

## The Truth About “Pokey” Pierce

By Chris

### ***Part 1: In which the stage is set***

“Pierce? Pierce? PIERCE!”

Pierce’s head snapped up at once, as several classmates giggled. “Wha...here, Miss Cheerilee!”

The young teacher smiled. “Thank you, Pierce. Now, please try to pay attention, won’t you?”

“Yes, Miss Cheerilee.” Pierce groaned inwardly. The day had barely begun, and he couldn’t even maintain his concentration long enough to make it through roll call! His mother had told him that he needed to do a better job focusing in class, but his mind wandered so often...

He glanced out the schoolhouse window, and saw Mr. Cake setting up a buffet table near the library. There was going to be a party today for the old librarian, who was retiring after almost three decades. Pierce had heard from his father that a lengthy search had turned up no suitable replacements, and that the building would be run entirely by volunteers from now on. A glance at the desk behind him showed that young Cake Jr. was watching his father as well. C.J. was the first in the class to get his cutie mark, and nopony had been surprised to see that it was three slices of cake. C.J. loved the bakery, and would no doubt follow in his father’s hoofsteps as soon as he finished his schooling. He wondered if C.J. would always be known as Jr., or if someday the ponies would simply know him as Mr. Cake...

A kind but obviously frustrated voice jolted him back to the present. “Pierce! I asked you a question!”

“Wha...sorry, what...um...” Pierce fumbled desperately, racking his brain for the question, but it was no use.

“Pierce, I asked you who the first weather pegasus to successfully disperse a tornado was. You *did* read the assigned chapter over the weekend, didn’t you?”

“Yes...um...it was...Windwhistler Blast!”

“That’s correct. Now please, try to focus.” Pierce relaxed as Miss Cheerilee continued her history lesson, but he tensed up again as a voice beside him whispered, “Nice going, *Pokey*. Teacher only needed to call your name three times. That’s a new personal best.”

Pierce didn’t turn to respond to Rose, his personal tormentor. Mother had said that if he just ignored her, eventually she would get bored and leave him alone...

“Hey, *Pokey!*” This time, the whisper was accompanied by a sharp jab at his flank. He jumped, and looked down at the spot where Rose had stabbed him with her pencil. Rose gave a satisfied smirk. “That got your attention. Maybe Miss Cheerilee should try it!”

Pierce rubbed his side and whispered back, “Please be quiet, I’m trying to pay attention to the

lesson.” Just like father had told him to say.

“You? Pay attention? That’ll be the day! It’s a good thing you aren’t a pegasus pony, or you’d probably forget to flap your wings and splatter yourself on the ground like a pancake!” A pair of high-pitched giggles revealed that Rose’s two compatriots, Lily and Daisy, were listening as well. Pierce turned his head away, trying not to show that their laughter had struck a nerve.

Suddenly, a loud, unrestrained voice interrupted the girls. “Now wait just a minute! Sure, sometimes Pokey doesn’t pay attention real good, but I’ll bet there’s lots of things he *is* really good at! Pokey might not be real smart, or strong, or fast, or good at magic, but I’ll bet he’s really nice and a bunch of snotty-snouted meanie-heads like you three just don’t appreciate how good he is at...um...being nice!”

Pierce buried his face in his hooves. Once more, the pink earth pony in the desk ahead of his had come to his defence. And once more, he was sure, Pinkie Pie’s words would only make things worse for him.

The lesson had stopped as soon as Pinkie began speaking, of course. Unlike the other ponies, she didn’t seem to grasp the concept of ‘indoor voices’. Miss Cheerilee walked up the aisle to his desk, putting a hand on Pinkie’s shoulder as she passed.

“Thank you, Pinkie. But remember what we said about yelling in the classroom?” Pinkie nodded and pressed her lips together. “Good. Now Pierce,” she continued, turning her attention to him as she spoke, “Was anypony bothering you just now?”

Pierce looked over at Rose, who was staring straight ahead with a neutral expression on her face. He sighed. “No, miss Cheerilee.”

“Good. I don’t want any bullying going on in my class.” With that, the teacher turned and went back to the blackboard, where she continued her lesson. From beside him, Pierce heard Rose whisper, “That’s right, Pokey. It’s not bullying if it’s true.”

A growled expletive from behind him caused Pierce to turn around, where C.J. was still staring out the window, a snarl on his face. “Why did that old hamhoof have to show up now? The retirement party’s in less than an hour!”

Looking out the window, Pierce saw a black earth pony with a grey-white mane. The cutie mark on his rump was a stylized face, with eyes scrunched up and tongue sticking out--the same label used to identify poisonous substances throughout Equestria.

As he watched, the old pony made his way down the buffet line, knocking pastries to the ground, plunging his face into bowls of punch, and soiling piles of plates and napkins. Mr. Cake, coming round the corner with a load of muffins to add to the buffet, cried out and ran at the intruder, chasing him away. But by then, the damage had already been done.

“Oh man, I spent all night helping dad with that!” groaned C.J. “There’s no way he’ll be able to put everything together in time for the party now! I *hate* that old coot so much!”

Everypony knew ‘that old coot,’ of course. His name was Canker, and he’d lived in Ponyville for as long as anypony could remember. Pierce saw him almost every day, but he’d never talked to the old stallion. As far as he knew, Canker didn’t have any friends at all. Wherever he went, people avoided him,

creating a bubble around the reclusive fellow. If he minded, he never showed it.

What Canker was best known for, of course, was what he was apparently doing right now: spoiling parties. Even though nopony ever invited him, he managed to find his way to almost every celebration in Ponyville. And when he arrived, he was sure to cause a disturbance. If he wasn't stopped, he would invariably soil the food and drink, wreck the party favors, defile the decorations, and generally cause as much chaos as he could. Little wonder, Pierce thought, that nopony liked him.

As Pierce watched Mr. Cake scramble to salvage the buffet, he noticed that C.J. was outside, helping. Strange, Pierce hadn't noticed that C.J. had left. In fact, there were some of his other classmates too...

With a start, Pierce looked around. The classroom was empty save for Miss Cheerilee, sitting at her desk as she worked on the lesson plan.

"I dismissed the class almost ten minutes ago, Pierce," she said without looking up. "I know it's hard for you, but you need to learn to focus."

His cheeks burning, Pierce headed outside. His only consolation was that his classmates had already left, so there was nopony to mock him as he headed home.

And nopony to see him cry.

**Part 2:** *In which life becomes increasingly miserable*

When Pierce went back to school the next day, he found a set of blinders at his desk. Attached was a note:

*For Pokey*

*Maybe this will help you focus!*

Sighing, Pierce stuffed the eyeware into his desk. It wasn't the first such 'gift' he'd received, and he doubted it would be the last. "Aren't you going to try them on, Pokey?" asked Rose, her voice dripping with saccharine. "I'll bet you'd look just *smashing* in blinders, don't you girls think?" Giggling, Lilly and Daisy nodded their assent. "Besides, then you and Derpy could hang out! Wouldn't that be cute? You two could get married and have lots and lots of stupid, funny-eyed kids!"

The mockery didn't end there, but Pierce had managed to tune it out. For now. Instead, he looked over at Ditzzy-Doo, or 'Derpy' as most of her classmates called her. Ditzzy didn't look back, of course. The special blinders she had to wear (which supposedly would help fix her lazy eye) prevented her from seeing any of her classmates with her peripheral vision. Pierce thought about the daily torment that Ditzzy endured, and for a brief moment, he felt like maybe being nicknamed 'Pokey' wasn't the worst thing in the world after all.

His reverie was shattered when Rose noticed the direction of his gaze. "He's *looking* at her! They *are* in love! Oh Pokey, won't you let me be the bridesmaid?"

Pierce's cheeks flushed. "I don't love Ditz-erm, Derpy!"

Pinkie Pie spun around in her chair. "You guys need to stop being so mean to Ditzzy-Doo! She looks funny, so what? I'll bet you wouldn't like it if your eyes were all EEGH-" she did a remarkably good impersonation of Ditzzy's eyes- "And everyone around you was all 'EEW!' In fact, you know what we should do? We should have a party for Ditzzy!"

Rose's retort was cut short as Miss Cheerilee entered the classroom. Pierce tapped his hoof to his head, and swore to himself that he would pay attention in class today.

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As soon as the schoolbell rang, most of the class bolted for the door. Pierce, on the other hand, took several minutes to collect his schoolwork and supplies, having been caught unaware once more by the end of class. As he poked his head out the door, he saw several of the ponies playing keep-away with Ditzzy's schoolbag. Pierce sighed in relief, knowing that they would be too busy taunting her to come harass him. Quietly, stealthily, he made his way through the schoolyard...

"Hiya, Pokey! I was waiting for you! What took you so long?"

Pierce jumped at the voice, but relaxed when he saw it was only Pinkie Pie. Pinkie had never been one to mock or tease. "Oh, hi Pinkie. I just...had some stuff."

"Well, now that you're here, I want to talk to you! C'mon, let's go somewhere we won't be

overheard!” With a conspiratorial wink, Pinkie took off, leaving Pierce scrambling to keep up.

Soon, they came to an ally in which lay a large cardboard box. Somepony had scrawled “Keep Out! Top Secret!” on the side. Pinkie crawled under the box. As Pierce looked around dubiously, Pinkie’s hoof snaked out from under the box, grabbing him by the mane and pulling him under.

For a moment, Pierce was plunged into darkness. Panicking, he lit up his horn—one of the only magic tricks he could consistently do. The light from his horn revealed Pinkie, holding a stack of what appeared to be carpenter’s blueprints. “Good work, Pokey! Now we can get to work on Operation Throw a Party for Ditzzy-Doo That’s So Fantastic That the Other Ponies Won’t Make Fun of Her Anymore and Everypony Will Be Friends and Have a Great Time!” Pinkie practically quivered with excitement. “I came up with the name myself. What do you think?”

“Um, it’s very...long. Listen, I-”

Before Pierce could even begin to formulate an objection, Pinkie had spread out the blueprints all over the ground. “Now, I already talked to C.J., and he’s going to help us bake some treats. I mean, what kind of party would it be without treats? And Rainbow Dash is going to keep Ditzzy busy all afternoon, so that she doesn’t find out about the party early and spoil the surprise! I’m going to do all the decorations and setup, but that leaves you with the most important job of all. Can you handle this kind of responsibility, Pokey? Huh? Can you?”

Pierce’s brain struggled to keep up. “Um...what?”

“Why, you’re in charge of guests, of course! I need you to go to the other ponies and tell them that we’re having a party for Ditzzy, and they’re all invited!”

Pierce blanched. “Oh...um. I don’t think that’s-”

“Great! Well, you’d better hurry, the party’s tonight, that only gives us a couple of hours to prepare! Now hurry, and make sure you invite everypony in the class!” And with that, Pinkie shoved Pierce out of the box and, thrusting some hoofmade invitations upon him, sent him on his way.

Standing alone in the alleyway, Pierce considered his options. He didn’t think it would do much good trying to talk to Pinkie again. And he had no desire to be the one to invite Rose and her friends to a party for Ditzzy. But then again, he wasn’t about to be the one who spoiled a party for the poor pony, either.

Sighing, he left the alley and started down the road. Pinkie was right about one thing; he didn’t have a lot of time before the party, and he had lots of invitations to deliver.

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Surprisingly, delivering an invitation to Rose wasn’t the worst part of his assignment. In fact, her father had answered the door, and Pierce had managed to escape without having to see the young filly at all. In retrospect, the worst was Blues.

When Pierce knocked on the door, Blues had answered right away. After handing him the invitation and explaining the party, Pierce had been about to leave when Blues stopped him. “Wait a minute, Pokey,” the much larger pony had said, “So is this party going to have any music?”

“Um, I guess? I don’t know. I’m just supposed to be handing out invitations...”

“Well, me and a couple of the guys have a group, and we could do a song or two when Derpy shows up. But we could really use a singer. You’ve got a pretty good voice, don’t you?”

Pierce’s jaw hit the floor. “ME? But, I’ve never even sung before!”

“Yeah, but your talking voice is great! You know the Surprise Party Song [*see note at bottom of document*], right?”

“Yeah...but...I...”

“Great! Me and the boys will be there! You’re going to be great, don’t you worry!”

As Pierce turned around in a daze, Blues added, “Oh, and make sure you wear something nice. When you’re performing, you’ve gotta look your best, you know? Do you have a tux?”

“Um...yeah. But it-”

“Perfect! Wear that, we’ll see you at the party!”

And with that, Blues shut the door, leaving a very nervous Pierce to continue his rounds while he wondered just what he’d gotten himself into.

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Less than two hours later, Pierce was standing on the front stage of Ponyville Plaza’s indoor ballroom, which Pinkie had somehow managed to reserve on only a few hours notice. He was wearing the powder blue tuxedo with matching bowtie and cummerbund which he had worn in last year’s school play, the sleeves already noticeably short on the young and growing pony. Behind him were “Blues and the Backbeat Boys,” as the banner over their heads declared, tuning up for the performance. Already, over thirty ponies were present, and more were still arriving.

“Hey Pokey, you aren’t nervous, are you?” Blues asked, startling Pierce.

“Um...yeah. Kinda.”

“Don’t worry, you’re probably a natural. Just make sure you’re standing right in front of the microphone,” he gestured at the mic and stand, “And everything will go fine.”

Pierce steeled himself. He hadn’t wanted any of this responsibility, but the more he thought about it, the more he came to realize that this was his big chance to break in with the cool kids. After all, if Blues and his band were willing to hang out with him, maybe the other ponies would give him a chance, too. Pierce smiled slightly, as he thought that maybe Pinkie had the right idea after all. This could be good for him and Ditzzy both.

Suddenly, all the lights went down. Pinkie’s voice cried out, “Ditzzy’s coming! Quick, everyone quiet! Get ready with the song!”

There was a hush. Pierce checked with his hoof to make sure the mic was still in front of him, and took a deep breath. He wished his heart would stop beating so loudly.

The door to the ballroom opened, and Pierce heard Rainbow Dash saying, "Go on in, Ditzzy. There's something I want to show you."

Then, the lights came on and everypony in the room cried out "Surprise!" Ditzzy nearly toppled over from shock, but Pinkie came running over and quickly guided her to the stage, in front of the band.

"Alright boys, hit it!"

The band began their intro. Pierce took a deep breath, and began singing. But...something was wrong. As he looked around, he saw the ponies in the audience muttering and gesticulating. They couldn't hear him! Frantically, he flicked the mic's power switch, but there wasn't any sound coming from the speakers.

He heard the crowd gasp a half-second before something heavy came crashing down on him. He stood up slowly, not understanding what was happening, when the stench hit his nostrils. Manure. He was covered in manure.

He looked around, and saw that Ditzzy had been hit as well. Above the two of them hung a pair of now-empty buckets.

Before he could finish processing the scene, the band started playing again. A singer joined them. Pierce looked over and saw Rose, holding another microphone, belting out a well-known tune over the suddenly functional speakers.

"Derpy and Pokey sitting in a tree,

K-I-S-S-I-N-G..."

At last, Pokey understood what was going on. He watched Ditzzy fly out the door, bawling her eyes out. He felt strangely detached from the whole situation. Slowly, he picked himself up, and began walking towards the door, through the mass of laughing, shrieking ponies. Almost as an afterthought, he looked around the crowd. Most of the ponies were hooting and jeering with callous abandon. A few even began tossing food and cups at Pierce as he passed. Pinkie, however, had a look of horror on her face. He decided that it was good to know that at least Pinkie didn't seem to be in on the prank, but the thought didn't penetrate. Instead, he kept slowly walking to the door, seemingly oblivious to the catcalls as the ponies urged him to go after Derpy, using increasingly lewd language.

Pierce walked to his house, and entered without disturbing his parents. He threw the old tuxedo away, and took a long shower. Once he was sure he had all the manure out of his mane, he went straight to bed.

Only then did he begin to cry.

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Unnoticed by the ponies at Ditzzy's party, an old black stallion was watching through the window. He observed everything that happened that night, surreptitiously leaving shortly after the dung-covered unicorn made his exit. Chortling to himself, the stallion said to the night air, "I suppose those youngsters don't need my help, do they? Well, it's good to have a night off. Now, I just need to remember to track down that unicorn...after a night like that, I think he might have real potential..."

*Note: Polyphonix the unicorn lived over 500 years ago. Although his skill as both singer and composer are legendary, none of his works have survived to the present day. The opera 'Equestria's Rejoicing,' a complex tale set during Princess Celestia's rise to power, is doubtless his most famous work. Although the opera itself has not survived, several accounts from audience members have. In the finale, the entire royal court throws a surprise party for Roundflank, a pony courtesan, at the behest of Lord Sandbar, who proposes to her as the curtain draws (she accepts, naturally).*

*Is this tune, traditionally sung at any surprise party, the same song as that finale? Only Princess Celestia knows, and she has never publicly spoken on the matter.*

## **Equestria's Rejoicing (Finale), or 'The Surprise Party Song'**

Traditional, attributed to  
Polyphonix of Canterlot (442-483)

The musical score is written on two staves in a 4/4 time signature with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is simple and repetitive. The first staff contains the lyrics: "Sur - prise! (name here), sur - prise! We've thrown a par - ty for you! We". The second staff contains the lyrics: "set this snare be-cause we want to show we care a-bout you! Sur - prise! Sur-prise! Sur - prise!". There are triplets indicated by a '3' above the notes in both staves.

Sur - prise! (name here), sur - prise! We've thrown a par - ty for you! We

set this snare be-cause we want to show we care a-bout you! Sur - prise! Sur-prise! Sur - prise!

**Part 3:** *In which life fails to improve*

Pierce managed to be 'sick' the next few days, but he couldn't avoid school forever. If his parents knew about the abortive party for Ditzzy, they said nothing to him. Perhaps they were trying to spare his feelings, Pierce thought. Maybe they were waiting for him to feel comfortable enough to bring up the subject himself.

Maybe they didn't care.

In any case, going back to school was an eventuality which he could not put off forever. His return went exactly as well as he imagined. Pinkie was distraught and apologetic; a few of the other ponies were visibly regretful. Most were simply cruel. Compounding his misery was the fact that Ditzzy no longer came to class, her parents deciding that it was in her best interests to be home schooled for the foreseeable future. That left the other ponies with only one target for their mockery.

As days stretched into weeks, the daily torment showed no signs of relenting. Pierce had never been a great student, but his grades plummeted as he spent more and more time trying to block out the world around him. He traveled from home to school and back again as quickly as he could, and rarely emerged from his self-imposed solitude. As he became more reclusive, the old black stallion who surreptitiously observed his comings and goings each day grew more and more confident. This was indeed the child he'd been looking for.

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"Alright Pinkie, we're all here. Now what's this great idea of yours?"

Rainbow Dash was quickly becoming uncomfortable in the 'party planning box,' as Pinkie had named it. Even if there had only been the two of them, the box would have been cozy. As it was, C.J., Applejack, and Raindrops had all crowded inside as well, and Dash could already feel the first hints of claustrophobia gnawing at her. Looking around at the other ponies' agitated faces, she saw she wasn't the only one feeling hemmed in.

If Pinkie was at all uncomfortable, however, it didn't show. Smiling conspiratorially, she explained, "Ever since all those meanies at school ruined the party I put on for Ditzzy, I've been trying to find the perfect way to get back at them. I thought and I thought, and sometimes the thinking didn't go very well, like when I got hungry, so I'd go get something to eat, but then I'd-"

"Pinkie..." Dash growled, hoping her gruff tone would hide her discomfort. "Get to the point."

"Oh! Well, I finally figured it out! We're going to-" she paused to lean in, although the box's tight confines meant that all the ponies were practically touching noses already, "-throw a party!"

There was a moment of silence. Finally, a confused looking Applejack slowly repeated, "A...party?"

"Yep!"

“Your plan to get back at Blues’ band and the flower girls...is to throw a party?”

Pinkie beamed. “I know! Isn’t it brilliant?”

Dash exploded, “Pinkie Pie, that’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said! If you want to retaliate, we can tie their manes to the backs of their chairs, or slip tabasco into their milkshakes, or sneak into their houses at night and put their hooves in bowls of warm water, or...or...or ANYTHING! How is having a party going to get back at them!?”

Pinkie thought hard for a moment. “Oh, that’s right! I didn’t tell you the rest of my plan! We’ll throw a party, and we’ll all be there, and we’ll invite Pokey, and it’ll be the best party ever! And when they find out they weren’t invited, they’ll wish they’d been there and that’s how we’ll get our revenge!”

The other ponies considered this. “Well,” mused Applejack, “Pokey sure seems like he could use a pick-me-up. If nothing else, maybe it’ll improve his mood a bit.”

“What about Derpy?” asked Dash. “After that prank, she won’t even show her face at school anymore! If we’re trying to cheer ponies up, we should invite her too.”

Raindrops, the pony who knew Ditzzy the best out of the group, shook her head. “Her parents took her to Canterlot to see some big-shot eye specialist. She won’t be back for another week. Besides, I don’t know if she’s ready to attend another party, given how well the last one turned out for her.”

“Then it’s settled!” Pinkie exclaimed. “We’ll throw a Private Pokey Party!” And with that, she began detailing her plans to the others.

A short while later, the ponies dispersed. Rainbow Dash still didn’t think this was any way to retaliate, but she had to admit that a party sounded like fun. And if Pokey felt a little less put-upon as a result, so much the better.

But most importantly, she’d have agreed to anything to get out of that box. Sighing, she stretched her wings and headed off.

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The next day, Pierce found a letter addressed to him in the mailbox. This in itself was unusual; he hardly ever got mail. When he saw that the letter was from Pinkie Pie, his surprise trebled. He had barely spoken to the pink pony since Ditzzy’s party, although she’d apologized to him many times since then. Opening the letter, he found a hoofwritten invitation folded inside. It read:

**You are invited!**

*What: A party for you! Pokey!*

*Where: At the Cakes’ shop!*

*When: Tonight after they close!*

*Why: Because we’re your friends, and friends hang out and have awesome parties together!*

*Who: You and me and a few other ponies...But don’t worry, no meanies will be there! Only nice ponies*

*are invited!*

*Don't worry, this'll be the best party ever!*

*-Your friend, Pinkie Pie!*

Pierce put his hoof to his temple and groaned. He had no doubt that Pinkie was trying to be kind, but partying was the last thing on his mind. Didn't she realize he just wanted to be left alone?

Well, that wasn't altogether true. Pierce *did* sometimes dream about making friends and being popular; what pony didn't? But he'd have been perfectly content if he could simply make it though one day at school without having his lunch stolen, his mane pulled, and his pride assaulted. In fact, he mused, if he could spend a day being completely ignored, it would probably be his best day since the school year began. No bullying, no teasing, no reprimands from the teacher...

His reverie was broken by his mother, who had noticed him standing in the front hall, holding the letter and staring out the window with a distant expression on his face. "What have you got there, Pierce?"

"Wha? Um, nothing. I mean, a letter." He awkwardly fumbled the object in question behind his back, no mean feat for a quadruped.

"Well, it's nice to see you getting some mail. Who's it from?"

"No-one. Um. Just someone from school. You don't know her."

"Oh, it's a *her*, is it? I think I can guess. It's that pink earth pony, isn't it?"

Pierce groaned inwardly. He could tell where this line of questioning was headed. "Yeah, her. Pinkie Pie."

"I thought it might be. Well, I won't pry, but you really should invite her over for dinner sometime, so your father and I can meet her."

"MOM!"

"Well, you don't have to, it's just a suggestion. Now, you'll be a gentlecolt and write her back right away, won't you?"

Pierce muttered something that might have been an affirmative, and dashed off to his room, shutting the door behind him. His mother watched him, a smile starting to form on her lips.

She had seen how Pinkie waved and giggled whenever she spotted Pierce, and she had seen him blush and hide his face from her. The mare could still remember her first schoolyard crush, and she remembered just how shy and awkward she had been at his age. Almost as an afterthought, she made a mental note to have Pierce's father give him 'the talk' soon. One can't be too careful, after all.

She then looked at the letter she had just been reading. Miss Cheerilee had written her to say that she was concerned about Pierce's social skills. She suggested that Pierce was having trouble making friends, and that this might help explain his poor academic performance of late.

With a roll of her eyes, she tossed the letter in the trash. It was clear enough to her that Pierce had friends, whether his teacher saw it or not. The boy just needed to learn to focus.

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It took Pierce some time to decide what to do about the letter. The simplest response, of course, would be to ignore it altogether. He could stay home tonight, and if Pinkie asked him later he could make up something about the invitation getting lost in the mail. He could alternatively swallow his discomfort and go. After all, what was the worst that could happen? The last party he'd attended had ended in a manure bath; things could only go uphill from there, right?

In the end, he decided that he would go find Pinkie, thank her for the invitation, and politely decline. The least he could do was tell her to her face that he wasn't interested in going to a party, after all. His mind made up, Pierce headed to the front door, mentally rehearsing what he would say.

Swinging open the door, he was surprised to see Pinkie standing on the front step, her hoof raised to knock.

"Oh, hey Pokey! I was just coming here to get you for the party, but it looks like you're all ready to go! C'mon, we can trot down to the bakery together!"

Looking up, Pierce saw that the sun was already low on the horizon. How long had he spent deciding what to do? As Pinkie Pie stood waiting in the doorway, his brain scrambled for something to say. His mouth, acting without orders, elected to go with the tried and true, if somewhat inelegant, "Huh?"

"Didn't you get your invitation? Well, no matter. You're invited anyway! C'mon, let's go!" And without waiting for a response, Pinkie grabbed Pierce's hoof and started leading him to the Cakes' bakery.

After walking two blocks without managing to get a word in edgewise, Pierce resigned himself to attending. From what Pinkie was saying, it sounded like there would only be a few ponies there anyway, and none of his primary tormentors among them. As he walked, Pierce even managed to relax a bit. Perhaps a small, informal party wouldn't be so bad, after all...

As the two young ponies approached the shop together, Applejack stepped out the door, emptying a tray full of broken glass into the garbage pail. Seeing Pinkie and Pierce arriving, she plastered an obviously fake smile on her face and greeted them. "Pokey! Good to see you made it! Um Pinkie, we might have a little problem..."

"What's wrong, Applejack? I thought I had everything ready when I went to get Pokey! Hmm, what did I forget..."

"Nothing, Pinkie, it's just...well...wouldn't it be nice to have this here shindig a little later? Like maybe, three or four hours from now?"

"Oh, Applejack, everypony's here now! Why would we want to put off the party?"

Pierce had a sinking suspicion that he knew. As soon as he'd seen the broken glass, he'd guessed what must have happened. Making his way to the shop's front entrance as the two young fillies talked, he peeked inside.

The entire shop was a mess. Streamers had been torn down, pastry displays were toppled, and plates and glassware lay broken on the ground. Someone had ripped open a pair of 50-pound sacks of flour that had been decoratively placed near the cash register, and their contents mixed with an overturned punch bowl to create a sticky, gummy mess that covered half the floor. Rainbow Dash, C.J., and Raindrops were frantically cleaning, but there was no way the three of them would be able to restore the shop to order anytime soon.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what pony had done this. Pierce ran around the shop to the back alley, just in time to see a large black stallion vanish around a bend. Muttering an oath under his breath, Pierce took off in pursuit.

Although the old pony was trotting and Pierce was running at a full gallop, the distance between them closed slowly. Pierce had never been particularly fast on his hooves, and he had to stop several times at intersections, unable to quickly ascertain which way his quarry had gone. If Pierce's target knew he was being followed, he betrayed no reaction.

Soon, the stallion reached his home, a rickety shack on the outskirts of town. He trotted in, closing the door behind him. Still in pursuit, Pierce saw him go inside. Without stopping to consider his actions, he swung open the door and marched in after him, intent on confronting the old pony.

Canker, the black stallion known throughout Ponyville for his party-crashing and general mean spirit, was waiting inside the poorly-furnished hovel. Pierce strode up to him without hesitating, letting out weeks of pent-up anger with every word. "Now see her Canker, you witless old gelding! I don't know who put a bee in your bonnet, but I'm certain that Pinkie Pie never did anything to you! Just what do you think gives you the right to go around wrecking somepony's good time? Don't you have a shred of decency in you? Don't you have anything to say for yourself? Of all the ponies that've ever called Ponyville home, I'll bet you're the most vile, unpleasant, despicable one that ever had the nerve to show himself in public!"

As Pierce spoke, Canker simply stood his ground, betraying no outward sign that he was even listening. Pierce started to falter; he didn't know what reaction he'd expected, but this certainly wasn't it. Nevertheless, he plunged on, committed to speaking his piece. "If you still have the slightest bit of respectability left in that withered old husk you call a body, you should feel ashamed of yourself! If you've got one scrap of goodwill rattling around in that bony old chest of yours, you should be embarrassed to have made such a mess of Pinkie Pie's party! And what about the other ponies that have to clean up now? Did you even stop to think of them?"

If you've got any heart at all, if you're anything more than just a miserable sack of skin and bile, you'll march yourself right back to the Cakes', apologize for what you've done, and help the other ponies clean up your mess!"

Pierce was panting hard, both from running to follow the stallion and from the effort those words had cost him. He'd never spoken like this to an adult before, and had no idea what reaction to expect. But it was too late to back down now; Pierce squared his shoulders and looked the old stallion straight in the eye.

After a moment of silence, Canker gave Pierce a leer which sent a shiver down the young colt's spine. Reaching over Pierce, he shut the cottage door. It suddenly occurred to Pierce that he was alone with the old stallion on a secluded property, and that nopony knew where he'd gone. Gesturing to a bed of hay near the fire, Canker said, "You're right about one thing. I do want to explain a few things to you.

Now go sit down over there.” When Pierce hesitated, the stallion rasped, “I didn’t ask you, Pokey. Sit.”

Unsure what else to do, Pierce knelt down on the hay Canker had indicated. His courage replaced with dread, he felt certain he’d made a terrible mistake.

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Pinkie continued to chatter as she helped clean the Cakes’ shop, as was her wont. How she managed to speak so quickly and clearly while holding a broom in her mouth was a mystery.

“Don’t you worry, Pokey! This isn’t exactly what I had planned, but we can still have fun! We’ll have a...a CLEANING party! We can do some mop bucket jousting, and have three-legged trash bag races, and-”

“Um, Pinkie,” Applejack interjected. “I can see you’re on a roll, but you do know that Pokey isn’t here, right?”

“What? Where did he go? He was here just a minute ago. Has anypony seen Pokey?”

Her question was greeted with shaking heads and murmured negatives all around.

It seemed to Pinkie that something wasn’t quite right, but she pushed the thought aside. After all, having your party ruined was enough to put anypony off her game. “Oh well, he probably went home when he saw all this mess. Now c’mon gang,” she placed a mop bucket on her head as she spoke, “Who will be the first to face Sir Pinkie, Knight of the Round Stable?”

**Part 4:** *In which a nation-spanning conspiracy is revealed*

Pierce sat very still on the straw pile. He didn't know what Canker wanted with him; he didn't know what to do. Lacking any outlet for his fear, he concentrated on making himself as small as possible.

Canker remained standing, and looked down at Pierce with intense scrutiny.

"Tell me, Pokey," the old stallion asked without preamble, "What do you know about old Canker, eh? What have you heard about me from the fine citizens of Ponyville?" His voice had a raspy, abrasive quality which Pierce found vaguely unwholesome.

"Nothing really, sir. I mean, nothing worth mentioning, I don't-

"I didn't ask you to stroke my ego, Pokey. I asked what you'd heard about me."

Pierce swallowed. "Mostly I've only heard folks talk about you when there's a celebration coming up. They mostly talk about how to keep you away. After all, you...well..."

"I what, boy? Spit it out!"

"Well...you ruin everything. No pony likes you, but somehow you always find your way to every get-together in Ponyville!" Pierce lowered his head. "That's, um, that's what they say about you."

"Pokey, I've been watching you for a while now. I've seen you're no fool, whatever the rest of the town thinks. Tell me, did you ever wonder *why* I've made it my business to crash every party in Ponyville? Did you ever ask yourself what's in it for *me*?"

"Let me put it another way for you. What do you think I do for a living?"

Pierce thought a moment. He had never considered these questions; he'd never given more than a passing thought to Canker at all, until today. "I'm...not sure."

Canker snorted. "Of course you aren't. No pony pays any attention to old Canker, except when he's out wrecking parties. They never think to wonder where he gets enough bits to support himself. Well boy, let me show you something." The stallion stepped over to a large chest near the fire and, after fumbling with the lock for a moment, swung it open for Pierce to see.

Inside was a massive pile of coins, a greater store of wealth than Pierce had ever seen in one place. Seeing the colt's eyes widen, Canker smirked and shut the chest again. "That's the problem with this job. The pay's good, but I've got nothing to spend it on. Hell, I'm probably the richest pony in this podunk town, and no pony even knows it."

"I don't understand," said Pierce, his fear overcome by curiosity. "*Who* pays you? I've never seen you working at any of the shops or farms. What do you do?"

"Oh, I work for a little government organization. Ever heard of the DPM?" Pierce shook his head in answer. "Of course not, its existence is classified. It's Celestia's dirty little secret: the Department of Productivity Maintenance." Suddenly, Canker was standing right in front of Pierce. "How would you like a little history lesson, Pokey? I can tell you the biggest story that never make it into the history books."

Unable to do otherwise, Pierce mutely nodded. “Well then, listen up. It all started a long time ago, back at the beginning of the Princess’ reign...” His voice took on a new flavor; it was obvious he was reciting from memory. And with that, Canker began to tell a story the likes of which Pokey had never heard.

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No pony really knows how long Celestia had ruled before the problem became apparent; no pony except Celestia herself, of course, but she never speaks about the past. At least, not on the record. In any case, she was still newly come to her position when the troubles began. At first it seemed like a series of isolated incidents; farmers from one village hadn’t grown enough crops to last the town through winter, weather teams were unable to keep the sky clear in other areas, that sort of thing. For a while, the solutions were equally stopgap: Celestia would simply order emergency food relief to affected areas, or would increase weather funding for cities with persistent sky-management problems. But as the years went by, things kept getting worse. More and more towns needed emergency aid, many on a yearly basis. At the same time, tax revenue had been steadily declining for years. The treasury was nearly empty.

Desperate for solutions, the Princess sent out one her most trusted court advisers, Sir Vellum Scroll, to travel the land incognito and discover the source of all these problems. After several months away from the capital, Vellum returned with his report.

He found that, whether they were involved in service work, private business, agriculture, or trade, the average adult pony spent only 18 hours a week working, down from 30 a decade before. In trying to identify the reason for this change, Vellum noted that pony consumption of art, music, and literature was virtually unchanged over the past several years. Ponies weren’t having more children, or taking longer maternity leaves. Businesses had seen no decrease in product demand to correlate to their lack of production. In fact, his record stated that there was overwhelming evidence that most if not all of the total production dropoff being experienced in Equestria had a single root cause:

*Partying. (“Partying?” interrupted Pierce. “But that doesn’t-” He was silenced by a hoof striking him hard across the face. “Now, where was I...”)*

Vellum’s report showed that ponies nationwide spent an average of 6 hours *per day* engaged in “non-business large group social interaction,” everything from birthday parties and social clubs to company picnics and local holiday celebrations (Which, the report showed, had increased from an average of 7.7 days per year prior to Celestia’s reign to 22.9). The data was clear: since Celestia took power, ponies were working less and less, and partying more and more.

After reading the report, the Princess had it removed from public record and convinced Vellum to accept “early retirement.” At least, that was the official story.

In fact, she gave Vellum access to the royal coffers and instructed him to find a way to surreptitiously promote pony productivity. Fearful of causing mass discontent with authoritarian injunctions against partying (and feeling that to do so would be unjust and immoral, to boot), she told Vellum to make sure that he did not overtly use royal resources or authority. It was with these restrictions in mind that Vellum conceived of the Department of Productivity Maintenance.

In his travels, Vellum had met many ponies who recognized that their lifestyle was unsustainable. Seeking them out individually, he offered them lavish salaries if they would perform a crucial duty for the crown. The price of accepting, however, was high: the work would be taxing and time-consuming, especially at first, and there would be no recognition of their deeds. Not even their families could know

the truth about what they were doing, or the reasons why. These were the first DPM field agents, and their task was to promote productivity by stopping or reducing the amount of “non-business large group social interaction” that ponies across Equestria were engaging in.

Although it was decades before partying began to approach pre-Celestian levels, there were quantifiable results within the first year of the DPM’s creation. Without ever knowing the larger reason, ponies around Equestria began to party less, and celebrations became both shorter and less frequent.

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“And *that*,” concluded Canker, “is what I and thousands of ponies like me have done ever since. Protect the nation by playing the villain. It’s the worst job in the world, but somepony’s got to do it.” The stallion leered again. “And, truth be told, there are some parts that I find to be quite enjoyable.”

He paused, clearly expecting Pierce to speak. Pierce, for his part, rubbed his jaw and debated the wisdom of opening his mouth again.

“Well, don’t you have anything to say to that, Pokey? Anything in that story tickle your mind?”

“Um, it was...very interesting. I didn’t know-”

“Interesting my hindquarters. That story’s a load of dung and you know it.” Pierce’s eyes widened. “If I thought you were dumb enough to swallow a steaming pile like that, I never would’ve told you the story in the first place. Now get your head in gear and tell what tipped you off that it couldn’t be real.”

Unsure how to proceed, Pierce hesitated. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he announced, “The first time I questioned your story was before you even started. Why should I trust you at all?” To his surprise, Canker laughed at this.

“That’s a good start, my boy! Never trust anypony, not unless you have no other choice. There’s not a mare or stallion out there who won’t betray you for a pile of rusty bits, and if you haven’t figured that out yourself, you will soon enough. Now, what else?”

“First off, there are no records that go back to the beginning of Celestia’s reign. You might as well try to tell me that the Mare in the Moon is a real story, too.” Canker nodded, silently encouraging Pierce to continue. “And there’s no reason for *why* the ponies started to party too much. Ponies are ponies, whoever their ruler is. Why would they start partying all the time just because Celestia was princess?”

“Good. Was that all?”

“One more thing. Celestia would never stand for something like this. I don’t believe for one second that the Princess could be behind something as deceptive as what you described. And if she didn’t know from the start, there’s no way she could stay ignorant forever. As soon as she found out about the Department, she’d shut it down.”

“All valid points, although if you dig a little deeper, I think you’ll find that your Princess isn’t nearly so benevolent as she’d have you believe. Nevertheless, that’s the official story, and it’s good to pay lip service to it if the Administrators should happen by.”

“The who?”

“Ponies like me are field agents; we’re the ones who do all the dirty work. Administrators are supposed to make sure that all the field agents are doing their jobs,” Canker shrugged his shoulders. “But don’t worry, they almost never come by. The last visit was over three years ago. They pretty much just leave us to ourselves. However, you’re going to have to deal with one pretty soon.”

“ME?” Pierce yelped. “What did I do?”

“Well, nothing yet...but an Administrator has to approve all new field agents. Once I transfer the job over to you, they-”

Pierce was already on his feet and moving towards the exit. “Oh no! I didn’t sign up for this! I’m not gonna have anything to do-” He was cut off as a heavy hoof planted itself on his tail, stopping him short of the door.

“Now Pokey, I...” as Pierce started to cry out, Canker punched him hard below the ribs. Pierce fell to the ground, unable to breath. “I thought you’d have learned better manners than that by now. Now Pokey, I’m going to let you leave, but I want you to remember something.” The old stallion leaned in close to Pierce’s face. His breath was rank with onion and mouldy straw.

“You can go back to your regular old existence if you want. You can live your entire life in this one-pony town, and ten minutes after you’re dead, no pony will even remember your name. But remember,” His words took on ever-greater vehemence as he spoke, “There’s no pony in this whole flea-bitten, rot-infested town that cares two bits who you are or what you do. You have no friends, your parents don’t care about you, your teacher thinks you’re an idiot, and there’s not one pony in Equestria that could look you in the eye and say ‘I love you’ with a straight face.

“Becoming a field agent won’t change that. But I’ve watched you these last weeks, and let me tell you some *truth*: There is no pony in this town more hated, abused, and ignored than you.”

With that, Canker backed up a step. Pierce rose shakily to his feet, the pain in his side slowly ebbing. “Those ponies don’t even hate *me* as much as they hate you, Pokey. I’m offering you a chance to get back at them every single day, with a guilt-free conscience to boot! Plus, it’s the best job a sad sack like yourself could ever hope for. Do you really think anypony in town would ever hire a lazy, stupid, near-magicless unicorn? Think it over.” Canker then turned back to tend the fire, which had burned down to embers while they talked. “Now get out of my house, before I throw you out by your ear.”

Pierce stumbled from the shack as quickly as he could, and began making his way home. Although the night was still young, there were only a few folks about. Nevertheless, Pierce stuck to the alleyways and backstreets as best he could, trying his best to remain unseen. At last, he arrived at his home.

As he walked inside, his mother looked up from the next room, gave him a distracted wave and half-smile, and returned to her knitting. His father paid him no mind at all as Pierce made his way to his room and shut the door behind him.

He tried to forget about the night he’d had, but doubts assailed him. He didn’t have any friends; that much was true. What about Pinkie? He barely saw her outside of school; the party she’d planned was

probably just motivated by pity. *Heh, a Pokey Pity Party*, he thought to himself. *That's got a ring to it.*

Was there anyone that loved him? Well, his parents, of course. They didn't seem to know or care that he'd been out all evening, and neither of them noticed the welts on his face and flank. But surely they loved him, right? They were his parents...

Pierce tried to put such thoughts out of his mind. *I'm just tired*, he told himself. *It's been a long day. I'll think more clearly in the morning.* With that, he turned himself over on his bed and concentrated as best he could on falling asleep.

The morning's first light had already broken over the horizon by the time he finally dozed off.

**Part 5:** *In which plans are brought to fruition*

Over the next few days, Pierce's life changed little, despite his fears. He didn't see Canker again, and the bizarre tale which the old pony had told began to seem more and more like some mean-spirited prank.

Then, as he stepped out to fetch the mail one afternoon, Pierce found that he'd received not one, but two items today: a letter, and a package. The letter was from Canker; the package had no return address. Setting aside the letter, he examined the mysterious parcel. It was fairly heavy considering its small size, and rattled when he shook it. Curious, he opened it.

Inside was a small pile of bits, gleaming brightly. There was no note, and nothing else in the box. For a moment, Pierce was confused, but then a terrible thought occurred to him. Quickly, he tore open the letter from Canker. It simply read:

*Pokey,*

*I've sent word to the Department that you're my new apprentice. You should receive your first monthly stipend within a few days. It's not much, at least compared to what they pay me, but consider it a taste of what's to come. You'll need to meet with an Administrator before you're eligible to replace me, but that can wait a while. Meantime, you'll just be my assistant.*

*-Canker*

Pierce wanted to go scream at Canker that he hadn't agreed to any of this, but he remembered how well the last confrontation between them had gone. So, swallowing his anger (and, if he was honest with himself, more than a little fear), he trotted towards Canker's shack, parcel tucked securely into his saddlebag. When he reached the wide fence which ringed the property, he stopped. He had planned to leave the package at Canker's door, but Pierce found himself reluctant to go any farther. Instead, he simply threw it onto the lawn and ran off, suddenly frightened. He spent the rest of the day inside, watching through the window for any sign of the black pony, but Canker never came.

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Pierce was confused and frightened, but time stops for no pony, and life, as they say, goes on. Over the next few months, unmarked packages of bits continued to arrive for Pierce, and Pierce continued to refuse them, depositing the coins in Canker's yard each time. The old pony, for his part, made no further attempt to contact his 'assistant,' despite Pierce's incessant worrying.

Life continued apace at school as well, where many of Pierce's classmates obtained their cutie marks as the year progressed. Before too long, only two ponies in the class still sported bare bottoms: Pierce and Pinkie Pie. In truth, it was no surprise that either of them were slow to mature; where the other young ponies had all gone out and tried myriad professions and trades in order to find their special skill, Pinkie seemed to do nothing but plan parties and play pranks, and Pierce continued to remain a recluse. Although the teasing and abuse he received at school only intensified as it became clear that he was a 'late bloomer,' Pierce didn't much mind his lack of cutie mark. Ever since he and Canker had

spoken, he had feared that he would wake up one morning to find a stylized face imprinted on his flank, grimacing at him with disgust.

Yet, despite the seeming return to normalcy, Pierce was all too aware that his current situation could not continue indefinitely. Among his classmates, only Pinkie continued to be friendly towards him; only Pinkie spoke to him as a pony, rather than as a freak or an idiot. Canker's words played daily in his mind: *"There's no pony in this whole flea-bitten, rot-infested town that cares two bits who you are or what you do. You have no friends, your parents don't care about you, your teacher thinks you're an idiot, and there's not one pony in Equestria that could look you in the eye and say 'I love you' with a straight face."*

With each passing day, the truth of those words became more and more apparent to him. With each passing day, the thought of revenging himself upon the citizens of Ponyville grew more and more alluring. Yet he resisted the urge to go to Canker, to ask how he could inflict 'productivity' upon his tormentors. *As long as one pony's still nice to me, he thought to himself, I'll get by. As long as Pinkie doesn't hate me, I can put up with this for the rest of the year. And next year, who knows? Maybe things will be better then.*

The words felt hollow, but he told himself that it was enough.

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One day, Pierce came into the classroom to find a mob of his classmates pressed around Pinkie Pie. He didn't need to guess the reason; there had been enough ponies showing off their new cutie marks over the past few months that he could recognize the tenor of the crowd at a glance. Still, he had been dreading this day, knowing that the other students would take even greater delight in his degradation now that he was the sole remaining blank-flank in class.

"...and Mr. Cake said, 'Oh no, how can I do all the baking for Bon-Bon's birthday party *and* get the shop front ready for C.J.'s Young Baker's competition afterparty *and* still find the time to do something nice for my wife on our anniversary?' And I said, 'You just leave it to me, Mr. Cake!' And he said, 'Bu-? But I said, 'Pinkie Pie party planning and presentation, prepare for...um...something that begins with "P" that means "Here we go!"' And then I put together all three parties at the same time! I mean, I knew I liked parties, well DUH, everyone likes parties, but I didn't realize until then how good I was at making them happen, and this morning when I woke up I had these balloons on my butt! Aren't they the most super-sweet thing you've ever seen?" All the ponies ooh-ed and ahh-ed appreciatively.

As Pierce took his seat, he was already mentally preparing for the rounds of humiliation which, if he was lucky, wouldn't start until recess, when he and the other students were out from under Miss Cheerilee's watchful eyes. If things were half as bad as he feared, this was going to be the worst day he'd had in a long time. But just before class was called to order, Pinkie took her seat in front of him. Turning around, she looked right at him and said, "Pokey, I know I just got my cutie mark today, but if my special talent is parties, then I'm gonna throw the biggest, best cutedeñera Ponyville's EVER seen!" Abruptly, the pink pony blushed. "And, well...I wanted to ask you to come. Before I invited anypony else." Her bashfulness was a dramatic break from her usual persona. She looked uncommonly serious as she asked, "You *will* come, won't you?"

It took a moment, but Pierce managed to choke out, "Of course! I'll be there."

Rose interjected then, commenting that no pony else had invited Pokey to *their* cutedeñeras, and

that while it was Pinkie's business if she wanted to ruin her special day by inviting total rejects, Rose could hardly be held responsible if he ruined the vibe for everypony. Pinkie continued to talk, thinking out loud about possible dates and venues. Miss Cheerilee was at the front of the class now, trying to settle the children down so she could begin the lesson. Pierce, however, was not listening to any of them. He was thinking about Pinkie's cuteceñera.

Today, he decided, was the best day he'd had in a long time.

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Applejack grunted, and straightened up as much as the confines of the 'party planning box' permitted. "Alright sugar-cube, now what's so dang important that you could only tell me about it in here?"

Pinkie, sitting opposite the orange earth pony, made a show of looking around the tiny space for intruders. Then she leaned in close and whispered, "Applejack, *I've got it!*"

"Got what, Pinkie? I'm not a mind-reader, here."

"I know how to have the best, most super-fun-tastic cuteceñera ever! It's going to be...a *surprise party!*"

"Huh?"

Pinkie rolled here eyes. "C'mon, Applejack, you know what a surprise party is, don't you? It's when-"

"Yes, I know *what* a surprise party is. But you're the guest of honor! How are you supposed to surprise yourself?"

"Oh silly, I'm not going to surprise *me*, I'm going to surprise everypony else! That'll be a lot easier anyway!"

"Um, Pinkie, it's a little late for that, don't you think? I mean, everypony already knows you got your cutie mark. And heck, you just told me on the way here that you already reserved the main ballroom for Friday night. Besides, if they don't know about your party, how will you get them to show up at all?"

"You just leave all that to Pinkie. But, there's something I need you to do for me. Your family can let me borrow the farm's barn for a few days, right?"

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From around the corner, the old black stallion strained his ears to catch the muffled conversation coming from inside the box. He'd been watching Pinkie for some time now, and had a pretty good idea what she had planned already. Aloud, he muttered, "Maybe this'll push him over the edge. Just gotta play my cards right...it'll take some effort, but one more shove ought to be all he needs..."

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When Friday's lessons had finally finished, Pierce hurried home. Pinkie's reminder as the class was dismissed still rang in his ears. "Don't forget, Pokey, the party's in the ballroom at five. And be ready;

there's a surprise waiting for you there!" What this 'surprise' could be, he couldn't imagine, but he knew that for the first time in months, he was excited to go out. After wracking his brain, he'd decided that too many other ponies would take the easy way out and get a balloon-themed present, so he'd tried to be more creative; knowing that parties and music go hand in hand, he'd opted to buy her a compilation of dance tunes on record. He'd looked over the songs carefully, and was sure she would appreciate each and every one of them.

When he got home, however, he found the front fence had been tagged by vandals. More shocking still, they had managed to cover every picket facing the street with a variety of words and phrases too crude for public utterance, let alone display. Vandalism was rare enough in Ponyville, but something like this was unheard of.

As he walked in the door, Pierce saw his mother hanging up the phone in the living room. Turning, she exclaimed, "Oh Pierce, I'm so glad you're here! I just got off the phone with the police, they'll be on the lookout for whoever did this to our fence. But right now, I need you to go paint over those dreadful words at once!"

Pierce's heart sank. There was no way he could finish this task and still be at the ballroom by five. He tried to negotiate with his mother, but there was no question that the ugly scrawls needed to be covered immediately, and she was adamant that Pierce be the one to do it. "After all," she pointed out, "It was probably one of your friends playing some particularly ill-thought-out prank. Do talk to your friends at school and make sure they know they crossed the line, won't you?"

In the end, Pierce had little choice but to put on a pair of work clothes and start painting the pickets with a fresh coat of whitewash. He worked as quickly as he could, and hoped this setback wouldn't delay him from Pinkie's party for too long.

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As the afternoon wore on, the hour of the party approached. Ponies began to file into the ballroom, but many were surprised and (though they were too polite to say as much out loud) a bit disappointed; the decorations were sparse, and there were only a few light appetizers lining the table. Sufficient for an ordinary pony's *cuteceñera*, perhaps, but for a pony who's talent *was* partying? It all seemed very...mundane. The pink pony herself, of course, had yet to make her entrance.

Just after 5:00 had come and gone, however, the state of the festivities rapidly altered. The lights abruptly went out, revealing the words written on the walls in glowing ink: LOOK OUTSIDE. Confused, the ponies made their way to the door, and looked about. They saw a series of brightly-lit signs pointing away to the southwest, towards Sweet Apple Acres. Over the hills in that direction, they could see fireworks exploding in the air.

It was only a few minute's walk to reach the nearest part of the farm, where the large barn rested on a low rise. Standing in the open hayloft and cheerfully firing explosives skyward was Pinkie Pie. When her confused guests began to trickle towards her, she started waving and began to sing the Surprise Party Song. As the first ponies to arrive began filing into the barn, Pinkie's grin grew by the minute. This was a party that nopony would ever forget.

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As the last straggler ponies left the ballroom to head towards the real party site, an old black

stallion slipped out of the shadows and into the town center. He looked about himself and grunted.

“Lots to do, and not much time. Still, everything’s going to plan so far. Just have to hurry and hope for the best.” With that, he began removing the signs which pointed out of town, being careful to leave no trace of their presence behind.

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Pierce hurried towards the ballroom, his work at last completed. Gripping his gift in his mouth, he ran down the streets towards Ponyville’s central plaza. But as he grew closer, he slowed his steps.

Something was wrong. He was almost an hour late, but he didn’t hear any noise coming from up ahead. Confused, he walked on and, arriving outside the ballroom, found the streets abandoned.

The ballroom itself was dark; it was obvious there was no party here tonight. Pierce mentally rechecked: today was Friday, the party was Friday at five, it was not quite six...they couldn’t possibly have ended so soon, could they have? Not knowing what else to do, he opened the ballroom door and stepped inside.

Flicking on the lights, it was immediately clear there had been no party here. The room was bare and empty; no streamers or decorations graced the walls, the tables and chairs sat vacant around the edges of the room, and the silence that filled his ears was deafening. He was not alone in the ballroom, however.

Sitting on the stage was the black stallion who Pierce had been dreading these past few months. Suddenly, he was once more face-to-face with Canker.

**Part 6:** *In which irrevocable decisions are made*

As Pierce struggled to process the scene before him, Canker leered down at him from the stage. “So, you decided to come after all. When you didn’t show up right away, I thought maybe you’d gotten wise. Oh well.”

“Gotten wise? What are you talking about? What’s going on here?”

“Use your head, Pokey. You tell me what happened.”

Pierce considered the situation. “I...I don’t know. Where is everypony? They can’t all have just left...”

“Of course not, Pokey. But the room’s empty, so that must mean...” he gestured for Pierce to finish the thought.

“...That means they weren’t here at all.”

Canker clapped his hooves together slowly, the sound echoing through the empty ballroom. “Bravo. There was never a party here. You, my boy, have been duped.” Canker frowned. “And here I’d hoped you were smarter than all that. Never mind, there’s still time to learn.”

“But I don’t understand! Pinkie said to be here at five! She told me this is where the party was! She...she told me...”

“Now Pokey, you didn’t *really* think a popular young filly like this ‘Pinkie Pie’ was going to invite you to her cuteceñera, did you? Can you imagine a social reject like you being allowed at the most important night of her life?”

“But, she told me-”

“She told you to come here, didn’t she? Look around you, my boy. There’s no party here.”

Pierce’s shoulders slumped as he came to grips with the situation. “Then...there never was a party. This is just one big joke being played on Pokey.”

Canker smiled, a sickly caricature of compassion worming its way across his face. “Now Pokey, that just isn’t true. You aren’t nearly important enough for her to bother pranking you. No, Pinkie just wanted to make sure you were out of the way while the *real* party went off. Couldn’t take the chance that you’d show up there uninvited now, could she?”

“The real party?”

“Of course! Today is her cuteceñera, after all. However, it seems that everypony else’s invitation told them to be at Sweet Apple Acres at five. What a coincidence, eh?”

Pierce’s face flushed. “No...Pinkie wouldn’t do that...that’s not like her at all!”

Canker snorted dismissively. “You feel free to go on believing whatever you want, Pokey. But do yourself a favor; head down to the Apple family barn, and check out what’s going on without you. Then

see what you think.”

“I will.” Pierce turned and began walking out the door, when the black stallion’s voice stopped him.

“One more thing, Pokey.” As Pierce turned, Canker kicked a large saddle bag over to him. “I think you might find these useful, once you get there.” Pierce looked inside, then back to Canker.

“Canker, what is this?”

“You just head down to the farm, Pokey. I’m sure you can figure it all out.”

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Everything had gone according to plan, Pinkie thought. She had really outdone herself with her idea for a reverse surprise party. And the cake! It had taken her two days of nonstop work to bake all of it, and most of a third to set it up just so, but it had been well worth the effort. The guests could hardly help but stare, so improbable was her creation. The music was playing, people were laughing and joking all around her, and she was at the center of it all, in her element.

There was one thing missing, though. By now, every pony on the guest list (and some who weren’t besides, but that was no problem; Pinkie had planned for a few extras) had shown up, save one. As she accepted complements and presents with her usual flare and excitement, Pinkie kept looking towards the barn’s wide-open doors, hoping to see one more pony coming in. Although he was late, Pinkie wasn’t worried. He’d promised he’d come, and she didn’t doubt that Pokey was as good as his word.

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Pierce didn’t need to walk far before he could see the light coming from Sweet Apple Acres, and hear the myriad sounds of celebration that commingled in the still night air. Still, he stubbornly clung to the hope that there was some misunderstanding. He crested the last low hill ahead of the party site, and approached the wide barn doors.

The doors were open, and Pierce could see that the barn was filled with ponies. There must have been a hundred or more all crowded together. A stage had been assembled at the far end of the barn, on which a young white unicorn was operating an elaborate sound system. But the most arresting thing about the party was the “cake.”

In the center of the barn was a monstrous conglomeration of pastry, candy, and sugar, at least ten feet on a side, which combined to form a remarkable representation of Ponyville’s downtown in miniature. Houses and buildings were constructed of gingerbread, while roads were paved with puffed rice. Gumdrop ponies made their way through the saccharine landscape, some pulling blown-sugar carriages while others leaned against candy cane lampposts.

Almost as impressive as the town itself was the way in which it hovered in the air. Tied all around the base were hundreds of brightly colored balloons, their combined lift carefully measured to keep the candy construction floating about two feet off the ground. The balloons lined the barn’s rafters, filling the usually dark and dull space with vibrant hues. Ponies ooh-ed and aah-ed at the sight of their town,

cleverly positioned at eye level for the school-age ponies, as it drifted slowly about the center of the room.

After a moment, Pierce realized he had stopped, slack-jawed with awe, as he took in the sight before him. Hurriedly, he ducked behind a nearby apple tree. There, he paused to consider his options.

He thought about simply walking through the barn's wide doors, but rejected that option out of hand. If Pinkie really didn't want him here (*that's not true*, he told himself, *there's got to be some other reason!*), he had nothing to gain by showing up except further humiliation. It would be better to just walk away and head home now.

To simply leave...that possibility Pierce did consider at length. After all, even if Pinkie had made an honest mistake, even if she had meant to invite him here, he had no doubt that the other ponies wouldn't miss him. Whatever Pinkie's intentions, he could save himself a lot of trouble if he just left now.

But, as tempting as that option was, Pierce couldn't will himself to follow through. He had promised Pinkie that he would come to her cutceñera, and that had to count for something. And, a more cynical part of his mind noted, he desperately wanted to know if Canker was telling the truth.

Shaking his head, he made his way to the far side of the barn. The ground-level doors here were closed, but up above him the loft's door stood open, doubtless to provide some ventilation on the warm night. Opening his saddlebag, he took out the rope and grappling hook that had been carefully packed inside. Pierce wondered how Canker had known it would come in handy, but shoved such thoughts aside as he concentrated on getting up into the hayloft. From there, he'd be able to look down on the party surreptitiously. Once he'd had a chance to observe for a bit, perhaps matters would become a little clearer.

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Pinkie knew she couldn't wait much longer. The guests were starting to grow antsy; they were waiting for her to give her speech. Until she'd addressed everypony, they couldn't cut the cake, and it had already been almost an hour since they'd arrived.

She had hoped Pokey would come, but she didn't let her smile falter. If he wanted to skip out on her cutceñera, it was his loss! She still had a lot of guests to entertain, and she intended to make sure there was nothing for them to complain about at her party.

Amid a hail of clinking glasses and cries of, "Speech! Speech!" Pinkie stepped up onto the stage.

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Pierce gasped for breath as he sprawled amid the hay in the open loft. He really was out of shape; just getting up the rope had been a struggle for him. While he recovered, he took the time to orient himself.

The loft was small; it only extended forward over perhaps a quarter of the barn. There might have been a similar setup on the other side, but his view was obscured by the hundreds of balloons that hovered directly in front of him, tethered to the enormous sugar village down below. The wood was ill-fit and full of knotholes, and he had no trouble finding a spot from which he could look down at the stage directly below him. As he looked, the ponies began to hush and the DJ turned off the music. Pinkie was clearly

preparing for her speech.

The young filly pranced up to a waiting microphone and addressed the crowd. “Heya, everypony! I hope you’re all having a super-duper time tonight!” Cheers and affirmations filled the barn. “Great! I don’t have very much to say, because the longer I talk, the longer I have to wait to get a piece of that cake! By the way, I call dibs on Sugarcube Corner!” The crowd laughed, and ponies began claiming those sections which they wanted for themselves. After a few moments, they quieted again, waiting for Pinkie to finish. “Well, before we all dig in, I just want to tell you all something. You’re all the best friends a pony could have, and I’m so happy that you’re all here tonight! Now, let’s make this the best party ever!” And with that, Pinkie leapt down from the stage amid thunderous applause. The music started up once more, its thunderous bass beat rattling the floorboards.

Pierce sighed as he stood up. Whatever the truth, Pinkie was clearly having a good time without him. It would be best if he just went home, before somepony found him skulking about and-

“Well, well, well! I thought I saw a little rat creeping around out back!”

Pierce stiffened at the sound of that voice. Turning, he faced Rose. She favored him with a malicious sneer.

“What’s the matter, *Pokey*? Aren’t us regular ponies good enough for you to hang out with? You weren’t *hiding*, were you? My friends and I were waiting for you!” She clapped her hooves together. “Oh, I know! Pinkie probably told you not to come after all, but you showed up anyway! You know, I told her it was a terrible idea to invite you, but I didn’t think she’d listen. Good for her!”

As Rose spoke, Pierce felt a strange feeling welling up inside him. Before, he had always tried to quietly absorb whatever abuse she hurled at him. He had always tried to make himself as small and unobtrusive as possible, hoping she would get bored and leave him alone. Before, he had always retreated into the safe confines of his mind.

Now, he felt something different. As Rose talked, Pierce felt his cheeks flush. His muscles began to quiver slightly, as a surge of adrenaline rushed through his veins. Abruptly, Pierce put a name to this new feeling.

He was angry. No, he was *furious*. His vision tinged red as he thought back on all to torment he had endured, and realized that he didn’t have to meekly acquiesce when Rose spoke.

He didn’t have to take this.

Rose stepped forward and gave Pierce a hard shove. “C’mon Pokey, aren’t you going to come down and play? Maybe if you get on your knees and beg, Pinkie will let you come in for a few minutes.” She pushed him again. “What’s the matter, Pokey? don’t you-”

With an inarticulate scream, Pierce rushed straight at the stunned Rose. Bowling into her headfirst, he hurled himself forward as hard as he could. Rose tried to brace herself, but she was caught entirely off-guard by Pierce’s sudden display of aggression. Toppling over, she slid backwards across the loft floor.

Pierce saw her tumble straight out the door. A moment later, he heard a soft thud, the sound

barely audible above the beat of the music below him.

Instantly, his anger was replaced with dread. He rushed to the door, and looked down to see Rose sprawled on the ground some fifteen feet below him. For moments that felt like hours, she lay unmoving.

Then, with a groan, she picked herself up. Standing shakily, she looked up at Pierce.

“What the hay, Pokey? Are you insane? I could have been killed by a fall like that!” She clutched her side with one hoof. “Ugh, I think I might have broken a rib. You just wait, Pokey! I’m gonna get Applejack’s parents, and then you’ll be in a *world* of trouble!” Slowly, she staggered away, leaving Pierce alone in the loft once more.

It wouldn’t take Rose long to reach the barn’s front entrance, even at the speed she was moving. But Pierce already knew what his next move would be. He was through playing the victim; now was the time to repay Ponyville for every wrong he’d ever suffered.

Starting with Pinkie Pie.

Pierce turned his attention to the balloons, and concentrated as hard as he could. Magic had never come easy to him, and this would be the most difficult incantation he’d ever attempted. But the years of pent-up anger and frustration that had now boiled over gave him strength. With a concussive blast, he released the spell.

As one, hundreds of dry needles of hay rose up around him. With another wave of effort, he hurled the makeshift arrows at the balloons in front of him.

Not all the balloons popped. Not all the hay even hit its mark; Pierce lacked the power or skill to aim each one individually. But enough hit; enough damage was done.

The energy used in the casting nearly caused Pierce to faint. Without waiting to see the result of his actions, he stumbled to the loft door. He slid down the rope, landing hard on his rump. Pulling himself up, he rushed off into the orchard as fast as his exhaustion permitted. From there, he began slowly making his way home, doing everything he could to stay out of sight.

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Below, Pinkie Pie had just finished posing for photos in front of her massive construction. Before she could cut the first slice, however, the room was rocked by a concussive burst. As one, the assembled ponies looked up to see that nearly half the balloons holding up the cake had popped simultaneously, all of them on the same side.

Immediately, the now-unsupported end of the construction lurched and fell to the ground. Hundreds of pounds of cake and candy slid to the floor in an unidentifiable heap. An instant later the other side of the cake, its balloons unpopped and much of the weight it supported now shorn, shot into the air. Sugary confectionery was hurled out over the crowd.

In the chaos which followed, Rose staggered in. Shocked at what she saw inside, she completely forgot to clutch her side or wail in pain. Nevertheless, she quickly found Applejack’s mother, who was acting as a chaperon, and told her that Pokey had been hiding in the loft. It didn’t take long for everypony to realize who must have been behind this.

Eventually, the crowd dispersed, each pony heading home, leaving the Apple family barn a sticky, disgusting mess. In the confusion, nopony noticed that Pinkie Pie had vanished.

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Pierce reached his home without being seen. As he closed the door behind him, he felt a strange mix of emotions; fear and sadness, regret and disappointment. But the overwhelming sensation was one of giddy exuberance: he had finally done *something*, and if it felt wrong, it also felt good.

Mere moments after he took his hoof from the knob, there was a knock on the door. Pierce froze. He almost didn't answer, but he realized that would only be putting off the inevitable. He was through hiding.

When he opened the door, Pinkie Pie was standing on the doorstep. Her dress was spattered with frosting and confectionery. The streaks below her eyes made it clear she had been crying. She looked nothing like the cheerful, exuberant Pinkie that everypony knew and loved. For a long moment, neither of them said anything.

Pinkie broke the silence with a simple question. "Why?"

Pierce didn't hesitate. "Oh, don't give me that. You deserved everything I did and more. I've got a list of slights a mile long, Pinkie. And from now on, I'm going to make sure that each and every one is repaid in full."

Pinkie hesitated a moment, then spoke. "I just wanted everypony to be happy. I wanted *you* to be happy, Pokey. But, if this is how you want it..." Her tone took on a whetted edge, "If this is what you want, fine. Pokey, you're not my friend anymore."

Pierce laughed. "Oh, Pinkie. We were never friends!" And with that, he slammed the door in her face.

That night, Pierce slept soundly. He awoke to discover that he had at last gotten his cutie mark: his flank was now graced with a gleaming silver pin. He knew exactly what his talent was.

That morning, he made his way to Canker's shack. The old stallion was waiting for him.

"So Pokey, what brings you here?"

"I've made my decision, Canker. I'm ready to become your apprentice."

**Part 7:** *In which the inexorable passage of time claims another victim*

Pierce fidgeted nervously in the fire's dim light. This was his least favorite part of the day; the brief period when he didn't feel powerful and important, but stupid and ineffectual. Clearing his throat, he addressed the pile of blankets that lay by the hearth.

"I made my usual rounds at 7:30 and 8:30, and didn't hear any relevant talk. I found a hiding place behind Sugarcube Corner for a brief while after that, but Pinkie found me and chased me off before I heard any news. During the school's recess, I was able to eavesdrop on a conversation between Blueberry and some of her friends. It seems they're planning a sleepover for the weekend. I've already added it to the calendar."

Pierce's recounting was interrupted by a wet hacking sound emanating from the blankets. After a moment it quieted, then ceased. Once he was sure the coughing fit had passed, Pierce continued.

"I took my lunch out of town off the main road to the south, in hopes that I'd be able to observe any travelers who's arrival might precipitate a celebration or other work stoppage. I made my usual rounds again at 2:30, without incident. I was going to try the bakery again, but it was closed early. There was no sign, but I found a discarded invitation by rooting through their trash bin. Apparently, Pinkie had planned a 'Monday Mini-Mixer' for seven o'clock tonight at the Jinxed Jester." Unsure whether Canker was familiar with the name, Pierce clarified, "It's the new store specializing in gear for practical jokes. They opened last month."

"I made my usual 4:30 rounds, then snuck into the Jester. By the time I arrived, the shop was closed and I was able to enter undetected. While alone inside, I found and dealt with sufficient materials to host a small party, and blocked up the front doors." Pierce didn't mention that the back door was still perfectly accessible to anyone with a key; Canker's views on property damage and disturbance in the line of work were somewhat different than his own, and he'd learned long ago not to press the issue. "Once that was done, I came back here."

There was a long silence. At length, a brittle, raspy voice wormed its way out from under the pile of blankets. "So, are you telling me you're finished for the day?"

Pierce stiffened. He'd recognized the direction of Canker's question; he'd missed something important. He racked his brain for some task or duty which he might have forgotten, but could think of nothing. Although he knew it was the wrong answer, he replied with a simple "Yes," and awaited the verbal lashing which he knew was coming.

There was another round of hacking from the blankets. At length, Canker spoke again. "Three years...for three years, you've been working under me...how can you still be so incompetent?"

Another long pause.

"You went by Sugarcube Corner twice. The first time, Pinkie chased you off immediately. That was your first clue. She was looking for you, therefore there was something she didn't want you to overhear.

"Your second hint was that Sugarcube Corner was closed early. By that time, you should have

suspected something big was afoot.

“Your third clue was the invitation. I’ll bet it was sitting right on top of all the garbage in plain sight, wasn’t it?”

Pierce winced. “Yes, it was.”

“And even though the bakery never closes except for major events, you didn’t even blink when you found ‘sufficient materials for a small party’ at the Jester. You didn’t even think to question why the place was empty if there was supposed to be a party there this evening. Pokey, you are truly a marvel of idiocy.”

“Then the party at the Jester was a red herring. That must mean there’s another party going on right now. The real party, the one they didn’t want me to find out about.”

The pile of blankets huffed. “You don’t get credit for figuring that out after I dragged all the clues in front of you. You need to be able to do this without my mollycoddling. Now can you handle this on your own, or do I need to get up and do this myself?”

Pierce frowned, thinking over what he knew. “It will be a big party, so there’s only a few venues large enough to hold it. It will be on the other side of the town from the Jester, and it won’t be one of the spots on my normal route. They’ll want somewhere reasonably large, that wouldn’t normally be considered a party spot, on the north end of town.” After a moment, he concluded, “The only place I can think of that fits is the library. The main room can hold at least fifty ponies comfortably, if they take out the tables.”

“Sixty-six, including room for refreshments. Not bad for an imbecile. Now get over there and stop that party in its tracks. This has Pinkie’s hoofprints all over it, and she’ll be on the lookout for you. Try not to screw up too badly.”

Pierce turned to go, then stopped. Taking a few tentative steps towards the fire, he asked again, “Can I please call Nurse Redheart? Somepony needs to come take a look at that cough of yours. It’s getting worse...”

It was a question he’d asked on several occasions over the last week, and the reply was no different than the other times. “If I wanted your opinion, Pokey, I’d beat it out of you. Now go do your blasted job, or I’ll knock you within an inch of your miserable life and deal with it myself.” Despite his threats, the black stallion showed no signs of rising from where he lay.

Not knowing what else to do, Pierce left the old pony alone, shutting the cottage door behind him as he left. He made his way towards the library, already considering how to break up the celebration. Pinkie Pie was clever, and a constant source of irritation for him and Canker, but Pierce hadn’t yet met the party he couldn’t crash.

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The dance was in full swing at the Ponyville Public Library. While the music played inside and young fillies and colts strutted about the makeshift dance floor, others sat outside in small groups, chatting amongst themselves and enjoying the festive atmosphere. It wouldn’t be easy to get close.

Of course, Pierce had spent the last three years learning how to get into places where he wasn’t

wanted. Scant minutes after he'd come within sight of the library, he had made his way onto the second story balcony, unnoticed by the ponies below.

The balcony door was locked of course, but that was no matter. Age had not brought Pierce any increase in magical aptitude, but he had developed a repertoire of simple spells which had proven very useful in his line of work. He put his head next to the lock and concentrated, the tip of his horn beginning to glow with lambent energy. After a moment, the lock clicked.

Pierce was about to enter, but something made him hesitate. A year ago, he might have shook off the feeling and gone on with his work, but hard-earned experience had taught him to trust his instincts. He began to examine the door, looking for something out of place.

There. A tiny thread of copper wire glinting in the low light. Pierce smirked, recognizing the setup. No doubt the wire led to a bell or other noisemaker which would alert the party-goers to his arrival. Pinkie wasn't showing much originality.

With another whisper of magic, Pierce slowly unbound the wire from the doorhandle and moved it to one side, careful not to jerk or jiggle it too much. Confidently, he opened the door and strode inside.

Entering the upstairs study, he made a quick sweep of the room, wary of any other surprises Pinkie might have left. Finding none, he approached the inner door. It was slightly ajar, giving Pierce the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the party going on below.

Surveying the ponies beneath him, Pierce considered his options. It was too late to simply disturb preparations; the party was already in full swing. The crowd was too large to intimidate or browbeat. He'd have to find some way to create a major disruption.

At length, his eyes settled on the bookshelves themselves. They were built into the wall, so pulling them down by force was right out. In any case, the crowd was tight enough that it would have been impossible to do so without the risk of crushing some of the ponies underneath. As Canker always put it, "The only thing less productive than a partying pony is a paralyzed pony." Pierce smiled as he remembered the quote; it was as close as the old stallion ever came to cracking a joke.

No, he couldn't pull down the bookcases, but the shelves themselves...

Brow furrowed in concentration, Pierce focused on the wall of shelves opposite him. He meticulously identified the joints of each board, located every nail in his mind's eye. He didn't have enough energy for more than a single casting of this magnitude; he'd have to do it perfectly on his first try.

It took several minutes, but at last he was ready. With a brilliant flash from his horn, the spell he'd woven took effect. As one, every nail which held the dusty shelves together leapt free of its moorings. With a dull but voluminous rumble, the combined contents of the bookcases which lined the far wall sloughed to the ground, burying the room (and many of its occupants) in an avalanche of mouldy tomes.

Although he was exhausted, Pierce didn't waste any time admiring his handiwork. He rushed back to the balcony and, descending as quickly as he dared, fled back to Canker's shack. He heard insults and epithets shouted after him, but he paid them no heed; his job done, he no longer had any need for secrecy.

Now he was finished for the day.

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“...And *then* he comes to the library even though *no*pony said anything about a party at the library (they’d better not have said anything about a party at the library, I *told* them not to say anything about a party at the library!) and even though we’re already in full-on A-double-plus party mode he *still* can’t just let us have our fun, nooooo, he has to come in through the roof (how’d he get in through the roof anyway, I had all the doors and windows rigged!) and he just...”

Applejack sighed, but dutifully continued mending the library shelves. She knew that Pinkie would calm down eventually, but that didn’t make the present cavalcade of invective and stream-of-consciousness digressions any more tolerable. It was the same tired pattern, over and over again: Pinkie plans a party. Pokey ruins party. Pinkie complains to Applejack for hours (*at least, it feels like hours*, she thought to herself). Then Pinkie decides to throw another party, and everything begins again.

Applejack was really starting to hate parties.

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The next morning, Canker took a turn for the worse.

Pierce brought him some water, but the black pony didn’t seem able to swallow. He hadn’t taken any food since the day before last. His chest rose and fell slowly, irregularly.

“That’s it,” said Pierce, “I’m bringing nurse Redheart. You need medical attention, *now*.”

Canker made a wheezing sound that might have been an attempt to respond. He gave another wet cough, but it was weaker now. Pierce rose from where he’d been kneeling beside the old stallion to go to the door, but a gnarled black hoof stopped him.

“Wait.” Canker wheezed, his voice barely intelligible through his natural rasp and the fetid dampness that clung to his lungs. “Read this.” From under the covers, he produced a parchment, and gave it to Pierce.

Pierce examined the paper. It was covered in hacked-up mucus and phlegm; the inevitable result of any non-unicorn trying to write while suffering from a chest infection. Still, the writing was legible. As Canker sunk back into his blankets, Pierce read:

*Blast it all, you ignorant dung pile,*

*I’ve been forced to spend my precious and rapidly fleeting time writing this letter instead of making myself comfortable because if there’s one thing I can count on, it’s your incompetence. When you see me in the morning, you’re no doubt going to demand I see a doctor or somesuch. Since I can barely speak anymore, I have to pen this out for you so you don’t go off and make my last hours even more miserable than they already are. If you cared two bits about my life, you’d have forced me to seek medical attention a week ago. If you cared two bits about what I WANT, you wouldn’t be bringing up doctors at*

all.

*I'm dying. In case that fact hasn't penetrated your thick skull yet.*

*That being the case, the least you could do is let me go out on my own terms. I despise everypony in this Celestia-forsaken town, and the last thing I want is to be surrounded by a bunch of ignorant, mush-minded simpletons in my waning hours. After all I've done for you, after bringing you into the DPM, after all the training, the LEAST you can do to repay me is to let me die with a little dignity.*

*Now, go do your morning rounds. Assuming I'm not gone by then, I'll be waiting for your report this evening. Try not to screw up too badly.*

Pierce set the letter down on the table and walked out the door. Canker gave no sign that he was aware of the younger pony's leaving.

Before he began his rounds, Pierce went to the Ponyville clinic. He stood outside for several minutes, oblivious to the stares and whispers of passers-by. Eventually, nurse Redheart came out, a look of apprehension and distrust on her face.

"Is there something you need, Pokey? I don't want any trouble with you."

Pierce shook his head mutely. Turning aside, he began his morning rounds.

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By mid-afternoon, it had begun to rain. It was already dark when Pierce arrived back at the cottage, shivering from the cold.

In his heart, he knew the truth even before he entered the shack. Still, he refused to accept what his instincts told him until he'd gone to Canker's body, until he'd felt its coolness with his own hooves. Only then did he concede to himself that the old stallion was dead.

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Dawn was breaking as Pierce stood beside the unmarked grave. Canker's will had been very clear on that point; he wanted no headstone, no plaque, nothing to indicate that a pony had been laid to rest on this spot.

In Equestria, it was traditional for burials to take place during the night. Then, on the following morn, friends and family would come to the grave site to say their last goodbyes. To watch the sun rise together, one last time.

Pierce stood alone among the headstones, the sole visitor to the graveyard.

As he watched the sunrise, he thought back to the words which Canker had spoken when the black pony had first offered him a job as DPM field agent:

*There's nopony in this whole flea-bitten, rot-infested town that cares two bits who you are or what you do. You have no friends, your parents don't care about you, your teacher thinks you're an*

*idiot, and there's not one pony in Equestria that could look you in the eye and say 'I love you' with a straight face.*

*...and ten minutes after you're dead, nopony will even remember your name.*

Pierce slowly swept his gaze across the empty graveyard. He wondered if anypony would wait for dawn by his grave. He wondered if Canker had ever stood in a lonely cemetery, and if the black stallion had ever asked himself those same questions.

It was that thought which made him weep.

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After the sun had risen, Pierce left the graveyard. Whispering promises to Canker as he walked, he set off to begin his usual morning rounds.

**Part 8:** *In which things become truly grim*

Pierce beat his temples with his hooves, trying to force the answer out of his head and onto the paper in front of him. Math had never come easy to the blue pony, but Canker had taught him the importance of accurate record-keeping.

Eventually, he managed to total the long list of numbers. The answer came as no surprise, but that made it no less unwelcome.

For the month of April, Pierce had broken up or curtailed 62 separate events. Another four had escaped his notice until it was too late, and an unknown number (Pierce always estimated it at double the number of confirmed misses) had never reached his attention at all. Adding up the number of ponies at each event and how long said events had lasted, over 1,500 total pony-hours were lost to large-group social recreation this month. Even assuming the parties he'd missed had mostly been small ones (which were much easier to conceal), the number was staggering. And it was going up each month.

Things had been growing worse and worse since Canker passed away. More parties, and larger ones at that. Pierce couldn't keep up. And he knew exactly who was to blame.

He added up the check-marks in the column labeled "PP?" There were 41 in all. Nearly two thirds of the parties in the last month had been planned or hosted by Pinkie Pie. Pierce scowled at the paper, but the numbers were clear: without Pinkie, parties in Ponyville would still be at manageable levels.

*What kind of a special talent is partying, anyway?* he fumed to himself. Pinkie had been a source of constant irritation for him and Canker since he'd first taken the job as DPM field agent, but things had gotten progressively worse in the year since the old stallion had taken ill and passed away. Acting alone, Pierce simply wasn't able to keep up.

As Pierce compared the numbers from month to month, he reached a conclusion: something had to be done about Pinkie Pie and her incessant parties.

He looked at the clock; it was already past midnight. He stood up with a sigh, knowing he had to get to sleep soon. Pinkie had a pancake breakfast scheduled for seven tomorrow morning, and he'd need to be up at least a few hours before that if he wanted to do his job properly. Still, he made a note in his planner before heading off to bed. If he had some time tomorrow, he really needed to start thinking of some way to slow Pinkie Pie down.

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It was past midnight, but Pinkie was not yet asleep. She still had work to do if she wanted to be ready for the pancake breakfast tomorrow! Not getting ready for the breakfast itself, of course; the dishes were cleaned, the tables were set out, the batter was mixed and ready. No, she still had work to do in order to protect her party from Pokey.

She reviewed the protective measures she'd taken so far: the tripwires and bells had been set up in a ring around Sugarcube Corner, the doors (front and back) were not only locked, but had chairs wedged under the door handles, the windows were all closed and shuttered, the chimney flue was shut...what

could she have forgotten?

Pinkie had a feeling that Pokey would get in anyway; he always did. Still, she'd taken every precaution she could think of, short of digging a moat around the building. She really wished the Cakes hadn't stopped her from building one, but no point worrying about that now. She just had to hope the defences she'd set up would hold off Pokey until morning.

*What kind of special talent is ruining parties, anyway?* she huffed to herself, stifling a yawn with one hoof. She decided she would booby-trap the first-story storeroom, then turn in for the night. She'd already set up a cot in the storage cellar; there was no way she was going to leave her party site undefended. In any case, it was *way* past her bedtime, and tomorrow was another big day.

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It was the early hours before dawn when the visitor arrived in Ponyville. The streets were empty, and the town lay silent before her, oblivious of her coming. Of course, even if she had arrived in the middle of the day, nopony would have seen her. She preferred to remain in the background whenever possible. Still, if what she'd heard from her predecessor as any indication, the goings-on in this town would necessitate her involvement.

She made her way towards the downtown and found a quiet, out-of-the-way place from which she could look down on the main square in peace. Reports were one thing, but there was no substitute for firsthand observation.

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It was still an hour before dawn. Pierce stood in Sugarcube Corner's foyer, examining his surroundings. Now that he was inside, it looked like the rest of the job would be easy enough; he just had to dirty up the dishes, dump out the batter, and hide the milk and eggs so that Pinkie and the Cakes couldn't quickly whip up another batch. Knowing from past experience that the eggs were kept in the storage cellar, he began to make his way downstairs.

As he opened the basement door, he heard a soft snirk below him, followed by giggling. Instantly, Pierce froze. From the basement, he heard a voice, unmistakably that of Pinkie Pie, speaking in a lazy slur to another pony.

"No, no...you can't do it lengthwise...but what about the bun?..."

Pierce, curiosity overcoming his native caution, began to slowly descend the staircase. Years of practice allowed him to make his way down with hardly a sound.

"I know, you silly filly...well fine, don't take my advice then..."

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Pierce waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the low light, then dared a quick glance into the storeroom. Amid the dim shadows, he could just make out the slumbering form of Pinkie Pie, stretched out on her cot.

"Well then...don't blame ME when you lose the hot-dog eating championship..."

Despite himself, Pierce smiled.

He slowly worked his way back up the stairs, considering his options. He couldn't do anything about the contents of the cellar while Pinkie was down there, obviously. And he'd have to be extra careful while going about his work with her sleeping right below his hooves. Still, he'd pulled off harder jobs than this. He headed towards the storeroom.

Then he stopped. Not because of the booby-trap; he'd already guessed from the slight press at the center of the door that there was probably a stack of pans or dishes or somesuch piled against the far side, ready to fall out with a clatter if he wasn't careful. No, something had just occurred to him.

Pinkie was here. Asleep. And the streets of Ponyville were still empty. That meant...

Pierce departed without a whisper, leaving the breakfast preparations undisturbed. Careful not to catch the tripwire with his hooves, he made his way towards Pinkie's home.

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The newcomer to Ponyville took a moment to peek through the windows of the bakery, confirming what she had seen from her hiding place. The blue unicorn had entered, pattered around for a few minutes, and then left without doing anything. Very strange.

With a mental shrug, she slipped away after the young stallion. Whatever he was up to, she wanted to see it with her own eyes.

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Pierce entered Pinkie Pie's home, closing the door behind him with a soft click. He considered turning on the lights, but opted against it. It was unlikely anypony would notice, but it wasn't worth taking the chance. Besides, the predawn gave just enough illumination for him to see by; in his line of work, he was used to dealing with poor light. He looked around the small house.

There was only one story. The front door had led him straight into the living room. To his left was a combined dining room/kitchen. To his right was a hallway, lined by three doors.

Pierce quickly discovered that two of the rooms were a tiny bathroom and a near-empty guestroom. These he dismissed at once. The third door, however, led to Pinkie's bedroom. He walked in, looking about in all directions.

He could barely see anything in the dark. The one window was facing west, and a heavy pair of curtains blocked what little light might have seeped in from it. Pierce had no intention of opening the shades. He also didn't want to use anything bright enough to be seen by anypony outside, which ruled out turning on the lights or illuminating the room with his horn. Luckily, he came prepared.

Reaching into his small work-bag, he produced a wax candle with a bronze holder. Lighting it, he examined the room.

Had the room belonged to anypony other than Pinkie, he might have been more surprised by its contents. As it was, he merely found most of the items filling the room bizarre.

The walls were painted day-glow pink. A bed sat against one wall, its sheets festooned with various equipomorphic candies. The rest of the room was mostly filled with boxes: streamers, balloons,

signs...there was even a large box of fireworks near the door.

*I don't think I'd want to sleep in the same room as a crate of explosives, though Pierce. This pony is crazy!* Nevertheless, he focused on what he'd come here for.

To call the room a mess was an understatement. There was barely any floor visible beneath the stacks of party supplies and other scattered detritus. Pierce hoped this wouldn't take much time.

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The pancake breakfast was going off without a hitch. Well, other than the fact that Mr. Cake had set off Pinkie's tripwire and almost given himself a heart attack. And then had been locked outside until Pinkie got up and unblocked the front door. And then had nearly been crushed beneath an avalanche of mixing bowls when he'd tried to get into the storeroom. But other than that, everything was going swimmingly.

Pinkie tried her best not to worry, but found her normal jollity under assault. Even though there was nothing she could do about it now, she was afraid that Pokey would show up and somehow ruin everything. Surely he'd known about the breakfast? He seemed to hear about every party in town. He hadn't just decided to take the morning off, had he?

She pushed aside her worries, smiling as she ladled another batch of pancakes onto the griddle. One nagging concern remained, however:

*Pokey always tries to ruin every party he hears about. Every single one. If he's not here...*

Unbidden, the thought ran through her mind: *I hope he's okay.*

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At last, Pierce found what he was looking for. It was a miniature footlocker, hidden beneath the bed by piles of party supplies. Shaking it, he heard the distinctive rattle of coins; inside were Pinkie's life savings.

The plan he'd hit upon back at Sugarcube Corner was simple: if Pinkie didn't have any money, how could she afford to keep throwing parties? At the very least, it would buy Pierce a few months while she struggled to make up for her unexpected shortfall. He had no doubt that Canker would have approved of his improvising.

Still, this was crossing a new line. Breaking up parties was one thing, but what he was contemplating was out-and-out thievery. He was prepared to play the villain, but robbing a pony who's only sin was excessive celebrations? Maybe he should give this some more thought. Of course, he was already here, and the money was right here in his hooves...

With a sigh, Pierce put the footlocker back. Whatever else he was, he wasn't a thief. He'd go back to the rickety shack he'd inherited from Canker and think of some other plan-

Suddenly, something grabbed him by the tail. Startled, Pierce yelped, dropping the candle in his surprise.

Time seemed to slow down while he watched, helpless to act, as the candle tumbled through the

air...

...and landed in the box of fireworks.

With a roar, rockets began to shoot out of the box in all directions. Panicking, Pierce ran headlong for the exit, explosions ripping through the hall above and around him. As he dived towards the door handle, a concussive blast shook him. Then, everything went black.

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At that same moment, the mare who had followed him from Sugarcube Corner suddenly vanished from the spot she'd been standing, leaving nothing but a brief flash of light in her wake.

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When she heard the dull rumbles from the west, Pinkie wondered if the weather team had messed up again. She was pretty sure today was supposed to be clear skies. It wasn't until she saw the black clouds rising up from the ground, until she heard the blaring of sirens, that she realized there was a fire.

As the rumbling intensified, she felt a sudden pit in her stomach; there was only one house to the west that was likely to have explosives stored inside. Abandoning her duties as breakfast host, she rushed towards the smoke.

By the time she reached her home, the whole structure was ablaze. The fireponies had apparently given her house up for lost, and were devoting their energy to preventing the flames from spreading to neighboring buildings. Without a second thought, Pinkie ran towards her home.

As she charged across the street, a pair of strong hooves wrapped around her, arresting her movement. "Hold up there, Miss Pie! You need to stay back, that house could collapse any moment!"

Pinkie squirmed in the grasp of the firepony. "But Gummy's in there! Did you get him out? Have you seen him?"

"Is that your cat or something?"

"No, he's an alligator! He's about this big," she gestured with her hooves, "and he's green with purple eyes, and he..." She finally turned and looked at the firepony holding her, tears in her eyes. "...You haven't seen him, have you?"

The stallion shook his head. "I'll keep my eyes open, but you need to promise me you'll stay away from the house if I let you go. Okay?"

"...Okay."

He released her, and immediately went back to work cordoning off the site. As a crowd of onlookers gathered, Pinkie sat down in the middle of the street and watched her home burn to the ground.

Her friends gathered around her, offering their sympathy and condolences. Mrs. Cake sat by her a while, and told her that she could stay in C.J.'s old room at Sugarcube Corner as long as she needed. One of the fireponies eventually approached her, and asked her a few questions about how the blaze could

have started.

Pinkie asked each of them if they had seen Gummy. No pony had.

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Pierce blinked the stars out of his eyes. He had thought for sure he was dead. He'd heard a blast, then suddenly felt as if his whole body was on fire...he looked around, his vision slowly swimming into focus.

To his surprise, he was back home in his shack. His coat and mane were singed, but he was otherwise unharmed.

Standing directly in front of him was a very angry looking brown unicorn. She glared at him with a ferocity he hadn't seen since Canker died.

"Now that you're awake, Mr. Pierce, you're going to tell me exactly what's going on. And it had better be good."

**Part 9:** *In which old values are re-examined*

The brown unicorn locked eyes with Pierce, her fury and intensity making him blanch. “Mr. Pierce, I have been in this town less than six hours, and already I’ve witnessed you engaged in two separate acts of breaking and entering, not to mention arson. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how INCREDIBLY ILLEGAL your actions are, and I’d like to know exactly...” To Pierce’s confusion, she trailed off, her gaze shifting away from his eyes and towards his rump. “...erm, what is *that*?”

Pierce looked at his backside. Once the fireworks had started going off, he’d been too busy running for his life to worry about the stranger who’d grabbed his tail. Looking at his rump, he now realized what had happened.

Still clinging to his tail was a miniature alligator. It was covered in black soot, but appeared otherwise unharmed. As he looked at it, the tiny creature gave an equally tiny cough, revealing its toothless pink maw. Then, it attacked his tail once more with renewed vigour.

Pierce groaned. “Oh Gummy, why’d you have to surprise me like that?” He turned to the bemused unicorn and explained, “That’s just Gummy. He’s Pinkie’s pet.” With a grunt, he pushed himself up on his hooves.

A sudden force, firm but not painful, shoved him back to the ground. “Oh no,” said the brown unicorn, her horn glowing slightly as she held Pierce down, “You aren’t going anywhere until you explain to me exactly what you’ve done to this town.”

Pierce growled, “And who are you? Just some-”

“You may address me,” she calmly spoke over him, “As Administrator Gage.” With that, she handed Pierce a scroll with the DPM seal stamped at the top.

As he examined the document, he felt a cold lump growing in his chest; the stamp, the signatures, everything was correct. He’d only met an Administrator on two previous occasions; once shortly after he’d formally accepted his apprenticeship, and once after Canker’s death, when he’d officially been put in charge of the Ponyville area. Both times it had been the same pony, a middle-aged ochre pegasus who had looked at over the records, chatted shop for a while, and quickly departed.

“What happened to Administrator Tart?”

“That’s neither your concern nor your business. You are going to immediately explain to me what you were doing and why I shouldn’t banish you from Equestria on the spot.”

Pierce didn’t know exactly what powers the Administrators wielded, but Canker had spoke more than once about their ability to remove ‘troublesome details.’ Looking up at Administrator Gage’s face, Pierce felt with icy certainty that her threat was no idle bluff.

Not knowing what else to do, Pierce told her everything that had happened. He described Pinkie Pie and her ‘unusual’ talent, and told the unicorn everything he had done since he’d woken up this morning. He told her how he’d broken into Pinkie’s house, and how he’d abandoned his plan to rob her at the last moment. He told her about the candle, and the fireworks. He omitted no detail.

He had noticed the cutie mark on the brown unicorn, a pair of balanced scales; he saw how her horn began to glow more brightly as soon as he started talking. He was quite certain lying to the pony would be fruitless at best.

As he told his tale, the Administrator's visage shifted from anger to disbelief, and finally to frustrated resignation.

“...and once the fireworks began going off, I ran towards the door as fast as I could. As I was running, I felt some sort of shock-wave hit me, and then I was here.” Pierce concluded. “I thought I was dead.”

The Administrator snorted. “You might well have been in some danger, had I not teleported you here. Nevertheless, the ‘shock-wave’ you felt was most likely a result of my casting, not of a concurrent explosion. Teleporting others is a bit...tricky, especially when one is doing it sight unseen. Consider yourself lucky you escaped with only a bit of singed hair.” She stared into Pierce’s eyes for several long moments, then said, “I believe your story. Since it’s clear to me that the fire was not deliberate, I’ll withhold judgement for the moment. Now then, I’ll need to see your records for the last year.”

Pierce tried again to rise, but found he was still being held firmly on the ground. “Oh no,” the Administrator warned, “You aren’t going anywhere yet. Simply tell me where you keep your documents, if you please.”

Pierce’s mind raced. Canker had taught him the value of keeping clear and concise records...preferably several different sets, depending on who would be looking at them. The books he’d prepared for Administrator Tart were resting in the top left-hoof drawer of his small desk. Those books told of a much ‘quieter’ Ponyville than his personal records.

Involuntarily, he glanced again at Administrator Gage’s cutie mark. He sighed; all that work for nothing. “In the desk behind you. Second drawer from the bottom, on the left.”

Pierce waited in silence while she carefully poured over his notes. Whoever she was, the Administrator’s magic was powerful: she had been exerting arcane energy almost constantly since she teleported him and herself to the shack, yet she showed no signs of exhaustion. There were only a few other unicorns in Ponyville, and none had near the raw power of this pony. Pierce abruptly felt glad that he was a DPM agent in a primarily earth pony town; it certainly made his job easier.

At length, the Administrator put down the papers and returned her attention to him. “Well, these reports certainly make for some interesting reading. In fact, I think this answers several of my questions.

“Tell me Mr. Pierce, what exactly is your job?”

Pierce quoted by rote, “It is the duty of every DPM agent to ensure that pony productivity is maintained in his or her region of authority. DPM agents will prevent excessive waste and consumption, to a degree which ensures that the proper functioning of all social and national duties within the region is maintained.” Canker had made him learn that exact piece to repeat to Administrator Tart when Pierce first accepted the job. He felt a shiver run down his spine as he recalled the punishments for misremembering a single word.

“Very well said. That would no doubt be entirely ‘by the book,’ if we had a book for our recruits.” She looked thoughtful a moment. “I suppose it isn’t practical, but a book would be handy. It might help

prevent situations like this.

“Now if you’re quite done quoting, I’ll ask you again: what is your job? Describe what you do in laypony’s terms, if you please.”

Pierce thought a moment. “Well...mostly I break up parties. That’s how everything got started back at the beginning of Celestia’s reign, after all. That’s a full-time job by itself--I already told you about Pinkie.”

“I suppose I should have expected this when I first read the dossier.” The Administrator bent down, putting her head level with Pierce’s. “Mr. Pierce, I don’t know exactly what training you received during your apprenticeship, but the DPM doesn’t care two bits whether or not ponies are partying.”

“Come again?”

“The Department was put into place because ponies weren’t doing enough actual work to feed the population and maintain the government. According to your figures, Sweet Apple Acres alone produced more than enough food this year to feed all of Ponyville and the surrounding area. Despite being a relatively small agrarian community, this town is one of Equestria’s top tax contributors per capita. Clearly, productivity is not a problem in this jurisdiction.”

Pierce grunted. Administrator Tart had said something similar when he came to visit last year: *“You don’t need to stop every party, my lad! Just as long as these numbers stay high!”*

Before he could answer, he felt a sharp pain in his backside. Twitching involuntarily, he looked back at Gummy.

The little reptile had been happily gnawing on Pierce’s tail for some time now, all but forgotten by the blue unicorn. Now, however, it seemed he’d learned a new trick: he grabbed a single hair from Pierce’s backside in his mouth, then rolled around on the floor until the hair was wrapped around his snout several times. With his grip secured, he yanked the tail hair from Pierce’s rump.

Pierce turned his head back to the brown unicorn. “Administrator Gage, I promise you I’m not going anywhere. Could you *please* let me up so I can deal him?”

The Administrator nodded, and Pierce felt the gentle pressure on his back ease. Rising, he walked to a small cabinet, from which he produced a length of rope. Gummy proved quite resourceful in eluding the (now thoroughly annoyed) Pierce, but eventually the tiny alligator found himself trussed up like a pig. Administrator Gage offered no help; the enjoyment she took in watching Pierce try to rope up the miniature reptile was evident. With a relieved sigh, Pierce set the creature near the fire, away from his damp and tangled tail.

That done, he returned his attention to the Administrator. Chasing Gummy had given him a chance to regain his bearings. He faced the brown unicorn, still afraid of what she could do to him, but no longer floundering and out of his element.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re satisfied with the productivity index here in Ponyville. I’m also glad that you agree that the incident at Pinkie Pie’s house, while regrettable, was merely an accident. That being the case, I believe our business here is concluded.”

The Administrator bristled. “Mr. Pierce, you would do well to presume less and listen a bit more. I’m not at all satisfied with the way things are being run here, and I-”

“I’m sorry, Administrator Gage. I was under the impression that field agents have broad freedom to act within their jurisdictions as they see necessary. You agree that I’m doing my job exceptionally well, what more is there to discuss?”

“Pierce, have you ever had any friends?”

The question was so absurd, so out of place, that Pierce stopped despite himself. In the pause, Administrator Gage continued, more quietly now, “I’ve seen the collected reports on your predecessor, Mr. Canker. His methods were...unorthodox, to say the least. However, his district showed a marked increase in productivity by nearly every metric when he took the assignment. The last few Administrators in this region decided to tolerate his eccentricities.

“Pierce, being a field agent sometimes means making tough decisions. It sometimes means being the voice of reason, alone in the wilderness. Sometimes it means doing things that no pony else is willing to do. You know all this; you wouldn’t have taken this job if you weren’t prepared to make those kinds of hard decisions.

“But this job does not require you to be the town’s resident boogy-mare. Pierce,” the Administrator had stepped closer as she spoke; her eyes were boring into his as they stood a mere pace apart, “Ponyville is a healthy, productive, vibrant place. What this town is missing is a little happiness. Can you give them that?”

For a long time, neither spoke. Both held one another’s gaze.

Pierce looked away first. Swallowing thickly, he said, “‘Happiness’ is not one of the metrics which I’m supposed to track. If there’s nothing else, I have work to do.”

The Administrator nodded sadly. “I was afraid you might say that. I really could have you banished, you know.”

Pierce looked at her hooves. “I know. But you aren’t going to.”

“No, I’m not. I’m going to let you keep working here, Pierce. I’m going to let you do what you want. What exactly that entails, I leave to you.”

She turned to leave, but as she opened the door, she paused. “Don’t you want to know why I won’t stop you, Mr. Pierce?”

Pierce still couldn’t meet her eyes. He said nothing.

“I’ve always had a talent for ferreting out the truth. But more than that, I discovered years ago that I could *read* ponies; I can tell what was in their hearts.” She paused, putting a hoof to her chin. “Well it sounds terribly cheesy when I say it like that, but you understand me, I’m sure.

“Mr. Pierce, you aren’t the pony Canker was.”

Pierce could barely speak. Choking, he managed to mumble, “This is who I am. I’ve come to

terms with that.”

The unicorn considered him a moment. As though it were not a change of subject, she asked him, “What is your cutie mark?”

Again, the seemingly irrelevant question caught Pierce off-guard. Stumbling mentally, he replied, “It’s a pin. An open safety pin.”

“Mr. Pierce, what do you suppose your cutie mark represents?” Seeing his confusion, she continued, “A pony’s cutie mark shows their special talent, after all. What’s your special talent?”

“Popping balloons.” The brown unicorn smiled at that, causing Pierce to flush. “It’s a long story, okay?”

“Do you know, when I first got my cutie mark, I thought it was a sign I was meant to be a judge? I went to school for many years pursuing that career. In time, I graduated and took a seat on the Hoofington district bench.

Do you know what I discovered, Mr. Pierce? I was a terrible judge.”

Despite the irrelevancy of the conversation, despite the cool air still blowing in through the open door, Pierce found himself compelled by her story. “How could you be? I thought you said you could tell if a pony was lying. Seems to me you’d always know who was right and who was wrong.”

“Oh, I handled all my cases admirably, if I say so myself. But I was desperately unhappy. I hated my work! My life’s ambition since I was a foal, and I despised my job!

“I’d always thought the scales on my flank meant I was destined to be a judge, but I soon realized I would never be happy if something didn’t change.”

“So, what happened? What did you do?”

By way of answer, the Administrator merely smiled mysteriously. “Mr. Pierce, do you know what else safety pins do? They hold things together. Think about it.”

And with that, she stepped out the door, closing it behind her. Suddenly galvanized into action, Pierce ran outside after her. He was not surprised, however, to find no trace of Administrator Gage.

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Pinkie Pie lay in the strange bed and stared at the ceiling. She supposed she ought to be grateful; if it wasn’t for the Cake’s generosity, she wouldn’t even have a bed to sleep in tonight. She tried to count her blessings, but the list seemed to come up awfully short.

And of course, there was Gummy.

Pinkie tried to think of something to do to cheer her up. Something that would at least divert her attention for a while. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized; there was nothing she really wanted to do. So she lay still and stared at the ceiling.

The sharp rapping of a hoof on her door shocked her out of her malaise; nopony could reach the

second floor without climbing the stairs by this room. Surely she'd have heard anypony coming? She strained her ears, but the knocking did not repeat itself. She heard no other sounds.

Alert now, she crept to the door and pricked up her ears. Listening closely, she could just barely discern the faintest sounds of movement coming from the other side.

Cautiously, Pinkie opened her door a tiny crack and looked out into the hall. Then, she threw the door open with a scream, scooping up the squirming miniature alligator that lay before her, muzzle, bindings, and all.

"GUMMY! Oh Gummy thank Celestia you're safe, I was so worried I was nearly sick (don't you EVER frighten me like that again!) but now that you're here and I'm here and your gag is here (hey, where'd you get the gag? Let's get that off!) and, well, that's it but you and me is PLENTY! Now we can..."

As she continued crying and cooing over her beloved pet, Mr. and Mrs. Cake came running up the stairs. At the landing, they both stopped in confusion.

Pinkie twirled towards them, holding her alligator up for them to admire. "LOOK! It's GUMMY!"

Mrs. Cake smiled and said, "Oh dear, it's a miracle! I'm so glad he's alright."

Mr. Cake, however, wore a puzzled frown. "Yes, that's wonderful...but how'd he get in here? And did he bring *that* with him?"

He pointed a hoof at the other object in the hall: a massive oak chest. Pinkie, who had somehow managed not to notice it in her elation over her reunion with Gummy, hopped over to it at once. "Ooh, do you think it's a treasure chest? It looks like a treasure chest! This would be a great prop for a pirate party!"

Mr. Cake scooped up an envelope that lay next to the chest. On it was written, "For Pinkie Pie." Shrugging, he handed it to Pinkie, who immediately tore the letter open.

Inside were a key and a note. The latter read:

*I must ask your forgiveness for the delay in returning your pet. Please accept my apologies.*

*I must further ask you to pardon the bindings in which I was forced to put him. I was not able to find any other way keep him detached from my tail. Again, my apologies.*

*In light of your current situation, please accept this chest and its contents. I have never had much need for it; I hope you will find a way to put it to better use.*

*I'm sorry.*

Pinkie flipped the note around, but could find no signature.

"Well, what's inside?" asked Mrs. Cake.

Pinkie grinned wickedly. "Well now, there's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

With the Cakes crowding around her back, Pinkie unlocked the chest with her key. With a

dramatic flourish, she threw open the lid.

The three of them (and Gummy, but his interest and comprehension were both minimal) stared into the chest, eyes slowly widening. It was Mr. Cake who was first to react, patting Pinkie on the back with one hoof and saying, “So, I guess dinner’s on you tomorrow?”

That broke the watershed. Soon, the three ponies were dancing and hugging and screaming, wondering at their good fortune.

Even after they calmed down, however, none of them had any idea who the mysterious benefactor could be. None of them had any clue who in Ponyville could have left her the massive chest, filled to the brim with gold bits.

**Part 10:** *In which the story concludes*

The party was already in full swing when Pierce walked through the door. An old record player near the entrance was gamely knocking out energizing music as the young fillies and their parents mingled in small knots. With a smirk, he noted the three-tiered tray of carrots on the buffet table; Diamond Tiara's mother must have put up an awful fight to convince Pinkie to serve anything that wasn't loaded with sugar.

Pierce wandered through the crowd, seeking out ponies and making small talk--and dropping little reminders.

"Lovely party, isn't it Carrot Top? Just make sure you aren't out too late--the pegasus ponies have a storm scheduled for tomorrow noon, and you've still got to tarp down all of your second plantings.

"Nice to see you, Berry Punch! You'll make sure little Berry Blast doesn't eat too much cake, won't you? Too many sweets will upset her stomach, after all, and she still has to write her history report tonight!

"Isn't this a wonderful cutceñera, Silver Spoon? It looks like everypony's having a great time! But don't forget: you promised your mother you'd be home by six! It wouldn't do to have her worrying about you, would it?"

The guests mostly nodded and smiled at his gentle admonitions (except Silver Spoon, who stuck out her tongue at him and retorted, "You're not the boss of me!"). They had long become used to his constant reminders. Some said he was a nag, plain and simple, but many of the town's residents found that they appreciated having somepony to help them keep track of their responsibilities.

After a while, Pierce slipped off to an out-of-the-way corner, and pulled out his notebook. He ran down the long list of names and jobs, checking off those ponies whom he'd already spoken to. Whatever else Canker had taught him, the value of organization was one lesson he was grateful for. In his youth, he'd barely been able to remember his own duties; there was no way he could have kept track of the entire town's workloads without diligent record-keeping.

He grinned as he looked over the laughing crowd. Here he was, standing in the middle of a full-on party...and his work was done. It was quite a change from the way he used to operate.

Well, he wasn't *quite* done. Looking around, he spotted a dozen balloons floating near the store counter. Perfect.

Walking over, he closed his eyes and smiled. Dancing to the music's beat, he thrust his horn back and forth, the loud pop of each balloon bringing back memories; not all good, but each worth cherishing. Each a part of who he was. He didn't open his eyes until his stabs were met by nothing but air.

Gazing down at the broken bits of latex, he thought back to old pony who'd introduced him to his life's work. Pierce made promises to Canker on the day the black stallion had been buried, and he had kept his word. The decorations were destroyed: this party was as good as ruined. And, if the old pony himself might not have thought the damage done was *quite* sufficient...well, it was the thought that

counted, right?

His reminiscing was interrupted by a loud SKRRITCH as the record player was knocked askew. Looking, he saw that the table had been bumped by the youngest Apple sibling, Applebloom. *Nice folks, the Apples*, the thought absentmindedly. *Hardly ever need a reminder from me to take care of their business.*

Along with all the other ponies, he watched as Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon marched towards her, seeing her and her 'blank flank' as an easy mark for their bullying. The look of resignation on Applebloom's face was one Pierce remembered all too well from his own youth.

This time, however, things would be a bit different.

He cast his eyes about the gathering. He'd seen them just a moment ago...there! In amongst the crowd were two young fillies: a white unicorn and an orange pegasus. Both notably lacked their cutie marks.

As he approached, he heard the pegasus saying, "C'mon Sweetie Bell! Let's tell those stuck-up goons a thing or two!"

The unicorn, however, was not so eager to intervene. "I dunno, Scoot. What if they just start picking on us instead?"

Stepping up next to them, Pierce said in a low voice, "Applebloom's one of the kindest, most honest fillies in Ponyville. If they *were* picking on you instead, don't you think she'd have something to say?"

Sweetie Bell looked down at her hooves, scuffing at the floor. "Well..."

Scootaloo nudged the young unicorn again. "Yeah, of course she'd do the same for us! Now c'mon, let's go!" Giving up her protests in the face of her friend's bravado, Sweetie Bell joined her compatriot as they trotted to Applebloom's defense.

Satisfied, Pierce slipped to the back door and left the building. As he headed off, he pulled out his notebook again, seeing what was next on his schedule. That was one thing that hadn't changed about the job; it was still lonely, lonely work. But he had no doubt that Ponyville was a better, happier place today, thanks to his efforts.

Some days, that felt like small comfort. But today...

Today, Pierce felt like he could live with that.

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From the stairway, Pinkie Pie watched the blue unicorn leave. She had seen him go talk to Sweetie Bell and Scootaloo. She didn't know what he'd said, but clearly it had motivated them to stand up to those meanies who were harassing Applebloom. That was good, right?

Of course, she'd also seen him pop the balloons, but that wasn't a big deal. After all, the rest of the decorations were still intact. Somepony just coming in probably wouldn't even notice they were missing.

And besides, Pinkie was prepared.

She opened the closet, pulling out a fresh box of balloons and a tank of helium. How she managed to fill and tie off the balloons with her hooves was a mystery, but she nevertheless had a dozen ready to go in no time at all.

She remembered the days when she had viewed Pokey as her personal tormentor. She had even seen him as some sort of villain, an arch-nemesis to her party-throwing superhero. But things had changed long ago. For years now, he had followed the same pattern at every party: he would show up, make one tiny little mess, and then leave. Sometimes he'd eat half a cupcake and drop the rest on the floor; sometimes he'd kick over a trash bin; today it was the balloons. Pinkie didn't know what to make of it.

But she'd seen the smile on his face when he made his tiny little mess. Whatever his problem was, at least he was happy.

Pinkie placed the new bunch of balloons in the same spot the old ones had rested. Satisfied, she ran to the back door. She popped her head out the window just in time to see Pokey turning down a corner, his nose buried in his notebook. His smile brought a compatriot grin to her face.

*The best parties, she thought to herself, are the ones where everypony leaves happy.*

The End