

Chapter 1 – Braeburn.

It's bleedin' hot in Agrabay, and that's the truth.

When I woke up, I was already sweating enough to make an oasis and a half. I felt like my face felt when I drooled in my sleep, only all over. My mane was a tangled bird's nest, and I really felt no need to get out of bed. Getting out of bed would require exertion, exertion would make me sweat even more, and my stomach was twisted up enough already. Moving might violently dislodge something, I felt. Why'd I eat so much last night, I thought, and why is it still alive? Somepony politely knocked on my wagon's door. I mumbled for Big Mac to get it. I needed some salt, I thought. Actually, what I needed was a dunking in some water and a nice soothing breakfast, but I felt like having some salt. Hair of the dog that bit you, right? Right.

Somepony knocked on the door, louder. "Big Mac, get the door already!" C'mon, Brae. Focus on tonight. Big night tonight, oh yes, big night. I'd been studying this part for months, ever since Trix got that letter from the Sultana of Agrabay. And the last thing I needed was to get sick. This – as Trix was very fond of reminding me at the drop of a hat – was the break of our lives. Years spent on the road, performing from city to city, cementing our reputation as the finest players in the world and beyond it, all culminating tonight in the grandest performance the Twilight Carnival would ever display. This would be it.

The knocking became a thunderclap in my ears, and I rolled over in bed. "Big Mac!" He was gone. Long gone, from the looks of his bed. Just how late had I slept in, anyway?

"Braeburn! Open up before I decide to turn your hair green!" I stumbled over to the door, wincing at the way my stomach flip-flopped. "Braeeeeeburn!"

I wrenched the door open. "Well, good morning to you, Trix." It was a good thing that I knew that voice, because I really couldn't see anything other than the light stabbing my eyes.

Celestia-in-her-court, that hurt like blazes. "You want something?"

"You look awful, Braeburn." It wasn't a pitying query, but an irritated statement. It's entirely your fault, that voice said, and you're going to pay for it.

"Give me two shakes and a bucket and I won't look nearly so bad, sister. Trust me on this one."

She rolled her eyes. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has been invited to eat breakfast with our employer," she said, not betraying even a hint of nervousness, "And our leading ponies were invited to come with her. However, it looks like one of them is a lazy bum who will not be joining us!"

"Trixie, I..."

"Did I hire you to sleep in bed all day, or did I hire you to act? Hmmm? Do you want to go back to where I found you? Unemployed? In Kazcatstan?"

"Just... I'll be fresh by breakfast. Give me time."

She sniffed haughtily, and then made a face suggesting that she regretted doing that right next to sweaty ol' me. "Fine. I'll send Rarity's servant to fetch you once you're presentable. Don't you

dare do anything else this morning." She turned, striding away, leaving me to blink in the sunlight. She's a mighty fine mare, really. Just a bit high-strung. And who wouldn't be in such a fine band of actors? You need to be a bit crazy to believe yourself an actor, after all.

I stretched my legs across the palace courtyard, going to fetch some water from the river that cut across our strange encampment. Once I had some water in a bucket, I washed my face and mane, scrubbing some of the sweat and dirt off by hoof. It made me shiver, but in a good way. Blast this heat. I caught a glimpse of my reflection - I didn't need to get my coat trimmed yet, and those mare-killing eyes were still in business. I actually looked better than I felt.

Around the time I finished grooming, Spike showed up. He was wearing one of those silly turbans that were so popular in Agrabay, and carrying my hat in his claws. "Hey, Braeburn." He seemed mighty plum about something, so I gave him a grin.

"Morning, lil' buddy! All's right in the world, I hope?"

"Eh." He passed me my hat, which I donned carefully, tucking some of my wet mane beneath it. I'd got that hat in Coltstantinople, and it was a hat like me - brown, practical while still being stylish, a bit rough around the edges but still good. "It's all right."

"You didn't get into another fight with Trix, did you?"

"No. Well, yes. Maybe." He looked away from me, and I couldn't help but shake my head. The kid was incorrigible, no doubt about it. He just couldn't stop asking - please, Trixie, let me play the hero this time, I know I can do it. Let me play the villain, let me do anything other than the pet.

"One of these days, Spike, you'll get it. I know you've got the lines down pat, but - well, this is royalty, you see, and they want to see the best, and today that's me. Tomorrow, I'm sure it'll be you. Now why don't you show me where breakfast is? I'm right starving!"

He gave me a wan little smile. He's a good kid, honest, and I don't think there's anywhere else in the world he'd be happier. He's a true show-beast, and that's the plum truth.

We passed plenty of guards on our way up into the shining-white palace, Spike and I did. After the third patrol passed us with suspicious eyes, I turned to Spike. "Hey, why's everything so tight around here? I mean, security-wise. You'd think they were at war." Spike didn't answer right away, just to keep up appearances, but we both knew that if there were loose lips anywhere in this palace, Spike would have heard them. He glanced back and forward, then waved me close - closer - closer still. In retrospect, this was not the best idea, as it left me blind to the larger world around me, including the guards we were approaching.

"Well... the Sultana has been revising her inheritance, or so I've heard. If anyone was to overthrow her before the revision was complete, it would throw Equestria into chaos. And today, with a motley band of actors here..."

"Can't exactly blame her for being cautious. Still, what would we measly actors be able to do?"

Maybe one of the sword-dancers might be suspect, but what would I do? Walk up to Celestia and murder her?"

And that's when my world turned upside-down and became rather painful.

"An admission, huh? I knew we couldn't trust you carny scum!"

I would have complained about the rather insulting name - even barbarians don't use that name for us anymore, at least while we're in earshot - but it's hard when somepony's practically got their foreleg in your throat. I settled for gasping in pain.

Mama always told me that when I died, it'd be because I'd finally been too loud when I should have been listening. Well, Mama, you were nearly right. Hope you're happy.

I was dragged upright, and I caught a glimpse of Spike being picked up by a second guard-pony out of the corner of my eye. "And now to present this evil-doer to the queen!" For a moment, my ears refused to believe themselves. Surely, I'd been wrong. I hadn't just been bushwacked by a mare, right?

Well, I said to myself, this is embarrassing. I would have said it out loud, but I wasn't in a position to say much at all. So much for being a strong, manly stallion.

The next couple of rooms were rather painful to be dragged through; I'd have an exact number, but it was all a blur. I'd like to say that she got a few of the guards to grab my arms and legs so that she could drag me through them, but I'm not a liar. She had strength in those wiry limbs of hers, enough that I'd have a hard time betting in a contest between her and Big Mac.

I would describe the rooms, but they were a painful blur. I think somewhere down the line I struggled and got her teeth in my mane. It hurt like blazes, and lost me my hat, to boot. Now that was just the worst thing that could possibly happen, and I would have scrambled back for it, except somepony's teeth were dragging me forward, and I valued my mane too much to risk having it half-ripped from my head.

And then I was unceremoniously dumped to the stone floor, and had a hoof driven into my back, pinning me there like a worm stuck on a hook. "Your Majesty! These pathetic foals declared their intent to assassinate the royal personage within our earshot, and so we detained them! Shall we have them thrown into the dungeons, or will you be incinerating them immediately?" She sounded like someone reciting lines that she didn't quite understand, looking to impress, other than the incineration bit.

There was a tense moment, in which I was praying hard for the dungeons, and then a shrill and indignant yell met my ears. "You will release the great and powerful Trixie's star actor, you blithering idiots! If he's been hurt, then we'll have to cancel our entire production!"

"Oh, Spike, what have you gotten into this time-" The kid was lucky to have somepony like

Rarity on his side. I wished I had somepony like that - but at the time, I just said to myself, Trix will do. She's no princess, but she'll back me up.

"So, you're the ringleader, eh? Well, then, seize her, too!"

"Rainbow Dash."

"And while you're at it, seize the other unicorn, too! They must all be in on it! In fact, go and arrest everypony outside-"

"Rainbow Dash, you will *stand down*." That voice, if you'll excuse the worn-out phrase, brooked no disagreement. That was a voice that was used to being obeyed, and didn't like to have to give orders. There was only one pony who could be in the room who could speak like that. Oh, dear.

"But, but... he said he was going to murder you!"

"It was a joke!" I said with as much breath as I could muster. "We actors do that, you know!"

"Well, how was I supposed to know that? If you say stupid things like that, whose fault is it if you get arrested?"

"Rainbow Dash," the sultana said, "Please apologize to our guest. His joke may have been ill-timed and rather inappropriate, but it was only that."

The offending hoof in the small of my back was removed, and I was allowed to scramble upright. I turned to see the mere slip of a filly who'd wrestled me down. I felt even more pathetic comparing myself to her. On one side - handsome, brawny stallion. On the other - skinny, boyish filly.

"I'm... you shouldn't have said that," she said, looking away from me.

"Rainbow Dash." Celestia's voice carried a stern edge, and the guard-pony's legs quaked.

"I may have been a bit rougher than I should have been." Celestia didn't even need to say anything this time. I could almost feel her glare lying hot on my mane, and Rainbow Dash's wings trembled.

"My apologies! Will not happen again, my lord! Please forgive your humble servant, my lord!"

She saluted, and then turned, marching stiffly away. I think she was tearing up there at the end.

Gal-darn it, now I just felt even worse.

"You forgot his hat!" Spike added from where he sat next to me. I winced. Kid, why'd you have to open your mouth? I saw the pegasus's wings stiffen, and she called back without turning, "It will be retrieved, sir! Please accept a temporary substitute, sir!" She took the golden wreath from her head, tossing it back to me without turning. You had to hand it to her - it landed right on my head. That took some skill.

"Oh, oh dear, oh my," someone said from right next to me. As Rarity started fussing over Spike, I turned to see who'd been addressing me. She was a cream-colored pegasus, wearing a rather silly rectangular hat. If there's one thing that Celestia's lacking, it's a good haberdashery. "Are you all right? I'm so sorry, you'll have to forgive us for this horrible, horrible breach in protocol, I hope you're not hurt, do you want to have her executed?"

You could have knocked me down with one of her feathers. The way she said it, so softly, as if it

were just an afterthought she'd had – who was this, anyway? "No! I mean, she was just doing her job, I wouldn't want to see somepony punished for that."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, I just thought that you might want..." Her voice trailed off, and she glanced down at my hooves ashamedly. She backed away, mumbling incoherently. There was a quiet, awkward moment, where I felt even more ashamed than before. I'd managed to upset two fillies already, and it was only breakfast-time. There's a time when a pony just feels like a heel, you know?

"So, now may I get to know this rakish young stallion, Trixie?" Celestia's voice was serene, as if nothing had happened, and I tugged at my vest self-consciously. Was I presentable? Had that drag through the palace ruined my mane? What standards were applicable when talking to a living goddess? There comes a time when a young stallion just has to grin and hope his natural charisma shines through, so I did, bowing to Celestia.

Trxie coughed. "Right!" She switched smoothly from her shocked voice to her actor's voice.

"This is Braeburn, formerly of the Appleutian mountains, one of the finest actors to ever come out of that land. He's fought Mercutio's duel, fought giants as Ali Babe, hypnotized vile blackguards as Manedrake the Magician, and won a thousand hearts and the love of a unicorn as Prince Lir, and tonight, he will be playing the part of the hero for your delight."

"He looks just like I'd imagined," came a quiet voice from next to Celestia. I looked at the mare seated there, getting my first glimpse of the Princess Luna. Well, only a glimpse, because she was hidden behind purple-and-silver veils, but that glimpse of her was enough. B'sun-and-moon, the stallion who'd get her hoof in marriage tonight would be the luckiest in the world. "I mean, like a hero would look. Isn't that how you'd imagine Mercutio to look, or Sinbad?"

"Well, it's good to meet you, Braeburn," said the unicorn sitting at Celestia's left side, rather hurriedly. Was that a hint of jealousy I heard? He had on a dark purple coat and a rich embroidered jacket, and a small crown set with those purple gem things. "Why don't you take a seat? My name's Twilit Glory, and these here are - as you probably know - the Sultana Celestia and the Princess Luna, our mutual hosts."

"Morning, all," I said amicably, taking a seat. I took it from Rarity's appalled glare that treating royalty like your bunkmates wasn't exactly the way things worked around here, but blame it all, I was hungry now. "Hope you don't mind if I start digging in."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," the Sultana said mildly, and we took to our food. It was mostly too rich for me - pastries filled with sweet jam, exotic truffles, pickled eels, spiced wine - so I stuck to the fresh fruit. I suppose that royalty could afford to eat like this every day, but it just overwhelmed poor ol' me. So I just sat back and watched. Funny thing for me to do, really. But it was really a funny kind of morning, so why not?

There, Rarity chatting away with the princess. I tried not to stare at either of them. There's a line, you see, and they weren't in my cards, not in this lifetime. The prince, though, he was more their type - though he did seem rather focused on his food, rather than the company. Shame. You never

know when a table like this could be set again, you know. Four motley actors and three royal personages - that's the kind of table to die for, you know?

And Trixie, chatting up the Sultana, telling her all about that battle with the Ursa Major. (The real truth of it is, we tricked it into chasing after a hot-air balloon. Saved our skins, it did.) I doubt the Ursa would leave a scratch on Celestia's hide, though - and yet Trixie was bringing it up like she did it with both forelegs tied behind her back. Either the sultana's polite, or real gullible, from the way she was paying such close attention.

And then there was the little shy pony, going around making sure everypony's glass was filled, nearly having a nervous breakdown every time Celestia coughed, trying her hardest to blend in with the carpet. She looked up at me once, catching me in the act of watching her. She kind of winked at me, and I winked back. Cute, but... I couldn't get that eerie calm in her voice out of my head.

And me and Spike, sitting together. Me all scratched up and messy, him still impeccable - but then again, what can get scales dirty? Beneath that, though, we were brothers, both of us out of our league in such opulent surroundings.

So we ate, and laughed, and minded our manners as best we could, we actors being rather uncouth hooligans more suited for a bazaar's square than a royal dining-hall in our natural form, and nothing of true import (other than that one wink) happened for a while. Well, until a guards-pony approached me, coughing politely to catch my attention. "My lord? There's somepony who wishes to see you outside."

"Who?" I asked, realizing who it was just as I said it. "Never mind - I'll come out, I'll come, don't worry. Just give me a moment, please." I looked over to Trixie. "I'll be back, so don't y'all panic over me."

That rainbow-haired guards-pony - Rainbow Dash, that was her name - was waiting for me in the hall outside, her purple eyes staring defiantly at me. She held out my hat wordlessly.

"Thank you kindly," I said, trying to be polite. No use repaying ill for ill, as Granma once told me. If somepony knocks you into a ditch, you don't spit in their food, or whisper behind their back, or knock them down the next chance you get.

That was the wrong thing to say, however. Now she really was tearing up. She continued to hold out the hat, motionless, silently daring me to take it from her. I stood there like a fool, trying to figure out what to do. She shook the hat slightly, and I removed her hat from my head, holding it out in return.

There was a moment where we stood there, each waiting for the other to take their hat back first. Finally, I caved, setting down her hat and taking mine in my teeth, tossing it up with a well-practiced twist of the head. It landed square on my head, just as perfectly as she'd got her wreath on mine. She picked hers up, turned to fly away. "Hey, wait a sec," I said, reaching out - and she turned on me faster than a dragon scenting a gem-mine.

"What? Do you want to make me apologize again? Tell me I'm a fool? What do you want?" I took a breath – sometimes paying good back for ill was harder than it looked.

"I'm sorry."

She looked confused for a moment, and then glared at me suspiciously. "What?"

"I just wanted to apologize, Dash. It was my fault for being a gal-darn idiot, making jokes like that. I should be the one apologizing for shaming you in front of royalty. I mean, if our positions were reversed, I'd be right proper ticked at you right now, and no mistake. In fact, I'd probably have gone and drowned my sorrows in salt, because there are some things that the heart can't take, and an embarrassment like that is one of them, I feel bad enough when I forget a line on stage in front of Trixie, and she's not even a god in pony form, and it's just a slip of memory rather than grabbing an honored guest and dragging them off, which I suppose is pretty bad in and of itself without the additional shame of having to go retrieve their hat – I mean, I would have gone to get it myself if Spike hadn't said anything, and it made me feel pretty low that you had to have your mistake rubbed in like that, and so I guess really it's me who should be apologizing to you because even though I'll heal up quick something like that, as they say, cuts deeper than mere skin and penetrates the armor of the heart – Manedrake said that, you know, and-"

"Braebuuuuurn!" The little pegasus was right up in my face now, and I backed away sheepishly. I had a feeling that it wasn't the first time she'd tried to get my attention.

"Er, yes, Rainbow Dash?" She kept her stern expression for a moment, and then smiled.

"I accept your apology." And like that, she was off. I stood there for a moment longer, watching her trot off happily. I don't know why, but Luna herself couldn't have moved my eyes. It had nothing to do with the way her hips swayed, honest-to-Celestia.

"She liiiiikes you, you know!" I near jumped out of my skin. A pink pony with a crazy mane was right up next to me, wearing an ill-fitting guardsman's outfit. "You should give her a kiss, because that's how these stories always end!"

"What? I don't- I mean, that'd be-" I stammered, before snapping back, "What d'you think you're on, anyway?"

"Happiness! Happiness and joy and wishes and those fancy little tarts that they have here! And I think that you two would look soooo cute together!" As if she didn't have room for more than one thought in her head, she immediately gasped and squeaked out, "Hey, watch this!" She ducked inside the armor, all her limbs vanishing inside the breastplate, and the armor crumpled to the ground.

After a moment, I nudged the armor. It rolled on the floor, empty. I looked inside the breastplate, trying to figure out where she'd gone. Was... was she an evil spirit of some sort, come to tempt me into lust? I'd always laughed at the campfire tales of djinn and ghouls that haunted the desert here, but sometimes a pony's just got to believe his eyes.

Just before I could panic completely, I heard a small cough by my shoulder, and I turned to see that small, adorable head beneath the rectangular hat. "Could I speak with you for a moment? That is, if it isn't a bother, if you really wouldn't mind, I can wait..."

"Sure thing." Truth be told, I just wanted things to be normal for a moment. And this shy little thing was more normal than vanishing fillies and that mysterious feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Can you do me a favor, sir? I mean, if it's not too much to ask of you, I know how busy you actors are, and I don't want to interrupt the preparations for the play at all..."

"Certainly, my dear," I said with a flourish. "Braeburn is at your service."

"This is so embarrassing," she said, "But I had a present that I was going to give the Prince of Colcutta, and I forgot that I was going to give it to him the last time I visited his quarters. I just forget things, you know, mind like something with a lot of holes in it. It must still be there, and I'd like to present it to him tonight, so could you- before he has a chance to go back and find it?"

"Sure thing, sugarcube. What's it look like?"

"Um, it's, um, bronzeware. Priceless antique lamp. And I really do want to give it to him tonight. If that's not too much trouble, that is."

"No trouble at all, though I don't think the guards will think the same thing when they see me coming," I said, half-jokingly.

"Oh! Well, just tell them that Grand Vizier Fluttershy sent you, and they'll be good. Thank you sooo much, Sir Braeburn. You're... nice."

We returned to the table. Fluttershy immediately dashed off to get another bottle of spiced wine, and I fetched another few pieces of fruit so I could fill my stomach before I went off and did that little errand for Fluttershy.

Breakfast slowly wound to a close, as we finally ran out of food and conversational topics, and I rose from the table first. "If you'll excuse me, gentleponies, I have some business to take care of. But thank you for your hospitality, and be sure to be in the audience tonight."

Celestia laughed politely. "Oh, I will be there, don't worry. I'll be eagerly awaiting your performance."

I stepped outside the room as Trixie and Rarity rose as well. I reached up, pushing back my hat, and tousled my mane a bit. Well, that had gone even better than I could have hoped. The patrons were nice, if a bit eccentric, and I had the chance to help out a pretty mare; I'd made my peace with that intriguing filly, too. Yes, Braeburn, I said to myself, things are going your way today.

"Braeburn!" Trixie caught up with me. "We need to go over the script again."

"What?" I said, and she rolled her eyes.

"Celestia – of course, you weren't there, having vanished most impolitely – suggested that we incorporate some of her servants into the play. Now we need to go over the script and see who we can add!"

"That... doesn't sound like a good idea, to be honest."

"Well, are you the intelligent, beautiful mare who runs this troupe?" She asked, before pressing on to make sure I didn't take that for a real question. "Oh, no, you're not. That would be me. So we're going to do it."

"All right – but can I do something first?"

"No, certainly not. Knowing you, you'll end up in the dungeons if I let you out of my sight for five minutes, if you don't find a place to take a nap first. You've got rehearsing to do!"

Now, you might not know that much about me, but I never break my word. Ever. That's something for ponies who aren't Braeburn. So, obviously, I was caught in a bit of a conundrum there. My eyes lit upon Spike, who was trailing them, and my brain halted in its tracks, finding the solution to my dilemma.

"Hey, Spike. Come here a moment." I gestured him over conspiratorially, and he trotted over with a grin.

"Yeah, Braeburn?"

"Listen - I've got to go with Trixie and mess around with the script to make unnecessary changes for who knows how long, but I promised that grand vizier that I'd go fetch something for her." Spike nodded. He'd been around me long enough that he immediately saw the dilemma that I was in. "So I need you to go run it for me."

His little chest puffed out in pride. "Sure thing, Braeburn!"

"Okay. It's a bronzeware antique, a lamp, up in the prince's quarters. It's her gift to him for tonight, and she accidentally left it in there. I'm sure you could bring it back to her in one piece, so go ahead and fetch it, would you?"

"Okay!"

"Thanks, lil' buddy. I'll see if I can get Rarity to give you a few extra gems tonight after the performance, okay?" He dashed off, and I called after him, "Just tell anypony who stops you that Fluttershy sent you!"

Trixie called back to me, "Are you coming, Braeburn? Hurry up!"

I sighed. Some days were just ups and downs, all over the place. But I didn't feel so hot anymore, and I think there was a bit of a spring in my step as I hurried after Trixie. And it had nothing to do with a little rainbow-haired filly, not at all.

Exit Braeburn, stage left.

I have a horrible talent for getting out of doing work.

It was near midday, and I was watching Applebloom and Scootaloo prepare the shadow-puppets for the upcoming performance. They were young, true, but they had a talent for this kind of puppetry. Not enough for a cutie-mark, sadly, but until the day they found their talent, puppetry would do well enough for them. The puppets they used were ungainly things, ugly and black, when they were all folded up, but when the two young fillies unfolded them and took their places behind the stage, they were capable of making such wonders, such terrors, as would shock an audience or drive them to awed silence. For this performance, they had out the forty demons of the Maregreb sorcerer who would be summoned to trouble the hero, and the awful genie who would grant the hero his three wishes. I'd seen both of the sets before, and they never ceased to amaze me.

I was half-waiting for Trixie to show up and berate me, to tell the truth – there's only so many times you can go over the reveal in the second act, after all, and watching these earnest young fillies in the shade seemed much better to me than giving my lungs another go at it on stage, which was why I was hiding back behind the stage rather than being up on it. But my expectations were shattered by something I hadn't expected at all: the sound of fillies squealing in glee. I glanced at the shadow puppeteers, who looked as confused as I was. "Uh, Applebloom? That wasn't you, was it?"

"Nope, Brae, it sure weren't," Applebloom said, shaking her head.

"And that was an excited young filly I just heard, wasn't it? Pretty sure it was. Maybe one that just got her hands on a fruit-tart?"

"Who goes nuts over a tart?" Scootaloo asked, looking at me like I was an idiot.

"Don't make me answer that." I stretched my legs, shaking out my mane for a moment. "I'll be back in a moment."

"You watch us too long," they replied cheerfully, "And she'll kick you off the stage!"

I ambled up onto the stage, to where I could see a growing crowd near the seats. I couldn't quite see what they were so interested in, but from the sounds they were making I guessed it was something right adorable. What surprised me was that I could see Rarity there, and Trix, as well as a good handful of our stage-mares. And they don't usually make noises like that, despite what you may have heard about us actor-types.

As I got closer, I could hear somepony reciting lines from the play. "-Ah, beautiful Badroulbador, I was afraid that you would reject me if you knew that I was but a simple beggar's-foal from Bayjing. I thought you wanted to see a prince, dressed in these finest of clothes, with a thousand servants at my beck and call – and so I was, all for you." Now, the funny thing about those lines was, they were mine. My first thought was that some wise-colt had decided to mock my acting, but when I got closer, I realized that whoever was saying the lines

was doing them right and earnest.

Besides, if he'd been mocking my acting, he'd have delivered the lines with the cheesiest smile possible and accentuated every other drawn-out word. I know my faults, and so does Trix, but the crowd loves me anyway. I think it's because everypony doesn't want to see some fool up on the stage, confused and quiet, but a loud and magnificent hero. I do my best to provide. No, this young colt was playing it completely straight, doing his best to conjure up a tearful reunion with the princess, rather than a bold-yet-embarrassed apology.

Being a good young pony, I held back and waited for him to finish the speech. Mama didn't raise an uncouth boar, after all. Truth be told, I couldn't actually see him in the middle of the crowd, but I could hear him giving his best – and he was good, real good – and Rarity providing the princess's lines for him. It sounded just as smooth as when the two of us did that speech, and I'd been working on it for a good while now. But everypony's got to have their chance to shine, after all, so I waited until he gave that last, beautiful line. As he finished, the stage-mares burst into applause, pounding their hooves on the stage.

I pushed my way through the crowd to get a look-see at this youngster, coming up next to Trix. The youngster – and I was right, he was just a slip of a colt – was standing proud, blushing slightly under the weight of all those laudations. He wasn't someone I'd seen around before, though, so I guessed he must have been a courtier or suchlike, come to try his hand at the lines. I mean, I'd remember any colt with a coat so glossy purple, or such bright, spiked green hair. The only pony with that kind of hair that I knew was the troupe magician, "Doctor" Whooves, and his hair was that way only through the careful application of arcane jellies and greases. The colt's hair looked razor-thin and just as sharp.

I poked Trix in the side. "So who's this, then? He doesn't look like the devilishly handsome star actor of tonight's show," I said good-naturedly. "Mind introducing me?"

"Oh, this is Nails, the new star actor for tonight's performance," she said with a flourish.

The words didn't quite sound right in my brain-box. It sounded like she'd said he was the new star actor. "Come again?"

"Nails. He's critically acclaimed, you know – his mentor was none other than Lyra the Magnificent. And he traveled over seven days of scorching hot sands and circling vultures to come here!" I tried to ask her how he'd traveled over circling vultures, but she cut me off. "And now he's professed his life's goal: he wants to perform this role tonight before the Sultana, so he can live happily ever after. Isn't that just lovely?"

"Oh, yeah, fantastic, but I seem to recall you already having somepony doing the role? Hmmm? Somepony called Braeburn?"

"Don't tell me you're jealous of him, Brae! I thought you were better than that!"

Blood-n'-thunder, she was being loud again. Everypony was looking at us, even him. Especially

him.

"Trix, I-

"The Great and Powerful Trixie would like to remind you, you neigh-sayer, that the Great and Powerful Trixie does not like diminutives! How could someone like the Great and Powerful Trixie-" I know your name already, Trix- "Ever be diminished in her grandeur? How could you think of questioning me, hmmm? Have you suddenly become an expert in casting for a role? Just like you're an expert in napping and being overdramatic?"

"I'm overdramatic?" I asked, flabbergasted. Now that's just calling the kettle black. "Me? I'm not the one going around demanding that everyone call me the Great and Powerful Braeburn, now am I?"

"That's different. You're *not* the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

"Braeburn, darling," Rarity said, shaking her head, "you simply must let him perform tonight. It's what has to happen."

"It's what will happen!" Trixie said with more dramatics than was necessary. "Tonight, Nails will wow the crowds, and win the heart of the mysterious pony he loves!"

Everyone was looking at me now, I realized, my heart sinking down into my gut – Rarity was watching me, with her half-pleading face, and the stage-ponies were watching me curiously, and the youngster with his enigmatic gaze. I couldn't see what was going on behind those eyes and that half-grin, and that scared me a bit.

"If this is a joke, Trix, it's gone on long enough."

"What, you mean your acting career?" They laughed. They actually laughed. That hurt, I don't mind telling you.

"No! Why are you even doing this?"

"Because... it's what I want to happen, and that's that!" Trixie turned away, trotting over to Nails.

"Come on, kid. I'll give you the old once-over and get you fitted."

He glanced back at me as Trix dragged him off. Just once, that was all, and then the two of them were gone, and the crowd dispersed, leaving me alone on the stage. And that was that.

Well, no, that wasn't quite that. First I slunk off the stage, and said something to the two fillies waiting behind the stage – something about unpredictable lying unicorns and conspiracies, something along those lines – and then I went looking for salt. I really just wanted something to take my mind of the fact that I'd just been upstaged by somepony I didn't even know, and a few licks of salt would do the trick nicely. In fact, I said sourly to myself, there's not really a reason to just stop at a few tonight. Everything's pretty much full up, between our actors and the cameo actors the Sultana sent us, and Trixie's capricious will had a tendency to become iron-set against someone when they passed from her favor.

So that's why I was looking down at the ground, not really watching where I was going, when

my world turned upside-down. Again. One moment, sad Braeburn moseying along, wallowing in self-pity, the next, stunned Braeburn looking into a wide grin and vivid rainbow hair.

"Guess who got a part in your play? Go on, guess! You'll never guess!"

"Hey, Rainbow." I gave her as much of a good old smile as I could muster. "That'd be you, I suppose."

"Yeah! Celestia decided that I should try to make up for tackling you this morning by helping you all out." One thing that I've always envied – well, envied ain't exactly the right word, admired might be better – about pegasi is their wings. When she jumped up in delight, her wings extended and began to beat allegro, keeping her hovering in mid-air right above me. "I'm going to be one of the princess's guards-ponies! I mean, in the play, because I'm already her best guards-pony."

"Well, that's.... wonderful." I said, doing my best to sound sincere. "Mighty kind of Celestia to let you do that."

"She's the kind of pony who'd do that for anypony. She never holds grudges, you know – not even that one time when the Grand Vizier fell into the pudding, right in front of the Hisponic ambassador. She's so awesome!" She did a little mid-air trot, tossing her short mane about. "I even get a line! It's the coolest line ever!"

"That's one more than me," I muttered to myself, pulling myself back up. My hat had been knocked clean from my head again, so I flipped it back on the old brainpan. My mane was still all messed up, but I didn't really need to worry about it now.

"Huh? But I thought you were going to get all the lines! You're the big-shot stallion who marries the princess! What happened?"

"It doesn't really bear repeating. I'm no tattle, right? I'm not gonna say a word about that hot-shot colt who came in and just made everypony fall in love with him, with his filly-killing eyes and his perfect diction- I just said too much, didn't I?" My ma always said I'd get hoof-in-mouth disease if I kept up my habit of rambling on, and there I was, looking like an envious hack who got booted off the stage.

Actually, that was worryingly accurate.

"What?" I swear she shot up three feet, fueled by sheer indignation. "You can't treat an actor like that! Didn't you fight back?"

"That's the way show business is." I shrugged my shoulders. "You get your big shot, and if you don't-"

"You didn't even get your big shot! Where's that insufferable unicorn? I'm going to go give her a piece of my mind!"

Now, I know pegasi. I've seen my share in action. But believe me when I say that she shot off like nothing I've ever seen. The only thing that I saw was the blurred rainbow that followed her, like the air itself got confused and thought her tail was still whipping through it. The dust whipped up a second later, shooting up into little devils and whirls, forcing me to close my eyes before I got blinded.

I'd like to say that I ran after her, to try and stop her before she got into a fight with Trix. I'd hate to say that I went and found a few bars of salt and woke up the next afternoon with a pounding-dry head. I didn't do either of them, as a matter of fact. Something sent me off in a different direction.

I'll gloss over the long search, the asking of directions from various and sundry, and my weaving through the maze of wagons and performers getting ready, all the costumers getting the faux-Equestrian costumes ready (because, really, real Equestrian clothing isn't real enough), and the amusing peccadillo with the sword-dancers that nearly cost me my mane, and instead skip ahead to my finding of Big Mac.

He was – as usual – doing some heavy lifting. They didn't call him the strongest pony in Equestria for nothing. Somepony had sent a prop back to be repainted, one of the heavy background props for the cave at the end of the first act, and now Big Mac was getting it on back to the stage. Being a pony of a few words, Mac just nodded at me as I trotted up alongside him. "Big Mac, could I have a word?" Nod. "Thanks, cousin. Now, did you hear the news about who's playing the main part now?" Shake. "It's some hot-shot new actor who literally showed up this afternoon! And Trix decided that he's skilled enough to do the part, just after listening to a few lines! I don't get it, Big Mac. I just don't get it. I mean, I won't be envious, I just wonder why it happened tonight. And whether he'll be joining us – what if she sends me back to being my cousin's understudy? Not that I don't like her, she's a wonderful gal, and she's going to do a fine job tonight playing the sorcerer, but you know how she gets, how unreasonable Trixie can be sometimes, and I'm wondering what kind of advice you've-"

"What about the pegasus?" Big Mac doesn't waste words, no sir. I kind of stuttered a bit, just a touch, and then recovered myself.

"How'd you know about... about her?" Celestia-in-her-court, I silently pleaded, please, don't say that one of the fillies had seen me and her and jumped to conclusions.

"Darndest thing. Pink pony came up and talked at me. Something about you and a rainbow pegasus and kissing and all that."

Now, Big Mac's the red one, but I swore, I was burning red, from ears to tail. "Now, just wait a moment – I didn't say anything about... well, I... just goes to show how much that one knows, anyway. We talking about the pink one, big mane like..." I threw my hooves up in the air, "Like poof, mouth like a weasel drinking Colcuttan coffee, that pink pony?"

"Eee-yup." Nod.

"Don't quote me on this, but I think she's some kind of Fury." I shuddered, thinking back to breakfast, and how she'd come out of nowhere and vanished just as fast. "Only instead of being vengeance itself she's the personification of meddling in matters that don't have anything worth meddling in. Did she... do anything unnatural around you, if you get my meaning?"

"Eee-yup. She was in two places at once, and fast as a pegasus." That was Big Mac to the core – unperturbed, even when talking about some strange pony-ghost-thing that was haunting our fair carnival.

"Well, you know she's crazy. So don't go listening to anything she says." I shook myself, wondering if she was watching me even now. "Anyway. As I was saying... do you have any advice for me, o wise sage?"

"Get that pegasus quick."

"Big Mac!"

"Go talk to the puppet-fillies. I'm sure that they'd appreciate your help."

"You think so?" He nodded, and I set my shoulders square and resolved to do so. When Big Mac suggested something, it was always a good idea to listen. "All right. Now I'll just-"

And that's when another pegasus dropped out of the sky onto me. This one, however, had all the force of a wet dishrag, leaving me standing upright and rather bemused. Big Mac turned slowly, raising one titanic eyebrow, as said wet dishrag began to break down into hysterics.

"Where *is it*, Brushburn? Tell me where you put it! Please tell me-" I heard a little squeak, like a mouse being caught in a trap, and looked up to see the little yellow pegasus, hanging from Big Mac's firm grasp. She blushed, looking down in shame. "Er. I mean, I-I'm sorry, if you don't mind, I'm kind of looking for that lamp you said you'd get for me."

"Big Mac, that there's royalty, or close enough. Mind putting her down?" I said, hurriedly, because unassuming or not that was still the royal vizier he was holding. He nodded and set her down carefully, though he kept a disapproving eye on her.

"I'm so sorry, I really am," she said, quivering down onto the ground, and that's just about when my heart broke. Poor thing - I'd given her my word, and then not made sure that it'd been kept. "I shouldn't have tackled you, I was just so frustrated- er, irritated, just with the way my day's gone."

"Well, see, thing is I asked my buddy Spike to take care of it, 'cause Trixie dragged me off for rehearsal. You know Spike. That little dragon kid, sitting with Miss Rarity at breakfast this morning?" Her eyes opened wide, and she smiled at me – the kind of smile that someone not really used to smiling like that smiles, all teeth and open corners.

"Oh, thank you so much, you're very nice, Brushburn."

"Braeburn."

"Braeburn, sorry, I'm so sorry, I won't forget your name again, it's a really nice name you know, you should really keep it. Do you know where Spike is?"

"That's the funny thing," I said, scratching at my mane in thought for a moment. "I haven't seen hide nor scale of him all day. You know, the last time I saw him was after-"

"Thank you very much you have a nice evening bye!" And then she was off, murmuring apologies all the way. The two of us watched her go.

"That's one odd pony."

"Eee-yup."

Exit Braeburn, stage left.

Chapter 3 - Pinkie.

When you get down to it, a play's a lot like a fire.

You spend ages getting everything set up just perfect, lugging pieces of wood around, making sure that you've got the right kindling so that it'll catch – and then you light it up and it burns bright and hot, until it finally dwindles down and leaves the audience in the dark, clapping. Not a perfect metaphor, but I think it works well enough. You see, I can always feel the sparks right before a performance, the little flashes that signal that the fire is about to be lit. And even when I'm not in the wings, being fussed over, I can still feel it. Tonight, I could feel it stronger than ever.

The temperature was dropping fast, and I had my jacket pulled tight around me as I helped Scootaloo and Applebloom prepare for the play's opening. The sun had almost set, and the shadows it cast were long; by the time the play opened, it would be night, and the princess's moon would rise above the city. Under that watchful eye, we'd play out the story of the Bayjing beggar and Badroulbador, the full-moon-mare. Well, I said to myself, they would, while I sat back behind the scenes and watched. I must admit that I was feeling a mite tense, waiting for the play to finally begin.

Scootaloo and Applebloom were surprisingly casual about the prospect of performing before royalty, probably because they only had a few roles and they just had to move the puppets the way they'd practiced to succeed - they didn't have to worry about remembering lines or speaking them properly. If a shadow-puppet waved his arm slightly differently than planned, well, who's to notice? They'll be terrifying all the same. So we sat behind the stage together and listened to the hubbub all about, their energy and innocent passion calming my storm-tossed brain-pan. I kind of wished that I was their age again. When you're a little pony, nothing seems truly terrifying. A good monster's nothing like the prospects of losing your job to some upstart young pony. But with age comes competence, and wisdom - maybe a mite of each in my case, but still I'd earned as much as I'd lost.

"Cues?" Scootaloo and Applebloom knew their routine by heart now, but they still went over the list every time, with that special kind of determination only youths can muster up.

"Check," Applebloom said. They had a scrap of the script, just enough copied down so that they knew when to set up the shadow-puppets and when to illuminate the back of the stage, so that when the time came, they would do it seamlessly.

"Lights?"

"Check," Applebloom said, glancing over at the lanterns that would light up the stage's backdrop. They were currently closed, but she'd open them up in a flash when it was time. Or maybe I'd do it, I said to myself. That'd be something that even I couldn't mess up. Rare enough to find something like that.

"Stilts?"

"Check." Applebloom rattled the puppet-stilts with a grin.

"Smoke bombs?"

"Ch... what d'you mean, smoke bombs?" Applebloom looked at Scootaloo as if she were crazy.

"Why would we need smoke bombs?"

"For when the genie comes out, duh!"

"Trixie was going to do that!"

"No, she wasn't! We need to have them here!"

"I'll check on them, all right?" I said, hoping to stop them before they could get into a real argument.

"You don't have to do that, Braeburn," Applebloom said, but I shook my head.

"Let me do this. I've got to be helpful one way or another to you two."

It would only take me a moment's short stroll into the wings to find Trixie, knowing her habit of hanging around the curtain before showtime. Funnily enough, I couldn't even go that far without running into someone interesting. I was heading down the back stairs to the wings when I saw him. He was having a quick conversation with our troupe's best singer, Sweetie Belle, and I wouldn't have given him a second glance, being rather preoccupied with thoughts of what I'd say to Trixie and whether I should bring up the touchy subject of ferocious rainbow-maned pegasi who may have attempted contract renegotiation on my part, except for the fact that I heard Spike's name clearly mentioned. So, naturally, I gave him a second glance, and realized with a start that Twilit Glory, the Prince of Colcutta, was back here with us actors.

The jacket he was wearing didn't look as fancy as the one he'd been wearing that morning, but it was clearly him. His cutie-mark was Celestia's emblem, the six-point star in deuce or something like that, and five smaller stars surrounded it; it probably stood for his special personality or something like that. Me, I've got an apple. Mama always said that I'd be good at apple-picking, but I had too much of a hankering for the stage to live that life. Me and my cousin, we lit out and never looked back. But him? Looked like he'd been born to royalty, never had to worry about whether going against his cutie-mark was the right thing to do, never had to struggle and fight to forge his own destiny.

Then again, you know what they say about judging books by their covers. You won't be right all the time, especially if it's one of those blank black covers that tells you almost nothing about the book except that it's old and quite possibly boring, but you can't ever really be sure until you open it up.

"I'm sorry," I said, interrupting them, "Did you say something about Spike just now?"

"Yes," Twilit said with a gleeful glimmer in his eyes, "I did. Would you happen to know where he is right now, good sir? I believe he has something of mine in his possession at this moment, and I require its immediate return."

"Something of yours? That can't be Spike!" A horrid thought struck me. "Heavens preserve me, you didn't leave some gemstones out in plain sight where some young dragon, not knowing any better, might think they were free samples, did you? I'm so sorry, he just goes crazy when he sees jewels within reach." He shook his head with a bemused expression on his face, and I heaved a sigh of relief. "Good. I don't want that Fillydelphic incident to ever happen again." That... had been awful. Before that day, I had never wondered about the ethicality of putting a young dragon on a leash.

"No, I wouldn't mind if he took something as common as that. After all, there's always more where those come from, aha. No, this was... um... a more personal item."

"What kind of personal item?" Sweetie Belle asked, radiating innocence from every hair. Twilit Glory turned back to her.

"It's a family heirloom. Um. It's this old beat-up lamp, and, uh, I need it back. Celestia's guards told me that he took it for someone."

"Well, funny thing is, he took it for me," I said with a nervous chuckle. Twilit spun about so fast I thought he'd collapse, his eyes almost bugging out of their sockets. And then he was in my face, so close that I could smell lunch on his breath.

"What? How'd you find out? Where is he now? Have you told anyone else? How much do you want me to pay? Will you let Celestia know? Have you tried using it? What do you want from me?"

"Hold your hippogriffs, sir," I said, backing away, "I did it as a favor for a lady, who said that it was hers and that she was going to give it to you tonight. I needed to come back here, so I asked Spike to get it for me on her behalf. Now, what's this about it really being yours?"

"Who was the lady?" Twilit asked.

"I asked the question first, sir. Mind explaining all this before I tell you who's responsible?"

"...No." We stared at each other for a moment, but as anypony could tell you, I can't win staring contests. I sighed, looking away from his accusing gaze.

"Look, I'm not going to besmirch a lady's honor, no matter how you slice it."

"Ooooh, a stalemate!" Now, I'm no expert, but I think that Twilit Glory's scream of terror was

more like a filly's than mine was. Sweetie Belle just settled for staring, bug-eyed, at the bright-pink froofy-maned Fury-of-romance that had just reappeared from behind Twilit. "Stalemates aren't really fun, you know, I think you should have freshmates! Hey, that kind of sounds like friend-mates, and those are the best kind of mates, well, except for *mates*-mates, you know!"

"Please, please, just leave me alone," Twilit Glory said, doing his best to hide behind me. Why must I always be the manly, handsome hero in these situations, when what I'd much rather be doing is hiding behind him?

"You don't sound like you're having fun," she said, her head drooping, her face twisting into a frown. The expression looked positively alien on her. "I thought that you'd enjoy getting to hang out with Celestia and Luna, Twilight."

"Twilit! The name's Twilit Glory!" He waved his forelimbs desperately, trying to shoo her away.

"Oh, okay. Sorry, I sometimes forget, Twilit." She giggled now, her former despondency gone like a cloud chased away by the wind. "But don't worry! Your auntie Pinkie Pie has got everything all taken care of! Oh, won't this be exciting?!?"

"No," he said. "No, not at all."

She shrugged, then seemed to notice me for the first time. "Oh, I nearly forgot! Duh, Pinkie! You're the reason I came over here in the first place!" She pulled out a bag – though I hadn't seen her carrying one – and started rummaging through it. "I'm really honest-triple-doozy sorry, Braeburn, this is all my fault. I'm sure it's all going to be fine, but I didn't want to leave you pouting back here tonight! You deserve something better! Aha!" She finally found what she was looking for, producing a shining golden ticket. "This is for you, so you can have a fun night tonight!"

I accepted it cautiously, like it would turn into a snake and bite me at any moment. The sad part was that I actually half-expected something like that to happen. When the coming-to-life-and-biting failed to happen, I looked at the ticket. It read simply:

-One Admission to the Royal Box-

--By order of her Holiness, the Sultana Celestia--

"You want me to go watch the play? In the royal box?" I gaped for a moment, then looked up at her, giving her what I hoped was a calculating glare. "Wait. How'd you get your hooves on this, anyway?"

"I used my feminine wiles, silly!" Celestia-in-her-court, I didn't need to imagine that. I did anyway, and nearly broke my brain-pan.

"You don't even know me," I said, hastily changing the subject, hoping my imagination would follow. "Why'd you go to all this trouble?"

"Oh, silly, of course I know you! Remember that time when we came to Aaaaaappleloosa?" She said, rearing up and kicking her forelegs. "Me and Twilight and Rainbow Dash and-" She giggled, raising her hoof to her mouth. "Whoopsy, that's breaking character. Hehe!"

"You know Rainbow Dash?" It would make a horrid kind of sense, given how she seemed to

know that that young filly "liked" me, but I couldn't see this insane pink pony being anywhere near Rainbow, not for any real length of time. Then again, how well did I actually know the pegasus? Not very well, not by far.

"Of course I know Rainbow Dash! I know everypony! But you're not supposed to know that yet, so don't tell anypony, okay? You've got to promise not to tell anypony!"

I mutely nodded my head, thoroughly bewildered.

"Oki-doki-loki! You have fun, okay? Tonight's going to be soooo awesome! There'll be kissing and parties and we'll get to all watch a play together, just like I asked for! Enjoy the play, Braeburn!"

We watched her bounce away, off towards the stage, in silent horror. After a moment, Twilit tried to sneak away, but I caught him by the collar before he could sidle off. "I'm just going to say my peace, sir, before you leave. Spike's a friend of mine, and I know he'd never steal anything. If you find him before the play starts, just explain matters to him. Somepony's lying here, and I don't know who, but if you touch one scale on that dragon, I'll do something that's probably illegal." I looked him straight in the eyes. "We carnival-folk, we're family, all of us. That lil' dragon, wherever he's gotten to, is my brother. And if you want to throw him in your big fancy dungeons, you'll have to throw me in first."

This finally put some backbone in the stallion. His mane bristled, and he shook off my hoof. "I didn't say anything about prison. I understand that you're protective of him, Mister Braeburn, but accusing somepony of ill intentions without just cause or evidence is morally flawed and inexcusably rude. I understand that he may be a pawn in the twisted webs of courtly intrigue, and I will take this into full account when the climax of our game comes into play."

"He didn't say anything about that, Braeburn," Sweetie Belle added, rather unhelpfully. "He just wanted to talk to Spike, and he was very polite." I exhaled sharply, looking down for a moment, then back up at him.

"...So you're not going to hurt him."

"Not in the slightest, though the evidence is looking rather grim for him. Perhaps if you told me who it was that requested that you steal the, um, old family heirloom from my quarters...?"

Now, I know how you're supposed to treat a mare. You don't hit them (unless they hit you first), and you don't shove them into a lake so you won't get wet. That's not being a proper young colt at all, mistreating a mare like that. But Fluttershy hadn't seemed entirely trustworthy the last time I'd seen her, and if I had to choose between a slightly crazy grand vizier and Spike...

"A mare by the name of Fluttershy. She said it was her gift to you for tonight, and she'd dropped it the last time she was in your quarters. Am I to understand that she was fabricating something awful?"

Twilit Glory nodded. "Fluttershy. I should have seen it coming, she was far too nice-" He

stopped, crinkling up his face in disgust. "Just say lying, please. Fabricating is not the word you're looking for in this context."

"Sorry. Sometimes we actors pick up fancy words without quite knowing what the context is, you know."

He chuckled mildly. "Straight from being at each other's throats to correcting grammar. Isn't it odd what a little courtesy can do?"

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. I didn't actually plan to. Fabricating is much too fun a word.

"Hope you get your heirloom back."

"I hope I do too," he said. "Or tonight might not end well for either of us." On that ominous note, he turned away dramatically, striding away with poise and dignity.

"Do you think he'll notice that he's walking in the wrong direction?" Sweetie Belle asked me quietly.

"Give him time," I replied. "He'll notice eventually."

"Sooooo," she said, trying to sound cute, "Are you going to go sit and watch the performance?"

I looked down at the ticket, and for a moment it was mighty tempting to go and sit out in the audience, to watch the play through new eyes. Why, I might even be able to sit next to the beautiful princess – but the fillies were depending on me, and besides, I'm never on my best manners when around royalty. I might end up offending their delicate sensibilities. No, I couldn't go. I looked back at Sweetie Belle.

"Hey, Sweetie Belle. How'd you like to go watch? I know you're not doing any major musical numbers tonight – the play's a drama piece, after all."

Her eyes widened. "Go and sit with the Sultana? And the princesses? Gosh, Braeburn, that would be the best!" It sometimes takes her brain a little bit to catch up with the rest of her, which is why she gasped dramatically after saying that. "Oh, but Braeburn, she gave the ticket to you! You should go."

"Your pals in the back need my help, and I don't want to go pushing through the crowd rudely after the show starts. If you hurry up now, you should be able to get to the seat, no problem." I held it out, and she hesitated, obviously torn between guilt at depriving Braeburn of the shiny ticket and desire to go and fulfill the dream of every young filly.

What can I say? I couldn't resist pulling it back out of her reach for a moment, just to see her grab for it. "No, wait, Braeburn! I want it, I want it!"

"You sure, Sweetie Belle? After all, you did make some good points just a moment ago, and-"

Then I let her grab it away from me with a triumphant lunge, and I bowed back gracefully.

"Quick now, before Trixie can catch you and ask you what you're doing with a ticket like that," I said. She giggled, dashing off, leaving me to find Trixie.

I found her conversing with somepony, looking like she'd been interrupted while getting ready to unveil the stage. Trix looked resplendent in her full showmaster's regalia, her cape of bright-blue

cloth covered in silver stars draped around her shoulders, her hat even grander and gaudier than usual. If there's anypony who can wear clothes like those without looking like a fool, it's Trixie. On the other hand, the mare she was talking to looked gaudy for an entirely different reason. She was wearing the kind of clothes that are worn to be looked at instead of you, the kind that was worn by palace slaves. Gold thread, translucent silks hanging over the wings, the works. That was the first thing I noticed about her – I'm a bit ashamed to say that the second was that she seemed to be staring in two directions at once.

"No, for the last time, the great and powerful Trixie hasn't seen her running around!" Trixie snapped at the slave, who cringed back. Poor thing shouldn't have messed with Trix when she was getting ready for showtime. "Now leave the great and powerful Trixie alone! The great and powerful Trixie doesn't have time for this!"

"Hey, Trix," I said as loudly as I dared so close to the curtain, to give the slave a chance to unobtrusively get out. "Quick question."

Trix turned her head, saw me, and rolled her eyes dramatically. "What is it *now*, Braeburn? No, Nails hasn't suddenly dropped dead, no, I don't have a spot open for you, no, I'm too busy to talk things out, now what do you want?" High-strung might not exactly be the right word for Trixie before a performance. Like a bit dark out isn't exactly the right word for midnight.

"Listen, the puppeteers don't know if they need the smoke bombs or not. Are you going to be triggering them when the genie appears, or not?"

She gave me a disgusted look. "They need to trigger them, obviously. Do they think that I'm capable of being everywhere at once?"

"Yes. The great and powerful Trixie can do anything, after all," I said with a completely straight face. I don't know whether she caught on or not, but her eyes narrowed.

"No, she can't," the slave said, with more directness than I'd expected from her. "She can't tell me where Flutteryshy is." I couldn't for the life of me tell you exactly where her accent was from, only that it wasn't from anywhere I'd been. It was just exotic enough to be real confusing.

"You mean Fluttershy?"

She nodded eagerly. "Flutteryshy."

"Poor dear," Trixie said in a stage whisper. "Can't even speak Equestrian right." Now that was beyond the pale, it really was, even for Trix. I pushed forward past her, quite literally, eliciting a surprised yelp from the showpony.

"I'm afraid that Flutteryshy isn't here right now, miss. She's looking for a friend of ours, Spike, but he's not here either." She looked rather sad at that, so I gave her a forced grin. "But she might be back in time for the performance! So why don't you go back and wait for her in the audience?"

She nodded and extended her decorated wings, flying up erratically. "Okay. Thyank you." With a slightly lopsided smile at me, she flew off through the wings, dipping and weaving a bit as she did so. A moment later, I saw her crash into Whooves, and I winced.

"I don't know what you saw in that cripple," Trixie said with a huff. "She was pestering me for five minutes straight, you know. Smoke bombs are in the back, near my wagon. You should need about two for the genie's entrance."

I was about to turn away and go grab those smoke bombs for the puppeteers, but a thought struck me. "Another question, Trix. Did you see a rainbow-haired pegasus today?"

"What, that loutish filly that tackled you at breakfast? Whyever would you ask about her?"

"Um..." I feverishly racked my brains for an excuse. "I thought I saw her around camp?"

She gave me a flat glare. "Uh-huh. And I have wings."

"You do?"

"No. I am very obviously un-winged, unlike that little wretch. She got a part in the play, you know, and decided to waste it arguing with me." An eyebrow was raised in what she thought was a clever manner. "Did you put her up to it?"

"No! No, I didn't. I wouldn't. You know me, Trix."

"Yes, I do, you salt-sodden lump. You're so desperate for the spotlight, you don't care who you trample to get what you want. Well, two can play at that game. And tonight, Nails is going to shine. Do you hear me?" I didn't respond, so she reached out and yanked on my jacket, nearly pulling me off my feet. "I said, do you hear me? If you cause one disruption tonight, you idiot, I'm going to kick you out of the troupe for good. Maybe then you could ask your rainbow-haired marefriend and that cripple for a job."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you," I said, backing off. "Loud and clear, Trix."

"You will refer to the great and powerful Trixie without diminutives, you foal!"

I just walked away then. Wasn't feeling like getting into another fight. I didn't have the heart for it tonight.

Exit Braeburn, stage left.