

“Now you’re sure this will give Twilight the biggest start of her life?”

“Absolutely! As the sign says, full satisfaction or your money back.”

“Okie-dokie mister!” Pinkie Pie slid her bits across the counter. The owner of the funny looking wagon that had rolled into Ponyville earlier in the day deposited them in the register.

“Say...have you ever had anything returned?” Pinkie asked, accepting the box labeled ‘snake dispenser’ and her receipt.

“Only the tactical nuclear stink bombs, and that was because they were duds. I’ve gotten that cleared up with the company though. Anything else I can get for you?”

“No, that should do it. Are you going to be in town long? Some of this stuff looks really neat.”

“Oh I’ll be around for quite some time I think.” The pony behind the counter looked at the bustling street. “Quite some time indeed.”

“OK! Well see you later!”

Pinkie bounced down the street, holding the package in her mouth. She giggled as the library grew closer, the thought of Twilight’s reaction and subsequent laughter they would share filling her with glee. After all, a good scare was part of the fun of life right? And what luck that a new joke seller would roll into town. As soon as she had seen the wagon with its big sign proclaiming ‘Pranks to die for’ she knew it would be a good day. Pinkie leapt behind a bush a few feet away from the library, trying to stifle the laugh that threatened to give away her plans. The box was inspected until she found the instructions.

“For those with a fear of...yes, that’s the idea...place in desired location, pull string to arm, get away within 30 seconds. When victim comes within five feet they get a scaly surprise!” Pinkie giggled again, the look on Twilight’s face as the fake snakes burst out filling her mind. She blinked and continued reading. “Warning: Not for use indoors. Manufacturer not liable for heart attacks caused by this product. Do not handle if you are allergic to...what is latex anyway? Meh.”

Pinkie crept to the front door of the library, her stifled laughs coming out as little snorts of amusement. She placed the box on the step and pulled the green string hanging from the image of the serpent on the side. With a mental count toward thirty starting up she knocked on the door of the library. As quietly as she could she dashed back towards her hiding place.
18...19...

“Coming.”

Twilight’s muffled voice came out of the library, accompanied by the sound of hooves approaching the door. *24...25...* Pinkie Pie tensed, her eyes widening with expectation. The door swung inward slowly. *28...29...30...* Twilight stepped out of the tree. The box disappeared with a low whumpf and the entry to the library was concealed by a large cloud of green smoke. Somewhere in the smoke a pony screamed in fright.

“Ah’ can’t believe you need mah help with this Rarity. You sure another pony won’t be bettah suited to watchoo got in mind?”

“Oh Applejack, I know how you dislike fancy dresses and high fashion but this next piece requires your skills. How else could I see if my line of dresses for athletic ponies would stand up to the kind of stress they’ll put them under?”

“Yeah well I just feel kinda foolish is all.”

“Don’t be ridiculous dear. You look simply amazing.”

“If you say so.” Applejack said, staring glumly at her reflection in the mirror. Sure, it was a nice enough dress, if that was what she was into. It was form fitting without being tight, designed to move and breathe with the wearer. Ideally, it would be as durable as its own as well. Ideally. And Rarity had said it would resist stains. “Just tell me what you want me to do again.”

“I just want you to go about your normal business for the day. Work around the farm. Buck some apples. Put the dress through its paces. When you’re done, bring it back to me and tell me what you think. It’s easy darling.”

“OK...I guess. But just so you know I ain’t wearin’ it about town where ever’pony can gawk and stare.”

“I didn’t expect you to. Now, off you-“ Rarity was interrupted by an ominous rumble from the ground. The two friends looked at each other.

“What in tarnation was that?”

“I have no idea.”

The ground began shaking in earnest. The Carousel Boutique was filled with the clatter of objects rattling off their shelves and hitting the floor. Both ponies dove towards the center of the room, away from the small avalanche of dress forms, fabric bolts, and other sewing equipment. With a loud crash the sewing machine fell off its table. The sound of ponies in the street screaming in fear and confusion filtered in through the windows. A few moments later the windows themselves shattered as the frame of the building twisted under the stress. Jagged lines of glass tinkled to the floor, and Applejack briefly wondered who was screaming so loudly. The noise of something massive shifting soon drowned out everything else. Something hit the sturdy earth pony on top of the head and she collapsed.

It was, Fluttershy decided, going to be a good day. All her little animal friends were fat, sleek, and happy. She hummed softly as she pattered about the chicken pen, spreading feed over the ground from her saddlebags. It was quiet and peaceful around her cottage, with only the soft clucking of the chickens and the breeze soughing softly in the trees. Angel bunny stood with his paws resting on top of the chicken fence, nose twitching, patiently waiting to for some time with his mistress. The scampering of something small made him turn his head. A field mouse was running as fast as its little legs could carry it across the yard. It bumped into Fluttershy’s hoof and began squeaking insistently.

“Calm down little one.” The gentle Pegasus leaned down and touched her nose to its quivering sides. “I can barely understand what you’re saying.”

The mouse continued to chatter frantically, gesturing towards the trees behind it. Angel bunny’s ears pricked up, swiveling towards something only he could hear. He hopped away from the fence and stared towards the source of the sound.

“What do you mean there’s a monster? You weren’t in the Everfree forest were you?” Fluttershy cocked her head to one side as the mouse at her feet related its story. “No? But there are no monsters in Equestria besides the forest.”

“*Help us...help us Fluttershy...*” The sound of a dozen small creatures filled the yellow pony’s ear.

“HA HA!” Pinkie launched herself out of the bush, pointing towards the library door. “Gotcha Twilight!” She started to laugh when the scream came again, a scream not of surprise, but of mortal terror.

“SNAKE! SNAAAAAAAAAgluk!”

“Twilight?” Pinkie Pie peered into the cloud of thick smoke. “Twilight?”

No answer greeted her query. Realizing that she might have gone a bit overboard, the pink filly took a deep breath and ran through the black haze into her friend’s home. She let out a startled gasp and froze at the sight of Twilight Sparkle, one of her best friends in the whole wide world, wrapped inside the constricting coils of an enormous serpent so green it was almost black. The bookish pony was frantically pawing at the coil of scaled muscle wrapped around her throat, eyes bulging as she struggled to draw breath. With the sound of twigs snapping the snake constricted tighter. Twilight’s head arched backwards as jagged ends of broken ribs pushed through her hide. Rivulets of blood began to flow from her nostrils, trailing down over the monster’s gleaming scales. With a sick splutch the skin of her lower body split open, pale coils of intestine spilling out amidst a new torrent of dark lifeblood. The serpent kept crushing until the weakening efforts of its prey stopped completely.

“No...” Pinkie Pie managed to find her voice, horror flooding her mind as the light in her friend’s eyes died. “No...nononononoNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Fluttershy jerked her head up with a little meep of alarm, looking around her empty yard.

“H...hello?”

“*Help us Fluttershy...you have to help us...*” The voices pleaded, more joining the chorus.

“Who’s there? Please come out, I can’t see you.”

“*Fluttershy help us, it has us and it won’t let us go...*” The voices sounded scared and in pain.

“Please...I can’t...what do you want me to do?” Fluttershy took a step backwards, head swiveling from side to side to try and see the source of the voices.

“*It took us...it took us and made us part of it...*” The chorus grew with each word, deepening in tone.

“*It*” Angel bunny’s nose twitched once, the fur on his back starting to rise as the ground started to tremble.

“*Took*” The field mouse jerked away from the gentle filly and fled as fast as it could go. Cracks began to appear in the earth of the chicken pen.

“*Us*” Angel bunny wheeled around and followed the field mouse, ears laid back in a panic, a shrill scream of distress bursting from his throat. The cracks widened, a strange purple light shining out of them.

“*And now it wants you.*” The ground in front of Fluttershy heaved and burst. The poor pegasi stood frozen in fear, watching helplessly as something massive and wrong clawed its way out of the earth. The monstrosity rose to its full height, shaking dirt off its frame, widely spaced eyes glowing with the same sinister light. The falling clods of soil revealed it, a misshapen amalgam of twisted bone and blood slicked fur.

“*What’s the matter Fluttershy? Don’t you recognize us?*” The thing’s tone was mocking. It came back onto all fours with a thump that shook the ground. “*Don’t you want to be friends with us anymore?*”

“I...I...I...” All Fluttershy could do was stare in speechless horror at the thing before her. The stench of rotting carrion and fresh blood filled the air around her. She felt her gorge rising and a small part of her hoped she would vomit, if only so she would choke on it and die.

"You didn't save us Fluttershy. You let it get us. You let it get us and make us part of it."

"I...I...please..."

"And we're still alive Fluttershy..." Almost as one a thousand animals began to scream in pain and fear. Fluttershy winced at the sound, her own tiny wail of fear overwhelmed by the noise.

"And it knows what we want. We want revenge. We want you to suffer as we suffer." The multitude of voices rose above the screams of the mangled creatures that made up the abomination. *"JOIN US!"*

The thing reached out with a clawed appendage. The timid filly felt it wrap around her. Hot blood streaked her side, partially from the monster, partially from the punctures in her sides where protruding pieces of sharp bone dug into her. It pulled her towards its too wide maw, rows of razor sharp teeth glinting in the morning sun. As the thing's jaws began to close around her neck Fluttershy finally found the strength to scream.

"Ugh...what happened?" Applejack opened her eyes to complete ruin. It looked like the shop had fallen in on itself. She stood up and felt at her head. A lance of pain shot through her body and her hoof came away slick with blood. "Rarity?"

The only answer was a small whimper of pain behind her. Applejack turned towards a pile of rubble topped by a large support beam.

"Rarity? That you sugarcube?"

"Help..." The muffled, pain filled voice of her friend jerked Applejack out of her reverie. "Please help..."

"Hold on Rarity!" Applejack said, rising. Her legs shook under her as if they wouldn't bear her weight. She set her jaws firmly and willed herself to remain steady. Tottering towards the pile she surveyed what had happened. Somehow the ground had moved. Screams filled the town. Somewhere near the edge of Ponyville a fire burned, filling the air with the sharp tang of wood smoke.

"Applejack...please...hurry..." The words were strained and full of hurt.

"I...can...barely...breathe..."

"Just you hold on! Ah'll have this cleared in no time!" Applejack slumped against the fallen ceiling beam, drawing deep breaths to steady herself. With a grunt of effort she wriggled underneath it, wincing as small splinters drove themselves into her back.

"Please...hurry..."

"Come on..." The stout earth pony strained to rise, ignoring her protesting back and knees.

"Come on you..." Was it her or had the beam risen an inch? "Hold on Rarity...hold on..."

It was a mighty struggle for the orange filly. Every muscle in her lean form strained as hard as it could. Slowly, agonizingly, the beam rose a little higher. The tip of a horn and a lock of purple mane appeared from under the rubble near her forelegs.

"Can you pull yourself out?" The words were drawn through gritted teeth.

"I can't...I can't feel my legs...please help me..." A note of panic had crept into the unicorn's voice.

"Just a little higher...there...we..." Applejack mustered every ounce of strength she had, not caring at the hot stabs of pain ripping up her flanks. "GO!" With a final grunt of effort she

locked her knees, the beam resting on her back. Small crashes sounded as some of the lighter pieces of the shop slid away from the center of the heavy support.

It was a pathetic sight that met her. Rarity's immaculate mane had become coated with plaster dust. Small pieces of glass glittered like gems, rubies where her flanks had been cut, diamonds where they had not. The white filly's back legs were twisted and broken. Blood oozed slowly from a dozen places where the shattered bone had punched through the skin. Rarity's sapphire eyes were glazed with shock but she still drew breath. She blinked dully at Applejack.

"Take mah hoof..."

Applejack grunted as she extended the hoof closest to the fallen mare. Her frame screamed with fresh agony as the weight of the load was redistributed. Constant trickles of sweat stung her eyes as she stretched as far as she could towards her stricken friend. Rarity reached out with one pedicured hoof and gripped tightly.

"Now this is probably going to hurt like the dickens..." Applejack pulled her friend forward a few inches. Rarity let out a garbled shriek of agony as her broken body was moved.

It was a slow, torturous process for both. After a few pulls Rarity stopped screaming altogether, her cries of pain subsiding to muffled whimpers and gibbering whines. Applejack could feel her legs beginning to buckle under the strain of keeping the pillar off the ground. She closed her eyes and willed the pain and weakness away, concentrating on her breathing. A quick glance showed Rarity almost free of the pile, her head almost directly beneath the large wooden beam. A few more pulls and the load could be rolled off onto the pile. Just a few more... Applejack's eyes shot open as the ground under her hooves grumbled warningly.

"No...no...not now...no..." Applejack kept a tight grip on Rarity's hoof, her eyes widening in fear. "Please Rarity ya gotta listen to me. Ya gotta help me. Pull yourself forward. Ah' know it hurts sugar but ya just gotta. Please...just..."

It seemed like Rarity got the message. She dug in with her free hoof and began to push. Applejack could feel her legs shaking, or was that the ground? With her friend's help the next pull was easier. Rarity's head was halfway clear of the beam. Trembling with strain, Applejack drew in a breath for the next pull when the floor bucked violently. Something in the pile shifted and the weight of the beam doubled. Her knees buckled under her and she collapsed. The heavy beam across her back drove her to the ground. She didn't notice the pain of her back breaking. The sensation of blood filling her lungs didn't register. The only thing that mattered was the image of her friend's head collapsing like a ripe pumpkin under a kick from Big Macintosh. The only thing in the world that existed was the broken horn resting on the floor. The only thing real was the gore and brains of the generous, lovely pony now spattered all over her own face. The choked, bubbling scream forcing its way out of her throat brought merciful darkness.

Screams of fear echoed across Ponyville that night. Light sleepers shot up in their beds with cold sweat running down their muzzles. Heavy sleepers struggled to free themselves from the tangle of covers they had wrapped themselves in. Something in the Everfree forest felt its terrible hunger slacken for a moment. Deep inside the ancient prison it opened long shuttered eyes. A long, pointed tongue shot forth from its corkscrew filled mouth, tasting the horror...relishing it. Thought flickered across the thing's mind for the first time in millennia. It would have its revenge on the world.