

Home Is Where the Hearts Are

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PONY FICTION VAULT



At some point in her life, Rainbow Dash had lost track of where her home was. Or, perhaps, had come to realize she had never known where her home was to begin with.

Originally she had lived with her parents in Cloudsdale. She spent her fair share of time escaping from their care to fly around the city in search of adventure, but little more than the average pegasus foal of her age. She had a few friends – mostly a bit older than herself, fillies and colts whom she could race against or swap dares with – but no one too close. Her report cards and parent-teacher meetings tended to describe her as bright but inattentive, with her mind always somewhere else, specifically the sky. Even as a young filly, she had loved the sky. She'd had a house, but had it really been her home?

Life had truly begun a few years later, the sky opening up to her a wealth of new possibilities and experiences. Summer Flight Camp. The Junior Speedsters. Gilda. The Sonic Rainboom. Her Cutie Mark. Fluttershy. Her parents came to take more and more of a back seat in her life as Rainbow Dash literally flew from one adventure or discovery to the next. Her grades were awful, but still, everypony could tell that she was a pony that was going to go places in the world. The excitement of performance flying beckoned to her, and she developed practically overnight an encyclopedic knowledge of stunt teams and individual fliers. For a brief moment, Rainbow Dash thought she had found her place in the world: no fixed place at all. Everywhere could be her home, anywhere could be, sometimes at scarcely a moment's notice, but nowhere for too long a stretch. It was in this glow of personal discovery that she had hunted down Fluttershy, waving a sheet of paper so excitedly it was a miracle it didn't fall down through the clouds beneath her.

"Fluttershy!" she had cried, finally encountering her yellow pegasus friend in an alley in the Cloudsdale residential district. "I've got the program for the next dozen Wonderbolts shows, only just released today! I'm going to follow them around on tour, and you're coming with me!"

Fluttershy, sweet timid Fluttershy, had spoken at almost the same time, with almost as much enthusiasm: "Rainbow Dash, I'm moving to Ponyville!"

And they both stared at each other as Rainbow Dash *felt* her lofty, wonderful, glorious plans slipping away from her.

They talked. They even argued, if only as well as Fluttershy was capable of arguing back then. Rainbow Dash said things she would spend the next several years of her life apologizing for at random intervals. In the end they *both* moved to Ponyville, because

somehow, Fluttershy was not something that Rainbow Dash could let escape from her life.

Rainbow Dash built a huge and ostentatious house from the clouds themselves, rainbows pouring from its immaterial gardens, and she parked it above Ponyville and never allowed it to drift too far away. She forced her way onto the Ponyville weather team and allowed herself to be bound by a routine, albeit a routine that she devised herself and one that involved a healthy amount of rest time.

Fluttershy made her home on the very outskirts of the town she had derailed Rainbow Dash's dreams to live in. Rather than using clouds, her small hut was if anything more tree than house, and she surrounded herself with animals like Rainbow Dash came to surround herself with admirers. While Rainbow Dash found an ardent fan in the filly Scootaloo, Fluttershy found a rabbit. One of Rainbow Dash's recurring jibes was making fun of Fluttershy for being a pegasus bound to the land, practically flightless, but then she would look at her own house – always hovering somewhere above Ponyville, never given leave to float curiously away into the adventuresome skies – and wonder.

Before Rainbow Dash could go stir crazy, though, or learn to hate Fluttershy for what she had let the gentle animal caretaker do to her, everything had changed. A unicorn arrived in town, looking for her – looking for both of them, though she hadn't known that at the time – and there had been something undeniably, indefinably, almost imperceptibly awesome about her. They had an adventure together, without hardly taking to the skies at all, and Rainbow Dash, forced to choose between joining a stunt team or helping Fluttershy and four ponies she hardly knew, chose friendship. The six of them had more adventures after that, and Rainbow Dash began to learn that not all adventures involved going places, seeing things, or even doing anything at all but talk to other ponies. Somehow Twilight Sparkle had made friendship into an adventure of its own.

In Applejack, she found a pony who was her physical equal – *almost* her equal, rather – but without the same drive for action that propelled Rainbow Dash through her waking hours; one who had learned to revel in the everyday and pay attention to the grounded world. In Rarity, she found passion and drive to rival her own, but in an area she had never even thought to consider, let alone disdain; a passion that she learned in time to respect, loathe as she would be to admit that to the fashionista in person. In Twilight, Rainbow Dash found somepony who respected her talents but still managed to question every belief she held dear. In Fluttershy, she found whom she had always sort of known was there, but understood more clearly than before: a pony who saw through every artifice that she invented, every show of false bravado, every grandiose boast, every

exaggeration, every little white lie to make sure that nopony worried about her; a pony who saw through all that, and still called her friend, *dear* friend, *oldest* friend, *hero*.

In Ponyville, it seemed, Rainbow Dash had found home. But...

But there was a sixth element. An Element of Laughter, or perhaps more aptly Chaos. There was Pinkie Pie, the party-throwing apprentice of Sugarcube Corner, whom Rainbow Dash had always avoided and even scorned in her early days in Ponyville. Pinkie forced her way *into* Rainbow Dash's life around the same time Gilda made her disastrous exit *from* it, and neither of them ever looked back – Pinkie because she had no wish to, and Rainbow Dash because Pinkie gave her no time to. Pinkie was no Applejack, but she was fast, and strong, and eventually just as good a chef in her own way. Pinkie was no Rarity, but she flung herself with passion and laughter into everything she did, even if nopony could predict what it was she was going to do before she did it. Pinkie was no Twilight, but she still found a way to take every preconceived notion Rainbow Dash had and turn it on its head, since what was the point of having preconceived notions? Pinkie was no Fluttershy, but she possessed as detailed and accurate an understanding of every pony in Ponyville – their friends especially – as Rainbow Dash had once possessed of the top stunt fliers, and she used that understanding to find ways to brighten everypony's day, every day, everywhere she went. Pinkie was no Rainbow Dash, but somehow the pink party pony showed her that you didn't need *wings* to fly, any more than you needed an *excuse* to throw a party, or have an adventure, or learn a ridiculous new dance move, or demonstrate that ridiculous new dance move in front of your entire fan club, or pull a prank, or make a friend, or fall in love.

And so one day in Spring, after they had all six gone through many adventures together, after many friendship reports to Princess Celestia had been written by every one of them, after Friendship alone had grown familiar and the temptress Love had begun to creep into their collective subconscious, Rainbow Dash admitted to herself that she really *was* in love with Pinkie Pie, reason be damned, and the very first thing she was going to do was tell Fluttershy all about it. Fluttershy would be sure to have some good advice, but more importantly, Rainbow Dash wanted her to be the first to know.

She sped over the streets and houses of Ponyville, bright blue wings beating the air against her sides, searching for that familiar pink mane and yellow coat until the moment she found them and came down to land, grinning, breathless. She carried no program with her, but was still every bit as excited as the time she'd tried to get Fluttershy to travel Equestria with her and the Wonderbolts. She noticed that Fluttershy was also excited and had something to say, and just that *one time*, in deference to her oldest friend, her kindest friend, her most trusted friend, she let Fluttershy go first, sure it would have

something to do with some badger or hummingbird that had finally learned to hibernate or something quintessentially *Fluttershy* like that.

"Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy, "Pinkie and I are together!"

Rainbow Dash spent the next five minutes making her repeat that, over and over again, explaining and re-explaining that yes, Fluttershy meant that they were together like a couple, like dating, like romantically: like everything the single fastest pony in all of Equestria had been one day too late to get for herself. Rainbow Dash managed a few words – she dearly hoped, and Fluttershy later reassured her, that "congratulations" was one of them – and then took off into the air to vent her frustrations on her house, a tree, a nearby lake, bowling pins, a jar of peanut butter, a brick wall, anything that couldn't fight back. For the first time in years, Rainbow Dash once again discovered that she didn't know where her home was.

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Rainbow Dash did, however, know where her *house* was, and it was there she spent the next several days. She cried into her pillow, and beat up her pillow for making her cry, and reread the many sections of her Daring Do collection that talked about just how little one needed a lover in order to have fun and live an adventurous life. Several ponies from the Ponyville weather team came by to check on her, but were duly repulsed by strategic use of an old cloud she had stashed away with some pent-up lightning bolts inside of it. Eventually, though, Rainbow Dash realized she was accomplishing nothing like this and had better talk about everything to *somepony*. She ran through her list of friends in her head, and decided that if she was going to get a lecture, at least she'd rather get it from somepony who wouldn't make it *sound* like a lecture while it was being delivered.

When she arrived, Applejack was hard at work bucking apples – Rainbow Dash had long since concluded the orange earth pony did nothing else all day – but looked up to greet her visitor with a glad smile. "Hey there, Rainbow Dash," she said. "Haven't seen hide nor hair of you in several days! Twilight and the girls were getting a touch worried. How you doing?"

"Applejack," said Rainbow Dash, coming in for a graceful landing beside her farmer friend. "You, me, fight. Now."

Applejack pushed her familiar hat back a few inches to scratch at the top of her head. "Begging your pardon?"

"I need to talk to someone," said Rainbow Dash, "but first I need to fight someone, badly, or I'll just keep building up anger and frustration until I explode. You're one of the only ponies I know that can keep up with me in a tussle, and you're pretty smart too. You're basically perfect for this."

"So let me get this straight," said Applejack, annoyingly calm about the whole thing. "You want to talk to me about something important – but before you can talk about whatever's so important, you want to fight me."

"Yeah!" said Rainbow Dash, pleased to be making herself clear.

Applejack appeared to give it a few seconds more of consideration, and then finally shrugged. "Well, everypony's got their quirks, I reckon. Besides, it's been a while since I had a proper workout. How do you want to do this? Another of your fool Iron Pony competitions, or should I get Twilight or somepony down here to referee some plain wrestling, or –"

Rainbow Dash tackled her.

Blue and orange, weather pony and farm pony, the two old rivals rolled about Sweet Apple Acres in a ball of flying dirt and hair and feathers. Applejack's teeth, long-time bunkmates of Rainbow Dash's tail in moments of impetuosity, found purchase in new parts of the pegasus's body, and Rainbow Dash's wings buffeted the earth pony's legs and back in place of their more familiar skies. Twice the powerful, apple-bucking rear legs of Applejack nearly knocked the senses from Rainbow Dash, who retaliated by straining with her front hooves to shove her opponent down to the disturbed earth below them. Stray apples, absorbed by proximity into their rolling battle, became rudimentary weapons to be hurled or smeared violently into eyes and nostrils. Still, through it all, Rainbow Dash could not find it in herself to fully recast her inward frustrations into outward rage, and – for which fact she wasn't sure whether she was grateful or angered – she could tell that Applejack in turn wasn't giving the fight her all either. Too soon it was over and Applejack stood triumphant, two hooves holding Rainbow Dash carefully down to the ground and the other two planted firmly beside her for support, her mane completely frazzled, her coat dirty and bruised, and her face filled with concern where there ought to have been smugness and excitement.

"Sugarcube," she said, "I've had better fights than that from Braeburn, and he's got more tells than we've got apple trees. What's *eating* you, girl?"

Rainbow Dash twisted uselessly beneath her friend's strong hooves. "I'll tell you if you just get offa me for one sec! Stupid roughneck farmer..."

Applejack raised her eyebrows at her, very lazily. "And if I do, you'll jump me again?" Rainbow Dash was silent, so she continued. "Remember, Rainbow, you came here to talk to me too. We can do this the easy way, or I can keep on standing on top of you till you're ready to do this the easy way."

Rainbow Dash glowered. "Hate you. Yeah, let's talk."

"There's the Rainbow I know!" said Applejack with a wide grin. She stepped casually away, leaving Rainbow Dash to gasp for a moment in pain before standing back up. "You wanna sit over by the water? Let me just get my hat and I'll be right with you."

In a minute the two ponies sat against the side of an enormous apple tree, silently watching the ripples of the small pond below them. It was the sort of thing Rainbow Dash would have had no patience for, once upon a time, but Fluttershy and Ponyville had changed her in ways that she could still only partly comprehend. On the opposite side of the pond, Rainbow Dash could just make out the tree where Apple Bloom kept track of her growth by making notches in the wood. The young farmpony was nearly fully as large as her sister Applejack by now, her cutie mark long since appeared, but she and her two Crusader friends were as close as ever. That, Rainbow Dash supposed, was the best she could hope for now – a bond that remained unbroken, if unchanging.

"AJ..." said Rainbow Dash, after it became clear that her friend was not going to start the talking for her, "have you ever been in love?"

Applejack blinked. "This conversation about you or me, sugarcube?"

"Me! I mean, I guess. Why, is there a you to have this conversation about?"

"Hard to say," said Applejack. "None of us are getting any younger, Rainbow, and sometimes I get to noticing that a pony that I once thought I had nothing in common with – a pony who, by all rights, ought to have left Ponyville for bigger things a *long* time ago – might be more similar to me than I'd expected. And sometimes this pony says things in just this certain way, and winks just subtly enough to make me wonder if, just maybe, she mightn't be amenable to such a thing herself." She blinked again, and shook herself. "But I've been burned before, as you know, and as I hear it, *you're* the one with problems that need a little rough and tumble just to get you to loosen your lips. Can't

spend all day preening yourself at getting the Element of Honesty to reveal her inner secrets."

Rainbow Dash felt herself torn between what could lead to painful soul searching on the one hoof, and learning some juicy info about one – two? – of her best friends on the other. "Yeah!" she said ambiguously. "Uhh, but so, are you..."

"Nah, I don't think I'm in love exactly," said Applejack, anticipating her question. "Just... interested. But it sounds like you might be."

"Yeah."

"So... Pinkie or Fluttershy?"

Rainbow Dash stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Aww, come on, girl. Even Colgate can notice the mess of complicated emotions y'all three have got set up, and you know she's still a bit awkward around any of us but Twilight. Then Fluttershy and Pinkie get together, and that same day you disappear. It doesn't take much brains to put these things together."

"Wow." Rainbow Dash looked back at the waters. "I... I didn't know we three had any 'mess of complicated emotions.' Look, the rest of you aren't *jealous*, are you? I mean..."

Applejack scoffed and pulled her hat down. "Not right now we aren't! No, but seriously, Rainbow, we're all six good friends, *real* good friends, and that's all that matters. But you're stalling. Pinkie or Fluttershy?"

"Pinkie Pie," answered Rainbow Dash with a sigh.

Applejack whistled. "Well, I just lost ten bits, then, and I ain't telling you who to."

Rainbow Dash ignored her, her weariness from the fight fading away to be replaced with agitation. "This is all wrong! Don't you see, AJ? I can't be in love with Pinkie Pie while she's going out with Fluttershy – that's adultery! And I certainly can't steal her from my oldest friend!"

"Slow down there, honeybunch," said Applejack. "It's only adultery, or stealing her, if she goes along with it. Your heart's in the right place to be worrying 'bout Fluttershy, but that's still a mite presumptuous of you."

"Okay, fine! But still, if I *don't* steal her, I can't be in love with her! I mean, what'll that do to our friendship? What if, like, the whole six of us start to fall apart?"

Applejack chuckled quietly. "You know, I used to wonder if maybe those Elements of Harmony had maybe gotten us mixed up, and I was really the Loyal one and you Honesty, but I reckon they were right all along. Look at you, worried about everypony but yourself."

"So what?" Rainbow Dash flapped her wings in frustration. "I need advice here, Applejack, not dumb jokes about my great talent for selflessness or whatever!"

"Hey, now, that was a compliment, not a joke. Look... Rainbow, I really don't know if I'm your gal for this! Rarity, she's had all sorts of prospects from that Canterlot crowd, and you know she likes her romance stories. Twilight's got Colgate these days, so she's got some real life experience in the matter! But me? Rainbow, you know how I solve my problems here at the farm?"

Rainbow Dash smirked, always primed for an opportunity to tease a friend. "You kick them?"

"Exactly. I kick them until the apples fall down, and then I move on to the next problem and kick that one too."

"What's that supposed to mean?! ...are you saying I should tell her?"

"I ain't saying nothing at all, dang it! But you, Loyalty, are fretting about splitting up the group if you say some things that Pinkie and Fluttershy might not want to hear... keep in mind, they're Kindness and Laughter. I can't think of two ponies more likely to forgive you for what you have to say, if forgiveness is what you're looking for."

"So... Honesty, huh?"

Applejack smiled a little. "I stick to what I know, Rainbow. That's how Sweet Apple Acres is still running strong, year in, year out."

Rainbow Dash sensed an opportunity to stall. "So if you're so flipping honest, why won't you tell this other pony how *you* feel? Or even tell me who it is? Just because it didn't work out last time..."

Applejack visibly stiffened a little. "Because I've got better things to do with my time, that's why! I've got apples to buck, and, um, apples to buck, and..."

"Is it Rarity?"

"Ain't saying," said Applejack, staring fixedly at the water, but her blush was obvious.

"I'll tell you what," said Rainbow Dash, determined to get something less than agonizingly dangerous out of their conversation. "If you tell Rarity what you think of her, I'll explain myself to Pinkie Pie."

Applejack narrowed her eyes at her. "Counting on me as an excuse, are you? Well, all right, if that's how you want to play things –"

"I *dare* you to tell Rarity," said Rainbow Dash, eyes glinting wickedly.

Applejack rose to all four hooves and glowered. "I hate you."

"Then we're even!" Rainbow Dash sprung into the air and hovered a few feet above Applejack, ignoring the muted pain from her wings' new scrapes and bruises. "So, are we on or what?!"

"We're on," said Applejack, and then looked surprisingly serious. "Look, Rainbow... I do think they'll forgive you. But afterwards, be happy, y'hear? We don't want to lose our favorite arrogant, oversaturated, loose cannon, do-nothing superspeedster."

The next step on Rainbow Dash's loosely constructed agenda was finding Pinkie Pie and also Fluttershy if necessary. Part of her wanted to put the confrontation off, but years of being what Applejack had called a "loose cannon" had conditioned her to shun the very idea of putting things off, unless there was napping that could be done in the interim. Napping took precedence over most things, but at that moment – no matter the aches she still felt from some of Applejack's better-aimed kicks and bites – Rainbow Dash did not feel tired at all. She was... jittery. This was something really important, like a big race or meeting with the Wonderbolts or managing a tornado team, but for a change, it wasn't so important just because it was seriously awesome. There was a whole lot riding on how she was about to perform. Fortunately, Rainbow Dash was nothing if not a performer.

Rainbow Dash passed several other pegasi in the Ponyville airspace during her search, including Cloud Kicker, who was happy to learn that her fellow weather pony was more or less back in action. She refused, however, to be drawn into conversation, promising to review her schedule later that day when she had the time. She had a party pony to find, and find her she did, bouncing gaily about the Ponyville parkgrounds while beside her, Fluttershy knelt down to the river to feed a crowd of ducklings. Rainbow Dash settled into the branches of a tree to watch them.

Something had definitely changed between her two friends. Fluttershy, always full of kind smiles for everypony who consented to be kind to her as well, had a smile for Pinkie Pie that was far softer and more powerful than any of her regular ones: a smile which Pinkie returned. And Pinkie the madcap partier, the loose cannon to outfire Rainbow Dash's own, was stopping to help feed the ducklings, stopping to cradle some of them with the same tenderness she had shown to Pound and Pumpkin Cake in their infancy. Sometimes too she would unerringly pick out the braver ducklings among the brood and place them in her massive poufy pink mane, giving them the ride of their young lives as she bounced back and forth across the bridge that spanned their river home. In the tree above them, Rainbow Dash found herself hesitating. This was so far beyond sappy it was downright sentimental. Oughtn't she come back and try again at a better time?

"Hi there Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash jumped completely out of her skin and whirled around. There in the tree next to her sat Pinkie Pie, face an enormous grin of inexplicably immaculate teeth, the biggest and most beautiful blue eyes in all of Equestria gazing at her in delight. "Pinkie?"

she asked, ignoring how obvious the answer was. "But... but you were down there! I was watching you!"

"And you were up here and I decided to watch you instead!" said Pinkie Pie. "You sure do like hanging out in trees, Dashie! Do all pegasi like trees? Should I get Pound a tree for his next birthday?"

Rainbow Dash felt a curious sensation as her friend called her "Dashie," but did her best to ignore it. "What?" she asked instead. "No, uh, I mean, probably not? Look, Pinkie, I need to talk to you..."

But "Oh, hello, Rainbow Dash!" came from behind her, and Rainbow Dash turned around again, this time to see Fluttershy hovering in the air before her, wings flapping rhythmically and unconsciously on either side. Long gone were the days of Fluttershy being too petrified to fly up the side of a mountain, and just as long gone were the days Rainbow Dash would have had it in her heart to deride her mercilessly for that. Rainbow Dash stared into that innocent smile and wondered just what it was she was there to accomplish.

"Hey Flutters!" said Pinkie from behind her. "Dashie just wanted to talk to me about something!"

"Really?" Fluttershy flapped closer. "Can I hear it too? You've been kind of missing these last few days, Rainbow Dash, and we've all been worried about you..."

Even though the confrontation had been her idea to begin with, Rainbow Dash was beginning to feel trapped between the two lovebirds. She gulped. "You too? Um, yeah, sure, I guess..."

"Rainbow Dash," said Pinkie abruptly, "you're hurt!"

Rainbow Dash shuddered as a surprisingly gentle pink hoof ran its way across her newly won wounds. "Huh? Oh, yeah, I got those from Applejack. No big deal."

Fluttershy gasped, her front hooves covering her mouth in a moment of shock. "You got in a fight with Applejack?"

Pinkie leaned dangerously far forward. "Applejack attacked you?!"

"No! I mean, more the other way around..."

"*You attacked Applejack?*" they both asked, this time in unison.

Rainbow Dash sank her head into her front hooves. "Somepony'll *hear* you guys! Look, it's really no big deal! I had some energy, she was bored, we had a quick fight. Sometimes friends do that."

"Oh, good," said Fluttershy. "So you don't hate her or anything?"

"Well, we did both say that we hated each other, and... no, it's not like that!" This was all going completely wrong. If this were a race in Cloudsdale, she'd have started off going backwards, crashed into several clouds while recovering, and then probably also set her tail on fire. She gave up. "We're *totally cool*, I swear. Just a friendly fight. Look, I really have to go do, umm... weather. Weather... things. With clouds. I'll catch you girls later!"

"Dashie?" asked Pinkie Pie before she could even jump out of the tree, and Rainbow Dash felt herself sitting back down to stare into that gorgeous, inquisitive face. "Didn't you want to talk to me about something?"

"We're your friends, Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy. "It looks like there's something bothering you, and if it's not too much of an imposition... we'd really like to help."

"Do you need a party?" asked Pinkie. "I've never thrown a party in a tree before, but I bet I could find a way! Maybe instead of balloons, there could be robins' eggs! Flutters, you could find me some robin eggs to borrow, right?"

"Of course," said Fluttershy, "but you'd have to promise me you'd take *very* good care of them. So, um... Rainbow Dash?"

Just like Applejack, her friends had seen there was something bothering her and they wanted to know what it was. And Rainbow Dash was not a very *private* pony. In her youth she had practically idolized Spitfire and Soarin' and the rest of the big name performers, and her admiration for them had only dulled, not vanished, with age. She had grown accustomed to having a fan club, and nopony could deny how much she loved to show off, although some found that a more positive quality in her than others. Sitting in that tree, being asked to explain her feelings, her friends interested in what was going on in her life... it felt like an invitation for a performance. For better or worse, Rainbow Dash was nothing if not a performer.

"Okay," she said. "Pinks, I know you're all into Pinkie Promises and all, but have either of you guys had a secret – not, like, somepony else's secret, but one of your own – that you felt really bad for keeping? Like, it was kind of burning you up inside?"

Pinkie nodded grimly. "I really ate *ten* of Mrs. Cake's corncakes," she said, as though it was the most heinous act in the world. Rainbow Dash, not really sure what she was talking about, decided not to press the issue.

"I was afraid to admit I was afraid of dragons," said Fluttershy. "Um, is that what you mean?"

"Maybe?" said Rainbow Dash. "Uh, so... I guess I need to tell you two things. Number one, Pinkie: I like you. Okay? I like you a lot, like, more than just as a friend, and I have for a while. You're great. But I'm not going to do anything about it, because...

"Because, number two: you two are great together. I can't say I *understand* it, you're so different, but you're obviously making each other happy and I would have to be a pretty awful pony to try to get in the way of that. You two are two of the greatest friends a gal could ask for, and I'm... I'm really happy you two are happy. Does that make sense? Like, if a big dragon ever shows up and wants to destroy your relationship or something like that, just point me at him, and I'll send him packing for you. You're worth it, and I wouldn't want to throw away our friendship for *anything*."

Rainbow Dash stopped talking, seeing that her two friends were looking at each other. She tried to read their expressions. Was that... concern? Curiosity? *Hope*? Ugh, subtlety of expression was so hard to deal with! She found herself growing increasingly uncomfortable as the silence progressed. She had messed up, she was sure of it. She had messed up, and said too much, and now they would never want to see her again and Twilight would drift away and Applejack would have been totally misreading Rarity and none of them would be friends anymore and –

"Okay, Rainbow Dash," said Pinkie suddenly, "that's like super-duper interesting! And Fluttershy and I are going to go down there and talk about it for a minute – just a minute or two! – and then we'll be *right back* and have an answer for you!"

"We just need to talk," said Fluttershy, her voice gentle, "but we really will come right back and please don't be worried."

Pinkie Pie ruffled Rainbow Dash's colorful mane, and then they both descended to the park below – Fluttershy flapping slowly earthward, and Pinkie Pie making an enormous leap and ending up in the river by mistake – while Rainbow Dash sat there with no idea what was going on. Talk? What in Equestria did they need to talk about? How much of a jerk she was? Why the hay had she even come here to begin with? She wasn't here to be loyal; she was here because she was incredibly selfish and wanted everything to go her

way. This was all wrong. If she acted quickly enough she could be out of this tree, maybe even out of Ponyville before they noticed, and all her friends could be happy without her screwing things up for them and –

"Hi again Rainbow Dash!"

Right. There was basically no way she'd be able to escape Ponyville without Pinkie Pie being magically able to track her down. And, somehow, being completely dry despite falling into the river just a few seconds ago. Time to face the music, then. "Hi, Pinkie."

"All right," said Pinkie, who was once again in the tree without Rainbow Dash having the faintest idea of how she had gotten there. "We're going to tell you kind of a weird idea, and it would be really great if you could wait until we're done before you say anything, okay?" She winked. "I mean, I know I tell you weird ideas *all the time*, sometimes while you're trying to sleep, sometimes while *I'm* trying to sleep, but this one is kinda weird even for me! But that's okay, because it might be super awesome as well as just weird, like the time I thought to mix lemon ice cream with artichokes and Rarity thought I had gone *completely loco*" – her eyes rolled around in her head illustratively – "and then –"

"Pinkie," said Rainbow Dash, "I get it. I like super awesome ideas. What's up?"

"Well..." said Pinkie, "Fluttershy and I... we're not necessarily *exclusive*, I guess. Does that make sense?"

"Pinkie," said Fluttershy, once again hovering nearby them, "you told her not to say anything until we were done explaining."

"Oh, right! I totally did do that, didn't I? Okay, I'll just assume that made sense, then. I'm not saying we're in a totally open relationship, because we're not, but it wouldn't be impossible if I wanted to see you too. And you're, like, super cute and cool and exciting and I love doing stuff with you, so I don't see why not!"

Fluttershy smiled softly. "Pinkie has a very big heart," she said, "and there's room for a lot of love in there."

"So you do, Fluttersh!"

"Thank you, Pinkie. You see, Rainbow Dash... Pinkie and I are very happy together so far. We'd been close for a long time, and she's good for me, and I think I'm good for her too." Pinkie gave her a wordless nuzzle by way of response. "But she can be a very, um, *energetic* pony, and I'm really not, and we've both worried that she might try to change

herself in order to accommodate me. One idea we had is that it would be good for Pinkie to have another major pony in her life, somepony who's a little bit more active than I am, so she can feel totally comfortable with who she is. Um, like she should! We were kind of stuck at figuring out who that pony could be, though, and what Pinkie's relationship with them would be, and how *that* relationship would relate to *our* relationship, and... well, we were kind of stuck."

"But the good kind of stuck," said Pinkie, "with lots of makeouts!"

"Um. Aheh."

"So then you showed up!" continued Pinkie. "And Fluttershy and I looked at each other and thought, hey, wait a minute, Rainbow Dash is *totally* a super active pony, and I like her, and apparently she likes me, and why don't we do this with her? I can be in a relationship with *both* of you and then everypony will be happy all the time forever!"

"And Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy, "please understand that this is *very* important and we probably wouldn't offer this to *anypony* else. Pinkie likes you a lot, and you're my very oldest friend in all of Equestria, and that's why we can trust you with this. I think a lot of ponies in this position would try to *take* Pinkie from me, but I don't think you're like that. I think Pinkie Pie can be in love with me, and she can be in love with you, and those can be two separate things and that's something we can both be okay with."

"We don't really have any of the details worked out yet," said Pinkie, "but I did some quick math and I took the number of makeouts I'm getting now, and if I was in a relationship with you too, I'd get roughly twice that number! So what do you say?"

• • •

Rarity leant eagerly forward. "And? What *did* you say?"

"Guess."

The white unicorn pursed her lips in obvious thought. The two of them were in the main chamber of the Carousel Boutique, where, for reasons she was still not entirely clear on, Rainbow Dash had flown immediately after talking to Pinkie and Fluttershy. Rarity, seeing that her friend needed to talk, had shooed her customers out of the building with coupons for their next visit and hung a large "CLOSED" sign across the door, and Rainbow Dash was enjoying the resultant peace and quiet.

"I suppose," she said at last, "that you weighed the many and varied pros and cons of the situation, and thought over your long history with Fluttershy, and were very touched by her trust in you, and..."

Rainbow Dash burst out laughing. "Nah! I just said yes right away. I mean, seriously, Rare! A few hours ago I had given up all hope of getting a relationship with Pinkie – or, well, I *think* I had, it's kind of hard to tell – and then they said I could have one anyway! Of course I was going to agree! But now I get the feeling I've entered into some sort of super-complicated super-emotional super-difficult agreement with a couple of my best friends and I don't even know what to call it."

"Polyamory."

Rainbow Dash blinked at Rarity. "Come again?"

"Polyamory. What you're trying to build with Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy is called a polyamorous relationship."

"Okay," said Rainbow Dash, "fine. So I know what it's called. But what I really need to know is how I'm going to make it work!"

"Yes," said Rarity, "quite. Well, darling, I will of course do anything in my power to help, but I must confess to being somewhat at a loss as to why you came to *me*. What makes me so much more qualified than our other friends to advise you?"

Rainbow Dash, who was still not entirely sure why her subconscious had led her there either, considered. "Umm... well, I already talked to Applejack," she said. "She'd just tell me to kick things. Girl thought I might have a crush on *Fluttershy*, of all ponies!"

Rarity's laughter filled the room like a wind chime. "Oh, please! Anypony with a lick of sense in her head could see the way you looked at Pinkie. In fact, I believe I have won ten bits on the matter... although, ah, I certainly shan't tell you from whom!" She glanced at Rainbow Dash's skeptical expression, and rushed quickly ahead. "But what about dear Twilight? She is, after all, the only one of the three of us who is actually *in* a relationship just now, to say nothing of a happy, healthy one."

Rainbow Dash frowned. It had been tough to get so much as an opinion out of Applejack, but Rarity was already proving quite cutting with her questions, and they had barely even touched on the issue she was actually there about. "Well," she said slowly, "I guess... that's kind of the problem. I mean, she's in a relationship with *Colgate*."

"Rainbow Dash," said Rarity, her eyes narrowing, "if you are here to deride Twilight's choice of romantic partner, I'm afraid I am going to have to ask you to leave, no matter your present troubles. What I have seen of Colgate suggests only that she is a *lovely* mare, and Twilight seems *very* happy."

"What? No, no, that's not what I mean!" Rainbow Dash looked nervously at Rarity and saw the unicorn was clearly still unconvinced. "It's nothing about who Colgate *is*, it's that she's not one of us! I mean, the six of us have been friends for quite a while now, and here I am proposing to get into some kind of relationship with not one, but *two* of our friends? I guess I'm worried that she might take that as some sort of... rebuke. For, like, daring to go outside the group for romance. Not that I believe that, but what if she took it that way?"

Rarity's expression softened. "Well, that makes a little more sense, I suppose. But that's only three of us. I'm sure you're aware that I have had various... *connections* in the past few years, however short-lived. Why would Twilight come to such a conclusion?"

"Sure, yeah," said Rainbow Dash, "but what about you and..." She stopped. Rainbow Dash was hardly a tactful pony, but in this case she was immediately aware that she had said too much. She hoped she was imagining it, though she could never be sure when dealing with unicorns, but she got a definite feeling that the room around them had just gotten a little bit darker. In addition, she suddenly noticed that every window in the building appeared to be locked.

"Yes, darling?" asked Rarity, her voice dangerous in its extreme politeness. "Was there something you were going to say?"

"Huh? Oh, no, no! You know me, always shooting off at the mouth, can't believe everything you hear..."

"Really? Because it sounded to me for a moment there as if, perhaps, you had access to some information that I would be dearly interested in hearing about. Concerning, perhaps, a mutual acquaintance of ours?"

"Aheh, nope! Same old insensitive Rainbow Dash, doesn't know a thing about how any of her friends are feeling. And you know what, I can tell you're *very* busy today" – she did her best to ignore the completely empty building, which seemed to be getting even darker – "so maybe I had better just be going, I mean, I'm sure I can figure out this stuff with Pinkie and Fluttershy all my own."

"Oh, Rainbow Dash," said Rarity, her voice now kind instead of terrifying. "Please. Fluttershy is my very closest friend, and the two of you saved my life. You have saved my life on your own as well, even when you had precious little reason to do so, and Pinkie... is a very distinctive individual. I wish all of you nothing but the purest of happiness and am *honored* to offer you whatever help and advice I can. That said," and her demeanor changed completely, "I would still be interested in knowing what it was you were going to say just now."

Rainbow Dash's mind raced in search of a way out. "Well, maybe I don't want to tell you!" she said, somewhat lamely. "Maybe... maybe I made a Pinkie Promise not to! Huh? Ever thought of that?"

"Darling, darling, darling. *Darling*. Let me remind you that I am a unicorn, and I can lock any door or window you might think to exit from long before you could reach it. Moreover, I have an extensive collection of outfits that I would find perfectly *divine* on you but which you, I'm sure, would completely detest. And oh my, just think of the wonderful publicity for the both of us if I were to take a few photographs with this camera that I conveniently happen to have! With your distinctive coloring, my designs could appear on the front page of every magazine in Equestria! – more than they already do, of course – and your name too could make its way to the lips of high society, for how well styled you are." An incredibly elaborate dress began to levitate its way into Rainbow Dash's field of vision. "Now, we can do this the easy way or we can do this the fabulous way."

"OKAY!" Rainbow Dash practically exploded upward before coming to a halt five or six feet above Rarity, her wings flapping in extreme agitation. Around her, the room returned to its natural levels of lighting. "Okay, fine! I'll tell you! You win! But first we have to talk about *my* problems, or otherwise you're going to start mooning over *whoever it is* and this whole stupid visit will be completely wasted."

"I," said Rarity, "do not *moon*. Still, I see your point! You came here with a purpose, and it is my duty – nay, my privilege – as your friend to assist you." She looked genuinely contrite. "I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash, truly. How can I help you?"

Rainbow Dash allowed herself to descend slowly back down to the boutique floor, still wary for further danger signs. "Well..." she began, noticing that she did not actually have an answer for that question. "You just said how close you and Fluttershy are, and I'm sure she uses you as a confy... confidante?" Rarity nodded. "And, y'know, I've been kinda out of the loop for the past few days. Can you tell me about her and Pinkie Pie? If we're both going after the same girl, I should know something about the other side."

Rarity sighed. "Rainbow Dash... you're not *going after* the same girl."

"Huh?"

"No. Look, polyamory was quite in vogue a few months ago, so I have a *little* sense of how this works. There's not really such a thing as a 'normal' polyamorous relationship – although, I suspect there is no such thing as a 'normal' monogamous relationship either, surprising as that might be – but it *is* important that the relationship be stable and consensual. You and Fluttershy aren't "going after" Pinkie Pie, because you both *already have* her. And, moreover, you are both constantly and completely okay with the *other* having her."

Rainbow Dash scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. "Heh... yeah. Sorry, I guess that was a bad choice of words. You're right! I've totally got Pinkie, and Fluttershy does too, and everything's awesome!"

"Lovely. Now, dear, I really should be sure... this relationship of yours, it is a single line with three points, yes? Or perhaps two lines, but certainly not a triangle?"

Rainbow Dash repeated her earlier "huh?"

"You and Fluttershy are not planning to fall in love, too, are you? Pinkie Pie is the only really polyamorous one in the relationship?"

"Psssh, yeah!" said Rainbow Dash. "Can you imagine me and Fluttershy together?"

"No," said Rarity smugly, "I have a little more romantic sense than our dear Applejack. But let's talk about Fluttershy, shall we? I can tell you what she has told me about Pinkie Pie, because I can't imagine any of it should be held private from you, given your new arrangement. Although that does raise the question: why don't you simply ask her yourself?"

"Huh. Um..."

"Take your time."

Rainbow Dash grunted. She hated it when her friends knew more about something than her and made a point of showing it off. "I guess... I guess I don't know how I'm supposed to treat her now," she said. "Like, what is she? She's not my lover, but she's not exactly my friend, at least not in this context."

"No?"

"No! ...yes? Maybe?"

Rarity laughed softly. "Oh, my poor, brave Rainbow Dash. I only wish I had answers for you. I don't think Fluttershy will ever *stop* being your friend, but she may well have to be something more. Something... in addition. Something that I don't think anypony but the two of you, or else the three of you, can or should try to define. Never, ever hate her, Rainbow Dash. The girl you love is in love with Fluttershy, and that must always be something you must accept, or better, be happy about. Pinkie's time with Fluttershy is a *good* thing for you, whether or not you'll ever comprehend that."

Rainbow Dash glared at her. "Wait a minute," she said after a moment's consideration, "I know what's going on here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"This is just like Applejack all over again. Her idea of a plan was for me to be Honest with Pinkie, and now here you are telling me to be Generous with Pinkie. Right?"

Rarity looked thoughtful for several seconds. "Rainbow Dash," she asked, "what do you think Generosity *is*?"

"Giving stuff away! Like when you made us all dresses, or that other time you made us all dresses, or..."

"Yes, well," said Rarity with an embarrassed cough, "we do all stick to what we know, I suppose. If I *didn't* make you dresses, would we still be friends?"

"Of course! Come on, Rare, what kind of dumb question is that? We'd have to be pretty awful to be your friends only because you give us stuff."

"Exactly. But Generosity is supposed to be one of the Elements of Harmony, one of the core components of this elusive Friendship. So what should I be doing with it?" For the first time, Rainbow Dash noticed that her friend seemed no longer entirely confident about the conversation. Maybe she wasn't fishing for one particular answer anymore. "I suppose that to be Generous is to put aside one's own interests. But if I give you a dress" – she giggled at Rainbow Dash's look of skepticism – "or get rid of some customers so that I can talk to you, or rearrange my schedule to spend time with Sweetie Belle, or anything like that, I'm not really putting aside my own interests. I do things because I *want* to do them! Helping you is so much more valuable than a few bits here or there."

Really, Rainbow Dash, either I have the easiest element of them all, or else I have the hardest and I simply don't know what it is I'm supposed to be doing."

Rainbow Dash decided to risk giving her friend one of her rare compliments. "Well, you're doing a pretty bang-up job as far as I can tell."

"Thank you," said Rarity, sounding completely genuine. "I guess, Rainbow Dash, my point is... no. No, I don't think you should be Generous with dear Pinkie Pie, lest you think that letting her spend time with Fluttershy is somehow *bad* for you. If you love this girl, as you tell me you do, you want her to be happy above all things, and you and I both know that spending time with the ponies she loves is the very best way to make Pinkie Pie happy. I suppose what you should do is be Loyal to her."

"Huh," said Rainbow Dash. "So what you're saying is I should be myself!"

"Oh, heavens no! You should be somepony *much* smarter and more sensitive than that."

Rainbow Dash flared her wings, ready to fight, but stopped when she saw the fashionista unicorn laughing merrily. After a few seconds of mild fuming, she began to laugh as well, eventually heading over to nuzzle Rarity affectionately. She forgot sometimes how much fun all of her friends could be.

Something caught her attention from the corner of her eye, and Rainbow Dash looked out the front window. "Hey, I should go, Rarity," she said. "Looks like you've got a customer."

Rarity frowned. "I closed the boutique so that we could talk, Rainbow Dash. Unless you think we're done here?"

"Well, it's not just any customer," said Rainbow Dash, moving aside so that Rarity could peek out the window herself. Along the pathway to the boutique was walking Applejack, a look of frightened determination on her face, holding in her mouth what Rainbow Dash strongly suspected was exactly ten bits' worth of Roseluck's best.

Beside her, Rarity froze up. "Rainbow Dash," she said faintly, "listen to me very closely. You are going to go outside and talk to Applejack for no less than three minutes, which time I will use to freshen myself up. If she asks, you will say nothing of our discussion. At the end of those three minutes, you will allow her to enter, and then you will leave. *Immediately and with no caveats*. Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal," said Rainbow Dash with a grin. "Good luck!"

As she approached the door, she was suddenly waylaid by Rarity engulfing her in an enormous hug that completely cut off her ability to breathe. "Roses!" said the unicorn. "She's bringing me *red roses*! Rainbow Dash, I have no idea what you said to that impossible farmer, but it worked! Thank you, and oh Rainbow Dash, good luck to you too!"

With that she fled into the depths of the Carousel Boutique, leaving Rainbow Dash to fly outside, bemused, and narrate once again the story of her meeting with Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie.

When Rainbow Dash used to wonder at her lack of clear home, she never expected she would come to lose track of her *house* as well.

It wasn't that her physical cloud house had gone missing; it still floated above Ponyville, dripping rainbow juice, requiring only occasional adjustments to make sure it didn't drift too far away or get lost in the Everfree Forest. But with Rainbow Dash's new relationship came a need to define locations for being together, and that proved complicated. Pinkie, Rainbow Dash was mostly certain, could not *actually* fly, and Twilight was only so willing to cast repeat cloud-walking spells on her, so they couldn't spend too much time up there. Pinkie still lived in Sugarcube Corner, where she was coming to take on more and more responsibilities, but that place was not as spacious as it had used to be. The Cakes' children whom Pinkie had once learned to change and burp were growing up, needing more and more room, and neither Rainbow Dash nor the Cakes were comfortable with the children running around and catching Pinkie and Rainbow Dash in potentially compromising moments. This left only Fluttershy's house, and so Rainbow Dash frequently found herself in the unusual position of needing to visit her girlfriend's other girlfriend in order to spend time with her.

Fortunately, as Rarity had suggested on that first, overpacked day, Fluttershy was more than just Rainbow Dash's girlfriend's other girlfriend. She was also her oldest friend, and while that relationship certainly had to be continually renegotiated, it did not softly and silently vanish away. Whenever Pinkie or Twilight or anypony else brought up the subject, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were quick to make assurances that they were great friends. There was nothing, absolutely nothing that Rainbow Dash would feel uncomfortable telling Fluttershy, and there was nothing that Fluttershy believed Rainbow Dash couldn't do if she put her mind to it, and they were still the absolute best of friends. If anything, they had to put in conscious effort to spend time with their *other* friends, they saw each other and Pinkie so frequently.

And so when Aerilyn's Aerial Aerodeo soared into town, Rainbow Dash recruited Applejack instead of Fluttershy to be her cheering section while she trained. The earth pony was far more experienced in rodeo techniques, albeit grounded ones, and there was never any danger that she might inflate Rainbow Dash's expectations beyond what was reasonable. Applejack was as free with criticism as she was with praise, and Rainbow Dash's skills soared. She did miss the feeling of being praised by somepony who thought she could do no wrong, and even when she did do wrong, well, she had tried very hard and was sure to get it right the next time – but she saw Fluttershy all the time! Sometimes they would all three would go out cloudgazing, and Rainbow Dash would think that a

cloud looked like a falcon, and Pinkie would agree with her, and Fluttershy would think that same cloud looked like an otter, and Pinkie would manage to agree with her too.

(Pinkie bought front row tickets for the Aerodeo for herself and Fluttershy, with the help of Twilight's cloud-walking spell, and Rainbow Dash had never been happier to see that enormous foam finger raised gleefully in the air. And when Fluttershy missed her triumphant first place finish in the stormcloud-tying event because she was looking at Pinkie at the time... well, it only hurt a little, because she was quick to praise Rainbow Dash for it later on at home. Still, the victory never felt quite as meaningful as Rainbow Dash had expected it would.)

When the time came for the annual butterfly migration, Fluttershy invited Rarity instead of Rainbow Dash to accompany her. The unicorn was entranced with the little insects, and their excursion led to the creation of her popular Glimmer Wings fashion line, which even Rainbow Dash agreed to model for her despite having perfectly good wings of her own. Pinkie thought, and Rainbow Dash agreed, that Rarity made for a better butterfly-watching companion anyway, since she was much less likely to spend half the time making dirty jokes about their flying formations to try and get Fluttershy to blush. Besides, they spent plenty of time together doing other things; sometimes when Pinkie had fallen asleep in the middle of a late night conversation, the two of them would recount stories of how Pinkie had done this on one of their dates, or said that, and laugh fondly at the antics of their mutual beloved.

(Rainbow Dash hadn't originally planned to model the Glimmer Wings line, and when Fluttershy suggested she give it a try, she laughed it off. But Rarity did have a way with words, and Applejack a way with blackmail. As for the butterfly migration: part of her did remember a conversation she'd once had with Fluttershy where she had asked why Fluttershy invited her to such boring things. Fluttershy had answered that she loved challenging Rainbow Dash to try out new things, because someday her brave friend was sure to find herself loving something she'd never have expected, just like she had with reading. Also, if it wasn't too presumptuous, Fluttershy was always flattered that Rainbow Dash would be willing to do things just because she knew that her friend enjoyed them. And then Rainbow Dash had had to admit that yes, she had never once actually turned down one of Fluttershy's invitations. So when Rarity was invited instead of her, it did hurt, though only a little.)

When apple cider season began, using for the first time the new and more streamlined means of production that Rarity had introduced into Sweet Apple Acres, it was Twilight instead of Fluttershy whom Rainbow Dash dragged from her bed in the early hours of the morning. The first cider of the season was always the best, and the old egghead was

never going to discover that without a little help. Pinkie, of course, was camped out at the very front of the line, and she was perfectly happy to share her spot with a lover and a close friend. Together the three of them made plans for a joint Applejack and Rarity party for the end of cider season, with Pinkie providing the more specialized party knowledge, Twilight handling some of the advanced logistics, and Rainbow Dash offering up raw ideas and enthusiasm to be molded into solid plans by her two compatriots. When Fluttershy arrived somewhat later, also getting to share Pinkie's tent with them, she didn't have much to contribute to the party conversation, but Rainbow Dash was nevertheless glad to see her because they were the very best of friends.

(The sunlight was overly bright that morning, making it hard to see Fluttershy's expression when she appeared, but Rainbow Dash thought for just a moment that it might have looked slightly hurt. She wasn't 100% sure, though, and it would have been presumptuous to say anything about it, no matter how guilty she found herself feeling later on.)

When Fluttershy somehow managed to net a combined concert for herself and her bird choir, playing in the royal theater in Canterlot of all places, it was from Sweetie Belle that Rainbow Dash first heard about it. By that time, Pinkie had already successfully organized a test audience of randomly picked ponies to deal with any of Fluttershy's lingering stage fright. When questioned, Rainbow Dash's friends assured her that they hadn't mentioned the concert because they assumed she already knew about it, and Fluttershy, bashfully, said that she was so used to Rainbow Dash knowing everything she did that bringing it up had completely slipped her mind. Neither of them said that part of the reason they knew so much about each other's activities was how much time they both spent with Pinkie. All in all there was no pony that Rainbow Dash could rightfully find to *blame* for her taking so long to hear about the concert, and she splurged and got front row tickets for herself and Pinkie to see it.

(A conversation with Medley the day of the concert ended up going longer than Rainbow Dash had anticipated, causing her to miss her train. She did manage to make it to the concert, about halfway in, and guiltily slid into her seat next to Pinkie. Because Fluttershy never mentioned noticing her late arrival, Rainbow Dash never quite saw the need to apologize for it, and after all, she was clueless enough about music that her praise was all quite generic and there was no way that Fluttershy could have noticed it all dealt with the material from the second half of the show. That night, as Fluttershy lay cradled in Pinkie's hooves on her living room couch, Rainbow Dash thought she could just make out tears in her friend's eyes – and thought for a moment that she might be on the verge of crying herself – but quite reasonably identified their source as extreme happiness at

the show's huge success. The fact that she'd never have so extended a conversation with Medley before, and never did so again, didn't seem very important.)

When the pegasus waterspout generation duties rotated back to Ponyville, Rainbow Dash was once again put in charge, Scootaloo standing pluckily at her side. Fluttershy performed about as well as any other pegasus on the team, neither noticeably poorly nor noticeably well, and Rainbow Dash found no reason to give her special treatment or ask specifically how she was doing. To do so would have been disrespectful of her friend's skills as a pegasus and her success in boosting her self-confidence, and Rainbow Dash had nothing but respect for Fluttershy. Still, their victory when they smashed the previous wingpower record felt oddly empty to her, and she made a note to let Scootaloo take charge instead the next time.

All in all, as the moments of "instead of Fluttershy" and "instead of Rainbow Dash" slowly increased, they also faded away. Not including Fluttershy became less and less a *conscious* decision until eventually Rainbow Dash gravitated towards Pinkie, or Twilight, or Applejack or Rarity or maybe the two of them together, by *default*. When one of her friends would ask casually if she didn't usually do such and such a thing with Fluttershy, she'd answer yes, she guessed so, but the two of them were spending so much time together these days that she had to be sure to see her other awesome pals once in a while too! Besides, Fluttershy wasn't really *into* this sort of thing; she'd just used to do it so Rainbow Dash wouldn't be unhappy, but it'd be pretty lousy of her to keep on putting her friend into that kind of situation, right? And if she was talking to Twilight at the time, she'd be sure to throw in an anecdote or two about just how well she and Fluttershy and Pinkie were all getting along, because Twilight and Colgate were *so Luna-damned perfect together* and there was no way that Rainbow Dash was going to let Twilight look better than her at something.

Meanwhile her relationship with Pinkie was a thrill ride to end all thrill rides, and would definitely have made everything worthwhile had there been anything wrong to make worthwhile in the first place. Rainbow Dash's lot in the relationship was dealing with Pinkie's more active side, and they both flung themselves into that: Rainbow Dash to prove how awesome and devoted she was, and Pinkie Pie because she was Pinkie Pie. When Fluttershy baked with Pinkie, the results were delicate, perfectly-balanced confections that Rarity would have been happy to sell had they been clothes instead of cupcakes; when Rainbow Dash tried her hoof at it, the kitchen ended up a mess and the desserts were of questionable quality at best, but she had rarely laughed harder in all her days. Fluttershy and Pinkie liked to take walks together and marvel at all the wonders of the world around them; Rainbow Dash and Pinkie raced. The fastest pegasus in Equestria could never figure out how the pink earth pony could keep up with her

wherever she went, and eventually stopped trying after one day when she got caught staring curiously at Pinkie's long slender legs.

Pinkie giggled and pranced around. "Gee, Rainbow Dash, staring much? My little Pinkie legs are going to melt right off if you keep looking at them like that, and then you'd have to carry me around with you like a swan!"

Rainbow Dash didn't bother complaining that nopony ever carried around swans. Instead she grinned at her girlfriend, embarrassed, and explained how she was trying to figure out how Pinkie could move so fast.

"That's a great question!" said Pinkie. "Do you think we could strap a camera to me? I like cameras! But what if we figured out the answer and it took away all the mystery? I kind of like mystery, Rainbow Dash, don't you? After all, remember what you always call me?"

Rainbow Dash kept grinning. "Pinkie Pie," she said for the thousandth time, "you are *so* random."

Not that there was anything wrong with random; random was fine. Actually, random was awesome! Random was sneaking into Sugarcube Corner at three in the morning in search of day-old donuts, only to discover that Pinkie had gotten a feeling she'd come by and was already baking a fresh batch just for her. Random was signing up for Pepperdance's flamenco lessons together, and going in to Rarity to get appropriate outfits together, and then swapping costumes with one another at the very last minute before their performance, much to the dressmaker's mortification. Random was getting off work for the day and descending earthwards in a bright spiral of clouds and miniature thunderclaps to find Pinkie below, likewise just off of work and waiting for her, full of wide open eyes, wide open smile, wide open hooves, wide open heart.

"Gee, Dashie, what do you want to do today?"

"The same thing we do every day, Pinkie –" and she would lean in close with that knowing look that Pinkie could never get enough of, "– everything!"

Random was taking pranksmaanship to a whole new level, so that even the victim felt part of the orchestration and was just as pleased as they were with how well it had come off. Random was flying blocks of ice down from mountaintops so that Pinkie could go ice-skating on the lake in summer, and then trying to join her, and then ending up skating so fast that she set the ice on fire by mistake and they had to swim to shore. Random was... random was... random was random. Rainbow Dash never once had the

experience of idly proposing some wonderful idea only to have to write it off as too elaborate, because Pinkie was always ready to find a way with her to make it work, just so long as the idea didn't involve leaving Ponyville. She would never leave Fluttershy. But so long as they kept themselves within the confines of the city, Rainbow Dash was confident that she could do anything at all, anywhere she pleased, and Pinkie would reward her with equal parts admiration and adoration. Pinkie was her lover and her fan. Her coolest fan. Her number one fan.

Her number one fan.

So time passed. Rainbow Dash's relationship with Pinkie retained many of its qualities and activities from the days of their friendship alone, but with added dimensions of intimacy and sensuality. Had they been or desired to be more complicated ponies, they would have had long and heartfelt discussions about their fears and aspirations, but both were content to wear their hearts on their flanks. They still found time to hang out with their other friends, and were polite enough to save their more involved explorations of one another's lips and bodies for when they were alone, Rainbow Dash knowing each time she tasted Pinkie that those same sensations were shared with another pony who deserved them every bit as much as she did. Pinkie Pie tasted like sugar and creamsicles and fresh cherries, and Rainbow Dash was forever impressed by how perfectly she distributed herself between her two partners, with equal time and excitement given happily to each of them.

This state of affairs might have progressed quite indefinitely had not Pinkie one night, just before going to bed, looked at them and said she worried that they were both sad about something.

"Sad?" asked Fluttershy. Her pink mane shone in the starlight around them and she already looked saddened for having upset her girlfriend. "What do you mean, Pinkie?"

For her part, Rainbow Dash scoffed. "Yeah, right! What do I have to be sad about? I've got the greatest girlfriend in all of Equestria, and plenty of awesome friends for when she's busy!"

"But what if that's the problem, Dashie?" asked Pinkie Pie, and yawned hugely. "I mean, sometimes you busy yourself with our friends because I'm busy with Flutters, but if I'm busy getting busy with her then you can't be busy with her at all unless I'm there too and then you're really busying yourself with *me* and nothing's changed!" She stopped, appearing to have confused even herself, but then brightened. "Ooh, unless you hang out together all the time up in the sky where I can't see it! Do you?!"

Fluttershy glanced at Rainbow Dash, evidently worried. "Umm... not exactly, no."

"See? Remember back when you two used to hang out all the time? Well not really *all the time* all the time, more like *some* of the time all the time, but still! I just don't get it! You guys are friends, right?"

"Pssh, duh!" said Rainbow Dash. "Why wouldn't we be? It's just with you around, Pinkie, we..."

Fluttershy looked as lost for words as Rainbow Dash suddenly felt. "We..."

Pinkie giggled inappropriately. "Aww, you girls! I know I'm super sweet and make you happy and all, but you should really make each other happy too, don't you think? That's what friends do! Unless I guess if you two fell in love with each other too then everything would work out, but that sounds pretty tricky. I dunno! Just promise me you'll hang out together soon, okay? Pinkie Promise?"

They both repeated Pinkie's sacred oath, and her face split into a wide smile. "Yay! Oh, I love you both so much! Sometimes I wonder 'Pinkie, which one do you love more?' and then I just sit there thinking to myself how great Rainbow Dash is when she does this, or how amazing Fluttershy is when she does that, and then some hours go by and at the end I don't have an answer but I feel super lucky and happy and –" she yawned again, hugely, and then followed it up with a laugh, "– and sleepy, I guess! Good night, girls! I love you!"

Pinkie Pie made her way off into the night, leaving the two pegasi standing there, silent. "Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy at long last, "our Pinkie thinks we need to see each other more."

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash. "So, uh... what do you wanna do?"

"Oh, I'm not very picky," said Fluttershy. "What would you like to do?"

Rainbow Dash knew that Pinkie hadn't *really* made any sort of suggestion for what they were supposed to, but she *had* said something *else*, and if she knew Fluttershy at all, she was sure that those words were hanging just as heavily on the other pegasus right then as they were on her. And because she was thoughtlessly impulsive, and endearingly tactless, and an unthinking loudmouth, and above all else deathly loyal to her girlfriend no matter the personal cost, she asked the question she had spent so much time mocking – "Fluttershy, would you like to go on a date with me sometime soon?" – hoping as she had never hoped before that Fluttershy would say no, that they could come up with something else to do...

And Fluttershy said, "That sounds lovely, Rainbow Dash," her eyes full of terror...

And they made plans for dinner the next evening, and agreed on a place and a time, and then, the moment everything had been decided on, fled in opposite directions.

• • •

There was only one place she could really go next. She definitely didn't need Applejack's help to come up with the idea of telling Fluttershy exactly what she'd been going through, totally inappropriate as that might be for a first date. Rarity could say all she wanted about being generous or loyal or whatever, but in practice that meant a romance where they seemed to spend half their time arguing with one another over the smallest things imaginable, then Rainbow Dash wanted none of it. She didn't want to fight with Fluttershy. What she wanted was a way to take their friendship and make sure it stayed forever perfect. What she needed was the Element of Magic.

"Hi Spike!" she said, once he finally opened the door after what must have been a full minute of continuous pounding. "Is Twilight upstairs?" The green and purple dragon was no longer quite a baby, but he was aging much more slowly than Scootaloo and her friends and the other ponies around them, and still as short as ever.

"Rainbow Dash?" Spike looked blearily at her, and she noticed the bedclothes that were still wrapped around him. Well, too bad: this was no time for napping. "Uhh, yeah, she is, but..."

"Thanks gotta go!" Rainbow Dash practically threw Spike to the side as she rushed in the door, pausing just quickly enough to avoid slamming into a bookshelf before turning around and heading up the stairs. It had taken her this many months to bring herself to really talk to Twilight about her relationship, and she wasn't going to give herself a chance to back out now. This was important. No, this was way more than important, it was super important. The light was on in Twilight's bedroom, suggesting the scholar was not yet abed, and she raced in without bothering to knock. "Twilight, I need your help!" she cried.

"Rainbow Dash?" A familiar purple face emerged, somewhat frightened, from beneath the pile of covers atop the bed. "What are you doing here? Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Not really!" said Rainbow Dash, prepared to put all her cards on the table. "Look, Twilight, I really need your advice for this date I'm supposed to go on, and it looked like you were awake, and –"

"You need advice for a date?" Twilight looked even more confused than she had before Rainbow Dash had started to explain. "Don't you and Pinkie Pie go on dates all the time?"

"This one's not Pinkie, it's Fluttershy."

"You're going out with Fluttershy now too?"

"No! I mean, yes! No! I don't know, that's what I'm here to figure out!"

"You're hysterical," said Twilight. She looked thoughtful for a moment and then turned to look at the pile of covers. "Colgate, umm, I'm sorry, but this sounds kind of important, and..."

Another unicorn, this one bright blue with a blue and white mane, popped into view. Rainbow Dash felt herself go red. "It's okay, Twilight," said Colgate, displaying one of her trademark smiles. "See you tomorrow?"

"Definitely," said Twilight, and gave the other unicorn a quick peck on the lips. Colgate shook the covers off of her and, somewhat unsteadily, made her way out of the room. They watched her silently as she left, Twilight looking worried but affectionate and Rainbow Dash's face a mask of embarrassment.

"Wow, Twilight, I'm really sorry," she said after Colgate had gone. "I didn't know she was here, I mean, um, and..."

"Come on," said Twilight abruptly, "I'll make us tea and you can tell me what you've gotten yourself into this time."

"I don't drink tea."

"Too bad."

"Do you have any soda?"

"No."

Waiting for the tea to be made was painful, since Twilight shot down any attempt she made to begin talking in the meantime, but it ended up being worth it. Twilight was much more amiable once she'd gotten some of the tea in her, and after several more attempts by Rainbow Dash to apologize, she warmed up enough to ask what exactly was going on. This of course forced Rainbow Dash to figure out for herself exactly what *was* going on, but it was still better than feeling she had gotten her friend angry at her.

"Well," she said, deciding to put it as simply as possible, "you know how Pinkie and I are going out, right?" Twilight said something about this being obvious. "And how she's also going out with Fluttershy? Right. Well, now Pinkie thinks that Fluttershy and I should get together too."

"Huh." Twilight blew at her tea. "So this is Pinkie's idea? Why?"

"I dunno! She said something dumb about Fluttershy and I not being good enough friends, and she thinks that if we fell for each other, we'd make each other happy. You know. Random Pinkie stuff."

Twilight grinned for a moment, though she quickly relaxed into a more somber expression. "Rainbow... how much help do you want me to try to be?"

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Huh? As much help as possible, I guess. It's not like I'm gonna come here in the middle of the night so you can make a few vague statements that don't get me anywhere."

"Well, okay!" said Twilight, once more looking cheerful. This particular cheerfulness, though, was one that Rainbow Dash knew a little too well: Twilight was feeling organized. "Rainbow, as your good friend, I promise you will not leave this library until you feel well and truly advised!"

Yeah, she was beginning to regret this decision. "You're not gonna make me lie on a bench again, are you?"

"Would you like to?! I haven't gotten any use out of my couch in *ages*, not since Twinkle visited from Canterlot the other month and we had this amazing conversation all about the meaning of friendship!"

"Umm... not really, no. Honestly, if we could get through this without props, that'd be fine."

"Awww." Rainbow Dash had a strange feeling that somewhere in the library, a couch was being pushed back into a closet. "No props at all? Not even the folders?"

"The what?"

"It's my newest hobby!" said Twilight, standing up proudly. "I've been keeping folders on all five of you, filled with my memories of all the things we've said and done together, so I can refer to specific moments in the past in case I ever need to for some reason! It's kind of like a scrapbook, except putting everything in folders means they're more organized, *and* I can change the order of things around if I have to. I got the idea when Applejack and Rarity had that big fight about the merits of pancakes that *didn't* have apples in them, and I thought if I came up with enough examples of what good friends they really were, then they'd stop fighting!"

Rainbow Dash thought back to the argument in question. "Right," she said, beginning to smile, "I remember that. And you heroically forced them apart, and were all set for the lecture of your life..."

"...yes, and then they explained that I shouldn't be worried, because arguing was just their form of... um..."

"Foreplay?"

Twilight went scarlet. "Aheheh! That's not *exactly* the word I had in mind, but yes, I suppose so. The Princess found my letter, err, very amusing."

"Yeah, I bet she would," said Rainbow Dash. "So where's my folder? Can I read it?"

Twilight waved her hoof uncomfortably in the air. "Umm... I'll give you an abridged version later, okay? I just thought that it might be useful to get out Fluttershy's, or maybe Pinkie's, depending on what you want to talk about."

"I... don't see any reason why *not*, I guess. Just no couch!"

Twilight smiled a bit. "Cross my heart, hope to –"

"And no Pinkie Promises tonight!"

Twilight's smile grew wider.

Soon the kitchen table, in addition to Twilight's cup of tea, was burdened with two enormous folders, one pink and the other yellow. Papers jutted out from each folder in all directions, covered in Twilight's inscrutable pictographs and immaculate hoofwriting, with occasional photos also peeking out from under the cover. And this was supposed to be more organized than a scrapbook?

"All right," said Twilight, "I guess we're ready to begin! So, Rainbow, you were saying? Pinkie wants you and Fluttershy to go on a date together?"

"Yeah, something like that," answered Rainbow Dash.

"Why?"

"I told you, she thinks we're not making each other happy anymore or something. Pinkie being Pinkie, same as usual."

"Is she?"

"Huh?"

Twilight frowned, and Rainbow Dash got a feeling she was about to be treated to a moment of insight. "Is she only 'being Pinkie'?"

"What else? I mean, I see Fluttershy all the time."

"Well, okay. Still... I agree that Pinkie Pie isn't always the *best* judge of how other ponies are feeling." Twilight reached for the pink folder and began to flip through it. "Remember the Cranky Doodle incident, when she didn't understand why he didn't want to be friends with her?"

"Heh, yeah." She was long accustomed to being woken up at odd hours of the day by Pinkie's overjoyed cries of "Guess what, Rainbow Dash! I made a new friend!", but that time had been *particularly* overjoyed. "And the time she thought those stupid gala snobs didn't want to party, but *par-tay*?"

"Exactly. And even before that, in Appleloosa, when she thought she could make everypony get along with her sharing and caring song."

Rainbow Dash nodded hesitantly. "Did... did, um, you ever apologize to her for that? I mean, we all said some kinda obnoxious stuff about that song."

Twilight looked surprised. "Of course! I think we all did, once things had calmed down a little. Didn't you?"

Rainbow Dash's heart sank. No, she *hadn't* ever apologized to Pinkie for saying how horrible that song had been, and as time had gone on, it had gotten harder and harder to say anything. "So what's your point?" she asked instead, ignoring the issue. "Pinkie misinterprets things, just like I said."

"Yes, but..." Twilight pursed her lips for a moment. "But she has a very consistent pattern of misinterpretation which gravitates heavily towards the optimistic, befitting her role as hilarity personified." She looked at Rainbow Dash's blank expression and tried again. "What I mean is, Pinkie Pie tends to assume everypony around her is *happy*. It takes a lot to make her think somepony's upset, which makes me worry that maybe you and Fluttershy *aren't* getting along so well as you might want to think. I, um, actually have some recorded events in this other folder that might work to corroborate her beliefs, and..."

Rainbow Dash tuned out Twilight's next several examples as she thought about the time she had never told anypony about, not even Fluttershy. The time she had come to Sugarcube Corner and found Pinkie gone completely insane. They had all seen Pinkie's distrust after Rainbow Dash had brought her to her surprise party by force, but only Rainbow Dash had gotten to see the full insanity. That, though, had taken a full day of every single one of her best friends shunning her completely. Maybe Twilight was right? Pinkie Pie *was* random, but her randomness leant towards everything being all right, not sudden beliefs that the two ponies she cared most about were unhappy. Was it possible that Pinkie – *Pinkie!* – had noticed something that she hadn't seen? Or something that she *had* seen, a long time ago even, but had refused to admit to herself?

"...and so," concluded Twilight, "there *is* some evidence that the bond between you and Fluttershy may not be as strong as it used to be."

Oh, right; she had forgotten for a moment that she was still talking to Twilight. Twilight, the last pony in Ponyville she wanted to know about this if it was true. "Come on, Twilight, is that all you got?" she asked weakly. "A bunch of stories that I was totally listening to? Fluttershy and I go back, like, *super* far."

"I know that, Rainbow," said Twilight, "and I think that's what's making it harder. I mean, *I* grew up with *Twinkle*, and that made it next to impossible for her to admit that we weren't friends anymore, after I had moved to Ponyville. But she needed to admit that – and, okay, we had to take some time off too – before we could become friends *again*."

"Admit' that, huh?" Rainbow Dash tried to look haughty. "You calling me a liar?"

Twilight's eyes went wide in alarm. "What? No! I wouldn't..." She broke off and sighed. "Rainbow Dash, can I tell you a story?"

"What, about you and Twinkle?"

"No, a more exciting one. Did I ever tell you about the time I met a hydra?"

Rainbow Dash was instantly attentive. "A *hydra*? Seriously? Why didn't you invite me?!"

"Heh, well, it wasn't exactly premeditated," said Twilight with an embarrassed cough. "It's part of a larger story about me learning to trust Pinkie – so I guess it ties in to our conversation in that way, too! – but anyway, none of us expected to run into it. Applejack and Pinkie Pie and Spike and I were in Froggy Bottom Bog looking for Fluttershy, and we'd just found her when the hydra attacked us."

"Yeah? So what did you do?!"

"We ran."

"Boring."

"Hey, it was really scary!" Twilight ignored Rainbow Dash's eye-rolling and continued. "We all ran until we reached this ravine, and the only way across was a series of incredibly unsafe rock platforms. The others all made it across, but I was scared, and the hydra had gotten so close that there wasn't enough room for me to get a good running start. What do you think I did next?"

Rainbow Dash pointed lazily at her friend's horn. "You teleported across."

Twilight looked confused. "Now that you mention it, that would have been a really good idea."

"Heh, that's me! Always good at thinking in times of crisis."

"Well, exactly! See, what happened was I stood there and asked myself, 'What would a brave pony like Rainbow Dash do?'"

Rainbow Dash thought about it for a moment. "Against a hydra? I guess I'd dash in there and kick it where it wouldn't forget me in a hurry!" She paused and looked at Twilight, eyes gleaming hopefully. "Wait, you didn't...?"

"No," said Twilight with a smile, "I didn't. Sorry. But I pretended to for a moment. I charged at it as aggressively as I could, putting it off guard, and I ran around to confuse it, and then I used that extra space to make a run for it and try to jump across the ravine."

"Huh," said Rainbow Dash. "Well, that's still *kind of* awesome, I guess. I didn't know I was your go-to girl for bravery."

"Rainbow, you're Ponyville's biggest hero, remember?" asked Twilight. "Who else would I think of? For that matter, I'm pretty sure I would've had a thing for you back then, if..."

She stopped, but Rainbow Dash had already caught on and was laughing uproariously. "Seriously?" she managed between guffaws. "You, a crush on me? The egghead and the superstar? Oh man, that's so rich!"

"Yes, well," said Twilight, a hint of Rarity in her voice, "I guess we can write off my theory about your not being such good friends with Fluttershy anymore, then. Clearly you are *far* too sensitive about other ponies' feelings for that."

Rainbow Dash forced herself to stop laughing, though it took a few seconds. "Aww, man, I'm sorry, Twilight," she said. "Honest, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed like that. It's just, we have so little in common, you know, back then especially, and I was really surprised..."

"It's okay, Rainbow," said Twilight, echoing her own girlfriend's words of earlier in the evening. "I mean, you're right: we're very different. Besides, I didn't *actually* have a crush on you, you know, the whole thing with Colgate was in the way."

"Right, yeah," said Rainbow Dash, still not entirely sure if she understood all the intricacies of her friend's romantic history, helpful as she was pretty sure she had been in bringing them about. "So is that, like, the point of your story? I'm brave?"

"Mostly. You said yourself – you would have attacked the problem head-on. Or, um, maybe in some other part of the body." She blushed a little. "I started out brave, but then I got strategic and ran around and eventually ended up running away. I think that's what you're doing here – you came into my house really aggressively, but now that we're getting deeper into the issue, you're starting to make compromises, and eventually you

may run away from the conversation entirely. If you really want my help with Fluttershy, you'll need to be Rainbow Dash, not Twilight Sparkle pretending to be Rainbow Dash."

"..." Rainbow Dash stared at the table while Twilight took advantage of the silence to take another drink from her tea. Twilight did have a point: she was *way* too awesome and impetuous to be running away from things like this. Or, wait, what was it she was supposed to be running away from again? Fluttershy? Of course not. There was *something* wrong with her threeway relationship, but it sure wasn't her and Fluttershy. Whatever it was, though, was still something she wasn't comfortable letting Twilight learn about, which wasn't brave at all, which meant...

"You're wrong," she said.

"Beg pardon?"

"You've got it all backwards. I'm no Twilight Sparkle pretending to be Rainbow Dash... I'm Rainbow Dash pretending to be Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight blinked a couple times, and then grinned. "Okay, you've lost me there! But I think we're breaking new ground, and it sounds very exciting! Are you *sure* you don't want the couch? I promise I wouldn't even wear my glasses."

"Totally sure."

"Fine..."

"*Anyway*, what I'm trying to say is that you're perfect. No, not like in that way," she added, as Twilight was already pretending to look flattered and seductive. "Like, you and Colgate are so perfect together, and you guys always get along, and you're always happy, and the idea of coming to you and saying 'hey there Ms. Shut-In Librarian, I know you're absolutely tops in love and everything, but I'm awful at it, can you give me some pointers,' well, *that's* what's terrifying." She paused in sudden reflection. "I guess it's not quite so terrifying when I'm actually *doing* it."

"Lots of things aren't," said Twilight, and looked at Rainbow Dash sadly. "Oh, Rainbow Dash... you really believe all that? You think Colgate and I have some sort of magical, fairytale romance and nothing ever goes wrong, and you didn't want to seem, I dunno, inferior to me?"

"Well, yeah!" Rainbow Dash waved her hooves wildly in the air. "Of course you'd have this magical romance, you're the Element of Magic! What else am I supposed to think, huh?"

"Rainbow Dash," said Twilight again. "Did you ever wonder why Applejack is so distrustful of magic?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged, not really all that surprised by the apparent non-sequitur. "She's distrustful of anything that's not her own four feet. Earth Pony Heritage, Tradition, My Parents And Their Parents And Their Parents Too And So On..."

It looked for a moment like Twilight was trying not to laugh. "Ahem," she said, "well, err... okay, that could be part of it too. But I had a talk with her after I got back from Canterlot that one time, and we came up with some really interesting ideas about magic, stuff that Celestia *never* mentioned. Magic... hmm. Magic's kind of like lying to the world so well that the world believes you, and by the time you're done, you aren't lying to it anymore."

"Huh. So illusions, like the Great and Snore-filled Trixie was doing back in the day?"

"Something like!" said Twilight. "Illusions are strictly about lying to other ponies about reality, while other forms of magic get into lying to *reality itself*. But there's definitely a fuzzy boundary line, and I wouldn't be surprised if her magic had gotten more powerful the more she could get her audience to believe in what she was doing. But my point is, you can touch this table, right?"

"Uh, of course."

"Right! But then suppose I want to put a force field around the table. Now of course you can really touch it, it's right there in front of you, so what I have to do is convince the world that you *can't*. In fact, *nopony can*. If I'm convincing enough, it'll believe me, and then you really truly won't be able to touch the table. Does that make sense?"

"Some," said Rainbow Dash. "It doesn't exactly sound related to our conversation, though."

Twilight's eyes darted to the side. "Not completely, but isn't it awesome?"

"Twilight..."

"Okay, fine. I'll summarize. My special talent is Magic, and that means I can look at the world, see that it's not the way I want it to be, and then make it the way I want it to be by telling it that it's already that way. When I do that in the real world with other ponies, like with Winter Wrap-Up, it gets called Organization, but it's really just another version of the same thing." She chuckled. "The main difference is learning to treat the ponies you're trying to organize a little more nicely than the raw physical matter. That's why I got sent to Ponyville in the first place, I think.

"Anyway, you may have noticed that I sometimes... overdo things a little?"

Rainbow Dash grinned. "Like the time Princess Celestia herself had to come down to Ponyville to fix the blowup you'd caused when you enchanted that old doll and –"

"Ahem! Yes, I think we can definitely both think of *plenty* of examples and we don't need to go over them in any detail. So in my relationship with Colgate, I want things to be perfect, all the time, just like you described. And I do my best to make them be that way, partly by acting as if they *are* that way, both with her and in public." She smiled sadly. "We're not 'perfect' together, Rainbow. But I don't like other ponies seeing that I'm doing something wrong. It's like the time I hoped I could fool the princess by making a complete and undamaged replica of Ponyville and pretending that was the real one, except in this case, the replica of Ponyville is the version of our relationship that I show to other ponies while we work on the real one in private. And Rainbow, I'm really sorry if that replica I erected made you feel worse about yourself."

Rainbow Dash sat dazedly on her haunches. This was a lot to process. "So you're saying in reality, behind this 'replica'..."

"Or façade, if you will. Um, we do like any ponies do. We argue sometimes, and sometimes it's about really petty stuff and sometimes it's more serious. We have good days and bad days. Sometimes I try to fix things by pretending there's nothing wrong, oftener than I really should, but we've managed to work around and past that so far. Colgate's very supportive, and I'm lucky to have her, and she thinks she's lucky to have me, so we keep on going. I mean, I'm not trying to say we're not happy, because we are, in a broad sense, overall, there are just occasional blemishes that get, ah, concealed. What we have's important, so we fight to keep it alive, even if it's ourselves we're fighting against."

"Twilight?"

"...Yes?"

"I get it, okay?" Rainbow Dash reached around the folders to give her friend a hug. "I'm not being sappy or anything, but thanks for saying all that. It kinda... takes a weight off my mind."

Twilight gently nuzzled the side of Rainbow Dash's head. "Anytime. So... about Fluttershy?"

Right. Fluttershy.

Still pressed against Twilight – and noticing guiltily for the first time how cold she was, since it was late at night and non-pegasi weren't nearly so weather resistant – Rainbow Dash began to let in the thoughts and memories that she'd been pretending for months didn't exist. The butterflies she never got to see, the rodeo victory that should have been better witnessed. The invitations that went to the wrong ponies. The conversation with Medley that she had known she was intentionally prolonging. The tornado where they'd ignored each other completely. The conversations that had taken place only through Pinkie, not directly, until they'd become really just conversations with Pinkie and Fluttershy had been forgotten. All the looks of pain and sadness and loss, from both of them, that she had ignored. The mess that she hadn't made, not individually at least, but now had to find a way to fix. "I guess," she said, "that you were wrong about us not having much in common, too. We both seem to act like things are awesomer than they really are."

"For example, you and Fluttershy?"

"Not awesome at all. Not anymore."

Twilight hugged her close.

"What are you going to do now?"

"What *can* I do? I'll meet Fluttershy tomorrow for dinner, and I'll find a way to fix things. Somehow."

"Rainbow Dash..." Twilight's words were soft, but in their position it was easy to hear everything she said. "I don't want to get your hopes too high, and I don't want to tell you not to bother, either, but... it's possible you won't be able to 'fix things,' you know. Maybe Pinkie's right and you two really do have some long-ignored romantic tension. Maybe you need to take a break from each other. I don't think you can really know before you talk to her."

"I hate it when you're right."

"Yes, I think that's obvious by now."

"I also hate keeping you up so late when you need to get some rest. Loyalty, y'know?"

"Some nice warm covers *would* be nice," said Twilight, with a sigh. "Nice and also warm. Are you going to be able to sleep?"

Rainbow Dash pulled back from the hug and gave her best impression of a confident smile. "Me? Ponyville's number one champion napper? Just tell me which element to be tomorrow and I'll get right out of your hair."

Twilight yawned. "Huh?"

"You know, what should I do for my date with Fluttershy? This whole thing got started when Applejack thought I should try Honesty. Then later I talked to Rarity, and she came out in favor of Loyalty. Now everything's gone haywire, but you've been bashing Magic tonight, so what's left? Kindness, maybe?"

Twilight looked puzzled. "But Rainbow, they're only the *Elements* of Harmony! You can't expect anything harmonious from just trying one of them at a time. The point is to bring them all *together*, and that's how you get to be –" she paused, appearing to look for the right word "– a friend."

Huh. That made sense. "Awesome! So I'll go in there and just be Rainbow Dash, which I guess has worked well enough so far. Thanks, Twilight."

"Mmhmm," said Twilight, smiling sleepily. "I really am sorry if I messed up your relationship by pretending to have some sort of magically perfect life."

"Hey, if I forgave you for that whole Mare-Do-Well crap, I can forgive you for something you didn't even do on purpose."

"I know. And Rainbow, I'm sorry about that too."

Rainbow Dash echoed once more Colgate's parting words. "It's okay, Twilight," she said, and sped into the night.

The next day was altogether too slow.

Rainbow Dash slept in as long as she could get away with, then flew over to a remarkably brief weather team meeting, where she had a rather ridiculous argument with Rainbowshine and Raindrops over the number of rainbows they should supply for Ponyville after the next rain storm. It was slightly prolonged by the unicorn Rainbow Wishes standing below the meeting and yelling unhelpful suggestions, but the meeting was still over far sooner than she would have liked, leaving her with several hours of dead time to fill before her "date."

She wondered if she ought to fill the time by hanging out with one of her friends, but she suspected the conversation would just end up turning to her upcoming evening with Fluttershy, even if she wanted to avoid the subject as long as possible. Pinkie was at an estate sale with Fluttershy that day, so she couldn't turn to her girlfriend, and Scootaloo would probably ask too many uncomfortable questions. The younger pegasus was certainly more mature than she had been back in the day, but Rainbow Dash remained her hero and that could make for an awkward discussion indeed. She still remembered the first time Scootaloo had learned about her arrangement with Pinkie and Fluttershy, and how the girl had exclaimed excitedly and inaccurately that she wanted to have a polyarmadillo relationship too. It had taken all of Rainbow Dash's limited powers of rhetoric to convince her otherwise.

"But why not?!" Scootaloo had asked. "*You're* in love with two ponies, so doesn't that make it cool? Why shouldn't I want to be cool?"

"First off," Rainbow Dash had replied, "I'm not in love with Fluttershy, duh. That's not how it works, that'd be just gross. Pinkie gets us both, but Fluttershy and I are just friends." Wisdom from her past?

"Second, kid, we're only doing this because it's cool for *us*, okay? Like, if I weren't me, or Pinkie weren't Pinkie, or... you get the idea. Lots of ponies like being in a relationship with only other pony, like the Cakes, and that's totally fine too."

"But which one's *cooler*, you three or the Cakes?"

"Hah, we are, obviously! Three awesome friends like us, compared to a couple of old bakers who have to spend half their time caring for some crying kids? No contest... wait a sec." She stopped, remembering the point she was trying to make. "No, okay, scratch that. Sure, we're awesomer than they are, but our *relationship*? Just the same, just as good."

Some gals are all into stallions, right? And if I was like that then maybe I'd be trying to jump Caramel's bones or something, but I don't. So Wind Whistler gets him instead, and they're happy, and that's awesome *for them*."

"Huh." Scootaloo still looked unconvinced. "What does jumping bones mean?"

"Uhh... actually, you probably shouldn't tell anypony I said that to you."

"Is that what Applejack and Rarity are doing now? Because Sweetie Belle says they make some pretty weird noises sometimes, and..."

Rainbow Dash stuck a hoof into her open mouth. "And you shouldn't tell anypony else about *that*, either! Look... it's not complicated! You know how nopony goes around saying, 'ooh, *my* girlfriend's the best, you should all be in love with *her*'? It's like that. Everypony falls in love with somepony else – or more than one somepony else – and everypony's got their own sort of relationship, and no one's *better* than any other." She scratched the back of her neck, embarrassed. "Heh... if anything, getting involved with only *one* other pony's probably easier, because then there's only one pony for you to get in fights with!"

"Oh," said Scootaloo, once again allowed to talk. "So are you going to get in lots of fights now?"

"What? Nah, of course not. Pinkie's awesome, we're gonna be totally happy. I mean, hey, if a nerd like Twilight can pull it off...!"

"But what about you and Fluttershy?"

Rainbow Dash gave her a smile of pure charm. "Not a chance, squirt. Fluttershy and I go way back... there's nothing we won't be able to work through together, I can promise you that."

Back in the present, at what felt worryingly like the tail end of a relationship instead of the new and exciting beginning, Rainbow Dash paused in her pacing around her house. Huh. Well, that was certainly a good belief to hold on to, to say nothing of a promise. She hated breaking promises, especially to her friends and fans, and Scootaloo was at least one of those. Besides, what would be the trouble? It wasn't as if there was anypony who actually *wanted* her and Fluttershy to be uncomfortable around each other. With everypony on the same side, she just had to show up, be herself, and everything would be fine!

Well, there was still the matter of what they *would* be, if not uncomfortable around each other, but otherwise... fine!

Okay, but what was she supposed to do until the date itself? She still hadn't decided on that. Should she dress up? Surely ponies dressed up for first dates sometimes? But if Fluttershy *didn't* dress up, then she'd look really foolish. If *Fluttershy* dressed up, though, and she *didn't*, that would probably be okay, because she could just blame it on her absence of social graces or whatever Rarity called it. No outfit, then. And no visiting Rarity, because the unicorn would either try to dress her up or would just tell her something about how important they both were to her, and she didn't need either of those right now. Maybe she could lower her tensions by beating up Applejack again? ...well, getting her revenge for that other time, that is? No, then she'd show up to her date looking all bruised and Fluttershy would spend the whole time fawning over her and nothing would get said. She'd talked to Twilight about things *just* last night, and Pinkie was still at that estate sale with Fluttershy, and her action-oriented book collection was hardly going to put her in a properly romantic mood, and...!

In the end, she gave up and took a nap.

She realized her mistake the moment she awoke, even before grabbing the alarm clock to confirm it: she'd overslept. Her date had started six minutes ago. She flew – literally, of course – out of bed, stopping only for an instant to check her reflection in the mirror. Did her mane look all right? Yep, disheveled as ever. Time to get to the restaurant. Where was it again? Stirrup Street? No, Riverview. Fly to Riverview, find the restaurant, touch down. Dash inside. Find Fluttershy. There she is, in that booth. Not wearing anything, but not looking too happy either. Okay. Damage control time.

"Hi Fluttershy! Hey, really sorry I'm late, hope you weren't waiting too long!"

Fluttershy looked at her calmly. "Oh, no, only a few minutes. I hope you had a good talk with Medley?"

"Huh? No, I overslept, and... oh." Rainbow Dash grimaced. "You, uh, you know about that, huh?"

"Pinkie and I *do* talk," she said. "You told her, I asked her, she told me. It wasn't terribly complicated."

"Well, yeah, but... why didn't you say anything?"

"Why didn't you?"

"..." Rainbow Dash gulped. She had not been ready for Fluttershy to be so... confrontational. "I... well, I felt really bad about it, y'know? What would *you* say if you were super late to one of your best friends' performances?"

Fluttershy looked worn. "I guess I'd start with 'sorry.' I mean, Rainbow Dash, that concert was very important to me."

"Oh, come on!" Rainbow Dash's wings flared up. "If it was so important to you, why didn't you *tell* me about it, huh?! I had to hear about it from Sweetie Belle, if you can believe it! How was that supposed to let me know this was so important?"

"I did talk about how important it was."

"Sure, to Pinkie! In case you haven't noticed, Fluttershy, *everything* you say to Pinkie sounds like the most heartfelt and meaningful thing ever said. I mean, I can see why you want to be a tree, if everything you say comes out sappy!"

"Well, I'm sorry if my conversations with Pinkie don't involve the word 'awesome' every three syllables."

"Look, that was just the *one* time, and we were playing a...!" She stopped, suddenly panicked. Other patrons of the restaurant were watching them curiously, and the conversation was going nothing like how she had hoped. "Oh, Celestia," she said quietly, "this is going completely wrong."

Fluttershy's eyes went wide. "Oh no! Oh, Rainbow Dash, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to say all that, I swear I didn't, it just *came out*, oh please don't be angry!"

Rainbow Dash gave a feeble laugh. "Heh, me angry? At you? Look, I'm the one who should be apologizing, I was acting a total mule about that concert, and now I drag you off on a date just to make you argue with me..."

"You didn't drag me off," said Fluttershy, "I agreed to come."

"Yeah, but it was my idea..."

"Well, I was thinking the same thing..."

"I shouldn't have snapped at you –"

"I shouldn't have been so prissy –"

They stopped, looked at each other, and began to laugh awkwardly. Rainbow Dash slid into her side of the table, feeling the attention of the other patrons leave them. "Fluttershy," she said after a moment more, "I'm *really* sorry about the concert. I knew I shouldn't have talked to Medley that long, and –"

"You knew?"

"No! Or, sort of? I honestly don't know what I did or didn't know. But I was super late, and I never said a word about it, and I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was going to be singing in Canterlot. It... well... I guess I didn't think you'd find it very interesting."

"Wait, you didn't tell me on purpose?"

Fluttershy chewed her lip. "Really, Rainbow Dash, I don't even know what I was thinking. But I *am* sorry."

"Huh." Rainbow Dash shrugged. "I gotta say, maybe I only heard half the concert, but what I *did* hear was *awesome*! Seriously, Fluttershy, I don't know why the mayor only lets you do opening fanfares and stuff!"

"Oh, um." Fluttershy blushed. "Honestly, the second half was *much* better than the first. I was very nervous, even with Pinkie's help, and I don't think I sang at all well. But then for the second half, I was just doing something again that I'd already done before, so that was easier. You didn't miss out on too much."

Rainbow Dash scoffed. "Pinkie doesn't know the first thing about performing. You've gotta work *with* the audience, feel what they want, and give it to them! You should've come to me, I bet I could've whipped you into shape in no time."

"You probably could have," said Fluttershy with a small smile. "I mean, if I'd let you. I can be quite stubborn, you know."

"Heh, you got that right! Remember that time we brought you along to scare off that old dragon, and it turned out you were afraid of dragons? We practically had to drag that detail out of you! No pun intended." She looked at the table between them. "Hey, where are the menus in this place? I'm starved."

"The waitress came by before you got here," said Fluttershy. "Um, I already ordered for both of us. Is that all right? I'm sure I can find her and take it back if you'd like...!"

"Nah, that's cool. What did you get me?"

"They had an alfalfa cake plate that I thought you'd like. I remember you were always excited when they had those at Summer Flight Camp, and..."

"And they're totally my *favorite!*" Rainbow Dash smiled hugely, all traces of their previous fight already gone from her mind. "Man, you are the best, Fluttershy! I couldn't have picked a better pony to go on this stupid date with!"

"Oh," said Fluttershy. "Um, right. Our... date."

"...Yeah. Our date."

They both sat there silently, staring at the table. A part of Rainbow Dash was yelling at the rest of her, saying that everything had been going so well and she'd just had to go and ruin it. But that didn't make any sense! A date was what they were *there for*. Pinkie's words echoed through her head: "I guess if you two fell in love with each other too then everything would work out." She glanced up at Fluttershy for a moment and could have sworn her friend was mouthing the very same words that she'd just been reciting to herself. They were there to go on a date, to see if they'd been wrong about the nature of their relationship all along and they could all three be happy and gooey and romantic together. She'd have Fluttershy, and Fluttershy would have her, and Pinkie would have them both and they'd both have her too, and everything would be simple and awesome. Right?

"So, um..." began Fluttershy, "...how's Tank doing?"

Yes! Ponies *definitely* talked about their pets while on dates. "He's... doing fine. Doesn't move very fast, doesn't have much to say, honestly kinda easy to confuse with a rock. You know. Normal turtle stuff."

"Tortoise."

"That's what I said. How's Angel? Still a holy terror?"

Fluttershy blushed a little. "He was *never* as bad as you made him out to be, you know," she said. "You should have seen him when I was training to help you with the waterspout. He was so helpful and considerate, and he's even gentler now that he's older."

Rainbow Dash smiled awkwardly. She still wasn't sure if she had done the right thing that day, leaving Fluttershy so that she could focus on the rest of the team. "That's cool," she said instead. "And, uh, your other animals?"

"Rainbow Dash, you don't really want to listen to me talk about every single one of my animal friends."

"...No, you're right. That sounds incredibly boring. Okay, so... what have you been doing today?"

Fluttershy looked down at her hooves. "Well, Pinkie and I went to an estate sale, and that was very fun. I got a nice scarf, but I don't really need any more scarves myself and I haven't decided whom to give it to yet. And then... then I guess I mostly sat around and stewed over our friendship and got kind of angry at you." She looked up, smiling rather too brightly. "How about you?"

"Wow, okay. Well, I had a weather meeting, and then I spent the rest of the day napping or thinking about how awesome this date was going to go." Had it been anypony else who had said that, she would have felt the urge to make a sarcastic comment, but it made less sense making fun of herself. "Want to hear about my weather meeting? See, we've got this rain storm coming up, and -"

"Actually," said Fluttershy, at a low enough volume that Rainbow Dash could have passed over her had she had not been so used to her friend's quietness, "I'm not really very interested in weather. Um, if that's all right? Obviously if you *really* want to talk about your meeting, I'm sure I could listen, but..."

"No, no, that's okay," said Rainbow Dash. "I mean, clouds, right?! Who cares about stupid stuff like that? Heh, next thing you know I'll be turning into one of those stupid ponies who just obsesses over something and doesn't do anything else. 'There goes Rainbow Dash with her clouds,' they'd say, 'and Applejack with her apples, and Twilight with her books, and Pinkie Pie with her parties, and Rarity with her dresses, and...'"

"Maybe you need a hobby."

Rainbow Dash stopped, both relieved to have been interrupted on her trajectory and surprised to hear Fluttershy speak so bluntly. "Huh? What are you talking about, Fluttershy? I fly, remember? Hardly a second tied down to the ground?"

"Yes," said Fluttershy, already looking embarrassed at her forwardness, "but it's not always good flying weather, is it? And, um, Pinkie *can't* fly, usually, and it can be nice to do things *with* your girlfriend, and..."

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "So? Remember pranking? And if you're gonna tell me that's too active to be a hobby or something, don't forget I read! These eyes of mine aren't just used for winking at hot chicks, y'know!"

"And by hot chicks, you mean... Pinkie?"

"Duh."

Fluttershy smiled, looking somewhat relieved. "Oh, all right, then. I guess I thought you just read those Daring Do books and nothing more ever came of it. I'm sorry if I misjudged you, Rainbow Dash."

"Hey, it's okay. I guess I never brought it up, and there's no reason you have to know every last thing about me. What made you think I should find a hobby, anyhow?"

"Oh, well..." Fluttershy's smile turned wistful. "I guess I was just thinking of that flamenco show that you and Pinkie did. It was a lot of fun, and I was sorry you seemed to stop after that one performance."

Rainbow Dash grinned awkwardly. "Eh, well, that show... didn't go over *too* well. The audience was kinda laughing at us. I think even you were, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Fluttershy, "but not because you were *bad* or anything! You and Pinkie are two very funny ponies, Rainbow Dash, and I really enjoyed watching you have fun and be funny together. It was... sweet."

"Huh. I had no idea maybe we were being laughed at because we were funny, not just uncoordinated. Guess I'm not the only one who's a bit bad at talking to performers about their shows. Thanks, 'Shy!"

Fluttershy smiled, but whatever she might have answered went unsaid, for at that moment the waitress finally arrived with their meals. Rainbow Dash's alfalfa cake platter looked amazing, and Fluttershy's salad... well, it definitely looked like a salad. Otherwise it was pretty dull and boring. The appeal of her own food won out over making any sort of sardonic remark, however, and they both ate in silence for several long minutes.

What was one supposed to talk about on a date? Sure, they'd *been* talking about stuff, but a lot of that wasn't any different from stuff they might talk about anytime else, and that was hardly going to let them figure out if they were compatible. She tried to think about going on dates with Pinkie, but her relationship with the pink earth pony was not nearly so formal as that, and they tended to shift in and out of romantic gestures at will. Also, she wasn't totally sure how appropriate it was to be thinking about her other girlfriend – no, just her girlfriend, really – while on a date with somepony else. Still, she had to say *something*.

"I really like your mane," she managed.

Fluttershy looked blank. "I'm sorry?"

"Your mane. It's, uhh, nice. It's pink! Pink is a nice color for manes." Okay, so she wasn't great at this. "I'm trying to compliment you because we're on a date." Really really not great at this.

"Oh," said Fluttershy. "Um, thank you." They ate for a few more seconds. "You're... very fast," she said. "It's impressive how fast you can fly."

"Aww, don't sell yourself short, Fluttershy! You can be plenty fast when you really want to be, remember? Like that time you tracked me down after Discord got his mutated hands on me."

"Rainbow Dash..."

"Because, sure, I'm probably the fastest pegasus in Equestria, but that doesn't mean you're slow or anything! You've been getting *heaps* better lately, and..."

"Rainbow Dash."

"...Yeah?"

"I was only trying to give you a compliment. About your speed. Because like you said, the date."

"...Oh. Right. Heh, thanks."

"You're welcome." Fluttershy looked at her oddly. "And, um, thank you for what you said. Although really, my self esteem isn't *so* low that you should need to affirm me in everything that I bring up."

"Hey, I'm not just trying to affirm you!" said Rainbow Dash, relatively certain she knew what that meant. "I care a lot about speed, y'know? And if I notice you getting faster, more practiced, that's something that's genuinely cool!"

Fluttershy blushed a little. "Thank you, Rainbow Dash," she said. "That... I don't think you said that just because we're on a date. And I'm sorry if I misjudged your intentions, truly."

Rainbow Dash said something nondescript in response, and they continued eating.

"Um... speaking of intentions."

Uh oh. "Yeah?"

"Why didn't you ask me to cheer for you while you were practicing for the Aerodeo?"

Ohboy. She could lie and say she hadn't thought about it, but she was sure Fluttershy wouldn't believe that for an instant. And it wasn't like the truth was so bad. "What, instead of Applejack?" she asked. "Well, AJ's got loads of practice with rodeos, and I figured she could help shave off any rough patches in my technique. Not that I thought I had any, understand, but hey, just in case! Besides, I was hanging out with you all the time with Pinkie, and really, 'Shy, it's not like you were ever all that pumped about stunt flying and stuff..."

"No," said Fluttershy softly, "but I was 'pumped' about you."

That ought to have been good to hear on a date, but somehow it didn't sound so good, even putting aside the 'was' part. "Why?" she asked. "What's so special about me?"

"Rainbow Dash... do you remember the day I told you I was moving to Ponyville?"

Yes. "I try not to."

"...Me too."

What? "You aren't saying you're regretting the decision, are you? 'Cause, like, all your friends are here, and your animals, and..."

"No, it's nothing like that!" Fluttershy looked almost shocked, her salad for the moment forgotten. "I, um, I'm trying to explain something to you, um, but, it's not easy. We had

an argument that day, didn't we? Heh, you must have been surprised that I even *could* have an argument, I know I was. Do you remember what you said?"

Word for word. "Uh, some of it, I guess? You wanted me to come with you, and I was angry at you, because I thought I'd be giving up the sky and that was a horrible idea."

"I know. I felt the same way." She hesitated, but Rainbow Dash said nothing, so she gulped and continued. "You had to choose to follow your friend to the ground. But Rainbow Dash, do you know how hard it is to be the one who has to make that decision, not because she's following anypony, but because the sky *isn't the place for her?*" Her words were getting faster, beginning to tumble out of her, and Rainbow Dash watched and listened intently. "I'm a pegasus pony! I went to *Summer Flight Camp*, my wings were supposed to be so important to me! My very best friend in the world was a rainbow-maned filly who told me again and again never to give up, never to listen to anypony making fun of me for how weak my wings were. When I fell from the clouds and got my cutie mark for taking care of animals, I *came back to try again!* I kept on trying again, and again, and again, and it just felt worse and worse each time and I missed the ground more and more, until finally..."

"...You decided Cloudsdale wasn't the best place for you."

"Yes," said Fluttershy. "I gave up."

Rainbow Dash's hackles rose. "Don't you ever dare say that!" she said, probably startling some of the other ponies in the restaurant. "You *hated* Cloudsdale, Fluttershy, and I was being selfish for pretending you didn't! You didn't just 'give up'..."

"You're right, Rainbow Dash. I didn't just give up. I dragged you with me."

"You said it yourself... moving down to Ponyville was like giving up the sky. That's exactly what I did. I think for a while I even *resented* my wings, because they felt like a reminder I didn't really belong there. Even my bird friends... did you notice, at our concert, all they ever did was sit on that tree and sing? There could have been wonderful aerial dance routines, but I shied away from all of that, just like how much trouble you had getting me to suggest a real flying pet for you that one day. I didn't want to be a pegasus pony."

"But *you* did. Your wings meant more to you than anything else in the world... except me, apparently, if I was able to bring you with me." She smiled for a moment. "So I did the only thing I could think to do to make it up to you: I became your biggest fan. I did

anything I could think of to make you the very best flier you could possibly be, cheering you as best I could despite my, um, natural shyness. You can't know how happy I was when you won the Best Young Fliers competition. After everything I'd done to you, you still managed to beat all the others, and some of those ponies probably spent their every waking moment in the sky. It was wonderful."

"I saw you," said Rainbow Dash. "I saw you jumping up and down. I'd *never* seen you that excited."

Fluttershy smiled again. "Well, now you know why."

"Yeah, but..." Rainbow Dash frowned, poking absently at her food. "I don't get it. If you want me to be the best flier I can, then why are you upset that I asked Applejack to train me for the Aerodeo?" She gasped. "Is this because of that one time she didn't win any blue ribbons? Are you saying AJ's not good enough for me?"

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "What? No, no! Nothing like that! I mean, you could always have invited *both* of us" – Rainbow Dash mumbled, embarrassed, that she hadn't thought of that – "but that wasn't all. I was ashamed that I had made you come down to the earth, but I was ashamed of myself for doing that too. There was a while where I hated that I wasn't an earth pony, but I also hated that I hated that in the first place, because I knew I was *supposed* to be a good flier. So I guess I tried to live through you; if I could watch you flying, because I'd cheered for you and helped you get there, then I could pretend it was me. When you didn't ask me to cheer for you for the Aerodeo... it felt like you were telling me that the free ride was over and I had to use my own wings for myself.

"I've been trying since then, Rainbow Dash. I really have. You said you noticed I've been getting better. I think I was adequate for the waterspout last time, and that's all I'm really trying for, adequacy. I don't want or need to be an amazing flier like you are. But I do miss being a part of your career."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "My what? Wait, you think flying – or stunt flying, I guess – is my career?"

"Um... yes?" Fluttershy took a cautious bite of her salad and pointed her fork vaguely at Rainbow Dash while she chewed. "I mean, you wanted me to follow the Wonderbolts around on tour with you, and you used to put up their posters all over town, and you used to talk all the time about how awesome it would be to join them, and –"

"Used to," said Rainbow Dash, "sure. Not recently. I got into the Wonderbolts, Fluttershy. A while ago, actually."

Fluttershy dropped her fork and stared. "What? But you... you never mentioned... you never *auditioned*... when... how... what?"

Rainbow Dash could not help but laugh at her friend's total bewilderment. "Ha, close your mouth before Spitfire misjudges her angle and crashes into it, Fluttershy! The Wonderbolts don't really *have* auditions, all right? Sure, they pretend they do, but that's really just an excuse to get a lot of fliers together in front of the press and keep stunt flying in the news. They're invite-only, and a while back I got sent one of those invites." She flexed her wings a little. "Heh, not that it wasn't inevitable with *these* babies, am I right?"

Fluttershy still looked baffled. "A while back? But surely we would have *noticed*! When did you..." she paused, realization passing over her features. "...You said no?"

"Sure did."

"*Why?*"

Rainbow Dash ate for several seconds before replying. She'd known the subject would come up *someday*, and she'd certainly thought about her answer, but that didn't mean she had a precise speech prepared or anything. "When you're a Wonderbolt," she said at last, "you're a Wonderbolt. And guess what: you're not much else. There are part time jobs, and there are full time jobs, and then there's being an athlete like them. I'd have had to give up practically everything for that. The filly I was in Cloudsdale would have said yes. Heck, the mare I was only a few months after meeting Twilight might have said yes. But there's *way* too much else in my life now to shove it all away to play sports hero. I love flying, Fluttershy, I really do, but I also love you five, and the adventures we go on, and Ponyville, and the weather team, and pranking, and (believe it or not) reading, and even Derpy on occasion. Staying here, with friends that I can do things with and who'll invite me to do things with them... *that's* the life I want to lead."

"So... you following me down to Ponyville..."

"I forgave you for that a long time ago."

"Oh," said Fluttershy, relieved. And then a second time, "Oh. But when I didn't invite you to watch the butterfly migration with me..."

"*That* hurt."

"Even though you wouldn't have wanted to go."

"Yeah."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

They held each other's gaze for a couple seconds, smiled, and returned to their meals.

The rest of the dinner was spent in silence, Rainbow Dash lost in her thoughts and Fluttershy presumably the same. Telling Fluttershy about the Wonderbolts had been surprisingly refreshing, and Rainbow Dash supposed that she'd now have to tell her other friends as well. If she knew Pinkie at all, the pink earth pony was sure to have supplies for a *Congratulations Dashie* party stored away *somewhere*, and it was about time they got to put to use. Likewise, she wouldn't put it past Twilight to have some lecture prepared about showmanship or combating wing fatigue or something. Hopefully Rarity hadn't ever decided to make her a custom Wonderbolts uniform, or then she'd feel really guilty for not having mentioned things sooner. She and her friends did meddle a lot in each other's lives, but she wouldn't have had it any other way. Applejack probably didn't have anything prepared, but she knew the farmer pony would be proud of her for having gotten in, and – given how much she cared about the values of home and family and tradition and stuff – probably even prouder that she had told them no.

Her date with Fluttershy, meanwhile, had started off badly but had turned out really well, although not at all how she had expected. She had plenty more stuff to apologize for – so did Fluttershy, knowing her – but they still seemed to be on better terms than they had been for a long time. If only that had been the point of the date, she could have relaxed, but she knew there was still another hurdle to overcome before the night was over.

"Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy after they had finished their meals and paid the waitress, "um, this has been a very nice start, but... well, um, I'm not sure it's helped with our falling in love."

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash. "Uh, do you want me to walk you home?"

"I'd like that," said Fluttershy. "Or, you could *fly* me home if you'd rather."

Rainbow Dash smirked. "Even better."

The two pegasi set off into the darkness. The night was remarkably clear, with Luna's moon barely visible, and stars filled the sky above them. The streetlamps were all dark, a recent paperwork mishap at city hall having put Minty in charge of buying Ponyville's new light bulbs and the off-green earth pony having chosen to install socks in them instead. The darkness had driven most of Ponyville's residents indoors, leaving their journey to be interrupted only by a few quiet stragglers and the occasional hoot of an owl. Though Rainbow Dash was not a great romancer, even she could see the potential for a romantic evening if she played her cards right.

"Great night."

"Yes."

Okay, so she was going to deal herself some new cards. "Wanna cut through the park? We could, uh..."

"Stargaze?"

"Yeah! Look at the sky and stuff."

"That would be nice."

Thus armed, they changed direction and entered Ponyville Park. Here the night was somewhat louder than it had been in the town proper, the silence frequently broken by the sound of youthful giggles and other sounds from among the bushes. The dry grass, not yet touched by the dew of morning, rustled softly beneath the rhythmic beat of their wings, and the river trickled forever along beneath the bridge, bearing fresh water from the Whitetail Woods down into Ponyville. Various small nocturnal creatures poked their heads out from behind trees and smaller plants to stare at them as they passed by, and Fluttershy seemed to have a wave and a smile for each one.

"Would you like to sit down?" asked Fluttershy after a while, pointing towards a grassy crest. "We could probably get a better view of the stars that way, I mean, if you still want to do that."

"Sure," said Rainbow Dash, heart beginning to beat a little faster. They settled themselves down on the grass and gazed upwards at the vast black sky and its innumerable pinpricks

of white fire. It wasn't honestly a very exciting sight without the thrill of shooting stars – the sky was for flying in, not staring at – but she supposed that this kind of low-energy stuff was what Fluttershy did all the time. And after a few minutes of resigned boredom, she had to admit that it *was* kind of peaceful, even if the stars weren't moving at all. If she tried hard enough, she could imagine lines between some of the brighter stars, creating little pictures in the sky. It wasn't so very different from the butterfly migration.

"Rainbow Dash," asked Fluttershy from beside her, "do you ever think about the princesses?"

"Huh? Everypony does, I guess. They raise the sun and moon, they beat up Discord and threw him in a chunk of stone... kinda hard to forget them!"

"No, um... the princesses as ponies, not as princesses. They must have feelings and dreams and everything just like the rest of us, don't you think? Remember that Nightmare Night, when we all met that poor, confused little pony that everyone knew as the Princess of the Night?"

"All of us but Rarity did, you mean," said Rainbow Dash. "Yeah, and I guess there was an article in the Foal Free Press once about Celestia's secret personal life or something. Why?"

Fluttershy was silent for a time, and Rainbow Dash had almost run out of interesting-looking stars to look at by the time she replied. "Earlier," she said, "I was sitting at home getting mad at you. And, um, me too I suppose, for how poorly we've been getting along. And I thought about Nightmare Moon, and how that all started when Princess Luna started to resent her sister, and how they had to spend a thousand years apart from each other. I guess I'm just really glad that we've been able to get along tonight, and you don't have to banish me to the moon or anything."

Rainbow Dash snorted, not wanting to think about the prospect of losing Fluttershy for a thousand years. "Me banish you? Come on, Fluttershy, you'd make a ridiculous Luna. HEAR US, WOODLAND CREATURES! WE ARE COME TO BRING YOU FOOD AND MAYBE WE COULD SING YOU A SONG LATER? WE BELIEVE THAT EVERY ANIMAL LOVETH SINGING!"

"I don't talk like that!" said Fluttershy, but she was giggling.

"OH MY GOODNESS, A BABY DRAGON! NEVER HAVE OUR EYES BEHELD A DRAGON INFANT BEFORE, FOR VERILY OUR TERRORS DO OUTWEIGH OUR CURIOSITY!"

"Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy, whacking her with one wing, "you're awful!"

"Exactly! I'm *way* too awful to be Princess Celestia, and you're... uh..."

"Yes?"

Rainbow Dash looked down at her chest, noticing that Fluttershy hadn't removed her wing. "You're way too, uh... soft. And cold."

Fluttershy shivered a little. "It *is* night time. I guess I'm not as weather resistant as you are."

"Hey, we can't all spend weeks practicing our agility by dodging hailstones. Bet you wish you had that scarf from your estate sale now, huh?"

"It *is* a very nice scarf," said Fluttershy. "Or I could just use you."

"Wait, huh? I'm not a scarf! Unless you're planning on chopping me into strips and sewing me together or something, and I would *not* hold still for that."

"You're silly," said Fluttershy, and scooted herself across the grass to cuddle against Rainbow Dash's side. "Is... is this all right?" she whispered, her breath hot against Rainbow Dash's exposed ear. She sounded suddenly far less confident than she had a moment earlier. "I, um, don't want to impose, and..."

It was all right. It was all wrong. It felt soft and sick and tender and twisted and Rainbow Dash didn't know how to react anymore. "It's... fine," she said, hoping her voice sounded calm. "Am I better than some old scarf?"

"Much," said Fluttershy. "Um, especially if you put your hoof around me."

There was no turning back now, reasoned Rainbow Dash, adjusting herself to pull Fluttershy closer to her. They lay against each other, heads still turned to the sky, which remained stubbornly devoid of shooting stars. Fluttershy was cold and soft and fragile and *loud*, her heart beating at least as fast as Rainbow Dash's own, and she felt suddenly very exposed right there in a public park for all to see. The giggles from around them seemed to have quieted, and she could only imagine the bushes' inhabitants leaning

excitedly forward to watch the two pegasi lying there together, wondering to themselves what they would do next. Somehow Rainbow Dash had never been less excited to be the center of attention, even if it was only in her imagination.

"So yeah," she said, trying to distract herself from their physical reality, "I don't think you'd make a great Luna. Way too quiet and, uh, not really spooky enough. Stick to what you know."

"Like what?" asked Fluttershy. "I don't think I'd make a very good Celestia either. She has to do so much and talk with so many strange ponies, and I wouldn't like that at all. I'd rather spend time with just a few ponies that I'm really close to, like Pinkie. Or you."

"Heh, yeah. You'd be the most reclusive ruler Equestria's ever had, totally. I guess you'll just have to be a Fluttershy, then."

"Am I a good Fluttershy?"

"You're an *awesome* Fluttershy," said Rainbow Dash, and instantly wondered why she had said that. The yellow pegasus had no response, but tightened her sideways embrace.

Part of her wished that Twilight could have warned her that this would happen, but the unicorn had admitted that she had no idea what the night might bring. Yes, they had "fixed" things, or at least made a good start in that direction, but they were definitely going somewhere else now, somewhere else that Rainbow Dash had never wanted to go... had she?

She *had* proposed the date.

Pinkie had said other things the night before, and she could have focused on any other one of them instead. She had told herself that Fluttershy was thinking the same thing, and that she had only proposed the date so that timid Fluttershy wouldn't have had to do it for her, but she'd had no way of knowing if that was *true*. She could have told Fluttershy to get off of her – she still could, in fact. She could have not proposed to walk Fluttershy home, or then later to stop in the park. She could have given her fewer compliments. All those things were choices that *she* had made. Not Fluttershy, not even Pinkie, but her. Rainbow Dash.

She thought back to the Best Young Fliers competition, and the moment of elation when she had seen Fluttershy cheering, a moment that had surpassed, however momentarily, the thrill of having just saved the lives of Rarity and three Wonderbolts. Had that been pride in her friend alone? They'd been telling each other that the recent split in their

friendship was something or other to do with jealousy, but was it? Wasn't there another story she could have been telling herself all this time: that Pinkie had awakened them both to the world of romantic feeling, and they had both realized that they had felt more for each other than they had ever admitted or really even guessed at? A story in which their resistance to these feelings had pushed them apart, and they were only now getting at the true core of their relationship, one that they had been ignorant of for so very long?

Ultimately, was there any way that she, Rainbow Dash, action pony extraordinaire, could really know the answer to her questions without doing something to try them out?

"Rainbow Dash, look!" said Fluttershy. "A fawn!"

Rainbow Dash looked, startled by the lack of connection to her thoughts. There was indeed a young deer in front of them, standing uncertainly in the middle of the park and looking back and forth as if lost. Almost instantly, Fluttershy had disentangled herself from their embrace and was walking slowly towards the fawn. Her step was soft, her voice quiet as she called out to it with those loving words that Rainbow Dash had often seen her use with so many of her animal friends. Carefully, gently, she approached the fawn, which held its ground, still unsure but now leaning its head against that of the gentle pony caretaker who had come to visit it.

"She's a white-tailed deer," said Fluttershy to Rainbow Dash, keeping her voice quiet. "They're where the Whitetail Woods get their name, but they're very shy. Oh, Rainbow Dash, isn't she lovely?"

Rainbow Dash watched as the fawn continued to stand there, now the focus of all of Fluttershy's attention. She had never seen anypony so gentle as Fluttershy, not even the workers at the spa the few times she had allowed Rarity to drag her there. She had felt those yellow hooves before, and now she imagined them sliding carefully over her entire body, leaving her more relaxed than she had ever felt before. She saw Fluttershy's eyes, not focused inward in the frightened timidity that had been enshrined in the last syllable of her name, but radiating love and kindness so pure that Rainbow Dash would have to spend the rest of her life working to earn them. Fluttershy was the focus of all the light of the stars above, and her mane gleamed, draped about her like the softest, most inviting cloud that Rainbow Dash had ever wanted to rest her head in. She was not Pinkie Pie, but even the butterflies upon her flank served as reminders that she had an energy all her own. She was...

"Beautiful," said Rainbow Dash.

Fluttershy turned around to smile at her, but her expression faltered when she saw her friend was no longer looking at the fawn. "...Rainbow Dash?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes wide with conflicted hope.

"Fluttershy..." began Rainbow Dash, but could find no other words to complete her sentence. She rose from the grass and approached Fluttershy every inch as carefully as her friend had approached the timid fawn but minutes earlier. Fluttershy made no move to ward her off, and as they closed their eyes, their lips met...

Fluttershy was a better kisser than Pinkie Pie, though a far less aggressive one. If kissing Pinkie tasted like cherries and sweets, kissing Fluttershy tasted like sunshine and flower petals and water from the clearest of springs. If kissing Pinkie felt like doing a somersault into a river of lemonade, kissing Fluttershy felt like sleeping in a treetop where all the leaves were made from softest cotton. If kissing Pinkie brought forth the promise of new adventures to come and secrets to discover, kissing Fluttershy brought back the memories of times and places gone by. Their legs wrapped around one another, the white-tailed fawn all but forgotten, Rainbow Dash watched as visions of the past swam before her lidded eyes. She had laughed at the idea of Twilight's folders, but she had just as detailed a collection of memories of each of her friends too, except hers was in her head.

A gangly, terrified yellow pegasus filly being backed over the edge of a cloud by two bullies, prompting her to fly down and offer to defend the filly's honor before even learning her name...

That same filly returning to flight camp a few days later, not curious about the outcome of the race but wanting to fly better, fly harder, fly faster...

Fluttershy, Fluttershy, Fluttershy can hardly fly!

Working late into the night, several nights a week, striving to help Fluttershy learn to fly, striving as hard as any of the camp counselors but without a bit in payment...

Fluttershy's awkward but sympathetic embrace and weird earth pony lullabies, anytime that she messed up or was made fun of or otherwise felt her bravado crack...

Who's gotta dash? Gonna make kissy? Rainbow Crash and the Pegasissy!

Refusing to take Gilda's advice to drop Fluttershy's friendship, the only thing she'd ever disagreed with her griffon friend on...

Being told by Fluttershy one night that she was going to quit flight school, even before she had realized it herself...

"Rainbow Dash, I'm moving to Ponyville!"

Hearing Fluttershy's avian chorus for the first time, and realizing that maybe the earth world wasn't *completely* bogus...

Finishing construction on her cloud house, and listening smugly to Fluttershy's praise of it, all the while knowing for a fact that Fluttershy would never visit her there...

Late nights drafting rainfall patterns at Fluttershy's house, until the day she realized that Fluttershy had no interest in rainfall and was only helping because she knew it was important to her best friend...

Their very first Winter Wrap Up together, and learning that Fluttershy had declined to join the weather team and had started her *own* team instead, because that was what Fluttershy did, she found alternate solutions...

Gradually, over the years, nudging other ponies to help Fluttershy coax the animals out of hibernation, until a full team had emerged and Fluttershy had never known she'd been responsible for it, probably...

Catching Twilight Sparkle together after she fell off a cliff, and remembering that Fluttershy *could* still fly, really, when she needed to...

Fluttershy's quiet patience, no matter how much she made fun of the shy pegasus while they climbed the mountain to deal with the red dragon, and her understanding when she finally got around to apologizing...

The shine of pride in Fluttershy's eyes, hovering beside the scoreboard, whenever she won a contest in the Iron Pony Competition...

Fluttershy doing her best, her very best, to help Rainbow Dash overcome the laws of physics and accomplish her second Sonic Rainboom, and that moment of pure jubilation when she did...

Learning from Twilight that Fluttershy had saved four other ponies and herself from the stare of a cockatrice, and quietly telling her friend the next day how awesome she was, knowing that she wouldn't want a big fuss to be made over her no matter how much she deserved it...

Briefly retiring from her weather work to become a commercial flier so that she could pull around advertisements featuring Fluttershy the famous fashion model, because okay, maybe she did want a big fuss made over her after all, whatever...

Months after the fact, finally learning about how Gilda had treated Fluttershy the day the griffon came to Ponyville, because Fluttershy had refused to burden her with the news

until then, fearing that she wouldn't appreciate hearing about such behavior by her former best friend...

Learning, after Discord had been beaten and order in Ponyville restored, that *Fluttershy* had outflown *her* in order to save Equestria...

Finding Tank, and everything that had led up to it...

Fluttershy apologizing for dressing up as the Mare-Do-Well, even before she had thought to confront her about it, and then later helping her through her feelings of betrayal from her other friends...

Saving Rarity and Spike, realizing only after the fact that she had never thought for even a *moment* that Fluttershy wouldn't be able to help her...

Fluttershy the surprisingly good actress, coming up with ideas for how Commander Hurricane could mistreat Private Pansy until their scenes read like a caricature of their own relationship, but one written by someone who had never met either one of them...

The incredible difficulty of leaving Fluttershy behind to rejoin the rest of the Ponyville pegasi, training to create the waterspout that first time...

Her unrepressed joy when Fluttershy returned to the training grounds, full of life and action, a joy followed all too quickly by disappointment...

Spitfire's praise, and how she hadn't hesitated at all to tell the Wonderbolt that the true hero of the day was Fluttershy, her number one flier, her number one fan, her number one friend, as she was reminded again and again, dozens more times, until one day...

"Rainbow Dash, Pinkie and I are together!" and the way that nearly every victory since then had felt empty, every joy muted, every party glum, every train missed, every invitation misplaced, until finally even Pinkie had noticed how unhappy they were together, and now this, their date, their apologies and fits of conversation and sudden romance, all in an attempt to rediscover or re-envision... what?

What exactly had they both allowed – maybe even *intended* – to be destroyed? Love? Did Applejack deserve those ten bits after all, or had Rarity been right to laugh the idea away like it was nothing?

When Fluttershy, wracked with guilt for having torn Rainbow Dash from the sky and brought her to live in Ponyville, had done her utmost to make her friend the best flier she could possibly be, was that love?

When Rainbow Dash, day after day, had learned that it was her oldest and shyest friend that she could count on to support her in anything she did, either with her wings or with her heart, was that love?

When they had both lain together in the park, trading compliments and tentative flirtations, saying things that felt nothing like anything they had ever said to each other before, was that love?

"No!"

They had both said it. They had both pulled away. And while the fawn ran terrified from the park, and while young ponies retreated slowly, embarrassed or even ashamed, from the bushes around them, Rainbow Dash knew for a fact that she was happy. She didn't know what this conclusion would do to their relationships with Pinkie Pie, but she knew the importance of her friendship with Fluttershy, and she knew that Fluttershy knew it too.

• • •

Pinkie Pie, through some obscure combination of her superstition and her natural predilection for things that made no sense, had an elaborate ritual built around going to sleep. First a special signal from her Pinkie Sense would inform her that she was tired. Next she would make her bed, alternating most every night which side the pillows went on. Then she would drape blankets over anything in the room that could be construed as having a face, Gummy included. As a final step before climbing into bed and closing her eyes – right eye, wait six seconds, then left eye – she would brush her teeth thoroughly, as is necessary for one who lives on pastries and candy. It was in this last stage, her mouth full of foam, that she was interrupted by the frantic arrival of the mares she loved.

"We tried, Pinks, honest we tried, but we just can't –"

"She needs me, Pinkie, more than I'd realized, and we don't feel that way about each other –"

"We had this dinner, see, but it wasn't really too romantic –"

"Although, um, I do see what you mean now, um, about kissing her –"

"I was talking with Twilight, and she said I should just be a friend, and she's right –"

"Rarity gave me all these tips about being seductive and flirtatious, but I felt so wrong using them –"

"I'm sorry!"

"We're sorry!"

Pinkie, whom Rainbow Dash had expected to be worried or disappointed or *something*, just looked confused. The pink mare spit the foam from her mouth, rinsed, and stood up to look at them brightly. "There!" she said, teeth shining from her wide grin. "Now I can talk again! That was a pretty silly conversation, you two shouting all sorts of things at the same time and me not able to say a single word. It was pretty cool to hear you shouting, though, Flutters! So what are you girls here about again?"

They looked at each other. "Well," Fluttershy began, "last night you said that you were worried that we were unhappy together. And Pinkie, you were right. We were just miserable."

"Yeah!" said Rainbow Dash. "But then you suggested that we should fall in love with each other. So I asked Fluttershy on a date, and she said yes, because who wouldn't want to go on a date with the Dash?"

"That's, um," said Fluttershy, "that's not *exactly* how it went."

"Close enough. Anyhow, we had the date and we talked about emotions and stuff, and we're doing better now. Then we made out, and it was nice but mostly really really weird."

"We did try, Pinkie. But I don't think we can just fall in love with each other, no matter how much simpler that would make things. That's just not how we work. I'm sorry."

Pinkie still looked confused. "But girls, why are you apologizing for a silly little thing like that? Why would I want you to fall in love?"

"..." Rainbow Dash fumbled for words. "Because you *told us to!* You said everything would work out if we fell in love with each other!"

Pinkie burst out laughing and enveloped them both in a big, toothpaste-scented hug. "Oh, you silly fillies. I only hoped you could fall in love because I thought maybe you *did*

love each other, and you were just afraid to admit it to me or something! But if you don't feel that way, then *duh, obviously* I don't want you to try to do something you can't! That would be like a squirrel wanting to tap dance with a muffin on its head!"

"Actually," said Fluttershy, "I *do* know some *very* talented squirrels, and..."

Pinkie shushed her with a kiss, and then kissed Rainbow Dash too for good measure. "I just want everypony to be happy!" she said. "Especially you two. That's way way way way way *way* more important than whether or not the reason you're happy is because you're kissing each other, isn't it?"

Rainbow Dash just stared at her, leaving Fluttershy to answer the question. "Yes, Pinkie, it is," she said. "We were just so worried we were making *you* unhappy, and we wanted to do anything we could to make you feel better about us. Even if it meant trying to be something we're not." Everything sounded so simple now, especially when she described it like that. Rainbow Dash was beginning to understand why Pinkie Pie had found their entire report so silly.

Pinkie gave them another hug. "You should never do that! That would be ridiculous." She gasped. "Oh no, this is my fault, isn't it? I said something I shouldn't have, and you two went on a date you didn't want to and had to get all huggy and flirty and kissy even though you were totally hating it! Oh, girls, I'm sorry!"

Rainbow Dash looked at Fluttershy through the mass of Pinkie's mane that was partially obscuring part of her vision. They shared a smile. "It's okay, Pinkie," she said. "I mean, yeah, it was definitely pretty weird, but I think it's good that we did it. We work together a lot better now than we did yesterday."

Fluttershy nodded into Pinkie's coat. "We had to learn what we *weren't* before we could learn what we *were*. And aside from that one kiss – which, um, wasn't actually all that bad, um, just as a kiss, I mean – all we really did was talk."

"Yeah!" said Rainbow Dash. "I gotta say, if there's one thing I've learned lately, it's how important it is have talks with your friends. Especially your friends that you're in crazy awesome complicated relationships with!"

"Which, um, is really all relationships," said Fluttershy.

Pinkie giggled. "Gosh, that sounds a lot like one of those silly old friendship reports! But I've got an idea: what if we all got into bed, where it's nice and comfy and warm, and then

we can have all the talks we need to and make sure we all agree about exactly what we all want?"

Rainbow Dash looked anxiously at the outside door. "Uh, is that going to be all right with the Cakes? I mean, with the kids wandering around..."

Pinkie gave her a playful hit. "You have such a dirty mind, Dashie! There's nothing wrong with us all lying there together and just *talking*. It's not like I'd do anything romancey with either of you while the other was right there, that'd be super rude. Well, okay, I'd kiss you, but *nothing else*. Maybe two kisses. Or hmm, no, maybe three, or..."

"Pinkie," said Fluttershy, "that sounds nice. I think we could all do with a warm bed and a good talk, so in the morning we can all have a fresh start and I can give Rainbow Dash a scarf that I think she'd like."

As it was, though, by some unspoken agreement, the good talk had to be postponed until the next day. After all the anxiety of the last twenty-four or so hours, to say nothing of the months before that, Rainbow Dash was happy to lie beneath some big warm fluffy covers and *not* worry about anything for a night. Fluttershy, she guessed, felt the same way, and Pinkie seemed completely content to lie there with her hooves around her two favorite mares in the world. Rainbow Dash could hardly blame her. Eyes threatening to close, she gazed fondly at the two faces beside her: the mare she loved, and the mare who would never ever let her down. It had taken her a long time, but now she was sure she really *had* found her home.

"Pinkie Pie?" she asked. Lying there, looking at the girl who deserved her girlfriend every bit as much as she did and whom she could never again resent for that, because she was the most amazing friend in Equestria, she had remembered one other thing that she was supposed to say.

"Mmhmm?"

"Way back in Appleloosa, you sang this song to try to get everypony to get along with each other, and it didn't really work. We all made fun of you for it, and that was really uncool of us, and... I'm sorry. Because you were right all along.

"You've gotta share. But you've also gotta care."