

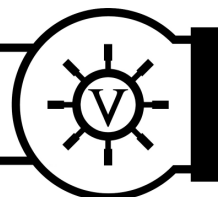
Seeking Beauty

Donny's Boy

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PONY FICTION VAULT



*"I don't need a parachute, baby, if I've got you.
Baby, if I've got you, I don't need a parachute.
You're gonna catch me,
You're gonna catch if I fall..."*
– Cheryl Cole, "Parachute"

Desert. Hard, barren, unforgiving desert, as far as the eye could see.

To her right, endless sand. To her left, endless sand. And in front of her only a long stretch of railroad track, disappearing off into distance. All of it standing out starkly against the huge expanse of cloudless sky, where the sun burned a dusky orange as it kissed the horizon.

Sweat dripped down in absolute torrents, stinging her eyes, making her coat feel sticky and slimy. Every pump of the rail car's lever sent another shudder through her aching muscles and another stream of perspiration down her back. But at least the discomfort caused by all this unladylike sweating and grunting served to distract her from the constant, incessant babbling that buzzed in the air like so many horseflies. For just as the sweat came pouring down in endless rivers, so poured out endless words from her companion's mouth.

She'd stopped listening long ago, of course, but she couldn't completely block them from her mind. All those words marched relentlessly forward, relentlessly onward. As the non-stop chatter battered her sanity, she tried to calm herself with daydreams about all the terrible, terrible vengeance she would wreak upon a certain rainbow-maned pegasus.

Then, the babbling suddenly stopped. She closed her eyes and drank in the sudden silence. It was as sweet as a drink of cool, refreshing water would have been at that same moment.

The quiet was not to be long-lived, however. "Hey, Rarity? I just wanted to say thanks."

"For what?" Her voice snapped out like a whip, much harsher than she'd meant it to sound.

But that harshness was only met with a happy giggle. "For catching me."

They both lapsed back into silence. The only thing to be heard, as dusk descended upon them, was the rhythmic squeak of the rail car's wheels as they traveled along the tracks.

"You're welcome, Pinkie." The words were so quiet, so gentle, they were almost lost to the wind. Almost, but not entirely.

It began with a simple business card.

The Duchess of Hoofington had been taunting her all through the evening, going on at length about her fabulous new caterer, who was as yet a complete unknown in Canterlot's high-society circles. All through the soup course, through the salad course and well into the course featuring the main entree, the duchess had sung the praises of her caterer's many delectables – cakes and pies and tarts and, apparently, dragon-fire crème brûlée. Even Fancy Pants, the most patient and tolerant of hosts, had shot the boastful mare a few annoyed looks from his place at the head of the dinner table.

But it wasn't until the dessert course that the duchess finally moved in for the kill. "You know, Lady Rarity," she began, with a smile as sharp as a dagger, "I really should put you in touch with my caterer. I'm sure her work would be just the most perfect thing for your fashion show after-parties."

"Is that so?" Rarity's smile was every inch as sharp and as dangerous. "Do tell, my dear duchess."

The duchess, a pale green unicorn with a too-thin face, tilted her head. "I believe I have her business card somewhere or other... oh, and while I'm looking for it, may I ask you something, Lady Rarity?" A calculated pause, followed by another one of those awful smiles. "I was hoping you might be able to create one of your stunning dresses for my daughter to wear at her upcoming cute-ceañera, if you happen to be available to do so. I know how busy you get this time of the year."

Aha. There it was. Rarity had been waiting for it because she knew, as surely as she knew that the Duchess of Hoofington was both an insufferable boor and an insufferable bore, that this would come down to a matter of *quid pro quo*. "I'm sure I can make some time in my schedule," she replied in a light, breezy tone, "and I would be delighted to design for your lovely daughter."

Free of charge, too, of course. That went without saying. Almost everything went without saying among Canterlot's aristocracy, really, as directness was considered terribly uncouth. As refined and elegant as she already was when she first moved to Canterlot, Rarity had still been a bit surprised to learn that, here, nothing could ever be *said* but only *implied*. All of those years in Ponyville, surrounded by ponies such as Applejack and Rainbow Dash – who seemed to have had the filters between their brains and their

mouths surgically removed at birth – had taken their toll on the unicorn's sensibilities. She'd grown too used to ponies actually meaning the things they said.

She'd learned quickly, though. She'd had to.

Still smiling, the Duchess of Hoofington took out a small white card and placed it on the fine linen of the table. She gently nudged the card towards Rarity with a dainty burst of magic. "If I do give you this, you *must* promise that you'll contact her! I don't give her information out to just anyone, you realize."

Despite herself, Rarity felt a flush of pleasure – that she wasn't "just anyone." It was silly, and it was wrong, but she felt it nonetheless. "I give you my word, Duchess," Rarity said in a solemn tone, as she used her own magic to pick up the business card.

Which she almost dropped, once she saw what was written upon it. Because on the front of the card, in swirly pink script, were the words:

Pinkie Pie, Esq., D.D.S., Ph.D.
Sugar Cube Corner, Proprietress
Caterer, Party Planner, and Balloon Animal Artiste

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Mixing business with friendship was never a good idea. And the mere thought of deliberately and *voluntarily* bringing Pinkie Pie up to Canterlot was enough to cause Rarity to nearly break out in psychosomatic hives. But she had promised the duchess, and one simply did not break promises to nobility.

So it was that she was now pacing around the large room that housed her work studio, anxious and restless, all while trying not to imagine all the many different ways everything could go horribly, horribly wrong. Soon enough, however, she was interrupted by her assistant, a rather short and stout young unicorn stallion, who rushed into the room as though being chased by an entire pack of timber wolves.

"I am so sorry, Lady Rarity," he gasped out, eyes wide with fear and contrition. "I *tried* to inform Lady Pinkie that I would announce her arrival, but she –"

He was cut off as a familiar, high-pitched voice squealed, "Oh, my gosh! This place is so *big!*"

Rarity smiled almost despite herself as a blur of pink bounded into the room, and it was one of her seldom-seen genuine smiles. Turning to her assistant, she replied, "It's quite all right, Snips. You oughtn't blame yourself at all. But would you go prepare some tea for the both of us, please?"

"Yes, milady." With a bow, the young unicorn stumbled his way out of the room, closing the door behind himself.

Once he'd left, Rarity approached her newly arrived guest, who was facing away from her and poking at a clothes mannequin with a curious hoof. "Lady Pinkamena! It's so good to see you, darling."

Pinkie Pie turned around with a grin. "Ha! 'Lady Pinkamena'... You're so funny, Rarity."

"That *is* your title, you know." The unicorn sighed. This was a conversation that had been had many times, but still, she felt compelled to try again. She always felt compelled to try again. "Certainly you remember the ceremony at which Princess Celestia bestowed ladyships upon all of us? In honor of our – and I quote – in honor of our dedicated service to the nation as bearers of the Elements of Harmony?"

Somehow, Pinkie was now halfway across the studio, inspecting some bolts of fabric with intense interest. She called out over her shoulder, "Well, sure, I remember! The party we had after that was one of the bestest I've ever thrown. But it's still really funny when you call me Lady Pinkamena."

With a quiet sigh, Rarity decided to let the matter go. The truth was, none of her friends ever used their titles, with the occasional exception of Rainbow Dash, who was of the firm belief that having a title made her name twenty percent cooler. In fact, Applejack had nearly refused to receive her ladyship at *all*, and it was only the combined pleading of Rarity and Twilight that had swayed the stubborn farm pony.

"I suppose you're right," the unicorn allowed, ever gracious. "Well, then. Let me start by saying that it was kind of you to come on such short notice, Pinkie."

"Of course! I love my friends, and I love parties! How could I *not* come?"

At the mention of friends, Rarity perked up. "Ah, yes, that reminds me. Before we settle down to business, perhaps you could join me for tea and share a bit about how everyone is doing back in Ponyville?"

She didn't actually have the time to do so, but then again, she never had the time. For anything, really. After only a few weeks of living in Canterlot, Rarity had learned that she'd have to *make* the time for the things that were truly important.

For instance, she'd been in the middle of a big rush order for Sapphire Shores when the letter arrived inviting her to Rainbow Dash's big try-out for the Wonderbolts – which, naturally, had been scheduled for the very next day. She'd stayed up through the entire night, working at a feverish pace, but still it hadn't been enough. By morning, she'd only completed half of the gowns that Sapphire had requested. It had been unfortunate, but there was only one thing that could be done.

She had dashed off a quick letter to Miss Shores full of the most abject apologies, and then she'd hopped the express train to Ponyville. She arrived just in time to join her other friends for the balloon ride that would take them all to Cloudsdale. And the very moment they'd landed in that grand city of the pegasi, she'd found herself engulfed in a giant, crushing hug by an athletic pegasus pony with a shaggy rainbow mane.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Rare," Dash had whispered in her ear, her voice even huskier than usual. "I'm really, really glad you could make it."

Rarity had laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Rainbow. I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

That had been two years ago. Two years Dash had been a Wonderbolt, and two years Rarity had received not a single order from Sapphires Shores.

She regretted nothing.

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The afternoon tea shared by the two old friends was a much louder, more boisterous affair than the teas to which Rarity had grown accustomed. Pinkie guzzled cups of the beverage as quickly and as messily as she used to down mugs of cider at Applejack's farm, all the while talking at a near breakneck pace.

"...and then Twilight got that look on her face – you know, the one where her eye starts twitching? – and Fluttershy said we should probably all leave, but I wasn't so sure about that. I mean, if your friend is upset, shouldn't you stay there and help them? So I was trying to explain all that to Fluttershy, but then Applejack chomped down on my tail and started dragging me away..."

Rarity took a dainty sip of her own tea. "Ever the eloquent diplomat, our Applejack," she murmured, fond amusement tinging her voice.

"Uh-huh!" agreed Pinkie enthusiastically, as she slurped more tea. "Oh, and then the library burned down. Again. But it's okay! Apple Bloom is fixing it back up, and it should be good as new soon." Finishing off yet another cup of tea, the earth pony sat back and grinned. "So! What's new with you?"

It was a question that Rarity was often asked, though not usually with such informal phrasing, and never with the utter sincerity that shone in Pinkie's voice. Rarity found it rather a nice change of pace, truth be told.

"Not too terribly much, darling," she replied with a casual wave of her hoof. "It's been the same clients, the same dinner parties, the same plays and musicals for the last few months. Sweetie Belle was able to stay for a few days not too long ago, though, and that was quite the treat. Her tours keep her so busy lately."

"I bet! I mean, she's only the bestest singer in all Equestria."

Rarity found herself smiling again. "I must admit that I agree with that opinion, though Sweetie tells me I'm biased. But if an older sister can't show a bit of pride, who can?"

"Oh, I so totally know what you mean," chirped Pinkie, nodding rapidly. "When my little sister broke open her first geode, I was so proud, I threw her a party right then and there!"

"*You* have a younger sister?" Rarity couldn't quite keep the note of surprise from her tone.

"No, silly, I have *two* younger sisters. They both still live on the farm, though. They took over the rock farming from Mom and Dad a few years back."

The unicorn took another sip of tea, while pondering over the various implications of this new bit of information. Fascinating. "I never knew you had sisters," she finally confessed.

Pinkie grinned in reply. "There's a lot that ponies don't know about me! Twilight says I'm complicated."

"I do believe our dear Twilight is quite correct in that assessment." Rarity chuckled dryly. "Though, she usually is, isn't she?"

"Yeppers! She's such a smarty pants."

At the thought of Twilight, Rarity had to stifle a sigh. How long had it been since she'd last visited Ponyville and seen Twilight Sparkle and the others? Two months? Three? She and Twilight corresponded regularly, of course – the studious unicorn did love writing and reading letters – but it wasn't as satisfying as when when they'd lived just down the road from one another. Fluttershy also sent mail fairly often, but neither Applejack nor Rainbow Dash were much for written correspondence. For her own part, Pinkie sent care packages with little notes tucked inside, but the various cupcakes and brownies tended to smudge out all of the words she'd written down.

They still loved her, and she still loved them. That hadn't changed a single iota through all the years. If anything, she'd come to love them more and more as the years passed by.

But things simply weren't the *same*. Of course, that had been the point, back when she'd first planned her move. She'd long grown tired of Ponyville, with its humdrum everyday sights, its constrictions and its limitations. She'd longed for the bustling streets and towering buildings of the big city, for the glimmering opportunities Canterlot promised for her career – and she'd been blessed to have friends who urged her to go, even as they cried and hugged her close.

Rarity glanced out the window of her boutique, out at those wide, bustling streets of Canterlot, where countless ponies dressed in the finest of clothing passed by. She usually adored pony-watching, silently critiquing the various fashions that walked by her window, but at the present moment she couldn't seem to muster up any enthusiasm. The sigh she'd been holding in finally slipped out.

So lost in all these thoughts was the unicorn that she didn't notice that a silence had fallen over the little tea table until it was broken by an unusually soft, unusually serious voice: "Are you... are you happy, Rarity?"

Rarity turned to look at Pinkie Pie, and slowly she blinked as she attempted to clear the cobwebs from her mind. "What? Why would you ask such a thing?" She shook her head. "Of course I'm happy."

The other mare frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Pinkie, I am *fine*. I am better than fine! I'm a successful, sought-after designer in one of the most glamorous cities in Equestria. This is everything I ever wanted. Why wouldn't I be happy?"

"I guess that's a good point," said Pinkie, still sounding the slightest bit doubtful. "As long as you're extra super sure."

"I am. Quite sure." And she *was* happy. She had accomplished exactly what she'd set out to do, and what more was there than that? What greater happiness could there be than making your dreams come true? "Now, as we've finished with tea, shall we begin discussing the preparations for tomorrow night?"

Not waiting for an answer, Rarity stood up and began heading across the room towards her work desk at a brisk trot. After a few moments she heard the clop of hooves behind her, as Pinkie finally followed.

"Now, tell me, darling... *what* are the rules again?"

A be-aproned Pinkie Pie huffed and rolled her eyes. "Rule numero uno! Don't leave the kitchen."

"Good, good." Rarity gave a clipped nod, before turning and running her eyes along the gleaming steel kitchen counters that held trays upon trays of delicate pastries. "And rule number two?"

"Don't leave the kitchen."

The icing on the cherry tarts was a touch crooked, but otherwise, everything was in excellent order. Rarity allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction. "And rule number three?"

"Check with you before I do anything."

"Such as?"

A beleaguered sigh. "Such as leaving the kitchen."

"Correct! I'm very proud of you." Rarity finally turned back around to beam at her caterer.

In reply, the other mare pouted. "I'm not a little filly, Rarity! I've planned and catered a bunch of fancy pants parties, and I totally know what I'm doing."

"Oh, I know, darling, I know." Rarity reached out and patted her friend's shoulder in what she hoped was a placating manner. "But this is a *very* important event, you must understand. All of the most important names in fashion will be here – Hoity Toity, Photo Finish, Fleur de Lis, on and on and on."

"And it's gonna go great! I Pinkie promise!" Pinkie bounced over to the kitchen's entrance and peeked out at the banquet hall beyond the doors. "Are you *sure* you don't need my help with the decorations, too?"

A spike of icy terror went through Rarity's heart at the mere thought of her beautiful and tastefully-decorated hall done up in tacky paper streamers and garish balloons. "Oh, no!"

Er, I mean... please don't feel as though you have to bother yourself with that. You have more than enough to handle here in the kitchen, after all."

Pinkie glanced over her shoulder with a deeply suspicious frown. For a long, tense moment, she stared right at Rarity – seemingly right *through* Rarity – before her entire face broke into a blinding smile. "Okie dokie lokie!" she chirped, bounding back over to the ovens.

The fashionista let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. "Well! As you have everything well in hoof here, I think I'll pop out into the main room to check on the ice sculptures and string quartet." But when she reached the kitchen door, she hesitated and bit her lip. "You do still remember the rules, don't you?"

Pinkie Pie blew a raspberry at her.

"Right! Right. Just checking."

• • •

Everything went fine, at first. For the first two hours or so, everything went rather swimmingly, in fact.

All of the ponies she'd been hoping would attend had shown up, and Fleur de Lis had even brought along Fancy Pants as her companion for the evening – and dear old Fancy Pants was always a sight for sore eyes. Even better, as she worked her way through the crowds, mingling and playing hostess, Rarity could overhear different groups of ponies discussing her winter fashion line with excited and complimentary words. Hoity Toity himself pronounced her designs "simply divine."

She'd also heard numerous high praises for the food at the reception, in particular the desserts, and Rarity silently promised herself that she would relay all of these compliments back to Pinkie as soon as the party was over. Then, she made the fatal mistake of mentally patting herself on the back for a job well done with the evening's festivities.

The fates must have heard her thoughts and been angered, for no sooner had she congratulated herself did she hear a completely unfamiliar voice call out, "Lady Rarity! Oh, Lady Rarity!"

Quickly slapping a smile on her face, Rarity turned around and saw two pegasi fluttering towards her. The stallion was sleek and gray, with a dark mane, while the mare was a soft salmon color. Rarity had not the faintest clue who either of them were.

"Lady Rarity," greeted the stallion, once he was in range. "I just wanted to personally thank you for inviting us to your little soiree. We've had the most delightful time."

Rarity just kept smiling at the pegasi as her mind raced, desperately trying to recall the names of the two ponies who stood before her and coming up completely empty.

The female pegasus gave her a penetrating look. "You *do* remember us, don't you?"

"Why, of course! Of course I do, darling!" The unicorn could feel a trickle of cold sweat snake its way down her back. "How could I ever forget –"

"Hi, guys!" Pinkie Pie had somehow materialized right by Rarity's side, as if by magic. She was no longer wearing her apron but now in an elegant dress – the same gown she'd worn to her very first Grand Galloping Gala, actually. "Oh, look, Rarity – it's Sir Feathermane! And he's brought along his husband's favorite cousin, Lady Ginger Snaps!"

Sir Feathermane looked a bit confused as he turned to stare at the intruding pink pony. "I beg your pardon, madam, but I don't believe we've yet to make an acquaintance."

"Oh, no, we haven't met yet, but I'm sure we're gonna be really great friends!" Pinkie grinned hugely, then thrust out a forehoof. "Hi! My name's Pinkie –"

"Sir Feathermane, Lady Ginger," Rarity quickly interrupted, nudging Pinkie to the side, "please allow me to present to you Lady Pinkamena Diane Pie. She is a good, dear friend of mine from Ponyville." She turned slightly and nodded to Pinkie. "Lady Pinkamena, this is Sir Feathermane and Lady Ginger Snaps of Cloudsdale."

It was a bit of a gamble, adding that they were from Cloudsdale, as Rarity still hadn't the foggiest notion just who these two ponies were. But the vast majority of the pegasus aristocracy hailed from that particular metropolis, so she'd decided it wasn't too risky a gamble. Fortunately, the smiles that graced the faces of both Lady Ginger and Sir Feathermane told Rarity that her shot in the dark had paid off.

In addition, Feathermane had obviously taken note of Pinkie's title, as he was now gazing at the riotous pony with a bit more respect. "Indeed? It is a pleasure, Lady Pinkamena."

Pinkie began shaking hooves with both the pegasi at the same time. "Nice to meetcha!"

"Yes. Well." Lady Ginger, for her own part, seemed completely flustered. She subtly extracted her hoof from the earth pony's grasp. "I'm charmed to meet you, as well, Lady Pinkamena. I am afraid we can't tarry too long, however. We really just wanted to thank Lady Rarity for a wonderful evening before we left for Cloudsdale."

"Of course, of course," replied Rarity, as smooth as silk. "I do hope you both have a safe journey home. And please give my regards to your wonderful husband, Sir Feathermane."

After another round or five of pleasantries and good-byes were exchanged, the two pegasi headed out the door at last. The moment they'd left, Rarity whirled around to gape at Pinkie with a combination of bafflement and awe. "How in Equestria did you know who those ponies were?"

"It's like I keep telling you girls," explained Pinkie, her eyes laughing. "I know *everypony*."

Suddenly, Rarity felt a tad bit guilty about the little lecture she'd given in the kitchen earlier that day. "But... but why? Why did you..."

Pinkie smiled, but it wasn't one of her usual, face-splitting smiles. It was small and gentle, strangely intimate, almost secretive. "Because I owed ya one, Rarity."

Utterly nonplussed by that answer, Rarity simply glanced back towards the front door of the banquet hall, through which the two pegasi from Cloudsdale had just left, to give herself some time to compose her thoughts and try to process what had just occurred. She shook her head. Even after all these years, Pinkie Pie was still surprising her, still as unpredictable as always. It was... oddly comforting, really.

When Rarity turned back around, she saw that Pinkie now had a frown on her face. "Pinkie? What's wrong, dear?"

"You're... you're not mad that I left the kitchen, are you?"

"Goodness, no. Of course not! Why, you saved me from a terrible faux pas just now. How could I be mad about that?" Rarity smiled warmly. "No, no, no. I'm grateful, not angry. *Thank you.*"

The frown evaporated instantly, only to be replaced with a beaming smile. "No problemo!" Then Pinkie tilted her head and curiously sniffed at the air. "Ooh, smells like the mini chocolate quiches are starting to burn! Gotta go!"

With bewildered amusement Rarity watched as the pink pony bounded across the banquet hall, nimbly threading her way through the clusters of mingling ponies, and then disappeared behind the kitchen doors. She allowed her gaze to linger on the kitchen for a few additional moments, as she tried to work up the energy to dive back into the crowds and execute her hostessing duties to her usual standard of perfection.

But just as she was about to do so, she was interrupted by a gentle cough that came from somewhere rather close by. Turning her head, the unicorn caught sight of Fancy Pants and Fleur de Lis, both standing just a few feet away and dressed to the nines.

She smiled at the two unicorns, and it was almost as wide and as warm a smile as the one she'd just given Pinkie. "Fancy Pants! Fleur de Lis! It's so good of you to attend, and I'm honored to have your presence."

"Rarity, darling!" The stallion leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "A splendid party, as always!"

Meanwhile, Fleur de Lis cut her eyes towards the kitchen, while a lightly teasing smile curled her lips. "She's unique, isn't she?"

"Hmm? Pinkie, you mean?" Rarity giggled a bit. "Well, I can't disagree with that. Pinkie is... she's in an entire class of her own, let's say."

The other mare looked thoughtful for a moment or two before giving a small, approving nod. "You make for quite the handsome couple, Lady Rarity. She's very beautiful."

Rarity suddenly forgot anything and everything she might have been about to say. She may, in fact, have forgotten her own name, as well. She simply blinked at the two unicorns before her, completely mute.

"Indeed, indeed." Fancy Pants chuckled gaily. "She's such a charming pony and a true breath of fresh air in a town as old as this one. I trust this means we'll be seeing her more often here in Canterlot?"

Finally, Rarity found her voice, as she spluttered in a distressingly unladylike fashion. "B-but she isn't... we aren't..."

"Oh, no need to try to hide it from us," interrupted Fancy Pants, with a sly wink. "I assure you that mum shall be the word with both of us regarding your new romance until you're ready to go public with it. And, my dear friend, if I may be so bold as to say – well done! You've chosen very wisely."

"I... I have?"

The stallion smiled. "Most certainly. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Sir Feathermane and Lady Ginger just a few moments ago, and I was duly impressed with Lady Pinkamena's excellent sense of timing. Very gallant of her."

"Quite," agreed Fleur de Lis, with one of her Mona Lisa smiles.

Slowly and thoughtfully, Rarity nodded her agreement. "Yes. Yes, I suppose it was."

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"She's very beautiful."

Those words, so casual, so nonchalant, replayed over and over in Rarity's mind as she watched her old friend dance around the guest bedroom. It was one of two guest bedrooms that existed in Rarity's clean, spacious apartment, which sat directly above her fashion studio much as Rarity's old home had sat within the old Carousel Boutique. But of course both Rarity's work space and her personal space were much larger and much grander nowadays. Carousel Boutique, in comparison, had been a complete hovel.

The unicorn watched with a mixture of annoyance and affection as Pinkie Pie bounded around the room, opening up all of the chest drawers, each and every window, plus the closet. Fortunately, Rarity kept almost nothing in the guest rooms except towels and linens, so there wasn't too terribly much that Pinkie could disturb or put out of place. Then, after checking under the rug – for what, Rarity couldn't even begin to guess – the rambunctious pink mare flopped onto the bed and gave a happy little bounce.

"This is the squishiest, comfiest bed I've ever been on!"

Rarity smiled and felt a rush of warmth spring from somewhere deep in her chest, the way she always did when she'd managed to please a friend. "I'm glad it's to your liking, dear."

Giggling a bit, Pinkie returned Rarity's smile. "Thanks again for letting me stay the night, Rarity."

"Think nothing of it. I wouldn't *dream* of having you make the trek all the way back to Ponyville at this time of night."

Almost impossibly, Pinkie's smile grew even wider. "You're always so nice," she said, her face open and almost painfully sincere. "I'm really glad we're friends."

"She's very beautiful."

It was odd. How one could fail to see something, something that was right there in front of one's very own eyes, until it was pointed out by someone else. Very odd indeed. Because Fleur de Lis had been right. Pinkie Pie was, in fact, not only beautiful but absolutely radiant.

The earth pony sat on the guest bed with her thick mane hanging loose, almost wavy, around her shoulders, and her large eyes twinkled joyfully. Perhaps that was what made Pinkie beautiful. That perpetual joy, which couldn't help but shine through Pinkie's every pore, as Pinkie positively *lived* for the opportunity to share that joy with others.

Rarity should have seen it. She shouldn't have needed for someone else to point it out to her. She was a fashion designer, after all, an artist whose media were all visual. Her entire life's purpose was about seeking beauty, appreciating beauty, *creating* beauty. She should have seen. She should have realized.

But there was no sense in regretting what was past. Especially when one could be planning for the future, instead.

If she could somehow tame Pinkie... teach her... mold her just a little... well, Pinkie Pie could blossom into something really rather wonderful. She could even, perhaps, become a force to be reckoned with in the Canterlot social world. And she could also become a very valuable asset to Rarity, as well – but, of course, that would merely be a pleasant little bonus and not the main goal.

"Pinkie?"

The other mare had resumed bouncing on the bed but, at the sound of Rarity's voice, she immediately stopped and glanced over. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if you might be interested in staying in Canterlot for a few extra days." Rarity made sure to keep her tone even and calm, to not betray the slightest hint of excitement. "There are a few more upcoming events on my social calendar, and I do so regret that you had to spend most of your time tonight in the kitchen."

Pinkie tilted her head, seemingly curious. "You mean, I'd be a party guest? Not a caterer?"

"Precisely! And it would all be my treat, of course. The preparations, the dresses, everything. You wouldn't have to spend a single bit."

"I dunno..." Pinkie frowned, very slightly, and her eyebrows knit together. "These big fancy Canterlot parties aren't really like Ponyville parties. They're not as much fun."

"Well, that's exactly why you should come, darling, to show everypony here how to have a proper good time!" She paused and considered the implications of what she'd just said. "Within the boundaries of tastefulness and decorum, of course."

Still Pinkie looked uncertain.

The unicorn put on her most winning and persuasive smile. "And I'm sure your lovely assistant at the bakery – Twist was her name, yes? – I'm sure Miss Twist would *love* the opportunity to look after Sugar Cube Corner for a while longer and prove to you how responsible she is." And... time for the coup de grace. "After all, didn't you yourself relish the chance to prove your responsibility back when the bakery was still run by Mr. and Mrs. Cake?"

Biting her lip, Pinkie Pie appeared to be thinking over the matter very carefully, very deliberately. Then her face broke into one of her trademarked, blinding grins. "Okie dokie lokie!"

Rarity couldn't resist the urge to clop her hooves together in glee, much as she used to as a filly on Hearth's Warming morning. "Oh, excellent! We'll have *such* a good time, darling. I can hardly wait."

"Me neither!"

After exchanging good nights, Rarity trotted off towards her own bedroom with a light step and happy heart. She thought over all of her newly-hatched plans and schemes as she prepared for bed, brushing out her mane, applying her nightly face mask, filing her hooves. There was a lot to be done in the morning, if she was to have Pinkie prepared enough to serve as her escort to tomorrow evening's art museum reception. She'd have to ask Snips to clear her calendar for the entire day, most likely, but one had to do what one had to do.

With a contented sigh, Rarity slipped under the silky sheets of her bed. Losing a day's worth of work wasn't ideal, but it wasn't the end of the world by any means. And if the potential Pinkie had shown earlier tonight came to even partial fruition, the lost day of

work would be nothing compared to what Rarity – and Pinkie herself – would gain in exchange.

She drifted into the warm embrace of sleep with one final, lazy, hazy thought: *She really is quite beautiful.*

The voice was terribly loud and painfully high-pitched, and it came from somewhere rather too close to her left ear. The sounds were muddled at first but, gradually, they grew sharper and more distinct. Eventually, Rarity could make out actual whole words.

"Rarity, wake up! Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

Rarity let out a groan and rolled over in bed. She didn't know what time it was, exactly, but she was fairly certain that, whatever time it might be, it was much, *much* too early.

"C'mon, Rarity! We're gonna miss it if we don't hurry."

Without lifting her head from her pillow, Rarity waved a hoof in the general direction of the disturbance. "Go 'way," she mumbled. "Go play in your own room, Sweetie Belle."

The voice giggled in response. "My name's not Sweetie, you silly filly. It's Pinkie Pie!"

Finally lifting her head, Rarity took off her sleep mask and cracked open an eye. A blindingly white smile and a pair of huge blue eyes filled up her entire field of vision. "Oh, yes, yes, of course. Good morning, Pinkie."

Pinkie leaned back a little and bounced impatiently on her hooves. "So? Can we go now?"

"Go?" Rarity tried to fight off a yawn but promptly lost the battle. "Go where, darling?"

"To see the surprise! Oh, it's the bestest surprise ever, and you'll be really, really glad you came to see. I promise! Cross my heart and hope to –"

"All right! All right." Rarity sighed. She knew all too well, from years of experience, that giving in was her only true option at this point. "Just give me a moment to make myself presentable, and then we'll go see your surprise."

Rarity completed her morning routine in a fraction of the time it usually took, prodded along mercilessly by an over-enthusiastic Pinkie Pie. Soon enough she was following her friend up to the roof of the building that housed both Rarity's work studio and her apartment. The early morning air was chilly on the roof, and Rarity found herself walking as close as possible to Pinkie in a mostly unsuccessful attempt to keep warm.

Once they'd reached the edge of the roof, Pinkie pointed off to a spot in the far distance, miles and miles away. Just visible above the horizon was a strange, multi-looped, zigzagging rainbow.

"You woke me up at the crack of dawn and dragged me all the way up here just for a rainbow?" Rarity couldn't quite keep the edge of annoyance out of her voice.

Rainbows weren't entirely common, it was true, but they also weren't entirely rare. And they absolutely weren't worth the price of losing precious beauty sleep.

In reply, Pinkie rolled her eyes, but her tone remained good-natured and bubbly as she explained, "Not just any rainbow... one of Rainbow Dash's rainbows!" Pinkie smiled. "And it's coming from the direction of Ponyville, which means she must be in town visiting, even though she didn't *tell* us she was gonna be coming to visit. She's such a sneaky pony sometimes, that Dashie."

The unicorn scoffed in disbelief. "How could you possibly know that Rainbow Dash is the one who created that rainbow?"

Pinkie turned and gave Rarity a look that suggested the pink pony thought her friend had perhaps a few screws loose. It was rather a surreal moment. "Don't be silly, Rarity. Dashie's rainbows always have those extra loops, see?" She gestured towards one of the rainbow's many twists and curls. "It's 'cause she likes doing tricks when she's making them. *No pony* makes rainbows like Rainbow Dash."

Now that Rarity thought about it... Pinkie was right. Dash's rainbows always did have that extra flair, those extra loops, didn't they? Rarity couldn't help but wonder just when exactly Pinkie Pie had noticed this. Actually, she wondered at all of these little things that Pinkie noticed about other ponies. And the unicorn abruptly wondered, with a touch of trepidation, as to what Pinkie might have noticed about *her*.

"Isn't it so pretty?" asked Pinkie, her words soft and reverent. "Whenever I see a rainbow, especially one of Dashie's, I always think about how rainbows taught me how to smile. And then I feel happy deep down in my tummy, like I did that day back on the rock farm."

Rarity nodded but said nothing. The cold outdoor air had her feeling a bit more awake, and now that she was, she couldn't help but notice how the soft, muted rays of the newly-risen sun made for a stunning backdrop and contrast to the hard, bright lines that comprised Dash's rainbow. It was breathtaking, really. The part of Rarity's mind that

never stopped thinking about fashion started wondering if she could recreate this ambiance, this beauty and its attendant feelings, in a dress... perhaps a pastel chiffon laid over a more brightly colored and sturdier fabric...

But her musings were interrupted when a quiet little sigh escaped her companion. "Sometimes... sometimes I get a teensy bit worried, though," the earth pony said. She sounded almost mournful. "That rainbows are too, y'know, frivolous. Or simple-minded. And I shouldn't like them as much as I do."

Rarity drew in her breath and wondered how best to respond. That had always been one of Pinkie's problems – as quick as the pink pony was to forgive, she never, ever *forgot*.

"Rarity? Do... do *you* think they're frivolous?"

There was a plaintive note in Pinkie's voice, something yearning, almost childlike, and the unicorn felt a pang in her chest. "No," Rarity replied gently. "No, Pinkie, I think they're absolutely beautiful."

There was a silence, and then Rarity felt something warm and soft press up against her. She glanced over to see Pinkie Pie nuzzling against her and beaming. "I *knew* you'd like the surprise."

• • •

The building was huge, all polished stone and sparkling glass, rising up to touch the sky with all the majesty of one of the palace's spires. It was one of Rarity's absolute most favorite buildings in Canterlot. Even though its size and modernity made the building, as stunning as it was, feel a bit out of place in this very old city, Rarity adored the Museum of Contemporary Art and Culture.

"Wow," murmured Pinkie Pie.

Rarity turned to gaze at her date for the evening, and she couldn't help but smile. Pinkie was staring at the museum with wide open eyes, her entire face alight with wonder and the purest kind of pleasure. Rarity felt a burst of happiness at seeing Pinkie appreciate the building's architecture as much as she herself did.

"Impressive, no?" Rarity asked, with a high, tinkling laugh. "And just wait until you see the interior, darling!"

After another moment or two of gaping, Pinkie finally dragged her eyes away from the museum and looked over at the unicorn with a ready smile. Still smiling herself, Rarity took an opportunity to give Pinkie an appraising once-over.

She'd dressed Pinkie in one of her very own gowns, a satiny affair in deep crimson, and she had personally applied Pinkie's make-up, which was subtle but made the mare's cheeks glow even pinker than they usually did. She'd also taken Pinkie to one of the most exclusive salons in Canterlot, much to the salon owners' eventual horror and ever-lasting trauma. But the results had been worth it. Pinkie's mane had been wrestled into something more orderly than its usual state – an up-swept style similar to the one she'd worn to their very first Grand Galloping Gala.

Right here, right now, the excitable baker and party planner actually looked the part of a pony who was named Lady Pinkamena Diane Pie. In fact, Pinkie looked downright breathtaking. Rarity felt a burst of pride in what she'd accomplished in just one little day.

"Um, Rarity?" Pinkie Pie was fidgeting nervously under the unicorn's uncompromising gaze. "Is... is something wrong? Do I look okay? Oh gosh, I didn't get my mane messed up *already*, did I?"

Rarity reached out with a hoof and smoothed it along Pinkie's shoulder in a reassuring way. "No, darling, you have done an admirable job in keeping your hair neat and tidy thus far."

"Oh, yay!" Pinkie clapped her hooves together as she cheered.

"Pinkie! Your manicure!"

The earth pony flinched. "Oops! Sorry."

"It's quite all right, dear. Now, do you remember all of our lessons in etiquette from this morning?"

Pinkie stuck out her tongue thoughtfully as she started counting off on her hooves. "Um, I think so? Lemme see... Don't hug anypony. If there's a chocolate fountain, don't stick my whole head in the chocolate fountain. Don't dance, no matter how great the music is." She glanced up. "Are you *sure* about the no dancing part?"

"Darling, I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

"I was afraid you were gonna say that." She sighed gustily before she resumed her pondering. "Um, what else, what else... that's all of the stuff you taught me, I think."

Rarity felt her lips twitch, trying to smile, but she forced her facial muscles into a stern expression. "No, I'm afraid you've forgotten something."

"Oh, no! What? What did I forget?"

"Why, the most important thing of all." Rarity's smile finally broke through. "Don't forget to enjoy yourself tonight."

Pinkie grinned at her with those wide, blue eyes of hers. With an exaggerated bow, Pinkie Pie suddenly took one of Rarity's front hooves between her own and lifted it to her lips. Then she pressed a light, gentle kiss to the unicorn's hoof before letting go. "My dear Lady Rarity," she said, affecting a ridiculously awful upper-crust accent, "shall I escort you inside to these most promising and, um, wonderous festivities?"

Rarity couldn't help it. She burst out laughing. "Very gallant of you, my dear Lady Pinkamena. And yes, let's go in. After all, we're *just* in time to arrive fashionably late."

• • •

The large and ornate lobby of the museum teemed with ponies mingling, drinking, eating, and laughing their glittering, fake laughs. In a far corner stood two mares – young but no longer fillies, gorgeously attired, almost painfully beautiful, and the subject of many discreet longing glances. But neither pony noticed any of the looks being directed their way, as they were too busy whispering furiously to one another.

"And the dark blue stallion over there?"

"That's Mr. Wrought Iron! He's from Fillydelphia. I met him the last time I was there at a bakery convention. He owns a bunch of steel factories."

Rarity gave a slight nod. The name sounded vaguely familiar, once she'd heard it. "And that unicorn mare by the hors d'oeuvres table? The one in the forest green dress?"

"That's Lady Lovelace! She's a baron – um, a barton –"

"You don't mean a baronetess, do you, darling?"

"Yeah! That!" Pinkie Pie nodded cheerfully. "She's originally from Trottingham, but she moved to Canterlot a few years ago." The earth pony's eyes lit up, and she bounced up and down a few times. "Ooh, ooh! And if you go over to talk to her, you should *totally* tell her to have a happy birthday tomorrow, 'cause tomorrow is her *birthday!*"

With a small, thoughtful frown, Rarity murmured to herself, "Lady Lovelace, baronetess, birthday tomorrow. Right, got it."

Then, before the unicorn could ask after any of the other reception attendees, Pinkie began shuddering and shaking uncontrollably. A few nearby ponies glanced over with anxious expressions, and Rarity herself felt a sickening jolt of worry before she realized – Pinkie's Pinkie sense.

At last the shuddering stopped and, after a moment of appearing dazed, Pinkie shook her head and straightened her shoulders. She wore a determined look on her face. "Sorry, Rarity, but I gotta go handle a smile emergency. Be back in a jiffy!"

And before Rarity could even formulate a question as to just what constituted a "smile emergency," the pink mare had bounded off and disappeared into the surrounding throngs of reception attendees. Rarity briefly entertained the notion of following after Pinkie but decided against it. She doubted she'd be able to convince Pinkie to call off whatever mission she had just embarked upon, even if she was somehow able to catch up to the lightning-fast earth pony in the first place.

She settled for sighing, deeply and dramatically, instead. It seemed she sighed more than usual whenever Pinkie was around, now that she thought about it.

"Lady Rarity? Is that you?"

The unicorn turned her head, just in time to see the Duchess of Hoofington approaching. The duchess looked as thin and as pale as ever, while wearing an overly ornate gown of the most ill-advised fabrics and colors. With more than a hint of smugness, Rarity thought to herself that money could buy many things, but it couldn't buy good taste.

"Ah, good evening, Duchess!" Rarity quickly put on one of her prefabricated smiles. "It's a pleasure to see you this evening."

"And you, as well," replied the duchess, in a sickly sweet voice. "I trust you've already taken a peek at the new exhibit? All black paintings – the entire canvas just coated entirely in black paint. It's very avant-garde."

Rarity was sure it was very *something*, but she kept that thought to herself. Instead, she simply nodded politely.

"Of course," the duchess continued on, adopting a disdainful tone, "they say the artist is mad as a hatter. Depression, you know. That's why he paints all in black. What was his name again? Rolling River? Rolling Rock?"

"Rolling Stone, I believe it was."

"Yes, yes. Rolling Stone. That's right." The pale green unicorn laughed a bit. It sounded very much like braying. "But that's quite enough about *him*. Tell me, Lady Rarity, surely a mare as lovely as you hasn't come to this little event without a proper escort?"

Rarity perked up a bit. Here was a chance to brag a bit, and she did always like taking advantage of these little opportunities. "Not at all, Duchess. My companion for the evening is the Lady Pinkamena Diane Pie – who asked that I give you her regards, by the by – but I'm afraid Lady Pinkamena had to step away for a few moments."

"Ah. I see." The duchess smiled tightly. "If I may, I'd like to offer a word of advice. From one friend to another."

A highly unpleasant feeling churned in Rarity's stomach. "Of course. I'd be honored to hear any wisdom you might have to impart."

"Ponies of our station do not... *consort*... with the hired help. It's simply not done. I do understand that you're rather new to –"

"Surely you don't refer to Lady Pinkamena?" Rarity interrupted, her voice icy and her eyes dark with a silent warning.

The duchess paused. When she spoke again, her voice was low and conspiratorial. "Come now, Lady Rarity. We both know that the ladyships given to your little Ponyville friends were utterly undeserved and that *you* were the only one truly worthy of being made a lady."

Rarity drew in a sharp breath and felt her magic suddenly begin flooding her horn. As of yet she wasn't sure just what exactly she was going to do with her magic, but she suspected that it was likely to be swift and painful. The Duchess of Hoofington's eyes went wide in surprise, and then –

"Attention, everypony!"

Immediately all of Rarity's anger drained away, along with her build-up of magic – only to be replaced with cold dread. She knew the voice that had just bellowed from the second floor of the museum. She knew that voice all too very well. Along with every other pony in the museum lobby, she slowly turned to gaze up at the source of the sudden interruption.

Pinkie Pie stood right there at the second floor balcony, perched atop the balcony railing while beaming down at the entire lobby. Next to her stood a smallish male earth pony with a dark green coat and deep purple mane. He looked more than a bit nervous.

Smart boy, thought Rarity. She knew that she should go after Pinkie to put a stop to... to whatever *this* was... but the numb shock caused by the entire situation left her rooted to the floor, motionless and mute.

Pinkie gestured with a forehoof as she continued yelling down to the gathered ponies. "Hi! This is my new friend, Rolling Stone! Most of you probably know him already, 'cause he painted all the neat paintings that are hanging up on all the walls here." She glanced over to the stallion and gave him a quick hug. "And he did a super great job, too! Didn't he, folks?"

Rarity could hear some quiet murmuring go through the crowd. A few ponies were asking just who that crazy pink mare was, while a few others were suggesting that someone go fetch security.

For the next part of her speech, Pinkie put on an almost comically serious face. "But even though he's painted lots of neat paintings, that hasn't made him happy. In fact, he's been really, really sad. Go on and tell 'em, Rollie."

Rolling Stone waved awkwardly to the crowd below. "I, er... well, Lady Pinkamena and I were –"

"Oh, silly, I *told* you that you can just call me Pinkie!"

"– right, right, Pinkie and I were talking, and she said a whole lot of things that made a lot of sense to me. About... you know, about not doing things unless you wanted to do them. And about loving what you *do* decide to do."

Oh, Rarity did not like where this was going. Not in the least. She suddenly wished she'd had the chance to drop by the drinks table earlier in the reception to have a glass of wine or two. Or three. Or ten.

Meanwhile, the flustered artist was glancing over at Pinkie Pie, who just nodded for him to continue. Raising his voice a bit, he said, "So I'm not going to paint for galleries and museums any more. I've always hated that paintings get hidden away in dusty old buildings and denied the light of day, so I'm going to go back to my first love. My true love." His entire face broke into a huge, goofy grin. "I'm going to go back to painting barns!"

The entire lobby of ponies gasped in perfect unison. For her own part, Rarity just closed her eyes and sighed yet another quiet, tired little sigh.

"I'm really super duper extra sorry, Rarity."

The unicorn refused to lift her eyes from the pad of paper that rested on the table before her. Instead, she simply continued her sketching as she replied, in an icy tone, "I am not speaking to you right now, Pinkamena Diane Pie."

"But... but I'm *sorry*."

"So you've informed me."

"Super duper extra sorry, even!"

"You've already said that, too, darling."

Pinkie let out a frustrated-sounding sigh. "But I can't *be* any more sorry than super duper extra sorry. That's, like, the sorriest a pony can get!"

"Oh, you're certainly *sorry*, all right," Rarity muttered under her breath, still stubbornly not taking her eyes off her sketchpad.

She was sitting at the little side table she used for tea and not at her larger work table, as the side table sat near a large window in her studio where the sunlight streamed in and made everything all warm and cozy. While doing her best to ignore Pinkie, who was leaning over her shoulder, distressingly far into her bubble of personal space, Rarity sketched out the basics of a new gown design. It was long and flowing, with a raw, jagged edge, reminiscent of a certain rainbow-colored mane. The main piece was to be of a vibrant pink, overlaid with chiffon dyed various pastel hues.

If she executed this design correctly, the final dress should be absolutely stunning. Just as stunning as it was to gaze at a rainbow in the magic of an early morning sunrise. Truth be told, Rarity was quite excited to see how this particular little project would turn out.

She was distracted as hot, sugary breath fell upon her cheek.

"*Rarity...*" Pinkie's voice came out as something between a whine and a plea.

"Still can't hear you, dear. Your speaking privileges remain revoked for..." Rarity glanced up from her sketchpad to check the clock that hung on the far wall. "...for ten more minutes."

"Ten more minutes? But that's practically forever!"

Rarity finally turned to look at Pinkie, who was pouting as petulantly as a foal. The unicorn lifted an unsympathetic eyebrow. "Well, perhaps a certain pony should have thought of that *before* she went and took actions that resulted in us being unceremoniously thrown out of one of Canterlot's most prestigious museums."

"But I didn't mean to –"

There was a soft cough from a few feet away, and both ponies' heads whirled around simultaneously.

Snips cringed and took a step back. "Uh, pardon me for interrupting, Lady Rarity." His eyes cut towards the doors on the opposite side of the room, beyond which lay the main reception area for the boutique. "I wanted to let you know that a Lady Calliope Hue is here. She says she's curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Culture."

Rarity drew in a sharp breath then let it out, very slowly and very deliberately. "Thank you, Snips. Please send her in."

After a nod and a bow, the unicorn stallion quickly made his way back across the room. He slipped through the doors and, after a moment, muffled voices could be heard from the reception area.

Without turning to look at Pinkie, Rarity hissed between clenched teeth, "*Thirty* minutes. Your speaking prohibition has now been extended to *thirty* minutes."

"Aww!"

The doors opened again before Pinkie could offer further protest, and in trotted a refined-looking unicorn mare with a pale tan coat and graying mane. Her face was a complete mask as she made her way across the room with a firm, brisk step. Rarity set aside her sketches and, with a heavy feeling in her chest, stood up so as to properly greet her visitor.

As the museum curator reached the two mares already present, Lady Calliope Hue offered a slight nod to each. Then she focused her uncompromising gaze on Pinkie Pie in particular. "Lady Pinkamena Diane Pie of Ponyville, I presume?"

"Uh, yep, that's me." Pinkie grinned nervously. "All my friends just call me Pinkie Pie, though."

Rarity resisted the urge to drop her face into her hooves and openly begin weeping. But she didn't think that would particularly help matters, so she remained standing perfectly still, with a pleasant if empty smile frozen on her face.

"Lady Pinkamena," the museum curator began again. "I am sure you know why I have sought you out."

Pinkie bit her lip. "Is it because you want me to throw a party?"

"No. It isn't."

Rarity felt a surge of protectiveness swell within her breast – she supposed it was the perpetual older sister in her. Irritating though Pinkie might be, Pinkie was nonetheless her dear friend, and she would not stand by idly as the poor, well-meaning pony was raked over the coals.

So she took a step forward, positioning herself between Pinkie and the other unicorn, and said in as smooth a voice as she could muster, "Now please see here, Lady Calliope. I do understand your position, but I assure you that Lady Pinkamena is terribly sorry about what –"

"Why?"

Rarity frowned. "I... I beg pardon?"

"Why would Lady Pinkamena be sorry?" A large grin suddenly broke over Lady Calliope's face. "Ever since word has gotten out that Rolling Stone has retired from the fine arts world, his renown as an artist has *skyrocketed*. And as our museum has the collection featuring his very last pieces of work, our reputation has skyrocketed, as well – not to mention the donations that have been pouring in all morning!"

Taken completely off guard, Rarity could only stare.

The older mare continued on, sounding positively giddy, "I just wanted to come to personally thank Lady Pinkamena for what she accomplished last night. That's all."

"Oh, don't mention it!" Pinkie had perked up considerably, now that she'd realized she wasn't in trouble. "It was no biggie. I take care of smile emergencies all the time, believe you me."

"Even so, Lady Pinkamena, we are greatly in your debt." With a flick of her horn, the curator magically pulled out two small slips of paper, levitated them over to where Pinkie Pie stood, and set them down on the side table. "As a small token of the museum's appreciation, please accept these tickets to tonight's performance that is taking place at the Canterlot Opera House."

Pinkie frowned thoughtfully. "Oh, I dunno, I'm not really –" She cut herself off and, after sneaking a not very stealthy glance over at Rarity, she smiled. "Actually, that sounds great! Thanks lots, Lady Calliope!"

"It's our pleasure, I assure you. I shan't take up any more of your time, as I'm sure you're both very busy mares." She nodded to Pinkie. "Thank you again, Lady Pinkamena." Turning, she gave Rarity a nod as well. "And thank you, Lady Rarity, for graciously granting me an audience with... your companion."

Still unclear on just what had happened here Rarity merely nodded back in reply. The curator left the room with the same purposeful, energetic gait as she'd entered.

As soon as Lady Calliope Hue disappeared through the door, Pinkie sidled over to Rarity. With a sly look in her eyes and a wicked grin on her face, she said in a faux casual tone, "So, Rarity... if I ask you to come to the opera with me, would that mean my talking ban can be over early?"

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As she sat across from Pinkie Pie at a table covered by the finest linens and illuminated by gently flickering candlelight, Rarity employed all of her considerable powers of restraint to keep from shouting at her dining companion. Pinkie was wolfing down her sauteed vegetable medley as though she hadn't eaten in years, and the tuxedoed waiter had shot the earth mare more than a few subtle glances of disgust. Plus, Pinkie was consistently speaking at a volume that would not be out of place at a Wonderbolts performance but was rather out of place at a quiet, classy, and expensive restaurant.

But Rarity couldn't bring herself to offer a protest to any of this. Not only was Pinkie taking her to the opera, but Pinkie had insisted on treating her to this dinner, as well. It would have been the height of rudeness for her to criticize her host, especially one acting as generously as Pinkie.

So Rarity bit down on her tongue and contented herself with arranging and then rearranging the folds of her gown. It was surprisingly soothing. Almost like meditating, really.

During a lull in the conversation, at a point where Pinkie began gobbling down bread rolls, Rarity decided to take the reins of the conversation. "So, tell me, darling, which opera will we be seeing tonight?"

"Oh! I dunno." Licking her lips as she finished the last of the rolls, Pinkie took out the tickets and squinted at them. "Uh, the words look kinda funny. I don't think I can read them."

"The title's probably in Istallion," Rarity replied with a light little laugh. "The librettos of most operas are in Istallion."

Pinkie nodded agreeably. "Yeah, that's probably it! I guess it doesn't matter, anyway. Seen one opera, seen 'em all, right?"

Rarity goggled at that completely absurd statement before narrowing her eyes suspiciously. "You... you've never been to an opera, have you?"

"Uh..." Immediately Pinkie became shifty eyed and fidgety. "Well, I'm not so sure that opera's really my thing, you know? I'm more of a polka pony, really. Polka's the music of my homeland, after all, and I –"

"Pinkie! Why in Equestria did you invite me to go with you if you don't even like opera?"

Pinkie gave the unicorn a shrug paired with a small, sheepish grin. "Because I know you *do* like opera. And I felt bad about what happened back at the museum and I wanted you to be happy again."

Before Rarity could reply, the waiter dropped by the table to refill their bread basket and look down his nose at Pinkie some more. As he did so, Rarity quietly studied her friend. Pinkie was attempting to make friendly chit-chat with the waiter, who in turn was stoically ignoring her every effort to do so. The more the waiter ignored her, however, the more animated and bubbly Pinkie grew.

Then, to emphasize some point or another that she was making, Pinkie slammed her hoof down on the table and sent her water glass flying. Her eyes went wide in surprise as the water splashed her right in the face, and as the mare let out a comical little squeak...

the waiter, at long last, cracked a grin. The grin was small, and it was fleeting, but it was undeniably *there*.

Pinkie must have seen that little grin, too, because she smiled triumphantly even as the water dripped down her face. With a small cough, the waiter schooled his features into something more serious and professional, before he righted Pinkie's glass and refilled it yet again.

It was only after the waiter had finally moved off that Pinkie glanced up and seemed to notice that Rarity was staring at her. "Uh, is something wrong, Rarity?"

"You didn't stay in Canterlot to go to parties." The unicorn's voice was very, very quiet. "You stayed in Canterlot to make me happy."

Pinkie laughed, a laugh that was high and sweet and pure. It ended in the most unladylike snort imaginable. "Well, duh! Canterlot parties are terrible. Why would I want to stay here for *those*?"

Rarity nodded, slowly and contemplatively. She should have known. She should have seen. She should have seen a lot of things, really, but she hadn't. It was shameful that she hadn't been able to do so, but Rarity was never one to dwell on the past. It was much preferable to fix an error by ensuring that one's next move was as absolutely brilliant and perfect as possible, so brilliant and perfect that nopony would even remember that earlier mistake, than it was to waste time fretting and groveling over things that couldn't be undone.

Fortunately, Rarity knew exactly what to do, and she was reasonably confident that her plan was both brilliant *and* perfect.

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The opera house stood just a few blocks away from the Museum of Contemporary Art and Culture, nestled in Canterlot's swanky arts district. It fit in much better with the surrounding architecture than did the museum, as the opera house was an ornate building of white marble and thick columns carved in the classical style. A long flight of stairs led up to the building's archways, and while Pinkie bounded up three or four stairs at a time, Rarity climbed the stairs at a more leisurely and decorous pace.

Upon reaching the top, Rarity was greeted by a beaming Pinkie, who had been waiting for her with surprising patience, and together they strolled up to the opera house's ticket booth.

In front of the booth stood a young couple, an earth pony stallion and mare, speaking with the tickets seller. Rarity could overhear the stallion, who both looked and sounded barely older than a colt, as the poor boy pleaded with the bored opera house clerk. Apparently the evening's performance was sold out, and the young couple hadn't been able to procure tickets in advance.

Rarity stopped walking and held out a hoof in front of Pinkie Pie. The pink mare turned to her with a quizzical grin.

"There's something I should like to ask you, darling," explained Rarity with a smile of her own, a smile that was small and mysterious. "Now, you must tell me the truth. Do you really want to attend this opera?"

"Well, sure, I do!"

"Do you want to attend for any reason *other* than you'd think it would make me happy?"

Pinkie frowned at that, as though the very nature of the question confused her, but didn't otherwise respond.

Rarity gave a small nod. "I thought so. Wait right here, Pinkie. I'll be back in a moment."

Without waiting for a reply, the unicorn trotted off towards the tickets booth, where the young stallion continued to plead his case in vain. "Excuse me, darlings!" Rarity called out in a cheerful tone, as soon as she was within speaking range. "Please forgive my interruption, but I just so happened to overhear the tragic circumstances you're currently facing. I was wondering if you'd like the pair of tickets I have in my possession."

The earth pony stallion silently blinked at her.

Rarity put on her most reassuring smile. "Something has come up last minute, you understand, and I simply can't make tonight's performance. It would be such a terrible shame to have the tickets go to waste."

"Um... that would be..." The stallion began fumbling with his saddlebags. "I... I think I should have enough bits in my change purse..."

With a lilting chuckle, the unicorn magically floated the tickets over to the earth pony mare, who stared at Rarity with wide eyes before taking the tickets between her teeth. "Oh, please, please, put that away," Rarity urged. "I won't accept a single bit for the tickets."

The stallion's head snapped back around. "R-really? This isn't some kind of joke?"

"But of course not! To even think of doing such a thing as a jest... how uncouth." Rarity gently shook her head before she turned to walk away. "I do hope you both enjoy the opera. Ta-ta!"

She was halfway back to Pinkie Pie when she heard the mare in the couple exclaim, "These are *box* seats!" Rarity smiled with a deep sense of self-satisfaction. Brilliant and perfect, indeed.

Meanwhile, Pinkie was wide-eyed with amazement. "But... but I thought we were gonna go to the opera!"

"Change of plans, my dear," returned Rarity in a breezy tone. "I thought that, perhaps instead of an opera, you might wish to go out dancing with me?"

"Dancing?" Pinkie Pie repeated, as though she'd never heard the word before in her life. Still her eyes were as large as saucers.

"Yes, darling, dancing. I was thinking perhaps we could go to a discotheque." The unicorn repressed a shudder at the very thought of such an entertainment venue. "My assistant Snips is always going on about a certain club that isn't too terribly far from here. He's informed me that it's quite well known for its 'house' music, as the colts and fillies call it."

Pinkie's jaw dropped open.

Rarity felt like laughing at the rarely-seen sight of Pinkie Pie rendered speechless but, gentlemare that she was, she stifled the urge. Instead, she asked, with a slight smirk playing upon her lips, "You are still fond of that particular genre of dance music, are you not?"

It was at this point that Pinkie launched herself at the unicorn, tackling her in a rib-crushing hug, and Rarity found herself resisting less than she usually would. The truth was, she was far too pleased with her recent accomplishments to feel too bothered by the embrace. Brilliant and perfect, indeed.

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The discotheque was quite possibly the most horrid place Rarity had ever been in her entire life, and she'd been to both the Everfree Forest *and* Dodge Junction. It was

crowded, hot, and tiny, with the large speakers by the dance floor pumping out music so loud that Rarity could feel her teeth rattling in her skull. As if that wasn't bad enough, the walls were dingy, the floor was dingy, and every single patron in the club was dingy. Every so often the excitable deejay, a white unicorn with a bright blue mane and sunglasses, would shout something into her microphone and cause the crowds on the dance floor to yell and writhe wildly in reply.

If there was a purgatory in the afterlife, Rarity had not the slightest doubt that it must look and sound exactly like Canterlot's *Lucky Horseshoe* nightclub.

"Isn't this *great*, Rarity?" Pinkie screamed over the oppressive drumbeat of the music.

Rarity diplomatically chose to leave that particular question unanswered. "I believe I could use a drink," she replied, leaning in close so she could be heard. "Would you care for one, darling?"

"Oh, no, thanks! I'm strictly a sarsaparilla kinda girl." The earth pony frowned for a moment. "Besides, I'm pretty sure *I* should be buying *you* a drink. I'm the one who asked you on the date, y'know!"

"You asked me to the opera, certainly, but I am the one who asked you to go –" Suddenly, Rarity was mirroring Pinkie's frown. "*Date?* What do you mean by 'date,' darling?"

Pinkie was bouncing on her hooves, her entire body vibrating in time to the music, as though she might simply burst if she didn't dance along. She shot Rarity an amused look as she answered, "Y'know, a date! Dinner and a show... or dinner and dancing, now, I guess! You talk and stuff. Tell jokes, make googly eyes at each other. And at the very end, if things went okay, you get smooches!"

Rarity blinked.

"Ooooh. Guess this *wasn't* a date, then." Pinkie's facial expression went blank, for the briefest of moments, before her smile returned full force. "Well, that's okay! Hanging out and dancing as just-friends is a lot of fun, too."

There was a brief pause, in which the deejay yelled out something that sounded very much like "Vinyl rules, Tavi drools!", and then Rarity gave a brief, dignified nod. "Right. Yes. Well. I'm getting a drink. Perhaps a shot of something completely vile and dangerously flammable." She smiled, and the smile only wobbled a little. "I shan't be long, Pinkie. Be a dear, won't you, and try not to get into too much trouble while I'm gone?"

It was a significantly tipsier and entirely more cheerful unicorn who returned to Pinkie Pie's side some half-hour later. Rarity located Pinkie out on the dance floor, dancing away in the middle of the crowd, which was precisely where Rarity had expected to find her. The pink mare was throwing herself around in gleeful abandon, her eyes half-lidded and a rapturous expression on her face.

Rarity couldn't stop a grin from slipping across her face. As she approached, Pinkie's eyes suddenly opened fully, and Pinkie grinned back at her with a wonderful, uncomplicated joy shining in those blue depths. It was beautiful to behold. The music was still too loud, the dance floor was still too densely packed, and the air smelled vaguely of stale beer and rancid sweat – but with graceful ease, Rarity shrugged it all off, as a duck might shake off droplets of water from her back, as she began dancing with Pinkie Pie.

If she was going to make an utter fool of herself, there was no point in only going halfway. Lady Rarity never did *anything* halfway. Also, there was the booze. The booze helped, too.

She matched Pinkie in enthusiasm – if not in clumsiness – as she danced, and soon Rarity could feel the perspiration streaming down her neck. She ignored it, though, choosing instead to focus on how the pulsing bass seemed to send the blood pumping through her veins, filling her from hoof to horn with a manic sort of energy. She let her eyes slide shut, and she surrendered herself to the music and to the amazing sense of *freedom* that was flowing through her entire body like wine flowing from a jug.

She wondered if this was how Pinkie felt all the time... and she wondered if there was any way she could feel like this more often herself.

As the *Lucky Horseshoe* nightclub finally turned off its lights and shut up its doors, two giggly mares stumbled and tumbled out onto the streets of Canterlot. A still-drunken Rarity leaned heavily on Pinkie as they headed in the general direction of Rarity's studio and apartment. As they walked down the near-empty streets, the unicorn lifted her eyes upwards and studied the night sky spread out above them.

"Can't see the stars," she mumbled, half to herself, with a sad shake of her head.

Pinkie turned her head, and her breath fell warm and sweet against the other mare's face. "What was that, Rarity? I couldn't hear."

Rarity raised her voice a bit. "You can't see the stars. Not... not as you can in Ponyville. Too many lights in the city, you know."

"Really?" Pinkie Pie craned her neck a bit to gaze up at the sky herself. "Huh. Guess you're right. You *can't* see the stars as well as you can back home."

"It's a shame. A terrible shame. Don't you think so?"

Pinkie was silent a moment. "Yeah. But don't worry, Rarity. The next time you come to visit us in Ponyville, I bet Twilight will let you use her telescope if you ask her nicely."

Rarity nodded at that. Really, Twilight would let her use the telescope even if she *didn't* ask nicely. Twilight Sparkle would simply be thrilled that somepony was actually interested in astronomy. As she imagined the wide-eyed look of childlike excitement that would appear on Twilight's face in response to such a request, Rarity found herself missing Twilight and the others with a fierceness and suddenness that nearly took her breath away.

She huddled a little closer to Pinkie, who gave her a nuzzle in return, and felt grateful to have at least one friend with her right now, right here. Grateful, yes, grateful and happy and perhaps even... She lost the thought to the drunken haze permeating her brain. She gave it up with a little mental shrug, content to simply let Pinkie continue to lead them homeward, until a lingering question drifted to the forefront of her thoughts.

"Pinkie?"

"Yeppers?"

"How did you really know who those pegasi were? The ones at my party?"

Pinkie giggled. "I already told you, silly filly. I know every –"

"You know everyone in *Ponyville*," Rarity quickly interrupted. "But surely you can't know every single pony in a city as large as Canterlot."

It was at this point that Rarity stumbled, just a bit, and she had to take a moment to stabilize herself. It wouldn't do at all for her to fall down in the middle of the street in the dead of night, after all. That wouldn't be ladylike at all. Once she felt a bit more sure-footed, she turned around to see that Pinkie had stopped walking – ah, no wonder she'd stumbled – and was staring down at her hooves, an oddly anxious expression on her face.

"Pinkie?" Rarity's voice couldn't help but reflect the earth pony's anxiety. "Darling, are you all right?"

When Pinkie spoke at last, she still did not look up. "When you and Dashie first went away, I got worried. That we wouldn't be as good friends as we were when you lived in Ponyville. So I, um, I started trying to find out everything I could about your *new* friends. I figured, if I did that, it'd be almost like you never left."

"Our... our new friends?"

Pinkie nodded. "Uh-huh. I read all the Canterlot newspapers and learned all kinds of stuff about the noble ponies in Canterlot who go to all the fancy pants parties, because I knew you'd want to meet all of them. And with Rainbow Dash, I learned about all of the Wonderbolts who were gonna be her teammates." She lifted her gaze, and a small grin crept across her face. "Like, Spitfire and Soarin' totally got engaged to each other last month, but nopony's supposed to know about it yet. *Especially* not Dashie, so don't tell her I said that, okay?"

It was a lot to process, especially given Rarity's current state of inebriation. She took a few moments to ponder over everything Pinkie had just revealed before replying, in a soft voice, "They aren't my friends."

Pinkie tilted her head and frowned.

"Fancy Pants and Fleur de Lis are my friends. Hoity Toity... well, we have a good-natured rivalry, I suppose you could say." Rarity swallowed thickly. Her throat felt as though it was stuffed with cotton. "But all of the rest? They aren't my friends."

"Rarity... Rarity, I'm sorry. I didn't know that –"

"Why do *you* like me?"

The words surprised Rarity as much as they seemed to surprise Pinkie Pie. The two mares stood in the dark, narrow street, facing one another and standing as still as stone. The light from the nearby gas lamps flickered and danced in both their eyes.

The unicorn cleared her throat, as daintily as she could. "My apologies, Pinkie. I meant... why did you befriend me?" She frowned. "No, no, that's not quite it either. You make friends with *every* pony. What I mean to say is... ah..." She trailed off helplessly and, for some strange reason, had to fight off the sudden, inexplicable urge to burst into tears.

"Because you're always trying to make ponies happy." Pinkie's voice was quiet, thoughtful, as gentle as a warm spring breeze. "Because you look at the world and see all kinds of ways of making it really, really beautiful. But do you wanna know the biggest reason of all?"

Struggling to compose herself, Rarity simply nodded. She couldn't quite bring herself to respond verbally.

Pinkie grinned at her. "Mostly, I just like you 'cause you're *you*."

That ridiculous desire to cry was still there, still choking her throat, making her eyes water and sting. Rarity took a few steps forward and buried her face against Pinkie's neck, which smelled of things spicy and sweet. Pinkie didn't move, and Pinkie didn't speak. The earth pony just stood there and waited, as the unicorn rested against her.

"Pinkie, darling?" Rarity hesitated, just a moment, before deciding to plunge ahead. "Would you care to know why I like you, as well?"

The other pony giggled. "Is it because I throw the bestest parties in Equestria?"

"It's because you look at the world and think it's already beautiful just as it is."

She could feel Pinkie's breath hitch, could feel Pinkie turn her head, and when Rarity glanced up, their faces were mere centimeters apart and Pinkie was looking down at her with bright, shining eyes. Rarity smiled up at the earth pony as she felt a warmth spread throughout her body that had nothing to do with the copious amounts of alcohol she'd ingested earlier that evening.

"Rarity, I think you're –"

And for the third time since they'd left the club, Rarity interrupted Pinkie – this time not with words but with a kiss. She pressed her mouth to Pinkie's in a kiss that was soft, tender, almost chaste. She allowed herself to linger and simply enjoy the taste of Pinkie on her lips. When Rarity did pull back, flushed and slightly panting, Pinkie had a huge smile ready and waiting for her.

Rarity couldn't help but smile in return. "Would you like to know a secret, darling? This is the best date I've ever been on."

"I thought you said this wasn't a date."

"Well, I changed my mind. That *is* a lady's prerogative, after all." The unicorn retook her former position by Pinkie's side, leaning against the soft flank of her friend, using Pinkie as support. "Let's go home, shall we?"

Pinkie's voice was as light and bubbly as ever as she replied, "Okie dokie lokie!"

• • •

Somewhat surprisingly, Rarity woke up without a hint of a hangover. She lifted her sleep mask and, while stretching out her limbs, she counted her blessings. It seemed that she had quite a few, lately. They could do with some counting. Yawning, she turned to place her sleep mask on the nightstand and gasped in surprise.

On her little bedside table stood a vase filled with the most beautiful roses, each and every one a perfect snowy white. Next to the vase was a sheet of paper with writing on it that was immediately recognizable as Pinkie's sloppy, expressive cursive.

Curious, Rarity picked up the paper with her magic and began reading.

Hi, Rarity!

Good morning, sleepy head! I hope you slept okay! I wanted to send a telegram to Applejack to make sure that Rainbow Dash will be in town until at least tomorrow, because I want to throw her a surprise "Welcome Home, Rainbow Dash!" party when I head back to Ponyville tomorrow morning. Can you imagine how surprised she'll be? I bet she won't be expecting a surprise party even a little bit, since I'm not even in Ponyville right now!

You should totally come back with me on the train tomorrow so you can go to the party. I'm sure Dashie and the others would love to see you. And, um, it'd just be really nice to have you there, too.

Oh, but anyways, I'm running some errands to get ready for the party, and that's why I'm not here to say good morning when you wake up. So I brought some flowers to say good morning for me! I wasn't sure which ones you'd like, so I got white ones because they kind of look like stars and I know you miss seeing stars.

I'll be back in time for dinner! That's a Pinkie promise!

*Hugs and smiles,
Pinkie Pie*

p.s. Last night was the best date I've ever been on, too.

The unicorn very gently set the note back down next to the vase of flowers before leaning forward to breathe in the roses' sweet perfume. Then she leaned back again with a happy little sigh. "Very gallant, indeed," she murmured.

Humming to herself, Rarity made her morning toilet and then, once she was sufficiently primped and prettified, headed downstairs. Snips proved to be already present, seated at his desk in the reception area. He greeted her with his customary nervous grin. "Good morning, Lady Rarity!"

"And a very good morning to you, too, Snips!" Rarity practically skipped across the reception area towards her work studio. "I'll be working on my fabulous new dress design and need to maintain my concentration, so please don't allow any interruptions unless they're from anticipated visitors."

"Does that, uh, include Lady Pinkie?"

Rarity paused at the doorway to her work studio. Glancing over her shoulder, she flashed her fellow unicorn an amused grin. "Darling, Lady Pinkamena's interruptions are something that should *always* be anticipated. You'd do well to learn that."

And with that, Rarity bounded into her studio and shut the door behind her on one very baffled-looking assistant.

The rest of the morning passed quickly and quietly. The Sunrise Dress, as she'd christened it, was coming along rather well. The fabric draped beautifully on the

mannequin, and the colors complemented and contrasted with one another just as she'd hoped. With any luck, she'd be able to finish the dress just in time for Rainbow Dash's surprise party.

It was well past noon when she'd snipped the final thread. Taking a few steps back, she studied her work for several long moments. It didn't look precisely like a rainbow at dawn, but the *feeling* was there, the mood and *emotion*, and that's what truly mattered. She decided she was pleased with what she'd accomplished. It would make a lovely homecoming present for Rainbow.

Then, all her happy musings were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Rarity turned around to see Snips' face peeking through the doorway. "This had better be important," she complained, though there was no real heat behind the words and a small smile graced her face even as she grumbled.

But Snips didn't return her smile. Instead, his eyes were serious and intense as he responded, "Please trust me, Lady Rarity... you'll want to see this."

• • •

Despite her better instincts, she couldn't stop reading and rereading the headlines of all the nasty little tabloids and newspapers that laid spread out across her work table. "Lady Rarity Takes a Lover." "The Fashionista and the Rock Farmer." "Beauty and the Beast"...that one, *that* one was the worst, sending Rarity's heart rate spiking as her shoulders shook with barely-repressed anger...

It went on and on and on. There were photographs, too – goodness knew where or from whom they came, but there were photographs. She and Pinkie dancing at that awful discotheque. She and Pinkie standing in that dark alley, kissing. Dark and grainy photos, but clear enough that she could tell that they were genuine.

She took a few deep breaths and fought down the urge to scream.

"Lady Rarity?"

She glanced over to Snips, who was staring at her with a concerned look on his face. "How long?" she demanded in a clipped tone. "How long have these papers been circulating?"

Trembling, the young stallion took a step back. "I – I – I don't know! I just happened to pass by a news stand while I was on my lunch break, and..."

Rarity sighed. "It's all right, Snips. I... I apologize. This isn't your fault at all." She gave her assistant a tiny, tired smile. "Thank you for bringing all of this to my attention. I do appreciate it, darling."

An uncomfortable silence settled between the two unicorns. Rarity glared down at the papers on her desk, racking her brains in an attempt to figure out how this had happened, until the silence was broken by her assistant's tentative voice: "So, uh, is it *true* that you and Lady Pinkie are –"

"If a certain young pony values having continued employment, he will think very carefully about what he is about to say next."

Snips coughed loudly. "Right! Right. Well, um, on the bright side, you know what Photo Finish always says. Any publicity is good publicity!"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Photo Finish is a few apples short of a bushel, as a dear friend of mine might put it. She *would* say that." She closed her eyes and began massaging her temples with a hoof. She could feel a headache coming on. "I have to prepare a counter-attack. Obviously, this cannot go unanswered. Snips, how does my schedule look for the rest of today?"

There were some shuffling noises, as Snips presumably rummaged through his desk to find the master calendar. "Here we go! Schedule looks pretty clear for the rest of the day, Lady Rarity. Oh, except for a garden party at the Duchess of Hoofington's mansion, but that isn't until late afternoon."

"No, no," the fashion designer murmured in reply, a touch distractedly. "I actually RSVPed that I wouldn't be attending, after the fiasco at the museum with... Pinkie... Pie..." Rarity's eyes popped open, and her entire facial expression hardened into a scowl. Under her breath, she hissed, "The Duchess of Hoofington!"

"Uh, Lady Rarity?"

The Duchess of Hoofington. Of course. Of *course*. The Duchess of Hoofington, who had been so disdainful of Pinkie Pie. The Duchess of Hoofington, who she had insulted through her intemperance back at the museum. The Duchess of Hoofington, who was, in every way imaginable, a horrible and repugnant pony.

The Duchess of Hoofington, whose uncle was the editor-in-chief of *The Canterlot Courier*.

There was no proof, of course, and there never would be. But Rarity knew as surely as she knew she was the best-dressed mare in Canterlot that the Duchess of Hoofington was the one behind all of this.

"Snips," Rarity began, in a voice that was suddenly as calm as a lake on a windless day. "My dear Snips, there has been a change of plans. I will in fact be attending that garden party."

"But you just said –"

"Yes, darling, I am aware of what I just said." She reached over and gave his hoof a comforting pat. "I must go make preparations. I trust you'll be able to mind the shop while I'm away?"

Snips nodded, his eyes wide and confused.

"Excellent! Then, I'm off, darling. Please do let Lady Pinkamena know where I've gone once she returns and that I ought to be back in time for us to dine together this evening."

With that settled, Rarity turned on her heels and marched back upstairs to find an outfit suitably fabulous enough for a high-society garden party. She began rapidly flipping through the garment hangers in her closet as soon as she stepped into her bedroom. She had to act quickly, after all, as there wasn't any time to spare. Because if she was going to crash a party, she'd need some help doing so.

Fortunately for her, she happened to be very good friends with one of the most well-connected and resourceful stallions in the entire city, if not in all of Equestria.

As she gracefully strolled down the sun-dappled avenues of Canterlot, Rarity turned her head to beam at the finely-attired stallion walking beside her. "It was so kind of Fleur de Lis to allow me to take her place as your date for the afternoon. Please do give her my thanks."

"Of course, my dear Rarity!" Fancy Pants chuckled in reply. "Fleur de Lis was all too happy to oblige once she found out why you wanted to attend today's little get-together. She's quite upset about all of the headlines, you know." He leaned towards Rarity and, with a sly wink, added, "Just between the two of us, Fleur is rather infatuated with Lady Pinkamena – I do believe she would have flirted quite shamelessly with the mare if your interest in her hadn't been so apparent."

Rarity couldn't quite decide on an appropriate response to that – surprise and bemusement ranked fairly high on the list of emotions she was suddenly feeling – and ended up spluttering, in a semi-coherent fashion, "But I thought she... and that you..."

The stallion waved a hoof in the air. "Oh, no, no, no. We dated for the briefest moment, but that was ages ago. We're just good friends now."

"Ah. I see," she replied absently, as she wrestled with the sudden tightness in her chest, the sick feeling in her stomach, the burst of adrenaline flooding her veins – all from finding out Fleur de Lis had eyes for *her* mare. Well, not Rarity's mare, actually. Not really, anyway... surely one date wasn't enough to establish much of anything... and yet...

And yet.

Jealousy, she realized with a start. She was feeling *jealousy*. It was not an emotion to which a pony as dazzling and admirable as she was accustomed to feeling. In fact, the last time she'd felt any jealousy even approaching the kind she felt now was years ago, back when Fluttershy temporarily became the darling of the modeling world.

She decided she didn't much care for jealousy. Jealousy, as a concept and as an emotion, did not have much to recommend it. Rarity resolved to herself that she would try to feel jealousy as little as possible in the future.

"Rarity?"

She blinked at the sound of her name and, as her attention snapped back into focus, found that she was standing directly in front of the large, ostentatious mansion that

belonged to the Duchess of Hoofington. A well-manicured lawn laid spread out before the house, with a towering water fountain directly in the center. She had no idea exactly how long they'd been standing here.

Turning towards the stallion beside her, she said in an apologetic tone, "I'm terribly sorry, Fancy Pants. I was... somewhat lost in thought."

He gave her a warm smile. "No apologies are necessary, my dear. Are you ready to enter?"

Rarity took the opportunity to give herself one last look-over. She'd chosen a dress that was something between a sundress and a proper gown, pale yellow in color and simple in details. Casual but elegant, the dress was, perfectly suited to an outdoor event taking place on a crisp autumn afternoon. Rarity felt her confidence bolstered as she reflected on how fabulous she looked – a well-chosen ensemble always did that for her.

She'd tried once, years and years ago, to share this little secret with her friends, but they hadn't seemed to comprehend the restorative powers of an appropriately glamorous outfit. Rainbow Dash had come closest to understanding, though her tastes ran more towards what the pegasus deemed "cool" and "radical" and usually involved body armor, while Applejack had openly scoffed at the very idea that the clothes could make the mare. "Like putting lipstick on a pig," she'd called it. But then, of course, that blasted farmer *would* say such a thing.

Pinkie had never really given an opinion, as she'd been busy at the time with pouring punch for Fluttershy. Rarity wondered what answer Pinkie might give, if she were to ask for the pink earth pony's opinion in the present day, and she decided to ask Pinkie Pie about it at the next available opportunity. But all that could wait until later, because right now, she had a garden party that desperately required her attendance.

Looking back up at Fancy Pants, Rarity finally returned the stallion's smile. "Yes, darling, I believe I'm quite ready. Let's do go in – after all, it would be terribly rude to keep the duchess waiting."

• • •

Rarity stood by the long table of refreshments that was filled with countless platters of tiny little sandwiches and took occasional, distracted sips from her glass of punch. She was used to being the center of attention at just about any and every affair, but right now, all of the ponies milling and chatting in the garden were very studiously avoiding her. It

wasn't a proper, thorough snubbing – there were no sideways glares or upturned noses – but it made things awkward nonetheless.

She'd anticipated this, of course. The Duchess of Hoofington would be displeased to see her, and all her little minions would naturally take up the duchess' side of things. On the other hoof, none of them would dare be openly nasty to the very good friend of a pony such as Fancy Pants. That left very few options available, and almost all of those gathered chose to simply pretend that they didn't see Rarity standing there.

Again, all very predictable, very foreseeable. But that didn't mean it wasn't maddening all the same.

Just then, coming from seemingly nowhere, Fancy Pants appeared by her side, wearing a small, gentle smile. "Are you certain you're doing all right?" he asked quietly, his tone solicitous.

"Oh, yes, quite." Rarity forced out a light little laugh. "Please don't feel as though you must hang around the refreshments table simply to keep me company."

"Ah, but I rather enjoy your company, my dear Rarity! Besides, a true gentlepony never abandons his companion for the evening."

Rarity reached out and laid her hoof along his shoulder. "I appreciate the sentiment – I appreciate it very much, I assure you – but it simply wouldn't be right to drag your name through the mud along with my own. I won't do that to you, Fancy Pants."

The stallion turned to thoughtfully gaze out at the expanse of lawn before them. The gardens at the Hoofington manor really were lovely and lush – even Rarity had to admit that. After a moment, he replied, "I have been, and always shall be, your friend. Please remember that."

"And the same is true for I, as well."

Fancy Pants gave a brief nod. "Well, then! I suppose I'll absent myself and perhaps ask Lady Seabreeze about her petunias. She does love talking about those petunias." He glanced over to the mare beside him. "Proceed with caution, Rarity... and, as the saying goes, mind that you don't become what you hate."

"I'll do my best, darling."

With that settled, Fancy Pants trotted off and melted back into the crowds of ponies. Rarity sighed once he'd gone, and she took another sip of punch. She suddenly wished she could have some sarsaparilla instead. Sarsaparilla was terribly inelegant and completely ill-suited for a soiree such as this, of course, but the drink wasn't without its merits. Sarsaparilla tasted like parties at Sugar Cube Corner and late nights at Twilight's library and Iron Pony competitions out at Sweet Apple Acres. Sarsaparilla tasted like a hundred different memories, most of them happy and all of them filled with the faces of five ponies who were the very best friends any mare could hope to have.

But mostly? Mostly, sarsaparilla tasted like *home*.

"Lady Rarity! It is so good of you to come to my little get-together!"

Rarity's head snapped around, and it took all of her willpower not to gasp aloud. The Duchess of Hoofington herself was heading directly towards her, a thin, predatory smile stretched across her face. Immediately, all conversations in the garden went dead, and silence hung in the air like an ominous thundercloud.

Rarity took a deep breath and returned the duchess' smile. "Thank you for having me, Duchess."

"Of course, of course. It wouldn't be a party, after all, without Canterlot's favorite fashion designer." The duchess' eyes were dark, glittering, dangerous. "Though I must admit I was a bit surprised to see that you came with Mr. Fancy Pants. He's a charming stallion, to be sure, but I'd thought your attentions were claimed by another?"

"Indeed, they are," returned Rarity, while keeping her smile perfectly in place. "Unfortunately, Lady Pinkamena is otherwise engaged for the afternoon and was unable to accompany me."

At hearing Pinkie's name, the duchess' face twisted, and the other unicorn said in a tone just shy of a snarl, "Are you actually in *love* with that mare?"

The question was a sneer, a slur, a challenge. Rarity could instantly feel every eye in the vicinity directly upon her, the other ponies' gazes intense, waiting. A few scandalized titters spread through the crowd. Instinctively, she knew she had a very important decision she had to make, right now and right here, and that making the wrong decision would cost her dearly.

The truth of the matter was that Rarity wasn't in love with Pinkie. She loved her dearly as a friend, as family, to be sure. And certainly things had changed between the two of them

since Pinkie had first set hoof in Canterlot. But it was still too new and too soon to call it romantic love.

Be that as it may, though Rarity knew she wasn't in love with Pinkie Pie, she also knew that someday she *could* be. Perhaps even would be. At any rate, she knew that the idea of falling in love with Pinkie Pie, as strange as it had first seemed, was an idea that intrigued her greatly.

So it was that Rarity lifted her chin ever so slightly and replied in a quiet, firm voice, "I am not sure I understand how that is any of your concern. However, what if I were in love with her? What of it?"

Immediately the snickering from the other ponies faded away.

But the Duchess of Hoofington only seemed to grow more enraged. "What *of* it? Do you really pretend not to know? That pony is utterly ridiculous! The laughingstock of all of Canterlot!"

Rarity set her jaw. "*That pony* is a very dear friend of mine, and I will thank you to not speak of her in such a way."

"Surely you see it, too," the duchess continued, as if Rarity hadn't said anything at all. "Surely even being love struck hasn't blinded you to the truth. She has the manners of a mule and the intelligence of a simpleton. It couldn't be more obvious that she was born and raised on a rock farm."

"Lady Pinka –" Rarity stopped herself and reconsidered. "Pinkie is a generous and kind-hearted mare, with nothing but love and tolerance for every pony she meets, and with no greater desire than to bring a smile to those without laughter in their hearts." She allowed the phrase "*such as you*" to remain implied, to hang in the air silently and accusingly.

"She is a –"

But Rarity wasn't finished. Far from it. "Did you know that Pinkie single-hoofedly removed an entire parasprite infestation from the town of Ponyville? Not only that, but she helped save the world not once but twice from the forces of chaos and darkness. In addition, she has composed more music than any other pony of my acquaintance, including an entire concerto for accordion and slide whistle." Rarity's voice had grown louder and louder during this entire speech, but it dropped to little more than a whisper as she finished. "But most importantly, my dear Duchess? Pinkamena Diane Pie is ten *times* the pony that you ever have been or ever will be."

The Duchess of Hoofington just stood there, speechless, her jaw hanging open.

And with that, Rarity carefully set down her punch glass, whirled on her heels, and began walking away with her head held high and proud. She ignored the looks and whispers that followed in her wake, keeping her eyes trained on the gate to the garden. She could feel her heart beat wildly in her chest with every step she took. Then, at last she reached the edge of the lawn and passed through the gate, out of the Duchess of Hoofington's mansion and into the sweet freedom of the street beyond.

But the unicorn's relief didn't last long. She hadn't taken more than a dozen steps before she was met by an all-too-familiar pair of large blue eyes, which shimmered like ocean waves as a complex mixture of emotions roiled beneath the deceptively calm surface.

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"You... you heard?"

Pinkie Pie simply nodded.

Rarity swallowed. She could still feel her heart pounding away. "You *heard*."

"Yeah," the earth pony whispered. "You... you really shouldn't have yelled at her like that, Rarity."

"I wasn't yelling."

"You kinda were, by the end. And the things you said were pretty mean."

Rarity had to look away from those terrible blue eyes. "She has... she's done unforgivable things, Pinkie. To you. To both of us. You might not have seen today's newspapers but –"

"Um, I did, actually. Snips showed me the papers after I asked where you went."

"Then surely you must understand."

Pinkie let out a snuffle, and Rarity glanced back over in confusion.

Shaking her head, Pinkie sadly replied, "It's *my* fault, Rarity. All of this. It's my fault."

That gave the unicorn pause. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting from this conversation, but this certainly wasn't it. "Don't be silly, darling. You've done absolutely nothing wrong here."

"But I did!" Pinkie's eyes were huge, pleading. "Do you know why the Duchess of Hoofington gave you my business card? It's because she wanted me to... to see if I could get you to agree to go on a date with her. 'Cause me and you have been friends for so long, y'know?"

Rarity could only gape in astonishment. *Definitely* not what she'd been expecting.

Pinkie flinched but bravely pushed onward. "And I didn't make any promises that I would – I would never break a Pinkie promise, you know I wouldn't – but I kinda sorta said I'd see if I could help. But then you started taking me places, and it felt really nice, and I was so happy just being with you. And I already liked you lots as a friend so it wasn't hard to start liking you as *more* than a friend..."

"Pinkie..."

The pink mare sniffled again and looked as miserable as Rarity imagined she must have looked as a little filly out on the Pie family's barren rock farm. "And now she's mad at me, and I ruined your chance to go out with a duchess, which isn't as good as a prince but is still pretty good, so *you're* gonna be mad at me too, and everything's all my fault!"

It was... a lot to take in. Perhaps too much to take in. So instead of trying to process it all, Rarity chose to ignore the larger picture for the time being and focus on one single element: Pinkie was crying. Pinkie was crying, and that was simply an unacceptable state of affairs.

The unicorn stepped forward and gave the other mare a nuzzle, pressing their cheeks together and feeling the warmth of Pinkie's tears against her face. "Shhh," Rarity whispered, softly, tenderly. "It's all right, darling. Nothing is ruined. I promise you."

"But... but..."

"I do wish you'd informed me that you were in town with, ah, ulterior motives, shall we say? But what's done is done." She drew back a bit so that she could look into Pinkie's eyes. "And even had I known of the Duchess of Hoofington's intentions... I would have told her no. I would have chosen you."

Pinkie smiled. It was small and trembling, utterly unlike her usual broad, beaming grins, but it was a smile.

"I have not the slightest regret, Pinkie, and I hope you don't have any regrets either – at least, not any regrets regarding what happened last night. In fact, I was hoping that you would –"

Whatever else Rarity might have been about to say was lost forever, as Pinkie chose that moment to lunge forward and kiss the unicorn hard on the mouth. The kiss was fierce, passionate, devouring. Overwhelming to all thoughts and senses. When the pink pony finally pulled back, Rarity could only gasp desperately for air and wonder if this was what it felt like to get hit by a runaway train.

"We should go eat!" chirped Pinkie, back to her normal state of cheeriness. "I found a great diner earlier today that has the bestest hay burgers and fries. You wanna go?"

Without waiting for a reply, the earth pony began hopping down the street, presumably in the direction of the aforementioned restaurant. Rarity felt as though she had no choice but to stumble along after Pinkie in a pleasantly befuddled daze. Once she caught up the bouncy mare, Pinkie Pie glanced over to her with laughing eyes.

"And after we eat," Pinkie rambled on happily, as though there had never been a break in the conversation, "we should totally plan a 'We're Sorry For Making You Sad, Duchess of Hoofington!' party for the duchess."

Rarity opened her mouth to ask if Pinkie was serious about that, but then she thought better of it. Of *course* Pinkie was serious. Pinkie was always deadly serious when it came to the subject of parties. With a sigh, Rarity replied, "I am not at all certain that the duchess would appreciate such a party."

Pinkie frowned a bit. "You were pretty mean to the duchess, Rarity. I kinda think you owe her at *least* one party. Maybe just a little one? With just a few itty, bitty streamers?"

"I will... consider it." Rarity resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "That's all I can promise."

Pinkie Pie appeared to think this over carefully, before finally giving a brisk nod. "Okie dokie lokie! Good enough for me!"

Rarity smiled. She was glad that was settled, and she was even gladder that she and Pinkie seemed to still be on good terms with one another and that their romance remained on track – well, as on track as any romance involving Pinkie Pie reasonably could be. It

didn't hurt that she'd be spending another evening in the bubbly pony's company, either. In fact, she was quite looking forward to going out with Pinkie to the –

"Darling, wait! You're taking us to a *diner*?"

Rarity rued the day she had ever *heard* the word "diner."

With every jolt and jostle of the train, the unicorn could feel her stomach give a foreboding lurch. The previous evening's fries and hay burger sat in her belly as heavy as rocks. Of course, in addition to all that, there was the deplorable state of filth in which the entire restaurant had existed. She shuddered to even think of it.

Well, she would have shuddered, except that doing so would have woken up Snips, whose head lolled against Rarity's shoulder while the young stallion snored away like a lumberjack. She suppressed a sigh. He'd been so excited at the prospect of a visit to Ponyville that Rarity hadn't had the heart to leave him behind, but right now, she was questioning the wisdom of that decision.

She could only hope Pinkie would be back soon from her foray to the dining car.

To while away the time – and to take her mind off her stomach ache – Rarity used her magic to pull out a quill and sheet of paper from the carry-on bag that rested at her feet. She laid the paper on the empty wooden seat in front of her and thoughtfully bit her lip.

My dearest Duchess, she began, her quill strokes short and tentative. Hmm. Would that be too forward or familiar? Or even be regarded as sarcastic? One had to take extra care with the written word, after all, as tone could be so hard to infer. Perhaps she'd best try again. She pulled out a fresh sheet of paper.

Dear Duchess,

I must offer you my deepest apologies for the disgraceful behavior I exhibited at your most recent social event. It was unacceptable under any circumstances, as well as an insult to your considerable hospitality, and I have felt terribly about it ever since...

Rarity paused. For just a second she pondered over whether she should admit to what Pinkie had told her... but then she remembered a charmless prince at a joyless gala, whose memory was quickly followed by one of her plummeting through the air while staring deeply into the wide, trusting eyes of a young dragon. And, just like that, she knew that she shouldn't breathe a word of what Pinkie had confessed. If she could offer nothing else to the duchess, she could at least do what she could to preserve the poor mare's sense of dignity.

"Whatcha doing?"

With just a tiny jump, Rarity glanced up from her letter to find that Pinkie had returned and now sat in the seat beside her. The earth pony grinned widely and carried a pile of cookies, cuddled against her chest as one might hold a foal.

"Ah, hello there, Pinkie," the unicorn replied, careful to keep her voice low so as to not wake her assistant. "I'm just penning a bit of an apology note to the Duchess of Hoofington. How was the dining car?"

Pinkie Pie eyed the sheet of paper with a furrowed brow. "Oh, the dining car was good. Not enough kumquats, but that's a pretty common problem. Trains, y'know? So I got a bunch of cookies instead." She cocked her head. "Are you gonna invite the duchess to our party?"

"Darling, I must remind you that I still have yet to agree to even hold a party."

"But Rarity! How're we gonna make her smile if we don't have a party?"

Rarity shushed the other mare, while gesturing towards the still-sleeping Snips, before she replied. "Firstly, I'm not sure either of us are really in the best position to be bringing a smile to the duchess' face, all things considered. And secondly, while parties are absolutely delightful, they can't solve *everything*, you know."

Pinkie squinted at her and mouthed the words "Can't solve everything?" with a deeply confused expression on her face.

With an indulgent sigh, Rarity leaned over and placed a kiss on the other mare's cheek. "Never mind, my dear. Forget I said anything."

"Done, and done!"

Pinkie grinned widely, and almost involuntarily Rarity smiled in return.

"You're beautiful." The words were out of Rarity's mouth before she'd even realized she'd been thinking them. "You're one of the most beautiful ponies I've ever met. Do you realize that?"

And it was then that Rarity came face to face with something she'd never thought she would see – a completely speechless Pinkie Pie. She could swear the earth pony was even blushing, just a tiny bit.

The unicorn's smile turned tender. "I first noticed it the night of the after-party, but I don't think it was until just yesterday that I really saw. That I really, truly understood." She leaned back slightly and gave Pinkie an appraising look. "There are so many different kinds of beauty, I am finding – and I feel as though I've learned more about them with you over the last few days than I have in the last several years."

"Oh, *Rarity*..."

"I hope to learn much more, too. If you would be amenable to teaching me, darling."

"I think..." Flustered, Pinkie giggled a bit. Her eyes shone with a hint of wetness. "I think that sounds super. Really, really super."

Then, before either of them could say anything further, a voice shouted out, "Next stop, Ponyville! Ponyville, next stop!"

"Whazzat?" Snips bolted upright with a snort. "Wasn't sleeping in class, Miss Cheerilee! Honest!"

The two mares glanced at the stallion then back to one another before both burst into giggles. The moment from earlier was gone, but Rarity found she didn't mind so terribly much. There would be other moments, other opportunities. Of that she felt quite sure.

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As soon as she stepped off the train, Rarity was tackled to the train platform by a blur of yellow fur and feathers. After taking a moment to gather her wits, she smiled gently and returned Fluttershy's enthusiastic hug. One never received hugs like this in Canterlot, after all. It was best to take advantage of it while she could.

Meanwhile, Twilight Sparkle's eyes went wide as Pinkie bounded off the train next. "So it's *true* that you two –"

"That you decided to come to Rainbow's surprise party," Fluttershy interjected, shooting an indecipherable look in Twilight's direction.

"Oh! Right!" Twilight began nodding energetically. "Yes! The surprise party. *That*. That is totally what I was referring to, yes."

Rarity gave her two friends a penetrating stare. "Darlings, is everything all right? You're both acting stranger than usual, no offense."

While Fluttershy disentangled herself enough from Rarity to stand back up, the white unicorn studied her two friends. They looked much the same as they had the last time she'd visited town. Twilight had the exact same mane cut she'd had from the very first day she'd set hoof in Ponyville, which surprised Rarity not in the least, and the only real difference in her appearance from those bygone days was the pair of reading glasses that hung from a cord around her neck.

Fluttershy, for her part, had her long mane tied back in a loose, casual braid. Rarity suspected that the braid was due to equal parts developed confidence – negating the prior need to hide behind a lengthy, flowing mane – and a desire to keep the hair from her face as she went about her daily chores around the cottage.

Their little group was still incomplete, however. She wondered as to how Applejack and Rainbow Dash were looking these days and, as if she'd spoken that thought aloud, Pinkie piped up, "Hey, where are Dashie and Applejack?"

"They're both at Sweet Apple Acres right now." Fluttershy smiled and blushed a bit. "Applejack said she'd try to keep Rainbow Dash, um, occupied while we set up the surprise party."

Pinkie's eyes lit up. "Oh! So Dashie doesn't even know that we're in *Ponyville*? Then it'll be an extra super duper surprise!"

Rarity tilted her head as she realized someone else was missing, too. "And where is dear little Spikey-Wikey?"

"Well, first of all, he's not so little," replied Twilight, with an amused chuckle. "He's grown another two or three inches since you last saw him. And he stayed back at the library. I asked if he wanted to come to the station with Fluttershy and me, but..." She paused to sigh. "But he told me that he was, and I quote, 'in mourning.' Which is more than a little melodramatic, if you ask me."

"Oh, dear. Is he quite all right?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "He'll be just fine. *Trust* me."

"If you're certain, Twilight... well, in that case, we'd best make the most of the time available, then, and get Pinkie's party set up while Rainbow is otherwise engaged." Rarity glanced over her shoulder and added, in a slightly imperious tone, "Snips! Aren't you coming, darling?"

The other three ponies followed Rarity's gaze, towards the open door on the train car, just as the unicorn stallion came stumbling out onto the platform. His steps were shaky and uncertain, as he was weighed down under a veritable mountain of luggage.

Twilight raised an eyebrow at Rarity, as the little quintet began walking away from the train tracks. "And just how long were you planning to stay in town?"

"Oh, just for the weekend. But you never know what outfit you might need or when. Best to be prepared, I always say."

Pinkie nodded in agreement and replied, very seriously, "That's why I always pack extra balloons and back-up supply of streamers whenever I go on a trip. Never know when you're gonna encounter a party emergency!"

Twilight Sparkle blinked. "I... see? I think?"

As Twilight seemed to puzzle over the concept of a party emergency, Fluttershy quietly inquired, "Will you be staying at the cottage again, Rarity? I'm always happy to have you, you know."

"Oh!" Rarity hadn't given two thoughts as to her lodging arrangements, actually. The events of the last few days had taken up most of her attention. "That's very kind of you, Fluttershy, but... well, you see..."

Pinkie quickly cut in. "But I kinda already asked Rarity to stay at Sugarcube Corner! 'Cause, um, I was the one to invite her to Ponyville and all."

Rarity looked over towards her pegasus friend with a worried expression. "Is that all right, darling? I know I've usually stayed with you ever since I sold the old boutique, and I'd hate to think I'll offend you if I stay elsewhere."

"Oh, no, that's fine." Fluttershy smiled softly, and her eyes sparkled with some emotion that Rarity couldn't quite place. "Don't worry, Rarity. I understand."

The unicorn was tempted to ask just what it was that Fluttershy understood, but a side conversation that had started up between Twilight and Snips, regarding how well the young stallion had been adjusting to life in Canterlot, quickly distracted Rarity from that line of thought. Soon she was joining in on the conversation, praising Snips' skills as an assistant and alternately giggling and rolling her eyes at Pinkie's humorous little interjections, as they cheerfully ambled away from the train station.

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"This... is totally *awesome!*"

Rainbow Dash stood in the center of Sugarcube Corner, which had been decorated to within an inch of its life with streamers every color under the sun, and wore as broad a grin as Rarity could remember ever seeing on her friend's face. With a little squeal of joy, Pinkie Pie bounded forward and threw herself at Rainbow, hugging the pegasus tightly.

"Were you surprised, Dashie? Oh, I hope so! 'Cause you sure look surprised!"

"Yeah, definitely!" Dash chuckled before turning to Rarity. "Were you in on this, too?"

Rarity smiled. "No, I'm afraid not. I was mostly just along for the ride, you might say." She used her magic to pick up a package from a nearby table and levitate it over to the pegasus. "*This*, however, is indeed my doing."

Rainbow Dash's eyes lit up. "I get presents, too? Ha! Best surprise party ever!"

Wiggling herself free from Pinkie's embrace, Rainbow quickly took the package between her hooves and began tearing off the wrapping paper with her teeth. Rarity studied her athletic friend as she did so. Rainbow Dash's hair was considerably shorter than it had been the last time they'd seen one another – it rather resembled that one Wonderbolt's mane style, now that Rarity thought about it. What was that pony's name? Sunfire? Spitfire?

"Look, guys, it's a dress!" said Dash, holding up the garment and grinning a lopsided grin. "Never woulda guessed!"

Applejack let out a little snort of amusement. She was standing right beside Rainbow and looked exactly as she'd always looked – indeed, sometimes Rarity suspected that Applejack had been *born* with that beaten-up old Stetson atop her head.

Putting on a pout, the unicorn pretended to be offended. "Now, now, Rainbow. As a Wonderbolt, you surely attend many formal events and need to look your best, do you not?"

"Hey, you know I was just kiddin', right? Seriously, Rarity, it's a really awesome dress. Thanks bunches!"

"Think nothing of it, darling. I'm simply happy that you're happy."

From her position over by the refreshments table, Fluttershy spoke up. "Why don't you go try it on, Rainbow? Um, if you want to, that is."

"Yes, yes, please do!" Rarity nodded eagerly. "I've only seen how it looks on the mannequin thus far, but I think your beautiful coat coloring will look simply stunning against the dress' fabric."

The boastful pegasus didn't need much encouragement, and soon she was trotting happily upstairs to use Pinkie's loft apartment to change. As soon as Rainbow Dash had left, Applejack sauntered up to Rarity with a broad grin. "So, Rare! If'n all them Canterlot papers can be believed, then you've gone and –"

"Gone and made quite a name for yourself in the fashion world!" shouted Twilight, with a nervous giggle. She glanced over to the farm pony. "Isn't that right, *Applejack?*"

Applejack frowned in evident confusion. "Uh, I reckon so?"

Something wasn't right here. As unease curled up in her stomach, Rarity cut her eyes over to Pinkie Pie and raised a questioning eyebrow. But Pinkie just smiled at her and shrugged.

Rarity sighed as she turned back towards the others. "I trust that eventually all of you will explain just what is going on here?"

"Oh, yes," Fluttershy replied in a reassuring tone, nodding.

"Explain?" blurted out Twilight, at the exact same time. "What's there to explain?"

If Rarity's eyebrow went any higher, it would be on the opposite side of her head. Abruptly, she whirled around so that she was face to face with Applejack, and she narrowed her eyes. "Applejack. You are the Element of Honesty. I know you'd never stoop so low as to *lie* to such an old and beloved friend as I am, now would you, darling?"

Applejack's eyes went wide in panic. "I... I don't right know what yer talkin' about, Rare..."

There was a loud clop of hooves from above, and all of the ponies on the first floor of the bakery glanced up in time to see Rainbow Dash begin descending the stairs. She was a vision of gloriousness and grace in the dress, nigh utter perfection, as the chiffon swirled fetchingly around Rainbow's legs with her every movement. Rarity felt a burst of pride and satisfaction as she saw how her dress enhanced the pegasus' natural beauty.

Once she'd reached the main floor, Rainbow Dash grinned at all of her friends. "So what'd I miss? Did Pinkie and Rarity admit they're fillyfriends yet?"

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As the party wore on, they separated into smaller groups. By the bakery's front windows sat Fluttershy with Twilight Sparkle. Fluttershy was speaking quietly but with great animation about some new experiment in horticulture, and Twilight was nodding at appropriate intervals. Snips had long ago disappeared somewhere or other with young Miss Twist. Rarity suspected that they were on a romantic moonlit stroll. At least, she *hoped* they were. Snips was a lovely and lovable stallion, for all his failings as an assistant, and he deserved a bit of happiness.

Meanwhile, Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash were ten cookies into an eating contest, and Rarity was beginning to feel ill just looking at the two of them. She'd never fully understood how those two ponies could eat as much food as they did and never gain an ounce. Certainly, Rainbow had on her side the fact that she was a pegasus, and pegasus ponies were nearly hummingbirds in their metabolisms, and Pinkie never rested for a single moment while awake. Still, though.

Every so often, Pinkie would glance over and give Rarity a flirtatious wink, which did help quell the unicorn's disgust at the proceedings – and also, much to her chagrin, caused her to blush. And for her own part, Dash would occasionally look up and grin at Applejack, who stood watching beside Rarity. The earth pony would simply shake her head, while grinning in return.

As she sipped cider from a mug, Applejack lazily asked, "Kinda gross, ain't it? The whole eating contest business."

Rarity nodded her agreement. "Indeed. Quite so."

"Rainbow's been stayin' at the farm, y'know. Just over the last few days, that dang pegasus has nearly eaten us out o' house and home."

"I can't say as I'm surprised." Rarity smiled. "I've noticed an increase in my food expenses during the time that Pinkie has been in Canterlot, as well."

Applejack chuckled heartily at that, before the two of them back fell into silence. It wasn't like those silences at Canterlot social functions, where the silence was wielded as a weapon and cut to the bone. No, this was an entirely different sort of silence – easy, gentle, friendly. Not unlike Applejack herself, really. Rarity decided that she liked it.

"Hey, Rare?" The tentative note in Applejack's voice caused the unicorn to glance over, and she saw that the farm pony was shuffling her hooves a bit. "I just wanted to let ya know... we were all real happy when we heard about you and Pinkie. Confused as the dickens, mind ya, but happy. We've been worried 'bout ya."

Rarity blinked in surprise. "Worried? Whatever for?"

Applejack gave a slight shrug. "Well, you've been surrounded by all them fancy city ponies for so long, and we weren't real sure whether they appreciated ya the way we do. Whether they'd look after ya, y'know? But we knew Pinkie wouldn't let nothin' happen to ya – well, nothin' that she didn't cause herself."

Rarity opened her mouth to protest the ridiculous idea that she needed *looking after*, but then she thought better of it. Sneaking a glance over towards Pinkie, who was laughing uproariously at something Rainbow Dash had just said or done, she replied, "I fended for myself fairly well, I should like to think. But I must admit that it's been... a pleasant change of pace, having someone there to catch me when I take a fall." She paused. "And it's good to be back in Ponyville."

"And it's good to have ya home, sugar cube." Applejack grinned, and there was a gleam in her eyes. "Even if ya are as much of a persnickety fuss-budget as ever."

"I must say, my dear Applejack, that I find you just as stubborn and unconcerned with propriety as the day we met, as well." She smiled warmly. "Don't ever change, darling."

"Heh. Wasn't intendin' to." The farm pony's grin faded slightly. "But seriously, though... you ever think about movin' back?"

Rarity drew in her breath. That was a question she honestly wasn't sure she was ready to answer. She'd felt a tremendous sense of ease and happiness ever since they'd stepped off the train, it was true, but years of work and effort and striving had been poured into building the life she had in Canterlot...

"I mean, I ain't tryin' to pry. I just know that Rainbow's been thinkin' of coming back, and I figured –"

"Wait a moment, darling. Why in Equestria would Rainbow Dash..."

All of a sudden Applejack wouldn't meet her eyes, and Rarity could swear she saw a hint of a blush on the farmer's cheeks. And just like that, everything fell into place. In fact, Rarity couldn't believe she hadn't pieced it all together earlier. Why Pinkie had sent the

telegram to Applejack. Why Rainbow was staying at the farm. Why Rainbow kept looking over at Applejack and grinning.

"I cannot *believe* it," the unicorn breathed, her voice caught between a giggle and a gasp. "You and *Rainbow Dash*?"

"Not so loud! Besides, it ain't nothin' official-like. She ain't promised me her hoof in marriage or anythin', I mean."

But Rarity couldn't resist clapping her hooves together in glee. "Oh, this is wonderful, darling! Just splendid!" She threw her forelegs around Applejack, who whinnied in distress. "I'd given up hope for your romantic prospects ages ago, my dear Applejack, but Rainbow Dash may be the one pony even more hopeless than you are in that realm!"

"I'm gonna git you for this, Rarity," Applejack muttered under her breath. "You just wait and see."

Then, from across the room came a sudden squeal. "Dashie and Applejack are *dating*? Oh my gosh! We should totally throw them a party!"

"Aw, c'mon, AJ! I thought we weren't gonna tell anypony 'til apple bucking season was over!"

As Rarity pulled back from her hug, Applejack glared her very best glare. The unicorn chuckled apologetically and, after a beat or two of stern silence, Applejack softened and began chuckling too.

"...and this is the tube assembly, that's the mount, and here's the eyepiece... ooh, and this little piece is called the finderscope, and it helps you locate..."

Rarity was seriously questioning the wisdom of having asked Twilight Sparkle to allow her the use of one of her many telescopes. Biting her lip, she ventured, "Perhaps, darling, you could just let me know when everything is prepared and we can see the stars?"

Twilight frowned for a second, seeming puzzled, before she gave a cheerful little nod. "Sure! Shouldn't take long. It's just about ready to go."

Rarity took a step back as Twilight continued to fiddle with the telescope's settings. Both unicorns were standing on a quiet hill just outside Ponyville. Above them was laid out an immense expanse of perfect black sky, dotted with a million twinkling lights. Not a single cloud marred the beautiful sight of the starry night sky, and Rarity gave silent thanks to the pegasi for clearing away all the clouds.

A little distance away sat the rest of their little group, lolling on picnic blankets. Fluttershy was chatting with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, while Applejack lay nestled against Dash's side, peacefully snoring away. Rarity couldn't help a small giggle – it was getting rather late, and the earth pony had likely been up and working since before sunrise. The farmer looked rather adorable in her sleeping state, truth be told, even vulnerable almost.

Then there was Spike. Twilight had managed to convince him to join the rest of them for this star-gazing outing, but he sat on the other side of the hill from the others, with his knees tucked up tight against his chest. Rarity felt a pang just from looking at the sad, faraway expression in his eyes.

"Twilight? Would you mind if I went to go have a word with Spike as you finish setting up the telescope?"

"That... that might not be a bad idea, actually." The other unicorn glanced up from her equipment and laid a hoof on Rarity's shoulder. "Just don't take it too personally if he's a bit, uh, temperamental, okay? The news was a bit of a blow for him."

Rarity offered up one of her most winning smiles. "I shall be the very model of patience, understanding, and tact."

With that, she left Twilight to her telescope adjustments and trotted off toward where Spike was sitting. She stood waiting for a moment once she'd reached him, but the young dragon neither spoke nor looked up. Finally, with a soft sigh, she sat down beside him and tried not to think too hard about how the dewy grass might stain her white coat.

"I'm quite glad you were able to come out with us," she began softly. "It wouldn't be a proper visit to Ponyville if I wasn't able to see my Spikey-Wikey."

Still, Spike said nothing.

Rarity briefly thought about reaching out, to pet him or cuddle him, before deciding against it. "I wish I could... I'm sorry that you are hurting, darling. I never wanted that."

"I know," muttered Spike, sounding as miserable as he looked.

"Oh, Spike... I do love you, as a friend and as family, and I always have. I always shall." She glanced toward her other friends and caught Pinkie staring in their direction. The pink pony's eyes were anxious and troubled. "Though I know I have no right to do so, I would like to ask a favor of you, Spike. Please don't hold this against Pinkie. She'll never say so out loud, but she's terribly worried that you're angry with her and that she'll lose your friendship."

Spike sighed gustily. "I'm not mad at her. Not really. Just... I dunno. It's hard."

Rarity nodded sympathetically. "It is – but you are one of the strongest individuals I have ever known, and I have no doubts that you will not just persevere but triumph." She gave a wink to the still-watching Pinkie Pie and, after a moment, Pinkie turned back around. "Time heals all wounds, or so they say. And I imagine any wounds not healed by time might be helped along with a few sapphire cupcakes."

Finally, Spike lifted his head, with a thoughtful look on his face. "You really think Pinkie would make me a sapphire cupcake? Those were pretty good."

"My dear Spike... Pinkie would make you a *mountain* of sapphire cupcakes if you but asked."

"Okay, everyone!" Twilight's voice rang out across the entire hillside. "Telescope's ready, and I've got it pointed right at the Starswirl Nebula!"

Immediately, Pinkie Pie bounded over to take a look, while Fluttershy followed at a slower pace and Rainbow Dash began trying to prod Applejack awake. For her own part,

Rarity looked over to her young dragon companion and lifted an eyebrow. "Well, darling? Shall we go listen to Professor Sparkle's no doubt *fascinating* lecture on the more esoteric aspects of astronomy?"

Spike laughed at that, a real laugh, deep from the belly. It was as beautiful to Rarity's ears as the finest concerto she'd heard in Canterlot's famed music halls.

• • •

Waving good-night to Twilight and Spike, Rarity and Pinkie Pie walked away from the library in the general direction of Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie was bouncing along, as always, but somehow managed to time her bounces so that she stayed right by Rarity's side as the unicorn trotted along in a more dignified manner. It was rather uncanny, Pinkie's ability to do so. Rarity decided it was best to not question it.

"So, um." Pinkie was looking straight ahead and seemed a bit uncomfortable. "How's Spike doing?"

Rarity felt her face ease into a smile. "He's still adjusting to things, but I believe in time he'll be right as rain again. A batch of sapphire cupcakes should help matters along rather nicely, though, I should think."

Pinkie nodded with all the seriousness of an ancient pegasus lieutenant taking orders from her army general. "Sapphire cupcakes! Got it!"

"Thank you, dear – I do appreciate it. And how was your little chat with Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash?"

"Oh, it was good! Dashie talked about the Wonderbolts a lot, like she always does, and Fluttershy was sharing about the garden experiments she and Twi have been working on. I didn't even know you could experiment on tomatoes, but I guess you can!"

Rarity perked up a bit. "Very interesting, indeed. Our dear Fluttershy does appear to be spending quite a bit of time with the dazzling Miss Twilight Sparkle, does she not? I do wonder about the two of them..."

Pinkie snorted in mirth. "Dashie already asked about that, and Fluttershy turned almost as red as the tomatoes she's been experimenting on! She said she and Twilight are just friends, but Dashie said she wouldn't blush that much if she wasn't hiding something, and *then* Fluttershy said there was somepony *else* she liked." Pinkie began hopping backwards, so that she was face to face with Rarity. "But she wouldn't say who it is that

she likes, even though Rainbow Dash tried really, really hard to find out and I offered to Pinkie promise to not tell anypony."

"Oh, my!" Rarity was delighted and scandalized, both at once. Immediately she began racking her brains, trying to remember if Fluttershy had mentioned any ponies particularly often in her most recent letters, but she couldn't recall any.

"Uh-huh!" Pinkie grinned. "I don't think Twilight likes anypony, though. Well, that's not really true – I mean, Twilight likes lots of ponies – but I don't think she *romantically* likes any ponies."

Rarity sadly shook her head. "Ah, the costs of being married to one's work. A life in academia is a lonely one. I'd had such high hopes, too, back when she and Princess Luna..." The rest of what she'd been about to say trailed off into nothing, as something suddenly caught her interest.

Carousel Boutique.

It was no longer a clothing boutique, of course, as she'd sold the building before she'd left town – but the exterior of the former boutique had been left exactly the same. It was odd, seeing it look as it had all those years ago, back when it had been her pride and joy. She stood and stared at the building, trying to figure out how she ought to feel. How she wanted to feel.

Her life, Rarity realized, had been so much simpler before she'd invited Pinkie Pie up to Canterlot. Not necessarily *happier*... but simpler.

Very quietly, Pinkie stepped up beside the unicorn and leaned against her. "I bet you could buy it back. If you wanted to, y'know."

Rarity swallowed over the lump in her throat. "I imagine I could, yes."

"I mean, you don't *have* to, but I just... I – I know that Applejack says Dashie might be moving back to –"

"I'm not Rainbow Dash."

"Well, of course not! Dashie's a pegasus, and you're a unicorn. Plus, I bet you brush your mane a whole lot more than Rainbow Dash does."

"It's not as easy as all of you are making it out to be." Rarity felt suddenly and irrationally angry, almost frightened, like an animal who'd been backed into a corner. "I've built a career in Canterlot – I've built an entire life! I can't just abandon it on a whim!"

"Um, I don't think anypony said you should, Rarity."

"Well, what if I should decide to *stay* in Canterlot? What then?"

She hated asking the question, and yet it was a question that had to be asked. But when she received nothing except silence in reply, she shut her eyes and regretted that she'd done so. It had been such a nice night before now, before she'd gone and ruined everything. And really, the question could have waited until later, couldn't it?

She could still feel Pinkie Pie leaning against her, could still feel Pinkie's warmth through her skin. It felt lovely on an evening as chilly as this one.

"If you decide to stay in Canterlot," Pinkie said at length, slowly, thoughtfully, "then I guess I'll be taking the train to Canterlot a whole bunch more."

Rarity opened her eyes. Pinkie was looking at her with those big, blue eyes of hers, and the unicorn wondered how those eyes seemed always to contain a hint of knowing, of secret knowledge. It was vaguely unsettling.

"I didn't mean it how it sounded," Rarity murmured in reply. "When I said that I... you aren't a whim, Pinkie Pie. *We* aren't a whim."

Pinkie smiled, a smile just as complex and mysterious as the expression in her eyes. "I already knew that, you silly filly. But thanks for saying so, anyways."

• • •

She couldn't sleep.

So instead of tossing and turning in a strange bed, in a strange room, Rarity had gone to the roof of Sugarcube Corner. She stood with her head tilted back and her eyes trained on the night sky above. The stars truly were dazzling. As she stood under Luna's sky, she found herself contrasting tonight's sky with the one that had greeted her outside that dirty nightclub back in Canterlot – which seemed like such a long time ago, now, though of course it really wasn't. She found herself reflecting upon that surprising and lovely answer Pinkie had given to the question of why she liked Rarity.

And she found herself closing her eyes and remembering what it had felt like to actually kiss the unpredictable pony who slumbered within the bakery.

She still didn't know what she should do. Whether she should stay in Canterlot or move back to Ponyville.

Her musings were cut short by the sound of quiet laughter drifting up from below. Opening her eyes, she glanced down and spotted Snips approaching the bakery with a small group of ponies by his side. Three of the ponies she recognized instantly – Sweetie Belle's good friends Scootaloo and Apple Bloom were there, as was Pinkie's young baking apprentice, Twist – but the last pony took her a moment to identify. He was a tall stallion, lanky, awkward, and he looked naggingly familiar.

The five young ponies stood in front of Sugarcube Corner for a few minutes, talking and laughing, before the mares in the group headed off in separate directions while waving good-bye. The entire time, Rarity stood atop the bakery, unseen and unnoticed, while she tried to remember the name of the second stallion.

By this point, Snips was fidgeting, even more than the nervous unicorn usually did. The other stallion appeared a bit nervous too but was smiling regardless. He took a step forward and, as he did, Snips stopped fidgeted and stood deathly still. A few words were exchanged – too soft for Rarity to hear – and then the other stallion dipped his head and placed a light kiss on Snips' muzzle. The kiss was over almost as soon as it had begun, and then the taller unicorn was bounding off. Snips stood outside the bakery and watched him go with a dreamy expression on his face.

Snails. That was the name of the other stallion. A foalhood friend of her assistant, if Rarity remembered correctly.

Eventually, after Snails had disappeared from view, Snips turned around and finally entered Sugarcube Corner. Even before he'd shut the door behind him, the gears in Rarity's mind were whirring away. It seemed that she'd been incorrect in her assumptions about Snips and Twist – but, then, there were a lot of things, and a lot of ponies, about which she'd been incorrect, weren't there? She'd been wrong about Fluttershy and Twilight, she'd been wrong about the Duchess of Hoofington, and she'd been wrong about Pinkie.

Oh, how very wrong she'd been about Pinkie, in so very many ways.

"Because you're always trying to make ponies happy. Because you look at the world and see all kinds of ways of making it really, really beautiful..."

And just like that, Rarity had her answer. She knew exactly what to do.

• • •

"Are you *sure* you can't stay in town for a few more days?"

Fluttershy's eyes were huge, colossal, and as dewy as a meadow on a crisp spring morning. Rarity could feel her resolve crumbling by the second.

Looking towards the stationary train, instead, the unicorn replied, "I'm afraid so, darling. The boutique won't run itself. But I promise I'll arrange another visit soon." She grinned wickedly. "And perhaps then you'll finally tell me just what lucky mare or stallion you have your eye set upon."

"R-Rarity!" Fluttershy sounded aghast.

Meanwhile, Twilight was glancing around and frowning. "You know, I would have thought Pinkie would be here to say good-bye. Rainbow Dash, too. Odd."

"Oh, yeah, about that." Applejack rolled her eyes. "Pinkie swung by the farm and nabbed RD this mornin'. Said she had a super big surprise or somethin' and she needed Rainbow's help to pull it off."

Twilight's eyebrows knit together. "*That* can't mean anything good."

"Certainly not," agreed Rarity, with a concerned look of her own. Although she felt no small measure of dismay at the very thought of the trouble Pinkie and Dash could cause together, she also felt a sudden rush of relief flood through her at the realization that Pinkie hadn't forgotten to come to the train station this morning. Pinkie hadn't forgotten *her*. It was a ridiculous thing to worry over, of course, and yet, worry she had.

Things were still so new, so tentative...

Her thoughts halted when she suddenly felt Fluttershy's hooves wrap around her neck and Fluttershy's cheek press up against her own. "I'm really, really happy for you, Rarity," the pegasus whispered, very softly, low enough that only Rarity could hear. "I always knew you'd find your prince or princess."

Tenderly Rarity returned her friend's hug as she whispered in reply, "Thank you, darling."

As Fluttershy stepped back, Twilight came forward to give Rarity a hug, as well. "Good luck with the situation with the duchess, Rarity. If there's anything we can do to help..."

"I shan't hesitate to call upon you."

"Good." Twilight pulled back and smiled. "And, well, you know we all love hearing from you, but... if you could write some letters to Spike specifically, I think he'd really appreciate it."

"Say no more, Twilight Sparkle. I'll have Snips pencil in a reminder on my calendar to write a weekly letter to our dear little Spike."

Applejack was next, and the earth pony's strong embrace was nearly rib-crushing. "You take care of yerself, y'hear?" the earth pony said firmly, in a tone reminiscent of the one she once used with a young Apple Bloom. "Don't let none o' them Canterlotians give you any guff."

Rarity chuckled. "I appreciate the sentiment, Applejack, and I will make sure that I do not... take any 'guff,' as you so colorfully put it."

Applejack gave a small nod of satisfaction.

"Oh, my goodness!"

Rarity turned in time to see Fluttershy looking upwards with a startled expression on her face. Following the pegasus' gaze, she spotted a familiar dot of blue streaking through the sky. Also familiar was the pink dot which seemed to be riding atop the blue dot. Together, the two dots weaved in and out of the clouds above, shaping them, sculpting them. Finally, after a few minutes, the clouds had been turned into full words:

Have a super great trip back! Will miss you lots and lots! – PDP

Rarity smiled despite herself. "Very gallant," she murmured under her breath. She felt quite certain she was blushing, but for once, she couldn't bring herself to care.

But then the blue and pink dots continued zig-zagging across the sky, and Rarity watched with renewed interest to see what might be spelled out next. It took significantly less time than the first message, as the second message was considerably shorter:

p.s. AJ is best pony! – RD

Still smiling, Rarity glanced over to Applejack. The farmer's eyes were locked onto the clouds above their heads, a tiny grin on her lips. "Crazy, fool-headed pegasus," she muttered, her voice just a touch watery. "Don't know what I'm gonna do with her."

Rarity walked over and leaned companionably against Applejack. In a bright tone of voice, she offered, "I suppose you'll just have to do what I do with Pinkie Pie."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"As soon as I figure that out, darling, you'll be the first to know."

• • •

Surreptitiously she watched Snips as the stallion stared out the train window at the passing scenery with boyish glee. He was different than the colt she'd known all those years ago, the one who'd lured an Ursa Minor into town, but in many ways, he was much the same as ever. Perhaps that's why she liked him so much. Perhaps that's why she had invited him to come to Canterlot with her when she'd started up the new boutique.

Perhaps it didn't really matter. She suspected that's what Pinkie Pie would tell her, anyway, if Pinkie were there.

"Snips, darling?"

He turned around to face her, a dreamy little smile on his face. "Yes, Lady Rarity?"

"I was just thinking..." The truth was, she wasn't sure exactly what he was going to say to her idea. But she'd never know if she never asked. "You've been with me a good many years, now. I was wondering if you haven't ever thought of setting out independently."

His smile was gone in an instant. "Are you *firing* me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No! Oh, no, no, no. That's not what I meant at all." Rarity shook her head. "If anything, it would be akin to a promotion."

"A... promotion?"

"Yes, Snips. A promotion." She smiled gently at her assistant as his face eased from panic into mild confusion. "I had the funny little notion of starting up the old Carousel

Boutique again while keeping the shop in Canterlot – expand the business, you know – and, well, if I did so, I would need someone reliable and knowledgeable to run the Ponyville store, would I not?"

"Oh! Well, sure." He tilted his head, looking puzzled. "So who's going to run the Ponyville shop?"

Rarity resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Well, darling, I was hoping it would be you."

His jaw dropped open. "R-really?"

"Really and truly."

The young stallion's entire face lit up like the palace during the Grand Galloping Gala. "Oh, *thank* you, Lady Rarity! Thank you, thank you, thank you –"

As the incessant show of gratitude continued, Rarity mentally tuned out her assistant and began ruminating over what would be needed to reopen her Ponyville boutique. She'd have to see if she could buy back the original building, of course, though there were others she could purchase and remodel if need be. She'd have to order fabrics, sewing machines, mannequins, and so forth. The next few weeks were going to be very busy, indeed.

But it would be worth it. It was about time that Snips learned to stand on his own four feet, and with any luck, she'd soon be presented with the delightful opportunity to design not just one but *two* wedding tuxedos. Besides that, she'd also have the chance to begin making more affordable fashions again, like she had in the old days, as the Ponyville clothing market was considerably more downscale than the one in Canterlot. She had to admit that she rather liked the idea of a greater number of ponies being able to buy and wear her clothes. After all, her entire life's purpose was creating and sharing beauty – and the more ponies she could enhance and beautify with her clothing, the better.

And that all of this would mean she'd have to come to Ponyville much more frequently than before... well, that wasn't such a terrible fate, now, was it?

It was undoubtedly the most elegant party that Ponyville had ever seen, and Ponyville was a town that had seen more than its fair share of parties over the years. The newly reopened Carousel Boutique glittered and gleamed like the brightest jewel, and its new business manager stood at the very center, beaming as brightly as the sun, with his coltfriend directly by his side. Both stallions were garbed in the finest suits imaginable, with matching neckties in a deep, royal purple the exact same shade as a certain fashion designer's mane.

Also inside the boutique was a string ensemble specially imported from Canterlot, fronted by the quickly rising singer Sweetie Belle – whose services for the evening were only procured through a combination of pure nepotism and the promise of all the cupcakes she could eat. Across the room from the singer and musicians stood long tables filled with the most intricately decorated desserts that a pony could ever wish to see. Tarts and bon bons and miniature éclairs were all laid out on the daintiest of crystal platters.

And in the very middle was erected a giant tower of sapphire-encrusted cupcakes – nay, an entire *mountain* of cupcakes – which sparkled as bright and as blue as the eyes of the baker who'd created them.

Rarity and Pinkie Pie had positioned themselves right inside the shop's doors, greeting each guest as he or she entered with, respectively, the utmost grace and warmest enthusiasm. Nearly every pony who came through the doors marveled at the two finely-attired hostesses, both dressed in Lady Rarity originals, and at their co-hosting abilities.

For every time Rarity's face went slightly slack with an absence of recognition, Pinkie leapt forward to shake hooves and introduce herself to the newly-arrived pony, whose name she invariably had right on the tip of her tongue. Every time Pinkie Pie began to encroach just a bit too much into another pony's personal space, Rarity would slip between the two, as smooth as silk, and gently back Pinkie away without so much as a hiccup in the conversation. And every so often, both ponies would happen to glance at one another at the exact same time and, as their eyes met, they would share a small, intimate smile.

It was like watching an intricate waltz, performed by two talented and well-practiced dancers. Most of those attending the party found it beautiful to behold – especially the group of four mares that hovered by the desserts table, giggling and grinning like mischievous little fillies. The young dragon who accompanied the four seemed

considerably less amused, but he soothed himself with double and triple helpings of the cupcakes.

All in all, it was as fine an evening as any could ever wish to see. It had taken many long months of hard work, but as Rarity surveyed the new yet old boutique, she couldn't help but nod in satisfaction. Everything was going precisely according to plan.

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"Good evening, Lady Rarity." The pale green unicorn's mouth twitched, as if she was unsure whether or not she ought to smile. "And a good evening to you, as well, Lady Pinkamena."

It was at this point that Rarity's considerable poise finally failed her, and she could only stare in naked shock.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, Pinkie Pie jumped into the breach with her customary verve and cheerfulness. "Hiya, Duchess! We're super glad you could make it!"

"Thank you for having me, Lady Pinkamena," the Duchess of Hoofington replied, in a tone that teetered somewhere between dignified and nervous. "I was... I was pleased to receive your invitation."

Invitation? That was most certainly *not* according to plan.

"Pinkie," said Rarity, once she'd found her voice again. "Could you be a dear and stay to greet our guests while I have a word with the duchess?"

For the briefest moment, Pinkie's eyes looked cloudy and uncertain. But the troubled expression passed as quickly as a spring shower in May, and then Pinkie flashed her co-hostess a quick smile. "Sure thing, Rarity!"

"Thank you, darling. I do appreciate it."

Rarity turned to the duchess, wearing a strained smile, and inclined her head. The other unicorn gave a small curtsy and began to follow after the fashion designer as Rarity carefully threaded her way through the crowded boutique. As they headed towards the kitchen, they passed by Hoity Toity and Photo Finish, who were chatting animatedly with one another and offered them distracted hellos, followed soon after by Fancy Pants and Fleur de Lis, who were speaking with Applejack and Fluttershy respectively. Fancy

Pants put on one of his best poker-faced smiles as the duchess passed by, while Fleur simply gave the duchess a baleful look that seemed to be made of pure ice.

Finally, they reached the relative safety and privacy of the boutique's kitchen. Rarity tried her best to ignore her jangling nerves as she worked to keep her smile in place. "Tell me, Duchess, how is your daughter? Did she care for the dress I made for her?" This seemed a neutral enough opening gambit.

"Oh, indeed she did. Her dress was the talk of the party. But then, a Lady Rarity original is the talk of *any* party, isn't it?"

The nobleman's tone was haughty, with more than a hint of smarm, and it made a thrill of irritation run through Rarity just as it always did. But there was something else there, something in the duchess' eyes, an anxiety, a tension. Something that belied the haughtiness and the smarm.

And Rarity realized the words weren't mere insincere flattery. She realized that, all this time, it hadn't just been about *quid pro quo* and social chess. She realized that this was, in fact, the duchess' way of bestowing a compliment. Her way of flirting, even.

"Thank you," the designer replied, quietly and sincerely. "I'm quite glad to hear she was pleased with the gown. She's a charming girl, your daughter."

"She truly is. She's more like her father was, I must confess, than she is like her mother." The duchess wouldn't quite meet Rarity's eyes. "I received your note. It was... generous of you to say all that you said."

Rarity took a deep breath. "It was hardly generous. Overdue, possibly – perhaps even insufficient – but not generous."

"Even so. Thank you for writing to me."

An uneasy silence settled between the two unicorns for a few long moments, where the only sounds to be heard were the soft singing, muffled conversation, and clinking of glasses coming from the main room.

"I don't know if it's possible for you and I to ever become friends, Duchess," Rarity said at last, very delicately, "but at the very least, I should like us to no longer be enemies."

It was then that the other unicorn finally met Rarity's gaze, and she offered up a small but genuine smile. "I believe I should like that as well, Lady Rarity."

Rarity returned the smile with one that was just as genuine.

"I wasn't wrong about your little Ponyville friends, however. Can't imagine what the princess was thinking in bestowing those ladyships." The duchess rolled her eyes. "Although perhaps I *should* have been a bit more diplomatic in how I phrased things."

Rarity's smile tightened. For a brief moment she felt tempted, ever so tempted, to make a veiled cutting remark or perhaps discreetly tear the duchess' dress with a well-applied burst of magic. But then, suddenly, unbidden, came the remembrance of deep blue eyes, shimmering and wet with tears – and she chose to hold both her tongue and her magic.

• • •

Unsurprisingly for a party hosted by Pinkie Pie, the festivities lasted well into the night and, just as unsurprisingly, the bearers of the Elements of Harmony were the very last to leave as the evening drew to its inevitable close. A proper hostess to the very end, Rarity stood at the boutique's entryway with a still-bouncing Pinkie on one side and a slightly drooping Sweetie Belle on the other. Graciously she held open the door as the other four Element bearers trooped past, tired but smiling.

"Thank you ever so much for coming," Rarity trilled. "I do apologize for being unable to spend more time chatting with all of you."

"Oh, that's all right, Rarity." Twilight Sparkle shifted on her hooves, to more evenly distribute the weight of the young dragon who was fast asleep and sprawled across her back. Spike was really too large to still ride on Twilight's back, but she stubbornly insisted on carrying him all the same. "We knew you'd be busy tonight. We're just glad you'll be in town for a few weeks this time around."

Rainbow Dash nodded enthusiastically and very, very drunkenly. "Heck, yeah! It's gonna be just like old times!"

"Inside voice, sugar cube," hissed Applejack, while Pinkie giggled.

"Aww, c'mon, AJ, what's the big deal? All the snooty ponies left hours ago!" Rainbow's head lolled against the farm pony's shoulder. "Good thing, too. I don't think that duchess or whoever really liked me that much."

In a quiet voice, Fluttershy offered, "I think that's because you threw up on her dress, Rainbow."

"I *told* her I was sorry! 'Sides, it was an accident."

Applejack rolled her eyes as she began steering Dash out the door. "G'night, y'all. Thanks for havin' us to yer fancy shindig."

"Good night, darlings!"

"Nighty night, guys!"

Rarity watched with fond amusement as the quartet stumbled down the road – Twilight sagging under Spike's weight while Applejack and Fluttershy leaned against Rainbow Dash on either side, in a valiant but mostly futile attempt to keep the intoxicated pegasus upright. Only after they had rounded a corner and vanished from view did Rarity finally turn around and look over to her sister. Sweetie Belle was gazing at the opened door with longing in her eyes.

Rarity couldn't begrudge her sister the desire to go spend time with her own friends, she supposed, but that didn't mean she particularly had to like it. Putting on her very best pout, the elder unicorn said in a wheedling tone, "Are you absolutely *certain* you can't stay in Ponyville for longer?"

"Afraid not, big sis. I've got a really big concert in Fillydelphia tomorrow night." Sweetie Belle chuckled. "Besides, we're still having brunch together in the morning, right?"

Rarity smiled fondly in return. "Why, of course we are, Sweetie."

"Great! Then I'll see you tomorrow morning." She leaned forward to deposit a kiss on her sister's cheek before bounding out the open door. "G'night, Rarity! G'night, Pinkie!"

"Say hi to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo for us!" Pinkie shouted after her.

"Sure thing!" Sweetie paused long enough to glance over her shoulder with a grin. "Take good care of Rarity for me, okay, Pinkie?"

The pink pony snapped to attention and executed a near-militaristic salute. "Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

Rarity sighed softly as her baby sister, no longer a baby, disappeared into the night to cause goodness knew what sorts of trouble with her fillyhood friends. "And to think that once upon a time it was *I* who was too busy for *her*."

"Aww, don't be sad, Rarity! You know Sweetie loves you lots and lots. It's just something that happens with little sisters. They're like tiny, itty, bitty birds, and when they grow up, they just gotta fly the nest! Or maybe they're more like griffons?" Pinkie thoughtfully tapped a hoof to her chin. "Or pterodactyls. Little sisters could be kinda like pterodactyls, I guess? Even though they don't really..."

Rarity knew full well that Pinkie could keep rambling for quite a while longer and decided she had better take action.

In one smooth movement Rarity stepped forward and kissed Pinkie Pie – kissed her swiftly and fiercely – and enjoyed the soft gasp of surprise that came from the other pony. But despite her surprise, the earth pony returned the kiss with all of her characteristic enthusiasm, and Rarity found herself slightly out of breath by the time she pulled away. She was pleased to see that Pinkie seemed the tiniest bit breathless, as well.

The unicorn smiled triumphantly. "Well, my dear Pinkie! Shall we be off?"

"We're going somewhere?" Pinkie tilted her head, the very picture of confusion. "Shouldn't we clean up all this party stuff first?"

"Oh, no need to bother with that. Snips and Snails will take care of it in the morning, I'm sure." Rarity adopted a lofty, virtuous tone as she added, "The very least I can do for Snips, the dear boy, is to give him some responsibility. It's very character-building, you know."

Pinkie Pie raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Rarity decided to bring out the big guns. "If you want to stay to clean, that's quite all right with me, of course... but I *was* hoping to show you a surprise that I'd prepared for –"

"Ooh! A surprise? For *me*?"

"Only if you're interested, darling."

"Yes!" Pinkie began hopping in excitement. "Surprise! Yes! Yay!"

As Rarity stepped out into the brisk night air and locked up the boutique, Pinkie followed right on her heels, peppering the unicorn with questions as to the exact nature of the promised surprise. The unicorn ignored her with practiced ease as she trotted down the darkened, empty streets of Ponyville. It was so much darker than it ever was in

Canterlot, except in the very seediest of back alleys, but somehow it didn't feel cold or lonely the way that nighttime in Canterlot sometimes did.

Soon enough they'd reached the destination Rarity had in mind, and she turned towards Pinkie with sparkling eyes.

The earth pony frowned. "But Rarity, this is just Sugarcube Corner."

"That is an excellent observation." Rarity tittered a bit, unable to contain her glee. "Open the door, darling."

Although she still seemed confused, Pinkie did as she was told. She unlocked the door and peeked her head inside. In an instant, the door was thrown the rest of the way open, and Pinkie Pie was bounding into the center of the bakery with a happy shriek of amazement and delight.

"Oh, my *gosh*, Rarity!"

Rarity ambled in at a more leisurely pace, feeling exceedingly pleased with herself and her accomplishments. The bakery was decorated to within an inch of its life, with every sort of balloon, streamer, and other imaginable scrap of party paraphernalia, in every color under the sun. In the very middle of it all was a table, covered in a tablecloth made of the shiniest plastic, which held cookies and sarsaparilla. Above the table hung a banner, large and proud, that read "*Welcome to your surprise party, Pinkie Pie!*", with each and every letter printed in the unholiness that was Comic Sans.

It was tacky. It was horrible. It was a complete assault on taste, decorum, and all things beautiful and refined.

It was perfect.

"There's so many cookies! Ooh, and sarsaparilla too!" Pinkie Pie flitted from one corner of the bakery to the next like a large pink hummingbird. "Oh, and look at those streamers! Those are such great streamers, Rarity!"

Quietly the unicorn murmured, "I know you're not fond of Canterlot-style parties like the one we threw tonight, so I thought I'd prepare one more to your liking for afterwards."

"Boy, is it ever!" Pinkie exclaimed, finally skidding to a halt in front of the other pony. "But how did you have the time to *do* all this? We spent all afternoon getting ready for the party at the boutique!"

"Oh, it was simplicity itself, darling. I enlisted your assistant Twist's help in getting the preparations ready." It had not, in fact, been simplicity itself – it had, in fact, been a headache and a half to accomplish all this – but Pinkie didn't need to know that. Rarity couldn't help a small, smug smile. "So! Is this, or is this not, an acceptable surprise, hmm?"

In lieu of a verbal answer, the earth pony leapt forward and attacked with a volley of rapid-fire kisses. Rarity was quickly tackled to the floor of Sugarcube Corner and, as Pinkie's kisses came slower and deeper, the unicorn was surprised to find that she didn't mind being tackled quite as much as she usually might. She leaned back and wrapped her forelegs around Pinkie's neck, breathing in the scent of the pink mane that fell lightly against her cheek. Pinkie's mane smelled of softness and warmth and the slightest hint of something sweet but not too sweet.

The cookies went uneaten, and the sarsaparilla went undrank.

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There was only the barest hint of light filtering in from the bedroom window when Rarity first cracked open her eyes. Drowsily she blinked and wondered as to just why she'd awoken so early. Glancing around the familiar room – bright, cheerful, and virtually unchanged from the first time she'd ever set hoof in it – she took inventory of what she saw. Table, chairs, closet, balloon stash, party cannon... ah, there was the problem, right there.

The bright, cheerful room was distinctly lacking a bright, cheerful pink pony.

The light clattering of hooves from the roof above tipped off Rarity as to just where Pinkie Pie might have disappeared to, although she could have guessed even without that clue. With only slight reluctance, the unicorn roused herself from bed. She stopped by the bathroom, to give her mane a thorough brushing and take care of other general morning maintenance, before she headed upstairs.

Pinkie sat towards the edge of the roof, uncharacteristically still, her eyes fixed firmly on the hills that lay just outside of Ponyville. The first hints of sunlight were just slipping above the horizon, and the entire world hung in that ineffable, mysterious balance

between what was night and what was day. Silently, Rarity approached and took her place beside the other mare. As soon as she'd sat down, Pinkie leaned over and rested her head against Rarity's shoulder.

"Sometimes," Pinkie began dreamily and without preamble, as though they'd already been talking for hours, "I like to wake up before all the other ponies so I can watch the sunrise. It'd be better if there was a rainbow like there was in Canterlot that one time – ooh, or two rainbows, or even *three* – but it's still kinda nice even without any rainbows at all. Don't you think?"

Rarity merely nodded in reply. She rested her chin on top of Pinkie's poofy mane, which was as warm and soft as ever, and tried to ignore the stray frizzy hairs that tickled at her nose.

"It's even nicer to have somepony to watch with, though." There was a pause, long and languid. "Say, Rarity?"

"Yes, Pinkie?"

"I love you. You... you know that, right?"

Rarity froze.

She'd dreamt of this moment, dreamt of hearing a pony confess love to her, so many times over so many years. She had always imagined that it would involve a candlelit dinner at a fancy restaurant, followed by a walk through the palace gardens, moonlight, music, perhaps a dozen red roses. She had pictured an eloquent declaration, words both poetic and passionate, whispered in a voice that was smooth and dark and seductively low.

She had never anticipated this moment would come on the rooftop of a bakery in the cold air of dawn, nor that the words she longed to hear would be uttered in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone by a pink earth pony. She'd dreamt of princes, not bakers – of elaborate and over-the-top romantic gestures, not simple and uncomplicated affection.

"I think I've known for a while, darling," the unicorn said softly, closing her eyes and smiling. "And I love you, as well. So very, very much."

No, truth be told, this wasn't at all what Rarity had ever imagined for herself.

It was *better*.

As the train rattled merrily down the tracks, she couldn't help but sneak glances at the orange earth pony sitting beside her. It wasn't a whim or an impulse that led her to do so, but rather a stark need, one that was inexplicably strong. She couldn't shake the nagging fear that the other pony might disappear on her all over again, if she didn't keep vigilantly checking to make sure she was still there.

Her wings wouldn't stay still, either, but fluttered constantly with a nervous sort of energy. It might have just been from being cooped up in a small train car, though. It didn't have to mean anything more than that.

Every once in a while, she'd get busted. She'd be looking over, and the earth pony would lift her head at that exact same moment – and her breath would catch in her throat, as a feeling almost like embarrassment filled her up from hooves to wings. But those green eyes would only smile at her, all friendliness and joy, and she'd find herself smiling in reply almost involuntarily. Then, after another beat or two of companionable silence, they'd both turn their heads away from one another and resume whatever they'd been doing before.

Eventually, she settled back against her seat, listening with half an ear as Applejack began regaling Twilight and Fluttershy with stories of the rodeo competition. She gazed out the train window at the barren desert landscape as it whizzed by and, with a sleepy yawn, felt completely and utterly content with her world. They were all back together, they were whole, and they were all headed home. Nothing else mattered. Perhaps when they got back, she and Pinkie could play a prank on Big Macintosh, maybe something having to do with –

"Oh, my gosh!"

Abruptly she sat forward, her eyes wide and panicked, all sleepiness gone in an instant.

"What is it?" asked Twilight, the frown audible in her voice. "What's wrong, Rainbow Dash?"

"Rarity and Pinkie Pie!" Cold horror washed over the pegasus. "Oh, man! Oh man, oh man, oh man. Rarity is gonna kill me..."