

Macintosh

By TotalOverflow



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Prologue

"Sir? You can come in now."

"Honey?"

"Come look, dear."

"Well, Ah'll be! Look'it him!"

"Isn't he wonderful? Yer a father now."

"Eheh, Ah guess Ah am. An' yer a mother!"

"Yes, Ah am."

"He looks strong! He's a fine colt! Ah know he'll make me proud!"

"What should we name him?"

"Look'it his red coat. Maybe Red Delicious?"

"Yer cousin's already named that."

"Oh, yeah. What 'bout Spartan?"

"No, that's terrible!"

"Yeah, yer right. How 'bout Macintosh?"

"Ah like it. Mah Little Macintosh..."

Chapter 1

The sky was just barely changing from navy blue to orange when Big Macintosh hopped out of bed. He always got up before the sunrise to begin working the fields, and today was no different. Combing his orange mane and throwing on his harness, he took one glance in his mirror to see a large, red earth pony with a few freckles glance back at him, his cutie mark a halved green apple. Not what you would call a vain pony by any stretch of the imagination, Macintosh preferred to keep himself looking somewhat groomed, even if there wasn't anypony in particular he was trying to impress. *Well, you never know*, he thought, *maybe somepony is watching from the sky...*

Turning towards the door his eyes fell upon a stack of books on the floor. 'The Equestrian Language,' 'Equine Etiquette' and 'Applied Theoretical Mathematics' among other similar titles sat beneath a small scrap of paper that read (in messy handwriting) 'RETURN BY TUESDAY,' which, he recalled, was today. *I'll have to get Apple Bloom to run those back to the Library*, he thought to himself as he stepped out into the hall.

On any other morning, the house would have been completely silent and, despite his large size, Big Macintosh was quite skilled at keeping it that way as he had a quick breakfast and let himself outside to begin work. Today however, he could clearly hear the voices of the rest of his family whispering in the kitchen. Briefly wondering if he overslept, he ambled down the staircase and turned into the kitchen to see his two younger sisters and grandmother huddled around the table. He wasn't one for eavesdropping, so he trotted right on in.

"Well, tan mah hide if it ain't the whole dang family up bright'n early," he said cheerfully. The others hadn't noticed his presence and all jumped slightly when they heard him, but quickly put on large, fake smiles.

"Well howdy Big Mac!" Applejack grinned.

"Hiya Big Brother!" Apple Bloom beamed.

"If it ain't mah favorite gran'son!" Granny Smith smiled.

Macintosh looked slowly at each one in turn before breaking the uncomfortable silence. "All right, y'all, what's goin' on here?" The other three exchanged nervous glances before Applejack finally swallowed and stepped up to the plate, fiddling with the old, worn hat upon her head with the funny bite in its brim.

"Well, Big Mac, we were talkin' an' we thought that maybe it would be a good idea fer ya to take the day off," she said, wincing slightly.

"Heh, that's a goodun, sis," chuckled Big Macintosh as he ate one of the apples from the basket on the table, "Yer a regular comedian." Apple Bloom took a deep breath and stepped forward, the pink bow in her hair bouncing.

"We thought that maybe you should go out an' try ta make some friends," she said sheepishly, ducking from the angry glare Applejack shot at her. Big Mac stared down at her incredulously.

"Because, y'know," Applejack was regaining some confidence as she stepped towards her brother, "y'all spend so much time in the fields we're worried that ya ain't got any friends; that all ya do all day is work and hardly talk ta no pony outside o' us three." Her younger sister had started towards him as well; together they were forcing him towards the front door.

"Yeah!" Apple Bloom squealed, "I made some great friends in town! Y'all gotta too!"

"It's a lovely day out!"

"Perfect for meetin' new faces!"

"Real friendly folk out there, just waitin' ta say howdy!"

"After all, you've got those books ta return an'-"

"Now hold on just one cotton-pickin' minute!" Big Mac bellowed as he planted his hooves on the floor and stood as tall as he could. His siblings cowered away, ears folded back and giving the large stallion the respect he demanded. Their brother almost never raised his voice; when he did, it meant he was very angry and they knew better than to try and argue. "Ah dun' know what y'all think yer doin', but that ain't no way ta talk ta yer big brother! Ah ain't got no need fer friends nor any such nonsense; Ah've got apples ta buck, an' Ah intend ta buck'em! Y'all may be in charge o' the farm now, Applejack, but Ah'm still the head o' this family! It ain't yer place ta be comin' up with fanciful ideas fer yer big brother's way o' life!"

"Now y'all calm down, young man!" chided Granny Smith as she strolled into the front entrance, behind the two fillies, "This here idea were mine, an' y'all are gun' do as Ah say!"

Macintosh drooped his head and stared sadly at the floor. "Yes, Gramma." His sisters stood straight again, grinning from ear to ear. "Ah'll go get mah books, Ah s'pose." As he trotted slowly back upstairs the old mare winked at her granddaughters who giggled quietly.

"Don't worry, Big Mac!" Applejack shouted up the stairs, "Yer gonna have fun!"

“Go make some friends,” he growled, plodding up the path towards town, “‘yer gun’ have fun!’ Where do those three get off comin’ up with ideas like that?” Groaning and shifting the stalk of hay he was chewing to the other side of his mouth, he looked back at the books that filled his satchels. Although he had read them and many others like them cover to cover, he found it hard to understand anything written in them. Not having the best reading ability didn’t help, and many of the concepts went clear over his head, but he wanted desperately to be able to act and talk like a city pony by the time he was ready to go into town for a day and meet some new ponies, but today was much too soon; he didn’t feel confident in his speaking skills nor his social skills. Working on a farm for your whole life, even one as nice as Sweet Apple Acres, severely hampered one’s social life outside of their family. He loved his family very much, and he knew they were right; he didn’t have any friends and almost never went into town since his sisters were more than happy to take care of any errands that needed to be run. His sisters had many friends, but he never interacted with them or got to know them personally whenever they came around the farm; after all, there was extra work to be done when Applejack was caught up with her friends. Even when working with others during Winter Wrap Up he kept to himself, just working, guiding others (like the accident prone Caramel) and he’d just go straight home after the closing ceremonies and before the party, since he really wasn’t the partying type. He appreciated the fact that his family was concerned on his behalf, but he couldn’t help but feel nervous. *I don’t know anypony in town, he thought, well at least not since school, and it’s been years since I’ve seen any of them. I’m going to look like such a foal in front of everyone. I don’t even know where the new library was built!* He sighed heavily as he realized that Apple Bloom always picked up and returned books for him, and that the last time he was in town was for the last Winter Wrap Up, which was several months ago. He even stayed home to work when Princess Celestia paid a visit, and he missed out on the whole phoenix fiasco; something he regretted missing, especially after reading up on the mythical birds that week.

Cresting the hill that overlooked the small city of Ponyville, Macintosh had to stop and admire the scenery. The sun had just started rising, tossing a warm orange glow between the branches of trees and down the roads. There were already a few ponies strolling about town, but the streets were empty for the most part. Macintosh savored these moments: the view of the town was always a remarkable sight to him, although most others took it for granted. He used to walk this road many times to get to

school as a foal, but that was a long time ago, and the town had changed much since then. Saying a quick 'thank you' to Celestia for rising the sun, he cantered slowly into town, head low and eyes darting nervously.

"Now where in the hay am Ah s'posed ta find that library?" He muttered, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of shouting from above.

"No, no, no!" berated a blue, rainbow-maned pegasus at a yellow, pink-maned one. They seemed familiar to him. He was pretty sure they were friends of his sister, but he didn't know them any better than that; he didn't even know their names. "How many times do I have to tell you! 'Spin, Lift, and Buck!'" she demonstrated on a nearby cloud, swiftly dissipating it. Her bucking actually was very similar to bucking apple trees. "Now, try again!" The yellow one floated to a nearby cloud and did her best to recreate what the blue one did, but merely bounced off the white pillow and had to straighten herself up again, letting her long bangs hide her face.

"Ugh! I got up at six in the morning for this!? Call me when you're ready to learn how to clear the sky for real!" With that, the blue pegasus dashed off, leaving the other one to float back to the ground, sighing quietly. Looking up, she saw Big Macintosh watching, his brow knitted. Blushing, she averted her gaze and flew off quickly, keeping low to the road.

"Never ceases ta amaze me," he whispered to himself as the mare disappeared from view. Staring longingly to the sky, he let out another sigh. "What Ah wouldn't give for a pair o' wings of mah very own..." Before he let himself get all sentimental again he resumed his mission, aimless as it was. Wandering the roads he searched for something that resembled a library, before stopping dead in his tracks. "Oh hay seed," he grumbled as he realized he didn't even know what a library was supposed to look like. *Am I really that out of touch?*

"Excuse me," a sing-song voice came from behind him. He turned to see a cream-colored earth pony with crimson hair highlighted by a streak of pink, a rose for a cutie mark and the deepest green eyes he had ever seen. "You seem lost. Were you looking for something?" She smiled broadly, but only received a wide-eyed stare from the stallion. "Are you new in town? I don't think we've ever met."

"Yeah," he stuttered, "Ah mean, no! Er, well kinda." He had to force himself to remove his eyes from hers. *Horse apples! This is just what I was afraid of!* Clearing his throat, he did his best to explain. "Ah'm tryin' ta find a book ta return mah libraries."

The mare laughed; it was such a light, flighty laugh, but it was still sincere and matched her tuneful voice. "A little too early in the morning for you, huh?" Big Mac blushed, grinning sheepishly. *Why did the first pony I meet have to be the prettiest one!?* He panicked slightly, completely befuddled in how to react.

"Er, yeah, early, heh heh."

"That's the library over there," she pointed over to a large tree that had somehow been turned into a building, "but I'm afraid it doesn't open for a few hours yet." Picking up a basket of flowers by her hooves she turned to leave. "I need to go open my flower stand now, but maybe we'll bump into each other again! See you!"

"Oh! Uh, goodbah!" Macintosh awkwardly raised a hoof to wave goodbye as the mare trotted away. When she was out of view he shook himself back to reality. "Well that was jes' perfect," he groaned, "Ah reckon she thinks yer as dumb as a bucket 'o nails. 'Returnin' libraries,' what a stupid thing ta say." Pulling at his harness he turned to stare at the library; beams of light passed through its branches and fell on the road before his hooves. *If only I could speak as well as I can think...*

Cantering over, he indeed found a sign by the door that read 'Open Nine to Nine.'

"Now let's see...The sun's 'bout right so," mumbling, he pointed at the sphere of light, "so that'd mean it's almost-" he jumped as he was interrupted by the sound of the clock tower ringing out seven loud chimes. From the farm, you couldn't hear the sound of the bells, and looking around town, he realized once again just how different it was.

The buildings seemed to be very old, but also looked very well built. Most of them had hay roofs, and some were even multi-storied, possibly housing more than one family. A couple of small fillies and colts were playing on the doorstep of one such house, as their mother was trying fruitlessly to get them ready for school. Ponies trotted to and fro, stopping to chat with others along their way. Stores were opening, carts being pushed and school bells ringing. Even though it was a small town, Macintosh suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable around so many ponies; it was much more activity than he was used to finding himself around. Swallowing, he slowly maneuvered through the growing crowds towards the edge of town.

Just as he turned the last corner, he was greeted by a view of a cottage, although a hill might be a better word for it. Its roof was covered by a tremendous amount of what looked like moss, grass and leaves,

decorated with several occupied bird houses of varying sizes. A tall chimney at its peak let off a small trail of smoke, casting a thin shadow upon the dirt road. The path in front led to a bridge over a small stream, which ran down the hill towards the EverFree Forest. Although it was dozens of yards away, Big Mac still found it surprising that anypony would live so close to the dreaded forest. Whoever it was must be a very brave pony.

Rounding the hillside came into view the same yellow pegasus as before, guiding a small bunch of ducklings towards the river and their waiting mother. She didn't notice Macintosh's presence on the other side of the stream and turned away to face the rising sun, stretching out her long, slender wings. As she extended them outwards, he marveled once again at the sight of a pegasus' outstretched wings. *What an amazing sight... Those are the longest wings I've ever seen.* Yet, somehow, they kept getting longer. Stretching farther and farther, her golden wings dwarfed most pegasi's, extending perhaps even further than the Princess Celestia's wingspan! Tremendous and elegant, they reached towards the sky, fluttering softly in the gentle breeze. Entranced, Macintosh took a step forward, snapping a twig beneath his hoof. The pegasus flinched and spun to face the stallion, her wings snapping to her sides in a flash of gold; her aqua eyes a mix of shock, embarrassment and irritation.

"Oh, er, um, Ah..." Big Mac stumbled, his red face somehow turning redder, "Ah didn't mean ta be spyin' or nuthin, Ah was jes'..." before he could say whatever he was trying to say, the pegasus squeaked and ran into her cottage, slamming and locking the door behind her. The nearby birds flew away at the noise, and the ducks in the stream hurried to hide under the bridge.

"Oh yeah, t'day's gun' be real fun."

Not wanting to bother the mare any more than he already had, Macintosh headed back into town, looking for a quiet spot to sit and wait for the library to open. He finally found an empty bench in the park where he sat down, chewing absentmindedly on his stalk of wheat which somehow had stayed in his mouth that morning. Dozens of ponies strolled through the park, but he didn't see any of them. His mind was completely focused on that yellow pegasus. *I didn't even know wings could get that enormous,* he thought, shuffling uncomfortably under the weight of his harness and satchels. Ever since he was a tiny colt, he had watched the pegasus ponies fly through the air with great envy. He felt it wasn't fair that they were stuck on the ground while others were soaring through the air, and he

often voiced these feelings to his father. The response he got every time, however, was a swift smack to the head and a long talking-to about the duties and responsibilities of being an earth pony, and how it was a much more satisfying life than that of a 'horsey-pony-pigeon,' as his father called them. At one time, Macintosh (he hadn't yet earned the title of 'Big') even became resentful of his winged brethren, believing that they felt themselves superior to the rest of the world. It wasn't until he actually met a pegasus that his resentment returned to admiration. He remembered that day well...It was just after his sister Applejack had left for ManeHatten, and she said...

"Hey! Buddy!"

"Huh? Wha?"

"You're using up the whole bench! Mind letting somepony else have a seat?" the tan pony with a massive handlebar-mustache snapped Big Macintosh from his reminiscing. He was dressed in sports gear, a tennis racket slung across his back and a giddy, cyan unicorn filly at his side.

"Oh, uh, sorry," Macintosh apologized as he stood up and left the bench for the two.

"Hey, thanks buddy!" said the colt as they sat down; he resumed telling tales of his latest tennis match to his friend, who hung on his every word. Macintosh, dejected, wandered around the park a bit more, but it wasn't long before the clock tower finally struck eight o' clock.

"One more hour," Big Mac reminded himself as he unsuccessfully tried to find another bench. Finally, he settled for just plopping down under a tree and removed his heavy bags. *May as well look through them one last time*, he reasoned as he took out a random book. 'Relative Theories of Antimatter: A Comprehensive Analysis on the InterDimensional Borders.' He decided to get a different one.

"Whatchya got there?" a high-pitched voice inquired. Looking around, Mac couldn't see anypony. "Up here!" Up in the tree, hanging upside down from a branch alongside her helmet and scooter was a young, orange pegasus filly with unruly purple hair, covered in scrapes and bruises.

"Uh, are y'all all right?" asked the stallion as he rose to his hooves.

"Yeah, I'm fine, just hangin' out," she wiggled herself free and fell with a thud. "I was tryin' out a new trick; it didn't go so well. Hey, you're Apple Bloom's big brother, right?"

"Eeyup," he smiled, resting on the grass again, "Big Macintosh. Ah'm afraid Ah can't recall yer name, though."

"Scootaloo," she grinned, striking a pose. Hopping over she stared down at the large book. "Related Threes of Auntie Mudder?' That's funny, your cutie mark looks like an apple, not a book reading...thingy."

Macintosh rolled his eyes as he tucked the book back in his satchel. "Ah'm readin' up on stuff everypony knows."

"Well, I don't know who Auntie Mudder is."

"Ah jes borrowed 'em from the library; Ah work out on Sweet Apple Acres, buckin' trees, plantin' seeds. All day long, every day."

"Oh, that explains the apple!"

"Eeyup," sighing deeply, he looked longingly back at the sky. Scootaloo tried to see what he was looking at, but her attention span didn't last.

"You're boring. Can you help me get my scooter out of the tree?" she was trying to climb the tree, her tiny wings flapping furiously, but she couldn't make it up more than a few feet.

"Why don't ya jes' fly up?" wrong question. The little filly's face fell and her wings drooped uselessly at her sides, but she tried to put on a brave face.

"Um, I'm just...Saving my energy!" her small wings fluttered a bit as she dropped to the grass, "me and my friends have a lot of crusading to do today." Her wings, which were smaller than one of Mac's hooves and bore only a couple feathers each, flittered a bit in the breeze before she tucked them at her sides, her eyes lighting up. "And hopefully I can get some practice flying with the master later!"

"An' who's that?"

"Rainbow Dash, duh! She's only the most mega-awesome pony around! Her tricks are amazing!" She was hopping all over the place, striking poses and punching the air.

"Sound's like a plan ta me," Big Mac smiled, reaching up and pulling down her scooter and helmet, "Ah'll bet yer cutie mark must be a pair o' wings or some such, eh?" Wrong question again. The filly stopped bouncing around and stared at her blank flanks sadly. *Crud, how could I not notice that?*

"I wake up every morning hoping it's there, but it never is," she sighed as she sat on her scooter, "but once I can fly like Rainbow, it'll definitely show up!"

Big Macintosh thoughtfully chewed his hay for a moment before answering. "Is flyin' like that pony ya mentioned what ya really want ta do?" The orange pegasus looked at him, bemused.

"More than anything!"

Macintosh smiled and patted her on the head. "Then you chase them dreams and don't let up 'till ya got the cutie mark ya want."

"Yeah!" she sprang up, threw on her helmet and popped onto her scooter, grinning back at the stallion. "I'm gonna get the most awesomest cutie mark ever! I've gotta get to class! See ya!" Her wings buzzing like a motor, she dashed away, squeezing through the crowds with ease. Macintosh smiled, but it was a sad smile. *I sure hope she gets the destiny she wants. I hope she never has to go through what I did.*

After absentmindedly flipping through his other books for a while, the clock tower finally struck nine o' clock. Packing up his things and straightening his pulling collar, the stallion cantered through town towards the tree-turned-library. He had to stop and ask for directions again at one point, but he got there pretty quickly.

"Welp, nuthin' else fer it, Ah s'pose," he muttered as he knocked on the door. A couple of voices came from within; he heard what sounded like a faint crash followed by arguing. Finally, the door opened, revealing a short, purple and green dragon who yawned dramatically.

"Yeah, what?" he grumbled, wiping the dust from his eye.

"Spike, smarten up!" came a second voice from within the library.

Macintosh cleared his throat. "Ah'm here ta return mah books."

"Oh, okay. C'mon in," the dragon yawned again as he opened the door to allow Macintosh into a very messy library. Piles of books were scattered across the floor and desks, with a wooden ladder on top. "Just toss 'em anywhere," he shrugged.

"Ugh! Spike!" The second voice came from a purple unicorn mare that Macintosh recognized; she was the new pony in town who saved last Winter Wrap Up and arrived in Ponyville just in time to stop Nightmare Moon. *Was that already a year ago?* He thought, *what's her name again?* "So sorry about Spike, sir," she apologized, too busy focusing on levitating a stack of books to look at the stallion, "he's always like this in the morning before he gets something to eat."

"Ain't no worry," Macintosh smiled, "would ya'll like some help cleanin' up this here mess?" The unicorn placed the books on a table and finally turned to face him.

"Hey, you're Big Macintosh, right? Applejack's brother?"

"Eeyup, Ah reckon Ah am," he grinned, popping off his satchels and pulling out his books. The unicorn trotted over and started lifting them off the ground with her magic. *Shoot, having magic like that would sure make work on the farm a whole lot easier.*

"Oh, so that's where these books went!" she was much more excited than would be considered normal; it was almost as though she were being reunited with old friends.

"I *told* you I didn't touch them!" Spike huffed as he waded through the mess towards the kitchen.

"Um, yeah, sorry about that, Spike," chuckled the mare nervously as she resumed looking through Mac's books. The dragon just sighed and disappeared around the corner. "That's funny, I don't remember you ever coming by to pick up any books," she pondered, separating the books to different piles.

"Mah li'l sister Apple Bloom takes 'em out," saying it aloud made him feel a little badly, but his sister was so eager to make the errands (in the hopes of earning her cutie mark) that he'd never thought about it much.

"Apple Bloom picked them up?" asked the unicorn, raising an eyebrow, "Apple Bloom?"

"I *told* you she took them out!" Spike shouted, "why don't you ever believe me!?"

"Well, excuse me for questioning what a young filly would want with a book about... 'Applied Theoretical Math?'" She read the cover before looking up at Macintosh, baffled. "Apple Bloom read these?"

"Uh, no, they were fer me," Macintosh replied. Twilight's expression became one of understanding, but it only lasted a moment before returning to confusion.

"Did you enjoy them?"

"Er, yeah, Ah s'pose," he shifted his weight. *Dang, what's her name again?* "Ah'm tryin' ta learn up on useful stuff." *Twinkle? Trixie?* "So, would ya'll like some help?"

"Huh?" she was focusing on the contents of a different book titled 'Magnets: How Do They Work?' before she heard his question. "Oh! No, I couldn't possibly ask you to do that!"

"T'ain't no trouble, Ah'd be more'n happy ta help."

"Well, in that case, thank you!" a look of relief washed across her face, "I've actually got a lot of stuff to do later in the morning, so help getting this done would be great! Would you mind putting those books over there back on the third shelf?" Macintosh nodded and began his work. "You know, we wouldn't have to clean at all if *someone* didn't try to put away all the books at once!"

"I *said* I was sorry, Twilight!" came a voice from the kitchen. *Twilight, of course!* thought Big Macintosh as he carefully refilled the shelves.

“So, Twilight,” the red stallion said, “ya’ve been here fer a while; how’re ya likin’ life in Ponyville?”

“Honestly, it’s much better than I thought it would be,” she hummed, dusting a shelf, “it took a while to get used to, but I’m so glad I came here. I’ve made so many wonderful friends!” Macintosh winced slightly at the word. “How about you? I don’t see you come into town very often. What’s life like on the farm?”

“Oh, er, y’know,” sighed Big Mac, “same as ever, Ah s’pose. Plantin’ and buckin’ trees all day.”

“You have a very nice family, you know. Apple Bloom is so adorable! I wish I had a little sister.”

Big Macintosh’s eyes lit up. “So would anypony after meetin’ li’l Apple Bloom! She’s the sweetest thing. An’ Applejack is the most honest, hardworkin’ pony Ah’ve ever known, even if she’s a mite stubborn.” He laughed softly as he lifted another pile of books. “Do y’all ‘member the time she tried ta buck the entire orchard by herself?”

“I don’t think anypony could forget!” Twilight chuckled.

“An’ Granny Smith is very wise; she may be old, an’ she sleeps a lot, but she’s still got a lot o’ fight left in ‘er!”

“It sounds like you love them very much.”

“They mean the whole world ta me,” he smiled contentedly as he put away the last book. “There y’are! We can see the floor again!”

“Oh, thank you so much, Big Macintosh!” Twilight said as she trotted over to admire their work, “with your help we got this cleaned up in no time!” Looking over the room, Macintosh noticed something hidden behind a desk.

“Oops, looks like we missed one,” he said as he pulled out a book covered in dust, “Mathematics 101,” he read the title, “Ah ‘member this one; it got me started learnin’ math.”

“Oh, that’s one of my favorites!” Twilight smiled as she took the book and flipped through it, “so that’s where it was this whole time!”

“I told you I didn’t burn it by accident!” came a voice from the kitchen.

“Heh heh, sorry again, Spike!” Twilight said sheepishly. She put the book away and turned to Big Mac. “You said you like math?”

“Eeyup, Ah like workin’ with numbers,” he smiled, “Ah handle all the accountin’ an’ orderin’ on the farm.”

“Most ponies hate math; I’ve never understood them!” shaking her head she trotted over to a table and sat down, motioning for Big Mac to do the same. “Spike! Could you bring us some tea?”

"Sure thing, Twilight!" Spike popped his head around the counter, gnawing on a gem, "what kind?"

"What kind of tea would you like, Big Macintosh?" Twilight asked. The red pony looked around nervously. *Tea? How did I suddenly get invited for tea?*

"Uh, there's more than one kind?" he grimaced.

"Ha! I know what you mean, bro!" Spike laughed, "how does mint tea sound?"

"Good idea," Twilight replied, prompting Spike to start the water boiling. Mac sat across from the purple unicorn, deep in thought. *Should I ask her about that yellow pegasus' wings?* He decided against it: it wasn't his place, after all.

"So, Big Mac," began Twilight, flipping absentmindedly through the math book, "did you find any of the books hard to read?"

"Er, um, no, uh," chewing furiously on his straw the stallion blushed slightly, "they're, well...No."

"Is your whole family that bad at lying?"

"Eeyup."

"Hey, listen, if you need any help with studying, feel free to ask. I have a little bit of time before I need to leave this morning, was there anything in particular you had trouble with?" At this moment Spike sprung back into the room carrying a tray filled with a tea kettle, teacups and various biscuits. The tray itself was fancier than anything Macintosh owned.

"That was fast," marveled the stallion as Spike rested the tray on the table.

"Being able to breathe fire helps," Spike boasted, letting out a small puff of green flame, "I'm gonna get started on organizing the second floor, 'kay, Twilight?"

"Thanks Spike," said Twilight as the dragon hopped upstairs. She added a sugar cube and a pinch of cream before noticing Big Macintosh's bemused stare at his teacup. "What's wrong?"

"It's so...Tiny," he muttered, placing his giant hoof next to the little cup. Delicately lifting it with both hooves he slowly raised it to his mouth, but couldn't keep it balanced and sent it and tea across the table with a clatter. "Horse apples! Ah'm so sorry!"

"Oh, it's okay," she levitated over a nearby towel and mopped up the mess, "I suppose those cups are a little small..."

Macintosh swallowed. *Should I tell her?* he wondered. *She would be able to help, I suppose...* "Well, ya see, Ah don't really understand

proper table manners,” clearing his throat he hoped she didn’t notice him blushing, “Ah mean, Ah read the books, but Ah couldn’t get much practice...”

The unicorn stared at him thoughtfully before snickering a little.

Macintosh’s face became even redder. “Well now, Ah know it’s embarrassin’, but ya’ll dun’ have ta laugh!”

“No, it’s not that,” she giggled, “I just remembered my first slumber party with Rarity and Applejack. I wonder what Rarity would think of you?” She failed at stifling her laughter.

I don’t see what’s so funny, thought Big Mac, *and who’s Rarity?*

“Let me just get my book on table etiquette and let’s go through it together, shall we?”

“Uh, no, y’all dun’ hafta do that,” Macintosh said hurriedly, unsure himself if we wanted to be tutored or not.

“No, it’s fine! I’ve wanted to try out this book anyway! Besides, I owe you one for helping me clean up!”

“Oh, okay then...” *This is so embarrassing...*

The next hour sped by. Macintosh learned much about correct manners and, to his surprise, found himself enjoying the ‘lesson.’ He was learning exactly what he’d tried and failed to teach himself by borrowing all those books. In fact, he even found himself excited for dinner that night so he could show off what he’d learned to his family. Before long, though, the clock tower struck ten, and Twilight began cleaning up the remains from tea time.

“Phew, time sure flies when you’re having fun, eh?” levitating the tray around the corner and into the kitchen, she also shut her book and stood, prompting Macintosh to do the same (he’d learned a gentlecolt was supposed to stand when a filly leaves the table). “I enjoyed that; I think we covered a lot of ground. Maybe we could do it again sometime?”

“Sounds good ta me!” Macintosh beamed, trotting towards the door, “thank ya kindly fer takin’ the time ta edumacate me!”

Using her magic she held the door open for him. “No problem at all. Say ‘hi’ to Applejack for me!”

“Will do,” he bowed his head as he left the library.

The sun had risen high, and the streets were even busier now than earlier that morning. Breathing deeply, Big Macintosh took in the sight of a bustling town. Most of the young fillies and colts were still in school, no doubt learning academics and how to act properly, but a few still played in the parks and roads, perhaps gleefully running from exasperated teachers

and parents. Vendors lined the streets, selling everything from carrots to flowers to dresses, smiling to potential customers and chatting idly to each other. The hour he had spent inside the library had almost caused him to forget how very different it was to him. He was just about to head out into the city looking for something to do when he heard a quiet, trembling voice behind him.

"Um, excuse me..." it said. Turning, he saw the yellow pegasus, hair hiding her head save for one eye looking up at him before nervously glancing away again. "Um, I was...Just...Well..." She spoke so incredibly quietly that Macintosh wondered if he hadn't gone deaf from all the city noise for a moment.

"Hey, listen," he said loudly, causing the mare to flinch, "Ah wanted to say sorry fer sneakin' up on ya this mornin'. Ah was jes' tryin' to find somewhere quiet an' stumbled across yer place."

"Oh, um, it's okay...I guess..." she whispered. The next few moments were filled with silence and awkwardness. Mac tried his best to smile, and eventually cleared his throat.

"Well, Ah s'pose Ah should get goin' now..." he turned to leave.

"Wait!" the pegasus said suddenly. When he looked back at her she ducked away and hid her face again. "I mean, if it's all right with you...I just wanted to...um..."

"What was that?" Big Macintosh asked, more confused than he'd been in recent memory. *This pony sure is a strange one...* The yellow pegasus glanced nervously at some passing ponies and motioned for Macintosh to step around to the back of the library. When they were hidden in the shade and out of sight of others, the filly did her best to speak but couldn't get any words out, her face turning the color of her mane. Macintosh felt unbelievably uncomfortable.

"Listen, Ah dun' wanna trouble ya, so Ah should go..."

"No, please! Wait!" she begged. Taking a deep breath she finally looked up at the stallion, her mesmerizing eyes large and earnest. "Please promise me you won't tell anyone about my wings!" As soon as she had said it she ducked away as if expecting to be struck. Macintosh shuffled for a moment, his face incredibly warm before answering.

"Um, Ah don't really understand," he blubbered. She opened one eye and stared at him. "Ah mean, yer wings are amazin'. Y'all must be a real great flyer," she blushed again and looked at him deeply.

"Please, just promise me you won't tell anyone, *anyone* at all!" she was biting her lip now, her large glassy eyes piercing his.

“Ah swear Ah won’t tell no pony,” he promised. The mare let out a huge sigh of relief and took to the air.

“Thank you so much!” she said quietly as she flew away. Funny, now her wings were only about average for a pegasus. Turning a corner in the direction of her cottage and not flying more than ten feet above the road, she disappeared from the sight of the bewildered stallion. He shook his head, trying and failing to regain his composure.

This was not how he had expected today to turn out at all.

Chapter 2

Taking a moment to reorient himself and toss the remains of his chewing straw, Big Macintosh sauntered once again into town, now bathed in the warmth of a midmorning sun. Townsfolk bustled to and fro, going cheerfully about their business completely oblivious to the strange encounter Macintosh had with the pegasus not five minutes prior. *Two awkward run-ins with the same pony in the same morning, he mused, is this a normal morning for most ponies?* Although being by far the most uncomfortable few hours he'd endured in years, they were also the most productive. While caring for his family and the farm was his top priority, reading and learning all he could understand in those complicated books was something he frequently attempted but often failed. Dropping out of school was a necessary measure to take charge of his family, and he'd always regretted the years he wasted goofing off in class when he could have been learning how to read properly. *If only I could be a little colt again,* he often reflected, recalling his father's disappointed sighs when presented with his son's report cards. *I never realized how badly I wanted to make you proud, Pa, until it was too late.*

He shook his head in an effort to clear it. Those persistent, nagging thoughts would eat at him, distracting him to the point of walking into trees on the farm. He'd already been embarrassed enough this morning with the strange encounters he had, so he steeled himself, breathed deeply and ventured into town.

While the ponies puttering around town were friendly and offered smiles to him, they were content in keeping to themselves, or chatting with friends. Slightly disheartened, Macintosh briefly wished he could return to Twilight's library if she didn't have business of her own to attend to. He considered returning to the farm, but realized that his family would only push him out of the house again if he returned early, so he continued taking in the sights and sounds, ambling about town in no particular direction. Rounding a turn, he caught sight of an elaborate (if a bit tacky) flower stand selling more kinds of flowers than Macintosh thought existed. Smiling and presenting her flowers to passersby was the earth pony with the rose cutie mark Big Mac spoke to earlier. On the other side doing the same thing were two other earth ponies, one a pink, green-haired filly with flowers as her cutie mark (Big Mac knew almost nothing about flowers and couldn't

identify them), the other a darker pink with a flower in her blonde mane, and a trio of the same flowers as her cutiemark. The crimson haired one from earlier caught sight of the red stallion, her face lighting up and hoof raised.

"Hello!" she smiled, calling him over, "did you get to return your books?"

Macintosh, blushing slightly, trotted over to the trio who tilted their heads in interest, smiling warmly at him. "Eeyup, Ah sure did."

"Oh!" she said suddenly, "I just remembered! I completely forgot to introduce myself this morning!" the green-maned one rolled her eyes at this, but she didn't notice. "My name is Rose. These are my friends Daisy," the green-maned mare nodded, "and Lily!" the blonde haired filly grinned widely and curtsied.

"Mah name's Big Macintosh," he bowed, "or at least that's what mah family calls me."

"Ooh! I love macintosh apples!" Lily bubbled, her amber eyes teeming with life, "Applejack makes the best apple pies with them! Do you know her?"

"Eeyup, Ah reckon Ah do, what with her bein' mah li'l sister an' all," Big Mac chuckled. Suddenly all their eyes grew wide with excitement.

"She went to the Grand Galloping Gala, didn't she!?" Rose beamed.

"Does she make apple pies every day!?" Lily bounced.

"Has she ever considered selling apple tree flowers!?" Daisy grinned.

"Whoa now!" Big Macintosh stepped back, "is mah sister really that famous?"

"Sorry about that," Rose blushed, "it's just that she's made quite a name for herself around here; she's sort of known as the most dependable one around." Macintosh sighed. *Great. My sister is the one these three are interested in, not me, he thought, they just want me to be the middle-pony for my sister.*

"Oh dear! I hope you don't think we want you to be the middle-pony for your sister!" Lily said, eyes wide and apologetic, "I'm so sorry for being so rude!"

Daisy stared sideways at her friend before rolling her eyes. "I *would* like to talk with Applejack sometime about potential business partnership ventures."

"But it can wait!" Lily glared at Daisy, "Big Macintosh is new in town and we mustn't be so inconsiderate to his feelings!"

"Er, how-"

"Because I haven't seen you around before!" Lily smiled, pleased with herself for cutting him off and answering his question, "well, at least not since that running leaf thingy. I said hi to you! But you probably don't remember; I'm not that memorable. Just last night I went into my living room to get something but I couldn't remember what it was! I think. It was last night so it was a while ago, so I kinda forgot what happened. Like I said, I'm not that memorable. Or, wait, did I already say that?" She pondered for a second, oblivious to (or just ignoring) Daisy's frustrated scowl. "But I never forget a face, especially when that face is yours! Actually, no, that sounds kind of creepy. But I promise I'm not creepy! Well, except for that one time I-"

"Okay, Lily, I think he gets the idea," Rose patted her friend on the head, "Lily's just kind of like that."

Macintosh grinned nervously. Lily's energy reminded him of another pony. Macintosh didn't know many ponies in town, but *everypony* knew that one. It would be quite a feat to ever forget about her. Lily shrugged and began rearranging flowers.

"So tell us about yourself, Big Macintosh," said Rose, "what brings you into town today?"

"Well, mah family thought that Ah didn't have enough fr-" he caught himself mid-word, "...Time off. They said Ah should take the day off and spend it in town." *I don't want them to think I'm a complete social shut-in, even if I am.*

"And do you work on the farm?"

"Ah sure do. Ah used ta run it 'till a few years back when Ah gave the farm ta Applejack," he scratched at the ground, aware of how boring his life was and wanting desperately to change the subject, "An' how 'bout y'all? You three run this here flower stand?"

"It's a living," Daisy said dryly, waving to passing ponies.

"I love it!" Lily blurted, hopping over with a basket of flowers, "and so does Daisy, even if she's acting like an old boring mule," Daisy rolled her green eyes once again as Lily pulled out a big flower like the one in her hair. "Here we go! A nice lily, just like mine!" she pounced over to Macintosh and slid the flower into his mane, turning the stallion an even brighter tone of red. "It's so beautiful!" she squealed. Rose sauntered over and casually removed the flower from Mac's mane, placing it back in the basket, much to Lily's chagrin.

"These are for the customers, Lily," she said flatly, "besides, I don't think Big Macintosh wants a flower in his mane, do you?"

“Not really,” he stuttered. Lily’s face fell. “Ah mean, it’s real purdy an’ all, but Ah’m...Well, flowers ain’t really mah...Um...” Lily hung her head, stepped slowly over to the side of the cart and plumped down onto the road, facing away from them. It almost seemed like the color and life drained from her body.

“Stop being so dramatic, Lily!” Daisy snapped. Instantly Lily popped back to her hooves, her vigour and color restored and stuck her tongue out at Daisy.

“You’re no fun at all!”

Macintosh chuckled nervously and looked back to Rose, who shook her head dismissively.

“Don’t mind them,” said the mare as she resumed smiling and waving to potential customers. The three ponies seemed to know most of the town folk by name, often teasing them or showing off certain breeds of flowers with which they were familiar. Business seemed to hold up well enough, as ponies purchased flowers on a whim, often giving them to a friend they traveled with or hinted at what their evenings would consist of; one blue unicorn colt with a particularly pointed horn and a safety pin cutie mark bought a bouquet for what he called ‘The Big Night,’ eliciting congratulations from Lily and Rose and a nod from Daisy.

“Y’all seem ta be familiar with half the town,” Big Mac marveled.

“You get to know your regulars quickly enough,” Rose grinned, dropping several newly acquired bits into a small box, “I always do my best to get to know a little about every customer I get.”

“We’d be a lot more efficient and make a lot more money if you didn’t talk to everypony for ten minutes,” huffed Daisy as she prepared a bunch of flowers for a pegasus and his fillyfriend.

“Let’s not get into this again,” Rose sighed, “and I don’t talk that much.”

“Not like me!!” shouted Lily. Looking up, Rose caught sight of a blue earth colt with a darker blue mane marching towards them, grinning.

“Hey, it’s the Flower Triplets!” he laughed, receiving a swift, playful smack to the head from Rose.

“Shut up! We’re not related!”

“Thank goodness,” Daisy mumbled.

“Big Macintosh, this is Blues,” Rose introduced the two, “he’s a friend of ours who helps out with the stand every now and then.” Macintosh bobbed his head and smiled. “Blues, this is Big Macintosh. He works out on Sweet Apple Acres.”

"Sweet, I love apples," Blues said, saluting the red stallion, before he squinted his eyes. "Wait a second...You seem familiar..."

"...Ah do?"

"Ugh, it's going to bother me all day until I figure it out! Ah well," he turned to look at the three mares. "So are you fillies coming tonight?"

"Of course!" said Lily, "I heard it's going to be awesome!"

"Yeah, it sounds like fun," nodded Rose, "I'll be there." Macintosh swallowed anxiously, feeling like a fifth wheel. Blues turned his attention to Daisy, who remained silent.

"What about you, Flower Wishes?" Blues smirked, earning another smack to the head, this time from Daisy.

"Shut up!" she did her best to hide her smile, but failed, "fine, I'll go." Clearing his throat, Mac stood straight.

"Well it sounds like y'all have got a big evenin' ahead o' ya, so Ah'll jes' be takin' off then," he waved goodbye and turned to leave the stand when Lily spoke up.

"Why don't you come with us?"

Big Macintosh winced. *Just what I was afraid of. Well, actually...*

"Yeah, man!" Blues smiled, "you should totally come!"

"Well, uh, Ah don't really know what it is y'all are talkin' 'bout..." Macintosh scratched his neck tensely. Lily's jaw fell open.

"It's only the best party slash dance ever!" she chirped, "I even heard Vinyl Scratch is going to be there!" Something pinged in the back of Macintosh's mind. *Party? Then that must mean...*

"Uh, Ah probably shouldn't," he stammered, "Ah mean, Ah've got a lot of work ta do on the farm, and, um, other things Ah should..."

"Aw, c'mon, I bet you'll have fun!" reassured Rose, her large green eyes staring expectantly at the earth pony.

"Ah've never really been much of, um, a party pony," he said sheepishly, searching desperately for some excuse he could use. *I can't go to a party...SHE'LL be there for sure!*

"Well maybe you'll change your tune," said Blues, "wherever Vinyl Scratch goes good music follows. Besides, there'll be food!"

Well, I suppose it does kind of sound like fun...After all, I did end up enjoying my time with Twilight, and maybe SHE won't be there after all...

"All right, Ah s'pose Ah could go."

"Cool!" smiled Rose, "it's at the east side of town tonight; I think they're setting up a tent or something. I'll see you there!" The others all smiled and waved goodbye (except for Daisy, who simply nodded) as Macintosh took his leave of the group. Hardly five seconds later the clock

tower struck eleven. This was by far the most eventful day he could remember, and it wasn't even noon.

A robin chirped in the tree above Macintosh's head. He had made his way back to the same tree he sat under earlier and rested for a minute, enjoying the scenery, which he hadn't taken a real look at last time. From this grassy knoll, he could watch the river run through the park, under a bridge and between the woods out of sight towards the edge of town. Several ponies took leisurely strolls along its bank, a few even taking a moment to stop and dip their hooves, pulling them sharply away with a shudder and a giggle from their friends. Almost nopony traveled alone; most had at least one friend with them, some even a small group of friends, chatting about their plans for the day and how they feel about their jobs and what they should eat for lunch. It was all very carefree, with no sense of urgency or worry exhibited by anypony (save for one cross-eyed pegasus, who was stressing about a muffin while darting throughout the park). This feeling of ease and peace was unfamiliar to Big Macintosh. His father had instilled in him a strong work ethic: that if you weren't working, you'd better start. Little tolerance was given to exhaustion and even less to laziness. The weekends were always a powerful relief from work as he only had to do his morning chores, but even those often lasted into the early afternoon.

"How did ya do it, Pa?" Macintosh whispered to himself. His father loved the farm he worked on, calling it his true love (which earned him many whacks to the head from Mac's mother) and he did his best to pass on that passion to his children.

Stretching his legs, Macintosh took a light canter around the park, hoping to return his mind to the present. It was difficult, however. The memory of his father's disappointed looks at his son were enough to...

"Nope!" Big Mac said suddenly, "Ah've got ta keep mah mind focused on t'day!" His canter had broken into a gallop, and soon he was racing around the park trying to distract himself. He hardly even noticed as he raced between ponies, ducked under branches and hopped over rocks, but the image of his father's hat and harness after the...

"WATCH OUT!!"

CRASH!

"Ugh..." the blue pegasus slowly pulled herself off of Macintosh, checking herself and her wings for any bruises. "What's the big idea,

buddy?" she accused, running a hoof through her rainbow mane, "why don't you watch where you're goin'?"

"Sorry," said Macintosh meekly as he stood up; although he was knocked to the ground by her speed he wasn't hurt at all. "Ah wasn't payin' attention. Why were ya flyin' so low?"

"Practicing a new move," exclaimed the filly, flapping her wings, "It should work as long as there aren't any big *hay-seeds* in my way next time!" Macintosh rose up at this, glaring down his snout at the pegasus he towered over. Unimpressed, she stood as straight as she could, trying to match his height, and tipping her head back she stared down her nose right back at him.

"Ah think y'all best settle down," he said slowly, watching himself. He didn't take kindly to being called names, but did his best to control his temper.

"And / think you should get out of my way so I can get back to practicing!" When she saw the stallion had no intention of moving she hovered in the air above him, firing daggers into his determined eyes.

"What's the matter? Got too much hay in your ears?"

"This sorta behavior is uncalled for, young lady."

"*You're* uncalled for! What do you think you're doing running, anyways? Do you think you're fast or something? You wanna become a race-horse?" By this time most ponies had stopped what they were doing to watch the potential scuffle. Macintosh was not ready to make a big show out of this and earn a bad reputation on his first real day out in town.

"Y'all don't hafta go floatin' around thinkin' yer better than the rest of us, y'know!" His anger was swelling; he hadn't felt this way about pegasi in a long time.

"I don't think I'm better than the rest of you, I *know* I'm better than the rest of you!" She was pumping her hoof in the air, energizing the growing crowd of ponies. "Why? You wanna make something of it? You think you're faster than me?"

"Ah never said anythin' of the sort."

"You wanna race?"

"No. Now you just calm down an' Ah'll be on mah way," he had turned away, stomping heavily as the crowd cleared a path for him. *I'm not going to let some pegasus embarrass me in front of the whole town.* The blue pony wasn't finished, however.

"You're just chicken!"

He stopped.

"No pony calls me chicken."

The race was to span the park, following the path and up the hill, weaving through the trees and back to the fountain, where the two crouched in position, ready to run. It all happened so fast; Macintosh didn't truly realize it was happening until a rather excitable cyan unicorn (the same one from earlier, he reckoned) guided them through the course and made the blue pegasus swear not to use her wings, which she boasted weren't necessary to win. The track wasn't very long and it was only one lap, but Big Mac still regretted ever 'agreeing' to do it. Already a sizable crowd had gathered to watch the event, and he earned more attention than he desired. Fortunately he didn't spot any of the friends he'd made that morning, so he was satisfied that they wouldn't see him embarrass himself.

Wait...Friends?

"GO!"

The blue pegasus shot away from the starting line leaving a trail of rainbow and a stunned Macintosh in her wake. Rearing up with a whinny he kicked off the ground and ran as fast as his hooves could take him, rapidly closing distance with the pegasus.

"Easy peasy," he heard her gloat as he pulled up beside her, gaining a dumbstruck expression from the filly. He quickly overtook her, his powerful legs throwing dirt behind him in a cloud of dust. The feeling was exhilarating; maybe he should have run in the Running of the Leaves last year?

The feeling didn't last long however as the pegasus kicked into overdrive and blasted ahead, blazing over the bridge and around the bend towards the woods. The edge of Big Mac's mouth curled into a grin as he felt a sudden burst of adrenaline surge throughout his body. His heavy hooves pounded the path through the trees as he effortlessly weaved through their trunks, ducking and dodging limbs and branches as he closed distance with his opponent. Clinking loudly with every step, his harness bounced on his shoulders, its weight unnoticed by its bearer. This energy he felt...It was completely unlike anything he'd experienced before. Years of applebucking had strengthened his limbs into steel bars, pumping him ahead with extreme speed.

Jumping over a large rock he found himself side-by-side with the pegasus again as they rounded the corner; the finish was in sight! The two glanced quickly at each other, their eyes ablaze. In a rare moment of pride, Macintosh winked as he pushed ahead, closing in on the finish line and victory.

“Oh no you don’t!!” yelled the pegasus as she used every ounce of her power to charge forward, head down. Just feet away from the finish line a multi-colored bolt of lightning hurtled past the stallion and across the finish, slowing down and returning to the shape of a pony. The crowd exploded into cheers and applause; some ponies exchanged hoof-fuls of bits. His jaw hanging open, Mac skid to a halt, gasping for air.

“How’d...y’all...do...that?” From the look of it, the blue pony wasn’t much better off.

“Be...cause...I’m...awesome!” she panted, taking a chug from a glass of water somepony hoofed her. Another pony passed one to Big Mac, which he downed in a flash.

“Yer...a mighty fine...athlete,” he grinned. Even though he lost the race and his muscles ached, he was still elated with the excitement of it all.

“Thanks...You’re really fast,” she said, recovering and wiping the sweat from her brow, “I like you; we should race again sometime.”

“Sounds good ta me,” Macintosh smiled, “so what should Ah call ya?”

“Amazing is good, but my name is Rainbow Dash!”

“Right, course y’are!” Macintosh face-hoofed, disgusted at himself for not recognizing her sooner, “shoulda recognized ya right off; y’all come round the farm pretty often ta see AJ.”

“Oh, duh!” Rainbow slapped herself, “that’s right! I thought I recognized you! You’re Big Macintosh! You just never talk or stuff whenever I come by. How come you never come into town?”

“Too much work ta do on the farm,” Mac shrugged, “never had the time.”

The pegasus nodded, saluted, and flew off, earning another cheer from the crowd, which slowly began dispersing with her departure. A few ponies congratulated Big Mac, exclaiming how rare it is for anypony to come so close to beating Rainbow Dash, but most simply went their way, laughing and joking with their friends. Before long, he was left alone by the fountain, the soft crash of its water a continuous applause.

He smiled.

That was fun.

Chapter 3

"Now let's see ya try, son."

"Ah don't wanna..."

"Y'all have ta learn to buck, son, if y'all ever want ta run the farm someday."

"But..."

"Don't talk back ta me! Now buck!"

I reared up and kicked. Nothing happened.

"Ah can't do it!"

"Jes' try again!"

Kick. Nothing.

"C'mon son, y'all can do it!"

Nothing.

"Ah jes' can't do it!"

"Jes' keep tryin' son. Y'all want ta earn yer cutie mark, don't ya?"

"Ah s'pose..."

He fixed his hat.

"So keep tryin', an' someday ya'll get a nice apple on yer flank, just like the rest of the family."

"An apple?"

He stared at me.

"Of course; yer goin' ta run the farm one day, so of course y'all are gun' get an apple."

"But Ah don't wanna run the farm..."

He hit me on the head.

"No buts! Don't go gettin' no more fancy ideas! Now keep buckin', Macintosh!"

Big Macintosh awoke with a start when the bell struck one o' clock. After the race he had returned to the tree he sat under, dropping onto the grass exhausted from running, and fell asleep not much later. Wiping his eyes and cricking his neck he looked around the park, unchanged from earlier save for the shadows having crept to new angles. He stood, stretched, straightened his heavy harness and felt his stomach grumble.

He hadn't eaten since before the sun rose, and after wearing himself out in such an unusual way he felt ready to eat half the apple orchard.

The air was warm with the noon sun, but a cool breeze ruffled his mane. *I haven't had a dream like that in a long time*, he thought, trotting along the road. Ironically, for such an unorthodox day filled with new experiences, the large pony's mind was being flooded with long forgotten memories and flashbacks to his youth. *I need to stay focused on today. I don't want to accidentally run into anypony...again.*

At the end of the street he could just make out what looked like a restaurant; it was a rather large building with tables out front, filled with ponies. Many pictures of clovers decorated the place, and once he was closer he could read the myriad of signs that identified it as the 'Clover Café.' A well-kept colt with a small mustache was taking orders, making his way to a table occupied by Daisy, who was by herself. Mac heard her place her order and return the menu to the waiter, sighing and laying her head on her hooves. Macintosh's eyes lit up when he saw her, excited for the chance to talk to someone he knew.

"Howdy Daisy," He said cheerfully as he approached her table. She rolled her head, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

"Oh, hey Macintosh," she said, yawning, "How's it going?"

"Ah'm fine, but what about y'all? Feelin' all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she turned her head the other way, sighing again.

"Tired?"

"I suppose."

Almost all the other tables were filled with groups of ponies, laughing and enjoying each other's company.

"How come y'all are here alone?" asked Mac. Daisy straightened up and stretched a bit.

"It's my lunch break; the others are still working," she said flatly, avoiding eye contact.

"Oh."

It was a strange environment: an island of solitude and solemnity in a sea of jubilation.

"Well, Ah'm a mite hungry, mind if Ah join ya?"

She glanced up in his general direction, her silvery green eyes avoiding his. "Sure, go ahead." The waiter returned, bringing Daisy a sandwich and handing Macintosh a menu. Instantly befuddled by the sheer amount of choices, he simply requested the same sandwich as Daisy. She began eating her sandwich in silence, glancing around the restaurant at the

other ponies, but never holding her gaze for long. *She's sure a quiet one, thought the stallion, I thought I was the quiet type.*

"So," he cleared his throat, "how long have y'all known yer friends?"

"Lily was my neighbor when we were little and we went to the same school..." she took a bite from her sandwich, chewing and swallowing quickly, "Rose moved into town several years ago and we just kinda started hanging out."

"Oh," said Macintosh, unsatisfied, "what about Blues?"

"What about him?" she accused suddenly without removing her eyes from her meal.

"Er, nuthin'," he backpedaled, "um, yer jes' friends, but, it's okay."

"That's right we're just friends," she said angrily, although to Mac it almost sounded more depressed than angry. The waiter returned with Big Mac's sandwich, which he was about to devour in a couple bites before he remembered his time with Twilight. Sitting straight and lifting the sandwich with a hoof he took a small bite, chewing carefully thirty times before swallowing. It was excruciating.

"So, what kind of ideas did ya have 'bout workin' with mah sister Applejack?" offered Mac, trying to get some sort of interaction going between the two. She looked up thoughtfully, but still never made eye contact with him.

"I was thinking about the flowers that grow on apple trees, that they might sell, but maybe even selling tree saplings. I think it could work." Her voice showed a tiny amount of enthusiasm as she stated her ideas, but she still seemed distant and distracted. Finishing her meal and standing (Macintosh barely remembered to do so as well), she tossed a few bits on the table and turned to leave.

"Well, see you," she said bluntly, stepping away.

"Oh, uh, goodbah."

Suddenly, she stopped and looked back to him, finally meeting his eyes.

"Are you still going to come tonight?"

"Eeyup," Macintosh smiled. For once, she did too.

"All right, see you then," she briskly cantered off, her curly green mane bouncing with every step. Standing for a few more moments, Macintosh watched her until she was out of sight. *I wonder what her story is?*

Once Big Macintosh was alone he indulged himself in his sandwich, trying his best to eat it slowly and carefully but eventually gave up and

downed it in a second. It wasn't very satisfying, but it was expensive, so he decided to save his appetite for supper. He left his money on the table and trotted away from the café. The town's layout was becoming familiar to him; he had always been a quick learner. He wandered aimlessly, wondering where he could go next. *That park is awfully nice, but surely there must be somewhere else I could go.* The road around him suddenly grew dark and cold; he looked up to see a few pegasus ponies pushing pillowy clouds in front of the sun. As he watched, one of them whistled loudly to get the attention of the ponies stuck on the ground.

"The scheduled rainfall begins in five minutes, everypony!" she shouted as even more flying ponies appeared, filling the blue sky with dark clouds. Flapping their elegant wings they carried about their task with ease, confounding Macintosh with their ability to actually grasp the clouds. Sighing wistfully, Big Mac didn't notice the other ponies running for cover from the impending downpour; his eyes were transfixed on the flying ponies as they soared through the air, completely free from the confines of the ground.

"Hey! You!" one pegasus called down to him, "do you wanna get drenched or something?"

The glaze finally left his eyes as he had to process what was said. "A li'l rain never hurt nopony," he said, his deep voice carrying through the cool air with ease.

"See?" a blue maned, orange filly grinned, lifting a cloud, "I told you I wasn't the only one who likes the rain!" Closing her eyes and sticking her snout in the air she tossed the raincloud carelessly towards a group of pegasi who were too busy moving their own clouds to notice the incoming cumulous. It struck one of them, causing him to lose his grip on his own cloud which in turn spiraled out of control at a young, white pegasus filly who was trying and failing to move a cloud of her own. The large cloud hit her hard, sending her hurtling for the ground, her eyes wide with shock and confusion.

"Cotton!" a blue-haired, white pegasus shrieked, flying as fast as she could for the falling filly, but a quick calculation in Macintosh's head assured him that she wouldn't be quick enough. Rearing up with a bray he kicked his legs away from the road, blazing across the street in a blur of red. The young pony's wits finally returned as she screamed, flailing her limbs and flapping her wings as the road rapidly rose to meet her. In a few seconds, this dark day would become much darker.

I'm not going to make it!!

Pushing every ounce of his strength into one powerful jump he flew through the air, spinning to catch the filly with his front legs and falling harshly onto his back, skidding painfully to a halt. The speed of her fall knocked the wind out of him, but his harness absorbed most of the impact. Eyes still glued shut and screaming frantically, the filly kicked Macintosh in the jaw a few times before she opened one panic stricken eye to see her savior.

"It's all right now," he said softly, trying to hide the pain in his voice, "Yer safe now."

"Cotton Cloudy!" gasped the white pegasus as she landed next to the pair, "are you okay!?"

Cotton's eyes were still locked on Macintosh's, wide with fear and astonishment. He smiled at her, which seemed to break her out of her daze; hopping off him and jumping into the arms of the older pegasus she began sobbing, her emotions finally catching up to her. Macintosh noticed that all the pegasi had stopped their work to watch the event.

"You're safe now," sighed the mare, hugging the filly closely. Macintosh picked himself off the road, trying to reclaim his lost breath. "Oh, thank you so much!" she said, looking up to him, "Oh, if it weren't for you..." she nuzzled Cotton again as the orange pony floated down towards them.

"Ohmygosh! Lightning Bolt! I'm so sorry!" she whimpered, covering her mouth with her hooves. Lightning Bolt looked up at her, her eyes a mix of anger and relief, but she quickly turned her attention to young Cotton.

"And just what were you doing up there, young lady?" she said sternly. Sniveling, Cotton Cloudy pulled away and kept her gaze on the road.

"I'm sorry Mom, I just wanted to help..."

"You know you aren't strong enough to fly that high yet! You're too young!"

"But Mom, I *can* fly!"

"No!" yelled the mare, her bright blue eyes brimming with frustration, "you can't fly! You just can't! You're going to hurt yourself if you keep trying!" Something painful resounded in the back of Macintosh's mind: for a brief moment, Lightning Bolt was replaced by a large, yellow earth stallion who glared down at a young, red colt wearing a brightly colored cape.

"But Mom..." moaned Cotton.

"No buts! Now you go back home right this instant, and when your father gets home we're going to have a long talk about this!" Wiping a tear from her eye the small filly hung her head shamefully and plodded along

the road towards her home. After a few moments of silence a pegasus cleared his throat.

"All right you ponies! Let's finish this job up and get this rain a' falling!!" One by one the pegasi pulled themselves away and resumed their work. Lightning Bolt brushed her blue mane out of her eyes and looked again at Macintosh.

"Thank you so much. Little Cotton wants to be a weather pony so badly she actually got her cutie mark first in her class, before she had even learned to fly properly," she chuckled nervously, wiping her eyes dry, "Thank you again. Is there any way I could repay you for saving my daughter?"

"Her safety is payment enough, ma'am," Macintosh said after a moment, his mind filled anew with painful memories, "please dun' be too hard on the young filly, Ah'm sure she's learned her lesson."

"Thank you," she smiled, lifting off the road and receiving a hug from another pegasus. Moving the last cloud into place the flying ponies disappeared above the veil. The sun was completely hidden from Big Mac's view now, and the dark clouds began to release their reservoirs, a light drizzle dancing upon the dry road. The cool rain felt good on his hide, washing away the anxiety that filled his heart. *That sure was a close one...* He thanked Celestia that he was able to catch the filly in time. The rain began to fall harder now, so he looked for some cover. Catching sight of a gazebo at the end of the road he trotted briskly to hide under its protection, shivering from the cold, damp air. He shook himself off as he stepped beneath its canopy, and found himself a seat in the empty pavilion, where he waited patiently for the downpour to finish.

"Macintosh?"

"Yes, Ma?"

"Yer father's out workin' the fields, why don't y'all go out an' help?"

"But Ah'm busy."

She fixed her bow.

"When ya finish, why don't ya go an' help?"

I looked up from the table and my work.

"Y'all still can't buck?"

"No, dear, not until the foal's born."

I held up my creation.

"What do ya think, Ma?"

"Oh, it's lovely, Macintosh!"
I put it on.
"Now, Ah can fly too!"
She sighed.
"Just don't let yer father see it, okay?"

The rain didn't fall for long, just enough to relieve the dry gardens and fields. Pegasus ponies swiftly cleared the skies, allowing the bright sun to warm the streets of Ponyville. Slowly but surely the streets were filled with all sorts of folk again, resuming their day as if nothing happened. Macintosh yawned, stretched and cantered out of the little building. Looking to the now blue sky he wondered what his family was up to right now. *Apple Bloom's probably finishing up school soon, and she'll work up an appetite playing with her friends, I bet.* He trotted along the road, his hooves clattering cheerfully and sending small sprays of water with each step. *Applejack's no doubt bucking her way through the spartans by now, with that old hat glued to her head.* He chuckled, wondering when was the last time that hat was cleaned. *Granny Smith's probably taking a nap before she gets up to do some housework, and get started on supper.* Suddenly he felt very homesick and lonely, a stranger in a strange place. Milling around, he caught sight of Blues, trotting in place on the doorstep of a flat roofed house. He raised his hoof to ring the bell but quickly pulled it away again, muttering to himself. Macintosh strolled casually up to him, trying not to startle him, but he did anyway.

"Hey Blues!" The blue colt jumped and spun to face the voice.

"Oh, hey...Um..."

"Macintosh," the red pony smiled.

"Right, sorry," he grinned sheepishly, rubbing his neck.

"So, what're y'all doin'?" It was an innocent question, but Blues reeled at it.

"Nothing! I mean...Yeah, nothing! Why, what makes you think I'm doing anything?"

"Is that yer house?"

Blues sighed, gazing long-fully at the building. "No, Vinyl Scratch lives here...I was hoping to talk to her..." He shuffled uncomfortably and pulled out a large black disk from one of his satchels. "I was hoping I could show her some of my music, but she probably wouldn't want to waste her

time..." Macintosh noticed for the first time that Blues' cutie mark was a pair of musical notes.

"Do y'all write blues music?" he asked innocently, but Blues just rolled his eyes and huffed as he put away the disk.

"No, I hate blues!" he moaned, hopping off the porch, "I don't know why my parents named me after it! I mean, at least my brother *likes* jazz..."

"Oh, so what kind o' music do ya write?"

"The stupid kind," his ears folded back, "I don't know what to call it. It's weird and experimental. Vinyl Scratch is really good at writing music; I was hoping she could offer me some advice. Oh well," he turned to leave, "she's probably not home anyways. See you tonight!" he trotted off, holding his head high but dragging his hooves. Macintosh looked back to the house, its strange flat roof standing out amongst all the other thatched roofs. A faint, rhythmic thumping sound, almost booming, came from within. He shook his head.

"City folk sure are odd."

By the sun's position in the sky Macintosh guessed it to be around three in the afternoon, and a trio of strikes from the clock tower confirmed it. Roaming around town he came within sight of the bakery, the wonderful smell of bread wafting through the air. It reminded him of his mother's baking. She was a wonderful mare, her light orange coat and auburn mane shone with love and life. The pink bow she wore in her hair was an heirloom from her side of the family, passed down through the fillies. She loved her family so very much, giving more than she should have been able to ensure their safety and happiness. Often she would help father with the apple bucking, and she passed on her secret technique to young Applejack, who loved every second of it. Macintosh regretted taking her kindness for granted, and in his mind, never telling her how much he loved her and was thankful for her. But at least he was blessed enough to remember her, unlike poor Apple Bloom...

After breathing in the tasty air for a few moments, Macintosh resumed his stroll, watching ponies go about their business in peace. He could hear the school bell ring, followed by distant excited shrieks from the fillies and colts, relishing their freedom from education. *I suppose I could go see Apple Bloom*, he mused, turning in the direction of the school bell. Once the old building came into view, he was taken aback at how little it had changed from his youth. The red, single classroom schoolhouse still had dozens of painted hearts adorning it, the weather vane still permanently stuck facing east and the red flag fluttering in the breeze. The old steel

swing-set still stood somehow, splintering seats of wood not concerning the foals who happily swung from its frame, kicking the air. The hedges out front had grown larger, but they were still trimmed, and even the bush pruned to look like a pony had survived. Macintosh wondered if the old groundskeeper still worked here, his goofy hat and long goatee still intact.

Bouncing with energy, three little fillies whispered excitedly on the front path. Apple Bloom was suggesting something to the others, a young white unicorn and the little pegasus from earlier, Scootaloo. He cantered cheerfully towards the group.

"Howdy, Apple Bloom!" he grinned. The fillies jumped at his deep voice, but smiled back when they recognized him (except for the unicorn, who seemed confused).

"Hiya Big Macintosh!" chirped Apple Bloom, running up and nuzzling her big brother's neck.

"Hey dude!" Scootaloo hopped over, her small wings extended.

"How was school?" asked Macintosh.

"Boring," complained Apple Bloom, "Ms. Cheerilee was goin' on about cutie marks again. I'm the only one in my class without one, now!"

"Yer all in different classes, eh?"

"Different schools, actually, but now it's time to crusade!" grinned Scootaloo, pulling out her helmet and scooter from seemingly nowhere, "C'mon girls, let's go get our cutie marks!"

"Yeah! See ya Macintosh!" Apple Bloom galloped down the path, followed by Scootaloo and eventually the unicorn, who still gazed at Big Macintosh with confused eyes. Feeling slightly dejected, Macintosh waved after the trio.

"Oh, those three are such a hoof-ful," sighed a maroon mare with three smiling flowers as a cutie mark who ambled out the front door, "but I really do admire their enthusiasm."

"Howdy Cheerilee," smiled Macintosh, "it's been a while."

"Yes, it certainly has, hasn't it?" she said happily.

"Ya broke yer promise, y'know," Macintosh grinned mischievously.

"I know, I know!" laughed Cheerilee as she looked back to the school, "It just took me a while to realize what my cutie mark meant."

"Ah remember," reminisced Mac, "ya always thought y'all were goin' ta sell flowers."

"And I tried for a while, if you'll recall," her green eyes flashed, "but I hated it. When I promised I would never set foot inside a school again I should have known I'd do exactly that. Despising learning but loving teaching. Figure that one out."

"Ah guess it's kinda hard ta sell smiling flowers," chuckled Macintosh, remembering the time she tried to do just that.

"Oh yes," she sighed, looking back to Macintosh, "and how about you? Still working on the farm?"

"Eeyup."

"Well, at least your cutie mark makes sense. It must run in the family to love applefarming."

"Ah s'pose it must," mumbled Mac, shuffling his hooves.

"Well, I should probably get going," Cheerilee smiled, "it was nice to see you again."

"You too," perked up Big Mac, "are y'all goin' ta the party t'night?" he asked suddenly. Cheerilee was stepping back inside the school but stopped and spun to face him.

"You know about that? You're going!?" she marveled, her eyes glittering.

"Eeyup."

She burst into laughter, clutching at her sides. "I didn't think you'd ever go to (hee hee) another party after-"

"Yeah, yeah!" Macintosh flushed, "Ah know, y'all dun' hafta remind me! 'Sides, there's no guarantee that she'll be there." This caused Cheerilee to collapse to the ground in a fit of giggles.

"Yeah, right! Sure she won't!" She slowly picked herself off the ground, her eyes watery, "oh, I need to bring my camera tonight! This is going to be gold!"

Macintosh huffed. "Well, maybe Ah won't go!"

"No! No, it'll be fun! Besides, you're right! I'm sure there won't be any clowns this time!"

Macintosh flushed bright red. "Then what's the camera for?"

"Um, I always take it around with me. You know, to take pictures of stuff," she wiped her eyes and stepped into the school doorway, "but don't worry about it; you should totally come! I'm just kidding about the camera. I'll see you then!" snickering to herself she closed the door behind her, leaving behind a blushing Macintosh.

"Ah knew Ah should never have agreed ta go," he bemoaned, adjusting his harness.

Chapter 4

Cheerilee - or Ms. Cheerilee as she is now known as by her students - was probably the closest friend Big Macintosh ever had growing up. They grew apart after he had to drop out of school, and today was the first time he'd seen her in years. Although she was around the same age as him (maybe a little older) they were in different grades, since he'd been held back a few times. She actually went to a different nearby school (which was designed very similarly to Mac's school, although much larger and missing the pony-shaped hedge out front). The two schools were so close in fact that Macintosh and Cheerilee would often meet and spend lunch together, chatting about their teachers or their family or the weather, and while most ponies made fun of his drawl, she never seemed to mind. Being the oldest and largest in his class Macintosh was often the brunt of many jokes and jeers, and looking back he wondered if that was when he earned the nickname 'Big Macintosh.' Well, at least he was called 'Big Dumb Macintosh.'

Being the oldest in his class was bad enough, but he was a 'blank flank' to boot. He massaged his neck, remembering all the times he was bullied or even beat up by younger, smaller colts who teamed up on him. He never fought back, however, partly because he knew he would get in trouble and could seriously hurt the younger ones, but mostly because due to his larger size he was never hurt by any of their attacks. Not hurt physically, anyway.

By now Big Macintosh had returned to the busy streets of Ponyville, made even busier by all the foals playing on the streets. He briefly caught sight of his little sister and her friends climbing a tree in the park, perhaps trying to become professional tree climbers. A few fillies ran screaming down the road, trying to get away from a pair of unicorn colts (one blue and stout, the other orange and lanky) who were hovering grasshoppers with their magic. He even spotted Cotton Cloudy again, floating in the air behind a tree, trying to form a cloud with moderate success. The city was teeming with life, the sort of thing Mac only saw during the Apple Family Reunion. His relatives could probably fill their own small city if they wanted to, and cousin Braeburn actually bet Big Macintosh that they could do just that, which led to the founding of AppleLoosa (not many ponies knew that). When Macintosh finally had the chance to visit, he found it populated with

non-Apple Family ponies and even run by a non-Apple Family sheriff. The look of shame on Braeburn's face was almost more satisfying than seeing him strut down the main street in a frilly pink saddle for losing the bet. Almost. Still, it was a very pleasant town, although Big Mac never did get the chance to meet any of the Buffalo he'd heard so much about. / *wouldn't mind visiting there again, sometime.* Entering the park, his mind wandered, eventually drifting back to his earlier visit with Twilight.

"Ah wonder if Twilight's finished her errands now," he said to himself suddenly, "Ah sure would like ta spend some more time studyin'."

"You WANT to study!?" said a voice. Turning, he saw the voice came from a bed of yellow and pink flowers growing happily by the side of the road. Blending in nearly to the point of invisibility was a pair of large, amber eyes resting in a pink head, its snout poking out for air.

"Er, Lily?" Macintosh said slowly, "what're ya doin' in there?"

"We've got much more important matters to discuss!" she cried as she untangled herself from the flora, hoof-fulls of petals and grass in her mane, "like why on earth would anypony *want* to study?"

"Well, Ah jes' enjoy readin', is all. Ah find it all very interestin'."

"I did all the studying and reading I needed in school," she boasted, looking him squarely in the eyes, "didn't you?"

"Um, well, not really."

"Huh?"

"Look, Ah'd rather not talk 'bout it, if'n y'all dun' mind," sighed Macintosh as he slowly cantered along the path.

"Okay," she said, sidling up beside him, "I dun' mind!" giggling, she hopped ahead of him, spun and began trotting backwards. "So what were you saying about Twilight Sparkle?"

"Uh, what?"

"You *like* her, don't you?" her eyes glimmered.

"What!?"

She gasped dramatically, throwing a hoof to her face and collapsing to the ground, her eyes rolling into her head. "How romantic!"

"Um..."

"Don't worry!" she chirped, hopping to her hooves in a pink and yellow blur, "I won't tell anypony!"

"Not that there's much ta tell," Macintosh said slowly, cocking an eyebrow at her theatrics. "What were y'all doin' in them flowers?"

"Well, to sell flowers, one must *be* the flowers! One with nature! Think like a flower!" she stopped and contorted her face to look like something out of one of Pablo Pichorso's paintings. "Suuuuuuun,

waaaaaaterrrrrrr, diiirrrrrrrt....Ah! A bee!" she swatted at the small insect, shrieked and ran in circles around Macintosh until she fell into a shivering heap at his side. The bug gave up trying to pollenate Lily's lily and buzzed towards a large bed of flowers.

"Y'all okay down there?" he looked sideways at her, amused and mildly annoyed at her energy.

"It's hard to be a flower!" she shuddered. Shaking his head Mac resumed trotting along the path, Lily swiftly catching up to him. "Sooooo, whatchya doin'?"

"Nuthin', "

"Nuthin', or *nuthin'*?"

"Both."

"Oh, I gotchya!" she nudged his side. He couldn't help but crack a tiny smile. Her cheeriness was contagious. *Shouldn't she be working right now, though?*

"I'm on a break right now, to answer your question."

"What?"

"You were going to ask why I wasn't working right now, right?" she looked at him with earnest, innocent eyes. His were filled with disbelief.

"But how did you..."

"My special talent is reading other's minds!"

"But yer..."

"Flowers ARE psychic! Why do you think I work with them so much?" she glanced nervously around the park before beckoning Big Mac to lean in close. She dropped her voice to a low, intense whisper. "You should hear some of the things they tell me!" her eyes were filled with dread; a deep secret locked away for years about to emerge. Macintosh's own eyes grew wide with wonder and curiosity.

"What do they tell ya?" he whispered.

"I dunno, they're flowers! They can't talk, silly!" she giggled, her golden eyes ablaze with realized mischief, "pshaw, talking flowers! That's almost as believable as ponies who can read minds!" She skipped along the road, across the bridge and out of sight, her long, blonde tail bouncing merrily along behind.

Macintosh felt planted to the path, legs locked in place.

"What jes' happened?"

Mind working overtime to make sense of the last few minutes, Big Macintosh felt a large, goofy grin creep its way across his heavy-set face. Lily was by far one of the strangest creatures he'd ever met.

And he couldn't wait to bump into her again.

I looked down.

I was very high up.

I had never been on top of the barn before. It took a long time to climb up here, but now here I was.

I looked up. I saw them flying. Their wings flapped and their legs kicked. They flew with the birds and moved the clouds. They could fly anywhere. They could go everywhere.

A wind blew and opened my cape, my own set of brightly colored wings.

I took a deep breath.

And I jumped.

And for a moment, I flew.

The trek back to the library was uneventful, leaving Big Macintosh alone with his thoughts. He walked slowly, enjoying the sights and taking an occasional intentional wrong turn just to see more hidden nooks and crannies of the town. By the time he arrived, therefore, it was already four in the afternoon. Dinner at the Apple Family household always started at six o' clock sharp, so he still had at least an hour to study with Twilight Sparkle, assuming she was back. Three brisk knocks to the door later he found himself welcomed inside by a cheerful Spike.

"Hey Big Macintosh! 'Sup?" he held a duster in his hand and had a neckerchief acting as a filter over his mouth.

"Not much," Macintosh's deep voice traveled throughout the room; the place was empty enough to have sent back an echo if it weren't for the books muffling sound slightly. "What's goin' on in here?"

"I was just doing some cleaning," smiled Spike, pulling down the mask, "Twilight doesn't spend much time outside the library so I always make sure to clean up whenever she's gone. She's really good at turning this place into a war zone."

"Ah see," coughed Big Mac, a bit of lingering dust invading his lungs, "so Ah gather she ain't here at the moment?"

"Nah, but she should be back soon, so just make yourself at home," said the dragon as he resumed dusting a corner of the room.

Strolling over to the impressive array of books that lined the walls Macintosh casually began reading their spines. He hadn't taken a second look at them this morning when helping clean, and he was now taken aback at how extensive the collection was, and at the wide variety of titles: 'History of Equestria Volume 6,' 'The Adventures of Captain Sethisto;' there was even a book about playing banjos with hooves written by somepony named Ralph. Every topic you could possibly imagine was covered, from mathematics to science to cooking to skydiving to art to music. He even saw one of his favorite story books from his school years, 'Fortress of Fire,' its blue spine (faded slightly with age) held a tale about a pair of young foals, he recalled, who trained under a mysterious old Creature Catcher to avenge their father's apparent death.

One book in particular caught his attention: 'The Physics of Flying.' Gently, he pulled it out of the shelf and set it down on the table, flipping through its contents. It was filled with diagrams and artwork of various flying creatures, from horseflies to pegasi, showing their wings in great detail. On one page, it compared the wingspans of different animals, starting with a pegasus and working its way up to a full grown dragon, whose wings were long enough to fold around the entire barn back home.

There was one page in particular that caught Macintosh's interest: it showed a pegasus with outstretched wings, going into detail on how finely tuned the size of the wings are to accommodate the size and weight of the pony. An average pegasus filly, for instance, should have a wingspan a little under twice her body length, while a colt's should be slightly longer. On the next page was an entry about wing defects, examining the myriad of afflictions or birth defects recorded. Wings too small, of course, wouldn't be strong enough to lift a pony off the ground, although they could use them to propel themselves along the ground and maybe glide through the air. Interestingly, a pegasus whose wings were too large could also have difficulty flying, as the massive wind displacement from their wings could send them careening off course, or they may not have fine control over the wings' movement.

The subject of flying was far more complex than Big Mac had ever expected; who knew there were so many variables, from wind speed to velocity to humidity to size and weight? On the following pages were articles about historical ponies who had tried to create their own flying devices, with an almost perfect record of failure. Macintosh chuckled at the memory of his own primitive attempt so long ago.

"Spike, I'm back!" the door swung open, snapping Macintosh away from his daydreams. Twilight marched into the library but stopped, stunned

at Macintosh's presence. "Oh, hello Big Macintosh, I didn't expect to see you here."

"Howdy," he smiled warmly; she was clearly frazzled by his being there. "Ah was jes' doin' some readin' while Ah was waitin' fer ya ta get back. Are ya all right?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm fine, just surprised is all," she smiled, placing her satchels onto a desk, "I didn't expect anypony to be here."

Big Mac tilted his head in confusion. "But this is a public library, right? Ah'da thought there'd be lots o' visitors all day." The purple unicorn sighed, looking deeply into his eyes for a moment before breaking away.

"Spike! Could you put my bag in my room please?" she called. Spike bounced into the room.

"Sure thing, Twi! What's in it?" he said, handling the large satchel.

"It's my Gala Gown. Rarity just had to do a few touch ups on it so it would be ready for the 'Summer Sun Celebration.'"

"But that's not for a few days!" Spike said, bemused.

"What, didn't you get a suit yet?"

"Meh, I'll get around to it."

"It pays to be prepared, you know!" she said, snout in the air, "will you just take it to my room, please?" The small dragon saluted and carried her bag off to the second floor, closing the door behind him. She turned back to Big Mac, sighing again. "You're right, this is the Ponyville public library, but ponies around here just don't come by that often. To be honest, I'm worried that it might be because of me."

"Now what in tarnation does that mean?" Mac asked, his voice reassuring, not accusatory.

"Well, the only thing different is that I'm running the library now. If it's not being used anymore it's got to be my fault. I have heard some ponies gossiping that I use it as a private study hall. I feel kind of bad about it..."

"Now Ah'm sure it ain't yer fault," Macintosh said, trying to smile, "Maybe the ponies 'round here jes' aren't much fer readin'."

"Maybe," she shook her head, an earnest smile returning to her face, "Anyway, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting; was there something I could do for you?"

"Well, Ah jes' had some spare time b'fore supper, an' Ah was hopin' ta get a li'l more studyin' done."

Her eyes lit up at this as she hopped over to his desk. "All right! Sounds like fun!" She glanced down at his book, its pages open to a diagram of a large metal tube with long, flat protrusions. "Oh, a flying machine! I didn't know you were interested in flight!"

Macintosh grinned. "Eeyup. Ah've always found it interestin'," he gazed down at the picture again. "Do y'all really think they can build a flyin' machine that works?"

"I hope so," she smiled, flipping through the other pages, "I think it would be a great alternative to air-chariot travel. Even the largest chariots can only hold about ten passengers, but one of these machines could carry hundreds! Balloons are a relaxing way to travel, but too slow to be very efficient..." She enthusiastically carried on about different possibilities for creating flying machines, but Big Mac's thoughts were halted at the mention of air-chariots.

I suppose I could get a ride on one of those, he thought, that could be a heap of fun. I've never ridden any sort of flying machine or balloon or air-chariot before. But, it's not really the same as flying on your own wings, is it? That freedom...I guess hang-gliding would come closest, but that's too dangerous for someone my size.

"...But if there were a form of propulsion, maybe the ignition of a fuel of some sort, with the lift of the wings and a propellor, it could fly."

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry, I guess I was rambling, heh heh," she shut the book, placing it back on the shelf, "was there any particular subject you wanted to study?"

Big Macintosh took a few seconds to bring himself to reality, his mind still lingering on thoughts of being airborne. "Ah did have a couple questions 'bout algebra. Ah never got a real chance ta study it in school an' them books are hard ta read."

"Ooh! Algebra!" she giddily pulled several books out of the shelf with her magic, arraying them across the desk. "That is a tricky subject, but once you get the hang of it, it's actually pretty fun! Let's take a look..."

Their hour together went smoothly; Macintosh was beginning to feel very at ease around the unicorn mare. They both enjoyed discussing topics most others would find boring (Spike pointed this out once, even asking if he should call a doctor or psychiatrist), and he felt they understood each other well. He asked for another quick refresher in table manners before he left, and he had considered asking if she was going to the party tonight, but she made mention of her plans for the evening (which would consist of more studying and correspondence with the Princess Celestia). Ironically, the prospect of extra studying sounded more appealing to the earth pony than going to the party, but he had promised his new friends he'd be there. Besides, he couldn't overstay his welcome.

He took his time waltzing back through town towards the farm, the early evening sun casting long shadows between the old fashioned buildings as his mind drifted back to his new acquaintances. *Are they really already my friends? Shouldn't it take longer than a day to become friends? Maybe they just invited me to the party out of pity. I mean, I'm obviously not the most exciting pony to be around.* His questions lingered in his head. Friend-making was not something he had experience in, and although he had met many new ponies who seemed nice enough, he was worried that they didn't regard him with any more interest than an out-of-town stranger would earn. Twilight seemed to enjoy spending time with him, but what if it was only because it meant she could do more reading?

Violently shaking his head he banished the thoughts. His mother always told him to never assume the worst about anypony, and he felt a pang of guilt for doing just that. *It's not my place to judge them or their intentions,* he thought, *if I want them to be friends then I've got to be friendly too.*

As he crested the last hill he took in the full sight of Sweet Apple Acres, illuminated by the evening sun. Its grandeur was a sight to behold, with hundreds if not thousands of trees sporting apples of every sort spreading out across the horizon. While apples were the main focus of the farm, they did have a small vegetable garden, chicken coop and cow ranch. The cows themselves were friendly, if a bit air-headed, but Macintosh couldn't bring himself to milk them. That task was left to a more steel-stomached (and less prone to blushing) sister of his. Applejack teased him constantly about his fear of milking, but he'd gladly take the teasing any day over having to...squeeze...and...

"Ech!" he cried, knocking his head with his hoof trying to forget the imagery. At his outburst Winona ran up to him, yipping and playfully jumping at him. She was a good dog, but rarely listened to his commands. Applejack was her 'mother.' Macintosh was more like an uncle. Patting her head he let himself into the house, a sweet aroma of cooked apples and carrots emanating from within.

"S'that you, Apple Bloom?" he heard Granny Smith call from the kitchen. He wiped his hooves and trotted in.

"Nope," he grinned, his stomach growling with forgotten hunger.

"Macintosh! Yer back!" his grandmother smiled, placing a steaming pie on the table, "Ah hope y'all had fun in town t'day! Now go fetch yer sisters b'fore dinner gets cold!"

Once they were all gathered around the table, Granny Smith said a quick thank you to Celestia for their meal before they all dug in. Big Mac took a moment to watch his family chow down, burying their muzzles in their meals. Chuckling to himself he carefully balanced his slice of pie on his hoof, taking small bites and chewing slowly and carefully. The food may taste better this way and sit better in one's belly, but it sure wasn't satisfying. Still, it was more than worth it for the stunned expressions it inflicted upon his family.

"Er, what're y'all doing, Mac?" Applejack asked, her own face dripping with apple pie filling.

"Well, Ah jes' though that maybe Ah should start actin' like a civilized pony if Ah'm goin' ta be spendin' time with 'em." His sisters had to take a moment to decide if they'd just been insulted or not. Finally, Granny Smith broke the silence.

"Well, good on ya!" she smiled, not deterred in the slightest about her own style of eating, "y'know, yer mother was a stickler fer good manners, right up 'til Applejack were born! Ah reckon she jes' gave up when she saw she gave birth ta a pig instead of a pony!"

"Grama!" moaned the orange pony, her hat only partially hiding her scowl.

"It's true," grinned Macintosh, "Ah 'member how Pa wouldn't ever get away with wearin' that hat ta the table!" His sister glowered at him, fastening her hat to her head.

"Well this here hat ain't budgin'!" she threw her face back into her meal, chewing and snarling loudly. Laughing, Macintosh looked down to his youngest sister. Apple Bloom had been quiet this evening, and although she giggled at the 'argument,' her eyes were tinted with sadness at the mention of her parents.

"So what were yer days like?" Big Mac quickly changed the subject.

Granny Smith was the first to reply. "Ah read some o' me stories and took a nap, then cooked up the vittles y'all are eatin'."

"Thanks fer supper, Gramma," the three said in unison.

"I was able to buck most of the west orchard t'day," boasted Applejack, "I got all them apples in the barn, even. It weren't easy without you around, Big Brother."

"Ah'm sure ya managed."

"Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle and me all tried to become Cutie Mark Crusader Maple Syrup Farmers, but we couldn't find any maple trees," said Apple Bloom. "Oh, and I pushed Snails into the mud during recess. But it was an accident," she added quickly.

"Sure it was," chuckled Applejack, "when are y'all jes' goin' to admit ya like him?"

"SIS!" she shrieked, "that's gross! Ew!"

"That's how Ah met yer Grampa, y'know!" laughed Granny Smith. The others chuckled, remembering that story which had been told many times, but Apple Bloom's face turned white.

"How was yer day, Macintosh?" asked Applejack, taking another mouthful of carrots and chewing loudly. He took a deep breath.

"Well let's see...Ah helped Twilight clean up her library, almost beat Rainbow Dash in a race, ate an expensive sandwich fer lunch, saved a filly from fallin' to her death, met a pony who claimed to be psychic an' could talk to flowers an' Ah learned how ta do algebra."

The only one who manage to keep her jaw fastened to her head was Applejack.

"Oh, an' Ah also got invited ta a big party after supper."

And there went Applejack's jaw.

"I still can't believe yer goin' to a party!" giggled Applejack. She stood just outside his room, watching him comb his ruffly orange mane. "I mean, after last time-"

"Ah know!" he blurted, "but that was a long time ago. It's time ta move on."

"Well, good luck with that," she snickered, "jes' watch out fer the punch!" guffawing, she cantered down the hall, Macintosh slamming the door behind her in a huff.

"It weren't funny," he grumbled to himself as he returned his comb to his drawer. *It'll be fine*, he reassured himself, *no need to worry. Nope, none at all*. His pep talk failed, he turned to face his stark room. He didn't spend much time in here, its dark blue walls unadorned and the bed messy. Really, all he ever did in here was sleep and get dressed for the day. Pulling off his harness and slinging it around the bed post he suddenly felt much lighter. He wore the harness almost all the time out of habit, but he wouldn't need it tonight, and its bulkiness would only be a hindrance at a social gathering, even if it was casual. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if there was something he could wear to look a little nicer, so he made his way to his closet and looked inside, taken aback at just how empty it was. He hadn't looked inside for a very long time. A single necktie and a winter coat were hung inside, and a small box rested beneath, covered in a layer of dust and neglect. In a sudden burst of nostalgia he

delicately pulled out the cardboard box: his own little treasure chest of memories.

He placed it on the bed and opened it, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Coughing, he looked inside. He smiled, pulling out various memorabilia from his youth. A small ball cap from the first baseball game he went to, an old ring he found in the field one day among other similar nicknacks. There was also his father's secret recipe for Apple Crumble. The mares of the Apple Family may have been the best bakers, but somehow Mac's father had come up with an amazing recipe that he shared with no pony but Big Mac. Macintosh had only attempted the recipe once and failed, much to his father's continual disappointment. *Didn't I ever do anything to make him proud? Maybe I'll try this recipe out again someday.*

Near the top of the box was an old newspaper clipping turning yellow from age. It mentioned how the Apple Family had produced a record-shattering crop that year, several months before Apple Bloom was born. In the accompanying photo, he saw his father, mother, little sister and himself smiling with satisfaction. Well, he wasn't smiling. He was scowling in the picture, and he vividly remembered why. It was the first time Big Macintosh had received a B+ on a test, the highest mark he'd ever earned up till then, but his family didn't take the time to look, much more preoccupied with the journalists that crowded the house. As they were whisked outside for the picture, the test was blown from his hooves, never to be seen again. His father didn't believe him about the mark, and his mother simply said how nice it was, insincerity tainting her voice. Frustrated and a little resentful, he vowed to one day get a perfect score and prove to his family that he could succeed, and didn't have to be stuck on the farm for the rest of his life.

Sighing, he placed the clipping aside and rummaged through the rest of the box. He found an old ball he used to play with, and even the first valentine he'd ever got from Cheerilee back when they were tiny little foals. Underneath them was something that Macintosh remembered far too well. He pulled out his old cape, its bright colors now faded and torn slightly. He recalled the day he spent creating it, which he considered to be his ticket to freedom. His flight attempt didn't go so well, however: he had to spend three months in casts, two of his legs broken from the fall. He remembered his father's face, filled with anger and concern when he found him crumpled at the bottom of the barn, barely conscious. It was then that his father's feelings about pegasi really struck a chord in Macintosh, and his cape wasn't worn for many years.

At the bottom of the box was possibly the most painful item of all. It was another newspaper clipping stapled to the last test he took. He finally earned an A+, but he never got to show his parents. The two old pieces of paper shared the same date, but while one was filled with numbers and a smiling sticker, the other held a grim article about the two farmers who lost their lives after a terrible rainstorm, trying to hold back the flood that threatened to destroy half the town. They managed to hold back the dam until help arrived, but at the cost of their own lives.

His heart heavy and eyes clouded he placed the items gently back into the box, gingerly tucking it away into the closet, where maybe he'd take another look at it in a few years.

Chapter 5

"Well, Ah hope yer happy, son! Yer little flyin' attempt's landed ya a fine nice groundin'!"

The casts hurt. They were itchy.

"Tryin' ta fly with a cape! Ah thought Ah raised ya better'n that!"

"But Pa-"

"No buts! What were ya thinkin'? Did ya really think ya could fly? What're they teachin' ya in that expensive school o' yers!?"

I cried. His words hurt.

He sighed.

"Come with me, son..."

He took me outside and showed me the sky. There were some of them flying up there, moving clouds.

"Look at 'em closely. Do y'all really think any o' them really care 'bout any of us earth ponies? They don't care 'bout whether or not it rains an' we have a strong harvest! They jes' lounge around the skies all day, goofin' off an' messin' about with their clouds!"

Their beautiful wings flapped in the air.

"But Pa, they eat the food we grow."

"But they dun' thank us fer it, do they? Nah, they wouldn't know hard work if it hit 'em in the head! Why would y'all want ta fly with them?"

"I..."

"They didn't notice when y'all tried ta fly, did they? Heck, they probably don't even see us right now! They don't care that ya hurt yerself tryin' ta fly with 'em! They don't even want you with 'em! Why would they want a 'lowly earth pony' ta fly with them?"

They never once looked down to the ground.

"Look at 'em, flappin' around like they own all of Equestria!"

Their legs kicked at the air, keeping them away from the earth. Away from us.

"Them and their fancy wings! Listen son, those no good horesey-pony-pidgeons think they're better'n us! They leech off our hard work 'n spend all day playin' with their clouds!"

One of them flew to his friends.

"Us earth ponies are the ones who work! We don't need no wings!"
They started laughing.

"They dun' care 'bout us!"
They were laughing at me.
"They are nuthin'!"

How dare they?

In the end, Macintosh didn't dress up at all for the evening. He'd almost made it out the door with his tie on, but was stopped by a chortling Applejack who assured him that if he wore that bright green and yellow tie he wouldn't be able to show his face in town for years. So he began his trek, unadorned and nervous. His harness provided a certain sense of comfort: almost like a brace against whatever the day could throw at him. Without it, he felt strangely...well, naked. He considered turning back to get it, but figured he may as well get used to not wearing it. After all, he couldn't wear it all the time right? He didn't need some silly pulling collar to be his identity.

The sun had just begun its descent by the time he left the farm, and as he entered town he caught sight of the clock tower, its face reading seven thirty.

"Now where did they say it was again?" he mumbled, glancing around anxiously at the streets which were significantly emptier than that afternoon. *Shoot, where is it?* His mind drew a blank. He remembered something about a tent, but other than that...

"Hey Big Macintosh!" he heard a familiar voice call out. Turning, he saw Rose trotting up to him. "On your way to the party?"

"Eeyup," he was relieved to no longer be alone, "but Ah forgot where it is."

She chuckled, pointing to the East. "It's just on the edge of town, that way. There's a big tent set up, so you can't miss it. I'm just closing up my shop right now, but would you like to go together?"

"Sounds good ta me," he smiled, his nervousness receding. He was becoming accustomed to being around others, and he found himself at ease around somepony as friendly as Rose. He followed her over to her flower cart, most of its inventory sold. The empty little cart looked oddly decrepit in the dim lighting, and without the presence of its two other owners it seemed rather...sad. Straightening up a few odds and ends and locking her bit-box behind a door, she pulled on a rope which dropped a

pair of wooden shutters over the cart with the word 'CLOSED' poorly painted on each and walked back to Macintosh.

"Oh, you aren't wearing your...Uh, thingy."

"Mah harness? Nah, figured Ah didn't need it."

"Oh, I see," she said, leading the way. They trotted together in silence for a bit before Rose spoke up. "So, how was your day? Anything exciting happen?"

"Eeyup, quite a bit, actually," he smiled, "definitely more'n Ah'm used to." He described some of the more interesting highlights of his day, and she hung on his words; she even gasped when he told about how he caught Cotton Cloudy in the nick of time. She was completely absorbed in his recounting, and they made it to the edge of town just as he finished the story of his day.

"Wow!" she marveled, "that's so cool! I wish I could have seen you race Rainbow Dash! You must be really fast!"

He blushed. "Ah'm sure Ah'm nuthin' special."

"Are you kidding!?" her emerald eyes were large with excitement, "you almost beat her and you were able to catch that falling filly! That's really incredible! You're really something!"

"Heh," he chuckled, embarrassed by her sudden shower of compliments. They stopped on top of a small hill which granted them a great vantage point of the setup below. There was a large, round tent erected in the middle of the small valley, and a few flashing lights from inside illuminated its fabric. It was big enough to hold probably at least a hundred ponies if they all squeezed together. Ponies were wandering around idly, waiting for the show to start, and there was even a pair of bouncer ponies standing vigil at the entrance in case things got out of control.

"Come on," she trotted down the hill, "we're just in time!" He followed, lagging behind a bit to enjoy the light show. The whole atmosphere was filled with excitement. Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad after all?

"OH BOY! CUPCAKES!"

Oh no.

SHE'S here.

He just barely caught sight of her curly pink tail bouncing through the crowd towards a table of snacks and desserts. Swallowing heavily he lowered his head and tried to back away, but as if sensing his fear she looked directly at him, her large blue eyes growing enormous.

Memories came flooding back as she began bouncing towards him.

The hoof-shake buzzer.

The cake.

The punch.

And... The clown.

Oh sweet Celestia in Canterlot, the CLOWN.

"Hiya Big Macintosh! I haven't seen you in like, forever! I mean, where've you been? Probably farming apples 'cause you're an apple farmer, I guess! I mean, duh, where else would you be! It's not like you were doing much of anything else, like flying into space or something! Oh! I knew this one pony who flew into space..." she rambled on, bouncing around him as he took a few shaky breaths, slowly continuing his walk to the tent. *Maybe if I just ignore her, she'll go away.*

"...I'll still never understand where she got that oatmeal, and even though I tried to warn her, she still threw it in and as soon as it hit the core, WELL!"

Guess not.

"Pinkie Pie," he said slowly and quietly. She stopped her blabbering and looked at him with large, expectant eyes.

"Stay away from me," he growled, turning and briskly trotting to the other side of the tent where he could have some time alone to think. He never looked back to her, but if he had, he would have seen a very emotionally injured pony.

He sat down against a nearby tree behind the tent, deep in thought. That pony...He didn't really know why he was so afraid of her, and even though every logical fibre of his body screamed at how irrational he was behaving, he couldn't help but feel terrified of her presence. *What am I afraid of? That she'll hurt me? I'm much too big to be hurt, much less by a filly like her.* Thinking back, he recalled the party she ruined. It was just supposed to be a simple birthday party, but instead it became a swirling torrent of pain and embarrassment. Everyone *laughed* at him.

He remembered what his father told him often about running the farm and a family: that once you lose your respect, you lose your authority, and the fastest way to lose your respect is to be laughed at. His ego took a severe blow from Pinkie's unexpected arrival into town and into his party, after he had so recently taken charge of the farm and the family. He was still very young, but he took it very seriously, and after she made a foal out of him, how could his family respect him any more? She made him *cry*. In front of his friends and family. How could he ever forgive her insolence?

Thinking about what she did, his fear slowly turned to disdain. He didn't want to let her get too close, worrying she might embarrass him again; not to mention her incredible reservoir of energy just wasn't a good match for his laid-back personality. Lily was random. Pinkie Pie was random on an infinite sugar rush. Luckily, he was able to avoid her any time he did need to come into town, and this was the first time he'd spoken to her in years. His gut wrenched as the harsh words he just said to her finally registered in his mind. *Still, she had it coming, didn't she?*

Didn't she?

"Macintosh?" Rose said. She had quietly walked up to him, startling him slightly. "Are you okay? What was that about?"

He sighed. "Ah'm sorry. Ah'm fine."

"I just saw you talk with Pinkie Pie and then run off."

Did I really run? "Ah jes' had a bad party experience with her once," he said, only telling part of the story.

"Haven't we all?" she laughed, "the first time she threw a party for me she lit my entire flower garden on fire. She never used fire-crackers at a party again. Still, she was so upset over the whole thing that she helped me replant the whole garden, and I just couldn't stay mad at her. She still gives me a free cupcake every time I visit her at the bakery."

Macintosh looked at the ground. In his mind, he could hear the warring voices of his mother and father...

"But honey, he said he was sorry-"

"No buts! Ah'm the head o' this family an' Ah won't have no son o' mine embarrassin' me like that!"

I pressed my ear against the door, trying to listen in.

"Is that all ya care about? Yer pride? Haven't ya ever once thought about how much it hurt Macintosh?"

"He jumped off the barn! Ah'm surprised he ain't dead!"

"But y'all didn't hafta be so harsh on him! Those things you said really hurt his feelings. You shoulda seen how much he cried!"

"If mah son ever wants ta become a stallion like me, he'll have ta learn not ta cry!"

Become like my father?

"Besides, Ah can't forgive him fer what he did ta mah reputation! When Ah'm not bein' scolded by all the mares in town fer bein' a bad parent and lettin' mah son plummet off roofs, Ah'm bein' laughed at by all

*the colts, askin' questions like 'So when's yer son gonna get his wings?'
Nopony laughs at me!"*

"But ya need ta forgive him!"

"No Ah don't!"

"Are you okay, Macintosh?"

"Huh?" his mind thrust back into reality, he looked up at Rose, who stared down at him, confused and concerned. "Oh, yeah, Ah'm fine. Jes'...thinkin'."

"Well come on, the others are waiting!" she smiled, and helped him to his hooves. He smiled back, relieved that she broke him out of that painful memory. The argument he overheard hurt him to hear, but the spanking he got for being caught eavesdropping hurt even more. *Become like my father...*

"Hey dude!" grinned Blues, who took a sip from his punch. They had just made their way inside the tent and quickly found the others, congregated around the snack bar.

"Hello Macintosh," Daisy nodded, smiling slightly upon seeing him. While most of the other ponies around were filled with excitement (and sugary treats), Daisy seemed oddly calm; maybe even a little bored.

"Hi BM!" Lily shouted. The others stared at her, aghast. "Oh, oops. That's probably not a good nickname."

Macintosh quickly brushed it off. "Hey Lily; good ta see you guys again."

"So you were able to come after all, eh?" Blues smirked.

"Eeyup."

"THAT'S IT!!" Blues exploded, pointing a hoof at Macintosh who took a step back.

"What's it!?" Rose panicked a little.

"At Winter Wrap Up! I was on the plant team and helped clear the fields! *That's* where I've seen you before!" he grinned, immensely satisfied with himself. Once he noticed all the others staring at him he threw up his hooves. "Hey, I *said* it would bother me all day..."

"Wow, Blues," Lily giggled, "you're pretty slow sometimes."

"Story of my life," he shrugged.

Macintosh chuckled, and as he helped himself to some punch a light red, blonde earth filly with a cherry cutie mark trotted over to Blues, passing him a cupcake.

"Thanks, Cherry!" he grinned, nuzzling the filly, "Macintosh, I'd like you to meet my fillyfriend, Cherry! She runs a cherry stand in town." She smiled pleasantly at him.

"Howdy!" smiled Mac.

"Excuse me," Daisy said suddenly, briskly leaving the group.

"What's her problem?" asked Cherry. Blues shrugged and Rose sighed, but before anypony could say anything the lights in the tent faded completely and a loud voice boomed over the speakers.

"Attention, everypony! Are you ready to party?"

"Yeah!" the crowd cheered, Lily screaming particularly loudly.

"I said, ARE YOU READY TO PARTY!?"

"YEAH!!!"

"Then stomp your hooves for...DJ PON-3!!!" The crowd burst into cheers as the colored lights exploded into a frenzy, illuminating a white, blue maned unicorn wearing sunglasses who stood behind a turntable. Suddenly a heavy, incredibly loud beat spread through the tent, followed by pulsing electronic techno, Macintosh's ears instinctively folded back at the intense volume.

"THAT'S VINYL SCRATCH!" Blues shouted, his voice only barely audible over the loud music.

"IT'S A LI'L LOUD, AIN'T IT!?" shouted Big Mac, but his complaint went completely unheard by the crowd of ponies who began hopping and dancing in time to the rhythm. Big Mac could feel the thumping beat rumble in his chest, even shaking the ground he stood on. He had to bring his hooves to his ears; they felt about ready to bleed. "WHAT IN TARNATION IS THIS NOISE!?" He had never heard anything this loud before. "HOW CAN ANYPONY ENJOY MUSIC THIS LOUD!?" His voice was completely lost under the trance inducing music, which was just too much for him to process. Coupled with the pulsating, flashing lights he felt his knees go weak. *Air. I need air!*

He pushed his way through the crowd, making a mad dash for the exit. When he finally made it out into the field, the music was still loud enough to pound in his chest, but at least it didn't sting his ears anymore. He strolled away from the tent, making his way for the other side of the field. From this distance he could actually make out the individual notes and tunes in the song, and even though it wasn't to his taste, he could at least recognize it as music now. *Why in Equestria would anypony want to*

listen to music that loud? He strolled through the now empty valley, the tent behind lighting up the sky with dozens of colors in a radiant glow. Although it was a wonderful sight, the music was still too loud for his liking, so he continued his walk through the field. Off in the distance, he caught sight of something yellow and pink scampering between the trees in pursuit of a small, white animal. Getting closer, he recognized them as the yellow pegasus from that morning chasing a small white bunny who was doing his best to get to the tent.

"No, Angel!" she pleaded, finally getting a hold of the critter with her hooves, "that sort of place isn't for a small bunny like you! You could be hurt or stepped on!" The rabbit kicked, trying to get away from her but she tightened her grip. "Besides, that loud music could hurt your ears! If you come home I promise I'll buy a big carrot cake for you tomorrow!" he glared up at her. "Okay, two carrot cakes." He finally resigned himself, nodded his head and began bouncing away towards home. She sighed and plumped herself down against a tree. Macintosh approached slowly, the distant rhythm of music hiding his hoofsteps.

"Howdy," he said as gently as he could, but the pegasus still yelped and jumped slightly. Once she recognized him, she calmed down. A little.

"Oh, um...Hi," she said quietly, her head low.

"Look, Ah think we kinda got off on the wrong hoof today. Mah name's Big Macintosh. But y'all can jes' call me Macintosh, or Big Mac, or Mac, or whatever suits ya."

"Um...I'm...Fluttershy."

"Howdy Fluttershy!"

"Um...Hi."

Macintosh scuffed his hoof, taken aback at just how reclusive this pony was. She made him look like a party animal in comparison.

"So, uh, that critter...Ah mean, that rabbit. He a pet o' yers?" he said, causing her face to lighten up a little.

"Oh, yes, Angel Bunny is a very special friend of mine, but I wouldn't call him a pet," she smiled, "he's really wonderful, even if he has trouble listening sometimes..."

"Ya seem ta be pretty good with animals." At that, her eyes glowed.

"I love taking care of small creatures! It's my special gift, you know. Really, I enjoy helping anything in need, from small animals to injured ponies. Sometimes I volunteer at the hospital when I have time," a bit of courage seemed to be building inside the mare as she stood straighter, "how about you? You're Applejack's brother, right?"

"Eeyup."

She looked at him sideways. "Do you enjoy working on the farm?"

"Ah s'pose, it's a livin'," he said slowly. She looked deeply at him, as if sensing his apprehension, but quickly broke her gaze. The next few moments were filled with silence.

"Um," Macintosh cleared his throat, "Ah was kinda wonderin'...Or, I was jes' curious about..."

"My wings?" she said suddenly, her eyes focused on the ground. Stunned, Macintosh stuttered over his next words.

"Uh, yeah, actually...Why were ya so keen on me keepin' them a secret?"

She sighed, and met his gaze with her large eyes. "I...suppose I should tell you...But...not here," she glanced around, "come to my cottage tomorrow morning. I mean...If that's all right with you...If you're free..."

"Sure thing, Ah'll be there," he said. She smiled awkwardly and turned to leave. "Hey, listen," he called out after her, "if'n y'all dun' want ta talk 'bout it..."

"No, I think...I would like to," her smile became authentic, "I'll see you tomorrow, then." She flew off, her regular length wings flapping stiffly in the air. Macintosh suddenly resumed breathing, the tense air finally lifting. *It's just so strange being around that one...She seems a little...Familiar?*

He stood there for a few moments longer until he heard the music slowing down. Canterng back in the direction of the tent a new song picked up, but it wasn't as loud or intense. The bouncers eyed him as he approached the tent, but being smaller than him they didn't say anything about his strange departure or return. Inside, the lights had become more steady, illuminating all the ponies inside, including the white unicorn at the back, still bobbing her head in time to the beat as she adjusted a few knobs on her station. Standing a little ways in were his friends, who called him over.

"Macintosh!" Rose asked, "is everything all right?"

"Yeah, you just kinda took off for no reason," said Blues, Cherry still clinging to his side.

"Sorry 'bout that," Mac said sheepishly, "Ah jes' ain't used ta music bein' so loud."

"You get used to it," smiled Lily as she chewed on a cupcake, "then you start to like it, and then love it, and pretty soon your ears bleed and you go deaf! And then you can only hear music when it's that loud! It's awesome!"

He stared at her, horrified.

"She's just kidding," chuckled Blues, "don't listen to her."

"Oh, ah ha ha," Mac forced a laugh.

"Hey Blues!" Lily shouted suddenly, "I think I see Rarity over there! Do you still have both your eyes?"

"Shut up!" Blues yelled, greatly annoyed, "It's not funny!" The others all laughed, Mac chuckled awkwardly and, looking around, noticed somepony was still missing. "Say, where's Daisy?"

"I dunno," answered Lily, "she still hasn't come back."

"I swear that Daisy pony isn't right in the head," grumbled Cherry. Blues shot her an injured look.

"Hey, c'mon, she's not bad, you just got to get her to break out of her shell."

"Oh, you know all about breaking a filly's shell..." Cherry cooed, playing with his mane.

"Ew, get a room you two!" Lily shouted dramatically, covering both hers and Macintosh's eyes. Laughing, he looked off into the crowd. Everypony was enjoying their evening, dancing in time to the music or eating snacks, or both in some cases, causing them to miss their mouths. One pony tried his best to bob his head with the beat and take a drink at the same time, and was rewarded with a straw up his left nostril. He even spotted Cheerilee, who was wearing a checkered neckerchief and dancing with her friends, a tan coated, indigo and pink maned mare and the same cyan unicorn filly from earlier. Bouncing merrily through the crowd was Pinkie Pie, who locked eyes with Mac for just a second, her smile faltering before she bounded away again. *I don't want her to embarrass me in front of my new friends*, he thought bitterly.

"Is that all ya care about? Yer pride?"

"What are you looking at?" asked Lily, who pressed her head against Mac's, snapping him back to reality.

"Oh, uh, nuthin'," he stammered, backing away.

"Nuthin', or *nuthin*?"

"Um, neither?"

"Oooh!" she winked at him. *What in the world is with this pony?* he questioned, smirking at her antics.

"So, that white unicorn..." Mac began.

"Vinyl Scratch!" Blues cut him off, grinning. Cherry rolled her eyes.

"Er, yeah. What's she do, exactly?"

"She's the DJ," continued Blues, "she chooses the music for things like this. She also does remixes and a lot of originals as well. That song she just played was a new one of hers; it was pretty cool."

"Yeah!" grinned Lily, "I liked the part where it went boom-boom-wao-wao-wao-vreentvreentvreent-nooooorn!"

"Did y'all get a chance ta talk ta her b'fore the show started?" asked Big Mac. Blues shot him a glare and became flustered as the others all fixed their gazes upon him.

"I, uh, I-I, well, um, n-no, she's...uh, too busy."

"Why would you want to talk to DJ PON-3, Blues?" Rose asked innocently.

Mac answered for him. "Because he wanted ta show her his-"

"-Autograph book! Yeah, and get her to sign it!" Blues blurted, shaking his head at Macintosh.

"Oh, okay," said Rose, satisfied. Cherry stared sideways at her nervously grinning coltfriend, and Lily eyed him suspiciously.

"Really?" Lily probed, her eyebrow cocked.

"Yes, really," gulped Blues.

"You're not writing more of that weird mu-"

"No!" he shouted, "ahahaha, I told you I'm not anymore!"

"Really?" Lily's lips curled into a mischievous grin, "so you don't want to show her your 'Underwater Ferris Wheel' song?"

"Shut up! I wrote that in grade school!" he stammered, "I've gotten a lot better since then!"

"HA! I knew it!" she giggled, "I knew that was why you wanted to go tonight!" Blues glared up at Macintosh, who was shuffling uncomfortably. *Well, pony feathers. What did I just do?* He looked for any sort of escape from the quarrel, and noticed Lightning Bolt trotting up to him, smiling. *Oh, thank Celestia.*

"Hello again!" she smiled. He cantered over, away from his group of friends who were too busy teasing Blues to notice him leave. She looked him over, her white coat mimicking the colors of the overhead lights. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've been properly introduced."

"Ah overheard the other pegasus ponies call ya Lightnin' Bolt," he said, "mah name's Macintosh, or Big Macintosh, or whatever works fer ya."

"Well Macintosh, I wanted to thank you again for saving my daughter. When I told my husband about what you did, he insisted on meeting you, so we were wondering if you'd like to come over to our place tomorrow for brunch?"

“Well Ah’d love ta,” he grinned, “but really, alls Ah did was mah duty as a pony of Equestria.”

“And a fine pony you are,” she remarked, “it’s the least we can do as thanks.” She gave him the directions to her place and confirmed the time before she left the party, heading back into town. Mac followed her partway to the entrance to get a look at the outside world. The sun had fallen behind the horizon but a bit of golden light still bloomed under the navy blue sky. Only one or two stars were visible, and the moon hadn’t yet risen into the sky, so this would officially be considered twilight. He thought about the purple unicorn with the same name for a moment, briefly wondering what book she was buried in now, but his thoughts were broken at the sight of a streak of rainbow whizzing through the cool air. It slowed down for just a moment, revealing it to be Rainbow Dash. She was trying to do some sort of roll, keeping her legs outstretched and her wings tucked in. It didn’t go so well and she skid onto the grass a couple dozen yards from the tent.

“Howdy Rainbow,” shouted Big Mac as he trotted over. She swiftly jumped to her hooves, trying to look casual.

“Oh, hey there! I musta got hit by a crosswind or something,” she said, gasping for air. She stared at him for a moment, tilting her head. “I didn’t take you for a party pony, Big Mac!”

“Well, Ah’m not, really,” he chuckled, “but mah friends invited me, and it’s not too bad, jes’ loud. What’re y’all doin’ way out here?”

“Practicing!” she hovered in the air, her slim wings effortlessly keeping her aloft.

“Fer?”

“The WonderBolts! Only the greatest flyers in all of Equestria!” she pounded her chest, face beaming with pride at extolling her idols to anypony who would listen, “I’m totally going to get into their ranks someday, and even become their captain!”

“Wow, sounds like y’all got big plans.”

“You better believe it! I’m gonna be famous!” she did a little spin in the air, striking a pose, “then everypony will know I’m the most mega-awesome pony around!”

“Ah know somepony who already thinks that,” grinned Macintosh. She spun to face him, her rose eyes a mix of shock and excitement.

“Who? Who!?”

“A li’l pegasus pony Ah met t’day named Scootaloo,” Mac said. Rainbow’s face fell for a moment as she returned to the ground, but she quickly put on her best indifferent expression.

"Oh, yeah, that little filly recognizes me for the greatness I am," she said, her voice a little uncertain.

"She told me how much she wants ta fly jes' like you."

"Yeah, I know," she said sadly, kicking at the grass, "I mean, I enjoy being a role model, but she kind of cramps my style sometimes...I mean, she can't even fly yet, and she keeps asking me to show her tricks and stuff."

"She can't fly yet?" Mac said, tilting his head, "Huh. Well, Ah guess we all got ta start somewhere."

"I guess, but I kinda feel bad for her. Um..." she looked around, making sure no one was within earshot, and beckoned him to come a little closer. "I'm going to tell you something, but you have to promise not to tell anyone. You're Applejack's brother, so I know you'll keep your promise."

He nodded and stepped forward to hear her whispers as she sat onto the grass. He did the same. She sighed, looking around thoughtfully before speaking.

"I talked to Scootaloo's parents a while back. They wanted to thank me for spending so much time with her, but they also told me that...Well, it's possible she may never be able to fly."

"What?"

"Her wings are too small. I mean, it's possible they might suddenly grow in, but it looks unlikely. She should be able to at least fly a little by now, but her wings are still too little."

Macintosh stared at the grass, his mind racing. *I thought it was bad enough not having wings and being stuck on the ground. But HAVING wings and being unable to fly? That almost sounds like torture.*

"I feel bad for her," sighed Rainbow, "it's like I'm showing her the life she could never have. I've even seen her try her best over and over to fly, and I know she wants to more than anything, but..." she trailed off, absentmindedly fiddling with the grass. Macintosh stared into the night sky, a few more stars appearing within its dark canopy. To be denied your own birthright...fate could be cruel sometimes. Mac knew this from experience. *I wonder how many others are out there, wishing to touch the sky while trapped on the ground.* He'd only spoken to Applejack once about his dreams of flight, but she couldn't empathize with him. She was completely satisfied with life as an earth pony, and from the pleasant demeanors of others he had met, they seemed to feel the same: perfectly content with their lot in life. He looked down at his cutie mark, a green apple half, seeds exposed. It felt more like a branding to him, marking him as an apple farmer for life rather than a symbol expressing his 'special talent.'

“Do...” he said suddenly and softly, “do ya think it’s possible...ta get a cutie mark ya don’t want?” From the side of his eye he could see her stunned expression as she looked at him before she glanced down at her own cutie mark.

“I...Dunno. I’m not really a philosopher like Twilight is. You should ask her.” They stared into the sky for a few moments longer until the pegasus stood up. “I’m going to get going. It’s pretty late. You’ll keep your promise though, right?”

“Of course,” replied Big Mac as he remained seated on the cool grass.

“All right, I’ll see you later then,” she said as she zipped off into the sky. He watched her leave, her blue wings gracefully carrying her through the air.

Over to the East the moon had just begun its ascent, its clear ivory face shining down upon the world. Macintosh still wasn’t used to seeing it without the visage of the Mare in the Moon upon its surface, but its disappearance was a pleasant reminder of how drastically things can change, and how some old pony tales turn out to be real. One common tale among foals was to wish upon the stars and the princess who guided them. When Macintosh was young he made such wishes almost every night for a pair of large, colorful wings of his own. His wishes halted after his disastrous flight attempt that landed him in the hospital, but sitting here now he felt a sudden urge to make that wish again.

“Star light, star bright,” he started, picking a large, brilliantly gleaming star, “diamond up in Luna’s night, hear mah cry, hear mah plight, an’ grant me the wish Ah make t’night,” he recited softly, but stopped when a thought hit him. The old poem mentioned Princess Luna, but nopony really knew who she was before she was freed last year. *She was the Mare in the Moon*, he realized all at once, *and she’s just as real as anything else*. He never really thought about it before, and he suddenly wondered if Princess Luna had heard all his wishes from his youth while she was in the moon. He had only seen her for a brief while at the ‘Summer Sun Celebration’ last year, but he was enraptured by her beautiful appearance. Her navy coat, her flowing blue mane that seemed to glisten with a hundred stars and her long, graceful wings. He would never forget the way she looked at him for just a moment: her large eyes that seemed to glow like the moon itself pierced his soul, and he had felt, just for an instant, that she knew all about him. It wasn’t until just now that he understood that feeling. *She heard my wishes. She probably knows me better than anypony else*. He felt very

vulnerable, looking up at her moon, wondering if she was watching him right now.

With a deep sigh, he restarted his new poem, making a wish he'd never made before....

*"Star light, star bright,
Diamond up in Luna's night,
Hear my cry, hear my plight,
Grant me the wish I make tonight.*

*So many wrongs to be made right,
Landing all within your sight.
Princess would you please alight
On Earth before the dawning light,*

*To visit those who dream they might
Someday own the gift of flight.
Cast your gaze upon the sight
Of one denied her own birthright*

*Please O Princess of the Night,
Dear Luna with your stars so bright,
Use your magic to make right
Destiny's cruel act of spite*

*Star light, star bright,
By the ivory moonlight,
Before the darkest hour of night,
Please grant the wish I make tonight."*

The moonlit sky gave no response, but Macintosh thought he felt a presence. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw a deep blue figure, but as he turned to look it vanished. He suddenly felt very serene, his wish made in more sincerity than any he had made as a foal. Staring into the star-filled canopy, he still longed for the ability to soar among the clouds, but if given the choice, he would gladly give up that gift to the one who deserved it more than he.

After watching the stars shine for a few more minutes he returned to the tent and bid his friends a goodnight. They invited him to meet up again tomorrow, which he happily accepted.

The trip back to the farm was unusually peaceful for the large stallion, and he was suddenly filled with a feeling of excitement for the day ahead.

"Princess Luna," he said softly, glancing again at the shining moon, "Ah sure hope Ah get ta meet ya someday."

Chapter 6

Father walked back and forth. He took off his hat. He put it on again.

Took it off, put it on. He nibbled on it a little.

I never saw him like this before.

A white pony walked in.

"You can come now," she said.

"C'mon son," said father.

We walked for a bit. I heard crying.

I followed father to a room. Mother was in the room, in the bed. She looked very sleepy.

She was holding something. Something that was crying.

"Look, honey," mother said.

"She's beautiful! Macintosh, come look!"

I walked over so I could see.

It was a pony. A tiny pony. It was crying.

"Ah want ya ta meet yer little sister, Macintosh."

The small pony opened its eyes. They were green.

"Say hello to Applejack."

Big Macintosh's desire to sleep and his internal alarm clock didn't get along the next morning. He was worn out from yesterday, but his body was trained to get up just before the sunrise, and try as he might he simply couldn't fall asleep again. As he buried his head under his covers, last night's events replayed in his mind. He had let himself quietly inside the house, and found Applejack and Granny Smith talking in the living room. They asked him about the party, but there wasn't much to say. When they asked if he had a good time, he had to think on it for a moment before responding: yes, he did have a good time.

A few rays of sunlight seeped into Mac's room and clean through his covers, destroying any possibility of further sleep. Reluctantly he stood up, wiped his eyes and put on his harness. *Wednesday morning*, he thought bitterly, *you and I have never got along*. Just as he was about to leave his room he stopped, and looked down to his old pulling collar, its stitching a little torn in places but still hanging together. He was going to town again

today, did he need to wear it? He found himself torn between the desire to bring it and to leave it. To wear it felt comfortable and made him feel secure, but he wasn't going to be working, at least not for the morning, so why bring it along? Finally, he hoisted it off his neck and replaced it on the bedpost. As he did, his eye caught sight of the small picture frame upon his desk. The desk was nearly bare save for the photograph, but to him it was a valuable enough item to deserve the space. Stepping over, he took a look at it, something he hadn't done for a few weeks.

It was a picture of his family, just after Apple Bloom was born and after Granny Smith had moved in. His mother was holding the newborn and his father was standing tall and proud above his other two children, who were smiling happily. He remembered that it was a good day: the family spent it in town, visiting the bakery and playing in the park to celebrate Apple Bloom's birth. She was too small to do anything other than cry and murmur and look around, but it was still a lot of fun for them all. Granny Smith always had difficulty using the camera, but she was able to take a great picture. Sunlight had slightly faded the colors in the photograph, but Mac could still make out his mother's pink bow in her mane. She always wore that bow, just as father always wore his hat and harness. It took a while for Big Mac to properly grow into it, but that harness was built so well he never had the need to replace it. It served him well, and he briefly wondered what his father would think if he saw it hanging sadly on the bedpost. *It's only for the morning*, thought Macintosh, *I promise I'll work extra hard this afternoon*. So he left it there and walked out of his room.

"Mornin' Big Macintosh," Applejack said as her brother strolled into the kitchen. She was chewing on an apple and looking over a long piece of parchment sprawled out across the table. "Yer up late t'day. Where's yer harness?"

"Ah was tired out from last night," he yawned, grabbing an apple for himself. Once seated, he saw the parchment was a long list of duties and appointments for the day. "An' Ah won't be needin' mah harness this mornin'."

"But there's a lot o' work ta do t'day, and we'd better get started," she said, rolling up her list and swallowing the rest of her breakfast, "shouldn't y'all get yer pullin' collar?"

"Uh, actually, AJ," Macintosh chewed his lip for a moment, "Ah've got some appointments of mah own this mornin'."

His sister eyed him suspiciously. "Ya do?"

"Eeyup."

She glared at him for a few seconds. Macintosh recognized that look: she was trying to gauge his honesty. It was one of those 'you'd better not be lying to me or else' looks that she had perfected over the years. He remembered how she'd giddily told him a year ago how she'd been chosen as the Spirit of the Element of Honesty, and he never doubted that. She somehow had the ability to see right through anypony's lies like they were glass. He'd seen her use that look on Caramel (a hired hoof for Winter Wrap Up) when he tried to cover up losing the grass seeds the first time, but Macintosh was surprised she'd try it on her own brother. Eyes unwavering and locked upon hers he steadily met her gaze, and after she was satisfied he was telling the truth she looked away.

"All right," she finally said, "I s'pose ya should keep yer appointments, but I'll need yer help this afternoon. We'll hafta work double time ta finish in time t'day. Ah was hopin' y'all could organize the woodshed in the northern field t'day."

"Y'all know Ah'd never lie ta ya AJ," Mac said slowly as he finished his apple, "b'sides, Ah'm a terrible liar."

"I know, but it's jes' so unusual fer ya. Ya've never missed a mornin' o' work b'fore. Still, I guess if y'all are finally gettin' out there an' meetin' folk it's a good thing." She adjusted her hat and trotted to the front door. Turning back she smiled at him. "I'm glad yer finally makin' somethin' out of yerself." She closed the door behind her quietly, not wanting to wake the other two members of the family.

I suppose I am finally doing something, Mac reflected, something other than apple farming. His sister was an extremely hard worker, sometimes at her own detriment, so he knew she could handle the workload alone, but he still felt bad for not fulfilling his duties to the farm. *I promised I'd meet those ponies today, and a member of the Apple Family always keeps their promises.* But didn't he also promise to always take care of the farm and his family? Wasn't this breaking one promise to keep another? Which was more important? *I'll be working extra hard this afternoon to make up for it. Besides, this is what my family wants, right?*

He stepped out onto his front porch. The morning light shone brightly across the world, the sun only barely resting above the horizon. The Princess Celestia rose it every day to give warmth and light to ponies across Equestria, sustenance to their crops and harvests which in turn sustained them. Without the sun...Macintosh silently thanked the Princess again for her brilliant gift. Swaying gently in the breeze were a few stalks of hay poking out amongst the damp grass; he plucked one for himself to chew on the way as he did almost every morning, out of habit more than

anything. He shifted it between his teeth, his mind still turning over promises he'd made. Being an honest sort, breaking a promise was an alien concept to him. An Apple always kept his word. But what if keeping a promise meant breaking another, or what if only afterwards you learned that keeping the promise could hurt someone else? What if by breaking a promise you opened a window for a great opportunity? These thoughts drifted around his mind, but no clear answers presented themselves. He did settle on one truth, however: that breaking a promise would always hurt the one that you made the promise to. Hooves treading the hard dirt, he set the idea to rest, satisfied with his conclusion.

By now he had entered town, the streets just barely coming to life. While yesterday he felt uneasy and nervous, today he felt a sort of welcoming, as though the town was glad to see his return. He sauntered his way through the cool roads, easily remembering the way to Fluttershy's home. As he turned the last corner the cottage came into view, and outside tending to her chickens was the pegasus, her golden coat glistening in the early light. Smiling, he cantered over, softly treading the grass still moist with morning dew.

"Good mornin' Fluttershy," he said cheerfully. As seemed to be the norm for her, she jumped slightly at his voice.

"Oh, hello Big Macintosh," she smiled, recovering, "how...how are you this morning?"

"Ah'm doin' jes' dandy," grinned the stallion, "an' yerself?"

"I'm well. I'm just collecting the eggs right now, please, go ahead inside. I'll join you in a moment...If you're okay with that."

"Would y'all like any help?"

"Oh...No, thank you. The chickens are scared easily by others," she popped her head inside the coop, from which came soft clucking, "Elisabeak, you need to let me have them!" Mac heard scuffling and loud clucking, and eventually Fluttershy returned with a few more eggs in her basket. "I'll be finished soon. Please, go ahead and make yourself at home...If you want."

Macintosh smiled and did as he was very politely suggested, stepping inside her cottage. The inside of her home stunned the red pony: dozens of little critters played or scampered about the floor, gophers and birds squeaked to each other, a family of mice danced around the table legs and the white bunny from last night was snarfing down a large slice of carrot cake. Said bunny eyed him warily as he stepped into the house, and kept an eye focused on Mac as he made his way to the couch. A few

hedgehogs were curled up between its pillows, so he carefully sat on the opposite side. Many of the smaller animals scurried away at his large presence, but none of them seemed particularly afraid of him. He gave them their space, and they in turn were friendly.

After a few minutes Fluttershy returned carrying a basket full of eggs which she placed on the table. "Sorry about making you wait," she said demurely, "would you like some tea?"

"No, thanks," he grimaced, remembering his last encounter with a teacup, "Ah'm fine."

"Oh...Okay then," she said softly as she attended briefly to a couple of squirrels, dividing a pile of nuts evenly between the pair.

"Y'all are really great with animals," Macintosh marveled as she moved on to help a little bird to its food.

"Oh, thank you," she smiled, trotting over to a cushioned chair and sitting, "It really is what I love to do. I love helping all animals, although there's a special place in my heart for butterflies." As if on cue, a large, blue butterfly glided through an open window, fluttering about the room. "They were the very first creatures I encountered on the ground, and they even became my cutie mark." As the butterfly rested in her mane she looked down contentedly at her cutie mark, a trio of pink butterflies. "I noticed your cutie mark is an apple...Not that I was looking, or anything..."

"Eeyup, everypony on mah pa's side o' the family has an apple fer a cutie mark," he said slowly, "Ah guess we ain't called the Apple Family fer nuthin'."

"So I suppose your special talent must be working with apples, just like Applejack?"

"Yeah, Ah s'pose," he answered bluntly. His eyes darted around the room, barely managing to take in the sight of so many animals at once. The bunny named Angel was starting on his second slice of cake, still keeping a disdainful eye on the red stallion. Fluttershy played absentmindedly with a mouse that had scurried over. Grateful for the sounds of the animals filling in the awkward silence, Macintosh took a deep breath. "Ah guess we're avoidin' the elephant in the room."

"What!? Where!?" she shrieked, curling into a ball and shuddering. The butterfly took to the air a moment before it alighted again on her head.

"Um, Ah jes' meant we're beatin' around the bush."

"Oh no! The poor little quails live in the bushes!"

"No, Ah meant that we're not discussin' the obvious topic."

"Oh, right..." she calmed down, sighing deeply. "My wings." She thoughtfully looked around the room, clearly gathering her thoughts.

Macintosh sat and waited patiently; out of the corner of his eye he saw Angel shaking his head in annoyance.

"Well..." Fluttershy said, a little shakily, "I suppose I should start at the beginning...I was born in Cloudsdale. I was born with abnormally large wings," her wings fluttered slightly, still pressed against her sides. "The doctors said it shouldn't be a problem, but my wings kept growing larger than anypony else's. By the time I was mid-way through grade school my wings were already fully grown. I couldn't fly well at all because they were so large and hard to control, but I also didn't get much practice. I tried to keep my wings hidden as much as I could."

"Why's that?" asked Mac.

"All the young fillies in my school compared wings, and the one with the longest wings became the most popular. Of course, my wings were much longer than any of their's, but I didn't want that kind of attention," she sighed as she let a lock of pink hair fall across her face, "I hate being the center of attention. And I certainly didn't want all the colts to follow me around like they would with the other fillies. I just wanted to be left alone."

"So, I never opened my wings in public. My parents told me to be proud of my wings...but I didn't want them. I still don't want them. Because of these long things I can hardly fly at all." She sat in silence for a bit, her eyes unfocused, peering back into her distant memories. The blue butterfly in her hair shifted a little. "By the time I was old enough to go to Summer Flight Camp, my wings were already longer than a grown pegasus' wings, but I was still terrible at flying. I didn't have my cutie mark yet either, so I was teased a lot. I really didn't want to go to camp, but my parents had to leave Cloudsdale for a while and there wasn't anyone else I could stay with."

"The first day the camp leaders gathered us all up and wanted us to show them how well we could fly. Of course, they just *had* to pick me first. As I was preparing to fly I was praying to Celestia that nopony would notice my wings. I started crying, and I felt my wings tingle a little. When I opened them and looked back, they were half as long as normal! I flew even worse with them so short, and I was made fun of for that, but at least nopony saw my long wings."

"Wait," Big Mac interrupted, "Ah dun' understand. Why were yer wings short all of a sudden? How did that happen?"

She smiled. "Like this." She unfurled her wings to their full length. Incredible and shining, they nearly reached the ceiling. Long, golden feathers lined the slender frame; even seated across from him, if she wanted she could easily touch Macintosh with them. His jaw suddenly

hanging slack he saw a faint blue glow surrounding her wings for just an instant (it was so faint that if you weren't watching, you wouldn't have even noticed), and they began folding upon themselves, their tips now pressed against her sides. Looking closely, Macintosh could see the crease in her wings where they squeezed together, but to anypony else they would just look like normal pegasus wings. Macintosh could only watch in wide-eyed wonder.

"I'm able to extend them half-way and hide them," she did her best to conceal her amusement at his shock, her cheeks blushing slightly.

"But..." Big Mac finally managed to breathe again, "don't that hurt?"

"Yes, it does hurt a little to keep them like this, and it's very uncomfortable to fly, but I've gotten used to it. It's worth it to avoid the attention."

"But!" Mac sputtered, "But! How!?"

"I'm not really sure, but I have an idea..." she said as she pressed her wings against her sides again. The butterfly fluttered through the air a moment, resting on her ear. "My grandmother was a unicorn. She passed away before I was born, but my parents told me how unicorn magic can sometimes skip a generation. Somehow, some of my grandmother's magic was passed on to me. Using it, I can hide my wings so well."

"Um," Macintosh was trying to wrap his head around this sudden influx of new information and possibilities, "did ya get any other magical abilities?"

"I believe so," she said softly, "I think the magic is partly responsible for my ability to communicate with animals so well. I also have a bit of power in my eyes, but I try not to use it that often..." she locked eyes with him and he found himself lost in their deep aqua sea. He felt compelled to do whatever she might ask, but she quickly removed her gaze. "My father didn't have any magical powers at all, so my parents were very surprised when they saw what I could do."

"Near the end of Summer Flight Camp I met Rainbow Dash. She saw me practicing and wanted to help teach me how to fly with my wings half-extended."

"So, Rainbow knows about yer wings too?"

"Yes... You and her are the only ones. Besides my parents, of course. Rainbow Dash didn't really know how to teach me to fly, but she stayed loyal to me and tried anyway. She helped me out and gave me lots of ideas of my own. She still gives me some advice every now and then, even if she can get a bit frustrated sometimes." She smiled at the memories, brushing her hair aside and causing the blue butterfly to fly

away. "After a lot of experimenting and practicing, I was finally able to fly with only half-length wings." She allowed her 'normal length' wings to flap a bit. "I was able to use some of those ideas to help my little bird friends learn to fly as well." She whistled softly, and in response a little orange bird flew over to her, resting upon her hoof. "This little one was born with a tiny wing," she held out the bird's wings (it made no attempt to get away; rather, it seemed to enjoy it) to reveal that one wing was only about a third the length of the other. "Thanks to my difficulties with my own wings, I was able to find a way to teach him how to fly with such a bad wing. Thank you, Nemo," she smiled as the bird chirped and flew off to a little bird house in the corner. She gasped, and looked at Macintosh with large eyes, as though she was suddenly struck with inspiration.

"You know," she said, "now that I think about it, if it weren't for my bad wings I wouldn't have been able to help little Nemo. In fact, I would never have come to the ground at all, and never would have found my cutie mark! I suppose...I suppose I am thankful for these wings after all." A warm smile spread across her face as she extended her wings to full length again, filling the room with their golden brilliance. They sat in silence for a moment, basking in the glow of the morning sun reflecting off her tremendous wings.

"Um..." she said after a moment, "I wanted to say...Thank you, for listening. I'm usually the one that others talk to, so...I don't talk much. I...It felt good to finally tell somepony else. And thank you for helping me realize that my wings aren't so bad after all."

Macintosh smiled, but he hardly heard what she said. His mind was connecting the dots one by one until the next course of action became obvious.

"Y'all can help ones with small wings ta fly, right?" he said, a grin spreading across his face.

"Um...That's right," she said, tucking her wings to her sides again.

This is great! Why, with Fluttershy's help I bet little Scootaloo will learn to fly in no time! When Rainbow Dash hears about...

Wait.

He felt his heart fall into his stomach. *I made a promise. I promised that I wouldn't tell anyone about Scootaloo's wings.*

"Why do you ask?" Fluttershy asked earnestly.

"Oh, um..." he stuttered, "no reason, it's jes' really amazin', is all..."

She smiled and nestled into her chair, blushing slightly. *I can't break a promise. I swore to keep it a secret. But it could really help Scootaloo! She could finally learn to fly!* The warring voices in his head were giving

him a splitting headache. What could he do? *Well, I suppose I could just tell Rainbow Dash. Yeah! Then she could talk to Fluttershy and-*

"Oh...um..." Fluttershy began, "please don't tell Rainbow Dash I told you."

Well, horse apples.

"I mean, if that's okay..." the pegasus continued, "She feels badly that she wasn't really able to teach me to fly. Even though without her help I never would have learned, she still feels that she failed...And she hates failing. Oh...Please don't tell her I said that."

"Uhh..." Macintosh muttered, licking his dry lips, "Ah promise..."

"Thank you," said the mare. Off in the distance, Mac could hear the faint strike of the clock tower. "Oh, goodness," Fluttershy hopped to her hooves, "I need to go check on the badgers!" She trotted to the door, holding it open for the stallion who rose and made his way for the exit, feeling a little lightheaded. "Thank you again for listening...And for promising to keep it between us."

"Eh...Yeah, no problem," he chuckled nervously as they stepped outside. The sun was still low in the sky but it had already brightened up the valley before them considerably. In this light he could see the river run through the forest and between some hills where dozens of small animals played along its banks. He could see it if he was paying attention, that is, but his head was entirely racked with uncertainty and confusion. *What happens now?*

"I need to go, so let's talk again later?" Fluttershy smiled as she cantered through the grass towards a small hill. Macintosh could only raise his hoof to wave goodbye.

He had managed to find himself in the middle of a most interesting situation.

"Macintosh! Pay attention!"

"Huh?"

Father smacked me lightly on the head. It hurt anyway.

"Y'all need ta pay attention! This is important stuff here!"

"But I dun' wanna..."

"Son, if y'all are gonna run the farm someday, y'all need ta know this stuff!"

"But I dun' wanna run the farm!"

He hit me again.

"No buts!"

He sighed.

"Look out there, son."

He pointed outside. I could see Mother and Applejack kicking trees.

Applejack was so small, but apples still fell for her. Father touched his hat.

"Even li'l Applejack can buck trees. She'll grow into a fine mare someday, but y'all are gonna be the head o' this family someday, son! It'll be yer responsibility ta keep the farm runnin'."

"But..."

"Listen, son. Ah love ya. Ah hope ya know that. An' Ah love yer mother an' yer sister too. Because Ah love 'em, Ah work the farm ta support 'em, and you. It's Apple Family tradition ta run the farm, an' Ah want ya ta promise me that y'all will always take care of the family an' the farm, all right?"

An apple fell on Sister's head.

Father sighed again. He fixed his harness.

"Someday Ah won't be around no more. Ah need ta know that y'all will protect them, okay?"

I looked up into his eyes.

They were also green.

"Okay, Pa. Ah promise."

"Gangway!"

"Coming through!"

Two young unicorn colts were racing through the roads, shouting warnings to anyone in their way, their eyes wide with panic. Macintosh barely got out of their path as they barreled past, slowing and huddling behind a nearby bush, panting for air. Now that they had stopped, Big Mac could get a look at them. One was very short and stout, his coat an odd blue color and his ruffly mane orange. The other was almost a complete opposite, being tall and lanky and his colors reversed, although more subdued. Macintosh recognized them from yesterday, but they had no insects with them this time.

"Snails!" the blue one panted, his voice nasally, "what do we do!?"

"Um," the other replied in a slow voice, "keep running?"

"They're gonna find us eventually! Augh, I told you putting slugs in their bags was a bad idea!"

"But Snips, that was your idea!"

“Oh yeah.”

“Aw crud! They’re coming!”

The ‘they’ the two colts spoke of were non other than Apple Bloom and her two friends, who at present were racing through the streets, eyes grim and focused. If Macintosh weren’t as large as he was he would have been very nervous about their next course of action.

“THERE THEY ARE!!” shrieked the small, white unicorn member of the team. In response the two colts flew to their hooves and, sounding not unlike a pair of banshees, blazed down the road with a velocity that would have even turned Rainbow Dash green with envy. Rearing up, the three fillies charged after them and past Big Mac, shouting their latest mission objective:

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADER PEST EXTERMINATORS!!”

Although it was impressive the way the pair of colts were able to jump and climb over a nearby flower stand in the following chase, considerably less impressed were the three mares who ran the now toppled flower stand, its contents spread unceremoniously across the street. Macintosh ran over, Rose, Daisy and Lily all stared dumbstruck at the upset flower cart.

“The horror!” bemoaned Rose, “the horror!”

“That was awful!” Lily weeped.

“This is a disaster!” cried Daisy.

Cantering over, Big Macintosh quickly set to work uprighting the stand, although the flowers it once held had begun fluttering away in the breeze, their petals snapping off. On its feet again, Big Mac saw a few boards splintered and a wheel bent slightly, but it had survived the incident.

“Oh no!” Rose wailed, rummaging through what little inventory had survived the encounter, “we’ve lost almost all the daffodils!”

“What will we do?” Lily asked, hyperventilating a little.

“Um, can Ah help at all?” Macintosh scratched his chin, eyeing the damage.

“Yes!” Daisy said suddenly, “you and Roseluck stay here and fix up the cart and watch the stand, and Lily and I’ll go get some more daffodils!” not waiting for an answer the two of them sped off, leaving the stallion and the filly to straighten up the stand.

“Thank you so much for helping!” Rose smiled weakly, grouping the remaining flowers together, “this is just awful! Those little brats! This would never have happened if we still had the store!”

“Oh?” Macintosh asked, adjusting the roof of the cart, “y’all used ta have a store?”

“Um, yeah, we did...” she sighed, “but we couldn’t keep it...we just weren’t...um...and...yeah.”

“Uh, okay.” They resumed their work in silence, Rose looking particularly upset. “Well, Ah think yer flower stand is nice.”

“Yeah, but with such a little stand we can’t have as much stuff with us at a time, and we sell out really quickly. Well...” she sighed again and looked him in the eyes, “I wish we could have kept the store. It was so much nicer than this dumb old cart,” she kicked it in disgust, “maybe someday I can run a shop again...”

“Oh, well, Ah’m sure that y’all can-”

“Ohmygosh!” she yelped, “I almost forgot about the special order for Carousel Boutique!” She dove her head into the stand and returned with a large bouquet, “I need to go! Um, can you stay and run the stand?” Mac nodded, and she glanced around the roads eagerly, “but we need somepony else to help watch the stand with you!”

Mac looked around as well and caught sight of a purple unicorn bobbing through the crowd. “Hey, Twilight!” he called. She stopped, smiled and sauntered over.

“Hello Big Macintosh! Hello Rose!” she chirped, unaware of the duty about to befall her.

“Perfect! I’ll be back in a flash!” Rose shouted as she blazed away. Twilight looked back to the stallion, baffled.

“Wait, be back where? What’s going on?”

“She needs us ta watch the stand fer her,” Mac chuckled nervously, “I was goin’ ta ask ya ta help but Ah guess it’s too late ta ask now.”

“Ooh, running a shop?” she grinned, “I’ve always wanted to try selling something! Now let’s see...” she rummaged around in one of her saddlebags for a book, and returned with a thick tome, “Aha! Here it is! My ‘Shopkeepers Guide to Shopkeeping!’

But...Why would you carry...

“All right!” she smiled, hopping to the side of the stand, “let’s do this!”

Ten minutes passed without any sales. The two just stood in silence, receiving confused looks from passersby. Macintosh would occasionally smile and wave to ponies, and they would smile back, but they didn’t seem very interested in buying flowers from a large red pony and a unicorn with her head buried in a book. Finally, a stallion cantered up to them.

“Hey!” he said, “I’d like to buy some flowers for my wife!”

“Oh, excellent!” Twilight grinned, setting aside her book, “come sample our fine wares!” she recited, leading him to the meager array of

flowers. He rooted through them a bit before surfacing with a decent sized bouquet.

"What's the damage on these?" he asked.

Twilight blinked. "Um, they're in pretty good shape..."

"No, I mean how much do they cost."

"Oh! Oh. Um," she looked over to Mac.

"Uh, ten bits?" he said, shrugging. The colt chewed his lip for a moment, appearing disinterested.

"Hmm, I wouldn't say more than five."

"Ooh, bartering!" Twilight beamed, clearing her throat, "nine bits!"

"Six."

"Eight!"

"Seven."

"Six! And that's my final offer!" Twilight grinned. The colt did too and quickly passed her the coins.

"Pleasure doing business with you!" he winked as he galloped away.

"Thank you for your patronization!" Twilight called after him. She turned back to Big Macintosh, her eyes shining and her smile stretched from ear to ear. "Look! Look! I made my first sale!" she giggled, passing the coins to Macintosh who tried to smile and ended up grimacing.

"Er, yeah, looky there," he said. *Oh, well, it's a learning experience.* Turning to the stand again he tried to find the bit-box. Eventually he found it behind a little door, and opening it held witness to the small pile of money within. Although all bit-boxes have little slots and alcoves for separating and locking coins into place, the bits in this box were just tossed in at random, completely unorganized with small scraps of paper poking out amongst the coins. As Twilight started trying to make another sale, Macintosh began separating the coins into their correct slots (which proved difficult for the large pony; his box at home was much bigger), and once they were all organized he took a look at one of the pieces of paper. On it were scribbled random numbers and equations, clearly attempts at adding up the days costs and income. Many wrong answers were crossed out, and some were torn and crumpled. *It must take them forever to count up all of their income every day when it's so unorganized, he mused, they would certainly have trouble balancing their finances and making ends meet if they have this much trouble simply keeping their money organized...*

"Look, look!" Twilight squealed; Mac hurriedly replaced the papers, "I made another sale! Ten bits! I didn't get to barter, though." She passed him the bits which he slid into place. *I can't help but wonder if this is why*

she lost the shop. If none of them are good at math, then it would be too difficult to operate a store and cover all the expenses. Hmm...

"Oh! Thank you!" Rose had returned, sweating and gasping for air, "did you have any trouble?"

"Nope!" Mac grinned, passing the bit-box to Rose, "even made a couple sales."

"Really? That's great!" she said, "thank you both for helping!"

"My pleasure!" said Twilight, stuffing her book back into her bag, "I had fun! Well, I should get back to the library; see you!"

"Bye!" Rose and Macintosh waved goodbye as the unicorn left. Rose fumbled with the coin box until she got it open and gasped at its neatness.

"Did...did you do this?"

"Eeyup, Ah saw how unorganized it was, so Ah figured Ah'd straighten it up. It makes it a mite easier ta count it all up at the end o' the day, Ah tell you what."

"Oh, yeah, I guess it would, wouldn't it?" she said, as if the concept had never even occurred to her.

Macintosh took advantage of the opportunity. "When countin' yer income it's a lot easier ta deal with each coin value separately an' deduct the costs fer the day from those, then add all those up after. If ya get any negative numbers ya can just treat 'em as a subtraction."

"...Negative numbers?" she stared blankly at him.

"Would y'all like me ta show ya?"

"Um, okay. I'm not very good at math, but, sure!"

Macintosh didn't have to do much, really. She was lying when she said she wasn't good at math; she was very good at it, she just had an unusual way of processing numbers in her head. Until now she tried to do it the way she was taught in school, and that usually ended in disaster. Macintosh found that they had a similar thought process when it came to dealing with numbers, so with a little direction she was able to quickly and easily do addition and subtraction in her head. Multiplication was a little trickier, but he knew she could figure it out with a little practice.

Every now and again some ponies would interrupt to buy some flowers, and using her new skills she was able to count up change quickly and efficiently, separating the bits into their proper slots and all. She was still far from being able to handle complex accounting and ordering like what Macintosh did back home, but he felt that with a little more tutoring she could pick it up. At one point the same blue unicorn colt with the safety pin cutie mark stopped by, and Rose asked how 'The Big Night' went. Not

so well, apparently, as the mare he was going to propose to turned out to be the daughter of the CEO of a balloon company, and there was a rather...well, unfortunate turn of events. He had stopped by today to purchase an apology bouquet.

Not much later Daisy and Lily returned, their baskets full of the daffodils they set out for. They thanked Mac for his help, and the sound of the clock tower striking ten times served as a reminder for him to meet Lightning Bolt soon. So, gleefully given a complementary daffodil by Lily, he set off into town, rounding the corner away from his new friends, ready for anything that would come his way next.

Well, anything except for a certain blue colt who hadn't been paying attention as he turned a corner at top speed.

Chapter 7

While not incredibly heavy, Blues wasn't exactly what one would call a lightweight. Macintosh found his face pressed into the road, weighted down by the blue colt's upside down body. After a moment of untangling themselves the two colts stood to their hooves.

"Sorry Macintosh," Blues muttered, "I didn't see you."

"S'okay," Mac replied, brushing himself off, "where's the fire?"

"Huh?" Blues' eyes seemed unfocused, "Oh, um, I was just looking for Cherry. I was supposed to help her with her fruit stand today. Have you seen her?"

"Nope, but Ah jes' met with Rose an' the others; maybe they know where she is?"

Blues frowned. "Is Daisy with them?"

"Eeyup."

"Oh," the blue colt sighed, "I'll just look for her myself, then," he began a light canter down the road. Tilting his head in confusion, Macintosh followed.

"Is there a problem with Daisy?"

"Um," Blues thought for a moment, "I dunno, she and Cherry don't get along."

"Why's that?"

"Fillies," he shrugged, "how should I know?" Macintosh nodded as they kept an eye out for Blues' fillyfriend. Their hooves clattered along the street, the morning sun warm on their hides. *I've got a bit of time before I should meet Lightning Bolt*, thought Big Mac. He wanted to get to know Blues a little better, and besides, he was curious.

"How long have you an' Cherry been together now?" inquired Mac.

"Since the last Winter Wrap Up," he replied, "actually, it was Ms. Cheerilee who introduced us. We were all on the plant team, so Cherry and I got to know each other." Macintosh saw a small glint in his eye. "She's quite the mare. Although I wish she wouldn't make so much fun of my music."

"Oh yeah, about that," Macintosh stuttered, "Ah wanted ta say sorry fer bringin' it up last night."

"Eh, don't worry about it," sighed Blues as they turned a corner, "Lily was bugging me all day about it anyways. I don't know what's up with that

filly. Sometimes it seems like she can see right into your soul. She's a little creepy," he chuckled; so did Mac as he recalled her supposed 'psychic powers.'

"Y'know," Mac said after a second, "Ah wouldn't mind hearin' some o' yer music sometime." Blues stopped in his tracks.

"Really? Uh, well," he stammered, looking around nervously, "I guess I could show you sometime. You might not like it, though. If you didn't like the music at the party last night then my stuff probably wouldn't be up your alley."

"There you are!" The two turned to see Cherry, her blonde mane bouncing over her disgruntled eyes as she trotted across the road to them, "I've been looking everywhere for you, Blues!"

"Hey!" he smiled, nuzzling her to her indignation, "I've been looking for you, too! You know I'd never skip out!"

"Well, now that you're here let's get the stand open," she pulled him back towards her cherry cart on the other side of the street, and without turning back she flatly said: "nice to see you again, Big Spartan."

"I'll catch ya later, Macintosh!" Blues shouted back, waving a hoof.

"Spartan?" Mac repeated, waving dumbly. *I can kind of see why Daisy wouldn't get along with that Cherry girl. I wonder what Blues sees in her.* Macintosh couldn't imagine spending quality time with somepony so...stuck up? No, that's not the right word...Somepony like her, anyway. *Sure, she's a looker, but that doesn't mean much if she's a...Dang, where's a dictionary when you need one?*

Macintosh shook his head and began a light canter through the increasingly busy roads of Ponyville. Like the day before shops were open and ponies were shouting proclamations of their wares and inventory to others. Breathing deeply, he set out for Lightning Bolt's place which was out on the other side of town, past the school. Luckily, he had committed the directions to her place to memory, and he was still a little ahead of schedule, so he walked slowly, letting his mind wander.

I kicked. Nothing happened.

"Macintosh?"

I kicked again. Nothing.

"Macintosh?"

Kick. Nothing.

"Macintosh?"

"What, Applejack?"
She was still really little but her eyes were big.
"Yer doin' it wrong."
"Ah am not."
I kicked really hard. Nothing.
"Yeah ya are!"
"Go away..."
"Want me ta show ya?"
"No! Ah'll do it mahself!"
Applejack went away. She looked sad.
I didn't like seeing her sad.
I kicked as hard as I could.
An apple fell on my head.

To get to his destination Mac walked past the bakery, down a road he hadn't yet ventured. One shop in particular caught his attention: 'Fanatical Breezy's Fantastic Fanitarium.' *Strange place*, he mused. Just then the door opened and a portly stallion sporting a green golf hat and vest stepped out, waving. Mac looked behind himself but saw nopony around. *He's not calling for me, is he?*

"Macintosh!" said the fellow as he approached.

"Uh, howdy?" Macintosh replied, "sorry, do Ah know ya?"

"I worked to help clear the snow under your command during Winter Wrap Up, chap. Well, perhaps I should say I attempted to do so, but found my physique to be rather unsuitable for the job," he chuckled, an unidentifiable accent pervading his speech, "Archibald Breezy's the name."

"Oh, okay," said Macintosh, trying and failing to recall ever seeing this pony before, "what can Ah do fer ya?"

"Well, I'm afraid your little sister Apple Bloom - she is your little sister, correct? She spent a lot of time around you during Winter Wrap Up, and I never forget a name or a face, most certainly not a face as darling as Apple Bloom's! The family resemblance is uncanny!"

Macintosh raised an eyebrow.

"Er, right. Where was I? Right! Mayhaps you've seen an out of place fan at your residence? I'm afraid Apple Bloom must have forgotten to return the fan she and her compatriots borrowed from me a few months ago." He paused and fiddled with the red tie on his vest. "Now, don't misunderstand me, dear boy, I have plenty more than enough fans to go

around, but I'm sure you can understand the principle and proper etiquette of borrowing and lending another's property, don't you?"

"Eeyup."

"Bravo! Good lad! I knew you were a true gentlecolt! Now then, if you wouldn't mind doing me the curtesy of returning said fan to me tomorrow morning, I would be ever in your debt. Perhaps you should write that down. You won't forget, will you?"

"Nope."

"Excellent! Well then, I await your return on the morrow! Cheerio!" Archibald tipped his hat and returned to the depths of his strange shop. So *that's where that fan came from*, Macintosh muttered to himself. With a sigh of relief to be away from the strange pony, he set off again to meet with the pegasus for brunch.

"That whole thing jes' sorta came outta nowhere," he grunted.

A few minutes later, Macintosh stopped in front of Lightning Bolt's home. It was a very beautifully built house, almost picturesque with its columns and archways. While completely unlike anything Big Macintosh had ever stepped hoof in before, he could imagine getting used to living in a place like this, and was looking forward to seeing the inside.

Too bad it was a hundred feet above the ground.

"Oops," he muttered, craning his neck upwards. *Looks like we overlooked something.* It shouldn't have come as a surprise, really; he knew that pegasi lived in custom made cloud homes, but it never occurred to him (or Lightning Bolt, apparently) that it could pose a problem. Just as he was about to turn and leave in hopes of getting an idea, a voice called down from the cloud home.

"Macintosh!" it yelled. He strained his eyes and could just make out the white coat and blue mane of Lightning Bolt as she waved down to him. Disappearing inside her house and momentarily reappearing with a basket, she flew down to meet him.

"Hi Macintosh!" she smiled, placing the covered basket at her hooves, "how are you this morning?"

"Ah'm fine, thank ya," he chuckled, "Ah was a mite confused there for a bit on how Ah was supposed ta get up there."

"Oh, yeah, I guess I forgot to mention our cloud home," she grinned nervously. Just then another pegasus flew down to meet them, his red hair and tan hide accentuating his blue star cutie mark. "Oh, there you are, Cool Star!" Lightning said, nuzzling the colt, "Macintosh, this is my husband, Cool Star." Cool Star nodded, his expression made of stone.

"Pleased ta meet ya," Macintosh smiled.

"So you're the one who saved my daughter," the colt said, his voice incredibly even and calculated, "Thank you. I've seen things that would make your head spin, but when I heard about what you did, I was sorry I missed it." The pegasus' eyes were steady, hardly ever blinking with almost no emotion showing, save for a faint glimmer of excitement and gratitude.

"Well, shall we?" Lightning said, picking up the basket and heading towards a nearby park. Their brunch was a pleasant affair, the meal Lightning Bolt had made was very filling and sweet. They talked about their occupations for a while, Macintosh briefly explained his before pressing them about theirs. Lightning was only a part time weather pony, while Cool Star was actually an assistant manager to one of the weather factories in Cloudsdale, so he made trips between Ponyville and Cloudsdale very often. He started detailing how the weather and clouds are made there (his face never cracking from its stoic expression) when something suddenly occurred to Macintosh.

"Hang on," he interrupted, "y'all say clouds are made in them factories?" Cool Star nodded. Frowning, Mac continued: "But jes' yesterday Ah saw li'l Cotton Cloudy makin' a cloud out of thin air!" The two looked at each other in surprise. Well, at least Lightning looked surprised.

"She's gifted," Cool Star said after a moment, "the art of hoof-crafting clouds has dwindled away over the last few centuries, and only a few pegasi have the ability. Cotton is one of those. Neither of us can do it. Well, not traditionally, anyway."

"How so?" asked Mac.

"Well," sighed Cool Star, "I used to do this trick that would condense water in the air into a sort of cloud. It was all for show, so it didn't have any substance to it and was useless, but it still impressed the audience," for just a second, his eyes glimmered, "somehow, even though Cotton's so young, she can not only form clouds but also fly really well. She's very gifted for her age."

"She takes after her father," Lightning grinned, poking her husband, "*especially* his carelessness. You need to stop encouraging her to fly! She's still too light; she was almost knocked out by a cloud!"

"Hey now," Cool Star cracked a tiny smile, "reckless flying runs in my blood. I can't help it if she inherited it. Besides, if it wasn't for my 'carelessness,' I wouldn't have met you during that show!" Lightning Bolt laughed and, as if suddenly remembering there was someone else with them, turned to Macintosh.

“Cool Star was trying to do some fancy new trick,” she explained, “but he was going so fast that he crashed right into the audience. Right into me, specifically,” she leaned onto her husband, “not exactly the most romantic introduction, but I guess it got the job done.”

“One second,” Mac said, scratching his head, “let’s back up fer a moment; y’all were a performer?”

“Oh, right,” Cool Star replied, a slight chuckle escaping his lips, “I used to be a member of the WonderBolts. I was known as ‘Cirro’ on the team since I could whip up clouds, but I quit once I got close to Lightning Bolt,” he nuzzled her, “I couldn’t start a family and be a hot-shot wiz-kid, so I made my choice. And I’m glad I did.”

“Wow, the WonderBolts, huh?” Mac smiled. Cool Star nodded.

“Like I said, I saw some insane things while on that team. Not much impresses me anymore. And I tell you, none of the fame or fortune that came with that gig even came close to what it’s like to care for a family.”

“Again, thank you,” Lightning smiled, bowing her head a little (which made Macintosh feel uncomfortable), “thanks for saving Cotton. If there’s anything we can do for you, please let us know.”

“This meal was more’n enough payment,” Macintosh smiled, bowing a little in return, “y’all dun’ need ta do nuthin’ more fer me.”

“Well, if there’s anything that you need,” Cool Star nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, Macintosh caught sight of something blue zipping through the air, kicking some clouds. A grin crept over his face.

“Well, actually, there is one thing...” He whistled, catching the attention of the blue object. “Hey, Rainbow Dash!” he shouted, prompting her to leave her fluffy perch and land next to him.

“Hey Big Mac!” she saluted, “what’s up?”

“There’s somepony Ah think y’all should meet,” he motioned towards Cool Star, who, despite his stoney expression, allowed a tiny smile to curl the edge of his lip. “This here’s Cool Star, but y’all might know him better as Cirro.”

The rainbow-maned pegasus squinted, waving to the tan pony.

“Hey, I remember you,” he said, waving back, “you were at the Best Young Fliers Competition! Yeah, you saved that white unicorn and my friends!”

“Your...friends?” Rainbow muttered, tilting her head. Suddenly, like a punch to the face, realization struck her.

“OhmygoshohmygoshohmygoshOHMYGOSH!!!” she squealed, her eyes bugging and wings flapping furiously. Mac, chuckling, looked back to the couple, who laughed and shook their heads, amused. “No, way!”

Rainbow bellowed, landing and stepping closer to Cool Star, "No way, NO WAY!! THE Cirro!? Oh, my, gosh! I can't believe it! You were incredible! You were, like, my favorite WonderBolt growing up! That cloud thing, where you spin, and, with the thing, and the stuff, and-and-and, like, it was so cool! I got my own pair of officially licensed goggles and everything!" she was acting like a little filly on her birthday. Cool Star took it all with grace, apparently well experienced with excited fans. After a few moments of Rainbow spouting accolades, Cool Star finally stepped in.

"You've got skills, kid," he said, "that stunt you pulled was pretty cool. 'Course, it alone wouldn't be enough to get you onto the team."

"Star, don't you dare!" Lightning teased, slapping him lightly.

"If you want...I could give you some flying tips."

THUD

Rainbow Dash didn't stay unconscious for long. Once she came to, she and Cool Star began discussing complex flight maneuvers and techniques while Mac stepped aside with Lightning Bolt.

"Ah hope Ah didn't overstep nuthin'," he said, looking apologetically at the blue haired pegasus.

She laughed. "Oh, don't worry about it. Star loves any excuse he can get to show off and do his tricks. I guess you can take the pegasus out of the WonderBolts, but you can never take the WonderBolts out of the pegasus. That was a nice thing you did for that filly, Macintosh. I'm only a part-time weather pony, like I said, so I never actually worked with Rainbow Dash before; I never knew she was so fond of the team."

"Mah pleasure," nodded Mac, "Ah hope she enjoys talkin' ta one o' her idols."

"Well, I should probably get going," Lightning said, heading back towards the others (who were just gearing up to take off and soar), "I'll see you later, Macintosh!"

Macintosh waved and turned to begin his trot back to town. He laughed; it felt nice to do that for Rainbow. Meeting a lifelong role model is always an incredible sensation. While he had never encountered anyone in that way, he did have a similar experience when he finally met a pegasus pony as a young colt. In a way, they were his role models, although at that time in his life he was still resentful towards his winged brethren, but once he met that pegasus...once he met her, well, he was reminded why he wanted so badly to fly.

Macintosh heard the distant sound of the clock tower strike eleven as he trotted back towards town. In one of the parks on his way he spotted Daisy, rummaging through a flower bed.

"Howdy Daisy," he said cheerfully, cantering over. She jumped slightly, but relaxed when she saw him and even smiled a little.

"Hi Macintosh," she said, her hooves full of flowers, "what are you doing out here?"

"Jes' meetin' sompony fer brunch," was his reply, "Ah'm jes' on mah way back home now. Y'all?"

"Collecting more flowers," she said plainly, placing her bounty into a basket. She brushed back her green mane and stepped a little closer.

"Listen, I wanted to apologize for my over-reaction earlier...I hate it when I get like that..."

"About yer cart tippin' over? Dun' worry 'bout it. We all get a li'l excited sometimes."

She smiled as they started trotting. "So, hey, Macintosh, it was pretty nice what you did for Rose back there, helping her out with her math. She was always the best at it out of us three, but now we'll probably be able to properly manage the shop," her talkativeness caught Macintosh off guard a little. Together, they walked towards town. "But, I am still interested in a partnership between our businesses. I thought Applejack would be the one to talk to, but I get the feeling you'd be better."

"Eeyup, Ah s'pose Ah would," he grinned, "y'all wanted ta sell apple flowers? That wouldn't be easy, Ah tell you what. Them little things are awful fragile, and wouldn't live long off a tree."

"But they are quite beautiful, and I think maybe they could be a premium item. But I was also considering branching out and selling plants other than just flowers, so maybe apple tree saplings? I could imagine some ponies would love the novelty of growing their own apple tree."

"True," Macintosh laughed as they passed the school house, "but Ah hope that wouldn't cut into mah business! Ponies might stop buyin' mah apples if they can grow their own!"

"Nah, that would never happen," she chuckled, "besides, you'd make a decent amount on each sapling sold. It would be nice if our little flower shop could maybe become a full garden center. Actually, if--"

"Macintosh! Daisy!" Cheerilee burst out the front door of the school and galloped up to them, sending up a small cloud of dust. Daisy stiffened and narrowed her eyes at the mare. "I'm so glad I found you! I really need someone to cover for my class for a bit!"

"Can't," Daisy growled, "Busy. See you, Macintosh." With that, she briskly trotted off, tail high.

"What in the hay was that about?" Mac asked, scratching his head. Cheerilee just sighed.

"I don't know, that filly just seems to hate my guts." She fired her gaze back to the red stallion. "Anyway! Macintosh, could you please cover for my class?"

"Um, sure, but what's the emergency?"

"Personal, can't talk!" she shouted behind her, already galloping away, "I left my lesson plan out on the desk! I won't be more than an hour!" And with that, she was gone.

"Crud," muttered Macintosh as he just realized what he agreed to. *Teaching a bunch of kids? This should be interesting...* He stepped into the building, the familiar smell of old wood and chalk dust making him feel like a student again, except he wasn't being teased for being a blank flank anymore. Being a single classroom school, it didn't take long to pass the small office and lunch room and find his old, familiar class. The fillies and colts inside were (thankfully) not as rambunctious as his old classmates were; instead, they were content with chatting it up and passing notes. Once the large stallion ducked through the doorway everypony froze. The silence was almost physical.

"Um, howdy," he grinned nervously, stepping to the desk, "uh, Cheer- Ah mean, Ms. Cheerilee had ta step out fer a bit so Ah'm coverin' fer her." No pony moved. No pony even blinked. "So, uh, mah name's Big-er, Mr. Macintosh. Um, what're yer names?"

No pony said anything.

"Okay then," his face hot, he stepped behind the desk, "Ah guess we should get started then." With a rush of wind the door swung open again as a small yellow filly with a pink bow in her mane burst into the classroom.

"Sorry I'm late, Ms. Cheerilee! I had to...Macintosh!?"

"Howdy, Apple Bloom," he nodded to his little sister, "looks like Ah'm yer teacher fer a bit. Why dun' y'all take yer seat?"

She didn't move. Her jaw fell open, but other than that she stayed motionless. *This is getting ridiculous.*

"Take yer seat, Apple Bloom," he said sternly, "an' let's begin our lesson, which is on..." he ruffled through the papers on the desk, "'What yer Cutie Mark Means,'" he read.

"AaaaAAUUUugh!!" the class groaned, finally showing some sign of life.

"Cutie marks again?" Apple Bloom pouted, finally taking her seat.

"Well, that's what Ms. Cheerilee left me, so that's what Ah'm goin' ta teach." Clearing his throat he began reading the lesson plan. "Let's see here... 'Cutie marks are special and...unique fer every pony, an' they all mean different things," he read, stumbling over some of the words. The students all slouched in their seats, doodling or whispering. "Um... 'A cutie mark has a special meanin' that might not be im-immediately obvious but...after enough time it will become clear what it r-rep-represents."

"Isn't that your brother, Apple Bloom?" whispered a filly, snickering. Apple Bloom sunk into her seat, cheeks red. The other students were whispering to each other and generally not paying attention. The only one who seemed interested was a frizzy red-maned filly with glasses.

"Uh," Macintosh swallowed, "um, 'sometimes a cutie mark won't make sense. If ya look at mah cutie mark, ya'll see it's three smiling flowers." The class burst into laughter and Macintosh looked down at his cutie mark which was completely unlike three smiling flowers. At this point, the class had almost completely broken down; nopony was listening to him at all, but he continued regardless. "'It may look like flowers but it's sym-symbolic of mah passion fer teachin' and-' a paper airplane to the snout broke whatever semblance of composure Big Mac had left.

"All right, that's enough!!" he bellowed. He caught himself, embarrassed at his outburst, although it did have the desired effect: the students sat straight, rapt with attention. Flustered, Macintosh did his best to regain his confidence. "All right, this ain't workin'. Why dun' we go on a field trip, instead?" That seemed to get the class on his side. "Gather yer things an' let's meet outside."

Macintosh wrote a quick note for Cheerilee and, once the class had assembled outside, did a quick headcount (reminding him of his management duties during harvest and Winter Wrap Up) before they set out for town. Luckily, the kids were compliant and nopony tried running off. They trotted towards town, Macintosh leading the pack who were whispering excitedly about where they could be going.

"Maybe we're going to Sugar Cube Corner!"

"Yay! Cupcakes!"

"Or maybe we're going to the toy store!"

"Or to see a magic show!"

Apple Bloom sidled up to her big brother who marched with determination. "Macintosh, where are we going?"

"We're here," he smiled, looking up to the building before him. The rest of the students stopped in their tracks and stared dumbfounded.

"THE LIBRARY!?" they groaned in unison.

"Eeyup," Macintosh smiled as he pushed open the door to see Twilight and Spike huddled over a book.

"Oh, hi Macintosh!" Twilight smiled, walking over, "what can I do for...you?" noticing the crowd of unamused foals outside her door her brows furrowed. "Um, what's going on?"

"Field trip," he grinned, "Ah'm watchin' Cheerilee's class fer an hour." He bowed his head, making way for the students to step inside, which they did, albeit reluctantly, plopping themselves onto the floor.

"Oh, um, ah!" grimaced Twilight, smiling for the group, "uh, hello! I'm, uh, the librarian?" she looked over to Mac, confused. He smiled and motioned for her to continue. On the other side of the room, Spike leaned back and crossed his arms, enjoying the show. "So! Do you kids like books?"

"No," they said flatly.

"I do!" the frizzy maned one chirped. Apple Bloom kept her disgruntled gaze upon her older brother, who cleared his throat and stepped forward.

"Ms. Twilight, why dun' y'all read 'em one o' yer stories?"

"Ugh, story time?" a pink filly with a tiara whined, "how old do you think we are?"

"A story?" Twilight tilted her head.

"Yeah, y'know, a pony tale or sumat," he swallowed. *I hope this works...* "Like that one," he pointed with a hoof to the spine of a familiar blue book.

"This one?" Spike asked, hopping over and pulling the dusty book from its place. Twilight lifted it with her magic raised her eyebrows.

"A pony tale?" mocked a grey filly with glasses, "Seriously? What is it, 'The Little Wagon That Could?'" the class burst into laughter.

"No," Twilight answered plainly, "it's called 'Fortress of Fire.' Really, Macintosh?"

"It sounds cool to me!" Spike boasted, reclining on the floor. A few ponies' ears perked up at the title, but most still let their eyes droop and jaws hang slack with boredom. Twilight shot one more concerned glance at Macintosh, who smiled reassuringly, before opening up the tome, a small cloud of dust erupting from its pages.

"Okay, let's see here. Ahem. 'Mr. Perrywing was an average pegasus stallion. He lived in an average home, on an average street in an average town. He had two average foals: Blaze, an average pegasus colt, and Frost, and average pegasus filly.'"

"Booooooring," somepony yawned.

“On one average morning, Mr. Perrywing woke up to find something not so average. In fact, it was by far the most unusual thing he had ever seen. It stood in the street outside his home. It was tall, very tall, yellow like a ripe banana and walked on seven spindly legs. He would have looked at it for a while longer if...’ Ack!” Twilight grimaced, “I can’t read that!”

“What?” Spike asked.

“What?” the foals sat a little straighter.

“This is not appropriate for young fillies and colts! Or dragons!” she huffed, slamming the book.

“What is it!? What is it!?” they shouted, leaning forward.

“Now, c’mon, Twilight,” Macintosh grinned, “Ah think these kids are plenty old ta hear this story.”

“Well...” she frowned, drooping her ears.

“We’re old enough! We’re old enough!” the foals chanted. Spike was in on it too.

“Fine,” she sighed, picking up where she left off, “Ahem. ‘He would have looked at it for a while longer if it didn’t snatch him up in its enormous toothy jaws, devouring him in one hungry bite.’” The gasp of the students filled the library, and all eyes were fixed upon the purple unicorn who blushed at the attention. “Blaze was watching from his window. He saw the seven legged beast greedily eat his father. Marching through the town the monster went, sending ponies running in every direction and gobbling up any it could reach with its big mouth. Blaze was a strong young colt. He puffed out his chest, and prepared himself to do battle with the monster. He would have tried too, foolish colt, but once he noticed five more of the terrible yellow creatures tearing through town devouring anything and anypony in their path, he suddenly became very wise and chose to instead hide under the bed with his younger sister.

“They knew, huddled together under the bed, that their average lives were gone. ‘What do we do now?’ Frost asked, squeezing onto her doll that was missing an eye. On the floor before them lay an advertisement: it depicted a wall of shadowy creatures, their red and yellow eyes shining behind the bars of their cages, in front of which stood a tall, dark and mysterious stallion, titled as ‘Renaldo: Creature Catcher Extraordinaire!’ And so, their journey began...”

“...Blaze looked over to Frost. Frost looked over to Blaze. Together, they looked ahead to Renaldo, his terrific pitch-black cloak and silky hat fluttering in the wind. From him, they looked up to the creature that stood

before them. Now, a bear, while threatening and deadly, could be relatively easy for somepony to capture. Blaze's uncle had done so once, or so he said. But nopony had captured an Ursa Minor before, which is precisely the creature that stood before them now. It bared its hungry fangs, dripping with saliva. Renaldo drew his blade. Blaze brandished his axe. Frost readied her scythe. With a deafening roar, the great monster leapt upon them, its razor sharp claws slicing through the air towards the group. Renaldo swung his blade with a 'swish,' but just as it was about to make its mark--"

DONG DONG DONG

The bell tower chiming twelve times interrupted the story.

"Well kids, Ah guess we should get back ta class," Macintosh said, standing and stretching.

"AaaaAAAAAwww!!" the little ponies moaned, "just five more minutes!"

"Please?" Spike begged.

"Sorry, but it's time ta go," Macintosh stated.

"Can we come back after school!?" a colt shouted, his body shaking with energy.

"Of course!" Twilight smiled, closing the book, "I'll be here!" The foals reluctantly stood, regaling each other with recounts of the story they had heard. As they filed through the door, Twilight cantered over to the red stallion.

"Well, that was interesting," she chuckled, "I have to admit, even I'm a little interested in what happens next. What made you think of all this?"

"Y'all mentioned how ya wanted the library ta be used more, so Ah thought Ah'd help ya out a bit."

Twilight smiled, blushing a little. "Oh, thank you. That was nice of you. I don't normally touch those sorts of books, but I guess there's a lot more in my own home than I expected." Macintosh followed the last student outside, bowing his head to the unicorn mare.

"No trouble't all," he grinned, "even them old books need a li'l love every now an' again. All right class! Let's head back ta school!" He lead the troupe through the streets, gathering amused glances from ponies as the fillies and colts began re-enacting scenes from the story. Three 'monsters' all chased a 'Renaldo,' a 'Blaze' jumped on one, tackling it to the road into a pile of giggles. All the students were enjoying themselves, save for two: the pink, tiara wearing filly and the grey filly with glasses.

“That was so, lame, right, Diamond Tiara?” the grey one snorted.

“So lame, Silver Spoon” the other replied, snout in the air, “what a foalish story. Only losers would like it.” Some of the other fillies and colts assumed similar attitudes, a complete switch from the lively playfulness they had a moment earlier. Most of the foals, however, ignored them and continued their games. Before long, the school came into view and the students stampeded down the hill, eager to finish their schoolwork so they could get right back to the library. Apple Bloom grinned at her older brother before rushing through the door, where Cheerilee stood.

“Big Macintosh!” she said, “so you took my class on a field trip to the library?”

“Eeyup. Got ‘em ta sit quietly an’ listen ta a nifty story, too.”

“I heard,” smiled the mare, “they were going on about ‘Renaldo’ this and ‘Blaze’ that while running inside. I haven’t read that book in a long time. How did you know that they’d love that old story?”

Big Mac smirked as he turned to leave. “Maybe Ah’m psychic.”

Chapter 8

I saw some up there. In the sky. They flew.

I walked.

I looked away.

The cart was heavy. It was full of apples. Apples I bucked.

"Macintosh!"

Applejack ran up to me.

"Macintosh! Ma an' Pa want ta talk ta us!"

I left my cart and went in the house with her. Mother sat with Father.

"Kids, yer ma's got somthin' ta tell y'all."

They held each other. They smiled.

Mother's pink bow was shiny in the sunlight. Her orange eyes were big.

"Macintosh? Jackie?"

"Yes Ma?"

"Yer goin' ta have a li'l brother or sister."

The walk from the school to Ponyville was short, and uneventful for Big Macintosh. The large stallion cheerfully strolled through the busy streets, the beginnings of hunger nipping at his belly. The town and its inhabitants were becoming familiar to him: just down the road was the library, and past that was the café he ate at yesterday. Over there was Rose, Daisy and Lily, who had moved the flower stand from its earlier position. *I should go say hi*, Macintosh thought, but once he noticed a certain fluffy-maned pink pony bouncing toward them he swiftly made an about face and started the other way, grumbling all the while. *Dang Pinkie Pie, of course she'd be there so she could make a foal out of me in front of my friends!*

"Is that all ya care about? Yer pride?"

He shook his head, steeled his eyes and stomped down the road. *I'm not going to let her embarrass me again! She'll just make a joke out of me! Nopony laughs at me!* His determined march became a swift canter as he tried to clear his head. He did his best to focus on anything - buildings, the

road, nearby bushes, anything to get his mind off the hyperactive pink filly. *I deserve to be angry at her! I am not going to become like-*

"OH CRAP!"

WHUMP

The noise derailed Macintosh's train of thought. A nearby white, blue maned unicorn filly stood by a large grey box on its side. Groaning, she shuffled her sunglasses and leaned to pick it up, but struggled to do any more than upright it.

"Y'all need a hoof?" asked Mac as he cantered over. Once closer he saw the grey box had two spots for records, surrounded by dozens of knobs, buttons and dials.

"Aw, dude, that would be wicked!" she grinned, her sunglasses flashing in the sunlight. He bent over and hoisted the box onto his back and, with a little help from the filly, had it perfectly balanced. He'd carried a lot of boxes full of apples around the farm and had mastered the art of never tipping his load.

"So where y'all headed with this?" he asked as they made their way down the road.

"Back to my pad," she said, her blue, spiky mane bouncing noisily with each step, "I propped it at my rig last night but never got the chance to pick it up. Glad nopony swiped it!"

Macintosh nodded, mentally deconstructing her explanation into terms he could understand. After a couple minutes, the two arrived at her home, the strange, flat roofed house he saw yesterday. Finally, the pieces were put together.

"Hey, hold on," Big Mac began, raising a hoof, "Yer...Yer that pony from the party last night! Vinyl Scratch, right?"

"Sure am, dude," she chuckled, "you wan' an autograph, or somethin'?"

"Uh, actually, no," he stammered. She just laughed.

"Really? Bro, you're the first to turn one down! I like you!"

"Um, thanks?" he shook his head as he slid the turntable off his back and onto her porch.

"Thanks man, I owe ya one!" she grinned, opening her door and shoving the station inside, "you want one of my albums, or something?"

"Uh, no, that's okay..."

"Really?" she asked, frowning a little, "well, I owe you a favor or something for helping me out."

"A favor?" scratching his chin he glanced back the way he came. "Actually, there is one thing ya could do fer me..."

As Big Macintosh trotted the dusty road back to Sweet Apple Acres he smiled, wishing he could have seen the look on Blues' face when he met the DJ; but he was already past due to help out his sister on the farm, so he made a mental note to catch up with Blues later and see how the meeting went.

Nearing the farm Big Macintosh spotted Applejack out working the fields, a line of full apple carts trailing behind her. He smiled, let himself into the house and, grabbing a quick snack, cantered up the stairs to his room. There on the bed-post rested his harness, and with a shimmy he fastened it on, its sudden weight coming as a slight shock to the earth pony. Throughout all this his mind was empty, going about his preparation for work in a sort of daze.

Before long he found himself in the field, staring down the rows of apple trees, their fruit ready and begging to be harvested. His carts securely fastened to his harness, he made his way to the edge of the field where he could work his way in. By this time in his life he'd gotten bucking trees down to a science, and rarely had to even use both his legs to knock down the round fruits.

After a few minutes of silent work a shadow passed over his snout. Looking up he saw the source: a group of pegasus ponies having a little race over the fields. He smiled, watching them for a bit. *I'll never get over it, he thought, I'm always amazed. Shoot, I really wish I could fly and not be stuck on the ground like...*

Like Scootaloo.

His stomach churned as he was reminded of the little filly's situation. The various promises and vows of secrecy he'd made in the past couple days flooded back to him, pounding in his head like an angry drum. *If only I could tell them! Then maybe Scootaloo could learn to fly! But I made promises, and an Apple never breaks his promise. But if only...*

He groaned, kicked a nearby tree, and turned possible solutions over in his mind. *I suppose I could sort of nudge them in the right direction. You know, casually mention Fluttershy's skill with animals...hope Scootaloo or Rainbow catch on....I'm sure Scootaloo would appreciate it...She wants to fly, right?*

Breaking him out of his thoughts was the sight of Ol' Bessy, the biggest tree on the farm. At least twice as big around as any other tree, it always yielded the tastiest apples out of all the acres. Getting them down was the hard part, though: its massive size always required more than one pony's efforts to buck it hard enough. Naming notable trees was a strange

tradition of his family, and his sister was prone to getting uncharacteristically attached to them, trimming their branches and doting on them like babies. He'd even caught her singing a lullaby to BloomBerg the night before it was shipped out to AppleLoosa. Grinning, Macintosh unlatched his cart and trotted over to Ol' Bessy, eager for the chance to try to harvest its crop by himself. He kicked one leg after the other, but only caused the apples to wiggle a bit. Rearing up, he prepared to kick with both legs.

"Macintosh!"

Big Mac nearly slipped and collapsed in a pile.

Applejack, laughing, cantered up to him. "Tryin' ta get Ol' Bessy's apples, eh? Here, lemme help ya."

"No thanks, AJ," he replied, "Ah want ta try it mahself."

She laughed. "Now, c'mon Big Brother, nopony's ever been able ta buck Ol' Bessy by 'emself, not even Pa could do it."

"Ah'll get'r done, AJ. It's a challenge."

"It's impossible, is what it is."

"Run along now, li'l sis. Ya'll see, t'night yer gun' be havin' Bessy's apples fer supper."

She tipped her hat to him, sauntering off. "All righty then, good luck! Ya'll need it!"

Rolling his eyes, he surveyed the tree, looking for the best spot to strike. Ol' Bessy had become a bit of an inside joke among his family, and a sort of rite of passage for the colts. Whenever his extended family would come over, they'd all take turns bucking, but of course, nopony ever knocked more than a couple dead leaves off. The great, stupid tree stood tall, probably one of, if not the first, tree planted on the farm. Finding a good spot, he reared and kicked. The tree shook slightly and a few leaves rustled, but otherwise, nothing. He only tried this once every few years, frequently reminded any time he did how impossible the solo task is. *I'll do it, he mumbled to himself, no matter what they say! And I'll do it myself, I'll beat the odds, and I'll do it without anypony's help!*

He froze in mid-kick.

Without anypony's help. A challenge. Was this...Could this be how Scootaloo felt? *She's probably been told all her life that she might never be able to fly. Could it be...a challenge for her?* He felt a sudden pang of guilt for just assuming all this time that she would even want help. Success is all the sweeter when it's accomplished solo, after all. *Stupid tree*, he grinned, *who would have thought I could learn something from a tree?*

With a swift, strong buck he struck the side of the tree. Two large apples plummeted to the grass. His eyes widening in delight, he reached down and scooped one up; its sweet scent made his mouth water, and, savoring every second of his victory, bit down into the fruit. Scootaloo will someday taste sweet triumph as well. *And she'll do it alone.*

Those two apples were the only ones Macintosh could persuade the tree to part with, so, after finding his sister and tossing her the other fruit with a wink (her jaw dislodging from her head in awe), Macintosh spent the next few hours in silent work. Mind wandering, he finished the harvest a bit later than he would have preferred, just in time for supper. His harvest locked in the barn, he let himself into the house, from which the tasty smell of roast potatoes and cabbage wafted.

"Macintosh?" Granny Smith called from the kitchen, "Come an' give yer gran'mother a hoof."

Trotting into the dining room he helped her lay out the table; he noticed two extra sets of plates and raised an eyebrow. "Guests t'night, Gramma?"

"Li'l Apple Bloom's friends are spendin' the night," she said casually, placing down a hot pot of cabbage. She moaned in slight pain as she clutched her bad hip. "But dun' worry. Ah reckon they're gun' be spendin' most o' their time out in yer old treehouse, so ya'll have quiet ta study an' whatnot."

"Oh, okay," he sighed. His grandfather had built them that treehouse so long ago, and when Applejack mentioned off-hoof that she gave it to Apple Bloom and her friends, he felt a little betrayed. That was their secret hidey spot, after all; his little refuge from the rest of the world. He and his sister spent many summer nights out there, playing make-believe and talking, but he hadn't set hoof in it for years and got over the initial sting of the bad news fairly quickly. Better for it to be used by somepony who appreciates it than to just slowly decay and fall apart.

"Smells good, Gramma!" Applejack bellowed, swinging into the dining room.

"Yer in a good mood," Macintosh chuckled as his sister, laughing, took her seat.

"Does my heart good ta see the barn full up, Big Brother!" she grinned, "b'sides, that apple ya got was really somethin' else!"

"Apple?" Granny Smith asked, slowly sitting down.

"Macintosh knocked me off an apple from Ol' Bessy, all by himself!"

"Two, actually. But Ah ate one mahself; sorry Gramma."

"Well, Ah declare, Macintosh!" the old green mare wheezed, punching his arm, "that ain't no small feat! Jes' wait 'til the rest o' the family hears!"

Macintosh, blushing a little, was about to say something when the door burst open and three little fillies flew into their seats.

"Hi Gramma! Hi Macintosh! Hi Applejack!" Apple Bloom shouted, a grin from ear to ear plastered on her face.

"Hi Mrs. Smith! Hi Dude! Hi AJ!" Scootaloo yelled, the same expression on her little head.

"Uh, hi!" the small white unicorn said meekly, attempting to smile but failing miserably.

"Girls, what's goin' on?" Applejack said slowly. The young fillies exchanged awkward glances.

"Um, nothing," Apple Bloom swallowed, "let's just say we aren't cut out ta be Cutie Mark Crusader Fashion Designers." The unicorn's face turned bright red and she hung her head.

Dinner, surprisingly, passed without incident or spillage, and they each merrily discussed their days, the tale of the three fillies' encounter with Snips and Snails proving particularly interesting, beginning with a dare from Scootaloo, leading to the discovery of slugs in their school bags and ending in an unfortunate climax in the bakery where a few unlucky customers found something...extra in their cupcakes. Macintosh told a little about his day (leaving out most of the more personal details), and mentioned the field trip to the library, at which point Apple Bloom took charge of the conversation, excitedly recounting how she, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle (the unicorn) and more than half the school showed up at Twilight's library to hear more of 'Fortress of Fire.'

"How far'd ya get?" Macintosh asked.

"Um, not much," grinned Apple Bloom, "we wanted ta start all over so my friends could hear it too."

"It's awesome!" Scootaloo pounded her hoof on the table, her small wings fluttering, "tomorrow, we're all going to go back and listen all day!"

"Oh right," Applejack said, "Y'all have t'morrow off from school."

"Yeah, a teacher's convention or something," Sweetie Belle chimed, "I just hope they manage to find Frost before the Basilisk returns..."

"Well, Ah guess ya'll hafta wait'n see," chuckled Macintosh, chewing on a potato.

"Save who from the what now?" AJ raised an eyebrow in confusion, "sounds like an interestin' teacher's convention."

"In the story, sis," whispered the stallion.

"Any plans fer t'night?" Granny Smith asked, smiling and rocking gently in her seat.

"We're gunna finally get our cutie marks!" the young fillies cheered loudly.

"Jes' a bit of organizin' an' such," Applejack replied, "I'll probably go into town fer a bit too. Apparently, Pinkie Pie has a new cupcake she wants me ta try. Somethin' 'bout confetti."

"Jes' dun' stay up too late," chided Granny, "An' y'all, Macintosh?"

"Hmm," he murmured, "Ah guess Ah've got mah work done fer t'day. Ah'll probably go back into town. B'sides, Ah need ta meet up with Blues anyhow."

"Blues?" Applejack squinted.

"Oh, right! Ah guess Ah haven't told y'all 'bout the friends Ah've made..."

He told his family a little about his new friends, and they seemed genuinely happy for him, although the three fillies got bored and left half-way through. As they finished cleaning up from supper, Macintosh couldn't help but notice that Applejack seemed strangely pre-occupied. After washing the last dishes and thanking their grandmother for dinner, Big Mac pulled Applejack aside.

"Everythin' all right, sis?" he asked. She avoided his eyes for a bit, clearly collecting her thoughts.

"Well, it's jes' that...well, I had ta work extra hard this mornin' ta get the work done by myself, an' y'all were kinda slow workin' this afternoon, an' ya never got that shed organized. Them logs are all jes' sittin' loose in there, an' we can't get much more in." Macintosh frowned, listening intently. "Now, dun' get me wrong," she continued, "I'm real happy that y'all are makin' friends. It's jes' that I'm worried that...well..."

"Spit it out, AJ," he said sternly, "an' be honest."

"Y'all dun' hafta tell *me* ta be honest!" she huffed, "look, I'm worried that y'all are gunna start spendin' more time out in town and not workin' the fields as much!" she said suddenly, her ears dropping, "I didn't realize how much work ya put in b'fore you left. I can't do it myself. I need yer help." Her eyes were large and glassy, and he felt his heart plummet.

She can't do it alone. She needs help. He looked out the window, where he could see Scootaloo playing with her friends. Sighing deeply, Big Macintosh looked back to his sister.

"Look, I know it sounds silly," she said, "but I need ta know yer not goin' ta leave us high an' dry. I need ta know yer goin' ta keep workin'." Her eyes watering slightly, Macintosh raised a hoof to her shoulder.

"Sis, Ah made a promise that Ah would always take care o' the farm, you, Gramma an' Apple Bloom."

She sighed, the tension fading from her body. "Thanks, big brother. Y'all put a scare into me this mornin'. I should never've doubted you." Smiling, she cantered off down the hall, her old hat bouncing with each step. Macintosh, his face set in stone, looked back out the window to the young pegasus.

"An' an Apple always keeps his promise."

*"Ah dun' know. Ah jes' dun' know anymore."
I knew I shouldn't listen in. But I did anyway.*

"Now, honey, Ah'm sure he'll get it soon. After all, yer mother was the last in her class ta get hers."

"But Macintosh is the oldest in his class by a couple years! Ah already got mah cutie mark when Ah was jes' a li'l older'n Applejack, an' there's Macintosh, failin' classes and hardly able ta buck...Ah wonder if he even tries at all."

*I did try. I wanted to tell him again.
But it wouldn't matter.*

"An' then he goes lyin' about gettin' a B+ on his test t'day. Yeah, that'll be the day!"

*He didn't believe me. I didn't lie.
Why wouldn't he believe me?*

"Dear, calm down. After all, in a few months we're goin' ta have another foal an'-"

"It's Apple Family tradition ta run the farm! What's wrong with mah son!?"

"Honey-"

"Applejack deserves the farm! Not him! Not mah lyin', blank-flank son!"

I didn't want to cry.

But I did anyway.

I walked back to my room. Did I hate Father?

Maybe.

I didn't want to. I didn't want him to hate me, but he did.

I looked out the window. I looked at all the apple trees. The farm I promised to run.

"WHAT!?"

Father shouted.

"A NON-APPLE CUTIE MARK!? How could you even suggest somethin' like that!! Mah son is an Apple! He's an Apple! That's jes' the way it is! Mah grandfather ran the farm jes' like his father, an' mah pa ran the farm jes' like him! Ah grew up jes' like mah pa, an' Macintosh is gun' do the same! An' Ah'm gun' make sure he runs the farm if'n it's the last thing Ah do!"

I didn't want to get an apple cutie mark.

I didn't have to be stuck here.

I'll do it. I'll get a perfect score. I'll prove I can do whatever I want.

I can be whatever I want.

Out in the field, I saw Grandfather coming home.

Maybe he finished my treehouse?

It was almost seven in the evening by the time Macintosh arrived in town. Streets were busy as the shops were closing and friends were meeting up for the evening, and just down the road Macintosh caught sight of his friends, Blues, Rose, Daisy and Lily all working together to close up the flower stand.

"Howdy," Big Mac waved, cantering up to the group.

"Hi Macintosh!" they smiled.

"Hey, Blues!" Macintosh began, "how'd it go with Vinyl Scratch?"

"Well," sighed Blues, "I was just telling them how she came up to me and Cherry. She mentioned that you sent her over, which was really awesome of you, by the way," he smiled weakly, "but Cherry...well..."

"She was being Cherry?" Lily asked.

"Pretty much, yeah. I mean, I finally got a chance to talk to DJ PON-3, but Cherry's all 'you're not going,' and 'forget about your music.'"

Daisy snorted.

"So what did you do?" asked Rose.

"I promised I'd spend extra time with Cherry tonight and tomorrow, so I did get to talk to Vinyl Scratch for a while."

"Did ya get ta show her yer music?" Big Mac said.

"Yeah! She actually really liked it!" Blues' face lit up, "she gave me some really awesome advice too, and wants to hang out some more!"

"That's so wonderful, Blues!" chimed Lily, "I'm so happy for you! I always knew you'd go far with your music!"

Macintosh eyed her suspiciously. *You sure didn't act like that yesterday...*

"That's great, Blues," Daisy said slowly, "maybe this is your big break?"

"Yeah, I hope so," smiled Blues. He looked up at the clock tower and sighed, turning away from the group. "Well, I guess I should go and find Cherry. I'll see you guys tomorrow?"

"See you then!" they called after him. Rose pulled the ropes and dropped the 'closed' signs on either side of the cart and spun to face the others, smiling. "So! What should we do now?"

"What would you like to do, Macintosh?" Daisy asked. They began walking aimlessly down the road.

"Oh, Ah dunno, what sorta things are there ta do?"

"We could go to SugarCube Corner!" Lily suggested, "get some of Pinkie's cupcakes!"

"Nah, we just ate there for supper," said Rose, much to Macintosh's relief, "I heard Lyra has a friend from out of town performing with her at the amphitheater, want to check that out?"

"That sounds nice," Daisy said, "let's do it." Together they made for the large outdoor theatre, passing through the double doors and finding some seats. The place was almost empty at the moment (Rose said they were a little early), but seats were slowly filling up.

"So Rose," Macintosh said, "or, Roseluck?" She blushed a little at hearing her full name. "How'd the rest o' the day go?"

"Really well, thank you," she smiled, "we were able to stay open a little later and make a few more sales, thanks to you."

"Thanks ta me?"

"You taught Rosey how to do math!" Lily grinned, "she got the bits and stuff counted in no time at all!" Macintosh nodded, blushing slightly.

"How about you?" Rose asked, "what were you up to this afternoon?"

"Ah, y'know," said Mac, "apple farm stuff, buckin' trees an' whatnot."

"It sounds kind of fun," Lily replied suddenly, "could I try bucking a tree sometime?"

"Uh, sure, Ah dun' see why not."

"Cool! I bet I'll get rid of that tree in no time! I've been to a lot of rodeos, so I've seen a lot of bucking! I didn't know trees rode ponies, though. I woulda thought they'd be too heavy, what with being made of tables and chairs and all, but maybe the birds make them lighter?"

Daisy groaned. "You have no idea what you're talking about, do you?"

"Nope!"

Laughing, the friends talked a little more about their day (apparently, Daisy saw a hedgehog at one point) until a pony stepped out on stage and a hush fell over the audience. He introduced the performers tonight, and they appeared with their instruments. The cyan unicorn filly (Lyra, apparently) brought her lyre with her, an indigo and pink maned mare had a row of glasses filled to varying levels, and a grey filly with a bow around her neck propped up her cello. Unlike Macintosh's previous run-ins with the cyan unicorn, she seemed very intense and focused on her performance tonight, hardly breaking a smile as she bowed for the audience. Once they began playing, the theatre was filled with a slow, calming melody; the sort of music perfect for quiet reflection or late night reading, the crystal glasses sending a particularly eerie hum throughout the arena.

It reminded Macintosh of the record Granny Smith brought with her when she moved in with the family. She would listen to it often after Mac's parents passed away; she said it was his father's favorite record growing up. Granny Smith slept a lot, but she spent a lot more time sleeping after his parents died, and even more when his grandfather passed on a few years later; she started mumbling in her sleep then, too. His grandfather, once a strong, red stallion like himself, left the world in a white bed, weak and boney. Building the treehouse was one of the last things he was able to do before he became ill, and the death of his son and daughter-in-law only worsened his condition. Macintosh could often hear Granny Smith crying softly in her sleep, although at the time she did her best to put on a strong face, knowing she was the last one to take care of the three young foals. All his other relatives were far out of town, and his mother's family, the Oranges, were a stuck up bunch of city folk who, Granny Smith once told him, had disowned their sister once she married a farmer; an Apple, no less. They never sent any letters, and only a couple of them came for the funeral; they didn't stay long, either. They only took in little Applejack for those few days out of pity and the hopes of turning her into a city-pony like themselves.

Suddenly feeling very sad, Macintosh thought about his extended family on his father's side. He only saw them maybe once a year, and even then he was only one of the very small number of male ponies. Cousin Braeburn was probably one of the closest 'friends' he had in the family, but once he left to settle AppleLoosa they fell out of touch. Granny Smith, while still kickin', would someday have to part with them too. He had

lost a lot of dear ones over the years, forcing him to grow into a stallion before he felt ready. He stifled a sob as the image of his family crying at the news of his parents' death floated to his mind. Poor Apple Bloom was just a newborn foal, hardly even a week old when it happened. She never knew her mother or father.

That day...The day of the storm...the day he finally got a perfect score...the day his parents passed away...of course that would be the day he would earn the cutie mark his father would never see.

Chapter 9

After the performance the group met up with and congratulated Lyra on a great show, her hyperactive and cheerful demeanor restored. Afterwards, they milled around the snack bar for a bit and later gathered outside the theatre, Macintosh's head still a little cloudy from the music. Bell chimes in the distance confirmed it to be nine in the evening.

"That was pretty cool!" Lily stretched, yawning a little, "not really my kinda music, but not bad. It wasn't loud enough."

"It was nice," Rose smiled, "you don't get to hear that sort of music very often."

"Certainly not live," said Daisy, a little dreamily. Macintosh simply nodded his head, taking in the sight of the setting sun, its deep red sky broken only by a streak of rainbow heading in their direction.

"Yo! Macintosh!" it yelled, slowing down and becoming recognizable as Rainbow Dash, "there you are!"

"Hello, Ms. Dash," Lily said pleasantly.

Rainbow blinked. "Wha...Ms.? Why'd you call me that?"

"Oh, sorry! What's the lucky colt's name?"

"Bu...huh? Who?"

"Oh no! How long have you been a widow?"

"Lily, stop it!" Daisy snapped, rolling her eyes. Macintosh, chuckling, turned back to the blue pegasus who was biting her lip.

"What's goin' on, Rainbow?"

"Oh, right! I wanted to say thanks for earlier today! Cirro taught me some awesome tricks! He said he might even get me a private audition with the WonderBolts!"

"WOW!" Lily jumped, "That's so cool!"

"I hope you get in!" Rose smiled.

"Glad ta have helped," grinned the red stallion, "Ah hope it goes well fer ya."

"Thanks! I'll see ya later!" and with that, she flew off, doing a quick loop in the air on her way.

"Oh yeah, you mentioned your brunch earlier," Rose chuckled, "I'm sure she'll get in the WonderBolts. She's a really great flyer."

"Eeyup," smiled Macintosh, "so what now?"

Rose tussled her crimson and pink mane. "Actually, I should probably get to bed. I've got a large order tomorrow and need to get up early. I'll see you guys tomorrow!" she waved as she left the group; they wished her a good night.

"I'ma go and see if Pinkie's got any left over snacks!" Lily grinned, her deep pink coat glistening in the faint twilight, "wanna come?"

"No thanks," Daisy replied daintily, "I had enough snacks back there." Lily looked to Big Macintosh.

"Uh, yeah, me too," he said brilliantly, "go an' have fun."

"All right, goodnight!" Lily hopped down the road towards the bakery.

Macintosh and Daisy heaved a simultaneous sigh of relief; the pair looked at each other awkwardly.

"Lily's a bit eccentric for my tastes," Daisy smiled nervously.

"Uh, yeah, Pinkie Pie fer me."

"Heh, bad party experience?"

"Eeyup..."

Daisy nodded. The pair slowly ambled down the road. "Yeah, me too," she said, running her hoof through her emerald mane, "my hair wasn't always this color, you know." Macintosh stared at her, eyes wide. She chuckled. "But, actually, I think it suits me. I like it. Besides, I couldn't stay mad at poor Pinkie. She was so upset that she ruined my party, and there's nothing worse than seeing Pinkie Pie upset."

Macintosh looked down to the road, sighing deeply.

"Anyway," Daisy began, "like we were talking about earlier, what size planter do you think would be best to sell saplings in? I've only done a little gardening of my own, but nothing larger than a tomato plant. Well, if you don't count sunflowers."

"Sunflowers?"

"Yeah, they can get pretty big. I grow a few in my garden. Anyway, how would you grow an apple tree?"

"Well..." Macintosh scratched his chin and went into detail on the early life of an apple tree. Still, throughout the conversation, a question kept tugging at Big Macintosh's lips, and halfway through a chat about fertilizers it suddenly came out.

"What happened between you an' Cheerilee?"

She stopped in her tracks, looking at him with large eyes which made their way to the ground. She shuffled a hoof for a bit, opening and closing her mouth several times. "Nothing," she finally said, walking again, "well, I'd like to talk some more about the, uh, apple things," she stammered, her eyes unfocused, "but, um, I guess I should get to bed...I'll...see you

tomorrow." She tossed him a brief, sad smile before trotting away, her body stiff.

Macintosh hit a sore spot, that much was obvious, but he didn't really regret it. Whatever it was, it seemed like something she wanted to talk about. *I know I shouldn't go poking my nose where it doesn't belong, but...well, I hope she doesn't let whatever it is eat her up from the inside.* He began his own trip home, musing to himself as he cantered along the nearly empty streets.

A quiet journey later Big Mac once again found himself at the entrance to Sweet Apple Acres, its legion of apple trees sleeping peacefully under the night sky, the tip of the pearly moon just showing between the distant mountains. He silently let himself inside and made his way to his room, stopping momentarily to smile at the excited whispers coming from his youngest sister's room. Sweet little Apple Bloom. *That little filly's got a great life ahead of her. I can't wait to see what her cutie mark will be.* Breathing deeply he stepped into his room, quietly shook off his harness (which he'd forgotten to take off after supper) and slid into bed. More exhausted than he expected from a full day of activity, it didn't take long for sleep to scurry its way to him.

"I hope we have a little sister! Then I'll have a brother an' a sister!" Applejack was happy. That made me happy. A little.

"Oh, look! Grampa even made a drawer fer toys! Lookit, Macintosh!" I stared out the window.

"Macintosh? What's wrong?"

"Pa hates me."

Applejack was quiet for a bit.

"No he don't."

"He does too."

I could feel Applejack looking at me.

Father told me he loved me.

Once.

"He hates me."

Applejack walked away.

"Maybe I should get all my toys an' bring 'em out here! Yeah! I'll be right back!"

Sister left. I watched her run between the trees.

Father was nearby. He scooped her up in his arms.

He put his hat on her.

They laughed.

He loved her.

I heard my tear hit the floor.

"Ah want ya ta love me too."

Macintosh awoke with a jump at the sound of a short yelp from the fields. Bleary eyed, he looked out the window. Another shout followed shortly after, coming from the direction of his old treehouse. Too confused to yawn properly he scampered downstairs and outside, cautiously trotting towards the old building. There, it came into sight, looking better than ever. Apple Bloom did quite a number on it, fixing it up to look even better than when it was new. Macintosh located the source of the noise as it fell with a thud: the young, orange pegasus filly picked herself off the grass, mumbling quietly. For at least the fourth time she climbed partway up the ramp to the treehouse, unfurled her little wings and jumped, falling and crumpling on the ground in a pile of hooves and feathers. Swallowing heavily, Macintosh stepped over.

"Scootaloo?" he said quietly. The filly, startled, spun to face him, wings outstretched. "What're y'all doin' out here so late?" he asked, knowing the answer full well.

"Um, nothin'," she sputtered, fixing her mane, "just, um...tryin' a new trick..." Their eyes locked for a few moments, hers saying more than she probably wanted. Macintosh, with a sigh, sat down on the grass.

"So, Scootaloo," he finally said, "did the Cutie Mark Crusaders have any luck t'night?" Her ears perked up a little.

"Well, I thought I was pretty good at cow tipping, but the cows didn't think so..."

Macintosh laughed lightly. "Ya really think that's yer special talent?"

She giggled. "I guess not. That'd be kinda weird." She nestled into the grass, not too far away.

"So, Scootaloo," he began, "what's yer family like? Any brother or sisters?"

"My dad's a weather pony, and my mom doesn't work outside the home," she said plainly, "and I don't have any brothers or sisters."

"Ah see."

"I wish I did..." she sighed, "both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle have awesome big sisters who run their own businesses and stuff..." she trailed off. Macintosh breathed slowly.

"So tell me," he said softly after a few seconds, "if ya could have any cutie mark you want, what'd it be?"

"Anything?" she thought for a second, twitching her tail, "I know I want to become a great flyer, so maybe-" she looked at him suddenly, eyes large, "I mean, not that I'm not a great flyer already. I just meant...I wanna become even better..." she trailed off again.

Macintosh sighed. He didn't want to address the issue head on, so he tried a different angle. "Did ya hear that Rainbow Dash is gettin' a private audition with the WonderBolts?"

"Really!?" she gasped. He looked down to her, her eyes wide with...fear?

"Eeyup, an' there's a good chance she'll get in."

"Oh..." Scootaloo sighed.

"What's wrong?" Mac asked, "ain't ya happy fer her?"

"Of...course I am!" She forced a smile, "I hope she gets in...I just...hope that she'll come visit...and stuff..."

Macintosh sighed. "Well, she ain't leavin' yet. B'sides, Ah'm sure she'd love ta show ya what moves she's gun' do fer 'em. Why dun' ya ask her t'morrow?"

Scootaloo perked up a little at this. "Yeah, that'd be cool, I guess."

They sat together in silence for a bit.

"Ya said ya were practicin' a new trick?" he said after a moment, looking up to the moon, now high in the sky.

"Um, yeah."

"Well, Ah think y'all should come in fer t'night. It's awful late. But t'morrow, keep practicin'." He met her eyes, indigo and glistening in the moonlight, "Ah know that y'all can do it. Jes' keep tryin' an' don't give up. Ya'll fly someday."

She gasped, eyes widening.

"Why," Mac continued, "Ah bet y'all will become the greatest flyer in Equestria. Even better'n Rainbow Dash."

"You really think so?"

"Eeyup. If that's what ya really want, then go fer it. Shoot fer the stars. An' make a pit stop on the moon on yer way," he chuckled, standing

up. "Y'know, when Ah was a li'l colt, Ah used ta make wishes on the stars. An' ya know Princess Luna?"

Scootaloo nodded.

"She heard 'em all. Don't hurt ta talk ta her every now an' again." She turned to look at the moon, eyes large and longing. "Dun' stay out too late, okay?" Macintosh smiled, stepping through the moist grass and stifling a yawn.

"Did she ever grant your wishes?" the pegasus asked, eyes still locked on the moon and wings outstretched, looking a little longer than usual.

A smile pulled on Mac's lips.

"Ah think she jes' may."

The dreamless sleep of that night refreshed Big Macintosh, granting him a bright-eyed, cheerful Thursday morning. Slipping somewhat into his normal routine he got up just before the crack of dawn and, after a quick combing and breakfast, threw on his old harness and began working the fields. *I want to get this done bright and early today*, he murmured to himself, excited to go back into town and see his friends. Funny how just two days can cause such a change in a pony's life. There was a lot more to life than apple farming; spending time in town was a lot of fun, Macintosh discovered, and he couldn't wait to get back to it. With a smile on his face his work went quickly and smoothly. He tilled the eastern field, harvested and planted a new row of potatoes, and even caught himself whistling at one point. Strapping on his old, trusty hoof-axe and fastening a long cart to his harness, he strolled through the fields to the northern acre, where there was a small group of apple trees that just couldn't keep up with the high expectations of the farm, hardly yielding more than a dozen apples in the past year. With a few swift strikes and a strong buck he felled them, and after stripping them bare he hoisted them onto his cart, pulling them away towards the woodpile shed by the old smokehouse. They used to dry apples in the smokehouse, but dried and smoked apple chips didn't sell very well anymore, so it was rarely used, and the woodshed was pretty much just a storage area for wood until he could take it to the woodshed near home. He reminded himself again that he needed to organize this shed, as it had at least a dozen or two unsecured logs inside that he never got around to dealing with. If someone careless were to fling open the doors those logs wouldn't stay inside the shed for long. *I'll get around to it*. On his way he walked past a nearby field, where apple trees he'd felled a few months ago were replaced with small apple tree sprouts. A chuckle

escaping his lips he carefully dropped off the logs at the shed and went to find a planter, a spring in his step.

A while later he found himself in Ponyville, the apple tree sapling held in place with a strap between the two knobs of his harness. A large, goofy grin stretched across his face and he had to stop himself from skipping down the road. After what felt like a longer walk than normal he finally found the flower stand, a single pony standing in front, her cream coat shining in the sunrise.

"Howdy Rose," he said, cantering up to her. She looked at him, eyes a little hazy but wrinkled with an honest smile.

"Good morning Macintosh," she said pleasantly, "you're here early."

"You too," he replied, "have any trouble settin' up?"

"A little. I'm not used to running the stand by myself."

"Where're Daisy and Lily?"

"Probably still asleep," she yawned, "I got that order finished, but I haven't had any customers yet. Oh! That reminds me: could you give me any advice on how to figure out shipping and postage charges? I kinda had to just hope the mail-ponies knew what they were doing this morning. I think I've got all my multiplication tables memorized now, so I'd like to try something new."

"Sure thing," Macintosh grinned, "but y'all need ta do me a favor."

"Oh?" her mouth made a crooked smile, "and what's that?"

"Can ya give this here planter ta Daisy when ya see her?"

"Of course!" she chuckled, "you had me worried there for a second, heh."

With Rose's help he slid the pot off his back and set it down on the cart so he could begin teaching Rose a little more complex math. After tackling percentages and shipping charges, he moved on to simple accounting, giving her tips on how to spot any potential financial issues before they arrived by recognizing trends and patterns. They made good progress in a short amount of time, and Rose was becoming much more confident with every successful lesson.

"...Once ya got that figured out, then ya'll notice right away if there's goin' ta be any problems."

"Oh, wow! Thank you so much, Macintosh!" Rose beamed, tucking away her notes, "this will make running the stand so much easier!"

Macintosh swallowed and looked at her sideways. "If'n ya dun' mind mah askin', how did y'all lose the shop?" Rose sighed, fiddling absentmindedly with a bunch of tulips.

"We didn't grow or order enough flowers from the hothouses for winter. We ran out only a couple weeks into winter, and then there was a small...accident with the heater for the shop." She paused, breathing slowly and looking to the morning sky. "We couldn't afford to keep the store and had to sell it just a week or two before Winter Wrap Up. Daisy took it really hard. And it sure didn't help when she and Blues br-" she glanced at Macintosh suddenly, "well, she took it hard. She really liked the shop."

"Ah see," Big Mac said, watching Rose as she straightened up a few flowers a little skittishly. *She and Blues?*

"Ugh, where are those two?" she groaned suddenly, "Macintosh, could you help me find Lily and Daisy?"

"Sure thing," he said, before adding: "don'tchya need somepony ta watch the stand?" Rose pulled the rope and the closed signs rattled down.

"It's fine, I never have any customers this early anyway." She pointed down the road, towards the East. "Daisy lives down that way, green mailbox, can't miss it. Could you go find her while I go find Lily?" Macintosh nodded and began his canter down the road.

A few minutes later he found the right place, the green mailbox resting peacefully in front of a small, modest home, its frames and windowpanes decorated with numerous flower blossoms. A shoulder high hedge wrapped around the house, roses growing in a few spots. Walking to the front door he knocked three times, but no answer came. He stepped back, looked up to the windows and called for her.

"Daisy? Y'all home?"

"Back here!"

Macintosh stepped between the hedge and the house around back past the open gate where he was greeted by the sight of a massive garden of sunflowers; three rows extended back several dozen yards, yielding at least a hundred of the large flowers - probably more, their golden petals shining in the morning sun. The smallest of the flowers were taller than him, their blossoms the size of his head. Wearing a sunhat and gripping a watering can in her teeth Daisy skipped out between the rows, politely smiling and depositing her watering can near a faucet. She cantered over to the large stallion, whose eyes were filled with wonder.

"Good morning Macintosh," she said cheerfully, "can I help you?"

"This is amazin'!" he forced out, "Ah ain't never seen so many sunflowers! Y'all said ya jes' grew a few!"

She grinned and flipped off her hat. "Heh, this *is* just a few. Once I managed to fit nearly three hundred of them back here."

"That's...this is really a sight."

"Thanks. I'm really good with them, despite my name and cutie mark," she said, chuckling. "Sorry, was there something you needed?"

"Oh! Uh, Rose was wonderin' where ya were."

"Oh right," she sighed, plucking an out of place petal from a flower, "I got a little caught up with my garden. I'll come right now." Trotting over to the gate she held it open for the stallion, who had to tear his eyes off the small forest.

"Ah've never seen ya sell any sunflowers at the stand," he said, bowing as he passed her to the front of the house. She sighed and followed him.

"Sunflowers don't really sell," she said, the smile fading from her face as they left, "ponies say they're just too big, or lose seeds or attract squirrels, whatever." She sighed, cantering slowly down the road. Macintosh followed.

"Now that's a darn shame," he said, "they're really somethin' else."

"I'd love to sell some," she pined, "I just grow them as a hobby, right? But it'd be great if I could make a little money out of it."

They walked in silence for a bit. Macintosh turned a few things over in his head. *Should I bring up Cheerilee again? And what was that that Rose said? That Daisy and Blues-*

"Well, I need to run a few errands before I start work," Daisy said suddenly and flatly, "I'll see you later."

"Uh, yeah, goodbah."

Daisy looked back to him, smiling as she trotted away. "Come by later though, won't you?"

"You bet," he grinned, nodding his head. She strolled away down the road and Big Mac, taking a deep breath, turned to look down another friendly street of Ponyville. Humming a little, Macintosh slowly sauntered down the road which was just barely coming to life, mares, stallions and foals wiping away the sleep from their eyes. The clock tower chimed in the distance and rounding a corner Mac's nose was assaulted with the warm, tasty smell of the bakery. He found himself dreamily drifting in that direction until the outline of a pink pony bouncing inside snapped him out of his reverie. *Pinkie...He grumbled, I forgot she was a baker. Well, I guess I'm not getting any bakery items today. Dang pony, why does she always have to show up?*

"Is that all ya care about? Yer pride?"

He slapped himself, head low and eyes narrowed. *No, It's just...That filly. I just know she'll make a foal out of me.*

"Is that all ya care about?..."

No! I'm entitled to be mad at her! She made everypony laugh at me!

"...Yer pride?"

"Ah am NOT becomin' mah father!!" Macintosh bellowed, oblivious to the confused and frightened glances he earned from nearby ponies.

"Then prove it."

Macintosh stiffened. There he stood for at least a minute, eyes fixed on the bakery until he finally made his decision.

The bell in the doorway chimed gleefully.

"Hellooooooooo!! Welcome to SugarCube Corner!" Pinkie Pie shouted, rummaging around beneath the counter. She poked her head up, a plate of cupcakes balanced on her hooves. "I've got a fresh batch of super-duper extra special-" the plate fell with a clatter when she saw the red stallion standing in the doorway, his ears flattened and eyes wet. "Oh, um, hi, Macintosh," she said. Looking through half-opened eyes, he could have sworn she looked a little darker in color, her mane a little flatter than the last time he'd seen her.

"Hi, Pinkie Pie," he said slowly, taking drawn-out, deliberate steps into the bakery.

"Um, Mrs. Cake is just about to wake up," Pinkie said, trying her best to plaster a smile on her face, "and I was just about to head out anyways, so she'll be happy...uh, wappy to help you." Her voice barely had any of its bubblegum and sugar left, although she did her best to hide it. Her mane falling in front of her blue eyes she skittishly turned for the kitchen.

"Uh, Pinkie Pie, hang on a sec."

She stopped, but didn't look back to him. Taking a deep breath he closed the distance between them.

"Pinkie, Ah, um..." he shuffled his hoof on the floor through scattered pieces of confetti, "well, Ah wanted ta say that...that Ah'm sorry. Fer what Ah said ta ya the other night." He stepped a little closer to try to look in her eyes, but she just turned away again. "Ah mean...you...Ah'm sorry."

She still kept her eyes away from his. After a few moments of silence, Big Mac sighed and headed for the door. Hardly half a step away he was tackled to the floor in a bear hug by a fluffy, glowing pink pony.

"Oh Macky!" she shouted, her eyes squeezed so tight in delight it was a wonder she didn't strain something, "I forgive you!" As Macintosh looked up to her she suddenly made an instantaneous 180, her eyes apprehensive and concerned. "And I haven't forgotten about your party way back then. I want to say I'm sorry too. I wanted to say sorry that day but you locked yourself in your room and the few times you came into town afterwards you avoided me and whenever I did talk to you I wanted to be friendly and never actually said sorry and I'm sorry for that too and-"

"Pinkie," he interrupted. Her bright blue eyes gazed deeply into his.

I will not become my father.

"Ah forgive ya."

The following squeal of joy must have woken any ponies still asleep throughout the whole town as Pinkie Pie nuzzled herself into Mac's thick neck.

"Oh thank you thank you thank youthank youthank you! I've wanted to hear you say that for so long! I was still just a itty-bitty little-little twinkie-Pinkie way back then and I still didn't really know much about how to party and I was still learning and you were kind of my test subject and I learned a lot of things never to do at a party like ever invite a clown ever again and and and and-"

"Pinkie!" Macintosh wheezed, "Ah can't breathe!"

"Oh! Sorry!" she bounded to her hooves, her blue eyes enormous and practically overflowing with life and giddiness, "AAHHH!!" she jumped, "you know what this means, don't you!?" she floated in the air for a moment longer than should have been possible. Macintosh, getting to his hooves, shook his head dumbly.

"It *means*," she grinned, "that we just HAVE to have a party to celebrate! A Forgiveness Festival! A Sorry Soirée! An I-don't-hate-you-anymore-and-I-wanna-be-your-friend...Party! Ooh! And I have the perfect party treat!" she pulled a plate of cupcakes out from nowhere and held it out in front of the stallion. "Here! Try one! Confetti Cakes version two!"

"Um, all right," he chuckled. Not smiling would have been a scientific impossibility at this point, so he took the little treat and bit in.

BLAM!

Confetti rained down, the cupcake blown open and spread across Macintosh's stunned face.

"Don't let any touch the floor!" Pinkie gleefully shouted, catching the falling bits of paper with her tongue and swallowing them, "Oh yeah! Much better when it's edible!"

Chapter 10

Father walked around. He walked in circles. He pulled on his harness. He took off his hat and put it on again.

"Pa? Y'all okay?" Applejack said.

"Uh, yeah, fine."

He took off his hat and squeezed it in his hooves. He nibbled on it.

A white mare came in.

Father was sweating.

"Well? Well??"

"Oh, sorry, not yet."

She went through the other door. Father groaned.

He chewed on his hat.

He bit hard. He took a big bite out of it.

Applejack stared.

"Pa! Yer hat!"

His hat looked funny now.

He put it on and walked around again.

I heard something. It sounded like mother. And then crying.

Another mare walked in.

"You may come inside, now."

"C'mon kids."

We followed him down the hall. The crying got louder.

Applejack looked worried. I wasn't.

We went into the room. Mother was in the bed. She looked very, very sleepy.

"Lookit, our daughter."

"Lookit her! Kids, come lookit yer li'l sister!"

We came close. It was another tiny pony. It cried.

"A sister? Yay, I have a sister!"

"Ya sure do, Jackie."

"This is yer li'l sister, kids."

Mother held it out for me to see. It opened its eyes.

They were also orange.

"Li'l Apple Bloom, meet yer big brother an' sister."

Macintosh jerked awake at the sound of the clock tower's bells. Although he and Pinkie Pie were on good terms again, he still felt incredibly drained after spending even five minutes with her, so he made his way back to his favorite tree and promptly fell asleep. Pinkie promised him a party, he recalled with a shiver, but she also assured him it would go much better than last time. He stood, stretched and shuffled a little in his harness, his mouth sticky from the sugary treats Pinkie had forced upon him. She was a nice filly, extremely sweet (possibly literally: her mane looked like a massive, tangled ball of cotton candy) but also very driven. He felt bad for misjudging her, and agreed with Daisy: there *WAS* nothing worse than seeing Pinkie Pie upset. Thankfully, the whole ordeal was behind them now. *That was hard*, he mused, *incredibly hard to apologize to her. But it was worth it.* He felt as though a weight was taken off him. Of course, there was the weight of his harsh words to her and the fear of being embarrassed and all that, but there was something extra: a sort of oppression that he'd been feeling for many, many years had finally drifted away. He couldn't quite put his hoof on what it was, and having just woken up certainly didn't help, but it was gone, and he felt like a new stallion.

The roads and parks of the small town of Ponyville were bristling with activity. The foals had today off school, so families were out enjoying walks through the city; colts and fillies were begging for spending money from their parents while older folk sat and enjoyed the morning sun. It was surprising, seeing so many ponies out and about this early, but, Macintosh supposed, the opportunity to spend a whole day with loved ones was a powerful enough allure to get even the most sleep-loving ponies out of bed early. *Sure would be nice if Apple Bloom, AJ, Gramma and I could spend some time together today. Maybe this afternoon we could all go for a walk or something.* He began ambling around the park, breathing in the warming air. Glancing around he happened to spot Fluttershy trotting towards him, her hooves hardly making a sound. She smiled when he noticed her, her pink mane fluttering softly in the breeze.

"Good morning, Big Macintosh!" she said sweetly, her soft voice a little stronger than usual.

"Mornin' Fluttershy," he bowed his head, "ya sure are quiet on yer hooves, there."

She blushed a little. "Oh, um...Pegasus ponies are light on their hooves. We don't weigh a whole lot, actually, which is partly why we're able to walk on clouds," she said matter-of-factly.

"Walk on clouds," Macintosh repeated dreamily.

"How are you today?"

"Ah'm fine, thank ya kindly. Yerself?"

"Busy," Fluttershy said, "the bunnies have been...um...busy this year, so the Annual Rabbit Roundup is happening a little early. I've already been busy getting all the forms and everything ready, but in a day or two I'm going to have to start the actual census."

"Ah see," replied Macintosh, "would y'all like any help with that?"

Her eyes widened, her face paling slightly. "Uh, um, well, uh, I...I suppose I could use the extra help," she said quietly.

"Ah'm pretty good at herdin'," Macintosh smiled reassuringly, "got lotsa practice back on the farm."

"Well, okay, thank you," she said, her voice a little shaky, "but, um, you won't...you won't bring Winona, will you?"

Macintosh stopped. "What!?" he stared at her, dumbfounded, "bring a dog ta round up li'l bunnies? What kind o' silly pony would do somethin' like that?"

She chuckled and stood a little straighter. "Oh, that's a relief. I'd appreciate the help, then. Meet me at my cottage on Saturday morning and I'll give you the forms you need." She smiled, her large azure eyes sparkling in the sunlight. "Thank you, Macintosh. You're...you're very thoughtful."

"Ah try," he grinned. The two walked quietly through the park, just looking around and enjoying the relaxing scenery. *Fluttershy sure is a nice pony*, Big Mac thought to himself, *it's no wonder all those little critters feel so safe around her. Still, I can't shake that feeling: there's something familiar about her...Oh well, maybe I'll figure it out eventually.*

"So, how's Angel doin'?" Macintosh asked after a minute or two.

"He's doing well, thank you," she sighed, "he liked you, actually."

"He did?"

She smiled. "Yes, he did. He doesn't get along very well with others, but he seemed to like you a lot."

"Ah wouldn't have thought so..."

"Oh, he acts all mean and grumpy, but..." she paused for a second, "well, I don't know. I have some trouble with him. He...his mother was one of the first animal friends I made. A little while after he was born, his...his mother and his brothers and sisters were killed by a wolf."

"Ah'm sorry."

"It's okay," she said, standing a little straighter, "when you work with animals as much as I do you need to learn to brush off death. I mean, I'm not saying it's not a big deal! It is, it's just...um...er..."

"S'all right, Ah understand. Ah help run a farm, 'member? I have ta deal with the same thing."

"Oh, right, of course." She sighed, brushing her mane out of her eyes.

"But, Ah thought wolves were a civilized folk, an' they dun' even live in Equestria."

"Yes, you're right, but...well, I'm not sure what happened to that wolf, but it seemed feral, wild. Maybe something happened to it a long time ago, back home, but...somehow it found its way here, hungry and savage."

"Anyways, the wolf attacked me while it was...after it had killed Angel's family. The sight of..." she shuddered, "it was a terrible sight. I was...confused and scared, and then the wolf...when it came at me I wasn't able to react at all. But...Angel...he was just a baby, but he jumped on the wolf and bit him. The wolf turned on Angel Bunny, and I was so angry that I..." Her eyes were large, focused and piercing his. He felt his mane stand on end beneath her intense gaze. "It killed his mother. It killed his brothers and sisters. It attacked me. And now, it was going to kill little Angel."

Her eyes glimmered. Macintosh felt a little dizzy. Peering into the depths of her eyes, he felt a sudden shiver of fear take hold, as though this pegasus could unleash hell should he get on her bad side. He swallowed, but wasn't able to look away. Finally, she broke their gaze.

"Oh, sorry, um, I'm...sorry. Thinking about it just makes me...angry. It...I used my Stare on the wolf. That was the first time. That wolf...I guess I feel a little sorry for it...it...I never saw it again. It ran, and didn't stop. Little Angel was hurt, but I was able to save him. He...saved my life. He was my angel. My little Angel Bunny."

"That's..." Macintosh stuttered, still feeling a little shaken, "that's..."

"Angel became...well, he became sort of difficult after that. He wasn't as friendly or trusting anymore, and he never made any animal friends, but...he's never left my side, either. I think he considers me his family now. Maybe he even feels that I need his protection. I...um, I guess I do, a little. He sort of...I know this sounds silly, but...well, sometimes he acts as my conscience."

Macintosh frowned a little. Fluttershy cleared her throat, kicking a small stone.

"He's always there whenever I'm acting...or when I'm...or if I go too far..." she began speaking very quietly, almost in whispers. "Even though he's so little, he...he feels like...a guardian, or older brother, in a way. I do need him. My little angel."

They walked in silence for a while. Macintosh needed some time to let it all ruminate in his mind. *Angel Bunny...so that's why you liked me. You're a very perceptive little critter. Somehow, just from looking at me, you could tell we have a lot in common.*

"I should probably go," Fluttershy began after several minutes of quiet walking, "it's almost time to feed the fish. Macintosh, I..." she looked up into his eyes. This time, her gaze was warm and loving, making him just want to curl up and fall asleep next to her. "Thank you for listening. I...it's really nice to have a friend who will just listen for once. Sometimes it's hard...I mean, my friends tell me all about their problems, and I'm glad they want to confide in me and that they trust me, but...well, sometimes even us 'listeners' need to talk to someone too."

"Well, Fluttershy," he said, smiling widely, "it's mah pleasure. Feel free ta come by the farm sometime."

"Thank you," said the yellow pegasus, turning to canter away, "I'll see you later, Big Macintosh." She walked a few steps, then, with a glimmer of her wings, took to the air; a bird from a nearby tree flew after her.

Macintosh sighed. Running a hoof through his orange mane he set out for town, his eyes focused ahead but unseeing. *It's not even ten in the morning, and already this feels like a full day. But it's so much more...interesting than life on the farm. Maybe...maybe someday, if Applejack feels she can run the farm alone...*he shook his head as the memory of his talk with Applejack last night resurfaced in his mind. *No. I made a promise. My family still needs me.* He knew his sisters were a capable pair: Applejack ran the farm (even though Macintosh did most of the behind-the-scenes work) and Apple Bloom could handle herself in a sticky situation, even traveling alone through the EverFree Forest to that zebra's place once. Still, they were children, as much as Applejack would like to think otherwise. Sure she is strong, dependable and an honest worker, but she overestimated herself far too often. Her escapades attempting to harvest the whole apple orchard alone was not the first time she found herself in over her head, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. As loyal and dependable a friend as she was, she still needed somepony else to be there to reel her in when she got out of control. Her friends couldn't be there all the time, and until Applejack learned enough discretion, he'd have to be the one to catch her when she fell.

Apple Bloom, on the other hand, seemed to be growing up too fast. She had already attempted a greater variety of activities and jobs than Macintosh ever had in the hopes of earning her cutie mark. She sort of *had*

to be independent, growing up without parents proper and all. Macintosh, Granny Smith and Applejack did their best to raise her, but with a whole farm for them to run, the young filly often found herself on her own for the day. Maybe for this or some other reason, Apple Bloom was a very perceptive girl. She was able to sense when somepony was feeling upset or scared, and often nestled herself up to them, comforting them; unless it was during a thunderstorm. Then she'd be under a bed somewhere. The few times Macintosh found himself emotional or depressed Apple Bloom wasn't far away to cheer him up.

In his mind's eye, he saw them: Applejack, standing tall, her hat with the bite taken out proudly perched upon her head. Apple Bloom, her large, orange eyes filled with love, the pink bow resting sweetly in her mane. After a moment, their image changed...In Applejack's place was a large, strong, yellow stallion, the same hat upon his thick brown mane. In Apple Bloom's, a soft, light orange mare, her auburn mane adorned with that pink bow. Although their bodies had changed, their eyes stayed the same.

Macintosh chuckled. *In a way, that was to be expected, I suppose.* The mental image faded as he took a deep breath, his heart filled with the hope of spending some quality time with his family later in the day.

Macintosh decided to head for the library, mentally deliberating on a new subject he and Twilight could study. *Maybe history? I am interested in the old legends around the Princesses...* As he walked down the roads however, he caught sight of the fan shop from yesterday and was suddenly very aware of the fan he forgot to bring with him.

"Horse apples," Mac muttered, swiftly turning and galloping in the other direction before that Breezy pony could see him. A run and fifteen minutes later Macintosh let himself into his house, grabbed the offending fan from the living room (taking care not to wake Granny Smith from her morning nap) and sped down the road to return it. By the time he reached the shop he found himself gasping for air as he reached to ring the bell. It played a gaudy tune as the curator opened the door, his weird green hat still perched upon his head.

"Top o' the mornin'!" he cheered, "you're up bright and early! I like that! Good blood, eh old boy? Ah, I see you brought my fan! Good show! Come in, come in! Make yourself at home! Please, put it anywhere, anywhere is fine at all." Inside the shop Macintosh beheld dozens of boxes, piled and sorted all over the place.

"What's goin' on?" Macintosh asked, setting down the fan, "movin'?"

"Correct! Excellent work old chap! Right as rain, I say! Your keen eye is right on the money! Do you know Mr. Davenport? Runs the Quill and Sofa Shoppe just down the road? No? He sells quills and sofas, you know. Well, he and I had the brilliant idea of a joint venture! Imagine! Combining our little shops into a trifecta! Why, it will be the talk of the town! Who, I say who can resist the convenience of fans, quills AND sofas available for your perusion all in one place? Truly outstanding! Is 'perusion' a word? Should be! Remind me to ring up Mr. Webster.

"Now I'm sure you're wondering what will happen to this place! Come on, lad! Hasn't your inner detective already figured it out? I'm selling, dear boy! Or, perhaps I should say, am going to sell. For you see I haven't as yet found a buyer. I find myself in the unfortunate position of owning an empty shop! Such a travesty! Perhaps I overact? I still have time to sell, after all! I shan't be moving my inventory into the other shop for a few weeks yet. I say, I certainly hope I can find a buyer in time! Chum, you wouldn't happen to know anypony interested in an establishment of their own, would you?"

"Ah'll keep an eye out. Say, what's that?"

"Aha! Dear boy, what you have just pointed out is none other than my most prized possession! It looks like an ordinary fan, you say? Feast your eyes as I turn it on! See? See? This fan had the blades inserted backwards! Oh, why does this matter you ask? Well, this particular fan was handcrafted by the great Marcello Fantastico! I'm sure you've heard of him! Well, although his first attempt was a disaster, it still became a much sought after collector's item! I say, when I first saw it at that auction..."

Macintosh quietly clicked the door shut and, taking a deep breath, left the shop in the dust.

"That was painful," he groaned, promising himself to never ever buy a fan.

It took Macintosh a minute to remember that his original goal was the library, so, with a smile he cantered in the direction of the tree/house. As he approached the door he found it to be ajar and heard voices from within. Peeking his head inside he saw a small crowd of fillies and colts (including the Cutie Mark Crusaders), their eyes and ears riveted on the purple unicorn filly as she read from the blue book.

"Frost, from high up on the tall cliff, could see Blaze standing far below. The colt held his silvery wings at his sides, ready for the signal. Frost flicked her hoof and fastened her new goggles over her eyes. 'Blaze!' she called. 'Yes?' was the reply. 'Ready?' 'Yes!' Frost breathed a shaky

breath. Stretching out her wondrous white wings she focused, and gasped as she saw them glimmer in the sunlight. They sparkled and shined, flashing with the light of a hundred small, shimmering snowflakes in the sun. An electric prickle ran down her neck. So this is what magic felt like! She took a deep, deep breath and ran to the edge of the cliff, kicking and jumping with all her might. At once, Blaze twisted and turned his shining wings. The warm sunlight bounced off his wings as though they were a pair of great feathery mirrors on his back. The hot air became even hotter and gave Frost just the lift she needed to soar. She flew higher, higher, higher until she flew as high as she could go. She flew so high she shivered in the cold and her lips froze shut. 'Perfect.' She closed her eyes and closed her wings and fell. She went faster and faster, pulling her wings to her sides. The ice on her body cracked off with a terrific crackling noise, and all the ice spun around and around the filly. Spinning as she fell, all the frigid snowflakes around her formed an incredible storm of ice, swooshing and swishing through the air sending a wonderful fluffy blanket of snow to the ground behind her. It floated around Blaze, who looked up to Renaldo. 'Magnificent,' he said. Oh! Macintosh!

All the children turned to look at the stallion, his sister and her friends grinning widely.

"Howdy Twilight," he said, stepping inside. *Oh well, I guess I can always study another time.* "Enjoyin' the story, kids?"

They all nodded and spun their attention back to the unicorn who smiled and flipped the page as she continued reading. Hopping down the stairs came Spike, holding a stack of books which he replaced on a shelf. Macintosh walked over, and kept his voice low so as not to disturb the reading.

"Howdy Spike. How's it goin'?"

"Hey Big Mac!" he grinned, "what's up?"

"Not interested in the story?" Mac chuckled.

"Actually, I went ahead and read the rest of it last night. Awesome story! I really love how it turns out that the seven-legged monsters are actually-"

"Shh! Dun' spoil it fer the foals!"

"Oh, right, sorry, heh." They leaned back against the wall, casually listening as Twilight continued telling the enraptured children about the strange woman Blaze had met, and how she seemed so very friendly.

"So Spike," Macintosh said quietly, "what's new?"

"Not much. Well, an old friend of mine from Canterlot is coming to visit this afternoon."

"Canterlot?"

"Yeah, me and Twilight used to live there. Pretty cool place."

"Lots'a higher ups there. Y'all know many ponies there?"

"Well, let's see...I know..." he counted on his fingers, "just about everypony there. I was the one who mentioned Rarity's fashion show to Hoity-Toity, you know! And, I don't want to brag," he said, rubbing his claws on his chest, "but I *maaaay* have pulled a few strings to get her a feature article in 'Clothes Horse Magazine.'"

"Never heard o' that, but it sounds mighty impressive," the stallion acknowledged, "so what's yer friend do?"

"He's a royal event planner," the dragon said nonchalantly, "oh, did I forget to mention I'm on a first name basis with the Princess?"

"Really?" Macintosh looked down his snout, a look of mock surprise on his face.

"Uh, no...But I am one of her royal messengers! Anyways, my friend said he needed some advice to plan this year's 'Summer Sun Celebration.'"

"Ah heard Twilight mention somethin' 'bout that. Ain't it happenin' in a couple days?"

"On Sunday, but yeah, it's no big deal. Y'know, it'll be in the royal hall, the princesses will be there, as well as anypony who's anypony - including me and Twilight, but yeah, same old, same old," he said, feigning boredom. Macintosh chuckled as he turned his attention back to the purple unicorn who was replacing her bookmark.

"All right," she said, "why don't we take a little break?"

"Aaaww!" the kids whined.

"Just a ten minute break, then we'll read some more," she said, closing and placing the book on a nearby desk. The fillies and colts moaned their dissatisfaction at this but shortly began playing games outside. Twilight, yawning, cantered over to Macintosh.

"Good morning," she said, "how's it going?"

"Fine, thanks. Tired?"

"Yeah, a little," she chuckled, "those little ponies had me read so much to them yesterday that I had to stay up late to finish my studies. But I don't mind. It's worth it to see the library get some use. Some of the foals have started taking out books of their own!" she said, a smile spreading across her face, "I guess a lot of them didn't realize how many good books are out there. Although," she coughed, "I don't think I'm up for reading a story like that again."

Macintosh laughed. "Dun' worry, Ah'm sure they'll start reading on their own or get their parents ta read ta 'em."

"Do you want some tea or something, Twi?" Spike asked, concerned.

"Oh, that would be great, thanks Spike," her voice was a little hoarse as the dragon hopped away into the kitchen. "Until now," she began suddenly, "until now I sort of felt bad about the public service budget the mayor set aside for me. You know, checks for maintaining the library although I was the only one using it. Those checks are my only form of income, so it was kind of awkward to accept money for, essentially, living in my own private study hall."

"Ah see," Macintosh said, nodding his head, "sounds like it's all working out fer ya then."

"It is, thanks again," she smiled. Spike returned with the tea and offered some to Mac (passing the red stallion a larger mug which he could actually hold) and the group sat quietly and enjoyed the hot drink. After a few minutes Twilight rounded up the kids who eagerly plopped down onto the floor as she hovered the book in front of her.

"All right, where were we...Ah, here it is..." she cleared her throat, "The duchess, her long green dress flowing gracefully, showed Blaze to a throne in the middle of the woods. As she pointed, a-"

Knock knock knock

Everypony in the room turned to look as the door creaked open and two fillies awkwardly stepped inside. They were the ones that gave Macintosh trouble yesterday; Diamond and Silver something.

"Um," the one with glasses began, "we were kinda wondering...um...if we could hear some more of the story."

A few minutes later the two fillies had been readily accepted into the group (although there was some short lived teasing from Apple Bloom and her friends) and were brought up to speed on the events of the story. Macintosh excused himself, grinning from ear to ear.

"Ah knew that story would get 'em," he chuckled.

"Y'all okay over there, Ma? Ya jes' need ta press-"

"Ah ken figure this dang thing out on mah own!"

"Hush, Apple Bloom, just hold still a little longer..."

"All right kids, ready?"

"Wait Gramma!"

"What is it, Jackie?"

"Yer hat's crooked, Pa!"

"Ah, better. Thanks Jackie."

"Ready now?"

"Apple Bloom, no! Jes' stay put!"

"Hee hee, she's chewin' on yer bow, Ma!"

"Leggo, Apple Bloom!"

"Ah said, are y'all ready yet?"

"Ah think so."

"Macintosh? Ya ready?"

I looked back up to Mother. She smiled. She was happy. My sisters were happy. Grandmother was happy. Father was happy.

I was happy too.

"Ah'm ready."

"All righty then, say cheese!"

Grinning and humming a little, Macintosh cantered back through town, his harness clinking happily with each step. Once he spotted his friends and their flower stand a little ways away, his smile stretched even wider.

Blues was extolling the virtues of a bouquet of flowers (daffodils, apparently, as he overheard Rose correct and berate him for calling them dandelions) to a customer, but, his sales pitch failed, turned and saw Macintosh on approach.

"Hey Big Mac!" he waved. The others turned and smiled.

"Howdy y'all," Mac returned. He looked over to Daisy. "So? How'd ya like yer present?"

Daisy blinked. "What present?"

"Oh! I forgot!" Rose slapped herself. She reached into a cabinet and pulled out the sapling, passing it to Daisy with an embarrassed smile.

"What is...an apple tree planter?" Daisy said, a smile growing on her face, "Macintosh! Wha!"

"Ah thought it could help ya out. If'n ya need any help with it, jes' let me know."

"Wow! Thanks!"

"Eeyup. See how it works out fer ya, an' then ya'll get an idea if they'd work ta sell."

Daisy nodded, turning over the planter and examining it with wide eyes from all angles. The others laughed lightly.

"Oh, an' there's one other thing," Mac said nonchalantly, "do any o' y'all know somepony who'd be interested in buyin' a shop?"

Their eyes locked on his as he looked at each one in turn, unable to hide his mischievous smile anymore.

"Y-you mean-!" Rose stammered.

"Eeyup. Mr. Breezy is lookin' ta sell his shop an' needs somepony ta take it off his hooves."

The three fillies gasped, their eyes massive with excitement.

"This is wonderful!" Rose cheered.

"I can't believe it!" Lily shouted.

"What an incred...ah crud." Daisy faltered, "there's no way we could afford to buy a shop!"

"Oh, yeah, you're right..." Rose deflated. Macintosh sighed and kicked at the road.

"Well, he said he's still got some time b'fore he needs ta sell, so maybe somethin'll work out."

"I doubt it," Daisy groaned.

"Aw, c'mon!" Blues said supportively, "who knows? The money could turn up!"

"Yeah!" pitched in Lily, "like, like, maybe! Maybe a dragon will come to town! And he'll be all 'RAR, I'M A DRAGON' and I'll be like 'I'ma slay the dragon and take his shinies!' and then, then, an alien will land, and give me his laser gun, and I'll be all 'PEW PEW PEW' and the dragon will be like 'HARK I AM DEAD' and I'll take all his money and diamonds and stuff and we can buy the shop and get married to the princes we saved and eat yoghurt!"

"Speaking of dragons..." Daisy said, completely monotone as she pointed down the road at Cherry, who impatiently tapped her hoof.

"Aw, man, I gotta go," Blues whined, "I'll meet you guys later!" As he stepped away, Cherry disappeared around the corner. The others waved goodbye, but Mac quickly joined the blue colt.

"Blues! Wait up!"

"Oh, 'sup, Macintosh?" he said, slowing down his pace a bit.

"Well, Ah wanted ta talk ta ya fer a bit."

"Uh, okay, what's up?"

Macintosh cleared his throat. *I guess I'll just come right out and ask it...* "So what's the story with you an' Daisy?"

"Me and Daisy?" he repeated, looking sideways at the stallion, "what do you mean? There's no story."

"Really?" Macintosh pressed. The blue colt looked up into his eyes, then sighed and stared ahead.

"She and I went out for a while. It was nothing special, and once I met Cherry I broke it off."

"Oh..." Mac said quietly. "Ya said Cheerilee introduced ya ta Cherry, right?" he continued after a moment, the dots slowly connecting.

"That's right, it was during Winter Wrap Up. Anyways, me and Daisy are all good now." He said quickly as they made the corner and cantered towards a scowling Cherry. "Anyways, I need to go. I'll talk to ya later!"

"All right," Macintosh replied as he slowed down and walked back the way he came, away from the cherry red filly and her stand of fruit. *So Blues and Daisy were a couple, he mused, I sort of suspected as much, but...well, I certainly wouldn't say they're 'all good now,' or at least Daisy sure isn't.* He kicked a loose pebble with his huge hoof. *Wait, they broke up right during Winter Wrap Up? But that was just after they all lost the-*

"MaaaacintooooOOOOOOOOoosh!!" something shrieked as it barreled into him. A pink something that was very messy and covered in flour and dough, its hooves sticky and poofy mane filled with bits of candy.

"Yes, Pinkie Pie?" he asked slowly, returning to his hooves as she clung to him. Stuck to him would be more accurate.

"Oh it's terrible! It's an absolute disaster! It's the worst possible thing that could ever happen ever! Come on!" she blurted as she grabbed his hoof (the gooey frosting that coated it ensuring he couldn't pull away) and dragged him off down the road, their destination a familiar bakery with a large, grey plume of smoke rising from the windows.

"Oh boy," Macintosh groaned.

Chapter 11

Once inside the bakery Macintosh was rushed through the streamer and confetti filled store-front and into the back kitchen. Within he held witness to the sight of piles of cakes, pies, fritters, cupcakes, waffles, muffins and dozens of other treats all malformed and some beyond recognition. The stove billowed smoke as a triple-layer cake-pie-sandwich roasted within. Pinkie quickly removed it and, looking it over and giving it a quick lick, contorted her face in disgust, throwing the abomination into the pile and opened another window to clear the smoke. She then turned to the red stallion (whose jaw was currently hanging slack in awe) with large, pleading eyes, her eyebrows as high as they could go.

"Macintosh! I can't do it!"

"Do what?"

"I can't think up anything new to bake!" she bemoaned as she kicked a mass of...something.

"Well, what about yer explodin' cupcake things?"

"That was just a new version! I need something *new* now! Macintosh, you're an Apple!" she said, turning to face him, one eyebrow raised.

"Eeyup."

"Apple? Apple! Hey, Apple!" she giggled.

"What!?"

"Can you bake?"

"Uh, what?"

"Bake. Confection. Creation. Art!" she cried out, striking poses, "can you do it!?"

"Well, uh..."

"I need something! Anything! Something new!"

Macintosh tried to think; a task made nearly impossible in present conditions.

"Macky!" she pleaded, "think! Apples! Make something with apples! Sweet, tasty, juuuuuuicy apples!"

"Why is it so important that ya get somethin' new right this second?" he asked, his voice a bit harsher than he intended.

"It's my eyebrows!" she shouted, pointing to them, "they're out of control!" Indeed, they switched positions every few seconds: one raised,

both furrowed, arched, flatlined; they even managed to do a 'wave.' "And you know what that means!"

"Nope."

"It *meeeeeeans* that somepony important is coming to town today!" she hopped into the storefront, bellowing, "and they want to try something new right here!" She pointed to a particular chair. "No, wait..." her eyebrow twitched, "right here!" she pointed one chair over.

"That's...oddly specific."

"I know! It's only happened...six times before! Except this pony is really important! If he doesn't try something new, the fate of the entire universe hangs in the balance!" she pounced back at Mac's hooves, wrapping her sticky arms around them, "you've got to help me!!"

He looked down at her, spotting an odd green and black cupcake nestled within her poofy mane.

"But, why me?"

"Because you're Applejack's brother, so you must share baking genes or something! She can bake anything great! Except muffins. She's not so good at those."

"But, I'm no good at cookin'!"

"Baking."

"-Bakin'."

"Please!"

"Ah'm sorry Pinkie, but that's jes' the way the cookie crumbles," he said; appropriately, a cookie fell out of Pinkie's tail and shattered on the floor. She glared at it.

"No! No! Macintosh Apple, this cookie must not crumble!" she cried, gathering up the remains and rubbing her face into it. *Wait a second...* Macintosh muttered, *Apple...Crumble...*

"Ah think Ah jes' may be able ta help ya out after all."

With Pinkie at his side (until they were able to hose down and detach from each other) Macintosh had returned home to the farm and let himself into his room, its drab colors and lighting instantly brightened by Pinkie Pie's presence. Big Mac slung his harness over the bedpost, slowly opened his dusty closet and pulled out his cardboard box, placed it on the bed and carefully lifted its lid.

"Ooh! What's that! A baseball hat? And a cape! *Gasp!* And a valentine from your *fillyfriend*~?" Pinkie sang, stuffing her nose into the box. Mac quickly pulled it away and shut it.

"Pinkie!" he said angrily, "if'n ya dun' mind, this here box is private!"

"Quiet down with yer canoodlin' up there!" Granny Smith bellowed from downstairs, "some of us are tryin' ta sleep!" Macintosh flushed bright pink, but Pinkie Pie wasn't perturbed.

"Okie-dokie-lokie!" she called back, spinning to busy herself with snooping through the rest of his room. Shaking his head in annoyance Macintosh shifted through the contents of his little box until he found the recipe in question.

"Aww! You were so cute!" she giggled, staring intently at the picture on his desk.

"Uh, why are ya wearing mah harness?" Mac asked as he stared at the pink filly. The huge harness hung loosely on her skinny frame, touching the floor.

"You mean your daddy's harness, don't you?" she said simply, her eyes large and innocent.

Macintosh was taken aback. "He gave it ta me," he said after a moment.

"Really? When? How come I've never met your parents before?" sweetly said the filly. Macintosh looked up to her, his eyes even and explaining everything. Pinkie's smile faded as she looked back to the picture. "Oh." Macintosh looked too. That picture was the last one of his parents. That day out in the town...the storm started shortly after the picture was taken, and...the next day...

"Well, it's no fun being all mopey-dopey about something that happened a long time ago!" Pinkie said, "especially when we've got Apple Crumble to make!" her voice was full of energy as she hopped over to him, "did you find it?"

Macintosh had to tear his eyes away from the picture on his desk. "Eeyup," he said after a second, passing her the slip of paper. She spun it in her hooves, trying to make sense of the messy handwriting.

"Oh wow, this looks really weird. I've never seen a recipe for Apple Crumble that asked for oranges, but no new recipe shall go untried!" she stepped easily out of his harness and bounded for the door. "Will you help me make it?"

Macintosh replaced his harness on his bedpost and followed her downstairs. "Like Ah said, Ah ain't no good at coo-bakin'. Ya'd be better off without me takin' up space in yer kitchen."

"Okie-dokie-lokie!" she chirped in reply. Together they treaded the path towards town, Macintosh's heavy hooves throwing dirt behind him while Pinkie bounded merrily, her hooves hardly touching the road and the recipe held in her mouth. Pinkie started humming at one point, no doubt

working on another song. Applejack had mentioned how she would break out into impromptu tunes whenever she felt fit, with mixed results. Apparently, one song was so bad it caused a stampede of angry buffalo. Macintosh knew it was wrong, but...he kinda wanted to hear that song.

They shortly made it back to the edge of town. Pinkie thanked him for the recipe and bounced away to attempt it. Exhausted from being around the sugary ball of energy for an extended period of time, Macintosh once again found his way to the park, nestled himself into the grass beneath the same old tree and let his mind wander.

"Macintosh?"

"Yes Pa?"

"Where were ya this mornin'?"

I looked at him. He stood in the kitchen. He didn't look at me.

"Ah was studyin'."

"Why?"

"Fer mah test t'day."

He still didn't look at me.

"Why weren't ya out in the field doin' yer chores?"

"B'cause Ah wanted ta study."

He slammed his hoof on the table.

"Dangnabbit, son! Yer family comes first!"

"But Pa! It's rainin' anyhow!"

He said a word I didn't know.

"No buts!" he yelled, "it dun' matter if it's an ice age out there! Y'all always do yer chores every mornin', no exceptions!"

"But!"

"That's how ya run a farm, boy! If'n ya can't take care o' the simple things, how can ya care fer a whole family!?"

"But I don't want ta run the farm!" I shouted.

Father looked at me. He was mad. He hit me.

"Ah ain't gun' tell ya again! No buts! This is tradition! Y'all are goin' ta run the farm! Whether or not ya like it!"

He looked away. He started talking quietly.

"Whether or not ya deserve it."

I swallowed.

"No Ah ain't."

He looked at me. There was a flash outside.

"What did ya jes' say?"

"Ah said Ah ain't goin' ta run the farm!"

He stepped a little closer. I talked louder.

"Ah dun' wanna run the farm! Ah can be whatever Ah want!"

He came close. He was really big. I heard the thunder.

"Ah hate the farm!"

He was mad. Really mad.

He hit me. Harder than he ever hit me before.

I cried.

"No good, son of a-! Boy, you listen, an' listen well! 'Cause this is the last time Ah'm gun' tell ya! Y'all are goin' ta take charge o' the family an' the farm!"

"But-"

"NO BUTS!"

He hit me again.

I heard Apple Bloom wake up. She started crying.

I didn't like that sound.

I cried harder.

"Stop cryin, Macintosh!"

I couldn't.

"Ah said, stop cryin'!"

He hit me again.

"No son o' mine is gun' be a no good, crybaby!"

I looked at him. I was mad too.

"Ah hate you."

He hit me. Really, really hard.

"GET OUTTA MAH SIGHT, YA NO GOOD LYIN' BLANK-FLANK!!!"

I ran. I ran outside. It was still raining.

"Macintosh! Wait!"

Mother ran after me. She hugged me.

"Macintosh, Macintosh..."

"Pa hates me!"

I cried. I think. It was raining.

"No, no he don't..."

"Yes he does!"

"No, he loves ya, son...He's jes' bad at showin' it."

She rocked me in her arms. We were getting wet. There was thunder again.

"Macintosh, listen, y'all can't leave yer father like this. Ya need ta go an' apologize."

"No!"

"Macintosh-"

"Ah dun' wanna run the farm!"

"Macintosh, ya'll need ta take care o' the family someday. That's what yer pa wants."

The family?

"Y'all can understand, can't ya? Ta take care o' the family ya hafta run the farm."

I pushed her away.

"No!"

"Macintosh-"

"Ah don't have ta run the farm! Ah'm goin' ta prove it to him! Ah'll get a perfect score! Ah'll show him that Ah can be whatever Ah want ta be!"
I ran.

"Macintosh!"

Macintosh was brought back to reality by the growl of his stomach. It was around noon, he reasoned, so he stood and cantered out of the park. That storm...The storm that formed hardly a week after Apple Bloom's birth was one of the worst in Ponyville history, he recalled. Apparently there was an accident in Cloudsdale and the rogue storm clouds made their way to Ponyville. It was the first storm little Apple Bloom ever experienced, and ever since she's been very unnerved by the loud, rainy experiences.

He rounded a turn to see the same restaurant from the other day, the 'Clover Café,' and Daisy seated out front again, alone. Once she saw him nearing, she smiled slightly and straightened.

"Hello Macintosh," she said.

"Howdy," he replied, "here on yer lunch break again?"

"Eeyup," she smirked mischievously as she motioned for him to take a seat. Chuckling, he did. The waiter appeared a moment later to take their order, Macintosh just pointed to something on the menu at random. The waiter snorted and snatched the menu back.

"So," he began, "how's that planter workin'?"

"I haven't had a chance to work with it yet," Daisy answered, "but I'm looking forward to it. I have a nice little spot for it behind all my sunflowers. How about you? Anything new?"

"Not much, jes' work on the farm as usual. Well, Ah did bump into Pinkie Pie."

"And you survived!"

Mac laughed. "Eeyup, Ah guess Ah did." Their food arrived a moment later, Daisy getting a pleasant looking sandwich and Macintosh a bowl filled with something green. And wiggly. The pair ate in silence for a bit (Mac doing his best to keep the strange meal that tasted like a mule's horseshoe down). At one point, Macintosh noticed Daisy's eyes narrow at a mare that entered the café, taking a seat a few tables over. It was Cheerilee, who smiled and waved at Macintosh but kept her gaze away from Daisy. *This can't go on*, Macintosh thought to himself, *this will just slowly tear her apart...*

"So Daisy," he said after a minute, "you an' Blues."

Her chewing paused for half a second.

"Yeah?" she said warily.

"You two okay?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Really?"

"What do you mean, 'really?'" she frowned.

Macintosh sighed. "The two o' ya went out fer a while, right?" She nodded dismissively, so Mac continued. "Are the two of you okay?"

"Of course we are," she answered plainly, "he's a nice colt. I enjoyed our time together."

"But he broke up with ya fer Cherry."

"So?"

"Right after ya lost the shop."

She stopped. She slowly lowered her sandwich and sighed deeply. "Yeah, well, it wasn't *his* fault," she growled as she glared over at Cheerilee, who could apparently sense it and shivered.

"That musta been hard, Ah reckon," Mac said softly, "losin' the store an' then gettin' dumped."

"Why are you asking me this?" she accused.

"Y'all need ta talk ta him. Ya can't jes' let yer bad relationship with others sit an' fester." She looked to the ground. Macintosh sighed. "Y'all think it'll jes' go away over time, that ya can jes' move past it an' forget about it." Her silvery green eyes looked into his. "But it won't. It'll never leave ya alone. Believe me, Ah know." Macintosh looked to the sky and sighed heavily. "Ah'll never forget the last words Ah said ta mah pa. An' Ah'll never forgive mahself for 'em either."

The two sat in silence for a few minutes. Daisy opened her mouth to speak on several occasions, but changed her mind at the last second each

time. Her expression was made of stone, but her eyes darted back and forth, deep in thought. Finally, she spoke.

"I...need to go think...alone..." she said, her eyes shaking a little as she looked to him. A moment later she stood, placed a few bits on the table for her unfinished meal and left the café in silence. Macintosh watched, before sighing and returning to his own meal. *I sure hope I didn't only make it worse...*

After a few minutes, the waiter returned and with a snort removed Daisy's plate, pocketing her bits. Macintosh resumed eating his own...lunch, finding it very easy to eat it slowly at the moment.

"Macintosh?"

Mac turned to see Cheerilee standing nearby. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Nope," he smiled as she sat across from him.

"Thanks. What was all that about, with Daisy?" she asked, brushing her maroon mane out of her eyes.

"Personal stuff," Mac replied, "she needed some time ta think."

"Oh, I see," said Cheerilee. When the waiter returned, she ordered a salad and passed him the menu.

"So," Mac began, "how's the class treatin' ya?"

"The little foals are doing well, thank you," her eyes lit up, "you're the talk of the schoolyard. They're always asking 'when will Mr. Macintosh come back?'"

"Ah guess they enjoyed the field trip."

"They sure did. I didn't think they'd enjoy the library, of all places. None of them are exactly the 'bookish' type. Except maybe for Twist."

"An' is Apple Bloom givin' ya any trouble?"

"Oh, no, of course not!" she chuckled, "she's very well-behaved, although I do feel badly for her. She is the only one in the school without a cutie mark now."

"Ah know what it's like ta be the last one ta get it," Mac said sadly.

"I remember. It was very hard for you."

"How are the school bullies?"

"They've been leaving her alone, thankfully. There was an...incident the other day."

Mac's head shot up. "What happened?"

"Oh don't worry, nopony was hurt. Snips and Snails came by during recess and started teasing her about being a blank flank. Well, Apple Bloom didn't stand for it and pushed Snails into the mud. The fillies and colts didn't want to mess with her after that."

Mac chuckled. "Li'l Apple Bloom is a fighter, all right. She loves practicin' her kung fu an' whatnot around the house. But those two colts-"

"They're not really that bad," she interjected, "in fact, I think they have a crush on Apple Bloom and her friends. Snips and Snails are a little older than the Cute Mark Crusaders, and they used to be students of mine until last year when they switched schools. They're good colts, they just don't know how to act around fillies."

"Ah see," Mac nodded. He could identify; he never had any luck with fillies either, growing up. The waiter arrived with Cheerilee's meal, which she happily started on.

"I'm very glad that Apple Bloom was able to make some friends her own age. But I do worry about what might happen when one of those three finally earn their cutie marks. I hope they can all stay together through it."

"Ah'm sure they'll stay friends," Mac said with conviction, "gettin' yer cutie mark can change a lot, but those three are best buds."

"I remember..." Cheerilee said softly, "you...when you got your cutie mark. That was just after..."

"Eeyup."

"You stopped coming to school."

"Had ta. Ah had a family ta take care of."

"I'm sorry..."

"S'okay, it was a long time ago. Ah do regret never graduatin', though. Ah wasted so much time in school." Mac looked at her suddenly. "How're Apple Bloom's grades?"

Cheerilee started a bit at the sudden question.

"Oh! Quite good. She's having a little trouble in math, but her grades are all still very high."

"That's good. Ah know she'll go far. She don't have ta be stuck on a farm her whole life. She's still got so much potential."

The two sat in silence, eating their meals and glancing around the open-air restaurant.

"Cheerilee," Mac said a few minutes later as he finished his meal, "y'all seem ta know a lot about cutie marks. Do ya think...do ya know of anypony who's gotten a cutie mark they didn't want?"

She stared at him, then furrowed her brow in thought.

"Not that I know of. That's not the way a cutie mark works, after all. There's only one mark for every pony, and that mark reflects their true passion and special talent. Some ponies get them later in life, but that's only because they haven't yet discovered it; everypony gets theirs eventually, though, once they use their special talent for the first time."

"Really?" Mac asked, interested and a little saddened by the information.

"Well, sometimes not the very first time, if they only did it with the wrong intentions or out of spite or something. It has to be the very first time they do it out of a pure passion and love for it. The mark itself is just symbolic, really: it just verifies that which the pony should already know, proving to themselves and others that that's what they love." She glanced down happily at her own mark, the grinning flowers smiling back.

Macintosh looked down at his in bitterness. *An apple...Of course it would be a stinking apple. Pa was right; I was destined to be stuck on the farm for my whole life.* Cheerilee sighed in satisfaction.

"I don't think anypony's ever gotten the wrong cutie mark. Like I said, it just doesn't work that way."

"There's a first time fer everythin'..." Mac grumbled.

"Hm? What was that?"

"Ah guess Ah should get goin," Mac said, standing and tossing his money on the table, "It was nice ta see ya again, Cheerilee. If'n ya need any more help with yer class, ya know where ta find me."

"All right, thank you!" she smiled and waved as he left.

'It just doesn't work that way.' Bah...*I'm living proof that it can.*

Macintosh mumbled to himself as he marched down the road. *Special talent...stupid apples.* Down the road he noticed Applejack running her apple stand, enthusiastically smiling and advertising her assortment of apples to the small line of customers she had. *AJ loves what she does. She loves working with apples. Her cutie mark makes sense. Three, shining, imbecilic apples.* He looked down at his own, the large, green apple half, a small cluster of black seeds exposed. He glared at it: the wretched, hateful branding upon his flank.

"An' of course," he growled, "Ah would get the same cutie mark as Pa."

Chapter 12

I did it.

I got it.

I ran for home. It was still raining a little bit. But I didn't care.

I did it. Now they would see. Now I would prove it to them.

They would see that I was right.

That I could be free.

I looked down at it.

My perfect score.

Macintosh grimaced. This sudden influx of unhappy memories wasn't doing him any favors. Glancing at the clock tower (it was nearly one in the afternoon) he decided it was probably time to get back to the farm. With Applejack running a stand in town and Granny Smith's bad hip, there was a whole lot of work back there that wasn't getting done. *Still, I really do hope I can spend some quality time with the family today*, he mused as he plodded the road for home. *Hopefully the rest of today will be quiet.*

A shadow passed overhead. Glancing up, Macintosh saw a royal air-chariot pulled by a pair of pegasus guards circling around and down towards the library. His curiosity getting the better of him, he headed in that direction. *The work can wait a little bit longer.*

When he arrived, he barely caught sight of the chariot pulling up and away, the guard ponies' golden armor glinting in the sun. Standing on the road in front of the library (presumably the passenger of said chariot) was a grey, silver-maned earth pony in a fancy suit and top hat. He knocked on the door, and Spike stepped out to greet him. *Must be that friend Spike mentioned*, Macintosh reasoned. Chuckling to himself, he turned to leave when he heard Spike call after him.

"Yo! Macintosh!" Macintosh spun around as Spike and the stallion cantered up to him. Once closer, Mac could see that the pony wore a monocle and had a golden wreath as a cutie mark.

"Howdy Spike," Macintosh nodded.

"Big Mac, this is my friend from Canterlot, Caesar!"

"Pleasure to meet you," Caesar shook Mac's hoof.

"Caesar, this is Big Macintosh. He helps run the apple farm on the edge of town."

"Howdy," Mac curtly said.

"Ah, the apple farm, eh?" Caesar grinned, tipping his hat, "Sweet Apple Acres if I'm not mistaken? I've heard many great things about your produce from Spike here."

"Heh, thanks," Mac smiled.

"Like I said, Caesar wanted some advice on organizing and planning the 'Summer Sun Celebration,'" said Spike, "I told him Ponyville was a great place for ideas!"

"Ain't the celebration in a couple days?" Mac asked, "ain't that cuttin' it a li'l close?"

"Oh, not to worry," Caesar waved his hoof in the air, "I've put on entire weddings with naught but five minutes and a bit of tissue paper! I must say, however, that I am rather excited at the prospect of heading this year's 'Summer Sun Celebration' in Canterlot. I became the royal event planner just under a year ago. The last planner quit when last year's celebration didn't go quite as planned," he said wryly, "if I'm not mistaken, it was held here in Ponyville, correct?"

"Eeyup."

"Hmm. Well, this year will most certainly go much smoother. I've already got the entire royal courtroom cleared out, just waiting for the decorations! Speaking of which, Spike: I had a few ideas, but I'm afraid I'm simply not very good at decor. Certainly you, my good dragon, can think of something?"

"Uh, well, what have you got so far?" Spike scratched his head. Macintosh fiddled with his harness, trying to think of an excuse to leave.

"Well!" Caesar rubbed his hooves together, "picture this..."

"Well, Ah guess Ah've got apples ta pick," Mac interjected, "Ah should probably get goin'."

"Oh, no, man!" Caesar reacted, "now that you're here, I must hear your opinions as well!"

"Ugh. Fine."

"Excellent! Now, as I was saying, held in the summer, obviously, so we need a summery theme! And of course, the sun is the focus. While flowers are normally associated with spring, I thought they could be used as well, but...Spike, you must have an idea! You're so good at ideas!"

Spike shrugged. Macintosh cleared his throat.

"How 'bout sunflowers?"

"Sunflowers? Sunflowers!" Caesar shouted, "Hundreds of sunflowers! Brilliant! How couldn't I think of that? I can see it now!" the pony swung his hooves in the air, dramatically recreating his vision, "sunflowers on the walls, the podium, on every table! It's absolutely brilliant! But, oh bother, Where in Equestria could I find the quantity I require! No pony sells sunflowers! No pony buys them! Oh, this is dreadful and...I say, Mr. Macintosh, why are you grinning so devilishly?"

It took a few minutes to track down the three flower shop owners, but once they did Caesar explained what he wanted and requested to see Daisy's garden, so Macintosh, Daisy, Caesar and Spike all trotted down the road to her place. On the way, Mac pulled Daisy aside.

"Oh, wow Macintosh!" she said happily, "this is incredible!"

"Dun' get too excited," he whispered, "ya haven't sold 'em yet."

"Oh, right," she whispered back.

"Did...Ah wanted ta say sorry fer gettin' ya upset back at the restaurant."

"No," she said after a second, "it's all right. You were right. I did some thinking, and I do need to talk to Blues soon. Hopefully today."

Mac nodded his assent as they arrived at Daisy's house. She led them around the back to her garden of sunflowers, and Caesar instantly exploded.

"Incredible! Absolutely marvelous! Why, just look at them! So large and golden! They're perfect! No, they're better than perfect! I'll buy them all!"

"Really!?" Daisy beamed.

"Hang on," Mac said, stepping in, "like y'all said, these are pretty nice flowers, so Ah'm sure the little lady here wouldn't mind a fair amount fer 'em."

"Oh of course!" he pulled out a check book and scribbled in it, ripped and presented the slip to Daisy. "How does this sound?"

THUMP

Macintosh helped Daisy back off the grass and had to gently close her jaw. Her eyes were fixed upon the slip clutched tightly in her hooves. Macintosh sneaked a glance at the enormous amount and felt his eyes grow in shock as well.

"Macintosh!" Daisy said in a voice much higher than he'd ever heard her use before, "Look! Oh my gosh! I bet this is more than enough to buy

that shop and everything we need to run it!" her voice reached Pinkie Pie heights, "WooohoooOOOO!!!"

"I take it that's a yes?" Caesar rubbed his ears.

"YES!" Daisy shrieked.

"Excellent!" Caesar grinned, "I'll leave you to prepare them for me; I'll need them no later than three P.M. tomorrow."

"You bet!" Daisy yelled, "Oh wait! I should get Roseluck and Lily to help! Thanks Macintosh! See you!" She dashed away, leaving the other three to slowly walk back out to the front of her house. *Thank me?*

Macintosh wondered, *what did I do?* Caesar turned to spike, who until now had been quiet.

"Spike, your friend here is a true talent! Most helpful!" he grinned, elbowing Mac, "If you don't mind, could I have the privilege of Mr. Macintosh's continued assistance for the day?"

"Uh, that's kind of up to Mac, isn't it?" Spike said, puzzled. Caesar turned to the red stallion, grinning expectantly.

"Uh, sure! Ah dun' mind."

"Excellent!" Caesar chirped.

"Okay then," Spike said, "I guess I'm gonna get going then. Got some work to catch up on in the library. You two have fun!" He began jogging away, but Mac stepped forward and bent his head down to whisper.

"But, this is yer friend!"

"Yeah," Spike smiled mischievously, "but I can't stand him when he needs help planning something," he ran off to town, waving behind him.

"Drop by the library when you're done!" he shouted.

Big Mac turned to the grey stallion, whose face radiated expectancy.

"Uh, okay, what's next?" Mac offered as they trotted towards town.

"Well! What's the most important thing at any celebration?"

"Uh-"

"The food, of course! Now, I've already got a large selection of dishes prepared - oh, the glazed corn will be magnificent! And have you ever tried braized carrot? Simply to die for! I have connections, you know! The main course will be talked about for years!" By now the pair returned to town. "But! While I have the hors d'oeuvres, and main course planned out, I am missing two key elements, including the most important part! Dessert! What meal is complete without dessert! Now, of course, there are dozens of wonderful caterers in Canterlot, but all their selection is old and blasé, with a capital 'blah.' I want something new and-Aha! What perfect timing! A bakery! Surely they will have what I seek!" The pony

pounced into SugarCube Corner; Macintosh had to snap himself to attention and follow him inside.

"Hello! Baker, if you please!" Caesar called. The few patrons that were inside all stopped what they were doing to eye the new pony. He waved at the two ponies behind the counter, a square-jawed yellow stallion and a rounder blue mare. "Hello! I would to try something new!"

"GUUUAAAAHHHH!" gasped something pink that somehow fell from the ceiling, "You're here! My Pinkie Sense hasn't failed me yet!" she shouted, rushing into the kitchen and returning with a still steaming pan of Apple Crumble, "here you go! One bowl of something new!"

"Hmm, Apple Crumble? Hardly new," Caesar murmured as he took a seat (which, Pinkie would not stop pointing out, was the one she said he would), "but, I've been wrong before, however rarely; let's give it a try!"

Pinkie doled him out a portion and the whole bakery held its breath as he smacked it for a moment, bringing his hoof to his chin in thought.

"Brilliant!" he bellowed, "Absolutely excellent! Best Apple Crumble I've ever had! Why, had I not known I would have never guessed what it was! I say, what is the secret ingredient?"

"Blood..." Pinkie smiled. The other ponies gasped. "...Oranges! Blood oranges aren't used very often, actually, now that I think about it." Pinkie's eyes formed little crescents.

"Brilliant! Really, really smashing!" the more excited Caesar became, the more his Trottingham accent came out, "this is absolutely perfect! Now then, on to business! I shall require three hundred servings of this for Saturday evening!"

"Th-th-three hundred!?" the mare and stallion behind the counter shrieked as they ran up and flanked either side of Pinkie Pie, who had the biggest grin in the world.

"At least! Perhaps that should be four hundred. Now! Payment up front!" Caesar chimed, writing another check, "will this cover the expenses?"

THUMP THUMP

"WHEE!" Pinkie screamed, bouncing off every surface (and pony) in the room. Macintosh helped the shop owners to their hooves as Pinkie Pie landed on his back, shaking his harness. "Looks like I'm gunna need to buy a whole lotta apples off you, Macky! Thanks!"

"Thanks fer wh-"

"Excellent! Now that we've taken care of that, Mr. Macintosh," Caesar grinned, pulling the red stallion outside and shooing Pinkie Pie away, "appetizers! We simply must have appetizers! And you've given me the most wonderful idea!"

"Ah have?"

"Yes! To match the theme of summer and an apple dessert, we simply must have an apple based appetizer and-Oh! Brilliant! An apple stand!" Caesar stormed off to Applejack's stand, Macintosh struggling to keep up.

"Howdy Macintosh," Applejack smiled, "Who's yer friend?"

"This here's Caesar," Mac panted, "an'-"

"Aha! You must be Ms. Applejack! You run Sweet Apple Acres, correct?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"You're Mr. Macintosh's sister, correct?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Brilliant! You two are clearly highly intelligent and perceptive ponies! Now! If you'll indulge me..." he scooped up one of Applejack's apples, devouring it in one bite.

"H-Hey! Y'all gonna pay fer that?"

"Smashing! Truly excellent!" he smacked his lips, "imagine, Macintosh! Your apples are so sweet, they need only be presented sliced with a chocolate dipping sauce and voila! The perfect appetizer! Now then, to business!" He turned to the orange filly, whose face was twisted in confusion, and passed her a slip of paper. "I'll need at least this many of your tastiest apples for Saturday night!"

Mac and Applejack gawked at the huge order.

With a rip, Caesar presented another check.

"Will this cover it?"

THUMP THUMP

Helped to their hooves by the grey stallion, Macintosh and Applejack could only blubber at the massive sum.

"I know the bakers will also require a substantial amount of your harvest, Ms. Applejack, so I want to ensure that you'll have enough money to get by while you wait for your crop to re-grow, or whatever it is that apples do. Will this be enough?"

Applejack nodded dumbly, eyes still fastened on the slip of paper.

"Excellent! Once again, displaying your brilliance, Ms. Applejack!"

"SHEEEEEEOOOOOT!" Applejack bellowed, "I'd better get started! I'll track down Caramel an' the others! Whooo-weee! If only my pa could see me now! Thank ya, Big Brother!"

"But Ah-"

"Mr. Macintosh!" Caesar called, already on the other side of the road and making tracks. Mac shook himself and hurried to catch up. "I must say, you certainly have quite the knack for this field of work! This is all going so much smoother than I expected! In fact, I think that-Oh my goodness!"

The grey stallion stopped in front of the town square, the town hall reaching high in the center of the large plaza.

"Look! Look at all this!" he bellowed, catching the attention of half the ponies in town, "why, it's beautiful! Look at all this wonderful, wide open space! The magnificent town hall! Exquisite! I must say, this is all perfect! That's it, I've decided!" He spun to face Macintosh, his eyes ablaze with passion. Macintosh and a small crowd stared expectantly at the grey pony. "I will hold the 'Summer Sun Celebration' right here in Ponyville!"

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

It looked like a war zone. Macintosh began helping ponies to their hooves as Caesar bounded around like a young filly in a candy shop.

"Jes' like that!?" Mac shouted, "yer switchin' locations jes' like that?"

"Oh, not to worry man! I'm sure they won't mind! After all, the Princess has a propensity herself to make sudden changes at the last second!" he hopped around, forming imaginary scenery with his hooves. "Yes! Right here! Banquet tables! Oh! And over here-Wait!" he jumped back to Macintosh, "Music! I had almost forgot! Of course, this will need music! Do you know anypony who'd be interested in running the music this year? ...You're grinning again in an unsettling fashion, Mr. Macintosh!"

Once they found Blues and Vinyl Scratch and explained the situation they sampled a bit of their music for Caesar, who gleefully presented them with another check. Blues and Vinyl (once Macintosh helped them to stand upright again) vigorously agreed to perform.

"Oh man, this will be awesome!" Blues shouted, still gushing over the check.

"Dude, your latest beat will totally knock 'em senseless!" Vinyl grinned, her sunglasses flashing. Cherry was nowhere to be seen.

"Wait! You know what would be totally awesome!?" Blues widened his stance.

"What would be totally awesome!?" Caesar mimicked.

"If we got Lyra and Bon-Bon to perform!"

"Aw, dude, that'd be sick!" Vinyl Scratch said, "we could totally sample their tunes and run 'em through the delay track and add a sick reverb!"

"I have no idea what you just said, but it sounds brilliant!" Caesar laughed, "I just know you and the royal band will get along like peas in a pod!"

"Let's go!" Blues and Vinyl shouted, rushing away, "Thanks Macintosh!"

"But Ah didn't do-"

"Mr. Macintosh, my dear, dear friend," Caesar said enthusiastically, galloping off in another direction, "you've helped me so very much today, I almost feel bad about this, but...I still need one more thing."

Macintosh gasped for air. "An'...what's...that?"

"I need somepony who can assist me in the decorum for the celebration! While I am amazingly talented, I'm afraid I have never been very good at color selection and palette swapping or whatever it is designers do; designing, presumably! Is there anypony around here with a...a flair for fashion and style?"

Macintosh thought for a moment. He couldn't think of anypony. *Wait, maybe that unicorn with the styled indigo mane knows someone.*

"Excuse me, miss," he said, catching her attention, "do y'all know anypony who's a good designer?"

Wrong question. Or, perhaps, exactly the right one.

"A DESIGNER!?" she bellowed, "Why, you're speaking to Rarity, only the most acclaimed fashionista and cultured connoisseur of design in Ponyville, and I assure you I am far better than 'good!' After all, I've designed for and attended the Grand Galloping Gala where my friends and I even had a private session with the Princess Celestia herself! I've made appearances in-"

"Rarity?" Caesar mused, "Aha! I knew you looked familiar! You designed for Hoity-Toity!"

"Yes!" Rarity puffed her hair.

"And Sapphire Shores!"

"Yes!"

"And you had that article in 'Clothes Horse Magazine!'"

"Yes yes yes!"

"You're perfect! I'm from the royal court of Canterlot, and I'm placing you in charge of design and decorations for this year's 'Summer Sun Celebration,' held here in Ponyville's town square! We're going with a summer theme with sunflowers as the main focus, which I've already lined up. Will this be enough payment?"

Macintosh thought quickly and caught the white unicorn as she fell.

"Oh my! T-t-this is incredible! Of-of course I'll do it!" she stammered, holding a hoof to her head.

"Excellent! Well, now that everything's taken care of here, I must away to Canterlot to inform the royal staff of the changes! I'll meet you again later tonight to make our preparations! I look forward to seeing you at the festival, Mr. Macintosh! Adieu and so long!" Caesar scurried off, leaving the red stallion and white unicorn alone.

"I can't believe it! A royal event planner asking ME for to design for him! Eeeee!" she squealed, clutching the check close to her heart, "this year is going to go so much better than last year's disaster! Oh!" she turned to Big Mac, "I cannot thank you enough!"

"...Me?"

"Yes, you! Thank you ever so much for bringing him here! This is such a huge opportunity! I was only able to provide a little direction and advice last year, but this! In charge of the whole celebration's design! Ah, but where are my manners? My name is Rarity. And yours?"

"Big Macintosh."

"Pleasure," she curtsied, "I don't know how I can thank you enough for-Oh! Of course! Come with me!" She pulled the stallion off towards a large tent like building nearby with several ponnyquins on it and a sign marked 'Carousel Boutique' above the door. The two poured into the front entrance, where Rarity pushed Macintosh towards a large platform near the entrance.

"Ditzy! Ditzy Doo!" she called as Macintosh obligingly stepped onto the podium. A moment later a grey pegasus with a blonde mane hobbled downstairs with Sweetie Belle in tow. "Macintosh, this is Ditzy Doo. She's a house guest of mine right now, and she's actually quite talented when it comes to design!"

"Design!" the pegasus repeated happily, shaking Mac's hoof. Rarity pulled out a measuring tape and, using her magic, took Mac's measurements, levitating his harness off him. "Sweetie Belle, could you fetch me my glasses?" The tiny unicorn ran off as Rarity began explaining the situation to Ditzy Doo. "You'll never believe it! I was just returning from one of my spa sessions with Fluttershy when - oh, thank you, Sweetie Belle

- and Macintosh here referred me to none other than the royal event planner for the 'Summer Sun Celebration!'"

"Triangles!?" Ditzzy asked excitedly.

"I know! And he asked *me* to design for the celebration!"

"That's spotty!"

"Now, of course, I knew you'd want to help out! After all, you have quite the talent for decorating, Ms. Doo!"

The pegasus fluttered in the air and, much to Big Mac's horror, her eyes started lolling in every direction imaginable. "Super magnets! The package shoos away the pesky giraffes and marks the landing with a fizzle!"

"Well, you'd better get started dear! The festival begins Saturday, and that's the day after tomorrow!"

Ditzzy gasped and flew down the hall, shouting something about muffins in her wake. Macintosh shook himself.

"Is she gun' be all right?" he asked.

"Oh, she'll be much more than all right!" Rarity chimed, making a few notes on a slip of paper, "she's very gifted at decorating and has wanted to try her hoof at managing a larger event for some time-*Will you stay still*, Macintosh?"

"Oh, uh, sorry, but, uh, what're ya doin'?"

Rarity looked at him with some mild bemusement. "Why, I'm making you a suit for the celebration, of course! It's the least I can do as thanks!"

"Now, y'all dun' have ta-"

"Nonsense, it's my pleasure!" she finished taking her notes and put her tools away, "Oh, it's going to be wonderful! I'm thinking a deep, forest green felt! Or maybe a navy blue!"

"But-"

"I'll have it ready for you tomorrow afternoon, no charge, of course! Now, I hate to be rude, but I have a lot of work to do, and I must begin!"

"Uh-"

"Thank you again, so much, Macintosh! This is really amazing! I'll see you tomorrow!"

The door closed and Macintosh found himself outside, clutching his harness in his hooves.

"What...jes' happened?"

Chapter 13

The town was buzzing with activity. News that the 'Summer Sun Celebration' had switched locales at the last second spread like wildfire, as ponies ran to and fro, hurrying to get their businesses in order for the festivities. This year was going to be a big deal, Mac overheard somepony say, since this is the first time in a thousand years that both princesses will be present. Certainly there would be a lot of royal guests and visitors from Canterlot, and it may even turn into a bigger event than the Grand Galloping Gala was. The tremendous amount of excitement overwhelmed Macintosh, so he headed for home, where he hoped he could find some peace and quiet, and maybe even spend some quality time with the family. Not so, he was rudely reminded, when he arrived and found Applejack organizing the massive tree-bucking harvest, at least a dozen hired hooves all standing at attention with a paycheck and a good meal to look forward to. Macintosh, shoulders sagging, let himself into the house where Granny Smith was busy cooking up a massive dinner and mentioned something about Apple Bloom's friends spending the evening again. *Looks like my family will have to wait*, he sighed, plodding up the stairs and into his room. Flumping down onto the bed he dozed, trying to recover from the hectic morning and resting up for what would surely be a very busy afternoon.

*I kept running. I was almost home.
It stopped raining. My legs were tired.
I saw home. I saw the farm.
The farm I was free from.
I ran to the door. It opened before I got there. Two stallions came out. I didn't know them. They looked sad.
I stepped inside the house. I heard something. Something I didn't like.
Crying.
Grandmother, Applejack and Apple Bloom were crying.
I walked into the living room. They were on the couch. Grandmother cried a lot. She held Apple Bloom.
Apple Bloom was so small. She cried really loud.
Applejack cried too. She was quiet, but she was crying.*

They didn't see me. They were looking at the table.

I looked too.

It was wet. The three things on the table were wet. I stepped closer, and I saw what they were.

Father's harness. Father's hat. And Mother's bow.

They were wet.

"Macintosh!"

"Huh? Wha?"

"Are ya jes' goin' ta sleep all day, or are ya goin' ta come out an' help?"

Macintosh looked up from the bed to see his sister standing in the doorframe, glistening with sweat. Groaning, he sat up and threw on his harness.

"All right, all right, Ah'm comin'," he said, "how's the work goin'?"

Applejack and her brother started downstairs. "Not bad, I've got eight ponies harvestin' the east orchards fer them appetizer thingies, an' the other seven are buckin' all the red delicious an' spartan trees fer Pinkie's order. We should be able ta finish up t'night, if we work hard."

They stepped out the front door. Macintosh winced at the bright sunlight. "An'? No disasters yet?"

"Not yet," she chuckled, "Caramel's doin' pretty good so far."

"Let's hope it keeps up," Mac said, his deep voice rumbling. The early afternoon sun beat down on the ponies, and Macintosh grabbed a quick drink from the makeshift drink stand Granny Smith set up. "So where'd ya want me ta go?" He asked.

"Ah was hopin' ya'd overlook the east orchard harvest. I'll go keep an eye on Caramel, since y'all can't seem ta manage it," she added with a snort.

"Ah only looked away fer a second. Ah dun' know how he managed ta lose an entire wagon."

"Anyways, let's get ta work. I'm only payin' them ponies till supper, and that's in five hours, so make 'em count!" She tipped her hat and trotted off. Macintosh strolled towards the east field, grabbing a stalk of hay on the way to chew. As he crested the hill he saw all the hired hooves working diligently to buck the apple trees and haul the wagons off; he recognized many of the ponies as regulars from last year's harvest and Winter Wrap Up. Macintosh assisted where needed, and bucked a few trees himself

when the opportunity arose, but work went slowly and Mac found himself with a lot of time to think.

So much for a quiet afternoon. Now I've gone and brought a honking big festival to town. Great. And here I was hoping to take a peaceful walk with the family. But no, it's just work, work, work. Mac's reasons for wanting to spend time with his family was partly selfish, as he really enjoyed being around them, but it was also out of a desire to prove to them that he loved and cared for them. He knew his father cared about the family too, but...well, like his mother said, he was really bad at showing it. Macintosh didn't want that problem. He wanted his immediate family to know he loved them. If he ever got married and had a family of his own, he wanted them to know, too. The last thing he wanted was to become like his father. *I will not let that happen.*

After an hour or two of solid work, Macintosh left his team on their own. *They're a capable bunch, he reasoned, they can handle it on their own for a few minutes,* so he sauntered down the hill towards the farmhouse. The smell of a slow-roasting meal wafted from within, and he let himself into the house.

"Grama?" he called.

"Macintosh! Jes' in time! Come give yer gran'mother a hoof!"

Macintosh stepped around into the kitchen where he saw Granny Smith busily working in the large kitchen, at least ten pots all boiling on the long stove.

"Macintosh, ken ya stir them carrots fer me? Ah've got ta keep an eye on these here 'taters else they'll go all soggy again!"

Big Mac gladly did as asked and together they got all the various meals simmering peacefully.

"Wow, Grama," Mac said, "Ah haven't seen ya cook up a meal like this since the last family reunion!"

"Well it ain't every day somepony ups an' gives ya a big fat stinkin' check!" she wheezed, wiping the sweat from her wrinkly, smiling face and slowly taking a seat at the table so as not to hurt herself, "ya'll shoulda seen Applejack when she ran in showin' off that li'l slip o' paper like it were her baby! Ah ain't seen her so giddy in years!"

"Well, Ah guess now we'll finally be able ta get yer hip fixed up!" Macintosh chuckled as he sat down beside her.

"Yeah, Ah guess so! 'Bout time, too!" she laughed. "Back in mah day, b'fore mah hip started actin' up, Ah used ta run in the races, y'know!"

"Really?" Mac pretended to be surprised; he heard the incoming story lots before and loved it every time, even if his grandmother took many

liberties with its truthfulness. In fact, every time she told it it was a little bit different.

"Darn tootin'! Ah was in a race against the Princess Celestia fer the crown of Equestria once, y'know! 'Course, back then, Celestia was jes' a li'l filly in school! Stop yer laughin' there, Macintosh! Ah'm older'n Ah look an' doin' jes fine fer mahself if Ah say so!"

Macintosh sat with his grandmother, happily listening to her near nonsensical ramblings about how she decided to let Celestia win the race and become the princess. Macintosh loved Granny Smith. She and his grandfather often came to visit when he was younger (always slipping him a shining bit or two), but once the two came to live with him after the accident, he found himself loving them even more. By then Granny Smith already had a bad hip that only got worse, and his grandfather had already taken a turn for the worse, so although they doted on him like a son, he found himself usually taking care of them. Once grandfather passed away, Granny Smith became even worse off, but she wouldn't let herself kick the bucket, even if she couldn't make a flight of stairs by herself anymore.

"...An' that's how Equestria was made! Now, c'mon boy! Help yer granny up! Ah reckon them zucchini patties are jes' 'bout ready ta be flipped!" Grinning, Macintosh assisted his grandmother over to the stove. "Fetch me mah walker, boy! I need ta make a trip ta the pantry fer some seasonin'!"

"Ah could jes' get it if ya want, Gramma."

"Shush yer face! Ah'm still alive!" she laughingly scolded him, "now go get me mah walker else ya'll be needin' it more'n me!"

Macintosh did as asked and was subsequently shooed out of the house so she could get back to work. Smiling contentedly, Macintosh breathed in the tasty air, quickly trotting over to his team to check up on their progress. Once satisfied that they were doing a good job, he decided to stroll to the other side of the orchard near the northern acre where he found his sister shouting orders for her team.

"AJ?" he said, sidling up to her.

"Oh, hey Big Brother," she looked up at him, "what's goin' on?"

"Nuthin', Ah jes' wanted ta see how it's all goin' fer ya over here."

"Not bad, everythin's goin' steady. Heh, I guess the harvest came a little early this year, huh? After all's said an' done, half the orchard'll be gone."

"Eeyup."

He watched a couple colts buck a tree together (their technique lacking, he noted) and haul away the apples that fell.

"So," he said after a minute or two, "how was yer day?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Fine, I suppose. I got some good business in town. 'Course, nothin' as good as when that Caesar pony showed up, I tell you what!" she chuckled, "land sakes, if Pa were here, he'd be prouder than a mother griffon watchin' her cubs first take flight!"

Macintosh just stared ahead. "Eeyup."

For a few minutes, they watched the work in silence.

"Hey, listen," Applejack began after a while, "I know you an' Pa didn't always get along."

Mac snorted.

"But," she continued, "he was a good stallion. He cared about us. Y'know, that harness yer wearin' was the only one he ever needed. It's good an' strong, jes' like Pa." She touched her hat. "Jes' like you."

"Ah dun' know."

"You an' Pa cared more for yer family than anypony Ah've ever known."

"He sure weren't good at showin' it."

They were quiet. Somepony bucked a tree; the apples fell with soft 'plops.'

"Well, Macintosh, y'all have done a whole lot fer this family. If it weren't fer you, well, I don't know where we'd be. I mean, after t'day, the farm'll be golden!" Applejack elbowed the red stallion, "I swear, we'll have enough money left over ta do a heap of fixin'-Hey hey hey! Caramel! Watch what yer doin'!"

Macintosh shook his head as he watched Caramel upright his apple cart and reload the apples with some help from a friend.

"Dang Caramel..." Applejack muttered.

"AJ, he ain't such a bad colt. He tries."

"I know. Jes'...He an' Clover together seem ta be a recipe fer disaster."

"They got yer carriage ta the Grand Galloping Gala in one piece, didn't they?"

Applejack chuckled. "Yeah, I s'pose. I guess yer right. As long as they don't-HEY! CAMEL! THAT SHED AIN'T FER APPLES!! STOP!!"

Macintosh watched in horror as Caramel and Clover kicked open the doors to the wood shed he stowed the felled trees in...the unsecured felled trees, he realized as his heart skipped several beats. He heard the rumble of tumbling logs but he didn't stay around to just watch them roll out.

Caramel and Clover scattered as Macintosh charged towards the shed.

Glancing down the hill Macintosh saw the young trees that would be easily

torn apart by the small mountain of twenty-foot wide logs, the cow ranch and chicken coop beyond that were just waiting to be crushed, and if they didn't stop them (which they wouldn't, Mac bitterly realized) they would reach the steep downwards slope leading to Ponyville...And Celestia help anypony in their path. *Idiot! Why didn't I just clean the stupid shed and tie down those logs when I had the chance!?* Mentally berating himself he turned to glare at the incoming avalanche. The first logs smashed their way through the double doors, and Macintosh gritted his teeth. *This is going to hurt.* Widening his stance he dug his back hooves into the dirt, then his front ones. He stiffened himself, pulled his head back, threw out his chest and closed his eyes.

"AAAARRGH!" he cried as the first log slammed into him; his harness absorbed most of the blow, but Mac could already feel one heck of a bruise forming from the two foot thick tree trunk. Once it hit him he bent forward a little, bending his front legs to hold it in place against his chest. He dug his hooves deeper into the ground as the following logs all rammed into him one after the other, forcing him back several feet, forming small trenches in the grass. Eyes glued shut and watery from pain, each log that joined the pile sent a tremor of pain through his chest. Using his strong neck he kept the logs in place, ensuring none of them rolled past him, although he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep it up. Cracking open one eye he watched the last log - and also, the largest by far - making a beeline for the pile. A burst of adrenaline surged through him as he clenched his teeth and closed his eyes...

WHAM
CRUNCH

The pain was incredible; burning knives seared through his chest. He did all he could to keep from biting his tongue in pain: if the first log bruised a rib or two then this one had broken them with a sickening '*snap.*' It knocked a smaller log loose which swung up and smashed him in the jaw. The force of the woodpile pushing him back slowly let up, until finally, all the timber stopped rolling, held in place by the red stallion.

"SOMEpony WANT TA GIVE ME A HOOOF, HERE!?" he bellowed; the action sent a jolt of pain through his body, but he held firm. Finally, snapping back to reality, the other ponies all rushed to his side, one-by-one rolling the massive logs back up the hill and into the shed, where, under Applejack's direction, they fastened and locked them down, ensuring this would never happen again. As the last log was pushed away, Macintosh

felt himself stumble and allowed himself the sweet relief of unconsciousness.

*She was leaving.
Why was she leaving?
How could she go? Did she even care?
It was only a week later. Only one week.
She smiled. She was happy.
But I wasn't.
Why was she leaving?
Grandmother was beside me. She was crying. We watched her leave.
Grandfather cried when she told him, but he stayed inside with Apple Bloom.
I didn't like this. I cried too.
Why would she do this to us?
I looked down. I was wearing Father's harness. It was still too big, but I had to wear it.
I was in charge now.
I had to run the farm. I had to protect the family.
I had no choice. My perfect score didn't matter.
This was where I had to be.
Sister...Why would you leave us?*

There was sound. It sounded like voices, but from underwater. Muffled. Macintosh tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. He couldn't feel anything either. Slowly, the voices became clearer.

"...Be...okay?..."

"...Ribbs.....lucky..."

"...Mac...osh....save...Pon..."

"..."

As feeling slowly returned to Macintosh he felt the pain jolt through his body, silencing the voices and knocking him into the darkness again.

When Macintosh finally awoke, he found himself in a white bed in a large tent; ponies with white hats stood around him, and he saw Applejack,

Granny Smith and Apple Bloom all sitting near the foot of his bed. *Hospital*, he figured.

"...Buh?" he managed to say, his mouth dry and sticky and jaw sore. Every head in the room spun to face him, his sisters and Grandmother rushing up to his side.

"Macintosh! Macintosh!" Apple Bloom squealed, trying to hug her brother but being held back by one of the nurses.

"He's in a very delicate condition!" snapped the nurse, "he can't afford to be jostled right now!" Apple Bloom pouted, and looked at Big Mac with large, watery eyes.

"Macintosh!" Applejack began, her own eyes red, "are y'all all right?"

"Ah...dunno," Mac croaked, "am Ah?"

"You broke two ribs and bruised three others, cracked your clavicle and suffered a mild concussion," the nurse rattled off, looking at a clipboard, "really, considering the beating you took, you're lucky that's all. Your harness took the brunt of the damage," she motioned to a table where his harness rested, looking worse for wear but still in one piece. He chuckled, which turned into coughing. *I guess it'll take more than that to break you.*

"You seem to be doing well," the nurse continued, "but you'll still need to wear these bandages for at least two months, probably longer, and you'll need to stay in bed tonight and all day tomorrow."

Macintosh looked down at the thick bandages around his neck and chest. "Now...Doc..." Mac coughed, "could...water..."

A nearby nurse brought him a cool glass of water which he downed in a flash. Clearing his throat, he continued.

"Doc, Ah've been worse off than this b'fore an' healed up quicker."

"Macintosh, listen ta the nice lady," Granny Smith chided, "y'all took quite a beatin' an' need yer rest!"

"But there's still work ta do..." Big Mac tried to sit up but collapsed back to the bed in pain.

"Don't even think about it!" the nurse scolded, laying his head on the pillow, "this isn't like that kidney injury from that silly bet you made with Applejack!" Mac's sister blushed and hung her head. "You need your rest!" resumed the nurse, "now, just get some sleep. Later tonight, we'll see about moving you back to your home."

"Ugh. Fine."

"Dun' worry Big Brother," Applejack said strongly, "we'll get all the rest of the apples bucked an' ready fer the celebration!" His family turned

for the exit (Granny Smith had to pry Apple Bloom away), but Mac called out after Applejack.

"AJ! Tell Caramel and Clover that it weren't their fault, okay?"

Applejack looked thoughtful for a moment, then smiled and tipped her hat. "All right Big Macintosh," she said, "I'll let 'em know. At least we finally got that shed sorted now," she added with a wink.

Big Mac groaned as they left the tent. The nurse pulled the curtain and passed him another glass of water.

"Now, just try to get some sleep. You are a strong stallion, and you're right, you'll heal up quickly, but for now, just try to rest."

Macintosh found it very easy to oblige all of a sudden, and within a few minutes fell soundly asleep.

Later in the afternoon, he was helped out of his bed and back to the farm, tired and bleary eyed. He wasn't really aware of the trip and soon found himself in his own bed again, his chest and head pounding slightly. Applejack came in the room and woke him up every couple of hours like the doctors said to give him water, and he was pretty sure that Cheerilee, Lightning Bolt and a few other ponies came to visit, but he was too tired to remember anything they said. He slept until late in the evening, when the family gathered in his room to eat their dinner, the leftovers from the meal Granny Smith cooked up. Apple Bloom sat herself right at his side as they ate, nuzzling up to her big brother affectionately, which he appreciated. The whole meal passed by in a blur, and he couldn't remember any details with the throbbing in his head. Before long, though, Macintosh found himself alone and drowsy, propped against his pillows and slowly falling asleep again.

"Macintosh?"

Mac pried one eye open.

"Macintosh? You awake?"

"Ah am now."

"Oh, good." Apple Bloom sat on his bed, her eyes wide with concern. "Feelin' any better?"

"Yeah, a bit," he said, sitting a little straighter. It hurt a bit to do, but he didn't let it show.

"I was so worried when I heard!" she squeaked, nuzzling into his large arm, "I was so scared!"

"Well, Ah'm still here."

She sighed happily and curled up at his side.

"I love you, Big Brother," she said quietly.

Mac smiled and ran a hoof through her mane, ruffling her pink bow.

"Ah love ya too."

"Wanna play a game?" she asked after a couple minutes.

"Sure," he replied, "what did ya have in mind?"

"We could play castle! I could be the knight an' you can be the dragon!"

"An' Applejack's the princess?" Mac said. The two looked at each other as the mental picture formed and they exploded into laughter.

Macintosh stopped abruptly in pain. "Maybe that ain't such a good idea."

"You okay?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Eeyup. Ah guess laughter ain't always the best medicine."

She giggled. "We could play a board game!"

"Ah like board games."

"Cool! I'll go grab one!" Apple Bloom grinned and hopped off the bed (which made Macintosh wince in pain) and returned in a moment with a game.

"Hang on a sec," Mac said as his sister opened the box and began setting it up on his bed, "weren't yer friends goin' ta stay the night?"

"Yeah, but after what happened we didn't want ta bother you.

B'sides, I needed ta take care of you tonight," she said matter-of-factly.

"Well, thank ya, Apple Bloom," he smiled, "Ah sure do appreciate it."

"I know. Okay, here, you can go first..."

Chapter 14

The night was a relatively peaceful one, considering Macintosh's condition. He had to stay still in his bed and woke up once or twice, but he was able to sleep in very late the next morning and already felt a lot better.

"When Caesar came back ta town last night," Applejack told the family over breakfast in Mac's room, "we talked 'bout how he wants them apples prepared an' when ta have 'em ready an' all. I'll need ta spend t'day cleanin' an' washin' all the apples. Got tons ta do!"

"Will ya be all right?" Mac asked, chewing slowly on his apple, "Ah should be able ta stand an' help ya wash later."

"I'll be fine, dun' worry. Y'all need ta rest up." She yawned loudly.

"How late did ya stay up workin' last night, anyhow?" Macintosh asked.

"I said dun' worry! I'll be fine."

Macintosh sighed. *I really hope she's right.*

"Is it all right if Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle sleep over tonight?" Apple Bloom asked, making her most adorable face and fluttering her eyelashes at her family.

"Only if Macintosh is feelin' up ta it," Granny Smith said. Apple Bloom widened her eyes even more and added in a little pout for good measure as she turned to her brother.

"Now Apple Bloom," he chuckled, "ya know Ah could never say no ta that face."

"Yay!" squealed the little filly

"But ain't it time fer ya ta get ta school?" Macintosh asked. Apple Bloom gasped and gulped down the rest of her breakfast.

"I almost forgot! Bye everypony!" she rushed out of the room as her family wished her farewell and finished their own breakfast.

"I guess I should get started too," Applejack stood, "lotsa work ta do. C'mon, Gramma, I'll help ya downstairs."

"All right, all right, jes' let me finish mah apple!"

"Jes' call if ya need anythin', Macintosh," Applejack said as they disappeared downstairs.

"See y'all," Mac called after them. Macintosh glanced around his room. *Not a whole lot to do in here,* he mumbled to himself. He had never gotten around to taking any more books out from the library, so he was

without reading materials too. Well, if you didn't count Granny Smith's romance novels, and he'd rather die than read one of those...again. To get his mind off the memory he found a spot on the ceiling to be intensely interesting for the next few minutes, but after a while he yawned and let himself doze to sleep. The pain medication he had taken was supposed to help him sleep, and it seemed to be doing a good job. Within a few minutes, he was out cold.

Knock knock knock

"Beh...Come in," he groaned as he rubbed his eyes, rudely awoken. The door opened, and Applejack poked her nose in.

"Ya've got a visitor, Big Brother," she smiled. She pushed the door open wider to allow Lily to trot in, a large bouquet of flowers in her mouth.

"Hi Macintosh!" she said cheerfully, placing the flowers on his desk, "I heard about what happened; how are you doing?"

"Howdy Lily," he sat up, "Ah'm fine, considerin'. How're y'all?"

"Good, good," she smiled, sitting on the edge of his bed. Her bright blonde mane and pink coat livened up his drab room. "Daisy and Rosey are both really busy, so they couldn't come."

"Busy?"

"Yup! Daisy is getting all those sunflowers ready for that roman guy, and Rose bought out that empty shop and is getting it ready to move into. They're both really, really happy," she said dreamily, "and they wanted me to say 'hi.'"

"That's nice," Mac said softly. "How's Blues doin'?"

"Um, I'm not sure," she shrugged, "I haven't seen him for a while. I saw Cherry earlier, and she didn't look very happy."

"What's new?"

Lily laughed. "I know, right? She's such a grump! A clumpy grumpy slumpy bumpy rumpy stumpy lumpy slumpy...no wait, I used that one. She reminds me of my auntie Gertrude! Anypony with a name like that is bound to be grumpy! One time, when I was a unicorn, she was all like 'ahr ahr ahr, nag nag nag, clean your room!' and I was all 'noooo I wanna sing like a bird in the winter!' and then we ran, ran, ran until we couldn't run anymore because she became a hydra and I was trying to use my magic to stop her but I tripped and my horn fell off."

"Lily," Mac snickered, "yer the strangest creature Ah've ever met."

"Aww, that's the nicest thing you've ever said!" she grinned, patting his head. She stayed around for the next hour or so, telling

incomprehensible stories and playing a board game or two with him. When lunch came, Granny Smith insisted that she stay, and Macintosh, feeling a lot better, was able to make his way downstairs to the dining room (with a little help, of course). Applejack was already waiting at the table, her hat pushed back on her head.

"How's it goin', AJ?" Mac asked, sitting down.

"Not bad," she replied. She had a couple small bags under her eyes and she seemed a little unfocused. "I spent the last few hours rotatin' the apples in the soakin' bins, gettin' rid o' all the worms. I've started sortin' through 'em, pickin' out all the rotten an' bruised ones, an' once I'm through with that I can start washin' 'em. I'll be done by the end o' the day."

"Want some help?" Lily beamed, "I'm good at washing things!"

"Well, I think I can manage," Applejack said defensively.

"AJ, that's a lot o' apples," Macintosh added, "are ya sure ya couldn't use the help?"

"Well..." her mouth went sideways, "all right, I guess I could use the help."

"Cool!" Lily grinned, "but I require one thing in return," she narrowed her eyes and leaned in towards the orange earth pony.

"Er, an' what's that?"

"Apple pie!" Lily said happily, "one of your super-delicious apple pies, Applejack! They're so goooOOOOood!"

Applejack laughed. "All right, it's a deal." Granny Smith strolled into the kitchen just then, with a pot of boiled carrots which she doled out for the group.

"Here ya go, Lily," she smiled, filling the filly's bowl, "eat up! You too, kids! Y'all need yer strength!"

"Grama, Ah'm layin' in a bed all day."

"But you want to get better, right?" Lily asked, digging into her lunch. Granny Smith laughed as she took her seat.

"This girl's got a good head on her shoulders, Mac!" she said, "so! When's the wedding?"

"PFFFT!" the glass of water Mac began drinking was suddenly spread all over the wall.

"Well, I was thinking late fall, something in a wide open field in front of a giant castle with a whole rock band in the wedding cake!" Lily began, completely unfazed.

"G-G-Grama!" Mac gasped, "we ain't gettin' married!"

Lily looked heartbroken. "You're dumping me!? It was that unicorn, wasn't it? I always knew you and Twilight were sneaking around behind my back!"

"PFFFT!" it was Applejack's turn to lose her drink.

"Ah like this filly!" Granny Smith guffawed, "she reminds me o' myself when Ah was her age! Ah was the talk o' the town; all the colts asked fer mah hoof in marriage, but Ah only had eyes fer one stallion: yer gran'pa! Why, he used ta travel the southern jungles in search o' treasure, y'know! Used ta call him Cap'n Red!"

Lily gasped dramatically. "Cap'n Red! My arch nemesis! I used to track that no good artifact stealin' bounty hunter to the five corners of the earth! I had him cornered in Stalliongrad: his pistol was empty and mine had but one round left! I looked him in the eye and I was all like 'ready ta meet yer maker, punk?'"

"An' then Ah swooped in an' saved 'im!" Mac's grandmother interjected, "an' the two o' us got married right there in Stalliongrad!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Are ya sure ya still want ta get hitched with Lily?" Applejack whispered, grinning evilly.

"A-AJ!"

The rest of the lunch went similarly: Lily and Granny Smith argued back and forth about the details of their made-up stories until Lily had to go back to work.

"I'll stop by later to help with the washing," she smiled at Applejack, "and you!" she pointed a hoof at Granny Smith, "we'll settle this next time...on the colored circles! I'll see you at the next full moon!" she galloped away towards town.

"Y'all best be ready, 'cause Ah used ta be the national kick-boxin' champion!" the old, green mare shouted after her, "Ah like that filly!"

Macintosh groaned. "Ah think Ah need ta go lay down."

"Too much excitement ain't good fer a broken rib," Applejack snickered, helping her large brother back upstairs to his room. "So they're the sorta friends yer makin' out in town, eh?"

"Lily's nice, jes'...enthusiastic," Mac chuckled lightly as he slid under the covers of his bed.

"Kinda reminds me o' Pinkie Pie, just without the sugar high."

"Eeyup."

"All righty then, Big Macintosh, best get some sleep. Rest up so y'all can get back ta work!" Applejack laughed, letting herself outside the room and turning off the light behind her. Macintosh shook his head, laughing a little as he took another dose of pain killer. *That sure was nice of Lily to stop by, he thought, I already miss the others. I wonder how all their work is going? Actually, I wonder what Twilight's up to, now that I think about it. She must have finished reading that story to the foals by now. I wonder if those fillies and colts are still visiting the library?* Macintosh smiled.

Thinking about his friends made him grateful for that morning that seemed so long ago, when his family first forced him out into town. *That was Tuesday morning, he reflected, today's Friday; it's only been three and a half days. Wow, a lot sure has happened in such a short time. Meeting Rose, and then Fluttershy...Oh right! I promised to help her with that bunny counting thing tomorrow morning! Well, now I really need to heal up fast!* Macintosh delicately rolled over and curled himself up in his blanket. He thought about all the things that happened in just half a week, and before long he fell soundly asleep.

"Macintosh! Wait! Y'all ken't leave! Think of li'l Apple Bloom! She needs ya!"

I ran. I didn't want to go back. I didn't want to listen to Grandmother.

I ran between the trees. The apple trees. Apples.

Apples.

Always apples.

I hated apples.

I hated the apple trees. I hated the farm.

I cried.

I hated the storm. I hated what it did. I hated the two stallions for telling us.

I hated Father and Mother for being taken away. I hated Sister for leaving.

I hated my cutie mark.

My brand new cutie mark.

It looked just like Father's. An apple.

Apple.

Always apples.

I hated it.

I hated the harness I wore.

I took it off and threw it at the ground.

"I hate you!" I yelled at it, "why couldn't you love me!?"

*I hated it.
So I ran.*

Macintosh awoke with wet eyes. His dreams were getting more and more vivid, those old memories arising fresh to haunt him. Macintosh never told Applejack what he did when she left for ManeHatten, and, as far as he knew, his grandparents never did either. In many ways, the experience was the same for both of them. Applejack had a wake up call in the city when she stayed with their aunt and uncle, realizing her true passion for apple farming and earning her cutie mark at the same time. Macintosh already had got his cutie mark, even if it was hardly a week prior, but he had a similar experience. He realized he couldn't just abandon his family, as much as he wanted to just run away from the pain.

He stretched and stepped out of bed. His neck was still a little swollen and his jaw sore, but somehow he was feeling better. Involuntarily he reached for where his harness should have been before realizing one: he shouldn't wear it in this condition and two: it was missing. Slowly and carefully he made his way downstairs by himself, and stepped into the living room where Granny Smith was fast asleep in her rocking chair, mumbling softly to herself. On the table was his battered harness, in the process of being repaired and fixed up.

"Thanks, Gramma," he whispered, letting himself out the front door.

By the sun's position he reasoned it to be around three or four in the afternoon. It rested high in the sky, casting a warm glow upon the farm. Macintosh took a seat on the front porch, looking around the acres and admiring all the partially harvested trees. *Applejack and those ponies sure did a good job clearing out the fields getting all those ripe apples yesterday,* thought the red earth pony, *it's going to take a while for them to grow in again, hopefully before winter comes.* He felt kind of useless, sitting around the farm and being unable to do any work. Applejack was probably still in the apple barn washing the apples, and Lily had probably returned by now to help out too. Macintosh couldn't think of anything else to do at the moment, so he sat and enjoyed the scenery.

From the direction of Ponyville, he could just make out a small, grey dot flying in a dizzying pattern towards the farm. Once it got closer, he could identify it as Ditzzy Doo, the friend of Rarity's, with a package in her arms. Macintosh stood to meet her.

"Special delivery!" she chirped, "Rarity was too busy hanging up the thingies, so she asked the package to deliver your monkey!"

"Oh, uh, thanks," Mac said, taking the floppy package in his hooves.

"She says she wants you to get waffled soon, and so do I! Don't sleep with the fishies too long!" she smiled sweetly as she saluted and flew off. Macintosh chuckled as he gently opened the package, pulling out the note inside:

Dear Macintosh,

It took me longer than I'm proud to admit to realize that you're Applejack's brother. Once I knew where you lived I was able to send Ditzzy Doo to deliver your finished outfit for the celebration. I'm sorry I couldn't deliver it in person, but Caesar and I have been up to our necks in work. The town square looks magnificent! I can't wait for you to see it!

I heard about your injury, although I didn't hear all the specifics, and I hope most sincerely that you don't have any trouble wearing your suit tomorrow. Please get well before the celebration. It would be such a shame if you couldn't attend after you worked so hard to bring it here!

I look forward to seeing you at the festival, and thank you again for everything!

Fashionably yours,

~Rarity

Macintosh grinned as he set the note aside, pulling out the beautiful suit the unicorn had designed for him. Its deep blue velvet shone in the sunlight, and there was even a red apple embroidered on the chest pocket.

"Not too shabby," he said, tucking it away into the paper. He poked his nose inside the house and set it on a nearby table. He'd probably need a little help getting into it; he almost never wore a suit. The last time he did was for his grandfather's funeral, and he outgrew that a long time ago. Outside again, he stretched and decided to check up on his sister and Lily's progress with the apple washing. The barn was a short walk away, although in his condition he had to take it extra slow, but he didn't mind. Along the way he admired the clouds and the trees. *Those trees look completely different when they're missing half their apples*, he mused, *I can't wait to see them when we harvest the rest come fall*. Autumn was his favorite time of the year: after every harvest he would take a walk around the acres, just looking at how different everything was. Once all the apples

were plucked and stored away, and once the other gardens, chicken coop and cow ranch were all taken care of and set up for winter, he found himself each year with at least one full day of no responsibilities, and he would spend it walking through the fields, watching the colorful fireworks of red, orange and yellow fall from the branches of the trees. He told his sister that he took those walks to knock the leaves to the ground, and that was true, as his large form was heavy enough to get the job done alone, but he really did it for the beautiful vista it created. The sight of the red, orange and yellow leaves falling against a burnt red sky and setting sun...Macintosh wished he had a camera. Or, perhaps not, as a picture couldn't even come close to capturing the elegance of the scene. Fall was still a few months off, and he couldn't wait for it to come.

His favorite part, however, was coming inside after the long walk, where he would find his sisters curled up in the living room with a mug of hot apple cider waiting for him. They didn't need to, but they did every year. They'd sit in front of the fire and talk about the year they had, have some snacks and play a few games. Just him, Applejack and Apple Bloom.

"Red, orange an' yellow," he chuckled.

He stopped at the door to the barn. It had a large half-door (the kind where you can open either the top or bottom) with a couple of ornate carvings on either side. This barn was here as long as he could remember, and when he and Applejack were foals they used to pretend that it was an ancient castle with a long forgotten language on the walls and secrets held within. Of course, every time they went inside all they ever saw were the large basins of water and the barrels and crates for storing apples, but that drab reality was no match for their imagination. A few years ago Applejack started building an underground apple cellar and finished it a few months ago, which was a much more effective way to store the apples and keep them fresh, but the old barn still had its uses. It was perfect to keep the orders in before they were delivered, for example.

Pushing the door open he found his sister and Lily working together at one of the water troughs, scrubbing apples with care.

"Howdy," Mac said, stepping inside.

"Hey Mac!" Lily waved, sending a spray of water all over. She passed the apple to Applejack and grabbed another from the large pile behind the pair.

"Macintosh, what're ya doin' out of bed?" Applejack asked, shining the apple on the towel around her neck before tossing it into a large crate.

"Ah wanted ta see how it's goin' in here. 'Sides, Ah'm feelin' a mite better after all that sleep."

"It's going great!" Lily grinned, starting on another apple, "we're almost halfway through Pinkie's order, and then we can get started on Caesar's!"

"Y'all haven't started his, yet?" Macintosh asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nope! They're still out in the carts behind the barn!"

Macintosh looked to his sister, who focused on her apple and kept her gaze away from him.

"What happened, AJ? Ah though y'all said ya wouldn't have any trouble."

"Well," she yawned, "after I soaked all the apples, I found that a lot of 'em weren't in the best shape or not ripe enough. I had ta throw about two hundred unripe an' bruised apples ta the pigs."

"They couldn'ta been that bad," Mac offered, poking his nose into one of the crates to look at the clean, shining fruits.

"But they're fer all them highfalutin ponies! If I want mah business ta get any reputation, only the best o' the best can be used! I had ta go out an' buck some more, an' it ended up taken' longer than I hoped...we already bucked most o' them yesterday. An' I only jes' got ta soak 'em when Lily arrived an' we started washin'."

She's so passionate about this.

"Well, AJ," Macintosh replied, "are ya sure ya don't need any extra help? Ah'm able bodied; Ah can wash."

"No way, no how!" Applejack said defiantly, furiously shining her apple, "I told ya I could do it, an' I meant it!"

"Yeah!" Lily chirped, "besides, she's got me here to help!"

"I could do it without yer help..." Applejack grumbled. Lily didn't seem to hear her and went about her work with a big smile.

"All right Applejack," Macintosh said, backing out of the barn, "do yer best, but dun' push yerself. 'Member what happened last applebuck season. Dun' be afraid ta ask fer help."

"Yeah yeah, I know, one pony plus hundreds of apples trees, I remember," she sighed. Macintosh shut the door and let himself out into the field again.

I'll need to swing by again later and make sure she's all right, he thought to himself. Applejack had plenty of friends - not to mention her own family - who'd be more than happy to help her out with whatever impossible task she set out to do, but she would have to deal with her stubborn pride first. Once she set her eyes on something she wouldn't give up till she got it. Macintosh admired that about her, but she lacked the discretion to know

when enough's enough. Sometimes she had to be broken before she could finally ask for help.

"She'll be okay," he murmured, "it's only washin', after all." Walking slowly between the nearly empty trees he let his mind wander, not thinking about anything in particular as he strolled through his wide, wide orchard. A little ways away he heard a voice: somepony talking to herself. Sneaking closer, he saw a rainbow mane and tail poking out among the branches of a tree.

"Ugh, what do I do, what do I *do*?" Rainbow Dash muttered, shifting around and knocking leaves all over.

"Rainbow?" Macintosh called. The blue pegasus stuck her head out, her eyes a mix of shock and frustration.

"Macintosh? When did you get here?"

"Few seconds ago, Ah reckon," he said casually as the pegasus dropped down from the tree, alighting on the grass, "can Ah ask why y'all are hangin' about in mah apple trees?"

She kicked at a rock. "Thinkin'."

"'Bout what?"

"...Stuff."

She looked around, trying her best to keep her eyes away from the earth pony. "Oh, hey, I heard about what happened. You feelin' any better?"

"Eeyup, Ah'm doin' fine. Can Ah say that 'bout you?"

She sighed and looked at him intensely.

"Cirro got me that private audition with the WonderBolts, and I just got back a few hours ago," she said quietly and slowly, hanging her head.

"Well that's great!" Mac smiled, "what's the problem?" His smile faded. "Oh no, they didn't accept ya, did they?"

"Um, actually..." she said, stepping a little closer, "I did get accepted. I got in. Well, not technically...I still have to say 'yes.'"

"Then what's stoppin' ya? Ain't this what ya always wanted?"

Rainbow sat down on the grass. Macintosh reflexively did so as well.

"They said if...that I'd have to..." she muttered, "I guess I should have always known, but...I'd have to leave Ponyville. Their base is in Cloudsdale." Macintosh nodded his head in understanding. "I mean, I'd still come by here every now and then to do a show...like, maybe once every couple years or something..."

"Ah see."

"It's just..." she groaned, "It's been my lifelong dream to join them! To fly with the WonderBolts! You can't imagine how badly I've wanted to fly with my lifelong heroes!"

I wouldn't be so sure about that, Macintosh smiled sadly.

"But now..." she sighed, "now...well, I don't know if I want to go...I'd almost never see my friends again, and...and...Ponyville..."

"Ponyville still needs ya, don't it?" Mac said suddenly. Rainbow shot her head up in surprise, but she slowly nodded her head.

"I guess...I mean, I'm still the number one weather pony here. And, I've got a lot of responsibilities here...and friends...It just feels wrong to leave them. But!" She threw her hooves to her head in frustration, "I might never get this chance again! If I don't join now, I might never get another chance! Rgh!"

"Ah bet yer friends would be happy fer ya ta join the WonderBolts."

"But what if *I'm* not happy!?" she shouted. She folded her ears back and ran her hoof through the grass. "I...I should be excited. This is what I want. I still want it. When they told me I was good enough...I'd never been so happy. But...I dunno...I just can't help but feel that it's too soon for me to leave. Like, like there's somepony in town who still needs me."

Macintosh looked at her intently. "Who do ya reckon it is?"

She met his eyes, and returned that look for a few moments. Suddenly, hers grew wide. "...Scootaloo," she whispered, "she still needs me..."

"She still needs her role-model. Her lifelong hero. She'll fly soon, Ah can feel it." Macintosh smiled lovingly as the blue pegasus continued to stare at him, her eyes large and thoughtful. "But she needs a reason to, an' she'll need somepony amazin' ta show her how ta be a great flyer once she finally takes off."

"Yesterday..." Rainbow said quietly, "She asked me to show her the moves I was going to do for the WonderBolts. She..." the blue pegasus trailed off.

"Y'all mean the world ta her, Rainbow Dash," Mac continued, "she looks up ta ya like a big sister."

"I..." she began, her eyes darting around, "I...I think I need to talk to Cirro." She lifted off the ground, flapping her wings evenly and deliberately. "That's...Well...It's a lot to think about. Thanks, Macintosh," she saluted sagely as she flew off, flying slowly back to town.

"Loyal as can be," Mac smiled, as he gently stood and resumed his walk.

I couldn't run anymore. I fell.

I ran so far. The apple trees were gone. Long ago, they were gone.

The farm was gone.

My family was gone.

Wasn't this what I wanted? To be free?

I cried.

"Applejack..."

Why did you have to leave us? I lost so much already. Why did you have to go too?

Was this freedom?

I heard a noise. It sounded like thunder, but it wasn't. It was so loud. It came from the sky.

I looked up. I saw a rainbow, but it wasn't a rainbow. It was round. It looked like fire.

A rainbow fire.

It was big. It went across the sky. It was so loud.

I cried.

I cried.

Was this the freedom I wanted?

"Boy? Why are you crying?"

Who said that?

"Ah'm not cryin'."

She sounded like an angel.

She looked like one.

"Yes, yes you are."

She landed in front of me. She had wings.

She was a pegasus. She looked a little younger than me.

"Why do you care? Ah'm jes' an earth pony..."

"Because...you're crying."

I wanted to be mad. I wanted to hate her wings.

But I couldn't.

She sat down beside me.

"What's wrong?"

I cried.

"Ah hate the farm! Ah hate mah family! Why couldn't Ah jes' be who Ah wanted? Why did this have ta happen?"

I leaned into her. She put her wing around me.

She was so warm. She was so kind.

"Did you run away?"

I nodded.

"Do you love your family?"

I looked at her. Her eyes were blue. And very big.

"Yes."

"Then you mustn't leave them. They need you."

I cried.

She was so warm.

"There, there...It's all right..."

This wasn't freedom.

This wasn't what I wanted.

What have I done?

After another quiet hour or so of solo walking, Macintosh returned to the barn Applejack was working in. Pushing the door open he saw her, still slaving over the large sink, her hat sitting crooked on her mane. Lily was just pouring out a cart of apples onto a large pile.

"How's it all goin' in here?" Mac asked.

"Hey!" Lily grinned, her smile a little strained from work but still earnest, "we finally finished Pinkie's order and we're just starting on the other one now."

"Ah see. AJ? How ya doin' over there?"

"Jes' fine," she said, irritation seething through her voice. Lily began washing again and Applejack kept polishing, but she moved a little slower than before.

"Are ya sure ya don't want some help?" Mac asked, stepping inside, "Ah can take over fer ya fer a bit if ya want."

"I said I'm fine," she muttered, her apple slipping from her hooves.

"Y'all should take a break."

"Macintosh, I know what I'm doin'!" she snapped as she picked it up and threw it back to the 'dirty' pile. She had noticeable bags under her eyes and she fought to hold back a yawn.

"Applejack, listen here, now," he said, stepping closer, "tell me the truth: what happened last night after the accident?"

"Nuthin'."

"AJ..."

She snorted. "After that big mess yesterday all the other ponies were jumpier'n rattlesnakes in a pickle barrel an' most o' them jes' up an' left. By the time supper came there were only about five or so left ta help me."

"Ya couldn't get it done b'fore supper, could ya?" Macintosh asked gently. His sister sighed and set down her apple slowly into the crate. "AJ, Ah'm real sorry. If Ah had jes' tied up them logs when ya asked, then none o' this would've happened."

"Well...It's all right. I s'pose."

"Y'all must've been up all night buckin' those apples," said Macintosh as he placed a hoof on Applejack's shoulder. She leaned into it. "Go home. Get some sleep. Lily an' Ah can keep workin'."

"But!"

"B'sides, Ah owe it ta ya. It's mah fault, 'member?"

Applejack sighed deeply and looked to her brother with unfocused but thankful eyes. "Thank ya, Big Brother. Ah sure do appreciate it."

"Eeyup, Ah know. Now run along, get some sleep. We'll wake ya fer supper."

Applejack smiled as she passed him her towel and nuzzled his neck.

"I love ya, Big Macintosh," she whispered.

Mac smiled and straightened her hat. "Ah love ya too." Applejack teetered out of the barn, gently closing the door behind her as Macintosh tied the towel around his neck and began work.

It took Macintosh and Lily a couple hours of hard work, but they were able to get every apple cleaned before supper. Granny Smith again insisted that Lily stay for the meal, and the dining room became very lively with their back and forth about the exact events of the Great Stampede as though they were both there. Apparently they were both close friends with Chief WhirlWind, and helped lead the buffalo to victory. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo listened with intense giddiness as the two grown ponies (even if they didn't act like it) energetically argued about things neither of them knew anything about. After dinner, Lily had to return to town, but Applejack promised that her apple pie reward was coming. Macintosh sat in the living room as Granny Smith and Applejack wouldn't let him help clean up, and his youngest sister and her friends went out into the fields to continue crusading for their cutie marks.

"Phoo-wee," Granny Smith said as she hobbled back into the living room, "Ah tell ya, them kids ken EAT! Why, Ah reckon they could out-eat cousin Strudel!"

"Whoa, now," Macintosh laughed, "that's quite a claim! Strudel's gone undefeated fer fifteen years!"

"Well, the bigger they are, the harder they fall, an' Strudel's bigger'n a bag o' whales!" Mac's grandmother took a seat in her old rocker, and gently started rocking back and forth, casting a sly look in Mac's direction. "Did ya notice anythin' missin' t'day?" she asked.

"Missin'?" Mac pursed his lips in thought, suppressing a chuckle.

"Ah'll give ya a hint: y'all look awfully naked without it!"

"Oh, mah harness!"

"Smart boy! Now, Ah wonder where it coulda run off ta? Y'know ya need ta keep on eye them things, boy! Else they go runnin' all over the place!"

"Hmm, Ah wonder," he drawled, sauntering over to the closet, "could it be in here?" He opened the door and inside his harness hung, looking better than ever. All the loose and broken stitches had been repaired, it was restuffed and even the metal knobs on the back were polished.

"Gramma!" he laughed, taking it out and admiring it, "y'all didn't have ta do that!"

"Ah won't have a second o' that!" she scolded as he sat down, "that old thing was beggin' fer a little LSD anyhow!"

"It's 'TLC,' and thank ya kindly, Gramma!" he grinned, setting it down on the table.

"Jes' dun' go wearin' it b'fore y'all are healed up! Ah won't have ya go an' hurt yerself again!"

"Deal!"

The two laughed and just looked at the pulling collar.

"Y'know," Granny Smith said after a while, "that there harness got our family through thick an' thin. Yer father wore it like it were a lifesaver."

Macintosh sighed.

"Ah miss him," the mare continued, sniffing and wiping a tear, "he were a good fellow. Li'l rough around the edges, but he cared."

"Eeyup," Macintosh grumbled.

"An' yer mother, why, she were the sweetest thing! She took care o' y'all like ya were made o' solid gold! Why, in her eyes, y'all probably were. Didn't take her long neither ta lose that highfalutin city accent, Ah tell you what!"

Macintosh sighed again.

"Ya sure done made me proud, y'know," his grandmother resumed, "y'all took charge o' the farm at such a young age an' did a ripsnortin' good job! An' what ya did yesterday? Why, any filly'd be luckier ta get hitched with ya than if they'd won the lottery!"

"Grama, stop," Mac chuckled.

"Ah mean it boy! Y'all are one heck of an Apple! Ah ken't thank ya enough fer all ya've done!" she sighed happily. With a large smile, she turned to him, her wrinkly orange eyes glimmering.

"Ah sure do love ya, Macintosh," she said.

Macintosh smiled at her wrinkled green face and fiery eyes. "Ah love ya too."

They sat in silence for a while, just enjoying each other's company.

"Boy!" Granny Smith shouted suddenly, "fetch me that there photo album! I want ta show ya the time Ah met the Great AlfAlfa Monster! No, not that one! The one next ta it! Where's yer head at, boy? Get over here so Ah ken smack some sense into ya!!"

As the sun set upon the horizon, Applejack tracked down the Cutie Mark Crusaders and ushered them into bed. She and Granny Smith also decided to turn in. Applejack had a big day tomorrow, hauling the cartloads of apples into town, and she was also going to help Caesar and his chef ponies prepare the appetizers. Applejack mentioned over supper that she had met with the royal chef, and he was not very pleased with the sudden changes made for the celebration, and apparently much of the other staff and guests were feeling the same way, but the Princess had no issues allowing the switch. Applejack mentioned how Celestia has been...conniving in the past, so perhaps she even...*No, no, no, there's no way the Princess would actually enjoy frustrating so many ponies...would she?*

Macintosh figured he should get some sleep too. Although feeling much better, he still had to be very gentle with himself, and if he wanted to help Fluttershy in the morning like he promised he'd need the extra rest. So he cantered upstairs, saying goodnight to his family and his youngest sister's friends and slipped into his own room. Setting his new suit and repaired harness on his desk next to his bouquet of flowers (which somepony had put in a vase of water), he took one more dose of pain medication and shuffled under the covers of his bed, falling asleep within minutes.

In the dead of the night, Macintosh awoke again to a sound from the fields. A shout and a thud. Macintosh groggily dragged himself out from under his blanket and quietly snuck downstairs and outside. Treading the damp grass he slowly made his way towards the treehouse. The large moon seemed especially bright tonight, and the few stars that were out shone particularly brilliantly.

"Ack!"

Thud

Keeping his head low, Macintosh pressed against the shadow of a nearby tree as he neared the treehouse. Pulling herself off the ground was Scootaloo, groaning and moaning in pain. Macintosh watched in silence as she, for the umpteenth time, plodded up the wooden ramp, unfurled her wings and jumped, flapping them furiously but never staying in the air longer than it took to reach the ground.

"Ouch," she mumbled, standing to her hooves and trying again. Time after time she tried, and with each one Macintosh found himself holding his breath. After a few minutes, he felt his eyelids suddenly weigh a lot more, and his bed seemed a lot more appealing than standing in a cold field in the middle of the night. Just as he was about to turn and head back for home he saw Scootaloo stand on the very edge of the ramp and stretch out her small wings. Just as she was about to jump she stopped, and looked to the moon. Macintosh looked as well and gasped.

It was larger and more beautiful than he'd ever seen it before: it filled at least a quarter of the night sky. Impossibly huge and glowing with a brilliance he'd never thought possible it hung, every dent and crater on its ivory surface close enough to touch. He had to tear his eyes away from the magnificent orb, and only then did he notice the incredible array of stars that surrounded it. Streams and waves of thousands of incandescent diamonds sparkled, forming rivers of gleaming crystal. Every constellation he'd ever seen in his books were visible tonight, even the ones that should have been impossible to see during this time of year. The unbelievable light show lit up the field, and a little filly who stood on a wooden plank leading to an old treehouse. Macintosh saw her mutter something and close her eyes.

"Please," Mac whispered, "please..."

He heard her breathe deep, and jump.

For a moment, oh, so brief a moment that lasted hardly longer than the blink of an eye, a shimmering blue glow enveloped the tiny pegasus as she took to the air. Her tiny wings pumped and beat the air as she fell and he saw her tense up for the crash landing...

Which never came.

She gasped. Macintosh gasped. Scootaloo flapped her wings harder and harder and soon she was in the tree-line, spinning around and around in little circles. Her flapping became uneven, and with a whoop she tumbled into the ground in a little pile of orange and purple. As she disentangled herself and stood up, she kept saying the same thing over and over and over:

"I DID IT!"

Macintosh looked up to the moon, its normal size and position in the sky restored, the stars returned to their hidden homes in the distance and out of sight.

"Ya sure did."

Chapter 15

*I saw her. She was far away, but I saw her coming.
I ran inside and told Grandmother. She ran outside.
I ran upstairs and told Grandfather. He smiled, but couldn't leave his bed.
I even ran and told Apple Bloom. She burped.
I ran back outside. Grandmother was already there, at the gate, watching her come.
She was running back. She was running to meet us.
"Applejack!"
"AJ!"
"Grama! Big Macintosh!"
She ran up to us. She pressed herself into us.
She was happy, but she cried a little.
Something sparkled. I looked down.
There. Right there on her flank.
Three red apples.
Sister's cutie mark.
"I'm so sorry," she said, "I should never have left!"
"It's all right; yer back, safe'n sound now."
Grandmother was so happy. She started crying too.
I was happy.
So happy.
"Ah love ya, Applejack."
I cried a little too.*

Saturday morning came bright and early for Big Macintosh. Although his chest, neck and legs were still sore, he felt better than ever. It seemed to be around eight in the morning, so he crawled out of bed, combed his scraggly orange mane and trotted downstairs and into the kitchen. Applejack was already there, chewing on her breakfast and looking over a checklist.

"Mornin' AJ," Mac yawned as he scooped an apple from the basket on the table.

"Howdy Mac," she grinned, "how're ya feelin'?"

"Whole lot better. Y'all?"

"Good, jes' busy. I'm goin' ta have ta haul all them apples into town t'day an' help out with gettin' them ready fer t'night."

"Do ya need-"

"No I don't!" she laughed, "y'all shouldn't do any heavy pullin' anyhow. Jes' rest up fer t'night."

"Whatever ya say," he chuckled, taking a seat.

"Oh, hey, by the way," the orange pony began, "I saw the suit Rarity made ya. It's pretty swanky, I gotta admit! That pony sure knows her way around a sewin' machine! Do y'all need any help gettin' into it?"

"Ah reckon Ah will."

"All right, I'll swing by in the afternoon ta help ya out. 'Till then, dun' do anythin' too heavy duty!" She tipped her hat to her brother as she strolled out of the kitchen.

Macintosh reclined in his chair. Tonight was going to be a busy night: the eve of the 'Summer Sun Celebration.' It's traditional to stay up all night partying until dawn, when the Princess raises the sun for the longest day of the year. Last year he had to turn in before the party began. The celebration may be a holiday, but there's no such thing as holidays for a farm. It unnerved him greatly therefore when the sun never rose the next morning at last year's celebration. He had hurried into town to find it in complete chaos: ponies were panicking in the streets and the mayor was doing all she could to calm everypony down, with little effect. Macintosh was able to find and comfort Apple Bloom, but Applejack had disappeared without a trace. Some ponies said they saw her head in the direction of the EverFree Forest, so he ran as fast as his huge hooves could carry him and, hunkering down behind a nearby tree, just caught sight of his sister leading a motley crew of ponies into the dreaded woods, for some reason discussing candy apples. He let them go; although he only recognized a couple of them, he knew that they'd be safe. Applejack wouldn't let anything happen to them. A few hours later there was the sound of an explosion and a huge flash of light from the direction of the forest, and, faster than he'd ever seen it rise before, the sun graced the sky with its presence. The following celebration and triumphant return of the Princesses and the six embodiments of the Elements of Harmony was spectacular. Little old Ponyville suddenly found itself on every map of Equestria after that.

Macintosh sighed. Hopefully nothing so outrageous would happen tonight. He wasn't one for parties at the best of times. *I'll just stay to see the start of the celebration*, he decided, *I'll eat supper at home and get to*

bed early. Let everypony else enjoy the party and day off. I've got work to do here, after all.

He stepped out onto his front porch and stretched. *I guess I'd better go and find Fluttershy. Those bunnies aren't going to count themselves.* As Macintosh approached town he could practically feel the energy radiating from it. He could just barely see the tip of the town hall poke above the buildings and saw a few pegasus ponies hanging decorations from it. The town was too hectic to walk through, he decided, so he instead walked around it until he arrived at Fluttershy's cottage. He knocked three times on the door, and the yellow pegasus opened it for him to enter.

"Good morning, Macintosh!" she smiled, "are you feeling any better? I visited you while you were in the hospital, but you probably don't remember. I'm sorry I couldn't visit you yesterday, but I was so busy."

"S'all right," he replied, stepping inside. The place was filled with just as many animals as before, and he spotted Angel relaxing on a pillow in the sunlight. Fluttershy picked up some papers from a desk and handed them to Macintosh.

"These are all the forms," she said, "there's a lot of them, but don't worry, it's not difficult. You just need to do some counting."

"Sounds good ta me," he smiled. Together they returned outside.

"The census is going to be in the field over there," she pointed, "and I've already got the pen set up. All we need to do is just round up all the bunnies and herd them into it. Come on, I'll show you." They trotted down the hill towards the large kennel.

"So, how're all yer li'l critters doin'?" asked Big Mac.

"Oh, they're all doing well, thank you. The beavers had a bit of an accident yesterday, but they'll recover nicely."

"That's good. How's li'l Nemo?"

She looked at him. "Nemo? Um, he's fine. Actually, he's getting even better at flying now. I'm so proud of him!"

"Well, Ah guess he had a good teacher."

Fluttershy flapped her wings a little. "Thanks."

They walked in silence for a bit.

"Actually," she said after a minute, "that reminds me...I had an idea the other day, after we talked."

"Oh?"

"You kind of gave it to me, actually."

"Ah did?" Mac asked, bemused.

"Well, sort of...I mean, I hadn't really thought about my wings in a long time before you came by. Um, I kind of forgot about them, I guess,

but...talking about them, how Rainbow Dash helped me fly and how I helped Nemo to fly with his bad wing got me to thinking."

Macintosh swallowed. "All right," he said.

"Well, I thought, maybe there are other pegasus foals with problems like mine. Ones who can't fly properly or have bad wings, or something."

"That's..." Macintosh stuttered.

"Um, and I was thinking...that...well, maybe I could help them out too. Maybe do a sort of junior flight training or something to help ponies who have trouble flying."

Macintosh smiled. "Ah see."

"Oh, um," Fluttershy cowered, "I guess...it's probably a silly idea...after all, most pegasi foals learn to fly from their parents or at summer flight camp and I've never met another one who had a problem like me and..."

"Fluttershy?" Mac interrupted. She looked at him with large, doe-like eyes. "Ah think that's a great idea."

"You...you do?"

"Eeyup. Ah'm sure there are plenty o' ponies right here in Ponyville who'd love ta get the help. An' ya dun' even have ta ever mention yer own wings. Jes' tell 'em y'all got experience with the birds an' whatnot."

Fluttershy chuckled. "Oh, thank you. I'm still not sure if I should do it, I mean, I don't know if I'd even have the time, but...If you think it's a good idea, then I guess I should try."

"Eeyup," Macintosh sighed. It was a good idea. Scootaloo could definitely benefit, but even if she didn't attend there were probably still other ponies who could, like Cotton Cloudy. "Ah think y'all should go fer it."

"Thank you," she smiled. "Oh, here we are," they stopped in front of the pen. A few rabbits were hopping around the field near it. It was a wooden circular fence about two feet tall, and had an open doorway for the bunnies to get in and out. Fluttershy pulled out a map and set her forms down in front of the pair. "Okay. So, I just need you to sign here...and here...and here...here...initial here...and there...and sign here...and once more here...and right there. Perfect. Um, I've marked down all the warrens and dens the bunnies live in on this map, but there are probably a lot of them just running around and playing, so you'll need to round up those ones too. If that's okay. Just direct them into the pen, and they'll stay inside. They're very well behaved. Uh, If you don't mind, could you cover this half of the field, near Ponyville? I'll search the other half."

"All righty, sounds like a plan."

Macintosh set out about his task slowly and carefully. The bunnies were shocked at his large presence, but once he lowered himself down, calmly talked to them and directed them towards the center of the field, they followed his command with little trouble. A few of the critters decided they wanted to play hide-and-seek or tag, so after a little back and forth he was able to nudge them in the direction of the pen as well. One bunny escaped from the small herd and ran off towards town. Macintosh followed it, and found it chewing on a rose bush. As he bent down to shoo it away he heard voices from the other side. He poked his snout around the bush so he could see.

It was Blues and Daisy. They were on the edge of town so they could talk in private. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but they both seemed rather intense about it. *I shouldn't eavesdrop anyway*, he thought to himself, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. He saw the bunny get bored and head back to the kennel, but Macintosh stayed and watched the ponies. At one point, Daisy shook her head and started trotting away. Blues stepped after her.

"Flower Wishes-" he called, but was cut off as Daisy spun to glare at him.

"Don't call me that!" she yelled, "It's over! She made sure of that!"

"No, Daisy!" Blues shouted back, "It wasn't her fault, okay? I hurt you! It was my fault!" Daisy stopped. "I shouldn't have dumped you like that. And, if it makes you feel any better..." he brought his voice down again as he stepped closer to the filly. They talked for a little more, finally hugged and trotted back into town.

Macintosh smiled as he snuck away. There were bunnies to be counted.

While he was herding a particularly grumpy group of the critters towards the pen he spotted Twilight cantering up the path to town from the direction of Sweet Apple Acres. When she saw him she changed direction to come talk to him.

"Macintosh!" she said, eyeing his bandages, "You weren't at the farm! I was so worried when I heard about what happened! How are you feeling?"

"Feelin' better," he smiled.

"Oh, that's good," she sighed, "I'm sorry I couldn't come and visit sooner, but I've been really busy lately!"

"Those little foals got ya readin' them another book?" Mac laughed.

"Heh heh, no, actually. Some of their parents came by to thank me for getting them out of their manes and giving them something to do. A few of their parents even took out a few books of their own!" She chuckled and brushed the purple mane around her horn. "Some of them even apologized for thinking I was keeping the library private. It's finally becoming a public library again!" she squealed, "it's so cool!"

"Glad ta hear it's workin' out," Mac smiled.

"Oh, but, hey, I wanted to thank you for something else, too," she grinned.

"An' what's that?"

"Well, because the 'Summer Sun Celebration' is here in town, the Princess will be coming too, of course! Whenever I've gone to it in the past it's always been in places like Hoofington or Canterlot, and she's always held up with other royals and politicians and such, and I never get any time to spend with her. But here in Ponyville, we should have lots of time to catch up! She even requested that I announce the rising of the sun!" her smile stretched from ear to ear and she trotted in place a little, "this is going to be so much better than the Grand Galloping Gala was!"

"Heh, y'all really like spendin' time with her, eh?" Mac chuckled.

"She's my mentor, and we used to spend so much time together when I lived in Canterlot, but I haven't really had the chance since I moved here. So thank you, Macintosh!"

"Me?"

"For bringing the celebration here! Ooh, it's going to be so awesome!" she bounded along the road towards town, "I'll see you tonight!"

"All right, goodbah," he shouted after her.

"Oh! Right!" Twilight turned on a dime and walked back to Macintosh, smiling widely. Once she stood before him her smile faded a little. "Macintosh, I...Um, I wanted to say that...that I enjoyed the time we spent together. Studying! The time we spent together studying!" she coughed nervously and flushed bright pink, "um, and anyway, I'd...Well, I'd like to see you come by again sometime. When you're feeling better."

Macintosh grinned. "Ah'd love ta."

Twilight smiled and waved, turning again to head back to town. Macintosh trotted back to the field. "That mare, Ah tell ya," he laughed, resuming his work.

Finally, after an hour or two of gently herding the baby bunnies, counting them all up and filling out a lot of forms, the two ponies finished their work and let all the little rabbits run free again. Macintosh and

Fluttershy sat on the grass near the pen, looking out at the rolling hills and forests in the distance and the majestic purple mountains that loomed beyond.

"Thank you so much for your help, Macintosh," the yellow filly smiled, "it all went so smoothly and quickly with you here. You seem to get along well with animals."

"Eeyup," he replied, "Ah give 'em their space. Seems ta work pretty well."

Fluttershy sighed as a butterfly flew near. She held out her hoof for the small creature as it alighted and flapped its wings delicately. After it left she dug around in her satchel and pulled out two apples. "I brought a little something to eat for lunch. Would you like one?"

"Why, thank ya kindly," Mac said, taking the green fruit in his hooves.

"Oh, um, I hope you don't mind...I guess I should have brought something else...I mean, you probably have apples all the time...You're probably sick of them...I'm sorry..."

"S'all right, Fluttershy," he cooed, "it's fine." They ate their apples in silence, although he occasionally caught the pegasus looking at his cutie mark.

"Um," she started after a few minutes, "if you don't mind me asking...when did you get your cutie mark?"

Macintosh looked at her, surprised.

"Oh! Um, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to...I shouldn't have asked..."

"No," he sighed, "it's okay." He took a few deep breaths and looked out into the distance, gathering his thoughts. "Well, Ah was older'n most ponies. Ah actually was held back a few classes, an' Ah was the last one in mah class ta get it, not that any o' them ever knew." He found himself suddenly growing angry and tried to calm his voice. "There was a big storm. One o' the worst in Ponyville history. Mah parents lost their lives holdin' back the flood that came after, an' Ah sort of inherited the farm. That's when it showed up." He kept his gaze ahead. He knew what his cutie mark looked like, he didn't need to look to know that it was still burned onto his side. He sighed deeply, and after a few seconds turned to the pegasus. "How 'bout y'all?"

Fluttershy stared at his cutie mark for a moment, eyes cloudy. "Huh? Oh, my cutie mark? Well..." she shuffled in the grass, "remember I told you how I was at Summer Flight Camp? Well, it was after I met Rainbow Dash and she had already given me tips on flying. I was practicing when some mean colts made fun of me, and Rainbow Dash challenged them to a race.

As the race began I was knocked off a cloud and I fell to the ground, but just before I landed I was caught by a flock of butterflies."

"How could..." Mac puzzled, "how could butterflies...?"

"Like I said, pegasus ponies are very light," she blushed a little.

"Well, I spent a little time in the field and saw so many wonderful creatures! Bunnies and birds and squirrels...it was wonderful. I had never seen such beautiful animals! But then Rainbow Dash did her Sonic Rainboom, and-"

"A-!" Mac shouted, "Rainbow did a Sonic Rainboom!?"

"Eep!"

"Er, sorry. Ah thought they were jes' old mare's tales!"

"Oh, no, they're very real. Didn't Applejack tell you about the Sonic Rainboom Rainbow did at the Best Young Flyer's Competition?"

"Well, Ah think she mentioned somethin' 'bout it, but...Well, Ah wasn't sure AJ was quite right in the head, goin' on 'bout walking on clouds an' such...Wait. You mean Rainbow did *two* Sonic Rainbooms!?"

"Well, yes. She did."

"That's..." Mac stammered, "that's amazin'! Ah knew she was a good flyer but...shoot, that's somethin' else right there."

Fluttershy giggled. "Well, it's thanks to that Rainboom that I got my cutie mark. All the animals were so afraid of the sound that they all ran and hid. Somehow, I was able to communicate with them on a different level to calm them down, and then my cutie mark appeared." She looked down at it happily.

Mac sighed. "That's really somethin'."

"I'll never forget that day. Actually, something else interesting happened that day too..."

"More interestin' than a Sonic Rainboom an' gettin' yer cutie mark?" Mac chuckled.

"Sort of," she replied, dead serious, "after I got my mark, I walked around the field, just enjoying the world below the clouds. As I was wondering how I'd get back up to the camp I heard a sound. I flew up so I could see where it was coming from, and found the source. Just laying in the middle of the field crying his eyes out was a young...red...colt...!!!"

The two ponies leapt to their hooves and faced each other, their eyes wide with shock and their bodies tense.

"B-but, the-then," Mac stuttered, his hooves spread wide, "it-it-it was-!"

"A-a-and!" Fluttershy blubbered, her wings outstretched, "I-I found-!"

The two stared into each other's eyes for what felt like an eternity. Finally, Macintosh felt himself break into a great smile and he relaxed.

"Ah...Ah can't..." he choked, sitting down on the grass again, "Ah...Ah thought you looked familiar!"

"And you..." she blushed, stepping over and sitting down next to him, "you seemed so familiar too. I can't believe I didn't realize it before."

"Ah..." Mac whispered, tearing up a little, "Ah never did...never did say thanks."

"Hey," she said softly, placing a wing around him, "it's what I'm good at."

Macintosh sniffled and lay his head on the grass. Under her warm, golden wing he just felt so...safe. Like nothing could hurt him. Big Macintosh didn't cry very often, but he could feel his eyes become watery. *Fluttershy...if it weren't for you...*

"Macintosh," she said quietly, "I'm so glad you went back." Macintosh looked up into her beautiful azure eyes. "You love your family so much...You became a good stallion."

Macintosh smiled. "Thank you..."

In the distance they heard the clock tower bells chime. It was noon, and they both needed to get home to prepare for the celebration.

"Fluttershy, Ah..." Mac began, his smile stretched so wide it almost hurt, "y'all really helped me out back there. Yer the kindest mare Ah've ever met."

She blushed. "Well...I try. I'll see you at the celebration?"

"Eeyup."

She spread her wings to fly but stopped and suddenly looked directly at Big Mac.

"You know," she said, "that day when I met you, that was the first time...You were the first earth pony I ever met."

Macintosh laughed lightly. "Figures," he grinned, "y'all were the first pegasus pony Ah ever met. Ah think...well, Ah'm glad ya were the first." She blushed and waved as she lifted off the ground, flying off towards her cottage. Even when only half extended her golden wings still glistened in the sunlight. Macintosh wiped his green eye dry and turned, plodding up the path for home.

When he arrived he found Applejack's door ajar, the orange filly within struggling to brush the back of her mane by herself.

"Granny Smith's still asleep, eh?" Mac said, leaning against her doorframe.

"Mind givin' me a hoof?" she asked, trying not to smile. Mac chuckled and took the brush, gently brushing her blonde mane; a few twigs and leaves fell out.

"How's the work comin'?" he asked.

"Fine an' dandy," replied the filly, "Ah got all 'em apples delivered ta the bakery a couple hours ago, an' Pinkie Pie's been busier than a...than a...Mac, what sort o' things are busy?"

"Uh, bees?"

"Ya mean when they collect that pollen stuff? From flowers?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's at a flower stand or somethin'."

"Busier than a bee at a flower stand." Applejack looked up, deep in thought. "Nah, Ah dun' like it. We'll hafta think up somethin' better'n that."

Mac laughed. "Applejack, yer such a silly pony."

"Hey now, them's fightin' words!"

"So Pinkie's workin' on all them Apple Crumbles, eh?" Mac resumed.

"Yeah. She may be a few apples short of a bushel, but when she hunkers down ta do some work she really gets into it."

"That pink filly," Mac chuckled, "she seems ta always go a hundred miles an hour, eh?"

"Um..." Applejack began, "does...are you an' her...y'know, did y'all make up?"

"Eeyup," smiled Mac, "shoulda done it a long time ago."

"That's good. I know she can be a bit annoyin' at times but-Ow! Hey, watch it there!" AJ smacked Mac as he forced her brush through a particularly tough tangle.

"Ah swear, AJ, y'all should consider brushin' more'n once a year."

"I'll brush mah mane however I dangwell please!"

Once Macintosh finished getting all the knots and tangles out of his sister's hair they rooted through her small wardrobe to find a nice gown for the evening. Tonight was going to be much more formal than last year, and Macintosh insisted that his sister dress up too if he was going to wear a suit.

"Well, there's this. Didn't y'all wear this fer the last family reunion?"

"Only fer the picture; I hate that thing!"

"Aunt Betty made it fer ya, right?"

"No surprise there. Not hard ta see she's colorblind."

"Well, let's see here...What in tarnation..."

"What?"

"AJ, what in Equestria is this?"

"It's...Rarity made it fer me."

"The same Rarity that made yer Gala gown and mah suit? 'Cause it looks like somethin' a one eyed mule would throw t'gether."

"Hey now! I put a lot o' thought into that!"

"..."

"Uh, well, anyways, *ahem* maybe I should jes' go in mah outfit fer the Gala."

"Eeyup, Ah'd say that'd probably be best."

"All right, then that's settled. We've got a whole afternoon ta kill b'fore the party, what should we do?"

"Well, were ya goin' ta set up an apple stand at the festival t'night?"

"Ah hadn't thought about it, but...that ain't a bad idea."

"Ah'll help ya get it ready."

"All right, thanks Big Brother!"

"Eeyup. ...Does Rarity know ya kept that thing?"

"What Rarity don't know won't hurt her!"

It took them a few hours to get Applejack's stand ready for the evening: they had to pick some apples from the apple cellar and prepare them, making caramel apples, apple fritters, pies and whatever else came to mind. Applejack made an especially large pie for Lily and an extra one for themselves to eat before the celebration, as the banquet was going to be quite late in the evening. Around four or five in the afternoon Apple Bloom returned home, and the whole family played some board games, listened to a few of Granny Smith's stories and ate a small dinner until it finally came time to get ready to leave. Applejack helped Macintosh into his suit (which was incredibly comfortable, he noted) and he couldn't help but admire himself in the mirror. The deep blue fabric highlighted his red coat perfectly, and the white bandages he wore poked out beneath the collar, creating a sort of faux tuxedo look. Against his sister's and grandmother's protests he slid on his cleaned up harness overtop, creating what he (and his family) had to admit was a stylish look. His sisters and grandmother then pushed him out of the house and down the road to Ponyville, saying they'd get changed and catch up later. Macintosh slipped a stalk of hay into his mouth for the trip and leisurely cantered down the road to the busy town. The sun was just barely beginning its descent, and in the distance Big Macintosh could see the city, practically glowing with energy and teeming with excitement.

"T'night's gun' be a busy night," he drawled. "Eeyup."

Chapter 16

The 'Summer Sun Celebration.' As far as Big Macintosh knew, this was the first time in a very long time that it had ever been held in the same place twice in a row. The festival would normally move from city to city, gracing the larger cosmopolitan areas with its presence, and every other year or so it would be held in the capital city of Canterlot. The fact that it was held in such a small town as Ponyville in the first place was a pretty big deal, but that it would be there two years in a row? Well, one could certainly tell from the sight of the town's grandiosely decorated entrance that the ponies here were incredibly proud of the honor bestowed upon them. Although Macintosh wasn't terribly excited to wade through the busy streets that were bound to be stuffed full to bursting with vendors and travelers from out of town, he was excited to see all the decorations and work put into the town square. First, however, he'd have to actually get *into* the town.

"Look, I've already explained it," the royal guard pegasus said in his gruff tone, "without a formal invitation we can't allow you to enter!"

Macintosh looked him dead in the eye. These ponies were some of the first he'd met that actually matched his size. "Ah dun' see what the problem here is," he said, doing his best to keep his voice steady, "Ah told ya, Ah live out in the farm down the road."

"But you don't actually live *in* the town, so therefore you need an invitation to enter!"

"Consarn it, Ah didn't need no invitation last year!"

"Since last year's incident we've had to tighten up security."

Mac face-hoofed. "Okay, look: ain't ya got a guest list or somethin'?"

"Of course we do."

"Well, then look up in there an' see if Ah'm marked down. Ah'm sure Caesar put me down in there somewhere."

"Without a formal invitation I *highly* doubt you'd be in the guest book," the guard snorted, "but since you say you know Caesar..." he nodded to his partner who disappeared into a small tent they set up and reappeared with a thick book. "What did you say your name was, again?"

"Big Macintosh."

"Your first name is 'Big?'"

"'Course not! Ah'd probably be in there under Macintosh Apple."

The guard didn't even try to hide his snicker. "Macintosh Apple? That's real clever. All right, let's see here..." He flipped through the book and stopped on a particular page. As he scanned it with his eyes Mac saw them fill with a very obvious 'oh crap' look. The guard shot his gaze back to Macintosh and stepped aside. "So sorry Mr. Apple! I didn't realize it was you! Please, accept my apologies and head right in!"

"Dun' call me Mr. Apple," Mac grumbled as he marched past the pair of flabbergasted guards. *Maybe Caesar put me on a V.I.P. list or something. Heh, whatever he wrote sure straightened up those guards something fierce!* Chuckling, Macintosh trotted through the gateway and down past the first few buildings where the town really came into view.

To say Ponyville was bustling tonight would have been a gross understatement. The streets were more filled and crowded than Macintosh thought possible; there were more ponies here than he had ever seen before. Ponies in regal robes, trussed up tuxes and decadent designer dresses all cantered down the roads; families and royal ambassadors exchanged friendly 'hellos' as they moved on to the next attraction. Lining the roads were dozens upon dozens of carriages and wagons, all set up into little or not so little shops selling anything from books to toys to fruit to horseshoes to back catalogues of 'The Equestria Daily.' The vendors shouted proclamations of how their inventory was infinitely superior to that of the pathetic shop down the road and what a smart, discerning young pony you were for recognizing that. Mixed in with the shops was the occasional arcade booth where forever unlucky colts tried over and over to win their giddy fillyfriend that giant stuffed panda in the back; the one with the top hat, of course. In the short few days that Macintosh had spent visiting the town he had become familiar with many faces of the ponies who lived here, but the recognizable ones were drowned in a sea of visitors, traveling merchants and guards standing vigil along the roads. Lining the streets were tall may-poles, their tips connected with long ribbons and ropes from which long banners depicting ancient art of the history of Equestria hung, along with smaller pennants, garlands of Daisy's giant sunflowers and hundreds of unlit, hoof-crafted lanterns. To the right Mac watched as a family helped their foals up a ladder to hang their lovingly created and decorated lantern among the others to be lit sometime tonight. Macintosh squeezed his way through the crowds of overly excited and well-dressed ponies, past the shops (politely refusing their 'final offers' and their '*final* final offers') and towards the town square.

As he pushed his way past the rather redundant salespony of a small bottle of supposed cure-all elixir ("only three bits a bottle, guaranteed to

work!") he was greeted with the sight of the main plaza: and what a sight it was. With all the work put into it it was nearly unrecognizable, looking nothing like the modest little town square with the modest little town hall it was before, but more like the royal courtyard of the great city of Canterlot, or at least what he imagined it would look like. City hall itself was adorned with tremendous flags and hanging banners, wreaths of sunflowers and twisting vines wrapping around and around to the very top, where a great bouquet of the golden flowers rested. From them extended dozens of long ribbons in every direction, lanterns, flags and sunflowers delightfully dangling from the strands of color. The ropes were so numerous that it almost looked as though some massive, technicolor spider had decided to spin its web from the tip of the building to the many tall poles that encircled the plaza. More flowers and wreaths wrapped around these poles, and fastened to each was a huge speaker whose wires led to a great booth off to the side of the town square, where Macintosh could swear he just saw Blues and Vinyl Scratch enter, each carrying a stack of records for their performance tonight. Macintosh looked to the ground at his hooves. Scattered along the road were the golden petals of sunflowers, scattered pieces of confetti and little glittery paper cutouts of the sun and moon. Following the road before him up towards the town hall he saw several incredibly long banquet tables, long enough to seat at least fifty ponies each. Dinnerware was just being set out by diligent ponies, and resting on every plate was a small triangle of paper indicating which lucky pony deserved a seat at the grand dinner. Every ten feet or so rested a vase housing a single sunflower, and at the end of the long rows rested two horizontal tables flanking a large podium at the base of the city hall. Busy ponies ran about, filling the vases with water or arranging an imperceptibly tiny out-of-place flower petal. Foals ran underhoof looking for any precious dropped bits and getting yelled at by the adults. A couple pegasi flew about, trying to find the best place to hang a long banner emblazoned with Princess Celestia's and Princess Luna's royal cutie marks before finally settling with stretching it between two of the ropes above Macintosh's head, creating a sort of make-shift gateway to the incredible outdoor banquet hall.

Macintosh marvelled at the unbelievable sight, but only one thought was going through the red earth pony's mind:

Who's going to clean all this up?

"Macintosh, my good man!" Mac turned to see Caesar cantering up to him, his monocle glistening in the evening light, "isn't this absolutely smashing?"

"Eeyup, Ah'd say so."

"I must say, everypony did such a fantastic job setting this all up! And you were absolutely on the button! Sunflowers were the perfect choice! Now then, on to business!" The stallion led Macintosh over to one of the center tables, pointing out one of the slips of paper with Mac's name written on it, about halfway down the long table. "Here is your seat for the banquet. I absolutely insisted that you get a good view for the evening, and even arranged for your friends and family to sit next to you!" Macintosh eyed the other seats and plates and indeed found them to be reserved for his family and the friends he'd made in town. Even Apple Bloom's friends had seats nearby.

"Wait a sec," Mac said, "why do Ah get a seat at this here fancy dinner?"

"Why?" Caesar laughed, "Why?" Mr. Macintosh, you're the whole reason the celebration is being held here in the first place! Of all the ponies in town, you deserve a place at the banquet! You, your family and friends, of course; I wouldn't have it any other way!"

"But, Ah imagine seats fer this here meal must be mighty expensive..."

"Oh, you have no idea! Most ponies would have to save up for their whole lives to afford a plate!"

"...Then there must be plenty o' other important ponies who'd deserve it more'n me."

Caesar guffawed and wrapped a hoof around Mac's shoulder. "So modest! Please, my good man, you must accept that you certainly do deserve this seat, and so much more!"

"...More?"

"Ah, but I get ahead of myself! All will be made clear come the morn! But for now, I'm afraid I must away to oversee the final preparations for the festival: I heard that Mr. Blues and Ms. Scratch have quite a selection of musical ditties lined up for tonight, and I simply must get a sampling! Oh, I do so love getting sneak previews! So! I'll see you here at the setting of the sun! Arrivederci!" He waved as he galloped off to the booth on the side of the plaza. Macintosh stood for a moment and pondered what the unusual pony had said. *Huh...I guess I was on a V.I.P. list or something after all.*

Macintosh watched for a few minutes as frantic ponies hurried to hang the final decorations and streamers. Off to the side tying colorful balloons to anything that wouldn't float away was the white unicorn Rarity

and her giddy friend Ditzzy Doo. The unicorn was dressed in an elaborate maroon gown, with golden highlights and jewels decorating its pleats. A purple shawl was wrapped around her shoulders, a reserved tiara sat on her brow and she wore shimmering glass slippers. Big Macintosh, wondering how one could walk in such shoes, cantered over.

"Howdy Rarity," he said.

"Why, Macintosh! What a pleasure to see you!" Rarity smiled sweetly, eyeing him up and down, "and I see you're wearing my suit! Oh, it looks so good on you! And I just *love* what your harness adds to the ensemble! A very 'Dapper WorkHorse' look; very nice."

Ditzzy finished tying a balloon to a nearby windowsill, landed beside her friend and pointed at Macintosh. "What a squid!" she shouted happily. She was wearing a simple black dress, her hair braided with a small muffin shaped hairpin holding it out of her eyes.

"Howdy Ditzzy," he grinned, "enjoyin' yerself?"

"Gummy!" she nodded vigorously. Her left eye decided the red stallion was boring so it went off to find something more interesting. "The Rocket Captain sent his army of toasters to the big basket! I've been spanking the rats and setting the pancakes! It's almost time for liftoff!"

"She's very excited," Rarity said, "she had so many wonderful ideas for the design of the festival. In fact, the lanterns were her idea, and she insisted that they be hung in a very specific fashion."

"Oh?" Mac raised his eyebrows, "why's that, Ditzzy?"

Her wings puffed out and she tried to hide her massive grin. "Blubber! Bottles of string fly but only the strong remain! Heave to and board her, boys! The secret reaches the sky! Only the sun knows!"

"Oh dear Ditzzy," Rarity gently ushered the pegasus' wings closed, "you're getting a little too excited! Come on, let's finish hanging these balloons and let Macintosh on his way. We'll see you at sunset!" she waved.

"The load's been loaded! Progress complete!" Ditzzy took to the air, soaring behind the unicorn, "no fatal errors detected! Here comes the tunnel, open up the train! Toot toot!"

"You simply must calm yourself, Ditzzy!" he heard Rarity chide, "remember your blood pressure!"

Macintosh allowed himself a gentle laugh and, a goofy grin on his face, turned to canter to the other side of the great plaza where a bridge spanned a small river. A few well-dressed ponies on the way smiled and waved, some even calling him by name, even though Mac had never met them before. He pleasantly returned the greetings regardless and

quickened his pace across the bridge towards a small park. It was also decorated similarly to the rest of the town, may-poles and their ribbons adorned with lanterns lining the curving roads between the trees. Ponies were hanging festive lights from the branches of the large trees, creating a glimmering light show that would no doubt look fantastic in the darkness of the night. Resting on a bench along the side of road was Fluttershy, looking rather skittish and uncomfortable. She shifted underneath her long, flowing green dress, a porcelain butterfly rested in the hair above her concerned eyes, and her mane (which was decorated with many small flowers) curled around the wreath of leaves around her neck. She looked like the very physical embodiment of springtime, even if she did sit as though she were ready to bolt out of town at the drop of a hat.

"Fluttershy?" he said softly, stepping close. As usual, she jumped at his voice.

"Oh! Macintosh! I...Sorry, um...hi."

"Y'all okay? Ya dun' look so good."

"Um, no, I'm...okay."

"Well, all right then," Mac shrugged, "mind if Ah take a seat?"

"Oh, no, go ahead," said Fluttershy, shifting a little to make room for the stallion. He gingerly sat down beside her, and they watched the ponies work around the park.

"Fluttershy," he said after a few minutes, "Ah was...Ah was wonderin' what...what it's like ta fly."

The pegasus looked at him in shock. "To fly?" she asked, "um, what do you want to know?"

"Everythin'," answered Mac, "what's it like, what's the world look like, what's it feel like, y'know."

"It's scary," she chuckled, but once she saw the dead serious look on Mac's face she cleared her throat. "Um, well...It's kinda...it...Um, I guess I've never really had to explain it before..." she shuffled around a bit, "well...Have you ever jumped from someplace high up?"

Macintosh stared ahead, his eyes glazing a little. "Eeyup."

"Do you know that feeling just before you fall?"

"Eeyup."

"It's like that. It...Well, it is scary. I don't really like heights, so I don't fly very high. But...well, it just feels like you could fall at any moment. I know ponies like Rainbow Dash love that feeling, but...Well, I don't, not really." She hummed a little. "Whenever I do fly high up, Equestria looks...everything looks really really small. I guess it is a little exciting, to

know you could just fly anywhere you want...Rainbow says that sometimes she just picks a point on the horizon and flies and flies until she gets there."

Macintosh sighed deeply.

"Um, Macintosh, why do you want to know?"

"Jes'...jes' curious, is all..."

The two sat quietly for a few minutes, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. There was a sort of silent agreement between the two that you didn't always have to talk or fill that silence; sometimes you could just enjoy the quiet time together. Macintosh sighed wistfully, turning over what the pegasus had said. *Fly anywhere you want...That freedom...*

"EEP!" yelled Fluttershy as a lantern fell from its hanging place right in front of her. An orange pegasus with a guilty look on her face floated down and scooped up the lantern, securely fastening it to the ribbon above.

"Y'all okay?" asked Macintosh, shaken out of his reverie, "y'all are actin' a mite jumpy over there."

"Oh, um, well...I just, uh...I don't really like these sorts of things," she whispered, "parties aren't really my thing..."

"Ah hear ya," laughed Mac, "Ah dun' really enjoy 'em too much mahself. Ah find 'em kinda loud an' jes' too hectic."

Fluttershy smiled. "Me too. I mean, I'm glad that others really enjoy them, but..."

"Well, ya dun' have ta stay if'n ya dun' want ta," Mac offered, "in fact, Ah reckon Ah'll head home after the banquet."

"What?" her eyes widened, "oh no, you mustn't leave! You need to stay until sunrise!"

"Uh...Why's that?" Mac scratched his neck. The pegasus stammered, caught off guard.

"Um, uh, well, uh, I mean...It just...well, you really shouldn't miss it...and um...well..."

"Macintosh! Fluttershy!" The pair looked up to see Twilight, wearing a deep blue dress with a starry theme trotting towards them. A single blue star on her ear jingled with every step. Macintosh heard Fluttershy breathe a loud sigh of relief.

"Twilight!" she said, "you're wearing your Gala gown too!"

"Yeah," the unicorn chuckled, "it's by far the nicest thing I have. It's good to see you two!"

"Good ta see y'all too," Mac nodded.

"Twilight, wait!" yelled Spike who ran towards the group. Twilight groaned and rolled her eyes.

"Spike, I *told* you many times to get one! You have only yourself to blame for forgetting."

"Puh-huh-leeze, Twilight!" he whined, clutching at her leg, "I need something! Anything! I promise I'll pay you back!"

"I doubt Rarity even has time right now."

"PLEASE!!"

"All right, all right! Sheesh, Spike!" she levitated several bits out of her purse into the eager scaly hands of the dragon, "next time, get your suit lined up earlier, okay?"

"YoubetthankyouTwilightseeyoulater!" he scurried off in a blur of green and purple. Twilight shook her head and turned back to the pair.

"Sorry about that. Spike can be a little forgetful sometimes."

"Not ta worry," Mac raised a hoof, "so! Enjoyin' yer time with the Princess?"

"Princess Celestia is here!?" Fluttershy squeaked, ducking her head between her hooves.

"Yes, she's already here in Ponyville, and yes, I've had a lot of time to catch up with her!" Twilight said dreamily, "actually, Fluttershy, she wanted to see you."

"ME!?" The pegasus practically melted into a quivering puddle. "Oh no, why would she want to see me!? Did I do something wrong? It's not my fault! I didn't know the bunnies would start early this year! I told them to wait!"

"Uh, no, you're not in trouble," Twilight said after a second, "actually, she brought an old friend with her she thought you might want to meet."

"Old friend?" Fluttershy pondered for a moment, then sat straight, her eyes wide with excitement. "Philomena?"

"That's right! Come on, I'll take you there! I'll see you at the banquet!" she waved to Macintosh as the pair took off. Fluttershy stopped a few feet away and turned back to the stallion, lowering her head and dropping her voice to a whisper.

"Um, please stay until sunrise," she said, "you'll see why then." With that she took to the air and soared after her friend.

"So much fer turnin' in early t'night," Macintosh sighed and pulled on his harness.

Macintosh, already feeling a little drained from the party that hadn't even begun yet, sat on the bench and watched as the final decorations were being hung. The evening sun was hardly an hour away from setting below the horizon, so Macintosh spent a few minutes resting on the park

bench, taking advantage of the quiet moment. Down the road Macintosh caught sight of Rainbow Dash, wearing a dress that matched her own color scheme and golden laurels on her brow, wandering aimlessly about the trees, eyeing the lanterns that dangled from above. Macintosh was about to stand and canter over to her and strike up a conversation, but another pegasus beat him to it. After a moment of watching the two converse Big Mac was able to identify the second pegasus as Cool Star. He said something, and Rainbow's jaw fell open, her eyes larger than dinner plates. Cool Star then passed her something: it was hard to make out from this distance, but to Mac it looked like a pair of glass disks in a leather lining held together by a strap. *Goggles?* As he held them out for the blue pegasus to take her eyes filled with more stars than Macintosh had ever seen before. She gently took the goggles, held them close to her heart and flew off. Cool Star began cantering along the road in the red pony's direction, so Mac called out to him.

"Howdy Cool Star," he nodded as the red-maned pegasus drew near, "or should Ah say, Cirro?"

"Cool Star's fine," he replied, his face expressionless, "how's the recovery going?"

"It's goin'," answered Mac, "Ah'm gettin' better. So Ah saw ya talkin' with Rainbow."

"Oh, yeah," Cool Star smirked a tiny bit, "I don't know if she told you, but I was able to get her an audition with my old team the other day."

"Eeyup, she mentioned it, said she passed an' all."

"She sure did, with flying colors. No pun intended. But you know what she said to me yesterday?" Cool Star leaned close, his eyes glimmering in just the faintest way, "she told me that she couldn't leave her friends here in Ponyville. Said she still had a lot to do here in town."

"Wow," Macintosh said, "that musta took a lot o' guts."

"Well, I respect anypony with such a strong sense of duty and loyalty," the pegasus said, standing tall, "and I think somepony like that deserves to be rewarded!" He unfurled his wings and took to the air. "Keep your eye on the sky tonight!" he called behind him as he soared away. Macintosh watched him fly into the sun, which was getting dangerously close to kissing the horizon. So, Cool Star's words reverberating in his head, Big Macintosh stood and made his way to the town square, squeezing his way through the growing crowds and the ever-increasing number of loud merchants.

When he arrived he found the square filled to the brim with ponies all gathered for the opening ceremonies. Near the back of the crowd

Macintosh saw Rose, Daisy and Lily, so he gladly pushed his way towards them.

"Macintosh!" Rose smiled as he arrived. She was wearing a long scarlet dress shimmering with sequins, a green bow in her hair and an emerald necklace. "I'm glad you could make it! I'm sorry I couldn't come and visit while you were recovering. I was so busy these last few days!"

"Ah heard," replied Mac, "y'all are gettin' Mr. Breezy's shop in order?"

"That's right. It's taking a lot of work, but it's going to be so worth it!" her face was practically glowing, "I've got the flower stand all ready for the final moving sale and everything! Oh, I can't wait! Um, but I might need a little help with the accounting stuff every now and then," she added with a sheepish grin.

"Ah'd be more'n happy ta give it," Mac laughed. He turned to Lily, who was dressed in a pastel blue blouse with a frilly, poofy skirt and her hair done up in pigtails with bright green hairbands. "How's it goin' Lily?"

"AWESOME!" she bellowed, "that party the other night is peanuts compared to tonight! This is going to be the whole elephant! No, the whole zoo! Wait! The whole planet! Yeah! If this is that other party," she held her hooves up a few inches apart, "then this is tonight!" she spread her hooves as wide as they would go, smacking Daisy in the face.

"Lily, do you mind?" she flatly returned, straightening her hair which had been curled to fall on either side of her face. She wore a long, forest green dress with a small sunflower pinned on her chest.

"Daisy, yer sunflowers look amazin'!" Mac grinned, "y'all really put a lot o' work into t'night!"

"Well, thank you," she smiled, blushing just a little, "I must say, it's very gratifying to see all that hard work paying off. And now that I've cleared up my garden, I can really get to work with that apple tree sapling you gave me, and experiment with other exotic plants!"

"Watch your mouth!" Lily shouted. Daisy just rolled her eyes.

"So everythin's workin' out fer everypony, eh?" Mac chuckled. The three ponies all looked at each other mischievously and replied in unison: "EEYUP!"

After a few minutes of shooting the breeze with the three fillies a hush fell over the plaza as the mayor of the town stepped behind the podium at the base of town hall.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," she announced, her voice magically amplified by the glowing horn of a unicorn at her side, "as mayor of

Ponyville, it is my great pleasure to announce the beginning of the 'Eve of the Summer Sun Celebration!"

The crowd exploded into cheers and stamps of hooves.

"In just a few moments," she continued, "the sun will set upon our fair land of Equestria, and the night festival will begin! Then, at the hour of midnight, the grand banquet will commence, highlighted by the lighting of the thousands of lanterns hung around town!" Foals all around the audience burst into excited cheers. "Then, at the end of the night, we will all gather back here to witness the magic of the sunrise! We have many visitors and merchants from out of town here tonight, and I hope you all enjoy the party!"

"YEAH! PARTY!!" Lily screamed above the uproar of excited shouts from hundreds of ponies.

"And now, let us count down until the sunset!" said the Mayor as everypony turned to face the setting sun, its tip just showing above the horizon.

"FIVE!"

"FOUR!"

"THREE!"

"TWO!"

"ONE!"

"ZERO!!"

An incredible cacophony of sound erupted from the sky as brilliant flashes of light exploded into rainfalls of color. More and more fireworks were set off into the twilight air, and great numbers of balloons were set free to rise into the sky. Macintosh watched in awe as the colorful explosions burst across the sky, but he had to cover his ears from the thundering noise.

As the final fireworks finished, a small orchestral band began playing festive music, and ponies dispersed to find drinks and snacks.

"This is going to be so awesome!" Lily squealed, "this party's gonna be the best! I'ma go get some cupcakes! You guys want anything?"

"No thanks," answered Daisy, "I'm not that hungry yet."

"I'll take one," said Rose, "try and get me an orange one, if there's any left."

"Mac? Want anything?" Lily asked.

"Nah, Ah'm not too hungry yet mahself."

"All right! Be back in a flash!" Lily bounced away through the crowds.

"So!" Macintosh began, "how're the movin' plans goin'?"

"I've already ordered a lot of inventory," Daisy replied, "I think that-"

"MACINTOOOOOSH!"

Mac turned to see Pinkie Pie, somehow made even pinker in a frilly dress covered in candy with a big pink bow. She had little shoes and wore a small cap as she charged towards him at max speed. Mac braced himself for impact but the filly somehow stopped on a dime mere inches away.

"Oh, that's right," she said, somewhat downtrodden, "you're hurt. I'll just hafta find somepony else to tackle!"

"Hi Pinkie," smiled Rose, "having fun?"

"Hi Roseluck!" Pinkie shouted back, "I'm having a party! Which makes sense, since this is a party. And what a party it is!!" she grabbed Macintosh by his harness and pressed her bright-eyed face into his, "this is SO AWESOME! Macky, this is going to be the best party ever!" she bounded around, pointing out anything that caught her eye, "there's so many lanterns all over the place I actually made a lantern it's pink and I gave it to Rarity who looks so pretty 'cause she's wearing her Gala gown like mine and you all look so pretty too everypony here looks pretty and fancy and shiny and there's the band and the music and the food even though I didn't get to help much well I helped a little and I made the dessert and and and and-" she paused to catch her breath, "it's going to be the best party ever!!"

"Party!" Lily shouted, trotting back to the group, a tray with a pair of cupcakes in her mouth. Daisy groaned loudly.

"CUPCAKES!" Pinkie shrieked, gobbling up both treats in one bite, "Ohmygosh, Lily!" she bellowed, "have you seen this party?"

"I have so totally seen this party!" Lily bellowed back, "and it is AWESOME!!"

"ARE YOU READY TO PARTAY!?" screamed Pinkie.

"I'M SO READY TO PARTAY YOU HAVE NO IDEA! MY BODY IS READY!!"

"THEN LET'S GO!!" the two pink fillies bounced away, loudly announcing their intentions to dance all night and never sleep again.

"Ugh," Daisy rubbed her temples, "those two shouldn't be allowed together."

"Well, I suppose Daisy and I should get our flower stand open," Rose laughed, "I'll see you later Macintosh! At the banquet!"

"Right!" Daisy shouted suddenly, turning to face the red stallion, "I don't know how you managed to get us seats, but thank you! I can't wait! I'm sure to make some big connections there!"

"Yes, thank you, Macintosh," Rose smiled as the pair cantered away, "this whole celebration is going to be wonderful, thanks to you. Please stop by and visit us sometime tonight!"

"Uh, yer welcome?" Mac scratched his neck as he watched the pair leave. "Why is everypony actin' like Ah dun' saved the town or somethin'? It weren't even mah idea ta bring this party here." He could hear the band in the town square finish their performance and some dance music begin pumping through the speakers that littered the town. Macintosh shook his head and leisurely strolled down the roads where the street lights were just being lit, clearing his head and enjoying the sight of the busy town and the excited ponies that filled its streets.

"Apple Bloom! I told ya! I dun' need yer help runnin' the stand t'night!"

"But Sis! I promise I'll do better'n last time!"

Macintosh grinned as he approached the apple cart where his sisters were fighting over an apron.

"No buts, Apple Bloom!" Applejack snatched the white apron away, "t'night's a big night fer the farm! I can't afford anythin' goin' wrong!" The orange filly was wearing her Gala outfit as well: an elaborate saddle on her back, green boots on her hooves and on her braided mane she wore her old, trusty hat rather than the novelty one Rarity made for her.

"Aw, please?" Apple Bloom pouted. Her pink bow was nestled in her red hair, and she wore a simple orange skirt.

"Now Apple Bloom," Macintosh said as he stepped up to them, "this here's a party t'night! Y'all shouldn't try ta work with yer borin' big sister!" The sister in question shot him a nasty glare. Macintosh leaned down and passed the little pony a hoof-full of shining bits. "Here: why dun' ya go find yer friends and get some cotton candy or sumat?"

Apple Bloom smiled meekly. "All right, I guess."

"There ya go. Now go'n have fun," Mac chuckled, tussling her mane. His youngest sister thanked him and galloped off.

"Thanks Big Brother," Applejack sighed, "I know Apple Bloom's eager ta find her special talent, but I'm pretty sure it ain't apple sellin'."

"Well, dun' be too hard on the filly," Mac chided, "Ah 'member the first time y'all tried ta sell some apples."

"Yeah, yeah, I 'member," Applejack said dismissively, "they got the stains out in the end."

"Anyhow, mind if Ah hang about fer a bit, help ya make some sales?"

Applejack eyed him suspiciously. "Don't ya got anythin' else ta do? What about yer friends?"

"They're all runnin' stands o' their own or keepin' busy," he said, stepping behind the cart, "Ah'll catch up with 'em a li'l later."

"But ya dun' ever run the stand. Sure ya can handle it?" she grinned wryly.

"As long as there ain't any clowns," he winked. Applejack laughed and nodded her head.

"So," Macintosh began as he rooted through their inventory, "did ya have any trouble gettin' past them guards?"

"Ugh, them guards were a real pain in the patootie!"

"Language, AJ!"

"Sorry. But I mean it! I forgot our invitations back home so I had ta go aaaall the way back ta get 'em!"

"Wait, yer invitations?"

"Yeah, y'know, got 'em from Caesar. It dun' matter how much of a bigwig y'are, if'n ya dun' got yer invitation ya ain't gettin' into the party," she said, shining an apple, "well, I guess 'cept fer Princess Celestia."

"Huh," Mac frowned.

"Anywho, them guards didn't need ta be so dang grumpy 'bout it! All's I asked was fer them ta watch li'l Apple Bloom 'til I got back, an' they acted like I was askin' them ta run a marathon around the country! An' when I got back they gave me a glare that coulda killed a lesser critter! I mean, sure, Apple Bloom's a hoof-full, but how much trouble could she really've been? I swear...Hey, Macintosh, are ya even listenin'?"

"Huh?"

"Are y'all okay? Ya've been kinda...weird this past week."

"Ah'm fine," Mac pulled on his harness, "jes'...got a lot on mah mind lately."

"Well, try an' stay focused fer now," Applejack said, passing him an apple, "we've got apples ta sell!" The filly turned and began waving and calling to passing ponies, extolling her wide selection of apples, pies and fritters, and a few stopped to purchase some, but Macintosh stared off into space. *There's something funny going on tonight. I never got an invitation like everypony else, but I was on the guest list?* He shook himself back to reality as a pale blue pegasus stallion with unruly navy hair cantered over to him. Unlike almost everypony else, he wasn't dressed up at all.

"Howdy partner," Mac nodded, "ya hungry?"

"As a horse!" the pegasus replied. Applejack's ears shot up and she turned to face him.

"Hang on," she said, pointing a hoof, "I 'member you! Ya bought that pie at the Gala!"

"Hey, yeah!" he chuckled, "that pie was amazing! Best apple pie I ever had! Got any more?"

"You bet!" Applejack grinned, passing him a large pie which he took in his mouth, "enjoy!"

"Fangf!" he mumbled as he tossed them some bits. Applejack slid them into the bit-box as Mac watched the pegasus leave.

"Y'all know that feller?" he asked.

"Sorta," Applejack replied, "he was the only one ta buy anythin' at that trainwreck of a gala. He was all dressed up in some blue chicken suit last time, though. Looked like somethin' Rainbow dash woulda liked," she added with a chuckle, "wonder what he's doin' here?"

"Huh," Mac muttered, "weird. Anyway, where's Gramma?"

"Ah, she didn't feel up fer comin' so early. She wanted me ta go get her fer the banquet an' the sunrise, though." Applejack laughed a little. "It's gun' be somethin' else, I tell ya! First the Princess'll raise the sun an' then-" she glanced at Macintosh briefly and cleared her throat. "Uh, well, then it's the real celebration an' all. Yup, it'll be great!"

"Y'all okay over there?" Mac raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah, never better!" she coughed, turning away to wave at some passing ponies. "Howdy there! Y'all interested in some o' Sweet Apple Acre's signature apples? Guaranteed ta be the sweetest apple y'all ever had!"

Macintosh sighed as he resumed pitching sales as well. *Why's everypony acting so weird about tonight?* he pondered. *Maybe all those sweets are going to their heads.*

For the next hour or so Macintosh helped out with the stand before he decided to go and visit his friends. The night was wearing on and any sunlight that had lingered after the sunset was almost completely gone, but the streetlights illuminated the road before his hooves. As he milled around he found Blues, leaning against a lamppost and sipping a drink. He was wearing a simple collar and bow tie.

"Hey Blues," Mac said, "what's goin' on?"

"Hey man!" he grinned, "not much. I'm just taking a break."

"A break?"

"Yeah, me and Vinyl Scratch are running the music tonight, right? Once the band finished playing we've been taking turns DJ-ing."

"Ah see. Say, where's Cherry?"

Blues choked on his drink. "Pfweh! Um, you didn't hear, I guess..."

"Uh, nope, Ah reckon Ah didn't."

"She dumped me."

Mac pursed his lips. "Oh, Ah see," he said, kicking a pebble, "how come?"

"She didn't like how much time I was spending with Vinyl Scratch," he said, his eyes a little glazed, "I guess she got jealous or something. I dunno. I'll never understand fillies."

"She was a bit of a...a grump, weren't she?" Macintosh ventured. *'Grump?' Really? That's the best I could come up with?*

"Yeah, I guess she was. I dunno, she seemed like a nice filly when we met, and she was really nice whenever we were together, but she didn't really let me do my own thing. I dunno, I guess she was a bit of a mule. Her brother's an awesome guy, though. I don't know why she's so demanding."

"Well, I guess that's that, then." Macintosh sighed. "So, are you an' Daisy...?"

"No, we're not," he said, fiddling with his drink, "I don't think we'd get together again. I mean, she's a great filly, but even if I never met Cherry I think we would have just petered out eventually anyways."

"Hm, Ah see. How 'bout Vinyl?"

Blues choked on his drink again. "Guah! Uh, I mean, no? Eheh, no, it's just personal business. I mean NOT personal! Just business! Yeah! We're just partners. Business partners! Not partners like that! Um. Yeah. We're just making music together. But not like that!!"

Macintosh, doing his best to bite his tongue and keep from laughing, leaned in close and channeled a little bit of Lily:

"Y'all *like* her, don'tchya?"

Blues turned the color of Twilight Sparkle, his pupils tiny. "No! Um, no. Heh heh, I do not! More like *you* do! Uh, um, well, yeah, kinda." His face burned with his blush and he buried himself in his drink. "Just...don't tell Lily, okay?" he whispered.

"Dun' worry, yer secret's safe with me," Mac guffawed. "Speakin' of which," he said after a minute, "y'all want ta go join 'em? Ah reckon they're still runnin' their flower stand."

"Yeah, I've got some time to kill," Blues said casually, "let's go." He finished his drink and the two trotted along the road.

"Y'know," Mac smirked, "they'd probably give ya a discount on a nice set o' flowers fer Vinyl."

"S-s-shut up!"

The two stallions wandered through town, casually glancing at whatever stall caught their interest at the moment. Blues was held up for a few minutes at the carriage of one mare who claimed to be able to predict who his true love was, and Macintosh watched as his face paled and she politely demanded the five bits he owed her; when asked Blues would only shake his head and mumble something about sugar. Macintosh saw some of his other friends as well perusing the myriad of colorful booths: to the right was Lightning Bolt and Cotton Cloudy trying together to toss a ball into a cup that was too far away (and it constantly moving at the last moment certainly didn't help), beside them was Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo running their own makeshift magic booth where they'd take a personal object from their customer and then make it disappear, followed by a demand for a refund when they couldn't figure out how to make it reappear. Across the road was a large booth where an old stallion held a puppet show in a large stage he had set up, the wooden dolls dancing and speaking in silly voices as they dangled from the strings he deftly twisted with his hooves. In the center of the road was a small group of performing ponies, dancing in ways that would land any less-talented ponies a bed in the nearest hospital. Macintosh was particularly impressed when one of the ponies procured a flaming sword from his mouth and proceeded to toss it in the air and twist it around his body, somehow never lighting him or anypony nearby on fire. Past them Macintosh spied Rose and Daisy happily waving and calling for passing ponies to take a moment of their time and see if there was something at their final moving sale (as the sign above their cart indicated) that they would be interested in. Macintosh and Blues cantered up to the mares who just managed to sell a trio of roses to a furiously blushing pair of colts: Snips and Snails, Mac realized with a chuckle. Macintosh, Blues, Rose and Daisy chatted for a bit, commenting on the wonderful decorations and wondering if Lily and Pinkie Pie were okay (or, more appropriately, if the snack bars were), and after about half an hour Blues had to leave to resume his DJ work, Mac giving him one more knowing wink as he left. For the next hour or so Macintosh and his friends ran the flower stand, and Macintosh tutored Rose on the finer points of accounting whenever the opportunity arose. Daisy held an interest as well, and together they brainstormed on what to call their flower shop when it was completed. Rose suggested the name they had for the last one ('Your Corner Florist'), but Daisy desired something new to go with their big step forward. Macintosh couldn't come up with anything remotely clever, and they decided they should let Lily in on the decision making process anyway.

Macintosh found himself completely at ease, any trace of nervousness and stress washing away in the cool night air. Instead of seeming crowded and intense, the streets and groups of ponies that traveled therein appeared more friendly and inviting. Macintosh even excused himself every now and again to go and investigate a stand that piqued his interest. Rose commented on how comfortable he seemed, and Mac just smiled, looking up to the starry sky and its large, shimmering moon. The clocktower rang from somewhere, its loud tolls hardly audible over the noise of the town.

"I'm going to go for a little walk," Rose said a while later, "Daisy, you can run the stand by yourself, right?"

"Of course," Daisy rolled her eyes.

"Oh good," smiled Rose, trotting away, "I'll be back in a while!"

"See ya," Mac waved. He and Daisy resumed operating the stand, but after a few minutes, business slowed to a halt and the two watched some nearby foals running about with silly hats.

"This is nice," Daisy said dreamily, "I'm really enjoying tonight."

"That's good," said Mac, "Ah am too." After a minute, Mac continued: "so did ya ever get a chance ta talk ta Blues?"

"Yes," Daisy answered, "I did. I...I guess I had things a little mixed up. I need to apologize to Cheerilee."

"So you an' Blues then; yer finished?"

"I think so," she sighed, "I don't think I really have time for anything like that right now anyways. I'm going to be really busy with the new shop and everything."

"Eeyup, Ah'd reckon so."

Daisy looked at him suddenly. "You know, you're a really nice guy. When we first met, well...no offence, but I thought you were a little slow."

"Ha ha, it ain't no worry," Mac laughed, "sometime's Ah am a mite slower than the average pony."

"Well, in any case," Daisy chuckled, "I was wrong about you. Thank you for caring about my friends and me."

"Eeyup," Mac sighed happily.

Rose returned a few minutes later, and shortly after an announcement was made over the loudspeakers around Ponyville:

"Attention everypony! It's forty-five minutes to midnight! All guests with seats at the banquet should head to the town square, if you please!"

"All right!" Daisy grinned, pulling the rope which dropped the 'closed' signs down over the cart, "let's eat!" The small group trotted through the town until they arrived at the main plaza, the seats at the long tables slowly

filling up with dignified looking ponies. A smiling mare asked for their names and showed them to their seats, where Macintosh found his family and friends already seated. Applejack, Apple Bloom and Granny Smith were seated to his right, great smiles spread across their faces. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle (both wearing simple purple skirts) sat across from Mac's youngest sister; each member of the Cutie Mark Crusaders had a single red rose in her mane. Past them sat Lightning Bolt and Cool Star, and Cotton Cloudy sat next to Scootaloo, the two no doubt becoming fast friends judging by their excited whisperings. Across from Big Macintosh sat Lily, Blues and Vinyl Scratch, and to his left were the seats for Rose and Daisy, who gladly took them. Past them were Twilight, Spike (wearing a dapper looking suit), Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy (who had a long flame red feather in her mane). Across from them was Pinkie Pie, Cheerilee, Rarity and Ditzy Doo, whose eyes were staying well-behaved. They all smiled and waved as Macintosh joined them, and Macintosh couldn't help but break out in a massive grin at the sight of his many friends.

"Howdy y'all," he said as he sat down, "fancy meetin' all you here!"

"Marshmallows!" Ditzy shouted happily.

"Excited for dinner?" Cheerilee asked, taking a sip from her drink.

"Eeyup, Ah'm lookin' forward ta seein' what Caesar did with our apples."

"What I did was take something already magnificent and make it even magnificenter!" Caesar laughed, somehow planting himself between Macintosh and his sister, "oh, look at you all! You look positively smashing! Ah, I wish I had a camera! If only I could capture this moment! Aha! You there!" Caesar tapped a light blue mare with silver hair and massive pink sunglasses on the shoulder as she and her entourage made their way to their seats.

"Ja?" she declared, somewhat irritated, "vat is it you vant?"

"Excuse me, but you wouldn't happen to have a camera, would you?" Caesar asked.

"I have FAR more zan a zimple camehra!" she waved her hoof, speaking in a bizarre mish-mash of accents.

"Brilliant! Would you mind taking a commemorative photo of our group?"

The pony threw her head back and laughed. "I, Photo Finish," she snapped her tale for emphasis, "am NOT juzt zome zimple photographer of zee common poohny! My talentz are rezerved for oohnly zee mozt beautiful and fashioned of poohniez! Only onez with...Zee Magic, dezerve zee honor of being captyured on my film!"

"Um, Photo Finish?" came the reserved voice of Fluttershy, who was being urged on by Rarity, "um, maybe you could, please? For us?"

"Floottershy!?" the mare shouted, "vat iz it yoo are doing here?"

"Please?" the yellow pegasus widened her eyes pleadingly.

"Ah, Floottershy, it iz for yoo aloohne zat I make zee exzepzion! Are yoo zertain zat yoo do not wish to return az zee greatezt model in Equeztia? Yoo have no idea zee amount of requestz I have been getting for your return!"

"I'm sorry, Photo Finish, but I'm happy right here," she said, smiling to Rarity.

"Ah, vat a pity. Elsie! Ve begin zee photo shoot...NOW!"

What the group got was much more than a simple commemorative photo. Photo Finish insisted on setting up lights and sending her makeup artists around the table to touch up the ponies, then completely changed her mind and demanded them all to pose at the base of town hall. The group of ponies organized themselves around Macintosh who reluctantly took the center of the photo.

"Iz everypooahny ready?" Photo Finish bellowed, "ov course yoo are! Vy do I azk! Now zen! Az much az I detezt zuch an inzipid practice, I cannot refute itz effectiveness! Zo! Zay cheeze!"

"CHEESE!" Macintosh and his friends shouted.

"Pickles!" said Ditzy.

SNAP

Once Photo Finish took all the photos she wanted (which was much more than Lily wanted to sit still for) the group sat themselves back at their table as the final guests seated themselves as well. At the two tables at the front sat the most important looking ponies, including the mayor, Caesar, and a prissy looking unicorn stallion who elicited a loud groan from Rarity as he took his seat. Once everypony was seated (and once they could get Pinkie to stop talking) the mayor took the podium.

"Fillies, gentlecolts, royal and esteemed guests," she began, "it is my great honor to welcome you all to Ponyville on this 'Eve of the Summer Sun Celebration!' As the banquet is set out, let us all thank Celestia for this wonderful holiday! And now, to celebrate, we shall light all the lanterns! Twilight, if you please!"

Twilight stood and cantered up to the front of the podium. She closed her eyes and her horn glowed, before sending up a spark to the top of the town hall. As the glowing light touched the very tip of the building it exploded, sending a brilliant flash of light down across all the ribbons and

ropes that stretched out from the center of town. As the spark touched each lantern they lit up, and soon the sparks reached the tall poles and split, sending more sparks down every road and street, lighting up every lantern that hung above the city. Their fantastic orange glow basked Ponyville in their radiance, and Macintosh could hear cheers and shouts erupting from all around the city.

"Picture!" Ditzzy shouted, "Hurry! The camera! It's our only hope!"

"Oh, all right Ditzzy," Rarity replied, pulling out a dusty black box, "I don't know why you'd want to use such an old camera..." Macintosh's cousin had one like that: it could instantly develop and print out a grainy picture.

"Opulence!" the pegasus said happily, taking to the air, "the sun sees all!" She flew high above the town and squealed in happiness when she looked down below her, aiming and taking a picture. Several other pegasi from around town flew up as well, and each one gasped and pointed down to the town below them. Ditzzy dived back down and waved the slip of paper around until it developed completely.

"Oh, that's amazing, Ditzzy!" Rarity gasped, taking a look at the picture, "that's beautiful! What a wonderful idea!"

"Lemme see! Lemme see!" Pinkie shouted, bouncing over, "ooh, pretty!"

"Green pirates knew forever!" Ditzzy grinned as she showed the picture to everypony, who all remarked what a great sight it was. Finally she stepped up to Macintosh. "Pineapples?" she asked as the stallion took a look.

From below, the lanterns were beautiful. They hung above everypony's head, happily shining with their orange light, drawn and painted by anypony who wanted to make one. Round ones, square ones, even a few triangular ones shone peacefully, and it was a wonderful sight from the ground. From the *air*, on the other hoof, it was an incredible, breathtaking sight. The little picture showed what anypony with wings could see for themselves: the lanterns formed an enormous, brilliantly glowing replica of the sun. The town square was the giant orb of light, and the twisting and winding roads formed the tendrils of warmth that extended out from the center. It looked exactly like the Princess Celestia's cutie mark, Macintosh realized; the cutie mark that had become the international symbol for the sun and was printed on every coin across Equestria. Macintosh looked back up into the glimmering crossed eyes of Ditzzy Doo.

"That's incredible," he said, his eyes wide with awe, "that's really somethin' else."

"Cupboard!" Ditzzy smiled, moving on to show the photograph to all the other ponies at the table. Macintosh looked back up to the night sky, illuminated by the thousands of hoof-crafted lanterns, sighing wistfully.

A few moments later, a small legion of chef unicorns levitated hundreds of covered plates and trays which they set out and uncovered for the ponies.

"Applejack, Macintosh, these are your apples, right?"

"Eeyup."

"They're delicious!"

"CHOCOLATE SAUCE!"

"Pinkie, how many sweets have you had tonight, anyways?"

"Nowhere near enough if I can still see straight!"

"Hey Blues, Vinyl Scratch, how come you aren't in the music booth?"

"Ah, they wanted the fancy band to play during dinner."

"They don't dig Daft Pony."

"What is this!? Just a few measly apple slices? No offence, Applejack."

"None taken....."

"Spike, it's only the appetizer. There's more food afterwards."

"Really? Oh, okay. Sorry Applejack."

"Hey Cotton, have you ever tried a barrel role?"

"Yeah, but Daddy said they're too dangerous."

"Darn tootin' they are! Why, back when Ah was cap'n of the royal air force, we used ta lose good flyers every day when they tried them foolish barrel roles!"

"Grama, how were ya in the air force if ya don't even have wings?"

"Ah lost 'em in the great war, Apple Bloom! Ah was leadin' the assault against NightMare Moon!"

"But that was over one thousand years ago..."

"I remember that! I was your wingpony, remember? I rode the gila lizard!"

"Lily, you were NOT there."

"Was too!"

"Oh, look! Here comes the main course!"

"All right! Ooh, this looks great!"

"Aw, no gemstones..."

"Sweetie Belle, be careful! I don't want to see any stains on that dress tonight!"

"Sorry sis..."

"Yum! Have you tried the porcupines? They're delicious!"

"The WHAT!?"
"No, Fluttershy! She means the carrots."
"Oh...I'm sorry for yelling..."
"Screwdriver!"
"Oh wow, this is so super-duper-yummy!"
"Better than cupcakes?"
"We're still a *loooong* way off from reaching cupcake territory, although I can't wait to see what dessert is!"
"Pinkie Pie, didn't you *make* the dessert?"
"Shh! You'll spoil the surprise!"
"Hmm, I've always wanted to try a sunflower..."
"Lily, don't you dare!"
"Hey Rainbow Dash! After the banquet could you show me your Super Speed Strut? Rainbow?"
"That's weird, she's gone!"
"Mommy, Daddy's gone too!"
"It's okay, Cotton. I'm sure he just went to the washroom."
"That's too bad. They're missing out on this amazing meal!"
"I'll eat it for them!"
"Oh no ya won't, Apple Bloom!"
"Pinkie Pie! Slow down! You're going to get a stomach ache!"
"So, Fluttershy! How's Philomena doing?"
"She's well. She's very beautiful when she's healthy."
"Philomena? You mean that phoenix of Celestia's?"
"That's right. She's a very nice bird. When she's healthy."
"Big Brother, y'all said ya wanted ta see a phoenix, right?"
"Eeyup."
"You do? You should come after dinner then and I'll introduce you!"
"Hey Cutie Mark Crusaders! Where'd you girls get those lovely roses?"
"Oh, um...We found them."
"Really?"
"Um, yeah."
"Are you sure they weren't from some colts?"
"Haha! Was it from yer coltfriend, Apple Bloom? Snails, was it?"
"SIS!"
"No, hers was from Snips."
"Sweetie Belle!!"
"Ooh, here comes dessert!"
"Awesome! Apple Crumble! Who could have known?"

"Pinkie...!"

"Oh wow, this is really good!"

"You did a really great job on this!"

"Thanks! Oh, look! The mayor's going to say something!"

"Attention, everypony!"

The tables fell silent as the mayor stood behind the podium. "I am pleased to present, in celebration of this year's festival, a special performance by the WonderBolts!" The crowd burst into applause as several pegasi in blue uniforms shot into the air, leaving trails of smoke or electricity behind them. "For tonight and tonight only," the mayor continued, "Cirro will fly with the team again!" On cue, Cool Star, wearing another of the uniforms, flew from behind town hall to join the rest, leaving a puffy trail of cloud. "And for this night only," resumed the mayor, "they will have a special guest captain! So please stomp your hooves for Captain Rainbow Dash!"

As Rainbow Dash, wearing the same uniform and a pair of goggles, soared up with the rest of the WonderBolts - leaving behind a trail of rainbow colors - Macintosh's table exploded into cheers and applause.

"YEAH! WHOO!" Pinkie screamed, "GO DASHIE!"

"RAINBOW DASH! RAINBOW DASH!" chanted the others. The stunt team of ponies made a formation behind Rainbow Dash, and together they performed flips, spins and dives that made Macintosh's head spin. At one point he looked over to Scootaloo and Cotton Cloudy, whose eyes were wide with wonder as they held onto each other, mouths hanging open in amazement. Macintosh laughed lightly as he looked back up to the flying wonders. Cirro spun around and around, forming a large white cloud above their heads. The others hovered in a wide circle around it, and Rainbow Dash dove down to ground level, positioning herself just below the cloud. With a wink at Macintosh she lowered her goggles and shot up, straight at the cloud. As she did so, the other pegasi dashed towards the center, and just as Rainbow burst through the cloud they all pulled up, spiraling around their guest captain forming a twisting, flashing, multicolored storm-cloud pillar that pierced the sky with a terrific clap of thunder. The group dispersed and hovered in formation above the plaza, taking a bow to the uproarious cheering from below. Macintosh grinned widely as the ponies all landed behind the town hall.

"OHMYGOSH!" Lily screamed, "THAT WAS AMAZING!!!"

"SO AWESOME!" Pinkie bellowed.

Macintosh looked back to Scootaloo, who looked back to him with the biggest, happiest grin in the world.

"Eeyup, it sure was," he chuckled.

"Rainbow Dash, that was incredible!" Twilight said as Rainbow and Cool Star returned to the table.

"Thanks," Rainbow laughed, "that was so much fun!"

"So I guess this means you're joining the team then, huh?" Scootaloo asked, ears drooped. Rainbow looked back to Cool Star and grinned.

"Nope," she said, "I'm stayin' here. Somepony needs to stay around here and be awesome, after all!"

"Really?" Scootaloo perked up.

"Good work out there, Rainbow," Cool Star smirked slightly, "you'll make a great captain someday."

"Thanks, and thanks a ton for doing that for me!"

"Hey, like I said!" the tan pony shrugged, "you deserved a reward."

Rainbow Dash looked at everypony contentedly, but after a second her countenance changed completely: she closed her eyes and she let loose a great squeal of joy.

"EEEEEEEEOhmygoshohmygoshohmygoshOHMYGOSH I FLEW WITH THE WONDERBOLTS!! THIS IS THE BEST NIGHT EVER!!" Her eyes snapped open as she realized all her friends were staring at her, great grins on their faces. "Eheh, um, yeah, that was pretty cool, I guess."

"So you finally flew with your lifelong idols, eh, Rainbow Dash?" Twilight grinned. Rainbow nodded dreamily.

"Well, this is a big deal!" Pinkie Pie declared, "We need to celebrate! And I have just the thing!" she shouted, pulling out a large tray of cupcakes.

"Pinkie Pie," Rarity sighed, "we just *had* dessert?"

"Silly, this is second dessert!" The pink pony bounced around and handed everyone a cupcake.

"Oh, it looks just like me!" Fluttershy giggled, holding the pink and yellow cupcake in her hooves, "it's even got a little candy butterfly on it!"

"Cool!" Spike said, holding his purple and green one, "mine's got a gem on it! Thanks, Pinkie!"

"Aw, it's so cute!" smiled Rose as she admired hers, "Pinkie, you didn't need to do this!"

"Yes I did, because I wanted to, and you're my friends!" she said as she passed Macintosh his. "How's it going Macky? You've been pretty quiet. Are you having fun?"

Macintosh looked down to the little cupcake on his plate. It was red, with orange frosting and a little green candy apple on top. He looked up to his friends, each one looking expectantly to him. He smiled.

"Eeyup."

"Mac'ntosh?"

"Yes Grampa?"

"C'me ov'r here, son. C'me closer."

I stepped over to the bed. Grandfather looked at me.

"Mac'ntosh, Mac'ntosh..."

"Yes?"

"Mac'ntosh, yer a good colt...yer such a strong colt...ya'll make a fahn stall'n s'meday...Eeyup..."

Grandfather coughed. His voice was scratchy.

"Ah see yer wearin' mah old harness...it done serv'd me well. Yer pa were jes' a li'l older'n y'all when Ah gave it ta him...Eeyup..."

He coughed.

"Mac'ntosh, d'ya know what the Apple Fam'ly tradition is?"

"It's ta run the farm."

Grandfather laughed.

"Eeyup, but that's jes' half o' it! Not ev'n the import'nt half!"

"What?"

He took my hoof. His eyes were so tired.

"Ah learn'd the tradition from mah pa...Eeyup...An' yer pa learn'd it from me. Yer pa...he knew it well, but he got it a li'l mix'd up as he grew up. Eeyup, he fer sure did."

He coughed again.

"He had trouble...Mac'ntosh, y'all dun' hafta end up like that. Jes' 'member what's the most import'nt part. Eeyup."

"An' what's that?"

He laughed and coughed. He became very quiet.

"Ya already know it, son...Eeyup...Ah jes' reckon...It'll take...a while...fer...ya ta.....see....."

"Grampa? Grampa?"

"Macintosh?"

The red pony jerked awake. After the Banquet he and Fluttershy paid the phoenix a quick visit, but even the sight of the magnificent fiery bird wasn't enough to keep the red pony's eyes open, so he had teetered his

way over to his favorite tree in the park, exhausted from the long night and fell asleep. As he looked up now he saw Cheerilee standing above him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes tinted with concern.

"Jes' a li'l tired," Macintosh yawned. Cheerilee chuckled and sat down next to him.

"I hear ya. I haven't partied like this in ages!" she laughed, "once I started teaching I had to leave all that behind. Maybe someday I'll take another visit to a disco."

"Y'all used ta be quite the party animal, eh?" Mac grinned, "Ah guess we sorta fell outta touch once Ah had ta drop out."

"Yeah, I guess. It's too bad. You were my closest friend during my school years."

"Really?"

"Yeah. All the other fillies and colts in my class were so obsessed with how they looked that nopony seemed genuine or real at all. It was just that age, you know. I got teased a lot because I was never able to stay up on the fashion trends. Plus, I was a bit of a shrimp for my age."

"Eeyup, Ah 'member."

"I even fit in perfectly into that weird play, even though I was a couple years older than everypony else. You wouldn't have known it from looking at me, though. Heh, that costume of Rarity's was so uncomfortable! She's really come a long way since then." The maroon pony sighed and looked to Big Mac. "So have you, Macintosh."

"Ah have?"

"Yes, you really have. Back in school you were picked on a lot, weren't you?"

"Eeyup. Didn't have any friends b'sides you."

"Exactly!" Cheerilee held up her hoof, "but just look at you now! Half of our table was filled with friends of yours!"

Macintosh fell quiet for a moment, pondering what she said. "Well," he said after a minute, "Ah guess havin' ta run a farm by yerself can change a pony."

"Maybe," Cheerilee replied, "but I have a feeling there was something more than that." She looked over to him, and smiled. "You know, you still owe me a valentine."

"What? Ah never got ya one?"

"Nope!" she laughed, "but don't worry. You can get me later." She nuzzled his neck a little and stood up. "I should get going. Lyra and Bon-Bon wanted to show me some booth selling old records. I'll see you at sunrise!" waving behind her she cantered off. Smiling, Macintosh watched

her go. He thought back to the first time he had met her: she was being picked on by some colts because she was so small, and he stepped in and told them to buzz off. He and Cheerilee became friends after that, and the other ponies stopped teasing her over time; they found Macintosh a much more interesting punching bag.

Big Macintosh shuffled under the weight of his harness. *It's too bad we couldn't have stayed in touch. We were both just too busy with our own problems.* He closed his eyes and cleared his head. All that was in the past, and the present and future were much brighter than they'd ever been for him before. For once, outside of his family, he had a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Macintosh stood and took a light canter around the park. It was relatively empty, save for one or two ponies out for a romantic stroll in the calm lantern light. Excitedly chatting on a bench down the path was Scootaloo and Cotton Cloudy, discussing which was their favorite trick from the WonderBolt show. Grinning, Mac trotted over.

"Howdy Scootaloo, Cotton," he waved.

"Hey dude!" Scootaloo smiled.

"Hi Mr. Macintosh," Cotton Cloudy said meekly, "um...Thanks for...y'know, saving my life..."

"Heh, ain't no trouble," Mac chuckled, "anypony woulda done it. So Scootaloo! How's yer trick comin' along?"

The orange pegasus' eyes lit up. "Awesome! I'm finally getting the hang of it all! I'm gunna be the greatest flier ever!"

"Sounds like a plan," said Mac, "what did ya think of Rainbow's show?"

"Oh man, it was awesome!" she grinned, puffing out her wings, "Rainbow even said that later tonight she'd show me how to do her Fantastic Filly Flash!"

"Maybe she'll show me too?" Cotton chimed, "I want to be a better flier too, but I'm too young to go to Summer Flight Camp..."

"Oh hey, that reminds me," Mac began, "Ah heard that Fluttershy is thinkin' o' startin' up a junior flight camp sorta thing, jes' ta help out young foals with trouble flyin'."

"Really?" Cotton said, surprised, "I wanna go!"

"Heh, flying with the Stare Master?" Scootaloo brought her hoof to her chin in thought, "I guess that would be pretty cool. Not that I need the help, or anything."

Macintosh smirked knowingly and shook his head. "Well, y'all should let her know ya'd be interested." Macintosh looked around suddenly. "Say, where's the rest o' the Cutie Mark Crusaders?"

"Oh, they went to get some snacks."

"Cutie Mark Crusaders?" Cotton asked, "what's that?"

"It's our totally awesome secret society!" Scootaloo boasted, "hey! You should totally join! I know you already have your cutie mark, but still! That would be awesome! I'll totally have to suggest it to Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle! This is so totally awesome!"

Macintosh chuckled. *She is totally saying awesome way too much.* "Well it sounds like y'all have a lot o' plannin' an' whatnot ta get back ta, so Ah'll be on mah way."

The two pegasi foals waved goodbye as the red stallion in the dark suit walked away, grinning to himself. *Looks like Scootaloo's found another kindred spirit. I bet those two go on to become one heck of a flying team.*

Macintosh finished his stroll around the park and decided to go back into town. Nearby he found Applejack, who was just closing up her stand.

"AJ?" he began, "what's goin' on?"

"Hey Big Brother!" she beamed, "I sold everythin'!"

"Wow, really?" Macintosh laughed.

"Sure did! Once all them guests got wind that mah apples were what they had fer dinner, why, they all clamored ta get some! I even got some large orders come fall! I practically had ta hold 'em back ta stop 'em from buyin' the apple pie I made fer Lily!"

"Well now, ain't that somethin'!"

"I tell ya, Macintosh, these past few days we've got more business at the farm than in the whole last year! I can't thank ya enough fer referrin' that Caesar fella ta us!"

"Well, yer welcome," chuckled Mac. Closing up her stand Applejack began pushing it away. "Where ya headed?" Macintosh called after her.

"Off ta Twilight's! She said I could tie up this here cart there fer the rest o' the night. Dun' worry, I'll be back in time fer the sunrise! See ya then, Big Macintosh!" She pushed her way through the crowds of ponies (who all seemed a little tired out too, judging from how they teetered as they walked) and disappeared from view. Macintosh continued his trek, heading towards town square from where he could hear loud dance music blasting.

"Macintosh!" Rose galloped up to him, "there you are! I've been looking all over for you!"

"Fer me?" he tilted his head.

"Yeah! It's almost time for the sunrise!"

"Wha-Already!?" Mac stuttered, "what time is it!? How long was Ah asleep?"

"Come on! We need to get our spots at our table!" Rose grabbed his hoof and pulled him along to the Plaza, past the growing numbers of ponies gathering for the spectacle. Together they rushed back to their table, where only Daisy, Lily, Fluttershy (who had Angel Bunny sitting on her head) and Pinkie Pie were already seated.

"Where are the others?" Rose asked as they sat down.

"Dunno," Pinkie shrugged, "but they'll be here!"

"Mac!" Lily waved dramatically from the other side of the table, "over here! Can you hear me!?"

"Hardly," Macintosh rubbed his ear against the loud music.

"Are you sure you don't find it too loud, Angel?" asked Fluttershy. The little white rabbit shook his head and continued to bob in rhythm with the beat.

"Now that's my kind of animal!" Pinkie laughed, "I would have brought Gummy, but he doesn't do so well in large crowds."

"Hey guys!" Rainbow Dash landed and took her seat, wearing her Gala gown again.

"Hi Ms. Dash!" Lily waved, "ooh, what's with the neat goggles?"

"Cirro gave them to me!" she gushed over the lenses, "they were his when he was a WonderBolt!"

"They served me well," Cool Star added as he and his family arrived, "I hope they do the same for you."

"Hi everyone!" chirped Ditzy as she and Rarity took their seats, "is everyone having paper bags?"

"Heh, 'peanut,'" giggled Sweetie Belle as she and the other Cutie Mark Crusaders sat.

"Get yer hooves off me, Applejack!" Granny Smith bellowed, "Ah'm still able-bodied!"

"All right, all right, Gramma!" Applejack resigned as they arrived, "oh hey, Lily, here's yer apple pie I promised ya!"

"Awesome sauce!" chirped Lily as she took the pie.

"Look what I found!" announced Spike as he carried a small bowl of gems over to the table, "anyone want one?"

"Lily, no," Daisy flatly said. Lily pulled her hoof away from the bowl and stuck her tongue out at Daisy.

"Hey guys!" Blues waved as he took his seat.

"Hi!" Rose smiled, "where's DJ PON-3?"

"She's just finishing up the last song, she'll be here any minute."

"...Well, maybe we should just change our name!" Scootaloo bantered with the other Cutie Mark Crusaders as they walked over.

"We'll think about it," Sweetie Belle answered.

"Oh good, I made it!" Cheerilee sighed as she sat down, "I kind of lost track of the time!"

"Is that everypony, then?" asked Rose.

"Hey! Where's Twilight?" Rainbow looked around.

"She's up at the front with the mayor," Spike replied, chewing on his treasure, "are you sure you don't want one, Rarity?"

"No thank you, Spike, I have plenty at home."

"Hey bronies!" Vinyl Scratch announced her arrival, "got the last record windin' down, freed me up to hang!"

"Ooh, this is so exciting!" Pinkie squealed, "are you excited because I'm excited I've never been so excited!!"

"Shh! It's starting!"

"Welcome everypony!" said the mayor as she took the podium, "welcome to the beginning of the 'Summer Sun Celebration!'" The massive audience of excited ponies exploded into applause. "In just a few moments, our town will witness the magic of the sunrise as we celebrate this: the longest day of the year!"

"Whooahoo! All right!" cheered Lily.

"It is my great pleasure to welcome Twilight Sparkle, student of Princess Celestia and caretaker of the Ponyville public library, to welcome the Princesses of our fair land of Equestria!"

"Yeah! Go Twilight!!" Spike bellowed.

"Hooray for the basket!" Ditzy shouted.

"Thank you," said Twilight as she stepped behind the podium, "and thank you all for coming to participate in this wonderful celebration! For the last one thousand years, our Princess Celestia rose and set the sun and the moon each and every day. But last year we held witness to the return of Princess Luna, who has since resumed her duties as caretaker of the moon and stars!" More applause and stomping of hooves from the audience. "And so, it is my great honor to welcome our Princess of the Night to lower the moon and make way for the dawn! Let us all bow before the wise and beautiful Princess Luna!"

The trumpeters played a royal fanfare as a small speck of light descended from the sky. It then hovered in front of town hall and, in a brilliant flash of white light, a majestic navy blue alicorn alighted upon the stage. The crowd all knelt low to the ground as Princess Luna regally

bowed her head to the audience. Macintosh looked up and felt his heart skip a beat as he saw that the beautiful princess, her starry blue hair glistening in the moonlight, was looking right at him.

His heart then stopped completely as the beautiful dark blue alicorn smiled...and winked.

Extending her elegant wings she took to the air, her horn glowing a radiant aqua blue. The audience stood straight to watch as an aura of light surrounded her, and she shone with the brilliance of the moon itself. Her power could be felt in Macintosh's chest as the giant orb of light in the sky majestically fell down to the horizon before disappearing completely, only the glow of the thousands of lanterns now lighting the town. The crowd exploded into cheers and stomps of hooves as Princess Luna landed on the left of Twilight, who bowed her head and resumed her speech.

"Thank you, Princess Luna, for giving us your beautiful moon and stars to watch over us every night." The moon princess bowed and took a step back. "And now," Twilight began, "It is my great pleasure to welcome our kind and loving ruler - and my personal mentor," she added with a giggle, "to rise the sun and usher in the longest day of the year! Let us all bow before our great and beloved Princess Celestia!"

Another fanfare came from the royal trumpeters as the Princess of the Day stepped out from behind a large curtain. The audience bowed to the ground as the princess, her regal form and long, multicolored and forever flowing mane flapped her long wings and flew above the stage. Her horn glowed and, in a tremendous flash of light, the great ball of fire rose above the horizon, warming the audience and casting its light upon the town. Macintosh winced at the bright light, and the crowd burst into cheers and applause as they all stood. The Princess Celestia landed to the right of Twilight, and the purple unicorn bowed and stepped aside to make room for the princess to take the podium.

"Thank you, my little ponies!" the royal alicorn said, her voice as warm and inviting as the sun that rose behind her, "and a special thank you to my dear sister. Let's everypony give her another round of applause!" The Moon Princess furiously shook her head as the audience stomped their hooves and cheered.

"YEAH! GO LUNA!" Pinkie bellowed. Princess Luna blushed and shot her elder sister a frustrated scowl. Celestia didn't seem to notice and continued her speech.

"Thank you all! We truly and honestly appreciate this wonderful show of gratitude. We are honored by your presence today." The two princesses bowed their heads to the ponies, and Macintosh found himself

instinctively bowing to the pair of wonderful alicorns. Glancing around he saw everypony else doing so as well.

"However..." the Sun Princess resumed, "I hear that there is somepony else to honor today. Somepony who, in the last few days, has become a wonderful friend to many, helped many ponies achieve their dreams, even saved the life of a filly and the town from potential destruction!"

"Wow, Ah'd sure like ta meet that pony," Macintosh mumbled under his breath. He looked around and found all his friends smiling at him.

"...What? Do Ah got somethin' in mah teeth?" He looked down to see that no, he was not still chewing his hay.

"And so," resumed the princess, a drumroll rising in intensity, "It is my great pleasure to present the Prized Pony of Ponyville award to the very stallion who brought this wonderful celebration to Ponyville: our guest of honor, Macintosh Apple!"

It shouldn't have been physically possible, but somehow, Macintosh's jaw hit the ground. The band played a loud tune as Big Macintosh looked around to all his friends and family, who smiled and urged him up to the stage. It took an actual push from Applejack to get his legs working again. The red stallion closed his mouth and watched as the other ponies all grinned, waved or stomped their hooves as he walked past. Over there were the foals from Cheerilee's class, who asked when he'd come back to teach them again. Even the two little fillies (Diamond something and Spoon something) waved and smiled as he passed. Over there was Caramel and Clover, who sheepishly waved, and even the WonderBolts who stood to the side saluted him as he made his way to the stage. He stepped up past Caesar (who congratulated him once again) and walked up to the princesses; he knelt to the ground in their presence. He felt Celestia's warm hoof touch and lift his chin, and he looked up into her radiant indigo eyes.

"Please, rise, my little pony," she smiled lovingly. Macintosh rose to his shaky hooves, and Twilight procured a golden, shining trophy from off to the side. It was similar to the one his sister got way back when, but this one was much larger and more ornate. Macintosh looked over to Luna, who grinned and nodded her head sagely.

"Uh," finally Mac's voice returned, "but, but, Ah don't...Ah don't deserve this! Ah didn't do nuthin'!"

Celestia laughed. It was an incredibly kind and warm laugh, like the sun she commanded. "Macintosh Apple, you most certainly do!"

"Macintosh, you've done so much for this town!" Twilight said, stepping forward.

"But, but, what have Ah done?"

Celestia looked to Twilight and smiled. She then stepped forward and laid a warm, ivory hoof on Mac's shoulder.

"Macintosh Apple, look around you. Look at all the friends you've made, the ponies you've helped, and the town you've saved!"

Big Macintosh looked.

He saw Rose, the first pony he met in town. He saw Daisy, a sunflower pinned on her chest, Lily, an apple pie in her hooves and Blues, who had Vinyl Scratch leaning upon his shoulder. Over there was Cotton Cloudy standing happily with her parents, Lightning Bolt and Cool Star. Rainbow Dash, wearing her precious new goggles and Fluttershy, a bunny who nodded approvingly resting on her golden wing. There was Scootaloo, wings extended and ready to fly. Pinkie Pie, balancing a cupcake on her nose, Cheerilee, running a hoof through her pink mane and Rarity, Sweetie Belle and Ditzy Doo, who shouted something about flying shoes. He looked up to Twilight, and Spike, who had run up to her side. He looked back down to Granny Smith, her wrinkly face filled with pride. He looked to Applejack, his father's trusty hat with the funny bite in it still perched above her green eyes. He saw Apple Bloom, his mother's faithful pink bow glowing in the morning, highlighting the filly's large orange eyes. He looked up to Ponyville, its buildings unscathed and its inhabitants unharmed by the landslide of logs he held back. He looked back down to the crowds of hundreds of ponies enjoying the wonderful party that he brought to town.

Everypony was smiling. Smiling wider than he'd ever seen them smile before.

Macintosh looked down to his father's harness that he wore around his neck.

Pa...I did what you asked. I kept my promise. I...I'm...I don't think...I don't think you hated me. I...You loved me, didn't you? You...You only wanted what was best for the family. For me.

I...I don't...I don't think that...I hate you anymore...

I'm...I'm sorry.

And suddenly, he understood.

How could I not see it before?

He remembered the moment he got his cutie mark. That fateful, painful moment when he ran into the house to find his family crying, and his father's harness, his father's hat and his mother's bow resting on the table. He remembered how he stepped up to his family. To his grandmother, to

his sisters, and how he held them close. He told them it would all be okay. He loved them.

It was at that moment that he had felt his flank tingle. His cutie mark, the green apple half that appeared, he knew now what it meant. He knew now what his special talent was. He knew now what was his passion.

He looked back to the family he loved. The Apple Family.

Macintosh looked up to the sky through watery eyes. He saw all the pegasi that flew up there, away from the ground.

He knew that he would never fly with them, never touch the sky and never taste the freedom that wings could give him.

But you know what?

He was okay with that.

After all, he thought, looking back to his friends and family, I've got everything I need right here.

Epilogue

"Macintosh? What did ya want ta talk ta me 'bout?"

"AJ, y'all have a good day?"

"Uh, yeah, I s'pose."

"What'd ya do t'day?"

"Well, I bucked half the west orchard!"

"All by yerself?"

"You bet! I got all them apples hauled away into the barn an' everythin'!"

"Did ya enjoy it?"

"Sure did! It does mah heart good ta see all them apples bucked!"

"Ah see."

"Uh, so Macintosh, what did ya want ta talk ta me 'bout?"

"Here, come with me, AJ."

"Why're we goin' inside?"

"AJ, Ah'm givin' ya the farm."

"Buh-wha? Macintosh, ya can't be serious!"

"Ah am. Y'all deserve it more'n me."

"But, but..."

"That's not all."

"...What?"

"Ah want ya ta have this, too."

"WHAT!? But, I couldn't! It's yers!"

"AJ, Ah want ya ta have it. B'sides, Ah already got his harness, an' Apple Bloom got Ma's bow. It's only fair that ya get somethin' too. B'sides, he'd want ya ta have it."

"But...Well, only if yer sure."

"Ah am. There. It looks good on ya!"

"Yeah, I guess it does. Thanks, Macintosh."

"No problem. Now c'mon, let's get back ta work. There's still a whole lotta apples ta buck."

"Macintosh...Are ya sure ya wanna give up the farm?"
I plucked a bit of hay to chew.

"Eeyup."

The story of 'Macintosh' has concluded; this 'Aftermath' is more like a side story.

Aftermath

Big Macintosh gave himself a 'once over' in his mirror. His mane was brushed, his harness was on straight, the bandages he still had to wear were fresh...Today was going to be a special day, he had a very specific destination in mind and he wanted to look his best. Nodding approvingly he turned to look at his desk. Only three items rested upon it. The last photo of him and his family, his trophy from the celebration, and a second framed photograph: the picture taken by Photo Finish of him and his friends. It was a wonderful picture. All his friends were dressed up and smiling happily, surrounding the grinning and blushing stallion who disliked being the center of attention. He smiled, thinking back to the incredible festival. He hadn't been to many parties in his life, but he had a good feeling he'd never go to one as sprawling and exciting as this year's 'Summer Sun Celebration.' The food, the lanterns, his friends and family, not to mention his newfound understanding...that night was spectacular. Unfortunately he had to go home shortly after he received his trophy, as he was just too exhausted from so much activity, and there was work to be done on the farm. From what he heard, the day after was a strange day: ponies tried their very hardest to keep partying, but most ponies just couldn't handle a full twenty-four hours of intense partying and made their way for home. Some fell asleep on the spot, however, and from how Applejack described it, it was like walking through a minefield of sleeping ponies. She was prone to exaggeration, though. The cleanup over the following days was exhausting, and Macintosh tried to help where he could, but his friends kept shooing him away, going on about 'guest of honor' this and 'done enough already' that. Afterwards, everypony fell somewhat back into their normal daily routine, although Big Mac made much more frequent trips out to town to visit his friends. One friend in particular became...Well, Mac felt that maybe, maybe she could become more than just a friend.

Now, today, around a week after the celebration had ended, Macintosh turned away from the trophy and the pair of photos beside it to look once again in his mirror.

“Welp,” he drawled, “Ah ain’t gettin’ any younger.” He sighed, opened his door and made his way downstairs. He’d already finished his work that morning, and it was around ten or eleven in the morning now. *Just about time for...*

BUMP

...The mail to arrive.

Macintosh chuckled to himself as he opened his front door to see a cross-eyed Ditzzy Doo rubbing her head.

“Mail call!” she smiled despite herself, passing him a couple letters, “here you go!”

“Thanks,” Mac replied, “y’know ya can jes’ use the mailbox out by the gate, Ditzzy.”

“But I never get to say ‘hi’ when I do!” she smiled, her eyes refocusing on the red stallion. Macintosh smirked and looked down to his mail.

Bill...Order...Junk...A letter from Braeburn? Huh, haven’t got one of those in a long time...I wonder what’s going on? The Apple Family had a ‘no news is good news’ sort of policy: you’d only write if there was something big going on.

“Tissue?” Ditzzy asked, “I mean, problem?” Mac snapped his head back up.

“Oh, uh, no,” he cleared his throat, leaning inside and placing the letters on a nearby table, “it’s nuthin’. Mah cousin wrote me, is all, an’ he don’t usually write us much.”

“Oh, well, maybe he wants to say ‘hi’ too!”

“Maybe...” Macintosh stepped outside and closed the door behind him, beginning his trot towards town.

“Aren’t you going to read it?” Ditzzy tilted her head.

“Nah, Granny Smith loves gettin’ an’ readin’ the mail, an’ there’s somethin’ Ah need ta do in town t’day b’sides. Want ta walk with me?”

“Beans!” she smiled, “you’re the last on my mail route anywho!”

The two walked in silence for a bit, Ditzzy humming quietly to herself and fluttering her grey wings absentmindedly in the breeze. “So how’re ya doin’?” Mac asked after a moment.

“Doing good!” she chirped, “Lightning Bolt was able to get me a spot on the weather team, and Rarity says she found a place for the package! Maybe I can afford it now that I have two jobs!”

“A place o’ yer own?”

"Yeah! I've stayed with the muffin lady longer than I wanted to, but now maybe I can finally get my own place! Although, I will miss Sweetie. I wish I had a little sister, or a d..." she trailed off, kicking at a loose stone.

Macintosh cleared his throat. "Well, a place fer yerself sounds nice." He didn't hear the whole story of how Ditzzy ended up staying with Rarity, but he had a feeling it was a touchy subject. "How 'bout the others? Anythin' new goin' on that Ah missed?"

"Uh, not much," she stood a little straighter, "Rarity's been working on some big orders, and Pinkie Pie's been getting a lot more customers lately, so she's been really busy, but she still gives me my muffin every morning!" she smiled happily, "how's your family doing?"

"Not bad, we've been busy too, though. AJ done got us a ton o' orders from some upper-class like ponies, so we've been plannin' all them things out, an' Apple Bloom's gettin' close ta finishin' school fer this year." The two made small talk for the rest of the trip, and before long they found themselves at the entrance to town.

"Thanks for the styrofoam!" said Ditzzy as she waved and flew off, "It's back to flapjacks for the package!" Macintosh smiled as he watched her go. *Nice filly, even if she's a little...unusual.* Breathing deeply, Big Mac trotted into town. The midmorning sun gracefully lit the streets and ponies therein, and the red stallion was cheerfully greeted by many ponies as he strolled around the roads. By now, almost everypony in town knew him; not a surprise really, considering what happened at the celebration, but it still slightly unnerved Macintosh. *Too much attention isn't good for a pony,* he thought as he smiled at a few passing ponies. He'd tried to lay low the last few days, as these friendly folk were constantly stopping him to say 'thanks' or invite him over for lunch or whatnot, and Macintosh felt bad about declining their generous offers, but he had work to do, and his family came first.

As Macintosh walked past a park, a small nearby bed of flowers set his heart aflutter as he remembered what he set out to do today. He knew where he had to go, but as he craned his neck to spy the clock tower he found that it insisted the current time was only about half past ten. *Too early,* he mumbled to himself as he glanced around town. In the distance he could hear the school bell ringing for recess, and on a whim Macintosh decided to head in that direction. Nearing the old building a few minutes later he saw all the students out in the playground enjoying the sunlight. He saw Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle run from the direction of the other school, and watched as they joined Apple Bloom and Cotton Cloudy, who in unison shouted "Cutie Mark Crusader Time Travelers!" and bolted off

down the field. Barely dodging out of their way was their maroon teacher, who shook her head and smirked at Macintosh as he drew near.

"Good morning, Macintosh!" she said, flicking her pink mane.

"Howdy, Cheerilee," nodded Mac, "recess time, eh?"

"Yeah, those foals seem to have unlimited energy; they must have taken whatever I had left."

"Probably sapped half the town, more like."

"Sugar cubes for breakfast, I would wager," she chuckled.

"Ah guess we spoil our young sometimes," Mac sighed, "after all, they're the future'n all, right?"

"Oh, you have no idea how many times I hear that sort of thing at my teacher's conventions!" she groaned, rolling her eyes, "but, you're right. Anyway, how's it going Macintosh? Anything new?"

"No, not much, jes' back ta work, as usual."

"Hi Mr. Mac!" lisped a frizzy red-maned filly with glasses who galloped over, "did you bring any more thweet appleth?"

"Hiya, Twist!" grinned Macintosh, "sorry, not t'day."

"Aw!" she sighed and took off, joining some other foals who were in the process of building an equine tower to reach a ball that got stuck in a tree.

"Thanks again for visiting the other day," Cheerilee chuckled, "the kids were so excited when I told them you were coming by, and then you brought candy apples! They were more strung up on sugar than I'd ever seen them. Thanks a *lot*," she punched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Heh, yeah, sorry," he sheepishly said.

"Don't worry about it. You should drop by again sometime!"

Cheerilee said, stepping onto the porch and opening the door. She turned to face Macintosh, her light green eyes glowing in the morning sun.

"Macintosh," she began, "I've been thinking about what you said; about all those questions you asked about cutie marks and everything, and I dug up some old books of mine on the subject. Would you like to take a look?"

Macintosh met her earnest and innocent gaze, before smiling and looking down to the green apple half on his flank. "No thanks, Cheerilee," he said resolutely, "Ah think Ah've got the answers Ah was lookin' fer."

"All right then," nodded the mare, "I've got them if you ever do want to take a look. Oh, and Macintosh?"

"Yes?" he replied, staring into the pink pony's eyes. Did they glimmer for a moment? He saw what looked like a series of emotions, hopes and wishes passing through them: what was, what is, what could be...what couldn't, and she opened her mouth to speak once or twice, before finally

her green eyes settled and became the eyes of a friend. A childhood friend, one Macintosh could talk to anytime, but only a friend.

"Don't worry about my valentine," she said softly, "you've already done a lot for the town and me."

Macintosh let out a long, slow breath. Finally, a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he sagely nodded his assent and understanding. Without a word, he turned and began his trek back to town. Behind him, he heard his friend call out for the children to line up and return to class as the school bell started ringing.

During the walk back towards town Mac took a slight deviation through a small park. The wind gently tugged at the wispy branches of the tall overhanging trees, and the grass below his hooves rustled in a gentle wave. A few birds sang in a nearby shrub sending an improvised melody throughout the park. Carried on the breeze between the bushes came an even sweeter sound: the softly singing voice of a mare Macintosh knew. Trotting around the bend she came into view, resting in a small clearing and sweetly serenading the birds and small critters who danced around her pink mane and golden hide. As if expecting him, she turned her azure eyes onto his, and for probably the first time since he'd met her, she didn't jump at his presence.

"Hello, Macintosh," she chimed, her mouth forming a loving smile as her wings fluttered a little.

"Howdy Fluttershy," he replied in a raspy voice. Clearing his throat he took a few tentative steps forward, taking care not to frighten the little animals nearby. "How's it goin'?"

"Oh, just wonderful," sighed the mare, "I was just spending some time with my little friends out here in the park."

"Did ya ever get ta talk ta the mayor 'bout yer ideas fer a flight camp?" asked Mac, who suddenly became very aware of his deep rumbling voice in sharp contrast to the filly's fair and gentle tone.

"I did, and she said she'd look into it. I think it may actually happen."

"Are ya excited?"

"Nervous," she chuckled, "but yes, I'd love to help any foals who have trouble flying. How about you, Macintosh? Anything special going on for you today?"

"Well, ah..." Macintosh felt his face become a little hotter. He looked deeply at the mare who was nestled into the grass before him.

Fluttershy...Probably one of my closest friends, now. "Ah came by ta meet with somepony."

"Oh, well then," she said, shifting a little, "I shouldn't keep you. Have a good day!" she smiled kindly. Macintosh smiled too and turned to leave the small clearing.

"Macintosh?"

He turned to look at her.

"Yes?"

Her eyes betrayed something, but just for a moment. A hint of sadness, but swiftly dampened out by joy and honest care.

"You're a very good friend."

Macintosh looked deeply into her eyes: the eyes of a dear, dear friend he knew he could confide completely in and feel totally safe around, but just a friend. He smiled, nodded and left, his heavy hooves flattening the wavy grass below.

By now, Macintosh had returned to town, and he held his head high, trotting in the direction of his original destination, only to catch sight of the clock tower and find that it was only a little before eleven now. *Still too early...* He pursed his lips in thought, aimlessly ambling around the road in no particular direction. A little ways off he saw a flash of dark pink and yellow disappear around a bend. *Lily?* he wondered as he followed after. As he turned the corner he saw a fruit stand tucked away in an alley being roughly tended to by a filly he hadn't seen for days. Cherry poked around her cart, rustling about between the nearly empty baskets of fruit and mumbling to herself. Big Mac resisted the urge to turn and leave, instead taking a few cautious steps forward.

"Cherry?" said the stallion. She spun to face him, a stunned look on her face.

"Oh, it's you," she answered, her expression growing darker, "what do you want?"

"Well," he cleared his dry throat, "Ah think we sorta got off on the wrong hoof. Ah didn't...uh, Ah mean..."

"Yes?" she said impatiently.

"Uh," he rubbed his neck, which was still sore from the log incident, "what Ah mean ta say is...um, Ah didn't mean ta, y'know, come between you an' Blues."

"Oh, is that all?" she said flatly, breaking her scornful gaze and resuming her work on her stand, "that colt wouldn't know a good thing if it blew up right in front of him."

"So...Are y'all all right?"

"Of course I am." She forcefully closed the shutters on the stand and picked up a small bag.

"Uh, what're ya doin'?" asked Mac.

"What's it to ya?" she glowered, but upon seeing the honest concern on Mac's face her expression lightened.

She sighed. "I'm leaving town. This backwater little village isn't good enough for me."

"Cherry..."

"Besides, it's not like anyone will miss me," she hid her face in the shadow of the alley.

"Cherry, Ah'm sure ya've got lot's o' friends here in town."

She snorted in response.

"Like," Macintosh continued, "what about Cheerilee? Ain't you an' her friends?"

"...I guess..."

"An' Ah heard ya've got a brother here in town too, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Ain't there anypony else ya spend time with?"

She stared at the road. "Well, I guess Pinkie Pie is always nice to me..." She started laughing. "And one time, Rarity-" Mac saw her eyes wide with mirth for probably the first time since he'd met her, but once she met his gaze her expression fell again.

"There ya go!" Mac grinned, "see? Ya've got friends here in town. Are ya sure ya jes' want ta up an' leave 'em all?"

She found the cobblestone road to be intensely interesting as she attempted to avoid his gaze. Finally, she scrunched her face up and looked him dead in the eye.

"I don't like you very much," she spoke quietly, her purple eyes tinted with a series of unreadable expressions. Finally, she looked away and cantered off down the alley towards the other side of town. Macintosh looked back to the sad and lonely cherry stand in the dark shadows. With a long, drawn out sigh, Macintosh finally pulled himself away and turned to leave, the conflicted eyes of Cherry still lingering on his mind.

Relationships sure are confusing, Mac muttered to himself as he stepped back into the sunlight. He had never really thought about getting into a relationship before. Of course, he had foalhood crushes and all that, but they never amounted to anything and he never had a fillyfriend before. Being pulled out of school and spending most of his life on a farm made sure of that, but it could all change today. At the thought of the mare he

was meeting today his heart skipped a beat again; it was a very strange feeling for the stallion. Even stranger was how his feelings for her seemed to come out of nowhere. At first, the two were just good friends, but as they spent more and more time together every day, something sort of sparked between them. These were new waters for him to tread, and he hoped he knew what he was doing.

Eleven loud tolls from the clock tower broke Macintosh out of his daydreaming, and he glanced around the road to regain his bearings. The town was busy with an average day of work, merchant stands and small shops open and inviting to passersby. Ponies wandered to and fro, enjoying the company of their friends and going about their daily business. They smiled and greeted the red stallion, and he curtly responded, but he couldn't help but wonder how many of these ponies were hiding pain and hardships of their own. *People are rarely what they seem on the surface*, he thought to himself as he trotted down the road. Life was a complex thing; he always knew this to be true, but it sort of shook him when he finally realized through meeting his new friends that his weren't the only problems in existence. *I suppose a lot has changed over these last couple weeks. I've sure changed.*

"Macintosh!"

Mac turned to see Rose cantering towards him from the library, her satchels filled with books and a smile on her face.

"Howdy Rose," he grinned, eyeing her heavy bags, "whatchya got there?"

"Oh, Twilight got me some great books on shopkeeping!" the crimson-maned filly replied, "how about you? How's it going?"

"Not bad, back ta work, an' all. Enjoyin' yer new shop?"

"Yes, thank you," she tilted her head happily, "and thank you for helping set it up. Everything's going so well!"

"Glad ta hear it," Mac widely smiled. Rose chuckled lightly to herself and glanced at the clock tower.

"I should get going, but please drop by the store sometime today!" Rose said as she cantered away, "I could actually use your help with managing this big order I just got!"

"Sure thing," Mac answered. "Rose," he called out suddenly. The cream-coated mare stopped and turned her forest green eyes upon him.

"Yes?" she replied in her tuneful voice. Mac looked deeply at her, her pink streaked bangs falling in front of her lively green eyes, filled with interest and curiosity. *The first friend I met in town.*

“...Nothing,” he said after a moment, “Ah’ll come by later an’ give ya a hoof.” She kept her gaze locked upon him for a moment longer, something flashing through her eyes before she smiled and nodded, turned and cantered off in the direction of her shop. Macintosh sighed, and spun to face the library, a literal tree of knowledge. He laughed lightly at his pun and knocked on the door.

“Hello?” said a small dragon who opened the door, “oh, hey Big Macintosh, you know you don’t have to knock anymore; you can just come on in.”

“Howdy Spike,” Mac smiled as he stepped in, “you an’ Twilight still live here. Ah should give y’all the curtesy of knockin’.” Spike shrugged and hopped over to a small stack of books he was organizing. There was another pony in the room perusing a book of his own, a brown stallion with an hour glass cutie mark. Twilight was nowhere to be seen. “So y’all have got the library up an’ runnin’ again, eh Spike?”

“Yup, gives me something to do other than always clean up after Twi,” the dragon chuckled.

“Is she out at the moment?” asked Mac.

“Nah, she’s downstairs working on a new spell. I’ll go get her,” Spike said as he bounded away. Macintosh casually examined the library: the shelves were missing a few books, no doubt taken out by ponies in town. The colt at the table had a small collection of books of his own spread out, and he read with furious intent. Suddenly he shot his gaze up at Macintosh.

“What time is it!?” he asked, his eyes blazing.

“Uh,” Mac stuttered, “jes’ past eleven.”

“Really? Fancy that,” he said, looking down his snout at Macintosh, “I’d love to stay and chat but I must be off!” He burst past the red stallion knocking a book or two off the table. Just as he cleared the door he spun around and faced Big Mac. “Oh, and if anyone asks about a spoon, tell them ‘not for ten years.’” With that, the odd stallion ran off and disappeared from sight. Macintosh, scratching his head, leaned over to pick up the fallen books. As he was about to pick one up his eye caught sight of the title on the page: ‘Page 27: Flight Spells.’ Big Macintosh felt his breath catch in his throat as he looked over the writing. ‘Walk on clouds,’ ‘weightlessness,’ ‘bird’s eye view’ and...‘temporary wings.’

“Hello? Macintosh?”

Big Mac looked up to see Twilight Sparkle entering the room. When she saw him, she smiled and cantered over.

“Uh, hey, Twilight,” he said, eyes unfocused.

"What have you got there?" she asked, peering down at the book, "oh, flight spells. Those are hard."

"You..." Mac stammered, "you can do these?"

"Yes, I can, but like I said, they're not easy. I gave Rarity a pair of wings once."

Mac stared down at the book again, his mind racing.

"Um, Macintosh?" Twilight asked, "is something wrong?"

Macintosh didn't answer. His eyes were locked on the page. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the red stallion looked back up to Twilight, and smiled.

"No. Nuthin's wrong." He bent over and closed the book. 'The Physics of Flying,' said the cover. Macintosh chuckled. He picked it up, and with a slow and deliberate motion, slid it back into its home on the shelf. "Nuthin's wrong."

Macintosh and Twilight spent the next hour researching and discussing ancient history and prophecy, and although they were interrupted every now and again by a visiting pony dropping off or picking up some books, they both enjoyed their time together, discussing topics they were interested in and sometimes just talking casually about what was new in their lives. Macintosh's mind lingered for a while on the contents of that book, and how close he was to finding those flight spells before. Had he just flipped a few more pages that day, things may have turned out very different, but now... *Well, like I said, I've changed over the last couple weeks.* Eventually the clock tower chimed and broke the two out of their studying.

"Twelve o' clock," Macintosh muttered to himself, his heart skipping a beat or two. *It's time.*

"Wow time flies," Twilight marveled, stretching a little, "that was fun!"

"Eeyup," Mac said a little shakily as he stood up, "Twilight?"

"Yes?" she asked. Macintosh looked down to the purple unicorn. Her dark indigo mane hid the base of her magical horn, and her eyes below were large and intelligent. Those eyes had seen magic beyond anything most ponies could ever imagine, and beneath her introverted behavior lay an earnest and kind pony. She was a very good friend of Macintosh's.

But only a friend.

"Ah'd best get goin'."

"Oh, really?" said the mare, "I was hoping we'd get to look at the legends around the constellations. Are you sure you can't stay?"

"Ah'm afraid not," he said, "Ah've got somepony to meet t'day."

The unicorn mare looked at him with eyes that shone for a moment before wrinkling with an honest smile. "All right. I'll see you later, then!"

Macintosh smiled in return, nodded and turned to leave the library. He closed the door behind him with a soft click, and took a deep breath as he finally set out to do what he had been thinking about all day.

A bell chimed as Macintosh opened the door to the flower shop.

"Hi, Macintosh!" Lily shouted from behind the counter, "welcome to 'The Oasis!'"

"Y'all finally got a name fer this place, huh?" chuckled Mac as he ambled through the shop. Large skylights had been installed in the roof, turning the shop into a large and humid greenhouse with rows upon rows of flowers stretching down the length of the store.

"Yep!" Lily said proudly, "although I still wanted to call it 'Super Mega Flower Power World 5000!' Oh well. What's up, Mac? I'm the only one here right now, was there anything you needed?"

"Eeyup. Ah need a real nice bouquet o' flowers. It's fer somepony special."

"OooooOOOOOooooh!" the pink filly gave him a hugely exaggerated wink, "I gotchya! Don't worry! I'll get you the biggest most flowery bouquet *ever!*" Lily set about her work, and Macintosh milled around the shop for a bit. A few other ponies were doing some shopping, and overall the store seemed to be doing very well for itself. He had helped a lot getting it all set up, giving them more advice on the finer details of running a business, not to mention helping install the skylights. Now that the store was up and running, they sold more than just flowers, as the apple tree saplings - while not their best sellers - made them enough money for them to invest in offering a wider selection of garden supplies, including vegetable and vine planters. The store was well on its way to becoming a full-on garden center.

"Here you go!" Lily beamed, setting a massive and colorful bouquet down on the counter, "the bestest bouquet ever! I think its my best work, actually. Look at all those little flowers... *They grow up so fast!*" she sniveled dramatically and wiped her eyes with a hankie. "Don't worry...Mommy loves you all!"

"Thanks Lily," Mac said, completely unfazed by her theatrics. He hoofed her the bits and slid the bouquet into his harness, taking care not to crush any of the blossoms. "When ya see Blues, tell him Ah said 'howdy,' all right?"

“Sure thing Mac!” Lily chirped, her cheerful demeanor restored without missing a beat, “and good luck!” she added with another hugely obvious wink.

Mac blushed and waved goodbye as he closed the door behind him, the bell chiming happily.

Walking slowly, he made his way down the road. Doing his best to keep his breathing steady, he kept his head clear. The town streets were busy with ponies out on their lunches, having picnics in the parks or visiting diners with their friends. Foals were out on lunch break as well, and they ran underhoof, playing games and trying their best to make good use of this free time and not waste it by doing something silly like eating the lunches their mothers prepared. Pegasi flew overhead, moving the clouds and keeping the sky clear and sunny, basking Ponyville in the warmth and light of their beloved princess’ sun. Macintosh moved with a direct focus in mind, trying his best to ignore his heart pounding in his throat. Finally, as he cleared the last corner, his destination came into view, the pounding got even worse and a few butterflies decided to call his stomach home for good measure. Macintosh swallowed them down and stepped over to the café, and the mare who sat alone out front.

He set the flowers out on the table before her. She looked between the bouquet and the stallion above them. Her eyes, deep emerald green, glistened with sudden realization. She gazed deeply at him, and a moment later her eyes lit up as a wide smile spread across her face.

"Hi, Macintosh," Daisy said.

~~The End~~

Author's Notes

Phew! That was a long one to write! Thank you all for taking the time to read, rate and comment! I'm really happy with how it turned out. I put a lot of thought, time and effort into this. I really wanted to delve into who Big Macintosh was, and provide some backstory for him and his family. Actually, after writing this, I can't watch Episode 23: The Cutie Mark Chronicles the same way anymore, heh heh.

In fact (and yes, I know how this sounds), reading through the story a second time you see a lot of things you may not have noticed before. When you know the whole story and what happened in Macintosh's past, there really are a lot of moments that stand out like they wouldn't your first time through. I think you'll find even the prologue has a bittersweet tinge to it now.

As my second fanfic, I really wanted to try something different, and I've wanted to do a character study for a while anyways. I hope you all enjoyed it! If any of you should want it, here's a high res version of the cover art:

<http://img580.imageshack.us/img580/5750/macintosh.png>

Special thanks to Sethisto, who got this story through the pre-screening.

While this is not a sequel or continuation of my first story 'Opposites' and it's not necessary to read that one first, there are elements carried over and some jokes that won't make sense if you hadn't read it, just so you know.

As a disclaimer, I should say that I had already started writing this story before 'Progress 5: Luna VS Lodging Part 3' by Andrew Joshua Talon came out. I was excited to see that both he and I had the same idea for Macintosh, in that he had dreams of flight, and I contacted him and asked if I could incorporate his cape idea into my story, which he was okay with. I also finished this story before I chose to read 'Tangled up in Blues' by The Descendant, as I didn't want two versions of Blues to be in my head at the same time :P

Of course, My Little Pony is owned by Hasbro and Lauren Faust.

P.S. I don't have father issues.