

Treasure Trove

By HeatWave



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Chapter 1

Treasure Your Time

Brilliant.

Though there were many words that could be used to describe such a scene, that was the one that most often came to mind. After all, the sun was nothing if not brilliant, and when dawning it seemed all the more so to the tired eyes pierced by its dazzling rays. Yet this was a dawn like any other. Steady, expected, and exactly on time. Whether that was the right time or not all depended upon who you asked—and when.

For example, at this moment, Twilight Sparkle was of the opinion that it was entirely the wrong time.

With a low groan she shifted in her bed, rolling around so as to face away from the radiant sun so that it would not assault her tired eyes. Under normal circumstances she would have been up an hour and half ago, but a long night of studying had prevented her from keeping her daily timetable, and she was several hours past due on her sleepy time.

The sun, however, was insistent that the day be started, and continued to fill her room in the upper story of the library with its luster and warmth. Twilight ignored the intrusive light. It was bearable as long as she wasn't facing it, and she was just as insistent that she recover those lost hours of sleep. It would have worked too, had the sun not found a very reflective surface on the other side of her room and managed to redirect itself.

Twilight groaned again and briefly contemplated closing the window curtain, but that would require getting out of bed. She killed the thought, opting instead for the less involved action of pulling the covers over her head. In an instant the brightness was cut off, and she gained several more minutes of respite.

Light flooded into the room freely now, but Twilight was secure in her blanket fortress, confident that no amount of photons beating against her bedcovers would breach her crafty defenses; but the day had other weapons in its arsenal. As Twilight lay there, recovering from the

momentary invasion, she realized that it was beginning to feel warm... too warm. Uncomfortably warm. In desperation she stuck her muzzle out the side of her sheets, attempting to vent her hot, recycled breath without exposing her sensitive eyes, but the damage was done. There was no sense fighting it now, she had lost this battle. It was time to get up.

Curse the summer sun.

With one final groan she rose out of bed, tossing the covers off to one side as she rolled off the other. Landing on all fours she yawned once, stretched twice, and then slowly began to move. The first item on the list was making the bed, followed by a quick brushing of her mane to rid herself of her bed-hair. Next on her list was a drink of water, her mouth having become exceptionally dry over the course of the night, but as she tried to sort out the best course of action to obtain one her groggy thoughts were viciously interrupted.

"TWILIGHT!"

She only had enough time to turn around before Spike burst through the door to her room. Wasting no time he slammed the door shut behind him and braced himself against it, breathing heavily. Twilight was taken aback at the sudden entrance, but at least she was no longer tired.

"Spike? What's wrong?" she asked her assistant, whose wide eyes didn't seem capable of focusing on anything in particular.

"It's too early for me to be dealing with this, Twilight!" Spike said, his words coming out as fast as he could work them through his lips. "This isn't what I signed up for when I agreed to stay with you in Ponyville! She's crazy!"

"Whoa, Spike, calm down," Twilight said, slowly making her way towards the normally unflappable baby dragon. "Who's crazy? What's going on?"

"It's Pi—" was all he managed to get out before the door seemed to fling itself open violently, sending the hapless dragon into a bookshelf across the room.

From the other side of the door, a voice was clearly heard. "Spiiiiiike! Come back! I haven't finished telling you about the—" a bright pink visage poked

through the doorway, only to visibly shift gears as it saw and recognized the other purple occupant of the room. "Hi Twilight!"

"Pinkie Pie?" Twilight asked, trying to make sense of it all.

"The one and only!" the bright pink pony confirmed for her cheerfully.

"Thank Celestia for that," a talking pile of books across the room commented with a muffled voice. The pile shifted for a moment as a small purple hand managed to find its way to the surface, but it couldn't find the leverage to do much else. "Uh... a little help here?"

"Spike!" Twilight started, moving quickly to assist her assistant. Her horn began to glow and several of the books were hauled off the small form beneath them, "Are you ok?"

The small purple and green dragon slowly crawled out from underneath his temporary educational penitentiary and unsteadily got back to his feet. "I'm ok," he assured his friend, even as the room swam before his eyes.

Twilight was less than convinced, "You don't look so good."

"Well, the room's spinning," he confirmed for her, "and I'm gonna have a lump on my head the size of Celestia's Castle, but I'll survive... I think."

Back in the doorway, Pinkie Pie giggled. "Silly Spike, you shouldn't play under the bookshelves. Some of those look really heavy!"

"Yeah, thanks, I noticed," Spike said, not even trying to hide his sarcasm.

As usual, it had no effect, "You're welcome!"

Upon confirming Spike more or less intact, Twilight turned her attention to their unexpected guest. "So, Pinkie Pie, what brings you here so early in the morning?"

"Oh, well it's Mr. and Mrs. Cake's day off!" Pinkie said enthusiastically, referring to the caretakers of the local eatery at which she worked and lived, "so I'm not allowed in the bakery today!"

Twilight was a little puzzled, "Wait... what?"

"Makes perfect sense to me," Spike said, rubbing the back of his head as he stepped gruffly past Pinkie Pie and out of the room. He could feel the aforementioned lump beginning to form, and it was just about as big as he'd thought. He gave a low growl. "Twilight, you deal with this. I'm going outside."

"Wait, Spike!" Twilight called as he walked out the door to her room. She was still trying to piece together what was going on. "What about breakfast?"

"Breakfast was ready five minutes ago!" Spike shot over his shoulder just before exiting the library with an angry slam. Twilight was a little perplexed at his behavior, but then again, she'd been one perplexed pony from the moment she'd gotten out of bed today.

"Yeah, and it was good too!"

"What?"

"Breakfast!" Pinkie Pie said without hesitation. "It was good! Spike makes some mean daisy and vanilla waffles!"

Twilight shot a glance at the kitchen area. It was in complete disarray, as if a tornado had gone through it during the night. With a sigh she began to piece together what had happened; her first conclusion being that she was going to be going hungry this morning, and it was unlikely that Spike had anything to eat either. She made a mental note to take him out to lunch. Maybe she'd be able to buy a few small gems off Rarity in compensation as well.

"Oh! Hey Twilight!" Pinkie Pie cut into her thoughts, "Maybe *you* can help me!"

Twilight turned to her bright pink earth pony friend. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have minded the company of the overtly excited partygoer, but Spike had been right about one thing: It was too early for this.

Nevertheless, she couldn't turn down a cry for help, no matter how insane it was likely to be.

"What do you need help with, Pinkie?"

"I'm looking for a book about parties!"

Oh, well, that didn't sound so bad, except...

"But— but you're Pinkie Pie! Equestria's self proclaimed authority on parties! What could you possibly learn from some book?"

Pinkie's expression became uncharacteristically stern for a moment, something that worried Twilight a little. "Well, after the Grand Galloping Gala," she began, "I realized that there was a type of party that I didn't know about! So I thought, 'maybe there are even *more* types of parties that I don't know about!'" Her stern expression disappeared quickly and her face brightened to her standard exaggerated glee, "So then I thought, 'I know, I'll ask my bestest best friend Twilight Sparkle! She such a super-smart-smarty-smart pants that she knows about everything!'" Now she alternated between the two as she spoke, switching rapidly between stern and excited with each new notion, "And then I thought, 'But wait, Twilight doesn't *like* to party all the time! Maybe she won't be able to help me!' but then I thought, 'But Twilight reads all the time! She *has* to know something I don't!' and then I thought, 'But she reads about boring things like science and magic!' and then I thought, 'But maybe she learned a few neat tricks!' and then I thought, 'but she doesn't like to show off, even if she *can*!' and then I thought 'but she's from Canterlot, she has to know *something* about the parties they have up there!' and then I thought—"

"Okay, okay..." Twilight interrupted before the other pony passed out on the floor for lack of inhalation, "I think I understand what you're searching for, Pinkie."

"Oh goodie!" Pinkie said, stamping her forehooves with joy. "I was worried I was going to have to explain the whole thing!"

"Come on," Twilight motioned for Pinkie to follow her and walked out the door to her room towards the stairs to the main library, "I'll admit that everything I know about parties comes from you, but I'm sure we can find something in here, this *is* a library, after all."

"Okey-Dokey-Lokey!" Pinkie said as she followed her friend gleefully, excited at the idea of learning something new. Especially if it was about parties!

Spike stormed down the dusty main street of Ponyville, headed for the Town Square. From there... who knew, Spike certainly didn't, he just needed to blow off some steam. As if to prove the point, two small jets of steam shot out of his nostrils, along with a frustrated grunt. Today was the first time in a long while he had actually managed to get up before Twilight. Once he realized she was still asleep, he'd fully intended to surprise her by getting all the morning chores done before she woke, something he had actually managed to do for the most part. He was even putting the finishing touches on a special breakfast when that blasted pink pony had shown up and ruined everything!

The thought made him stop in his tracks and he tensed, letting all his frustration vent out a second time in the form of hot smoke shooting from every orifice he could manage. Several ponies paused to witness the spectacle, but quickly moved on.

Once he finished smoldering, he took another deep breath. This one he let out much more slowly in the form of a defeated sigh. He didn't like being angry, but after the disaster that Pinkie Pie had made of his plans he'd needed to get out of the library.

Not that he didn't like Pinkie either, he reminded himself. In fact, on most occasions he was more than willing to play party to her wild pony antics, and even he had to admit that she always threw one hay of a party. *Just... why did she have to show up this morning, of all times?*

A nearby carriage rolled past and snapped him out of his musing, bringing to light the fact that he was still standing in the middle of the road. Looking around he spotted a nearby bench beneath a shady tree. With nothing better to do he walked over and plopped himself down on top of it in a huff.

He hadn't wanted to abandon Twilight like that. He absolutely hated it when either of them parted ways in anger, even if he hadn't been angry at *her*. He promised himself that he'd make it up to her, starting with cleaning the mess left in the kitchen... assuming she didn't get it done before he got

back. He should probably apologize to Pinkie Pie too, though knowing her she probably hadn't even noticed his temper. That was one of the perks of having Pinkie Pie for a friend; she couldn't pass judgment if she wanted to.

Spike chuckled as a thought crossed his mind, *Well, ok... maybe in **extreme** cases...*

As he sat there sorting his thoughts and working up the courage to return to the library and face the consequences of his actions, a figure caught the edge of his peripheral vision. He didn't even have to look twice. In an instant all other thoughts were forcibly ejected from his head as the white unicorn crossing the street became the center of his attention.

It was Rarity, looking dazzling as ever as she pranced down the street at a quick pace, her mane and tail flowing wistfully with the slight breeze of the morning air. Every step with purpose, every hair in place, there was nothing that unicorn did that was not done to the utmost detail.

As she passed by she caught sight of Spike, and in a surprise twist for the small dragon, she instantly changed course and made a beeline for him. Spike had a momentary panic attack as he gave himself a once over, making sure he looked as presentable as possible.

Everything was a go as the unicorn made her final approach.

"Hello, Spike dear," she said in her usual singsong voice that sent Spike's heart racing, "How are you this morning?"

"Hi Rarity! I'm, uh..." Spike paused for just a moment as the morning's events coursed through his brain, "I'm great! Just... uh... running errands! Yeah! For... for Twilight!"

Rarity softly clicked her tongue as she slowly shook her head, making her velvet mane bounce lightly with the motion, "At such an early hour? That Twilight... I'm going to have to talk to her about overworking her assistants."

"Oh, it's not so bad," Spike said quickly. If Rarity talked to Twilight she'd learn about everything! That wouldn't be good. "I was up early this morning anyway, so I volunteered!"

Rarity offered the eager dragon a small smile, "And you are just such a sweetie for doing so."

Spike looked at the ground, suddenly feeling very embarrassed. "Aw, shucks..."

"Anyway, Spike, dear," Rarity continued, the look on her face turning a bit more serious, "You haven't happened to see Fluttershy lately, have you?"

Spike brought a finger up to his chin in thought, "Fluttershy?" He tried to remember anything over the last few days... any sign he might have seen of their pegasus friend. "No..." he said finally, "come to think of it, I haven't seen her since the night at the Gala last week."

Rarity's expression fell another notch, "Oh dear, that's what I was afraid of," she mused, almost to herself. "I haven't seen her since then either, and she didn't meet me at the spa yesterday. I was on my way to the meadow now to see if I could find her. I'm terribly worried."

Seeing Rarity upset sent Spike into comfort mode. He didn't like to see so much worry on such a beautiful face.

"I'm sure she's ok," he tried to assure her. "She seemed fine at the donut shop. Besides, it's wouldn't be the first time Fluttershy disappeared for a few days."

Rarity cast a sidelong glance, though it wasn't quite so downtrodden, "Yes, that is true," she agreed. "But still, she wasn't quite herself that night. I believe I will stop by her home regardless... just in case."

Spike eagerly hopped off the bench he was sitting on. "Do you want someone to come with you?"

Rarity hesitated for just a moment, "Er—no, thank you, Spike. I wouldn't want to interfere with your errands. Twilight might get worried."

Spike's eager expression quickly died as he recalled his initial deception, "Oh... yeah, my errands... right."

"Yes, now you'd best get on them," Rarity said, giving him a nudge. "Thank you so much for your help."

"You're welcome."

Without another word the unicorn moved off into the crowd, headed west towards Fluttershy's meadow. Spike watched her go until he was confident she was out of earshot.

"Stupid Spike," he berated himself, "that could have been your chance." He gave himself a light knock on the back of his head, only to release a startled yelp as he made contact with his earlier injury, which he then nursed gingerly. "Owww..."

The bump reminded him once again why he was where he was. His anger having dissipated at the sight of his heart's desire, he decided it was a good a time as any to return to the library and apologize to Twilight.

Oh... and Pinkie too, if she was still there.

Pinkie Pie had her face buried in a book, and for once it wasn't because of Rainbow Dash.

"Letsee!" she said as eager as ever, "After-parties, anniversaries, baby showers, bachelorette parties... ooh! That sounds fun! Page thirty-tw—Hey!" She yelped when the book suddenly snapped shut, nearly catching her nose in the process.

"Here we are!" Twilight said quickly, handing Pinkie a volume she had picked up off a nearby shelf and levitating the book Pinkie had been looking at far across the room. "The Life and Times of the Ballroom Dance, I believe this is what you were looking for?"

"Ooh, ooh, lemme see! Lemme see!" Pinkie said, bouncing several times in her excitement. She quickly grabbed the book and nosed through it, seeming to absorb the information on each page through sheer osmosis.

As Pinkie Pie did her thing, Twilight turned back to the book she had found during her search, A Comprehensive History of the Grand Galloping Gala. *In retrospect*, she thought to herself, *I should have looked this up a month ago*. They were both too occupied in their reading to hear the main doors open softly, that is until Twilight heard a quiet whisper behind her.

"Psst, Twilight!"

Twilight turned to see Spike, speaking softly as Twilight always instructed him to whenever anyone else was reading in the library. He waved sheepishly at her, obviously upset with himself.

Twilight gave him a reassuring smile, "Hi Spike, feeling better?"

"A little, yeah. I just wanted to... you know, apologize for earlier."

Twilight moved to give him an affectionate nuzzle, "Don't worry about it." She cast a sidelong glance at their guest, "I think I have a pretty good idea of what happened."

Spike still looked a little upset, "You... want me to go get the kitchen cleaned?" he asked somewhat timidly.

Twilight was a little surprised. Spike absolutely hated cleaning the kitchen, so to hear him actually offer was no small feat. She glanced over at the small kitchen area, only to wince at the state that it was in. "You know what, Spike? No... we'll tackle that one together later. Why don't you go pick up the books that fell off the shelves upstairs and once Pinkie leaves we'll go get something to eat, ok?"

Spike perked up visibly at this, equal parts glad that he wouldn't be knee deep in the mire on his own, and that the morning wasn't about to be a total loss. With an eager, "You got it!" he started towards the staircase, only to be intercepted by a large tome that quickly carried him into the nearest wall with a loud thud.

"Spike!" Twilight cried in alarm.

"Fooey," Pinkie Pie said, not even having looked at where the book had landed. "There's nothing in that book but fancy footsteps and ridiculous rules." She stuck out her tongue and blew a loud raspberry. "How can anyone call that a party!"

For the second time that morning, Twilight rushed to the aid of her beleaguered assistant. "Spike! Are you ok!"

Across the room, Pinkie suddenly became very tense as her tail began to twitch involuntarily. "Uh oh..."

"I'm ok, Twilight," Spike said, pushing over the book that had him pinned to the wall, but before he could get away a shelf overhead managed to dislodge itself, dumping a rather bulky looking chest towards the hapless dragon below. With a startled cry Spike cringed and covered his head, but was pleasantly surprised when the chest didn't make a lasting impression on his face. Looking up he saw that Twilight had managed to grab the chest before impact with her magic, and had gently set it down beside the baby dragon.

"Whew, thanks Twilight," Spike said, wiping his forehead, only to get conked on the noggin by a glass snowglobe that had sat beside the chest on the shelf.

"Oops, sorry Spike," the purple unicorn apologized.

"My tail's twitching! My tail is twitching!" Pinkie exclaimed, rushing to her friend's side. "Oh, wait... it stopped."

Spike sat on the floor, rubbing his head at multiple points. "Pinkie," he said with a wince, "I think being around you is becoming hazardous to my health."

Twilight gave a sigh, not liking to be too stern with the energetic and innocent minded pony, but she had to put her hoof down at some point.

"Pinkie," she said firmly, "I'm going to have to ask you not to throw the books around like that. They're not exactly indestructible."

Pinkie's eyes went wide as she lowered her head and took a few steps back, "Oh, I'm so very sorry Twilight! I won't do it again."

"Pinkie Promise?" Twilight asked, wanting to settle this once and for all.

The earth pony had to think for a moment before vigorously shaking her head. "No. Pinkie Promises are only meant for the most important things."

Twilight sighed, "A regular promise then?"

"Okay!"

With a look of frustrated amusement on her face, the purple unicorn turned back to the newest mess that had appeared on the library floor. As she reset the shelf and picked up the chest, Pinkie Pie shot to her side.

"Ooh, ooh, what's that!" the earth pony asked, gesturing wildly to the bulky box.

"*That...*" Twilight said, hoisting the box back onto the shelf, "is my treasure chest."

Chapter 2

Treasure Your Friends

With a series of soft 'clops' the end of a white hoof knocked repeatedly against the wooden doorway. When no answer was immediately forthcoming, the motion was repeated, this time with a little more force.

Rarity stood in front of the small cottage at the edge of the Everfree Forest that her friend called home, hoping desperately for an answer from within.

"Fluttershy!" the unicorn called, rapping on the door a third time.

"Fluttershy, please come out!" From inside she heard something shift and emit a soft squeak, but no one came to answer the door.

"Fluttershy!" she called again, banging on the door even more forcefully.

"Fluttershy, I know you're in there! Answer this door right away!"

Her efforts were rewarded with another scuffling sound and a brief bout of movement visible in the small window to her right. She moved in closer, hoping to get a look at what was transpiring within, but was instead met by a small white visage which suddenly appeared behind the glass. Rarity recognized the face of Fluttershy's constant companion, which was a good sign at least. If he was home, the chances were good that Fluttershy was home as well.

"Ah, Angel," she said, throwing on the charm as much as she could for the often temperamental bunny, "Would you kindly be a dear and go tell Fluttershy that Rarity is here to see her?"

Angel appeared less than happy, and he indicated as much by vigorously shaking his head.

Not expecting the proffered reaction, Rarity was momentarily taken aback. "She is home, is she not?" she asked.

The bunny cast a quick glance over his shoulder before offering a curt nod.

The unicorn was now a bit miffed. She had never been refused entry into Fluttershy's home before. "Angel, I am *not* here to play games," she explained to the small rabbit, her tone taking on a bit of an edge. "I want to speak to Fluttershy immediately. Don't force me to go collect Opal and bring her back here."

Angel began to gesture wildly, making it clear in no uncertain terms that the unicorn's presence was, for the moment, less than welcome.

At this point Rarity began to lose her composure. "Now listen here you long-eared mouse, I will not tolerate being treated like this!" She turned away from the window and stamped her hooves on the mat in front of the door. "You tell Fluttershy that I am not moving from this spot—until she comes out to speak with me! And furthermore—"

Her tirade was interrupted as a bright orange carrot stub sailed through the air to lightly impact into the back of her head. She turned angrily on the perpetrator, but as she approached the window a second time it was promptly slammed shut, and Angel made a point to celebrate his endeavor from the safety of the cottage interior.

Rarity was approaching her limit. "Why you little *rodent!*" she exclaimed, glaring daggers at the minuscule critter. "How *dare* you treat a lady this way! I will not stand for this! You bring Fluttershy here *right this very instant!*"

For a moment it appeared that Angel was going to persist in his attempts to dissuade the stubborn unicorn, but a soft voice from within caught his attention.

"That's enough, Angel."

At this the minuscule bunny turned from where he sat on the windowsill, and began to gesture again, apparently attempting to prevent the occupant inside from following through with her predetermined course of action.

The voice within was stern, yet kind in tone, "Now Angel, you know we don't treat our friends that way. Won't you let Rarity in?"

The rabbit seemed to pout and took a moment to look back through the window, shooting a surprisingly potent glare at the unicorn outside before

disappearing from the windowsill. A moment later the latch clicked and the door opened an inch or two. Rarity wasted no time, but promptly entered the establishment, only to fire a glare of her own as she passed by the very angry looking bunny that stood off to the side.

Breaking the brief eye contact with her momentary antagonist, Rarity spared a glance for the cottage interior. It was, as usual, very well organized, and everything was in its proper place. Yet there was something strangely odd about the home that Rarity could not put her hoof on. Deciding to worry about that later, she glanced about for her friend. It didn't take long to find her.

Fluttershy sat on the couch in the center of the main room, the yellow pegasus curled up in as comfortable position as was possible on the small piece of furniture. Much unlike the house itself, however, Rarity could instantly tell something was wrong. The unicorn was well aware of the fact that of all her friends (apart from herself, of course) Fluttershy was the one who spent the most time on physical appearance; yet the pony before her was in a state that Rarity would never have imagined possible. Her coat was ragged and dirty, and spotted in several places, and her mane and tail were an absolute mess: Matted, disheveled, and snarled. Several painful looking welts covered her forelegs, and she had some nasty scratch marks on her back. She was almost unrecognizable.

"Good *heavens*, dear!" Rarity exclaimed in utter horror. "What happened to you!"

Back at the Ponyville library, Pinkie Pie was convinced that she had made the biggest discovery of the decade.

"Your treasure chest!" she asked excitedly. "Ooooh, I wonder what's inside?"

Spike looked up from where he sat on the ground, "I didn't know you kept treasure, Twilight. Have you been holding out on me this whole time?"

Twilight giggled at the idea. "Oh Spike," she said, shifting the box comfortably back in position on the shelf, "it's not that kind of treasure."

Confident that her handiwork was stable, she turned away from the wall, only to have her personal space disappear as the color pink filled her view.

"Well, what's inside? What's inside!" Pinkie asked with an eager bounce.

Twilight took a surprised step backwards. "R—really Pinkie," she stammered, "it's nothing that special."

"I wanna see! I wanna see!"

For a moment, Twilight didn't quite know how to react, though she was more uncomfortable with the other pony's demanding presence than any real reluctance to show the contents of the box.

"Come to think of it," Spike added, moving to stand beside Pinkie, "I don't think I've ever seen what's in that box either. Whaddya say, Twilight? Show us?"

"Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!" Pinkie added, her eyes suddenly becoming very moist and dilating spontaneously.

Faced with the combined pleas of her two friends, Twilight caved in with a small smile. "Oh, alright," she said, turning back towards the shelf and once again grabbing the box with her magic, "but I promise it's not nearly as special as you guys are making it out to be."

Slowly Twilight lowered the crate until it was sitting comfortably on the floor. Spike eagerly moved to flip it open, but stopped short when he realized that he would need a numeric combination to do so.

"Ah, ah, aah," Twilight said in chastisement. "Not so fast."

"Not important, huh?" the dragon said with a huff. "Why keep it all locked up then?"

"Just because it's not worth much doesn't mean that it isn't important to me," the unicorn explained before spinning the keypad away from the observant group and inputting the proper combination. The box sprung open and she turned it to face her friends once again, eliciting an excited 'ooh' from the pink earth pony. Spike rushed forward, eager to see the

interior contents. It was obvious that his imagination was on overdrive, as he immediately looked disappointed.

"What's with all the papers and trinkets?" he moaned. "I thought you said it was treasure."

"I said it was *my* treasure, Spike," the unicorn clarified, "and these 'papers and trinkets' are very important to me. For example," with a nod of her head a single sheet of paper with a very elegant seal stamped on the bottom lifted from the chest, "*this* is my acceptance letter into Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns as Princess Celestia's personal student, and *this*," with another gesture a ribbon with a shiny medal attached to the end floated out as well, "is the fifth place medal I won at the Running of the Leaves last year."

"Ah, big deal," Spike said dismissively. "That's all ancient history."

"Ancient history or not, these are my memoirs," she said defensively. As she spoke, a sudden thought crossed her mind and she looked at the dragon with a sly expression, "Besides, it's not like you don't have a few keepsakes... like a certain photograph and a bow-tie you keep in a box under your bed? Or how about that jewel that remains mysteriously uneaten?"

Spike sputtered, having been caught off guard. "Th—that's different!" he insisted. "Those were gifts!"

The unicorn nodded, "And I keep those too, like this party blower from the second party anypony has ever thrown for me." She pulled out a small pink party blower that was fastened to a wooden base.

Pinkie stood transfixed at the sight of the party blower. "Wow, Twilight! I didn't know it meant that much to you!"

The unicorn gave her pony friend a hangdog look, "Well, I wasn't very appreciative of the first one..." she admitted sheepishly.

Pinkie seemed too occupied to care, lost in her own thoughts. She stared at the party blower for a moment until something seemed to click behind her bright pink visage. "That's. So. *Cool!* I think I'll keep something from

every party I throw! As a reminder! I never want to forget another party again!"

Twilight's expression became uncertain, "Yes... well..." She silently prayed that Mr. and Mrs. Cake would forgive her.

"Bah!" Spike interrupted, sticking his tongue out as he stepped away from the box. "I was looking for something interesting, not a bunch of mushy reminders and knickknacks."

"Oh, is that all this is?" Twilight responded, grinning down at her assistant. "Then you certainly wouldn't be interested in *this*." Another item floated out of the chest, a crystal ball about the size of an orange.

Spike was interested despite himself; after all, it was very shiny. He looked at it with curiosity, not noticing anything out of the ordinary at first. Upon closer inspection he realized that there was something encased inside the crystal— something that was a light shade of purple.

He squinted at the ball, trying to determine its contents. "What is that?" he asked.

"This." Twilight said proudly, "Is a reminder of my first true test in magic." Though her initial expression was one of haughtiness and pride, it slowly softened into a much warmer expression as she continued. "It reminds me of the day that I got my cutie mark, and is also a reminder of my first real friend."

At that Spike perked up, "The day you got your cutie mark? But that... that's..."

Twilight guided the ball over to him for a better look. "This is a fragment of your egg-shell, Spike," she explained.

Spike was transfixed as he grasped the crystal ball out of the air for a closer look. "Wow..." he said distractedly, but then something came to his attention. "Wait... but this fragment is purple with dark purple spots. I thought my egg was purple and green."

Twilight shook her head, "Nope. It was two shades of purple."

"It was?"

"Yup."

"Oh..." Spike seemed confused, "and all this time I thought..." he turned his gaze back towards the crystal, "but still... wow! I didn't know you had this, Twilight."

"I have two, actually," the unicorn said with a broad smile, hoisting another, similar object from the chest. "I was going to give you one when you were old enough. I guess now's as good a time as any. Just don't eat it accidentally, ok?"

"Of course not!" Spike said indignantly, but he was unable to keep his attention from the bauble for long. "Thanks Twilight! You're the best!"

"Anything for my number one assistant," she told him, giving him a friendly nuzzle.

Throughout the exchange, Pinkie Pie sat strangely quiet, and if either of the other two occupants of the room were to pay attention, they would have been able to see the gears working from within her head, and as she watched the exchange between Twilight and Spike those gears seemed to finally settle into place with a noticeable click.

The suddenly very loud and audible gasp startled both Twilight and Spike out of their musings, and they looked over at Pinkie only to see a cloud of dust where the pony had just been standing not a second before. They heard the door to the library slam shut immediately afterwards and sat together for a long moment, neither quite knowing what to make of the sudden departure.

"What do you think that was all about?" Twilight finally asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Spike answered, "but the last time I saw her do that..."

"Yup, somepony's probably due for a party soon." They stared a bit longer, watching as the trail of dust left behind in the speedy pony's wake dissipated into the air. Finally Twilight broke the silence again. "So, you hungry?"

"Starving,"

"Me too. How about we head on over to the Sugarcube Corner? At least we know we won't run into Pinkie Pie there today."

"Right behind you, sister." Spike said with gusto.

"Hello, Rarity," Fluttershy said, seemingly ignoring the unicorn's outburst, "I'm so sorry about that... I must have fallen asleep."

As she spoke, Rarity noticed that she did not raise her head—or even open her eyes—but remained at rest on the small sofa. Her voice seemed to match her appearance, worn and strained, but mostly tired—she sounded extremely tired.

"Fallen asleep?" Rarity repeated, "Goodness, darling, are you alright? You look positively dreadful."

At this Fluttershy finally perked up a bit, lifting her eyelids and raising her head slightly. "Do I?" she asked, giving herself a brief once over. "I'm sorry, I've just been..." she yawned, weakly trying to cover it with a hoof, "...I've been so busy."

Busy? Rarity thought, *but this house looks like it has not been used in days!* In fact—that was it! Everything inside the home was coated in a thin layer of dust! That's what she had noticed earlier!

If the unicorn was worried before, she was absolutely paranoid now. Fluttershy would *never* allow her home to fall into disrepair.

"Fluttershy, look at me," Rarity commanded her friend. Sensing the tone, the pegasus managed to give her unicorn friend a lethargic gaze. Rarity took in the details of her face, noting that her eyes were slightly bloodshot and saggy. She looked like she hadn't slept in a long while—much longer than was healthy, apparently.

Rarity moved to kneel beside the pegasus. "Fluttershy," she started, her voice going soft, almost pleading, "please tell me you are not still angry with yourself over what happened at the Gala."

Fluttershy gave a slight start at the question. "Uh... th—the Gala?" she repeated, "N—no, of course not."

Rarity stood up again, far from convinced. "Now Fluttershy, we promised each other there would be no more secrets between us."

Fluttershy's head dropped back to the sofa cushion. "Well..." she said with a hint of hesitation, "...maybe... just a little. I... I wasn't really myself that night."

"Darling, please," Rarity pleaded, "none of us were quite ourselves that night. We were all desperate ponies, but you cannot let that change who you *are*."

"I know that," Fluttershy admitted quietly, "but still..."

Rarity took a few steps back to look over the house again. "There will be no buts about it," she said matter-of-factly. "You need to get out of this house."

The pegasus' eyes closed wistfully, "Oh please, Rarity..." she whispered, "not—not right now, I can't."

"You can't afford *not* to, darling."

"But I'm just... so tired..."

"Goodness, dear, when was the last time you had a full night's rest?" she asked, hoping to get to the bottom of it all, but she did not receive an answer. "Fluttershy?" She returned her gaze to her friend. Fluttershy sat silently on the sofa, breathing steadily; she had fallen asleep again.

"Oh, Fluttershy." With a sigh the unicorn moved to rouse the pegasus from her slumber, but before she could do so she was intercepted by an irritated rabbit, who quickly moved to stand between them defensively.

Rarity glowered at the critter, still angry over their earlier quarrel. "Oh, what is it now?"

Angel placed his forepaws together and set his head atop them, then began to shoo at Rarity, obviously indicating that she should let her sleeping friend lie.

"Angel, *look* at her!" Rarity demanded. "She is a mess, and nothing in this cottage has been touched for over a week! I'm *not* going to let her sit here and waste herself away like this!"

The bunny remained stalwart, crossing his arms in finality. They stood there in stalemate, one doing his utmost despite his diminutive physique, the other not truly wanting to initiate a physical altercation.

Finally, as a desperate measure, Angel softened his expression from an angry glare to that of gentle pleading. It caught the unicorn completely off guard, but it was enough. Feeling her will beginning to falter, Rarity cast another glimpse at her friend on the couch. She once again took note of Fluttershy's physical state, which was absolutely dreadful; and yet, the expression on her face was one of perfect peace—almost... happy.

Rarity looked askance from the bunny with a grimace and grumbled in resignation. "Oh, very well. I'll let her be for now. But don't think this is the end of it!"

She cast a final glance around the cottage, now able to see what she couldn't before. There were distinct signs of under-use, and it begged all manner of questions. At the same time, however, it offered her an excuse.

"I suppose at the very least I can clean up a bit," she mused to herself. With a second thought, she turned again to the bunny on the ground, and roughly hoisted him up with her magic, "...and I don't suppose you would mind *helping* me... would you dear?"

Angel struggled viciously, but soon realized there was no other way out. With a heavy sigh he nodded assent, and was promptly dropped.

"Good, now would you kindly show me where Fluttershy keeps her cleaning supplies?"

With a glower that could kill a lesser being, Angel slowly led the way.

They spent the next two hours in silence, dusting, wiping, and just straightening up whatever needed it. There wasn't much out of place, to be sure, but everywhere she went Rarity found signs of general disuse. Even the bedroom looked like it hadn't been used in a few days, and that only caused her to worry more. Perhaps the most alarming was the distinct lack

of critters that usually filled the small cottage. It cast an eerie atmosphere over the hovel that was usually brimming with life, and put Rarity even more on edge—but at least it had made the cleaning easier.

Finally she cleaned out the last corner behind the last piece of furniture and shifted it back into place. "Well, I suppose that about does it," she said, more to herself than to anypony else.

She spared another glance at her friend. Fluttershy still hadn't woken, and though Rarity did not want to leave her, she had other responsibilities to take care of. The Carousel Boutique hadn't been open all morning, and she still had that hefty order to complete by next week. It was best to work on such things before Sweetie Belle returned from school in the afternoon.

Still, she didn't want to leave without some form of closure. Finding a quill and a blank piece of paper, she wrote a note for her slumbering friend, indicating a desire that Fluttershy come see her the moment she woke up.

Replacing the quill in its holder, she carefully set the note down next to the pegasus on the couch. She noticed Angel looking at her from the sidelines, an annoyed expression on his face. She turned once more to the rabbit.

"I want this to be the first thing that she sees when she wakes up," Rarity explained, her tone leaving no room for argument as she fixed the critter with a stern look. "And so help me, Angel, if I discover that Fluttershy never sees this note, I will fabricate an excuse to ensure that Opalescence will be here twice a week for the *next three months!*"

She received a gesture of reluctant assent, and satisfied with that, moved towards the door. Rarity paused only once, glancing back at her friend just before leaving the home. She took a final note of comfort in seeing the expression of complete contentment painted onto the pegasus' face, and silently prayed that her worst nightmares were not true. She then stepped outside and gently closed the door behind her.

Chapter 3

Treasure Your Thoughts

She raced back and forth moving almost faster than the eye could see, overturning drawers and emptying out cupboards with reckless abandon. If its job was to hold, conceal, or contain something it became a priority target.

"Quill! Quill! I need a quill!"

She continued to phase from place to place, looking desperately for any sort of writing instrument. One of her jaunty ventures sped her towards the nearest entryway—the barn's back door—but as she got close her body tensed, and she instantly ceased all unessential activity, giving full attention to what she knew was coming.

Ear Flop.

Eye Flutter.

Knee Twitch.

Heeding the call she promptly took several steps back from the doorway, which true to form, abruptly slammed open.

"*WHAT* in tar-*nation's* goin' **on** in h—Pinkie Pah?"

"Hi Applejack!"

Applejack took one look at the interior of the kitchen. She was quite dismayed at the sight that met her eyes. "What've ya done did to my barn, filly!" she cried.

"I'm so sorry, Applejack," Pinkie exclaimed, not sounding particularly sorry at all, "but I had such a super awesome *amazing* idea that I just had to write it down! And since I can't go back to the Sugarcube Corner until closing time, and since Rarity wasn't home and Twilight disappeared and

Rainbow Dash is too hard to visit I thought I'd come here! I need a quill! Do you have one?"

Applejack just stared at her friend with a slack-jawed expression, sorting out the best way to react to the given situation.

Pinkie didn't have the patience to wait. "It's ok if you don't have one," she said, bouncing back to the task at hand. "I'm sure I'll find one around here somew—hoa!" her movement was brought to a jarring halt as she was none-too-gently yanked back towards the door.

"Lemme git this straight," Applejack said, finally finding her voice as she spat the pink tail in her mouth onto the floor. "Yer tearin' my barn apart like a madpony lookin' for a quill?"

Pinkie nodded vigorously, "Uh-huh! Or a pencil! Do you have one?"

"And yer just sittin' there, lettin'er do this?" Applejack asked, turning towards a nearby table where a bright red stallion with an orange mane sat, munching quietly on a bean-sprout and tomato sandwich.

"Ee-yup," Big Macintosh said between bites. He'd long since learned not to interfere where the reputable party pony was concerned. It was almost always easier to let his sister Applejack deal with it.

"An' ya couldn't be bothered tah show 'er where we keep th' pens 'n pencils?"

"Ee-yup."

Applejack released the strongest sigh of frustrated resignation known to ponydom. "Ah step outside fer *five minutes*—"she paused to grab Pinkie by the tail, preventing her from escaping a second time, "—an' *this* is what ah come back to?"

"Ee—"

"*Don't* say it, big brother," she interrupted, shooting him a glare. The stallion promptly complied.

With another sigh the orange pony finally addressed the bubbling mass of pink. "Pinkie Pah, we don't keep th' writin' instruments in th' kitchen." Applejack raised a single hoof, indicating a door on the other side of the room, "They're in th' study. Now if'n ya follow me real calm-like, ah 'cn git'cha one."

"Oh, thank you soooo much, Applejack!"

The orange pony rolled her eyes, "I'd 'preciate it nex' time if'n ya'll came to get me first. I don' necessarily *like* scrubbin' kitchen floors."

"An' *you*," she pointed at Big Macintosh, "Clean this mess up!" Applejack then led her overeager friend into the other room, who was unable to prevent herself from bouncing in excitement, but as they passed through the doorway the pink pony recalled another reason she had come to visit her friend.

"Hey Applejack, do *you* have any treasure?"

"Treasure?" Applejack asked in return, not knowing where the question was coming from. "Y'mean, like bits n' stuff? Well sure," she confirmed with a shrug. "We're a bus'ness after all, but like all good bus'ness folk, we do our bankin' at the bank."

Pinkie shook her head wildly, "No, not that kind of treasure, silly. I mean *treasure* treasure!"

"*Treasure* treasure?" Applejack asked, slightly confused. "You mean, like diamonds?" She took a moment, trying to remember if she kept any jewelry. "Well, ah s'pose we've got a few up in granny's jewel case, but they don' get used much. Why d'yuh ask?"

The pink pony continued to shake her head even more forcefully. "No, no, *no!* I mean ***treasure*** treasure treasure!"

Applejack stopped at this, turning back to look at her friend, "Okay, y'done lost me now."

Pinkie's head dropped nearly to the ground and she gave a frustrated groan. "You know! *Special* treasure! Treasure that nopony else might think

is treasure but has a special deep significance or meaning that exclusively applies to only you!"

Understanding finally crossed through Applejack's eyes, "Oh, y'mean like mah hat!"

"Your hat?" Pinkie asked, slightly flabbergasted. "What kind of treasure is that?"

The workhorse gave her head a forceful reverse nod. Her Stetson hat flipped off her head into a backwards somersault before falling back into place. "Why, this 'ere hat's been in th' Apple Family fer generations," she explained to her friend. "Pa' gave it to Big Macintosh first, but he gave it to me t' keep shortly after Apple Bloom was born." She paused in thought, "He kept th' harness, though."

"Ooh, yes!" Pinkie exclaimed gleefully, "Things like that! Do you have any other treasure like that?"

Having reached the only desk in the room, Applejack popped open the top drawer and pulled out a quill and inkwell, placing them on the desktop. "Ah s'pose ah got a few keepsakes here and there; mostly stuff's been passed down by th' family. Granny Smith's got that jar that's got the seeds from the first apple ever picked from our orchard, an' Apple Bloom's ribbon was a gift t' my ma' from Auntie Orange—"

"Eh, A.J.?" Turing back to the doorway they had just come through, both ponies saw the frame of Big Macintosh poking his head into the study. "You've got 'nother guest waitin' on ya," he announced with his trademark drawl.

Applejack rolled her eyes, "'Course it always gets busy a'fore lunch." She made her way over to her brother, "Ah'll be right back, Pinkie Pah." She followed the stallion as he turned around and re-entered the other room. The door closed gently behind them.

Suddenly finding herself alone and entirely unsupervised, Pinkie made a dash for the desktop whereupon sat the quill and ink Applejack had pulled out. She wasted no time, but instantly began to write.

It had come to her as she had watched the exchange between Spike and Twilight at the library. A new type of party! A themed party! A specific party, catered to the things which the recipient treasured most! If she could discover what that was, she would have the proper ammunition to spontaneously throw a relevant party for *any pony at any time!*

Not that lack of an excuse had ever stopped her before, but now she would have a focus!

But who to use as the first subject? It was too soon for Twilight, who might become suspicious. Applejack hadn't given her much to use, and Spike's would just be awkward (plus she'd Pinkie Promised she wouldn't tell). There were her other friends of course, but she knew even less about their treasures. What could she do? Who would be best?

Who to choose... who to choose... *who to choose!*

As if in direct answer to her question, a muffled name seemed to float through the kitchen door and settle itself gently within her eardrum.

Fluttershy.

Pinkie was a little bewildered. Fluttershy? Pinkie couldn't even remember the last time she had thrown a party for Fluttershy. She hadn't even considered the pegasus as an option for such an experiment, and yet...

Fluttershy!

Pinkie's eyes slowly grew very wide. It was *perfect!* Under normal circumstances, the party pony was reluctant to host a party that centered on her timid friend. Sure the shy pony had no problem *attending* parties, but making her the focus of one was always destined to end in disaster. She *hated* being the center of attention.

But that problem could be solved! If Pinkie held a themed party that focused on what Fluttershy held most dear, she could personally throw her a party *and she wouldn't even know it!* She could make her the guest-of-honor-without-a-clue! Without any awkwardness or shame; no regret whatsoever! The idea was slick, it was subtle, it was almost so good that Pinkie felt evil just thinking about it.

She'd have to first figure out what keepsakes Fluttershy had, but she would worry about that later. Right now she was too busy. This new party idea had opened up all sorts of additional party options. What about other themed parties? Why had she not thought to do this before? There was no need to look for an excuse to throw a party when she could just make one up whenever she wanted!

More and more thoughts flashed through her mind, and she struggled to get them all written down. They came to her faster, and with more detail. She was in the zone, and there was no stopping her. May Celestia help all the ponies of Ponyville from that day forward, for there would be no rest from the marathon parties of Pinkie Diane Pie!

Then, suddenly, she stopped. She hadn't meant to—she didn't *want* to, but the fact of the matter was that she had run out of places to write. Yet though her pen may have ceased its erratic behavior, her mind was still in full stride, and she could feel the ideas continuously flowing forward—blocked in her head by the inability to be converted into written form. It created a traffic jam of thought as more and more ideas were brought to light yet found themselves unable to escape the confines of her brain. It was overwhelming. It was overpowering. She **had** to get them out!

Desperately she looked around for a blank space; a corner or an edge, even a small indentation! But there were none. She expanded her search outwards, seeking another surface upon which to write, but no such surface could be found. Her behavior became more frantic, her search pattern more violent; but the required resources remained elusive. Throughout it all the ideas continued to build up—begging, crying for an outlet! They plead for her to release them, to record them, to save them from the fate of forgotten obscurity! As her mind became supersaturated and her neural path throughput began to falter, some of them even began to die.

She felt them die. She *heard* them die.

It was too much for the poor pony.

As the door closed behind them Big Macintosh turned to his sister with a cocked eyebrow. "Yew sure it's a good idea t' leave her in there alone?"

"She's got what she wanted," Applejack said, waving him off, "She'll be fine. Now who'd you say was here t' see me?"

"I didn't," the red stallion countered, "but it's yer unicorn friend."

"Twilight?"

"Naw, th' white one."

Applejack gave a start at this news. "Rarity? Well what brings *her* out here?"

"Donno," Big Macintosh said with a shrug, moving back to the table to resume eating.

Realizing she wasn't about to get any more answers from her soft-spoken kin, Applejack cantered over to the front entrance. She found Rarity sitting within the entryway, eyeing the décor with an apprehensive gaze. Applejack knew that look, but she wasn't about to say anything as long as Rarity didn't.

"Well howdy there, friend," She said instead as she approached the white unicorn mare.

Rarity started at the sound of her voice, her attention having been elsewhere. "Oh! Hello Applejack, how are you today?"

"Fine an' dandy, thank y' kindly. To what do ah owe th' pleasure?"

"Oh, I won't be long," Rarity assured her friend. "There was just something I wanted to talk to you about, and I was in the area, so I thought I'd stop by."

Applejack cocked an eyebrow. Rarity was rarely, if ever, 'in the area', so it struck the earth pony as a bit strange, but she'd let her tell the tale. "Well, since yer here, can I getcha anything?"

"Well..." Rarity hesitated for just a second. "I supposed I *could* do with a glass of water, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. C'mon in." With a gesture, Applejack indicated for Rarity to follow and strode back to the kitchen, grateful that Big Macintosh had

already somehow gotten it cleaned up. The last thing she needed was to hear any complaints the unicorn might have about the mess. Rarity, for her part, followed silently, waiting patiently until Applejack procured the requested drink. Rarity took the glass and sipped at it delicately. Her eyes began to wander about the room, and Applejack tensed, knowing what was coming before it was even said.

"Ah unnerstand that my choice of internal decoratin' might not be up to par to yer trained eye," she said, deciding to nip the issue in the bud.

"Actually, I was going to say that I found it rather endearing, in a manner," Rarity countered. "A very old-fashioned style, but it suits the home. I just felt kitchen needed a bit more red—to match the exterior."

Applejack paused in her rebuttal, her retort interrupted with a thought. "Y'know... Apple Bloom said th' same thing not three weeks ago."

"Well then, she's a filly with a good eye," Rarity concluded, taking another sip from her drink, "but you're right of course, I did not come here to comment on your choice of decor." She placed her glass on the countertop and gave Applejack her full attention before continuing.

"I'm worried about Fluttershy," she said bluntly.

"Fluttershy?" Applejack repeated. "What's wrong with 'er?"

"I just stopped by to visit her and I found her in an absolutely dreary state," Rarity explained. "I could not get a full explanation from her, and as you are her closest neighbor, I thought I would ask. Have you noticed anything strange about her cottage recently?"

Applejack shook her head, "Not more'n usual. Though I *have* noticed an increase in critters hangin' out in th' orchards." She paused as her mind recalled an item she had recently added to that morning's to-do list. "Come to think of it, I was jus' 'bout to go see her myself an' see if she could do anythin' 'bout that. They're startin' to git a bit bothersome."

Rarity softly shook her head, "I might actually be able to explain that," she said, "and I don't know if Fluttershy would be much help at the moment. Her cottage was barren of her pets."

"Barren? As in, empty?"

"It was absolutely deserted! It was almost unnatural to behold." Rarity gave an involuntary shudder as she recalled the sullen atmosphere of the home.

"Well, I s'pose that'd certainly 'splain the critter count in th' orchards, then," Applejack said making the connection. "She tell ya why?"

"I could hardly get a full conversation out of her," the unicorn said in exasperation, "she was completely exhausted."

"Y'think she just needed a break?"

Rarity shook her head again, "I sincerely doubt it. I've never heard of her needing such a thing in the past, and she looked just awful. I've never seen her let herself go like that."

As she listened to Rarity's tale, Applejack's concern mounted. "Well, if'n there's one thing I can count on with you, it's yer attention to detail," she said, almost as if a reminder to herself. "Ah'll keep my eyes open, and if I see anything, ah'll letcha know."

"I would appreciate it if you do," Rarity said, offering her friend a grateful expression, "I'm rather beside myself in frustration right now, and I'm terribly worried."

"No worries, I'm sure we can sort this out."

Rarity listed her head to one side in frustration. "I do hope so," she said with a sigh before deciding it was time for a more lighthearted topic of conversation. "In the meanwhile, how is business treating you lately?"

Applejack's eyes lit up. There wasn't a whole lot she could relate to with Rarity, but business was certainly one of them. As both ponies owned and operated their own enterprises it was often the go-to topic of discussion when they spent any amount of time together. "We're doin' ok fer ourselves," she explained. "It's a slow time of th' year, so there ain't much to do but tend to th' trees until Applebuck Season starts up. How's about yerself?"

Rarity gave an exaggerated sigh, "Ugh, ever since I caught the eyes of Hoity Toity and Sapphire Shores business has been picking up quite a bit," she said. Realizing that she had not sounded particularly grateful, she promptly shifted emotional gears, "Not that I'm complaining, mind you. It's just that demand has increased tremendously, and I've been rather hard pressed to keep up. I don't know how much longer I can continue before I'll be forced to hire some help."

"Well, I'm sure when th' time comes you'll find plenty of ponies qualified fer the job," Applejack assured her. "Why, with th' reputation of the Carousel Boutique, they'll be lined up fer miles."

Rarity allowed a small smile to adorn her lips, "I do appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Think nothin' of it, sugarcube," Applejack said. "You've got th' right mindset, and yer good at what you d—DAG**GUM**!"

Both ponies nearly jumped off their hooves when the door behind them slammed open with such force that it shook the entire barn. Turning sharply towards the sound, they were met with a very startling sight.

Behind the door, now framed by the open doorway, stood a black and pink pony shaped figure. Its chest heaved with ragged, heavy breaths, and it held a look of wild desperation in its eyes. Behind her, Applejack heard Rarity scream in abject horror as something heavy and soft hit the floor. It took a moment longer for the farmer to recognize Pinkie Pie. She was covered head to toe in various notes and scribbles of black ink, even her mane and tail—something that Applejack would later wonder about—and she had an aura of intense distress about her. All in all it appeared as if she'd just taken a wild ride through the typewriter of horrors.

"Paper!" Pinkie shrieked frantically, "*Paper!* I need **PAPER!**"

Big Macintosh glanced over at all the commotion, then calmly took another bite of his sandwich.

Chapter 4

Treasure Your Feelings

Focus.

She struggled to remain motionless, her eyes closed in intense concentration.

*Focus... you can **do** this!*

She tried not to think about the empty air before her, tried not to think about what the history books said. After all, she'd already *made* history... twice.

She felt a grin begin to form on her face and attempted to suppress it, but failed. She'd made those ponies eat their words, she wasn't about to let what they said stop her anymore. She knew this was possible, and she knew if anyone could pull it off, it would be her.

Alright, let's do this!

With a final breath she let herself go, allowing gravity to take hold and pull her earthward. Her free fall lasted only a moment before she quickly regained control. Diving into the troposphere, her wings began to beat, slowly, almost leisurely at first, then faster and faster as she added her own power to gravity's pull. It wasn't long before she broke through the cloud cover and saw the lake stretch out below her.

But speed wasn't her ultimate goal here, though it certainly helped. Still, she concentrated on collecting the wind, using her wings to grip the very air around her and pull it down as she dropped. She would need it in a moment, need the current that would come with it.

Still she descended. Closer—closer to the smooth surface of the water below—as close as she could possibly manage. To some it might have already appeared too late, but she was not some. She was better than some. She was better than all!

She was the best.

She waited until she felt she could wait no more then promptly shifted her wings, angling them so that her rapid descent suddenly became a flight parallel to the lake's surface. She fanned her wings out, trying desperately to maintain her speed even with the increased drag and the weight of the current following in her wake.

Skimming the lake's surface she shifted her wings again, causing her long, straight flight path to become a circular course. Once she had the pattern down, she began to close that circle. This was the easy part. She'd had plenty of practice doing this and that practice was paying off. The circle became tighter and tighter, until a vortex began to form.

Once she felt the winds gain strength she urged them onward, closing up her wings just a bit so she could help push them along. The vortex grew until, with her help, it became a miniature tornado, which eagerly began to suck up water from the lake's surface. She let it; encouraging it to flow into the air until it became saturated with moisture.

She had to be careful here. If she didn't collect enough moisture she wouldn't be able to finish what she'd started. On the other hoof, if she gathered too much it would prove very dangerous. She tried not to think about what would happen then—willing herself through the process despite her fears.

As soon as she was satisfied that she had what she needed she launched herself skyward in a dizzying spiral, bringing her controlled typhoon with her. Now was the hard part. It was time to put her training to the test. A look of stalwart determination crossed her face.

This time... This time she would succeed!

Fluttershy's frustration was starting to mount... just a teeny bit. She had been standing here for nearly fifteen minutes now, without even a hint of an answer, and she was beginning to wonder if she should be more upset or worried. She decided to worry—she didn't like being upset. She'd try once more... or maybe twice. No, better make it three times at least, in case no one heard the first two.

Gingerly she tapped on the door of Ponyville's fashion center, the Carousel Boutique. "Um... Rarity?" she called softly. "It's me. Fluttershy. You... you wanted to see me?"

"Hi Fluttershy!"

With a startled squeal the pegasus whirled around, only to come face to face with one of the most precious ponies in Ponyville.

"Oh! Sweetie Belle!" she said, releasing a sigh of relief. "Please don't sneak up on me like that."

"I'm sorry, Fluttershy," the unicorn filly apologized quickly, "I was just coming over to visit my sister, but when I saw you I thought I'd say 'hi'."

Fluttershy smiled at the filly, even when embarrassed she was the cutest thing. "It's ok, Sweetie Belle," she assured the small pony, "You just surprised me, that's all." With a glance she indicated the establishment behind her, "And anyway, I don't know if your sister is home. I've been knocking on the door for fifteen minutes now, but she hadn't answered."

Sweetie Belle furrowed her brow in thought, "But... Rarity never leaves her store. Not unless it's *really* important."

"I know," Fluttershy agreed. "She came by to visit me this morning, but I don't think she stayed very long. I wonder if—"

"LOOK OUT BELOW!"

The call from the sky was the only warning they would receive. Both ponies looked up to see a large white object rapidly approaching their location. There was no time to do much else. A terrified squeak was all Fluttershy could utter before the object landed atop her with a heavy 'pomp'.

Sweetie Belle, who had only narrowly escaped a similar fate, released a startled yelp.

"Oh, hey there, squirt." From the sky descended a very familiar sky blue pegasus pony with a very unnatural rainbow colored mane and tail. Sweetie Belle, however, didn't seem to notice, but could only gape at the large pile of... white... that had enveloped her sister's friend.

Rainbow Dash stared at the filly, a puzzled look on her face. "Uh... you ok there, squeaker?"

The terrified cry of, "Fluttershy!" was her only response as Sweetie Belle made a mad dash for the pile and instantly began digging.

"Fluttershy?" Rainbow Dash asked quizzically, "What does she have to do with—"

"Fluttershy!" the unicorn filly cried again, sounding a bit more frantic.

"Oh!" The pegasus finally made the connection and promptly shoved Sweetie Belle aside, "Stand back, squeaker." She took a small leap to get airborne then began to beat her wings furiously. The pile of white slowly shifted and started to fall apart, sending whole chunks flying away with powerful gusts. Several startled cries filled the air as the substance found new homes amongst Ponyville's populace.

"Hey!" one voice rose above the others, demanding to be heard. Rainbow Dash stopped her vigorous wing beats and saw a pedestrian who had managed to get himself caught in the fiasco. "You mind knocking that off?" he said gruffly. "Winter ended three months ago!"

The pegasus could only offer him a cheeky grin with a nervous chuckle. "Oops, hehe... sorry about that."

The soaking earth pony walked off, grumbling under his breath as he did so, "Blasted pegasus... can't even get the seasons straight anymore..."

Once he had moved on, Rainbow Dash finally turned her attention back to her initial goal, only to discover a very wet Fluttershy had been hidden beneath the pile.

"Fluttershy!" Sweetie Belle cried again, rushing to her side. "Are you ok?"

Fluttershy was shivering, and the young filly couldn't help but notice that her normal yellow coat was beginning to look a little blue.

"S-s-sn-snow!" was all she could say between her chattering teeth.

Rainbow Dash looked a little crestfallen at the reminder. "I know, darn it," she said in frustration. "It keeps freezing too fast. I just can't seem to get it right!"

"Get what right?" Sweetie Belle asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Oh, just a little something I've been working on, squeaker," Rainbow Dash said with a small smile. "I'm trying to make some clouds!"

"B-but we've b-been making c-clouds for c-centuries," Fluttershy chimed in as she desperately prayed for the sun to increase its warmth.

"Oh sure," her friend scoffed, "with those lousy evaporators." She rolled her eyes in disgust before bending low in a makeshift action stance, "But back before they had those things, we pegasi had to make the clouds ourselves!"

"Really?" Sweetie Belle asked with growing intrigue.

"Yup, and it was really hard too!" Rainbow Dash replied, intent on milking her captive audience for all it was worth. "That's why they switched to those machines! Most pegasus ponies couldn't do it, and even the ones who could didn't like doing it. They thought it was too dangerous!"

The mention of the word 'danger' was enough. The unicorn filly was completely enchanted now, "Do *you* think it's dangerous?" she asked.

"Of course it is!" the pegasus said, puffing out her chest, "But that's not gonna stop the best flier in Equestria! I love a good challenge!"

"B-but no one re-remembers how to d-do it," Fluttershy pointed out.

Rainbow Dash scoffed again, "Like I'm gonna let a little detail like *that* stop me?" She took to the air a second time, spinning a few shallow loops in a dizzying display, "I'm Rainbow Dash! I *live* for this stuff!" Finishing her spectacle she dropped to the ground once more. "Besides, I proved the Sonic Rainboom was possible, didn't I? And I can't rely on that forever. If I'm going to get the Wonderbolts' attention, I'm gonna need something else to show them! I'm not going to be just another one-trick pony!"

"Wow, Rainbow Dash! That's so cool!"

"Yeah, well, it's what I do."

"A-are you sh-sure you should be p-practicing this over the middle of P-Ponyville?"

Rainbow Dash released all her bluster with a frustrated sigh, "I wasn't over the village," she said in exasperation. "I was over the lake, but when the water froze it became too heavy and just got launched."

"O-oh. I s-see."

Rainbow Dash finally seemed to recognize the miserable state that her friend was in, "Oh, right... sorry about that, Fluttershy." In a wink she darted towards her friend, spinning several dizzying circles to create another vortex that forcibly removed all moisture in the area.

Finally dry again, Fluttershy felt the sun begin to warm her numb extremities and her shivering ceased. "Oh, thank you Rainbow Dash."

"No problem." The blue pegasus took a moment to look around, "So... what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Well, I was here to see Rarity," Fluttershy explained. "She left me a note saying she wanted to talk to me." A look of worry crossed her face as she remembered the contents of that note. "It sounded awfully urgent. I hope she's okay."

"Well, what are you standing around out here for, then?"

"I tried knocking, but she hasn't answered."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes, "Fluttershy, it's a store," she said in irritation as she moved towards the door. "You don't have to knock firs—" her attempt to push the door open failed when it refused to budge, which caused her a small amount of surprise. She looked at the door in annoyance and pushed again. When it remained stalwart in its stand she tried several more times before admitting that it was, indeed, locked. "Huh... that's weird."

"I thought it was strange as well," Fluttershy agreed. "And she was just so insistent that I come speak to her, too. What if something happened to her?"

Dash waved at her friend in dismissal. "Nah, we would have heard about something like that by now. I'm sure she's fine. She probably just got called off to make a dress or something." Despite her better judgment, however, Rainbow Dash was unable to eliminate a quiet nagging doubt. Maybe a little investigation wouldn't hurt after all.

"What did she want to talk to you about, anyway?" she asked.

Fluttershy gave a meek shrug, "I'm not sure. I remember her saying something about the Gala, but I was very tired at the time, and the entire conversation felt like a dream. I wasn't even sure it had been real until Angel showed me the note she left." A gasp escaped her lips as a terrible thought occurred to her. "You don't think she's still upset over what happened that night, do you?"

Rainbow Dash just laughed, "What? Rarity? Nah," she said with a wave of her hoof. "She was over that Blueblood jerk the moment the cake landed. She wouldn't let something like that bother her..." her argument seemed to lose steam even to herself as she recalled how their friend had reacted to the events of that night, "...would she?"

"Jerk?" a soft voice piped up. "But Rarity said that she had the best night ever at the Gala."

Both pegasi glanced down at the small unicorn who was beginning to look a little upset herself. Sharing a quick apprehensive glance, they came to a silent agreement that it was time to change the subject.

"It was the best night ever!" Rainbow Dash said quickly, believing some closure was necessary first. She didn't know what Rarity had told her little sister about that evening, but she was sure there was a reason for it. "We just had a bit of a rough start, that's all."

The young unicorn still seemed confused, "But... why would you call Prince Blueblood a jer—"

"By the way, Sweetie Belle," Fluttershy interrupted, "How are you and the Cutie Mark Crusaders holding up?"

At the mention of her little clique, Sweetie Belle's eyes simply lit up. "We're doing well!" she assured the older pony. "We've been meeting every day!" Her eager expression faded as she remembered something else, "In fact, I was supposed to meet them at the clubhouse after my visit with Rarity, so I should probably get over there."

Fluttershy nodded with a smile, "Yes, you shouldn't keep them waiting. You be safe now, and let me know if you need anything."

"Of course! Thanks Fluttershy!" without another word the filly took off towards the southwest and Sweet Apple acres. As soon as she was far enough away, both pegasi gave a sigh of relief.

"Whew, that was a close one," Rainbow Dash said. "What do you think Rarity told her?"

"I don't know, but it wasn't the truth," Fluttershy said worriedly. "Are you sure she's not still bothered by it?"

The shrug Rainbow Dash offered the other pegasus matched her facial expression of complete bewilderment. "I wouldn't think so, but I guess you can never tell sometimes."

"What should we do?" Fluttershy asked, feeling on the verge of hysterics. "I want to go find her, but I don't know where to start looking," she looked over her shoulder, a concerned expression on her face, "and I just don't have any more time today."

"Tell ya what," Rainbow Dash offered, "I've finished my chores for today. I'll go look for Rarity, and let you know what I find out."

Fluttershy looked at her fellow pegasus hopefully, "Would you? I would feel so much better." Her eagerness gave way to sudden apprehension, "But... I can't ask you to do that. I don't want to interfere with your practice."

The blue pegasus waved her off, "Ah, don't worry about it. The lake will still be there tomorrow, and frankly, I kinda wanna know what's going on as well."

"Oh, thank you, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said gratefully. "Please tell Rarity that I'm so very sorry I missed her, and that I'll come by to see her later, but right now, I really have to go." Fluttershy didn't give Rainbow Dash the opportunity to respond, but trotted away without hesitation now that she had the other pegasus' reassurance.

Rainbow Dash was a bit surprised at her sudden departure, it wasn't like Fluttershy to be so readily put at ease when worried for a friend. With a shrug she decided to let it go. If Fluttershy was learning to be less of a worrywart and a prude, who was Rainbow Dash to argue?

Instead she turned her thoughts to Rarity, and where she would begin to look for her. If the unicorn was not here, nor with Fluttershy, where else could she possibly be? At her parents? But then Sweetie Belle would have run into her. And she wasn't known to frequent the Sugarcube Corner with Pinkie. What about Sweet Apple Acres?

Rainbow Dash scoffed. *Yeah, that'll be the day. Twilight's it is, then.*

With a final flourish of the pen assaulting the page Pinkie Pie struck a dramatic pose. "Aaaaaaaand *done!*" she exclaimed. "Whew, I don't think I've ever written that much before!"

Applejack was inclined to agree as she stared in dismay at the hundreds of sheets of paper strewn about the room. "'Bout time," she said with a sigh. "Ah don' know why you do what y'do, Pinkie, but sometimes..."

Pinkie wasn't paying attention, already eagerly gathering up each of the individual pages and placing them within the saddlebags on her back. "So—" she asked, her speech breaking with each page she picked up, "Is Rarity—" *shff*, "awake—" *shff*, "yet?"

Applejack glanced over at the only piece of padded furniture in the room, where Rarity had been laying all afternoon. "Nope," she answered simply.

"I hope she didn't—" *shff*, "bump her head—" *shff*, "when she fainted."

"Ah don' think so," Applejack said, only marginally convinced she was telling the truth, "Y'done gave us quite the start there, though."

"I'm sorry—" *shff*, "I wasn't trying to—" *shff*, "start anything."

Applejack sighed again—she'd been doing that a lot today. "Look, y'sure I can't help you clean up here?"

"That's ok!" *shff*, "You've already—" *shff*, "helped me enough—" *shff*, "by letting me borrow—" *shff*, "these saddlebags!"

Applejack shrugged. "Suit yerself."

As she watched her pink friend collect the remainder of the pages she silently prayed this would be the end of it. She had just as much fun with Pinkie Pie as the next mare, but she had other things to do today besides keeping an eye on the energetic party pony to prevent any further disasters.

Just at that moment, the door to the study opened, and in walked a yellow earth pony filly with a red mane and a large red ribbon in her hair.

"Applejack, I'm home!" she called out.

"Hey Apple Bloom!"

The reply caught the filly by surprise, for it hadn't been Applejack who'd responded. She took another look around the room before realizing her sister was not its only occupant. "Oh, hey Pinkie Pah! What're you doin' here?"

"Oh, I was just—" *shff*, "writing down—" *shff*, "some ideas."

Apple Bloom was still a little confused, "Uh... okay. An' what's goin' on with Rarity?"

"It's a long story, little sister," Applejack said, not wanting to go into details at the moment. "How was yer day at school?"

Apple Bloom made a disgusted face, "Ugh, I can't wait 'til school's out fer the summer," she said. "Maybe I can go a whole day without hearin' 'Blank Flank' shouted 'cross the playground."

Applejack sighed, "They still botherin' you 'bout that?"

The young filly gave a little snuffle, a bitter look beginning to blossom on her face, "Uh-huh."

Applejack moved to stand beside her sister, "Now you listen to me, little filly," she said firmly, "Them other fillies ain't nothin' but bullies, an' you don't hafta let them walk over you if you don't wanna."

Apple Bloom sniffed again, "But, how'm ah s'posed ta make 'em stop? Teach' says to just ignore 'em but sometimes that don't always work, an' ah don't wanna git in trouble."

"Now listen here," Applejack said, "Your sister Applejack ain't gonna condone gettin' physical, but if you ever feel like you can't hold it in any longer," she locked eyes with her younger sibling, "then don't! Teach them girls a lesson if ya hafta, but don' let them think for one moment they can git away with teasin' you without consequence. Y'ain't wrong fer standin' up fer yerself, and if that ever happens, then you just let me worry 'bout Miss Cherilee."

Little Apple Bloom was still far from comforted and she sniffled again, "Ohkay, big sis..."

Applejack bent low and rested her head across her sister's neck in comfort, "Now don't you fret none," she reassured the younger filly, "when the time comes fer you t' get yer cutie mark, it's gonna be so beautiful, and them other fillies is gonna be so jealous, they won't be able t' speak at'cha again."

Apple Bloom looked up hopefully, "Y'really think so?" she asked.

"Ah knows so," Applejack said, pressing her nose against her little sister's in a tender nuzzle.

Apple Bloom giggled at the gesture, then immediately perked up. "Oh hey, that reminds me. I was s'posed to meet up with th' other Crusaders after school today."

Applejack's gaze was stern, "How much homework've ya got fer t'morrah?"

"It's not much, I promise!" Apple Bloom said, willing her most innocent expression to appear on her face. "I can git it done real quick t'nite! Can I go out? Pleeeeeeease?"

"Oh, alright." Applejack acquiesced. "But I wan' it done a'fore seven, y'hear?"

The young filly hadn't even waited to hear Applejack finish, but was already rushing to the barn's rearward exit, "Ah will, ah promise!" she called over her shoulder as she galloped out.

The slamming of the back door caused a shudder throughout the barn, and on a chair in the study, a white unicorn pony finally began to stir.

"Oooh, Applejack!" Pinkie said, noticing the soft groans emanating from the chair, "I think she's waking up!"

Both ponies moved to stand beside their friend, who was slowly opening her eyes. She tried to focus, but it took several moments. Eventually she was able to make out the rough outline of Applejack standing beside her with a worried look on her face.

"Applejack...?"

"You ohkay there, Sugarcube?" the earth pony asked.

"I... I believe so. What happ—" sudden remembrance flooded through her as the memories of her final vestiges of sensory input were pieced together, "—Aaah!" she cried, nearly falling off the couch in a mad scramble, "Where is it? *Where is it!* Don't let it get meeeeeeee!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Applejack called, motioning for calm, "Calm down there, girl, ain't nothin' gonna getcha."

"But I saw it!" Rarity exclaimed, on the verge of hyperventillating, "It was staring into the very reaches of my soul! It wanted to devour me like a precious pony morsel!"

On her other side, Pinkie Pie giggled. "Oh, Rarity, you're such a drama queen!"

Hearing another voice seemed to snap the unicorn out of her crazed state, "What?" She turned, as if noticing Pinkie Pie for the first time. "Pinkie Pie? What are *you* doing here?"

"Just doing some writing!" the other pony said, moving back to finish picking up her remaining pages.

"It was her that ya seen," Applejack explained. "She got a mite overzealous with th' ink for a bit, is all."

"You mean, that monstrosity was merely Pinkie Pie, covered in ink?"

"Mmm-hmm," Applejack nodded.

"Oh good heavens," Rarity sank back onto the sofa in relief, "but you gave me such a fright, dear." She sat still, attempting to calm her frayed nerves when a second synapse made a connection.

"Wait!" Rarity jumped back off the sofa to face Applejack. "What time is it?"

Applejack had to think for a bit. "Uh... ah donno," Apple Bloom had just gotten home, so that would put it at about... "say maybe three... thirty?"

"Three-thirty!" Rarity cried, "Good gracious I've been here all afternoon!" She started pacing around the room frenetically, "I've got to get home, I've so much to do! And Fluttershy! Oh dear me I told her to come see me! What if I missed her? I hope I didn't miss her! I must know what's going on!" Seeming to realize she was panicking, she stopped and turned to Applejack, "I apologize Applejack, but I must leave at once!" She couldn't wait for a response, and immediately dashed from the room, leaving the two earth ponies alone again.

"Uh... ohkay, there... Rarity," Applejack said by means of a delayed response.

"Wow! She sure was upset!" Pinkie Pie observed. "What was all that about Fluttershy?"

"Aw, Rarity's a bit worried, seems to think she's still havin' issues with that Gala fiasco last week. That she's still upset 'bout the whole thing."

"Rrrreeeally?" Pinkie asked. So Fluttershy was having a problem, huh? Well this little pony knew just the cure, and a sly expression began to blossom on her face.

It did not escape Applejack's notice. "Ah don' like that look in yer eye there, sugah."

Just like that, it was gone, replaced by the pink pony's typical bubbly expression. "What look?"

Applejack just shook her head, "Nothin', never mind."

"Anyway, I'm all done now, Applejack!" the orange pony took a moment to look around and see that, indeed, all the pages has been collected, "and I've got something else to do, so I'll be going now, but thank you sooooooooo much for your help today! I'll be back to return the saddlebags later!"

"No worries, take yer time," Applejack said with a chuckle. "I've a few things ah need to git done a'fore ah hit the hay t'nite as well."

"I didn't know there were any recipes that called for tenderized hay."

The look she shot her pink pony friend was of pure disbelief. "Pinkie Pah, one'a these days I'ma hafta sitcha down and have a very thorough discussion 'bout the figures'a speech."

"Oh don't be silly, Applejack!" Pinkie said, trotting past her friend towards the door, "I already know all about the alphabet! I memorized the whole thing years ago!" For the third time that day Applejack found herself unable to get the last word in as Pinkie left her standing in the study.

Pinkie, however, wasn't headed home, but turned northward. She still had a plan in mind, and that plan required some research.

...And there was no better time to do research like the present.

Chapter 5

Treasure Your Goals

Angel sat stretched across the loveseat, enjoying the momentary silence of the absence of his caretaker and the myriad other animals that usually inhabited the house on a regular basis. Complete privacy in Fluttershy's cottage was a rather rare experience, and in many ways it was quite relaxing. He could get used to this. He could get used to this very easily indeed.

It wasn't that he held no love for the pegasus pony. On the contrary he loved her very much. It had been no surprise to him when she had come home that night after the appearance of Nightmare Moon with the claim that she was the aspect of kindness in something called the Elements of Harmony. He hadn't been able to make much sense of it all, but one thing had seemed perfectly natural to him: That throughout all of the ponies in Equestria, it would be Fluttershy who turned out to be the embodiment of kindness. She *was* kind. She was exceptionally kind. In many ways she was *too* kind.

The rabbit smirked to himself. When he had first met the pegasus who had fallen from the sky, he had been your average run-of-the-mill bunny rabbit. She, however, had been far from the average pegasus, and as Angel had spent time with her he discovered something more underneath that kind exterior.

After her initial elation at having discovered the creatures of the earth—and her cutie mark—had worn off, Angel was able to meet the true Fluttershy, and learn the tale of a pegasus from the city of clouds who did not fit the mold; who, as kind as she was, had been mercilessly mocked for her inability to perform even the most basic of skills. Who had been tormented into a state of social awkwardness because of a meek demeanor and an overzealous consideration for others—which more often than not had been mistaken for weakness.

She had hidden it well. She hadn't wanted to cause anyone to worry, certainly not amongst the woodland creatures she called her friends. Even

now it amazed him how she had managed to bury it all with her service to others. Still, one day he caught her in a vulnerable moment, and it revealed to him the pain that she bore inside, the pain that she covered with a soft smile and an eager disposition. It had torn his little heart asunder, and he vowed from that moment on that he would do everything in his power to take care of her just as she took care of everyone around her.

It wasn't easy. Fluttershy thought nothing for herself. Everything she did, she did for somepony else, and it often ran the poor rabbit ragged just to remind her that she also had needs and wants that needed to be met. As a result he had become much more aggressive, having to deliberately push the personal desires of the shy pegasus onto others because she could never bring herself to impose on another like that. What he could not do for her directly, he made sure someone else could.

He often gave her a hard time as well, if only to remind her that life was not the perfect picture she often imagined it to be, but he always took care not to push her very far.

Luckily things had been picking up for poor pegasus. She had found a circle of friends that had been more than accommodating, and he was finding his job becoming less and less necessary as they stepped in to help her belong and encouraged her to come out of the defensive wall she had built around herself.

Of course... that was before last week... and the Gala.

Fluttershy had come home happy enough, but even she could not hide the disappointment she had felt for very long, and he could tell that it was eating at her. What bothered him most however was that it was partially his fault, and he had been powerless to help. He didn't know *what* would have become of her if it hadn't been for—

His ears snapped upright long before he noticed anything, but it didn't surprise him. They seemed to have a mind of their own at times and he had long since learned to pay attention. They had caught something that he had not, and so he listened more intently. It didn't take long to pinpoint the source.

Something was outside, moving around the exterior of the cottage. They were obviously trying to be sneaky, but weren't having much success of it;

not to him anyway. He sat upright on the couch, briefly debating whether or not he should go out and check. He wasn't really that worried; despite living so close to the Everfree Forest, it was a truly rare occurrence that anything dangerous would make its way out of the woods.

He decided to observe for now, moving to the windows to try and get a glimpse of whatever it was, but it remained hidden from his sight. He could still hear it though, moving from one point to another around the perimeter of the cottage. Finally, it seemed to grow bored and left, and the rabbit made his way to the door— just to make sure there hadn't been anything damaged or taken.

Initial inspections showed that nothing seemed to have been tampered with; nothing immediately noticeable, anyway. He moved around towards the back of the cottage, and as he rounded the corner the most peculiar sight caught his eye.

A piece of cake lay off to one side, hidden from the cottage interior by a low bush, but it wasn't just the cake that gave him pause. It was the fact that the cake lie neatly underneath a large cardboard box that was lying open at an angle over it.

An obvious trap.

Angel moved closer to inspect the device. It seemed basic enough. The cake was a rather blatant piece of bait, with the trigger set to spring the trap the moment it was disturbed. A bell lie atop the box—probably meant to sound the alert when the trap had been sprung.

Angel smirked. He didn't know who was going around setting traps for small critters near Fluttershy's cottage but they couldn't be that bright if they thought cake was a suitable bait, and they would be sorely mistaken indeed if they thought such an obvious device would catch *him* anytime soon. But sure, he'd play along.

Looking around he spotted a long stick lying several feet away, and moved to retrieve it. He'd spring the trap and then lie in wait to see who—or what—it was that had placed it. Such were his thoughts when he picked up the branch only to have his life suddenly flipped and turned upside down.

He took a moment to sit right there, quite disappointed with himself. He was held suspended in midair by a metal cord around his ankle, his ears hanging loosely underneath him. After a period of fierce personal berating he tried to reach the snare that bound him so he could untangle it, but found it quite secure. Realizing there was no way he was going to escape this on his own, he folded his arms over his chest and waited, a very cross look on his face. Fluttershy would be home soon. He hoped.

Perfect!

Pinkie Pie smiled a wry grin of satisfaction upon witnessing the bunny hanging helplessly in her snare and slowly lowered her spyglass. They never saw it coming. After all, no one ever suspected that a stick would be the true bait.

Of course, that's why it always worked.

Pinkie sought out a nearby string and gave it a good solid yank. Instantly a second sapling sprang up, sending the cake and cardboard box flying towards the nearby forest. The box shredded itself in midair, descending to the ground like a bushel of brown confetti that would be nearly indecipherable from the surrounding landscape. The cake made it safely past the tree line, forever concealed by the growth of the Everfree Forest.

Just as planned.

She took a moment of silence for the lost piece that would never please a hungry tongue, but she couldn't mourn for long, she was on the clock. With all incriminating evidence destroyed and Angel Bunny secured, Pinkie was now free to proceed with her designs. Fluttershy obviously wasn't home, and she hadn't seen another soul within thirty yards of the cottage, pony or otherwise. Taking care so as not to appear within Angel's line of sight, she moved around to the front door of the hovel and entered. Slowly and methodologically she began searching the cottage interior. It wasn't her usual inclination to be so careful, but she couldn't leave a trace. If Fluttershy had any keepsakes lying around she was going to find them, but she had to be discreet. She couldn't let anyone know... not yet. The first party had to be something special, and entirely unexpected.

She couldn't give Fluttershy the chance to see it coming.

"Do you honestly believe that Rarity is still letting it bother her?" Twilight asked the perplexed pegasus that drifted lightly next to her.

"Well, honestly, no." Rainbow Dash responded. "I mean, not at first, but Fluttershy looked so worried—not to mention the fact that she had to have straight up lied to her sister." The pegasus paused, trying to figure it all out in her own mind. "I just... don't want to take any chances," she finished curtly.

"So where's Fluttershy now?" Twilight asked.

Rainbow shrugged, "Donno. Guess she had some other stuff to do, so I told her I'd look into it." The unicorn stalled mid-step, causing Rainbow Dash to fly several feet ahead before she could match the gesture.

"Wait, Fluttershy ran off? In spite of her worry for Rarity?" Twilight asked incredulously.

"I know, right?" Dash said, "It kinda threw me off too."

A very quizzical expression crossed the purple pony's face. "Huh," she mused, "That seems so... unusual." Her puzzlement vanished with a shrug, "Well, I guess we can ask her about it later. Meanwhile, I suppose there's no harm in checking up on Rarity. You said she wasn't home though, right?"

"Not when we were there," the pegasus confirmed. "Any idea where she might be?"

"Well, if she's not at home, and she's not with Fluttershy, and Sweetie Belle had no idea where she was—" Twilight paused in thought when she caught sight of a familiar figure. A figure who was running at a full gallop towards, alongside, and ultimately right past the two pponies, "...I'd say right there," the unicorn finished, following the interloper's movements.

"R—Rarity!" Rainbow Dash yelled after her, "Wait!"

"I'm sorry girls," Rarity called over her shoulder, not slowing in the slightest, "I've simply no time at the moment!" Twilight and Rainbow Dash could only stare after her.

"What in *Equestria* is going on?" Twilight asked no pony in particular.

"I donno," Dash said, a determined look crossing over her features, "But I'm gonna find out!"

In a rainbow flash she was gone, darting after the departing Rarity with all haste. She quickly overtook the galloping unicorn and moved ahead several meters before planting her hooves firmly on the ground directly in Rarity's path, forcing the unicorn to stop short or risk crashing unceremoniously into the other pony.

Rarity barely managed to avoid the collision, cutting her momentum just shy of the pegasus. Quickly recovering from the sudden stop she began pawing at the ground impatiently. "Oh what *is* it, Rainbow Dash?" she demanded, a note of irritation creeping into her voice. "I'm in a hurry!"

Hearing Rarity's tone, Dash felt her temper begin to rise. "What's with *me*?" she countered, "What's with *you*?"

Rarity stopped pawing and fixed her friend with a hard stare. "And what, pray tell, is *that* supposed to mean?" the unicorn asked in challenge.

"What do you mean, 'what's that supposed to mean'?" Dash shot back. "You get Fluttershy all worried about you, then go galloping around Ponyville like there's nothing wrong—"

"Fluttershy?" Rarity interrupted, her disposition moving from irritation to attentive at the mention of their mutual friend, "Did you see her? Is she here?"

Rainbow Dash was completely taken aback, quite puzzled at Rarity's sudden change of temperament. "Uhh... yeah..." she stammered, "I mean... she *was*..."

"Well where is she now?" the unicorn pressed, leaning invasively towards the other pony.

"She... she ran off," Rainbow said, taking a step back and trying to collect herself.

Rarity's face fell at the news. "Oh, *drat!*" she exclaimed. "Then I *did* miss her."

"Yeah... I mean, *yeah* you did." Rainbow Dash accused the unicorn, her earlier anger beginning to resurface as Rarity's own presence faded. "And now she's in a panic! Where *were* you anyway?"

"I was over— I was running some errands!" Rarity said defensively. "I... just didn't expect them to take this long."

It was Rainbow Dash's turn to get indignant. "Well they *did!*" she said, moving in to emphasize her point and causing Rarity to take a step back. "And Fluttershy couldn't find you, so now she's worried sick about you!"

Rarity blinked her eyes in confusion, "Worried about me? Why, whatever for?"

Dash pressed the attack, taking an offensive position. "Because you couldn't deal with the fact that your 'Prince Charming' wasn't so princely, that's why!"

At the mention of the foalish prince that had once been the object of her dreams, Rarity felt her blood begin to boil, "I have absolutely *no* idea what you are talking about, Rainbow Dash. Blueblood was a coward and a foal, and I have *no* desire to spend my life with such a character."

"Girls?"

"Oh yeah? Then why did you lie to your sister about what happened that night, huh?" Rainbow Dash continued, far from deterred.

The mention of her younger sibling added fuel the fire of Rarity's temper. "What I share with my sister has nothing to do with you!" she declared to the other pony, pushing back against Rainbow's presence. "I'm not going to ruin a filly's dream of romance just because mine wasn't as picture perfect as I'd imagined it!"

"*Girls!*"

Rarity's fire, in turn, only served to bolster Rainbow Dash's own. "Well maybe if you didn't have such 'high-and-mighty' expectations you wouldn't have been so affected by the disappointment when it all went south!"

"And mayhap if you weren't so pretentious with the belief that the Wonderbolts should welcome you with open arms, you might actually be a descent pony to be around at times!"

And with that, the argument had become personal. Rainbow Dash inhaled sharply through her nose, her rage easily visible on her face. "And maybe if *you* weren't such a—!"

"**GIRLS!**" Twilight shouted, determined to stop the tirade before it spiraled entirely out of control. "Knock it off, both of you!" The other two ponies turned to regard their friend, having momentarily forgotten about her during their mutual tantrum.

Rainbow Dash, however, wasn't quite finished. "But Twilight, she totally said I was—"

"*Dash!*" Twilight almost shouted, cutting her off, and giving them both a reprimanding look. "You're both letting your tempers get the better of you, we just wanted to know what's going on, remember? And shouting at each other like this isn't going to get us any answers!"

Rarity and Dash exchanged an angry glare, but remained silent. Twilight on the other hoof, took several deep breaths to calm her nerves before she continued, determined not to be dragged into the whole ordeal.

"Now," she continued once she believed that all tempers involved had subsided some, "What I believe we have here is a failure to communicate, so I'm going to moderate from this point on." She turned to her fellow unicorn first. "Rarity, Rainbow Dash says she ran into Fluttershy trying to find you at the Carousel Boutique, and became upset when you weren't there because you had left her a note to come see her."

Rarity nodded, "This is true," she affirmed. "I stopped by to speak with her this morning because I haven't seen her in several days, and I was worried. She wasn't in much of a state to talk, so I left a note telling her to come see me when she had the time."

"Yeah, well you could have been a little more clear about that." Dash piped in. "She was worried sick about you!"

"Quiet, Dash." Twilight demanded before turning back to Rarity. "Now, Rarity, I'm a little confused—"

"Worried about me?" Rarity interrupted Twilight in favor of hearing more from the pegasus. "You said that earlier, but why on earth was she worried about me?"

Rarity's genuine interest managed to have a calming affect on Rainbow Dash, who was becoming more confused than angry. "Well, your store was closed, and she couldn't find you. She remembered you had mentioned something about that Gala, and there was that note you left..." Dash shrugged. Now that she was looking Rarity in the eye, the whole theory was starting to sound more and more ridiculous. "I guess she jumped to conclusions that you were still worried about what happened that night."

Rarity shook her head wildly, "No, no no no no... That's not it at *all*. When I saw her this morning she looked absolutely horrid!"

"Horrid?" Twilight asked, having given up on her moderating now that the conversation seemed to be adopting a more civil tone.

"Why, she looked positively *ragged* dear! It was awful to behold! I asked her about the Gala because I was worried for *her*!"

Rainbow Dash was now deep in thought. "You know, she *did* seem a little out of it that night..." a moment of silence followed as she attempted to connect a few more pieces of the grand puzzle before her, "...but she didn't look all that out of sorts when I saw her earlier."

"Well, she might have just gotten cleaned up a bit before going to see Rarity." Twilight offered.

Another thought suddenly occurred to the pegasus, "Or... I might have accidentally given her a snow shower before I saw her..." she said sheepishly.

"A snow shower? In June?"

"It's a long story, Twilight." Dash cut her off, preferring to stick to the topic on hand. "Anyway, I didn't notice anything really out of place about Fluttershy."

Rarity glanced to the side, sorting her own thoughts. "Well, I suppose that should be a good sign, but I would still rather speak to her. Do you know where she is now?"

"No," Twilight said, shaking her head, "Apparently she had some other things to do and ran off."

"Oh confound that pony!" Rarity said, now entirely exasperated, "How she drives me to worry."

"Look," Twilight tried to reassure the other unicorn, "I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for all this. We just need to find Fluttershy and figure out what's going on."

"You think she could've gone back home?" Rainbow Dash asked, casting a glance in the direction of Fluttershy's cottage.

"I suppose that's probably the best place to start looking," Twilight agreed. "We might as well check."

"Her cottage?" Rarity said in disbelief, "but I just came from... Oh never mind." Her posture sagged noticeably as she came to an unavoidable conclusion. "I'm obviously not going to be getting anything else done today. I'll come with you."

Pinkie Pie swept the room once again, searching desperately for any hint that any one object in the vicinity would hold a higher consideration to the homeowner than the rest. There was nothing to be found. Not a clue, not a hint, not a seam in the wall. She had gone over the entire cottage three times, and had been unable to find any sort of evidence that such a object—let alone a cache—even existed.

What she *had* found was an abundance of stored animal feeds, some basic woodworking and yard tools, a plethora of sewing materials, outdoor and camping gear, and enough medical supplies to stock the local Ponyville Emergency Ward. Outside of a few photographs and some decorative

figurines, there was simply no fuel to power the party that Pinkie had in mind, and it was remarkably discouraging. Either the pegasus had hidden it away too well, or it simply just didn't exist.

"Oh Fluttershy," the earth pony said with a frustrated sigh, "Can you take *anything* personally?" Two brief images passed through Pinkie's head; one of a gryphon that had visited Ponyville several months back, the other of a pegasus pony dressed in a flowery green dress bursting through a set of double doors in Canterlot.

"...When it's *not* a bad thing." she added as an amendment of her statement.

Having run into this metaphorical brick wall, Pinkie weighed her options. She could choose another pony, but the idea that she could finally throw a party for Fluttershy specifically had made her so excited that she was loathe to give up the chance. She could go ahead with what she'd found, but even Pinkie would be hard pressed to throw a party based on birdseed and yard tools. A sewing party? Perhaps that would work, but given the various talents of her friends, it was likely that only Rarity and Fluttershy would respond favorably to the idea, and Pinkie hated to limit her parties like that.

Several other ideas sprang to mind but were similarly dismissed. There just *had* to be a way to make this work. Perhaps if she—

"Angel Bunny!"

The horrified shout served its purpose perfectly, and the earth pony was instantly alerted to the fact that the homeowner had returned. In any second now both her and the trussed up rabbit outside would be charging through the front door, and she would be stuck explaining what, exactly, she had been up to. Pinkie's time had run out.