

The Hound of Ponyville

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Chapter 1

A Hound from a Nightmare

*"So listen, my masters, and listen well,
For I have a tale of horrors to tell,
Of heroes and demons and blood and death
And the vilest monster e're to draw breath..."*

"A long time ago, as ponies measure things, when the Sun and Moon were young, there lived a stallion unlike any other. Born of two powerful and ancient lines that ruled even in those days when Equestria was an eternal twilight, before day or night were dreamed of. He was the most handsome being in all the world. His eyes were so blue the sky was made grey, his coat whiter than the heart of a star and his mane made true gold seem as fool's. Of breeding there were none truer, of wealth there were none greater, in the ways of hearts he was supreme...

"And of pride, none had more. He was perfection incarnate, and this he **knew**.

"It was this stallion who caught the eye, and then the heart of Princess Luna, the Navigator of the Moon, the Silver Voice, the Abacus of the Heavens. Luna was young in those days, wild and untameable, a spirit of the forest and all that existed beyond the boundaries of civilisation. She was an artist, too, and a singer, and a dancer. In her youngest days she would gallop across the heavens and sing to the ancient stars, dancing with them and arranging them into great patterns across the sky. If she had one regret, it was that the world below slept through her song and paid no heed to her dance. Celestia's daily, stately, orderly walk was watched by millions while few cared to pay attention to Luna's eternal chorus.

"But this she could endure. For in those days, Luna loved the stars, and the stars loved her, and she needed no attention but theirs. She had endured it for many years past, and could endure it for many years hence...

"Or, she could, but that her gaze fell upon the stallion, and her heart doomed them both.

"He lived in what is now known as Ponyville Manor, a great and beautiful house on the border of the Everfree, in the swampy moors around Froggy Bottom Bog. He had no fear of the wilderness for no creature, great or small, would dare mar his perfection. It was said that even mud would harden to stone before him lest it stain his hooves. He was a creature of culture, of cleanliness, of order, of grace and sophistication. And so, when a breathless Princess Luna, mane tangled with brambles and leaves, hooves scorched from where they touched star-flame, strong and fit and wild, approached the stallion and asked him to dance, he waved her off as though she was but another commoner.

"For you see, the stallion's pride allowed him to consider only one being as his potential equal and mate: Princess Celestia herself, the Daystar, Sol Invictus and Luna's older sister. Luna had long had cause to envy her sister, but this was the ultimate blow: the one thing in all Creation that Luna desired, the **one** thing she had **ever** asked for, was already owned by Celestia. Jealousy, rage, resentment, disappointment - hell hath no fury like a mare scorned.

"But though Luna was a wild creature, she had friends who had wisdom and experience with civilisation that she lacked. She went to these and told them her troubles, and, as friends do, they supported her. They cleaned her hooves and tended to her wounds. They brushed her mane and braided her tail. They dressed her in silver and starlight. By the time they were through with her, Luna's friends had made her radiant.

"Here stood a mare of silver and indigo, a glowing and flowing beauty who wore the night like a ballgown. To look upon her was to know the Moon was her nature and the Stars were her birthright, to look upon her was to see the heavens in all their glory. To look upon her was to know that she was a Princess, and that she was in love.

"And so, again, she presented herself to the stallion of her dreams. This time she walked with him all through the night. She ate a formal dinner with perfect manners, the results of many hours of hard practice. She joked and laughed, but in the subtle understated way of the wealthy. They crossed the moors together and she told him of the stars and showed him a constellation she had arranged especially for him.

"Too soon! Too early! Too quickly the sun rose over the horizon, or so it seemed to Luna, and cut that perfect night short! And she saw immediately as it did so how it reflected in the stallion's eyes, how he smiled at the rising sun like he never had at her rising moon, and how he walked away from her without a second thought to meet it!

"First, Luna did not believe. And then, she wept - she wept so deeply that the stars, cast out by the daytime sun, heard her and wept with her. She wept all through the day and all through the night, for it was her first love and it had been utterly, thoughtlessly crushed and cast aside.

"And then, when her tears were all spent and sympathy from the stars was no longer enough, she grew angry.

"She tore her silver dress in two and cloaked herself in a form of darkness and fury. Her mane was that of the sky itself, awash with the stars, who alone cared for her, and her coat became the absolute black of the space between those stars. And when she felt the call in the morning, her sister's voice from so far away, asking her to lower the moon, she said, "No."

"This was not an easy thing to do.

"It was in Luna's nature to lower the moon when it was time for the sun to rise. It beat in the back of her head. Lower the moon. Lower the moon. Her sister's voice, calling across the world. Lower the moon. She wanted to obey. Lower the moon. She knew what would happen to the world if she didn't.

"And yet, she refused. "No," she said again, louder.

"Lower the moon. "No!" she shouted.

"Lower the moon. "NEVER!" screamed the Princess, casting all her rage, hurt and defiance into that one word.

"The moon stayed in the sky, silver and resplendent with the stars.

"The sun did not rise.

"And Luna sought her vengeance.

"Luna's friends had been searching all night for her. As they crossed the moors they encountered a terrified farmer pony, hiding under her hat and shaking with pure fear. They demanded of her if she had seen Princess Luna, and gradually received this halting reply,

""I saw the Princess as a Nightmare, standing high and tall over the moors, chasing a desperate white stallion. They were running faster than I could keep track of, but they were both followed by a beast that caught my eyes and froze my mind."

""What beast is this?"

""A Hound. A Hound risen from Tartarus itself, a hound so vast and terrible with eyes aflame and full of rage. A Hound so terrifying and blasphemous, snapping at their heels, that Celestia forbid it should ever snap at my heels."

"Luna's friends were daunted by this grim news and hurried in their pursuit of Luna. They crossed over hills and moors and crossed without fear into the Everfree itself. Along their path they encountered and fought monsters the likes of which they had not imagined, of which the world had not heard of. Hydras, Ursas, Manticores - abominations spawned from the rage of Princess Luna. Hate, sorrow and vengeance made manifest. And yet, all these beasts seemed afraid. They were fleeing, fleeing from whatever it was deepest in the forest's heart.

"They steeled themselves and continued, coming at last to a mist-filled vale. The rocks were torn and shattered, and the earth was scarred with the marks of enormous claws. And there, just ahead, in the scar-shaped pit that went down to the lowest depths of the Everfree, Princess Luna stood over the stallion who had spurned her.

"It took the assembled a moment to recognise him, so warped and twisted was he. Luna had done the unthinkable and cursed away his beauty. Where once had been a beauty that could charm the birds from the trees and poison from serpents now existed an abomination, a half-breed, a **mule**. It was a sight so horrible it would cause lesser ponies to faint, but it was by far not the worst thing here.

"What was the worst thing was the Hound that stood by Nightmare Moon's side. Twelve feet tall, made of stars and fire, with a mark of rage upon it's brow. It was Hate, it was Vengeance, it was the death of a Princess and the birth of a Goddess. As it howled, Nightmare Moon laughed, and the ponies broke and fled.

"The survivors lived troubled and broken lives afterwards, forever haunted by the memory of the Hound. And though Celestia later defeated Luna, she never found the Hound. The Hound has been the bane of the stallion's family line ever since. It has haunted them for over a thousand years, and the House of Ponyville has ever become a byword for misfortune, tragedy, and ill-omened death.

"And that is the legend of the Hound of Ponyville," finished the Great and Powerful Trixie.

I stared in rapture. The Unicorn could spin a tale, of that there was no doubt. My eyes were wide and focused, my breath shallow, and my heart was beating with the fear of that encroaching, inevitable Hound...

"Interesting. To a collector of fairy tales," Rarity said with absolute boredom in her voice. "And I doubt you came all this way to regale me with children's stories."

I suddenly caught myself. If Rarity wasn't impressed by Trixie's story, I resolved myself not to be either. If I have implied that this is an easy thing to do, I have misled you. It was all I could do to think of something other than burning fangs by that point.

"Hmph. The Great and Powerful Trixie expected **more** from the so-called powers of deduction of Rarity the Unicorn," Trixie said, tossing her head arrogantly, "Trixie obviously gave you too much credit."

"There are no deductions I can draw from a story about demon dogs other than that somepony has a very active imagination," Rarity said laconically.

"Very well, if it is *facts* you desire, then *facts* you shall have," Trixie said dramatically, "Fluttershy Red, Heir to the Ponyville Manor, has **vanished**."

It is at this point I must pause and provide some context for my narrative.

A little over two months ago, I submitted my account of the Study in Rainbows to the newspaper Equestria Daily, detailing the adventures of Rarity the Unicorn in her masterful handling of the Poison Joke Affair. As my postscript may have indicated, I did not inform Rarity about this until she saw it published. Her reaction was one of nervous laughter and false confidence, and her words to me were "My dear Rainbow Dash, I fear you have just wasted the time of a great many ponies!"

I remained adamant in my praise and refused to allow her to talk down her talents. And to my enormous relief, the article received a hugely positive reaction. Rarity tried to pretend she was unconcerned with the whole thing, but she spent many days afterwards walking with a spring in her step and a song on her lips. For giving her this happiness, I thank every one of you.

Business, naturally, saw a boost, with more letters than our wall-eyed postmare could easily handle. We made something of a game of these - I would read the letters out loud, Rarity would make a snap judgement of the crime, which I would pen and send away. On rare occasion a case would ignite her interest enough for us to make a trip out to the site in question, but she would invariably locate the solution within the hour. I have tried several times to pen these accounts but the fact remains there is not much substance to them. Rarity's genius is such that these are hardly challenges and hardly notable.

Fluttershy, her association with Photo Finish mercifully ended, discovered that her father, the famous Red Stallion, had passed away and left her heir to the Ponyville Hall country manor. She gladly took the chance to retire to the countryside and she and I maintained some correspondence over this separation - though less than I would have liked. At this point in my story I was especially regretting having put off finishing my most recent letter to her.

When Fluttershy made her announcement to leave, the uncomfortably hyperactive baker, Pinkie Pie, decided she was to pack up shop and accompany Fluttershy into the country. As she explained to me (completely unsolicited while I attempted to purchase a packet of biscuits), she had family in the country and was looking forwards to visiting them and keeping

Fluttershy company both. She seemed to imply it would be a short trip, but she did not return in the weeks that followed. At the time, I ashamedly was glad for the peace and quiet and thought no more of it.

Twilight Sparkle had emerged from the Poison Joke affair relatively unscathed due to her association with the Princess and the discovery of a genuine cure. The last I saw of her she was hard at work doing community service in an attempt to atone for her crimes. I wish her luck in the attempt.

Applejack of Sweet Apple Acres remained mostly the same. I avoided borrowing money from her and she avoided listening to the advice of maniacal purple dragons. Something of a gentlemen's pact, you could say. On the topic of Spike, he had not been seen since the battle at Reichenbach falls and honestly, I was glad of the absence. Ten minutes spent in the presence of that particular blackguard had been enough to satisfy me for a lifetime.

Of myself there is little worth noting, so I will try and be brief. It was discovered that the slow recovery of my wings was due in part to trace elements of Poison Joke in my blood from my time in Zebrica and, cure discovered, I regained some of my former health. I won the Running of the Leaves, became champion Stormsurfer twice, won the Cloudsdale Award for Best Civilian Flier and the *totally awesome* Medal of the Solar Phoenix. You know, nothing major.

I apologise for inflicting upon my readers the tedious details of what I and my associates have been doing over these past two months. I know for certain nopony came here to read Rainbow Dash's report on what she did over the summer break. I will now return to my story proper and not begrudge any reader who made the decision to skip over my earlier rambling paragraphs.

"Fluttershy, vanished?" I said, jumping out of my chair and into the air. My habit of constant flight had reasserted itself with the recovery of my wings. "Where, when?!"

"And with something as important as this, why did you open with that mystifying tale about hellhounds?" Rarity said, also looking concerned. It was an odd sensation, but I got the feeling she was guarded about this

because a foal could see there was only one connection between the two stories - and it was not a good one.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie never does anything without a reason," Trixie said haughtily, "and Trixie told you that story so Trixie could tell you this one.

"Firstly, about my own motives: The Great and Powerful Trixie has long had an interest in Ponyville Hall. It is a site of enormous magic and history, and of historical importance to Trixie's illustrious family. This was why Trixie graciously accepted the position of Court Arcanist when the Lady Fluttershy Red was wise enough to make the offer. Trixie, of course, has the safety of Lady Fluttershy as her foremost priority but she also has an obligation to ensure Ponyville Hall is maintained and run. This is a doubly difficult thing given the place's evil reputation, which the disappearance of Fluttershy will not help.

"Now, about the events surrounding Fluttershy's disappearance,

"Ever since Trixie entered Fluttershy's service five months ago, Trixie noticed that Fluttershy was something of a blubbering coward. With alarming regularity, Trixie's rest was interrupted to deal with some imagined horror or other. The Great and Powerful Trixie has never been a mother, but after her time spent dealing with Fluttershy's fears she finds herself turned entirely off the idea.

"But two weeks ago, Trixie noticed a distinct rise in the frequency, intensity and specificity of Fluttershy's panic attacks. Multiple times, Fluttershy complained of hearing howling of a dog and seeing a huge beast lurking around the boundaries of the house. She could not articulate why this apparition scared her, which Trixie found unusual, as Fluttershy has no fear of any other type of animal. Either way, Trixie did her duty as a Unicorn must, and cast a great magical working to bar all dogs from the grounds around Ponyville Hall. Some of the farmers complained, but that was not Trixie's concern as much as getting a decent night's sleep was.

"The day after Trixie put up her great abjuration, Fluttershy went for an unannounced evening walk. This was unusual for Fluttershy, but no doubt she was given confidence by the Greatness and Powerfulness of Trixie's magic. Trixie did not discover that Fluttershy was gone until nearly midnight

when Fluttershy failed to request Trixie's presence in ensuring there were no monsters in the closet or sinister looking lamps or what-have-you.

"Trixie, upon noticing the absence, gathered the help of Sedimentary Elbert Pie, the manor's coltservant, who carried a lantern while Trixie followed Fluttershy's trail. It lead across the fields to the fence that separates the family property from the moors proper. There, Trixie surmised that Fluttershy had lingered for at least half an hour -"

"Pardon me," said Rarity, "But how did you discern that?"

"Fluttershy had taken with her a bag of animal feed, no doubt to pass out to whatever disease-carrying rodents she encountered along the way. Trixie had seen her with such a thing before and estimates that it takes somewhere between half an hour and the amount of time it takes for Trixie to get so bored she stops counting to distribute in it's entirety. Trixie located the empty bag near the gate."

"Was this a cheap, disposable bag?"

"No, a quality one, which Fluttershy seemed quite attached to."

"Hmm. Continue."

"The trail continued down a tree-lined avenue that lead towards the main street out of the property. From the way the tracks were spaced, Trixie believes that for this period, Fluttershy was tiptoeing. And then, halfway down the avenue, the tracks vanished all together."

"Uh, maybe because she started flying?" I commented.

"Perhaps," Trixie said. "But her disappearance was not what troubled me. What troubled me were the tracks following in her wake."

"And those tracks, lady Trixie?" Rarity pressed.

Trixie looked at Rarity, and gave a smug smile.

"Why, Miss Rarity. They were the tracks of an enormous hound!"

Chapter 2

The Handsome Prince

"A hound?" I repeated like a dullard. It was all I could do to think of anything other than Fluttershy being hunted by that burning monster -

"A hound," Trixie said, raising her head.

"So your ward failed?" Rarity said, but even what was intended as a jab betrayed her concern.

"My wards were perfect," Trixie said haughtily, "I even tested them, and there was no damage."

"Lady Trixie, this is indeed a fascinating series of events and a mystery I find my mind compelled by, but I find myself wondering why you brought it to us," Rarity said, leaning forward in her chair.

"Because the Great and Powerful Trixie is a busy pony, and because the majority of her time will be spent protecting the person of the new Lord of Ponyville Hall. She has no time to go on wild goose chases around the countryside. The Great and Powerful Trixie does not know what happened to Fluttershy, nor does she know who or what was responsible. And so, Trixie would commission the two of you to investigate this on her behalf. If it does turn out to be a monster, simply stand aside and allow Trixie to deal with it."

"Hmm..." Rarity frowned deeply, then her eyes flicked up. "New lord of Ponyville Hall? So soon after Fluttershy's disappearance?"

"As Trixie has already made clear, Trixie's livelihood - not to mention the livelihoods of the farmers and towns in the Hall's area - require that somepony sits at the Manor. Trixie has already contacted the next in line and is here in Ponyville to escort him back to the Manor."

"And this colt?"

"You might know him as Prince Blueblood of Canterlot," Trixie said.

I have known Rarity for some time now, and my admiration of her cool and collected manner has been well documented. And as such, I was intensely taken aback by the fact that she was rendered speechless by this. She gaped and stuttered, something I had not known her to ever do. When she did manage to speak it was in a high pitched squeak, as if she was withholding a squeal. "Prince Blueblood?"

"The same." Trixie said. "He will arrive at the docks in one hour, and Trixie will be there to meet him and escort him to the Manor."

"**The** Prince Blueblood?" Rarity responded in an even giddier tone. Trixie rolled her eyes.

"Did Trixie say one hour? Trixie meant five minutes, and had best leave immediately to greet him. If you accept the case, you know where to find us." Without another word, the blue unicorn walked proudly from our room, leaving me with Rarity.

I took a long look at her face which was gradually metamorphosing into the biggest grin I'd ever seen on a pony.

"I shall hazard a guess that you feel like taking this case," I commented dryly.

"Prince Blueblood!" She said, eyes lighting up like stars, "The most gallant handsome stallion in all Equestria! I'm going to have a chance to meet Prince Blueblood!" She gasped, "And I don't have a thing to wear!"

I walked over to her wardrobe and opened it to reveal racks of hundreds of dresses.

"No! None of these shall do at all!" Rarity cried, tearing down one of them in a fit of pique, "I must make something new, something perfect for the occasion - oh, but what if that hound attacks the Prince while I'm working?" She began to pace back and forth, mane frizzing slightly as she began to fret.

"Don't worry, Rarity. I shall go with the Prince and keep him safe while you make preparations," I volunteered. My options were to go out to the country or sit uselessly in the corner while Rarity made dresses, and the decision to me seemed obvious. This was also a chance to see just how much of Rarity's theories I had learned – and, if I was lucky, a chance at a case I could solve by myself.

"Oh, would you? Thank you! Thank you so much!" Rarity cried, giving me a quick embrace, "Quickly, Rainbow Dash! Go and meet the Prince, I shall follow no more than three days behind."

"Very well. Is there anything you require me to do, or thoughts you have on the case?" I asked.

"Firstly, stay close to Trixie. She is powerful and intelligent, if sometimes dementedly misinformed as to basic rules of deduction," Rarity said, thinking out loud, "Secondly, talk to as many ponies as you can. I can't form an assessment of the case without knowing who the suspects are. Thirdly, and above all keep yourself safe."

"Don't worry about me," I said confidently, "But what did you mean when you said Trixie was misinformed?"

"Why, think about it, Rainbow. Fluttershy goes for an unannounced evening walk down to a gate at the edge of the property, facing the Everfree Forest. And then she waits there, all through sundown and well into darkness. And then she abruptly starts tiptoeing home? No, no, Trixie misread the trail. She was *running*, Rainbow Dash. Running from something she saw coming over the moor. Running for her life. Running until the beast leapt the fence, grabbed her, and carried her away."

"Sweet Princess... how do you know she didn't fly away?"

"We both know Fluttershy. If she's scared, that scared, her wings clamp to her sides like irons. No, if she's gone, then the beast caught her."

There was a long silence where we both considered the gravity of the situation.

"I should get moving," I said at last.

“Yes. Rainbow Dash, you must be my eyes. Write to me, everything you notice, no matter how trivial. I shall form an assessment of the case from here and catch up to you as soon as I can.”

I nodded, took my hat and left the comfortable room at 221B Baker Street. The air outside was cold and tasted of ash and smoke, and the wind tugged at my feathers. And yet, to me the world was still hot and slightly dizzying. I could still see that image of the demon hound in my head and was still troubled by the thought of it bounding across those silent, dark moors, hunting Fluttershy, catching her, carrying her away...

Carried by such dark thoughts, I allowed the crowd to buffet me towards the docks. Picking Trixie out of a crowd was not difficult – I simply looked for the hat – and as I approached her I saw the stallion come down the gangplank.

Rarity was correct – he was a visually stunning creature. He had a regal bearing, flawless grooming and perfect poise. I usually felt inadequate and inferior about my appearance when around Rarity, but this was another level entirely. I could feel every spot of matted fur on my body, I was acutely aware of the chip on my right forehoof, of the line a drop of sweat was making as it rolled down my forehead. I brushed my mane awkwardly with one hoof, but it rebelled and tangled even more, so I simply gave up.

Trixie bowed as the Prince entered our presence, and I did the same. He nodded slightly, which I took as leave to stand again. I stood at attention, feeling undressed without my uniform. For some reason, just being in his presence reminded me of my days in the Air Force, and the feeling of meeting a Lord General.

“My Prince,” Trixie began, “The Great and Powerful Trixie has prepared your carriage,”

“Thank you, Trixie. And you are...?” He said in a soft, velvet voice turning his gaze on me.

“Thunderstriker First Class, Lt. Rainbow Miriam Dash, honourably discharged, sir!” I said, snapping out a salute. The whole motion was kind

of awkward and stiff, my body doing what it knew while my mind blindly groped for a way to make a good first impression.

“Charmed,” he said, taking my saluting hoof with his own and kissing it. Trixie later commented that she had been preparing to summon a nurse because she mistook the expression of shock I wore for the beginnings of a stroke, “I am Prince Lacross Blueblood,”

“I... at your service sir!” I fired wildly.

“One does find the military simply fascinating.”

“Yes sir!”

“One would love to hear the tale of your career,”

“Yes sir!”

“One invites you to sit in one’s carriage,”

“Yes sir!” Those were words I could reliably say, so I was going to keep saying them even though they seemed to be rapidly drawing me into a world I had no idea how to handle.

The Prince walked over to the carriage and stepped inside. Trixie gave me a flat, sideways glance as I remained rooted to the spot, still saluting.

“Guess he likes you,” she said, a mischievous smile working its way onto her face.

“What’s –“ I lowered my hoof through sheer force of will, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They say,” Trixie said, wiggling her eyebrows, “That dating the Prince is a fast track to a promotion, *lieutenant*.”

“Where did – I’m not! No way! I’m not even in the army any more!” I began to sputter, and the purple-cloaked unicorn raised her hoof in apology.

“Trixie apologises, Trixie should have seen you already have your eye on somepony.” Trixie said, looking as though she was trying very hard not to laugh. “Don’t keep the Prince waiting.”

I flushed, but hurried into the carriage and sat opposite the Prince, who was reclining on a red velvet cushion. He smiled, and I swear to Celestia that his teeth actually shined. “So tell us, *lieutenant*,” he said in a voice so charming I felt like he was about to undress me. Given that I was only wearing a hat at the time this sentiment felt a touch silly. I kept one of my hooves on the hat nonetheless, holding it as if it was the one defence my modesty had. “What campaigns were you a part of?”

“My first and only campaign was in the Second Moon War, a five year tour of duty cut short to four after I was wounded in battle.” I said, trying to be as to the point as possible.

“Ah, the Moon War. A most fascinating campaign, and one has studied it in great... detail.” I would like to note that this is not time, poor memory, or authorial design which influences my account of the Prince’s dialogue – he actually did speak like a character from one of Rarity’s romance novels. Which I certainly have never read.

“Yes sir,” I responded, glancing to Trixie for help. She just winked, treacherous wretch that she was.

“One hears that there were Griffons in these battles.”

“Yes sir. One served under my command as an orderly, her name was Gilda, sir.” I said. My spooked mind seized upon the topic as a potential way to talk about something other than myself.

“And you are a commander of Griffons too, Lady Rainbow? One is impressed. And intrigued. You must be as resourceful as you are beautiful,” said the Prince, turning the conversation back on me with absolutely no effort. I flushed even more.

The entire four hour carriage ride to the country was like that. The Prince politely but firmly pressed me for details about myself, and would turn even my worst stories into compliments I did not know how to respond to. Trixie

would just smile like a twisted foal watching a cat play with a mouse. At first I thought I was overreacting, that Trixie was just playing with my mind and there was no way a Prince would pay me any heed beyond simple politeness. That thought gradually gave way to the intimidating truth – he was courting me, scruffy Rainbow Dash with her unwashed hair and muddy hooves. And he was doing so according to some system or set of rules I simply could not comprehend. I suspected the Prince had something of a taste for military pegasi, and took great pleasure in toying with them.

This was made all the more twisted by the fact that it was my mission to keep him safe for Rarity, so she would have a chance to win him herself. I had absolutely no idea how I was going to explain any of this to her. I certainly had no intention of accepting his advances, but I was so out of my depth I was worried I might say something I did not mean by accident.

It was with the most enormous relief that we arrived at Ponyville Hall. It was a beautiful building, standing atop a hill and overlooking distant Ponyville, several other smaller villages, and the great Everfree Forest. Around the base of the hill, separated from the property by a stone fence, were the moors – grey and misty, with deep green vegetation and deep pools of water. Here and there were red lights, glimmering and fading through the mist. The mist wrapped around the trees at the base of the property, rising up, giving Ponyville Hall an ominous and mystical feel.

“What do you think of the moors, Lady Rainbow?” Trixie said, speaking for the first time the entire trip.

“They’re... ominous. But kind of cool,” I said haltingly, having come to constantly second guess every word of mine in the attempt to avoid giving Blueblood an opening for another compliment.

“And lethal,” Trixie said, “If a pony even steps into that bog, they’ll be dragged down to the bottom and never seen again.”

“Then why build a Manor here?” I asked

“Because of the presence of the Pie family. They are some of the greatest rock farmers in the world, and Sedimentary Elbert Pie has spent many of his years building paths through the swamp, dragging rocks out into the moor and piling them up until they’re safe to walk on. He marks the paths

he's made with those red lanterns. Don't go walking on the moor while you're here, and if you must, don't stray from the lantern path."

"I'll try and remember," I said, "though I intend to fly where possible."

"Of course," Trixie said, opening the door to the carriage and stepping out. She held the door open for the Prince who strode out without so much as a thank-you, which Trixie didn't seem to mind. I hurried out in his wake.

Standing there to greet us were three figures, none of whom I recognised. One was an old, bearded stallion, gray and hatted, with the cutie mark of a pickaxe. Standing next to him was an old mare with wireframe glasses. And there, by their side...

I blinked. I had to be mistaken. There was no way...

"Rainbow Dash, Prince Blueblood, the Great and Powerful Trixie would like to introduce you to the Pie Family."

The straight haired, pink pony looked at me with empty blue eyes. "Hello, Rainbow Miriam Dash," said Pinkamina Diane Pie. "Long time, no see."

Chapter 3

Lanterns in the Mist

“Oh hey, Pinkie Pie,” I said awkwardly. There was something about the way Pinkie snarled when she spoke that set my feathers on edge, like she wasn’t so much greeting me as accusing me.

“Pinkamina! Do you know this - filly?” snapped Mrs. Pie, and I could have sworn she was going to end that sentence with ‘harlot’ and changed it at the last minute. I bristled slightly and was about to respond in kind when Pinkie cut me off.

“No. She just used to be one of my *customers* and *nothing else*,” Pinkie said, turning her nose up in the air.

“... While the Great and Powerful Trixie no doubt cares deeply about this emotional reunion, the Great and Powerful Trixie has had a long trip and would like to get it over with,” Trixie piped up, and Mr. Pie nodded.

“Of course,” he said in a tired, gravelly voice as he turned and walked inside. “Follow me,”

Trixie and I exchanged glances, but Blueblood strode inside without a care, so we cautiously followed him. Pinkie walked ahead of us, which blocked even attempt at conversation.

“An’ this here is the main hall,” said Mr. Pie, leading us through a great hall with a sweeping double staircase, lined with portraits of past lords of Ponyville Hall. It chilled my blood when I saw Fluttershy’s picture hanging from the second story wall – it was only half completed. Fluttershy’s sad eyes looked out from under a red hat which was the only colour on the painting. It turned into sketchy pencil lines below the shoulder and faded away entirely a little later.

In the picture, Fluttershy looked like she was crying.

“Who does the paintings?” Trixie asked, following my gaze.

"I do. Hobby of mine," said Mr. Pie. "An' my father before me. Kinda cut off before I could finish that last one. This is the dining hall. We have some guests here already, I'm afraid."

"Guests?" I said, remembering Rarity's instructions to talk to as many ponies as possible, "Would you introduce us?"

"I reckon I'll let Pinkamina do that, they are her friends," said Mr. Pie. Pinkie stalked ahead of him and opened the door.

The dining hall was empty, and I looked around twitchily. And then a high-pitched voice came from nowhere, "Nice to meet you, everypony."

And then a low, mumbling voice added "Well. Nice to meet *most* of you."

At this point, I was able to locate the source of the voices. The seats were occupied after all, but it wasn't by ponies. There was a bucket of turnips, a bag of flour, a pile of rocks and a lump of lint all talking to me at the same time. No doubt you are concerned for my sanity, and in that moment I was too. But I noticed that Pinkie had somehow got past us and had slipped under the table, and was moving the garbage and making the voices. It was the creepiest puppet show I'd ever seen.

"So, Sir Lintsalot, I appreciated the letter you wrote me the other day," said Pinkie, shaking the bag of flour.

"Of course. It's only natural for friends to write to each other," said Pinkie as the lint heap.

"Oh yes. I even wrote a letter to Pinkamina the other day. Do you know that was the first letter she got since she moved here? From anypony?" said the pile of rocks.

"Why! That's downright DESPICABLE!" cried the bag of flour.

"Guys..." said Pinkie, putting on a slightly nervous smile as she took a seat at the table, "We have company, and this probably isn't making a good first impression... maybe you should introduce yourselves?"

"I am Rocky," said Pinkie, eyes unfocusing and leaning over the table to shake the rock heap.

"Sir Lintsalot," said Pinkie, wobbling the lint.

"Madame le'Flour," said Pinkie, shaking the flour bag.

"Mr. Turnip," said Pinkie, rattling the bucket of turnips.

"ENOUGH!" Shouted Prince Blueblood, "Mr. Pie, this is ridiculous! If your daughter insists upon being insane, discipline her!"

"Pinkamina Diane Pie! Go to your room!" Snapped Mr. Pie without hesitation.

Pinkie Pie stopped dead, eyes widening and jaw dropping like somepony had just kicked Gummy in front of her. She lowered her head and started to walk slowly from the room. There were tears in her eyes and she was glaring at the floor, muttering under her breath.

"Cute kid," said Mr. Pie, smiling after her.

Blueblood swept Mr. Turnip off the chair with one hoof and sat in his place. "Dinner," he said haughtily.

"Right away, sir," said Mrs. Pie, disappearing into the kitchen.

I exchanged another look with Trixie. She looked as weirded out by this as I was. "I think we're gonna go for a walk," I said.

"Careful about the moors," said Mr. Pie, tipping his hat.

"Okay, that's new," said Trixie, letting out a sharp breath once we were clear of the house.

"What, the absolute insanity?" I said, glancing over my shoulder at the intimidating form of Ponyville Manor.

“Yeah. The Great and Powerful Trixie knew Pinkie Pie as a hyperactive baker.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Hmm... not for a little over a week. Trixie had not seen her for a day or two before Fluttershy disappeared, and did not see her afterwards.” Trixie said, thinking.

“Maybe Fluttershy’s disappearance hit her hard?” I suggested.

“All the more cause to recover Fluttershy as soon as possible,” Trixie agreed, “Trixie feels confident that every sane pony the world over will recognise that The Great and Powerful Trixie cannot be replaced by a bag of flour, but in the event of total disconnect from reality it is *possible* that ponies will stop respecting Trixie’s greatness.”

“On the topic of greatness, I still want to check this supposed ward you set up, and then take a look at this avenue and this gate.”

“Of course. This way,” Trixie said, leading me down the hill, towards a field with hundreds of glimmering red lights.

“These are the family kennels,” said Trixie, stopping near a gate and gesturing at a large shed a little way off the property, “There are two dogs in there, well trained creatures but we had to move them when Trixie put the ward up. Here is why.” Trixie’s entire hat glowed as she worked a spell, and the latch on the gate undid itself. Trixie cleared her throat and boomed in her orator’s voice, “The GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie orders you to COME!”

Two dogs – big dogs, a Franconian breed all orange and black and teeth – bolted from the kennels like shots from a gun and raced towards us, barking wildly. I reflexively jumped in the air and readied myself to have to kick them. They jumped the fence at the same time and, impossibly, froze in the air, all momentum gone. The dogs continued to bark and slobber, legs kicking uselessly in the air. Trixie walked over to them, smiled with a kindness I did not expect of her, and patted one on the head. It licked her hoof enthusiastically.

"I didn't take you for a dog pony," I said in surprise as she produced treats with a puff of magic and gave one to each of the dogs.

"Showdogs. Trixie's family bred them. They're excellently trained and smarter than most ponies Trixie knows," Trixie said, gently pushing the dogs in the centre of the chest and they drifted back over to the fence and dropped to the ground. They stood there, slobbering enthusiastically. "Home!" Trixie cried, and both dogs turned and ran back to their shed.

"Well, I suppose I can't doubt the effectiveness of your wards," I said.

"No, you cannot," Trixie sniffed. "Though Trixie has never tested that particular spell against ancient demon dogs, hence why Trixie believes that is still a possibility."

"Well then, shall we investigate this gate?"

I followed Trixie over to the gate to the moors where Fluttershy had lingered. It was a simple wooden barrier. I paced back and forth along it, looking out over the mist covered moor, and at the lines of red lanterns that lead through it.

I was thinking hard, asking myself what Fluttershy had waited here, in this spot for? Had she been waiting for somepony? Who? Why? The sun was setting behind us and the looming line of the Everfree Forest became a towering blackness, rising to block out the stars.

"Trixie, does anypony live in the forest?"

"A zebra, or so Trixie has heard, but she doesn't come this way often. There are two neighbouring houses; to the north, the estate of Lady Octavia, to the south the hamlet of Bridle Shores."

"And does anypony of note live in Bridle Shores?"

"Well, the Pie family has a house there where they officially live, though Sed regularly stays with the house, as do the others when the master requires them. There may be a few farmers or other rubes but no pony whom Trixie feels is worth noting."

"I see. Shall we investigate the avenue?"

Trixie lead me up the avenue where Fluttershy had disappeared. It was a dense and overgrown corridor of trees, with the branches above making it seem like a tunnel or cave. The rains had all but destroyed the tracks, but here and there Trixie pointed out gouges in the trees from what looked like enormous claws. Eventually she stopped, halfway down. "This is where she vanished."

I gazed at the spot, trying to recreate what had happened here. One part was easy enough – the visual of Fluttershy running down this endless avenue, with no way out to either side, no way up or down, just a pure contest of speed against that demon hound – my imagination had become quite active in visualising exactly how that particular moment had played itself out.

"Lookin' for somepony, ladies?" said Sedimentary Elbert Pie, stepping out from the trees. I jumped in the air, and even Trixie looked like she was about to hex him.

"Sorry. Sorry. Was just makin' sure you hadn't got lost," said Mr. Pie, sounding tired and coming out onto the road proper. "Can't be too careful."

"Right... Mr. Pie, have you ever seen a hound around these parts?" I asked.

"What, the Hound of Ponyville? Lady, in my time I've had five Lords and Ladies, and the Hound has got every pony of them. Same it was with my father, and his father before him."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"Oh, aye. Sometimes when I'm walking the moors I see it in the distance. Huge beast, line of stars on its head, glows blue and black and is covered in constellations. Like an Ursa, but bigger and scarier."

"Hmph," Trixie said, "defeating an Ursa is foal's play for a unicorn like Trixie."

"No doubt, lady," Mr. Pie said, lighting a lantern he'd brought with him, casting deep red shadows all about us, "But it's got a lot of unicorns in its

time too. Now, I'm going to be moving some lanterns tonight, so stay clear of the moor, y'hear?"

"Why are you doing this during the night?" I asked. From what I'd heard of the moor, that sounded extremely dangerous.

"It's safer at night, because the only thing you can see is the lanterns. No temptation to go off course," said Mr. Pie. "There's a philosophy to live by, eh? If all you can see is the goal you can't go off course."

"Right. See you around, Mr. Pie," I said, and the old stallion picked up his lantern and continued his slow walk down towards the gate.

Trixie and I continued to the manor in silence, not having much to say to each other after that ominous exchange. We returned to the dinner table – now blessedly lacking any sign of Pinkie's 'friends' – and took our seats. Moments later, Mrs. Pie laid out some surprisingly well prepared food before us.

"Mrs Pie," I said, still determined to learn as much as I could about this situation, "Apart from the disappearance of Fluttershy, has anything unusual happened around these parts?"

"Oh, well a criminal escaped from Bridle Shores a week or so back."

"Why was Trixie not informed!?" Trixie cried, slamming her levitating glass into the table. "This is important!"

"Oh, I tried to tell you, but by the time I'd heard the news you'd already left for Ponyville," Mrs. Pie said sedately. Trixie ground her teeth.

"And this criminal – he escaped before Fluttershy disappeared, didn't he?"

"By a matter of hours."

Trixie stood up and stomped away from the table. When Rarity entered fits of pique like this, most of the time I could tell she was hamming it up intentionally, but with Trixie it seemed she genuinely was angry at the news. "Here I am, entertaining theories about demon dogs to explain what was clearly a criminal taking a hostage!" Trixie cried. "What a waste of

time... Rainbow Dash, at very least, you and Rarity have more experience tracking down ponies, correct?"

"Sadly, yes," I said. For a moment, I inwardly celebrated, thinking that there was no demon hound and that this was a straight up knock down kidnapping, with a culprit whom I could kick in the face.

But some part of that explanation rung hollow. As much as I would have liked to believe that there was nothing more supernatural here than perhaps a rogue unicorn, I feared that there was by no means enough information to make that conclusion. That nothing that happened here, in Ponyville Hall, would be resolved that simply.

"Very well, Trixie will spend some time updating her protections around the Prince to defend him against malicious ponies, and you, Rainbow Dash, track him down and bring him to justice."

"Right," I said, but I did not truly believe it.

That night, I could hardly sleep. From downstairs I could hear Pinkie's muffled voice as she spoke to her inanimate objects, apologising to them on the Prince's behalf, and from the raised voices... er, voice... I could discern that they weren't buying it. Out the window, I could see the moor, with the lines of red lanterns glimmering, and the slow, steady movement of Mr. Pie's lantern along the lines of red light. I was troubled by the thoughts of the Prince, for I had no way to determine how serious he was – I liked to think he was simply looking for an easy conquest, but feared that he might harbour more serious plans for me. Neither option seemed particularly appealing, especially with the memory of Rarity's wide, trusting smile when I agreed to look after him.

And then there was that half completed picture of Fluttershy hanging from the wall above the main hall, doomed to forever be an incomplete skeleton. The promise of a picture, never to be finished.

What had she been crying about when Mr. Pie had drawn her?

Who was this criminal who had escaped from Bridle Shores?

What had happened to Pinkie Pie?

It was my task to discover the answer to these questions, to stay here until the mystery was solved and the case was closed, but every bone in my body, every fibre of my being was screaming at me to leave.

Leave. There's something wrong here. Something you want nothing to do with. Leave.

In the distance, I heard a howling, as if from a great hound.

Chapter 4

The Butterfly's Decision

I was awoken at an ungodly hour of the morning by Trixie, who knocked heavily on my door and told me to get downstairs as soon as possible. Fearing that an attempt had been made on the Prince, I hurried down without hesitation, bypassing my usual morning rituals in the process. I was especially panicked because I had not slept well, tormented by dreams of star-wolves chasing me down that avenue, and was fearing the worst. In the entrance hall I just managed to catch up with Prince Blueblood, Trixie and Pinkie Pie who were walking out the front door.

Trixie looked how I felt – dishevelled, sleepy and angry. Her silver mane was frizzled at the edges and there were lines around her eyes. It was some small comfort to know I wasn't the only pony here who didn't get along well with mornings. Pinkie was burdened under huge quantities of boxes, instruments and bags, struggling to keep up and glaring furiously straight ahead. The Prince was as calm, perfect and suave as ever, strolling casually down the avenue, without even the suggestion of morning blariness. For that crime, I hated him.

I imagine we were quite a sight, walking down the avenue that morning. The Prince, as fresh and clear as a spring breeze, without so much as a hair out of place, followed by three glaring and exhausted mares. The sun was just a suggestion of white on the crest of the Everfree Forest. The lines of lanterns continued to burn, pale and wan in that early dawn light.

"Trixie," I eventually managed to say, "What's happening?"

"The Prince," said Trixie, with a hint of a snarl in her own voice, "has decided to go butterfly hunting and has *requested* our presence."

"Butterflies?" I said. My brain, which was very much in a switched-off state in that moment, and refused to process that piece of information. "Why butterflies? Why *now*?"

“Apparently,” Trixie said, “there is a rare type that comes out in early mornings,”

“One has a passing fancy in entomology,” said the Prince serenely, “and the moors around Froggy Bottom and the Everfree exist quite isolated from modern Equestrian weather magic. One is eager to rediscover species that may have been lost.”

“Butterflies.” I repeated. At first I thought this was a sick joke, but I remembered the old army story of a unicorn general who had invaded an entire country because he believed there was a rare type of tree serpent there. From what I read in the paper, the campaign was ongoing, but at least the serpent had been recovered.

“Oh yes, butterflies. They are a topic of fascination for me. Truly beautiful, in their way. They are brightly coloured and proud, and yet so delicate...” he turned to look at me directly. My mind stumbled, I lost control of my legs and I tripped and fell on my face in an act of supreme clumsiness.

A hoof was offered to help me to my feet, and I took it. I looked up into the wide, bright eyes of... Trixie? I blinked, looking away – the Prince had just continued to walk, leaving me where I’d fallen, and Trixie was the pony who had taken the time to help me up. I coughed awkwardly and said, “Thanks,” and Trixie looked away and muttered “Don’t mention it”.

The caped unicorn started off after the Prince again, and I paused to reflect on the exchange. In that moment, I felt I had misjudged Trixie. Until then I had held a private belief that she was, as Applejack might put it, all hat and no cattle. Even though I had just fallen on my face, and even though the sun still hadn’t cleared the horizon, I still felt oddly happy about the exchange.

There were lines in the swamp made of piles of rocks. Evidently, Mr. Pie gathered rocks from his rock farm and carried them all the way out to the bog, where he dropped them to the bottom until they piled up and formed solid, stable surfaces across the swamp. There were places where the rock paths merged with islands in the swamp, and these islands were considerably less treacherous to navigate. The rock paths were slippery from moisture and mildew, and picking our way across them was time

consuming. Lanterns lined the paths to either side, glimmering red in the early morning sunlight.

It was mid morning by the time we reached a small, green hill arising from the centre of the swamp, where Blueblood indicated Pinkie should unpack the gear she was carrying.

I'd avoided speaking directly to Pinkie before now, out of nervousness it must be said, and she hadn't said a word the entire trip. She went about setting up the site with some aggressiveness, throwing down a picnic blanket and cushion for Prince Blueblood and preparing a large array of butterfly nets and jars. Blueblood took a seat, and Pinkie wordlessly served him his lunch. Trixie and I awkwardly sat opposite the Prince.

"You may begin collecting the butterflies now," Blueblood said to Pinkie Pie. Pinkie grabbed a net in her teeth and made to leave. The butterflies were distributed all across the moor, above solid land and above murderous patches of swamp. Chasing them seemed, to me, an almost suicidal proposition for an earth pony, so I stopped Pinkie as she was about to run after them.

"Wait, let me do this," I said.

"No," Pinkie snapped.

I pressed the point. "Pinkie! I can fly and you can't, it's safer if I do this!"

Pinkie's eyes unfocused and her gaze fell upon a nearby pile of rocks. She slid over behind it and shook it, putting on a low voice. "Hey, back off!" said the rock pile.

"Pinkie." I said warningly. I wasn't about to let this go. To back my point up, I grabbed one end of the net in my teeth and began to pull, trying to get it away from her.

"I – said – NO!" Pinkie said through clenched teeth, grabbing the other end of the net and digging her hooves into the ground. I beat my wings hard, struggling against her.

Bands of magical force grabbed both of us, and pulled us apart.

“Stop this, you foals!” Trixie said, stepping between us, “You’re inches away from falling into the swamp and the Great and Powerful Trixie does not relish the idea of having to explain how *two* ponies got themselves drowned on her watch!”

I reluctantly backed off. Pinkie glared at both of us.

“Listen, Rainbow, Trixie is going to head to Bridle Shores to investigate this escaped criminal. You stay here and keep the Prince safe, and help Pinkie where you can.” Trixie said, “Use some of that deductive reasoning Trixie is paying you for.”

“Alright,” I said, not relishing the nature of the task.

As Trixie made her way into the fog, I picked up a net and started hunting butterflies in the opposite direction that Pinkie Pie had went. I was more focused on the moor itself, though, and looking for any clues I could discover. It was the work of hours, but any pause meant having to go sit with Blueblood and suffer more compliments.

The first thing I found in my search was a set of hoofprints on the trail between Ponyville Hall and Bridle Shores. They were old and almost faded entirely, but Rarity had shown me what to look for. A close examination revealed two sets of four, the feet in close proximity and the indentations unusually deep. It was but a guess, but I imagined a pony had been jumping along this path, in Pinkie Pie’s fashion when she was less... depressed. The tracks were old; I liked to guess at a week but to be honest that had no grounding in any knowledge of mine.

The second thing I found was a tree with several deep claw marks in the same fashion as the ones in the avenue where Fluttershy had disappeared. This unsettled me greatly and I hurried by without pause.

And the last thing I found was a butterfly – but made of teal cloth, marked with a single star in its centre. The find baffled me, as I pulled it out of the edge of the swamp. It seemed a well made thing, and strangest of all, oddly familiar. I kept it with me to show to Rarity later.

By this point I was exhausted and hungry and had come to the decision that I was prepared to endure some flirtation in exchange for a proper meal. I returned to Blueblood, who was examining the jars full of butterflies that Pinkie Pie had collected for him.

“Where’s Pinkie Pie?” I asked as I took my seat.

“I sent her home,” said the Prince, “that we may be alone,”

I was suddenly very edgy. “My Prince...?” I started, but before I knew what was happening I was swept off my hooves, and the Prince kissed me full on the lips. It was a sweeping, passionate, romantic kiss like none I had ever experienced before. My head spun.

“Don’t you see, Lady Rainbow?” he whispered in a low, seductive voice as he held me in his hooves, “The Fates intended it so. By all the stars in the sky, by the passage of the Sun and Moon, this was meant to be.”

I panicked.

I am not easily scared - my flights of fancy about the Hound aside – but this scared me. It is difficult to articulate why; by almost any standard, being kissed romantically by the handsomest stallion in Equestria would seem a good way to spend an afternoon. But what scared me was how *easy* it was. Blueblood hadn’t even asked, hadn’t even waited for an indication of interest on my part. He was so confident I’d crumble before him that he didn’t even feel the need to *try*. Perhaps it was the thought of losing without a fight, the feeling of entrapment by the perfect web of charm with no way out. I don’t know. The end result was that I struggled free, shouting something about having left my washing machine turned on, and fled over the moor as fast as my wings would carry me.

I did not pay much attention to my direction, destination or surroundings. When I spied a small wooden hut in the moor, I dropped to the ground and ran inside without pausing to think. I knocked the door open and got two steps inside, slowing to take a deep breath of relief, when I tumbled down a deep pit, covered by a rug just inside the doorway. I hit the bottom of the pit in a tangle of wings, legs and carpet.

“What kind of sick mind,” I wondered aloud, “has a pit trap inside his own house?”

“My dear Rainbow Dash,” came an abhorrently familiar voice from above, “So good of you to... DROP IN! BWUAAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Of course, I thought.

Of course it was him.

“Hello, Spike,” I said.

Now, while my instinct, no doubt shared by my readers, was to fly up there and kick the dragon in his mustachioed face, the pit was too narrow for me to really spread my wings. For the time being I was trapped listening to the villain’s monologue.

“You thought you saw the last of me, didn’t you? And you almost had. I had to shed every single one of my scales after you dropped me off the Reichenbach and it took them *months* to grow back.” Spike snarled, looking over the side. He’d acquired a new hat, cape and moustache, I saw, though I snarkily noted that they were significantly lower quality than his originals.

“You’re the criminal who escaped from Bridle Shores, aren’t you?” I taunted back, “That’s sad, Spike – caught by local police.”

“Those Bridle Shores ponies were foals!” Spike snarled. “But even foals get lucky on occasion.”

“What, out of curiosity, was the master crime they busted you on?”

“... seven hour bubble bath.”

I burst out into laughter. “The Napolecorn of Crime, locked up for using too much hot water? Better call out the royal guard to hunt him down!”

“I caught you didn’t I?”

“You built a pit trap in your living room. Who *does* that?”

“Silence!”

I bit my lip to keep back further giggles.

“What I was *trying* to tell you was that I do not wish you ill, Rainbow Dash. Vengeance is an unprofitable waste of time. Instead, I have a *proposition* for you.”

“What could *you* possibly offer me?” I said, rolling my eyes in my enclosed space.

“Silence! We have a common interest, Rainbow Dash, and that common interest is under threat. Rarity is in love with Prince Blueblood, the same Prince Blueblood we both know to be an arrogant fool, a churl and a womaniser!” Spike snapped, “He does not deserve her!”

I went quiet for a moment, and Spike smirked and continued.

“Yes, I had a feeling that would get your attention. I’ve seen the Prince, seen his dalliances – I even saw him kiss *you* not ten minutes past,” Spike said, tapping a set of binoculars that hung from his neck. “But you are a smart pony, Rainbow Dash. You knew better than to become a notch on his bedpost. Rarity, however...”

I imagined the Prince and Rarity together, her too giddy to notice his flaws, him too arrogant to tell the difference between her and any of the other mares he chased. The idea of Rarity having her heart broken – and I knew, I could tell, that the Prince was a heartbreaker – spun around in my head. And it made me angry. Angry enough to make one of the stupidest decisions of my life.

“You have a deal,” I said.

“Excellent. My sources tell me Rarity will arrive at noon tomorrow. We have until then to plan our attack.”

I cleared my throat.

“But first, I have to go and find a rope.” Spike said.

“You built a *pit trap* in your *living room* and didn’t think to stock **rope**?” I said in disbelief.

“Frankly, I didn’t think anypony would be dumb enough to fall into it.”

Touché.

Chapter 5

Worst Day Ever

We planned well into the night. Our objective was to humiliate Prince Blueblood in front of Rarity and drive her away from him, but some of our schemes and ideas passed well into the range of cartoonishly absurd. Eventually, we settled on three core ideas that, in sequence, would achieve our ends perfectly. We practiced, rehearsed and plotted contingencies. It was oddly fun - Spike may have been a villain of the first order, but he understood the ways of pranks better than anypony I had previously encountered. Some of his ideas however, like tearing up a toy mouse and blaming it on the Prince, were just stupid. Mine were much better.

The next morning we were hiding in the bushes outside the main gate, taking turns to look through Spike's binoculars. We spied Rarity's carriage coming from some way off, and I observed the Prince, Pinkamina and Mrs. Pie to emerge to meet them. I could spot neither Trixie nor Mr. Pie anywhere. Just as well - Trixie was the biggest threat to this joint operation, and having her out of the picture made things a lot easier.

"Lady Dash," Spike said, twirling his greasy black moustache, "You may begin phase one."

I took the container of prepared sneezing powder, flew into the sky and snagged a convenient cloud, and flew it low over the entrance hall of Ponyville Manor. From this cover, I had an excellent vantage point from which to view the proceedings. The Prince was looking bored, Pinkie was looking furious, and Rarity, just coming out of the carriage, was looking absolutely *radiant*...

I pray my readers will forgive me a brief lapse into fangirlism, but Rarity simply stole my breath away in that moment. She wore a red and crystal dress which seemed to be the ultimate manifestation of her craft. It was elegant while being complex; eye-catching while being understated; an expression of individuality and spirit while concealing and enchanting. My breath stopped, and for a moment I forgot my mission.

And then she smiled - smiled at Blueblood - and I remembered. My task here was to save her from him. And so, I upended my bag of sneezing powder over the Prince and took cover behind the cloud. No doubt his churlish nature would show through in the event of a sneezing fit, or so the plan went. And no doubt Rarity would be enraged if he sneezed on her dress.

"Hello," said Rarity with a coy smile, "I don't believe we have been introduced."

"Indeed," said the Prince, raising one eyebrow in a charming and flirtatious way, "I am Prince Blueblood, and it is simply - aah! AAH!" The Prince sneezed suddenly and dramatically. I grinned and winked at Spike.

"Oh! Poor dear!" Rarity said, and grabbed the cloak off her back and offered it to the Prince. He grabbed it with both hooves and sneezed spectacularly into it. When he looked up, his expression was vaguely sheepish.

"Quickly, we must get you some fresh air!" Rarity said, urging the Prince away from the door and starting to walk very close by his side.

Spike and I stared at each other in shock. The plan had succeeded perfectly and yet failed spectacularly. In retrospect we should have adjusted for Rarity's natural generosity of spirit. All was not lost, though; this just meant that we had to be doubly successful with our next attempt.

We crept around the house and found a spot in the bushes along the path where Rarity and Blueblood were walking. Prince Blueblood paused by a rose bush to take a sniff of a beautiful, red rose in full bloom.

"Oh, what an enchanting rose!" said Rarity. Spike brushed the rose bush forwards so the thorns caught on the Prince's shirt collar.

"You mean... *this* rose?" the Prince said, standing up with the rose in his mouth. The wind caught his hair and the light caught his teeth. It was a truly spectacular motion - that was some weapons grade seduction, right there.

And there was a loud ripping sound as he tore his collar clean off on the rose bush.

Spike and I grinned and exchanged a brohoof.

The Prince dropped the rose, gasping in horror. Rarity's eyes widened, and she stepped forwards, horn glowing. She levitated the rose and the remains of the collar, and focused. With a rapid series of delicate movements she somehow stitched the two together around the Prince's neck, using the rose's stem as a thread to hold the collar together.

"... thank you," said the Prince in surprise.

"It goes with your eyes," Rarity said, batting her eyelashes.

Spike and I exchanged another grim look. How were we succeeding so completely and yet failing so utterly? We had one trick left up our sleeves, though. We set about infiltrating Ponyville Hall's upper levels in preparation for our next and final prank. There was heavy lifting involved, and I would like it recorded Spike was no help at all with it.

I glanced out of the second story window. Rarity and the Prince were standing still in front of the closed door into Ponyville Hall. I could tell immediately what was happening - the two were waiting for the other to open the door. Which meant they'd be there for a while. Perfect.

I stepped back into the room and gave the grand piano we'd aimed out the window a severe kick. There was a gasp and the sound of splintering wood and discordant music as it landed on Prince Blueblood's head - a direct hit. Spike and I both wore expressions of victory, briefly celebrating before we heard Rarity's voice from below crying, "Oh, you poor dear! Let's get you inside!"

Spike and I stopped celebrating immediately.

"How was *that* supposed to drive them apart!?" I shouted at Spike.

"I don't know, it was your idea!" Spike retorted.

"No, I just asked if we could find a piano. You were the one who suggested dropping it on his head!"

"Why would you ask for a piano if you weren't thinking of dropping it on his head!?"

"I don't know!"

At that exact moment, Trixie burst into the room we were talking in. She strode in proudly, brandishing a piece of paper in her magical grip, "Rainbow Dash! The Great and Powerful Trixie has discovered the true identity of the escaped criminal on the moor!"

"I know," I said, looking out the window with the binoculars. "It's Spike."

"Exactly! It's Scootal -" Trixie stopped in mid sentence, looking from me to Spike, and her expression fell from triumph to embarrassment to anger. She scrunched up the paper she was carrying and threw it into the corner. "Alright then. Spike. Where's the Hound?"

"Hound?" Spike said, and Trixie picked him up by the tail with her magic and shook him vigorously. His hat, his small change, and a locket with a picture of Rarity clattered to the floor.

I hesitated for a moment while I figured out what Trixie was talking about, and then realized that in my desire to deal with Blueblood I'd completely forgotten to ask Spike about the Hound. I facehoofed briefly at my own idiocy, but decided to play along as to not embarrass myself in front of Trixie by confessing my collaboration with him. "Yeah! The Hound!"

"Why do you want to know about the Hound? That thing is scary!" Spike said. Trixie shook him again. "Okay, okay! I'll tell you! Just put me down!"

Trixie cast him into a corner, and the two of us loomed over him.

"When I got away from Bridle Shores, I was looking for somewhere to sleep, and I found this cave, right?" Spike babbled, spilling his guts so readily I felt embarrassed for him, "On the border of the moor? Seemed pretty legit, so I was going to go in - and then this huge monster comes out!"

"What did it look like?"

"Big. Purple and black. Covered in stars, bunch of stars on its head. Ginormous teeth!" Spike said. Trixie and I exchanged glances.

"Did you see any ponies?" I pressed.

"Ponies?"

"Fluttershy!"

"Oh, yeah. She was in a cage or something. I wasn't really paying attention."

Fluttershy was alive - and she was being kept by the Hound! Without waiting for further confirmation, I jumped out the open window and started to fly. I heard Trixie shout, "Rainbow, wait!" from behind me but I wasn't going to slow down and deal with this rationally. I swept over the moors, searching for the cave Spike had described.

I swiftly found it. It was a dark and ominous construction, large enough for an Ursa Minor to enter, with all too familiar claw marks all around the entrance. There was a strangely oceanic smell to the place, the tang of sea salt and trace amounts of white sand around the entrance. I pressed on into the cave without hesitation, calling Fluttershy's name.

And I found her.

The interior of the cave was not what I had been expecting. It was oddly... homey. Everything was designed for something much larger than a pony but seemed otherwise normal. There were outsized armchairs, a fireplace, a kitchen counter, and other amenities that one would expect in a modern house. Here and there were piles of brightly coloured spherical shapes - seeming to me like skull piles in the flickering darkness - and there, was what looked to be a sound stage with various instruments piled up. There were lines of portraits on the walls, though I couldn't make out the figures in the gloom.

And hanging from the ceiling, low to the ground, were a number of bird cages. Two of them were occupied - and one of those was Fluttershy! The other held a pegasus I did not know, and was trussed with rope besides.

And in front of her, sitting before an easel, was Mr. Pie. He had before him the painting that had been on the wall of Ponyville Hall, and was delicately colouring it in. Fluttershy was slumped in her cage. She had that defeated, sad, weeping look in her eyes that Mr. Pie had captured in his painting.

"Ah, Lady Rainbow Dash. So glad you could join us," said Sedimentary Elbert Pie, putting his brush down and turning to face me.

"Mr. Pie! You're the one behind this?" I cried, and he nodded in an uninterested, sedate way.

"Now, easy there, Lady. You're obviously thinkin' that this isn't what it is."

"You kidnapped Fluttershy! What else could it possibly be?" I cried.

"This ain't nothing but a family thing," said Mr. Pie calmly.

"Fluttershy isn't your family!"

"Yep. But Pinkamina is," and for a moment, I saw real anger in Mr. Pie's eyes. He spat contemptuously on the ground. "An' this here hussy came along and starts distracting our Pinkamina. I done *seen* what they got up to. Distracting each other! So I decided to, well, remove the sun so to speak. You know that if all you can see is the goal you can't go wrong? I'm just helpin' my daughter focus on what's important."

"What could be so important that's worth kidnapping somepony for!"

"Rocks."

He was dead serious as he said it.

"Rocks? Really?" I said, mouth dry upon the realisation I was in the presence of legitimate crazy.

"Rocks ain't gonna grow themselves."

"Right. This is the part where I kick you into unconsciousness." I said, resolving myself and starting forwards.

"Now, now, Lady Dash. Harry here might have somethin' to say about that."

And something huge loomed out of the darkness. The Hound of Ponyville. My jaw dropped.

It wasn't a hound.

It was a **bear**.

A big, brown, furry, grizzly bear.

And it was wearing a dress. A dress I knew all too well.

It was purple. It was black. It had constellations on it. It had a line of four stars on a headband. And it had teal bows and highlights. I remembered the teal and starred butterfly I'd picked out of the swamp. This was Twilight's dress, the horrible one that Rarity had made. The one she'd thrown away.

Somepony must have gone dumpster diving.

I was so stunned by the sight that my dodge was off, and I was grabbed and stuffed into the cage next to Fluttershy. The cage door was slammed shut.

"An' now I've got draw *another* picture." said Mr. Pie, sounding wearied by the prospect. "Not to mention if our friend here told anypony else where to find your house, Harry. C'mon, let's go to Ponyville Manor an' sort this all out."

The bear nodded, and the two of them walked towards the entrance of the cave. As they went, the bear picked up one of the instruments from the sound stage. It was a sea shell, a huge sea shell. The bear blew into it, and played the sound of a great hellhound howling. He brushed one of the sphere piles and picked up a big beach volleyball, tucking it under his arm as the two of them left.

They slammed and locked the heavy wooden door behind them, and I heard the sound of a bolt being thrown.

My eyes adjusted soon to the gloom.

"Um. Thanks for the rescue, Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy.

This was the worst day ever.

Chapter 6

A Duel In Darkness

My first impulse, as my readers no doubt guessed, was to try and kick my way out of the cage. Unfortunately this was far more difficult than I expected - the footing was awkward, and the cage swung from its chain whenever I shifted my weight. When I kicked at the bars, I just made myself swing backwards and forwards, filling the air with the creaking sound of chains and making absolutely no progress towards freeing myself. I soon realised the motion was hopeless unless I found a way to brace myself and stop the cage from moving, though frustration lead me to continue kicking regardless.

Anger gradually gave way to a deep sense of defeat and despair. Not only had I flown off on my own without pausing to tell anypony or wait for help, I'd put Rarity into grave danger. It had been an impulsive and rash decision, born of a mixture of panic about Fluttershy, fear at my association with Spike being discovered and a desire to prove myself superior to Blueblood and worthy in my role of detective. I began to slump in my cage, and even the squeaking of the chain began to die away as the cage settled back to equilibrium.

It was at this point that I heard a sound like a mouse sighing, and turned towards my companion in darkness.

"What was that, Fluttershy?" I asked.

"I was asking if you were okay." Fluttershy said. I was struck by the sentiment - Fluttershy had been in here for over a week and her first action was to ask if I was all right. If there was anypony who didn't deserve this treatment, it was her.

"Does it look like I'm okay?" I said, meeting kindness with despair and anger, "I have placed everypony in grave danger and been captured and locked in a cage! I had one, simple task and I failed."

"It's not your fault," Fluttershy's voice, soft and concerned, as if the worst thing to happen to her was finding out that I was upset. "It's my fault."

"Fluttershy, don't be ridiculous. You were kidnapped. That's not your fault." I said.

"I got caught. I couldn't escape. I distracted Pinkie Pie. I didn't stay in Ponyville where it was safe. Of course it's my fault."

She sounded like her heart was breaking, like the only place she could find to put all the blame and sorrow that had built up during the days she'd spent in captivity was on her own back. She was the one least able to deal with guilt like that, and she was also the one least able to give it to anypony else. She would prefer to accept Mr. Pie's insane beliefs as true if that meant she didn't have to hate him.

And I wasn't about to let that slide, not when I had a much more valid target for the blame. "No, Fluttershy, it's my fault for running all the way out here without thinking."

"I should have called out and warned you," Fluttershy went on stubbornly.

"I should have figured out Mr. Pie was behind it from the start." I countered with what may, in retrospect, have been a little stubbornness of my own.

"I should have gotten word out somehow," Fluttershy said.

"I should have finished that letter I was writing to you."

A silence fell between us. In the absolute darkness, when the words stopped it was like I was alone. Like there was a gulf between Fluttershy and myself of more than just distance and darkness. It was like speaking was putting part of yourself at risk, putting your words out into the void and having to hope they'd be answered. Having to hope they'd be the right words.

I shifted in my cage. The bars were laid unevenly and I had to stand in an awkwardly splayed stance to remain vertical. If I moved then one of my hooves would drop through the space between the bars. If I tried to sit down then I had to place all my weight on one narrow, cold metal surface. It

was supremely uncomfortable and the distraction of trying to find a position I was content with drew my thoughts away from Fluttershy. Sometime throughout the process of trying to find a comfortable position I muttered aloud, "I should have brought a pillow,"

There was a sound like a cough from Fluttershy. It went on for a little bit; the beginnings of laughter. "I should have packed a lockpick,"

Despite myself, despite my predicament, I started to smile too. "I should have learned to chew through metal bars."

"I should have taken that contortionist class." Fluttershy said

"I should have heat ray vision,"

"I should have been born an alicorn."

By this point, we were starting to giggle. It was quite ridiculous under the circumstances, but the laughter was addictive. For the first time in days I was genuinely laughing. For the first time since I'd arrived at Ponyville Hall, I was weirdly glad that I'd come.

"So, what brings you to Ponyville Hall?" Fluttershy asked, voice warm and jokingly formal.

"Trixie came south, told us about your disappearance and hired us to investigate. She also acquired the new Lord of the Hall, one Prince Blueblood, to manage the estate in your absence." I summarised.

"I don't think I've met him,"

"Then consider yourself fortunate. I have never had as much cause to hate a stallion so," I said, impulsively and with feeling.

"Hate?"

"He's flirtatious and grabby, with the soul of a churl. A well dressed idiot. And, worst of all, he has caught the eye and perhaps, now, the heart of Rarity - despite my best efforts to prevent it."

"Did you talk to her? What did she say?"

"Actually..." I trailed off, then awkwardly confessed, "I didn't so much *talk* to her as I teamed up with the most wanted criminal in Equestria to pull off a series of pranks to drive them apart." I said that last bit very fast.

Fluttershy laughed, and took a moment to realise that it wasn't a joke.

"You did *what*?"

"I may have teamed up with Spike."

"Spike? You teamed up with *Spike*?" Fluttershy said, "Poison Joke Spike?"

"I may not have been thinking particularly straight at the time." I said weakly.

"What about this Prince is so bad you'd go to such lengths to stop him?"

"Because Rarity can beat Spike," I said with conviction, "She can beat the Hound. She can beat Mr. Pie. She can solve this case, rescue us and lock Mr. Pie up in ten seconds flat. But I don't know if she can defeat a broken heart and broken dreams,"

"You must care about her deeply."

"And what does he have anyway?" I snapped, suddenly putting voice to a sentiment that had long lurked in the back of my head, "Money? Power? Fame? Looks?" I paused, "Well, yes. I suppose he has all those things. But he wouldn't *treat* her right."

There was silence. A long, awkward silence as I realised that I had said far more than I intended to, and that Fluttershy didn't know what to say. The warmth drained from the air gradually and the void between us seemed insurmountable.

"How's Pinkie Pie?" Fluttershy's voice, soft and low.

"Bad."

"Tell me."

"Descended into creepy town, talking to rocks and lint, and the lint talks back. What's going on with her, Fluttershy?"

"When we arrived together, Mr. Pie takes Pinkie Pie to her room and introduces us to her "friends" - a collection of inanimate objects. And I've never seen Pinkie Pie upset before, but when her father asked why she didn't want to play with Sir Lintsalot anymore her legs were trembling. Nothing scared her half as much as the idea of those things. I tried to look after her. We became... close. And that seemed to make Mr. Pie angry, and while I was Lady of the Hall I couldn't tell him what to do in his own house. When it became clear that Pinkie wasn't going to last long in this place, I sent her a letter to meet me by the gate to the moors where I'd talk to her and suggest going back to Ponyville..."

"And Mr. Pie found the letter and sent the bear to capture you. Of course. And Pinkie thinks you stood her up."

"Or that I was only calling her to say goodbye."

"No wonder she changed," I murmured.

I heard a soft sniffing sound. A faint, ungraceful sniff. The sound of tears.

And I knew that I had to do something. No matter what, no matter how futile the effort might be, I had to get out of this cage and set things to right. I set my feet and threw my weight forwards, and then backwards. The chain squeaked as I gradually built up momentum, arcing backwards and forwards, flapping my wings for additional speed. But no matter how much momentum I built up, I couldn't smash myself against a wall and potentially break the cage open. Swinging myself horizontally, all the way up to the rooftop, killed all my momentum just before contact.

And then, on the swing back down, my cage clipped something and I went spinning off in another direction. There was a squeak from Fluttershy - I'd accidentally hit her cage while swinging my own around like a fool.

But I noticed, running my hoof along in the gloom in front of me, that one of the bars had bent very slightly.

"Fluttershy." I called. There was no response.

I got very worried very quickly. "Fluttershy! Are you all right?"

There was a huge smashing sound as a cage smashed right into mine. I spun away, dizzyingly quickly, though the impact didn't do more than rattle my teeth.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Fluttershy's voice called back. "I thought that maybe if we could bend the bars a little more..."

"Sorry," I said with a new smile, flaring my wings to arrest my momentum and bring myself back into a controlled swing, "Isn't good enough."

And we duelled.

In utter darkness, we duelled. Using weapons we had no real control over, we duelled, trying our best to gather momentum and swing at each other with maximum force. We had limited control over our cages, the only thing we had to aim by was the squeaking of chains, the beating of wings, the occasional crash of metal and our gradually rising laughter. Many times there were great rushes of air as we missed each other by inches. Stopping, talking and co-ordinating didn't occur to us. This was a battle, like a combination of swings, shopping trolleys and bumper cars. And I, for one, intended to win it.

I came to the peak of one swing and hurtled down to where I thought Fluttershy would be. There was a huge crash as our cages finally hit each other, dead on, at maximum velocity. We were both thrown against the front bars as the twisted metal finally gave away and the cage doors burst open. As our cages spun away in opposite directions we were thrown out and landed heavily on the ground. A little bruised, but otherwise exhilarated. And above all, we were free.

I flew over to the door without hesitation and kicked it open. Light flooded the cage. Blinking, Fluttershy and I stepped out into the light. In the distance, we heard the baying of Trixie's hounds. We did not need to talk, we didn't even need to look at each other. Fluttershy and I immediately began flying at top speed towards Ponyville Manor.

And the sound of a great hellhound howling hung in the air before us, rising over the splintering of wood and the roaring of a great bear.

Chapter 7

A Duel In Daylight

We flew across the moors. As we reached the boundary of Ponyville Hall, I saw Trixie's dogs, hanging in mid-air above the wall, caught by the ward. They were barking and kicking their legs uselessly in the air, trying to reach the Manor, where the sounds of roaring and splintering wood was coming from.

We flew on, through the upstairs window of Ponyville hall, hitting the floor in a full gallop and rushing through to the great hall. The huge double doors were closed and barricaded – Trixie was standing in the centre of the hall, collecting tables, paintings, chairs and anything else she could gather with her magic and stacking it in front of the doors. Even so, in the hard wood there were rents where claws had done great damage. I could see Rarity – still in that marvellous crimson dress - and Blueblood standing on the stairs, Blueblood looking confident and unbothered, but subtly edging back behind Rarity. Of Spike, I saw no sign.

I rushed over to Rarity, who saw me, and then Fluttershy, with shock and then a curious sense of disappointment crossing her features. "Are you all right?" I asked at once, glancing between her and Blueblood.

"Rainbow..." Rarity said slowly, "what possessed you to ally yourself with Spike?"

"I – what? How did you know that?" I gaped in dumb shock.

"I found the villain's binoculars. And I noted that one of them had a covering of black grease around one of the rims. And you, Rainbow Dash, have a completely blackened eye."

I raised my hoof to my face. Sure enough, some black grease came off. "Spike," I snarled with anger – of course he hadn't been able to resist pranking me, even when we were supposedly allied.

"If you don't mind," Trixie's voice called, slightly shrill as a claw splintered through the barricade, "I could use some help here!"

Knowing the situation had to be serious of Trixie had forgotten her usual mode of speech, I flew forwards into a guarding position above the door, moments before it crashed open and the huge bear, dressed in that awful purple gown, stomped into the hall. I hadn't had a chance to look at it closely before, and doing so now was not an encouraging experience. It was three times as tall as a Pony when it was on all fours, and when it reared up it reached almost to the Hall's ceiling. Its fur was thick, brown, matted and poorly groomed. The hideous dress it wore was, however, in excellent repair, without the smallest scuff or loose thread.

I bucked it as hard as I could on the top of the head, and Trixie conjured a lightning bolt to strike it. Both attacks were utterly ineffective, and I had to dodge wildly to avoid being swatted by a flailing claw.

"Trixie!" I called, "Make a cloud!"

Trixie nodded and conjured a huge, dark stormcloud, which I spun around at maximum speed and then kicked directly into the bear's face. It exploded in a burst of electricity and the bear roared and actually stepped back, and for a moment I thought we had gained the upper hand. As was the way in these situations, though, immediately after thinking that I was caught by the bear's backhand and knocked into a pillar.

While waiting for my ears to stop ringing, I saw the bear advance on Trixie who was backing away hurriedly and fearfully. I got unsteadily to my feet when I heard a voice – Fluttershy's voice! – call something out. "Trixie, your dogs!"

Trixie suddenly smiled, and there was an almost imperceptible rush of air as she dispelled her own ward. The bear stopped as it heard the barking of dogs getting louder and turned around just in time to see the two orange and black dogs start to circle him. Trixie, grinning like a circus ringleader, tossed her hat directly at the bear. The bear raised one paw as if to block it, but one of the dogs jumped and caught it half way. The other dog jumped onto the bear's back and there was a ripping sound as it tore purple fabric.

There was a roar of absolute fury from the bear and it swung itself into a stone wall in an attempt to crush the dog, which jumped off at the last second. It surged forwards, and the dogs scattered, and Trixie screamed and bolted moments before she was crushed by an enormous claw. The bear chased after her and swept her up in its claws. I lunged in to save her but, in a movement that was unfairly fast for a monster that size, I was grabbed as well. Its grip was absolutely crushing, tighter than any pony would be able to escape from. The air was forced from my lungs as it squeezed.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Growled the bear, speaking for the first time. Its eyes were utterly enraged and in that moment I was convinced I was going to die. “That was an original design from the greatest mind in fashion, and you have ruined it!”

“I know, and Rainbow’s behaviour is *quite* shocking,” said Rarity, coming down the steps, gown trailing in her wake. The bear’s grip slackened a little, and Trixie and I took deep gasps for breath.

The bear looked at her, and blinked. His eyes were wide and contemplative “Excuse me, ma’am,” he said, in that deep, gravelly voice, “may I ask who your designer is?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Rarity said, turning to show off the full, graceful design of her perfect dress. “You like it?”

“Like it? I love it!” Snarled the bear. I was not familiar with conversations with bears, but he managed to make a compliment sound like a death threat. “Only three ponies in Equestria have that kind of talent.”

“May I enquire as to who they are?”

“Why, Hoity Toity, Mr. Walker and Rarity, of course,” snapped Harry the Bear.

“I see you have one of Miss Rarity’s works already,” Rarity commented, as calmly as if she was at a formal dinner reception.

“So it is Rarity’s design! Oh! That is so inconvenient!” The bear cried, throwing his arms up in the air in exasperation and scrambling the minds of Trixie and myself in the process.

“Inconvenient? Inconvenient how?” Rarity said, surprised.

“Why, because if I crush you I shall damage the dress, likely beyond repair. And that would be a tragedy.”

“A crime against fabulosity, you could say.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Cried the bear, throwing up his arms again and making my eyes cross themselves.

“Well, we simply cannot have that,” Rarity said, nodding firmly. “And so, I shall give you the dress now so you can go about your crushing with a clean conscience.”

“You’d do that?” Harry’s eyes seemed to light up like stars.

“Of course,” said Rarity, horn glowing and undoing her dress. She removed it and set it down a safe distance away.

“You are, without a doubt, the most generous pony I’ve ever met,” said Harry, raising the paw that was holding me up in preparation to swat Rarity. I tried biting his finger but just got a mouthful of fur for my trouble. Rarity looked up at certain demise without fear. “May I ask who I have had the honour of crushing?”

“You can call me Miss Rarity.”

Harry stopped.

“THE Miss Rarity?”

“I would be quite disappointed if there was another.” Rarity said calmly.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” Harry said, leaning down, eyes wide.

“Looking for inspiration. And I think I’ve found it,” Rarity said, eyes gleaming, “Would you happen to know any bears who would be content to model for me?”

“Why, I would be delighted to!” Harry cried.

“Oh, but I see you have an existing commitment,” Rarity said, gesturing to Trixie and myself. I wanted to hiss at her ‘don’t remind him!’ but was too tightly gripped to get the words out.

“Bah!” said Harry, dropping Trixie and I to the ground where we both gasped for air, “I’m only here to pay off the loan I took out to buy this dress from Mr. Pie. And your offer is frankly better.”

“You flatter me,” Rarity said demurely. “Would you go and get ready? I need to get my materials,”

“Of course!” And the great bear turned and left the manor without another word, leaving only ruin in his wake.

“Rarity...” I gasped, getting to my feet.

“There is no time,” she said, suddenly serious, “Mr. Pie took Pinkie out into the swamp, and we need to find her before the bear comes back. Trixie, you stay with the Prince. Rainbow, Fluttershy, we have to move.

“Okay,” wheezed Trixie. Rarity galloped for the door and Fluttershy and I followed her as fast as we could.

*

We reached the gate to the moors, where the fog had set in proper. There was no way to tell where Pinkie had gotten to from here, and the lanterns glowed red and bright. I opened my mouth to ask where we had to go now, but Rarity’s horn was already glowing.

“I can feel Mr. Pie’s pickax, it has some quartz stuck to it... this way!” She said, starting over the rock path.

We moved as fast as we could, but the path was treacherous and slippery. Rarity's horn almost pulled her along but more than once she had to skid to a halt and fight against it before it pulled her off the path and into the swamp. She lead the way as we hurried blindly through the mist, following the gleam of lantern-light and the white-purple glow of her horn.

In the mist, I heard voices. Pinkie's voice, and Mr. Pie's – as well as the voices of Pinkie's 'friends'. Ahead, coming out of the fog, we could see a large table, set for eight, with Pinkie sitting at one end, Mr. Pie sitting at the other, and a variety of inanimate objects occupying the remaining seats. Sir Lintsalot, Madame le'Flour, Mr. Turnip and Rocky – as well as Mr. Pie's pickax, sitting by Mr. Pie's right hand. There was one other figure I couldn't make out from where I was, and it didn't seem to be saying anything.

Fluttershy cried, "Pinkie!" and rushed forwards, and Rarity and I followed. I found myself pulled to a sudden halt – my feet were stuck in the mud! The path had, imperceptibly, vanished in front of us and we were all suddenly caught in quicksand! Of course – Mr. Pie had moved the lanterns, and we'd blundered right into his trap.

Pinkie Pie looked up. "Fluttershy?" she said.

Mr. Pie smiled calmly. "I didn't hear anything."

"But she's right there!" Pinkie said, eyes fixing entirely on Fluttershy, widening big and blue.

Mr. Pie leaned across the table, grabbed Mr. Turnip, and said, "Pinkie, your mind's playing tricks on you."

He slid across to Rocky. "And even if she was there, didn't she leave you without even a goodbye?"

"Well... yeah. I suppose she did." Pinkie said, a hint of steel creeping into her voice.

"Pinkie! It's me! I'm sorry!" Fluttershy called out, struggling against the quicksand but making no progress. In fact, her struggling was making her sink faster than either Rarity or myself.

“You know,” said Mr. Pie, leaning across to shake Sir Lintasalot, “you should eat up your porridge. Keep up your strength.”

“Long day of rock farming ahead of us,” said Mr. Pie, shaking Rocky.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Pinkie said, settling into her seat and taking a slow bite of her porridge. “I must be seeing things.”

“That’s my girl,” said Mr. Pie, eyes unfocusing as he picked up his pickax and swung it around. With every other voice, he appeared completely sane and in control, but when he lifted that pickax I saw true madness.

“Yes. You’re doing good,” said Mr. Pie, rattling Mr. Turnip’s can.

“We’re proud of you, Pinkie,” said Mr. Pie, lifting up Sir Lintasalot.

“Don’t ever leave us again,” said Mr. Pie, shaking Rocky.

“And what about you, Madame le’Flour? What do you think?” said Mr. Pie as himself

“Pinkie!” Cried Fluttershy, up to her neck.

“I think...” Pinkie said, slowly leaning over to the bag of flour. She put on Madame le’Flour’s voice “What if Fluttershy didn’t mean it?”

“What?” Said Mr. Pie as the lint.

“What?” Said Mr. Pie as the rocks.

“Beg pardon?” Said Mr. Pie as the turnips.

“Madame le’Flour...” Said Mr. Pie warningly, holding his pickax.

“I’m just saying that Fluttershy was a good friend, and if she is drowning in the swamp we should at least check...”

“Check? Check?” Mr. Pie said, voice raising, “CHECK? You’re being DISTRACTED, Pinkie! Eyes on the PATH! If you look away, look to either side, even for a SECOND you’ll be in the swamp!”

"Maybe she has a point?" Pinkie said as herself, weakly.

"A POINT? A POINT?" Mr. Pie said, snatching up his pickax and jumping onto the table. "I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT HAPPENS TO PONIES WHO DISTRACT. MY. DAUGHTERS!!!"

And he brought the pickax around in a huge, double-hoofed swing. It smashed into the bag of flour with terrible force, sending up a great puff of white. Mr. Pie swung, and swung, and swung again, each swing smashing into the bag of flour and sending up a cloud of white dust. He smashed it and smashed it in a frenzy, teeth gritted, eyes maddened, and then finally slowed and stopped, breathing heavily, covered head to toe in flour.

Madame le'Flour's destroyed corpse dropped slowly and dramatically to the ground.

There was a moment of absolute silence.

"You... killed her," said Mr. Turnip.

"She was our friend," said Rocky.

"You monster!" Cried Sir Lintsalot.

Pinkie Pie stood up on the table as well, looking her father in the eye, holding a glare of absolute fury. Her father swung the pickax guardingly between them, warding her off. "Pinkie! I did it for you. I don't want you to get hurt. I've got to remove the distractions. You *know* what happens when there are distractions," said Mr Pie.

Pinkie didn't move or blink, she didn't reach out and touch and shake the remaining objects, but they began to talk anyway. In a different voice – a voice I gradually recognised, and when I did, my blood froze.

"He's just saying that," said Spike, as Rocky.

"He took Fluttershy away," said Spike, as Mr. Turnip.

“You need to stop him. You need to hurt him. For Madame le’Flour. For Fluttershy,” said Spike as Sir Lintsalot.

Pinkie took a slow step forwards.

“Pinkie!” Cried Fluttershy, who was almost entirely under the quicksand.

“No! NO! STAY BACK!” Screamed Mr. Pie shrilly, swinging his pickax as he backed up.

“Pinkie!” Fluttershy called, barely keeping her mouth and nose above the quicksand.

Pinkie Pie took a step forwards.

“YOU CAN’T DO THIS!!” screamed Mr. Pie, swinging his pickax again. It passed inches from Pinkie’s face but she didn’t even blink.

“Do it,” hissed Spike, standing on Pinkie’s back, whispering directly into her ear. “Do it. For Fluttershy.”

“I’m just trying to help you!” Mr. Pie almost sobbed, swinging another brutally powerful blow from his pickax inches away from Pinkie. “I’m just trying to keep you on the path!”

“Pinkie,” Fluttershy gasped as the last of her nose disappeared under the quicksand.

Pinkie Pie took a step forwards.

And stopped.

Mr. Pie was balanced right on the edge of the table.

She blinked.

“Fluttershy?”

“No! Mr. Pie! You have to stop Mr. Pie!” hissed Spike, voice full of venom.

“No. Not dad,” she said, reaching out and taking the pickax from Mr. Pie’s trembling hooves, like taking a toy from a child. “It’s you, Baron Pickax. It’s always been you.”

“No!” hissed Spike.

“Yes,” said Pinkie calmly, and bucked Spike off her back casually. She stepped down off the table and started walking towards the swamp, “Dad was so afraid. So afraid. And he needed you to protect him. Like I needed my friends to protect me. But I... I remember now. Somepony once told me, right before I moved to Ponyville. That’s not the way to deal with fears at all.”

“It is! You deal with fears by defeating anyone who scares you!” Spike said, chasing after her, “There’s only room for one at the top!”

“No,” said Pinkie with a smile.

“There’s room for two.”

She slammed the pickax into the dirt of the shore, hard. And, smiling, she started wading into the quicksand. She held the pickax with one hoof and lowered her head into the quicksand.

And she came back out with Fluttershy in her hooves. Fluttershy was muddy, soaked, gasping for air and spitting up sand. Pinkie Pie slowly helped her out to the bank and the yellow Pegasus almost collapsed. Pinkie helped wipe the mud out of Fluttershy’s eyes, and she looked up at the poofy haired pink pony. And there was a moment as they were there, in each other’s arms, meeting each other’s gaze, and the world seemed like it was full of colour again for the first time in a long time.

“So sorry to inter-uupt,” Rarity said in a sing-song voice as the last of her neck vanished under the quicksand.

“So, Rarity, once again you find yourself in my power,” Spike was saying, standing on the rocks over her and twirling his moustache, “I show mercy in victory, however, and am prepared to help you out in exchange for... well, what are you doing on Friday?”

“My hair.” Said Rarity flatly.

“Saturday?”

“Rainbow’s hair.”

“Saturday evening?”

By this point, Pinkie Pie had made it over to where Spike and Rarity were, and Fluttershy was hovering above me and pulling me out. Spike grinned when he saw Pinkie Pie looming over him. “Oh, hey Pinkie Pie. No hard feelings, right?”

“Nope!” Pinkie said brightly, offering one hoof.

Spike took it, and was promptly electrocuted by the buzzer Pinkie wore. He collapsed in a blackened pile of smoke. Pinkie giggled, and leaned over the side to help Rarity up out of the mud.

“Just as well I gave my dress away,” said Rarity. “Cleaning *that* off it would have been unendurable.”

Pinkie laughed, and I did too. For a moment, all seemed right with the world.

“So what do we do about him?” said Fluttershy, looking over at Mr. Pie, who was shaking helplessly by the edge of the swamp. Pinkie smiled and walked over to him, helping him up and urging him along.

“We take care of him, silly. And we teach him how to laugh.”

*

We made our slow path back to Ponyville Hall. Fluttershy was helping along Mr. Pie with the kindness of a saint, and Pinkie was carrying the unconscious Spike. Rarity complained the entire way about the mud, extracting it piecemeal from her coat with her magic. By the time we arrived back at the front gate, she was almost clean, which – given who was waiting there for us – may have been a grave strategic blunder.

Because as soon as he saw Rarity, Prince Blueblood swept her off her hooves in a motion dramatic, romantic – and practised. He ignored everypony else, everything else, and said to the swooning Rarity, “You have saved my life, and my hall.”

“Oh,” breathed Rarity directly into that dazzling smile.

“Don’t you see, Lady Rarity? The Fates intended it so. By all the stars in the sky, by the passage of the Sun and Moon, this was meant to be.”

Oh no he didn’t.

I stepped forwards and slapped him right across his smug face as hard as I could.

He dropped Rarity like a sack of potatoes, looked at me in shock, and then suddenly slapped me right back. I stepped back in shock – he hadn’t pulled that at all, and my cheek stung.

“Knave!” cried Prince Blueblood, “What is the meaning of this!?”

“Keep your hooves off her, you two-faced slime!” I shouted, flaring my wings aggressively.

“You would come between true love?” the Prince said, stepping forwards. He was much bigger than me, but I didn’t even blink in stepping up to him.

“You incomparable toad, you used the exact same line on me!”

“Jealousy,” said the Prince smugly, “Jealousy because Rarity and I share something you will never possess.”

I raised my hoof to punch him in the face, but the Prince snorted contemptuously. “If you insist on this arrogant idiocy, then at very least we shall settle this as a proper matter of honour. I accept your challenge of a duel, and I choose swords at sundown.”

“Why not right now?” I challenged, “Are you scared?”

The Prince glared. “Immediately, then! Trixie! One’s swords!”

Everypony else backed off as Trixie brought out a pair of swords in a large red box. I grabbed one in my mouth and floated up into the air. My blood was boiling, I was seeing red, and I wasn't thinking straight. I just wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face.

And then I saw Prince Blueblood levitate up his sword with his magic and spin it in a dramatic figure-of-eight movement, going through an enormously complex preparation kata. I was holding my sword in my mouth and, if you've never had the privilege of doing so, this was a fairly ineffectual position. I could only perform one move: the clumsy horizontal slash. And I was going up against a unicorn who was evidently extremely skilled in fencing.

"First blood?" he asked calmly.

I suddenly realised that I was absolutely doomed and that I was absolutely going to lose.

"You bet."

I lunged forwards anyway.

Blueblood caught my predictable attack elegantly and twisted the sword around to flip me upside down and throw me back. I lunged right back to my feet and was on the assault again, lunging in with my one horizontal strike – and repulsed just as easily. He stood perfectly still, sword dancing around him like a dervish. It didn't take long to realise the Prince was playing with me. Of all the weapons in the world, swords were simply not meant to be wielded by those without either magic or opposable thumbs.

I tried using my superior speed, spinning around and attacking from angles or behind. The Prince didn't even move or turn around, sword spinning around behind him to deflect my attacks and knock me away. Again and again, I hurtled myself at an immovable object, and again and again I was defeated and repulsed with childish ease.

After dragging it out long enough to demonstrate his utter superiority, Prince Blueblood performed a dazzling attack against every side of me at once, a baffling array of strikes ending with the jabbing the hilt of his sword

into my throat and causing me to gag and drop my own blade. He caught it in his own telekinesis and crossed it along with his other blade at my throat. A single drop of blood ran down my cheek and I knew that I'd lost. The Prince snorted, threw the blades aside, and turned around.

"My lady Rarity," said he, smiling and filled with pride, "One has brought you victory and defended your honour."

I lowered my eyes in defeat.

"And tell me, my Prince..." Rarity said, in that slow voice that meant she was thinking of something, "What has this victory cost you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know what it cost Rainbow, because I know Rainbow. She hates losing, more than anything, and she just accepted an invitation to a fight she was absolutely certain to lose. That cost her a lot. You, on the other hoof, started a fight you were sure to win. That didn't cost you anything."

"But one proved one is the greater. And one shall prove one is greater than anypony in the entire world, for one *is*."

"You may be greater... but she was prepared to give more than you were."

"One doesn't see what that has to do with anything!" The Prince said, "Anyway, one is prepared to prove himself. Ask! Set what challenge you want! Slay a dragon, storm a tower – one shall do it!"

Rarity reached down, gathered some mud, and smeared it on her face.

"Kiss me," she said.

"That's disgusting!" The Prince said, backing off.

"Afraid of a little mud?" she said with a smile. She turned to face me.

"Rainbow?"

I kissed her.

I understand that it is vulgar to kiss and tell, so I shall avoid going in to much more detail. Suffice to say that for once in my life I did not regret my impulsive decision.

“Well then,” said Rarity, with a little less than her characteristic composure, “I believe that is decided.”

“Decided?” said Blueblood furiously, snatching the sword up off the ground, “You would turn down a Prince? You would make an enemy of the most powerful stallion in Equestria? For a *pegasus*? One is still Lord of Ponyville Manor, and one won’t forget this!”

“Why, you!” I said, starting forwards, but the sword was immediately at my throat.

“And what,” he said with a wicked smirk, “do you think you can do about it, little *soldier*?”

“... I said, that isn’t actually entirely correct.” Came a voice from off to the side.

“Trixie, shut that pony up, I’m busy,” snapped Blueblood. He was answered with a thunderclap, and he yelped and backpedalled rapidly from the lightning bolt that had struck the earth just in front of him.

“The GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie will have SILENCE while the Lady of Ponyville Manor speaks!” Shouted Trixie, and the skies above her rumbled. She gestured dramatically at Fluttershy, who cowered back a bit at suddenly being the centre of attention.

“Oh. Oh dear. Uh, what I was trying to say is that I’m actually kind of still the Lady of Ponyville Manor still.” She pawed at the ground a little.

“Pah! No matter,” Blueblood said, “Even without this place one can still see to it you *fillyfoolers* get what’s coming to you!”

“What?” Fluttershy said, looking up sharply.

"One said," said Prince Blueblood, tossing his mane proudly, "That one is still a Prince, and will see to it that none of you *ever* work in this country again! Say goodbye to your careers, ladies! One would say it has been fun, but if it was we wouldn't be having this talk," And he turned on his heel to walk away.

And came eye-to-eye with Fluttershy.

"How dare you." She said. And there was something in that look that made Blueblood stop dead.

"I am the Lady of Ponyville Manor, and you are threatening *my* friends on *my* land. And I can put up with being kidnapped, locked in a cage and hunted by a giant scary bear - but you do not, I repeat **not**, HURT. MY. FRIENDS!"

And he fled. Prince Blueblood, the most proud and handsome and powerful unicorn in all the land, fled from that little yellow pegasus so fast he almost tripped over his own tail.

*"So listen, my masters," said Trixie aloud, "and listen well,
"For I have a tale of wonders to tell.
"Of heroines and jerkwads and love and grace
"And the strangest monster to trouble this place."*

*

I feel compelled to apologise to my readers, whom I lured into this story with promises of a brilliant detective and a display of the science of deduction and the art of the dress, and instead provided with a tale of a bunglingly mishandled case and atypical romance. I am very sorry.

Harry the cross-dressing bear received a magnificent gown, as well as a tuxedo, designed and fitted especially for him from Rarity. When delivering it, I noticed to my eternal shame that the Pegasus who had been chained up in the cave with Fluttershy and myself was still there. We had quite forgotten about her in our rush to save Rarity, and the gag she wore had prevented her from raising her voice. I released her from her captivity but she seemed remarkably unbothered by the entire ordeal, claiming that she was used to it. I can't imagine what kind of lifestyle would involve getting

used to being tied up and stuffed in cages and felt it would be impolite to ask. I am lead to believe she has since taken to writing a series starring Fluttershy and myself. I haven't read it, but when I asked Fluttershy about it she went a brighter shade of pink than Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie Pie, on that topic, made a full recovery, and Mr. Pie was given the psychological help he so dearly needed. Pinkie and Fluttershy opted, ultimately, to stay in Ponyville Hall together. I make it a point to visit often, for they have begun to bring real colour and life to that previously dismal place. The Great and Powerful Trixie, after umming and ah'ing for a theatrically long time, ultimately decided to stay as well. I wish the three of them happiness together.

And as for Rarity and myself, well. Suffice to say that you will be able to always find us, together, at number 221B Baker Street, ready to solve any crime great or small.

- RAINBOW MIRIAM DASH

--The End--