

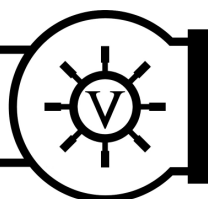
Fixing Up Miss Smartypants

Arkensaw Pinkerton

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	28
Chapter 4	45
Chapter 5	59
Chapter 6	74
Chapter 7	94
Epilogue	125

PONY FICTION VAULT



"Ah'm in a heap o'trouble, sis."

Big Macintosh had the decency to blush a little as he heaped the tatty old doll onto the kitchen table, although it wasn't noticeable under his crimson hair to anyone who didn't know him well. Applejack certainly did, though, and was willing to let her big brother explain the doll with the loose button eyes before asking questions.

"This belongs to Miz Sparkle. It's her doll from all the kerfuffle six weeks ago."

Applejack couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"Big Macintosh, y'all oughta know better than to hold onto somepony else's property for so long! There was a spell or some such on the old thing. Twilight knows she was wrong to cast it on her doll but she's been lookin' for it ever since. Ah was gonna visit her later today anyhow, if you want me to take it?"

Big Macintosh looked at his sister, and slowly shook his head, eyes pleading.

"So y'don't want me to take it over. You're gonna take it yourself? 'Cause if you are you better not be thinking Ah'm gonna catch you up for the work you'll be missin' on the south fields."

Big Macintosh shook his head again, faster, desperate not to have to spell it out.

"Big Macintosh, if Ah didn't know better Ah'd think you were wantin' to keep that old thing for yourself! Y'know it belongs to Twilight, right? 'Cause –"

"Of course Ah know who it belongs to, sis. S'why Ah took it in th' first place. So's Ah could be th' one to return it."

Applejack took a few seconds to stare at her brother before responding, in case she was wrong. The signs were there for anyone who knew the big stallion, though. He was looking everywhere except into his sister's eyes, and he was starting to rub his forelegs together like a colt who'd been caught in the pantry. Big Macintosh was nervous, and not just nervous; he was embarrassed about it.

Applejack decided to go with the good ol' Apple family standby and just confront the truth head on. Whether it was a bad case of powdery mildew across the entire western

front, a broken beam in the barn or a pie that Granny'd plumb forgotten to put sugar in, there wasn't much that was made better by waiting to talk about it.

"Big Macintosh, were you lookin' for an excuse to talk to Twilight?"

Big Macintosh finally returned her gaze. Before he answered, he stood up straight and took a deep breath, ready for and fully expecting an argument.

"Eeyup."

Applejack didn't blink. Big Macintosh realised, all of a sudden, that his tongue was far too large in his mouth. Applejack's response was measured; Big Macintosh knew there was a shouting match to be had, if he put a hoof wrong, but it wasn't absolutely certain yet.

"Less'n three months ago Ah remember you were this nervous, and it was because you were asking me if it was alright for you to go courtin' Fluttershy! Now you be honest with me, Big Macintosh, have you got yourself an answer from her yet? 'Cause Ah'm not about to let my big brother go messing my friends about, y'hear?"

Big Macintosh looked away for a second, hanging his head a little under Applejack's stare. He could feel his words stumble over his teeth like they always did when he was nervous or worried, even if his stammer was mostly under control these days.

"N-Now, don't be thinking that. Miz Fluttershy was awful nice t'me. But she w-weren't interested in me as a gentlecolt caller and she was kind enough not to pretend anythin' different."

Applejack started for a second, suddenly indignant. What was wrong with Big Macintosh that Fluttershy would just shut him down like that? She'd spoken to Fluttershy before about the sort of pony she'd be interested in, and Big Macintosh seemed to fit the bill just so: reliable, hard-working, honest and gentle with both Apple Bloom and the parade of critters Fluttershy always had wandering through her place. Applejack didn't exactly consider herself qualified to judge the desirability of any stallion, let alone her big brother, but she'd always figured Fluttershy'd be a good match for him.

Horsefeathers, Applejack thought, Fluttershy'd be lucky to have her brother as a gentlecolt caller! He'd been running the farm since Applejack could remember, sitting up until late in the night balancing books with his ridiculously tiny reading glasses perched at the end of his nose. He could do stuff with finances Applejack could barely understand, haggle with the suppliers and apple traders like nopony's business, and he'd

even spent a week and a half reading those ridiculous romance novels Rarity had said Fluttershy was so fond of so he'd have something to talk about with her! Applejack resolved herself to have a conversation with Fluttershy as soon as possible before she let her chance with Big Macintosh slip away.

Not that she had anything against Twilight as a potential suitor for Big Macintosh, Applejack quickly reminded herself. She was a studious pony alright, reliable in her own way, and Big Macintosh could sure lose himself in a book the same way she kept seeing Twilight disappear into one, so they weren't necessarily a bad fit. It's just that Applejack had always assumed, she realised, that Fluttershy would be invited into the Apple family sooner rather than later. She was good with animals, and that'd be real useful for sure, but it was more than that.

Applejack had always appreciated her brother's taciturn nature, letting her speak her full mind before responding, even when she was a little filly and had been prattling on about nothing. She'd not realised at the time it was a terrible stammer of her brother's that had contributed so much to his quiet nature. She'd just liked that he let her finish her piece. Even now, the rest of her friends spoke too quickly for her liking. Fluttershy would let her finish saying everything she wanted to say before she'd say anything in response, and that response would always show she'd really taken the time to listen. With Fluttershy it was more her consideration for the speaker than anything else that prevented her from butting in, but in any case whenever Applejack had spoken to Fluttershy it felt safe. It felt like she was speaking with family.

Big Macintosh saw Applejack set her face into a determined grin, and internally braced himself. That face meant he was about to hear a plan that he'd have no hope of changing. Worse than that, it usually meant that Applejack had decided – again – to go off and do something instead of waiting to find out everything that was going on.

"Well, don't go trying to open another door before we're certain this one is closed, y'hear? Ah'm gonna go and have a talk with Fluttershy this afternoon about our chickens anyhow, so Ah figure Ah can make sure y'all have got your apples in a row before you go talking to anypony else."

Big Macintosh felt his heart sink. Applejack bringing this all up with Fluttershy was the last thing he wanted. Fluttershy'd been honest enough with him about the hows and whys of why they wouldn't exactly work as a couple and he didn't exactly want Applejack dragging a rake through it, if only because he knew it'd make the nervous little pegasus feel even more awkward than usual. One look at his sister's face, however, told him it was a done deal. He sighed, and gently lifted the battered doll from the table.

"You do what y'think best, sis. Could you at least take Miz Smartypants here with you? Ah was gonna ask Miz Fluttershy if she could find the time to spruce her up some, re-attach the eye and whatnot."

Applejack sighed and roughly took the doll, jamming her into a saddlebag and making Big Macintosh wince.

"Whatever you say, big brother. But this is as a favour to Twilight and not for any other reason. Ah'll make sure Ah bring it back so's you can be the one to return it, but if I know Fluttershy, and Ah do, then y'all will be returning it as Twilight's friend's brother and nothin' more. Ah'm sure Fluttershy was just too nervous to say anything to you before!"

Applejack shot a wide grin at her brother for a second before turning and cantering out of the door, off in the direction of Fluttershy's cottage. Big Macintosh stared after her sadly for a couple of seconds before sighing and following her outside, looking for a moment in the direction of the town proper before heading off to the south fields. From the farmhouse, he could just see the top of the library tree peaking above the rest of the buildings. With a quiet smile on his face, Big Macintosh walked off to the south fields, ready for a good, long, distracting day of work.

• • •

As she pounded down the road towards the town, Applejack was starting to have misgivings about taking the doll with her to Fluttershy's place. She knew she was no good in a protracted lie and it was bound to slip out that Big Macintosh had been holding on to the thing. If she was going to convince Fluttershy that Big Macintosh was a viable suitor after all, then she couldn't be having anything on her that might cast misgivings on his affections; like hanging on to some other pony's prized personal possessions.

She slowed down her running as she looked back at the raggedy old doll in her saddlebags and thought about it. What she needed to do was drop it off with somepony else, somepony who could fix her up as good as Fluttershy would be able to do with her crazy knowledge of sewing – Rarity! She'd have to dance around the truth a little and say she just found it in the house, otherwise Rarity'd just let on to Fluttershy about it at one of their frou-frou spa sessions, but that wasn't really a lie. She had found out about it in the house, at any rate.

Applejack changed direction and headed into town towards Carousel Boutique, pulling the doll out of her saddlebags as she cantered up to the door and knocked on it loudly with her front hooves. It wasn't long before a slightly harassed-looking Rarity answered.

"Applejack! You're a sight for sore – isn't Apple Bloom with you?"

"Hmr?" Applejack mumbled around the doll. "Uh fort thut she –"

"Dear, I absolutely cannot hear you around that – that thing you're carrying around. Do wipe your feet, come in and put it down, but if it was supposed to be an article of clothing I'm afraid it's beyond even my talent to rescue."

Applejack quickly stamped the dust off her hooves and walked into the boutique, depositing Miss Smartypants on a nearby table.

"Sorry about that, sugarcube. Ah was gonna say Ah thought your sister and Scootaloo were meeting Apple Bloom up at Sweet Apple Acres. That's what Apple Bloom's been flappin' her jaw about in any case."

Rarity's eye twitched for a moment, and she spoke through gritted teeth.

"So Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo have been waiting here – playing in my boutique – when they could have been using all that energy to, say, walk over to your farm? Well, no time like the present."

Rarity turned to her stairs and shouted up.

"Girls, stop whatever little projects you're working on! Apple Bloom's waiting for you at Sweet Apple Acres!"

Upstairs, the noise reached a crescendo moments before Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo pounded down the stairs. Rarity turned back to Applejack and looked at the slumped old doll on her table for a second, before raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Oh, this ol' thing? It's Twilight's doll from that whole mess a few weeks back. Ah, uh, Ah found it up at the farm and Ah wondered if maybe you could try fixing it up some before Ah give it back. Ah'd be real appreciative, Rarity, Ah know it's not the sort of thing you usually do."

Rarity sighed and magically lifted the doll to a work table in the corner.

"I will give it my very best, Applejack, but I'm not sure how it's going to turn out. Why didn't you just give it back to Twilight straight away?"

Before Applejack could answer, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo started firing off their own questions, each jostling in front of the other for Applejack's attention as they spoke.

"Why did you keep the doll for so long?"

"Yeah, why? Were you playing with it? It's really old."

"How come you want it all fixed up? Are you gonna give it to her as a present?"

"You can't give someone something that's already theirs as a present!"

"That's why she's having it all fixed!"

Applejack finally found a way into the conversation by pushing the two foals away from each other.

"Now, girls, there's no reason to argue over it. Sweetie Belle's right, Ah'm getting it fixed up for her as kind of a present. Now Apple Bloom is waitin' on you both, so –"

"Why are you getting her a present?"

Both girls chimed in at once, joined by Rarity who was looking up quizzically from an extremely critical examination of Miss Smartyponies and starting to thread a needle. Applejack hated being the centre of attention when she couldn't just tell the truth, and she could feel a blush starting on her ears and working its way down across her face.

"Because – because sometimes it's nice to get somepony a present when y'care about – when they're your friend, d'ye hear? Rarity, I gotta go. Girls, Apple Bloom's waiting for you both at the farm."

Applejack quickly backed out of the door and took a moment to clear her head. She hated lying, even doing anything that was close to lying, and she knew full well she was no good at it. As she looked out towards Fluttershy's cottage, she felt her belly rumbling. Deciding that that particular conversation was going to be tricky enough without an empty stomach distracting her, she headed into town with the intent of grabbing a quick sandwich before carrying on with her day.

Back at the boutique, Rarity and the girls stared at the door for a second. Suddenly, Rarity put everything together. Applejack was incredibly nervous about asking Rarity to repair the doll, so it must have meant a lot to her that it was in its best possible shape

before handing it back to Twilight. And since Applejack didn't normally care at all about the little things, that must mean...

"Oooooooh!" Rarity squealed to herself. "Oh, I shall simply have to outdo myself! This has got to be absolutely perfect for Applejack."

"Don't you mean for Twilight? It's her doll," Sweetie Belle asked, breaking Rarity's reverie.

She smiled at Sweetie Belle before carefully framing her answer; her little sister was, of course, still a stranger to complicated affairs of the heart. After all, it took a pony with true sophistication to understand this delicate a matter with such crystal clear intuition.

"Yes, Sweetie, for Twilight too. It's just very important to Applejack to be able to hand over something nice as a gift."

Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo stared at Rarity blankly.

"Why?" they asked in unison.

"That's not important, dears. Now off you go, Apple Bloom's waiting!" she said in that cheery tone of voice that Sweetie Belle knew meant they were now intruding on her big sister's work.

"Okay, fine. Come on, Scootaloo!"

The two fillies walked out of the door and started out towards Sweet Apple Acres.

"What was that all about?" asked Scootaloo.

"I dunno. Let's go ask Apple Bloom! I bet she knows why Applejack was so nervous!" Sweetie Belle said, breaking into a canter. Scootaloo quickly sped up to follow her, and they both started giggling as they began an impromptu race towards the farm.

• • •

Big Macintosh enjoyed physical labour; the repetitive nature of a task never bored him. He usually found it freed up his mind, allowing him to almost unconsciously get on with the job at hand, and he hadn't expected his work in the south fields replacing the old fence to be any different. But then, he hadn't expected Apple Bloom to be following him around for the past hour, first making everything take twice as long by "helpin' make sure

you use th'right nail each time!", then shouting instructions at him in case her cutie mark would appear for "organizin' a labor force!". For the past twenty minutes, though, she'd found a far more odious game to play, and Big Macintosh had resigned himself to one heck of a headache later.

"Is it... Fluttershy?" Apple Bloom asked excitedly, suddenly popping up in his left ear.

"Nnnope," Big Macintosh answered. He moved the beam into place, bit a nail and jammed it in where he'd need it. He grabbed the mallet in his teeth, took careful aim and –

"Is it Rainbow Dash? 'Cause that don't seem like it'd work out," Apple Bloom asked again, bouncing up in front of Big Macintosh so suddenly he dropped the mallet. He sighed and answered before picking it up again.

"Nnnope." Big Macintosh swung the mallet into the nail once, driving it firmly into the beam and the post both, before dropping the mallet and fetching another nail from the bag he'd brought with him.

"Is it Derpy Hooves?" Apple Bloom asked happily, jumping around behind Big Macintosh.

Big Macintosh dropped the nail, swung his head around and bit the bouncing Apple Bloom's big pink bow for a second, leaving her swinging from his mouth. Just as suddenly he let go, depositing her on her rump. He leaned down to speak to her face to face.

"Now whut have Ah told you about that nickname?" he said quietly. Apple Bloom cringed. There wasn't much that'd make her brother angry, but this was one of the few things that could do it consistently.

"Ah meant Ditzzy Doo! Ah did! Ah didn't mean to say – to use the mean name. 'm sorry," Apple Bloom blurted. Big Macintosh gave her a good, long look before grabbing another nail and putting it in place.

"Is it Ditzzy Doo, though? Y'see her at speech therapy all th'time," Apple Bloom asked, running and fetching the mallet for her brother. Big Macintosh sighed. It was turning into an extremely long afternoon.

"Nnnope." Big Macintosh took the mallet and swung at the fence again, pinning the beam firmly in place with a single satisfying 'thunk'. Even with the distractions, it'd only

take him another half an hour to finish the job. Maybe, he thought, he could go into town early, visit the library before meeting up with Ditzzy for their group speech session. Even if he could barely get a word out, Twilight always seemed so pleased to see –

"Are y' SURE it isn't Fluttershy? 'Cause Applejack said that she was practic'ly part of the family, so Ah thought that –"

Apple Bloom was prevented from finishing by the sounds of a small, mobile fight rolling over the hill, from the direction of the farm house. The dust up seemed to include equal parts Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, a blue scooter and accusations of cheating until Big Macintosh walked calmly over and pushed them apart with his nose.

"You can't use a scooter in a race! It's supposed to be a RACE!" Sweetie Belle was shouting.

"Yes I can! You never said I couldn't!" Scootaloo screamed back. Big Macintosh took a deep breath – it looked like getting these two on talking terms again was going to take up the rest of his afternoon. There goes the library, he thought. He was about to start the long, laborious process of mediating the argument when Apple Bloom interrupted him.

"Girls, knock it off! Ah've got a great plan for our crusadin' today!" Apple Bloom proudly announced from atop Big Macintosh's head. Before she'd even finished speaking, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were side by side in front of Big Macintosh, looking up at Apple Bloom with excited eyes, their argument totally forgotten.

"Ooooh, what's the plan?"

"Yeah, tell us tell us tell us!"

"Ah'll tell y'all in a second," Apple Bloom said, before bouncing to the ground and turning around to face Big Macintosh.

"But it's a secret, Big Macintosh, so you're gonna have to finish the fence without me. Ah'm sorry but it's important!" Apple Bloom said with an extremely serious expression on her face. Very carefully, and without allowing any expression of confused relief to creep onto his face, Big Macintosh walked back to the fence and continued his work, pleased to sink back into pleasant thoughts of the filly at the library.

"So here's mah plan for our crusadin' today! Except y'gotta keep it real quiet otherwise Big Macintosh'll hear," Apple Bloom whispered, leaning her head in towards her almost awestruck friends. Suddenly, Sweetie Belle started, interrupting loudly.

"Oh! I just remembered! Apple Bloom, do you know why Applejack was so nervous this morning? She had that old doll of Twilight's we fought over, and she wanted Rarity to fix it, except she kept on looking at her hooves and she wouldn't answer any of our questions."

Apple Bloom looked at Sweetie Belle dismissively. "Of course Ah know why! That's where Ah got mah plan for today's crusadin! We're gonna be matchmakers!"

"Matchmakers?" Scootaloo wrinkled up her nose in confusion. "You mean we gotta make matches? Like, fire matches?"

"We don't even know what the bit that catches fire is made from," admitted Sweetie Belle, rubbing her legs together in embarrassment. "Apple Bloom, I don't think –"

"No, you've got it all wrong! Ah mean we're gonna help other ponies find their one true love!" Apple Bloom explained excitedly.

"Oh!" Sweetie Belle exclaimed with a huge grin. "That's so romantic! I bet that would give you a great cutie mark!"

Scootaloo's expression was a lot less animated. She sat down in the field and fixed her fellow crusaders with a blunt look.

"That sounds so sappy! Who would even want a cutie mark for making ponies get all lovey-dovey with each other?" she said, looking thoroughly dejected at the idea of an afternoon wasted.

"Well..." Apple Bloom looked up for a second, thinking hard about what might get her friend excited about her great idea.

"Oh! Ah know! You can fix up Rainbow Dash with someone! That's sure to work!"

Scootaloo perked up a little at that. Rainbow Dash was really pretty, after all, so it couldn't be that hard getting her matched up with someone. And then she could tell Rainbow Dash that she helped fix her up, and Dash would be so happy that she'd teach her how to do the Super Speed Strut! And the Buccaneer Blaze! And even how to do a Sonic Rainboom! Yes!

"Okay, I'm in! So what do we have to do to matchmake?"

"Well, first we have to decide who we're gonna match up with who, but we've got insider knowledge." Apple Bloom smirked. "Applejack's been hiding that ol' doll in the barn for weeks now! I didn't say anything cause Ah thought maybe she'd make me keep it or somethin'. But if today she's gettin' it fixed for Twilight, then it must mean she's almost ready to ask her on a date!" Apple Bloom pronounced triumphantly.

"Well, if she's gonna ask her out anyway then how do we do any matchmaking?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"That's easy! We just go and make sure Twilight's interested in Applejack!" Scootaloo blurted out. "R-right?"

"Exactly!" Apple Bloom grinned at both her friends. "But y'all have got to fix ponies up too. Sweetie Belle, can you think of anyone who you could fix up Rarity with?"

Sweetie Belle sat and thought for a moment, trying to work out if her sister had recently mentioned any pony more than often, or in a particularly dreamy way.

"Well, there is ONE pony she might want to get all snuggled up with," Sweetie Belle said, almost thinking out loud. "She made her a costume for Nightmare Night and then she made herself a matching costume. But she couldn't go out 'cause Mom and Daddy were goin' to Nightmare Karaoke and they needed someone to sit and watch the house, 'cause Daddy said somepony might throw eggs at it. She was really grumpy about it too, and her costume didn't really make much sense on its own for a unicorn and ponies kept asking her about it and she kept saying how it was the worst possible night!"

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo didn't look particularly impressed. Sweetie Belle looked at them quizzically, cocking her head to one side.

"Your sister says that all the time, Sweetie Belle. She said it last week when we tried Cutie Mark Crusader Chimney Sweeps, remember?" Apple Bloom said.

"I don't need to remember," muttered Scootaloo, kicking at one of her ears and depositing a small pile of soot on the ground.

Sweetie Belle stamped her foot, putting on her most determined expression. "I know she can be a bit dramatic, but she was really upset! She was so upset she got QUIET about it for a whole day!"

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo were stunned into silence. They'd managed to make Rarity pretty mad over the last few months – Cutie Mark Crusader Basement Builders and the

Cutie Mark Crusader Fashion Designer Talent Agency sprang to mind – but they'd never managed to upset her so much she'd actually gone quiet.

"So there!" Sweetie Bell said, clearly quite pleased with herself. "We gotta get Rarity and Rainbow Dash together. That covers you too, Scootaloo!"

Scootaloo thought for a second. Rainbow Dash was really pretty, and Rarity was really pretty too, so she couldn't see any problems with the idea.

"Alright!" she said. "We got a plan!"

"Okay, this'll get us our cutie marks for sure!" said Apple Bloom. "And while we're doin' all that we should fix up Big Macintosh and Fluttershy too, 'cause everypony knows that's just a matter o'time and they're just too nervous to speak to each other. Even Granny Smith said so."

"Well, yeah, obviously."

"Rarity's even already made them a tuxedo and a big frilly dress that she keeps in the back of the cupboard."

"Okay then – all together now!" Apple Bloom shouted, all discretion lost.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADER MATCHMAKERS!" they yelled together, before Scootaloo grabbed her scooter and the three of them disappeared in the general direction of Ponyville proper.

At the fence, Big Macintosh looked up from his work for a second, the mental image of him presenting Twilight with a first edition of *Starswirl the Bearded's Compiled Research* slowly disappearing from his mind. Had somepony shouted something at him? A little unsure, he returned to finishing off the fence, but couldn't quite shake the nagging feeling that something was about to go very, very wrong indeed.

Spike strained against the handle, slowly pulling his overstuffed red wagon through the streets of Ponyville. As a bolt of cloth rolled off the side and he had to run after it for the third time in as many minutes, he decided it was definitely a bad idea to have volunteered to collect all Rarity's stuff from the post office. At least, it was a bad idea to have tried to do it in one trip. He'd just not realised anypony could order so much at once! There were new fabrics, new magazines, an entire box of black opals from some country Spike couldn't even pronounce (he could practically smell them) and several jars of imported face mask stuff. At least one of which was now filled with plain old Ponyville mud after a particularly bad spill early on in Spike's journey had knocked the lid off, and he'd lost track of the contents. It's not like it really makes a difference, thought Spike. It's still mud, at least.

Finally, thought Spike, wheeling his wagon over the last rise and seeing Carousel Boutique down the road. Rarity was really pretty, and sweet to him too, but she wasn't worth this sort of effort. Well she probably wasn't, amended Spike, thinking about his gem-studded bow tie safe in his keepsakes box under the sink in the library. Well maybe she was a little bit worth it, if he considered how grateful she'd been when he'd helped her with the gem digging. As he pulled the wagon up to the door of the boutique and pushed it open, he thought about how radiant she'd looked when Hoity Toity had asked to feature her fashions. Okay, okay, Spike admitted to himself. She's completely worth it. She's so beautiful, and sophisticated, and refined.

None of these traits were in particular evidence at the moment, however. Spike opened the door and immediately ducked under a flying pair of scissors that stuck, quivering, in the door jam. He looked up to see Rarity wide-eyed and practically vibrating with rage, screaming at a tattered old doll.

"Why. Are. You. Being so DIFFICULT!" Rarity yelled, as the doll convulsed on the table and fired a loop of thread around Rarity's horn.

"Um, Rarity?" Spike offered, from behind his wagon. "I brought your stuff from the post office. What's going on?"

"Oh, hello, Spike," Rarity said, turning and attempting a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm attempting a bit of a restoration of Twilight's old doll, and somepony has decided to enchant her with a spell that resists deliberate changes. I imagine that it was a youthful attempt to stave off the ravages of time, but that was clearly quite a miserable

failure. As it is, whenever I deviate the tiniest amount from the basic design, the moment I try to change out old buttons for new or add a little glamour- well, see for yourself!"

Rarity levitated a sapphire from her gem chest and placed it in the lap of the recumbent Miss Smartypants. Spike cautiously walked over to the table, leaning up to see exactly what was going on. After a few seconds, he turned to Rarity.

"I don't think it's –" The jewel catapulted away from Miss Smartypants at terrific speed, careening off Spike's skull with a high-pitched 'Ping!' and sending him sprawling to the floor. Spike's vision blurred for a couple of seconds before resolving into the very pleasant form of a worried looking Rarity leaning over him.

"Oh, you poor dear! I had simply no idea that a larger gem would be repelled with so much extra force. You lie there and I'll go and get you a cold compress," Rarity said kindly before trotting off to her kitchen.

Spike had no intention of going anywhere, at least for a moment or two. While his pressing concern was the lump he was going to have later, he still had questions, though. Why did Rarity even have Miss Smartypants in the first place? Twilight had looked for her doll for two weeks after she'd lost it, and she'd asked all her friends if they knew where it was. Spike knew she'd felt terrible about it – she'd been too old for it for years, but as soon as she couldn't find it she felt like she'd lost a piece of her childhood. Why would Rarity hide it from her?

Rarity re-entered the room with a bag of crushed ice tied with a daring green ribbon and levitated it over to Spike.

"There you are, you poor thing. And after you went to so much trouble fetching all my mail, too!" Rarity said, walking over to the wagon at the door and delightedly rifling through the contents.

"Oh, the new edition of *Shod!* They keep asking for an interview, but I simply can't find the time until I've finished my new line. My opals! Oh, you are a marvellous assistant, you know, I don't know what Twilight ever did to deserve you. And my new face masks from Manehattan! Spike, you must come and sniff this, it smells so healthy and earthy," Rarity bubbled over the contents as she unpacked them neatly around the room.

"Uh, I think I caught a whiff of that one already," Spike said, careful not to catch Rarity's eye. "Rarity, why do you have Miss Smartypants in the first place? I know Twilight's been looking all over for it."

Rarity shuffled her hooves a little bit, looking at the ceiling for inspiration. It was, of course, absolutely imperative that Twilight not find out about Applejack's feelings until Applejack was ready. But was it so terrible if she knew that somepony was interested in her? Rarity loved Twilight dearly, of course, but the poor mare was even more naive than Applejack when it came to romance. Perhaps, then, the right thing to do would be to clue Spike in that Miss Smartypants was being repaired as a romantic gesture, but not give away so much that Twilight would work out who it was? *Oh yes, thought Rarity, that's magnificent! I'll give away just enough that Twilight knows I'm working on the doll for some shadowed suitor, but not so much that she'll work out who it is!*

Of course, thought Rarity as she wandered over to her drawing table, they'd need her assistance in planning everything for the inevitable wedding. It would be so perfect if they made it a double ceremony with Big Macintosh and Fluttershy! And the dresses would have to compliment each other just so while remaining absolutely, intrinsically tied to each pony's personality...

"Um, Rarity? The doll?" Spike broke Rarity's reverie halfway through a rough sketch for the perfect Apple family wedding gown.

"Oh! Yes, the doll. Well, Spike, I'm not sure I can tell you everything. You see, it's something of a secret, as 'twere," Rarity danced around the issue, keeping her back to Spike so he couldn't see the delighted grin playing across her features.

"It's a secret?" asked Spike, now genuinely confused. "You don't want Twilight to know you're working on it?"

"Well, it's probably best to keep my name out of it, Spike," Rarity said as she walked back to the doll. "You see, some pony who would rather remain anonymous found the doll recently, and they wanted to make a gift of returning it. You see, the pony that found the doll wanted to make sure Twilight was absolutely delighted with it when they returned it."

Rarity had a sudden flash of inspiration. Applejack may not know much about romance, but Rarity had been asked on dates by several very eligible mares and stallions, and they always seemed so nervous; why not do Applejack a favour and set the date up now, so that all Applejack had to do was show up clean and smart?

"They'll return it to Twilight Sparkle tonight. At the Maison de Lune, at 8pm. Make sure Twilight arrives in style, would you Spike? I'm sure she wouldn't want to disappoint her suitor," Rarity said as she turned to face Spike, her eyes sparkling with delight at her plan.

Spike looked at Rarity, seeing excited joy written across her face. The Maison de Lune was her favourite restaurant, he remembered. He looked at the doll on the table that had been frustrating Rarity so much, that she'd been working so hard on. And he felt his heart sink somewhere to the level of his tail as he came to a very understandable conclusion.

"Oh. Okay then. I'll tell Twilight. Eight o'clock and dress in style," he said, staring at his feet.

"Why, Spike, you seem disappointed!" Rarity said, looking at Spike and seeing his downcast expression. "Don't you think this is wonderful news for Twilight? After all this time with her nose stuck in a book she's finally going to learn about love! Oh, it's going to be the perfect first date, I just know it. That is, so long as Miss Crankypants over here decides to let me fix her properly."

Rarity turned back to the doll, threading a needle in midair. Spike looked at her as she did so, and made up his mind. He'd always tried to treat Rarity like a proper gentlecolt should, and now Twilight had the chance to go on a date with her and he was going to sulk about it like a hatchling? Huh, no way! Twilight Sparkle was the best pony he knew, the best big sister he could ever ask for, and she deserved to be dating somepony as good-looking and generous and hard-working as Rarity. So what if Spike had had a crush on Rarity? All that meant was he wanted her to be happy. Spike blinked rapidly a couple of times, cleared his throat, and put on his best smile.

"You're right, Rarity, I guess it is good news for Twilight. I'll make sure her best dress is pressed and ready! After all, we wouldn't want her *mystery date* to think she looked bad," he said with an exaggerated wink.

Rarity blinked back some faint confusion and carried on. It was important Spike was on board, even if it seemed like – oh, of course! It made perfect sense Spike had been a little reluctant at first. He was only a small child, after all, and he'd be worried about Twilight's attention transferring entirely to her new beau.

"Absolutely, Spike dear. Incidentally, I'm fairly sure that the dress that would make the best impression is her Gala gown? The one I designed?"

"No problem, Rarity! I'll go and let Twilight know that you'll be –"

Rarity's coy smile suddenly fell.

"Oh, Spike, no no no! It would be awful if Twilight knew I was involved in all this! Why, it would ruin the whole surprise of the gift, the magic of that first romantic gesture! If it doesn't go well, she'll feel like a complete foal, believe me," Rarity said, her eyes flickering to a storecupboard for a moment. She sighed at it, momentarily downcast, before composing herself, clearing her throat and continuing.

"Spike, you must promise me that when you talk to Twilight Sparkle about this date that my name does not. Come. Up." Rarity leaned right into Spike, pushing her face up against his to punctuate the last few words. For a brief moment, Spike was reminded of the time he'd come face to face with a belligerent dragon.

"Okay, okay! Just the date! Mystery guest! No pony needs to hear any names!"

Rarity trotted back over to the work table, picked up the needle and started to reattach Miss Smartypants' loose eye.

"Exactly, Spike. Now run along and let Twilight know! I'm sure she'll want to spend the rest of the day preparing."

Spike watched Rarity get absorbed in her work again as he pushed his wagon out through the door, and made a promise to himself. If Rarity wouldn't be happy with him, but with Twilight Sparkle instead, then he was going to do everything in his power to make sure they had the best date possible. He strode into town with new purpose in his heart, thinking over exactly how to prepare Twilight for the date properly. She'd need to be dressed well, of course. And she'd want to read up about first dates to make sure she knew exactly what was going to happen. He'd have to check they'd not lent out any books on the subject... Spike picked up the pace. It was going to be a very busy afternoon.

• • •

Ditzy Doo breached the surface for a moment, drew a great lungful of air, and plunged back into the lake. Powerful wingbeats against the water propelled her towards the bottom, before a complex turn and spread of her wings brought her to a dead stop inches above the sucking mud of the lake bed. Looking up, she could see the blurred light of the surface, dancing around the bubbles that left her feathers as the water crept into them, displacing the air. With a grin, she started sweeping her wings through the water, gathering more and more momentum as she headed towards the surface, until suddenly she broke free.

Tucking into a tight ball, she span forward twice before flaring her wings and beating them once, backflipping into a lazy glide towards a grey unicorn filly with a blonde mane who was bouncing around with excitement beside a landing platform. She forced both her eyes to focus for a moment as she glided in, getting a distance on the platform for a fraction of a second. It was all she needed. All four of Ditzzy's hooves landed at precisely the same time with a satisfying 'clack'.

"Mom that was so great! You were totally perfect! You'll win a Marelympic gold for sure!" The little unicorn said, winding between Ditzzy's legs.

"I-it wasn't p-p-p-" Ditzzy said, feeling her stammer aggravated by her shortness of breath after that last dive. She stopped to take a quick breath before carrying on, shifting her weight to distract her voice like she'd been taught. "Wasn't p-perfect. I sh-shorted the forward spins."

Ditzzy saw her daughter's face fall before deliberately grinning and leaning in towards her, winking with her good eye.

"It was still g-good, though, Dinky," she whispered conspiratorially. "Thanks for watching me practice." Dinky Doo looked at her mother with undisguised confusion.

"Mooom, you know I like watching you practice. It's totally my favourite thing to do!" she said, running and fetching a towel sat next to two mailbags that were piled next to the platform. "It's so cool that you're doing the training again! Grandpa said he thought you'd never do it again because your physical responses looking after me take sorority, but I told him you'd find time."

Ditzzy looked at her daughter for a second before thinking through the sentence. Dinky was clever – precocious, even – but had a habit of trying to re-use words she'd only ever heard once, and often got the pronunciation and context completely wrong.

"Did you mean 'fiscal responsibilities take p-priority'?" she hazarded a guess.

"Yes! Exactly! But I told him you were going to be in the Marelympics again, just like before you had me."

"It's the Paramarelympics, remember? And we'll see, k-kiddo. I've got a lot of work to do." She smiled at her daughter as she towelled off – she'd never get all the water out of her feathers, so her afternoon's flight would be a bit heavy and clunky, but they'd be dry enough for basic flight at least.

Both of them were suddenly interrupted by three young fillies coming charging over the nearest hillside, abandoning a bucket of apples as they broke into a run. Dinky recognised them as Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, from one of the other classes at school.

"See? See, I told you Miss Ditzy went swimming before she delivered the mail! I told you!" Scootaloo shouted happily as they charged up to Ditzy and Dinky.

"Ah never said you didn't know! Ah was askin' why you knew in the first place."

"I knew in the first place because of the pegasus swimming lessons. If you start drowning more than three times, then Miss Ditzy picks you for her special weekend class, and I nearly drowned five times on the first day!" Scootaloo proudly announced, sticking her chest out and her head high.

"Five times on the first day? I guess you can't get a cutie mark for drowning, then, huh," Sweetie Belle said before nodding at Apple Bloom, who took a large, dog-eared list from one of her saddlebags, marked 'Things we know don't work'. Dinky watched with interest as Apple Bloom scribbled 'Drowning' in between 'Drooling' and 'Drum Catapulting'.

"What's drum catapulting?" Dinky asked.

"Oh! It's a way of getting a big bass drum across town really really fast. Apple Bloom invented it!" Sweetie Belle said.

"It's a way of gettin' unfairly grounded really really fast," Apple Bloom muttered, putting the list back in her bag. "How was Ah supposed t'know Applejack was gonna set her stall up right in the target zone?"

"But Applejack always sets her stall up in the same place, doesn't she?" Dinky said.

"Aw, you sound just like her," Apple Bloom said to Dinky with a wounded expression, before turning her attention to Ditzy.

"Miss Ditzy, we were wonderin' if maybe you could do us a favour! See, we've got these letters that have got to get to Rarity and Rainbow Dash," Apple Bloom explained, pulling two envelopes out of her saddlebags and presenting them proudly. One of them had "For Rarity" written on the front in slapdash print, the other "Miss Rainbow Dash" in elaborate cursive. On both envelopes, an abundance of hearts were printed around the edges.

"We'd take them ourselves, except we can't take them to Rainbow Dash's place because she can fly so she lives in a cloud house and I've not got the hang of my wings yet," Scootaloo leaned in to explain.

"And I said I'd give the other one to my sister but the pony who wrote it doesn't want her to know that they wrote it, and if I give it to Rarity myself then she'll make me tell," Sweetie Belle explained, reddening slightly. Scootaloo almost groaned; this was such a tiny lie, and Sweetie Belle was still terrible at it! It wasn't even really a lie at all, Scootaloo figured, since she'd written the letter to Rarity herself and she sure didn't want her finding out about it.

Ditzy looked at the letters and the fillies in front of her with her good eye. She raised an eyebrow for a second, thinking it over. From the way Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle were starting to blush, and Scootaloo's obvious exasperation, she wouldn't be surprised if the two more embarrassed fillies had started to reach the age where anonymous love letters seemed like a great way to communicate with a new and unexpected crush.

"Okay, g-girls, I'll t-take them," Ditzy said, to a resounding chorus of cheers. She made a mental note to herself to explain the source of the letters to Rarity and Rainbow Dash before handing them over – they'd want to handle the situation themselves, and that'd be much easier for them if they knew who'd authored the letters.

She lifted the letters in her mouth, depositing them in one of the mailbags by the platform before shifting the bags over her shoulders, getting used to the weight and the heft of them. They were heavy today – best to keep as much height as possible, Ditzy figured. She didn't want to cause any accidents, after all. She had her mail route to run, and then time to get home and wash up before speech therapy. At the thought of that last appointment, she could almost feel her tongue freeze up, and grimaced in frustration. Couldn't she even think about him without falling over her words now? While she continued her flight preparations, the fillies behind her started talking with her daughter about their ongoing crusade.

"Hey, Dinky, you don't have a cutie mark! I thought you had a bubble wand." Sweetie Belle said.

"Ah thought it was dolphins. Didn't you used t'thave dolphins?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Well – well I was just –" Dinky shrank back, embarrassed.

"No way, it was a pillow, I remember! What happened to it? Did you lose it? Can you lose a cutie mark?" Scootaloo asked with mounting panic.

"No – I just – I –" Dinky closed her eyes, blushing furiously. "I drew them on! I thought maybe it would help me get one!"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders stared at Dinky for a second before all starting to talk at the same time.

"That's such a good idea! I can't believe we didn't think of that!"

"They looked really good, too! You know, I bet if you got the right one then it'd help everything along. Rarity always says it's easier to work from a good pattern."

"Well, that's just th'sort of spirit we're looking for in the Cutie Mark Crusaders!" Apple Bloom ran over to Ditzzy, who was starting to prepare her takeoff.

"Miss Ditzzy! Miss Ditzzy! Can Dinky play with us this afternoon? We're gonna try and get our cutie marks and with Dinky helpin' we'll be done before dinner for sure!"

"Oh! Mom that would be totally great! Please please please?" Dinky ran over to her mother as well, bouncing up and down as she pleaded.

"Sure you c-can, Dinky. Just m-make sure you tell Sparkle wh-where you're going, okay?" Ditzzy said. She was pleased Dinky seemed to be making new friends; while Sparkle was a great help and the 'big sister' program had really started to get the shy little unicorn out of her shell, it was good that she was making friends about her own age.

"Okay mom! We'll go into town and tell Sparkle and then we'll go get our cutie marks! Bye mom!" Dinky and Apple Bloom ran off towards the other two fillies, and Ditzzy saw them have a brief discussion before Apple Bloom pointed out the great bucket of apples she'd left at the top of the hill. As Ditzzy took off, veering slightly to the left, she saw the four fillies start dragging the bucket towards the town. Shaking her head, the mailmare adjusted her bags once more and started to gain a little height, aiming for the library at the centre of town and almost staying on track.

• • •

"That's *Love In The Time Of Colic* for Lyra, *Apples Are Not The Only Fruit* for Granny Smith, and... wait, that can't be right," Twilight talked to herself as she packed her saddlebags for town. She wrinkled her nose at the bad information and checked her

packing list against her book requests list to find that Spike had gotten those last two mixed up. She shook her head, remembering how absent-minded her number one assistant had been that morning; at the prospect of any interaction with Rarity he tended to be more than a little distracted. After attaching the correct notes to the books, Twilight was about to levitate her saddlebags onto her back when she heard hoofbeats and a voice on her balcony.

"Hey! Twilight! Are you around? I need to talk to you about something," Rainbow Dash's voice rang out through the library.

"I'm down here, Rainbow!" Twilight shouted back. "I was just getting ready to do some deliveries. We could walk together if you like?"

"Nah, it's okay. If you're busy, I mean. I can just talk to you about it later or something."

Not for the first time since coming to Ponyville, Twilight silently thanked Celestia she'd built an extra hour into her routine in case of an unexpected occurrence. Rainbow Dash clearly wanted to talk about something a little uncomfortable, since she'd made the trip over and then immediately tried to brush it off. Twilight walked up the stairs to see Rainbow hovering over her balcony, ready to leave.

"I've always got time for a friend who needs to talk. What was it you wanted to discuss?" Twilight asked with a bright smile. Rainbow landed on the balcony again, not making eye contact with Twilight for a second. When she did, she seemed to think for a second before saying anything.

"I don't actually need to talk to you. Well, I do, but not for me. I've just – I've got this friend, okay? And I've given her my advice on something, and that totally covered everything because I knew exactly what to do, but I thought maybe I should get your advice – for her – too, because... because maybe you read about it in a book. Or something."

Twilight untangled the sentence in her mind for a second.

"Well, why not just tell me who your friend is? Then I could just talk to her directly," Twilight asked.

"No, that won't work. Because, er, she's too shy to talk to you face to face," Rainbow explained with a tired smile.

"Is it Fluttershy? Because she knows she can always just come round and –"

"It's not Fluttershy! It doesn't matter who it is! Will you just go and get whatever book it is that says how to ask somepony on a date so you can tell me what to do?" Rainbow almost shouted, exasperation written plainly across her face. "I mean, tell her what to do. My friend. I already know how to ask a pony on a date."

"Oh, you need dating books! I've got loads of those!" Twilight exclaimed happily. "I can get just the right one for your friend and you can take it to her, if you tell me a couple of things. Is she interested in a mare or a stallion?"

"She's thinking of asking a – wait, no, if I tell you you might work out who it is. She definitely doesn't want that."

"Rainbow, it's not really statistically significant information. I mean, if you take the accepted averages of twenty percent of the population having a specific interest in mares, twenty in stallions, and sixty in both, then..." Twilight started to hit her stride, levitating a handy scrap of paper over to demonstrate the math. Rainbow Dash could feel her focus slip, imagining for a second giving her Wonderbolts acceptance speech to an adoring crowd. Applejack and Pinkie Pie would be cheering as hard as they could, Fluttershy would be doing her best to keep up, Twilight would be stamping her hooves as hard as possible, and Rarity...

She snapped back to reality, blushing, as an oblivious Twilight finished up her explanation.

"...so even if I knew an existing sexual predilection of every mare your friend could be then this new information would, at best, eliminate twenty-five percent of the possible candidates, so there's no good statistical reason not to tell me and it'll really improve the accuracy of the books I'm able to give you!" Twilight finished with a flourish of her quill on the paper and a satisfied smile. Rainbow Dash snapped up the page, scanning it intently.

"Well, the math checks out," Rainbow said, "so I guess it's okay to tell you she's interested in a mare."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at that. Mathematics was not traditionally one of Rainbow's strong suits. She was about to mention it before Rainbow Dash carried on; a dam of information seemed to have burst somewhere within her.

"It's not so much that she doesn't know how to ask a mare out, though. I mean, I've asked mares out before," Rainbow flushed scarlet before continuing, her words falling over

each other as she blurted it all out. "So has she! I mean, I have, and my friend has, and that's not the problem, okay? It's that she's never asked out somepony who's so different to her before. I mean, they have totally different priorities! She's got no time for fun, at least not proper fun, and she'd be totally lost without her stupid weekly spa visits, and she spends way too long on her mane even if it does look all – all soft –"

Rainbow Dash trailed off, staring at her hooves. Twilight took a moment before speaking very softly indeed.

"Dash, are you interested in somepony?"

"Yes," Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

"And is that somepony Rarity?" Twilight asked in the same quiet voice, suppressing a smile.

"Yes! No! I don't know!" Rainbow sat down in a slump on the balcony. "I just – I can't stop thinking about her. I don't know how to look her in the eye. I can't get her on her own and I don't know what I'd say even if I did! Ever since the Best Young Fliers competition I've been trying to get a way to talk to her properly, or do another Sonic Rainboom, and I can't do either. I've never had trouble asking a pony out before. Or with a trick. So I thought maybe you'd know some way to help me out, like a spell or something."

"Rainbow, I don't think this needs a spell. Everything I've read tells me they're nothing but trouble when it comes to romance. And have you actually tried just going round to the boutique and asking her out? No plans, no get-out clauses?" Twilight nodded towards her library.

"I have read a lot of books about this. The more nervous you are about asking a question, the more invested you are emotionally in the outcome. In this case, your nerves are really just a signal that you should bite the bit and go for it."

Rainbow sat up, smiling at her friend. Twilight was right! Since when had she been afraid of anything? She was Rainbow Dash, for crying out loud! No more excuses, no more stupid plans, no more anything except getting out there, and doing it!

"Okay!" she squeaked, her voice pitifully small. She took a deep breath and stood, facing Twilight and getting ready to shout.

"Okay! You're right! I'll go over to her boutique and knock on her door and ask her out." Her volume slid away as she got to the end of the sentence.

"Tomorrow," she said, twitching her ears down apologetically.

"No excuses, Rainbow –" Twilight was interrupted by an enormously loud crash at the front door, extending into the library. She and Rainbow exchanged worried glances before running down the stairs to see letters strewn about the library and the local mailmare holding her head in her hooves and cursing quietly.

"Oh my goodness! Ditzzy, are you alright? What happened?" Twilight asked, running down to check on Ditzzy Doo.

"The d-d-. The d-" Ditzzy stammered at Twilight, taking a moment to get her voice under control. "D-door was c-closer than I th-thought. N-nothing broken."

Ditzzy smiled apologetically, getting to her hooves and starting to sweep up the mail that had spilled out of the top of her bags. Rainbow and Twilight pitched in too, grabbing pieces of mail from between books, under tables and in one case from behind Ditzzy's own ear.

"Oh, hey, this one's for me!" Rainbow said, extracting an envelope from between the floorboards.

"Look, it's all formal. 'Miss Rainbow Dash', heh. It's got hearts all over it." She took the envelope in her teeth.

"W-wait!" Ditzzy shouted, reaching out a hoof to stop Rainbow Dash opening it, and getting the distance right on the second attempt. "I was g-given that b-b-by Sweetie Belle. I th-think she's got a b-bit of a crush."

"Huh. Sweetie Belle, really? I mean, I know Scootaloo has kind of a hero worship thing going on, but I didn't – huh. What am I supposed to do about something like this?" Rainbow said, putting the unopened letter on a nearby table and glaring at it accusingly.

"I remember doing something like that when I was about her age," Twilight said, smiling at the other two ponies. "It was just after I'd started magic school properly, and Celestia had made me her own personal protégé there. She just seemed so regal, and kind, and she was at least kind enough never to mention the letter I sent her. I don't think you need to do anything, Rainbow, except maybe go talk to Rarity? I think she'd want to know, and she won't let on to Sweetie Belle."

Ditzy nodded, grateful that Twilight had articulated what she wanted to suggest so clearly, before suddenly starting – she must have been in here for five minutes! That meant she was going to be late finishing her round, which meant she'd be late for speech therapy, and that was definitely not something she needed to be more stressful than it already was. Waving to Twilight and Rainbow, she set off out of the open doorway.

"Bye Ditzy!" Twilight shouted after her, before turning back to Rainbow. "Now, you go! You've got a good reason to talk to Rarity now, so no more excuses." Twilight shoved the letter in her friend's mouth, muffling any further argument as she shoved the feebly protesting pegasus out of the door.

Twilight shut the door firmly, looking over the mess of her library. They'd managed to get all the letters together, she was fairly sure, but her books had still been badly scattered by the crash. Sighing, she resigned herself and Spike to yet another weekend of organisation and levitated her saddlebags onto her back. As she made her final preparations for leaving, she didn't notice that one of the letters had wedged itself inside *Common Maladies of the Malus Genus* at the top of her bag, little hearts on the edge of the envelope just visible whenever she moved.

"So that's *A Mare's Guide To Marriage* back safe and sound," Spike said, dropping the weighty tome into his wagon and giving the mint green unicorn in front of him a quiet wink.

"Just make sure you don't let on anything to Bon-Bon. I've been planning this proposal for weeks now. I'm sure she thinks I've developed some secret obsession," Lyra whispered back, blushing slightly.

"I won't let on anything to anypony! Let me know when she's said yes, okay?" Spike said with a wave as he wheeled his wagon away from Lyra and Bon-Bon's little house. Lyra nodded enthusiastically before going back inside and shutting her door.

Spike eyed his wagon critically. It was getting a little full, and he'd only just hit the halfway point on the list of books he wanted to collect. He'd gone to the library after dropping off all Rarity's mail, and as he'd expected Twilight was out on her weekly delivery for those ponies who couldn't find the time to get to the library during opening hours. That was a lot of ponies, thought Spike. Probably because Twilight tended to view opening hours as a mild suggestion rather than strict rules. Still, the book delivery service was a way of getting around the irritation caused in the town by the number of times the library was closed for one of Twilight's experiments. Or because she was reading upstairs and had forgotten to unlock the door. Or because she was out and about on what Spike was assured were 'important examinations of the magic of friendship', although he was starting to get suspicious about how those tended to coincide with her turn to do the washing up.

He'd used the time to go through the list of books out of the library from the romance section, and since most of them were due back in anyway he figured he'd go and collect them before finding Twilight to tell her about her date. The first thing she was likely to ask him to do in any case was to fetch reading material, so it'd be best if he actually had some to hand. There were a lot more romance books out than he'd expected though, and some ponies had been pretty embarrassed about revealing their reading material to Spike in any case. Colgate had only admitted she'd got *Stallions Are from Ares, Mares Are from Eros* after Spike had showed her the list. Doc Whooves hadn't stopped trying to explain exactly why it was important research that had led him to take out the entire series of *Doctor, Darling* paperbacks. Cheerilee wouldn't even look him in the eye when returning something called *The Art of the Bridle*, although in fairness that one was illustrated.

All in all, though, Spike felt he was running out of time. The next name on his list was Fluttershy, and she lived quite a way out of town. She had the majority of the remaining books, and actually almost half the 'erotica' section. Fluttershy was one of those few ponies who used Twilight's 'automated checkout' system at the library, which was Twilight's name for 'just let Spike know you took the book out and don't bother me while I'm reading'. Actually, Fluttershy had taken out almost all her books through Spike instead of through Twilight. Spike frowned a little. Did Fluttershy want to keep Twilight in the dark about her taste in books? *This would be a lot easier to work out, Spike thought, if I knew what 'erotica' was. I'll have to check the dictionary when I get back to the library. In any case, it's a good job I'm the one getting them back – if Fluttershy was keeping her reading list quiet, it'd only make her flustered if somepony else found out about it.*

If I make that one last stop at Fluttershy's now, figured Spike, then I'll have pretty much everything back. Then I can find Twilight, tell her about her date tonight and she'll have a ton of books to leaf through. His decision made, he turned around the fountain, only to see his big sister on the other side of the town centre, wearing mostly-empty saddlebags and being followed by a belligerent-looking Rainbow Dash. As he walked over to meet them, he heard a snippet of their conversation.

"All I'm saying is you might need somepony to fly one of your books somewhere while you're on your route," Rainbow was saying, although she wasn't actually looking Twilight in the eyes while she spoke.

"Uh huh." Twilight's voice had the same peculiarly flat tone it did when Spike tried to tell her something while she was reading, and Spike got the feeling that she hadn't been listening to her pegasus companion for some time now.

"You can't fly. Not even with all your magic! But I can, and I refuse to let a friend be stuck in trouble because I was off on a personal errand."

"Uh huh."

"I'm the Element of Loyalty, Twilight." Rainbow suddenly flipped in front of Twilight, blocking her path and rearing. "*Loyalty*. I couldn't leave you in the lurch like that!"

"Sure thing, Rainbow. I bet it's nothing to do with – oh, hey Spike!" Twilight's eyes lit up as she spotted Spike walking over with the wagon.

"Twilight, I've got news for you!" Spike shouted as he got closer. This was too good an opportunity to miss. He could tell Twilight about her 'mystery date' and then get Fluttershy's books later. Pleased with himself, he put on his best dramatic voice, swelled his chest and spoke.

"Twilight Sparkle, while I was running errands earlier I was talking to another pony in town. A pony who shall remain nameless. A *mystery pony*. And they wanted me to tell you that they would be –"

"Are you collecting books?" Twilight cut across him, sounding peeved. "Spike, Tuesday is book collecting day! This isn't Tuesday! This is Thursday, which is book delivery day!" Twilight indicated her saddlebags with a flick of her horn.

"Well, yeah, but this *mystery pony* –"

"What if you've picked up one of the books that I just gave out? You could have really irritated somepony! What if they wrote me a letter of complaint?" Twilight carried on, her voice getting higher and higher pitched as Rainbow Dash stifled a giggle behind her hooves.

"But – but the mystery pony –"

"What if they wrote Celestia a letter of complaint? She'll decide I can't be trusted with the library! She'll –"

Spike took a deep breath and shouted across Twilight's rant.

"You've been asked on a blind date!"

Twilight's jaw hung open, mid-rebuke. Even Rainbow was stunned into silence long enough for Spike to get out a hastily spoken sentence.

"You've been asked out on a date tonight at the Maison de Lune at eight o'clock, and you have to wear something nice, and it's a mystery pony who asked you and I can't tell you who it is because I promised I wouldn't."

"But – but the books –" Twilight stammered out.

"These are almost all the books that had been taken out of the Romance section. I thought you might want to have a read before deciding what to do. But you should wear

your Gala dress, because the mystery pony likes it a lot," Spike said, frowning a little to emphasise that last point.

"I've never been on a date before," Twilight said quietly, looking at the ground. "I didn't think – Spike, are you sure I'll like them?"

She looked up at Spike with nervous eyes under heavy lids, and Spike almost couldn't bear it. She really was a bit naive when it came to romance after all.

"You'll love them," he said with a big, brave smile. Twilight lifted her head a little higher and exchanged a quick, pleased glance with Rainbow Dash, who was grinning widely at her.

Suddenly, a large red apple bounced off the back of Twilight's head at fairly high speed before ricocheting into the fountain.

"Ow! What was that?" Twilight said, wincing at the impact. She levitated the bruised apple out of the fountain, pulling it over to where Spike and Rainbow looked at it in confusion.

"I dunno. That's pretty weird. Maybe somepony threw it at you," Rainbow said, her eyes lighting up. "Maybe somepony's throwing apples at a whole bunch of ponies! They've got to be stopped! Twilight, I gotta go after them!"

"You don't have to do anything except go speak to – to a certain pony," Twilight said, flickering her gaze to Spike momentarily. "You have to stop making excuses! Like me, for example. I've never been on a date before, and this is a blind date at a fancy restaurant and I'm going to go even though I'm nervous. And you're going to go and talk to the pony you've been avoiding. Okay?"

Rainbow pouted, looking sulkily at the fountain. "Fine. If you can do yours then there's no way I can't do mine. I can find the Apple Bandit of Ponyville tomorrow."

Twilight and Spike exchanged exasperated glances for a moment before Spike jumped into the lull in conversation.

"I've got almost all the books back from the Romance section, but Fluttershy still has a lot of the rest. Twilight, you can take these back to the library and I'll go over to Fluttershy's, get the other books and meet you back there, okay?"

"I'm not sure, Spike," said Twilight, looking at the sun. "It's nearly four already and I'll need at least an hour to dry from a bath and sort my mane, plus a half hour in the bath, and a half hour to dress, and if I need one of the books from Fluttershy's then I'll only have about an hour and a half to read it if you go at your normal speed."

Twilight grabbed the wagon handle in one hoof, and levitated her saddlebags over to Spike.

"Wait, I don't think –" Spike tried to explain that he'd rather be the one to get Fluttershy's books back, but Twilight cut him off mid-sentence.

"You finish these deliveries – there are only two or three left – and I'll teleport over to Fluttershy's cottage, get the books on the list and then meet you back at the library when you've finished. See you later!" She smiled for a second, and then she and the wagon both disappeared in a flash of white light.

"I never quite get used to that," Spike muttered to Rainbow. "I do get used to her leaving me a job, though."

Spike picked the saddlebags up off the floor and turned round, only to be confronted by Rainbow grinning madly at him.

"So Spike, you promised not to tell Twilight who her mystery date was, right?"

"Yeah," said Spike, nervously. This was not going to end well. He could feel it.

"But I bet you didn't promise not to tell anypony else who the date was, did you?" Rainbow's grin grew even wider.

"Well, not exactly, but I'm sure –"

"Tell me who it is! This is too juicy, Spike! Somepony's got a crush on little miss smartypants? I gotta know who!" Rainbow said, smiling and stamping one hoof on the ground.

"I don't think –"

"Is it Applejack?" Rainbow started flying, lifting off the ground and pushing her face towards Spike.

"I'm just not sure I should –"

"Is it Fluttershy?" Rainbow said, leaning right in towards Spike.

"Fluttershy?" Spike asked, genuinely bamboozled for a second, all his nervousness forgotten. "I thought Fluttershy and Big Macintosh were dating."

"Fluttershy and Big Mac? Hah!" Rainbow snickered, doing a quick loop-the-loop in amusement. "Fluttershy's not interested in stallions. Didn't you know that?"

"Well, obviously not!" Spike said in indignation. "I just figured because she spent so much time up at the farm that she was trying to get close to him, or something."

"'Or something' is right." Rainbow laughed under her breath. "But we're getting off topic. Is it Colgate? Or Caramel?"

"No," Spike said, turning to haul the saddlebags onto one shoulder and trying to ignore the pegasus hovering over the other

"Daisy? Rose? Fancy Pants?"

"No!" Spike shouted, his frustration rising.

"It's not Lyra, is it?" Rainbow mused, starting to run out of ideas.

"Of course it's not Lyra! Lyra's proposing to Bon-Bon!" Spike clapped his claws over his mouth and spun to face an astonished Rainbow Dash.

"Lyra's gonna prop—" Rainbow was cut short by Spike's claws over her mouth.

"You can't tell anypony! I promised Lyra, okay? I'll even tell you who Twilight's meeting on her date, but you can't tell anypony about Lyra and Bon-Bon and you can't interfere in Twilight's date tonight! Promise!" Spike blurted out, desperation on his face. Rainbow pushed his claws away from her mouth with a triumphant smile.

"You got it. I promise. So tell me already!"

Spike leaned towards Rainbow, looking around for anypony who might be listening in, before whispering.

"Twilight's mystery date is Rarity."

Spike pulled back, a little confused. He'd expected some reaction – it was excellent gossip, after all, and after telling somepony it might be a relief to finally talk about it – but Rainbow just stayed quiet, her eyes focused in the middle distance, as she slowly landed on the ground.

"Rainbow? Rainbow Dash? Hello?" Spike waved a claw in front of her face, and suddenly the pegasus seemed to snap awake, with a brittle smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Spike, hey! Yeah, that's quite a scoop. Good for Twilight. Look, I gotta get going, okay? I think I'm late for a nap. And I have, er, a letter to deal with," she said, pulling a little envelope trimmed with hearts from under her wing.

"Didn't Twilight say you had somepony to talk to?" Spike asked, genuinely confused.

"Huh? Oh, that. No, not really. Not any more, anyway. Catch you later, Spike." Rainbow Dash beat her wings once or twice and soared away with uncharacteristic slowness, as Spike looked on, confused.

As he pulled Twilight's saddlebags over his shoulder, he didn't notice four young fillies dragging a big bucket of apples behind them leave from the other side of the fountain, pulling towards Fluttershy's cottage on the edge of town.

• • •

Big Macintosh lumbered slowly into the centre of Ponyville, his near-empty saddlebags loose across his broad back. The fence across the southern fields had been completed in enough time for him to go into the library for a few minutes. Maybe he'd look up one of the farming almanacs in the reading corner. The one that faced the fire, where Miz Sparkle liked to sit while she was cross-referencing.

He pondered, as he made his way around the fountain, what had drawn him to the bookish unicorn in the first place. She enjoyed reading, and it'd be nice to discuss the books he read with somepony else, sure enough. He did have to admit that Applejack was justified in her surprise, though. He enjoyed working with his hooves, and the hard work of the farm was in his bones. Twilight Sparkle worked hard too, but all her muscles were in her mind. He'd seen her hunt down a magical rule she needed the same way he'd track an errant sheep, finding traces of the author in book after book until she'd pinned down the scroll it was scribbled in the margins of. That was impressive, but it wasn't the sort of work that would help out at Sweet Apple Acres, he knew. What if she got bored at the

farm? What if she resented his time there, or got upset or frustrated that she wasn't as strong as he or Applejack?

Not that she wasn't perfectly athletic, Big Mac corrected himself. She did well in the Running of the Leaves and she wasn't weak or slight. She could probably adapt to farm life pretty well if she didn't mind putting on a few pounds of solid muscle in the process. She could also lift a heck of a lot with her magic, certainly more than Big Macintosh could lift himself. That's the sort of talent that could come in useful, he thought to himself. If she didn't mind getting a little practical with her research, maybe they could finally get the stream diverted due east, irrigate out some of the higher land so it'd be usable all year round. They could move into his Ma and Pa's old room, after they'd been seeing each other long enough. Granny Smith had been bugging him to do it for years – head of the household and all – but it hadn't felt right to him, to take that big room on his own.

Big Macintosh shook his head a little to clear it of daydreams, and smiled ruefully at himself. He could try convincing himself Twilight was the right choice for the farm all he liked, but the fact of the matter was his heart had fixed on her about two months ago and it wasn't planning to point in any other direction. He'd thought he'd fallen for Fluttershy in the past – she was kind to him, and he found it easy to speak to her, and he'd been upset sure enough when she'd turned him down. But that hadn't felt anything like what he now felt for the little lavender unicorn who ran the library.

It was when he'd spotted her looking through him this all started, Mac thought to himself. He'd been in the library looking for something to read to relax after a hard day, and after a brief and pleasant conversation Twilight had set him up with a copy of *One Flew Over The Griffin's Nest* and he'd sat down to read. He could see her working in front of the fire and occasionally he'd happen to glance over at her, hard at work on a series of magical problems. Back then, she was just another of his little sister's friends, somepony he'd see around occasionally but nopony special.

Then he'd looked up to see her staring right at him. She was deep in thought, with a serious expression and the tiniest wrinkle between her eyebrows that showed how hard she was concentrating. She seemed to be examining him minutely, looking into his eyes for something, and suddenly – to his great surprise – Big Macintosh felt a blush starting around his neck and rising through his cheeks.

"M-Miz S-Sparkle?" he'd stuttered out, suddenly breaking her concentration. Her gaze snapped onto his, looking at him properly for the first time, and suddenly she'd started talking, flushing with embarrassment and burbling her words as she suddenly stood up.

"Oh! I wasn't – I wasn't staring at you! I know I was looking directly in your direction but my attention was directed elsewhere. I mean, was thinking about a magical spell that switches the colours of things, so I was looking around the room at different colours, and you've got green eyes and Stormlord the Bald's first law states that it's always more difficult to change a pony magically than to change an inanimate object, so I was thinking about what I'd have to do differently if I wanted to change the colour of your eyes but I don't actually really want to do it."

Twilight sighed and lowered her ears, looking away from Big Macintosh as she saw his perplexed expression and starting again.

"I meant to say I didn't mean to stare. And that you have green eyes but you probably know that already," Twilight said, looking back up with an apologetic expression. She had violet eyes, Big Macintosh realised, and for a moment he couldn't believe he had ever found them possible to overlook.

"Eeyup," he said. He couldn't find any other words.

Ever since then, he'd been as smitten with her as a cat with cream, he thought to himself. He started to lose himself in daydreams again until he was interrupted by a yell from almost underneath him.

"Whoa there, Big Mac! You nearly stepped on me!" Spike said with irritation as he walked further out in front of the stallion. He hefted Twilight's saddlebags on his shoulder onto the street before pulling out a fairly large textbook and a paperback novel.

"I've been looking for you everywhere! You're my last delivery for the day, if you'll take something with you for Granny Smith. She's got *Love In The Time Of Colic* here, and you've got *Common Maladies of the Malus Genus*, which is almost as heavy as I am so be careful with that. You good to go with those?" Spike said, scratching off names on a little list.

"Eeyup." Big Macintosh grabbed the paperback first and tossed it into a saddlebag.

"Okay, I'm done for the day! I'm back off to the library. See you later, Big Mac!" Spike waved a quick goodbye and started off at a brisk walk as Big Macintosh slowly maneuvered the larger book into his other saddlebag, carefully working around the lump of his glasses case. In his caution, he dislodged a scrap of paper from the textbook, sending it drifting to the ground in front of him.

He didn't need his glasses to see the name 'Rarity' printed clearly on the front of the envelope. Or the little hearts around the edge.

Calm down, Big Macintosh thought to himself. Yes, it's probably a love letter to Rarity. Yes, it was in Twilight's saddlebags. But that don't mean Twilight wrote it. It could have been, er, it could have been – come on fella use your darn brain for once in your lifetime –

"Spike!" Big Macintosh exclaimed to himself, picking up the letter in his teeth and galloping after the young dragon. As he rounded the second corner towards the library, he only saw a brief, terrified flash of green and purple before he tripped over Spike and the two of them landed in a heap. Spike pried himself out from underneath Big Macintosh, his eyes unfocused.

"Did I give you the wrong book?" Spike slurred, wobbling to his feet.

"Nnnope," Big Mac said firmly, controlling his words and moving the letter to directly in front of Spike's face.

"Did you write this to Miz R-Rarity?" he asked around the letter, his face unreadable. Spike raised an eyebrow and snatched the letter out of the stallion's mouth.

"Nope! This hoofwriting is awful, it looks more like Twilight's than mine. Where did you find it?" Spike said, looking carefully at the letter. Big Mac could feel his stomach sinking with every word.

"In th' textbook," Big Mac mumbled.

"Well, it's not mine. It could be Twilight's, I guess. They are her saddlebags. But I don't know why she'd write a letter to Rarity when she sees her so often. And what's with all these little hearts on the edge?" Spike looked up at Big Mac quizzically, before examining the envelope again. Big Mac could almost see the wheels turning in Spike's head as his eyes lit up.

"Wait, you don't think this is a love letter, do you? Oh, wow! Big Mac, this is perfect!"

Big Mac raised an eyebrow at Spike's enthusiasm. Wasn't the little dragon head over heels for Rarity? Spike saw his confusion and leaned in close before whispering the rest.

"Look, don't tell anypony, but Twilight's got a mystery date tonight with Rarity! This letter means that Twilight must like her back, so now I know it'll definitely go well."

Spike leaned back expectantly, waiting for Big Mac to react to his news. Big Mac took a deep breath, swallowed, and looked Spike directly in the eye.

"Eeyup."

Spike's excited expression faded, as he picked up Twilight's dusty saddlebags, muttering something about ponies not knowing good gossip if it bit them. Big Mac could see from his expression that Spike had wanted a better reaction, but Big Mac didn't have it in him to fake the enthusiasm the dragon wanted.

Rarity? Really? Big Mac thought to himself. *She's about as far away from me as you can get and still be a pony. She's all powders and perfumes, fashion and gems. If that's the sort of pony Twilight likes then she would never have been interested in me.* Big Mac cleared his head and took the letter out of Spike's claws, putting it safely in his saddlebags again.

"Ah'll deliver it. Ah'll bet you're gonna be busy makin' sure Miz Sparkle's ready for her date," Big Mac said tonelessly. Still, it had the effect he'd wanted, since Spike gave a grateful thumbs up and sped off towards the library.

Big Mac turned and headed for Carousel Boutique, keeping his mind carefully blank of ideas like losing the letter in a sudden blizzard, or accidentally delivering it to a convenient fire. He was a grown stallion, darn it, and he wasn't gonna let himself get riled over some pony he liked preferring somepony other than him. It wasn't like he and Twilight had been seeing each other and Rarity had up and stolen his date with strategic dressmaking. She and Twilight were two ponies who liked each other and deserved a clear run at it. As he reached the boutique, Big Mac just wished he'd had the courage to ask Twilight out back when he might have had a chance.

No use crying over unbuckled apples, he told himself as he got to the door and retrieved the letter. He decided he'd rather not actually deliver it face to face and see Rarity's reaction right in front of him, so he slid it under the door and knocked three times before turning around and walking back to town to meet Ditzzy Doo before their speech therapy lesson. Even that didn't work as he'd hoped, since he wasn't a hundred yards away before he and every other pony within half a mile heard a great squeal of excitement from Carousel Boutique. Eyes downcast, he made his way slowly back to the fountain.

"Wh-what's g-got you looking so d-down?" Big Mac looked up to see Ditzzy waiting for him at the fountain, looking at him with her good eye. He supposed he must have been quite a sight, moping his way down the street towards her. He shifted his collar and stood up straight before replying.

"Well, Miz Ditzzy, Ah just got some news Ah didn't care to hear. Ah suppose Ah was sulking about it a little," he said with a little smile.

"Oh. D-do you want to t-talk about it?" Big Mac could see the concern in Ditzzy's eyes. The blonde pegasus had been a good friend to him ever since they'd met at speech therapy. Not that the therapy actually seemed to help her much, he thought. Her stammer was still as bad during the lessons as it was when they'd first started, but she said she found the information helpful as soon as she got away from the stress of the lessons.

"Naw, Ah'm just being foalish," Big Mac replied, setting into a slow walk. Ditzzy fell in beside him, matching his pace. "We've just got time for a muffin each from Sugarcube Corner before we go see Doc Whooves. What d'ya think?"

Ditzzy nodded enthusiastically at that, and the two friends set off to their appointment.

• • •

"Okay now, sir, if you'd just stretch your wing out a tiny bit more for me that'd be just wonderful."

On Fluttershy's table, a bright blue cardinal stretched its left wing out to its fullest extent, enabling Fluttershy to carefully unwrap the tiny bandages around its base. She looked at the uncovered wing critically, checking to see if the bandages had restricted feather growth or hidden any unexpected infections. Satisfied that the wing had healed properly, she allowed herself a big smile before continuing.

"Well everything looks just perfect. I'm sure if you just take it slowly and avoid any sudden exertion you'll be absolutely as good as new within –"

BAM BAM BAM

A loud, insistent knocking startled the cardinal and Fluttershy both, sending the bird flying out of the window as fast as he could move and Fluttershy cowering under her table before she realised it was just a knock. It took a few seconds and a raised eyebrow from Angel Bunny before she remembered she was supposed to actually say something in response to a knock on the door, even if it was a really loud knock.

"Who is it please?" Fluttershy asked in what she was sure was a confident and commanding tone.

"Fluttershy? Are you in? I need to talk to you!"

Fluttershy sighed with relief at hearing Twilight's voice, even if her friend did sound a little stressed. Extracting herself from under the table, she walked over to the door and opened it to let Twilight in. As soon as she did, she could see relief on the unicorn's face – whatever she needed to discuss was clearly important.

"Hi there Twilight! Please come in, I'll get you a cup of tea." Fluttershy gestured as Twilight dragged in Spike's wagon, heaped high with books. Fluttershy couldn't help but notice the titles on some of them – what on earth was Twilight doing with a book like *The Art of the Bridle*?

"No time for tea I'm afraid. I just needed to get back the romance books you borrowed. I've got research to do!" Twilight pronounced happily. She pulled up a list from the wagon and scanned over it, reading a few of the titles out loud before she realised what she was saying.

"So let's start with *The Mare Erotic* and the *Filly Friends* series, and then *Housemares at Play: fifteen tales of forbidden...*" Twilight trailed off, embarrassed. Fluttershy couldn't say anything; she'd frozen in place.

"How about I just give you the list and you find the books yourself and I have a cup of this delicious tea?" Twilight said quickly, sliding the list over to Fluttershy and sitting at the table. She busied herself pouring out a cup of tea and quickly hiding her face behind it. Fluttershy picked up the paper from the table and looked over it, almost fainting when she saw all her 'entertainment' listed out in front of her.

Quickly sweeping the list off the table Fluttershy set about retrieving the books from her bedroom. By her third trip, Twilight seemed to have recovered from her shock enough to ask a question.

"Fluttershy? I'm – I'm a little surprised at your choice of reading material. Not that I disapprove or anything! I really don't, I mean I've got a well-read copy of – not that you need to know about my reading habits, sorry. What I meant to ask is – this all seems marephilic. I thought you and Big Macintosh had an understanding. Was I wrong?"

Fluttershy felt her stomach fall. Ever since she'd turned Big Macintosh down a few months ago, she'd found it simpler to just not explain the situation to anypony. They all assumed that Big Mac and she had been carrying on in secret, and since they were both fairly private and shy nopony had really pressed her on it. Even Rarity had had the good

grace not to press too hard during their spa sessions, and though Fluttershy had never actually lied she'd carefully let Rarity come to the wrong conclusion. The pegasus sighed at herself a little, sat down at the table and looked up at Twilight from under her mane. She'd promised herself she wouldn't lie about this if somepony asked her directly.

"Yes. I mean, I don't have an understanding with Big Macintosh. He's a nice pony and I like him a lot but I'm not attracted to stallions," Fluttershy said quietly. She wasn't sure what reaction she expected from Twilight, but an exasperated sigh certainly wasn't it.

"So you turned him down a few months ago. He's just been walking around and not dating anypony, even though he could just go and ask out anypony he liked." Twilight folded her forelegs, looking thoroughly peeved. "I really thought you and he were dating!"

"I asked him not to tell anypony that I'd turned him down," Fluttershy said, biting her lip. "I was – I didn't want Applejack to get mad at me. Or say I shouldn't go to the farm so much." Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Why would Applejack do that? I mean, if Big Macintosh was alright with everything."

"It's not that I think she would want to see less of me or think I was hurting Big Macintosh's feelings or anything. I just think Applejack's really focused on a specific picture of the future. I think she saw that Big Macintosh liked me, and that she and I get on well and I'm good with the animals and I can even help a little with the weather. She's planned a whole life for us all in her heart. I don't want to have to tell her it can't be that way," Fluttershy said, feeling tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Twilight listened silently, her tea forgotten.

"I don't want Big Macintosh. I want Applejack."

Fluttershy didn't feel any better for saying it out loud. She'd hoped she would, but it wasn't a relief to get it off her chest. It was just a confirmation that it was true, that she'd been pining over a farm pony who'd never think of her as more than a friend. Not while it might hurt Big Macintosh to think otherwise. Fluttershy wiped her eyes with a hoof and set back to her bedroom to get more books.

Suddenly, Twilight was in front of her. Fluttershy caught a glimpse of the tears in her friend's eyes before she was pulled up into an enormous hug, Twilight squeezing her hard enough to trap one of her wings in the process.

"Oh, Fluttershy!" Twilight almost sobbed into the pegasus' shoulder. "I didn't – I had no idea that you were – I promise I won't tell her, okay? More importantly, I promise you we'll get Applejack to come around. The way she is around you – the care she takes – I'm sure she feels something for you. I just know it. We just need to get her to know it."

Fluttershy extracted her wing from Twilight's embrace, pulling her forward into a more comfortable hug.

"You really think that we could –" Fluttershy was interrupted by a flat, cold voice from the door.

"Not that Ah want to interrupt, but Ah need to have a word with Fluttershy," Applejack said.

Fluttershy and Twilight froze for a second before Twilight disentangled herself. While Fluttershy mostly kept her composure and just quietly returned to her hooves, Twilight couldn't seem to stop herself talking.

"Applejack! What are you doing here? Not that you shouldn't be here, of course, I mean who doesn't like to call on Fluttershy? Not that I'm calling on Fluttershy! I'm just here about the books!"

Applejack eyed Twilight suspiciously before taking a look at the wagon and turning pale. Snorting from her nostrils, she started towards Twilight, getting louder with each step.

"This is what you were here for? Well, don't it all start makin' sense now! You've been coming round here with your little smut wagon for a few months now, Ah reckon. You've been seducin' Big Macintosh with your fancy books at the library, and now you're peddlin' your bawdy nonsense to Fluttershy! Well, the amount of time she's spent up at the farm she's practically part of the family, d'ye hear? Ah look after the Apple family! Me! You got no right to take her away from me!"

Applejack had pressed Twilight right back against the wall of the little cottage. Fluttershy could see Twilight silently pleading with her to help, but Fluttershy just couldn't find her voice.

"I think you've got the wrong idea Applejack, I wasn't –" Twilight stammered out.

"You weren't what? Staying? Well you're right there, missy. Here, you take your cart of fornication and you teleport back to that book barn you call a home!" Applejack said, grabbing the handle and forcing the wagon at Twilight.

"Applejack – I didn't –"

"Listen, sugarcube, Ah'm gonna make this real simple for you. Either you get home right now or Ah buck you there." Applejack turned to make good on her threat, and with a squeak of protest – and an apologetic, panicked glance at Fluttershy – Twilight disappeared in a flash of white light.

Fluttershy took a longing look at the open door for a second before meeting Applejack's furious gaze. Applejack didn't speak straight away, and when she did her voice had the same awful, even flatness as when she'd arrived.

"Ah could understand if you didn't want Big Macintosh for personal reasons, Fluttershy. Ah really could. But you have been lying to me. Don't come to the farm again."

By the time Fluttershy found her voice, Applejack had left, her powerful strides taking her out of the cottage and over the hill. Fluttershy sat down by the table and stared at her cooling, unwanted tea, taking deep breaths to calm herself. After a few minutes, there was a tentative knock on the door. Fluttershy wandered over listlessly and nudged it open, to see four young fillies and a pail of apples.

"Hey there Fluttershy! Did we miss Twilight Sparkle?" Apple Bloom said, beaming and panting with exertion.

"Yes, you missed her. Can I help?" Fluttershy asked tonelessly.

"I don't think so. We've got to throw apples at her!" Dinky cheerfully exclaimed.

"Not *at* her, *to* her. Ah thought we covered that at the fountain," Apple Bloom complained.

"I say it's too hard to keep up with her just to throw them near! We've gotta make every shot count," Scootaloo interjected.

"Scootaloo's right," Sweetie Belle agreed. "We've gotta make sure she can't think of anything but apples!"

"Well, maybe. Perhaps if we hit her hard enough with them we only need two or three good throws. Fluttershy, where'd Twilight get herself off to?"

Apple Bloom realised after asking the question that she had maybe misjudged Fluttershy's mood. Across the pegasus' face there was an expression she'd only seen once

or twice before, and each time it had meant that she and her friends were in a whole heap of trouble. Fluttershy's glare had an intensity that was difficult to ignore.

"I think," Fluttershy said quietly, "that you girls had better come in and tell me everything."

The four young fillies filed silently into the house, their heads held low. Fluttershy followed them in and closed the door.

"Sweetie Belle, I am going to kill you!"

Rainbow Dash crumpled up the letter in her hooves and stamped around her cloud in frustration. As if it wasn't bad enough finding out Rarity was interested in Twilight, now Sweetie Belle and her annoying little friends had played this stupid prank on her. *No, thought Rainbow, this isn't a prank, this is just being mean. This is playing around with a pony's feelings!* As though it would be stupid or funny or ridiculous for Rarity to like her. Pulling the letter open again, Rainbow read it one more time, her anger mounting.

Dearest Rainbow Dash,

You are very pretty. I really like your mane. It has seven colours in it and I would like to design you a new dress using all the colours. Then you can wear the dress and we can go out to dinner together at one of those snooty places I keep taking my sister and afterwards I will watch you do tricks. It will be a date so we can also smooch. I think smooching you would be really good and not weird at all. Please come and visit me later so we can start being marefriends.

When you talk to me about this please do not mention the letter because I am embarrassed about writing it and will get angry if you mention it.

Rarity
xxxxxx

"Agh!" Rainbow shouted. It was almost too much to bear! It was exactly the sort of letter she'd been hoping to receive from Rarity for months! Not that she'd been hoping for letters, that is. *But, Rainbow thought, this is the sort of letter that leads to the things I'd been hoping for!* It even mentions smooches right there on the bucking page! And the whole thing was some ridiculous, mean-spirited prank!

"Alright! That's it! Somepony's gonna get it!" Rainbow's raw fury propelled her off the cloud, practiced wingbeats propelling her towards the town proper at breakneck speed. While she was powering through the sky, Rainbow tried to go over exactly what she was going to say to Sweetie Belle, but couldn't quite hold the words together.

Rainbow realised that the reason she was so angry – furious, in fact – was because she'd let it get to this ridiculous point. She knew exactly why she'd not told Rarity she was interested, and it was because she knew it was a lost cause. The mare had never shown

the slightest interest in her since the Best Young Fliers competition, which that painted, powdered unicorn had completely ruined.

I should be able to think back to the competition as a triumph, thought Rainbow. My second ever Sonic Rainboom! A tiara thingy from the Princess herself! Meeting the Wonderbolts! Streamers and cheering and all my friends, new and old, congratulating me! So what do I remember? That stone in my gut when I saw she was in trouble. How her hooves felt in mine, even if it was only for a few seconds. That breathless apology that I brushed off. That moment, diving for her, reaching for her, pushing as hard as I could to grab her, when I saw her stop panicking. She stopped being afraid because she knew I was coming for her. She knew I wouldn't fail her. She trusted me to get it right, to save her life. That's what I remember.

"Urgh, why did I have to play it so cool?" Rainbow shouted at herself as she covered the last few hundred yards. She'd waited for Rarity to make the first move, show the first sign of affection, like Rainbow was certain she would. But the unicorn never had. Now the moment had passed, Rainbow thought as she landed in front of Carousel Boutique. *Now her little sister's sending me hurtful jokey prank notes! Now Rarity's forgotten about the whole thing and moved on and started mooning over Twilight bucking Sparkle! Aaaa!*

Rainbow slammed her front hoof into the front door four times loudly and shouted.

"Rarity! Are you in? We gotta talk!" Rainbow bellowed. *First things first, she thought, we need to have a talk about somepony keeping a tighter leash on her little sister.*

Rainbow heard an excited squeal and caught a glimpse of Rarity's mud-caked face peeking out of her bedroom window.

"Oooh, you're earlier than I expected! Give me just a few moments to get everything ready," Rarity said in a slightly husky voice before disappearing back inside. Rainbow blinked a couple of times in confusion. Rarity had been expecting her? A thought started gnawing at the back of her brain – had Rarity had known about this all along? Was she in on the joke? If she was, decided Rainbow, then she would – she'd have to – she didn't know what. But it was going to involve tearing a strip off that prissy little princess. After a few seconds she hammered on the door again.

"Rarity, open the door!" she shouted, letting some more of her anger seep into her voice. It felt good to finally be shouting at somepony about this. "I need to have a few words with ya! Let me in!"

"Just a minute!" came Rarity's sing-song reply from inside the boutique. Rainbow listened up against the door for a second, hearing what sounded like furniture being moved. Was she redecorating or something? Rainbow took a step back to see that Rarity had closed the curtains as well. Thoroughly confused, Rainbow took a step back and raised her voice again.

"Rarity, open the door right now or –"

"One more second, darling, I'm aaaalmost ready!"

Rainbow furrowed her brows. Almost ready for what? What in the hay was going on in there? She pawed at the ground for a moment, setting up a charge.

"I don't care! I'm coming in right –" Rainbow was interrupted by Rarity clearing her throat extremely loudly, and the furious pegasus heard the door unlock.

"The door's open! Do come in," Rainbow heard Rarity trill from inside the boutique. Striding forwards with a huff, she threw the door wide, ready to give Rarity a piece of her mind, and was momentarily stunned by what she saw.

The room was dark, lit only by three candles on a small table and some stray tendrils of sunlight that escaped the hastily drawn curtains. Next to the candles there was a small metal bucket containing a bottle Dash was unfamiliar with, and two long, tall glasses. More immediately arresting than this was the unfamiliar and enormous red chaise lounge behind the table, quite out of place in the middle of Rarity's main workspace, and what had rendered Rainbow Dash speechless was Rarity, relaxing in a diaphanous rose-coloured robe that clung to her, half concealing and half accentuating her body beneath it.

For a moment, Rainbow found her mouth far too dry to say anything at all and Rarity took full advantage.

"Rainbow, do come and sit with me. I know there are things you want to say, things we need to talk about, but I thought they might go a bit smoother if we both have a little drink while we chat. We've ever so much to discuss, don't you think?" Rarity fluttered her eyelashes at Rainbow and something inside Rainbow Dash snapped.

"You think this is funny? You think this is some sort of joke? I should have known you were planning something like this! I always appreciate a good prank, Rarity, but this is playing around with really personal stuff! It's just mean!" Rainbow punctuated her

sentence by throwing her crumpled note at Rarity, who caught it with a faintly perplexed look on her face.

"What is this?" she asked, unfolding the note and reading it with a growing expression of horror on her face. Rainbow launched into another attack before Rarity could say anything else.

"It's the worst prank ever is what it is! You and your little sister were conspiring against me! I get it, Rarity and Rainbow, how bucking hilarious is that? We don't have anything in common. We don't spend any time together. You barely know me and I have literally no idea why I like you! You're stuck-up and you ignore everypony and you think you're too good for me! So yeah, maybe this is a great wake-up call, Rarity. I won't try to be your friend again."

Rainbow turned to stride out, her anger spent, when Rarity called to her quietly. Rainbow was ready to ignore anything, but when she heard the catch in Rarity's voice she found herself turning to hear her out. The normally pristine unicorn was practically quivering with the effort of keeping herself together, fat tears rolling over her cheeks as she struggled to keep her voice level.

"Thank you for your candour. It's better that I know where I stand. Here!" she said, her voice starting to crack as she levitated a letter from the table to Rainbow and then started using her magic to push the pegasus and the note both out of the door.

"This is the note I got!" she half-sobbed, slamming the door in Rainbow's face as soon as she was clear of the frame. Rainbow opened the note and read it as she stamped away, slowly coming to a stop in the park as she got to the final few lines.

Rarity!

I am the best at flying but it is not enough even though I am totally awesome and cool! I want a marefriend as well. I thought about it a lot and I think you are the best choice for a marefriend! You are the prettiest and I like you a lot. I will come over later and we can start dating and things!

Please do not mention the letter when I arrive because I am way too cool for letters and I am ashamed of my hoofwriting.

Rainbow Dash!

Rainbow screwed up her eyes in frustration. They'd sent Rarity a letter too? Rainbow Dash scanned the letter again. She had to grudgingly admit that Sweetie Belle and her friends had managed to forge her writing style and hoofwriting almost perfectly. If Rarity had gotten the letter without an explanation, then she had probably thought it was genuine. So why had she gone along with the whole thing? If she wasn't in on the joke, what reason could she possibly have for the wine and the candles and the skimpy –

Rainbow's anguished yell could be heard across the town.

In a few seconds, she was swooping back to the door of the boutique, grimacing at the extremely loud sobbing coming from inside. Tentatively, she knocked on the door with one hoof.

"Rarity? I'm –"

"GO AWAY! Leave me alone! I want to be alone!" Rarity screamed from the upstairs bedroom. Cringing, Rainbow backed away from the door and, ears down, walked back towards the park. What was she going to do? Her heart was fluttering around in her chest, conflicting feelings pulling her in every direction. Rarity did like her! But then she'd sort of screamed at Rarity until she'd gotten upset and locked herself away. What she needed was a way to get Rarity to listen to her. Maybe if she got Fluttershy's help?

Rainbow nodded to herself. Fluttershy was her oldest friend, and was really close to Rarity. If she swallowed her pride for a second and explained what was going on to Fluttershy, she should be able to at least calm down Rarity enough so that they could talk. Her mind made up, Rainbow extended her wings and started off towards Fluttershy's cottage. Biting her lip, she just hoped she'd be able to undo the damage.

• • •

"That's great work there, Mac! Dizzy, remember you can close your eyes if it helps you focus. Face the window with me again and let's have a nice loud 'A', stretching for a full ten seconds. And go!"

Doctor John "Whooves" Smith took the opportunity of the long note to assess his pupils. As the only therapist in Ponyville, he'd taken on some strange requests over the years, but the treatment of stammers had been as new to him as it had been to Big Macintosh a year ago. Since then, they'd been working on strengthening his voice and reducing his stammer and they'd made some rather marvellous progress together. Looking at his

much larger patient – and friend – he couldn't help but feel a little proud. Looking at his other student, however, brought forth a rather different rush of emotions.

Ditzy was currently enunciating the vowel sounds rather well, with her eyes closed. That was the problem, though; whenever she noticed that either he or Big Macintosh were looking in her direction, her stutter would come back with an unholy vengeance, and she'd blush her way into silence. He'd never met a pony who seemed so uncomfortable around him. She'd stated quite clearly that the lessons were something she valued, but he didn't see how they were really any help. Her stammer was every bit as bad as it had been when she'd joined the therapy eight months ago, encouraged by Big Macintosh.

He had tried everything he could to make her more comfortable – he'd even admitted to his old nickname of 'Whooves' in an attempt to foster a closer, more comfortable relationship, and she'd allowed that her daughter had said 'Ditzy' as 'Dizzy' for quite a long time until she'd got the pronunciation down. It was, she'd joked with one eye on the floor and a quiet grin, the only thing her friend Carrot Top called her now. But that hadn't worked – in fact, sharing that personal information had seemed to drive a greater wedge of quiet, tense embarrassment between them.

At Big Mac's suggestion, they'd all spent some evenings – marvellous, long evenings – simply spending time around each other in quiet. They'd read or write or walk through the town in an effort to help Ditzy open up and stop being so nervous around him. As far as Whooves could tell, this had just made things worse, in both directions – she seemed to find him as intimidating as ever, barely able to say a sentence to him, and he'd found himself thinking about her a lot of the time. Almost always, in fact. To the point where he found himself conflicted about whether he should really be treating her at all; there was a conflict of interest here, an emotional attachment that he didn't want to examine too closely. If he did, he thought to himself, he'd probably see straight away that he was far too fascinated with the athletic grey pegasus to treat her properly. He'd have to stop their sessions. And then he wouldn't see her any more.

A strand of Ditzy's hair fell across her eye, and without thinking, Whooves reached out a hoof to put it back behind her ear. Suddenly catching himself, he slammed his hoof to the ground, blanching at what he'd almost done.

As if on cue, Ditzy opened her eyes for the last couple of seconds and glanced over to see Whooves looking at her. Her voice, clear and strong for the last few seconds, dwindled away into a squeak, and she looked away. As usual, Whooves tried everything he could to pretend he didn't see her blush, and when he spoke he could tell his voice was too loud.

"That was great, you two!" Whooves glanced at an ornate golden hourglass, a device he'd had since before he could remember. It marked their session as barely a quarter complete. "I think now is a good time for us all to practice what we've learnt with a little bit of 'public speaking'. Dizzy, how about you go first?"

The three ponies arranged themselves around a little makeshift podium at one end of Whooves' extensive treatment space. His house was terrifically cramped to make room for it, but he didn't mind – it was more important that he had the space to treat his patients properly, as far as he was concerned. Ditzzy took her place behind the podium and Big Mac and Whooves sat on a pair of big plump cushions in front of her. The point of this exercise was to say what had happened during their day, and try to get used to the sort of trappings likely to make them nervous – as well as speaking without interruption for an extensive period of time. Ditzzy cleared her throat, closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and then opened them and began, looking out at them both with her good eye.

"T-t-t-" She shook her head, annoyed at herself, and started again. "T-today I w-woke at h-h-h-... at half p-past s-seven. After b-breakfast..."

Whooves tried to listen, but he found himself quite unable. One of the minor perks of the 'public speaking' exercise was that he had a genuine opportunity to look at Ditzzy without having to feel embarrassed or try to hide it. She was astonishing to him – when he'd found out about her Reverse Diving training, he'd looked at her in a whole new way, and realised just how much strength, how much toughness there was underneath her soft hair. She had such graceful movements in her shoulders, such tightness in the muscles of her legs and back. She was the sort of pony, Whooves mused to himself, that it would be a genuine pleasure to hold, just to appreciate properly the aesthetics of the pegasus form. The mental image that he'd formed had very little to do with aesthetics and everything to do with wondering how soft her lips were, however, and he was rudely jerked out of a very pleasant daydream when Big Mac interrupted, quite uncharacteristically.

"Wait, Ditzzy, would y'be so kind as to go over that last p-part again?" the big red stallion asked, a concerned expression on his broad face.

"Sh-sure," Ditzzy said, taking a breath and concentrating again. "Apple B-Bloom and her friends g-gave me letters t-to d-deliver to R-Rarity and Rainbow D-Dash. I think th-they were l-love notes." Big Mac stood up, all pretence to the exercise forgotten.

"D-Ditzzy, is there any way y'mighta lost track of those letters? Maybe at the library?"

Ditzzy looked taken aback for a second. "Y-yeah, I crashed there. H-how did you –"

"Aw, ponyfeathers!" Big Mac said to himself, with his eyes closed. Whooves could see him thinking for a second, putting things together, before the stallion set his jaw. He'd seemed to come to a decision.

"Miz Sparkle might not be interested in her after all!" he said in a whisper, mostly to himself. "Ditzy, Doc, I have t'go speak with Rarity. Sorry to duck out early b-but this is important t'me."

Whooves was a little taken aback. He knew Twilight Sparkle from the library, but wasn't Rarity a model or something? How did Big Mac even know these ponies? The farmpony was taciturn whenever they went out for a drink, especially when it came to his love life. This sort of grand gesture seemed a little strange from him. Whooves was about to ask what exactly was going on, but before he could put together a reasonable question, Big Macintosh had barrelled out of the door.

"Do you know what that was all about?" Whooves asked Ditzy, as they watched Big Mac canter towards the centre of town.

"N-Not exactly, but he mentioned T-Twilight Sparkle. He's had a bit of a thing for her r-recently," Ditzy said, looking at the big pony turn a corner towards the fountain.

Whooves was stunned. That sentence had so few moments of stammering in it, and Ditzy had let her speech flow around the few errors there had been. Whooves reluctantly smiled to himself as he realised why – Ditzy was clearly more comfortable when her mind was elsewhere. It was him that was the problem. He really couldn't help.

"Dizzy, I think this is a good opportunity for us to have a bit of an important conversation," Whooves said, indicating the cushions in front of the podium. As he spoke, he could see Ditzy blushing furiously, staring at her hooves as she went to sit down as though she was afraid she'd trip over them. Whooves walked over as well, sitting and trying to hold Ditzy's gaze – she seemed to keep wanting to look at anything in the room except him.

"It's about these sessions, Dizzy," he started gently, not noticing the slight furrowing of Ditzy's brow. "You see, Big Macintosh has already reached an excellent standard of speech. He doesn't really need them any more. And as far as you're concerned – I'm not really certain there's any way I can help you with your speech in a therapeutic context. What I'm saying, Dizzy, is that I think it's in everypony's best interests if these sessions end and we terminate our therapist-client relationship. You understand that –"

"I understand p-perfectly." The grey mailmare had one eye fixed on him and a distinctly unamused expression on her face, and Whooves had the terrible feeling that once again he'd managed to stick his hoof in his mouth. Before he could say anything, Ditzzy stood and started shouting at him.

"I understand just bucking fine! Why in the hay would you want to spend any more bucking time than you have to with Derpy Hooves, huh? I thought y-y-" As her anger abated and her stammer crept back into her voice, Ditzzy snorted and turned to leave, unwilling to say more. Whooves found his voice after a moment, managing to say something just before she took flight.

"Wait! Dizzy, I didn't mean –"

"You d-don't get to call me that! That's a p-personal n-n-nickname!" she spat over her shoulder at him, glaring at him through a yellow eye before bounding into the sky.

Whooves rubbed his forehead with a hoof for a second, talking to himself.

"Well done, old chap. You handled that just blasted marvellously." Whooves thought for a second, and decided to track down Big Macintosh. He needed somepony to get Ditzzy to give him a chance to explain a few things, starting with the fact that a doctor is not allowed to date his clients. Trying to remember where Rarity lived, he trotted off in the direction Big Mac had gone. He couldn't be that difficult to track down, Whooves thought to himself.

• • •

Applejack lay back on her bed, trying to think of something to do besides sulk. The pigs were fed, the trees were pruned, Big Mac and Apple Bloom had managed to fix the broken beam in the barn three days ago and Granny Smith had kicked her out of the kitchen after she'd oversugared three separate apple pies. The fact of the matter was that she was grumpy, hurt and angry at a whole bunch of ponies including herself.

Applejack tried to pick the matter apart, but every time she did she found herself so furious at some aspect of the situation that she couldn't do it. For example, she couldn't be angry at Big Macintosh for not getting together with Fluttershy. Heck, she couldn't even be angry at Fluttershy for not liking Big Mac. Clearly, the pegasus had a very different taste in ponies, as evidenced by Twilight Sparkle, who was just there with her forelegs wrapped around Fluttershy like she owned her or some darn thing and how was that – Applejack caught herself getting angry again. At a time like this she liked nothing

better than to lose herself in some work and let her mind think things through in the background while she let her hooves concentrate on something useful. But the farm wasn't living up to its side of the bargain; there wasn't anything genuinely useful to do, and Applejack despised busywork.

Applejack sat up and frowned at herself in the mirror. She was being foalish, she decided, and she knew it. So Fluttershy'd rather spend her time at the library than at the farm! That was no big deal. The farm was hard work, and it wasn't for everypony.

Applejack fell back on her bed. It wasn't for everypony – that was the point! It fitted Fluttershy so well. The girl had such a way with the animals. She was good with the rest of the work, as well – she'd sometimes freeze up when she was scared, but there was steel on her bones, Applejack knew. Fluttershy would never fail to come through for her. For any of her friends.

So why didn't it feel that way now? It felt like Fluttershy had taken a step away, like Applejack had somehow become less important to her shy friend. But that didn't make any sense! Applejack had always wanted Fluttershy to have somepony special in her life. Yes, she'd wanted that pony to be Big Mac. But that didn't mean that Fluttershy being with some other pony should feel like such a betrayal, did it?

Maybe, Applejack admitted to herself, Big Mac didn't really count. If Fluttershy picked Applejack's big brother, then there wasn't any conflict. Applejack didn't have to feel overlooked because Fluttershy would still have picked everything that Applejack valued. The fact of the matter was that Fluttershy was important to her. Maybe even – wait, what was that?

Applejack walked over to her door and opened it, listening again. Her Granny's voice rang out through the house, clearly for the second time.

"Applejack! I said your little marefriend is here! Now are you coming down or not?"

"Ah'm not going anywhere! An' Ah don't have a marefriend!" Applejack bellowed down the stairs.

"Are y'sure? I mean Fluttershy! She's around here 'most every day an' I know she ain't seein' Big Macintosh, because she and I have had ourselves a conversation about it. Now she's helping me with the pies, since you ain't bein' any darn use with 'em, so she'll be waitin' for you when y'get down here." Granny's voice didn't leave much room for argument, but Applejack tried anyway.

"Well what if Ah ain't comin' down? Ah don't wanna talk to anypony!" Applejack shouted, but the fight had gone from her voice.

"Y'gotta come down sometime, sweetheart. Now I ain't gonna hold it against you that yer wantin' to have a little bit of a sulk, so you just come on down here when you're ready," Granny Smith shouted back up through the house.

There wasn't much arguing with that, Applejack regretfully admitted to herself. She was sulking a little bit. Not that she was likely to admit that to Fluttershy any time soon. She'd wait a reasonable amount of time and then she'd come downstairs with her dignity intact.

• • •

Two and a half minutes later, Applejack started creeping down the stairs, hearing Granny Smith and Fluttershy talking as they worked on the pies. Without a unicorn around, it really was a two-pony job; Applejack could imagine that Fluttershy was handling the slightly heavier work of getting the filling into the shaped crusts, while Granny Smith made the lattice lids that she was so famous for.

"So, y'ain't seein' Big Macintosh. Now, why is that? He's a strapping young pony and smart to boot, not that smart ever mattered after lights out. He was awful fond of you, too."

"It's not that he's not a very nice pony. I like talking to him and I think he'll make somepony a great husband some day. I'm just not – he's not really – I mean he's a stallion. If I were interested in stallions then he would be just perfect, but I'm not. I'm sorry."

"Now, you don't have to be sorry for who you tilt at, y'silly filly! Heck, back in the day Applejack's grandfather had a bushel of competition from a very nice Carrot mare, Baby Bell, her name was. She was a pretty little thing and I don't mind admitting I was very sweet on her. So don't you go tryin' to be sorry for who you ain't interested in, because I'm a lot more interested in who you are."

Applejack hadn't meant to be sneaking down the stairs, but she found herself stepping extremely quietly, unwilling to interrupt the conversation. Fluttershy wasn't even interested in stallions? Well, that was a new bronco at the rodeo and no mistake. It meant she hadn't rejected Big Mac because he was no good, she'd rejected him because he was, well, a him! It took a second for Applejack to realise that Fluttershy hadn't actually

responded to Granny Smith's last little ramble – by the time she had, Granny Smith seemed to have realised the same thing.

"Well? I'm talking about Applejack, girl. She's a good filly, got a decent head on her shoulders and you seem quite keen on her. Are y'interested in the girl or not?"

Applejack's heart lodged in her throat for a second, sending another confusing tumble of thoughts through her head. Why did she care so much about this? Why did it matter if Fluttershy was attracted to her? Why was that thought making her blush as red as an apple ripe for the bucking?

"I don't think it's so much about whether I'm sweet on Applejack, Granny. I think it's more about whether Applejack is – hello Applejack! I didn't see you there for a second."

Fluttershy fixed Applejack with a faintly manic glare as she saw the farmpony at the bottom of the stairs. Granny Smith turned from her stool and fixed Applejack with the same look as when she'd been four and Granny Smith had caught her in the pantry with a sticky spoon and four empty jars of apple jam.

"Well, look who decided she's gonna come out of her room at just this specific point in our conversation," Granny Smith said witheringly. "I suppose now's as good a time as any for m'nap. Fluttershy, be a dear and make sure all those pies get in at the same time. I'll be awake by the time they're done so don't let worrying about them get in the way of whatever plans y'might have for the rest of the day, d'ye hear?"

"Yes, Granny Smith," Applejack and Fluttershy chorused as the elder pony left the room. Applejack would swear that she'd winked at Fluttershy as she left.

That left Applejack and Fluttershy on their own in the kitchen, and it didn't take more than a couple of seconds for Applejack's pride to kick in.

"Last time Ah saw you Ah told you you weren't welcome at the farm no more, Fluttershy. Why'd you decide that didn't count for you?" Applejack said, teeth gritted, braced against a response.

"I decided because I had news you should know. I was talking to Apple Bloom earlier and she's had, um, a very busy day. She and her friends have been trying to matchmake ponies, and I think they might have caused Rainbow Dash and Rarity some problems. They also think you're interested in Twilight so they've been trying to get her interested in you, but I think they've got the wrong end of the stick because I know Big Macintosh is interested in her. And you should know I'm not seeing Twilight. She really was just

getting back some books I'd taken out. She's a good friend but we're not dating," Fluttershy said, smiling at Applejack as she tried to absorb all the new information.

"Okay sugarcube, one thing at a time," said Applejack, pinching her brow. "You're not courtin' Twilight?"

"No. Not at all. She's not the pony I – I don't have romantic feelings towards her." Fluttershy stumbled over her words a little, hiding behind her mane as she did so. Applejack felt a weight lifted from her chest that she hadn't known was there.

"Good," Applejack said, relaxing into the conversation a little. "That's good. Ah mean, it's a good start. Now, Apple Bloom thinks Ah've got a thing for Twilight?"

"Well, she did until I told her that she'd probably gotten mistaken. Her only proof was that old doll of Twilight's, and I know that Big Macintosh had been hiding that, not you. I told her."

"Alright then. What was that about Rainbow Dash?"

"Oh, they've been a little bit naughty. They faked love letters to Rarity and Rainbow Dash, each from the other, and I think it might have caused problems because – well –" Fluttershy started stalling over the end of her sentence, biting her lip and clearly trying to think her way around something.

"Spit it out, sugarcube. Why's it a particular problem?" Applejack asked, but with a sinking stomach remembered a particular confession of Rainbow's, eked out after the pushy pegasus had lost a bet over which of them could buck the most apples in an hour. Rainbow was her best friend in the world, and while Applejack could understand that she had a bit of a crush on Rarity, it didn't seem like the sort of thing that would work out. This sort of well-intended 'help' could cause her far more harm than good.

"I can't say. I promised! Rarity made me Pinkie Pie swear! Just please, trust me it won't be good if it goes wrong. I was hoping you could maybe come into town with me and sort everything out. I've already sent your little sister and her friends to Sugarcube Corner to get some help." Fluttershy looked at Applejack as though there was a possibility that she'd say no, and in that moment Applejack realised she'd never be able to turn down the pale yellow pegasus with the pink mane who'd wormed her way into her life so firmly.

Applejack didn't know exactly how it'd happened, but she knew she loved Fluttershy. She didn't know exactly what that meant any more – it was different, now she knew she'd never see Big Mac and Fluttershy together, like she'd always imagined. There was a heat

to Fluttershy's presence, an intensity in her eyes that hadn't been there before. Heck, maybe it had always been there and Applejack was finally looking properly. Either way, this was something new and a little exciting. A little scary too, but that had never counted for much with Applejack.

"Ah'll come in with you. Those two're stubborn enough they won't be able to deal with anything on their own. And Fluttershy?"

"Yes?" Fluttershy said quietly, as they headed for the door.

"You're welcome around the farm again. More'n welcome. Ah meant it when Ah said you were family."

Fluttershy's smile was almost entirely in her eyes, but Applejack felt like she'd seen her friend come alive for the first time that day. She couldn't help but smile in return as she set off down the dirt path towards the town, Fluttershy gliding up beside her.

"Come on, now. We got work to do!" Applejack started running for the joy of it, turning her head to see that Fluttershy was doing her best to keep up with her, a wildness in her eyes as they both sped towards Ponyville.

"Missus Cake? We need t'see Pinkie Pie."

Apple Bloom fixed Cup Cake with her most serious expression, backed up by the other three crusaders. Fluttershy had given her a job to do, and it was the most difficult, most important job the Crusaders had ever faced. It was mostly just trying to undo all the damage they'd done this morning, but that didn't make it any less challenging. Actually, thought Apple Bloom, her sister often mentioned how much hard work it was to tidy up after their crusades. If they spent all their time fixing the problems they caused when they tried to help, perhaps that'd be the sort of hard work that would earn them their cutie marks! And if it didn't then they'd probably caused even bigger problems, and then they could fix those! Filing the thought to the back of her mind to be examined at detail, Apple Bloom focussed her attention back on Mrs. Cake, who seemed to have some sort of objection.

"Girls, I'm afraid Pinkie's got company at the moment. How about you wait here for her and I'll let her know?" Mrs. Cake leaned in towards Dinky and Scootaloo. "I might even have a little batch of chocolate muffins that need taste testing, how does that sound?"

"Chocolate!?"

"Muffins!? That sounds totally great!" Dinky and Scootaloo were easily swayed, but Apple Bloom was resolved. Giving a nod to Sweetie Belle, she walked past Mrs. Cake towards a display of pastries, and as the baker turned to follow Apple Bloom's progress Sweetie Belle took the opportunity to sneak up the unguarded stairs towards Pinkie's room.

"Missus Cake, it's important that we see her right now. Fluttershy sent us! It's a matter of broken hearts!" Apple Bloom protested, trying not to look directly at Sweetie Belle.

"I know, dear, but it's just best if she's not disturbed at the moment. I promise I'll let them – I mean, let her know as soon as possible. There might even be an apple and blueberry muffin that needs testing as well, if you're a good girl." Mrs. Cake gave Apple Bloom a wink and walked into the back to get the fillies some treats.

"You stay right there now!" the baker shouted back, oblivious to the ruckus starting behind her – the three fillies were having a spirited if silent argument about whether or not they should just all run up the stairs, which Apple Bloom was losing. Faced with the fact that Scootaloo and Dinky seemed quite happy to sit on their rumps and mouth "But chocolate muffins!" at her until their faces were blue, she rolled her eyes and started off up the stairs on her own.

She'd just reached the top of the stairs when she heard Mrs. Cake return.

"Here you go, girls – oh, dear. Where did Apple Bloom go? Wasn't Sweetie Belle with you?"

"Um – you see, what happened was – we saw a big raccoon, okay?" Apple Bloom groaned quietly as Scootaloo started to tell the raccoon story again. It's not that Scootaloo was a bad liar – she was the best out of the three of them when it came to straight-up denials – she just didn't have a great imagination when she was put on the spot.

"Scootaloo's just telling stories again, Mrs. Cake," Dinky chimed in. Apple Bloom almost gave herself away by gasping loudly – was her new friend really going to rat them all out that quickly?

"The truth is that Fluttershy gave us a list of a few important things to do. So we figured we didn't all have to wait here, and since Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle don't like chocolate muffins as much as we do, they went to go and talk to Rarity. It's totally nice of them to let us stay!" Dinky cheerfully lied.

"I see. Well, take your time girls. I'll just be in the kitchen – I think Pinkie might be another fifteen minutes or so. Maybe twenty-five."

"Thanks Mrs. Cake!" Dinky chirruped. Apple Bloom was about to head on to Pinkie's door when she heard Dinky mutter to Scootaloo.

"Seriously? A raccoon?"

Focussing on her task of getting to Pinkie, Apple Bloom carefully and quickly turned the corner, to see Sweetie Belle slowly lifting one hoof and putting it down an inch or so closer to Pinkie's door. The little unicorn breathed a sigh of relief, and lifted another hoof. Ugh, thought Apple Bloom, that's way too cautious! We'll be here all day at this rate. Apple Bloom walked up behind Sweetie Belle and tapped her friend on the shoulder.

"I WASN'T DOINmmmmfrgmm?" Sweetie Belle shouted out, her panicked objection cut short by Apple Bloom's hoof in her mouth. Apple Bloom gave her friend a stern look before removing it. She indicated Pinkie's door and the two crusaders edged stealthily towards it.

"Are you sure this is Pinkie's room?" Sweetie Belle asked, only to be answered by a giggle from the other side of the door followed by a snort that couldn't really belong to anypony

else. Emboldened, Sweetie Belle knocked on the door loudly. From the other side, though, there were suddenly two voices – Pinkie's and another mare's that neither of the two young fillies recognised.

"Oh! There's someone at the door! Could you get that for me?"

"Seriously? I was just about – ugh. Fine! But if this is either of the Cakes with another pastry –" The door opened, to reveal a unicorn with an electric blue mane and enormous sunglasses pushed up onto her forehead. "– then I'm going to tell them to shove it right up their –"

The unicorn looked out at first and then down, registering that their guests were a lot smaller than she'd expected. Her red eyes narrowed in confusion, and whatever she was going to say was cut short by Sweetie Belle.

"I know you! You're the DJ my sister hired for her fashion show. Vinyl Scratch, right?"

"Oh yeah!" Apple Bloom chimed in. "What are you doin' in Pinkie's room?"

The two Crusaders looked up at the reddening unicorn, who was looking around for an explanation.

"We were, er, doing the sort of thing you might, um. Oh! We were planning a party! I'm a DJ and Pinkie plans parties, and we were planning a party together. Yes. That's what it was."

"It was!?" Pinkie shouted in excitement, bouncing off the bed towards the door with an expression of delighted surprise. "I thought we were just making out! Were we planning a party at the same time? That's my best invention ever!"

Pinkie completely ignored Vinyl, who was pinching the bridge of her nose and muttering something about the most embarrassing marefriend she'd ever had, to lean in and have a quick chat with Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle.

"Hi girls! Were you looking for me?" Pinkie asked. Apple Bloom took a deep breath and tried to say everything at once. Better to get it over with fast, she figured.

"Today we decided to try and get our cutie marks by doin' matchmaking so we were gonna set up Applejack and Twilight and then Rainbow and Rarity so we wrote letters to Rainbow and Rarity from each other and secretly delivered them but Fluttershy says it'll only make things worse and she says that Applejack's probably not interested in Twilight

and Twilight's probably interested in some other pony but we've been throwin' apples at her and she said we should come and get you for help an' *Ah didn't mean to mess it all up!*"

Apple Bloom took some deep breaths, trying to hold back her tears.

"Aw, don't cry Apple Bloom! I've been waiting for something like this to happen for a few months now. Everypony's been hiding their feelings and letting it bottle up and bottle up until KABLOOEY!"

Pinkie pulled a small string behind the door frame and a variety of streamers suddenly exploded across her room, accompanied by a small trumpet cheer. Vinyl and Sweetie Belle exchanged confused looks, but Apple Bloom seemed quite encouraged.

"So this isn't all our fault?" she asked in a very small voice.

"Not at all!" Pinkie smiled at her. "In fact, it means everything's happening all at once, which means it can all happen in the same place, and THAT means I can make sure everything happens exactly the way it's supposed to!"

"You can?" asked the other three ponies in unison, the Crusaders delighted and Vinyl genuinely confused.

"Yep! Because if everything's happening tonight, then everypony's going to be at the big party! So all we have to do is make sure that all of my very bestest friends attend as well, and then we can make sure everything comes out right."

"Wait, this big bash you hired me for is tonight? Sweet Celestia, Pinkie, I usually have a little more warning than that! Where am I setting up?" Vinyl shouted, suddenly panicked.

"You'll be in the park! Don't worry, my Cloudsdale boys will already be setting up the stage for you and the sound system will be tuned just as you like it on preset number 2. All you have to do is hustle your rump down there for seven-thirty sharp and start warming everypony up!"

Pinkie winked at Vinyl, who visibly relaxed for a second before levitating a pen and pad out of one of her bags.

"Okay, so just your standard party mix, not too much dubtrot – wait, preset number 2? Have you got another act booked for this thing?"

"Yep!" The pink party pony giggled. "My sister owes me her yearly favour in exchange for keeping out of her hair, so she's going to be –"

The pad and pan fell to the floor.

"Your sister. You mean Octavia? You can't mean Tavi, Pinkie. You wouldn't. Tell me you wouldn't invite her to the same party as me. You know I can't see her right now, right?" Vinyl's voice had a dangerous edge to it, Apple Bloom noticed, and the two fillies slowly started backing away from the door.

"Of course it's Octypuss, silly! You can't see her because she's not in the same room yet, but that's okay because she should be arriving in about a hundred and ninety-six seconds. You two are going to be performing together!" Pinkie bounced around a stunned Vinyl, who was sat, speechless, with one of her eyelids twitching.

"Well, she took that better than I thought," Pinkie whispered from behind Apple Bloom, who jumped, startled at the sudden shift in Pinkie's location. Pinkie closed the door on Vinyl before turning to face the two Crusaders.

"Now, like I said, if everypony does their part, then we can make sure this is the best party ever! I need you to do some special jobs, though. Is Scootaloo with you?"

"Yup! She's downstairs with Dinky. Is Vinyl going to be –" Apple Bloom got cut off by Pinkie as the older pony herded the two fillies down the stairs.

"She'll be fine! She's just upset because she used to date my sister and they were super-serious and then Octavia got all smoochy with this showpony she met and they had a huge enormous argument about it. So I invited Vinyl to come and stay with me for a few days!"

They arrived downstairs, where a deeply satisfied Dinky and Scootaloo sat with a plate between them, scattered with a few forlorn crumbs and the occasional escaped chocolate chip.

"Okay, Crusaders! Form up!" Pinkie shouted, affecting a military salute. The four fillies snapped to attention, lining up in front of Pinkie. Dinky seemed to take a moment longer than the other three, holding her stomach as she wobbled to her feet.

"This party is going to be the biggest, most important party Ponyville has ever seen. It's a surprise party for the whole town, all asked for by one particular pony so she can propose! As a matter of absolute secrecy, I can't tell you which pony it is –"

"It's Lyra, isn't it? She talks about it with my mom sometimes and I'm not supposed to say anything." Dinky clapped her hooves over her mouth, appalled at what she'd just blurted out. Even Pinkie seemed surprised.

"Okay, so you all know, but now you have to keep it completely secret. You're going to have to Pinkie Pie swear on it, otherwise the party will be ruined and everypony will end up unhappy. Do you swear to keep it a secret?"

The four fillies crossed their hearts and placed a hoof over their eyes, leaving Dinky and Scootaloo each with a dark ring of chocolate crumbs around their right eyes. Dinky breathed a sigh of relief – she hadn't meant to say anything.

"Good," Pinkie continued. "Now, I've got three important jobs that you're going to have to do. The first one is that somepony needs to head to the library and get Spike. I need him to send some messages for me. But you can't let Twilight Sparkle know he's gone!"

"I'll do it! Pick me!" Sweetie Belle bounced up and down, a hoof in the air before she realised none of the other Crusaders had volunteered. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo snickered to each other – when Dinky gave them a confused look, Scootaloo leaned in and whispered something in her ear.

"But he's a dragon," Dinky started to say, until she saw the angry, blushing face on Sweetie Belle.

"Private Sweetie Belle of the Party Brigade, you have your orders! Go and retrieve Spike!" Pinkie shouted, cutting through the tension and sending Sweetie Belle bouncing happily out of the bakery door. Before the door could swing shut, a grey earth pony with a neat little bow tie pushed it back open and strode in, her dark mane coiffed perfectly.

"Good afternoon, Pinkamena. I thought I'd stop by and confirm the arrangements for this evening; I've already dropped off my cello at the park," said the newcomer, who was immediately bowled over with an enormous hug from Pinkie.

"Octavia! Octy-wocty-Octypuss! It's so good to see you! You're supposed to be on stage at seven-thirty sharp – you're on preset one on the sound system and I've made sure you've got exactly the same number of amps as your opponent! Afterwards we can go and get drinks and you can introduce me to your new marefriend. Then I can introduce her to MY new marefriend! You won't have to be introduced because you already know everypony."

"There's no need for the introductions to wait until then," Octavia said. "I rather hoped I could introduce you now. She's waiting outside, I'll fetch her in a moment. I'm also hoping that you'll go into perhaps a teensy bit more detail about my 'opponent', as you put it. Am I to be competing in a musical challenge of some variety?" Octavia raised an eyebrow as she extricated herself from Pinkie's grip, adjusting her bow-tie back to its former position.

"Haha, yep! You'll be going amp to amp, both playing at once! It'll be the musical war of the century!" Pinkie squealed with delight.

"And my opponent?" Octavia pressed.

"That would be me." Vinyl's voice was cold as she stepped down the stairs, her head high and her signature shades firmly in place. "I can't say I'm happy about being the pony who destroys your musical career, Tavi, so if you wanna back out of the gig now I'll be happy to fill the fifteen seconds of entertainment you'd usually be able to muster up."

Octavia snorted, her face flushing with anger as she faced her former beau.

"You can be angry at me all you like, Vinyl, but don't try to win points by comparing our musical skills. I have some, you see, whereas all you are is a glorified ringleader. You showcase other ponies' talents. I believe you have very little of your own."

"Better a ringleader than a clown. I see you've still got that pathetic little bow-tie."

"Hah, as though you can call anyone a clown while you're wearing those ridiculous sunglasses."

"Still pretending you're upper-crust to get gigs, rock farm girl?"

"Still pretending you're not, Lady Scratch of the Canterlot Scratches?"

"Enough!" Vinyl shouted. The two ponies had gotten closer and closer as they were shouting, their faces red and their breathing heavy as they stood an inch or two apart. They both seemed to realise how close they'd gotten at the same time, backing off and dropping their eyes from the other's.

"Enough," the unicorn repeated. "I don't want to get into a spat with an ex in front of my new marefriend."

Without taking her gaze off Octavia, Vinyl leaned in towards Pinkie and kissed her on the cheek, before breaking into a malicious smile. Octavia's face fell for a second, genuine upset creeping into her expression before she recovered and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"TRIXIE! GET IN HERE!"

Vinyl reached up and pulled off her shades, fury in her eyes. Octavia jutted her lip for a second before the two ponies launched into another shouting match.

"You brought her with you? You knew I was spending some time in Ponyville!"

"I didn't know you'd be using that time to seduce my big sister! How could you, Vinyl?"

"How could I? Don't you dare put the blame for this on me! You broke my heart, Tavi. I have no reason to apologise for taking comfort where I find it!"

"Comfort? What, you think I used you so you're using Pinkie in revenge? She's my sister! She should have nothing to do with this disaster of a breakup!"

The two ponies paused for breath for a brief second, and suddenly the lights in the bakery went dim. With a flash of green flame and a firework squeal, the door flew open, the flash of rockets momentarily silhouetting the blue unicorn in the cape and wizard hat who was rearing in the doorway.

"Greetings, friends of Octavia! The Great and Powerful Trixie –"

Trixie looked around the room at the expressions of the ponies. Scootaloo, Apple Bloom and Dinky looked thoroughly confused, and Vinyl and Octavia looked like they both wanted to murder somepony. Only Pinkie had the delighted expression Trixie usually liked to see after a grand entrance. She took a second look at Vinyl before saying anything else, landing on all fours as she did.

"– will be waiting outside for you, Octavia Louise Pie, and is sorry that she interrupted." Trixie's voice fell away as she scooted outside with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Her? Seriously?" Vinyl said, quietly, fixing her sunglasses back in place.

"Oh, shut up," Octavia muttered, although there was no more venom in her voice.

"I'm going to crush you this evening, you know," Vinyl said, and now there was a hint of challenge in her voice.

"We'll see. Well, you'll see, anyway. Every other pony will just be listening to me," Octavia responded. "Pinkie, this has been – educational – but I'm off to check my setup. I'm sure you understand."

"Wait, you don't go anywhere near that stage without me. I don't want you messing it up." Vinyl stepped towards the door at the same time as Octavia, and without words the two ponies started speeding up. They left the bakery at a run, racing towards the park side by side.

Apple Bloom tugged at Pinkie's tail as the pink pony smiled after her sister and Vinyl charging off towards the park.

"Pinkie? Do all of yer plans involve that much yelling?" she asked, quietly.

"Nope!" Pinkie answered happily. "I think maybe Rarity and Rainbow will have to yell a little, but you'll see. It'll all come together! Apple Bloom, I have a special job for you. You remember that big catapult? Rainbow's old one that you borrowed for the bass drum experiment?"

"It's hard to forget," Apple Bloom said, tilting her ears downwards. "Applejack made me take the whole thing apart after Ah destroyed her cart."

"Exactly! So if some pony like me had saved all the parts in their basement then you'd be able to put it back together, right? We need that catapult up and ready in the park. I had some of my teamsters drag all the parts and connections and stuff out there earlier, just in case, but I can't spare them to put it together because they're all super busy with the stage."

"Ah guess Ah could put it back together," said Apple Bloom, pursing her lips as she thought it through. "But Ah can't lift all the stuff to the places it needs to be. Ah'm not big enough!"

"That's not a problem," smirked Pinkie, looking out towards the door before raising her voice. "Trixie! Come in here, we need you to settle a bet!"

The doorway remained defiantly empty. After a few seconds, Trixie could be heard speaking in a loud stage whisper.

"Is Vinyl still in there?"

"Nope! She and Octavia went to sort out the music for this evening," shouted Scootaloo, before dropping her voice so that Trixie wouldn't hear. "What do we need that blowhard for? She's no good at anything."

"Fear not, fillies and gentlecolts!" Trixie shouted as she strode into Sugarcube Corner. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has deigned to settle your meaningless bet."

Dinky rolled her eyes at Scootaloo, who was trying to suppress a groan.

"Here's the bet – I bet these fillies a whole week's worth of chores that you couldn't do an hour of manual labour," said Pinkie. "I've got a device that needs putting together and Apple Bloom knows how to put it together but she's not strong enough to lift the heavy parts. Since Apple Bloom's such a huge fan of yours, she suggested you, since everypony knows that the Great and Powerful Trixie has the strongest magic in Equestria! And I said that there was no way you could do it because you're just a big phony faker."

Trixie seemed to swell with indignation, rearing up and stamping on the floor. Apple Bloom mouthed 'I'm a big fan?' at Pinkie, who just shrugged as Trixie found her voice.

"You dare to insult Trixie to her face? Trixie has never exaggerated or faked anything! Trixie is more than powerful enough to assist this foal! Why, Trixie once –"

"Okay great! Apple Bloom, lead the way!" said Pinkie, herding Apple Bloom and Trixie towards the door. Apple Bloom swore she saw Pinkie wink at her quickly before the door was closed behind them.

"Alright miss Trixie, we got work to do. Now come on!" Apple Bloom said, running towards the park before Trixie could sort out her cape or work out exactly what had just happened. Behind her, she heard Trixie's objections before the showpony finally gave in and chased after her.

"Little filly, Trixie had no intention of actually – wait! Trixie is not going to – slow down! Wait for Trixie!"

• • •

Sweetie Belle threw another ruby at the library's kitchen window and huffed in annoyance. Spike was taking forever to notice her; not that that was any different from

normal, she thought to herself. She lifted the last little gemstone she'd liberated from Rarity's stores and threw it at the window with irritated strength.

Spike opened the window with a quizzical expression, and Sweetie Belle covered her mouth in horror as her emerald projectile hit Spike in the eye. The young dragon immediately grabbed his face with both claws, losing his grip on the windowsill and falling out into the rosebushes below.

"Oh no! Spike, are you okay? I'm so sorry!"

Sweetie Belle ran over to the little flowerbed, grimacing as she saw Spike extract himself from the thorns. He looked extremely sorry for himself until he noticed the little gems littering the ground around his window, quickly crunching up one of the rubies before responding.

"I've had worse. Don't remind me about Twilight's number 6," Spike said, shuddering as he picked up a sapphire and swallowed it whole. "Have you been throwing these gems at the window? Not that I don't appreciate it, but you could have just knocked. And maybe added a little cinnamon."

"I couldn't knock. I needed to talk to you without Twilight knowing I'd come and got you."

"Why can't Twilight – oh, is it something about the date? Rarity hasn't changed her mind or anything, has she?"

Sweetie Belle was incredibly confused. What on earth was Spike talking about? Had he organised a date with Rarity? Was Twilight jealous or something?

"Wait, you organised a date? With Rarity?"

"Hey, I didn't do the organising. Rarity planned it all out herself! All I have to do is make sure Twilight doesn't catch on. So what's the problem?"

Sweetie Belle's stomach tightened for a second, but she tried not to let it show. What on earth was her big sister doing playing around with Spike's feelings?

"Spike, I don't think Rarity's going to be taking any date she's on all that seriously. She's got a huge crush on Rainbow Dash. I'm not sure anypony else really has a chance with her."

"Really? I dunno, Sweetie Belle. Rainbow's great and all, but Rarity seemed awfully keen on getting that doll fixed up to give to Twilight at their date tonight."

"But Applejack found that old doll! My big sister was only repairing it for her as a favour," said Sweetie Belle.

Spike and Sweetie Belle frowned at each other, both thinking things through. So Rarity's date was with Twilight? Or was it Applejack's date? Sweetie Belle couldn't work it out. She suddenly realised that Spike's eyes were widening, his claws covering his mouth unconsciously as he came to some terrible conclusion.

"I think I might have made a mistake, Sweetie Belle," he said, nervously looking from side to side. "I didn't mean to but I've told so many ponies about this. If I was wrong – what am I gonna do? I'll upset everypony!"

Sweetie Belle cautiously put a foreleg around Spike's shoulders, pulling him in for an awkward hug. As she did, she could feel the warmth emanating from his body – it was so unlike hugging another pony. For a lot of reasons, she thought, dropping her hoof to the ground again and speaking in as determined a voice as she could muster.

"I know exactly what we're going to do. We're going to go to see Pinkie Pie and you tell her everything you know. She's got a plan for it! I promise."

"Are you sure?" Spike looked like he was on the verge of crying.

"I'm sure. But we've got to move fast! Come on!"

Sweetie Belle and Spike ran back towards Sugarcube Corner as fast as their legs would carry them.

• • •

Big Macintosh knocked on the door again for the third time in as many minutes, with no discernible effect other than a slight increase in the volume of the incoherent, screaming sobs coming from within. He'd made it to the boutique a while ago, alternating between calling for Rarity and knocking on the door, but he'd seen neither hide nor hair of the fashionista.

Consarn it, this is frustrating! thought the big stallion. *If Rarity's interested in Twilight, then that's fine. She asked Twilight out first and she deserves a fair try to win Miz Sparkle's affections. But Ah'm interested in Twilight too – more than interested – and Ah intend to*

press my suit as well. The honourable thing to do is to let Rarity know, so there's a level playing field and Twilight can make a fair choice. So why won't the mare stop crying for a fraction of a second so Ah can talk to her?

Big Mac sighed and tried knocking on the door again, to no avail. He was about to call out again when he saw Whooves round the corner, the smaller stallion's face breaking into an expression of relief.

"Macintosh! Thank Celestia I've finally found you. Who would have thought this place was so hard to locate, eh?"

Big Mac just shrugged, encouraging Whooves to go on.

"Mac, I need your help, I'm afraid. I think I've rather managed to upset Dizzy – Ditzzy, I mean – and I'm not quite sure how. Or how to apologise." Whooves sat down, ears lowered.

"How did y'upset her?" Big Mac asked carefully. Whooves sprang up, gesticulating wildly as he tried to explain – *the fella looks like he's at th' end of a long rope*, thought the big red stallion.

"I don't know! Look, this is what happened – you decided to go charging off out to this town's miniscule fashion district to see a mare about a letter, and I was a bit lost as to the cause of your actions. Dizzy – I mean Ditzzy – said that she thought you were interested in Miss Sparkle, from the library?" Whooves paused for a second, waiting for confirmation, and Big Mac gave him a grudging nod.

"Ha! See, I thought you were seeing Dizzy! Ditzzy! So as soon as I find out you're not, obviously I'm delighted, because now there's no reason I can't ask her out to dinner. On a date, I mean. Romantically. Do you follow?"

Big Mac blinked.

"Well there's no need to be sarcastic. Except, obviously, I can't ask her out, because she's a client and that would be terribly unethical. So that's the only thing in my way, yes? I ask her to sit down and I tell her you don't need the sessions anymore – you don't, by the way, I really think you've made marvellous progress – and I tell her that I don't think the sessions are really helping her, and so we should wrap the sessions up. Then she screamed at me –"

"Wait, you led with 'these sessions ain't helping you and you shouldn't come to 'em any more now that Big Mac's alright'?" said Big Mac, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't be daft! I didn't – well, that wasn't my point, I meant to say that – if she'd stayed around to hear me out I could have – oh, figs." Whooves slumped, defeated.

"I've made a royal mess of this, Mac. You've got to go and talk to Dizzy for me, see if she'll at least hear me out. I don't expect a miracle. If she doesn't want me then I can get over it, I'm a big lad. But she thinks I don't want her, and she's right off the mark."

Big Mac thought for a moment, looking at Whooves with new eyes. He trusted the smaller stallion with a lot of things – therapy was very personal after all – and he'd always borne up well. Ditzzy was important to Big Mac, and she'd always played her personal feelings very close to her chest. For a long time, the stallion had thought that she might have been attracted to him, but as time went on, that hadn't seemed to be the case; their relationship had matured into a close friendship. He felt more comfortable around Ditzzy than almost any other pony. He made a decision and stared at Whooves, making the smaller stallion flinch.

"Y'really like her?"

"Yes." Whooves didn't drop his gaze for a second.

"You weren't just crushing on her because you couldn't have her?"

"Of course not." Whooves snorted indignantly.

"And you ain't just looking to stud her?"

"You listen here, big fella, you talk about her like that again and farm upbringing or not I will kick you so hard you'll forget what apples are." Whooves narrowed his eyes.

Big Mac could barely suppress his laughter – Whooves was puffed up like a bantam rooster, fury in his eyes as he stared up at the enormous farmpony.

"Alright, Ah'll talk to her. But Ah have to speak with Miz Rarity first, an' she won't stop c-crying," said Big Macintosh, allowing himself a smile as Whooves deflated into a wide grin. Whooves seemed to be about to say something in response when a familiar buzzing noise interrupted them; as the noise got louder, Scootaloo powered around the corner, her wings flapping madly as she used her scooter to pull a wagon containing Dinky and a

stack of flyers. Big Mac had barely had time to register what he was seeing before Dinky threw a handful of the flyers at the two stallions, shouting.

"There's a party tonight! In the park! Everypony totally has to come, it's a really big deal!"

Big Mac looked at one of the flyers – something about a "Magical Mystery Benefactor Bash". Seemed like some pony had decided to throw a real festival for every little pony in town. He was only distracted for a second, though, suddenly remembering he had a good reason to talk to Scootaloo.

"Scootaloo! You get back here, now! We need to have a c-conversation!"

"Can't hear you! Going too fast! Doing this for Pinkie! Sorry!" Scootaloo shouted back as the two fillies rounded another corner, but Big Mac was sure the little filly looked far too worried to have missed what he said. Whooves peeled a flyer off his face, dismissing it before he continued.

"I was about to say that I may be some help with regards to your hysterical friend. I am a therapist, after all. I'll pop in there, calm her down enough for you to speak to her, and then we can go and chat with Dizzy. Does that sound like a plan?"

Big Mac shrugged, as Whooves walked up to the boutique's door and rapped on it smartly a couple of times.

"Miss Rarity? My name is Doctor John Smith and I'm a therapist! I couldn't help but hear you crying, and I wondered if I might be – augh!"

The door cracked open enough for a pale foreleg to reach out, grab Whooves around the neck and yank him into the building, where the sobbing seemed to be immediately replaced with a rambling monologue that Big Mac couldn't, thankfully, quite make out. Unsure if his friend had actually been any help at all, Big Mac wrinkled his nose before sitting down again and resigning himself to wait.

He had a look at one of the flyers again – at least there was going to be something to do tonight. Pinkie could be a bit off sometimes, he mused, but the mare knew how to put on a decent hootenanny, that was for sure. If he could just square things with Rarity, he might even get a dance with Miz Sparkle. Smiling quietly to himself, Big Mac started daydreaming, thinking about the steps of a waltz and a certain lavender unicorn.

"Miss Trixie, yer holdin' it in the wrong place! Ah need you to lift it another three inches, and then hold it steady while I put the bolts in. You can't move it around or stop payin' attention or some pony's gonna get hurt. Now are you ready to pay attention or not?" Apple Bloom stamped her hoof and pulled a wrench out of the toolbox, shooting Trixie a withering glare before climbing back up the half-finished catapult.

Trixie rolled her eyes. This was completely intolerable! The filly was manipulating her shamelessly, with a mixture of authoritarian demands, dismissive comments about Trixie's mental strength, and sometimes – when Trixie felt like walking away from the entire pointless project – a whimpered worry that Trixie would abandon her completely and leave her a "terrible unreliable failure in th' eyes of mah family and friends!"

Despite the transparency of Apple Bloom's manipulation, Trixie couldn't deny that it was working. She shifted her forelegs on her cushion, sipping at the iced tea she'd demanded from a very snippy pegasus who'd been working on the main stage. Trixie didn't actually want to let the little filly down, she admitted to herself. Whatever the catapult was for, it seemed to be part of the show that Pinkie was putting on, and even though the party planner grated on every single one of Trixie's exquisitely sensitive nerves, the magician had to admit that she knew how to create an evening that nopony could forget.

The park was being transformed into a cornucopia of delights, nearly every business in town with a little stall dotted around the space. The stalls ranged from an apple foods cart run by one of Apple Bloom's innumerable relatives to a cut-down version of the Maison de Lune, the fine restaurant having set up little outside tables where clients could sit and order food to be run to them by an array of sharply dressed waiters. The park was, however, dominated by a huge stage, upon which Trixie could just about see her current lover, Octavia, arguing with the unicorn she used to date. Trixie narrowed her eyes, picking out the grey earth pony, and sighed wistfully at herself. She'd been seeing Octavia for only a little while, having successfully seduced the fussy musician away from her usual, boorish companion, and as she watched the graceful pony wrinkle her brows to shout something at Vinyl, Trixie had to admit to herself – Octavia was getting a little boring. The pony seemed to think her career actually merited as much time as the Great and Powerful Trixie! It was clearly time for Trixie to move on. *Maybe a pegasus this time*, she thought to herself.

"Miss Trixie! You ain't concentrating!" Apple Bloom's voice rang out from the catapult, and Trixie wrinkled her nose in irritation.

She hadn't been concentrating, of course, but it was annoying to have it pointed out. With a grunt of concentration, Trixie shoved the board three inches up and to the right, and held it in position while Apple Bloom worked. She'd agreed to this nonsense bet in a moment of understandable pride, but Trixie wasn't used to using this much brute force at once, and it was beginning to tax her. She was about to call for another break when she spotted Pinkie Pie walking over to the park, brushing off the ponies coming to her with important news and listening intently to a unicorn filly and – was that a baby dragon? As they got closer, Trixie began to pick out their conversation.

"It's pretty simple stuff, Spike! I've got the firewire codes all etched onto the letter already. All you have to do is send a letter to the princess!" said Pinkie, bouncing towards Trixie and Apple Bloom.

"I dunno, Pinkie. I mean, isn't this kinda beneath her notice? I'm sure she has a tonne of royal duties to handle," said the dragon. He seemed a little worried, if Trixie was any judge.

"Please, Spike?" the little unicorn asked. "We've done everything wrong today! We've got to work together to make it right and you're the only one who can get a letter to the princess."

The dragon looked up at Pinkie's empty grin and the filly's anxious face, and held a claw out.

"Okay, fine. But I'm not taking responsibility for when this all goes wrong," he said with a forced smile.

Pinkie dropped a scroll into Spike's claw, and with a deep breath in he exhaled a gout of green flame, incinerating the letter to ashes which sped towards the sky. Trixie watched with interest – she'd never actually seen a firewire letter sent before. And to the princess? Where on earth had Pinkie managed to get the codes? Those were practically a state secret! Trixie's musings were interrupted by the little dragon belching out not one, but six replies to the letter. Trixie narrowed her eyes. What was being planned here? More importantly, how could Trixie gain from it?

"Miss Trixie! Pull yer darn weight!" Apple Bloom's shout, half exasperated and half exhausted, startled Trixie back into concentration. The little filly was straining every muscle trying to keep the board in position on her own, and Trixie couldn't help but stifle a giggle when a brief magical correction knocked the little filly on her rump. Apple

Bloom took a deep breath and got back to the job, but Trixie could hear her muttering something about Trixie's work ethic.

Turning to face Pinkie again, Trixie was taken quite aback to find that the pink pony had moved a lot closer, her face only an inch or so away from Trixie's own.

"Hi Trixie! Sweetie Belle said that you could do us a favour!"

"Then she has been grossly misinformed. The Great and Powerful Trixie does not do favours for ponies she does not know, and Sweater Belt is certainly no acquaintance of Trixie's." Trixie tried to look down her nose at Pinkie, but every time she tilted her head back Pinkie leaned further and further over her. It was, Trixie admitted to herself, a little disconcerting. The earth pony didn't seem to need to blink.

"See, I knew it! Sweetie Belle, Trixie can't help us. She's all magicked out after helping Apple Bloom, and a unicorn like her can only do so much magic in a day before she's too tired to do anything else." Pinkie didn't drop Trixie's gaze for a second, and still didn't blink. Trixie felt her eyes beginning to water. This was ridiculous! It was the second time today this piffling pastry chef had insulted her ability, and it would not stand!

"Trixie is not tired! Trixie's abilities remain as stupendous as ever at all stages of the day! Trixie simply does not wish to waste her prodigious magical talents on your meaningless favour –"

"But you will anyway, just because one of your biggest fans asked you? Wow, that really is classy!" Pinkie cut across Trixie, shoving Sweetie Belle in front of the magician before she could come up with a response.

"I knew you'd come through, Trixie!" Sweetie Belle shouted far too loudly, a forced grin etched across her face. Trixie was about to dismiss the blatant manipulation completely when she realised that Sweetie Belle really had used some volume – almost every pony in the park was looking over towards them with interest. *Ah well*, thought Trixie, *good publicity doesn't jump onto your back every day of the week*.

"Of course I have come through, Sweetheart Ball! I am always happy to help a fan!" Trixie said in her loudest stage voice. The reaction seemed to be mostly positive, mares and stallions smiling in approval before getting back to their work, even if it did seem to send Octavia's ex into a giggling fit in the middle of the stage.

Trixie dropped her stage voice and pushed Sweetie Belle into Spike, sending the two of them rolling over each other as Trixie stepped closer to Pinkie.

"Out with it, then. What do you need me for now?" Trixie snapped, ignoring the furiously blushing young unicorn and dragon who were busily disentangling themselves from each other.

"You need to send these letters –" Pinkie displayed the six scrolls she'd received, each sealed with the royal coat of arms. "– to my friends. I know you can't firewire them, but I've tied a strand of their hair around each letter so you should be able to use that as a homing device, right?"

"You keep a supply of your friends' hair?" Trixie asked, appalled. "Why in Equestria would you have something like that?"

"For emergencies!" Pinkie grinned. "Now can you do it or not?"

"Certainly. So long as the catapult is finished and I don't have to concentrate on it any more. After I've done this, I am through doing favours for you and your motley crew of underage losers, understand?"

"Sure! Apple Bloom, do you need Trixie's help any more?" Pinkie shouted up the catapult, and a harassed-looking Apple Bloom peeked over the top of the launch platform.

"Ah needed her help for the last half-hour and all Ah've been gettin' is a bad attitude. But there's no more heavy lifting to do, so you're welcome to her," Apple Bloom stated flatly, returning to work tightening up some nuts and bolts.

Trixie flicked her hair back and removed her hat, freeing up her horn for this more complicated display of magic, and arranged the six letters in front of her, concentrating on the hair strands tied neatly around each scroll as she located the ponies who were to receive them. Three of them were together, somewhere near the edge of town. The other two were in a little closer, and the last scroll didn't have a hair on it. Trixie looked carefully at the last letter – was that Pinkie's? The foal! She'd left her letter right here! Trixie smiled at herself as the plan for a small revenge formed in her mind.

"Spike, isn't it? Dragon boy? Over here, I need your aura to send these letters properly," Trixie lied as casually as she could manage.

"Sure thing, your majesty," Spike muttered to himself, stamping over to stand beside Trixie. The magician was pleased – at least Twilight had trained her assistant to take orders well.

With a sudden grunt of effort, Trixie sent the first three letters zooming over the stage and out to the edge of town, trailed by a thin shower of blue sparks. Next was Twilight's letter, flying towards the library on the back of another pulse of magic. Finally, Trixie spun Rarity's letter as she lifted it in the air, sending a spray of white sparks from both ends. As Trixie expected, everypony in the area – and a certain dragon – watched it rise, mouths wide at the sudden display of magic.

Trixie sent Rarity's letter flying to its destination, and at the same time stamped down hard on Spike's tail. In shock and pain, Spike belched a vast quantity of green flame, and Trixie lifted Pinkie's scroll and fed it to the flames with one smooth motion. Unlike the last time Spike had burned a letter, this time the crumpled ash simply settled to the ground. The little dragon looked at the ground and then Trixie, appalled.

"Those codes were to me! I can't send letters to myself! You've just burnt it!"

"Oh, really?" Trixie smiled at Spike, levitating her hat back on and adjusting her cape. "Whoops."

Trixie walked towards the rest of the party as the disgusted dragon ran off to tattle on her to Pinkie, and allowed herself a quiet laugh. *No pony got the best of Trixie*, she thought to herself. *Now, all that's needed to make this a perfect evening is some pleasurable company, and since my standing date is otherwise occupied –* Trixie glanced at the stage to see Vinyl and Octavia practically wrestling over a sound dial – *I shall have to scare something up myself.*

Yes, thought Trixie. *Perhaps this trip could turn out to be fun after all.*

• • •

Twilight made an irritated noise and started pulling her brush through her mane again. It just wouldn't sit straight! She'd got an hour until her date and everything else was organised. Her gala dress still fitted perfectly; Rarity's work really was excellent. She was cleaned and scrubbed and she'd even found time to scan a few of the relationship books and make a list of appropriate conversational topics for a first date, which she'd managed to hide in the ruffles on her back so she could get to it at short notice in case she got into trouble.

Since Spike was out for some reason, she'd taken advantage of his absence to thoroughly consult some of the other books – mostly the ones that Fluttershy had borrowed – and

make another list, which she'd stored in her bedroom. It's a perfectly sensible thing to have done, she thought to herself. A prudent pony prepares for play! The books said!

No amount of justifying it could prevent her from blushing a little, though. Some of those books were illustrated.

Twilight's train of thought was utterly derailed by a scroll bouncing through her open balcony doors and rolling towards the fire. She barely saved it, grabbing it at the last second with her magic, and levitated it over. It had the royal seal on – a letter from the princess? Twilight opened it straight away, and a flyer fluttered to the ground as she read the note.

Dearest Twilight Sparkle,

It Has Been Too Long Since Our Last Meeting! It Was Fortuitous Indeed That You Were Able To Help Guide Us In The Modern Arts Of Celebration At Our Festival Of Humorous Terror. We Are Attending The Enclosed Event And Wish To Enlist Your Personal Assistance Once Again To Walk Among Our Subjects In An Appropriate Manner. I Will Arrive At Thirty Minutes Past Seven Of The Clock –

Phew, thought Twilight, that still gives me time for my date.

– But I Will Not Expect Your Company Until Eight Of The Clock.

Oh. Right. Fine then, no date.

Yours In Joyous Expectation,
Luna

Exasperated, Twilight picked up the flyer, wondering how on earth she could get word to her mystery date that she'd been called away on palace business. Scanning the flyer – something about a mystery benefactor event – she noticed that the Maison de Lune was apparently upping sticks and moving to the park for the evening.

Twilight smiled – that all worked out perfectly! If the Maison de Lune was at the park then she could meet up with her mystery date at eight, and then explain the situation. Plus Luna being there would give her a good way to escape the date if she really didn't get along with her potential suitor. Twilight thought about this for a second, and started writing down a schedule for the evening.

7.45: leave library and head for park.

7.55: arrive at park. Five minutes free time.

8.00: meet date at Maison de Lune and explain situation.

8.00: meet Princess Luna and

Twilight stopped writing halfway through that last line. She looked over Luna's letter again, and checked – Eight o'clock. Joyous expectation. She levitated over the notes she'd made about her date – Eight o'clock. Maison de *Lune*. Twilight shook her head, smiling at the ridiculous notion that had just entered it. There was no way her mystery date was the moon princess! The very idea was completely laughable.

"Ha ha ha," laughed Twilight to herself. The falseness of it seemed to echo around the library.

What if it wasn't laughable? What if it really was Luna? What if they didn't get on? What if Luna thought she was being unfaithful and told Celestia and got Twilight banished forever? *Easy, girl*, Twilight thought to herself. *You've got no proof. It's probably a coincidence.* Twilight quickly rewrote her schedule, and got back to brushing her hair with a nervous expression on her face.

7.45: leave library and head for park.

7.55: arrive at park. Observe Maison de Lune for information that proves Princess Luna is not Mystery Date.

8.00: meet date at Maison de Lune and explain situation.

Alternative: start date with Princess Luna.

8.02 : meet Princess Luna and explain situation.

Alternative: make no mistakes at all and proceed with completely perfect date.

It was going to be okay, Twilight tried to convince herself. She had a schedule. It was going to be okay. Oh sweet Celestia, what if she wasn't attracted to the Princess? She'd never even thought about Luna in that way! Twilight grabbed her schedule again, scribbling additional notes at the top and in the margins.

7.35: leave library and head for park.

7.45: Observe Princess Luna and establish basic attraction parameters.

7.55: Observe Maison de Lune for information that proves Princess Luna is not Mystery Date.

Alternative: Observe for information that proves Luna IS mystery date, assuming attraction has been established.

8.00: meet date at Maison de Lune and explain situation.

Alternative: start date with Princess Luna.

Second Alternative: start date with Princess Luna and inform her (with grace/kindness) that attraction has not been established.

8.02 : meet Princess Luna and explain situation.

Alternative: make no mistakes at all and proceed with completely perfect date.

Second alternative: BANISHED TO MOON

Twilight let out a panicked whine of frustration, and grabbed a fresh sheet of paper. There had to be some way to work out a schedule that would satisfy everypony, regardless of her feelings! She just needed to work out exactly what it was. Twilight started scribbling furiously, ignoring the lowering sun.

• • •

Rainbow rolled her eyes as Fluttershy returned to the table with their drinks and Applejack almost immediately excused herself to use the restroom. Rainbow had found the two of them and suggested heading to the bar for a drink so they could talk over what the right move was for her to make, but Fluttershy and Applejack didn't seem to be able to stay in the same conversation for more than a couple of minutes before one or the other of them would make some excuse and leave the table as fast as their legs would carry them.

They'd been avoiding each other in shifts since the three of them had sat down at one of Berry Punch's outdoor tables, at the ever-popular Led To Water bar in the outskirts of Ponyville. Even when they were actually sat at the same table, neither Fluttershy nor Applejack seemed to be acknowledging the other's presence. Not directly, in any case. Rainbow felt like she was having to hold up half the conversation, and the whole time the two of them kept flickering glances at each other, almost saying something and then holding their tongues. Rainbow had had about as much of it as she could stand, and as Applejack left the table decided to confront Fluttershy head on.

"So what is the deal with you and Applejack? When I met you two you were running like you'd stolen something and now you won't even look at each other. What's going on?"

Fluttershy sighed and sipped her drink.

"Nothing's going on!" she said quietly, before hiding behind her hair again. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to shout. I just get so frustrated with her. If she'd just let me know what she was feeling then I could – I'm sorry, I shouldn't unload on you like this."

Rainbow raised an eyebrow.

"That didn't answer my question at all. What actually happened?"

"I'm not sure I should say. I don't think it's fair to make you listen to the whole thing. I mean, you're Applejack's best friend and all," Fluttershy said apologetically.

"Yeah, exactly!" Rainbow said, downing her drink and slamming her hoof on the table. "I'm Applejack's best friend and I'm your oldest friend. So what gives, Fluttershy? Don't you think you can trust me with this?"

"It's not that. It's that you're not just my oldest friend, Dash, and I don't want to hurt your feelings if I can avoid it." Fluttershy looked straight at Rainbow, willing her to pick up the meaning so the nervous pegasus didn't have to spell it out.

Rainbow suddenly realised what Fluttershy was insinuating, and nearly burst out laughing. "Seriously? Fluttershy, you're cute, but we broke up years ago! I just now explained to you and Applejack that I've messed everything up with Rarity – you remember, the mare I like? The whole reason I was looking for you? I'm not still carrying a torch or anything. I mean, you were right, we were terrible as a couple."

Fluttershy seemed mollified by this, and Rainbow decided to push a little further.

"If you thought I was going to be upset, though – I guess you've got a little thing going on with Applejack? That's great! I always wondered how long it would take her to spot what was right under her nose."

Fluttershy shook her head slowly, taking another deliberate sip of her drink.

"So, you're not together? What is this, charades? Talk to me, Fluttershy!" Rainbow demanded, and suddenly everything came spilling out of Fluttershy, the yellow pegasus barely pausing for breath as she tried to say it all at once.

"I don't know what's going on with her. She knows I don't like stallions. She knows I spend all my extra time at the farm, every minute I can spare. She says I'm family. She knows I like her, Rainbow, she has to know! Even if she's not attracted to me I just wish I knew how she felt. I really don't like not knowing and I can't be the one who pushes it and asks, Rainbow, I can't do it. Because if I'm wrong – if she doesn't want me –" Fluttershy's voice choked away to nothingness.

"I hear you," said Rainbow, in as supportive a voice as she could manage, giving her friend's shoulder a squeeze. "I was gonna say you should just go for it and kiss her but I understand, I do. Oh, hey Applejack!"

The last shout was a warning to Fluttershy as much as a greeting to Applejack, and the yellow pegasus took her cue, murmuring something about needing the restroom as well and leaving without looking Applejack in the eye. Applejack sat at the table and picked up her drink, looking critically at Rainbow.

"You didn't say something to upset her, did you?" the earth pony asked as she settled into her chair.

"Hey, if anypony here's upsetting her it's you!" Rainbow snapped. "You're not exactly treating her fairly, Applejack."

"Now, I ain't discussin' Fluttershy with you. You don't know a darn thing about what's goin' on," Applejack pointed out calmly.

"That's not true! I know that –"

"That Fluttershy would rather you didn't start flapping your jaw about her to me? Ah thought so. Now Ah ain't gonna lie to you and say that the situation is anythin' less than complicated, but until Ah've got my head around it Ah'm keeping my mouth shut. Ah figure Fluttershy should be the first to know as soon as Ah work out exactly what Ah'm feeling. The truth is, right now Ah'm just not sure what that is," Applejack said with finality. Rainbow had to admit, she had some good points.

"Still, you should talk to her. She's freaking out," said Rainbow, determined to help out in at least some small way.

"Alright, fine. Now you've gotten into a proper mess with Rarity, right? Because all you've been saying is how impossible she is and we knew that already. We ain't actually heard what you did wrong yet."

"Oh yeah. Let's wait until Fluttershy gets back, I don't want to tell it twice," said Rainbow. When Fluttershy returned to the table, Rainbow could see that her eyes were a little red around the edges, and the sky blue pegasus didn't know what to say.

"Fluttershy?" Applejack asked, filling the silence. "Ah was thinkin' – Rainbow needs our help right now, so we gotta concentrate on her for a bit. Can we just be friends? Ah mean

while we're sortin' all this out. We work out real good as friends, right? Is that okay for now?"

Fluttershy squeaked, and then looked right at Applejack. She seemed to find her courage, and her next sentence was louder, even if it was still barely audible.

"That's fine. If that's what you want that's fine."

Rainbow waited for Applejack to say something – anything – for a few seconds, and when she couldn't stand the silence any more she started talking until she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Rarity and I got letters from each other today, except they weren't actually from each other, okay? They were from Scootaloo and her friends, and they were all romantic and stuff. Derpy explained about mine, but I guess she forgot to explain to Rarity or something, because Rarity thought hers was real, and on top of that Spike told me Rarity had a secret date with Twilight. I was so mad at her! But I guess he was wrong, because I went round to yell at Rarity and she was, er, dressed all pretty and she'd got wine and candles and stuff."

"So what did y'do next?" Applejack asked, interested.

"Do go on. But don't call her Derpy any more, please. Her name is Ditzzy and she really hates that nickname," said Fluttershy.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," Rainbow continued. "Anyway, like I said, she was all dressed up and I thought she was in on the prank with Sweetie Belle or something. As though it would be obviously funny for her to like me? So I got real mad and I told her I didn't know why we spent any time together and that we had nothing in common and that she was vain. And some other stuff, I don't remember all of it. So she was all teary and then she showed me her letter and locked me out, and I worked out that she liked me but now she won't talk to me! What am I supposed to do?"

Fluttershy and Applejack exchanged worried glances, and Fluttershy was the first to say anything.

"I'm not really sure you can do very much. Rarity's going to be really mad." Rainbow felt her stomach drop. Fluttershy knew Rarity better than anypony.

"Ah'm not so sure, sugarcube," Applejack chimed in. "Ah've seen Rarity plenty mad before. Ah think maybe all you have to do is weather the storm, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes. That might actually work," Fluttershy agreed.

"And what exactly does 'weather the storm' mean?" Rainbow asked, through gritted teeth.

"I think Applejack just means that when Rarity blows up at you don't defend yourself. She's going to need to get out all of her anger. Then when she's done, you can explain. Is that what you meant, Applejack? Not that you aren't perfectly clear," Fluttershy said. Rainbow could swear there was the tiniest edge to her voice there – not that Applejack noticed.

"Sure is," said the earth pony laconically.

Rainbow had a think for a second. So all she had to do was keep a hold of her temper? Fine. Rarity was worth taking a loss in a shouting match. Rainbow Dash can win anything, even if it means holding her tongue. Keep calm and don't get mad. Easy. Right?

Rainbow had her inner monologue interrupted by an irritatingly familiar buzzing noise, and the three ponies at the table turned to see Scootaloo pulling Dinky in her little red wagon, Dinky throwing out hooffuls of flyers as they went.

"It's a totally awesome party!" Dinky shouted in a slightly hoarse voice. "In the park tonight, it's the Magical Mystery Benefactor – Scootaloo! Go go go, code Rainbow!"

The filly's voice rose to a panicked screech with that last part and an expression of terror was suddenly pasted onto Scootaloo's face. Speeding up, the little pegasus' wings became a blur, the buzz rising in pitch as she pushed herself as hard as possible. The burst of speed was so impressive Dinky nearly fell out of the wagon. Rainbow was paralysed by rage for a moment, seeing the looks on the faces of the fillies – they knew they'd done something wrong, that they were in trouble. It was only when Fluttershy said something about calming down that Dash felt her wings snap into action, propelling her towards the girls.

As she flipped the table and took to the air, Rainbow failed to notice a set of three scrolls travelling towards her location at a fairly impressive speed. They caught her in the forehead, one after another, turning her quick start into an impromptu somersault and a faceful of road dirt.

Head spinning, when Rainbow regained her senses she could hear Scootaloo's buzzing, but she was too far away to bother with now and the impact had taken all the fight out of her. Grunting, she picked herself up and grabbed the scrolls from the dirt, and opened the first one – it was for her!

Dearest Rainbow Dash,

Do You Remember The Humorous Jape I Played Upon You Late Last Nightmare Night? What Hilarity! We Are Attending The Enclosed Event And Wish To Enlist Your Assistance, And The Assistance Of Your Friends, To Once Again Ensure An Evening Of Genuine Amusement. I Will Arrive At Thirty Minutes Past Seven Of The Clock, But I Will Not Expect Your Company Until Eight Of The Clock.

*Yours In Joyous Expectation,
Luna*

Princess Luna was coming to town? Rainbow shook her head fully clear and re-read the letter, handing the other two scrolls to Fluttershy and Applejack. The impact with her forehead seemed to have knocked a flyer loose from inside her scroll, so Rainbow picked that up too and gave it a quick look – some big party in the park. Obviously a Pinkie Pie event, if Rainbow was any judge.

"Says here Princess Luna's coming to town. Soon, too. Do you two have the same sort of letter?" Rainbow asked. Applejack and Fluttershy both nodded.

"So if we've all been invited to this thing, Rarity's gonna be there, right? I mean, she doesn't miss a chance to show off a new design, does she?"

"Probably. Unless she's too upset, but if she is you're best off leaving her alone for a bit anyhow," said Applejack.

"Alright, awesome! I'll go to the party thing then, and she can shout at me and then I can get everything straight with her."

"That sounds like a good plan, Rainbow. We should get going or we'll be late," said Fluttershy. Without looking properly at either Rainbow or Applejack, she took off towards the park within a few hesitant wingbeats, staying too high off the ground to talk to anypony stuck down there. Rainbow took the opportunity to whisper a quick word to Applejack.

"You shouldn't have asked her to be friends, she's gonna –"

"Ah don't need your advice, Rainbow. Ah'm dealing with this my way, alright?" Applejack shouldered Rainbow out of the way, cantering towards the park after Fluttershy.

Rainbow Dash sighed to herself before taking off after her friends. They sure seemed set on doing this the hard way.

• • •

"And now I'm in therapy! Therapy! It's so pathetic!"

Rarity lost her voice again, sobbing into an enormous velvet pillow as Whooves shifted his weight from leg to leg uncomfortably. This was not going as well as he would have liked. He'd hoped he'd be in, calm Rarity down within five minutes or so, then she comes out, has a heart to heart with Big Mac, ten minutes tops, and then they'd be on the road to Ditzy's place so Big Mac could explain that Whooves was a big idiot. After that, Whooves figured, he could ask Ditzy out and the whole thing could be over and done with.

Instead, Rarity had treated him to a staggeringly vast monologue, recounting her troubles with "that spectrum-haired hussy" in excruciating detail, punctuated with vast, theatrical bouts of sobbing. Whooves had the distinct impression that all she'd wanted was an audience. Leaning to the side, he checked the clock again – it was seven, for Celestia's sake! This needed to be wrapped up yesterday.

"Miss Rarity? Miss Rarity, please! I can't help you if you don't listen to me!" Whooves said in a stern voice.

"I can't even do the therapy right!" Rarity wailed, sobbing even louder. *This is a disaster*, Whooves thought. *She's never going to stop*. Whooves was so preoccupied with the situation he barely noticed when a scroll bounced in through the open window, rolling to a stop in front of Rarity. Rarity sniffled, picking up the scroll with a confused look and unrolled it, glancing at the flyer and going over the letter twice.

As she did, she wiped her eyes, and seemed to genuinely start pulling herself together. Whooves thought, for a moment, that there was a chance the letter had achieved what he couldn't and actually calmed Rarity down. When she put the scroll and flyer to one side though, he could see he'd been quite wrong – the theatrical hysterics had been replaced with clear, cold anger.

"Doctor Smith, wasn't it? You are a qualified medical doctor?" Rarity asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"No, not medical. I have a doctorate in psychological studies," said Whooves. Then he saw the expression on her face. "Is that okay?"

"Hmm. I feel like an MD would make a stronger impression, but you'll have to do," said Rarity dismissively. "You're about thirteen hooves tall, yes? A little slim around the waist..." she trailed off, shoving away clutter from in front of a store cupboard and throwing a few items on the floor in a clutter, a great red cape covering up a Wonderbolts costume and an enormous, old fashioned formal wig. After a quick rummage, Rarity emerged with a formal coat and shirt that Whooves suspected would fit him rather well indeed.

"What exactly are you planning, Rarity?" Whooves asked warily.

"Nothing you'll find arduous, Doctor, I assure you. I've simply decided to attend a social event this evening, at which I will be meeting royalty, and you are the lucky stallion I have selected to accompany me," Rarity said as she sat in front of a mirror and clucked irritably at her ruined make-up. She wiped her face clean with a cloth and began applying her eye-shadow again, before turning her attention back to Whooves. For his part, he was looking at the windows and wondering exactly how much damage he'd do to himself if he just went straight through the big one and never looked back. Writing it off as a bad idea, he decided to just tell the truth as clearly as possible. If Rarity broke down again he'd just have to deal with it.

"Rarity, I'm sure almost anypony would be delighted to accompany you to your event, but the fact of the matter is that I'm, ah, otherwise engaged. Emotionally, I mean. If I was going to take anypony to something this evening it would be her. If she'd talk to me, I mean."

Rarity put down her mascara brush and turned to face Whooves, the traces of her earlier tears almost entirely gone from her face.

"Fine. Then see this as a business transaction, Doctor. You accompany me tonight, and I will do you a rather extraordinary favour. Which mare is the object of your affections?"

"Ditzy Doo," Whooves admitted before he could catch himself.

"Oh, the mailmare? She's a sweetie. Absolutely marvellous figure, especially considering she's had a foal. Next time I see her, I will invite her in for a dress fitting – absolutely at

my expense, of course – and the entire time I will simply gush about how wonderful you are and about all the lovely things you've been saying about her."

Whooves thought for a second. A new dress for Ditzzy and being talked up for an entire morning? It seemed like a good idea. So long as Rarity understood exactly where she stood.

"Okay," said Whooves, carrying on quickly when he saw Rarity's face light up. "I'll accompany you as your friend, but I won't lie to anyone who asks if we're together. And if Ditzzy's there then I need you to explain exactly what's going on, okay? I don't want her getting the wrong idea. And I want to know why you think you need a date for this thing you're going to."

Rarity seemed satisfied, and picked up her mascara brush again, carefully accentuating her eyelashes before responding.

"She can't see me this affected this evening, Doctor. I can't let her see how thoroughly she's hurt me. The clearest way I can prove to her I'm fine is to be seen with a successful gentlecolt who can actually see something good in me. Who doesn't think I'm vain, or stuck-up, or – oh, this is so silly! I just applied this!"

Rarity wiped her watering eyes clean, took a deep breath and started to reapply her mascara.

"I'd rather not discuss it too much more, Doctor. I'd like to look my best this evening and I keep ruining my makeup."

Whooves looked at Rarity critically as she returned to her mirror. She seemed to be stable, but that was obviously a thin crust over what, if Whooves was any judge, was the start of a broken heart. If nothing else, the mare could do with a friendly face next to her this evening and Whooves could certainly do that. As soon as he'd decided that he would go with Rarity, he remembered why he'd actually come to talk to her in the first place.

"Absolutely understood, Rarity. I'll accompany you this evening, but could you do me the tiniest favour? Big Mac is outside and he needs to have a very brief word with you before we go."

Rarity seemed confused for a moment before suddenly grasping what was going on.

"Oh, of course! This is about the little dolly for Applejack, I've no doubt. Call him in, would you? I'd get the door myself but this eyeshadow won't even itself out."

Whooves got to the door and cracked it open – Big Mac was sat a little way away, lost in thought. Whooves stamped to get the big stallion's attention and Big Mac quickly trotted over to the boutique.

"Mac, I think I've calmed her down enough for you to have a quick word. Now, I've achieved that because I'm accompanying her to a social event tonight. That's as a friend, because I think she's going to need one, okay? That's all that is so if it comes up you can... you look like you've swallowed a bee. What's wrong?"

Big Mac looked completely bamboozled.

"Ah ain't sure," said Big Mac, furrowing his brows. "Best Ah speak to her so's we can straighten this out."

The two stallions re-entered the boutique, and Rarity turned to see them as they did so. Even for two gentlecolts with their hearts elsewhere, she was undeniably stunning.

"Macintosh, always a pleasure to see you. Twilight's doll is quite repaired, but unfortunately I couldn't embellish it at all. It's just over there on the table, and I've sent a quick note to the Maison de Lune to tell them to expect Twilight and Applejack at eight. That should cover everything, yes?" said the unicorn cheerfully. Big Macintosh blinked twice, slowly.

"Nnnope," he drawled. "You ain't seeing Twilight tonight? On her blind date? Spike said –"

"Oh, you must have misheard him! I set up the blind date for Twilight, yes, but it was on Applejack's behalf. She's been keeping that old doll, you see – a token of her affections – and I thought I'd do her a little bit of a favour and set up a date, so Applejack could hand the doll over then."

Big Macintosh didn't say anything for a couple of minutes, turning the situation over in his mind. Whooves was about to say something to break the silence when the farmpony finally spoke.

"Does Applejack know you set this all up?" he asked, deliberately.

"Oh! Actually, with everything else I don't think I've had time to tell her. Macintosh, would you be a dear and pass on the message for me?"

Macintosh walked carefully forwards, leaned in towards the mare, and kissed her gently on the cheek. When he raised his head again, he had an enormous grin.

"Nnnope!"

Big Macintosh grabbed the doll in his teeth and trotted jauntily out of the front door. Whooves grinned at Rarity, who seemed to be trying to work out which question to ask first.

"Rarity, I shouldn't worry. I actually think it's going to work out alright."

• • •

At the park, Pinkie was dealing with last minute issues. She'd had to set the volume on the stage to something that was too quiet for Vinyl and too loud for Octavia, which they'd both complained about at length. The Maison de Lune staff had been slowly and deliberately expanding their tables into apple fritter territory, and Pinkie had had to put three waiters, Apple Bloom, and Caramel into time out until they agreed to stop fighting. On top of that, Trixie had apparently decided to replenish her firework supply from Pinkie's stock, and she was running dangerously low on catherine wheels. Pinkie wrinkled her snout when she even thought about that meanypants Trixie. The big boasting bully had burned up her letter and stolen half the pyrotechnics that were earmarked for the finale!

Ponies were already starting to arrive, and Pinkie figured she had about five minutes until everything kicked off properly. She chewed a toffee for a moment, letting the sugary goodness melt away her stress, until two young voices interrupted her solitude

"Pinkie! All reports are looking good and the dance floor has been rolled out," said Spike.

"Yeah, and I just had the engineers do a preliminary sound check and everything's looking great!" Sweetie Belle chimed in, ticking the items off a clipboard.

Pinkie had to admit – Spike and Sweetie Belle had a knack for this size of party. Or, at least, Spike had a knack for powering through a big list of little, detailed jobs and Sweetie Belle really wanted to help him out.

"Okey-dokey-lokey! That's great, you two! I think you've finished all the jobs I've got for you. I've got to go backstage and sort out a few things, but why don't you take these –" Pinkie fished a couple of lanyards out of her saddlebags and threw them to the youngsters. "– and they'll let you have food from any of the stalls!"

"Seriously?" Spike said, practically salivating. "Because I had a bet with Caramel that he couldn't chrome an apple, and he said that –"

"I was thinking you could maybe take me to the Maison de Lune. If you like," said Sweetie Belle from behind Spike. The little dragon just shrugged.

"Sure if that's where you wanna eat. I think he's got a decent gravel, at least," said Spike as he and the bouncing, happy unicorn wandered over towards the food stalls. Pinkie giggled to herself – Spike seemed completely unaware he was basically on his first little date.

On the subject of dates, Pinkie thought to herself, she still hadn't thought of anypony who'd make a good partner for Twilight. As far as she could gather from Spike and the Cutie Mark Crusaders, Twilight thought she was getting a blind date tonight – but she was the only one who was actually turning up. Pinkie could stand in herself, she thought for a moment. She and Vinyl weren't exactly exclusive – the unicorn was still hung up on her sister, Pinkie knew, so she didn't really have grounds to complain if Pinkie went on a date with a friend. The earth pony had the feeling, however, that she wasn't exactly Twilight's type. Twilight needed someone older, a little more bookish. Pinkie was thinking it over when she realised there wasn't any noise at all coming from the centre of the park – that was weird.

Running over to see what the problem was, Pinkie was met with a sight that made her bound with delight, even if it was completely unexpected. Princess Luna was standing in the centre of the dance floor, looking a little uncomfortable at the sudden silence – but when she saw the pink pony, her face broke into a genuine, uncomplicated smile.

"Pinkamena! It Is A Pleasure To See You Once Again!" the princess proclaimed, accidentally dropping into her traditional voice.

"Luna! You came to my party! I didn't expect you to actually come, I only needed you to write the letters, but now you're here and you're all shouty! Yay!" Pinkie bounced around the princess, and the other ponies in the park seemed to relax a little when they saw how comfortable Pinkie was with Luna's presence.

"I apologise for my loudness," said the Princess in a more normal voice. "I was merely excited to greet you in person! I have been enjoying our correspondence a great deal. It is more pleasing than I had anticipated to be in your company once again. Did you not receive my letter informing you that I was planning to attend in person? I thought that I might be able to assist you in disentangling your friends' romantic misadventures."

"I got your letter alright, but I didn't get a chance to read it! It got burned up. So this is a total surprise!"

"Oh dear! I did not intend to discomfit you in any fashion. Should I take my leave?"

Pinkie rolled her eyes and grinned at Luna. She was such a sillyhead to think Pinkie would ever want her to leave! They'd been writing to each other at least once a week since Nightmare Night – Luna had sent out thank you letters to Pinkie and Twilight and all their friends, and so Pinkie sent a thank you letter for the thank you letter that included a recipe for chocolate éclairs. Then Luna had sent a thank you letter for that thank you letter and a second letter about how great the éclairs were, and she'd included a really old recipe for brandy fruitcake. Since then they'd just not stopped writing and they'd been talking about everything! Luna was really clever, thought Pinkie, and so kind and polite and – oh!

"Hey, you actually really might be able to help me out! You're single, right?" asked Pinkie. Luna seemed to be taken aback for a second, replying too quickly and too loudly.

"Pinkamena, I didn't expect – I mean yes. Yes, I am single," Luna said, smiling shyly.

"Hooray!" squealed Pinkie. This was working out better than she could have imagined! "I have a great idea for your evening! See the Maison de Lune over there? Could you go sit at one of the tables for a few minutes? They'll get you anything you want to eat. I just have to sort out a couple of things backstage and then I'll come over and we can get you on a date this evening!"

Luna seemed a little stunned, but quite pleased.

"I am looking forward to it, Pinkamena. I must say – I feel we have become quite fast friends already. I truly do look forward to seeing you again later," said the princess as she left to take a seat at the Maison de Lune.

Pinkie waved her goodbye and headed off towards the stage. Now Twilight had a date all lined up! Perfect! Pinkie frowned to herself as she got to the stage. Something was making her stomach all twisty, and it was rare for her to get nerves. She checked the backstage clock as she stood in the wings – it was seven-thirty. No time for nerves now, she told herself.

Showtime!

Big Macintosh drummed his hooves nervously on the table. He'd gotten to the Maison de Lune early and had decided against rushing back to the farm to change into anything formal. Miss Smartypants sat slumped on the table in front of him, looking questioningly off to his left at one of the only other two ponies at the Maison's tables this evening. Big Mac resisted the urge to do the same – Princess Luna had walked over a while ago and taken a seat after politely greeting him. He knew the correct thing to do was to make small talk, but his tongue seemed to have frozen up. It didn't seem to matter too much, though – Luna seemed to be anticipating something just as much as he was, and wasn't paying him much heed.

The other pony, to Big Mac's left, had barely noticed the princess – she seemed too enamoured with her own companion, who had just launched into another apparently fascinating diatribe on the relative merits of granite and low-quality quartz. As Spike happily chattered away, Sweetie Belle barely seemed to notice his words, just nodding along occasionally, with a big grin across her face.

His companions at the restaurant weren't helping, but Big Mac was mostly nervous because he didn't know exactly what he was going to do. Twilight should show up for her date any minute now and he had no plan other than presenting Miss Smartypants. Conversation, he worried, was likely to elude him.

From his right, he heard a familiar buzzing noise, and Scootaloo and Dinky zoomed into view. They'd ditched the red wagon somewhere since he'd seen them last, and Scootaloo was looking tired, taking intermittent breaks from powering her little scooter along. Dinky seemed to be trying to help too, her horn producing a faltering grey glow around the scooter's wheels while she crouched in between Scootaloo and the handlebars.

"Come on, Scoots! A little further, she's getting close!" Dinky shouted as Scootaloo veered through a nearby bush. Big Mac didn't really have time to engage with the situation before he saw Ditzzy veering erratically over the Maison's tables, landing next to him and breathing heavily.

"Ditzzy? Y'alright?" he asked, concerned.

"It's D-Dinky. She w-won't come home! I've b-been chasing her down. Could you h-help? Please?" the grey pegasus asked. She looked tired, thought Big Mac, and if he was any judge she'd been having a bit of a cry. He didn't even have to think about it.

"Sure thing, Ditzzy," he said, turning to the table next to him. "Spike, Sweetie Belle? Ditzzy's worried about Dinky. Could y'help us find her and bring her back to her ma?"

"Sure, I guess so," said Spike, not noticing Sweetie Belle's slightly put out expression. "How hard can she be to find?"

Spike dropped to the ground and indicated the nearby bushes.

"Sweetie Belle and I will see if we can follow their tracks. Why don't you two try asking around?"

Spike and the unicorn filly walked off into the bushes by the same route Scootaloo and Dinky had gone, leaving Big Mac and Ditzzy alone. Big Mac realised this might be a good time to help untangle Ditzzy's anger with Whooves, as the two of them walked towards the crowd and left Luna as the last pony at the Maison tables. If Big Mac was any judge, the princess was the reason the rest of their tables were empty – everypony seemed a bit intimidated by her. Fixing his attention on Ditzzy, he decided to bring it up as bluntly as possible.

"Whooves is sweet on you. He's bad at sayin' it is all."

Ditzzy looked at Big Mac incredulously with her good eye and snorted derisively. "N-nopony's that bad at s-saying things. He said he didn't want to s-see me any more."

"Ah'm just telling you how it is," said Big Mac with finality, and he could see doubt creeping into Ditzzy's expression. "Y'should let him say his piece."

Ditzzy thought about it for a second and sighed.

"Fine, I'll h-hear him out. We n-need to get looking for D-Dinky though, I d-don't know why she's leading me on such a ch-chase."

Big Mac thought he might have some idea why, but thought it best to keep that to himself for now. Keeping an eye on the bushes and flower beds, he and Ditzzy started asking around in the crowd for leads.

• • •

Twilight's stomach dropped as she saw Ditzzy and Big Mac leave the Maison tables from her hiding place in the nearby bushes. She'd already had the hem of her dress run over by

Scootaloo, who thankfully hadn't spotted her, and had to deal with a barrage of barbed cat-calls from Trixie, who had.

At first it had all looked like it was going so perfectly! Spike and Sweetie Belle were already at a table, and they clearly weren't her mystery date. Then Big Mac had showed up and taken a seat. He'd even got a little gift, or something. It was pretty clear he was waiting for a date, Twilight thought – he was looking all nervous and excited, and that was what the books had said a pony was likely to be feeling before a romantic encounter. With a rush of relief, Twilight had realised she was feeling the same things. She'd always known Big Mac was handsome, but recently she'd found her eyes wandering to his usual reading spot even when he wasn't there. He was so well-read, too, and more than that – Twilight knew that ponies could sometimes tune her out when she got too enthusiastic about a subject, but Big Mac always seemed like he was really, actually listening to her. It looked like all her worries had been baseless.

Then, Luna arrived and sat at the Maison, showing just as much anticipation as Big Mac, and everything was all jumbled again. It could be either of them! If Luna had arrived first, Twilight might have actually been able to stick to her plan and work out if she was actually attracted to Luna at all, but all she could do was compare her to Big Mac. Luna seemed perfectly nice, but Twilight knew Big Mac. No, more than that – now the two possibilities for her date were sat next to each other, she realised she'd hoped it would be him all along.

Then she'd had her dress ruined by Scootaloo and Dinky, and shortly after that Ditzzy had arrived. She and Big Mac had spoken to each other for a minute and then they'd just left. He might have been waiting there for her all along, Twilight thought with a heavy heart. She'd barely noticed as Spike and Sweetie Belle stamped through the bushes next to her, not coming close to her before crashing out on the other side and picking up Scootaloo's trail again.

There wasn't much to do but make the best of it – go and talk to Luna, maybe try and have a good time on the date. Even if it wasn't the one she wanted. Twilight bundled herself up and got out of the bushes, her chin high, projecting a confidence she didn't have and enthusiasm she didn't feel.

• • •

Applejack arrived in the park a little after Fluttershy and Rainbow, who were talking urgently in low voices when she arrived. Applejack knew they were likely talking about her – as far as she was concerned they were welcome to. Fluttershy could probably do

with a bit of a conversation with somepony, and Applejack knew she wasn't dealing with the whole situation well at all. Whenever she looked at the yellow pegasus, Applejack felt like she'd caught her chest in a vise – her breathing got tight and uncontrolled. She knew she was using the whole Rarity and Rainbow disaster to try and buy herself some time to think things through, but she didn't know what conclusion would be a good one.

Fluttershy was pretty, there was no denying that. It was easy – easier than Applejack was comfortable with – to imagine her moving to the farm and being part of every single day there, sun-up to sunrise. It was easy to imagine kissing her, Applejack thought, and at that her chest tightened up again. So why was she so nervous about the whole thing? Why did it feel like she didn't know what she wanted? Applejack took a quick breath and tried to work it through. What she needed was somepony to talk this through with, she decided. But who? Rainbow needed to be there for Fluttershy, that was fine. Rarity was nowhere to be seen and Rainbow likely wouldn't thank Applejack for trying to find her. Pinkie would be busy with party planning – *Maybe Twilight would have read something about this?* Applejack thought to herself. Twilight's probably got a book about relationships somewhere, or –

Rainbow and Fluttershy both saw the orange pony go pale for a second, her eyes suddenly wide. Applejack couldn't believe herself – she'd screamed at Twilight this afternoon, accused the unicorn of all sorts of awful things, and she'd been absolutely wrong. She'd only just realised it! She'd been so relieved, so blessedly relieved that Fluttershy and Twilight weren't together the farm pony had completely forgotten that she owed Twilight an apology.

"Rainbow, Fluttershy, Ah'm sorry but Ah've got to go and find Twilight. Ah owe her an apology and Ah don't think it can wait. Fluttershy, you understand, don't you? Rainbow, I promise Ah'll be back in time to help you out, okay?"

Fluttershy didn't say anything, and Rainbow looked between her two friends for a second before blurting something out.

"I'll go find her! You and Fluttershy can wait here for, uh, for Rarity! I can cover the ground faster than you anyway," the cyan pegasus said, forcing a smile.

"That's mighty kind of you, Rainbow, but Ah really need to find her myself. Fluttershy, Ah'll be back soon. Ah promise, okay?"

"Sure," said Fluttershy quietly, without looking Applejack in the eye.

Applejack hesitated for a second before leaving. Part of her was screaming just to tilt her hat back and kiss Fluttershy, to just let her know how much she was loved, but there was that tiny, nagging doubt in the pit of her stomach. *If Ah did this now, Applejack thought, that'd never go away. There would always be a part of me that wondered if Ah really wanted her the way Ah should – the way she deserves to be wanted. Or if Ah was just trying to make my friend as happy as possible.*

"Sorry, y'all. Ah've got to talk to Twilight," Applejack said, turning and cantering out towards the food stalls.

Rainbow sighed, turning to Fluttershy.

"Sorry, I tried. Look, she's gonna come around, okay? You know that, right?"

"Rainbow, if she wanted to tell me anything she wouldn't be running off to Twilight the first moment she had a chance. I wanted to know if she liked me, and now I suppose I do. She wants to be friends."

"No! Look, you can't think like that! She's just stubborn, alright? Give her just a little time to get her head together and she'll realise that she loves you."

"She's had years to get her head together and see me properly, Rainbow. Listen, Rarity could come in through the other entrance too. You should go cover that one or you might miss her," said Fluttershy sadly.

Rainbow looked worried, pacing backwards and forwards for a moment before groaning.

"Augh, fine! I don't want to miss her. But I'll keep going backwards and forwards, okay? If you want to go after Applejack, don't feel like you have to stay here. I can work stuff out with Rarity on my own."

Rainbow took to the skies, and with one last worried look at her friend, sped towards the other entrance to check for Rarity.

• • •

Fluttershy watched her friend fly away, and dropped her gaze back to the ground, feeling thoroughly miserable. She couldn't tell how long it was before she was interrupted.

"Excuse me? Are you – that is you! Trixie knew it!" Fluttershy looked up to see a blue unicorn with a silvery mane looking at her excitedly. The newcomer quickly brushed down her cape, adjusted her hat and carried on excitedly.

"Trixie was wandering the park, looking for a pony worth her precious time and then she saw you! You're Fluttershy, yes? The model?"

Fluttershy nodded nervously; she'd had bad experiences with fans in the past and Angel Bunny usually dealt with them. Extremely thoroughly, actually – there had been a few lawsuits – but he was all the way back at the cottage.

"Oh, Trixie knew it! She looked over and saw you here, all glum, and Trixie thought to herself 'Such a pretty pegasus simply must be cheered up a little.' As Trixie got closer, she recognised you from your work! Trixie has to admit – you are simply stunning in the flesh, Fluttershy. Your pictures really don't do you justice."

Fluttershy blinked in surprise. She'd seen Trixie before, when she'd performed at Ponyville, and the showpony had seemed a lot boastful and a little cruel. Now she was actually speaking to her, Trixie seemed a lot nicer – confident instead of arrogant, and so complimentary, even if she did speak in the third pony. Fluttershy realised to her horror that she was starting to blush a little.

"Thank you," she said in a small voice, before realising she should probably say something more substantial. "What brings you to Ponyville, Trixie?"

"Oh, Trixie was visiting with a friend, but she's all tied up with work. Trixie doesn't really have anything special to do, but Trixie did, ah, acquire these –" Trixie levitated out a pair of lanyards from underneath her cloak, "– and they could let me take a friend backstage, but Trixie doesn't really know anypony here. Trixie wondered if – no, Trixie is being silly! Enjoy the party, Fluttershy. It's been so nice meeting you!"

Trixie turned to walk away, and Fluttershy almost reached out to stop her. Trixie had made a bad first impression with her show, but that didn't mean Fluttershy should treat her badly now. *Besides*, thought Fluttershy, *it's nice to be appreciated a little*.

"Trixie, wait – I mean, if you want, I could perhaps go with you? I don't mean to push if you'd rather not."

Fluttershy didn't see the grin on Trixie's face at her words, just Trixie's expression of surprised delight as the unicorn turned back to face her.

"Really? Trixie considers it a great honour to be accompanied by such a delightful pony!"

Trixie put her own lanyard with magic, but reached around Fluttershy's neck to snap the other one around the pegasus. Fluttershy caught the scent of Trixie's hair as she did so – it smelt of gunpowder and sandalwood.

The two ponies went towards the back of the stage, Trixie making most of the conversation and standing a little too close to Fluttershy, and Fluttershy surprised herself by not minding in the least. There was still something dark and cold in her gut, but it was easier to ignore it and just listen to the handsome unicorn mare tell her how pretty she was. *Yes, Fluttershy lied to herself. I'm just fine.*

• • •

Twilight left the bushes, dignified and calm and ready for her date, and was almost immediately assailed by two of her friends. Applejack and Pinkie Pie both spotted her at the same time and immediately charged over, each trying to speak over the other in their haste to be understood.

"Whoa, calm down, you two! Applejack, you first," Twilight said, wanting the worst over with. Applejack had been extremely angry at her earlier, and Twilight didn't know if she still was – but when she got a good look at the farmer, Twilight could see her worries were utterly foundationless.

Applejack looked tired, more than anything, and almost on the verge of tears. Pinkie seemed to notice at the same time as Twilight, becoming unusually quiet.

"Twilight, Ah'm sorry. Ah said some stuff to you earlier that Ah ain't proud of, about the way you'd treated Fluttershy, and Ah made a real fool out of myself. Ah lost my temper and Ah should know better. Can you forgive me?"

"Applejack, of course I can! I can understand why you'd say what you did. You misunderstood the situation. Just give me a chance to explain myself in future, okay?" Twilight said, relaxing a little. But that didn't seem to be everything on Applejack's mind; she pawed at the floor nervously before continuing.

"Ah've got myself into a corner over Fluttershy," said Applejack slowly, her eyes starting to fill with tears. "Ah think – no, Ah know – she's in love with me. And Ah love her too, but it might not be in the same way. It's so hard to tell! She's so dear to me, and Ah want her to be happy. She'd be happiest with me, Ah reckon. Ah can see how it'd be easy to be with her and Ah know she's real good for me but what if Ah'm leadin' her on?"

"That's a tough one, Applejack. I'm not sure what the right advice is to give," Twilight admitted.

"I am!" Pinkie shouted, almost bouncing with delight. "At least I think I am. If I'm right. So let's see if I am! Applejack, why were you so mad at Twilight earlier?"

"I guess because Ah caught her – Ah mean, Ah thought Ah caught her getting all seductive with Fluttershy. It really ticked me off, because Ah always thought Fluttershy would end up with Big Macintosh," Applejack admitted with an apologetic glance at Twilight, who wrinkled her nose. That wasn't quite right.

"Actually, Applejack, that's not what you were shouting. You said I'd been seducing Fluttershy and that I had no right to take her away from you. Not Big Mac. You," Twilight said carefully, while Pinkie grinned manically and bounced on the spot.

"See? I thought I was right! You were jealous for yourself, because you didn't want to see Fluttershy with anypony except you!"

Applejack looked down, considering this new information for a minute. She didn't look up again when she spoke, and underneath her hat Twilight could see tears spattering the ground.

"You're right. Thank Celestia, you're right. I love her the same way," she murmured, lifting her head, and Twilight and Pinkie finally saw a smile on her face. Pinkie immediately pulled Applejack and Twilight into an enormous hug, squeezing them both tight.

"Woohoo! Applejack, I'm so pleased for you! Erk." Pinkie's glee seemed to be cut short by her left ear twitching madly.

"Aaa! That means Rarity's nearly here! Applejack, I need you over at the catapult, and you've got to go over your script," said Pinkie, producing a couple of pages of text for Applejack to read. The farmpony took them with an incredulous look at Pinkie.

"Darn it, Pinkie, Ah was gonna go find Fluttershy and tell 'er –"

"You don't have time! Go go go!" said Pinkie, pushing Applejack towards the catapult until she finally got the hint and set off on her own. Twilight watched them leave, when a thought crossed her mind. Earlier today, Applejack had accused her of seducing Big Mac. Twilight snorted in frustration – that was probably her last good chance to ask her about that! Collecting herself, she adjusted her dress and was about to finally walk to the

Maison when Pinkie suddenly popped up in front of her, causing the unicorn to shriek and jump backwards.

"I forgot to introduce you!" Pinkie grinned. She grabbed Twilight's hoof and started dragging her towards the Maison tables, finally depositing the dishevelled Twilight on a chair in front of Princess Luna, whose expression quickly changed from a faintly dreamy anticipation to stark surprise.

"Luna! You remember Twilight, right? Well, I thought you two had so much in common and you're both such great ponies that I thought I'd set you up on a date tonight!" Pinkie said, with an enormous grin. Luna seemed less than impressed as Pinkie barrelled on undeterred.

"I've even got these passes so you can eat for free and – huh. I thought I had more of these, " said Pinkie, pulling two lanyards from a saddlebag and putting them on the table. Luna cleared her throat to get the earth pony's attention.

"I fear I misunderstood the situation earlier, Pinkamena. Truly, is Twilight Sparkle to be my paramour this evening?" Luna said, and Twilight thought she could sense a hint of pleading in the Princess's voice. Twilight's schedule flashed through her head, with "BANISHED TO MOON" circled several times in red. She had to be as charming as possible!

"It's an honour, Princess!" Twilight said, forcing her best smile. "I'm sure we'll have a great time and it won't be treasonously uncomfortable at all!"

Pinkie and Luna exchanged a glance. Luna smiled nervously, leaning in to whisper to Pinkie, but Twilight could still hear every word; subtlety was not exactly the Princess's strong point.

"Pinkamena, Twilight Sparkle is a fine pony indeed, but I was under the impression that –"

"That you two were going to have a great time?" Pinkie supplied, clearly aware that Twilight couldn't help listening in. "I hope you have a fantabulous evening!" Pinkie quickly swept the contents of the neighbouring tables, candles and all, into her saddlebags, leaving Luna and Twilight isolated even if other ponies came to sit.

"At least, I think I hope you do," Pinkie muttered to herself as she left, frowning for a moment before her usual bubbly demeanour re-asserted itself.

Twilight looked at Luna, who seemed thoroughly peeved. In a panic, Twilight reached for her list of conversational topics, not caring if Luna saw. They had to talk about something! Okay, this one looked good!

"Luna, did you know that there are over seven thousand types of apple? And several of those are grown right here in Ponyville?"

Luna raised an eyebrow at Twilight before bursting out into a surprisingly loud, throaty chuckle. Twilight tried to find the joke in what she'd said – was that funny? Were there way more or less? Had she just made an idiot of herself in front of the Princess?

"There really are!" Twilight blurted out, causing Luna to laugh even harder. "I've got lists at home and I'm almost never wrong! I can fetch them!"

Twilight realised she was almost shouting in her panic, and was about to keep defending her apple-related knowledge when Luna gently placed a hoof over Twilight's, silencing her.

"Twilight Sparkle, please calm yourself," Luna said, wiping away a tear of mirth. "It is abundantly apparent that I am not the companion you expected this evening, and in all honesty my affections lie elsewhere too. You do not need to impress me with apple factoids."

As she finished her sentence, Luna started to giggle again, and Twilight started to see how ridiculous the situation was. She was unable to prevent a laugh slipping out, and before she knew it she and the princess were both in absolute hysterics, beating onto the table and clutching their stomachs before they pulled themselves together. Twilight honestly couldn't say how long she'd been laughing, but it felt like it had purged something from her. She realised she wasn't nervous at all, even a little bit.

"Sorry, Princess. I was so worried about impressing you," Twilight admitted, adjusting her dress.

"Do not aggrieve yourself, my little pony," Luna said. "I should hope that you know I count you as a firm friend after the assistance you have provided me in the past. You need not impress me further. Now, what say we make the best of an awkward situation and order something to eat?"

Twilight was about to agree when she heard an incredibly loud high-pitched scream from the direction of the main crowd, followed by an almighty crash.

"What was that?" she said, realising that both she and Luna had risen to their hooves.

"It may require our assistance," Luna said, all levity vanished from her face. "Twilight, come with me and we shall see what can be done."

Worried, the two ponies cantered towards the main stage, the crowd parting before them as they saw the Princess. Twilight tried to calm herself. Whatever happened, they could probably fix it. Right?

• • •

Rarity entered the park, the Doctor standing beside her and her barding on. True, her chestplate might be a fabulously slinky little blue number, and her helmet might be a perfectly coiffured mane, but it was barding all the same. Rarity felt she needed it; she'd made an utter fool of herself over Rainbow Dash one too many times, and now she needed to prove to Rainbow – to everypony – that she didn't give a short sharp buck about the dashing weatherpony. She glanced to her left, checking on the Doctor, and was pleased by what she saw. As well as being educated, he fitted formal dress extremely well, his jacket hanging pleasingly across his flanks.

Rarity still didn't have any deeper reaction than that, though, and that was irritating. She was seeing him through dressmaker's eyes, looking for cut and fit, not at the pony himself as a possible romantic option. If she was honest with herself, it had been a long time since she'd looked at anypony that way. Except one. Rarity shook her head a little to clear the cobwebs, and listened to the music – it seemed to be a mix of a heavy bass beat and some extraordinarily gifted strings. Eminently danceable, at least.

"Shall we, Doctor?" Rarity smiled at her companion and the two of them set off towards the dance floor. As they got there, they were greeted with a wave by Pinkie, who directed them to a clear space near the edge, by what Rarity assumed was a platform for firework launching. Pinkie gave Rarity a quick smile and then melted away into the rest of the party, staying unusually quiet. Rarity thought that was rather odd, but was distracted when she noticed that Whooves seemed a little uncomfortable.

"Doctor? Is there a problem?" she asked, politely.

"No, not at all! Except, ah, I don't actually know how to dance," Whooves admitted, slightly embarrassed. Rarity took a deep breath and kept her best smile on.

"Oh, it's not difficult at all. Look, I'll show you. Start by standing up straight – that's it – and now you just need to –"

"Hey Rarity," came a voice from behind Whooves that Rarity hadn't expected quite this soon. Taking a deep breath, she moved around Whooves to speak to Rainbow.

"Good evening, Rainbow," Rarity said as calmly as she could manage. Just seeing the pegasus brought on such a rush of feelings it was all she could do to remember breathing. Rainbow had an apologetic smile and her wings folded, and before Rarity could say anything else, Rainbow started to speak.

"Look, Rarity, I owe you an apology, alright? I'm sorry I shouted at you," Rainbow said quietly. She seemed to be waiting for a response, and Rarity somehow found a way to keep her anger down. While she collected herself, Rainbow didn't seem to be able to let the silence rest, suddenly blurting out a sentence she seemed to instantly regret.

"I mean, it doesn't matter that much right? You found a date for tonight quickly enough."

Rarity snorted at the implication, snapping back at Rainbow.

"Oh, you mean the Doctor here? He's a very dear friend who agreed to accompany me this evening. As my date. I was just teaching him to dance."

Rainbow narrowed her eyes, her apologetic posture seemingly forgotten, anger at Whooves' presence written clearly across her face.

"He can't even dance? Great catch there, Rarity. He's a total keeper."

"It's not the dancing that's important, Rainbow! Doctor Smith knows how to treat a mare, you see," Rarity said, not noticing the little grey unicorn filly skidding to a stop in front of Whooves. Dinky's expression of delight at finding Whooves quickly changed to dismay as she started to take in the circumstances in which she'd found him. Whooves raised an eyebrow as he noticed Dinky, and was about to interrupt Rarity when she continued.

"Doctor Smith understands how to actually care for somepony, you see? He doesn't shout at me or call me names! He doesn't ignore me for months on end, Rainbow!"

Rarity's voice was starting to get genuinely loud. The nearby ponies had stopped dancing, fascinated by this new spectacle – through them, Whooves saw Big Macintosh's eyes widen as he suddenly turned to try and restrain another pony the crowd was obscuring. Rarity seemed oblivious, continuing with her rant, and Whooves had a sinking feeling it was too late to prevent a disaster.

"He doesn't ignore the effort it takes to make a gift! He doesn't think I'm vain, or boring, or manipulative! He's a better fit for me than you could ever be!"

Rarity's last tirade was unfortunately punctuated by Ditzzy Doo pushing past Big Mac with a flare of her wings. Glaring at Whooves with one good eye, she advanced on Whooves and Rarity as Whooves tried to get out an explanation.

"Dizzy, I'm just doing Rarity a favour here –"

Ditzzy turned sideways and flared her wing across Whooves's face with a sharp cracking noise, silencing him and leaving a thin red mark across his cheek.

"I bet you are," she said without looking at him, her voice clearer with anger than it had ever been before. They stayed frozen like that for a second, Whooves trying to find his words, when they were both snapped to their senses by a wailing from around their hooves.

"You're not supposed to fight! You're supposed to – No! NO!" shouted Dinky, with an angry, horrified expression. Suddenly the filly turned and bolted through the crowd, disappearing into the forest of legs and hooves. Ditzzy didn't look at Whooves as she immediately took to the air, scanning the park for her daughter.

"That went about as badly as it could go," muttered Whooves to himself.

"Eeyup," said Big Mac, patting his smaller friend on the shoulder. "We'd best go find Dinky. C-come on, John."

"Yeah. Yes, you're right, of course," said Whooves, wiping an eye and turning to Rarity. "Rarity, I've got to go. I won't hold you to your end of the deal. It's a lost cause, I fear."

Whooves smiled sadly at himself, and Big Mac shepherded him into the crowd to help look for Dinky. For a moment, there was silence, and then Rarity was appalled to hear Rainbow all too eager to fill it.

"He wasn't a real date, then."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" retorted Rarity.

"He was doing you a favour. As part of a deal. Why were you bringing some other pony with you tonight?" Rainbow asked, her brows narrowing. "Were you trying to hurt me? Is that what this is?"

Rainbow and Rarity started to circle each other, getting closer and closer, neither of them able to keep still.

"Me hurt you? Me hurt YOU?" Rarity shouted. "I was trying to let you off the hook after making such an idiot out of myself! I was trying to make you think I was fine! It's pretty clear you've never cared for me at all. After you saved me, you didn't visit. You barely spoke to me. You didn't even thank me for your silly Nightmare Night costume!"

"I didn't think that was such a big deal," said Rainbow dismissively. "It didn't really fit me, it was too tight."

"It did fit you, you featherbrain! It was aerodynamically contoured! It was supposed to be tight!"

"You made me a proper flightsuit?" Rainbow asked, suddenly forgetting any anger she'd had. "Like the Wonderbolts use? You must have put a lot of work into it, huh."

"Yes!" screamed Rarity, advancing on Rainbow, who backed off the dance floor. "Weeks of research! A matching costume for myself in Wonderbolts and Shadowbolts colours! I had Twilight prepare the spell that gave me wings! I even had Pinkie script us a little scene where you corrupted me into changing sides!"

"I corrupted you?" Rainbow asked, suddenly stopping her retreat. The fight seemed to go out of Rarity all at once.

"That was the plan," Rarity said, her eyes starting to fill with tears. "You never even visited my house."

"Aw, Rarity, I'm so sorry. I didn't know! You never showed up, and I'd spent so long altering the costume – I was kind of mad it didn't fit, I thought you didn't care. I was a bonehead, I'm really sorry," Rainbow said. As soon as Rainbow had started to apologise, Rarity could see that the pegasus' words were coming to her more easily, as if some great block had been lifted from their path.

"Rarity, the truth is I've been – I've been playing it cool, okay? After the Young Fliers Competition I just didn't know how to talk to you. But I wanted to! I really did, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I can't stop thinking about you. I didn't mean to hurt you, Rarity, I swear."

With every word, Rarity could feel a weight lifting from her, until she honestly felt that her next steps would take her aloft. Rarity sniffled a little, before raising her head.

Rainbow was standing there, looking so concerned, so beautiful. There was just one little thing that Rarity was confused by, now.

"Wait, you altered the costume? You altered a professionally tailored flightsuit? Rainbow, you don't know how to thread a needle. How on earth did you alter it?" Rarity said, smiling. Rainbow grinned in relief before answering.

"Oh, easy! See, I have this old stapler, and –"

"You used staples?" Rarity cut Rainbow off, and Rainbow backed away again, Rarity following her quite deliberately.

"You used STAPLES!?" she asked again, her voice taking on a dangerously high pitch. Rarity could feel her blood boiling. "Did you even THINK about how much WORK I had to –"

"Oh no!" a familiar voice yelled from somewhere up above. Rarity looked up with the rest of the crowd to see Applejack standing atop some sort of platform, shouting to the crowd.

"It is too distressing to me to see mah friends fighting like this! Ah believe Ah am about to faint!" Applejack shouted in a practiced, mechanical voice, rolling her eyes as she jumped off the platform. Rarity and Rainbow gasped – what was Applejack doing? Before Applejack landed, Pinkie Pie suddenly appeared behind Rarity and shoved her sideways, sending her staggering onto a tilted platform.

• • •

Rainbow was the first pony to work out what was happening, and she had her wings flared before Applejack landed. Applejack was landing on the same catapult Rainbow had tried to use in the past, to improve her take-offs, and Rarity had just been pushed onto the other side. Applejack hit the catapult hard, and in the blink of an eye Rarity was in the air, screaming as loudly as she could, soaring towards the stage as the assembled crowd gasped, too stunned to react.

"Rarity!" Rainbow shouted, powering into the air as fast as she could. She'd reacted fast enough she was only thirty yards away from the spiralling, screaming Rarity, then twenty yards, then ten, pushing harder and harder, accelerating as fast as possible. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of Rarity's eyes, and there it was again – that moment of panic turned to trust. Rarity knew she'd be saved. She knew Rainbow wouldn't let her down. With a sudden burst of speed, Rainbow closed the gap and grabbed Rarity bodily,

pulling her chest to chest. She felt Rarity's forelegs locking around the back of her neck, felt Rarity's lips on her chin and jaw and throat, heard the unicorn she was carrying – the unicorn she loved – whispering that she felt so safe, Dash, so right in her grasp, so happy to be caught by her Rainbow, murmuring the pegasus's name over and over again and punctuating it with small, frantic kisses as Rainbow tried to slow their descent towards the stage.

It was understandable, Rainbow maintained afterwards, that she'd judged the landing so badly that they'd ploughed straight through the backstage area and into the flower beds. Rainbow wrapped herself tight around Rarity during the crash, taking the brunt of the fall, and when the dust had cleared Rainbow was flat on her back in the dahlias. Rarity was still grasping her tight, the unicorn's head pressed against the pegasus's heaving chest as Rainbow gasped for breath.

"You saved me again," said Rarity, lifting her head and kissing Rainbow full on the lips. "You always save me."

Rarity pulled back for a second, her head above Rainbow's, tears dripping down her nose and landing hot on Rainbow's face. Her mascara was running, there was a big smudge of dirt on her cheek, and Rainbow had never seen her more beautiful. The tired pegasus pulled her head up and kissed Rarity again for a second before slumping back down.

"Always," said Rainbow. "I promise. Always."

They lay there, in the flower bed, holding each other for an amount of time Rainbow found it quite impossible to measure, until Rainbow realised something.

"Shouldn't somepony have come to find us by now? Not that I'm complaining."

"I suppose you're right. Should we go and find out what's happened?" Rarity asked, lazily.

Rainbow flared her wings and wrapped them around Rarity, pulling her tight and kissing her forehead. Her hair smelled of tangerines, Rainbow realised.

"Nah. Not yet."

• • •

Applejack started galloping for the stage the moment after she landed on the catapult and launched Rarity through the air – as Pinkie predicted, Rainbow was after her like a shot. Pinkie's predictions started to get a little fuzzy about the subject of landing,

however, and instead of a graceful landing on the stage Rainbow and Rarity tore through the backdrops one after another, vast swathes of fabric falling from the rafters and landing haphazardly across the stage. The musicians seemed to be dealing with the whole disaster pretty well, Applejack thought – Octavia was keeping up the tune even though she had to quickly drag her cello fifteen feet backwards to avoid being draped in thick, dark fabric, and Vinyl's horn was glowing brightly as she deflected the falling debris away from her equipment. It was only when Applejack got close enough to climb up on the stage and find out what had happened that the music lost some depth, and Applejack realised Octavia had stopped playing.

As she clambered up, Applejack could see Octavia had dropped her cello, and was staring, stunned, at the wings of the stage. Vinyl was still concentrating on keeping her records spinning and the debris out of her equipment, so Applejack figured she was the only other one who'd noticed what Octavia had. There in the wings, Trixie and Fluttershy were lying on a pile of sandbags, kissing deeply, seemingly oblivious to their sudden visibility. It hurt like a sledgehammer to the chest. Applejack heard a low, pained moan, a wounded animal noise, and didn't realise for a moment she'd made it herself. She didn't snap back into action until she heard Octavia lose it.

"TRIXIE! You little – I'm going to kill you!" she screamed, and with practiced reflexes taking over Applejack bit the musician's tail, pulling her back onto her rump. Trixie broke away from Fluttershy at hearing her name, and the unicorn didn't seem to be fazed by the situation at all. Applejack could see Fluttershy's expression as Trixie broke away from their kiss – she didn't seem happy, or shocked at Octavia's outburst, or appalled at being interrupted. She just looked numb. Trixie shook her mane out of her face and levitated her hat back on her head before saying anything.

"Octavia, you'll do nothing of the sort. Trixie has never stated that you had any right to expect Trixie's unwavering attention. Frankly –" the showpony glanced at one of her hooves, blowing sand out of it, "– given how we got together, did you really expect anything else? I was getting a little bored of you anyway."

Octavia was stunned. Applejack could barely believe the sheer, unassailable arrogance radiating from Trixie – did she honestly think she'd done nothing wrong? Neither of the earth ponies could find anything to say, until the silence was broken by a small voice from behind Trixie.

"Excuse me – Trixie, were you dating this pony?" Fluttershy asked, rising to her hooves.

"Trixie fails to see how that's any of your business, dear," said Trixie, not turning around.

Applejack's attention to the scene was broken by a voice from beside her that turned out to belong to Pinkie Pie, who must have finally caught up with her.

"What'd I miss?" she asked cheerfully.

"I can't believe this, Trixie! Not just that you cheated on me with her – yeah, I should have known you were a total scumbag, you're right – but that you were stupid enough to do it on the same bucking stage I was performing on!" Octavia screamed.

"Okay, I'm up to speed!" Pinkie smiled, before her face suddenly became serious.

"Trixie doesn't really think there's much you can do about it, Octavia. None of you have the magic to stop me. Now, if you'll allow Trixie to make her way off the stage?" Trixie sneered, ready to push past the ponies in front of her.

"Augh! You loathsome little wretch!" Octavia screamed, grabbing things at random from Pinkie's saddlebags and hurling them at Trixie. The showpony just caught them in midair with her magic, stopping a handful of balloons, an unfurled streamer and a little doll inches in front of her face.

"As I was saying –" said Trixie dismissively, before she was cut off by a white glow arising around her. A confused look passed over her face for a second before she suddenly lifted into the air, still holding Octavia's impromptu missiles, and then accelerated out of the hole in the backstage that Rainbow and Rarity had torn a few moments ago. Rushing over to look with Pinkie and Octavia, Applejack thought she saw a glimpse of Trixie, screaming loudly, disappearing over the top of the town hall. From behind the three ponies, Vinyl spoke up.

"Tavi, please don't be mad. I didn't want to overstep my boundaries, but –"

She was cut off by Octavia's mouth on hers, pressing against her in a grateful kiss. Vinyl seemed to lose herself in it for a moment before breaking away.

"Yah! Um! Tavi, Pinkie and I – we're still sort of a thing, I can't just –" Vinyl said, looking at Pinkie pleadingly. Applejack saw her friend almost roll her eyes, smiling quietly.

"Vinyl, it's okay. Really. I understand, alright? Now could you go look after Octy? She's had a pretty rough day."

Vinyl seemed stunned for a moment, until Octavia pressed into her, needing the contact, the familiar feel of Vinyl against her. With a last, apologetic, grateful glance at Pinkie, Vinyl led her lover off the stage.

Applejack was so caught up in this she'd almost forgotten about Fluttershy, but as soon as she turned and saw the pegasus mare standing there, still where she'd been a moment ago, the crushing weight in Applejack's chest came back.

"Fluttershy?" said Applejack quietly, pulling away from Pinkie, who'd graciously returned to staring out of the hole at the back of the stage. As she got closer, Fluttershy said something so quietly Applejack couldn't hear it.

"Say again, sugarcube? That was a mite quiet for me." Fluttershy looked up at Applejack, and while her eyes were as determined as Applejack had ever seen them, her face was wet with tears.

"I said don't you dare be mad at me."

Applejack took a deep breath. This was going to be hard to say right.

"Ah ain't mad. Ah ain't going to pretend it didn't hurt me none, seeing you all curled up with Trixie, but Ah ain't mad at you. You got your reasons for doin' what you done and Ah don't mind what they were."

Applejack could see Fluttershy was about to either collapse or scream at her, and so hurriedly pressed on.

"Ah got to be honest with you, Fluttershy. Ah want you to move in up at the farm and for us to be a couple together. Ah want to wake up in the morning and see your head on the pillow next to mine. Ah ain't just saying this because it's gonna make you happy to hear it, either. Ah'm plain telling you what Ah want, and it's you. Ah love you, Fluttershy. It's okay if you don't love me back, or if you want to kiss every pony in Canterlot. Ah just wanted you to know."

Applejack couldn't read Fluttershy's reaction – her face was still a mask except for the tears pouring down her cheeks. All of a sudden, the pegasus's lips were against hers, soft and gentle, and Applejack knew she'd never want to kiss anypony else. Fluttershy pulled back for a second, smiling at Applejack, and the farmpony felt the weight on her chest dissolve in her happiness.

"You were pretty silly about this, you know."

"Ah reckon so. So what do we do now?"

Fluttershy blushed a little, and leaned in to whisper in Applejack's ear. Applejack could feel her own blush spring up at Fluttershy's suggestions, and her cheeks got hotter and hotter until she finally leaned away. Applejack called to the group of ponies that, she realised with embarrassment, had turned to watch them. Pinkie had at some point been joined by Twilight and Princess Luna, Applejack noticed.

"Um, Pinkie Pie? You mind makin' sure Apple Bloom gets to a friend's place tonight, for a sleepover or something? Ah'm not gonna be home."

"I don't think she can stay at mine," a small voice piped up from the hole at the back of the stage. The assembled ponies turned to see Spike and Sweetie Belle looking out through the place Rainbow and Rarity had crashed through the backstage. Sweetie Belle pointed to a flowerbed where it was just possible to see two ponies, one white and one pale blue, curled up around each other and kissing.

"We were looking for Rarity – we saw her get thrown through the air – and, er, she's going to be busy too, I think," Spike said, a little downcast.

"Yeah, last time she had company I got in trouble for singing too loud in the bathroom and ruining the mood, so I definitely can't stay at hers," Sweetie Belle said, before turning to Spike. "Don't be too sad, Spike. She's too old for you anyway."

"Yeah, I know," admitted Spike ruefully.

"Ooooh! I know! We can have a campout right here in the park!" Pinkie squealed joyfully. "Me and Spike and Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle and anypony else who wants to!"

"That sounds just champion," said Applejack, smiling broadly. Then she realised something – the music had stopped completely. The last record Vinyl had put on must have reached its conclusion.

"We don't have any musicians left!" Pinkie Pie shouted, clapping her hooves to her mouth as she realised the problem.

"It has been some time, but I believe I can play the instrument your sister left here," Luna said, walking over to the cello and lifting it and the bow with her magic. The crowd seemed to go silent as they realised what they were about to witness – a performance from the princess herself.

"Twilight Sparkle, may I have a moment of your time while I prepare?" Luna said, settling down and making herself comfortable while she familiarised herself with the instrument, lifting it in the glow of her magic. Twilight raised an eyebrow and walked over to her.

"Twilight, there was somepony else you were hoping for at your date tonight, yes?" Twilight nodded, looking a little embarrassed.

"Then for my sake, go and find them. This is too pleasant an evening to be wasted on mistakes," Luna said quietly, looking seriously at the lavender unicorn. Twilight seemed like she was about to say something, and then just smiled at the princess and her friends before running off the stage. As she reached the wings, Applejack called after her.

"Twilight! Big Mac's looking for you, just so you know. It'd work out pretty well for you if you were looking for him, if you understand me."

Twilight nearly span around, grinning enthusiastically and shouting back before leaving the stage.

"That's perfect! Thanks, Applejack!"

Luna held the cello in place, raised her head and called for Pinkie.

"Pinkamena? I would like very much for you to stay on stage while I play. I play better when it is for an audience of one, even if everypony can hear it," the princess said. Pinkie smiled and moved to lie down beside the princess, folding her legs underneath her as Luna tried a few tentative notes on the cello.

Then the princess began to play: a waltz, beautiful and simple, her eyes closed as she concentrated on her magic, dancing the bow across the strings. Applejack felt a tug at her foreleg, and saw that Fluttershy wanted her to join the dance floor, where ponies were coupling up and starting to dance.

They reached the floor and stood on their hind legs, each supporting the other. Applejack wrapped her hooves around Fluttershy's waist, and the pegasus leaned into her, whispering in her ear as they swayed to the music.

"I love you too, Applejack. You did know that, right?" Fluttershy murmured quietly.

"Ah think Ah have for a long time," she whispered back, holding Fluttershy tight as they spiralled out onto the floor.

• • •

Lyra breathed a sigh of relief when the Princess's waltz began. She'd been looking for the perfect opportunity to propose all night, and every time she thought she'd found the right moment, something had happened to ruin it. First, they'd entered the park, and Bon-Bon had been so delighted by everything. It seemed just right – but then she'd seen Luna at the Maison, and suddenly that was all she'd talk about. They'd had a little picnic with apple fritters a while after that, and another perfect moment had been utterly ruined by the shrieking Rarity sailing through the air. After that, Bon-Bon had been all aflutter about Rainbow Dash's heroics, gossiping about the pegasus' supposed romantic entanglements. Apparently, Lyra had found out, most of the town assumed she had been secretly seeing Applejack. Lyra didn't care a bit. She was starting to worry she'd never get to propose, after saving up so much for the party and all the entertainment.

The waltz, though, gave Lyra a real opportunity. She could lead Bon-Bon to the centre of the floor, and then give the signal for the spotlight, and then finally propose. Everything was going wonderfully at first, she and Bon-Bon getting lost in each other's eyes, and then Bon-Bon had suddenly spotted something over Lyra's shoulder. As they rotated, Lyra saw that it was Applejack and some pegasus she didn't really know kissing and dancing, and Bon-Bon was off again, rattling off new gossip. The moment had completely gone, Lyra thought.

"Sweetie? What's wrong? You seem a little distracted," Bon-Bon asked, pulling Lyra out of her reverie.

"Ah, it's nothing really, babe. I just – I guess I had different expectations about this evening, is all. Not that it hasn't been lovely!" Lyra hurriedly added, but she needn't have worried.

"Oh, it has been, hasn't it!" Bon-Bon said happily. "All this romance and tension in the air, a visit from the princess, and you. My perfect partner."

Bon-Bon seemed to consider something for a second, swallowing hard and pulling her head back to see Lyra properly.

"This evening's inspired me, sweetie. You know I love you – I love you more than I've ever loved anypony. More than I've ever loved anything. Lyra, would you marry me?"

Lyra was stunned for a moment, and then before she knew it she was babbling with excitement.

"Yes! Of course yes! I'll marry you and we'll be married!" Lyra pulled her head back, shouting to the crowd, wanting everyone to hear. "We're getting married!" The waltz became a gauntlet of congratulations after that, everypony wanting to share in the happiness of the longstanding couple. After a while, Lyra found a moment to hold Bon-Bon close, and spoke to her quietly.

"This was perfect, babe. I couldn't have planned a better proposal," Lyra said, smiling broadly. She didn't think she'd ever let Bon-Bon know exactly how true that was.

• • •

Not every pony was out on the dance floor. Whooves was still looking around for Dinky around the back of the stage, watching as outlying ponies – including Rainbow and Rarity, he noticed with a smile – walked over to join in the Princess's waltz. Whooves had been looking around, feeling distinctly sorry for himself, for some time now, trying to spot Dinky among the crowds of ponies.

Then he'd had an idea – he was likely looking in the wrong places. Where would a pony like Dinky want to hide? Somewhere she felt like she wouldn't be spotted. Somewhere she knew fairly well. Around the back of the stage, there were several picnic tables, and Whooves had seen Dinky and her mother eat at them occasionally. So far, he'd checked three tables without success, but as he got to the fourth, he was certain he saw movement underneath it. Carefully, he sat down on one of the benches.

"Dinky?" he said softly.

"No! Go away!" came a small voice from under the table. Whooves thought for a moment before answering – he'd have to play this cautiously.

"Oh, you're not Dinky Doo? My apologies, miss. Her mum's lost track of her, though. Have you seen her?"

"Maybe," said the little voice. "What if I have?"

"Well, if you have, can you tell her I'm looking for her? My name is Whooves, and I think I've upset her," Whooves said, looking at the ground. "I think she saw me with a pony called Rarity, who's a friend of mine. I think she's worried – just like her mum is – that I'm in love with Rarity. I'm not though. I'm in love with her mother, with Ditzzy Doo. I was just helping Rarity out so that she'd help me win Ditzzy over, because I'm a big idiot and I never say the right things. I needed the help."

"You are a big idiot," came the incredulous filly's voice from under the table. "Mum – I mean, Ditzzy Doo – she's liked you for ages. Dinky knows, she told me. You should have just said 'I love you' and kissed her. "

"Really?" said Whooves, smiling to himself. He got off the bench and leaned his head under the table, to see Dinky huddled up. She'd obviously been crying, but she smiled at Whooves when she saw him. Whooves was about to try and coax her out when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"R-really," Ditzzy said, and Whooves tried to stand up so quickly he smacked his head off the bottom of the table. Backing up, he raised his head – he'd have quite a lump tomorrow, to go with the wingslap mark he'd received earlier – and turned to face Ditzzy, who was smiling at him. That, at least, was a big improvement.

"Dizzy! I mean, Ditzzy! Look, I can explain everything, okay?" Whooves said, frantically smiling. Ditzzy raised an eyebrow and shook her head.

"Y-you're worse with w-words than I am," she said quietly, stepping closer to Whooves, until they were inches apart. "You should t-take Dinky's advice."

She smelled of clean sweat and honeysuckle, Whooves realised, and the words came tumbling out of his mouth before he'd had any time to overthink them.

"I love you," he said.

Ditzzy smiled at him, leaned in and kissed him twice. First, gently along the red mark she'd made on his cheek, and then hard against his lips, pressing herself against him and only breaking away when Dinky cleared her throat.

"I'm still technically lost, mum," she said pointedly.

"There y-you are!" Ditzzy said theatrically, picking up Dinky in an enormous hug and falling flat on her back, eliciting a series of snorting giggles from her daughter, who suddenly started pawing at her mother's chest in alarm.

"Mum! You've got to go! You and Mister Whooves can't miss the dance!" Dinky said, bouncing off Ditzzy and worriedly looking towards the dance floor. "Otherwise Mister Whooves isn't being a proper gentlecolt and that would be totally disasterisk!"

Ditzzy rolled to her feet, leaning into Whooves as they followed the frantic filly towards the dance floor. Whooves realised that she felt different against him than he'd imagined –

her body felt every bit as marvellous as he'd thought, but he hadn't ever imagined it would feel this right, that he would feel this comfortable. As they got to the dance floor and Dinky and Ditzzy stepped out ahead of him, he thought about saying he couldn't dance, and then changed his mind. Frankly, words had only gotten him in trouble recently. He lifted the giggling Dinky onto his shoulders and pulled Ditzzy up into the same hold as the other dancers were using, trusting her to balance him. This couldn't be that hard, could it? As he faltered through the first few steps, Ditzzy pulled him close, whispering in his left ear.

"I love you t-too," she said quietly. Whooves found he couldn't move at all as Ditzzy pulled back, blushing quietly.

Dinky pulled his right ear hard from her perch on his shoulders, whispering into it loudly.

"You're supposed to kiss her! Don't you know anything?"

Whooves and Ditzzy both suppressed a laugh, and Whooves leaned in and kissed her gently, feeling her pull him closer as he did. He would take a leaf out of Big Macintosh's book from now on, he promised himself, and barely say anything ever again.

• • •

Big Macintosh sighed in frustration as he lumbered through the flowers, looking for Dinky. He'd already found Scootaloo, who had been busily losing a strudel-eating contest with Apple Bloom, but she'd lost track of Dinky a while ago. This, he thought, pushing aside the posies to see if there was a filly hiding under them, was not the evening he'd hoped for. He was about to start on the rhododendron bushes when he heard a voice behind him.

"Big Mac? What are you up to?" Twilight asked him.

Big Mac turned around and saw Twilight, who had removed her dress and left it backstage. The unicorn looked tired and nervous, almost bouncing from hoof to hoof.

"H-hullo, M-M-Miz Sparkle," said Big Macintosh, cursing his stammer as he did so. It was always so difficult to say anything to her! "D-Dinky's gone m-missing."

"Actually, I think she's been found now. She was on the dance floor with her mom and Doctor Smith. Didn't you know?" Twilight asked apologetically.

"Nnnope," drawled Big Mac, letting his irritation seep into the word.

"Well, that means you don't have to look for her any more, right? So you aren't doing anything right now?" Twilight asked, looking from side to side.

"Nnnope," the big stallion said again. He'd been dreaming of something like this for a while now, of Twilight coming to speak to him, and now he couldn't say the words. He had them lined up in his head, all ready to say – that she was stunning, that he loved hearing her talk, that she was in every way a pony that he had never expected to know, and that he absolutely adored. He just couldn't force them past his stupid tongue.

"I was thinking that – that maybe –" Twilight asked, starting to blush. "I was hoping that – that you would –"

Big Mac realised, then, that Twilight was having exactly the same problem he was, and that suddenly made everything a whole lot easier. Shifting his weight between his hooves, he started speaking, trying not to think about it too hard and let his stammer take over completely.

"Miz Twilight, Ah was hoping to be your blind d-date tonight. Ah'd got your old doll all fixed up as a gift and there was a whole kerfuffle over which pony was supposed t'be waiting for you, but Ah wanted it to be me. But Ah've lost the doll – Ah think Ah left it at the M-Maison de Lune – so Ah don't have a gift for you any more."

Twilight seemed a little taken aback at this, but Big Mac didn't let it stop him. It felt good to be doing things the proper Apple way, finally breaking through his shyness, just telling the truth regardless of the consequences.

"You're th' highlight of my day, when Ah can make it to the library. You're adorable when y-you're concentrating on something. You work hard and you take good care of Spike. Ah would be very interested, Miz Sparkle, in spending some time with you this evening. If you would like to spend it with me."

Twilight seemed to have sort of frozen into an embarrassed silence. Big Mac waited for her response, trying not to panic. Surely, he thought, she'd have said something by now if she was interested. She certainly would, right? Twilight broke the silence by speaking far too loudly, all at once.

"You're really pretty!" Twilight practically shouted, wincing at her volume when she realised how loud she'd been. Big Macintosh was blushing as furiously as he ever had.

"What I mean is, you're really pretty." Twilight clarified, before realising she hadn't actually said anything new. "I mean – you actually want to go on a date with me? Because you're really – I mean – you still have green eyes."

Twilight slammed a hoof against her forehead in frustration and Big Mac smiled at her. The unicorn was clearly having a bad words day.

"R-really," he clarified, walking up to the unicorn and leaning towards her. "May I?" he asked, his face inches away from hers.

"May you? Oh! Yes, I mean –"

Big Mac cut off Twilight with his lips against hers, and after a moment of freezing Twilight leaned into the kiss, tentatively at first and then hungrily, pushing against Big Mac with a strength he hadn't expected. After some time, they broke off the kiss, both breathing heavily.

"Whew!" Twilight said, smiling, so much calmer than she had been a few moments ago. "I mean – I mean, well, that was really nice. I mean really good! I've never kissed anypony quite like that before."

She bit her lip at that last admission, smiling at Big Mac.

"What do we do now? I mean, do you have any plans for the date? Because there's a new book in at the library that I think you'll really enjoy. We could read it together?" Twilight asked, flush with her first dating success. Big Mac nodded, and the two of them fell into matching step as they walked towards Twilight's home.

"Big Mac?" Twilight asked quietly as they walked together, standing closer than they ever had before. He found something extraordinarily comforting in her presence, Big Mac realised.

"Eeyup?"

"Did you know there are over seven thousand varieties of apple?"

"Eeyup," Big Mac raised an eyebrow. "We grow 'em, Twilight."

"Oh yeah, of course," Twilight realised, rolling her eyes at herself. Big Mac felt like it was perhaps, now, his job to keep the conversation moving.

"Ah'm sorry Ah lost your doll, Twilight."

"It's okay. I didn't really need her or anything. It's nice to know somepony who cared picked her up – that's really all I wanted, I think. And Big Mac?"

"Eeyup?"

"I like when you call me 'Twilight,'" she said. Suddenly, she leaned up on the tips of her hooves to kiss him on the cheek, and returned to walking beside him just as quickly. Big Mac felt the heat of her lips fading away, and silently thanked whatever forces had brought them together.

• • •

After she'd finished her impromptu concert, Luna had taken three rounds of grateful applause, and had then retired to a cloud over the park to rest while Pinkie closed up the evening. Pinkie had busily organised the deconstruction of the stage for tomorrow and started the clean-up processes, as well as press-ganging Octavia and Vinyl into rounding up and looking after Dinky, the Cutie Mark Crusaders and Spike. They'd made tents out of the backdrop material from the stage and a bonfire out of parts of the catapult, and from her lofty perch anypony could see them clearly. Luna could see and hear them perfectly, if she concentrated – the sun had gone down and Luna had risen the moon, and now all that transpired under it was her domain. Vinyl was telling a ghost story, complete with monstrous faces and spooky noises, to the rapt attention of the foals – Scootaloo and Apple Bloom seemed to revel in the gory details, Dinky was soaking it in as though she'd never heard a ghost story before, and Spike was clutching Sweetie Belle's hoof as the two of them cowered together.

Octavia was lying a little away from the group, a smile on her face as she saw Vinyl entertain the foals. Luna had been very careful not to listen in earlier when Pinkie, Vinyl and Octavia had had a longer conversation and afterwards, Vinyl and Octavia seemed to just be too tired of pretending they didn't need each other. Luna did have to admit to herself, she took some pleasure in the fact that Pinkie was no longer dating anypony.

As she looked around for Pinkie, she realised that there was a rapidly expanding shape coming up from beneath her cloud, and she barely had time to roll aside before a balloon crested through the cumulus. The balloon rose to reveal Pinkie in the basket.

"Hi Luna!" Pinkie said, cheerfully. "Would you do a spell so I can walk on the cloud? I brought fudge!"

Luna smiled and obliged, a flash of light around each of Pinkie's hooves fading into the skin. Pinkie walked over to Luna and lay down beside her, cuddling up to the princess with the lack of decorum Luna had grown to expect and delight in.

"Brr, it's cold! I thought we could maybe see how my friends are doing, if that's okay? I just want to make sure everything went off alright," Pinkie asked.

"Certainly, Pinkamena," Luna said, touching the cloudstuff with her horn and stretching it into an oval shape. Rotating the cloud with her magic, Luna aimed the lens at various places over Ponyville, amplifying the sound as well as the light.

"Whom shall we check on first?" Luna asked. It was rare that she could delight in playing voyeur, and she intended to make the most of it. She normally made a concerted effort not to pay any attention to the nocturnal lives of her little ponies.

"Ooh, Rarity and Rainbow Dash! I didn't get to see them after the catapult trick."

The lens aimed towards Carousel Boutique, zooming in at a window, Luna's magic clarifying the scene therein. Rarity was looking at herself in a mirror, bemoaning her ruined makeup, while noises from the bathroom indicated that Rainbow Dash was bathing.

"Oh, I look such a fright! Why didn't you just bring me back here straight away?"

"Hey, I'm not the one who suggested the dancing!" Rainbow's voice came back, gently mocking. "I don't think anypony noticed in particular, though. I mean, I had a flower stuck in my wings, roots and all."

"Eww!" Rarity screamed in faux disgust, smiling quietly. "You mean you didn't even notice until you got in the bath?"

Rainbow strode out of the bathroom, still dripping wet and wearing a wicked grin.

"Nope! Now, come on princess, it's time for your bath!" Rainbow lifted a feebly protesting Rarity in her forelegs and carried her, staggering, into the bathroom.

"Oh! What are you doing – you brute! Put me down!" Luna and Pinkie heard an enormous splash, quickly followed by Rainbow's laughter.

"Fbbppl!" Rarity spluttered, half-giggling. "You monster! Well, two can play at that game!" There was another grand splash that cut off a shout of protest from Rainbow, and

then more laughter and the sounds of splashing, both slowly getting less and less frequent. At the first gentle moan from Rarity, Luna discreetly moved the cloud across to focus on a nearby tree.

"Wow, that worked better than I thought!" said Pinkie. "Let's check on Applejack and Fluttershy. I think they'll be out at her cottage."

Luna moved the lens out to the cottage and focused it on Fluttershy's little window.

Then, extremely quickly, while Pinkie started choking on a piece of fudge and Luna blushed a deep red, she defocused it as fast as possible.

"Whoa," said Pinkie, finally swallowing her fudge. "That worked out way, way, better than I thought. Can you see if Big Mac and Twilight are still up? Before we check on them?"

Luna nodded her assent, slowly moving the lens across to Twilight's and confirming that Big Mac and Twilight were both in the main body of the library, reading. As the lens got halfway there, neither she nor Pinkie really noticed a grey pegasus and a brown earth pony, both dark against the night, swimming in the local pond. As the lens scanned over them, the pegasus suddenly appeared from beneath the surface, grabbing the stallion into an embrace and a kiss and dragging him under the water. A moment later the two of them spluttered out at the water's edge, giggling and panting, lying on the shore of the pond and rolling, happily, into each other's embrace.

At the library, the lens could see Twilight and Big Mac both reading a book in front of them. As she watched them, Pinkie started smiling widely, for no reason Luna could see until Pinkie leaned in towards her.

"Look at their eyes!" Pinkie whispered to Luna. "They're not reading at all – they're waiting for that last candle to go out."

Luna looked closer and saw that it was true – both ponies were looking at the candle, shifting closer to each other, quietly willing it to go out and leave them in darkness. Luna smiled, and gently blew through the lens. In the library, the candle winked out, exterminated by a sudden gust of wind, and Big Macintosh and Twilight, liberated by the darkness, leaned in to kiss each other. Twilight broke away after a couple of seconds, looking worried, and relit the candle.

"Don't worry! That was good – I mean that was really good – but I need to be able to read my other list!" Twilight said, giving Big Macintosh a peck on the cheek and taking the candle. She paused at the bottom of the stairs.

"Well?" the lavender unicorn asked, with a sly grin. "Are you coming?"

"Yes ma'am," replied the big red stallion enthusiastically, following her up the stairs.

Luna let the lens drift away, losing focus on the couple, as she noticed Pinkie shivering. Cautiously, she extended a wing over the pink pony, pulling her in closer.

"Oooh, you're warm!" Pinkie said appreciatively. "I'm so glad everypony has somepony."

"What about you?" Luna asked, trying to keep her voice level. "You just lost Vinyl to your sister."

"Don't be silly, Vinyl was never really mine. And besides, I have you!" Pinkie said, turning her head to the alicorn and kissing her on the cheek. Luna seemed completely stunned.

"Do you want to try some of the fudge?" Pinkie asked. "It's cranberry. And then maybe we could make out a little, if you like!"

"That sounds, er, marvellous," said Luna, both shocked and pleased at Pinkie's bluntness. She took a piece of fudge and chewed it, her eyes widening in delight.

"Mmm! Pinkamena, this is exceptional," Luna said, revelling in the surprising, sweet tartness of the treat, chewing it slowly.

"Well don't feel like you have to rush it," Pinkie said, snuggling up to the Princess. "I'm not going anywhere."

Trixie swept off her hat, revealing one of the rabbit dolls she used for practice balanced around her horn.

"As you can see, fillies and gentlecolts, he has returned completely unharmed!" she shouted triumphantly, imagining the applause from the crowd. Ponyville had been an unmitigated disaster once again – she needed to get back on the road, she thought to herself. Tidying away her tricks into the bags hidden in her cape, she checked her map and was about to leave the clearing and get back on the road to West Hoofington when she remembered she'd forgotten her audience.

Trotting back into the clearing, she lifted the abandoned little doll with the mismatched eyes and after considering the bags for a second, decided to hide it in her hat. As she carefully packed away the doll, she smiled at it.

"You really are the best crowd I've ever had," she murmured to Miss Smartypants happily, dreaming of stadiums of adoring fans. Carefully balancing her hat over her horn, Trixie hit the road.