

# Friendship is Mercenaries

[Chapter Five: Giggle at the Gespenst](#)

[Chapter Six: Big Damn Heroes](#)

[Chapter Seven: A Plan Forms](#)

[Chapter Eight: Meet Red Salvo](#)

## Chapter Five: Giggle at the Gespenst

There was a very long, awkward silence after this. It felt like it lasted hours. Neither Pinkie nor the Soldier could think of anything to say. After what was really only a few minutes, the Soldier was scared out of his wits by Pinkie's hair spontaneously re-inflating. He leapt several feet into the air, cried out in horror, and fell onto his back. Pinkie, of course, laughed loudly.

"Gotcha!" she chuckled.

"How did a goat get in here?" the Soldier asked. Pinkie didn't answer, and after a long moment, the Soldier stood up.

"So," he said. "This whole 'friendship' thing...how does it work? How do we get started?"

"You don't even know?" Pinkie shuddered. "Well, for starters, we need to learn some things about each other! I already know a lot about you, though..."

"So this is the part where we talk about you?"

"Yepperoonie! My name's Pinkie Pie, but you already know that! I work in Sugarcube Corner, and I live here, too! I'm Ponyville's resident party pony, and I don't talk about it much, but I'm also the Element of Laughter!" The Soldier blinked.

"Element of Laughter?" he repeated. "I thought we only had Earth, Fire, Wind, Water, and Heart." Pinkie giggled.

"Well, in *your* dimension, but not here!" she said cheerfully. "We've got Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty and Magic!" The Soldier reared back in genuine shock.

"Magic?!" he repeated. "Wait—I thought...but..."

"What's the matter?" Pinkie asked. The Soldier shook the shock from his face and grinned.

"Magic is common here, then?" he said, a hint of devilry in his voice.

"Yep!" Pinkie answered. "Every unicorn has magic!"

"What a relief," the Soldier said. "I mentioned this earlier, but I got sent here by a wizard. He's the only wizard left alive where I come from, but if magic's common here, I can just get a unicorn to figure out how to open a new portal. Then...I can go back home." *And beat the shit out of Merasmus*, the devilish smirk on his face added.

"Well, Twilight'll definitely know what to do!" Pinkie chirped, leaping excitedly into the air. "She's the Element of Magic! She's the best magician I know besides the princesses! If anypony'll know how to get open the portal, it'll be her!" The Soldier hesitated, trying to choose between the many questions that had just been raised.

"What does it mean to be the Element of Laughter?" he finally decided on. "What do you do?" Pinkie giggled

loudly and hopped onto a nearby crate.

"I'm glad you asked!"

---

Rarity allowed a large smile to cross her face. Her spell had worked perfectly the second time around. However, she was curious now: if she'd made the dress for somepony else, would it have yielded different results?

*Well, there's only one way to find out,* she thought. *I'll just have to make a stunning new dress for somepony else to test it on!* As if on cue, the bell hanging over the door to Carousel Boutique rang, heralding the arrival of a new customer.

"Cooo-ming~" Rarity sang, trotting merrily over to the door. "Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where every outfit is chic, unique, and magnifique!"

"Um...hello, Rarity..." said the soft, hesitant voice of Rarity's newest customer as the door closed behind her.

"Oh, hello, Fluttershy, darling!" Rarity said cheerfully. A wide smile spread across her face. The butter-yellow pegasus had been Rarity's friend since they were both foals, long before they became the Elements of Kindness and Generosity, respectively. Rarity liked to think their having been chosen to wield the Elements hadn't changed their friendship much, but regardless, it was always a joy to see her.

"Hello, Rarity," Fluttershy said softly. "Um...I was just wondering...have you seen Twilight today? I'm...a little worried about her..." Rarity blinked.

"I have, in fact," she answered. "She came by here earlier today. She asked for a hat which I'd been testing some magic on, I gave it to her, and she left. I'm not sure what it was all about."

"What magic would that be?"

"Well, see for yourself!" Rarity answered, gesturing toward the dress she'd been working on. It reminded Fluttershy of the dress Rarity worn to the Grand Galloping Gala, only the colors were inverted: while the Gala dress had been predominantly red with yellow accents, this one was predominantly yellow with red accents. Of course, the dress's main draw was the three ethereal diamonds orbiting around it.

"Oh, my..." Fluttershy said softly.

"Do you like it?" Rarity asked. "I call it the Noteworthy Charm."

"It's lovely," Fluttershy said, smiling faintly as she trotted toward the dress.

"Isn't it?" Rarity said proudly. "Be honest—you've never seen anything like it before, have you?" Fluttershy's smile faded.

"...Um...actually, that's...what I was going to talk to you about..." Fluttershy said. "I ran into Twilight earlier today...she was carrying some kind of helmet with...well, i-it looked kind of like this. She seemed really, really

nervous about something. She didn't even notice me when I asked what was wrong..."

"Well, I was testing the Charm on a helmet earlier," Rarity said. "But I'm sure whatever Twilight needed it for, she can handle it on her own."

"A-Are you sure?" Fluttershy murmured. "Because I don't want what happened last time to happen again..." Fluttershy shrunk backwards and let out a small "eep." In response, Rarity stepped forward, placed her hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder, and smiled reassuringly.

"Fluttershy," she said, "I invented the Noteworthy Charm myself. I told Twilight that, and she didn't even react. Whatever her objective is, her commitment to get it fulfilled has completely overridden her studious nature. I believe it would be better if we left her be this time."

---

The Soldier leapt out from behind a crate of indeterminate content and let out a vicious snarl. On each of his feet, he wore what looked like a shoebox with a bright red lid. On each of his arms, he wore what looked like an aluminum dryer hose. And on his head was a large cardboard box with a coat hanger taped to the top. There was a large rectangular hole on the box which was large enough for the Soldier to look through, and two bright red plastic cups had been taped to the front of the box. The Soldier had faithfully recreated his Halloween costume using only materials he'd scavenged from the basement.

"I am a robot from the future!" he said in a poor impression of a synthesized voice. Pinkie, upon seeing this, began to laugh heartily, beating her hoof on the ground. Eventually, she got to her hooves again.

"Wh...what do you want with me?" she said in mock horror.

"Scientists in the future have studied your ass for centuries...and sent me back in time to kick it!" Pinkie let out a shriek of mock terror and dove into the sea of crates. The Soldier charged after her purposefully. "You cannot run from me! I cannot be bargained with! I cannot be reasoned with! I do not know where I am!" The Soldier lost sight of Pinkie for a moment, and scanned the area searching for her.

"I will find you!" he said. "That's what I do! That's all I do!"

"I'm right behind you!" Pinkie answered in a much better impression of a synthesized voice than the Soldier's. The Soldier only just had enough time to turn around before Pinkie pounced on him, knocking him to the ground. In the few seconds the Soldier had lost sight of her, Pinkie had donned a costume very similar to his, except she wore pink where he wore red. She wore shoeboxes and dryer tubes on all four of her legs, and her muzzle poked out of the corresponding hole in the box on her head. The Soldier didn't know how she'd gotten the costume change done that quickly, but he was having too much fun to care.

"Oh, no! That robot is a ghost!" he said, remaining in character.

"I was a robot the whole time!" Pinkie intoned in a very impressive false synthesized voice. "I am programmed to give you a sensible haircut!" The Soldier almost cracked up.

"Beep boop, I am terrified! I ask that you reconsider!" He very nearly didn't finish his sentence, he was

laughing so hard.

"It is what I have been programmed to do! It is my responsibility. You cannot shrug off your responsibilities. You have to pull yourself up and meet the challenges head on. That is the only way you will succeed in life."

Two things then happened at the same time. First, the Soldier's smile vanished, and he stopped laughing instantly. Secondly, Pinkie's knee got pinchy again.

"Uh-oh...did I say something wrong?" Pinkie asked nervously, reverting to her normal voice.

The Soldier lost it. He bellowed with rage and bloodlust, grabbed Pinkie by the throat, and forced her onto her back. Before Pinkie knew what was happening, he was on top of her, hands wrapped around her throat. "You BASTARD!" he bellowed. "You cruel, sadistic Nazi bastard! Did you think I'd forget about you?! Did you think I would forget what you did to those people?!"

"S-Soldier, what are you—" Pinkie began, struggling to breathe.

"WELL, I DID!" the Soldier bellowed. "I forgot all about it for decades, but I sure as hell remember now! And I don't know how I ever managed to forget! I will avenge your victims, Feldwebel! Everything you did to those people, I will do to you—only WORSE! YOUR skin will be made into MY hat when I'm done with you!" Charging in to defend his mistress, Gummy leapt into the air and clamped down on the Soldier's arm. Unfortunately, the valiant alligator was only a few inches long and toothless, and the Soldier failed to notice his brave assault.

"Soldier, it...it's me...Pinkie...your friend!" Pinkie wheezed.

"I WILL CRAM THAT INFERNAL STRUDEL OF YOURS RIGHT DOWN YOUR THROAT!" Gummy leapt into the air and bit the Soldier's ear. Again, he didn't notice. "I WILL NEVER FEEL PITY—" Gummy repositioned to the Soldier's chin. No response. "—OR REMORSE—" Gummy clamped down on the Soldier's right nipple, still eliciting no reaction. "—OR FEAR—" Gummy leapt down to the Soldier's left hip, and got no reaction at all. "—OR COMFORTABLE IN THIS COSTUME!" Gummy leapt into the air once more and bit down as hard as he could on the Soldier's testicles. That time, he got a response.

"AAAAAUGH GET IT OFF GET IT OFF GET IT OFF!" the Soldier shrieked, releasing Pinkie and stumbling blindly into the basement. He slammed into a pile of crates, sending them toppling over and covering him completely. Pinkie took a deep, gasping breath and slowly got to her hooves. She tilted her head forward, throwing the box off.

"Soldier? Are you okay?" she asked, sounding more concerned than scared. The Soldier slowly climbed out of the pile of crates, and Gummy after him.

"That alligator just saved your life," he whimpered in what Pinkie thought was a very good impression of Fluttershy as he slowly waddled back toward Pinkie.

"What did I do?" Pinkie asked with genuine regret in her voice. The Soldier took a deep, wincing breath as Gummy waddled past him.

"You...triggered a flashback," he answered after a moment. "It was a terrible, terrible memory of...something that happened to me during World War II. It was a... I-I don't want to talk about it..." The Soldier sunk to his knees,

covered his face with his hands, and remained still for a long time. Eventually, Pinkie stepped forward and placed her hoof on his shoulder. The Soldier finally looked up.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Soldier." Pinkie smiled as broadly as ever.

"You don't understand," the Soldier responded. "You *can't* understand. This Technicolor dimension is not ready for the story of the Feldwebel." Pinkie only giggled.

"Now, that's no way to think!" she chirped.

"No, really. I'd give you nightmares for years. *I'm* gonna have nightmares for years now that I've remembered this, and I'm a goddamn career killer." Pinkie, as always, smiled.

"Soldier," she said, "let me teach you a little lesson about fear..." As she spoke, cheerful music began to play, seeming to come from everywhere at once. The light streaming in from the basement window seemed to shine brighter, lighting the room fully and evenly. Before the Soldier realized what was happening, Pinkie leapt backwards, landing a few feet in front of him, and started singing.

*"When I was a little filly and the sun was going dooooooown..."*

"Where's that music coming from?" the Soldier asked.

*"The darkness and the shadows, they would always make me frooooooown..."*

"No, seriously. This is creepy."

*"I'd hide under my pillow...from what I thought I saw...but Granny Pie said that wasn't the way to deal with fears at aaaaaallll!"*

"Then what is?" The Soldier wasn't sure why he said that. The words just popped out of his mouth. Once he'd said them, though, Pinkie spontaneously appeared right next to him and continued singing.

*"She said, Pinkie, you gotta stand up tall—learn to face your fears!"* Pinkie hopped over to the center of the room as she sang her next line. *"You'll see that they can't hurt you—just laugh and make them disappear!"* As she sang the last syllable, she somehow pushed herself onto her hind legs, throwing her forelegs wide apart much like a human would if they wanted a hug. The Soldier didn't know what he'd been expecting Pinkie to do, but it hadn't been that.

*"Ha! Ha! Ha!"*

The more the Soldier thought about what was going on, the funnier it seemed.

"SO..." Just before Pinkie launched into what must have been the final verse of the song, she leapt behind the crate she was standing on top of and vanished behind it. An instant later, she popped out from a row of crates several yards behind her. After each sentence, she shot behind the crate again and popped out from behind another, as though she was teleporting.

*"Giggle at the ghostly! Guffaw at the grossly! Crack up at the creepy! Whoop it up with the weepy! Chortle at*

*the kooky! Snortle at the spooky!*" Pinkie vanished again. A millisecond later, she popped out of the crate she'd initially hopped onto, and began singing at a very rapid tempo.

*"And tell that big dumb scary face to take a hike and leave you alone and if he thinks he can scare you he's got another thing coming and the very idea of such a thing just makes you wanna..."* Pinkie cut herself off here, having brought herself to a sudden fit of laughter. After a couple of seconds, she regained control. Her final note was just as loud as the rest, but it seemed to ring through the Soldier's consciousness like the blasts of a million pipe bombs at once.

*"LAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH!"* The Soldier looked down to the ground and began to chuckle softly. After what felt like a long, long time, Pinkie hopped out of her crate, retrieved her robot mask from where it had fallen onto the floor, and trotted up to the Soldier.

"Beep boop?" she asked. The Soldier removed his hands from his face and stared at Pinkie for a long, long moment. After what felt like hours, he finally smiled a warm smile, nodded, and got to his feet again.

"Beep boop, son...beep boop."

## Chapter Six: Big Damn Heroes

"Twilight, I'm telling you! There's nothing about dimensional transportation in any of these books!" said Spike, trying desperately to get Twilight's attention.

"We have to keep looking, Spike!" Twilight shouted back, skimming through the books three at a time now. "We can't let the Princess just work on this alone! It has to be somewhere! It just has to be! Keep looking!"

"But, Twilight—" Spike began. Twilight squeezed her eyes shut, bared her teeth and growled with frustration.

"I SAID KEEP LOOKING!" she screamed. Her screams resounded throughout the library, and were punctuated by a sudden and completely unexpected clap of thunder. That shut both of them up.

"...There wasn't supposed to be a storm today, was there, Spike?" asked Twilight, too confused to stay angry.

"I don't think so..." responded Spike, equally confused. Suddenly, the library's front door burst open.

"Twilight! What the hay is going on in here?!"

"Oh, hey, Rainbow Dash!" said Twilight, trying to sound calm and failing miserably. "Did you hear that thunder just now? What was up with that?" The sky blue pegasus rolled her eyes.

"Oh, it's nothing important. Derpy just decided to try her hoof at cloud-clearing."

"Wait, Derpy? Isn't she a mailpony?"

"Yeah, but the mail doesn't run on Sundays," Rainbow Dash responded, shutting the door behind her and flitting over to Twilight. "Apparently, a friend of hers couldn't make it to work today, so Derpy offered to fill in for her. I was supposed to keep an eye on the trainee, being Weather Manager and all."

"And how'd that turn out?" asked Spike, chuckling to himself.

"Well, she didn't break anything this time," answered Rainbow Dash. "She was on her last cloud when you startled her, Twilight."

"I...startled her?" asked Twilight.

"That scream of yours scared her, yeah. Nice job breaking it, hero." No one said anything for a while after that.

"Well, anyway..." said Twilight, turning back to the books, "since you're here, do you think you could give me a hoof?" Spike let out an exasperated groan.

"Twilight, come ON! You've been through every book in here like three times already!"

"What's goin' on, Twilight?" asked Rainbow Dash.



"I've got about an hour now to figure out something about dimensional transportation magic!" said Twilight, pulling another book off the pile of books she'd already checked.

"Dimensional transportation magic?" echoed Rainbow Dash. "Have you been getting into the Neighponese comics again?" Before Twilight had time to refuse to respond, however, the door opened again. This time, Rarity stood at the entrance.

"Twilight...my conscience has gotten the better of me," she said in a concerned tone of voice, trotting over to the ever-growing pile of books.

"Rarity! What are you doing here?" said Twilight, dropping the book she was looking through in surprise.

"I'm here to make sure you're alright!" Rarity answered.

"Get out of here now, before she puts you to work too!" shouted Spike.

"What in the world are you going on about?" Rarity asked, concerned, as she walked toward Twilight's massive collection of books. Twilight lifted her book back off the floor and continued to flip through it.

"Look, if you're not going to help me find the information I'm looking for, then get out of here and let me look by myself!"

"Again, what are you going on about?" asked Rarity, concerned and frustrated at the same time.

"*I don't know!*" screamed Twilight, hurling her book at the far wall. Rainbow Dash and Rarity both reared backwards in shock at her sudden outburst. "I don't know the first thing about dimensional transportation magic! I don't know how to open a portal into another dimension, and I don't know how to fix one that's not working! I just know that I have to find out about it in less than an hour, or else Pinkie Pie is going to be killed! Now are you going to help me or not?!"

"WHAT?!" shouted Spike, Rainbow Dash and Rarity in unison. A look of horror crossed Twilight's face, and she covered her mouth with her hoof.

"Oh, no...now you're all going to want to get involved..." she said quietly.

"Of course we're gonna get involved!" said Dash, flying over to the pile of books and perching on top of it. "Pinkie Pie's life is at stake! We've got to save her!"

"Save her? No! You can't! If you try to rescue her, that monster will kill her right then! And then he'll kill you!"

"Well, we've got to do SOMETHING!" said Spike, clearly panicked.

"If you want to do something, then help me look through these books!" said Twilight, grabbing yet another book off the pile.

"No, no, *no!*" shouted Dash, leaping off the pile of books. "Pinkie Pie's *life* is in danger! I'm not just going to sit on my flanks trying to appease a kidnapper! I'm going after her!"

"Dash, wait!" Twilight shouted. But it was too late. Dash had already flown out the door.

"We've got to stop her before she gets to Sugarcube Corner!" screamed Twilight. She charged over to the center of the room, where Spike was standing. She knocked him into the air with her head as she dashed past him, propelling him into the air and onto her back. Without breaking stride, she galloped out the front door after Dash. Rarity was left standing in the library in shock. She didn't know what was going on. In her stunned stupor, she noticed something strange sitting on one of the nearby tables.

*...Is that the helmet from earlier?* she thought to herself, leaning closer to investigate. It was, in fact, the Tyrant's Helm that Rarity had tested her Noteworthy Charm on. In an instant, all the pieces fit together. The hat belonged to the kidnapper. That must have been why Twilight had needed it.

*Oh, no...if that's the case, then the kidnapper is going to want it back!* thought Rarity. She magically lifted the helmet off the table and suspended it in midair beside her. Having done this, she charged out the door after Twilight and Rainbow Dash.

---

Oblivious to all of this, the Soldier and Pinkie Pie were sitting on crates, still wearing their robot costumes, eating cupcakes.

"I just cannot get over how good these things are," the Soldier said, brushing a few stray crumbs off his lapel. "I've never touched an oven in my life, but I think I may need to take it up after this."

"I know! The Cakes are amazing bakers, but their cupcakes are just out of this world!" said Pinkie. The Soldier said nothing. Instead he stared off into the distance. His face looked as though he'd just smelled something sour.

"What's the matter, Soldier?" she asked, cheerful as ever. The Soldier stood up slowly.

"Pinkie..." he said, walking to the center of the basement, "do you hear a high-pitched whistling noise?" Pinkie tilted her head to the side, listening closely.

"...Now that you mention it," she answered, hopping off the crate she was sitting on, "yeah, I do!"

"...That almost sounds like..." At that instant, the Soldier happened to glance at the window, and spotted a multicolored blur speeding straight toward it.

"INCOMING!"

Everything seemed to move in slow-motion after that. The window shattered, and a blue missile shot into the room. Pinkie Pie shrieked. The blue missile whizzed over the Soldier's head—just barely—as he dove for the ground. It soared past where the Soldier had been standing, and slammed into the far wall just as the Soldier hit the ground.

The Soldier looked up. He looked over to the far wall where the missile had struck. There was a sizable crater in the wall, and a light blue winged pony with a rainbow-colored mane was lying dazed on the floor. The Soldier took a moment to take this situation in. After a few moments of silence, he began to laugh heartily.

"Ducking saves my life once again!" he said, getting to his feet and brushing himself off. "You would not believe how many times I've forgotten to duck!" Just then, the seemingly unconscious pony scrambled to her hooves, leapt into the air, and began to hover above the ground.

"I'm not going to let you hurt Pinkie Pie, you monster!" she shouted.

"Whoa—you're still alive?! You're not even unconscious after hitting that wall at Mach 1? YOU, despite appearances, are officially a badass."

"Shut up!" the pegasus shouted, swooping up to the Soldier. "If you've hurt a single hair in her mane," she continued, prodding the Soldier repeatedly with an indignant hoof, "I'll personally kick your—" Just then, a metallic clink sounded off throughout the room. The Soldier's look of shock matched Rainbow Dash's perfectly. He quickly looked down at his feet. A metallic ring was lying discarded at his feet. In that instant, the Soldier knew he would get to deliver a line he'd spent years of his life perfecting.

"NO, YOU FOOL! YOU'VE KILLED US ALL!" Moving faster than he thought possible, he yanked the now pinless grenade off of his chest and hurled it at the far wall. It bounced off the wall and into the open box of baking chocolate.

"Both of you, into the corner! NOW!" he bellowed. Before Rainbow Dash had time to react, the Soldier grabbed her outstretched hoof and flung her bodily into the opposite corner of the room. Pinkie Pie leapt into the corner after her. Once they were both there, the Soldier sprinted into the corner and threw his body against the two confused and terrified ponies.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE, GIRLS!" he bellowed, squeezing his eyes shut. A split second later, an explosion rocked the basement. Both Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash shrieked in terror.

---

Once the dust settled, the Soldier looked behind him to see the damage his grenade had done. As it turned out, there was surprisingly little—the box of baking chocolate had been demolished, a few crates had been overturned, and there was a very large scorch mark on the floor, but very little structural damage had been done, which had been the Soldier's biggest concern. The Soldier let out a huge sigh of relief. Then he stood up, grabbed Rainbow Dash by the scruff of the neck, and pulled her up to his eye level. She was a lot heavier than the Soldier thought she was going to be, and he let out a grunt of exertion as he hoisted her into the air. Rainbow Dash cried out in pain as she was lifted off the ground. She began to struggle violently, flapping her wings and legs around wildly.

"I hope you've learned a valuable lesson here today, young lady," he said sternly as he walked to the center of the room again. Rainbow Dash looked intimidated for a split second, then twisted her face back into a look of anger.

"And what would that be?" she said, remaining indignant despite having just barely escaped death.

*"Never screw around with live explosives!"*

"Oh, come on, Soldier!" Pinkie said cheerfully, hopping over to where the Soldier stood. "How was Rainbow

Dash supposed to know that thing was going to explode?"

"Wait, Soldier?" Dash blurted out, her eyes widening with surprise. "Pinkie, you know this guy?"

"Sure I do! We've been hanging out down here for the past three hours!" Pinkie Pie chirped, giving the Soldier a gentle nuzzle.

"We're on friendly terms now," the Soldier agreed.

"So...you're not going to kill her?" Dash asked.

"Turns out I couldn't, even if I wanted to," the Soldier answered, patting Pinkie Pie on the head with his free hand.

"Well, great!" chuckled Dash. "There's only one problem..." Suddenly, the door at the top of the stairs burst open.

"Let them go, you monster!"

## Chapter Seven: A Plan Forms

Twilight Sparkle charged down the streets of Ponyville, weaving with surprising grace through the crowd of ponies between her and Sugarcube Corner.

"Do you think they're going to be okay?" Spike asked, clutching at Twilight's mane for dear life.

"I don't know, Spike..." Twilight responded, obviously very scared. "I hope they are, but—" Just then, a massive explosion sounded off from somewhere beneath the street. Twilight skidded to a stop. A collective gasp sounded off over the town.

"That sounded like it came from the bakery!" shouted Spike, perhaps a bit too loudly.

"Twilight! What's happened?" Twilight whipped her head around to see Rarity barreling down the street towards her, with the helmet floating beside her.

"I don't know! I think Pinkie and Dash might be in serious trouble!"

"I suppose appeasing the kidnapper is out of the question now..." Rarity said, lowering her head with worry.

"That's why you brought the helmet? You thought it'd help appease the kidnapper?" asked Spike.

"Yes, exactly!" replied Rarity.

"There's no time for that! We've got to get into the basement, *now!*" shouted Twilight. She charged off towards the bakery, and Rarity after her.

---

"Well, great!" chuckled Dash. "There's only one problem..." Suddenly, the door at the top of the stairs burst open.

"Let them go, you monster!"

The Soldier, Pinkie, and Dash's heads whipped around to look at the door. Twilight Sparkle and Rarity were standing at the top of the stairs, glaring determinedly at the Soldier, ready to fight to defend their friends. Spike was glaring with similar determination from atop Twilight's back. Twilight's and Rarity's horns were glowing with a dark purple and pale blue aura, respectively. The sound of magic rang out over the room, but it sounded an octave higher than Merasmus's magic. But still, it was clearly magic.

"What have you done to Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, you ruffian?!" shouted Rarity.

"I just saved their lives!" shouted the Soldier.

"He just saved our lives!" shouted Pinkie Pie simultaneously. The two of them exchanged an odd glance. A few moments later, the two burst into laughter—the Soldier chuckling heartily while Pinkie giggled at his side.

"Huh?" was all Twilight could bring herself to say. The Soldier cleared his throat and stopped laughing.

"That explosion just now is what you were worried about, right?" the Soldier asked.

"Well, yeah..." Twilight responded, confused.

"That only happened because Rainbow Dash here accidentally knocked the pin out of one of my grenades. Complete accident. And both Pinkie and Dash are fine."

"Well...they..." Twilight looked down, shamefully.

"Why so glum, Twilight? ...Oh, wait. It's because I said if you didn't come alone, I'd kill Pinkie and whoever you brought with you, right?"

"What?!" blurted out Dash. "Twilight, why didn't you tell me that?!"

"I did tell you that!" Twilight shouted back.

"Relax, all of you. I'm not going to kill anybody." Pinkie cleared her throat and elbowed the Soldier's leg meaningfully.

"...Anypony," the Soldier corrected himself. "I'm not going to kill anypony."

"But you said you would—"

"I know I said I would. I can't. My weapons are designed not to work against anyone wearing the color red. And even if I could, I don't want to anymore. Pinkie and I are..." The Soldier hesitated. "...friends now. ...Psychotic outbreaks aside."

"Uh, hello? If you're not gonna kill me, then let go of me!" scoffed Rainbow Dash, crossing her front legs.

"Oh, right." The Soldier bent down and gently placed Rainbow Dash on the floor of the basement. Seconds later, she jumped back into the air and began hovering at about the Soldier's eye level.

"Okay. Now, then, Twilight, no, I'm not going to kill them. But I still want you to hold to your end of the bargain. We'll handle the easy part first. Did you bring my hat with you?" Twilight and Rarity appeared briefly horrified, and looked down at their hooves.

"...Is that a no?" the Soldier asked, crossing his arms.

"Well, there's good news and there's bad news," said Spike.

"The good news is, we did manage to get your hat back," said Twilight shamefully, not looking up.

"The bad news is..." Rarity sighed deeply. She lifted the hat from where she'd been concealing it behind her and levitated it into the basement. The Soldier stared at the helmet, his face conveying more shock with its blankness than any look of horror could have. Saying nothing, the Soldier stared at his hat and the tiny rainbow floating above it. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he removed the cardboard box from his head, dropped it to the ground beside

him, and looked up.

"The pony you got my hat back from...Rarity...where is she?" he asked softly. Rarity reared back, shocked. After a moment, she looked down again and sighed.

"I'm Rarity," she said regretfully. "I'm sorry...I didn't know the hat belonged to you. I—"

"Sorry?" the Soldier snapped. "Sorry?!" As quick as a flash, he reached out and snatched the hat out of midair. He held it up at eye level. And then he did something that no one could have expected: he wept.

"It's *beautiful!*" he said, tears welling up in his eyes. The Soldier received an odd look from everypony in the room.

"It's...what?" Rarity responded dumbly. The Soldier, meanwhile, was cradling the helmet gently in his arms and softly stroking it.

"It's *beautiful!*" he said again, tears of joy rolling down his face. "I've worked for RED for fifteen years now, and I've never even SEEN an Unusual, let alone WORN one!" Twilight and Rarity exchanged an odd look. Pinkie and Dash did the same.

"...So...you like it?" Rainbow Dash asked, more than a little confused.

"I love it! I can't thank you enough!" the Soldier practically cheered, gingerly placing the hat on his head. Rarity smiled awkwardly and looked up for a moment.

"Oh...well...it was nothing, really. Just a little practical application of magic." The smile suddenly vanished off the Soldier's face.

"Magic...right, that reminds me," he said, turning to Twilight. "Did you find out anything about dimensional transportation, Twilight?" Twilight winced and hesitated for a long moment.

"...No, nothing," she finally said, hanging her head. "It's too theoretical. There's no information on it anywhere in the library.

"Right." The Soldier sighed deeply. "Dammit... I was really hoping..." He slowly trailed off. "Is your...lizard there alright?" he asked. Twilight looked behind her. Spike was covering his mouth with his hands, and looked like he was about to throw up. Suddenly, he shot up into the air and belched. A plume of green flame shot out of his mouth. Before the Soldier's eyes, it began to contort and twist in midair. Within a few seconds, it had turned into a sheet of parchment rolled into a scroll. Twilight caught the parchment using her magic and unfurled it. She took a moment to read the letter. The Soldier, meanwhile, shot an odd look at Rainbow Dash.

"Does that...normally happen?" he asked.

"Yeah, Spike does that a lot. One of the perks of having a baby dragon as your personal assistant," Dash responded.

"Oh, no..." Twilight muttered, anxiety plain in her voice. "Just when you think the day can't get any worse..."

"What? What's happened?" asked Rarity.

"It's a letter from the princess," Twilight said. "There's...good news and bad news..."

---

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I sincerely apologize for taking so long to reply, but there is very little information available about dimensional transportation magic. The most I was able to find was an almost suspiciously detailed thesis by the late Dr. Quantum Leap. According to him, there is a way to open an inter-dimensional portal, but it's an incredibly draining technique which cannot be performed by anypony who doesn't have experience in the field. Not even you would be able to open a portal without direct instruction from him, and sadly, he died in the year 972. Therefore, your only option is to use the portal that's already open.

According to Dr. Leap, inter-dimensional portals will remain open indefinitely if left to their own devices, and cannot be closed by anypony except the pony who opened them. Dr. Leap believed that anypony could pass through the portals and back at will. However, he theorized that if somepony passed through a portal, there was what he referred to as a "cooling period" of three minutes and fifteen seconds. If somepony tried to pass through the portal during the cooling period, they would only be able to go back through the portal if they and whoever initialized the cooling period went through at the same time.

This, of course, is even more concerning. If your bipedal creature can't go back through the portal, this suggests that something else from its native dimension has been pulled through with it. The only way you will be able to send this creature home is by finding the other creature or creatures and sending them back through together. I am tempted to send somepony to assist you, perhaps authorizing a formal search party, but this would likely panic the population of Ponyville. Besides, you asked me not to send anypony, and I respect your wishes. However, if you do feel that you need assistance from the Equestrian military, do not hesitate to ask.

Your loving mentor,

Princess Celestia

---

"Well, that's bad," said Rainbow Dash, hovering in midair behind Twilight.

"I'll say!" chirped Pinkie.

"Where would we even start looking for creatures from another reality?" Rarity wondered aloud. The Soldier cast his mind back to when he was transported into Equestria.

"...About that," he said, raising his hand. "I didn't see anything coming through the portal with me." The ponies gave the Soldier a series of concerned looks. Twilight and Rarity began walking down the stairs, and Rainbow Dash hovered just overhead behind them.

"You didn't?" Twilight asked.

"No, I didn't. But I do know where we can start looking. We could go back to the portal. It's in that dark forest



on the outskirts of town. If I went in there, I could probably lead you to it so we can start looking for clues.”

“The...E-Everfree Forest?” Rarity stammered.

“...If that’s what it’s called, then yeah.”

“Well, that’s a start!” chirped Pinkie, hopping around the Soldier in a circle once before joining her group of friends. “Now we just need to find the other creature and get him back, too!”

“Well, before we do anything,” put in Rainbow Dash, “we need to get the Soldier here out of this basement so he can get back to the portal.”

“That might be a little bit of a problem,” the Soldier said. “I don’t think anybody...anypony in Ponyville has ever seen a human before. The princess is probably right—I probably would cause a panic. Is there a way to get me out of here without anybo—anypony seeing me?”

“I might be able to help with that,” Twilight said.

“What did you have in mind?” the Soldier asked.

“While I was looking for information, I found a spell that could turn a creature into an earth pony. If I use it on you, you’ll be able to blend into the crowd in Ponyville. It’s kind of a complicated spell, though...”

“Well, I don’t see that we have any other choice here,” the Soldier said. He stood looked up slightly, shut his eyes, and braced himself for impact. “Work your magic, Twilight.”

Twilight shut her eyes. Her horn began to glow softly. As it grew steadily brighter, beams of light began to snake around the Soldier’s body. Twilight grimaced with effort, and huge beads of sweat rolled down her forehead. Soon, the Soldier was completely enveloped in light. A dark blue ball of energy materialized between Twilight and the Soldier, sparking electricity. As Pinkie, Spike, Rainbow Dash and Rarity watched in awe and anxiety, a huge flash of light erupted from the ball of energy. The ponies and the Soldier were flung in opposite directions by the sudden blast, and for a long, long moment afterwards, no one could see anything...

## Chapter Eight: Meet Red Salvo

Twilight slowly picked herself up off the ground, coughing and sputtering. The explosion had demolished a nearby stack of empty crates, and now everypony was scattered around in a pile of broken wood and ponies. Around her, her friends were doing their best to disentangle themselves.

"Soldier? Are you okay?" Pinkie called out worriedly, glancing around the room.

"Arrrrgh..." came the Soldier's voice from behind a row of crates on the far end of the room. A dark, almost blood-red hoof reached out from behind them. Slowly, a stallion resembling a young workhorse crawled out. His short-cropped, tangled tail was the same shade of dark brown as his unshorn fetlocks. He wore a black cloth belt around his midsection to which a single grenade was affixed. Though there was a dark patch of unshaven fur on his face, his eyes and mane couldn't be seen; they were hidden under his Noteworthy bronze war helmet.

"I'm...not sure if it worked..." the ponified Soldier said.

"It worked, alright!" said Spike, climbing out of the pile of wood.

"It did?" the Soldier replied, confused. He pushed himself up off the ground and onto his hind legs. "How come I don't feel any different, then?" Suddenly, he lost his balance and collapsed back to the ground, letting out a cry of surprise. He failed to catch himself with his front hooves, and slammed into the ground hard.

"Ow..." he groaned. With his legs splayed out in front of him, he only now noticed that they were, in fact, legs as opposed to arms. "...Oh, I guess it did work."

"Wow! I'm impressed, Twilight! You got the face a lot better this time!" said Rarity, brushing the dust off of her coat. "He'll fit right in now!"

"Well, it wasn't exactly the same spell as last time," Twilight said, smiling humbly. "The one I used at the Gala would have worn off at midnight, and obviously, it was...less than convincing. But this is a more sophisticated spell. It should be permanent unless I lift it. So, yes, he should fit right in."

"You think I will?" the Soldier asked, hobbling unsteadily toward the group of ponies. "You don't notice anything...out of the ordinary about me?"

"I don't see anything!" chirped Pinkie, hopping out of the pile of rubble cheerfully as ever, Gummy clamped to her mane. "Now we can start looking for that other creature! C'mon, let's go get Applejack and Fluttershy!"

"First of all, we don't know there's only one of them, secondly, who?" the Soldier asked.

"Applejack and Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash said, hopping off the pile and trotting over to the bottom of the staircase. "They're two other friends of ours—the other two bearers of the Elements of Harmony."

"And who are the Elements of Harmony, again?" the Soldier asked, coming to a slow stop. "I know Pinkie's the Element of Laughter and Twilight's the Element of Magic, but who are the rest of them?"

"Well, I'm the Element of Loyalty," Dash said with a cocky grin, placing a single hoof on her chest.

"And I'm the Element of Generosity," Rarity added. "Fluttershy is the Element of Kindness, and Applejack is the Element of Honesty."

"Okay, I think I can remember that," the Soldier said. "Let's go, ladies." Suddenly, Rainbow jumped into the air again. She swooped in close to the Soldier and examined his left hind flank closely.

"Hey...gimme a few hours, will ya?" the Soldier said, chuckling at his own bad joke.

"Where's his cutie mark?" Dash asked.

"Oh, no...I thought that was going to happen," said Twilight, slapping her forehead with her right front hoof.

"Um...what's a cutie mark?" the Soldier asked. Pinkie Pie bounded back over to him.

"A cutie mark is a mark on your flank that represents your special talent!" she chirped.

"Ponies aren't born with them," Rarity said, walking up to the Soldier. "Once a young foal discovers his or her talent, then his or her cutie mark appears on his or her flank. What the mark actually is depends on the talent. For example, Pinkie's special talent is throwing parties and generally making ponies happy, so her cutie mark is three balloons." Pinkie turned to the side so that the Soldier could see her flank. Her flank bore the image of three balloons, two of them blue and one of them yellow. The Soldier looked around at the rest of the ponies. They also bore "cutie marks"—Rarity's of three blue diamonds, Dash's of a storm cloud shooting a rainbow-colored bolt of lightning, and Twilight's of a pink six-pronged star with several smaller stars around it.

"So...if I don't have a cutie mark, then people are going to think I'm completely useless?" the Soldier asked.

"No, that's not it at all!" said Twilight. "A foal without a cutie mark is still full of potential!"

"A foal, maybe," said Dash, crossing her front legs, "but what about a full-grown pony without a cutie mark?" There was an awkward silence.

"...You know what? I don't think it matters," the Soldier said, attempting a trot over to the staircase. "So long as no one asks about it, we should be fine. Let's just get those other two Element bearers and go." The Soldier mounted the staircase and promptly tripped over his own hooves, slamming his head into the stairs. He cried out in pain as his head hit the wooden steps, then slowly got to his hooves a few moments later.

"This is going to take some time to get used to," he grumbled.

"Okay, let's go!" Pinkie chirped. The rest of the ponies trotted out of the basement, but Pinkie remained behind for a moment. Before she left, she shook her head, and Gummy detached from her mane. "Gummy, you stay here and let the Cakes know where I've gone, okay?" The alligator blinked its eyes out of synchronization. "Great! See you when I get back!" With that, Pinkie hopped out of the basement.

---

The odd procession trotted through Town Square, trying not to draw attention to the Soldier. It wasn't

working. The Soldier felt like everyone was staring at him, and he didn't like it.

"So, where are we headed, again, Twilight?" the Soldier whispered.

"We're going to Sweet Apple Acres, remember?" Twilight whispered back. "It's Applejack's family's farm. We'll find her there, and then we'll head over to Fluttershy's."

"I just hope we can avoid any undue attention on the way over there," Rarity said nervously.

"Twilight! There you are!" The procession turned their heads to see where the voice was coming from. Rainbow Dash sighed in exasperation.

"You had to say it, didn't you, Rarity?" she grumbled. A light brown colt with a dark brown, spiky mane and an hourglass cutie mark trotted up to the group of ponies.

"I've been looking for you," he said with what sounded like a British accent, glancing nervously from side to side. "I just wanted to let you know, I might be a little late returning *Hoofhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*."

"That won't be a problem, Doctor," Twilight said awkwardly, trying to pull her group away, "but as it happens, I'm a little busy right now, and I really don't have time to chat."

"Well, at least introduce me to your friend here!" The group of ponies exchanged a series of alarmed looks.

"Um...I...I really don't—" Twilight began.

"Twilight, it's fine. It won't take long, after all," the Soldier interrupted, stepping out from the center of his tiny herd. "I'm...uh..." It wasn't until that moment that the Soldier realized he hadn't chosen an alias for himself. He commanded himself to think of something, *anything*, he could use as inspiration for a name. After what seemed like hours, the image of a critical rocket popped into his head.

"I'm...Red...uh...Salvo. Yeah, Red Salvo."

"Nice to meet you, Red Salvo," replied the mysterious stranger, extending his hoof. "I'm the Doctor."

"The...doctor of what?" the Soldier asked. This exchange was starting to sound eerily familiar, like something in a TV show the Scout had forced him to watch once.

"I earned my degree in craftsmanship," the Doctor answered. "I make clocks for a living, as you might have guessed."

"Oh! For a second, I thought you were going to say you were a time traveler." The Doctor gave the Soldier a quizzical look.

"...I'm sorry?" he said simply. The Soldier then realized that any references to the culture of his native dimension would be completely lost on the ponies. He resisted the urge to slap himself in the face and simply grimaced.

"Uh...never mind," he said nervously, taking the Doctor's hoof in his own. "Nice to meet you too, Doctor."

"You're not from around here, are you, Salvo?" the Doctor asked, tilting his head to the side.

"No, I'm from...uh...out of town. I was just stopping by to...uh...pay a...visit to Pinkie."

"Ah, I see," the Doctor responded, craning his head to get a better look at "Red Salvo". "I...couldn't help but notice that you don't seem to have a cutie mark..." he said awkwardly. The Soldier scoffed in annoyance.

"Oh, sure, you just *had* to bring *that* up, didn't you?" he groaned, rolling his eyes.

"O-okay! Now that we've all met, we really need to get going!" Twilight stammered quickly, shoving the Soldier away from the Doctor. "See you around, Doctor!" And just like that, the herd was lost in the crowd. Doctor was simply left standing there, confused.

"...Okay, bye..." he said to no one in particular.

---

"Red Salvo, huh?" Dash smirked as she flapped along behind the group.

"It was short notice, alright? That was the first thing I came up with."

"Well, we've got to stick with it now!" Pinkie chirped. "And I guess we should start calling you that, too, huh?"

"Yeah...for consistency," the Soldier agreed.

"And why'd you think he was a time traveler, anyway?" Dash asked.

"Oh, that's nothing. Just something I saw on TV once," the Soldier responded.

"What's TV?" Pinkie asked.

"Hush up, everyone," Twilight said to the herd before the Soldier had a chance to answer. "Just don't say anything else until we're out of town, and we'll be safe."

The team of ponies managed to make it to the main plaza of the town. The Soldier glanced around and observed Ponyville in the daylight. The procession was headed towards one of two stone bridges the Soldier could see. A large, circular building stood behind him which he didn't know the purpose of. Across the river the bridges spanned, he could see another circular building which looked much more eccentric.

"What's with the giant carousel?" he asked Pinkie, who was hopping merrily along beside him.

"That's Carousel Boutique!" Pinkie answered. "Rarity lives and works there!"

"Hm," the Soldier remarked. "What is it with you ponies living where you work?"

"GANGWAY!" Before anypony had time to react, the Soldier felt a sharp pain in his neck. He lost what unsteady footing he had, and went skidding across the pavilion.

"Oh, no..." murmured Twilight, horror evident on her face. The Soldier took no notice of her—he was still stunned from the assault of the mint-green unicorn who'd just run him over and nearly gored him.

"Omigosh, I'm so sorry! Are you alright?" she said as she disentangled herself from the Soldier, obvious regret in her eyes.

"Red Leader, Red Leader, I'm goin' down," moaned the Soldier as his eyes rotated quickly in opposite directions (not that anypony noticed them under his helmet).

"Lyra! Again?" came the voice of an annoyed woman...or rather, an annoyed mare. The Soldier's new friends looked on in horror as said cream-white earth mare began to help him up. "I'm sorry about her," she was saying. "She can be a little enthusiastic."

"That's not the word I would've used," the Soldier groaned. Now firmly on all fours again, he let out a relieved sigh. "That wasn't necessary...but thanks."

"No problem," the earth mare responded, smiling warmly. Then she turned back to the mint-green assailant and gave her a very stern glare. "Say you're sorry, Lyra," she commanded. "Lyra" gave the Soldier an awkward grin and chuckle.

"Sorry about that, mister," she said. "I wasn't looking where I was going." In response, the Soldier growled in frustration.

"It's fine," he snapped. He slowly and carefully raised one hoof to his neck and began rubbing the point where Lyra's horn had impacted it. "I'm gonna have one helluva shiner tomorrow, but I've had worse." It was then that his friends began to rush up to him.

"You okay, Red?" Dash asked, a rare hint of concern gracing her voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine, ladies," the Soldier answered. He attempted to trot back over to the group of ponies, only to lose his footing and fall flat on his face again. "Agh, dammit!" As his friends helped him to his feet, the two mares exchanged a worried look.

"How hard did you hit this guy?" the earth mare asked. The other mare didn't respond. She was simply staring at the Soldier. It was obvious that gears were turning in her head at an incredible rate. The other mare sighed and clapped her hoof to her face. "Oh, not again..." she groaned.

"We haven't met before, have we?" the unicorn said slowly. The Soldier, now on his hooves again, turned to face the unicorn as his friends looked on.

"No, I'm new in town," he said. "I'm an old friend of Pinkie's, here for a visit."

"Really now?" the mare asked, slowly trotting up to him. "That's odd. If an old friend of Pinkie's was coming here, I would've thought she'd throw a Welcome to Ponyville party. A big one, that everypony in Ponyville would've been invited to. Did I...miss the invitation?" The Soldier tried to come up with something to say to satisfy her, but Pinkie jumped into defend him—literally jumped between the Soldier and Lyra—before he had the chance.

"Well, of course I *would've* thrown a party, Lyra," she said, "but Mr. Salvo here isn't all that big on parties! He was an old member of my fellowship before he was excommunicated a few years ago, and he's still a little reluctant about extravagance." The Soldier donned a very confused look.

"Fellowship?" he echoed. Pinkie turned her head and gave the Soldier a "just go with it" look. "Uh, I mean, yeah! Fellowship, yes."

"I...see," Lyra said. "Though I can't help but notice that...hat of his."

"Well, he's not bound by their laws anymore, silly! He can have magical items if he wants them!"

"I suppose so," Lyra said, her voice distant.

*My God, Pinkie used to be Amish?* the Soldier thought. *This dimension is more similar to mine than I thought. I wonder what else we have in common.* As if in response to this thought, the earth mare quickly trotted up to Lyra.

"Er, Lyra?" she said, placing her hoof on Lyra's back. "Don't you think we should let Mr. Salvo go now? We have the...thing, at the place." Lyra turned to the mare and saw a pleading look in her eyes. However, there was also a smile which the Soldier knew he'd seen somewhere before. "You know...the *thing*...at the *place*," she added. Lyra stared into the earth mare's eyes for a moment, then sighed and returned her smile in full.

"Oh, you know I can't argue with you, Bonnie," she said. And before the Soldier knew what was happening, Lyra swooped in and kissed the other mare. It only lasted an instant, but it was enough. The two of them trotted off toward the circular building the Soldier noticed earlier. Neither mare looked back. Once they were gone, the assembled Elements let out large sighs of relief.

"That was too close," Twilight said. "Okay, let's get out of here." The Elements began trotting off back toward the bridge they'd been headed toward, only to stop a few moments later and look back.

"Salvo? You comin'?" Spike asked. The Soldier didn't answer. In light of this particular revelation, the pain in his neck was completely forgotten. He was completely paralyzed. His jaw hung open loosely, and his legs wobbled like they were about to snap in two. Eventually, Pinkie hopped back up to him.

"Salvo? Are you okay?" she asked. The Soldier's hind legs gave out, and he fell onto his haunches.

"I need a freakin' drink," he murmured.

---

"Honey, there's something on your mind, isn't there?" the cream-colored candymaker asked her marefriend. Lyra trotted slowly to the exterior wall of Town Hall. Facing the wall, she began to speak.

"Bon Bon," she said, "something is afoot."

"You mean ahoof, dear," Bon Bon answered.

"No, Bon Bon. I do, in fact, mean afoot. Salvo, whoever he really is, is not who he wants us to believe he is.

First of all, when Pinkie was explaining who he was, he answered like he didn't know what she was talking about. Pinkie was lying about that, and she didn't tell him the lie first. So obviously, he wants to conceal his true identity."

"Oh, Lyra..." Bon Bon said, already starting to see where Lyra was going with this.

"And then there's how he spoke," Lyra said, turning around slowly. "He's going to have one helluva shiner? I don't know what either of those words mean, but they're not words an excommunicated Maneonite would use, that's for sure."

"Lyra, please, not in front of all these people..."

"And don't forget how unsteady he seemed. It was like watching a toddler walk for the first time. Then there's that strange hat he was wearing, the belt around his chest, and oh yeah, did I mention *he had no cutie mark*?! Therefore, it is my belief..." Lyra grinned an ecstatic grin. "...that that pony is not a pony at all! No, Bon Bon, Red Salvo..." Suddenly, Lyra pushed herself onto her hind legs. Her momentum carried her to an upright position, where she managed to balance herself against the wall of the Town Hall. Grinning the grin of a madmare, she exclaimed at the top of her lungs: "IS A HUMAN!"

"Dear, please! You're making a scene!" Bon Bon exclaimed, rushing up to Lyra and pulling her onto her forehooves again.

"No, really, I'm being serious here!" Lyra cried, oblivious to the odd looks she was receiving. "I really do think he is! Why else would they have wanted to get him out of town so quickly?"

"But Lyra, you remember last time, don't you?" Lyra grimaced, then regained her determined grin.

"That was different!" she said. "She was *trying* to make me believe she was a human just to mess with my head!"

"And it worked!"

"This time will be different! I'll prove it! I'll prove he's a human!" Bon Bon sighed and looked down.

"Look, Lyra," she said, "I respect your fascination with humans, but if you're going to keep dragging random ponies into it like this, it's going to..." Bon Bon looked up and stopped in her tracks. Lyra was gone. Bon Bon stood still for a moment, then sighed heavily.

"Oh, not again..." she groaned.