get this thing open?" she continued, sweeping over the edge

of the catwalk and landing next to one of the barrels. His mane stood on end at the question.

He stammered, "Open it? You can't possibly open it! The risks of exposure a-are unimaginable! You could be killed, or worse, you could—"

"Never mind, I got it," the pegasus said, grabbing the barrel and hauling it up to the ceiling... then, to his horror, piledriving it into the concrete floor as workers ran for their lives.

Twilight Sparkle was doing her best, but it just wasn't good enough. They were trying a diversionary tactic, attacking the creature from behind instead of ahead, throwing debris and launching blasts of hail and even running up and kicking the beast, but it was slowing down at best. It had paused briefly at an intersection, only to turn and start breaking through a warehouse—the warehouse next door to the storage facility, she realized, feeling sick. It was as if it were being drawn to the discordant fluid like a magnet, and when it reached it... Chaos. Absolute chaos.

Pinkie Pie was down, having been whipped off its tail into a building, and Applejack was walking with a limp from having been yanked into the air with her own lasso. Rarity was panting with exhaustion as she tried to levitate objects large enough to have some effect on the creature, and Fluttershy was still unconscious. And Rainbow Dash was still nowhere to be seen.

"Whatever you're going to do, you need to do it fast," Twilight said, wondering if the situation had become dire enough to try casting a spell on the beast and causing it to mutate further, possibly into something less dangerous.

Then the side of the storage facility blew up.

Twilight gasped, then frowned, as she realized two important things. One, the creature was still working its way through the other warehouse, and two, the blast had been outward from the storage facility, followed by the sound of another impact on the far side of the warehouse. Something had

punched its way from one building to the other, but what?

She got her answer in short order, but she wasn't sure she believed it. A head pushed its way through the building in front of the creature, completing the destruction, and continued to rise, followed by a body that grew up... and up... and up. It looked like a pegasus pony, wrapped in silver and striped with bold sky-blue slashes with jagged edges, like lightning bolts running all over it. Its face was nearly featureless, with only a small hole where the mouth should be and almond-shaped eyes, glowing white. At its throat, a brilliant blue light shone; she had to squint, but it looked like it was bolt-shaped as well.

And for a mane, it had a dangerous-looking fin, running over its head all the way back to its tail... striped all the colors of the rainbow.

"Rainbow... Dash?" She gaped.

Then the giant pegasus kicked the salamander in the face.

Rainbow Dash could hear the screams from far away, like little panicked mice, but she couldn't focus on them. Everything was so small! And weird-looking, like she had eyes on the sides of her head and goofy glasses. But that was nothing compared to the weird sensations churning in her gut, the urge to crush and break and destroy, to leave nothing but chaos in her wake.

She could feel a light burning in her heart, holding back the chaos, the power of the Element of Loyalty... but she couldn't fully embrace it. If she did, the power she'd been given would go away, and she needed that power right now, to save her friends. So she lashed out at the big lizard, driving it back, wincing a little as it crushed another warehouse. "Sorry!" she said, or tried to; she didn't seem able to speak in this form, just grunt.

The lizard had gotten faster, or she'd gotten slower. Even as she moved forward to hit it again, it was bracing itself, and when she tackled it she only slid it back a bit, ruining more of the landscape before it got its feet under it and charged her in turn. She met the charge, held it back, but when it bit at

her face she had to let go and step back.

The lizard's spines began to glow, and another ball of flame gathered in its throat. Rainbow Dash stood up, finding the gesture easier than she'd expected, and raised her forelegs to block the blast; it poured over her legs and chest, dizzying her, but not doing any real damage.

Okay, she thought, *my turn*. She moved forward and began pummeling the lizard with everything she could think of, sharp karate chops, kicks to the legs, even a headbutt when she was feeling particularly saucy. The lizard gave way with every blow, moving further and further from the storage facility and its dangerous contents, and Rainbow Dash began to feel rather smug about how easy it all was.

Then the lizard stopped flinching when she hit it.

Huh? she thought, right before it rang her bell with a right cross. Dazed, she stumbled back, beginning to spread her wings and take to the air, only to realize too late that she'd been lured into the business district, filled with buildings as tall or taller than her. Her wings impacted unpleasantly on glass and steel, sending shards raining down on panicked ponies below and forcing her to draw them closed again.

Distracted by this, she failed to avoid the beast grabbing her forelegs with its hands, then falling backward, dragging her on top of it. She didn't know what the point of that maneuver was until it put its foot to her belly, bracing her as the lizard crashed to the ground, then kicking, flipping her up and over only to land much more heavily herself on the city street. She was dimly aware of concrete breaking and fire hydrants bursting, but mostly she just felt pain.

Slowly and carefully, she staggered to her feet, only to be met by the lizard again. *When did this thing learn to fight?* she wondered as it continued to punish her, clawing and raking and biting. She tried backing away as quickly as she could to get a chance to regroup and charge it, only to be met with another blast of flame, this one even hotter, temporarily blinding her.

The chaos in her was reacting, pulsing faster and faster. She let it run, charging forward as the flames died and delivering a headbutt to the

creature. It fell, and then she was on it, beating it with her hooves, tearing at its flesh. It tried to rise, but she ignored the feeble slaps of its arms, punching the same spot on its chest again and again and again, aiming to punch through its ribcage and shatter its heart—

No! she thought, drawing back in horror at her own actions. The lapse cost her, the lizard taking the opportunity to shove her off with all four limbs, sending her back to the ground as it began to rise. She staggered up as well, but her stomach lurched, the chaos lashing at her brain, trying to replace every thought with anarchy and hate. She looked down at herself and realized the light at her throat, symbolic of her element, had faded from sky blue to an angry red.

This fight couldn't go on. She had to stop it now, before she became as great a threat as the monster itself. But how? She wasn't sure she could get up to enough speed to perform a Sonic Rainboom, and at this size it might level the city. What else could she try?

An idea popped into her head.

She turned and ran the other way.

Twilight had watched the whole battle anxiously, seeing the momentum shift back and forth, helpless to help her friend. Now she watched Rainbow Dash apparently fleeing the battle, pausing as soon as she was clear of the skyscrapers to spread her great wings and take to the air, going upward startlingly quickly for something so big.

What was she going to do? She couldn't be thinking of a Sonic Rainboom; even Rainbow Dash wouldn't be that careless. And much as some might suspect her of running away, Twilight knew in her heart of hearts that Dash would never abandon her; if the transformed pegasus was backing off, she had a reason.

And that meant Twilight had to give her time. Without a sparring partner, the salamander had turned and begun walking down its own path of devastation, set once more on reaching the storage facility. The royal

guard had been forced to turn all of their attention to evacuating survivors, which left only her, Applejack, and Rarity to stand in its way.

Looking grimly from Applejack to Rarity, then to the monster, she spoke. "I'll grab everything I can and bring it here. Applejack, you buck it at that thing. Rarity, try to guide it to vulnerable spots. Maybe we can blind it or hurt its knees."

The two nodded grimly. They knew the stakes and the odds. Neither would back down.

Twilight Sparkle blinked away a sudden wetness in her eyes. "Rainbow Dash," she murmured, "hurry."

Rainbow Dash was running out of time.

She'd flown as high as she could, higher than she'd ever dared, so high the air would barely support her weight. (Strangely, the cold and the thin air didn't bother her at all.) The jewel at her throat had begun pulsing, each throb a little faster than the last, and with each pulse another spike of hate lanced through her. She figured she had maybe thirty seconds before she lost it completely.

It was time. She shifted her weight, pointed toward the speck of Equestria that was Manehattan, and dove, flapping her wings as hard as she could. At first, they hardly helped, gravity doing most of the work, but as the air got thicker she was able to power forward harder and harder.

The wind resistance grew stronger and stronger as well. She could feel the cone of air forming in front of her, and for once she didn't try to punch through it, riding right on the ragged edge where it was as strong as possible. She needed to be fast, but not too fast... just fast enough.

The ground was coming up faster than she'd expected; her vision was still distorted, making everything look too small, throwing off her sense of speed. She began to pull up, and it was an agonizingly slow process, turning her momentum degree by degree. The turn had to be sharper, she

realized, pausing a moment, gathering her strength. If it was too gradual, even if she pulled out in time she'd be over Fillydelphia by the time she leveled off.

She spotted her target, over halfway back to the warehouse and closing fast. It was now or never. Throwing everything in her body into the turn—her loyalty, her rage, her very spirit—she brought herself level over the city, a hurricane wind in her wake, the great buildings looming ahead, too close together by far for her to fly.

So she folded her wings.

Twilight Sparkle had been forced all the way back to the street near the ruined warehouse. The thing had used its fire breath on them again, and though she'd been able to shield Applejack and Rarity, it'd spent almost all the magic she had left. She'd tried to face it anyway, only to be forcibly dragged away by Applejack, led with Rarity back to where Pinkie Pie had regained consciousness and was watching over Fluttershy with anxious eyes. Fluttershy was awake as well, thank Celestia, but still not strong enough to stand.

Twilight looked at her friends, then back at the monster, just now emerging from the skyscrapers. They'd thrown everything they had at it, and it hadn't been enough. They had nothing left. They'd have to withdraw, try to find Rainbow Dash, prepare to try the Elements of Harmony again. Manehattan would be destroyed, but maybe they could save the rest of Equestria from this thing that moved without fear or pity, this product of their own carelessness.

For a moment, she thought of looking away, the sight of her failure too painful.

Then a blur of rainbow light hit it from behind.

As she, her friends, and the royal guard watched in shock, the light carried the creature closer and closer to the warehouse, only to bend at what seemed the last second and carry it up into the air. Debris caught in her

wake shot past, leaving Twilight intensely grateful that she and her friends were standing somewhat to the side, and the wind buffeted her mercilessly, though not nearly so strongly as a true Sonic Rainboom.

As they watched, the creature seemed to shrink smaller and smaller, soon almost a dot in the sky. *Is she going to throw it into space? Sweet Celestia...*

Even as Twilight thought it, though, the rainbow light suddenly went out.

She couldn't fly anymore.

Rainbow Dash's wings had seized up, the muscles and joints unable to cope with the strain. She was still rising, but she was rising slower and slower, well short of where she had hoped to be. Then again, she hadn't really thought past 'throw it into space'.

She was thinking about it now, though. Exhaustion had given her brief clarity, even as discord continued to claw at her heart, the jewel at her throat throbbing achingly. She needed more oomph. If she just let the lizard go now, it'd just fall back to Equestria somewhere. If she was lucky, it'd land somewhere unpopulated and be splattered by the fall. If she was unlucky...

No. She needed more. And she had it. Her flesh had tired, but she could feel the magic of every pegasus still thrumming in her body, and alongside it the chaos energy that she could still, barely, command. She let the lizard go, the motion slowing her just a fraction relative to it, and as she begun to drift away, she focused that magic, feeling it burning in her flesh, seeing a glow building in her body. Strangely, it seemed to be concentrating in her forelegs, not her wings.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was this one last act, to protect her friends and all of Equestria. Even if she fell and never rose again, she could die happy knowing that they were safe.

She brought her forelegs together in front of her and screamed in her head,

then gave it everything she had left—

—and Twilight Sparkle gasped as an impossibly bright light appeared in the sky, expanding in both directions now, one end carrying the giant monster higher and higher, the other driving down toward the ground. A few seconds later, the upper end exploded, a rainbow-colored cloud spreading in all directions, hanging in the air as the light blazed down. Then the light faded again, and she was left blinking, afterimages burned into her vision.

As a result, she very nearly missed that the light hadn't entirely faded. Like a meteor, Rainbow Dash descended to earth, crashing into the street dangerously close to where Twilight and her friends were resting. "Rainbow Dash!" she screamed, leaping up and galloping over, her friends following at their best pace. All she could see when she reached the crash site, however, was billowing smoke, and she lacked the strength to push it away.

Thankfully, Rarity still had some reserves. She brought a large fan out and used it to flap at the smoke, which cleared to reveal a large but shallow crater, trickles of water from a busted main—and a bruised, battered, but very much alive, and normal, Rainbow Dash. The pegasus groaned, shifted fitfully, and mumbled, "Did anyone get the number of that chariot?"

Her friends charged into the crater, heedless of their injuries, and clustered around her, holding her close.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of the story.

When the six of them had finished laughing, crying, and alternately congratulating and scolding Rainbow Dash for her reckless endangerment of herself and others that had, nonetheless, won the day, they were able to return their attention to the original reason they'd come to Manehattan. Carefully they walked over the rubble in the street, only vaguely paying attention to the royal guards who were just beginning to restore order, and made their way to the warehouse that held the dangerous cargo they'd all fought so hard to save.

Which made it a little hard to take when they showed up to find the entire warehouse empty.

"Where could it all have gone?" Rainbow Dash protested. "There was tons of it here!" She gestured futilely at dust marks on the floor.

Twilight Sparkle had managed to regain some of her strength, and her horn flickered. She looked shocked by the results. "Teleport magic was used here. Somepony took it all away!"

"Who would do such a thing?" Pinkie squealed, raising her hooves to her mouth.

"And why?" Fluttershy added.

"And how?" Rarity added. "Not even you could move that much so quickly, not on your best day." She gazed at Twilight Sparkle as she said it.

"Uh, guys?" Rainbow Dash said, suddenly feeling extremely guilty. The others turned to look at where the only remaining barrel of Discordium sat, crushed like a soda can, its contents sprayed over the floor, wall... and mesh catwalk. There was a silhouette on the wall behind it that resembled a rather surprised unicorn.

"I think I may know what happened to the Discord juice," Dash sheepishly admitted.

Rainbow Dash sighed, sulking on her cloud.

"It's just not fair," she grouched. Oh sure, they'd all saved the city, and everypony'd been happy about that, but so much of it had been torn up during the fighting that they hadn't exactly been in a mood to throw a party. The group had been pressed into disaster relief instead of getting to see any of the Manehattan sights, not that any of them were open anyway after the attack. Combine that with Rainbow Dash's little screwup, and it hadn't exactly been a happy group of ponies that limped back to Ponyville.

Then they'd found out what happened to the stuff. Dash groaned, rolling over. Three times this month—three times!—another giant something or other had popped up and set out for the nearest major city to start wrecking the place. Twilight said she was making progress on the spells being used by the once-Professor Zeta to move the stuff around, and she was hopeful she'd be able to find his base of operations so they could shut him down. Dash didn't hold out much hope for that happening soon, though.

"How much longer am I gonna be stuck with this thing?" she complained, looking down at the necklace still around her neck. They'd discovered the hard way that she was still contaminated by chaos, and while wearing the Element of Loyalty kept that under control, if she took it off she'd transform once again. The obvious answer, to use the elements to purify her, had been put off at first by Twilight, who wanted to study the transformation—and then the first monster showed up, and they decided they'd be best served leaving Rainbow Dash on monster-pummeling duty until they found a solution that didn't involve dragging all six of them hither and yon.

As if summoned by her thoughts, a rolled-up scroll appeared in front of Rainbow Dash's nose, bearing Princess Celestia's seal. She unrolled it, reading with no surprise that another monster had appeared, this one some sort of flying bug, headed directly for Canterlot itself.

"Aw man, Sunday already?" she whined, standing up. And this one could fly, to boot. Well, maybe that would be okay. If she could fight it in the air, at least she wouldn't be trashing everypony's stuff. She'd personally made at least four construction companies filthy stinking rich, she figured.

"Might as well get it over with," she continued, but to tell the truth, she wasn't feeling as bad as she sounded, not anymore. At least it was something to do. And it was pretty awesome to be able to punch out some mutant freak and not have to feel guilty about blowing it up afterward. Heck, the last one, she'd figured out how to throw a shockwave from her mane somehow, and it'd been cut in half and then exploded!

Mental note: don't do that in city limits again.

She reached for her necklace, pulling it off and holding the gemstone up to the sky. It wasn't strictly necessary—technically, she could just will the thing to stop holding the chaos back—but it felt right somehow to add a bit

of flair to the proceedings. Which was why, just before she started to grow and felt the silver skin slide over her body once more, she shouted:

"Let's go! Ultradash!"

Pinkie Pie

Gallows Humor

Rainbow Dash couldn't sleep.

She tossed and turned on her cloud bed, eyes squeezed shut, body tense, hair frazzled. Below her, the base of her cloud home grumbled, the usually white cloud having gone gray and stormy, threatening rain but never quite producing it. She wasn't sure if it was reflecting her mood or just rebelling without her keeping it in line, but either way it wasn't helping.

Not that silence would have helped either. Silence just left a void to fill with her thoughts, which made it that much harder for her not to think, especially when she was trying not to think about one thing in particular. That was working out about as well as she could expect; her thoughts kept circling around like a tornado, pulling her back to that no-fly zone again and again, and each time the storm did a little more damage, making it harder and harder to pull away.

She'd tried spending the day flying, pushing herself for longer than she ever had before, no fancy tricks or flashy stunts, just raw speed for as long as she could sustain it. It hadn't helped. Oh, her body was tired—aching, begging for sleep—but her brain was spinning in circles as fast as ever, and the result was a sort of spastic twitch that added a new level of futility to her efforts to fight insomnia.

When the knock at the door came, it was almost a relief. Almost.

Rainbow Dash's eyes snapped open, then stared blearily at darkness. "Wh' time izzit?" she mumbled, trying to focus on her clock, giving up after a moment. It was just too much effort. At any rate, she was pretty sure it was somewhere around buzz off o'clock. Whoever was at her door would just have to wait until morning.

Thump thump, the door said.

"Go 'way!" she protested, though too weakly for her voice to carry far, and

rolled over, stuffing some cloud in her ears. She didn't know what was so important, and she didn't care. Right now, the only important thing in her universe was getting some sweet, blessed sleep.

Thump thump thump thump thump.

"Auuuugh," Rainbow Dash half-screamed, half-moaned, as she realized her nocturnal visitor wasn't going to give up. Staggering from the relative comfort of her bed on shaky legs, she stumbled through the house, calling out, "All right, all right! I'm coming already!" It didn't seem to matter to the door, though, which just kept thumping as if somepony were trying to beat it down. Each thump made Dash's skull vibrate like it was being used as a drum, and by the time she finally reached the door, anger had given her some semblance of alertness and energy, enough for her to swing the door open violently and yell, "What!?"

There was no one there.

Staring uncomprehendingly at the empty space for a long moment, Rainbow Dash could only think of one thing to say: "If this is your idea of a joke, it's not funny!" She didn't even know who she was talking to; nopony she knew would be so cruel. Whoever it was didn't answer, though, and so she slammed the door and stumbled back to bed, grumbling incoherently the whole way.

By the time she reached the bed, her anger had drained away, leaving her feeling even more exhausted. Craving the release of sleep with almost violent desperation, she half-rolled, half-fell onto the bed's fluffy goodness.

Only to punch straight through.

She screamed, trying to sort her body out and catch herself with her wings, but her body was slow and stiff even with adrenaline shooting through it, and the distance between her cloud home and the ground was the worst possible distance: high enough to hurt, but not high enough for her to get into any sort of controlled flight. She smacked into the ground hard, a tangled ball of limbs and pain, and for a moment she saw stars.

Fortunately, Rainbow Dash was tougher than she looked, and after a moment she was able to shift herself, confirm that nothing was worse than

bruised. Which left only one question in her mind. "What the...?" she began, looking up.

There was a hole in the cloud that hadn't been there before, the width and length of her bed, tunneling straight up through the cloud until it reached the bed's base. Only a thin layer of cloud had been left to disguise the trap, and that layer hadn't been enough to support Dash's weight. It was a pit trap in the sky, and even in her addled state, she could only think of one prankster ingenious enough to pull it off.

"Pinkie Pie, I'll get you for this if it's the last—"

Then she remembered.

Then she cried.

Rarity found her some hours later, the pegasus having cried herself to sleep where she fell, and managed to coax her into joining Rarity in a trip to the spa. It was a measure of Dash's mental state that she'd agreed without argument, and Rarity promised herself not to take advantage of that: no pestering about beauty treatment, no scented oils or mud masks, just a nice hot soak, a good scrub, and a thorough massage. Dash slept through most of it, which Rarity thought was for the best, all things considered. They'd all been hit hard, but the weather pony had it the worst of all of them.

With the spa session complete, Rarity had asked Rainbow Dash to join her for lunch, and again the pegasus offered no protest. She still seemed asleep on her feet, though; Rarity had to order for her, and she ate her salad with all the joie de vivre of a gravestone—

Rarity cringed inwardly. Bad example. At any rate, it didn't seem she'd be able to offer Rainbow Dash more than a decent meal in who knew how long; her few attempts to start a conversation had fallen flat, and she wasn't sure what she could say that would make a difference anyway.

It came as a surprise, then, when Rainbow Dash was the one to speak up.

"Rarity?"

"Yes, Rainbow Dash?" Rarity looked up from her own mostly-empty plate of greens, adopting her best expression of earnest attention.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

The question caught Rarity off guard. "I... I don't know what you mean, dear," she replied, though she feared she could guess.

"Last night, somepony knocked at my door, and when I went to look, there was nopony there. And when I went back to bed, they'd dug a hole straight through my cloud!"

"Oh, how awful!" Rarity replied, aghast at the thought of someone interrupting her beauty sleep like that.

Rainbow Dash wasn't finished. "And it's just... who would even do that? And how? There aren't that many pegasus ponies in Ponyville, and none of 'em are that fast. I mean, *maybe* I could do it, but not that neatly."

"Maybe there was more than one...?" Rarity said, groping for the right word; even 'villain' seemed too mild. She couldn't imagine the level of cruelty involved in playing a prank like that on Rainbow Dash at a time like this.

"More than one pony in Ponyville who'd wanna pull a stunt like that?" Dash replied, echoing her thoughts. "I can only think of one pony who would. Who could."

Rarity frowned slightly. She'd been afraid that was where the conversation was headed. "Are you quite certain you didn't dream the whole thing? You've been under a lot of stress—"

"I'm not lying!" Dash protested, thumping a hoof on the table, glaring at Rarity.

"I never said you were," Rarity replied with as much poise as she could muster. "But, darling, we all miss Pinkie Pie. Isn't it possible you just imagined the sort of prank she'd pull?"

Rainbow Dash looked like she wanted to scream at the unicorn, but the moment passed, and her head sunk. "I guess that does sound more likely than her... pranking me from beyond the grave, huh?" Her voice hitched, and Rarity reached across the table to put her hoof on Dash's.

"For what it's worth... if there's anypony who could pull it off, it'd be her," she said, willing Rainbow Dash to see the compassion in her eyes. After a moment, Dash looked up, and though it looked forced, she managed a slight smile.

"Yeah. I guess you're right. Uh... thanks. Y'know. For everything."

Rarity nodded slightly. "Think nothing of it, dear. We need to be there for each other. Especially now."

The rest of the meal passed in silence.

Rarity couldn't sleep.

It wasn't that Rainbow Dash's words had gotten to her. Of course not. She wasn't a little filly to jump at superstitious nonsense. Much as she might miss Pinkie Pie's antics, she knew there was no coming back from beyond... especially after departing in such a... spectacular manner.

Honestly, what were the odds?

Still, she hadn't yet had time to properly grieve for her loss. Pinkie Pie had more or less taken over party planning for the entire town on her arrival, and that included funerals, odd as that might sound. Twilight Sparkle had volunteered to take on the responsibility for her friend's memorial, and Rarity was confident that Twilight would approach the task with the same professionalism she brought to anything she cared about, but she'd yet to even set a date.

Not that Rarity was being any more productive, she had to admit. She'd hoped a bit of sewing would help take her mind off things, but she'd been

completely unable to get into the zone, producing only scraps for her efforts. Her earlier attempt at designing had been even less fruitful, the blank pages seeming to taunt her as she stared at them.

She sighed, getting up from the sewing machine. Maybe some hot tea would help.

Then she paused, looking around intently. She wasn't sure, but she thought she'd heard something. For a long moment, she waited to see if she'd hear it again.

There! It was a faint sound, but something was definitely moving downstairs. Something heavy. Could someone be trying to rob her? Heavens!

Well, she wasn't going to stand idly by while someone rustled through her latest designs, ripping seams and getting dirt all over dresses. Slowly she crept toward the stairs, pausing as she reached them, considering her options. It'd be tricky to get down them quietly, especially with a sneakthief alert for any sound that might mean he'd been caught in the act.

Plan B it was, then. She charged down the stairs, hoping he'd be too frightened by her sudden appearance to put up a fight, and paused in the doorway leading into the shop, turning the boutique's lights on with a flick of her magic.

And stared.

And screamed.

Fluttershy was worried.

She was not, despite what some might think, a worrier. She was timid, yes, and sometimes anxious, but she wasn't the sort of pony to work herself up into a huge lather if any little part of her daily routine went wrong. At least, not without encouragement.

Still, it wasn't like Rarity to miss a spa day at all, let alone one they shared. The unicorn had been instrumental in keeping her from withdrawing entirely into her shell on coming to Ponyville, more so in some ways than Rainbow Dash. More to the point, the only thing she enjoyed more than making herself beautiful was helping others to be beautiful.

As Fluttershy approached the Boutique, she told herself that something must have come up, some rush order or other, that had kept Rarity too busy even to cancel her appointment. Fluttershy just needed to see it for herself, and then the uncomfortable feeling in her stomach would settle down.

She reached the door of the Boutique, gave it a gentle push, and was surprised when nothing happened. Maybe Rarity didn't want to be disturbed? She hesitated, then knocked at the door. "Rarity?" she wondered timidly.

Nothing continued to happen.

Fluttershy dithered. Should she try knocking again? But what if Rarity was busy? She didn't want to be a bother. What if something was wrong, though? What if something had happened to Rarity? But she couldn't just barge in. That would be incredibly rude. Where was Sweetie Belle, anyway? She'd be at school. Would she know what was going on? She might have slept over with one of her friends, and to take her out of class would be awkward even if she did know—

Rarity screamed.

Fluttershy jumped, turned toward the door, and rammed it before she quite knew what she was doing. The lock gave way, leaving her to stare wide-eyed at her friend, trembling at the steps on the far side of the boutique, surrounded by—

—mannequins?

Puzzled, Fluttershy made her way over to Rarity, who seemed to be coming to her senses. "Um, I'm sorry about breaking your door," Fluttershy stammered, not sure what else to say.

Rarity waved off the apology, pushing herself to her feet. "It's quite all right, dear. I'm sorry for startling you so." She still looked a touch pale.

"What happened here?" Fluttershy wondered, looking from the mannequins to Rarity.

"Oh, it was just dreadful!" Rarity replied. "I was up late working, and I heard a noise from downstairs, and when I came down to see what was happening, I saw this!" She gestured at the mannequins. "It was too much to bear! And then to wake, only to find them still here? My heart's still pounding!"

"It must have been very scary," Fluttershy soothed. A half-dozen mannequins staring at her disapprovingly when she turned on the light? It was no wonder Rarity had fainted.

"So ghastly," Rarity agreed, looking at the mannequins with distaste. "They couldn't possibly have chosen worse hats to go with those dresses!" She reached out with her magic and begun to swap hats, unable to bear it any longer.

Fluttershy blinked. "You mean... it wasn't the mannequins that scared you?"

"Oh, well, yes, that was startling too, I suppose," Rarity replied. "But to think, someone broke into my shop just to do this? Somepony has a sick sense of humor."

Fluttershy wasn't quite sure she understood, so she focused on what she did understand. "Who do you think did this?"

"I haven't a clue," Rarity admitted. "The last time I got such a fright was when Pinkie Pie..."

An awkward silence fell over the room.

"Would... would you like me to help you clean up?" Fluttershy offered.

"No no, it's quite all right," Rarity replied. "There. That should hold them until we get back from the spa." Fluttershy wasn't sure why this

arrangement of hats and dresses was such a vast improvement, but she knew better than to say so. "Just give me a moment to freshen up, all right, darling? Goodness me, I may need two sessions today."

Rarity headed back upstairs, leaving Fluttershy to peer at the mannequins and wonder. Was this somepony's way of trying to fill the gap Pinkie Pie had left behind?

Or was it something else?

Twilight Sparkle couldn't sleep.

It'd been nearly a week since Pinkie Pie had died, and she still couldn't bring herself to believe it. They'd been through so much together, survived things that could have killed them a dozen times over, and yet they were still young enough to believe themselves invincible. Pinkie Pie especially; if she walked through Twilight's door right now, Twilight wouldn't have questioned for a second that the pony had somehow managed to survive... that.

"Pinkie Pie," she sighed softly, "you are so random." It was something she'd heard Rainbow Dash say more than once, and it seemed to fit the pink pony even in death. Who else would find a way to be killed that, as far as she'd been able to research, had never happened to any pony in the history of Equestria before?

She looked up at the stars, feeling little solace in their cool light. Princess Luna hadn't known Pinkie Pie well, and the times they had met had been problematic, but all the same she and Celestia had both mourned Pinkie's loss. Celestia had very nearly declared a day of national mourning, held back only by the obvious objection: Pinkie Pie would never want that.

They hadn't actually honored her death yet. A funeral seemed too somber; a wake seemed to fit better. But the wound was still too raw, and Twilight had been unable to read the book she'd found on party planning without bursting into tears. She'd brought it with her onto the balcony, but she hadn't yet brought herself to open it.

She heard a distant thump.

One ear perked. Was that someone knocking at the front door? It seemed unlikely, and she hadn't noticed anypony approaching the library, but she supposed she should take a look. She wasn't in any real rush, though. If someone needed a book at this hour of the night, they could wait a minute or two.

More thumps followed.

Twilight frowned. That hadn't sounded like knocking. The quality of the sound was wrong, too muffled; if someone had knocked on the door that gently, she wouldn't have been able to hear it. She walked over to the edge of the balcony, peered into the darkness below, but saw nothing. "Hello? Anypony down there?" she called anyway.

Another thump, this one a loud one.

Twilight recognized the sound. She'd heard it many times before. Books hitting carpet, from the third... no, fourth shelf. "Spike, are you awake?" she called, heading back into the darkened library; she couldn't think why he'd want to be reading at this hour, and all the books at his reading level were closer to the floor for obvious reasons, but she didn't know what else might explain the sound.

More and louder thumps. Twilight froze, some nameless terror chilling her veins at the strange sounds, but fear turned to anger at the thought of an intruder damaging her books—or worse, planning to steal them!—and she raced down the stairs. "Hold it right there!" she commanded, lighting the lanterns with a thought, her horn blazing with gathered energy as she faced down

an empty room.

"Huh?" she said, looking around suspiciously for any shadows a pony could hide in—only to scream and jump as a small group of books slid off the shelf in front of her and landed on the floor. She quickly recovered, passed the light of her horn over the shelves, but sensed nothing amiss, no spell residue, no pony hiding behind the books.

Cautiously she made her way over to the windows, finding them unbroken, then the door, finding it still locked. Puzzled, she turned to look at the shelves themselves and spotted something she hadn't noticed before, having been looking at the shelves at an oblique angle.

The spaces where the books had been formed a smiling face.

Twilight called her friends together first thing in the morning.

"I told you something was going on!" Rainbow Dash declared triumphantly to Rarity, the five of them, plus Spike, seated around Twilight's kitchen table.

"There's no need to jump to conclusions just yet," Rarity protested. "Whoever did this may simply have abysmal taste. There's no call for you to be telling ghost stories."

"I never said anything about ghosts," Rainbow Dash replied smugly. "But come on! Pranking me, you, and Twilight, three nights in a row, and none of us can figure out how? There's only one pony I know who could have pulled that off."

"There's only one way to know for sure," Twilight replied. "And that's to catch them in the act."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Rarity blinked.

"Applejack," Rainbow Dash said, and all eyes turned to a confused-looking farm pony. "She's the only one of us that hasn't been pranked yet."

"Now hang on just a second," Applejack replied. "Fluttershy hasn't been pranked neither."

"But Pinkie Pie would never prank Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash said.

"And what if our intruder isn't some..." Rarity began, searching for the right

word.

"Pinkie poltergeist?" Twilight suggested.

Rarity nodded. "Will they know that?" she finished.

Applejack considered the situation. "Well, I suppose if we were all in the same place, they'd have to come to us if they were planning any funny business. And the farmhouse is a mite bigger than your country cottage, no offense, sugarcube." Fluttershy just nodded.

"Right, it's settled," Rainbow Dash said, thumping her hoof on the table. "We're gonna catch our prankster pink-hooved!"

"What if it is Pinkie Pie's ghost?" Fluttershy stammered. "What do we do then?"

"Spike," Twilight said, "do we still have that copy of Portram's Paranormal Compilation?"

"I think so, Twilight." Spike looked thoughtful. "I'll go check."

"Who's the what now?" Applejack wondered.

"It's a collection of lore on identifying and dealing with the supernatural," Twilight answered. "I don't know how authentic it is, but the spells in it do something. I just can't tell what without having an actual... subject." Twilight didn't look comfortable with the situation, and Applejack couldn't blame her.

"And if it's just some idiot trying to be clever, we ought to be able to buck some sense into them," Applejack replied.

Twilight nodded, looking somberly at the assembled faces. "All right. Let's find out what's going on here. One way or the other."

Fluttershy couldn't sleep.

They'd agreed to take turns staying up and listening for an intruder, and right now it was technically Applejack's turn, but Fluttershy hadn't felt tired when her turn was over, and Applejack looked so peaceful when she was asleep, so Fluttershy had decided not to wake her.

She was beginning to wonder if that had been a good idea, though. Not that she was in danger of nodding off and missing an intruder. Quite the opposite, really; she was too nervous to sleep without some other pony to watch over her. What if Rainbow Dash was wrong and it wasn't Pinkie Pie, just some pony with a really bad sense of humor? What if she did catch the pony in the act? What might they do in a panic to keep their identity secret?

And what if it was Pinkie's ghost? From what few ghost stories she knew, ponies didn't just decide to become ghosts, especially nice ponies like Pinkie Pie. It took something awful to make a ghost, something like dying in a truly... terrible way.

Like what happened to Pinkie Pie.

And she hadn't heard any stories about happy ghosts, either. Some of them were sad. Most of them were angry. Some of them were very angry.

Did Pinkie blame them for not somehow saving her? Was this her way of letting them know they were on her list? Was she just getting warmed up for something really dreadful?

It occurred to Fluttershy that she might actually be a bit of a worrier.

She couldn't help it, though. She didn't even know what kind of prank Pinkie might think to pull. She'd never been good at pranks, and the last time she'd had any played on her was back in Cloudsdale. Sticking somepony's hoof in a bowl of warm water or sticking a note to someone's flank didn't seem like Pinkie's style, though, even if she wasn't a ghost.

Anyway, with all five of them in the farmhouse, plus the rest of the Apple clan, it seemed like whoever was doing this was taking an awfully big risk. It'd be much safer to do something outside where nopony would notice until morning, like—

Fluttershy froze, then carefully crept toward the window and peered out.

One of Applejack's trees was burning with a pale blue flame.

The fire wasn't harming the trees. That wasn't the point.

In fact, it wasn't technically the tree that was on fire. Only the apples were burning, the flames causing the skins of the fruit to turn orange and form black stripes. In a matter of moments, the tree was festooned not with apples but with cheery jack-o-lanterns. (Apple lanterns had a nice ring to it, she thought.) Once one tree was done, the flames jumped to the next tree. It was hard work, but she was confident she'd have done enough of them by morning to really leave an impression.

Then Twilight Sparkle was there. That was surprising.

What was more surprising was what Twilight did next. She had a book with her—that wasn't the surprising part—and she started reading from it, her horn glowing brighter as she did—that wasn't the surprising part either. The surprising part was that the words *hurt*. They weren't loud, but they went into her head and did funny things, things she didn't like.

She tried to run away, but she couldn't. She couldn't even do her special running away trick! It was like the words were a rope and Twilight's horn was a stake; all she could do was waggle around on the end of the rope, which would have been more fun if Twilight would just stop saying those hurtful things.

She could see her other friends coming out of the farmhouse now, headed her way. Maybe they could tell Twilight to stop. She tried herself, but Twilight wasn't listening for some reason, just saying more of those words.

Twilight knelt, touching her horn to the ground, and said a final syllable. The rope snapped, and Pinkie staggered back, only to hit a wall that hadn't been there before. She looked around dazedly, seeing the wall all around her, shining from a circle on the ground and reaching up, way

too high to jump. On the other side of the wall, her friends stared at her, their expressions mixtures of shock, amazement, and fear.

What was with them all anyway? They looked like they'd seen a ghost!

"I'm seeing it," Applejack said, "but I don't believe it."

She spoke for all of them in a sense. Even Rainbow Dash, who'd most hoped they'd find Pinkie Pie had found a way to cheat death, wasn't sure how to react to the sight. The burning fruit had been eerie enough, but when Twilight begun to cast her spell, a shape had appeared in the air, a shape that had become a spectral Pinkie, hovering in the air as if it was no big deal, beating on the invisible walls that had made her visible to begin with. She looked afraid, like she didn't even recognize them, and wailed unpleasantly.

"Should... should we try giggling at her?" Fluttershy suggested. None of them felt quite up to trying.

"So what do we do?" Rarity said, a moment later.

There was no response.

"Twilight?" Applejack ventured. Twilight jerked.

"Huh? Oh! Right! Sorry, I just... I didn't think it would actually work. I mean... wow. Just... wow."

"Twilight," Applejack repeated, "what do we do?"

"Uh." Twilight looked back to the book, flipped through it urgently. "There's a section on laying spirits to rest. It should... should only take a couple of minutes—"

"What!?" Rainbow Dash protested. "We just found out she's still here, and you wanna kill her?"

"She's already dead!" Twilight shouted, driving Dash back. "I can't bring her back to life! Not even the princesses can do that!" From the sudden fury, Rainbow Dash realized Twilight had asked. She swallowed at the thought of Celestia denying her prized student anything.

"I'm sorry," Twilight continued, voice thick. "Stay away from the circle. She may try to... break out." She looked at the book again, cleared her throat, then began to read, more of those long, sonorous words that made Dash's ears itch. Supposedly anypony, not just a unicorn, could use the spells in the book and have them work. Twilight had simply been the obvious choice for doing them right.

Pinkie's ghost screamed again, and Fluttershy answered that scream. Rainbow Dash looked up in shock. Pinkie's form was changing, flashes of bone and muscle appearing, her whole body twisting in agony. With each passing second, she looked more and more like she had...

...when they saw her.

When she died.

When Dash failed her.

"I can't," Dash realized, the words almost inaudible. Then, before even she knew what she was doing, she charged forward, screaming, "I can't!" Applejack tried to stop her, but for once the earth pony's grasp on her tail was just a hair too slow, and Dash was able to surge forward... and cross the circle.

The barrier that trapped Pinkie didn't feel like anything to her. Her half-formed plan to tackle the ghost out of the circle didn't work either; she felt only a bone-chilling cold as she passed through Pinkie. One of her hooves scraped the ground where the circle glowed, though, and that was enough; the barrier popped like a soap bubble.

Even as Rainbow Dash collapsed, suddenly so very tired, and Twilight fell backward from the feedback of the spell, Pinkie Pie fled.

She went back to Ponyville, her mind a jumble.

Twilight had hurt her. Twilight Sparkle, her best friend in the history of friends, had hurt her.

And the rest had watched. Even Rainbow Dash, her extra super best friend, had watched as she screamed and begged and cried, until at last she couldn't watch any more and let her go. That's what made her Pinkie's extra super best friend.

But still! She'd watched—they'd all watched as Twilight hurt her! She didn't even know why! First they'd been ignoring her, and then they'd started crying when they talked about her, and now it was like they didn't even want her around anymore! She couldn't even understand what she'd done wrong!

She stumbled home, or thought she did. She'd been feeling bad for... a while. Sick, maybe. Things looked weird, and sometimes she forgot how she got somewhere. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. When she tried to remember, tried to think about anything too hard, her brain got all jumbly wumbly.

Maybe she was sick. Maybe Twilight was just trying to make her feel better. Maybe she hadn't understood because she was sick. Maybe it was just really nasty medicine. That made way more sense than Twilight hurting her on purpose. Yes, she'd just stay here, and Twilight would find her, and they'd have a good laugh after about how sick she was that she didn't even know Twilight was trying to—

Pinkie paused.

She wasn't in her room.

She was in a little room in Nurse Redheart's house, a room that didn't get a lot of use. In fact, the last time she'd been here, it'd been when they found Old Withers on his farm the day after it'd been super cold out, and he'd—

—he'd—

Pinkie Pie slowly looked down, into the coffin on the table in front of her.

Saw a familiar pink face, smiling and peaceful, looking as if she was just taking a nap. As long as you didn't look too closely at... the rest of her.

She's already dead.

No.

I can't bring her back to life.

No!

Not even the princesses can do that.

It wasn't fair.

I'm sorry.

"It's not fair!" Pinkie howled—

—and the world went red.

Rainbow Dash skidded to a stop in mid-air, the rest of the group following suit, and stared in shock at the sight before her.

Ponyville was burning.

"Oh, mercy," Applejack said, removing her hat as she looked on. The flames didn't seem to be harming the buildings, but they were panicking ponies nonetheless, sending them screaming through the streets.

The flames were the least of their worries. The town seemed to be full of angry ghosts, ponies and... parts of ponies brought back from who knows where, and each and every one seemed bent on tormenting the living. They'd pop up from the ground or out of walls, lashing out at ponies, sending them running first down one street, then another, in a desperate

attempt to escape. No pony had been hurt, at least that they could see, but if this went on, it couldn't end well.

At the center of it all, a pillar of light, a deep, angry red, swirled around a building they'd all last been inside under very unhappy circumstances.

"We've got to stop her!" Rainbow Dash yelled. "We can't let her do this!"

"I was trying to stop her!" Twilight yelled back, her eyes seeming to glow red in the unearthly light. "You wouldn't let me!"

"I'm sorry!" Dash shouted back. "I... I didn't know she'd do this!"

"That doesn't matter now," Applejack said, stepping between the two and giving each a stern look. "What matters is, how do we shut this down?"

Twilight worked her mouth a moment, brought the book up again, looked through it. "I can protect us from the ghosts, but I can't do it and stop Pinkie," she said. "Someone else will have to do that."

Rarity nodded, opened her mouth to volunteer.

"I'll do it!"

"What?" Rarity said, gaping at Rainbow Dash. "You can't possibly—"

"My fault," Dash replied. "My responsibility. All I have to do is say the words, right?"

Twilight nodded, skimmed the book to be sure she had her own incantation right, flipped it to the right page, and pressed it on Rainbow Dash. "It'll be easier if it's just the two of us," she said. "Applejack, you keep Fluttershy and Rarity safe."

Applejack nodded solemnly. "You've got my word, Twilight. You come back safe too."

Twilight nodded once, then, beginning to chant, led Rainbow Dash into the storm.

It was an eerie sight, like being in the eye of a tornado.

All around them, chaos reigned; fires blazed, ghosts screamed, ponies panicked. Every so often, a ghost would try to leap at them, only to turn away at the last second. There was no shimmering bubble of force, nothing obviously magical holding them back, just Twilight's calm, measured words. Who'd come up with these spells? How'd they wind up in a book Twilight had last used for costume ideas, of all things? Rainbow Dash wasn't sure she even wanted to know.

They reached Nurse Redheart's office. The nurse was lying on the street in front of it, looking like she'd been frightened to death. Dash felt a lump in her throat, one that lingered even after she knelt next to the pony, felt her thready pulse.

Pinkie Pie was killing ponies. Might have killed ponies already. Rainbow Dash's fault.

She looked at the book she was cradling in her forelegs as she hovered beside Twilight. All she had to do was read the passages where Pinkie Pie could hear them. One for binding a ghost to prevent it from escaping. One to banish a bound ghost from the land of the living. Simple. A minute, tops.

A minute to kill her friend.

The door opened for them. The flames on the walls, the light shining all around them, peeled away from Twilight's voice.

Rainbow Dash knew the way. It hadn't been that long, after all. A right here. A left there. The most isolated part of the building, used the least. Wouldn't want to disturb the patients.

There weren't any patients here now. Just ghosts. How many had died here? How many had died peacefully, in their sleep? Killed in the frontier days? From illness or accident or even violence? Ponyville was supposed to be a small town; just how many dead ponies could it have to its name?

They entered the room. It probably had some fancy medical name. Rainbow Dash didn't care. They'd put Pinkie on a table, and then they'd put her in a box, and then they were going to put her in the ground as soon as Twilight thought of just the right words to say.

She'd found the words now, but Rainbow Dash would have to say them.

Pinkie was there, though Dash barely recognized her. She was blazing with fury, the pink of her mane no longer so cheerful when it was the only light to see by, crimson rage burning. She saw them immediately, tried to attack them. Forced Twilight back a step somehow, without even touching her.

The words. Rainbow Dash looked down at the book, began to read. They were harder to pronounce than she'd expected, but Twilight had made little pencil notes, just in case.

Pinkie's ghost recognized the danger, tried to flee. Too late already, she was caught by the first syllable. She tried to attack them, but Twilight held her back with an increasing effort.

Rainbow Dash read. She couldn't rush it. She didn't know what would happen if she said one of the words wrong.

There was a big mark on the page. What did the mark mean? Oh, she was done with the first part. She looked up.

It had worked. Pinkie was caught in an invisible tube again, the light in the room faded, just enough to read by. The other ghosts were still restless, still beating at Twilight's defenses, but they would go away once Pinkie was banished, right?

Rainbow Dash looked at the book. Looked up at Pinkie.

There was a long silence.

"I can't," Rainbow Dash said again. She couldn't kill Pinkie Pie.

But she couldn't let Pinkie Pie kill anypony else either.

She stepped toward the tube, despite Twilight's desperate glare. Unable to stop chanting for even a second, her voice the only thing keeping the ghosts from jumping them both, Twilight was forced to follow Dash closer.

"Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash yelled. "Pinkie!"

She couldn't tell if the ghost understood her or not. Its form had become a sort of blur of red, only vaguely recognizable shapes inside it.

"Pinkie, you have to calm down!" Dash yelled. "There are ghosts running around, and everypony's scared, and some ponies have been hurt already, and... and..." She searched for something, anything she could say that would get through to the ghost, something Pinkie would understand.

"Pinkie, this isn't funny anymore!"

The ghosts, all of the ghosts, hesitated. Pinkie's ghost was still for a long moment, then deflated like a balloon inside its tube, turning into something Rainbow Dash had only seen once before: straight-haired, abandoned, lonely Pinkamena, eyes wide and wet with tears, standing on her hind legs and pressing her hooves against the invisible barrier.

"I'm sorry!" Pinkie said. "I was just... I didn't know what was happening, and nopony would pay attention to me, and I did my best jokes, and nopony laughed, and then Twilight hurt me, and I ran away, only I wound up here, and it's not fair, Rainbow Dash! It's not fair!"

"I know it's not fair, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash said, closing her eyes, squeezing her own tears out. "It's not fair at all. If I could just... bring you back somehow..."

There was a moment's silence, save for Twilight's continued chanting. Her voice was starting to sound ragged.

"Twilight!" Rainbow Dash said, turning to the unicorn. "We don't have to banish her, right? I mean, we can get rid of the other ghosts and... and not have to send her away, right?"

Pinkie Pie looked uncertain. "But then I'll still be a ghostie! Forever!"

"It's that or send you off to wherever you're supposed to go!" Dash said, turning back to Pinkie. "If that's what you want, I... I'll do it, but I don't think these ghosts are gonna wait much longer!" The ghosts Pinkie's rage had brought up were beginning to look restless again, pressing at the force Twilight's words exerted.

Pinkie Pie hesitated, looking around as if trying to read another option off the walls or something. One of the ghosts attacked Rainbow Dash, forcing her to edge closer to Twilight, and that seemed to decide the issue.

"I don't want to leave!" Pinkie cried. "I want to stay with you, Dashie! You and Twilight and all my friends! I don't care if you can't see or hear me! I don't care if it means I can't ever throw a party again!" She gazed at Rainbow Dash with sky-blue eyes, looking for that one moment as real and solid as Dash had ever seen her. "Please..."

Dash turned again. "Twilight!" she pleaded. The unicorn didn't answer, but the book in Dash's arms began to glow, and it quickly turned itself to a new page. Dash scanned the page hurriedly, not understanding at first what Twilight was trying to tell her... then smiled, realizing she'd been offered that third option.

"Thanks, Twilight," she said, voice barely audible over the lamentations of the dead, then turned her eyes to the ghost of her best friend. "Hang on, Pinkie!" she shouted. "I'm coming!"

Then she stepped into the column with Pinkie Pie.

Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy watched from the outskirts of Ponyville as their friends disappeared into its streets. They'd been in Nurse Redheart's for at least a few minutes now, Applejack reckoned, at least if she'd seen correctly; there'd been a sort of shadow against the flame, the sign of whatever spell Twilight had used to get them inside.

"We should be doing something," Rarity protested, looking worriedly at the town. "Surely between the three of us we could evacuate at least some of

the ponies from Ponyville, right?"

"I promised Twilight I'd keep you two safe, and I intend to keep that promise," Applejack said, beginning to unwind her lasso. Rarity noticed, and her eyes widened.

"What do you propose to do with that?"

"I don't suppose you two'll get into too much trouble if I tie you to one of these here trees, will you? At least, not enough for me to regret leavin' you behind."

Rarity understood immediately. "You're very brave, Applejack," she said, "but I can't ask you to go alone."

"I ain't askin' anything either," Applejack replied. "If I have to hogtie you to keep you out of trouble, I will. I'm suggesting maybe you'll be more comfortable if—"

Then the screaming stopped.

The three turned to look at Ponyville just in time to see the red light recede like the tide, pulling fires and ghosts with it, collecting into a swirling tornado over Nurse Redheart's office. There it hung for a long moment before sucking itself down into the building, vanishing utterly, leaving a strange silence.

Fluttershy was the first to break herself from the spell and hurry forward, but the other two were close behind. In the streets they found ponies, frightened, hurt, some unconscious, but all of them alive. They didn't linger long, just long enough to be sure nopony needed urgent aid, pressing on to the clinic.

Nurse Redheart was there, picking herself up gingerly, but no other ponies. It wasn't until the three reached the morgue that they found what they were looking for: Twilight and Rainbow Dash, both lying on the floor next to Pinkie Pie's casket. Rainbow Dash was unconscious, but Twilight was awake.

"Did you...?" Rarity began, once again unsure how to finish the

sentence. Twilight shook her head slightly. "Then what happened to... well, everything?"

Twilight tried to speak, only croaked. Thankfully, her magic was still strong, so she plucked the book out from under Rainbow Dash, holding it up to Rarity, the page still open.

Rarity read silently, and her eyes widened. "Oh my."

Rainbow Dash was sleeping like a baby.

The incident hadn't been Ponyville's first brush with disaster, and it probably wouldn't be the last. No pony was seriously hurt, though a few had hurt themselves in a panic and were sporting bandages or slings. There'd been some property damage as well—again, panicked ponies, plus pesky poltergeists—but nothing that couldn't be cleaned up in a day or two.

They had the wake three nights later. Pinkie Pie had been the guest of honor, of course, even though she could only attend in spirit. (Dash hadn't been able to believe Twilight could say that with a straight face.) Everypony who attended was encouraged to tell stories of how Pinkie had changed their lives for the better, and many ponies did. There were tears, but mostly laughter... just how she would have wanted it.

Rainbow Dash still hurt, even months later. They all did; Twilight Sparkle's last-second stroke of brilliance had been, well, brilliant, but it hadn't brought Pinkie back to life. Every day they had to remind themselves that Pinkie wasn't there to bring a smile to their faces, and that meant they had to pick up the slack. Fluttershy had even, rather timidly, played a joke on the Cutie Mark Crusaders, taking them out into Whitetail Wood at night to help her look for an injured snipe. (Even Dash had to admit, that was a stroke of genius. No pony saw it coming from her.)

Daaaaashie...

Dash stirred on her cloud, mumbling something incoherent. She'd been

busy busting clouds most of the day, and she really needed to be well-rested for tonight.

Oh, Rainbow Daaaaaash...

Somepony seemed to have other ideas, though. Groggily Dash blinked awake, looking over at the perky pink pony next to her—one only she could see.

"You know you don't actually need wings, right?" she grumbled at Pinkie Pie.

Come on, Rainbow Dash! Pinkie enthused, bouncing up and down on thin air and flapping pink wings. *The sun's about to set, and you know what that means!*

Dash stood and stretched. "Yeah, I know," she said. It wasn't easy for the dead to enter the realm of the living, especially a good-hearted ghost like Pinkie Pie, and even appearing for Rainbow Dash to see wasn't something she could do anytime she wanted. Some times made it easier, though. Like tonight. "Just remember, I'm not as flexible as you, okay? You just about broke something last time."

Just about only counts in horseshoes! Pinkie protested, only to receive a glare. Sighing, she performed the ritual: *Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye.* Rainbow Dash was positive that last bit hadn't looked so... disturbing before.

Almost positive.

"Remember the rules," Rainbow Dash said, looking her own bleached body over. "You only get to eat a third of the candy." Pinkie's usual intake would probably send Dash to join her.

Check!

"No doing anything really stupid with my body and leaving me to deal with it."

Checkerooni!

"And no singing!"

Awww, but your voice is even better than mine!

"No!"

Fine, check.

"Okay, then," Dash said, seeing the sun dipping under the horizon, the moon rising to take its place. "Let's do this."

Yippee! Pinkie declared, then rushed at Rainbow Dash. There was a moment of confusion—and then Rainbow Dash, returned to her usual colors, hovered nearby as Pinkie Pie fuzzled her borrowed mane, trying to get it to poof up appropriately.

Why didn't you have me dye myself pink, anyway? Dash wondered. It didn't seem like much of a Nightmare Night costume. A white body was a start, but a blonde mane?

"It's a surprise!" Pinkie replied.

Applejack

One of the Herd

Harvest time at Sweet Apple Acres was always the busiest time of year for Applejack and the rest of the Apple clan. That wasn't to say they ever had a day off, exactly; there was always something that needed doing on the farm, planting crops or tilling soil or making repairs or pulling weeds. Sales went on year-round as well, whether they be of fresh apples or apple-based baked goods. Still, there were natural rhythms in the pace of farm life, and harvest time was when they went all out.

Some ponies might not understand, therefore, why Applejack was planning on attending a sleepover at Twilight Sparkle's house that night. Those ponies hadn't been around for last year's near-disastrous applebuck season, when Applejack had very nearly scuppered not only her own harvest but all of Ponyville through a combination of fatigue and bull-headedness. Big Macintosh was healthy this year, but neither Applejack nor Twilight were taking chances on a repeat of the episode, so when Twilight had suggested Applejack join her for a night of stargazing, Applejack had readily accepted.

That didn't mean she was going to laze the day away, though. She'd set her stall up in Ponyville's bustling market square and was hawking the first of the year's crop to anypony who wanted some. Sweet Apple Acres produced some of the best apples in Equestria, and after several months of only canned apples and applesauce, ponies were practically chomping at the bit to get them fresh. That meant Applejack could charge a premium for these apples, lowering the price later in the season as supply caught up to demand, one of the many lessons Granny Smith had taught her about running the family farm.

Applejack finished ringing up a customer, then looked to the next pony in line, surprised to see it was a somewhat frazzled-looking Twilight Sparkle. "Land sakes, Twilight, what happened to you?" she wondered. It couldn't have been anything serious, though; the unicorn was still smiling.

"Oh, I was just up late last night watching the meteor shower," Twilight

answered, confirming Applejack's suspicions. "It was incredible! You should have been there to see it!"

"Thought you said tonight was gonna be the best night for that, sugarcube?" Applejack replied. She wasn't sure how meteor showers worked, to be honest; nopony, not even the princesses, was responsible for scheduling them, but nonetheless they seemed to happen about the same time each year according to Twilight.

"Oh, I'm sure it will be," Twilight said, "but last night was just amazing! I've never seen so many Orionids in one night!"

"Oriowha?"

"There was even one that looked like it came right down on your farm!" Twilight continued, oblivious to Applejack's confusion. "We should go out there and see if there are any meteorites!"

"Whoa there, Twilight," Applejack said, reaching out to put a hoof on the unicorn's shoulder. "This ain't exactly the time to go sightseeing around the farm. Besides, I've got work to do, and I reckon you need a nap if we're gonna do this slumber party thing."

Twilight faltered slightly at that. "I suppose you're right," she said, then brightened again. "Besides, if we look tomorrow, there'll probably be even more to find!"

Applejack sighed. Well, they still had some fallow land even at this time of year; she supposed it wouldn't hurt to let Twilight poke around a bit to find some space rocks or what have you. "All right. You can come with me back to the farm tomorrow, and we'll see what turns up. Now, if you don't mind, you're holding up the paying customers."

Twilight looked behind her at ponies eager to stock up on apples, laughed with embarrassment, and put some bits on the counter. "Can you bring a bushel by tonight? Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash are coming too, and I should stock up."

Applejack nodded, sweeping the bits into the register, already making a mental note of which apples to set aside—only the freshest and best for her

friends. "One for the road," she added, setting an apple in front of Twilight, who bit into it right away.

"Even better than last year," Twilight pronounced, her eyes forming happy half-moons, then began working through the crowd back toward the library. Applejack, pleased with the compliment, turned her attention to the next pony in line.

"Hey, Applejack," a familiar voice said.

It was getting on toward afternoon, and Applejack's sales had only picked up as the day went on, but eventually she'd put up the 'back in 30' sign and settled down for a break, eating the lunch Granny Smith had packed for her and tucking her hat over her eyes for a brief nap. Naturally, Rainbow Dash had chosen that moment to drop by her stall.

"Something I can help you with, Rainbow..." she began, tipping her hat back... then stopped, irritation fading to confusion.

Applejack had always been a straight shooter, and it didn't take some fancy necklace to prove it. She'd never been able to get away with anything as a foal, her face and voice giving the game away no matter how hard she'd tried. At first, she'd assumed Granny Smith was just that good at spotting a lie, but when she noticed how easily Apple Bloom could pull one over on the Apple matriarch—and how quickly her fibs fell apart when confronted by her older sister—Applejack had realized she had a knack for the truth. She'd never been a fanciful pony, but sometimes, when somepony tried to lie to her, it felt like a physical presence, an aura of wrongness about them.

Rainbow Dash was giving off that aura now, and she hadn't even said anything.

"Just thought I'd stop by," Dash said, oblivious to Applejack's reaction. "Maybe pick up some apples, see how you're doing."

"What, Big Macintosh chase you out of our trees?" Applejack

snapped. She couldn't help it; the sensation she was experiencing was extremely uncomfortable. It wasn't even like Rainbow Dash was lying about the reason she'd come over; it was more like the time that used car salesman had tried to con Caramel into buying a wagon with a cracked axle, where she'd known something was up before he even opened his mouth.

It wasn't a sensation she was used to coming from a pony who, for all her faults, seldom bothered hiding anything.

Rainbow Dash looked hurt. "I'm hurt, AJ!" Case in point. "You think I'm the sort of pony to just mooch off you all year round? Besides, Big Macintosh is working that empty field."

Which was true, but raised an obvious question. "And how would you know that anyhow?"

"Flew over there this morning," Dash replied, smirking. "He found some big rock there, wanted me to take a look. Looked pretty cool."

"Do you know what he did with it?" Applejack wondered, despite the sensation still gnawing at her skin. Maybe Twilight would get her space rock after all.

"Nah," Dash replied. "I was just passing by anyway. Wanted to see Fluttershy before she went to her spa thing." The pegasus's disgust with primping and preening was obvious—usually. Applejack was rattled to discover it was significantly harder to pick up on with that alarm going off in her head.

"Rainbow Dash," Applejack said, "I really do need to get some rest if I'm gonna be ready for tonight's slumber party." She hoped Dash would take the hint and go away.

Thankfully, it seemed she did. "Oh yeah, the falling star thing. I need to get a nap in myself. Hey, see you then!" She gathered herself, then zoomed off in her usual prismatic fashion, taking the uneasy sensation with her.

Most of it, anyway. Applejack was left wondering what had set it off in the first place.

Maybe she was coming down with something.

Applejack had reopened her stand a bit later than she'd meant to, the odd encounter with Rainbow Dash having made it difficult for her to squeeze a nap in, but it hadn't hurt business any; customers from all over Ponyville were only too willing to wait however long it took to get fresh Sweet Apple Acres apples. For a few hours, she'd even been able to put the incident behind her in the hustle and bustle of sales and conversation.

Then Lily stopped by, and Applejack got that weird crawling sensation again. She couldn't figure out why; the pink pony had been polite and well-mannered, doing nothing more untoward than buying a peck of apples and complimenting Applejack on the quality of the year's crop, but something about her—the way she moved, the focus of her eyes, the timber of her voice—was causing warning bells to ring in Applejack's head. She helped Lily as quickly as she could, relieved but concerned when Lily took the strange feelings with her.

Since then, Applejack had come across three more ponies who gave her the same uncomfortable vibe. She was so used to her talent for truth-finding picking out lies that she'd carefully analyzed every scrap of conversation they had with her, trying to figure out what they could possibly be hiding from her. Were they planning a surprise party for her, and nervous about it? That didn't make sense; aside from living in Ponyville, none of them had anything in common. None of them aside from Rainbow Dash were particularly close to her, and none of them were party-planning ponies.

By the time she closed up shop for the evening, Applejack was feeling a bit jumpy. She'd never been prone to paranoia, not like some of her friends had gotten, but she couldn't help feeling there was something going on in Ponyville, something dangerous, and she needed to get to the bottom of it as soon as possible.

The only problem was, she hadn't the slightest idea how.

"Twilight... have you noticed anything weird about the ponies in town?"

Twilight chuckled at that for some reason. "I seem to recall saying 'all the ponies in this town are crazy' my first night in Ponyville."

Applejack stomped her hoof on the floor of the library, glaring at the unicorn. "I'm being serious here, Twilight!" Twilight smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry, Applejack. I've been in the library most of the day as usual. I don't think I saw anything strange today, though. Why do you ask?"

Applejack sighed. "I don't know what it is, but... some of the ponies in town have just felt... wrong."

"Wrong?" Twilight echoed, tilting her head. At least she was taking Applejack seriously.

"I don't know how to explain it," Applejack said, pacing the floor. "I just get this feeling like... like they're lying to me. All the time, even when they're just standing there. First Rainbow Dash, then Lily... it's like... like they're some other pony *pretending* to be somepony I know." For a moment, she felt satisfaction at having identified the sensation, but it didn't last; the implications if that were true were even more disturbing.

Twilight Sparkle considered this. "Well, there are spells you can use to disguise yourself as another pony. Hiding the cutie mark is the hardest part... did you see their cutie marks?" Applejack nodded. "I know a spell that breaks illusions. And I can look and see if maybe there's something else that might make you feel uneasy around other ponies. I've never heard of a disease that makes ponies feel untrustworthy, but we've run into stranger things."

"Y'might wanna check me out while you're at it," Applejack said, smiling with relief. Twilight was a smart cookie; if there was anything to this, she'd

figure it out. "I wouldn't want to be coming down with something at this time of year."

Twilight nodded. "I'll have a look at my books. In the meantime, why don't you go ahead and pick a spot for the sleepover? Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash aren't here yet, but—"

Thump thump thump. The two turned to look at the front door. Applejack swallowed, feeling that sensation of wrongness again, even though she couldn't see who was on the other side.

"Hey, Twilight, your telescope's blocking the balcony, lemme in!" Rainbow Dash called.

Applejack was seized with a sudden moment of terror. "Don't let her in," she hissed. Twilight looked at her strangely, then opened the door for the pegasus, who sauntered in as if nothing were the matter.

"Thanks," Rainbow Dash said, carrying a tray of baked goods into the library, hovering to free her legs. "Pinkie can't make it; some sort of party emergency. I didn't get a lot out of her. She sent these over with me, though."

"Well, that's very thoughtful of her," Twilight said, smiling and taking the tray with her magic. "Go ahead and grab a spot upstairs, and we'll be right up." Rainbow Dash nodded, then zoomed upstairs, leaving Twilight alone with Applejack.

"She doesn't seem abnormal," Twilight said, shrugging at her friend, who could only smile weakly back.

"Can you check into her anyway?" she asked, relieved when Twilight nodded.

"No problem. Let's get these upstairs."

The evening had been torture.

They'd had a late dinner (prepared by Spike), spent some time hanging out and talking about recent events in Ponyville, then, when the light permitted, moved to Twilight's balcony and watched the meteor shower. It had been every bit as spectacular as Twilight had said it would be, white lights slashing across the sky again and again, some seeming almost to touch the earth. Applejack hadn't seen a meteor shower since she was a little filly—too busy with farmwork, she supposed—and Twilight had said that, based on her preliminary observations, this was going to be the best one in a century.

But Applejack couldn't enjoy it. Rainbow Dash wasn't acting any differently than she usually did. She joked. She bragged. She laughed. She even suggested flying up and catching a meteorite, which Twilight had only been able to talk her out of after pointing out just how hot a falling meteor would be. In every single respect, she acted exactly like Applejack would have expected her to, not a single thing out of character.

So why did Applejack feel like Dash couldn't be trusted alone in a room with either of them?

She'd made up an increasingly flimsy series of excuses to join Twilight any time she left the room, and if Rainbow Dash noticed, she gave no sign of doing so. Twilight hadn't been able to help, unfortunately. She'd covertly cast a number of spells on both Rainbow Dash and Applejack throughout the evening and been able to find nothing wrong with either pony, no reason for the farmer's gnawing unease. It was maddening.

When it finally came time for them to settle down for the evening, Applejack was seriously considering begging off, going back to Sweet Apple Acres, anything to get away from Rainbow Dash. But that would mean leaving Twilight alone with her, which, even in the face of all evidence to the contrary, Applejack couldn't bring herself to do. She'd set her own sleeping bag up between Twilight and Rainbow Dash, more willing to risk herself than her friend, and tried her best to ignore the sensations screaming in her ear and get some sleep.

She'd failed.

"Hey, AJ. You asleep?"

Applejack flinched at the sound of the voice. "Tryin' to be," she snapped.

There was a pause, and then Rainbow Dash responded subduedly. "AJ, you've been acting weird all night. There something wrong?"

"N-nothing's wrong," Applejack lied. She flinched again, hearing how obvious the lie was.

"Back me up on this, Twilight," Dash said. There was no response. "Twilight?" Another pause. "Guess she's asleep already."

"We should get some sleep too," Applejack suggested, hoping to change the topic.

No such luck. "AJ, all night long you've been acting as jumpy and twitchy as Fluttershy trying out for the Wonderbolts. I'm getting worried. You sure you haven't been working too hard?"

"Maybe I have been," Applejack stammered, grasping at the excuse. "I should get some rest, huh?"

"Hey," Dash said, "I know something that'll help you relax. It's an old trick my mom taught me when I couldn't sleep. Just close your eyes and relax, okay?" In the darkness, Applejack could hear Rainbow Dash scooting out of her sleeping bag and moving slowly closer, every little sound driving a new note of tension into her thoughts. She had to fight the urge to scream, to thrash out, as her best friend moved ever closer, and she squeezed her eyes tight in silent terror, only to open them a moment later as the fear of not seeing it coming.

Rainbow Dash's head was right above hers, the pegasus's mouth open for a warm, wet kiss on the lips.

Applejack twisted her head desperately, bringing a hoof out of her sleeping bag and socking Dash in the cheek, sending her falling backward and sideways to land roughly on the floor. Twilight startled awake, mumbling "Wha?"

"You hit me!" Dash protested, cradling her cheek. The light flicked on a

second later as Twilight lit the lamps with her magic.

"You tried to kiss me!" Applejack argued, wriggling out of her own sleeping bag, adrenaline jangling.

"Wha—I did not!" Rainbow Dash replied—and much to Applejack's relief, the weird crawling sensation briefly intensified.

"That's a lie!" she shouted, confidence in her own abilities surging and giving her strength to voice her fears. "I've thought there was something weird about you all day, and now I'm sure of it! What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything!" Dash responded, looking over to an increasingly concerned Twilight.

"Another lie!" Applejack said, advancing on the pegasus. "What are you trying to pull? And what about Lily and Ginger Gold and Twinkle? Are they in on it too?"

Rainbow Dash's eyes widened, a tell obvious enough for even Twilight to pick up on it. "You're crazy!" she shouted, but she wasn't convincing either of them now.

A sudden thought, and fear, struck Applejack. "Where's Pinkie Pie?" she demanded, moving face to face with the pegasus. "What'd you do with her?"

She wasn't prepared to be bucked in the face.

Rainbow Dash had a surprising strength in her legs, considering the pegasus almost never walked anywhere if she could help it, and Applejack was thrown into a tangled heap of legs. Twilight gasped, and in her distraction, she was unable to stop Dash from taking off, smashing one of the windows open and taking off into the night.

Applejack picked herself up, staring in astonishment at the space where her friend had been, while Twilight reached out with a spell to close and lock the window... then, after only a second's pause, lock each of the other windows and doors in the library. "It looks like you were right about her," Twilight said. "But that doesn't tell us what's going on!"

"We need to find Pinkie Pie," Applejack said, "She might be hurt." Twilight nodded, climbing out of bed. "And if she isn't, we need to warn her not to trust Rainbow Dash."

As Twilight woke Spike and gave him strict instructions not to let anypony into the library without her express permission, Applejack stared at the window Dash had flown out through, at the stars beyond. What had happened to her friend to make her do what she'd done?

And what had she been trying to do?

Sugarcube Corner wasn't far, though traveling there at night was eerie, especially with both ponies jumping at any shadow that might be shaped like Rainbow Dash. The streets were deserted at this time of night, and the moonlight cast weird shadows off every building. The uncertainty of what they'd find at their destination, anything from a badly injured Pinkie Pie to an ambush from Rainbow Dash, only served to further shatter their nerves.

The two hesitated at the doorstep, then moved by silent agreement, Applejack watching out for anyone approaching, Twilight moving to the door to thump on it vigorously. "Pinkie?" she yelled. "Mrs. Cake? Open up, it's an emergency!"

The door swung open only a second later, the lights in the store coming on, revealing a confused Pinkie Pie. "Ooo, is it a party emergency?" she wondered. Twilight sagged with relief.

"Thank goodness," she began. "We were afraid something'd happened to—" She felt a bump on her shoulder, turned to look at Applejack.

Who was staring past her at Pinkie Pie, eyes wide with horror.

Twilight, reacting a second too slow, swung her head back toward Pinkie... and caught a kiss full on the lips.

Applejack screamed, grabbing Twilight and trying to pull her away from the

suddenly amorous Pinkie Pie, but the pink pony had a grip like a leech and refused to be dislodged. There was something horrible about the sight, no romance or affection in the gesture, just an obscene groping, cheeks distending as if she were blowing into Twilight's mouth.

After a struggle that seemed to take forever but only took a few seconds, Pinkie Pie suddenly let Twilight go, sending Applejack stumbling backward to land on her rear and Twilight falling to the ground where she stood. She began coughing violently.

"What did you do to her?" Applejack said, staring at Pinkie in increasing revulsion. "What did you do?"

"You silly filly," Pinkie replied, her singsong tone terrifyingly normal, her smile as innocent as ever. "You gave Rainbow Dash quite a spookers! But it's okay, I understand."

"You do?" Applejack replied despite herself, pushing herself to her hooves, unable to look away from the pink pony.

"We've been super busy planning our surprise party, and you've been feeling left out! I should have realized sooner; you're good at finding secrets." She smiled broadly. "But that's okay. We'll just have to start the party sooner! I think we have enough ponies now anyway." She paused briefly, glanced down. "Isn't that right, Twilight?"

Applejack's gaze fell. Her horror grew.

Twilight was standing up now, looking a bit wobbly, but essentially unhurt. If Applejack had happened past a second or two later, she wouldn't have even seen anything wrong. Indeed, having been right there, she realized all she'd seen were two ponies being rather more affectionate with each other than usual, then a brief coughing fit. The sort anypony might get, and it'd mean nothing.

The sort of thing nopony would think too much about until it happened to them.

Twilight Sparkle—the thing that had been Twilight Sparkle—looked at her. "It's okay, Applejack," she said. "She didn't hurt me. She just... I

know what's going on now." She paused, offered her most reassuring smile. "It's all right."

Applejack ran.

She didn't know what she was going to do. She hadn't been able to think of anything but getting out of Ponyville.

How many ponies were already... infected? How long would it take to infect the rest? They'd been careful so far, not wanting to raise suspicions. Now that they knew she was onto them, were there enough of them to just drag ponies out of their beds, change them wholesale? How often could they infect other ponies? Did they have to build up some level of... poison, or could it happen as fast as they could go door to door?

And how long would it stay confined to Ponyville? They didn't get a lot of visitors, but even one would be enough. One infected pony making his way to Manehattan—

Applejack stumbled at another horrifying thought. Twilight. She could go home, ask Spike to open the door for her, or just force it open with her magic. Even if he was suspicious, she could just grab him with her magic, make him kiss her. *Dear Princess Celestia: I've discovered something I'd like to discuss with you privately. Please come to Ponyville at your earliest convenience. Your faithful student—*

She could see the buildings of Sweet Apple Acres up ahead. It was the middle of the night, and they'd all be deep asleep, but she'd get them up. They'd have to figure something out. Fortify the farmhouse, maybe, or find somewhere to hide. It wouldn't be easy, but she couldn't abandon her family.

There was a light on, she realized, on the porch. She could see Big Macintosh silhouetted in the light. He must have had trouble sleeping. Good. She'd feel better with her brother at her side—

He found some big rock there, wanted me to take a look. Looked pretty

cool.

She skidded to a stop, blood going cold. No. It couldn't be.

"Applejack?"

She spun around, nearly shrieking at the fright. Twilight was standing there in the road behind her, obviously having teleported to follow. Pinkie Pie and Rarity weren't far behind, running to catch up with both of them, and beyond them Applejack could see the lights of Ponyville turning on one by one.

"Applejack, I know you're scared, but we just want to help you. Just stay there for a moment and listen to me," Twilight soothed.

Applejack turned and ran. She knew what she was running toward, but it didn't matter; all that mattered was staying away from the infected a moment, even a second longer.

She wasn't surprised to see Rainbow Dash appear up ahead, blocking the road past the farmhouse, but her heart sank a little more to see Fluttershy there with her, staring Applejack's way with eyes that had no right to look that kind.

"Applejack, please stop!" Fluttershy called, but Applejack didn't, turning instead toward the farmhouse, to the silhouette there, hoping against hope that she was wrong.

She wasn't. Big Macintosh looked at her with soft, puzzled eyes, gently wondering, "Something go wrong at the slumber party, sis?" He was every inch of him the sweet, kind brother who'd helped take care of her since she was a foal, and he was wrong, all wrong.

"Big Macintosh? Is Applejack back already?" a soft voice wondered.

No. No no no not that anything but that please Celestia not her not her!

Apple Bloom ventured out onto the porch, wiped sleep from her eyes. Scootaloo was there too, and Sweetie Belle. Of course they were. Apple Bloom had helped out on the farm in the morning, and then

she'd probably gone straight to her fellow Cutie Mark Crusaders. Told them about something cool she saw, had them close their eyes so she could show them too.

If Applejack hadn't had that slumber party to go to, she'd have been on the farm. Big Macintosh would have found her, taking a break from apple-bucking. Said he found something odd in the field, and would she mind taking a look? Or maybe he'd have just approached her on some pretext, and before she knew it he'd have pressed his lips to hers—

"AJ?"

It was Rainbow Dash again. She turned, heart hollow, to see the inevitable. They'd all caught up to her now, Rainbow Dash and Rarity and Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle, all of them looking at her like she was the one who was sick, like she was the one who was wrong.

Maybe she was. For all she knew, she was the only one left.

"It doesn't hurt, AJ," Rainbow Dash said, gazing intently at her. "It feels kinda gross at first, and you wanna spit it out, but then you... well, you understand. They don't wanna hurt us. They just wanna live. And they need our help."

"I was scared too, at first," Fluttershy said. Was Angel infected? Were her other animals? Applejack didn't see them, didn't know. "But they don't want us to do anything bad. They just want homes."

"There's nowhere for you to go, sis," Big Macintosh said from behind her. "We can't just let you leave; other ponies might not understand. Let us help you."

There was a silent moment while the ponies watched her. Wild thoughts flew through Applejack's head. Fighting them all for as long as there was strength in her body. Running into the Everfree and hoping they hadn't reached Zecora. Finding something sharp in the barn and hurling herself on it, so she could at least die on her terms—

"Applejack?"

She turned, saw Apple Bloom staring up at her with large, innocent eyes, and all of a sudden her strength was gone. She sank to her knees, crying bitterly, knowing what was going to happen, unable to fight any longer. She could sooner tear off her own leg than hurt her precious little sister.

"Get... get it over with," she croaked, squeezing her eyes tight. She could hear Apple Bloom stepping closer, feel soft breaths on her face. Sense lips drawing close. *She's never even kissed a colt, why her, why do they have to make her do this!?*

Then the lips met hers.

There was a surge of dust, fine and sweet, like powdered sugar. She couldn't help herself; she breathed it in and begun to choke and cough as Apple Bloom moved away. She staggered to her feet, trying to catch her breath, stumbling toward the farmhouse as Big Macintosh moved out of the way, as the others watched, not trying to stop her. There was no reason to now.

It took surprisingly little time to clear the dust out of her lungs. She took one deep breath, then another, her senses returning to her. Looked up at the others and waited.

And waited.

And realized, with a growing shock and euphoria, that *nothing had happened*.

It hadn't worked. Why hadn't it worked? She hadn't tried to fight it. She hadn't had a reason to. No pony else had been able to fight it, or they'd have held her or something until they were sure. She was the only one.

Just like she was the only one who'd noticed anything wrong in the first place.

She could see them realizing something had gone wrong, starting to move toward her, but before they could she charged Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, scrambling between them and into the farmhouse. The lights were out inside, but she'd lived there all her life, knew exactly when to turn, how

many steps there were to climb. She could hear her brother close behind her, knew the others would be following as well, but they'd be slowed by turning on lights, trying to figure out which way she'd gone.

She knew exactly where she was going.

She slammed the door to her bedroom open, ran to her nightstand on the far wall, focused her will. An innocuous-looking jewelry box opened, revealing a golden necklace with a ruby apple set in the center. The necklace rose into the air, glowing with its own light, and slapped itself against her neck just as Big Macintosh entered the room behind her.

She turned, and the light of Honesty rose, filling the room with a crimson light. He screamed and recoiled from it as if it burned his skin, and she advanced, forcing him back, out of the room, halfway down the stairs before he turned and fled. Filled with a new hope, she followed him outside—

—and stopped, faced down by a knot of friends and relations, all staring at her, cringing at the light but standing their ground. It was hurting them, but that was all. It wasn't curing them.

"Applejack, don't do this," Twilight pleaded. "We can... we can figure out why it didn't work. Or lock you up until it's safe to let you out again. Or something."

"You have to sleep sometime, AJ," Rainbow Dash added. "Just take the necklace off, and nopony has to get hurt."

Applejack could see some of the other Apple clan now, called from the guest housing she put them up in when they came to help with the harvest. Big Macintosh nodded slightly to them, and they began to move to encircle her, cut her off from running.

If they were so confident she had nowhere to run, why were they trying to stop her?

She sprinted for the gap, and the others ran too, but she was faster, fueled by desperation. Caramel tried to block her, shied away from her pendant at the last second, only managed to bump up against her. She heard Big

Macintosh yell to follow her, heard the pounding of many hooves.

Twilight appeared in front of her in a flash of light; she shied up, and the unicorn reached out with a spell, tugging at the Element of Honesty. She charged Twilight, breaking her concentration, and knocked her to the ground, continuing to run.

"I've got you now!" Rainbow Dash yelled—poor, predictable Rainbow Dash, couldn't help announcing her attacks even under alien control. Applejack ran straight for two steps, jukeed left, and a rainbow blur plowed into the field, skidded several feet before stopping.

Wait. She felt something. A wrongness even more intense than that in her friends and family. It was coming from the old barn, the one they were leaving empty until they could afford to fix it up. On a hunch, she ran toward it.

The night suddenly acquired a violet glow, and Applejack's feet lost purchase on the ground; she twisted her head, saw Rarity grunting with the strain of levitating her. She remembered the battle with Discord, focused her will, and fired a bolt of red at the unicorn; Rarity jerked and screamed, and her focus was lost. Applejack fell, hit the ground running.

Fluttershy flew up beside her, called, "Applejack, you stop this instant!" Applejack risked looking. Whatever power had taken hold of her friend, it couldn't command the Stare; she shifted sideways, bumped Fluttershy's wings, forced her back.

She was almost at the barn now, the wrongness, the evil, like a palpable thing now, pulsing and throbbing. She just had to get through the door and

Pinkie Pie popped out of it, standing on her hind legs, holding her forelegs out in a barring gesture. Applejack crashed into her, rolled across the ground, wound up wrapped up in party pony. She looked up from where she lay.

It was no rock. It was about the size of a pony's head, gray and rough like a rock, but it was pulsing like a heart, and veins of pale blue light came out of cracks on its surface, covering it like roots. They dug into the ground, spreading out for ten feet in every direction. Luminescent blue mushrooms

had sprouted from the cracks and veins; she'd disturbed one in her tumble, and sweet-smelling dust wafted from its cap.

The others reached the door, hesitated, but she realized they wouldn't hold back much longer. Pinkie had managed to grab her; her Element's ability to protect her was almost gone.

So she struck.

"I reckon it's time you all saw the truth!" she shouted, and focused all of her considerable will into her necklace.

A red light blazed from her throat, filling the barn. The reaction was immediate. The rock—the egg—let out a horrible shrieking noise, thrashing around as if trying to get away, pinned by its own roots. The fungus veins begin to hiss and sizzle like eggs in a skillet, shriveling and blackening under the assault of the Element of Honesty.

So too did the ponies react, even the ones not actually in the barn, screaming and writhing and thrashing about as they fell, digging at the ground with their hooves. Pinkie produced a sound Applejack would have sworn couldn't come out of a living throat and hurled herself away, landing on her back and spasming like a dying spider.

Applejack didn't falter, didn't let up for a second. She poured every bit of herself into the amulet, her love of her friends, her duty to her family, her hatred of the thing that had twisted them, and most of all that simple country wholesomeness that made her the Element of Honesty. She poured that power out over everything, giving and giving and giving—

—until she had nothing left. Darkness took her.

She woke slowly, groggily, and looked around. For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Then she didn't know why she was there; hadn't she gone to Twilight's for a sleepover? Why was she back in her own bed?

Then memory came back, and she shot bolt upright, only to be pushed

back down by Big Macintosh.

"Easy there, sis," he said. "I think you've earned another hour or two at least."

She turned to look at him, saw her friends standing by her bed, all of them blessedly normal, not a trace of taint in any of them.

"That was awesome!" Rainbow Dash proclaimed. "You were all 'fwoosh' and we were all 'auuugh' and then the spores all, like, burned up or something, and we were all okay again!"

"We are all okay again, right?" Twilight asked, smiling a little nervously. "I think I figured out how to detect the fungus from studying its remains, and I haven't found any active spores, but..."

Applejack nodded slowly, smiling at Twilight's look of relief.

"How are you feeling?" Fluttershy wondered. Applejack considered that.

"Like I spent all night in the Running of the Leaves," she replied. "But a lot better than I was expecting to feel, all things considered."

"I have to admit, I think you've taken this whole ordeal better than I have," Rarity said, looking grim. "Even thinking about kissing is making me ill."

"Everypony's kinda jumpy," Pinkie added, her own cheeriness present but subdued. "I was gonna throw a Hey We're Not Pod Ponies Anymore party, but nopony wanted to come."

Applejack gave Pinkie an odd look, wondering what pods had to do with anything, then said, "Well, I can't blame 'em, Pinkie. Trust takes a lot longer to heal than it does to bruise. I'm just glad I was able to stop it." She paused, then continued, "I know I've taken being able to catch ponies in a fib for granted, but I guess there's more to it than that. Never thought I'd have to use an Element of Harmony without the rest of you at my side."

"Ooo, I wonder if that means I can shoot laughter beams?" Pinkie wondered. "I can be all pyew zoop zoop zoop! I'm the balloon

sniper! You'll be happy and you won't know why!"

"It might not hurt to try it out," Twilight said, putting a hoof on Pinkie to steady her exuberant prancing. "Under controlled conditions. I didn't even know the Elements of Harmony worked by themselves."

Applejack sighed softly, sinking back into her bed. "I think I'm gonna take the rest of the day off." She paused. "Well, the morning, at least. Don't suppose you made any breakfast?" She looked at Big Macintosh, but it was Pinkie who answered, producing a tureen without, somehow, spilling its contents.

"Sure did! Just the thing for the hero of the day: a big bowl of mushroom soup!"

There was a shocked silence.

"Just kidding! It's hot applesauce." Pinkie set the dish on the nightstand and started dishing some up.

"Pinkie," Rainbow Dash declared, "the one thing I don't get about this is how they got to you. I would have bet money you already had an alien brain."

Applejack laughed, squeezing her eyes shut at tears of relief. That was Rainbow Dash, all right.

The genuine article.

Twilight Sparkle

The Case of Wild Clover the Warder

Twilight Sparkle would never know what forces led her to obtain the book.

She and her friends had traveled to Canterlot on official business—some bureaucrat had proposed a holiday recognizing the Elements of Harmony, and Princess Celestia had invited them to speak their minds on how they felt about such recognition—but the wheels of government could turn strangely slowly for what was technically a diarchy, and they'd found themselves with an excess of time to kill. Under normal circumstances, Twilight would have happily spent the entirety of her free time either immersed in the texts of the royal library or socializing with her friends, but both had been denied to her this afternoon: the library was closed—an infestation of bookworms had been discovered, and they were fumigating—and her friends had each left on their own jaunts about the city without thinking to tell her where they were going.

So she wandered the streets of Canterlot, hoping she might spot a familiar face, either one of her new friends or one of her old... she hesitated even to call them acquaintances. Certainly she knew them, but the old, bookish Twilight Sparkle had found friendship a distraction from the pursuit of knowledge, and she had spent as little time around those circumstance pressed into her company as possible. She wasn't even certain what she would do or say if she did meet one of them. Perhaps an apology. It was too late, she felt, to reach out in friendship; trips to Canterlot were too rare an occurrence.

The estate sale caught her eye, and she wandered closer to the crowd surrounding a table set up in front of one of Canterlot's older houses, a once-fine manor that had slumped with neglect and decay. An auctioneer was selling off the former possessions of the former owner one by one to any passers-by. It struck Twilight as a dismal proceeding; the owner must have died without heir or family, his property falling into the care of the state, which now sought to convert it into whatever sum of bits it could obtain. The history of his line would be lost, cut into dozens of conversation pieces scattered about Canterlot.

She hadn't intended to linger, the whole affair reinforcing a melancholy mood, but at that moment the auctioneer had called out the next lot: a collection of references from the owner's library. The ancient, musty tomes drew little interest from the crowd, and bidding was hesitant at best. Twilight felt a certain sympathy for the books, unloved simply because they had fallen out of date, and after a moment called out a bid herself; she was caught off-guard, however, when no further bids followed, and on the spot she found herself the owner of a large box of old, dusty, and most importantly heavy books.

Carrying them back to the palace had been a struggle, but thankfully her status there had led a guard to volunteer to return the books to her suite for her. Her friends had returned from their errands around the city by then, and she had to endure mocking over her acquisition, but it was good-natured for the most part, and at any rate brief, for they soon had to depart for yet another session in the congress hall, waiting to see if they would at last be permitted to speak. Thankfully, they were, and after voicing their opinions—largely that they felt such a holiday would be ostentatious and that the spirit of harmony would be better served by honoring its elements in day-to-day life—they were permitted to depart for Ponyville, souvenirs of the trip in tow.

Twilight had lost little time bringing the books into her basement; their condition required them to be properly cleaned and treated before introducing them to the library proper, assuming that there was merit in doing so. Their age was considerable, and she suspected their value as references was negligible, but all the same they might provide a window into the past that would give her some evenings' worth of entertainment.

As she removed the books from their container, however, she noticed one she had previously overlooked, pressed between a volume of appendices and the side of the box. It was smaller than the others, bound in a simple black cover, and lacked a title or any other adornment. Gingerly easing the book open, she discovered a flyleaf on which, in neat and steady strokes, the prior owner had written:

PROPERTY OF WILD CLOVER
ONCE WARDER IN CELESTIA'S SERVICE

She flipped carefully through the pages, realizing quickly that it was a diary—and not just any diary! Partway through the book she recognized a diagram, one commonly used by instructors at the School for Gifted Unicorns to aid students in forming the proper mindset to cast a spell. The particular markings on the diagram, however, were not ones she recognized; the general layout appeared to be a spell of knowledge, or perhaps of warding, but the actual function of the spell eluded her. The diary must have belonged to a unicorn, one who had possessed knowledge beyond her own!

Resisting the urge to salivate, she turned the pages more swiftly, seeing more illustrations scattered through the text, scraps of knowledge and theory being considered, fit together, sometimes rejected. It reminded her of her own diary when she was doing research, her thoughts unwilling to be confined to her official research journal and spilling out whenever she might write.

There was something else, though, something that struck her as odd. As she drew closer and closer to the end of the book, the author's writing lost more and more of its neat, formal style, became ragged and unsteady. There were blotches here and there of spilled ink, words angrily scratched out, even a page that had been torn from the diary altogether. Finally, no more than two thirds of the way through the text, another magical diagram appeared, one so sloppily drawn that she could barely make it out—and the rest of the tome was blank.

Twilight closed the book slowly, considering what she'd seen. What had happened to Wild Clover while he was writing his diary? Had something gone wrong in his life, some building stress that had led to this degeneration, bit by bit? What had driven him so intensely to the creation of the second spell, and what was it intended to do? And why had that been the final entry?

There was only one way to know, she ultimately decided. She would have to read the diary and see.

July 23rd, 982.

Today marks my first day of civilian life since I first entered Celestia's service. I admit to some trepidation about the prospect. I have spent many years among the elite, studying ancient and mysterious texts, developing new methods of warding Equestria against the terrors that lurk outside its borders, traveling to distant lands to renew boundary stones and recover forgotten lore. Yet it seems my greatest challenge may be living as an ordinary unicorn within the safety and security of Canterlot's walls.

My pension has secured me a modest manor house in the outskirts of the residential district, minimally furnished yet sufficient to house the numerous manuscripts I have collected over the years. I shall be moving my possessions into it over the course of the day.

To commemorate the occasion, I have purchased a new journal, in which this is the first entry. I am uncertain what I shall write in it, as I no longer have the minutiae of life as a royal warder to record, no glyphs to collect, no hypotheses to form. I shall record what events occur in daily life as I make the transition to civilian, hopefully successfully. Hopefully they will prove sufficient.

The guards have arrived to assist me with my possessions. Until later, good journal!

Twilight wondered what had happened to Wild Clover's other journals. Would she be able to track down their new owner if she asked around Canterlot?

July 23rd, evening.

A curious happening today. On arriving in the neighborhood of my new housing, I encountered a pony of cerulean fur and goldenrod mane. Her cutie mark resembled a cylindrical package being snapped in half, with

sparks and glitter shooting from the break.

Ordinarily, I would have taken as little note of her as I did of any other pony on the street, but she happened to be standing in the most convenient avenue for me to approach my new dwelling, and I thought it impolite to brush past her without a word. I offered her greeting, but something in my manner or tone appeared to offend her, for she let out a great exhalation of fright, then ran into the crowd with startling alacrity. I was altogether uncertain what to make of the proceedings.

As it turned out, there was some minor difficulty in securing the keys to my new lodging, so I elected to wander into the marketplace and have a late lunch while the movers sorted matters out and put my belongings inside. Thus fortified, I elected to further delay my return to my new home by meandering about the shops, attempting to learn where best to purchase additional furnishings, as well as the sundries of daily life. Eventually, however, I tired of these pursuits and returned to my dwelling place, where I found the keys tucked under the mat.

The security, or lack thereof, of such an arrangement was made immediately evident on my entrance to the building—for with a great shout, a multitude of ponies waiting in the foyer of my house made themselves apparent. I admit, I was greatly taken aback, wondering for a moment if I had somehow inadvertently entered the wrong building. The true nature of their presence swiftly became clear, however; it seems the pony I had encountered earlier in the day lives in the neighborhood and had taken it upon herself to throw me a housewarming party, inviting all of my new neighbors to attend.

I was wearier than I thought from the day's labors, and the fright I had received on entering my house, a place I had thought would be a refuge of solitude, had left me feeling most ill-tempered, but the pony seemed immune to my choleric mood, pressing food and drink upon me and introducing me to my neighbors at such a rapid pace that I was unable to successfully retain a single name, other than her own: Party Popper. Faced with such a display of blithe ignorance and unwilling to resort to the level of hostility necessary to clear the attendants out without her assistance, I chose the coward's path and retreated to my bedroom, which thankfully was not occupied. It was my hope that, in the absence of the guest of honor, the party would quickly dissipate, but it seemed to linger

for an unconscionable length of time before the house grew still.

I have now completed a survey of the house, satisfying myself that no trace of the ringleader or her cohorts remains. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my intruder is at least a courteous host, as I found almost no evidence of the expected detritus from such an entertainment, and my possessions are unmolested to the best of my knowledge. Still, it is an experience I hope not to repeat.

Tomorrow will hopefully be less eventful, good journal.

Twilight smiled wryly, remembering an oddly similar encounter in her own past. She wondered if Pinkie Pie had any cousins in Canterlot. However, unlike her and Pinkie, it seemed Wild Clover and Party Popper hadn't become friends; indeed, he made no mention of her in the next several diary entries, which covered the rather mundane details of settling into retirement, getting his house organized, and considering hobbies to occupy his now-plentiful spare time.

Another entry caught her eye.

August 18th, 982.

I saw Party Popper again in the marketplace today. I am still uncertain what to make of our previous encounter; those of my neighbors I have spoken to all know her, but none of them were able to supply any details one might expect a neighbor to know, such as a place of residence or a typical routine. Perhaps she is a vagabond.

Yet I would not expect someone in that state to have made such a persistent impression on my neighborhood. All those I have spoken to agree that, although the intensity of her personality can on occasion be uncomfortable, she is possessed of near-inexhaustible exuberance, enough to melt even the sternest of hearts. It makes me wonder why I had not seen her between my arrival in the neighborhood and today.

But I digress. I first saw her at some distance, a flash of color that caught my attention. She was partially crouched behind some barrels, and although it was difficult to be certain at such a remove, she appeared to be observing another pony, green with a violet mane; I was unable to observe her cutie mark, as she was wearing saddlebags. Perhaps the other pony had reason to suspect she was being observed, for she turned almost immediately to look behind her; Party Popper ducked behind the barrels just in time, however, and eluded observation.

I observed the barrels, curious if Party Popper were perhaps attempting to play some jest on the other pony. It would be difficult for her to move from her position without exposing herself at some point, and I wondered if she would wait for her target to be obscured by the other ponies in the plaza, or perhaps for some diversion or distraction to take the green pony's attention.

Then I noticed color out of the corner of my eye and turned to look. Party Popper was looking up from behind a potted plant... at least ten yards away from her former hiding spot.

The method of her transit from one hiding place to another completely eluded me. The plaza, as I said, was occupied by other ponies, but for her to maneuver in such a way as to be constantly hidden from my sight by them would have taken both consummate skill and a fair portion of luck. Furthermore, such a course would have provided her no protection from her target's gaze, which seemed still to be her primary concern. Not only that, but she had significantly closed the distance between her and the other pony, a feat which would have required speed incompatible with stealth; her target had traveled no slower than a walk throughout the time I spent observing the barrels, and in more or less a straight line.

The pursued again looked behind her, again foiled by a swift retreat by Party Popper, then looked in my direction, causing me to hastily avert my gaze. Fortunately, she seemed not to notice my attention, for she then continued on her way, and I was able to observe her approaching a local fruit merchant's stand. I was briefly distracted by the oranges on display, imported from southern lands, and considered making a purchase myself.

Then Party Popper appeared again... from inside the fruit stand.

I cannot fathom how she was able to perform such a feat. The construction of the cart itself should not have permitted her to position her body in such a fashion, unless it were equipped (for some reason) with not one but two secret access panels. Furthermore, it would seem improbable for her to make her way to, then into the cart without having attracted my notice, and impossible to do so without being spotted by either the green pony or the fruit vendor, yet they both seemed as startled as I by the occurrence.

The two exchanged some short conversation that I was not privy to, and then Party Popper withdrew into the fruit stand. I noted that the green pony reached briefly for one of the oranges, as if to determine the means of Party Popper's appearance, then lowered her hoof again, shook her head, and walked away. I suspect she was uncertain she wanted the obvious question answered.

Where her heart may have faltered, however, mine still pounds in my chest. Such feats should not be possible for an earth pony to perform. Indeed, I am uncertain that I would be able to perform them without the collaboration of the fruit vendor, whom I observed for some time after in case Party Popper should return to congratulate him on the jest, but without yielding, er, fruit. (I do apologize.) Is it possible that she has an accomplice of some sort in her japery? If so, why was I unable to observe the accomplice, or even the slightest hint of magic being invoked?

I must divine a course of action that will enable me to learn how this trick was performed. I shall count on you to keep my thoughts ordered, dear journal.

Twilight couldn't help but recall her own encounter with only one of Pinkie Pie's unknown quantities, her so-called 'Pinkie Sense'. The experience had been traumatic, and not just in the emotional sense; it was as if the universe had conspired to physically punish her for investigating that mystery too deeply. At the time, she had believed she'd come to accept that there were some things science couldn't explain... but thinking back on it, she began to wonder if she had simply given up under the strain, convinced on some level that the price for knowledge was too high.

Wild Clover's words woke that thirst for knowledge in her mind again. She turned the pages eagerly, wondering what, if anything, he had learned.

September 7, 982.

Another day, another frustrating failure.

Party Popper continues to profess no knowledge of any sort of unusual behavior or abilities on her part, despite continuing to exhibit these strange behaviors and abilities. While her cooperation with my studies seemed at first easy to achieve, it has become apparent to me that she is performing some sort of mockery at my expense, waiting until the very moment it is impossible for me to observe her translocation, then performing it in such a way as to maximize my discomfort and shock, only to deny having done anything out of the ordinary. I do not care how guilelessly she acts, it is not possible for her to have simply walked from my study to the inside of my refrigerator without me having observed her passage in any way whatsoever!

Her abilities are producing further difficulties in my studies. She can seemingly appear at any time, in any place, so long as no eyes are actively upon her hiding place. Twice now I have found her reading over my shoulder as I attempted to research possible methods of earth ponies commanding the flow of magic, and my time writing here has been divided most unpleasantly by the need to look repeatedly over my shoulders for just such an intrusion. Even if I develop some counter to whatever technique she is using to confound my senses, it will be useless if she learns of it and deploys a counter of her own.

Unless...

Theoretically, it should be possible to prepare a spell that has no countermeasure. If no spell to allow one pony to observe another is without flaw, that posits the existence of a spell to deny observation without flaw. Either would serve my purposes; either she would no longer be able to prevent me from observing her relocation, or she would be unable to prevent me from following her until such time as she relocated, my inability

to perceive the relocation proof that it had nonetheless occurred.

I shall begin the necessary research immediately. In this, dear journal, you will assist me.

That was the first spell, Twilight realized. She skimmed through the following entries, feeling as if she were looking over Wild Clover's shoulders as he tested one school of magic against another, divination against obfuscation, striving to see which would come out on top. His intellect was obvious, his devotion to the task admirable. He wasn't the raw prodigy she was, but she suspected in a contest of knowledge, she would have come out second best.

At last, she reached the entry whose facing page contained the diagram.

November 19, 982.

It is completed.

The spell I have constructed will make me aware without fail of the presence and location of any intelligence which is observing or attempting to observe me. It draws from both disciplines, acting as both unstoppable object and immovable force; its only counter is the use of the very same spell, which will make both casters aware of each other's attention.

I shall place Party Popper in a situation in which she wishes to relocate without drawing my attention; necessarily she must determine my own position and focus in order to do so, at which point my spell will allow me to track her as she relocates. Even should she have possession of this spell and the ability to cast it, I will know the instant she does. Either way, I will at last have tangible proof that she is not merely performing some trick of misdirection to divert my attention, and with that proof I will confront her once and for all.

I will learn her secret, dear journal.

Twilight looked at the diagram for some time, considering casting the spell... but in the end decided against it. There was still the rest of the journal to read, after all, and the decline in his writing in its remainder had her concerned. Had he somehow performed the spell incorrectly?

November 20, 982.

I fear I have made a miscalculation.

Last night, I performed the spell without mishap, satisfying myself that there was no attention being cast at that time on my person. Electing to sustain the spell—for by its nature it must be active constantly to be of any use—I went to bed.

My sleep, however, was uneasy. Just as I had begun to drift off, I was startled awake by an awareness that someone was observing me. The sensation was most peculiar, however, for the component of the spell that should have informed me of the location of the attention was giving me impossible results. I am uncertain how even to describe what I sensed, save that it came from quite near me, yet I could draw no closer to it no matter how I moved about in the room.

At last, I dismissed the spell that I might rest, yet a lingering sensation remained. My imagination, perhaps. I suspected the spell was flawed, yet some primitive portion of my mind refused to accept the verdict so easily. The night passed slowly.

I spent the morning attempting to determine where I might have gone wrong, without success. Eventually, I decided that I would need more data to determine the location of the flaw, so re-cast the spell—thankfully without the sensation of observation immediately returning—and set about to walk among the shops of Canterlot, to see if the spell even had its intended function.

In that regard, it was a success. I was immediately able to discern the eyes

of fellow citizens around me, as if a globe were hanging in my thoughts, filled with shapes of perception, cones of sight and blobs of sound. I was even able to distinguish between those who were merely perceiving me and those who had taken some active interest in me, perhaps to avoid walking into me. It was a curious perception, like suddenly being able to perceive the flow of blood in your own body, yet the spell granted me not only the perception but mastery thereof.

Unfortunately, when I reached the marketplace, the phantom perception returned. I was no more able to track it than I had the night before, and I began to wonder if the spell had the unfortunate side effect of generating paranoia in its subject—unfortunate, indeed, given the spell's intended function of removing the reason for such an affliction! An alternative theory presented itself as well, that Party Popper might indeed have learned of my spell, or independently derived it, and found some way to mitigate its effects that I had overlooked, so that I would be able to tell she was watching me but unable to say for certain from where. Such a precaution would render it useless for my purposes.

I saw her then, standing next to a vendor of miscellany of the sort used for an evening's entertainment. I have previously seen her making purchases there, and if not for the sensations I was experiencing, I would have thought little of it. Nonetheless, I determined to make some test of my hypotheses, so I called out to her to draw her attention.

Immediately, the spell notified me of that attention, first by sound, then by sight as she turned to look at me. Something in my demeanor must have alarmed her, for she leapt behind the stand, blocking my vision, but not my perception of her.

Then a most astonishing thing happened. She moved in a way I do not have words to describe here, and though my senses insisted she was still there, she was also elsewhere, no more than a few feet away from where she'd started in a direction I had no name for. She moved swiftly out from behind cover and down an alley, and though I watched all the while I could see no trace of her passage; she only moved in a direction opposite to her first motion, placing her back... in the now? In the here? At a location I could not see. Shortly thereafter, my perception of her faded as she ceased looking for me.

Even as I record these events, I can scarcely credit their reality. The smaller mystery of Party Popper's abilities, even now unsolved (though tantalizingly clarified!), pales in comparison to the thought that I am being, even as I write this, observed by unknown intelligences

I speak in the plural because, even in that brief glimpse of her locomotion, I learned much. The attention I sense is diffuse, that of multiple entities; indeed, they seem to be separated by great distances, their perceived closeness appearing only in aggregate. It is a form of perception something like sight and something like sound, but not entirely like either. Furthermore, they appear to be observing me from the opposite 'direction' as that taken by Party Popper during her escape; I am uncertain of the significance of this, but I have detected no observation from that direction.

Their attention, thankfully, is not constant; it waxes and wanes in a rhythm I have not yet identified. I shall notify you as I learn more, dear journal.

Twilight bit her lip, looking around her basement. Invisible beings, watching her every move? Was it a fancy Wild Clover invented under the influence of unstable mind magic, or had he found something all too real? She hoped reading the rest of the journal would tell her more.

December 17, 982.

I believe that I have at last determined what draws the attention of the beings in ana-space. I have been maintaining a graph of the apparent intensity of their observation over the last month, and after comparing it with the entries I have made during that time in you, o faithful journal, I have determined that it has varied in direct proportion to the level of, for lack of a better word, excitement in my life. Even now, it rises to a new peak, as if to confirm my hypothesis. Yet it cannot be simply related to my own levels of arousal or anticipation, for on several occasions a heightening in attention served as prelude to something dramatic happening in my vicinity, as if the ana-space beings were able to predict

the event occurring—or, perhaps, could see the chain of events being set in motion from their unique perspectives.

Party Popper has become elusive these last weeks; perhaps she has become aware of the breakthrough in my observational method. I have been able to detect her watching for me even when I have been nowhere near her, and several times I have detected her entering kata-space, perhaps in an attempt to elude me, perhaps for unrelated reasons. She doesn't seem to spend more than a short amount of time in that space; I am uncertain if this means there is some inherent risk to that space (something that might explain the lack of observers in that direction) or if it is a simple reflection of her ability to travel at great speed while located in that space. (Her time spent in kata-space is not constant, but the natural log of my measurements has no more than a ± 0.5 deviation from the mean.)

If I could locate her, I would press her for more information—does she know about the ana-space beings? Is that why she elects to travel only in kata-space? Are they capable of entering our space? Do they mean us harm, or are they but observers? Unfortunately, it seems I must strive to answer these questions on my own.

I have been having increasing difficulty coping with this attention. I think I will disable the spell tonight. I pray to Celestia that they will not choose the moment I take my eye off them to strike.

Sleep well, dear journal.

The sun had set. Twilight was unaware of this.

December 18, 982.

I am unable to end the spell.

Have I sustained it too long without rest, or does some other force now

empower it? In either event, it no longer reacts to my commands; it feels almost as if the spell itself has begun to spread outward, into ana-space and kata-space, outside the grip of my will. If anything, it is stronger now, clearer; I can sense the very moment one being 'looks' away from me, when another focuses their gaze.

There are more of them now, I am sure of it. At first, they were merely curious, or happened to be observing me as I observe any number of things and people in the passing of the day. Their attention has increased, however; whether this means they have become aware of my observation, or whether it is a portent of some event of great significance to come in my life, I am uncertain.

I must have answers. The pursuit of knowledge has brought me into this vale, and knowledge will lead me out. Long-distance communication is not my forte, but it is not an unrelated discipline to my studies, and at any rate I have more experience (I dare hope) in this field of study than any other. I must construct a spell that will allow me to determine why they have focused their eyes on me, to somehow plead my case to them.

I cannot go on in this state, not indefinitely. Every pony needs his sanctuary, a place solely his own. Whether their intent is good or ill, it is destroying me as surely as darkness is destroyed by the light.

Wish me well, dear journal.

Twilight read the journal, page by page, as Wild Clover detailed his attempts to construct a spell that would let him see or hear or speak in a direction opposed to every direction, his 'voice' growing more frantic with each failure. Party Popper disappeared entirely from the narrative at this point; did that mean she'd left Canterlot, or was he simply no longer concerned for her? He seldom left his house, at any rate, and only to test a spell or collect the bare necessities of survival; he seldom slept, seldom bathed.

His entries became rambling, disjointed. Two pages were devoted entirely to a letter to ana-space, pleading with the entities that dwelled there to let

him live in peace. Another entry accused them of trying to drive him mad, knowing him to be the only pony aware of their growing power and threat to Equestria. One even lambasted the journal itself for being in league with them, as if he somehow wouldn't notice that their attention increased each time he wrote in it.

Yet he never stopped searching for an answer... and, at last, he found it.

MARCH 15, 983.

IT IS FINISHED.

Twilight studied the diagram intently, tore the blank page at the back of the journal out, began to make marks of her own. It was shakily drawn, yes, but not as incoherent as she'd thought, not with the bulk of the journal to answer her questions about whether this mark was supposed to be to the left or right of that, whether this blob should be circular or elliptical. It only took her five minutes to reconstruct the diagram in her own precise writing.

It didn't look like it would do anything at all.

She understood the basic principles, at least. It was a long-distance communication spell, one that would, in theory, allow her to contact another pony hundreds if not thousands of miles away, requiring only a painstakingly precise description of the target pony. Most of the spell was devoted to just such a description, meaning that, in theory, all Twilight would have to do is cast the spell to be put in touch with whoever, or whatever, Wild Clover had contacted.

But the symbols were all wrong. The way they were organized, their shape and placement—none of it made sense. She'd have to study the spell further to work out how to make it work for someone else, but she understood enough to at least make a beginning at an arrangement for any of her friends, for Princess Celestia—and she could make an educated guess how anypony's glyphs would look. Indeed, any Equestrian's. These

glyphs looked nothing like any of those.

It shouldn't do anything. And yet, that was the end of the journal. Nearly twenty years ago. What had happened to him? It didn't kill him, obviously, but the condition of his house was consistent with having been neglected for that long. What had caused a once-successful royal warder to sink into obscurity for twenty years without even the slightest comment—for she felt certain she'd have heard something about him in her childhood if he'd served as some sort of cautionary tale?

She looked at her diagram, at the journal, at her diagram.

She had to know.

Just like him.

She focused on the diagram, placed its nonsensical shapes in her mind, pushed power through them and into her horn. It took a lot; she was beginning to sweat when, at last, she felt something shift, something happen. Whatever she'd done, she'd done something.

She opened her eyes—

and screamed.

She didn't stop screaming when Spike ran in. She didn't stop screaming when the other ponies came in, summoned by a panicked Spike. She didn't stop screaming until well after they'd hauled her bodily to the Ponyville Clinic.

The screaming started again the moment they'd left her room.

"They're back, oh Celestia, they're back! Make them go away!"

Applejack looked uneasily at Rainbow Dash, who winced at the sound; Fluttershy appeared to be trying to will herself invisible, despite Rarity's best efforts to comfort her. Twilight had been sleeping, if uneasily, and

they'd begun to hope whatever malady had struck her down wasn't as serious as it'd seemed when Spike found her.

Nurse Tenderheart sighed. "And she was doing so well," she said, echoing their sentiment. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to sedate her." She walked off to get the sedative.

"I wish I knew what happened to her," Applejack said. "It just don't seem natural."

"I'm afraid I haven't a clue," Rarity replied. "It looked like she was studying some sort of spell, but... well, the details were frankly beyond me."

"She's gonna get better, though, right?" Rainbow Dash asked, looking from one face to another, seeking reassurance. "Right?" None of them had any to give.

Fluttershy had something to say, though. "Pinkie Pie?"

The other three ponies blinked, looked at her, then looked where she was looking. Pinkie Pie had just appeared, looking neither her usual bubbly self nor the despondent pony they all felt. Instead, she looked... determined. Not unlike her expression when she'd single-hoofedly dealt with the parasprite infestation, like she was annoyed at having to deal with everything herself.

"What's she been yelling about?" she demanded of Rarity, who shied back a little at the tone of voice.

"She's, uh, been talking about ponies watching her, saying it hurts—"

"Ponies or people?"

Rarity blinked. "Uh, people, I suppose. What difference does that—"

"Are they watching her all the time?"

"No, she said they went away a bit after we got her here. Pinkie Pie—"

"Has she been talking in tongues!?" This seemed the most important

question of all, Pinkie pressing her face right up against Rarity's, eyes bugging out.

"—no," Rarity answered, unable to muster further response.

Pinkie immediately sagged back down, an expression of relief flowing over her face. "Whew! That was a close one. That'd be a real doozy to clean up. Okay, everypony wait right here, and I'll be right back!"

She walked into Twilight's room, not caring that all of her friends were staring at her now. Twilight turned to look at her, a pleading expression in her eyes.

"Pinkie, you've got to make them stop looking at me, it hurts..."

Pinkie Pie nodded. "They get like that sometimes. It's okay!"

Twilight's eyes widened. "You believe me?" she gasped, sounding hopeful, seeing something she hadn't expected to see in Pinkie's eyes.

"Of course I do!" Pinkie cheerily replied. "They watch me all the time!"

"Can you do something? Make them go away or, or make me forget about them, or..."

Pinkie considered the matter with all due gravity. "Well... I can't make them go away, but I can make it so it doesn't hurt anymore. How's that?"

Rarity and the others exchanged puzzled looks.

"Anything," Twilight said, looking like a drowning mare grabbing at a lifeline. "I'll do anything."

Pinkie giggled, then walked over to the door to the room, looking at her friends. "This is a little bit private, so you just wait out here, okay? Thanks." Then she closed the door in their faces.

Rarity and the others continued to exchange puzzled looks. Nurse Tenderheart returned, pushing a wheeled tray with a bottle of medicine on it, and paused when she noticed the door was closed.

"Uh, Pinkie went in to talk to Twilight or something," Rainbow Dash said. "Maybe you should give her a minute—"

There was a horrible, blood-curdling scream. Applejack spun, pushed on the door, bounced back startledly. "It's locked!"

Nurse Tenderheart looked confused. "All of these doors lock from the outside," she protested; Applejack tried the lock without effect, but noticed a reddish glow.

"Twilight locked it with magic!" she said, flabbergasted.

Rarity began to step forward, horn glowing. "I'll see if I can unlock it," she said, but Applejack was already swinging into position, blocking her path.

"My way's faster," Applejack said. "Hiyah!" She bucked the door, breaking the lock and causing the door to fly open, and the others charged past her, discovering—

—an awake, alert, and seemingly normal Twilight Sparkle, smiling at them from the hospital bed. Pinkie Pie looked surprised they'd busted in, but otherwise looked her normal cheery self as well.

Rainbow Dash spoke first. "Twilight? Are you okay?" Twilight nodded.

"I'm sorry to worry all of you," she said. "I had a little trouble with a spell, but Pinkie sorted it all out."

"Pinkie helped you with a spell," Rainbow Dash replied, her expression deadpan.

"Well, no, not the spell itself," Twilight admitted, "more the effects of it. I found out the hard way that there are Things Pony Was Not Meant to Know." The others, save Pinkie Pie, blinked at being able to hear the capital letters.

"Like what?" Applejack asked skeptically.

"Oh, you weren't meant to know them," Twilight answered cheerily. "That's

okay, though. Pinkie helped me come to terms with it all, so I'm all right now!" She let out an odd giggle. "Mostly."

"And you're all right now?" Rarity wondered. "The... people watching you have gone away?"

Twilight shook her head. "Oh no, they're still here," she said with serene certainty. "But that's all right. They won't hurt me any more. They didn't mean to anyway."

The other ponies exchanged an uneasy look. Nurse Tenderheart spoke. "I think you should spend at least another day here, for observation."

"You don't believe me," Twilight protested, then shrugged. "That's okay, though. It's better if you don't. I promise not to bring them up again." She paused, then wondered, "Would you mind bringing me something to read while I'm here? Maybe, uh..."

Pinkie Pie piped up. "Applied Quantum Rainbowdynamics? The new edition?"

"Oh, is that out today?" Twilight said, perking up. "Yes, I put an order in, if you wouldn't mind picking it up."

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pinkie Pie replied—echoed by Twilight. The two looked at each other, then broke into identical giggles.

The other ponies exchanged another uneasy look.

"Well, we're gonna let you get your rest, okay, Twilight?" Applejack said.

"No problem!" Twilight said. "Thanks for stopping by. Hopefully I can convince them to let me out tomorrow; I really need to clean up that basement. I made a bit of a mess with you having to drag me out and everything."

Slowly, the assembled ponies filed out one by one, Nurse Tenderheart making Twilight promise to call her if she started feeling unwell, the rest of them offering some form of well wishes. Pinkie was the last out, the others waiting to ambush her with questions about what exactly she'd done and

why Twilight was still acting a bit, well, like Pinkie, but they were destined to be disappointed. It was for the best, after all.

Twilight, for her part, took a deep, cleansing breath, sunk back into her pillow, and wriggled about a bit, getting comfortable. She was feeling a bit tired still—going crazy took it out of you, and the 'cure' had been a concentrated dose of more of the same—and she decided to take a nap while she waited for Pinkie to return with her book.

There was just one more thing to do.

Turning to look at you, she said, "I guess I'll see you later, then!"

And then she went to sleep.