

# Once Bitten, Twice Shy

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# Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	28
Chapter 3	54
Chapter 4	90

# Chapter 1

“Huhhh...” Twilight sighed as she entered her humble abode, scarcely able to lift her weary hooves. “Spike?” she called out, checking if the dragon was home. There was no reply. Owlowski didn't seem to be on his perch either. “Oh. That's right,” she said to herself. They'd gone with Zecora, hadn't they? It must have slipped her mind that their trip was scheduled for that day.

To be honest, she was relieved to be alone. She didn't particularly want to be seen like this, and she didn't think she could keep her feelings bottled up inside any longer.

She barely took a few steps inside before giving up and grumpily slumping to the ground. This funk had been with her all morning, and it showed no signs of lifting. It was as if there was a shadow hovering over her, leaving her devoid of colour and vibrancy. She couldn't shake it off, no matter how hard she tried.

What was worse was that she knew the source. She knew why she felt like this, and what would cure her blues. That just made her broody mood feel all the more immature and childish. It was her own fault she couldn't act on it; her own failings that had left her feeling this way. So why was she taking it out on the rest of the world?

Oh. Right. Pettiness.

“Who would have thought,” she muttered to herself, “That the noble name of Twilight would ever be associated with melodramatically moping around all because of somepony you have a crush on?” she sighed, pouting as she rested her head on her hooves, ashamed of herself for being such an adolescent about this.

“Look out belooooooooow!”

Twilight didn't even flinch as a cyan streak crashed through her window, landed muzzle first on the floor and careened into a bookcase, causing its contents to spray everywhere upon impact.

"Hi, Rainbow," Twilight dead-panned.

"Hi, Twilight," Rainbow Dash cheerily replied, poking her head up from under the pile of books, one of them splayed open on her head. Twilight didn't even bother to ask for an explanation. This was a common enough occurrence that it was practically on schedule.

"Hey. You can get up now," Rainbow Dash said as she trotted over to her prone friend. The unicorn gave no response. "Why're you still ducking like that?"

"I'm not ducking," Twilight Sparkle mumbled, not moving from her spot.

"Okay," Rainbow eyed her strangely. "What are you doing then?"

"OOOH! A GUESSING GAME!" Pinkie Pie enthused, abruptly leaping up out of Twilight's waste-paper basket without so much as a word of warning or explanation.

"AAAA—Oh, it's you," Twilight cut herself off mid-squeal, her initial surprise immediately fading once she realised it was just Pinkie. "Hi, Pinkie," she forced herself to smile, on some level grateful for the presence of her friends, but still wishing to be left alone.

"Can I play the guessing game?" Pinkie asked, bouncing up and down with glee.

"Yeah. Go ahead. Knock yourselves out. I don't mind," Twilight said, sullenly dragging her hooves over to the stairs, heading to bed where she could sulk some more in peace.

"Okay! Um, let's see...Was she looking for her contact lens? Or digging for treasure? Or pretending to be a dog?" Pinkie wondered aloud, eager to figure it out. "Am I right? Is that the answer? Is there a prize if I get the answer? What's the prize? Is it something you eat?"

Rainbow Dash wasn't listening, more focused on bigger concerns. Sure, Twilight could be a grump, but she'd never been this much of a bummer before. "Huh," she hummed to herself, cocking her head slightly, confused by her friend's odd behaviour. "Hey, Pinkie. What's wrong with Twilight?" she asked, wondering if she'd missed some big event while practising her tricks earlier that morning.

"Huh?" Pinkie stopped mid-hop, turning to cast a glance at Twilight's retreating form. "I dunno. Now that you mention it, she seems pretty down," she agreed, rubbing her chin in contemplation, curious as to what could have caused this unwarranted downturn in her mood.

"Maybe we should cheer her up then," Rainbow commented with an idle shrug. Pinkie looked at her expectantly, apparently not catching on that it had been a prompt for her to be her near-perpetually cheery self and spout an assortment of suggestions, most likely in song. Rainbow cleared her throat. "...You got any ideas?" she tried again, less subtly.

Pinkie gasped as one came to her. "Does she like butter-tarts?!" she all but buzzed with excitement, an apparently ingenious solution to Twilight's problems already forming in her eccentric mind.

Rainbow Dash blinked, side-eyeing her pink companion. "...Do you have any ideas that make sense?"

"Oh!" Pinkie laughed, tapping a hoof to her head. "No. None whatsoever."

Rainbow sighed. "Fine. I guess it's up to me then," she said, following Twilight upstairs, figuring she had to handle this the old-fashioned way. By talking.

When she reached the second floor, she saw Twilight curled up on her bed, facing the wall, practically huddled right in the corner. Rainbow suppressed an awkward groan. She really wasn't the right pony for this. She'd never been much good at any of that, uh – what was the word? – 'sensitive' stuff. But, then again, there was a first time for everything.

She swallowed. "Heeeeey," she began, sporting a very unconvincing grin. Twilight didn't respond. "Hey...buddy," Rainbow tried again, uncertainly, moving a little closer. "Whatcha doin' there?"

Twilight lifted a blanket with her magic and draped it over herself, signalling that she was very definitely ignoring her and planned on sustaining this course of action.

Rainbow's ears went lopsided, a confused look coming over her. "...So, you *do* wanna talk about it? Or you don't?" she asked, unsure what she was supposed to be reading from her body language.

"Yes. No? I don't know," Twilight sighed, flopping back on her bed. It wasn't fair of her to act like this. Just because she was miserable was no excuse to treat her friends like manure, especially when they were only trying to help her feel better. "It's just...it's complicated," she explained, sitting up more properly, though her head still hung low, as if she couldn't summon the will to lift it to its regular height.

"Try me," Rainbow challenged with a friendly smirk.

Twilight averted her eyes, her inner turmoil written plainly on her face. Her insides squirmed as she sat there, locked in a battle between the urge to keep her secret locked away forever, and the desire to let it out and seek the help she knew she needed.

"...I'm in love," she admitted, the words sinking like a stone in the silence of the room.

"IN LOVE?!" Pinkie exclaimed, leaping high enough in the air that she nearly hit the ceiling. "That's not bad news! That's wonderful! That's incredible!" she chirped, dancing her way up to the second floor.

"Yeah!" Rainbow agreed, preparing to congratulate her friend, until a secondary doubt struck her. "Isn't it?"

"It would be, if I didn't keep making a fool out of myself every time we're together!" Twilight lamented, picking up a pillow and holding it over her head, as if hoping that she and all her shame would disappear if she hid there long enough.

“Aww. Don't worry about it, Sparky. Love makes foals of us all!” Pinkie encouraged, throwing a friendly hoof over her shoulder in her perpetually positive way.

Twilight's response was muffled by the pillow, coming out as little more than a strained mewl. It was like a curse. To think of all that time she'd spent pouring over her books, studying tomes of ancient knowledge, sharpening her mind into a fine instrument of wit, only for her to turn into a tongue-tied dolt the one time it really counted to keep her senses about her. Ugh. She could have dropped dead from embarrassment five and a half times over just thinking about it.

“So, go on. Don't leave us hangin'. Who's the lucky pony?” asked Rainbow, taking the pillow between her teeth and throwing it aside, leaving her poor, smitten friend with nowhere to hide.

Twilight bit her lip, nervously shrinking under her friends' eager stares. This was going to be one hay of a revelation for them.

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The bell above Carousel Boutique's door twinkled as a pink mane peeked timidly inside. “Um, hello?” Fluttershy weakly called out, seeing the main floor was uncharacteristically empty. “R-Rarity?” she tried again, stepping a little further inside, letting the door swing shut behind her. The sound made her jump.

It wasn't her imagination. The shop really did seem to be deserted.

Oh, no. She hoped she hadn't missed her. Of all the times for Rarity to be out, why today? Not today, *please*. Fluttershy didn't think she could bare it any longer; being stuck the way she was.

She needed a friend. Badly.

Thankfully, she heard the upstairs door swing open little more than a moment later. “Hang on, I'll be right—oh, Fluttershy! It's you! Come right up, darling,” Rarity greeted her, beaming brightly and gesturing for the

pegasus to join her. Fluttershy didn't hesitate to sigh with relief, never more glad to see her best friend. "Really, there's no need for you to wait for an invitation to come upstairs. You're practically family."

"Thank you." Fluttershy blushed, her mane falling in front of her eyes as it so often did, concealing the expression.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" asked Rarity, waiting at the top of the stairs for her notoriously reserved companion to reach her. Fluttershy wasn't in any hurry to make the climb, if her pace was any indication.

"Well, it's, um...I hope it's not a bad time, but...it's, I, uh...you see...I just, I really need to talk to somepony...well, to you, right now," Fluttershy admitted, her gaze drifting bashfully to the floor. She knew Rarity was busy all the time, and that she was probably interrupting a million far more important things with her petty troubles, but, well, she was desperate. She needed advice. Lots of it. And who else could she turn to if not her very own best friend?

"Oh, you poor dear. Of course. You know you can always talk to me about anything," Rarity said sincerely, her big sister instincts showing. She was always concerned for the welfare of her friends. Well, almost always, at least. Sometimes. Occasionally. "I can assure you, you have my undivided attention," she said, holding open the door to her private quarters, prepared to do anything she could to help.

"Thank you so much. This really means a lot to—"

The moment she looked into the room, Fluttershy froze.

"Oh, hi there, Fluttershy!" Applejack said, grinning widely at her arrival, evidently pleased to see that she had stopped by.

"A-Applejack?" she stammered. Ordinarily, Fluttershy would have been thrilled to have her there, but, on this day, things were more than a little different. She had to stifle a squeak as her nerves got the better of her. "W-What are you doing here?" she asked, what small amount of confidence she'd had previously falling to bits in an instant.



"Nothin' much," Applejack replied, trotting over from the work area. "No real story to it. Just workin' on a gift for Granny Smith. I don't know nothin' about no sewing, ya see—"

"So I graciously offered to help her in her hour of need," Rarity finished for her, clearly speaking with the greatest admiration of her own infinitely charitable spirit.

"Yeah. That," Applejack said, rolling her eyes behind Rarity's back.

"Oh. I, um, I see. That's...good?" Fluttershy forced a smile, instinctively backing away, suddenly no longer looking forward to airing her problems in company. Her very *private* problems.

As much as she loved Applejack, and trusted her with all her heart, it had taken every ounce of her inner-strength to work up enough courage to even consider telling Rarity about this. Having to tell two ponies right off the bat was like skipping a foal's first tentative steps and signing them straight up to go cliff-diving. Suffice it to say, this was a much bigger task than she had expected.

"So what brings you here?" Applejack genially asked, seemingly clueless to Fluttershy's nervous trembling, even as she stood right next to her. Then again, maybe she was just used to her being like that; as if convinced it was her natural physical state. "Anythin' I can help ya with?"

"Th-that? I-i-it's nothing. I'm sure it can wai—"

"It sounded like something was really troubling you," Rarity said as she idly tidied up her work area, unaware that she had cut the pegasus off. Her attempts at speech were virtually inaudible, even more so than usual. "Whatever's on your mind, you know you need not keep it to yourself, darling. Especially if it's urgent."

"Well, uh...yes. Yes it is, sort of," Fluttershy meekly admitted, still eyeing the door behind her as she weighed up her options.

"Well, that's what your friends are for, sugarcube," Applejack reminded her, giving her an encouraging nudge, which did bring a small smile to Fluttershy's face, in spite of everything. Come to think of it, of all

the other non-Rarity ponies who could have been there at that moment, AJ was definitely her ideal choice. After all, there she was, offering her timid friend her unconditional support without question or criticism, just like she always did. "Your secrets are in safe hooves here."

"I know. And I'm very grateful for that," Fluttershy said, moving a little further into the room and sitting down, steeling herself for all she was about to do.

Rarity and Applejack were both silent, each expecting Fluttershy to speak. Unsurprisingly, she merely sat there, resigned to her silence, and made no move to say anything at all.

"...So, then..." Rarity broke the quiet, hoping that might prompt Fluttershy to get started. It did not. She frowned slightly. "Well, go on, darling. What's all this fuss about?"

Fluttershy blanched. "Oh. No. I...I didn't mean to cause a-a fuss. I'm so sorry," she said, looking so incredibly guilty at the thought of being a bother that she damn near seemed ready to turn herself in to the clops over it. Rarity eyed her, unsure whether the pegasus had actually misinterpreted what she'd said, or whether she was deliberately stalling in an effort to put off the conversation.

Odds were on the latter.

"Come on, now. We can't be of much use if ya don't say what's ailin' ya," Applejack light-heartedly pointed out.

"You're right..." Fluttershy conceded, not that it did anything to quell the increasingly furious pounding of her heart, and the quickening of her breath. Oh, gosh, why had it suddenly gotten so hot in there? Was it a fever? Yes, that must have been it. Maybe she was ill. Maybe she should put this off and get some rest. She could tell them the truth when she was feeling better, right?

She shook her head, silencing her own inner-monologue. No. She couldn't let any of that stop her. She had to fight through the anxiety coursing through her. This was at least half the reason why she'd needed to come here in the first place. It was her nerves that kept getting her stuck

in these awful jams and rendered her unable to express her feelings, or act on them at all.

If she didn't start fighting her fears now, she'd never get anywhere, and it would all be for nothing.

So, she released a shaky breath, squeezing her eyes shut, knowing what she had to do.

"I..." she began.

"Yes?" Rarity encouraged, hopefully.

"I..."

"That's it. You're almost there," said Applejack, inwardly cheering her on.

Fluttershy could feel the words in her throat, ready to get out. All they needed was a little push. Just one little push. She took a breath, and swallowed, preparing to force them out. She moved to speak. She opened her mouth, and then...

The only sound that escaped her was a pathetic bleat. Her eyes widened. Her limbs locked up. Next thing she knew she was on her back, her panic-stricken limbs sticking ramrod straight in the air.

Applejack and Rarity both sighed. She'd choked. "Oh, and she was so close too," said the unicorn sympathetically. It was impossible not to feel disappointed by the result on Fluttershy's behalf.

"This is like that incident with the dragon all over again," Applejack commented, sadly, wishing there was something more she could do for her situation beyond standing there and praying real hard.

"It's okay," Fluttershy stammered, attempting to clamber back up onto her hooves, though she lost her balance in the process. Her legs wobbled like jelly every time she tried to stand, her limbs clearly sending the message that they either couldn't or wouldn't support her. "I, uh...I th-

thought this might happen, so, um...I wrote a note, just in case,” she said, nodding towards her left wing, having anticipated this outcome.

Rarity arched a brow at that, but, seeing as this was still a vast improvement over getting nothing out of her whatsoever, elected not to press the issue. A note would have to do as long as Fluttershy couldn't find her voice. She used her magic to levitate the note over to her, neatly unfolded it, and—

A gasp resonated throughout the room. “Oh my!” said Rarity, the note falling out of the air.

Fluttershy winced, hiding behind her mane, blushing so fiercely her entire coat seemed to be tinged with pink. She'd been worried about how they would react to her confession. That was part of what made it so hard. So *petrifying*.

“What? Let me see,” said Applejack, standing over the fallen note and squinting in an effort to read the small writing.

All that was there were three little words.

*I love Twilight.*

Before Applejack could react, Rarity grabbed her, all but barrelling into the earth pony in her haste to do so. “Do you know what this means?!” she asked as she seized her, causing Applejack to flinch at the volume, not to mention at the half-crazed look in her histrionic cohort's eyes. Fluttershy whimpered and buried her muzzle under her hoof, not sure she wanted to hear this. “MATCHMAKING!” Rarity squealed with delight, clapping her front fetlocks together, seeming oblivious to the fact that she was squeezing the air out of Applejack every time she did so.

Fluttershy braced herself for the fallout, knowing the terrible consequences this could have on their friend—“Wait, what?” she glanced up, wondering if her ears were playing tricks on her.

“Oh, this is simply marvellous!” Rarity said, practically glowing with excitement. She was so thrilled that she didn't even seem to care that she had been cuddling up against Applejack, of all ponies.

“Gwah...” the cowpony murmured when her asphyxiation finally ended, falling to the floor like a lump of lead once Rarity released her from her death-grip. The unicorn ignored this, having turned her attention to Fluttershy.

“You definitely came to the right pony, darling,” Rarity assured her lovelorn friend, throwing a forelimb over Fluttershy's shoulders. “After all, I am an expert when it comes to all matters of, 'ow you say, *ze romance*,” she said with an excess of theatricality, already caught up in picturing some grand fantasy of a love story for her two friends, and clearly determined to see it come to fruition.

“Phew,” Fluttershy sighed with relief. For a second there, she'd thought she was going to be mad at her or something. She should have known Rarity better than that; *of course* she was the right pony to ask about this sort of stuff. *Of course* she would jump at the opportunity to meddle in this kind of affair.

“Ahem. Excuse me,” Applejack raised a hoof to interrupt, still looking more than a little bizarrely at Rarity before snapping her focus back to more important matters. “I'm mighty happy for you, hun. Really, I am. But, if you don't mind my askin', why didn't you just say so?” she asked, as if it should have been obvious. She didn't see what all the drama was for.

Fluttershy tilted her head in confusion. “Well, um, if, if you'll remember back to about two minutes ago, I-I tried to, but then I, um, then I fell over like this...” she explained, rolling onto her back, re-enacting her fearful fainting spell from earlier.

“No, no. Not to us. I meant why didn't you just tell Twilight how you feel?” Applejack asked with a shrug, ever the voice of reason, mundane a role as it was. “I'm assumin' you haven't told her none, seein' as how you're comin' to us askin' for help an' all.”

Fluttershy glanced down, looking troubled. “I can't.”

“Well, sure ya can!” AJ encouraged, endeavouring to boost her confidence, since that was clearly the only obstacle standing in her way.

"C'mon, now. You know Twi' as well as I do. She ain't gonna hurt ya none. What's the worst that could—"

"No," Fluttershy cut her off far more firmly, looking her square in the eye. "*I can't.*"

"Because of your nerves?" asked Rarity, genuinely lost as to what Fluttershy meant when she said she couldn't tell her how she felt.

"Yes. But also because we're friends," she said, unconsciously rubbing one of her forelegs against the other, as if in an attempt to console herself. "I can't...I can't just walk up to her and be like, 'Hey, how's your day going? That's great. I love...'" Fluttershy choked, not even able to finish the thought, hanging her head once she'd finished her vague enactment, clearly plagued with worries about this whole dilemma.

"...Why not?" asked Applejack, straightforwardly. It seemed to her like the fears that held Fluttershy back were just figments of her imagination. "Sounds good to me."

"Because *we're friends*," Fluttershy emphasised, as if that should have said everything. "If she doesn't feel the same way, or something goes wrong, and we don't work out, then it will be really awkward, and there will be all these hurt feelings, and then we won't be able to be around each other, and we'll start avoiding each other, and so then the rest of you will have to split between us in order to make us feel better and make it feel like neither one of us is being favoured or left out, but then you'll eventually realise that you stopped hanging out with all your other friends on the other side because of us, and then you'll start to resent me and Twilight for making things all uncomfortable between us and splitting up the group, and then you'll start taking out those frustrations on us and we'll all start arguing and fighting all the time and then we won't want to hang out at all and, next thing you know, we won't be friends. Never ever again," she explained, all in a single breath.

Applejack and Rarity blinked blankly, both of them stunned.

"...Give her credit. She's thought this through, at least." Rarity dryly remarked.

“So, um...yeah...” Fluttershy ducked her head down, unable to lift her gaze. On second thought, she wished she hadn't brought up that scenario at all. She'd made herself sad just thinking about it.

“If you feel that way, then what do you want our help for?” asked Applejack, growing increasingly confused; the more she heard about this, the less sense it made. It sounded like Fluttershy didn't want to pursue her feelings for Twilight in the first place, in which case there was no need for her friends to become involved. Was there?

“Weren't you listening?” said Rarity, 'tssk'ing and shaking her head at her obviously intellectually inferior comrade. “*Honestly*,” she scoffed, turning up her nose at the ruffian before resuming her place at Fluttershy's side. “*I* understand,” she said.

“Y-you do?” asked Fluttershy, hopefully. If Rarity understood, then that meant she wouldn't have to stutter out another convoluted explanation that probably wouldn't have made any sense to anypony else but her anyway.

“Of course I do, darling. You want to be able to gauge whether your feelings for Twilight might be reciprocated without taking the risk of confessing everything to her all at once, which you...probably can't even do anyway, even if you tried.”

“Yes.” Fluttershy nodded in agreement.

“And, you want to make sure that, if you think you do have the opportunity to pursue a relationship, that, firstly, you'll work as a couple,”

“Yes.”

“And, secondly, you want to ensure that your relationship gets off to an excellent start, particularly since that increases your chances of achieving the former point – see above, re: working as a couple – and also because it will eliminate the lingering doubts and fears in your mind that are currently preventing you from opening up and telling her how you feel,”

“Oh, oh, *definitely* yes.”

“So, it follows that the reason why you were so eager to seek my help, darling, was because you desired my advice and assistance in creating The Completely and Utterly Perfect First Date (without Twilight ever actually catching on that it is a date) that would sweep her off her hooves and be the ideal opportunity for you to tell her how you feel, and then lead into your chance to officially ask her out,” Rarity concluded, looking thoroughly pleased with her deductive reasoning. “How am I doing?”

“You're really good at this.” Fluttershy blushed, genuinely impressed.

“I know,” Rarity smugly replied. “Did you catch all that, Applejack?”

“Yeah, yeah. I was listenin’,” Applejack answered her. “But why do you need our help with that?” she asked. “You've been friends with Twilight for a good long while now. Surely you don't need any help hangin' out with her and havin' a good time.” The cowpony laughed at the very thought of such a thing. “It's not like you're completely clueless as to what you're s'posed to do when you're around her, right?”

Fluttershy shrank back, her face falling. “Um...actually...” she trailed off, anxiously, deciding she would have to tell them...*the story* just so they would understand how dire her situation truly was.

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“I don't get it,” said Rainbow Dash, flapping her wings as she hovered in the general area above Twilight, following her around as she re-stacked all of the books the speedy pegasus had previously knocked over. “So you like Fluttershy. Big deal. Why don't you just go out and spend time with her?”

“I have!” Twilight insisted in exasperation.

“You have?” Pinkie echoed excitedly.

“I've tried!” she clarified, uncomfortably.



"'You've tried?' What does that even mean!?" asked an irritated Rainbow Dash. Twilight just wasn't like normal ponies sometimes. She kept talking in circles, and not one of them made a lick of sense.

"Ugh. You just don't get it," Twilight groaned, letting her head flop against her desk. "If you'd been there yesterday, you'd understand."

"Yesterday? What happened yesterday?" Pinkie Pie asked, situating herself atop Twilight's desk, keen to hear a story. She liked stories.

"My latest and lamest attempt at a non-date with Fluttershy happened," Twilight explained, morosely. "If our dates are as terrible as our non-dates, then I guess I'd almost be lucky if Fluttershy doesn't return my affections..."

"YOU LIKE FLUTTERSHY?!" Pinkie gasped, her jaw hitting the floor.

Neither Twilight nor Rainbow even acknowledged Pinkie apparently forgetting what she'd learned not even two minutes ago.

"Come on, Twilight. It can't have been *that* bad," Rainbow commented, sure that this so-called disaster of a non-date was nothing more than Twilight's perfectionism blowing one minor flaw completely out of proportion. She could be worse than Rarity sometimes.

"Wanna bet?" Twilight replied, prepared to share the gruesome details. It wasn't like she had any more dignity left to lose. "I can remember it like it was yesterday..."

"It was yesterday!" Rainbow Dash interjected.

"Do you want the flashback or not?!" Twilight shouted her down, literally; the sound managed to knock Rainbow Dash to the floor, leaving her more than a little startled. Hmmp. Yeah, she thought so. "I remember it like it was yesterday..." she resumed.

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"Will it be the usual for both of you?" the café waiter asked.

"Yes, please," Twilight replied, sitting comfortably atop her small haystack. "Um, that is for me, anyway. Didn't mean to speak for you, Fluttershy," she laughed awkwardly, attempting to pass it off as a joke.

"For you, madame?" the waiter boredly inquired.

"Uh, yeah...just...you know...whatever," she skittishly replied, far too nervous to actually concentrate on the menu when she was too busy thinking about somepony else.

"Whatever it is," the waiter dead-panned, collecting their menus and walking away.

Ah, good! Alone at last.

Twilight grinned across the table. Fluttershy shyly smiled back.

"Um, hi," Twilight somewhat uneasily began where she thought it best to begin.

"H-hi..." Fluttershy replied.

"You look..." 'Cute, beautiful, wonderful, radiant, lovely, resplendent, gorgeous, like the pony of my dreams.' All these terms popped into her mind at that very moment. Shame she couldn't finish the darn sentence.

"L-look where?" Fluttershy asked, warily glancing about herself. She didn't see anything of particular importance. Nothing worth her notice, anyway.

Deciding that she couldn't suddenly say 'hot' now without it sounding weird, Twilight elected to just go along with that interpretation. "Um...that was fine?"

"Oh. O-okay." Fluttershy bowed her head slightly, sensing something was a bit off. She hadn't looked at the wrong thing had she? Oh, gosh. That would make her seem so dumb and clueless. Not like Twilight, who was so beautiful and smart.

How embarrassing. That was not the impression she wanted to make around her. Maybe she should just be quiet. She couldn't cause trouble if she kept her thoughts to herself.

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

Silence. Dead silence.

‘Gee. What a fantastic start,’ Twilight thought to herself.

“Ahem,” Twilight cleared her throat. She was wracking her brain in search of something brilliant and charming to say, so naturally she wanted to make sure that when she finally found such a line her voice would be working properly.

“Um, b-bless you.” Fluttershy squeaked out, instantly regretting that utterance. She was only meant to say that when somepony sneezed, not when they coughed. She must have sounded like an idiot. Again.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Sorry, I thought you said something,” said Twilight, sure she'd heard her speak a moment ago.

“Oh. No...” Fluttershy shook her head, hiding behind her mane, anything she might have wanted to say quickly dying in her throat.

Twilight suppressed a sigh. Everything was going so well. All she needed was for her ears to start playing tricks on her too. She gave them a flick, wondering if they needed a clean. She couldn't do that in front of her not-date, though, could she? Yes, that would surely charm and attract Fluttershy where conversation had failed.

'Way to be weird, Sparkle,' she thought to herself, doing her darndest to sit still and refrain from fidgeting.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Fluttershy swallowed, too terrified to think. It was so quiet Twilight could probably hear her heart thumping in her chest. Gosh, how embarrassing would that be; to have the silence broken by her awkward, panicky bodily noises.

Her self-consciousness spiked to eleven, making everything even louder. 'Shh, heart!' Fluttershy told herself, closing her eyes in a futile effort to will her pulse to slow down just a teensy bit. Her stomach churned, making her wince. Twilight definitely had to have heard that. If that didn't creep her out, nothing would.

“You okay?” asked Twilight, seeing Fluttershy squinting at her, making the most bizarre facial expressions in her general direction. “Is there something on my face?” she said, half-jokingly.

“Yes. I mean—no! I mean...maybe? Oh gosh.” Oh goodness, now she'd insulted her. This was just wonderful. This was why she was better saying nothing; at least then she couldn't screw up as badly as she already had.

“Haha...no biggie. Thanks for, um...yeah...pointing that out,” Twilight gave an awkward laugh to hide her humiliation, waiting for a split-second when Fluttershy averted her gaze to hastily wipe at her face, hoping her

broad strokes would clear away whatever mess was distracting Fluttershy so much. Instead, all her efforts got her was a hoof to the nose. "Ow!"

"Ow?" Fluttershy echoed, concerned yet confused.

"Uh," Twilight glanced up, not sure how exactly she could explain this. Especially not if there was blood. Oh Celestia, was there blood? "...I...said...'ow...are you? 'Ow are you?"

"Oh. Um...m'fine...thank you for...asking..."

'Whew. Good save.'

" ... "

" ... "

" ... "

" ... "

"I, uh..." Twilight began, ignoring her still-throbbing nose, hoping her brain would kick into gear and fill in the blank once she actually started speaking. It didn't.

"Hmm?"

"N-no, nothing..." she chickened out, looking down at the hay beneath her.

" ... "

" ... "

A tumble-weed went by.

" ... "

" ... "

Fluttershy felt her pulse pounding in her throat. Usually, she liked the quiet, but here it was deafening. Maybe it was time to try and say something; to make a good impression. If Twilight was okay with that, of course.

“...S-so...”

“YES, VERY!” Twilight eagerly reacted, grinning brightly, if falsely. She hadn't been listening (too caught up in her thoughts to do so). Hence, when she had tuned back in and heard Fluttershy speaking, she'd naturally assumed she'd missed something important, and had hoped to hastily cover the fact with, well, with that.

Instead all she'd done was make Fluttershy's head disappear under the table, where the pegasus had taken to cowering in fright.

“F-...Fluttershy?”

“...?” She timidly glanced up. “Oh. Sorry.” She tried to force her limbs to pick her back up, shaking though they were. They hurt from how much they'd been shivering throughout this whole totally platonic lunch. “I, just...you know...hay. I...I love hay,” she murmured by way of explanation.

“So do I!” Twilight enthused, genuinely happy. This might be the lead-in she needed for an actual conversation to start. “You love hay, I love hay! We have so much in common!” She laughed, beads of sweat brimming on her brow.

And the cone of silence descended once more. So much for that idea.

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

“ ”  
...

Twilight bit her lower lip. Failure level critical. Abort. ABORT. "...Well, this has been fun!" she said with far too much enthusiasm.

"This has been fun," Fluttershy agreed, relieved to be given an out, though she was sure she would be upset about it later. Right now, she just needed an excuse to go before she passed out, threw up or had a heart attack. "W-we should do it again sometime."

"Definitely! I would...I would love to do it again, but, hey, look at the time."

"Wow. Is it that late already?"

"Time flies when you're having fun! Ahahaha...ha..."

"It does. Wouldn't you know it? I have to go feed my...bed!"

"I have to go wash my books!"

"So many important things."

"You know how it is! Busy, busy, busy!"

"Haha. Yes. It is like that..."

"Well...see you!"

"Bye!"

Fluttershy flew off as fast as her wings would take her, and Twilight teleported to safety without so much as a momentary hesitation.

As luck would have it, the waiter walked out with their meals right at that very second, only to see the two patrons fleeing the scene faster than the Wonderbolts. "Hmmp!" he huffed, all but tossing the plates to the floor. "How rude."

Twilight popped back into existence outside her house. Unfortunately, she'd been so rushed that she had rematerialised roughly

her own height off the ground, sending her crashing into the dirt face-first. "Ugh..." she groaned as she sat up, seeing stars.

Then it all sank in, and she groaned even louder. "Oh, Celestia!"

What an embarrassment. How could she have been so stupid? This proved it; there was no way Fluttershy could ever be interested in a socially backwards dork like her. She only needed to take one look at what had happened to see the evidence. After all, Fluttershy hadn't been able to get away from her fast enough when she made her escape. She hadn't wanted to talk to her at all. She'd acted like she couldn't even be near her anymore. Not willingly, anyway.

That was it, wasn't it? Fluttershy probably never wanted to be around her again after this.

This was the textbook definition of a disaster.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Ponyville, Fluttershy hadn't made it far before her wings locked up, and sent her spiralling into somepony's garden, where she smacked straight into a pot-plant. After that, she gave up on flying and just galloped for it. Eventually, she stopped to catch her breath, cowering behind a wall, hoping she was far, far away from anywhere Twilight might see her.

Her heart was beating so hard she thought it might explode. Just being around Twilight was enough to get her in this state. How could she ever get a smart and interesting pony like Twilight to like her when she couldn't even form words around her, let alone tell her how she felt? She was so weird, and awkward, and uncomfortable in her own skin, not cool and collected like Twilight.

Fluttershy sighed, on the verge of giving up completely. She couldn't do this. That much was obvious. If she was ever going to get anywhere, then she needed help. If she couldn't express herself to Twilight, then surely somepony else could teach her how to.

That was, if Twilight still wanted to see her at all after this...

---



Rainbow Dash couldn't stop laughing as Twilight's version of events came to an end. The bright blue pony was rolling around on the floor with tears coming out of her eyes, cackling with such intensity she almost seemed like she was choking on the sound. "You look? *You look!*"

"I know..." Twilight groaned.

"*Ow are you?!*"

"I know!" she hid under her hooves.

"AHA! AHAHA! Ahahaha! Ahhhhhh..." Rainbow Dash wiped the last mirthful tear from her eyes, finally managing to compose herself. "Tragic."

"I know..." Twilight sighed in misery, feeling nauseous just thinking about it. "Every time I try to talk to her, I can't say anything. I just...I clamp up! It's like I've got a lead bridle around my mouth that makes it impossible to speak. Oh, Celestia. She probably hates me," Twilight lamented, not sure whether she wanted to scream or cry.

"What, Fluttershy?" Pinkie asked, finishing the last kernels from the bucket of popcorn that had appeared in her possession out of thin air around the time the flashback started. "Nah, Fluttershy would never hate you," she insisted, reassuringly. "She probably thinks *you* hate *her* and that's why you're weird around her. Yeah, that's *way* more likely," she casually commented, oblivious to the expression of horror that fell over Twilight's features.

"Pinkie's got a point," Rainbow Dash agreed, ever the one to be blunt. "Fluttershy's probably terrified of you, right now!" she said, as if that was somehow an improvement.

Twilight whimpered, utterly devastated.

"Aww, c'mon! Cheer up, Charlie!" Pinkie said, wrapping a hoof around her forlorn friend. "Just because you've got no moves doesn't mean you can't be smooth! You just need a helping hoof, is all!"

“Hey, yeah!” Rainbow enthused, inspiration flashing in her eyes. That was a *great* idea!

“From who?” Twilight asked, failing to follow.

“Um, HELLO!” Rainbow clopped her on the head. “You’re looking at the coolest pony in Ponyville!” she boasted, proudly puffing up her chest. “I could take you from chump to hunk in ten seconds flat!” she said with the utmost confidence.

“I don’t know about that...” Twilight said with a sceptical sigh. At this rate, it would take a miracle to make her seem like anything other than the Queen of Dweebs. “Whenever I’m around Fluttershy I turn into a muddled-up, mindless moron.”

“Hey. Trust me. Follow my advice, and you’ll seem like a regular Coltanova! You’ll be the hottest of horses; the flyest of fillies; the pimpingest of ponies,” Rainbow guaranteed her, casually kicking Twilight’s hat-stand, letting a trilby hat fall onto her head, landing with the brim slanted to one side. “With me in your corner, you’ll definitely be able to keep your cool around Fluttershy,” she said with a smirk, winking with her uncovered eye.

Twilight wasn’t convinced, and her expression showed it. “...Wouldn’t ‘keeping my cool’ around her entail me having some semblance of cool to begin with?” she pointed out.

“I have no idea what you just said,” Rainbow smugly admitted. When she was that cool, she didn’t have to understand words. “Me and Pinkie are going to give you game. Isn’t that right, Pinkie?”

“That sounds awesome!” Pinkie cheered, merrily bouncing around Rainbow. Twilight didn’t need a Pinkie sense to know that a song was coming on.

“When you’re in love,  
You’ve gotta say the right words  
To that special girl!

When you're in love,  
You've gotta treat her nicely  
Tell her she's your world!

Oh, love is such a silly thing!  
It makes you sweat and makes you sing!  
And when you feel it happening  
That girl becomes your everything!

When you're in love,  
You're so in love,  
When you're in loooooove!"

Pinkie posed for her finish, a cascade of streamers spontaneously appearing out of nowhere to coincide with the big finale. Rainbow Dash nodded, approvingly.

"Lesson number one," Rainbow began, "Don't do that," she said, offhandedly gesturing towards Pinkie, appreciating the apt demonstration of how *not* to be a player.

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Twilight dryly remarked.

# Chapter 2

“And that's what happened yesterday,” Fluttershy finished recounting her side of the story, looking utterly ashamed of herself as she did so.

“Oh dear.” Rarity seemed aghast as the tale ended, suddenly wondering if she'd bitten off more than she could chew. “The situation is far worse than we thought.” Fixing up a successful date for Fluttershy and Twilight was bound to be no easy task, not even for the most skilled of merry matchmakers.

“I dunno, 'Shy,” Applejack chuckled knowingly, finding this all quite amusing. “Sounds to me like she likes you.”

“If she did, she probably doesn't any more...” Fluttershy mumbled to herself, softly scuffing the floor. Why would an exotic, talented, special pony like Twilight ever be interested in a plain old pink-maned Ponyville pegasus like her as anything more than friends? “I left such a bad impression on her, I don't even want to know what she thinks. But I do know I need your help to fix that. Please? If, um, if that's okay with you...”

“Well, sure thing, sug. If you really want to impress Twilight, then of course I'll help ya. I'd be happy to,” Applejack assured her, giving her a comforting, if slightly teasing nudge in the side. “But I reckon you needn't be beating yourself up about thi—”

“I'VE GOT IT!” Rarity abruptly announced, her eyes wide with excitement.

“Got what? No manners?” Applejack muttered to herself, more than a little miffed at being interrupted.

“No. The perfect idea for your date,” Rarity said, her horn glowing as she consciously conjured up an illusion, whisking her friends away to the world of pure imagination she saw in her mind's eye. “Can't you just picture it now? The perfect moonlit night, reflected in the ripples on the water. Magical lights (courtesy of your amazingly clever and generous friend

Rarity) softly glowing in the trees around you. The two of you gently drifting across the lake together in a gondola—”

“A what-dola?” Applejack interrupted.

Rarity paused, visibly displeased. “A gondola.”

“Gone-where?” the cowpony scratched her head.

Rarity glared at her. “...You, shut up. Ahem. Where was I?” she asked, quickly returning to her state of wonder and whimsy. “Oh, yes. Twilight and Fluttershy drifting across the lake, the serene caress of the breeze coasting past them, coaching them to come closer, and share more of their hearts’ deepest desires with one another, until they have...*THE MOMENT!*” she said, as if delivering a Shakesmarean performance.

Fluttershy blinked. “The...moment—?”

“*THE MOMENT!*” Rarity declared with vigour, beginning to enact *THE MOMENT* on a very bewildered Fluttershy as her melodramatic explanation continued. “*THE MOMENT* when you just can't resist the call of romance any longer. *THE MOMENT* where you lose yourself in a sudden burst of heartfelt passion; where you reach out and grab Twilight, take her in your hooves and say to her, 'You stupid foal! Can't you see what I'm trying to tell you, I love you! I have always loved you, and loved you well! Now kiss me!'" she demanded.

“Uh, R-Rarity?!” Fluttershy shrank back, not particularly keen to be kissed by her best friend. She didn't even realise how far back she'd leaned until she fell over, emitting a high-pitched yelp.

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Honestly, darling, it's called acting. Do relax yourself,” she said dismissively.

“Oh. I see,” Fluttershy said, suddenly feeling very embarrassed. Maybe she hadn't gotten *that* carried away. “Well, um, that sounds...that sounds...*nice*, Rarity, but I'm...um...I'm not sure if I...want that...right away?” she uneasily admitted, not wanting to hurt her best friend's feelings, since it was clear she was already so invested in this idea.

"No. I suppose you're right. That would be a bit forward, wouldn't it?" Rarity conceded, oblivious to the sigh of relief that elicited from Fluttershy. "We should save that for the *second* date!"

"Oh...oh my..." Fluttershy flushed a bashful shade of crimson, a somewhat goofy grin working its way across her features. Could she really be so lucky as to have two dates with Twilight Sparkle? Oh, she couldn't believe that. She didn't dare hope. She...she...wasn't breathing. A sudden coughing fit more or less cured that oxygen deprivation.

"You alright, there?" Rarity eyed her, wondering if she should offer a glass of water.

"Ahem," Applejack cleared her throat, calling her friends' attention over to her general direction. "That plan o'yours is all well an' good an' all, Rarity, but let's not get ahead of ourselves here. First things first, Fluttershy. Before you can get to any of that, you're gonna hafta pull on your big mare's britches, march on over there to Twilight's library, knock on her door and invite her out with ya," she instructed. That was just proper manners.

Fluttershy's face fell, her fantasy shattered. "I don't get to...skip that part?" she asked, already trembling at the prospect. She'd liked it much better when she could pretend they were already on their second date.

"Applejack's right," Rarity agreed, able to appreciate the cowpony's healthy knack for common sense. It did help to keep her grand ideas firmly rooted to reality, and keep her focused on the important details of the present rather than those of the distant future. "You'll never get to the romantic gondola on the lake with the fairy lights where you experience *THE MOMENT* if you spend all your time avoiding her. And that would be a tragedy. You simply have to ask her out as soon as possible."

"W-what?" Fluttershy cringed in abject horror.

"You wanted to have a good time with her, right?" AJ pointed out, remembering Rarity's earlier summary of Fluttershy's motives. "That's what you were strugglin' with, and that's what you needed us to fix for ya."

"W-well...well, yes," Fluttershy conceded, "But—"

"Well that settles it then!" Applejack continued, giving her an affectionate slap on the back.

"Ow."

"If you want to have that, err, t'utterly and completely perfect first date (without Twilight ever actually realisin' that it's a date), then now's your chance," Applejack insisted, thinking all her friend's problems had been solved in one fell swoop. "No time like the present!"

"But I—"

"She's right," Rarity cut her off. "The quicker you go about this, the quicker you'll have built up your confidence. And the sooner you're able to stop dwelling on yesterday's disaster the better," she said, determined to get Fluttershy and Twilight together, even if they had to start small, with simple, friendly hanging out rather than grand romantic gestures.

It was a simple plan, really. Once Fluttershy saw that she could be around Twilight without it ending in catastrophe, all her friend's worries would fly away, and from that point onwards everything between them would go smashingly. *Then* she could get to the grand romantic gestures.

"Yes, yes. It simply must be tonight," said Rarity, already spinning a web of delightfully devious schemes for the future. "Don't you think?"

"Uh..." Fluttershy's voice shook. Oh wait, that wasn't her voice. That was her whole body. Oh gosh. "N-no!" she hunkered down, lying prone on the floor, squeezing her eyes shut. She couldn't do this. Even thinking about talking to Twilight was enough to make her fall to pieces. The last thing she needed was to embarrass herself in front of her again. She'd had quite enough of that, thank you very much. Knowing that her friends would be watching only made it worse.

"I'm sorry, sugarcube, but I ain't takin' 'no' for an answer!" Applejack said, moving over to her, prepared to make her go whether she liked it or not. It was for her own good, and one day she would appreciate it. "Up ya get there, missy."

“N-no!” Fluttershy didn't budge, remaining firmly in her shivering heap on the floor, hooves covering her eyes. “I'm not going. Y-you can't make me.”

---

“You can't make me,” Fluttershy insisted again, to no avail. Rarity was levitating her with her horn while Applejack had taken her by the tail, dragging the pony along behind her, the pair attracting odd looks as they led their unwilling friend through Ponyville's streets.

Abruptly, Fluttershy fell to the ground with an 'oof!'. “We're here,” Applejack announced, smiling brightly at her good deed.

“Oh no...” Fluttershy squeaked, overtaken by the urge to make a run for it. And, for once, her legs listened to her desire to flee in terror. Unfortunately, she was lying on her side at the time, so she didn't make it very far. She whimpered.

“Come now, darling, it's not that difficult,” Rarity said, pushing Fluttershy up off the ground and towards Twilight's library. The fact that she dug her hooves into the dirt in an instinctive effort to resist didn't seem to make it any harder for the unicorn to deposit her right in front of the door.

“All you hafta do is ask her if she's free tonight and if she'd like to go somewhere with ya,” Applejack said, trotting over to the library, intent on sticking close by Fluttershy to give her a sense of support (ideally while also remaining out of sight of Twilight when she inevitably opened the door).

“O-o-o-okay,” Fluttershy stammered, already hyperventilating. “...H-h-how do I do that?” she asked, drawing a complete mental blank.

Rarity daintily cleared her throat. “Repeat after me: 'Twilight, would you like to go out with me?'" she said, articulating like the skilled orator she was.

“...'Twilight, would you like to go out with me?'" Fluttershy repeated. Oh. Was that all she had to do? Okay. That wasn't so hard. She



could...she could do that. "Twilight, would you like to go out with me?" she said again, more confidently.

"That's it! You've got it!" Applejack said encouragingly. She had figured this wouldn't be so hard. "Now, remember, we're right here with you."

"That's right," Rarity piped up. "Just remember to breathe."

"And keep your wits about ya."

"R-right—"

"And keep a proper posture."

"Yeah, ya gotta seem confident."

"But not *too* confident."

"W-wait—" Fluttershy shook her head, getting confused. She didn't think she'd be able to remember all these instructions.

"Stay strong."

"But be demure."

"Show her you're interested."

"Maintain a mystique; the thrill is in the chase, darling."

"Just don't forget ta be yourself, sugar."

"But, above all else, you must be ALOOF!" was Rarity's concluding command, the unicorn swiftly diving behind some bushes in order to hide.

Fluttershy blinked incredulously. "Be a loofah?" she asked, feeling completely lost, not to mention terrified. But it was too late. "W-wait. What's a loofah?" asked Fluttershy, beginning to panic.

Before she could get an answer, Applejack had already knocked on the door on her behalf, the cowpony quickly flattening herself against the wall to stay out of sight.

“Eep!” Fluttershy froze. This wasn't happening. This was just a bad dream. If she tried really hard, maybe she could wake up before—

Twilight opened the door. “Hel—” she cut herself off mid-word when she saw who was there. “F-F-Fluttershy?” she said, her heart soaring at the sight of her. As far as surprises went, this one was more than welcome. She could cancel all her holidays; no gift would top this.

“...H...Hi...” Fluttershy smiled nervously, her cheeks reddening slightly. As scared as she was, she was also secretly elated to be around her again. Being near Twilight always made her feel all tingly inside, like she was made of cotton candy.

“Hi. Uh...hi! Hi!” Twilight reflexively replied, too stunned to think of anything else to say.

She hadn't expected this at all. Here she'd thought Fluttershy hated her, or didn't want to see her because she thought that Twilight hated her, as Pinkie had predicted. But, here she was. Right in front of her. On her doorstep. And she was so...pretty...

“...Hi...” Twilight said through a deeply infatuated sigh, her pupils closely resembling the shape of hearts as she gazed at her.

“Hi,” Fluttershy said, totally and utterly smitten with her. She liked the way Twilight said 'hi'; it made her feel as if she was hearing the word for the very first time. She'd never heard another pony say it the same way. The way Twilight said hi was so melodic, so wonderful, and so cute too. And, to think, she was saying it to a plain old nopony like her.

“Hi...” Twilight couldn't help the goofy grin that washed over her then. A book being flung at her head from behind quickly snapped her out of her daze, though. ‘Oh. Right! Be cool. Be cool. Yes.’ “Ahem. I mean, um...what are you—”

Another book hit her as a means of correction, forcibly reminding her to do as she'd been told. 'Oh, horseapples,' she silently cursed her mental blank for striking again. What was that line again? What had Rainbow Dash told her to say?

"...What's a...nice pony like you doing in a place like this?" Twilight asked, trying to seem casual and collected, moving to lean nonchalantly on her door frame. However, she misjudged the distance, and lost her balance. "Gah!" She flailed, quickly managing to catch herself on the frame before she fell.

Somewhere behind her, Pinkie Pie had to bite her hooves to stifle her laughter.

"Oh, it's, um, it's...it's nothing...I should just—" Before she could excuse herself, Fluttershy met eyes with a thoroughly displeased Rarity, who shook her head and sternly gestured for her to get on with it, OR ELSE.

She didn't have a choice, did she? Oh, goodness. She had to muster up her courage and go through with it.

"Um...w-what I mean to say is..." she glanced down, anxiously twisting her hoof against the ground. "I've been uh...thinking about...yesterday...and, um...I had a really good time and..." she swallowed, her knees knocking together as she spoke.

"Yes?" asked Twilight, leaning in closer in an effort to hear her beautiful voice.

"I was wondering if you might like to do it again sometime like maybe tonight but I mean I could understand if you wouldn't it's just a suggestion really you don't have to," Fluttershy mumbled before immediately ducking behind her mane, too scared to hear the answer.

Rarity smacked herself in the head.

Twilight blinked, her eyes and ears conveying her confusion. "...Sorry. Didn't catch any of that," she admitted with an uncomfortable

laugh. "Would you, uh, run that by me again, please?" she said, sure that she would love anything Fluttershy had to say.

Fluttershy took a few deep breaths, telling herself to calm down. She could do this. She knew what to say. She'd practised it. ...Well, twice. She swallowed, and shifted her legs, gathering what little inner-strength was still with her at that point, preparing to say those fateful words.

"T...T-Twilight? D-d-do you...do you..." she began in a voice even dogs would have struggled to hear. However, just as she started speaking, Applejack bit her tail, and gave it a mighty yank, the painful jolt causing her volume to suddenly spike. "Do you want to go out wi—"

"**YES!**" Twilight eagerly leaped forward, unable to contain herself.

Fluttershy yelped and fell backwards in shock, literally bowled over by the sudden sound. Her wide, startled eyes stared up at Twilight, unblinking, her tail still throbbing from Applejack having pulled it.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. She had the worst freaking students.

"Eheh," Twilight chuckled awkwardly. On second thought, maybe that had been a little much. "I mean, uh, I would love to...go out with you sometime," she smiled shyly, her cheeks turning pink. "If...if that's what you were asking, I mean."

"Oh. Really?" Fluttershy released the breath she wasn't aware she'd been holding. "I-I mean, yes. Yes, that is what I was asking!" she said. She didn't even notice that her wings had lifted her off the ground, nor that she was hovering in the air there like a hummingbird. "I, um...t-toni—?"

"TONIGHT'S FINE!" Twilight beamed, once again unable to control her volume. "It's excellent, even! Spectacularriffic!" she all but squealed. Wait, spectacularriffic? ...She would never forgive her brain for making her say that.

"Gr-Great!" Fluttershy breathed, raising her forelimbs above her head with joy, so thrilled she couldn't even believe it. Apparently, neither could her wings, which made her do a loop in the air, not that Fluttershy was aware of this motion. "I-I'll, uh...I'll meet you here?" she offered,

unconsciously rubbing her front fetlocks together in a manner Twilight thought was the sweetest thing ever to be witnessed by ponykind.

"That would be swell!" Twilight said, scarcely able to keep a lid on her excitement. She felt like she was going to burst into fireworks at any second.

'Swell?!' Rainbow Dash mouthed in disbelief, exchanging looks with Pinkie, though the pink pony didn't seem to share her objections to the term.

"Okay, so...okay." Fluttershy grinned.

"Okay!" Twilight replied.

"Okay," Fluttershy said back, still just hovering there, staring into Twilight's eyes.

Another tug on her tail caught Fluttershy's attention. She looked over to see both Applejack and Rarity darting their eyes to one side, tilting their necks in the same direction, as if they were signalling something. For several moments, she had no idea what they meant, though. Why would they keep gesturing away from Twilight's house like that?

...Oh Gosh! She'd forgotten to leave, hadn't she? How did she forget that, of all things? That was only the second most basic thing after arriving. But, now that she'd jumped the first hurdle, she didn't want to go anywhere. She was content to stay right where she was. Unfortunately, she knew she did have to leave, at least for a little while.

"I, uh...I suppose I should..." Fluttershy floated backwards slightly, averting her eyes.

"If you must..." Twilight replied without realising she'd said it out loud.

"So, then...u-until tonight," said Fluttershy, her heart pitter-pattering in a manner that so suited her name.

"Fly Buttershy. I mean, shy Flutterbye. I mean, bye Fluttershy," Twilight murmured, wholeheartedly lovestruck, her tongue all in a twist as a

million different thoughts danced through her head. She stood there and sighed dreamily, watching her beloved float away, unwilling to break eye contact.

“Um...Twilight?” Rainbow Dash said, flying down and slowly closing the door, making sure she couldn’t be seen from the street as she did so. Twilight didn’t seem to notice. “Twilight?” she tried again, waving a hoof in front of her. No response. “...I think she’s broken,” the pegasus shrugged, looking to Pinkie Pie for help.

It was around that moment that everything finally sank in.

“YES!” Twilight cheered, springing into the air.

“Gah!” Rainbow recoiled in shock.

“Yesyesyesyes! Yesyesyesyesyesyes! Isaidyes! Isaidyes! Isaidyeeeeeees! Yesyesyes! Yesyesyes! Yesyesyesyesyesyesyes! !! SAID! YES!” Twilight said, jumping around in circles in pure, unbridled joy. She had never been so happy in her entire life! “Isaidyes! Isaidyes!”

“Shesaidyes! Shesaidyes! Shesaidyes! Yesyesyesyesyesyes!” said Pinkie Pie, who, naturally, was doing the exact same thing as Twilight, merrily bouncing along behind her, not that the purple pony noticed. “Yesyesyesyesyesyes! Haha. This is fun, Dashie! You should try it! Yesyesyesyesyes!”

Rainbow Dash let the brim of her hat fall over eyes a little more. “...TWILIGHT!” she eventually called out.

“What?!” Twilight immediately came to a stop, causing Pinkie to crash into her. She glanced around herself in haste, wondering if Fluttershy was back. She didn’t want her to catch her like that. That would have been an awkward way to make her feelings known.

“Shouldn’t you be, you know, getting ready?” Rainbow pointed out, having witnessed first-hand just how hopeless and unprepared Twilight still was for this.

Twilight gasped, glancing up at the clock. "Oh, Celestia! You're right!" she said, galloping over to one of her bookshelves.

She only had a few hours until Fluttershy came back to take her out. In that time, she had to learn how to be cool from Rainbow Dash, study up on everything she could about proper date technique and procedure, and, on top of that, she had to figure out what she was going to wear, get ready and make herself look nice. There was no time to lose!

If she was going to make it, she was going to have to cram like she'd never crammed before.

"Pinkie," Twilight called out with all the seriousness of a surgeon in the middle of an operation.

"Yes?" Pinkie appeared at her side, saluting.

"I need you to start looking for some books," Twilight instructed, knowing the pink pony had a gift for finding even the most elusive texts. "If you could possibly find any instructional books or comprehensive guides to dating—"

"You mean like this one?" Pinkie replied, her words muffled by the book that was already in her mouth.

Twilight looked at her strangely before quickly shaking off her puzzlement. "Let me see," she said, summoning it to her with her horn. "'A Perfect Gentlecolt: The True Romantic's Guide to Wooing a Lady'." Twilight grinned. "Pinkie, this is great! See if you can find anything else!" she said, carrying the book over to her desk so she could get to work copying notes.

"Will do," Pinkie said, happily hopping up and down in front of the bookshelves, possibly in an effort to read the titles, but then again maybe just because she was Pinkie.

"Hey! What are you doing?" asked Rainbow Dash, looking more than a little miffed at being forgotten.

"Making a cheat-sheet," Twilight answered bluntly. "I can't very well carry an entire book with me when I'm out with Fluttershy, can I?" she

pointed out, planning on making a discreet list she could refer to throughout the night.

"Well...no! I guess not," Rainbow conceded. "But that's not what I meant!"

"What did you mean?" asked Twilight, too busy flipping through the book to pay her friend much attention.

"I thought / was going to teach you how to be cool," she said, feeling offended at being overlooked for a stuffy old book. The book didn't even have a neat hat!

"You are," Twilight assured her, much to Rainbow's confusion. "You're just not going to have as much time or freedom to tutor me as we thought. You'll have to try to teach me all you can while I'm taking notes from these books."

Rainbow looked unsure. "But being cool isn't something you can just learn by ear. Especially not you..." she commented, only now really grasping the gravity of the task she had signed herself up for. She could do it, sure, and she would give it her all, but...Twilight was going to take *a lot* of work to de-dorkify. "You have to, like, practise this stuff. I mean, why do you think I spend so much time training my tricks? You've gotta drill it until it becomes second nature!"

"Hmm. I understand," Twilight nodded, willing to acknowledge she had a darn good point. "In that case, I'll set aside some time for a practice session. I can do some last minute revision with you then. And, I'm...I'm probably going to need you to come with me," she said, casting her most imploring glance up at the pegasus, begging her to agree like a puppy would beg to be let in from the cold.

"Come *with* you?!" Rainbow balked, evidently unmoved by her puppy-dog eyes.

"Ooh! Ooh! Can I come too?!" asked Pinkie, desperate to be taken as well. She did so love to be a part of everything. It was better than being left behind, anyway.



"Sure you can," Twilight happily agreed, knowing that Pinkie was sure to have her uses. With her spontaneity, she would never be short on any topics for conversation.

"GREAT!" Pinkie cheered. "Where are we going?" she asked excitedly. Twilight just stared at her. "Oh, right. Helping you put the *moves* on Fluttershy," she said, suggestively nudging the smitten pony in the side. "I just thought you might've been talking about something else, is all," she said, casually strutting off to do her...Pinkie things.

"Wait. Let me get this straight," Rainbow seized the opportunity to cut in, needing to clear this up to make sure she was hearing her friend correctly. "You want me to tag along *on your date*?" she asked in disbelief, hoping even Twilight could see the flaws with that suggestion.

"It's not a date! At least, I don't want Fluttershy to know that it is yet," Twilight said, hanging her head as the daunting demands of the situation increasingly loomed over her like the shadow of a guillotine blade. "And I don't want you to actually be in there with us or anything. I just want you to stick nearby so I can go to you for advice. That way, you can tell me what to do or say when I clamp up," she explained, flipping the page in her guidebook, her quill furiously scratching away.

Realisation dawned on Rainbow Dash. "Oh. I get it," she nodded in understanding, finally following her train of thought. "You want me to be your coach and call your plays from the sidelines!"

Twilight hesitated. "...Yes? I think so. I don't know much about sports."

"I gotcha, chief," Rainbow reassured her, giving her a sly wink, signalling that nothing more needed to be said. "You made the right call. I won't let you down!" she said, clearly getting pumped up, motivated by a renewed sense of team spirit.

"Everything is going to be super and special and awesome! I'll make sure of it!" Pinkie promised, intent on making this the *actual* best night ever, already anticipating how much fun this would be. "You and Fluttershy are going to go out, and then you're going to go out some more, and then you're going to fall in love, and then you're going to move in together, and

then you're going to propose to her, and then you'll be engaged, and then you're going to get married, and then you'll have children, and then you'll name them combinations of your names like Flutter Sparkle and Twitter Shy, and then—”

Rainbow covered her mouth with a hoof, bringing the torrent of words to a halt. “Why don't we focus on getting one date off the ground before we start sending out the wedding invitations?”

“Aww...okay,” Pinkie said, throwing away the invitations she'd already written. It was fine. She could always make more.

“No need to rush the lovebirds, eh?” said Rainbow, teasingly brushing up against Twilight, managing to elicit a blush from the unicorn, even as she tried to concentrate on jotting down pointers from the book.

“Thanks, you two. You have no idea how much it'll mean to me to have you there. I really appreciate it,” Twilight said sincerely, doubting she would ever be able to repay them in a way that accurately encompassed her gratitude.

“Think nothing of it,” Rainbow said, like she was some sort of dashing hero, nudging up the brim of the hat. “It's all in a day's work for the coolest pony in Equestria. And don't even *think* of trying to repay me. I do this because I care. Entirely out of the goodness of my own heart. I mean, I'm not the Element of Loyalty for no—“

“You want the hat, don't you?” Twilight realised, becoming annoyed.

“I *really* like this hat,” Rainbow trailed off with a grin, once again getting distracted by the snazzy trilby atop her head.

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“She...I...bwuh...” Fluttershy murmured, lost in a dreamlike state. She felt like her heart had grown wings. Her hooves hadn't touched the ground since they left Twilight's library. Literally.

"*Somepony's* happy," Rarity smirked smugly, prancing along as if in dressage. She did so love being proven correct.

"I told ya there was nuthin' to worry about," said Applejack, now more convinced than ever that she had called the situation right from the start. Fluttershy wasn't the only lovestruck foal, if her eyes and ears were to be believed, and they didn't usually go around playing tricks on her.

"Guh...fada...shuh...wha..." was all Fluttershy managed, too smitten and too far gone to form anything more than gibberish. She didn't seem to have any idea where she was, nor did she have a care in Equestria. Twilight had said yes. She wanted to go out with her again. "Heheh...heh..." she giggled, unconsciously performing a barrel-roll.

Applejack quirked a brow. "...Should we do somethin' about that?" she asked, wondering if she should lure Fluttershy's head down from the clouds sooner rather than later.

"Oh, let her have her fun," Rarity said, finding Fluttershy's current mood far too sweet to spoil. "You know as well as I that she'll be a nervous wreck all afternoon. May as well let her savour this moment."

"I guess you have a point," Applejack agreed. Even if Fluttershy now closely resembled a mushy puddle of amorphous goo, that was definitely an improvement over how she'd been before.

"So dreamy..." Fluttershy sighed, utterly spellbound. And, to think, it would only be a few hours before she saw her again. Only a few hours until their special little date (only Twilight wasn't supposed to know it was a date) later tonight.

Wait, tonight?! She was seeing her tonight! In a few hours!

OH GOSH! WHAT HAD SHE DONE?!

"BWAH!" she fell out of the sky.

"Oh, there it is," Rarity commented without even looking. "Welcome back, darling."

Fluttershy shook her head to clear the dizziness that had overtaken her, popping back up onto her legs and frantically pacing. "Oh my goodness!" she said, horrified at the thought of what she still had to do. How could she possibly impress Twilight when it had only been a day since their last disaster? "What do I do? What do I do?!" she lamented to herself. "...No, r-really, what do I do?" she asked, turning to Rarity and Applejack for advice.

"What are you so strung up about?" asked Applejack, genuinely confused. Was she the only pony with any sense around these parts? "Surely, even when your eyes were all googly for Twilight, you could see it plain as day."

"See what?" Fluttershy wondered aloud, looking more concerned than before. She hadn't missed something important had she? "Th-there was something to see?"

"That she *likes* you, slowpoke!" AJ said, shaking her head at her oblivious friend. Did she really have to point out something so obvious?

"You don't know that," Fluttershy said, sadly, unwilling to get her hopes up when her fears kept sending them crashing back down to reality.

"Fluttershy, you asked her if she wanted to *go out* with you, and she jumped at t'opportunity," Applejack pointed out, starting to question whether Fluttershy had a faulty memory.

"Yes. Go out. As *friends*," Fluttershy corrected her.

"You have to admit, darling, she was very eager to enjoy your company," Rarity chipped in.

"Yes, because the way I've been acting lately probably made her think there's something wrong with our friendship," Fluttershy rather sensibly answered. Even though she didn't agree, Rarity had to admit it wasn't an illogical deduction by any means.

Applejack scratched her head. "But she got all tongue-tied and nervous around you," she observed, still unsure why she had to argue the point when it was staring them right in the face.

"Yes. Probably because the way I act around her creeps her out," Fluttershy said, sinking lower to the ground at the prospect, her ears flopping in sadness.

Rarity and Applejack stopped to exchange looks. No wonder Fluttershy was such an introvert; they would be too, if they always imagined the worst case scenario for every possible event.

"...Are you naturally this pessimistic, or did you have to practise?" Rarity remarked.

"Yes," Fluttershy murmured, not especially keen to talk about it anymore. They'd already made it back to Carousel Boutique. She hadn't even realised they'd been headed there.

"Well, not much you can do now except go through with it," Applejack said brightly, giving her a slap on the rump, making her jump forward.

"I-I-I don't know if I can," Fluttershy admitted, plagued with doubts. All of this was happening so fast. She hadn't even had time to adjust. "I-I, I think I should just head home..."

"Oh," Applejack suddenly frowned and lowered her head, seeming really hurt. "I see. So, that's how it's gonna be, huh?" She sighed. "Real classy."

Fluttershy stared cluelessly. "W-what?"

"Honestly, Fluttershy, how could you of all ponies be so thoughtless and mean-spirited?" Rarity shook her head with disapproval, catching on quickly and playing along with Applejack's little act. "I thought you were better than this."

"I...huh?"

"You would ask your dear friend Twilight Sparkle to spend time with you and get her hopes up like that, only to abandon her and leave her waiting there all night, alone and unwanted?" said Rarity, looking betrayed at the very thought. "And you claim to *love* her?"

"She'll be crushed when she realises Fluttershy ain't comin'," Applejack said to her, giving a world-weary shake of her head. "After being treated like that, Twilight will probably never be able to trust her, or anypony, ever again."

"Indeed," Rarity nodded solemnly, very conscious of the increasing expression of guilt and regret on Fluttershy's features. "And we all know that losing a friend's trust is the quickest way to lose their friendship—"

"FOREVER!" Pinkie Pie popped out of a tree's foliage to say with the utmost seriousness, before slinking back inside again, returning to Twilight's library.

"Oh goodness!" Fluttershy squeezed her eyes shut, feeling like she was on the verge of tears. "...You're right," she conceded. She couldn't just walk away from an engagement she'd already made and leave the pony she loved hanging. She'd made her bed, now she had to lie in it. "I will go out with Twilight like I promised. But, if I'm going to do this, I really, really, really, really, really, really, *really*, really, really, really need your help. Really," she concluded, unable to emphasise that point enough.

"That's what we're here for, darling," Rarity assured her, regaining her happy mood in an instant.

"You can count on us!" Applejack said with a trustworthy wink.

"Ooh, this is going to be so excitiiiiiiing," Rarity all but sang with glee, dashing inside her store as her mind overflowed with brilliant ideas. "Oh, I've got dozens – *dozens* of outfits that would be absolutely perfect for you!" she said, using her magic to sort through the clothing racks.

"Aw, here she goes," Applejack rolled her eyes, bringing a hoof to her face in annoyance.

"Now, do you want to look sexy, sensual, spicy, saucy, seductive, secretive, vibrant, virginal, vivacious, chaste, charming, cute, hot, cool, pretty, beautiful, ravishing, feisty, demure, exotic, erotic, quixotic, fiery, laid-back, casual, alluring, tempting, revealing, or merely fantastic? I have one for *every* occasion," said Rarity, intently rifling through her shelves. "Oh.

Where's she gone?" she asked, glancing about herself in confusion, seeing as how Fluttershy had apparently vanished into thin air.

In fact, she had ducked behind Applejack, where she had begun quivering in terror. She was so bad at decisions! Why did there have to be so many *choices*? She didn't even know what some of those words *meant*!

Sensing her friend's distress, Applejack elected to step forward. "Um, Rarity? Don't you think this is all little much?"

"*Too much*?" Rarity looked aghast, as if the concept that any amount of fashion could ever be 'too much' was completely alien to her.

Applejack moved closer, whispering to her privately. "Twilight already likes her for who she is," she pointed out, knowing Rarity shared her suspicions about that. "No need to go makin' her look like somepony she's not."

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean she can't look nice," Rarity countered, wanting the evening to be special for her dearest friend. "I mean, what about—?"

"No." Applejack pushed whatever dress she was reaching for back into the rack.

"But I've got—"

"Rar', it's *Fluttershy's* date (only Twilight ain't supposed to know it's a date). Don't ya think *she* should get to choose how she looks instead of playin' your mannequin?" Applejack said, staring the unicorn dead in the eye.

Once again, Rarity knew she was right, reluctant though she was to admit it. "...Well, when you put it like that," she glanced down, gloomily. "I guess I'll just have to do her *make-up* then!" She instantly perked back up again.

Applejack sighed in frustration. "She looks *fine*," she insisted, lightly pushing Rarity back in place. After all, Fluttershy had become a

supermodel with that face, and without any of the caked on glitter and paint Rarity liked to drench herself in when she got all dolled up.

“Oh, come on!” Rarity complained.

“I ain't 'bout to let you paint her up like a carnival pony,” said Applejack, refusing to budge.

“Please? Just a *teensy*—”

“Rarity.”

“A smidgen of—?”

“No!”

“But—”

“Shh!”

Rarity huffed, glaring at the cowpony who was so devoted to the task of raining on her parade. “*Must* you spoil my fun?” she asked.

“Where possible.” Applejack grinned.

If looks could kill, there would have been an Apple family funeral that day. “...Well, can I at *least* do her mane?” Rarity asked, hoping she could seek some sort of compromise to satisfy her need to do...something!

Applejack opened her mouth as if to protest, but that was when a quiet voice piped up. “Um. Actually, I-I'd like that,” Fluttershy said, sincerely, sending a somewhat apologetic smile in Rarity's direction. She did want her to get involved, after all. That had been the whole point of coming to her in the first place.

Rarity turned to Applejack, clamping her hooves together as if in prayer, batting her eyelashes angelically. “Pleeeeeease?”

Applejack shrugged. “If Fluttershy says so, I guess that'd be fine, then.”



“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Rarity half-squealed and half-giggled with sheer glee before practically pouncing on the pegasus with mountains of mane product.

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“C'mon, champ! You ready for this?” Rainbow Dash asked rhetorically, planning on giving an impromptu pep-talk to the purple pony, who was pacing back and forth with apprehension as the hour of her non-date drew closer.

“No!” Twilight admitted, apparently missing the point of the whole ‘rhetorical question’ thing. She was wearing a groove in the floor from how quickly she kept tracing the same steps. It hadn't done much to calm her down, either. “There are still so many things that aren't right! For starters, the book said I'm supposed to greet her with flowers, and I haven't got—”

“FLOWERS!” Pinkie squealed. “Why didn't you say so?”

And then suddenly flowers! Hundreds of flowers rained down upon her from the ceiling, burying Twilight in a pile that reached about three yards high. Twilight spluttered for breath as she pulled herself up to the surface. “Uh, Pinkie? Too many flowers...”

“Oh. Whoops,” she shrugged, humming happily to herself, dancing off without so much as a care.

Twilight spat out a flower, glowering in no particular direction.

“Uh, yeah. About that,” Rainbow flew over, perching atop the pile of flowers. “Are you really sure you want Pinkie to be there tonight?” she asked, questioning her friend's judgement. Not that Pinkie wasn't awesome or wouldn't try her hardest to help, just...it was Pinkie. She didn't do subtlety. Or restraint. The whole incident in Appleoosa had kind of showed that her methods weren't always the most constructive.

“Of course she does!” Pinkie popped up between the two ponies. “Why wouldn't she? I'm the helpingest helper who ever helped!”

to—” “Oh, no.” Rainbow cringed, sensing what was coming. “She's going

“Yep,” Twilight dead-panned.

“I know what ponies like  
I know what ponies want  
I know what ponies like  
I've got what ponies want

I know what ponies like  
I know what ponies want  
I've seen them looking

I make 'em want me  
I like to tease them  
They want to touch me  
I never let them

I know what ponies like  
I know what ponies want  
I know what ponies like  
Ponies like  
Ponies like me!”

Rainbow didn't know whether to be amused or annoyed. “...That's great, Pinkie. We have to make one particular pony like *Twilight* though,” she pointed out.

“Oh. Really? Why?” asked Pinkie, innocently.

“Because she has a date with Fluttershy!” Rainbow said, her patience wearing thin.

“TWILIGHT LIKES FLUTTERSHY?!” Pinkie gasped.

Two sets of eyes stared at her. “...Pinkie, are you actually forgetting this every time we tell you, or are you doing this on purpose just to annoy me?” asked Twilight, growing tired of this cycle.

“Um...” Pinkie put a hoof to her chin, thinking it over. “Yep!” she eventually answered, unhelpfully.

“Forget it,” Twilight said, too short on time to bother pursuing that line of questioning any further, pulling herself out of the flower pile instead. “This will have to do. There's nothing more I can accomplish before she gets here,” she said, straightening out her dress, shaking off the loose petals that had become stuck to her to the best of her ability.

“I still say you should have worn a suit,” Rainbow commented with a shrug. “Suits are hot.”

“Will you shut up already!” Twilight snapped. That argument had gone on way too long.

A knock at the door killed any chance of them fighting over that again.

“Oh, Celestia! She's here!” Twilight gasped.

“Okay. Breathe! Breathe! Be cool,” Rainbow coached her, giving her a shoulder massage in an effort to keep her relaxed. “Pinkie and I will follow you from the sky. Wherever you end up, make sure you get a table outside so we can watch you. We'll find somewhere to hang nearby. Until you feel ready to come and find us, just go with the list. You got it?”

“Got it!” Twilight nodded.

“Ready?”

“Ready!” Twilight enthused, picking up some flowers with her magic, binding the stems together with a piece of ribbon.

“You psyched?”

“Yeah!”

“Can you do it?”

“Yeah!”

“Three, two, one, BREAK!” Rainbow said, swiftly darting off, grabbing Pinkie as she flew up to the second floor. With that, she made her exit off the balcony.

Twilight sighed, letting the bouquet rest on her back. “Come on, Twilight. You're a Sparkle. You'll do fine,” she said in an effort to steel herself, before finally opening the door.

There she was. The pony of her dreams.

“Um...hi.” Fluttershy nervously smiled.

“Hi,” Twilight said giddily before consciously snapping herself out of her stupor. She wasn't about to start that again. She had to be cool.

“I'm, I'm not too early am I?” asked Fluttershy, feeling her head spin just looking at Twilight.

“No, no. Not at all,” said Twilight, not even caring if she was early or late. Now that Fluttershy was standing in front of her – looking so, so very beautiful – she couldn't wait another second. Her date, or, uh, not-date couldn't start fast enough.

“Good. Good...” Fluttershy said, trailing off into shy silence.

Twilight felt the lull coming, and decided to put an end to it before it began, just as Rainbow Dash had advised. Lulls were bad. So, she said the first thing that came to her head. “I love what you've done with your mane,” she said, honestly, glad that the first thing on her mind had been that, and not something ridiculous.

“HA!” Rarity gloated from her hiding place, rubbing that small victory in Applejack's face. The cowpony purposefully ignored her, and the two went back to spying.

“Oh! Th-thank you!” Fluttershy blushed, giggling a little. She knew she always hid behind her mane, so she'd made sure she couldn't do that tonight by keeping it clipped back. No more hiding.

“...Ah! That reminds me!” Twilight laughed nervously, deciding to get this done before she forgot about it. “Here,” she said, levitating the bouquet with her mind.

Fluttershy gave a soft gasp, her heart humming and her wings flapping, bringing her into the air. “Oh...oh my!” she said, practically dumbstruck. She hadn't expected this. But she liked it. “Th-thank you so much!” she managed to say through her ill-contained surprise and excitement, cheeks glowing red as she took the flowers between her fetlocks. “They're beautiful.”

“...Like you,” Twilight all but gushed.

“How romaaaantic,” Rarity cooed, batting her eyelashes.

Applejack groaned. This was going to be a long night.

For several moments, it was silent again. “...So!” Twilight eventually perked up. “Let's go, shall we?”

“Oh! Yes! Let's,” Fluttershy replied, nodding as if to convince herself that she hadn't nearly forgotten she was the one who knew where this date was taking place.

“Come on,” said Applejack, poking a daydreaming Rarity in the side, which did nothing to rouse her. “We have to get there before they see us,” she reminded her, practically dragging the unicorn away, taking the short cut to their destination.

# Chapter 3

Twilight was trotting along behind Fluttershy, letting the pegasus lead her. The walk had given her time to check her list without being spotted, which was an opportunity she appreciated; it meant she could keep herself focused on what she had to do. She was also very conscious of a hot air balloon less-than-subtly lurking above them, keeping a watchful eye on the pair. Twilight elected to ignore that.

'Okay, so, I should do item number five first, then item number three. Or, wait, no. Should I go in order? Does the order make a difference?' she thought to herself.

"Twilight?" Fluttershy said.

"Gah!" Twilight jumped, startled, immediately stashing the note in her dress.

Fluttershy didn't appear to hear the sound. "Um...we're here?" she said, smiling sheepishly as she came down to the ground, holding her gift of flowers in her wing.

"Oh! Of...of course we are!" Twilight chuckled, feigning casualness.

'Item number six,' she internally reminded herself, 'A true romantic always holds the door open for their partner.'

"Here. Let me get that for you," she said, politely standing by the door, her horn glowing with magic as she opened it, gesturing for Fluttershy to go in ahead of her.

"Did ya see that?" Applejack nudged Rarity, the ponies now hidden behind the décor of a nearby restaurant, where they were inconspicuously (or so they hoped) sharing a table while spying on their friends through gaps in the garden hedge. "Told ya she liked her."

“What a charmer. What manners!” Rarity enthused, watching the two lovebirds through a golden pair of opera glasses. “Speaking of which, will you take off that hat!” she scolded Applejack, snatching it from her, leading to a tug-of-war between the two, which AJ ultimately won.

Rarity huffed. If anything was going to give them away, that hat would be it.

As she approached the door, Fluttershy's initial instinct was to say 'Thank you', but, then again, she was supposed to be acting aloof, just like Rarity had told her to do. 'Thank you' wasn't very aloof. It was too earnest. Maybe she should just say 'Thanks'. 'Thanks' was more casual, right? But, then, she didn't want to be *too* casual. Then she would just seem rude, or disinterested. Oh, no. What did she say? Thanks or thank you? Thanks or thank you? Thanks or thank you?

“Thank!” Fluttershy eventually said, smiling brightly. Only a split second later did she actually register what she had said, and she was definitely not oblivious to the confused look that passed over Twilight's features when the purple pony did the same.

Not far away, Applejack winced in sympathetic pain. Rarity banged her head against the table.

Fluttershy feigned laughter and walked inside. Only once she had turned away did she let the utter horror bubbling inside her slip into her expression.

“Good evening,” the Maitre D' greeted them. “Have you got reservations?”

'Several,' Fluttershy thought to herself, still reeling from her error. “Um, yes. Table for two, under Fluttershy?” she said, uncomfortably avoiding the stallion's gaze.

“Ah, excellent, Ms. Fluttershy,” he said, marking off her booking. “We have several free tables at this hour. Where would you like to sit?”

“Um...” Fluttershy trailed off, looking over at Twilight, questioningly.

“Uh, you know, it's a nice night. Could we maybe sit outside, please?” asked Twilight, trying to be subtle and non-suspicious with her request, and failing miserably at the task. Fortunately, Fluttershy was too self-conscious to notice anything out of the ordinary about her manner.

“Very well. Right this way, please,” he said, leading them back outside.

“Look! There they are!” said Pinkie, pointing at the pair in excitement, rocking the balloon basket with her motions.

“I can see that,” Rainbow replied, squinting as she tried her hardest to hear what they were saying. No good. It was too far away. “You stay up here. I'm going in closer. I'll meet you down there,” she said, jumping off onto a cloud.

“Okie dokie lokie!” Pinkie grinned, pulling the burner on her balloon and flying away. Rainbow Dash flinched at the impossibly loud sound, her hat nearly falling off at her sudden jump. Luckily for her, Twilight and Fluttershy seemed too wrapped up in each other to notice.

She hunkered down in her small cloud, stealthily paddling it closer.

“Um, so...” Fluttershy awkwardly began. “This food looks...nice?” she tried.

“Huh? Oh. Yes! Yes it does!” Twilight agreed, pretending to read the menu, when, in actual fact, she was slyly referring to her notes again.

‘Hmm. Let's see. What should I do?’ she asked herself, browsing her list in search of ideas. ‘Point number two: the key to her heart is to compliment her eyes.’ Twilight quirked a brow in confusion. ‘What? Um. Okay. If the book says so...’

Fluttershy glanced around, instinctively peeking over her shoulder, her eyes drawn to the spot where she knew her friends were hiding. Only a few minutes in, and already she had no clue what to do. Maybe she would have to excuse herself and seek their help sooner than she thought.



No. She could do this. It wasn't that hard. Like Applejack had said, she just had to pretend she was talking to her or Rarity. If she was ever in doubt, she merely had to think of what would she say if it was any of her other friends across the table.

"Um," she hesitated, thinking about it. "...H-How was your—?"

"YOUR EYES ARE GREAT," Twilight suddenly said, far too enthusiastically.

Rainbow slapped her forehead so hard she almost fell off her cloud.

"W-w-what?" Fluttershy baulked in confusion. Why? Why would Twilight suddenly say something like that? Unless she was lying to convince her nothing was the matter with them, which of course meant that there had to be something wrong with them. Oh, goodness!

"Is-is-is there something wrong with my eyes?" she asked, her insides starting to twist with panic.

"Huh? N-no! Th-th-they're, they're great! I said they're great!" Twilight assured her in a rush. Her tone just made Fluttershy worry even more.

"Oh, no! Please! Just, just tell me what's wrong with them!" she all but pleaded as her anxiety skyrocketed. She did her utmost to try and look at her own eyes without the aid of a mirror, which only resulted in her going cross-eyed and subsequently making herself dizzy.

"Nothing! Really!" Twilight insisted, beyond bewildered by Fluttershy's reaction. The book hadn't said anything about this. "I just thought you should know they're great," she said hastily, backtracking from her apparent faux pas as hard as she could. Perhaps it wasn't the advice that was wrong; maybe she just hadn't complimented her well enough. "You seem like you have excellent vision," she tried, still unsure why the book was so adamant in encouraging its readers to say such things.

Fluttershy finally stopped panicking. Instead, all she could do was stare at Twilight incredulously. She had excellent *vision*? What was that even supposed to mean?

"Th...thank?" was all Fluttershy managed to say in response, before inwardly cringing. Oh goodness, she'd done that again.

Twilight tried to force a smile, but her unease was palpable. Only minutes in, and already disaster. This was an emergency. A crisis. But where was Rainbow Dash when she needed her? She glanced around, looking for—oh, there she was! She spotted Rainbow and Pinkie seated at an alfresco juice bar across the street; they were hard to miss when the cyan pegasus was very unsubtly gesturing for her to come over there right that instant. That settled it, then.

TIME-OUT!

"...Um, could you excuse me? I need to use the little fillies' room," Twilight said, getting up and slowly backing away from her seat.

"Oh, me too!" Fluttershy replied, grateful for the out. She'd take any excuse she could get if it meant she had a chance to find her friends and seek their advice. "Sh-shame this restaurant doesn't have any bathrooms!"

"Oh, darn," Twilight didn't even bother to feign disappointment. "Guess I'll try over there!"

"And I'll look over there!"

They both darted off without a second thought.

"Rainboooooooooow," Twilight whined as she crossed the street, looking utterly distraught at her early failure, her pout suggesting that she was in dire need of consolation and support. All she got was a clomp to the head. "Ow!"

"What were you thinking?!" Rainbow harshly whispered.

"I don't know what went wrong!" Twilight insisted, finding it unfair that she should be held at fault when she had only followed instructions. It wasn't her mistake.

"I thought you did great!" Pinkie earnestly enthused, earning two sets of deadpan expressions.

“...What part of 'be cool' didn't you understand?” Rainbow resumed, shaking the purple pony.

“All of it, apparently.” Twilight hung her head.

“Your eyes are great!” Rainbow said, mocking Twilight's goofy, love-stoned affectations.

“I just did what the book told me to do!” Twilight explained, still completely clueless as to what she'd done wrong. Maybe the book wasn't the irrefutable tome of knowledge and expertise it claimed to be, if that advice was the best it had to offer.

“You're a disgrace! You'll never amount to anything! You're just like your father!” Rainbow berated her friend.

“What?” Twilight stared blankly at the pegasus.

“I dunno. Just getting into character.” Rainbow shrugged, wanting to play the part of coach correctly. “C'mon, champ! You can do this!” she said, prepared to save Twilight from the hole she'd gotten herself into before she could dig herself any deeper. “You've gotta be aggressive!”

“YEAH!” Pinkie cheered, looking intensely motivated. “You've gotta grab that bull by the horns and ZAP! POW! GIVE 'EM THE LEFT! GIVE 'EM THE RIGHT! One! Two! Three! You're out! Ding ding ding! Ladies and gentlecolts, here is your winner, and NEW Undisputed Champion of Equestria! Twilight Sparkle!” she announced, raising her friend's hoof in victory, confetti spontaneously sprinkling down on them from nowhere.

“Yeah, you tell 'er, Pinkie!” Rainbow agreed, entirely seriously. A light-bulb suddenly lit up above her head (because the bar had activated its decorative lighting system). “Hey! I've got an idea!” she said, a smirk coming to her lips.

“You do?” asked Twilight, hopefully.

“Uh huh,” Rainbow nodded confidently, leaning in to stage-whisper to her hopeless companion. “When Fluttershy gets back, you should say that

you've heard she's a *flying machine*, then tell her she can take you home and practise *aerial manoeuvres* on you until she *makes you soar*," said Rainbow, thrusting her hips suggestively.

Twilight eyed her strangely. "What kind of suggestion is that? You know I can't fly. And Fluttershy is scared of heights," she pointed out, the subtext flying right over her head.

"Gosh, Dashie," Pinkie rolled her eyes and shook her head at her friend's obvious error. "You're such an airhead."

Rainbow clopped her own forehead in irritation.

---

"Are you sure there's nothing in my eye?  
There's something in my eye isn't there? Can you look—"

"FLUTTERSHY!" the sudden outburst from Applejack finally succeeded in cutting off her frantic babbling. "YOUR. EYES. ARE. FINE!" said AJ, making damn sure she was heard that time.

Fluttershy cowered against a wall, more than a little startled.

"...Are you done?" asked Rarity, not keen to be interrupted again.

"Um...yes?" Fluttershy said, definitely having snapped out of it after that.

"Good. Now, shall we figure out a plan?"

"That would be nice..." Fluttershy meekly agreed.

"Ain't no need for no plan. Ya just gotta relax, pardner," Applejack said, throwing a comforting hoof around her friend. "You were doin' fine until ya got all nervous and flustered."

"Okay." Fluttershy nodded thoughtfully, considering her advice. "How do I stop getting nervous?" was what she asked next, in complete

seriousness. Applejack's evasive expression told her the cowpony didn't have an answer for that.

"You're fine just the way you are," AJ tried again, ever the big sister.

"*Thank*," Fluttershy countered.

Applejack had to admit she'd won that argument.

"Ahem," a smug sound from Rarity drew their attention. Floating in front of her, suspended with magic, was a glass of wine. "It's not called a social lubricant for nothing, darling," she said, smartly.

"Uh..." Applejack's ears flattened with concern. "I don't think that's such a good idea," she said, getting a bad feeling about mixing Fluttershy and any quantity of alcohol. She didn't have to be a genius to know that wasn't a winning combination.

"Just a sip, is all," Rarity insisted. Honestly, she wasn't stupid. She wasn't about to go getting her best friend drunk on one of the most important occasions of her life. She just wanted her to *think* she wasn't nervous, when it would really be her own inner-confidence that did the trick. There was nothing like a good placebo. "Just enough to take the edge off," she said, inching the glass closer.

Fluttershy instinctively drew back, as if she thought the glass might bite her. She was totally inexperienced with alcohol. If she was being honest, she wasn't even entirely sure what it did, except maybe that it had similar effects to salt. But, then, it was just one tiny little mouthful. And, if Rarity said it was fine, then it had to be safe, right?

"That...sounds...okay..." she said, in spite of her reservations, surprised at how seemingly easy the solution to her nervousness was.

"That's my girl!" Rarity encouraged, ignoring Applejack's look of disapproval. "Go on."

Fluttershy tentatively sniffed the glass before taking an experimental sip. Huh. That wasn't so bad. She took another sip.

"There. How does that make you feel?" asked Rarity, hopeful that the self-induced trick of the mind would work on her.

The pegasus glanced down momentarily, evaluating how she felt. "...Warm?" she said.

"Hey. Twilight's comin' back. You best get on over there," said Applejack a little too quickly, shooing her friend away before she could be further corrupted by a certain unicorn's bad influence.

"Oh. Right!" Fluttershy hastily bounded around the hedge, not wanting Twilight to realise who she'd been talking to, nor why they were there to begin with.

Applejack cast a glare at Rarity out of the corners of her eyes, silently declaring her objections to this plan of hers, and convinced that it would backfire horribly. "It's rude to stare," the fashionista commented, before proceeding to lift her gilded binoculars to her eyes once more and continue her spying, oblivious to the hypocrisy.

The wannabe lovers arrived back at the table at the exact same time.

"Hi!" Fluttershy said, trying not to seem suspicious.

"Hi." Twilight grinned back, attempting to do the same.

"..."

"..."

Oh, no. Not this again. Twilight bit her lip. She had to be assertive, and say something. But all the things Rainbow Dash suggested were confusing and made no sense, and, after that last incident, she wasn't sure she trusted her book anymore either. After all, Fluttershy had taken the last supposedly romantic gesture like some kind of personal insult.

...Rainbow Dash's advice it was, then.

"Um, you know, I think you physically resemble a parking violation," Twilight began uncertainly, earning a baffled look from her friend, "Because

you have fines written all over you,” she said, still confused as to what in Equestria that was supposed to mean.

Not far away, Pinkie burst into torrents of laughter, making sure to write that down on a napkin in between giggles, while Rainbow Dash groaned and hung her head, looking about ready to give up on life.

Fluttershy blinked, then glanced down at herself, then back up at Twilight. Was...was that an insult? A joke? A compliment? She had no idea how to react to that.

Apparently, neither did Twilight. “I don't know. I'm just saying...” She shrugged, staring down at her menu, letting the awkward silence wash over her. “...Garçon!” she called out, purely to move on from that uncomfortable moment as quickly as possible. “Ready to order!”

Fluttershy timidly glanced down at her menu, which she hadn't actually read yet, figuring she'd have to make a split-second decision as to what she would eat. She peered upwards momentarily to see Twilight hiding behind her menu, naught but her horn and the top of her mane showing.

In spite of the...weirdness, Fluttershy felt a smile creep across her face. Twilight was just so cute, even if she couldn't always understand what she was talking about. Even her odd demeanour so far was, she had to admit, strangely charming.

The faint blush on her cheeks. The way she cleared her throat. The vaguely stilted way she moved when she talked to the waiter. The way her little horn moved with every slight turn of her head. It was all so adorable.

She sighed, lovingly.

“And for you, miss?” the waiter asked.

“Yeah...just, um...yeah,” Fluttershy murmured, everything else forgotten as she gazed at Twilight, hopelessly lost in her features. The purple pony flushed pink when she met Fluttershy's stare, and went all coy. Those beautiful eyes. The things they did to her.

The waiter quirked a brow. "...I'll put you down for the same," he said, deciding that was the closest to a sensible interpretation he would get. "Ugh. Young couples," he sneered under his breath. They were always impossible to work with. With that, he turned and left the two alone.

"Yes! Yes!" Rarity watched with anticipation, sensing the spark between the two. Romance was in the air. "Ooh, now would be the perfect time to conjure an illusion. Something subtle that signals that they're soulmates—"

"No illusions," Applejack cut her off, pushing down the opera glasses. "This is somethin' Fluttershy has to do by herself. Your heart's in the right place, but I reckon she needs to know she can do this on her own," she said, firmly sticking to her principles.

Rarity sighed. "Oh, I suppose you have a point. But if the situation demands it, then I will do whatever I must!" she insisted, unable to suppress her urge to meddle in this affair and meticulously fix everything to the point of perfection.

"She'll be fine," Applejack assured her, confident that the next few moments would seal the deal without so much as a hitch.

Twilight and Fluttershy remained locked in place, everything else fading away, seeing nought but each other. Twilight felt herself melt as she stared deeper into Fluttershy's eyes. Now seemed like the time. Time to confess her feelings. Just like the book and her friends had told her to do; she had to tell Fluttershy just how much she—

Twilight blinked as a realisation struck her. 'Make me *sore*,' she thought, having just gotten the joke, if it could even be called that. She wasn't laughing. 'Ugh. Rainbow Dash! You creep.' Twilight turned a hue of red, not sure whether she was embarrassed or fuming or both. Nevertheless, the moment was broken.

She glanced over to the other side of the street, planning to fix that pesky pegasus with a glare. Instead, she spotted Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie both trying to catch her attention. Once Twilight had seen them, Rainbow knelt down and took Pinkie's hoof in her own, the pink pony miming a swoon, the pair clearly trying to indicate to her that now was the



time to do the same, both of them nodding when they figured Twilight had caught on.

The unicorn narrowed her eyes suspiciously, beginning to question whether they were really the best sources for advice. She couldn't be sure that they were even trying to help her at all at that point. But, hey, this couldn't hurt. Could it?

'Well, why the hay not?' she thought, feeling a burst of courage.

Gently, she reached out, and touched Fluttershy's right foreleg. The pegasus gave a sharp intake of breath, surprised out of her stupor by the soft contact. There was...touching, and... "Huh?"

"Uh, Fluttershy," Twilight began, unconsciously stroking her dainty limb. Fluttershy felt her heart pound. Oh gosh. That felt *really* good; like warm, bubbly water was rushing up her leg, cascading over her coat, sending ripples through her skin. "I just, um...I wanted to tell you, that..."

She felt those silky soft hooves running further up her front leg, drifting past her knee, towards her elbow; felt the sparks emanating from her touch. Her breath quickened. Her heart raced. If Twilight could do this to her merely by caressing her arm, then she couldn't even imagine what it would feel like if she...if she...

Except she did imagine it. Fluttershy felt her cheeks heat up. She could see Twilight coming nearer, the gap between them shrinking. Her mind's eye involuntarily drifted to other places. Her imagination showed Twilight leaning across the table, and she could feel the phantom sensation of her breath ghosting across her muzzle as the space grew smaller and smaller.

"Fluttershy..." she whispered, her voice penetrating the increasingly real daydream. "I want...I want to..."

SPROING!

"Oh goodness!" Fluttershy yelped in mortification, instinctively scurrying backwards, only to fall over in the attempt. She had been thrown off balance by the one utterly humiliating factor that had startled her in the

first place: the fact that her wings were at full extension. There was no hiding it.

“Whoa,” Rainbow Dash said, something between impressed and amused. “Way to go, Twilight! I taught her everything she knows,” she smugly bragged to some nearby patrons of the juice bar.

Twilight straightened up, a quizzical expression on her face. She had no idea what was happening. As far as she could see, Fluttershy had just jumped back in panic, and was looking around with unbridled horror, desperate to get away from her. All because she had touched her?

“I-I-I, I gotta, gotta, gotta, please let me go,” Fluttershy hyperventilated as mixed emotions ran rampant throughout her body. “I’ll be right back!” she said, scampering off to find Rarity and Applejack with such haste that she tripped over her own hooves as she fled.

Twilight watched her leave, staring vacantly at her retreating form for several moments. Then, suddenly, she burst into flames, a look of fury flashing across her features, steam billowing out of her nostrils, her eyes turning white. “*Rainbow!*” she growled, marching straight over to that meddlesome pegasus.

When she saw her coming, Pinkie gasped in shock. “OH MY GOSH YOU’RE ON FIRE! I’LL SAVE YOU!” she said, hurriedly running to her rescue, tipping a glass of water on Twilight’s head, putting out the blaze. “There,” Pinkie dusted off her hooves. “My work here is done.”

Some tendrils of smoke rose from Twilight’s mane. The flames had been quenched, but her rage had nowhere near diminished. She walked right up to a thoroughly bewildered Rainbow Dash, glaring her dead in the eyes, so close in her personal space that their heads were practically pressed together.

Rainbow glanced around, wondering what was up with her bookish friend’s uncharacteristic behaviour. “...You mad?” she asked, uncertainly.

“You think this is *funny?*” Twilight snapped.

"What?" Rainbow scratched her head, genuinely clueless as to what she was talking about.

"Funny? Nah; I think this is a riot!" said Pinkie, somewhere off to the side. Twilight glanced at the pony, only to find that she was reading the funny pages of the local newspaper. "Ahahahaha! Oh, Daghoof! Funny, funny Daghoof! Horsie is such a good comic."

Twilight shook her head before turning her ire back to Rainbow Dash. "Are you *deliberately* giving me bad advice so I'll screw up in front of Fluttershy?" she accused, beginning to believe as much.

"What are you talking about?" asked Rainbow, regarding the purple pony bizarrely. "I think my last piece of advice turned out pretty well," she said, nudging Twilight suggestively. "Fluttershy certainly seemed to enjoy herself, if you know what I mean."

"Are you kidding me?" Twilight shouted her down, slamming her hooves into the bar either side of Rainbow Dash. "She couldn't get away from me fast enough! She even spread her wings like she wanted to fly away," said the unicorn, facing away from her friends when her anger suddenly subsided, replaced by a palpable air of misery. Fluttershy was obviously *repulsed* by her. "I think she made it pretty clear she spurns my advances..." she sighed forlornly, just wanting to go home before she made an even bigger foal out of herself.

"Oh," Rainbow Dash snorted with laughter, covering her mouth in a futile effort to stifle her chuckles as she realised what was going on, "Is *that* what you think that meant?"

"Yes." Twilight narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "...Why? What are you hiding from me?" she asked, leaning in interrogatively.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing," the pegasus lied, dismissively waving away the issue, scarcely able to keep from snickering. "I'll tell you when you're older."

"Nnngh!" Twilight all but growled, her anger far from gone. "You'll tell me nothing!" she said, thrusting a hoof at her unhelpful friend. "You've done enough damage already! You might as well go home, because I'm never

asking you for advice ever again! Not tonight! Not *ever!*" she declared definitively, turning on her hooves and trudging crankily back to her table.

Pinkie pouted, standing alongside her friend. "I don't think she likes you, Dashie," she commented, displaying an inspiring grasp of the obvious. "Does this mean you're not gonna coach her anymore?" she asked, saddened by the prospect.

"Eh. She'll be back," Rainbow brushed it off, confidently. "After all, I'm an expert at the art of picking ponies up," she boasted. At that moment, two handsome young stallions occupying seats further down the bar caught her eye. Rainbow smirked and adjusted her hat, sliding over to the two, a devious grin on her face. "How *you* doin'?"

While Rainbow chatted up the gents, Pinkie poked a hoof against her chin, for the first time growing seriously concerned about the progress of Fluttershy and Twilight's date. She'd expected it to be easy as cupcakes for the both of them, but things didn't seem to be running as smoothly as she'd anticipated. Hmm. Maybe it was time for her to sprinkle some of her magic in the air.

Pinkie giggled. "I know exactly what to do," she said to herself, casually turning her gaze to the fourth wall. "You, there! Don't go anywhere. I've gotta feeling I'm about to have my big scene," she announced, winking knowingly at the now rather perplexed reader. "Hey. Don't just look at me like that. The story's down there," she said, manifesting a scene break and slotting it into place.

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"Ohgoshohgoshohgoshohgoshohgosh," Fluttershy stammered like the nervous wreck she was. She lay on the floor, curled up in a foetal position, glowing bright red. Her face was so hot that the air around her sizzled. Her wings were still painfully erect, and, despite willing it with every ounce of her being, there was nothing she could do to make them go down again. "This has never happened to me before! I swear!" she said, looking like she was going to cry.

"It's perfectly natural..." Rarity said, consolingly stroking her mane. Applejack just looked lost, having no clue what any of this meant. "There's no need to be ashamed, darling."

Fluttershy timidly peeked out from under her hooves. "D-d-d-do you think maybe she didn't notice?" the pink-maned pegasus asked hopefully.

"Ehh," Rarity averted her eyes, uncomfortably. Unfortunately, a pair of fully spread wings standing at attention were rather hard to miss. "Well...you were out of there so fast, she probably never saw a thing," Rarity lied, if only to make Fluttershy feel better.

Fluttershy sighed with relief. "I hope so." Now, if only she could get her wings down again. She mewled as she stood up. She couldn't even lift herself above a crouch for fear her wing-tips would be visible over the hedges. She was going to be stuck like this all night, wasn't she?

She winced, realising she was going to have to resort to desperate measures. She slinked over to the table, reached out and took the wine glass between her teeth, draining the rest of its contents. She needed all the courage a pony could muster for this.

"Applejack..." Fluttershy began with a quiver in her voice, lying on the ground again, squeezing her eyes shut in anticipation. "Help."

"Huh?" the cowpony blinked. "Help how?"

"I n-n-need you to...push my wings down," she said, already aching at the thought.

Applejack winced in pain. Fluttershy wanted her to force her fragile wings back down to her sides? "Ew. No!" That had to smart like...she didn't even know what would smart that much. "Isn't that gonna hurt?" she asked. She could tell from the pegasus's expression that it would. A lot. "...B-but I can't! I could break your wings!"

"Just do it," Fluttershy all but whimpered, just wanting her to get it over with before she chickened out altogether.

"Are ya crazy? No!"

“Please!”

“I can't! I ain't doin' it!”

“I'm telling you—”

“That's *sick*!”

“AAAAAAAAGH! A DRAGON!” Rarity shrilly screamed.

“DRAGON!?” Fluttershy leapt into the air, her wings instantly locking up in terror. “WHERE?!” she shrieked, instinctively diving back down to the ground and cowering behind Applejack in fright, hoping with all her heart that the beast hadn't caught sight of her.

Rarity puffed up like an especially vain peacock. “Problem solved,” she announced, indescribably pleased with herself.

Fluttershy blinked curiously, glancing over her shoulder with a questioning expression. Her eyes brightened. “Hey! My wings!” she chirped, springing up onto her legs, thrilled to see her feathered appendages hanging limply back at her sides where they belonged. “Thank you so much!” she said, so happy she could have kissed her best friend for fixing this very personal problem.

“You're welcome, darling. Now, off you go,” said Rarity, urging her back to her table, where Twilight was already waiting for her, um, 'friend' to return.

“Right!” said Fluttershy, eagerly heading back with a skip in her step, keen to resume where she and Twilight had left off, now that she had a quick solution for her potential problem. 'Think of dragons. Think of dragons. Think of dragons,' she reminded herself as she trotted over, feeling the effect that had on her wings. Yep. They wouldn't be bothering her again.

“...What even just happened?” asked Applejack, genuinely oblivious as to what all this business with the wings was about.

Rarity merely smirked at her naivete. 'How precious,' she internally remarked.

"Hi! Um, s-s-sorry about that. I just, uh, it's, I..." Fluttershy babbled as she retook her seat, trying and failing to come up with a remotely good excuse.

"No. It's okay. I understand," said Twilight, still kicking herself for being so forward. It was no surprise that Fluttershy had been freaked out. That was what she got for following *Rainbow's* advice. That traitor. From here on out, she was sticking firmly with the book.

Fluttershy blinked. "You do?" she asked, surprised that Twilight would be so...comfortable with that. She wasn't even the least bit weirded out, offended, or embarrassed? She wasn't even shocked to learn that Fluttershy felt that way about her? And to have it revealed to her in *that* way of all ways? Had she already known?

Before she could ask, a pink blur whirled past them.

"Hola potras!" Pinkie greeted her friends, poorly disguised in a sombrero, a moustache and a poncho, and sporting a very bad attempt at a vaguely foreign accent. "My name is Señor Pinkasso! I am a traveller from a far away land, and I carry with me a song of love and passion everywhere I go!" she declared, seemingly oblivious to the looks her friends were giving her. "May I sing it to you?"

Twilight's jaw had hit the table in muted shock. What was Pinkie doing?! The last thing she wanted was for Fluttershy to see her friends interfering in an effort to set them up! That would clue her in about *everything*.

Seeing that Twilight was in no fit state to respond, Fluttershy timidly spoke up. "Uh, no...we're...we're—"

Before she could finish, Pinkie had shoved a rose between Fluttershy's teeth and whipped an acoustic guitar out of nowhere, managing to strum it rather well despite possessing only hooves, but, then, such was her way. The tango rhythm was supported by a drum beat that had no visible source.

"My song,  
Is for young lovers in the night,  
(That's you Fluttershy and Twilight)  
It's just for you."

"Uh...Pinkie?" Twilight tried to interrupt, but, before she could speak, she found herself falling to the floor as the seat she was on disappeared. They were not in the restaurant anymore, it seemed. And just in time for a chord change.

"Hold heeeeer,  
Feel the beating of her heart  
Inside her cheeeeeeeest!"

"...Where are we?" Fluttershy asked nopony in particular, receiving no explanation, if there even was an explanation for any of this.

"Oh loooooove!  
She is a very strange creature,  
Written all over your features,  
So claim it now if you daaaaaaaaare!"

"Pinkie!" Twilight all but hissed, to no avail.

"Your love,  
Is in the rhythm of the dance,  
It is the music of romance,  
That you feel."

Twilight and Fluttershy suddenly found themselves being pushed together. Awkward looks passed between the pair in their incredibly close proximity, Fluttershy managing to look sheepish in spite of the rose between her teeth.

"Take heeeeer,  
Make her shake with all the passion  
In your heeeeeeeeart!"



If they were supposed to dance to the music, they didn't, too distracted by their unexpected embrace, and...closeness to even contemplate doing such a thing. 'Think of dragons, think of dragons, think of dragons.'

"Oh loooooove!  
She is such an unkind mistress,  
But you can not resist this,  
So seal it now with a kiss..."

And, with that, the music ended. Suddenly, they were right back at the table again, as if they had never moved in the first place.

"Welp! That's all from me!" Pinkie said cheerfully, darting off again, her disguise falling to the ground in her wake in her haste to leave the two lovers alone.

Instead, all she left behind her was a stunned silence, and two thoroughly bewildered ponies, both frozen stiff, neither of them blinking.

Meanwhile, not far away, two other ponies were equally bemused. "...If she does that again, please do hurt her," Rarity commanded, her brain shorting out as she tried to comprehend what in Celestia's green Equestria had just happened.

"Will do," Applejack replied, dumbly, her eye twitching periodically.

Back at the table, the empty quietude was deafening. Twilight probably would have felt mortified were she not too stunned to think, unable to wrap her mind around the events that had just occurred. None of this was in the book. No, this wasn't in the book at all!

Fluttershy was the first to come back to her senses, upon realising she still had a rose between her teeth. She daintily let it fall out, adding it to her bouquet, which was still lying on the table next to her. She cleared her throat, needing to ask the question that was on everypony's mind. "...What was—"

“HAHA! THAT PINKIE!” Twilight feigned casualness. Badly. “SHE’S SO RANDOM!” she said, attempting to laugh it off as another one of her inexplicable non sequiturs.

After a moment, Fluttershy started to giggle too. “Heh. Yeah. She’s a...silly...billy...” she said, realising that had to be it. Although, it made her wonder, had Pinkie figured out her feelings for Twilight? The song seemed to suggest as much. Oh, dear. That wasn’t how she wanted her to find out. Not at all.

Another pregnant pause ensued, each pony trying to gauge whether or not the other had figured out their feelings thanks to Pinkie’s song, or whether their attempts at covering their tracks had worked.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

With each passing second, they grew more nervous, more unsure of themselves. Sweat began to drip from Twilight’s mane. Fluttershy’s heart pounded like a drum, threatening to burst out of her rib cage.

“ ... ? ”

“ ... ! ”

Realisation flashed across both ponies’ features. Oh, Celestia.

...TIME-OUT!

“Bathroom break!” Twilight said, grinning unconvincingly.

“Yes, definitely,” Fluttershy agreed, the pair of ponies dashing off to their respective corners.

“Fluttershy?” Rarity said as her friend rushed past her. “What’s the—?” her eyes widened when she saw the pegasus immediately race to the nearest bottle of wine, seize it between her fetlocks, and start drinking, desperate to drain all the courage and comfort from the bottle that she could. “WHAT?! No! What are you doing?!” Rarity scolded, knocking the

bottle away from her with a jolt of magic, but, alas, it seemed, too late to avert the consequences.

“Don't you – hic – don't you see?” Fluttershy said, trembling, tears already streaming down her face. “She knows! – hic – She knows how I feel ab– hic –out her,” she sobbed, amid hiccups. She'd never been so embarrassed in her whole life. She could have died right then and there.

Applejack rolled her eyes, massaging the bridge of her nose with a hoof. “And that's how Fluttershy became an alcoholic...” she muttered to herself, shaking her head sadly. “Now look at what you've done!” she said, rounding on Rarity, sending her a cold look.

“ME?!” she looked beyond offended at the suggestion that this was in any way her fault. “I never! I never wanted her to get herself drunk!”

“You're the one who planted the idea in her head! You're the one who told her wine would calm her nerves and make her feel better!” Applejack accused, marching right over to the unicorn.

“I never meant it like that!” Rarity explained, her excuses falling on sceptical ears. “I just thought it might trick her into thinking she wasn't scared and make her realise she was capable of doing this all along without our interference!”

“– hic –“

“You couldn't have done that without trickin' her into thinkin' alcohol was some kinda magic happy juice when you know as well as anypony that it isn't that at all?”

“WELL I REGRET IT NOW!”

“You'd better.”

“Uhhnn...think I'm gonna be – hic –“

“Why are you blaming me when it was Pinkie Pie who went and ruined everything with her stupid song?” Rarity challenged, not about to let herself be pushed around over something that was...well, okay, so it was

partially her fault, but even so that meant she was still mostly innocent! “She’s the one who went and blurted out the truth about their feelings before either of them were ready to admit it.”

“Pinkie Pie doesn't know any better! *You do*,” Applejack countered, emphatically prodding her in the chest. “Or ya should, anyway. Sometimes I wonder ‘bout whether ya do...”

“Mommy? Daddy? I don't like it when you fight...”

“Why are you even here, Applejack?” Rarity fired back in retaliation, slapping away her hoof for good measure. “All you've done is shoot down my ideas!”

“Cause they're mostly terrible,” Applejack quipped honestly.

“Well I haven't heard you come up with anything!” Rarity retorted.

“Can't we just be a fam— hic —ly?”

Applejack and Rarity ceased their bickering to look at a very wobbly and disoriented Fluttershy, who still seemed utterly crushed at the way in which things were unfolding that evening.

Rarity sighed, well aware that there were far more important things at stake here than her regularly scheduled sessions of conflict with Applejack. “Well, we've got, at most, a few minutes to put her back together if we're going to save this date and stop her from despising us. You up for it?” she asked, more than willing to set aside her petty grievances for the greater good.

“I'm game if you are,” Applejack replied, just wanting what was best for Fluttershy and Twilight in the end. “Got any ideas?”

“A few,” said Rarity, charging up her horn, hoping that old sobriety spell still worked.

---

"Deep breaths. In and out," Rainbow said, a little miffed that she had to be there holding up a paper bag for a hyperventilating Twilight when she could have been pursuing other, more exciting company. She sighed, guessing she wouldn't be getting to know any attractive strangers that night. Oh well. Friends came first. Element of Loyalty and all that.

"...You still got any air in those lungs?" asked Rainbow, surprised that Twilight hadn't passed out from breathing her own recycled air yet. "You're freaking me out here. Say something."

Twilight took one last deep breath from the bag, releasing it shakily, composing herself. Slowly, she inhaled, preparing to speak. "... Her body hitched forward, and her eyes bulged. She brought a hoof to her muzzle. "Nope. M'gonna throw up," she mumbled queasily, looking for somewhere safe to stumble to before her dry wretches brought up something unpleasant.

Rainbow sighed, wanting to roll her eyes again, but some part of her still cared. Either that or she felt guilty. Either way, it was enough to make her follow her friend. "What brought this on?" she asked, genuinely lost as to what could possibly be so bad as to have put her in this state.

"Didn't you see?!" asked Twilight, not sure how the singing pink pony with inexplicable reality bending powers could have escaped her notice. Rainbow Dash whistled innocently, not wanting her friend to catch on that she had been a little distracted by a pair of stallions at the time. "She knows, Rainbow! *She knows!*" she all but wept.

"...So what?" Rainbow shrugged, since it was obvious Fluttershy felt the same way.

"SO WHAT?!" Twilight had grabbed her before she knew it. "So I'm *doomed!*" she said, looking up at the sky in grief. "Oh, what do I do?" she asked, never having felt so lost or helpless in her life. She wanted to give up, but, darn it, she couldn't. That was the price of loving somepony, she guessed.

"Easy; you go back there and sweep her off her hooves, just like I told you do all along," Rainbow suggested the obvious, since, in her experience, the simplest answer was usually the correct one, or the one

answer she kept trying to force into being right long enough that it eventually worked. "Just like you *want* to do."

"But how can I do that?" she cried, falling to pieces. "It's just no good! She'll never like me..." Twilight all but sobbed.

"She does!" Rainbow insisted.

"I'll believe that when I see it," Twilight mumbled, having lost all confidence in herself. "There has to be something in these notes," she said to herself, desperate for some sort of crutch to lean on. "UGH! I should have just followed these all along!" she said, electing to blame that as the reason her plans had fallen apart. "Gotta cram! Gotta cram! Gotta cram!" she began reading through her check list of items as fast as possible. Not that it was easy. Her sweat had practically made the notes unreadable.

"Enough with the notes!" Rainbow's frustrations finally got the best of her. She knocked Twilight's notes out of the air, and stomped them into the ground, her hooves tearing them to shreds.

Twilight could only stare in disbelief as the fractured pieces of her paper fell all around her. She tried to catch one, but all she could make out was one smudged letter. Her eyes welled up with tears. She was so devastated, so heartbroken that she couldn't even scream or cry.

"That's your problem, Twilight! You think too much!" Rainbow persisted, making sure the purple pony heard her. "Instead of just going out there and taking charge, you spend all your time up here," she tapped her on the head. "If you'd actually spent this night with *Fluttershy* instead of in your own dumb brain you wouldn't even need my help!"

"...My notes..." was all Twilight could manage.

Rainbow nearly screamed with exasperation. "Screw this. I'm outta here. You're on your own," she said. If Twilight was so intent on screwing this up for herself, than that was her business. Rainbow still had a swanky hat, her best friend, and a pair of stallions waiting for her. This night could turn out pretty good for her. She wasn't stupid enough to go down with this sinking ship.

“...Kill me...” she heard Twilight say behind her.

“Hey!” Pinkie abruptly bounced up into Rainbow's view.

“Welcome back,” Rainbow Dash didn't even flinch.

“Where're you going?” Pinkie asked, innocently. “Aren't you helping Twilight and Fluttershy?”

“I was,” Rainbow replied, casting a look back at the purple unicorn. “I mean, I tried. But Twilight's so hopeless at this that it's honestly *boring* watching her fail,” she said, getting tired of getting nowhere with that pony.

“Then make it more interesting,” Pinkie casually suggested, thinking the solution should have been obvious. Then again, ‘if reality sucks, make it more interesting’ was pretty much Pinkie's entire life's motto.

Rainbow stopped mid-step, a light-bulb appearing above her head again. Inspiration had struck. And *how*! “...Pinkie, you're a genius!” she said, enthusiastically, now knowing exactly what to do to make things right.

“Uh, pretty sure I'm a pony, Dashie,” Pinkie pointed out, eyeing the pegasus strangely, much to Rainbow's puzzlement. “Huh. My friend. She's crazy,” Pinkie said to some nearby ponies at the juice bar.

---

“How're ya feelin' now?” asked Applejack.

“Mmm, better,” Fluttershy said, making a face even so. “I still feel warm, and kind of numb, and a bit tired, and like I might be sick...” she said, putting a hoof to her head, which was still swimming a little.

“But you don't feel drunk?” asked Rarity, since that was the most important part.

“No.” Fluttershy shook her head, honestly. She was definitely her usual self in her mind, even if she was suffering some effects of the drink. Her hiccups had gone too.

“Well, she seems coherent,” said Rarity, shrugging, not sure she could do much better. She was no real magician, after all. Even trying the spell in the first place had triggered a small headache in her.

“How’d ya even know how ta do that?” AJ wondered aloud, looking inquisitively at Rarity. It was rather an odd trick to have in one’s repertoire, considering it was totally unrelated to her natural talents.

“Believe it or not, I did have a life before I met you, Applejack,” Rarity somewhat snappily replied, the tension still thick between them from their earlier argument.

“I think it worked,” said Fluttershy, still holding her head. It wasn’t perfect, of course, but she could live with it long enough to wait for the alcohol to break down on its own. Her symptoms were manageable, at least. “I feel fine. Really.”

“You’re sure you feel okay?” Applejack asked her, concerned for her health. That trumped everything else, in her book. “Maybe you should go home an’ sleep it off. There’ll always be other dates.”

“I can do that?” asked Fluttershy perking up at the prospect of being allowed to run away. Moments later, though, she shook her head. “No. I-I have to do this. I want to...If I can’t act now that my feelings are already out in the open, I’ll never be able to,” she said, despite the audible quiver in her voice, and the layer of fog clouding up her mind.

“Well, if you say so...” said Applejack, a little sceptically, but not about to go making Fluttershy’s decisions for her. “Your food’s ready, by the way,” she said, nodding back to the table. “Better let ‘em know you’re still here.”

“Okay.” Fluttershy nodded, turning to run back to the table, but she stopped briefly, having one thing she wanted to say before she left. “Um, by the way, thanks for, you know...being here. Both of you,” she said, sincerely, beyond grateful to have her two friends there looking out for her.

“Yes, yes. Quit stalling,” said Rarity, jokingly, massaging her stinging head.



Twilight was nowhere in sight as Fluttershy walked back to the table. Fluttershy lowered her head as she approached, scanning the area, growing increasingly worried. Oh, no. She must have been scared off. Not that she could really blame her. If Pinkie suddenly came up to her and started singing about true love while trying to set her up with a pony whose feelings she'd had no idea about, Fluttershy's first instinct would have been to run, too.

Anxious though she was, Fluttershy elected to take her seat and wait. There was still a little flicker of hope in her heart amidst all her self-doubt and pessimism. Maybe she would come back. Maybe there was still a chance.

Not far away, Twilight was still trying in vain to magically stick her notes back together. Eventually, her horn stopped glowing, and she let all the pieces fall to the ground. She sniffed, and rubbed her cheek. What was the point? What good were her notes when Fluttershy had probably already run off?

"Celestia..." her breath hitched, failing to fight back tears. What she wouldn't have given for her teacher's wise words of wisdom right now. She probably would have picked her up, laughed, and said something obvious yet insightful that would have fixed the whole thing from the beginning if she'd only said it sooner. But, then, that was the problem with having to learn things on her own. Sometimes there weren't any easy answers, or solutions. Just mistakes.

She pushed herself up, preparing to cast one last glance back at the no doubt empty table before drearily dragging herself home. But—

Hold on. Was that...Fluttershy? But, huh? Why would she be back at the table? She couldn't possibly be...waiting for her. She knew about Twilight's feelings, and had witnessed her make a complete fool out of herself all evening.

After all that, she still wanted to stick around?

Twilight laughed. Of course she did. Fluttershy. That gentle soul. Her sweetness and kindness was unparalleled. That was so much of what she loved about her.

Fluttershy sighed, glancing back towards her friends' hiding place, toying with her bouquet of flowers. Maybe...maybe she wasn't coming back after all.

A sudden galloping of hooves prompted the pegasus to glance up. Twilight sighed, catching her breath after that quick burst of speed. "Sorry. Long line. Got held up," she lied by way of an excuse, but her smile was entirely sincere. "Hello, Fluttershy," she said, feeling like she was seeing her for the first time in an eternity.

Fluttershy felt her heart skip a beat. "Hello, Skylight Twarple." She froze. Gosh. Maybe she was still a little drunk.

Twilight just laughed, a beautiful, beautiful sound. Then Fluttershy cracked up in giggles. Heh. Yeah. It was kind of funny, in a way.

"Um. Hey. Dinner," Twilight said with a bright smile.

"Din who?" Fluttershy said, lost in infatuated daydreams. After a moment, it sank in. "Oh! Right. Yes. Looks delicious." She smiled. "– hic –" Fluttershy gasped and covered her mouth, eyes shifting back and forth evasively. Oh dear. Maybe Rarity's spell really hadn't worked all that well after all.

Twilight quirked a brow. Huh. Fluttershy was acting a little strange. But, yeah...good strange. She didn't give it much thought.

"Eheheh," Fluttershy chuckled, electing to stuff her face with food before something else embarrassing came out of her mouth.

Meanwhile, not far away, a certain cyan pegasus snuck closer to the restaurant. She could barely restrain a smirk, laughing inside her own mind. Twilight couldn't see how Fluttershy felt about her? Well, she would *show* her. She'd make it so obvious even the densest of ponies would have to catch a clue. With that in her thoughts, she stealthily slid open a window, and ducked inside.

"This is...tasty," Twilight lied, trying not to make a sour face at the food. She knew she should have actually *looked* at the menu before ordering.

Fluttershy said nothing, just making muffled sounds as she ate.

Twilight paused, curious as to what was going on with her now. Fluttershy was usually the natural epitome of unpretentious poise and grace. Talking, or, uh, whatever she was doing, with food in her mouth was very unlike her, to say the least. After everything that had happened that night, she couldn't help but feel a little wary.

Maybe Fluttershy really didn't like her. Maybe she was just staying with her out of the kindness of her heart, because she didn't want to hurt her feelings, even if Twilight's crush made her uncomfortable. She was just letting her down gently, too scared to actually deliver the blow.

No. Yes. No. Yes. Maybe. Twilight didn't know. But she wanted to find out. She didn't want to get her hopes up for nothing.

'Gah, this really is the worst thing I've ever tasted,' she thought to herself, distracted. Even the infamous worm muffins would have been an improvement over this.

Fluttershy's head spun. She wasn't sure whether it was from the drink, or from being around Twilight, or both. Everything was moving in circles. She closed her eyes, and briefly glanced away in an effort to refocus her vision.

Huh. That was funny. She could have sworn she saw Rainbow Dash waving to her from the window. She blinked, and looked more closely. Suddenly, it happened again.

'I did! I did saw a Rainbow Dash!' she thought. 'Err, see. See Rainbow Dash,' she corrected herself.

Her fellow pegasus was gesturing for her to come inside, signalling from behind Twilight, making sure to stay out of the unicorn's sight. Fluttershy was inquisitive, questioning her friend's sudden appearance.

What was she doing here? Had she figured what was going on? Well, if she'd heard Pinkie's song, she probably had.

“– hic –“ Oh, not again.

“You know, my books say holding your breath and drinking water is a good cure for that,” Twilight commented, ever the know-it-all.

“Ooh! Good idea,” Fluttershy said, relieved that she didn't have to make up her own reason for going inside, “I'll go and see if we can get some,” she felt queasy at the following word, “Drinks.” She shuddered. “Um, excuse me.”

Twilight narrowed her eyes. Fluttershy was *willingly* going out and seeking a waiter to bother him for drinks? She *wanted* to talk to strangers? This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all!

That confirmed it. She was acting odd. This suspicious behaviour definitely warranted further investigation. She was going to see what Fluttershy was up to. There had to be a window nearby. A concealed one, where nopony could spot her.

Meanwhile, inside. “C'mere,” said Rainbow Dash, dragging Fluttershy over to a secluded part of the room, making sure they were well out of sight in the event that Twilight wandered in at any point.

“Rainbow, what, uh...hey, did you get a new hat?” Fluttershy said, momentarily distracted by the new accessory. “I like it. It suits you.”

“Thanks!” she replied, proudly nudging the brim. It was pretty cool, wasn't it? “So, anyway, I just happened to be passing through the neighbourhood, and I couldn't help but notice you and Twilight sharing a romantic candlelit dinner,” Rainbow said teasingly, eliciting a blush from her fellow pegasus. “Anything I should know about?”

“Uhh...” Fluttershy froze like a statue. “...Meep.”

“You're on a date, aren't you?” Rainbow answered her own question, knowing she'd be waiting forever and a day if she had any hopes of getting the story out of Fluttershy.

“Yes,” she admitted, coyly pawing at the floor, “Only Twilight's not supposed to know it's a date, but I think she already does...”

“Want some help?”

“– hic –”

“I'll take that as a yes.” Rainbow Dash smirked, wrapping a hoof around her friend's neck, and leaning in to whisper to her. “Now, what you've gotta do is simple; you've gotta tell her (whisperwhisperwhisper) and then you've gotta (whisperwhisperwhisper)...”

“Oh! Oh my goodness...” Fluttershy turned beet red, instinctively retreating deeper into the corner, like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. “I-I-I don't know if I can do that...” she said, thinking this task required a far more assertive pony than her.

“Why? What's the big deal?” asked Rainbow Dash, assuming Fluttershy would be too naïve and innocent to truly grasp the meaning of her plan. After all, Twilight had been utterly ignorant about the whole wing thing. It only made sense that the reverse would be true.

“I just, I just, I don't normally get that close to ponies,” Fluttershy said, trembling at the thought of doing what Rainbow Dash had suggested. ‘Think of dragons think of dragons think of dragons.’ “An-and what if she thinks I'm weird and invading her space and—”

“Hey. Trust me,” Rainbow cut her off. “I know Twilight better than anypony. I wouldn't tell you to do it if I didn't know it'd make her like you,” she assured her, supportively. And it was *partially* true, anyway. She wasn't lying so much as...omitting details. Besides, it wasn't like her friends wouldn't enjoy it. She was doing this for their own good.

“Well, uh...okay...” said Fluttershy, hesitant though she was.

Maybe it was just the alcohol talking; the lingering aftereffects of intoxication that were making it seem like a good idea. If her head hadn't been fuzzy, she would have been petrified with nerves and second-guesses. She knew that much. But now? Now was her chance to be

assertive. To make a move. To make Twilight see her not as a friend, but as a mare. To show her a grown-up, strong side. To—

“— hic —”

Rainbow flinched. “You okay?” she asked warily, distinctly aware of a pale tinge of green beneath a yellow coat.

“I feel sick,” Fluttershy whimpered, wondering if there was anyway to quit.

“Go get a glass of water. Jeez,” said Rainbow, ushering her away before she could ralph all over her or something equally unpleasant.

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Twilight had crept around to the far side of the restaurant when nopony was watching. Alas, the windows were a little high for her to see inside, though that didn't stop her from trying. “Hngh! Come on, come on! Yah!” she said, jumping up and down in an effort to spot her date. No luck. It seemed hopeless. Perhaps she'd have been better off trying to see in from the other—

Wait. Did she just hear that? ...No. That couldn't be. Her ears must have been playing tricks on her. Unless...

Her eyes narrowed after glancing in the direction of the whispers. Twilight wasn't an expert when it came to picking voices, but she would have recognised that hat anywhere. Applejack and Rarity. What were *they* doing here?

“If you had just let me do as I planned from the start—” the white unicorn complained, she and Applejack having been locked in an argument ever since Fluttershy left them alone.

“Will ya stop goin' on about your illusions!” AJ cut her off, sick of hearing about it. “Do ya really think they would have helped any?”

“Well it would have been something!”

“Sorry. Guess I plum forgot the part where this was all about you,” the earth pony retorted.

“It’s *not*. Honestly, darling, if you had just—AAGH!” Rarity shrieked when she spotted a very familiar purple unicorn standing right in front of her. “I mean, ‘Oh, Twilight. What are you doing here? Lovely evening, isn’t it?’” she instantly recovered, though it was still far too late to save face.

“Fancy meetin’ you here,” Applejack laughed, her attempt at sounding innocent coming out guiltier than a gopher next to a hole in the ground, but then she was terrible at hiding even the littlest of things. Being the Element of Honesty was a curse more than it was a blessing.

“Yes. Fancy that,” said Twilight, suspiciously shifting her eyes between the two. “And what would you happen to be doing here?” she asked, leaning forward interrogatively.

“...Eating dinner?” Applejack went with the most obvious cover story, Rarity smiling and nodding so sweetly one could practically see the halo hovering over her head.

That was quite possibly the single least convincing cover story Twilight had ever heard, and that was counting the stuffed mouse murder incident. “You two. Dining out. *Together*. Willingly. At a romantic restaurant,” she restated, scepticism dripping from her tone.

“What? Can’t two friends of the same gender share a meal at an upper-crust establishment without it being seen as lurid or peculiar?” asked Rarity, feigning offence, as if she thought her fellow unicorn judgemental for implying such a thing. “There’s nothing sordid going on here, I can promise you.”

“Yes. You two always get along so well,” Twilight sarcastically remarked. “It makes perfect sense that on the one night you both put aside your differences you would just so happen to wind up camped out right next to the restaurant I’m eating at.”

"Haha. We did?" Applejack chuckled, looking increasingly unsettled as Twilight kept tugging on loose threads, intent on pulling apart their story. "You were over there this whole time? What're the odds!" A bead of sweat visibly formed on her brow as she stood under her friend's scrutinising gaze.

"What a coincidence! We hadn't the faintest idea," said Rarity, far more of an expert in the art of shameless lying.

"So why'd you pick this restaurant?" asked Twilight, growing even more determined to trip them up in their web of deceit, just for the satisfaction of unravelling whatever scheme they had spun.

"We were just here for the, uh..." Applejack trailed off as nothing came to mind, and looked to her companion for help.

Unfortunately, Rarity didn't have the faintest idea what to say either. So, she went with the first thing in her line of sight – a certain pony's cutie mark. "...Apples," she improvised, managing to sound vaguely sincere.

Twilight didn't even dignify that with a response.

"Yeah! Apples!" AJ earnestly butted in. "Heh, you know me. Applejack, Apple family. M'obsessed with them. Can't talk 'bout nothin' but apples. Twenty-four seven. S'all there is to me," she said, doing her darndest to be convincing.

Twilight stared at her, unblinking. "...You're here for apples."

"Yup. You, uh, you caught me. Heard they had one of the best apple dishes in town. I was hopin' I could sneak in here, figure out the recipe and steal it for myself. So, lock me up an' throw away the key. I'm guilty as charged." She laughed, jokingly holding out her front hooves as if expecting to be arrested.

"Well, don't blame yourself too harshly." Rarity pushed her forelimbs back down, giving her a patronising pat on the head. "It was my idea, after all."



Applejack sent her a sidelong glare, clearly rubbed the wrong way by that assertion. "I can come up with my own ideas, Rar'. No need to go foolin' yourself into thinkin' you're the brains of this operation," she said, her patience clearly wearing thin after butting heads with Rarity all day.

"So quick to fall on her own sword," Rarity said, shaking her head as she leaned in to whisper to Twilight. "You and I both know she could never devise even such a basic ruse on her own."

"*Excuse me?*" AJ spun Rarity around to face her, a warning look in her eyes. "Would you mind runnin' that buy me one more time?" she challenged, openly daring her to say what was on her mind.

"Not at all. You see, I was implying that you are, in fact, quite stupid," Rarity cheerfully said, not in the least bit intimidated.

"Um. Hey. What about me? Standing right here. Interrogating you," said Twilight, unsurprisingly overlooked by the two. This was a familiar feeling.

"Rrgh!" Applejack's frustration with Rarity reached the boiling point. "Is it your mission in life ta always be this impossible? It's like you're runnin' in a contest for Equestria's Most Annoyin' Pony and you're the only contestant!"

"At least I, unlike you, have drive. I have ambition. While you're stuck on a one-dimensional train of thought, I think outside the box and innovate because I have aspirations of being something greater than what I am."

"You have pretensions is what you have."

"Um, girls?" Twilight piped up, annoyed at being forgotten.

"You are a small-minded, stubborn, argumentative buffoon."

"You're a spoiled brat. You whine, you're obnoxious, an' my li'l sister – heck, *your* li'l sister's tougher'n you!"

"You have the fashion sense of a damp log!"

“You wouldn’t know real work if it slapped ya in the face.”

*“I dislike you!”*

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Forget it,” she said, not really in the mood to watch the two of them bicker like an old married couple. They’d already distracted her long enough. No doubt she’d wasted her opportunity to see if Fluttershy was hiding something from her – like how she really felt about their little date, for example. “Have a nice night,” she said with palpable sarcasm as she turned and left, bidding the arguing pair farewell.

Applejack stared after her, suddenly feeling like she’d gotten away with murder, immediately dropping her fake fight with Rarity to wipe the perspiration from her forehead. “...Do you think she bought it?” she asked out of the side of her mouth.

“Not in the slightest,” Rarity bluntly answered her, returning to her espionage without hesitation.

“Yeah, I reckon you’re right.” She sighed. “Well, even so, I think your idea worked like a charm,” said Applejack, grateful that Rarity had spontaneously come up with the plan of staging an argument, knowing that it would get Twilight to leave before either one of them cracked under pressure. “That was nice actin’ back there, by the way.”

“Oh, I wasn’t acting,” Rarity casually replied.

Applejack glared at her. “...I hate you.”

“There’s a fine line, darling,” Rarity teased her, smirking wickedly.

# Chapter 4

When Twilight returned to her table, Fluttershy was indeed already there, doing a very good job of being interested in the ground, a stray thread in her own dress, a notch in the tabletop. In fact, it appeared that she was doing everything in her power to look everywhere except at Twilight. Fluttershy must have been the worst poker player. She couldn't have sold fresh water to an explorer dying of thirst in the desert with a face that guilty.

It was awfully cute, though.

"Your next course, madams." The sudden appearance of the waiter beside them startled her. She'd been too wrapped up in watching Fluttershy to notice his presence.

"Thank you," Twilight said automatically, a tad flustered by her lapse. Now Fluttershy was staring at her, unblinking, a peculiar expression on her face. Twilight swallowed, feeling a strange pressure mounting inside her. She instinctively moved to loosen her collar before realising she wasn't wearing one, and, in fact, never wore one.

"...Let's eat, huh!" Twilight suggested, purely to break the silence. She levitated her meal with her magic and began tucking in, chomping away.

Fluttershy felt a pain in her chest, her stomach turning like she'd swallowed a family of very active butterflies. She couldn't do this. It was too weird. Too close. Too personal. It definitely required a braver pony than her to make any kind of move, let alone this one. No amount of alcohol could change that.

But, then again, Rainbow Dash had told her to do it. There had to be some reason why. She wouldn't have lied to her. It wasn't a big deal, right? It was just physical contact. Just flirting. No harm would come of it. All it would take was a few seconds, then it would be over. She just had to close

her eyes, think of dragons, and do it. Then there'd be nothing left but to wait and see what happened.

She swallowed, steeling herself.

“Oh, haha, look at that. You g-g-got some on your horn,” said Fluttershy, her voice shaking far more than it ever normally did. “S-s-some f-food, I mean.”

“What?” Twilight blanched with embarrassment. That hadn't happened to her since she'd first learned how to use her magic. Oh, of all the times. This evening just couldn't get any worse. It was like a conga line of humiliation; one disaster following right after the other. “Where is it? Did I get it?” Twilight hurriedly asked, ineffectually trying to bat at her horn with her hooves.

“Um. H-here. Let me get that for you,” said Fluttershy, managing one last deep breath before she stepped forward, ready to take the plunge. There was no going back now.

“Fluttershy? What are you—?” Twilight's thoughts came to an abrupt halt when she felt it. That first tentative flick. Fluttershy's tongue. Touching her horn.

Rarity gasped, dropping her dainty binoculars in shock, the glass shattering against the ground, a hoof covering her mouth. “FLUTTERSHY!” she exclaimed, caught off guard by her best friend's uncharacteristically lewd behaviour. “...You *beast*. I didn't know you had it in you,” she smirked with wicked approval, spreading the hedges with her hooves to peer through them once again, eager to see more. “I'm beginning to think we should get her drunk more often.”

Once again, Applejack was lost.

Twilight couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. It was as if someone had unplugged her from a power socket, and sent her into an immediate shutdown. All she was conscious of was the sensations in her horn.

Fluttershy didn't stop to contemplate Twilight's reaction, too scared of what she'd find to do so. After all, she was so close in her personal space, she was practically kissing her (and Rainbow had told her that she should do that as well). She was laying her feelings, or at least her attraction, bare on a plate for Twilight to see. She didn't know what Twilight would think. So, she just timidly licked her again.

'Thinkofdragonsthinkofdragonsthinkofdragons.'

Twilight shivered, biting her lip to stifle a moan. Oh, Celestia! This couldn't be real. The pony she loved was right there. Licking. Her. Horn. And it felt so *good*. That warm, wet touch gently stroking the sensitive underside.

She whimpered.

"Haha! Good one!" Pinkie enthused from her place on the other side of the street, giving Rainbow Dash a pat on the back, the pegasus fighting with all her strength to keep herself from bursting out laughing. "I never would have thought of that!"

Twilight felt her limbs quiver, the tension mounting in her horn, after only two licks no less. Oh goodness. She was gonna...

Somehow, she managed to find the wherewithal to reach out and push Fluttershy away from her before it was too late. Fluttershy looked up in time to see Twilight's eyes roll into the back of her head, a shimmering purple aura surrounding her, and then—

BAMF!

She was gone.

A hush fell over the area, quickly followed by a disquieted murmur, all eyes drawn to the sound and the flash of light. Fluttershy managed to push herself up, blinking blankly at the empty space, utterly gobsmacked, clueless as to what had just occurred.

Pinkie and Rainbow were in hysterics. "She *cast!*" said the pegasus between chortles, laughing so hard she thought she was going to pass out.

"Oh my gosh!" she cried deliriously. She knew Twilight would enjoy that, but she hadn't expected her to like it *that* much.

"Oh my..." Rarity breathed, leaning back from the bushes, feeling light-headed, and more than a little flushed. That had been a very, uh...stirring display to witness. "Is it hot out here, or is that just me?" she asked, fanning herself with a large frond attached to one of the plants in the restaurant's garden.

Applejack eyed her unicorn companion, then glanced over to the table, then back at Rarity. Something had just gone on there, hadn't it? And she didn't like not knowing what it was. First the wings, now the horn. There was something nopony was telling her about all of this.

Fluttershy's stare was as vacant as the space in front of her. Cautiously, she waved a hoof through the air where Twilight had once been, as if to confirm that she was, in fact, not there anymore.

BAMF!

Without warning, Twilight materialised once again, landing right on top of Fluttershy, knocking the wind out of both of them. "Oof!" In her haste, it seemed she'd gotten her destination a little off again.

"Sorry sorry sorry sorry!" said Twilight hurriedly, as if in an apologetic fit. "I just...I just went off!" She laughed awkwardly, spitting out her sheepish excuse as quick as she could, hoping that Fluttershy didn't see her as any less of a unicorn because of this.

Fluttershy blinked up at her, still at a loss. What in Equestria was going on?

Not far away, Applejack was trying her darndest to concentrate on their conversation, but her eyes kept wandering back over to a still rather flushed Rarity. Specifically, to her horn. There had to be *something* going on there that she was missing. She just couldn't figure it out, and it was bugging her something fierce.

Meanwhile, Twilight was a flustered mess of mixed emotions. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to feel. On the one hand, there was

humiliation, obviously. On the other, it had felt incredibly good. And, on top of both of those, there was a lingering doubt that left her cold.

That entire display had been so unlike Fluttershy. To have done, well...*that* to her, and in *public* no less was just bizarre. Throughout their friendship, as she'd grown to realise she had more-than-platonic feelings for Fluttershy, it had always been her personality that attracted her the most. She liked her for who she was. Seeing her change and act so differently was, suffice it to say, off-putting. It left her stunned and even less able to fully comprehend what had just happened than she already was.

What had brought this on in her? Why had possessed Fluttershy to do such a thing?

"...Twilight?" Fluttershy's timid voice interrupted her, concerned about the purple pony's reaction. It was then that Twilight realised she was still on top of her.

"Oh, sorry!" said Twilight, belatedly getting up off of her. "Oh, Celestia," she murmured to herself, trying to hide her face from any onlookers. She just felt so awkward. How could she not? She had involuntarily discharged magic in front of a huge crowd. That hadn't happened to her since...

"It's, uh...it's okay," Fluttershy hazily replied, her head still spinning from their previous proximity. 'Thinkofdragonsthinkofdragonsthinkofdragons.' "You, uh...are you okay?" she hesitantly asked, increasingly troubled by the prospect that she had done something wrong. It didn't take a genius to notice the conflicted feelings playing across Twilight's features.

"Yes! Yes, I'm...I'm fine," said Twilight, doing her utmost to try and compose herself, to little avail. She couldn't get the incident out of her head. But, the more she thought about it, the more her doubts were replaced by a sense of cautious optimism.

There was no way Fluttershy could have done that to her unless she returned her affections. This had to mean she liked her, right? That was good. That was beyond good. Wasn't it? She was unsure.

Maybe...maybe Fluttershy had been trying to convey her feelings for her this whole evening. Maybe Twilight had just been oblivious to her intentions, too wrapped up in her own worries about the date to see those of the pony sitting right across from her. Maybe Fluttershy had only acted like that because she thought she had no choice but to go to extremes to cut through her denseness.

No. It couldn't be. That was almost too good to be true.

"Uh?" Fluttershy spoke up, watching the different feelings and thoughts unconsciously conveyed in Twilight's facial expressions. A goofy grin had come to her, seemingly out of nowhere. She wasn't sure what was going on inside her mind, but it was clear that Twilight didn't exactly have her hooves on the ground. She was in a very different space. Fluttershy wasn't sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

"I, um, I'm sorry if I'm being weird about this, it's just that..." Twilight began, shyly averting her gaze, fidgeting her hooves in front of her. "No pony's ever done anything like that with me before," she admitted, a blush appearing on her cheeks.

"Aw, how sweet..." Rarity cooed at her admission of innocence. Crude though it was, perhaps Fluttershy's strategy had worked. Maybe they were *finally* opening up to each other about how they felt.

"I mean, it's not exactly how I was expecting or, uh...hoping it would happen," Twilight continued, tracing patterns on the table with her hoof, glancing around to see if any pony was still staring at her with their judging eyes, having borne witness to her first time crossing that threshold. "But, um...that's okay. I'm, I'm, I'm okay. That you did that, I mean," she assured her, not wanting Fluttershy to get the wrong idea.

Fluttershy's confusion only grew. Done *what*? What had she done, exactly? And why was Twilight acting so strangely all of a sudden? Considering how they'd both behaved so far that night...well, to be frank, it was perfectly consistent with her behaviour that night. But, even so, her subject of conversation was so unlike anything they'd spoken about and such a mystery to Fluttershy that it was almost like Twilight had been replaced with a completely different pony during her teleportation.



...Well, Rainbow Dash had said that doing that to her horn would make Twilight like her. And this had definitely had some sort of effect. Maybe it had worked. Maybe it had elicited the reaction she desired, even if she hadn't the faintest idea how or why.

Yes. That was it, wasn't it? Kissing her horn must have been some secret unicorn way of saying, 'I love you!' A sweet, intimate gesture.

Fluttershy felt relieved, a small smile crossing her lips. For a second there, she'd almost thought it was some kind of weird, perverted thing. Ha. That was just silly.

Meanwhile, a thoroughly baffled Applejack scratched her head, feeling utterly bewildered by this course of events. She didn't follow what had transpired between them at all.

What was it with the horn? Why had that been such a big deal? Why was everypony acting weird about it? Why had that changed the way Fluttershy and Twilight were interacting?

...Okay, this was never going to leave her alone. She *had* to know.

There was only one way she could figure this out. Well, only one way within reach, that was. Tentatively, she crept up behind Rarity, making sure the unicorn didn't sense her approach. Luckily for her, Rarity was a little distracted, trying to repair her recently broken theatre binoculars.

"Hrrm." Rarity pouted, having little luck. "These were *really* expensive..."

Applejack swallowed, not sure what was going to happen next. With some hesitation, she reached out, and experimentally brushed a hoof against her horn, lightly rubbing up and down.

Rarity dropped the glasses once again, her concentration as shattered as the lenses. "Nyah..." she moaned in a mixture of surprise and pleasure, her back leg instinctively twitching as the electric sensation coursed through her, making her hoof thump against the ground like a rabbit's foot.

Applejack quickly withdrew from the contact, stared down at her hoof, then over at a disorientated Rarity, who was panting softly as she regained her equilibrium, then back at her hoof. "What the hay?" she muttered, just as confused as before, finding no enlightenment or epiphany to clue her in.

After taking a moment to regain her senses, Rarity growled, having no such trouble registering what had happened. "AT LEAST HAVE THE COURTESY TO BUY ME DINNER FIRST!" she said as she rounded on her companion, her eyes ablaze as she 'hmmph'ed and turned away, thoroughly offended. "*Rude*," she sneered as she snatched up her binoculars, refusing to acknowledge Applejack's presence next to her, an icy chill radiating from the ruffled unicorn.

AJ still didn't get it. What was the big deal? Why was everypony making such a big fuss over horns and wings all of a sudden? From the way her friends were acting, it would almost make her think they were some kind of erogenous zo—

"...OH!" She recoiled with disgust when it finally sank in. What she'd just done. With *Rarity*. "EWW! NO! I...NO!" she spluttered as she shook her hoof, holding it as far away from the rest of her as possible, looking at it in the same way one would regard a malignant parasite. She'd touched *Rarity*. On her horn. And, from the looks of her companion, she'd *enjoyed* it.

"OH SWEET CHEESES!" AJ gagged, making an immediate dash for the nearest washroom, needing to scrub her hoof – and her brain – clean of all trace of what had just happened. Or to amputate her leg entirely. She wasn't sure she still wanted it attached to her after this.

Rarity didn't bother to conceal the devious smirk that crept across her features. "Worth it," she said to herself, amused by Applejack's pain. With that, she returned her attention to the two lovers, listening in on their date.

She hadn't missed much. The two had remained relatively silent, neither sure what to say, nor how to broach the issue hovering in the air between them.

“Fluttershy,” Twilight was the first to move, tentatively reaching out across the table and touching their hooves together. The pegasus felt her heart jump. The way Twilight was looking at her. The shimmer in her eyes. It was the same expression Fluttershy imagined she had whenever she looked at Twi—

‘...Oh goodness.’

Her breath caught. Her world seemed to spin off its axis.

“You...” was all she managed to say, scarcely daring to believe it.

“Yes! YES!” Pinkie Pie cheered, fireworks going off behind her. This was it! They were going to do it! They were going to tell each other! “Say it!”

Twilight felt her face grow hot. All she could manage was a sheepish smile before going all coy.

Fluttershy's eyes widened, blooming like a flower in the sun, the most brilliant expression coming over her. She beamed so brightly her light outshone the stars.

Twilight liked her. *Twilight* liked her. Twilight *liked* her. Twilight liked *her*. *Twilight liked her!*

“YES!” Fluttershy squeaked with delight, the flapping of her wings scattering the hay beneath her. She was in the air with her hooves raised in triumph before she even realised she was doing it. Oh joyous day! Hip-hip hooray! Oh what a beautiful world! Everything was wonderful! Oh to be blessed with such a precious gift. She'd never felt more alive.

Twilight blinked, not sure what in Equestria Fluttershy was suddenly so excited about. It was awfully cute, though. She could hardly be said to have objected to the moodswing.

Fluttershy was so thrilled, so elated that she thought she was going to burst. She couldn't contain it. She had to tell somepony. She had to tell everypony!

She was in love. She was loved in return. And it felt *amazing*.

Fluttershy flew over and wrapped Twilight up in a hug, squeezing her tightly. Twilight didn't mind that at all, either. Quite the contrary. "Give me a moment. I'll be right back," said the pegasus, giving her a peck on the cheek. In her blissful state, she didn't worry if anyone saw, and didn't shyly second guess herself. She didn't have a care in the world.

Twilight giggled giddily and rubbed the spot where Fluttershy had kissed her. Maybe she had been right. Maybe she really did feel the same way.

Yes! That was it! She did! Fluttershy liked her back! It wasn't a fanciful dream! That really *was* what it all meant!

"Yesyesyesyesyesyesyes!" Twilight jumped for joy, celebrating what had to be the happiest moment of her young life so far. After a moment, she froze, falling out of the air, realising everypony was staring at her. Why did that always happen?

"Eheheheh..." she laughed awkwardly, slowly backing away from the table, electing to express her elation somewhere a little more secluded.

Rarity didn't even have time to brace herself before a pink and yellow blur swooped down upon her, crashing into her with enough force to knock the wind out of her.

"Well, it's nice to see you too, darling," Rarity wheezed, finally giving up on any hope she'd had of fixing her repeatedly crushed spectacles.

"Oh, Rarity! You won't believe—! I have to tell—" Fluttershy paused after a moment, raising a hoof to her chin as she glanced around, noticing the conspicuous absence of a particular pony. "Wait, where's Applejack?" she asked, seeing nought but a dotted outline where she should have been.

"Oh, nowhere. Just having a little crisis, is all," Rarity said smugly, an evil glint in her eye.

Fluttershy tilted her head quizzically. "Huh?"

"Never you mind about her. Come. Share," said Rarity, patting the seat next to her invitingly, intent on hearing all the details. "What did you say? What did she say? Was it *romantic*? Did you have *THE MOMENT*?" she asked, eager to catch up on all the things she hadn't been able to overhear.

"We had a moment," Fluttershy excitedly confirmed, gushing with joy. "I think...I think she likes me!" the pegasus exclaimed, twirling on the spot.

"Eeee!" Rarity giggled with girlish glee. "I knew it! Have you asked her out yet?" she asked, eagerly leaning forward, already imagining the floral arrangements and mentally sketching out some dress designs for their inevitable future wedding.

"Well, no. I haven't yet, but...Oh, hi, Applejack! You *are* here," Fluttershy brightly greeted her when she saw her friend lingering a few tables away, watching them both with a very peculiar expression. "Come on over. We were just talking."

"N-naw. I'm...I'm good over here, thanks," AJ said, keen to keep a wide berth between herself and Rarity for as long as possible. Rarity winked and blew her a kiss. A shiver ran up Applejack's spine. Of all the ponies she could have inadvertently had a sexy undercover moment with, why did it have to be *Rarity*? That just made her feel unclean.

"Ignore her," said Rarity with a dismissive wave, bringing Fluttershy's attention back to her. "Darling, that was very devious of you," the unicorn all but purred with approval, looking immensely proud of her usually reserved friend, in a rather wicked sort of way. "I'm impressed."

"You are?" Fluttershy blinked in confusion. "Uh, good. I'm glad," she said, wracking her brain in an effort to figure out what she'd done. Nothing came to mind. "...For what?"

"*You know*," Rarity said suggestively, giving her a light tap on the shoulder. "Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. That was quite a show you put on," she teased.

"Oh, Sweet Apple Acres," Applejack shook her head, now unable to shake the mental image of Fluttershy doing *that* to Twilight from her mind.

That was not something she had needed to see her friends doing, and even less did she need to picture it happening again in far more gratuitous detail. "I'm never gonna be able to look a unicorn in the face again..."

Eventually, Fluttershy figured it out. "Oh! That," she said, grinning bashfully, one hoof idly stroking her mane. "Yeah. Heh. A little birdy told me that Twilight would like that," she admitted, glad that Rainbow Dash's advice had worked as she had promised.

Rarity laughed. "Well I should imagine so, darling!" she said, suggestive implications dripping from her tone.

Fluttershy looked puzzled. What was that supposed to mean?

After a moment, something clicked in Rarity's mind. She groaned, rolling her eyes and shaking her head as the increasingly obvious truth sank in. "Honestly, did nopony ever give either of you 'the talk'?" she asked. "You know, 'when two ponies like each other very much'..." she prompted, receiving only blank stares from her companions.

Really, now. Between Fluttershy and Applejack, she was beginning to wonder if she was the only pony in Ponyville with a basic working knowledge of...*intimacy*.

"Oh, dear..." Rarity sighed, not especially looking forward to breaking the news to her friend. But, then, being a big sister, having to explain some of the facts of life was a situation that wasn't completely alien to her. "Come here, darling. Let me explain it to you."

Tentatively, Fluttershy moved over to her, somehow getting the sense that she was going to discover something bad. Applejack watched on as Rarity leaned in and whispered something to her. She held onto her hat in anticipation. Several seconds passed.

"I DID *WHAT*?!"

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"Will you stop snickering?" said Twilight, more than a little annoyed by Rainbow and Pinkie's inability to say so much as two words to her without breaking down in immature chortles.

"What's the matter, Twi'?" Rainbow Dash asked, her hooves doing a poor job of stifling her snorts. "Did Fluttershy make you...*horny*? BWA-HA-HA!" the pair of ponies cracked up yet again, Pinkie Pie thumping the bar as the chuckles overtook her.

"Haha. Yeah, I've never heard *that* one before." Twilight rolled her eyes.

Pinkie exchanged a hushed whisper with Rainbow, clearly telling her to hold it in for a second. She had a better one. "Hey, Twilight," the pink pony began, "Did you get lost at sea? Because I'm pretty sure I saw you...*castaway*!"

The two collapsed together in another fit of hilarity. Rainbow Dash's voice cracked she was laughing so hard. "I can't breathe!" the pegasus managed to say between giggles.

"I'm glad this amuses you," Twilight dead-panned.

"Shh! Shh!" said Pinkie, waving for Rainbow to shut up again. "Um, so, I know you're not one to...toot your own horn—" Rainbow had to bury her face in Pinkie's shoulders to keep herself from cracking up again, "But I think you've taken the title from Dashie here; you're now officially the fastest pony in Equestria!"

"STOP! STOP! YOU'RE KILLING ME!" Rainbow all but cried, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Ugh." Twilight groaned. "Are you four?" she asked, not that they heard her.

"No. No more." Rainbow gasped for breath, feeling light-headed from lack of air. "Seriously, if I laugh any harder, I'm going to pull a Twilight."

A pause passed between them. Then the two started laughing again.

Gradually, Twilight's expression darkened. A thought had just occurred to her. And, the more she turned it over in her mind, the more she realised it made complete sense.

"Oh and gee," she said coldly, her stare narrowing into a glare, remarkably unsurprised by her discovery. "It was you!" she declared, poking Rainbow Dash accusingly. "That was *your* idea! *You* put Fluttershy up to that!"

"Well, yeah," Rainbow admitted shamelessly, failing to see the problem with her actions. "It worked, didn't it? Now you know Fluttershy likes you."

"I don't know what to think, thanks to you!" said Twilight, huffing and turning her back on her. "She probably doesn't even realise what she did! How do you think she's going to feel when she realises you tricked her into...*that*?"

"I dunno," Rainbow shrugged.

"Umm," Pinkie put a hoof to her chin, treating the question seriously. "I think she'll either be aroused, or she'll be furious. Or both," she conceded, though she wasn't willing to bet money on it.

"Ugh. I feel awful," Twilight said with a groan, guilt washing over her as she imagined how livid even the normally timid Fluttershy would be. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to face her again. I basically just took advantage of the girl I love," she muttered, feeling like a horrible pony.

"What?!" Rainbow looked at her like she was nuttier than a squirrel. "No you didn't!"

"Yeah," Pinkie agreed, looking horrified that Twilight would ever think such a thing. "I mean, technically, it was Dashie here who took advantage of her. You didn't really have a say in any of this," she pointed out, honestly.

"Yeah! Wait..." Rainbow trailed off, not sure she'd done the right thing by agreeing with that.



“Ugh! I thought I'd finally figured out what was going on, but now I'm just not sure anymore,” said Twilight, beginning to doubt what was going on between her and Fluttershy. She'd thought it was possible that her feelings were reciprocated, but maybe it was just in her mind after all. “I need to go talk to her,” she said, trotting off back to the table, needing to make things right.

“Oh, great.” Rainbow Dash groaned, clopping her forehead in frustration. “I finally got them to admit their feelings, and now they're going to go and screw it up again!” she said, wondering why she even bothered. “It's like they're *trying* to sabotage themselves!”

“Not while I'm around!” Pinkie Pie declared, heroically stepping forward. “Pinkie Pie to the rescue!” she said before dashing off to set another brilliant plan in motion.

“Yeah! You show 'em, Pinkie!” Rainbow yelled supportively.

The two lovebirds returned to their table, each in a far worse mood than when they had left it. Fluttershy had simmered down from her initial outburst, but was still seething to some degree beneath the surface. Rainbow Dash. That meanie. She should have known it was just a prank.

‘Great. Now she's tricked me, and made me look like a complete idiot in front of Twilight. Or like a...like a loose pony. *Sluttershy*, more like,’ she thought to herself, pouting as she did so. It was the first time she had ever used such a word, even inside her own mind.

How could she ever make up to Twilight the fact that she had essentially jumped her and, well, violated her in public? How could she look her in the eye?

Ugh. It just made her so mad!

“Let me guess,” said Twilight, summoning the courage to be direct with Fluttershy, “You have a bone to pick with a certain pegasus who's sitting right over there wearing a new hat?” she guessed, deciding that the time had come to be honest with her friend, even if it ruined their chances at becoming something more. She owed her as much after the disaster that had been their night so far.

“...Yes...” Fluttershy admitted, staring down at her plate. She had to do it. She had to explain herself. Twilight deserved to know why she'd done what she did. She didn't deceive herself into thinking she could salvage a shot at a relationship by that point, but how else could she fix their friendship, or renew any sense of trust between them? “Listen, Twilight, I...I have to tell you something...”

“So do I,” said Twilight, shifting her hooves somewhat anxiously, ready to come clean about what she had been hiding. She respected her too much to keep lying to her. “But you go first,” she offered, out of politeness, rather than any reluctance to confess her sins.

“I'm...I'm sorry I did that to you earlier. I didn't...I didn't know. Th-the thing is, I've...I've been getting advice. Advice from our friends. Because I...I really like you. And I wanted to impress you,” Fluttershy timidly admitted, expecting Twilight to be mad at her, so mad that they'd never speak again.

“I know, Fluttershy. Me too,” Twilight confessed, earning a surprised look from the pegasus. “I was so nervous and so afraid of screwing up around you again, especially after yesterday. I felt like you wouldn't like me if I couldn't do everything perfectly, so I, um, I wanted to stop being me and become the sort of pony you'd like to go out with,” she said, sadly hanging her head.

Fluttershy blinked incredulously, wondering if the alcohol in her system was making her hallucinate. “B-but...that can't be how you felt; that's how I felt,” she said, stunned at the revelation that they had both been approaching that evening from exactly the same place without realising it.

After a moment, Twilight chuckled in spite of herself. “...We're both kinda silly, aren't we?” she said, feeling a swarm of butterflies inside her chest. Funny how her determination to make this the perfect evening had only led to more and more mistakes. If she'd just been honest the whole time, or less of a coward, maybe she could have avoided it.

Fluttershy didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She felt so stupid. Had she been so wrapped up in her fears and doubts that she hadn't been

able to see what was right in front of her? How could she have been so blind? It had been like a self-fulfilling prophecy; she'd been so convinced that Twilight would never like her that she'd more or less done everything possible to ensure that outcome.

When she found the strength to breathe, she sighed and shook her head, still effectively lost. "Did we...did we ruin it?" she asked, the words hurting as they left her lips. After everything that had happened, she wouldn't have been surprised if it put an end to any chance they had.

"No," Twilight replied, not willing to give up just yet. "One messed up date doesn't mean we have to call it quits. I mean, our night's not even over yet," she pointed out, hoping to Celestia that it worked.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Fluttershy amid a quiet snuffle.

"...Maybe we should, uh...start again from the beginning?" Twilight suggested, certain that everything that could possibly have gone wrong had already occurred. It could only be uphill from there on out. They'd made it past the hard parts, and she sure as hay didn't want it to be for nothing.

"I...I would like that," Fluttershy replied, managing a faint smile, wiping away the early tears that had begun to gather in her eyes.

Twilight let out a breath of relief. For a moment there, she'd been worried. She glanced down, keen to find some way of cheering up Fluttershy, wanting nothing more than to alleviate her sadness.

"Oh, I know," she said to herself as inspiration struck. She reached out and picked up the bouquet of flowers still lying on the table opposite her, clearing her throat as she hid them behind her back. "Ta da! I got these for you," she said, revealing her gift as if for the first time.

Fluttershy giggled, sufficiently charmed. "For me?" she said as she accepted the bouquet, feigning surprise at the gesture. "You shouldn't have."

That was when Pinkie Pie showed up with an accordion. "When an eel's beady-eyed, mean and ugly and bites, that's a moraaaaaay," she

sang, dancing around the two young lovers in an attempt to bring their two hearts together.

“*Applejack*,” Rarity growled through gritted teeth.

“Way ahead o’ ya,” Applejack replied, already twirling her lasso above her head. She cast the line at Pinkie, looping the rope around her middle, and tightened it with an abrupt yank.

“WHOA!” Pinkie yelped as she was unceremoniously jerked away.

“What the?!” Rainbow Dash shot up from her seat, immediately racing across the street to her friend’s rescue, nearly blowing over Twilight and Fluttershy’s table in her haste. “You leave her alone—!” her heroic intervention was cut short when she arrived at the site, and saw who was responsible. “Hey. What are *you* doing here?” she asked, eyeing AJ and Rarity suspiciously.

Rarity glared back, equally displeased. “I could ask you the very same question, Rainb—ooh, nice hat!” she enthused, momentarily distracted by her perpetual obsession with fashion. She’d never thought she would live to see the day when Rainbow Dash dressed in style.

“Thanks!” Rainbow smirked proudly, admiring her own flawlessly cool appearance.

That exchange out of the way, the two ponies instantly slipped back into confrontational stances, staring each other down.

“I’ll bet this was all your doin’, wadn’t it?” said AJ, standing alongside Rarity. “All this chaos and calamity. Shoulda known you two couldn’t be far behind.”

“Who, me?!” Rainbow baulked, outraged. “That’s crazy talk!”

“Yeah!” the hog-tied Pinkie said in protest, managing to wriggle onto her hooves and bounce up beside Rainbow Dash. “We haven’t done anything except help our friends. Which means it must be *your fault!*” she accused, thoroughly miffed and mistrustful.

"Why must you turn this restaurant into a house of *lies*?" Rarity dramatically replied, a true Equestrian thespian. "You! You started all of this! Do you know what you did? Do you understand *life*? Do you?!" she asked, shaking the pink pony, blaming her for everything that had gone astray.

"Hey!" Rainbow slapped Rarity's hooves away, standing in front of her best friend protectively, shielding her. "Why don't you pick on somepony who could easily beat you up," she challenged.

"I could say the same to you," Applejack said firmly, knowing which side she was on. No pony pushed her friends around. Not even her friends! '...Wait...' she paused, having confused herself.

Rarity and Rainbow Dash both growled at each other, their features contorting with anger. "I cannot allow this to go unavenged!" said the unicorn, courageously stepping forward. "I shall never forgive you for ruining this precious chance for true love to flourish!" she vowed, steam rising off of her coat.

"I gave Twilight my word that I would make this date go smoothly," said Rainbow Dash, stomping forward as well, not about to back down when her heart told her she was in the right. "And I would have, if you hadn't showed up. You turned me into a *liar*!" she fumed, her wings flaring in warning as she pressed her forehead against Rarity's.

The unicorn pushed back just as hard, not in the least bit intimidated. This wasn't terribly surprising; after all, she had kicked a manticore in the face once. "If you are accusing me of doing anything other than being the best matchmaker I could possibly be, then I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to *step outside*!" Rarity said, dangerously.

"We *are* outside!" Rainbow pointed out, her last nerve frayed to where it was ready to snap.

"It's a figure of speech!" Rarity scowled.

"*You're* a figure of speech!" Rainbow retorted, sparks of lightning crackling between their glares.

"Alright. Break it up. Stop the violence," Applejack intervened, stepping between the two, keeping them apart. As the only sensible pony there, she felt it was her duty to defuse the situation and get things back under control before anypony got hurt. "Simmer down now. Ain't no need for that."

"Yeah. AJ's right," Pinkie Pie conceded, chewing through the rope to free herself from its binding coils. "We shouldn't fight over this. After all, we already know it's all their fault, Dashie," she said, casually indicating the opposing team.

"*Pardon?*" said Applejack, narrowing her eyes at the pink pony. "Maybe I missed somethin' here, but I don't remember either o'us dancin' around singin' stupid songs or tellin' Fluttershy ta go 'round doin', uh...things that t'ain't proper ta do in front of others!" she countered, taking on a slightly less diplomatic posture. "That was all your doin'. Y'all caused all the problems."

"Hey, at least my plan actually got them somewhere!" Rainbow asserted, sticking up for her idea.

"Oh, yeah, trickin' 'em into doin' that got 'em so far," AJ remarked sarcastically, having borne witness to Fluttershy's reaction to learning that bit of information. "Ah, Rainbow. It just goes to show that, even at a time like this, you just can't help being a complete *donkey*."

Pinkie gasped and covered her mouth. "You watch your language!" she scolded, sounding offended by the crude insult against her best friend.

"It's alright, Pinkie," said Rainbow, sticking out a hoof to stop her from confronting Applejack. She didn't need to be defended by anypony; she could stand up for herself. "Hey, AJ," she began, rising to the challenge, "Why don't you give the trees a break and go buck yourself for once!"

Rarity and Pinkie both looked shocked. Applejack's eyes darkened. "*Say that again.*" She stepped forward, threateningly.

"You heard me!" Rainbow Dash said back, not about to back down from her frequent rival.

“Enough of this talk!” Rarity shouted over the top of both of them. “You are responsible for ruining a romantic rendezvous between two of my closest friends!”

“No, you!” Pinkie shot back, striking a kung-fu pose.

“I cannot allow this travesty to go unpunished!” Rarity declared, her eyes flaring with fiery fury.

It. Was. On.

“Let's do this!” Rainbow all but roared, mad as hay and not going to take it anymore.

“Wait, no!” Applejack protested, making one last attempt to calm the situation, immediately regretting taking the bait earlier. This hadn't been part of her plan. “Can't we handle this like adults?”

“HAVE AT YOU!” Rarity gracefully leaped over Applejack, rearing back when she landed and kicking her rival matchmakers in much the same manner as a classically trained dancer might. “HI-YAH!”

“Oh, horseapples.” Applejack rolled her eyes before jumping into the fray herself, not about to let Rarity take on two ponies by herself. So much for avoiding violence.

Straight away, the four were engulfed in a big ball of violence. Where one began and another ended was a mystery. Each pony was indistinguishable from the others.

Twilight and Fluttershy watched the whole thing as if in a trance. They were utterly dumbstruck. All they could do was sit there wearing slack-jawed stares, watching as their quarrelling companions rolled into restaurant tables, scattering patrons everywhere they went.

Fluttershy felt herself shake and tremble, the tears that had welled up in her eyes beginning to trickle down her cheeks. “Shut up.”

No pony heard her. Except for Twilight, that is, who moved over and consolingly touched her shoulder. It did little to soothe her.

“Ow! Who bit me?” Rainbow Dash winced, momentarily dislodged from the scuffle, immediately diving back in.

“We're allowed to bite? Why didn't any pony tell me?” Pinkie's voice answered back.

The next noise was a squeak from Rarity.

“Shut up,” Fluttershy said again, her voice cracking.

Twilight felt queasy. Everything had gone wrong. This date had been a nightmare, not only for her and Fluttershy, but now her friends too. Was this going to be the end of it? One bad date. One date had spiralled out of control and led to this. How could their friendships ever be the same when everything was so screwed up? Would they even be friends at all after this fighting?

Oh, Celestia. Fluttershy looked utterly devastated too, and there was nothing Twilight could do to stem the flow of her tears. It was awful. She felt like she was going to pass out.

The brawling ponies knocked over another table. Applejack grabbed the tablecloth, endeavouring to wrap up her opponents in an effort to stop the scuffle. Rarity resorted to fighting dirty, however, launching plates like torpedoes with her magic powers.

“Hey! No fair! You can't do that!” said Pinkie, ducking and swerving out of the way before pouncing on her opponents once more.

“I can do as I wi—Ow! That hurts!” Rarity replied, suddenly sounding ready to quit.

**“SHUT UP!”**

Everypony froze, the words cutting through them like lightning.



The four were still as a picture, stuck like statues in a tableaux of the final moment of the scuffle. Rarity seemed to have been tapping out from the submission hold Pinkie Pie had put her in. Applejack had Pinkie's tail in her mouth in an attempt to pull her off, while Rainbow Dash was in mid-air, apparently about a split-second away from colliding with the cowpony.

At the epicentre of the sound was Fluttershy. She was furious. None of her friends had seen her like this since the night of the Grand Galloping Gala. Just like then, something inside her had snapped. Her frustrations had built up to the point where everything that she normally kept locked up inside exploded, breaking through the barrier of shyness which couldn't contain them any longer.

In the aftermath, though, she found she had nothing more to say, her moment of anger subsiding quickly, replaced by her inherent kindness. She covered her mouth, shocked by her own outburst, and instantly regretting it. She looked around at the stunned faces of her friends, still in that same awkward pile of frozen positions, then over at Twilight, who had turned a pale shade of green.

Another moment passed. Then Fluttershy burst into tears.

This was worse than even her worst fears. Everything had been ruined. She'd made a foal out of herself countless times. Her friends were fighting like they couldn't stand each other. Twilight looked nauseous, sickened by her. And she just...she didn't want to be there anymore.

Before Twilight could say anything, Fluttershy ran off, crying.

The four formerly fighting friends disentangled themselves from one another, each having the decency to look downcast as they did so. They'd never meant to cause any harm.

Twilight stood there silently, her fringe obscuring her eyes. All she could feel was the pain in her chest, where her heart had split in two.

"I hope you're happy..." she began, rounding on her friends. "This is all your fault!"

“Our fau—” Pinkie’s protests were cut off by Rainbow Dash covering her mouth. She gave the pink pony a small shake of the head, silently telling her not to interrupt or argue.

“You know, maybe there was a time where we really did need your help,” Twilight continued, pacing back and forth in front of her friends like a teacher scolding a bunch of misbehaving school-fillies. “Maybe there were moments when we were too lost in ourselves to see what was right in front of us, but, right now, it seems to me like we would have been *fine* if it weren’t for you meddling ponies!”

Her friends looked chastened, remorseful even. Well, mostly. But Twilight didn’t care. She was mad, and she was sick of holding it in.

“So, yes! I hope you’re happy with yourselves! You ruined everything between me and Fluttershy! And, frankly, I don’t think I ever want to see any of you ever again! So go! Just go!” she said, turning her back on her friends, pointedly refusing to face them.

“...You done?” asked Rainbow Dash, boredly.

Twilight took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Feel better?” asked Rarity.

“...Yes.” Twilight hung her head. She hadn’t really meant those things. She was just upset, and had needed to yell. Luckily her friends understood that. They’d been in the same boat mere moments ago.

“Well what are you waiting for?” said Applejack, placing a friendly hoof on her back, urging her to get moving. “Go get her, ya idiot!”

“I want to, but I don’t know where she is,” Twilight pointed out, helplessly.

“I do!” Pinkie cheerfully piped up. “She’s headed to the lake,” she said, picking up some plates of recently abandoned food and preparing to chow down, stopping only when Applejack gave her a stare of disapproval, causing the pink pony to look guilty. After all, it was technically stealing.

“...How do you know that?” asked Rainbow Dash. She didn't doubt Pinkie's veracity, but it was still a mystery as to how she knew.

Pinkie just shrugged and said, “It's me.” That explanation was good enough for everypony.

Twilight managed a smile. “Thanks, guys,” she said, sincerely. With that, she ran off.

For several moments, the remaining ponies merely stood there, each one debating whether to apologise for their behaviour, or simply to let it go and leave the words unsaid. The silence was broken when Rarity stepped forward, moving as if to follow Twilight. She paused and glanced back at the others. “Are you coming or not? We didn't go to all that work for nothing, did we?” she said with a smile.

Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie exchanged smirks. “I'm game if you are,” said Rainbow Dash, ready to try her hoof at spreading a little magic.

“Let's get this show on the road,” AJ replied, bumping hooves with Rainbow.

“Last one there's a rotten egg!” said Pinkie, racing off a second ahead of the others.

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“Fluttershy?” Twilight called out, galloping towards the lake, hoping she could catch up to her. She stepped off the path between some trees, scanning the area, searching for any sign of her. That was when she saw her, lying prone on the grass below, sobbing into her forelegs.

It hurt just to look at her. She couldn't stand it. To think that she had played some part in causing Fluttershy to feel like this just broke her heart.

No. She had to fix it. She had to make her happy again, by any means necessary.

She moved her hooves, bracing herself, focusing every last ounce of her magic into her horn. She'd never done anything like this before. But it was worth a try. For her.

"What's she doing?" asked Rainbow, perplexed, turning to her four friends who stood alongside her atop their nearby vantage point. This hadn't been part of any of her coolness lessons.

"I know!" Pinkie leaped up, an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. "Dashie, you have to go and clear the sky! Quick!" she instructed, jumping on the pegasus's back, which initially just resulted in Rainbow face-planting into the dirt, flattened like a pancake.

"She's right!" Rarity agreed, recognition washing over her features. She saw it too. "I know a grand romantic gesture when I see one! Do it!" she commanded.

"Ya best do as she says," said Applejack with a shrug, trusting her intuition.

Rainbow rolled her eyes, but obeyed nonetheless, flying up with Pinkie on her back and sneakily pushing the clouds out of the sky one by one, revealing the stars hidden behind them.

Rarity cast a smirk back at Applejack. "Am I allowed to use my illusions now?" she asked teasingly, already concentrating power into her horn.

"I dunno what you're doin', but ya best do it quick," Applejack replied. "It don't pain me none to admit that I trust ya, even after hollerin' at ya all night," she admitted with a sincere smile.

Rarity returned the expression, clearing her throat before turning her attention back to the now clear area of sky in front of them. "Stand back," she advised, squeezing her eyes shut, summoning all the energy she could muster.

"I don't get it," said Rainbow Dash, resting on a cloud, while Pinkie lay on her back. "What's Twilight doing? And what are we doing?"

"Don't you see, silly?" Pinkie Pie gave her a jovial clomp on the head, nearly knocking Rainbow's new hat off, though the pegasus was quick enough to catch it before it fell. "Twilight's going to move the stars themselves to be with the pony she loves!" she said, raising her forelegs in the air.

"She can do that?" asked Rainbow, not sure whether to be impressed or terrified.

"Haha. Of course not, dummy. But we can make her *think* she did," Pinkie said with a wink, grabbing onto Rainbow's mane. "Hiho, Dashie, away!" she said, kicking her sides, prompting her to fly back down to the others.

Rarity's illusion took effect, projected against the backdrop of the night, making it seem as if the stars were moving, coming together. Twilight opened an eye, her heart skipping with glee when she saw the heavens responding to her will. 'Yes! It's working!' she thought. She watched as the stars in the sky bent to form three little words.

I love you.

The flickering light from the sky made Fluttershy peer up. She gasped in awe as she saw what stood before her. "How did? Where?" was all she could manage to say. A soft sound prompted her to look behind her. What she saw was Twilight standing on the grassy slope a little way above her, shyly smiling down at her.

"Sorry for being dramatic about it," said Twilight with a sheepish laugh. "That's what I've been trying to tell you all evening," she said, trotting over to her. "I just couldn't work up the courage."

Fluttershy blushed, bashfully glancing down, hiding behind her mane, which was no longer done up in its earlier style, having removed the clips. "I...I know the feeling," she coyly confessed.

Her duty done, Rarity promptly passed out, collapsing onto a still thoroughly weirded out Applejack, spirals twirling in her eyes and a parade of stars circling around her head in a conga line.

Down below, neither Twilight nor Fluttershy noticed the illusion vanish. They were both lost in a very different spell. "So, now that we've got that out of the way...do you think, maybe, we could take another shot at starting over?" asked Twilight, hopefully.

"Y-yes. That would be nice, because, um, actually...I have something to ask you," said Fluttershy, tentatively moving closer to her. She paused, swallowing her last remaining nerves, clearing her voice as she gathered all the bravery she possessed. "Twilight, would you like to go out with me?" she asked, carefully enunciating each word, managing to hold her eyes open as she did so, maintaining eye contact.

Twilight laughed. "Just try and stop me," she said, stepping closer to her.

Fluttershy grinned, her cheeks turning pink at her proximity to Twilight. "Good. I'm glad," she said, sweetly. Despite earlier disasters, she was already looking forward to it. "I'd love to be able to go on a real date with you."

"I thought we were on one," Twilight replied.

Fluttershy chuckled. "I'm not so sure I'd want it to count."

"No, no. That's not what I..." Twilight trailed off, briefly joining Fluttershy in bashful laughter. "Of course, there are a million things I'd like to change about what happened tonight, but this, this moment definitely isn't one of them," she confessed.

"Oh, I see," said Fluttershy, following Twilight's train of thought. They didn't have to wait. They were already having a good time. Right then. Right there. "Well, uh, you're right. This...this part definitely counts. And the, um, the star thing was nice too..." she shyly continued.

"Yeah. And, I mean, the night is still young. We don't have to finish straight away." She smiled, not ready to be parted from Fluttershy's company just yet. "So, what do you say? There's no reason why we only have to remember this night for the bad parts. Let's end on a high note," she suggested in a manner that Fluttershy found immensely charming, her eyes bright with sincerity.

"That would be nice," Fluttershy replied, her heart flutter once more. It was funny. A few minutes ago she would have given anything for this night to be over. Now, she didn't want it to end at all. "Um, it's a beautiful sky tonight," she said, gesturing up at the now normally arranged stars, moving back towards the lake as she did so. "Would you like to...look at it with me?"

The grinning Twilight couldn't bounce over to her fast enough.

The re-awoken Rarity broke down in very loud, melodramatic sobs as the young lovers wandered over to the lake together, her histrionics earning several bewildered looks from her friends. "Sorry!" she sniffed in a futile effort to contain her emotions. "It's just...*I'M. SO. **HAPPY!***" she cried, burying herself in Applejack's coat, bawling her eyes out.

"Uh...there, there?" AJ tried weakly to console her, uncomfortable though she was with their closeness. As much as Rarity prided herself on her beauty, she was definitely not a pretty crier. "...Please stop huggin' me..." she said quietly.

"Yeah. It is pretty touching, isn't it?" Pinkie sniffled and wiped her eye, smiling proudly at the pair of young lovers. So romantic. So sweet. "This calls for a so—"

"NO!" two sets of voices shouted her down, the third too busy crying to do the same.

"What the hay?" a familiar voice at their side made a few of the ponies jump.

Sure enough, there was Spike, with Owlowiscious on his shoulder and a package of supplies from Zecora in his arms, staring down at the scene before him in puzzlement, having by sheer coincidence stumbled across them on his way home. The way Twilight and Fluttershy were curled up together on the grass like that, it was almost like...

"...Oh, for crying..." He rolled his eyes, exasperated. He got left out of all the important things. "I go away for one day and I miss *this*? I'm never

leaving you ponies out of my sight again,” he said, shaking his head at the group.

“SPIIII-HIII-HIIIKE!” Rarity wept, wrapping up the little dragon in a hug, her waterworks continuing undiminished. “I can’t—IT’S SO BEAUTIFUL!”

“Guuuh...” Spike grinned, heart bubbles floating above his head as he revelled in Rarity’s embrace. Maybe this turn of events wasn’t so bad after all.

“Hoo,” Owlowiscious flew over to Rainbow Dash, landing on her swank new hat. “Hoo?”

Rainbow blinked. She’d honestly forgotten she was wearing that. “What, this old thing?” she asked, earning another hoot from the owl. “Eh, I never really liked this hat anyway,” she said, throwing it aside, already bored with it.

“Ooh! Mine!” Rarity immediately dropped Spike and picked the hat up, her tears instantly drying as she admired the accessory. “I’ve got a cart full of gems with your name on it,” she said, affectionately stroking the hat.

Spike sighed adoringly at her, and Applejack rolled her eyes.

Down on the grass below, Twilight snuggled up closer to Fluttershy, so comfortable she could have stayed there forever given the chance. Fluttershy glanced over at her, shyly. Ever so tentatively, she extended her wing, letting it gently unfurl over Twilight, covering her like a warm blanket.

The two exchanged coy smiles, relaxing and resting their heads together.

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Spike yawned, dragging a blanket with him to a basket on the floor of Fluttershy’s cottage, glad he had yet to be assaulted by the possessed demons the pegasus called animals. “G’nite, Twilight. G’nite, Fluttershy,” he said tiredly, ready to call it a day and hit the hay. “Don’t get up to anything.”



The two girls made eye contact and laughed. Spike had no need to worry about that.

“Goodnight, Spike,” said Fluttershy, curling up under the blankets and sighing sleepily. “Goodnight, Twilight,” she whispered, her face the last thing she saw before she closed her eyes and drifted into dreams.

Twilight beamed at her, getting settled on the bed herself, but she was not ready to nod off just yet. There was one last thing she had to do first. She summoned a quill and a small scroll with her magic, and began to write, speaking the words aloud (though gently enough so as not to disturb either Spike or Fluttershy) as she etched them onto the paper.

*“Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today I learned that, when you like somepony as more than a friend, it's always best to just be yourself. Being honest about your feelings can be difficult, even scary, but it's certainly better than running away from your problems or pretending to be somepony you're not.*

*After all, if you can't trust your friend enough to talk about your feelings, and you feel you have to hide from them or trick them into liking you, then your actions aren't speaking very highly of the friendship you share, are they?*

*In conclusion,”*

“Oh my goodness!” Rarity gasped in horror, standing on a very annoyed Applejack’s shoulders to spy through the bedroom window. “Darling, are you *narrating*?!” she asked, utterly appalled at the sight.

“Don't do that!” Rainbow Dash scolded. Clearly she’d taught her nothing about the art of cool.

Twilight rolled her eyes in an affectionate manner. “Goodnight, all of you,” she said, walking over to the window and firmly shutting it, causing Rarity to lose her balance and fall, dragging Rainbow to the ground with her, the four friends landing in a heap.

As she moved back towards the bed, Twilight paused, looking at her latest letter to Celestia. "On second thought..." Her horn glowed, and she crumpled up the paper. She'd changed her mind.

Yes, she had learned something that day, and while she did value the lesson written in the letter, that wasn't what was really important. There was another thing she'd taken away from that evening. What mattered more than anything was the knowledge that, given the chance, she wouldn't have changed a thing.

All she had to do was look at Fluttershy, contentedly curled up on the bed, to know the truth. The journey had been a rocky ride, but she couldn't have wished for a more perfect destination. And, yeah, she would have gone through all of that again in a heartbeat. For her.

With that, she blew out the last candle, and let the night take her.

~~THE END~~

“Until the sequel!” said Pinkie, pushing aside the fade on the happy ending. “What? You’ve always gotta cash in with a shameless sequel. Milk that success, baby!” she cheered before the writer could stop her, disappearing back inside the scene.

~~THE END~~

~~REALLY~~