

Hound of Ponyville p4: The Butterfly's Decision

By Thanqol

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! BWUAAHAHAHAHHAAH!”

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.