Marks of Harmony
Part 6

Despite many of its features only partially illuminated by the steady yellow glow of lampposts, Inky Jay considered Ponyville to be a rather nice looking town. Its size and generally unorganized layout reminded him of his home village, though it was still more brightfully cheerful and not as well defended as his home. He was glad it was night, for even though his ceremonial white jacket almost glowed in the darkness, at least a pony would have to be out and looking for him to see him. He appreciated the peace and solitude the night could bring a pony and his thoughts. If anything, it was better for him to have finally left Aurora's ship so late. Any ponies willing to prowl the darkness most certainly would be possessed on an interesting persona. Only being able to catch a glimpse of one such pony's movement and—if he was lucky—their color, would be enough for him to begin building a fascinating fictional character.

Such was the mind of an author; always on the hunt for ideas. And yet, as he strolled through the night-covered Ponyville, Inky Jay had little else to do save examine the eccentricity of the town more carefully. His favorite work of art, the starlit sky, was obscured partly by the street lamps, and not a single pony of interest seemed to wander the paths like him. Thus, his perception began to lead him to the conclusion that while Ponyville possessed a certain, messily constructed air; it was so by design. Where Caedmon, his home, was actually a convoluted gaggle of houses and shops resting amongst the red sand dunes, Ponyville's design was purposefully whimsical.

His opinion slowly shifted from one of appreciation to one of disdain as the truth of this became more and more apparent with every step. The feeling in the architecture he received was sickeningly artificial, especially when all of the homes and buildings he could see were identical. It was a clear sign that their residents were adherent to 'civilized' culture and society. There simply was no natural spontaneity of vision or creativity like in Caedmon. He tried to pass it off at first by insisting that perhaps all of the artistically inclined ponies were asleep, but intruding thoughts of home and the nighttime art shows kept pestering him until he accepted his initial thought as true.

He had hoped that by being the only volunteer to come with Aurora Streak, he would have the opportunity of his dreams to see and write of the vibrant and variegated scenery and cultures of Equestria. The Changeling Hive had been the most exquisite place he had ever visited, but it was not within Equestria proper, and he had not exactly been allowed to wander freely within the tunnels. Most certainly the forests and wildlife of the Home of the Sun and Moon were fascinating to observe, document, and imagine as characters; but the denizens of the Bad Lands and the Land of Red Dunes were far more interesting than the Equestrians.

There was of course the possibility that he was simply on the 'wrong side of town'. He really did not understand this phrase entirely, but Aurora had explained it to him rather awkwardly. "Even their smallest villages are at least twice the size of a settlement like

Caedmon," she had said when they had been drawing close to the border. "The size creates this subconscious rift between certain areas, often along the lines of certain trades." As he was presently attempting to find himself some accommodation, he reconciled his disappointment with Ponyville by concluding that this district—whatever one might call it—was merely not of the artistic persuasion.

Still, he thought as he stepped up to an inn promising cheap rates, *they could at least consider some nighttime galleries. I have never seen so many ponies with such ignorance of the stars' intricacy. At least in the Land of Red Dunes we had proper respect for the Princess of the Night. Luna must be so ashamed of these.* He snorted contemptibly, amused that the Equestrians still had not learned to at least show respect for the night after the Nightmare Moon incident. He and the rest of the Caedmon natives could proudly say they had never abandoned Luna. Before pushing the inn's door open, he took one last glance around the street: making a last bid for sight of any ponies out so late. There were none, so he dutifully stepped out of the quiet and refreshing night air into the humid confines of the inn.

A small bell tinkled at his entrance, but in the silence around him, Inky Jay thought the ringing was more akin to the tolling of a city hall's clock tower. The reception area was barely large enough for three ponies to stand within comfortably, a considerable portion of the space taken up by the reception desk. The room was lit by seven candles placed randomly around the room and a small electric lamp at the receptionist's desk. The actual pony supposed to be working at the counter was not to be seen. Inky huffed, throwing back his hood in distaste. Even with cheap rates, they still ought to be capable enough to have a receptionist working at night.

Upon Inky's coming up to the counter, the mystery of the missing clerk was solved. A blue colt whose color was made stale by the lack of proper lighting sat in a chair, head collapsed on the records book, ruining the paper further with his light drool. Without the slightest hesitation, Inky Jay removed a pencil from his jacket, place it in his mouth, and swiftly jabbed the colt in the forehead. His small scream at being awoke in such a brutal manner was only enough to cause Inky to raise one eyebrow and sigh. "Oh sorry! Sorry!" the colt apologized profusely, ruining the effect slightly by wiping away some remaining drool with his hoof. "It's just been so busy lately. All of the visitors are transferring to cheaper hotels like ours and—"

"Do I look like a stallion that even cares the slightest bit about any of that?" Inky asked as he stowed the pencil back in a pocket, desiring only to receive his room key. "I came here for a room, not to hear the woes of a clerk. If I wanted that, I would have taken a trip to the farmer's market." The colt was momentarily stunned by Inky's brusqueness, but he managed to break his staring as Inky's brows furrowed more and more the longer he did nothing.

"Oh, well then," the colt said, picking up a pencil from somewhere behind the desk, "what sort of room would you like? I'm afraid many of the more sizeable ones have already been taken, so..."

"I'm a single stallion pegasus," Inky said deridingly, finding the colt's denseness nearly unbearable. "Do I look like I need a room with any more than a bed in it?"

“It’ll be twenty-six bits then,” the blue clerk said, catching on for once as he rifled through room keys Inky could not see.

“Bits?” Inky Jay asked, utterly confused. “Is that some sort of slang for Granes now?”

“Granes?” the colt mirrored Inky. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The pegasus author could only let out a rather pointed and heartfelt grumble as he reached into his pocket again for his native currency.

“Show me one of these ‘Bits’,” Inky demanded, needing a way to compare the value of the money.

“Do I look that gullible?” the receptionist pony asked, offended.

“No, you just look and sound stupid,” Inky said flatly. “We have different currency, in case you hadn’t already figured that out. If you want a fair price, I need to see both side by side.” The colt scowled heavily at Inky’s words, but could not deny the legitimacy of the pegasus’s request. He gingerly set a single bit on the counter, taking extra care to keep it from clattering. A quick look over the golden piece was enough for Inky to sputter in laughter. “*That’s* the new Equestrian currency!? Ha ha! Wow, this at least made my day.”

“If you cannot keep quiet sir, I can force you to leave,” the colt said, trying unsuccessfully to put on an air of professional intimidation.

“I would keep my mouth shut if I were you,” Inky chuckled, placing his Granes on the counter. There were less than a third of what the clerk had asked for in Bits, but each Grane was edged in amethyst and had an amethyst in its center. “Else I’ll be taking some of those back,” Inky finished his earlier statement. “Those are worth far more than the amount of silly Bits you were asking for, especially with the rarity of desert gems.”

“I’m not sure I can accept these,” the clerk said absently, gazing at the Granes wide-eyed.

“Of course you can,” Inky said impatiently. “They are the currency of another country, just as if you were to take Griffon money. Now where is my key?” The colt absently slid the key onto the counter, never taking his eyes off the Granes while Inky made his way up the narrow stairs to his right and into the room.

True to Inky’s request, there was nothing save a bed in the small space. He extracted his remaining Granes, notebook, and pencil before removing the jacket and draping it over the foot of the bed. He settled onto the not-so-plush mattress, propping his back on the pillows and head board. Taking the pencil in his mouth and readjusting slightly to be sure his prime writing position was as good as it would be without his own pillows, Inky Jay began to scratch on his notebook. He smirked slightly as the words describing an incredibly dense, blue colt took shape on the off-white paper.

For Twilight Sparkle and her friends, the night had been tortuous. It had already been late when Rainbow Dash had fled the group to who knew where, and despite Twilight’s nagging suspicions and desire to act upon them, there was simply not enough time left in the day. As it

were, since she would need her friends' help in the next day, Twilight had invited them to stay the night at the library. She had plenty of space after all. The meal prepared by Rarity with Spike's help that evening had been delicious, but it did nothing to alleviate the awkward silence amongst the remaining Elements. Even Pinkie Pie, the life of any get-together, had had her voice struck down by Rainbow Dash's fretful departure. The sudden nature of it all had left a hole of confusion and concern none of the ponies could fill.

And the night had not been any better. Despite her restless and incredibly trying day, Twilight had not been able go to sleep. Her theories on the seemingly random personality spikes in herself and those of her friends had pushed sleep to the side as they bounced mercilessly inside her head. It did not help that she had felt that the others had had an equally difficult time passing into their dreams. It had also been rather odd that not once had the Changeling issue entered her thoughts. All of her energy—or what had been left of it—had been entirely focused upon Rainbow Dash's uncharacteristic flight. She embodied the Element of Loyalty. Of all them, she should have known to stay and that they would have helped her.

But we didn't, and she didn't stay, Twilight thought as she moved around her kitchen in the early morning hours. *Were we just missing the point and not paying attention to what was really wrong, or am I right?* Even having stayed up through most of the night hours, Twilight had not come up with a solution to the question. "How ya doin' sugarcube?" Applejack's mellow voice said from behind. Twilight had known she was there, but had just been too caught up in her own thoughts to say anything.

"Good morning to you too," Twilight said dryly, continuing to watch her toaster.

"Ya couldn' sleep either?" Applejack asked, taking an apple from the counter.

"I don't see how any of us could have," Twilight said, levitating the toast onto her plate and carrying it into the dining room. "I still can't decide what happened yesterday."

"Well ya said ya knew who migh' be able to tell us somethin'," Applejack said. "Did ya need ta do yer fact checkin' and stuff?"

"No, I just wanted to be sure I was right before we did anything stupid," Twilight replied. "And, like I said, I still don't know."

"Good morning everypony," Rarity's groggy voice sounded from in the hallway leading to the bathroom.

"No it's not!" Pinkie's voice blasted through the previously quiet library, somehow still energized. "Dashie's not back here is she!? How can it be a good morning?!" Only, the energy was strained; a clear sign of Pinkie's anxiety.

"Calm down Pinkie!" Applejack hollered from the kitchen. "Twilight'll figure somethin' out! Won'tcha Twi?"

"Yeah!" Twilight raised her voice at a pointed shove from Applejack. "I'll figure it out!"

"Really!? That's awesome Twilight! Can I help?!" Pinkie Pie asked, her attitude switched immediately back to its jovial self as she zipped into the dining room.

"I'm not sure Pinkie," Twilight said honestly, although already weary of the day. "I'm

sure you can help us track somepony down if I'm right."

"OOOoooo," Pinkie drew out her eagerness. "I'll go get my stuff then!" As quickly as she had come, the cotton-candy pony careened out the door.

"Good job gettin' 'er out o' our hair," Applejack complemented Twilight.

"I was being serious," Twilight said straightly. "The Pinkie Sense might come in handy."

"Ya do realize what yer sayin'," Applejack replied cynically. "Ain't no pony that can tell the Pinkie Sense what ta do. Even Pinkie Pie."

"She might be able to distract him at the very least though," Twilight said.

"It's a stallion?" Applejack queried. Twilight nodded with a non-committal mumble as she downed a glass of apple juice.

"Morning guys," Spike said, grabbing a cereal box from the pantry. "Anypony seen Fluttershy?"

"No," Twilight answered. "Where did she sleep last night?"

"In tha' little room off tha balcony," Applejack answered. "Tha highest one."

"Weird, that's what I thought too," Spike said, scratching his chin in thought. "I went up there this morning to get a lighter blanket, and she wasn't there, but the bedding was."

"She pro'bly stepped out fer some fresh air, Spike," Applejack reassured him. "I know I can't start a mornin' o' work without gettin' a nice breath o' mornin' air."

"Then why wasn't she just out on the balcony?" Spike pressured the two mares.

"Okay, okay, fine," Twilight relented. "If something has happened, better to find out sooner than later. I'll check the room; Applejack, could you check outside?"

"No prob'em sugarcube. Be back with 'er in a jiff. I'm sure that's where she's at," Applejack said confidently as she strode up into the library's main room and out the door.

"Come on Spike," Twilight said as she chewed the last of her toast. "I wish you weren't so jittery when random things happen. You shouldn't read all those pulp fiction books Rainbow Dash talks about." She climbed the stairs without much conviction, prompting Spike to brush her tail with his swinging arms in his haste. "Calm down Spike," she half-laughed upon opening the door. "Why can't you just trust Applejack? She knows what she's talking about." Her certainty of Fluttershy's safety was confirmed with only a sweeping gaze of the room. Only Fluttershy—and perhaps Rarity—would ever make their beds the moment they had risen. "See," Twilight said, pointing at the delicately arranged blankets over the air mattress, "she took the time to make her bed. If she weren't okay, that would not be the case. Can you relax now?"

"I guess," Spike said stubbornly, still not wholly convinced. He crossed his arms, darting his eyes everywhere to keep from having to look at Twilight directly. However selfish the initial motive happened to be, it bore unexpected fruit. "Hey, you don't leave notes up here Twilight," Spike said, having spotted a simple piece of stationery lying on a decorative table. "And you sure as hay don't fold your stuff this neatly."

"Hey, I fold my papers just fine," Twilight retorted, but without much menace in her tone. She was distracted by the note, which had come from her own store of stationery. "I guess it has

to be from her," she admitted, levitating it up and undoing its many folds. Her eyes began silently flying over the words until Spike tapped her sitting flank in a disgruntled fashion. "Oh, sorry," she said sheepishly before restarting, this time reading aloud. "Good morning everypony. I couldn't sleep at all last night. Rainbow Dash just looked and sounded so awful, I felt horrible about not helping her. I'm sure everypony else understands, and I think everypony can get to the bottom of whatever is bothering Twilight so much without me. I've gone to Rainbow Dash's house to see if I can help her get through what is making her so distressed. Don't worry about me. We'll be back once she's feeling better. All the best, Fluttershy."

"Well at least somepony's going to go see her," Spike said, visibly relieved. "I may have been able to sleep eventually, but I've never seen Rainbow act like that. It was creepy enough to keep me up."

"I guess it's okay," Twilight said hesitantly, rolling up the note into a scroll. "I really wanted everypony helping, but, not that I think about it, Fluttershy probably wouldn't be up for what I have in mind anyway."

"And hey, maybe she's right and you're wrong and Rainbow Dash... is... just..." Spike began enthusiastically before trailing off at Twilight's annoyed glare. "You know I didn't mean it like that!" he defended his words.

"I know," Twilight giggled, playfully rubbing a hoof on his head. "I was just giving you a hard time. But you're right, really. Fluttershy might be able to do a world of good for Rainbow, and if I'm wrong—here's hoping—then it's definitely better for her to have been there and not here."

"Okay, now that I know that you're not mad at me," Spike said easily, "what is it you want to do. It can't be a good idea, the way you won't tell anypony."

"It's not one of my better ideas, I'll admit," Twilight said dubiously as the pair made their way down into foyer again. "But there aren't exactly many good options, and we have to do it before Aurora comes into town this afternoon."

"Whoa, hang on," Spike said, confused. He retreated into the kitchen momentarily before reappearing with his cereal. "What were you saying about Aurora coming into town?" Twilight swore mildly, before continuing; having forgotten she had not told everpony about Aurora's demonstration.

"Aurora wants to win the town over with a display of her science, whatever that means," Twilight explained rapidly. She was interrupted then by Applejack crashing into the library, concern spread over her entire face.

"Fluttershy ain't out anywhere!" she exclaimed.

"She's gone to see Rainbow Dash," Twilight said, levitating the note for Applejack to read.

"Well good fer her," Applejack beamed. "At least one o' us can go help tha' way."

"Mm," Twilight agreed before turning back to Spike and continuing. "So she'll be getting Scootaloo's scooter back, and be giving anypony a device to solve any difficulty they have with

their current livelihood. She wants to prove her technology is superior."

"What now?" Applejack asked, perplexed by having come into the conversation in its middle.

"Aurora," Twilight said simply. "If my plan is going to work, we have to pull it off before she comes into town. She'll notice if I'm not there, and that will only make things worse for Ponyville in the long run."

"So wer on a schedule," Applejack concluded. "I'll be righ' back. Once I drag Rarity out o' tha shower, ya can tell us all them little details yer so good at."

There were certain days Fluttershy drove herself crazy. Her heart would tell her to do something, and her brain would most often follow its advice without any hesitation. This was not what sparked her frustration with herself. Instead, she would always fret about the best way to go about doing whatever it was her heart and head were trying to get her to do. In this instance, she was confident that going to comfort Rainbow Dash was the best thing she could do, but she was currently paralyzed with hovering midway between her friend's house and the library. What if the note she had left was not clear enough? What if Twilight and the rest ended up really needing her in the plan Twilight was going to lay out? What if Rainbow Dash was so cold and distant she could not help her at all? What if she wasted her time choosing one when she should have chosen the other? *Okay Fluttershy,* she pepped talked herself, *You've already made up your mind. Help Rainbow Dash. Help Rainbow Dash. Twilight can take care of everypony.*

Forms of this strain of thought passed through her mind as she made purposeful flaps of her wings toward Rainbow Dash's home. Inwardly, Fluttershy was glad Rainbow had decided to move it over Ponyville's outskirts after the Discord incident. It made her nearly petrifying flight time that much shorter and gave her fewer excuses to turn around the closer she came to the floating cloud and rainbow isle. Not many ponies were around the outskirts luckily. With Aurora's ship so menacing and—as far as many of the townsponies were concerned—semi-sentient, the general consensus that it was better for your health if you stayed close to everypony else nearer the center of town.

As far as Fluttershy was concerned, this was in her favor. The last thing poor Rainbow Dash needed at this point was a gawking crowd shouting questions at her. Fluttershy gently alighted on the extended walkway, peering carefully at the cloud path to Rainbow Dash's door. She was notorious to disliking visitors when she was home, and her house was rumored to be rigged with all sorts of prank-like traps to ward away any unwanted 'guests'. Fluttershy had never heard or seen any proof to validate these claims, as the rumors themselves were as much a ward as the supposed traps themselves. She was not, however, so naive as to take them lightly. Nothing on the path appeared to be rigged, so she gently stepped from cloud to cloud until she reached the brass door. She had not taken much mind of the entrance before, but now with the *House of a Thousand Fangs* a constant presence, Fluttershy could not help but notice the fact

that Rainbow's door was constructed of brass. It was a beautiful addition to the cloud tower, what with the rainbow rivers' light glinting off its shined surface, but it was still somewhat ironically unnerving.

Nevertheless, Fluttershy had not come so far—in the air no less—to be turned away from her friend's need by a silly door that just so happened to be constructed of a similar metal as that which coated the capital ship above Ponyville Square. Ever the sweet and gentle mare, Fluttershy lightly tapped her hoof against the door. The clanging was louder than she had meant it to be, but Rainbow did not answer anyway. Fluttershy waited for several awkward seconds, only the sound of the Rainbow fountains in her ears. When Rainbow Dash still did not come to the door, Fluttershy became convinced she had made the right choice in coming.

With a tentative hoof, she pushed on Rainbow's door. It was unlocked and the hoof latch was not even secured properly. Anypony could easily have walked in. Fluttershy had never been inside Rainbow's three level flat, and was unsurprised that it showed a complete lack of style-sense: the walls, carpet, and even the ceiling all painted in a bright, burning blue. Rainbow Dash was most definitely not one for such nonsense, as further evidenced by the furniture all having been mashed together rather sloppily from spare clouds. Some were even still gray with stormy potential. Despite this general mismatched image, it was all incredibly clean; evidence to the fact that Rainbow Dash was rarely home. Fluttershy sighed pleasantly at the sight, amused at how laid-back the house seemed even without Rainbow Dash's presence.

She had no time, however, to explore her friend's lodging. Fluttershy knew Rainbow's bedroom was the entire top tier, and it was likely that was where she had retreated. The cloud-built spiral staircase stood in the center of the tower, a rainbowfall running through its middle. Fluttershy gingerly ascended the steps, forcefully subduing a shriek every time one would lower slightly at her extra weight. The climb to the second floor was shorter than she had expected, and out of curiosity, Fluttershy took a chance to peek around the second level of Rainbow's home.

Her curiosity became a blessing as she spotted a still shell-shocked Rainbow Dash lying on her back on a cloud of sofa. Even from her distance, Fluttershy could see Dash's eyes were raw and red from silent tears and lack of sleep. Three of her hooves were curled up tightly to her body, while the fourth possessing the Changeling's encrusted innards lay slung limply over the sofa's side. Rainbow Dash stared blankly at the ceiling, thoughts either flying through her mind at dizzying speed or completely lacking from her altogether. Fluttershy assumed the latter to be true, although she was certain the former had likely kept her fellow pegasus awake all night. "Rainbow Dash," she said cautiously, uncertain of Rainbow's reaction to her presence.

"Go away Fluttershy," Rainbow said, her voice dry and toneless. Neither her head nor her eyes even moved in Fluttershy's direction. "You don't get it. None of you do. But that's fine. Just don't try to act like you understand."

"But I think I... um... do understand," Fluttershy said softly, coming into the room proper and sitting on the floor near Dash's head.

“Really?” Rainbow said sarcastically, though it was lacking in her usual energy.

“Um... yes,” Fluttershy said, unable to think of a better reply.

“How could you?” Dash asked, her voice wavering as she turned her face into the back of the sofa. “You didn’t even do anything at the wedding. You don’t even know how to touch something without petting it. Just go away.” Fluttershy scowled uncharacteristically. She knew what she had to share would help Rainbow Dash, but her friend was allowing herself to drown in her own self-inflicted guilt.

“I’m going to tell you a story Rainbow Dash,” Fluttershy said as authoritatively as was possible for her. Dash said nothing in response. Her very soul was torn in two with Fluttershy now present. On the one hoof, she could never accept so much as a kind word in a situation like this. Deep down, she knew she was better than the blubbery mess she was at the moment, and allowing Fluttershy to console her would do nothing for that sentiment—more likely it would detract from it. But just as well on the other hoof, nothing she had tried to tell herself was doing any good for her mental state. Every excuse, every reason she had debated never helped her out of the emotional rut. It was a clear stalemate of the mind—one which Rainbow neither despised nor welcomed—and her silence was its lonely product.

Fluttershy, not knowing the full extent of the mental struggle within Rainbow, took the chance to push onward before her friend threw her out forcibly. “When I discovered that my special talent was caring for animals, I was so happy,” she began. “I couldn’t wait to get started making all of them so happy and safe. But I didn’t know a single thing about how to properly take care of them. I told myself that since it was my special talent, I must not need any training or anything.” As much as Rainbow needed to hear her tale, Fluttershy shivered at what she was about to say. She had reconciled herself to what had happened so long ago, but there were still tormenting thoughts that welled up within her whenever she thought or spoke of it. “I shouldn’t have listened to myself,” she continued. “That first winter, I didn’t know how to help them, and... some of them... didn’t make it.”

“Oh come on,” Rainbow sniveled slightly as she turned around to finally face Fluttershy.

“It’s true,” Fluttershy said, glad that she was making some headway in that Rainbow had decided to actually face her. “And it is just like you and the Changeling.”

“See, what did I say,” Rainbow said, sniffing again and rolling back over. “None of you get it, no matter how hard you try. That’s nothing like me.”

“I... I think it is,” Fluttershy said despite Dash’s emotionally distraught obstinance. “I was devastated for days. I wouldn’t talk to anypony. But, I eventually realized that even though it was my fault, I didn’t do it on purpose. I didn’t want them to die just like you didn’t want to kill the Changeling. It was just an accident. It was terrible, but it was still just an accident.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that I did it!” Dash broke down, turning to Fluttershy, her eyes glistening with what few tears she had left.

“That’s... true,” Fluttershy said carefully. “But you won’t be able to make up for it by not doing anything. We all want to help you and we all forgive you. The best way to make up for it

would be to come and help everypony so no more ponies or Changelings have to die."

"You really think that's the way it'll happen?" Dash asked, forcefully wiping away her tears but still not convinced.

"I can't be positively sure," Fluttershy replied, "but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do our part to try."

Rainbow sat up, drawing in a deep breath as if she were a new mare, saying, "But if I hadn't been snooping around in the first place, none of it would have happened."

"That would be the same as me saying I shouldn't have tried to take care of animals even though it is my special talent," Fluttershy retorted in something of a perturbed voice. More quietly and gently, she added, "We all have to let go at some point."

"You're right," Rainbow said, the irritation at herself evident in her tone. "I shouldn't have let it get to me so much."

"No... I... I think it was a good thing," Fluttershy said. "It shows you care, which is always good to know."

"It's still embarrassing," Rainbow said, then, with her pep suddenly re-ignited, albeit with a sniff, added, "but hey, I've been in plenty of embarrassing situations before. I'll get over this one just like those."

"That's good," Fluttershy said, smiling that Rainbow Dash was back to her normal self. "You... um... you should probably take a bath though."

"Why?" Rainbow asked.

"... your... hoof," Fluttershy said uneasily, not wanting to tread too harshly on bridges she had just rebuilt. Rainbow's face grimaced when she looked at the coated hoof, as if she was fighting a well of emotions attempting to come to the surface.

"You're right," she said, tearing her eyes away from it. "If I don't, I'll look like a total wierdo. That is the last thing I need all my fans seeing." She strode up the stairs to the final floor, and Fluttershy suppressed a small giggle. Now that Rainbow Dash was back to her normal self, they could go stop Twilight and the rest before they did something they would probably regret.

Even if Rainbow Dash's sentiments had been the primary culprit in disrupting Twilight's evening of rest, her theories concerning it had also taken a considerable portion of her sleep. So though she could already feel irritability crawling over her skin, Twilight's organizational skills had not yet faltered. Applejack, Rarity (still robed with towels for her mane), Spike, and an extra jittery Pinkie Pie sat in a circle in the center of the library, watching as Twilight threw scroll after scroll into a pile into the center of their ring. Well, perhaps 'sat' was an apt description for everypony except Pinkie Pie. As it so happened, her 'stuff' had been a ridiculous amount of sweet goods as well as pure sugar. According to her before the sugar had taken its hold on her body, she insisted that an excessive amount of the ingredient heightened the Pinkie sense. Now that it had, her entire form was bouncing in place like one's jaw on a blustery winter day.

None of her friends had yet asked what exactly all of the scrolls were, for which Twilight was grateful. There was an enormous amount she was collecting for them all, and missing just one could mean the difference between success and failure. The fewer the distractions aside from Pinkie's incessant bouncing, the faster and more thoroughly she could move through the scrolls. At long last, she levitated the final one onto the stack now taller and wider than two ponies combined. "What'n tarnation 're these ol' thangs?" Applejack was the first to ask. Her tone betrayed that her patience was the most frayed.

"Maps," Twilight said simply. "These are all maps. Maps of Ponyville, maps of the Everfree Forest, and even blueprints for all of the public buildings in Ponyville."

"Good gracious!" Rarity exclaimed. "Why would a library have things of such a personal nature?"

"Architecture students sometimes want the blueprints to study," Twilight explained, though in truth the inches of dust on most of the scrolls indicated otherwise. "And the other maps are for ponies passing through."

"Is there a map of SugarCube Corner in there?!" Pinkie asked in a glucose-fueled pitch. "What if there are secret passages in it?!"

"I do have one actually," Twilight gratefully levitated one of the scrolls to her, if only to keep her quiet. "But it's only of the business portion. Your and the Cake's bedrooms and living space aren't on it."

"Aw..." Pinkie deflated, though she still peered carefully at the parchment.

"Why're maps so important to us Twi?" Applejack asked. "Most of us've grown up in this here town. It's not like we're gonna get lost or nothin'."

"Maybe not," Twilight explained, "but we need these maps nonetheless. See, I think we may have a chance to get some more information about Aurora without having to go on her ship and without having to risk being caught by her."

"Do elaborate dear," Rarity said. "This sounds intriguing and subtle."

"We need to kidnap Inky Jay," Twilight said plainly. The reactions of her friends were predictable, if not desirable.

Rarity sputtered before remembering her more 'lady-like' manners, Applejack's jaw dropped, Spike merely rolled his eyes as if he had expected something similarly crazy, and Pinkie exploded in an enthusiastic, "Cool!"

"Come on girls," Twilight entreated them. "How many times have I wanted us to do something that seemed crazy, but you all didn't want to, and it turned out it would have been a good idea?"

"That Changelin' got ya thinkin' 'bout tha last time we saw 'em?" Applejack said seriously. Twilight nodded, though that particular fiasco was not at the forefront of her mind. "Well, if ya'd done told me a few days ago there'd be a magic flyin' boat over Ponyville, I'd of said you were crazy. Kidnappin' don't seem as crazy as that, and seein' as tha' happened, I thank I can folla' ya on this one."

“Thanks Applejack,” Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. “And I know you’re with us Pinkie.”

“Sure am!” Pinkie said, still shaking manically. “You want me to use my Pinkie Sense to help track the meanie pegasus if he tries to get away right?!” Twilight nodded, and Pinkie’s grin grew even larger than it already had been.

“Spike you have to come,” Twilight turned to the dragon sternly. “You’re my assistant.”

“Well this assistant would rather not be arrested and thrown in the Canterlot dungeons for kidnapping,” Spike retorted legitimately. “Couldn’t you, you know, *talk* to him before you tied him up in the basement?”

“Spike, you’ve never met Inky Jay,” Twilight said flatly. “He is incredibly loyal to Aurora Streak, and he is not the kind of pony that being civil will make him talk.”

“From what you have told me dear,” Rarity spoke up before Spike could reply, “this Inky Jay character is Aurora’s servant—”

“Scribe,” Twilight corrected.

“Scribe,” Rarity said. “All the same, it sounds to me as if we would have to go onto the ship to find him anyway. I am not seeing how this is any better than doing what poor Rainbow Dash did.”

“Well, I know I didn’t tell anypony this,” Twilight said, “but I didn’t think it was important until I was lying awake last night. When Aurora met us on the top deck, she dismissed Inky Jay by telling him he had leave to go into Ponyville if he wanted.”

“So he *is* here!” Pinkie said gleefully.

“That’s my theory, and it will be one chance in a million for us to catch him,” Twilight elaborated. “Since Aurora is coming to town for her demonstration this afternoon, I think Inky Jay will rejoin her when she leaves. It makes sense.”

“So ya want us all ta fan out ta find ‘im,” Applejack inferred.

“Exactly,” Twilight said, pointing her hoof at the pile of maps, “and each of us will need the blueprints for the hotels, restaurants, or shops we think he might be in. The maps of Ponyville can help us narrow the search down, but we still don’t want to miss anything.”

“I still think it’s nuts,” Spike mumbled. Twilight ignored him, snatching a scroll from beneath the pile and levitating said pile out of the circle of friends. She unfurled her chosen map, revealing a builder’s overhead view of the town. Rather than marking each of the streets or notable buildings with their names, each was inscribed with a sloppy two number code.

“These numbers tell us which of the blueprints to look for,” Twilight said. Rarity let out an audible sigh of relief at this revelation. “Applejack,” Twilight directed her speech at the apple farmer, “you’ve lived here the longest. Can you tell me where the residential areas are?”

“Hmm,” Applejack mumbled, staring intently at the parchment. It being marked with numbers rather than letters, it was a tad more difficult for Applejack to find her points of reference. “Okay, I know from here ta here are all houses,” she finally said, tapping two points on the map with her hoof. A pop and small flash from Twilight’s horn and the numbers in the

area Applejack had indicated vanished.

"Applejack would not know this," Rarity said confidently, now understanding the exercise ahead, "but I think we can safely assume the stallion will not be anywhere in this area."

"Why not Rarity?" Twilight asked, giving the location the designer had motioned toward a closer look.

"Well, with as rough a tongue as you say," Rarity said, aghast at the very thought, "I dare say the wealthy would not take kindly to him staying in their district."

"Point taken," Twilight said—though not without some chagrin—wiping away more numbers. "Here's the difficult part," she said once the five of them were staring anew at the map. "There are several places that hotels are grouped together. We need to figure out which one he might have stayed at. That should limit the area we have to search."

"Well, he's sounds like a big meanie," Pinkie said plainly, "so I don't think he'll go anywhere near the bakers. We have so much fun there!" Twilight nodded in affirmation, glad she could do away with even more numbers.

"Um, ain't 'e a pegasus Twi?" Applejack asked, doubtful at the plan's success due to this singular loop hole.

"Shoot! I had forgotten about that," Twilight said with a scowl. "If we had Rainbow Dash or Fluttershy here, we wouldn't have to worry about that."

"But is he truly the type of pegasus to do a lot of flying dear?" Rarity asked genuinely. "You said he didn't move his wings all that much."

"And you've always got me and the Pinkie Sense!" Pinkie chimed in.

"I also said it was because pegasi have difficulty accessing their flying magic when on the ship," Twilight reiterated to Rarity. "He told me it wasn't worth the effort to fly when on the ship. That doesn't mean he won't now that he's off the ship. If anything, he's probably more likely to go flying around. And Pinkie, do you really think you could keep up with a flying pegasus?"

"Ye—!" Pinkie Pie began to say positively at first, only to be halted by some conflicting thought. "Awwww, phooey."

Applejack frowned further than she already had been, studying not the map before them, but an imagined play of sorts were she in Inky Jay's hooves. She could relate to his apparent economic position as a servant-for-hire, and thus had a general idea of the kind of inns he would be searching for. They would be places with low to medium rates, but as he was—according to Twilight—an author, he would also want a place catering slightly to such a profession. She knew that if she was having to stay in a completely foreign city, she would be most comfortable in an inn near a store front. Applejack got along with business ponies of most types, and being close to them always lessened the nerves that accompanied staying out of town.

However, she had not an iota of knowledge of the more artsy side of Ponyville. She considered asking Twilight, but her friend was more into non-fiction than fiction. Without Rainbow Dash as a source on the 'cool' places around Ponyville, she turned to Spike. "Hey

Spike," she said, startling the four, "you got any clue 'bout where ponies like Rainbow Dash hang out in Ponyville?"

"Uhhhh, why?" Spike asked in utter confusion.

"AJ," Twilight cut in before Applejack could answer the dragon, "I know it would be better if we had Rainbow Dash with us, but Inky Jay is only going to be here for a little while and he might be the only one we can get real answers from about the ship."

"That ain't why I asked," Applejack said, returning her attention to Spike. "I'd thank he'd be stayin' close ta somewhere kinda, I don' know, moar interestin' than tha rest o' Ponyville."

"What makes you say that?" Spike asked. "Twilight's description doesn't make me think of Rainbow Dash."

"He may be moar irritatin' than a worm in a fresh apple," Applejack replied, "but I reckon he sticks close ta tha... artsy types."

"Rainbow Dash is far from artsy Applejack," Rarity said simply and not with a little disdain. "She is more like you dear."

"But ain't them artsy ponies... 'cool'," Applejack asked, bemused.

"You could say that," Twilight said with a small chuckle. "But it's not the same kind of cool that Rainbow Dash is always going on about. You're onto something though. Inky does strike me as an artistic pony. Does anypony know if we have—"

She was cut off by Spike jerking his clawed hand in the air and Pinkie chanting, "Ooh ooh ooh!"

"Yes," she said to them, eyes heavy-lidded.

"You mean like those ponies that are always playing music in the street late at night?!" Pinkie asked excitedly.

"Yeah," Spike added, "wherever it is that those ponies that are always at festivals always hang out."

"I believe I know the street they are talking about Twilight," Rarity said, though her attitude was still somewhat scornful. "Though if we are going to search up and down Barrel Street, at least we will not have to stay long."

"Barrel Street?" Twilight asked, bewildered. "That's a musicians gathering place. Well... I... hm... it's better than anything else we've come up with yet. And you're right Rarity, with so many ponies around, we can just ask if anypony has seen him. As late as they stay out, we won't have a problem pinning him."

"We get to talk to the music ponies!" Pinkie bounced up and down excitedly. "They're all so nice!"

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight cautioned, "why don't you let me and Rarity handle the talking." Pinkie's lower lip puckered out in a plea for Twilight to change her mind, and the effect was more than Twilight could stand. "Okay fine," she said grudgingly. "But only to the ponies you know personally."

"Great!" Pinkie answered. "I've had some play at my parties before." Twilight nodded

and levitated the map out of everypony else's vision, mentally recording the numbers for Barrel Street. The parchment was shortly rolled back into a scroll, and Twilight exchanged it for at least fifty different scrolls from the pyramiding pile.

"Even if we can find Inky Jay by asking around," Twilight said, "it will still be a good idea to carry blueprints if we aren't given exact locations."

"This is a ridiculous amount of scrolls darling," Rarity said, staring horror-struck at the amount of paper before her. "What makes you think we won't look suspicious carrying all of these around?"

"Obviously we're going to look suspicious," Twilight said confidently. "That's the reason I want Pinkie to come along. If we're lucky, we'll flush him out without having to do much searching, and Pinkie Pie can take over from there."

"Yeppy!" Pinkie affirmed. "That meanie pants isn't getting away from me."

"Okay..." Applejack said, voice heavy with skepticism. She was reaching for a group of scrolls when a light knock on the library door brought immediate silence into the library. Although normally a place of peaceful calm, the new stillness that settled over the the shelves of books was of a different kind. Apprehension gripped the air. With a subtle nod from Twilight, she and Rarity backed into the center of the main floor, horns lowered defensively at the door. Pinkie ascended the stairs onto the balcony in preparation to leap down upon any intruder, and Applejack crawled her way to just beside the door, prepared to buck any hostile intruder. Only they were all in place did Spike take hold on the latch and swing the entrance open.

"Oh! Hey guys!" Spike said in a jubilant tone. Though his volume was nothing short of normal, the other ponies in the library winced at the noise relative to the covert silence just before. "It's okay guys," he said to his friends on the inside, "Fluttershy's back and she brought somepony with her!" Twilight and the rest—shocked by Fluttershy's reappearance alone—readjusted to normal standing poses; Applejack coming away from the door to be less threatening. Even so, she was the first to see Fluttershy's companion.

"Well hayseed!" Applejack exclaimed, "Rainbow Dash's back everypony!"

"Really?!" Twilight asked eagerly.

"Don't crowd so much everypony," Fluttershy said timidly as she and Rainbow came into the library proper. "Rainbow Dash needs to tell you something." Though the brash pegasus ruffled her mane importantly, Twilight could see heavy bags under her eyes.

"I've been kinda stupid everypony," Rainbow said finally, taking it turns to look each of them and Spike in the eye. "What happened on that dang ship isn't going away anytime soon, but that doesn't mean I should have run off and tried to hide from it. I'm way cooler than that, and I'm gonna prove it by helping you guys make that allicorn wish she'd never come to Ponyville."

"DASHIE'S BACK!" Pinkie Pie hollered with unbridled joy, stage-diving from the balcony onto the main floor.

"Sure as Tartarus I'm back," Rainbow replied confidently. "So what's the plan? Fluttershy said Twilight had some something or other ready to go."

Mirroring the grin present on all their faces at Rainbow Dash's return to them, Twilight said, placing a friendly hoof on Rainbow's shoulder, "First, I think I can say for all of us that we're sorry too. This whole sequence of events could have been avoided if we had just listened and tried to understand in the first place." Rainbow nodded her acceptance of the apology, but her eyes betrayed her eagerness to forget the past and focus on the endeavor ahead. "As for the plan," Twilight said with cunning satisfaction in her voice, "things are going to be much easier with you and Fluttershy to help."