

# Giving Love a Helping Hoof

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# Chapter 1

Silence reigned over the Everfree Forest. Ponyville's forbidding neighbour usually held a raucous evening court, the bass rumbles of the manticores punctuated by the high pitched squeaking of the local parasprite clouds. Tonight, however, was quite different.

Tonight, the cockatrice slept easy, its head tucked under a wing. Tonight, the Ursa Minor slumbered peacefully despite the colossal snoring of its mother. Tonight, even the normally unshakeable Zecora unbolted her door and raised her gaze to the stars, dreaming of another time and place.

Tonight was peaceful.

Deep within the silken canopy of the undergrowth one could find a ruined castle, nestled against a cliff-side, all but worn away by the constant ebb and flow of the wind and the wilds. Known as the resting place of the fabled Elements of Harmony, this castle was the ancient home of the Solar Sisters, the rulers of the realm themselves.

Tonight, that castle would bear witness to something most would consider a miracle.

...

A sleepy parasprite, surprisingly unaccompanied by the usual chattering cloud of relatives, fluttered through a broken window into its temporary abode. To the simple creature, this place was not a relic of times past, nor a sacred resting place, it was merely a home.

The small critter bobbed through empty corridors, slipped through a crack in the crumbling masonry, and found itself in what could only be described as the main chamber. Letting out a contented purr, the parasprite made its way towards the centre of the room, and the tall, five-armed structure resting there. It had constructed a nest at the very top of the sculpture, needing good wind exposure to lift off of a morning and glide great distances using little energy.

Upon arrival, it snuggled down into the small bundle of leaves and sticks it had painstakingly built and stuck to the sculpture. Yawning widely, the small creature wrapped its wings about itself and began to drift off to sleep.

Catching a flicker of movement, the dozing parasprite immediately sprung up and tensed its wings, always ready to retreat in the face of a new predator. Looking left and right, the creature steadily grew more suspicious as it noted the slight brightening of its surroundings. The parasprite's mind worked itself hard, unused to complicated thoughts. Light-time wasn't supposed to be here yet... Where was the bright coming from?

With the barest of creaks, the door on the far side of the chamber shifted, before slowly swinging inward. The parasprite leapt into the air, already beating a hasty retreat, before it got a look at what came through the door and stopped, awestruck.

A wisp of white cloud, as bright as a sunny day, flowed into the room, radiating compassion and peace. The cloud swirled around the parasprite briefly, before cradling the small creature upon its white cushiony-softness, and prompting it into a deep, contented slumber. In the light of the full moon, the little nimbus deposited the parasprite onto a high wall, leaving the creature to its rest.

From within the cloud came a mellifluous, baritone chuckle, bouncing off the walls of the castle.

The cloud continued into the room, flowing over and around the structure at its centre, briefly pausing at the level of the five off-shooting arms, before sliding to the ground. It paused for a moment as if to gather its bearings, before turning a slow circle around the structure, the sculpture that it knew once housed the Elements of Harmony. After a full circle, the cloud stopped, and seemed to sit up on its haunches.

At the centre of the little nimbus, a brilliant gold light pulsed.

Wisps of cloud shot in every direction, pouring over the sculpture, covering it in poofy whiteness. It spread out into the masonry, permeating the very rock it was carved from, centuries and centuries ago. The cloud stayed that way for a moment, flowing aimlessly, before sinking entirely into the core of the structure, leaving no trace of its coming.

Once inside, it began to search.

Leading its awareness to each of the arms one by one, the cloud came to know each of them, feeling them as an extension of itself. It needed to be so, for the plan to work. After some time, once it was content with its level of awareness within the structure, it focused its attention upon the small protrusion at the end of each arm, where the magic was strongest. Where the sympathy was focused.

Sympathy was an ancient magical law, one that only the most powerful and learned of ponies would still study, compared to it being common knowledge back in the cloud's day. The little nimbus felt a touch of nostalgia at the recollection.

Whenever somepony handled an item, they left a part of their own unique magical aura or vibration upon it. With enough skill and practice, it was capable to gain an almost complete understanding of somepony through only the use of sympathy reading. Of course, the magic required to do so was astounding, and something somepony would only be able to do after an almost unfathomable amount of practice. But this particular cloud had the experience of the sun and the moon, and its knowledge of magic was unsurpassed.

The other particular drawback to this technique was that a certain amount of sympathy was needed to do it, otherwise you would simply end up with a fragmented and incomplete version of the pony in question. Thankfully, the more powerful an item was, the more sympathy it tended to gather from whoever touched it.

And the Elements of Harmony were powerful indeed.

The little nimbus prepared itself for the next step, before looking around it with a start, confused. The light was shifting... What was going on?

The cloud twisted, looking up through the crumbling roof. Of *course*, the moon was going down. Daylight was almost upon it!

Grumbling slightly, the cloud withdrew from the structure, casting a quick glance around it. It would have to come back another time, this was hard work! Wiping a mental hand across a mental sweaty brow, the cloud

silently wished the waking parasprite a pleasant day, before twisting in upon itself and disappearing in a dazzling golden flash.

...

For the briefest of instants, the horn of every unicorn in Ponyville flared, reacting to the monumental surge of magic taking place in the Everfree Forest, so close to the town's borders. Never before had this happened, and normally this would have been the cause of a mild panic, as all the ponies of the town sought to find out exactly what could cause such a reaction.

However, this being the cold darkness of pre-dawn no alarm was raised, and no notice was taken. At this hour, only one unicorn pony was even awake, and she was so engrossed in the tome in front of her that if her horn had shone as brightly as day she would have taken no notice, save that it allowed her to write more easily.

Twilight Sparkle, the dearest and most faithful student of the beloved Princess Celestia, was currently lying in her bed, going over the last few pages of her journal. The intellectual pony found that ideas and thoughts tended to slip her mind more often than she would like, so she had taken to writing down anything she felt was important enough in her journal. Going over the past few days every night simply helped her organise her thoughts.

With a brief pulse of magic, the quill she kept handy beside her bed levitated before her, and began scrawling across the page, not writing anything of great wonder, simply letting the pony get her thoughts out. After a time Twilight Sparkle put aside her journal, and let sleep claim her.

She awoke what seemed an instant later to find herself flying through the air.

With a shriek, the purple mare flung her arms around the pony carrying her, and at that moment realised that a pony was carrying her.

"RAINBOW DASH!"

"Mornin' Twilight!", the excited pegasus said. "Sleep well?"

"What the hay are you doing?" squealed the unicorn, her voice rising in pitch with each syllable.

"Oh, well ya see, I just invented a new trick, and I just HAD to show it to somepony. And, ya know, the library kinda stands out, so you were the first pony I thought of!"

"So why didn't you just wake me up and show me?"

"Oh, you seemed so peaceful, I didn't want to! So I figured I'd just fly you out of town myself!"

Twilight's sluggish mind struggled to keep up with her friend's somewhat flawed explanation. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she asked, "Isn't it a little early to be thinking of new tricks? I always thought you'd be a late sleeper."

The rainbow-maned pony gave her an incredulous look. "Are you crazy? It's never too early to think of new tricks! I can never get to sleep for too long before I wake up because I've thought of another one! Haven't you ever wondered why I have to take naps all the time?"

Twilight Sparkle had to concede that it made sense, in a Rainbow Dash kind of way.

"Please tell me your going to put me on the ground before you show me."

...

After returning from Rainbow Dash's (admittedly impressive) stunt session, Twilight found herself meandering through the marketplace of Ponyville, idly looking for a good place to eat breakfast. What she did not expect to find, however, was an incredibly more intriguing sight.

Rounding a bend, she found herself across the square from Applejack's Apple Cart, in early on market day. What was interesting about it was the colt standing in front of it, conversing with Applejack. Or rather, how he was conversing.

Twilight had seen the colt around Ponyville before, though didn't know his name, and could tell that he was expressing more than a passing interest in

Applejack. The colt stood across from the cowpony, a bright smile on his face. He didn't seem to notice the hoof he was twisting in the dirt.

"Awww", she thought with a smile. "He's nervous!"

Eventually the colt strolled off with a bushel of apples clamped in his mouth, and Applejack turned her attention back to her cart. Though the earth pony was able to keep up a professional image when face-to-face with a potential customer, as soon as the colt passed out of sight she allowed a slight blush to creep onto her cheeks.

Deciding that a little bit of teasing was as good as any breakfast, Twilight headed toward her friend. "Hey Applejack!"

With a slight start the Element of Honesty turned towards the approaching unicorn, a friendly smile on her face. "Well howdy there Twilight! What brings you out here so early?"

"Oh, Rainbow Dash woke me up a while ago to show me her latest trick. But we can talk about that later! Just whoooo," she said, pointing a knowing hoof in the direction the colt had gone, "was he?"

"Oh... Ya saw that didja?" Applejack never had been good at hiding anything. "He was jus', ya know, a customer."

"From the looks of it, I'd say a regular customer."

"Oh, well, he comes by every market day," said the farmer pony, her blush deepening. "Always buys some apples, and stays for a bit o' chit-chat."

"Stop pretending AJ, he likes you!" Twilight said, smiling hugely. "And you know he does! From the looks of that blush you like him too!"

Applejack gasped. "NO! No, it's not like that at all Twi'. I mean, he seems like a nice enough colt and all, but... It's always jus' bin' me, Big Macintosh, Granny Smith and Applebloom over on the farm. I come to town from time t' time, but Ah've never really bin' 'round colts much, 'asides mah brother."

"So why the blush if you don't think of him like that?"



"Well... even a country girl likes to get noticed every now and again," smiled Applejack, looking away.

Twilight realised this was true, and almost absently started thinking back, trying to recall whether she'd ever noticed any colts looking at her in that particular way. Applejack butted in before she reached her inevitable conclusion.

"Now I know that look Twilight, and don't you go gettin' your apples in a bunch! Ah can personally swear that Ah've seen at least one other colt givin' you the look. You've jus' always got your eyes buried in some book or other, ya jus' plum never notice it."

The unicorn gasped. "Who?"

Her question was met with a cheesy grin. "Now that would be tellin', wouldn't it?"

Twilight laughed with her friend, content with the fact that her secret admirer would remain secret. "You know, I can see what your saying Applejack. Looking back, I've always been so engrossed in my studies, I've never really had time for colts. To be honest... I've never even had a coltfriend," Twilight finished with a sad smile.

Applejack was having none of it. "Now don't you worry about it sugarcube," she said, waving a nonchalant hoof through the air. "Ah've never had one either, Ah've never found the time."

Twilight nodded absently for a moment before bursting into giggles. "I don't think we've ever even talked about colts before, but a cute one talks to you and suddenly it's all we can think about."

Applejack smiled. "I suppose that's true Twi', but in our defence it sure has been busy recently, with takin' Bloomberg to Appleloosa, you and Fluttershy takin' care o' that con-founded bird of Princess Celestia and the Gala after that!"

The unicorn nodded in agreement, trying not to think about The Grand Galloping Trainwreck. "It really has been a while since all of us could get together and just have a nice, relaxing time. Even after the gala we couldn't really unwind with Princess Celestia there. Sure, she's a nice pony but

she's still a princess!" A twinkle shined in Twilight Sparkle's eyes as she suddenly reared up and clopped her front hooves together. "Ooooh, we should have another slumber party tomorrow night! I had so much fun at our last one! We can get all the girls together, and we can stay up late and have makeovers and pillowfights and play games..."

"Uhhh... Twi'?"

"...and I'll get Spike to stay over somewhere so it's just us fillies, and play Truth or Dare but properly this time without you and Rarity fighting..."

"Sugarcube?"

" and we can tell ghost stories, and in the morning... I'm making *waffles*!"

"TWILIGHT SPARKLE!"

With a start, the purple pony broke off her rambling. Smiling sheepishly, she said, "What is it AJ?"

"Well, Ah think that's a wonderful idea sugarcube, but ya gotta promise me jus' one thing," said the farmer pony.

"Oh? What's that?"

"No checklists like last time," Applejack deadpanned.

Twilight Sparkle looked horrified but, after a brief internal struggle, agreed to the terms. "On one condition!" Applejack narrowed her eyes, but nodded for her to continue. "At some point we have to talk about colts!"

The Element of Honesty stared blankly at her fellow Element for a moment before bursting out laughing. Wiping a tear from her eye, she said, "Ah think that's a given, sugarcube."

...

For the second time in as many nights, a small parasprite in the Everfree Forest found itself enjoying a magically-induced snooze. The cloud had returned, this time determined to finish its task and set the plans of itself and its co-conspirator into motion.

After sinking itself back into the structure and finding where it had left off last night, the cloud attempted something that even it wasn't sure would work, for in all the recorded history of Equestria such a thing had never been attempted. Its magic now fought to transcend both time and space, for it did not search for the sympathy of the Elements that had rested upon the structure, but rather for the sympathy of the ponies that then touched the Elements. For the umpteenth time it cursed the necessity of this circuitous route, but it had been reminded (time and again, it might add) that this was the only way to gain the sympathy of these *particular* ponies without tipping any of them off.

Deciding to concentrate its efforts to better ensure results, the cloud poured all its will into one of the arms of the sculpture, attempting to find the nebulous magical lines that would lead through the Element and into the sympathy of the pony. It pressed against the wall of time itself, as both the Element and the pony were long gone. For long moments it strained, perfectly still and serene under the light of the moon. Finally, with a golden pulse of light at its core, the little nimbus felt something unravel, and pulled its will back from the arm, a squiggling strand of pink sympathy within its grasp. Tucking the sympathy within itself, the cloud went about repeating the process.

The hours slowly ticked by, as the cloud frayed time again and again, each trip returning with yet more sympathy. Orange... Pure white... A multi-hued, especially vibrant strand... A rather easily obtained yellow strand.

Finally, the cloud enveloped the fifth strand, looking forward to the completion of its task. Even for one such as it there were limits, and reaching through time was not something to be handled lightly. Maintaining each of the strands of sympathy was also becoming quite taxing.

Now turning its will to the room at large, the little nimbus was faced with a challenge: drawing sympathy from a non-specific point. Thankfully, sympathy was at heart a type of magic, and the area was absolutely saturated in two distinct types of it. A somewhat recognisable type, though tainted by evil like a muddy hoof dipped in a bath, and a more... pure type, that was honestly surprising in its intensity. As the cloud broke through the time barrier, and after some searching finally clutched the last strand of sympathy, its moment of triumph was cut short by a spark of pain lancing through it. Immediately, it started losing its grip on all six strands.

Redoubling its efforts, and clenching its mental jaw, the little nimbus consolidated its hold over the strands, pouring its will into the final one. This ultimate, purple strand of sympathy was not coming quietly, fighting with strength that, when compared to the cloud's own was not considerable, but was most definitely surprising, and after such a long struggle, the smoke was more than fatigued.

Finally, the little nimbus was able to envelop the purple strand, holding it within itself as it did the others. Letting out a surprisingly audible sigh, the cloud laughed brightly to itself for a moment, pleased. With a small bow to the parasprite whose hospitality it had now twice imposed upon, the cloud disappeared once again in a flash of golden sunlight.

# Chapter 2

A harried white unicorn knocked a dainty hoof on the door to Ponyville's library, her saddlebags bulging.

"Coming!"

The door opened before her, bathing her in a warm glow. Her hostess stood before her.

"Rarity! I'm so glad you made it, we were beginning to wonder whether you were coming."

Rarity giggled, brushing her mane out of her eyes. "Oh, think nothing of it Twilight, it simply took more time than I would have liked to close down the boutique today. Not that I'm complaining of course, business is positively booming!" Though the Grand Galloping Gala hadn't quite proceeded exactly as planned, the image of six unknown mares arriving in tasteful gowns of an unfamiliar but intriguing design had certainly stuck with some of the more fashion conscious of the higher echelons of society. "After making myself presentable and getting Sweetie Belle over to Sweet Apple Acres with Scootaloo and Applebloom... Well, suffice it to say that after THAT trip I found the need to make myself presentable again. I just hope Spike and Big Macintosh are up to the challenge!"

Standing aside to let her guest in out of the dark, Twilight laughed. "Knowing the Cutie Mark Crusaders, I'm surprised you made it at all!"

Laughing with Twilight, Rarity trotted inside and levitated her cloak off, hanging it beside the door. "Now, where shall I put my things darling?"

"Just bring them up to my room Rarity, that's where everyone's bunking tonight."

Ascending the stairs, Rarity was greeted by the sight of her remaining best friends, all sprawled out over cushions and sleeping bags.

"Good evening dears! I hope I didn't miss anything important."

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth for some witty comment, but Pinkie Pie beat her to the punch.

"Oh no Rarity, nothing's really happened yet, we've only all been here for a little while and we didn't really WANT anything to happen yet because it would be silly for anything to happen if all of us weren't here because then if something DID happen then as soon as someone else got here we'd have to go over everything that happened!"

Long since used to her long-time friend's... unique type of diction, Rarity merely smiled indulgently before perfectly unrolling her sleeping bag and settling herself gracefully upon it. "So ladies, what are we discussing?"

"Man Rarity, you shoulda seen it!" Rainbow Dash buzzed over to the unicorn, hovering in front of her face in a frenzy of excitement. "I thought of a new trick last night, and today I NAILED it! On my first try too!"

The Elements of Harmony sat and talked long into the night, conversation ranging from the more mundane topics of how Fluttershy's animals were doing and anything interesting Twilight had researched recently to the more spicy topics of Derpy's borderline fanatic love of muffins and just what Big Macintosh was doing when he trotted off the farm with a succinct "Be back later", and didn't return for hours. The most popular theory was that the big stallion had finally found himself a marefriend.

Twilight found it ease itself to then direct the conversation towards colts. With a smirk towards a silently pleading Applejack, she said, "You know, on that topic, you'll never guess what I saw earlier today..."

All of the other fillies collectively "Ooooh!"-ed, although Rainbow Dash clomped a hoof to her mouth in embarrassment afterwards. Twilight Sparkle proceeded to tell them what she had seen in the marketplace that day.

Rarity looked like she was going to explode out of excitement. "Oh darling, I've been so eager for this day! I know just who that colt is as well! His name is Bright Dancer, he works over at Quills and Sofas! Tomorrow, come to my boutique and I shall do your mane and tail, and then you can walk over there and-!"

"Now hold on there Rarity!" interrupted Applejack, looking mildly alarmed. "I know ya mean well, but..."

"But what dear? It's nothing to be nervous about, it's ease itself to simply trot over to a colt and... Well, you know", she finished lamely.

Applejack's eyes gaze sharpened. "No Ah don't sugarcube."

"You just- Well, you know all you do is..." Rarity's gaze shifted left and right, sweat dotting her flank. "See, when he-"

Applejack pounced on the weakness. "Ah KNEW it! You ain't never talked to a colt like that before neither!"

Rarity's eyes blazed. "I beg your pardon! You DO remember whom I was with on the night of the Gala don't you?"

Applejack snorted. "And jus' look at how well THAT turned out!"

At that all the fight leaked out of Rarity, and the unicorn lowered her gaze to the floor. Applejack's face fell, and sidled over to her friend and put a hoof over her shoulders.

"Ah'm sorry Rarity, that was a plum stupid thing to say. We all know that you were a perfect lady that night. That fancy-shmancy Blueblood was just... Well, he was so far up 'imself he was lickin' his own horn."

Even Rarity cracked a small smile at that, as Rainbow Dash fell out of the air laughing.

"If it makes y'all feel any better... Ah've never even had a coltfriend. Or bin' out on a date." She evilly looked over at Twilight Sparkle, who was frantically shaking her head and crossing her hooves in front of her. "And I know that Twilight at least ain't never had one neither."

At this, all eyes turned to the apprentice of Celestia, who grinned sheepishly before nodding.

Pinkie Pie sprang into the conversational lull. "Now don't you silly-fillies worry about a thing! Your Auntie Pinkie Pie has never been out on a date neither and I've never worried about it!" (This was not strictly true; a much

younger Pinkie Pie had actually been asked out once but had mistaken the concept for a two-person, extra big party. The young colt had been found unconscious in a cupboard at Sugarcube Corner two days later, muttering something about the dangers of oatmeal.)

"There, ya see Rarity?" said Applejack, a grin on her face. "Most of us ain't had much experience with colts before. You jus' got off on the wrong hoof."

The fashionista perked up, and smiled warmly at Applejack. "I suppose your right dear, I probably could've set the bit slightly higher on my first try... Still, I am rather surprised somepony has managed to stay quiet for so long on such an interesting topic. Rainbow Dash, nothing to say for once, hmm?"

The pegasus pony had gotten tired of buzzing around the room and was currently reclining on her Wonderbolts sleeping bag. "Me? Pfff, of course I do! I've been on a date before! You expect someone as cool as ME not to have been?" She reclined back, hooves crossed behind her head as she tried to be the image of careless confidence. "We only ever had time for the one, what with my training schedule and all, but it still counts! It was no big deal anyway, we met up, walked around for a while, talked, and went our ways. Kinda boring if ya ask me."

"Now that's not true Rainbow Dash."

Heads turned at the softly spoken interruption, causing the speaker to blush. After a brief but telling moment Rainbow Dash laughed nervously, saying, "What do you mean Fluttershy?"

The shy pegasus gently smiled. "I mean that you were so nervous I had to talk you out from under your bed and help you get ready."

At this almost everyone burst into laughter, finding the prospect of a cowed Rainbow Dash quite entertaining. The pegasus huffed, crossing her front legs and nursing her wounded pride. Already her mind got to work thinking of new tricks to earn her cred back.

Applejack in particular couldn't catch her breath. "Oh mercy!" she yelled as she rolled around the floor, clutching her sides. "Make it stop! Ah can't breathe!"



Rainbow shot into the air, wings moving in a blur, hooves gesturing every which way. "No no no! You've got it all wrong! I wasn't hiding under my bed! I was – I was sleeping under there! You know how it is with clouds! My normal bed got boring... so I made bunk beds! For when Fluttershy wanted to stay over!"

Though not the most brazen of ponies, Fluttershy was not averse to a joke. With a grin, she said, "Then how come I couldn't get you to stop saying 'Oh my gosh!' over and over?"

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to deliver a well-formulated and plausible response to that question...

...And found herself hovering in mid-air, one hoof raised and mouth wide open, unable to think of a cloudsdamned thing. A muscle twitched near her eye, setting Applejack off into renewed hysterics.

After a few moments the earth pony calmed herself down and wiped a tear of laughter from her eye. "Ahhh. See, there ya go Rarity. Only one of us has ever been on a date before. T'ain't nothin' to be gettin' your mane in a bunch for, sugarcube."

"Um... Well, actually Applejack..."

The farmer filly turned to Fluttershy and saw that the Element of Kindness was in a right state, her hoof working at the floor in front of her, and her deep blush almost hidden behind her mane.

Jaws around the room collectively dropped.

Twilight Sparkle spoke up first. "YOU'VE been on a date, Fluttershy?"

Rainbow Dash clopped a hoof to her forehead. "Of course! I can't believe I forgot about that!"

"Ah swear, must be somethin' in the water at Cloudsdale."

Fluttershy, eyes glued to the floor, weakly responded. "Yes, Twilight. It was a long time ago, just after I moved out of Cloudsdale."

The earth-bound ponies of the room all tried to process what they had just heard. Of all ponies, Fluttershy had beaten them to a date!

Twilight Sparkle asked the question on everyone's mind. "How did it happen?" Even Pinkie Pie was stunned into silence, lying on her belly with her face propped on her hooves, staring up at Fluttershy.

"Weeeelll..." The animal-loving pegasus drew the word out, a smile blossoming on her face. "His name was Pine. He was an earth pony."

Rarity detected a possible hazard, and tried to head it off. "'Was', dear?"

Fluttershy, eyes wide, gasped and shook her head. "Oh no, don't think that! Nothing bad happened to him, he just moved away is all. I suppose his name still is Pine, and he's still an earth pony."

Rarity breathed a sigh. "Oh, thank goodness."

Pinkie spoke up. "Wouldn't it have been extra super duper hard when he moved away if you had been on a datey-watey with him?"

"Yes, it was very sad", said Fluttershy, nodding her head. "We only went on two dates, but I considered him a good friend. Thankfully he left just after Winter Wrap Up, so I had a lot of work to do to keep me busy, and lots of new baby bunnies to keep me and Angel company."

Rainbow Dash chimed in, shattering her aura of cool indifference. "How did you meet him? You never told me."

"It was just after I moved into my cottage near the Everfree Forest. I used to walk through the woods and fields around there all the time, to learn where herbs grew and where I could find good dens for some of the animals." Fluttershy's smile widened and her blush receded as she lost herself in memory. "I found Pine by a broken sapling. He loved trees and plants as much as I love animals, and he was crying because he was so sad. He told me later that he thought it was unfair that such a young tree didn't get a chance at life."

"Pfff!" Rainbow Dash looked almost sickened. "Crying over a tree? That's so stupid!"

Her complaints, however, were drowned out by a chorus of "N'awwww!"

Fluttershy continued. "I took him back to my house, and showed him a new litter of baby bunnies that had just been born. It was a big litter, but one of them had been a stillborn. It was sad, but I explained to him that if you cry every single time something dies, you'll run out of tears. I told him that he should celebrate the bloom of new life around him, not the loss of it. After that he just looked at me, and then we stayed and watched the bunnies while he finished crying. Then we started meeting up more and more often. He would help me look after the animals, I would help him tend to the plants, and eventually..." Fluttershy blushed and looked down at the ground again. "Well, he asked if I wanted to go on a date with him... And I said yes."

Bounding off the floor in excitement, Pinkie Pie reacted predictably (or as much as such a word could apply to her), questioning Fluttershy at super-speed. "Oooh, what was it like? Where did you go? Did you have a super-duper humongous party and invite all your friends?"

"Oh no, Pinkie Pie, nothing like that! The first time we just went for a nice walk, had a picnic and watched the sunset."

"Oh my, what a little gentlecolt!" gushed a beaming Rarity. "That sounds absolutely magical my dear."

"Ah gotta admit, even though Rarity and Ah probably have diff'rent ideas o' the perfect date, that sounds pretty nice there sugarcube," said Applejack, her expression matching Rarity's as the pegasus pony told her tale.

Even Twilight seemed enraptured. "What about your second date?" she asked.

Fluttershy smiled that certain smile again, that smile everypony knows is in memory of somepony who was more than a mere friend. "Well, the first date was all planned out but our second date just kind of happened. I came across him planting some seeds on top of a hill, and asked why he was planting them there. He took me over to another hill with a huge tree on it, and said that he had planted that when he was only a little colt. He said 'There is never too much green in the world...' Fluttershy's voice faltered as her smile grew goofy and her face lit up like the setting sun. "...like your eyes."

Rainbow Dash, despite her best efforts, felt herself sitting up and listening intently. Though she tried her absolute best to be confident, fearless and most importantly, cool, she was still just a young mare, and desired companionship as much as any other. The shy pony's story struck at every schoolfilly's dreams.

Fluttershy continued her story with a giggle. "He also said they were great for cloudwatching. So we just lay down and pointed out all the shapes we saw. After a while, I think we both fell asleep, because next thing I knew it was sunset. We both said our goodbyes and headed home."

There was a moment of silence as each of the mares became lost in their own thoughts, be it fond reminiscence, a slight hint of jealousy, or craving for cake.

Ponyville's resident librarian broke the silence. Twilight Sparkle asked, "Do you still think about him?"

"Oh yes, I don't think any filly ever forgets their first date!"

"But Fluttershy!" chimed in the pink coated sugar-machine that was Pinkie. "Don't you miss him?"

The Element of Kindness nodded in response. "I did terribly at first, but after a while it faded away. I still miss his smile, but I've moved on." The sincerity in the pony's smile spoke volumes.

Rainbow Dash spoke up, realising that with the added pressure of her other friends around, she could finally get a long awaited answer out of Fluttershy. "So what exactly did you two get up to, anyway?" she asked, a sly smirk on her face. "You never told me that either."

Fluttershy's inherent innocence prevented her from catching her fellow flier's drift. "What do you mean Rainbow? I just told you."

"Nuh-uh, I don't mean what'd you do on your dates... I mean, what did you two DO together?" The emphasis finally got the point across.

Fluttershy's eyes widened even as the rest of the fillies leaned forward in anticipation, Pinkie overbalancing.

"Oh my, I could never talk about that!"

"Come on, Fluttershy!" insisted Twilight. "It's just us fillies here! You can tell us."

"It's just so... So..." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "...embarrassing."

"Now nopony's here to judge, Fluttershy," insisted Applejack. "We won't tell nopony that you don't want us to."

After a few deep breaths, Fluttershy admirably steeled herself. "On our first date we held hooves for a while and when he walked me home I nuzzled him!" she blurted out quickly.

"Aw, that's so sweet!" said Twilight, smiling.

Rainbow Dash grinned. "Hehe, I thought so! You had a spring in your wings all day!"

Her confidence boosted by the positive reaction to her first revelation, Fluttershy continued. "On our second date nothing really happened, we just sat under a tree and watched some clouds. But..."

"Buuuut?" Pinkie was almost bouncing around the room, the suspense killing her. "But but but but but?"

"Well... When I woke up under the tree later... His hooves were around me."

At that moment five fillies breathed a contented sigh, each looking wistfully into the middle distance.

"And..."

Everyone's attention snapped back to Fluttershy, wondering what the timid pony's next revelation was.

"When he came to say goodbye before he moved away..." she trailed off, whispering something unintelligible.

"Uhhh... Come again?" said Applejack.

"He said goodbye and then..." Once more she reverted to whispering.

"Could you please repeat that dear?" said Rarity, cupping a hoof over her ear.

Fluttershy was growing more withdrawn by the second. "And then he..."

Rising, Twilight trotted over to Fluttershy, turning her head to place it right in front of the pegasus' mouth. "One more time Fluttershy?"

Screwing her eyes shut, the Element of Kindness said in what was (for her, at least) a yell, "He kissed me!"

The silence was deafening.

"No. Way." said Rainbow Dash, eyes wide.

Through a slack jaw, Applejack managed to get out, "Ah don't believe it."

To the absolute horror and complete chagrin of Fluttershy, Ponyville's bounciest citizen, Pinkamena Diane Pie, chose that moment to ask, "What was it like?"

The slow, steady chiming of the Ponyville clock, operated and maintained by the town's brown-maned clockmaker, saved Fluttershy from potentially dying of embarrassment.

Twilight gasped. "Oh my, I didn't realise it was so late! Come on girls, bed time!"

There was a rustling as each of the mares slid into her sleeping bag, Twilight settling into her bed.

"Good night everypony!" Receiving a chorus of "Good night!"s in return, Twilight reached over and turned off the light, leaving six fillies alone with nothing but their own colt-ridden thoughts and a long, long night.

...

Smiling goodnight to a yawning Luna, Princess Celestia trotted through the hallways of Canterlot towards her bedroom for her morning routine, after having set the sun on its daily journey. The Alicorn stopped in her tracks as

she saw hanging upon her doorknob a small, poorly written sign that read "DO NOT DISTRUB" in adorably foalish hoofwriting. Luna had written that sign for her centuries and centuries ago, and she had never had the heart to get rid of it. All the castle staff eventually got used to its innocuous presence, though Luna had nearly died from embarrassment when she had seen it again.

What made it particularly significant at this moment however, was that aside from Celestia, only one other had ever hung that sign upon her door. And if he was back, then that meant...

After briefly looking left and right, the princess let out a very unprincess-like squeal, prancing happily on the spot for a moment before rushing into her room and slamming the door.

However, in her haste the Alicorn overlooked something. Evescrop, the most inquisitive and borderline nosy of the palace's cleaning staff managed to evade the princess' detection by the simple expedient of imitating a statue in a small alcove, a featherduster her sword. The second she heard the lock click on Celestia's door, she tip-hoofed over to it and planted her practiced ear against the polished wood, straining in vain to hear the muted conversation on the other side.

Backing away after a moment, defeated, the chocolate-brown unicorn noticed a bright golden light suddenly flash on the other side of the door, spilling out underneath it. But a moment later, the door abruptly swung open, revealing the excited face of Princess Celestia. Evescrop gulped; she'd been caught.

However the princess seemed not to notice the unicorn's consternation, as she herself looked like she'd been caught levitating the cookie jar. Quickly schooling her features and clearing her throat, the Alicorn said, "Good morning Evescrop, how are you?"

Evescrop smiled brightly, happy for new gossip and continued employment both. "Very good, thank you, your Highness! Is there anything I can do for you this morning?"

Celestia smiled, waving a hoof in the air. "That's quite all right dear, you just continue with your duties."

Bowing low, the unicorn said, "Of course, your Highness," before turning away, her mind already working over what she'd just seen.

Her good mood crashed spectacularly as the princess spoke up.

"Actually, Evescrop..."

Her heart pounding somewhere in her throat, Evescrop slowly turned. "Y-yes, your Highness?"

Celestia loomed over her, a blank look on her face. Her magenta eyes bored into Evescrop's own orange orbs, tearing away all resistance.

The spell was broken as the princess smiled cheekily. "Would you fetch me a parchment and quill?"

Evescrop released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "Of-of course your majesty!" she stammered, before stumbling off down the hallway, holding a hoof to her heart. Celestia watched as she went, stifling a giggle.

...

"Twilight! Twilight, wake up!"

The purple unicorn tumbled out of bed in a heap of hooves and blankets, falling unceremoniously onto the ground. Caught within the cushy confines of her sheets, Twilight panicked for a moment before finding her way out, opening her eyes to the new morning.

"Ohhhh... What is it? What happened?" Looking around blearily, Twilight Sparkle noticed that each of her friends was waking up, rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. Turning around, she saw Spike frantically waving a scroll back and forth in his paw.

"A letter from Princess Celestia! It's urgent!"

Twilight Sparkle frowned; she was up-to-date with all her studies, as far as she knew Celestia had no need to send her a letter. Levitating it over to her, she unrolled the parchment and began scanning the page.



Noting her friend's growing look of surprise, Applejack rose and clopped over to her. "What is-" She broke off to yawn hugely for a moment. "What is it Twi'?" The cowpony flipped her trademark hat onto her head. "Somepony in trouble?"

Raising her gaze, Twilight saw each of her friends looking at her, expressions of curiosity on their faces.

"Pack your things girls!" she said. "We're going to Canterlot."

# Chapter 3

*My Faithful Student Twilight Sparkle,*

*I need you and your fellow Elements of Harmony to come to Canterlot as soon as possible. A situation has arisen that affects each of you more profoundly than I can currently foresee. I shall send a chariot for you and your friends, it should arrive within the hour.*

*With love,  
Princess Celestia*

...

Pulled by a pair of armoured pegasus, a golden chariot flew across the idyllic countryside of Equestria, the roaring winds kept at bay through enchantment. A group of fillies clustered around a purple unicorn upon it.

"Whatever do you think it could be, Twilight?" asked Rarity, looking askance at the scroll between the purple unicorn's hooves.

Twilight Sparkle had been almost silent since they had left Ponyville, lost in her own thoughts. Rarity waved a hoof in front of her friend's face.

"Ugh, she's doing it again. Rainbow, darling?"

Taking in a deep breath, the pegasus screamed, "TWI-LIIIGHT!" a vein pulsing in her forehead.

The sonic assault broke Twilight's stupor, as her eyes focussed on Rarity's cringing visage. "Hm? You say something Rarity?"

"I said my dear, whatever do you think this could be about? Why do you think the Princess needs us?" The two pegasus soldiers pricked their ears, their curiosity piqued.

Twilight shook her head. "That's what I've been trying to figure out! I honestly have no idea."

"It's more fun this way silly!" scoffed Pinkie, leaning dangerously far over the rail. "A surprise isn't a surprise if you know what it is!"

"Now... T'ain't no use in... In gettin' our manes in a tangle... Until we know what the Princess wants..." croaked a weak voice. The assembled ponies turned, and beheld Applejack.

The farmfilly was facing away from them, hanging her head over the rail with one hoof holding her hat on. Had she turned, they would have seen that her face was an alarming shade of green.

Rainbow Dash buzzed over, suppressing a snicker at her friend's predicament. Applejack hadn't said a word of protest when boarding the chariot, but it had all gone downhill from there. "I never knew you were so scared of flying, AJ."

Applejack whirled, bringing her muzzle-to-muzzle with Rainbow. "I AIN'T SCARED!" A sudden lurch of the chariot caused her to groan and face back over the rail. "I'm an EARTH pony Rainbow Dash. And this ain't the earth. Woaaaaahh Nelly..." Everyone visibly recoiled at a horrible splattering noise. The two escorts traded irritated looks; they'd have to clean that.

Pinkie raised her nose. "Does anyone smell apples?"

Fluttershy patted Applejack's shoulder and tried not to look disgusted as the earth pony retched once more. Gasping, she said, "Pinkie... please don't say apples... Can somepony try talkin' about somethin'? Make the time pass, an' all."

"Oooh, I know! I know! I know!" Pinkie bounced on the spot, unable to contain herself. "I wanna hear about Dashie's date!"

"My date?" Rainbow Dash looked genuinely puzzled. "Why? I told you guys, it was boring."

"Now Rainbow Dash," said Rarity, "It can't have been that dull if you were as nervous as Fluttershy said you were. What was his name?"

"Skychaser. He went to the Junior Speedster flight camp as well, though he wasn't in any of my classes." Nobody noticed the pegasus soldiers stiffen under their armour. "Back then he was one of the only ponies around who

could push me, after I got my cutie mark. He even won sometimes! After the instructor called one of our races a draw, he came over and asked if I wanted to get together to talk about racing and the Wonderbolts, so I said ok. I didn't even realise until I got home that he meant it as a date."

As Applejack focused on Rainbow Dash's story, she felt her sickness receding. Each of the ponies failed to notice the miles being eaten away beneath them.

"Alot of the rest you guys already know. I got..." Rainbow faltered for a moment. "I got a TEENSY bit nervous, and Fluttershy helped me get ready." A warm smile let the Element of Kindness know how much she was appreciated. "I headed out, and met up with him at the Cloudiseum. His dad worked there, so we got to have a behind-the-scenes look at the whole place. We even got into the Wonderbolts dressing room, that was awesome! We went and had lunch at a cafe, then we just wandered around Cloudsdale for a while. It was like I said: boring. I'm built for speed, not for walkin' around. We both went home, and it never happened again. We were still friends, but that was it." The pegasus filly shrugged. "I guess I just wasn't really all that into colts back then. If it had been a few years later, who knows?"

The group looked up to see the spires of Canterlot swelling before them. One of the pegasus guards turned.

"Welcome to Canterlot. Prepare for landing." His voice cracked imperceptibly.

The two stallions gracefully brought the chariot around, setting it down gently upon one of Canterlot's landing strips. As the fillies disembarked, an armoured earth pony trotted up to them. Turning to Twilight, he asked, "Are you Miss Twilight Sparkle?"

The lavender unicorn responded in the affirmative. "Yes, we were summoned here by Princess Celestia."

The large guard nodded. "The Princess has requested your presence in the throne room. If you'll please follow me."

...

The eyes of the pegasus escorts tracked their passengers intently as they walked off, specifically the sky-blue pegasus filly among them.

One of the guards spoke up. "Chase... Was she...?"

The other cut him off. "Yeah, she was. I didn't recognise her, it was so long ago. I guess I just blocked the memories out. I was very fond of her..." He lapsed into silence, his gaze never wavering from her retreating form. "She's grown into a beautiful mare."

"She sure has," responded his companion. "So what's your problem? Go after her!"

"You kidding?" Skychaser said incredulously. "The General would have me grounded for months if I did that on duty. Besides..." He sighed. "You heard what she said. I had my shot. Come on, let's get this chariot cleaned up."

...

Princess Celestia took several deep breaths and tried desperately to stop giggling. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she had laughed like this, it was intoxicating! But one of the palace guard had just informed her that Twilight and the others had landed, and she had a facade to maintain.

After a few minutes of doing her best impression of a giddy schoolfilly, Celestia managed to calm herself down. Breathe in, breathe out. As her attuned senses picked up the distant sound of hooves clopping on marble, the Alicorn levitated an open scroll in front of her and prepared to give the performance of her life.

...

The enormous doors of the throne room of Canterlot greeted the Elements of Harmony as their escort nodded to the two ponies standing guard. Each took a handle in their jaws and backed away, opening the magnificent portal. Their guide bowed courteously to them before gesturing inside.

"The Princess asked that she receive you in private. Good day, my ladies."

With that, each of them trotted inside, and proceeded to crane their necks back... and back.

"It never fails," breathed Rarity. "Even after the Gala, this place just seems so... enormous. And the guards, such manners!"

Inevitably, their gaze was drawn towards the end of the room, and the throne situated there. The Seat of Equestria was a wonder in its own right. Framed by tapestries, bordered by shrubbery, the sheer grandeur of it offset by the gentle splashing of the fountains at its base, all backlit by the wondrous majesty of Canterlot's benevolent monarch, Princess Celestia.

Or at least, it would have been, had her face not been buried in a scroll.

As the fillies neared the throne, they slowed their pace and took care to allow their hooves to clomp noisily on the floor. When the princess did not look up, Twilight diplomatically cleared her throat. Still, the Alicorn did not respond. Rainbow nudged an elbow into Twilight's ribs.

The unicorn stepped forward. "Uhh... Princess?"

Celestia looked like she very nearly had a heart attack, leaping a foot out of her throne, her horn spearing clean through the parchment in her hooves. Her surprise in turn terrified the Ponyvillians, prompting Fluttershy to dive behind Applejack.

Holding a hoof to her heart, Princess Celestia looked down upon them and laughed. "My goodness girls, you startled me! It's a good thing Luna is handling the sun today, I haven't had a fright like that in years! I hope your all well?"

As the sextuplet bowed, Twilight said, "Very well your Majesty, though we are all very curious as to why you summoned us here." As the librarian raised her gaze, she noticed something peculiar: there were scrolls everywhere. Stashed behind the throne, poking out of the pot plants, one even (her heart lurched) floating in the fountain. She realised she had a long way to go before she could study on par with her mentor.

Celestia nodded. "Yes, of course. My summons was rather vague." The Alicorn rose, and moved to an open balcony, beckoning them to follow her. As the fillies stepped onto the terrace they were rewarded with a

brehtaking view of Canterlot, the royal flags snapping crisply in the breeze.

Celestia gazed out over the kingdom with a smile on her face. Without looking back, she said, "Last night, the castle had some unexpected visitors requesting to see me. I almost denied them; it was late in the evening after all, and the night is the realm of my sister. However, I acquiesced." She turned to regard them. "Before they even entered the throne room, I could tell that they were visitors of note. They were saturated with powerful magic, it was so strong I could almost smell it. Though, by the light of the sun, I couldn't tell what type of magic it was."

The Elements traded glances uneasily. The monarch of the realm, a goddess in her own right, could not recognise magic? The somewhat irritated look on Celestia's face didn't help matters.

"Now, you girls know I've been watching over the ponies of Equestria for over a thousand years. I can't even clearly recall the last time I learnt something new concerning magic. Ever since I talked with my guests, I've been spending all my time in the archives, going over the scrolls we have on magic. I even asked Luna to assist me." The Alicorn smiled slyly, sensing the fillies' unease. "Some of the scrolls down there are even older than we are!"

The well-placed joke did wonders for the mood of the group, and the sounds of their mirth echoed around the throne room, dancing in the sunlight streaming through the high, arching windows.

Celestia unfurled her wings, stretching them out. "As soon as I received word that you were on your way, I gathered the closest scrolls, and brought them up here to continue reading," she said, waving a hoof towards the motley assortment of literature cluttering her throne. "And so far, nothing. Not a single mention of anything even remotely similar to what I felt from these ponies."

"Uhhh... Your Hahness?"

The princess turned, smiling. "Yes Applejack, what is it?"

Slightly cowed at the prospect of being on a first-name basis with a millennia old princess, the earth pony continued, undeterred. "Well, beggin'

your pardon, and Ah might not fully understand, but... Magic is magic, ain't it?"

Celestia nodded indulgently. "To a point, yes, magic is all the same. However it can be a bit more subtle than that. It... is difficult to explain to someone who does not wield it themselves. Just believe me, this particular type of magic was different, and strong."

Applejack bowed. "Ah'm mighty sorry for interruptin', your majesty..."

"That's quite alright dear! I want all of you to fully understand the situation, if you have any questions, please ask them! In any case..." The Alicorn turned, and led them back inside. "I had an audience with these ponies, and had a long talk with them, where I noted that they were not the origin of the magical efflux I had detected, merely soaked in its after-effects. I'm now convinced that, while they are certainly... peculiar... they are in no way a threat to Equestria. The magic surrounding them, while powerful, was not malevolent."

Applejack subtly leaned over to Rarity. "Malevowhat?" she whispered.

"It means 'of evil intent'!" was the whispered response.

"Your Highness, while this is all fascinating," said Twilight, almost salivating over the prospect of heretofore undiscovered magic, "what does it have to do with us? Why did you call us here?"

Celestia regarded her pupil warmly. "From what I have seen, I believe that each of you will have a... shall we say, special connection? With these ponies."

Pinkie Pie gasped humongously. "A special connection! You mean we're going to become the absolute bestest of best friends?"

The princess laughed at her exuberance. "I certainly hope so Pinkie! But to be honest, I really have no idea what it might be. I just know there is a connection."

Rarity tossed her mane. "Well, I for one have grown quite curious about this whole ordeal. Your Majesty, where might we find these ponies? I rather wish to meet with them, and see just what all the fuss is about. Though



perhaps not as learned in the ways of magic as Twilight, you've certainly piqued my interest with this talk of 'magical saturation'."

"Of course Rarity," said Celestia, nodding. "I'd hoped you'd all wish to to meet them for yourselves anyway."

Applejack stepped forward. "All this talk o' magic and 'connections' has sure got my saddle in a twist."

"Yay! A chance to meet new friends! We should HAVE A PART-" Pinkie was cut off by a cyan hoof being jammed in her mouth.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again Pinkie," deadpanned Rainbow Dash. "A simple nod will do."

Fluttershy spoke up from the back of the group. "Well, if you want us to meet them your Highness, then I suppose we'll do what we can..."

Twilight Sparkle rounded off the group with a determined nod. "Anything we can to assist you Princess."

Princess Celestia smiled. "Splendid! In that case, follow me, I shall take you to them now. They're in the banquet hall with Luna." The Alicorn laughed. "She always did eat breakfast late."

...

The short trot to Princess Luna provided ample opportunity to admire the great castle of Canterlot by the light of the sun. Though often the most poised and proper of the group, Rarity could not keep from gazing around in slack-jawed wonderment as Celestia explained this artefact or that tapestry. For her part the princess seemed more than happy to play tour guide to the fillies, happily giving them a truncated tour of her castle. Though Twilight, more attuned to the mannerism's of Celestia than the others, couldn't help but notice the barest of halts in her speech, an almost non-existent sheen over her eyes.

Sidling over to the Alicorn and trying to angle herself so that the others wouldn't notice her speaking, Twilight murmured, "Princess, are you alright?"

Celestia grinned internally. This was going marvelously! She had even fooled Twilight! Granted, so far she had almost pulled a facial muscle struggling not to crack into a big smile, but if she could pull the wool over the mare that had known her since foalhood then surely she had the others wrapped around her hoof! Stretching out her wings to block the other's view of them, Celestia leaned down to her pupil's level and said, "To be honest Twilight, I am a little concerned over exactly what might happen when you all meet... these ponies." The Alicorn frowned.

Twilight paused. "Are they really that... unusual?"

The princess smiled, genuine humour on her visage. "Oh, you could most definitely say that. I can't even think of how to go about introducing you all in the least problematic way. I certainly hope Luna has an idea."

At a quiet question from Fluttershy, Celestia turned, leaving Twilight to her thoughts. The unicorn's hooves worked on auto-pilot as she processed what she had just heard.

"*These ponies...*" she thought to herself, "*...they must really be something.*"

In short order the great doors of the banquet hall loomed before the group. Celestia's horn glowed for a moment before she said, "Wait here for a moment girls, Luna is coming out to meet us."

A moment later one of the doors creaked outward, the slight form of Princess Luna squeezing through the gap. An almost inaudible hum of conversation sneaked out with her, before the door was shut firmly again.

The fillies customarily bowed, prompting Luna to smile uneasily, a blush on her cheeks. "Please girls, rise! There is no need to bow before me. How have you all been? I haven't seen any of you since... Well, since Nightmare Moon." Luna's gaze shifted for a moment, clearly uncomfortable.

Celestia came to her sister's rescue. With a benevolent smile, she said, "Well, in your defence Luna, you DO have a thousand years of Equestrian history to catch up on."

Everypony laughed, not expecting the princess to be such a jokester. Luna leaned up against her briefly.

After a moment, Celestia said, "Now, Luna, I felt that you had a suggestion as to how we could handle our... situation?"

"Oh, yes Tia! I think the whole process might go smoother if we introduce them in pairs." Nobody missed the emphasis on 'pairs'.

Celestia smiled. "Excellent idea Luna. Girls? Please follow me." With a quick wink towards Luna (who was a surprisingly good actor), the princess led the group into a small side chamber, with a door on the other side. "This is one of the rooms used by castle staff during banquets, it connects to several others." Her horn pulsed. "Luna has assembled the colts two rooms over. One by one, you will each meet in the middle, then wait in the banquet hall for everypony else. Twilight, why don't you go first?"

At that the princess abruptly started ushering her towards the door. Twilight sputtered for a moment, caught off-guard at the sudden turn of events. She voiced the question on everyone's mind. "Colts'?" she said. "You mean these ponies are all stallions?"

Celestia's eyes widened. "Oh dear, I might have said too much. Come on Twilight, in you go."

Twilight Sparkle began to sweat, seeing the door before her begin to swing open, guided by Celestia's magic. A gap just large enough for her to squeeze through was all the princess allowed, doubtless to prevent the others from seeing anything. She turned to face her mentor, still backing into the room. She noticed all her friends watching, wide-eyed.

"Princess Celestia," she began, "Don't you think I should go in with somepony else? Or maybe you could even come in with me?"

As the unicorn backed fully into the room, Celestia merely smiled through the small gap in the doorway, saying, "No Twilight Sparkle, I think this is a job best handled by you and you alone."

The door clicked shut as Twilight continued to speak, yelling to be heard through the thick oak. "And what did you mean by 'colts'?"

As she strained to listen for an answering shout, she heard the sound of a door opening behind her. Her heart leapt into her throat. She whirled around.

A pair of purple legs were backing into the room from the opposite doorway.

A very *male* pair of legs.

Hooves clopping on the polished floor, the other pony backed into the room, slowly revealing a toned flank and broad shoulders. Twilight heard the pony's deeper voice as the door swung shut and it finally registered with her that it was most definitely a colt.

"Fillies'? What do you mean, 'fillies'?"

Her brain stalled. All at once everything she had seen of the colt's appearance and every little hint that Celestia had dropped all came together. Unable to stop herself, she gasped.

The colt spun, searching for the source of the noise. His gaze locked on her. Two violet eyes met. All doubt vanished as two ponies instinctively examined each other's identical cutie marks.

The colt and the filly expressed themselves as best they knew how.

"Holy buck."

# Chapter 4

In a small, seldom-used antechamber off the banquet hall of the great capitol of Canterlot, two seriously freaking out ponies stared dumbly at each other. Two minds, normally so able, were completely incapable of stringing together a coherent thought.

With a sharp *twang*, a single hair in the mane of each flew askance. As one, the two started rambling, not so much talking to each other as they were voicing their thoughts.

"This makes absolutely no sense!"

"How can this even be possible?"

"You can't be real!"

"Is this all a dream? Did I have too much of Granny Smith's 'special' cider?"

"Maybe I fell off the chariot on the way to Canterlot and I'm in a coma!"

"What if we all never even had a sleepover?"

"What if I never even went to Ponyville!"

"What if Ponyville isn't even real!"

"What if I'M not even real!"

"What if-"

"What if-"

Finally, in what two eavesdropping Alicorns would call really, really creepy, they both shouted in perfect unison, "*Oh, just look at me! I'm **CUTE!***"

...

Celestia snorted loudly, before slapping a hoof to her mouth. It was funny. By the Sun, was it funny. The fillies traded glances, concerned. Rarity looked in shock at having heard such a noise from her.

"Are you alright, your majesty?" ventured Rainbow Dash.

Exerting a titanic effort to contain the explosive force of her steadily building mirth, the princess merely smiled benignly. "Nothing to worry about my dear, just clearing my throat."

At that the pegasus turned away, apparently satisfied with her improvised response. Tuning her senses back towards the next room, the Alicorn thought to herself, *"Heavens, I certainly hope things wind down from here. I think I felt one of my ribs break."*

...

The two purple ponies stared at each other, glowing like the setting sun at what they'd each said. Both fervently wished they hadn't blurted out something like that in the heat of the moment, but what's done is done. Eventually, rationality was prodded awake and rose grumbling out of bed to impose itself on the situation.

Clearing his throat, the colt said, "This is going nowhere. Slowly."

"Well..." offered Twilight, "What now?"

After a moment's consideration, the colt walked over to her. Up close, it really was disconcerting, seeing oneself reflected in the opposite gender. He raised his hoof.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Dusk Shine."

"*Dusk Shine...*". His words echoed through Twilight's mind for a moment. She latched onto his practicality. "Pleased to meet you, Dusk Shine." She raised her own hoof. "I'm Twilight Sparkle."

As their hooves connected, it was all they could do not to shy away. Moon and Stars, this was awkward. And warm.

Twilight suddenly remembered the depth of the situation. She cast out a simple magical scan, so cursory she barely felt it, but the results were unmistakeable: He was saturated with magical residue. It almost felt like the magic of Princess Celestia, heady and comforting all at once. Yet it was not quite right. As if... as if wielded in a subtly different manner. The same quill, yet two ponies' hoofwriting.

That puzzle could wait for another time. A time when she wasn't locked in a room. With a colt.

Desperate to derail that train of thought, Twilight clenched her eyes shut for a moment, her horn glowing. Dusk Shine blinked as two cushy pillows popped into existence.

Twilight smiled. "Why don't we sit down? I'm sure you've got quite a tale to tell."

Dusk laughed as he collapsed down onto a pillow. "Yes, I suppose you could say that Miss Sparkle."

The filly settled on the second pillow with a bit more grace. "Please, just call me Twilight."

He looked at her with a smile. "So long as you call me Dusk."

Twilight laughed. "I think that can be arranged!" She looked down and he quickly glanced away, clearing his throat. The silence stretched.

Dusk abruptly spoke up. "Anyway, my story!"

Grinning like a foal, Twilight said, "Yes! Of course!"

The colt crossed his hooves in front of him and rested his chin upon them. "Well, there isn't really all that much to it. I woke up yesterday evening, and found myself in a small copse just outside Canterlot. I have no idea how I got there, or how I managed to sleep through a night and almost a full day, but all the guys were there too. I assumed it had something to do with the Elements."

Twilight's eyes widened. She wet her suddenly dry lips. "Elements?"

He looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "Yeah, the Elements. Of Harmony? Surely you know... about... them..." He trailed off, clearly coming to the same conclusion as her. They both sat there in silence, lost in the incredible oddness of the situation.

"Dusk... What are their names?"

The colt looked at her, ticking them off in his head. "There's Rainbow Blitz, Applejack, Berry Bubble, Butterscotch and Elusive. And yours?"

"Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Rarity. AJ's still the same."

The moment spiralled into silence yet again, the pair trying to wrap their minds around the situation. Dusk eventually spoke up, saying, "What's going on?"

Twilight massaged her temples with her hooves. "At this point Dusk, I have no idea. Why don't you finish your story?"

He nodded. "Fair enough. So, we all woke up outside Canterlot. I thought we might have been summoned there by the Princess or something, so we waited around for a little while. No pony showed up, so we headed into Canterlot to see her. Everything seemed normal, right up until I requested to see Princess Celestia. The guard let us in, but told me that we weren't expected by the Princess, nor had he ever heard of a pony by the name of Dusk Shine. My suspicions compounded when the princess didn't recognise me, or any of us."

Twilight could well imagine. "I'm sure that was a shock."

Dusk looked at her, a hint of a smile on his face. "You have no idea. Imagine if she didn't recognise you, Twilight." The filly shuddered, and he smiled properly. "My feelings exactly. In any case, after a few questions she gave us all a place to sleep right here in Canterlot and we were woken up by Princess Luna this morning. I have no idea how she stays up all night and doesn't seem tired, but I suppose she *is* an Alicorn. We've been with her ever since."

"So..." Twilight cast an appraising glance over him, gaze roving over his angular face, his short, well-trimmed mane and (she had to look away) his horn. "Let's get this straight..." She sighed. "You're me, aren't you."



It wasn't a question, but Dusk still answered. "Yes. And you are me."

Twilight was shaking her head before he finished. "This isn't possible."

Dusk laughed, sputtering for a moment. "And yet here we are!"

"Yes," said Twilight. His grin was infectious. "Here we are." She noticed how deeply Dusk had sunk into his cushion; it almost seemed like the colt was falling asleep.

"Tired?"

He answered her question with a huge yawn. "Sure as hay. Couldn't sleep. I was up all night trying to figure everything out. How we got here, why the Princess didn't recognise us..."

"Come up with anything?"

He rubbed his eyes. "Well, sure. Nothing that made much sense though."

Twilight laughed. "I'm sitting here with a male version of myself. At this point we've kind of thrown sense out the window."

"Point taken. The first idea I came up with was that we are from parallel planes of existence, and my group somehow ended up here."

Twilight raised a brow. "Even for a wild theory that sounds pretty crazy."

"Exactly, that's why I discarded the idea so quickly. I think I only came up with it because I read it in a book not too long ago, as a matter of fact."

"That's funny," said Twilight, a hoof to her chin. "I think I might have read the same book. Cross...Cross... Crossing something?"

"I think it was 'Crossing the Arrow' Twilight."

The filly shook her head. "No, it was definitely 'On the Arrow's Crossing'. I only read it three weeks ago."

Her pondering screeched to a halt as Dusk shot to his hooves. "Three weeks ago?"

Perplexed, Twilight responded, "Yes, three weeks ago. Why?"

He ignored her question. "Right after you finished reading 'Supernaturals' again?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." The filly narrowed her eyes, suspicious. "To find a cure..."

"...for Spike's laryngitis", finished Dusk with a sigh. "I was afraid of this. We have the same memories. *Exactly* the same memories, give or take some here and there for being different genders. None of the theories I came up with make any sense at all now."

"We need to focus on what we know", said Twilight practically. "We can figure out everything else later, and I'm sure the Princess will have some additional information for us."

"Ok," agreed Dusk with a nod. "What do we know?"

"Firstly, we know that your group came *here*, otherwise why wouldn't the princess recognise you?" After a moment's consideration, Dusk nodded. "We know that we are each other, somehow. The only difference between us is our gender and some adjusted memories." Again, Dusk nodded. "At this point, that's really all we've got. We don't know how you got here, we don't know how this affects the Elements, and we don't know why you're saturated in odd magic."

This was news to Dusk. "Magic? I haven't noticed anything weird."

Twilight pursed her lips in thought. "You must have just become used to it." She told Dusk everything she knew about the whole situation, from the scroll sent by Celestia to the quick chat with the Princess herself before being shunted into the room.

Dusk Shine groaned. "That just raises more questions than answers! Now I'm covered in magic that no one has experienced in living memory and Princess Celestia herself has no idea what's going on." His mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Fantastic."

Unable to sit still with her thoughts in such turmoil, Twilight rose and began pacing the small room. "The one thing I'm concerned about is the Elements."

Dusk's ears pricked and he raised his head. "The Elements? What about them?"

"Well, what becomes of them now?" The purple filly met his gaze, her eyes shining at this new puzzle. "There can't be two sets of Elements. Or can there? Is one group now the Elements of Harmony, or both? Or neither?"

The colt rose from his cushion and placed a hoof on her shoulder to steady her. "There's no point in getting worked up over something we can't figure out. Besides, I think that's exactly what everypony else is doing outside right now." He tilted his head towards a side-door. "I say we go and wait in the banquet hall like the Princess said, and let everypony else have their own little meetings. Then we can see what else the Princess might be able to tell us, and whether we can make more sense of the situation."

Twilight was a little slow on the uptake, still stuck on processing the hoof on her shoulder. His touch felt firm, warm and undeniably right. She realised that Dusk was looking at her quizzically, expecting a response. He lowered his hoof.

With a slight shake of her head, Twilight smiled. "You're right. No need to make an Ursa of a parasprite. Come on." With that, the filly started trotting towards the door.

Dusk stared at his hoof for a moment before following her.

...

One by one, each filly and each colt met their counterpart and one by one each pair followed Dusk and Twilight out into the banquet hall. The two unicorns, though sorely tempted, did not try and overhear what went on in the room. They patiently waited in the hall, seated a respectable distance away from each other and trying not to think about how awkward the silence had gotten and how much they hoped the other didn't notice their blushing.

First to trot out of the room was a chuckling pair of Applejacks, both with smiles on their faces. Though Twilight had tried to prepare herself for the shock of seeing one of her best friends in stallion form, it wasn't exactly an easy thing to shrug off. Her jaw dropped in unison with Dusk's.

Applejack (the colt) stood almost a full head taller than Applejack (the filly) and his workhorse musculature definitely showed through more on a stallion, though aside from that he was unsurprisingly similar to her. Same cutie mark, same freckles, same old Stetson hat, though perched on a shorter mane. The farm ponies approached the two gaping unicorns.

"Well howdy!" said Applejack (the filly), offering a hoof. "You must be Dusk Shine!"

"And you," said Applejack (the colt), "must be Twilight Sparkle!" He offered his own large hoof.

Smiling awkwardly, Twilight endured the colt's vigorous hoofshake. "I suppose you're Applejack?"

Dusk was surprised that a filly's grip was able to leave his own hoof so numb. "And I suppose you're... also... Applejack?"

The tan pair laughed, completely at ease. "Already thought of that!" responded the big stallion. "From now on, Ah'm gonna be Applejack," he announced, indicating himself before pointing at his counterpart, "and she's gonna be AJ."

"We hoofwrassled for it," explained AJ, glaring at Applejack, "which I STILL don't think was fair! Just look at how many more muscles you've got!" She quickly looked away and cleared her throat. "If only you coulda' hoofwrassled Big Macintosh..."

Applejack, a slight blush evident, raised an incredulous brow and smiled cheekily. "Now who ain't bein' fair?"

AJ sighed wearily. "Yeah, yeah. Anyways..." She raised her gaze back to the unicorns. "Ah guess we're all on the same page now. These guys," she tilted her head towards Applejack, "Wake up outside Canterlot one day, nopony recanises 'em, and they find out that they're all fillies here. Sound about right?"

Unsurprised at her ability to put things so succinctly, though still unaccustomed to hearing it in such a high tone, Dusk nodded to the farmfilly. "Couldn't have said it better myself AJ. Twilight and I had gotten to that point, but after that, all we could keep thinking of was wild, crazy theories. We decided to just come out here, wait for everypony else, and see what the princesses might be able to tell us."

Applejack lowered himself down to the floor and crossed his hooves. "Sounds good to me haystack."

The four ponies sat and chatted for a short while, really having little to say. How exactly does one politely enquire about the life of somepony who is essentially a stranger, whilst simultaneously knowing almost every detail? The situation was quite unique. So they chatted about that too.

From what they could deduce, the one and only notable difference in the lives of the colts and the fillies was that in Dusk and Applejack's world, Blueblood was a princess, not a prince, which was accepted after a moment's thought.

"Though I'm sure her behaviour was exactly as rude," remarked Dusk.

Beyond that, everything was shockingly, eerily identical. Applejack and AJ, perhaps being a bit more stubborn than your average pony, grilled each other mercilessly over every small detail they could think of, trying to find just one small difference, but it was impossible. Eventually, the pair relented.

"Ah give up," sighed AJ, "Tain't no use. Everything's exactly the same."

"Well..." Applejack was holding a hoof to his chin, eyes roaming the ceiling. "Almost everything."

"What'd you say?" In an instant, AJ was nose-to-nose with Applejack, so close she may as well have been looking at her own eyes in a mirror. "Whaddaya mean, 'almost everything'? We couldn' find a single difference!"

The stallion chuckled. "Well there's always what happens when the bathroom door swings shut behind ya!"

AJ drew back, red in the face, and swatted a hoof across the back of Applejack's head, sending his Stetson to the floor.

"Honestly, talkin' 'bout things like that. You're lucky somepony like Rarity ain't here."

With a laugh, the farmcolt flipped his hat back on. He smiled warmly at AJ as he said, "Me and Elusive never *did* quite see eye-to-eye." The filly smiled right back, before they both looked away, suddenly far more interested in their own hooves.

Twilight and Dusk caught each other's eye and grinned, seeing exactly what was going on between their two friends. It was cute, really. Though they both felt kind of bad for that colt/filly from the marketplace. After a moment though they remembered precisely who they were currently looking in the eye and grinning at, and became just as interested in the health of their hooves as the farmer ponies.

Slowly, relentlessly, painfully awkwardly, the seconds ticked away, each pony trying desperately to think of something, *anything*, to say. Interesting books suddenly faded into nameless, bland tomes. Different types of apples became much of a muchness. Recent events became distant memories. Finally, like the tolling of the bell that every schoolfoal prays for, the handle of the door before them started turning and a cultured voice floated towards them.

"...and you simply *must* meet them, my dear Elusive!"

Simultaneously, Applejack and AJ gulped.

# Chapter 5

A short while later found the group split in two; colts on one side and fillies the other. Rarity being as AJ often said "far and away the most frou-frou filly Ah've ever met", the seamstress very much wished for a moment of privacy to see what her friends thought of the whole situation. After some brief introductions and many utterances of "So *that's* what my dear friend would look like as the opposite gender! I must say, they make quite the dashing filly/colt!", she spirited her friends away. However Twilight and AJ could read her like a book. They shared a smirk.

The duo quickly brought Rarity up to speed on what exactly they'd each discovered, the unicorn nodding in agreement to their deductions. Though, all too swiftly, she cut the two of them short.

"Twilight, while I am as concerned about what effect this will have on the Elements as anypony, I think we've covered it quite enough. We don't wish to beat a dead... Well, I forget how that saying ends but it's not important. Darlings, what do you think of the *colts*?"

AJ looked at her incredulously. "What do ya mean Rarity? What's there to think, they're us... Just a lil' different."

Rarity waved a hoof. "Now Applejack-"

"AJ."

The unicorn blinked. "Beg pardon?"

The farm pony glowered. "Our names 'r both Applejack. We hoofwrassled; he's Applejack and Ah'm AJ."

"But my dear, you are giving up your very name! Doesn't that bother you?"

AJ shrugged. "Ah honestly thought it would too, but it really don't. While I *wish* I hadda won," she said, shooting a glare in Applejack's direction, "Ah came up with hoofwrasslin' and Ah lost fair and square."

Rarity nodded. "Well my dear, if it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me! And frankly it will make keeping track of things a tad simpler."

Twilight spoke up. "You were saying, Rarity?"

"I was?" The dressmaker blinked. "I was! Appleja-AJ, they are not *just us*, they are their own ponies, completely separate from us, and they should be treated as such."

Removing her hat, the filly scratched her head in confusion. "Ah don't get it. He's me! He's Applejack!"

"Oh, how to put this..." Rarity tapped a hoof against her chin before throwing it up in the air. "Ah-ha! AJ, say I was to ask you if... I don't know, if you just wanted to go do something. You'd say yes or no. Now, what do you think Applejack would say if I asked him the same question?"

Not getting the point, but willing to see where the unicorn was going with this, AJ thought for a moment before answering, "Well, he'd probably say the same thing as me."

Rarity blinked. "Probably, dear?"

The farm pony shrugged. "There's no way to know for sure. He can make his own decisions..." Realisation dawned on her face. "He can make his own decisions... so he's his own pony. I getcha now Rarity! Thanks for helping me out there, sugarcube."

The unicorn tittered. "Oh, it was no problem at all! But back to my original question: What do you think of him?"

"Hmmm..." AJ turned around and appraised the stallion, giving her answer more thought than she would have a minute ago. "Well... He seems like a nice, hardworking pony. Kinda reminds me of Big Macintosh t' be honest, though maybe not as quiet. Or red. Or big."

Glancing over for herself, Rarity said, "You're right darling, I can see the resemblance! I suppose they must be brothers where he comes from, so it stands to reason they'd look rather similar." Rarity smiled at AJ. "Why don't we just wait and see if he comes back to Ponyville, then we can check for ourselves!"



AJ laughed right back. "Now *that'd* be a sight to see. How 'bout you Twi'?"

The librarian nodded, grinning. "It sure would be interesting to see them side by side!"

"No no, not that sugarcube. What do ya think of Dusk Shine!"

"Oh, Dusk! He seems fine to me. It'll be great to have someone to talk to who reads as many books as I do! Plus we think the same way, and have the same sense of humour... though I suppose that's understandable."

"Now don't go expectin' him to act a certain way, Twi'." AJ grinned slyly and winked at Rarity. "He is his own pony after all."

Twilight laughed. "Point taken! Rarity, what do you think of Elusive? Does he seem nice?"

Twilight knew she had erred the second she saw AJ's face and the '*ohhaynowyou'vegoneanddoomedusall*' look on it.

The unicorn was off, describing every little aspect of the stallion she could recall with the memory and eye for detail of an experienced dressmaker. How fashionable his mane was cut, how well maintained his coat was, how toned his flanks were, how gentlecoltly he was. AJ knew the only way to escape this alive was to try and cut the unicorn off before she built up some steam, but she couldn't get a word in edgewise. Rarity must have been bottling it up, waiting for just this moment to describe every little detail that was Elusive, and the seamstress scarcely seemed to be breathing. Eventually, and the Element of Honesty was loathe to admit that it was with the ease born of long practice, Rarity's ranting became so much white noise... until one small snippet caught her attention.

"...what a fine catch he is; we simply must find him a nice mare!"

Both Twilight and AJ were stunned at the unicorn's declaration. Twilight managed to recover first, disbelief evident in her tone. "'A nice mare?' But Rarity, I thought... well, just the way you were going on about him, it seemed..."

"Seemed what, Twilight?"

"Well... You *know*..."

"Oh my dear, you thought that I...?" began Rarity, waving a hoof in Elusive's general direction.

AJ nodded. "Nail on the head, sugarcube."

"Oh my goodness no! I could never!"

Twilight raised a brow. "Why not? Weren't you just saying how good his mane is?"

"How 'well maintained' his coat is?" added AJ.

"How much of a gentlecolt he is?"

"Y'all were just saying how good his flanks are."

Almost involuntarily, Rarity murmured, "How good his *flanks are*..."

Twilight and AJ laughed. "See what we mean sugarcube?"

Poking a hoof at Rarity, Twilight remarked, "I think we've found him a nice mare already!"

The seamstress swatted the hoof away, blushing furiously. "Twilight, please! I... I couldn't!"

The librarian took her hoof back, concerned. Her fellow unicorn looked distraught, eyes watery and fixed on the floor.

"Rarity?" She scooted closer, putting a hoof around her friend. "What's wrong?"

The mare was silent for a moment before she looked up and smiled half-heartedly. "Blueblood seemed like a gentlecolt as well." Comprehension dawned on their faces.

"Now Ah thought we'd bin' over this sugarcube." AJ shooed Twilight away, knowing that a firm hoof was needed. "Blueblood was about as rotten as a pony can be, true, but ya can't think everypony's gonna act like him; that just ain't fair. That's kinda the downside of trust Rarity; it certainly brings the

other pony closer, but it leaves you wide open to get hurt. But the second you stop trustin' folks sugarcube, well then you ain't no friend o' mine. That there stallion hasn't done a thing to make you think he's anything but a gentlecolt, and I think you should treat him like one."

After a few ragged breaths, Rarity raised her gaze and gave AJ a watery smile. "Words, spoken honestly, have never been so correct. I still don't know girls... But I'll try."

The fillies smiled silently for a moment, before AJ and Twilight drew Rarity into a hug. From behind them came the creaking of an opening door.

...

Slowly, ever so cautiously, the tip of a delicate yellow nose poked itself out of the small gap between door and jamb. Inch by terrified inch it slid, slowly revealing hints of a pink curtain of hair, before a bright turquoise eye found its way out. It slowly swept across the room, taking in AJ, Rarity and Twilight, before widening alarmingly at the sight of Applejack, Elusive and Dusk Shine, and disappearing back into the room with a startled squeak.

After a moment, another subtly different nose poked out. Though the same hue as the previous one, this nose was slightly more angular and prominent. It slowly came out further and further, almost exactly copying the motions of the last nose, until a second, less feminine bright turquoise eye was revealed. After seeing the three fillies, this second cyan orb promptly widened and snapped back into the room with an identical squeak.

The six ponies stared dumbly at the door before them, mouths gaping at the display. Jaws worked soundlessly, brains sputtered incomprehensibly, before AJ managed to sum up the group's feelings.

"That there was one o' the creepiest things Ah've ever seen."

Applejack rose and trotted over to the door. "Come on, we may as well drag 'em out. They sure as hay ain't comin' out on their own."

"Right behind ya sugarcube," seconded AJ, setting her hat firmly on her head.

A white hoof blocked their path. "Applejack, while I'm sure you're quite capable of 'dragging' Butterscotch out of there," said Elusive, sketching quotations in the air, "I think it might be best if I went and talked to him. It might be a touch easier on him that way."

"And I do believe the same thing could be said of Fluttershy," intoned Rarity, motioning for AJ to sit back down. "What with our weekly spa visits and all, I think I might be able to talk to her best."

"The poor things." Elusive trotted over to the door. "I must question Princess Luna's wisdom in pairing those two together. Knowing them, they probably just sat there in silence this entire time!" The stallion opened the door for Rarity.

With a ladylike nod of thanks, the filly trotted over the threshold. As she passed Elusive, Rarity happened to glance at him out of the corner of her eye. His own azure orbs looked right back.

The moment spun out as the two unicorns locked eyes, time unspooling like a bolt of fabric. The world dropped away, awareness reduced to a pair of crystal eyes before them. Reflected in each gaze the ponies saw a deep-seated mistrust and an underlying hurt. *Ah, so he has known pain too... And of course she has, our experiences are near identical. He went to the gala. She had an audience with royalty. They had their dream shatter around them and their night failed as spectacularly as mine.* Conscious thought halted as each pony regarded the other, an instant stretching to a moment stretching to an eon. Rarity searched Elusive's eyes, not even sure what it was she was looking for. She wasn't even sure she found it. But as the moment passed, and the spell was broken, she caught sight of his pure white hoof holding the door open for her.

It appeared Elusive was ready to trust again.

The ponies regarded each other for a moment more, before reaching an intangible but mutual agreement. "Thank you, gentlecolt." The filly inclined her head, but didn't smile. Roan wasn't built in a day... but the longest journey begins with a single trot.

The stallion bowed right back. "You're most welcome, milady."

...

Several tense minutes later, the unicorns returned with two nervous pegasi in tow. After a few halting hellos and some stuttering introductions, Fluttershy and Butterscotch began to relax around the new arrivals. However, both ponies seemed more surprised than anypony else at seeing all their closest friends in this new form.

"Oh m-my..." Butterscotch let his gaze sweep over each of the new fillies in amazement, still not believing his eyes. Contrary to what Elusive and Rarity thought, he and Fluttershy had actually spoken quite a bit when they were locked in together, but while they had come to the conclusion that they and their friends were in fact somehow copies of each other they simply hadn't dwelled on it, moving on to talk about other things. Though they didn't know it, so far they had opened up more to each other than any other pony, even going so far as to talk about their first relationship. It had tugged at Fluttershy's heartstrings to hear Butterscotch talk about Conifer, even though she knew how the story went. And when he hid his eyes behind his short mane in embarrassment even though she already knew they had kissed, well that was cuter than a baby bunny. Eventually the pair had realised how long they'd been talking, but found themselves unable to leave the room, not having prepared themselves for the shock of meeting the new ponies outside.

Now here they were, and Butterscotch realised he'd been staring at the new fillies for far too long. Blushing red, he dropped his gaze and pawed at the floor, Fluttershy doing similar after looking at the colts.

Twilight came to the rescue. "Fluttershy, Butterscotch, it's alright, you don't need to be nervous," she said with a smile. "We're all friends here. Why don't you come over here and talk with us until the next two ponies are ready to come out?" When they still hesitated, she joked, "It's alright, we won't bite!" She grinned wider. "We're not Rainbow!"

Everyone laughed at that, even the two pegasi lifting their heads and smiling softly. They got to their hooves and began trotting over to the group...

...only to be scared out of their wits when the door behind them suddenly slammed open and bounced off the wall with a resounding *CRASH!*

Both Fluttershy and Butterscotch reverted to type, running on autopilot when terrified. Each leapt into the air, screamed, and dived behind the

nearest Apple pony as two multi-coloured blurs shot out of the doorway. There was a moment of confusion as the two gentle ponies found themselves behind unfamiliar camouflage, Fluttershy with an unusually large hiding place and most of Butterscotch's body sticking out from behind AJ.

The two blurs raced around the large hall once, twice, before screeching to a halt at the end of the third lap. Two panting, rainbow-maned ponies hovered in mid-air, wide grins on their faces.

"! A draw! Do you know how *long* it's been since someone could fly as fast as me?" Rainbow Dash could barely contain her excitement, having finally found a worthy training partner.

The colt in question buzzed in mid-air, a bundle of excitement himself. With a roguish grin, he said, "Actually, I do!" The pair fell out of the air laughing.

Applejack eyed the rainbow filly wearily. "Ah shoulda guessed."

The farmcolt's words jolted the two panting ponies out of their mirth, reminding them that they were not alone. The colt sprung to his hooves.

"Oh! Guys! Meet Rainbow Dash! Rainbow Dash, these are the guys."

Dash playfully saluted before turning to the fillies. "Girls, allow me to introduce Rainbow Blitz! Blitz, these are the girls."

The colt bowed dramatically in mid-air, before fluttering to the floor. Most ponies were only now beginning to process what the hay just happened. Fluttershy and Butterscotch had yet to open their eyes.

Dusk spoke up. "Blitz, what in the name of Celestia are you doing out here?" The unicorn looked baffled. "You and Rainbow Dash were only in there for a couple of minutes!"

The pegasus thought for a moment and shrugged. "What can I say?" he smirked. "When you're as fast as we are, things just go by like *that*." He snapped his wings together behind him.

Rainbow Dash leaned over to whisper in Twilight's ear, "Isn't he *awesome*?" The unicorn did a double-take, turning to behold a grinning

Dash staring at Blitz, her face glowing like the setting sun. "He's like, the perfect colt!" With an audible *clop*, the unicorn brought a hoof to her face.

*"I should be surprised,"* she thought, *"but I'm not."*

The chromatic duo were quickly brought up to speed and introduced to everypony. They nodded at what the group had come up with so far, but swiftly lost interest in the details, before splitting off and beginning what promised to be a long, winding and intense discussion of the Wonderbolts.

Twenty minutes passed, and again. The ponies moved back and forth, talking amongst themselves, splitting into groups. Eventually, Fluttershy and Butterscotch started floating around the room with a butterfly that had found its way in through an open window as Blitz and Dash told stories of their flying exploits to each other, loving hearing them as much as telling them. The two farmponies were discussing the ins and outs of which fertiliser was best, surprisingly at loggerheads. Their discussion steadily heated up, until echoes of "Ah say the best is Mooriella's Choice!" and "Well *Ahsay* it's Mootilda's Magic!" could be heard throughout the banquet hall, prompting Butterscotch to try and coax the little butterfly out of Fluttershy's mane. The four unicorns sat in a small huddle off to the side, talking about all things fashionable and magical, although Dusk's fatigue finally caught up with him as he dozed off next to Twilight.

The librarian happened to notice the shadows of the great arched windows splashed across the floor. She frowned, quickly calculating something. "You know, we've been waiting out here for an awfully long time now."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that my dear," remarked Elusive. "After how quickly Blitz and Dash got out of there it's no surprise that this next pony seems to be taking a long time."

Rarity nodded. "Who's in there now, do you think?"

"Well, that's obvious," came the sleepy reply. On the floor, Dusk stretched out all four legs, before sitting back on his haunches and wiping at his eye with a hoof. "Process of elimination. The only ponies left to go are Berry and Pinkie Pie."

The hall fell dead silent. AJ and Applejack whipped around, jaws hanging. All four pegasi fell out of the air. Rarity and Elusive fainted dead away.

Twilight gripped Dusk by the shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "Do you mean to tell me," she said, speaking slowly, "That there are two pink, party-loving, alligator-owning ponies in there?"

His still sluggish mind failed to comprehend. "Yes, of course I-" He cut himself off, horror dawning on his features. "Oh sweet Celestia no."

...

As one, all the ponies sat perfectly still and watched the door in front of them. Ever since Dusk had revealed the identities of the final two to meet each other, the group had gotten more and more tense, the speedsters pacing the hall back and forth, the farmponies competing to name the most types of Apples to distract themselves. Slowly, they had all fallen silent, and taken to just watching the panelled, oaken portal into insanity. Each pony considered the pastel pink horrors that could be taking place beyond, a whirlwind of Berry sense and Pinkie Pie swears, cupcakes and the dreaded oatmeal. They all knew just how much effort those two put into throwing parties, especially when they met somepony new. Twilight and Dusk had been the last to experience a welcome party from the craziest pony in Ponyville, be they colt or filly, and the scholarly unicorns well remembered just how intense the experience had been. What would it be like if Berry and Pinkie both planned a welcoming party for each other... *at the same time!* Would Celestia have to step in? Would Celestia *join*in? Could the nation of Equestria, nay, the fabric of space-time itself even handle such a monumental and potentially cataclysmic event? The passage of time went unnoticed as everypony thought more and more dour thoughts; they had to have been waiting in the banquet hall for over an hour now.

Twilight's frayed nerves snapped. "I can't take it anymore!" She sprung to her hooves, staring wide-eyed at the door. "What's taking them so long? What are they planning in there!"

As if on cue, the door unlatched and swung a few inches outward.

Everypony gasped, rising to their hooves. Some covered their eyes. For ten long seconds, they all waited for something cataclysmic to happen. When nothing did, they only grew more fearful.

Somepony cleared their throat. AJ, determination blazing in her eyes, strode forward. Applejack joined her almost immediately. Together, the two



blonde ponies reached the door, and kicked it wide open, revealing the occupants.

Pinkie and Berry sat in the centre of the room, scarcely two feet from each other. Each bore an unreadable expression on their face as they looked directly at the other. Before everyponies' stupefied gaze, they blinked in perfect unison.

Everypony jumped at least a foot in the air, the pegasi staying there, as Pinkie and Berry both threw their hooves up in the air and collapsed backward with a cheer.

"Wow! That was super-duper-luper awesome! I've never had a staring contest that long before!"

Beaming from ear to ear, Berry sprung forward. "Neither have I! Everyone eventually gives up, even Gummy! You must be the most stareriffic super spectacular starrer ever!"

"Oh nonononono!" Pinkie shook her head. "The best starrer is Fluttershy!"

Berry sprung into the air, gasping humungously. "Oh my gosh I can't believe I forgot about Butterscotch! He can stare *really* good!"

Pinkie nodded. "We don't mess with them!"

"They're the stare masters!"

"They've mastered the stares!"

"Ahem..." A heavily accented voice broke in. "Excuse me haystack," said Applejack, "but... do y'all mean to tell us that this whole time you two've bin' havin' a starin' contest?"

Berry looked at his long time friend, grinning hugely. "Ah-huh!" Pinkie and Berry sprung to their hooves and bounced on the spot, too excited to stay still.

Pinkie suddenly frowned. Cupping a hoof around her mouth, she whispered, "Pssst! Berry! Why are they all just staring at us like that?"

# Chapter 6

Sunlight streamed in through the great arching windows of Canterlot's banquet hall, catching the dancing motion of countless dust motes frolicking through the air, washing the entire room in a warm golden glow. Such was the gift of Princess Celestia.

A small group of ponies a dozen strong sat inside, quietly talking amongst themselves. Were one to walk into the hall at that point no pony could fault them for rubbing their eyes in disbelief, thinking they were seeing double. They very nearly were. Seated in a circle were six young mares, and directly next to each were six young stallions, all looking so alike as to be uncanny.

Most conspicuous however, was the pair of pink ponies, seemingly incapable of standing still. The two were bouncing on the spot, yammering at each other at a speed high indecipherable, wound by some perpetual internal spring. This very pair had nearly caused the remaining ponies to have a group heart attack not a few minutes ago.

"Oh come on Mister Mopeypants! It wasn't *that* scary!" said the pink stallion, prodding a grumbling unicorn.

Dusk looked irritably at his most unpredictable friend. "Are you *crazy*? It was downright terrifying! It was worse than the first time I met Gummy in the bath!"

Fluttershy and Butterscotch had been far and away the most frightened. "Did you r-really mean to s-scare us like that, P-Pinkie?" asked the yellow filly, still slightly hidden behind her mane.

"Well, we didn't MEAN to," explained the party-pony, "But we knew it was going to happen! We got a combo! Knocky knees, itchy hoof, ear flap! It means, 'I'm about to terrify everypony in the room!'"

Butterscotch spoke up. "Can't you s-stop a c-c-combo from happening?"

Berry looked puzzled for a second before he shrugged. "I've never really tried! I just let 'em happen!"

The pegasus stallion swallowed and sat up, his trembling easing. "We n-need to find some sort of c-c-c-combo-breaker."

Pinkie and Berry overheard him and, to everypony's confusion, found his statement highly entertaining. Both leapt to their hooves and shouted, "C-C-C-COMBO-BREAKER!"

Opening his mouth and pointing a hoof, Dusk fully intended to question his eccentric friend, before noticing everypony else shaking their heads at him. With a sigh, the unicorn resigned himself yet *again* to simply, as Blitz put it, 'go with it'.

...

Luna trotted beside her sister, the grand doors of the banquet hall looming ever closer before them. The younger Alicorn kept her gaze firmly fixed on Celestia, a quizzical look on her face.

"What is it Luna?"

She wasn't surprised that Celestia knew she was being observed, but was still curious as to her methods. "How did you know?"

With a short laugh, the Princess of the Sun turned to face her sibling. "I could almost hear you thinking." She smirked. "Besides, you're *never* this quiet."

Luna smiled weakly at the joke, but moments later grew thoughtful once more. "I just don't understand what you're doing, Tia."

The white Alicorn stretched her wings, eyes impatiently flicking to the banquet hall doors and back again. "What do you mean?"

Luna shrugged. "Well, you've always liked to play your jokes." The purple Alicorn smiled nostalgically. "Father *did* say it was genetic."

Remembering those very words, Celestia let out a musical laugh. "Remember when he tried to teach us how to jump out from underneath a bridge to startle ponies, like the trolls in the stories?"

Glowering, Luna nodded. Oh yes, she remembered. She had been pulling lily pads out of her mane for hours. "In any case, this all seems rather elaborate. Why are you going to such lengths just for a slightly amusing jest? And how will the Elements of Harmony react when they find out?"

Celestia's face fell as she regarded her sister. "You know more than they do, my dear Luna, but even you do not know my full plan. I will tell them all that they need to know and see them off to Ponyville. Then you and I shall have a talk."

...

With their typical groan, the banquet hall doors opened, aglow in golden magic. The Solar Sisters entered and everypony respectfully bowed.

Long since used to this reaction, Celestia motioned for them to stand. "Well, I'm glad to see you're getting along. Did you all enjoy meeting one another?" Now back among her subjects, the Alicorn once again had to work to keep the amusement out of her voice.

Without fail, everypony glanced at their gender opposite, caught the other glancing back, and immediately looked elsewhere.

"Well..." Dusk Shine struggled for words. "How do I put this? It was... erm..."

"...interesting," finished Twilight.

Luna managed to convert a giggle into a passable cough.

"Yes," said Celestia, "I'm sure it was." There was a moment of silence as her eyes ranged over each of the ponies, taking in the scene before her. Her gaze misted over slightly as all the amusement drained out of her and she remembered just what she was doing and why. For a moment, it was all she could do not to hang her head and let her wings flop by her sides.

They were all looking at her, confused. *Come on Celestia, hold it together.* "In any case, I'm sure you all have questions. Hopefully I can put a lot of them to rest now. Yes: you are each other." She gestured to the closest pair. "Elusive, you are Rarity. However, Rarity, you are also Elusive."

This caused some consternation among the ponies, particularly Dusk Shine and Twilight Sparkle. Even though they had spent the greater portion of their time together discussing just how they were connected, how they came to be each other, hearing it out loud, from the Princess herself no less, eliminated any doubt. But in the deepest, most scientifically and rationally entrenched corners of their minds, they still couldn't quite let it go. It... it simply wasn't possible; there had to be a reasonable explanation for it!

"But, your Majesty..." Heads turned at the sound of the cultured voice, to behold a slightly frazzled, though still pristinely groomed, white stallion. "I mean, surely... Which one of us came first? Who is the real... us? The real *me*?"

This gave the Alicorn pause. *How to answer...* "Both of you," she declared, "and neither of you. You are one and the same, two halves to a whole."

Glancing at Rarity, AJ said, "But Princess, are we still our own pony? I mean, can we still each make our own decisions, even though we're kinda... the same... ish? Whoa-Nelly this is hard to keep track of."

Smiling benevolently, the Princess replied, "Of course you are, my little pony! Free will is something that no magic can touch, and each individual is unique."

Everypony slumped in relief at hearing it straight from the Alicorn's mouth. Nothing could be more terrifying than a loss of self.

"Now, as for the Elements," continued Celestia, "As you know, Luna and I have been studying some of Canterlot's most ancient and powerful scrolls. Over the past few hours, we have also been subtly observing each of your magical vibrations. From what we can deduce, you are still all Elements of Harmony. The fact that there are now twelve of you does not affect how powerful the Elements are; they all draw from the same wellspring of

energy. However, all of you are now needed to manifest the full power of Harmony." Sighs of relief echoed; Equestria was still protected.

"Umm... Princess?"

Celestia smiled. "Yes, Twilight? Do you have a question?"

The unicorn straightened. "While this is all very fascinating... How did it happen?" The unicorn looked perplexed, as if there was a connection she couldn't quite make. "Where did these stallions come from?" An instant later a rainbow trail burned itself into Twilight's corneas and she found her vision obscured by a frenetic cyan blur.

Poking her chest with an accusing hoof, Rainbow Blitz hovered before her. "Waddaya mean 'where did *they* come from'? Who says *we* came from anywhere! We were here*first*!"

Rainbow Dash, nostrils flaring, spread her wings to take after him and put the stallion in his place, but before she could even launch herself into the air, a lavender blur swatted Blitz's hoof away.

"Not only does *Twilight* say that we came from elsewhere, which should be more than enough," said Dusk Shine, glaring at the pegasus, "*I* say we came from elsewhere. This is their world, and *they* were here first." The unicorn stepped slightly in front of Twilight, shielding her from Blitz.

There was a tense moment of uncomfortable silence. Twilight couldn't take her eyes off Dusk, the stallion defending her from her accuser. It wasn't that she couldn't take care of herself, but still, the gesture... Heat crept up her face. For his own part, Dusk was still glaring at Blitz, the pegasus glaring right back at him. Upon seeing his friend's strong reaction, Blitz had realised that perhaps he had gone a bit far, but his pride would never allow him to admit it. His mind raced, considering ways to escape this situation with pride intact.

*Got it!* "How the hay do you figure that!" he cried, throwing his hooves in the air. "This is all so weird! I have no idea what the *hay*s going on!"

Livid, Elusive hissed, "Blitz!" The pegasus turned. "Not only is that no way to treat a lady, but that is no way to speak in front of *Princesses*!"

Finally, Blitz appeared repentant, his gaze flicking over to the silently watching Alicorns. "Oh, uh... Sorry your highnesses. I guess I got carried away..."

Luna waved a hoof. "Do not let it concern you. Celestia and I have been around long enough to have heard far worse." Unconsciously, both Alicorn's gaze slid over to Twilight and Dusk, recalling their first two words to each other. Who knew the bookworms had it in them?

"Quite right," agreed Celestia, nodding. She turned to her students. "Dusk, Twilight, how did you conclude that it is the stallions that are not native to this world?"

Relaxing once more, Dusk explained, "Simple logical deduction, Princess. We realised that since you didn't recognise any of my group..." He trailed off, gesturing vaguely towards the stallions.

"...But you *did* recognise us," continued Twilight, nodding towards the fillies, "Our group must still have been in the same world, whereas their group travelled *here*."

During the explanation Blitz had quietly slinked back to his position next to Rainbow Dash, going to sit next to her as he had been. In truth, he felt a connection with this filly that went beyond being the only flier in Equestria who could match him for speed. *No, not filly...* He regarded her for a moment, taking her in. The pegasus frequently 'checked out' other fillies, almost unconsciously, but this was different. Rainbow Dash was the type of filly that he wanted to look at, but not to 'check out'. She was above checking out. *She's above being a filly... She's a mare.* But he noticed that now she took care to stay a couple extra hooflengths away from him, and kept shooting him dirty looks out of the corner of her eyes. Apparently his stunt before had ruffled a few feathers. *Slick move Casanova.* He refocused his attention as the Princess spoke up.

"Exactly! Well reasoned, my prized pupils. Does anypony else have any questions?"

"Well, um... Yes, Princess. I mean, if it's alright with you."

Celestia smiled warmly. "Of course Butterscotch, what is it?"

The stallion blushed and ducked his head at being addressed by the Princess. "Well, um... What happens to us now? If we aren't from this world, I mean, even though it's the exact same as ours, what do we do? Can we go back? Or should we stay here? I'll miss Angel Bunny terribly..."

Elusive gasped dramatically, terror in his eyes. "SWEETIE BELLE!" All the stallions suddenly looked varying degrees of uncomfortable, only now recalling the loved ones they might never see again.

Thankfully, this was something Celestia had planned long and hard to take care of. "You don't have to worry about never seeing those you care for again! Though I suggest you all sit down, this is a rather complicated explanation and may come as something of a shock..."

For some time, the princess spun a tale of dimensional law and physical theory, always using words so everypony could understand. She explained how two separate ponies could be the same being, how they could exist in two different places, lead two different (though incredibly similar) lives and even the consequences of being placed in a different world. Finally, she sat back and heaved a great sigh. "And that is everything."

Applejack closed his eyes, still trying to wrap his head around the concept. "So, your hahness, what your sayin' is... when we came t' this world, our world... disappeared?"

Wide-eyed, Celestia shook her head. "No, not at all Applejack! It is not that your world ceased to exist, but rather you ceased to exist in your world. It is as if you were never born there, never existed there. No pony would know you, and therefore no pony would miss you." At the downcast eyes, she continued, "However the silver lining to this rain cloud is that due to the severing of your ties in that world, you have gained new ones here. Have none of you noticed how natural this place feels?"

All the stallions traded glances, silently communicating. Dusk shrugged, saying, "I'd felt *something*, but I thought that was just me."

The Princess nodded. "You probably feel it particularly strongly due to your ties to magic, Dusk Shine."

"I feel it! I feel it!" cried Berry, jumping on the spot. "A super duper, fuzzy wuzzy warmy feeling in my tummy!"



"I had noticed a certain... *je ne sais quois* in the air," nodded Elusive.

Applejack shrugged. "This place, it doesn't feel weird 'tall, it feels..." He trailed off, grasping for words.

Looking up at the blonde stallion, AJ smiled warmly and said, "Like home, sugarcube?"

The stallion smiled right back. "Bingo, haystack."

Celestia smiled warmly at this. "Dusk Shine, Elusive, Berry Bubble, Applejack, Butterscotch and Rainbow Blitz." All the stallions stood straighter, felt happier, smiled more broadly.

"Welcome to Equestria." Her smile widened, a warm glow extending from her body. She was the avatar of the sun itself, and despite some of her un-Princess-like tendencies, she loved each and every one of the ponies she shone down upon. "Think of this as a new beginning, a new chance. A glorious new day! Welcome to our world. Welcome to your new home." A smiling Luna joined in, manifesting the power of the moon in a pure white light. The magic of the two Alicorns flowed together, joined as one, before pulsing outwards in a blinding flash, showering everypony in the room with magical luminescence. As warming sunlight and soothing moonlight streamed over them, streamed through them, each of the stallions felt more than heard a heartfelt statement from each of the Princesses, overlapping as one.

"*Welcome.*"

In an instant, all the tension drained out of the room, all animosity forgotten. Berry and Pinkie actually stood still, simply drinking in the sensation. Dash smiled warmly at Blitz and moved a little bit closer to nudge his shoulder, forgiving his earlier transgression. Dusk and Twilight, particularly attuned to the magical sensations of the Princesses' blessing, happened to glance at each other. They held each other's gaze for a breath longer than they had before.

Eventually the light died down and the Princesses stood waiting once more. Looking around, Twilight noticed that everypony seemed content, with nothing left to say. Facing her mentor, she asked, "Princess... What now?"

...

The group of ponies strolled through the halls of Canterlot, led by the Princesses themselves. They were heading towards the private royal air strip, where Princess Celestia had said their transportation back to Ponyville would be waiting. At the front of the group, Twilight thought back on the Princess' words.

...

*"I'm sending all of you back to Ponyville," declared Celestia, looking between each of the ponies. "I want you all to help your fellow Element get settled in." Turning to the stallions, she asked, "What new career would you each like to pursue?" Only then did it occur to each of the colts that since their job would already be taken, they'd have to find a new profession. Even Berry was stumped at this, none of them able to think of anything they'd rather do than their old jobs.*

*The Princess smiled mischievously. "From the looks of things I assume that none of can think of anything else you'd rather do?" She got some miserable nods in return. "Well, it's a good thing I've arranged for you all to keep your old positions!" All eyes snapped to Celestia, filled with hope and confusion.*

*The Alicorn explained herself. "Applejack, Rarity, you both have jobs that would benefit directly from having another set of hooves around, don't you? As do you, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie? Well, why don't we just get each of the stallions to work with you?"*

*This was the perfect solution for almost everypony; another set of strong hooves on the farm, someone to help with the difficult medical procedures that would be so much easier with a second pony around, even someone to help think of new recipes! Rarity, though she took great pains not to show it, was the most hesitant; however, she was not about to let down the Princess herself! Happy agreements were heard all around.*

*"Princess, what about me and Dusk?" Rainbow Blitz looked mildly concerned; he'd never admit it, but he had come to like the weather patrol. "Neither of us have a say in how our jobs are run."*

*Celestia grinned. "Not quite correct, Rainbow Blitz! Twilight Sparkle gets her weekly stipend directly from me, and her pay as librarian of Ponyville is regulated by the government of Ponyville, which answers to Canterlot. It will be a simple matter to double both. As for your job as weather pony, the weather patrol was created by the Equestrian military and serves as a civilian branch. I can just put in the word with the general of the Pegasus division and the problem will be solved!"*

*Rainbow Blitz leapt into the air in delight. Yes! I get to work with her!*  
*"Thank you Princess!"*

*She laughed musically. "Think nothing of it, my little pony!"*

...

Twilight broke out of her reverie as the Princess started speaking. "Now, I want each of you to use the ride back to Ponyville to go over some details with your opposite, how you will work together and such. The guards will be moving quickly, so you will have to stay on the chariots to be able to hear each other over the wind."

Blitz and Dash shared a sour glance; they wouldn't even get to fly!

Celestia's choice of words had piqued Dusk Shine's interest. "'Chariots', Princess?"

As the group broke out into the sunlight of the air strip, the Princess nodded. "Yes, chariots!" Everypony was flabbergasted at the sight before them. Sitting on the air strip was not a large, communal, carriage-like transport, but rather six, small, private, *two-pony* chariots.

The Princess continued as if she'd never been interrupted. "Not even the royal carriage would have been large enough for all twelve of you!" Again she felt the urge to giggle incessantly. *Hold it in Celestia.* "This will give you all some private time alone with your fellow element to discuss things. I wish you all a safe journey, and look forward to hearing how each of you adjust to your new life."

# Chapter 7

The six golden chariots receded into the bright blue sky, winging their way towards an unknown future. The royal sisters watched them go, each thinking their own private thoughts. The two stood there for some time, gazing into the sky, looking out over Canterlot. It was surreal, sometimes, to look out over the young ponies, and try to imagine each of their lives, their worries, their fears. Almost too much to imagine, and Luna didn't like to if she could help it. Eventually, the younger Alicorn started moving from hoof to hoof, looking to Celestia and back into the castle.

Celestia herself simply stood there, perfectly still, her slowly waving mane the only feature betraying her as a living thing and not part of the castle statuary. Less often than she would care to admit did she have time to simply stand, and think, and watch. Of course, she had more time to herself these days, what with Luna taking more and more of her royal duties back again, but still... Nothing gave her joy quite like seeing the ponies of Equestria living their lives, the ups and downs, losing, winning, laughing, loving. It was at these times that she thought her deepest, most private thoughts, the thoughts of Tia the sister and not of Celestia, the Princess. It was also at these times that she felt the weight of her age pressing down on her. Immortality, or at least an inability to age and die, was a curious thing. Celestia had always tried to avoid thinking about it; it tended to give even one such as her a headache with its technical impossibility. Yet she and her family were living, breathing examples that it worked. As to how it worked... Well, that just made her feel old again.

And she did. At that moment, with Luna at her side and the Elements dwindling in the distance, she felt old. So incredibly old. She'd made so many mistakes, so many things that could have been done differently, that could have worked differently... Standing by her side was one of her greatest failures. Freshly imprisoned in the Royal Gardens was yet another. If she were to keep count, the single most common phrase to pass through her mind would undoubtedly be 'What if?' Millennia of memories, countless ponies, good and bad. Had she been the right ruler for them? Had she done her best? Every mistake was a crack in the armour that shielded her from insanity, a window into the world of failure and misery. The very magic

and longevity that caused her family to become the caretakers of Equestria also caused such a high rate of insanity in her bloodline, leading to so many needless deaths... So many lost lights. Every mention of her father, every recollection of his cheesy grin and booming laugh, was a test of her resolve. She had passed it today, more from a lack of choice than anything else, before Luna and the Elements. But Sun and Moon... When they had lost him, a victim of his own mind, and so soon after Mother... Celestia often wondered if that was what had started her sister's long, slow descent into Nightmares.

At that moment, with the weight of her crown pressing down on her, with the weight of her age and her memories and her powers, with the weight of a billion ponies and more, with the weight of grief and with the weight of a nation, with the weight of the sun itself pressing down upon her, Celestia found she couldn't hold it in. Her knees buckled, her head spun, her vision swam. She almost fell. Hot tears started leaking down her face.

The Alicorn suddenly reached out and grasped Luna, pulling her into a fierce embrace. She held the Princess of the Night tightly, and buried her muzzle in her waving, star-studded locks.

"I love you Luna. I love you very, very much."

...

Though Luna was still shooting Celestia odd looks, the sisters eventually retired to their chambers to discuss the day's events.

"Alright Tia," started Luna, completely at ease in the privacy of their sanctum. "Spill it. What are you up to?"

Celestia was very glad she had gotten her minor breakdown out of her system; it made this all much easier.

Easier... But not quite easy.

"Luna, you know I have made many... mistakes, over the years." No one knew Celestia better than Luna, and she could tell just how much pain was hidden in that slight hitch in her sister's speech. "So many issues that could have gone either way... But to this day I know my single biggest mistake and regret." Luna leaned forwards, nodding encouragingly.

Celestia sighed. "It is a shame that you are not going to agree with me, but you still have some growing to do, my little sister."

Luna, as most siblings would, bristled at being spoken down to like that. "Growing? I'm thousands of years old Celestia; *you've* been there to count them! How could I possibly not understand your mistake, whatever it is?"

In contrast to her sister's agitation, Celestia calmly moved across the room, her horn aglow as she removed her crown and ceremonial trappings. Moving slowly and easily, she settled down onto her bed, across from Luna's. "You know as well as I that we age differently to the mortal ponies, Luna. By the standards of Alicorns, you are close, but you are not quite a mare yet."

Luna snorted indignantly, "Hmph!", and looked away. Most annoying was that Celestia was correct.

The Princess of the Sun sighed and looked up, gazing at some ineffable thing beyond Luna's comprehension. "Luna, what have I always said is the greatest power, gift and curse?"

"Love." She didn't have to think about it, the answer was automatic. Celestia broke out *that* old chestnut at least every other week. Her tone must have carried more of her thoughts than she intended, as Celestia laughed drily.

"Yes, love." She looked back at Luna. "You have probably heard it enough that you don't think about it anymore, but I truly and deeply mean that when I say it. No magic is more powerful, beautiful and terrible than love. It can elevate the most simple of ponies to the highest of heights... And it can tear them right back down again. You know this."

Luna shook her head, no. Celestia looked at her in mild disbelief.

"You truly do not know the powers of love? Mother and Father never told you?" Again, Luna shook her head, more intrigued now than anything else.

Shaking off her surprise, Celestia said, "Very well, I shall give you the abridged version, as the sands of the hourglass dwindle." Settling herself comfortably, Celestia cleared her throat. "This is the story, or at least the outline of the story, that Mother and Father told me when I was a foal, and

asked them why we as Alicorns were so different. Where did we come from?"

The Princess of the Night sat at rapt attention, completely focused on her sister. She had not even been aware this information existed, story form or no!

"In the beginning," began Celestia, closing her eyes, "And I do mean the very beginning, there was simply a land and a sea. Nothing else. No hills, no valleys, no rivers, no mountains. No trees. No animals. No light. No life. Except for one." Celestia spoke softly, as if this story was very dear to her... Likely it was. Luna had to crane her neck to hear.

"He was an Earth pony, and he was the first pony. The original pony. *The* pony. And his name was Sol." The Alicorn said this in a whisper, and Luna realised she had just been told one of her family's most private secrets. "He lived entirely alone, in the dark, with no friends and no enemies. Nothing. Just him. And yet, he loved."

Luna blinked, already confused. "But Tia, there are already holes in your story a million hooves wide! Where did Sol come from? What did he love?"

Celestia smiled softly, instantly easing her sister's consternation. "Those are two questions that I do believe every Alicorn to ever live has lost sleep over. But back to the story..." She coughed into her hoof. "Sol was filled with love, irrational, unconventional, and entirely unconditional. Over time, it changed him. Each day he arose, stronger, faster, more powerful. Eventually, he found that through his own willpower, he could create the smallest amounts of light. Just enough to illuminate himself and a small area around him, but it was enough." She smiled. "He loved what he saw."

"As his love grew, so too did his powers, each day allowing him to see further and further, lighting up more and more of his world, until eventually he found he couldn't see darkness anymore. No matter which direction he looked, no matter how far he galloped, there was only light, and beauty. So... he galloped. For days on end, the light never failing as his magic sustained it, travelling the length and breadth of the land. Finally, he came to the ocean. Sol had known only hard, unyielding earth his entire life, however long it had been. The ocean was simply another miracle for him to adore. Fighting his own trepidation, he trotted right up to the waters edge, and got the fright of his life as he saw another pony looking back at him. A

pony with a horn glowing like the sun." At this, Celestia laughed, loudly. "It took him two weeks to figure out it was his reflection."

Luna giggled.

"He stayed by the waters edge, unsure of what to do with himself. He had been everywhere, done everything. His light touched the horizon. What was there left to do? So he let the light fade a little, just enough to see, and slept. When he woke, he saw yet another surprise waiting for him in the water: the pony looking back at him now had a pair of wings. Again, another week to realise it was his reflection, each day finding himself growing larger and larger.

"Over time, he learnt how to use his wings, move them around, finally to flap them properly. Eventually he found he could use them to leap great distances, even to hover. So he began to wonder: why not fly? For months, maybe years, Sol tried to teach himself every subtle aspect of flight, learning from scratch as no pony has ever done since. He had all the time in the world to do it, so each day he picked himself up and kept going. Finally, he was powerful enough, and confident enough, to fly the length of the ocean. So he did. But then what?

"He had crossed the lands. He had crossed the seas. What was there left to do? For eons he was alone, always considering, thinking, where he could go from there, his powers stronger each time he awoke. One day, upon seeing his reflection in the water once more, he had an idea, the perfect solution to his problem, the fruit of his musings: why not try to make another pony? A friend, a companion, a playmate? Someone to explore the mysteries of life and the universe with?"

"But," interrupted Luna, wonderment in her voice, "He couldn't do that, right? Sol couldn't create life. That's impossible, even by Alicorn standards. Creating life from nothing simply can't be done."

"Exactly," agreed Celestia, nodding. "So he didn't create it from scratch, he used himself as a guide. Using his own body as almost something of an instruction manual, Sol focussed all of his powers, unimaginable even when compared to our own combined abilities, on creating just a single pony. Suffice it to say..." Celestia grinned at this. "He overshot his target a little. When Sol opened his eyes and looked up, he saw a hundred ponies, of all shapes and sizes, stretched out before him. His jaw dropped, it was



all he could do to stay standing. None of them had wings, or horns, but they were ponies! Living breathing ponies!

"And so he set to work caring for them, teaching them, changing the shape of the land itself to suit them. They felt hunger and thirst as he did not, so he altered the water to suit them. He used his own life force to fuel the creation of plants, and trees. The ponies, under his guidance, planted them and cared for them, cultivating a garden, then a copse, then a forest. They built a village, played and danced and laughed, and everything was good. That is, until one day, when a very small problem appeared."

"Yes? What was it?"

Celestia smiled warmly, a loving, calming expression. "...a Foal. Suddenly, following one of the mares around everywhere she went was a little filly. No pony knew quite what to make of it, least of all Sol himself. He certainly hadn't made her, so where had she come from? All of the ponies of the village looked upon Sol as a leader, almost like a father, so the mare eventually came to him for help. He learned of what had happened between the mare and one of the stallions, and he smiled. He smiled so brightly that it was too much for the other ponies, his light burning brighter and brighter. So he cast his light out, into the heavens, where it sits even today. At that very moment, the secrets and power of love and life were passed on, and King Light, the first Alicorn and the giver of light itself, was born."

...

For a long time, both sisters sat silently. Luna finally spoke up.

"Wow."

Celestia nodded her mute concurrence. Even now, the story gave her tingles.

"Love... created everything..." Luna's face scrunched up as she tried to wrap her head around it. It was no use. "I don't get it..."

"In truth, Luna," whispered Celestia, leaning closer, "Neither do I!"

Both of the Alicorns fell back laughing at the silliness of it all, revelling in the moment. This was life! This was all that their ancestor had struggled to create!

Celestia calmed as she recalled the other half of the story. This would not be so fun.

"That, my dear sister, is the power of love to create. But love can also destroy..."

Luna fell silent, listening once more to her sister. This was turning out to be quite the discussion!

"When you were just a little filly, there were only five Alicorns left. You, I, Mother, Father, and one other. He was the last of his family and indeed the last Alicorn not of our line. His name..." Celestia smiled deeply, looking away. "His name was Harmony, the guardian of magic itself."

Luna almost shot to her hooves. "Harmony! As in 'Elements of'?"

"Yes, the Elements of Harmony. He actually created them, using his own mastery over the arcane, harnessing his own feelings towards the ponies we watched over, towards us, the closest thing to a family he had, but mostly..." Celestia trailed off. Luna was stunned to notice she was blushing. "But mostly harnessing his feelings towards me." She sighed. "Harmony loved me."

Luna gasped, shocked at the scandal of it. "But how could that have been acceptable? Wouldn't you two have been related?"

Celestia shook her head. "No, our families had divided generations and generations ago. His feelings towards me were perfectly acceptable." Her blush deepened. "After a time, so were my feelings for him."

Jaw dropping, Luna said, "You fell for him?"

Looking into the middle distance once more, Celestia nodded. "Completely, head over hooves in love. It was perfect. It was beautiful."

There was an awkward silence as Luna worked up the courage to ask the next question. "What happened?"

For the first time since beginning their talk, Celestia looked truly saddened, and Luna immediately regretted asking. "Sister, if you don't wish to discuss it..."

"No." Celestia drew herself up. "You need to know. You have a *right* to know.

"Over time, our love grew, we became closer and closer. Mother and Father actually began whispering of new foals, if you can believe it. But as time passed, things between us... changed. Harmony changed.

"At first, we had bonded over our love of the ponies we cared for, earth, unicorn and pegasi. He had even crafted the Elements after some of the best traits we saw among the mortal ponies, though he couldn't resist making his own Element, magic, the most prevalent." Celestia's features shifted into a wry grin. "He always was a little self-absorbed, but I loved him anyway. Despite that though, his favourite Element had always been laughter.

"Over time, as Mother and Father passed more royal duties on to me, our time together grew less. Though he was magic itself, a powerful being, his family had long since split off from royalty, not wishing for the responsibility. He accepted our growing separation with good graces... or so I thought." Celestia's gaze lowered as she sighed. Making a visible effort to collect herself, she continued, "His love for me became... almost too strong, overbearing. He couldn't bear to part with me. His love began to consume him. I tried my best to help him, but I had so little time to devote to it. So..." She sighed. "So he began to play little jokes on the ponies to amuse himself. Nothing catastrophic, simply little jests, toying with them. But eventually they grew worse. He used his magic more recklessly, more irresponsibly, every day. And it changed him.

"Each time I saw him, he looked like a different being. I've always wondered when it was he was an Alicorn, and when he became something... else. Soon, his tricks escalated. He truly came to be a danger to the mortal ponies. I left my duties with Mother and Father for a day, and went to see him, to hopefully put all of this behind us.

"But he had grown bitter, and angry. At that point he-" She stopped, her voice cracking. Even now, after so, so long, it still hurt. "At that point he didn't love me anymore. He wasn't the Harmony I loved. He had become

the very embodiment of everything he ever *wasn't*, everything we had ever stood against. He had become Discord itself."

Luna truly jumped to her hooves, disbelief etched into every line of her body. But she knew Celestia couldn't be lying about something like this. This was... amazing! Astonishing! Utterly, completely and totally unbelievable! "You... You almost had foals with *Discord*!"

Celestia nodded miserably, her wings drooping. In the distance, echoing off the halls of Canterlot, could be heard the faintest clattering of hooves.

The younger Alicorn managed to sit back down, still shocked. "What happened?"

"We fought," muttered Celestia, "We fought for days and nights on end. Sometimes with words, sometimes with spells, sometimes with our bare hooves. Or whatever he had by that point."

Luna was fascinated. "How did you win?"

Celestia laughed, loudly and completely without humour. "Win? I don't think I won. If I had, Harmony would be at my side, and I would be telling this silly story to our foals. No..." She shook her head. "I didn't win."

The echoing hoofbeats continued to grow louder, though still just barely under the notice of both Alicorns. They seemed to be drawing closer. "Well... how did you imprison him?" pressed Luna, stunned at all of the day's new developments. "The legends say that both of us used the Elements of Harmony, but I've always known that wasn't the case."

Celestia surprised her yet again. "Actually Luna, in this case the legends are surprisingly accurate. It took the Elements, my power and yours to overcome Discord. At one point I managed to distract him long enough to wrest the Elements from his grasp. The Elements, as you know, are powered above all other things by love. At first I thought I'd simply taken his weapons away, that I'd never be able to use them, as he had taken my love with him, and destroyed it when he turned into... that. But he made the mistake of threatening you, my darling little sister, and that was all it took. All my feelings, all my love for you." She smiled, and reached out to rest her hoof on Luna's. The two sisters shared a moment together.

"It was more than enough to activate the Elements, so I directed their power towards him... And froze him. I couldn't destroy him, I just couldn't, so I locked him away for millennia." Her gaze wandered over to the window, looking out over the Canterlot gardens. "I still wonder, sometimes."

Finally, Luna happened to notice the echoing of hooves on masonry in the distance. "Sister, do you hear that?"

Celestia either hadn't heard her or had ignored her. "When I locked Discord away, his final act was to take a part of the Elements with him, something that he has long since destroyed. He took their love away."

"Their love'? Is that even possible?"

Celestia shrugged. "He was magic itself. Even I don't know all of his secrets, the extent of his might. But in any case, the Elements were a shadow of what they once were, now drawing on the love inherent in a pony to power them. That is why the Elements themselves have been manifested so little over the centuries; they require not only the trait for which they are named, but powerful love to work. I have only ever been able to use them once since, they are just too painful a memory for me.

"So I have had to call upon other ponies to use them. It has not always been easy, and there have been some less than perfect matches, but Equestria has survived. However..." Celestia drew a shuddering breath, and Luna moved to comfort her. This was obviously a very powerful moment for her. "Every pony that has ever manifested the Elements, and that includes myself, has been unable to maintain love. Marriages have ended, coltfriends and fillyfriends have scattered, even some families, though thank the Moon and Sun that those are less frequent. Over the years, I have been forced to bar so many ponies from love... Too many."

Now the hoofbeats truly were recognisable, their staccato rhythm the background noise to Celestia's confessions.

"And now, I had to do it to Twilight and her friends as well... My prized pupil. I couldn't. I wouldn't. I had to draw the line somewhere. So I studied. I studied for hours, days, years, always learning, always seeking. Finally, I thought I had what I wanted."

Luna, scarcely daring to breath, simply asked, "What?"

Celestia turned her head. "A spell. A spell inspired by King Light, using the ancient magical laws, and brought on by Discord, the avatar of magic itself. A spell to create love."

The hoofbeats seemed to be in the very hall outside now, but Luna couldn't have cared less if they were thundering around her skull. "To create love!" she exclaimed in awe.

"Yes," nodded Celestia, "To create love. Those stallions are the products of it. They are not from another world, universe, dimension, or any such nonsense. If such a thing is possible it is beyond even Discord. I had them brought into being, created them from the very sympathy of our current Elements. They are copies of each other... But not quite. They are all still independent, living, breathing ponies. It is my deepest and most sincere wish that they all find love with each other, and break the curse of the Elements. In fact, I have done everything in my power to make it so."

"But... but this is astounding!" Luna was absolutely gobsmacked, stunned at everything she had heard, her mind running itself ragged trying to comprehend everything. She settled upon the first question she could think of. "How do you even know it will work?"

For the first time since the Elements had left, Celestia truly smiled. She smiled widely, and Luna felt her sister's glowing, golden *presencereturn*. For all her talk of Discord stealing her love away, she certainly seemed to be filled with it.

The older Alicorn stood and moved toward the door. Only then did Luna notice that the hoofbeats no longer sounded, having stopped directly outside.

"Because, my dear Luna," smiled Celestia, turning a loving gaze towards the door. "I tested my spell on someone else first." She opened the door.

A glorious figure stood on the other side, towering over even Celestia. Before Luna's completely stunned gaze, he stepped a pristine white hoof, clad in glittering, golden armour, into the room.

# Chapter 8

Flying through the air, sunlight glinting off their golden finish, six magnificent chariots made their way towards Ponyville. Their pegasus escorts, picked at random from the Canterlot guard rotation, had known that something interesting was happening when they had seen just how many guards were being assembled – twelve guards was a full pegasus division! Upon seeing just who they were escorting, the stoic ponies very nearly widened their eyes in surprise; the Elements of Harmony themselves!

...and the Elements of Harmony... again?

However, one didn't become one of the elite pegasi guard of Canterlot by asking questions. They did as they were ordered, immediately and without complaint. So each guard had strapped himself in, nodded politely to his assigned passengers, and with an affirmative glance to his co-pilot had taken off down the runway.

It was at this point that six of them entered their own private hell.

Leading the pack, more than likely due to a subconscious desire of the guard's to make the trip as swift as possible, was the chariot containing Berry and Pinkie. The two pink dynamos would not *sit still*. Their non-stop blasted *chatter* was enough to severely fray the pegasi's nerves, but these two seemed to be completely incapable of understanding the implications and consequences of gravity. They bounced, *literally bounced*, back and forth, over and over, singing and dancing and playing games! They seemed to actively enjoy the danger of falling to their own doom! The two guards had been forced to make so many minuscule adjustments to their flight pattern to keep the paired Elements on board, and every adjustment brought their heart leaping into their throat. Each began to wonder whether it would ever descend into their chest again.

Trailing the comparatively frantic lead chariot were two particularly dour-faced pegasi. The deep glower marring the features of each spoke volumes as to just how intensely irritated they were at their current predicament.

They wouldn't speak a word of complaint; they would do their assigned task as best they could, but they would hate every second of it.

A disgusting retching noise sounded, in stereo, from the chariot they were pulling. A splattering noise sounded from the panelling on each side. The guard on the left gritted his teeth. The guard on the right's eye spasmed. The scent of too-sweet apples briefly reached their nostrils.

Bucking farm ponies.

The third and final pair of guards that considered this assignment a particularly gruelling chore had been forced to put up with more complaining than the dreaded 'Blueblood Brigade', the small squad of ponies appointed to watch over and protect the Prince. Though Blueblood was capable of delivering an astonishing variety of different commands, complaints, comments and concerns in his usual verbose vernacular, the two chromatic pegasi sitting in the chariot had put him entirely to shame.

And all just because the two wanted to fly!

But orders were orders. The Princess commanded the ponies stay on the chariots, so the ponies stay on the chariots. It was just a shame she didn't command they be quiet about it as well. So the two guards continually repeated themselves, each time forcing the politeness through just a bit more, "Apologies, sir and ma'am, but our orders were for you to stay in the chariot", and each time the two left them alone for a little while, only to start prodding again in a few minutes like an irritating foal. Thankfully, the two seemed to distract each other as much as they tried to distract their escort. It was amusing, actually, subtly watching the two testing the waters with each other. They seemed to stand closer together than was strictly necessary a lot, and when the filly 'accidentally' tripped into the stallion's arms they sure took their time separating.

...

"Aha! Take a look over there!"

Rarity followed Elusive's pointing hoof, taking care not to look in Applejack's direction, to behold the normally graceful and coordinated Rainbow Dash stumble over her own hooves, right into Rainbow Blitz's



waiting grasp. She could almost hear the giddy giggle and the muttered "Oops!"

Rarity sighed, smiling at her friend endearingly. "That pony... She can be such a little filly sometimes."

Elusive nodded, watching the pair in amusement. "Yes, Blitz too." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Although don't tell him I said that he can be such a little filly."

Despite her best efforts, Rarity couldn't quite hold back a grin.

Elusive smiled. "I'm sorry, I appear to have amused you."

Rarity laughed outright at that, surprised by the stallion's sense of humour. In a weird moment of self-admiration, she thought, "*I never realised I was so funny!*"

After the laughter died down, there was an awkward moment of silence as both unicorns struggled to think of something to say that wouldn't make them sound like a complete foal.

"So..." Rarity looked to Elusive as the stallion spoke, noting his supreme discomfiture as he tried to complete his thought, obviously casting stones into the conversational abyss. Her narcissism evaporated as she folded her ears against her head and looked away in shame. She had scarcely said a word and kept more than a respectable distance from Elusive the entire trip, yet here he was putting his pride and, more importantly, his *poise* on the line to try and bridge the gap between them. He had taken the first step in Canterlot, acting the perfect gentlecolt, and here he was again, doing his best to put her at ease with simple conversation. Yet at every turn she shied away, still too wrapped up in her own insecurities to let the well-meaning stallion through her defences.

*Well!* She narrowed her eyes and stomped a mental hoof. *No more!*

Levitating out the little notepad and quill she kept in her mane at all times, Rarity approached the stallion. "So, Elusive, how exactly do you think we should split the work at the Boutique? Why don't we start going over some of the details, hmm?" She sat down, admittedly with no small amount of trepidation, right next to him.

Elusive's horn glowed as he levitated out his own notepad. There was the smallest twinkle of gratitude and relief in his eyes as he smiled broadly at her. "Why Rarity, I do believe that is a fine idea."

Rarity, her heart fluttering with an odd mixture of conflicting emotions, couldn't help but smile right back.

...

Fluttershy had always been a particularly perceptive pony. Though normally she preferred the company of animals, empathy didn't really limit itself to any particular species; she was always willing to help somepony with a problem, so she was particularly concerned with just how quiet Butterscotch was being. Though she knew that he, like her, preferred not to be what one would call the most sociable pony, when they had first met and talked to each other in Canterlot they had gotten along wonderfully, each sharing stories and thoughts. It was one of the few times Fluttershy had felt comfortable enough around another pony to talk freely about herself, yet she had never felt so at ease so quickly with anypony before, and that sent her off on an entirely different train of thought altogether...

Refocusing her attention, she raised a delicate hoof and tapped Butterscotch's shoulder. "Ummm... Butterscotch? Are you alright?" *Ohmygoodnesshe'ssowarm!*

The stallion blinked and raised his head. "Oh, I'm sorry Fluttershy, I didn't mean to be so rude. I'm just worried."

Fluttershy had to fight an urge to stroke his mane like she would a small bunny. He just seemed so... so... "Oh no, you weren't being rude at all! What are you worried about?"

Butterscotch looked away, his ears drooping. "It's just... what the Princess said about our world..." He drew in a ragged breath and his chin wobbled. "I'm scared that I'll never get to see Angel again..."

The very same compassion that made Fluttershy who she is now worked against her. She read Butterscotch like an open book, and saw just how much pain he was in, exactly what he was hiding inside. Unable to resist, she immediately moved to his side and put a wing around him, drawing him

close. The stallion gasped in surprise and embarrassment, but Fluttershy didn't hesitate.

"There there, it's alright." She nuzzled his neck. "Don't you be sad now..."

Butterscotch had never felt so... so *safe* as he did right now, being held by this mare, feeling her gentle warmth against his side.

"You just close your eyes and let it all out. I'll be here for you." She started humming a familiar tune.

He turned and rested his chin atop her head, before just letting himself go and crying. Fluttershy held onto him for Celestia knows how long, Equestria racing by beneath them, as the stallion let out all the stress and tension he had accumulated over the past couple of days. Being so approachable as he was, several of his friends had already come to him during their time in this world for comfort, just to talk and gain reassurance from his gentle kindness. Even Blitz, though he would never admit it, had been stressed out over the change, and had almost had to be talked out of the air at one point. But the gentle pony had not uttered a word of complaint, nor hesitated for an instant to be there for his friends. He had tried so hard to be strong, to help them as much as he could. He held in all his own fears and worries, so the others in turn wouldn't worry about him.

But the stress of holding it all in had apparently been as obvious as the sun and moon to the perceptive pony beside him. As the tears flowed, he put his own wing around her, and touched his hoof to hers. She just kept humming, that same tune, over and over. It wasn't long before he found himself humming along with her.

...

Dusk Shine and Twilight Sparkle were so wrapped up in their own devices that they couldn't give a flying fetlock about what exactly all their friends were doing. Though lacking a quill and parchment, normally courtesy of the everpresent Spike, the two were still having a stellar time making a checklist with what one could call a slightly worrying amount of enthusiasm. However the novelty quickly faded due to the lack of stationary.

Heaving an exasperated sigh as his listing urge was stifled, Dusk Shine plonked his rear end down. "So, Twilight..." The mare looked up at him.

"How do you think everypony's going to react to us?" He gestured vaguely at the other chariots.

Twilight thought for a moment before answering. Her eyes narrowed, her gaze shifted, and she tilted her head just slightly. It was an unconscious reaction, and one that Dusk knew he himself was guilty of, but was content to live with. In fact, seeing Twilight do it... it was really quite cute. He cleared his throat at the thought.

"I think," said Twilight, not noticing his slight awkwardness, "that it shouldn't bother most ponies. After some of the things that have happened around here lately, I don't think there's too much that can surprise Ponyville these days."

Dusk nodded in agreement, though he still had reservations. "I certainly hope so. I don't want to be mistrusted by ponies that I know as my friends."

"That's exactly what I think will work in your favour!" nodded Twilight, pointing a hoof at him. "If anypony doubts the authenticity of our story, we can just get them to ask us a question only I would know. Then we simply get you to answer!"

Dusk smiled at Twilight's enthusiasm and quick-thinking both. "Good idea! Why I didn't think of that?"

Twilight smiled slyly. "Well, I guess that settles it!" She turned her nose up in the air, doing her best Blueblood impression. "Mares really are the more clever ponies!"

Letting out a snort of suppressed laughter, Dusk played along with the joke. "Hay, it's not my fault! Everypony knows what stallions think with!"

The words hung in the air for a moment before the unicorn realised just how little of his time he spent around mares, and how badly it showed.

Twilight let out a very short and very unconvincing laugh, looking anywhere but at Dusk. The stallion simply sat there dumbly, mentally berating himself.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid! She's a mare you foal! You don't make dirty jokes around mares unless you've known them for years, it said so in Mares:*

How to Meet Them, Greet Them and Keep Them! *What, do you turn into a brainless pile of mush whenever you're close to her?*

His internal monologue ground to a halt as it cornered itself.

*Oh. Fair enough. Well, lesson learned! Don't do it again!*

"So..." said Dusk, unknowingly emulating Elusive. The stallion's sharp mind immediately latched onto that one subject, that classic mainstay that anypony could turn to at the slightest hints of conversational awkwardness to save the day. "Lovely weather we're having!"

Twilight Sparkle vehemently agreed and the two were off, springboarding from topic to topic, the conversation getting less awkward with each change of subject. Eventually the two were talking naturally again, enjoying each other's company. For a time the pair lapsed into a comfortable silence, enjoying the view of Equestria sprawled out beneath them. Dusk Shine in fact grew so enamoured with the view that he failed to notice it had long since lost Twilight's attention.

No, her purple gaze was firmly fixed on him, ready to refocus at a moment's notice. Had he managed to catch her, he would've caught an odd look in her eyes, a certain gleam deep within their violet depths. Twilight Sparkle was just beginning to feel the barest hints, the mere scratch on the tip of the iceberg, of a feeling she had yet to encounter. It was enough to make her heart pound a little bit faster, and she immediately turned away, to look out over Equestria once more.

Standing on the precipice was one thing, leaping into the void was quite another.

However, as the wisemare once said, "Great minds think alike". When he was sure that Twilight's attention was entirely focused on the far and not the near, Dusk couldn't help but glance her way.

...

The chariots gently set down just outside Ponyville, and with an exasperated nod from one of the pegasus escorts two wound up pegasi immediately took to the air, happy to stretch their wings once more. What's that? My stretching wings brushed yours? My my, how did *that* happen?

Eventually everypony disembarked, and the chariots wheeled around, taking to the sky once more. Some of the guards sure had an interesting tale to tell.

The group all met up, Dash and Blitz alighting once more. Though they had left for Canterlot only that very morning, each of the mares felt like they had been gone for days, the events of the morning completely draining them. By comparison the stallions seemed energetic, even frisky, looking around Ponyville with bright eyes and wide grins. Berry's tail wagged back and forth behind him like an excited puppy.

"It's so so goody woody toody noody *good* to be back in Ponyville!" The stallion bounced back and forth, Pinkie joining in for the fun of it. "It feels like it's been days since I've seen Sugarcube Corner!"

Dash snickered. "Berry, it *has* been days since you've seen Sugarcube Corner."

"HUUUUHHHH!" Berry came to a dead stop in mid-air, halfway through a bounce. Pinkie crashed into his rear, and the two tumbled to the ground in a tangle of pink legs. When the dust cleared, Berry was standing with Pinkie perfectly balanced on two hooves on his back, doing a little jig. "Pinkie! Do you wanna go to Sugarcube Corner!"

"HUUUUHHHHLET'SGO!" And the two were off, disappearing like a couple of pink fireworks, leaving only confusion and the vague scent of cupcakes in the air.

Dusk Shine raised a protesting hoof, words of caution on his lips, but it was too little too late. "Pinkie! Berry! Wait! We need to think this through!"

"Now hold on there Sugarcube, Ah think they're on to somethin'," said AJ, cutting off the hare-brained plans to try and contain *Pinkie*, of all ponies. "If we all stick together, an' march right on into town, we're gonna get eyeballed worse than a turtle at a track meet." The corner of her mouth twitched.

Dash and Blitz glowered. "TORTOISE!" Fluttershy and Butterscotch looked on proudly. *Yay!*

With a chuckle, AJ waved a hoof through the air. "Mah point still stands!" The filly's next words confirmed Twilight's suspicions that even though Applejack and AJ hadn't done much talking, AJ at least had still been thinking of the situation. "What better way to convince everypony that these colts are... well, what they are, than to see 'em actin' just like us? I say we all head on home, and act like nothin's happened. If anypony asks about 'em," she continued, making Applejack wince as she prodded him in the side with her hoof, "we tell 'em what they want to know. Easy as pie."

"Now AJ, I'm not quite certain that is the best way to go about announcing ourselves!" intoned Elusive, waving a dramatic hoof through the air. "I'm sure you have the same views on Honesty as Applejack does-"

"Darn tootin' Ah do!" interjected the filly with a glare.

"-which is *why* I think you might be predisposed towards seeking a particular course of action that might not be entirely in our best interests!"

Both farm ponies looked at Elusive blankly. Applejack spoke up.

"Say what now?"

Further confusion was forestalled by Twilight Sparkle's intervention.

"Elusive, I think I agree with AJ this time. While it might be a little bit easier for the citizens of Ponyville to come to terms with the appearance of six new colts if we slowly introduce all of you bit by bit, it would just be too difficult on each of you! You'd have to stay out of sight all the time, locked up indoors... No, I think that this will be like taking off a band-aid. We just get it all over and done with at once."

"So what do you think we should do, Twilight?" asked Butterscotch.

"I think we should all take our fellow Element, and go home," replied the unicorn. "We should just act normally, and if anypony asks, we tell them the complete truth. That way, no idle gossip will go around, and no one will think that we're 'evil enchantresses'," she finished with a smile.

"Thank Celestia Berry and Pinkie aren't here," muttered Blitz. Dash giggled and punched him in the shoulder.

"We've all got a bit of explaining ahead of us anyway," continued Twilight. "There is a baby dragon at the library who just might have a heart attack."

Dusk paled. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Hooowee, this'll be a whopper t' explain t' the family," grimaced AJ.

Applejack smiled encouragingly at her. "Well shoot AJ, you know as well as anypony than an Apple can always tell an Apple. Besides..." He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. "Ah still got that little secret o' Big Macintosh's Ah've bin' hangin' on to... Remember?"

AJ's green eyes widened for a moment, before she burst out laughing. Clutching her sides, the farmpony tumbled to the ground. "Well Ah'll be! Ah'd plum forgot about that! With you danglin' *that* nice juicy apple over his head, he'll say whatever y' want him to!" Applejack joined in her mirth.

Rarity, gossip mode engaging, pressed forward eagerly. "What's this you say? Big Macintosh has a skeleton in his closet?" Elusive hovered over her shoulder.

After AJ calmed down a little, she shook her head. "Nuh-uh Rarirty, I promised Ah wouldn't tell. Breaking mah brother's trust is the best way to lose 'im."

A distant voice echoed on the breeze. "*Fooooorreevvveerr...*"

The farmfilly pretended not to notice; sometimes her sugar-powered friend was just a little *tooweird*. "And technically Ah still haven't told anypony." She nudged a still chuckling Applejack. "Why, it's just the luck o' the draw that Applejack here happens to already know!" The orange ponies burst into renewed peals of laughter.

"Sides!" choked out Applejack, between gasps, "Shouldn't... you... worry 'bout... Sweetie Belle?"

This closed down the fashionista. "Yes, I *have* been wondering about that." She lowered her gaze, slightly troubled. "What will I tell her?"

"Why, we tell her the truth, my dear Rarity!" Heads turned to Elusive. "I do believe that Twilight is spot on: the truth is the way to go! I'd rather leave



Sweetie Belle with a bit of a puzzle than with a lie." Rarity had to agree with that. "Besides, you know her! She's a nice girl, she'll be fine. Frankly, I'm far more interested in just *how* exactly another little filly is going to react..."

Rarity raised a perfectly shaped brow. "Oh? Who is that, Elusive?"

He smiled. "Welllllll..." he said, turning towards the now recovered farm ponies. "We've discussed how Applebloom is going to handle things, we've discussed how Sweetie Belle will react... Tell me, aren't those two members of a particular *organisation*? A 'crusade', if you will? Wasn't there..." He turned to smile fiendishly at Rainbow Dash and Rainbow Blitz. "...a third member of that group?"

The two pegasi looked at Elusive, then at each other, then off into the middle distance, then each other again. Slowly, their eyes widened.

The buzzing of tiny wings filled the air.

# Chapter 9

Dread filled the assembled ponies as the immediately recognisable sound of tiny orange wings buzzing at a hummingbird-like intensity reached their ears. Fate was certainly forcing their hooves!

Each reacted differently: a startled gasp, a thoughtful grimace, trembling uncontrollably. However the combined reactions of every other pony couldn't hold a flicker of a spark of a candle to that of Rainbow Dash and Rainbow Blitz. As the two pegasi realised that Scootaloo, *Scootaloo!*, was heading their way, they screamed in unison, hair standing on end. Their wings very nearly locked up!

"AAAAHHHHH!"

As soon as their lungs emptied and without so much as a word of goodbye, they took to the air to seek refuge amongst the clouds, leaving nothing but a fading rainbow trail.

The remaining eight ponies watched the phenomenon of the, albeit brief, double rainbow in slack jawed amazement for a moment, before a sputter in the buzzing jolted them all back to reality. Wild looks were exchanged: thought stalled, panic mode engaged!

Rearing up on her back hooves, Rarity screamed, "EVERYPONY FOR THEMSELVES!" The two ivory unicorns bolted off in the direction of Carousel Boutique, instinctively seeking their place of refuge.

Everypony else had similar thoughts. Applejack and AJ raced into town, taking the long way around to Sweet Apple Acres to avoid the oncoming Cutie Mark Crusaders. Twilight grabbed Dusk and both quickly moved towards the library, neither relishing having to explain the story at *all*, let alone to one of those little fillies, and especially not all of them at once.

Fluttershy and Butterscotch simply leapt into the nearest bush, wings wrapped around each other in fright.

...

Scootaloo braked with a flourish, spinning her scooter and accompanying wagon around in a perfect little arch. The filly smirked to herself, removing her helmet. "*That's right. That's how Scootaloo scootarolls!*"

Applebloom and Sweetie Belle climbed out of the wagon, stumbling slightly. The youngest Apple had often said that high-speed manoeuvres were not exactly to her liking, but Scootaloo could never resist. Who knew when *Rainbow Dash* might be watching!

As if in response to her thoughts, Sweetie Belle spoke up. "Well, Scootaloo?" she said, eyes darting left and right. "Here we are, and I don't see any chariots, or royal pegasi, or anything!"

"Ah couldn't even see 'em when ya pointed 'em out earlier..." muttered Applebloom.

Apparently not quite quietly enough, as Scootaloo swept a hoof over her shoulders, drawing her in close with a condescending grin. "Aw, don't you worry Applebloom!" The pegasus patted her on the head. "Your eyes just aren't as sharp as mine! We pegasi are made for it!" The farmfilly glared at her. "Besides, I *know* I saw them around here somewhere. Come on, everypony split up. There's bound to be something around here!"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders broke off, each moving slowly in a different direction to look for clues.

"Hey, maybe this is our special talent!" exclaimed Applebloom suddenly. She turned her excited gaze to to see her friend's quizzical expressions, her bow waving in the breeze. "Maybe we're meant to be detective ponies!"

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle stared at her blankly for a moment, before turning to each other. Slowly, a smile crawled across all of their muzzles.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS, DETECTIVE PONIES! YAY!" The three fillies glued their eyes to the ground, inspecting every nook and every cranny, every rock and every clod of dirt. Their zeal was almost palpable.

None of them happened to notice a trembling quartet of cyan eyes peeking out from within the nearby shrubbery.

After a few minutes of intense searching, each filly not quite making the connection between the wheels of a chariot and the shallow grooves in the recently disturbed earth, they were ready to give up.

Sweetie Belle collapsed on her haunches with a sigh. "I guess we're not meant to be detective ponies either. Come on girls, let's head back to base."

"Wait a second!" Scootaloo's excited voice filled the air. "I think I found something!"

The little orange pegasus was directly in front of the bush that Fluttershy and Butterscotch were hiding in, hovering a few inches off the ground in her excitement.

Applebloom and Sweetie Belle were at her side in an instant.

"What is it?"

"Wadja see?"

Slowly, Scootaloo raised a hoof, pointing into the bush directly in front of her. The two hiding pegasi scarcely dared to breathe. For a tense, terrifying moment, the little filly was pointing right at them.

Suddenly, Scootaloo shot her hoof higher, pointing into the tree branches directly overhead. "See? Up there! There's something suspicious in that tree! It must be a CLUE!"

The Elements of Kindness released a breath they hadn't known they were holding.

Sweetie Belle cocked her head, twitching her well-trained ears. "Did anypony hear that?"

Scootaloo raised a brow. "Hear what?"

"I thought I heard something just now, like someone sighing."

Applebloom grinned fiercely, coming up beneath the unicorn filly and lifting her into the air. "Alls Ah can hear is the sound of mah own destiny! Climb up Scootaloo, you're the lightest! Get that clue down!"

With a whoop, the pegasus leapt on top of Sweetie Belle, flapping her wings for good measure. It couldn't hurt, right?

"OW! Scootaloo!"

"Oh, sorry Sweetie Belle, I didn't mean to hit your horn!"

"Would you two mind hurryin' things up?"

"Hold still Sweetie Belle, I can't reach it!"

"Ah! Horseapples Sweetie Belle, get off mah mane!"

"Maybe if *Scootaloo* wasn't leaning so far over!"

"Hey, it's not *my* fault! We're too far away! Applebloom, move us over!"

"In case y'all didn't realise, carryin' two ponies on your back is *hard*!"

"It doesn't seem too tough..."

"That's 'cos you're carrying the pony meant to float through the air!"

"HEY! What's that supposed to mean!"

"Scootaloo, would you just be quiet and get whatever it is down? Applebloom is slippery!"

"Oh, Ah'm *slippery* now, am Ah? I'll show you slippery!"

Back and forth the trio bickered, getting no closer to their goal and eventually forgetting about it entirely. The three pony stack began to sway dangerously, barely seeming to notice. Threats were issued, challenges laid down, insults thrown. A bare-hoof-brawl seemed imminent.

Applebloom's hoof caught in the dirt. The earth pony stumbled, and all sense of equilibrium was lost.

"Scootaloo!" Her voice cut through the bickering. "Grab it! NOW!"

As the three of them tumbled to the ground, Scootaloo made a flying leap off Sweetie Belle's back, wings churning, hooves outstretched. She just barely managed to nick the very corner of the mysterious object, upsetting its balance, causing it to wobble dangerously...

...and to fully tip over, dumping its load of tree sap all over the three fillies.

"In hindsight," said Sweetie Belle after a moment, "We should have expected that."

...

Slowly, Butterscotch and Fluttershy's breathing returned to normal, the near hyperventilation of a few minutes ago almost passed. Oh my goodness, that had been so close! To think that... Well, not to say that they weren't good girls, but having to explain something like *this* to them... that was something the two gentle pegasi *did not* want to have to deal with!

So, they did the logical thing. Step one, find closest shelter. Step two, enter it. Step three, cling to nearest pony.

Butterscotch suddenly flushed bright red. *Oh my goodness she's clinging to me!* He didn't dare make a move, not wanting to startle the mare next to him... But then again, he couldn't stay perfectly still, that would be weird! *Oh my goodness, what's the perfect amount of movement so she won't think I'm creepy?*

Fluttershy suddenly both solved his problem and created a multitude of new ones. With a gentle sigh, the pegasus sagged, leaning heavily against Butterscotch.

"That was a close one," she said.

Butterscotch swallowed nervously. Sure, he had talked with this mare before, in startling depth actually, but that had been before... Well, before what had happened on the chariot ride to Ponyville.

"Yes... Um... It sure was... I mean, if you think so..."

It wasn't that it had been awkward to hold each other and to cry on her shoulder... But that was just it: it *hadn't* been awkward. It had just been a pony comforting another; age, gender, that stuff hadn't mattered.

Still, there had been *something* there. Butterscotch had felt it. And now, to hold her after that...

Startling him, a pair of cyan eyes swivelled around to face him. In the small confines of the bush, with their wings still wrapped around each other, they were startlingly close.

Incredibly close.

Too close.

Butterscotch gulped.

Fluttershy blushed darkly.

In one simultaneous motion...

... the two pegasi sprung apart, leaping bodily out of the bush to land a respectable distance away from each other.

Suddenly the pair were all "um"s and "ah"s once again, nerves back in full force. For a solid minute the two stood there, kicking at the ground and looking absolutely *anywhere* but at the other pony. Finally a loud *crash* in the distance jolted them both into action.

"!" gushed Fluttershy, still hiding behind her mane slightly.

"Um... Ok," nodded Butterscotch, putting on a brave smile. The stallion attempted conversation, trying to put the awkwardness behind them. "I wonder what that noise could have been..."

Desperate to move past the uncomfortable silence, Fluttershy clung to his conversational lifeline like a drowning pony. "Oh, yes, so do I! Maybe it was Twilight and Dusk trying out a new spell already?"

"Maybe." Butterscotch smiled. "Or maybe it's Pinkie and Berry... doing what they do."

Fluttershy giggled at his comment, and the two ponies walked off down the path, chatting amiably to each other as they went, each comment easier than the last.

...

"Aw, hayseed!"

"What is it Applebloom?"

"I forgot mah helmet Sweetie Belle! Scootaloo! Turn us around, Ah need to go back for mah helmet!"

"You got it sister!"

...

Trotting along next to each other, Fluttershy and Butterscotch were content to enjoy the quiet of nature all around them, even more so with another pony who loved it as much as they did.

Fluttershy sighed wistfully. "Oh, I love this time of the year, but I do miss the butterflies."

It took Butterscotch a moment to clue on. "That's right, it hasn't been long enough for them to have hatched yet, has it?"

Fluttershy shook her head sadly. "No, Winter Wrap Up wasn't that long ago."

The stallion thought for a moment, before an idea came to him and he spread his wings. "Fluttershy, come with me! Quickly!" Having beaten this path many times before, he knew exactly where he was going. With a hop, skip and a jump he launched himself into the air and began flying smoothly away, Fluttershy right behind him.

After just a couple hundred paces, the stallion touched down again, reaching back a gentlecoltly hoof to help Fluttershy out of the air. It was an old-fashioned thing to do, but it earned him a beautiful smile, so it was well worth it.



"Now," he thought to himself as he trotted along, "*where did I see it?*" His eyes roved over the trees on either side of the path. "*Oh, it was around here somewhere...*" A bright flash of orange caught his attention. With a delighted gasp, he bolted over to it.

"Fluttershy! Come and see!"

Intensely curious, the mare followed, hot on his hooves. When she saw what had so excited Butterscotch, she brought a hoof to her mouth as tears sprang to her eyes. How could she possibly have forgotten?

Directly in front of them, just beginning to wriggle back and forth, was the chrysalis of a Giant Monarch Butterfly.

"Oh, Butterscotch! I can't believe I forgot the first butterfly of the season! I remember helping him spin his cocoon when he was just a little hungry caterpillar."

Butterscotch nodded in fond reminiscence. "Me too."

"That you remembered... A-and you brought me here... Well, I... Ummm..." She trailed off, mumbling quietly. When she finally worked up the nerve to look at him, he smiled shyly, completely understanding.

The pair stood there and watched the first butterfly of the season emerge, giving it gentle encouragement when it grew tired. Slowly, the tiny insect emerged from its brief prison, lifting its still moist wings. As the beautiful pattern emblazoned on them slowly came into view, Butterscotch took a deep breath and steeled himself. Not even daring to look at her, he raised a trembling wing in Fluttershy's direction.

*Ohmygoodnessohmygoodness...*

The mare snuggled right into him.

...

"Do either of you two see it anywhere?"

"Ah still haven't seen it yet Sweetie Belle! Scootaloo, how about your fancy-shmancy pegasus eyes?"

"I haven't seen the helmet yet, but maybe those two ponies over there have?"

...

Applejack and AJ had been enjoying a quiet walk on a nice spring day, but now that they had entered Ponyville proper the mood was slightly spoiled. Much as it pained her to eat her own words, AJ was doing her best to keep to the backstreets and alleyways to make sure no one noticed Applejack. It wasn't that she wanted to keep him under wraps, she agreed wholeheartedly with Twilight that it would do no good just to coop the stallions up, but this was the sort of thing she wanted to clear with her family first, before any crazy rumours got back to them. In fact, she found herself mentally checking off everypony she ducked out of sight from, reminding herself to seek them out later and explain it to them.

For one of the first times in her life, AJ found herself appreciating how small she was. If she was about to be spotted, no problem, she could just duck behind a cart or a barrel. It was a much more difficult task for Applejack. Sure, the stallion wasn't quite in Big Macintosh's league, but he wasn't too far from it either.

"Ah shoot!" The mailmare's gaze passed over them (at least, she thought it did). "Applejack, down!"

"Ooph!" The stallion flopped flat on his stomach, hooves spread-eagled behind a bale of hay. Thankfully he was in full agreement that the Apple family had a right to know about their predicament first, but he seemed to be the one worse for wear because of it.

After several more near-misses, and a painfully long time, the stallion took a particularly nasty blow to the head, trying to duck underneath a cart.

"OUCH! Ah, that tears it!"

"Applejack, *shhh*!" AJ frantically hushed the larger pony, eyes locked on the teal unicorn sitting oddly nearby, staring forlornly at her front hooves.

The stallion clamped his mouth shut before continuing in a much more subdued tone, "While Ah think this is a good idea AJ, Ah don't think this is

the best way to go about it. Ah don't know if you've noticed, but Ah ain't no ninja pony!"

The filly made to protest, before catching Applejack's *Seriously?* look. Nodding in defeat, she cast her gaze around for inspiration. "Well, what do you think we should do then?"

Applejack was quiet for a moment, eyes narrowed in concentration. After a brief pause, he uttered two unwise words, laced with more than a hint of a challenge. "Race ya."

"What?" AJ looked at him incredulously.

The stallion grinned fiercely. "Y'all heard me. Ah'll race ya home; it's not too far to th' Acres from here."

AJ was about to protest, dismiss his idea, even lay into him a little for how foalish it was, but even as she opened her mouth, she knew she couldn't resist. It just wasn't in her nature to turn down a challenge, and it apparently wasn't in his either.

"That is..."

Ohoho, what was this?

Applejack flashed his best Rainbow Blitz smile, trying to push the filly over the edge. "... If y'all think you can keep up. Ah'm gonna have to move pretty quick t' make sure nopony gets a good look at me."

AJ could have bucked clean through Bloomberg himself at that. Narrowing her eyes but with a smile on her lips, the filly said, "On three."

Applejack couldn't help but let out a little laugh. "One..."

AJ raised herself up and stood in plain sight, secrecy be damned. She needed a good start and wasn't going to lose this thing! "Two..."

The stallion stood next to her, mirroring her pose exactly. Head down, hoof raised, body tilted slightly forwards. This wasn't quite Iron Pony... But it sure was Iron Apple. A stray leaf fluttered into their field of vision, dancing in the

breeze. Two sets of bright green eyes tracked it back and forth, unblinking. As it touched earth the farmponies both yelled out, "THREE!"

Like a couple of apple-scented bullets, the two athletes took off, hooves pounding into the dirt. The thrill of the challenge fizzed in their veins, energising them, pushing them to greater and greater heights. They raced past Lyra, the musician turning to just catch a pair of orange flanks disappearing around the corner.

Through the streets they swept, ducking and weaving through the crowds of ponies, never staying in one place long enough for somepony to get a good look at them. More than once they had to throw "Pardon!" and "Scuse me!" back over their shoulders, but never once did either of their courses waver. Their inherent sportsmanship made sure that they both stayed on the main path out to Sweet Apple Acres, which of course swept right through the centre of Ponyville, but it didn't stop either of them from hugging the corners, jostling to try and get the better position. Applejack made good use of his stature, leaping over obstacles that were just slightly too high for AJ, his bulk forcing her to take second place through narrow gaps, but AJ was not without her own edge. She was definitely more agile and manoeuvrable than Applejack, making tighter turns and weaving through crowds of ponies the stallion had to swerve completely around.

Their advantages and disadvantages complimented each other, and the two stayed more or less dead even.

"Well, Ah'll be!" panted AJ, looking sidelong at her opponent. "You're quicker than Ah thought you'd be!"

Applejack managed to grin, even as he poured on the speed. "Likewise!"

The filly grunted, straining to match his pace. Up ahead, there was a small stand of market stalls, then it was a clear shot out to the Acres. She had to pull ahead before then, otherwise she'd never outpace him!

Pulling out the stops, AJ hit her top speed, hooves flying, mane and tail whipping in the breeze. She brushed past Applejack, ignoring his surprised exclamation. Her field of vision narrowed down to the path directly in front of her, though she still had enough presence of mind to hear the pounding of heavy hooves right behind her.

*"Land sakes!", she thought. "Ah'll never beat 'im at this rate!"* The farmfilly grimaced, trying to come up with an idea. A vague memory nagged at her. *"Wait a second... What was it that Granny Smith used t' say t' me?"* The venerable matriarch of the Apple clan had always been a veritable paragon of wisdom, but she had neglected to give the same advice to Big Macintosh. Applebloom too, so far. AJ grinned fiercely as she remembered why. *"'Use what Celestia gave ya'!"*

Seconds before the duo entered the final patch of market stalls, AJ turned her head and made sure to catch Applejack's eye. Giving him a cheeky grin, the mare winked.

Not two seconds later there was a grunt, a thud, and a muttered curse.

"Oh, motherbu-!"

*CRASH!*

The stallion plowed right into the side of one of the market stalls, tipping it over but thankfully not damaging the sturdy structure. AJ skidded to a halt a few steps later, her jaw dropping. She hadn't been expecting such a severe response!

Stars in his eyes, Applejack unsteadily rose to his hooves, accidentally upsetting a couple of bunches of grapes. The purple stall owner grumbled, before rising almost as tremblingly to her own hooves.

Applejack was nothing if not polite. "Oh, Ah'm terribly sorry miss! Please allow me to help you clean that up!" He immediately set his shoulder against the stall, pushing it upright once more, as the mare stumbled over to him, waving a hoof.

"S'no problem, acksdents happen!"

The stallion looked up, a couple of bunches of grapes gripped in his jaws, at the ponies strange speech pattern. It almost sounded like...

"Oh, Berry Punch!" Mystery solved. "So nice to see y'all again! How's little Ruby Pinch?"

The mare gave him a somewhat unfocussed but nonetheless confused look. "'Scuse me, but've we met?"

Applejack looked at her perplexedly. "Why, o' course we have! It's me, Appleja-!"

"THERE you are!" A loud voice cut him off as AJ came rushing up to him. She gave him a stern look that said in no uncertain terms *Keep quiet!*

"Applejack, you know 'ths guy?"

AJ nodded, keeping a wary eye on the dazed stallion to make sure he realised who was being addressed. "Well ah sure do Berry! He's, uh... He's a friend of mine, from out of town!" Her eyes shifted back and forth.

Berry Punch eyed the stallion critically. "He is, huh?" Her vision swam, but she'd have to be blind not to notice. "He looks 'n awful lot like you."

AJ cleared her throat. *Horseapples, Ah'm no good at this!*"Well, yeah! He's family! Yeah, that's it, mah cousin!"

The purple mare raised her brow. "Thought you said he's a friend?"

AJ nodded heartily as Applejack busied himself picking up the rest of the grapes, trying to avoid scrutiny. "Yeah, that's right! He's a friend, but he's also family! Ah'm friends with all mah family! Heh, you know us Apples!"

Berry Punch narrowed her eyes, training her suspicious gaze on a sweating AJ, before smiling and nodding her head. "Well, any friend 'f Applejack's 's a friend 'f mine! I'm Berry Punch, nice to meet you...?"

The stallion raised his hoof with a smile. "Pleasures all mine, Ah'm Apple-ooph!"

"AAAAAnyway," said AJ, retracting her hoof from Applejack's side with a glare, "We gotta get on back to Sweet Apple Acres! Plenty of work to do! Come on, let's go!" Half-dragging the stallion along with her, AJ started off towards Sweet Apple Acres at a gallop.

Berry Punch waved to them as they left. "Nice to meet you Appleooph!"

She could've sworn she heard a stifled guffaw as the two ponies ran off into the distance.

...

"You're darn right you ain't no ninja-pony! Whatever happened to keepin' things quiet!"

"In case ya hadn't noticed, that stall was pretty solid! Ah still can't decide which of the three of ya t' talk to!"

...

"Scuse me, but've either of y'all seen a little blue helmet lyin' around?"

# Chapter 10

With a startled shriek, Fluttershy and Butterscotch leapt into the air, wings freezing up in fright. As their hooves touched earth, the two immediately attempted to bolt off in opposite directions, only for their still entwined wings to bounce them right back. With a simultaneous "Ooph!" the two pegasi collided and flopped to the ground in a jumble of yellow legs.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders immediately crowded around, trying to assist the dazed couple.

"Oh mah gosh, Fluttershy! I didn't mean to scare you! Are ya alright?" Applebloom hovered over the pegasus, fretting.

Carefully disentangling herself from Butterscotch, the pegasus rose to her hooves, none the worse for wear. "Oh, it's fine Applebloom. I was just a little bit frightened."

Applebloom sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. Anyway, have ya seen mah helmet lyin' around anywhere? It's blue with a black strap."

Shaking her head, Fluttershy replied, "I'm sorry Applebloom, I haven't seen it anywhere. Have you Butterscotch?"

The stallion thought for a moment, before shaking his head as well. "Sorry girls."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders were uncharacteristically quiet for a moment, before all three said, "Butterscotch?"

"Oh!" Fluttershy gasped. "Please forgive me, where are my manners? Girls, this is Butterscotch. Butterscotch, this is Applebloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo."

The stallion waved shyly, slightly uncomfortable even though he'd known the little fillies for a long time.



The Cutie Mark Crusaders had no such qualms, enthusiastically saying hello. Sweetie Belle's gaze slid between the two of them, considering. After a moment she piped up, "Are you two coltfriend and fillyfriend?"

Butterscotch and Fluttershy instantaneously flushed bright red, ducking their heads to try and make themselves as small as possible. Each was incapable of answering the little filly's question.

Sweetie Belle didn't miss a beat, thankfully taking their silence as a 'no'. "Oh, ok then."

"Are y'all family? Ya look pretty similar," chimed in Applebloom. This time, the two pegasi managed to shake their heads.

Scootaloo gave up the guessing game. "Where are you from Butterscotch? I've never seen you around Ponyville before."

The stallion's eyes widened. At that moment he remembered that he was almost as bad at lying as Applejack was. But in a flash of intuition, the perfect answer came to him. Looking theatrically left and right, he whispered, "It's a secret!"

The fillies all gasped as Fluttershy looked on curiously.

Butterscotch's brain worked overtime, thinking on its hooves. "Only... Only your older sister is allowed to tell you! We can't say anything, so you'll have to go and ask them."

Sweetie Belle and Applebloom nodded frantically, already scouring the area around them for Applebloom's lost helmet so they could be on their way.

In contrast, Scootaloo looked crushed, staring at the ground with her head hung low. "I don't have an older sister. I guess I don't get to know the secret then, huh?"

Butterscotch's brain stalled and jaw dropped as he realised just how insensitive he had been. He had *known* the little pegasus was an only child, but he'd still callously told her that she needed a sister! What kind of monster was he? Oh, he was so cruel and thoughtless...

"Don't worry Scootaloo," said a soft voice. The stallion looked up to see Fluttershy giving the filly a hug. She winked at Butterscotch over Scootaloo's shoulder. "I'm sure Rainbow Dash would be happy to tell you!"

To say the little pegasus brightened up would be to say that Berry was a bit eclectic. Scootaloo leapt out of Fluttershy's embrace, facing lighting up in a huge grin.

"Really! *Rainbow Dash* will tell me! *Herself!*"

Fluttershy giggled into her hoof at the filly's exuberance. "Yes, I'm sure she will! Just go find her and tell her what I've said. She's sure to explain it to you!"

"Wow, thanks Fluttershy! Come on girls, we've got to go! I've got an appointment with Rainbow Dash!"

After a few moments of searching they located Applebloom's helmet and set off for Sweet Apple Acres to drop her off. The three fillies waved and shouted goodbyes as they sped away.

Fluttershy and Butterscotch stood there waving until the trio were out of sight. "Good thinking," said the stallion, turning to face Fluttershy. "I would never have been able to think of something that clever."

Fluttershy waved a hoof modestly. "Oh no, it was your idea first! I just helped it along a little bit, that's all."

The pair smiled nervously, catching each other's eye before looking away.

"So, um... I suppose we should get back to your cottage... I mean, if that's alright with you," suggested Butterscotch.

"Oh, yes!" Fluttershy floated over to his side and they began walking in the general direction of her cottage. "I wonder what the animals will think of seeing two of us?"

Butterscotch sagged a little. "Oh my, I hadn't thought of that. They'll know you, but... but they've never really seen me before. What if... What if they don't like me?"

Fluttershy smiled warmly at the stallion, finding his fear adorable. "Don't you worry Butterscotch, I'm sure they'll like you."

He looked up at her, surprised at the confidence in her voice. "But how do you know?"

Without thinking, Fluttershy said, "Because I like you."

There was a moment of dead silence before Fluttershy realised what she had said. Her wings snapped to her sides as her eyes widened. She turned to look at Butterscotch. The stallion was staring at her, his wings and bright red colouration identical to her own.

For a few moments, it was all either of them could do to stay standing, before, almost against his will, Butterscotch's mouth started moving and words came tumbling out.

"I like you too."

This time, Fluttershy definitely wobbled, close to blacking out. Butterscotch seemed incapable of removing his hoof from the small furrow in the dirt he was digging. The pair stood there, idly fidgeting, for an uncomfortable amount of time, neither able to bring themselves to say or do something.

A freshly hatched Giant Monarch Butterfly floated past Fluttershy's muzzle, brushing her nose as it did so. In that touch the little creature managed to convey just the slightest hint of confidence. She took a deep breath.

"So... Um... I mean... My cottage?" It wasn't much, and she scarcely more than breathed it, but at least she had said something.

Thankfully, Butterscotch seemed to have excellent hearing. Though he still couldn't quite look at her, he managed to smile and nod his head.

As one, the pair started moving off once again to Fluttershy's, walking side by side. This time, Butterscotch didn't wait nearly as long to offer his wing to Fluttershy. For her part, she was much quicker to accept it.

...

"Mr. Cake! Mrs. Cake! I've got a surpriiiiise for youuuuu!"

Pinkamena Diane Pie cartwheeled through the entrance of Sugarcube Corner, narrowly missing the town clockmaker, here to pick up his usual order of muffins. The party pony pranced on the spot, incapable of containing her excitement.

Mr. Carrot Cake and Mrs. Cup Cake both slowly backed out of the work room, precariously balancing a giant, multi-layered cake between them. Pinkie, excitement forgotten, immediately rushed to help, steadying their load. She might be a bit off the wall, but she would never let the cakes down.

Thankfully, four sets of hooves made light work. Berry Bubble stood opposite Pinkie, helping the Cakes heave their work on to the counter. The bakers stared mutely between the two pink ponies, the serving dish held in their jaws keeping their mouths clamped shut. Once they finally hoisted the huge cake on to the bench, they found themselves still quite incapable of speech.

Berry spoke up first, wiping his brow with a hoof and an exaggerated sigh. "Wow! That's got to be one of the biggest, most stupenderrific super wonderful fantastic cakes I've ever seen!"

Mr. Cake's jaw dropped.

"Uhhh... Pinkie, dear?"

Pinkie tilted her head upside-down. "Yes Mrs. Cake? Hey, you're on the roof!"

After so long, the master baker didn't even take note of Pinkie's off-hand oddness. "Yes dear. You said you had a surprise for us?"

"I sure do! And it's one of the best surprises you'll ever get! Oh my gosh, it's such a good surprise, you'll NEVER guess what it is, not even in a thousand years! You could even stop baking, and I'm sure the Princess would be so sad that she'd send you to the moon, and WHOOSH! Off you'd go! And you'd be stuck up there for a thousand years, with nothing to do but bake moon-dust and talk to rocks and give them names and throw parties, but they'd be so booooo-riiiiing, 'cos you'd have nopony to talk to, except maybe the other rocks that you invited to the party, but that's not a good idea! Unless you maybe take a bag of flour with you. But even after

a *thousand* years of nothing but moon rocks and parties, you *still* wouldn't be able to guess even the teeniest, tiniest amount of this humongous, mega, super-duper-

"It wouldn't happen to be this young stallion here, would it?" broke in Mr. Cake, pointing at Berry.

Pinkie stopped mid rant and gasped. "Wow, I didn't know ponies could have zebra senses as well! Boy, Applejack sure was wrong about that one. Unless-Wait." She stared at Mr. Cake. "Are you secretly a zebra?"

The husband and wife exchanged glances. Even for Pinkie this was over the top! She sure was excited.

"No dearie, we're not secretly zebras and nopony's going to the moon," said Mrs. Cake. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Of course!" replied Pinkie, suddenly at the older mare's side. She threw a couple of hooffuls of confetti into the air. "Mr. and Mrs. Cake, meet Berry Bubble!"

Berry was there in an instant. "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Cake! It's sooooo nice to meet you! Well, actually, we've met before. It was just a little while ago, when I came in and started helping you with that cake! I said, 'I'm Berry Bubble! Would you like a hoof with your cake?' but it actually sounded like I said 'Um bry bbl! D uh lk uh hf wth uh ck?' so I can understand if you didn't know what I said! So this means that this is our first meeting! Wait! No, there was another one! We all met again, years and years ago, when I first came to Ponyville. But does that mean that this *isn't* a meeting? Can you meet a pony twice? And if you can, can you throw a meeting party twice? This calls for research! Pinkie, to the party-pedia!"

Pinkie saluted, and the pair rushed up the stairs, leaving an utterly bewildered Mr. and Mrs. Cake staring after them.

"Uhhh..." Carrot Cake's brain slowly ticked over. "What just happened honeybun?"

"I... I'm not sure, Sweetie."

Mr. Cake's face slowly split into a grin as he reached his most favoured conclusion, something he'd wanted for the pony who was like a daughter to him for so long. "I can't say for sure, but I think that just maybe Pinkie has a coltfriend now!"

Mrs. Cake gasped and swatted at his shoulder, though with a smile on her face. "Oh Carrot, honestly!"

"Well, think about it! Have you ever seen another pony that can keep up with Pinkie when she... Well, just keep up with her at all! Those two seem made for each other."

...

In the highest tower of Canterlot, an Alicorn sneezed, almost upsetting her golden crown.

...

A few quick teleportations later, Dusk and Twilight found themselves outside the Ponyville Library. Despite their earlier words, the pair had, like Applejack and AJ, done their best to avoid attention. They had even gone so far as to teleport most of the way. More than anything else, the duo wanted to clear this with Spike, and make sure the dragon knew exactly what was happening before they progressed onward. It had been an interesting morning, and no doubt Spike would want to be filled in.

The two pressed against the shadowed doorway, eyeing the empty street before them. After a cursory magical sweep, they breathed easier. Safe, for now.

Dusk Shine raised a hoof, meaning to open the library door, but was intercepted by Twilight.

The mare read the question in his gaze. "I don't think we should just head in and start explaining things off the top of our horns."

Dusk nodded. "Good thinking. We need a plan; a strategy!"

"If only we could make a checklist..." sighed Twilight, prompting a hushed laugh from Dusk.

"We've been over this! Come on, this can't be that hard. We go in there, tell him that we all now have gender opposites and explain the same things to him that the Princesses did to us, and problem solved. Then we just need to give him time to figure it out on his own."

Twilight looked at the colt in amusement. "It's weird to talk with someone who knows Spike as well as I do."

Dusk grinned. "Get used to it Missy, because apparently I'm not going anywhere!"

Twilight giggled, honest to Celestia *giggled*, at his jest. Dusk laughed along so as not to seem weird, but his face coloured slightly. He cast out for something else funny to say, desperate to hear that magical sound again.

*Bingo!* "The hardest part will be trying to pry Elusive out of his claws!" The mare immediately stopped laughing gave him a look of such seriousness he almost took a step back. *Oh dear.*

"Prying '*Elusive*' out of his claws?" she asked. "Don't you mean Rarity?"

Dusk eyed her. "No, Elusive. You know how he feels about- Wait. No, no you don't. Oh my."

Twilight gasped and brought a hoof to her mouth. "Wait a second... Are you saying that, in your world, Spike is... Well, he's... like... that?"

Dusk caught on immediately and sputtered for a moment. "What? No! Of course not! I mean, not that there's anything *wrong* with that..."

"No, of course not!" interrupted Twilight.

"But Spike doesn't feel that way about Elusive, the little guy just worships him. Admired his dignity and sophistication from day one; you know how grown up he likes to act sometimes."

"Oh, ok," said Twilight, heaving a relieved sigh. She'd love Spike no matter what, but this certainly made this transition a bit easier.

"Unfortunately," continued Dusk, eyes narrowing in thought, "This could still be a bit of a problem."

The smaller unicorn cocked a brow. "What do you mean?"

Dusk Shine shuffled his hooves. "Well, I'm not sure how Spike here acts towards Rarity, but he's always been very... protective of Elusive."

"Oh?"

"As in grilling any mare that ever showed an interest to make sure they were good enough. The whole Blueblood thing... He almost took it harder than Elusive."

"Ah", nodded Twilight, vividly recalling Spike's silent fuming after she had told him the whole story when they got home from the Gala.

Dusk continued, "So if Spike adores Rarity as much as he did Elusive, if in a slightly different way, then this could still be a problem. We could barely get a word in edgewise when Elusive started talking about Rarity."

Smiling, Twilight replied, "It was the same thing with Rarity. Could you all see it too?"

With a grin, Dusk answered, "Plain as day. Those two were made for each other."

...

"Ahhhhh-CHOOOOOOO!" A golden crown went shooting across the throne room, narrowly missing a fast-reacting guard.

...

The stallion cleared his throat. "If Rarity and Elusive are going to end up feeling this way about each other, then I just don't know how Spike is going to take it. Will Elusive not be good enough? Will *Rarity* not be good enough? Will he be unhappy about it no matter what we do?"

Dusk was beginning to babble, and Twilight gave him a gentle nudge to knock him out of it. She retreated perhaps swifter than necessary, her ears folded against her head. "Come on Dusk, you know it's not all that bad."



Dusk Shine took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He grinned weakly. "Sorry about that. I tend to panic sometimes."

Twilight gasped dramatically. "Really? Heavens, I'd know *nothing* about *that*!"

Dusk broke into laughter, Twilight quickly following suit. As the duo's mirth died, their smiling gazes met. Clearing his throat, Dusk abruptly stepped forward and awkwardly embraced Twilight, wrapping a hoof around her shoulders. The mare froze up, completely unsure of how to handle herself. "*He's actually hugging me! What do I do? Do I hug back? How do I hug back! Which are my front hooves again?*"

Stiff as a board, Twilight watched with wide eyes as, after a moment, Dusk released her and backed up, looking any direction but hers.

"Thanks Twilight... I could have gone a bit loco in the coco there..."

The mare remained silent, still standing ram-rod straight. Dusk began to panic. "*Oh Celestia, was that too soon? I just wanted to thank her, isn't that how you thank mares? I didn't mean it like that... Did I? Why is she not saying anything! That's it, I'm teleporting!*"

Just as Dusk's horn began to tingle, Twilight snapped out of her trance. "No problem, Dusk." The mare kept her gaze glued on her hooves, kicking one back and forth. "Happy to help."

Desperate not to sink into yet *another* of the uncomfortable silences that seemed to plague his conversations with Twilight, Dusk latched on to their previous topic. "I'm just worried about how this is going to affect Spike. I don't want to see the little guy hurt."

Twilight looked up at him now, her gaze caring but concerned. "I don't either, but if it was up to me he'd never leave my side and I'd protect him forever. He's got to grow up some time, and... This is part of it. I'm not going to lie to him, and I'm not going to ask Rarity or Elusive to be someone they're not. I wish he didn't have to learn it so soon, but... That's the danger of having a crush, sometimes you get... crushed."

The stallion nodded, the concern in his gaze matched only by the determined set of his jaw. "I know... I just wish it could have waited a little while longer."

A leg wrapped around his neck, and Twilight pressed against his front briefly, returning his earlier embrace. This time, they shared a smile, albeit a sad one.

As Twilight pushed open the door of the library, she heard Dusk speak up from behind her.

"This isn't going to be easy."

She sighed. "I never said it would be. SPIKE!"

Dusk Shine trotted in after her, and locked the library door behind him. It wouldn't do to be interrupted during this conversation.

...

A set of little orange wings buzzed faster than ever before, nearly providing lift to the small pegasus filly bouncing along on her scooter. Her two best friends, trailing the scooter in a little wagon, hung on for dear life as their friend moved faster than they'd ever known her to.

After a particularly nasty bump, Sweetie Belle spoke up.

"Scootaloo! What-ow! What are you trying-OW!- to do, crash? Why are-ow! Why are you going so *fast*?"

Scootaloo barely heard her, caught up in her thoughts. "Didn't you hear what Fluttershy said? Butterscotch said to go talk to our big sisters, and then she said that *Rainbow Dash* would tell me herself! Just this once she'll be *my* big sister! Do you think she'd be creeped out if I wore my Rainbow Dash hat?"

Sweetie Belle and Applebloom shared a look, and declined to answer. Instead, Applebloom, looking alarmingly green at the high-speed ride, asked, "While Ah can understand that you're excited an' all, do ya have to go so fast? This is just downright dangerous!"

"Well, it's a long way out to Sweet Apple Acres!" protested Scootaloo, slowing all the same. "The faster we go, the quicker I can drop you off, then Sweetie Belle at Rarity's house, then go and talk with Rainbow Dash!"

As the trio made it out to Sweet Apple Acres, they failed to notice the kicked up mud and broken branches typical of a pony or two in an immense hurry along the way. Applebloom quickly hopped out as soon as Scootaloo skidded to a stop, but curiously she tugged Sweetie Belle out with her. The two fillies approached the little pegasus, and quickly drew her into a group hug, surprising her.

"Guys, come on!" Scootaloo squirmed, smiling embarrassedly.

When they separated, Sweetie Belle spoke up. "We don't care what Fluttershy said."

Applebloom nodded. "Even if Rainbow Dash doesn't tell ya anything, it don't matter. We'd've toldja as soon as we found out... You're our sister too."

Scootaloo looked away with a big smile, and embraced her friends again. The Cutie Mark Crusaders shared a moment together. Getting a cutie mark paled in comparison to the memories of these moments.

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle quickly headed off, the pegasus filly's enthusiasm not dampened in the slightest. Applebloom waved until the pair were out of sight, before turning around and heading towards the farmhouse. In the distance she spotted her siblings.

*"Huh. Ah wonder why Big Macintosh is orange?"*

# Chapter 11

Rarity and Elusive both slumped against the door of Carousel Boutique, gasping for breath. The pair's headlong flight through Ponyville was a bit more exertion than either or the two unicorns was used to.

"Well... that was... certainly interesting," wheezed Elusive.

"Yes... I suppose... that's one word for it!" Rarity wiped a hoof across her brow, noticing that she was *sweaty* of all things.

The stallion took a deep breath, feeling his pounding heart beginning to slow. Things hadn't gone exactly to plan; in their haste to escape from the Cutie Mark Crusaders, they had drawn more attention to themselves than even they would have liked. Perhaps the continual high pitched screams hadn't been exactly the best idea, but Celestia knew how *terrifying* those three fillies could be! As his breathing evened out, he began to take in his surroundings. Ah, the beloved Boutique! The mannequins, the podium, the work area... It was all here! Granted, perhaps there were a few more dresses around than he remembered, but that was surely to be expected. The stallion rubbed his chin in thought. This could work out; he *had* been meaning to do a few more dress designs recently.

Rarity stepped forwards. "Well, I don't know about you Elusive, but I am absolutely *filthy*! I simply cannot go on until I wash up."

Elusive bowed his head. "By all means Rarity, if you so desire. I was rather hoping I could wash up as well. Would you mind terribly if...?"

"Oh, goodness, not at all darling!" Rarity waved a hoof. "I'll never deny another pony being fabulous. The spare bathroom is just down..." She trailed off, with an odd look on her face. "Heavens, here I am guiding you around a place you've lived in as long as I have! You know where to go Elusive; I'll meet you in the kitchen when you are done."

Rarity watched as, after a gracious thank you, Elusive turned and trotted off towards her second washroom, usually reserved for the use of clients. She felt somewhat guilty as she began ascending the stairs to her own private

rooms: while she kept a very high level of hygiene throughout her establishment - Luna forbid Sapphire Shores entered and had to use a dirty bathroom! - she was well aware that it didn't measure up to the opulence of her own private bathroom. And Elusive must have known that as well... Yet she hadn't detected even a hint of anything but gratitude as the stallion had thanked her. The unicorn, after splashing some water on herself, began touching up her makeup, more out of habit than anything else.

Her mind dwelled on the enigma of the stallion downstairs. He seemed like everything she had ever wanted; cultured, handsome, gentlecoltly, even a fashion designer! And she was not afraid to admit to herself that she found him attractive, at least on a physical level. She watched her own face colour slightly in the mirror as she recalled their flight to the Boutique. Elusive had pulled ahead of her, his long legs eating up the distance, and as his richly curled tail bounced back and forth she had been given tantalising glimpses of-

She gasped. *No!* She splashed herself with some water. *Bad Rarity!*

She lowered her head and rested her brow against the lip of the sink. The cool porcelain soothed her pounding head. "*I've never met anyone quite like him before,*" she mused to herself before gritting her teeth and letting out an irritated growl. "*When did stallions get so difficult!*"

...

Elusive examined his reflection, levitating a wet cloth up to dab at an offending patch of dirt. A quick brush to straighten out any offending hairs, and... Done! He smiled, showing off his pearly whites. *Perfect, as always!*

The client washroom, while small, was still expertly maintained, and a deft hoof like Elusive needed very little to work with to keep himself looking fabulous. Still, he *did* miss his own bathroom, filled with everything he could ever need.

He snorted, looking away. *Do not get hung up on that!* This wasn't his *world*, let alone his home. He was a guest here, and he was going to act appropriately!

Thoughts of worlds and homes made the stallion a little bit introspective, and his gaze misted over a little as he pondered. Ever since Dusk had

arrived in Ponyville, life had become so much more busy... *No, that's not right.* The stallion frowned. Things had always been busy; the lavender unicorn had made things *interesting*. But, as he always did when he thought of his past, his thoughts turned to a certain mare, and a scowl marred his features.

For so long, his thoughts had revolved around her. All his behaviour, all his goals, his dreams, all leading to her. Within weeks of Dusk arriving, the librarian had even managed to come up with the very window of opportunity Elusive had been waiting for: Gala tickets! Finally, everything was moving his way! All those months of planning, countless late nights, all paying off! Then the night had actually arrived; he had been at the Gala! *TheGrand Galloping Gala!*

He sighed, and tried not to dwell on that night.

Afterwards, things had been different. Not bad, exactly, just... different. Had he changed? Had his friends changed? Or was it all just because of some silly little dream he'd hung on to for far too long? The stallion sighed yet again; probably best not to answer that.

Thankfully though, things had quickly picked back up to their usual frantic pace. First Discord, then that rather extreme bout of the flu that had kept him bed-ridden throughout the entirety of Princess Luna's visit... Even the whole Wonder-Colt prank on Rainbow Blitz had been amusing, in its way. But then... it happened.

Fancypants.

All of Elusive's dreams had come true, the stallion experiencing one of the most intense weeks of his life. Always a party, or a benefit, or a gathering, or a social, or something! It had been amazing! And it had only taken one pony to ruin it for him.

His mouth twisted in a scowl. *Blueblood.*

The instant that Elusive began rising through the social circles of Canterlot, the Princess began paying him extra attention: taking care to catch his eye, standing slightly closer than propriety demanded. The selfish mule had even gone so far as to trick him into attending the Christening of a new air

ship, an event at which Elusive had later found out everypony had thought him Blueblood's escort!

In truth, while Elusive missed the high-life of Canterlot, he had been happy to return, if only to get away from that-

He took a deep breath. *Easy, Elusive. Let it go.*

Instead, his thoughts turned to another ivory mare in his life. Now Rarity, *there* was a shining example of a lady. Poised, elegant, not to mention *stunningly* beautiful. Even after finding out that the mare shared his memories almost exactly, he had found himself surprised that she was unattached. His first, knee-jerk reaction had been to try and court her, but he had dismissed that notion almost immediately. He was done with mares for a long time, after how deeply Blueblood had... had *hurthim*.

However putting the seamstress out of his thoughts had been easier said than done. She constantly reminded him, albeit unintentionally, how much of a lady she was, how perfect her manners were... how perfect *she* was. It was hard *not* to like her.

Then they had come to Ponyville, and along the way they had bonded, really bonded. The two industrious unicorns had concluded how the Boutique was going to be run from now on in a matter of minutes, and had plenty of time just to talk with each other, even share some design ideas. It had been a pleasant surprise to discover that they had even had some unique ideas to share with each other.

Elusive groaned, resting his head in his hooves. He had vowed to stay away from mares at least for a little while, but this... He simply couldn't deny his attraction to Rarity. He didn't know whether he had just had a slightly different experience due to being a stallion, or whether he just thought differently to her, or even if, as Blitz often snickered, he was thinking with his *other* horn, but he couldn't get Rarity out of his head.

However this only served to remind him just how Rarity seemed to be reacting to him. While certainly polite and courteous, she was still very guarded. Did she feel the same way about him? He didn't know, and he wouldn't be able to find out until her wall came down.

A soft knock on the door nearly scared him out of his wits. Silently cursing his own wandering thoughts, the stallion rose and trotted over to the door. He opened it, revealing a slightly uncomfortable Rarity.

"E...Elusive. So sorry to interrupt, but... Well, would you care to use the upstairs washroom?"

...

Rainbow Dash burst out of the side of a cloud, letting out a loud cheer. She lived for flying; it was just what she did. And now she finally had somepony else to enjoy it as much as her!

It had taken only seconds to put a comfortable distance between the two speedsters and the oncoming Crusaders, and now Blitz and Dash were more than content to frolic among the clouds, trying out this manoeuvre or that, absently fixing up a cloud or two. Free to stretch their wings in a way that the Canterlot banquet hall hadn't quite allowed, the two pegusi found themselves oddly lost. Now that the whole wide world was open, and with somepony equally as fast by their side, which way did you turn?

As a straight line of evenly spaced trees emerged on the ground before them, the Elements of Loyalty shared a challenging smirk. Every way at once, of course.

They bolted off on some unseen signal, weaving in and out of the trees ahead, looping, twisting, ducking and diving. The pair flew all around Ponyville, not caring who saw. Twilight had said if anypony asked, tell them the full story, right? Well, if they could keep up, Rainbow Dash would tell them anything they wanted to know. She'd tell them what she had for breakfast. Hay, she'd tell them what her *mother* had for breakfast.

A cyan flank whooshed past her, accompanied by a thrilled laugh. The filly grit her teeth, irritated at herself for becoming distracted. That's what thinking cost you! Flight was the beautiful, freeing absence of thought. Thinking slowed you down. All you had to do was *react*. It was dangerous, it was often reckless, and it was *hers*.

Rainbow Blitz flew past her again, the other way this time. Their eyes met briefly.



She grinned fiercely. Scratch that, it was *theirs*.

...

The events of the morning soon caught up with the two pegasus speedsters, and at Rainbow Dash's insistence they retreated to her house for something to eat.

Blitz couldn't wipe the grin off his face. Flying with Dash had been incredible! The way she moved, how quickly she could accelerate, how she could turn on a bit! Was that how he looked when he flew? It couldn't be, there was no way he was that graceful. She was all flowing movements and easy transitions, her mane and tail always whipping behind her, the flags of her own... her own... awesomeness! Her coolness!

Dash bent over in front of him, looking under the wisp of cloud next to her door for the little key he knew she kept there. Her sextuple coloured tail swished slightly back and forth, and suddenly Blitz became acutely aware of the word 'sextuple'. His face burned red. *POMF*. His wings jumped to attention at his sides.

*Her radicalness...*

The mare pulled her head back up, a small key between her teeth. Small wisps of cloud stuck in her mane and eyelashes.

"Thre go!" she managed to say around the key. She smiled as she turned to face the stallion, shuffling her back hooves a little self-consciously. In the back of her mind, she knew she didn't have to bend quite so far over to reach the key, but that little voice was shut out for now. Seeing the stallion standing there with a mad blush on his face and his wings standing at straight attention nearly caused her to drop the key.

Blitz's jaw immediately slammed shut. "Do..." *Buck Blitz, think! THINK!* "Do my feathers look straight to you!" he blurted out.

Dash, her own temperature rising, raised a brow.

"I.. I felt a little bit of drag! Yeah, you know, in that last pass there, I was tilting a little to the left. Nothing there?" He pretended to examine his wings.

A blush spreading across her face, Rainbow shook her head. She noticed Blitz's eyes tracking the movement. The stallion stepped forward.

"Hang on Dash, you've got a bit of cloud in your mane." He reached upward, and gently plucked the offending wisps from her rainbow forelock. He grew redder. "And, uh... A bit more, just here." He gestured towards her face. The mare closed her eyes, feeling the stallion brush away a few strands of cloud.

*He's so gentle.*

*She's so warm.*

As soon as Blitz pulled back, Dash's eyes snapped open in alarm. "*Oh Celestia, not now!*" Suddenly nervous, the mare ushered Blitz inside, opening the door for him. "So, Blitz, why don't you go inside and make yourself comfortable, get something to eat! You know where everything is, I'll be right behind you! Just gotta-" She winced. "Just gotta put this key back!"

Eager for a private moment to try and get his wings back under control, Blitz agreed and headed inside. Dash pulled the key out of the door and deposited it back amongst the clouds, before taking a furtive look around. Not seeing anyone else, especially Blitz, she let out a great sigh of relief. *POMF*. Actually jolting her off her hooves for a moment, her wings snapped to full extension.

"Ugh, that is SO much better!"

...

After the two Rainbow's had managed to calm themselves down and found something passably edible in Dash's fridge, she had introduced Blitz to Tank. The little tortoise had taken one look at Blitz and accepted him, briefly stretching up his neck for a pat. While he was by no means stupid, Tank preferred to take a simpler look at things, and another Rainbow pony was not a problem to him. When the reptile trundled off to do whatever it was he did, the speedsters found themselves awkwardly seated next to each other on the mare's couch.

Blitz rubbed the back of his neck with a hoof. "Soooo... What now?"

Dash looked away, slightly embarrassed at the implications of his question. *Ugh, why do I have to be so weird!*" Well, Twilight and the Princess both said to get you settled in Ponyville. You don't have to worry about a job, the Princess said she'd sort that out, so... what else is there?"

After a moment's consideration, Blitz asked, "Where am I going to stay?" The second the words left his lips, he could have kicked himself. "*You foal!*" he thought. "*She's going to think you want to stay here! And then she'll get the wrong idea entirely!*" His brain caught up to itself, and began projecting a whole slew of *graphically detailed* images into his mind's eye. "*GAH! Make it stop! Why do all of my thoughts about her always end up HERE!*"

Indeed, at first Rainbow Dash looked like she really could read his thoughts, but the mare quickly schooled her features back to what she hoped was a cool, casual look. "Duh! You'll stay here!"

Blitz's jaw dropped and he started stammering incoherently. Dash sat straight up, not sure whether she was offended or pleased by his assumption.

"No no no no, nothing like that!" The mare waved her hooves for emphasis. "It would just be silly to make you stay anywhere else, this is pretty much your house as well."

"Well, ok, but... Where will I sleep? Here?" he said, gesturing to the couch they sat on. "We only ever made the one bedroom."

Something glinted in Rainbow Dash's eyes. "So we make another bedroom!"

...

After a quick race out to the Ponyville Weather Patrol Headquarters to sift through the excess cloud bin for good quality clouds, the two pegasi got to work remodelling what was to be *their* home. As always they went for simplicity over anything else. After moving any non-cloud items to a room they wouldn't be touching, the duo set to work demolishing part of the upper level, and flattening out the roof of the lower level to give themselves more room to work. Years of experience working with clouds made the work fly along, and sooner than either had hoped they were putting up the

walls on Blitz's new bedroom, right next to Dash's. Both pegasi pointedly avoided mentioning this.

Rainbow Dash took a few steps back as Blitz continued building the walls, trying to get a better look at the overall structure. The brash flier had a bit of a soft spot for her home, and always did her best to make at least the outside look presentable. Satisfied with how the work was going, she made to go and help Blitz with the finishing touches, before a voice stopped her in her tracks. A voice that served to remind her just how wrapped up in her thoughts she had been.

"Hey! Rainbow Dash!"

Scootaloo.

She turned to behold the filly herself, scooter and all, her little striped helmet dangling from the handlebars. Try as she might she could never even get irritated at the younger pegasus; she was just so enthusiastic. And had very good taste in heros, if Rainbow Dash said so herself. She conveniently forgot the whole Mare Do Well fiasco.

Smiling despite her dismay, Rainbow called out to the filly. "Heya Squirt! What's up?"

Scootaloo hopped on the spot, fairly humming with excitement. Taking a deep breath, she launched into an explanation. "Weeeeelll, Applebloom, Sweetie Belle and I were throwing our ball around when I saw these chariots come out of the sky so went to investigate and try to get our Detective Pony cutie marks but we didn't find anything and we got covered in tree sap *a-gain*, so we went back to Ponyville but Applebloom forgot her helmet so we went back to get it and couldn't find it and we ran into Fluttershy and a pony we'd never met before and Fluttershy said he was Butterscotch and we asked where he was from and he said it was a secret that only your big sister could tell you so I thought I wouldn't get to know but then Fluttershy said that you would tell me so *will you please tell me what the secret is?*"

Rainbow Dash blinked, slowly. Even *her* brain was having a little trouble processing at that speed. She caught on though, and narrowed her eyes, realising she'd been had. *Very clever, Fluttershy.*

"Hey Rainbow Dash!" Blitz spoke up at the worst possible time. "What's the hold up? I could use a hoof over here!"

Scootaloo gasped, going red in the face. "Oh my gosh, is there a colt up there?" She gasped even louder. "Oh my gosh, do you have a *coltfriend*?"

Rainbow flushed. "No, of course not! Well... I mean...I don't know..." She started to babble, and clamped her mouth shut. "Why'd you come here again?" In her distraction, the mare failed to notice the stallion alight next to her.

"Yoohoo, Rainbow Dash? What is it?" He noticed the little form down on the ground. "Oh, hey Scoots!"

The pegasus filly's eyes darted to Dash, then to Blitz, and back again. Her jaw dropped. Her mouth worked soundlessly. Her brain pressed against the inside of her skull with wide eyes, not believing what it was supposed to be processing. The rainbow spectrum reflected in her vision, twice over.

Her knees wobbled.

Her vision wavered.

Darkness began to take her...

...and retreated just as quickly.

Letting out a fillyish squeal of pure excitement, Scootaloo turned and bounded towards the nearest tree in one wing-assisted leap. Powered by the promise of a double rainbow, the little filly used one of the branches as a catapult to launch herself into the sky, her small wings doing their job of guiding her towards the cloud house. She bowled right into the two Rainbows, knocking them flat on their backs and standing over them with a massive grin on her face.

*"OH MY GOSH THERE ARE TWO RAINBOW DASHES!"*

...

Throughout Ponyville, all twelve of the Elements of Harmony sat down and talked, be it with an over-excited filly, a baby dragon, or a little white bunny.

They explained everything they knew, a couple of them going so far as to quote Princess Celestia word for word. Thankfully, all of it was accepted with open minds and open hearts, allowing all of the colts to breathe a little easier.

Their families accepted them. Their friends accepted them. Their loved ones accepted them. For now, that was enough.