

On a Cross and Arrow

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[All Chapter artworks created by KtKat](#)

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Chapter One

On a Word Misheard



"Spike, can you be a dear and get me 'Rules of Thermodynamics 101?'"

"Sure thing Twilight, hang on."

The lavender mare nodded to her assistant as he rushed off, before turning back to her book. It was a book that she had managed to find only a few minutes ago. A mysterious title labeled 'Exploring the Aether for Fun and Profit'.

She'd already managed to work her way halfway through the volume, her curiosity continually piqued more and more as she delved deeper. It was a traveler's guide, and she was doubly pleased to see that it was aimed AT unicorns, a spell popping up every now and then on the pages.

Some of these, she could see adding to her normal repertoire. The compass spell in particular, she resolved to commit to memory. That would be extremely handy, should she ever wind up inside the Everfree once again. Another, was a 'foodstuff sanitizer'. *Definitely keeping that one.* she

thought to herself, reminded of her one trip outside Equestrian borders to Mexicolit. Never again would she have to suffer Mountezuma's Revenge.

And then finally, her eyes alighted upon a really GOOD one that made her bounce in place in anticipation. It was a teleportation spell, but reading it over, she saw it was significantly more advanced than the one she utilized regularly. This required a ritual. While lengthy and complex, the benefit was that it offered instant travel to any location on the globe, and for the caster to be accompanied by a party of up to 10 ponies at once.

I know ten ponies. she mused. But there are five in particular that I'd love to invite!

It had been then that she had asked her dragon friend to retrieve the physics guide. Transferring 6 ponies over that much distance, in such a short amount of time, was BOUND to create some sort of heat-lash, even in ether form.

Her eyes glanced at the spell that rested below the teleportation one. Sharing the same page was a simple viewing spell... offering glimpses into parallel dimensions. *Very interesting. Exciting even...* she gave it the once over, before adding *...But not very practical. Maybe another time.*

Spike arrived with the tome in-hand. "Here we are Twilight." he spoke, plopping a rather hefty volume next to the unicorn's current book. "Whoosh. Anymore heavy lifting like that, and I'll be as ripped as Applejack."

"There's a disturbing thought." Twilight joked, before her horn lit and the book opened up. Within moments, she double-checked her theories on energy buildup and release, before comparing them with the spell. Yes... *yes, it COULD work! Leylines, of course!*

There was then a slam, as the student announced her next intention. "Spike, pack my bags. I'm going on a trip."

That caught the dragon by surprise. "Wh-what? Trip? B-but Twilight, where're we going?"

"Not 'We' Spike, I need you to remain at the library and keep it running. You're a big dragon now. I have full confidence in you to keep the place running while I'm gone. Besides, the trip shouldn't take THAT long. Two, three days at the most."

He blinked. He'd taken custodianship of the library before, but never for a whole day. Not even THREE whole days. "W-wow... Twilight, I'm... I'm touched! Y-you can count on me!" His scaled chest puffed out in pride. "I won't let you down!"

The filly giggled. "I know you won't." she assured, as she prepared a saddlebag, taking her travel book, and her bitpurse. "Just remember to tell Owlowicious when it's his turn!"

"Oh..." Spike's ears drooped as he was reminded he'd be SHARING his duties. But he let it slide as another question entered his mind. "Wait a second, where ARE you going anyways?"

As Twilight trotted towards the door and opened it, she looked back at her assistant. "Don't know yet!" she exclaimed. "But I bet it's gonna be VERY educational!"

"Ah spell that lets ya'll go anywhere at th' drop o' a hat?"

"That's right Applejack!" The unicorn nodded to her Earth-pony friend, who was bringing in the last wagon full of apples for the day. "It'll also let me take as many ponies as I want with me! Well, up to a maximum of ten actually, but you get the idea!"

Applejack hummed in thought, a hoof going up to tilt her hat back. "Sounds mighty temptin', Twi. Tell meh... ya'll got a place 'n mind?"

"Not yet. I was hoping you all would have ideas."

"Hmmm.... welp, ah got a day 'r so off comin' up. An' ah admit, it's been a while since ah last saw that Big Apple... Manehattan sit allright wit' you?"

"Manehatten sounds WONDERFUL darling!" Rarity crooned. "Seriously Applejack, it never ceases to amaze me that you've been to such a capital of glamour and class!"

AJ simply rolled her eyes as she leaned against one of the boutique's walls. Twilight simply smiled. "She's offered to give us a tour of the city. We could use the spell to go there, spend the day, and then come back!"

"Certainly sounds like a plan to me, dear!" With that, the white mare's horn glowed, as a saddlebag and various other items began to float out into the open. "Oh you'll simply must excuse me now dears. I have a lot of packing to do!"

The other two chuckled and began to depart, before the purple pony stopped in her tracks. "Oh, Rarity, if you can, pack plenty of rubies. We'll be needing them."

That earned her a surprised look. "Rubies? Wh-why ever for dear?"

"The spell is a ritual-based one." she explained, head craned up to look at the cloud above her. "And that's one of items required, if we're going to pull it off successfully."

"A blue feather?" Rainbow Dash had an eyebrow cocked. "I mean yeah, I've got plenty of them, but I kinda, y'know, NEED them for flying. I had a new stunt I was wanting to try today..."

"C'mon now Dash, ah know it taint' THAT hard." The applebucker was directing her voice upwards. "Pegasusus tend t'molt every now an' 'gain, don't they?"

"That's PeguSAI." Rarity corrected.

The vibrant-maned speedster looked vaguely uncomfortable. "It's... not something we really like to talk about to... other non-winged ones..." she then hurriedly cast her rose-colored eyes back downwards. "No offense to you guys! Just... okay, tell you what, I'm in. I have a few down feathers that're coming loose anyways. Still think I could fly to Manehattan in less time than your spell, but if you REALLY need the Dash..."

"Oh THANK you!" came the smile, followed by a hug. Fluttershy returned both readily, as she embraced Twilight.

"I-it's no problem at all, Twilight. I had been given these vases anyways, as a gift from White Wash, for taking care of his ferrets." The yellow pony gestured to the two ceramic containers, each one about the size of a bottle of soda. "I was originally thinking of putting cut roses in them, but th-this is better."

"Glad t' hear it, Fluttershy." Applejack smiled, giving her a pat on the back. "Ah promise, Manehattan may be pretty loud, but Central Park's as relaxin' a place as any 'round. The critters there're so tame, they'll eat th' bread right outta yer hooves, if not straight outta yer bag!"

"O-oh my~" the animal-lover's eyes practically glowed. "I'll have to be sure to pack plenty of bread then! A-and carrots, for the bunnies, and seeds for the birds, a-and nuts for the squirrels, and fish for the alligators..."

"And CUPCAKES for the ponies!!" Pinkie Pie chimed in, twirling about Sugarcube Corner's kitchen floor with a plate full of the treats balanced on her head.

"Yes yes, Pinkie." Rarity waved a hoof at her hyperactive friend. "We're all aware of a pony's predilection for those pastries."

"Actually, Pinkie." The purple unicorn stepped forward as her eyes scanned the spellbook hovering in front of her. "I need a different item. Not

that I don't like cupcakes too, but would you happen to have any sunflower oil?"

The party pony stopped her dance, eyes slightly crossed as she processed the request. "Sunflower oil? Sure, I got some! But that wouldn't taste very good with the cupcakes! I mean, I guess you could make cupcakes WITH sunflower oil instead of regular vegetable oil, but I've never had a need to do that. Hmmm, though that WOULD be interesting to try, I wonder what kind of taste those would impart on the-"

"PINKIE-PIE~!" Rainbow yelled, startling her friend out of her rant. "Just get us the stuff, please?"

A pause, before the cheerful response of "Okie-dokie-Lokie!"

Ten minutes later, all six ponies reconvened at the outskirts of Ponyville. Each pony had packed light... this was just supposed to be a day-trip after all.

However, it seemed that somepony had forgotten to tell Rarity that, as she slowly made it to the top of the hill that Dash, Applejack, Pinkie and Fluttershy were lounging on.

"Woah." The farmer went, as she caught the size of the dressmaker's baggage. "Think ya'll packed enough jewels in there, Rarity?"

"That, and a few other things~" she responded, trying to keep the strain out of her voice. "This is Manehattan we're going to, after all. I must SIMPLY be prepared to look my best, wherever we head to!"

"Ya'll may not cotton to it as much 'o all that, Rares. Ah seem t' recall th' streets bein' awfully crowded... and dirty."

The look that came over the pale unicorn's face was enough to set Rainbow off guffawing.

The timid yellow pony simply shook her head, before turning to her blue-coated friend. "What are you going to be doing there, Dash?" she asked. "I-I hear that flying there is tricky, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah, that's what I hear." came the answer. "But the updrafts are supposed to be wicked awesome for stunt-flying! Maybe I'll be able to pull off my new trick while I'm there!"

"Oh, oh, don't forget the food!" The pink pony leapt up, her hooves waving in the air. "I know there's supposed to be SUPER-DUPER yummy restaurants around there! Like Lombardi's Pizzeria, and Cha Cha's, in Little Itallion!" She then pantomimed tossing a pizza crust into the air. "I can't WAIT to try them all!"

There was a round of chuckling and giggling from all fillies present, before the cyan pegasus looked off to the side. "Oop, better straighten up girls, our ride's here."

Indeed, Twilight Sparkle was trotting up the hill, her saddlebag secured to her side, and the spellbook on her back. As she drew closer, she called out to them. "Sorry girls! Had to stop by the library and grab my bags. Also had to promise Spike I'd pick up a slice of pizza while we were gone."

"Shore thing!" Applejack drawled. "What kind does he like?"

"Peppers and Emeralds with Extra Cheese."

"If we ARE going to eat out," Rarity began, "I must insist that we try the Deloco Rooteria. It's a five-star establishment you know, where only the best-"

"Nuh-uh." the orange equine suddenly vetoed her idea. "Tain't goin' within twelve feet o' that place."

There was a surprised blink. "Why Applejack, why ever not?"

"Cause Ah've EATEN thar b'fore." she stated flatly. "Too much money fer not enough food. Twenty-four bits fer a steamed turnip 'n some chives? Ah'll take one o' them carrot-dog stands any day o' th' week!"

"Was this back when you were a filly?"

"Girls." came a commanding voice. The dark-maned unicorn was giving them an odd look. "We'll discuss eating arrangements AFTER we've arrived. Let's focus on GETTING there first. Fluttershy... you have the vase?"

The yellow one nodded, and dug into her pack, retrieving one of the white vessels, placing it on an even patch of ground. Twilight opened her book, found the spell, and began reciting from it.

"A vessel of white, to hold the down."

"Okay, step one." Applejack stated cheerfully. "What next?"

"Hmmm... A feather of blue, to match the sky 'round."

All eyes turned to Rainbow Dash, who fidgeted for just a second, before extending a wing out. She reached her head back there, inspected her feathers, and then singled one out, gripping it in her teeth and plucking it, with only a slight wince and an 'ow' from her lips.

"Thank you, Dash." the unicorn soothed, as the pegasus dropped the feather inside the vase. "Also inside the vase, we need... A stone of fire, from light which grows..."

Rarity levitated a ruby from her saddlepack, the surface gleaming flawlessly. With a smile, she nudged it down into the ceramic vessel, trying to disturb Dash's feather as little as possible.

"And finally, Pinkie. The essence of flower, for which the sun glows!"

The named equine stepped up, a bottle of oil in her mouth. With disturbing ease, and with nary a drop spilled, the golden substance poured into the vase. "Fill it about halfway, that should be more than enough." the magician instructed.

The finished conglomeration sat there in the middle of the group, eyes all upon it. "Ho'kay, sugarcube..." Applejack began. "What's next?"

"Now, everypony huddle around the vase. And just let me do the work." There was a confident smile.

They did as they were told. Twilight took one more glance at the spellbook, and then lowered her head as she concentrated. A glow began to coalesce around the vase, purple at first, but then turning to a bright gold as the items contained within began to react with one another.

"Oooh, preeety~" Pinkie sang as the light began to intensify. After a couple of seconds, the glow began to expand, encompassing the entire group within it's borders. Rarity wasn't sure if the tingle she was getting was only being felt by her, or if her friends were feeling it too.

Okay. Twilight thought to herself. So far so good. Now I just need to find the leyline... the one that directs me straight to the Clydesler Building. That'd be a good place to start. Now let's see...

In her mind's eye, she began to perceive the waves of energy, usually unseen to the naked eye, that danced and cavorted about them. She spotted at least a dozen different streams that seemed to go in all directions. Tapping into one of those, and then riding its current, would provide the teleportation needed. But she couldn't... quite make them out. They were fuzzy... indistinct. She wasn't sure which one she needed. *I must not be properly tuned right. she realized. What frequency? I need to double-check.*

She opened an eye, her vision blurred slightly from strain. But she spotted the frequency reading on the page in front of her. 40.1 Kiimehertz.

She readjusted her horn's magic output... and instantly a new layout became visible to her, a land of lines that resembled the webs of cracked glass. One in particular popped out to her, and if she was perceiving it right, it seemed to be stretching out into the northeast, in the general direction of Manehattan.

That's probably as close as we're gonna get. she told herself, and then tapped into the line.

What happened next, was not covered in her book. Instantly, she felt a whirlwind of energy emitting from the point she had touched. No, it wasn't coming from inside the line... it was coming from herself! It was sucking them in!

In the waking world, the glow that was surrounding the group had suddenly turned violent, ripples of wind thrashing their manes, as a pillar of light exploded from the vase and pierced into the sky.

"TWILIGHT!" Applejack had to strain to make herself heard of the roar of air. "YA'LL SURE THIS IS S'POSSED T' HAPPEN, SUGARCUBE!?"

"I'M NOT SURE!" Twilight yelled back. "JUST KEEP TOGETHER! EVERYPONY, HANG ON!!"

The magic field began to compress, the forms of the six mares inside becoming smaller and indistinct as well. A rumble like thunder began, before it opened and cracked as the field suddenly leapt upwards, following the pillar into the sky. With a blinding flash, both the glowing column and the wind died away.

The only things left on the hill, was a smoldering vase, and an open book, it's pages ruffling listlessly in the breeze.

The first thing she became aware of, was grass tickling her cheek.

With a groan, Twilight righted herself. *What... happened?* She didn't think a teleportation spell would have involved a pillar of light. She found herself wincing as her horn throbbed. *Nor did I think it'd take so much OUT of me!* She groggily turned her head to take in the surrounding scene.

She found herself relieved to see that her friends were present and accounted for. They too, were all in various states of confusion and

wooziness. Dash was the first to have gotten to her feet, and was experimentally taking a few steps, angling herself towards Fluttershy to assist her. Applejack was on her back, doing a fair impression of Ditzzy Doo, and Rarity's face had seemingly frozen in a expression of wild-eyed terror. Unsurprisingly, Pinkie had landed on her front, forelegs and neck supporting her body as her hindhooves kicked in the air.

There was also a manic grin on her face. "Whoooo!! Let's do that again!"

"I-i-if... if that's a-all right with you..." the yellow pegasus stuttered as Rainbow helped her to her feet. "I'd... I'd rather not."

"Same here, Fluttershy." Twilight responded. "I'm sorry about that guys. Had no idea the landing would be so... rough."

"Ya'll SHORE that light show there was expected n' all?" AJ questioned, as she rolled back onto her side. "Ya'll seemed awful panicked there. Did it work right? Actually..." her green eyes began to roam the landscape about them. "How I ain't seein' th' Statue o' Miss Li-Bray-ty?"

Now the purple unicorn took the time to look beyond her group. They were sitting on a grassy hill. The sun was still in the same position in the sky. Off in the distance, she saw the treeline of a forest. And over to the side, she spied the rooftops of a sleepy little village. She had a feeling that if she was close enough, she'd see a sign along it's border that said 'Welcome to Ponyville'.

They were right where they'd started.

"What the HAY?!" Rainbow exclaimed, taking in the sight. "All that flashing and blowing, and we haven't even budged a yard!"

"Calm down Dash, we don't know WHAT happened." the magician groaned, leaning back and rubbing her forehead. "Okay. First off. Let's take stock. Is everypony okay?"

"I... I'm fine dear." Rarity finally spoke, coming out of her stupor. "I apologize, that was just... QUITE more than I had expected, really. Twilight, I never KNEW you had so... so MUCH in you!"

Why did that make her blush? She shook her head and directed herself at each pony in turn. "You Applejack?"

"Ah'm allright sugarcube. It'll take more 'n that t' scare th' cutiemarks offa me."

"I'm a bit frustrated that we've just spent time I could have been using practicing, going nowhere at all. Other than that, I'm fine."

"Oh, um, I'm okay, really Twilight. Though I admit, that was... um... rather... s-scary..."

"I thought it was fun! Can we do it again Twilight, HuhHuhHuh??"

Twilight simply rolled her eyes, as she finally got to her hooves. "I'm sorry girls. But whatever the spell did, it took a FAIR lot out of me. I don't think the book said anything about-"

She looked down at the ground where she had sat the tome. It was gone.

"Gah!" she shrieked, causing all present to jump. "My travel book! It's gone!!"

She got a nudge from the white mare. "Dear, that's not ALL that's gone. The vase is missing too!"

There was a frantic searching of the immediate premises that proved fruitless. Both the spellbook, and their ritual machina, had both disappeared without a trace.

"Well GREAT." their pegasus friend grumped. "Apparently, the spell DID work. Just not for US. I hope my feather's enjoying the view from the Brookmare Bridge."

"Now now Dash, don't be goin' 'n getting yer tail all inna knot." Applejack stated, before walking up to Twilight. "Hon, yer th' one wit' th' skills. Lay it out fer us. What HAPPENED, exactly?"

The lavender pony bit her lip. "Well... I'll be honest, I think... I think the spell DID work... and we DID move..." she lowered her head, and tried to activate her horn, but only a few sparks flew from it's tip. "I've used up SO much magic... If it had just been the vase and the book that had teleported, that wouldn't have been the case! But... that still doesn't explain why we're in the same spot that we started from..."

Fluttershy's eyes flew open. "Twilight! What if... I mean, I don't usually say this, but... what IF... we moved in OTHER ways instead? I've read about it in those Neighponese comics Scootaloo lets me borrow."

Dash quirked an eyebrow. "I never knew you read Nann-ga. The science-fiction ones, or those icky schoolfilly ones?"

"Uhm.... both?"

"Hold on, hold on." Twilight interrupted, a hoof to her chin. "You mentioned other KINDS of travel. You're talking something like along the lines of... time-travel, aren't you?"

A silence descended upon them so quickly, it made the butter-pony go 'eep!' in surprise.

"You know." Rarity got to all four hooves, shouldering her pack. "There's really only one way to find out."

"ADVENTURE!!" Pinkie cheered for all present.

All six mares ponied up and began their trek into town, each one with a vague sense of unease within their stomachs. Well, all but one, her stomach was simply empty, and she was craving fudge. They left the

scene, the breeze ruffling the grass they had previously trampled. Within a few minutes time, any sign that they had been there, was gone with them.

Nopony saw the unicorn stallion who advanced on the hill from the other direction, his horn aglow as he checked the site for signs of the flash he had seen minutes earlier.

"Holy horseapples!" he exclaimed, catching the leftover energy residue. "What in Solaris's kingdom has the power for THAT kinda magic??"

The fillies' sense of unease increased as they entered Ponyville proper. As far as they knew, it WAS Ponyville. At least, it had looked like it from outside of town. Inside however...

"IS this Ponyville? Ah mean, th' place looks th' same 'n all." Applejack stated as she strolled through the square. "But ah dun reco'nize any 'o these ponies."

Twilight looked around the town herself. The street LOOKED the same. All the architecture was in place. But her friend had a point, Absolutely NONE of the ponies that milled around the town looked familiar. At least she didn't THINK they did...

"Maybe we... maybe we really DID, y'know, travel in time?" Dash stated, a slight tinge of fear creeping into her voice. "I mean, we c-could be in the past, o-or the future!"

"Rainbow, please." the white unicorn chided. "I would have noticed if this were a different time period. Look." She trotted over to a nearby lamp-post. "This pole has a patina on it, the same as the current state of wear back home, if we're not already there. If this were the past, this would have been new paint, not a bit of erosion. And if this were the future, there would most definitely be rust building around the base and lantern itself."

"A very astute observation, Rarity!" Twilight beamed. "You would have made a great detective, you know!"

As the purple-maned one preened at the comment, she turned back to her friends. "So we can assume that we're still in the present day and age. If we DID time-travel at all, it probably has only been by a few days."

Fluttershy glanced around. "B-but with so many different ponies... there must be a holiday going on. And there's not a Ponyville holiday for another month or so. A-at least I don't THINK there is..."

"What holiday would that be?" Twilight asked.

"Oh! Oh! Memememe!" the party pony suddenly leapt. "The CLOVER DERBY! Everypony gathers in the park when all the clover leaves are in bloom and they all lineup and run through the fields picking as many clovers as they can! The one who finds a FOUR-LEAF clover is the WINNER!"

"Though usually, it comes down'ta whoever comes in first." Applejack finished. "Four-leaves bein' so rare 'n all."

"Hey!" Dash interjected. "If it IS the Clover Derby today, what say we enter!?" She hovered in the air, eyes alight and current plight momentarily forgotten.

Rarity clucked her tongue. "Dearie, we have more important matters to worry about at the moment. Though I DO agree that if that's what it is, then let's head to the park."

"The sooner the better." Twilight agreed. "I'd like to know if I've missed a month of friendship reports or not."

The group galloped off, only Pinkie trailing slightly behind. "Ooooh, I LOVE Clovers! Especially on a Radish salad!"

"Well, THIS looks like a bust."

"It shore looks like it, don't it?" the farmer agreed with the pegasus as they looked over the park. There WERE ponies in it, but not the huge

gaggle usually associated with the running of a race. No, there were ponies playing, eating, chatting. the usual stuff. And they were STILL all ponies that they had never seen before.

"Oh my." Rarity stated, looking a bit antsy. "At this point, I would even be grateful to see Ditzzy Doo! I mean, the mare has SUCH a hard time, but she's STILL a sweetheart!"

"I don't recognize ANY of them!" Twilight groaned, entering a state of panic herself. "How is this even POSSIBLE!? What did the spell DO!? D-did we... are we...?"

An uneasy silence settled over them as they looked to the ground. Which made it easier for Fluttershy to be heard.

"Look!" she exclaimed, as loudly as she was oft to do. She was pointing to a park bench that was facing away from them. "Lyra and BonBon!"

Sure enough, a pair of manes peaked over the edge of the bench's back. A mint-green with a stripe, and a more curly pink-and-purple do.

Suddenly all six mares were tripping over each other as they galloped to the bench. Twilight was the first to round the corner as she spun and faced them. "Lyra! BonBon! It's so good to-"

She stopped in mid-sentence as she stared in wide-eyed confusion. The rest of her group caught up with her, and one-by-one, they too paused and stared, Dash adding a gaping mouth to hers.

The two ponies on the bench were giving them confused looks of their own. The green one was a unicorn, perched on their rear with their back against the rest, hindlegs draped over the edge in exactly the way a pony doesn't sit. Curled up next to the pony, was a cream-coated equine with wide blue eyes.

What surprised the group was the fact that these two also possessed sloped and squared noses, a slightly larger stature, and toned chests.

Though the green pony had a lyre cutiemark, and the earth-pony a trio of candies... these two were unmistakably stallions.

"Um..." the not-BonBon started. "Can we help you?"

The group gaped for a second more, before Twilight finally managed to collect her wits. "Oh! I-I'm sorry." she apologized, cheeks going red. "From behind, you two looked just like somepony else we knew."

The male Lyra waved a hoof. "Ahh, that's okay. You'd be surprised how often that happens." He turned to his companion. "Hey Babar, DID I ever tell you about the time I participated in the Clover Derby last year? I swore I saw another stallion there who looked JUST like me, save he was an earth-pony!"

'Babar' chuckled. "I can just imagine it now. New and improved Earth-Pony Harpsy! With Apple-bucking action!"

He got a look, but soon he began chuckling alongside his friend, before moving in and giving him an affectionate nuzzle. Somewhere in the back of the group, a butter pegasus went 'Awww~'.

The mint unicorn, Harpsy, turned back to the fillies. "Right, sorry about that. Are you girls new in town? Can't say I've seen you lot here before."

"Oh... um... yeah, we..." Twilight bit her lip. She was faltering in the face of all this information, and she couldn't quite-

"Why yes we are!" Rarity spoke up. "Me and my friends were just passing through. We're on our way to Fillydelphia for a show there, this is our first time in Ponyville!"

"Well then, welcome!" Babar cheered. "If you can, stay around for a spell! You won't find a nicer town in all of Equestria. We can give you a tour, if you'd like!"

"Oh oh!" Pinkie suddenly cheered. "Let's go see Sugarcube Corner! I hear it's the BEST!"

"Actually," Applejack interrupted. "Ain't we runnin' a bit late fer that 'show', Rarity?"

She got a stare in her direction, which she returned. It took a second for the dressmaker to pick up. "Oh! Oh yes, my friend makes a dreadfully good point. I apologize, but we have to depart posthaste. It was mighty good to meet you though!"

"Nice meeting you!" Harpsy responded, waving a hoof. "Be sure to stick around on your return trip!"

"Oh we will!" Rarity responded, turning to follow her friends as they alternatively slunk, stumbled, crept, or bounced away behind the trees. "Untill we meet again!"

The two colts continued to wave as the group progressed out of sight. After a long minute, the earth-pony turned to his friend. "Say... didn't those fillies remind you of a certain OTHER group?"

"Y'know... they DID kinda. Can't put my finger on why, but they did remind me of them..."

"... hon, don't you mean 'hoof?'"

"OhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygosh-" Dash was chanting. The implications were hitting her the hardest.

"I can't believe I didn't see it earlier!" Twilight exclaimed, head poking out of the bushes as she took in the surrounding ponyfolk. "But it's TRUE! Everypony IS here, they're just... all..."

"SWITCHED!" Applejack thundered. "Lookit over there! Ain't that th' Professor?!" She was pointing at a tan mare with a spiky mane and an hourglass cutiemark.

"And THAT, If I'm not mistaken..." Rarity quipped, looking at a lanky purple colt that walked with a slight stagger in his step. "... is quite possibly Berry Punch. Poor thing can't seem to hold his cider as a boy OR a girl."

"I-i-i-if every pony here who was a filly back home, is now a colt..." Fluttershy began, trying to wrap her mind around the concept. "Th-then... would that make the Princess, a Prince?"

The student's face turned a bright shade of crimson at the thought. "M-maybe. T-that's not the point! The point is, we at least have a better idea of where we are. We've not really traveled in TIME... but we DID travel in space. We're in an Alternate Universe!"

"Woo!" Pinkie cheered. "Where no mare has gone before!"

"S-space?" Rainbow stuttered, her wings still slightly trembling. "Y-you mean we're not even on the same planet anymore?"

"That's probably a bad word for it." Rarity interjected. "We're still in Equestria. It's just not OUR Equestria."

The orange equine raised an eyebrow. "Beg pardon sugarcube, but what 'n tarnation's THAT s'posed t'mean?"

"An alternate timeline," Twilight began, launching into her explanation. "Emerges when a set of different circumstances occur. Technically, a new universe is spawned with every decision made or not made, with every event that did or didn't happen. Buuuut, that's probably a bit much to go into..." she grinned sheepishly at the baffled faces before her. She thought for a moment, before her ears perked up. "Rarity, do you have a marker and some ribbons?"

The white mare provided the two materials. As the purple one took them, she started anew. "Let's say that this red ribbon is our native timeline. It's the world which we all grew up in and made us who we are. Now... we all know that Rainbow Dash's first Sonic Rainboom gave us all our Cutie Marks at about the same time, right?"

She got a round of nods. "Good. Now, this isn't a slight against your skill Dash, but let's face it. There was always the chance that you never would have made it, right?"

For a second, it looked like the pegasus wanted to argue against the possibility, but she then closed her eyes and slowly nodded her head.

"There's always the chance that the opposite result, will occur. And when that happens, a whole new chain of events happen." She bright a marker up to the red ribbon, made a dot on it, and then brought up a blue strip to branch away from the point. "And the laws of causality states that every choice HAS to happen. Somewhere out there, there's a universe where Dash DIDN'T make the Sonic Rainboom. And when she didn't, a new timeline branched off that point. This blue ribbon..." she gave it a wave. "Is that alternate universe."

All the ponies present stared, dumbfounded, as the thought sank in. Even Pinkie was uncharacteristically silent, thinking back on the Rock farm.

"Ah would still be in Manehattan..." Applejack mumbled. "Goll-darn. When we git back, ah'll have'ta pay Aunt 'n Uncle Orange another visit."

"It's not pleasant for me to think about either, what with the test and all." Twilight added. "But what happens, happens. and our other selves have to live with it, like we have to live with what we have."

"But we're NOT living our own lives right now." Rarity spoke. "If what you say is right, we've jumped off our OWN ribbon, and landed on another."

"Where everypony was born the opposite gender?" Dash quipped. "Well... I can think of worse places to wind up... but still, that's just creepy."

"W-wait," Fluttershy suddenly spoke, her eyes wide. "If everyone here was born the other sex..."

"... what about US?"

A silence reigned. Fillies looked back and forth at each other, a chill going down their spines.

"D-do y'think our.... 'selves'... are still here?" Applejack stuttered. "Or d'ya think we out 'n out switched places and they're havin' this conversation right now in OUR world, wonderin' why th' hay they tain't in Manehattan yet?"

More silence, before Twilight finally narrowed her eyes.

"Only one way to find out. To the Library!"

The plan was half-baked, but a plan was still a plan. The giant tree that served as Ponyville's repository of knowledge loomed close as they galloped towards it. Twilight was relieved to see that there was nothing substantially different about the place on the outside.

Or on the inside, as they piled through the door. It was mercifully empty as they all caught their breath. She took a moment to see that yes, everything was still in perfect order. She felt a surge of pride, even though she knew technically that this wasn't exactly HER library.

"Well, I don't see us." Dash replied, panting as she looked around. "Not that I was really looking forward to that, but still."

"Is this even a good idea?" Rarity quipped. "Twilight, isn't there a rule about time-traveling paradoxes, and meeting yourself in the past?"

"That's time-traveling, not dimension-hopping." the magician replied. "But... I CAN see what you mean by it."

"Wh-what do you mean? W-will something bad happen?" Fluttershy asked, hooves up to her mouth.

"Well... some research ponies believe that it's impossible for the same pony to exist twice in the same place and time. If one meets the other, the both of them might... well..." she bit her lip, not sure if she wanted to say it.

"Go poof?" Pinkie suggested.

"Cease to exist."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Pardon me," the applefarmer butted in. "But if that's true, then why 'n tarnation are we all gathered 'round here? Isn't this one 'o our meetin' spots?"

"If our other selves ARE in this dimension still, then yes, that's a cause for worry." Rarity replied. "Though there's also the case that they're experiencing the same thing we are. In which case, we should be fine."

Suddenly, a voice drifted from above. It was a young voice, slightly squeaky and whiny... but it was female.

"Hello? Anypony down there?"

"Spike!" Twilight hissed under her breath. "Ponyfeathers! We can't stay here, the rest of the other ponyfolk may not have recognized us, but he, er, she surely will!"

"But I thought we were trying to get answers!" Rainbow whispered back. "Somepony's gonna have to stay!"

"It can't be me!" the student exclaimed, quietly. "She'll know me the best!"

"Not me!" Rarity interjected, eyes flickering back and forth. "We all know how the dear feels about me, and I wouldn't want to traumatize!"

"Ah don't trust Pinkie." Applejack whispered, earning her a confused look from the pink pony. "An I also dun trust mahself, OR Dash, t'go an start flappin' our mouths." She got another look, rather angry, from the pegasus. "So that just leaves-"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" came the voice from upstairs again, followed by the patter of dragonoid feet.

Suddenly, Fluttershy found a farmer's hat plopped onto her head, quickly followed by a bright blue scarf from the dressmaker's saddlebag wrapped around her throat and mouth. Then just as suddenly, she was wished a hasty 'good luck!', before finding herself alone in the middle of the library proper, the door still swinging slightly from a hasty departure.

Aqua eyes wide, she began looking around for a hiding place herself, before a purple form ran into view. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I was napping! I'll be down innaWOAA-HOHOAAH!!!"

The small dragon had tripped, their trip down the stairs a bumpy one. As they finally landed in a heap at the bottom, Fluttershy got her first good look. The dragoness was still small, about the same size as Spike. Her spines were a lighter green however, almost lime. They were smaller and limp as well, falling down the back of her head not unlike a mane.

The purple lizard got back on her feet, before dusting herself off. "Sorry about that. Just not my day today... oh!" The green eyes finally locked on the yellow pegasus, a look of ease coming over her face. "Heya Butterscotch. Fancy findin' you here. Say... isn't that AJ's hat?"

"O-oh, um... er..." she faltered, not really certain how to answer. "Y-yeah, sh-um, he let me b-borrow it for today. I mean, s-er, he didn't mind, that is..."

Now the dragoness had a look of worry, as an eyebrow was arched. "You okay there, 'Scotch? You're not soundin' like yourself, pony."

An idea came to mind, and she held a hoof up as she pretend-coughed into it. "*Ahack!* Oh, no, I'm... I'm really not. I, well, I caught a cold, and *ahack!* and... well, AJ let me borrow her-*AHACK* I mean, um, his hat, to keep me warm."

"Well now that was mighty neighborly of him!" the femme reptile replied, her eyes now going to the scarf. "And I bet Elusive gave you that too, didn't he? Oh, whatta guy~..." her eyes went misty for a second, before she came back to focus. "Is there anything I can do to help, 'Scotch?"

Fluttershy's eyes returned to scanning the room. Along one window, she saw a multitude of eyes peering in. "O-oh, well, um, well, i-if it isn't too much of a bother, Sp-*ahack!* um... Sp-*ahack!* ... um..."

"Aww, c'mon Butterscotch, it's me, Spines." the she-lizard replied, spreading her arms wide. "Only dragon in Ponyville, but you knew that already, right? C'mon brony, lay it on me, can I get'ya anything at all?"

The yellow pony sat in thought for a second. She'd talked herself into this corner, and now she would have to talk herself back out. Too bad she didn't have any Poison joke on her, the man-voice would have come in handy... wait.

"Um... would you still happen to have 'Supernaturals?" she asked, before giving another cough.

Spines smiled back. "Sure thing! Just wait right here, I'll get it right quick!"

She found herself grinning beneath her scarf as the dragoness ran off. Despite being a girl, the personality had more-or-less remained the same. And that comforted her on some unexplainable level.

I hope she manages to find it soon. she thought to herself. *The sooner I can leave, the better.*

Outside, five fillies were breathing sighs of relief as they watched and listened.

"Good thinking dear!" Rarity said, more to herself than anypony else. "That was truly inspired, to combine the cover of sickness with the quest for knowledge!"

"That girl can think on 'er feet whennit comes right down to it, that's f'sure!" Applejack agreed, a smile plastered on her face.

"So far, so good." Twilight spoke, her eyes still watching the scene inside. "It's still weird to see Spike as a girl, but besides that, she doesn't SEEM that different. Maybe this universe really IS a mirror world, and-"

Her words were cut short by the sound of hoofsteps. Quickly, all the mares ducked back into the shrubbery behind the library sign as the clopping grew closer.

As the steps trotted up to the library door, the student found her curiosity overwhelming. Gently, she activated her horn to allow her a peek through the bushes, as the new pony came into view...

...and she stopped as she saw himself.

"Welp." Applejack whispered. "So much fer mirrors."

Pinkie Pie blinked, a mirror in her mouth. "I'm SFO confuzzed."

"Spines, I'm home."

Fluttershy's eyes shrunk at the sound of the voice. It was male, but light. Like that of a schoolteacher she had back in Cloudsdale. Slowly she forced her head to turn in the direction of the speaker.

It was a purple unicorn stallion, with a fair build. She found herself thinking of Caramel the most, in regards of structure. His hair was straight-cut, with only a hint of raggedness towards the rear of the mane, his tail echoing the style. Upon his flank, was a familiar pink six-pointed star.

"Oh hey Dusk!" the dragoness called out from atop a ladder. "Just helpin' out Butterscotch with somethin'."

The lavender colt turned his purple eyes upon the pegasus, having apparently missed her earlier. "Oh! Hey there 'Scotch, didn't see you before. Sorry about that." He laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his mane. "Kinda had my head in the clouds, you know."

She was now stammering as she faced down a different face of one of her friends. "It... it.... it's alright... I...I... *ahack!*"

Dusk paused, his eyes widening in much the same way as Spine's did earlier. "Wow Butterscotch... you're not sounding too good. You didn't get into the Poison Joke again, did you?"

"He's got a cold." Spines replied, rejoining the two with a green book in her hands. "Here we go, li'l guy. Supernaturals, the one book that woulda

saved us all if SOMEPONY hadn't been in such a hurry." she gave a pointed glare to the purple pony, who grinned sheepishly.

"Oh, th-thank you Sp-Spines." Fluttershy responded, coming forward and taking the book in her own hooves. "This is just what I *ahack* what I needed."

"Y'know Scotch." Dusk began, coming up alongside the winged one. "You could have let me try and find a cure spell for whatever you've got. I mean, I know they SAY there's no cure for the common cold, but that doesn't mean somepony shouldn't GIVE it a try."

"Oh! th-tha-thank you, D... D-Dusk." she replied, her tongue tripping over the use of the name. "B-but you know me... I'd like to try and g-go the *ahack!* the natural route first... um, this is, if you don't mind..." Inwardly, she was already imagining that if Dusk were anything LIKE her friend, she'd be stuck having to endure experiment after experiment to try and rid her of whatever 'cold' she had.

He smiled at her. "Of course." the purple colt replied, before leaning in and giving her a nuzzle. "Just be sure and wash those clothes before you go giving them back. I bet Applejack wouldn't be happy to catch whatever it is you've got."

She was being nuzzled by a colt. Even if it was more or less Twilight in male form, he was STILL a COLT. She found herself blushing furiously under the scarf, her wits temporarily scattered. "I...I... I will... I...I know... Rarity wouldn't like her... scarf... um... I mean..."

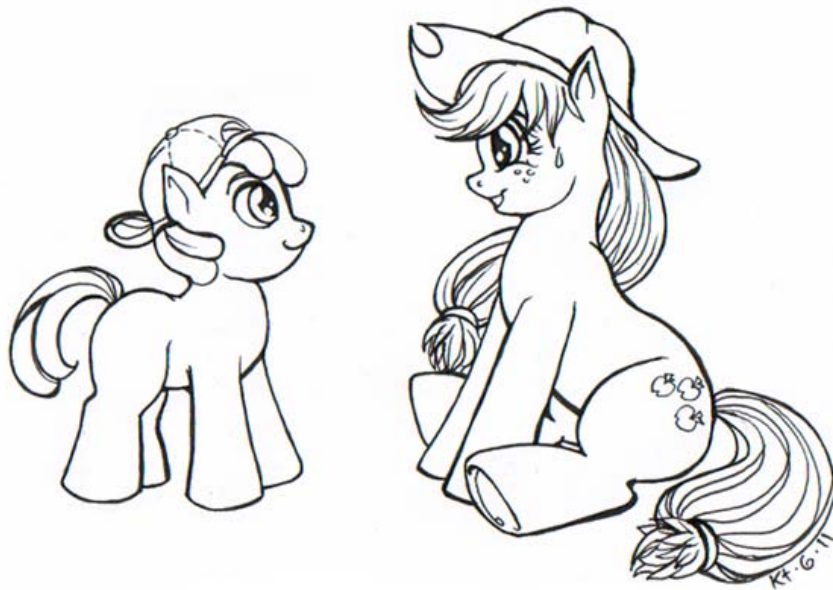
Dusk pulled his head back, an eyebrow raised. "Um... yeah... souuunds to me like you'd better get some rest." he chuckled nervously.

She blinked, before she chuckled alongside him, trying her best to keep it from turning into a giggle. "You're right, I should be going. See you two later. And thanks again Spik*ahack* um, Spines!"

"No problem!" the girl dragon called back, as Fluttershy did an about-face and quickly galloped out of the library.

Chapter Two

Out of the Mouths of Babes



Out in a field somewhere outside of Sweet Apple Acres, two fillies were keeping their distances from each other.

"Ah'm a bit worried 'bout those two." Applejack spoke, glancing between Twilight and Fluttershy, who were both sitting on the ground with their backs turned to one another, paced about three yards apart. Both ponies possessed a blush of sorts on their faces, and were also giving each other awkward glances and avoidances.

"They just need time, dear." Rarity replied, though she herself was looking a bit twitterpated as well. "I mean, the reaction here is understandable after all. Did you get a good look at him? I must say, Twilight makes for a handsome colt."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "UGH. Isn't there like, a time and place for everything? We need to get our GAME together, guys!"

"Dashie's right!" Pinkie interjected, her stance suddenly proud and tall. "We need to make a plan and get ourselves over this! Besides, it's no fun when your best friends are being all awky-awkward-pants with each other over themselves and their not-selves!" She seated herself between the unicorn and pegasus, and then implemented her as-yet-unexplained powers of Pie as her limbs stretched out and roped the two perplexed ponies together. "You two are still friends, are'ya not?"

Twilight looked at Pinkie, before giving Fluttershy another glance, and a small, hopeful smile. A few seconds passed, before the butter pegasus returned the smile and spoke.

"I'm sorry Twilight. I know D-Dusk is kinda like you, b-but I should still think of the two of you as two separate ponies. It's... less confusing that way."

The student nodded. "Thanks, 'Shy. I can only imagine if the roles had been reversed... if I had run into 'Butterscotch' back in our own world."

"Speaking of worlds," the white unicorn interjected. "I think it's quite obvious now that the earlier 'Mirror circumstances' theory is thoroughly debunked."

"Our other selves 'r still here." the farmer added, looking around at the field. "An' now we gotta worry about that other time-parradoxen-thingamajigger ya'll were talkin' 'bout. Y'know, th' one where if we meet each other, we *STOP EXISTING?*"

"I know, I know." Twilight replied. "Right... here's what we need to do. We need to STAY out of Ponyville as MUCH as equinely possible. I'll try to cast the spell again, but I need time to prepare it. Untill it's ready, we all need to keep our heads low. That means ALL of us. Got it, Rainbow?"

"Yeah yeah, I hear yah." the pegasus snorted, hovering on her back. "Seriously, this is gonna cut WAY into my practicing time."

"Y'still on that practicin' bit?" AJ eyed her with a crooked expression.

"Well, I WAS. Before Twilight called us all over and we got caught up in this weird alternate-dimension business. I had a new trick I was gonna try and do. A DOUBLE RAINBOO-"

She was interrupted as a twin explosion of color occurred in the sky right behind her. Everypony directed their attention upwards as two circles of multihued light spread out and covered the blue. Speeding away from the discs, was a solid beam of rainbow that twisted it's way upwards and away, fading into the distance.

The last thing they expected was for Rainbow Dash herself to start jumping up and down, cheering at the sight. "WHOOOOHOOOOO! DIDJA SEE THAT! THAT WAS AWESOME! LIKE, WAAAY MORE THAN TWENTY PERCENT AWESOME! MAN, I am GOOD!! JUST LOOKIT ME GOOOO WHOOOOOOOOO RAINBOW!!"

To nopony's surprise, Pinkie joined into the cheering, and soon, even Fluttershy was jumping with them. AJ, Rarity, and Twilight hung back as they all looked at each other.

"THIS is gonna be a challenge." The farmer pony quipped. "We've got our work cut out fer ourselves."

"What do we do, Twilight?" Rarity asked. "Back home, Dash is the faster flier in Equestria. Now there's TWO of them, and though she may seem... placated now..." she glanced at the cheering squad. "We all know that her pride won't stand for that."

"One problem at a time, PLEASE." the unicorn pleaded, a hoof massaging her forehead. "Okay, so. We know that today is still today, thanks to that rainboom. We can put any lingering time-traveling doubts to bed. That said, we need to get out of town, first and foremost. Where's a good spot where we can hide?"

"Oh, there's th' ol' treehouse. We can camp out there." the orange pony enthused.

"AJ... YOU know about the treehouse."

"Yeah, so?"

"Think about it... anything that YOU know..."

Green eyes widened. "Anythin' ah know... mah other self's bound t'know too. Well shucks, din' think 'o that!"

"Oh, Oh! We can hide out at Sugarcube Corner!" Pinkie popped up, blue eyes gleaming as always. "Or SPACE? Wanna go to space? Hey, hey! Wanna go to space?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "That won't work Pinkie. Augh, I didn't think about it before, but this applies to ALL of us!" She lumped on the ground as the rest of the ponies gathered around her. "Any hiding spot that WE can think of, our other selves are going to think of too! And we can't ask for help from any of the townsponies, they'll become suspicious!!"

"Hmmm..." the party pony hummed to herself, before something in the distance caught her eye. "What about THOSE guys?!"

As one, everypony looked in the direction Pinkie was pointing at. There was a red and orange blur working it's way down the path towards them. As it got closer, a noise began to fill the air... the buzzing of miniature wings.

"Crusaders!" Fluttershy yelped, her eyes wide as she tried to make out the forms of three small ponies.

"Ah... Twilight, ah..." A wide-eyed Applejack groped for words, a pit having suddenly appeared in the bottom of her stomach. "Ah... ah think we should git outta here Twi, ah... ah don't think ah'm ready for this..."

"To tell the truth..." Rarity half-grinned, half grimaced as she trotted up next to the farmpony, muscles tensing for a bolt. "I'm... not sure I'm prepared either. Shall we... make ourselves scarce?"

"Uhm..." again, Twilight bit her lip as she sighted the rapidly incoming wagon. She had been able to see female Spike from behind a window. This oncoming disaster would involve face-to-face meetings between the two

elder sisters, and their little 'brothers'. She could see the reasoning behind their reluctance, but still-

Apparently, she had been too slow. She found herself suddenly scooped up by Dash, as the pegasus angled herself for the nearby treeline. She was quickly joined by the rest of the gang as they fled the oncoming Crusader-mobile.

Not that it did them any good. Applejack, heading the pack, tripped on an errant rock. There was a general cacophony of noises as limbs and bodies flailed through the air, Twilight herself knocked out of Dash's grasp by a wayward Pinkie Pie. The resultant pastel-colored pile of ponies rested at the bottom of a hill, a facehoofing blue pegasus hovering above them.

And that's when the Cutie Mark Crusaders caught up.

"Whoooooah-on there!" a squeaky voice called out. "Scoot! Slow down!"

"I'm trying I'm trying!" said another. The fillies all grimaced as the wagon shot past them, screeching to a halt.

A small orange pegasus panted as he fell off his scooter, wings twitching spasmodically. A yellow earth pony and white unicorn both fumbled at their helmets, unhitching the headgear and hopping out to help their friend back on his feet.

"Ah... Applebloom?" the farmer gulped, her heart up in her throat.

The yellow one turned to look at them. Though the eyes were orange and the mane was crimson, there was no sign of eyelashes or a bow-adorned ponytail. Instead, a faded-red, backwards-pointed baseball cap adorned the young colt's head. He looked the group over, eyes full of worry. "GOLLY." he spoke, voice not that much lower than his original. "Ya'll alright? Looks like ya'll took ah real tumble!"

He was joined by the white colt, his lavender hair slightly straight up-front, only curling in the back. His voice was quite squeaky as he spoke. "Oh, that looks it hurt! Here, let us help!" He darted forward and grabbed a pink hoof, pulling as hard as he could.

"It's, it's okay." Fluttershy stuttered, flapping her wings as she untangled herself. "We just, um, tripped."

"Tripped, huh?" said the last schoolpony. As Twilight eyed the orange one up and down, she had to admit that besides the lack of eyelashes, he didn't look, nor sound that much different from his other self. "Must have been some trip if you made a mess like this. We didn't scare you, did we?"

"Pfft." Dash replied as she landed next to a flailing Rarity. "As if we'd be scared of some kids onna red flyer wagon."

"Y-yeah, imagine that." Applejack laughed as she got to her hooves. "Tain't easily scared by no-"

She paused as she saw her 'brother' sitting right in front of her.

"... nopony..."

The little horse let his eyes travel up and down the applefarmer's body, before he closed his eyes in a smile. "Howdy! Ya'll are new 'round these parts, ain'tcha? Ah'm Applebuck, an' these 'r mah friends, Sweepy Bell 'n Scooteroll!"

"Hello!" Sweepy cheered, gaining a slightly panicked look from the dressmaker mare. The scooter pony simply nodded his head.

"W-why hello!" Twilight greeted, walking up to the front. "Yes, we're... kinda new. Sorry for the running, we didn't know if you guys were... friendly."

"Aww shucks, we ain't nothin' t'be 'fraid of!" Applebuck cheered, as his inter-dimensional relative continued staring at him with wide eyes. "We can give ya'll th' grand tour o' Ponyville, if ya'll like!"

"Awww, c'mon." Scooteroll groaned. "I thought we were gonna try to get our high-diving cutie-marks this afternoon!"

"HIGH-DIVING?!" Rarity blurted, eyes now going from one crusader to the next, though they always lingered on the white colt. "Good gracious! Do you-!"

I mean, do you three ALWAYS do such dangerous stunts?"

"More often than I'd like." Sweepy admitted, his green eyes doing a roll.

It was now that Rainbow Dash's own eyes became wide, as an idea coursed through her head. Quickly, she trotted to the front, as she leaned her head down and whispered conspiratorially. "Hey... wanna try for a DIFFERENT Cutiemark?"

The orange pegasus looked her over, a hoof going up and stroking his chin. "I'm listening."

"Dash, what're you doing?" Twilight hissed between her teeth.

"Just trust me on this." Rainbow hissed back, before returning to the crusaders. "Y'see, my friends and I ARE new in town, but the thing is... we can't just let ANYPONY see us."

"Y'cain't?"

"Nope." She gave a shake of her multihued mane. "Y'see, there's a few.... MYSTERIOUS FOLKS in town. Folks that my friends and I are tracking."

"Dash, what in tarnation-" Applejack was quickly silenced as a wing bopped her on the noggin.

"We are..." here, the pegasus reared onto her hind legs as she struck a pose. "A secret sector of the Equestrian government. Ones who track down the ponies who do... *stuff*... with no permits! We are...MARES IN BLACK."

Somewhere in the back, a unicorn facehoofed.

However, the story was enough to sell the three colts. "Woouooooowwwwww..." the trio gaped in unison. "That's so COOL!"

"And right now!" Dash turned away and crossed her hooves behind her back, a pink pony mirroring her actions. "We need help. If we can, we'd like..." turnabout pose, a hoof pointed at the crusaders. "YOUR help!"

"How!? Howcanwehelp!?" Applebuck gushed, words running together as he spoke a mile a minute.

The blue one smirked, as she turned towards her lavender friend. "Agent T, would you care to fill our friends in?"

"Uh... uhm, sure!" Twilight sputtered, stepping forward again. "What we really need right now, is a hiding place. Someplace that nopony else knows of, not your friends, and not... *gulp* your family. This is really important, do you know of any place like that?"

The three ponies looked at each other, apparently deep in thought. At long last, Scooteroll lifted his head up. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked his friends.

"Yep." the yellow pony replied. "The HEDGE."

"I was thinking that too..." Sweepy added. "But that's right on the edge of the Everfree Forest. Do you think they'd be safe?"

"Sure they'll be safe!" the scooty pony quipped, his eyes alight with admiration. 'I mean, c'mon, they're AGENTS. I bet they've faced down worse things than Manticores or Ursa Majors! They'll be fine!"

"Sure!" Pinkie enthused, popping up behind the trio. "We'll take care of any meanie beanies that try to bop us! If anypony tries to gamble with us, they'll find..." here, the party pony pulled a pair of sunglasses out of hammerspace, before setting them on her face. "... that the dice... are loaded against them."

There was an awkward pause, with copious amounts of staring. She stared back. "I thought there was supposed to be a yell, followed by a song." she explained, before slinking back into the group.

Twilight shook her head. "Anyway! That sounds perfect, gi- er, guys. Can you take us to it?"

"Can do!" Applebuck cheered, before all three colts joined up together and belted out their newest mission statement.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS SUPER SECRET SPY MISSION, YEAH!!!"

"Hey." Sweepy Bell quipped some minutes later. "If you're supposed to be Mares in Black... then shouldn't you be wearing, you know... black?"

"Oh, uhm..." Rarity's eyes darted around in thought. "Our suits are.... currently at the dry-cleaner's, you see. They got filthy on our... LAST mission."

The little unicorn nodded, apparently satisfied with that explanation. "Gotta keep them snazzy and neat, my big brother would say!" he cheered.

"O-oh, does he really?" she replied, the thought of there being a male version of herself sending... she wasn't sure if they were shivers or tickles... down her spine. "W-what's your brother's name?"

The boy opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it. "Um... I'm... I'm not sure if I should say. I don't want to get him into trouble. I mean... he's not in trouble, IS he, Miss Agent??" he looked at her with imploring eyes.

She had to blink. For a second, that wasn't Sweepy, but Sweetie staring back at her, begging for forgiveness. This was going to be MUCH harder than she thought. "I... I don't know, dearie. if I don't know his name, then I can't be sure if he IS in trouble or not..."

Rarity then brightened with a reassuring smile. "But then again, maybe that's for the best. It's a better idea to play it safe after all, right?"

Her 'brother' returned her smile at full power. "Right!" he agreed.

The group was being led by the Crusader-mobile, going at a much slower speed than before. Rainbow Dash hovered alongside the diminutive trio, while the other five were strung out behind, slowly making their way to the periphery of the Everfree itself.

"So." Scooteroll suddenly spoke up, turning to the blue pegasus. "What's up? What dya do in your group?"

Dash gave him a grin. "I'm the speed reconnaissance pony. You can call me Agent D. I don't like t'brag, but you see, I'm the fastest flier in all of Equestria."

Unbelieving purple eyes bored into her. "No way. You can't be the fastest, that title belongs to Rainbow Blitz!"

For a split second, her wings faltered and she dropped a few inches to the ground, before catching herself. "Uhm... oh yeah? Was he the guy who did that Double-Rainboom earlier?"

"He sure was!" His face took on a dreamy look as he rambled on. "Rainbow Blitz is the coolest pony who ever lived! He even won the Best Young Flier's cup in Cloudsdale! Man, someday, when I'm able to fly right, I'm gonna ask him to be my teacher!"

Dash took a second for that to sink in. She knew that back in her world, Scootaloo hung out around her often. This was the first time she'd heard about flight lessons however. And if Boy-Scoot here had such plans...

Her thoughts were interrupted as the orange colt spoke again. "Say, you SURE you're not a fan?" he questioned, eying her mane and tail. "You sure LOOK an awful lot like him. You... you even have the same Cutie-mark!"

"Really?" she replied, trying to appear nonchalant. "Wow, weird. But nope, never heard of the guy till today. Maybe we're long-lost cousins, who knows. He came outta Cloudsdale, right?"

There was a nod, as the two lapsed into a more casual conversation, discussing the exploits of her dimensional twin.

Back in the wagon, Applebuck stretched his limbs, before sighing. "Ah'm gonna hop out 'n walk, mah hooves are fallin' asleep."

"Oh, o-okay!" Sweepy hastily replied, as the yellow pony leapt out of their transport.

Quickly, he found himself trotting alongside the other fillies, his eyes studying them. He'd never been with so many older girls in his life. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could see why a stallion could fall head-over-heels with one, his eyes gravitating towards the pink one occasionally. *Still, girls are icky.* he thought to himself. *Ah don't need no fru-fru stuff crampin' mah style.*

Then, not for the first time, the young colt's eyes locked on the orange pony. If it weren't for the fact that she was a mare, she was a dead ringer for somepony he knew. Quickly he trotted up until he was walking alongside the Stetson-bearing horse. She didn't notice until a minute or so later, her green eyes flickering downwards, before giving a slight jump as she focused on him.

"Ah... heya." Applejack stammered.

"Hi!" the boy answered, voice as cheerful as before. "Don't be scared none, ah dun have any cooties, ah swear!"

Despite the unease the farmer pony was feeling around her 'brother', she couldn't help but crack a smile at that. "Ah'm sorry sugarcube. Ah'm just... a li'l on-edge. Ya'll can understand that, right?"

Applebuck gave a nod in return. They continued to walk together in silence, their gazes flickering back and forth from each other. At length, he found himself speaking again. "Say... would'ja thinkit weird if ah said that... ya'll reminded me o' somepony else?"

The orange equine could feel the sweat beading on her brow. "Ah dunno... who do ah remind yah of?"

"Mah big brother, Applejack. He an' I work onna farm not far from here, Sweet Apple Acres. We live thar t'gether wit' Red Gala and Grampy Smith. Ah could introduce ya'll sometime if you'd like, they're all right good folks!"

There was no answer for a few seconds, the blonde running the names through her head. Red Gala was more than likely Big Mac, though she was having a hard time picturing him as a female. However, what was REALLY worrying her, was the fact that her male self apparently still had the same name as she did. *Ah guess Applejack's pretty non-gender-specific, ain't it?* she thought to herself.

She realized that the yellow pony was still staring at her. "Ah, ah'm sorry." she said quickly. "It's just that... well, ya'll r'mind me of mah own li'l sister back home. That's... why ah've been actin' so weird t'wards ya."

A confused, yet curious look spread across his face. "Ah do? Well don't that beat all... hey!" his eyes had finally spotted the trio of apples that served as her cutiemark. "Y'all got apples on ya! You wouldn't happen t'have an apple farm too, wouldja?"

She looked down as she thought fast. "Uhm... yeah, ah do, it's just... clear on th'other side o' Equestria. Can't even make it to th' reunions usually."

"Th' Apple Family reunion?" he enthused. "Ya'll 'r Apple family?"

Applejack finally lifted her head as she returned his gaze. "A few times r'moved but yeah, ah'm proud t'say that ah'm Apple family."

She thought she'd been making good progress on dealing with her conflicted emotions towards her alternate sibling. However, she was quite unprepared as the colt galloped up and rubbed up against her, in that familiar way. She tensed up as he cheered. "Yeah! Apples f'ever! Ah found a new cousin! Say Cousin, ya'll never told me yer name now, y'know. What'cha called?"

"Uhm..." her brain racked for an answer. "Ya'll can... uhm... just call me JayJay, fer now. Mah real name's a secret. Super spy stuff 'n all that."

"Sure thing!" Applebuck replied happily, his excitement giving him cause to leap and buck into the air a few times as he dashed back towards the front. "Ah got a new cousin! Ah got a new cousin!"

And there it was. As she watched him cavort, that emotion that she was scared of feeling flooded into her heart, leaving her light-headed. It was family. She felt the attachment forming, equal parts happiness and pride at Applebuck's cheerfulness.

He's not Applebloom! she told her heart. *He's a different pony from her, ah cain't start thinkin' that he's mah family! Ah just cain't!*

But her heart stood firm.

"We're here!" Scooteroll announced, as they finally stopped in front of a rather tall and wide gathering of bushes.

Twilight looked over the mass of foliage with a wary eye. "This is the place?"

"Yep!" Sweepy replied. "The HEDGE."

"Oh dearie me," Rarity moaned. "We have to go inside THAT? Just THINK of the debris that'll get caught in my mane!"

Applebuck chuckled. "Oh no girls, those bushes 'r just cover. Follow me, ah'll show ya'll th' entrance!"

They all watched as the yellow earth pony trotted towards a smallish space between two of the bushes. He ducked down, and went inside, seemingly disappearing. He was quickly followed by his friends, and one Pinkie Pie, who stuck her head in first before entering. "Ooooh, spiffy!" she said, an echoing quality to her voice.

Twilight and Fluttershy exchanged looks, before the unicorn herself trotted forth. As she got low and entered, she felt a slope of dirt extending downwards beneath her hooves.

"Welcome to the HEDGE!" Scooteroll replied, as Sweepy Bell activated his horn, giving light to their surroundings. It was a burrow, and quite a fair-sized one at that. More than big enough for three schoolponies, there were already signs of furnishing, a rock table at one end and a log-bench up against the wall.

"We were gonna use THIS as our clubhouse, 'till big bro showed us th' treehouse." Applebuck explained. "We haven't used it since. Make ya'll-selves at home!"

It managed to hold all nine ponies at once, with some walking room still. Rarity found herself tisking as she began sweeping the floor. "My my! Such appalling conditions, but I suppose that's to be expected. With a little bit of work, this will be a cave fit for a king!"

As Scooteroll and Rainbow Dash performed synchronous eye-rolling, Fluttershy inspected the roof. "This used to be a rabbit warren, I can tell." she spoke, soft as ever. "The bush-roots above are keeping the ceiling in place. We should be safe here for a long time."

"Good enough fer' me." Applejack replied, seating herself at the table.

"Thank you, my little ponies." Twilight turned to the crusaders. "We'll be able to make our plans in peace here. I hereby declare that your mission, was a success!"

"YAY!" the three of them cheered, right before looking backwards and lifting a leg to examine their flanks.... which still remained unadorned. "Awww..." they then groaned, dejected eyes hitting the floor. The sight made a yellow pegasus giggle.

"Hey, chin-up guys." Rainbow enthused, stepping towards the group. "There's still lotsa stuff to try, you know! You'll get your Cutie-marks eventually."

"It just takes patience." the white mare added, seating herself next to Sweepy. "And I know for a fact, that you've all got the patience you need. Just keep trying dears. They'll come."

The crusaders nodded, their mood somewhat restored, before they turned to leave. The white colt however, paused as he turned to look back at Rarity. "Uhm... Miss... miss...?"

Her eyes softened as she took in his awkwardness. "You can call me Rarity, dear." she replied.

"Miss Rarity." Sweepy repeated, before turning around to face her. "You all gonna be all right here?"

"Oh of course dear, don't worry about us. We're full-grown mares after all."

He nodded, before pawing the ground. "Y'know, I'm sorry didn't mention this before... My big brother. His name's Elusive. You kinda..." he turned his green eyes back to her. "You kinda remind me of him... like if, you were my sister."

It was all she could do to keep herself from sweeping him up into a hug right there. Instead, her eyes misted over as she tried to bring words to order. "That's... that's such a sweet thing to say... you're a perfect... gentleman, Sweepy... you take good care of your brother, you hear me?"

The little unicorn blushed, before bowing and nodding. With a quick turn, he was up and out of the burrow. The six ponies remained silent as they heard the buzzing of Scooteroll's wings start up, before fading into the distance.

Collectively, they let out a sigh. Applejack leaned up against the wall. "Celestia's Mane Twilight, PLEASE tell me we won't hav'ta do that again? Ah don't think mah heart can take it."

Fluttershy trotted up to Rarity, nuzzling the purple-maned one. "Will you be alright? I mean, I-if you don't mind my asking..."

The unicorn turned to face the rest of the group, tears flowing freely. "They weren't OUR siblings, Applejack... and yet at the same time, they WERE! I'm just... absolutely TORN! Please Twilight, tell me you can get us back home! I... I miss my sister..."

Twilight looked around at all the faces present. Each one was beseeching the same request from her, to make things right again. Rarity had joined Applejack in the corner, the both of them hugging each other over their shared woes. Rainbow and Pinkie both looked at the pair, awkward expressions on their faces. And Fluttershy... Twilight had already had her moment with the pegasus earlier. She tried not to think of it again.

"I... I'll try." she replied to all present. "But like I said, it's going to take time. The spell took a lot out of me the first time around, and I need to get my energy back."

"How long will that take?" Dash questioned.

The unicorn turned her gaze to the dirt floor. "Two... three days at the least. Plus I need those items. We had them ready back in our own world, but since they didn't get taken with us, we'll have to gather them all over again."

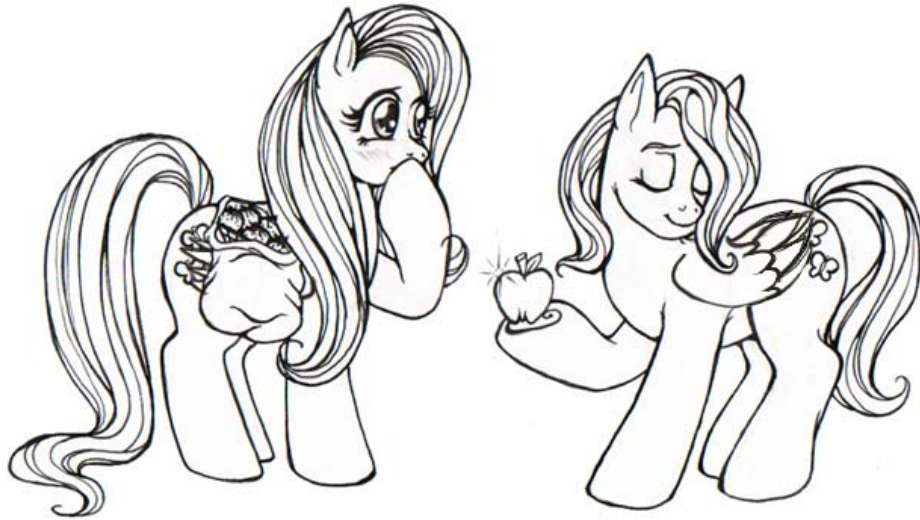
Fluttershy sighed. "Then for now, I guess we'd better... make the best of it."

The six mares all looked at each other, having shielded themselves from a stallion's world. Surely, they could keep hidden and get back to their own world without causing a commotion, without alerting their other selves to their presence...

Right?

Chapter Three

Of a Fruit Forbidden



"Spines, can you be a sweetheart and get me 'Rules of Causality 101?'"

"Sure thing Dusk, hang on."

The lavender stallion nodded to his assistant as she rushed off, before turning back to his book. It was a book that he had managed to find only a few minutes ago. A mysterious title labeled 'Exploring the Aether for Fun and Profit'.

He had seen it earlier today, but had been distracted by a rather high powered anomaly outside the library. When he had returned, a sick Butterscotch had been present, bundled up, his voice softer and higher than usual. At the time, he had thought nothing of it. He DID ask for 'Supernaturals' after all, though Dusk still thought he could have cleared him up with a good spell.

However, that seemingly innocent event was resurfacing in his mind, after reading halfway through his current tome. A spell for instant long-range teleportation was positioned above another spell for dimensional viewing. He had been intrigued by the thought of long-distance teleportation, and for a second, entertained the idea of calling the gang together to try it out... *Maybe Applejack would have some ideas on where to go...*

Butterscotch wouldn't have been able to make it though, he's sick. And so he had shelved the idea, read the next spell, and spotted it's rather long list of warnings.

That was when the alarm bells went off in his head. *Usage of this spell in conjunction with the above might result in accidental dimensional displacement. Use with extreme caution. Reference the Rules of Causality before using.*

"Here we are Dusk." Spines spoke up, plopping a rather hefty volume next to the unicorn's current book. "Whoosh. Anymore heavy lifting like that, and I'll be as ripped as Applejack."

"There's a disturbing thought." Dusk joked, before his horn lit and the book opened up. "Say... when Butterscotch was here earlier today, did you notice anything... odd about him?"

"What, you mean besides the fact that he sounded kinda like 'Butter-babe' again?" the dragoness replied. "Not really, no. Not that I could see a lot of him, his face was pretty wrapped up."

"It was, wasn't it?" the colt murmured, a hoof stroking his chin. "I can see why AJ would give him his hat, but Elusive's scarf? The Boutique is clear on the other side of Ponyville from the farm."

"Maybe he was visiting." Spines suggested. "I know I wouldn't mind a visit from that stallion anytime soon." Her feet left the ground, as a dreamlike expression spread across her face. "Oh Elusive... why yes, I'd be mad to refuse anything from you... to lend Butterscotch his scarf? He's so selfless... Oh, whatta *man!*"

The purple pony could only roll his eyes, he'd dealt with this fangirl side of his assistant before. "Yes yes, we're all aware he's the Element of Generosity, I WAS there. Back on task. You didn't see anything weird about Butterscotch at all?"

The little lizardess blinked, before she landed softly on her haunches. "N-no, I didn't... why, is there something wrong, Dusk?"

He hummed for a bit longer, his eyes running over a particular passage in the heavyset tome, before speaking again. "It's just a hunch... it may be nothing at all, really. Hey, I know!" He stepped away from his desk, a smile on his face. "Spines, grab the tea. We'll pay Butterscotch a visit!"

As Spines saluted smartly and rushed off, Dusk Shine clopped over to a saddlebag and slipped it on, grabbing his wallet. As he waited, his eyes darted back over to the open chapter of the book he'd left.

The chapter titled "Alternate Universes and You."

Fluttershy clopped into Ponyville, a saddlepack around her waist and a purse filled with bits in her mouth.

She had volunteered to do the shopping. It was clear that the bushes that made up the HEDGE were inedible to any degree, and if they were going to wait for three days, they would need food and supplies. So they had pooled their bits, given the money and bags to the pegasus, and set her on her way. They had all agreed that in this alternate world, she was the least conspicuous of the six.

She looked around furtively as she entered town, spying and identifying every pony she saw. A blue mare with a saxophone played outside a delicatessen, an orange stallion with a carrot cutie-mark ordering a carrot-dog, and fluttering along the sky, a cross-eyed pegasus colt delivered the mail. They made no effort to single her out, which she noted with no small relief.

Her luck held up as she entered the marketplace. Her eyes steadily avoided the Sweet Apple Acres stand, as she instead directed herself to

another fruit stall. No pony recognized her, but she was greeted friendly and warmly by every stall owner, much to her relief. *I should have known Ponyville's friendliness to new ponies would have held up.* she thought to herself.

It didn't take long to fill her bags, she noticed, and as she stuffed a bunch of bananas into one of the pockets, she realized that she'd bought more than she'd expected. *N-not that that's a bad thing. We ARE waiting for three days after all.*

After settling a deal for a pack of strawberries, she finally did an about-face and left the market, eyes still wandering about the place. She spotted Harpsy and Babar outside of Sugarcube Corner, her path instantly directing itself away from the establishment. She still thought the two, as colts, made a cute couple, but they had also seen her once before yesterday, and she didn't want to risk-

"Oof!"

She hadn't been looking where she was going, having collided with another pony. On top of that, the collision had popped the top off one of the bags, fruit spilling everywhere.

"Oh! I-I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going." She immediately set about gathering the loose produce back up.

"Oh, n-no, it was my fault, I was distracted." came the other pony's voice, who bent down and began assisting her with the corralling.

"Oh, think nothing of it, I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No, it's okay, here, let me help you. I didn't mean to make you spill your stuff."

"It's alright, this happens more often than you would think."

"I-if you say so. I'm still responsible though, here."

"Oh, w-well, thank you sir."

"Oh, you're welcome miss... I mean, that is... if you don't mind..."

There was one apple left, and two hooves alighted on it at once. Two butter-yellow hooves.

Fluttershy's eyes widened as she tracked the other hoof back up to its owner. She was met with a pair of aqua-blue orbs that returned her gaze, apparently seeing her for the first time as well. He was a pegasus, with wavy pink hair that was cut slightly short. From here, she could tell that he had at least one butterfly for a cutie-mark.

He was... her.

Her eyes shrunk and her cheeks flushed, as somewhere in the back of her mind, a warning bell rang off that said at any moment now, she would be exploding. Twice.

A full minute passed as they stared at each other. Nothing happened.

".... um.... hi." the colt managed to squeak out.

"...hi...." she managed to squeak in return.

The male pegasus dipped his head low as he blushed slightly, a gesture that she found endearing. "I... I haven't seen you around before. I'm... I'm not usually the f-forward one, but... what's your name?"

She dipped her own head down as she pawed at the ground. "I'm... i'm fluttershy." she whispered.

Apparently he had good hearing, as his ears perked and a smile came across his face. "H-hi Fluttershy... I'm Butterscotch..."

"Butterscotch..." she echoed, looking back up at him again. The same name Dusk and Spines had used when she'd met them. So this really WAS her male self. Despite the awkwardness she felt, a smile graced her own lips at she looked him over.

Another round of awkward silence descended, before Butterscotch spied the apple again. He scooped it up with his hoof, and offered it to the

filly, shy blush still in place. She accepted the fruit, taking the stem in her mouth and placing it in her bag. "T-thank you for helping me." she squeaked, as she closed the flap precariously over the bulging baggage.

"I-it was no trouble." he replied, eying the luggage she was carrying. "Are you sure y-you don't need any help carrying all that? That looks like an awful lot of fruit."

"Oh, it's n-nothing I'm not used to." Fluttershy responded, a hoof pawing at the flap's snap. "I always carry as much as I can whenever I'm feeding the animals."

Suddenly, the yellow stallion's eyes sparkled. "Y-you like to take care of the animals too?"

She looked towards him, and seeing his joyed expression, somehow caused her own face to light up in tandem. "Oh yes! It's one of the most special things to me in the world."

"Oooh, the same with me! It always fills me with joy to help feed the ducks,"

"And the help groom the ferrets,"

"And shine the turtle shells,"

"And do you feed the otters by cracking the clams just slightly too?"

"Oh yes, so they can still feel strong when they open them themselves." The thought caused the pair of ponies to devolve into a giggle fit.

At length, they looked into each other's eyes again. The mare felt any trepidation she had before, slowly dissolving away. Having met her own self... she felt something. Like... a lightness. It tingled in her hooves and worked it's way across her body. As they continued staring, she got the distinct feeling that at any minute now, she was about to fly away, without even having opened her wings. *D... does h-he feel the same way?...*

Finally, Butterscotch opened his mouth to speak again.

"I like you." he stated, the blush more prominent than before.

She was surprised when she found her own mouth saying "I like you too."

They stared at each other for a few seconds more. Around them, Ponyville continued on with its business, heedless of the two yellow pegusai. "W-would you like to eat somewhere? I c-could take you to Sugarcube Corner, one of my friends works there." the small stallion suggested, as he pointed a hoof over to the store. "I mean, if that's alright..."

Fluttershy made as if to accept, but then another thought flitted across her mind. "Ooh... I would love to, believe me Butterscotch. B-but I have friends that are waiting for me, for these." she made a motion back to her bags. "I-if I can though... another time, I would love to go eat somewhere with you."

He nodded, his blush still matching his female counterpart's own. "Okay then, I understand. I-I'll keep an eye out for you. Untill next time, Miss Fluttershy?"

She got onto all four hooves and trotted up to him, snout-to-snout, before she whispered. "Untill next time."

Two things happened at once then. The first thing that she was cognizant of, was that she was running full-tilt back towards the forest, her bag miraculously staying intact.

The second thing that she became aware of, turned her face bright-red, as she realized she'd done it first, before breaking into a gallop.

She had nuzzled him.

Back in that street, a pink-maned pegasus stared off in the distance at the retreating form of what he felt was, his better half. The brush against

his cheek was quite warm, and as it sunk in, a goofy smile began to spread across his face.

"Yo! Hey there brony!"

There was a rush of wind as another pegasus stallion landed next to him, spiky multihued mane sticking out in all directions. "Yo 'Scotch! Been lookin' around for you, what've you been up to?"

There was no reply.

"...ummmm... 'Scotch? Yo? Equestria to Butterscotch?"

The blue pony waved a hoof in front of his friend's face. No reaction.

Now the stallion grimaced, as he clopped his forehooves together in front of the yellow equine's eyes. "Hey! Butterscotch!"

Finally, the aforementioned colt blinked as the noise registered. Slowly he looked up, aqua eyes meeting with rose ones. "Oh... Hi Rainbow Blitz... lovely day out today, isn't it?"

An eyebrow was arched. "Um... yeah, real nice weather we've been having." the cyan one replied, a slightly sarcastic tone in his voice.

It went unnoticed. "Yes..." Butterscotch turned his head back in the direction that the mare had gone. "Absolutely.... beautiful..."

Now Blitz was confused, as he took to the air again to hover upside-down in Scotch's face. "Hey there, pony. Something wrong? You look like you just let the mare of your dreams get away from you."

This caused the smaller pegasus to let loose a distinctly un-manly giggle. "Well... she DID go away, but, she asked nicely. I didn't mind. She said she'd love to come back another time."

This, Rainbow had not been expecting. He turned his head in the direction his friend was looking in. However, all he could spot was a settling cloud of dust. That didn't matter. A grin had blossomed on his face, as he righted himself and wrapped a hoof around the yellow one's shoulders.

"Ahhhh-HAH, it finally happened, didn't it 'Scotch!? Y'found yourself a *fillyfriend*! Tell me, what's she like? She cute? She sassy? Tell me, you going steady? Oooh just WAIT 'till Berry hears this, I bet the bash he'll throw'll be AWESOME!"

Butterscotch was turning a deeper shade of red as his friend had continued, before finally squirming himself free. "P-p-please, Blitz! I JUST met her today, and all we did was talk! W-well, we first, um, kinda bumped into each other, and she, um, spilled her groceries, but still. We t-talked, and, we discovered that we both liked animals, a-and she was really cute, a-and then, well..."

"Kindred spirits, eh?" the blue pegasus gave a playful hoof-punch to the shoulder. "Lucky buck. Then what happened?"

"W-well, th, then I said.... that i.... liked her."

"And?"

"...... andthenshesaidshelikedmetoo!"

It was not the way that Rainbow Blitz would have gone about it, but he couldn't argue with the results, a surge of pride building in his chest as he pulled his friend close and gave him a noogie. "You *STUD*! I always knew there'd be a gal out there for you, and whaddya know! Oh, I have GOT to tell Dusk about this, he'll SO put it in his next letter to the Prince!"

Now Butterscotch's face was a deep red. "Oh no, Blitz, you WOULDN'T!" he gaped, mortified.

All he got in return was a sinister grin. "Say, what IS her name? I'm guessing she's another pegasus, right?"

Shyly, the yellow one nodded. "Her... her name is Fluttershy..." his voice took on a reverent tone as he said her name, which gave Blitz a cause to roll his eyes.

"Oh she was just so... so wonderful. she was very calm, and polite, and she was wonderfully timid, which I found so VERY cute. It made me all but forget the visit that Dusk paid me earlier today. I still don't know why he thought I was sick. I-.... Blitz? Rainbow Blitz?"

Apparently, the blue stallion liked hearing stories of scoring, not romance. A couple of feathers were all that remained next to Butterscotch's hooves.

Fluttershy had managed to catch her breath, once she had returned to the HEDGE. Twilight was waiting for her outside, and with a little assistance, they managed to fit the crowded bags through the diminutive entrance.

"O-oh my!" the shypony exclaimed, once she got inside. The interior had undergone a dramatic transformation, a few colored blankets hung on the walls, a small firepit had been dug out and constructed, and there were plenty of haystacks for seating. Hanging from a root in the ceiling was a firefly lamp, and the stone table from earlier was now festooned with a tablecloth and a vase full of daisies.

"Oh Fluttershy, welcome back!" Rarity called out, tail sweeping busily at the floor, while Pinkie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack worked on tacking on the door to a makeshift pantry.

"Rarity's done a good job sprucing up the place, don't you think?" Twilight asked, a hoof unbuckling one of the bags.

"O-oh yes, this all looks so WON-derful." the pegasus replied, taking in the cave's homey atmosphere. "I had no idea you were carrying so much with you, Rarity."

"My darling, one must NEVER leave her house unprepared." the unicorn drawled, while Dash made faces behind her. "It would simply have been unbecoming of me. Besides, I simply HAD to do SOMETHING. If this is to be our little home away from home, then let's DO make it our own, right?"

"Can't argue wit' that'." Applejack added, as she strolled over to the saddlebags. "Say, y'got any apples in thar? Ah'm hungrier thanna pig that's gone a coupla days wit'out slop!"

"Oh, yes, I brought enough for everyone." Fluttershy smiled, as she opened the other bag, a few strawberries falling out. "Everypony dig in!"

There was no need to say anything else. All six fillies proceeded to partake of the feast that had been retrieved, much smacking and nomming filling the cave. After a bit, the yellow pony herself stopped eating as she noticed she was holding an apple. Slowly, a faraway look appeared in her eyes.

Twilight brought her head up from the date she had been chewing on, her eyes noticing her friend's odd state. She trotted beside her, poking at her hoof. "Fluttershy? You alright?"

The pegasus started a bit as she focused, but gave a calm smile to the unicorn. "Yeah, I'm okay. It's just that... uhm..."

Inquisitive, the student leaned in. "What? Something happen?"

"W-well... I just..." aqua eyes dipped down to the floor, before she spoke the following. "I... I think your other theory is wrong too, Twilight."

For some reason, despite the volume of the words spoken, they had managed to grab the attention of everypony present, and the sounds of eating quickly died down, eyes homed in on the pair of ponies off to the side.

"Wh... what do you mean?" Twilight asked, a suspicion already forming in her mind as her pupils began to shrink.

"I... I mean that I... I... didn't explode..."

Pears and grapes were dropped, as the other four horses gasped, Applejack in particular looking like she was about to faint.

"Fluttershy..." The lavender unicorn was now all business. "What happened while you were out there?"

Fluttershy could now tell she was in trouble. She began to shrink down in her spot as she mumbled. "I....i met btrscth"

"What was that, 'Shy?" Dash asked, now hovering over the pony's other side.

"I... i ran into btrschatthmrkplace..."

"One more t-*HA/me?*" Applejack asked, her face getting into Fluttershy's own. That was enough to provoke a reaction.

"I Ran Into Butterscotch!"

There was a mass of sighs and moans as the words confirmed their worst fears. "Q-uite literally, actually. I wasn't looking where I was going, a-and we both walked into each other, and then he was nice enough to help me pick up all those fruits and vegetables, and then we got started on talking about ani-"

"Yeah yeah, we get it." Dash interrupted, her patience quickly running low. "Geeze 'Shy, sometimes you're just as bad as Pinkie. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you'd found yourself a new colt-friend."

At this, Fluttershy blushed heavily as she cast her gaze down, a hoof pawing at the ground.

Rarity's eyes widened at this, recognizing the signs immediately, before pointing at her. "Fluttershy! Y.... You didn't!"

".....he..... he said that he liked me."

"And what did YOU say?" Dash leaned in, accusingly.

"..... i... isaidthatilikeditoo!"

"Ooooooh-nonononononono~" Twilight suddenly chanted, her expression having evolved from shock to outright panic. "This is NOT what we need! That's the LAST thing we need! Fluttershy, do you REALIZE what this MEANS?? If you start crushing on yourself, and vice versa, then the whole of reality itself could be doomed!"

"But Twilight!" Pinkie interjected. "You said that if we met ourselves we'd all go poof, and Fluttershy's still here, she and her boysself haven't gone poof!"

"I KNOW. That was just a theory though, and Fluttershy's managed to disprove it. But what's happening instead could be FAR more devastating over the long run!" The librarian ran her hooves through her hair as scenario after scenario rampaged through her mind. Scenarios involving dimensional physics getting mixed up with that one science that she had yet to do any real study on. Romance.

"I'm sorry Fluttershy." Twilight began, as she rounded about back to her friend. "But this... this just isn't going to happen. I don't want to do this, but the truth is, if you've got these... FEELINGS, for Butterscotch? For your own male self? We can't let you do the shopping anymore."

"B-but, but Twilight-!"

"End of discussion." she stated, the finality evident in her words. The unicorn turned to look at the rest of her group. "This goes for all of us. We can't meet our own selves, or something like THIS might happen."

"Twilight, you CAN'T be serious." Rarity stated, stepping forward. "These are matters of the heart you speak of! You can't expect to simply lock Fluttershy up in here and deny her any kind of closure to the bonds she's forged in herself!"

She got a look that told her that was EXACTLY what she had been planning on doing. "This is NOT. OUR. WORLD." she stated, each word punctuated with a stamping of a hoof. "We have no place in it. None at all. And we need to make sure we DON'T leave ANY kind of mark here! We've probably already caused who knows WHAT untold damage when we enlisted the Crusaders, and now Fluttershy has a crush on her male alter ego?"

"The fabric of reality is a delicate thing! Rarity, you can appreciate this metaphor I'm about to use. Imagine our reality as an afghan quilt, weaved out of yarn. Every piece of yarn used, is in fact, a pony. So what happens if a couple of pieces of the same yarn try and occupy the same stitch?"

The white one could already see where this was going. "An... an ugly quilt, for certain. And if it stayed in there..."

"Yes, then things could happen. BAD things. We don't know WHAT, but rest assured, they would be BAD. VERY BAD."

There was silence all around. Out of it, came a very timid voice. "I... i'm sorry..."

Twilight looked towards the pegasus, expression softening, if only for a second. "No, I'm the one who's sorry, Fluttershy. The last thing I want to do is to deny you something... But trust me... this is the way it has to be."

She only got a single nod in reply. Rarity moved first, taking Fluttershy aside, while Applejack hefted the bag and dragged it towards their newly-built pantry, the remaining two ponies assisting her.

The student sighed, as she let her eyes rest on a green tome, levitating it up to her face. It was going to be a long three days.

There was a tapping at the window. Somewhere in the back of the library, there was a snort, followed by a feminine *'Five more minutes, pleez Dusk?'*

The unicorn rolled his eyes, before lighting his horn and swinging the window open. In came a familiar blue stallion, crooked rainbow tail swinging as he glided in towards Dusk's desk.

"We have a door you know, Blitz."

He got a lopsided grin in return. "Now where would the fun be in that?"

There was a shaking of a mane, with an amused grin. "What brings you by here, today? We all know you're not the reading type."

"Oh man, I've got a juicy piece of news for you. It's about Butterscotch!" The pegasus was obviously in glee as he clopped his hooves together.

Dusk on the other hand, was not amused. "Oh gosh, something about Butterscotch? Let me tell you something weird about Butterscotch. Apparently, either we've all gone crazy, or there's two of him lurking around Ponyville."

This caught Blitz by surprise. "Two of him? Whaddya mean by that?"

The lavender equine collected his wits, before starting from the beginning. "Okay. Earlier today, Butterscotch shows up in my library, decked out in AJ's hat and a scarf. He claims he's got a cold, and his voice is so tinny that I'm inclined to believe him. He checks out 'Supernaturals'. Fair and good. Later in the day, I get worried about him, gather up Spines and some tea, and go visit his cottage. Wanna know what I find? Not only is he hunky dory and okay, but he's got *no memory* of ever even BEING in the library today, and 'Supernaturals' is nowhere to be seen."

The rainbow colt sat there for a few seconds, absorbing the information. "So... you're saying that 'Scotch was... LYING to you?"

"He wasn't lying, at least when we met him at his place. You and I both know him, and the poor guy couldn't belt out a whopper under pressure even if he tried!"

"That much is true..." Blitz hummed as he crossed his forehooves. "I wonder if his girlfriend has anything to do with this..."

Now it was Dusk's turn to blink. "Girlfriend? What?"

Rainbow shook his head, as the original purpose of his visit resurfaced in his mind. "Oh yeah, that's what I came here to tell you! Butterscotch met the filly of his dreams today!"

The unicorn blinked awkwardly. "Aha... that's, that's great news, actually! Did you see her?"

"Nope. She was already gone when I got there, but the fella was positively DRIPPING with puppy-love. It was written all over his face!" He snickered at the memory.

"Well, did he describe her to you?"

"Well, from what I stuck around to find out, apparently she's an animal-lover like him. And that she's got twice the number of shy bones that he has, if that's even possible."

Somewhere in the back of Dusk's mind, a suspicion was growing larger with every word his friend spoke. "Did he tell you what she looked like?"

Here, the blue colt took on a sheepish expression. "I.... can't remember if he did or not, exactly... oh, he DID say she was a pegasus too!"

There was a massaging of temples. "And her name?"

"Hmmm..." the pony tilted his head back as he wracked his brain. "Flooty? Floosytot? Shooty? Solaris, what WAS it... Flooter...shay? Flut, Flutter!" he suddenly sprung on all four hooves. "Flutter... Shy! *Fluttershy!* Yeah, that was it! Fluttershy!"

"Fluttershy..." the student rolled the name around on his tongue, his eyes unfocused in thought. "Butterscotch... Fluttershy... Butter-SCOTCH... Flutter-SHY!" His expression took on a gape of shock, scenarios running through his mind. "Of course! It HAS to be!"

Now Rainbow Blitz was completely confused. "Has to be what? What's going on here Dusk?"

"I'm not sure yet." Dusk replied, now trotting back towards his desk. "But I have a feeling this isn't the end of it. Blitz, if you see ANY ponies that you don't recognize, walking around Ponyville, come and tell me immediately. I need to start keeping a record." His horn glowed as a piece of parchment and a quill pen came into view.

"Um... if you say so, brony." the pegasus replied, lifting himself up towards the opened window. "A record of what, exactly? I-is it somethin' big?"

"It's something." came the reply, as a couple of names were written down on the paper. "Whether it becomes big or not, we've yet to see. Just keep an eye out, okay? Oh, and watch yourself! We don't know what these ponies are capable of!"

The stallion pshawed. "C'mon Dusk, I'll run circles around them. I'm Rainbow Blitz, remember? I'll find your 'weird ponies' in ten seconds flat!"

With that, he left through the window in his trademarked multihued blur. Dusk couldn't help but chuckle at the nature of his friend's exit, before returning his attention to the paper, and what he'd written.

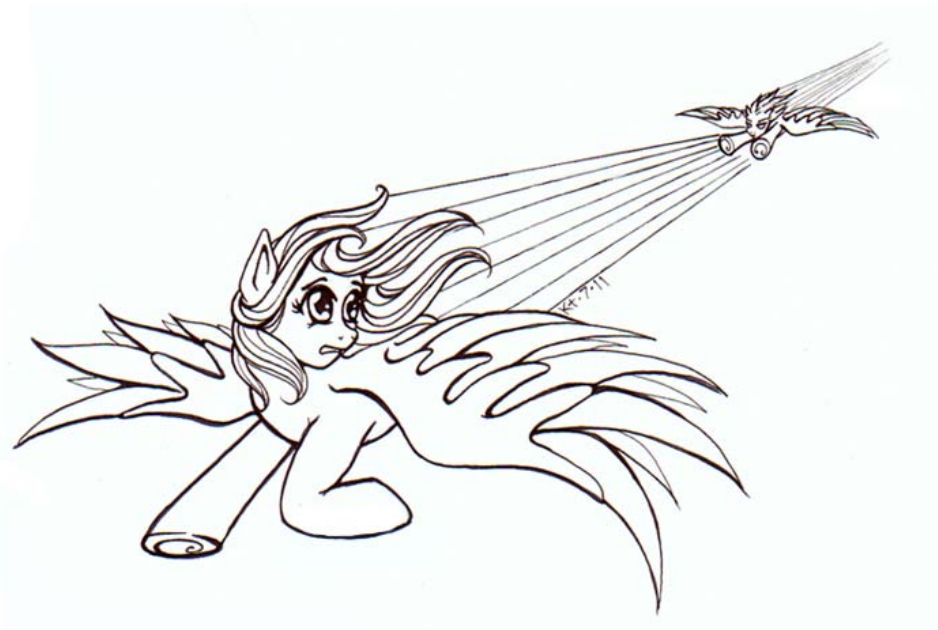
'BUTTERSCOTCH' <-----> FLUTTERSHY'
Parallel genderswapped universe?
Future cases to go below.

For an instant, an absurd thought flashed through his mind, one that both amused him, and frightened him at the same time.

"TWO Rainbow Blitzes?" he chuckled out-loud to himself. "I don't think Equestria would be able to survive THAT!"

Chapter Four

Upon a Wing and a Prayer



Rainbow Dash sneezed.

It was the second day of their living in the odd Genderswapped dimension, and the blue mare was bored to TEARS. The morning had dawned uneventfully, and though she had originally had the mindset to treat the odd turn of events as a vacation of sorts, she realized that remaining cooped up beneath the HEDGE was of absolutely no interest to her.

"AUGH" she groaned, rearing her back and flapping her wings restlessly for the fifth time in twice as many minutes. "I can't STAND this. I gotta do SOMETHING Twilight, or I'm gonna go STIR-CRAZY!"

Applejack glanced from her sitting spot, over to the bookfilly, who was currently engrossed in the local copy of 'Supernaturals'. "Y'all may want ta' listen t'her Twi. Ah've seen her stir-crazy, and it tain't pretty."

Twilight did her own groan as she set the book down. "Look, for the last time. We are NOT stepping hide nor hair nor hoof outside of the

HEDGE for the remainder of our stay here, unless it's absolutely necessary."

"That time may come sooner than later, darling." came the interruption. All eyes turned to the white unicorn as she strolled into their midst. "I'm pleased to say that lunch has been served. Pinkie's done up a marvelous fruit salad for every one of us." Perked ears and smiles came at the mention of fruit salad.

"However, to go about it, she's managed to use up every piece of fruit that we had left over from yesterday."

Applejack was incredulous as she glanced over to the table. "Even th' carrots?"

"I thought they made a nice touch!" Pinkie replied from her post behind a log-constructed counter.

"Oh dear," Twilight sighed, a look of worry evident on her face. "We went through that much faster than I expected. I originally thought we'd be able to stretch that one trip's worth of food out for the whole three days. H-how did we go..."

Dash rolled her eyes. "Think about it Twi. When a pony can't do anything but stay cooped up inside and have nothing to do besides reading, writing, and losing to Pinkie at twenty-three consecutive matches of Tic-Tac-Toe, what's the only other really exciting activity?"

"Eating." Fluttershy replied, from her own corner at the table, already nibbling at her bowl.

"They're right, darling." Rarity added, giving the lavender pony an imploring look. "I know Twilight, I fear for the sake of all of reality, but you must understand, I also fear for the state of all our figures if we simply let ourselves continue to gorge out of boredom! I can already feel the calories going straight to my flanks." she whined, giving her rear a small shake.

Twilight facehoofed, but then directed her eyes downward. "Sorry guys... I didn't think that the act of waiting it out would be so... hard on

you..."

Applejack got onto all fours as she walked over and nuzzled the student. "It's alright Twi. We're just not used'ta stayin' indoors at all hours and distractin' ourselves wit' readin', like you are. We're active ponies. At least, Pinkie, Dash an' Ah are."

There were sounds of agreement from all present. As Twilight gave them all gazes of gratefulness, she began working on a solution to their newest problem. "Okay... if that's the case, then here's what we're gonna do. Everypony still have some bits left?"

There were nods.

"Good. Later this evening, we'll have somepony else head into town and do more shopping-"

"I'LL GO!!" Rainbow Dash eagerly enthused, both hooves waving in the air.

"A-heh, no, you won't." Twilight stated, letting the pegasus deflate like a balloon. "Sorry Dash, but if your male self here is anywhere near as prolific and active as you were back in Ponyville, then you're going to get looks. Ponies probably all thought you were a fan when we first arrived."

"Rainbow Blitz." Dash harrumphed. "Scoots told me about him. Sure, he pulled off the Double Rainboom, but I'll bet he's not even one FOURTH as cool as me in person."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Ah knew this would happen sooner 'r later." she groaned.

"Applejack." she started at the mentioning of her name. "I'm going to hand the shopping delegation to you. You know the marketplace as well as any pony, AND you know how to make a deal. Stretch our bits as much as you can, alright? We're going to try and make this trip our LAST one, got it?" The unicorn gave an even gaze to all present.

"Okie Dokie Lokie!" Pinkie replied, bounding over to the table. "Now stop being such a buncha coiled mare-inna-boxes and get over here and eat already! These salads won't enjoy themselves!"

The fillies did just that, as they gathered round and dug in. The carrots WERE a nice touch.

Rarity had managed to come up with a way to keep the majority of their group busy. That way, was with a new dress. She had cannibalized some of the blankets she had brought, and asked Fluttershy to model for her, Applejack and Pinkie Pie helping out in whatever ways they could. That left just Twilight, who had picked back where she'd left off in her book, and Rainbow Dash, who was STILL bored to tears.

She bit back a yawn, as she stole a glance at the small concealed opening, trying the gauge the angle of what little light penetrated it. "What time is it, Twi?"

The student looked at the few sunbeams herself, thinking. "It's probably noon. Not quite time to send AJ off shopping yet."

The pegasus groaned. "Fine, whatever. I guess I'm gonna take a nap. Wake me when the world ends."

She laid her head down on the blanket she'd been resting on. *It's not THAT bad.* she thought to herself. *Twilight doesn't mind naps. Besides, this is probably around when I USUALLY take my nap anywa-*

A brainwave snapped her eyes open, as her mane and tail suddenly stood on end.

A split second later, Twilight let out an 'ackfpb!!' as a blue filly suddenly interjected herself between the unicorn and her book. "Twilight." she stated evenly. 'I need to go fly. Now."

Twilight let out a breath. "Dash, we've been over this. I'm not letting-"

"NO." Rainbow interrupted, suddenly taking the purple one's head in both her forehooves. "I need to go and fly. NOW."

Deep lavender orbs met rose-colored ones with a pinch of trepidation. "This... this wouldn't happen to be that stir-crazy stuff that Applejack mentioned earlier, would it?" she asked, the voice tinged with a touch of fear.

The pegasus let go of her head in surprise. "What? No, I'm not THAT bad off, YET." She then leaned in real close, touching snouts with the student. "But believe me when I say, If you want to keep me manageable, then you've GOT to LET me GO, NOW, or I'll have to stay cooped up here until this time tomorrow!"

"Why?" Twilight stammered. The commotion had gathered the rest of the filly's attention. "WHY right now?"

"Because it's my NAP TIME."

Silence reigned for a few seconds. "Beg pardon?" Applejack asked.

"Well, if the other me in this world, is anything like the REAL me," she got out of the unicorn's face and turned to her friends. "Then right about now, and for at least the rest of the afternoon until 5, he'll be napping! And if he's napping, I'll be able to go out there and stretch my wings, and stay out of sight of everypony else! If they DO see me, I'll be so high up, they'll just think I'm him instead, getting a little extra practice in!"

Rarity blinked. "Wow... my, that's... actually quite crafty, Dash. Still risky as all goodall, but crafty nonetheless!"

"Sounds plenty reasonable, if y'ask me." the farmer opinioned, before locking her green eyes with Twilight's, ones that seemed to say *PLEASE SAY YES*.

"Well, Twi?" Dash asked, turning back to the unicorn, bounding in place. "Whaddya say?"

For a long minute, there was no answer. On the one hoof, she didn't want to have any more damage happen to the timeline than was already

done. On the other, she could tell that AJ was really leery of keeping their pegasus friend cooped up. Maybe it would be better if she allowed her out. Besides, she had to admit, it WAS a sound plan...

"... well... I guess-"

Rainbow Dash didn't even wait for the rest. Twilight gagged as she was suddenly hugged, then struggled to stay on her feet as a multihued tornado erupted from her sitting position, the rainbow contrail leading directly to the HEDGE's exit.

THIS WAS FREEDOM.

For the moment, Rainbow Dash cleared her mind of any weirdness that she had seen and witnessed these past few days. Right now, it was just her, the clouds, and the sky for miles around.

"Oh sweet Equestrian airspace, how I've missed you!" she yelled out, performing an Immelman loop out of pure joy. The speed and wind in her mane was all she needed. It was an essential part of her diet, much like apples or carrots would normally be. She needed flight to stay alive.

She flew and swooped and performed for half an hour, however long it took to release all of her pent-up energy. When her wings finally demanded that she take it easy, she found a stray cloud to alight onto, and nestled herself down into it. She was tempted to drop off right then and there, but she shook her head. *No, if I take a nap now, I'll waste my chance to fly. Once HE wakes up, I'll have to beat a quick retreat back to the HEDGE. Why is it called the HEDGE anyways? I guess the Crusaders thought it sounded cool.*

So, what can I do? Oh, I could try my hoof at the Double Rainboom! But wait, that'll draw a lot of attention. Attention that HE'll notice, and know it wasn't HIM who did it. She had to smile at herself, if there was anypony who she knew how to think like, it was herself.

Well, I suppose I could do a little reconnaissance. I AM supposed to be 'Agent D' after all. Maybe I'll check out the library, see if 'Dusk' is really

as much an egghead as Twi. Or maybe I could spy on the boutique, and see if Rarity's double is every bit as prissy and fru-fru as SHE is.

"Or maybe..." she said this part out loud to herself. She knew that whenever SHE napped, she usually would do so on a cloud, or in one of the many trees of Sweet Apple Acres.

She only ever slept at her own house at night.

Grinning like a fox in a henhouse, she lifted off the cloud, and directed herself towards a far-off, familiar cloud structure.

Getting in had been easy. Dash hadn't even needed to use the spare key she knew was hidden under the doormat, her own key opened the door just fine. Apparently, doorlocks remained the same, whatever the dimension they were home to.

She trotted inside and looked around, inspecting her own sense of decor. Nothing tremendously out-of-place popped out at her, save for the photos that adorned the walls. She trotted forward and took in the image of her male self for the first time, a saluting pose from his days in the Junior Speedster's Camp.

"Heh... think you're pretty hot stuff, huh?" she spoke to the frame. The pegasus moved on over to the trophy case, where the medals and awards she had accumulated over time were displayed.

They were all present, she noted. The Mercury Cup, the Aerobic Assault Grand Prix. She found herself comforted as she noticed the Best Young Flyer's tiara was still on the very top shelf.

Then she turned around, and saw the Wonderbolts poster. At first she stared at it in confusion, because the pegusai on the poster weren't quite as she remembered. However, she managed to identify each one after some length of time. The stallion up towards the front... in her world, Soarin' had taken that spot. In this one, it was Spitfire.

Spitfire. she found herself thinking. Now THERE was a pony full of life. She didn't know if the feelings she held for the yellow daredevil were romantic or not, but had never indulged her curiosity to find out. Now that she was in a world where a male Spitfire was present, she found herself much more receptive to the idea of a possible relationship.

Unless...

She blushed as she looked upstairs. She knew what would be up there, and yet at the same time, she wasn't sure she WANTED to know. A minute or so passed, before Dash finally set her teeth, and trotted up the steps. It was HER house after all. Well, maybe not exactly, but still.

She nudged the bedroom door open. Everything was still as she'd remembered it. The bed sat there, calling her name out to her, but she studiously ignored it's cries. There would be time for sleep later.

Instead, she turned to the chest of drawers, it's size now seemingly larger than life. Gulping, she hooked a hoof around the bottom drawer's handle, pulling it out. There were knickknacks and odds and ends in here, childhood toys that she knew, or were in forms different from her memory. Either way, they weren't the goal.

It was the black box at the back of the drawer that she wanted to see.

She knew what it's contents were... that is, she knew back in her own world. But due to the nature of this one, she was certain that they had changed, along with almost everything else. She lifted the box out, found herself taking a breath, and squeezing her eyes shut in a grimace as she pulled the top up, one eye glancing inside.

'PLAYPONY: THE COLT-CUDDLER ISSUE'

It was quickly closed, and stuffed back inside the drawer, the drawer itself making a rather loud racket as it was shoved back into the chest. NOW she fell onto the bed, the normally unflappable blue pony's face flushed a pure crimson as she considered the implications.

My... My other self's just as bi-curious as I am.

"HEY!"

Her heart leapt in her throat. The voice was rough, but commanding. It wasn't superbly deep, like she had expected it to be, but it was still enough to give her the willies, not to mention a chill down her spine as she remembered at that exact moment that she'd left the front door SWINGING WIDE OPEN.

"Hey! Is there somepony in here?!"

They were still downstairs, that much was for certain. She could have leapt out the window, but she knew they would spot her. Hiding under the bed didn't make much sense. The closet? Like she'd fit! Maybe even-

Clopsteps started up the stairs. She bolted up into an airhole and lodged herself into the house's cooling system.

Rainbow Dash held her breath as she heard the figure enter the bedroom. There were sounds of rummaging, before another call came out. "I know you're still in here! The window's still closed! C'mon out, so I can teach you something called 'private property laws'!"

She didn't of course. The filly scooted as quietly as she could into the bowels of the house. Judging from her position, she figured she was now over the living room. A screened airhole allowed her to peer down and confirm her location.

It also allowed her a good look at the sky-blue stallion who was making his way back down the stairs, wild rainbow mane flailing about as his rose-tinted eyes searched the premises for the intruder. Snorting, he stomped a hoof onto the floor.

"C'mon, show yourself! I'm not afraid of you!"

Now that she was actually seeing him for herself, she found her body reacting in a way she hadn't expected. That was to say, she was feeling a rock in the bottom of her stomach weighing her down. The same weight that she had felt back at the Best Young Flier's competition.

But I'm afraid of YOU. she realized with shock. *I don't know why. But I'm afraid of you.*

Some more moments of silence passed in the house, as the colt below seemed to calm down. "You're one of those 'weird' ponies that Dusk was talkin' about, aren't yah?" he challenged the quiet. "It didn't make much sense to me at the time. Hay, it STILL doesn't make any sense. Whatever it is. He thinks 'Fluttershy' is one of them. Is that who's there? Is that you, 'Fluttershy'?"

The words only served to increase the sense of dread that Dash felt. So they KNEW about them? They knew Fluttershy's name? Twilight would have a fit.

"Fine." he said nonchalantly at last. "See if I care. There's ways to get criminal ponies to come out of hiding. There's the official way..." he casually strolled to the center of the building, before taking to his wings. "And then there's the PEGASUS way!"

And right then, he began to fly around in a circle. Faster and Faster he went, until a rainbow-colored vortex ring began to form. Slowly but surely, it began to expand, the cumulous making up the floor slowly dissipating, being sucked up, almost like...

...he's going to destroy his own house to get to me! she realized.

To most pegusai, this was not a big deal. Clouds were plentiful, and could easily be obtained for rebuilding the houses, or outright replacing them. However, usually a pegasus had the foresight to remove whatever fragile objects they had, off the premises before demolition.

A technicality that the Male her had apparently overlooked. Already she could hear the trophy-case rattling in the high-speed winds. All those awards, medals, the tiara itself...

And then, she realized that she was no longer in the air duct. Not because it had dissolved, but rather because she had pulled herself out, and had begun flying around the miniature tornado in the opposite direction.

As she increased her speed, she could feel the original vortex begin to slow down. She was canceling it's momentum! Enthused, she checked her own velocity, meeting with the counter-rotation at every point.

Slowly but surely, the tornado died down, the multicolored blurs fading from sight. She looked around as she slowed, glad to see that the house had only sustained minimal damage-

THUMP

She collided with an object mid-air. As she backed up and hovered in place, her eyes shrunk as she stared at...

He was regarding her with as much the same shocked expression as she was. His pupils were small rose dots, his wings beating erratically as he took in his female lookalike. "You..." he stammered. "You... you're..."

She didn't stick around to hear the rest. She vanished from his sight as a sudden rainbow blur shot out the door.

Rainbow Blitz remained for only a second longer, before he gave chase.

"Ho-kay... just gotta act real natural-like. That's it! Don't need'ta make a ruckus.... still wish they'd let me keep mah hat."

Applejack slowly made her way down Carrot Street, trying her best to blend into the rest of the townsfolk. For this outing, the group had decided that a degree of change to the farmer's appearance was necessary. This included the braiding of her mane and tail, the shifting of the saddlebags more towards the rear to hide her cutie-marks, and the biggest change of all, the removal of her pappy's hat from her head.

She knew it was in good hooves, but that still didn't change the fact that she felt naked without it.

She was working her way towards the marketplace, like Fluttershy before, her eyes more-or-less concentrated on the goal. Sure, every now and then she looked to the side to get a glance of a familiar face or so. She spotted Cloudkicker the pegasus, the gangly colt watching a caramel-colored mare from a distance. At the flower shop, she recognized a trio of stallions, who at the moment, were NOT bemoaning the end of the world. And over there was Sugarcube-

THE FRAGRANCE OF DARK COFFEE

It hit her like a ton of bricks. She found herself stopping in her tracks, and inhaling the scent. *Good heavens! Ah haven't had a good cup o' joe in days! Ah... Ah wonder if th' girls'll mind me slippin' in an' grabbin' them a tray o' muffins 'r so.*

With a small amount of trepidation, she trotted inside the bakery. The familiar smells of cupcakes fresh from the oven filled the air, as her eyes roamed the piles of pastries lining the counters. Already she was feeling closer to home.

At least, up until she heard a voice go "Oh, hello there!"

She turned around and spotted Mrs Cake. Or was it? She had to do a double-take. It sure LOOKED like Mrs Cake, save that she was a bright yellow and orange instead of blue and pink, and had a trio of brownies for her cutiemark.

"Oh, wh-why, hello!" the farmer stammered. "Sorry, ah couldn't help but smell th' coffee. Ah've... been on th' road fer a while, haven't had any inna good long time!"

"Oh my, a traveler, are you? You certainly look new." The yellow Mrs Cake replied. "Well just sit tight dearie, rest your hooves. I'll have a cup out to you in a jiffy. Oh Honeybun~!"

"Yes, sugarmuffin~?" a blue lanky head with a cap on top rose from behind the counter, pink mane sticking straight out.

"A cup of joe for our traveling pony here!"

"Sure thing, sweetiemelon!"

As Mr Cake trotted to the back to retrieve some brew, Applejack was left sitting with her mind spinning. *Not what ah expected ay-tall. Those two look more like they just traded colors, rather' than gender.*

From beyond the door, she heard a crash. Her ears perked up and her eyes widened as she heard a boyish giggle emanate from the kitchen. "Who-hoops! Sorry about that, Mr Cake! Got a little too much baking soda in that batch!"

"It's alright, sonny." came the reply, as the blue stallion re-entered the storefront, a coffeepot in his mouth. A quick pour later, and AJ was in heaven as she let the bitter darkness cascade down her throat.

"Oh my," Mrs Cake exclaimed as she watched the orange one all but inhale the hot drink. "And with no cream or sugar! You really WERE aching for it, weren't you?"

"Y'all have no ah-dea." came the reply, the mare licking her lips.

Another crash sounded from the back of the store, and Applejack found herself talking fast. "Uhm, cannah also git a tray o' them blueberry muffins too? How much do ah owe you allt'gether?"

"Oh, at least six bits for the muffins. But dearie, don't worry about the coffee. That was on the house."

"Thank y'all kindly." Applejack replied, her heart warmed by the thought that the Cake's charity still remained intact, even in this world. She didn't wait very long however, after the box of muffins was handed to her. She left with another word of thanks to the couple. And a word of thanks to whatever the name of the Prince was here, that she had managed to escape meeting the male rendition of her partypony friend.

Once back out on the street, she trotted along into the marketplace proper. She began haggling with the vegetable vendors for their goods, a feat she found easier than usual, due to already knowing most of the ponies here, despite them being opposite genders. Carrot Top in particular, she found was almost TOO easy, the stallion just about giving her two

bushels of the roots for free. She wasn't quite sure, but she thought she heard him sigh as she departed.

She had just managed to wrangle a good deal out of Rusty Tuber for a sack of potatoes, when she saw the next cart in line... and almost bolted from the marketplace right there on the spot.

A familiar stall was sitting there, the fresh smell of apples and cinnamon wafting from it, as fruit and pies were laid out on it's surface. Currently manning this stall was a single yellow cap-wearing colt. He was scanning the marketplace, before noticing her out of the corner of his eye.

She found herself sweating as he looked her over, his eyes lighting up in recognition. He began waving at her to come join him.

Slowly but surely, she began marching her hooves towards the Sweet Apple Acres stand.

"Cousin JayJay!" Applebuck cheered loudly as she approached. "So good tah seeya again!"

"Applebl- uh, Applebuck." she replied, her stomach performing flipflops once again. "N-Nice t'see you too."

"How's the mission goin'?!" the diminutive pony gushed, leaning up on the stall. "Ah haven't said a word t'no pony 'bout it, ah swear!"

"I-it's been doin' fine." Applejack assured, eyes looking furtively about. "S-say, ain't you a bit young t'be mannin' th' stall by yerself?"

"Ah'm not young." he retorted. "Ah'm a big pony now! Ah keep tellin' mah big brother that, but he don't believe me none!"

Oh good lawrd. the farmer pony cringed. He sounds JUST like her! Ah've... ah've GOTTA lookit this o'jectively. H-he's a boy. He's NOT Applebloom. He's not he's not he's NOT...

"...but yeah, ah'm not alone." the earth-pony continued, looking off in a disgruntled fashion. "Applejack stepped 'way fer a bit, said he'd be back

inna minute 'r so. Hey!" he turned those big orange eyes back on her. "What brings y'all t' town? Trackin' down sum bad apples?"

The orange filly's mind raced. Simply excuse herself and leave, before her double returned? Stick around, and try to grin and bear it? Try to explain things? What should she do?

"Ah... ah'm onna mission." she started, voice faltering just a tad. "A very complicat'd mission, somethin' along th' lines of 'Operation: Grocery Shopping'."

He gave her a flat look. "Grocery Shopping?"

"Hay, even us agents hav'ta eat. So, um... how much y'all want fer a bushel o' them Braeburns?"

Here, the schoolpony waved her off, as he dipped down to retrieve a bag. "Dun worry 'bout payin' nuthin', Cousin JayJay! Yer family, an' ah insist y'all take how'ver many apples y'need, on th' house!"

Applejack found herself touched, the feeling settling her stomach somewhat. "That's... that's mighty kind of yah, Applebuck. Ah appreciate that, ah really do."

He gave her a smile, a pure and familiar grin that looked just at home on his face as it did on another filly untold dimensions away. She tried her best not to burst into tears right there, as she began picking out apples to add to the bag.

"An' a couple o' these Smith's as well." she stated, pointing towards the bright green fruits. Quickly they were snatched up and dropped in.

"Oh, hello Applejack!"

Without thinking, she instantly replied. "Oh, hey there sugarcube. What kin' ah do fer- *whoop!*"

She quickly placed her hooves over her mouth, before glancing around to see who had spoken to her. Behind her, she found a butter

yellow pegasus colt with a shock of pink hair, his head low to the ground. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw her face. "Oops! O-oh, I'm so sorry. I-I didn't mean to surprise you, I thought you were somepony else."

"Hey there Butterscotch." Applebuck piped up, setting the filled bag on the counter. "This's mah Cousin, JayJay! She's visitin' fer a spell!" He hopped down and placed himself between the two grown ponies, introducing the other male. "This is Butterscotch, Cousin JayJay. He helps take care o' all th' animals here in Ponyville!"

So *THIS is Fluttershy's twin*. Applejack thought to herself, easily identifying the cutiemark of butterflies. He looked up at her forlornly, his aqua eyes achieving the same effect that her friend's did whenever anypony saw her. *Awww, he's cute fer a colt! No wonder she had 'er little ol' heart go out fer 'im!*

"H-hi, Miss JayJay." he said softly. "S-sorry about earlier. I really should have known better."

She waved a hoof, her mouth retrieving the bag of apples and stuffing them into her saddlepack. "Tain't nothin' t'worry about sugarcube, m'stakes happen all th' time."

"O-oh, oh good." he replied, a hoof pawing at the ground. "Uhm... um, you're new around here, r-right? Can I ask you a question?"

Both apple ponies raised an eyebrow, but the mare was game. "Shore, go 'head?"

"Uhm... would you happen to... to know a-another pegasus... named fluttershy?"

Applejack sighed, apparently that crush really WAS working in both directions. However, she relented, as a kind smile spread across her face. "Maybe. She wouldn't happen t' be another yellow pony wit' pink hair now, would she?"

Butterscotch's head lifted up, eyes shining in hope. "Y-yes! Y-you know her? We, we met yesterday at the market. I liked her, and, she said

that she liked me, so, I was wondering if I could find her again, but, I haven't had much luck..." now his head dipped down again.

The orange mare leaned down in front of him. "Y'know... ah think ah kin' send a message... if y'all would like..."

Applebuck made a face at the sappy turn of events things were taking, but he was ignored as the pegasus looked back up at the farmer. "Th-that would be nice... Um... could you tell her that... um... even though I might not see her again... I'll still always keep her in my thoughts?"

"Ah think she'll be glad t'hear that. Ah'll be sure t' pass it along t'her." She raised her head back up, giving the male pony a warm smile. *This trip hasn't gone as bad as ah thought it would.*

"Th-thank you very much, Miss JayJay. And again, sorry about confusing you with Applejack earlier."

"Pshaw, tain't nothin' big, like ah said. Not shore how much like 'em I really look."

"It WAS rather silly of me. I mean," Butterscotch now lifted a hoof and pointed over her shoulder. "Now that I can see the both of you, he doesn't look THAT much like you."

The earlier feeling of calm she had, suddenly vanished as she heard a set of hoofsteps getting closer from behind. Applebuck's eyes lit up as he got to all four hooves and galloped out of sight. "Hey Big bro! What took 'yah?"

"Sorry 'bout that, haystack. Me 'n one o' th clients had'ta work out a few MISUNDERSTANDINGS, if y'all catch mah drift."

Her first thought was that the voice was a key or so short of being a dead ringer for Big Macintosh. The second thought was that those hoofsteps were heavy, but again, not as heavy as her brother's. The third thought; *HAYSTACK?*

" 'Ey there Butterscotch." the voice continued, drawing closer.
"How're you doin' t'day? Oh, and a good after'noon t'you, miss! Say... ain't seen you 'bout town b'fore. You new?"

"AJ, AJ!" the young colt chanted. "She's actually Apple family! Cousin JayJay, meet mah big brother, Applejack!"

Though every instinct that she possessed was yelling at her to bolt for the woods right that very moment, she managed, with tremendous strain, to turn her head towards the pair of males behind her.

Green eyes. Orange hide. Blonde mane and tail, only barely kept in check by bands. Tall and solidly built. Unshorn fetlocks, like her brother. Same trio of apples on his flank. A surprising addition of a yoke around his neck. And last, but not least, Pappy's hat, perched on top of his head.

He was giving her an eye of his own, the stallion peering over her face and saddlebags. "Well whip mah whiskers." he spoke, an eyebrow arched. "Ah kin' see th' family r'semblance, but ah cain't say Ah've ever seen y'all at th' reunion. You shore you're an Apple?"

At these words, she gave him a look of consternation. Of course she was an Apple, through and through! But instead of giving voice, she instead got to all fours and pulled her saddlebags up, revealing her cutiemark.

"Oooh, she IS." Butterscotch cooed. "I mean, Applebuck said she was, but, well, you can never know for sure, right?" He lowered his head again, sheepishly.

She gave him a smile. "Already said, dun sweat th' small stuff too much, alright sugarcube?"

"How 'bout that?" the male Applejack remarked, tilting his hat back. "So y' can talk too."

"What's that s'posed t' mean?" the mare retorted, turning her attention fully back to her doppelganger. "'Course ah kin' talk! Just fine too, though CERTAIN ponies tend tah disagree."

"Ah hear y'all there." he replied. "So! You say you're an Apple? Cousin JayJay, wassit? How come ah never saw yah at th' reunion last year?"

"S'like ah told yer brother. Mah farm's clear on th' other side o' Equestria. Much too far t'make th' trip."

"Even farther than Cousin Honeycrisp?"

She narrowed her eyes. Cousin Honeycrisp was the farthest relative from Ponyville. Before she said anymore, she had to make a mental rearrangement. Honeycrisp was originally a mare, so...

"That's right, 'bout fifty miles farther! Ask Honeycrisp next time th' reunion rolls around, he'll tell y'all 'bout it."

"Ah intend to..." the orange ponies were staring down each other something fierce. Applejack knew why. Though she was usually a friendly sort, she would have been suspicious of anypony she didn't know, calling themselves a part of her family. This treatment she was getting from her stallion-self did not come as a big surprise to her.

Butterscotch and Applebuck continued switching looks between the two, confused expressions on their faces, as the banter began anew. "What's yer actual name, anyways? JayJay's gotta be short fer somethin'."

Thanks to her encyclopedic knowledge of apple breeds, the answer came easily. "Jonica Johnagold."

He blinked. "Ah thought we already had one a' those."

"Yer prob'ly thinkin' o' Cousin Jonnee Red Johnathan. Ah know he makes it to th' reunion more than ah do."

"Applejaaaack~" the yellow pony whined to his brother "Why y'all gotta be so tough on Cousin JayJay? She's family!"

The draft horse's look of suspicion softened as he regarded his sibling. "Sorry haystack, but y' can't go believin' every word somepony says that ya hear. Ah see she's got an Apple cutiemark, an' ah kin' see th' ol'

freckles, clear as day, but still..." he leveled his eyes at her again. "Ah just don't feel.... RIGHT. Like there's somethin' *off* 'bout you, 'Cousin' JayJay."

This brought a whole new level of understanding to the orange filly's mind. The feeling in the pit of her stomach had remained throughout their entire exchange, which she had chalked up to simple fear. However, if HE was feeling it too... was there something going on here that she didn't understand? Twilight would probably know.

However, despite the words against her, she found herself stomping the ground and snorting. "Ah tain't lyin', cousin! Ah'm part o' th' Apple Family, just like you n' Applebuck! If y'all 'r REALLY wantin' t' get all serious about, then ah say we hoof-wrassle right here n' now!"

Now the orange equine found himself chuckling. "Cousin, ah hate t'say this, but it tain't mah style t' go hoof-wrasslin' mares. Ah mean, d'ya think y'all kin' really match up t' me?"

She leveled her gaze as she said "Are you sayin' mah mouth is makin' promises mah legs cain't keep?"

The stallion made as if to affirm the statement, but he paused as the words echoed through his head. His eyes widened, as her gave the farmfilly another look. "Wait... what did you say?"

Anything else that was said was quickly drowned out as the ponies about the marketplace ceased their hustling and bustling, gasps and gawking suddenly issuing everywhere, hooves pointed up towards the sky.

"AJ! AJ!" Applebuck cried out, pointing as well. "Lookit THAT!"

"What... what in the world??" Butterscotch stammered, eyes pointed up, with wings deployed as a shield.

Applejack turned around and glanced up into the deep blue, before his hat popped off his head. "Peel 'n Core me! What in tarnation-!"

Applejack lifted her head up and saw the spectacle that everypony was gawking at... and instantly knew that things had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

"Ahhhhhhh..... ponyfeathers."

"GET BACK HERE!!!"

She heard his cries over the screaming wind, but didn't dare to respond, to even look back. She was pumping her wings hard, SO hard, harder than she had ever worked them before. She had to loose him.

She had to loose the fastest flier in all of Equestria.

Rainbow Dash's expression hardened. No. That title was HERS, not some... not somepony else's! Hers and hers alone!

And yet, whatever maneuver she managed to bust out, he still kept with her trail, never gaining, but never falling back either. It was becoming increasingly aggravating. At one point, she had made as if to do a headlong crash into the ground, but he had kept on her, even pulling up at the exact same rate of incline as she leveled out and buzzed the trees.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN KEEP THIS UP!?" Rainbow Blitz called out again, the sneer evident in his tone of voice. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU'RE MESSING WITH, KID!"

Sticks and stones. the pegasus filly thought to herself. Let'em say what he wants. He can't catch you. He can't even DREAM of catching you.

"YOU CAN'T EVEN *DREAM* OF GETTING AWAY!"

Okay, that was freaky... but they're still words. Words can't hurt you, and neither can he. You've been called worse. Much worse than Rainbow 'Ditz'. Man, am I glad I've never-

"YOU FILLY-FAKER! YOU'RE A GIRL!! YOU CAN'T EVEN HOPE TO-"

Dash flared her wings out in a rapid halting maneuver, her momentum still carrying her forward, but still slowing her down enough to

allow her to turn her head back and see the look on her doppelganger's face as he too tried to slow down enough to avoid collision.

It also bought her enough time to bring her rear hooves up, waiting until Blitz's face was almost at her haunches, before striking out in a buck that would have made apple farmers everywhere flinch in worry for the safety of their trees.

The blue stallion was propelled backwards, head over hooves, as the mare took the liftoff from the kick and turned it into new forward motion, resuming her escape.

Rainbow Blitz's vision swam, having a kick delivered to you in the head would do that to a pony. Yet he shook himself, his vibrant mane flopping about as he regained control, before he fixed his eyes back on the rainbow trail that his quarry was leaving.

He had seen it, for a brief second, right before she had bucked him. Her cutiemark.

A very familiar-looking cutiemark.

Dusk's words of weird ponies came back to his mind now, and he redoubled his chase speed.

She had been heading in the direction of the Everfree forest. However, she managed to spot him, and began to perform evasive maneuvers once more, diving down. It took him extra effort to come within close range once more, but he managed it, despite a throbbing head. He could see her own multihued mane flowing in the wind.

"COME BACK!" Rainbow Blitz called out again, his voice ragged for breath. "LET'S TALK THIS OVER!"

"I CAN'T!!" Dash found herself finally replying. "I CAN'T LET YOU CATCH ME!!"

"WHY NOT?!!" he yelled back, a funny feeling in his throat. Must have swallowed a bug.

"I CAN'T TELL YOU!!" She looked over her shoulder, her rose eyes bleary from the windspeeds. "I... I JUST CAN'T!! PLEASE!! STOP CHASING ME!!"

He shook his mane. "I CAN'T DO THAT!!"

The mare didn't respond to that, except by turning her head forwards again, and angling herself downwards into a dive, hooves pinned together in front of her.

That must have been a HUGE bug, as the pegasus colt found himself choking at the sight of the maneuver she was about to pull. *She's insane! She'll never make it!* Quickly he mirrored her actions, as he felt the familiar push of force against his hide. His familiar enemy, the Sound Barrier.

"STOP!!" he cried out to her, his voice now pleading. "YOU WON'T MAKE IT!!"

"I CAN!!" she cried back. "I WILL!! YOU CAN'T STOP ME!!"

"*WHY??!!*" he outright screamed, trying to vector in his path behind the mare's. If the barrier tossed her back, he'd be able to catch her from behind, hopefully saving her from a lethal fall.

"BECAUSE!!..."

He was closing in. Just a little further...

"I'VE!!..."

Her tail was beginning to flap around his own sound barrier distortion. He didn't see the raised hoof.

"*DONE THIS BEFORE!!!*"

On the ground, everypony gaped as the two rainbow trails suddenly erupted into twin discs of multicolored light, rumbles of thunder peeling through the air.

"A DOUBLE RAINBOOM!" the Doctress cried out in awe.

"All the way across the sky!" Mayor Mustang pronounced grandly in his bass voice.

"Oh wow! Oh my gosh!" Applebuck cheered at the sight.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN!?" a pink stallion with blonde hair cried out, hooves grasping the sides of his head.

"Holy horseapples!" an orange colt gaped, before looking around and retrieving his hat. "Looks like Blitz shore dun outdid 'imself that time!"

Butterscotch stared in wonder at the display, an inch away from breaking out into cheering. The only thing that kept him from doing so, was the odd display beforehand. "But... but what do you think the second rainbow trail came from? I-I mean, we all saw it, right? It looked like there were TWO Rainbow Blitzes!"

"Ah dunno," Applebuck hummed. "Maybe he needed 'nother pegasus t'do a Double Rainboom? Ah mean, it makes sense. Two ponies, two rainbooms at th' same time."

"Hmmm... ah reckon y'all may be onta sumthin' there, haystack." Applejack replied, a hoof rubbing his chin.

The yellow pony turned to his side as he began. "What do you think, Miss JayJay... um..... Miss JayJay?"

The three ponies suddenly looked around their stall. Cousin JayJay was nowhere to be seen.

He was grateful, he supposed, that that last kick was what saved him. Had the sound barrier snapped back closed with him so close, the results wouldn't have been pretty. It still smarted though.

Rainbow Blitz hovered unsteadily, his eyes taking in the grand spectacle that was a Double Rainboom. It was amazing, spectacular, and just as beautiful as he had imagined it would be.

And yet, he couldn't take joy from it. Because it hadn't been made by HIM. The Filly-faker... *SHE* had pulled it off.

His eyes traced the rapidly-fading multicolored trail that stretched from the exit point of the rainbooms, over into the horizon off in the direction of the Everfree forest. By the time he had recovered his fall from the combined kick and shockwave, she had already been far out of range.

Ooooh, it smarted. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten that kicking out with the left hindhoof had been exactly what he'd done, the first time he pulled off the Double Rainboom over Applejack's estate. He hadn't been sure it would work, the reason why he had chosen such a secluded location. Obviously, somepony had been watching anyway, and saw what needed to be done. *Someone with binoculars. And good tracking. Yeah, that was it. Had to be.*

The argument sounded hollow in his head, and he knew it. The filly-faker... she had looked JUST like him, right down to the cutie mark. Blitz was more than aware of ponies who took hero-worship far too seriously, dying their manes and coats to resemble their idols. But one couldn't paint over a cutiemark easily, so sticker patches were often used.

That was no sticker-patch, he mused. And the odds of two ponies getting the exact same cutiemark were astronomical. There was also the bit of conversation that had been exchanged between them. She.... couldn't let him catch her? She had even pleaded he stop. The implications were enough to bring that bug in his throat back. Nervously, he swallowed.

The pegasus shook his head. *The emotional stuff can wait. There's a filly out there who looks just like me, can fly just as fast as me, and can even perform the Sonic Rainboom. On top of that, she bucked me. Twice. If there was ever a weird pony, that one most definitely fits the bill.*

I need to go see Dusk.

... right after I fix my house.... and finish my nap... oooh yeah, nap sounds SO good right now.

In a few moments, the HEDGE would not a happy place to be at that evening.

Against all expectations, Applejack had managed to get back to the hiding place first. Right now, she was in the midst of telling the rest of the mares how her visit went... and of the complications that were involved.

"Fyu wenft intfo Thugarcubf Cornerf?" Twilight accused through a mouthfull of muffin. She swallowed, before continuing. "Not that I'm complaining that much, actually, but still, you took a big risk there."

"What were the Cakes like?" Fluttershy asked, nibbling away at her own blueberry-studded pastry.

"Well, it 'twere mighty odd. Imagine if y'can... the Cakes, not switched genders, but more like switched colors 'n Cutiemarks."

Rarity gaped. "You mean... Mrs Cake was... as tall and skinny as..."

"As 'er hubby in our world. That's correct." the farmer pony nodded, hat firmly secured to her head once again.

"And then y'met Applebuck again?" Pinkie questioned. She had finished her muffin minutes ago, and was now working on a pear.

"Ah did..." Applejack let her ears droop as she recalled the scene. "Ah'd fergotten that t'day was a market day fer th' Acres. He recognized me, called me over t'chat. Tried mah best not t'get wrung outta sorts. Gave me free apples."

Here, she raised her head back up as she let her gaze focus upon a yellow pony. "An' then ah ran into another pony, that Applebuck introduced me to. Right cute li'l colt. Said 'is name was... Butterscotch."

Eyes widened all around, as Fluttershy's head shot up. "Y-you... you met him?"

"Ah did. Ah kin' see why y'went fer 'im too." the orange pony replied, leaning her head in close as she smiled. "He... asked me t'pass along a message."

"Applejaaack..." Twilight spoke, her voice a warning tone. It was ignored.

"He told me... t'tell some gal I prob'ly know, who's a yellow pegasus named Fluttershy... that even if he never sees yah again, he'll think o' you. Always."

The named pony's eyes grew wide as the words entered her mind, before she relaxed, a blush and goofy grin plastered across her face.

"Awww~" Rarity crooned, quite taken with the scene. "Isn't love such a beautiful sight? Even if it IS with your own male self, I must say, it's so refreshing to see!"

Applejack chuckled as she took a bite of her own muffin. "Ah tell ya Rarity, ah can out 'n out see the two o' them together. If they weren't already each other, Ah'd say they were a match made 'n heaven!"

"Girls, please." Twilight stamped her hoof, trying to gain control of the situation again. "Applejack, that was... yes, it was thoughtful of you to bring that message from him to Fluttershy. Thank you for that. But we can't simply treat this kind of thing as a casual love affair! If Fluttershy is any indication, who's to say we won't all be so similarly smitten the instant we spot our own doubles?"

The farmer spat a berry seed into her hoof. "That tain't likely t' happen. Ah didn't think he t'were all THAT handsome, mahself."

She continued to chew on her muffin a bit more, before she noticed the sudden silence. Slowly, she opened her eyes and turned to see that everypony's eyes were trained on her.

"Applejack..." Twilight began, her voice weary, but still warning.
"Applebuck's too young to man the stall himself, isn't he?"

"Uhm... e-yeah... as it turned out, his... uhm, 'brother' had stepped 'way t'take care of some sticky business... and welp, Ah was so caught up talkin' wit' Butterscotch that ah didn't see 'im a-comin back'--"

The purple unicorn facehoofed. "You met yourself."

"Eeeee-Yep."

Rarity leaned forward expectantly. "And?"

"Turns out, ah'm a bit too much like Big Mac. Ah mean, he had th' hat, and he shore tain't shy 'bout speakin' 'is mind. But other'n that... well, mah heart was poundin', but more in the 'ah think ah should run now' way than that pitterpat a girl gets when she sees a right-good stallion, y'know what ah mean?"

"Wow, Applejack!" Pinkie spoke. "You get pitterpats? I only get them after I've eaten twenty pixie-sticks in a row!"

Twilight was not so easily redirected. "What did you talk about?"

The farmer sighed before she leaned against the cave wall. "Well, Applebuck introduced me as Cousin JayJay. An' mah other self thinks that's suspicious, so he starts drillin' me wit' questions. Sayin' ah tain't part o' th' Apple family." She crossed her hooves and looked sorely at the nearby lamp. "Ah stood 'n argued mah case that I were too one o' th' Apples."

"O-oh, AJ." Fluttershy spoke. "Y-you could have just... you know, dropped the whole thing, and just, let him have his say?"

"She's got a point there." Twilight added. "You could have been out of there a lot quicker, if you'd just let the whole ordeal slide. Your pride's been a problem for you in the past, it could have gotten you into deep trouble here too."

"Ah know." Applejack replied, curling up. "But... well, Applebuck b'lieved me... and ah didn't wanna let 'im down... Ah didn't want t' let mah... mah..."

Another bout of silence came down. "How did you get free?" the white mare questioned.

She reared back up, green eyes looking at everypony present, noting not for the first time, that one of their number was still conspicuously absent, her muffin untouched. "Welp... ah had the help of a distraction. A very UNWELCOME distraction."

Suddenly her ears perked, as she heard the telltale whoosh of wing-beats. "Well, speak o' th' smooze." she groaned, as she got onto all four hooves.

The bushes around the entrance parted to let in evening light, along with a very tired, and short-breathed Rainbow Dash. Her hooves had barely touched the ground, when Applejack suddenly lighted into her.

"Y'HAVE ANY AH-DEA WHAT IN TH' SEVEN HEAVENS Y'ALL WERE DOIN' UP THAR?!!"

"Geeze, AJ." the pegasus groaned, rubbing at a shoulder. "Can it wait till later?"

"No Rainbow, it CAIN'T. Ah saw y'all up there t'day... ah saw the BOTH of yah!"

There were gasps all around as Dash visibly sagged. "You d-did?"

"Ah shore did. As did the majority o' Ponyville!"

"Rainbow!" Twilight gaped, rushing to her friend's side. Her voice was a mixture of both worry, and scolding, as she asked. "What did you DO?"

"Aheh..." there was a weary shrug, before a grimace as she taxed a pulled muscle. "I kinda had a... complication."

"Dash, bein' chased through Ponyville airspace right n' plain view o' everypony in town, by yer colt-self, is NOT what ah'd call a complication!"

"How do YOU know he was chasing ME, and I wasn't chasin' HIM?"

"Yah' bucked 'im." AJ replied flatly. "An' ah'm not seein' any bruise on yer head right now. Yer other half's prob'ly nursin' a spot th' size o' an orange 'bout now though."

Color fled from the blue mare's face. "You could SEE that?"

Rarity outright gaped. "Dash! Tell me you didn't!"

"W-what else was I supposed to do!?" came the exclamation. "I couldn't shake him off, and he kept yelling at me! He called me a FILLY-FAKER!! Why... why that, that, *COLT-CRUDDER!*"

"Did you just make that up?"

"So what if I did?" Rainbow pounded her hooves together threateningly. "I'm keeping it! It's something I can use the NEXT time I see his face!"

"There won't *BE* a next time, if I have *anything to SAY about it!!*" Twilight thundered. The five ponies suddenly found their heads ducking down at the outburst.

"We've been trying our best to not TOUCH this dimension, and what do you do? You BUCK yourself in the *FACE!!* This is absolutely *RIDICOULOUS!!* I expected BETTER out of you girls! We're the Elements of Harmony, the chosen ones of Equestria! WHY is it so HARD for you all to just *STAY PUT and KEEP OUT of TROUBLE?!!*"

The words echoed inside even the small confines of the HEDGE's walls. No pony dared to make a sound, after that display.

At length, the frustrated look on the unicorn's face dissipated, replaced by outright weariness. She collapsed there on the spot, kneeling onto the floor, as she tried to compose herself. Looking around, she noted

the shamed and cowed faces of her friends, and instantly felt the weight of her own harsh words.

"I... I'm sorry..." she whispered, achieving Fluttershy-levels of softness. "I... I didn't... this is just... I just want this to stop..."

Nopony moved for a second. Not until the yellow pegasus got to her feet, shuffled over to Twilight, and laid down next to her, offering her presence as comfort. Slowly but surely, the rest of the mares all converged on their silent friend, surrounding her, keeping silent, but still giving her support.

With a shuddering intake of breath, she looked at everypony once more, purple eyes misting over. "I'm sorry... I'm SO so sorry... I d-don't deserve this, I-"

"Shush now, darling." Rarity spoke, nuzzling her friend. "It's quite alright. We all understand. These past few days have worn hard on all of us. But we... still are ignorant to what may be at stake here..."

"We don't think o' it, th' way you can, Twi." Applejack added. "Ah've never been good at all that sciencey stuff. But you understand. And... and ah wish ah knew half as much as you did... if we all knew, we wouldn't be makin' as big a mess o' things as we are right now."

There were murmurs of agreement from all around. "We'll try our best from now on, to do what you say, Twilight." Fluttershy quipped, a small smile on her face.

"Twilight knows best." Pinkie added, her normal cheer returning. "If you say it means I have to NOT throw a party for a WHOLE MONTH, I'll do it! And that's a promise!"

This managed to drag a chuckle out of the lavender pony. "I won't make you Pinkie-promise to that." she stated, beads appearing at the corners of her eyes. "Thank you guys. Thank you for forgiving me. I'm sorry I yelled at you all, but I want you to know that I'm just worried. Worried about what might happen, to this world... our world.... to them... to US..."

Here, she turned to Rainbow Dash, who had remained quiet for the most part. "And I'm sorry Dash, for... for unloading on you. I still think what you did was pretty stupid... but I'm sorry all the same."

The blue mare gave a wing-shrug. "Eh, no worries Twi. I know it was pretty stupid too... but hey, at least I managed to pull off the Double Rainboom."

A flat look. "You what?"

"She did, Twi." Applejack spoke up again. "It t'were th' only thing that managed t' shake off her other self."

"What did you DO exactly, that made him chase you so hard anyway?" Rarity asked.

"Not THAT sure, really. I mean, all I did was visit my house. Sure, I left the front door open, but I didn't think it was THAT big a deal."

There were a few groans here and there. "And you didn't think to reverse the scenario in your mind beforehand to look at it from your own point of view?" Twilight asked.

This earned her a blank stare. "What? Say again, in Equestrian?"

"Ahh nevermind." the unicorn waved, turning back towards the remaining muffin. "I'm just gonna put this in the pantry for safekeeping."

"Oh? Oh hey, Applejack, you got muffins? Sweet!" The wild-maned one flew over to scoop the treat up, but it was quickly whisked out of reach by the student.

"Ah-ah! No muffins for you tonight!"

"Awww, c'mon Twi, I said I was sorry!"

"You didn't, in manners of exact wording. And besides, even saying that you're sorry, still doesn't make up for the fact that you risked letting Ponyville know of our existence!" The muffin floated over to their makeshift cupboard, the door slamming closed as it nestled on a shelf.

Twilight's words triggered a memory in the pegasus' mind however, as her hooves flailed about suddenly. "OH YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT!! Twilight, I DID overheard some important information today!"

Eyes widened all around. The purple pony's eyes changed from condescending to serious in a instant. "What was it, Dash?"

"Well, when I was inside the house, and he was looking for me... Rainbow Blitz mentioned Fluttershy. BY NAME."

There was an 'eep!' as a butter pony concealed herself beneath Pinkie's tail. Dash continued, unaware. "He said that Dusk told him to keep an eye out for what he called, 'Weird Ponies'. Twilight... they're *ALREADY AWARE* of us."

Now a whole new silence descended upon the inhabitants of the HEDGE. The student sat herself roughly on her haunches, eyes hollow with realization... and fear.

"We're doomed." she whispered. "We were doomed the moment we left Fluttershy in the library."

Chapter Five

With a Finger Crossed



There wasn't even a knock. The library door slammed open as a stallion groggily weaved his way inside. "DUSK!? Dusk, I gotta talk to you!"

"Rainbow?" came a voice behind a stack of books. A unicorn's head popped up from the mess of volumes. "Rainbow, what's uuuuAAAOOOH *SWEET SOLARIS WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?!*"

"It's not as bad as it looks." Blitz assured, woozily waving off the patch of dark purple that had encompassed half his face. "Seriously, I've handled worse."

"I sincerely doubt that! Get your flank over here, let me have a look at that. Didn't you even go to the clinic?"

"And risk being seen in public with a shiner like this?" He trotted over unsteadily, before collapsing onto his haunches. "C'mon brony, I got an image to keep up after all."

There was a clicking of the tongue as a first aid book was levitated over. "Sometimes, you're just as bad as Elusive."

"Hey! You take that back!" the colt demanded, shooting onto all four feet, before wobbling and falling flat back on his flank. "Ow..."

Dusk simply sighed as his horn lit up and he went to work, healing his friend to the best of his abilities. "So, what *did* happen, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Ugh, Dusk, I didn't believe you at first, but it turns out, you're right! There *are* weird ponies in Ponyville!"

The purple stallion's eyes widened, though he kept his concentration on the wound. "R-really? You saw one?"

"SAW one?! Dusk, she was IN MY HOUSE! Ooooh, that... that Filly-faker! When I get my hooves on her-!"

A look of confusion. "Wait, Filly-faker?"

"Yeah, Filly-faker! Freaky as all hay, Dusk! She was obviously a girl, but she looked *Exactly Like Me!* The coat, the mane, even my Cutie-mark! A-a-a-and don't even get me STARTED on her flying!" The pegasus was obviously still in a tizzy, his hooves waving in the air at his last sentence.

"Gack, Blitz, hold still," Dusk warned. "This is a complicated spell, if you keep moving like that, I'm gonna wind up giving you a third eye."

His patient quickly complied, and allowed the student to continue his work. At length, the unicorn resumed the discussion. "Her flying? I'd think you'd be able to catch her. Aren't you the fastest flyer in Equestria, after all?"

"You'd think," Blitz replied glumly. His rose eyes darted around the library to see if anypony else was present *which there wasn't, except for

Spines snoozing on a biography of Queen Irontail,* before continuing. "But... I just, could not catch up to her. I always managed to get within like, three, four yard's distance from her, but she always managed to stay just out of reach! It doesn't make any sense, I mean, she was just a girl! I should've caught up to her easy!"

"There are tradeoffs to each gender, you know." the lavender colt supplied. "A pegasus stallion like you usually has more developed muscles, to account for the weight and drag that the male form usually has. But a mare's form is much more slender and aerodynamically shaped, so even if their wing muscles aren't as developed, they would still be able to keep up with the strongest stallion out there."

The blue pony found himself snorting. "I thought you didn't attend flight school."

"Well, *you* did, and yet this didn't occur to you. What does that say about how you spent *your* study time?"

There was a roll of the eyes, as he changed the subject. "Either way, next time I see her, I'm giving her a piece of my mind. Especially after the way she pulled a fast one on me!"

"A fast one on-?"

Suddenly, Dusk's complexion lightened, as the pieces were put together. A hoof went up to his face, as he tried to suppress the snicker that was forming. "Blitz... this bruise on your head... did she?"

"N-no! I-it was just an accident! Nothing major!" Rainbow blurted, trying his best to look casual, though the unicorn knew his body language well enough to know he was in denial.

"She *did*, didn't she?!" the magician finally guffawed. "She bucked you! You got bucked by a girl!"

Multihued-mane drooping, the stallion lowered his head. "Twice."

Dusk was tempted to fall to the floor and begin laughing in much the same manner Blitz had when they had first met. However, he managed to

recover his chuckles, though the grin still remained. "Ooooh, I'm so sorry Blitz, that was terrible of me. I just... I never thought the day would come!"

"PLEASE don't tell the rest of the guys about this?" Rainbow pleaded, hooves in prayer form. "If Applejack hears word of it, he'll never let me live it down!"

The unicorn gave another chuckle, before he sighed and nodded. "I promise, Rainbow. I won't tell anyone."

A rose-red gaze. "Berry Bubble Swear?"

Another sigh and roll of the eyes, before the colt got to his haunches. "Cross my heart. Hope to fly. Stick a cupcake in my..." *pause, close eyelid, THEN touch.* "Eye."

Blitz relaxed after that, allowing Dusk to resume his healing spell. Already he could tell that there would still be a dark spot right above the eye after he finished, but something like that wouldn't take long to heal naturally. Again, he restarted the topic. "So... twice, you say? Like, one right after the other, or once-"

"Once, while I was chasing her." his patient clarified. "The second, right before I... well, right before I lost her."

Here, Dusk was surprised. "You lost her? How'd she manage to do that?"

"She... she performed... *IT*."

A raised eyebrow. "It?"

"My move, Dusk. My signature move!"

"Blitz... you don't mean...?"

A heavy nod. "She performed the Double Rainboom! By the time I'd recovered from the shockwave, she was long gone."

The medical tome that the unicorn had been holding, suddenly fell to the floor. Rainbow blinked as he felt his friend's magical energies release their hold on his head. He prodded the side of his face with a hoof, glad to see that the earlier throbbing and dizziness that was present before, was no longer there. He then redirected his attention to Dusk, just in time to see the look on his face shift from open-mouthed shock, to newfound determination.

"Thanks Blitz." he said, though his voice had a hollow tone to it. The purple stallion turned on the spot, and quickly trotted over to a nearby desk, a quill flying out of an inkpot as he began quickly scribbling on the piece of parchment there.

"Dusk?" The pegasus got to his feet carefully, testing for wooziness, before joining his friend. "What's going on, brony? You know something about these ponies, I can tell. Let's hear it."

The other pony was hesitant. "I'm... I'm not sure if the theory I have is sound, Blitz... but after what you've told me today, the evidence is overwhelming. I'm also not sure if you'll believe me..."

"Hey, don't be like that, Dusk. I trust you, y'know? Whatever you have to say, I'll listen."

He regarded his friend with a look of gratitude at those words. "Thanks, Blitz. Okay then." he turned back to the paper. "Tell me. What do you know about Alternate Dimensions?"

"Oh my. This simply won't do at all!"

A number of heads reared up at the words. They had come from a white unicorn mare, who was entering the HEDGE with a towel wrapped around both her mane and her tail, the wet condition of her fur due to the result of bathing in a nearby stream.

"What's up, Rarity?" Applejack asked, a half-eaten Macintosh in her hoof.

"This is!" the dressmaker cried, as a shampoo bottle flew out from her towel. A few squeezes produced whistling noises, signaling its empty state. "I've completely run out of my favored conditioner!"

Blue and orange ponies rolled their eyes. Twilight gave a flat, confused look. Fluttershy, ever sympathetic, went 'Awww.' Pinkie took the bottle into her own hooves and attempted to perform 'Equestria the Beautiful' with it.

"It's just soap, Rarity." Dash replied. "You can live a few days without it."

"Maybe *you* can." Blue eyes rolled at the pegasus. "But I assure you, most of us more refined types require more *frequent* upkeep than others! And simply because we've been secluding ourselves away in this... cozy little habitat-" she regarded their surroundings with an apologetic smile. "- does not mean I cannot look my best at all times."

Twilight groaned to herself, but gave a smile to her friend. "We know, Rarity, we know. I'm sorry about your soap, but just hang on for a while longer. I've almost restored my power. With luck, by the end of today, we'll be back home, and all of this will be behind us."

Applejack let out a whoosh of relief. " 'Bout goll-darn time too. T'day is our third day in this here world, ain't it? Ah'd kinda lost track o' time."

There were murmurs of agreement all around. Rarity, though she wanted to believe that it would be as easy as it was said, still had the reservation in her heart that it wouldn't be. *It doesn't hurt to prepare for the long-run.* she thought to herself. *Besides, there's still.... that OTHER matter...*

The unicorn turned her eyes onto the student. "You're right of course. Sorry for my complaining, dears. But, uhm, just in case, Twilight, you wouldn't happen to know how to transform a pear into a bottle of hair conditioner, would you?"

Twilight sighed with a smile, but shook her head. "Normally, I wouldn't turn you down, but I need to keep as much energy as I can for the spell tonight. Sorry."

She got a nod in return. "That's quite alright, dearie. I suppose there's just no helping it." She trotted over to a corner where a mirror had been mounted on the wall, a brush levitating over as she removed the towel from her mane and began to groom it.

"I'll just have to go into town today."

She counted up to five seconds before the walls of the HEDGE reverberated with a unanimous "WHAAAAT??"

"Rarity!" Applejack thundered, skidding to a stop beside the mare. "Have y'all been *awake* th' past two days?! Ev'ry time one o' us steps out thar, we wind up makin' a c'mmotion!"

"This is too much!" Twilight added, galloping up to her other side. "You're seriously going to risk our being discovered and found over a bottle of SHAMPOO??"

"Ladies, please!" Rarity soothed, her composure unruffled despite the heat directed at her. "I am no madmare, you're all well aware. There *is* a larger overlying reason as to why I must venture into the strange outdoors. Shampoo would just be a side-benefit."

"What in the hay are you talking about?!" Rainbow yelled, hovering with a frustrated expression. "We've had plenty of cases where you've gone over the deep end! What makes what you're planning on doing, any different?!"

"If you'll allow me to speak..." the white unicorn said patiently. "Then I'll tell you why." She then directed her gaze at the student, never halting with her brushstrokes. "Twilight, dear. I'm a bit surprised that even *you* think this trip is unnecessary."

"Rarity!" Twilight's expression was one of confusion and hurt. "Seriously, what are you going on about?"

"Can you recall for me, the separate items that you needed in order to activate the spell in the first place?"

In everypony's current state of mind, the question seemed like a non-sequiter. However, the magician humored her friend as she began to list the objects.

"A... a vessel of white, to hold the down."

They all looked at the table. The vase sat there, today's flower of choice being a maroon tulip.

"A feather of blue, to match the sky 'round."

Rainbow Dash preened at this, it *had* required one of her feathers the first time around.

"A stone of fire, from light which grows,"

Rarity levitated a ruby from her saddlepack, the surface gleaming flawlessly.

"And the essence of flower, for which the sun glows..."

Silence.

Looks of realization began to percolate on everypony's face. "Sunflower oil!" Applejack gushed. "We plum done fergot th' sunflower oil!"

Rarity did her best to refrain her smile from getting TOO smug, as Twilight gaped. "I'm sorry, dears." she apologized. "I-I thought you had all remembered. I couldn't help but notice that there wasn't any sunflower oil in the bags after Fluttershy and Applejack did their shopping trips. It *is* a key ingredient, isn't it?"

"It is..." the lavender pony spoke, an embarrassed blush on her cheeks. "I-I can't believe I didn't... and here I thought... I'm sorry I thought you were..."

There was a tisk, as a hug and nuzzle was exchanged. "Think nothing of it, dear. We've all been out of sorts. I don't blame you in the least for thinking I had become a crazy cat lady."

"Y'mean you're not?" Pinkie quipped.

"W-well, better to have found out sooner than later." Fluttershy spoke, directing attention towards herself. "Imagine if we had waited until tonight, and THEN found out."

Applejack let out a low whistle. "Yeah, that would'a been a right nasty s'prise. Count on Rarity t' notice somethin' like that in th' nick of time!" Her green eyes gave her friend a look of respect.

"Okay okay, so, now we know." Dash added, alighting on the floor once more. "So... I guess we pool bits again? I'm kinda running low over here myself."

"Rarity." The white unicorn turned towards Twilight at the mentioning of her name. "Since you were the one who brought it up, were you volunteering?"

"O-oh, well yes, I suppose I was."

"Any particular reason why it should be you, and not Applejack again?"

"Well dear, we're not doing a big shopping trip like we *have* done the past two days. All that I need to get is a bottle of Sunflower oil, and some shampoo. I have more than enough bits, so don't worry about pooling any money for me."

"Also," here, she leaned in to the purple pony. "Nothing against them, but I am no Rainbow Dash or Pinkie Pie. I am quite well and aware of the situation we are currently in. You can count on me to keep my 'cool' and to not create a scene, should something unforeseen crop up."

"Lastly," she then turned to look back at the farmer. "Not to slight against you, Applejack, but you don't know the exact kind and brand of

conditioner that my *coiffure* requires." She got a good-natured eyeroll in response.

Twilight sat there in thought for a while, before she looked back up, her decision made. "Okay then... I'll let you do it. But we need to get you into a disguise, before you step foot into Ponyville."

Here, Rarity gleamed. "Oh you needn't worry about that too much, Twilight dear. I have JUST the thing!"

"Meet... Rarity Umbrella!"

No pony had any idea when she had obtained a sun-umbrella from. But it did match the red bow that she had affixed to her hair. Surprisingly, she wore nothing else... except for a blank flank.

"So, where did you learn this spell again?" Twilight asked, her eyes wide open as Rarity's horn glowed, the diamonds on the dressmaker's hindquarters slowly fading into obscurity.

"Well... you see, I was among the first of my friends in class, to gain my Cutie-mark." the unicorn began, her face a picture of concentration. "I admit, I was.... somewhat ostracized by my peers as a result at first. Eventually, I found a spell in a book, that temporarily removed a cutie-mark from view, for a few hours at a time. Armed with that, I would head into school, cast the spell, be able to commune with my friends, and then head back home."

"O-oh my," Fluttershy cooed, her own eyes also wide and watching, a look of worry across her face. "Were you picked on badly by the other colts and fillies?"

"Oh, there were a few words said here and there. You know how the youth are." Rarity waved it off. "Eventually, my friends began to gain their cutie-marks as well, and so I ceased usage of the spell. I even offered to teach it to a few of them. I never thought a scenario would arise, where I would need to use it once more."

"Ah hav'ta say sugarcube, up till t'day, ah'm kinda glad it never did too." Applejack added, an unsettled look in her eyes. "That's just... just plain creepy, if y'ask me."

"I think it's done." Twilight announced. "Congratulations Rarity, you are now a fully grown, adult blank flank."

The white mare looked back at her hindquarters, and nodded. "Not for long though. Fluttershy, if you'd be so kind, my makeup kit."

"How much stuff did you *bring* with you?" Dash asked, incredulous. "I've got no clue how you managed to make it all fit into those saddlebags in the first place!"

"Oh, just the bare essentials, nothing more." came the answer. She smiled as the timid pony returned with a black box in her mouth. Giving a nod, her horn lit as the case was levitated, then opened, a black mascara pencil floating out. Turning her head, she then concentrated as she began doodling on her own flanks, custom-making a pair of cutiemarks.

After a minute or so, she had one. It was a pair of opened umbrellas, both crossed and tilted perpendicular to each other, their red tops glowing as solid as the real thing.

"Rarity Umbrella!" she announced grandly. "Maker of fine specialty umbrellas, custom-fashioned to fit everypony's unique individual needs!"

"Woooooow," Pinkie cooed, a hoof wavering as if to touch the mark. "It looks so REAL~"

"I must admit, that is extraordinary!" Twilight added, her face beaming. "I would be hard-pressed to see you as anything but genuine."

The rest of the ponies gave their approval, as Rarity positively glowed from all the comments. "Thank you, thank you my dears!" she exhaled, picking up her umbrella and a small neckbag, strutting towards the exit. "I shan't be long, Twilight! You can trust me on this, I hope!"

"No, I trust you." the student answered, an honest smile on her face. "Just remember. we're all counting on you!"

"Better you than me, Rarity." Applejack cheered. "Go get'em!"

"Don't you worry, fillies!" the unicorn chimed back, as she slipped out between the bushes. "That's *Exactly* what I'm planning on doing."

"Wow, whatta gal!" the party pony cheered, as she hopped back towards their rock table. "I totally forgot all about the sunny sunflower sun oil sunny stuff!"

"Me too." Twilight replied, turning away from the exit. "Once again she proves her knack for detail."

"If y'say so." Rainbow said, lazily laying on her back. "Personally, I think she was just getting tired of being cooped up in here with all of us."

"O-oh, well, that would make sense." Fluttershy mumbled. "I-I mean, I noticed that she had slept on the far end of the cave last night. Maybe it was my snoring."

"Hey, Fluttershy!" Pinkie spoke up. "Maybe if she's lucky, she'll run into Butterscotch today too!"

The thought made the yellow pegasus's cheeks tint pink, a sight that the apple farmer couldn't help but chuckle over. "That'd be a nice surprise, wouldn't it, sugarcube? Ah ain't th' romantic type usually, but ah still think th' two 'o you're cuter than two peas inna pod. An' ah know Rarity'd agree wit' me, should she see 'im!"

The orange pony continued trotting towards the table. "Ah mean, Rarity knows what all goes inta' a relationship anyways. Sometimes, it's th' opposites that attract, an' then other times, it means findin' yer own-"

She suddenly stopped, her hat falling off due to leftover forward momentum.

Everypony stared at Applejack, rather confused. "AJ? What, did you think of something?" Twilight asked, approaching her friend cautiously.

Rainbow thought she heard a creaking sound as the blonde slowly turned her head to face the unicorn, green eyes hollow and haunted. "Twilight... ah can only think o' two stores in all o' Ponyville that sell shampoo. And one o' dem ain't open t'day."

There was silence that was shortly punctuated by a quiet "Oh! The Luxury Lotus Spa is closed on Sundays."

Twilight's brows narrowed. "And the only other store that I can think of is Carousel Bou-"

It hit her.

She turned back to the HEDGE's entrance, eyes as wide as dinnerplates. "RARITY!! WHY SHE-!! SHE DID THAT ON PURPOSE!!"

"Is she... is she REALLY?!" Dash exclaimed, her wings now beating in panic.

"She's goin' to th' Boutique tah meet her male self!!" Applejack cried out. "We gotta stop 'er!!"

Twilight was nearest, and thusly, was the first one out the exit. The rest of the mares were momentarily discombobulated by the shock, but they all got to their hooves and galloped towards the opening-

-right in time for the purple unicorn to bolt back inside, her eyes now achieving apoplectic levels of panic, as she furiously hissed "*EVERYPONY, HEADS DOWN AND KEEP QUIET!*"

"Quiet?!" Pinkie exclaimed. "But Twilight, I thought we were gonna go save Rarity from making a-"

A muzzle composed of pure magic materialized around the pink pony's mouth, effectively silencing her. The resultant quiet was enough to allow them to hear a faint rustling.

Somepony was outside.

"*Twilight...*" Fluttershy asked, almost inaudible. "*Wh... wh-who is it?*"

"*It's... it's him.*"

Looks of confusion were traded for a few minutes... up until they heard a voice pipe up from outside.

"Okay, what're we doing here again, Dusk?" Spines asked.

"We're looking, that's what. Look, you remember what happened the other day with Butterscotch, right?"

"How could I forget? Seriously man, how cold can you get? Checking out a book and then claiming you don't have it?"

"That's besides the point, Spines. Think back. You remember hearing about the filly Butterscotch met later?"

"The one Blitz says is 'Scotch's girlfriend?"

"That's the one."

Twilight looked over at Fluttershy's face, the yellow pegasus' cheeks flushed red, tears beading in her eyes.

"I think the 'Butterscotch' that visited us in the library, and the mare he met later, are one and the same."

"Really? And what makes you think she'd be out here at the edge of the Everfree?"

"Because of the *second* sighting that Blitz told me about yesterday. You heard about the Double Rainboom, right?"

"Yeah, caused quite a commotion. Shouldn't Rainbow Blitz 'ave been proud of that?"

"He would have been, if it hadn't been for the fact that it was his *doppelganger* who did it, not him."

There was a scuffling sound. Twilight could imagine Spines nearly slipping off her friend's back. "Doppel- you mean, a twin?"

"Yeah, a twin or a clone. Blitz said they looked *just* like him, save for the fact that she was a filly. In his own words, a 'Filly-faker'."

Now Twilight heard a motion to her left. She looked up in time to see Applejack restraining Dash from flying straight out into the open, hooves blazing.

"Either way, he told me that the female 'Blitz' had headed off in the direction of the Everfree forest. I've already been out to Zircon's hut today, and he told me that he hadn't seen anything weird out there lately. So I'm assuming our doppelgangers are keeping base a little closer to home."

"Ahhh, I get'cha brony." The dragoness could be imagined nodding her head. "So, it's a search party then, eh? Shouldn't you have called the rest of the gang?"

"I was tempted to, but decided against it. The LAST thing we need is for Berry to go and make this a REAL party." There was a stamp of hooves right outside the HEDGE's entrance, as the voice become loud and clear.

"No, I think we can do this. We should be able to find 'ourselves' out here. Or I'm not the Prized Student of Prince Solaris, Dusk Shine!"

Down in that burrow, the Prized Student of Princess Celestia, Twilight Sparkle, felt a knot begin to form in the pit of her stomach as her eyes darted over to a green-backed hardcover book.

I should have had Fluttershy return it the first day.

Rarity Umbrella trotted through Ponyville with a skip and bounce in her step. She was a mare on a mission... even if she hadn't been fully honest with her friends on what that mission was.

Hearing the tales of the fillies one by one meeting their masculine halves had kindled an emotion that she'd not welcomed, but tolerated

nonetheless. Jealousy. And after having heard and witnessed the apparent success of Fluttershy's crush, despite having not been looking in the first place, the story had filled her with yet another feeling. Hope.

Hope which she held onto as she saw the familiar spire of Carousel Boutique. Her heart a-titter, she quickly reviewed her mental checklist. She had gone ahead and purchased the bottle of Sunflower oil, which had gone without a hitch. She would meet with her 'better half', and see how compatible they really were. She had been admittedly put off by AJ and Dash's own stories, but she believed she knew her own self better than that.

Should they hit it off, she would ask a dress of him. And of course, a bottle of shampoo. Should they continue warming up, and should she really feel it, she would express her undying love towards him. And should that be met with joy in his eyes... *oooh Rarity, you naughty filly for even thinking that!*

Quickly, she checked her mane, and adjusted her umbrella. The faux Cutiemark was still in-place. She hoped she wouldn't get sweaty. Should that happen, it would surely run something awful.

Taking a deep breath, she then trotted up to the door, and daintily produced a few knocks on its frame.

"Cooooo-miiiiing~" she heard a rich contralto sing from inside. Already, her knees felt weak.

The doorknob jangled, before the barrier pulled aside, allowing her to behold the mirror of her soul.

He was tall, just as she knew he'd be. His deep purple mane was cut short, but *oh so stylishly* so! His legs, though not superbly toned, were still of reasonable build, complimenting his distinguished torso and chin. But his flanks! *Oh, his flanks!* Her diamond cutie-marks looked absolutely superb, seated as they were upon such firm cheeks! She had to wrest her eyes away from them, and continue viewing her male self, taking in his nose, that horn *her inner schoolgirl squealed at its length,* and finally, *finally*, his *deep, star-studded eyes*, as blue as the ocean itself beneath a clear summer's sky.

Eyes that were currently regarding her with about the same amount of fascination that she had been giving him.

The both of them coughed into their hooves at roughly the same time, before reaffirming their airs of grace. The stallion spoke first.

"Greetings, and welcome to Carousel Boutique. My name..." he paused for a dramatic beat, before continuing "-is Elusive. How may I be of service to you today, my lady?"

She was screaming to herself inside her own head. *He said 'My Lady'!! You know you NEVER say 'My Good Sir' unless it's a customer you find really cute!!*

"G-greetings, Sir Elusive." she began, her cultured tenor coming out in full force. "My name is Rarity Umbrella. I have heard good word across Equestria of your fine works in the fields of clothing and design."

"Oh?" he replied, an excited, yet calmly hopeful edge to his voice. "And what is it that is said, on the streets of Equestria?"

She gave him a warm smile, eyes sparkling as she spoke. "That your suits and dresses are among some of the most amazing designs ever seen by pony eyes. That you put care and diligence into each and every one of your works, always doing your best, always asking your customers to trust in you, and them never leaving your shop disappointed."

She was essentially patting herself on the back, but what did she care? It was worth it to see the shine of adoration come forth from Elusive's eyes, before he stepped back and bowed his head. "Please step inside, my lady, so we may talk."

Head held high, and with a practiced sway in her step, she strutted in, hoping her feminine wiles really *were* having an effect on her masculine self. She was not disappointed, as she felt eyes upon her flanks.

The shop's interior was not that different from her home dimension's, honestly. She could see a few distinct changes... her personal projects postboard now contained more suits than dresses, which was to be

expected. The 'men's' fabric pile was fuller than the 'girl's' pile. And over on a folded piece of blue fabric, snoozed a huge white ball of fluff.

"Do be careful of Alexanderite." She heard the stallion warn. "He doesn't take kindly to guests."

She chuckled, a merry sound to anypony who heard. "Oh dearie, I will. I have a cat of my own you know, and she's just about the same way."

"Oh-ho!" came the reply, as he trotted up next to her. "The joys of feline ownership. Or pains, rather, am I right?"

They both shared a hearty chuckle, before relaxing and taking each other in yet again. At length, Elusive spoke. "Can I get you anything to drink, Miss Umbrella?"

"Hmmm... a simple water with a lime twist will do." she said. His eyes perked up, apparently surprised at the serendipity that he just so happened to HAVE sliced limes in his kitchen. As he bowed and turned towards the back, she spoke up again.

"And Elusive, sir? Just call me 'Rarity'. I insist." She gave him a sweet smile.

He nodded, returning her smile. As he departed, both unicorns let their smiles slip into big goofy grins.

Upon his return, she had already checked out the shop more in-depth, again, finding nothing of particular surprise in the area. She had given thought to trying to pet the cat, but given Opal's tendencies in her world, she felt that she should take the warnings to heart and leave him be.

The drink was presented to her. Much to her surprise, it was much more than simple glass of water. Lime wedges were present, yes, but there was also a straw. As she sipped at it, a unique flavor enveloped her tongue, and a delightful smell filled her nose, a shot of something strong in the concoction. He had, in effect, mixed her favorite drink.

Her eyes shone in outright gratitude as she stared at him. He simply bowed his head with a smile. "Only the best, for my future... patrons..."

Oh Celestia he really IS feeling the same way about me! Butterflies abounded in her stomach, her heart singing at the rightness of it all.

For a moment more, they sat, simply enjoying each other's company, her sipping her drink, before she finally made her next move. "Right. Onto business."

"Right." he agreed, sitting up straight. "What may I help you with today, Rarity?"

"I'm looking for something simple. Not very large, not very complex. A saddle, more or less." she stated, her umbrella coming up and opening. "I had originally brought this umbrella as a template for you to work off of in terms of theme and design, but I should have realized that such a request would have been an outright insult to your abilities."

"Oh no, that's quite alright my dear." the white colt waved off the words. "I'm more than willing to follow a theme, if you so wish it. Solaris knows, I've done plenty of odd requests in my time!" He then leaned in, conspiratorially grinning. "I should tell you about the time I designed these absolutely *horrid* suits at the behest of my friends, when we went to the Grand Galloping Gala."

She leaned in as well, returning his grin. "Oh, I'd simply *love* to hear about it! Oh, for the Gala? I had heard you designed ensembles for it every year, but not that you had attended yourself!"

He sighed theatrically, a hoof going to his forehead. "Alas, I DID attend that trainwreck of a social gathering! I had gone there, on the hopes and dreams of high society and glamour... not to mention to gain the chance of meeting who I *thought* would be, my true love..." he tracked his eyes to the floor. "And it was supposed to be the best night ever. Oh Princess Bluebell..."

"Personally, I thought they deserved every ounce of cake they got."

She took another sip of her drink, before realizing that Elusive had fixed her with a wide-eyed look. Suddenly, a hot blush spread across her

face as she realized her slip. "Uhm. I, aha... I-I must confess. I was at the Gala too, this year. I saw the cake."

Now it was the stallion's turn to blush, as he looked down. "Sorry you had to see such a shameful display."

"Not at all, my dear. She was a Royal pain anyway."

"She was. You're right, she deserved every ounce of cake she got."

"I mean, honestly." She leaned forward, now on a roll. She could only guess at what events differed from her own at Canterlot, but she had a feeling her guesses were good ones. "There are such things at being gentlemanly, right? But I bet she simply took you for granted, didn't she?"

"She did. She barely acknowledged that I existed."

"What shamefulness, for a lady to act that way! A gentlecolt is there to offer his support, after all!"

"She turned her nose up at everything I did for her! Oh poor Applejack, I was so distraught when she spat out his fritters."

"Oh rest assured, if I ever had a stallion there to wait on me, I would have returned his every motion with the thankfulness and gratitude he so richly deserved!"

"I... I..." he stammered, his eyes glistening. "You really mean that, don't you, Miss Rarity?"

"With all my soul, Sir Elusive." she answered, her own eyes shimmering.

Once more, silence descended between the two. They didn't really notice the passage of time, caught up as they were in each other's eyes. It took the presence of a third in order to break the spell. A cat who was looking up at the stallion and was giving him a very solid and disappointed 'Meow.'

"Wh-wha? Oh, hello Alex. Awake, are you?" Elusive greeted his pet. "Ah right, it IS about feeding time for you, isn't it? Apologies Miss Rarity, but I must attend to my 'taskmaster' here." he gave the feline a wry grin. "It'll only take a moment, and it'll keep him out of our manes. When I come back, would you like to get started?"

"Oh most certainly, that would be wonderful. And don't worry, take your time!"

She smiled as owner and cat departed towards the back room. At least, she remained smiling up to the point where Alex paused, looked back at her, and then gave her a grin the likes of which she'd never seen.

Perhaps cats really *were* smarter than most ponies thought.

"Are you ready, Rarity?"

"I am, Elusive. Let us... begin."

Rarity found herself standing on a familiar stage, keeping her body perfectly still, as the tall white stallion levitated a tape measure, getting her widths and lengths, jotting down notes and looking over her form, before placing a line here and there on a piece of paper, a saddle-dress slowly taking form.

"I must say, my dear." Elusive stated, lifting up his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Your figure is one of the most marvelous I've ever laid eyes on! How do you do it?"

You're hot. Rarity translated in her head. *That's exactly what I said that one day when I fitted Big Macintosh. And now I'm hearing it from the most handsome stallion in this dimension!*

"Oh, it takes work." she sighed dramatically. "Most of my friends are usually of the opinion that I'm overly fussy about my appearance, but they have no IDEA of the trials and tribulations that I have to go to, in order to maintain this body!"

"Oh, you speak to the choir, my dear!" the unicorn colt bright a hoof to his forehead, a pencil levitating in the air. "Often, my friends tease me of being too '*girly*' or '*Fru-fru*' to even be called a stallion!"

A gasp. "The nerve!"

He chuckled as he turned back to her. "Ah, but do not be so quick to judge. I know they only tease, meaning nothing harmful by it. Well, there was the ONE time when Berry switched out every bolt of fabric I had in the boutique with pink lace, but I think he knows now to not pull anything like that again."

She found herself giggling, a sound that caught his ears and perked them. Soon, he began to chuckle alongside her, the sound of laughter filling the shop.

"Ooooooh, Sir Elusive!" she cried out, once she had regained her breath. "You must lead such an interesting life!"

"Oh, it's been quite... FULL, indeed." he smirked, turning his attention back towards the drawing. "Oh, but enough about me. This is *your* time, my dear! Tell me, what do you do?"

"Well..." she licked her lips, her practiced spiel firmly within her head. "I'm from a somewhat-noble family in Fillydelphia, having struck out at the tender age of sixteen. As you saw, from my Cutiemark, I have something of a penchant for making umbrellas and weather-wear. I've my own shop. Not too much unlike yours actually," she found herself faltering for a second. "Where I take in custom orders, mainly from pegusai. My brand is not nearly as well-known as yours is, but I make enough to get by for now. One day, elements willing, I'll be able to take the fashion world by storm!"

"My, my." came the reply, a smile upon his face. "It certainly sounds like you've got a lot of work cut out for you."

"Oh, nothing I can't handle, I assure you." she waved off the comment.

"Indeed... also, Miss Rarity?"

"Hmmm?"

Elusive allowed his spectacles to slide down the bridge of his nose, a half-lidded gaze leveled at her. "It's awfully unbecoming for lovely young ladies like you to tell such *bold-faced* lies, don't you think?"

Her heart shot up her throat, eyes wide. How did he know?! What could have given it away?! What did she do-

She felt a moistness upon her forehead, and found her answer.

"Oh, dear." she sighed theatrically, her head lowering. "I should have known. Your legendary eye for detail has found me out."

The stallion chuckled, a dark black pencil flying through the air as he began to touch-up the spot on her fake cutie-marks, where the makeup had begun to run. "It's alright, my dear." he soothed, working quickly. "You should have used actual body paints, instead of makeup."

"You're..." she gave a sniffle. "You're not upset that I... lied to you?"

The unicorn colt shook his head, smile still in place. "Not at all, my dear. In fact, I'm rather in awe that you know the spell for Cutiemark-vanishment! Not even my friend Dusk knows of the spell, and *he* went to the Canterlot University for Gifted Unicorns!"

Rarity chuckled, before lowering her head, stepping off the stage. "Very well... yes, my talent is not in making umbrellas. Though I CAN make them, they're just, not my specialty. I just wasn't... sure how you'd like my true Cutie-mark, so I substituted for another."

"Miss Rarity..." He lifted a hoof in a placating gesture, before she turned away from him, her eyes cast downward.

"I apologize." she stated, before picking up her umbrella. "I shan't waste anymore of your ti-"

He was upon her in an instant. She suddenly found her hooves being held by his, as he looked imploringly into her eyes. *Oh dear, may need to*

re-think that theory yet again Twilight, I feel like I'm about to explode! If not twice!

"Miss Rarity, please." he pleaded. "Don't let this secret eat away at you. Though you may not feel comfortable in showing your true cutiemark to me today, I want to let you know, that I in no way, think of you in any less a manner. You have been nothing, but a joy ever since you stepped into my shop. In fact, I dare say, this aura of mystery about you..." He leaned in, breath hot on her snout. "It makes you even more... alluring..."

"Sir Elusive..." she returned, before slipping out of his grasp. "Oh, Elusive! I-I've never met another stallion in all my years, who has been so kind and patient and understanding with me, as you have been today! You are a true gentlecolt, in the purest of words! And dare I even say..." she turned back to look at her male self. "The most ELIGIBLE Stallion in all of Equestria!"

"Oh Rarity!" he cried out, theatrics in full swing. "When I opened that door this morning... did your heart sing as mine did!?"

"Yes! And you, Elusive! Did your stomach fill with the dance of a dozen butterflies, the same as mine did when I laid eyes upon you!?"

"Yes! YES! Oh, it HAS to be!"

"It MUST be *Destiny*!!" Rarity found herself forgetting all else, as her heart ran away with itself.

"Oh RARITY!!"

"Oh ELUSIVE!!"

The two white ponies collided together there in the middle of the boutique floor, hooves wrapped tightly around each other, as they hugged and nuzzled each other passionately, tears of joy flowing from their eyes.

"My DEAREST!!"

"My LOVE!!"

"OH How I've LONGED for this MOMENT!!"

"ME TOO! FINALLY, my LIFE feels COMPLETE!!"

Awkwardly, their arms still bound to each other, the pair lifted themselves onto their hind hooves, before shuffling towards an open window, where the sun was streaming in. Placing themselves squarely in the beam of light, they looked out at the sun, pleading teary looks on their faces.

"PLEASE, PRINCE SOLARIS!!" Elusive cried out towards the sky. "PLEASE GRANT THIS COUPLE YOUR BLESSING IN LOVE!! MAY WE NEVER AGAIN FIND OURSELVES IN LONELINESS, AND BE BLESSED WITH THE ETERNAL BOND OF TRUE LOVE EVERLASTING!!"

"PLEASE, PRINCESS!!" Rarity cried out alongside. "PLEASE CELESTIA, PLEASE!!"

"Celestia?" He gave her a confused look.

"Oh, um, I mean, PLEASE *SOLARIS*, PLEASE!!"

Together, hoof-in-hoof, tears of rapture streaming down their faces, the two ivory unicorns stared towards the sun, awaiting an answer to their prayers of love and fortune...

... only to be foiled by a blue pegasus stallion nonchalantly scooting a cloud in front of the sun, blocking their light, before hopping on top of it for an evening nap.

"Well!" Rarity harrumphed. "That was rude."

Elusive took a more direct course of action however, stomping over to the window, opening it, and bellowing.

"RAINBOW BLITZ YOU MOVE THAT CLOUD OUT OF THE WAY RIGHT THIS INSTANT OR SO HELP ME SOLARIS, I'LL BLEACH THAT MISERABLE DISASTER YOU CALL A MANE IN YOUR SLEEP!!"

"Gah!" she heard a voice outside. Mercifully, the sunlight returned. "Okay okay, sheesh, what's the big deal? Interrupt your tanning?"

"I'm making a plea to the Prince!" the unicorn yelled back, hoof shaking in the air. "I need this Blitz, I need his blessing in love!"

"Love? What?" The voice was coming closer. "You find a girlfriend, 'Lucy?'"

"It's ELUSIVE." came the reply. "And she's not *just* a girlfriend, she's my *Soul Mate!!* Destiny has finally rewarded me with my significant other! Not that YOU would know anything about matters of the heart!"

"Oh this I gotta see." the voice came even closer, as the white colt backed up, allowing the pegasus to slip inside to land. Rarity's eyes widened as her suspicions were confirmed, the rainbow mane eliminating any chances of doubt. This was Rainbow Dash's male self.

"So, who's the mystery ma-" Blitz's eyes met with Rarity's, and stopped. She could see the rose eyes shrink as he took her in, before switching his gaze over to his friend. He repeated the maneuver a number of times, Elusive looking at him with an expression of pure confusion.

"Good heavens Blitz, what *are* you doing?"

"Oh! Um, sorry." the colt shook his head, blinking a number of times. "It's just that... well, you two haven't looked at each other in the mirror now, have you?"

"Rainbow, please." the unicorn rolled his eyes, before turning to the mare. "You'll have to forgive him, love. This is Rainbow Blitz, Ponyville's resident Weather-pony. Not the most cultured lot, but a good friend."

"O-ho, it's quite alright." she nervously chuckled in return. "Pleased to meet you, sir Blitz. I dare say, you rather remind me of a friend of mine."

"Hee-yeah," the blue pony chuckled, before squinting his eyes. "I BET I DO."

Oh, right. Rarity found her brain kicking itself. *Dash DID mention something about him being AWARE of us.*

"Blitz." Elusive spoke again, rather grandly this time. "This is the lady Rarity Umbrella. Today, she walked into this shop, a simple customer. Today, she walks out, as my One True Love!"

"Oh, Elusive~" she found herself swooning at his words, taking comfort in them despite the predicament she found herself in.

Rainbow found his eyes rolling at the spectacle, earning a glare from his friend. "Blitz, I thought you'd be more tolerant than this!"

"I'm sorry!" the pegasus replied. "But from here, the two of you look... more like twin siblings to me! You're like, gender-swapped reflections of yourselves! It's actually pretty creepy! I mean, have you checked to see if you've even got the same cutie-marks?"

Rarity's heart skipped a beat at hearing the emphasis he put on the words 'genderswapped'. She would have sweated her fake cutie-mark right off again, had the stallion by her side not spoken up.

"Rainbow!" Elusive stated, a little shocked. "Rarity is a specialist in producing umbrellas and weather-protection gear! You can see it right there on her flank!"

Rarity shifted her body to the side, allowing the blue stallion a better view of her umbrellas. "As you can see, it is quite different from Elusive's cutiemark, and indeed, does not match up to his in any way, shape or form. Especially not function!"

"Indeed!" her other half stated grandly. "You couldn't get any two cutie marks as different if you tried!" He then directed an eye towards the white filly, and gave her a quick wink.

H-he's protecting me! She found her heart melting and fluttering all over again. *He's helping me keep up my guise! Such a true gentlecolt!*

"Riiiiight..." Rainbow Blitz looked at the two unicorns, his gaze flickering between each one. White coats. Purple manes. Blue eyes. And they were holding hooves, which they hadn't been doing a second ago. That creepy tingle he was getting up and down his spine wasn't going away anytime soon. The cutiemark thing was a sham as far as he was concerned. He just knew that this 'Rarity' was one of them. One of the *weird* ponies.

But for now, he would play along. Actually, as he thought, playing along was exactly what he NEEDED to do, as a plan formed in his vibrant-maned head.

"Y'know... you're right." he stated, bowing his head towards the pair. "I'm awfully sorry for being, rude, and stuff. Didn't mean to get your tails in a knot. Just haven't had a good week, y'know what I mean?"

Elusive let a smile come to his muzzle. "It's alright, Blitz, I understand. But you should learn how to better corral your words."

"I getcha." the pegasus waved a hoof at the unicorn. "All that aside. Hey. If you're happy, I'm happy. So, um... congrats to you two?"

Rarity found herself being hugged... and returning the hug... as the stallion of her dreams embraced her. "*Thank you, Blitz. Thank you SO much.*" the two of them said in-stereo.

The speedster stallion did his best not to blanch at the resulting sound, before rearing up. "Y'know, come t' think of it, this is such good news... how 'bout I go and find Dusk, and bring him over? I think he'd love to get to know the future Miss Elusive, don't you think?"

"Oh Blitz, that's a WONDERFUL idea!" Elusive proclaimed, though the mare in his hooves found her stomach sinking. "Oh, I should probably fix us all dinner! How long do you think it'll be?"

"Eh, probably an hour to fifteen minutes, you can never tell with Dusk. If he's not at the library, he's doing Solaris-knows-what. Which Solaris probably does." A roll of the eyes. "But still, don't worry about it. Just keep 'er around till we get back, alright?"

"Oh, I most definitely will, you can count on that." He outright grinned as he gave Rarity another squeeze.

"Alrighty! I'll see you two lovebirds later then! Hasta La'coasta!" Rainbow Blitz saluted, before mounting his forehooves onto the window. However, before he took off, Rarity heard him add one more word under his breath.

"Filly-faker."

And with that, he launched himself back out the open window, leaving a trail of colors in his wake.

The couple finding themselves alone again, the male unicorn chuckled sadly to himself. "That's 'Hasta La'vista', Blitz." With a sigh, he looked back down, noticing his significant other's stillness. Gently, he cupped her cheek and turned her head to look at him.

"Rarity... are you alright, love? You're not in trouble with somepony, are you?"

The mare blinked, before she regained her composure. "Oh! Oh, no, no trouble at all. It's just that, well, I'll be honest. I didn't expect to stay here THAT long... I mean, this is all happening so fast..."

Elusive nodded, his eyes giving her a comforting gaze. "Yes, it is, isn't it? But I can't deny the red strings of fate, when they finally bring the one you love, straight to your door... Rarity?"

"Yes, my love?" She was lost inside his eyes once more, putty in his hooves.

"Will... *will* you stay with me, tonight? Have dinner with me? Meet my friends? I so, so much want them to get to know the mare I'm going to spend the rest of my life with... Will you?"

She tried to say no. Somewhere in the back of her mind, there was a purple unicorn, under a bush, crying out for her friend to stop what she was

doing, to stop performing this ultimate act of narcissism and falling in love with herself, to come back so that they could all go home...

... but home had never felt like THIS.

"I..." her voice trembled. "I... I suppose I can... wait around, for a little while..."

Whatever else might have been said, was silenced by the motion of lips locking into a forbidden, interdimensional kiss.

Chapter Six

Through a Stitch in Time



"Ugh," Dash groaned, quietly. "*It's been HOURS.*"

"Gah, c'mon Dusk!" groaned the voice outside. "*It's been HOURS.*"

"I know, I know." Dusk replied to the tired dragoness.

"I know, I know." Twilight replied to the tired pegasus, right at the same time her male double outside voiced the same words.

Everypony inside the HEDGE cringed once more. This had not been the first time this had happened today, and it *still* freaked them out whenever it happened. Most of all, Twilight herself.

The two searching members had been going up and down the treeline along the Everfree forest, inspecting every nook and cranny they could find. They hadn't found anything yet, but for some reason, they

always wound up right around the circle of bushes at the end of every string.

"What *is* it about this place, anyways?" Spines complained, eying the mass of shrubbery. "I don't really get why we keep coming back here."

"Neither do I, if you want my honest opinion." Dusk replied. "I just... I dunno. I don't *feel* anything off about this area, and yet, I'm... drawn, I guess? I dunno."

"*Hey, Twi.*" Applejack whispered from their place of cover. "*Y'all wouldn't happen t' be feelin' funny right now, wouldja?*"

"*Y-you mean, besides this crippling sense of fear that I've got right this moment?!*" the unicorn replied, stress making her snappish, if quietly so.

The farmer pressed on. "*Tell me sugarcube. What's th' fear FEEL like?*"

"Drawn?" Spines asked her friend, raising an eyebrow. "Sure you're not feeling something?"

"Like a knot in my stomach?"

"Like a knot in my stomach?"

Pinkie Pie crossed off another mark on her forehoof. It was up to fifteen.

"Oh, I don't know Spines, I'm just... rather frustrated. We've been out here *all day*, and not a single sign of pony." There was a rustle as Dusk planted his haunches. "I'm tempted to do something rather deconstructive, but that wouldn't look very good on the next Friendship report, would it?"

"Speaking of which, you've not sent one for a few days now." the little dragon quipped. "Maybe you should, y'know, ask for some help?"

"No, Spines, I *need* to do this. I mean, the implications are *staggering*. Doppelganger ponies, interdimensional twins? I have my

suspicions, but seriously, what do they want? Do they plan on replacing us, or are they going to invade, what? I just... I need to know."

"*Oh Dusk...*" Twilight whispered to herself. "*You can't know. It's for your own good.*"

"*Sixteen.*" Pinkie hissed.

"*What?*" Dash objected. "*That one didn't count!*"

The lavender filly let her eyes direct downwards. *Friendship reports.* She couldn't send any to her mentor, as long as she was trapped in this world. But now, her being trapped here was apparently driving her stallion-self to forgo his own, in his quest for the 'intruders'. What would his prince think? *What would Celestia think?*

"*sigh*... I'll write a report as soon I get back."

"*sigh*... I'll write a report as soon I get back."

"*Seventeen.*" the party pony whispered, marker in her mouth fumbling about.

A stretch of quiet came, the only noise passing through was gentle breathing. Finally, there was more rustling. "They can't *really* be hiding in there, can they? Those bushes are too thick!"

"I dunno. I've seen some of Butterscotch's friends get into some pretty tight spaces." Spines replied.

"There's a thought. Let's get Butterscotch and some of his friends, see if they can't find something off about this hedge." Dusk chuckled. "Maybe there's like, a rabbit warren or something inside."

A slow lifting of yellow wings signaled that Fluttershy was okay with this plan.

"Welp, we're not getting anything done, hanging around here!" the purple stallion suddenly exclaimed, as he hefted himself to all fours. "Let's go check the path to Zircon's hut. Maybe they're got it set up there-"

"YO! HEY BRONY!"

The new voice caused everypony inside the HEDGE to jump. And for one of those ponies to give a glare at the ceiling.

"*Colt-crudder!*" Dash hissed.

Quickly but silently, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Twilight crawled towards the entrance, getting a look outside. Lucky for them, Dusk, Spines, and Rainbow Blitz were in full and clear view, the pegasus stallion quickly zooming in.

"Hey Blitz, what's up?" the male unicorn asked, his mood improved somewhat by a familiar face.

"I'll tell you what's up! Something BIG!" Blitz replied, as he slowed down and hovered in front of his friend.

"*Ooooooh sugarcakes.*" Applejack whispered, her green eyes wide as she sighted the blue stallion. "Twi, r'member when ah were talkin' 'bout how a gal's heart goes pitty-pat th' other day?"

"Yeah, I remember." Twilight replied, confused. "Why?"

The apple farmer's face had a new addition to it. A crimson line of a blush. "Cause ah think mah heart's a-doin' that pitty-pattin' right now. You make a *damn* fine colt, Rainbow!"

"Hey!" the multihued mare squeaked in indignation. "No crushing on my clone! That's just weird!!"

"Girls, quiet!" the purple pony hushed. "They're talking."

"*ANOTHER ONE?!*" both Dusk and Spines said, incredulously.

"Yeah, another one! She's called 'Rarity', and she's a *dead* ringer for Elusive!" the hovering pony exclaimed. "She's at Carousel Boutique, I've got 'Lucy keeping her there! Not that I had to try very hard, they were practically tripping all over each other!"

"You're KIDDING." The unicorn stallion gaped.

"Nope! Y'wanna know how I found out? Apparently, I pushed my nap cloud right into the sunbeam they were using to ask for Prince Solaris's blessing!"

"Oh GAWD." Now the purple colt was massaging his forehead with a hoof. "Butterscotch was bad enough, but *this*? Blitz, this is *not* looking good for the dimensional continuum as a whole!"

"If you mean the universe is gonna explode if they kiss, then we're probably already too late. I think they were making out the moment I left."

The dragoness practically had steam coming out of her ears.

"*Ugh!*" was the only reply that the pegasus got, as Dusk suddenly broke into a gallop, heading off back towards town. "At least one in the hoof is worth two in the bush! Hurry Blitz, we might still have time!"

As the trio disappeared into the distance, they heard Spines crying out "I'm coming to SAVE you, hon!"

Everypony waited for a minute. When it became obvious that the coast was clear, Twilight found herself hopping to all four hooves. "Hurry girls! We might still have time!"

"Eighteen!"

"NOT NOW PINKIE!" Applejack exclaimed. "We all need t' pony up 'n go save Rarity a'fore she goes 'n does somethin' stupid!"

"Twilight!" Dash gaped, wings flapping at the air. "If meeting ourselves, and touching each other didn't make us disappear... d-do you think th-that... you know!" Her face was reddening just thinking about it.

"I-I have NO IDEA! I've never once read a theory about the end of all time and space being brought about by two of the same ponies from different dimensions having sexual intercourse!!" the student's ears were burning as she said the words, but she had no idea how else to say it, despite how ridiculous it sounded. "A-at least I don't *think* I have!"

"We need to rescue her. If not from herself," Fluttershy quipped, a look of determination gracing her features. "T-then at least from our other selves!"

"Okay, okay, stop panicking!" Twilight told herself, her eyes shut in concentration for a second. "Okay. Rainbow Dash, fly to the boutique at full speed, as low to the ground as you can go. Introduce yourself as-"

"Woah, woah, wait up." the pegasus stalled. "Speed I can do fine, but this 'Elusive' guy is probably gonna ask questions if he sees me. I'd need a disguise. And it's pretty darned hard to try and disguise *this*." She ran a hoof through her mane of colors.

"Oh, yeah, that's true. Right. New plan. Rainbow, take... um, Fluttershy, she's the lightest of us all. We'll get her disguised, and she'll do the talking. Sound good?"

There were nods all around. "Good. Okay, Fluttershy, where's that makeup kit?"

The butter pegasus opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it as a look of realization came over her. "Uhm... Rarity took it with her..."

Twilight facehoofed again. It was becoming an unhealthy habit, her forehead told her. "O-KAY, Anypony here got any kind of markers or dye on them that *isn't* black. Anypony? Anypony? Time's a wastin' here!"

"Ahh... ah'm sorry Twi," Applejack hoofed at the ground. "Ah kin' offer mah hat again, but ah've got no colorin' stuff on me."

Dash shook her own head. "Sorry Twilight, this rainbow doesn't wash out. I've never had a need for dyes here."

"Uhm, I'm sorry Twilight... I left my crayons back at my cottage in our world... though, I bet if we asked-"

"I've got some coloring!"

This last one came from a perpetually happy pink pony, who was currently bouncing in place without a care in the world. She was swiftly surrounded.

"Pinkie, you're a life-saver!" Twilight exclaimed. "Let's see it! We need to get Fluttershy into it, quick!"

The mistress of Pie reached her head into the pink fluff of her tail, before withdrawing from it, a simple box of tubes. Four tubes in fact. Green, Red, Yellow, and Blue.

The student found herself sighing as she recognized the package. *It makes sense. This is Pinkie we're talking about. But it'll still work.*

"Pinkie?" the apple farmer questioned. "What in th' hay is that?"

Pinkie Pie proudly opened the box, taking out the blue tube.

"Food coloring!"

As Rarity poured up the steaming pot of broccoli into a strainer, she found something tickling her consciousness... she had forgotten something, but what?

Oh, she was well aware of the predicament that she was in. The bottle of Sunflower Oil was still in her neckbag, which was resting on a coat hanger in the workshop. She knew that a few hours had passed, and that her friends back at the HEDGE were probably becoming extremely anxious for her return.

There was also the matter of impending doom that she knew would be coming through the Boutique door at any minute. She was quite certain that when Dusk and Blitz arrived, their faces would more than likely, not be ones of support, but suspicion. *They know who I am. They'll take me in, and drill me for questions, they'll probably want me to squeal on my friends, and tell them where the HEDGE is. And then... and then, we may be stuck here, forever...*

Hot breath cascaded down her neck as she felt an affectionate nuzzle work its way up her mane. Instantly, she found her eyes closing in bliss, as all her worries washed down the drain like used cooking water. *Oh... but it would be so worth it...*

The two had spent some of their time after the pegasus had left, simply standing there in the boutique, lips embracing. Somewhere along in there, Rarity had managed to give the offer of helping her male self with the preparation of dinner, which they had slowly, but eventually, gotten around to.

"Hey there, love." his voice sounded at her ear. "Steamed broccoli with almondine?"

"Mmmm, yes~" she giggled, leaning her head back to brush her cheek with his own. "One of my favorite dishes. My mother cooked it all the time back home. I suppose you could call it, comfort food..."

"Amazing..." Elusive whispered, as he stared into the eyes of his loved one in awe, not for the first time this evening. "My mother used to cook the same! And judging by this, it seems our mothers both used the same recipe. Oh Rarity, the more I find out about you, the more of my heart becomes yours~"

She silenced his monologue with yet another kiss. *Let doomsday come. she thought. Every second I have is another second with my love. My prince. My better self...*

She heard a squeak of a door opening. Her eyes shot open in surprise, as the thought of her time coming to an end too soon brought chills of fright and regret through her spine-

"Hey, Big brother! I'm home!"

Okay, so it *wasn't* the end of the world yet. But she now had to deal with yet *another* unforeseen circumstance that had not crossed her mind until right this very second. Sweepy Bell.

The white stallion broke contact with her lips, a smile on his face. "Welcome home, Sweepy!" he called out. "We're in the kitchen. There's somepony very... special, that I want you to meet."

"Special?" the little lavender-haired colt questioned, as his stubby legs trotted him right into the linoleum floor. "Did you find another princess, Elusiv-!"

Sweepy's green eyes widened as he saw and recognized the white mare standing at the sink. She gave him back a nervous smile, before winking at him. *Oh gracious, I hope he doesn't say anything too... unsettling.*

"Sweepy Bell." Elusive stated, taking a few steps towards his sibling. "THIS... is Lady Rarity Umbrelle. She is... the most amazing unicorn that I have ever met in my life. Rarity?" he then turned back towards his female half. "This is my little brother, and the apple of my eye, Sweepy Bell."

She trotted forward, her mind's eye filled with the image of the two brothers standing together. Instantly, she felt a heartache blossom in her chest, as that image was reversed. In that moment, she realized what exactly had happened... and what she had almost lost.

"S-Sweepy..." she whispered, kneeling down in front of the little pony. "It is an honor to finally meet you."

The white colt stared for a second longer, before remembering himself and returning the bow. "The h-honor is all mine, Miss Rarity. Are y-you..." his eyes flickered around the kitchen, before settling back on her. "Are you helping my brother make dinner tonight?"

"Indeed I am." she gave him a smile. "Broccoli almonidine, and... if it's okay with your brother," she gave Elusive a knowing look, before leaning forward. "Maple-glazed carrots."

Eyes lit up in absolute delight, the sight of which made her heart both ache, and sing. "Maple-glazed carrots?! Wow!" Sweepy cheered, the thought of his favorite dish ever being made for dinner tonight. He pranced for a second, before running over to Elusive and rearing up on one of his forelegs. "Can we really have Maple carrots, Bro? Canwecanwecanwe?!"

The white unicorn chuckled at the antics. "Of course, Sweepy! Tonight is a special night. I have no reason to see why we shouldn't." His blue eyes directed themselves back at the mare, as she fluttered her own sapphire orbs. "Yes... tonight is a *very* special night indeed. Now run along hon, get cleaned up. Dinner will be ready shortly."

"Sure thing, Elusive!" the pale pony cheered, before scampering out of the kitchen. He didn't want to be late for maple-glazed carrots if he could possibly help it.

"Ahhh, the youth of today." Elusive grinned, watching his sibling depart. "So energetic, so happy. I remember a time when I was like-"

As he turned back towards Rarity, he caught sight of her tear-stained face, eyes locked on the door that his brother had left through. "Rarity? Love?" he whispered, coming close to her, nuzzling once more. "What troubles you? You can tell me."

"I... I have a sister," she gasped through a barely-contained sob. "I-I haven't seen her in so long... seeing your brother just now, just made me realize... *how much I really miss her!!*" she then collapsed inwards, her face burying itself into the stallion's chest, as he wrapped his hooves around her, comforting her.

"Oh, Rarity!" he crooned, nuzzling her mane. "Oh, I had no *IDEA!* I'm so sorry~!"

"It's okay!" she managed to choke through her muffled sobs. "There was no way you *could* have known... nor could you know that I need to make a choice..."

"A choice? Oh... oh my love!" He felt his heart clenching, as he pulled her away long enough to look her in the face. "Is your sister in trouble? Oh please tell me! Elusive will do his best to listen, to help in any way that he can!"

"Oh love!" she gaped, again touched by the depths of his generosity. "I... it's complicated, my love. Believe me, I want to tell you everything, I truly, truly do... but..."

"But?"

"But... explaining would take all night, and we can't let maple-glazed carrots cook that long, less they turn to mush!"

She was stalling, he knew, but he simply brought his lips close, kissing her on the forehead. "Another time then, my dearest. Don't feel as if you need to rush, but please, do not keep it to yourself for long."

"You are my better half, and I am yours. Secrets between us, though we may have a few, will eventually pass. Remember, you have captured my heart, and all its contents, are yours and yours alone to see."

New tears began on Rarity's face, before she flung her hooves around his neck, and kissed him once more. Somewhere in the back, a kettle began to whistle.

Dinner was eventually finished, the sun finishing its final decent over the horizon, as it was all plated. With two unicorns in the kitchen instead of one, the whole thing came together rather quickly. Again, Elusive was amazed by Rarity's powers of prowess, especially in the kitchen. Never once did she have to ask him where pots, pans, or condiments were located. It was like she had cooked in his kitchen before!

Sweepy Bell eventually rejoined them, descending down the stairs, his mane combed and prim. His eyes were wide too as he witnessed for the first time, the two elder unicorns locking lips as they levitated plates over to the table.

"Oh... oh m-my." he found himself going. So it was true!

They continued to share their passion between each other, barely cognizant enough to put the plates on the table in the right order. At least, not nearly cognizant enough to notice that they were joined by a young colt seating himself right in front of them.

"Um... B-Big brother?"

The pair gasped as they were caught by surprise, a mad blush going over both their faces. "Oh, Sweepy! Sorry about that, we, um, we didn't see-"

"Elusive? Miss Rarity? Are you two in love?"

Out of the mouths of babes, it has been said. The pair of ponies stared blankly at him for a few seconds, before softening their gazes and looking back at one another. "Yes," Rarity began. "Your brother and I... are very much in love."

Now Sweepy's eyes grew wider, his green gaze locked on the mare. "M-Miss Rarity? D-does that mean... that you're going to become..."

"... my big sister?"

There it was. All of a sudden, she no longer saw a colt, but a filly sitting there, Sweetie Belle's face imploring at her. *What do you choose, big sister?* she asked. *Whose heart are you going to break?*

"I... I..."

knock knock

As loud as the bells of death to her, she instantly felt the color drain from her pale face. "Oh, that must be Dusk and Blitz now~" Elusive sang, forehooves wheeling in the air before he took off for the door.

"I..." she remained shock-still, her mouth gaping like a fish, as she watched her life flash before her eyes, as she watched the last few seconds of the most perfect moments of her existence, tick away. "Elusive... I..."

In the front room, she heard the door creak. "Hello there, my- oh! Oh, I do apologize ma'am. Welcome to Carousel Boutique! My name is Elusive. We're actually closed right now, but can I help you with anything?"

"O-oh," came a soft voice. "E-excuse me. My... m-my name is G-Grassy Graze. I-I was just w-wondering... if you wouldn't mind... if you'd happen to have seen my friend..."

Fluttershy! Rarity thought. She found her hooves galloping towards the front room, past her male half as she zoomed to the door. "Fluttersh-!"

It was most definitely her standing at the door. Though the last time the white mare had checked, Fluttershy's coat was a butter yellow, not a pale green. And her mane was usually a vibrant pink, instead of being a soaked, purple-tinged do. To her, it looked like as if somepony had taken her timid pegasus friend and dipped her bodily into a vat of weak blue dye.

"O-oh, Rarity!" Her aqua eyes brightened at seeing her friend. "I was getting worried. W-we were supposed to go see the show earlier. D-do you remember?"

"Oh... oh YES!!" the unicorn cried out, maxing out her drama meter. "I can't *BELIEVE* I've forgotten! Oh, can you *EVER* forgive me, my dear Greeny?"

"Grassy."

"Grassy! Oh, I apologize, profusely! I just simply lost track of time, after I met," She pulled Elusive close to her, and traded nuzzles with him. "The STALLION of my DREAMS!"

At this, 'Grassy's gaze grew even wider. "O... Oh! Oh my, I-I'm so happy to hear that!" she cheered, her hooves clapping in joy. A rustle from the bushes next to her however, put her back on-track. "O-oh, but yes. It's okay, Rarity. B-but we don't have much time left, you see..." she tilted her head and flicked her sight behind her, signaling her intention.

Rarity nodded, keeping a straight face despite the jumble of mixed emotions that filled her head. "O-of course, dear. Just give me a moment." She then turned to lock eyes with her better half, her own face a vision of regret. "I'm so sorry, my love... I had *completely* forgotten about my prior engagement. Like I said earlier, I had no *idea* that Destiny would happen here..."

The tall unicorn smiled as he shook his mane. "It's alright, my dear. Do not worry for me. I well understand the value of keeping your words to a friend. Go on, Rarity. Enjoy the rest of your evening! *Live the life!*"

"Oh Elusive!" she found herself swooning once more. "My life will never be quite the same, without you! How will I manage! How will...."

Her memory jogged.

"WAIT!! Can I ask of one more thing of you, before I depart from your embrace?"

"Oh Rarity, ANYTHING! Ask, and it shall be yours!"

"Um, it's unusual. It's, well..." she looked down for a second, before looking back up, a blush on her face. "Shampoo."

Elusive blinked. "Shampoo?"

"Lauren F, formula 1563, Keratin-B supplemented, for that full-body bounce and shine. I think you know the one~?" There was a hopeful edge to her voice.

His eyes brightened as his own personally preferred conditioner was mentioned. "Oh, I know the one! Be right back, my sweet!" He galloped off, the wind flowing through his mane, as a confused Sweepy Bell trotted up to the door.

"O-oh, hi Sweepy." Fluttershy greeted, a smile on her face.

The pony took a second to recognize her. "Wow, your specialty must be camouflage! Hi there Agent.... Agent... aww, I didn't catch your agent name."

She giggled. "I'm going by Grassy Graze right now. Don't tell anypony, okay?" With that, she gave a wink to the diminutive unicorn.

"Ugh, how long are they gonna *take*?" came a whisper from the bush next to the Greener-Shy.

"Hi Agent D!" the little one cheered at the foliage. "Why are you disguised like a bush?"

"Eh, hi squirt. I'm playing high-speed escape vehicle tonight, so I gotta stay hid."

"Oooh, that sounds dangerous. Scooteroll always plays high-speed escape, even when we're NOT escaping from anything!"

Rarity rolled her eyes at the conversation, mouth quirked in a smile as she retrieved her neckbag, before her ears caught the sounds of rushing hoofsteps once more. Quickly, Elusive rejoined them, a bottle of mane-soap floating at his side.

"Here we are, just as requested!" the ivory stallion breathed, the vessel floating over to her. "I should have guessed that my better half would have had exquisite tastes in conditioner as well!"

"Nothing but the best!" she agreed, her horn lighting up as she took it into her own hold. A pained look came across her features, as she trotted up to Elusive, quickly closing the distance between them. "My love... this is... goodbye..."

"Don't say that, my sweet." he soothed, leaning his head in to touch noses with her. "Instead, let us say 'farewell', until we are reunited once more. Remember, my dearest Rarity, though we may be separated... know that my heart, will always be yours."

"As... as mine is yours!" the unicorn cried, her voice breaking. "Oh Elusive!"

"Oh Rarity!"

Once again, they embraced each other, lips meeting in one last, passionate kiss. From the door, Sweepy Bell chuckled, as 'Grassy Green' brought her forehooves to her face and went "Awwww!" Beside her, the bush proceeded to make retching sounds.

It *did* seem to take an awfully long time, but the two eventually disentangled themselves. Rarity turned, trotted quickly to the door, paused, and then quickly wrapped Sweepy Bell into her hooves. "As far as I'm concerned," she whispered to him. "You're already my... my little b-brother..."

She released him, and galloped off into the night, a trail of tears streaming behind her. Fluttershy eeped and called after her, running in hot pursuit. Unseen, a pegasus slipped out of the shrubbery and made a quick escape.

Elusive and Sweepy Bell stood at the door for a long while, well after the fillies had gone out of sight.

"I like her." the small colt finally spoke. "She makes me think of Mom."

"Yes... she does, doesn't she?" the stallion replied, a faraway cast to his eyes.

"I am going to marry that mare. Even if she never resurfaces in Ponyville again, I am going to track her down. I will move the heavens and the earth, if that's what it takes. I'll even take on Prince Solaris himself, if it would mean being reunited with my one true love!"

"Elusive." Green eyes stared at him. "You're monolouging again."

"And I meant every word of it." He gave a nod to himself. A few more seconds passed, before finally, he let out a wistful sigh, his purple mane seeming to deflate. "Well... in the meantime, I suppose we should get back to dinner. The carrots have probably gone cold."

"That's okay." the younger sibling assured, turning back inside. "What matters was that SHE helped cooked it, right?"

"... you're right!" the unicorn replied, as he turned around and closed the door. "She has left us both with her own offering of generosity! And it behooves us as gentlecolts to appreciate a lady's hard work and spirit! Come Sweepy, let us enjoy the gift that Rarity has left us~"

The brothers began trotting back to the kitchen, stomachs growling. Sadly, about halfway there, the door suddenly reverberated with a panicked staccato of pounding.

"Oh good heavens, what NOW?" Elusive griped, as he pivoted on a hoof and trotted back. "*Just a second!*"

He sat himself in front of the door, and opened it right in time to-

"**WHERE IS SHE?!**" Dusk Shine raggedly breathed in the suitmaker's face. He and the magician had never crossed horns literally before, but it was hard to ignore the clattering as their noses were quite pressed against one another.

"Dusk!" he exclaimed, falling back on his haunches in surprise. "You've been running! Where *were* you, it must have been quite a distance!"

"No time for explanations!" Rainbow Blitz brayed, zooming into the shop proper. "Where's your Fillyfriend? Dusk's been dying to meet her!"

"Blitz, now please." The white pony was getting flustered. "It would behoove a man to at least wipe his hooves before entering another's domain-"

"I've been flying this whole time, my hooves are clean, your argument is invalid." the pegasus snorted. "Seriously, she *is* still here, right? I thought you were gonna treat us to dinner!"

"Yes, I've been... looking forward to it..." Dusk added, his legs wobbling under Spine's snoozing weight as he walked inside. His stomach rumbled in agreement. "But not as much as meeting your 'True love'! Can we speak with her?"

Elusive gave a toss of the head, before shaking his mane and shrugging. "My apologies, gentlecolts... **but you've** missed the lovely lady Rarity Umbrella by a mere manner of minutes."

A beat passed, before they responded.

"**WHAT!?**" Blitz yelled, his face a picture of surprise and frustration. "I thought I told you to KEEP her here till we got back!!"

"Rainbow! I am a gentleman, and a true man of virtue would *never* keep a lady withheld against her will! I'm appalled that you would have me keep her a prisoner in my shop!"

"Elusive, PLEASE!" Dusk piped up, his earlier weariness now banished. "This 'Rarity' you're talking about... she's not a normal pony!"

The white pony's eyes glazed over. "Oh, I would say not! She was a pure picture of divinity itself... that *mane*... those *gorgeous eyes*!... her nose was just the most DELICATE thing... and most astounding, her MIND! A soul like hers, I have never before seen in all my years. And I feel blessed to have finally met the one my heart has ached for... the *MARE of my DREAMS*!"

"*Told you it was bad.*" the blue colt murmured to the purple one.

"That's a very... enlightening description of her." the unicorn deadpanned. "She sounds like quite a catch. So why is she gone?"

The suitmaker shook himself out of his revelry. "Oh, I do apologize. Yes, it appeared that she had a prior obligation. A friend of hers came to my door asking for her, and they left together."

Both ponies' heads picked up. "A friend? Can you describe them?"

"Oh! Um, well... she was a small filly. Pegasus, green coat. Long mane that was a maroon tint. Didn't catch her cutie-mark. Aqua-blue eyes."

Blitz gave a confused look to Dusk. "Doesn't sound like anypony we've heard of..."

"Oh, and the most adorable voice. She was so timid and shy! I pinned her as a possible date for Butterscotch the moment she spoke."

"*Fluttershy.*" the lavender unicorn whispered. "Go ahead and look, I'll stay here."

"Gotcha." came the reply. With a whoosh of wind, the rainbow pony was out the door.

Elusive blinked at the sudden exit, before rounding onto the magician. "Dusk? Just what *is* all this about? I get the feeling you're not here on account of my invite to dinner."

"While I *would* appreciate that, Elusive," his stomach mumbled in agreement. "There's a lot more going on here than you think. Tell me, did you get a good look at your date's cutie-mark?"

"It was a pair of umbrellas." came the reply, his eyes closed in concentration. "Rarity is a maker of fine rainwear items, based outside of Fillydelphia. She's shown me that she's quite adept at her craft!"

"I can imagine." Dusk returned, his face taking on a serious expression. He turned his head back at the snoozing dragoness and took a moment to levitate her off his back, onto a nearby pile of fabric, before returning to his interrogation. "Elusive... tell me. Doesn't the Cutiemark-vanishment spell leave behind a faint traceable PKE residue?"

Now the white pony found himself on edge. "Wh-what do you mean, Dusk? I wasn't aware that you'd been learning it."

"I haven't." came the reply, as the lavender equine got to all fours, trotting into the shop interior, his horn aglow. "But I can still trace that residue. It's very distinct. And.... there's a bit of it distinctly on your stage."

"Oh? O-oh my~ Well, mayhaps I was a bit rusty, trying it out again earlier today-"

"Elusive." His purple eyes locked with the stallion's blue ones. "You *knew*. You're *COVERING* for her!"

"Oh DUSK PLEASE!" The normally tall and relaxed colt suddenly collapsed belly-down on the floor, hooves begging at Dusk's feet. "She's NOT a BAD PONY! I can FEEL, in her heart of hearts, in MY heart of hearts, she has NOTHING but the most AMAZING qualities to her!! She even helped make dinner! Broccoli Almondine! Nopony with a speck of evil intent would even *know* how to make the PERFECT Broccoli Almondine!!"

"Lucy, get up." Dusk's face was a picture of calm exasperation. "Let me tell you what's going on."

Sniffing, the white horse regained his footing, as his ears perked up.

"I haven't told all of the guys yet, until I know for certain. Until I do, I'm going to have to ask you to keep all this hush-hush for the moment, clear? Good."

"It started three days ago, when Butterscotch came by my place to check out a book. Only, it *wasn't Butterscotch*. She looked like him, but was most certainly a filly. Later on, Butterscotch met her for himself, and from what I hear, he now has a crush on her."

"Oh, how quaint!" Elusive chuckled. "Butterscotch with a crush? I never thought I'd see the day-"

"I'm not done. The next day, there's a commotion in the skies of Ponyville. Two rainbow trails, followed by a Double Rainboom. Later, Blitz comes to me, and tells me that his house had been raided... by a filly that looks just like *him*, even down to the cutiemark."

"Really? Is that how he got that small bruise above his eye?"

"*How did-?... of course, you would notice. But sorry, I am under Berry Bubble Swear to not divulge that information.*"

"Oh, I see." There was a quick nervous glance around the premises for spongebuckets. "W-well then. Please continue."

"Well, that brings us to today. Today, from what Blitz has described to me, you've had a customer. Who is a white unicorn. Just like you."

"W-well, that *is* true..."

"She has a purple mane. Blue eyes. A penchant for the dramatic, and an eye for design. Just like you."

Now Elusive found himself backing up against a wall, as Dusk continued to speak. "Y-yes, also true. B-but you see-"

"And she knows the Cutiemark Vanishment spell. Just. Like. You."

"N-now see here Dusk, I... I think I can see what you're getting at. But honestly, it's all sounding to me like you've been hitting the science-fiction section of your library a bit hard."

A mouth was opened to retort, but it was then that Rainbow Blitz made his reappearance, hooves alighting on the carpet lazily.

"No luck?" Dusk asked, a defeated look in his eyes.

The vibrant mane shook from side to side. "Nope. Couldn't find a trace of them. They must have had that Filly-faker with them." His eyes grew stormy as the words left his mouth.

"Filly-faker?" the white one repeated. "Really Blitz, such slang!"

"His own word for his double." The unicorn dragged himself to the center of the boutique, looking rather haggard. "This is getting ridiculous. I've been out at the Everfree Forest all day today, looking to see if I could find their camp, and I've gotten nothing. Then the *one lead* that we could have used to crack this case wide open, slips through our hooves, cause our friend here is too much of a 'gentleman' to keep her detained!"

Now it was Elusive's turn to roll his eyes. "*Please* Dusk. I'll admit, it all sounds rather... fantastic. But that's all it is! You don't *really* think that we're being invaded by 'duplicates' now, do you? The whole thing is rather preposterous if you ask me."

"You saying Dusk is a liar!?" The blue pony popped up in his face. "He's been bustin' his flank trying to find these creeps, and all you can do is go and fall in love with yourself! *Literally!*"

"I am saying no such thing!" The stallion's face turned red with indignation. "Dusk is as much my friend as he is yours, Rainbow, but please, think this through! If these ARE our... clones or whatever, then what makes you think they really intend us harm? Do you know what their *real* plans are?"

"That's what we were hoping to find out." the lavender colt replied, his haunches seating themselves on the floor. "We could have asked your

female self... politely, I assure you... where she came from, and how many friends she had with her. What she was *doing* here..."

His stomach protested against anymore action today. "Ugh... if her cooking's really as good as you say it is..."

"Dinner is still on the table." Elusive replied, looking over to the kitchen door, Sweepy looking at the three from inside the dining room. "It's probably a bit cold by now, but still, I insist that you join me. I shan't leave my friends to starve, after all! And hopefully you'll believe me when I say, whether she's a 'double' or not, I feel... in my heart of hearts... that she could *never* have been the type to plot anything dastardly against us~!"

The pegasus gave a half-lidded look to his bookworm friend, but they dropped the subject. Even Blitz had to admit that all the flying today had given him an appetite.

As the trio trotted into the back room, the young colt watched them go by. He knew where the fillies were... but he didn't think they were evil sorts. Nopony who made his favorite maple-glazed carrots could have been bad! With a look of determination, Sweepy decided to keep his mouth shut for now.

They would later all agree, Rarity's cooking was out of this world.

"Really, you could have TOLD me it was food coloring. This is going to stain my coat something awful!"

"O-oh, sorry Rarity... b-but at least it's all-natural."

"*snort* Yeah. Heaven forbid you get artificial preservatives mixed up in your mane."

They alighted outside the HEDGE, Dash's wings flapping erratically. Flying at near super-sonic speeds close to the ground with a cargo of two ponies had taken more out of the mare than she would have liked to admit.

Slowly, the three made their way inside. Rarity was the first to enter, followed by Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash soon after. As the white mare left the incline, she found a pair of purple eyes drilling holes into her.

"Rarity." Twilight began. "Why?"

She fidgeted at the words, trying to think up a suitable response. "I, I was... I was *curious*, darling. Fluttershy has proven that love is possible between our worlds, and I knew that... well, because of myself, Twilight! I'm not afraid to admit that I felt my beauty and grace in our world, would translate into ruggedness and... and... **sigh~** gentlecolt-ness in this one!"

"You should have SEEN them!" The pegasus complained. "They took HOURS saying goodbye! They even KISSED!!"

"It was really sweet~" 'Grassy Graze' soothed, her green complexion graced with a smile.

Applejack rolled her eyes. "It all sounds very romantic, Rarity. But still, ah can't believe y'all went an' did such a goll-darn foal thing! Right under our noses!"

"Rarity." the bookfilly spoke again. "We TRUSTED you."

"N-now now ladies," the dressmaker assured, her horn lighting up and opening her neckbag, producing the bottle of Sunflower Oil. "I swear, I did not forget you girls entirely. I got our needed item first. I just took a detour... an admittedly lengthy one, I'll admit. But I must confess, though you may speak to me badly of it, I do not think I could ever regret having met my..." here, her eyes drew distant, as stars shone before her face. "My *better* half. My dream-colt. The one who... made me feel *complete~!*"

Unsettled looks were traded among the remaining five ponies. At length, Twilight spoke again. "Did you at least get your shampoo?"

Rarity didn't even budge as the bottle of soap was levitated out as well. She gave it a long stare, before bringing it close and rubbing her cheek against its surface. "I shall never part with it for as long as I live!"

"Holy horseapples, she's got it BAD." Applejack stated, staring at the scene, before turning to the magician. "Let's go 'head and git outta here a'fore we all drown from all this sap!"

"Got yah." Twilight replied, taking the sunflower oil into her own hold, trotting over to the table and beginning the procedure from scratch.

The white mare remained standing, still nuzzling the shampoo. She didn't notice when Dash walked up next to her, an accusing look on her face.

"So..." she spoke. "Before we got there... you and Mister Fabulous perform Aerial Maneuver Sixty Nine or what?"

The unfamiliar parlance was enough to drag Rarity to the here and now. "B-beg your pardon, Dash?"

"What she means," Applejack drawled, a sly smile on her face. "Is, did you two go 'n have a tumble in th' hay 'r not?"

The unicorn was a bit more familiar with that term, as her face flushed red. "*Applejack!* I'll have you know, it's not considered good gentlemanly behavior to accept a lady's 'virtue' upon the first night."

This drew a grin out of the other two fillies. But before they could further press their friend, they were called by the purple pony from the corner.

"Okay girls. Gather around. It's time to go home."

They all quickly surrounded the table. The flower laid next to the vase, the vessel itself half-full of oil as Twilight dropped a red gemstone into its depths. "Dash, if you please?"

The rainbow-maned one nodded, before extending a wing and preening at it. With a very subtle 'ow', she then turned back with a feather in her mouth. Twilight took it, and levitated it into the vase.

"Okay... here goes."

The magician's horn began to glow in full-force, a similar affluence surrounding the vase. Soon, the field extended outwards, enveloping all six fillies.

Okay. Twilight thought to herself. I just need to find that ley-line from before. If I can find that, then I can get us all back home, and this whole nightmare will be over!

Inside her mind's eye, she saw... not a spiderweb of cracks, as she had expected. But instead, something akin to a ball of dark-matter yarn. There were hundreds upon *thousands* upon *MILLIONS* of leylines. Leylines that, she realized now, were actually timelines. Each thread was an alternate dimension. She just had to find the thread that was *theirs*.

She tried to concentrate. But a fog was rolling in. Every thread looked the same to her. She tried to probe them, tried to get a feel for the contents. Surely there was one thread that had been slightly unraveled, from their earlier journey! Desperate, she 'pinged' the cosmos for an answer.

No reply.

Before she could redouble her efforts, she was suddenly tossed backwards, all her energy suddenly bouncing back from whence it came.

She came to a split-second later, eyes staring up at the dirt ceiling, her horn apparently embedded into one of the HEDGE's walls. Blinking, she then realized that her friends were surrounding her, looks of worry on their faces.

"*Twilight!*" Fluttershy gasped. "A-are you okay?"

"You look like you just sang the Pony Pokey for ten hours straight!" Pinkie chimed.

"Twilight..." Applejack looked at her, fear on her face. "It didn't work, did it?"

"I'm okay." the lavender mare replied, before prying her horn out of the dirt. "I'm fine. And the spell *is* working, I just... need more energy. Yeah.

I could see the timelines, I just couldn't find ours. I'll need a little more magic in order to locate the correct one."

"So what you're saying..." Dash drew on, an indiscernible look taking over her features. "Is that we're still stuck here."

"Just for one more day, Dash. Tomorrow night will be it. I promise."

There were sighs all around, before everypony bowed their heads in acceptance. "Ah guess ah kin' try 'n see if ah can repeat mah one-off win against Pinkie Pie." Applejack gloomed.

"Oh yeah, that would be fun! I hardly ever NEVER win!" the party pony cheered, her happiness recovering from the setback.

"Twilight..." said a soft voice. "You know, there's always... another option..."

The magician turned to her timid yellow friend, eyes curious. "What do you mean, Fluttershy?"

"Well..." eyes dipped down, a hoof pawing at the floor. "You're the most powerful unicorn in all of Equestria... but, if you alone can't do it... I-I mean, not that you can't, but, you know, just in case... there's *another* most powerful unicorn, in all of Equestria..."

Twilight felt that knot return in full-force at those words. Her pupils began to shrink into dots as she attempted to stammer the words. "D... y-you mean, I-I sh-sh-should meet with D-d... with D-d..."

"She has a point, darling." Rarity commented, coming up alongside Fluttershy. "We all know the wonders you're capable of performing by yourself. Just imagine how much you could accomplish if there were *two* of you, working together!"

"I... I-I... no." she flatly stated, shaking her head. "No, I can't. You weren't here earlier, Rarity. Dusk was OUTSIDE all day today, looking for us! He-he wanted to f-find us, to ask us why we're here, t-to bring us out into the open... We, I... I just can't!"

"Twilight..." Now the apple farmer was walking forth. "Can't ya just, y'know... explain everything t' him? Ah know you, yer a pony o' reason. There's no reason t' assume that HE isn't."

Now the unicorn was kneeling to the ground, looking up at those imploring eyes. Even Rainbow was looking at her with a pleading look, while Pinkie tilted her head, confused.

"I... I know... a-and you're all probably right... but still." She managed to straighten her head up. "I know I can DO this, without causing any more damage to this world. Just hang on a little longer, okay? You've all trusted me so far. All I'm asking you to do, is to have faith in me. I can do this."

There was a few seconds of silence, before murmurs of agreement were given. "If y'all say so Twi." Applejack relented, getting onto her feet. "Ah'm willin' t' trust yah. T'morrow it is then."

"Yeah, tomorrow." Rainbow echoed, jumping and gliding to a far corner of the HEDGE, curling up as she landed. "Here's to hoping, Twilight."

"Thanks guys. Now... what say we get some sleep, everypony?"

More murmurs of agreement were voiced, as the lamp was extinguished, and dark calm settled over the lot of them. Well, most of them. Twilight remained awake for a time, her heart at war with her mind.

It's not like it's not a good idea, it is. she thought. It's just that... I don't think I can do it. I'm, this is just too much for me. I just... can't. I'm...

I'm scared of him. I'm scared of myself. It doesn't make sense, but I am. Whenever he's near, this darned lump in my throat surfaces. How did they all do it? How did they meet themselves without turning into piles of quivering goo? I just don't understand...

She groaned, before tossing onto her other side. *Worrying won't do any good. I can get us back myself. Yeah. I can do that. Now get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a long day.*

".... ooooooh *Elusive*~...."

Twilight winced. *Scratch that. This is going to be a long night.*

Chapter Seven

In my Beautiful Balloon



Rainbow Dash yawned in a bored manner. True, this was at least ten times better than staying inside the cramped quarters of the HEDGE... but it was still boring work. She had no idea how those royal bodyguards did it.

The pegasus was nestled deep in the clump of bushes that made up their hideout's roof. Guard duty was something they had all agreed on the first thing that morning. The majority of them were convinced that Dusk was going to try again today, and it was Rainbow's job to watch out for him, giving the mares inside ample time to barricade the entrance before he got close enough to do any serious probing.

So far though, the day had been uneventful. Nothing but birds, trees, and the occasional rabbit which Dash still hid from, in the off-chance that said rabbit was Angel. Or Angelica. Whichever.

"This is getting old." she muttered to herself, her hooves idly waving in the air. "I'm gonna fall asleep at this rate... hmmm... maybe I should have

Fluttershy take a turn. Yeah, she could watch, and I'll grab a quick nap before taking over again. That sounds like a plan."

The pegasus righted herself, giving a lazy stretch to all her limbs, before giving another glance across the surrounding area. Nothing but grass and greenery for miles arou-

wait

A speck of color caught her eye, coming from the direction of Ponyville. Her wings shot up in alert, her eyes concentrating on the spot. It was coming closer.

She dug herself deeper into the bushes, secluding her body as best she could. Soon, she could make out the shape of the approaching form. It was a pony alright. And it was.... bouncing?

Her eyes kept their watch. The pony's course was not changing in the slightest, it looked like they were going to pass within a few yards of the HEDGE. She began to realize that as the equine approached, its colors were becoming more distinct. Bit by bit, Dash's face began to devolve into an expression of anguish as she realized that coat was not a lavender hue... but a bright shade of bubblegum pink.

She was also chagrined to find that as the form became clearer, her wings began to stiffen, deploying themselves against her will.

Celestia dammit! she thought. Why do want?!

There was a yipe from a yellow pony as their watchmare suddenly exploded into the HEDGE.

"Fillies." she started, her face wide and panicked, but her voice oddly even and calm. "We've got a situation on our hooves."

Instantly, Twilight and Applejack rushed to her side, Rarity hanging back and watching from a distance. Fluttershy cowered behind her, while

Pinkie remained undisturbed, a bubble issuing from her snout as she snoozed.

"Dusk?" the magician flinched as she said the name. "I-is he back?"

"It's not Dusk!" Dash shook her head, before refocusing on Twilight. "It's *WORSE*."

"Worse?" The apple farmer briefly removed her hat to skritch her mane. "What 'kin be worse than a stallion who can't help pokin' his nose 'round where it don't belong?"

"Here, riddle me this." The pegasus was apparently trying to make light of this situation, though her expression said it was anything but. "What's bouncy, bubbly, makes cupcakes for a living, more than likely has a pet alligator, is at least six kinds of pink, is known for being COMPLETELY unpredictable, and *hasn't met his female self yet?*"

All eyes directed themselves towards the back, where a party pony napped peacefully. A split-second later, Rainbow, Applejack, and Twilight crammed themselves around the cave's entrance, their pupils shrinking into specks as the intruder bounced closer.

"Sweet Celestia's Mane." the student swore. She would have to apologize to her mentor later.

The colt was built almost as lightly as a filly, though his squared-off snout left little doubt that he was male, despite his bright-pink coat and curled cherry do. On his flank was a familiar trio of blue and yellow balloons. He had his eyes closed, bouncing along quite happily, humming a song to himself. For all intents and purposes, he had no idea of the group of fillies nearby who were scared to death of his existence.

He was not going to pass too far off. As far as they knew, he was on his way to meet the local version of Zecora. Or maybe he was going to pick berries. Who could tell? This was Pinkie Pie's male reflection they were dealing with.

They grew very very quiet as the pony hopped along in front of them. For a second, it looked like he was going to pass, and they could all relax...

... right up until his eyes popped open in surprise, orbs as blue as his double's. He stopped in mid-air, dropped to the ground and stood still, staring into space for a second...

...and then his hindlegs kicked out behind him, seemingly held in place by an invisible force, before they began rotating madly, wheels of pink spinning in the air.

"*Yipe!*"

The three watching mares heard the shriek behind them, and turned their heads just in time to see Pinkie Pie jolted awake, her body shooting itself to her feet. Her bright blue eyes widened in surprise as her hindlegs kicked themselves out, before performing windmills at record speed.

"No... No! Nononononono!" Twilight panicked, her eyes as big as dinner plates. "There CAN'T be! Sweet Celestia there CAN'T be a Pinkie Sense for that!!"

The stallion's hindhooves ceased their spinning. He waited for a second, before his forehooves repeated the process, stretching out in front of him, rapidly turning in place like a stroke-swimming pony on coffee.

Pinkie's look of detached confusion continued as her own front limbs began swinging in the air as well, accidentally knocking an apple off the table. "Oops!" she called out. "Sorry about that!"

He found himself standing on all fours again. Blinking, he began looking back and fourth, trying to see if-

Suddenly, his entire body bounced off the ground, before he began spinning in place, a tornado in miniature forming quickly, his mane and tail coloring the vortex a deep pink.

Fluttershy and Rarity had backed themselves up against the other three, as their pink friend became a pony-sized dust-devil, blankets and tablecloths whipping about in the wind.

Applejack's look of pure terror remained as she kept glancing back and forth between the convulsing pony outside, and the convulsing pony inside. A long-time believer of the twitchy-tail, this display of pinkie sense of this size was painting a brand new stripe of respect and fear for her perpetually cheerful friend into the farmer's mind. *Who woulda known she'd have a Doozy of THIS magnitude in her?!*

"Pinkie!" Dash was calling out to her. "Pinkie, STOP! You're gonna give us away!"

"She can't help it!" Twilight replied, voice filled with despair. "This is it! *This is the end of us all!!*"

Just as suddenly as it started, the stallion's body screeched to a halt in mid-air. Slowly, he descended like a feather, hooves alighting on the ground with nary a scratch.

He stood there for a full thirty seconds, eyes wide and blinking, waiting to see if anything else would happen. When nothing did, he finally opened his mouth.

"WOW." he said, voice as fizzy as cherry cola. "THAT was a new one!"

"WOW." Pinkie stated, as her feet touched the floor, the area surrounding her a scene of only *minor* devastation. "I've never felt THAT one before!"

She then 'awp'ed as she found herself the target of an impromptu pony-pile, all five fillies stacking themselves on top of her, restraining her as best they could.

"Pinkie, stay quiet!" Rarity whispered harshly. "One of them is out there!"

"Oh?" The pink pony's ears perked. "I don't hear Spines complaining. Is it somepony else?"

"Y'all could say that." Applejack replied, her hooves wrapped around a bubblegum hindleg. "Just keep yerself still 'n quiet. If we're lucky, he'll go 'way!"

"Who will?" The pie's eyes were wide and curious, apparently not minding being held motionless.

Twilight opened her mouth as if to answer, but somepony else spoke instead.

"Hel-IOOOOOOOOoooooooo~?" came a singsong voice from the entrance of the HEDGE. Instantly, everypony in the cave stayed very, very still.

"There anypony in there? I mean, If there isn't anypony in there, I understand, but y'see, my Berry Sense just kinda, freaked out right about now, and it usually doesn't do that unless something's about to happen. And I thought I heard somepony yelling over here, and usually whenever my Berry-Sense goes off, and there's yelling closeby, that usually means there's another pony somewhere around here, so I was just curious to know if anypony was around here yelling and stuff, but if there's not then that's TOTALLY absolutely posilutely okay!"

Wow! Pinkie found herself thinking. If I'd been alone and had that Pinkie-sense happen to me, that's what I would have said!

"Hey, hey! If there IS some yelling pony in there, wanna come with me to Ponyville and have a party? I know every pony in Ponyville and if you're a new pony that means you're new and I've never seen you before! And I always throw a 'Welcome new pony to Ponyville!' party whenever we have a new pony in Ponyville!"

The pink filly's eyes had begun to sparkle. "*Don't listen to him, Pinkie!*" Twilight whispered furiously. "*Fluttershy, grab her ears!*"

"Oh, by the way, my name is Berry Bubble! Usually ponies call me 'Berry' or 'Bubbly' or 'Random', though I don't know why they call me that last one, I mean, it's not even in my name! If you ask my folks, they'll tell you my name's Berriswainer DaVinci Bubble, but that's kinda long and boring, ain't it? I've never known another pony to have gotten such a long and boring name like mine."

OHMIGOSH ME NEITHER! Pinkemena Diane Pie practically shouted in her skull, loud enough for Rarity to give her a funny look.

"But hey, enough about boring ol' Berry-me!" the stallion continued speaking to the shrubbery, completely ignorant to the trio of bunnies that had gathered to watch him, wondering if the pink pony had lost his sanity. "If there IS somepony in there, won'tcha come out and say hi? I've got a lot of friends I'd like you to meet! Oh, and we can have a party to say HI to you!"

"Re-really?" Pinkie quietly asked, a grin on her face. Instantly, her friends pressed down harder on her.

"We can eat cake and cupcakes and muffins and meringue and have *lots* and *lots* of PIE~"

The grin crept wider across her mouth, as those eyes began to shrink in excitement.

"We can drink sugartea and sugar soda and have sugar canes with sundaes and sunrays and SARSPARILLA!"

"*He's going on like the Gala!*" Twilight realized, before glancing down at her party friend's rapidly expanding smile. "*No Pinkie, you can't! You'll doom us all if you do!*" she pleaded.

"And we'll have *games*, like Piñatas and Spin the Bottle and Twister..."

The frizzy-maned pony's face hurt, that grinning expression reaching from ear-to-ear.

"And my most favoritest of favorite fun games~!"

Pinkie's eyes began to cross, as she giddily awaited the words she knew she was going to hear.

"...PIN THE TAIL ON THE PONY!!"

The five mares weren't exactly sure what happened. They hadn't even blinked. One second, they had had their impulsively perky friend thoroughly restrained at every limb. The second after that? They all went 'oof' as they fell into the space that had been previously occupied by a party-loving pony.

Berry was caught quite by surprise as a pink fluffy-haired filly suddenly leapt out of the clump of bushes that he had been talking to, screaming "PIN THE TAIL ON THE PONY?! MINE TOO!!"

He stared at her, taking her in as she landed. She kept a goofy smile on her face before his presence finally registered in her brain, her expression suddenly taking on a mirror-image look of surprise.

There was a scuffle inside the HEDGE as everypony clamored to get a good look at what was going outside. Dash made a motion to dive out there and drag Pinkie back in, but was restrained with a tail-tug from Applejack at the last minute.

"*We don't want t' make things any worse!*" she whispered.

"WORSE?! There's TWO PINKIE PIES out there, we've already REACHED that point!" the pegasus argued.

"*Shush!*" Twilight hissed, her eyes focused on the pair as they regarded each other.

Berry blinked. Pinkie blinked back.

They zoomed in to each other, honking noses, trading soul-searching gazes.

They craned their heads to the side, looking at each other's cutiemark, before looking back at their own, and then back again, recognizing the resemblance.

They zoomed in circles, looking at each other's tails. In synchronous motions, they twitched their tails side-to-side.

They backed up into each other, their manes compressing as the backs of their heads met. Each one reached a hoof back to poke at each other's hair.

They assumed a very *compromising* position, ying-yang style with Pinkie laying on her back as she inspected her double's hindquarters, Berry standing above her as his eyes examined her own haunches.

Finally, they resumed their original poses, standing in front of each other, blinking, with surprised looks on their faces.

They held this for a few seconds, before they reared up, smiles blossoming on both their faces as they spoke in stereo.

"*Hi! My name's-*"

They both stopped, before breaking out into giggles. Pinkie waved a hoof at him. "You go!"

He did. "Hi! My name's Berry Bubble, and I love to throw parties!"

"Hi Berry Bubble!" she cheered. "My name's Pinkie Pie, and I love to throw parties too!"

"Hi Pinkie Pie! Ohmygosh, REALLY? Me too! I especially love all the candy and the streamers and the dance music-"

"-and the fruit punch and the decorations and the party games! Those are all always so *awesome-saucsome!*" she finished his exclamation herself.

They pointed hooves at each other as they once more spoke at the same time. "*Hey! Can I call you Berry/Pinkie? Sure you can!*"

"So!" the colt proclaimed, giving a hopeful look to his female half. "You wanna go have a PARTY?"

"I'd *LOVE* to go have a party!" Pinkie exclaimed, hooves waving in the air. "Where at? Oh! Wanna go to Sugarcube Corner?"

"Are you kidding, I practically LIVE there! Actually, I *do* live there, cause I work for the Cakes too y'know, and they're really *super-nice* ponies for letting me do so, I mean, I get to help make cupcakes and croissants and cakes and crumbles and did I already mention cupcakes? I think it's the PERFECT place for a party! Yeah, let's go to Sugarcube Corner!"

"Ohmygosh, REALLY? *Me too!* Let's go to Sugarcube Corner!"

"*YEAH!*"

And with that, Berry turned around and began to hop in the opposite direction, back towards Ponyville. Only *this* time, he was accompanied by a new friend, a bubblegum mare that alternated bounce right behind him, as full of energy and cheer as himself.

And that's how Equestria was unmade.

"WE'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!!"

"I KNOW WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING!!"

"WHY AREN'T WE DOING SOMETHING?!"

"Um, uh..."

"BECAUSE WE'RE YELLING!!"

"WHY ARE WE YELLING?!"

"GIRLS!" Twilight interjected herself between Applejack and Rainbow Dash, hooves pushing the quarreling ponies apart. "Get a hold of yourselves! This is no time to panic!"

"Twilight, you're one to talk!" Rarity shrieked. "If there ever was a time to panic, THIS is IT!"

"Um, excuse me, but..."

"We've done gone unleashed the Ponyocalypse on Equestria!" the farmer cried out, the sheer amount of terror in her voice drowning out her accent. "TWO Pinkie Pies!! We could barely handle ONE! What're THEY gonna do with TWO of them?!"

"I-I should be able to get her back!" Dash suggested weakly. "Nothing big! Just zoom out there, scoop her up, and high-tail it back here! I'll get it done in Ten-"

"No Rainbow!" the violet unicorn yelled, blocking the pegasus' path. "We can't have you flying in broad daylight, ponies will see you, and then we'll have an incident like the day before last!"

"Uhm... Twilight... if you'd-"

"Well, *somepony* has to go out there!" Rarity exclaimed, eyes looking furtively back and forth between the exit, and her friends. "I-I mean, I'd be more than willing to go, but I don't know if-"

"Nah-ah." was the response she got. "Don't think I forgot about yesterday. You're staying put. End of discussion."

"But Twilight~!"

"END. OF. DISCUSSION."

"Then that leaves just me n' Fluttershy!" Applejack brayed, her stance suddenly taking on a determined set. "We kin' do this, sugarcube! Ah'll head 'em off at th' pass and git Pinkie lassoed up 'n hogtied, y'just keep her coltfriend busy while ah drag 'er back-"

"TWILIIIIIGHT~!"

A voice rarely heard raised, tended to get noticed. Everypony quieted down as they directed their attention towards the yellow pony.

"Um... yes, Fluttershy?"

She looked down, cheeks tinted at her outburst. "Um... Not that the... that the situation with Pinkie isn't bad... but we've also... got another problem..." She looked to the white rabbit sitting by her side as she bit her lip-

wait. The white rab-

"For Pete's sake!" Rainbow cried out, facehoofing.

"Everypony, I'd like for you to meet Angela. She slipped in here during all the confusion, and she's, well, she's rather adamant about going back out there and telling Butterscotch about us, so..."

The white mare rolled her eyes, her horn lit as she probed in her saddlebags to see if she'd packed a cage. "Not that I don't blame the little darling, but could she wait until later? Now's *really* not the best time."

"Uhm, that's what I've been trying to tell her... b-but- eep!" Fluttershy winced as the lapine tapped her with an impatient hind leg. "Sh-she just won't listen to reason..."

Twilight had had enough of these horseapples. Her horn lit up, and Applejack had to jump as their makeshift pantry suddenly shapeshifted into a hutch. Without ceremony, Angela was levitated, tossed into the enclosure, and locked in. The bunny gave her a glare full of daggers in return.

"That's *another* day gone, thanks to that." the unicorn grumped, head throbbing from the exertion. Or frustration. She couldn't tell at this point, and she didn't care. "Fluttershy, I charge you with guard duty. Applejack..." she turned away from a shocked pegasus, towards the earth pony. "Gear up. You're going after Pinkie Pie. Every minute we wait is another minute where she's free to do as much damage to this world as she wants, without even realizing it!"

"Ah'm on it, Twilight!" The orange equine reared up as she tilted her hat forward, stomping towards the HEDGE exit. "Ah'll have 'er back in two shakes of ah pony's tail-!"

"And where do *you* think you're going, dressed like that?" Rarity interjected herself in front of Applejack, blocking her path. "You're well aware that before you even step foot outside, we must have you adorned in a disguise, correct?"

The applebucker sputtered, before glaring in consternation. "Dis-GAUI-ses?! We ain't got no time fer dis-gauis-ses, Rarity! If ah'm t' make any time t' catch them two a'fore they blow up Ponyville, ah need t' make like a tree an' drop apples!"

"While I agree with you on principle, Rarity, I have to side with Applejack with this one." Twilight looked from behind the blonde pony, giving the dressmaker a look. "We simply don't have the time to properly guise her up on the level we would do for a shopping excursion!"

"Oh, don't worry my dears!" the white mare beamed a smile at her compatriots, before casting her eyes on a folded dress in a corner. "What I have in mind won't take long at all!"

It's a beautiful day in Ponyville today, Elusive thought to himself. Though I must admit, every day will seem grey and cloudy now, that SHE is no longer in my life!

He had been on his way to the Luxury Lotus spa, for his usual meet-up with Butterscotch. He really needed it today, he felt. Having your soulmate wrested away from you after only a single day of togetherness had worn on him hard. And according to the words *however wild they sounded* of his friends, his pegasus friend had recently undergone a similar ordeal. Today, he would cover the cost of both his and his friend's sessions. Nevermind that they were already given discounts for being about the only males in town who openly visited the establishment.

Ponies say what they will about the two colts, he would hear none of it. The Spa was a wonderful place to relax, and Alex and Lexi were always such joys to be around. And he had to admit, the masseur that usually gave his special, Quakehoof, had a certain charm about them...

"Hi Elusive! Bye Elusive!"

The stallion had to bring himself up short as a pink colt bounced right into his path, and then right back out, his constant cheerful manner bubbling as always. It took a second for his heart to recover itself, a relieved smile spread across his muzzle as he reminded himself that it was just Berry, being Berry, as he was usually want to do-

"Hi Pony-who-looks-just-like-my-best-friend-Rarity! Bye Pony-who-looks-just-like-my-best-friend-Rarity!"

His heart DID stop this time, as a filly-flavored afterimage of his friend landed right in front of him, before continuing on, following close behind the original. The two of them were bouncing towards Sugarcube Corner.

"B... B-bu..." the suitmaker stammered, Dusk's words from last night now resurfacing in his head. "T... Two? Two B-Berry Bubbles?! Oh... Ohh my goodness... oh, Oh my stars... OoooOOOOH Sweet Solaris!"

With a hoof to his forehead, Elusive's eyes rolled back as he fainted dead away right there on the street.

A jangle of the door sounded behind 'Mrs' Cake as she put the last of the carrot and raisin muffins into the display case, a cross-eyed customer watching the scene with rapt attention. "Oh, hello!" she greeted loudly, her eyes not really directed towards the newcomer.

"Hi Mrs Cake!" came the cheerful reply. Her eyes simply smiled as she recognized the voice, its pink source bouncing past her into the kitchen.

"Welcome home dear!" she called out.

"Hi Mrs Cake!" came yet another cheerful reply, noticeably higher-pitched than the first, its pink source bouncing past her into the kitchen.

"Welcome, dearie~" she automatically replied, closing the door to the display counter and turning to pick up a tray of meringue cookies, when her eyes shot open in realization. *Did I just greet Berry twice?*

There was a clop of hooves as the bright yellow pony galloped to the kitchen door. As she looked inside, she had to restrain from letting her jaw hit the floor. For inside of her store, there were a pair of pink ponies that were happily hopping about on the floor, following each other in circles, for no apparent reason other than for the pure sake of hopping. Two ponies that seemed neigh indistinguishable from each other in terms of color and energy, save that one was obviously a mare.

"B-Berry!" Mrs Cake gaped, trying to wrap her mind around it. "W-w-who's this? D-did you find a new friend?"

The colt and filly ceased their antics, as they faced the shop owner with a smile. "Hi Mrs Cake!" Berry bubbled, earlier greeting apparently forgotten. "Yes indeedly I did! This is Pinkie Pie, Mrs Cake, and she's my newest and bestest friend in Ponyville!"

"Hi Mrs Cake!" the strange filly greeted, leaping into the air in a manner disturbingly similar to Berry's. "I've heard a lot about Sugarcube

Coner and I've always wanted to come visit, but I've been busy being kept in a cave, so I haven't had a chance until now to visit! I'm so glad to finally see the place, even if it may be like I HAVE seen it all before, but that would be silly, it's not like I fell out of a dimension that's just like this one, save that everypony's genders are opposite, right?"

Pinkie was aware that she should be holding her existence a secret. She was trying. It just wasn't working very well. She had forgotten to Pinkie-Pie swear on it after all.

"R-r-right..." the baker stammered, eyes quickly flicking from one pink pony to the other.

"She's a new Pony in Ponyville, so I'm gonna throw her one of my special Berryriffic Berry Bubble Bashes, to give her a proper welcome! It's going to be SUPER SPECTACULAR!" The colt was waving his hooves in the air.

"WOW, now that I think of it, I've NEVER had a Welcome-new-pony-to-Ponyville party thrown JUST for li'l ol' Pinkie-me!" his double gushed. "OH! I bet we could combine your Berryriffic Berry Bubble Bash with my patent pending Pinkielicious Pinkie Pie PARTY! It'd be SUPER DUPER SPECTACULAR!!"

"*Gaaaaaaaasp* WHAT A GREAT IDEA!!" Berry cried out, grabbing his new friend's hooves and dancing in-place with her. "It'll be AMAZING! The most AMAZINGLY Amazingest Mazey maze that ever amazed!"

The duo then brought their heads together, as their curled manes pressed up against each other. The following left their mouth in stereo.

"It'll be the BIGGEST, BESTEST and most AMAZINGLYEST Party in ALL of EQUESTRIA!!"

Slowly, 'Mrs' Cake backed up through the door, her eyes not leaving the scene of the twin plotting party ponies as they continued animatedly chatting to one another. "I'll get the balloons!" Pinkie was offering enthusiastically.

"And I'll get the streamers!" the bubblegum colt returned, his face matching Pinkie's grin.

"I'll get the food!"

"I'll get the hot sauce!"

"I'll get the invitations!"

"I'll get the games!"

The elderly mare pressed herself up against the wall next to the door with panicked eyes, as their list went on.

"I'll get the cupcakes!"

"I'll get the ribbons!"

"I'll get the punch!"

"I'll get the live band!"

"And I'll get the alligators!"

"Great! It's not a party without Gummy!"

"Is that everything we need?"

"Hmm, I think so. Though you can never tell! Let's add anything else we can think of along the way!"

There was a mess of giggling that made 'Mrs' Cake want to run her hooves through her red mane. She then proceeded to yipe as Berry leapt out of the kitchen in his usual bouncing manner, Pinkie right behind him.

"See ya Mrs Cake! Me and Pinkie're gonna go shopping for our party! OH! We need to remember the piñatas!" the stallion gushed, turning back to look at his femme self.

"Yeah!" She bubbled happily. "And the sugarcubes and sugarcanes, and the Sundaes and sunrays-"

"-AND SARSPARILLA!/" they bonked their heads together as they sang that last part in harmony. At this point, the Corner's few present patrons were openly staring as the shocking, *not to mention frightening*, display of pink.

"We'll be back soon Mrs Cake!" the frizzy-maned mare turned to the baker, and fixed her blue eyes on the perplexed pony. "When we get back, we're gonna have a Party soooooo big, EVERYPONY in Ponyville'll be invited! See ya soon!!"

With that, the two ponies bounced their way out the door unimpeded. "Heya Pony-who-looks-like Miss Linky! Oh hi Pony-who-looks-like-Ditzy-Doo! Be safe delivering the mail today!"

A silence followed after their departure, nopony making any movements for a full minute, waiting to see if they would return. At length, the blonde-haired pegasus colt that had been single-eying the muffins before, slowly turned to the store proprietor.

"Should... Should I cull the Mayo?" he asked, crossed oculars both displaying looks of worry.

"N-not yet, Derpy. I-I mean... Berry's always been a kind soul..." 'Mrs' Cake tried to sound more reassuring than she actually felt. "It's just that... sweet honeybuns with icing, that filly he found! She's an absolute match to him! If she's his new fillyfriend... " both the grey stallion and yellow mare shared a shiver. "Then may Solaris help us all!"

Derpy looked back at the door for a few seconds, brows knitted in thought, before his eyes snapped open. Apparently, the scene with the pink equines had distracted him enough to forget the purpose of his visit. Turning to the baker again, he simply stated. "Muffins."

"Oh... o-oh, yes! Sorry about that dear. I'll get them right out to you."

She grabbed a pair of tongs and lifted out one of those freshly-baked pastries, the customer's golden eyes alight with reverence as the thing was held aloft over a bag-

The door jingled again.

Apparently, her nerves were shot, as the tongs slipped out of her lips, muffin sent flying through the air. Disaster was averted however. Derpy hadn't become Mid-air Snacker Champion of Trottingham for nothing.

"O-oh, ah'm sorry." came a voice from the door. "Ah didn't mean t' disturb y'all's."

"It's alright." 'Mrs' Cake soothed, collecting her wits as she made it back around the counter. "Hello, and welcome to Sugarcube Corner! What can I get for... oh hey! I remember you! Hello again!"

"H'lo~" the orange traveling earth-pony drawled. The elderly mare wasn't sure, but there seemed to be a tint of nervousness to her voice. She was also certain that the bright yellow sun-dress that the freckled horse was wearing, was a new addition as well.

"Decided to come back, eh?" The baker found herself relaxing as she spoke. "Care for another cup of coffee? I've got a pot brewing in the back, it'll be a minute still."

"Thank ya fer th' offer, but that's not what ah'm here fer." the farmer spoke, a hoof going up and rubbing the back of her head. "Ma'am, Ah... ah've got a mighty unusual question..."

A curious look. "Go ahead dear, let's hear it."

"Y'all wouldn't 'ave happen'd t' have seen mah friend around here, wouldja? She kindah got 'way from me, and ah've been lookin' all over Ponyville fer her!"

"O-oh?" The store owner felt a suspicion bubbling in the back of her mind. "Can you describe her? I mean, we *did* see somepony new today, but... well you know, just to be sure..."

The traveler's green eyes gave her a flat look. "She's pink."

"*Oh THANK Solaris.*" Everypony in the store let out a whoosh of breath they didn't know they'd been holding.

"We saw her!" a blue stallion with a curly do stated. "She was with Berry! Freakiest thing I've ever seen!"

"Berry Bubble is an employee of ours." 'Mrs' Cake explained. "He's a good soul, but has way too much energy in his body. And your friend... Pinkie Pie, right?" There was a nod. "She looks and acts essentially like a filly version of our Berry, from what we've seen! It was all I could do to keep from calling for help the instant they entered the Corner together!"

"*Dagnabbit, Pinkie!*" the blonde pony muttered under her breath. Out-loud, she continued questioning. "Where're they now? Ah think ah kin' save Equestria from a party o' apocalyptic per'portions, if ah kin' find 'em in time!"

"They bent to the store!" Derpy exclaimed. "Dropping for hearty surprise!"

"Thank'yah Ditzzy-! er, ah mean, uhm, thank'yah, mister!" The traveling equine appeared to be tripping over her own tongue, cheeks blushing in frustration. "Sorry fer not buyin' anythin', but ah need tah run! Thank y'all Mister-! Agh, *Misses Cake!*"

"Don't worry about it, hon!" the baker replied, waving a hoof. "Good luck! *We're counting on you!*" she added as the gaily-dressed pony turned around and galloped out the door, bell jingling as it closed.

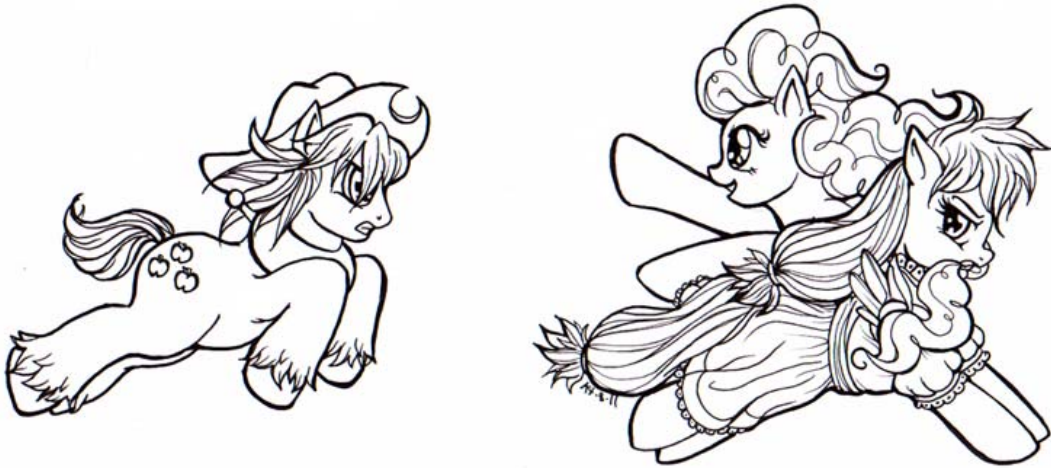
Another pause of silence came and went, before the proprietor narrowed her eyes, dug her head back into the display case, and sat the tray full of muffins back on the counter.

"I decree today to be Free Muffins Dooms-Day. Everypony dig in. We may not have a lot of time left before they return."

"MUFFINS!" Derpy Doo cried out joyously, as he leapt into the air for a swan-dive, the question of why he had been called 'Ditzzy' twice having completely slipped his mind.

Chapter Eight

Over the Hills



Well Tar-nation. Applejack grumped in her head. Not only were Pinkie not there, but they all had t' see me in THIS fru-fru thing.

Besides the removal of her hat once again, it was the only thing that they had added to her appearance. The dress was the same one that Rarity had begun to distract all the ponies as they waited. She had originally meant to have Fluttershy keep it, but, as everypony agreed, this was an emergency.

It looks better on 'er than it does on me anyways, on any day o' th' week! she continued thinking, looking down at the dappled yellow thing. It had a white frilly border to its hem that made her think of pampered field fillies from the south, belles who did nothing but roam the hills behind their houses and occasionally broke out into song.

Not feelin' th' part. Especially not th' singin'.

But she hadn't protested at the moment. It had simply gone on over her head, pulled and tugged for a second, and then she had been out the exit like a shot, galloping at full speed towards Ponyville.

An' not a moment too soon! she gagged. She was chagrined to find that the twin bubbles of impending party disaster had already left Sugarcube Corner before she'd gotten there, but as long as she didn't have anymore interruptions, she would be able to catch up to her friend, before the both of them blew everypony out of the water.

At least the lead she'd been given was easy. There was only one party supplier in Ponyville, and that was the Jester's Joke shop. She had made a beeline for the establishment as soon as she had left the bakery.

As Applejack got closer, she began to notice that ponies... were staring. Not directly *at* her, to her relief, but off into the distance, down the street she was running through. Out of curiosity, she skidded to a stop next to a pair of young, gangly fillies who were also looking off in the same direction.

"What's all th' commotion'?" she panted, trying to catch her breath. "Somethin' come this way?"

"Not ONE something!" the taller of the two girls, an orange unicorn with a long green mane and lazy voice, proceeded to drawl. "TWO somethings~!"

"Yeah!" her green friend exclaimed, spiky red hair bouncing around a chubby-cheeked face. "There were TWO Berry Bubbles just now! And I heard them talking about a party!" She bunched her hooves together, as if she were about to explode into song. "Whenever there's a Berry Bubble Bash, everypony has fun, but if there's gonna be TWO of them, it's gonna be AWE-SOOOOOME!"

The farmer found herself doing a double-take as she recognized the cutie-marks on the ponies she was conversing with. Proceeding to shake her head, she simply replied. "Thanks y'all, ah were just curious!"

They didn't even register her leaving, the cloud of dust she kicked up settling over their bodies like so much unused furniture.

As she turned down the street the shop was on, she encountered a mare escaping from the opposite direction. "They can take everything!" she was panicking. "Just DON'T LET THEM GET NEAR ME!"

Applejack had to blink a few times at the strange pony. She'd never met her before, either here or in her own world, but that apron she had been wearing had seemed important. Turning her head back to the shop, she then understood why.

Just now leaving the Jester's Joke shop were a pair of bubblegum bronies, saddlebags packed to bursting with various items of one sort or another. Hanging on the store's door, was a sign that read 'OUT OF STOCK.' That fleeing filly had been the storeowner, scared of the fact that the number of most loyal customers had suddenly doubled, and that by working together, they had completely cleaned-out her shop of each and every party and prank implement left in Ponyville.

Berry still took the lead, Pinkie apparently was more than willing to follow him about wherever he went. They turned back down the street towards Sugarcube Corner, heedless of the dozens of staring ponies. They still wore those overly happy smiles and content faces that they'd been wearing when he'd first left the HEDGE with her in tow. Acting like nothing was wrong with the world... That really got the orange equine's dander up.

With a snort, the farmer galloped straight towards the pair, fully intending on tackling her pink pony friend and whisking her out of Ponyville. At least, that had been the plan. She *thought* it was a good plan. Simple and straightforward.

It didn't account for the 'twins' suddenly looking off to the side and abruptly changing their course, as they chanted in stereo "Ooooooh, *slushies!*"

Aw ponyfeathers. the applebucker groaned, as she landed in the dirt. *Rarity's gonna 'ave a fit 'bout this dress.*

She raised her head and tried to focus her spinning green eyes on what the two were doing. For a split-second, she saw four blurs of pink, which was too terrifying to even contemplate. Focusing harder, she saw that they had actually stopped moving, sitting on their haunches in front of

a frozen treat stand, the stallion manning the place looking from one pony to the other, fear evident on his face.

"I'll have an EXTRA-large Cotton Candy Swirl, with some CHERRY COLA!" Pinkie cheered, a hoof pointing at the named item on a chalkboard menu.

"Make it DOUBLE for me!" Berry added, his curled mane bobbing as he rapidly nodded. "Double the pleasure!"

The pink mare's eyes lit up. "Double the fun!" she continued in a singsong voice.

They then pressed their heads together and sang out the rest of the jingle in harmony, looking at each other mischievously. "*That's the STAAATE-ness of the great-ness of Bubble-Mare-Gum~!!*"

The two then proceeded to giggle madly, giving everypony who was watching the scene an extra case of the uneasy shivers. Or at least the chance that Applejack needed to calmly get to her hooves and walk over to the party-ponies, seating herself right next to the female one.

"Pinkie Pie." she started, in a flat voice. "What in all o' th' bloomin' apple trees 'n Equestria are ya doin'?"

"Oh, I'm going to have a SUPER-DUPER special party with my new friend Berry Bubble, wanna come and help?!" was the reply she got, before that frizzy mane turned, blue eyes seeing her friend for real.

"Oh!" Pinkie exclaimed joyfully. "Heya Applejack!"

"Heya sugarcube." Applejack replied.

"Oh!" Berry exclaimed joyfully. "Heya Applejack!"

"Heya haystack." Applejack replied.

The farm-filly's eyes shot open, her mane standing on end as she recognized that drawl. Slowly, she tilted her head to the right, peering past

Pinkie, and seeing her male reflection doing much the same over Berry's shoulder.

"Oh! Why h-howdy there, Cousin JayJay." the orange stallion spoke. "Fancy meetin' you here. Ah was hearin' a buncha commotion all th' way from th' market, an' ah had t' see what was goin' on." His green eyes then fixed themselves back on his colt-friend, before switching to gaze at the femme partypony, and then back and forth. "But *laaaaaand* sakes! Ah shore weren't expectin' anything like THIS!"

"Yer tellin' me!" The blonde mare agreed. "Ah'm awful sorry 'bout all this, a-ah had no idea that there'd be another pony like mah friend Pinkie-Pie here. Otherwise, ah'd woulda never 'ave brought her t' Ponyville in th' first place!"

"But 'JAY-JAY'!" Pinkie Pie gushed loudly. One could practically hear the quotation marks. "I thought that we arrived here knowing that there were going to be other ponies like-"

She was silenced by an apple. One good thing about the dress, AJ reflected, was that it possessed pockets for extra emergency apples.

The draft horse had to blink a few times at that scene. Why did that seem so familiar? "So... Berry..." he started slowly, fixing his friend with a gaze. "What were y'all plannin' on doin' wit' yer new... filly-friend?"

The pink colt stood on his hindhooves. No pony knew where he had suddenly obtained a skillet and a white chef's uniform, complete with apron. "She's koinda new in town, y'see. Me 'n moi friend Pinkie here, woi're gonna shake things up around here in Poenyville tonoiht!" he drawled in a depressingly hokey Emeril Lagrassy accent. "Tell mie, Appolejack... are youse all ready, t' BUCK IT UP A NOTCH!?" Berry tossed a clove of garlic into the pan, which exploded with a BAM!

Applejack was NOT ready, as evidenced when he stuffed an apple of his own into the pink equine's mouth.

His femme doppelganger couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. His ears perked at the sound, and he looked back at Pinkie Pie, who had

begun chewing through her red fruit gag. He snickered, before joining in on the chuckling.

"Aaaah, land sakes!" the orange filly sighed, wiping at an imaginary tear. "Them Party ponies! Can't live wit' em..."

"Can't live wit'out 'em." he finished, before looking back at the female farmer herself. His eyes widened. "That's a new outfit on yah, cousin. Looks like somethin' a friend o' mine woulda made."

"O-oh!" AJ found herself blushing and looking down, having forgotten that she was still trussed up like a schoolfilly on a first date. "Th-thank' yah kindly. Ah'm just borrowin' it from a friend. I-It tain't really mah style, y'know, now that ah look at it. Ah kinda-"

"Personally, ah think it looks pretty nice on yah." the stallion replied, his hooves crossing into his signature easygoing pose.

She had cause to blink. *Did ah just go n' tell mahself ah look pretty?*

"Cousin JayJay..." Now the orange workhorse faltered, the yoke around his neck seemingly weighing him down. "Since yer here, ah figure... now's as good ah time as any to... well..." He gave a sigh as he tilted his head down, trying to corral his words.

It was here that the farmfilly began to blush something fierce, the hole in her stomach yawning open ferociously. *Ah hope he ain't 'bout t' say what ah THINK he's 'bout t' say! Ah don't even FEEL that way 'bout 'im!*

"Ah wanted t' apologize." he finally blurted. "Fer th' other day. Ah had no right t' out 'n go be nasty 'n suspicious 'bout you. When y'all up 'n disappeared that time in th' market, Applebuck was as sore towards me as a pegasus who'd fergot t' flap." His blonde mane ruffled as he shook his head side-to-side. "After thinkin' 'bout it, ah realized he was right. Ah'm not quite sure what came over me that day. It was improper o' me, and mah Gran-pappy always told me t' treat a lady with proper respect. So it's wit' that respect that ah say, ah'm sorry... can we try again, cousin?"

Applejack blinked, her eyes wide. On the one hoof, she had been relieved to discover that it was not in fact, a declaration of affection as she

had feared. On the other, she was rather confused about what she WAS feeling. The earlier pit in her stomach was no longer present. What she was feeling right now, she hadn't the words for. It was different. A warmth. Like she'd just had a piping hot cupcake straight from the pan.

Or a slice of familiar, comforting, apple pie.

It was *family*, she realized, now recognizing the tug she'd felt whenever Applebuck had been around her. Somewhere along the line, she really *had* started thinking of her other self as a cousin, she realized. If not something closer. And his apology just now, it felt as if a great big blanket had been dropped over her body, soothing and warming. She had been *accepted*.

"...shore we can, cousin." she finally replied at length, a genuine smile crossing her face. "We Apples've gotta stick together after all. Apology accepted, Cousin Applejack."

The stallion smiled in return, a look of relief evident in his face. "Glad t' hear that, Cousin JayJay."

"Awwwww~!" a cheerful voice sounded from the side. It was interrupted by the sound of straw-slurping, before it continued. "Aren't they just so CUTE when they make up?"

"They are! Hey Applejack, you and 'Cousin JayJay' wanna help us with our party tonight? You can supply the apples for bobbing-for-apples!" This was also punctuated by another slurp.

AJ was quickly reminded of her mission, as she saw Pinkie Pie and Berry Bubble sitting together off to the side, watching the two orange horses intently, their slushies now in-hoof.

"O-oh, that reminds me!" she quickly started, coughing behind a hoof. "Pinkie, we need t' talk, you 'n I. Let's go off someplace AWAY from here, a'fore somethin' else happens."

The insinuation appeared to fly right over her friend's head. "But 'JAY-JAY', Berry and me need tah get back to Sugarcube Corner! How else are we gonna throw our super-duper special hybrid Berririffic-Pinkielicious

Berry-Pinkie Bubble-Pie Bash-Party, without the Pinkie Pie Party portion involved?"

"Ah was kinda hopin' you wouldn't actually, sugarcube." The farmer got her face right up into the pink pony's own. "Pinkie, ah just don't think Ponyville's ready fer th' two o' yah! Ah mean, yer parties are always a hoot'n a holler t' go to, an' ah bet his are too. But wit' th' two o' yah workin' together, y'all might wind up makin' a party that nopony can handle!"

"Awww, 'JAY-JAY' has a point!" Berry chimed in. The way he had said her alias made her wonder. "What if we DO over-do it?! Maybe NO one pony should have all that party!"

"Now now, haystack." Male-Jack offered. "Y'know, we're not doin' anythin' at th' farm this evening. You an' yer friend could work onna party there together, and we'd just invite the guys. Just a friendly li'l shindig. How's that sound, cousin?"

Darn mah tendency t' wanna offer mah support. "W-well, while that sounds mighty kind o' yah cousin, me 'n Pinkie really have t' head out o' town t'day!"

"No we don-!"

"Sugarcube, please zip it." AJ whispered, bringing a hoof up to interrupt. She then turned back to her double. "A-sides, you shore y'all got everythin' done? Got th' pigs all slopped?"

A nod. "Applebuck got t' them this mornin'."

Green eyes were narrowed. "Got th' trees fertilized?"

A raised eyebrow. "Red Gala took care o' that earlier."

Pinkie's blue eyes shifted back to her friend. "Y'done all the bakin' fer t'day?"

Berry joined her, his own bright orbs joining in watching the verbal tennis match. "Got th' last Dutch pie outta th' oven not forty minutes ago! Still fresh 'n hot, if you'd like t'come back to th' cart and have a bite."

And suffer another gut-wrenching indecisive sibling moment with Applebuck? No thanks. Desperate, Applejack racked her mind for another chore, any chore, that might not've been done yet. Then one hit her.

"What 'bout th' four-leaf Clover seeds? Y'all need those germinated in time fer th' derby."

"Oh pshaw." the stallion waved a hoof at her. "That's a right piece o' pie right there. We only ever grow three atta time, just fer th'-..."

He paused, his hat suddenly tilted to the side as his eyes widened. "Wait.... hang on just one cottenpickin' minute... only Me, Red Gala, and th' Mayor know 'bout us supplyin' the Clovers fer th' Clover Derby... how did YOU know, Cousin JayJay?"

Her ears drooped in hopelessness, as she realized that the very same fact was also true in her world. For a depressingly long time, the Clover Derby had been a dismal failure, year after year, until the Mayor had approached the Apple family with an offer to help increase the odds of finding a four-leaf clover. She had given them leeway on their farm taxes, in return for a small number of the rare plants to be grown every year for the derby.

They had accepted, but had kept it hush-hush. Not that AJ had minded giving competitors a fair chance at getting one of the plants, but still. Apples growing clovers? She didn't really want that getting around.

And apparently, neither had her double, as he drilled a look of pure shock and curiosity in her direction.

"It's a MYSTERYYYYY~!" Pinkie offered, bouncing up between the two orange ones, Berry in step behind her. "And one that you're going to have to WAIT for!"

The farming colt gave Pinkie a look that said she'd just claimed she was a moon-pony. "Really? How d' y'all figure *that*?"

"Be-CAAAAuuuUSE my HOOVES are itchy!" she sang, shuffling her feet in the dirt. Instantly, Applejack's ears perked, as she began scanning

the ponies on the street. "And that means you're gonna have-tah CHASE US!!"

"Pinkie!" the blond mare gaped, looking warily about with panic in her eyes. "He don't know anythin' bout yer Sense, why cain't yah keep yer pie-hole shut and let it all-"

Dusk Shine suddenly rounded about from behind a building's corner, Spines perched on his back. His expression had been calm and content, at least up to when he spied the open-doored state of the Joke shop. His purple eyes cast about the crowd...

... and instantly zoned in on her own green ones.

There were four ponies in front of that slushie stand.

Two orange. Two pink. All Earth-ponies.

One filly and one colt per color.

The manestyles and eyes... and CUTIEMARKS... all matched each other.

And the orange mare had spotted him.

"Sorry sugarcubes!" she suddenly blurted, teeth latching around the pink filly's frizzy tail. "Need tah move 'em out!"

"Bye Berry!" the party pony called out, cheerfully waving as she was hauled away tail-first at breakneck speed. "See you! We should do this again soon!"

"Bye Pinkie!" Berry Bubble called back, waving in return, a half-finished slushie in the other hoof. "We should! I'll be waiting!"

Applejack watched the rapidly retreating pair with disbelieving eyes, before he starting looking about to see what had set them off. Upon

sighting his unicorn friend's own wide-eyed gaping expression, he called out.

"Dusk! What in tarnation's-"

"APPLEJACK!! *AFTER THEM!!*"

He didn't need to be told twice. His hooves thundered as he took off, hot on their trail, Dusk following him from behind, a startled dragoness holding on for dear life.

Trailing in the rear of the pack, a perky pink colt bounced along at his own pace, happily humming a tune to himself.

Consarn this dress! Tweren't ever made wit' runnin' in mind!

When Pinkie had mentioned itchy hooves, she had hoped against all hope that it wouldn't mean copious amounts of running for the two of them, as it had in the past. But alas, that was not to be. Once again, the Pinkie Sense had proved itself infallible. Unfortunately.

She had managed to make to the outskirts of Ponyville, her friend's body flailing in the air as she continued hauling her by the tail, the filly's body surprisingly light. So far, they were making good time with their head start. She had hoped it would be enough. However, that hope didn't hold out long as she heard the heavy hoofsteps of her male alter-ego slowly become more and more distinct, as he caught up to them.

"Cousin JayJay!" he called out. "Ah dunno what this is all 'bout, but if y'all come back, we can talk this over!"

"Shurhy, shurguhcube! Gun't du thut!!" she replied through a mass of pink frizz.

"What was that?!"

Pinkie cupped her hooves as she called back. "She said 'Shurhy, shurguhcube! Gun't du thut!!'" she explained, helpfully.

"Why not?!" the Stetson-bearing stallion yelled. At least having the yelling being done in HIS direction helped in translation.

"Nught aht lihberthy th' thay, cusfhin!"

"Whaat?!"

"She said 'Nught aht lihberthy th' thay, cusfhin!'"

"Ah can't rightly say ah like that answer, cousin! Ah've got a few questions fer yah myself!"

"Thfey'll hvevv tah whet fpher anothftfa thime!"

"WHaaaaat?!"

"She said 'Thfey'll hvevv tah whet fpher anothftfa thime!'"

"Pinkthie Pief, thuftf upf!!"

"Pinkthie Pief, thuftf upf!!" the party pony parroted, hooves and mane waving in the wind.

"Well, if that's how y'all're gonna be!..." a bit of silence, before his voice returned. "Thfen yuu gibv meh nu choife, phudnrah!"

The sudden addition of a lisp in her double's voice made alarm bells go off in her head. Instantly, Applejack felt like a sitting duck.

Her fears do not go unfounded, as a lasso flew out into the air, casting a thin shadow on the fleeing fillies. As it descended threateningly above her head, the farmer suddenly bolted off to the side, narrowly avoiding the closing noose. She swore she felt a seam or two rip in the dress's skirt. Pinkie whooped as she was jolted off alongside, body bouncing through the air like a wind sock.

A few lengths back, the orange stallion's eyes widened as his attempt at capture was evaded. He'd never missed a shot. Then again, he'd never tried to lasso an escaping pony before. Especially not a pony who had

managed to surprise him twice in one week. She rather reminded him of.... *well, mahself actually*, his mind pondered.

Still, he remained hot on their trail. They had continued running in a fairly straight direction, off towards the Everfree Forest. If he could catch them before they reached there, he'd be a right happy colt. And he was sure that he'd catch them eventually. He reeled the rope in, and started another lasso a-spinning.

The galloping mare moved in a zig-zag pattern as she continued covering ground. *Ah'm gettin' close to th' HEDGE, but ah need t'shake mah 'cousin' off our tails first, afore ah head there f' real. He's a big boy... ah know that Big Mac has more stamina than me 'n Pinkie Pie. If mah other self's more similar t' Big Mac than t'me... will he... will he be able t' outrun me?*

Her ear cocked as she heard the rope whistle again. "Incthumng ah fphive aclophk!" Pinkie yelled at her, now talking with a piece of her mane in her mouth.

AJ looked back in time to see a low-flying halo spinning towards her, aimed at her legs. *He's tryin' t' hogtie me!* she realized, and braced herself.

The lasso actually managed to hook itself around her right hindleg, but before it could draw tight, she leapt into the air. The noose popped loose as it slipped off in mid-flight.

The farm-colt in the back almost tripped at this. That should have gotten her, easily! *Cousin JayJay shore seems t' know her lassos!* he found himself thinking, as he pulled the rope in for another toss.

"Hpe's stfhrthin' upf aghein!" the pinky earth-pony called back to her friend. "I'hve nuveh BEEN inneh rhodtheo bffphore! Whpheeeee~!"

The blonde mare looked around the field they were running through, for anything, anything at all. Any obstacle that'd might help. All that she saw were trees in the distance. Wait, there was *one* tree that was closer that that... And as it drew closer still, she recognized its breed, and began angling herself towards it.

They were upon it in no-time, and it was only here that Applejack paused in her running. At least long enough to give the tree a good old-fashioned Apple family tree-buck. She then sent off flying again, Pinkie's momentary rest on the ground quickly interrupted.

Male Applejack closed in on the tree, and arrived just in time for the large plant to finish it's shivering, pelting the pony with dozens upon dozens of bumpy bright-green Bodark fruits. Quite literally, horseapples.

He yiped and stumbled, doing his best to avoid the falling crop. Here and there a bodark broke open on his flank or his snout, the heavy fruit giving him thumps, but thankfully nothing that would leave more than a bruise. For a second, he almost lost his hat.

Then he was off again, the rain of horseapples having done its job and slowed him down. He could still see the escaping ponies though, and worked his legs even harder as he tried to close in. *She shore BUCKS like an' Apple.* he found himself thinking once again. *Ah've got no doubt now. She IS family. So why 'n tarnation's she so scared o' Dusk?*

He didn't whip the lasso back out, as he drew closer. Instead, he tried to come within conversation distance once again, his voice ragged from heavy breathing.

"Cousin!" he yelled. "C'mon back now and let's stop this foalishness! Dusk won't hurt ya' none, ah promise! Why cain't we talk this over like normal ponies?!"

"Cfhouse weh thain't norfmhal pohnfies!" his doppelganger cried out, her natural honesty slipping out around her friend's tailfur.

"What was that?!"

Pinkie lifted her head "Thpre thaid, 'Cfhouse weh thain't-!"

"Fer Pete's sake Miss Pie, y'all dun need ta talk like ah mule with ah toothache now, y'hear?!" The colt was seeing more and more of Berry inside the bubblegum pony every time she opened her mouth, and a little of

that good-natured irritation he usually reserved for him was slipping out as a result.

The filly spat out the piece of hair that had been in her mouth, and drawled in a surprisingly good approximation of her friend's voice. "She said 'Cause we tain't normal ponies!"

Applejack rolled her eyes. Here she was, trying to shake off her stallion-self, and Pinkie was acting as a go-between. Her legs were beginning to burn, and she was pretty certain that the sundress she had on was looking like it'd just gone through a war.

Somethin' gottah give. she groused. *Ah could maybe run faster if ah didn't have this fru-fru thing on, but he tain't gonna give me th' time t' slip it off. If only ah could find a GOOD way t'-*

She saw a dark line come into view across the field. Memories began to pop up. She knew where she was. This was one of Barley Oat's fields, and the formation she was coming across was in fact, a three-yard deep, dried-up creek bed. She remembered playing around in it as a filly, and taking naps under the many trees that grew along its edge.

And just like that, she then had a plan.

She turned her head to look back at her opposite gender, her eyes narrowed and a smile on her lips. "Yhph'all pheelin' lucphy, cfusfhn?!"

"What'd she say?!"

"She SAIID~" The pink filly looked back at her friend, before turning her head back around and giving the stallion a matching grin. "Y'all feelin' lucky, cousin?"

She then yiped as she was yanked forward, her body rippling like a flag in the breeze as the farm-filly put on an extra burst of speed, galloping towards one of the trees lining the creek. Jack gaped for a second, before increasing his velocity to match.

As they drew closer, AJ mumbled through her lips. "Hold ohn thpight, shurguhcube!!" she called out to Pinkie, before snapping her neck forward.

With her mouth full of tail, the apple pony wasn't really able to retrieve her own rope. So she had to make do with what she had. The party horse barely had time to squeal as she suddenly found herself being tossed around in circles, apparently being used for a substitute lasso. As they finally arrived at the tree, right before it looked like they were about to plummet into the creek bed, Applejack tossed her pink friend into the air.

For her part, Pinkie held up remarkably well as she caught a branch in her mouth, her body stretching like taffy as the orange equine pushed off and propelled herself into the air. As she hit the apex of her hang-time, she gave another yank to her 'lasso', causing the pony to dislodge herself. The pair landed on the other side of the creek with nary a scratch.

And as AJ looked back, she found herself grinning as her alter-ego tossed a lasso at that same branch, apparently intent on beating his cousin at her own game.

Sorry sugarcube. Despite everythin' 'bout th' two of us that's still alike, you 'n me still have differences. Yer a boy, and so you've got th' endurance that ah know a stallion has. But ah'm a mare, an' ah've got somethin' that you'll never have.

And that's a different center o' balance!

Applejack watched as her doppelganger pushed off into the air. However, his leg strength, coupled with his top-heavy musculature, worked against him as he took off much faster than intended, the rope looping him up and around the treebranch and giving him a face-to-face meeting with Mister Trunk, landing with a hefty **WHAMPH!!** on the opposite side.

With that, the farmer pony let out a whoop of country cheer, Pinkie yelling alongside her, as they galloped off into the bushes, unseen and unhindered.

There was a moment or so of silence. Or at least, he would have *liked* for a moment or so of silence. The ringing in his ears would just *not* let up!

Applejack stumbled as he peeled himself off the tree's bark, green eyes crossed. He was aware that somewhere in there, his hat had fallen off. Right now at this moment, his vision was too impaired to go looking for it. He was pretty content to just sit there on his haunches, leaning back, waiting for the world to come back into focus again.

There was a ragged breathing as another stallion clumsily ran up to join him. Dusk wasn't built for this kind of marathon running, and it showed as he came into view, bags under his eyes, his mane and tail limp with sweat. Even his horn seemed to droop. Spines was in no better condition, her eyes having shrunk to pupils, claws digging deep into the lavender pony's hide.

"Wha... wha..." the unicorn was having trouble catching his breath. "Where... did... did they... they go... AJ?"

The farmer barely registered his presence. Doing an impressive imitation of Derpy Doo, one eye focused on him, while the other seemed to inspect a random bird in the sky. "WHATDYA SAY?!" he shouted.

"I said, where did they go?!" The student raised his voice, already suspecting the worst.

"HOW DOES HAY FLOW? AH DUNNO, AH ALWAYS THOUGHT IT STOOD STILL MAHSELF!"

"No, the fillies, AJ!" Dusk stomped a hoof in frustration. "The fillies got away, didn't they?!"

"THE FLIES GOT T' PAY, Y' SAY? THEY'RE MIGHTY ANNOYIN' AH AGREE, BUT-"

"Gah, not this again!" he grumped, trotting past him and scanning the field with wide purple eyes. "We were so close Applejack. So *CLOSE*. I actually *SAW* them this time!"

"OH, AND DUSK, SORRY 'BOUT LETTIN' COUSIN JAYJAY AN' HER FRIEND GET 'WAY. AH STILL DUNNO WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT THOUGH!!"

"What happened, anyway?" He looked back at the applebucker, and seemed to notice for the first time his friend's condition, a look of concern going over his face. "She didn't happen to buck you, did she?"

"HUH?!" The orange colt blinked, before finally focusing both eyes on him. "OH! NAH, SHE JUST WENT N' PULLED A FAST ONE ON ME, S'ALL. OH, BY THE WAY, YOU SEEN MAH HAT?"

Dusk sighed, before wincing and looking back at Spines. "You can let go now, hon."

"I'm kinda afraid to. If I went and put a hole in your hide from hanging on too tight..."

She was given a look, and she obediently hopped down. The magician turned back to Applejack, and began inspecting him for bruises. "So... 'Cousin JayJay'?"

"THAT'S RI- Oh, eheh, uhm, yeah that's right." he began. "She showed up in town a couple o' days ago. Ah'd never seen 'er b'fore, but she said she were part o' th' family, just had th' farthest farm, an could never make it to th' reunion. She's an Apple though, through n' through." His eyes unfocused a bit as he recalled the chase. "Ah tried t' lasso her, but she 'voided every one, an' then she went n' bucked a horseapple tree on me." A hoof rubbed at one of his shoulders. "Darned near tripped me up there. But Ah stayed on their tail right up t'... well, right up to 'bout here, actually."

The unicorn raised an eyebrow, as he looked behind him at the creek bed. "Up to here? She made it across and you didn't?"

"It was SUPER AMAZING!" a new voice dropped in from above. "Applejack was all like VROOM, and then Cousin JayJay was all like VROOM, and they ran for the tree, and then JayJay used Pinkie as a rope and swung her way across, and then Applejack tried too, but he was too big, and he went WHOOP and landed back up against the tree, which looked like FUN, except for the landing-on-your-face part..."

All three looked up to see Berry Bubble hanging down from the sycamore's branches. They didn't ask how he'd gotten up there, as the pink

pony fell from the height, accompanied by a few leaves. It was Berry being Berry. That was all they needed to know.

"Uhm... yeah. What he said." Applejack flushed slightly under his yoke, at his less-than-flattering defeat. Having been outsmarted by a filly, family or not, still stung something fierce.

"I see... At any rate," Dusk shook his mane. "Applejack, you *did* notice the resemblances, right?"

"Resemblances?"

"You know. Your 'Cousin' is an orange earth pony with a blonde mane just like you, right?"

"True, but th' same can be said o' my Cousin Apple Cobbler!"

"She's also got green eyes and freckles like you, remember?"

"In case y'all fergot pardner, Red Gala's got'em too. An' ah highly doubt you'd fergotten that. Ah've seen th' looks you've thrown at mah big sister-"

"NOT the point." the unicorn gave a hoof-swipe. "And she's got the same kind of accent that you've got, doesn't she?"

"Haystack, ah fail t' see yer point. In case y' haven't noticed, all us Apples speak th' same. Annit TAIN'T no ack-cent!"

"GUH, never mind!" Apparently, Applejack would be a hard sell. He quickly pointed a hoof at Berry. "What about HIM? You saw HIS friend, right? Didn't you find it a bit suspicious that they were so similar to each other?"

At this, the farmer brought a hoof up to his chin. "Now that y'all mention it, it *did* seem a might bit strange. Ah mean, ah understand that anypony who saw Two Berries bouncin' down th' street together would have th' right t' go freakin' like a striped ape. One's a bit much already. What in th' world would we'd 'ave done wit' TWO o' them?"

"And *you*, Berry." Now the lavender pony turned his head to face his perky pony pal. "Where did *you* find your 'companion' in the first place?"

Bubble leapt to his hooves as he happily answered. "Oh, she hopped out of a bush!"

Stares all around. "She.... what now?" Spines asked.

"Well, y'see, it went kinda like this. I was on my way to Zircon's hut to see if he had any kind of good berries that I could use in my next batch of cupcakes, but while I was on my way there, I had a new kind of Berry-Sense COMBO that I'd never had before! My hindlegs spun in place, then my forelegs, and then my whole body spun me around like a tornado! And when it stopped, I saw this bush, and I figured that since my Berry Sense never usually goes off without somepony around, there must be somepony around hiding! So I go up to the bush and I say 'Hello, is there somepony there! But if there isn't, I TOTALLY understand!', and then I talked about throwing a party for them in Ponyville, and then *BOING*, she hopped out! She told me her name was Pinkie Pie, and that she'd love to help me hold a party, and so we went back into town and we went to Sugarcube Corner and we made plans on making a brand-new-kind-a-party the likes that Ponyville had never seen, and then we went to the Jester's Joke shop, and everypony kept STARING at us, and then-"

"Berry." Applejack stuffed another apple into the stallion's mouth. "Ah think we git th' picture."

Dusk however, pressed in. "You said she jumped out of a bush?"

Berry took a bite of his apple, and munched, before going "Yep!"

"On your way to Zircon's?"

"Yessiree bob!"

"On the edge of the Everfree Forest?!"

"Uh-huh! Ran into a pink party pony who looks just like me, talks just like me, loves to party just like me, and even has the same CUTIE-MARK as me!"

"WHERE?!" the bookcolt demanded, grabbing his friend and shaking him by the shoulders. "Tell me Berry! WHERE'S THE BUSH?!"

"Dusk!" The farmer gaped, before taking the dark purple tail in his mouth and tugging him away from the fluffy-maned one. "Ah don't think Ah'm followin' here. Yer not sayin' that Miss Pie is actually *dangerous*, are yah?"

"It's NOT just her!!" he turned to face the orange one again, eyes wide and expression panicked. "Over the past few days, strange ponies! Strange *FILLIES!!* Have been showing up all over Ponyville! Butterscotch, you heard about his girlfriend?! Blitz got kicked in the face by one of them, who then escaped with the Sonic Rainboom! Elusive has a mare who looks JUST like him, visit his shop, and they fall head-over-heels with each other! Your 'Cousin' shows up and out-maneuvers YOU, the king of all things country! And NOW there are *TWO BERRY BUBBLES!!*"

While Applejack was left trying to imagine what a female Rainbow Blitz would look like, Dusk turned back towards his perky pink companion. "And I've been trying, with no luck so far, to find where it is they've been hiding! They *MUST* have some kind of plan for us! They wouldn't have caused so much CHAOS if they hadn't! Tell me Berry, where did you find the bush? Can you take me to it?! If you can, we can finally confront them and put an end to this *WHOLE thing!!*"

Berry Bubble took in the pleading face of his friend with his blue eyes, before he scrunched his face up, trying to think. "Hmmm..." he dramatically hummed, cupping a chin with his hoof, stroking his lip. Spines half-suspected a cheesy curly moustache to appear at any second now.

After a full minute of thought, the unicorn stallion leaned in. "W-well? Do you remember, Berry?"

A beat passed, before the party pony uncrossed his hooves and shrugged with an apologetic face. "Nope! Sorry Dusk, but ALL those

bushes look alike, you know! They could be ANYWHERE along the Everfree Forest! Sorry I couldn't be of more help! Bye!"

And with that, Berry got to all four hooves and skipped away back in the direction of Ponyville, singing '*La-lala-lalaaa~*' as he went.

Dusk was left with a wide gaping look on his face. With no small amount of trepidation, AJ sidled up to him. "Ah... Dusk?... You gonna be alright there, haystack?"

"But... B-but he was... a-and She! The-they! A-and... g...g-G-G... **GRAAAAHHHHHHGGGGHHHHGHHG!!!!**"

The farmer and dragoness both stepped back a fair distance as the unicorn leapt into the air and EXPLODED, his hide suddenly glowing white-hot, as his mane and tail transfigured into erupting columns of fire. His eyes turned ruby red as he momentarily lost all focus of rational thought, visions of destruction and frustration stampeding through his mind.

And then, just like that, it was over. The student pony collapsed back on the ground, hair and hide singed. In his eyes now, was a picture of defeat.

The two approached carefully, making sure he didn't have any fireworks left in him. After a few seconds, he looked up at them. They looked back. He let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry guys." he apologized. "I just don't *know* anymore. The evidence is all *there*, but... it's like how I was trying to research Berry-sense a while back. I just can't seem to *get* anywhere. For every one trot forward, it's three trots back..."

"N-now, don't beat 'cherself up 'bout it, haystack." Applejack soothed, his brow creased with worry. "M-maybe yer right... an' then again, maybe not. A-ah mean, th' whole story... well..." he redirected his gaze back downwards. "Ah'm just not sure. Some o' it makes sense, after seeing Berry an' Miss Pie. Th' rest? Well..."

The lavender colt shook his head as he struggled to his feet. "Don't worry about it AJ. I'm not going to. I'm done chasing today... come on

Spines." He turned around, head hung low in a defeated manner as he began to walk away. "We're going home."

The dragoness made as if she wanted to say something, but closed her mouth and looked back at the draft horse. He gave her a nod, and motioned towards the student. With a return nod, the assistant ran to catch up to her departing friend.

The orange stallion gave a sigh as he glanced about. The sun had begun its evening descent, and the light was starting to wane. A glance upwards revealed to him that his hat was hanging off one of the sycamore tree's branches. A quick trot over to the base, and he gave the tree a good hefty buck, enough so to return the favor by leaving a hoofprint in its bark. He smiled in satisfaction as his hat floated down from its lodging.

As he placed the hat upon his head, he caught himself glancing across the dried-up creek bed once again. "Cousin JayJay..." he murmured, the words that Dusk had imparted, that his cousin herself had spoke, danced through his head.

"Just what are you, Cousin JayJay?"

"We're home!" came the drawl. Everypony's heads perked up as Applejack entered the HEDGE, mouth still full of Pinkie tail.

"Applejack!" Rarity exclaimed, eyes instantly homing in on the dress's tattered condition. "What *have* you been doing?! Oh dear, I'm going to need to completely re-seam the entire thing!"

The farmer spat out the pink frizz, before fixing the dressmaker with a weary look. "Y'all're welcome to it. Ah'm awful sorry 'bout it Fluttershy, but it gets kinda unavoidable when yer runnin' fer yer life."

"Oh, it's no problem." the pegasus soothed, trading glances between AJ and their captive rabbit. "I'm sorry you had to wear it. I know dresses and you don't usually get along..."

"You had to run?" Dash was instantly up in the blonde mare's face, as Twilight helped Pinkie to her feet. "Who from?! Are they still out there?"

"Nah, lost 'em quite a ways back. They still got no clue where we are." AJ allowed a look of pride to grace her features. "Taught 'em a lesson too. A filly's more than capable o' takin' on a stallion, even if they *are* 'er double!"

"Even if they... Oh no." the student groaned, trotting up to her. "You met your other self *again*?!"

"Weren't somethin' we could really 'void, Twi. Ah mean, he had 'is heart in th' right place at first. He agreed wit' me that TWO Pinkie Pies were worse than one!"

"Oh come ON 'JayJay', we weren't being THAT bad!" Pinkie grumped, fixing her rescuer with an accusatory look. "I mean, yeah sure, we DID plan out a super-duper spectacular party for everypony in Ponyville to enjoy, and I think we might've scared Missus Mister Cake, then we went shopping and bought ALL the party stuff at the Jester's Joke store, and then Me an' Berry each got a slushie, while Applejack and Applejack talked, and then-!"

The blue pegasus took the turn of stuffing an apple into the party pony's mouth. "You BOUGHT OUT the Joke store?! Geeze louise, talk about your show-stoppers!"

"Were they *really* being that bad, Applejack?" Fluttershy asked, hat in her hooves, as she watched Rarity assist the farmer in removing the outfit.

"Ah tell yah, **erf** ah went straight t' the Corner first. They'd already **ackpf** left by then, but everypony in there was twitcher thanna rabbit inna viper's pit! An' when I followed them down Apricot Avenue, **woof, thank ya Rarity** there were a ton o' ponies standin' n' starin', like they'd just seen Nightmare Moon inna tutu!"

Rarity blanched as she pulled the dress away from Applejack's form. "Oh *my*, that must have been quite the scene! Pinkie already stands out in a crowd. With *two* of them, anypony they passed must have *surely* noticed them!"

"And then that's when mah 'cousin' shows up. We manage t' have ah... friendly chat, actually, but then he offers t' hold this party that Pinkie 'n Berry are plannin', down at th' Acres. And while ah'm tryin' t' convince him he still needed work t' do, Dusk comes trottin' up, sees me 'n Pinkie, an then goes 'n tells mah other half t' catch us!"

"My hooves itched right before he showed up!" the pie pony added helpfully. "I just KNEW chasing was gonna be involved!"

"D... D-Dusk?! No... No, Not good, NOT GOOD AT ALL!!" Twilight had passed panic sometime back, and was now livid. "If everypony in Ponyville knows there's two Pinkies now, then it won't take them long to connect the dots, and soon we'll have all of EQUESTRIA coming after us!!"

"Uhm, Twilight..."

"We've done our best so far, but it's all coming undone around us!" she wailed. Rarity found herself impressed with the sheer amount of drama the purple pony was exuding. "We've been hiding for days, and every day, we keep doing something that brings us closer to... t-t, to THEM! And on top of that, now THEY'VE started coming to US!" She pointed a hoof over to the hutch, glaring daggers at a white rodent who returned them with equal force.

"Ah, T-Twilight, listen, about that--"

"And to top it all off, that... that new PINKIE-Sense! What do we call that?"

"Th' Whopper." AJ stated.

"Sounds good to me!" Pinkie happily agreed.

"Fine then, The Whopper. Both she *and* her other half have the same sense, and it went off when they came into close proximity of each other! All it would take is blind luck for one of them to accompany him along the forest's edge, and set it off again! Pinkie's a ticking TIME BOMB waiting to go-"

"TWILIGHT!!"

That last word was spoken rather forcefully, from a demure set of lungs. All eyes turned to Fluttershy, who momentarily shrunk from the extra attention.

"Yes, Fluttershy?" The unicorn asked, giving the pegasus an assuring smile.

"Well, I was wondering... I thought of this after seeing them both do the same Pinkie Sense... this may not have much to do with anything, but, I just wanted to ask..." She paused, before gathering herself to air her question.

"H-have any of you felt something... weird, when your other self was nearby?"

The words sunk into everypony for a few seconds. Applejack was the first to reply, to everypony's surprise.

"Y'know, now that y' mention it sugarcube... Ah remember havin' a thought when I first met mah other half. It was kinda-sorta like a great big hole had opened up inside mah stomach. At first, ah'd just chalked it all up t' bein' scared..."

"But then, while he t'were questionin' me, an' Applebuck asked him t' lighten up... he said that he had a funny feelin' in *his* stomach... like there was somethin' 'off' 'bout me..."

The gears in Twilight's head were churning full-force. "H-he did? If you and him were feeling the same thing... at the same time..." her pupils were beginning to shrink again. "Dusk... he kept getting drawn back around the HEDGE for reasons he didn't know... and every time he was near, I had gotten this... this *lump*, in my throat..."

"I-if it helps any, at all..." Fluttershy spoke again. "When I met Butterscotch for the first time, I felt something. Like a... a lightness, almost. Like, I could fly away without even flapping my wings..."

"Huh, that's odd." Dash replied. When she was given looks, she sighed and relented. "When I finally saw Blitz in person, I... I dunno. It felt like being back at the Best Young Flier's competition. There was a rock the size of one of one of Applejack's seven-layer apple crumbles, resting in the pit of my stomach, weighing me down."

"My heart positively SUNG when I laid my eyes upon my prince~!" Rarity sung, forehooves clasping together. "Butterflies abounded within my very being, and he told me that he had felt much the same, the moment we met~"

"And ah bet that thing that Pinkie 'n Berry did a while ago... that WHOPPER of a Pinkie-sense, is what *they* feel when they get close!" Applejack reasoned. "Twilight! You thinkin' what ah'm thinkin'?"

"That we appear to all be connected to our doubles in some manner or another?" Twilight sounded rather glum at the conclusion. "Then yes, I think we are. Girls, this HEDGE isn't going to cut it anymore. If we can't get home by tomorrow night, then we're... we're going to have to move. Maybe to another town. I hear Fillydelphia is nice this time of year, isn't it? Or hey, we could head for Manehattan, 'cept this time, to STAY."

"Twilight..." Rainbow found herself most crushed by the tone in her friend's voice. "You're not sounding very hopeful here..."

"I'm being a realist." was the reply. "If we're all going to be affected by each other's proximity, then the only other recourse, is to distance ourselves. I mean, I have every confidence that we'll get home, tomorrow... but still, it doesn't hurt to plan ahead..."

"Twilight..." Fluttershy spoke again. "Is... is there really a point to us hiding anymore?"

The lavender pony bit her lip. "I... I don't think that that's... that's not what I..."

"The darling once again makes a point." Rarity stated. "With Ponyville having been repeatedly barraged by our appearances outside, and with the threat of Party-doom rearing its head whenever Pinkie and 'Berry' meet, it

seems to me that any hope of future concealment we may have wished for, is rather moot."

"You're... you're saying we should... come out of hiding... on purpose?!"

"That seems t' be the case they're pleadin'." Applejack drawled, walking up next to the unicorn. "Show ourselves. Explain things. Git sum help. Maybe see if their 'Prince' is a-willin' as Celestia and'll help us get back?"

Twilight screwed her eyes shut. "What? I-I... n-no, NO! I c-can't just give us up like THAT! They're LOOKING for us for a reason! You heard Dusk, they think we're some sort of invasion force! I mean, we've even taken a PRISONER!" Again, she gestured at Angela. "We'll be tied up and tossed in their prison, not to mention banished and then being banished again! W-we might even-"

"Twi. Sugarcube. Stop."

Twilight did, blinking as she noticed that her friends were all looking at her with worried expressions of varying degrees. The farmer had placed her hoof on one of her shoulders, locking her green eyes on the student's face.

"Hon... ah ain't no psycho-chiatrist, but even ah know an excuse when ah hear one. You're scared. You're more scared than th' lot of us were altogether, of yer colt-self. You're th' only one o' us left now, who's *not* met their other half yet. And ah kin' see you're diggin' yer hooves in deeper 'n deeper, th' more an' more likely that meetin' becomes."

"H-hey..." Dash spoke up as well, trotting to stand next to her friend. "Twi, I... I'm not happy with the idea of having to face that Colt-Cru-... er, um, ah, my 'other self' again either. But, if it means a guaranteed chance at getting back to our home world... then I'm willing to put up with it."

"Besides, they're not like, EVIL or anything!" Pinkie stated. "They're just ponies. Just like us!"

The magician sighed, her ears down. "I-I don't know, girls... I mean, yeah, technically I could... b-but still... I..."

She trailed off, eyes directed at the floor, at a loss for words. She felt the blush of shame touching her face as she realized how true their words were ringing. She knew they were right. But that still didn't change how she *felt*.

A few seconds of silence passed, before Rarity breathed out a sigh. "Now now girls. Twilight, I can see that we're putting undue pressure on you. I DO apologize for my part. If you truly wish for us to remain hidden... then I shall remain by your decision."

Applejack kicked at an errant rock, before nodding as well. "Ah still think we should go wit' th' better chance... but if it means that much t' yah hon, ah'll trust yah."

The unicorn looked towards Rainbow, seeking her opinion. She got a shrug. "It's alright. I don't mind waiting some more. Gives me more time to catch up on my napping anyway." the pegasus said nonchalantly.

"I'm with you, Twilight!" the party pony quipped, giving her friend a look that spoke volumes about the trust she had. "I know I've been a silly pony today, but there's nopony else I'd trust when it comes to epic adventure big-timey choices!"

At last, Twilight glanced towards Fluttershy, who was in the process of delivering a carrot to Angela. The rabbit made a motion as if to refuse, but a miniature stomach growl signaled her surrender, as she scooped up the veggie and began to munch.

"Fluttershy?... I'm sorry. I..."

The butter pony looked over at her, and gave her as much a smile as she could muster. "I'm still with you, Twilight... you're my friend, and I could never abandon you... but sometimes, you need to be aware... that if we're not able to go home, well... there are lines that you have to keep from crossing. Besides the ones we've... already..." she glanced over to the hutch, before directing her gaze to the floor.

Dash sighed, foreseeing the moment, before turning tail and flying out of the HEDGE, reassuming guard duty. As the rest of the girls broke up, occupying themselves with other tasks, the lavender unicorn remained seated next to her, as they watched their captive. "... I know, Fluttershy... I'm sorry. I... I promise. I won't let it happen again."

A pink mane bobbed in reply in a nod, though she could tell that those eyes were still turned down.

Under a Midnight Star



Dash was snoring, loudly, on her back, Applejack seemingly in a contest with her to see who could make the most racket. Rarity was tucked away in a corner, in a pile of blankets, as she murmured something about dream stallions. Pinkie, surprisingly, was the most serene of the bunch, hooves curled up daintily as she snoozed.

I can't do this. she then realized. *They're counting on me, and I can't do this. But I can't do THAT either...*

I know what I need to do.

But... I can't...

The unicorn planted a hoof on the ground, as she lifted herself quietly.

I can't... please...

She got onto all fours, looking over her friends that she'd come to love. That she'd come to trust. That had come to trust *her*.

I... can't...

She wasn't sure who she was pleading to. But beads appeared at the corners of her eyes, as she realized that she was beginning to walk away from the group. Towards the cave's entrance. She knew what she *had* to do. For all of them. But her fear... the relentless, unyielding fear...

I.....

...just...

...can't.

Within minutes, the lavender pony had exited the safety of the HEDGE's shelter. The field and foliage about her was lit by the moon, giving her enough to see by. It also allowed her to see the hamlet that she had come to see her home, far in the distance...

... and the one building whose lights were still on at this time of night.

Slowly, alone, undisguised, and with a lump in her throat, Twilight began the long walk towards Ponyville.

No pony was on the streets. She had never had cause to stroll through them at this time of night before, save that one time when she had

to lull a star-bear to sleep. But she decided she had to do this more often. It was relaxing.

At least, she thought was relaxing, up to a point where she turned a corner, and spied the lit windows of the Ponyville Public Library. Then that knot returned, choking her as bad as before.

I-it's not too late. she told herself. I could turn around and go back. Yeah. I could go back to the HEDGE. Go back to sleep. No pony would have to know. I could wait till tomorrow morning, and try the spell again. I could do that... yeah...

...but is it FAIR to them? To make them wait any longer? To have them wait on me to make a spell I have no idea how to control, that I can't reference anymore? I don't have the book. I can organize, write, and memorize... but I'm absolute crap if I don't have a book backing me up. Even if I DO cast it tomorrow, there's no guarantee, absolutely none, that I'll be able to do it successfully on my own.

I just... I need help.

But the one pony who can help in this world... can I do it?

Can I... face him?

Somewhere within that inner monologue, she had begun walking again, without even realizing it. As she looked up from the ground, she realized that she was no longer viewing the great tree from a distance. She was right at its door.

Her door.

HIS door.

She shook as she lifted a hoof... and knocked.

There was silence at first. For a second, she was hopeful that everypony inside had simply dropped off to sleep with the lights on.

Then the door-handle began to turn. She hadn't *heard* anypony come to the door. The knot tightened as she braced herself, coming face-to face with...

... nothing at first. The door finished its wide swing open, before an owl flapped out from behind it. The bird let its eyes rest upon her, before perching itself on the door-handle.

The unicorn took a tentative step inside, before looking back at the nocturnal avian. "I guess you're not called Owlowicious here, are you?"

"Who?"

She simply rolled her eyes, before looking around. Books were left open here and there, cluttering the floor, stacked on the tables, and littering the desks. And she didn't *make* this mess. Suddenly, she had a new appreciation of what Spike did for her, every time she went on a studying binge.

Which was apparently what her male half was doing right now. Her heart froze as she spotted him, hunched over a desk, head down low, relentlessly pouring through the heavysset text that was laid out before him.

His back was turned. He hadn't seen her come in.

Her hooves felt like lead as she stepped towards him. She could hear him speaking in a voice that was pitched low enough as not to disturb the assistant sleeping upstairs. Her ears perked forwards as she tried to make out his words.

"...there are four explanations, that each answer the question of 'why?' in different ways. These various means of explanation can be divided into the four general types of causality, as follows..."

Aristotle, she realized, recognizing the words. *He's reading Aristotle's rules of Causality.*

His head shifted as he continued reading.

"The first cause, the 'Material Cause', is the physical matter, the mass of 'raw material', of which something is 'made'. Of which the subject itself consists of."

He moved his head as he went to the next rule. "The second cause, the 'Formal Cause', tells us what, by analogy to the plans of an artisan, a thing is intended..."

"...What it is originally planned to be."

"...What it is originally planned to be."

Dusk's head rose a couple of inches. He wasn't sure, but it had sounded like somepony else had spoken the rule alongside him.

He looked back down as he recited the third rule. "The third cause, the 'Efficient Cause', is that external entity, an outside force..." he found himself trailing off.

"...from which the rite of change, or the ending of the change, first starts." Twilight finished, behind him.

He didn't move. Didn't even budge. The stallion instead raised his head up level, as he spoke the final part from memory alone.

"The Final Cause is that for the sake of which a thing exists, or is done... including both purposeful and instrumental actions..."

The mare that was seated behind him opened her mouth, unable to stop the words from spilling out.

"The Final Cause, or telos, is the purpose, or end, that THAT something, is supposed to serve."

A moment of silence descended between the two. Neither pony moved, neither one spoke a word, but the both of them were now keenly aware of this second presence that was in the room.

Finally, the lavender stallion asked the air quietly.

"What... is your final cause? What... what do you want?"

She almost choked right there. The lump that was in her throat felt so large and swollen, it was like she would gag on it, should a misplaced word pass through her lips. *What do I say? How do I even begin?*

How would you want to be told?

"...All we want..." Twilight finally spoke. "All we want... is just to go home..."

Dusk remained still for a few seconds more... before slowly turning around, and looking upon his own double for the first time. His mane was slightly in disarray, purple eyes half-hidden by hair. But it still allowed the femme to see his pupils shrink, as he took her in.

He got to his feet, and walked quietly towards her, before seating himself in front of his filly-self. To her credit, she didn't bolt or freak out. Instead, they kept their eyes locked on each other, studying features and differences. Face-to-face with nopony else but him and her own self.

At length, the colt spoke again.

"My name is Dusk Shine. I am the prized student of our benevolent leader, Prince Solaris, ruler of Equestria. And I am also the librarian of the Books and Branches Ponyville Public Library.

"And... and you?"

She tried her best to swallow that lump.

"My name is Twilight Sparkle. I am the prized student of our benevolent leader, Princess Celestia, ruler of Equestria. And I am ALSO... the librarian of the Books and Branches Ponyville Public Library."

There was a pause, and then a nod. "We... we at least seem to have the same taste in bags." he attempted to joke, nervously.

Twilight looked to her side. She had been carrying her saddlebag this whole way. She didn't even remember having put it on, leaving the HEDGE. Her horn lit as she probed its contents... and found, to her

surprise, a book floating out. She stared at it, before facing her doppelganger again.

"Here." she simply said, as she levitated the green volume to him. "I'm... I'm hoping it's not overdue?"

Dusk took the book into his own hold. It was the book he had been rather afraid had gone completely missing. 'Supernaturals'. He offered her a grateful smile, before hovering the book and placing it in its proper spot on a nearby shelf.

Another bout of uneasy silence descended. *This is ridiculous.* Dusk found himself thinking. *I talk to myself all the time, and now that there's TWO of me here, neither of us can think of anything to say!*

The lavender mare then whispered. "I'm sorry."

He shook his mane, and trotted a bit closer. "I've spent days looking for you."

"I know. I'm... I'm sorry we put you through so much trouble."

"Why did you hide away? We could have helped."

"We didn't want to effect your world anymore than we possibly could." She directed her eyes to the floor, a depressed look on her face. "Though if the past week has told me anything, it's that it's neigh-impossible to accomplish."

Despite the tone and situation, the unicorn stallion found himself chuckling. "How many of you are here, altogether?"

She looked back up at him. "Six. All mares."

He didn't need to make any wild guesses as to who the other five fillies were. He seated himself again as he spoke. "Butterscotch?"

"Fluttershy." Twilight nodded.

"Rainbow Blitz?"

"Rainbow Dash."

"Applejack?"

At this, she couldn't help but give her own chuckle. "No change there. Still Applejack."

"Oh... uhm, then... Elusive?"

"Rarity."

"And... Berry Bubble?"

"Pinkie Pie. I know. I was rather frightened too."

The both of them shared an uneasy laugh, that died off as they resumed staring at each other. The silence was deafening. From above, came the soft snores of a baby dragon.

"...I had thought you had all come here on purpose. But it really was an accident, wasn't it?" Dusk asked.

A nod. "We were just trying to visit Manehattan. Applejack said she knew the place well, and I had found this book-"

"Exploring the Aether for Fun and Profit?"

Twilight's head shot up, a surprised expression on her face that made the colt smile. His horn lit up, and a book flew from the numerous stacks, over to hover between the pair of ponies. It was the same traveling spellbook

He opened the tome to the same page that contained the teleportation spell. "This is purely conjecture on my part... but you mixed up a portion of the Teleportation spell with the dimensional viewing spell that was directly below it. You tapped into our own dimension, thinking it was a leyline for Manehattan, didn't you?"

As the purple mare read over the rift-viewing spell, and its lengthy list of warnings... she found her ears burning, realizing what she could have

avoided, had she not gone off at the spur of the moment. "It was the frequency." she clarified. "I tuned into the wrong one when I tried to perceive the leylines. I used the one in that view spell, instead of the one listed in the teleportation ritual."

"I found this book a few days ago." the stallion began, reading over the book as well. "When I first started reading, I was really excited to memorize some of these spells. But before I even got to this page... something happened."

Her eyes turned to the side, as she regarded her double with curiosity. "What... was it?"

"There was a surge of magic energy outside of Ponyville. I'm surprised no other unicorn sensed it. When I went to check it out, I found a hill that was soaked with leftover PKE residue."

Twilight gaped. "Our... Our teleportation spell..."

"And then, when I got back to the library, there was Butterscotch. Wrapped up in a hat and scarf." He shook his head as he chuckled. "Sounded weird. Said he was sick. Checked out 'Supernaturals'..." he then turned his own eyes to the side to meet hers. "But you already knew all that, didn't you?"

Gulping, she nodded. He then continued his spiel. "After 'he' left, I got back to the book. I found the teleportation spell, and my first thought was 'I know ten ponies... but there are five in particular I'd love to invite!'... then I remembered that Butterscotch was sick, and so, I moved on to the next spell. Once I finished reading it... well..."

"The pieces started falling into place." the femme equine finished. "You had a hunch... that something had happened."

"Yes. After I read the spell, and referenced the Rules of Causality, I decided to pay Butterscotch a visit. Turns out, he wasn't sick, and he didn't have the book he'd checked out, nor did he remember doing so. And then later that same day, Blitz flies in and tells me that our timid friend had met his 'match'..."

"And it just kept getting worse from there." Now Twilight was fully shame-faced, looking at the floor. "Dash invaded Blitz's home. Applejack got into an argument with her 'cousin'. Rarity out and tricked us, when she went to meet with herself for the express purpose of romance. And Pinkie and Berry... we very nearly dodged a bullet there."

"You've certainly made our lives very... interesting, these past few days." Dusk admitted, looking at his doppelganger, a worried expression on his face.

"You mean we've made them a complete disaster. I tried my best to leave your world untouched. And I've failed." Her entire frame seemed to sag.

"H-hey now," he started, a hoof going out towards her, almost touching her shoulder. "Even *if* things didn't go according to plan, you know... you still managed to save us."

Her head tilted upwards slightly, causing him to retract his foreleg. "Save you? H-how exactly?"

"Well, think about it. Either our worlds are naturally a-synchronous with each other, or you also somehow traveled back in time by about an hour. Either way, if you and your friends hadn't touched down in Ponyville... if your Fluttershy hadn't shown up in the library, pretending to be sick..."

"Then more than likely, we would have wound up in your horseshoes. I would have gathered my friends. Applejack would have suggested Manehattan, and Blitz would have donated a feather. Knowing me, I'd have botched the spell, and then we would have wound up in your world instead... Solaris's mane, there's probably another pair of dimensions out there where that's *exactly* what happened. We'd have wandered around Ponyville, looking at all the unfamiliar ponies, trying to find a familiar face-"

"Lyra and BonBon." the filly suddenly stated.

That drew a surprised glance. "Who what now?"

"Lyra and BonBon. The first ponies we recognized here, were your Harpsy and Babar. In our world, they're known as Lyra and BonBon."

Dusk's eyes went slightly wide at the thought, but he shook his head. "Either way, the point I'm trying to make, is this: We owe you. If you and your group hadn't come here, then more than likely, we would have been undergoing the very same thing that all of you have."

Twilight let her eyes dip low in thought. Her male self had a point there. She could easily imagine the frustrations she would have suffered, had six stallions landed themselves in her world. Her imagination relived those past few days, through a mirror as she ran around the Everfree forest, tried to track down a captured colt, and then chased a pair of fleeing stallions from the village.

"We still caused you trouble." she stated. "You must have been really frustrated, trying to find us..."

"Well... I did have my moments, yes..." he tilted his head down to look into her eyes. "But that's all in the past. You're here *now*, T... T-Twilight. The only thing I REALLY want to know is... why didn't you come forward sooner? I know you said you didn't want to effect our world, but... you know that we would have still helped. Why didn't you let us?"

The filly found herself stuttering as she lifted her head. "B-because... I... I was scared of you, D-Dusk." she answered, tears forming at the corners of her lavender orbs. "I was SO scared. By Celestia's Mane, I'm *STILL* scared of you! Can't you feel it?! I've had this *lump* appear in my throat, every time you've been near me. Tell me, aren't you feeling it now as well?"

The purple stallion shifted his eyes to the side as he gulped. He WAS feeling it right at the moment, actually ever since he'd heard her voice, but he had been trying his best to ignore it.

"I'm sorry D-Dusk, but I can't explain this... this irrational fear! I mean, seriously! You're ME! I'm YOU! The only differences between us are our genders, and that just... just makes things even MORE awkward! How am I supposed to FEEL about you?! Do I treat you like a cousin, like Applejack does hers? With abject aggression, like Rainbow? D-dare I even consider the route that Rarity took?! I'm... I'm so confused, *and it scares me!* There's no guide on how deal with situations like this, cause this situation's never

happened before! At least I don't THINK there's a guide! If there is, I haven't read it yet!!"

Dusk found himself becoming a bit edgier as his reflection continued her outpour. He'd never been good with emotional fillies, and now not only was he dealing with one, it was himself in femme form. As her voice continued to increase in volume, he found himself pointing up the stairs, going *'shhh!'*

Instantly her eyes widened, and hooves clapped to her mouth. They both sat in silence, looking up at the bedroom above. Thankfully, the quiet snore of a snoozing dragoness continued uninterrupted.

"Sorry..." Twilight whispered, rubbing the tears away from her eyes. *"I didn't mean to... get so carried away..."*

The colt shook his head. "It's alright. She's slept through worse." he assured, before a corner of his mouth quirked in a smile. "Though I imagine you already knew that."

She gave him a nod, and for the moment, they let the previous topic pass away. They were content to just sit there, listening to the sounds of Spine's breathing.

"I miss him, you know." Twilight quipped, her eyes still misty.

"Your 'Spines', you mean?"

"I named him Spike." she replied. "I left him in charge of the library. Right before we left, I told him it would probably take us... two, three days, before we came back from traveling..." she found herself sniffing again. "I... I hope he's doing alright. I-I never got him his pizza..."

"... peppers and emeralds with extra cheese?"

"His favorite!"

He found himself chuckling, despite it all. "I'm sure he's doing fine. You know how, um... how *they* are, when it comes to pizza." He looked back up to the loft, and sighed. "I'm willing to bet he's holding down the fort,

just like Spines would, if I had left. It's a little strange to think of her as a guy... but their personalities are still the same, despite whatever gender they are, am I right?"

Twilight nodded, eyes still concentrating on the loft above them. "That's been one of the things about this world, that has comforted us. Every pony we meet here, still acts like the pony we knew back home. When I saw and heard Spines for the first time, it comforted me to no end to see how similar she was to Spike... You should be proud to have someone like her in your life."

"Believe me, I am." came the reply. "Getting Spines when I was growing up... even though she's not a pony, she's as good as a little sister, to me..."

Another bout of silence passed, before the colt turned back to his visitor. She was regarding him with a new light in her eyes. "A sibling..." she whispered. "The same with me and Spike. He became my little assistant... but he'll always be my little brother first..."

Somewhere in there, both unicorns began the same thought process. *I don't know how to deal with you... you, this pony who is me, but isn't. We have so much in common. So much that we've both done. So many feelings we can't understand. If I can't think of you as a cousin, a rival, or a lover... can I think of you, as a friend? Can I overcome my fear, and think of you, as somepony close to me? Like...*

Slowly, tentatively, Twilight and Dusk each extended a hoof. Their movement paused for just a second, before they finally met and touched each other, simply holding hooves, staring at each other in the library's low light.

"Dusk..." she found herself speaking. "I've tried to perform the spell again to get us back... but I can't do it. I can't find our thread. I... I need help. Please help us. Please help my friends. Help us get back home. That's... that's all I ask for. Please?"

The colt allowed a smile to grace his lips, before nodding. "Sure thing, Twilight. I'll do everything in my power to help you... sis."

And it was then that the mare suddenly found herself breathing easy. The lump in her throat had disappeared. In its place... she didn't know. It felt like something. Like a tingle, maybe. Like... a spark? She knew that whatever it was, it was bright. *He really doesn't mean us any harm. He's nothing to be afraid of. He IS me. And yet... he's not. But in a good way. He's... I can think of him like this. I can think of him, like I think of Spike...*

As my brother.

She returned his smile. "Thank you, b-brother. I was... I was so scared, that you wouldn't agree. I don't know why still, but... I thought that..."

The purple stallion allowed an eyebrow to raise. "It's because I'm male, isn't it? Despite how similar we are, you originally thought that by virtue of gender, my thought process would be significantly different from yours... right?"

She lowered her head, ears drooping in a nod. However, her head was tilted back upwards to face his, as he gave her a reassuring gaze. "It's okay. I know a lot of us men out there tend to be... rough. But I'm not them. I'm you. And besides occasionally exploding over a scientific conundrum, you know how *that* is, I try my best to not perpetuate the masculine mindset stereotype. Seriously, sis... did you really think you'd turn yourself away?"

The filly allowed herself to sit up straight, as she became more at-ease. "I did... but I know better now. Thank you, Dusk. I-I never should have doubted you. Though, I have to wonder. Did you *really* think we were going to invade, or replace you, like pod-ponies?"

He flushed. "You heard that? Uhm... well, you see... I didn't have a lot to work with, so..."

Twilight found his blush rather amusing, and stifled a giggle. As she did so however, it turned into a yawn. A rather *hefty* one at that. By the time it finished, she possessed a set of rosy cheeks herself.

"Eeh... sorry about that. It *IS* rather late. Guilty conscience drove me to wake up and seek you out."

"Wow." He blinked, before looking back at the door. "So... are you heading back to your friends? Going to tell them that I'm willing to help?"

"I really should." The femme student turned her head towards the door, thinking of the *loooooong* walk it had taken from their hiding place to here, before turning her head back upwards towards the bedroom, her face a picture of longing as she thought of her own bed so close at-hoof. "But I have to think... should I wake them *now*, or wait till the morning?..."

Dusk caught her line of sight, and chuckled again. "You know... that bed up there, is as much yours as it is mine."

A new heat suddenly overtook Twilight's face. "Oh! Oh, no, i-it wouldn't be right of me. I mean, this is YOUR dimension, not mine. I-I can walk! It's just..." again, her body sagged from weariness. "... right on the edge of the Everfree Forest..."

"Yeah, I had figured." he replied, taking to his hooves and walking around his double. "Really, I insist. Stay for the night. I'll just drag out that second bed and sleep in it tonight. You can have mine. I'll have Owlowicious wake the both of us up in the morning before Spines does, and we can go get your friends then."

The filly grimaced. "The second bed? Isn't that thing still full of lumps from when Applejack and Rarit- um, I mean, uh, Elusive, fought inside it?" Idly, she wondered if males had sleepovers or not.

"Well... yeah, that's true... but it'll still sleep." The colt continued walking towards the stairs. "Besides, if it's that uncomfortable, there's always the floor."

"Dusk, I-I..." she bit her lip, before finally airing the words she had been thinking. "Do you want to... y'know... *share* the bed?"

He stopped in his tracks, and looked at her in disbelief. Slowly, he turned his body back around to give her a long gaze. She returned his look with equal curiosity.

"...um... are you sure that'd be... proper?"

"Well... why not? Either way it's okay, I'd still wake up with myself."

"I know, I know. Still, what I mean is..." he trotted forward, placing himself in front of the lavender mare. "Do... I mean, we know each other... we know who *WE* are... but do you trust your own... 'brother'... enough to do that?"

Twilight stood her ground, noting that the flush she was seeing on his face, was similar to her own. "Do *you* trust your own 'sister'?" she asked back.

The twin purple ponies stood there, facing each other, the question lingering in the air. Around them, the night snoozed on.

"Good morning girls!"

Rainbow Dash muttered a plea for ten more minutes of sleep in some arcane language that incorporated copious amounts of yawning and mumbling.

"C'mon girls! Up n' attem!"

"*Twaaaaiii-light?*" Applejack moaned, stretching her back out and wincing as a couple of joints popped. "What's up, sugarcube?"

"I'm up, for one. And the rest of you need to be too. Come on, let's get to it!"

"Oogh... my stars, what time is it?" Rarity whined, as she removed her sleeping mask. "Twilight, I must protest-...T-Twilight?"

Fluttershy snorted herself awake at the noise, and found herself looking around quickly, heedless of the mesh pattern that had imprinted itself into her cheekfur. The one pony whose voice they were hearing, they couldn't *find* anywhere inside the HEDGE.

"Woow, are we playing hide and seek?" Pinkie bubbled, effortlessly perking herself awake. "If we are, you got GOOOOD, Twilight!"

There was a chuckle. It came from outside the entrance. "I'm not hiding, silly filly, I'm right over here!"

Twilight, outside the HEDGE? The apple farmer was the first one to scramble to all fours and gallop over to the opening. "Twi? What inarnation's going-"

She paused as she poked her head out. There was her purple unicorn friend, standing there a couple of feet from where the cave of the warren began. She seemed well-rested, her eyes bright and open, and her saddlebag secured tightly to her midsection.

What AJ had NOT been expecting was for a stallion of similar hue and breed as her friend to have been standing a foot or so behind and to the left of the student. His own eyes were quite wide. Apparently, he hadn't been expecting anypony to actually have been hiding in there.

"TWILIGHT!!!" Dash screamed, causing the orange pony to grimace from the pegasus's sheer volume. She had stuck her head next to AJ's, and had just witnessed the same scene. *"WHAT'RE YOU DOING?! HE'S RIGHT BEHIND YOU!!!"*

Twilight blinked, and looked behind her at Dusk, who returned her blinking. She then faced her friends again, a smile on her face. "That he is, Rainbow. Why don't you come out and say hi?"

The two fillies were flabbergasted, their jaws hanging wide in absolute shock. They didn't even budge when Fluttershy squeezed past them and joined the two unicorns.

"Oh, h-h-hi. there, um, Dusk." the yellow pony spoke, her mood somewhat lighter than one would have expected. "Um, I'm... I'm Fluttershy. You probably didn't know, but, um, that day when you thought Butterscotch was sick? Um, well... that was actually me. I-I'm sorry for trick-"

He silenced her with a smile and a wave of a hoof. "Twilight told me all about it. And she returned the book. You have nothing to apologize for, dear."

"Oh, oh I'm so glad to hear that!"

"Twilight!" a grandiose voice spoke, before another pony- A certain white unicorn- squeezed itself out of the burrow. Her eyes quickly and calmly took in the sight of the colt, while Dusk did his level best to not ogle her frame. "Why, it appears to me you've been quite busy last night! Does this mean that..." her blue eyes began to glisten. "Do you... are we actually?!"

The magician nodded, before her expression turned serious. "Okay, listen up. Fluttershy, you can release Angela now. Everypony, get packing. We have about fifteen minutes before the rest of Ponyville wakes up."

"Come on, it's time to go home."

It was an interesting-looking procession that wandered through the streets of Ponyville in the early hours of that morning. Seven ponies overall, two of which looked like they could be twins. There was barely anypony out on the streets at that hour... which allowed the group a relative peace with which to use.

"So, finally went n' listened t' reason, eh sugarcube?" Applejack joked, tossing a fond smile in Twilight's direction.

"Yeah... I guess you can say I did." she admitted, a blush of shame on her face. "I'm sorry I was so, well, *scared* guys. But you were right. This really *IS* the better way."

"I'm glad you came around to it." Dusk chuckled, looking back at the group. "I still don't know why you chose to do it at one in the morning, but I'm not complaining!"

"Good heavens, Twilight." Rarity crooned. "So late at night? And you didn't even wake us?"

"I had a bad case of guilty conscience. Especially after seeing Fluttershy. You holding up okay back there?"

"O-oh, I'm fine." the pegasus assured, rubbing the spot on her cheek. The indent had almost finished fading. She looked down to her side and smiled as Angela hopped alongside her.

"Guilty conscience, huh?" Rainbow Dash questioned. A cocked eyebrow said that she wasn't completely convinced. "You sure something else didn't come up? I mean, what REALLY changed your mind? You were pretty set against having anything to do with Dusk, yesterday."

"I was... but that was the fear talking." the purple unicorn explained. "I was so worried that he wasn't going to be understanding, or accepting. If anything, I was afraid he was going to make us into enemies of the state. And it scared me, because, well, thinking back on it... I was so certain that *that* was exactly what I would have done, in his position. You know what they say. Sometimes, you're your own worse enemy."

"Ouch. Low blow there, sis."

"Sorry, bro. No offense meant, you know."

The exchange caused everypony in line to blink and look amongst each other. "Sis? Bro? A-ah mean, ah can see why y'all're goin' th' family route, but... really, siblings?" the farmer questioned.

"That's another thing." came the reply, as she turned her head to look at her friends. "I didn't even know how to RELATE to Dusk. Over the course of our stay, all of us have developed different relationship ideas, regarding our male selves. Fluttershy and Rarity, the both of you came to see Butterscotch and Elusive as 'partners'."

This caused the two named ponies to dart their eyes down as they blushed. Twilight continued, unabated. "Rainbow Dash, during *her* short encounter, came to think of Blitz as a rival."

"Psh, as if." the pegasus piped up from her spot. "I can fly circles around that imposter any day of the week."

Many among them rolled their eyes, while the two leading ponies exchanged a whisper. "She's Blitz's double, alright," the male shared.

"Have to admit, it's a bit weird to see his nature wrapped up in a small form like that!"

This got a chuckle out of the magician, before she started again. "Pinkie Pie. I could see, from the short time you two were together, both you and Berry became really fast friends."

"Well, why wouldn't we be?" the pink filly squeaked "I like to throw parties. Berry likes to throw parties. Oh, and we both enjoy sarsaparilla and slushies and muffins and meringue and Pin-the-tail-on-the-pony! I mean really, what's not to love?"

"And Applejack." The hat-bearing mare perked her head up at her name. "It's mainly thanks to you that I figured out my... connection with my double. You and the Applejack of this world came to relate to each other as cousins. That the both of you shared the same family."

"Well... that's true, Twi." the applebucker conceded. "Ah admit, when mah colt-self asked me fer another chance at bein' family... ah got rather relaxed an' easy. It felt right. Like he really *were* mah cousin. B-but still, what's yer story? Ah mean... ah already got sibling conniptions whenever ah'm around Applebuck. You?"

The two purple unicorns gave each other a look, before the male gave his 'sister' a reassuring smile. Twilight returned the smile, before speaking again. "It's because, well... last night, when I went and took a chance... when I went and spoke with Dusk... the both of us managed to feel something powerful. It felt really strong, stronger than just friendship... Like you said, it felt RIGHT. It was then that I realized that I was feeling the same way about him, that I felt about Spike."

"And Me, the way I felt about Spines." Dusk spoke up. "Once she introduced herself to me... once we managed to actually sit down, and talk... I realized that my heart was going out for her, the same way it did with Spines. It was there that we started calling each other brother and sister."

"And it's worked really well for us so far." The filly looked back at her friends with an honest smile. "I can say that I... *fee/* right, whenever I'm around him now, instead of having that awful knot in my larynx. Good thing

too." She turned her head back forward as she breathed a sigh of relief. "Otherwise, I NEVER would've gotten any sleep last night!"

There was a tumbling noise as a miniature pony pileup occurred, the sound causing the two leaders to pause and stare in confusion.

"S-sleep?" Rarity's eyes were wide. "Twi, you... you didn't come *back* to the Hedge after meeting Dusk, did you?"

"Well, it *was* a rather long walk, and I was... well, falling apart at the end of it, to put it bluntly, but still-"

"Twilight." Dash spoke up this time, her mouth trying to wrestle the words through her lips. "You guys didn't... I mean, with Dusk? You didn't, like..."

Both unicorns raised an eyebrow at the same time. "What're you getting at, Bli- er, Miss Dash?" the stallion questioned.

"N-now now." Applejack assured everypony. "You remember Rares, Twi has a second bed, right? Ah'm shore it tweren't anythin' that were..." she then turned her green eyes to the pair and coughed twice. "**a-heh-hem** IN-appropriate. Right, Twi?"

They got confused lavender stares for a few more seconds, before they blanched, the meaning FINALLY registering in their minds. Both boy and girl students blushed furiously, before they began sputtering at the same time. "*How-! Really-?! You-! With him/her?! He's/she's my brother/sister! How could you even-?!*"

That was all the mares needed to know, as they all laughed at the twin's expense, slowly straightening themselves out and getting to their hooves.

"Oooo-hoho! Ooooh I'm sorry, sugarcube." the farmer apologized, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Yeah, we know you two'd never do that. But that t'were too precious. Th' both o' you! Hey Pinkie, make that thar count 'Twenty', y'hear?"

"Gotcha!"

While Dusk looked at the girls in confusion, the bookfilly merely shook her head, the blush still present on her face. "Very funny, fillies. Now come on, we still have a ways left to go to the library. Barring any MORE unforeseen events, we should make it there in plenty of time."

Eventually, the great tree became visible to them, causing their pace to pick up a bit. As they drew closer to the library however, one more last unexpected event transpired.

Fluttershy yelped as she ducked down. Pinkie, who had been trotting in front of her, had seemingly suddenly bucked out both rear hooves behind her.

"Oop! Sorry about that!" the party pony apologized, before her hind legs began spinning in place. "Whooop! *It's happening again~!*"

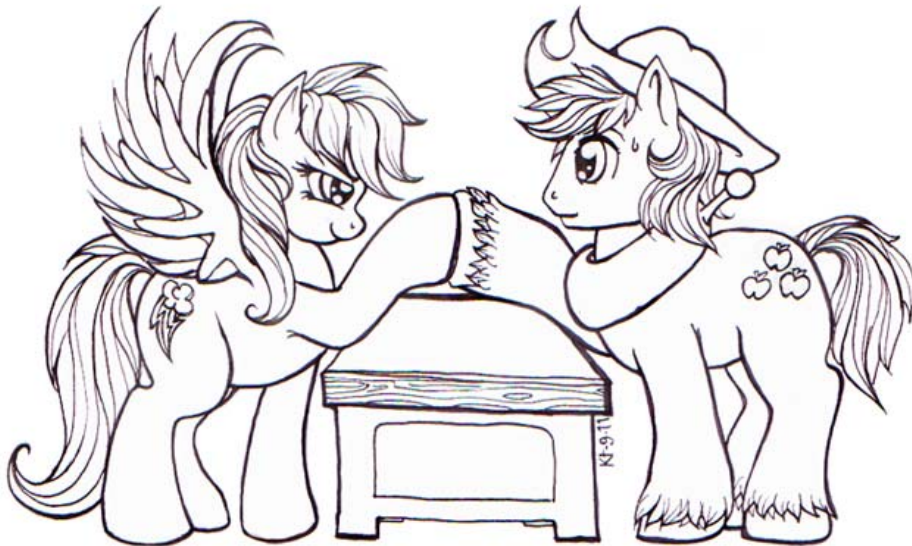
"The Whopper...!" Twilight stared at her twitching friend, before quickly spinning her head to face her double, his own eyes wide open as he watched the Pinkie Sense go off. "Dusk! P-please... tell me you didn't!"

The colt looked at her, before sighing and shaking his head as he reached a hoof out to the library door. "I left a note behind for Spines, before we left this morning. I'm sorry, Twilight. You've explained things to *me...*"

"But the rest of them deserve an explanation too."

Chapter Ten

Across the Horizon



"Y'mind tellin' me what this's all 'bout?" Applejack questioned, as he looked around the library walls and its piled tomes of knowledge.

"Beats me." Spines replied. "I woke up this morning to find Dusk gone. That alone worries me, he's not usually up until way later. Then, I find a note from him. It said to bring you guys all together. Sorry about the early wake-up call, but he said it was urgent."

"Oh my~" Elusive stated. "If it's managed to get our librarian friend out of bed at such early hours, then it **MUST** have been important!"

Butterscotch pawed at the floor, looking around uneasily. "I... I wonder what it could have been? Oh I do hope it involves Angela. I've been worried sick since she went missing yesterday..."

"Don't worry guys." Rainbow Blitz assured, hovering on his back. "I've got a *few* ideas on what it could be..."

The farmer rolled his eyes. "Blitz, ah shore dun hope you're gonna say what ah think you're 'bout t' say..."

"Bliiiiitz..." the white stallion added, cocking an eyebrow. "You're not going to talk about our 'doubles' again, are you?"

"You've all met them." the pegasus retorted, righting himself in the air. "At least *two* of you have gotten crushes on them. I'm kinda sorry I missed out on seeing Berry's double though, that would have been fun to see."

"It WAS fun!" Berry cheered, bouncing in place. "We had a good time together! We WERE gonna throw a party, but then Cousin JayJay ran away with Pinkie Pie and then Dusk said no."

The remaining colts all shivered at the thought. "Ugh... *two* Berry Bubbles. I can still see it." the unicorn stuttered. "They bounced right in front of me on their way to the bakery!"

"Ah-HAH!!" Blitz shouted as he zoomed and pointed a hoof at Elusive's face. "So you DO believe!"

A snort and a polite shove out of personal space. "Rainbow Blitz, please. While it was... unsettling, there's still no reason to believe that Ponyville has been invaded by opposite-gendered versions of our very own-"

It was right then that Berry's eyes shot open wide, as his hind legs kicked out. They all stared at him, as he proceeded to spasm right in front of their eyes. Hindleg spin. Foreleg spin. And then finally, a violent full-body tornado. The display was enough to make Butterscotch cower behind Applejack's flank.

At last, the party pony's motions came to a halt, body descending lightly to the floor. He stared blankly into space for a second, before leaping into the air and splitting it with a squeal of "She's HERE!!
She'shereshe'shereshe'shere~!"

Before Applejack could open his mouth to ask the question on everyone's mind, the library's door swung open. Stepping into the threshold came the familiar form of Dusk Shine.

"Dusk!" the suitmaker changed his own question. "Where have you been? What exactly is this all..."

Any further words that he had, died on his lips as a SECOND Dusk Shine followed him into the room. The only differences between this one and the original being a delicate snout and the presence of additional curves. She was unmistakably a young mare.

As was the orange hat-bearing cowpony that came in right behind, who was also followed by a cyan, rainbow-maned filly. The males all continued to gape as a yellow pegasus followed close behind, their eyes especially going wide at the sight of a glamorous white unicorn. And heading up the rear, to eliminate any remaining doubt in their minds, was a bouncing, perky, pink pony.

Said pony was the first to speak as her blue eyes took in the room, resting them on a familiar face. "Berry Bubble!" she called out, breaking away from her group and leaping towards the colts.

"Pinkie Pie!" the aforementioned equine replied, jumping to his own hooves and bouncing forward. The pair met half-way in the middle, simply bouncing around in circles for the sheer fun of it, chanting "*You're here!*" over and over again.

Blitz broke his eyes from the scene to focus on his librarian friend. "Dusk... you DID it! You caught our weird doubles! I KNEW you could do it!"

"Hey!" came a brash, femme voice. The blue stallion suddenly found his face full of vibrant mane as his own doppelganger zoomed up to him. "He didn't 'Capture' us! We came WILLINGLY!"

Now face-to-rosy-eyed face with his female alter-ego once again, he had to pause to fight down the lump in his stomach, before rounding about on her. "Oh yeah? I bet he made all you an offer you couldn't refuse, eh, Filly-Faker?"

There was a honk as a pair of blue noses were squashed together. "Oh yeah? I didn't see YOU coming up with any brilliant options, Colt-Cruder!"

Oh, NOW he was mad. His nostrils flared as he pressed his head against hers. "COLT-CRUDDER?! That sounds a bit TOO close to *Colt-Cuddler* if you ask me!"

She pressed back against him with equal force, wings beating rapidly, rainbow-hued manes becoming tousled as they all but wrestled. "Whaddya think '*Filly-Faker*' sounds like to ME?!"

They then both yiped in unison, as they were yanked to the ground by their tails, a pair of southern voices admonishing them. "*Dash/Blitz! Stop harassin' th' man/lady, it tain't proper!*"

The two country horses looked up from their friends at the same time, and caught each other's faces. An awkward silence descended between them, as green eyes went wide.

"Cousin JayJay?..."

She gave him a sad smile, as she shook her head. "Ah'm sorry cousin. Mah name tain't JayJay... and it tain't Jonica Johnagold either..."

The orange stallion felt his knees grow weak as he took in her form for real this time. Unadorned. Plainspoken. And so very similar to himself. He spied the hat upon her head. An eerily familiar hat. "Cousin... where'd you get that?"

She took her hat off, and held it in her hooves. "Mah... mah pappy gave me this hat. When he did, he told me... 'AJ, fer as long 'as you wear that hat... th' farm b'longs t' you. Make them apples grow big 'n strong, sugarcube..."

Tears were gathering in her eyes. Ones that reflected his own as he recalled the exact same speech. "You... yer not just mah cousin, are yah?..." he stammered. "Ah didn't want t' b'lieve it... but Dusk was right, wasn't he?..."

The blonde mare tossed the hat back onto her head, before reaching a hoof up to wipe at a tear. "No... ah'm not just yer cousin. You already know what mah name is, ah bet. But you know... ah'm still an Apple. Ah'm still family. Even in this world... Ah'm still Applejack."

In the background of this exchange, a yellow filly scampered from her place in line, towards a certain pegasus. His face lit up as he saw her, and the little rabbit running by her side.

"Butterscotch!" Fluttershy exclaimed, diving right at him with a shameless nuzzle. "Oh, I'm so sorry about making you wait so long!"

"I-it's okay." he assured, though he showed no signs of backing down from her affection. Indeed, he appeared to be attempting to return it. "I'm just glad to know that you're alright. I must admit, I'm... I'm rather confused about everything going on here..."

"Ooh," the female pony found herself blushing. "Well, um... I may have... gotten you into trouble earlier. You see, um, when we first came here, I... I had to pretend to be you."

Eyes widened. "You did? But you don't really sound like me..."

"Well, when you **ahack** pretend to be **ahack** coughing, it becomes a bit more believable..."

"Ooooooooooh..." Butterscotch slowly nodded. "So *that's* why Dusk came to my place, thinking I was sick."

Before the two could say anything else, there was a thumping on the floor between them. The butter colt's attention was swiftly directed downwards to an impatient-looking white lapine. "Oh! Angela Bunny! I'm so glad to see you're alright! What happened?"

"We did." came the reply from his female counterpart. She rubbed a hoof in embarrassment. "Twilight didn't want us found, so when Angela found us, we had... we had to... lock her up..."

At this, his face took on an expression of outright surprise. He looked back down at the rabbit again, and softly asked "Did they treat you okay, Angela?"

To both ponies' surprise, the little rodent leaned over to Fluttershy and hugged her hoof, before returning a smile and nod to the pink-maned male.

Towards the edge of the library floor, near the stairs, Elusive merely watched the ensuing interactions with a slack jaw. Two Applejacks. Two Dusks. Two RAINBOWS. It was all so much for the stallion to take in! For a second he thought to pinch himself to double-check and make sure if he was awake or-

"Elusive?"

He was startled out of his stupor by that voice. That *WONDERFUL* voice. He looked off to the side, and found no pony else standing there, but the beautiful mare who had visited his shop those short few days ago, her sapphire eyes staring into his soul with an inquisitive look. And, he noted, a lip set in trepidation.

"Rarity..." he breathed. "All... all of this... are you..." he bit his own lip. "Are you... really?"

The white mare bowed her head down with a look of shame, before turning her torso slightly to the side. "You... you *did* say you wanted to see my real cutie-mark someday, didn't you?..."

Gracing those curved buttocks, was a familiar trio of gems that he easily recognized as his own cutie-mark. This was the genuine article. He nodded his head before opening his mouth again.

"So it's true then. It all makes sense now, how you knew of my shame at the Gala. How you knew that those carrots were Sweepy's favorite. How you knew how to cook the *perfect* Broccoli Almondine..."

She looked back up and nodded. "Yes Elusive, it is true. I know not if you'll accept me for who I am, or if you will never wish to see me again... but even then, know this truth for what it is. For I... am YOU!"

Hearing her actually SAY it was enough to set him on his haunches. "Oh Rarity! Then why?! Why visit me, when you knew that the same blood runs through our veins?! While I must admit that the whole thing is rather kinky, now that I think about it, STILL! Were you merely attempting to play with my heart, as so many mares have tried before?"

The unicorn held a hoof to her chest as she gasped. "No, Elusive! I was... DRAWN to you. Even from our hiding place in the Everfree forest, I could feel the tugs of your presence in my heart!" She dared to take a few steps closer to the stallion, her eyes pleading and open. "Know that, though I had kept my identity hidden from you, the passion that I felt for you within my heart of hearts was nothing but true and genuine! I never meant harm for you! Indeed, if not for my own sister... if I didn't have Sweetie Belle waiting for me in my world... I would gladly stay with you by your side, forever!"

He stared at her, eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Oh, my Lady Rarity... you truly mean every word, don't you?"

"I do!" she squeaked, "Oh Elusive, I truly do!"

"Oh... oh *RARITY*!"

"Oh *ELUSIVE*!"

There was a scrambling of hooves, as the two white ponies suddenly became entangled with one another, hugging and kissing each other once more, tears of joy being shed by both parties.

From a distance, another pair of unicorns watched the scene. Twilight found herself tearing up, as the dressmakers continued their affectionate display.

"Well?" Dusk asked, watching the scene with a smile on his own mouth. "Good idea, or bad idea?"

"Good idea." she replied, before letting herself lean up against him. "I'm sorry again for doubting you. It's a bad habit of mine to second-guess myself."

He chuckled. "Why sis, I'm shocked. And here I thought only I did that."

"Uhm.... Dusk?"

The both of them turned at that voice, glancing down. Spines was standing at their feet, her eyes glancing back and forth from her adoptive brother, to the lavender mare who looked just like him. "Wow..." she breathed. "You two really are... wow. I'm... I'm not sure I... am I still asleep?" She took a moment to pinch her tail, yipe, and then look back at Dusk and Twilight. "Huh. Guess not."

"Spines." the stallion began, before placing a hoof on his double's shoulder. "This is Twilight Sparkle. She's... well, she's me. She's my female alter-ego from that parallel dimension to ours. Twilight, this is Spines. You... you already know." he gave a chuckle.

She gave him a nod, before lowering her head. "It's nice to finally meet you, Spines. I would say that you remind me of a certain someone, but at this point, it's rather cliché." She held out a hoof for a shake, which was nervously accepted.

"I... I hope that's a good thing." the dragoness replied, before taking another look around at all the ponies conversing in the library proper. "Not to ruin the mood or anything... but I've read about this in some of those Nann-gas Scooteroll lets me borrow. Shouldn't there be lots of... exploding, right about now?"

They laughed and chuckled at that for a few seconds, before looking at their friends again. Rarity and Elusive continued to hold and cuddle each other, while Fluttershy slowly and patiently explained to Butterscotch what had happened. The Apple farmers had managed to strike up a steady, if uneasy dialogue between themselves, while Pinkie and Berry leapt around the room, cheerfulness unabated.

And on top of one shelf, a blue filly pegasus sat, studiously ignoring the rainbow-maned stallion on the other side of the room, though the both of them kept trading looks and glares back and forth between each other.

"Those two were the only ones I was really worried about." the male magician admitted, looking over at Rainbow Blitz. "The ones with the uncompromising egos... They probably won't be able to stay in the same room for too long without getting into a fight of some sort."

The filly let out a breath, before nodding. "Then let's go ahead and get this over with." she stated, her horn lighting up and levitating a white vase out of her saddlebag. "I'm ready when you are, brother."

He nodded, before turning his eyes back to the restive, uneasy scene. "Let's hope that they'll be ready too."

"So... Applebloom, eh?"

The magicians had gone upstairs to perform fine-tuning of the spell. There was nothing left to do but wait. And talk.

Each double had paired off with themselves, with the exception of the two speedster pegusai. The two fashionistas had not separated once, the both of them still holding hooves, even as they proceeded into small-talk. Pinkie and Berry had found and dug out an old game called Twister, and had managed to talk their animal-loving friends and the one lone dragoness into playing with them. This left the two orange equines on the sidelines, sitting next to each other, as they tried to sort out the conflicted feelings amongst themselves.

"Yeah, that's right." the female Applejack replied to her male half's question. "When ah first saw Applebuck, ah done near had a heart-attack. It t'were just so... *weird*, seeing mah li'l sister as a colt. Ah dun think Rarity had it any better 'n me, but still. An' then ah... well..." here, she bowed her head down a few inches, as she recalled the first day in this dimension. "When we all first arrived here, ah had thought t' mahself, ah'd best not get attached t' anypony over here on this side... but then yer brother comes 'long, and th' next thing ah know, ah'm thinkin' o' him th' same as Applebloom back home. He's not mah sister... but he's so much like her..."

"... An' ah guess mah bein' suspicious didn't help matters none, did it?" the stallion added, a sheepish look on his face.

She waved a foreleg in reply. "Dun worry 'bout that none, AJ. We both know ah would'a done th' exact same thing, were th' horseshoe on th' other hoof."

He was slow to nod back, the gears in his head obviously churning. "Yeah... y'all're prob'ly right. Just... just thinkin' 'bout it is givin' me a headache."

"We tain't exactly thinkers, are we?" the mare gave a dry chuckle. "We tend t' feel things out first, you 'n me. Not like Big Macintosh an' his fancy mathematics."

Ears instantly perked up. "Big Macin-?... oh, oh, I see. He's your big brother, ain't he? Red Gala's double. Ah... ah have t' admit, ah'm havin' a hard time imaginin' her as a stallion..."

"Well, if it helps y'all any, ah cain't rightly picture 'im as a mare mahself." she assured. "Though if y' really want a comparison, look in a mirror an' imagine yerself red wit' short hair. Say..." the filly lifted her head to look in her double's face. "Does Red Gala happen t' look like me, any at all?"

The male farmer tilted his hat back, as he inspected his female reflection. "Hmmm... ah can see th' resemblance. Save she wears 'er hair loose all th' time... an', well, she's a good bit taller."

Applejack nodded back. "Makes sense. Ah can only guess she's every bit 'a good at buckin' dem trees as y'all are, eh?"

"Oh yeah. Ah do as much as ah can, but sometimes ah wonder if Red Gala don't carry half th' farm on her back... heh." He then faced her with an apologetic look. "If y' fell intah our world 'bout five days ago... then y'all got some buckin' t'do when y'all get back. Ah'm awful sorry 'bout that."

HAS it been 5 days? It feels like it's been longer. the apple mare pondered to herself. "Neh... tain't nothin' ah haven't done b'fore. Hey, least it's been an adventure an' a half."

"That also reminds me... Ah done apologized fer bein' rude at th' market place, but ah haven't said sorry fer chasin' you n' Miss Pie yet. So... sorry fer scarin' y'alls tails off."

She gave him a warm smile. "Ti's prolly a bit late fer th' scarin' part... but ah fergive yah, sugarcube."

He nodded back to her, before they both lapsed into a silence. From a corner, Butterscotch tripped trying to put a forehoof on a green spot, resulting in him falling on top of Pinkie Pie, who reacted with a giggle. The laughter filled the library, easing the overall mood somewhat.

"Say..." the orange stallion began again. "How much *did* our world scare you? Ah don't think Ah'd've handled it very well mahself..."

The green-eyed female tilted her head as she thought. "... well, at first? Yeah, t'was freaky as all git-out. But now that we've been here a while... ah kin' see it's just like any other ol' place y' would travel to. It tain't bad. Just... different."

"Yeah..." he nodded, before turning his head to focus on something else. "Real... different..."

For a second, Applejack was confused by the shift in tone in her other half's voice. But that didn't last long, as she moved her head to the side and found the object of his focus. The sight gave her a smile.

"Say... we know we're both feelin' types, right?"

"Uh-huh?" Male AJ replied, not looking back.

"So tell me... is it a pitterpat fer you, or is it more a thumpa-thud?"

That caused a reaction, as he suddenly turned away from staring at Rainbow Dash, a thick blush on his snout. "Uhm.. er, uh..."

She gave the colt a smile before blushing herself and turning to look at the other pegasus on the far side of the room. Apparently having made up her mind, she got to all four feet and stretched before whispering in his own ear.

"Ah dunno how long'll take fer them t' get the spell goin'. Now's as good a time as any. Her name's Dash. G'luck!"

There was a scramble of hooves as the draft horse shook his head, turning to see his filly-self trotting away to meet with his pegasus friend.

"Hmmm... do you think this strip here would look too gaudy?"

"Let me see... ah, I can see why you would think that. Just make it a bit thinner, that should do the job."

"Riiii-tiiyyyy.... aha! Correct as usual, my sweet! Oh, this will undoubtedly be the crux of our lines, love! I have SO much to thank destiny for, these past few days!~"

Rarity allowed her smile to widen as she leaned into her masculine self. It was amazing how much could be accomplished within a short amount of time. Whatever reservations the pair had about their true identities initially, they had been swiftly put to rest. The couple had more important things to take care of, such as an impromptu interdimensional Co-venture between the two clotheshorses, one that was bound to make quite a mark on BOTH their worlds.

"Such exquisite work~" she crooned, taking a look at the sketch between her own hooves. "And just think. Once we've returned, it's almost guaranteed that any modifications that I make to any of these, you'll also be making!"

Elusive turned to her and flashed that charming grin. "You know what they say, my love. Great minds, think alike!"

She giggled at this, before leaning in and planting a kiss under his chin. "Never before has it been more true~!"

They shared yet another intimate moment between each other, putting their eventual separation far from their minds. There were no words, simply snuggling and cuddling. And drawing.

At length, the stallion finally spoke. "So... Sweetie Belle, was it? Tell me... what's she like?"

At the name, the mare found her heart tightening. "She's... she's... well, you should know how it is. She's precious, and I could never trade her for anything in the world. Sure, she can be... clumsy, and annoying, and over-energetic..."

"Especially when her friends are around, right?"

"Oh most definitely. They're all such darlings, even when I can't *wait* to get them out of my mane. Still. I don't think I've ever... spent as long a time away from my sister as I have, these past few days..." she directed her eyes downward towards her hooves, as she sighed wistfully.

The white colt leaned in to nuzzle her cheek. "You must miss her terribly. I can only imagine what it would be like, to be separated from Sweepy for so long..."

"I do... I really do..." she sighed, nuzzling back. "I can't wait to see her again... but it's balanced out with how much I wish to remain by your side... How can I choose, Elusive? How can I choose between you... and her?"

There was a bout of silence between them, before it was finally broken by his voice.

"Choose her." he said, tilting her head up to look into his eyes. "Though I equally wish for us to remain together forever... I've even considered asking Dusk if I could be in on your 'return trip'... I realize that there's no way I could leave Sweepy Bell on his lonesome. Not willingly at least." He gave her an imploring look, gazing into her deep blue orbs. "Only promise me, even if you meet another stallion of your dreams in your world... you won't ever forget me. Will you?"

The unicorn felt fresh tears spring to her eyes as she realized that he was resigning himself to their fate. Something that she had yet to do herself. Even though his words rang true, she was still reluctant to admit that, despite how perfectly matched the two of them were, it could never truly work.

Her horn lit, and her saddlebag opened up, a pair of the rubies she had packed coming out into the open. She sat one in front of Elusive, before directing her eyes towards the gemstone in front of her. Her expression narrowed in concentration as her horn began to glow brighter. A sparking began to come off her jewel, a carving slowly making its appearance.

The stallion saw what she was doing, and instantly turned to his own ruby, his own magic going into effect. The pair remained silent in their tasks, gemstones flickering as their surfaces were etched, sparks flying every now and then. At long last, they finished, holding up their works for each other to admire.

The male had carved his name and signature eye into his. Rarity, with hers, had also signed her gem with a stylized flourish.

They looked at each other, and their horns briefly flared as holds were exchanged. The mare took her lover's gem, and placed it back in her bag, while the colt stowed hers away into his tail.

"I'll never forget you." Rarity finally spoke, her voice heavy. "We'll never forget each other... will we, love?"

He shook his head, before leaning in once more to nuzzle with her. "No, my love... we'll never forget."

Drawings forgotten, the two white unicorns simply laid there, enjoying their last few moments of togetherness, for however long it would last.

"I still don't want to go..."

"I know, dear... I know..."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The vase hummed with a steady glow, as a pair of magicians combined their forces to look into the voids unseen by mortal eyes. Though

their eyes were closed, they still conversed, as their consciousnesses weaved around, studying and probing the dark-matter ball of yarn that made up what they knew now to be the multiverse.

“Y’ know...” Dusk stated, as he mentally prodded a dark purple coil. “I’m still a little bit perturbed that you took so long to come out. Who knows what we could’ve done while you were recovering your energy?”

Twilight felt her head bow, as she looked over another dimensional thread. “I know... Still, I wasn’t exactly eager to test out some of those interdimensional travel theories. Imagine if they had been correct? We’d all probably have been wiped from existence several times over by this point.”

The stallion chuckled uneasily. “You got me there. Still, my point stands. There’s a lot of stuff we could have accomplished together.”

She found herself mulling the words over. “Yeah, I know... we probably could have caught up on our studying in half the time, if we really worked at it.”

“Or have tried out a few of the lesser arcane spells.”

“Or have tried our hoof at painting? You know that’s always interested me.”

“Hehe, true. We could have painted each other!”

“Now that’s something the Princess would love to read about....”

A silence suddenly fell over the two. In the waking world, Twilight opened her eyes to gaze at her other half.

“What’s Solaris like?”

Dusk opened his own eyes, as he found himself smiling. “He’s... he’s an absolute inspiration to me. I... I’m not sure there’s much more that I could say, that you wouldn’t have to say about your own Princess Celestia...” he paused there, and his eyes seemed to widen, as a blush came across his face.

The purple filly couldn't help but share his blush. "You've seemed to have come to the same realization I did... it seems weird, doesn't it? To think of our mentors as opposite genders... and then realize that the love and respect that we give them, can so easily bloom into something more..."

"Perhaps..." he gave a nod before continuing. "Perhaps that tells us something about our own selves, doesn't it?"

The silence from before washed over them again, and their horns ceased glowing. The vase stood inert, as they tried to marshal their thoughts.

"I'm going to miss you."

The filly's ears perked. "But... we've barely known each other for a few hours."

"Does that really matter?" The colt gave her an imploring gaze. "You're like the sister I never had. I've only just met you, and we've only barely gotten to know each other. And now, we're working on getting you and your friends back home... we're going to be separated again."

Twilight worked her jaw, trying to think of something to say. Nothing was coming forth. He was right. They weren't going to see each other again.

... and I don't want that. she suddenly realized. *I want to be with him now. I want to paint those paintings. Research those spells. SO many things I want to do with him... I miss Spike, but I'm also going to miss Dusk just as much...*

"I'm... I'm sorry," she stammered. "I-I didn't think this through. But you're right... we're siblings now. And that's just going to make this whole thing so much more... *painful...*"

Her eyes cast themselves to the floor, as the other unicorn fidgeted slightly in his seat. Uneasily, he got to his hooves and trotted over to her, looking at her face. When she looked back up to his, he sat himself and opened his arms wide... an invitation to a hug.

One that Twilight did not turn down.

They sat there for a minute or so in silence, listening to the hubbub coming up the stairs from below. Hooves wrapped around each other, they both shared their last few moments of siblinghood in peace.

"...hey." The stallion suddenly let his ears perk up. "I've got an idea..."

The mare felt her own ears perk in curiosity at the words. "Oh? Let's hear it."

He bent down his head to whisper. Soon, the unease was dissipated, as a smile played over Twilight's face at what she was hearing. *I may not be with Dusk for much longer... but that may change, with time.*

And that prospect, gave her hope.

"Howdy?"

Blitz had been in the process of dozing off, before the voice had interrupted that endeavor. Blinking, he rubbed his eyes and tried to focus. "Yeah? Who's there?"

"Down here, sugarcube."

The voice was southern, but it wasn't Applejack. At least, not the Applejack HE knew. He stuck his head over the bookshelf, and found himself face-to-face with the farmfilly. She was looking up at him with a kind and friendly smile... one that was familiar, but still wasn't quite the same, coming from a girl.

"Oh, um... hi." he replied. *Not quite sure how to handle this.* "Can... can I help you with anything?"

She kept staring, only blinking once or twice. "Actually hon, I was wonderin' if ah could do somethin' t' help you."

He stared at her. "What?"

"Ah mean, you're kinda off in th' corner all by yer lonesome. Y'coulda joined in on yer friend Berry's games, y'know. Twister's yer fave, ain't it?" The apple pony allowed a knowing expression to cross her face.

The pegasus found himself stuttering. "W-well, yeah, but... I just know that the instant I join in, SHE'S going to join in too. And I just..."

"Aww, c'mon, don't be like that!" The orange equine was giving him a pair of bright-eyes now. "If nothin' else, I could give y'all a bit o' company."

Dammit, he thought to himself. *Those have no right to look so cute on AJ's filly-faker.*

"Look." Blitz began, his hooves coming up in a placating gesture. "Listen here, Miss... wait, your name's the same as AJ's, isn't it?"

"EeeeYep." she replied. "Y'all kin' call me JayJay though, if y'want."

"Fine, JayJay. I um... appreciate your concern. But I'm fine. Really. I'm just waiting for you all to... y'know, go back to wherever you guys came from."

At this, Applejack had to chuckle. "Really now? Then why're you hanging around? No pony's stoppin' y'all from flyin' out 'n doin' that trainin'."

"It's because of *her*." He pointed a hoof over to the other side of the room, where his other half was currently undergoing a similar chat from his farmer friend. "If I let her out of my sight, who knows what she'll do? She might... I dunno, go out and do *another* Sonic Rainboom. And Ponies'll mistake her for *ME*. That ain't happening. Not on my watch." He finished this with a snort.

The blonde mare rolled her eyes, before looking back behind her. "Ah know she didn't exactly make a good first impression on y'all, but honestly. Ah'm a bit surprised y' haven't challenged Dash to a race yet. You'd think she'd be th' perfect challenge."

Now he found his ears perking up, despite his attempt at keeping an aloof attitude. "D... Dash?"

"Yeah, that's right." She turned to look back up at him. "Her name's Rainbow Dash. And you're Rainbow Blitz, am ah right?"

"Well... I won't say you're *wrong*..." The blue colt put a hoof to his chest. "I mean, besides... *her*... do you know of any other pegasus as quick, maneuverable and awesome as this one?"

She gave him a grin. "Or as inflated an ego an' as big a blowhard?"

That was pure Applejack. It just stunned him that it had come out of the mouth of a GIRL. He stared at her for a long few seconds as she smirked.

At length, he finally shook his head. "That was freaky. You sounded just like AJ."

"Well, ah kinda *am* him, sugarcube."

A groan. "What do you WANT from me?"

"Ah just wanted t' be neighborly." She offered a shrug. "Y'all looked like y'could use some company, an' ah thought Ah'd come on over 'n say hi. Really Blitz, just cause Ah'm a girl, y'don't have t' lookit me like ah just stepped off th' moon. Ah'm still Applejack!"

No, you're not! he nearly bit out in reply. Instead, he drew in a breath, before composing and speaking his answer. "Sorry, miss. I know that, up here in the noggin, you're *supposed* to be him. But... well I just can't see it. I mean... for one, your eyes are big."

The farmer blinked. "Uhm... Well yeah, got me there..."

"And secondly you're... well, you're all... *curvy*."

She couldn't help but giggle at this, as she shyly swayed her flanks. "Why, thank'ya kindly, sugarcube."

"And finally, you're... well, you're *SMALL*. You look frail."

Her expression instantly shifted into a stern look. "Frail?! Ah'll show you who's a frail pony! You pegasai tain't made o' nothin' but twig-fer-bones all 'round! Git down here, y' featherduster, hoofwrasslin' time, now!"

He was quickly learning to associate this filly-faker's image with that of his friend. That outburst was pure concentrated Applejack right there, and he had already gotten to his feet, fully prepared to accept the challenge, when he suddenly remembered *Oh yeah, this is a GIRL. WHY can't I keep that straight?*

"Erhm... ah... sorry, 'JayJay'." he replied nervously. "Ah... I-I usually don't make it a point to hoof-wrestle mares..." His eyes darted nervously about the room, trying his best to focus on anything BUT her.

AJ merely raised an eyebrow. She took the moment of silence to look about the room herself, a small rabble from behind her grabbing her attention. Her eyes and ears alighted on another spectacle, and she couldn't help but grin as she gave her reply.

"Then wouldja mind tellin' me what Dash's doin' right now?"

Rainbow Blitz blinked, and then looked over to the other side of the room... where he saw his female self and his REAL farmer friend caught up in the midst of their own contest of wills, grins set tight as forelimb struggled against forelimb.

"Wouldja lookit that." the apple filly stated in that tone of voice she KNEW frustrated her blue companion usually. "Looks like Dash tain't afraid of lettin' a li'l ol' thing like gender git in th' way of a bit o' friendly competition. Ahh well, so much fer' y'all bein' equals." She then turned her body away from the bookshelf, as if to trot off. "If y'all really that insistin' on bein' alone, ah guess Ah'll just mosey on then. Sorry t've wasted yer-"

"Okay. Okay. Wait."

She hid a grin as she heard the ruffle of feathers, accompanied by the clop of hooves alighting on the floor. When she turned back around, the rainbow-maned male was standing behind her, his eyes steeled, his pose trying its best to project a full aura of confidence. He took a few steps

forward, before sticking his snout in her face. "You and me. Hoofwrestling time. *Now.*"

Applejack nodded back, scoring this small victory in her heart, as she tried to keep the pitty-pats from coloring her face. As they walked towards a nearby desk, she noted the stallion looking over towards the other wrestling pair. Both parties seemed to have tired themselves out and were resting... Dash in particular, seemed to be looking straight at her doppelganger. But not with an expression of frustration like before.

If anything, she seemed... thoughtful? Whatever it was, it mirrored the look on his own face.

"Got any aces?"

"Hmmm... nope! Go Graze!"

"Darn." Berry sighed, as he drew a card. "So close, and yet so far."

Fluttershy couldn't help but giggle, hiding a smile behind her hoof of cards. "That's how the story of our stay here has been so far!"

There was a shared chuckle all around the four seated ponies, plus one dragon. After having finally tired themselves on the multicolored mat, the Pink and Yellow pony group had moved onto something more sedate. Pinkie and Berry so VERY much wanted to hold a party, but they had been continually vetoed every time the suggestion was aired. So, Go Graze it was.

"Aw gals, I can't say how much of a blast it's been!" Spines cheered as she leaned up against Pinkie. "Nothing against Dusk or the rest of you guys, but it feels good t' have a little girl time, y'know?"

Butterscotch smiled over at the scaled one. "It's not a problem, Spines. You're certainly not hearing me complaining!"

The balloon-marked filly snorted as she laughed. "I'm SO glad you're having a good time, Spines-sy! Even if this isn't a Pinkie-Berry Spectacular, if ponies are having fun, then that's good enough for me!"

"You said it!" Berry bubbled, bouncing in place and yet managing to keep his cards firmly secured. "Hey, if we still have time, maybe we can get AJ and AJ to join in! Twice the number of ponies makes for twice the fun!"

"Oh yeah, why not? The more gals, the merrier! I mean, not that there aren't... some complications..." Again, the dragoness's green eyes flickered not for the first time over to the corner where two white unicorns chatted, a dark expression on her face. "But still! I wish you girls had come out sooner! Who knows *what* we could've done?"

The pegasus mare among followed her line of sight, before smiling softly. "Oh, I would have loved to have done that, believe me. Uhm... though I don't know if you would-"

"Hey, I know!" Pinkie suddenly exclaimed. "If we ever come by here again, we should bring Spike with us! I bet he'd love a little 'guy' time himself!"

"Sp...Sp-Spike?" Spines stuttered, her reptilian brain already making the connections, and shutting down as a result.

"Yeah, Spike! Cutest little boy-dragon I ever saw! Well, he's the ONLY little boy-dragon I've ever seen, but I think he's still the cutest. We could bring him along and have the two of you meet and then maybe you won't be so jealous of Rarity being with Mister Pony-who-looks-just-like-Rarity anymore! You two should have a lot of fun, eenie-meenie-speenie-Spinesie! Oh, that's MUCH more fun to say than Spikey-wikey!" She gave another giggle, before returning her eyes to her cards.

There was no reply to that. The assistant's face wore a completely blank expression, the only hint of cognitive function going on inside being the rapid widening and shrinking of her slitted pupils, as she attempted to process what exactly the pony was insinuating.

"Hmmm... Hey Berry, can I ask you a question?" the pink filly spoke up, eyes still riveted to her hoof.

"Sure thing Pinkie!" The male perked his head up. "I think carrots in fruit salad should make a nice touch."

"*giggle* Crazy Colt, I already found that out earlier this week. No, I wanna ask. Do you know Blues?"

His eyes lit up. "Oh, the jazz-mare? Of course! Oh, wait, well, I guess she'd be a *he* in your place."

"Yeah, he is... so." She looked up at her double, face unusually serious. "Do you think we should?"

Berry thought long and hard, before looking back at Pinkie. Finally, they both nodded at the same time. "Yeah. We should." he answered.

The yellow pegusai exchanged confused looks between each other. Pinkie simply smiled as she replied. "Okie Dokie Lokie. Hmmm... got any 3s?"

"O-oh dear." Butterscotch sighed, picking out three cards from his hoof. "And I was SO close to a full set."

"Awww, it's okay." the filly sitting next to him reached her head over and nuzzled him gently. "Not even Pinkie can win every time. O-oh, by the way, would any of you happen to have any Queens?"

Angela made a noise, as she stuck out a card from her own hand. Fluttershy took the queen with a smile and a '*thank-you*'.

"You know..." the male pegasus started. "I'm still... a bit shocked. You, and Pinkie Pie, and all your friends..." he raised his head and looked back at the remaining ponies in the room. "You're all... *us*. Except as girls?"

He got a nod back. "That's right, Butterscotch. It's rather... strange, for me too I have to admit. But we never meant any harm, I promise!"

"O-oh, I believe you Fluttershy. Angela wouldn't have... well, I suppose you would know... um, but still. You knew that I was you. And... and yet, you... like me?"

She returned his gaze, a blush going over her cheeks as she fidgeted with her cards. "Well... you liked *me*. I mean... now that you know who I am... do you *still* like me?"

Butterscotch opened his mouth to answer. "Fluttershy... I... uhm, what I mean to say is... how could... t-that is-" He closed his mouth and stared into her aqua-green orbs, before simply nodding, a likewise redness going over his own features. Berry and Pinkie simply grinned from ear-to-ear while Spines suddenly snapped out of her trance, as they watched their friends begin to lean into each other, eyes slowly closing, lips puckering...

It was at that moment however that the library suddenly got very quiet, save for a pair of hoofsteps. Twilight and Dusk were descending the stairs.

The atmosphere changed. Gone was the moment of boredom and camaraderie, instantly replaced by a sense of excitement... and reluctance. Elusive and Rarity, who had so far kept to themselves, suddenly wrapped their hooves around each other again, as if the approaching unicorns were about to bodily rip them apart. Fluttershy, now knowing that the time was near, suddenly dropped all her cards and launched herself at her double, giving him affection that he was not likely to forget very soon.

Rainbow Dash glided towards her bookfilly friend, an air of indifference around her. "So? How'd it go?"

The lavender pony gave a smile. "I think we've nailed it. It was hard, but Dusk and I both managed to find our original dimension. Girls... we can finally head home."

That sealed the deal. All six fillies got to their hooves, before each one turned to their doubles.

Fluttershy blushed heavily as she disentangled herself from the yellow colt. "When Applejack gave me that message from you... did you really mean it?"

He nodded shyly, a blush of equal proportion to hers on his cheeks. "Y-yes... I did. I'll always think of you... Fluttershy."

"And... I'll always think of you too." She smiled back at him, before darting her mouth forward to steal one last kiss from his lips. While he was frozen in shock, she used the moment to turn and dash away.

Applejack watched her race past, before turning to her own stallion-self as he walked up to her. A sly smile spread across her face. "So? How'd it go?"

He returned her smile with a raised eyebrow. "She's every little bit like Blitz. Kept comin' up in ties, neither one o' us managed to out-wrestle th' other. You?"

The farmer filly tilted her hat back. "'Bout th' same, unsurprisingly. Yer Blitz's as stubborn as they come. Ah think ah managed t' get him thinkin' though. Ah kin' only guess y'all did th' same?"

"EeeeYup. Though ah gotta admit, ah t'was *not* expectin' her t' be so cute when she t'were frustrated... ah, erm, ah mean.." his snout turned red as he ducked his head down at his slip.

Fortunately, he was with his own self, who simply chuckled as she blushed alongside him. "Neither was I, t' be honest. Glad we had this chance, aren't you?"

They stared at each other for a long while, before they both extended hooves and shook.

"Take care o' th' farm, Cousin." the mare spoke. "Raise Applebuck right. He needs his big brother, whether he says he do 'r not."

"You too, Cousin." the colt replied. "And don't fergit t' give Cousin Honeycrisp a call. Ah bet they'd like some company sometime." He tossed her a wink.

With a shared chuckle, and a tip of the hat, the applebuckers parted ways.

The pair of pink ponies stared at the farewells between their friends, before they faced each other. They then exchanged a series of complex hoof-maneuvers and body gestures that could have been translated into

oaths in some arcane sign language or another. Towards the end, they crossed their hearts, flapped their forelimbs, and then each closed an eyelid as they stuck a hoof into it. Their farewell ritual ended with a clapping of hooves, and the exclamation "*Until Next Time!*"

With that, Pinkie Pie departed her colt self, bouncing to rejoin the rest of her friends.

She continued her humming, as she passed a scene of reluctant drama between two white unicorns. They were holding hooves... and it was obvious that neither one was willing to let go anytime soon.

"Oh Elusive... it looks like this is it!"

"Oh Rarity! I... I can only wish that this moment would never pass!"

"As do I! But... Sweetie Belle! Sweepy! We can't leave them be, can we?!"

"No... no we can't! Oh, the cruelty of obligations!"

"To have met, and then to never meet again!"

"To only know perfection in love for such a short time!"

"I..."

"I..."

The last word shared between them was not a word, but another kiss, the likes of which they'd never shared before. It was held to a depth so deep, it would have made bathyspheres implode, before they finally wrested themselves from each other. Rarity took to her hooves and galloped away, tears flowing, as Elusive distanced himself from her, lest his heart cause him to entangle with her once more, and prevent her reunion with her sister.

That just left Rainbow Blitz. The blue pegasus colt wound up joining the rest of the men along the walls of the library floor, eyes searching out and then trading yet another look with his female alter-ego. Dash looked

back at him, face now sharing more surprising emotions with his own. Those of panic and regret.

Twilight's horn lit up, as she levitated an already-prepared vase into the middle of the floor. Dusk spoke to the group of mares. "I'll be assisting Twilight in making contact with your dimension. Once you all get started, I'll get out of the way, and you all will be on your own way home."

"Thanks, brother." the magician thanked her other self, before looking over her friend's faces, taking in the variety of expressions everypony was wearing. "Are you... all ready to go?"

Applejack bit her lip. "Twi... Ah... ah think ah'm ready."
From the dressmaker, a heavy dramatic sigh. "Oh... if we must, we must."

"Uhm... I'm ready to go, if you all are." their yellow friend chimed in.

"A party waits for nopony!" Pinkie cheered.

"Yeah... yeah, let's go ahead and blow this joint already." Dash finally added, trying to sound more indifferent than she actually felt.

There were nods all around, as they sat themselves down around the ritual machina. The blue pony found enough time to direct a glare at AJ and whisper *"Your colt-self's got a crush on ME. Care to explain that?"*

While the farmer filly whistled in innocence, Dusk and Twilight turned to each other, closed their eyes, and lit their horns in tandem. "We're going to find the thread first, before casting the spell proper." the lavender mare told her friends. "Just give us a second."

"I marked the thing with a harmonic tag." the stallion spoke to his other self. "Keep your eye open for anything orange."

The prepared vase was enveloped in a familiar light. All the ponies in the room, male and female alike, fidgeted. You could cut the tension with a knife.

"Okay." Twilight spoke, her eyes still closed. "I *think* we have it. Is this it?"

"Maybe." he replied. "Give me a second to get a good look at-"

Something DID begin to cut through the air. A low hum that steadily increased in frequency, from a tinny noise, to a very prominent buzzing sound.

"*Oh no.*" Rarity's eyes grew wide as her ears perked. "Um... did anypony leave behind a note at the HEDGE before we left?"

"Oh! I did." Fluttershy replied. "I wrote 'Thank you Crusaders for your help. We couldn't have finished our mission without you.'"

"The Crusaders?" Spines stared from the sidelines with a shocked expression. "The Cutie Mark Crusaders? The same ones?"

"They *HID* you?!" Now Dusk had his eyes open, though his horn was still aglow. "I could've tracked down Applebuck or Scooteroll and *ASKED* them where you were, this whole time?!"

Twilight gave an apologetic grin, before her expression changed to one of joy, her inner eye spying the tag her other self had left. "I see it! This is the right one!"

"Quick, git 'er movin'!" Applejack spoke, raising her voice over the steadily increasing volume of buzz. "A'fore they get here 'n see us!"

The unicorn nodded, and bent her head down. The glow of the vase began to extend outwards, and Dusk quickly got to his hooves, nuzzling Twilight and whispering '*good luck!*' before he cantered away, leaving his sister's side as it enveloped all six females. The golden effluence began to intensify, the wind picking up around its edges...

And then the library door exploded *OFF* its hinges, as a scooter and wagon mowed down the offending obstacle in their path, before skidding to a stop. The three sets of eyes on-board the Crusader-mobile widened as they took in the sight in front of them. Six stallions. Six fillies. And a whole lot of glowin' and blowin' goin' on.

"Cousin JayJay?!" Applebuck cried out, spying the orange pony inside. He leapt out of the wagon and galloped as if to join her, but as he encountered the perimeter of the field, he bounced off. It had become solid, preventing anypony from leaving or entering. "COUSIN JAYJAY!!" he yelled, getting back onto his feet and pounding against the glow.

"Miss Rarity!" Sweepy yelled in turn, running up short of the field, even though his elder brother hurried in to pull him back. "MISS RARITY! *BIG SISTER!!*"

"Sweepy Bell!" Rarity called back, getting onto all four hooves as she fought back tears. "Sweepy! Elusive! Take good care of each other!!"

"Applebuck!!" Applejack herself cried out, locking eyes with her otherworldly sibling. "Ah'm sorry, but Ah've got t' go!"

"Go WHERE?!" he replied, his face bunching up in confusion. "Ah want'd y'all t' stay! Ah wanna git t' know you better! *Ah wanna be FAMILY wit' you!*"

"Ah'm so sorry!!" Her own eyes were tearing up as well, at the realization that she wasn't going to be seeing him again. "Ah'm SO sorry, sugarcube! Ah wanna be family wit' yah too! But Applebloom's waitin' for me! I can't... *I can't leave...*"

The field's glowing began in increase in magnitude. Unsecured papers began to flit about in the steadily encroaching winds, books flapping open and closed in the breeze. All the present ponies began to duck their heads down, shielding their eyes from the brewing maelstrom. As the farming stallion closed in to sweep up his younger brother, Scooteroll sat back, his purple eyes wide at taking in the scene.

Hey... I never noticed before... but that lady's got the same hat as Applejack! And that pink one... she looks just like Berry! And... And... Agent D... she really DOES look just like-!

The next thing that happened, NOPONY had been expecting. There was a whirl of blue wings, before two pegusai suddenly appeared on

opposite sides of the field, their faces wide and regretful, eyes hiding tears, rainbow-hued manes flapping in the wind.

"This isn't over!" both Dash and Blitz yelled at the same time. *"Don't you even PRETEND this is over!"*

"Y-you'll see!" The filly stammered, hooves pressing into the field as she tried to touch her other self. "We both know who the best flier in Equestria is!"

"Don't think for a SECOND that's you!" the stallion boasted in frustration and false bravado. "Next time... Next time, I want a REAL race!"

"You-! You're on! Maybe next time, you won't be so slow to face me!"

"Oh yeah!? Well maybe YOU won't be so stubborn when I kick your flank!"

"Hah! Well maybe YOU won't wait till t-the last minute to tell me how you feel!"

"Is that so?!" Blitz shook his mane as he tried to shrug off the increasingly heavy weight of regret off his back. "How... how do you THINK I feel?!"

"I think you feel pretty LOUSY!" Dash bellowed back, her own face a picture of frustration. "You're letting a pretty filly like me slip through your hooves!"

"Well maybe I AM! And I bet you feel the *same way!*" He looked up, and pressed his face as close as he could, rose irises locking with her own.

"So what if I do too?!" she pressed her face forward as well. She swore she could almost touch him. "J-jerk! You should've TOLD me sooner!"

Tears finally escaped from their eyes as Blitz yelled at the top of his lungs. "You-! You'd BETTER come back someday! I mean it, you Filly-Faker!"

“Same to you, you Colt-Crudder!”

"Rainbow Dash!"

"Rainbow Blitz!"

"I think I love you!!"

"I think I love you t-!!"

Suddenly, everything turned white. Those who didn't shield their eyes, found themselves blinded as the vase erupted in a pillar of light, piercing straight through the library's ceiling. Blitz found himself tumbling away as the field began to contract, compacting its occupants. Applebuck yelled at the top of his lungs, fighting against his brother's grip, while the rest of the stallions grimaced at the brilliant light display.

The last thing any of them heard was the dull clap of thunder as the ball of energy leapt out of the great tree and into the summer sky.

Epilogue

And Back Again



"Twilight?... you okay?"

"Huh? Oh... yeah, I'm okay Spike."

The dragon gave his boss a worried glance as he rode upon her back. "You *sure* about that, Twi? Ever since you all came back from your trip a couple of days ago... well, not to put too fine a point on it, but you've all been acting really *weird*."

The two were trotting along the streets of Ponyville, Equestria. Over at a nearby delicatessen, a blue-coated stallion blew long and hard on his sax, while a yellow mare with a carrot cutie-mark dug into her carrot-dog.

Above their heads, a grey-coated, blonde-haired pegasus filly flew by, a letter in her mouth.

The unicorn chuckled. "Where we went, Spike... it kinda had that effect on you. Can you blame us? Again, I apologize for having taken so long. Didn't expect to be gone for a whole week."

Spike shrugged. "It's no problem. Gave me a good bit of freedom, y'know. And it wasn't *that* much longer, just a couple days. Though Owlowicious was startin' to get worried... not like me, y'know, heheh..." he blushed slightly, before clearing his throat and attempting to regain control of the conversation. "The only thing I'm frustrated about is that you never got me my pizza."

She rolled her eyes. "I know, Spike. That's why I'm making it up to you now."

With that, she turned a corner, revealing the local Pizza Cottage, the tantalizing smell of Italian herbs and melted cheese wafting from its open windows. His eyes goggled at her and the restaurant, limbs scrambling to keep his perch on her back. "Y... y' mean it? Seriously?"

"Of course, li'l bro!" she replied, tilting her head back to give him an affectionate gaze. "You've MORE than earned it."

He smiled back at her, but still lifted an eyebrow. "That's another thing. You've been calling me your little brother a lot more often now than you did before you left... you sure you don't wanna tell me where you all went?"

Her eyes looked away in contemplation, before looking back to him. "Ask Scootaloo for some of her Neighponese comics. The science-fiction ones. That should give you a good idea of what happened, before I really tell you."

The little lizard's eyes widened further. "*You're* recommending Nann-ga to *me*? Are you REALLY SURE you're the real Twilight Sparkle?"

At this, she simply giggled as she sat down, allowing him to slide off. Once he was back on his feet, he found himself further beleaguered by an

affectionate filly hugging and nuzzling him with, to his considerable surprise, small tears at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Spike." she apologized again, her voice soft. "I just... *really* missed my favorite little assistant. My little brother. Where we went made me realize just how much you really mean to me. I missed you so much..."

"Awww... c'mon Twi, cut it out. Not in *publiiiiic*~" he groaned, his cheeks rather red as what little masculinity he had left was threatened by his adoptive sister's display of love. "Can't we wait till we get our pizza and head back home for that mushy stuff?"

"Sure thing~" she sang, as she relented and began stepping towards the pizzeria again, dragon quickly keeping pace. Her eyes lit up however, as a thought came across her mind. "Hey... do you really want to take the pizza back home, or do you wanna eat someplace else?"

"Either's fine with me." Spike replied, looking at the magician with curiosity again. "Why d'ya ask? Got someplace in mind?"

Twilight held a hoof to her mouth as she cast her eyes upwards. "There's this nice little place that me and the girls have heard about. It's a fair walk from here, but it's pretty well... hidden. Nice and private. It's called... the HEDGE."

"I think I remember the Crusaders mentioning it." the dragon spoke, doing his best to keep a pair of pizza boxes balanced on his head. "I think it was before Applejack showed them the treehouse. They were gonna use it for a clubhouse, if I remember right."

"That's right." the purple pony replied, as the two continued walking down the trail towards the Everfree Forest. "It's too close to the forest to really be safe for them... but we're full-grown ponies. We can handle it."

"If y'say so." he replied, taking a look at their surroundings. Nothing but grass and brush for yards around. The town was receding into the distance behind them, and the woods were drawing close. "Say, um... if it's

supposed to be so well-hidden, how do we go about finding it in the first place?"

The unicorn didn't say anything at first, her eyes simply scanning the premises. Finally, to her left, she spotted what she was looking for. A gathering of tall bushes.

"Over there." she directed, making a beeline, a confused reptile hot on her heels. As she approached, her eyes inspected the small gaps between shrubs. There, right where it had been in the other dimension. A small, dark opening.

"It's under here." she replied, turning back to her assistant. "It's... not been used in a while, so it'll probably be dirty, just to warn you. It's also a little steep, so watch your step."

With that, she lit her horn for light, and ducked down into the old warren, fully expecting an empty cave, with nothing much save a log and a rock table to be there...

... and instead, her eyes widened as she took in the interior. A few colored blankets hung on the walls, a small firepit had been dug out and lined with stones, and there were plenty of haystacks for seating. Hanging from a root in the ceiling was a firefly lamp, and the stone table she was expecting to be barren, stood festooned with a tablecloth and a vase full of daisies. In the middle of it all, a white unicorn hummed as she dusted the floor with her tail.

"RARITY!" Twilight exclaimed loudly, causing the dressmaker to yelp and turn in surprise. As she did so, another head popped up from behind the table, pink mane bouncing about. "And Fluttershy! Wha... what're you two doing here?!"

"W... w-why the same could be asked of you, Twilight!" Rarity replied, collecting her wits. "I hardly expected for you to return to our... little home-away-from-home."

"I-it was Rarity's idea," the timid pegasus explained. "After we got back... well, we both wanted to do something... you know, have someplace, well, to remember our visit by..."

"Woowoow." came a low whistle of appreciation, as Spike descended into the HEDGE proper, pizzas still in-hand. "Pretty swank, Twi! I thought you said the place was aban- Rarity! O-oh, goodness gracious my lady! I had no clue YOU'D be here!"

"That makes two of us." The lavender mare added. "Spike and I were going to eat our lunch in here. I had no idea that, well, that you'd have spruced the place up already. I had thought you were getting tired of the HEDGE, weren't you, Rarity?"

The white one simply sniffed, putting on her best nonchalant airs. "It's true, that after an extended stay, the quarters *did* become rather... cramped." She then opened her eyes, and looked up at the patchy ceiling with an affectionate smile. "But I must admit, the memories associated with this place... have lead me to become quite fond of our little hideout."

The dragon was completely confused. "Woah, woah, hold on here. What're you girls going on about? You haven't *seriously* been hiding out in this cave this whole entire past week, have you?"

"O-oh my." Fluttershy let her hooves go to her mouth. "You haven't told him yet?"

"Well..." Twilight bit her lip and looked down at her assistant, taking in his befuddled gaze, before letting her eyes lock with Rarity's deep blue ones. "Have *you* told Sweetie Belle?"

She fidgeted. "Well... perhaps... not yet. B-but I swear that I will! Eventually..."

Everypony paused as a new sound coursed through the air. It was a familiar buzz of rapidly-beating wings. Thankfully, this time around, the sound did not bring a wave of trepidation, like before, but instead, a group of smiles.

"Looks like you may get your chance sooner than later. We're about to have company." Fluttershy stated, before dipping her head to tug at the tablecloth, straightening it out. "I hope there's plenty of room."

"I hope they don't want any of this pizza either!" Spike grumped, setting the boxes on the table and placing an arm over them protectively. "We only got enough for Twilight and me!"

The buzzing eventually halted, and there were sounds of scuffling outside. Soon, the bushes parted as a trio of small schoolfillies paraded into the cave, their eyes quite wide as they noticed the redecoration.

"Whoo-wee!" Applebloom gushed, orange eyes roaming the walls. "Who went 'n made th' HEDGE a bona-fide clubhouse while we were gone?!"

"Rarity!" Sweetie Belle replied, both as an answer, and as an exclamation as she rushed into her elder sister's hooves. "Big sis! How'd YOU find the place?"

"Ooooh... a little pony told me." the white horse let her eyes drift upwards mischievously. "Really Sweetie, it *is* too close to the forest for you girls, but as long as you're with one of us, I see no harm in you all using this place as well!"

"That's right, sugarcubes. Y'all kin' hang out here fer a right long while, long as somepony older's about!" came a familiar southern twang.

Everypony present turned to see Applejack descending from the hideout's entrance as well. She gave them all a beaming smile as she trotted over and sat herself next to her younger sibling. "Howdy gals. Fancy meetin' y'all here."

"Applejack!" Twilight managed to squeeze out past her continually surprised expression. "Watching over the Crusaders today?"

"That's right. An' they just *HAPPENED* t' let slip 'bout this here li'l ol' hidin' place they had b'fore th' treehouse. So ah says, 'How 'bout you all let me take a look 'n see if it's as good ah place as y'say?"

"Siiiiis!" The smaller earth pony sighed, before leaning up against her. "Ah keep tellin' yah, we din' say nuthin'! Ah STILL dunno how y' found out 'bout it!"

"Aww, that ain't real important now, is it?" the farmer lowered her head to nuzzle at her sister's mane. "What matters is, ah think this's a right good li'l place. And Ah'm glad that everypony else thinks so too, don't you?"

Applebloom rolled her eyes, but leaned her head up to accept the nuzzling. She glanced over to Sweetie Belle, who was also being slathered with affection from her own sister.

"*They weren't all this lovey-dovey a'fore they left, were they?*" she whispered.

"I don't think so." The small unicorn replied, closing an eye as Rarity kissed her cheek. "You guys've been really... um... close, since you all came back."

"Tell me about it." Spike quipped, directing a glare in Twilight's direction. "Suffocating's the word I'd probably use."

Scootaloo rolled her eyes at the entire scene, before her nostrils widened. "Mmmm... is that pizza I'm smelling? Is there garlic chips and feta? I wouldn't mind a slice, scooting around three ponies makes a girl hungry."

The dragon panicked slightly, both arms now covering his precious boxes of Italian pie. "N-n-no, there isn't! Look, I don't know what's going on, but we had NO idea there'd be so many PONIES here! It's not like we'd planned to have a Pizza party!"

"A PIZZA PARTY?!" Pinkie Pie cried out, suddenly popping up from behind the log-constructed counter. "SPIKE, you've READ my MIND!!"

Everypony present let out a yipe of surprise. "Pinkie!" Fluttershy gaped, recovering her wits. "How long have you been there?! And how did you get-"

"It's Pinkie Pie." the orange pegasus groaned. "That's all we need to know."

The pink earth pony nevertheless, answered the question. "Well, I was hopping through Ponyville today and I saw Twilight and Spike going

into the Pizza Cottage and I found myself thinking OH HEY, I never got to eat at any pizza places while we were gone, I mean, I totally had my mouth set on Mushroom and Olive right before we left, and then we spent a WHOLE WEEK without having anything itallion! So I decided hey, I think Rarity and Fluttershy are at the HEDGE, I know what I'll do! I'll order a buncha pizza and have ourselves our very own *PINKIE PIE PIZZA PARTY* here at our good ol' hidey-hole hiding spot!"

Applejack exchanged confounded looks with Twilight and Rarity, before turning back to the party filly. "But Pinkie... sugarcube, while that shore does sound lovely... ah shore don't see any pizza on you. Didja order delivery? If y' did, then th' poor delivery pony's gonna have a heck of a time findin' th' place!"

"Oh Applejack~" The frizzy-maned one giggled as she waved a hoof. "Don't you worry your little appley head about it! I made sure that we had a SPECIAL delivery pony take the order!"

As if on cue, another noise began to issue from outside the cave's exit. The steady whoosh of beating wings. As one last pony entered the premises, smiles were beamed all around, accompanied by one hero-worshiping gaze, at the blue mare with the vibrant mane and at least five pizza boxes stacked on her back.

"Delivery!" Rainbow Dash called out. "Fresh piping hot Pizza Pie! Straight from the oven to your door in ten seconds flat, or your money back!"

"Rainbow Dash!" Scootaloo cheered, galloping towards her idol. "Oh wow, so much pizza! Did you *really* get from there to here in ten seconds? Oh, I bet it only took you FIVE!"

The pegasus only smiled as she allowed herself to be unloaded by her friends. "Heya squirt." she said fondly. "Didja miss me? Sorry I've not been 'round a lot, just had a lot of practice to catch up on."

"I remember." Rarity smiled at her friend. "The Double Rainboom was just as lovely to see as it was before."

"Oh yeah, it was AWESOME!!" the small fanfilly gushed, hopping in place. "I saw it! It was the most spectacular thing I'd ever SEEN! Rainbow Dash, you're like, the coolest pony in all of Equestria! I can only hope that I'll be half as good as you!"

The elder pegasus's expression softened, as she recalled the words of another orange pony worlds away. "I bet you'll do better than half. Y'know... now that I think about it, the Junior Speedster's Flight camp is about to start soon. Aren't you going to be attending?"

Scootaloo paused in her cheering, a blush going over her face. "W-well... I-I'd like to, really. I-I mean, they're supposed to teach me how to fly and all... I just don't think..." at this point, she lowered her head as the words were reduced to a mumble. "I-I mean... I'm not sure if I'm really ready. I've been practicing, but... I still can't get very far off the ground..."

"Hmmmm... in that case... how would you like to have your *very own* personal trainer?"

Purple eyes shot open as she stared at Dash, who merely wiggled her eyebrows and grinned. A split-second later, she chuckled as the orange filly glomped her and hugged her tight. "Oh THANK you Rainbow Dash! *Thank you thank you THANK YOU!!*"

"It's no problem, Scoot. You'll enter that camp with an edge above all the others once I'm done with you! Gonna warn ya though, don't expect me to go easy on you!"

"I can take it, Dash!" Scootaloo assured, releasing her hold on her idol and landing on all fours in a readied pose. "I promise, I won't let you down! Maybe I'll even get to find my cutie-!"

"COME AND GET IT~!"

They were interrupted by the powerful lungs of a pink-maned pony, still seated behind her bar counter, which was now covered with opened pizza boxes. The familiar aroma of melted mozzarella and garlicky tomato sauce reached everypony's noses, and there was no hesitation as plates were distributed and slices of cheesy heaven were collected.

Spike, head still reeling from the spontaneous onset of a party, left the pandemonium and sat himself on the log bench up against the wall, before blinking and remembering that he was still carrying HIS pizza box around. With little fare-the-well, it was opened. If everypony was gonna eat pizza too, then why shouldn't he? "Girls." he mumbled, before taking a bite. "Go figure."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders took their slices and joined the dragon, while the elder mares regrouped around the table. Twilight herself was still blinking, her own pizza box opened as she idly munched a slice of her zucchini blossom and olive. "Wow... Pinkie, you are just *full* of surprises, you know that?"

The Pie pony simply grinned at her. "Silly filly, what's life without a few surprises along the way? BOR-RING~, that's what!"

"Well I for one, am not complaining." Rarity soothed, as she daintily nibbled a slice of sunflower seed and onion. "Pinkie, this is a most *excellent* idea. What better way to throw a cave-warming soiree' than with a pizza buffet?"

"Yof seid iff!" Rainbow agreed through a mouthful of pizza. "Whfn Pinkie Pie toffed thph idhea hft mfh, ahf waf- **gulp** I was ALL over it! It's a good thing you and Spike already ordered yours, Twi, pizza boxes aren't that aerodynamic. Any more, and it woulda taken me a whole MINUTE!"

Applejack chuckled from her slice of apple on white sauce, before turning to the pegasus, her eyes darting back and forth between her and the crusader in the background. "Y'all really meant what y' said, Dash? You showin' Scootaloo th' ropes 'n all. You sure y' can even handle it?"

Dash looked back behind her, before giving a shrug. "To be honest... no, I'm not sure. You all know, I'm no good at this 'older sibling' stuff. But... darned if I'm not gonna try! I mean, if Scoot was... that is, uhm...if he..."

Fluttershy simply nodded back, a piece of five-cheese and daisy petals halfway to her mouth. "It was Scooteroll, wasn't it?"

"...yeah, it was. He'd told me he was hoping Blitz would become his teacher someday. I had no idea. But I knew that if *he* had those hopes...

then Scootaloo would probably have them too." She dipped her head down, eyes staring at the tablecloth. "I kinda wish I... hadn't been so bull-headed now... wish I had told Blitz about that, before we left..."

There was a bout of silence, before Twilight scooted herself closer to the pegasus, and laid a hoof on her shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Dash. I mean, who knows? They *are* a parallel dimension, after all... perhaps, even as we speak... maybe he's already offered the same to Scooteroll. Maybe, in their world, they're all right here, right now, with us."

"Here in th' HEDGE." the farmer pony nodded in agreement.

"Havin' a party!" Pinkie chimed in.

"Reliving happy memories." Rarity added.

"Thinking... of us." Fluttershy finished.

There was a long pause of silence, as the six friends began to contemplate. Yes, it had been unintended, but now that they were back home, those memories they shared were cast in a fond light. Meeting Dusk and Butterscotch, Rainbow Blitz and the stallion Applejack, Elusive, and Berry Bubble. Meeting your own self, was an experience that... had no words.

"... we'll never forget them, will we?" Dash asked.

There were various sounds of agreement. The white unicorn in particular, levitated an etched ruby out into the open for all to see.

"As long as we keep in mind that our homes are theirs... that we are both reflections of each other's hearts... as long as we keep the HEDGE alive... I can't see how we ever will." She gave them all a smile, though her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

The silence that followed was filled with the munching of pizza, broken only once by a timid and forlorn voice.

"... i still miss butterscotch..."

The pink party pony slid over to her yellow winged friend, and leaned up against her, before looking up and giving the purple unicorn an unusually serious gaze. "Twilight, do you think... maybe someday, we could...?"

Suddenly, the student found herself the center of a barrage of gazes, all of them pleading. The first time they had turned to her with those, it had been with hope that she would be able to take them home. Now that they were back, safe and sound, the opposite was true.

"I still..." Rainbow Dash gulped. "I s-still want to challenge Blitz to a race someday..."

"You know me, dear." Rarity added. "For a few more moments with Elusive... to even bring Sweetie along and have them meet... I would almost give anything..."

"I never got to have my hybrid party with Berry, y'know!" Pinkie stated, giving another look to Twilight. "I'd love to get together with him and finally hold it!"

"If y' do, it'll have tah be a private li'l shindig." Applejack chuckled. "Say... at th' Acres? We got plenty o' room, should anythin' world-endin' happen there."

Twilight could only shake her head. "Girls, believe me. I-I miss my brother too. But... even if we *did* try again, there's no guarantee we'd find the exact same dimension again. Besides..." she leaned in, a smile on her face nonetheless. "You wouldn't want to arrive there, and then find out that we'd missed them, because they thought the same things you all are thinking right now, right?"

That brought cheer to the table, as the six equines gave heartened looks to each other. "H-having them, come and visit us?" the butter pegasus pondered softly. "I... I don't think I would mind that."

The farmer looked behind her at her younger sister, before chuckling. "Boy howdy, ah kin' see it now. Cousin AJ'd prob'ly have a conniption fit like me, seein' Applebloom."

"So... we wait then?" the multihued mare questioned, eyes looking hopeful. "I... I think I can do that."

"We wait." Rarity agreed, holding the gem close and letting it rub against her cheek. "We wait... and we hope."

And with that, eating returned full-force to the six, as they let that single thought buoy their spirits. Even though they might be worlds apart, even though each of them still had mixed feelings, they couldn't disagree that they all now felt the same towards their other halves. A feeling of camaraderie.

A feeling of friendship.

Purple eyes popped open, before the magician stood up from the table. "Excuse me for a second girls. Need to take care of something."

"Sfur finhg Thwi!" came a muffled reply from Pinkie, cheeks bulging with cheese. "Anythinf beg?"

"Just need to send a letter. Spike~?"

The dragon popped his head up at the mention of his name, before dashing over to her. "Yeah Twi? What'cha need?"

Twilight gave Spike a soft smile, before lighting her horn. Out of her tail, came a wrapped scroll.

"Spike," she began. "Would you mind sending this to the Princess, please?"

"A friendship report?" the dragon asked, taking the parchment into his claws as if it were a precious artifact. "I don't think I recall you writing one since you've gotten back."

"I had it prepared while we were... away." she explained. "Could you send it, please? Celestia's probably worried sick by now."

He saluted smartly, before trotting over to the HEDGE's entrance. With a deep breath, and a gout of green flame, the paper was incinerated,

the mystical smoke curling for a second before whisking itself out the opening, into the air.

"Say, Twilight?" Applejack spoke, having watched the exchange. "Ah don't 'xactly recall you writin' anythin' while we were there either. What'd you put in thar, anyways?"

She got a chuckle in reply. "It's just a letter... from me, to myself. Now come on. Let's not let the pizza get cold! This is a party after all!"

"YEAH!" Pinkie enthused. "Pin-The-Tail-On-The-Pony time!!"

From outside, if one were to walk by a random patch of shrubbery, one could almost imagine the noises of a party going on beneath its roots. The sounds of their joy and warmth continued, as music, laughter, and memories warmed the HEDGE. The party continued well into the night, and as they all finally curled up to sleep, they imagined a strange world waiting outside their cave. A world like their own, but at the same time, different. A world they had touched once... and were looking forward to its touch yet again.

Court Canterlot had been slow today. *No surprise there*, thought Celestia. *It's been a dull few days as of late.*

Idly, the regent of Equestria's thoughts turned back to her pupil as the last set of nobles finished their presentation on the state of lemon crops in Hoofington to her and bowed, thanking her for her time. She usually would have paid much more rapt attention, but the lack of friendship reports from her protégé had unsettled her slightly. Had something happened to Twilight? *Maybe I should pay a surprise visit to Ponyville. Nothing saying I can't use these old wings every now and then...*

Thankfully, she wouldn't have to wait much longer. As the two nobles opened the court door to exit, a stream of silver smoke rushed in. The monarch's eyes widened in delight as the dust paused in front of her, swirled for a second, and then flashed into its original shape as a scroll, descending into her telekinetic grip.

Without ceremony, Princess Celestia tore the bind and unwrapped it, her eyes greedily taking in the words on the page.

The expression on her face however, shifted from one of joy, to one of confusion. Carefully, she re-read the letter again, her lips moving silently as she self-dictated... before finally, a smile of comprehension graced her face once more.

So it has finally happened.

"Guards." she intoned. "Court is closed for the day. I desire a moment in private. Wait for me outside. I won't be long."

The twin unicorns that kept station at her throne both nodded, before taking to their hooves and trotting across the floor out into the hall. With a thud of the doors, the princess had her privacy. All the better, for what she was about to do.

She stepped from her seat, and cast her eyes about the grand room. There. A full-length mirror that hung on the wall. She trotted towards it, scroll still in her grip.

The alicorn took in the image of herself as she approached it. She didn't think she looked bad, for a mare of a thousand plus. Then again, she didn't think *he* looked bad for a pony of his age either.

With a smile, she stopped in front of the silvered surface, before leaning forward and touching her horn to it. *40.1 Kiimehertz.*

The frequency of magic vibrated the mirror in its stand, ripples forming in the center and pooling outwards, like a drop of water in a pond. Her reflection bent and wavered in the undulations, the form on the other side undergoing a change.

For a few seconds longer, she held the frequency, before stepping back and taking another look. Now standing on the other side of the mirror, was still a white Alicorn, to be certain. But instead of a flowing mane of blues, greens, and purples, their hair resembled the soft flames of a fire, coated with reds, oranges, and yellows. A more stately-than-elegant

accrue ment of ornaments covered their person, complementing the pony's barreled chest, slightly flared legs, and goatee-adorned chin.

They were also holding a scroll. Their lavender eyes blinked for a second, before the squared face broke out into a smile.

"Princess Celestia!" the stallion spoke. "Always a pleasure to see you!"

"Prince Solaris!" the monarch returned, a smile on her face as she viewed her other self. "It's been far too long, don't you think?"

"Oh, you're telling me." her male counterpart replied, rolling his eyes. "I apologize terribly for not having gotten in touch as often as I'd like."

"You needn't apologize, Solly." she soothed, a hoof reaching up and through the mirror to rest on her doppelganger's shoulder. "I've been just as busy as you have, if not more so. You know the nature of our dimensions, after all..."

"Oh, I can imagine. How is Luna, anyways? Does she fare well?"

"She's doing fine. She's been recuperating, and just a month or so ago, she began taking on her old duties once more."

"That's excellent news to hear. I hope she's taking the new nightlife in stride."

"Oh, she is, believe me. But you would know, wouldn't you? How IS Artemis, by the by?"

"He's doing just as well. I don't know about you, but I'm glad this entire Anarchy Apollo situation is behind us."

She gave him a wry grin. "Nightmare Moon in my world, dear. Still, as well as our siblings are doing, we would do good to keep our eyes on them... we can only hope that they'll be able to forgive themselves, in time..."

Solaris nodded back at her, before his eyes flickered over to his scroll. It hovered forward. "I believe that I have something that was meant for you."

She nodded, and floated her own scroll towards the gent. "The same here. Rather surprising to get a letter delivered to the wrong address!"

They exchanged their psychic grips, and pulled the pieces of parchment through the mirror's frame, each one now resting in their home dimensions. The two white horses looked back at each other, before Celestia finally spoke the question on her mind.

"Were they very much trouble?"

Solaris nickered in a chuckle. "O-ho, let's see. Young Rainbow Dash made *quite* an impression on Blitz, the two dressmakers actually prayed for a blessing in love from me, and from what I understand, Miss Pinkie Pie and Berry Bubble very nearly brought about the end of Equestria. *How* they were going to do it is still beyond me."

The wise mare let out a laugh. "Oh my, our students certainly have an imagination! They have a way of assuming the worst of things, don't they?"

They shared a hearty bout of mirth, before they returned to their conversation. "Speaking of Twilight... tell me, what did you think of her?"

The prince gave her a smile. "She's an astounding pony, Celly. To be able to cross the dimensional divide by pure accident. And then, that night when she finally revealed herself to Dusk, I was quite pleased to see her own character on display.

It was *quite* cute to see them, especially when they shared the bed!"

Celestia let her hooves fly to her mouth as she let out an un-ladylike squeal. "Twilight shared a bed with Dusk?! *AW!* I am SO jealous Solly, I wish I could have seen that!"

"You would have loved it. I was watching to make sure they didn't do anything, you know, 'untoward'. And they were both so nervous and timid!

But it was also very serene, once they relaxed. Held in each other's hooves, each one comforted by the other, like a brother and sister should." He closed his eyes and remained motionless, aside from his red mane billowing in the solar wind, before he spoke again. "I was so proud... and you should be too, Celly."

"I am." she smiled with a parent's pride, shaking her mane."Even WITH the things that our little ponies get into."

"Indeed." he responded, shaking his own head and returning her smile. "And we wouldn't trade them for anything in the world."

They simply stood there and looked at each other for a few seconds more, before a chime began to sound in the distance, from both sides of the mirror. The twin deities both heaved a sigh.

"*Sundown in fifteen minutes.*" they both said at the same time, before looking back at each other, and then breaking into another round of chuckling.

"It's been a pleasure, as always, Solaris." Celestia spoke, reaching a foreleg up to touch hooves with him through the frame. "I'll try to be in contact again soon."

"No worries, Celestia." the prince assured, shaking her hoof as he tossed his mane. "Besides, the way that Dusk has been since they left, we *may* be seeing each other again sooner than you think."

The white mare smiled in anticipation as she bowed her head, the stallion returning her actions. "Safe times, Prince Solaris."

"Safe times, Princess Celestia."

They then both turned as if to leave, but the male stopped in his steps, before looking back. "Oh, and Celly?"

Having fully turned around, she tilted her head as she looked behind her. Solaris proceeded to give her something completely out-of-line, had it come from anypony else: a rougish wink and a grin.

"See you later, *sweet thing*."

A likewise grin erupted on her face, as she proceeded to wiggle her flanks in his direction. "You too, *hot stuff*."

At last, the vision of her male reflection began to waver once more, the harmonic energies infused in the mirror finally wearing off. As the surface rippled back into its previous silvered form, the ruler of Equestria stepped back into the middle of her court, her mind imagining him doing the same, still wearing the grin she sported as well. She admitted to herself, she was REALLY looking forward to next time. *Even a goddess needs to get her kicks every now and then!*

Finally, her lavender eyes drifted back towards the paper that she carried with her. The seal was already broken, but that was fine. The ivory equine unrolled it, and lifted it up to take in this latest missive from Twilight Sparkle, a smile playing across her face.

Dear Princess Celestia

If this letter gets to you, then you probably already know of the adventure that my friends and I have been on. It was a complete accident, I assure you. But now, looking back on it, I don't think I would have traded it for the world.

When we landed there, it was scary, when we finally realized where we were. Sometimes, a new place can scare you when you see things that are so similar, and yet at the same time, so different from home. But just because the place is different, doesn't mean it's bad. Different can be good, and kind, not to mention fun. Just as long as you remember to be yourself.

Knowing yourself is a tricky thing. You think you know exactly how you would react, given a certain situation. But sometimes, you wind up surprising yourself, as you see sides of your own personality that you've never seen or considered before.

My friends and I have learned that even when faced with our own selves, we have to recognize that things will never go exactly as how you think they should. And sometimes, that's a good thing. How else can a

pony grow, and get to better know themselves than to make a few mistakes along the way?

I know me and my friends will never forget this place, or the lessons we have learned here during our stay. As I'm writing this, they're all downstairs, saying their goodbyes, while my brother writes his own note. We intend to trade them, and send them to our own respective mentors. It may seem unconventional, but at least this way, it will not only explain my absence, but also give you something of the world that my friends and I have touched. Have you been there, Princess? If you're reading this, I would have to assume so! I would love to hear about it soon!

I hope that this letter finds you in good health. Even if it never makes it back to you, I'm glad I had the chance to write this. I know that Dusk Shine is!

Your Faithful Student

Twilight Sparkle.

P.S. Prince Solaris, when you read this, I hope you don't mind a feminine perspective of your favored student! Dusk is fine, and he says hello. Expect an actual letter from him soon. Hope to meet you in person someday!

"Someday, Twilight Sparkle." Prince Solaris hummed, as he turned and strolled towards the court door, the scroll wrapped and placed into his chestpiece. A smile played across his face.

"Someday."

~ ON A CROSS AND ARROW ~

There was a whisper of wind.

The serene and empty road into Ponyville laid bare, only a couple of birds resting in the trees bearing witness to the sudden scene that unfolded.

A maelstrom suddenly erupted, as if torn from sheets of a mighty hurricane itself. Dust flew into the air and the setting sun's brightness suddenly became a back-lighting, as from the sky, a pillar of purest white suddenly descended.

It hit the earth with a muffled thunderclap. A final rush of wind shook the trees and scattered loose pebbles and leaves, as the impact blasted a wave of air outwards. It was certainly enough to send the birds flying.

Just as quickly as it had started, the noise ceased. A cloud of debris continued to float around the site. After a minute of silence, another sound cut through the quiet: that of a small pony, coughing.

"**ahack!* Uhh... **ahack!* Mister... Mister Presto? Mister Great and **ahack** Powerful Presto? You there?"

There were more sounds of scuffling and small clopsteps, as the young pony tried to wave away the cloud of dirt. Gradually, his form came into view as the dust began to settle. Though a fair amount of the dirt clung to his yellow hide, the young colt's orange eyes remained undeterred, even when he took off his baseball cap and waved at the cloud some more.

"**ahack, ahack!* Mister Presto? Where... where'd you go?" he questioned, obviously looking for somepony. Once he deduced that he was actually alone on the road, he began taking in his surroundings once more.

"It don't *look* like ah moved any... did Mister Presto get moved instead? Ah mean, he's s'posed t' be the second best unicorn in Equestria! Ah wouldn't think he'd be able t' get it wrong!"

When it became obvious that he'd get no answers from an empty patch of road, the young boy pony finally turned himself towards the small village in the distance. He set his eyes in determination, and placed his hat back on his head, before rearing up onto his hindlegs.

"If it *did* work... then maybe ah actually made it! But Ah won't know f' sure till ah find out! So... here we go!"

And with that, Applebuck began galloping towards Ponyville, yelling at the top of his lungs.

"JAYJAY!! COUSIN JAYJAY!! AH'M-AH COMIN'! *WAIT FER ME, COUSIN JAYJAAAAAY!!*"

By the time he made it into the town proper and began encountering ponies, he was simultaneously heartened and unnerved to learn that he had indeed, landed in the right dimension.

The earth-pony's eyes were wide as he spotted familiar faces. Ones that were soft where they were once strong before, and vice-versa. He did a double-take as a pony he knew as 'Lemon Hooves' in his world walked past him, and then yet another as 'Pokey Pop' strolled through his path. The former was now a filly, the latter, now a stallion. All the colts were mares now, and all the mares were colts!

He shook his head as he tried to think. *Ah need tah find Cousin JayJay! Even if she's... not really mah cousin, ah still want tah find her! She's not Red Gala, an' she's shore not Applejack! She's... she's th' big sis ah never had! And ah wanna be wit' her!*

A young colt in a mare's land, Applebuck nevertheless steeled himself. He pointed himself towards the marketplace, a clear vision of the Sweet Apple Acres fruit stand in mind. He would have reached there unimpeded as well, if only he hadn't given himself tunnel-vision and accidentally run into another pony.

"Awp!" came the voice, as he felt his forehoof land on something that *wasn't* ground.

"Oh!" he yelped, jumping back a step. "Ah'm so sorry, are y'all all-riii....?"

Harpsy and Babar were both giving him a curious look, the cream-coated pony in particular rubbing at a hoof. At least, they *looked* like Harpsy and Babar. But their shorter stature, rounded curves, and delicate snouts unequivocally marked them as mares instead of stallions.

"Oh, it's okay dear." the not-Babar soothed, a patient look on her face. "Though you should really keep a better eye on where you're going."

"A little preoccupied, are we?" the female Harpsy spoke up, giving the colt a smile. "Say, I don't think I've seen you around before, actually. You new here?"

"Uhm... a-ah yeah, ah am." the red-maned pony bashfully replied. "Ah just... got into Ponyville t'day, y'know. Hey, uhm... real sorry 'bout th' trippin' up, ah was just..."

Both fillies chuckled. The mint unicorn spoke yet again. "Well then, welcome to Ponyville! I'm Lyra, and the one you nearly tripped up here is BonBon. If you're lost, we can give you the grand tour of the town, if you'd like!"

Applebuck worked his jaw a few times, before managing a reply. "Ah... Well... ah... ah thank y-ya kindly, but... ah... ah'm just lookin' fer m-mah Cousin JayJay. She lives here in Ponyville, and ah wanted t' visit."

The mares blinked, before looking at each other. "JayJay... I don't know any JayJay." BonBon hummed. "Can you think of anypony named that, Lyra?"

"No-one comes to mind... then again, it's not like we know *EVERY* pony in Ponyville, that's Pinkie's job. I bet if we asked her-"

"A-ah'm sorry." the yellow colt interrupted, his cheeks slightly red from embarrassment. "T-that's just what ah call her. Her... her actual name is, uhm... Applejack." It felt odd to say the name out-loud and not be referring to his elder brother at the same time.

Thankfully, the two faces lit up in recognition. "Oh, APPLEJACK!" the musician exclaimed. "I should have guessed, with your accent and all. I'm afraid you just missed her."

The curly-haired equine nodded as well. "She was packing up the stall in the marketplace when we last saw her, a minute or so ago. If you know where the Acres are, you might could catch up with her!"

At this, the little pony cheered. "Yee-haw! That's all ah wanted t' know! Thank 'ya Har- ah, a-ah mean, Miss Lyra. And thank 'ya too Miss B-...B-BonBon!"

They waved farewell to him as he galloped quickly off in another direction, angling himself towards the apple farm. Once he was out of sight, the candy-maker put a hoof to her mouth, humming in contemplation.

"That colt... he kind of reminds me of a certain *other* little pony, don't you think?"

"Hmmm... now that you mention it, yeah, he does kinda. How exactly though, I'm not sure. Can't really put my finger on it..."

"... hon, don't you mean 'hoof'?"

Applebuck ran pell-mell over hill after hill, his destination firmly in mind. As he finally crested one last grassy knoll, his eyes lit up in excitement at the sight before him. Sweet Apple Acres. Home sweet home.

Or, in this case, home-away-from-home.

He didn't really have a plan when he had first set out. He had only learned the basics. That the 'agents' were really doubles of the six most well-known ponies in Ponyville. That 'Cousin JayJay' was in fact, Applejack. A *female* Applejack. And that it was a spell that had brought them to his own world... and had also taken them back.

Finding the spell in question had been easy. A few well-placed questions directed at Spines had gotten him the info he needed. Finding another unicorn that wasn't Dusk, but just as strong as him, to pull off the spell had been trickier, but doable. And now that he was here... he found himself hesitating for a second.

Now that ah'm here... once ah go in thar... once ah find mah cousin... then what? Will she be happy t' see me? Or will she be upset? Ah don't want her mad at me! Ah just... ah wanna be family wit' her! Ah wanna sit down at th' table an' have dinner, an' then play some card games, an' then go t' bed an' listen to a story! Ah wanna know what it's like, t' have somepony like her as mah cousin! As mah SISTER!

"Cousin JayJay..." the young pony whispered to himself, eyes still trained on the farm before him. "Can y'all give me one more chance?"

The silence stretched into a long minute. At last, the cap-bearing colt finally placed a hoof forward, setting himself into motion, when a buzz began to echo through the air.

He froze and let his eyes dart around, easily recognizing the sound. "Sc... Scooteroll?" he called out, his mind awash in possibilities. Did the rest of the Crusaders follow after him? Was Scooteroll and Sweepy currently barreling down on his position? Or...

Wait, that was something else he hadn't thought about. For every pony that's a mare back home, they're here as a colt instead. And for every BOY that there was back home...

He barely dodged out of the way as a scooter and wagon suddenly crested over the hill's edge. Panicked screams were had all around as the Crusader-mobile careened and screeched to a stop, Applebuck tumbling

head over hooves as he landed a short distance away, pride bruised, but otherwise uninjured.

"Scootaloo!" came a soft, squeaky voice. "You really shouldn't go so fast all the time! You almost HIT somepony!"

"I know, I know! I'm sorry!" came another voice, somewhat tomboyish, panicked in tone. They called out to him. "Oh man, hey! You alright?!"

"Y-yeah. Ah'm okay." the schoolpony groaned, rubbing the dirt from his eyes. He felt a presence step up next to him, before feeling a hoof upon his own. He accepted the help as he was brought back up to a sitting position, taking the time to bring both forelimbs to his eyes, cleaning them out.

"GOLLY." said a high-pitched, southern twang from the pony who had assisted him. "Y'all shore? Y' took a real tumble back there!"

Applebuck blinked, while his vision slowly cleared up. He felt the world come screeching to a complete halt, as the last thing that he had ever expected, came into his focus.

Standing before him was another yellow earth-pony. Her red mane was held back by a sizable pink bow in a ponytail, and her large, orange eyes were adorned with obvious lashes.

"Awful sorry 'bout that. Scootaloo 'kin be rather *RASH* sometimes." she continued, looking behind her to give the orange pegasus a glare. She then quickly turned back. "But, um, if yer all right, then howdy! Ain't ever seen you 'round b'fore!" she greeted, eyes giving him a welcoming sparkle.

The young capped colt continued staring at the sight before him, being face-to-face with something that he was in no way in the least, in this entire short-sighted escapade, prepared for.

It's me. Oh AJ, Red Gala, Grampy Smith, help me! She's ME!!

The bow-bearing filly gave him a smile, before holding out a hoof towards him in friendship.

"Mah name's Applebloom! What's yours?"

To Be Continued?