

Pony Psychology

By Saddlesoap Opera

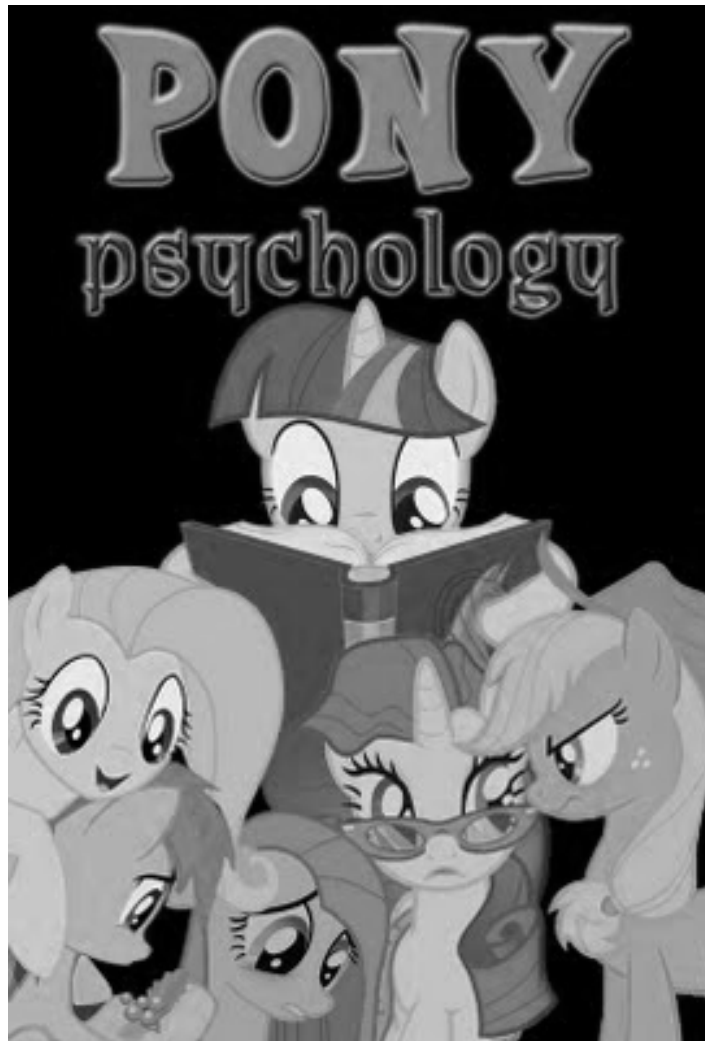


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FLUTTERSHY ORIGINS

"...THE BEST NIGHT EVER!"

The disheveled Ponyville Ponies, Princess Celestia and Spike burst into laughter. The Grand Galloping Gala hadn't turned out the way they'd hoped, but they'd managed to salvage the night anyway. All was well.

Princess Celestia excused herself to go and manage the dozens of shocked and outraged guests still lurking in the grand ballroom a few stories above, leaving the six Ponies and their Dragon companion to enjoy each other's company – and some more doughnuts – before returning to their enchanted apple coach and making the trip back to Ponyville.

Rarity's would-be paramours had seen the fiasco in the ballroom, but a few more dainty bats of her long eyelashes and a tiny peck on the more reluctant stallion's nose convinced them to pull the coach once again. Soon enough, the group was back at the Carousel Boutique, carefully removing the damaged remains of their Gala dresses while Spike snoozed in a basket of yarn. The mayhem at the Gala was still the hot topic of conversation.

"When the Princess and I walked into the ballroom, I thought I was going to have a heart attack!" laughed Twilight Sparkle, her horn glowing as she magicked the starry cloak off her shoulders and into a neatly folded square.

"Aww, cut us some slack, Twilight," said Rainbow Dash, unceremoniously shaking a golden laurel wreath from her multi-coloured mane. "You can't even turn around without somethin' gettin' in your way in that palace! Cloudsdale's buildings are made with tons of open spaces – how's a filly supposed to *manoeuvre* in Canterlot with all those statues and columns and crowds and stuff everywhere?" She flapped her wings, hovering in midair for emphasis. "No wonder we made such a mess!"

"Fluttershy's lil' *stampede* mighta had somethin' to do with it, too," added Applejack as she switched her Gala hat for her standard headwear. "Shucks, fer a second there, I thought everypony was gonna chalk what happened up to plain ol' bad luck. But then – yeehaw! Bird n' bunny rodeo!"

In the corner of the room Fluttershy blushed, her rosy cheeks matching the colour of her mane.

"O-oh my...was it really that bad...?" Fluttershy's voice seemed even meeker than usual. Her wings twitched nervously.

"It was quite the scene, dah-ling," said Rarity from behind a changing screen. The glow of the Unicorn's horn was faintly visible through the screen's golden silk, as was the magicked brush taming the tangles in her coiling purple mane. "But I can hardly fault you, now can I? After all, a moment earlier I was shaking apple-flavoured frosting all over the place like some hyperactive foal!"

"Yay, frosting!" added Pinkie Pie, springing out of her piled Gala clothes like a Colt-in-the-Box. "It's okay, Fluttershy – I'll bet those animals were all stuffy-wuffy boring types, just like all those Ponies in the ballroom. I mean, seriously, who can resist the Pony-Pokey? It's just not natural! It's like totally the funnest song EVER! Yooouuuuu reach your right hoof in..."

"STOP!" said Twilight, cutting off Pinkie before her song and dance could fully begin. "Um, I mean... we're all pretty tired from the Gala, and we wouldn't want to...to...*cheapen!*...Cheapen the Pony-Pokey with low-effort dance moves." Twilight smiled nervously, her eyes silently begging Pinkie to swallow her excuse.

Pinkie pondered for a moment, still teetering on one hoof in mid-dance-step. "You're right, Twilight!" she said at last. "A great song like that calls for maximum energy!" Twilight sighed in relief, and the other Ponies did likewise.

"Well, I thought that entrance was *awesome*, Fluttershy," said Dash after a moment. "You were pretty tough facing down that Dragon up on the mountain, but I'd *never* seen anything like that from you before. Or *heard!* I didn't know you had it in you!" Dash nudged Fluttershy with an elbow, but the yellow Pegasus didn't react in the slightest. "Say...are you okay?"

Fluttershy was standing stock-still, her eyes staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. Dash's words...*I didn't know you had it in you*...still echoed in her ears, pulling her down a long and winding path of memories.

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She was a foal again, and her earliest memory was of staring up at her mother's vivid yellow flank. The mare's Cutie Mark was a snarled jumble of multi-coloured speckles, like a childish scribble. Slowly, like clouds moving, the patterns would twist, coil and knot, sometimes even changing colours.

As a foal, she'd thought it was pretty. It wasn't until much later that she learned what it meant...and why it was the reason that her father had left them.

It was maybe a year later, and her mother was scaring her. She had woken Fluttershy up in the middle of the night, all hissing whispers and fear-widened eyes. That stare – that wild-eyed stare of a mother fearing for her offspring – pierced Fluttershy to her core, planting seeds of fear and doubt that would haunt her the rest of her days. The mare hustled her foal down the spiral ramp in the middle of their home, all the way to the basement, where the clouds were so thin they almost sagged under the tiny Pony's hooves. Dragons, her mother had insisted. There were Dragons on the hunt, and they needed to be very still and very quiet until they went away. Fluttershy fell asleep listening to her mother softly crooning a lullaby, panic edging her every word.

She was still a foal but older still, and she was reading about sewing. The winter was coming, and without the bits to buy warm clothes, Fluttershy had no choice but to make scarves, boots and padded saddles for her and her mother. A shaft of light from the setting sun reminded her that it was time for her mother to take her medicine. The older mare's Cutie Mark was now a featureless slate-grey circle, but the scribbled patterns were faintly visible around its edges. She didn't want to take the pills. They made everything grey, she said. They made her dull. She needed her wits, she said, in case the Dragons come. Gently, kindly, and for the thousandth time, Fluttershy reminded her mother that there are no Dragons in Cloudsdale.

She was home from the last day of school before Summer vacation, but she wasn't happy. Spending so much time caring for her mother had chipped away at her study time, and her grades had slipped badly. Her flight skills were even worse. Her teacher had told her she would have to repeat the grade next year – and that meant no Summer Flight Camp until the year after. As Fluttershy walked into her home, she instantly knew that her mother was off her meds again. The place was in disarray, and she could hear her mother's paranoid muttering coming from the upper story. As she trotted up the ramp, she stepped on the torn remains of her favourite stuffed toy – Angel the Rabbit. Her mother would later tell her that she'd had no choice; Angel had been spying on them for the Dragons.

It was almost exactly one year later, and two Pegasus stallions in heavy white smocks marked with red crosses were pushing her mother out of the house. You can't take me away, she screamed. I'm all she's got. I have to keep her safe, she said. She accused them of working for the Dragons. Divide and conquer, she said. Split us up so you can eat us one by one.

Softly, firmly, and for the very last time, Fluttershy spoke to her mother. She told her that the Dragons didn't bring the doctors; Fluttershy had asked them to come. She was sick, and these Ponies were here to help her. In an instant, the fear in her mother's gaze was replaced by burning rage.

"You ungrateful, blank-flanked little BUZZARD!" her mother howled as the stallions dragged her away by her back legs. Her front hooves dug furrows into the clouds, releasing rumbles of thunder. "You NEED me! You'll see! You don't know anything about ANYTHING! You've never even seen the GROUND! When I get out, you'll still be right here! You're gonna wait for me, and-"

"You're...going to...LOVE ME!" Fluttershy's demure green Gala dress was in tatters, her heart was pounding in her chest, and her lungs were burning from the exertion of hours spent chasing the palace's menagerie. Her Cutie Marks tingled and itched. As her quarry ran to and fro through the ruins of the grand ballroom, she closed her jaws on a passing squirrel, and wrenched it off its feet. A sick, dark impulse urged her to bite down until she heard a snap, but it was cut short by a shrill whistle from Twilight Sparkle. Realization spread through Fluttershy like a splash of cold water; the tingling in her Cutie Marks vanished. She dropped the squirrel. As the Ponies galloped down the stairs

together, she thought to herself: "I have something you didn't, Mother. Something rare and special. Something that will keep my hooves on solid ground, even when I'm flying. I'll never end up like you did, Mother..."

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"...Never."

"What?" Rainbow Dash tilted her head in confusion at Fluttershy's sudden statement.

"N-never...never better, Rainbow Dash. Thank you."

"...Oh. Okay then!"

Slowly, warmly, and for the thousandth time, Fluttershy smiled at her fellow Pegasus.

PINKIE PIE SCHISM

Pinkie Pie was so very, very tired.

She had woken up tired yesterday, too. She had yawned into her punch glass during yesterday's party. She had dragged herself into bed with barely a shred of energy left after the last guest had left. And with the dawning of a new day, she felt as if the sun had risen the instant she'd shut her eyes.

Thoughts of her old home floated through her mind as she fought not to fully wake up. The gloomy routines of rock farming had been her entire world for the better part of her childhood, and it had taken a multi-coloured atmospheric extravaganza to make her realize that there could be more to life than a weathered face prematurely aged from pushing rocks and meal after meal of stone soup.

At times like this, when sleep did little to purge her weariness, she couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if she'd missed seeing the Sonic Rainboom. Would she still be there, on the farm? Would her sister still have left home when she did? Without opening her eyes, she rubbed a front hoof across the faint rock-pushing callus still present on the end of her nose.

Eventually the insistent glow of sunshine became too bright to ignore, and she crawled out of the quicksand-like embrace of her plush bed and plodded over to the mirror standing against the wall opposite her bedroom door. Pinkie looked at herself in the mirror, and instantly regretted it.

Yesterday had been just the tip of the iceberg; the past few days had been particularly party-intensive, with a seemingly-endless array of reasons for her and her friends to let their hair down. The toll all that partying had taken was undeniable.

She looked terrible. Her unruly magenta mane hung limply around her face, and her wide blue eyes were ringed with rose-coloured circles much darker than her carnation-pink hide. Fatigue seemed to radiate off of her like steam off of freshly-baked cupcakes. She could count on her hooves the hours of sleep she'd gotten this week.

Pinkie violently shook her head while blowing a raspberry, briefly turning her head into a noisy pink tornado. When she stopped and faced the mirror again, her eyes were a touch brighter.

"Awww...who's being a little-miss-gloomy-hooves?" she said to her reflection. "C'mon – let's see that *smile!*" She willed the corners of her mouth to rise, but the results were scarcely satisfactory. It was not her usual winning smile. It wasn't even a grin. It was closer to a grimace – maybe even a *rictus*.

She let her mouth flop down into an exhausted frown. Her eyebrows dropped as well, and her mane and tail drooped slightly. She trotted closer to the mirror, and put one front hoof on either side of the washbasin resting in front of it. She unceremoniously

dunked her face into the cold water; the shock made her heart race. With a supreme effort, she arranged her dripping face back into something resembling friendliness.

"Ooohh...you're a *toughie*!" she said to the mirror, droplets scattering off her face as she spoke. "When I feel down, there's one thing that *always* cheers me up – A PARTY!" She spread her front hooves wide, releasing a burst of confetti from nowhere in particular.

As the colourful paper scraps settled onto the wooden floor, Pinkie stayed on her hind legs, front hooves still raised, waiting for the laughter to come. The fun, joyous, silly-filly surge of energy that helped her leave every other reveler in Ponyville in the dust.

Nothing happened. She let her hooves drop.

She took a deep breath. "I said..." She darted under her bed, pulled out a party horn, and blew a deafening honk at the mirror. "A PARTY!" Again, she felt nothing.

The horn fell out of her mouth. She sat down heavily.

Why are you even still doing this, Pinkamena? she silently asked her reflection. *What's the point?* She scowled at the mirror.

Why don't you stop lying to yourself? You know what's wrong: you're all partied out. You can jump and shout and dance and prank until pigs fly, but deep down you're all partied out.

Tears streaked down her cheeks. *You shoulda paced yourself. Maybe one a week – two if there's a holiday. But no – you partied and partied like there was no tomorrow. And now there isn't. You're worn out. Whatever that Sonic Rainboom put in you is used up. And what's left behind? What will they all say when they see you like this?* She gritted her teeth as a bitter surge of loathing rose up from the empty feeling inside of her like a snake slithering out of its den.

"Gloomy-hooves..." she muttered at the mirror. "Wallflower...stick-in-the-mud..." She started to shake as her voice rose in volume. "Tired old mare...! Dull-as-dishwater party-pooper! **STUPID! BORING! ROCK-FARMER!**"

Outside, the sky above Sugarcube Corner filled with a shock of colour as Rainbow Dash surged into view from above. The speedy Pegasus neatly perched on the second-story windowsill of Sugarcube Corner, and pulled open the window with her mouth. She stuck her head inside, and called out:

"Hey, Pinkie...! You wanna go-*ohmygosh!*"

"**YOU'RE WORTHLESS!**" Pinkie screamed, and smashed her forehead into the mirror with punishing force; a spiderweb crack spread across the glass. "**YOU'RE NOTHING!**" Her face struck the glass again. Shards fell into the wash basin, revealing

the mirror's wooden backing. A thread of blood spilled down Pinkie's face from a cut on her forehead. As she drew back for another strike, she finally noticed the sky-blue Pegasus staring at her in horror from the open window.

"R-Rainbow Dash! Good morning!" Pinkie resumed her typical jolly manner in the blink of an eye. This time her forced smile was so wide it made her jaw hurt worse than her forehead. Her mane had perked into its usual frizz...except for a strand of forelock pasted to her face by the blood still oozing from her cut.

"P...Pp..." Rainbow Dash tried to speak, but her mouth felt numb; this was so much worse than walking in on Pinkie's little "party" a few weeks ago. *Why me?* she wondered.

"Ooooh! Are we playing a guessing game?" Pinkie's voice was almost sickeningly shrill and perky. "Let's see...starts with P...OOH! Is it PARTY?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head, and hopped into the room. Averting her eyes from Pinkie's wide, gleaming gaze, she took a deep breath and forced the words to come out.

"P-Pinkie...I saw what you did. I...I heard what you *said*. Did something happen? Are you okay...?" Rainbow Dash waited for an answer, but she heard nothing. She looked over at Pinkie Pie, but the pink mare had vanished...because she was suddenly right next to her. Dash yelped in shock.

"Don't tell anypony about this, Dashie! *Please!*" Fresh tears welled up in the Earth Pony's eyes. "I was just a little sad, is all! It doesn't mean anything! Everypony gets sad, right? *EVERYPONY!* I mean, if you didn't get sad, how would you know when you got happy – right? *RIGHT?*" Pinkie had her front hooves wrapped around Dash's shoulders; her forehead was pressed against the Pegasus'. Dash could feel her friend's blood moistening the orange streak of her forelock, and smell her hot, perpetually-sugary breath.

"D-Don't worry, Pinkie...I won't tell!" Dash was struggling to get free now, flapping her wings and skating her hooves on the smooth wooden floor. "I promise!"

Pinkie let go, and Rainbow Dash surged backward. She crashed into Pinkie's bed, and fell in a heap next to it.

"Oh, thankyouthankyouthankyou! I *knew* I could count on you! You'd never break your promise, would you, Dashie? After all, losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend..." In a split second, Pinkie had scooped up Rainbow Dash, and cupped the Pegasus' face in her hooves. "...*FOREVER.*"

"You can c-count on me, Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash forced a smile, and nodded as much as Pinkie's grip would allow. Pinkie Pie released her, and waved her hooves for joy.

"YAAAYY! You're the best, Dashie!" Pinkie gasped in realization. "We should throw a PARTY to remind everyone how awesome you are! I'll go start getting ready!" With that, Pinkie took off down the stairs like a fizzy pink cannonball.

Rainbow Dash sat on the bedroom floor curled up in a ball. She wanted to fly away, but she was shaking so badly she was worried she'd crash. Not since Rarity's confidence-crushing display of her magicked gossamer wings before the Best Young Flyer Competition had one of her friends upset her so profoundly. The burden of her new secret felt like a pair of cement saddlebags on her back.

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As the party in her honour rolled on, the weight moved from Rainbow Dash's back to the pit of her stomach. Pinkie Pie was totally normal again – for Pinkie Pie, anyway. Laughing and giggling, hopping about, singing and dancing, gobbling up pastries; even the cut on her forehead was invisible beneath her dark pink mane. There wasn't even the faintest hint of the wailing, despairing, self-destructive Pinkie she'd seen before. Whatever had upset her was – apparently – gone.

But what Rainbow Dash had seen still haunted her, and she couldn't let any sign of her worries show or she'd risk breaking her promise. So she had to smile and laugh and celebrate right along with her Earth Pony friend, even though she felt like a ball of stress covered with a light dusting of hide and feathers.

As Pinkie Pie juggled a quartet of frosted petit-fours, she glanced across the room at her Pegasus friend. During the whole Photo Finish fiasco, Twilight Sparkle had proven she couldn't keep a secret when it counted, but Pinkie felt she could trust Rainbow Dash. She had barely said a thing about what she'd seen on Pinkie's last birthday, and she'd shown no sign of blurting out what she'd seen today to any of the party felt relieved that it had been Dash who had seen her outburst.

You're the one, Rainbow Dash, she thought to herself. *You'll understand. You've got to.* With a dramatic flourish, Pinkie dropped the miniature cakes into her gaping mouth, and gulped them down.

"Ta-DAAHHH!" The party guests stomped applause and cheered; Pinkie felt nothing.

It was after the party and after hours, and Sugarcube Corner's main floor was empty of Ponies save for Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash. Dash had insisted that as the guest of honour and the party organizer, the two of them would handle the cleanup on their own.

The pair tidied up the balloons, streamers and other party paraphernalia in silence for a time, but soon Rainbow Dash couldn't hold her tongue any longer. She trotted over to the archway leading into the kitchen, where Pinkie was busying herself pouring the dregs of the punch down the drain.

"Pinkie..." The word seemed to echo. Now that the silence was finally broken, Dash wasn't sure how to continue. "Are...are you sure you're okay?"

Pinkie answered without turning around. "Of course, silly! Why wouldn't I be okay?" Her tone was slightly – just *slightly* – lower and slower than usual.

"You *know* why, Pinkie." Dash rubbed the back of her rainbow-maned neck with a hoof. "Look, I'm not all that good at all this kinda thing, but I wouldn't be a very good Element of Loyalty if I didn't watch out for my friends. And I *hate* losing. So if something's wrong, I want you to tell me, okay?"

Pinkie Pie's shoulders heaved for a second, and she let out a tiny whimper. "I'm not happy, Dash."

"What...?" Rainbow Dash trotted closer.

Pinkie turned, suddenly almost nose to nose with Rainbow Dash. Her eyes were shining with tears. "*I'M NOT HAPPY!*" she wailed, and threw her hooves around the Pegasus' shoulders. She buried her face in Dash's multi-coloured mane, and sobbed. Blindsided by the outburst, Dash could only hug the Earth Pony back.

"I *TRY* to be happy, Dash! I try SO hard! And I try even harder to make everypony around me happy, too. But lately I just feel so *EMPTY* inside! And it makes me wanna cry, but if I do then everypony will know there's something *WRONG* with me! And they'll just try to get the happy, silly-filly, fun Pinkie back! But I don't *WANT* to party, Dash! Sometimes I...I want...I just..." Pinkie collapsed against her friend, coughing out wracking sobs between gasped breaths. "I don't want to party, Dash. Oh, please,*PLEASE* don't hate me..."

"*Pinkie...*" Tears of her own stung Rainbow Dash's eyes. Her expression turned stern. "I don't hate you. No pony hates you! Everypony loves you! And we won't stop loving you just 'cause you get a little sad! If you wanna cry, then you go right ahead!"

At a loss for words, Pinkie simply obliged. She wept in her friend's embrace for what felt like hours, unleashing emotions that had been devouring her from the inside for years. Bit by bit, the flood of tears slowed to a trickle, and finally stopped.

"Th-thank you, Dash." Pinkie sniffled. "This means so much to me. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there. You're the best!" Pinkie smiled a tiny – by her standards – smile.

"Guilty," chuckled Rainbow Dash, relieved to see a touch of brightness back in her friend's demeanour.

Pinkie chuckled back, but then turned serious. "...I still don't want anypony else to know about this, okay Dash? Not yet, anyways."

Rainbow Dash nodded firmly. "I'm sure all of our friends would feel the same as I do, but a promise is a promise, Pinkie. This'll be just between us – flyer's honour!" Dash solemnly raised a hoof. Pinkie Pie's smile widened to its customary broadness, and her colour seemed to brighten. She hugged her Pegasus friend one more time as Rainbow Dash turned to leave.

Outside, the sun was creeping behind the horizon as Celestia's duties gave way to Luna's. Rainbow Dash trotted a few paces, and then took to the air.

She was only just above Ponyville's skyline when she felt a twinge in her back; helping her friend had felt good, but it had also been extremely stressful.

And there was still that complex rain squall to orchestrate tomorrow, followed by the High Altitude Vertical Sprint Semifinals, and then her duties teaching Pegasus foals about proper cloud-busting techniques...Rainbow Dash shook her head.

No problem! she thought to herself. *If I can do a Sonic Rainboom and catch four Ponies while pulling a thousand G's, I can handle ANYTHING!*

But the knots in her muscles stayed where they were.

RAINBOW DASH DEPENDENCE

Though she was almost blinded by condensation on her goggles, Rainbow Dash could tell she was in the lead. The air currents were clean, undisturbed by anypony ahead of her. With a last burst of speed, she felt the tingling splash of the storm cloud that acted as the finish line for the Cloudsdale High-Altitude Vertical Sprint Semifinals, and let out a shout of triumph as she heard its thunderclap signal her victory. The other contestants scattered at the sound. Some shouted praise up at Dash, and some sneered in an unsportsponylife fashion.

Crowds of Pegasi watching the event cheered and whistled, flapping their wings and stomping applause on whatever hard surfaces they could find – clouds were scarcely noisy enough. The event's announcer tapped his microphone for silence, and spoke: "We have a winner – contestant 23 and last year's Best Young Flyer, Rrrrrainbow Daaaaaash!" The crowd's cheers surged once more. "Everypony wish her the best of luck for representing Cloudsdale at the finals next week! You can do it, Miss Dash! *We're all counting on you!*"

Having finally shed her upward momentum, Rainbow Dash arced down toward the stadium to receive her trophy. She was only a few seconds' flight from the podium when a flare of pain lanced across her shoulders and into her wings. Her supracoracoideus muscles were suddenly agonizingly taut, pulling her wings far too high for a safe glide.

Oh, no...not a muscle cramp! Not now! Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth, fighting against the pain, and willed her wings to keep working for *just...a bit...longer...*

Her four hooves all touched cloud, but it was a very near thing. She skidded sideways on the puffy surface, coming to a halt, panting, in front of the announcer at the podium. Taking her emergency landing and upraised wings for a flourish, the crowd cheered all the louder. As Rainbow Dash said a few words of appreciation for her trophy, she hoped the crowd would also take the quaver in her voice and the droplets inside her goggles for signs that she was crying for joy.

An hour later, Rainbow Dash stood alone under a personal miniature downpour. The single purloined cloud's rain soothed her aching wings enough that she could – with extreme care – lower and fold them. But she could feel that the problem wasn't gone. Her back was still an ocean of tension, and her wings hadn't been this sore since she'd first fledged. She needed help.

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Fluttershy trotted over to her cottage door; the insistent, pounding knock had been startling, but she recognized it. Her suspicions were confirmed as she opened the door. "Why, hello Rainbow Dash. So nice of you to come 'round. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She smiled and stood aside to allow her friend to enter.

The rainbow-maned Pegasus trotted inside, and paced around the living room silently for a moment before turning to face Fluttershy. "I need some advice on how to relax."

Fluttershy's perpetually-concerned expression deepened. "Oh, my. Are you feeling stressed?"

Rainbow Dash mentally reviewed recent events:

It was a week ago, and she was peering into the second-story window of Sugarcube Corner, watching in mute horror as one of her best friends screamed and smashed a mirror with her pink, tear-streaked face.

It was five days ago, and she was smacking a walleyed mailmare with a rolled-up scroll, shouting at her – again – to stop delivering her letters coming from a Griffin she'd cut out of her life. The grey Pegasus cried, and she felt like a monster.

It was three days ago, and she was so wrapped up in cloud busting that she knocked the floor right out from under a cotton candy vendor Pegasus' kiosk. She had to pay for the crashed stand.

It was yesterday, and as she felt her cramping wings lose more and more lift she briefly wondered if she'd feel the impact before dying when she struck the ground at terminal velocity.

She shook her head. "N-no way...!" she blustered. "I've just been workin' really hard on the weather lately, and I figured Equestria's top flyer deserved a little R and R, you know?"

"Well, when Rarity and I visit the spa, I always come out feeling just *wonderful*. Maybe we could pay Lotus and Aloe a visit?"

"Nahh, I can't afford that place! I mean, I'm not a fancy dressmaker or a...wait. How can *you* afford to go there, Fluttershy?" Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow.

"Oh! Um, I bring them plants for their lotions and mixtures, so they give me a discount, and I...I have some bits stashed away from...*an inheritance*." A look of grief passed over Fluttershy's features, but it quickly vanished. "But, anyway, if the spa's a no-go, maybe I could help you myself."

"Really...? Okay. What do you have in mind?"

Rainbow Dash lay on her belly on top of a soft pillow in the middle of the cottage's living room floor. The birds and animals had been gently shooed out, the curtains were drawn, the lamps were low, and herb-scented beeswax candles provided the only other illumination. The peace and serenity in the room was almost tangible.

Fluttershy was in the kitchen, scrubbing her hooves. She dried them on a towel, and trotted up behind her fellow Pegasus. "*Now, just take slow, even breaths, and let your mind drift.*" With her trademark gentleness, Fluttershy straddled Rainbow Dash's back,

lowered her smooth, unshod hooves toward the space between Rainbow Dash's wings, and STABBED HER WITH A BURNING ICEPICK.

That's what it felt like to Rainbow Dash, anyway. "Ow-ow-ow-OWW!" Rainbow Dash instinctively bucked, sending the yellow Pegasus tumbling. Fluttershy quickly righted herself, and rushed to Rainbow Dash's side.

"Oh my *goodness!* I'm so sorry, Rainbow Dash! I didn't know you had so much tension there!" Fluttershy looked devastated by the prospect of having hurt her friend.

"It...it's okay, Fluttershy," winced Dash as she tried to catch her breath.

"It most certainly is not..." insisted Fluttershy. "With that many knots in your back, you're more vulnerable to fatigue, sprains, pulls – you could even *cramp up in mid-flight!*" Rainbow Dash chuckled nervously under her breath. "Wait right there," Fluttershy continued, "I'll be right back." She trotted over to the front door, opened it, and took to the air.

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a sprig of some plant or other in her mouth. She set it down in front of Rainbow Dash. "Here...eat a couple of these."

Rainbow Dash sniffed the reddish-purple berries doubtfully. They smelled sweet and faintly spicy, like glazed gingerbread. "Dessert? Isn't this more Pinkie Pie's style?"

"It's not a treat – it's medicine," said Fluttershy. "Just one or two should do it – and make sure you swallow the seeds."

Rainbow Dash shrugged, and bit a couple of berries off of the twig. The taste matched the scent – the berries were almost cloyingly sweet – but as she chewed, a faint tingle spread through her mouth. She swallowed the mouthful, and the tingle spread down her throat. In a few seconds, the feeling subsided. She stood still for a moment, and then started tapping a hoof impatiently.

"Are you sure that was medicine, Fluttershy? I don't feel a thing."

"*Exactly.*" She motioned at the pillow. "Please...let's try this one more time?"

Rainbow Dash hesitantly sat back down on the pillow, and tried her best to relax. Even more gently than before, Fluttershy got into position and lowered her hooves toward Rainbow Dash's back.

"Careful, Fluttershy...go easy on me-ee-eeeeooooohmygoshhhh...." Rainbow Dash's eyes crossed, and then closed. Her hooves stretched out in all directions. A warm, soothing fuzziness crept into her consciousness, crowding out her restless thoughts. She let out a long, pleasure-filled sigh. The sensation of Fluttershy's hooves kneading her back was positively *heavenly*. The warmth and weight of Fluttershy's body on her hindquarters

was no torture, either; her wings slowly rose. She blushed slightly, but at this point she was almost beyond caring about the *faux pas*. She couldn't remember ever feeling so *good*.

If Fluttershy knew why Rainbow Dash had "spread," she clearly didn't mind. She wrapped a front leg around one of Rainbow Dash's erect wings, and worked at the tender flight muscles with her other hoof. When she let it go the wing flopped down like wet cloth, too relaxed to even fold. She moved on to the other side. Rainbow Dash moaned softly.

Fluttershy took her time with the massage, kneading from the back of Rainbow Dash's head to the base of her tail. She went so far as to massage Dash's Cutie Marks – something even Dash knew that Lotus and Aloe would charge extra for.

By the time Fluttershy stood, Rainbow Dash was so relaxed she could hardly move. Her eyelids drooped, but she wasn't paying much attention to what she saw, anyway. She felt like every moment of stress in her life – every secret and crisis and obligation and frustration – was just some story that happened to some *other* Pony; somepony without a kind, gentle, indulgent friend that smelled of blossoms and whose hooves were just *magic*.

"*Poor buz'zard...glad 'm not herrr...*" she slurred.

"What was that?" asked Fluttershy.

"*Nuffin...*" Rainbow Dash curled up on the pillow, and slowly sank into an utterly blissful sleep. As the last of consciousness left her, she could have sworn that she felt Fluttershy's feather-soft lips brush across her cheek in a tiny, tender kiss.

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The sun was slightly higher when Rainbow Dash finally opened her eyes. Blearily, she realized that that meant she had been asleep for nearly twenty-four hours. She had to get moving! There were plenty of duties calling. She felt a little weak as she shakily stood – she was still fantastically relaxed, but there was also a strange *blurriness* to the sensation.

"Fluttershy...?" Rainbow Dash looked around, but her friend was nowhere to be found. Eventually, she spotted a note addressed to her on a nearby end-table. She unfolded it, and recognized Fluttershy's delicate mouthwriting:

*Dash – had to go and count the new Swifts and Starlings.
Feel free to help yourself to the food in the pantry.
Hope you feel better!
— FS*

Rainbow Dash smiled, and sighed; she *did* feel better. She felt like she could take on all of Equestria! And it was all thanks to Fluttershy...and those berries.

Rainbow Dash's gaze fell on the tiny fruit, still sitting where Fluttershy had put them. She looked around, cautiously, and then picked up the bunch with her mouth as she trotted over to the door.

A short time later, Fluttershy returned to her now-empty cottage. She called out as she trotted from room to room; she searched until she was sure Dash had left. Returning to the living room she looked around, cautiously, and then nuzzled the pillow Rainbow Dash had slept on, inhaling her friend's unmistakable scent of healthy sweat and rainwater and sighing a shuddering sigh.



Rainbow Dash had to work at top speed for the rest of the day to catch up on her weather duties, and she still barely finished in time. Princess Celestia had made a special request to honour her younger sister's first birthday in Equestria in a millennium, one that had required extreme effort from dozens of residents of Cloudsdale: the Princess had wanted a rainbow by moonlight.

The display went off without a hitch; the custom-blended extra-reflective pastel colours came out somewhere between a daytime rainbow and an aurora, and the two Alicorns had both expressed their satisfaction and appreciation. Buoyed though she was by that double helping of Royal praise, Rainbow Dash was sore, stressed and exhausted all over again by the time she finally got home to Cloudsdale.

Her eyes stung from rainbow residue, her wings were tired from flying all day, and her legs were stiff and aching from hours of cloud-clearing. She trotted sluggishly over to the snow-cloud in the kitchen, and peered inside of it.

There was little one could consider edible in the Cloudsdale-style icebox – Rainbow Dash was not the most prolific cook. There was only a small bouquet of wilted flowers, a pair of rock-hard sugar cubes...and the berries from Fluttershy's cottage.

Why not...? wondered Rainbow Dash. I hurt all over – of course I should take some medicine!

Without any further thought she snapped up the remaining berries, spitting out the bitter twigs and leaves. She trotted over to her bedroom and flopped down on her belly on the pile of pillows she used as a bed to wait for the berries to take effect. She didn't have to wait long.

Mmmmmhh... Smooth, velvety lethargy slowly crept through Rainbow Dash's body, dissolving the knots in her muscles and the stress in her mind. Even without a pair of skilled hooves on her flanks, the feeling was *glorious*.

Skilled hooves... thoughts of her soft-spoken friend slowly rose into her awareness, crowding out whatever musings were there before. In her mind's eye, Rainbow Dash saw strands of pink mane dangling in front of her eyes from above, and felt a soft, smooth mouth nibble at her ear. Rainbow Dash felt her wings stir.

She shook her head slightly, and frowned. *Hey...!* she chided her imagination. *Cut that out! I'm no filly-fooler, no matter what the rumours say!*

But her fantasy didn't listen; the sense-memories were too closely-linked. The phantasmal Fluttershy marked a trail of kisses from her ear down her neck, while those delicate hooves played across her wings...and her shoulders...and her ribs...*and her Cutie Marks.*

Moaning in surrender, Rainbow Dash rolled on her back, reached up with her hooves, and moved to kiss the thin air.

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The next afternoon, Fluttershy was tending to her flower gardens outside, pulling up weeds and munching on the more palatable ones, humming softly to herself. She picked up a watering can with her mouth, and gave the thirsty plants a drink. Then, a voice from behind her broke her out of her reverie:

"Fluttershy?"

She turned around, and saw Rainbow Dash standing on the path to her cottage. The sky-blue Pegasus looked tired and disheveled, with her mane tangled and her flanks shiny with sweat, as if she'd just won a race – not unlike the way Fluttershy had often pictured her in private moments. Her heart, for lack of a better word, fluttered.

"Oh! H-hello, Rainbow Dash. What's up?" she said, her voice slightly muffled by the can's handle.

"I need you." Rainbow Dash's tone was gravely serious. Fluttershy dropped the watering can.

"Uh...uh...O-o-of c-course," she stammered. "How can I help?"

"The weather teams have been workin' even harder lately, and I'm under a ton of...*stress*. I've tried to take it easy, but you know me – my only speed is *top speed!*" Fluttershy nodded appreciatively. "Anyway, I dunno if you're busy or anything, but I wondered if you could...you know...like before..." Rainbow Dash did her best to conceal the desperation in her voice.

"Oh, Certainly!" replied Fluttershy, doing her best to conceal the elation in *her* voice. "Come right in!"

Minutes later Rainbow Dash was sprawled on the same pillow as before, surrounded by the same scented candles, and trying not to bounce in anticipation. She heard Fluttershy finish washing her hooves, and trot up behind her. Before the Pegasus could lay a hoof on her, Rainbow Dash cringed theatrically.

"Wait...! I'm feeling really *tense*. And I don't wanna buck you again! Do you have any more of that...*medicine*?" Rainbow Dash knew that she'd done a poor job of hiding the hunger in her voice, but she didn't care.

"Of course. I'll be right back!"

"Great! I'll be here!" The minutes until Fluttershy returned felt like *days*. Rainbow Dash started nervously tapping her front hooves on the wooden floor.

Finally the yellow Pegasus came back, carrying another sprig of berries in her mouth. Rainbow Dash all but lunged for them, pressing her lips to Fluttershy's as she bit berries off the twig. Fluttershy blushed. "Thanks!" said Rainbow Dash around a mouthful of berries. "Okay...do your stuff!" She flopped back down on the pillow.

The second massage was as good as the first; Rainbow Dash positively *melted* beneath Fluttershy's hooves. But it was the haze of euphoria from those *wonderful* berries that spurred her to mutter: "Ooohh...yeaahh...tha'ss...sssoooo goood..." Rainbow Dash writhed under Fluttershy, her eyes half-closed and her mouth hanging open in chemical bliss.

Fluttershy's heart felt like a hummingbird in her chest. Her she was, with the filly of her dreams like putty in her hooves. As if her words weren't proof enough, Rainbow Dash's body language couldn't be clearer: she was in *ecstasy*. All because of her! It was time for Fluttershy to be *assertive*. It was time for lots of control, screaming and hollering, and *passion*.

She took a deep breath, shifted alongside Rainbow Dash, and took the Pegasus' face in her hooves. "I love you," Fluttershy said, and kissed her. After a brief moment of wide-eyed surprise, Rainbow Dash kissed back.

Woohoo! Fluttershy thought to herself.

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Rainbow Dash woke up feeling like she'd just crashed through a hedgerow backwards. She had a throbbing headache, and her limbs were wracked with pins and needles. She raised her head, and felt the hoof wrapped around her neck flop down. *Wait...hoof...? What the buck?*

With a start, Rainbow Dash realized that Fluttershy was sleeping cuddled right up against her, her back leg still draped across her hindquarters. The two of them were in

Fluttershy's bedroom. Rainbow Dash snapped into full alertness; she couldn't even remember what had happened for most of yesterday, but from the looks of it, things had gone *a lot* farther than she'd wanted them to.

Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh... With excruciating slowness, Rainbow Dash inched out of Fluttershy's embrace, crept off of the bed, and slinked out of the cottage. The rush of wind as she took to the air usually exhilarated Rainbow Dash, but now it just felt cold.

What's wrong with you, Dash? You played with your best friend's feelings and ended up in bed with her, all to get some stupid berries...? Get your head in the game! She grimaced, pounding the sides of her head with her front hooves. Guilt over what had happened hung on Rainbow Dash's shoulders like a leaden yoke, but there was another feeling beneath it all that made her feel even worse:

She still wanted more berries.

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Early that evening, Twilight Sparkle trotted into her library home without a care, only to be stopped at the doorway by her diminutive Dragon assistant. He was standing with his arms folded, swishing his meaty tail with a look of annoyance on his face.

The purple Unicorn leaned forward slightly, meeting Spike's emerald gaze. "Hey, Spike! Something wrong?"

"Yes...!" he snapped. "It's hard enough for me and *him*," – Spike gestured to the brown owl currently snoozing on a nearby perch – "to keep all these books in order when it's just *you* leaving stuff everywhere whenever an idea gets into your head, but when one of your friends comes 'round while you're out and turns the place upside down as well, *it's just too much!*"

"One of my...?" Twilight looked past Spike at the half-tidied archival maelstrom in the library. "Whoa! Spike, who did this?"

"Rainbow Dash! She barreled in here without saying a word, and started tearing the place apart! She didn't stop until I demanded to help her find what she was looking for."

"*Demanded?*" Twilight raised an eyebrow.

The Dragon sighed, releasing a tiny puff of green smoke. "Fine, *begged*."

"So what was she after?"

"*Super-Naturals*. I asked if someone had gotten into the Poison Joke patch again, but she didn't answer. She just flipped through the pages, read one entry, and then took off!"

"I'm sorry, Spike. You know how impulsive Rainbow Dash can be sometimes. Why don't I help you clean all this up?" Twilight trotted over to the lectern where Dash had left the herbal.

Her eyes fell on the open book as she magicked it into the air. She squinted at the entry occupying both pages. *Why would Rainbow Dash need to look up...oh, no!* Twilight let the book fall. In a blaze of white-hot magic, she disappeared.

"Okay! Bye! And thanks for all your help!" muttered Spike sarcastically as he stooped to pick up the fallen book.

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"*FLUTTERSHY!*" Twilight bellowed. "Have you been giving Rainbow Dash Palfrey's Nightshade?"

Twilight had appeared in the cottage's living room in a sudden flash of magic. Her horn was painfully hot, and still leaking motes of energy; she'd teleported point-to-point all the way from the library.

Fluttershy cringed behind a loveseat; only her long pink tail was visible. "**Squeak*...H-how...?*"

"There is no time for you to be timid, Fluttershy! It's not a common plant, it obviously doesn't grow in Cloudsdale, and you're the only one of us other than me who knows anything about herbalism! Come on – Dash's LIFE may be in danger!"

The yellow Pegasus' head popped up from behind the chair. "*What...? What do you mean?*"

"Did you give her the Nightshade or not, Fluttershy?"

"Yes, for her muscle aches! But it's not dangerous! It's just a little painkiller, as weak as White Willow Bark! I've used it for the bunnies' aches and pains plenty of times – even Angel's! And rabbits are *much* smaller than a Pony!"

"But they're *not* Ponies, and Palfrey's Nightshade is *definitely* not weak! Rabbits are just mostly immune to it! Ponies *aren't*! Even a *couple* of berries can have *terrible* effects on us – addiction, delirium, paralysis...even *death*!"

"*Celestia forgive me...*" Fluttershy's eyes filled with tears. "Is...is she going to...?" Even the *thought* of losing Dash made her heart leap into her throat.

"Not if we find her. She looked up the plant in the library – I think she's trying to find more on her own. It's too dangerous for me to teleport into underbrush and there's no time to gallop, so I need you to fly me there. I'll try to lighten myself a bit." Twilight's horn lit up once more.

Fluttershy's face took on a stern, determined expression that she'd once used to stare down an adult Dragon. "Let's go."

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Rainbow Dash leaned against an oak tree, giggling.

The berry patch had been right where the book said; a whole clearing full of luscious little orbs, literally ripe for the taking. She'd flitted from plant to plant across the field, snapping up the plumpest berries. Reddish juice stained her nose and chin.

The customary tingling in her mouth and throat was more like numbness now, and the same un-feeling was slowly creeping into her limbs. She vaguely felt her wings unfolding, hanging limply by her sides. But the rush was there as well, bigger and more intense than ever. It coloured *everything* in shades of wonder and delight.

"Nabad, huh, tree...?" she slurred giddily, nudging the oak with an elbow. "Bellyfull o'happy in t-ten sec'nds f...fl...fffff..."

Her eyes rolled upward, and she collapsed.

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Rainbow Dash lay on her back, dozing in a field of flowers. The sun was high in the cloudless sky, and the soothingly warm breeze smelled of blossoms. It was an utterly peaceful scene, and for once Rainbow Dash was content to stay still and enjoy it. A shadow passed over her face; she half-opened her eyes, and saw Fluttershy leaning over her. Rainbow Dash spoke:

"Shy...I'm sorry I...I used you, like that. I didn't know you felt that way about me. I didn't mean to hurt you—" Fluttershy put a hoof to Rainbow Dash's lips.

"Shhh...it's alright, my love. I forgive you. It was my fault, anyway – giving you those nasty berries." Fluttershy was leaning on Rainbow Dash's chest now, her soft hooves pressing down with surprising weight. "But now you don't have to worry about any of that. You just have to do one thing..."

"What's that?" asked Rainbow Dash. As Fluttershy leaned in to kiss her, Rainbow Dash felt the first drops of a rain squall falling.

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"**BREATHE!**" screamed Fluttershy as she compressed Rainbow Dash's ribcage with her hooves in a hard, stomping rhythm. She took another painfully deep breath, pinched the Pegasus' nostrils with her hooves, clamped her lips over her mouth, and forced air into the unconscious Pegasus' lungs once more. Tears dripped from her eyes onto Dash's face. *Please, oh Celestia, PLEASE breathe...* She jerked her head back up, and turned to Twilight Sparkle. "Anything?"

Twilight sat nearby, using a spell to detect Dash's vital signs. She shook her head. Tears slid down her cheeks as well. Fluttershy went back to pressing on Rainbow Dash's chest.

The pair had flown faster than Twilight had ever seen Fluttershy travel, slaloming between trees barely above ground level in a fairly convincing rendition of Rainbow Dash's *Sonic Rainboom: Phase One*. They'd spotted Rainbow Dash's distinctive colours at the edge of the berry patch almost instantly. She was flat on her back, not moving...and not breathing.

Twilight had used a spell to force the unconscious Pegasus to purge her stomach contents, and then directed Fluttershy to start trying to resuscitate her while she Scryed her vitals. Things didn't look good; even with the berries out of her stomach, there was still too much toxin in Rainbow Dash's bloodstream. *Poison in her blood...* Inspiration briefly brightened Twilight's expression, but then just as quickly faded. *No...I couldn't...*

Fixated though she was on keeping the guttering spark of her love's life flickering, Fluttershy noticed the look on Twilight's face. "What is it? *What?*" she demanded.

"While I was researching Nightmare Moon...I studied a lot of books about forbidden magic," Twilight admitted anxiously. "I think Black Magic could destroy Rainbow Dash's tainted blood, and replace it with clean blood, but..."

"*Then do it!*" Fluttershy shouted, and sucked in another breath to share with Dash.

"No! It's not that simple! Black Magic can't create – only destroy and steal! If I wanted to put clean Pegasus blood into her...it would have to come from *somepony else*."

Feeling the weight of passing seconds like boulders piling on her back, Fluttershy faced Twilight Sparkle and unleashed the terrible, transfixing force of The Stare.

"Save her. Do it. Do it *NOW*. And even if you have to take *every last drop* of my blood, don't you *DARE* stop, Twilight Sparkle. Do you hear me? *DON'T YOU DARE!*"

Helpless to resist, Twilight nodded, closed her eyes and started gathering an orb of slithering blackness at the tip of her horn. She could cast most of the spells she knew silently, but this little-used enchantment called for an incantation. Tears streamed from her glowing eyes as she half-sobbed the cruel words, her voice taking on an otherworldly echo:

***"Foulest lords of filth and mud, scour this Pony of her blood.
Bleakest darkness, woe and strife, fill her up with stolen life.
Hateful spirits, heed my call: one shall rise...
AND ONE SHALL FALL!"***

A wave of crackling blackness erupted from Twilight's horn, engulfing the two Pegasi. For half a dozen yards in every direction the plants withered and crumbled, poisoned by the unnatural magic. Twilight Sparkle staggered, sickened by the residual Black Magic boiling off of her purple hide. As her swimming vision cleared, she looked over at the other two Ponies in the clearing.

Rainbow Dash was sitting on her belly, slowly stirring into consciousness. Fluttershy was curled around her, pale and immobile. As Rainbow Dash's eyes flickered open, she noticed her stricken friend. She put her lips to the yellow Pegasus' ear, and whispered something Twilight couldn't quite make out.

Fluttershy's ears twitched, followed by her wings. Slowly, weakly, she opened her dark-circled eyes, and looked up into Rainbow Dash's teary gaze. The two shared a smile, and then a hug.

Twilight stared, agog. Somehow, both of them had survived the spell. She was overjoyed, but also deeply confused. It was impossible; *nothing* could endure that much Black Magic! Well, nothing except...

Twilight considered the scene before her once again, taking in the warmth of her friends' embrace and the joy in their eyes. She blushed, and chuckled awkwardly.

"Oh. Uhh...*ahem*...well! I'll...just give you two a moment, then..." she said, and vanished in a burst of clean white magic.

Fluttershy pulled away from the hug first, and spoke: "Rainbow Dash...did you really mean what you whispered to me?"

Rainbow Dash smiled warmly. "Absolutely! While that dark, cold magic was all around us, I could feel you offering me life – *your* life. And when I took it, I saw myself the way you see me. I could *feel* how much you loved me. And I could see that it stopped the magic from eating you up. It was like I saved you while you saved me. It was...*awesome*!" Rainbow Dash chuckled. "I'm no filly-fooler...but you're no filly. You're a grown mare, you love me, and I...I..." Fluttershy cut her off with a kiss.

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On a dirt road at the crest of a nearby hill, out of earshot but well within eyeshot, the Stetson-shaded eyes of an orange Earth Pony took in the sight of the two Pegasi's passionate embrace and narrowed, filling with stinging tears. The Pony gritted her teeth,

and lashed out with a muscular back leg; the tree behind her cracked from roots to canopy.

"You buckin' liar, Dash...you said you weren't that way..."

APPLEJACK EXPOSURE

By the time the sun rose, Applejack was already hard at work. Sweet Apple Acres was right alongside the Carrot family's holdings, and Applejack made it a point of pride to try and get started ahead of them each morning.

She stood near the property line picking through baskets of freshly-bucked apples, looking for bruised or worm-eaten ones and casting them aside to nourish the soil. While she worked, the Carrot family's middle daughter trotted nearby, carrying a sizeable bunch of carrots in her mouth. Applejack knew her – an earnest Pony, if a little soft-bodied. She flashed a neighbourly smile. "Mornin', Carrot Top," she said.

"Hw'dy, Ah'le-j'k," said the yellow Earth Pony through the mouthful of stalks, before stopping and putting them down. "Shore is a nice day, ain't it?"

"Shore is," replied Applejack, tossing a brown apple away.

Carrot Top looked at the orchard spread out behind Applejack, and whistled. "Golly...it must be an *awful* lotta hard work to buck that many apple trees. Makes me glad our carrots pull outta the ground so easy!"

"Shucks, nothin' wrong with a little hard work," replied Applejack. "*Maybe if y'all did a little, ya wouldn't be so pudgy!*"

As Carrot Top's jaw dropped in shock, Applejack realized that she'd spoken that last part, rather than just thinking it.

"Well, *ah never!*" Carrot Top huffed. "You Apples shore do have sharp tongues!" Her tone was indignant, but the blush across her face and the shine in her eyes betrayed her hurt feelings.

"Aww heck...I'm sorry I called y'all pudgy...*out loud.*" Applejack pressed a hoof to her mouth so fast her steel shoe almost split her lip.

"Well, *buck you too!*" shouted Carrot Top as she galloped off, and then briefly returned to snatch up the bunch of carrots. Once the yellow Earth Pony was a fair distance away, Applejack could hear her sobs echoing in the crisp morning air.

Applejack shook her head in disbelief. *Tarnation! What's wrong with me today?*

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Two hours later, Applejack sat awaiting breakfast at a picnic table near Sweet Apple Acres' newly-rebuilt barn. Her little sister Apple Bloom and her brother Big Macintosh were sitting with her, while old Granny Smith creaked her way through preparing a pot of oatmeal with applesauce over a nearby fire. The process was agonizingly slow, but

the younger Apples knew the taste would be worth it. While they waited, Applejack recounted her odd experience with Carrot Top.

"...but then I said 'out loud,' right after! I tell ya, she was fit to be tied – an' rightly so! I don't know what came over me, Big Mac. Pretty peculiar, huh?"

"Eeeyup," said the sizeable red stallion, chewing on a piece of straw.

"I'm gonna hafta go apologize after breakfast. Can't let a slight like that drive a wedge 'twixt us neighbours. Shewt...won't half be awkward, though. *Almost as awkward as when I spotted you an' the Mayor foalin' around behind the cider shed th'other da–*" both of Applejack's front hooves slammed into her mouth this time, and a blush spread across the bridge of her nose.

Big Mac partially inhaled the straw, and coughed it back out spasmodically.

Apple Bloom raised an eyebrow. "Foalin' around? Whut, like wrasslin' or somethin'?" she asked.

"Somethin' like that," managed Big Mac once he'd cleared his throat. He mussed the tiny yellow filly's red mane with a broad hoof. "Y'see, fixin' the barn after them Parasprites ate it up was mighty costly, and the Mayor offered us a break on our taxes if I'd..." – he racked his brain for a euphemism – "...go fer a *play date* with 'er." He smiled nervously.

Applejack could feel further ill-advised commentary welling up in her throat like a sour-apple burp. "*I gotta go!*" she blurted, and galloped away from the table.

"Soup's on, everypony!" said Granny Smith, turning toward the table at length and noticing the empty spot. "Well, peel n' core me...where's Applejack gone off to?"

Big Mac and Apple Bloom both shrugged.

"...Can I have her oatmeal?" asked Apple Bloom.

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Applejack trotted down the dirt road between Sweet Apple Acres and downtown Ponyville, lost in thought. It wasn't a state she found enjoyable. She was far from unintelligent, but she'd always preferred action to thoughts. Action *got things done*. Too much thinking often just complicated matters.

The walk did little to quiet the turmoil in her mind. She still couldn't believe the things she'd said earlier. It was as if the moment a thought had occurred to her – no matter how foalish or mean-spirited – she couldn't help but voice it.

Applejack paid little attention to her progress, and soon she was in the middle of Ponyville. The bustling morning crowds created a blurred din of conversation, hoofbeats and miscellaneous noise that finally snapped Applejack out of her musing.

She'd gotten as far as the Carousel Boutique; as Applejack looked up at the looming, garish pagoda, a look of inspiration crossed her Stetson-shaded face. She trotted into the shop.

"Mornin', Rarity. I need some advice, and I reckon yer the Pony I wanna see."

The pale Unicorn's eyes shone as she turned away from pinning a skirt's hem and faced her Earth Pony friend. "Oh, I *knew* this day would come!" She trotted over to Applejack, magicking a measuring tape to hover along with her. The tape started snaking around Applejack's body while she continued: "I'm thinking something in satin – oh! *Green* satin, to go with your eyes!"

"*Rarity...*"

Rarity and the slithering tape measure paid her no heed. "...And we'll want to do something about that sun-damaged mane, of course. Not to mention those *hooves!* Have you *ever* had a pedicure?"

"Rarity...!"

"Now, as for the shoes, if you *must* go shod, ferrous metals are *so* passé. I have a set of *gorgeous* etched and lacquered Equinium plates studded with San Caballo emeralds that are to *die* for! They're Jacques Farrier originals–"

"*RARITY!*" Applejack shouted so loudly that her hat fell off.

The tape measure dropped lifelessly to the floor. "...Yes?"

"I *ain't* here fer no apple-pickin' *makeover!* I just need some advice."

"Ah. I see...my mistake," she said, and took a quick but deep breath. "Well, if you're not here for *fashion* advice, then whatever is the matter?"

"...I've been havin' trouble keepin' my mouth shut."

Rarity stifled a smirk.

"I *mean* it! This here's a serious problem! Anytime a thought comes to me, or I answer a question, or *anythin'*, the full-on, unvarnished *truth* just comes *bustin'* outta me. I don't know what to do!"

"Really? You can't hide *anything?*"

Applejack shook her head.

"...What do you think of this dress?" asked Rarity, pointing a hoof at the piece she'd been hemming.

"It's nice...*if yer client's a Manehattan street-trotter.*" Aww, dang it! Applejack stomped a front hoof.

Rarity's white hide couldn't conceal the enraged flush in her face, but her voice stayed under rigid control. "*I see. And my coiffure?*" She shook her head, and her coiling purple locks danced around her face and neck.

Applejack gritted her teeth. "*It's always made me think o' bailin' wire.*" Shewt! "Rarity, please!"

"Oh." Rarity snarled – a small, barely-audible, dainty, fillylike snarl. She was advancing on Applejack now, and the Earth Pony was backing away, deeper into the shop. "*So tell me...why did you come to me about this, instead of Twilight?*"

Applejack's rump hit the shop's back wall. She cringed. "*I...I'd rather not say...that I was less worried about makin' you mad than her.*" Applejack looked away, unwilling to meet the Unicorn's gaze.

Rarity gasped. "*I knew it!* Even after that slumber party at the library, you *still* don't like me!"

"Naw, Rarity, that ain't it...it's just that Twilight's magic is so much stronger than yours; I wanna stay on her good side! I like ya just fine..." Applejack's eyes widened; she felt what was coming. Hot blood rushed to her ears and cheeks. *Please, no...* she silently begged, *whatever's doin' this, please don't make me...not to her!* But the urge was irresistible.

"...*I especially like them toned hindquarters o' yours. Heck, wiry mane or none, I'd have a roll in the hay with y'all any day o' the week!*" Applejack stomped her front hooves and grimaced as if in pain, every muscle in her face tightening, but the words kept coming. "*It'd just be a tumble, though – nothin' serious... 'cause I'm in love with Rainbow Dash!*" Applejack thrust her head into a nearby bin of fabric remnants, and unleashed a half-muffled scream of frustration. *Stop it! BUCKIN' STOP!*

The righteous indignation drained out of Rarity like grain from a cracked silo. She stared, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging open to an undignified degree. "Applejack...!You...you're a..."

Applejack jerked her head out of the bin, and stared daggers at the Unicorn. "A...*what?*"

"A...a...*a-attracted* to other fillies. I had no idea!"

Applejack looked away. "That was kinda *the point*, sugarcube. I didn't wanna go tellin' everypony 'bout my romantic pro-clivities. T'ain't nopony's business. *Especially not yours, ya big gossip.*" She winced. "Sorry."

Rarity took the involuntary jab in stride. "No...*I'm* sorry. I'm sorry I...*pried*, Applejack. I didn't expect to drag quite so much out of you. But scarily magical or not, I really think Twilight is the one you should talk to about this; it's somewhat outside of my area of expertise."

Applejack nodded glumly.

"Oh, and as long as we're being so *candid*, you should know I don't think any less of you, dah-ling. There's absolutely nothing wrong with being *that way*. *Lots* of Ponies are...*different*. In my line of work, especially. Why, if I told you *half* of what I've heard about Photo Finish...!" Rarity laughed, and then frowned. "Ah. That *did* sound a bit gossipy, didn't it? Well, don't worry. If you'd rather stay in the paddock, I promise I won't tell anypony."

"Thanks..." muttered Applejack anemically.

"...Just so we're clear though: I'm flattered, but I'm just not interested. Personally, I *love* the co— *come right in! Welcome to Carousel Boutique!*" Rarity trotted over to the newly-arrived Pony standing in the front doorway, cutting herself off in midsentence and seamlessly switching to customer service mode.

Applejack stooped to retrieve her hat as she trotted out of the shop.

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Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash hovered along at Pony shoulder height, weaving their way through the streets of Ponyville. Dash was carrying a fully-loaded picnic basket, the handles between her teeth.

"You're going to *love* the view once we get to the hill," said Fluttershy softly. "It's so different from an aerial view. You can see Cloudsdale in the distance, and on a clear day like this one, even Canterlot!"

"*Mm-hmm...smm'nds wmm'br'fhl*," said Rainbow Dash, before colliding with a shock of pink that seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Silly filly!" giggled Pinkie Pie. "You shouldn't talk with your mouth full!"

"Oh! Hello, Pinkie," said Fluttershy. "What's up?"

"Birds," replied Pinkie Pie, casting her gaze skyward. "But anyways, I need to borrow Rainbow Dash for a bit. I have—" Pinkie paused for a fraction of a second. "—some*ceiling decorations* that need hanging, and only Equestria's top flyer is up to the job!"

Pinkie Pie cast a quick sidelong glance to Rainbow Dash; for a tiny moment her carefree mask slipped, and the desperation and sadness peeked through. *Please*, she mouthed silently.

Rainbow Dash stood, dusting herself off. "...S-sure thing, Pinkie Pie! One Rainbow Ribbon Extravaganza, comin' right up! Fluttershy – can you go on ahead? This won't take long, and I'll catch up with you just like *that!*" Dash clopped her front hooves together.

"Certainly, Rainbow Dash. Helping others comes first. I'll see you at the hill." Fluttershy smiled, picked up the basket, and trotted off.

Pinkie Pie mouthed a quick *thank you* as she and Rainbow Dash headed for Sugarcube Corner. Her eyes were already shining with tears.

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Applejack watched the exchange between Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy from a half-block away. The sight of Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy next to each other summoned up a surge of bitter resentment that made her heart ache; it seemed she couldn't even hide the truth from *herself*.

The orange Earth Pony raised an eyebrow as Dash and Pinkie parted ways with Fluttershy.

Now what could be important enough to leave her wuunnnnderful new fillyfriend for? wondered Applejack, sarcastically. Casting aside her plan to visit Twilight for the moment, she followed the pair at a discreet distance.

Sugarcube Corner was closed for a few days while the Cakes went to Fillydelphia to negotiate about opening a franchise there, but Pinkie and Dash went inside anyway. A few moments later, Applejack crept into the bakery as quietly as her steel apple-bucking shoes would allow.

There was no sign of the pair on the main floor, so Applejack slowly climbed the stairs. At the upper landing, she could hear faint voices coming from behind the closed door to Pinkie Pie's room. Bit by tiny bit, she inched closer.

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Pinkamena Diane Pie shuddered in Rainbow Dash's embrace, her face buried in the Pegasus' shoulder to silence the noise of her sobs.

"I'm sorry, Dash..." she whimpered. "I know I said I'd be okay, but it's just so *quiet* in here without the Cakes! There was nopony to talk to, and nothing to do, and all I could think of to fill the space was throwing a party! *Again!* But I can't do it, Dash. I just can't. I'm so tired..." she wept against Rainbow Dash's sky-blue hide once again.

"Shhh...it's okay, Pinkie," said Rainbow Dash reassuringly, stroking the pink Pony's half-sagging mane with a hoof while – unseen by Pinkie – she frowned and rolled her eyes.

Truth be told, *it was pretty far from okay*. Rainbow Dash could think of *dozens* of things she'd rather do than delay a picnic brunch with her new (and first!) fillyfriend to go and console an emotionally-unstable compulsive reveler. Of course, Fluttershy presented a whole other host of complicated emotions for Dash, but she was far less likely to burst into racking sobs. Dash's wingjerk reaction was to leap out the window and leave Pinkie to her own devices, but she just couldn't bring herself to ignore a friend in need like that. It felt...*unnatural*.
She had to help Pinkie; she *had* to.

So here they sat in the middle of Pinkie's bedroom floor, while she hugged and Pinkie cried.

Lost in a haze of emotion, Pinkie didn't notice as her Pinkie Sense made her knee start to pinch.

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Applejack slinked up to the closed door, and pressed an ear to it. She could finally make out what the Ponies on the other side were saying:

Thank you, Dash. I really needed this. I was so...lonely. Pinkie sounded breathless.

No problem. I do kinda feel bad about lying to Fluttershy, though. The guilt in Rainbow Dash's voice was unmistakable.

Oh, but you can't tell her, Dash! I...I don't want anypony to know I'm...like this! Pinkie's voice held shame and fear, smoothly blended. Applejack knew the feeling well.

I told you, Pinkie – there's nothing wrong with you! Sheesh! Everypony has feelings like that! After Applejack and I got in that fight over the running of the leaves, and we went off alone, she–

"NO!" A kick from Applejack's powerful back legs exploded the door inwards, reducing it to scattered splinters. She turned to face the Ponies inside the bedroom. They were cringing on the floor, still wrapped in a close embrace. Applejack loomed over them, her studded shoes leaving tiny divots in the wooden floorboards as she approached. Rage throbbed in her veins like liquid fire.

"You two-timin' *snake!* You *said* you weren't that way! You *swore* you wouldn't tell – you gave your *word!*"

"*Wha- Applejack!* What are you doing here?" Rainbow Dash hopped to her hooves, standing between Pinkie Pie and the enraged orange Earth Pony.

"*I'm fixin' to beat the blue right offa your worthless hide,*" snarled Applejack, grimly pleased that she'd had no difficulty saying those words...because that meant they were *true*.

"Hey...! Wait, you don't understand. This isn't what it looks lik–"

"*LIAR!*" Applejack lashed out with a front hoof, and smashed a tempered steel-shod hoof into Rainbow Dash's cheek. The blow sent the light-bodied Pegasus sprawling. Pinkie Pie screamed.

Rainbow Dash struggled to get back onto all fours. She spit blood onto the floor, and shot Applejack a teary but fierce glare. "You wanna mix it up? *Fine by me.*" With a flick of her wings, she lunged at the Earth Pony.

Pinkie Pie sat with her back to the corner of the room, curled into a ball. She watched in horror as two of her best friends tore into each other like wild beasts. This was no school-field scuffle; they were playing for *keeps*. And it was *all her fault*. Shuddering, Pinkie slowly fell onto her side. Tears noiselessly dripped from her wide blue eyes. She wanted to whisper her grandmother's song...but she couldn't remember the words.

The fight went on for minutes on end, Rainbow Dash's speed and agility pitted against Applejack's strength and endurance. Soon Applejack's hide was speckled with crescent welts from Dash's darting jabs, and Dash was covered in angry horseshoe-shaped bruises. Both were bleeding in several places.

"*I wasn't gonna tell her!*" Rainbow Dash shouted, and slammed her forehead into Applejack's nose; the Earth Pony staggered back, and Rainbow Dash followed.

Shaking her head, Applejack spun on the spot, and unleashed a devastating back-legged kick as Dash drew near. Rainbow Dash sailed backward, smashing into – and through – a closet door. Coughs and a groan echoed from inside a moment later.

"*Stop...buckin'...LYIN'!*" Applejack punctuated each word with the heavy stomp of a hoof as she stalked toward the ruined closet. "Yer nothin' but a lyin', cheatin'*BUZZARD!*" Applejack threw open the remains of the closet door, and pulled the dazed Pegasus up off the floor, bringing her up almost nose-to-nose. "*I hate myself fer lovin' you!*"

Applejack froze. She hadn't meant to say that, but she'd meant it as she'd said it. She let Rainbow Dash drop, and took in the scene around her:

Judging by the sun, it had been more than two hours; Fluttershy was pacing in a circle at the top of a hill on the outskirts of Ponyville. Anxious, needling thoughts crawled through her mind like spiders.

Where is she? She's way too fast to take this long on a tiny errand! Did something happen? Is she alright? Should I try to find her? But what if I do, and she comes here? She'll think I stood her up! And what if she's fine? What if she was just waiting for an excuse? Is she mad at me about the Nightshade? Does she hate me? Is all of this just a big prank to get back at me? Is Pinkie Pie in on it? Maybe they're laughing at me right now...

Fluttershy gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and violently shook her head. She flopped down in the grass, and turned to look toward Ponyville. "Where are you?" she whispered mournfully.

Unnoticed by the yellow Pegasus, faint, tiny, multi-coloured dots slowly appeared around the edges of her butterfly Cutie Marks, swarming lazily like a cloud of gnats.

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Back in the Carousel Boutique, Rarity magicked the final ribbon on a purplish-grey Unicorn foal's party dress into a wide bow.

"There we are – absolutely *fabulous!*" she beamed. The foal giggled, prancing to and fro in front of one of the Boutique's many mirrors and admiring herself. Rarity turned to the blonde-maned grey Pegasus who had brought in the foal. "Now...If there's nothing else you require, shall we settle up?"

The Pegasus nodded, removed her saddlebags and rummaged around in them with her hooves. Her golden eyes slowly veered in separate directions as she concentrated. At length, she produced a paper bag, and set it on a counter.

"Sweep the range!" she said warmly, putting the bags back on and escorting the foal out of the shop.

"Umm..thank you! Come again!" Rarity called after them. She magicked open the bag, hoping – *desperately* hoping – that there would at least be enough bits inside to cover the cost of the dress.

"...Oh."

Rarity magicked out one of the freshly-baked muffins, and glumly took a bite.

Anxiety about her shop's future still nagged at her, but she couldn't stay mad at the Pegasus; the muffins were the first real food she'd had in two days.

RARITY LOSS

Rarity scowled at the Pony in front of her.

Such an awful sight!

That unhealthy physique, so lean the ribs nearly show. Those tired eyes, baggy and heavy-lidded. That dull, lifeless mane, hanging sadly like so many dark willow branches. Those hooves, as rough and worn as any Earth Pony's. And those shining, lovely Cutie Marks, mocking the whole with their perfection – the exception that proves the rule.

Terrible. Just terrible. You won't sell a thing looking like that.

She turned away from her bedroom mirror. Her horn ignited with purple-white energy as she magicked a hairbrush, makeup compact, powder puff, hoof file and polish, eyelash curler, hairspray bottle and perfume atomizer into the air.

As she worked on making the best of herself, Rarity noted that some of her cosmetics were starting to run low. They seemed to be running out faster and faster lately – it was taking more effort to maintain her striking looks. Soon it would be time for another shopping trip.

The thought – which once would have hummed in her mind like a cheerful song – now filled her with dread. *What will I do then?* she silently asked the room.

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An hour later, she was back to the Unicorn her friends knew and loved: bright-eyed, curly-maned, gorgeous – and ready to spread fabulosity.

She trotted down the stairs, and into the kitchenette in the back of the Carousel Boutique. Carefully, methodically, she searched through every cupboard and shelf, on the off chance that she'd missed a small package of food during any of the previous searches. There was nothing.

She magicked open the icebox, and surveyed the frozen wasteland inside. More nothing, with the sole exception of a single stale muffin – the last remains of a client's somewhat feeble-minded attempt at barter. The bag of muffins had bought the grey Pegasus' daughter a party dress that could have sold for two hundred bits.

Rarity would have turned the offer down, but – well, no. She wouldn't have. And she didn't. She magicked the muffin in half, and floated one piece over to the table. She sat down glumly on the kitchenette's lone chair.

There's always a reason, she mused as she took a bite of the dry, chewy muffin. A bad harvest, a delayed repayment, a sick relative, or plain old poverty. How fabulous would I seem if I turned them down? How quickly would they turn on me? The pretty, talented Unicorn with the knack for fashion and the gem-sensing horn. How quickly would they realize how easy it is to hate me?

Her experience with the Diamond Dogs had driven that point home. Needy, whining, stuck-up, spoiled Ponies were a living Pony Hell, worth trading a mother lode of gems to escape from. She'd felt clever at the time...until she'd realized how close to her standard manner she'd been.

But what do I do now? She wondered. *Bilking that Dragon didn't work. Banking on marrying rich didn't work. No Photo Finish-backed career. No Aerial Ballet contract in Cloudsdale. And soon, not even the tools to maintain my looks. What do I do when I run out of things to distract them all with?*

She took another bite, and winced. Oh, how she was getting *sick* of the taste of muffins.

"*I deserve this,*" she muttered.

She heard the sound of hoofsteps in her dress shop's entryway. Rarity quickly gulped down the rest of her breakfast in one dreadful swallow, and came trotting into the shop's main room. She readied her customary greeting:

"Hello and welcome to Carousel Boutique! How can I be of – *oh!* Good afternoon, ma'am. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know why I'm here, Rarity." The Mayor of Ponyville stood in the open doorway, backlit by the brighter light from outside. She stared over her gold-rimmed pince-nez at the white Unicorn.

Rarity swallowed. "Ah...yes. The matter of my taxes."

"Yes. In recognition of what you and your friends have done for Ponyville this past year, I have given you several extensions. But you can't ignore this any longer. I haven't seen a bit from you since before the last Winter Wrap-up. You need to pay what you owe."

Rarity's lower lip quivered. "B-but Mayor...! If I *had* the bits, I would have paid you already!"

The older Earth Pony scoffed. "*Please*, Rarity. Don't lie to an elected official. We have a keen sense for falsehood. Your *work* –" the Mayor gestured at the various complete and in-progress fashion masterpieces on display around the shop "– is some of the finest in Equestria! This is not exactly a flax-weaver's hovel, to say the least."

"But it's *true!*" Rarity's voice raised in pitch. "I can't afford to pay you, Miss Mayor! I *can't!*" She turned away.

The Mayor narrowed her eyes and frowned. "...I see. I suppose you wouldn't be the first wealthy Pony to be bad at holding onto her gold. And at this rate, you won't be the first to find that it cost them their property."

Rarity choked back a sob. "N-no...! Not my Boutique! *Please!*" She still couldn't bear to look the Mayor in the eye; it had taken a supreme effort just to voice her objection.

"Oh, now don't get upset..." The Mayor slowly grinned. "Perhaps there is some...*other* way you could settle your debts. I've had my eye on your...*assets*...for a long time, you know." The Mayor's tone was as sweet as fresh honey. She chuckled. "If you do me a little *favour* from time to time, I'll consider your taxes paid."

Rarity shuddered. So it had finally come to *this*. Her finances were all but gone, her debts were mounting, and she had nothing but half of a stale muffin left in the icebox – yet she had never even *considered* it.

A surge of outrage burned hot on Rarity's cheeks, but she forced it down. *What will it be – your morals or your home?* she asked herself. The rage slowly drained away, replaced with an empty, sinking feeling the likes of which she'd hadn't felt since she'd hung in midair above the Cloudiseum, the evaporated remnants of her temporary wings floating in the air like so much glitter.

I thought so. Rarity turned to face the grey-maned beige Earth Pony, willing her eyes to stay tear-free. *Be brave, Rarity – the least you can do is try to take it like a mare.*

The Mayor was loosening her cravat. Rarity let out a tiny whimper. *Try harder!* She mentally chided herself.

"If...if that's what it takes to keep my shop, M-Mayor," said Rarity at length, her voice trembling ever-so-slightly, "then I w-will do as you ask."

"Oh, I *am* glad to hear it," said the Mayor, letting her cravat and collar drop and stepping toward the pale Unicorn.

Rarity help up a warding hoof, and cowered. "*Please...! Be gentle with me,*" she whispered, closing her eyes tightly.

If the Mayor heard her, she showed no sign of it. She had angled her approach to walk past Rarity, and she was now standing in front of one of the shop's tall mirrors. "Why don't we start with...something in silver and sapphires? I wear a 14 neck."

Rarity opened one eye, momentarily dumbstruck. Eventually, she spoke: "...*Beg pardon?*"

The Mayor gestured at her bare neck with a hoof. "A necklace. Size 14."

"Oh?...OH! Y-yes, of course, Mayor! S-sapphires...to go with your eyes! Just...just w-wait right there, and I'll get some *beauties* – I won't be a m-minute!" Rarity was shaking all over as she trotted into the shop's back room.

Once she was out of the Mayor's sight, she collapsed onto the plush carpet and curled up into a ball. She breathed in short, ragged gasps, trying to push down the adrenaline surging through her system. Her eyes were wide, staring at nothing.

Oh, Celestia! I thought she...I almost...I was going to... a brief surge of nausea threatened to cost Rarity her meager breakfast.

She gritted her teeth, rolled onto her knees, and then stood. She took a slow, deep breath.

"I deserve this," she whispered to the empty room.

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The next afternoon, Fluttershy sat immersed up to her shoulders in the steamy water of the broad wooden hot-tub at Ponyville's finest and only spa, her long pink mane wrapped up in a soft white towel.

Rarity had planned to skip the costly outing this week, still shaken as she was from the encounter with the Mayor. But she just couldn't bring herself to deprive her friend of a treat

So, Rarity sat in the water opposite Fluttershy, similarly wrapped up and nodding absently while the yellow Pegasus continued her anxious, disturbing, meandering anecdote.

" – covered in horseshoe-shaped bruises from head to tail, and splattered with *blood!* I was horrified, just *horrified!* I knew something bad had happened to her when she didn't show up to our picnic! I *knew* it! She told me that she got tangled in ceiling garlands and crashed into Pinkie Pie while she was carrying an open box of horseshoes for a party game, and then tumbled down the stairs, taking the box with her. I trust Dash, but I don't know...something just felt *wrong* about that story..."

Aloe, one of the spa's graceful Earth Pony proprietors, trotted over with a small bowl of perfumed salts and dumped them into the tub.

More money I don't have, thought Rarity. *One bit for the salts. Three bits for the tub time. Five for the facial. Six for the pedicure. Four for the sauna. Four for the mud-bath. Eight for the massage...oh, Celestia – what will I do next week?*

"Rarity...?"

Rarity snapped out of her reverie. "Yes, sorry. I'm listening. Do go on."

"I said, what do you think? I hate to sound suspicious, but I can't help but have my doubts. She just seemed so...*distant*." Fluttershy shifted uncomfortably on the submerged bench inside the tub. Her flanks were itching again.

Rarity frowned. "Well, there's only one other way to get covered in horseshoe-shaped bruises, now isn't there?"

Fluttershy gasped. "Y-you think somepony *beat her up*...? But who? And why wouldn't she tell me?"

"I'm sure I have no idea, dah-ling..." said Rarity, but her thoughts wandered back to a few days prior, when a certain rugged orange Earth Pony had stood in her store, shamefully blurting out a confession of love for Fluttershy's rainbow-maned fillyfriend. The echo of Applejack's steel-shod hooves stomping on her shop's floor rang in her ears.

Fluttershy's expression darkened. "*You're lying.*"

Rarity's jaw dropped. "Wh-what?"

Fluttershy waded closer to the white Unicorn, narrowing her eyes. "You're lying. I know I'm not the most sociable Pony, but I'm not a foal. You look away when you lie. And your tone of voice was just like when you told me how *happy* you were that Photo Finish made me a model. You're *hiding* something. *Don't* lie to me, Rarity. What do you know? *Who hurt Dash?*"

Rarity started sweating – and not from the steaming-hot water. Her back was pressed into the hot-tub's wall; Fluttershy's nose was now an inch from hers.

"P-please, Fluttershy...! It's not that I...that is, I didn't actually...I mean...I *promised* not to say–"

"*WHO DID IT?*" Fluttershy's wings spread behind her, sending bathwater splashing in all directions. Her insistent, piercing stare filled Rarity's veins with ice.

"*It was Applejack...!*" Rarity squeaked, and plunged down under the water.

When she surfaced, the yellow Pegasus was nowhere to be found.

Rarity's pounding heart sank when she realized that she'd just sold out a good friend on nothing but a strong hunch; it sank still further when she realized that with Fluttershy gone she would have to put *both* of their makeovers on her already-sizeable tab, and Fluttershy wouldn't even be there to appreciate it.

She dragged herself out of the tub, and headed behind a changing screen to brush her mane.

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Twilight Sparkle trotted around the main floor of her library home, magicking a broom to sweep in her wake and humming a little ditty that seemed to get stuck in her head every so often.

"*Grr...* can't a Dragon have a nice afternoon nap in peace?" groaned Spike from his basket-bed nearby. "I wish you'd never *heard* that song! Now I'll *never* get back to sleep." Spike rolled over, and quickly started snoring.

The purple Unicorn paused. "Now that you mention it, I have *no idea* where I first heard tha—"

A knock at the door cut her off. "Who could that be?" she wondered.

Twilight opened the door, and Rarity all but bowled her over in her haste to enter.

"It's a *lovely* day outside, isn't it?" asked Rarity, idly trotting around the library's main room and examining the occasional book cover.

Twilight regained her hoofing, and dusted herself off. "Um...yes, yes it is."

"I do so enjoy a sunny day," said Rarity, a faint sheen of sweat appearing on her brow.

"Me...too...?" Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Those Pegasi do a *fine* job on the weather here." Rarity giggled anxiously.

"They sure do...?" Twilight tilted her head slightly, her brows knitting.

"Oh!" Rarity continued, finally noticing the magicked broom still following her fellow Unicorn. "I see I've caught you in the middle of some chores. *Terribly* sorry to bother you...I'd best be on my way." Her left eyelid twitched.

"It's fine," said Twilight, letting the broom come to rest. "Rarity...is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No, no...! There's no need to put yourself out. *I'm not worth it*. Why don't I make you a new sunhat to apologize for wasting your time?" Rarity trotted toward the door, humming nervously.

Twilight magicked the door shut before Rarity could leave. "*Wait!* What did you just say?"

"...A new sunhat!" Rarity smiled too-widely. "A filly's got to take care to avoid sunburn—"

"Not that," said Twilight, frowning. "*Before* that."

"I..." Rarity sagged. "...I'm not worth it. *I don't deserve your help.*" She turned away.

"*Rarity...!* Why would you ever think that? You're one of my best friends. *Of course* you deserve my help! Now tell me: *what's wrong?*" Twilight bore down on the cowering white Unicorn, her tone firm but her eyes full of sympathy.

Some floodgate inside of Rarity shattered and her miseries came flooding forth. She spoke faster and faster, until it was almost hard to follow her.

"Oh, Twilight...I don't know what to do! I'm beautiful and talented and cultured, and everypony *despises* me for it! I *know* they do! So I do my best to buy them off with scandalously low prices at my shop and luxurious outings, and it's costing a *fortune!* And the stress is just *devastating* me, and maintaining my fabulosity just costs *more*, but if I let myself go I'll be *ugly* as well as hated, and...and... and I'm *ruined!* I have so many debts, and I don't have two bits to rub together – at this rate, I'll be totally destitute within the week!" Rarity grimaced as if in pain, but forced a few more words out: "Please...I know I deserve this, but I want your help. I *need* your help! Oh, please! *Please! PLEEEEEEEEEZ!*"

"You're...? But Rarity, you're one of Ponyville's liveliest lovers of luxury! You still smell of perfume from the *spa!* If you don't have any money, how are you–"

"All on *credit!*" she wailed. "Fluttershy *loves* to go to the spa, Pinkie Pie keeps holding birthday parties for Ponies we hardly know, Sparkler and I go shopping, Lyra looks forward to the symphony...I can't let them down. *I can't!* They'll turn on me!" A wave of dizziness passed through Rarity; she staggered.

"Rarity!" Twilight darted forward to support her falling friend. "Are you alright?"

Rarity shook her head. "I'm fine...fine. Just a little hungry, is all."

"You've even been skipping *meals* just so you can afford to indulge your friends?" Twilight's eyes shone with tears. "Rarity, that's *terrible!* You don't need to *bribe* your friends! We love you for *you!*"

"*Sure* you do...when I'm churning out *dresses* for you! But as soon as I want something for *myself*, you'll change your tune! If I'm not *giving*, I'm *worthless* to you!"

"*Enough!*" Twilight's horn glowed; a wave of magical force slapped Rarity across the face.

The white Unicorn stared in shock, gingerly rubbing her pink cheek with a hoof.

"Get a *hold* of yourself, Rarity! This isn't like you!"

"Well maybe I've just grown up," she whimpered. "Maybe I finally noticed everypony staring daggers at me whenever I live it up a little. I'm better off using my bits to make *other* Ponies happy." Rarity sighed.

"*Nopony* will be happy if you end up on the street, Rarity!"

"Then what can I *do*, Twilight? It's too *late*! I don't have the bits to buy *hay*!"

"Well, I can help you with *that*, at least. If you need money that badly, I know just what you should—" A crash from outside derailed Twilight's train of thought. "What the...?"

"...What?" begged Rarity. "What should I do? *Please*, Twilight!"

Twilight's attention snapped back to Rarity. "Right! You...you ought to—" More crashes rang out, followed by a chorus of shouts. Curiosity overwhelmed the purple Unicorn. "I'm sorry, Rarity. This will just take a second."

She magicked open the door...and then stared out in disbelief.

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"Did you hear that?" Rainbow Dash trotted over to Pinkie Pie's bedroom window; she still limped slightly as she moved, and her body was covered in adhesive bandages. "It sounded like Applejack."

The damage to the room from Rainbow Dash and Applejack's fight was still only partially repaired. Pinkie Pie looked up from the delicate task of gluing a vase back together without the use of opposable digits. "I didn't hear any—*uh-oh*!" Pinkie's tail was shuddering back and forth. She raced over to join Rainbow Dash at the window.

In the distance, a blurry shape in the sky drew closer: it was a yellow Pegasus, struggling to carry a flailing orange Earth Pony. The breeze carried the faint sounds of the Earth Pony shouting, but neither Dash nor Pinkie could make out any words.

And then the Pegasus let the Earth Pony drop.

"*Oh my gosh!*" Rainbow Dash surged out of the open window, aching to take to the air with far less than her usual speed and grace.

"Wait for me!" shouted Pinkie, galloping toward the stairs.

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Applejack groaned, the smashed remains of the flower stand shifting around her as she struggled to get back to her hooves. Next to her, the stand's shocked Earth Pony

proprietor put a hoof to her brow, and fainted. Applejack shakily looked upwards. "You crazy filly – you coulda *killed* me!"

Fluttershy alighted a few feet from the ruins of the stand. "I am *not* crazy. And maybe now you'll think twice about beating up innocent Pegasi next time."

Applejack scowled. "I *told* you – it weren't no *beatin'*! It was a fight! A real, two-sided hoof-em-up!"

"You hurt Rainbow Dash!"

"So you pick me up like some Griffon on the hunt and drop me over the middle o'town? I dragged your craven hind-end up a mountain *backwards*, you *ungrateful little buzzard*!"

Fluttershy gasped; a single tear slid down her cheek. Her wounded expression suddenly darkened, and without another word she lunged at the orange Earth Pony.

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Twilight stared in frozen shock at the scene before her.

On the street in front of the library, Fluttershy and Applejack were pummeling each other while Rainbow Dash tried to pull Fluttershy away and Pinkie Pie tugged at Applejack. The dirt road was littered with the broken remains of a destroyed flower stand, several smashed window-boxes and an overturned display of liquid herbal soaps.

"*You don't deserve her, ya lunatic!*" shouted Applejack, pounding an elbow down between Fluttershy's wings.

"*I am NOT CRAZY!*" Fluttershy shouted back. She jabbed a hoof forward, striking Applejack in the gut.

"Stop it! *Please!* There's been enough fighting!" begged Pinkie pie around a mouthful of Applejack's blonde tail.

"*You stay outta this!*" Applejack lashed out with a back leg, shoving Pinkie Pie away. The rose-hued Earth Pony landed heavily on her side, and burst into tears.

"Fluttershy! Cut it out!" said Dash, the Pegasus' pale pink tail between her teeth.

Fluttershy turned to face the blue Pegasus. "You *lied*, Dash! I saved your *life* and you *lied to me!*"

Dash spit out Fluttershy's tail. "I only *lied* because I thought you'd go off your cloud - like you did at the Gala. *And you did!*" Dash shouted. "Why did you have to make everything so *complicated?*"

The deeper meaning behind Dash's words was plain. Fluttershy stared at her in frozen, wounded shock. "*Dash...! You...you don't...*"

Applejack took the opportunity to tackle her.

"I *need* to know, Twilight!" said Rarity from behind Twilight, desperation colouring her every word. "I don't know how long jewelry will tide the Mayor over..."

"All of you, stop – that's enough!" cried Twilight, but the din of the shouting match outside drowned her out.

Applejack hefted a dazed Fluttershy above her with her front hooves, and turned toward one of the few undamaged kiosks left in the area. "Lessee how *you* like it!" she growled. "No - *don't!*" interjected Dash, but she held back from physically stopping the Earth Pony.

"Just a hint? *Pleeeez!*" Rarity was groveling on the floor right next to Twilight now.

Twilight gritted her teeth. Her horn ignited with the glow of magic. "*I...said...that's...*"

"ENOUGH!"

A blaze of light and a magical thunderclap emphasized the word as the deafening pronouncement echoed off the nearby houses. Windows in the closest buildings cracked from the noise.

Applejack let go of Fluttershy, and they, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Rarity silently fell onto bended knees, their eyes downcast.

Twilight Sparkle rubbed the back of her neck with a hoof. "Whoa...that was a lot louder than I expect—" she looked down, and noticed the long, regal shadow she was casting...and its wings.

The purple Unicorn pivoted in place, and looked up into the stern visage of the Royal Alicorn of the Dawn. She stood in the middle of the library's main room, backlit with majestic morning light. Her pastel-hued mane and tail flowed silently on invisible solar winds.

"P-Princess Celestia...!"

"*Twilight Sparkle...*" Celestia's tone was as hard as diamond. "What is the meaning of this *shameful* display?"

Twilight cringed. "Princess...I'm so sorry! My friends were...it was...they didn't...I tried to—" The Princess cut her off.

"I am shocked and appalled to see such *chaos* caused by the bearers of the Elements of Harmony. How *dare* you all make such a mockery of your duty?" The Princess stomped a gold-shod hoof, and thunder rumbled from the clear sky.

The Ponies cowered; Pinkie Pie wept. Fluttershy hid her face, trembling. Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Rarity turned away in shame.

Twilight Sparkle took a deep breath, and faced her teacher. She swallowed. "Princess Celestia...please don't blame them. I will take full responsibility for their actions."

The pale ghost of a smile seemed to cross the Princess' features, but it quickly disappeared. "...So be it, then. Twilight Sparkle – you will come with me. The rest of you Ponies – return to your homes *at once!*"

Princess Celestia's horn blazed white with magic as she spoke; in a blinding flash she and Twilight vanished, leaving the room dark and empty of life save for Rarity at the doorstep and Spike in his basket – sound asleep through the whole exchange.

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As the glow of magic faded, Twilight found herself in Princess Celestia's private study in one of the tallest towers of Canterlot's Royal Palace. It was a round room, furnished with comfortable sitting pillows and lined with shelves of ancient tomes. The rear window afforded a beautiful view of the eastern skyline. The Princess was seated by that window, magicking a teapot to fill the shallow porcelain cup on the table beside her.

"Princess Celestia...I can't tell you how sorry I am..." Twilight looked away, and noticed that the door out of the room was flanked by a pair of Royal Guard Pegasi.

Princess Celestia magicked up the cup and took a slow, thoughtful sip of her tea. Her eyes were closed, her face a serene, unreadable mask. She set down the cup, turned toward the guards, opened her eyes, and softly said two words:

"Kill her."

TWILIGHT SPARKLE SPELLBOUND

PART ONE: REBIRTH

Twilight Sparkle floated in a blank white void, unaware even of herself.

A sense of up and down returned to her first, followed by a feeling of weight and, eventually, the sensation of a cold floor underneath her prone body.

She heard a bird trilling in the distance, and closer by she could hear the whisper-faint rustle of feathered wings moving.

She drew breath – a deep, heaving gasp that seemed to take *hours* to fill her lungs – and smelled old books and hot tea; the smell of home.

"*Spike...? Owlowliscious?*" Twilight's voice was weak and thin. "I had a *terrible* dream..."

A soft, matronly voice answered her. "I am sorry, my student...*but it was not a dream.*"

Twilight's eyes snapped open.

She was in Canterlot, in the private tower-top study of Princess Celestia herself. She was lying on her side on the smooth stone floor. The Princess sat nearby, looking down at her.

Twilight lurched to her hooves, and backed away from the spot where she'd lain. A dark red stain marked the ancient white stone. Her gaze darted from the stain, to the Princess, to her own side, where the last hair-thin remnant of a fatal sword-wound was fading into invisibility. Twilight's eyes widened. Her pulse quickened as her most recent memories crashed back into focus. She gasped.

"Y-you...you told them to...!" Twilight looked behind her, but the Pegasus guards were gone. She and the Princess were alone. "Why?" she demanded, her voice cracking. "*How could you?*"

Princess Celestia still sat on a broad velvet pillow in front of the tower study's window. She regarded her student with an uncharacteristic look of sadness on her regal features.

"I am so sorry to have put you through that, Twilight Sparkle. It pained me more than you can imagine. But some lessons can't be taught from a book; they can only be *experienced* first-hoof."

Twilight scowled. She fixed her stance, took a deep breath, and:

"*WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! This is CRAZY! They stabbed me! Was this a punishment? Would you rather I didn't stick up for my friends? What in Pony Hell was killing me and bringing me back supposed to teach me!*"

Twilight panted, shaking with fury. As the echoes of her tirade faded, Twilight remembered who she was speaking to; she backed down slightly, blushing. "...*Your Majesty,*" she added sheepishly.

Celestia fought away tears. "Oh, Twilight...my dearest, most faithful student. This was no punishment. I could *never* raise a hoof against you in anger. It was all I could do to give the order. But try to understand...the lesson was that you brought *yourself* back."

Twilight stared, and then frowned in frustration. "*I brought myself back?*" That's *impossible!* How could I have used magic while I was *dead?*"

"You didn't *use* magic, Twilight Sparkle. You *are* Magic."

Twilight's tilted her head. An array of outraged, dumbfounded and shocked expressions crossed her face in quick succession. "*I...I don't...what do you...*" She staggered, her knees suddenly weak.

"*Please*, Twilight – have a seat. A cup of tea will do you good." Princess Celestia gestured with a wing toward the pillow next to hers. She magicked the teapot resting on the low table between the pillows into the air, and poured a fresh cupful.

Twilight numbly trotted across the room, and flopped down onto the pillow. She shakily magicked up the cup, and took a small sip. It was the Princess' personal blend, imported from Xiao Ma; as upset as she was, Twilight couldn't deny that it was delicious.

The two sat in silence until they had both finished their tea. Twilight spoke up first:

"What *is* this, Princess? What did you mean?"

The Princess let out a tiny sigh. "Twilight...it's time I told you more about the secrets of the Elements of Harmony – the secrets that no book has ever detailed. The secrets of their *power*...and of the *burdens* that they press on their bearers."

A sudden knock at the study's door caught both Ponies' attention. A cultured Canterlotter stallion spoke up from the other side:

"Begging Your Majesty's pardon...the Tsarevna of Stalliongrad and her retinue have arrived."

The Princess sagged, but when she spoke her voice carried the full weight of her nobility: "Very well. Direct them to the Main Hall. I will be there shortly."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Princess Celestia turned back to Twilight Sparkle. "I'm sorry, my student. You need to hear these things, but it would be unfair to my subjects to put our private discussion ahead of affairs of state like this. I hope you understand."

Twilight bit back her frustration, and forced a smile. "...Of course, Princess. I understand."

Celestia smiled. "Good. Please...if you head to your old chambers, I will be there as soon as I can. We can continue our talk then."



After the Princess departed, Twilight Sparkle slowly trotted down the tower's winding stairs, across several broad hallways lined with tapestries, paintings and ancient suits of barding, and out into the early evening air. She trotted up the exterior steps of her old tower home, and magicked open the blue wooden doors.

The place was almost as Twilight had left it, but the room's tall burgundy curtains were drawn, covering the west wall's picture window and leaving the room somewhat gloomy.

A deep purple Alicorn with a pale blue mane sat at a desk in the middle of the library-like chamber's raised study; open books on history, science, poetry, magical theory and astronomy sat on the wooden table's surface, as did a small clockwork orrery, a pot of ink and several quills, a sheaf of parchment, a half-eaten bowl of dried flowers, and a well-worn abacus.

"Oh...*it's you*," said the Alicorn, magicking a blue-framed pince-nez off of her face and setting it down on the cluttered table.

"*Princess Luna...*!" said Twilight. "I didn't expect to find you—"

"—*in my own room?*" interjected Luna, raising an eyebrow.

Twilight froze, momentarily dumbstruck. "But...this wasn't—"

The Alicorn interrupted again. "—Not my *original* room, of course. That was in the old Royal Castle. But my sister had this tower built *just for me* when this palace was constructed. She set it aside from the noisy hustle and bustle of the palace's main halls so I could sleep through the day in peace, filled it with books on all of my favourite topics, made sure it had a commanding view of the night sky, and put in an hourglass counting down the time until my...*release*. She kept it pristine and ready to use for more than nine centuries. I suppose she thought it would help to *appease* me. A *welcome-home present* for her poor, misguided little sister."

Luna stood, and trotted over to the purple Unicorn. She was taller than Twilight, but thinner. She had a lean – almost gangly – build, her feathered wings almost totally covering the sides of her slender torso. But even so, her presence was only slightly less overwhelming than Celestia's. At a distance, she seemed a bookish recluse; up close, she was a Goddess of the Night.

"Of course, all that changed when *you* came along. She gave you this place without a second thought. She thinks I don't know, but I was *watching* from up there – every single night." She loomed over Twilight, casting a darker shadow over her in the already-dark room. "I moved in here yesterday – I haven't gotten around to telling her. I trust she won't mind that I spoiled her *surprise*." Luna looked down her nose at Twilight. "But where *are* my manners? Was there something you *wanted*?"

Twilight shifted from side to side, uncomfortably. "P-Princess Celestia told me to wait for her here. She wanted to tell me more about the..." Twilight lowered her voice. "...*the Elements of Harmony*."

Luna chuckled. "Ah...I see. So she hasn't told you about the curse, yet."

Twilight's jaw dropped. "*The curse*?"

"Oh *my*, yes. Magic that powerful doesn't come without a *price*, you know. The Elements force their bearers to become living embodiments of their virtues – and *nomortal* Pony can be expected to personify such a *perfect* state. The ones that try are *slowly. Driven. Mad*."

Twilight's eyes shone. "*That can't be true...*" she whispered, but her thoughts darted back to the last she'd seen of her friends: a fierce brawl, punctuated by screams, shouts and tears.

"*I'm sorry*," said Luna, her tone making it abundantly clear that she wasn't.

Luna's revelation stripped Twilight of what little endurance her resurrection had granted her; she slid down onto her knees, and hot tears slid down her face. "*What have I done...*?" she whispered.

Behind the two Ponies, the setting sun shone into the room through the thin gap between the curtains. The shaft of light fell on them both.

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In the palace's opulent Main Hall, Princess Celestia sat at the head of a vastly long wooden table surrounded by visiting dignitaries and local gentry.

At the far end of the table sat the Tsarevna of Stalliongrad. The demure scarlet Unicorn's long golden-yellow mane was restrained by a simple gold wire tiara, and a similarly-designed yoke adorned her long neck.

The two heads of state were discussing trade routes, importation laws, and the synchronization of the lengths of their respective seasons.

Celestia paused in mid-sentence as a warm yellow glow flashed across her eyes, bringing with it a flicker of insight; she stifled a gasp.

The Princess stood, spreading her wings for silence. The room obeyed in a heartbeat.

"Прости, царевна," said Celestia, switching to her visitor's native language as a sign of respect. "но я должна вас покинуть. *Тысяча извинений!*"

Without waiting for a reply, the Princess gave a slight bow and trotted out of the room.

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"*Shhh...*there, there...it's alright. Don't cry..." Luna rested a sapphire-shod front hoof across Twilight's heaving shoulders. Her voice was as soft and gentle as crescent moonlight. "*I know...*" I know what it's like to be swept up in my sister's plans. To be a *pawn*. You couldn't have known what you were getting yourself – and your *friends* – into..."

Twilight sobbed in despair, covering her eyes with her hooves; she knew that the Alicorn was being insincere, but the thought that she had *condemned* the first friends that she had ever made her heart break nonetheless.

Luna grinned a small, vindictive grin. "...And when they're gone, you'll have to live with that you did to them forev—"

A blinding explosion of sunlight erupted in front of the two Ponies. In its wake appeared Princess Celestia, her full resplendent glory unrestrained.

Luna hopped backward and cringed, averting her sensitive eyes from the Princess' searing light. "B-big sister...!" she stammered from behind the shade of one of her wings. "I found the room you made me! It's *wonderful*—" Celestia cut her off:

"Little sister, you go too far." Celestia stomped a gold-shod front hoof; the curtains jerked open and let in the full light of the sunset. "I *know* you haven't forgiven me for...*what happened*...a thousand years ago, but Twilight Sparkle is *not* to blame!"

Luna gritted her teeth. She leapt to her hooves and faced her sister, her eyes streaming and squinting nearly shut from the glare. "*Isn't she?* It's right there on her *flanks*! She's the Sixth! The Spark! She's the one you picked to use the Elements because you were too *afraid* to do it again!"

"*ENOUGH!*" Celestia's voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling. "Your quarrel is with *me*, sister. If you are going to let hatred back into your heart, *then direct it at me alone!*"

Luna's lower lip quivered. "*You know I can't...*" she whispered. She spread her wings, and took off toward the door. The scattered possessions on the tabletop glowed, hovered, and swarmed after her like so many startled birds.

As the door slammed behind her sister, Celestia let her blazing glow subside. She trotted over to her protégé, who was still sobbing curled up on the floor, her hooves covering her face.

"I am sorry you had to endure that, my student," said Celestia, her voice softening. "My sister has a great depth of feeling, but she has never had much skill at expressing it. It sometimes pushes her to make...*unwise*...decisions." Celestia looked over to the large, gilt hourglass nearby for a moment.

"*Is it true?*" asked Twilight, her voice barely above a whisper. "Are the Elements of Harmony what's making them suffer? Are they all going to...to..."

The white Alicorn sat down next to her student. "Yes...and no. What is making them suffer is the *lack* of an Element, Twilight Sparkle. The five lesser Elements yearn to unite in Harmony – to support and foster the *sixth*."

"Magic..." whispered Twilight.

"Yes, my student. They *need* you. Not just your presence, but your wisdom. Your guidance. You give them *purpose*. Without you, the Elements' urgings stretch them beyond their limits, and they collapse like an arch missing its keystone. Magic is at the heart of friendship, Twilight. It's what turns familiar faces into lifelong companions. Magic is what makes it...*complete*. As bearers of Elements of Harmony, your friends represent that companionship, and *you* represent that Magic."

The possibility of hope bolstered the purple Unicorn. "*A keystone....* So I can help them, just by being there for them?" She frowned. "But I do that *all the time!* At least one of us has some crazy crisis once a week – or more! I'm *always* helping them!"

"You mustn't just *wait* for trouble to come to you, Twilight. Some problems lurk beneath the surface. I have watched you every day. I have seen how much time you still spend alone in your library. Friendships are like gardens – they can grow wild and messy if they are not tended to."

Twilight looked away in shame. "I know...but sometimes it feels like there's never enough *time*."

Something in what Twilight said seemed to cut the Princess deeply; she shed a single crystal-clear tear. "Oh, my most faithful student. *You have all the time in the world, now.*"

Twilight's brow furrowed in thought for a moment, and then a look of inspiration dawned on her features. "Princess Luna said '*when they're gone*, you'll have to live with that you did to them *forever*'...did she mean...?"

Celestia took a slow, deep breath. "Yes, Twilight. Just as the Elements have pushed your companions to personify their chosen virtues, you too have become like Magic: versatile, powerful...and *eternal*."

The confirmation struck Twilight like a physical blow. "I...I'm...*immortal*?"

"Yes. Like we Alicorns, you are as much Magic as flesh now, and precious little in this world can do you any lasting harm. The Elements will grant your friends health and long life, but you will live as long as you care to, the centuries passing no harder than the minutes. It is a great gift, but also a great burden."

Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. Her head swayed drunkenly for a moment; her eyes rolled up, and she knew no more.

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Twilight was sitting in a wheelchair in Ponyville, watching Pinkie Pie from afar, when a clumsy delivery-mare dropped the majority of a moving wagon's contents on top of her. A falling anvil landed squarely on her unprotected skull...but she was only dazed.

She was in her library, focusing on an untested spell to grant Earth Ponies wings. As the spell engulfed her fellow Unicorn an overload of magical feedback exploded, sending Twilight tumbling. She landed poorly, and her neck twisted at an unnatural angle...before it popped back into alignment.

She was in a field of lush purple-red berries, channeling foul Neighcromantic energy in an effort to save one friend's life by stealing the essence of another. In her haste and her concern for the two Pegasi, she hadn't even bothered to worry about the years of life the spell would cost her...or would have cost her, that is.

She was standing on the edge of the Ponyville spa's hot-tub. A riot of frizzy pink mane and blue eyes burst from the bowl of sponges next to her, and shrieked:

"FOREVER!"

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Twilight awoke with a start, jerking into a sitting position.

She was in a huge, soft bed, covered in luxurious silken sheets and pillows in various shades of pastel pink, blue and green.

The bedroom was enormous; its purple and blue marble walls soared to a vaulted ceiling that was almost out of sight. The windows reached from the floor to that same lofty height, bathing the room in warm morning light. The walls were decorated with antique oil paintings of unfamiliar Alicorns, tapestries depicting the moon and stars or Pony victory over Griffons and Dragons, and the occasional relief carving of a stylized sun.

Celestia's personal bedroom! Twilight hopped out of the bed, and hurriedly magicked its sumptuous sheets back into order.

"Calm down, my student. You could have kept resting, you know."

Twilight pivoted, and saw the Princess sitting on a pillow near a sizeable hearth. She had spread a row of six decorated cards in a semicircle on the floor in front of her. The rest of the deck sat nearby.

"Oh! Um, good morning Princess." Twilight trotted over, a feeling of awkwardness stiffening her gait. The revelations that had driven her to faint still weighed heavily on her mind; she had so many *questions*. The first one that came to mind, though, was: "What are those?"

As Twilight drew nearer, she could see that the cards were labeled in the festive glyphs of cursive Pony writing: *The Foal*, *The Tradesmare*, *The Charger*, *The Jewel*, and *The High Ritesmare* were turned to face her, and *The Enchantress* faced the Princess.

"This is the Equestrian Tarot. In ancient times, ritesmares would use cards like these to read Ponies' fortunes. These six cards in particular represent the Elements of Harmony...and they will show you how to save your friends."

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PART TWO: RESTORATION

The golden Pegasus-drawn chariot cut through the clear morning skies over Ponyville, and arced down into the town square for a landing. Its lone dark-maned purple Unicorn occupant hopped down onto the street, and nodded appreciatively to her chauffeurs. They whickered proudly, and then took off once more.

The Unicorn trotted purposefully through the streets of Ponyville – she was a mare on a mission. As she turned a corner, she almost bumped into a frizzy-maned pink Earth Pony carrying a fireplace bellows in her mouth.

Pinkie Pie let the bellows drop and unleashed a tremendous gasp, the force of which propelled her several feet upwards.

"*TWILIGHT!* You're back!"

Twilight Sparkle smiled, and gave a tiny nod. "Hello, Pinkie."

"Wow! Wowie-wow! You were gone for *two days*, and now you're back! This is great! Super great! *Super-duper* great! You know what this calls for...?" The speed with which Pinkie spoke left her nearly breathless.

Twilight held up a front hoof. "Wait, Pinkie. I'm pretty tired. Why don't you and I hold off on the party for now, and just go get a grain smoothie? You know...a nice, quiet, casual chat. You can catch me up on what's happened while I've been gone. My treat?"

Pinkie Pie's enormous smile shrank to a more modest grin. "...Okie dokie."

A few minutes later, Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle sat atop a grassy hill on the outskirts of Ponyville, facing the town. Pinkie Pie noisily sipped her smoothie through a complicated purple curly-straw.

"Everypony was so scared after seeing Celestia get all—" Pinkie Pie looked around cautiously, and lowered her voice. "*—grumpy*, that we pretty much *galloped* straight home. No pony even *tried* to keep arguing, or fighting, or anything." Pinkie Pie took another loud sip. "We haven't really seen each other much since then...well, at least *I* haven't seen anypony."

Twilight nodded slowly. "That might be for the best...it seems like things were getting a bit...*heated*, before. Maybe everypony *needed* a chance to calm down."

Pinkie Pie frowned. "Yeah..." She perked up suddenly. "Wait...! You have to tell me what happened to *you*! The way you both *poofed* away, I thought you were gonna end up *banished* for sure!"

Twilight looked away. "The Princess...taught me a lesson. One I needed to learn. It was..." She trailed off; words failed her.

Pinkie Pie's brow knitted in worry. "*Oh no!* So she *did* punish you! I *knew* it! Did you get *burned*? *Beaten*? *Battered*? *Baked*? *Sliced*? *Diced*? *Sliced twice*? *Covered in mice*? *Given lice*? *Sliced thrice*? *Over-spiced*? *Put on ice*?" Pinkie's hooves clapped to her cheeks in horror; she gasped for breath.

Twilight Sparkle shook her head vehemently. "No! It was nothing like that! ...It was still pretty scary though. Even here in Ponyville, everypony knows me as the Princess' student. When she got that angry, it felt like she might stop being my teacher. I was *terrified* of that. It felt like – I don't know – like if I wasn't her protégé, Ponies wouldn't even recognize me...like I'd be *no pony*. *I know there's more to me than that, but the image that's built up around me is so strong, it's as if...*"

Pinkie's pale blue eyes were wide and watery. "...*as if you can't help but try to live up to it?*" she whispered, uncharacteristically still and quiet.

Twilight nodded. "But things turned out alright. She was a lot less mad than she seemed, and the more I thought about it, the more I knew that you all would still know me – *and care about me* – no matter what I was...or wasn't."

Pinkie Pie bit her lower lip, and sniffed back tears. "*H-how did you...?*"

Twilight smiled. "Like I said...the Princess taught me a lesson. I realized that I've been taking all of your friendships somewhat for granted, and I decided to do something about it. Once I made that decision, it all came down to a mix of observation, deduction, and a little magic. For example: you have dark circles under your eyes, you breathe quickly and shallowly even when you're at rest, and you blink a lot. It's obvious to anypony who actually *looks* at you that you're *exhausted*. Clearly, what you need is some leisure time. Maybe a *party*."

Pinkie's heart sank like a stone. "But..." Tears slid down her cheeks. "N-no...it *can't* be...I thought...I thought you..." she sobbed.

Twilight put her front hooves firmly on Pinkie's shoulders, and stared deeply into her eyes. "Pinkie...*what is a party for?*"

Pinkie sniffled. "F-for...fu-un..." she whimpered.

"That's right. So if you haven't been having any fun...*you haven't been partying*."

Pinkie's eyes nearly crossed in confusion. "I...I haven't?"

"Most certainly not. And as Ponyville's primary Pony party purveyor, it is your precious purpose to party properly. Right?"

Pinkie wiped her eyes with a foreleg. "Y-yeah..."

"Well, then! *Clearly* you don't have to even *try* to have another party until you can do it justice. A party's not a party if the party-Pony's heart isn't in it. The only party you need to work on...is one in *here*." Twilight pressed a hoof to Pinkie's chest. "The rest of them can wait as long as they have to."

"*Oh, Twilight...thank you!*" she squeaked and pulled Twilight into a hug, giggling through her tears.

The party balloon Cutie Marks on Pinkie Pie's flanks drew into sharp relief, brightening until they almost glowed.

*The Foal is unflinchingly merry,
Her world full of laughter and song.
But that life of joy has made her wary
Of speaking up when things go wrong.*

.....

Soon after, Twilight Sparkle trotted and Pinkie Pie bounded down the dirt road on the edge of Ponyville; ahead, the vast spread of farm-Pony plots spread out for miles. They turned down the path to the closest farm: Sweet Apple Acres.

The pair skirted the edge of the property, heading for the farmhouse. Farther down the lane, they spotted a Stetson-wearing orange Earth Pony speaking to her fiery-maned neighbor.

"Just give me a second, Pinkie," said Twilight, trotting on ahead.

Pinkie Pie nodded. While she waited, she surreptitiously jabbed a nearby tree with a back leg, and snapped up the resulting fallen apple.

"...I know it musta stung ya somethin' fierce, and I really *am* sorry, Carrot Top." Applejack turned slightly away, crossing her front hooves anxiously. "Can ya forgive me?"

"You Apples ain't never been anythin' but fine neighbours in the past. Apology accepted." The yellow Earth Pony smiled, and then trotted away.

Applejack let out a sigh of relief, which she sucked right back in with a gasp as her gaze fell on the purple Unicorn approaching her.

"Peel 'n' core me! *TWILIGHT!*" Applejack surged forward and took up Twilight Sparkle's front hooves in her own. "Shewt, I worried y'all were *never* comin' back!"

"It's good to see you, Applejack."

"So what happened? I ain't ever *seen* the Princess so mad before. Shucks, I figured we were all bucked fer sure!" Applejack winced. "Pardon m'language."

"Princess Celestia just reminded me of my duties." Twilight sagged. "It can be ...*difficult*... sometimes, being her pupil."

Applejack released Twilight's hooves. "Yeah...?"

Twilight nodded. "Having powerful magic is something I was born with, but that hasn't made it easy. Even at the School for Gifted Unicorns, everypony knew I was...*different*. The Princess hadn't taken a personal student in something like a hundred years, and it made me stand out no matter how hard I tried to blend in. Sometimes, I *wished* I was just...normal."

Applejack projected an air of nonchalance, but her words betrayed her:

"Huh. That sounds *familiar*—" She stomped the ground. "*Rough!* That sounds rough."

"It was, but after a time I came to realize that I couldn't change who I was, and that the *Ponies who care about me wouldn't want me to lie to myself*. Just like how I like you the way *you* are, Applejack."

The orange Earth Pony froze, and then swallowed hard. "*The way...*? Wh-what way d'you mean, Twilight?" A sheen of sweat appeared on Applejack's brow.

"You *know...*" said Twilight coyly. "...Strong. Hard-working. Forthright. Honest. Proud. The very *model* of a dependable Earth Pony – the backbone of Equestria." She smiled. "I'm *honoured* to have you as a friend."

Applejack blushed. "Yer too kind! But, what about..." Applejack waited for her free-willed mouth to force her to blurt out the rest of the shame-inducing sentence...but no urge came. She stayed quiet.

"What else matters?" asked Twilight sunnily. "Would anything else change those things I mentioned?"

Applejack slowly smiled. "...No - I s'pose it wouldn't. Would'ja care fer some fritters?"

"Absolutely—"

"*YUM!*" exclaimed Pinkie, suddenly appearing from behind Twilight.

Applejack and Twilight laughed, and Pinkie soon joined in.

As the three headed for the farm, Applejack leaned in close and whispered to Twilight: "*How did ya know?*"

"AJ..." Twilight whispered back. "I attended an *all-fillies* school; Pinkie's not the only one with a *sense* for some things."

When the trio trotted into the farmhouse, the apple Cutie Marks on Applejack's flanks shone riper and redder than the finest produce from her farm.

***The Tradesmare** labours without tiring,
Her honest words a bond of honour.
Not one for plots or conspiring,
Secrets weigh heavy upon her.*

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Twilight Sparkle hopped out of the pink and purple hot-air balloon's basket onto the pliant white cloudstuff that served as building material for Pegasi. She smiled; the spell

that allowed wingless Ponies to walk on clouds was working as well as ever. She turned back to the balloon's other two occupants.

"I won't be long. Will you two be okay waiting here?"

"You bet!" said Applejack and Pinkie Pie in unison.

While Twilight trotted over to the cloud-mansion's front door, Applejack turned to Pinkie.

"Say, while we got a minute...I wanted to tell ya how *sorry* I am 'bout wreckin' yer room th'other day, sugarcube. ...And scarin a yellow stripe up yer back with m'hollerin'....And whuppin' the tar outta Dash while she was tryin' to help you. ...*And kickin' you.*" The orange Earth Pony rubbed a front hoof across her other foreleg sheepishly.

"Aww, that's okay," said Pinkie, smiling. "Fixing everything in my room was like solving a great big jigsaw puzzle. I *love* puzzles!"

"Oh. Uhh...well, great, then," said Applejack, a look of consternation on her face.

Meanwhile, twilight knocked on the door. After a lengthy delay it slowly creaked inward, and a fatigued blue Pegasus with a colourful mane peered out.

"Twilight?" said Rainbow Dash, her voice scratchier than usual. "Awesome! Come on in."

Twilight followed her friend inside, but then stopped in the entryway. Her jaw dropped.

The interior of the house was a disaster. Creased and dog-eared weather planning charts were strewn across the floors and pinned up on the walls. Used dishes were piled up in corners and on what few chart-free surfaces remained. Here and there, hoof-tracks in liquid rainbow stained the floors.

Rainbow Dash was struggling to don a heavy pair of tinted protective goggles attached by an array of straps to a saddle holding a brass tank labeled with a multi-coloured exclamation point. A row of seven metal nozzles jutted from the rear of the tank.

Stiffness, fatigue and the last of a few unhealed bruises had robbed Dash of a fair measure of her range of motion; with nearly every bend and flex, she winced in pain.

"I was just – *nng!* – getting ready to go out and put up a rainbow, but I can *totally* make time to hear how things went down – *rrg!* – with the Princess."

Twilight trotted over to the blue Pegasus, and magicked the rainbow-spraying rig into a better fit. "Have you been taking extra weather shifts, Dash?" Twilight tried to sound casual, but the concern in her voice showed.

"Thanks! Yeah...I've been doing a few odd jobs, covering for sick Pegasi – that kind of thing. The gang hasn't really gotten together since you, y'know, *left*, and I hate to feel like I'm wasting time."

"What about Fluttershy?"

Rainbow Dash gulped. "I, uh, I haven't seen her either. After that fight outside the library, I figured I'd give her a chance to calm down." She ducked down and picked up the control bit for the rainbow tank with her mouth. She gave it an experimental bite, and a tiny spritz of colour puffed out of the nozzles. "*Sho terr ree...wha' hff'ned?*" she said, muffled by the bit.

Twilight rubbed the back of her neck with a front hoof. "Well, the whole thing was pretty *complicated*, right from the start. It felt really *awkward* to be stuck in the middle between you guys and the Princess. She's been so *kind* to me – *I owe her so much that it felt wrong not to take her side, even though I felt like she was being unreasonable*. You know what I mean?"

"Yhh!" Dash spit out the bit, and turned away. "...I mean, sure, yeah – I guess so." She looked up at a complex cirrus pattern diagram pinned on the wall. "So...what did you do?"

"I called her on it. I realized that *standing up to someone and saying how you really feel isn't the same thing as betraying their friendship*. Sometimes, the best way you can have someone's back is to face them down." Twilight paused. "Does that make any sense?"

Dash sighed, and the gesture seemed to release weeks of pent-up tension along with her breath. She turned back to face Twilight; the lenses of her goggles were misty. "...*Totally*. Thanks, Twilight. ...For coming by, I mean!" Dash smiled.

"Any time, Dash. I'd better go, though – I don't want to keep you from your work!"

"Yeah..." Dash shifted side to side. "You know...maybe I should take a break." She tugged at the release strap, and the rainbow rig dropped to the floor.

"Great! AJ and Pinkie are outside - I'm gathering up the whole gang. You can come along!"

"Cool!"

As Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash trotted out into the sunlight, Dash's multi-hued lightning-bolt Cutie Marks shone like polished glass.

*The Charger races ever forward,
Full of vim naught can dispel.*

*Loyal, stubborn and straightforward,
She'd follow a friend to Pony Hell.*

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Rainbow Dash led the way back down to Ponyville, while her Unicorn and Earth Pony friends followed in the balloon. As they descended through the sparse cloud cover, the sounds and smells of Ponyville rose up to meet them: Fresh baking. Blossoms. Hoofbeats. Songs.

The balloon's basket touched down outside of Carousel Boutique. Near the ostentatious shop's front entrance, a Unicorn covered in layers of patched but well-sewn rags was magicking a hammer to nail up a wooden sign on the door lintel:

**F O R S A L E:
FABULOUS SHOP FULL OF
DRESSES, ACCESSORIES
AND THE LIKE. IF INTERESTED, PLEASE
SEE STORE OWNER AND PROPRIETOR,
RARITY**

The three Ponies climbed out of the balloon, while Dash alighted on a nearby fencepost. Twilight Sparkle trotted toward the shop, but then paused and turned to face the others.

"This looks bad...but I think we got here just in time." She pondered for a moment.
"You'd better wait here...I don't think she'd want everypony to see her like this."

Twilight's three companions nodded and murmured in agreement.

While Twilight trotted toward the Unicorn in the homeless wretch ensemble, Applejack turned to Rainbow Dash. Dash noticed, and hopped down off of the fence to face her eye to eye.

"Dash, I—" Rainbow Dash cut her off unintentionally with her own start: "AJ, listen—"

"You go," said Dash.

"I just wanted to say that I hope there ain't no bad blood between us. I was in a powerful odd way these past few days, and I weren't thinkin' none too clearly. I can't believe what a foal I was. I know y'all don't...see *me*...like I see you, but If I lost you as a friend as well, I'd just..." Applejack looked down in shame.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Yeah, well I didn't really try too hard to talk you down, either. We're still cool. And plus, Fluttershy kicked your butt – that's punishment enough in my book!" Dash gave a wry smile.

Applejack gawked, her heartache momentarily forgotten. "She sure as sugar *did not!* She bushwacked me, an' pulled me offa th'ground before I could peep. No way that's fair!"

"Oh? Does your 'no wings' policy go for ambushes, too?"

The two Ponies stared each other down, forehead to forehead. Pinkie Pie was about to intervene, when the two both smirked, snorted, and broke out laughing.

At the same time, Twilight Sparkle trotted over to the rag-swaddled Unicorn. She heaved a deep, theatrical sigh as Twilight approached, and sat down heavily on the path in front of the shop's door.

"You're too late," she muttered. "It's all over...I haven't a bit to my name. All I can do is sell my –" She choked up. "*–beautiful shop...*"

"Rarity, I *tried* to tell you earlier," said Twilight, kneeling down next to her dejected friend. "If you need money, *why don't you sell some gems?*"

Rarity gasped. "Oh, I *couldn't!* I could *never* be so greedy as to deprive my customers of the finest in jeweled fabulosity! You might as well ask Applejack to sell her...*rope...thing.*"

"Lasso."

"Whatever."

Twilight sighed in exasperation. "*And I was doing so well...*" she said, under her breath.

"Beg pardon?"

"Nothing..." Twilight looked around.

A twinkling from a nearby trash bin caught her eye. She trotted over to it. "Wait...what about *these* gems? Did you throw these *away?*" She stirred her hooves through the trash; it was mostly gemstones and fabric remnants.

Rarity wrinkled her nose. "Of course, dah-ling. They're all *flawed*. Who would want *them?*"

Twilight magicked up a smooth red sphere. "...What's wrong with this one?"

"It isn't *clear* – there's an inclusion all through it. I tried to polish it, but the problem was *inside* it."

Twilight stared. "*Rarity*...this is a—" Twilight's horn flickered brighter for a moment. "—thirty, maybe thirty-one carat cabochon-cut corundum crystal with a six-point asterism!"

Rarity stared blankly.

Twilight groaned. "It's a *STAR RUBY*, Rarity!" she shouted. "It's *INCREDIBLY* valuable!"

"*Valuable*...?" Rarity's hood-shaded eyes brightened for a moment. "But it isn't *perfect*!"

Twilight smiled. "*It's the imperfection that makes it valuable*. Yes, it's not as clear as it could be on the inside, but *when you look at it the right way, the worth of what's inside it becomes obvious*." She angled the gem in the sunlight; the rutile inclusions in the stone caught the light, releasing a brilliant star-shaped gleam.

The star reflected in Rarity's eyes. "My *goodness*...! I...I never saw..." She swallowed. "How much...?"

"If you sold it in Canterlot, this stone alone could buy every book in my library." Twilight magicked up a blue diamond and a yellow sapphire from the bin, bringing them over to float with the ruby. "Add these as well, and you could buy every book in *Princess Celestia's* library!"

Rarity pulled back her hood; underneath, her purple mane was as immaculately-coiffed as ever. "Oh, Twilight...! I'm saved! My *Boutique* is saved!" She galloped in place, squealing and giggling. Her rags fell away. She magicked the blue diamond out of Twilight's arcane grasp, and slid its sharpest point down the sign she'd nailed up. Half of the sign fell away, leaving it reading:

**F O R
FABULOUS
DRESSES
AND THE LIKE
SEE STORE OWNER
RARITY**

"Hellooooo!" Rarity waved to her other friends, still waiting over by the balloon. "I have the most *wonderful* news! We simply *must* celebrate with a makeover – my treat!"

Twilight slapped a front hoof to her forehead. "Rarity..."

"What? Just because I've had some profound moment of realization about my personal value in others' eyes doesn't mean I can't still appreciate the *finer* things in life. I'm a Pony of means and distinction!" She shook her head, sending her coiled mane bouncing. As she turned to trot over to her friends her jewel Cutie Marks glittered, bright as any star.

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"Terrified! That's why I'm out here! I said if she was so worried, I could send a letter to the Princess so she could apologize. That's when she panicked, called me a spy, and chained me up out here." He reached into the den, and pulled out a water dish and a clay bowl of glittering stones. "I've been living on *gems and water!*"

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Spike...you *always* live on gems and water."

"Yeah, but these are *semiprecious*! Moss agate, garnet – even *quartz*!" Spike rattled the bowl of uncut stone for emphasis and stuck out his tongue in disgust.

"You poor thing," said Twilight, her mild amusement at war with her concern for her friend and her assistant. "Dash? I think we'd better both go have a talk with Fluttershy." Rainbow Dash nodded sternly.

As the two Ponies trotted down the path to Fluttershy's door, Applejack turned away in silence while Rarity sat magicking daisies into a chain and Pinkie Pie experimentally swallowed a smooth rose quartz pebble from Spike's bowl.

Twilight knocked on Fluttershy's door with a front hoof; the only answer was a chorus of birdcalls.

When a second knock produced much the same result, Twilight ignited her horn and magicked the lock open. She gently pulled open the door.

The interior of the cottage was packed from floor to ceiling with birdhouses, kennels, cages and boxes, all crowded with Fluttershy's animal friends. Dozens of tiny eyes shone in the shadows.

Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle trotted into the cramped front hall single file, the sunlight from the open door casting one long, blended shadow ahead of them.

As the tall, horned, winged shadow reached the middle of the room, a piercing scream erupted from deeper inside the cottage:

"AAAAAALICOOOORN!!" A streak of pink and yellow slalomed between the columns of caged animals, and shot up the stairs. Despite Fluttershy's frantic speed, Twilight caught a glimpse of the Pegasus' speckled, distorted Cutie Mark.

"Oh no...!" Twilight gasped. "Dash...did you see her Cutie Mark?"

"Sort of..." replied Dash. "It looked like she's got some sorta *bugs* on it. Maybe she got fleas from all these animals?"

Twilight shook her head gravely. "It's not fleas, Dash."

"What do you mean?"

"When Apple Bloom and her little friends kept pestering all of us about getting their Cutie Marks, it inspired me to do some reading on the subject. If I'm right, Fluttershy has a *very* serious condition: Cutie Mark Decay Disorder."

Rainbow Dash's brow furrowed in worry. "What does that mean?"

"It's an inherited condition where emotional stress starts to *unravel* a Pony's bond to their Cutie Mark. As the Mark loses its shape, the Pony loses their sense of self. They can become irritable, withdrawn, paranoid - even delusional or violent."

"*Stress*? Oh my gosh...did I make this happen to her?" Guilt twisted Dash's features.

"No...! *No*," said Twilight emphatically. "Something else triggered it - something earlier. I'm sure of it." *Something like an Element of Harmony*, she mentally added.

Twilight headed toward the stairs, weaving around the cages. She magicked up an unoccupied wooden bird perch as she went. "Follow me, Dash! What's important now is that we help her."

The pair followed the sounds of Fluttershy's panicked ranting into her darkened bedroom. From the glow of Twilight's horn, a quivering pale pink tail was visible sticking out from under the bed. As they drew closer the light revealed Fluttershy's hindquarters, and a clear view of the ragged butterflies on her flanks.

Twilight looked away, sadly. "This isn't good. It *is* CMDD."

"What do we do now?" asked Dash, her voice full of concern.

"She needs magical treatment *immediately*," said Twilight. Her horn glowed brighter, and the top quarter of the perch broke free; Twilight discarded the rest. "I need you to pull her out of there, and hold her down."

Dash gawked. "Wh-what? Why? What are you gonna do?"

Twilight squinted in concentration; a tiny crackling sphere of purple-white energy formed at the tip of her horn. "I'm going to shock her."

"*Storm therapy*? No...! NO WAY! That's for madponies! She doesn't need *that* – she's just a little anxious!" said Dash, waving her front hooves in an outward sweep. "It's too dangerous! Pegasi almost *never* survive it!"

"That's because you do it with *clouds* in midflight, and you usually fall. We're on the *ground* now – it's not the same!"

"I am NOT gonna help you zap her!" Dash interposed herself between Twilight and her fellow Pegasus.

Twilight met her friend's determined maroon stare head-on. "Dash...when you overdosed on that Nightshade, Fluttershy was willing to stomp on your ribs and fill your

lungs like party balloons because I told her it would help keep you alive. She *trusted* me. I *know* you trust me, too. *Please*...help me do this."

Rainbow Dash closed her eyes and sighed, hanging her head. When she looked up, she gave a tiny nod.

"NOOOO! Dash, DON'T! It doesn't WORK! They tried it on my mother and she DIED!" Fluttershy screamed and cried in terror as Rainbow Dash dragged her out from under the bed by her tail and leaped on top of her, holding her down. "She's working for HER! She's trying to kill me, too!"

"Your mom...?" Rainbow Dash's grip slackened slightly. "You never told me..."

Fluttershy bucked and thrashed around, nearly escaping Dash's grip. Her distraction broken, Rainbow Dash fought to get her back under control. Fluttershy continued to scream. "I'm scared, Dash! Don't do this! I don't want to die! Let me go! Let m-MMNG!" Twilight magicked the perch's cylindrical wooden top between Fluttershy's jaws like a bit. Unable to speak, she wordlessly sobbed around the wooden gag.

Dash turned to Twilight. "Twilight...are you *sure*?"

Twilight nodded firmly. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "If I don't, she'll only get worse." She bent her head to touch the tip of her crackling horn to Fluttershy's damaged Cutie Mark.

With a bright flash and an electrical *snap* Fluttershy violently convulsed, surging to her hooves and nearly bucking Rainbow Dash off of her back. The wooden perch split. As her seizing muscles loosened, Fluttershy collapsed in a dead faint. Rainbow Dash stood up, and backed away.

Before the two other Ponies' eyes, purple-white motes of energy chased the swarming distortions on Fluttershy's flanks, consuming them in tiny flares before winking out themselves. As the last of the gnat-like specks vanished, her original butterfly Cutie Marks drew back into focus.

A few moments later, Fluttershy stirred. She half-opened her eyes, raised her head, and squinted to make out her friends in the dim light. She spat out the broken pieces of the perch. "*R-rainbow Dash...? Twilight?*" Her voice was even softer than usual. "W-what happened? What are you doing here? I...I don't remember, I...it's so *dark*!" She struggled to get to her hooves; Rainbow Dash rushed over to support her.

"Twilight's back from Canterlot, and she came to thank you for taking care of Spike and Owlowiscious for her while she was gone. *Right*, Twilight?" Dash shot Twilight a stern sidelong glance.

"Thanks for your help!" said Twilight, taking the hint. "And thanks for covering your windows and bringing in some friends to help make Owlowiscious feel welcome!"

"Oh...um, you're welcome...?" said Fluttershy tilting her head in confusion.

"I *mean* it," insisted Twilight. "No pony asked you to do it, but you did your best in a difficult situation. I know *it isn't easy being a caregiver* – I have enough trouble keeping Spike, Owlowiscious and my books safe! But you did a *wonderful* job."

Fluttershy smiled weakly. "Thank you for saying so," she said.

"Twilight..." Dash shifted uncomfortably. "Could you go wait for us outside? I need to talk to Fluttershy. *Alone*."

Twilight nodded silently, and trotted out of the room.

"Shy, I know you've been through a lot lately, but...I just wanna say...I mean you deserve to know, I..." Dash paced nervously, at a loss for how to continue.

"...*You don't love me*," Fluttershy whispered.

"Yes!" Dash caught herself. "No...! I mean, you mean a *lot* to me, and I owe you *everything*. But..." she sagged. "*But I don't love you*. I *wanted* to, and after those berries and that magic of Twilight's, I thought I *did*, but..." Dash sank lower, her front hooves splaying. Her nose nearly touched the floor. "I'm sorry..."

Fluttershy trotted over and rested her head against Dash's shoulder. "I know. Maybe part of me knew from the beginning. But it just seemed so *real*...I couldn't admit it to myself. I wanted you to love me so *badly*. I'm sorry, too." She quietly wept into Rainbow Dash's multi-coloured mane.

Dash raised up her head and pulled Fluttershy into a hug. "Someday you'll find a filly to love you back," she said, fighting to keep her voice from cracking, "and they're gonna treat you right - or they'll hafta answer to *me*!"

Fluttershy laughed a small, teary laugh. The two held one another in silence for a long moment, and then went to go join the others.

As Dash led her down the stairs, Fluttershy's restored Cutie Marks were as bright and vivid as the butterflies that had once saved her life.

*The High Ritesmare, loved everywhere,
Kindly helps her flock to grow.
But without them soon sinks to despair;
Alone she withers – a flower in snow.*

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Twilight turned in a slow circle, surveying the interior of her library.

Inspired by a resurgent *desire* to party matching her *urge* to do so, Pinkie Pie had decorated the building in a matter of minutes. She and Applejack had provided food and Rarity had fetched a record player. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash had gathered a small bucket of raw rainbows, and painted the ceiling in garish colours. All things considered, the Ponies had assembled a party welcoming Twilight home in record time.

In one corner, Rarity and Pinkie Pie were locked in a pitched cake-eating contest; the Unicorn's progress was severely handicapped by her insistence on using silverware and taking small, dainty mouthfuls. Nevertheless, she seemed to have a surprisingly large appetite.

In the middle of the room Spike danced to the music, wearing his customary lampshade hat. Rainbow Dash danced along, turning aerial somersaults over the tiny Dragon.

In another corner, Applejack and Fluttershy stood near the punchbowl. They seemed to be chatting, but Twilight couldn't make out what they were saying over the music.

"She's real...*graceful*...ain't she?" mused Applejack, her eyes following Dash's musical acrobatics.

Fluttershy nodded. She sighed wistfully.

"...She broke it off, huh?"

Fluttershy's lower lip quivered. She nodded again.

"Shewt, I'm sorry, 'Shy. ...Fer what it's worth, y'all did make a nice lookin' pair."

Fluttershy turned slightly, letting her mane partially hide her face. "*Thanks*."

Applejack cleared her throat. "Listen...I know we've *both* done some mighty regrettable things these past couple o' days, and well, fer my part, I wantcha to know I'm sorry. Sometimes *bein' in love* can make a Pony do some foalish things." Her eyes still followed Dash's dance.

Fluttershy's face emerged from behind her mane. "Applejack...you...?"

Applejack nodded. "Since I first laid eyes on 'er. Though I s'pose you got me beat in that respect, bein' from Cloudsdale an' all."

Realization spread across Fluttershy's face. "She didn't tell me about the fight..."

"Uh-huh. If she'd explained the whole sorry business, she woulda had to tell ya how I felt, and she'd promised not to. Loyal to a *fault*, that Pony."

Fluttershy and Applejack watched Dash in silence for a time. They both sighed at once.

Inspiration brightened Applejack's features. She turned and rummaged in a nearby saddlebag. She brought out a small metal flask, and poured a tiny splash of amber liquid into two punch glasses. The heady, medicinal scent of thoroughly-distilled apples filled the air around them. "T'ain't right bein' down in the dumps durin' a party. Here...this stuff's worked pretty well fer me so far when thoughts o' that fine blue filly have gotten me down. To Rainbow Dash - Bottoms up!"

"*T-to Rainbow Dash!*" Fluttershy picked up the glass in her front hooves and slugged back the shot in tandem with Applejack. After a moment of silent consideration, her eyes skewed in opposite directions, her face flushed, and she coughed violently.

"Woops!" Applejack chuckled, patting Fluttershy on the back. "Prolly shoulda warned ya - that stuff packs a mighty big kick! Big Mac says they oughta name it after me!"

"...It's...*nice*," Fluttershy wheezed.

Meanwhile, Twilight Sparkle magicked up a bottle and a goblet, and began pouring.

"Everypony – I wanted to say something!" Twilight's friends paused in their merrymaking, and turned to face her.

"I would like to propose a toast to all of you: the best friends I've ever had."

"Twilight..." Rarity swallowed a mouthful of cake and raised an importunate hoof.

Twilight set down the bottle. "*Please, just let me finish.* I know I spend a lot of time with my nose in books, but that doesn't mean I'm not interested in what else is happening – or in *you*."

"Twilight..." Applejack trotted forward.

Twilight magicked the filled goblet higher. "*Just a second.* You're all very important to me, and in the future I plan to pay you all a lot more attention. There's only so much time, after all, and I want to spend as much of it as I can with the Ponies who mean the most to me. Cheers!" As Twilight finished her toast, her six-star Cutie Marks, for lack of a better word, *sparkled*.

"TWILIGHT!" Pinkie Pie popped up next to Twilight like a frosting-daubed colt-in-the-box.

"For Celestia's sake, WHAT?" asked Twilight. She took a large gulp from the goblet.

Pinkie Pie grinned broadly. "That's hot sauce again."

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Back in Canterlot, Princess Celestia watched her faithful student frantically drinking from the library's kitchen sink in the glowing reflections of a flickering curtain of magical sunlight. She smiled a small, dignified smile, and magicked the last of the tarot cards back into the deck.

***The Enchantress, though she'll live forever,
Finds loneliness hard to defeat.
Magic can hold one's life together...
But friendship makes it all complete.***