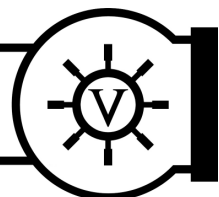


Sparkle's Law

AestheticB

PONY FICTION VAULT



The bell hanging over the door to the Books and Branches library rang to announce the entrance of a pony. A moment later Twilight heard the door clatter shut, and Rarity called out from the entryway. "Oh, it is just a *gorgeous* day out, darling." Her silvery voice grew louder as she trotted into the room where Twilight slept. "Hardly a cloud in the sky! Rainbow Dash won't have much work to do today, I can tell you that much. Mind you, it's a bit nippy out, but as the sun rises things should warm up nicely. Now the *flowers* –"

Twilight groaned. "I get it," she said irritably from her place in bed, "it's beautiful day in Ponyville." She reluctantly left the warm embrace of her pillow to sit up and rub the sleep from her eyes. She shot an accusing glare at the shaft of sunlight streaming in through her window, scowling at it as though it had deliberately interrupted her slumber. It was morning already, and she couldn't have gotten more than four hours of sleep. She got out of bed and slowly trudged down to where Rarity waited, her face never losing its scowl.

Rarity looked aghast. "Is... something wrong, dear? You look a tad... *peaked*."

Twilight pressed a hoof to her temple and closed her eyes momentarily. "I'm sorry, Rarity," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude." She walked over to the tiny basket where Spike was snoring peacefully as he sucked his thumb.

"Spike, wake up."

Twilight turned back to Rarity. "I just stayed up all last night studying, is all. I shouldn't have, especially seeing as today is so important, but I got carried away with this new spell. I'm a little grumpy from exhaustion."

"Oh, I know *exactly* what you mean, Twilight," Rarity said as Spike rolled over and mumbled something inaudible from his basket. "It's so easy to get caught up with a design and lose track of time."

"*Spike!*" Twilight gave his basket a little nudge.

The dragon stirred in his sleep, pulling the thumb he had been sucking out of his mouth. "No..." he muttered, still unconscious, "the *other* monkey..."

"*Spike!* Rarity's here!"

"Huh? What?" The baby dragon shot up and looked around, and his eyes found Rarity. He kicked the basket away from himself and gave a bow. "L-L-Lady Rarity!" he stammered. "I didn't think –"

"*Spike!*" Twilight said grumpily. Spike tore his eyes away from Rarity to look at the other unicorn, seeming to notice her for the first time. "Coffee," she said simply.

"Oh! Right!" Spike sprang into action, scurrying through the doorway to fetch Twilight her morning caffeine fix. Twilight gave a neanderthal-like grunt of approval as she watched Spike disappear into the kitchen. "I was supposed to get up a half an hour ago," she said to Rarity after the dragon had left. "You weren't supposed to see me like this."

Rarity had brought a saddlebag, and she opened it to produce a brush. "Don't worry, Twilight, I understand completely. I myself am not much of a *morning pony* when I don't get *my* beauty sleep. Let me help you out, darling." She began to run the brush through Twilight's mane.

Twilight considered telling Rarity to stop, but thought better of it. Her mane was probably a complete and total mess, and she didn't feel like grooming herself. She didn't feel like anything, come to think of it. She reminded herself that she was just tired and grumpy, and that the coffee was on its way. The thought soothed her.

As Rarity ran the brush through Twilight's mane, chatting idly, Pinkie Pie entered the library. Upon seeing Rarity and Twilight, Pinkie's face lit up with a goofy smile. "Oh, *goodie!*" she exclaimed. "Let me help!" She bounced over to Twilight and Rarity, holding a brush in her mouth.

Twilight recoiled from the pink pony. "Pinkie Pie, where did you get the brush?" She examined her reflection in the metal handle of Rarity's brush and decided that her mane was straight enough. Pinkie didn't answer her. "Okay," she said after a moment. "Pinkie's here, which means that we're just waiting for Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash." She rubbed her temple again.

"What about AJ?" Pinkie asked.

"Applejack has chores to do in the morning. She won't be coming." Pinkie Pie frowned.

Twilight continued groggily. "Princess Celestia decided that she's going to come to Ponyville for this year's Summer Sun Celebration because she missed the last one. She's also going to come during the day and spend the night celebrating with the townsfolk. This meeting isn't exactly necessary for any of us, as we are essentially just repeating the arrangements we made last year. I just want to make sure everypony's on the same page so that everything is perfect for when the Princess arrives."

"And it *will* be perfect, Twilight!" Rarity said. "I have the nicest fabrics picked out for the bunting."

Pinkie Pie bounced. "And I'm going to make sure everypony stays up *all* night! My party will be so loud that *nopony* will be able to get any sleep even if they *try*!"

"Sounds wonderful," Twilight said dryly. "This meeting is just to make sure everypony is on the same page. If we keep organized and stay focused, *nothing* is going to go wrong."

It was then that Rainbow Dash crashed through Twilight's bedroom window.

Pieces of the window frame and tiny shards of glass showered down upon the room's occupants. Rarity and Pinkie Pie ducked and covered their heads. Twilight simply stood, her back to the exploding glass. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she was coated with the falling debris. "*Nothing* is going to go wrong," she repeatedly quietly to herself. Then she opened her eyes, challenging the universe to refute her claim.

Rainbow Dash lay in a heap at the base of a bookcase. The pegasus moved to stand, and the already unbalanced bookcase toppled forward, spilling its contents all over the floor. Dash quickly flew out of the way, then dusted herself off.

Twilight fought to control her voice as she spoke to the pegasus. "I have a *door*."

Dash ignored her. "Twilight!" The pegasus appeared out of breath, and her eyes were wild. "Fluttershy is missing!"

At this, Rarity and Pinkie Pie gasped. Twilight failed to suppress a twitch, and she felt several hairs in her mane spring outward. "What do you mean, *missing*?"

"She's not at her cottage, and I didn't see her on the way here! What are we going to do?"

Twilight was beginning to regret getting out of bed. She reminded herself once again that the coffee was on its way. "Fluttershy... probably just got distracted by a wounded bird or something. You know how she is. Let's just focus on the present and hope that she shows up eventually."

"It isn't like Fluttershy to blow us off like this, though!" Rainbow Dash said.

"What if she's in trouble!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"What if a bear is holding her captive!"

For the third time that morning, Twilight rubbed her temple with a hoof. "Then I feel sorry for the bear," she said wearily.

"Or she's been turned invisible!"

"Not that that's possible, but we'd still be able to hear her."

"Or she's trapped down a well!" Rainbow Dash offered.

"She can *fly*."

"Or what if she's been sucked into the after-world by ghosts!"

Twilight gave an exasperated sigh. "Pinkie Pie, ghosts aren't –" Pinkie Pie blinked at her with wide eyes. "You know what, forget it. Fluttershy will turn up, and the rest of us will stay on track in her absence. We came into this prepared, and I'm confident that we can handle whatever challenges arise, *together*. With... the magic of friendship, or something," she finished unenthusiastically. *I really need my coffee*, she thought.

Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash seemed to settle down a little upon hearing Twilight's half-hearted inspirational speech. Twilight felt her spirits lift. "*Nothing* is going to go wrong," she said.

"Twi," Spike called out from the kitchen. "We're out of coffee."

"*What!?*" Twilight ran across the shards of broken glass and out of the doorway to find Spike looking at her apologetically from the kitchen. "How can we be out of *coffee!?*" Spike shrugged. "What about the *emergency coffee?*" He shook his head.

Twilight's mane burst into a mass of wiry clumps of hair that pointed in every direction. She felt one of her lower eyelids twitch. "*No... coffee...*" She began to shake. Everything had gone *horribly wrong*.

Her friends joined them. "What's the big deal, Twilight?" Pinkie Pie asked. "Just have some orange juice."

"The *big deal*," Twilight said, fuming, "is that I spent eight hours studying a shrinking spell last night, and as a result got only four hours of sleep. The night before that, I stayed up arranging the schedule for the Summer Sun Celebration.

"I'm burnt out. My brain feels like mush. *Painful* mush. My bedroom window is broken, the reasons for which *you* have yet to explain to me." She shot a disapproving glare at Rainbow Dash, who shifted uncomfortably. "Fluttershy is missing, and Princess Celestia is going to be here in *five* hours. I'm doomed."

"Hey!" Dash said. "What happened to facing challenges *together*? What about the magic of friendship?"

Twilight twitched once again. Dash cringed slightly. "You think *friendship* is magic? *Caffeine* is magic!" She began to speak slowly, emphasizing each word: "*I. Need. The coffee.* Without the coffee, I can't focus, and when I can't focus, my system falls apart. And if the system falls apart, chaos will consume *Ponyville!*"

Her three friends were looking at her strangely. Pinkie Pie spoke first. "Don't worry, Twilight!" she said. "Detective Pinkamena Diane Pie is on the case of the missing Fluttershy!"

Twilight did not like where this was going. "Where did that hat come from?"

Pinkie whipped out a magnifying glass. "Don't worry, miss." Her voice had become much deeper and more rough. "I'll find your missing pegasus and bring her home, or I'm not *Pinkie: P.I.*"

"You aren't *Pinkie: P.I.* You work in a bakery."

Pinkie Pie turned away from Twilight to look at nothing in particular. "*Ponyville.*" She kept speaking in her low, rough voice. "*A sunny town smack dab in the middle of nowhere. The kind of town where everypony knows their neighbor. The kind of town where a disappearing pegasus gets noticed.*"

The other three ponies exchanged worried glances. "Uh, Pinkie Pie?" Dash asked. "Who are you talking to?"

Pinkie paid Rainbow Dash no heed, and carried on with her monologue even as she walked out the door. "*With no leads to go on, I had less direction than a freshly spun, blindfolded toddler playing Pin the Tail on the Pony. I needed something solid, something to work with, but first, I needed to call in an old acquaintance of mine...*" The sound of her voice faded as the door closed behind her.

The three ponies, as well as Spike, watched her go with blank expressions. "Hey Twilight," Dash said as though Pinkie Pie's outburst had never happened. "You said that the birds already know how to sing, right?"

Twilight was more than happy to answer Dash and ignore Pinkie's... whatever that had been. "I suppose I did, why?"

"Then we don't need Fluttershy at all! I'll just go round up all her little birds and bring them into town."

Rarity cut in. "Forgive me, Rainbow Dash, but I don't think you have the, er, *gentle touch* that Fluttershy does when it comes to the critters."

"*Pfft!* How hard can it be? They're just dumb birds! I'll have them singing Fluttershy's melody *backwards* before the Princess arrives."

"You have to clear the clouds, Dash."

"I can clear the skies in no time flat," Dash said as she too moved towards the door. "Trust me Twilight, you don't have to worry *one bit* about the music *or* the skies. Rainbow Dash has got it covered." She puffed out her chest. "No need to thank me, just doing my job as a friend." She left, and Twilight observed that this time she at least had the good sense to use the door.

"Well, Twilight, if it helps at all *I* will still be supervising the decorations."

Twilight sighed. "It does help, Rarity. Although I'm sure Pinkie and Dash are just trying to help too. Even so..." Twilight turned to Spike. "Fetch me *Empathetic Enchantments and Emotional Enticements*. Leave it on the counter when you have it." The dragon rushed to comply.

"Whatever do you need the book for?" Rarity asked.

"There's a spell in there that I could use to calm a horde of rampaging birds."

"*Ah.*"

Spike plopped the book onto the counter. "Anything else, Twilight?"

Twilight ran a hoof through her ravaged mane. "Yes," she said simply. "Your job, Spike, your *only* job today, is to *find me a cup of coffee*. I don't care what you have to do, what

resources you have to expend, just *get me my caffeine*. You are my number one assistant, Spike, and this is our number one priority. Understand?"

Spike puffed out his chest. "I won't disappoint you, Twi! Your number one assistant is on the job!"

She turned to Rarity. "You might want to get back to the Boutique," she said gravely. "Pinkie Pie is loose in Ponyville, after all."

• • •

Applejack gave an annoyed grunt as an apple hit her squarely on the head, then gathered up her filled apple baskets. She appraised the fruits, deciding that they would be enough to get her family through the day. She loaded the apples into her cart and began to pull it toward the farmhouse, keeping an eye on the entrance to Sweet Apple Acres as she did so. The sun had finished peeking its way over the horizon, meaning that the rest of her family was scheduled to arrive soon.

They could have used apples from the store room to prepare the food for the Summer Sun Celebration, but Applejack had decided that only freshly picked apples would do. This *was* a chance to showcase their harvest to the rest of the town, after all, and Applejack wanted to leave the best impression she possibly could on the potential customers. With the Carrot family helping out this year, it was even more imperative that they put their best hoof forward in regards to the food. Applejack would not stand to be shown up by their neighbors.

So, at the crack of dawn, Applejack had hit the fields for some apple-buckin' while Mac and Apple Bloom handled her usual chores. She didn't mind, really. A bit of hard work was always an excellent way to start the day, and the weather had been shaping up to make things a beautiful day in Ponyville.

"Applejack!" Apple Bloom ran out of the house toward her. "The Carrots are all already here!" She stopped next to her older sister and caught her breath. "Well," she said, "not *here*, but in Ponyville. There's like a hundred of them! What are we going to do?!"

"Calm down there, Apple Bloom." Applejack began to lead them towards the house. "We ain't gonna *do* anything. The Carrots get to do the food for this year's Summer Sun Celebration along with us. We wouldn't be doing it at all, if Nightmare Moon hadn't come in and ruined everything last year. Be glad," she said, ruffling her sister's mane, "havin' two families cover one town lightens our workload. We'll have more time to

spend with the family. And there might be a hundred of them, but there's at least eighty of us this year."

"But Ah thought competition was bad!"

Applejack laughed. "Nonsense, Apple Bloom. Competition breeds improvement! The Carrots ain't our rivals, just our neighbors. Even if we do have the odd disagreement here and there." She ruffled her sister's mane, then leaned down. "Besides," she said quietly. "Carrots against Apples? Ain't a competition."

Applejack grinned along with her sister as they headed inside for breakfast. "You already eaten, Apple Bloom?"

"Yup!"

"Good." Applejack set her hat on the table and began to fix herself a plate. "Grab the list and go through it with me one more time. Ah want to know who's bringing who and what."

"Do I *have* to? Nopony is even *here* yet! I wanna go play on the tire swing!" She turned to Mac, who was seated quietly at the table. "*Ma-ac*," she drew his name out into two syllables. "Can I go play on the tire swing?"

"Nope."

Apple Bloom sighed and grabbed the list as Applejack looked for some juice. The list was a scroll of Twilight's creation, a single piece of paper that tracked every member of her family and what they were bringing to Ponyville for the celebration. Applejack had insisted it wasn't necessary at first, but had slowly come to appreciate the benefits of being so organized.

Apple Bloom began to recite from the list as Applejack continued to search the kitchen for some apple juice. "Golden Delicious is bringing Red Delicious," she said, the tone of her voice making it clear that she'd rather be someplace else.

Applejack frowned. "Then what's Red Delicious bringing?"

Apple Bloom consulted the list. "Red delicious," she said. "*Obviously*."

"But you just said Golden Delicious was bringing red delicious."

"He is."

"Well we can't have two ponies bringing red delicious!"

"We don't. Golden Delicious is bringing golden delicious."

Applejack scratched her forehead. "But you just said –"

"They're also bringing Apple Tart, who's bringing the apple tarts."

"So Apple Tart is coming with Golden Delicious?"

"No, she's coming with *apple tarts*. Are you even listening?"

Applejack was beginning to think twice about Twilight's list. "Then who's coming with Golden Delicious?"

"Golden Delicious."

Applejack gave an exasperated sigh. "Maybe you should put the list down for now. Ah'll take a look at that when Ah'm done with my breakfast." She gave up her search for some juice and turned to eat her breakfast.

Naturally, she spotted a metal juice jug sitting to one side on the kitchen table. She didn't recognize it as belonging to her family, but she guessed that Mac had gotten them a new one. They *did* have the entire family to feed today, after all. She grabbed the jug in her teeth and upended it, taking a long pull of its contents before putting it back on the table.

"Does this mean I can go play on the tire swing now?"

Applejack spat, spraying juice into the air in front of her as the juice jug clattered to the floor. Apple Bloom's question went ignored. "What is this?" she demanded.

"Carrot Top brought that over while you were buckin' trees," Apple Bloom said.

Applejack looked down to see the jug's contents flowing out around her hooves. It was an opaque, orange substance. She quickly moved her legs so that they didn't touch the fluid. "You don't mean..."

"*Eeyup*. That's carrot juice, sister."

"Now what's Carrot Top think she's doin' bringing that poison into our house in the first place?"

"Poison?" Apple Bloom said timidly. "Ah thought it was tasty."

Applejack narrowed her eyes and stood up. "Look Apple Bloom," she said. "You are a full blooded apple, and we like *apples* more than any other food in Equestria. And that's because *apples* are the best food there is!"

"But you said that –"

"What Ah *said* was that carrots against apples ain't a competition, and it ain't! Maybe *Carrot Top* with her fancy *carrot juice* doesn't think so, but you and Ah know differently. And Ponyville is gonna know differently too! This carrot juice is a challenge from the Carrots to the Apples! And Ah won't stand for it! You know what we're gonna do?"

"Play on the tire swing?" Apple Bloom asked hopefully.

"No, Apple Bloom. Not that."

• • •

It was a holiday. Which meant most of the shops were closed. Which meant there was nowhere to buy coffee.

Twilight had flattened her mane until it was at least presentable, and she wore a permanent squint against the cruel, cruel sunlight. Her head still throbbed.

Somewhere in this town, she thought, somepony has coffee. Spike will find them. It's only a matter of time.

She trudged into the town hall, grateful to give her eyes a rest from the sunlight. Ponies outside were setting up tables in preparation for the celebration. Ponies inside were checking and double checking lists to make sure that they had an accurate estimate of the number of ponies who would be attending. As she passed, several of them looked up at her.

It was then that she got an idea. Before, when she had come to Ponyville, she had been a stranger. *Now* she was a known quantity. She was the librarian and Celestia's personal student. Everypony here probably knew that she was, for lack of a better term, "in charge" of the preparations.

"Listen up!" She winced slightly at the volume of her voice. Her plan worked, however, and several ponies around her looked up sharply, obviously expecting orders of some kind.

Twilight didn't want to simply shout *get me a coffee*. No, she needed to make it seem like an afterthought. "Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia is going to be here in less than five hours." She spoke as loud as her piercing headache allowed. "We need extra tables set out on account of the fact that both the Apple *and* the Carrot families will be providing food this year. I want a team of ponies ready to assist Rarity once she's prepared to start putting up decorations. If anyone sees a yellow pegasus with a pink mane, that's Fluttershy. Send her my way immediately. Understand?"

Several ponies nodded and continued with their work. Twilight's authority had been recognized. "And somepony get me a cup of coffee," she said. She watched with satisfaction as a young mare rushed to fill her request. Twilight sat down and tried her best to ignore all light and sound while she waited. It didn't work.

"Um, miss?" Twilight looked up. "We've done everything you asked us to, but..."

We don't have enough tables. We can't spare anypony to help Rarity. We found Fluttershy and she says she hates you and never wants to see you again. Just don't say –

"We don't have any coffee," the mare finished.

Twilight glared at her through the coffee-less haze.

"The thing is, not many ponies drink coffee here in Ponyville. At least, not nearly as many as in Canterlot. And it's a holiday, so the shops are all closed. Otherwise, you could just try Sugar Cube Corner, I'm pretty sure they have some, even though they're a bakery and all."

Twilight grabbed the mare and shook her. "How sure?" she demanded.

"Um... pretty sure?"

"Eh, good enough. Thank you, you're a fantastic intern."

"I'm a carpenter."

Twilight released the mare and took off for Sugar Cube Corner at a gallop.

Then, she clutched at her temple and slowed down to her much-preferable slow trudge. "Ugh," she grumbled as the sunlight drilled through the back of her eyes. "Bad day."

• • •

"It was a beautiful day in Ponyville. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. When you're part of a race that controls the weather and provides for the local wildlife, it's a beautiful day every day. But I wasn't a weather pony, I was a detective, and detectives don't give weather reports, they –" Pinkie Pie paused for a moment to think. What exactly did detectives do other than monologue extensively using colorful metaphors? *"– detect. And unlike perfect weather, Fluttershy getting kidnapped isn't something that happens every day."*

As Pinkie Pie walked through town, passing ponies gave her strange looks. She ignored them. Ponies normally gave her strange looks. Their treatment was not a new phenomenon.

"I had picked up Gummy at the bakery and was preparing to head out to the scene of the crime. He was the quiet type of assistant, and was also slightly an alligator, but he had the knack alright. He was the sort to notice things that others missed."

"Pinkie Pie, darling! Where *did* you get that overcoat?"

"The voice rang in my ears like a set of crystal church-bells. I turned around, and then I saw her: Rarity. A mane that shone like a silk curtain and the coat of a porcelain doll. She had legs that went –"

"Pinkie Pie?" Rarity asked in an uneasy voice. "I can hear you. You're speaking out loud."

Pinkie Pie stopped and adjusted her hat. "Something I can help you with, madam? I'm in the middle of an investigation."

"I..." Rarity backed away slightly. "No, that's quite alright. Maybe you should take your coat off, though, it *is* rather hot out." Rarity turned and left Pinkie and Gummy in the middle of the road.

"I let her go. Sometimes that's the best you can do. The only thing you can do. A pony like me doesn't get a happily ever after."

"I needed to clear my head. I needed to find Fluttershy. Hay, I needed a sprinkled donut with extra frosting, a trip to the carnival, and enough bits to buy my own confectionary. What I had was a cheap fedora, an over-sized duster, and an alligator."

Pinkie Pie picked up Gummy with her mouth and tossed him into the air. The alligator clamped onto the back of mane, and she set off towards Fluttershy's cottage.

"I set off towards Fluttershy's cottage," she said, "hoping that there we could find some answers. Rarity had been right. My coat was hot. The sun was hammering down on us like it had something to prove to John Hoofry. But when your name is Pinkie: P.I., you can't take off your duster. It just ain't done."

• • •

Okay, Rainbow Dash thought as she slowly glided toward a tree filled with birds. Just do it like Fluttershy would. Twilight is counting on you. Fluttershy is always quiet and shy, right? So you just have to be gentle.

"Hey," she said casually to the tree's occupants. The birds flew away. "Oh, come on!" she shouted after them. Birds from several adjacent trees also took flight. "Hey!" she shouted, flying after them. "Get back here! I'm being *gentle* !"

It was no use; the birds had been thoroughly spooked. Apparently regular speaking volume wasn't gentle enough. She needed to be quieter. After all, Fluttershy was normally *way* more quiet than Rainbow Dash.

"Hey," she said in her indoor voice to another tree. The birds all turned to her in unison, and for a moment Dash thought it had worked. Then they flew away. One of them let out a fast paced series of chirps as it took off, and for a moment Dash thought she was being laughed at.

Of course they're not laughing at you, Dash, they're just stupid birds. Quieter. "Hey." This time she said it in a coarse whisper.

This time the birds did not fly away from her, but rather flew towards her, jostling her with their tiny wings and scratching her with their beaks before gaining altitude. Dash let out a yelp of surprise. "I know where you live!" she called out after the retreating flock of birds.

This isn't personal, Dash, she thought to herself. You're gonna get the birds to sing for you like THAT? QUIETER!

She approached another tree. "Hey," she said as quietly as she could manage. The birds didn't react. "Hey," she said again. The birds gave no indication that they had heard once again.

"Oh come on, you can *totally* hear me!" The birds flew away at her sudden outburst. "Augh!" Dash cried. "This is crazy!"

What was she doing wrong? What did Fluttershy have that she didn't? They were just dumb birds, and Fluttershy had supposedly trained them. She decided that her problem was her opening. Fluttershy never said "hey," she said "um, excuse me, but." Dash wasn't about to act *that* intimidated by a bunch of birds, but she could adopt a similar approach.

She looked around for another tree filled with birds, but she had scared away all of the critters in her immediate vicinity. Rainbow Dash was the fastest pegasus alive, however, and it did not take her long to fly to another group of trees.

"Excuse me," she whispered.

Every bird sitting in the tree looked over at her. Dash felt a little uneasy. Her technique had worked, but now she had no idea how to proceed. She felt the stares of two dozen birds on her.

"I, uh, need you to sing," she said simply.

The birds continued to give her a blank stare.

"You know," she said, "sing. *Lalala-la-lalalaaaah.*"

The birds looked at her with the same blank stare again, then every one of them burst into the same screeching laughter that Dash had heard earlier. "Hey!" Dash said in protest. "I'm not that good at singing, okay?"

The largest bird, a bright red one with pointed feathers atop its head, began to let out a low pitched chirp that was clearly an imitation of Rainbow Dash. It thrashed its wings around and waved its head while it did so, and all of the other birds began to laugh even harder.

"Hey, punk!" Dash said. The bird looked over at her. "Yeah, I'm talking to you! You don't want to do this the nice way? Then we'll do it the *not-so-nice* way."

The other birds in the tree suddenly grew extremely quiet. The red one, the one Dash assumed was their leader, flew to the end of a branch that was only inches from her face. It puffed out its chest and thrust its chin upward, a gesture that clearly said: *I can take you*. The other birds all gave low whistles.

Dash was perfectly happy to oblige the bird. Maybe being gentle and kind hadn't worked out, but violence and bravado were two things she had in abundance. She threw her head forward, intending to headbutt the cocky bird-leader.

It leapt back with a surprising amount of speed, and the branch it was standing on was flung upward, free from the red bird's weight. Dash poked herself in the eye with a tree branch. The birds took up their laughter once more as Dash fell to the ground and clutched her burning eye.

She looked up at the red bird, the only bird in the tree who wasn't laughing. It looked down at her, then brushed one of its shoulders with a wing.

"Oh," Rainbow Dash said dangerously, *"it's on."*

• • •

Twilight gently opened the door to Sugar Cube Corner and trotted slowly into the bakery, grateful to be out of the harsh, cruel sunlight that had not only forced her to get out of bed, but was also worsening her headache. She wondered briefly if writing to Celestia and asking for a couple hours of impromptu night was in the cards.

"Twilight!" Mrs Cake greeted her, coming down the stairs that Twilight presumed led up to her room. "You look positively *ragged*, dearie. And how did you manage to get in?" she asked slowly. "The door was... locked."

I told the mayor that I needed her key to the town to rescue Fluttershy. "Not important," Twilight declared. "What's important is that you have..." She paused for a moment, savoring the beautiful word that was about to pass through her lips. "*Coffee*." She drew the two syllables out and allowed a look of bliss to pass over her face.

"I, ah..." A look of hesitation passed over Mrs Cake's face, and Twilight felt the coffee-less terror grip her once again. What if Mrs Cake *didn't* have any coffee? What if the mare back in the town hall had lied to her? What if it was all an elaborate ruse to get her out of the way and set the stage for Nightmare Moon's return?!

She imagined Nightmare Moon rising to power, plunging the world into an eternity without daylight or coffee. She imagined herself enslaved by the evil princess, who would taunt her with herbal tea and *Coca-Colta-Zero* while she begged for the sweet release of death. Her eyes widened, and she imagined –

"I was just preparing for the arrival of the Carrots, they'll be using the bakery today, you see, but I suppose I could fix you up a cup." Relief flooded through Twilight at the words, and Mrs Cake flashed her a small smile. "You sure look like you need it. Just wait right here, hon."

Before Mrs Cake could leave, Twilight grabbed her and pulled their faces closer together. She looked Mrs Cake directly in the eyes before speaking. "Thank you, Mrs Cake," she said quietly. "*Thank you.*"

Mrs Cake backed into the kitchen without ever taking her eyes off of Twilight. "Er... *yes,*" she said. "You're... welcome."

Twilight took a seat in an empty booth and rubbed at her temples with her hooves. Everything was going to work out okay. Nothing was going to go wrong.

"And watch out for Pinkie Pie while you're around town," Mrs Cake called out from the kitchen. "She's acting a little more odd than usual today. Hopefully she won't get into any trouble."

"Has she done this before?"

"Oh, goodness yes," was Mrs Cake's emphatic reply. "Last time my good spatula went missing she spent two weeks' worth of pay on a coat and hat and then went missing for two days. We eventually found her in the basement interrogating a customer."

Twilight groaned. Pinkie would be one more thing to worry about, but only after she got her coffee.

"Cream and sugar, dearie?"

"No cream. Pinkie Pie amount of sugar."

"So," Mrs Cake began as she set the steaming mug in front of Twilight. "How are the preparations for the celebration going?" She sat across from the unicorn and offered her a biscuit.

Twilight was about to cool the coffee with a spell, but decided that using magic in her current mental state was probably a bad idea. "Oh," she said cheerfully as she blew on her coffee, "horribly."

"Oh. Well, um..."

"Fluttershy is missing, and Pinkie Pie is doing whatever it is she does trying to find her." Twilight was surprised at how happy she sounded saying the words. "Rainbow Dash is going to try to tame Fluttershy's birds, which will probably end in disaster."

"Well if there's anything I can help you with –"

"Oh, you've helped me enough already, Mrs Cake, believe me. Anyway, Applejack and Rarity are doing their parts perfectly, I'm sure. Fluttershy will turn up and everything will be fine."

Normally Twilight would be pulling her hair out worried that the day would end in disaster, but the acquisition of coffee had her in a wonderful mood. Nothing was going to go wrong.

She took a sip.

Her smile immediately fell away as her eyes narrowed. "What is this?" she asked Mrs Cake in a low, dangerous voice.

"What do you mean, dearie?"

Twilight felt one of her lower eyelids twitch as several parts of her mane sprung out of place once more. "This isn't coffee!" she accused. "This is... something *else*. Something *wrong*."

Mrs Cake began to edge away from Twilight, looking genuinely afraid. "Sorry, I should have asked you if decaf was okay..."

"*Decaf!*" The mug shattered, spilling the blasphemous fluid all over the table. "Of course it isn't okay! You think I abandoned my duties and broke into your house for a cup of *decaffeinated coffee!*"

Mrs Cake had backed halfway to the back of the room. "You think we keep real coffee in a house with *Pinkie Pie?*"

The increasing volume of their conversation was causing Twilight's headache to worsen. She groaned and clutched her skull with a foreleg. "Of course you don't," she said, her voice returning to indoor volume. "That would be madness." She stood.

"Maybe..." Mrs Cake said apprehensively. "Maybe you should try to function *without* the caffeine, dearie. It seems to be taking its toll on you."

Twilight looked at her as if she had suggested sawing off her own horn. "Yeah," she said slowly. "I'm just going to... *go now*."

"Okay... well, have... fun?" was all Mrs Cake could manage as Twilight left the building.

With the door to Sugar Cube Corner closed behind her and the sunlight doing its best to cause her brain to explode, Twilight thought about her options. Clearly, acquiring coffee was her number one priority. She set off towards the Carousel Boutique, hoping that Spike had made better progress than she. "Sugar Cube Corner," she muttered as she went. "More like Sugar Cube *Lies*."

• • •

Applejack liked *apples*.

Carrot juice, Applejack thought, scoffing. *What could Carrot Top be up to, bringin' us carrot juice so early in the mornin'? Maybe she spiked it, tryin' to knock us out of the competition because she knows our food is gonna outshine hers.*

"Ah won't stand for it," she muttered to herself.

"AJ?" Apple Bloom's voice brought the orange pony back to the present. She was standing in front of the farmhouse with the dozens of Apple family members who had arrived to help them with the food preparations. Applejack knew and could name every one of them. The Apple family was a close-knit bunch, even if they were so plentiful. Applejack reckoned that they were probably way more close-knit than the *Carrots*.

It was growing hotter as the day progressed, and Applejack felt grateful for the stetson that sat atop her head, shielding her eyes from the sunlight. She looked down at her younger sister, who was fiddling with the bow in her mane as she spoke. "We're going to be late for lunch if you keep starin' off into space like that."

"Huh?" Applejack looked around once again. Her family was indeed moving away from the farmhouse in small groups, heading down the hill toward the boundary between the

Sweet Apple Acres and the Carrot family farm. "Aw, shoot. Ah forgot we're eating lunch with *them*."

"You forgot? What *have* you been thinking about for the past two hours?"

"Nevermind, Apple Bloom. Just grab some food and take it down with you."

"Can I sit beside Apple Tart? She's gonna tell me how she got her cutie mark!"

"Yeah, sure. Just watch out for them *Carrots*," Applejack said the word as though she was talking about a troublesome breed of pest.

Apple Bloom ran off, galloping down the hill with youthful exuberance. Moments later, Applejack felt the stoic presence of her brother beside her. "You ain't gonna do anything stupid, are you, AJ?"

"Now why would I do anything stupid, Mac?"

"You're in charge, AJ, and the Carrots and us have never seen eye to eye. Especially since the fight at the Harvest Festival last year. This is a chance to mend broken fences."

"Them Carrots broke our fence?! They'll pay for that!"

Big Macintosh face-hoofed. "No, AJ, nopony broke anypony's fence."

"You're not makin' a lick of sense, Mac. Ah'm famished. Ahm gonna go eat some delicious *apples*."

With that, Applejack walked down the hill toward where the two families were eating together.

Carrot Top was speaking loudly to a group consisting of members of both families as Applejack approached. "So we found that if you add *just* a little mashed pineapple to the batter along with the pecans, it makes the cake taste that much the better!"

Applejack noticed that Golden Delicious was part of the group. "Well I can't wait to try a piece at the party!" he said jubilantly. "Funny how a *vegetable* can make such a delicious cake."

"Well it just goes to show," Carrot Top said with a smile, "how truly *amazing* they are when compared to *other* foods. Did you know that they're especially good for your eyes? Just like apples," she added offhandedly.

An orange pony next to Carrot Top made a show of rubbing her chin with a hoof. "I don't think apples *are* good for your eyesight, Top," she remarked. *Orange*, Applejack thought, examining the vibrantly colored pony. *Too orange. She just looks plain unnatural.*

At this, Carrot Top gave an airy laugh. "You know, Chantenay, I think you might be right. I don't know *what* I was thinking. I'm sure apples are good for *all sorts* of other things, though."

Applejack cursed inwardly as she overheard the conversation, but knew better than to cut in. She wasn't good at the kind of insults Carrot Top was throwing around. She'd just make things worse.

She caught the eye of Red Gala and jerked her head toward Carrot Top and Golden Delicious. Red Gala nodded, then gave Applejack a wink as she set the pastry that she had been eating down onto one of the picnic tables.

"Um, yes," Golden Delicious was saying. "All sorts of things."

"Well do tell," Carrot said as her smile became a smirk. "After all, apples are the *superior* fruit, aren't they?"

"Actually..." Red Gala had joined the conversation. "Apples *are* a natural source of vitamin A, which is good for eyesight. Not to mention they contain pantothenic acid, which helps acts as an internal catalyst for the magical metabolism, especially in pegasi. Oh, sorry," she gave Carrot Top a sympathetic smile. "I forgot you're a *carrot* farmer. I'll use smaller words."

The muscles in Carrot Top's neck tightened visibly. "No need," she said stiffly. "I understood you perfectly."

Applejack shuffled over and shared a light hoof-tap with Gala under the table. Carrot Top was normally able to insult Applejack in a conversation, but Gala was another matter entirely. Gala had a fancy degree from Manehattan university and everything. For a farmer, she sure was good with her words.

Applejack's green-maned cousin ignored Carrot Top's obvious offense and continued cheerily. Applejack stopped paying attention to their conversation. What had Red Gala called it one year at the Harvest Festival? *Verbal jousting*. Applejack didn't know anything about Gala's game, but she did know something about competition. And if there was a competition between Apples and Carrots, it was her job to make sure it was Apples who came out on top, every time.

As if in response to her thoughts, Apple Bloom came running towards her in tears. "Applejack!" she sobbed. Half of her bow was undone.

Applejack caught her in an embrace. "What's wrong? Ah thought you were eating lunch with Apple Tart?"

"Ah was!" she whined. "But then T-T-Taproot made fun of me for being a b-blank f-fl-flank!"

"And? That's never bothered you this much before."

"Well..." Apple Bloom looked around suspiciously. "H-he said something else, too. But I don't want to tell you. You'll get mad."

"Just whisper it in my ear. Ah won't get mad at you, Ah promise."

Apple Bloom leaned in and told her. As she did, Applejack's face darkened.

"Is that her?" said a deep male voice. Applejack looked up to see a Carrot stallion pointing at Apple Bloom. Behind him was a young colt with blood running from his muzzle. The colt nodded.

Applejack turned to Apple Bloom. "Apple Bloom, did you go and hit him?"

"Well, maybe a little..."

"Apple Bloom!"

"But he said that you and Mac –"

"Ah know what he said, Apple Bloom. Ah'll handle this. You go play on the tire swing."

Apple Bloom wiped her tears and then ran off. Applejack watched her go, noting that the filly was practically skipping by the time she was ten paces away. Apparently Apple Bloom really liked the tire swing.

"Go and play?" the Carrot stallion said. "She assaults my son and you're going to *reward* her?"

"Way Ah heard it, you're son was saying some pretty nasty things. Makes me wonder who he heard such nonsense from in the first place."

"Well *I* didn't raise Taproot to be a bully," the stallion said indignantly. "Clearly your daughter is telling lies."

Applejack had half a mind to hammer the Carrot back into the ground where carrots belong. She adjusted her stetson and pawed at the ground, preparing to charge. Before she could do anything stupid, however, Golden Delicious spoke.

"You know dang well that's her sister, Danvers. And you know dang well that your son heard that particular rumor from your wife. That mare gossips so much it's a wonder she can even manage to feed herself your atrocious carrots between lies."

"Hey! Don't you dare talk about carrots that way!"

"Oh, *please*." Red Delicious had joined her husband. "You're second-rate farmers harvesting a second-rate vegetable. The only reason you're with us this year is because you need the Apple family to hold your hoof. The mayor can't afford to have you screw up something this big."

Red Delicious cringed suddenly as a cupcake struck the back of her head. The icing stuck in her mane as the tiny cake fell away to the ground. Everypony at the picnic turned to look at the culprit. Carrot Top was still standing near Red Gala, who looked genuinely surprised.

"Carrots," she said coldly, "are *not* second rate."

Seeing that the conflict had moved past words, Applejack stepped in. It was time to prove her loyalty to the Apple family. Time to prove that she liked apples more than any other pony alive. She intentionally stepped over the cupcake as she moved to Red Delicious's side. She lifted her hoof and brushed the remains of the cupcake away. It was a carrot cupcake.

Carrot Top continued. "You Apples think apples are the end-all be-all of pony existence, and I think I speak for my whole family when I say that that's a load of *manure*." There was collective cheer from most of the present Carrots. "This year is *our* time to shine! *Our time!* Carrots are delicious! Carrots are wholesome! Carrots –"

"Ah'm *real* happy for you, Carrot Top, and Ah'ma let you finish, but apples are the best food of all time. Y'all hear? *Of all time.*" This time, it was her own family who cheered. Most of them, at least. From his place on the hillside, Mac was shaking his head slowly.

The carrot cake struck Applejack full on in the face. It broke into pieces that fell to the ground, leaving her coat and mane covered in cream-cheese icing. It was sticky and uncomfortable, but Applejack couldn't be happier. Now everypony would get to see just how much of an Apple she really was.

"If you're gonna start throwin' food," she said with a grin as she trotted over to a nearby picnic table laden with pies. "At least make sure it's *good* food."

She pounded down on the bench with her forelegs, causing the picnic table itself to throw its contents into air. Applejack made note of two of the pies as they sailed upward. She shouted, "*Food-fight*, everypony!"

As the pies descended, she struck the back of their foil plates with her hind legs. They were thrown through the air with deadly accuracy and speed. One struck Carrot Top in the face, and the other sped past her to hit Carrot Cake in the chest.

Both of the ponies were thrown backwards several feet and landed on their flanks. The power behind Applejack's kicks was legendary.

Carrot Top shook most the pie filling off of her face, but some of the sweet, sticky fluid remained. She spat slightly, and flakes of crust puffed outward from her mouth in a small cloud. She looked up at Applejack, who was casually leaning back on two legs. Her eyes narrowed before she gave the order that Applejack had been hoping for:

"Get them!"

What followed was one of the most brutal skirmishes Applejack had fought in. Pies and cakes, apples and carrots, squeezed juice and cider all flew through the air between the two families. She didn't remember many details, other than at one point standing in the midst of the fray, shouting "To me! To me!" as her apple missiles struck down Carrot after Carrot. Her family had answered her call as the Carrots rallied around Carrot Top

herself. Heavy losses were had on both sides, and eventually the fight became one of total attrition before both families pulled back.

It was then, leading her family up the hill to their farmhouse, that Applejack found Big Macintosh. Applejack wondered briefly if he had moved at all since she saw him last. "What?" she said in response to his scowl. "They started it. Ah think. Hey, this one ain't half as bad as the one at the planting ceremony two years ago. Or the one at the Harvest Festival a year before that." Mac turned to go inside.

"Alright, everypony," Applejack called out to her family members. "We've all done this before. And we are *not* gonna let the Carrots get the best of us." Her family members nodded. Applejack began to give orders.

"Red Gala, gather a team and start cleaning off our wounded and fallen. Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, your team cooks. Apple pies, apple tarts, anything we can use to bring them Carrots down. Fritter, Bumpkin, your team harvests. There'll be Carrots wanting to raid while we harvest, so bring ammo. Bloom, Tart, Crisp, Caramel, you're with me. We're the raiding party."

At this, Apple Bloom perked up. "Ah get to fight this time?"

"You sure did a number on Taproot. Ah think you're ready, even if you don't have your Apple family cutie mark yet."

Apple Bloom cheered and spun in a circle.

"You're still in big trouble for hitting somepony."

"Oh..."

Applejack looked around as her family members got organized and began to take action. "When Ah'm out in the field, Gala is in charge." Gala nodded. Applejack's team began to arm themselves, and Apple Tart and Apple Fritter began to fasten Applejack's saddlebags and laden them with food.

"So..." Apple Bloom tied her bow back into its usual position. "What does raiding party do? Where are we going?"

Applejack looked off into the distance, where Carrots were already harvesting their outer fields for ammunition.

"War, Apple Bloom. We're going to war."

• • •

"There was a dark cloud hovering over Fluttershy's cottage, making me feel like I had stepped into a paperback fiction. It really just meant that Rainbow Dash was probably having some trouble with the weather. If that pegasus didn't get to it soon, that cloud was gonna burst, and the rain would come down like every pegasus in Cloudsdale was having a pissing contest.

"Curiously, there was no sign of struggle once I got to the home. Although, if Fluttershy was taken against her will, it probably wouldn't be much of a struggle. The mare was about as harmful as an unplugged toaster. Which is to say, not harmful at all. Unless she was placed very high up and could fall onto somepony's head. Or in such a place that somepony might trip on her cord."

Pinkie Placed a hoof to her mouth, pondering for a moment.

"The first thing I determined after arriving at the cottage was that Fluttershy was not an unplugged toaster. I came to this conclusion using a complex system of deductive reasoning. I pulled Gummy out of my mane and set him on the ground to let him do his thing. I knew he didn't want me looking over his shoulder. Kid worked best alone.

"I felt that.

"Fluttershy's cottage was a homely little nook. Not too big, but not cramped. Cosy. Thick rugs and a wide fireplace. Wall hangings and an overall nature motif. The effect was to make a pony feel relaxed as soon as they walked through the door. Even with the yellow pegasus gone, the whole place still felt safe and warm. It was kind of killing my noir-detective vibe."

Pinkie Pie pulled out her magnifying glass and began to search for clues.

"I pulled out my magnifying glass and began to search for clues. Somewhere in this cottage, something was going to tell us where to find my pegasus friend. Time was of the essence."

She searched the kitchen, and found a suspicious pair of leftover brownies. The brownies checked out alright, but led her to investigate a glass of milk and a chocolate bar that she found in the pantry. Unfortunately, they gave her no leads either.

As Pinkie Pie began to wander about the premise, she wondered where Angel Bunny was.

"I wondered where Angel Bunny was. So far, coming to the cottage had only given me more questions. Questions, rising to the surface of my mind like bubbles in a glass of Coca-Cola. Where did Fluttershy get those delicious brownies? Was that supposed to be a table, or just abstract art? Why was my magnifying glass making everything look smaller instead of larger? Where did I even get a magnifying glass in the first place?"

Pinkie Pie looked up to find herself surrounded by a group of perplexed chickens in a small, dark room. *"And where the hay was I?"*

• • •

"It took me about ten minutes to find my way out of the chicken coop and back into the cottage. My magnifying glass wasn't any help at all. Dysfunctional thing keeps making everything look smaller, making me think I'm twenty feet tall.

"When I got back, the kid had found something."

Gummy had found something. He was attached to a small writing desk, his jaws clamped tightly around the handle of the drawer. Pinkie Pie lowered her head so that he could clamp onto her mane again and then opened the desk with her mouth. Inside, she found a stack of various papers.

"Inside was a stack of various papers. Birthday cards, get-well cards, the ticket Fluttershy used to go to the Grand Galloping Gala. One of them stood out in particular. It was a small note, an invitation to have tea the very night before her disappearance. Or, as I was beginning to suspect, the night of her disappearance."

Pinkie Pie wished she had saved Gummy some brownie. "This is a good find, kid." She patted him on the back. She read the note with the magnifying glass, a difficult task considering it was really some kind of de-magnifying glass. She suspected Rainbow Dash may have pranked her by replacing her real magnifying glass with the phony one.

"It was easy enough to tell who the note came from. I didn't want to believe it at first, but when you've worked in the field as long as I have, you're no stranger to betrayal. That didn't change the fact that this one stung, stung like a nest of bees trying to protect their hive from a hyperactive pony looking for honey. Which is something I had no experience with. Certainly not something that has happened to me twice. In one day.

"The calligraphy on the note was fancy stuff. The letters had as many curves as Rarity. Or, at least, almost as many. Had to be written by a unicorn. But not just any unicorn. Only one unicorn was obsessive enough to make her writing this flawless. There were no deviations between two of the same letters, no perceivable difference in the length of white spaces. Only one 'corn would put that much meticulous effort into a simple note like this. Only one would leave a six-pointed star in place of a signature.

"The last pony to see Fluttershy was Twilight Sparkle, prized pupil of Princess Celestia herself. Perhaps the most powerful unicorn in the world, both politically and magically. One of my best friends. Now my prime suspect.

"Disco."

• • •

Dash hit a tree.

She had been moving slowly, but 'slowly' still meant that the impact was enough to send her crumpling the ground. She lay there, seeing stars, as the blurred forms of dozens of birds flitted around her. She could hear their mocking laughter, the high pitched chirping that seemed to drill into her ears. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the fat red form of their leader, flitting from branch to branch.

It was the third time he had tricked her into hitting a tree. Dash gritted her teeth and rose into the air once again. The red bird responded by chirping out its imitation of her trying to sing.

"Hey!" Dash said. "I can sing! All ponies can, just not all the time. It's a magic thing, okay? You wouldn't get it." The bird simply imitated her once again. Dash lost her temper and lunged.

It was a quick little bugger. Dash was certainly faster than it, something that could admittedly be said about any creature regardless of context, but the bird was tiny and maneuvered well. It escaped her grasp once again, and she struck a tree branch.

Dash yelped, then righted herself in the air once more. She was not about to let some dumb bird get the best of her. Her initial task forgotten, she began to yell at the birds. "You want to play rough? Fine. Maybe Fluttershy lets you get away with this stuff, but Rainbow Dash doesn't let anypony push *her* around! Or birds! Especially birds!"

She didn't lunge again, but instead turned and began to circle the tree. She circled faster and faster, focusing inwardly on her unique brand of pegasus magic. She felt the intense weight of her own centrifugal force. She didn't call the air around her, that would have created a cyclone. Instead, she called fire.

Maybe I overdid it a little, Dash thought afterward, looking at the tree that was totally engulfed in rainbow flames. The birds had all taken flight, and were hovering above the burning tree, staring down at it.

"Yeah, that's right! Now that I have your attention..."

The birds all turned away from her and settled into an adjacent tree, completely ignoring Rainbow Dash.

"Hey! *Hey!* I'm talking to you!"

The red bird looked over his shoulder once, then turned back around to continue ignoring her.

"Listen here, you stupid birds!" Some of the birds turned to face her once again. Their red leader was not one of them. "You're going to do as I tell you, or I will personally see to it that Fluttershy doesn't feed you for a month. You got that?"

At this, the entire flock turned toward her, the red bird included. Dash thought that she actually might have gotten their attention until the red bird's eyes narrowed.

Rainbow Dash returned its look, and they stared one another down, bird and pegasus. "Don't try it, pal."

It gave an earsplitting shriek, a cry not meant to mock her, but to signal the attack. Before Rainbow Dash could register what was happening, dozens of birds were on her, clawing and pecking at her while they shrieked. She tried to swipe at them with her hooves, but they dodged. She shook several of them off of herself, but even more managed to cling to her coat. There were too many of them. Dash felt the birds drawing blood.

She shielded her eyes with a hoof and called her pegasus magic once more. She gave a single beat of her wings, and a wave of concussive force knocked the tiny creatures away from her and threw her thirty feet into the air. She kept beating her wings, gaining altitude to bring herself far above the flock of feral birds. When she was several thousand

feet up, she stopped, letting herself gently turn over to face downward, and looked down at the lightly wooded area she had just fled.

"You want to play rough!" she screamed, dimly aware of the fact that there was no way the birds could hear her. She dove, and as she gained velocity she focused her pegasus magic. Not just *some* of her pegasus magic. *All* of it. She let out her own feral shriek as she plummeted towards the birds. "Then have a little *overkill!*"

• • •

"Rarity?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Do you have any coffee?"

"No, Twilight. I would have offered you some earlier if I did."

"Rarity?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Do you know where I can find some coffee?"

"No, Twilight. And while I'm certainly sympathetic to your plight, this is the eighth time you've asked."

"Really? I thought we were on seven."

"If you really need the coffee so badly, why not just go look for some somewhere else? Ponyville is a pretty big town, I'm sure there's some coffee to be found somewhere that isn't in my Boutique."

"Can't go outside. Sun kills head. Too noisy, too. In here nice and quiet."

It was then that Applejack burst through the front door. "Rarity!" she shouted.

Twilight watched Rarity look up from her selection of ribbons and gasp. Applejack tromped into the Boutique covered in the pulp and juice of all different sorts fruits and vegetables, her eyes wild. "*Applejack!*" Rarity positively screeched. "You're covered in filth!"

"We ain't got time for that! Ah need all the red body paint you own!"

The volume of their conversation was causing Twilight's headache to get worse. She stuck her hooves in her ears to block out the noise. The noise, however, remained thoroughly unblocked. Twilight groaned.

"What in the world do you need –"

"Ah told you, we ain't got time! Now where is it?"

Rarity shouted in protest as Applejack began to root through every drawer and cupboard she could find, unwittingly flinging the bits of food clinging to her body everywhere.

"Alright! Alright!" Rarity said, evidently deciding that giving in would be the quickest way to get Applejack out of the Boutique. She levitated a large metal can out of one of her cupboards. "I don't typically stock this," she said. "*Red* is one of the few colors I have, thank Celestia."

From her place in the corner, Twilight groaned once more. Applejack seemed to notice her for the first time. "Oh, hey Twilight," she said. She bent down and began to try wrenching the can of body paint open with her teeth despite the fact that it was made of steel. "owsh uh prepuh-rashuns 'oin?"

Before Twilight could answer, Rarity was pushing Applejack out the door. "Outside!" she screeched. "Open it *outside*, you barbarian!" She slammed the door on their friend. Twilight pushed herself to her feet as Rarity turned to regard the interior of the Boutique.

"Look at this!" she shouted. "She got filth all over *everything*. How am I supposed to decorate now! I'm going to have to re-make the *entire line!*" Rarity fell to her haunches and drew a foreleg across her forehead. "Of all the things that could have happened! This is *the. Worst. Possible.*"

Twilight left.

Outside she found Applejack liberally spreading red body paint over her face in two wide, vertical stripes. The earth pony was muttering to herself, and there was paint all over the balcony around the Boutique. At the sight of the half-crazed farmer, Twilight twitched and several more strands of her hair sprung outward.

"Havin' a bad mane-day are ya, sugarcube?" Applejack asked as she noisily pounded the lid back onto the can of paint with a hind leg.

"A bad mane day," Twilight echoed softly.

More than half the decorations had just been ruined. Fluttershy was still missing. Rainbow Dash was attempting to tame wild animals instead of clearing any new clouds. Pinkie Pie was being Pinkie Pie. Most importantly, Spike had not yet returned.

Which meant that Twilight Sparkle had not yet had her morning coffee. The day was well into the afternoon.

Calm down, Twilight. Remember you have a habit of overreacting. Try not to overreact. Just ask Applejack –

"Applejack?"

"Ya-huh, Twilight?"

"Is the food situation okay?"

"Course it is! What's makin' you think otherwise?"

"You're wearing war paint," she said levelly.

Applejack's eyes shifted left, then right. "I, uh... gotta go. Them apples don't pick themselves!" She took off, and Twilight even didn't try to stop her. She did, however, wonder why Applejack needed to take the whole can of paint with her.

It's okay, Twilight. Just calm down. There's still two hours before the Princess arrives. Applejack might be acting strange but she wouldn't lie to you. If anypony can rush the decorations, it's Rarity. Pinkie Pie had no responsibilities, so it isn't like she can cause any real damage, right? Neither can Rainbow Dash. Everypony still has time. Spike will find you some coffee, and everything will turn out fine. She took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. She would keep it together.

Nothing is going to go wrong.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous boom and a wave of concussive force from the direction of Fluttershy's cottage. Twilight looked, and saw a massive, rainbow, mushroom-shaped cloud expanding out over the horizon.

There was a muffled *thump* as Twilight turned around and beat her head against the wall.

• • •

Rainbow Dash landed amidst the trees, all of which had gotten their leaves blown off by the blast. "How do you like *that!*" she shouted. She searched the bare branches, but the birds were nowhere to be seen. "What, I scare you off? Too intimidated by my awesomeness?"

It was then that the red bird from earlier landed in a tree not thirty feet away from Rainbow Dash. Dash noted with smug satisfaction that it was no longer laughing at her. "Yeah, that's right, you keep your beak closed!" Several more birds landed beside their leader, but did not make any noise. All of them simply faced Rainbow Dash, who stood at the center of a tiny crater.

"From now on, I'm calling the shots, you got it?" The rest of the birds from her earlier encounter had settled in the tree, as well as what looked like a few additional ones. "And *I* say that you're going to sing for Princess Celestia this afternoon!"

More birds were settling in the trees around her. They would come in groups of six or seven, land in a line on a single branch, then stare at her. The only sound they made was the flapping of their wings as they settled onto their perch. Dash was a little unnerved by the fact that there was now triple the number of birds she had been dealing with originally. Had Fluttershy used that many the previous year?

"Um, so for those of you just arriving," she said. "I'm in charge now."

The birds were no longer coming in groups of six or seven, but rather in dozens. Flocks of birds descended upon the surrounding trees in a flurry of wing-beats, coating every single available branch in the multi-colored avians. Dash turned in a full circle to see that there were birds coming from everywhere, occupying every tree, all giving her the same blank stare.

"Uh," Dash said, much less sure of herself. "You got that?" She tried to get a rough estimate of the number of birds she could see. There had be ten birds for every pony in Ponyville. She realized that there was no way she could take them all in a fight.

"On second thought, maybe I'll just be going." The birds gave no response. "I'll just leave you all to putting the leaves back on your trees. No hard feelings though, right?"

She looked at the red bird. Slowly, it reared its head back, looking down its beak at her menacingly. Dash thought she saw a red glint in its eyes, but it was probably just a trick

of the light. It flared the feathers running along the back of its head outward, then gave a ear-piercing caw.

The birds attacked.

• • •

The Apple family line stemmed from some of the most powerful earth ponies in Equestrian history. Its seed was strong, and Applejack was an Apple to the core. She was what you would get if you were to press ten Apples into juice and then concentrate the result. She was the ripest fruit hanging from the tallest branch of the Apple family tree.

The Apple clan came above all else. And she would destroy its enemies.

A pumpkin exploded not ten feet away from her, cast from afar by a long-range Carrot catapult. She was showered lightly with pumpkin guts, but they did not bother her. Applejack was no stranger to the horrors of combat. An older Carrot came at her, wielding a three-carrot flail between his teeth. Applejack ducked under his swing, cringing inwardly as it grazed her stetson. The Carrot moved past her, and she reached back and pulled a pie from her saddlebag, tossing it into the air with her teeth. Her enemy got his bearings just as she bucked the pie into his face.

The pie filling burst across the Carrot's face, causing his flesh to ripple outward from the impact, and her foe fell to the ground. Applejack reached for another pie, and found her saddlebag in want of ammunition. She adjusted her stetson, cried "Reload!", then dove behind a tree to avoid a volley of baby carrots.

It was Apple Bloom who came to replenish her stock of weaponry. She was pleased to see that her sister had brought her several baked apples. They were a personal favorite of Applejack's; their soft interior could do untold damage from any distance. She was doubly pleased to see that Apple Bloom was still up and fighting despite the smear of mashed carrots that ran along her flank. Her younger sister had also tied her ribbon fully around her head military-style rather than go with her usual bow.

Carrots and other vegetables zoomed past them and splattered against the ground as Apple Bloom replenished Applejack's weaponry. Applejack watched Red Gala as her sister worked. The pink pony was crossing the danger zone, rolling and sprinting to avoid the crisscrossing lines of fire. She threw herself back-first against a tree next to Applejack.

Red Gala had to shout to be heard over the deafening cacophony of battle. "We've got them squashed behind their barricades." She adjusted her goggles. "But they're rooted in tight." She reached into her jacket with her mouth and produced three small white sticks. "Lollipop?" she asked.

Applejack and Apple Bloom both nodded, and Gala tossed them each a sucker. "Alright," Applejack said after each of them had the white handle of a lollipop sticking out of their mouth. "We wait for their next charge, then my team pushes back with everything we've got, you hear? We make an opening, then the rest of you follow!"

"One team pushing the entire Carrot line? That's suicide!"

"Not just one team," Applejack said. "My team."

"If you say so, AJ." Gala began to signal to Apple Brioche, who was back commanding the main line. Brioche would relay her commands to rest of the family.

Apple Bloom crunched away at her lollipop. "What makes you so sure they're gonna push?"

"Trust me, Ah know Carrot Top. They're coming. When they do, you'll be the feed. That means you throw the apples into my path, got it?"

"What apples?" Apple Bloom opened her own tiny saddlebag, which contained mostly crab apples. "These?"

"No. You'll see."

"If you say so. Hey Applejack?"

"Yeah, sugarcube?"

"This is really fun."

"Course it is. That's why we do it so often."

Just then, a thundering battle cry sounded from the other side of no-pony's land. Applejack didn't need to look to see what was going on. "Carrots," she spat. She turned to Red Gala. "Time to do some weed-whacking!"

Applejack bucked the tree she was under, and a torrent of apples fell to the ground around them. She pulled her stetson lower onto her head, and observed a large body of Carrots advancing across no-pony's land, screaming and brandishing weaponry.

"Three-pony automatic!" she cried. She flattened herself against the ground and pushed her flank into the air. Gala grabbed her tail with her teeth.

From her place with her face in the dirt, Applejack heard her other sister say, "I get it!" before she began to kick.

Apple Bloom threw the apples littering the ground around them into the path of Applejack's powerful hind legs. Red Gala swung Applejack's flank around, aiming by pulling on her tail. Applejack's hooves connected with apple after apple, sending them ripping through the air towards their foes at a rate of four-hundred-fifty apples per minute.

It could not have been more than thirty seconds before Gala released Applejack's tail. Applejack immediately shot back onto her feet to see how many Carrots had made it across to their position.

None had.

"Reds!" she screamed, calling out to her own elite unit, which was identified by the bright red war-paint they wore. From behind the Apple battle lines, roughly two dozen painted faces poked their way over the barricades.

Applejack wiped some of the body-paint off of her face with a hoof, then smeared it across her sister's cheek. "That means you, too, AB."

"Awesome!"

Applejack turned again to her troops. "What are we?!"

The collective voice of the Apple family answered her.

"Apples!"

"What are they?!"

"Compost!"

The thrill of combat overtook her, and Applejack gave an incoherent scream as she rounded the apple tree to face the entire Carrot line. She began to run, and knew that her troops were following on her hooves. She wasn't halfway across the war-torn field before the Carrots began to react.

She rolled under a glob of mashed potatoes, then jumped over a double-carrot bola. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched a member of her family fall, stuck in the face by a tub of carrot pudding. Another Apple went down to a bowl of carrot raita.

Applejack turned back toward the Carrot battle line, and saw her: Carrot Top. The enemy commander was sporting an eye patch, and a belt of carrots was thrown over her shoulder to fall across her front like a sash. Applejack could make out Carrot Top indicating her with a hoof, directing her family's firepower.

There were too many Carrots, Applejack realized, and every second more of them would pop up to launch more food. Her team wasn't going to make it across the field, not unless she did something.

And so, in the very center of no-pony's land, in view of the entire Carrot family, Applejack stopped to provide her team covering fire. It was too big a task for one pony, and some might say that Applejack was biting off more than she could chew. Applejack was an Apple to the core, however.

A pumpkin came hurtling towards her, and Applejack drew lightning fast and sent an apple to intercept it. They collided in the air, and both burst, causing pumpkin guts to harmlessly rain down on a bare patch of ground. Applejack drew several baked apples and kicked them toward the Carrot line before rolling out of the way of a volley of baby carrots.

She only hit one Carrot, but the rest of them took cover, and for a moment, their firing ceased. They resumed again several seconds later, and Applejack was almost brained by a twice-baked potato. She pulled a rope out of her saddlebag, and began to spin a lasso. A boiled radish struck her in the chest, but it was a minor hit, and years of training allowed her to ignore it.

She kicked an apple to deflect a catapulted melon, then pulled out a tray of apple tarts and tossed it on the ground. Still swinging the lasso, she stomped on the end of the tray, and the tarts were flung up and over towards the Carrot battle line. In the brief moment of cover that the tarts bought her, Applejack threw her lasso, roping it around an unbroken pumpkin that lay on the ground next to a fallen Carrot nearby.

Her team was overtaking her now, running past her toward their enemy. Applejack noticed that some of them had fallen, but there were still plenty of Apples in the charge, enough to accomplish their goal.

She allowed herself a grin as she began to swing the pumpkin around her in smaller and smaller circles. When she released the rope, the pumpkin sailed upward and over the carrot line.

Applejack turned and kicked another apple. Her aim was dead-on, and the apple struck the pumpkin just as it passed over the Carrot barricades. It exploded, showering the Carrots beneath with pumpkin guts and seeds.

Her troops began to reach the Carrot line, and she watched as they engaged the rival family in close-quarters combat. She had done it. She had given them cover, held the entire Carrot family by herself for a few seconds. It was no wonder Applejack was in charge.

She gave another incoherent scream as she began to rush the line. Behind her, the rest of the Apple family jumped the barricades and began to charge as well. While the Carrots were locked in close combat, there was nothing to stop the Apples from crossing no-pony's land.

Applejack reached the line just in time to see Carrot Top bearing down on her younger sister with a pair of carrot-chucks. The pair were surrounded by three fallen members of Applejack's elite. Apple Bloom was fast, and seemed to be managing to survive purely by virtue of making herself difficult to strike, but was quickly being backed into a barricade.

There were four Carrots between Applejack and her sister. Applejack regarded them as she tightened her stetson. The situation did not require any fancy mathematics or verbal jousting. Four Carrots stood between her and Carrot Top. Four Carrots would go down.

One of them threw a carrot pudding at her, but Applejack drew an apple pie and caught it on the pastry. She pulled a second pie and held it with her other foreleg. She avoided a jab that one of her opponents made with a carrot, then stepped inside his guard. She smashed the Carrot in the face with a pie hard enough to send the pony windmilling to the ground.

As her opponent hit the floor, more than a dozen beets rolled out of his saddlebag. Applejack kicked one off of the ground and into the face of another Carrot with enough

force to lift the enemy off her feet, then threw the other pie at another opponent. The last of the four came at her swinging a carrot-flail, and she ducked under it.

She plowed into the Carrot, wrapped her forelegs around him, then threw him over her in a feat of immense physical strength. She slammed him into the ground, landing on the beets that had been spilled earlier. Each of them burst under him, and he was drenched with their deep red juice.

"Fall back!" The voice that was shouting was shouting was Carrot Top's. "Fall back! To Ponyville! Fall back!"

Applejack looked up to see that Carrot Top had ceased her attempts to strike down her younger sister. The enemy commander was directing her forces, beckoning the Carrots back as she herself retreated.

The rest of the Apple family had joined the fight, and the Carrots could not hold. Carrot Top was doing the sensible thing by falling back to an uncompromised position rather than stay and fight.

Applejack's eyes, shaded by her stetson, met the eye that wasn't covered by Carrot Top's eye patch. She saw Carrot Top mouth something that she couldn't hear from her distance before turning around and joining the retreating Carrots. The meaning was clear enough, though. *This isn't over, between you and I.*

For once, Applejack found herself happily agreeing with a Carrot.

• • •

A glaring light hit Twilight Sparkle in the face, causing her headache to rise to an all-new level of pain. She groaned for the umpteenth time that day, and shielded her eyes with a foreleg.

"Alright, Sparkle. Time to talk."

The light had disoriented Twilight, and she spoke slowly. "Pinkie Pie? How did I get here?"

"Where's Fluttershy?" Pinkie Pie sounded like a chain-smoking stallion.

"Seriously, Pinkie: I can't remember how I got here. I'm not letting this one go."

"You're gonna let her go, alright."

"I wasn't talking about... oh, nevermind. Where are we? How did I get here? Did you... did you *drug me*?"

"What have you done with the pegasus?"

"I'm not even going to go into how many laws you've broken by kidnapping me. I'm just going to leave."

Twilight crossed the cube-shaped, concrete room to open the door. Pinkie Pie tackled her before she made it there.

"Where is she?!"

"I don't have Fluttershy, now get off of me! I haven't seen her since last night!"

Pinkie Pie turned her over and pressed her muzzle against Twilight's. "Where is she?!"

"For Celestia's sake, Pinkie! You think I'd sabotage my own Summer Sun Celebration by kidnapping Fluttershy?"

"Uh..."

"She came over to the library last night and we hung out. We baked brownies, talked about wildlife patterns, and then she went home. I practiced a shrinking spell for seven hours and then I went to bed."

"Well then, there's only one possible explanation."

"That you're insane, Fluttershy wasn't kidnapped, and you've just broken the law and wasted my time on one the *worst days of my life*?"

"You shrunk Fluttershy," Pinkie said in a completely serious tone. "We have to find her!"

"I loathe you."

"It's the only possible explanation!"

Twilight pushed the pink pony off of herself and stood. "Pinkie Pie," she said quietly. "I am hanging by a thread. If I try to teleport out of here, I might reduce this entire building

to ash instead, and you along with it. But if you try to stop me when I go to leave, I swear to Celestia that *I will try to teleport out of here*. Now I don't care if you want to play detective while you do it, but you are going to come with me and help me fix things. Understand?"

Pinkie Pie narrowed her eyes. "*So it's like that, is it?*"

Twilight twitched, then turned and opened the door to find herself in the basement of the library. Her lab looked much the same as it always did. "I don't understand," she said, walking to the center of her lab and turning to examining the door she had just exited from.

"This door has never been here before. The library doesn't have an interrogation room. Pinkie Pie, how did –" She looked at Pinkie Pie, who was examining a bare patch of floor with a backwards magnifying glass. "You know what, nevermind. I'm past needing explanations. All I need is coffee."

She led Pinkie Pie up into the library proper. It looked the same as it had when she had left that morning, and Spike was still absent. Twilight glanced at the clock, and her stomach dropped out of her chest.

"Pinkie Pie!" she shrieked. "You knocked me unconscious for *two hours?! Celestia is going to be here in ten minutes!*" If any of the hairs in her mane had been in order, they weren't anymore.

"I found the book with the enlargement spell in it! You can use it to unshrink Fluttershy!"

"Fluttershy isn't – Ugh, just forget it. I need you to do something for me, and then I'll unshrink Fluttershy, alright?"

Pinkie Pie looked up from her magnifying glass. Twilight Sparkle grabbed the book that Spike had left out on the counter earlier and tore a page out of it with her teeth. "I need you to bring me this page if I ask for it. Understand?"

"I felt dirty for giving into her demands, but if it meant seeing Fluttershy again, I –"

"I'll take that as a yes," Twilight cut her off. Maybe they wouldn't be very prepared for Celestia's arrival, but Twilight would at least be ready to avert complete disaster if Dash came into town trailing a flock of angry birds.

A flock of angry birds. Normally Twilight would have dismissed the idea as ridiculous, but she was having that kind of day.

"I am going to go find Spike and get my coffee. He's had hours to search the town, I'm sure he's come up with something. Rarity will have hopefully fixed the decorations by now. Who knows, maybe Fluttershy came back. And even if Applejack went crazy and couldn't fix the food, the Carrots will have."

She opened the door and a pie hit her in the face, knocking her to the ground..

"Kill me," Twilight said softly as pie filling ran down her face. She shook most of it off, then surveyed the scene unfolding before her.

Ponyville was a warzone. Fallen Apples and Carrots littered the town square, and there wasn't a building in sight that wasn't plastered with food. Fruits, vegetables, and pastries were flying through the air between the two families. Twilight saw Applejack, a string of broken carrots hanging from her neck and red war paint smeared across her face, kicking apples through the air toward Carrot Top, who was inexplicably wearing an eye patch. Carrot Top batted several apples out of the air with a makeshift carrot-weapon before hurling it at the other earth pony.

Twilight twitched so hard she was almost thrown off balance. The stress of the situation was making her headache worse, but she strode out into the sunlight and between the two battling families nonetheless.

A cupcake struck her in the flank, but she ignored it. A radish bounced off her head, and she gritted her teeth and pressed onward through the crossfire. It was only when she had reached the center of the town that a pumpkin broke against her back, sending her to the ground and covering her in pumpkin guts and seeds.

Twilight lost it.

She screamed as her magic came to her involuntarily, causing her mane and tail to burst into flames. Her coat became a pure white, and she was lifted several feet into the air before falling back to the ground, the flames of her mane extinguished.

She looked up to see that every pony in the square was staring at her, their fighting forgotten. She smelled like burnt pumpkin.

"Have all of you lost your bucking *minds?!'*" she shouted. The pain of her headache returned, but she decided it wasn't worth her attention anymore. "Well?" She looked

around at the guilty faces of the two families. "What do you have to say for yourselves?" The Apples and the Carrots looked around at Ponyville, seeming to notice the extensive damage they had caused for the first time.

"Did it maybe *occur* to you that the food you have been painting the town with is tonight's feast? Because *now* nopony gets to *eat!* Since none of you seem too keen on following any my orders, I'm sure you'll be happy in about five minutes when the Princess arrives and *exiles me to Horsica!*"

Applejack opened her mouth to speak, and Twilight cut her off. "You will all clean this mess up, and then you will begin preparing a new feast, understand?" Applejack gave a thick gulp and nodded sheepishly. "And somepony. Anypony! *Get me a cup of coffee!*"

The two groups began to mill about as Twilight Sparkle stormed up to Applejack. She grabbed the other pony's stetson with her forelegs and jammed it onto her head to shield her eyes from the sunlight.

"Hey! You can't –"

"*Fire, Applejack. Agonizing fire.*"

"Uh, just give it back when you're done with it, alright?"

"Has Fluttershy come back?"

"Uh, haven't seen her."

"And Rarity?"

"Hasn't left the Boutique since we started."

"Of course. And Rainbow Dash?"

"Ah think that's her now."

Twilight followed Applejack's gaze, looking toward the horizon in the direction of Fluttershy's cottage. After a moment she saw her: a small blue form racing towards the, silhouetted against a dark storm cloud.

Dash landed beside them, her eyes wild. The pegasus was covered in small cuts and scrapes, and she was shaking.

"Dash," said Applejack, "what's wrong?"

Twilight closed her eyes and began to rub a temple with a hoof. She was beginning to suspect that what she had seen wasn't a storm cloud. Her fears were confirmed when Dash spoke.

"Birds," the pegasus said quickly, rocking back and forth. "Birds all over my body! Birds, birds birds..."

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight said slowly. "Go get me the spell."

"Right! The spell, gotcha! I mean, uh, *right*," she said, returning to her detective voice. "*The spell, I got it.*"

Twilight face-hoofed as her pegasus friend ran off. It was then that Rarity approached. "Twilight, dear! *What* is going on? Has the fighting stopped? Why are you wearing Applejack's hat?"

Twilight now had both hoofs rubbing her temples. "A flock of crazed birds is about to descend upon Ponyville," she said levelly. "Because the Apples and the Carrots spent this afternoon playing warfare with the town's food supply, they are likely going to eat off of everything and everypony in sight, and turn my celebration into a scene from a Hitchcock film. I am going to cast a spell to calm them down, and you are going to maintain a shield spell around us while I do it. Being eaten by birds will, surprisingly, break my concentration. More-so than the effects of caffeine deprivation or the stress at my pending punishment already is," she added.

The birds hit Ponyville.

There seemed to be millions of them. They coated rooftops, street signs, and landed on the ground. They spun and swarmed around helpless ponies, pecking away at any who were unfortunate enough to be covered in food. Twilight only slightly lamented the fact that Rarity included Applejack in her shield spell as birds flew into the blue dome that encased them. She sat back and watched Pinkie Pie make her way towards them from the library.

The pink pony held a page in her mouth, and was still wearing her overcoat and fedora. She stalked across the square, evidently going for stealth despite the fact that it was broad daylight and she was blatantly the most conspicuous figure around. When a group of birds approached her, she would give a loud, high pitched *squawk*, and they would fly

away. Pinkie Pie made it to their position, and Rarity let her inside the barrier. Pinkie was muttering to herself once again as she approached.

“– a good thing I had learned to speak bird, because I left my bird-repellent at home on my utility belt.”

"Pinkie!"

"Oh, right."

Pinkie Pie passed Twilight the formula page, and Twilight levitated it out in front of her. It would be a difficult bit of magic, made all the more difficult by her splitting headache and her strange temptation to simply let the birds have their way with Ponyville. Twilight was not a bad pony, however, no matter how much she might want to punish some of her friends. Or all of her friends. Extensively.

She focused, shaping her magic in the way the page dictated. She normally didn't perform formulaic spells, but there was simply no time to learn the theory behind this one. After she held the magic in her mind, she concentrated on the birds ravaging the town, using their inherent similarities to point the spell at each and every bird present. She gathered and released the magic, and a wave of violet energy washed over the town.

Every bird grew to ten times its normal size.

"Pinkie! I told you to bring me the soothing spell!"

"Oh. I thought you meant the one that would unshrink Fluttershy."

"Fluttershy isn't shrunk!"

The birds began to fall, crushing fruit stalls and denting rooftops before bouncing to the ground. They were all colorful balls of feathers, each roughly as big a pony's head. They rolled to and fro, and from her place on the ground, Rainbow Dash screamed and shook as she tried to back away from one giant bird only to run into another.

"Why can't they fly?" said Applejack.

"They're too heavy. Their wings can't support their weight."

"But their wings grew too."

"It's a question of volume versus surface area, though. A square-cube ratio."

"Don't you use your fancy –"

Twilight gave an exasperated sigh. "Whatever, AJ. It's *magic*. Can we just sit back and wait for Princess Celestia to –"

"*Twilight!*"

Twilight looked across the square to see Spike, standing amidst a field of giant round birds, holding a lidded, steaming mug of what could only be coffee.

He was also wearing a dress, lipstick, and a bonnet, but hey— it was just one of those days.

Twilight's eyes widened in anticipation of the hot beverage, but she realized that there was no way Spike was going to reach her through the falling birds. She pointed at Spike and shouted to her friends. "Get me that coffee!" she ordered. "Ow," she added as the volume of her voice caused her head to spike with pain. Her friends set out to fetch the coffee as Spike began to cross the chaotic square.

To Twilight Sparkle, it happened in slow motion.

Spike began to run towards her, coffee in hand. His legs were short, and he didn't set much of a pace, but Twilight could tell he was giving it his all. He was her number one assistant, after all, and Twilight knew that she could always rely on him to deliver. Looking at Spike bring her the coffee, she felt a surge of what could only be described as motherly love towards the baby dragon. Spike had been with her through the best and the worst times, always there to –

A bird rolled off a rooftop and struck Spike in the head. While the baby dragon could take much worse punishment, the weight of the bird still drove him face first into the dirt. Twilight watched in horror as the lidded mug left his hands, spinning through the air on a trajectory that would bring it to crash against the ground.

"*Noooooooooooooooooooooo–*"

Rarity caught it with her magic.

Twilight felt a surge of relief as the light-blue aura of telekinesis encased the mug of coffee. Rarity had saved it; had saved *her*. Rarity was a saviour, a hero, a paragon of all

things virtuous. Twilight knew that Rarity cared, *deeply*, about her needs. The unicorn was as beautiful on the outside as she was –

A bird dropping ten times larger than the typical variety landed directly on top of Rarity's head with a wet slap. It dripped down her face and flattened her mane against her neck. Rarity gave an understandably horrified shriek, and even Twilight didn't fault her when she lost her magical grip on the coffee.

“-ooooooooooooo-”

Rainbow Dash slid in under the coffee and grabbed it with a front hoof.

Again, Twilight felt an overwhelming sense of love and compassion toward her pegasus friend. Sure, Dash had incited thousands of birds into attacking Ponyville, but her *heart* had been in the right place when she volunteered to do Fluttershy's job. The pegasus was brave, bold, and loyal. She would fight for Twilight Sparkle, even to her –

A giant red bird, larger than all the others, landed on Dash's back and began to peck at her neck. Twilight had no idea how the bird had managed to lift itself into the air, but watched in dismay as Rainbow Dash curled up into a ball and began to shake at the sight of the giant red bird. The coffee, forgotten, went spinning through the air once again.

“-ooooooooooooo-”

Pinkie Pie jumped and caught it mid-flight.

She had leapt almost five feet into the air to retrieve Twilight's coffee. Maybe she had spent all day being a crazy detective, and maybe she had drugged and kidnapped Twilight as well as assaulting her and meddling with her spells, but what was all that, really? It was Pinkie Pie's way of being a friend. And Twilight was Pinkie's friend, too. Friends *forgave* –

As Pinkie Pie landed, she lost her grip on the magnifying glass. It went spinning away from her, and the pink pony watched it go with her mouth open. As it turned to the proper side and Pinkie Pie saw it magnify things for once instead of shrinking them, her eyes widened. She let go of the coffee, sending it soaring through the air once more, and reached out with both forelegs for the magnifying glass.

“-ooooooooooooo-”

Applejack plucked the covered mug out of the air.

She was only twenty feet away from Twilight. She grabbed the mug out of the air with her teeth, then turned and began to take off toward the screaming unicorn. Applejack was like a sister, Twilight realized, way better than any of her other friends and Spike. She was dependable, hard-working, and *so what* if she declared open war on the Carrots during the most important day of the year? What was important was that Twilight would get her coffee, not the Summer Sun –

Over a kilogram of mashed carrot struck Applejack directly in the face.

Oh, come on!

Carrot Top had taken the opportunity to strike Applejack down. The mashed carrot spread over her war-paint, engulfing the earth pony's eyes and mouth completely. Applejack went down, and the coffee went sailing through the air towards Twilight Sparkle once again.

“-ooooooooooooo-”

She knew that she wasn't going to make it in time. She couldn't grab the coffee with her magic, because she simply couldn't focus quickly enough through the caffeine-less haze. She made a mental note to find and murder irony itself as the coffee plummeted toward the dirt.

Where it was *caught*, by none other than –

"Oh, um, sorry," Fluttershy said, seeing the expression on Twilight's face. "Was I supposed to let that fall? You were all looking at it so strangely I thought –"

"Fluttershy," Twilight said with a burning intensity. "If you give me that coffee I will –"

What she said next made the pegasus blush furiously.

"Um, I don't... I mean... I like you, Twilight, but, you can just, um, have the coffee? We don't need to... I don't want..."

Twilight took the mug, tore off the lid, and downed the scorching hot coffee in three gulps.

Spike had not failed her; it was the real thing. Instantly she felt the coffee beginning to take effect, and she gave a moan of pleasure. It was as though somepony was massaging her brain, soothing away all of her worries along with her pesky headache. She felt her

magic return to her, embracing her warmly as though she were a loved one. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again...

When she opened them again, Ponyville was still a total disaster and she was still probably going to incur the wrath of her God-Princess and never see the light of day again, but with the way the light of day had been treating her, she didn't mind the thought all that much.

"Where were you?" she asked Fluttershy.

"Well, I, um..."

• • •

The heat coming from the open maw of the active volcano was almost unbearable. It beat against her in waves, parching her mouth and throat and demanding that she shield her eyes. What was worse, the rickety wooden rope-bridge underneath her swung to and fro rapidly, throwing her off balance, and the dry boards beneath her hooves creaked and splintered, threatening to snap at any moment. Fluttershy would not have worried, except the blind zebra seer had bound her wings as punishment for not seeing that she was actually a beautiful giraffe in disguise.

Fluttershy had bigger things to worry about, however. She made a great leap into the air and kicked the eleven foot tall grizzly bear directly in the face. It recoiled, and she grabbed onto its head, flipping herself onto its back and forcing it to the ground. It fell under her, and she gave a savage grunt before driving a hoof into the back of its skull. Then, she drew the mystic rod and held it between her teeth, turning to face the family of ravenous pterodactyls, each of which had glowing red eyes.

"Angel," she called out desperately as she fended off the possessed dinosaurs with the enormous power of the mystic rod. "Forget about me! Rescue the baby chicks!"

Angel, further down on the rope bridge and outfitted from ears to feet in his black mission gear, turned from Fluttershy toward the nest of baby birds teetering at the edge of the volcano. He looked back to Fluttershy, clearly torn between protecting his mistress and following orders.

"I can handle this!" Fluttershy shouted as she blew a hole in a pterodactyl's wing. "You need to save them, then get to the control room!"

Angel nodded, then turned and hopped away.

Fluttershy estimated that she had only twelve seconds before the arcanobomb detonated, causing the volcano to erupt. She needed to –

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"You know what," she finished meekly, "it isn't important. I'm here now."

Twilight was looking past her, into the air. "And so is she," she whispered.

A glorious fanfare was played by Celestia's royal guard as they landed in the middle of the Ponyville town square. The music died down, however, as the guards and the Princess collectively looked around at the chaotic mess that was Ponyville.

Giant, circular birds littered the ground, rolling around using their stubby legs. Food was plastered over almost every surface in sight, and ponies that had suffered minor injuries lay groaning around the square. Twilight stood with her friends in the middle of it.

"Oh!" Fluttershy exclaimed softly. "The Princess is here!" She fluttered over to the large red bird that had attacked Rainbow Dash. "Ready, Red Leader? *A-one, a-two, a-one-two-three!*"

The birds began to sing, but because of their enormous size, the sound that came out was a deep, dull droning noise. Celestia carefully picked her way through the mess toward Twilight, the birds continuing their deep monotone all the way.

"Twilight Sparkle," she asked. "Are you alright?"

Twilight's mane was in complete disarray, and she knew her eyes were bloodshot. She could still taste the remnants of the coffee around her burnt tongue, however.

"Perfectly fine, Princess. Yourself?"

"In that case, Twilight... what happened?"

Twilight knew that she was likely about to be severely punished for her failure, but strangely she didn't mind. She had quite simply reached her limit when it came to stress. The coffee had also given her a strange euphoria, a caffeine high that gave her a sense of happiness she just couldn't shake.

"Bad day," she said simply.

"I... see..." Celestia looked genuinely perplexed. "Did you at least learn something about friendship while all of..." she indicated Ponyville "*this* was happening?"

Twilight perked up immediately. "Of course, Princess!" She looked at her friends. "I learned that..."

Spike was still wearing a dress, lipstick, and a bonnet. Given how things had gone, Twilight didn't really want to know.

"Uh..."

Rarity was wailing, "*It's in my eyes! It's in my eyes! Oh the equinity!*" as she tried to magic bird feces out of her mane and off her face.

"I learned..."

Applejack was halfway across the square, locked in combat with Carrot Top. Her face was still half-covered in red paint and half-covered in mashed carrots.

"You see, *friends*, they..."

Pinkie Pie was looking directly at the sun. Through a magnifying glass. In a bucking detective costume.

"They, um..."

Rainbow Dash was curled up on the ground, shaking uncontrollably as her eyes darted from one oversized bird to the next. Twilight reckoned the pegasus had been severely traumatized.

"They can always..."

Fluttershy was hovering calmly next to Twilight. The birds were still singing their continuous drone.

"*Yeah*," Twilight said delicately, turning back to the Princess once again.

"I've got nothin'."