

Wooly Fetlocks and the Fashion Factory

By Pen Pal



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Introduction

A long, long time ago, there was a young and handsome colt who went by the name of Wool Socks. His coat was a beautiful shade of rich and regal dark purple, and yet, cruelly enough, his mane was a clashing rust colored felt. He was often distracted with odd creations and miraculous inventions the likes of which his fellow fillies and colts did not understand. Often made fun of by his peers for his oddities, his mismatched mane and coat, and his constant distraction from worldly affairs that resulted in a constant state of unshorn fetlocks (such was the state of his lower legs that he was given the moniker Wooly Fetlocks, and try as he might, the ingenuous cruelty of young foals being what it is, the name stuck), he was often a lonely pony. Yet alone was where his unfettered imagination shone best.

Years later, when he had become a full-grown stallion, he became the single most sought after fashion designer in all of Canterlot. So much so he could afford to pay for his own clothing factory, where he manufactured the cheapest chic designs in all the industry. Yet how he *hated* those other, much less original fashion designers, those foalish folks who attempted time and again to steal his life's work.

"I have risen from lowly beginnings to the very heights of the fashion world! Nowhere, I see now, is safe! When I was but a foal, there were the bullies, and now that I am an adult there are thieves and vandals! What cannot be defamed is stolen! What cannot be stolen is destroyed! No more!" Soon after, he declared that the doors to his amazing factory be shut forever and disappeared from Equestria. No pony could find hide nor tail of him.

Yet...ten long years later smoke begins to pour from the smokestacks again, and the windsocks move once more. The gates open, and carts bearing the trademark of the Unshorn Fetlock, Wooly's mark, have begun appearing in shopping centers across Equestria and beyond.

Only strange, short, ponies are ever allowed in or out of the factory and all attempts at interviews have failed. A mysterious wind blows across the Equestrian fashion world...and everypony asks the obvious question:

Has Wooly Fetlocks finally returned?

Chapter 1

Luna was not a morning pony. The moon goddess, by the very definition of her existence, was a creature of the night. Honestly, she felt like the times that Celestia woke her during the day, albeit rare, were the bane of her existence.

“Celly?!” she whined as the blazing bright light of the sun beat down on her face, “It’s only noon!”

Clack clack clack, went Celestia’s hooves on the marble tiling. Luna’s older sister continued her slow walk around Luna’s bedroom, horn glowing as she pulled back the silk curtains. “Oh hush. You’ve had plenty of time to sleep,” she said.

Luna stuffed her head under her pillow, her glowing horn poking out from underneath. “No, I’ve had more of a nap than an actual sleep,” she grumbled.

Celestia chuckled to herself and kept walking. Then she tripped. The curtains had stopped moving, and her magical tether had, instead of pulling the curtains, pulled on her. “Oh come ON Luna! Your breakfast is ready, and you’ve been sleeping since dawn!” There were very few ponies that ever heard the high and mighty Princess Celestia whining, and of those, even fewer could resist. Luna, unluckily, was not one of those ponies.

“No,” Luna said, levitating her blanket over the pillow that was over her head.

“But I had a treat for you! Don’t you want to come see it?” Celestia continued whining.

The blankets shifted, almost as if the Moon Princess was covering her ears with her hooves. “I can’t hear you Celly!” Luna sang out in sing song. Celestia smiled. She knew she was winning.

“Come on, come on, come on, come on!” Celestia said, stomping her hooves lightly on each repetition.

Luna sighed, removing the pillow and covers from her head. "Fine," she said; and then she rolled out of bed and into her hooves. "Where is this surprise you wanted to show me?"

Celestia covered her hoof with her mouth, stifling a giggle. She finally broke into full laughter when Luna glared daggers at her. "What. Is. So. Funny. Sister?" she asked.

Celestia pointed her hoof at Luna. "You-you-you ha-have bedmane!" she managed to say before being thrown into another fit of laughter. Celestia was leaning forward, her knees bent, nose nearly hitting the ground each time she convulsed into giggling once more.

Luna blew a lock of hair out of her eyes. "Oh ha ha ha. Very funny Celly. I have bedmane, just like any other pony who just woke up. Now, what was this surprise?" she responded. The exasperation in her voice was clear as crystal; and Celestia tried to stop laughing. She didn't succeed.

"On-only aft-aft-after breakfast," she said. "And after you fix that bedmane," she continued, finally regaining control. "I kind of wish I had kept on laughing. I don't get to do that very often," she mused.

"Oh ha ha ha. Like you don't get enough laughs at my expense," said Luna. She was in front of the mirror attempting to deal with one particularly troublesome cowlick. "Darn cowlick. Why are they even called that?" she asked.

"Even called what?" Celestia responded. Her eyebrows were raised in an expression combining surprise, curiosity, and a touch of poorly hidden sarcasm.

"You know what I'm talking about Celly! Why are cowlicks called cowlicks?" Luna snapped, stomping her hoof. The various toiletries on her dark ebony vanity clattered about, and the leaves engraved into the frame of the mirror shook so much Celestia could have sworn that a wind was passing through a real forest.

"Cowlicks?" Celestia asked, her eyes wide in confusion.

"Yes! Cowlicks! You know? This?" Luna exclaimed, pointing at the offending mass of hair with her levitating hairbrush. "Clearly a cow didn't come in here during the morning and give me a good lick!"

“Oh. No. Of course not,” Celestia said. She looked away with a slight frown on her face.

Luna stared at her older sister. “You didn’t,” she said. Celestia continued to look away, rubbing her shoulder with her hoof; Luna gasped in horror. “Oh no no no no no! NO NO NO NO NO! You DIDN’T!” she screamed. Celestia cringed, looking like a school filly caught covering the walls with her hoof paints instead of her paper.

“Um...yeah...” Celestia admitted. Luna froze and stared at her sister. Anypony listening could have sworn the silence was loud enough to deafen Beethooven. Again. Even though he was already deaf. Captain Draught, the guardpony right outside the door, said as much everytime he told the story later.

Celestia, finally unable to contain herself any longer, let the mirth take over, and the room rang out with her clear laughter.

“Just what in the hay is so funny, dear sister?” Luna managed to force out.

“Your expression! It’s priceless!” Celestia kept tittering. Celestia took a few minutes to calm down before continuing, “No, of course I didn’t. It’s just wonderful to see how much you trust your older sister.”

“Oh ha ha ha, very funny Celly,” Luna deadpanned. She pointed her hairbrush at her sister. “Don’t *make* me ruin your *perfect* hair.”

“Oh, now don’t be like that. A laugh every now and then is good for everypony. All the doctors say so. Adds years to your life!” Celestia said, smiling widely. Luna could almost swear she looked like the Cheshire Cat from one of Lewis Colter’s stories, and sadly, the Cheshire Cat did not amuse Luna.

“Because more years mean **anything** to an immortal alicorn?” Luna retorted. She snorted to emphasize her point, but Celestia pointedly ignored it. “What’s this surprise you mentioned?”

“Oh, of course!” Celestia said. “Look! In today’s newspaper!” She levitated the newspaper directly into Luna’s face.

Luna stared at the paper. Then she stared at Celestia. “Why do I care about whoever this Woolly Fetlocks is? I’ve been on the moon. I haven’t even seen his fashions, nor do I care. Fashion doesn’t help me rule Equestria does it? It doesn’t help me plan when rains should come, or how low the moon should hang in the sky, or how bright to make Polaris or Vega or any of them. So...I ask again. Why do I care? Because I’m losing some very good sleep for this” she said. Luna did not look like she was going to take any nonsense; she’d already had enough for the morning, thank you very much (though, if Captain Draught is to be believed, this tale currently has far less than the usual amount of Daily Celestial Shenanigans).

“Looooook!” Celestia repeated, her horn glowing. The words she highlighted shone directly into Luna’s face. Luna glanced at the words, annoyed, her mouth open with another retort. A retort that never made it out of her mouth died on her tongue as her jaw dropped open and her hairbrush fell to the floor. The offending cowlick slowly rose again after having been almost defeated by the Moon Princess’s efforts.

“Oh my gosh! His fashion factory has an entire wing dedicated to socks!?” Luna squealed in delight. “I absolutely *have* to get one of these tickets now Celly!” She jumped onto her bed and continued jumping as she levitated a rather old abacus from the nightstand beside her. “Did you hear that Abby?” she squealed. “Woolly Fetlocks has a factory with a whole department *just for socks!!!* Oh! And there’s this secret prize for one of the ponies who has a ticket, *to be given away on the day of the tour!*” she said, her voice carrying off the balcony and off into the mountains of Canterlot.

Celestia frowned. “Are you suggesting that I use my position to unfairly obtain a ticket for you Luna?” she asked. Luna stopped jumping, pausing to take a moment to blow the now drooping former cowlick out of her eyes. She wasn’t sure when it had stopped being a cowlick, but she wasn’t about to complain.

“Of course not Celly,” she said. “I have every intention of doing this fairly.”

“No emptying the Canterlot Coffers to buy every single pair of socks in Hoity Toity’s store just to see if you can get a ticket? No direct ordering from the factory? No rewards for the ticket put on every signpost from here to Appleloosa?” Celestia asked.

“Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye,” Luna swore.

“When did you learn the Pinkie Pie swear?” Celestia asked. Her surprise was clear, but a hint of curiosity hovered in the arc of her eyebrows.

“I overheard you one night as you were reading over one of Twilight’s friendship reports out loud.”

Celestia smiled. “You know you shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

Luna grinned. Celestia’s smile faded. “And dear sister, **you** know that **you** shouldn’t try to convince **your** younger sister that **you** snuck a cow in hear just so he or she could give me a *literal* cowlick.” She levitated a white cotton sock out from underneath the bed. It had one red and one green button attached to the seams and single red thread sewn into the form of a mouth; all of it coming together to form a rather crude, if somewhat adorable, sock puppet. “Or your younger sister will chase you around the room with-“

“Mr. Buttons doesn’t scare me anymore Luna,” Celestia said evenly. Even so, her eyes followed the sock puppet obsessively as it inched ever closer.

“Oh *really*?” Luna said. “Why don’t we just see about that.”

When asked later, Captain Draught could only say that he had had to try his absolute hardest to avoid breaking out into hysterics at the sight of the supreme ruler of all of Equestria fleeing from her younger sister’s levitating sock puppet. After all, a captain in the Royal Guard has to keep up appearances.

...

Luna sighed as another cellophane wrapper hit the wastebasket. One per day. That was her allowance. It hurt Celestia to see her like this, but both princesses understood why this was necessary.

Celestia had been true to her word: she trusted her younger sister. The rule was Luna’s, and she’d stuck by it. She allowed herself only one package of socks from Hoity Toity’s shop daily, and she’d come back

empty hooved from his store more than a few times. The fashionable stallion had offered to reserve a package for the Princess for each day, but she had told him no. Everypony had to have a fair chance. Even if some of the nobles of Canterlot didn't quite see it her way. She had begun ordering socks from Carousel Boutique and having them sent to her older sister by Spike. Even that didn't work all the time. Ponies everywhere were looking for the tickets. There were only five after all. It had said so on the evening news:

Welcome to EBC news. I'm Straight Talk. Our top stories tonight. Fire-Hearth Steward, the famous business magnate and the mare behind the magazine, My Hearth at Home, has been convicted on charges of conspiracy, lying to royal investigators, and obstruction of an agency proceeding. Her sentencing hearing is set to occur in one month's time.

The Republic of Emeralds banned smoking in all indoor work areas today, including privately owned restaurants. The ban was instituted, according to one Emerald MP, in order to protect ponies from the dangers of passive or second-hand smoke.

Wooly Fetlocks, the famous fashion designer, has decided to celebrate his return to the public eye after an absence of ten years. According to an announcement made by Fetlocks himself, he has packaged five golden tickets inside of five of his designer socks. In one month, Mr. Fetlocks will open up his factory for a special tour only for ticketholders, along with a chance to win a special prize: a lifetime's supply of the entirety of any new designs to come out of Mr. Fetlocks' factory at each season change. Furthermore, Mr. Fetlocks has announced another secret prize to be given away the day of the factory tour. The pairs of socks containing the tickets will be on sale everywhere from Wal-Mart to Mr. Toity's Best of the Best Boutique in Canterlot in order to, quote, "Facilitate ease of access and increase fairness across the board." Suggested retail price is two bits per pair of socks.

"Luna," Celestia said. "I know how important this is to you. I really could just--"

“No,” interrupted Luna. “I’m not going to win by cheating. If I get a ticket, it’s going to be because I did it just like any pony off the street. Besides, wasn’t it you who wanted to make sure that I did things fairly?” she responded.

Celestia nodded in acquiescence. “I understand sister. Though I don’t think that everypony has your sense of...fair play.” Celestia levitated a newspaper in front of Luna. A picture of a rather bratty looking grayish magenta pony with grayish violet hair punctuated with a single stripe of white almost leapt out of the front page; the title line read in rudely explosive letters, “300,000 Bits Blown!”

Luna tore the newspaper from Celestia’s magical grasp, and, after a minute of reading, threw it down on the breakfast table. “That’s just...ARGH!” She crumpled the newspaper into a tiny ball and threw it across the wide breakfast hall, where it knocked over a, fortunately empty, wastebasket. A maid quickly descended on the spot, restoring order to the sparsely decorated, but elegantly carved marble room.

Luna stomped around the room in a rage. “But-how-I mean-SHE’S JUST SPOILED!” she shouted.

“Luna...there’s nothing we can do. It’s perfectly within this little filly’s father’s rights to try to buy her the ticket. The fact that he’s spoiled her this badly is just a sign of how bad a parent he is; honestly, I feel sorry for the filly and her father instead of angry,” Celestia said. She demurely raised her teacup to her lips and took an elegant sip.

“I know I shouldn’t be upset Celly, but it’s just so...” Luna started.

“I understand. If you’d like to try to buy more pairs of socks per day, I wouldn’t blame you,” Celestia said quietly.

Luna stared at her. “You know I won’t do that Celly. I’m not going to commandeer the resources of our great nation for my own whims. I’ve already overstepped my bounds as ruler of Equestria by allowing myself one pair of socks *per day* when I know that there are many ponies who can’t even afford that.” She paused and pawed at the ground slightly. “I’m being terribly selfish aren’t I? I should stop.”

Celestia moved to her sister and pulled her into a deep hug, wrapping her wings around Luna. “Luna, you might be being a little selfish, but I think

you've earned it. Ever since you came back from the moon you've done nothing but work for the good of the common pony. You brokered the peace between the Gryffins and the Dragons. You found the bookkeeping flaw that led to the downfall of Ponron. You even worked out a balanced budget for the castle, in a week, on your own!"

Luna blushed. "Well...I did get some help from Abby on that one."

Celestia struggled not to facehoof. "...Regardless. You've done a lot of good ever since you returned to Equestria. You need to do things for yourself. You know. Besides polish your abacus." Luna opened her mouth to speak. "And stare at yourself in the mirror while you're wearing socks. Honestly Luna, I don't understand it. I hate socks, I really do."

Luna giggled. "You're just saying that because you're scared of Mr. Buttons," she said, nuzzling her older sister. Celestia let her chin rest on Luna's head for a moment before pulling back and looking her straight in the eye.

"You're right. I am scared of Mr. Buttons. In fact, I hate Mr. Buttons even more than I hate socks. But I love you, and it hurts me to see you so upset about this. I've seen you worry, and cry, and struggle with yourself over these tickets; some days I wonder if I might lose you if you didn't get one of the tickets...so if you really need to-"

"Celestia, promise me something," Luna said, rigid determination in her eyes. Whatever she was about to say, Celestia knew, Luna would never budge. "Don't you ever ask me if I want to break my rule of at most one pair of socks per day again."

Celestia nodded and pulled Luna in for an even tighter hug. They stayed there for some time, embracing, filled with a sisterly love born of a newfound understanding and a millennium of separation.

Chapter 2

Rarity could not believe her eyes. There were ponies everywhere, clambering about, climbing over, and crawling over each other, all just to get into Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Boutique. As she struggled to fight her way in, she was jostled and bumped until her joints felt like seaweed jelly, and she nearly lost control over the boxes she was levitating several times.

"Coming through! One moment please! Excuse me!" she called as she shoved her way into the press. She immediately rebounded; "This must be what bouncing off the sound barrier is like," she thought.

"Hey! Wait your turn!" shouted one pony, as Rarity shoved her out of the way.

"I have a special delivery to make!" Rarity declared. The other pony immediately backed up to allow her through. "Why thank you," Rarity said, glad that the other pony had removed herself from Rarity's way. That only left...several more to go. At least the fighting seemed to be quieting down.

Rarity paused. She realized that it was quieting down because everypony was staring at either her or the boxes she was levitating. More and more eyes shifted to the boxes.

"She must have more socks in those boxes!" one of them shouted! The crowd began to close in on her.

"Clearly I should have brought these in the back way," Rarity muttered to herself. To the crowd she hollered, "So terribly sorry! There are no socks here! Just bringing a small shipment of dresses from Ponyville! Carousel Boutique! That's all!"

"She's lying! Hoity Toity gets more socks every day! And we haven't seen them yet! She's got 'em!" shouted the first pony as he continued advancing. He had a half-crazed look in his eye, and the crowd seemed to be catching his fervor. A few of them glared at her in such a spiteful manner that she was sure that Fluttershy would have fled in tears.

“We’ve been waiting all day. And the sun is soooo hot...and we’re soooo tired. Don’t you think we deserve these? Don’t you think that maybe, just maybe, we deserve these?” asked the first pony, his voice quieting, even soothing...but none of that calmed Rarity; he still had those crazed eyes. As he slowly walked towards Rarity, she noticed everypony advancing on her slowly. “Maybe a trade? Say...two bits per package of socks? That’s got to be more than you’re getting paid.” They all continued to close in.

“I’ll give her ten bits per package!” shouted one member of the crowd. The first pony glared at him.

“Three thousand for the whole thing!” shouted another. The crowd continued to close in, but the first pony could feel what Rarity already knew. He had lost control of them; the floodgates of greed were opened wide, and Rarity didn’t know what to do. So she did the first thing that came to mind.

“Stay back! Stay back!” she screamed, wildly swinging the box around her. It wasn’t exactly the best plan, and she didn’t want to hurt anypony, but she was rather frightened by the large crowd of sock ravenous ponies before her. She later admitted that it wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she had expressed a wish to be mobbed by strangers wherever she went.

Rarity barreled towards Hoity Toity’s door, using the crate to try and clear a path in front of her. Ponies, fearing the rather sizeable object Rarity was wielding, leapt out of her path; though apparently they hadn’t learned their lessons very well, and immediately started trying to pile in behind her. They were trying to hem her in. It occurred to her that it was likely that none of them were actually going to hurt her. On the other hoof she wasn’t about to take chances with a pile of sock-crazed ponies.

Rarity kept running, eyes shut, unable to tell if she was even moving towards the boutique’s doors anymore. She just kept running and running, and every step, every moment, felt like an eternity spent in Ponytory. The shouting of ponies around her died away to silence, and all she could hear was the sound of her hooves making contact with the cobblestones and the pounding of her own heartbeat, all she could feel was the cold sweat of panic, and all she could...

Wait. Cold sweat? She opened her eyes and looked around; around her were racks and stands and some of the finest fashions she'd ever seen! She had made it! Hoity Toity was at the door, absolutely livid, screaming at the ponies trying to storm his premises. He was flanked by two massive stallions, and there were two more struggling with the still open doors.

"Absolutely shameful behavior! All of you! You'll be lucky if I sell you the lint the groundspony left in the dust bin! Now away with you! All of you!" screamed Hoity Toity. A small amount of foam flew from his mouth, peppering the ponies right in front of him. Moments later, one of the doors slammed shut as Hoity Toity threw himself against it, sending his sunglasses flying. The other door clicked shut; the ponies outside were awkwardly standing outside, unsure of what to do or say. Some of them stared woefully through the glass doors; one of them tapped on the glass, only to be met by a glare that sent the pony skittering.

"I'm terribly sorry for the trouble, Miss Rarity. Ever since Mr. Fetlocks started that ticket contest, everypony here in Canterlot has had an endless appetite for socks! Everyday, I'm sold out of one thing! Socks! I'm afraid that the craze has just gone too far this time," Hoity apologized.

Rarity was much calmer now; but her breath still caught in her throat, and her heart was still beating far too fast. "Get ahold of yourself Rarity!" she thought. "You've faced far worse! A crowd full of sock crazed ponies is nothing compared to a chimera or a dragon!" Still, she could not entirely dispel the fear she had felt; the panic. She wasn't sure why. Twilight would later explain that she had probably not expected that ponies would ever be so...maddened. It was the sense of shock and betrayal more than anything.

"Are you alright?" Hoity asked concernedly. One of his guardponies stood close by with Hoity's glasses in mouth. "Would you like something to help you calm down? Some tea? I have some wonderful chamomile tea. Just arrived yesterday."

Rarity nodded. Hoity Toity led her to the Boutique's break room. A couple of salesponies were carefully arranging clothes racks and shelves filled with the latest, incredibly colorful fashions. The spring lines were in.

"Afterwards, would you like to see the corner of my boutique I've dedicated to your work?" Hoity asked. Rarity stopped in her tracks. Hoity

kept walking for a moment before turning around, noticing that the sound of Rarity's hooves had disappeared. "Is there a problem?"

Rarity's mouth was so wide open that Pinkie would have told her to pick it up off the floor. Maybe. Maybe that was Applejack. Rarity couldn't be sure. Only one thing was really processing. "...I...I...have my own...corner...in your boutique?" she asked, her harrowing experience moments before completely forgotten.

Hoity smiled. "Of course my dear! You're one of the best designers I've ever had the privilege of working with! Oh, please bring a quad of socks for Miss Rarity here," he clapped his hooves together, and two very fashion conscious ponies immediately appeared bearing an unopened quad of Wooly Fetlocks socks. Rarity stared at the package. "A token of my sincerest apologies for the incident outside. The shipment of socks was being delivered in the back right when you arrived. I'm hoping that this small gift is satisfactory?"

Rarity's horn glowed, her face a mask of anger. "NO!" The quad of socks levitated into the air, and Hoity Toity stepped back as his four of the guardsponies stepped forwards. The sock threads began to undo themselves. "This thing is the cause for my suffering, and you think to callously toss them to me as a token of your *apologies*?!" she said, thrusting her nose into Hoity's face. His mouth was agape. "Do you *really think* that a quad of Fetlock's Fantabulous Socks is *really* what I want to see right now?!" she screamed.

"Um-I-I-I was-I" he stuttered, as the threads from the socks wrapped themselves around his ears, tying them back.

"Listen *very* closely, Mr. Toity! I'll be happy if I never have to see another quad of Fantabulous Socks as long as I live!" With that she tossed the remainder of the socks into his face. Hoity stared. The guardsponies stared. The salesponies stared. Rarity stared.

A single golden ticket fluttered towards the ground, where it came to rest on the cold black tile floor of Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Boutique.

Hoity Toity cleared his throat. "If you're sure that this gift is unsatisfactory then maybe I could-"

Rarity seized the ticket and stuffed it into her saddlebags. "Thank you for your sincerest hospitality Mr. Toity. Perhaps you'd like to do this again sometime? I'd love to stay and chat over tea, but I *really* must go."

The guardsponies began to close in, as Hoity Toity advanced, smiling eerily. "Well, Miss Rarity," he said, continuing to walk forward, "I do believe we can arrange for a more appropriate gift for you? You did express some...disappointment with it, did you not?" His eyes were glued not to Rarity's face, but to the golden ticket sticking out of her saddlebags.

Rarity's eyes began to flit around, looking for an exit. Any exit. The guardsponies began to close faster as Hoity motioned them forwards.

"A bonus for the pony who brings me that golden ticket!" he said, the very monster of envy and greed rearing in his eyes.

Rarity's stomach lurched. She wasn't sure if it was because she was in the presence of a pony who was currently completely consumed with the opposite of the Element of Generosity, or if it was because she wasn't sure what to do. A few tense moments passed as she continued to back away from the continuously moving guardsponies. Another step. Another step. And another step. And another-

She felt the glass doors at her back. As she looked up at the ceiling for another avenue of escape, an inset ceiling light flickered on, and her horn began to glow. The glass doors unlocked themselves and Rarity threw the doors fully open with her magic. She didn't know if anypony was still out there, but if she had to guess...

"I'VE GOT A GOLDEN TICKET EVERYPONY!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. The guardsponies froze. Hoity Toity stared. Rarity glared back at them, her heart fluttering a million miles a minute. She didn't know if the ponies outside would try and rip the ticket from her, or worse, but she had to take that chance. Hoity Toity certainly wasn't giving her any alternatives. Besides, she reasoned, there was a difference between a claimed and an unclaimed ticket; and ponies respected the difference between claimed property and unclaimed property...right? She visibly gulped, but continued staring down Hoity Toity and his guardponies.

Moments later Rarity's gamble paid off as a pile of paparazzi charged the doors of Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Boutique in Canterlot, accompanied by a mass of ponies all vying to try and trade for Rarity's

ticket. One particularly handsome stallion even proposed marriage. As Rarity was carried off to safety by the unintentional spot of limelight and sudden escort of police ponies, Hoity Toity stood at the top of the gently rising stairs to his boutique, absolutely livid.

“Sir? A question if you would? How does it feel to have been the first pony to sell one of these much sought after golden tickets?” a newspony asked him. The young colt looked fresh off the presses of the university, his eyes shining with bright innocence and wonder.

Hoity Toity regarded him callously before speaking, carefully picking each and every word. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to correct you. It was a gift...the gift of a lifetime.”

As he slowly walked back into his boutique and away from the rather confused press pony, he turned to one of his salesponies and asked, “Did I just terrorize Miss Rarity to try and steal her golden ticket?” The salespony nodded. “Oh...oh...” he said, his voice hollow with regret. “I’ll be up in my office. Bring me some stationery, a fresh quill, and some ink...I have...an apology to write.”

Chapter 3

“Booooo!” one pony shouted. The rest of the audience quickly joined in. Then the vegetable throwing started. Trixie cringed, ducking a rather unseemly, and foul smelling, watermelon before dashing off the stage in tears.

“Good riddance!” another shouted. “She was really beginning to get on my nerves!”

“Defeated an Ursa Major! AS IF!” another continued. The jeering just kept going as Trixie left the stage. Behind her she could hear the squelch of a tomato as it struck the stage floor and skidded.

Trixie found her way to a lonely corner of the back hallway, where she began to quietly cry her eyes out. The pain, the failure. All of it had started in Ponyville. Ever since her disgrace in Ponyville, her classic act about defeating an Ursa Major had only been met with ridicule. The tale of Twilight Sparkle’s defeat of an Ursa Minor had spread far and wide; so far and so wide that, in fact, whenever she started her story she was almost universally met with disdain as somepony commented “Aren’t you supposed to be lavender?”

Twilight Sparkle. That name brought shivers to Trixie. She had never met a pony that displayed such...power before. If anypony had the capability to defeat an Ursa Major other than the Royal Pony Sisters, it was her. Trixie had never before felt so...second class. She had been able to defeat anypony who had faced her before, with her vast repertoire of tricks and superbly precise magical control. Yet, after that display...she knew that the denizens of Ponyville would want Twilight to challenge her to a duel of magic as soon as possible, and that was one duel that she knew she couldn’t win.

So, she fled. Fled with false pride, a final arrogant yet empty taunt...and the events had haunted her ever since. Not only had she lost her confidence, she’d lost her wagon, and most importantly, her hat and cloak. They had originally been a gift from her mother, a blessing, and an acknowledgment of the path that Trixie wanted to take.

Her father had not approved; but then, what Canterlot noblestallion would approve of his daughter becoming a wandering troubadour? It didn't help that soon after Trixie had left, her mother finally succumbed to the illness that had governed all of their lives. A week afterwards Trixie had shown up, wagon and all, for the funeral, only to be denied access by her own father. As she left, she had heard him firing every single guardpony who had let Trixie in. One member had actually retorted, "I didn't sign up so I could stop somepony from attendin' her mother's funeral. I ain't got the right, and neither do you." Trixie shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. Now was not the time to be letting bad memories bubble up.

"Miss Trixie?" somepony said. Trixie looked up, seeing a kindly older mare with a beige coat and tan mane. "I'm sorry, but the manager would like you to leave. I tried to reason with him but-"

"It's no problem Curtain Call," Trixie said. "I can go." She paused before standing. "Am I still going to get paid?"

Curtain Call shook her head. "I'm sorry Trixie...I really tried..." Trixie laid a hoof on Curtain Call's shoulder.

"You've already done too much for me already. It's...it's no problem. I'll just find somewhere else," Trixie said. After saying her goodbyes, she slowly walked towards the green room as Curtain Call tried to find the next act. Something involving a standing comic who called herself Giggly Jowls.

In the green room, several other one-shot acts were preparing for their one chance to shine, here, on the small stage. They stood, chatting, stretching, warming up...it was all the normal jazz that ponies often saw in the movies. Trixie could swear that one of them was doing Pilates, as she walked over to her little cubby and retrieved her saddlebags. After she had put on her long cloak, she noticed the silence. Everypony was staring at her. Some of them were muttering...well, except for the mime. But nopony cared about the mime. Trixie thought she could hear some of the muttering...something. She was sure it was about it.

"Poor girl. I really hate it when ponies get booed off the stage," one of them whispered.

Trixie raised her head, and straightened her stance. "Even if I walk out of here in failure," she thought to herself, "I walk out PROUD." With her nose in the air, she walked out into the rainy streets of Fillydelphia.

Trixie sighed to herself as she watched the rain from underneath the stone overhang of the Colt and Carpet's back entrance (Colt and Carpet! Show and a Dinner, because other places just have Dinner and a Show!). There weren't many places *left* in Fillydelphia. She briefly considered becoming a street performer, but then realized that she needed an act that was...well, entertaining.

Her shows almost always involved her proving her own supremacy over other ponies. A trait of her father's and one she had always thought that she would never inherit. Nevertheless, there was just something...addicting about proving yourself better than another pony.

"Maybe I go back to storytelling..." she mused. "It's not far from my current act, and I can already put together the light show for it." A flash of lightning illuminated the back alley for her. The water was already *floating* smaller pebbles down the drains. Trixie needed to get going.

Reaching into her saddlebags, she pulled out a quad of socks and boots. Both were far more worn than they should have been: the boots were scuffed and held together with more magic and glue than actual fabric, and the socks had enough holes that she wasn't sure if they qualified as socks or rags. Still, they were both serviceable, if only barely.

As Trixie trotted past the Fillydelphia clocktower, she noted the time. 8:37 P.M. Enough time to grab something to eat. Trixie began trotting over to a nearby diner: Mike and Ike's Sandwich Shop. Right off of First and Horseshoe, between the Secondhand Capes and Clothing Emporium and the Dungeons and Demons game store. She'd been flirted with by some of the more...geeky ponies who had decided to grab something to eat while playing in their weekly games...something involving little bits of cardboard and incredibly powerful pony magicians who could apparently walk between worlds. She'd felt flattered, but she was certain that she was far too mature. These...suitors, for lack of a better word, were simply not ready for a mare like her. Besides, she argued to herself, she enjoyed her freedom. It certainly didn't help that she enjoyed the companionship of other mares.

"I swear," she muttered, "Colts and stallions seem to have only one thing on their minds. When two mares get together all they can think of is jumping in with them." If one of her rather gangly pseudo-suitors hadn't

bumped into her in front of the clothing emporium, she never would have noticed the sign.

After sending the poor colt on his way, another flash of lightning illuminated the street. That was when she saw it. A “Help Wanted” sign sitting in the corner of the window of the Secondhand Capes and Clothing Emporium! She glanced at her reflection in the window. Her cheekbones were a more prominent than they should have been, her cloak was tattered...and then she glanced back at the sign.

“Well...I could really use the money...I shouldn’t be eating out tonight anyways considering I just lost my job *before* I even got paid...” she said to no one in particular. She made a mental note to return first thing in the morning, and then entered the diner next door.

“The usual Miss Trixie?” asked the pony behind the counter. Trixie nodded as she levitated her cloak off, and wrung it into one of the nearby waiting buckets. Her hooves clacked on loudly on the linoleum floor.

“All the colts are next door. They said that they’re just starting their draft. I’m not sure how there’s any room to pull anything inside a small game store, but far be it from me to criticize,” said the pony.

Trixie smiled. “You always know how to tell a joke Feather Fall,” she said.

The orange pegasus grinned, flipping her candy pink mane out of her eyes before turning around and shouting, “HEY! SHORT ORDER! MEDIUM HAY FRIES, AND A CUCUMBER SANDWICH!”

A small earth pony’s head popped up on the other side of the opening into the kitchen. “You don’t gotta shout, you know,” he grumbled. “Miss Trixie! What a surprise to see you here! I thought you had a show tonight!”

Trixie looked down at the table. Feather Fall glared at Short Order, and he gaped between the two for a moment before disappearing. The sound of cookware began to fill up the empty diner. The wall muffled a shout that could have been something about some “Gotta STOP putting my hoof in my mouth!”.

“Don’t you worry about this one,” Feather Fall said. “It’s on the house.”

“Th-thank you,” Trixie said. As Feather Fall left to continue cleaning the bar, Trixie really, truly, for the first time, noticed her cutie mark: an image of a cushion of feathers beneath a dark rain cloud. “It really fits her,” Trixie thought. She continued to stare for a moment, until Feather Fall turned around and looked her straight in the eyes, flipping her mane as she did so. Trixie knew Feather Fall’s barn door didn’t swing that way, and she was teasing every time. It didn’t help. Trixie still blushed and looked down at the table, wondering if she could ever find a mare like her. Or at least one that looked as good.

...

The next morning Trixie had shown up at the Secondhand Capes and Clothing Emporium before doing anything else. It wasn’t really that breakfast could wait...it was more that it had to wait. Trixie’s landlord had asked for her rent last night, and she’d only barely managed to pay half of it off exactly by searching beneath a floorboard where she’d seen some few coins drop as fellow residents of the apartment complex climbed up and down the stairs.

“You’re still a month behind,” he had said coldly. Trixie had only stuck her tongue out at at back as he left. It hadn’t actually done anything to help her situation, but it certainly made her feel better. However, the emptiness of her bitbag bumping against her side as she walked took the edge off of that feeling quickly.

The proprietor of the Emporium was an older mare. She was a gentle, nice sort of mare; the kind that you expected to be somepony’s favorite grandmother. “You’re looking for work, aren’t you dear?” The first question she had asked.

Trixie blinked. “How did you know that?” she asked.

“I have my ways,” said the older mare, looking at Trixie’s dilapidated boots. “I don’t have a lot of help these days. My daughter up and moved away soon as she could. Couldn’t stand this old place any more; least that’s what she said about thirty years ago. Visits every now and then. Every summer my grandcolt comes to help, but he’s a young colt. I know he’d rather be out having fun. Oh, but I’m sorry, I do have a habit of just talking away; you said were interested in workin’ for me?”

Trixie nodded. She was getting more unsure about working for this elderly mare by the second. She seemed to be on the verge of senility. Or comprehensibility. Trixie couldn't tell which.

"Oh! How rude of me. I haven't had your name yet. Mine's Bobbin. Like the thing you put thread on? Now what's yours?" Bobbin hadn't turned from the rack of dresses she was sorting. Next to it was a pile of rather moth eaten bow ties.

"I'm The Gre-" Trixie paused. She wasn't sure if she really **was** all that Great and Powerful anymore. If anything, that title belonged to Twilight Sparkle. Trixie shook her head. She didn't want to think about that right now! She was interviewing for work! No bad memories! No!

"You don't want to tell me your name?"

"Oh, sorry ma'am. It was nothing. My name is Trixie," she said quickly. A lone moth on the far side of the room settled down on a dusty shelf, preparing to sleep through the long day. She could almost see it wipe its antennae on its legs.

"Well, young lady, you seem nice enough and my old bones could really use the help. You're hired. How soon can you start?" the old mare asked. She had now moved onto the rather hopeless mission of arranging the bow ties in an artistic fashion. One of them sat lazily by the edge of the dust filled wooden display basket that she was filling. It looked absolutely pathetic; the left bow was almost completely torn off, and the right bow drooped off the edge of the edge of the basket, begging to fall to the floor so it could stop fighting the eternal pull of gravity. The inexorable force of inertia denied it.

Trixie looked around at the dusty shelves, and the empty display cases. The store was much like Bobbin: it had clearly seen better days. Still, it was a job, and Trixie needed the money. "I can start today; but I have to ask, and I don't mean to be rude: how much?"

Bobbin moved another bow tie around the pile aimlessly. No matter where she put it, it didn't seem to fit. "Say about fifteen bits an hour?"

Trixie's heart leapt into her throat. That going rate was INCREDIBLE compared to what she thought she would get (about seven bits an hour

was minimum wage in Equestria; average cost of living, of course, required far more than that). “Yes,” she said.

Bobbin nodded at her before turning back to the bows. “Head to the back would you? You can take care of the crate of socks; I want them all over these shelves in an hour. Neatly arranged, if possible,” she said before returning to the aged bow ties.

Trixie was confused as she walked towards the back of the store. All of these shelves filled with socks? Why had she said “if possible”? Arranging socks didn’t take that long. And why were secondhand socks coming in a crate?

Her eyes bulged as she opened the door to the back room. In the room was an unopened crate of Fetlock’s Fantabulous Socks. Suddenly it all became clear; Bobbin was raking in bits hoof over horseshoe because she, like every other clothing store from Manehattan to Canterlot, was busy selling the living daylights out of Mr. Fetlock’s socks. Everypony was talking about these things right now. Here...here was the chance of a lifetime. She could search each sock for the ticket before putting them on display...Bobbin wouldn’t mind, would she?

Where was something to open the crate with...there: a rather dust-free crowbar lay on one of the old tables. Trixie levitated the tool over to the crate, and after a moment to position it...*crack*! She levitated away both the crowbar and the lid, before levitating out a single quad of socks.

Her breath caught in her throat. She had no idea if these socks had one of the golden tickets...but if they did all her troubles would be over! She could sell the ticket for cartfulls and cartfulls of bits! Never again would she go hungry! All she had to do was peel back the packaging! Yes! That was it! Yes! She’d have a nice place to live in a nice neighborhood, good food to eat every day, ponies would call her successful, and she would have finally proven her father- Trixie froze. Her horn stopped glowing and the semi-open quad of socks dropped to the floor with a soft, crackle. “This...this isn’t what I wanted,” she said. Was she really succeeding if she took the easy way out?

“Are you alright down there?” Bobbin’s voice carried through the door and out into the back room, breaking Trixie out of her reverie. “Trixie?” she called.

“Coming!” Trixie shouted. “Just had a little trouble with the crate!” Her horn started glowing again, and as she walked out of the back room, every single sock in the crate floated out behind her, folding themselves. The concentration on her face was obvious, but she definitely wanted to impress Bobbin on the first day...and she wanted to keep that golden ticket off her mind.

Only an hour later, the store had become a hectic mess of ponies wandering around the store and trying to stuff as many packages of socks into their shopping saddlebags as possible. Bobbin was maring the cash register as Trixie stood by the door to the back room levitating the contents of the crate into each pony’s bulging saddlebags. A hastily scribbled sign read “One saddlebag per customer; no exceptions.”

Bobbin disappeared after the morning rush of ponies had dwindled down to a small trickle; everypony was out to lunch after all. So Trixie sat, alone, in a rather dusty used clothing store selling old dresses to everypony who wanted them. Anyone watching would hardly call haggling with rather rude and insistent customers over the price of fifteen year old dresses a form of actual social interaction.

“Please come again to Bobbin’s Secondhand Capes and Clothing Emporium!” she called after the last pony in the store as he left with a bag stuffed full of socks. She looked around her. The shelves were almost bare, save for one lone quad of socks. Temptation began to creep back into her mind...the temptation to crack open that lone quad of socks.

“Huh, that’s funny,” she said to no one. The socks were the same ones from that morning; the packaging was slightly cracked open, and there was that familiar tear in the cellophane. Ponies probably hadn’t bought it because they thought that if the ticket was in that package of socks, whoever had opened them previously had bolted with it and was long gone.

Her father’s disapproving face appeared in her mind. “Go ahead!” he taunted. “Go ahead! You’ll be rich, sure! Go on! You’ll just be lucky, that’s what you’ll be.”

Trixie shook her head. She refused. She wouldn’t take the easy way out. The door opened, ringing the little bell Bobbin had hung. Helped with customer service, she had explained. “Welcome to Bobbin’s Capes and

Clo-Oh! Bobbin! It's you!" she said, a smile breaking out on her face. They hadn't said much to each other that morning, but somehow, the sight of the old mare brought a smile to Trixie's face. Bobbin's saddlebags were stuffed full of old bolts of cloth, and she looked a little tired. "Here!" Trixie said, "Let me get that for you!"

"Oh, thank you dear," Bobbin said as Trixie levitated away her saddlebags. "They were getting quite heavy, I assure you. Oh! I see that we're almost out of socks!" The bell rang.

"Welcome to Bobbin's Secondhand Capes and Cloth-Oh my!" Bobbin said. A rather imposing stallion stepped into the room; the fact that the stallion was imposing at all was an impressive feat in and of itself considering that he was tiny and wearing a jacket with one too many pockets sewn on. In his mouth, he carried a rather tattered bow tie.; spitting it into a nearby waste bin he turned to Bobbin.

"My dear, you wouldn't happen to-Ah! Here we are! How much?" he asked, pointing at the...Trixie couldn't believe her eyes. He wanted the sad...half torn bow tie that Bobbin had had such trouble trying to put *anywhere* that she'd just left it right next to the basket. He wanted *that one*?! What pony in his right mind would want that bowtie?

"Well...that one is-" Bobbin started. The vibrant stallion shook his head vigorously. Trixie could swear that his hourglass cutie mark's sand grains were being shaken out of the top and into the bottom. *tink* There went one. *tink* There went another.

"No, no, no. I want all of them," he said.

"All of them?" Bobbin choked. She couldn't believe it. Trixie stared at him. What was some strange, brown-coated pony, going to do with several hundred half-torn, worn out, bowties?

"Yes. *All* of them," he said firmly. The glint in his eye said that he knew exactly what he was doing, even if his actions spoke otherwise.

"Um...two hundred bits?" she squeaked. The stallion reared, aghast. "We can make it one-fifty if you'd like!" Bobbin said quickly.

The stallion shook his head. "Oh no no no no no! You clearly don't know the worth of a bow tie! These have character! Pizzazz!" He stood on his rear legs and spread his fore legs wide as he said it.

Trixie began to catch on to this eccentric pony's train of thought. "Yes, of course!" she jumped in. "We couldn't possibly let something of this caliber go for anything less than seven-fifty!" she trilled, dancing a little in place. She couldn't help but let off a few fireworks of joy. Sure it was Bobbin's money, and she wasn't going to get anything out of it, but it the sheer ridiculousness of what was happening was just as infectious as the stallion's good mood.

He smiled a wide smile that showed off all of his teeth, impressing deeply upon both of them the fact that he really was an incredibly handsome stallion. "Not a bit below eight hundred; an extra fifty more for how the display's prettiness is fair, I think?" Bobbin could only nod as the stallion counted out eight hundred bits from his pockets, and she passed him a large bag stuffed full of bow ties. Trixie had stuffed one of the spare saddlebags full of them once she was certain that the stallion really wanted these awful bowties.

"Ditzy!" he called. "I just had an incredibly successful shopping trip!" he shouted as he galloped out of the store. "More than a hundred good bow ties, all presenting live cultures of the fungus we needed! What do you *mean* I just wanted bow ties! These bow ties have the fungus all over them! Besides, bow ties are cool." Trixie thought she caught a glimpse of a googly eyed, grey pegasus mare flying around, her tongue .

"Trixie?" Bobbin asked. Trixie turned her attention away from the happy pair trotting down the street together and back to Bobbin. The basket that had formerly held all the bow ties now held all of the eight hundred bits that the stallion had paid them. "I think you deserve this," Bobbin said. Trixie's jaw dropped.

Trixie stared at the basket of money. "But...but...I couldn't possibly," she started.

Bobbin shook her head, and pushed the basket towards Trixie. "Just take it. I've seen the state of your clothes, and it honestly looks like you could use the money. Besides, you made that sale, not me. You deserve it."

Trixie smiled, tears in her eyes. "Th-thank you...", she whispered, levitating the basket towards herself.

Bobbin waved her hoof dismissively. "Ever since that silly golden ticket craze, I've been making piles and piles of bits. It only seemed right that I share the Celestia given bounty with somepony who needed it, and you fit the bill quite nicely I think."

"Thank you so much, Bobbin," Trixie said quietly. "This...this means a lot."

"Go ahead and take the rest of the day off," Bobbin continued. "We don't have much else that anypony wants."

So, thanking Bobbin once again, and quite unable to believe her luck, Trixie left her wonderful new job to visit the diner next door, where Feather Fall was waiting with a plate full of hay fries and a cucumber sandwich.

"I was wondering when your lunch break was!" she said as Trixie walked in the door. "I didn't think that that nice old Bobbin would work someone so hard on their first day; I meant its three! Oh! How was your first day?"

Trixie levitated forward the basket full of bits. "My first day bonus! Made a great sale, and Miss Bobbin just gave me the bits!"

Feather Fall's eyes widened, her mouth flew open. "Is that all of it?" Trixie nodded. "Good old Bobbin! She's always been such a wonderful mare; you know. She's so lonely since her daughter left, you know. Asked me if I wanted to see this show...something about this wonderful storytelling showmare...what was she called? The Great and Powerful...Pixie?" Trixie began awkwardly looking around the room, hoping that Feather Fall would notice and decide to avoid the matter entirely. Sadly, she did not. "No...it was...Trixie! The Great and Powerful Trix-" Feather Fall gasped. "IT'S YOU!" she shouted, pointing her hoof at Trixie. "Oh! My! Gosh! You were amazing! Oh! Wait! You're the one the rumors are about! Oh my dear, I'm so terribly sorry about what happened, but I mean-"

"I deserved it?" Trixie said, looking down at the floor.

"Well...if the rumors are true...maybe just a little bit?" Feather Fall said. "But, listen to me; you don't act or sound like the pony from the

rumors. You're humble and you know the meaning of a hard day's work; I know you do, I've seen it! You're like you were when I saw Bobbin and I went to see your show here, in Fillydelphia, years ago; you were an amazing storyteller...told us a tale about two lovestruck ponies who couldn't be together, and ended up dying in each other's hooves...it was the most heartbreaking thing I'd ever seen, and I enjoyed every second of it. You did too!" Feather Fall nodded; Trixie wasn't sure if she was supposed to say something or if Feather Fall was simply affirming the truth of her monologue. "It's why I think Bobbin took such a liking to you; she remembered you Trixie!" Feather Fall said.

Trixie nodded. "Probably, but I'm starving. Can we continue this while I eat?" Feather Fall nodded, and followed Trixie to a nearby booth in the otherwise empty diner. "No lunch rush today?"

"Well, there were earlier. We get most of our business while ponies are busy buying socks from Bobbin's place next door," Feather Fall replied.

As Trixie set the basket on the table, the bits shifted and she heard something. Something cellophane. Peeking in the basket, and moving bits around, she found the package of socks from earlier that morning. The one that she had partially cracked open. She was unsure of what to do, and turned to Featherfall, mouth open to speak.

Feather Fall shook her head, interrupting Trixie. "She did that on purpose Trixie, there's no accident here. She gave them to you. The only question now is, what are you going to do with them?"

Trixie raised her head in a haughty pose. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has no need for the golden ticket. She would rather earn her way into the upper echelons of society than win the lottery."

Feather Fall laughed. "You see? You do know the value of a hard day's work! But, honestly, I think you're stupid for refusing this chance."

Trixie blinked. Feather Fall had never called her stupid before; in fact, Trixie would be hard pressed to remember a time when Feather Fall had ever been so blatantly rude. "Now see here-" she started. Feather Fall raised her hoof.

"Now just wait a minute. You don't want to sell a golden ticket you find, right?" Trixie nodded. "But who says that you can't go see the factory?"

I mean, that's a once in a lifetime experience. And who knows? Maybe Mr. Fetlock's magical fashion factory has just the stuff you need to really get your show back on the road!"

"What kind of magical fashion factory are we talking about?" Trixie asked. She couldn't help but be curious. She didn't know how a fashion factory could help her show, but Feather Fall seemed to think it could; maybe there was something to this whole golden ticket thing after all?

"I've heard stories about looms that weave clothes out of gold and silver INGOTS!!!" Feather Fall said. Trixie was in awe. Such an enchantment would surely evaporate after existing for only a few minutes! The transfiguration from solid metal to wire, to thread, had to either occur under high heat to aid the process, or the magic would have to be intense. Gold and silver soaked up and held magic almost as efficiently as gemstones, but with a terrible sponge-like property that gemstones just didn't have; the enchantments would surely have to be renewed every day just from the bleeding effect!

"That does it. I need to see this for myself," Trixie declared; and with that, she levitated the package of socks in front of her. "Feather Fall?" she asked.

"Yes Trixie?" Feather Fall looked quizzical.

"We'll still be...friends...if I get a ticket right?" Trixie continued. "You won't be...jealous or anything will you?" She was honestly frightened of losing one of the few friends she'd ever had; the lessons learned in Ponyville had only recently begun to sink in, the first of which was that being over-prideful and a braggart only brought jealousy and anger. She couldn't imagine what how strong that jealousy would be if there was actually something to be jealous about, and she didn't want to find out.

Feather Fall laughed so infectiously that Trixie couldn't help but giggle along. "Trixie," Feather Fall said, wiping the tears from her eyes, "I promise not to let something like this come between us. But," she continued, much more seriously, "I have to admit that I will be a little jealous. Yet, how could I possibly be upset? Something amazing happened to one of my friends! I should be happy, and I know I will." She laid a hoof on Trixie's shoulder. "Don't you worry about me Trixie. Just go ahead and

open that package, and let's find out if your run of luck has ended for today."

Trixie nodded. Moments later, they were laughing and dancing around the empty diner together, a single golden ticket floating between them while Short Order rubbed his hooves over his eyes in the kitchen and looked at the two dancing mares. The smell of burning hay fries met his nose, and he turned to the deep fryer to see his usually nice crisp hay carbonized jet black. "Crud. Feather Fall is gonna kill me." He shouted over his shoulder, knowing that it was better to tell her sooner rather than later, "Feather Fall? Trixie's hay fries might be a little longer. I burnt the first batch!"

"It's alright!" Feather Fall shouted back! "Just put on another one! And one for me too!"

Short Order blinked. Had Feather Fall just not been upset over burnt food and making Trixie wait longer for her lunch? He glanced out of the window at them, and blinked. "Mares are absolutely nuts I tells ya," he said as he trotted towards the refrigerator. "Dancing about in the middle of the day."

Chapter 4

“Daddy!” Diamond Tiara screamed. “Daddy, I want a ticket!” She stomped her hoof to emphasize her frustration, and the pout hung heavily on her lips. Big Bucks simply did not know what to tell his daughter. His cotton mill had been working, not on threading spools of cotton, but on unwrapping packages and packages of socks. All of it, for his little darling daughter.

The Hoofington Cotton Mill was one of the largest companies based near Everfree. Big Bucks had purchased the land that the mill now stood on for a pittance; nopony wanted to build near the Everfree Forest. No one liked spending time near the forest unnecessarily; it was one of the main reasons that Ponyville wasn’t a major tourist attraction, despite being the town where Princess Luna was freed from the darkness and jealousy that had transformed her into Nightmare Moon, and the closest civilization for anypony interested in exploring the Old Castle.

Still, Hoofington Cotton did an enormous amount of business, and had paid itself off in the first year. It produced several hundred pounds of cotton thread per day. Or it would have been, if Big Bucks didn’t dote on his daughter 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. It was well known in the factory that he literally gave her everything she wanted, though if anypony ever asked he quickly denied it.

“It’s not *everything*,” he would retort. “There are plenty of things that I wouldn’t give her, for her own benefit of course.” He would then nod knowingly, as if his response had cut away the inquisitive pony’s unspoken accusation; his statements ignored the fact that he had, only moments before, given her the latest new doll or toy from The Magical Magisterium, Canterlot’s premier toy store.

So, when Mr. Fetlocks had announced the golden ticket contest, it surprised nopony that Diamond Tiara had had her personal flyer take her out to daddy’s mill. Big Bucks had been in a meeting with a rather large investor when she stormed into his office screaming, “DADDY! I WANT A GOLDEN TICKET!” The investor had been so incredibly incensed that he simply left. Of course, Daddy’s Little Angel got away with it scot free; the

ponies punished for the intrusion were the guards who had not stopped her from storming in on his meeting.

“Anything! Do you hear me? Doing **anything**! Giving her **anything**! Anything to ensure that she didn’t interrupt that meeting!” he had shouted at them. They decided not to mention that she had been absolutely *insistent* on meeting with her father right away; and that if they had refused her he would *still* be shouting at them for not giving her what she wanted. “Do you know who he was? He was a representative of the Coltan of Cashmere! Where Cashmere Cotton comes from? Some of the most expensive cotton in the world? It would have increased our market share by a hundred fold!” Big Bucks’ left eye began to twitch. His subordinates could not fault his logic; there was a reason why Big Bucks’ cutie mark was a pile of gold bits after all.

The conference room doors flew open again, banging loudly into the ornate carved oak walls. Diamond Tiara stomped her way into the room, followed by two rather desperately pleading ponies.

“Please, Miss Tiara...you can clearly see that your father is busy!” said the blue coated mare with the pacifier cutie mark. Her mane was frazzled, and a tiny pocket of foam had gathered at the corner of her mouth. She was clearly not having a good day; though, she attested to never having a truly good day since becoming one of Diamond Tiara’s paid caretakers. She stayed because the bits were good; she had long since stopped enjoying child care. Diamond Tiara had a way of doing that to the ponies who took care of her...all of them except her father, though some speculated that was because he didn’t really care for her.

“Shall we wait in the playroom? Perhaps you can ask your father later; when he’s not in a business meeting?” suggested the other. Neither looked very confident that their begging would work; it had never done so before.

Diamond Tiara shoved past both of them, stopping next to her father. She glared at him. Big Bucks shot an accusatory glare at both of the two caretaker ponies. “What is it my little pony?” he asked, smiling brightly at his daughter. The deal with the Coltan of Cashmere didn’t matter in the long run, as long as his daughter was happy. Besides, the Coltan’s representative had insulted his daughter. Big Bucks had struggled not to simply smack the representative with his hoof, but it had come close.

Ponies just didn't do that anymore; if they did he would have ripped his sock off his foreleg and challenged the rude neighsayer to a duel right then and there.

"Daddy...I've been waiting to talk to you!" Diamond Tiara said, stomping once again for emphasis. Not a good sign. She normally didn't like stomping; it scuffed her hooves. Whatever she wanted this time was going to be big. "Mr. Fetlocks started a contest yesterday! Miss Cheerilee talked about it during class; he's is selling socks with golden tickets in them, and there's only five, and I want one!" she said. Big Bucks cringed. This wasn't just any usual request. This was actually going to be costly. Still, he'd do anything for his little filly.

"Daddy...will see what he can do," he said. Diamond Tiara's face screwed up like she was preparing to scream; the caretaker ponies covered their ears with their hooves, and the other ponies took a step back. Big Bucks cleared his throat, attempting to head off the trouble. "Don't worry my little angel. Daddy will get you a golden ticket." Every other pony rolled their eyes at the caricature of the father/daughter relationship. Big Bucks glared at a few of them.

"You'd think that being as smart as he is, he'd understand that he's absolutely spoiling his daughter completely rotten," said a brown coated stallion.

The next day, everypony at the Hoofington Cotton Mill was busy unwrapping socks instead of whatever else they were supposed to be doing. Tens of earth pony and pegasus pulled carts arrived at the mill loading dock, dumping their loads of socks onto the mountain of still-packaged Woolly Fetlock's Fantabulous Socks. On the dock itself, pegasi and earth ponies loaded carts of socks pulled by other earth ponies to be taken away to the unpacking floor, clearly demarked by a crudely drawn sign with a rather clumsy arrow topped with an attempt to draw a rather sparkly tiara. Diamond Tiara had insisted on helping with the process, much against the insistence of her father; to be fair, however, her help had mostly been limited to the drawing of a few signs with crayon (Custom Amaponian Latex Crayons) on card stock (Quality Card Stock made from the highest grade Amaponian Wood Pulp), and counting carts of socks as they came in. She'd lost count twice and started over, much to the annoyance of Lemon Spice, Big Bucks' secretary. She was taking inventory, or rather, was attempting to take inventory while a rather

excitable random number generator followed her around and kept throwing off her own count, as well as its own. Big Bucks himself was wandering the unpacking floor, where every unicorn in the cotton mill had been assigned, along with several volunteer pegasus and earth ponies. Many of them sat at one of several rows of long tables that spread over the wide expanse of a hastily converted cafeteria. Piles of packaged socks were on one side of every pony; on the other side was the pile of opened socks. On either side of each row stood a single unicorn, alternately pulling away opened socks and packaging or distributing unopened socks from the carts parked behind them. It was all incredibly organized, especially considering that Big Bucks had had only one evening to arrange everything; though anypony who knew him well knew that Big Bucks was a master of administration and organization.

“Once the golden ticket is found, everypony gets a bonus! A hundred bits each!” Big Bucks had shouted. Every pony on the floor immediately started working faster as news of a bonus spread further up the chain. That had to be...about eighty thousand bits extra Big Bucks was willing to pay! He wanted this thing found, and he wanted it found fast.

After a week the first ticket was found. The news was played over the cotton mill intercom:

Hello, this is EPR, Equestrian Public Radio. I’m Solid Anchor. Our top story today: a fashion designer from Ponyville by the name of Rarity has located the first of Mr. Fetlocks’ golden tickets. She reports having located the ticket in a package of socks given to her by Hoity Toity in Canterlot while delivering a shipment of dresses to Hoity Toity’s Best of the Best Boutique.

When asked what she plans to do with the ticket, Rarity stated that she intended to visit the factory rather than sell the ticket. Miss Rarity operates the Carousel Boutique in Ponyville, and has recently designed several outfits for the famous pop starlet Sapphire Shores.

EPR was unable to reach Mr. Toity for comment.

Diamond Tiara was not happy. “DAAAAAAADDDY!” she screamed. “I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO GET ME A GOLDEN TICKET!” She was sitting on Big Bucks’ desk, where she had taken all his papers in her

mouth and tossed them over the room. Big Bucks struggled not to get angry with his daughter. She was only a young filly after all, not to mention his little angel. However, the past week had left his nerves frayed. His daughter was visiting the cotton mill daily to help ensure that she was there when the golden ticket was found, he'd spent almost 75,000 bits so far, and he'd lost another 25,000 bits in possible revenue. This golden ticket affair was costing him a fortune. His credit rating had already dropped two notches, and the bank was considering another three; Big Bucks' reputation might be ruined if he didn't find the ticket soon.

Four more days passed. Four long days of endless unpacking; several of the employees were beginning to lose hope. The Hoofington Cotton Mill had suffered about one million bits in actual losses, and countless more in virtual losses. Big Bucks wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this up. Worker output and morale had dropped dramatically and was continuing to nosedive each day; there was something disheartening about being paid to make the boss's "little angel" happy at incredibly low wages when that "little angel" spent most of her time getting everything she wanted.

The afternoon of the eleventh day, news broke that the second of the five golden tickets had been found. The pony was some...Trixie? Apparently she was formerly a wandering troubadour, but was currently employed as a sales representative at some secondhand clothing shop in Fillydelphia. Some news ponies had done a little digging and discovered that she had had a rather successful career until a downslope started a few months prior, culminating in what, now confirmed, rumors referred to as the (Ursa) Minor Ponyville Incident. The report ended with a side note on how more and more Canterlot University investigators were interested in finding out why exactly Ponyville seemed to be such a hive of...well...stuff that was out of the ordinary.

"Oh bloody...I'll never find this blasted thing!" he shouted. Despair had taken him at last, and he sat at his desk, a bottle of the fine apple wine next to him (though according to Lemon Spice, he was more of a pear cordial stallion). He had never failed to get Diamond Tiara what she wanted before. Then again, she had never asked for anything this big before; maybe he'd have to break into Diamond Tiara's "Whenever She Asks for a Theme Park – Or Some Other Obscenely Large Request" fund to be able to keep going. It was what the fund was for after all, though he imagined that the managers of Diamond Tiara's theme park trust would not be happy

with withdrawing money not intended for the construction of several roller coasters...on the other hoof, they seemed unhappy with the idea of withdrawing any money. "Greedy. That's all they are," he mumbled, taking another deep draft.

Big Bucks stared at the half empty bottle before him, wondering exactly what he would do. It was almost four in the afternoon; soon his daughter would be in his office. She had long since stopped walking in with a hopeful face; she now entered his office, resigned to the likelihood that he had not acquired one of five incredibly elusive items worldwide. He had tried to explain to her just how hard it was; Diamond Tiara had not been understanding. Nevertheless, from that day onwards, she had not raged at him for not having the ticket. Much. She at least knew that this was nothing like another puppy or kitty or toy; and that thought comforted him. He didn't know how she would take it if he failed, but the thought was becoming more and more of a reality as time passed.

"I'm the worst father ever..." he muttered to himself half-drunkenly. "Worst boss too," he continued. A few of his workers had quit. He couldn't blame them. The Hoofington Cotton Mill was a sinking ship at this point; it had suffered two million bits in actual losses, another 1.5 million in opportunity costs, and nothing to show for it. Not even a scrap of a ticket paint. At least he could sell the drop of gold paint for a few bits. Scratch that, maybe he could sell it for a single bit. No pony used pure gold paint after all. No pony sane.

He stood, preparing himself for one last check on the work floor before Diamond Tiara arrived from school. Maybe she would have a picture or a painting or something today. Or maybe not. He didn't know; she had stopped being nice to him after the first two days. Tottering a bit, he placed one hoof in front of the other. One in front of the other. Slowly swaying as he walked past Lemon Spice's desk, he nodded at her. She nodded back, her face as grim as his.

"She's on her way," she said. She was wearing blush today. Big Bucks had never noticed how pretty Lemon Spice was before...no, maybe it was just the alcohol. Big Bucks considered it for a minute...nope, definitely wasn't the alcohol. Lemon Spice was definitely very desirable. "I'm sorry sir, is there something you needed?" she asked, eyeing her boss carefully.

“Nothing,” Big Bucks said. “Just admiring the view.” Lemon Spice screwed up her nose haughtily as Big Bucks laughed at his cleverness. Lemon Spice, if her body language meant anything, clearly agreed. Or was it disagreed? He couldn’t really tell at the moment.

“If you have nothing further sir, the work crew awaits your inspiring presence,” she sniped. Big Bucks straightened up immediately; she definitely disagreed with him. Definitely time to go. As he stumbled over the doorstep, Lemon Spice wrinkled her nose. “I hate him when he’s drinking.”

He faltered at the stairs before bracing himself. He’d done this before...he’d taken stairs while drunk. Just not...steep factory stairs. By the time he was at the bottom, his legs were visibly shaking from the effort of trying to keep himself from swaying. Big Bucks knew he was greatly overcompensating, maybe, but better safe than sorry.

As he glanced about the room, he saw it. There it was. One of the workers had stopped unpacking; she held the ticket, glistening gold, and nestled in her hooves. None of the other ponies had stopped to take notice; they were still busily unpacking socks or they were standing around chatting, and there were far more of the latter. Big Bucks hadn’t had the heart to demand real work from them for days. They stared as he drunkenly galloped towards the mare...what was her name? Poppy Blossom? It was worth a shot; anything to stop her before she was done sneaking the ticket into her saddlebags and leaving for the day. All the other workers had to do was get a glimpse...just a glimpse, and they’d help him get the ticket. He hoped.

“Poppy!” he shouted. The mare jumped, turning to face him as she hurriedly stuffed the rest of the ticket in the saddlebag. Everypony on the floor was now staring at either Big Bucks or Poppy Blossom. He’d done it...maybe.

“Yes Mr. Big Bucks?” she asked. Her magenta coat looked like it was standing on end, and her face was visibly nervous. She was stealing from her boss, and based on how everypony in the room had stopped talking they had probably figured it out as well. The gig was up; Lemon Spice could only describe the entire situation as, “Exactly how we all expected it would end. Now would you scoot along and stop interrupting my hoof treatment? I’m supposed to be getting pampered today.”

“Where is the golden ticket?” Big Bucks asked. He eyed her saddlebags very carefully before returning his full attention to Poppy.

“What golden ticket? I haven’t found a golden ticket,” Poppy responded. “You said we were free to leave anytime during the day for the next three days. A sort of optional vacation? Well, I decided it’s time to go home, that’s all.” She could feel the walls of the hole she was digging herself into growing ever higher.

“Give it to me,” he said. “I know you have it. Everypony in here saw you stuff it inside your saddlebags.” He looked around the room, and several hooves shot into the air while several more heads nodded in affirmation. “Just give it up.”

Poppy Blossom broke into tears, reaching into her saddlebag and retrieving the golden ticket. The sobs wracked her body, and her weeping flowed down her face and spattered onto the smooth, cold concrete. “I’m sorry!” she said, her tears catching in her throat before she continued. “I just need the money from selling the ticket! I didn’t want to take the ticket from you sir, but my marefriend is really really sick! And I-I-” she sobbed.

Big Bucks’s face softened. He didn’t know if it was the wine talking or what; he wouldn’t normally be this nice...or maybe he would? He was too drunk to know or care about what he would normally do; besides, he was already 250,000 bits in the hole anyways. How much worse could another few thousand be? “Give me the ticket, and then we’re going to go to my office. I’ll get Lemon Spice to arrange a meeting for you and your marefriend with my doctor; I’ll pay for everything from there.” Big Bucks didn’t know if he would regret it or not, since medical bills did run sky high; however, he did understand that he had finally obtained a golden ticket. Poppy Blossom couldn’t speak, so surprised was she by Big Bucks’ kindness. She simply decided to nod. Big Bucks pointed her up the stairs, towards Lemon Spice. As she left, he grasped the golden ticket in his hooves and lifted it, basking in its glory and splendor. He had finally found the object of such hard work by so many ponies. He had succeeded.

Just in time too, as Diamond Tiara leapt along the tables of socks, blasting them out of her way with a magical impulse as she moved. Some of the socks struck ponies as they rushed to get out of her way; one decided to be rather comic about the whole thing and he melodramatically fell to the floor with a loud flump, his legs spread-eagled (His fellow co-

workers agreed that it was quite the artful fall, and in the week's vote for most interesting event he took second place). She giggled at him as he fell, and then continued her mad dash towards her father. "You got the golden ticket!" she shouted as she leapt from one table to the next one.

"Yes! Daddy got the golden ticket!" Big Bucks laughed. He was finally free of the golden ticket curse set upon him by Mr. Fetlocks. He felt liberated. He felt like running around in a circle over and over. He felt like, like...like his apple wine was finding it rather difficult to settle on the stomach. "That's odd," he thought, "because I normally get this feeling only when something bad is about to happen."

"Daddy?"

"Yes my little angel?"

"Can I have a party with a cake to celebrate the me getting a golden ticket? Oh, and there have to be a ton of cakes, and candies, and little purple jellybeans, and..."

Big Bucks groaned internally, but held a wooden smile externally. Smile and nod. That was how he handled it: in one ear and out the other. He should have known she'd have a litany of

"Oh, and enough balloons for me to write my name in all pink and white! Oh, and the new Unseasonable dolls from The Magical Mysterium? And don't forget the ice cream! I want all the flavors to be there! Oh, and sherbet and frozen yogurt too, and some..."

Chapter 5

Big Macintosh was not a pony of many words, and he liked it that way. He was the silent type. Mares loved a good, quiet stallion, especially if he was big and strong and very very good at mathematics. Math led to good jobs; and even though he wasn't exactly interested in a professorship at the Canterlot Royal Academy of Sciences, he still wrote several papers for them. There was even a movie about him: Good Colt Hunting. However, he had to admit that the directors had taken quite a lot of liberties with the events of his life, not the least of which was the fact that he did not, in fact, have the four kissing circles of Le Cart's Theorem as his cutie mark. The green apple on his flank attested to that.

Most importantly, there was no Coltifornian girl, and there was never going to be. He'd had enough of Coltifornians during his undergraduate life, thank you very much. Valley Mare had spoiled them for him; she had been so incredibly gorgeous, utterly brainless, and she had the most terrifyingly thick accent. Every other word she spoke was either "like", "um" or "whatever". She had nearly driven him nuts for the year they had been dating whenever she simply opened her mouth.

Finally, he had not decided to work at Wheeler Laboratories. New Yoke City was not his kind of place. Manehattan wasn't any better. Instead of working in a high-class laboratory with a high-rise office, Big Macintosh worked an apple farm and did mathematics in his spare time. As he whiled away his time, tending to Sweet Apple Acres, the world of higher thought had come to believe that he was the greatest mind in all of modern Equestria; he had already won the Field's Medal, and had been nominated for yet another: an unprecedented feat. Younger graduate students often came to the farm, requesting to study under him; he never refused. He only asked that they help tend to the farm. The students never lasted long.

Big Mac's life was filled with predictability and order. It was the kind of life a mathematician could really enjoy; one filled with the very patterns that he so often teased out of the seeming chaos. Truth from the void, his graduate adviser had called it; the order of all things that could be described only by the most abstract of languages. It was exactly this element of a structured life that he loved most; yet it was a deviation from

his structured life that had caused him to meet with the one mare that had captured his heart in the most surprising of ways.

He had been on a sales trip to Canterlot, selling apples at Equestria's World's Fair in the evenings and attending the Annual Summit of Equestrian Mathematicians during the day. It was his yearly getaway from Sweet Apple Acres; a sort of vacation kindly granted by Granny Smith and Applejack. Big Macintosh greatly appreciated it, enjoying the week long event to full advantage every year. This particular day, since nothing interesting was happening at the summit (arguing with several indignant ponies over the validity of the solution to Fermat's Last Theorem was not how Big Mac wanted to spend his day; Mr. Wheels was absolutely right in his book), he decided to go on the tour of Canterlot Castle. He'd never been before, and it would certainly be more interesting than minding his apple stall in the summer heat.

He had seen pillars of alabaster and marble carved into some of the most beautiful leaf adorned shapes. Doric columns the tour guide had said? The high flying castle architecture amazed him; ponies had built this with no knowledge of vector physics? How resourceful they must have been! And the brilliant tapestries! The gardens! All of it was so incredibly wonderful that he simply didn't know what to say.

Yet, that was not the most beautiful thing he had seen that day. The most beautiful thing he had seen that day was a mare. Not just any mare either. The Moon Princess herself, Luna of the Night Sky. Though, to be entirely fair, he had heard her first; she had seen him before he saw her. Sadly, she hadn't sounded exactly happy to see him.

"My stars, Celestia! That young stallion is gadding about with his fetlocks unshorn!" At that moment Big Mac had first looked at his fetlocks. He had admitted at the time that they were *a little* hairier than most, but he was an apple farmer and a mathematician. Keeping his fetlocks neat wasn't exactly anywhere near the top of his list of priorities. It was at that moment that he decided, noble or not, that he would give whoever she was a good piece of his mind. All that changed when he first saw her.

Time seemed to freeze, and his breath caught in his chest. There, on Celestia's left, was Luna. The small, blue alicorn's face was wide in shock, her hair covering one of her eyes, and her hoof drawn upwards in a pose of confusion and surprise. Her wings were raised in the natural pegasus

warding motion, and she looked almost ready to rear. Yet despite how reviled she seemed, he couldn't help but feel that strange attraction; maybe it was her adorable monocle that she was wearing over her hair rather than on the eye that was hidden by her hair. Maybe it was some kind of joke Celestia was playing on her; Celestia was rumored to be quite the prankster after all. All of these details, and more, Big Macintosh drank in over the eternity of that instant; he knew of no technique, no strategy, no way of discerning truth, whether mathematical or philosophical, that could definitively prove what he knew then: he was decidedly, completely, and whole-heartedly in love with Luna. The next thing Luna said, however, was enough to break him out of his Cupid-given reverie with just as much shock as Luna seemed to be going through at that moment.

"Have him arrested, before he incites the castle's mares to a riotous lust!" she shouted. Celestia was visibly facehoofing and slowly shaking her head. The guards present were uncomfortably looking about, unsure of exactly what to do.

"Can we arrest somepony just for having hairy hooves?" one of them muttered to a nearby colleague. His colleague could only shrug.

"Luna?" Celestia said. "It is not against the law for a pony to go about with hooves that are a little hairier than most. And we need to talk about social trends for the last millenium. Again. Heaven knows that Nightmare Night incident was bad enough."

That had been two years ago. Two long years of yearning, and visiting the castle again and again during his week-long vacations had yielded nothing. He hadn't seen her since. Several letters from Sweet Apple Acres had tried to make their way through the Equestrian Postal Service to Luna, but she had never replied. She probably got letters like his all the time, he consoled himself; he was sure that she held nothing against him for that day...mostly sure.

For two years he had kept up with her: read about her in the news, listened to gossip, studied how to be a good gentlecolt from Rarity...all of it for Luna. For a few months, Rarity and AJ had tried to dig the identity of "the lucky filly" out of him; they had failed utterly. He still got weekly lessons from Rarity, though Applejack shook her head every time he went.

“Look, all Ah’m sayin’ is that you don’t hafta worry! You’re one of Equestria’s finest gentlecolts, and a genius to boot! Now what foal of a filly wouldn’t want that?” Applejack had said. “Just be honest. That’s all a filly should want and ask from a stallion; if’n it don’t work out, it don’t work out. Least, that’s what Ah think.” She had nodded sagely at that point; Big Macintosh snorted.

“You’re just sayin’ that ‘cause Ah told you that when you wanted to meet that handsome stallion with the hourglass cutie mark,” he had retorted. Applejack had only blushed deep red at that point; the retort she had stammered out was completely unintelligible. “Least Ah know that mah sister speaks Equestrian.” He’d had to avoid a playful hoof jab, but it was worth it.

This year, he was yet again wandering the halls of Canterlot Castle. The tour guides had gotten so used to seeing Big Macintosh every year that they kindly let him wander around wherever he wished; wherever, that is, the guards did not obstruct his passage. As he wandered about aimlessly, he toyed around with a generalized conic in the quaternions whose shadow was being mapped into the three dimensional plane consisting of the real plane and imaginary plane where the mapping was distinctly...

He had become so lost in his reverie that he didn’t notice where his hooves were taking him. The thing that brought him back to reality was the sudden appearance of a pair of wings barring passage. Backing up immediately, he took a moment to glance around and find out where he was. It was one of the side stairways to the private floors of Canterlot Castle; wherein the Royal Sisters and their staff resided.

“Lost Big Mac?” one of the guards asked him. “It’s not like you to wander around here.” He looked a little concerned, but did not budge from his position.

“Nope,” Big Mac responded. He turned, about to make his way slowly back down the stairs. He paused for a moment, turning around to face them. Something was different. “Captain Draught? What are you doin’ here? Ah thought you were in charge of protectin’ the Princess’ quarters, not necessarily guardin’ the place yourself.”

“What, can’t a colt do some of his own hard work? I never expected to hear that from you,” Draught retorted. Big Mac had to admit, Draught was a right about that; he was a farmer first and a mathematician second after all.

“Well, can’t fault a colt for being an upstandin’ citizen and a good leader,” Big Macintosh replied, smiling. “Did you see somethin’ embarrassin’ again? Or did ya annoy Princess Celestia?” Draught coughed. “Gotcha didn’t Ah?”

Draught smiled back. “Oh you got me good Big Mac. Can’t slip anything by you can I? Guess that’s why you’re the genius.” He paused a moment and pawed at the floor a little awkwardly. “Dew Drop, I never told Big Mac anything. Ok?” The other guardpony nodded, flicking her mane out of her eyes afterwards and sniggering slightly. “Anyways, I saw Luna pranking Celestia. After something like that, I like to stay out of their way for awhile. They’re a little embarrassed whenever they walk by, so I try to spare them the awkward moments.”

“Ya sure you got that right? Ain’t it usually the other way round?” Big Macintosh asked. Draught had been one of the first ponies to discover that Big Mac was smitten with Luna; it didn’t surprise him. Many stallions were infatuated with the princesses; Big Mac just happened to be one of the nicest of the bunch.

“Nope. This time it was Luna. With her sock puppet named Mr. Buttons,” Draught replied. He nodded his head to confirm the truth of his statement.

Big Macintosh was confused. Luna played with sock puppets? His Luna? Sock puppets? It wasn’t exactly the kind of hobby he normally pictured a filly having, but then again, Luna wasn’t exactly a normal filly. The word “filly” didn’t even fit; she was at *least* several hundred times his age.

Captain Draught nodded again. “Oh, I’ve never told you have I? Princess Luna has a fascination with socks. Loves them to death. She’s been buying a quad of socks every day just to see if she can get one of those golden tickets; apparently Mr. Fetlocks’ factory has an entire wing dedicated to making socks, and she wants to see it.”

Big Macintosh was floored. Luna loved socks? He'd already known about her pet abacus, and being a mathematician that had only made her more attractive, but socks? Fashionable socks? He had never ever pictured her as a sock lover. His mental Fantasy Luna shattered, to be replaced with a very, very down to earth and pony-like Luna. Of course Luna wasn't the perfect image that had only existed in his mind; she was a pony, complex and impossible to reconstruct exactly with all of her variegated perfections and imperfections. Yet, somehow, the thought made him fall even further for her rather than less. He could win the heart of a pony; he couldn't even begin to convince himself that he deserved perfection. Then again, he reasoned, he thought she was perfect and that was really all that mattered wasn't it? At that moment, a flash of hope shot through his mind; it was wonderfully simple, elegant, and most importantly romantic. "Has she found one of them golden tickets yet?"

Captain Draught grinned. "No Big Mac, I don't think she has. I'm certain I would have been the one of the first ponies in Canterlot Castle to know." He paused for a moment. "Three of the tickets have already been found. If you want socks, Hoity Toity's is going to be sold out by this hour; but I hear that there's a store on the corner of Fifth and Saddlewood. Almost nopony knows about it. Called Eleanor's Accessories. Good luck."

Big Macintosh only nodded in thanks before hurrying off. He had someplace he needed to be.

...

"Hello and welcome to Eleanor's Accessories, how may I help you?" droned the mauve mare behind the desk. She continued flipping through the newspaper with her magic as Big Macintosh looked around the small store. Nopony seemed interested in buying any of it; mainly because a lot of it consisted of rather...strange looking objects and artifacts. It was the kind of place you expected to fill up more towards the evening; or when teenage colts and fillies left school so they could come and be rebellious. "The tattoo artist is out to lunch, but feel free to browse our hip and happening wares," the mare droned, flipping another page disinterestedly.

Big Macintosh looked for shoes. Socks were usually kept near shoes. After wandering up and down the aisles and peering through shelves for awhile, he gave up looking himself. It was time to ask the greeter for assistance; there certainly didn't seem to be anypony else in the store.

Modern music of some unknown genre played over the store speakers; it was something with some oomph and thump to it. Was this dance music? If so, why were such vulgar and disingenuous lyrics accompanying it? Did ponies really dance to other ponies *complaining*? Even though he was only in his mid twenties, Big Macintosh suddenly felt very, very old. Would Luna even like somepony who was as behind the times as he was? He shook his head clear of such thoughts; it didn't matter. He was just looking to buy some socks so he could look for the ticket for the mare he loved.

As he approached the desk where the customer service representative continued to flip through the newspaper (he could swear she'd flipped the same page back and forth at least seven times now), he noticed the sound of gum. Bubblegum. She was blowing bubblegum? What was this, a contemporary movie? Was he supposed to fall in love with her rebellious, yet quirkily adorable attitude? He snorted; he'd been to one too many of Rarity's Feminine Film Fridays (she had insisted that it would help his chances with mares; considering which mare he happened to be in love with, he needed all the help he could get). He just needed to get in, get the socks, and get out.

He cleared his throat. The bubblegum popping continued. Another throat clearing. Another flip of the page. Her callous behavior was beginning to wear on his nerves.

"Scuse me ma'am?" he asked, keeping all but the barest hint of annoyance out of his throat. The mare looked at him over her newspaper, chewing her gum with her mouth open. Her mouth stayed open, and the gum dropped. She was drinking in his...his...size. Big Macintosh smiled, half to himself, half to calm the poor mare. Very few ponies could help but be awed when meeting him for the first time; he dwarfed most ponies simply by standing on the other side of the street.

She seemed to snap out of it a moment later, returning to her sullen look from earlier. Maybe it was the yoke? He braced himself for a "farm yokel" joke; they happened far too often. He couldn't get away from them even at the summit; some ponies just couldn't resist a cheap jibe. "Is there something you need? Maybe a new...accessory to go along with the yoke?" she asked. Somehow, she managed to drone while still sounding slightly awed by his size. He wasn't sure how she managed it, but she had.

“Ah’m lookin’ for a few socks. The Fetlocks’ kind. With them golden tickets?” he asked. His eyes followed the floating pack of gum as she took out another piece, unwrapped it, and slowly put it in her mouth before she started chewing again; all the while, she was staring at him intently, her eyes following the curve of his yoke. At least, he hoped it was the yoke.

“We don’t have many. Just a few, on the rack by the...bedtime bridles,” she replied, pointing her hoof at the shelf in question. He thanked her, and hurriedly marched towards the shelf which was mercifully kept out of her sight by a rack of black and pink dresses. He peered over the packages of Fantabulous Socks. They came in all different colors and shapes, all claiming incredibly high thread count, and all of which guaranteed comfort or bits back. Nothing about them looked particularly fashionable. Maybe he’d never understand fashion. Or mares. Still, Big Macintosh gathered up all of the socks, stuffing them in one of the baskets he’d picked up by the desk. The mare at the desk only stared at him more intensely as he approached the desk and set the saddlebag on the desk; did he have an apple pie stain or something?

“That all?” she asked, eyeing both the bag and him. Or was it him and the bag? He couldn’t tell at this point; but he did know that the sooner he got away from this store and its creepy cashier, the better.

“Eeyup,” he responded. She reached for the saddlebag with her hooves, but as she did so, she suddenly lost her balance and brushed Big Macintosh across his chest before recovering and giggling a little.

“Sorry about that,” she said as she rang up his socks. “I’m just such a klutz sometimes.” As she passed the last package over the scanner, she swished her tail. It wasn’t an angry swish...more a – oh no. One of THESE mares. This was the exact trick that Valley Mare had used to start dating him; well he was much older and wiser now, and he wasn’t falling for that same trick again. He was going to buy his socks, and leave, and that would be that. “That’ll be 20 bits even,” she said, passing him the bag of socks. Big Macintosh sighed in relief. At least she wasn’t so infatuated with him that she would try giving him a few quads of socks for free; that conversation would have just been awkward.

“Thank you ma’am,” he said as he walked out of the store. He could *feel* her staring at his backside as he left; something about the entire experience felt distinctly unnerving and he didn’t like it. He just had to make

it back to his apple stall in time for the dinner rush, and then he'd have time to open the socks later. Still, maybe just one package, right now. Sitting down on a nearby bench, he opened one of the packages of socks. Nothing. It was truly disappointing. Maybe another? And another? And another?

One last package of socks. Big Mac, one of the finest mathematicians in the world, snorted at his own foolishness. Probability dictated that he had a better chance of getting hit by a cart than finding one of the golden tickets; the difference in magnitude was like comparing the weight of a whale to a sugarcube. He stuffed the last quad of socks in his saddlebags in disgust. What would Granny Smith say about his wastefulness? He didn't need that many quads of socks after all; and all for a mare that he would, very likely, never have a chance with. Maybe he'd be better off going back to Eleanor's Accessories and giving that mare with the newspaper and bubblegum a chance.

His gaze wandered around the street; it was getting closer to the evening, and several couples were already wandering around the streets of Canterlot. One couple slowly kissed each other several times underneath the eaves of a carefully groomed, decorative tree; another walked down the street, window shopping while nuzzling and whispering sweet nothings. Laying his head on his hooves, he couldn't help but feel jealous. The thought of going back to see the mare with the newspaper re-entered his mind, but he shooed it away. What on earth was going on with him? It was like he was in Ponyville High all over again. Here he was, moping while the sun was setting and –

The sun was setting. He wasn't tending to his apple stall at the World's Fair. Big Macintosh leapt to his hooves, and galloped towards Canterlot Public Park. Several ponies moved out of his way as he thundered down the high rise streets and expensive stores. After what seemed like an eternity of running, he saw the grand emerald canopy of the park before him. At the gold and silver gates was an incredibly long line to enter the park; families and foals, couples, groups of friends, and lone stragglers all waited impatiently. The guards gave him a cursory nod as he galloped past the line, shouting "Ah'm a vendor!"; he could hear a couple of them try the same line to get into the fair faster. From the sound of squabbling it clearly hadn't worked; Big Macintosh was a highly recognizable pony after all.

There it was! The Apple Family Apple Stall! Even if he had almost certainly failed Princess Luna, he could at least make up for it by ensuring that he was around to sell his family's treats. The World's Fair was one of the more profitable events that Sweet Apple Acres took part in, and he wouldn't be doing right by his family if he simply spent the night languishing on a bench somewhere in the middle of Canterlot. Princess Luna wasn't just some mare, but she wasn't family. He had responsibilities after all.

That particular night at the Fair was short of spectacular. Big Macintosh could not get Luna and the unopened package of socks off of his mind. It didn't help matters that romantically involved ponies kept lining up in front of his stall. He was glad to see the customers, but every one of them reminded him of the hopelessness of his own situation. "Oh to live forever with love unrequited, to suffer the bittersweet and sorrowful pangs o' desire until the end o' mah days," he muttered to himself. He blinked at himself: quoting Charlie Baudlyre could only mean that he was feeling rather lonely tonight. No doubt it was all the romance in the air.

Later that night, as he walked back to his hotel, his thoughts turned once again to the golden tickets and the last package of socks he had purchased. He'd wasted the day today, he thought. Besides, the Equestrian Society of Mathematicians had paid for his fancy room at the Waldorf Equestria; he should at least be gracious enough to actually show up at the summit. Maybe deliver the speech they had wanted for years? Yet, the niggling thought that trying at all was better than not trying kept popping up like some ubiquitous, but obvious, statement about the time of day.

As he closed the door to his room, he decided. He'd open the last package of socks. Who he was doing it for and why he was doing it didn't matter; he'd already bought them, he might as well open them. He flopped down on the bed, seizing the cellophane tab in his teeth. If there was no ticket, it was no great loss; he'd have a brand new quad of high quality socks. If there was a ticket...well, he'd figure it out then.

He tore the tab. After a few nudges of the nose, he saw it. A glint of gold. The perfect gift for the perfect mare.

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Luna awoke to find a small envelope lying on the nightstand next to her bed, beside her daily package of socks. The light from Celestia's sun

burned bright over the top of her curtains, but they acted as a wonderful alarm clock. It was the summer, after all; the day lasted longer than the night, so it only made sense for her to not sleep the day away. As she got to her hooves, she decided to wait a moment on the socks themselves; it wasn't every day that she got a letter after all.

As she levitated the envelope towards her, she thought to herself, "When have I ever gotten a letter? It had better not be another one of Celly's pranks. I might just have to get a little...vindictive...if it is." She giggled as she recalled the last prank she pulled on Celestia.

Celestia, almost universally, yawned whenever she woke up; whenever she yawned she had a tendency to try to be polite and yawn into her right hoof. This particular morning, she'd woken up and yawned. Into a sock. In her shock, she flung it off of her hoof with her magic immediately, throwing it across the room to the farthest corner, where it landed with a loud *flump*. As she glared the corner something about her room seemed...wrong. She closed her eyes, shook her head, and opened her eyes again. To find her bedroom entirely covered in socks. All of them from Luna's private collection. Socks were draped over the sofa, they littered the floor, there was a layer of them on Celestia's bed, and Celestia's nightcap had been replaced with what was probably a sock. She levitated it off her head only to find...Mr. Buttons.

Celestia's scream of "LUUUUUUUUNNNAAAAAAA!!!!" had resonated from the very heights of the Tower of the Setting Sun in the farthest east of the castle to the Tower of the Waning Moon in the farthest west of the castle. Luna had only sniggered to herself quietly as she drifted off to sleep. Celestia wouldn't hurt her favorite sock puppet.

Luna slowly opened the envelope, taking care to stuff it underneath her blankets as she opened it the rest of the way. A bit of movement caught her eye from the doorway, and she smiled.

"Celly?" she called, "I'm on to you. I know this envelope is one of your pranks!" She turned to face the doorway, levitating her key weapon out from his drawer next to her bed. "Come on out Celly! I know you're there!" she said again, advancing the sock puppet forwards until it was almost around the corner. Then, without warning, Mr. Buttons flew around the corner at Celestia's head height. She felt it hit...air? Was Celly ducking? She cantered around the corner to find Captain Draught standing at

attention, though he kept an eye on the still floating sock puppet that Celestia was so deeply frightened of.

"Is there something I can help you with milady?" Draught asked calmly. His posture was stiff, and formal; not like his usual, more relaxed self. He had, after all, seen things that most news organizations and gossip columns would have given their fore legs for; things that would embarrassing the Royal Pony Sisters for the next ten thousand years. Like Mr. Buttons. And the incident in the garden involving Luna's "number one fan". Luna realized that he had been the one behind the envelope. Seizing it with her magic, she levitated it, and its contents out into the hallway...only to gasp as she stared at one of Wooly Fetlocks' legendary golden tickets. A piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Luna didn't notice.

"Wha-wha-wha?" Luna gasped. "What is the meaning of this?!" The ticket danced in front of Draught's face; he remained utterly impassive. "Did Celly pull some strings? Where did this come from?" Draught didn't speak. "As your Princess, I **demand** that you answer!" Luna cringed inwardly as she commanded him to speak; she hated pulling rank on anypony as much as, if not more than, Celestia did. Still, if Celestia had finally given in to her overprotective instincts that was something they needed to talk about. Preferably now. Almost certainly now.

"A secret admirer sends his regards," Captain Draught said quietly. Luna's eyes screwed her eyes up in suspicion.

"It wouldn't happen to be Celly would it?" she asked pointedly. "Or you acting on behalf of Celly?"

Draught sighed. "Milady, permission to speak freely?"

Luna blinked. He usually only asked for that when either Celestia or herself had done or said something that he found, according to his common sense, to be utterly stupid. He had never been wrong before either; it was no wonder, after all, that the Royal Sisters entrusted him with their most personal secrets by proximity. "Permission granted."

"If you would just read the letter that came with it all would become clear," he said, pointing at the paper. Luna blushed, levitating the letter with her magic. What she read was the shocked her more than anything else that had happened ever since her return.

To my dearest Luna,

I hope that you enjoy the gift.

Thank you.

From a Secret Admirer

Captain Draught smirked at Luna's face as she stared at the letter for a full minute before asking, "Is this real? No fan this time?"

Draught shook his head, "Milady, I know the pony who sent you this. Under pain of loss of friendship, I have sworn not to reveal the pony's identity. So I'll just have to keep you in the dark, won't I?"

"It's not you is it?" Luna continued, eyeing Draught carefully. Draught frowned.

"Milady, I am not the pony in question. I can swear that I am speaking the honest truth when I say that the pony in question is, very and truly, madly in love with you." Luna fainted. "That didn't go as well as Mac expected," Draught muttered as he carefully lifted the Moon Princess back onto her bed. As he pulled the covers over her, her eyes fluttered open. "Well, looks like I went to all the trouble of putting you to bed for nothing," he commented as she clambered out of bed for the second time in under ten minutes.

"I...I can't accept this pony's gift," she said, radiating stubbornness and shock in waves. "Whoever this pony is deserves the ticket; she, or he, is giving up the chance of a lifetime for my happiness. Who knows when Mr. Fetlocks will let more ponies into the factory? I can't let this pony give that away." She paused, tears in her eyes. "I just can't. But...Draught? When you meet with her...or him...would you deliver a message for me?"

Draught nodded. He knew that Luna often felt lonely but...this lonely? Then again, her only real friend was her older sister, and they only saw each other for about an hour or so a day (if that), mostly to eat or discuss affairs of state. Outside of Celestia her closest friend was probably...him, and he spent most of his time telling other ponies to stand stoically next to her bedroom door.

Luna swallowed deeply, carefully placing the ticket back in the envelope, and storing the letter away in her nightstand's drawer. "Tell this pony that they should go on the tour; if I get a golden ticket, I will meet them there. Then we'll...we'll see where things go." Luna watched as Captain Draught took the envelope and gently stored it in one of the compartments of his armor before turning to Luna, nodding, and then saluting.

"I'll see to it that the pony gets the message, Princess," Draught said before descending the stairs. How was he going to explain this to Big Macintosh? How would he take it? Draught didn't know, but he knew that Big Mac probably would not be very happy.

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Big Macintosh was ecstatic. "Didja hear that?" he whooped, "She wants to meet with me! Ah can't believe mah luck!" He danced in place for a little bit before realizing exactly where he was and who was in the room with him. Draught didn't know what to say to a fully grown stallion when he was dancing, especially when that stallion happened to be about twice his size.

"She still needs to find one of the tickets," Draught replied. Big Macintosh's head remained in the clouds, despite Draught's feeble attempts to drag it back down to the ground where earth pony heads belonged.

"She wants to meet with me! That's all that matters!" the stallion replied. He calmed down long enough to step onto the balcony and watch as the evening star began to shine in the night sky, and the moon began to rise. It's gentle light touched its face, and he could feel a cool breeze flow across his face and tickling his fore legs. "Ah'm comin' Luna."

Chapter 6

“Luna?” Celestia called. “Luna, are you alright?” She was standing in the ornate hallway right outside Luna’s bedchambers, facing the door carved with the eight phases of the moon.

“No!” Luna shouted. Luna’s voice was wracked, and tear-ridden. She’d clearly been crying for some time, and the sobbing didn’t sound like it was anywhere near finished. Celestia sighed; she had been afraid of this. Only this morning the news had hit the airwaves.

This is UNN, Unicorn News Network. I’m Silver Tongue. Our top story today? The fifth and last golden ticket has been found by a very lucky camel by the name of Sabre Espada. He announced his possession of the ticket yesterday, and reporters visually confirmed his possession of one of Fetlocks’ tickets. I think we can all agree that this camel is one very lucky son of a stallion.

In other news, or rather the lack of further news now that the Fetlocks’ socks craze has finally come to an end, reporters worldwide remain unable to determine the identity of the anonymous pony who is in possession of the fourth golden ticket. We at UNN assure all watchers that we are working around the clock to determine the identity of this pony; UNN is currently offering a reward of ten thousand bits for any information at all concerning the identity or the whereabouts of the fourth ticket holder. A five thousand bit reward has been offered for any information concerning Royal Guard Captain Draught’s contact information while he remains in the castle, as he remains the sole confirmatory source of information regarding the fourth golden ticket.

Hopefully we can all look forward to a return to normalcy; at least until the day that Wooly Fetlocks opens his factory.

Luna had been slowly poking away at her salad when the news hit; moments later she had dashed out of the room in tears. Celestia dashed out of the room after her, moving Captain Draught out of her way as she galloped after her younger sister.

"Well," Captain Draught had grumbled, wiping alfalfa off his snout, "That was a waste of good alfalfa." He felt sorry for Luna, he really did; however, living with the Royal Sisters for several days can begin to wear on your nerves after awhile. At least before he had retreated beyond the reach of the paparazzi he'd been able to go home and relax with his wife and daughter and away from the Royal Shenanigans. Now the three of them were staying in the castle because, to quote Luna, "The endless maw of the daily news cares little for the troubles of lesser ponyfolk." She had been feeling particularly poetic that night. Draught grit his teeth as he dragged a particularly annoying purple flower out of his nose; Big Macintosh owed him *big time*.

"Luna," Celestia said, leaning in closer to the door, "Do you want to talk?"

"NO! Just! Go away!" Luna screamed. The sobbing intensified for a moment and then softened again. For the first time in a millennium, Celestia had no idea what to do; however, she at least took solace in the fact that Luna was unlikely to become a crazy cat lady: neither of the Royal Pony Sisters kept pet cats. Furthermore, Luna did know what ponies wallowed in. Or at least she hadn't berated herself for not knowing.

"Luna...it'll be alright," Celestia said softly. She had already resolved to spend the rest of the day making herself available for Luna; her mistakes more than a thousand years ago had taught her that she couldn't simply ignore her little sister. Equestria could survive a day without administration; it already did so, on a regular basis. "Everything will work out in the end," she said, not knowing if it was true. She heard the sound of a package of socks wrapped in cellophane strike the other side of the door.

"You don't know that!" shouted Luna. Celestia had forgotten that Luna had quite the temper; the sisters had not fought about anything significant ever since that fateful night that Celestia had been forced to banish her younger sister to the moon. "You think you know everything, but you DON'T!" Whatever had just smashed against the door sounded rather expensive. Celestia hoped it wasn't the four thousand year old vase; that

was a national treasure of the Rams of the Hoovalayan Mountains, given as an act of goodwill ages ago. "Oh look at me, I'm Celestia, Princess of the Noon Day, She Who Guides the Sun! I have reigned over Equestria for the last one thousand years alone as Princess of the Heavenly Bodies! I **banished my little sister** to the moon for a thousand years, and **now** when she's hurting, she thinks that just **a few words can fix it!**" Another loud crash from the other side of the door; whatever it was, it sounded expensive.

Celestia was stunned into silence. She had always been able to handle any situation, any problem; that was, in fact, her greatest weakness as a ruler. She always knew what to do, and that often meant doing nothing at all. Ponies had a habit of being gifted enough to be able to fix their own problems. Had this approach bled through into her relationship with the single most important pony in her life? Had she, as usual, expected that things would resolve themselves when things had never actually been that certain? Celestia didn't know if she could answer these questions. What she did know, however, was that right now her sister needed her. "Luna? I told you that I would make up for what happened a thousand years ago, and I will. I promise. But right now, I need to ask you if I can come in now. Can I come in?"

Nothing. Celestia could still hear Luna crying softly, but Luna had said nothing. Maybe, Celestia thought, she should go away and come back later? Sometimes ponies needed time to calm down a little before they got started. Or maybe she should just wait by the door until Luna was ready to talk? The second one was preferable. That way she could be there for her Luna, if she needed her older sister. Luna very rarely brought up her millennium of imprisonment on the moon; to say that it was a sore point between the sisters would be to make the understatement of the.

An hour later, Luna was audibly sniffing. Celestia lay by the door, hooves tucked underneath, head on the floor, waiting. Simply waiting. Down the hall, she could hear the voices of several advisors and clerical ponies joined in a raucous cacophony; Captain Draught had waylaid them. "Good old Captain Draught," she thought, "One of the most honorable and loyal ponies I could have ever had the luck of meeting." She raised her head, peering out of one of the windows; it had to be about four in the afternoon now. Luna had been spared the morning report. Celestia saw no need to wake her sister simply for bad news.

“Celly?” Luna called from the room. “Celly, are you out there? I’m sorry.” Celestia fluttered her wings a little, alighting on her feet. “I’m sorry...I...I shouldn’t have-” Celestia knocked on the door with her hoof as she heard Luna starting to cry again. She needed it. Both of them did. “You can come in. I promise I won’t throw anything,” Luna said.

Celestia slowly stepped through the door, horn glowing, moving pieces of broken porcelain, dirt, and glass out of her way. She sighed a sigh of relief; neither the four thousand year old vase nor the green jade plant she had given to Luna were among the destroyed objects. Luna was lying in her bed, waiting, eyes puffy and swollen from crying.

“It’s ok,” Celestia said, walking closer. “I know it seems like the end of the world now, but everything always works out. You’ll see.” Her horn glowed brighter, and the green jade flower blossomed widely, its petals reaching for Luna in an embrace that promised that there was happiness, true happiness, somewhere.

Luna shook her head. “No...it’s worse than that. There was this pony...sent me the fourth golden ticket.” Her voice was ragged and weary, and she didn’t look Celestia in the eye as she spoke. Celestia, wisely, decided not to interrupt; Luna needed to talk more than Luna needed to be talked to. “I sent it back. It was too kind of them. But...this pony, she or he is-” Luna gulped, unsure of what Celestia would think, though she supposed that it was too late to worry about that by now, “Well, she or he is in love with me. Or thinks that they are.” She turned away, unwilling to see her older sister scoffing at her secret admirer.

Celestia smiled. “Do you know who this pony is?” There were stars dancing in Celestia’s eyes; Luna normally took that as a bad sign, a sign of a prank, but today it was a sign that she approved of whoever this was. “Because this is the way I see it: this pony sent you a golden ticket. A once in a lifetime opportunity. Whoever this pony is gave it up, because to her or him, it was more important that you have this opportunity. Only a pony who was really, truly, cared about you would do such a thing. So, what’s the name?”

Luna shook her head. “I don’t know. Captain Draught says that he can’t tell me on pain of ‘loss of friendship’.” She shifted a little, turning back to look Celestia directly in the eyes. “I wanted to meet this pony so badly, and now, I don’t know if I can. If I try to meet in pony, every every reporter,

every enthusiast, every last gossip vulture will be after me to try and find out. I don't want to put this pony through that. It's...it's just too much to expect." Luna traced her right fore hoof about the bed aimlessly, leaving wrinkles in the blanket. She had resigned herself to her fate; that her love life was doomed. Celestia laughed. Luna glared at her. "What exactly is so funny sister?"

Celestia continued giggling for a little before answering. "You concede too easily Luna. We just need to get Captain Draught to invite this pony to the castle. We can have him flown in by pegasus carriage; it won't be secret, but we can keep the paparazzi out of the way and give you two your lovely little get-to-know-each-other date."

"But, the factory would have been special," Luna responded. Her mane covered one side of her face, accentuating her sorrow. Celestia wasn't sure she could keep up her playfulness while Luna was moping this badly; she could only hope.

"It's who you spend the time with, not where you are, that makes it special," Celestia answered. "You clearly need to get out more. Make some friends."

Luna giggled a little; Celestia was getting through. Luna wouldn't be sad for much longer...if everything went well. "You make me sound like Twilight Sparkle before you sent her to Ponyville." She paused for a moment. "I was afraid you were going to hate me."

Celestia's surprise was obvious; the only thing moving was her flowing mane. "Whatever for dear sister?" She wasn't at all sure where things were going, but they weren't heading directly towards Happyland. They were taking a detour.

Luna looked away, the sadness returning to her voice. "I brought up my banishment. I screamed at you for it. I mocked you for it. I-"

It was Celestia's turn to cry. She nuzzled Luna, tears pouring down her face and landing with an almost silent plunk on the sheets. "You should. I sent you away..." She lay down next to the bed, her head nestled against Luna's. "I sentenced my little sister to a life of misery and loneliness for a millennium in the most desolate place I could imagine; I didn't want to do it, and I know I had to. But some small part of me wanted revenge for all the suffering you had caused, all the ponies you were willing to hurt with

your endless night; it wanted to be as vindictive as possible. So, instead of trying, of taking that glimmer of hope I had of shattering your form as Nightmare Moon and returning you to Luna, I-" Celestia's voice cracked, her eyes closed. Her mane lay around her, unmoving, obscuring her form. "I let my anger take me over, and I banished you to the moon." Luna was shocked into silence. Celestia could only sob into the sheets before she continued, "I failed you Luna. I punished my little sister for feeling lonely and unloved, for my own biggest mistake of neglecting the single most important pony in my life. I should be afraid that you hate me...and I am."

They both stayed in silence for awhile, Celestia crying and Luna simply lying in bed, neither knowing what to say. Finally, Luna began moving. Celestia, tried to shift out of Luna's way, only to find Luna drawing Celestia in for a deep hug.

"I don't hate you sister," Luna said. "We both made a mistake that night, and I'm sorry."

Celestia draped Luna with one her wings, drawing her in for a tighter hug before withdrawing. "I'm sorry too."

Luna clambered out of bed, tripping over her hooves as she did so, landing on her chin with a rather loud *oof* sound. She hastily got to her hooves as Celestia stifled a very tiny giggle; Luna ignored it.

As the Moon Princess surveyed the wake of destruction she had left in the room, she cringed. Several tables were overturned, and the door was surrounded by several broken shards of ceramic and clods of dirt. "I'm sorry again Celly," she said, "I did all of this because I wanted one of Woolly Fetlocks' golden tickets. My behavior was completely uncalled for."

Celestia winked at her little sister. "Given the talk that we just had," she responded, "I think I have it in my heart to forgive you." She was grinning broadly, and her mane had once again self-styled itself into flowing iridescence.

"Only if I get to forgive you," Luna answered. Celestia nodded.

Three hard knocks resounded throughout the room. "Princesses? I have some news I think you need to hear." It was Captain Draught at the door...and who were the other voices? The Royal Pony Sisters of Canterlot did not expect that the paparazzi had finally defeated Captain Draught;

upset or not, he was still the finest Chamber Captain since Captain Wingbeat, and she had been in charge more than one and a half thousand years ago.

“Come in,” Luna said, horn glowing. The door opened slowly, inviting Captain Draught into the room. He marched in, wearing a radio which hung from his neck on a rather strong line of coil. The two sisters stared at him, and at the radio, which was still playing. Captain Draught was pointing at the radio.

...repeat, the fifth ticket presented by Mr. Espada has been confirmed to be a fake. He has admitted to forging the ticket using linen paper and gold paint after being confronted by a representative for Woolly Fetlocks, a certain Dr. Whooves. This dramatic turn of events means that the Fetlocks’ Socks Extravaganza is still on. That’s right, despite Sabre Espada’s vile efforts to the contrary, the Fetlocks Socks’ Extravaganza is still on!

In other news, the Shetland Clover Famine continues. The diminutive Shettish ponies continue their immigration to Equestria, where, here he is again, Woolly Fetlocks is apparently offering a job to the first one hundred ponies to arrive in Canterlot though the vast majority continue to migrate to Trottingham. Attempts to find a single Shettish pony who is willing to agree to an interview have, thus far, all ended in failure.

This is Cornwall, with the SBC, Shettish Broadcasting Service. International News Television.

Luna and Celestia stared at each other. Then they stared at the single package of socks by the door. Only a few moments later, Luna had the package of socks on a little rug that sat next to her bed. Draught was standing by the door, ensuring that no desperate reporters were going to try and sneak into the Moon Princess’ private quarters. Except maybe for the one reporter whose radio he had stolen in the cacophony; that one pony might come looking. To be fair, that reporter had also clocked him with it; Draught gingerly rubbed the side of his head with his hoof, cringing as he touched the side of his chin.

Celestia stood by the socks, waiting. She couldn't open the package for Luna; if she found the socks, it would mean nothing. It had to be Luna; Celestia could only hope that her little sister's luck would make a turn for the miraculous. The package of socks floated into the air, and everypony present held their breath.

Rip. Tear. Pull. Lift. Luna looked as if she was concentrating on an incredibly difficult surgery, gingerly lifting the outer sock to unveil...nothing. There was nothing. No ticket.

"I'm so sorry Luna," Celestia said, stepping closer to her. She didn't want her sister to start crying again; she wasn't sure she could take it again. Not so soon.

Luna smiled, "There's still tomorrow Celly." She frowned for a moment, gasped, then hurriedly peeled back her curtains. The sun was waiting, patiently, for Celestia. Luna could feel the moon tugging at her magic; both were waiting, rather impatiently, for the final push that would send them on their way. "Looks like we forgot to do," Luna said.

As Luna and Celestia began to attend to their appointed tasks, Draught stepped into the hallway. He'd have to call the maids to clean up Luna's mess, and they were NOT going to be happy. Spick Ann Sparkle would probably want to throttle him when he told her. He sighed, lying down next to the door. Cleaning up the mess could wait; he'd already been hit one too many times today, and plastic radios *hurt!*

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"Oh! Princess! What an honor!" Hoity Toity said. He rapidly pulled himself into low bow, signaling to his store's guards to do the same. "I thought I already sent you your daily package of socks!" If he could have dropped his jaw any lower, it would be touching the floor.

Luna giggled a little at the sight, giving him an affirming nod. "I'm just touring Canterlot today. Finding out about the latest fall fashions, exploring The Magical Magisterium, you know. Relaxing." She stood in the doorway, gazing awkwardly at all of the ponies bowing before her. "You know, you don't have to keep bowing," she said, pawing at the ground.

Hoity Toity and his staff rose, though everypony continued to stand around, unsure of whether they should get back to work or if they should

wait on the princess. Luna grinned awkwardly, and motioned with her hoof for them to go about their day. She had to repeat the action at least twice more before understood. Hoity Toity remained.

“Is there anything I can help you with Your Highness?” he asked. He had a wide, rather plasticine, and clearly forced smile plastered all over his face. His glasses sat, nestled on the bridge of his nose, and his eyes peeked over the top in a rather adorable fashion. Luna had no idea if this was the pony who had tried to give her a golden ticket, but it would make sense, sort of: he did have access to piles and piles of socks after all. On the other hand, Hoity Toity wasn’t exactly the kind of pony she wanted to be dating. “Your Highness?” he asked again.

Luna blinked. Had she been staring at him? “Oh, no, there’s nothing. I would just like to see your sock collection,” she answered. She peered down at her hooves, sad that she was unable to wear her socks out in public. They were considered ‘racy’ by some of the older ponies in the current generation; Luna had scoffed at the idea initially. She was, after all, several hundred times the senior of any senior citizen in Equestria.

Hoity Toity led her rapidly along the shelves, passing several dresses, design patterns, several shoes and saddlebags, and some full pony suits. Luna thought she could catch a glimpse of a brown stallion arguing with a sales representative.

“What do you *mean* you don’t have bowties here? I thought this was the finest fashion store in all of Canterlot, and you don’t have bowties?!” he said, stomping his hooves in frustration. The sales pony rolled her eyes and sighed. This was clearly not one of her better days.

“Sir, if you keep behaving in this manner, I’m going to have to ask you to leave before security escorts you out,” she said in a bored tone. The stallion pulled a watch on a chain out of one of his many pockets. Laying it down on the counter, he peered at it closely.

“Well, I have to get going anyways madam. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to *quickly* find the way out of this subpar establishment!” With that, he spun on his hooves, and stepped smartly out of the store. A googly eyed pegasus mared followed after him, turning back to shout an apology as she left. “I don’t get paid enough for this,” the sales representative said.

Luna was worried. Was Hoity Toity demanding a disproportionate amount of work from his employees? He was a very wealthy pony after all. This would bear looking in to, and she mentally filed it away for further investigation. For now though, she was supposed to be on vacation; away from the castle, away from diplomatic work, and away from the golden ticket craze.

"I'm afraid that I don't have any Fantabulous Socks at the moment. They sell out every day before noon," he said apologetically. Luna shook her head in response.

"I don't want any. I've limited myself to paying for one package of socks per day. I want to give other ponies a fair chance at getting tickets. Or the ticket now, I guess." She looked around the shelves and shelves of designer socks in Hoity Toity's store, trying to ignore the press of ponies who were now flowing in through the doors. A princess never got a regular day to herself.

"How honorable Your Highness," Hoity Toity complimented. He lifted a pair of rather plain, white, silk socks with an impossibly high thread count. "What do you think?"

Luna shook her head again. "I don't need help Mr. Toity. I'm quite fine on my own," and with that, she wandered off down the shelves, peering at various quads of socks. None of them were...exciting. They were mostly striped, or plain color...it was as if designers didn't actually put thought into making a good pair of socks. Socks were something ponies wore at home, in private, with somepony special; alternatively, they were used to protect ponies from calluses from forming just above their hooves if they had to wear actual shoes or boots instead of horseshoes. The best quad of socks she saw were a plain pair of socks made from silver threading...then she saw them: Fetlocks' socks.

They were colorful, exciting, exuberant. It was as if Fetlocks was full of life, and he had let that show when designing these socks. As she looked through the collection, she was absolutely amazed. One type claimed that the hooves would never get hot or sweaty inside of them. Another claimed to be made of cotton candy. The single most amazing brand of sock Luna found asserted that ponies would never lose a member of a quad in the dryer, but made it clear that no such guarantees were made for the washing machine. Somepony behind her cleared his throat; it

sounded like Hoity Toity. Luna, rolling her eyes, decided not to turn around. The quad of socks that shone with the iridescent colors of the rainbow was more entrancing than him anyways. "Yes?"

"I do believe I've found one quad of Fantabulous Fetlocks socks Your Majesty. One of my employees accidentally placed it with the socks in the F. L. section. Some of the finest work I've ever seen, if I do say so myself, F. L." Hoity Toity said. "Please take the socks, with my compliments."

When Luna saw the quad of socks she gasped; they were themed...after her. An alicorn stood silhouetted against an enormous moon, her horn glowing and her wings spread wide as she leapt gracefully. Each step was depicted on a different sock. The label read 'For our underappreciated Lunar Princess' She was speechless. Her horn glowed, lifting the cellophane wrapped package before her. As she turned them, she noticed the socks had some sort of...holo-thread? The image shifted! Each sock depicted the entire scene, shifted some.

"Do you like them?" Hoity Toity asked. He was visibly nervous. If the princess said no, that news might sink his entire store for good.

Luna nodded vigorously. "How much?"

Hoity Toity waved his hoof. "For free," he said.

Luna nodded vigorously. She had already done so once in the past month; she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth again. Besides, she (or he) had wanted to give her an actual ticket; this was a package of socks. They probably didn't even hold the ticket anyways. It was still quite difficult for her to withhold her excitement as she peeled away the cellophane, tearing the tab away with her teeth.

She saw it. There it was. A glint of gold. She flipped the top sock over. There it was. At last. The golden ticket. She stared at it. Her heart fluttered, beating at a million miles a minute. She could scarcely breathe. After weeks of heartache she had finally found it; the last of Fetlocks' golden tickets was hers. She turned to Hoity Toity, wanting to thank him for his generosity.

His face was a mask of anger, confusion, contempt, and...happiness? A moment later, he openly face-hoofed. Luna thought she could hear him muttering, "How did I manage to do this *again*?" When he finally faced the

princess, he had that same plastic smile plastered all over his face. “Well, lucky you Princess! You found the last golden ticket!”

At that moment, all discord broke loose. A pile of ponies piled into Fetlocks section, limiting Luna’s movement. The press of the crowd of ponies stood before her, all of them shouting, all of them unintelligible.

“Princess Luna! I’ll give you ten thousand bits!”

“You twit! She’s the princess! What’s she going to do with bits? I’ll give you my hoof in marriage!”

“You again?! Who’d want to marry you? I’ll give you my first born foal!”

Luna kept the ticket hovering underneath her. She wasn’t sure if any of the ponies would try to pry it from her magic, but she wasn’t taking any chances. She needed a way out, and she needed it now.

Suddenly, Hoity Toity thrust his body in front of her, barring the mob from reaching her. “Luna! Follow me!” he shouted. He began barreling into the throng. Ponies cleared a path before him, and Luna followed closely behind. “I’ll let you out the back way! After that, fly home! Fly straight to Canterlot Castle!” Luna only barely heard him over the cacophony. An eternity of harrowing moments later, they were through the door into the administrative portions of Hoity Toity’s store. Two guard ponies threw themselves against the door, the pegasus beating his wings to keep the door shut. Hoity Toity turned around, preparing to stand his ground against the crazed mob.

“Why?” Luna asked. “Everypony out there wants it, why don’t you?”

Hoity Toity answered without turning to face her. She was sure that his glare could burn a hole in the door, even though she couldn’t see it; it was written in his body language. “I tried to take the ticket from Rarity,” he said bluntly. “I have to make up for it at some point, and I might as well do it here. Besides, it’s not like I can steal anything from Princess Celestia’s younger sister and get away with it. Now get going.” He continued to stand, watching as his two guards held the door against the press, his hooves rooted to the ground.

Luna stared at him, unsure of what to think. Finally, something clicked. “No,” she said. Hoity Toity’s sureness left his stance, and he turned around, confusion written on his face. “I’m not some helpless damsel in distress. I’m Princess Luna of the Moon. As much as I’m thankful for your assistance, I can take care of myself.” She marched past Hoity Toity, whose mouth had dropped open, stopping behind the guards who were bracing themselves against the door. “Let them through,” she said.

A little fear crept into their eyes, but they did as they were told. After all, she was Princess Luna; between disobeying her and disobeying Hoity Toity, they’d pick Hoity Toity any day. The door flew open, and several ponies fell through the doorway, barreling towards Luna. Her horn glowed bright white and silver, and the crowd stopped, held back by the force of her telekinesis.

“Pay attention everypony, and pay very close attention,” she said, levitating the less fortunate members of the mob onto their hooves. If she hadn’t been there, some of them might have been trampled; surely Fetlocks had not intended for tragedy to befall simply because of an excess of greed. Slowly the ponies began to stop milling around as they noticed their peers stopping; the ones in the front pawed at the ground, unsure of what to say or do under Luna’s withering glare. They had never felt so foalish in their lives. Luna continued to stare at them, in silence, until she heard nothing. No pony was moving around; it was all calm. Then she began to walk forwards; they made a path, dividing before her like water flowing around an immovable fortress of stone.

“You all should be *ashamed*. Somepony could have gotten hurt!” She cast a quick glance around, finding a light blue mare with tears in her eyes, gingerly holding her left forehoof in the air. “SOME PONY DID GET HURT!” she shouted at them; her voice seemed to leave intensity lines in the air and resounded off the wall. “LOOK AT YOURSELVES! Ask the question, ‘Was it worth it?’ ‘Is it worth it?’ You all mobbed a dressmaker at this very store only a few weeks ago! Yes, I know about that! What do you have to say for yourselves? Well?” She stomped one of her hooves to emphasize her point, leaving tiny cracks in the floor beneath her.

Throughout the crowd, scattered statements of “I’m sorry,” were muttered. Luna thought she heard somepony try to whisper quietly, “Does this mean she isn’t going to sell one of us the ticket?” Had they learned nothing? Were ponies really this selfish, this uncaring? She stomped her

hoof again, harder this time. Several mannequins in the store shook, and a few ponies struggled to keep their balance. A unified “We’re sorry,” resounded through the crowd, and they began to disperse, many of them heading for the door, the hurt mare limping off after them.

Luna trotted in front of her, and blocked her way. The mare turned away, ashamed, expecting a longer diatribe. Luna said nothing. She touched the mare’s hoof with her glowing horn, healing away the hurt as she had been taught several thousand years ago. Then she stepped outside the store, spread her wings, and flew away, a single sparkling golden ticket floating after her.

Luna smirked, the wind whipping through her mane. Wouldn’t Celestia be surprised? They would almost certainly have a private party; they’d have to give Draught the day off. He certainly deserved it after all he had gone through ever since the whole sock craze began. Maybe Luna would take his daughter, Penny, for a ride over Canterlot. She might enjoy that.

Most importantly, Luna thought, she would be able to meet her secret admirer at quite possibly one of the most special venues in all of Equestrian history. She was certain that the day of the factory tour would be the best day ever.

As she landed on Celestia’s balcony, she waved the ticket in front of her, practically prancing into her elder sister’s private quarters while shouting, “Celly! Look what I found!” Captain Draught later stated that he had been forced, yes, forced, to take part in the impromptu celebratory dance party. No pony was convinced, least of all his daughter.

Chapter 7

Chiffon and lace floated in the afternoon breezes of Canterlot. A ribbon jerked lazily in the wind for a moment, before suddenly changing direction as the Moon Princess turned to get a better view of herself in the mirror. She sighed. Nothing looked right. She had spent the past two hours trying to decide what to wear tomorrow; she'd even gotten up extra early to give herself time to prepare. It was *hard* getting up at nine in the morning.

"Fat lot of good all this time is doing me," she muttered. Celestia snoozed quietly on a nearby couch, her mane blowing gently in the wind. "Celly!" Luna said, "I thought you were going to help me pick something to wear for tomorrow!"

Celestia turned, driving her face into the cushions, her back towards Luna. "Luna, I think you'll be fine just being yourself. It's not like we normally wear clothes." She paused for a moment, holding her hoof to her mouth as if she were pondering something incredibly profound. "I mean, besides our crowns, your socks, and my sweaters."

Luna continued to shift about, her horn glowing as ribbons, streamers, brushes, and bows floated by, ignoring her elder sister's comment. After a few moments of deliberation, her face lit up, and the doors to the Moon Princess' walk-in closet opened; after them floated a single, rather dusty, rust-colored corset. Celestia casually caught one of the strings in her mouth as it flew by, eyes closed. Luna turned to find where the corset had gone, only to go from consternation to frustration.

"Celly! If you're not going to help, you could at least stay out of the way!" Luna said, stomping her hooves. Two locks of hair fell in front of her face, and she raged a little longer before finally flopping onto the floor and blowing one of them out of her eyes. She felt completely drained. "What am I going to *do*?!" she whimpered. "Everything needs to be perfect tomorrow!"

Celestia raised her head, spitting out the tie to the corset, which now lay on the ground. A thick layer of dust had fallen off of it onto the floor during its short lived flight. The Sun Princess could only imagine what was going through her younger sister's head if she had been *that* desperate. She stared at Luna for a few seconds before finally saying the most blunt thing

she could think of, "You really need to get out more little sister. You're being quite melodramatic."

Luna glared at Celestia, but did not move. **"IT DOES NOT CONCERN US,"** she responded; Celestia giggled: Luna very rarely used the royal "We", and whenever she did she was either adorable or frightening. Celestia did not find the idea of a mare, lying on the floor, throwing a pseudo-tantrum in a dress that was more ribbon than fabric frightening.

"WE WISH TO MEET A RETAINER AND POTENTIAL SUITOR OF OURS. WE SHALL NOT DISAPPOINT. IF THOU WISH TO AID US NOT, WE REQUEST THEE LEAVE FORTHWITH," she continued, her heart clearly not in the request. Celestia was openly tittering now, her "nap" quite over.

"WHAT DOTTH THOU LAUGH AT? WE DO NOT APPRECIATE HUMILIATION!" Luna responded. The Moon Princess was unsure at this point if she was simply having fun or if she actually wanted Celestia to stop being annoying and help, but either way her desperation and bad mood were quickly waning.

Her receding bad mood reminded her that she needed to start the moon on its waning cycle; it had been full for a full extra day now and reports were streaming in of several buffalo tribe calendars being rightfully confused. Quadrupeds hadn't been so confused and distraught since Celestia had refused to get up and raise the sun about two thousand years before; she had answered all of the castle staff with "I dun wanna," before stuffing her head back under the pillows. Luna had finally had to step outside and raise the sun herself, a full two hours late; she had been having the most wonderful dream too. Something about a muscular, handsome stallion carrying her off into the moon-rise.

"Oh, Luna. I'm telling you that he'll like you no matter what you wear. What's important is who you're spending your time with, not what you're wearing when you're out," Celestia commented. She paused for a moment, held her hoof to her mouth in consideration of something or another, and continued, "Except maybe trying not to speak like you're in a Shakesmarerian play. Now why don't you take the rest of the day off. Relax. Nothing shows nerves like being nervous." She giggled a little at her cleverness.

Luna raised her head, snorting at Celestia. "Well Ms. Obvious, is there anything else you'd like to-" She froze. A thought rang through her head, slicing through all others until, at last, she asked. "How do you know it's a he?" She got to her hooves, the dress swishing gently back and forth.

Celestia fluttered her eyelashes innocently. "Whatever do you mean?"

Luna was not amused. "Sister..." she said, her hackles rising, "I've had to suffer through your snipes, jibes, general lack of helpfulness, and annoying tendencies for the entire morning." She was glaring directly into Celestia's demurely half-shut eyes, intending to stare down the Sun Princess' calm demeanor if it was the last thing she did. "Now you've let slip that my date tomorrow is a stallion. I, at least, respected Captain Draught's friendship with this pony enough to not dig; and he respected my not wanting to find out about him until tomorrow! Now *you* come and *ruin* it!" Her eyes hurt. She felt like crying again. Celly was always like this. Callous. Thoughtless. Sure Celly meant well, but more times than she liked to admit she ended up with her hoof in her mouth. Or pie on her face. Whichever modern idiom fit best.

Celestia's quiet smirk had disappeared, only to be replaced with a look filled with regret. "I'm sorry," she said, her mane now drooping, "I didn't mean to upset you. I just...I'll...I'll leave. Good luck tomorrow." The door quietly snapped shut behind her.

"She deserves it," Luna said to herself. Looking in the mirror, she began to brush her hair. "Oh! Why won't you ever just let yourself be fixed?!" She huffed at the lock of hair that perpetually hung in her eyes; it was the same one that always seemed to be the afternoon cowlick too.

A scattering of clouds broke, allowing the heat and light of the noonday sun to blaze into her room. The glare of the sunlight upon her mirror blinded her, and she dropped her brush in surprise. She stepped back, blinking the sudden light out of her eyes and saw...a beautiful grayish purple mare with a teal mane. The lock of hair she'd been trying to fix fell right where it had been falling all along: right into the perfect spot. The only thing that looked off was the fact that she seemed to be a single purple head floating in a sea of white clouds.

Maybe Celly was right? Maybe...maybe she had been trying too hard? She levitated the dress back onto its hanger in the closet, mulling things over as she went about the process of looking at herself, really looking at herself, when she was just herself. She hadn't done so in more than a thousand years; it had always been socks, or trying out a new dress for a ball, or shoes, or something else. And there it was. Luna looked stunning.

"Maybe that's why he's so infatuated with me," she giggled to herself. "Whoever he is, he's in for a treat tomorrow. I certainly know I am." She blinked her eyelashes at herself flirtatiously, like Celly often did whenever she wanted to make an ambassador nervous. Maybe a pouty face? Neither of those really felt...natural. "I really should just be myself tomorrow," Luna said. She levitated Abby off of her desk and Mr. Buttons out from under the bed. "What do you two think?"

Luna was so absorbed in talking to herself through her abacus and sock puppet, she didn't notice Celestia hiding on the balcony, smiling. The Sun Princess spread her wings, and took off from her younger sister's balcony. "Sometimes," Celestia thought to herself, "Everypony just needs a nudge in the right direction." After Celestia landed on her own balcony, she trotted over to her closet and retrieved a slightly tattered pink wool sweater. "Well Mrs. Fluffykins," she said to the sweater, "It's been quite some time." Luna later found her sleeping on her chaise wearing Mrs. Fluffykins, the image of the smiling sun staring right back at her. The younger sister smirked, decided not to prank her older sister with Mr. Buttons, and instead went to lunch. The sisters didn't get enough time to relax anyways; the demands of the royal office were just too much. Let Celestia sleep; she deserved it.

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"Ah just don't think that all o' this is necessary," Big Mac said. He had been stuffed into a rather tight fitting grey suit with a black tie. He ducked a top hat and several random gems that whizzed through the air above his head.

"Dear, you absolutely must look your best for tomorrow!" Rarity responded. "Dress to impress, and you certainly have your work cut out for you. It's not every day that a pony gets to court Princess Luna!" She continued to dig through several bags that lay scattered around her on the

floor of the Apple family farm house. Applejack sat nearby, watching the scene, visibly unsure if she wanted to laugh or empathize with her older brother.

The red stallion sighed. He appreciated all the work the dressmaker was putting into his appearance tomorrow, but even so it seemed like she was going a bit too far. It wasn't a formal occasion. They were going on a tour of a factory, not out to a fancy dinner or an orchestra. Still...he did want to look his best for Luna. "Maybe just a small hat," he said. He didn't like hats that much; AJ was the one with the Stetson in the family after all.

"Ah! Let's try this," Rarity said, levitating out a grey fedora. After she settled it on Big Macintosh's head, she squealed with delight. "Why! Big Macintosh! I do believe that this chapeau is perfect! What do you think Applejack?" she asked, tapping her hooves several times.

Applejack's eyes were wide with awe at Rarity's work. "Why, Big Macintosh, Ah think that when Princess Luna sees you, she'll be falling into your hooves in no time," she said. "Rarity, I hafta admit that you did one amazin' job with mah big brother. If he went out in these duds, he'd probably have to fight off the fillies with a stick." She straightened her Stetson; Rarity's quality fashion work always made her a little more self-conscious than she was used to being.

Big Macintosh looked at himself in the tall mirror that rested against the wall. It was like looking at a different him; maybe a version that had decided to major in acting or some other, more popular, field of study. No, that wasn't it. He was dressed like a pony from *The Godfather*, or a condruped. Then again, lots of ponies dressed this way right? Whenever ponies happened to dress at all, of course. Still, he couldn't deny he looked incredibly handsome. Sort of like the protagonist from that Equestria Network show, *White Yoke*.

"This'll do," he said. He wasn't sure who he was talking to, but he was certain that this was the way he wanted to look tomorrow. Now they just had to get going. "Y'all ready Miss Rarity?" he asked. Rarity, in the meantime, was busily rummaging through the bags again.

"I certainly am. I've been packed since yesterday; why you decided to wait until the last minute for something this important is beyond me. It's rude to keep a lady waiting you know," she said, winking as she did so. A

moment later, she emerged, levitating a lapel pin of the night time sky. "What do you think?" she asked breathlessly. Big Macintosh decided not to comment on the wink.

"Ah don't think Ah need it, Miss Rarity. It'd just be unnecessary. You'd know about all that Ah reckon. Elegant simplicity and some such," he said. It was his mathematical side poking through: the side that emphasized the fact that the simple was often times more beautiful than the complex; that sometimes being unassuming was the best way to be impressive.

Rarity nodded quietly, put the pin away, and began to clear up the rest of the mess. "I've got to get this back to the boutique before we leave for Canterlot. Can't afford to be late tomorrow after all!"

After another hour of packing Big Macintosh's luggage and carting everything back from Sweet Apple Acres to the Carousel Boutique, they were ready to go. Everypony was waiting to bid them a bon voyage, from Twilight Sparkle to Lotus and Aloe.

"Oh! We should totally have a going away party!" Pinkie Pie shouted over the hubbub of congratulations and well-wishes. Twilight opened her mouth to comment, but Applejack merely put her hoof on Twilight's shoulder and shook her head.

"Pinkie, we already had the party. Yesterday?" Rarity responded. Pinkie continued to hop in place, excitedly chattering about how many balloons they were going to need, and cake, and all manner of emergency party supplies.

"...Have fun...you know...um...if you want to..." said Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash facehoofed.

"Fluttershy, c'mon, you've have to do better than that! They're going someplace awesome!" Rainbow said. Then, she stood on her rear legs waving her hooves about wildly screaming, "Yeaaaah! Big Mac! Rarity! Go get 'em!"

"...Um...Rainbow Dash? You know...it's not a contest..." Fluttershy responded. Rainbow, who didn't notice, continued prancing about and nearly struck Karamel in the face.

Big Macintosh, meanwhile, was busily trying to resist a pair of rather large and soulfully sad brown eyes. "Can Ah come with you?" Applebloom asked. Everyone in the Apple family found it incredibly hard to resist the little filly's adorable begging face. Applejack couldn't tell if it was because her younger sister was just so cute. Big Macintosh couldn't tell if it was because Applebloom just happened to know how to push all of the right buttons in just the right way; his skepticism didn't help him.

"Now now, you don't want to go ruinin' Big Mac's big date now do you?" Granny Smith asked. She gave Applebloom a very carefully designed piercing stare, neither kind nor angry. Applebloom wilted only the tiniest bit.

"Awww," she said, "But Ah wanted to go and see the factory." Applebloom's face fell, and even the elderly Granny Smith had trouble keeping up her guard.

"Oh, Applebloom, if you go, then what about the Crusader slumber party that Sweetie Belle had planned?" Rarity asked, winking at Applejack as she did so. On cue, Scootaloo raced down the street on her scooter, pulling Sweetie Belle in attached wagon. She deftly avoided slamming into the several ponies milling about in the crowd, until at last, the two arrived next to Applebloom. Several ponies murmured about Scootaloo's reckless behavior; Pinkie Pie, unnoticed, suggested that a party be held celebrating the fact that nopony had been injured by the little orange filly's antics.

The Crusaders immediately started talking about what activities they were going to try that night in order to try and discover their special talents. The fillies now lost in their own little world, Big Macintosh nodded at Rarity. It was time to go. Diamond Tiara had left earlier that morning with her father, Big Bucks, by way of Pegasus Air; Mayor Mare had had quite a lot of trouble simply arranging for a landing zone for them within city limits for the enormous chariot that had been ordered (Diamond had insisted that a landing zone outside of the town would simply be unacceptable). The two remaining Ponyvillians would be hoofing it; and neither had any intention of getting to Canterlot in the middle of the night only to have to get up the next morning. Besides, Rarity had planned on heading out to a fancy dinner at the Balmory Bistro.

“When in Canterlot,” she had said, “Do as the Cantrarians.” Big Macintosh hadn't had the heart to tell her that Balmory was a Shettish restaurant rather than a native Equestrian restaurant.

In contrast, Mac had every intention of getting a cheap room service meal and going straight to bed; if room service at the local Sleep Stable was cheap. Rarity had called the business unacceptably unposh when in Canterlot; Big Mac figured he wouldn't mind it. He only ever used his room in the Waldorf as a place to sleep at any rate.

So with a few heartfelt goodbyes, and more than a few explosive showers of confetti and balloons, they left; nobody could ever figure out where exactly Pinkie Pie kept them. Shhh! It's a secret Silly! Off the two trotted into the day, heading towards something that they would surely never forget.

Chapter 8

“Good morning everypony, I’m Picture Perfect, reporting to you live from the Fetlock Fashion Factory for the EET, Equestrian Entertainment Television,” said a mauve mare to the camerapony in front of her. Her hair was folded perfectly, and she spoke with an effortless accent into her headset; Picture Perfect wasn’t the EET Canterlot correspondent for nothing. To her right stood a light blue mare with white hair and rose-tinted glasses. “Commentating with me on today’s events is Photo Finish. We are glad you are joining us for one of the single most historic events in the history of the Equestrian fashion world.” Picture took a moment to flip her hair, sending it lightly brushing against Photo’s nose; the Germaren mare sneezed and then continued her stoic vigil; the way she held herself reflected a general dislike with her current company.

“Earlier today the world was rocked when we found out who the owner of the fourth golden ticket is: Doctor Big Macintosh. Now don’t get your mane all tangled, this mighty mustang isn’t a medical doctor: he’s got a PhD in mathematics, which is pretty close, but he works as a draft horse on the family farm at Sweet Apple Acres,” Picture said. Her eyes began twinkling a bit, and she looked for a moment to be mulling over a juicy piece of gossip. Picture’s camerapony, Second Sight, sighed quietly; it was all for the act. He’d never really liked working for EET; but work was work and bits were bits.

“That’s not the most interesting bit about our Big Mac. When Princess Luna arrived, a multitude of eyewitnesses agreed that they began *talking* to each other! Immediately! She just trotted straight up to him, raised him from his bow, and started *talking*! And, let’s take a look at them *now*!” Picture waved her hoof at the pair, who were standing behind the security cordon as piles of press ponies attempted to interview them.

As Second Sight zoomed in on Big Macintosh and Luna, he caught a glimpse of a little filly standing on her father’s back and chattering excitedly, and a white unicorn eyeing a blue unicorn with a cold glare; the light blue unicorn didn’t seem to be returning her gaze, but didn’t seem to want to be anywhere near the white one either. Moments later, Big Macintosh and Luna filled the screen, and they could be seen quietly chattering to one

another. Luna looked at Second Sight out of the corner of her eye, seemingly begging him to take the camera away. Big Macintosh moved slightly, obscuring the camera's view of her. Picture decided to resume speaking.

"If talking hasn't been enough, some eyewitnesses claim that they saw the Moon Princess hopping with glee, *and* they caught the two *nuzzling*! We haven't been able to catch the act on camera, but we'll be sure to let you know when we do!" Picture Perfect was close to squealing at the camera at this point; Photo Finish sniffed in haughty disdain.

"Vat," asked the photographer, "Does zis have to do vith ze magics?" Photo asked, the derision in her voice clear. She corrected her glasses before returning to her stony silence.

Picture laughed irreverently. "Oh Photo Finish, what in Equestria are you talking about?" She continued to titter for a few seconds as Photo looked on, her expression mostly unreadable.

"I'm sure the audience out there understands fully the consequences of such *scandalous* news! The Moon Princess, Goddess of the Night Sky and Keeper of the Stars, dating a *workhorse*?" Second Sight almost rolled his eyes at the comment; almost, firstly, because he wasn't sure exactly how much of an earful he wanted to have after today was over, and secondly because he caught a glimpse of Luna glaring at Picture Perfect. She couldn't hear Picture over all of that noise could she? He remembered, for a moment, the old stories about how Luna used to listen to night time prayers on the wind and shivered; he didn't want to be in Picture's hooves right now. Yep. There it was. Little sparkle ... barely glowy horn ... really didn't want to be in Picture's hooves right now.

"Surely she can do better! Last week I heard that Tom Flanks was an eligible bachelor again! I mean it all turned out to be a hoax from the Equestrian Inquirer, but still, there's Buck Pitt or Angelica Po-Ny if she's into mares. Ever since those two split up there's been talk – " Picture Perfect didn't finish her sentence. At that moment a large purple sock covered in sequins poofed into existence, covering the microphone end of her headset. She stared at it in confusion, the earth pony completely baffled as to where it had come from. Photo Finish looked positively stoic as Picture tried to pry the sock off with her teeth; the fact that it was knotted into one of the joints was not making it any easier.

“Nice work Princess,” Second Sight whispered under his breath. He thought he caught Princess Luna winking at the camera before turning away to continue her conversation, inching ever closer to the red stallion beside her. Smiling, he trained the camera back out and focused on Picture Perfect, who had taken her headset off and was now fiddling with it in her hooves. It was not going anywhere.

“Photo! Help me get this off!” she whined.

The fashionista didn’t lift a hoof. “It goes vell with your mane.”

...

Trixie couldn't believe her eyes. She was here. Outside the Woolly Fetlocks Fashion Factory. Waiting for her chance to see some of the most amazing magic the world had ever known. Princess Luna was coming, and Big Macintosh, a celebrity in his own right. In fact, the only pony that she would be somewhat unhappy to see would be Rarity; and that was only because she had dreaded meeting with the dressmaker ever since Ponyville. She wasn't sure she was strong enough to apologize yet; she wasn't even sure that the white unicorn would accept her apology.

The events of that fateful day played in her mind, and she winced a little. Admittedly, storytelling was always better when you were telling something that didn't sound quite so boastful; ever since Feather Fall had suggested that book series by J.K. Foaler, Trixie hadn't stopped comparing herself against Gilded Hart. People were, for whatever reason, more inclined to listen to stories that weren't about the amazing feats of the storyteller; they wanted to hear about something exotic. Trixie hadn't been delivering.

She sighed as she noticed Rarity had already arrived. Diamond Tiara was here as well, though Trixie had no clue who else was with the young filly. Was it her father perhaps? Regardless, she could only name the other ticket holders because of the sheer amount of news coverage. That she still had no idea who the fourth ticket holder was a little disappointing. Still she didn't have to...what on earth was this mountainous rock doing wearing a hat? And why was it blocking her way? And why was it-oh. Nevermind.

“Scuse me ma'am, name's Big Macintosh, and if you wouldn't mind, mah friend over there, Miss Rarity, would like to let you know that she ain't exactly on the best of terms with you, so if'n you wouldn't mind keepin' your

distance?" he asked politely. Trixie had been meaning to apologize, but with this mountain of buck in the way she couldn't very well do so.

"No offense meant ma'am, but she's doin' it more for your sake than for hers. She's not entirely sure what she will do to you, but Ah've been told to assure you that it prob'ly has to do with your hair," he continued. The stallion tried to smile a winning, but awkward smile from under his grey hat. Wasn't exactly the world's best circumstances to be polite.

Well if she didn't want to be polite, Trixie didn't have to be polite either. She owed nothing to the mare but an apology, and if she couldn't do that, she couldn't do anything. After all, she couldn't very well *make* Rarity want to listen to her.

Trixie sighed again. She'd been doing a lot of that lately. Feather Fall had that effect on ponies, and Trixie couldn't help it if Rarity was inadvertently doing the same thing. They both were incredibly attractive mares, and Trixie took a moment to appreciate Rarity's physical form. She was more than a little certain that a certain baby dragon wouldn't be very happy about it if he had known; Snips and Snails had been particularly free with the town gossip that day. After about a minute or so, the white unicorn glared at her from across the cordoned space; ogling Rarity was definitely off limits.

Numerous reporters called her name from over the cordon repeatedly; when once she would have reveled in such attention, she was a little afraid of it now. She shivered when she thought about the multitude of ponies she had mistreated back when she was more of a drama queen. Letting fame and attention go to her head was the reason she had had to suffer the events of Ponyville after. Then again, those same events had led her here; maybe there was it was all part of some Celestial chain of events that would eventually lead to her redemption? It was too much to ask for, and the Sun Princess had openly admitted that tarot cards didn't tap into any of the magic of the heavenly bodies at all; the entire tarot mini-industry disappeared nearly overnight.

Then again, she had learned her lesson right? She wouldn't go back to that arrogance ever again, so maybe reveling in all the fanfare a little bit wouldn't be a bad thing? Trixie neighed quietly in denial; it was that kind of thinking that had gotten her into the whole Ponyville debacle in the first place. She'd take fame and fortune when she deserved it, no sooner.

Trixie was so lost in thought, she hadn't noticed that Rarity was now standing next to her until Rarity had cleared her throat the third time.

"Trixie," Rarity said, "I know that today is going to be a very big day for both of us, and we both intend to have a lot of fun today." Her eyes were cold and unforgiving, as if she fully expected Trixie to try something unbecoming; Trixie wanted to feel insulted, she really did. However, she did have to admit that this mare was one of the many she had wronged. If she deserved to be chewed out by anyone, it was one of the Ponyville ponies. Trixie had been at her worst in Ponyville.

Trixie gulped. She needed to take her chance now. There was no guarantee that - whoops nevermind. Trixie couldn't very well apologize to a mare who was now conversing with a reporter at the cordon's barrier. She gazed up at the large golden gates before the factory and back through to the imposing brick walls and cold, lifeless windows of the factory itself. It looked like a terrible place for creative work.

Trixie shivered. She wasn't entirely sure she was going to enjoy the trip any longer, and it wasn't just because she had been denied the chance to at least try to patch things up. Something felt weird, and she wasn't sure which.

"On the other hoof," she thought, turning around, "I get to stare at Rarity some more!"

...

Luna hadn't quite expected her suitor to be ... well, she hadn't expected to be able to use her suitor as a portable, pony shaped parasol (albeit a small parasol). Then again, Big Macintosh certainly lived up to his namesake: he wasn't much larger than she was, and she was a little larger than the average pony! At least, compared to other ponies. Good Colt Hunting hadn't done him justice in the least. Her satchel strap slowly drifted off her shoulder, until the satchel itself fell to the ground with a soft flump.

As she gazed at him, half in shock, half in awe, he trotted over to her from in between a blue unicorn and a white unicorn, both of whom were keeping each other at a distance. As he approached, he swept his hat off his head with his hoof, and bowed low before her.

“Your majesty,” he said, keeping his eyes to the ground. Whoever had chosen this outfit for him had done a wonderful job; he certainly filled out the suit well. It probably had to do with him being a farm pony.

Luna just continued to stare at him, for a few seconds until he sneezed from the city’s dust on the ground. “Oh! I’m terribly sorry,” she said, “You may rise. Everypony, you may rise and go about your business.” Eeyup, back to being smaller than somepony; Celestia had it easy.

He placed the hat back on his head slowly, cocked at a such a devilishly charming angle ... well, it was actually a little awkward but she figured that anything he did would be devilishly charming. She was *definitely* happy with the stallion it had turned out to be; it was only icing on the cake that she was an avid reader of his monthly column in Scientific Equestrian. She liked to read his columns aloud when it was Abby’s bedtime. Her heart fluttered as he picked up the satchel strap in his teeth, offering it to her.

“I have to admit, you’re not exactly what I expected,” Luna said, levitating her satchel back over her neck and shoulder. Big Macintosh seemed to deflate a bit, flustering Luna a little. “No no no! I didn’t mean it like that; you’re a great stallion and ... oh dear.” The red stallion was now staring at the ground, and pawing at it awkwardly. Why did that only make him more attractive? He was making it incredibly difficult for her to think straight, let alone figure out the right thing to say.

“Well, Ah understand if Ah’m not what you wanted, but if’n you could give me a chance?” he asked, more to the ground than to her.

She didn’t know why she did it; the feeling that he needed it just sort of overcame her. Maybe it was the millennium of isolation. Maybe it was the fact that her best friends were her sister, an abacus, and a sock puppet. Maybe it was because he had enraptured her with the golden ticket stunt. It didn’t matter; the emotion overwhelmed her completely. Big Macintosh suddenly found himself being nuzzled, her face a little wet.

“Yes,” she said; and that was all he needed to hear. They stayed like that for awhile, touching, completely unaware of the world around them until a hovering boom mike swatted Big Macintosh in the face. The glare the poor operator received from the both of them was enough to send him, and the surrounding reporters fleeing for a few moments.

Then they began to talk. About themselves, each other, their lives, their likes and dislikes. They took care not to show any physical signs of affection again, and only spoke with one another. Big Macintosh laughed about Luna's adventures with Mr. Buttons, and Luna smiled as he discussed the finer points of apple farming.

Every so often a reporter would stand by the edge of the cordon and try to eavesdrop on their meeting only to be met with scorn, distaste, and either a very imposing but polite red stallion or the flick of a glowing horn. The paparazzi eventually gave up, taking their consolation prize: watching from afar as the two danced the eternal waltz of courtship that has existed from the beginning of life itself.

...

"Daddy! When I get inside I want to go and see the gold and silk thread layers! And the holographic room! Oh! And I want to see the -"

"Shhh! I think something's happening! Diamond Tiara! Look over there, the door -"

"Daaaadddy! Stop talking, you're distracting me! The door is opening!"

...

A small side entrance door to the factory slowly, slowly creaked open. As the door folded back it revealed nothing. Black empty nothing. Shadows and darkness.

From that nothing emerged a rather small, but wiry and well framed purple stallion wearing a buttoned coat of rich complimentary violet. On his head was a red felt hat, and he wore a long sling that held a single black cane. His feet were shod in simple white socks ending in rust colored shoes, and he walked with a slow limp.

The entire plaza before the factory had fallen completely silent, save for the light whistling of the winds of the Canterlot mountains. Slowly, slowly, the stallion walked; one hoof in front of the other, the infinite pain he must be suffering scored into every movement.

“Should we help him?” somepony whispered loudly. The stallion only shook his head and unslung his cane in response.

He moved to take another step. Then he fell forwards, arcing downwards in a graceful fall towards the hard cobblestone below him ... until he curled up as he fell and rolled to stand on his back hooves before bowing graciously. The golden gates to the factory opened.

“Welcome! Welcome my dear ponies! We have much to do today, so if you would all present your tickets at the gate, we can get the proceedings underway!” he jabbered excitedly. Ponies tried to stream through the gates, attempting to overwhelm him. A stern look from the Moon Princess stopped that immediately.

“Now now, I certainly hope we can all be civil about this,” he said, smiling broadly. “I’m sure you’re wondering, but yes, I am the ever humble Woolly Fetlocks, and I bid you a wonderful good morning. Now, if the ticket holders could please step through the gates, we can get things moving. So much to see today!” He clopped his hooves together several times in sheer glee before waving his guests through the gate.

“Milady, how wonderful to see you. I have heard stories about your endless fascination with socks, and I certainly have quite the treat for you!”

“Of course Mr. Fetlocks. You may rise; and please tell everyone in the factory that they don’t have to bow for me. I’d rather not be a disturbance to your factory’s everyday operations.”

“Of course Milady, now if you’ll just stand over there by the door, we can get started shortly. Ah! Mr. Macintosh! They say you’re the greatest mathematician in all of Equestria! It’s an honor sir!”

“Likewise.”

“Miss Trixie, how wonderful to see you could make it! I hope you have a wonderful time.”

“Trixie hopes that she has as much fun as everypony will.”

“Miss Rarity! Ah! Your designs are truly inspiring! I quite adore your work, though I did find your Sapphire Shores work a little too ... sparkly for my taste?”

“Thank you for the commentary Mr. Fetlocks! It’s not often that I get to receive critique from a luminary such as yourself. And please, call me Rarity.”

“Oh, you tease Miss Rarity. Run along now. Now who do we have here? I see a tiny little foal standing on top of who must be her guardian for the day! Aren’t you ex-”

“I wanna go see the factory! I want to go now!”

“Patience my dear! All in good time! Mr. Bucks, if you would wait with the rest of the group, that would be lovely, Is that everyone? Yes? Good? Let me lock the gates and we can get started! We have so much time and so little to see.” Fetlocks paused for a moment, his confusion clear.

“Wait a minute. Strike that. Reverse it. Thank you.”

...

They stood in a small alcove with an enormous mural of a scroll covered in ever shrinking text. Fetlocks stood before them bowing on two legs, cane in hoof.

“Now that you’ve all signed the requisite waivers and contract, we can get to the real meat of the tour! After all, so much time and so little to see.” Fetlocks blinked for a moment. “I’m going to keep doing that today aren’t I?”

Everypony looked awkwardly at each other. No pony was quite sure exactly what to say. Fetlocks shook his head. “Well, regardless of how many times I say it, strike that. Reverse it.” Fetlocks leapt over a pile of papers about as tall as a potted plant, and began fiddling with the keychain that hung from his coat. The guests followed, Big Macintosh stepping gingerly around the stacks of signed documents.

“This is an awful lot of papers ta sign ain’t it?” he asked.

Fetlocks waved a hoof in the air. “Formalities my good sir. Formalities. Equestria’s ever vigilant legal system has a tendency to get a little ... overexcited, if you’ll forgive my criticism of your sister’s government, Your Majesty.” He smiled awkwardly before finally fishing out the key to the next room. Several other keys now lay on the floor around his shoes.

“I can certainly forgive your criticism sir,” Luna said.

“Oh wonderful! Now we can continue on our-”

“Because I designed them myself more than three thousand years ago,” the Moon Princess continued. The color drained out of the fashion designer’s face.

“Oh ... oh dear,” he said mildly. “Well, I’m terribly sorry Your Majesty. I meant no insult-” Luna interrupted by waving her hoof dismissively and giggling; Fetlocks relaxed.

“Ah ... just joking Your Majesty. Wonderful. Good joke. Ha,” he said after some time. Fiddling with the key in the lock, he struggled for a little before he heard the lock click in agreement.

“Daddy?” Diamond Tiara asked, her eyes round in anticipation.

“Yes my little princess?” Big Bucks asked, stiffening in apprehension. How would he give her anything in here?

“Daddy, Mr. Fetlocks is weird,” she said. Big Bucks relaxed, chuckling a little.

“Well maybe he’s a good kind of weird,” he said, following the purple coat wearing stallion into the next room.

...

“I take it all back! Fetlocks are you some kind of lunatic? Is this place a fun house?” he shouted. The next room was a hallway that literally shrunk with perspective, with several fake doors painted along the side.

“Why? Having fun?” Fetlocks retorted cheerily. He continued trotting down the hall as if absolutely nothing were wrong. He even seemed to be shrinking with it at some points.

Big Bucks immediately resorted to muttering something about “bloody murder”. Diamond Tiara clung to his neck, desperately trying not to touch the floor of the “crazy room” as she had called it.

“What do you think?” Trixie asked. Rarity only increased her pace.

"I think he's a good sort," Luna answered. They both watched as Fetlocks began to fiddle with a small inset door flap in the end of the hallway, singing to himself in Germaren as he went. "A bit nutty, but good."

Big Macintosh nickered a little. "Ain't 'xactly the most normal type is he?" Luna fluttered her eyelashes at him.

"Neither are you," she said. Macintosh blushed visibly red and set both Trixie and Luna off giggling.

"Oh, where are my manners? I am your humble servant, Trixie, Your Majesty." Trixie bowed low. Luna smiled.

"My dear little pony, apparently you haven't heard that I'm not exactly the biggest fan of formality? You may rise." Trixie rose to her hooves, tripping a little when she realized that part of the corner where the floor met the wall was very steeply angled in. She tripped a little.

"Is the room shrinking?" Rarity asked. She had bumped her head against the ceiling several times by this point, and was now struggling simply to stay on her hooves; Trixie thought that Rarity appeared to be searching high and low for a way out.

"Nevermind. Make that low and high," she muttered. Trixie wasn't exactly sure why she had thought up the idea, but it seemed fitting. The comment only seemed to make Luna giggle more. Big Macintosh lowered his hat over his eyes, his expression unreadable.

"Daddy? I want to leave!" Diamond wailed. Big Bucks nodded his head in agreement and turned around.

"Mr. Fetlocks, we're leaving!" he shouted.

"Terribly sorry sir!" Fetlocks called back. "The only way out is forward!" Big Bucks balked. The door to the contract room had snapped shut.

"Ah! There it is!" The little panel snapped open, revealing a small piano.

"He's a complete lunatic he is!" Big Bucks said. Diamond Tiara only clung to her father's neck more tightly.

Luna gave Big Bucks a stern look. "I would appreciate it if we kept the use of the term 'lunatic' to a minimum?"

Big Bucks stared blankly at her for a moment before his mistake became clear, at which

point his jaw dropped open. "I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness!" he managed as Big Macintosh raised his hat to look him directly in the eyes. The look was cold and calculating; exactly the kind of eyes you expected from a mathematician. Especially if that mathematician happened to be staring you down with freezing fury.

Suddenly a few bars of the Marriage of Figaro played.

"Is that Rachmareinoff?" Rarity asked.

Fetlocks shook his head. "Coltzart," he answered. He turned to the group, cane in hoof. No pony was quite sure how he was standing on two legs again, or, more importantly, how he managed to do so when everypony was crouching on four legs.

"In the next room, all of my dreams become realities, and some of my realities become dreams. I must ask you to mind your head, and crucially to mind your manners. Everything in the next room is tearable. Terrible. Terrible tearable." Fetlocks paused, taking a moment to roll his tongue around and work his mouth in a vocal exercise. "Terribly sorry, I meant to say that everything in the next room is wearable. You are free to take anything you like with the caveat that you carry it with you for the rest of the tour. Thank you, and please try not to be too excited. I warn you that I like to start big."

He opened the door, pushing out the entire back wall. Everypony except Fetlocks gasped.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, The Gallery."

Interlude

Luna Celly Flashback Time

“SISTER, HOW WONDERFUL THAT THOU VISITETH US! FOR WHAT REASON DOTTH MINE BELOVED ELDER SISTER GRACE US WITH HER PRESENCE?” Luna asked. The castle staff were more than used to the Moon Princess’ royal voice, having acclimated over the last few weeks. She was still stuck in customs from a thousand years ago, and while the Sun Princess had promised her little sister that they would meet soon to help the younger sister acclimate to more modern times, however, the pressures of ruling a kingdom had prevented that session. The fact that everypony walked around now with large, fluffy earmuffs didn’t help matters. Luna had long since forgotten that Celestia was supposed to give her ‘Modernization Lessons’ and was now quite happy staying in the Canterlot Library until odd hours of the night with only her abacus for company as she worked behind the scenes to ensure that Equestria ran smoothly.

Needless to say, the private wing of the Canterlot Library was no longer quiet.

“Luna, must you really shout so?” Celestia rubbed her head with her hoof, gently rubbing her right temple. A few of the books on the table had fallen over, and a torn piece of parchment fluttered slowly in the air, drifting lazily to the ground.

“WHY? IS THIS NOT THE ROYAL VOICE?” Luna was incredulous. The quill that had been continuously scratching stopped, frozen in time, levitating in Luna’s magic.

“Yes, it is. However, I’m not sure why you insist on using it all the time,” Celestia commented. The piece of parchment had flown high into the rafters at this point, and the dust was racing through the air. ‘If she doesn’t stop, she might bring the entire tower down by shouting,’ she thought.

“IS THIS NOT THE VOICE THAT WE UTILIZE TO ADDRESS THE CASTLE STAFF?” Luna responded.

Celestia stared at her younger sister for a moment, her eye twitching slightly. She had rescheduled the meeting with the Gryffins for this? Her younger sister was absolutely hopeless! “Luna ... I’m not castle staff,” she finally said.

“WE REALIZE. WE SIMPLY BELIEVE WE ARE ... WHAT IS THE PHRASE NOW? OUT OF PRACTICE?” Luna said. Celestia wasn’t quite sure how, but Luna had managed to look apologetic while shouting. It was a trick that the Sun Princess was quite interested in learning; it would most definitely confuse a certain prince the next time he decided to “grace” her court with his presence.

“Luna, I understand, but didn’t Twilight Sparkle teach you about not shouting at everypony? On Nightmare Night?” she asked. The quill dropped and Luna looked awkwardly down at the page before her.

“Yes,” Luna answered. “But we are unsure if-”

“And the royal we? Lose it.” Celestia’s face was sterner than it had been for a long while. Ever since the Smartypants incident in Ponyville even. Some Ponyvillian had gone and painted the picture and named it Teacher Admonishes Student; the painting had been so life like that Luna had actually stopped, stared at it, and asked if she had done something wrong.

“Verily?” Luna asked, her eyes large. “The royal we is traditional ...”

Celestia facehoofed. “Lose. It.” the Sun Princess interrupted. She really didn’t need a headache right now. Not right now. Please not ... nevermind. It looked like Mortar and Pestle would be making more willow bark tea by the end of the day; or maybe she could just get them to make her some acetaminophen?

Luna shuffled awkwardly before rising to her hooves, carefully placing Abacus in the desk. “Have I done something wrong?”

Celestia immediately cringed. “No, you did nothing wrong little sister. It’s just ... don’t you remember that I was going to give you some modernization lessons? Help you fit in more? A lot of our customs have changed since a thousand years ago.”

She remembered the first time that Luna had been served bok choy kimchi; it had been at a state dinner, and several Ponean goats had left in a huff as she levitated it and poked it with her hoof. Luna had asked what it was at least four times, completely confused as to the answer each time. She'd never been one for trying out new foods; Celestia had had a hard enough time just getting her younger sister to eat alfalfa several thousand years ago. Somehow a kimchi monster didn't seem fitting in front of all of the assembled diplomats. The fact that her younger sister insisted on shouting at everyone didn't help matters.

Things had only gone further south once the sushi had been served. Luna had always hated pickled cucumber, and pickled ginger wrapped in rice had had the distinct honor of being publically ranked worse.

"Celestia?" Luna asked. "Celestia, hath an evil memory been brought to the surface of thy mind?" Celestia shook her head, clearing her mind of that ... minor ... political debacle. Luna was looking terribly worried, leaning over the desk with big, soulful eyes.

"No, it's fine. It's just, you speak like you're straight out of a Shakesmareian play. This isn't Trottingham from a thousand years ago Luna." Celestia leaned forward, placing a hoof over her ear. "Don't you hear me? Using contractions? Not speaking in complete sentences?" She took her hoof off her ear, and looked Luna directly in the eyes. "I use apostrophes in my speech Luna. Modern speaking rules involve a lot of efficiency when talking. Correct construction isn't important; Equestrian society figured out that less is more."

"But, thou -" Celestia shook her head. "...you do not ..." More head shaking. "...you don't ... use contractions in formal speech." Luna leapt to her hooves, laughing. "Elder sister! I have succeeded in speaking in a most modern tone of -" The Moon Princess noticed her older sister facehoofing. "Are we speaking in aulder tones once more?" Celestia nodded.

Luna thought for a moment; she needed a solution that would allow herself to acclimate herself to modern modes of speech without tying up her sister's time or patience. Then it hit her. "I have had the most wonderful of ideas! If I am exposed to media employing modern modes of speech I can make a study of the matter, employ myself in its practice, and improve my skills on my own!" She clopped her hooves together in sheer glee.

Celestia swallowed. She wasn't sure how this was going to turn out, but something about this plan sounded like it could go terribly wrong. Still, it freed up some more time for her to get back to ruling Equestria, whose problems were never done. 'Well, what problems could this possibly cause? It's not like watching a movie or reading a magazine ever did anything bad.' With that, she nodded. "Good luck Luna! Shall we meet here in three days?"

"Yes. Let's." Luna said before clopping her hooves again! "I have used the apostrophe!"

Celestia sighed. This was going to be a *lot* harder than she thought it was going to be.

...

The Sun Princess had returned, only to be mortified by the sight before her. Books were piled everywhere in a terrifying mess, and papers were scattered all over the place. Luna wasn't sitting before her desk working; she was lying on a couch behind her desk, listening to music pouring out of the stereo next to her, chewing bubblegum, and flipping through the pages of *Cosmare!* What was this? The Eighties all over again?

It didn't help that the music playing was classical chamber music written for the harpsichord. Celestia had never been particularly impressed with Piano Forte, but after returning Luna had fallen in love with his music. The scene had frozen the Sun Princess in place; the cognitive dissonance was simply too much.

"Hey. Celly." Pop. "Like, what's up?" Pop. Luna continued to flip through her magazine. Each time Celestia opened her mouth to speak, Luna would either pop a bubble or loudly turn a page. It was infuriating.

"So, Celly. I hear, like, that Robert Ponyson is, like, the hawtest thing ever? Could you, like, you know, do some of your, like, pony princess magic and, you know, get me some, like, *alone time* with him?" Luna drawled. When did she learn to drawl? How did she actually manage to make it absolutely clear that she was saying "hawt" and not "hot"? Had she been taking notes on Clueless the last three days? Had she - wait a second. Taking notes on Clueless. That sounded like something Luna would do.

“May I?” Celestia asked, gesturing at one of the stray pieces of parchment.

“Whatever,” Luna said, not looking up from her magazine. Celestia levitated one of sheets of paper to herself and began reading.

“Cher is saving herself for Luke Pony,” was written on the page, surrounded by several strange equations and scratched out scribbles.

That was all she needed to read. In fact, that was all that Celestia managed to read; at that moment, it was snatched out of her grasp and replaced by Luna’s rather upset face.

“Like, what’s your problem?” she said, tossing the parchment across the room in a crumpled ball of disgust. “You, like, shouldn’t be looking through, like, my stuff, you know? I mean, duh! It’s my private stuff, and you, like, shouldn’t be invading it and all. It’s really, like, uncool, you know?”

Celestia didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the scene before her. Luna was behaving like a poorly disciplined teenage foal! Clearly her attempts at modernizing her younger sister should have been a bit more ... guided.

Celestia began to giggle; she’d decided that Luna’s attempts to fit in were more amusing than they were troubling.

Luna was not amused. “Like, what is your problem? It’s, like, rude, you know, to laugh at, you know, somepony else!” Her ears were set back, and Celestia thought she could see a fake tattoo magically imposed over Luna’s moon cutie mark. It looked a little like a shopping bag.

Celestia managed to stop laughing for a moment. “You’re almost ten thousand years old, and you’re behaving like a teenager!” She wiped a tear away from her face with her hoof before continuing, her sides aching from rolling around on the floor. Whether it was from the floorboards or the laughter she wasn’t sure.

“Whatever,” Luna said. Celestia smirked; Luna wasn’t getting off that easily.

“Oh Luna?” Celestia said as the Moon Princess turned her back.

“Yeah?”

Celestia's smirk became a full smile, and she could see her sister's mane standing on end. They both knew Celestia's 'It's time for some fun' voice. "I think it's time I took a more ... direct ... role in your modernization education. Shall we start now?"

Luna whirled around, snorting angrily. "As if! That would be, like, so totally uncool, you know? Abby and I were, like, going to, you know, go shopping!"

"Oh, it won't take more than a few seconds for the first lesson, I promise," Celestia said, crossing her heart with her hoof. "First lesson: Valspeak is, you know, like, so *totally* three decades ago."

If Luna's jaw could have dropped any further, it would have made a hole in the floor of the library.

"Second lesson: Robert Ponyson is *not* the most handsome stallion of all time. Tailor Foxner is," Celestia continued. Her smirk was now a million miles wide and her eyes were twinkling like she had just pulled a totally tubular prank. She might have to deal with Mr. Buttons on a daily basis for at least a month, but it was worth it.

...

After sitting Luna down and forcing her to both read *and* watch the Twilight novel and film respectively, they both agreed that Celestia would take a more direct role in Luna's modernization education. They also agreed that Twilight Sparkle was rather unfortunately named.

Yet it was a struggle, getting Luna to be able to speak normally. Even after a month she was still occasionally slipping up and dropping either a thee or a thou or an "As if!". Still, she made rapid progress and Celestia had felt like, with all the time they were spending together, she was beginning to make up for her younger sister's millenium of exile; it was something she could never come close to repaying, but that didn't mean she shouldn't try. If anything, it only made her try harder.

"I still can't believe that I asked you to get me some 'alone time' with Robert Ponyson," Luna muttered, her chin resting on the balcony railing. Her eyes were closed, and she was enjoying the gentle mountain breeze that flowed over her wings.

Celestia walked out of the dining hall to enjoy the mountain breeze with her younger sister. "I still can't believe that you thought that everypony talked like they were right out of Clueless." She paused and stretched her wings, feeling the wind tickle her feathers. "Ah. There's nothing like crisp watercress and a nice, cool, breeze in the morning. Are you going to head to bed soon?" Luna nodded. "It looks like your reintegration into modern Equestrian culture is going well then?"

"Yeah. It's just, I feel like I've missed so much in the past millenium. I feel so...outdated. Ever since coming back, we don't think we have done very much correctly." She paused for a moment. "You see? I can't even keep talking properly."

Celestia giggled. "Oh Luna. We can't be perfect. No pony is."

"Yeah, but at least you don't mess up nearly as spectacularly," Luna retorted, turning to look at her sister. Celestia was awkwardly looking nowhere in particular, though a general up direction could be used to describe it.

Luna smiled. "Ok, what was it? What did I miss?"

...

"The Jamarecan Ambassador, The Honorable Good Feelings has arrived! Her gift to your court, Your Highness, consists of several crates of tropical fruit."

"So, Ms. Good Feelings, could I ask you a question?"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

Celestia couldn't resist. "Do you like bananas?"

...

"You didn't miss anything Luna," Celestia responded, "Aren't you feeling sleepy?"

Luna smiled. "Oh alright. I'll bet it's just something I can look up in the archive anyways."

As Luna left for bed, Celestia made a mental note to request that all copies of *Egregious Equestrian Political Faux Pas* in Luna's personal library be replaced with a much, much, older version.

After all, it wouldn't do for the Sun Princess to be outpranked by her younger sister. Celestia's professional pride was at stake!

Interlude

Lunactintosh Flashback Time

Nightmare Night

Nightmare Night. One of the most popular holidays in Equestria; a night when candy colored ponies wandered through streets dressed in candy colored costumes collecting candy colored candies. It was also one of Big Macintosh's favorite nights in Ponyville; Pinkie's Pie Day (Mac insisted it was actually pi, but the pink earth pony never listened) every March 14th, among other holidays, ranked higher.

Every Nightmare Night he would give hay rides, escort children, and generally be a regular pony dressed in a costume. Every Nightmare Night was incredibly fun. Every Nightmare Night in Ponyville ended the same way.

Big Macintosh would watch the lovers dance that last slow dance on the floor as ponies stayed up further and further into the night just to spend time with each other. It was something that he enjoyed partaking in from a distance; there was something heartwarming about it.

Yet he still envied them. As much as he loved to watch them circle round and round, endlessly lost in each others' hooves, the jealousy that welled up inside of him was almost enough to overwhelm whatever good feelings he had at the time; luckily he had too much horse sense for that. Growing up on a farm usually does that to a pony.

He had no one. He hadn't had anyone ever since Valley Mare, and everypony back on the farm knew how that had ended.

...

"Macintosh! You, like, promised that you'd take me out to dinner! We haven't, you know, been out together since, like...forever ago!" the pink mare whined. She had been wearing her mane in a truly lascivious fashion; her hairstyle, sadly, did not go well with the running mascara. Valley had

always been good at crying at will, and it always worked on Big Macintosh. Until that night.

"Valley, Ah'm sorry, but Ah've got exams tomorrow," he said, shuffling a little at the table. "And Ah don't recall promisin' to take you out ta dinner tonight; Ah think Ah'd remember if'n Ah had an exam or four." As talented as he was, even he had to look through the textbooks from time to time and actually bother memorizing definitions and theorems. Mathematics classes almost exclusively built on old material, compounding upon itself one step at a time, and even the most gifted students had to cram the requisite material into their brains.

Valley sniffled. "Well, you know, / remember you promising to, like, take me out to dinner, like, tonight," she huffed. She rubbed her eye with a hoof, smearing her mascara even further. "Besides, aren't you, you know, a genius or something?" Valley began to pout rather noticeably; Big Macintosh hated it when she pouted.

Feeling less like a gentlecolt by the minute, he chose to stare quietly at a suddenly rather interesting spot on the kitchen table. It was a dark spot, surrounded by concentric whorls of steadily lighter brown; Big Mac could almost feel the branch of the tree poking out at him. It would have been digging right into his ribs, about where his heart was.

"Valley," he said, "Ah promise Ah'll take you out tomorrow; tonight Ah really need ta focus on my exams."

Valley glared at him. He couldn't tell if she looked sexy or angry. She was really good with mane-cuts: the way it fell over her face perfectly framed her face. On the other hoof, her running mascara did nothing for her looks at all; in fact, it turned her into some sort of banshee that populated Granny Smith's Nightmare Night stories. After a moment, her anger broke into more tears, and she turned away, sobbing gently. "If you really cared about me," she said, "You'd, like, take me out tonight. It's been, you know, like forever since we had a night, like, alone *alone*."

"Valley, Ah took you out ta dinner three nights ago, and Ah distinctly remember tellin' you that Ah had ta study tonight!" he answered. Big Macintosh did not often get upset, but Valley was really beginning to wear on his nerves; growing up on a farm meant that he didn't often forget his responsibilities or his promises, and ever since Valley had become his

marefriend it seemed that forgetting his responsibilities and his promises were all he could do. At least, according to her.

“But we go out every Thursday night!” she whined. She lay backwards on the sofa, waving her hooves in the air. The stallion quietly ignored the fact that she had chosen to position herself so that her rump was pointed directly at his face, returning to the spot of interest on the kitchen table.

Rather, he would have returned to the dark spot on the kitchen table if he could find it. It had somehow gotten lost among the multitude of spots and twists that composed the smooth wooden surface. Apparently this tree had, at some point, either several branches or had had a vast multitude of knots and growths. He sincerely hoped for the former; the latter, he knew from experience, was more than trying.

“Valley, Ah just need one night,” he responded dully. He knew it probably wouldn't work. When it came to Valley Mare, what she said went, and what she wanted she got. It was about as one-sided as it got.

“Big Mac!” she sobbed, waving her hooves some more, “Don't you love me anymore? Don't you love me at all?” Several of her tears quietly dripped mascara onto the sofa, leaving black trails across the soft beige upholstery.

Big Macintosh opened his mouth to say “Of course, Ah love you.” Then he paused.

It is an interesting trait of mathematicians that they are not usually interested in the truth so much as the implications of what is assumed to be true. That night, Big Macintosh decided not to be a mathematician for a little while. He decided to concern himself with the truth.

“No,” he said. And that was that. She had leapt into his face in a rage of sorrow, screaming bloody murder into his apologetic face, yelled at him to gather his precious textbooks and get out.

After whizzing through most of his exams the next day, he returned to their apartment. She wasn't there. None of her things were either. No notes had been left, no indication of where she had gone or if she would be coming back. They were over and done with.

He couldn't tell if he was happy about it or not.

...

Tonight, Big Macintosh had decided to dress as Mr. Hyde, the legendary mad scientist. Twilight Sparkle had gone out of her way to suggest alternate costumes for him, but he had insisted on this particular costume at the Carousel Boutique; Twilight apparently wasn't the biggest fan of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. She'd been rather vocal about it as well. Big Macintosh could still hear her commenting about the several weaknesses of the story itself, and while he actually rather disagreed, he did understand the importance of not interrupting Twilight mid-rant.

The hay rides tonight were especially lucrative; he'd been dragging several partying mares around from stop to stop. Apparently, one of them was turning legal at midnight, and they intended to simply stay up until she could walk into a bar and order a tall, ice cold glass of hard apple cider. Legally, that is. The red draft horse was pretty sure, as their mares' chauffeur at least, that they had snuck several drinks already. He nickered a little; they were going to wake up with terrible headaches in the morning.

At the moment, he was resting. Big Macintosh wasn't opposed to the occasional drink, but hay, he wasn't partying with them tonight. He was dragging them around in a cart full of hay at about 40 bits an hour. It wasn't much, but then again, charging through the bit only took the fun out of what was supposed to be a really fun night for everypony.

The Chaff wasn't exactly Ponyville's premier spot for a drink, but then again Ponyville wasn't really a town where they had premier anything (and the red stallion liked it that way, thank you very much). He sat quietly in the corner nursing a glass of water as he watched the three young mares try to race each other with shots. When she finally turned legal, she would either be unconscious or smashed; he wasn't sure which. Big Macintosh got this sort of thing though; it was the kind of stuff that happened on game nights with the Ponyville High hoofball team, only with a lot more people watching out for things like parents and police ponies.

One of them coughed a bit; apparently she'd hit her limit for the night and was waving her hoof in defeat. The small crowd of chanting ponies apparently disagreed, and one of them tried to hand her another drink; she shook her head, leaned over to the other two girls and muttered a few

words before attempting to walk over to where Big Mac was. She staggered more than anything else.

"Hey, uh, Big Mac riigh?" she slurred. The viking helmet drooping over her eyes. "D'you think you could, you know, give me a ride home? The gals said it was okay an' all; they'll be here when you get back." Her eyes were focused (if you could call it that) on a spot just above Big Macintosh's face. He nodded quietly before quietly allowing her to lean on him before they gingerly made their way out to the hay cart.

He pulled in silence as she hung listlessly over the cart, staring at nothing in particular. When she handed over not quite enough to cover her part of the bill for the night, he said nothing. It was close enough to begin with, and arguing with a drunk mare over a few bits was not something that he wanted to experience if he could help it. It was never fun.

"That's...not enough, ish it?" she asked. He shook his head quietly, trying his best to quietly tell her that it was alright, that three bits didn't mean anything. She didn't seem to get the hint. "I don't have anymore on me tonight...but...maybe this might make up for it?" And with that she immediately pressed her muzzle against the red stallion's and his entire train of thought vanished. She pulled away as quickly as the gentle kiss had began and looked a bit dejected that Big Macintosh had not reciprocated.

"Well...um...well now, Ah think we can just call it even," he said plainly. Her face dropped even further.

"Just in case...you...you know, change your mind...the name's Raindrop," she said quietly before heading into her house.

Big Macintosh sighed. The problems of being one of Ponyville's most eligible bachelors was that everypony just seemed to think that he needed a marefriend. Or coltfriend, as the case may be. Caramel had offered to set him up on a blind date once; things had only become ridiculously awkward when Caramel had been incredibly insistent that Big Macintosh agree to the date, and then things became much worse when Big Macintosh arrived only to find that it was none other than Caramel himself waiting for him. That conversation had gone places that he was almost entirely sure that he never wanted to experience personally again; not that there was anything wrong with Caramel of course.

Neither of the two remaining mares was at The Chaff when he arrived; no matter, he'd just talk to them about payment in the morning. This sort of thing happened often on Nightmare Night; he only hoped that the young Cloudkicker could depend on Cherry to look after her.

Done with work for the night, he decided to leave the cart at The Chaff and wander about Ponyville, enjoying the sights and sounds of Nightmare Night as a mere attendee rather than a worker. Maybe he'd drop in and see how Applejack was doing with her apple bobbing stand.

It was at that moment that Big Macintosh heard an incredibly loud voice booming over all of Ponyville, and he slowly walked out of the alleyway to find none other than...Princess Luna?

"WE DECREE THAT NIGHTMARE NIGHT SHALL BE CANCELED! FOREVER!" she shouted. He was simultaneously horrified and amazed at the same time. He had heard that the princesses were incredibly attractive but he'd never thought that-wait a second, had she just canceled Nightmare Night? Could she do that? Was Nightmare Night even an official holiday? Foals still went to school on Nightmare Night so-WOW the way her mane framed her face was perfect and-

Wait. She'd just canceled Nightmare Night.

Big Macintosh's brain, normally lightning quick, had finally processed the fact that the Princess of the Night had canceled Nightmare Night. It had also finally noticed that Raindrop had decided to return to the festivities, and was now cowering before Princess Luna. It was hard to be drunk when one of the two Royal Pony Sisters is busy roaring right in front of you.

Big Mac wasn't sure what to make of it all; Princess Luna deciding to cancel Nightmare Night had to be one of the worst possible things that could happen. So he decided to wait.

...

He'd seen enough. Foals were crying, and ponies looked utterly mortified everywhere that they had lost one of Equestria's most popular holidays. Big Macintosh could reasonably understand why Luna would be so upset, he really could. None of that justified her tantrum, and she was *definitely* going to receive a rather large piece of his already sizeable mind when he found her. No pony made any filly cry on Nightmare Night. Not

even if she was one of the two monarchic heads of the Equestrian government.

As he searched for her, his thoughts kept turning to Valley for some reason. He was comparing the two. It was almost as if...Big Macintosh whinnied. This was no time to be noting that the two had remarkably similar lower leg shape, he had a tirade to deliver and a princess to convince!

Admittedly he felt a lot less confident than he looked.

...

Big Macintosh had searched the outskirts of Ponyville downtown proper for the Princess of the Night for nearly two hours now. He was beginning to tire from the brisk pace he was keeping, and from attempting to trim down his now rather lengthy tirade to something more amenable to a pony whose time was incredibly valuable. He had seen neither hide nor hair of the Princess, but maybe somepony else had? Princess Luna wasn't exactly hard to miss, so if he hadn't seen her he could surely ask around.

As he headed back into town, he saw that the celebrations were once again in full swing...and Princess Luna was enjoying herself again? And foals were making live candy offerings to the Moon Princess herself? At her hooves?

The smile on her face made Big Macintosh's heart quiver a little. Had she really reinstated Nightmare Night? Nothing else made sense; she must have. He whinnied in delight, his plans of a lengthy lecture punctured by the delightful fact that it was no longer necessary. He'd be up partying tonight. He made a mental note to thank Luna for being understanding about Nightmare Night, and even loosening up and joining in with it.

Big Macintosh laughed at himself. The thought of ever having the chance to actually deliver a meaningful statement of thanks to the little alicorn was almost impossible. She was one of the Royal Pony Sisters after all. She was too busy to talk to the likes of Big Macintosh; world famous mathematicians weren't exactly the most valuable use of time for rulers of large nations like Equestria after all. Still, if he ever got the chance, he knew he would take it. It would certainly be a day to remember.

Or night, as the case might be.

Chapter 9

The back wall had opened to reveal ... something incredible. Arrayed before them was a sea of green grass, punctuated by occasional trees that looked very much like well dressed ponyquins. Overhead clothesline vines hung from the rafters, and set against the distant far wall was a large mountain like construct, down which flowed a river of light blue liquid. Against the walls were set hundreds of glass cases, rising and falling gently with the hills, and the paths were made of red carpet. Rotating lights hung from the ceiling, occasionally pointing here and there, stopping for a minute or so on each ponyquin. The lights flashed repeatedly over several clear pools scattered across the hills in seemingly strategic locations along with numerous crystalline growths.

Everypony gasped except for Fetlocks. He sighed. Moving to all fours and slinging his cane, he motioned for everypony to follow.

"Come now, the clock is ticking," he said. His audience only nodded silently and began to follow him towards the stairs, which he confusingly cavorted up and down. Big Bucks was forced to step backwards at least three times as Fetlocks moved up the stairs slightly rather than down. Luna giggled.

Rarity was the first to break the silence, "Mr. Fetlocks, are those...what I think they are?"

"What do you think they are Miss Rarity?" he asked, continuing to prance in place on the step before the last one. He waited a moment for her to answer before continuing, "Because they are exactly what you think they are and so much more."

Finally, he stepped onto the soft velvet path and turned to them. Everypony waited with baited breath as Fetlocks began to hum a soft tune. Everypony watched him with baited breath, waiting until they were let loose to explore this wilderness of pure imagination. Trixie looked like she was struggling to keep her hooves on the floor; something had clearly grabbed her attention.

“Those of you with weak constitutions may wish to leave the arena now,” Fetlocks said. Everyone laughed awkwardly at the joke for a little until Fetlocks raised his hoof, coughed a little, and then continued humming for a moment.

“Look around. Catch your breath. Now feel free,” he said, bowing before them. Each of them broken for the nearest object that interested them most. Diamond Tiara leapt off her father’s back and galloped towards a small ponyquin with a cutecenera dress, followed closely by Big Bucks. Rarity dashed towards the top of a hill where awaited stationary cotton cloud, gently raining dyed thread. Trixie sniffed some of the dragonscale flowers, sneezing a little at the yellow sulfur powder. Luna ran towards a small copse of ponyquin trees that seemed to be home to several plaid winged butterflies. Big Mac stared suspiciously at the grass.

It was only a few moments later that everypony noticed Fetlocks was singing. His voice floated over the hills, bouncing off the walls with horrid acoustics but nopony cared. He was baring his soul, and had enraptured his audience.

*Follow me,
And you'll see
A world of
Fashion Fascination
Feel the cloth
And you'll fall
Into Fashion Fascination*

*Try a dress
And impress
Canterlot's noblesse and
Fussy fashionistas
What you'll wear
Will reveal
Your inner princess!*

He paused for a minute, realizing something that he had forgotten and blushing lightly in embarrassment.

“Don’t worry gentlecolts, there’s plenty in here for you as well.” He paused again. “Gentlecolt.”

*If you want to live luxury,
Go ahead, reach out and touch it!
Anything fabulous, grab it!
Want to show the world
Who you are?
Do it.*

*Nothing compares
To the sensation
Of Fashion Fascination
If you want
To be free
Go ahead and be*

*If you want to live luxury,
Go ahead, reach out and touch it!
Anything fabulous, grab it!
Want to show the world
Who you are?
Do it.*

He stopped singing, only to pluck a lapel pin from a silvery vine that was bristling with them and attach it to his suit. It depicted the moon and sun revolving slowly around a single bright star, and he rubbed it gently to brush off a few specks of dirt.

“Mr. Fetlocks? Ah’ve got a question fer you,” Big Macintosh called. He was standing near Luna, who was gleefully chasing after the butterflies.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE THAT THESE CAN ACTUALLY FLY!!!” she screamed. A few of the butterflies landed on her back and began to tickle her, fluttering away as she collapsed to on the grass, laughing.

Fetlocks glanced at her bemusedly before turning to the red stallion. “Yes?” he asked. “Is it about the room?”

“You want us to believe that you’re growin’ green felt grass?” the mathematician asked bluntly. “Because Ah’m not exactly sure Ah can swallow that.”

Fetlocks grinned before answering. "Of course you can't swallow green felt sir! Sadly, I have yet to get dresses and suits to grow...perhaps if I use guide lines? What do you think Mr. Macintosh?" he responded, tapping his chin with a hoof and leaning on his cane with the other. Big Macintosh simply stared before shaking his head in disbelief.

"Ah'm not sure what Ah think about all of this," Macintosh said. He nudged some of the felt grass with his hoof. His gaze aimlessly turned to Luna as he mulled things over; she was rolling in the felt, laughing wildly as the butterflies danced around her.

"Big Mac!" she shouted, "You've got to come try this!"

"I think," Fetlocks said conspiratorially, "That you go roll in the grass over by your marefriend." The dressmaker nudged Big Macintosh in his ribs and bowed out, trotting over to Rarity. He looked over his shoulder only to find that Big Macintosh had decided simply go with things, and was also rolling around in the grass. He chuckled at the two lovebirds.

"Mr. Fetlocks," Rarity asked as he approached, "What is this strange plant?" She waved her hoof at the trellis before her, overgrown in vines. "Are these vines...made of lace?" Rarity touched the lace with a hoof, "But...how?"

Wooly winked at her. "Because, my dear Rarity, our work is the work of imagination, and imagination is limitless." She stared at him as he wandered over to where Diamond Tiara was standing: in a forest of ponyquins. Her father was struggling under the weight of several dresses.

"My little filly!" Fetlocks called, "I don't think we should get too carried away!" She only glared at him in response. Wooly, deciding it wise not to further anger the present party, decided to see what Trixie was up to. He only shook his head in disgust as she tore another dress off a ponyquin and threw it onto her father's back. He grunted at the extra weight; this one happened to use gold thread and several gemstones in a half French style, nobody was quite sure what the other half was.

"I'm not a fan of gold...should have used silver there," he muttered. He quietly tapped a tree covered in little buds as he passed, grinning at the gasps he received from daughter and father as the flowers opened to reveal clip on neck-tie petals.

Trixie stood on the top of a nearby hill, gazing at the small ponies on the other side of the stream, working away as they poured light blue powder into the river. "Care to take a seat?" she asked.

"Of course Miss Trixie," he answered, carelessly flopping down on the grass next to her. "Now what about my little garden of a gallery has caught your attention so?"

Trixie paused for a moment before continuing. "I know it looks like your workers-

Fetlocks leapt to his hooves, motioning wildly at them. "Of course it's my workers! Such loyal and wonderful ponies! You know, most of them are Shettish ponies from very close to Trottingham. It's terrible the potato famine they're having in Shetland; nopony is quite sure exactly why it's happening you know. But they're such dependable workers, and quite mum too!" His face hardened for a moment before continuing, "So that they don't talk to those thieves, those scalawags, those rogues who steal my material and only masquerade as icons of fashion."

Trixie cleared her throat. "Um..." she said quietly, "It's not your workers. It's actually nothing that belongs to you." Fetlocks turned and stared at her, his face utterly bewildered.

"What on earth in here could possibly have caught your attention more than anything I've created?" he asked, the incredulity playing between his eyes. He waved his hoof over the whole of the panorama. "There are hundreds, if not hundreds of thousands of ponies who would give their left hoof to be in your horseshoes! This room is the envy of fashion icons across the world, and none of them have even seen it! What on earth could have caught your attention?"

Trixie involuntarily glanced at Rarity for a moment. The white mare was currently gazing upon a ponyquin dressed in a strange, white and silver sequined dress with a very fuzzy purple scarf. Fetlocks nodded quietly.

"I suppose when you feel that way about someone, ignoring the works of this room is quite excusable." Trixie glared at him.

"Do you even understand what you just said?" she asked. She had thrust her snout into his face; Fetlocks himself stumbled backwards and

rolled down the hill. Gazing up from where he had come to a stop, Trixie was now fuming at the top of the hill, nose pointed directly at the ceiling.

"They are terribly like each other," he mumbled around his mouthful of felt. He stood, shook himself off, spat out the felt, and decided that perhaps an audience with the princess was in store. Or perhaps not, since Big Macintosh and Luna were now standing together talking only to each other. "There are far more ponies in love today than I could have ever possibly expected to be here," he said to the air. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he glimpsed a brown stallion in a tacky suit and bowtie wandering about in one of the small ponyquin copses. When he turned to take a closer look, the strange stallion was gone; Fetlocks blinked, convinced that the strange hallucination was nothing more than a byproduct of his already enormous imagination.

Taking a look at his watch, he saw that they had stayed in the garden for an additional fifteen minutes longer than expected. Then again, no planned events ever went shorter than expected and they couldn't very well leave until his personal yacht, the Softsurf, arrived at the small dock on the river.

"Mr. Fetlocks," a soft voice said. Woolly leapt into the air before turning to see who it was: Princess Luna. "Mr. Fetlocks," she repeated, "I'm afraid that you may have ruined your water table. There are pollution protection ordinances for a reason you know," she chided. "That's not to say that your gallery isn't amazing." Luna waved her hoof over the whole of the room, smiling widely but awkwardly.

Fetlocks grinned wildly. "Oh, you mean my river of dye? You know, coloring clothes by waterfall is the only way to get the layering just perfect."

Luna stared at him for a full minute. Fetlocks could feel the sweat breaking upon his brow as she stared through him; clearly the Princess of the Night was much more environmentally conscious than her elder sister.

"Well, Mr. Fetlocks? What do you have to say for yourself?" Luna asked, her eyes narrowing. She did not stop staring. Big Macintosh looked the other way. All he could think at that moment was how lucky he was that *he* wasn't getting stared down.

Fetlocks visibly gulped. He had made absolutely certain that the river was not in violation of all existence...or had he? Maybe he'd left one too

many things for Inky Black; heaven knows that the poor lawyer was always complaining about the amount of paperwork to handle. Maybe Thunder Quill had something to do with it? Paperwork was never something that Fetlocks was good at.

“...Maybe...” Wooly ventured slowly, hoping that he could at least salvage some time for his factory to find out what was wrong, “...maybe something fell through the cracks? I assure you that once we have found the problem, we will do everything within our power to correct it!” He was leaning so far backwards now that if he hadn’t been using his cane for support he would have fallen; the head was digging deeply into his back at this point. Fetlocks was almost certain he’d need a massage afterwards.

Luna’s eyes narrowed even further, and she leaned closer. “I take the environmental protection of our natural Equestrian resources very personally Mr. Fetlocks. Would it help you if I told you the problem right now?” The Moon Princess’ eyes started to glow, giving everything in the room another layer of otherworldly feeling. Everypony in the room stopped what they were doing at this point to openly stare at the rust colored stallion cowering before the Equestria’s second in command. Big Macintosh cringed.

“...yes...?” Fetlocks squeaked, falling onto his back. The cane rolled slowly to stop at Luna’s hooves as she continued her glare.

“**YOUR PROBLEM,**” she roared, “**IS QUITE SIMPLE!**” She reared back, and lightning flashed from behind the enchanted glass ceiling. Diamond Tiara leapt underneath her father, and Rarity and Trixie attempted to hide behind the same rock (Rarity won).

Big Macintosh coughed quietly into his hoof. “Ah think you might be takin’ this a little far,” he mumbled as he pulled his hat over his eyes. Luna’s mouth twitched.

Luna’s voice echoed around the room, and the river of blue dye threw up froth and waves. Several of the Shettish workers had abandoned their posts and were now hiding behind chalkstone boulders. “**YOUR PROBLEM IS-**” she paused to inhale, “-you can’t take a joke.”

Big Macintosh cleared his throat again. “Luna,” He said, “Maybe yer eyes should stop glowin’” He quietly shuffled his hooves in place.

Luna gasped. "Oh! Did I forget to turn that off? I'm so sorry!" she babbled as the light left her eyes. "Now that I'm no longer blinding anypony brave enough to look me in the eyes, I have to say that your blue dye river impresses me greatly! I've never seen a pollution hazard handled this way, it's absolutely incredible-" and everypony nodded quietly along as Luna gushed about the river's technical specs. She had apparently gone over them at least four or five times in the week before coming to the factory. Diamond Tiara barely yawned politely as Luna extolled the benefits of Fetlocks' ingenious spell brush technique; the dye cleansing spell was wrapped into the fibers of small brush rollers that were secured in small alcoves along the sides of the waterfall. The alcoves fed one into another, and the rollers fed the extracted dye up into small containers where it was fed back into the river, or so new colors could be added. It had ranked as one of the most efficient chemical reclamation systems in all of Equestria, almost a perpetual motion machine.

"...and at 80% reclamation efficiency I have to say that it's truly a triumph of Equestrian engineering. Wonderful work Mr. Fetlocks," Luna said, stomping her hooves lightly in appreciation. The others joined in and Fetlocks, blushing lightly, bowed. "And *thank you*, my noble stallion, for reminding me to turn the moonbeams off." She pecked Big Macintosh on the cheek; how exactly Big Macintosh managed to blush visibly nopony would ever know, but he succeeded even more spectacularly than ever before. Luna giggled. "It's cute when you do that."

"Ah didn't think we'd gotten that far," he mumbled, pulling his hat over his face. He was smiling, despite himself. Luna apparently really liked pushing his buttons, and they'd only been together for less than an hour! If they were actually together of course; still, she seemed to be moving very, very quickly. Then again, maybe it was just that she liked pushing the buttons of other ponies; if Draught's stories were accurate then Celestia was the same way. This was going to be very, very fun.

Fetlocks shook his head as he turned to check the dock. The Softsurf was only now being tied to the dock; he looked at his watch again and gasped. "We're nearly twenty-two minutes behind schedule!" he screeched. Everypony in the room looked at him except for Big Bucks. He was too busy trying to drag himself to where Fetlocks was standing with a makeshift bag full of clothing lashed to him. Diamond Tiara, in the meantime, was frolicking between his legs and occasionally shouting at him to go faster. The glee on her face was unmistakable.

“Dear, Ah’m goin’ to go help him out,” Big Macintosh said, tipping his hat before trotting off to where Big Bucks was still struggling with the bag.

Luna tittered as she watched Big Macintosh lift the bag in his teeth effortlessly trot over to where the Softsurf was docked. Big Bucks, in the meantime, was wildly kicking his legs in protest; he was still tied to the bag of clothing. Diamond Tiara seemed to think that this was one of the most amazing things in the world as she cantered to keep up with Big Macintosh, mouth agape.

“Such behavior from a foal, entirely unacceptable,” Rarity said. Luna and Wooly jumped, surprised by the sudden appearance of the dressmaker. Trixie was trotting up the hill to meet them as well, a plain but luxuriously comfortable cashmere wool cape and hat in tow. “She’s spoiled is what she is.”

“Now, now, Miss Rarity. There’s no need to say such things; let’s keep the smiling faces, shall we?” Fetlocks grinned. Rarity sniffed quietly before nodding.

Trixie glared at Wooly for a moment before smirking and winking. “So, I hear that we’re behind schedule. What stupendous thing are we going to see next?”

SPLASH

“Help! Somepony help! Diamond Tiara can’t swim!” Big Bucks shouted, flailing about on the dock. Big Macintosh had already slipped out of his suit, thrown his hat onto the dock, and leapt into the river. Diamond Tiara’s head crested over the water; she gasped, drinking in some of the dye, choking on it, and went under again. Big Buck fainted.

Everypony dashed for the river, Fetlocks screaming as they went. “MY BEAUTIFUL DYEEEE!” he screeched. Luna glared at him as they went. Fetlocks avoided her eyes, looking at the floor as he mumbled under his breath, “Help. Police. Murder.”

Big Macintosh struggled against the river’s flow down towards a very strange and dark tunnel; the sound of roaring liquid emanated from it as they grew closer, and Diamond Tiara had not surfaced for about a few seconds now. Yet every time he reached under to grab her mane, he could

feel it. Barely. Just beyond the reach of his neck...but maybe not the reach of his hooves.

“Luna!” he shouted, “Grab me!” Then he was gone.

Big Mac plunged himself entirely underwater propelling himself by rocking his body into the flow, going tail first instead of head first. He had no idea if his estimations were right enough, but then again the stallion hadn't gotten to be one of the leading mathematicians in the world by being outside the margin of error very often. He tried. He hugged. He hugged the fluid and felt a little filly, struggling still against the flowing fluid; it was all Big Macintosh needed to know. At least for now. A very light burning in his lungs had started, and he had no idea how much longer he might last; Big Macintosh hadn't gone swimming in years.

Mere moments later, he felt magic pass over him, as if it was searching for something, and he almost panicked. The back of his eyelids were getting darker; he had to be getting closer to the tunnel, yet he could hear nothing. All he could feel were the feeble struggles of the filly as he tried to force her to the surface for air.

Then he felt it. He stopped moving. The fluid continued to flow around Big Macintosh and Diamond Tiara, and yet, the stallion knew that they were no longer moving towards the hole. The back of his eyelids grew brighter, the weight on him grew lighter, and he knew they were safe, wrapped in Luna's soothingly cool magic.

Luna's eyes were shut tight in concentration as she lifted the two out of the fast flowing river. Fetlocks quietly paced in place as she laid them both down on the dock. Both Big Mac and Diamond Tiara's coats were matted from the dye, but both were breathing.

“There's nothing dangerous in your dyes, is there?” Luna asked.

Fetlocks thought for a moment, racking his brain for anything that might be the slightest bit harmful. “Unless they're allergic to anything, no,” he said after an unbearably long two seconds. “I use entirely all natural ingredients for my dye; it's incredibly expensive to do so, but entirely compatible with pony physiology. Passes right through you.”

Luna nodded at him, her horn glowing once more as she lifted the dye from her colt and the filly. A tear blossomed at the corner of her eye. Rarity saw it.

"It's alright Your Highness," the dressmaking mare said, "They're both alright now, and that's the important part, yes?" She bit her lip worriedly.

"Her dad doesn't look like he's waking up anytime soon," Trixie commented. She had stuffed her cape under his head to raise his head, and his breathing was regular. Yet there was no sign of anything from him.

"Can Ah open mah eyes yet?" Big Macintosh muttered. A few drops of dye hit his tongue and he sputtered. "This tastes terrible. Must be good fer me."

"Or really, really bad," Luna answered, pecking on the cheek.

"Are we really there yet?" the stallion mumbled. "Mah tongue feels like Ah tried to swallow it."

"I'm just happy you're ok you big oaf," she answered. "Don't pretend you didn't like it." She turned to Fetlocks, her ears flattened and eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Fetlocks," she hissed, "Exactly why aren't there any railings?"

Fetlocks sputtered. "I really...have no idea? I think I might have chosen not to have any because they...ruined the landscape?" Luna's glare was real this time, and there was no getting out of it.

"That has to be one of the worst reasons for violating a safety standard I have ever heard of. This filly could have died because of your own callous carelessness!" Luna reared on her hooves, striking the ground and leaving small craters behind. "When we're done here, you're going to put those railings in *immediately!*"

Fetlocks could only nod anxiously, hoping that the Princess of the Night would at least decide it was time to move on. "Well, if we could all hop aboard the Softsurf-"

"You're *still* looking to continue the tour?" Luna asked incredulously.

“Well, I have a small on-site clinic where we can examine the filly for any injuries,” Fetlocks admitted. “And the father too, I guess.”

Big Macintosh clambered to his hooves. “Sounds like a plan Luna,” he said. “Ah think we should do it.” He let his tongue hang out some more, panting a little like a dog. “What?” he asked when everypony stared at him. “Ah told ya it tastes terrible.”

Luna glared at Fetlocks again. “I am watching you. You will correct each and every safety issue that we find here in this factory, or so help me I *will* shut you down. I don’t care if I take beautiful plaid winged butterflies with you; do you understand me?” She thrust her hoof into Fetlock’s chest.

“Of course Your Highness,” Fetlocks squeaked.

Trixie whistled appreciatively. “You go princess,” she muttered.