

Chapter Nine: *One Last Hurrah*

Chapter 8 \ \ \ \ Chapter 10

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“You did *what*?!”

Rainbow Dash cringed as Applejack continued to gawk in disbelief. A quick glance around the room offered no comfort, despite being one of Dash’s favorite places. Because of what Rainbow had done the previous evening, she had exiled herself from the farm, spending the night alone in the clouds for the first time in months. Dreading the moment when she would tell Applejack that she had struck a filly in the mouth out of frenzied and misdirected anger, Rainbow Dash had avoided the farmhouse for most of the morning and eaten her breakfast in town. She had seen more than a few familiar faces, reluctantly exchanging greetings, but received no word on the results of the previous day’s search. That is, until she ran into Pinkie Pie, just before returning to Sweet Apple Acres.

Now Rainbow felt as though her presence were polluting that most sacred of bedrooms. The late morning sun illuminated the room, a soft glow reflecting beautifully over the blond cascade of Applejack’s mane. The shame pulled Rainbow’s gaze to the floor, watching as a few more of her tears splashed against it.

After a full minute of silence, the earth pony spoke up. “Why, Dash? Why would ya do that?”

“Because she-” Rainbow choked on her words, shaking her head. “She said it was her fault! She’s the reason that the hydra attacked Ponyville! She’s the reason you lost your leg!”

“Damnit Dash, Ah already told ya; it ain’t nopony’s fault but mine that Ah got mah leg bit off! Ah knew what Ah was gettin’ into when Ah came up with that plan, an’ ain’t nopony forced me ta do it!” The pegasus glanced up to find a look of concern where she had expected one of anger. “Ya can’t keep blamin’ yerself, an’ ya certainly can’t go around blamin’ a filly. Now c’mere.”

Obediently, Rainbow approached the side of the bed, keeping her gaze downcast. She felt bandaged forehooves on the back of her neck, gently pulling her closer.

“You’re not mad at me?” Dash whispered, trembling.

“Ah’m disappointed, but Ah understand... Now Ah ain’t sayin’ what ya did was okay by any means, an’ you gotta make things right with Scootaloo, but...”

She felt those same hooves slowly lifting her head, until their eyes met. “You need to let this go. Ah know yer scared. Ah am too, but ya can’t keep this inside you, or it’ll break you like a sick tree in a storm. Life throws all kinds ‘a twists an’ turns at us, but we’re stronger for it if we can make tha’ best of things. The only way we can start doin’ that is by lettin’ go an’ accepting things fer what they are.”

“Accepting things for what they are...” Rainbow repeated as she closed her eyes. “And what are things right now?”

“Well... Fer starters, how’s everypony else doin’? They ain’t worryin’ bout me too much, Ah hope.”

“I... I’m not really sure... Pinkie might be stopping in to cheer you up later, but other than that...” Rainbow flapped her wings, lifting herself into bed beside Applejack. “Twilight left with Celestia last night, and Fluttershy-”

The blond mare sighed. “Still no luck findin’ her?”

"Worse," she answered, shaking her head. "Pinkie told me that Rarity is gone now, too. Didn't even show up for the funeral service."

"Neither did we," Applejack hastily replied. "That don't mean nothin'."

"Yeah, but Aloe was one of her close friends... I think she skipped town. No pony has seen a trace of her. Pinkie also told me that Celestia and Twilight left for Canterlot pretty much a little while after the search started. I'm betting Mahara has Fluttershy there, trying to hide right where Celestia wouldn't think to look, and Rarity is going there to—"

"Goin' there ta rescue Fluttershy? Attagirl! Ah'd be right there with her if..." Applejack trailed off as she looked Dash in the eyes, bringing Rainbow out of her distant stare. "What's wrong, Sugarcube?"

"I wanna believe that she's gonna to try and rescue Fluttershy, but..." Dash shook her head. "I don't know, AJ. Everything is all screwed up these days..."

"Well, Ah hope they catch Mahara." The earth pony looked to the foot of the bed, snorting. "Ah hope they make sure she can't hurt another pony ever again." Rainbow Dash nodded, resting her head against Applejack's breast. The earth pony's heart was pounding.

"But you know what," Applejack spat, her gaze narrowing into a glare. "Ah jus' realized, Ah been looking at this all wrong... This whole thing has that two bit bitch written all over it! An' not jus' Fluttershy an' Rarity goin' missin'! Scootaloo an' the others only went into the Everfree forest 'cause they were lookin' fer Mahara!" She turned her furious stare on the pegasus. Her chest heaved, her face beet red, a few hot tears streaming from her eyes.

"Ah was wrong, Dash, it's **her** fault! None of this woulda happened if **she** never showed up 'round here! Ah did what Ah had to do ta protect mah family! Ah ain't ta blame fer puttin' mah neck on tha line! An' it ain't Scootaloo's fault, an' it sure as hell isn't your fault neither!"

Some of the fire left Applejack's eyes as Rainbow returned a fearful stare. Like a tree on the last few chops of an axe, the blond mare collapsed against her pillow, shuddering as she wept quietly. All the pegasus could do was embrace her and hold her as tightly as she could.

The silence stretched on until Applejack's soft whimpers subsided, and she decided to speak again.

"What happened to us, Dash?" Rainbow looked up, but Applejack was looking out the window, drying her eyes with a bandaged hoof. "We all use'ta be so close. There weren't a problem we couldn't solve together. Now look at us..."

"It's not all bad," Rainbow whispered. "We still have each other."

Applejack smiled, seemingly just about to answer when the bedroom door suddenly swung open. Rainbow jolted, her eyes finding Big Macintosh when she turned to look. Despite his sudden entrance, he immediately closed his eyes and backed out of the room.

"Sorry," he called from the hallway. "Didn't mean to interrupt ya'll."

The slightest blush lit up Applejack's cheeks, but she just gave a weak laugh and shook her head. "Hell, Ah jus' missed an appointment with death a day ago, Mac... The doc told me ta take it easy, remember?"

"Hah, yeah... Still, I shoulda knocked." Macintosh trotted back into the room, looking more than a little

embarrassed himself.

Rainbow sat up, resting her back against the headboard. "So, what's up, big guy?"

"Ya'll ain't seen Applebloom around, have ya? Ah checked on her before Ah went to bed last night an'..." He looked down at his forehooves for a moment, shuffling nervously. "Well, Ah ain't seen her since!"

"I..." Rainbow paused as she glanced to Applejack, finding the earth pony's expression occupied with quickly mounting concern. "I didn't sleep on the farm last night... What about you, AJ?"

"Applebloom talked to me yesterday, a little while after sundown. She said that maybe Zecora would have some kinda potion to help me grow back mah leg..." Applejack smiled sadly, shaking her head. Big Macintosh looked between them with visible impatience, tapping a forehoof on the floor as he listened.

"Ah told her that was a mite foalish, but you know how she is once she's got an idea in there. Anyway, she's probably just at Zecora's hut."

"Yeah," Rainbow nodded, "but Zecora left town with Twilight and the princess. And Zecora hasn't even been staying at her hut the last few days. She'd been staying with Twilight." The blond pony arched her brows. "Does Applebloom know that?"

"Ah sure as hell didn't know that! Well, maybe she's just around town, then! Mahara ain't in Ponyville anymore, right? An' Applebloom said she was done with her, anyway! She can't be too far!"

Applejack shifted around, looking as though she were going to try and get out of bed. Rainbow put a hoof on her shoulder, halting the effort. "Easy... Mac and I will find her."

"Ah hate this..." she stated bitterly.

There was a helplessness in the blond mare's eyes that made Rainbow feel a twinge of guilt. The same kind of helplessness she'd seen just before her love was snatched between the jaws of a hydra. Clearly having heard enough, Big Macintosh stepped out of the room and galloped down the stairs, the front door slamming a few moments later. Rainbow Dash remained, however, rubbing her hooves over Applejack's forelegs. The blond mare looked up at her with a face full of worry, a slight tremble running through her.

"Are you gonna be okay here by yourself?"

"Ah reckon so... Ah ain't paralyzed, jus' one hoof short, an' Ah know you'll bring her home safe." Her delicate smile brought reassurance to Rainbow. They kissed briefly, after which the earth pony pointed to the door. "Now fer heaven's sake, git goin' an' find mah lil' sister!"

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The excitement Twilight Sparkle might have felt as she visited the more private quarters of the royal palace was severely dampened by the sense of dread invading her every thought. At the end of a corridor decorated and lit as if to imitate the night sky, an enormous pair of doors rested in their frame, adorned with a carving of the moon. A pair of guards stood on either side of that door, watching attentively as they drew nearer. As if sensing the unicorn's anxiety, Celestia glanced back at her, tilting her head and offering a smile.

"We're only going to ask her a few questions, Twilight. There's nothing to worry about."

Twilight looked between the two armored pegasi following closely behind Celestia. "What about the guards?" The princess was not dressed in armor herself, but the pegasi remained fully covered.

"Just a precaution, of course." The alicorn smiled again, but Twilight felt her heart sink deeper with every step. She dared not even imagine what would happen if they discovered Luna was involved in some way. "We're here to speak with Luna," Celestia informed the black, bat winged pegasus standing at attention before her. They nodded, maintaining their posts.

A loud click sounded from the other side of the doors. Celestia and her escorts paused, the princess looking to them, each nodding in turn. She turned toward Twilight and motioned for her to come closer, cleared her throat, and took a deep breath. Only when the unicorn had hesitantly come to her side did Celestia push the heavy-looking doors open with her magic, a loud, dry creak resonating through the otherwise empty hall.

Together, they stepped through the threshold into darkness.

At least, it appeared to be complete darkness at first. Twilight's eyes slowly adjusted to the near-absence of light, and as they did, she began to notice the soft glow coming from seemingly all around her. Faint, distant points of light completely circled them, highlighting the silhouettes of Celestia and her guards. It occurred to the unicorn that the room had no actual walls, and she was immediately reminded of the domed ceiling of a planetarium. Her gaze drifted across various constellations, eventually settling on the softly glowing sphere of the moon. She realized moments later that the moon in the display was occupying the same space as the sun.

"Hello sister," came a voice from somewhere in the chamber, dripping with playful sarcasm. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Luna, there is a matter that requires immediate discussion." The finer details of Celestia's face slowly came into focus as Twilight's eyes continued to adjust. "I regret that I have not informed you of the current situation sooner, but anxiety got the better of me, and I acted without first consulting you."

Princess Luna emerged from the surrounding darkness as she stepped forward, regarding her sister curiously. Her gaze casually drifted over the guards before settling on Twilight for several moments. The unicorn quickly averted her gaze, looking down at the barely visible floor until Luna began to speak.

"And what seems to be the trouble, dear sister?" Twilight looked up in time to catch a sly grin across Luna's lips, the alicorn motioning toward her. "Surely it's nothing that you and your star pupil cannot resolve on your own."

"I had hoped that it would be, but that hasn't been the case."

Luna took another step forward, still smiling. "And how might I be of service?"

"Mahara has been released, although perhaps resurrected is the better word." Luna froze in place, her grin vanishing. Celestia continued. "She has already infected at least one of my subjects with her black magic, with a very possible, but as-of-yet unconfirmed second infection. Her location is currently unknown, which means the possibility of additional corruption is very high. We have reason to believe that she may be in Canterlot, however."

"Yes..." Luna replied, after a short stretch of silence. She looked away, brow furrowing. "That is very concerning indeed..."

Both princesses held their ground. "Were you aware of this turn of events prior to this conversation?"

"I'm afraid not, or I would have informed you immediately. How is it that she is alive again?"

"It would appear that when I attempted to seal her within her diary, while her physical form resisted the spell, her soul was bound to it." Celestia glanced down at the unicorn before continuing. "It was Twilight that discovered the diary in the Ponyville library's basement, and evidently Mahara was able to influence the book itself to draw blood from her so that she might escape."

Twilight managed a feeble nod, making another few seconds of eye contact with Luna. Gone was the grandeur from moon princess's expression, however. She almost appeared hurt at the news.

"That brings me to my next question." Celestia took a step forward, narrowing her eyes at her sister. "How did Mahara's diary end up in the basement of a library, Luna?"

"I... I'm not certain as to how, sister. I had nothing to do with-" Luna shrank away as Celestia leaned forward. "I'm telling the truth, sister! I had no involvement with this!"

Twilight lifted her head, stepping around to lock eyes with the sun princess. "Celestia, Mahara's diary wasn't just lying around in the basement. There was an accident moving things around the day before I found it. Spike knocked down a section of the wall, and I decided to explore the passage that had been revealed. The passage itself wasn't the result of any pony excavation, but the roots themselves, and I practically had to pry the diary out of them to get a look at it." Celestia eased back, and Luna seemed greatly relieved.

"What I'm saying is... it doesn't seem like anypony intended for me to find the diary. I only found it by chance. I'm sorry that I didn't mention this sooner..."

"It has been so long," Luna began, "I had forgotten that I had buried Mahara's diary in the same soil that Ponyville has been built on."

Celestia arched a brow. "You buried it?"

"You did not provide me with a body to bury, so I buried her diary in her place." The black alicorn hung her head low, ears splayed. "Sister, I had no idea..."

"Nor did I. Those were troubled times, and I have already forgiven you, dearest Luna." The white alicorn smiled sadly, lifting a hoof to Luna's breast, letting it return to the floor when Luna looked up at her. "We can talk about this more later, if you'd like, but for the moment, we must discuss an appropriate course of action with which to deal with her and the ponies she has corrupted."

Luna nodded slightly, giving Celestia her full attention. The flowing, nebulous form of her mane blended almost seamlessly with the illusion of the starry night surrounding them. As Twilight took a few steps back, she realized that the stars visible in Luna's mane moved in accordance with the direction from which she looked at them, like an astrologically correct portal into the night sky.

"And what is it that you intend, sister?"

"While I hold no ill will against the ponies that have been tainted with black magic, because there is no way to cure them of their affliction, I am afraid that they cannot remain among my-" Celestia shifted her weight, briefly glancing up at the ceiling. "Our subjects. The risk of unnecessary bloodshed is simply too high."

"How, exactly, do you propose that these individuals are..." The smaller alicorn hesitated. "*Removed*... from our kingdom?"

“At first, I had thought it appropriate to seal them away, but...” Luna’s eyes went wide at the mention of sealing, but she settled after Celestia raised a forehoof. “But these ponies, Mahara included, have done nothing deserving of so harsh a punishment... of their own volition, anyway.”

“Something...” Luna seemed to hesitate, lips drawn tightly, “*tragic*... has already occurred, I assume?”

Celestia took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “A zebra by the name of Zecora, living on the outskirts of Ponyville; friends with Twilight in fact. Mahara infected her, and she went without blood until she was consumed with a lust for it. She killed two members of my guard and came very close to killing a third.” Luna nodded slowly, her expression grave as she remained silent. “Zecora has expressed an urge to be executed for her actions, even though I have given her a sincere pardon. She tells me that the memories are unbearable and that she cannot live with what she has done.”

For roughly a minute, Luna was speechless. “Will you grant her request?”

“I have no desire to stain my hooves with blood, especially from so noble a mare... but she has agreed to help us track down Mahara on the grounds that she will be put out of her misery when Mahara is no longer a threat. Unless she changes her mind, I am honor bound to uphold the agreement, and to deny her... Well, I fear she may take her own life if I am unable to take it for her.”

“How very sad...” Luna looked down at her hooves as Celestia gave a slow nod. After a few moments, she asked, “What of Mahara?”

“Ending her life once was traumatic enough for me... While perhaps I had at one point thought it appropriate to seal her away in her diary once again, now...” Celestia shook her head. “After you had been sealed within the moon, Luna, there were so many ponies left in your wake, both uninfected supporters and those willingly or unwillingly changed into creatures of the night. Some of them wanted to keep fighting, others accepted defeat and turned themselves over, and still more went into hiding, realizing what was likely to come.”

The sun princess stepped away from her sister, the sound of her hooves echoing through the immense chamber. Luna turned, following at her side, while the guards remained by the door. Twilight trailed behind them, letting her gaze wander as she listened in.

Luna’s voice held the slightest tremble, almost fearful. “What did you do, Sister?”

“Some of them were treasonous, while others were simply caught up in the chaos and found themselves in over their heads, but... all of them presented a threat. I couldn’t bear to have them all executed. I had already seen more than enough carnage in the turmoil leading up to your imprisonment. I...”

Celestia stopped abruptly, turning her head toward Luna. “I banished them. I sent them very, very far from here, to a place which they would have no chance of escaping. I sent a small army to ensure order was upheld as well, but... that was a very, very long time ago. I want to believe that, all these centuries later, they have reached a point of peace, but...”

“I’ve never read about this before...” Both princesses looked back at Twilight when she raised her voice, approaching them slowly. “How is it that so much of this was unrecorded?”

“You’ll find that often in recorded history, some things receive greater focus than others. In this case, the absence of the sun was worth greater mention in the eyes of historians than the appearance and disappearance of strange, nocturnal ponies, and as far as most historians are concerned, the conflict was solely between Luna and myself, handled swiftly and cleanly. The truth, as you now understand, was far less pleasant.”

Twilight glanced between the regal sisters, gauging their expressions. “How is it, then, that Zecora knew about ponies like Mahara?”

“While my subjects didn’t take the time to document the scattered stories of a new type of pony, the subjects of the zebra tribes were not so quick to dismiss them. What remains of that history exists in the form of zebra folklore, as you heard from Zecora...”

Celestia looked away for a moment, sliding her hoof in a circle. “And while it is possible that, despite my best efforts, some of the tainted ponies may have escaped beyond the borders of Equestria, I have received no word of any incidents for hundreds and hundreds of years.”

“Wait, what about...” The unicorn looked to Luna, tilting her head. “What about your personal guards? Like the ones standing outside. They have eyes like Mahara, and bat wings.”

The moon princess smiled. “Nothing more than an enchantment of their armor, mostly for aesthetics’ sake. The eyes, however, serve a practical purpose. Being able to see in the dark would naturally be essential to serving me.” She returned her focus to Celestia, her brow knitted. “You intend to banish Mahara, then? You’re going to send her somewhere that may not even be safe?”

“I know it sounds cruel, but it’s a much better alternative to death, or undeath within the confines of a book. And depending on the state we find Fluttershy in...” The white alicorn’s gaze nervously swept over Twilight. “Well, Mahara won’t be going there alone, at the very least.”

It’s really happening... A dry gasp choked its way out of Twilight, her breast tightening at those words. I’m really going to lose her!

“One of the element bearers?” Luna asked. “The quiet one?”

The room began to spin, Celestia’s voice becoming distant. “Yes... And if it becomes necessary, Rarity as well.” The sun princess looked to Twilight, her brow shooting up. “I know this is very troubling for you but- Twilight? Twilight?!”

The unicorn felt her legs give out from under her, the pale silhouette of princess Celestia lost under a blanket of darkness.

Her vision returned under a soft haze, with the sun shining brightly overhead. Her five closest friends smiled back at her, and at one another, laughing, lounging, and telling stories. Clouds began to roll across the horizon, a strong wind blowing across the field. Applejack and Rainbow Dash embraced one another, kissed deeply, then the pair got to their hooves, waved, and slowly walked away from the group.

Wait, she called after them, Pinkie Pie echoing her sentiments. The pink pony shrugged after a moment and returned her attention to the group. Everyone but Twilight kept laughing. Applejack and Rainbow Dash only focused on each other, ignoring everyone else as they crossed the field, until finally vanishing from view.

Heavy storm clouds churned overhead, rumbling as they blotted out most of the sky. The sun continued to shine through a break in the clouds, directly overhead. Shouting brought her attention back to her remaining friends. Rarity and Fluttershy stood on opposite sides of the picnic blanket, with Rarity spitting harsh words at her closest friend, crying tears of anger. Now sobbing hysterically, Fluttershy slowly turned away and began to cross the field.

Please don’t go, Twilight cried. Pinkie Pie looked at her from the other side of the blanket, then turned her gaze to Fluttershy, attempting to follow, asking her to return. Before Pinkie could even lay a hoof on

her, Rarity ran to Fluttershy's side, hugging her tightly around the neck. As they began to smile, a formless red mist swirled around them both and whisked them away.

Pinkie sighed softly, returning to the blanket and settling across from Twilight. She was trying to smile, but Twilight could see how hard it had become for her.

What did we do wrong? Pinkie asked, her curls starting to straighten out. *Did they get bored of us? Is there anything we can do to bring them back? Or are we just bad friends?*

I... I don't know, Pinkie... Rain began to fall in sheets, soaking everything around the unicorn. A single column of sunlight protected her. Pinkie looked skyward, her hair completely limp. Twilight did the same, finding herself staring up at Celestia.

The princess slowly descended, landing in front of Twilight, smiling her gentle, regal smile. The unicorn felt her weight slowly lifting, drifting into the air with Celestia as she began to ascend. Her elation was extinguished as she looked down at the blanket again. Pinkie was nowhere to be seen.

Nothing lasts forever, the princess whispered.

And just like that, Twilight Sparkle was completely alone.

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Won't she be surprised to see me! Ah bet this'll cheer her right up!

Were this her first time seeing Canterlot, Applebloom might have gasped or stood in awe. Instead, she looked around the Canterlot Central Station courtyard with a wide grin, taking a deep breath of fresh air. Everything about the situation was exciting to the young mare. She had gone into the Everfree forest on her own plenty of times, but never to another town, and certainly not to another city without some kind of adult or chaperone.

After finding Zecora's hut completely abandoned, she had returned to Ponyville, where she quickly found out why Zecora had left town and where she had gone. The regular morning run to Canterlot had just pulled in as she trotted past the station. One particularly large suitcase lay partially open next to a pile of several others. A bunch of blankets lay within; nothing that she figured anypony would miss too badly, and there wasn't another pony in sight. Applebloom's decision was an easy one.

Over the constantly moving heads of the crowd around her, the castle stood proudly in the center of the city, illuminated by the sun's gentle rays. She was, at least, vaguely familiar with the way to the royal palace, thanks in part to her fair share of fieldtrips to Equestria's capital. Applebloom spent a moment reflecting on those fieldtrips, most of them largely uneventful. It had been at least two and a half years since the trip that ended in Discord's release. If anything, that was a point of concern for her.

Almost three years, an' still no cutie mark... Mah birthday is comin' up, too... Ah'm gonna be-

A bell began to toll not far from where she stood, drawing her gaze to the enormous face of a clock tower.

Shucks, ain't even noon yet. Ah'm sure they don't even know Ah'm gone! She smiled as a few ponies looked down at her, brows arched and mouths askew with curiosity. She waved, then rejoined the flow of the crowd. *Still, Ah ain't got time ta go sight seein'.*

Several blocks of looking into shop windows and crossing busy streets made her realize that traveling to

the castle on hoof was going to take longer than she had expected. A cluttered cart waited patiently at an intersection, hitched to what appeared to be a pony wearing the armor of the royal guard. As quietly as she could, Applebloom crawled in, laying flat against the bed moments before it began to rumble with motion. Smiling, she rolled onto her back, watching the buildings pass on either side. Every time she felt the cart come to a stop, she peered over the side, finding herself closer to her destination.

Not wanting to press her luck, she slipped out of the cart about a block from the gates, cautiously trotting up to the enormous wall surrounding the perimeter. The castle itself was a bit higher up on the mountain, but there was plenty of foliage to take cover in as she approached. She checked to make sure no one was watching her, rubbing her hooves together as she prepared to scale the wall.

“And as you can see, ahead of us is the royal palace.” Applebloom turned toward the voice, finding a large group of ponies led by a very friendly looking mare. “Now, I will remind you again to stay with the tour group and refrain from bucking, licking, nudging, biting, levitating, touching or otherwise disturbing anything behind ropes within the castle. Photos are permissible.”

The filly looked between the wall and the tour group several times, then scurried over to join them. None of them even seemed to notice.

The walk up to the castle was agonizingly slow with the tour guide frequently pausing to point out important trees and statues or recite history, most of it she had already learned from field trips. The second they had crossed the moat and entered the castle, Applebloom split from the group, slipping under a velvet rope and into the hallway it barred. She completely lost track of time after that, sneaking through side passages, peering into rooms, and avoiding guards as they patrolled the corridors. All things considered, it wasn't that difficult, but then they probably weren't expecting an intrusion, much less from a filly.

Occasionally, Applebloom would emerge back into one of the main halls, catch sight of the tour group, and quickly vanish back into areas that were supposed to be off limits. In the distance, the clock tower tolled, informing her of the arrival of noon. She began to lose hope; the castle was much too large for one filly to search every inch of it. As she leaned against a wall, sighing softly, her ear swiveled in the direction of a conversation.

“...not sure it's safe to keep her here, especially not so close to the princess's bedroom. Can't we build a stable or something for her?”

“She's friends with that Twilight Sparkle girl-”

“Oh, isn't she-”

“Yeah, the princess's *star pupil*... and all of the sudden, Celestia herself seems to admire her too, so that's a big no.”

Applebloom leaned around the corner, setting her eyes on a pair of guards; one male, the other female, both earth ponies. They were completely absorbed in their chat, slowly moving down the hall. Staying as low to the floor as she could, the filly began to follow them.

“But yeah,” she continued, “didn't Celestia just tell us how dangerous they are the day before?” The female guard had her helmet balanced on her nose, occasionally jerking whenever it threatened to fall. She was the reason for their snail pace. “Why are we even keeping her alive?”

“I know. You can tell how bad she wants to be put out of her misery, too. What a shame...” The stallion sighed, shaking his head. “Such beautiful stripes...”

The mare turned toward him, grinning. Applebloom darted behind a vase. "Didn't figure you for the zebra-chasing type. I never really got into much interspecies stuff, myself."

"Wait, what? Aren't you dating a griffon?"

A soft clattering sound reached Applebloom's ears. As she glanced across the rim of the vase, she saw that they had come to a complete stop and that the mare had dropped her helmet, blushing rather intensely.

"*Much*. I said I didn't get into *much* interspecies stuff."

"Oh really?" He leaned toward her, brow cocked. "Zebras and ponies are almost the same kind of equine. They can have foals together. A griffon is like, a cat... bird... thing... they have two different kinds of claws, sharp beaks... *barbed*."

"Yeah, well...!" She sputtered several times, beet red in the face. The stallion was visibly fighting to keep himself from laughing. "Don't you have some stripes to go gawk at?!"

Applebloom held her breath as the mare stormed right past her, vanishing around the corner. The stallion laughed until he cried as he made his way down the hall. She resumed her stalking, staying several pony-lengths behind him for fear that he might look back and spot her. Eventually, she followed him to a much larger, slightly more populated hallway. Ponies in professional looking attire passed by ponies in armor and ponies carrying cleaning supplies. She hesitated behind a trash bin as he traveled further and further across the hall, fearing she might lose him. To her surprise, he stopped at a door on the other side, nodding to the pair of guards on either side of it. She strained to listen as they started to speak.

"...been pretty quiet all day, mostly," said the unicorn stallion to the left. "Asked for a few ingredients a little while ago. Celestia said it was safe to give her whatever she requested, so we rounded them up for her."

"I thought we weren't supposed to regard her as a prisoner," said the guard she had followed.

"We're not. She's holed herself in there on her own." The stocky unicorn shrugged. "She said she doesn't want to come out unless Twilight Sparkle or Princess Celestia asks for her personally."

The filly ducked into a doorway as she pondered how to reach the room without being seen. She had no doubt that she would find Zecora within, but getting there was going to be more than a challenge. She peered out again, all three guards staying put as they continued to talk amongst themselves.

If Ah could jus' get to tha other side of the hallway...

Applebloom froze as a soft rattling came from behind her. She whipped around just in time to see a pony in a maid's outfit round the corner. Thinking fast, she flattened against a depression in the wall, striking a pose and holding her breath as the pony passed, pulling cart loaded with cleaning supplies. The lowest shelf of the cart was surrounded by a partially opened curtain, vacant, and large enough for her to hide in.

Bingo.

Half stepping, half rolling, she slipped onto the shelf, drawing the curtain, curling up tightly and praying no one noticed her. To her relief, she wasn't yanked out and dragged out of the castle. She peered out through a gap in the curtain, then rolled back out of the cart as it passed an open door on the other side of the hall. Once inside, she scanned her surroundings, hiding behind a tapestry to narrowly avoiding

being spotted by another maid. The maid slowly trotted back out of the room, likely finished dusting, and closed the door behind her. The filly heaved a sigh of relief and made her way to the enormous window.

Just as she had hoped, the window opened onto a balcony, with identical balconies on either side, flush to the curved exterior of the castle. The window opened with little difficulty, but a strong gust of wind made her flinch, blowing her mane into her eyes. Carefully, she closed the window behind her, stepping up to the railing. Staring into the gap between the balcony on which she stood and the balcony of Zecora's room, she felt a nervous chill run down her back. Far below, ponies went about their business in the castle courtyard. A few unintelligible shouts found their way up to her, but she ignored them and braced her forehooves against the rail.

Here goes...

She pushed herself up with her forehooves, jumping onto the railing with her hinds, and then coiled like a spring as she touched the railing, launching onto the adjacent balcony. She teetered in place where she landed, letting out her breath in a giggle. Looking down on the way had been a mistake. With a dizzy grin, she turned toward Zecora's window.

The zebra was occupied, holding her door ajar and peering through the crack. Applebloom quietly snuck into the room, crouching down behind the bed and listening in. "I'm feeling very strange indeed..." she softly stated, sounding almost apologetic. "I feel it must be time to feed."

"We'll make the arrangements immediately," came a response from the voice of the stocky unicorn.

She heard the door click, followed by the sound of hooves against the floor, slowly approaching the bed.

"I'm not sure why you've ignored my request, but to your presence I fear I must protest." Applebloom was so startled by the address that she locked up. A few clumsy syllables made their way past her lips as she felt herself gripped with anxiety.

"I do not care what you have to say!" She recognized the fear and anger in Zecora's voice. "I just want you to go away!"

"Zecora, it's me!" The zebra staggered back when Applebloom peered at her from across the bed. Remembering that there were guards outside, she lowered her voice. "Ah didn't mean ta sneak in an' startle you. Well, Ah did mean ta sneak in, but- Well, you know what Ah mean. Ah never got to talk to ya before ya left, so Ah figured Ah'd visit you here, an', well, howdy."

Applebloom gave the biggest smile she could, and for about a minute, Zecora was speechless. Eventually, the smallest trace of a smile found its way across her lips. She took a few steps closer, lightly shaking her head.

"I'm very happy to see you, Applebloom, but you should not be here in this room." Her smile vanished as she looked away, stopping several paces from the bed. "I'm... not quite myself anymore, you see... I fear it's not safe to be here with me..."

"Ah don't understand..." The filly stepped out from behind the bed, slowly trotting toward her friend. "Yer not yerself? What do you mean?"

As Zecora looked her in the eyes, displaying the slits of her pupils and the soft turquoise glow, Applebloom understood exactly what the zebra meant.

"How?" she whispered.

"Like you, I am a victim of her treachery... To be spared was her plan, as you can see. For the moment, I am in control, but should I unhinge..." Zecora turned away again, looking down at the floor. After a moment, she shook her head. "It's too costly a toll."

"What..." The filly hesitated, fearing what the answer might bring. "What kinda toll?"

Zecora continued to stare at the floor. "This thirst is a beast in a flimsy cage, and none are safe from its endless rage. I've brought two lives to a painful end. The next could very well be you, my friend... I cannot risk that, nor live with what I've done. My life must end for the sake of everyone." She closed her eyes as she took a deep breath, trembling. "I know this may be hard to hear... but I'm already gone... please, just say goodbye, my dear."

A blanket of near silence fell over the room, neither mare moving from where they stood. The news that Zecora had committed murder was difficult for her to swallow, but Applebloom could feel the pain radiating from her at the mention of what she had done. Instead of fear, she felt only concern.

"No," Applebloom managed at last. "Ah ain't leavin', an' Ah sure ain't sayin' goodbye."

The zebra lifted her head, narrowing her teary eyes. "Applebloom, this is no joke. I meant every word I spoke."

"An' Ah mean that Ah ain't jus' gonna forget about you an' move on, Zecora!" She tried to move closer, but for every step forward she took, Zecora took a step back. Applebloom stopped only when Zecora had her haunches to the door. "Ah mean, you didn't mean ta kill 'em, right?"

"Their dying breaths fill me with grief..." She shook her head slowly, eyes squeezed shut. "From this guilt, there is no relief! I'd trade my life for theirs without hesitation, so my death will be justice, and just compensation."

"No... Zecora, you may have her blood in ya now, but you ain't a monster. Ah can see that plain as day from where Ah'm standin'." Zecora continued to shake her head, her tears silently rolling down her muzzle. "Whatever happened weren't yer fault. It was an accident. Diein' ain't gonna fix anything; jus' make a whole lotta ponies feel a whole lot worse."

Applebloom took a deep breath and a slow, cautious step forward.

"Please," Applebloom whispered, wrapping her forelegs around the zebra's neck. "Ah'm already all bent outta' shape 'bout Mahara an' what Ah did to Scootaloo. Ah don't know what Ah'm gonna do if Ah lose you, too..."

Slowly, Zecora opened her eyes, blinking away a few more tears as her fragile smile returned.

"For one so young, you've become quite wise... I'll give it more thought, perhaps compromise..." She returned the embrace, hugging Applebloom tightly. The doorknob began to glow. "But if you won't leave, then it's best you hide. This part of the castle you shouldn't-"

"Yeah, we know you have someone else in there," interrupted the stocky unicorn. "*You're* a not a prisoner, and if *you* wanted to see her this badly, you could have just asked."

"Oh..." they said in unison.

Applebloom sighed, Zecora mumbling something in her native tongue as she stepped away from the door. Half a dozen guards peered into the room when the door opened, displaying various degrees of confusion, amusement, or mild irritation.

“She’s not supposed to be here?” asked a pegasus mare, pointing at Applebloom. “I saw her sneaking around earlier and I thought she was one of the Kinder-Guardians practicing infiltration tactics or something.”

“I thought the captain said we were supposed to call them *Junior Shieldsters*...”

An uneasy silence swept the excitement out of the room, and as Applebloom’s gaze swept over the faces present, she found half of the guards down casting their gaze, the others shooting a dark glare in Zecora’s direction. The zebra winced before looking down at the floor herself.

After several silent, tense seconds, one of the guards mumbled, “So I guess this means nopony liked my *Foal Phalanx* suggestion?”

As the small crowd of guards began to snicker, Zecora loudly cleared her throat. “This will not sound rude, I think, but I believe I stated my need to drink?”

“Right! Right, Shining Dawn should be back any moment now.” The crowd slowly dissipated as the stocky unicorn looked down the hall. “There she is. What about your uh... guest there?”

Applebloom and Zecora exchanged glances. “She may remain if she so desires, but please send her home before the day expires.”

The filly beamed, wiggling her ears. Another smile broke across Zecora’s lips, muted slightly when a mare entered the room. She carried a tray with a napkin, a salt shaker, and a large bowl in the center. Zecora cast a nervous glance at Applebloom, but the filly just smiled and nodded, trotting over to the bed and settling on the end, looking out the window as she waited for the zebra to finish.

V ^ ^ V

Once their thirst had been slaked, Rarity insisted that Mahara and Fluttershy go out and have fun. The only condition was that the fun in question be legal and not likely to draw unwanted attention. Trixie declined their offer to accompany them on their outing, much preferring to lounge around Sapphire Shores’ lavish penthouse. Rarity stated that she was determined to get some work done, and similarly declined. Instead, she provided them with new clothes and a purse full of bits to spend, and then shoed them out the door.

A bright, sunny afternoon greeted them the moment they set hoof outside, but with adequate covering, the mostly cloudless sky was hardly a bother. It felt a bit strange to look out at the world from behind sunglasses, but as far as Fluttershy was concerned, it was a much better alternative to near-blindness. With no plans for any sort of dark magic, the necessity to draw fresh blood was minimal, at the most, and the dresses, hats, and sunglasses all but eliminated the need for any actual disguise.

Despite its state of perpetual sleeplessness, Manehattan was much more active during the day. Music carried on the gentle breeze, complimented by the occasional flock of birds or busy pegasi, and every shop seemed to be open for business. Tack’s Square was first on their itinerary, with the park listed as one of the things to visit before sundown, both for its gardens and its wildlife.

Mahara pranced about beside her as they moved through the constantly flowing crowd on the street, grinning from ear to ear as she took in the sights and sounds and smells of the city. Fluttershy smiled and giggled softly as she caught an excited glance from the red mare. She hadn’t felt so relaxed or so eager to enjoy herself in an uncomfortably long time. Mahara clearly felt the same.

It also felt nice to wear something that fit properly. Fluttershy had yet to really get a grasp on shape shifting, and considering that it meant pain and the expenditure of blood, she was less than enthusiastic to try and slim herself down right away. To her relief, Rarity had been very understanding and more than happy to modify a dress for the pegasus with the resources at her disposal. The hemming in back hung down to her ankles, bearing print resembling ivy, with the sleeves reaching all the way to her fetlocks, and blue sash tied snugly around her middle to hold the outfit together.

It wasn't anything too flashy, the pegasus always favoring modesty over grandeur, and it resembled her dress from the Gala to a degree, though shorter, more casual, and more concealing. Most importantly, it flowed well with her figure, and she had to admit that it made her feel pretty good. Almost confident.

Almost.

Even though they blended near-seamlessly with the crowd, her sunglasses and hat provided something of a comforting barrier. Where Fluttershy's sun hat resembled something made of woven grass, its wide brim dotted with the occasional fake flower, Mahara's very nearly resembled a bonnet, adorned with a large white bow.

As much as she loved what Rarity had come up with on short notice, she was having a hard time keeping her eyes off of the red mare gleefully exploring the city with her, and she found herself fixated on her companion as they waited at a crossing. The idea of Mahara wearing something that Rarity described as "dark" and "mysterious" was at first a point of doubt, but actually seeing her in the short, puffy, black dress with bows and frilly white lace trimming was oddly appropriate. In the place of sleeves, she wore near-shoulder length stockings with white lace curling along the border.

The pegasus looked away from Mahara as they slowed with the traffic, a large crowd gathered out in front of a building, its enormous bay windows facing Tack's Square. An unintelligible murmur came from within, interrupted by a loud bang, which was followed by a roar of applause. The red mare's eyes just about sparkled as she motioned for Fluttershy to follow her inside.

A short line, at least a dozen more bangs, another round of thunderous applause, and two tickets later, they stood in an enormous foyer ringed with two levels of mezzanines. Despite the room's size, it was nearly packed from wall to wall with ponies. More than a dozen pegasi littered the air, attempting to get some breathing room as they watched intently. What everypony was watching, however, remained a mystery. Mahara tapped her shoulder and flicked her tail against Fluttershy's lips, making a chomping motion. Snickering, Fluttershy bit down on Mahara's tail as instructed, letting the red mare lead her through the crowd.

"...this little baby here— manufactured by Mouser— is much more compact, as you can see." Fluttershy caught a glimpse of the speaker, realizing that the voice was coming from a griffon. "Instead of a revolving cylinder, it uses a spring loaded box magazine. I understand that you non-magical, hooved-types might have a little trouble getting those tiny bullets into those tiny chambers, but I assure you, a magazine is much more convenient than individually loading each round before you're ready to fire."

Finally, Mahara and Fluttershy had pushed close enough to get a good view. He wore his plumage up, almost like the points and comb of a rooster, though interrupted slightly by a pair of ear muffs. His feathers were a reddish beige, the tips tinted a soft pomegranate. As seemed to be the trend in Manehattan, he was fully clothed, wearing a dress shirt the color of cream and pants the same color as his highlights. A matching vest and a hat were slung over a chair not far from him.

The griffon stood in what almost appeared to be a transparent box of some kind, surrounded by several short crates and a wall of sand bags. The interior was scuffed and streaked in multiple places. On the other end of the box were multiple stands with various smashed and un-smashed fruit and pottery.

Behind that was a very opaque, very wet-looking wall of some thick substance. Clay came to mind. He held up a small, blocky object with a metal cylinder jutting from one end, displaying it for his audience.

His gaze swept proudly over the crowd as he grinned around his beak. "So, how about a demonstration?" The noise of the crowd was near-deafening, and Fluttershy cringed as the commotion reverberated in her sensitive ears. "Alright then! And, as before, remember that I'm a trained professional!"

The griffon raised the object over his head, then narrowed his eyes and exhaled as he leveled it, seeming to look across it at the other side of the box. The first flash and subsequent crack were such a surprise that Fluttershy didn't even react, confused more than anything. A melon on the far end exploded in that same instant, pulp spattering the floor. Every ear splitting crack that followed made her whimper. Mahara turned, her brow furrowed, and started to push back through the crowd. Fluttershy followed.

Another cheer went up behind them. "So in case you weren't counting," he shouted, barely audible over the commotion, "that was ten shots! Four more than the Weston revolver we showcased last year! The Mouser pistol should be available for consumers by fall, but today, one of you lucky folks will-"

"Are you alright?" Fluttershy looked up, noting the worry in Mahara's expression.

"Loud..." the pegasus mumbled. "Very loud, and a little scary..." She glanced back at her right flank, biting her lower lip. "Also, it reminded me of the other night. And the hydra..."

Mahara nodded. "I know what you mean. Let's look at another exhibit."

"Exhibit?" The red mare pointed up at an enormous banner Fluttershy had failed to notice upon entering. It read, in stylized letters, *Thirty-Seventh Annual Manehattan Innovations Expo*. "Oh. Okay." She smiled, nuzzling Mahara on the back of the neck as they pressed through the crowd.

Much to their mutual relief, the other panels at the expo were showcasing much less destructive inventions. Most of them were amusingly novel. One particularly distressed mare had to explain to her audience several times that her contraption wasn't just a box that made beeping noises then you tapped its metal lever. Mahara seemed to have a hard time believing otherwise, but it made perfect sense to Fluttershy; it reminded her of the way birds communicated through chirps.

Closer to the center of the foyer, a crowd had formed that rivaled the one gathered around the firearms exhibit. At the heart of it, they found something resembling a wagon that emitted a steady chug and thick, black plume of smoke. A team of pegasi slowly circled over the rattling, smoke-spewing pipe, guiding the puffy black cloud out through an open skylight. The wheels of the carriage seemed to turn on their own, even though there were no ponies pulling it. Fluttershy realized moments later that it sat atop an enormous, moving conveyor belt. There was a counter attached to the belt, the number steadily climbing, with *Miles* written above it in bright red letters. The conveyor belt had no motor, however.

"Do you think it's magic?" she asked, leaning closer to Mahara.

"Do you think it's magic, she says!" Fluttershy staggered back as she realized a stallion had come between Mahara and herself. "Did you hear that?!"

"Magic?!" questioned an almost identical voice from the other side of the carriage. "Hah! Hardly!"

Mahara peered around the side of the first stallion, looking as confused as Fluttershy felt. The stallion in question grinned down at her with bright green eyes, bearing a full, red mustache. His horn pushed against the rim of his cheap-looking, blue top hat. The blue and white suit and black bow tie he wore

looked to be of equally poor quality. Moments later, he was joined by a second unicorn stallion, completely indistinguishable from the first except that he lacked a mustache. Mahara made an attempt to step around them, halted when they both raised their forelegs toward the carriage.

“Once upon a time, our very first design, that one ran on magic.”

“But not all of you have horns to cast it too, and that, my dear, is tragic.”

The crowd drew in closer, swallowing Mahara up. “Wait, Fluttershy,” she called out frantically as the pegasus lost sight of her. “What’s happening?!”

“They’re... it’s...” Fluttershy arched a brow, her skepticism fading into a grin. “Oh, just watch and see...”

“Why travel by air, if you haven’t got a pair of wings to take you skyward?”

“Take a look around, we’re all here on the ground, shouldn’t transit be less awkward?”

“So my brother and I, we decided to try and make something more convenient!”

“Give us an ear, we’ll make it quite clear, and we’re sure you’ll be in agreement!”

Fluttershy nodded along eagerly, and, resting their hooves on her withers, they slowly walked her closer to the carriage.

“Let’s start with our names— He’s Flim, I’m Flam, and in case you didn’t hear, we’re brothers!”

“We used to make cider, but that didn’t stick, though we’ve stuck to helping others!”

“No magic required, nor will you get tired; our invention is easy to use!”

“Unless you’re a foal, you can see it burns coal; light her up and you’re ready to cruise!”

The brothers reared up, a foreleg around each other’s back, singing in unison. “And together we take another step forward, the fruits of progress well within our reach! There’s no reason to fear what awaits us tomorrow, embrace healthy change, of that we beseech!”

A stallion chimed in from somewhere in the crowd. “Is its movement restricted? Can its path be predicted? You’re making a claim that’s quite bold!”

A horned mare pranced around the carriage, grinning widely. “I’d sure like to try one! How soon can I buy one? This thing sounds so convenient, I’m sold!”

“Well, unlike a train, the whole world’s your domain; drive it wherever you like!”

“It sure beats walking, and we’re not just talking; you’ll be glad once you’ve cut out the hike!”

“While you can’t buy it here, never you fear, ‘cause we’ve got a contract in writing!”

“They’ll soon be in production, and it’s our fair deduction, they’ll sell at a price that’s inviting!”

An older, winged stallion stepped around the side of the carriage, eyebrow raised. “Not to rain on your parade, but some of us are paid for pulling the wagons and carts.”

A filly on somepony’s back added, “That smoke smells kinda funny, and won’t repairs cost money? It just

looks like there's so many parts!"

"Well, perhaps we should mention it's not our intention to put anypony out of work."

"Quite the opposite, sir, our new plant should stir all kinds of fresh jobs as a perk."

"Smell's no issue outside. You can inhale with pride. We can certainly promise you that."

"But if that's every question, that concludes this fine session, and we're thrilled to have had this great chat!"

Smiling, Fluttershy joined in. "Well it sounds to me, if you don't mind my saying, this invention of yours has potential conveying! I can't see a downside, if you've spoken truth, and I'm really quite glad that I stopped by this booth!"

The voices of the crowd rose as one, everyone singing in harmony. "And together we take another step forward, the fruits of progress well within our reach! There's no reason to fear what awaits us tomorrow, embrace healthy change, of that we beseech!"

Mahara emerged from the crowd, breast heaving as she wrapped her foreleg around Fluttershy's neck and gently tugged. "While that's all well and good, come with me if you would, for I fear this affair took a turn for the strange..." The singing stopped as everyone looked to the red mare. "Don't you all gawk at me because I don't share your glee; improvised singing in public?! How deranged!" She paused, seeming to think her words over as several ponies in the crowd began to snicker. "Wait..."

Fluttershy giggled softly as she stepped away from the carriage with Mahara, leaving the singing crowd behind as they picked up from the chorus.

"And together we take another step forward, the fruits of progress well within our reach! There's no reason to fear what awaits us tomorrow, embrace healthy change, of that we beseech!"

The pegasus continued to hum the tune as they walked through the foyer, stopping when Mahara abruptly put her hooves on a support beam, nearly pinning her. Her shock wore off as she looked her companion in the eyes.

"What was that back there?"

Fluttershy arched a brow, smiling. "What was what?"

"That whole..." Mahara rolled her hoof in the air, one ear cocked. "Song... thing. Am I the only pony here who found that strange?"

She shook her head, giggling again. "Mahara, I think you're acting just a little bit silly. Besides, I think singing is fun." This time, when Fluttershy smiled, the red mare relaxed with a long sigh. She leaned in to nuzzle Mahara on the cheek. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

Mahara nodded, flatly replying with, "Please."

V ^ ^ V

"Jeeze you guys are getting big!" Pinkie Pie grinned as she leaned over a wall of blocks, Pound grinning right back at her. "I swear, you two are sprouting up overnight!"

"Can you take us out to the park, maybe?" Pumpkin asked as she trotted past, levitating a small doll with her. "Please?"

Pound lifted his head as he nodded, nearly nose-to-nose with Pinkie. "Pleeeeeease?"

"Maaaaaybe... It's gonna be dark in a few hours." Pinkie snickered as she leaned back, then around the doorframe, glancing down the hall. "Let me ask your momma!" The sound of tumbling blocks and laughter followed her out of the room. "And you have to put away your toys first!"

With the normally busy kitchen at a standstill, Pinkie let her thoughts fill the silence.

This is the second day in a row that we haven't gotten much business. I mean, I know we did a whole bunch of baking for the funeral service, but that was all charity work! 'cause I mean, come on, it's a funeral! Mr. Cake said it didn't count, anyway.

She came down the stairs, looking across the nearly vacant café. There they are, drinking coffee. They don't seem too down about it, even if they both love baking. I guess everyone just needs a break every once in a while. Oh, and there's Lyra and Bonbon, right on schedule. No, I've got this! You two just relax!

"So, what'll it be today?" she asked cheerfully, a quill at the ready in the corner of her mouth.

"Weeeeell," Bonbon began, grinning at her marefriend, "to start with..."

As long as these two are regulars, or at least Lyra, anyway, we're never going to have to worry about not making any money! Gosh, where does she even put this all stuff? Oh? Is that all? Alright, give me a minute to get that together. I don't want you to chomp it all down while you're standing at the counter!

Carefully, Pinkie balanced various baked goods on her body, stacking some of them as she went down the list. *And a slice of cake... A little pie... And half a dozen scones... A quiche... Some other stuff... I think that's everything! That will be thirty-eight bits, please! Thank you! By the way, you're looking much better, Bonbon! Oh I'm sure you'll be ready to take the bandages off any day now! Do you two need help carrying all this over? No? Alright, enjoy!*

The frizzy maned pony hopped over the counter and back into the café. Mrs. Cake nodded along as her husband spoke.

"...seemed like a novel little trinket at the time, but I never thought I would actually have to *fire* it... Hmm?"

The Cakes looked up at her as she bobbed beside their table. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything, but Pound and Pumpkin wanted me to take them to the park! How about it?"

"Oh..." Cup Cake looked across the table at her husband, biting her lower lip. "Not that I don't trust you, dearie, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the twins going outside... Not so soon after... Well, after a hydra attacked the town, and that pony snatcher still on the loose. I can't believe we threw her a welcoming party... Honestly, I'm having enough trouble as it is just sending them off to school in the morning."

"It's okay, I understand." She hugged Mrs. Cake tightly, nodding. "You're gonna have to tell them though! Since I'm not taking them anywhere, I'm going out solo!"

"Be careful out there, Pinkie," Carrot called after her. She paused at the door, glancing back at him. His grave expression made her frown. "I used to think it was safe here, but these past few days... The world is changing, and I don't think it's for the better."

She closed the door quietly behind her, but the motion opened a floodgate of concerns. *Everypony's been pretty down, but I don't really blame them. Gotta think of a way to cheer them all up! A regular party isn't going to cut it. No, I need to think of something big! Oh! Hey Ditzzy! Ditzzy?*

The blond pegasus glanced up at her with her good eye, giving a half hearted smile. "Hey, sorry. I've just got a lot on my mind. A-lot-more-than-usual a lot. Here's uh..." She dipped into her bag for a moment. "Here's your mail."

Almost every single letter was addressed to Carrot or Cup Cake, the exception being a single letter for Pinkie Pie. The pink mare looked up, furrowing her brow.

"Is this about your pen pal?" she asked gently.

"It's about a lot of things... My pen pal, he's... he's just part of it. I have all these questions, and barely one, single answer. I'm just..." She looked up at Pinkie before glancing away again. "I'm confused more than anything. I remember when it was easy to tell what was good and what was bad. Everything is so blurry now, I'm not sure how to feel, or if I should even feel anything at all."

Pinkie took a step closer, offering a fragile smile. "You should always feel *something*."

"I do feel something... I just..." Ditzzy pawed at the ground, her ears splayed. "Ever have something that just eats at you, but there's nothing you can really do about it? And... you want to tell everypony you run into, hoping that maybe if you spread it around it'll be less *sharp*, but at the same time, you just can't?" Her expression silently begged for understanding. Pinkie nodded in earnest; she knew exactly how that felt. "Sorry, I should go. It's my stuff, I shouldn't... I should go."

"It's okay, really! I asked!" She began to follow the grey pegasus. "You're sure you have to go? Do you want me to come with you?"

"Not now. Later. Maybe. Like I said, it's my stuff, and I need to think it through more... put it in order. Besides," she gave her mail bags a shake, "got lots of work to do."

Ditzzy took another step into the street, then stopped sharply, turned, and wrapped her forelegs around Pinkie's neck, giving her a squeeze. "Don't worry about me. Everything will turn out alright, right? I mean, it just usually does," she said with a smile that didn't quite match the glistening in her eyes. "It always used to..."

The pink mare smiled, sincere and sad all at once, closing her eyes as they embraced. "I'll be here when you need me."

A lonely feeling accompanied Pinkie as she traveled through town. The uncomfortable silence gave rise to more uncomfortable thoughts.

No Ditzzy, no Fluttershy, no Rarity, no Twilight... I still need to pay Applejack and Rainbow Dash a visit but... Well, they were keeping to themselves even before we all found out about them being together. I didn't really want to admit it, but it felt a little weird hanging out with them sometimes. Kinda like trying to hang out with Dash when her griffon friend was around, except nopony was being a jerk! Oh well. I hope I don't get side tracked this time when I do try to stop by Sweet Apple. Actually, I wonder how... Hold on a minute...

Pinkie looked back, spying a lone, leafy bush resting in the middle of the road. *That wasn't there a second ago... What the hay? Is someone trying to surprise me?!*

“Don’t you know who I am?!” she shouted, grinning, advancing on the tiny, out-of-place bush. “I’m the Queen of Pranks!”

Pinkie pounced, poking her head into the foliage, but there was no one inside. Confused, her gaze swept over the branches, coming to a stop on the ground. A piece of paper greeted her; a note reading *Look up!*

“Huh...?” She yanked her head free of the bush, looking skyward just in time for a water balloon to smooosh against her face.

Okay, she mused as the balloon burst, soaking her. *That was pretty good.*

She wiped away the excess water and shreds of rubber, only to find herself face to face with Scootaloo. The filly’s lip looked much better, and she practically grinned from ear to ear before she burst out laughing. Pinkie had just started to join in when she noticed that the young pegasus wasn’t touching the ground. As her eyes centered in on Scootaloo’s wings, she found them moving in a smooth rhythm, the soft sound of feathers against air reaching her ears. She beamed proudly, and with the exception of her laughter, remained mostly silent.

“Wait a minute,” Pinkie began, eyes wide and mouth agape. “Are you-”

“I sure am! It just kinda clicked yesterday!” The filly glanced back at her steadily beating wings, still bearing a wide grin. “I always thought flying was like, something you did by flapping your wings really fast, so I was always bummed out because buzzing my wings didn’t get me off the ground.” She turned in the air, almost as if she were doing a pirouette. “Then yesterday, after you walked me home, I got to thinking; *maybe it’s a slower, more graceful motion.* Less like a hummingbird and more like a swan or something, you know?! Watching you bounce is what gave me the idea, really!”

“Oh, wow! Scootaloo, you’ve been working at getting this right forever! I’m so impressed! I-” Pinkie started to hop in place, ears tilted forward as her awe turned to excitement. “Oh my gosh, we should throw a party!”

Blushing, Scootaloo fluttered a little closer to the ground. “Really? You think so?”

“Totally! This is *exactly* what everypony needs, and I can’t think of a better reason to celebrate! I’m gonna go back to Sugarcube Corner and get everything ready, and you go spread the word, okay?” The filly giggled as she nodded bashfully in agreement. “Great! Tell your guests to meet up at my place in about an hour!”

As she hopped home on long, swift arcs, it occurred to her that she could try to invite the Apples and Rainbow Dash, effectively baking every cake with one oven. *Oh, but... Dash is the reason Scootaloo’s lip was all busted up yesterday... Maaaaan, there goes that idea. I’ll just have to throw Applejack a get well party later, I guess. Ohhh, I just love the way that bell sounds. Yep, I’m back already! Why? Change of plans, Mr. and Mrs. Cake! Scootaloo just learned how to fly! Yeah, I know! I’m going to throw a party for her up in my room! No, I learned my lesson. No alcohol this time! She’s just a filly anyway! Sheesh! Oh, hey, another customer! Don’t you lift a hoof, I’ve got this one, too!*

The pegasus stallion waiting by the register wasn’t a regular. She hadn’t even seen him in town before. “Heeeeello, Sir!” Pinkie leaned over the counter, wearing her salespony smile. “And what can I do for you today?”

“Hey there! A buttered croissant and some coffee would really hit the spot. I just flew in from Manehattan, and boy, are my wings tired!” He ruffled his pumpkin colored feathers a little, grinning back at her with brilliant hazel eyes under a trimmed mane of deeper orange.

Pinkie stifled a giggle. It was a terrible joke, and she loved it. "Oh yeah? I have some friends out there! Did you have a good time?"

She listened in as she got his order together. "I had a great time! While I was vacationing there, though, the weirdest thing happened. Big scene in the restauraunt I was eating at, and then the next morning, I see this wanted poster. Took me a minute to realize it, but one of these mares here used to be a model." He fished a large scroll of parchment out of his bag and held it up for her to see. "Kinda sad, really. She was quite the looker before she put on so much weight!"

The sound of shattering porcelain rang through Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie stared across the counter at a poster with Fluttershy's face on it. She traced his foreleg with her eyes, down his side to the bags slung across his back. The flap bore an insignia of the royal guard.

Oh shit.

His surprise turning to confusion, the pegasus quickly glanced between the poster and Pinkie several times before stowing it in his bag again. "Yeesh. I mean yeah, she's a porker, but she's not *that* bad looking! Hey, do you need help with that back there?"

"No no no no!" Pinkie shook her head rapidly, waving her hooves. "I'm okay! Sorry about that, Mister! Let me just get another cup!" Her mind began to race as she watched fresh coffee swirl in its pot.

Okay, Pinkie Pie, he's a member of the royal guard, and he has a wanted poster with Fluttershy on it. Stay calm, you've got this! Oh gosh what am I gonna do?! Huh?!

"I uh... I said that usually the coffee is supposed to stay inside the cup, you know, for drinking." He leaned toward her, an ear cocked and a brow raised. "Are you feeling okay? You don't look so good all the sudden. Was it the pun? Man, it's always the puns!"

"Oh! No, actually! I mean it was an awful pun, but I thought it was cute!" His concern immediately melted into a smile. "Let me just wipe this off a little... Here! Okay! One scone and one cup of coffee!"

The pegasus looked down at the plate, then back up at Pinkie. "I... You know what, a scone is totally fine too. Sooooo, do you live around here, by any chance?"

"Yes!" she shouted, slamming her hooves down on the counter. The Cakes jumped and looked over at her in unison. "I do live around here! How about you?! I bet you live in Canterlot, huh?!"

"Actually, yeah! I uh..." He shifted his weight, followed by the soft sound of his hoof tapping the floor. "It doesn't take too long to fly from Canterlot to here so... Maybe you'd like to get something to eat later? Not here, of course, you work here! But, you know!"

Pinkie turned away from the counter, nearly galloping into the kitchen. "Nope! Sorry! Not today! Got plans!"

"Oh..." he called after her. "Okay, well, don't you want me to pay for this, at least?!"

He's going to eat that, drink that, fly back home— I mean, he probably doesn't live in the castle! That would be crazy! But when he reports back to duty, he'll probably start talking about the wanted poster, they'll ask to see it, and— What now?!

"Pinkie Pie, what's gotten into you?" Mrs. Cake peered into the kitchen, concern weighing on her brow. She could hear Mr. Cake apologizing over the *ka-ching* of the opening register. "Calm down and talk to

us about it. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not that big of a deal."

Okay. Deep breath. What if he never gets home? He never goes back to Canterlot, he can't tell the other guards, and that will buy them some more time in Manehattan.

Smiling, Pinkie nodded. "You're right. Sorry about that. Just, I'm throwing that party and I'm not sure if we have any ribbon! Please tell me we have ribbon! I need a whole lot of it!"

She spent the next twelve minutes and thirty-five seconds with her eye to a crack in the floorboards, watching the off duty guard enjoy his scone and his coffee from the room above him. With a smile and a thank you, he got up from his seat and made his way to the front door. Pinkie propped open a window and slipped out onto the roof. He moved with no real hurry, wearing a bright smile, nodding to ponies in passing. A warm, fuzzy feeling started to build up inside her, very nearly dragging her into a daydream. She shook it off as he spread his wings and took to the air.

Showtime...

The rooftops of Ponyville blurred under her outstretched hooves, replaced by the branches of trees as the pegasus drifted away from town in the general direction of Canterlot. The space between them decreased in leaps and bounds, the wind tugging at her curly mane and tail as she continued to build speed. In the distance, the whistle of an arriving train. The stallion glanced back just in time to catch a glimpse of her mid-pounce, with barely any time to do a spit take. He dropped like a rock when she made contact, binding him up with ribbon as they plummeted.

They hit the top of a pine tree with an oof, fragrant needles bristling against her coat. "Wha-"

"I'm really, really, *really* sorry!" She already had him cocooned in festive ribbon and slung across her back.

"Now hold on a minute here!" He struggled, flopping against her as she hopped from higher branches to lower ones. "Look, I think you're a very pretty girl, but shouldn't you at least let me take you out to dinner first?!"

"I know you really wanna go home and stuff, but I can't let you do that right now, okay?" She glanced back at him, her ears slightly splayed. "That mare on your wanted poster? I made a Pinkie-promise to keep her safe, so I can't let you tell any of your royal guard friends, and definitely not Princess Celesta."

"A Pinkie-promise?" He gradually stopped struggling as she passed between the trees, approaching the edge of Ponyville.

"Yep! My name is Pinkamina Diane Pie, but you can just call me Pinkie!"

"Pinkie, huh? I should have guessed. How original." He released a sighing chuckle. "You know, if you wanted to keep me from going home so badly, you could have just let me take you out on a date."

A bit of a blush crept across her cheeks. "Oh... Well I- I didn't- Hey, what about you? What's your name?" She glanced back again, trying not to look embarrassed.

"Cirrus. Drifting Cirrus..." He trailed off as she sprang onto a roof in a single bound. "So... What are you going to do with me, exactly?"

"I dunno, I hadn't thought that far ahead! Do you like parties?!"

V ^ ^ V

Well, this got off to an awkward start, but... Scootaloo grinned as she hovered over the ponies crowded into Pinkie Pie's bedroom, the tips of her wings brushing the ceiling. *Leave it to Pinkie to throw a great party!*

A balloon drifted past her, drawing her attention to ponies below.

"Well?" Applebloom grinned up at her, pointing excitedly. "Ain'tcha gonna throw it back?"

At one point, the young pegasus might have given chase, but she had quite literally been flying since she woke up that morning. Her wings were starting to ache, her steady hover becoming more of a moth-like waver. She followed the balloon to the floor, sighing with exhaustion as her wings finally stopped moving, folding stiffly against her sides. Applebloom slipped through the crowd, smiling as she made eye contact.

"You feelin' okay, Scootaloo?" she asked, stopping a few noses in front of the pegasus.

"Yeah, just tired." Scootaloo offered a grin. "I think I'm all flown out for the day."

Applebloom's smile vanished, then returned just as quickly. "Oh! That's okay! Do ya wanna do somethin' else?"

"I kinda just wanna relax, to be honest." The pegasus turned her attention toward the enormous cake on a table in the middle of the room, decorated with clouds and feathers made of icing. "I haven't even eaten any cake yet."

"Cake is cool, too!"

Scootaloo arched a brow. "Yeah... Don't take this the wrong way, but you're kind of weirding me out a little. You're not still, you know..." She lifted a hoof to the side of her head, rolling it slowly. "Are you sure that *you're* feeling okay?"

"Sorry," The bow-clad filly mumbled, some of the wind leaving her sails. "Ah'm jus' a lil' excited fer you is all. An' uh..." She glanced away for a moment, pawing at the floor. "Scootaloo, Ah'm really, *really* sorry 'bout what happened in the tree fort. I shouldn't have tricked ya like that, an' Ah wish Ah'd apologized sooner."

"Applebloom..." A gentle smile came to Scootaloo's lips as she took a step closer. "It's alright. I was never mad at you, and I know you weren't really right in the head when that happened. Actually..." The pegasus looked down at the floor, ears splaying. "I feel like I should be apologizing to *you*. It's kinda my fault the hydra came to town and—Yeah..."

She felt a hoof on her back, lifting her head to meet Applebloom's compassionate gaze. "Ya'll couldn't have known, an ya ain't ta blame fer what happened ta Applejack... So, we're still cool?"

Scootaloo reared up, wrapping her forelegs around Applebloom's neck. "We never *stopped* being cool."

"Thanks," she heard Applebloom whisper. The earth pony filly pulled away a moment later, grinning from ear to ear. "Now, enough of this mooshy lovey-dovey stuff! Let's eat some darn cake!"

With a grin and a nod, they set out for the mountain of frosting and pastry, but seeing Sweetie Belle sitting all by herself called for a detour. A sad party guest was some sort of anomaly, considering that Pinkie Pie was the host. And yet, Pinkie was nowhere to be seen. Sweetie slowly looked up at them after they came to a stop, doing her best to smile.

"C'mon now, it's not a party if you're not having fun." Scootaloo sat down next to her, resting a hoof on her back. "Is this about your sister?"

The unicorn filly laughed sadly, almost painfully. "Is it that obvious?"

"Sweetie Belle, Ah'm sure Rarity is jus' fine. Ah know Applejack might say that she's a hoity-toity softy—" Applebloom bit her tongue as Sweetie donned a frown, Scootaloo rapidly shaking her head. "Er... What Ah'm *tryin'* ta say is, Rarity is one smart mare. Ah'm sure she's doin' jus' fine."

"That's not what I'm worried about, though..." The unicorn shook her head, looking down at the floor again. "It's the things ponies are saying about her."

Scootaloo sat up straight, ears foward. "Who? Diamond Tiara? Silver Spoon? Don't listen to any of those stuck up *bitches*." Applebloom arched a brow, but the pegasus carried on. "And besides, in case you didn't notice, I only invited our *friends*. That means neither of them are here." Sweetie Belle met her gaze, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. "Everything is gonna be alright. I promise."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Sweetie replied with a laugh. "You're right, though. I'm sorry for being a downer. I know Rarity would never do those things." The unicorn got to her hooves, smiling, and joined them on their journey to acquire cake.

Several more requests for aerial feats were made as she approached the center of the room. It felt strange for Scootaloo to actually turn down chances to show off an ability she had spent years trying to master. They had just started taking bites out of their respective slices of cake when Sweetie Belle perked up, apparently having an epiphany.

"How come Rainbow Dash isn't here?" She turned toward Scootaloo, tilting her head. "Didn't you invite her?"

The pegasus was speechless, her mind suddenly flooded with formerly fond memories turned sour by the violence she had endured the day before. Sweetie Belle leaned closer, lips still puckered with confusion. There was a fleeting moment of eye contact with Applebloom, her ears wilting in silent recognition as she looked away. A wall of pink came between Scootaloo and her friends.

"Rainbow Dash couldn't make it! Bummer, right?!" Pinkie Pie glanced back at Scootaloo, looking as hurt as the filly felt. The wrinkles of concern in Pinkie's brow vanished the moment she turned her attention back to the others. "Hey, isn't school almost out for the summer, though?! I bet you're all super excited about that!"

"Oh, hey! She's right!" Applebloom bobbed excitedly, her plate of cake nearly slipping out of her hooves.

“Another week or two and we’re done!”

Scotaloo followed Pinkie with her eyes as the earth pony happily bounced back to the corner occupied by her bed.

“Hey,” the pegasus said as she got to her hooves. “I’ll be right back. And before you ask, yes, I’m fine.”

The bed occupying the corner was itself occupied, not just by Pinkie, but by a pumpkin orange pegasus stallion. He started laughing as Pinkie finished telling him something, leaning in to take a bite of cake as she offered it to him. Scotaloo still didn’t know his name, and he was still bound in ribbon.

The stallion was the reason her party got off to an awkward start. When she had arrived with all her guests, she opened Pinkie’s bedroom door to find him tied up and squirming on his back. Just as Scotaloo had started to turn and close the door, assuming she had interrupted something, Pinkie skidded across the floor and informed them all that he had simply lost a game. From across the room, he agreed, and knowing Pinkie Pie, nopony really questioned it.

“...is actually a lot simpler than you think, if you ask me.” Pinkie nodded along, hanging on his every word. “I mean, I would get jealous too if the mare I had feelings for just got swept out from under me.”

The pink mare cocked a brow and smiled, looking confused and happy all at once. “Feelings? Like, what kind of feelings?”

Scotaloo had just started to turn back when the stallion noticed her. “Oh, hey fly-girl!

“Hey hey,” Pinkie beamed. “Having a good time?”

“Totally!” The pegasus filly nodded. “This cake is great! And thank you for setting everything up so quick.”

“Psh, I’m the party queen! This is my *thing!*” She smiled over at the stallion beside her, then back to Scotaloo. “But, I’m really happy you’re having a good time! Can’t think of a better reason to throw a party! Well, unless Applebloom and Sweetie Belle start flying, too, or something. That would be a pretty good reason!”

The stallion leaned toward her, nearly falling over in the process. “Yeah, I can’t even tell you how long it took me to get my head around the whole flying thing. Once you get it down though, it’s like... well, *flying!*” Pinkie snorted out a giggle, bringing him a big, toothy grin. “Anyway, Pinkie here was just telling me about her relationship troubles. Doesn’t surprise me that a pretty girl like her would wind up with a tangled web or two. And just my luck that the mare I get the hots for is a filly fooler!”

“Whaaaat?!” Pinkie waved her hoof dismissively. “I don’t have any tangled webs! I’m a pony, not a spider! Wait...” She tilted her head again. “Did you say—”

“You’re really gonna make me come out and say it, huh? You’ve been talking about your friend since I got here. You’re in love with her, you silly girl!”

“No, I’m... I...” Pinkie’s eyes widened even more than usual, her face going from pink to red in seconds.

Her jaw dropped as a squeaking sound escaped her throat.

"Yeah, I know," the stallion replied. "I was shocked too."

"Pinkie, you okay?" Scootaloo asked gently. The blushing mare had yet to move.

"What?" asked the bound stallion, helping himself to rest of the cake on Pinkie's plate. "Was it something I said?"

V ^ ^ V

From noon until dusk, Canterlot ground to a halt under heavy lockdowns. With Celestia personally overseeing the operation, Twilight, Zecora, and every available member of the royal guard searched the city twice over, block by block. However, an entire day of searching high and low in Canterlot yielded not one single clue as to the locations of Mahara, Fluttershy, or Rarity. Celestia offered a public apology for the inconveniences, and they all returned to the castle less confident than when they had set out. Luna was the exception. With the setting of the sun and Applebloom on a train back to Ponyville, the moon princess made a suggestion. While initially reluctant, Zecora eventually agreed.

The zebra reflected on her decision as she looked back at herself in the mirror, the depth of her own glowing eyes slowly drawing her in. She could see Celestia, Luna, Twilight, and several others behind her, all watching intently, anxiously, a few murmured conversations staving off complete silence.

"I know I asked you earlier, Twilight, how are you feeling?" The sight of Celestia stung Zecora's eyes, even as a reflection.

"A little tired." The scholarly unicorn offered a smile. "But I think that's more from trotting around the city for most of the day and less from being stressed out."

"Yes... Again, I'm very sorry for that. I should have chosen my words more carefully. I know how much your friends mean to you."

Twilight's smile faded. "No, it's alright. I understand what's at stake, and it would be selfish of me to put myself before the safety of the entire kingdom."

"Do not lose hope, Twilight. None of your concerns are set in stone as of yet." As Luna spoke, she took a few steps closer to Zecora. A strange feeling of comfort came over the zebra, as it had earlier with such close proximity to the moon princess. "Now, let's attend to the matter at hoof."

"Yes, I feel I am ready to begin. To start the process..." Zecora glanced away from the mirror, her eyes meeting Luna's. "I must look within?"

"Every pony imbued with the curse I devised has several inherent abilities." Even though Luna was looking directly at her, she felt as though Luna was looking right through her. "As I'm sure you've realized, shape shifting and hypnosis are among those abilities. Earlier, you mentioned being able to draw blood out of parchment, even though it had dried. Control over blood that has severed its ties to its vessel, or control over your own blood, is also an ability available each and every one of the ponies I have cursed, directly or indirectly."

Luna turned her gaze to the mirror, slowly trotting around to Zecora's other side. "Ponies I have not directly cursed, however... Ponies that have had the curse spread to them by blood; they have an ability I had not intended. Are you familiar with the term *clairvoyance*?"

"I recall learning this from my mother... You mean to see through the eyes of another?"

"Precisely. It can be induced by another pony, but you can induce it much more easily yourself. All you need is focus." As if anticipating a question, Luna glanced back, she assumed, at Celestia. "I would have mentioned all of this sooner, but this is an ability you may only take advantage of once the sun has set, and before the sun has risen."

"Yes, of course." Zecora refrained from looking as Celestia replied.

"When you're ready, look yourself in the eyes and concentrate solely on Mahara. Do not try to control the process once it begins; merely allow it to guide you."

Zecora nodded, turning her focus to her reflection. In the mirror, she watched Luna recede, joining the group behind her. Celestia's presence continued to make her skin crawl. She had a strong desire to flee, but at several paces away, the zebra found she could compose herself if she really tried. The longer she stared into her own eyes, the easier it became to ignore the rest of the room. A soft haze filled the corners of her vision. Her pupils slowly dilated, her entire reflection seeming to reach out for her, coming closer. Her irises burned brightly as everything else became a faded blur. Numbness swept over her. As her irises began to overlap, movement registered in the void between them, becoming clearer by the moment. Zecora shuddered as she descended through what felt like a tunnel, coming closer and closer to the motion on the other end. Once completely overlapped, her irises faded.

An overweight pegasus smiled back at her with glowing blue eyes, nodding. She didn't have to guess to realize that she was seeing what Mahara could see. They appeared to be seated on a couch. A curtain hung across the wall behind Fluttershy, undoubtedly covering a window. Rarity trotted by, the sound of her hooves against the floor slightly distorted. Mahara's gaze briefly followed her, then returned to Fluttershy, occasionally drifting, following the flow of her mane or the curves of her figure.

"Well, it sounds like the two of you had a simply wonderful day." Rarity's voice circled slowly, distant and slightly muffled as she continued. "I'm happy to say that I got quite a bit of work done while you were out. Our guest did absolutely nothing, as you might expect."

Mahara's gaze swept the room. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Probably sleeping," Rarity mused with an air of bitterness.

Mahara's laughter sounded alien to her, but then, Zecora knew that she was the one actually doing the invading. Stranger still was the inability to control where she was looking. Mahara was still entirely in control of her own eyes. Fluttershy glanced in the direction Rarity had gone, and Mahara followed her lead, setting her sights on a doorway.

"What do you see?" Luna's voice echoed in her ear, fading in and out as it overlapped everything she could hear through Mahara.

"I'm in a room with Fluttershy." Her own voice carried clear as crystal. "Rarity is definitely their ally."

"Has Rarity allowed them to spread the curse to her?"

"Thankfully, it is not as we expected. At this time, she appears uninfected. Fluttershy, on the other hoof... There are at least two cursed mares under their roof..."

Luna spoke over a soft, pained, and distant whimper. "And their location? Do you see any buildings or landmarks of any sort?"

“There may be a window near, but the curtain is drawn. Perhaps they will reveal as their conversation goes on.”

Rarity emerged from the doorway with multiple garments slung over her back, two others floating on either side of her. Fluttershy gave a soft coo of admiration.

“I don’t have much of an eye for fashion, but for what it’s worth,” a red forehoof slipped into her field of view, pointing toward the clothing toting unicorn, “those look fantastic.”

“Well, I should hope so, my dear! One of these is for you, after all!” With that, one of the two floating dresses drifted toward Mahara, the other traveling to Fluttershy in the corner of her vision. Rarity smiled as she looked toward the pegasus. “And one for you as well, of course. I used the same measurements from the dress you wore today. I do hope that’s alright.”

“Oh, absolutely! Rarity this-” Mahara’s gaze shifted away from the elegant looking dress before her, focusing on Fluttershy’s dress, then Fluttershy herself. Zecora thought that the pegasus looked to be bordering on tears. “I don’t know what to say!”

Mahara looked toward the sound of approaching hooves. Smiling, Rarity stood beside the couch, looking over the dress with her winged friend. “A thank you would be nice.”

Fluttershy flung her forelegs around the unicorn, nuzzling into her breast. “Thank you so much! It’s beautiful!”

“What about the rest of them?” Mahara asked, looking over the many dresses draped over Rarity’s back.

“Yes, I’d love to see those as well, if that’s alright with you, I mean.” The pegasus released Rarity, settling back on the couch. “Are they part of the urban line you were working on?”

“Actually, they’re not. When I had finished making new dresses for you and Mahara, well... I made one for myself next...” The rest of the dresses came to life, spreading out before her. Of the five of them, the one in the middle complimented Rarity’s eyes, coat and mane. Zecora quickly realized for whom the other four dresses were made. “And I just felt so *inspired*, so I kept going.”

“Rarity, these are all so amazing...” Fluttershy’s pleasant awe rode her brows and her wide eyes in the corner of Mahara’s vision. “But... How are you going to give them to...”

The unicorn gave a sad smile, shaking her head. “Perhaps I’ll use them as bargaining chips when I return to Ponyville without you. At the very least, I know Pinkie will be happy with hers...”

“I’m sorry that I dragged you into this.” Mahara leaned forward, reaching out for her. Rarity shook her head again.

“I came here of my own decision. You can’t be blamed for my actions.” All seven of the dresses lined up and returned to Rarity’s back as she turned away. She paused in the doorway, glancing back, and the hint of guilt Zecora noticed on Rarity’s knitted brow was validated as the unicorn spoke. “So, while there’s nothing I can do to help Aloe now, I can still help you, Fluttershy. That’s what counts.”

Silence settled over the room after Rarity disappeared through the door. Mahara looked to Fluttershy, and the pegasus returned her gaze, a timid smile slowly returning to her lips. She shifted closer, laying across the couch and resting her head on Mahara’s flank. A red forehoof glided through the glossy, pink river of her mane. Seconds later, a yawn made Fluttershy jump. Mahara’s vision focused in on an icy blue unicorn with a frost-colored mane, her face and mark unfamiliar to the zebra.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie would like to thank you all for refraining from waking her. She had a very nice sleep, and feels like she could take on the world.” The unicorn rubbed her eyes, blinking slowly as she looked around the room, smiling as she looked to Mahara. “What did she miss while she was out?”

“There is a fourth pony whom I can see. She calls herself ‘*Great and Powerful Trixie*’.”

“Wait a minute,” Twilight’s voice sounded distant, “I think I remember her. What is she doing with them?”

Celestia began to respond as Trixie nodded along. Zecora mentally kicked herself as she realized the commotion in the background was interrupting the audio reception of her clairvoyance.

“Is she one of them?” Luna asked, hushing the rest of the room. Mahara had already finished speaking, however, and Trixie was mid laugh.

“Mahara and Fluttershy are the only ones cursed.” A pair of bite marks stood out against the blue of Trixie’s coat. “But clearly their guests help them with their thirst. And I ask that you all please refrain from making noise. It disrupts the balance in which I am poised.”

Fluttershy’s voice gradually faded back into her perception as the others quieted down. “...one exhibit, though... What was it called?”

“Uh...” The view of the room tilted, Fluttershy looking back at Mahara expectantly. “The Mouser exhibit, I guess.”

The pegasus nodded. “The Mouser exhibit was kinda scary... but the griffon showcasing it seemed nice enough.”

“Sounds like a pretty good time for the most part! Of course, Trixie very much enjoyed just lounging around all day.” Mahara’s eyes followed the unicorn as she rounded the couch, settling on the chair to her left. “So, what are you girls up to now?”

“Rarity just finished showing us the dresses she made today.” There was a quick glance in Fluttershy’s direction, the pegasus sitting upright again as she spoke.

“Did she make Trixie anything? Trixie loves getting gifts!”

“Well no, she um-”

“The *Talented and Generous* Rarity didn’t feel like the *Great and Powerful* Trixie needed any *gifts*, sorry.” Mahara had already begun to snicker, glancing between Rarity in the doorway and the increasingly indignant Trixie. “Besides, you’re already staying here free of charge. I should think that is gift enough, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You- Trixie feels that-” She snorted, settling back in her chair. “*Fine*.”

“And while I didn’t *make* anything for you, I did notice the hat and cape I saw you wearing around this morning were in dreadful need of some work.” Rarity smiled as she levitated a magician’s hat and matching cape across the room. Trixie’s expression immediately lit up with delight. “And what are the magic words?”

“Oh, these look fantastic! Even better than when I bought them! I gotta try them on!” She looked to Rarity and paused. “Oh, right. Uh, thanks. Like, a lot.”

Mahara, and by extension, Zecora, caught a glimpse of the grin on Rarity's lips as she seated herself. "You're very welcome." The fashionista made sweeping eye contact with her and with Fluttershy. "I assume the two of you will be departing shortly to enjoy the night life?"

"I figured we would just relax for tonight. We had a busy day, after all." Fluttershy nodded out of the corner of her eye. "Although... If the two of you are willing..." She turned to the pegasus. "Would you be interested in some more lessons?"

"Lessons?" Fluttershy echoed. "Oh! Well, if you'd like. Why do we need them, though?"

Mahara grinned, slowly getting up from the couch. "Because tonight, I'd like to teach you about hypnosis. Naturally, we'll need some volunteers."

"Oh, sure," said Trixie. "Count Trixie in."

"I don't mind, I suppose. What is it, exactly, that you need us to do?" Rarity gracefully got to her hooves, taking a few steps toward Mahara.

"You don't really need to do much of anything. Just relax and make eye contact when we ask you to." She turned her attention toward Fluttershy, moving toward her. "We're on lesson four now, right?"

The pegasus cocked an ear. "I think so? I'm sorry, I haven't been keeping track."

"Quite alright. Anyway, hypnosis. To hypnotize or otherwise influence somepony, you have to make eye contact, like I'm doing with you right now." Fluttershy nodded. As she continued, a green haze filled the corners of her vision. "Unless you're putting that pony into a trance, like a deep sleep, you usually have to maintain eye contact. When Big Macintosh was chasing us, for example."

"When Big Macintosh was what?" interjected Rarity. Mahara kept her gaze locked with Fluttershy's.

"It was nothing, water under the bridge. So when he was chasing us, I made eye contact and forced his body to lock up without lifting a hoof or saying a word. It's all in the eyes. You make eye contact, and you impose your will. For instance, try moving right now." Mahara was silent for a moment, as if waiting for some kind of response. "Can't do it, can you?"

She looked away, toward Rarity and Trixie, and Fluttershy gasped softly. The pegasus was fluttering her wings and lightly cantering in place when Mahara looked back at her. "I could feel you putting more effort into it after I asked. If the pony you're hypnotizing is particularly strong-willed, you may not be able to influence them, or they may be able to overcome you once you've started. Making a pony do something, as in, a physical or verbal action, works the same way, from my experience. However, it's much, much harder to make someone perform an action against their will than it is to restrain them."

"So, now it's your turn. I'm going to wiggle my ears. I want you to make me stop."

"Oh... O-okay." Fluttershy closed her eyes for a moment. "It's all in the eyes..." she whispered to herself. When her eyes snapped open, they glowed intensely, almost appearing to give off a blue flame. "Like this?" A minute of silence passed before she closed her eyes again, the glow vanishing behind her eyelids.

Mahara's vision bobbed as the sound of stomping carried through the room. "Wonderful! On your first try, no less! Did you feel the resistance once you had me under your control?" Fluttershy nodded, smiling bashfully. "Well, clearly you're already showing an understanding of the basics. Let's try something a bit more advanced. To influence a pony's emotions is much like putting them in a trance, but you don't need a trigger phrase to bring them out of it. The same concept applies, though. It's like

making them dream while they're still awake, if that makes sense. Make eye contact, and concentrate on how you want them to feel. Keep in mind that it's easier to manipulate feelings that already exist than it is to insert new ones."

She turned her gaze toward the fashionista. "Rarity, if you would..."

"This *will* be temporary, of course?" Rarity looked between the two of them, a brow raised.

"Of course." Mahara took a few steps closer to Fluttershy before turning to face Rarity. "Are you ready?" Rarity nodded. "Alright, Fluttershy, show us what you can do."

Several seconds of silence passed, during which neither Fluttershy nor Rarity moved an inch. The pegasus closed her eyes, ears splaying. Rarity looked around the room.

"Am I supposed to be feel-" She fell immediately silent as Fluttershy opened her eyes, irises glowing fiercely, projecting a ghostly blue flame.

"Oh, wow..." Trixie mumbled.

"If it isn't too much trouble," Fluttershy stated softly, "I would like you to follow my instructions. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Rarity replied, calmly.

"Please come here." Rarity did as asked, waiting patiently in front of the pegasus. "Very good. There is a vase on the table to your right, only, it isn't a vase. You believe that it is a diamond. You will continue to believe that it is a diamond until I say *that's rather silly, don't you think*. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she repeated.

"Good."

Fluttershy closed her eyes, and Rarity shuddered, glancing around curiously. The unicorn froze as she set her sights on the table. Rarity looked back at them, then at the table again, taking a few cautious steps toward it.

"This... This wasn't here before, was it?! Good heavens, where did this come from?!" Rarity knelt down, leaning across the table and eyeing the vase very closely. "How magnificent... I knew Sapphire was rich, but..."

Fluttershy tilted her head, her grin starting to show. "What do you see, Rarity?" Trixie had already started laughing, and from the sound of things, Mahara was having a hard time keeping her snickering in check.

"Why, it's a diamond! A beautiful diamond! Don't you all see it, too? Wait... Is... Is this the hypnosis?" Rarity's expression bore concern as she glanced back at them. "This is the hypnosis, isn't it?"

"That's rather silly," Fluttershy mused, grinning, "don't you think?"

"What do you..." Rarity looked back at the table, then heaved a low groan. "Why does everyone make me see diamonds?"

"This has happened before?" asked Trixie and Mahara.

"We've agreed not to talk about it," replied Fluttershy and Rarity.

Laughter filled the room, until her vision clouded with tears. She closed her eyes to wipe them away, and after a moment, Zecora found herself looking at her own reflection again. Very briefly, she assumed that her clairvoyance had ended, but the reflection vanished a moment later, replaced with a view of a smiling, bowing Fluttershy.

"In all seriousness, I'm very impressed, to say the least!" Mahara put a hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder, rubbing gently. "You're demonstrating quite a talent for this! You just decided to go ahead and induce a trance?"

"Well... It just felt natural, really. I've always had a knack for... this, I guess. Before, it was just persuasion more than anything, but now..." The pegasus blushed, looking over at Rarity. "I'm very sorry for doing that to you. It wasn't very nice."

"Quite alright, dear. The only harm done was to my pride."

Mahara snickered a little, surveying the room. "Anyway, if you want to practice or experiment some more, and these two are willing, I think you should go for it."

Laughing, Trixie stepped forward. "Yeah, do Trixie next!"

Fluttershy continued to test her hypnosis well into the night, stopping only when Rarity and Trixie informed them that they needed to get some rest. Left alone, the pegasus gave Mahara a soft, longing look, slowly approaching with her tail held high. A feeling of discomfort swept over Zecora as she watched the pegasus part her lips, Mahara's eyelids descending slowly. She found herself back in the royal castle, staring into a mirror, but she could still hear them as they kissed. The zebra tried to pull away, and just like that, she felt herself returning to her own body, her connection to Mahara severed.

"Well?" Luna questioned, standing over her.

"I'd like to stop for now, if that's alright..." She shook her head, feeling disoriented as the numbness slowly receded. "We'll try again tomorrow night."

A short series of questions followed, and Zecora answered each to the best of her ability given the limited information she was able to gather. Not long after that, the group dissipated for the evening, a pair of guards escorting the zebra back to her room. A feeling of disappointment accompanied her. Hours of observation had yielded barely anything useful. Barely twelve paces down the hall, the pair began to chatter. Her efforts to tune them out proved mostly futile.

"What's got your tail in a knot?" asked the tall unicorn mare to her left. "You've been griping all day."

The earth pony stallion to her right gave his partner a half glance. "I wanted this week off so I could go to the Innovations Expo. They have stuff there that you can't buy without leaving Equestria."

"So you couldn't go shopping." She shrugged, rolling her eyes. "So what?"

"They were supposed to be putting out a new Mouser pistol."

Mouser. Zecora's ears perked up. Fluttershy had mentioned that name to her friends.

"I know guns may not seem like a big deal for you unicorns," he continued, "but I have family right next to Everfree and they're all earth ponies. It'd give me some peace of mind if-"

"Where was this exhibition event?!" Zecora all but shouted. "Think quickly, this is most urgent!"

"Ah..." The stallion gave the unicorn a nervous look, swallowing. "Well the *Manehattan* Innovations Expo is held in *Manehatten*."

Zecora pulled away from them, galloping down the hall as fast as she could manage. Even as the guards called after her, she refused to slow down. There could be no detour, no stopping to explain. She had reclaimed her purpose.

V ^ ^ V

Good heavens, what now?

Rarity peeled away her sleep mask as another burst of banging rang through the penthouse. The world was a blurred, rolling mess as she made her way out of her room on wobbling legs. The pounding was coming from the front door. She could hear hushed voices on the other side.

"What should we do?"

The pale unicorn nearly jumped out of her skin as Mahara's voice reached her ears. She whipped her head around, face to face with the red mare, Fluttershy standing just a few paces behind her. They wore varying degrees of worry.

"Well, have you any idea who it might be?" Rarity rubbed her eyes, a shiver passing through her. "Perhaps it's nothing to worry-"

"This is the Manehattan Police," thundered a gruff-sounding stallion. "Open up this instant!"

"Oh, bother... Where is Trixie?"

"I'll go get her," answered Fluttershy, already halfway across the room.

"We know somepony's in there! Open this door!"

"It's very impolite to disrupt a lady's beauty sleep, my dear officer!" The unicorn pointed toward the door to the recording studio with a hind leg. "On top of that, you simply must allow me to ready myself before I'll let you and your lot inside!"

"We've received numerous tips that you've been harboring fugitives of the law! We would like to take a look around! This is looking worse and worse for you the longer you stall!"

There was a brief tapping on her withers. Rarity turned to find Fluttershy at the door with Trixie slung over her back. Mahara was mid trot, looking back at her all the while. She nodded and pointed at the door again, opening it with her magic. Fluttershy hesitated, taking a few steps toward her. The pegasus halted when Rarity shook her head, pointing one last time.

"I'll be alright," she mouthed. Much more loudly, she shouted, "and I must say I find these allegations completely ridiculous! I'll be having a word with your supervisor!"

Mustering all her pride and courage, Rarity returned her attention to the front door, waiting several moments after hearing the click of the lock. Not a second later, several winged police began hovering around the garden. Rarity hesitated for a moment, but ultimately refrained from drawing the curtains. With her head held high and wearing her most haughty sneer, she opened the front door. Several stallions of various color and type, all wearing police uniforms, stared back at her. She leaned against

the doorframe and cocked a brow.

"After all that, you have nothing to say to me? Didn't you want to go through my things a minute ago? Or have you lost your nerve?" The stallion at the head of the group grunted and pushed past her, the rest following. "That's what I thought. You have my permission to check whatever you like, since I doubt you have a warrant."

Once inside the penthouse, the officers spread out, looking in cabinets and under furniture first, tapping on the walls and the floor every so often. Rarity followed the stallion she had been speaking with, assuming him to be the one in charge.

"And just whom is it that you're looking for, exactly?"

"Three mares; one a unicorn, the other two pegasi. Of the two pegasi, one is heavysset. They wouldn't happen to be friends of yours, would they?"

The officer unrolled a wanted poster, an illustration of Fluttershy's chubby, startled face staring back at her. "No, I can't say I know who any of these mares are. The one in the middle though, didn't she used to be a model?" Rarity froze as one of them pulled the curtains open, sunlight flooding the room. The garden appeared to be vacant, much to her relief.

"You know, me and the boys were talking about that." He glanced back at her as he pushed open the door to Sapphire's bedroom. "She was in that Hearth Warming pageant one year, and that was her last official public appearance. Quite a shame that she's come to this. Actually, you kinda look like one of the lead girls, yourself."

Rarity forced a giggle. "Flattery will get you everywhere, my dear."

He paused after taking a few steps into the room, undoubtedly looking at the row of mostly burned candles on the windowsill, and the pictures she had taken with Aloe behind them.

"My friend passed away recently," she explained. "I wasn't able to attend her funeral so I've been trying to say prayers for her before I sleep every night. It's not much, but..."

"My condolences, Miss," he said with a tip of his hat.

Rarity sat on the corner of the bed as the officer continued to nose around the room. She found herself looking over the spread of pictures, reliving the memories. The guilt remained, even though she knew Aloe's death wasn't her fault, or anypony's fault, for that matter. A voice from the living room disrupted her chain of thought.

"...certainly is interesting..." He stepped away from the door and took a few steps toward her. "Now, Miss, we know this penthouse belongs to Sapphire Shores, and the receptionist in the lobby told us that Miss Shores gave you her permission to use the place, but..." Rarity looked up at him, her brow arching again. "Have you just been sleeping in all of these beds, or have you been having company?"

"I admit to having a few... gentleman callers the other night, and the maid hasn't been around yet to tidy up the place, the lazy thing. A bit of promiscuity isn't a crime, as far as I can recall." She pouted her lower lip, batting her eyelashes.

"No, Miss, but it's just that the receptionist, several other residents, and the cleaning staff all confirmed and identified your guests as the same two girls from the poster..." His brow began to furrow, the corners of his mouth weighted into a frown. "So, either they're all lying, or something in your story doesn't add up."

"How petty of them, to say such scandalous things about me!" Rarity closed her eyes and turned up her nose. "Jealousy! Jealous of how a girl from Ponyville could become so successful and have such famous friends!"

"Would you mind telling us what's behind the only locked door in the penthouse?"

"That would be Sapphire's recording studio," she replied, keeping her eyes closed in feigned disinterest. "She keeps it locked, I'm afraid. I haven't the slightest idea what might lie within, and I do believe you need a warrant if you intend on breaking down any doors."

She peered out of one eye as another officer stepped into the room, holding a star spangled hat and a business card. "*The Great and Powerful Trixie*, huh? I suppose these belong to one of your *gentlemen callers*?"

"Yes, well..." Both officers advanced cautiously, blocking her way to the door. "Some of them have rather... exotic fantasies, and..."

The stallion in the back reached for his shackles. "Put your hooves where we can see them, ma'am!"

"Oh, and I so hoped we'd be able to do this the civilized way..."

Rarity sprung off the bed just as they lunged, grabbing several spools of thread with her magic. The thread unraveled, looped and coiled, snaring the lead officer and tying his hooves together. He toppled over on the bed, struggling against the bindings. She prepared to repeat her performance on the second officer as he took a swing at her with a billy club. Sidestepping, she threaded several needles with a flick of her horn. Smiling, she sewed the sleeves and legs of his uniform together, then tied the two of them together with a bow, leaving them both squirming and shouting.

In the few seconds that had passed since engaging the officers present, a pegasus and a unicorn had rushed to the door. A bright flash cast their shadows against the wall, but they ignored it and charged. The pegasus was easy prey, flying right into her silken web and squirming as he crashed to the floor. The unicorn, on the other hoof, was able to push the threads apart with his magic. Similarly, he was able to grab the pegasus's billy club with his magic and take another swing at her. Rarity narrowly dodged that time, feeling it skim her mane and tip of her ear as she leaned out of the way. At the end of the swing, she was able to bind it, tying it tightly into the tangle of thread that had more or less filled the room.

"Now see here, I don't want to fight you, but Celestia help me I will if you don't back down!" She tried to tie him up again, but he pushed the threads out of the way, taking another step closer. "I mean it!"

The shuffling of hooves rolled in behind him, two figures moving around in the mess behind him. Without taking his eyes off of her, he fought to untie the officers she had already dealt with. Without warning, a glowing vase pushed through the web and came down on his head with a loud smash. He wavered for a moment, and then fell heavily to the floor.

"Not exactly a diamond, but it got the job done!" Rarity wasn't ashamed to admit to herself that the sound of Trixie's voice was a huge relief. "How are you doing in there?"

With her magic, the fashionista slowly cleared a path. "I've been better. What about the rest of them?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie put her smoke and mirrors to good use. They're all out cold." The magician smiled as they made eye contact. "But Trixie feels we should probably clear out of here, and not through the front door."

“Actually...” Mahara mused from the living room.

Rarity's ears splayed as she listened in. *Ooooooh this is a horrible idea...*

Several minutes later, Mahara, disguised as the head officer, lead the three of them through the lobby in chains. Mahara didn't need much convincing to agree to carry a suitcase containing all the dresses she had put together for them. Rarity had no problem forcing fake tears, and in truth, the entire situation was humiliating enough that they were half-honest. The whimpering and sobbing behind her, however, was stealing her fire. She glanced back at Trixie, at the way her lower lip trembled as she practically gushed, and resolved to try and go more dramatic. She adopted a sway and a gasping cry, allowing a bit of resistance to build up between her and Mahara.

“I'm too pretty to go to jail!” she wailed. “Please don't make me go! I'm sorry!”

The imposter stallion, along with everypony in the lobby, stopped to stare if they hadn't stopped already. She flicked Trixie in the nose with her tail as Mahara shook her head and started pulling again.

Heavy grey clouds rolled overhead, blotting out the sun. Rarity hadn't noticed them inside, their sudden appearance striking her as odd. Several passersby seemed to share her opinion, paying more attention to the sudden cloud cover than the group of ponies being led in chains. A police wagon waited by the curb. The stallions hitched to it snorted as Mahara approached.

“Where's Brass and Copper?” one of them asked. “And Lock?”

“They're securing the crime scene. We only got two of the girls from the poster, but,” she looked back at Rarity, then behind her. “We got the girl that was hiding them there.”

“Okay, but what about the suit case on your back?”

“Oh! Evidence!” One of the stallions cocked his head at that.

“Yeah, sure, just load them in and let's get going.”

Rarity climbed in without any difficulty, as did Trixie, but she watched as Mahara helped Fluttershy feel her way into the wagon. It took her a moment to remember that the pair of them were nearly blind in sunlight. Mahara followed, closing the door behind her and shedding her disguise, her form returning to its normal, female appearance. The red mare knocked on the front panel.

“Alright,” she called with the officer's voice. “We're all secure. Get a move on.”

Trixie leaned forward as Rarity levitated the key to their shackles around the cabin. “And the plan is?”

“Once Fluttershy gets loose, she and I jump onto their backs, we hypnotize them, and we have them take us to the train station.” Mahara fished a pair of sunglasses out of the police uniform and gave them to the pegasus.

“Y-you want me to um...” Fluttershy looked down at the floor. “Jump onto one of them? I don't think that's such a good idea.”

After a moment, Mahara sighed. “Okay. What if I just unhitch them?” Rarity nodded, Trixie and Fluttershy doing the same as the red mare looked around the cabin. “Alright then, let's do this.”

As the wagon rattled down the street, Mahara pushed the door open and put her forehooves on the roof,

lifting herself up and out of sight. Rarity followed the sound of her hooves as she moved around above them, Fluttershy turning toward the sound of movement as it reached the front of the cabin. While Rarity had expected the unhitching to be fairly silent, instead, the sound of splintering wood rang through the air, followed by whinnies of surprise. The wagon immediately began to slow down.

“Alright girls,” shouted Mahara, “that’s your cue!”

Without warning, Trixie hurled herself out of the still moving wagon. Rarity looked to Fluttershy, the pegasus returning her wide eyed shock. Fluttershy took a deep breath, stepped up to the banging door, and leapt out with a flap of her enormous wings.

The fashionista held the door open with her magic, looking over the lip at the blurred cobblestone speeding by below her. “Mahara?! I don’t suppose you could carry me?! ...Mahara?” She glanced down the street, all three of them stomping and shouting for her to jump, appearing smaller by the moment. “I used to make dresses...”

Rarity closed her eyes, leaned over the edge, and let gravity take over. Mid tumble, she tucked her limbs into her body as tightly as she could, attempting to put her head between her forelegs. The first impact knocked the breath out of her, pain shooting through her body as she hit the cobblestone with such force that she bounced. The second impact was no less brutal, but she was thankful under the blanket of agony that she didn’t rebound. Her body attempted to resist as she unfolded herself, every inch of her seeming to ache. She made an effort to stand, but her right foreleg gave out from under her, a fresher wave of searing anguish shooting through her. Delirious, Rarity managed a smile as her friends tried to help her up.

“Are the dresses okay?” she whispered.

Mahara nodded, motioning to the suitcase on her back. “I’ve got them right here. Can you walk?”

“I... I think her leg might be broken...” Fluttershy looked up from the unicorn’s leg, biting her lower lip. “Badly sprained, at the very least. It looks like she hit her head pretty hard, too.”

“Fuck it, Trixie’s got this.” Rarity watched as a glow enveloped her, lifting her onto Trixie’s back. “Now let’s go! I’m *not* going back to jail!”

Giggling, her head still spinning, Rarity mumbled, “*Back?* As in, you’ve been to prison *before?* Oh, you *ruffian!*”

“Trixie really hopes this isn’t permanent.”

A sea of ponies gave them awkward glances, or stopped to stare outright as they shoved their way down the busy street. Suddenly, the majority of the pedestrians looked skyward. Rarity craned her sore neck to see what had everypony’s attention, spying a bright red flare drifting high over the city, standing out against the overcast sky. She traced its trail back to about where they had abandoned the carriage. Her shock began to fade, replaced by a splitting headache.

“I think they’re onto us...”

Trixie looked back, Fluttershy doing the same. Their panic showed through gritted teeth and arched brows. “So, are we just going to gallop into the train station or what?” The magician nearly dropped Rarity as she shoved a news vendor aside. “Mahara?!”

“Thinking! Hold on!”

A pair of pegasi in police uniforms swept by overhead, shouting to one another before circling back around. They maintained their altitude, slowing to a near hover several stories above them.

“Okay! Fluttershy, you’re with me! Trixie, you try and lose them before you take Rarity to the station!”

Mahara clenched her jaw as a pair of enormous bat wings just about erupted from her back, unfolding to their full span, the membranes billowing like sails against the wind. She nodded to Fluttershy, and together they launched from the sidewalk. Rarity watched them swooping and diving at the airborne police for several moments before Trixie rounded a corner. After what felt like a minute had passed, Mahara and Fluttershy streaked through the air, several large, grey creatures following them.

“Ffffuck,” Trixie hissed back at her. “They’re sending gargoyles!”

No sooner had the words left her lips than did an enormous stone figure crash down in the center of the street, leering back at Rarity with glowing yellow eyes. It resembled a cross between a pony and a pig, but with goat horns, talons in front, cloven hooves in back, and the wings of a bat. Pedestrian traffic came to a complete standstill. It began to advance just as Trixie pushed her way into an alley, galloping at full speed and frantically babbling something about “*the big house*”. Rarity watched as, behind them, the gargoyle made an effort to give chase, shoving several paces deep into the narrow alley before it was halted by its sheer size. The dust of pulverized bricks swirled around it as it snarled and tried to crawl after them.

Ahead of them, the dimmed light of day and the motion of the street came closer and closer.

“Okay, I think we’re in the clear,” Trixie whispered as they re-entered the flow of the sidewalk. “We just have to keep a low-”

A red and grey blur slammed into the back of a cart carrying furniture, fragments and splinters scattering into the surrounding area. Some ponies ran screaming, while others were frozen to the spot, watching in awe. Mahara emerged from the wreckage, bloodied but grinning, a few black wisps of smoke drifting off of her open wounds as a ray of sunlight swept over her. With the claws that protruded from the wrist of her wings, she lifted a stone head out of the broken furniture. Still grinning, she reared back and smashed it against her forehead.

“Wow,” Trixie said to nopony in particular. “That thing wasn’t alive, was it?”

Gawking herself, Rarity looked between Mahara and the magician. “What? No, I don’t believe so. They’re constructs or something like that. A stone statue, an animation spell, and *voila*.”

“Oh, right. Trixie knew that, of course...”

“Shouldn’t you two be going somewhere?” the red mare asked as she took to the air again. She hesitated, however, hovering close enough to give Rarity the suitcase. “Actually, change of plans. Don’t wait for us at the station. You two get on the first train to Ponyville that you can while we keep them busy. I’ll let Fluttershy know about the change when I catch up to her.”

With that, she zipped off into the sky again, two more gargoyles giving chase. The crowd kept its distance after Mahara had departed, eyeing both unicorns and the suitcase on Rarity’s back. Trixie looked around, flashed a nervous grin, and quietly carried Rarity to the corner.

“Okay, we’ve seriously gotta lose all the attention here,” she whispered as the traffic parted around them. Shouting echoed down the street. “Come ooon, give us a break!”

Though her head was still pounding and her right foreleg definitely felt as though there were something

out of place, Rarity regained her senses as Trixie pushed her way down the street, skimming the road at times to avoid street vendors and seemingly impenetrable crowds. She could hear the police in the distance, occasionally joined by the shouts of bystanders directing them toward herself and Trixie. Much to her relief, the voices began to fade into the background, their trail going cold as Trixie navigated narrow alleys and took advantage of unguarded back doors to go right through shops.

After at least half an hour of winding through the streets, Paddock Station came into view. Trixie waited patiently as Rarity eased herself onto the sidewalk, keeping her weight off of her injured foreleg. With the suitcase handle in her mouth, the magician lead the way, moving at a pace slow enough for Rarity to limp alongside her. Several officers stood by a police wagon at the corner, accompanied by a small group of hound dogs. Rarity held her breath as she passed them, one of the hounds perking up and sniffing around excitedly. She heaved a sigh of relief when it lifted its leg and began licking its own crotch.

As they moved with the flow of the crowd, Trixie lifted a hoof in the direction of the ticket kiosk. "You did bring money for tickets, right?"

Rarity snorted, pulled her purse out of the suitcase, and purchased a pair of one-way fares to Ponyville. "We don't have much time; let's get down to the concourse."

The train hissed impatiently as Rarity hobbled down the stairs, unloading passengers and luggage from one end while a line of ponies began to shuffle in at the other.

Seconds after stepping onto the train, she heard a conductor cry, "Last call for Ponyville! All aboard!"

They settled into their seats, giving each other a nod and a bit of a smile, sharing in what the fashionista felt was unspoken but mutual respect. Trixie's smile faded within a moment, however.

"Do you think they're okay?"

Rarity smiled a little wider. "I watched Mahara *destroy a hydra*. I don't think a few gargoyles and ponies in uniform will give them too much trouble."

"I know she says it's a curse and everything," Trixie said with arched brows, "but really, if all you have to do is bite a pony every now and then, that whole package seems pretty damn cool."

"All the dress making I could get done if I never had to sleep... Or never growing old... Or being able to look however I like at just about the drop of a hat..." Rarity looked down at her swollen foreleg, and then out the window as the train began to chug down the track. "Or being able to shrug off physical inconveniences... I'd be lying if I said I've not given it a little consideration. But... I think it's best we not lose sight of what is real and what is fantasy... A fantasy has never hurt anypony, at any rate."

Trixie nodded, closing her eyes and curling up in her seat.

Closing her own eyes, she mused, *For a washed up, two bit magician, you're not such a bad pony after all.*

V ^ ^ V

It wasn't uncommon for Rarity to go on trips for one reason or another. It wasn't uncommon for their parents to leave on spur-of-the-moment vacations, at that, but the nature of Rarity's disappearance was what made Sweetie Belle anxious. At school, the day before, Diamond Tiara had asked her how it felt to be related to a criminal. She ran home crying. Saturday morning had come and gone, and she hadn't

even bothered visiting her friends, despite the fact that she told her parents that was what she was what she had planned for the day.

Her parents didn't know what to think about Rarity's actions, either, and that just made her feel worse.

A distant bell tolled an hour past noon, and Sweetie Belle sighed, bored and lonely, as she looked out her window. She knew it wasn't actually her window, but Rarity's, since she didn't actually live in the boutique. At the same time, this was the room she always stayed in when she visited, and she felt like Rarity had practically designated it as hers. Without her older sister around, however, the building just felt empty, and she felt like an intruder.

Opalescence swirled around her hind legs, tickling lightly and making half-formed meows.

"You know it's not time for you to eat yet, silly." She smiled down at the cat, only to find herself reminded of her sister again. "Do you miss her too? I mean, I know you're a cat and everything, but... But I'm talking to my sister's cat..."

The young mare leaned back against the windowsill and resigned herself to daydream and watch the steady bustle of activity in town. At the very least, three days after the hydra attack, things were starting to return to normal.

Normal, she thought to herself, following the path of the town's resident mail pegasus. *Were things ever normal in Ponyville? There was always some kind of adventure to go on or some kind of charade unfolding, but nothing like this... At least, if things happened on this level when I was younger, I didn't notice them.*

Sweetie Belle's thoughts were scattered when Opal jumped onto the sill, rubbing against the side of her face. She smiled and ran a hoof along the feline's back. Just as she reached the base of Opal's tail, the cat perked up, eyes wide. Sweetie turned toward the sound of a key jiggling in a lock, echoing through the vacant shop floor. Immediately following was the sound of the front door opening, accompanied by the jingle of a bell.

"Oh, wow, yeah, this is pretty cool! And you run it all by yourself?"

The muffled, unfamiliar voice made her tense up, quietly stepping away from the window and peering out into the front room. She froze when a second figure emerged, recognizing her before she even said a word.

"Oh yes, it's quite nice, really! I make up my own schedule, decide which clients to take and which to decline..." Rarity smiled at the unicorn looking around the boutique, setting a single suitcase by the door. "It can get a little stressful with large orders, but for the most part, it's my dream come true."

"Rarity!" Sweetie cried, galloping across the room.

"Sweetie Belle?!" The filly lost sight of her sister's look of shock, rearing up and hugging her tightly. The embrace was returned without hesitation. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at Mother and Father's?"

"I dunno, I just felt like coming here. Everyone was really worried about you, especially Mom and Dad." Sweetie pulled back, looking up at her older sister. "Ponies are saying that you're some kind of criminal or traitor or something... That you ran off to Canterlot with Fluttershy and the monster that killed the hydra. But, now you're home, so you can tell them that you didn't do any of that!"

She let go, settling back on all fours. "Who's your friend, by the way? And where did you go? How come

you didn't tell anypony but Pinkie?"

"My friend?" Rarity glanced to the frost blue unicorn beside her, the unicorn in question smiling and shrugging. "Her name is Trixie. Trixie, this is my younger sister, Sweetie Belle."

Trixie gave an overly dramatic bow, foreleg sweeping to one side. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is pleased to make your acquaintance."

Sweetie Belle stifled a giggle, looking back to Rarity.

"As for where I was, I just needed to get away for a few days. I got a few dresses done while I was gone, and I... I made a new friend, I suppose." She smiled and nodded. "So, it was a pleasant vacation, all in all. Aside from my being accused of sedition, I trust things have calmed down since I left?"

Sweetie Belle returned the nod. "Pretty much... Scootaloo got her lip busted the other day, but she won't say who did it..." She looked around for a moment, tapping a hoof against the floor. "Oh! And she finally figured out flying! How could I forget that?! Pinkie threw her a really great party yesterday to celebrate! Applebloom was there, and she looked like she was doing a lot better. She says Applejack is recovering, too, so that's good."

"That sounds wonderful for the most part. I'd actually planned on visiting Pinkie shortly. You're more than welcome to come with me, if you like." Rarity looked between them, wearing a gentle smile. "Both of you. Let me just unpack and say hello to Opalescence first."

Rarity trotted out of the room, a slight limp in her step, the sound of her hooves fading as she climbed the stairs. Sweetie Belle sat down on the couch, curiously looking Trixie over as the frost colored unicorn explored the dimly lit shop.

"So, what do you do?"

Trixie looked up from a dress rack, ears perked. "Trixie is a magician. One of the best, in fact!" A grin slowly curled across her lips. "Of course, she only performs for royalty and those who can afford her talents, so, if you've never heard of her-"

"Oh! No, I remember now! You were performing in town one day, a few years back!" Trixie's grin immediately vanished, her brow flattening against her eyes. "Hey, how come you speak in the third person?"

"Why does your sister speak with a fake accent?"

The filly giggled, bobbing against the arm of the couch. "I know, right?! Mom and Dad don't sound anything like her!"

"Mom and Dad don't sound anything like whom?" Rarity inquired as she stepped into the room.

"Nopony," she said in unison with Trixie.

Rarity cocked a brow. "Very well, then. Let's visit Pinkie Pie, shall we?"

Sweetie Belle followed the pair of older unicorns, listening in as they discussed spells and strategies for publicity. Their conversation dropped off as they approached Sugarcube corner. A large crowd had gathered, and above them hovered several pegasi outfitted in the armor of the royal guard. Without saying a word, Rarity started pushing her way through the gathering. Trixie glanced back at her as if hoping for an explanation; when she received nothing but a shrug from Sweetie, she began to worm her

way into the crowd as well.

The last thing Sweetie Belle expected to see, once she had finally squeezed close enough to see the source of the commotion, was Pinkie Pie being led out of the bakery by the royal guard. The pink pony hung her head as she slowly descended the front steps of her home, her mane and tail hanging limp. Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, and Twilight Sparkle followed a short distance behind her. Their expressions were difficult for her to place, though they all gave her the impression of disappointment. The Cakes appeared in the doorway after Celestia and her entourage, Cup, Pumpkin and Pound all crying as they watched. Carrot looked on in silence, his expression vacant.

She realized a moment later that Scootaloo and Ditzzy were at Pinkie's side, joined by a much larger pegasus stallion that she recognized from the party, all three of them seemingly torn between trying to comfort her and trying to talk to Celestia. The entire procession came to a halt when Twilight looked her way. Sweetie Belle glanced behind herself before realizing Twilight was actually looking at Rarity. Almost immediately, Pinkie reared up, the guards surrounding her jumping back in surprise.

"They know!" she shouted, waving her forehooves. "They know! Get outta here!"

"And go where?" Rarity calmly replied, stepping forward after the crowd cleared from around her. "We've done our part, Pinkie. All we can do now is hope they get somewhere safe."

Twilight narrowed her eyes as she moved aggressively toward Rarity. "Somewhere safe? Like *Manehattan*? We wouldn't have even found out about their little *vacation* if Celestia hadn't received a bulletin from the Manehattan Police Department! Now, I can understand telling a lie or two, even if you're putting them before *every single pony in Equestria*, but," she glanced back at Pinkie and the winged stallion beside her, "*kidnapping* somepony?! Even if he says it's not a big deal, that doesn't change the fact that you actually went that far!"

She returned her furious stare to Rarity. "And you! Assaulting officers of the law?! And, apparently, Big Macintosh *shot* Fluttershy two nights ago?! I don't know what's gotten into all of you, but we all need to have a very, very long talk about all of this! This whole thing has gotten completely out of control! We don't even know where Zecora is now! Who knows what shenanigans she could be getting up to as we speak!"

Huffing, Twilight paused for a moment, scanning the crowd behind Rarity. "And don't think you're just going to slink away from this, Trixie! You're just as guilty of attacking police officers as she is!" She began to point, stabbing at the air with her hoof. "Yes, I see you there! Come here!"

Sweetie Belle watched Trixie hesitate, the surrounding ponies slowly backing away from her. "The Great and Powerful-"

"No. Stop. Just *stop*. You're not talking your way out of this, now come here. You too, Rarity. You're all going to wait for us at the castle, and we're going to Manehattan to try and put a stop to all of this craziness." She turned and stomped back to Celestia's side, snorting quietly as she looked over her shoulder.

Luna nodded, trotting toward the pair of chariots waiting for them on the other side of the street. "Well said, Twilight Sparkle."

Celestia lifted her head as she looked around the crowd. "Once again, you have my apologies for disrupting the peace. I know that you have all been through quite a lot in the last few days, and it is not my intention to continuously stir up additional cause for alarm. You have my word, fair citizens of Ponyville, that we will have this issue resolved and see peace restored across Equestria before dawn tomorrow. That is all."

After the chariots and their escort gracefully sailed off into the sky, one bound for Manehattan, the other for Canterlot, the crowd quickly disintegrated. Mrs. Cake ushered her foals back into the house, gently tugging on Carrot's mane until he followed, too. A few minutes later, only Scootaloo, Ditzzy, the pegasus stallion, and Sweetie Belle remained. Scootaloo sniffled softly as Sweetie approached, sitting down beside her. Ditzzy joined them, a muffled whimper escaping her throat.

Something in the back of Sweetie's mind told her that she should be crying too, but somehow, she wasn't. She couldn't.

"I'm sorry," the stallion whispered, taking to the air a minute later.

"It's funny," Sweetie Belle said aloud, though more to herself than either of them. "I was just thinking how things looked like they were starting to go back to normal."

"Things will never go back to normal," Scootaloo mumbled through gasps.

The unicorn filly closed her eyes. "I guess you're right..."

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The air was completely saturated with light and sound, so much so that it was nearly overwhelming. A few days ago, it would have been, but in that time, Fluttershy had adjusted to her more sensitive hearing in leaps and bounds. Slowly, she followed Mahara through the laughing, screaming crowd, taking in the sights as they made their way down the boardwalk. She couldn't remember the last time she had been to an amusement park. While the novelty of the experience sparked excitement in her, it wasn't enough to overshadow the real reason they were there. The Poney Island amusement park was a stone's throw from Bucklyn's massive shipyard. In less than two hours, a freighter would dock there, and together they would stow away and leave Equestria behind. For that reason, her smile was stitched with anxiety.

Mahara gently nudged her, pointing toward a cotton candy stand. She nodded, and, a minute later, was sitting on a bench and nibbling at an enormous tuft of sugar. The red mare declined the offer when Fluttershy held it toward her, apparently more interested in scanning the crowd. The other reason for their being at the park was to feed, preferably more than once, according to her companion. A twinge of guilt mingled with her eagerness to taste blood. She stopped pulling at the cloud of sugar, and looking up at the faintly glowing night sky, her thoughts began to wander. Another nudge roused her. Mahara wore a look of concern.

"I never got to say goodbye." Fluttershy turned toward her, looking down at Mahara's mouth and throat more than her eyes. "I never got to tell my friends how much I love them, how much I miss them... I never even got to say goodbye to Angel." She took a deep breath, shuddering.

Mahara pressed closer, a foreleg wrapped around her. "I never got to say goodbye, either... but you're lucky. Do you know why?" Fluttershy glanced up at her, finding a smile spread across the red mare's lips. "You don't *need* to say goodbye. This isn't the end, Fluttershy. Not by a long shot. I know for a fact that they love you as much as you love them, and they'll be waiting for you when you return. I... I don't know when that will be, because once we get on that boat, it's going to take us very far away. I won't lie; it may be years from now, but I can tell you for certain that you'll see all your friends again someday."

The pegasus blinked away a few tears, feeling some of the weight lifting off of her heart, and she began to smile. "Do you really mean that?"

"Every word. I may not know where, when, or how, but I promise you, you'll be with them again." She

leaned forward, kissing Fluttershy on the nose. "Now come on, we have a whole park to enjoy and not much time to enjoy it!"

The world became a blur of flashing lights and faces screaming with wild delight, broken up by brief moments of stillness as they waited in line for the next ride. Fluttershy's heart raced, thrilled, terrified, and ecstatic all at once as she looked out over the tallest hill of a roller coaster, tightly squeezing Mahara's hoof and squealing with frightened glee when the car roared down the track. Her legs were still shaking as she rode a wooden unicorn on the merry go round, both she and Mahara staying far away from the wooden alicorn bearing the likeness of Celestia. To Mahara's disappointment, understanding, and mild amusement, Fluttershy politely declined the chance to take part in the bungee jumping attraction.

Not long after taking two turns at the bumper cars, Fluttershy idly ran her tongue over her fangs. Her mouth and throat felt dry, even as she nursed a bottle of sparkling cider. She cast a timid glance toward Mahara, swallowing, and Mahara grinned.

"I know that look," she whispered. "I think it's about time we dealt with our peculiar needs, don't you?"

"Y-yes... If you want to, I mean..." Fluttershy felt her cheeks starting to burn, trying to look away and escape Mahara's lewd, sideways glance. "Where, though?"

"Somewhere private... Somewhere secluded, where we're not likely to be interrupted..." Mahara's grin flattened as she pursed her lips, giving the question serious thought. The pegasus fluttered her wings and pointed when she found the answer. "Oh..." Mahara mused as she followed Fluttershy's hoof. "Yes, that will do nicely... I hope you're not planning on asking for donors while we're waiting in line."

Fluttershy bit her lip, tail flicking involuntarily. "I um... I think we can afford to be assertive this time, since we're on a tight schedule and all..."

"Goodness, Fluttershy, that's absolutely depraved..." She blushed even brighter as the red mare gave her a big, fang-filled grin. "I love it!"

The *Tunnel of Love* was so dimly lit that anypony not gifted with the ability to see in the dark would have a hard time seeing more than a few noses in front of them. On top of that, the swan shaped boats moved with enough distance between them that privacy was just about guaranteed.

A shiver ran through the pegasus as she waited in line, fighting to keep her wings folded against her sides. She occasionally glanced around until she spotted Mahara. The red mare carried a stack of napkins as she slipped into line beside her. Dozens of couples milled before and behind them, some of them already trading saliva and breathy panting. The pounding of hearts came to the forefront of her hearing, bringing the promise of so much fresh blood. Fluttershy eagerly tapped a hoof against the floor of the boat as they were seated; salivating by the time they had started moving. Mahara inhaled slowly as they slipped into near darkness, sprouting wings, her eyes glowing softly behind her mane.

Without speaking a word, they lifted off from the boat, watching as it slowly floated away from them. When the next boat drifted under them, they descended in complete silence and landed on either side of the pair of earth stallions who were lost in a passionate kiss. They tapped on their prey in unison, meeting looks of confusion with burning stares, locking them into a state of passive tranquility. Without hesitation, Fluttershy sank her fangs into her limp stallion's neck, drawing thick rivers of blood, groaning as the taste rolled over her tongue. Swallow by swallow, she felt bliss washing over her, filling her every nerve with a buzzing rush.

The sound of the park echoed in from the end of the tunnel, signaling an end to the first course. She pulled away from the stallion, giggling softly as she noted his dumbfounded grin, and put the finishing

touches on her trance.

"You and your colt friend bit each other a little too hard during the ride. I want you to hold this napkin to your bite until you hear the words *are you alright*. Do you understand?" The stallion nodded slowly, pressing the offered napkin to the bleeding fang marks in the side of his neck. "Good. Mahara?"

"All set on this end." She sat back from the stallion she had been suckling, offering him a napkin, which he held to the side of his neck. "Ready for more?"

Fluttershy was already nodding before Mahara had even finished speaking. "Absolutely!"

The pegasus clasped her hooves over her mouth as she realized that she had shouted. Mahara laughed, and Fluttershy joined in as they fluttered into the air, flying back to the entrance of the ride and waiting.

Three passes later, Fluttershy gave a moan of satisfaction, belching wetly as she licked the corners of her lips. The warmth of her meal slowly spread through her body, leaving her feeling both comfortably sluggish and empowered. She could feel the strength pulsing through her, fresh blood mingling with her own, her every sense functioning at its peak. The sensation was nearly disorienting. She could just about hear the paint slowly peeling from the submerged sides of the boat. Mahara nudged her, grinning smugly, decadently, her breath a bouquet of the blood she had drawn from various mares and stallions. Even the gentle pressure of a hoof against her belly lit her skin on fire.

"One more," she whispered, almost clumsily propelling herself back into the air on leathery wings.

"Oh no, I couldn't." Fluttershy smiled drunkenly, following her anyway.

"Just this one, and then we'll call it quits. Come here..."

Before Mahara had even pursed her lips to the side of Fluttershy's neck, she knew what was going to happen. Her breath caught in her throat upon contact, giving a shrill whine when her lover pierced the side of her neck; the exact same spot Mahara had pierced the first time she let the red mare feed from her.

"Yes..." she whispered, feeling the rolling pressure, the sharp tingling of fangs in her flesh, the warmth of her own blood.

Driven by instinct, she craned her neck, pushing her lips to Mahara's skin, spreading them until her fangs started to divot over her pulsing artery. She pushed through, lapping slowly around lips sealed to her flesh, drawing out a steady crimson stream, swallowing hungrily. Mid swallow, Mahara pulled away, pushing Fluttershy's muzzle up with her hoof. Their glistening lips met, dripping, spattering down her breast as her tongue rolled, and panting through her nose. Their blood mingled between them, settling in her belly like fire.

"Okay, okay," Mahara finally mumbled against the pegasus's mouth. "As much as I want to-" She was briefly silenced as Fluttershy pushed in for one last kiss. "This isn't the time or the place."

Heart still hammering in her breast, Fluttershy nodded, exclaiming with a soft, happy sigh. Together, they vacated the tunnel through a maintenance passage, casually trotting away from the crowd that had gathered as a result of the sudden outbreak of pony biting.

An enormous ferris wheel loomed over the other end of the park. Not too far behind that, according to Mahara, was the Bucklyn harbor.

“Why don’t we ride it?” Fluttershy smiled as she took a few steps forward, Mahara following. “From up there, we’ll be able to see the boat when it comes in, right?”

“Alright, sure! We’ve got some time to kill before it’s due in, anyway.”

While the line for the ride wasn’t terribly long, it was just long enough for the blood drinking high to wind down. She knew that her senses hadn’t degraded at all, but without the razor edge that fresh blood provided, they felt somewhat dulled. The drumming of beating hearts was almost completely faded under the music and chatter surrounding her. It was as close to what she once considered normal as she had felt in days, and, somehow, it just made her feel vulnerable.

The car rocked gently as they stepped into it, and then again as, car by car, the rest of the passengers were seated. A steady hum filled the air as the motor went from starts and stops to full motion, supplemented by the creak of metal, and the occasional laugh or shout from one of the other riders. On one side, the Manehattan skyline glowed like a mountain of embers. On the other, the ocean stretched out as far as she could see, moonlight shimmering across the surface. Fluttershy smiled as she looked out over the world below, wrapping a foreleg around Mahara, holding her tightly. They sat in silence as the wheel revolved, but as their car started to rise again, the red mare jolted. The pegasus glanced up at her with confusion and concern. Mahara was pointing. She followed the outstretched hoof, scanning the horizon.

She spotted it when they reached the highest point. In the distance, a beacon of light. Thick black smoke billowed out behind it.

“That’s our ride,” Mahara whispered.

There was no fear left, no uncertainty clouding her judgment. Her new life would begin the moment she set hoof on that distant freighter, and knowing that she would see her friends again someday, she finally felt excited about it. Still smiling, she glanced up at Mahara.

Tight lips and a knitted brow greeted her. The red mare’s gaze swept the interior of the car, her ears twitching and swiveling. Her apparent worry spread to Fluttershy.

“Mahara? What’s wrong?”

Wide-eyed panic manifested in her expression. “Can’t you hear that?”

The pegasus looked around the car, ears perked, rubbing Mahara’s sides as her breast began to rapidly rise and fall. She could hear Mahara’s unusual heartbeat, nearly identical to her own, and the sound of all the other living, breathing ponies on the ride with them.

“Fluttershy, please tell me I’m imagining it!”

Then she heard it. A heartbeat, similar to theirs, so very close, and slowly getting closer as their car continued to descend.

Mahara stood slowly, moving to the other side of the car, looking through the screen to the other side of the ferris wheel. On the roof of the car across from them, there stood a lone, hooded figure, staring back at them with turquoise eyes that pierced the darkness. Before the name even rolled off of Mahara’s tongue, Fluttershy knew who had found them.

“Zecora...”

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