



Shipping and Handling

By Pegasus Rescue Brigade

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Chapter 1

"That is the last straw!"

The bulky brown Pegasus slammed his front hooves down on the desk so hard, Ditzzy Doo feared it would split in two. He positively glowered at the grey pegasus, his face just inches from hers.

"I... I'm sorry, boss..." Ditzzy mumbled, shrinking back a bit. "Uh... it won't happen again?" Her apology was phrased more like a question.

"Oh, right. Sure. *That's* believable..." the larger pegasus snorted, twisting his black baseball cap haphazardly. "I mean, what are the odds of Ditzzy Doo screwing up another delivery? I mean, that *never* happens..."

Ditzzy winced at the harsh sarcasm in her superior's voice. Still, she managed to work up the nerve to ask the inevitable question.

"So..." she began, trying her best to focus both her eyes on the angry pony in front of her. "...Um... how much are you gonna' dock my pay this time?"

The other pegasus slapped a hoof to his forehead. "Ditzzy, what're you not getting, here?" he barked back. "It's bigger than that this time! I mean, you have the lowest successful delivery rate in the history of Cloudsdale Mail and Freight, you're constantly losing letters or delivering them to the wrong locations, your sense of direction is so bad it takes you five times as long to get anywhere as it would for any other pegasus... heck you're even a hazard to pedestrians sometimes! You're lucky that purple unicorn didn't sue us that one day when we were delivering the piano and all that other junk!"

Ditzzy winced at the memory, and sunk even lower in front of her furious boss. "Well... what do you want me to do, sir?" she squeaked. "I'm trying my best."

"Then your best isn't good enough for this company!" The stallion roared. Ditzzy groaned and slumped fully to the floor, covering her head

with her hooves as if she feared being struck.

Seeing that he had taken his verbal abuse a bit too far, the larger pegasus softened a bit, and lowered his voice. "Get up, Ditz'. I'm not gonna' hurt you."

Peering up with one large yellow eye, Ditzzy hesitantly rose back up to hover at the height of her superior.

"Right... now, uh..." the brown pony searched for a less harsh way to speak his mind. "Ditzzy, I know we kind of hired you on... 'special considerations', what with your little disability and all. But, in all honesty, you need to at least live up to the basic requirements that come with being a mailmare."

He glanced a little sympathetically at the dejected grey pegasus. "I've given you a lot of second chances now," he continued. "But... I just don't think our reputation can take any more. So, I think... I think we're gonna have to let you go."

"What!?" Ditzzy's crossed eyes went wide with panic. "But...but...but I need this job! I've got little Dinky to take care of at home! After her father... and the accident... I'm the only one she's got for support right now!"

The other pony hid his eyes beneath the brim of his hat. "I know that, and that's why I've been so lenient with you before. But today was different."

The larger pony's eyes turned angry again. "It was a letter from *freakin' Princess Celestia*, Ditzzy! That sort of thing needs to arrive at the correct location, and it needs to arrive on time! Her decree to solve the situation in Manehattan arrived *six hours late*, and by then rioters had destroyed a lot of private property! Do you know who's gonna' get charged for that, Ditzzy? We are!"

Again, the boss made an attempt to control his anger. "Now, you see what I mean here?" he grumbled a little more gently. "I gotta' do what I gotta' do. Cloudsdale Mail and Freight needs to conserve what little reputation it has left. Believe me, if I don't fire you now, they're gonna' be all over me about it. It's pretty much out of my hooves."

Ditzy opened her mouth to respond, but couldn't manage to say anything. Her head swam with unfortunate memories; accidents and errors that could have been avoided had a more 'professional' pony been given the job. Defeated, she just looked sadly at her superior, and then floated over to collect her things.

"Hey, if it helps at all..." the brown pegasus mentioned. "I won't dock anything from your last paycheck. In fact, I'll even throw in a little goodbye bonus for you. You know, a dozen extra bits or so?"

"Thank you, sir," Ditzy tried to smile, but her mood was betrayed by the tears welling up in her eyes. "Have a good afternoon."

With a final sigh, she made for the door, bumping into the doorframe on her first attempt to exit. "Lousy depth perception," she grumbled, as she flew out into the open air of Cloudsdale.

The bright, beautiful day in the aerial city contrasted with the aura of gloom surrounding the grey pegasus. A few other pegasi watched in concern as she fluttered haphazardly by, grumbling to herself.

"I can't believe this," she moaned aloud as she descended from the pegasus capitol toward her home on the ground, "So I get lost a couple of times, and bam, I'm out the door."

She thought about that. *Well, more like a couple of times a week, actually.*

She brought her forehooves to her face, rubbing her misaligned eyes. "It's these blasted eyes!" she yelled to no one in particular. "I can't help if my directional judgement, and depth perception, and face recognition, and... reading skills, and... oh, all those things, are so poor! I think I function pretty well for a pegasus who can't see straight!"

Wiping the last of the tears from her face, the dejected pegasus flew home, thinking ahead to the grim task of searching through the help wanted section of today's newspaper.

"Mom! Mom!" Dinky Doo burst through the door of the cottage, brandishing

a colorful paper with her horn's magic as she scurried inside. "Look what I made in school today!"

Ditzy looked up from the newspaper she was struggling to read to smile at her eager filly. Dinky proudly levitated her prize in front of her mother's face, holding it at the angle that she had learned made it easiest for her mom to see the details clearly.

Ditzy gazed at the filly's crude but colorful drawing. In the background, there was a small building that was identifiable as their cottage, with various flowers growing around it. In the foreground stood two ponies, a larger pegasus, and a smaller unicorn, both colored in shades of grey. The drawing wasn't greatly detailed, but Ditzy could still tell it was a picture of Dinky and herself. The sky behind them was bright blue, adorned with a rainbow, which was colored nicely, despite the fact that the colors were in the wrong order. The little filly must have spent all day making it look just right.

"That's a very nice drawing, Dinky," Ditzy said as lightheartedly as she could. Dinky retrieved the paper, smiling at her success, but then her smile faded when she looked at her mom again.

"Mom... is something wrong?"

Ditzy bristled. Her mind worked furiously to create a convincing lie, so that Dinky wouldn't be concerned.

"Just... just a little problem I ran into this morning," the pegasus responded, smiling at her filly. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Something went wrong at work again, didn't it?" Dinky continued, frowning.

Dang. That unicorn could be too smart for her own good sometimes.

"Um... well..." Ditzy stammered. "Yeah, there was a little mishap, but it's really nothing to get worked up over..."

Dinky put her front hooves onto the couch, glancing at the newspaper before Ditzy could put it away. "Want ads?" she asked skeptically. "Mommy, you didn't lose your job, did you?"

"I... I..." Ditzzy thought fast, not wanting to upset Dinky. "I'm just thinking of maybe switching jobs, that's all," she lied. "Things are getting hectic at work. Yeah."

If Dinky suspected anything more was amiss (and she probably did), she didn't show it. The filly trotted up to her room to do her assignments for the evening. Ditzzy sighed in relief and went back to scouring the paper for any job she was qualified for. One small ad in the corner of the page caught her eye.

"Equestria Speedy Shipping Services! Equestria's number-one shipping service looking for new employees! Previous experience preferred. Located just outside of Ponyville, please visit us to apply."

That sounds perfect! Ditzzy thought. *I've shipped plenty of freight to every city in Equestria in the past. I think I could handle a job here! And the best part is, I'll have a clean slate with my new boss. Maybe I could be a better mailmare this time!*

Grinning wildly, Ditzzy hastily scribbled down the details for tomorrow, and then rose from her couch to go prepare dinner.

Shoving the remnants of her muffin-based breakfast into her mouth as she flew, Ditzzy arrived in the quiet streets of Ponyville. Squinting at the address she had written, she flew through the streets, looking for the location.

It took longer than she thought to find the place. She'd been looking for a large, noticeable office or other glossy delivery building. Instead, she found herself at what looked like a slightly run-down old establishment rammed between a long string of small businesses and an old warehouse. Ditzzy suspected the warehouse was probably used as the storage building for freight the company transported.

Ditzzy checked the address number, and it matched the one she had copied from the newspaper ad. There was no sign on the door, but she supposed it didn't matter. The pegasus pushed open the door.

The first thing Ditzzy noticed after closing the door behind her was the low amount of light. A small window on one side of the room was the only light source, and the shadow of the adjacent warehouse blocked a lot of that light as well. The walls were bare, and the room was totally empty save for a long counter on which absolutely nothing was sitting save for a service bell. A door in the wall behind the counter read "offices".

Ditzzy wasn't surprised she'd never heard of this place; it certainly didn't look like a big deal; if the reception room was any indication, it probably wasn't a very wealthy company. Ditzzy pondered if a little service like this probably could even be considered a business competitor to the nationally renowned Cloudsdale Mail and Freight.

"Beggars can't be choosers, I guess," Ditzzy said aloud, unfazed by how humble as the new place seemed compared to her old place of employment. She flew up to the counter and rang the little bell. Then she waited, one eye focused on the door to the back while the other scanned the bland room for any further details.

The door creaked open, and a male unicorn peered out, his eyes falling on Ditzzy.

"Yes, ma'am?" he asked in a clearly uninterested voice, not bothering to bring any more than his head forth from the back room.

"Uh..." Ditzzy stammered, trying not to be intimidated by the unicorn's completely indifferent demeanor. "...I...I came to apply for a job. I saw the ad in the newspaper, and..."

The unicorn suddenly looked considerably more interested. "A potential employee? That's good news! Please come on back here, my office is at the end of the hall."

As suddenly as he had arrived, the unicorn disappeared again into the depths of the building. He hadn't even stepped far enough from the shadow of the doorway for the pegasus to get a good look at him.

Ditzzy cautiously flew over the desk and gave the door a nudge. It opened to a hallway just as barren as the front room, and the pegasus caught a glimpse of the unicorn disappearing into the last room at the end.

"This building sure is... drab," the cross-eyed pony mumbled as she walked past the row of identical, unmarked doors. Only two in the whole hall gave any indication of what lied behind; one was marked with a symbol of a staircase, and the door to which Ditzzy was headed held a nameplate.

"Dr. Candyfloss, Senior Manager."

Ditzzy entered the office and found the unicorn that was presumably Dr. Candyfloss sitting behind his desk. She squinted at the sudden change in lighting; this room held a window that wasn't blocked by any outside structure, allowing light to flood the room. Once her eyes adjusted, Ditzzy turned her attention toward the unicorn himself.

Dr. Candyfloss had a very airy appearance about him. His coat was white, contrasting with his magenta mane and tail, both of which seemed to be spread out lazily in a wispy sort of style, as if wind had blown his hair back and it had frozen in place like that. It looked curiously like the aerated sugar product that was the unicorn's namesake, if not for the slightly darker color of the mane.

He also wore a small bowtie, and a thick gold ring around one hoof. Perhaps most unusual were his eyes, which were a cloudy gray color that caused him to cast a somewhat unsettling gaze.

Ditzzy glanced at his cutie mark, which appeared to be a small, golden bow with an arrow in place. The pegasus had no idea what it meant, but she never questioned it if a pony's cutie mark didn't seem to match their career, considering the bubbles that adorned her flank had nothing to do with her passion for mail delivery or muffins.

"Come in, miss, come in," Dr. Candyfloss called, gesturing to a chair in the corner. His voice was unusually high and breathy for a male pony. Ditzzy moved to the chair in question and faced the unicorn.

"Hi!" she said cheerfully. "So... this is where I apply, right?"

"That it is," the unicorn said with a smile. "I'm very glad to find somepony showing an interest; we're woefully understaffed right now. So if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to get right to the interview."

His horn glowed briefly, and a quill and piece of paper escaped the clutter of his desk rose up in front of him.

"So, ma'am, why don't you give me your name and tell me a bit about yourself."

Ditzy cleared her throat. "Well, my name's Ditzy Doo. I'm a pegasus living a short ways outside of Cloudsdale. I'm looking for a job to support myself and my filly, since I'm a single mom and..."

"Hold it, hold it," Dr. Candyfloss intervened, frowning. "You're a single mother? Dear me, I'm afraid if you're separated, it won't look good for our..."

"Actually," Ditzy cut him off. "We're not... I mean weren't, separated. It's just my husband is... deceased..."

"Oh!" The stallion responded. Much to Ditzy's confusion and slight indignation, Dr. Candyfloss seemed to brighten considerably at this news. "Well, that works then. No problems. Please continue."

Ditzy struggled to find her voice again. *Why in Equestria...* she thought, *...Would it be preferable to have a dead spouse to a seperated one?* She decided it didn't matter either way; she couldn't fathom how either option could have any bearing on a delivery job.

"So..." she picked up. "Yeah, I need the job if possible, since I don't have any income at the moment."

"Don't worry," the unicorn responded. "We'll be sure to hire you if at all possible, and help you with the whole nasty business." He glanced at his notes. "Speaking of which, would you mind giving me past employment details?"

"Well, my last job was at Cloudsdale Mail and Freight," the pegasus continued, somewhat nervous about the direction the topic was taking.

"Your position?"

"Mailmare, of course."

"And why did you leave that job?"

"Well," Ditzzy began, her head drooping a bit in shame. "I... wasn't particularly punctual. Or good at navigation. I get the job done, most of the time, but I'm a little slow at it because of my eye condition..."

"Yes, I was wondering about the eyes," Candyfloss responded. "No offense, of course! They're just... curious."

"Oh it's no problem. I get that a lot." Ditzzy replied, waving away the mention of her unusual eyes. "So anyways, eventually they had to let me go, because I couldn't keep up with their speed and accuracy standards." She leaned forward suddenly. "But I really try my best! Surely with your understaffing here, employing a less-than-100%-efficient pony is preferable to not employing anyone at all!"

"Calm down, my dear!" Dr. Candyfloss responded with a reassuring smile. "Don't let it worry you. Such difficulties make little difference to us here!"

Ditzzy was struck dumb. The unicorn had brushed off her somewhat terrible delivery record like it was nothing. "Gee, Dr. Candyfloss," she said hesitantly. "You guys must really be desperate for employees, then."

The unicorn smiled at the confused pony. "No, miss Ditzzy, it's simply that I am more concerned about your personality than your physical skills for this job. And you seem to be quite charming; friendly as well as honest. I think you'll be fine."

"Well... thanks!" Ditzzy replied, smiling. "So, is there anything else you need to know?"

The unicorn put a hoof to his chin in thought. "Just outstanding medical conditions, I suppose. How bad, really, is your little eye problem? And do you currently have any other major health issues?"

Ditzzy grinned sheepishly. "The eyes are the only problem, and they aren't really that bad. My depth perception is a little off, and I get lost easily. Oh,

and I can't read very quickly. But other than that, I'm fine."

Dr. Candyfloss scribbled down a few more notes with his magical quill, then looked up and smiled politely at his pegasus guest. "Well then, miss Ditzzy Doo, I think you make the cut! I'd be happy to make you a member of the team at Equestria Speedy Shipping Services!"

Ditzzy's eyes lit up. "Really? I'm hired?"

"Almost," the unicorn chuckled. "Just sign the line on the employment contract!"

He levitated a long scroll full of text and a quill over to Ditzzy. She glanced briefly at the contract, and didn't see any particularly noticeable problems with it. Besides, Dr. Candyfloss seemed trustworthy, just a bit unconventional; Ditzzy put her doubts aside and signed her name at the bottom of the contract, which promptly rolled shut and floated into the unicorn's file cabinet.

"Excellent!" Dr. Candyfloss chirped. "It's still early, so we'll have time to send you out on your first assignment later today! In the meantime, please head upstairs to the employee lounge. At least one of our other members should be up there to show you around. I'll call you over an intercom when I have your first assignment."

"Thank you sir!" Ditzzy squealed excitedly. She performed a goofy salute before zipping out of the office.

Dr. Candyfloss chuckled to himself as he watched her go. "Such enthusiasm." He said to himself. "I just hope she can live up to my expectations. This job takes a special kind of pony. She may not be a top-notch mailmare, but perhaps she'll find her duties here more to her tastes."

Ditzzy opened the door with the little stairway sign on it. As she proceeded up the narrow stairwell, she thought to herself about her new boss; he was an unusual pony, to say the least. Ditzzy wondered why he seemed more concerned about her personality than her skills; maybe she was going to be assigned a short, easy mail route full of little old ponies who like to stop and

have a friendly conversation with the mailmare.

The grey pegasus was so busy fantasizing about her job that she crashed right into the upper door, causing it to swing open. Once she recovered from the impact, she was able to peer into the employee lounge. It wasn't lavish, but at least it was furnished. A few couches and a bookshelf sat around the edges. A fridge sat in one corner, and there was fresh coffee on a counter, as well as crumbs on a plate, the remnants of what Ditzzy hoped to Celestia had been muffins. The room had a rather high ceiling and a large window; it seemed a calm and cozy place for her to relax between deliveries.

However, there was no sign of the other pony Candyfloss had mentioned; maybe he or she had left early, or was on an assignment after all.

"Hey! Yeah, you! The gray mare!"

Surprised by the voice, Ditzzy peered almost straight up, and spotted a pegasus that had been hovering by the ceiling when she entered. He had a red coat and brown mane, and a pair of intense green eyes. He also had a strong, sleek build; he looked rather athletic.

Ditzzy gawked for a moment as the other pegasus swooped down. "Hey," he said. "What's wrong, didn't Candyfloss answer the service bell again? His office is at the end of the hall downstairs."

"What?" Ditzzy was momentarily confused. "Oh... no, I'm not a customer. I'm a new employee."

"Really? You're kidding!" the other pegasus responded. "We haven't gotten anyone new in ages! This'll be really helpful."

He extended a hoof. "I'm Autumn Breeze," he said with a friendly smile. "But I usually just go by Breeze. And you are?"

"Ditzzy Doo," the female pegasus answered, shaking Breeze's hoof. "I was just hired a couple minutes ago."

"Sweet," Breeze responded. "The other's are all out on jobs right now, so I'll give you the new worker lowdown."

He gestured around the room. "Later in the day, most of us are going to be hanging out in here. This is where we chill when we're on the clock but not on assignment. It's a nice place, really. Fridge is usually stocked, and we got hot breakfast and fresh coffee in the mornings. Unfortunately, you seem to have missed breakfast today. Pity too, we had some really nice blueberry muffins..."

Ditzy jumped and put a hoof to her mouth to stop a squeal, as she literally quivered with excitement at the prospect of fresh baked muffins daily. Fortunately for her, Breeze was looking the other way at the time.

"That's about all we got around here..." Breeze finished, turning back to look at Ditzy. "Have any questions before old Candyfloss sends you out?"

"Well," Ditzy pondered. "Uh, is there any way to get from here into the warehouse next door?"

Breeze raised an eyebrow. "What... why would you need to get in there?"

"Well, that's where the freight is stored, isn't it?"

"What freight?"

Now it was Ditzy's turn to give Breeze a weird look. "Uh... you know... the packages, the furniture, everything else. Where's the freight we need to ship?"

"What are you talking ab..." Breeze stopped in mid-sentence as he processed Dtizy's last comment. "Wait... did you just say, the *freight* we need to ship?"

"Yes!" Ditzy yelled in exasperation. "This is Equestria Speedy Shipping Services, isn't it? If I'm going to be a mailmare, I need to know where the mail I'm delivering is!"

Breeze stared at Ditzy, speechless for a split-second. Then, he burst into a fit of laughter so intense that he fell to the floor, rolling and flailing around as he continued to guffaw. Ditzy stared at him, completely at a loss for words to the male pegasus' seemingly senseless reaction.

"Oh, I told him! I TOLD Candyfloss this was gonna happen if he didn't reword the ad! He didn't believe me! Oh, I'm never gonna let him live this down!"

"Excuse me..." said Ditzy weakly. "But, can you please explain what in Equestria is going on?"

Breeze finally got to his hooves, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes. "Ditzy, my girl," he said with a chuckle. "Nowadays, the word 'shipping' has more than one definition."

Ditzy looked skeptical. "Meaning..."

"Meaning," continued Breeze, "that Equestria Speedy Shipping doesn't deliver letters and haul freight at all."

Ditzy tensed. "Then... then what *do* you do?"

"The other type of shipping," Breeze answered with a glint in his eye. "We at Equestria Speedy Shipping aren't delivery ponies... we're pony matchmakers!"

Chapter 2

The next thing Ditzzy remembered was waking suddenly. She would have immediately taken the opportunity to pass the whole incident off as a dream, had she not looked up to see Autumn Breeze standing over her.

"Hi." Said Breeze bluntly. "You passed out, so I put you on the couch. I'll give you a second to collect yourself, in case coming to grips with your situation makes you faint again."

He chuckled a bit, but Ditzzy hardly heard him; her head was positively swimming with thoughts as everything Dr. Candyfloss had said and done began to make sense. *Dr. Candyfloss was glad to hear I wasn't separated from my husband... she thought, ...because that would mean that there had been poor choices of romantic partner made. He wouldn't hire a matchmaker that had failed to match herself up!*

One after another, the rest of Candyfloss's mannerisms began to make sense. *And personality is more important than delivery skills since I'm not going to be delivering anything at all! And Dr. Candyfloss's cutie mark... it's Cupid's bow and arrow... and...*

Shaking herself from her fast-paced reverie, Ditzzy finally sat up, looking overwhelmed and somewhat miserable. Breeze still looked concerned as he looked over her.

"Are you gonna be okay?" the male pegasus asked. "I guess that news was kind of a shock. I'll get you a glass of water, and then you can feel free to bombard me with any questions you may have. I'm sure some have arisen in your mind by now."

He was right in that respect; Ditzzy was overflowing with new concerns, as well as a nagging feeling that she had wound up in way over her head this time. The grey pegasus took the glass that Breeze offered and quickly downed the water. Her head feeling a little clearer, she turned to look at Breeze, who was smiling a little awkwardly.

"So..." Ditzzy finally found her voice. "I guess the first thing I need to know is... now what? Can I just go down to Dr. Candyfloss right now and quit?"

"I doubt it," Breeze responded. "You signed the contract, right? That means you're on the job for one year, and then you renew or quit."

"But, surely if it's a mistake, he can reconsider!" Ditzzy countered. "I mean, this isn't what I thought I signed up for! I even told Dr. Candyfloss I was a mailmare before this!"

"You did?" Breeze looked intrigued. "Well, it's not like I haven't been telling him that one of these days a mailpony was going to apply by accident. That must mean he hired you on purpose, even knowing that you had no idea what was going on!"

"What?" Ditzzy replied incredulously. "I knew he was desperate for new employees, but not to the point of hiring completely inexperienced mares that aren't even aware what they're applying for!"

"No, it's not that," said Breeze calmly. "Listen Ditzzy. Candyfloss may not be the best boss ever, but he's unparalleled in the shipping business... and yes, I mean the new definition of shipping," he added quickly, countering the question Ditzzy was about to ask. "Anyway, he would never do something like this without a reason. If he hired you on such bizarre circumstances, then he sees something in you that he thinks will make you a valuable member of our team."

Ditzzy looked skeptical. "What else do you know about Dr. Candyfloss?"

"Quite a bit, actually," Breeze chuckled. "First of all, he's not a doctor, he just likes the sound of adding a title to his name. I tend to remind him of that pretty often, since it drives him crazy." Breeze punctuated his sentence with a chuckle. "Anyway, he was born into a family who owns a candy company in Fillydelphia, but he never really liked the candy business. He was an introverted little colt, not talking to many other ponies, and always keeping notes in a secret notebook of his. Then one day, so he tells me, he put those notes he took to good use, dropped a few choice tidbits of information to a few choice ponies, and by the end of the day, half the employees at the factory were paired up with a significant other. And thus, Candyfloss got his matchmaking Cutie Mark."

"But my special talent isn't matchmaking!" Ditzzy responded. "My cutie mark has nothing to do with it!"

"Neither does mine," said Breeze calmly, showing off his cutie mark, a maple leaf. "I'm actually part of the fall weather team. I'm usually in charge of getting any leaves off the trees that the Running of the Leaves doesn't take care of. But, during the other nine months of the year, I need something to do, and here I am."

"Then... you're good at your job here?" Ditzzy asked, before realizing the negative implication she had made. "I mean, uh, even though it's not your special talent?"

"Actually, yeah," Breeze answered. "I applied here on purpose, matchmaking is sort of a secondary talent of mine. Very few ponies have it as their special talent, but plenty can do it almost as well on the side."

He looked at Ditzzy for a moment, as if trying to see some obscure detail. "Even if you've never tried to ship two ponies together before, you might have the talent for it hidden in there somewhere. And Candyfloss can see it; I think he can see it in everypony who has it. If he hired you, even while knowing that you have no experience, then something about you is signaling to him that you're the pony for the job."

"But I... I..." Ditzzy didn't know what to say. She couldn't think of another argument. Instead, she said something entirely different.

"Maybe... I should just give it a try then?"

"That's the spirit!" Breeze smiled broadly. "You never know until you've given it a go, right?"

"Yeah, but..." Ditzzy looked a little worried still. "Can you at least give me a better idea of what I need to do?"

"Sure, it's not as hard as it sounds," Breeze replied. "See, the pony looking to win the heart of their crush sometimes is unsure how to go about doing it. So they call this company, and Candyfloss sends whoever he deems to be the best employee for the job out to help. And don't think he doesn't

already have a specific type of job in mind for you. He does. He's always a step ahead somehow."

Ditzy just gulped.

"Anyway, one of us goes to meet this lovestruck pony," Breeze continued. "And find out who the object of their affection is. Then comes the fun part. We're tasked with finding a discrete way to get the other pony interested in our client, to whatever extent the client asks, be it a simple, casual date, or something way more complicated. A price is agreed on beforehand, which is different for everypony; we bargain with the client until we both agree on a price, and if we succeed in the matchmaking, the client pays."

"And if we fail?" Ditzy asked.

"That's up to the client. Some are friendly and will give a fraction of the pay for the attempt. Others won't turn over a single bit if they're dissatisfied. In that way, it can be a tough business. And 10% of your pay goes to Candyfloss so he can keep this run-down place from crumbling in on us."

"Alright, that all makes sense," Ditzy responded. "But you still didn't tell me *how* to go about the matchmaking."

Breeze grinned mischievously. "That's because that part is different every time. Get creative. And don't get too worked up about it; if you have a talent for this stuff, it will usually work out, surprising as that may sound."

Ditzy didn't really believe him, and he seemed to pick up on that. "Really, don't worry," he said gently. "Try it once or twice and see for yourself."

A loud screech filled the room. Ditzy flinched from the sound, but Breeze didn't so much as bat an eyelash. "You get used to that," he said dully. "It's the intercom."

The grating sound was replaced by the breathy voice of Candyfloss. "Paging miss Ditzy Doo. Please report to my office for your first assignment."

Ditzy shot a panicked look at Breeze, who just smiled and

shrugged. "Good luck," he chuckled, as Ditzzy slowly exited the room.

Ditzzy stared at the address on the little paper. It was the only resource she was given. There was no way to know who the client was, or what kind of job they had in mind. Ditzzy was instructed to just go to the address and see for herself.

However, she wasn't totally in the dark. Ditzzy had realized that there was one advantage to being a mailmare before taking this job; she was already familiar with a fair number of mailing addresses around Equestria. For instance, she recognized the one she was given today as the address of the Ponyville library.

Ditzzy's heart pounded as she landed in front of the large tree that contained the library. It was finally time to start her first assignment, and she still didn't feel ready. She hesitated for a few moments.

"For Dinky," the pegasus repeated to herself again and again. "I have to do this. I need the money to support Dinky. I can do it." She raised a hoof and rapped on the door.

The door opened, but curiously nopony was on the other side. As far as Ditzzy knew, Ponyville library did not have an automatic door. "Hello?" she asked hesitantly, peering into the library's semi-dark interior.

"Right here," came a male voice. Ditzzy looked down and locked eyes with a small purple dragon.

"Oh! Hi Spike!" Ditzzy greeted. "How are you?" The pegasus was relieved to see Spike; Twilight Sparkle was usually busy studying or out with her friends, and so Ditzzy was used to delivering the mail to the unicorn's little dragon assistant.

"I'm fine, actually," Spike replied. "What's up, Ditzzy? Is there a delivery for Twilight or something?"

"No," Ditzzy replied. "It's something totally different, actually. I, uh... I'm supposed to respond to a call that came from this location, directed to

Equestria Speedy Shipping Services..."

Spike gasped, grabbed Ditzzy's mane and yanked her inside, and slammed the door.

"I contacted them this morning," the young dragon whispered. "But I didn't know you worked there. How long has that been going on?"

"Since this morning," Ditzzy said dryly.

"Oh," Spike pondered this for a second. "Well, are you any good?"

"I have no idea," Ditzzy continued in the same cynical tone.

There was a long pause as Spike thought about this. "Good enough," he said finally. "I guess I have your first assignment then." He leaned in to speak softly to the pegasus. "You see, I've noticed that word is starting to get around in Ponyville that I like Rarity, and I..."

"You like Rarity!?" Ditzzy cried loudly, likely alerting half the neighborhood.

"Shush!" Spike scolded. "It's *supposed* to still be a secret!"

"Sorry," Ditzzy mumbled, covering her mouth. "Continue."

"Anyway," Spike went on. "Word seems to be getting around, and so lately I've been getting desperate to find a way to clue Rarity in to how I feel before she finds out herself through... extenuating circumstances. I think that would just complicate things."

"So..." Ditzzy started. "What do you want me to do, then?"

"It doesn't have to be anything big," Spike mumbled, looking down in mild embarrassment. "Just... see if you can get her to go to dinner with me or something. Or anything else; it doesn't have to be dinner. I just want some way for the two of us to get together without Twilight and all her other friends, so Rarity can at least get to know me better, and... well, I'll try to handle things from there."

"Well, I can try to manage that," Ditzzy said. "Do you have a price in mind?"

"Well, I don't have any bits," Spike responded. "But I do have a bunch of gems. I was going to eat them, but you can take them if you help me out. I'd gladly give up all the gems in the world for Rarity..."

Spike trailed off into a happy daydream. Ditzzy considered the assignment. "So, all I have to do is get Rarity to go on what is more or less a date with you?"

"I guess, if you want to word it like that," Spike mumbled, blushing profusely.

"Well, alright, Spike, you've got yourself a deal." The pegasus chirped. "I'll go talk to Rarity and see what I can do. No guarantees, though."

"Thanks! And good luck!" Spike called as the Ditzzy flew off to Carousel Boutique.

Rarity hummed contently as she carefully united two pieces of fabric, a part of a dazzling new design she had envisioned that morning. Her work was suddenly interrupted by the sound of something heavy slamming into her front door.

"Good heavens, what was that?" the unicorn asked herself out loud. "Honestly, if this has something to do with Sweetie Belle and her friends again..."

Rarity used magic to yank open the door, and gasped with surprise at the sight of a grey pegasus, sprawled on the ground and clutching her snout.

"Owww," Ditzzy groaned. "Stupid depth perception! I could have sworn I had a few more feet until I reached that door."

"Dear, are you okay?" Rarity asked sympathetically. "Do step inside; I'll get you some ice for that bump."

Rarity disappeared into another room as Ditzzy wandered in to the boutique. The grey pegasus found herself surrounded by pony

mannequins, each clad in a fabulous, flashy, work-in-progress dress of Rarity's. However, she hardly noticed her glamorous surroundings; she was too busy racking her brain for the best way to get Rarity to do what Spike wanted, as well as rubbing her sore nose.

"Here we are, darling," Rarity sang, returning with a bag of ice, which was quickly tied around Ditzy's snout. "Now, why did you drop by today, dear?"

"Uh... I wanted to...um... I mean... I was thinking of purchasing a... dress?" Ditzy stammered, fumbling to come up with an excuse for her arrival.

Rarity's eyes lit up. "Oh, of course! Please, come with me, I have an absolutely *fabulous* new collection I've recently finished, tailor-made just for pegasi. I'm sure we can have you looking simply *stunning*!"

Rarity paused, frowning slightly. "Of course, they haven't been adjusted yet, I've been unable to get them modeled. Fluttershy is out of town this week, and Rainbow Dash flat-out refused..." Suddenly, a look of excitement washed over Rarity's features. "My dear, I know I hardly know you, but how would *you* like to model for me today?"

"Sure!" Ditzy answered, excited at the chance. *Plus*, she thought, *It'll give me more time to figure out how to get what Spike wants from her.*

"Marvelous!" Rarity cried. "Just stand up on the stage between the mirrors and I'll bring in the dresses!"

"Okay, think," Ditzy whispered to herself as she waited for her hostess to return. "How can I turn the topic to Spike?" The pegasus felt her stomach begin to knot in worry. "What if I can't do it? If I can't make such a minor thing happen, I guess I have no place in the pony shipping business."

Ditzy recalled what her new co-worker Breeze had said to her. *If Candyfloss hired you, even while knowing that you have no experience, then something about you is signaling to him that you're the pony for the job.*

Ditzy stamped her hoof in frustration. "Candyfloss might be wrong," she grumbled. "I'm a lousy mailmare, and I might turn out to be just as lousy a

matchmaker."

"Here we are!" Rarity mused as she reappeared, rolling out a rack containing at least a dozen dresses. "Let's get started."

Over the next hour, Ditzy allowed herself to be Rarity's model, waiting patiently while the unicorn made tiny adjustments to the pieces and fawned over the pegasus' appearance in them.

"So, what do you think of this one, miss... erm..." Rarity faltered. "Pardon me, I know you're the mailmare, but I don't believe I know your name."

"Ditzy Doo," the pegasus replied. "And this dress is beautiful!"

The pegasus admired the garment that was undoubtedly her favorite dress of the bunch. It was a somewhat frilly yellow piece that went nicely with her mane and eyes. Rarity seemed to agree; she was practically faint with glee at the sight of her fashion genius looking so perfect on somepony.

Ditzy was hesitant to remove the dress as she marveled at its beauty. *If there's one thing this unicorn can do better than anyone else, it's fashion*, she thought.

Wait. Fashion. That was the key. That was her opening to strike.

"So," Ditzy tried to sound casual as she removed the dress and prepared to model the next one. "Do you only make clothing for ponies?"

Rarity looked somewhat confused. "For the most part," she answered. "There aren't exactly a lot of intelligent species besides ponies in the area, but I suppose now and again a whip up something special for a visiting creature from another part of Equestria. But, why do you ask?"

"Well," Ditzy tried to look nonchalant, which was usually easy to accomplish; it's hard to look too focused when one's eyes face different directions. "I was talking to Twilight Sparkle's dragon friend Spike, and he expressed an interest in getting a suit from somewhere, you know, to go with that top hat of his and the magic moustache..."

Rarity began to laugh. "Oh, Spike! He's such a charming little

dragon! Why didn't he just come to me in the first place? I could definitely make a little formal jacket or something for him!"

"Awesome," the pegasus responded. "After we're done here, I'll go find him and let him know. I think he's not busy today, since Twilight's off somewhere."

Rarity was beaming at the prospect of creating a tiny suit for the dragon. "Never mind the modeling, go find him now! I'll get the dresses put away, and be ready when he gets here!"

"Rarity's going to *what*?"

"I know it's not exactly what you were after..." Ditzzy said. "But it was the only way I could turn the topic of conversation to you without it seeming suspicious."

Spike just gawked. Ditzzy shifted her weight uncomfortably.

"Not... not really what you wanted, huh? Sorry, I gave it a shot and..."

"This is the greatest thing EVER!" Spike cried suddenly, leaping up and pulling Ditzzy into a hug. "I couldn't possibly ask for a better situation! Now I get to spend time with Rarity, and she gets to do what she does best at the same time! It'll make conversation so much easier than if we'd wound up just getting dinner."

Spike literally had tears of joy in his eyes. "Ditzzy, how can I ever repay you?"

Ditzzy smirked. "Well, the price we agreed on earlier would be a good start."

Spike blushed. "Oh, yeah. I almost forgot." The dragon produced an ornate box, which contained about a dozen large gemstones. "I'm not sure of the current prices on some of these," Spike said. "But I bet you could get about two-hundred bits for them."

Ditzzy gratefully accepted the marvelous gems; "Two hundred bits? That's

like a week's pay at Cloudsdale Mail and Freight!"

"Ah, it's nothing," Spike said. "It's barely enough thanks for what you did for me."

The little dragon skipped around the library as he finished up his chores and shined his scales, and then he and Ditzy proceeded back to Carousel Boutique.

Ditzy watched discretely through an upper window as Rarity trotted around, taking measurements and displaying various sample cloth scraps to Spike. The dragon was beaming the whole time, and he and Rarity seemed to be engaged in a hearty conversation after only a few minutes.

As the pegasus clutched the box of gems to her chest, the reality of it all finally sunk in. Her very first assignment, and she had succeeded! In fact, she'd gone above and beyond what her client had asked for without even trying. Ditzy flew home, already rehearsing her announcement of her grand achievement in her head for when she would tell Breeze about it tomorrow morning.

Chapter 3

"Muffins!"

Ditzy burst through the door of the employee lounge, leapt into the air, and flew straight across the room to the breakfast table. An entire muffin was already in her mouth before her hooves even touched the floor again. The grey pegasus chewed contently for a few moments.

"Hungry today, are we?"

Ditzy snapped out of her muffin trance, and turned to glance at the pony who had addressed her.

"Hi Breeze!" she greeted cheerfully after managing to swallow the large quantity of muffin she had been chewing.

"Hey." Breeze replied, flashing a friendly smile. "So, how'd that first job go yesterday? Did you manage to fulfill your client's request?"

Ditzy nodded enthusiastically and proceeded to tell her co-worker all about the previous day's assignment.

"Well, sounds like an easy one, but I bet Candyfloss planned that, it being your first assignment and all" Breeze answered when her story had concluded. "But still, you had a creative way of handling it. Sounds like it went well."

"Yeah," Ditzy replied, groping for another muffin. "And I got a good price, too! Two-hundred bits!"

Breeze grinned. "Wait till you get a job from Canterlot," he replied. "You can make a lot more than that if you know how to haggle."

"Really?" asked Ditzy, surprised that anypony would be willing to pay that much.

"We work in a rare business, Ditzzy," Breeze said. "It's a tough job sometimes, but if you have a few successful jobs a week, any money problems you might have will vanish pretty quickly."

Ditzzy imagined her life if she made double what she had made at her old job. She wouldn't be struggling to get by anymore. She could purchase better food, give her cottage the maintenance it needed, and even buy Dinky those expensive dolls she wanted for her birthday.

"Is this your new friend then, Breeze?" came an accented voice. Ditzzy and Breeze turned to see another pegasus entering the room. He had a white coat and a dark grey mane, and wore a small beret perched at an angle on his head. He had a raincloud for a cutie mark.

"Morning, Cloudcover," Breeze said. He turned back to Ditzzy. "Ditzzy, this is Cloudcover," he said. "He's the only other pegasus that works here besides the two of us."

"Pleasure to meet you," Cloudcover said, extending a hoof to Ditzzy.

"I know that accent..." Ditzzy said as she shook the newcomer's hoof. "You're from Trottingham, aren't you?"

"Right-o!" Cloudcover responded. "I'm surprised you're familiar with the accent; Trottingham isn't exactly next door."

"Oh, I've been around," Ditzzy replied. "I used to be a mailmare. There isn't a city in Equestria I haven't visited at some point or another."

"Oh, right!" Cloudcover chuckled. "Breeze told me yesterday that you wound up here somewhat by accident."

"She succeeded on her first assignment, though," Breeze cut in.

"Splendid!" the white pegasus replied. "I'll admit I failed my first task quite badly, but I've gotten a mite better since then."

Ditzzy turned back to Breeze as Cloudcover floated over to the table for some coffee. "So, Breeze, how many other ponies work here?"

"Just two," said Breeze. "They should be here any moment actually."

There was a loud crash in the vicinity of the staircase, followed by wild laughter and a muffled, but clearly angry, female voice. "That would be them now," Breeze said.

The lounge door opened and a yellow Earth pony with a brown mane raced into the room. He had an extremely enthusiastic expression on his face; his yellow eyes practically glowed with excitement. Ditzzy noticed the energetic pony had a pair of live wires with a spark between them for a cutie mark.

"What's the hold up? You're so slow!" the Earth Pony called down the steps.

"I think you're just too fast, as always," the female voice replied. The owner of this voice, a sky blue unicorn with a teal mane, sauntered into the room. In contrast to the other new arrival, she didn't look particularly enthused; her purple eyes stared in annoyance at the Earth Pony. The unicorn sported a cluster of small stars and a comet as a cutie mark.

"Oh, lighten up," the Earth pony said to his unicorn companion. He glanced over, and his eyes locked on Ditzzy. "Oh! There! It's the new employee!"

In an instant, the Earth pony was right in front of Ditzzy, shaking her hoof so rapidly that her whole body vibrated.

"Hi! How are ya! The name's Kilowatt Hour, most people just call me Watt, probably because by the time they say my whole name I'm already gone!" He punctuated his erratic greeting with an annoyingly loud, gleeful laugh. Ditzzy had to listen carefully to catch everything the pony said; he talked just as quickly as he moved.

"So anyways, who're you?"

"D-D-Ditzzy D-Doo," Ditzzy stammered, her body still trembling from Watt's jarring hoofshake.

"Nice to meet ya', Ditzzy Doo! I'm positive you and I will get along just fine, even though I don't know anything about you, because I get along well with

everypony and hey are those muffins?"

And suddenly, Watt was at the breakfast table, helping himself. Ditzzy barely even saw him move.

Breeze met Ditzzy's slightly distressed look with a grin. "Don't worry about him," he said. "Watt takes a little getting used to, but he's just about the friendliest pony you'll ever meet."

"He certainly seems... energetic," Ditzzy commented.

"That's what happens when you work with electricity!" Watt yelled without turning away from his breakfast. "Once you get shocked enough times, everything around you starts moving real slowly!"

He shoved another pastry into his mouth, and suddenly, he was on the other side of the room, talking to Cloudcover. All Ditzzy saw was a blur of yellow fur as he passed by.

Ditzzy turned to look at the unicorn, who hadn't spoken to anyone since entering the room. She was now seated in the corner, using her magic to page through a magazine.

"Who's that?"

Breeze looked over at the unicorn. "That's Cosmic Glow. We just call her Glow. Well, except for Watt; he calls her Cosmo for whatever reason."

"Should I go introduce myself?" Ditzzy asked. "She didn't come join us; is she shy or something?"

"Shy is... not the right word," Breeze said. "More like... just plain antisocial."

"Oh, she can't be that bad," Ditzzy argued. "She's gotta have some social skills if she's a matchmaker."

Breeze shrugged. "Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Oh, hush," Ditzzy chided. She left the dining area and trotted over to

Cosmic Glow. She stood in front of the unicorn for a few moments, but the latter didn't lower her magazine.

"Hello," said Ditzzy loudly, determined to get the unicorn to talk to her.

Glow finally put down the magazine and looked up at Ditzzy. She stared blankly at the pegasus for a few moments, and then scrunched up her nose as if she had smelled something rotten.

"Ew. What's wrong with your eyes?"

Ditzzy was used to the question, but was still taken aback by how rudely the unicorn had phrased it. "They've... been that way for a while..." she replied slowly, not trying to hide her ticked-off expression. "It's an unfortunate medical condition."

She turned the topic away from her disability. "Anyway," she continued, extending her hoof in greeting. "I'm Ditzzy Doo. You are...?"

"Glow," the unicorn responded, rudely ignoring Ditzzy's offered hoofshake. "I have the best success rate at this company. I suppose you, being a newbie, came to me for some tips?"

"Not... really," Ditzzy was getting more and more annoyed with this unicorn's personality. "I just figured I'd be friendly and say hello."

"Well then, hello. Now go away, I'm busy," Glow responded, levitating her magazine again. Ditzzy snorted indignantly, and turned and trotted back toward the other ponies.

"A real charmer, isn't she?" said Breeze sarcastically as the frustrated pony walked up to him.

"She's... she's just a jerk, really," Ditzzy said under her breath. "Does she really have the highest shipping success rate of all of you?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Breeze replied. "While she naturally has not one polite bone in her body, she's awfully good at faking it when dealing with clients. And despite her utterly snide attitude, she really gets the workings of relationships, somehow. Her total success number is way higher than

any of ours. The only pony with a better record for success is Candyfloss himself, and he's in a whole different category than we are."

"What kind of jobs does Candyfloss do, anyway?" Ditzzy asked.

"No pony knows. All I can tell you is he handles super-complex or very delicate situations; sometimes his plan to get two ponies together can span a month or more. And yet, rumor has it he's never failed a single job he's taken."

"Really?"

Breeze shrugged again. "Like I said, it's all rumors. Hardly any pony knows any real details about what Candyfloss really does. So, as far as proven records go, Glow still holds first place for most successful ships."

Ditzzy glanced at every pony around the room. Autumn Breeze, Cloudcover, Kilowatt Hour, and Cosmic Glow; she certainly had some interesting new co-workers.

A loud screech filled the room, followed by Candyfloss's voice on the intercom.

"Ditzzy Doo, an assignment has come in for you. Please report to my office."

"Got an early one today?" Breeze asked. "Good luck, as always."

"Thanks Breeze," Ditzzy answered as she trotted out the door.

"Meet me in Ponyville Park, under the big oak tree."

Ditzzy read her assignment from the slip of paper again to ensure she remembered it as she glided along over the town. She tried to push her thoughts about her new co-workers out of her mind for the time being so she could focus on helping the client when she arrived.

The big oak tree was easy to spot, even with Ditzzy's visual impairment. It was far and away the largest tree in the park, throwing shade for dozens of

feet in every direction. The pegasus angled her flight toward it.

Unfortunately, a stray branch worked its way into a blind spot in poor Ditzzy's vision. There was a sudden loud crack as she struck it, and the pegasus fell to the ground, tangled in a mesh of leaves and broken branches.

Ditzzy groaned and rolled over, trying to escape the pile of foliage. She felt another pony's hoof grab her arm and help her get up.

Once Ditzzy's head cleared from the crash, she turned to see who had helped her. She found herself face to face with a familiar Earth pony, a mare with a cream colored coat and a purple and blue mane.

"Oh, hi Bon-Bon! Thanks for the help," Ditzzy said.

"No problem," Bon-Bon replied. "I guess you didn't see the... um... huge tree."

"I saw the *tree*!" Ditzzy replied in false indignation. "Just not that particular branch!"

Both mares laughed. Ditzzy and Bon-Bon lived relatively near to each other, and had gotten to be good friends over the years. Bon-Bon was used to Ditzzy's unfortunate shenanigans, and the two of them joked about it all the time.

"So," said Ditzzy after she stopped giggling. "Did you contact Equestria Speedy Shipping Services? I'm supposed to meet a client right here."

"Why, yes," Bon-Bon replied, looking surprised. "I didn't know you were a matchmaker, Ditzzy!"

"I think I'm the one who should be surprised," Ditzzy said. "What do you need shipping services for, Bon-Bon? Aren't you and Lyra already kind of an item? I mean, I thought everypony knew you two were together."

Bon-Bon looked a little sad. "Well, I guess that's true," she said. "Almost everypony does consider me and Lyra an couple. Everypony except... Lyra."

Ditzy gasped. "Lyra doesn't like you anymore?!"

"No, no, it's not that," Bon-Bon said hastily. "I just think Lyra might not... actually notice that we're a couple. She's been a bit... *distracted* lately, by her, um, hobby..."

"Hey, Bon-Bon!" cried a nearby voice. The two mares turned to see Lyra herself galloping toward them, carrying a long, low box of some sort.

"Hi Ditzy," said Lyra, before quickly turning back to Bon-Bon. "Bon, look at this!"

The mint green unicorn levitated the box in front of Bon-Bon, and removed the lid. Inside was a pile of mud, with an unusual oblong pattern imprinted on it.

"And... this is...?" Bon-Bon asked.

"I found it at the edge of the Everfree forest!" Lyra said. "Bon, I think this is a human footprint! From an actual *human shoe*!"

Lyra squealed with delight at her own discovery, eyeing the shape in the mud as if it was a pile of valuable gems. Bon-Bon just raised an eyebrow.

"I see you're speechless with excitement!" Lyra said after a moment. "I'm going to take this thing back to my place and analyze it further. Come with me, would you Bon?"

"Um, you go ahead, I'll be along in a few minutes," Bon-Bon replied. Lyra nodded and took off. "Oh, and, can Ditzy come too?" Bon-Bon called after her.

"Sure, why not!" cried Lyra as she disappeared around the corner.

Bon-Bon turned back to Ditzy. "And now you see my problem," she said. "Lately, Lyra's been so engrossed in her human studies that I feel more like her lab assistant than her lover." She looked at Ditzy with pleading eyes. "I just want to make sure Lyra still feels about me how I feel about her. Do you think you can do something about that?"

"I will certainly try," said Ditzzy, pitying Bon-Bon's plight. "Did you have a price in mind?"

"Oh. Hmm," Bon-Bon thought about it. "I don't know, what do you usually get for a job like this?"

"I don't know; I'm too new at this to have any averages."

"How's... a hundred bits sound?"

"Deal," said Ditzzy, not really about the lower price since, in essence, she had made an entire week's salary yesterday anyway. "Should we head over to Lyra's now?"

"Yeah, she'll be expecting us."

Bon-Bon pushed open the door to Lyra's home, and the two ponies stepped inside. There was no sign of Lyra in the main room, but this didn't seem to concern Bon-Bon. She walked over to a large picture of herself and Lyra hanging on the wall, and then looked over to Ditzzy again.

"Lyra would appreciate it if you keep everything you're about to see secret," the Earth Pony said. She pushed the picture aside, reached into an alcove in the wall behind it, and pulled the lever found there. A corner of the floor suddenly fell away, revealing a narrow, dark staircase leading to a subterranean chamber.

"This leads to Lyra's Human Research Laboratory," Bon-Bon said dryly.

"This... hobby of Lyra's..." Ditzzy said skeptically. "It's... more of an obsession, isn't it?"

"Well... yeah," Bon-Bon deadpanned.

The Earth pony sighed and started down the stairs. Ditzzy followed along very slowly; she couldn't see too well and the last thing she needed now was to fall down the stairs on top of Bon-Bon.

At last the two reached the bottom of the steps. Ditzzy stared at her surroundings in awe.

The walls were covered with sketches of various creatures, or parts of creatures, that Ditzzy didn't recognize. She supposed they were all Lyra's attempts at recreating the theoretical structure of a human. A large bulletin board was completely clogged with a collage of photographs, every single one containing a horribly blurred or distant image of what was apparently some type of bipedal creature. None of them were of good enough quality to make out any details beyond that. A few long tables were littered with Lyra's collected "human artifacts"; all sorts of various odds and ends that certainly didn't appear to be of pony-made origins. One table even held a computer, a device that was horribly rare in Equestria. Ditzzy marveled at the fact that anyone in Ponyville was able to afford one.

Over at one lab bench was Lyra, sitting in her usual awkward upright pose, gazing intently at her footprint specimen under a magnifying glass.

"Um, Lyra..." Bon-Bon said quietly. "We're here."

"Oh, good," mumbled Lyra without looking up. "Get me the little dust-brush thingy, would you, Bon?"

Bon-Bon trotted over to one of the desk drawers and retrieved the tool Lyra had requested. She deposited it on the table, and returned to stand next to Ditzzy.

"What should I do?" Ditzzy whispered. "I think messing with her stuff would only make her upset. How can I distract her from it?"

"I don't know," Bon-Bon replied. "You're the matchmaker here; you must have *something* up your sleeve."

Ditzzy kept quiet for a moment, running ideas through her mind. Suddenly, a crazy thought came to her; a technique she had seen in a movie once seemed applicable to this situation. Ditzzy wasn't sure if she could trust the movies, but obviously she had to try something.

"Hey Lyra," Ditzzy piped up.

"Yeah?" Lyra's response was slightly delayed; she was now engrossed on creating a detailed sketch of the footprint.

"I thought you might be interested to know..." Ditzzy continued. "Yesterday, when I was flying over the Everfree forest, I saw a creature that looked a little like some of these drawings of yours."

Lyra's pencil clattered to the floor as she stared in shock at the pegasus. "You saw a human? Where?!"

"Near those ruins in the forest," Ditzzy said. "I wonder if it's still around?"

"We're going to find out!" declared Lyra, leaping from her stool and charging up the steps. "Grab your saddlebags, Bon-Bon! We're going to the Everfree forest!"

Bon-Bon gave Ditzzy a shocked look. "What in Equestria are you doing, Ditzzy?"

"Working on my plan," Ditzzy said. "Go with it for now. And for a little while, it's important that Lyra doesn't know I'm following you guys, alright? Tell Lyra I said I'll meet you two at the ruins."

Bon-Bon looked grave. "I hope you know what you're doing, Ditzzy Doo."

"Me too," said Ditzzy as she trotted up the stairs.

Ditzzy was perched on a cloud, peering down over the edge as she watched Lyra and Bon-Bon walk toward the Everfree Forest. Bon-Bon was expecting to meet her discreetly in the forest in a few minutes. Lyra, on the other hand, believed that Ditzzy had flown ahead to the ruins. It was imperative that she wasn't seen by Lyra, or her plan would be ruined. The pegasus waited nervously until both ponies had disappeared into the trees, and then swooped down into the forest herself.

"I can't believe this!" said Lyra excitedly. "Do you think I'll really get to see a human up close today? This could be the culmination of all my work and studies!"

Bon-Bon suppressed a groan. She looked around, and spotted Ditzzy peeking out from behind a tree. She beckoned to Bon-Bon.

"Uhh, Lyra," said Bon-Bon. "Why don't you check over that way for a minute, and I'll look over here."

"Okay," said Lyra, trotting off to a nearby clearing and scribbling notes in her notepad.

Bon-Bon waited until she was out of sight, and then darted over to Ditzzy. "Okay," she said with visible annoyance. "Will you *please* tell me what is going on now?"

"Yeah," said Ditzzy. "First of all, this is a wild goose chase. There is no human."

"I figured that," Bon-Bon replied. "But how does this expedition make Lyra notice me?"

"I'm going to cause some... inconvenient situations," Ditzzy said. "You know, cause minor accidents where it would only be proper for Lyra to help you out. Hopefully that will be enough for her to take her mind off the humans for long enough to treat you like a friend, not an assistant."

"What if she still doesn't notice?" Bon-Bon asked.

"Then you get all dirty and tired for no reason." Ditzzy replied bluntly. "But this is the only idea I have right now."

"Fine," Bon-Bon mumbled. "Let's give it a try."

Lyra's hoofsteps could be heard nearby, so Ditzzy quickly hid herself again. Lyra reappeared, and the two ponies ventured deeper into the forest, bound for the ruins at the center.

Ditzzy, keeping out of sight in the treetops, grabbed a flexible branch and yanked it backwards. She then waited silently for her target. Soon, Lyra trotted by, with Bon-Bon following close behind. The hidden pegasus waited for the right moment, and then released the branch.

"SMACK!"

The limb whipped forward, knocking into Bon-Bon and sending her careening sideways. She landed with a splat in a pool of sticky black mud.

"Ugh, really?" asked Bon-Bon in annoyance, struggling in the goop. She turned to look at Lyra expectantly, but the unicorn was busy examining a pile of broken twigs, and hadn't even noticed the Earth pony's fall. Grumbling, Bon-Bon managed to stagger to her hooves by herself. She yanked a gob of smelly mud out of her mane, chucked it angrily aside, and followed Lyra again.

A few minutes later, the pair was passing through a narrow path lined thickly with bushes on either side. Ditzzy lurked in one of the bushes, holding a vine between her teeth.

"This time, it's gotta work," Ditzzy whispered through a mouthful of vine. She spotted the approaching hooves of the target ponies and hunkered down deeper in the bush. Two pairs of hooves belonging to Lyra passed by. Right before Bon-Bon passed, Ditzzy yanked the vine with a jerk of her head, pulling it taut.

Bon-Bon cried out as she once again pitched sideways, this time landing in a large bush loaded with burs. The tiny, spiky spheres stuck by the hundreds to Bon-Bon's coat as she climbed back out.

This time, Lyra turned around. "Oh, Bon, you're totally covered in burs. Maybe we should..." Lyra stopped in mid sentence and her eyes lit up; an idea had just come to her.

"Burs! That reminds me! Humans always wear clothes, and burs stick to them just as easily as they do to ponies! I bet if any of the bur bushes around here are disturbed, it could clue us in to where the human is hiding!"

Forgetting completely about Bon-Bon, Lyra quickly began closely examining all the nearby shrubbery. Bon-Bon shook her body profusely, but not a single bur dislodged itself from her fur. With an exasperated groan, she continued to follow Lyra.

"This isn't working!" said a thoroughly dirty, smelly, but covered Bon-Bon to Ditzzy a few minutes later.

"You're right," said Ditzzy. "It's time to kick it up a notch."

Ignoring Bon-Bon's look of horror, Ditzzy explained her new plan. "What we need to do is fake a life threatening situation! Just up ahead is a rope bridge leading to the ruins. You have to 'accidentally' slip and dangle from the edge, and Lyra will have to save you! Even she can't ignore something like that!"

"And... what if she accidentally fails?" asked Bon-Bon, her shifting her weight nervously.

"Well, that's why I'll be waiting in the crevice to catch you, just in case." Ditzzy replied.

"Something tells me this is a bad idea," Bon-Bon said. "But I trust you. Let's try it."

Lyra crossed the bridge without any trouble. "Come on, Bon!" she called. "We're almost there!"

Bon-Bon started across the bridge. It seemed pretty rickety; the Earth pony figured it would be easy to fake an accident on something like this.

However, Bon-Bon wasn't expecting one thing. When she neared the end of the bridge, a few planks actually did break loose. With a cry of surprise, the mare fell halfway, through the gap, barely clutching the wood of the remaining plank with her front hooves.

"Lyra! Lyra! Help!!"

But Lyra, in her uncontrollable excitement, had already disappeared into the ruins.

Bon-Bon blinked. "Oh, you have got to be *kidding me!*" She screeched as she lost her grip and fell through.

"I gotcha!" yelled Ditzzy, hovering beneath the earth pony. Bon-Bon plummeted right onto Ditzzy, who unfortunately hadn't been expecting the former to weigh quite as much as she did. Ditzzy cried out in terror when she realized she couldn't support the Earth pony alone. The two mares tumbled into the valley.

"I knew this was a bad idea!" Bon-Bon screeched in rage.

The two ponies screamed as the ground rushed up at them. Impact would come at any moment, and it would likely be fatal. Both mares closed their eyes and waited for the inevitable.

But the impact never came. After several seconds, both ponies opened their eyes to see why they hadn't crashed yet.

Lyra grunted with the strain as she used her magic to haul the two frightened mares back up to the safety of the cliffside. Panting, she set them down, and then collapsed on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Lyra," said Bon-Bon after a moment. "You... you just saved our lives."

"Well, duh," said Lyra between gasps. "I'm not gonna just let my marefriend fall to her death now, am I?" Lyra chuckled, but then her expression turned more serious. "I heard you calling, but by the time I got back, you'd already fallen. I'm really sorry; I shouldn't just leave you like that in a dangerous place like this."

"So now you're sorry," said Bon-Bon. "Why did it have to be a life-or-death situation before you remembered your friend, Lyra?"

"Because...because I've been way too busy with all this human stuff lately..." Lyra said, finally making the connection. "Oh Bon, I've been acting like a total loser toward you lately, haven't I?"

"Well," said Bon-Bon. "You didn't exactly pay as much attention as you could have..."

Lyra jumped up and wrapped her arms around her friend. "Bon, I'm so sorry. I promise, I'll tone down my human studies. They almost made me forget what's really most important to me."

Smiling, Bon-Bon returned the hug. Over Lyra's shoulder, she mouthed "I'll pay you later," to Ditzzy. Ditzzy just nodded and winked.

After the hug broke, Lyra turned to Ditzzy. "Ditzzy, you can go home. We'll look for the human another time."

"Okay," Ditzzy chirped. "See you later!"

Ditzzy watched for a moment as the two ponies began the long walk back to Ponyville. "So, really, how can I make it up to you?" Lyra asked her marefriend.

"For starters, you can help me get all the mud and burs off when we get back!" Bon-Bon responded playfully.

The two mares laughed, and Ditzzy took to the skies, satisfied with her second successful mission.

Chapter 4

"Attention employees. It is now five o'clock. Your shift is over for the day. See you next week."

Breeze stomped his front hooves in satisfaction upon hearing the intercom message, and quickly cantered out of Equestria Speedy Shipping Services' Headquarters. Once outside, he bent down and extended his wings, ready to take off.

"Hey Breeze! Wait up!"

Breeze turned to face the source of the familiar female voice, looking up as Ditzzy Doo descended and (for once) landed successfully.

"I just got back from a job," Ditzzy panted. "Are we done for the day?"

"Yep," Breeze replied. "Candyfloss just announced it was closing time. We're done until Monday."

"Alright, I guess I'll head home then," Ditzzy said.

"Which way are you headed?" The male pegasus asked. "Towards Cloudsdale?"

"Well... in that general direction," Ditzzy replied.

"Cool. We'll fly together."

The two pegasi took to the air, quickly passing over Ponyville and crossing the countryside towards Cloudsdale.

"So... it's been a whole week already," Breeze observed. "If you don't mind me asking, Ditzzy, what did you think of your first week working at Equestria Speedy Shipping Services?"

Ditzzy grinned. "It went a lot better than I thought it would," she

replied. "But a week of assignments isn't enough to take away the nervousness that comes with being a matchmaker."

"Come on, now," Breeze replied teasingly. "You've been on, what, four jobs now, and you haven't failed yet!"

It was true. After Ditzzy's assignment with Lyra and Bon-Bon, the mare had received a few more jobs throughout the rest of the week, completing each one with what Breeze called "an unusual amount of creativity."

Ditzzy laughed. "Yes, Breeze, but I've been getting lucky so far. There are definitely more complex jobs out there than the ones I've been getting, and now that I've been doing well, Candyfloss is probably going to start giving them to me."

"And I'm sure you'll find creative new ways to handle those jobs, just like always," Breeze reassured her.

"Wait, sorry, hang on," Ditzzy said suddenly, glancing around. "Are we still going the right way?"

"If you mean toward Cloudsdale, then yes," said Breeze.

Ditzzy caught sight of the landmark that she was searching for, which had escaped her vision for a few moments. "You're right. Sorry, I get lost pretty often."

"It's cool," Breeze said simply. "Don't worry, we're still on course."

Ditzzy turned to Breeze, hovering silently in the air for a moment as she stared at him. "It occurs to me, Breeze..." she said slowly. "...That you are the first pony in *years* that has never once asked about my eye troubles. Even when I get lost in an obvious place, like I just did, you don't speak up. Not that I'm complaining, but... why haven't you?"

Breeze shrugged. "You get around fine by yourself. You usually manage to overcome any obstacles in a moment or two when you do come across them. I didn't see a need to bug you about it." He thought for a moment. "It's like... like asking a pony with an obscure Cutie Mark what it means. It's not exactly impolite, but why bring it up? It's not bothering

anyone as is."

"Well, I appreciate it," Ditzzy replied. "It's nice to know there's actually somepony out there who wants to know *me* more than they want to know about my eyes."

Breeze just nodded, and the two pegasi flew in silence for a few more moments.

"These eyes are the reason I lost my last job, you know," said Ditzzy quietly. "All my deliveries were too slow, too inaccurate, or totally lost. Sometimes I just can't tell where I'm going, or if I'm about to run into something, or even what address I'm at. My vision just wasn't good enough to keep up with the demands."

"Then maybe it's a good thing you work with us now," Breeze suggested. "We're not big on deadlines and accuracy here. Heck, you could get lost on the way to an assignment and still make it to the client before any earth pony. Well... except for Watt; I'm a pegasus and even I can't keep up with him."

The pegasi laughed about their unusual coworker. "The point is," Breeze continued finally. "None of us, except maybe Glow, are going to judge you just because you're different. We work to bring happiness to lonely ponies, and I think most of us are better because of it. For the sake of our jobs, we need to understand and empathize with those around us."

"Yeah, I guess so," Ditzzy answered thoughtfully. "And if there was one thing I was good at while I was a mailmare, it was making friends with the ponies on my mail route."

"See?" Breeze replied. "You're made for this job. All it takes is a determined and personable pony with a little intellect and creativity to be a successful shipper. You've got all those qualities in excess anyway."

"I...t-t thanks..." Ditzzy stuttered, turning away and blushing a little at the praise. She glanced down and noticed her cottage coming up in the distance.

"Alright, Breeze," she said. "See you later. This is my stop."

"Where?" Breeze looked all around in confusion. "I don't see any houses up here."

"That's because I live down *there*," the mare replied, pointing to the small building.

"Oh!" Breeze said, surprised. "I didn't realize you lived on the ground. Why don't you live in a cloud house near Cloudsdale?"

"I did when I was younger," Ditzzy answered. "But my husband was a unicorn, so I had to move down here to be with him. I would have moved back up after he passed away, but my daughter is a unicorn, too."

"Is she?" Breeze asked with interest. "I don't think you told me that."

"Say," said Ditzzy suddenly. "Would you like to come and visit for a minute or two? You could meet Dinky."

"I'd love to," Breeze replied. "Lead the way."

The two pegasi descended to ground level. Ditzzy landed on the wide, bare hill that she had purposely kept clear of trees and shrubs to provide herself with a landing pad even she couldn't miss. She lightly touched down, and trotted toward the cottage, Breeze following along behind her.

"One more thing," Ditzzy said. "Dinky doesn't know I've been fired from my old job yet, so try not to bring up work, okay?"

"Gotcha" Breeze said with a wink.

Ditzzy pushed open the front door, and was greeted with a squeal of delight as her filly leapt up from couch and ran to her. Dinky jumped up and hugged her mother tightly; Ditzzy returned the hug, smiling warmly at her daughter.

"Hiya, Dinky!" Ditzzy said. "How was school today?"

"It was great!" Dinky replied excitedly. "Miss Cheerilee taught us all about..."

The little unicorn stopped mid-sentence when she spotted the red pegasus standing in the doorway behind her mother. "Mommy, who's that?"

"Dinky, this is Breeze," Ditzzy said. "He's a friend of mine from work, and he stopped by to visit today on his way home."

Dinky trotted over to Breeze and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Breeze," she said sweetly. "Mommy doesn't bring friends from work to visit very often. Are you staying for dinner with us?"

Breeze laughed. "No, no, I just dropped in to say hello. I don't live very far away, and your mom and I got off work at the same time today, so we decided I could come and visit."

"You know, Dinky," Ditzzy cut in. "Maybe we can have Breeze over for dinner another time though; we'll plan it in advance, and I'll have time to make something special."

Dinky beamed. "Please, can we do that soon, mommy? I love it when we have guests for dinner."

"Sure we can," Ditzzy replied. "That is, if you're interested," she added, turning to Breeze questioningly.

"I'd love to," Breeze answered. "Just let me know at work, and I'll come over for the evening."

"Of course," said Ditzzy. "We'd be happy to have you."

"Speaking of dinner," said Breeze. "I should probably go get some now myself. I'll see you on Monday, Ditzzy."

"Bye Breeze!" the mare and her filly called as Breeze took to the air again. The male pegasus waved, before turning and rocketing off towards Cloudsdale.

"We should eat dinner too," Ditzzy said to her daughter. "If you eat all your alfalfa like a good little filly, I'll bake you some muffins for dessert."

"Yay!" the little unicorn chirped in excitement. The two ponies trotted back into their cottage for the night.

The weekend passed quickly, as weekends often do, and before Ditzzy knew it, it was Monday morning again. The pegasus slowly opened her eyes and glanced at the clock on the bedside table.

"Oh no! I'm gonna be late!"

As quickly as she could, Ditzzy washed up and brushed her mane, and then hurtled out the door as fast as her wings would carry her. Ten minutes later, she barged through the door of Equestria Speedy Shipping Services, and collapsed on the floor in the lobby, panting hard. She was only there for a few seconds when the intercom crackled to life.

"Miss Ditzzy Doo, I have an assignment for you. Please report to my office."

Looks like I made it just in time, Ditzzy thought, staggering to her feet and down the hall. She tapped on Candyfloss's door before letting herself in and falling into the chair.

"Good morning, miss Ditzzy," the unicorn said. "Today, I'd like you to..."

He paused, noticing the pegasus's disheveled mane and fact that she was still panting. "Goodness, are you alright?"

"F...Fine," Ditzzy panted. "I was just a little late... so I was hurrying to get here. I'm sorry."

"Don't let it worry you," Candyfloss replied. "Tardiness now and again is entirely excuseable."

He turned his attention to the papers on his desk. "Now, I've just received a call about a potential job I'd like you to handle. Apparently, you will find your client at the north end of the Ponyville outdoor marketplace, at the carrot vendor."

"The carrot vendor?" Ditzzy asked. "Why, that's probably Carrot-Top! She's a good friend of mine!"

"Splendid," said Candyfloss with a calm smile. "Good luck with your assignment as always."

"Thank you sir!" Ditzzy replied excitedly as she galloped out the door.

Carrot-top breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh smell of the morning air. The brightly colored Earth pony had just finished setting up her stand, and now she waited patiently for any customers willing to buy her home-grown carrots. The market was not very busy yet at this hour, but Carrot-top was content to just enjoy the early morning peace. Nothing could break her serenity today.

"Hey! Carrot-Top!"

Instantly, Carrot-top's pupils dilated in panic. Her body tensed as she turned toward the sky, catching sight of the shape plummeting toward her. With a cry of terror, the earth pony dove under her carrot cart, covering her head with her hooves and cowering in fear.

She caught sight of four legs belonging to a certain grey pegasus appearing next to the carrot cart. And a moment later, a pair of misaligned yellow eyes peered into the crawlspace.

"Uh... what're you doing, Carrot-top?" Ditzzy asked.

Carrot-top crawled out from beneath the cart. "Just... taking precautions," she replied awkwardly. "I mean, your landings around here are usually a little... destructive."

"You're still mad about last month, aren't you?" Ditzzy questioned.

Carrot-top twitched at the horrific memory. "I still have nightmares," she grumbled. "Can't you try to crash into a cart that sells something less dangerous next time? I mean, that one big cleaver landed about an inch from my neck!"

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," said Ditzzy dismissively, waving away Carrot-top's complaint. "Anyway, I wanted to ask you..."

"No!" Carrot-top cried suddenly. "You can't borrow any more money! Or food!"

"It's not that," Ditzzy answered. "In fact... here." She reached into her saddlebag and extracted the fifty bits Carrot-top had loaned her. The earth pony accepted the money incredulously.

"You're... paying me back?" she asked skeptically. "The eternally pressed-for-funds Ditzzy Doo is paying me back?"

"I'm actually not too bad in terms of money right now." Ditzzy said, eliciting another shocked look from the other mare. "I wasn't coming to ask you about money. I was coming to ask you if you contacted Equestria Speedy Shipping Services today. Have you?"

Carrot-top's look of surprise was even more extreme this time. "You... you..." she stuttered weakly. "You work for..."

Carrot-top couldn't finish her sentence; she wobbled dangerously and Ditzzy moved to support her so she wouldn't collapse.

"I'm sorry," the woozy mare mumbled, running her forehoof nervously through her bright orange mane. "It's just... one surprise after another. You didn't destroy anything when you landed, you paid back your loan in full, and now you happen to work for Equestria Speedy Shipping Services? Who are you and what have you done with Ditzzy Doo?"

Ditzzy grinned. "Maybe I'm just getting my act together," she replied. "Now, tell me why you called for a shipper. Do you have your eye on somepony?"

"Well... yes," Carrot-top admitted. "I've been in the fruit and vegetable business for a long time now, and I think I'm falling for a certain business competitor."

"Which one?" Ditzzy asked curiously, glancing around the market in an attempt to predict the object of Carrot-top's affections.

"It's... um... Applejack," Carrot-top responded, blushing slightly.

"Applejack?" Ditzzy repeated. "But Carrot-top, our services are for discreetly matching up ponies, so that it seems like it happened by chance. But Applejack is a totally friendly and accepting pony, and she's very straightforward. I'm sure if you just went up to her and told her how you feel, she would probably give you a chance. Using the sneaky setup method just seems like it would overcomplicate things when dealing with her."

"That makes sense," Carrot-top replied. "And if I were any other pony, I would take that advice in a heartbeat. However, there's another problem stopping me from doing that."

"Another problem? What kind of problem?"

Carrot-top sighed. "It's the silly Ponyville produce feud. The Apple and Carrot families have been rivals for three generations, since we both sell produce in Ponyville. Apparently, Applejack's grandfather and my grandmother got into an argument about whose product was better, and ever since then, the Apple and Carrot families have been bitter enemies."

Ditzzy scrunched up her nose in thought. "But, if the Apple and Carrot families hate each other, why don't you hate Applejack?"

"Because I'm not really part of the feud myself!" Carrot-top answered. "I only grow a few carrots in my personal garden; most of the ones I sell here come from the carrot farm my cousins run; all I do is sell them. My cousins are the ones who keep the feud going with the Apple family. And since Applejack does the farming as well as the selling, she's got plenty of reason to turn up her nose at the mention of anyone in the Carrot family."

"But don't you think if you just tell Applejack you want no part of this feud, she'll believe you?" Ditzzy asked.

"Look, Applejack is loyal to her family to the point that she can be described as... just plain stubborn." Carrot-top said. "She grew up hearing nothing but bad things about the Carrot family, most of it probably lies, from her grandmother and older brother. And I've heard it isn't easy to change Applejack's opinion once she has her mind set to something."

Carrot-top turned to Ditzzy imploringly. "I really respect Applejack, and I'd

like to get to know her better, and find out if she returns my, um... interests. But that's impossible as long as the feud between our families still stands. And *that's* what I need you to do something about. Once Applejack doesn't hate me, then I'll try to make her like me."

Ditzy placed a hoof on her chin, pondering the situation. "Well, I can probably work something out," she mused. "Now, about the price..."

"Ah, this is kind of expensive, isn't it?" Carrot-top asked.

"Well, normal jobs go from one to two hundred bits," Ditzy replied. "And ending a feud that spans several generations probably qualifies it for extra costs..."

"Fine. I'll give you two-hundred fifty bits," Carrot-top answered. "But only if you put this stupid feud to rest once and for all!"

"Well alright then," Ditzy said. "Operation End-the-pony-produce-feud is now underway!" The pegasus spread her wings haphazardly, knocking a few loose carrots from the earth pony's stand. "I'll be back later!" she announced before launching herself into the air.

Carrot-top watched the goofy pegasus flutter out of sight. "Dear Celestia," she whispered. "I just left a delicate diplomatic operation in the hooves of Ditzy Doo. When this is all over, I'll be lucky if our little family rivalry hasn't escalated to an Equestria-wide war."

The concerned mare just sighed and bent down to pick up her scattered carrots.

The sun shined brightly on Sweet Apple Acres, and a certain farm pony reveled in the morning air. Applejack grunted in satisfaction as she watched another barrelful of apples fall from the tree, somehow all landing neatly in the container as usual. But her satisfied smile turned to a frown when she noticed one lone fruit still dangling from a branch. The earth pony bucked the tree again, harder, but the stubborn apple remained in place. Snorting, Applejack planted her front hooves firmly, and bucked the tree again and again with all her strength. Panting, she turned to check if she had succeeded. But the apple still hung there, taunting her.

"Consarn it!" the earth pony cried. "What's it gonna take to get you down from that tree?!"

Out of nowhere, a certain wayward pegasus pitched sideways in midair, snapping the branch and its offending apple from the tree before crashing into the ground and leaving a sizeable skid mark.

"That's one way to do it I s'pose," Applejack chuckled. "Y'alright there, sugarcube?"

"I fink tho...", Ditzzy found it hard to speak, considering the entire stubborn apple had wound up rammed into her mouth upon landing. She pulled the fruit out of her mouth. "Do you want this back?"

Applejack cringed. "Y'all can keep that one on the house."

Ditzzy shrugged and bit into the apple.

"So," Applejack started awkwardly, watching the oblivious pegasus enjoy her treat. "Any particular reason y'all dropped by?"

"Oh yeah!" said Ditzzy, finally regaining the train of thought that had been derailed in her crash landing. "I wanted to buy some apples, but you weren't at the market today, so I came here!"

Applejack brightened. "Well, why didn't you say so, sugarcube? Come on over to the farmhouse and I'll get you a bushel or two."

The two ponies trotted through the hills toward Applejack's place of residence. "If you don't mind me askin'," Applejack began. "What do y'all need apples for? Gonna bake some of those famous apple cinnamon muffins of yours?"

"Yeah!" Ditzzy replied. "I'm making a bunch of different muffins actually. Why just this morning I was at the market getting some fresh carrots from Carrot-top, and I..."

Ditzzy stopped mid-sentence when she noticed Applejack had stopped walking. She turned to the earth pony curiously.

"Let me give you a bit of advice," said Applejack slowly. "Ain't nothing good comes from associating with Carrot-top, or any of the Carrot family, for that matter. Best y'all just stick with apples when you can."

"There's nothing wrong with Carrot-top!" said Ditzy defensively, realizing that her client's fears concerning Applejack's disposition were surprisingly accurate.

"The Carrot Family," said Applejack with a scowl, "Are a bunch of no-good, cheatin', lazy, stuck-up, mean-spirited..." Her chain of adjectives continued for a few moments, with longer gaps between each one.

"...I plum went an' forgot my point," Applejack deadpanned. "Point is, them Carrot ponies are bad news."

The mares had arrived at the farmhouse. Applejack opened the door and retrieved a bushel of apples in a sack. "There's yer' apples," she said icily. "Ya'll run along now." She moved to close the door.

"Wait!" Ditzy cried. "At least tell me *why* you don't like the Carrot family!"

Applejack's mood seemed to drop lower each time that name was mentioned. "Look here," she said through clenched teeth. "The Carrot family has been tryin' to steal all our business since my old Granny Smith was just a filly. They make for lots of produce and easy sales by growing acres of cheap, low quality carrots, undermining the true hard work we put in here at Sweet Apple Acres. Now I don't wanna talk about them no more, so you just mosey on along now."

Applejack closed the door, leaving Ditzy on the doorstep.

"Well, shoot," Ditzy mumbled. "I know that Carrot-top, at the very least, isn't any of those things. But how do I make Applejack believe me?"

"Well, I believe you," said a small voice.

Ditzy looked around and spotted a yellow filly peering around the corner of the farmhouse.

"Sorry for eavesdroppin'" the filly continued. "My name's Applebloom; Applejack is my big sis'."

"Hello Applebloom," said Ditzy pleasantly. "Did you say you believed me?"

"I did," said Applebloom. "I don't think miss Carrot-top is trouble. But, let's talk about that somewhere else; I don't want my big sis to overhear."

The mare and the filly walked slowly among the trees of Sweet Apple Acres, talking as they did so.

"I don't believe a thing about this whole feud," said Applebloom. "I expect the Carrot family is actually real nice, hardworkin' ponies like the Apple family. An' I tried one of miss Carrot-Top's carrots at the market once, and I thought it was delicious."

"Carrot-top is a friend of mine," said Ditzy. "And she doesn't want this feud to go on any longer. I want to end it, but I need to find a way to convince your sister."

"I wish I could help," Applebloom mumbled. "But bringin' diplomacy ain't my special talent." Suddenly, the earth filly's head shot up, her eyes wide as an idea formed. "Or... maybe it is my special talent! Or at least Sweetie Belle's or Scootaloo's!"

Much to Ditzy's surprise, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. "Did I hear our names just now?" Scootaloo asked Applebloom.

"Yeah!" cried Applebloom excitedly. "Girls, today we're gonna' try somethin' new! We're gonna' end the feud between the Apple and Carrot families! And if we can make everypony friendly towards each other again, we'll be gettin' our Cutie Marks for sure!"

"Cutie Mark Crusader Diplomats! Yay!!" the three fillies cried.

"Woah, wait," said Ditzy quickly, feeling a growing sense of dread at the developing situation. "I'm not sure you three should..."

"Meet us at our clubhouse, Miss Ditzy!" Applebloom said. "We'll be

formulatin' our plans there! C'mon girls!"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders took off into the trees, leaving Ditzzy standing alone.

Ditzzy was finally able to locate the clubhouse by the sound of the Crusaders' excited squeals. At last, tired and covered in grime from her wanderings through Sweet Apple Acres, she trudged up the ramp into the pastel-colored building.

"There you are!" Applebloom said as Ditzzy entered the small room. "What took you so long? We already came up with a bunch of ideas!"

"Yeah!" Sweetie Belle chimed in. "Then again, some of them might not work if we can't find a Mariachi Band..."

"Um..." Ditzzy said, trying her best to ignore Sweetie's unusual comment. "Maybe we just need to demonstrate to Applejack that Carrot-top isn't that bad."

"But how do we do that?" Scootaloo asked.

"That's what I've been trying to figure out all day!" Ditzzy moaned. "But I just haven't had any... wait... I just had a crazy idea!"

Struck by sudden and somewhat bizarre inspiration, the pegasus beckoned for the others to lean in close, and explained her secret new plan in a whisper. When she finished, the Crusaders were grinning ear to ear. "That could actually work," Applebloom said with excitement. "Let's do it!"

The Crusaders and their pegasus friend sped out of the treehouse to enact their plans.

An hour or so later, Carrot-top watched from a distance as Applejack arrived at the market, pulling a large cart full of apples behind her. She set up her merchandise in the baskets at her stand. Ditzzy Doo was nowhere in sight, and Carrot-top began to wonder if the absentminded mare had entirely forgotten about her assignment.

"Psst! Carrot-top!"

Carrot-top turned around and suddenly found herself nose to nose with Ditzzy. "I'm working on your request," Ditzzy said quietly. "In a few minutes, two fillies are going to come by and ask to help you sell carrots. It's all part of our setup; just play along."

"O-okay," Carrot-top stuttered, watching Ditzzy disappear into an alleyway again.

Sure enough, the mare soon spotted Sweetie-Belle and Scootaloo wandering toward her stand. Carrot-top was still unsure if it was smart to play along with any plan that involved Ditzzy Doo, but she decided to give the grey mare the benefit of the doubt, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"Hi!" said Sweetie Belle cheerfully as she and Scootaloo arrived at the carrot stand. "Miss Carrot-top, do you think we can help you run the stand today? We're trying to earn our... um... mercenary Cutie Marks!"

Scootaloo laughed nervously and gave Sweetie Belle a nudge. "She means merchant, not mercenary," the orange pegasus corrected.

"Now who's the dictionary?" Sweetie Belle responded with a mischievous grin, eliciting a glare from Scootaloo.

Carrot-top tried to laugh, but her giggle came out even more nervous than Scootaloo's. "Sure, I... guess there's no harm in letting you help with my stand."

"Yay!" the fillies cheered, darting behind the cart to help their new temporary employer.

The next few minutes went well; Sweetie-Belle and Scootaloo actually did what Carrot-top told them (much to her relief), but the mare still couldn't understand how these new junior helpers would lead her to the end of the feud with the Apple family.

Ditzzy, on the other hoof, knew exactly what to do next. "Okay,

Applebloom," she whispered to the filly hiding in the shadows with her. "You know what to do."

Applebloom nodded, and proceeded to wander as nonchalantly as possible into the wide plaza.

"Hey Applebloom!" Scootaloo called from the carrot stand, doing an excellent job of pretending that she hadn't expected to see her friend there. "Wanna buy a carrot?"

"Uh, I don't know," said Applebloom. "My big sis' isn't real fond of carrots. I'm not sure I should."

"Oh, come on," Scootaloo coaxed. "Just one couldn't hurt."

"Alright, fine," Applebloom responded. "She handed a few bits to Scootaloo, who in turn gave them to Carrot-top, and Sweetie Belle tossed a carrot to Applebloom in return.

Applebloom bit into the vegetable, and her eyes lit up in surprise. "Why, that's delicious!" she complimented.

"Why thank you," said Carrot-top, shocked to have received praise from any member of the Apple family. Perhaps Ditzzy had been up to something useful today after all.

Continuing with the plan, Applebloom wandered across the market, coming to linger near her sister's apple stand, and taking care to keep the carrot she was eating in plain view. It took only seconds for the desired effect to occur.

"Applebloom!"

The filly turned to look at her angry sister, the carrot still dangling from her mouth. "Yeah, sis?"

"Are you eatin' a *carrot*?" asked Applejack, indignation clearly recognizable in her voice.

"Yeah," said Applebloom. "Just one carrot once in a while can't hurt,

right?"

"Wrong," said Applejack. "What are you thinking buying from the Carrot family? Don't you know we're competin' against them? If we want enough money to keep running the farm, we gotta get more sales than them. Now spit that dang thing out an' I'll throw it on the compost heap."

Applebloom reluctantly parted with her half eaten carrot, and then trotted off the the peripheral streets surrounding the market once again.

"It didn't work," she called once she located Ditzzy.

"I know," Ditzzy called back. "I guess it's time for the next phase. Go give the warning signal to Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

Applebloom cantered off once again, leaving Ditzzy alone.

This is going to be really risky, Ditzzy thought to herself. Even if this goes exactly as planned, it's going to be a mess. If anything goes wrong, not only will I fail the mission, but I'll lose any fragment of trust Carrot-top still has in me.

The mare gulped nervously and ascended to sit on a roof overlooking the market. Once perched there, she took a pen, a piece of paper, and a protractor from her saddlebags. A few simple physics calculations later, she had determined the trajectory and velocity she would need for what she was about to do. She waved down to Applebloom, who moved to the shelter of a nearby overhang, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo in tow. Carrot-top, as well as all the other ponies at the market, remained oblivious to the fact that anything was about to happen.

Ditzzy took to the air, flying high above Ponyville. She stared down, struggling to focus her poor vision of the tiny rectangle that was the carrot cart. *I need to do this with absolute precision, and still make it look like an accident,* she thought to herself. *Here goes nothing...*

The mare folded her wings and dove downwards with incredible speed. The small market quickly grew much larger as Ditzzy raced toward the ground.

"Mayday! Mayday!" Ditzzy cried, pretending she was out of control once again. "We're going down!"

Carrot-top didn't even have time to prepare herself; she could only watch in horror as the destruction unfolded. There was a resounding crash as the plummeting pegasus crashed into the carrot cart like a meteor, sending the entire wooden structure hurtling into the air. All eyes in the market took immediate notice as the stand flew through the air, raining loose carrots down on the merchants and shoppers.

Applejack cried out and jumped backwards just in time as the flying vendor crashed into the apple stand, utterly obliterating them both and leaving a chaotic pile of apples, carrots, tattered fabric, and splintered wood.

After a moment, the noise ended and the dust settled. Ditzzy managed to yank herself out of the ten foot skid mark she had left in the dirt, to find all eyes in the market staring at her.

"Heh... sorry everypony," Ditzzy said apologetically.

After a few moments of awkward silence, most of the stands that weren't affected by the crash returned to their daily business. Ditzzy looked behind her to where Carrot-top was standing.

The mare hadn't moved an inch since the moment Ditzzy collided with the cart. She simply stood unblinking, mouth agape, staring into space in the direction she had been looking when her cart was decimated. Ditzzy trotted over to see if she was okay.

"Carrot-top? Um... Hello?"

Ditzzy waved her hand in front of the other mare's face, eliciting no response whatsoever.

"Um..." Ditzzy wondered what to do next when she heard hoofsteps behind her.

"Alright Carrot-top," came an accented voice. "We need to talk."

Applejack's arrival managed to snap Carrot-top out of her shocked

paralysis. She turned to find the orange earth pony glowering at her.

"Yes, Applejack?" she asked weakly.

"Look, I don't like you, and you don't like me, but we gotta clean up this mess."

Carrot-top finally seemed to become aware of what had happened after her stand was annihilated. "Oh, yes... yes we should."

The two mares trotted over to the pile of rubble that was all that remained of their two stands. Ditzzy followed along at a distance.

"Sheesh," Applejack said, looking over the mess again. "It's gonna take all day to separate all this. Guess we're both done selling for today."

"But you can't be done already!"

The mares turned to see the Cutie Mark Crusaders. "Miss Carrot-top hired us as apprentices today," Sweetie Belle said. "But we hardly got to do anything."

"Sorry girls," Carrot-top said. "But we can't exactly keep working like this."

"Sure we can!" Applebloom piped up. "We just need to set up an apple *and* carrot stand for today! That way I can work with you, sis, and Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo at the same time!"

"Oh, no," Applejack said in a warning tone. "There ain't no way I'm working with a Carrot pony!"

At this moment, Carrot-top finally made the connection; she understood the meaning behind Ditzzy's actions and knew that the next move was hers.

"Now Applejack," Carrot-top said, keeping her tone as businesslike as possible. "I know we have our differences, but don't you think it would be in the best monetary interests of both of us to, you know, form an alliance... only because of the current circumstances, of course."

"Yeah, right," Applejack responded. "You'll probably sabotage my

merchandise, or steal my share of the profit, or..."

"No she won't, sis!" Applebloom interrupted. "Me an' the girls will keep an eye on both of you, to make sure nopony's cheatin' nopony."

"Yeah!" Scootaloo agreed. "When I pony comes asking for an apple, sell them an apple. If they want a carrot, sell them a carrot. No arguing, no persuasion, no tricks, just fruit and vegetables."

Applejack looked defeated. "Well... alright," she said finally. "But if I catch you steppin' out of line even once, Carrot-top, I swear I'm gonna..."

"No need for threats, now," said Carrot-top. "You have my word; we do completely honest business, and that's that."

The two ponies overturned the cart Applejack had used to carry her apples to the market and used it as a makeshift display stand, and the Crusaders assumed their "guard" positions. The two ponies, begrudgingly in Applejack's case and much less so in Carrot-top's, began to sell their produce again.

The sun was setting; it had been a long and busy day at the Ponyville market. News of Ditzzy's crash had brought a large number of curious ponies to the market that afternoon, most of which had wound up purchasing apples, carrots, or both. Both Applejack and Carrot-top made a bigger daily profit than either of them had in a long time.

"Well, I'll be," Applejack commented when it finally came time to pack up for the day. "A whole day, and not one trick from the Carrot pony."

"I told you, I've never done dishonest business," Carrot-top replied. "Heck, I don't even want to be part of this crazy feud between our families. I'll admit apples are just as important as carrots."

"You know," said Applejack slowly. "If you'd said that to me yesterday, I'd have laughed in yer' face and accused you of treachery. But after how well everything went today, I'm starting to think you might be tellin' the truth."

"I am!" Carrot-top insisted. "This feud is way older than me or you. It was

probably fought over something stupid in the first place. Don't you think we can just end it and behave like decent ponies for once?"

Applejack was quiet for a long moment. "Well," she said finally. "If you tell them cousins of yours to stop it, then I'll let the rest of the Apple family know."

"It's a deal," Carrot-top said. She held out her hoof. "Truce?"

Applejack took her hoof and shook it firmly. "Truce."

The two ponies finished loading the unsold produce into their bags. "It's crazy," Applejack commented. "If that goofy pegasus hadn't caused all this damage, we'd still be bitter enemies right now."

Carrot-top, who had slowly been processing this very fact all day long, said nothing.

"Applejack," Carrot-top said finally. "Now that we're friends and all, how about we get dinner, and talk about an alliance. Maybe a business partnership?"

"Might not be a bad idea," Applejack commented, rubbing her chin in thought. "I'll meet you at the restaurant on Mane Street after I drop off the apples at home."

"See you then," Carrot-top responded, before the ponies went their separate ways.

No sooner had Carrot-top left the market when she spotted a familiar shape dropping out of the sky once again. She ducked for cover, but Ditzy alighted easily this time.

"Well?" Ditzy asked. "What did you think?"

Carrot-top gave Ditzy an inscrutable look. Ditzy couldn't tell if she was about to be praised, or yelled at.

"Ditzy..." Carrot-top said. "You... are a genius. You're positively, undeniably insane, but you're a genius."

"I can live with that," Ditzzy chuckled. "Can you take it from here?"

"I have more-or-less a dinner date with Applejack," Carrot-top replied. "We might wind up going into business together, and I'm sure if we do that, a relationship can easily evolve from there."

"Great!" the pegasus replied. "Now, two-hundred bits, please."

"I thought I owed you two-hundred fifty?" Carrot-top answered in confusion.

"Yeah," said Ditzzy. "But I destroyed your stand, so I think I can offer you a discount."

Carrot-top smiled. "You're crazy, you know that? You even got those fillies in on your game."

Ditzzy shrugged. "Hey, whatever works!"

Carrot-top handed over the money to Ditzzy. "Right, then!" the grey mare announced. "See you around, Carrot-top!"

"Wait," the yellow mare said quickly as Ditzzy spread her wings.

"Yes?"

Carrot-top grinned darkly. "Remind me never to ask you for help again."

The two friends laughed loudly as Ditzzy took to the skies, sailing home by the light of the setting sun.

Chapter 4

"And... checkmate." Cloudcover declared, effectively trapping Breeze's king and ending the chess game. Breeze scrutinized the board for several seconds before sighing and sweeping the remaining pieces of the board with a hoof.

"That's the fourth game in a row you've won," the red pony grumbled indignantly.

Cloudcover grinned. "I've always been somewhat of a whiz at this game. Better luck next time, mate. Shall we set up again?"

"Nah," Breeze replied. "We've been at it all day," he glanced at the clock. "Literally. It must be a slow day for shipping in Equestria."

"Did anyone get assigned a job at all today?" Cloudcover asked.

"Yeah," said Breeze. "Haven't you noticed that we haven't seen Ditzzy in a couple hours?"

"Ah, right," said the white pegasus, scanning the room to confirm that the mare was not present. "Sorry, it's hard to concentrate with those two always yelling."

He pointed the other side of the lounge area where, as usual, Watt and Glow were engaged in an argument, or maybe just plain conversation; When those two were involved, it was impossible to make that distinction.

"Watt, I told you, I don't *care* how many volts of electricity you got shocked with last week."

"Aw, come on, Cosmo! You never let me tell you stories about my electrician job!"

"That's because most of them are rather unsettling. And will you *stop* calling me Cosmo already!?"

Breeze shook his head. "Try to tune them out. It usually works for me."

Cloudcover was about to respond when the door to the lounge opened, and Ditzzy walked in.

"Hey Ditzzy!" said Breeze cheerfully.

"Hi..." the grey pegasus replied in a subdued tone.

It was easy to tell that something was not right. Ditzzy slunk into the room, her eyes trained on the floor. She eventually flopped down on the couch, staring out the window listlessly.

"Well, somepony's upset," Breeze said as he trotted up next to the other pegasus. "Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

Ditzzy sighed. "I... I failed my assignment today, Breeze."

"Oh." Breeze said. "Was this the first time that's happened?"

"Yeah," Ditzzy sniffed, not looking at the other pony.

"Ditzzy, you've been working here for a *month*. You failed one, and only one, out of about twenty assignments. Most of us fail one in every four or five. Your record is still spectacular!"

"I'm not worried about my record!" Ditzzy said suddenly, with a bit more energy in her voice. "I'm upset that, thanks to me, the pony I was helping today won't be able to go out with the mare he likes." She finally turned to look at Breeze; her big, usually joyful eyes showed signs that she had been crying. "I've finally come to realize the hardest part of this job. How can I live with myself now that I know I've let another pony down?"

Breeze thought about it for a moment, but he wasn't sure how to answer. He opened his mouth to respond, if only to say some clichéd comforting statement, but he never got the chance; another voice spoke out first.

"So, the rookie's little beginner's luck streak is finally over, huh?"

Ditzy and Breeze both looked at Glow, who had decided to acknowledge Ditzy's presence; this only occurred when she had something insulting or otherwise demeaning to say to the pegasus.

Ditzy narrowed her eyes and glared at the unicorn. "I don't need your input, Glow."

"Aww, little Ditzy is grumpy," Glow cooed mockingly. "You're looking a little upset there. What's wrong, can't handle it when things don't go how you planned?"

"I said be quiet," said Ditzy a little more loudly, though her sadness was still apparent through the veil of anger.

"Of course," said Glow in her sarcastic tone. "But first, I just thought it would be courteous of me to answer your question. You know, a pro offering a rookie a little piece of advice."

"My question?"

"Yes, you just asked Breeze how you can handle failing an assignment," Glow continued. "And the answer is pretty simple really. Just stop caring so much about your client. Your job is to do what they ask you, so you get paid. When you fail, you don't get paid, and that's all the incentive you need. If you actually *concern* yourself with the client's well-being, you're just going to be a mess when you fail."

Ditzy snorted. "That's not true. The clients are ponies like you and me. We change lives with what we do; a lot of times, we set up a lifelong partnership between two ponies. How can you work at a job like that without any emotion toward your client?"

"Because that's the most effective way to get things done," Glow said in a matter-of-fact tone. "But you aren't cut out for this job, Ditzy. You're way too emotional; those kinds of ponies can't make it in this line of work."

"Glow, shut up," said Breeze firmly, noticing Ditzy's increasingly horrified and despairing expression.

"Oho," Glow grinned darkly. "Coming to your marefriend's defense now, are we Breeze?"

Breeze's red fur managed to hide any resulting blush, but he still flinched at Glow's accusation. Ditzzy blinked in surprise as well.

"She..." Breeze stuttered. "...She's not my marefriend! I just try to be courteous to our newest team member, unlike you!"

"Oh, right Breeze. Give me a break. It's perfectly obvious that you're head-over-hooves for our walleyed little friend there."

Breeze snarled. "No one asked you, you irritating little..."

"Ahem."

The cough was soft, almost inaudible, but it caught the attention of all five ponies immediately, and all heads turned to see a certain wispy white unicorn standing calmly in the doorway.

"Uh... good afternoon, Candyfloss," said Breeze awkwardly.

"Sorry, what was that?" Candyfloss asked in an expectant tone.

Breeze groaned. "Good afternoon, *Doctor* Candyfloss..."

"Good Afternoon," the unicorn replied with a small, mischievous smile. "I would like the five of you to gather around the table, please. It's time for our monthly staff meeting."

The unicorn trotted toward the table, leaving the other five ponies wallowing in the awkward silence following their interrupted argument. After a moment, Ditzzy rose from the sofa and fluttered to the table, and the other employees followed.

Candyfloss sat for a moment, using magic to organize the papers he had brought along. This left the others to wonder about how much of the previous fiasco their boss had heard; was it really possible that he had missed the whole thing? Or was he simply pretending that he had?

"Okay!" the magenta-maned unicorn announced suddenly. "So, monthly news. Our newest employee arrived the day after our last staff meeting, so I assume you've all had time to get acquainted with her since then." He turned to the pegasus in question. "I know this is late, but welcome once again, Ditzzy Doo."

Ditzzy just smiled sheepishly.

"Let's see, what else..." he continued. "Ah, it appears Glow has reached an astonishing one-hundred-fifty successful ships! Let's applaud Glow as she continues to push the record higher!"

Glow held up her head arrogantly, and received a very halfhearted round of applause from the other employees.

Candyfloss brought up a few more uninteresting points concerning the last month, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the air. After a few more awkward minutes, he reached the bottom of his list.

"Alright, that concludes the news," the unicorn said quietly. "Are there any issues you all would like to discuss before we conclude the meeting?"

No one looked directly at Candyfloss. Breeze coughed quietly.

"Very well," said Candyfloss, smiling his usual mysterious smile. "The work day is over; I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Gratefully, the five ponies rose from the table to leave for the day. Glow was the first to exit, with Watt following behind and attempting to start another pointless conversation with the unicorn. Ditzzy was at the back of the line.

"Oh, Ditzzy," said Candyfloss suddenly, just before the mare passed through the doorway.

"Yes, sir?" the grey pegasus asked hesitantly.

"Could you come to my office for just a moment before you leave?" the unicorn asked calmly.

Ditzy gulped. "Yes, sir."

Candyfloss nodded and proceeded down the stairs. Ditzy followed him into his office and sat down. Candyfloss didn't look angry, but then again, the unicorn's expression was never very indicative of what he was thinking. Ditzy waited uncomfortably as he stared at her for a few moments.

"I just wanted to ask you..." he said slowly. "...if you have any... specific concerns about your job, now that you've had a chance to experience a variety of situations."

Ditzy suspected Candyfloss had overheard everything that happened prior to the staff meeting. He was now prompting her to ask the same question she had tried to ask Breeze.

"Well," Ditzy started, shifting uncomfortably under her boss's gaze. "I failed a mission for the first time today. Now the pony I was trying to help won't be able to date the mare of his dreams. How... how can I continue while knowing that I wasn't able to help?"

Candyfloss took a very slow, deep breath. "Ditzy, I'd like to tell you a little story, if you can spare the time to listen."

"I have a few minutes," Ditzy replied.

Candyfloss leaned forward a bit. "Good, I haven't had a chance to tell anyone this in ages. You see, Ditzy, when I started this company a few years ago, it almost collapsed shortly after opening. Do you know why?"

"Um... poor advertising?" Ditzy guessed.

Candyfloss chuckled. "No. It was because as soon as I hired my first employees, I witnessed something I had never been exposed to before. I saw potential couples fail, despite the work of my shippers. And it didn't take long for me to wind up feeling a bit like you are now."

"Then... why didn't you close the company?" Ditzy asked.

"Because, just as I was about to do so, I received a letter from a client... a

client whose request our shippers were unable to grant. In the letter, she expressed her happiness that our employee had failed, as she had learned a terrible truth about the stallion she had been infatuated with. Her life would, in fact, have gotten infinitely worse in a big hurry had we succeeded in shipping her with him."

"So you got lucky once," said Ditzzy. "But that doesn't mean all failed jobs are a good thing."

"At first, you would think so," continued Candyfloss. "But you see, Ditzzy, this little incident allowed me to compare myself to the rest of my employees. I am the only pony among us whose special talent is matchmaking; ponies like you, while quite capable of working in this job, would be at a disadvantage when compared to me, right?"

"Right," Ditzzy agreed.

"Wrong!" Candyfloss cried, in the loudest voice Ditzzy had ever heard the normally soft-spoken unicorn use. "Being born to be a matchmaker is both a blessing and a curse. You see, I have an innate, magical sense, that tells me when two ponies are meant to be together. The problem is, I cannot control when it arrives, or who it points to. Sometimes, ponies I don't even know are involved. But there are so many ponies out there who are meant to be together, who are living so very different lives that my powers cannot detect them. So, while I have matched many ponies myself, so very many more have developed a love for another pony that I cannot detect. This is natural; love is an ancient and powerful force that far exceeds the talents of any one pony."

"So... you hire shippers, to help with the rest," Ditzzy responded.

"Yes, I hire shippers, who act only upon request of a love struck pony, as opposed to the unsolicited help that I provide." Candyfloss answered.

"But that still doesn't solve the problem!" Ditzzy yelled in exasperation. "The shippers... the ponies whose special talent is *not* matchmaking... can't decide for certain if a couple is meant to be like you can! So how can we know if a failure, or even a success, is a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"That," said Candyfloss, "Is what I aimed to discover. And I believe I found

the answer."

He leaned still closer to his pegasus employee. "I believe that the magic that I possess, and that other ponies will this talent also control, is not confined to us select few. I believe... that Equestria itself is imbued with this same magic, and it channels itself through those it finds fit to wield its power."

"Huh?" Ditzzy asked. "Sorry, but I have no idea what you mean."

"Let me rephrase," Candyfloss said. "This magic, that allows for good matches to be made, and bad ones to be rejected, can, and often is, wielded by ponies who do not possess a matchmaking Cutie Mark. But this only works if the pony is seriously, sincerely trying to create a bond between two others. If it is meant to be, it will be, and if it is not, it will not. Either outcome will ultimately be best for the ponies involved in the matchup."

"So... you're saying that it's impossible for us to create a bad match?" Ditzzy asked.

"Almost," said Candyfloss. "But it is possible for other ponies to choose the wrong partner. So, herein lies the value of a Shipping Service; assuming the job is done right, you effectively 'test' the other pony's choice for them. If you fail, it means that pony chose a partner poorly, and now they are prevented from acting on that poor choice. So in the grand scheme of things, you've helped them just as much as if you had matched them with the pony they were meant to be with."

Ditzzy was stunned. "Is all this really true?"

"Well, it's my personal theory," Candyfloss said. "But it's yet to be proven wrong."

"Awesome!" the pegasus replied, leaping into the air. "So, what happened today was meant to happen anyway."

"Probably," said Candyfloss. "But remember, Ditzzy, you are not infallible. It's still possible to perform an assignment so poorly that even the innate magic cannot help you, but I believe you think your assignments

through well enough to avoid that. More importantly, you cannot be certain that the magic has worked if you withhold any effort or lack any sincerity about the work you do. If you stick to these principles, then it is far more likely that failure to create a couple can be blamed on the fact that they were not meant to be together, rather than on your own ineptitude."

Candyfloss glanced at his clock. "Goodness, it's getting late! Run on home now, miss Ditzy. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you sir!" Ditzy called gratefully as she flew down the hallway and out of the building. Candyfloss gathered his things, and left for the day as well.

There was silence in the halls of Equestria Speedy Shipping Services for a few more minutes. Then the silence was broken by the faint hum of an invisibility spell wearing off, revealing a certain blue unicorn.

"What a load of horseapples!" Glow said to no one in particular. "I bet Ditzy totally buys that little story of Candyfloss's, too." She smiled deviously to herself. "I bet, if I wait 'till the time is right, I can make good use of that little fable; it's just another weapon for me to use against her later. I'm gonna make that dopey pegasus regret joining this company, one way or another!"

The next morning, Ditzy Doo found herself on another early morning assignment. The pegasus flew contently along, feeling renewed in her devotion to her job after her talk with Candyfloss the day before.

Today, the main thought occupying Ditzy's mind was the address to which she had been sent. It was an easy address to remember; it was located on Everfree Lane, the street in Ponyville that passed closest to the Everfree forest. There was only one home on the street, and it belonged to a pony that, now that Ditzy thought about it, seemed a likely candidate to need a shipping service to help her in a relationship.

The house soon came into view; a quaint cottage next to a bubbling stream, surrounded by a plethora of underground dens, birds' nests, feeders, animal pens, and dozens of other signs that indicated the presence of Ponyville's resident animal expert.

After she landed (in the stream, unfortunately) Ditzzy shook herself off and trotted up to the door, rapping on it a few times with her hoof.

There was silence for a few moments, and then the door creaked open a crack. A pair of sky blue eyes stared out for a second.

"Fluttershy?" asked Ditzzy hesitantly. "That you?"

The door opened the rest of the way, revealing the aforementioned yellow pegasus. "Yes, and, um... good morning." Said Fluttershy. "Are you here to deliver mail already?"

"No," said Ditzzy. "I'm here from Equestria Speedy Shipping Services."

"Oh!" Fluttershy squeaked. "Goodness, that was fast. I hope I didn't call too early... I thought they would wait until later. I'm so sorry for bothering you at such an early hour..."

"Shush," said Ditzzy. "I was already at work anyway. I needed something to do."

"Oh, well... okay," Fluttershy mumbled. "Um... won't you come in? Can I offer you some breakfast?"

In truth, Ditzzy hadn't had time to eat that morning. She accepted Fluttershy's offer, and soon found herself seated at the table, watching Fluttershy whip up a large batch of oatmeal.

"So, Fluttershy," Ditzzy asked. "What kind of job did you have in mind when you called this morning?"

"Oh, um..." Fluttershy stuttered. "Well, I, uh... I'm not sure if I should actually, um, go through with it, until I've given it a little more thought and, um, time..."

Typical Fluttershy. Hesitant and wishy-washy as always.

"No, Fluttershy," Ditzzy said firmly as Fluttershy placed a steaming bowl of oatmeal in front of her. "You can't back down now; I know you called us for

a reason. I understand you're worried about making a move, but I can help. You just need to tell me who it is you're interested in."

Fluttershy hid the majority of her face behind her mane and thought about what to do. Ditzzy waited patiently for the shy mare to work up the courage to speak. In the meantime, she helped herself to the oatmeal, which was exquisite, at least as far as oatmeal goes.

"I... it's... um...", Fluttershy mumbled something.

"Beg your pardon? Ditzzy asked, putting a hoof to her ear expectantly.

"I said it's... it's..."

"Who?"

"Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy screamed, practically knocking Ditzzy out of her chair with the yell. The timid pegasus immediately covered her mouth with both hooves, blushing madly.

"Sorry... I'm just... I'm really nervous."

"I can tell," Ditzzy replied, patting down her mane to the style it was in before Fluttershy had blown in back. "But at least I know who we're dealing with now."

Fluttershy sighed. "Rainbow Dash and I have been friends for years; I've known her longer than any of my other friends. And lately, I've started having some feelings for her, but we're just so... so different."

Ditzzy just nodded, since her mouth was again full of oatmeal.

"Rainbow Dash treats me like a friend," Fluttershy continued. "But it seems like she's only really interested in her stunts and her training. She'll probably fall in love with another amazingly talented pegasus like her, not a quiet, timid pony like me."

"You never know, though," said Ditzzy. "I think we should go find Rainbow Dash now; I'll talk to her a little bit and see if I can find a way to make her like you."

"But won't she wonder what we're up to if we just start interrogating her?" Fluttershy asked.

"We'll just pretend the two of us are going shopping," Ditzy said, "And start a casual conversation on the way by."

Ditzy had used the 'going shopping' excuse for a number of assignments now; it was a good way to prevent the target pony from realizing that she and the client were in cahoots.

Fluttershy shrugged. "Okay, I guess that will work," she said. "But... I still don't know if you'll find out anything about her that will help."

"Well, we have to start somewhere," Ditzy said, finishing off the bowl of oatmeal. "Let's go!"

Fluttershy and Ditzy flew into Cloudsdale, where Rainbow Dash was likely to be at this time of day. It didn't take long to find the multicolored pegasus, pushing together a group of rainclouds for a scheduled downpour at a nearby town.

Rainbow noticed as the other two pegasi approached. "Hi Fluttershy. Hi Ditzy. How are you?"

"We're going shopping, why do you ask!?" said Fluttershy way too loudly.

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. Ditzy just facehoofed.

"I mean..." said Fluttershy, finally realizing she had answered the wrong question, "...I'm fine. How are you, Rainbow Dash?"

"Can't complain," Rainbow Dash replied, chalking up Fluttershy's unusual behavior as another result of the yellow pegasus's frayed nerves. "But I'm really excited for later today! Do you know why?"

"Umm... no?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"The Wonderbolts are coming!" Rainbow cried. "This afternoon, they'll be

signing autographs in front of Cloudsdale stadium! I hope they remember me!"

"Oh," said Fluttershy. "That's... um... nice."

"Heck yeah it's nice!" Rainbow responded. "Listen ladies, I'd love to stay and chat, but I have to get the weather done in time for this afternoon! See ya!"

Rainbow turned and hauled the amalgamation of storm clouds off into the distance.

"Well, that didn't last long," Fluttershy said sadly. "But you can see what I mean, right? Rainbow Dash would probably rather be with the Wonderbolts than with me."

Ditzy didn't respond.

"Um, hello?" Fluttershy asked nervously, waving a hoof in front of Ditzy's face.

But the grey mare didn't respond. Somewhere, in the depths of her brain, another crazy plan was suddenly piecing itself together.

Fluttershy was just about to give up and go look for a pony with medical expertise, when Ditzy snapped out of her trance, and grinned at Fluttershy.

"I think I know just how we can get Rainbow to like you, Fluttershy..."

Fluttershy was unnerved by the sly look on Ditzy's face. "Is that... a good thing?"

"Go back to your cottage for now," said Ditzy, ignoring the question. "I'll meet you there a little later and we'll continue. I've got something to take care of first."

Fluttershy whimpered, unsure of precisely what she was getting herself into, but she turned and flew away, leaving Ditzy to begin her new plan.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts, and ponies of all ages! May I present to you... the Wonderbolts!"

The huge crowd of pegasi cheered wildly as the famous flying team appeared, creating complex patterns in midair with their smoke trails, before finally coming to stand by the long table set up in front of the stadium. Rainbow Dash was one of the very first ponies in line, eager to talk to her heroes again, and get a few signed photographs. A certain grey pegasus was also there, a few ponies behind.

"Well, if it isn't our biggest fan!" Spitfire, the Wonderbolts leader, commented as Rainbow Dash approached. "How have you been, Rainbow Dash?"

"I've been great!" Rainbow announced. "I've been training hard, just like always!"

"Good to hear," the Wonderbolt replied. "Don't forget, Ponyville's round of new recruit tryouts are in just a few months."

"Wouldn't miss 'em for the world!" Rainbow replied.

Spitfire smiled. "I really like your spirit, Dash. I hope you manage to make the team one day."

Dash giggled giddily as Spitfire signed a photograph and passed it to her.

"Thanks, Spitfire! See you around!"

Spitfire waved as Dash clutched the photo tightly, and darted off to meet the other Wonderbolts.

Spitfire watched her for a few moments, and then turned to greet the next pony in line.

"Well, would you look at this! It's Ditzzy Doo! How's my old roommate from flight school doing today?"

Ditzzy grinned. "Not bad, Spitfire. And you?"

"Same old, same old," Spitfire laughed. "The life of a celebrity. Fun, but predictable."

The two long-time friends laughed, but then Ditzzy's expression became more serious. "Listen, Spitfire. Remember that favor you owe me? I've come to collect it. I need you to lend me something."

Spitfire's grin diminished. "Uh, sure. What do you need?"

"Two Wonderbolts costumes. Both for mares."

"We're going to *what?!?*"

Fluttershy stood, quaking, staring down apprehensively at the bright blue garment like it was a venomous snake.

"You heard me," Ditzzy said. "You and I are going to pretend we're new Wonderbolts, get Dash to totally adore you, and then reveal who you really are. That will make her see how cool you can really be!"

"But... I can't be cool," Fluttershy deadpanned. "I mean... I'm not good at doing aerial stunts or anything..."

"It doesn't really matter," said Ditzzy. "I'm pretty sure Dash will be too excited about hanging out with a Wonderbolt to even notice if you're not up to the standards of the rest of them."

"But... but..." Fluttershy stammered, fumbling for another excuse. "But my mane! She'll recognize that even if I'm wearing the disguise."

Ditzzy hurled a bottle of temporary mane-dye in Fluttershy's direction. The timid pony groaned, but gave in and went into the bathroom to apply it.

"Now I look like the Great and Powerful Trixie," the yellow pegasus grumbled when she emerged, toying disapprovingly with her now blue-white mane and tail. Ditzzy just laughed as she trotted in and applied the bright green dye she had purchased for herself.

Ditzzy exited the bathroom to find Fluttershy finally decked out in the

borrowed uniform. It was very convincing; Ditzzy wouldn't have recognized Fluttershy at all if she hadn't been aware of her identity ahead of time.

"That just leaves one more thing to address," Ditzzy continued as she donned the other Wonderbolts uniform. "Your voice. We need to disguise it."

"Oh, that's easy," said Fluttershy. "I... um... took voice lessons. I seem to have a natural talent for impressions."

"Really?" Ditzzy asked. "You? With that little voice of yours? Show me."

"Hi, I'm Ditzzy Doo, and I like muffins!" Fluttershy announced, perfectly mirroring Ditzzy's voice in every aspect. Hearing another pony speak in her own voice caused Ditzzy to collapse with laughter. Fluttershy giggled as well.

"Great, great!" Ditzzy said as she hiccupped away the last of her chuckles. "Now see if you can fabricate a good Wonderbolt voice. Maybe like Spitfire's, but a little higher."

"Like this?" asked Fluttershy in a new voice.

"Perfect!" Ditzzy remarked. "Your identity is completely concealed. Let's go!"

"But... But I'm not sure if I'm... um..."

"Oh, just come on!" Ditzzy grumbled, yanking the cautious pony out the door.

The Two "new Wonderbolts" crouched in the uppermost branches of the oak tree, their eyes trained on the prismatic pegasus napping on a cloud a few meters above.

"What do I do?" whispered Fluttershy anxiously.

"You just need to act like a Wonderbolt!" Ditzzy hissed back. "Be confident! Be a little arrogant if you have to. Make up some stories about

aerial feats you've done that will impress even Rainbow Dash! And I'll be right beside you to back you up. Just remember, keep your voice disguised, and whatever you do, don't break character, or it's game over."

Fluttershy gulped. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this..."

"Too late for second thoughts. Here we go!"

Ditzy jumped up from the tree and floated into the air, with Fluttershy following behind. Soon, they were within a few meters of Rainbow Dash, who had not yet stirred from her sleep.

Fluttershy took a slow, deep breath, cleared her throat, and began to speak in her synthesized Wonderbolt voice.

"Hey, that must be Rainbow Dash. Spitfire mentioned something about her."

Rainbow awoke at the mention of her name. She blinked a few times, and her eyes went wide when she realized two Wonderbolts were hovering over her.

"Oh my gosh! It's the Wonderbolts!" Dash got up, looking between the two newcomers excitedly. "Wh... what are you doing here? Are you looking for me?"

"We were," said Fluttershy. "We're two new recruits that passed the tryouts last time they were in Hoofington. Spitfire told us about you, so we figured we'd come meet you while we were in Cloudsdale."

"Awesome!" Rainbow Dash squealed. "So, what're your names?"

Fluttershy froze; she and Ditzy had forgot to come up with codenames before they began!

"I'm... uh... Stormchaser!" Fluttershy answered, hoping she had been quick enough. "And this is my partner... uh... Sky Cyclone!"

Ditzy, who was not as good at disguising her voice, just nodded. She wanted to avoid speaking when possible.

"Nice to meet you!" Rainbow said enthusiastically. "Spitfire probably told you this, but I'm Rainbow Dash! I'm one of the fastest flyers in Equestria, and I'll be joining the Wonderbolts myself just as soon as the tryouts arrive here again!"

"Really?" asked Fluttershy, managing to add a hint of curious skepticism to her voice. "Let's see some of your moves then, hotshot."

Ditzy had to turn around to hide her grin. Fluttershy couldn't be assertive, sarcastic, challenging, or anything else harsh in reality to save her life, but wow, could she act!

"Sure! Check this out!" Rainbow said, speeding off to do some tricks in the sky.

Ditzy floated next to Fluttershy. "You are amazing!" she whispered to the usually-shy pegasus. "How are you doing that?"

"I... I learned it in a school play," Fluttershy mumbled back. "I discovered that, if I pretend I really am the pony I'm playing the part of, I can manage to act like that pony would, instead of myself. It's... all about the mindset, I guess."

Ditzy was stunned. "Fluttershy, you're a pony of many talents, you know that?"

"Who's Fluttershy?" Fluttershy asked, disguising her voice again. "I'm *Stormchaser!*"

"That's the spirit!" Ditzy whispered as Rainbow Dash came soaring back over to the pair.

"So how was that?" Rainbow asked smugly. "Pretty sweet moves, huh?"

"Yeah, not bad," said Fluttershy, trying to sound only moderately impressed.

"What about you, Sky Cyclone?"

Ditzy grinned and nodded fiercely to indicate her feelings.

Dash raised an eyebrow. "You don't talk much, do you?"

"No, she doesn't," Fluttershy said. "So, those we're decent moves and all, Rainbow Dash, but what about..."

"Oh! I just had an idea!" Rainbow suddenly cried, cutting the pseudo-Wonderbolt off. "Since you guys are recent additions to the Wonderbolts team, how about we have a race! If I can keep up with you, then I'll *know* I'm ready to ace the tryouts!"

"Uhh..." Fluttershy thought quickly, searching for a way out. "Alright then. Excuse us for a second while we discuss which of us will race you."

Fluttershy grabbed Ditzy and pulled her over to nearby cloud, where the two pegasi turned their backs to Rainbow.

"Now what?" Fluttershy squeaked. "Rainbow Dash will actually be paying attention to our performance now! She'll know we're not really Wonderbolts if we can't at least keep up with her!"

"Well don't look at me," said Ditzy. "My flying is terrible. It's hard to move forward with lots of speed when you're looking in two directions at once."

Fluttershy groaned. "I can fly *decently*, but there's simply no way I can keep up with Rainbow Dash."

"Unless..." said Ditzy suddenly. "You can use strategy instead of speed!"

"We need to set a race course that you can somehow use to your advantage, to make it seem like you're going faster than you really are."

Fluttershy gasped. "Like during the Running of the Leaves last year... Applejack used a flexible tree branch to launch herself forward!"

"Right!" Ditzy answered. "We need to use stuff like that to help you. We'll set a course through the woods, and we'll find you a bunch of shortcuts and other surprises you can use to stay ahead of Rainbow! She'll never know what hit her!"

"Do you... do you think it could work?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"I hope so. It's the only way you could win, I think."

The two ponies ceased their huddle and flew back over to Rainbow Dash. "Alright Rainbow," Fluttershy said. "Here's the scoop. Sky Cyclone here is going to mark a course through the woods, so neither of us will know the route by heart. Then you and I will race through there when she's done."

"A test of speed *and* agility!" Rainbow observed. "You Wonderbolts know how to do it right!"

"Meet us at the woods in about an hour," Fluttershy said. Rainbow saluted and took off, probably to go practice. Fluttershy turned to her companion.

"The next part's up to you, Ditzzy. So, um... good luck."

"There you are," Fluttershy panted in relief when Ditzzy came into view. "Are you finished? Rainbow will be here any minute!"

"I'm done," Ditzzy said. "I've lined up a trail of red mushrooms along the path you're supposed to follow. Every now and then, I've laid a blue mushroom on a patch of moss. When you see a blue mushroom on moss, it means there's a shortcut there. If you follow it, it will lead you to a later part of the red trail. If you use the shortcuts, you should be able to keep up with Rainbow, since she won't know they're there. Just don't let her see you take those routes, or she'll know you're cheating."

"Okay," said Fluttershy. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," said Ditzzy. "At the end of the course is a long straightaway leading out of the trees. If Rainbow still manages to get ahead of you, you can use this one big tree branch just like Applejack did to throw yourself forward. Just flap your wings while you do, so it looks like you're still flying. If you can pull that off, you'll win for sure."

"Good," said Fluttershy. "Because here she comes!"

The two pegasi looked up as Rainbow Dash descended from the sky. The colorful pony's mane was very windblown; she'd probably been giving herself a serious workout to warm up.

"You ready?" Rainbow challenged.

"Of course," said Fluttershy coolly, again doing a fabulous job of hiding her nervousness. "Sky cyclone set up a trail of red mushrooms for us to follow. First one to reach the outer edge of the woods wins."

Both ponies crouched down, wings spread, ready to take off. Fluttershy glanced at Ditzy, signaling her to start the race.

"On your mark..." Ditzy said, trying as hard as possible to change her voice to literally anything other than its normal sound.

"Get set..."

Rainbow tensed, flapping her wings once in anticipation. Fluttershy did the same.

"Go!"

Both ponies rocketed forward into the woods. Almost immediately, Rainbow Dash took the lead. "What's the matter, Stormchaser?" she called. "Can't keep up?"

"Just getting warmed up," Fluttershy called back, trying to sound arrogant.

Ditzy watched the pegasi disappear, and then flew around the outside of the woods to wait at the finish line.

Fluttershy weaved through the trees, moving as fast as her wings would carry her, but Rainbow was pulling further and further ahead. Fluttershy scanned the ground, desperately searching for the shortcut marker.

Just as Rainbow moved out of sight completely, Fluttershy spotted the first blue mushroom, and turned left sharply, passing through a narrow tunnel beneath the boughs. She emerged just a moment after Rainbow passed

the spot where the shortcut ended.

The kaleidoscopic pegasus glanced backward in surprise. "Wow, you're faster than I thought! Time to step it up!" Rainbow beat her wings even harder, and Fluttershy watched in amazement as the pegasus continued to rocket ahead.

She's even faster than I expected, Fluttershy thought. I hope there's enough shortcuts for me to keep up!

She took a turn at the next blue mushroom, and found herself floating over a wide gorge that Rainbow was likely going all the way around. After a moment, she reached the other side, and after passing through a wall of brush, was back on the red trail. A few more shortcuts soon after kept her close behind Rainbow once again.

The two ponies turned a corner and came onto the straightaway. The light beyond the woods was visible, a speck a few hundred meters away. Fluttershy had a tiny lead, but Rainbow was closing in fast. Fluttershy slowed deliberately, letting her rival get ahead.

Quickly, the yellow pegasus grabbed the branch Ditzy had mentioned. She pushed it back, jumped up so the branch sat against her flank, and let go of the tree.

Woosh! The branch snapped back to its original position, hurling Fluttershy forward at a speed she had never experienced before. The pegasus spread her wings and rode the air easily thanks to the incredible momentum.

Rainbow Dash was stunned when the other pegasus blazed past her, plummeting toward the finish line.

I'm going to win! Fluttershy thought ecstatically. *I'm actually going to...*

SNAG!

A loose branch caught on Fluttershy, which, given her uncontrolled speed, sent her hurtling into a chaotic tumble. She pitched forward with a shriek and plowed into the ground...

...and across the finish line.

It took Fluttershy a moment to get her bearings, but once she had, she realized she had beaten Rainbow. The other racer came to a stop at the finish line a moment later, her expression incredulous.

"Ha! Take that!" Fluttershy announced proudly.

Rainbow Dash said nothing. She just stared at Fluttershy with a shocked and confused expression. Fluttershy began to sense that something was wrong.

It took Rainbow a moment to speak. She was unable to piece this turn of events together.

"F...Fl...Fluttershy...?"

Fluttershy's eyes went wide. *How does she know? I didn't let my character down for an instant. And it's not like she can see my..."*

Fluttershy stopped, and put her hooves to her fully exposed face. The Wonderbolts mask dangled from the branch that had caught her at the end of the race.

"But if you're Fluttershy," said Rainbow, in an almost scared-sounding tone, "Then... who is..."

Ditzy made a move to get out of the way, but Rainbow was on her in an instant. The cyan pegasus tore off the mask, revealing Ditzy's telltale misaligned eyes.

"Ditzy Doo?!" said Rainbow, shocked once again. "Alright, what the hay is going on here!?"

"Well... um..." Ditzy stammered. She wasn't supposed to let anyone but the client know what she was up to. The matchup was destined to fail if she did.

"I... I..."

"It was all my idea," Fluttershy lied smoothly. "Ditzy just agreed to help me. Leave her out of this."

"But... but why?" Rainbow stammered. "And... *how?*"

Fluttershy moaned and sank to the ground, covering her face completely with her mane and holding it there. Rainbow stamped her hoof.

"Fluttershy! This isn't funny! I want an explanation now!"

"I... I'm sorry!" Fluttershy squeaked. "I just... just really wanted you to think I was cool, Rainbow. But I was supposed to reveal my identity later, not like this..."

"But... why did you want to make me think you were cool?"

"Because it was the only way I could get you to like me!" Fluttershy sobbed, collapsing yet again.

"Wha... Fluttershy, I already like you!"

"No," sobbed Fluttershy. "I mean... *like* me..."

Rainbow's eyes widened. "Fluttershy..." she started tentatively. "Do you, uh... Do *you* like *me*?"

"Y...Yes..." Fluttershy managed to gurgle between sobs.

Rainbow grinned. "Well, that saves me a lot of trouble, then!"

Fluttershy ceased crying suddenly. "Wait... what?"

"Heh..." Dash was blushing now, but she was smiling. "I actually... have had a crush on you for a while now... but I was scared to tell you."

Fluttershy gasped and sat up. "You... you did?"

"Yeah!" said Rainbow, her usual vigor returning. "I like the Wonderbolts and all, and I think their flying is really cool and all, but I don't, you know, *love* them."

"You don't?"

"Nah," said Rainbow. "I find the sweet, timid types much more charming."

Rainbow jumped forward suddenly and scooped Fluttershy up in a big hug, lifting her into the air a bit. Fluttershy hugged back, the tears in her eyes now stemming from happiness rather than despair.

"Rainbow," said Fluttershy, after they touched down again. "Just give me a moment to properly thank Ditzy for all the trouble I put her through. Then maybe we can... hang out?"

Rainbow Dash smiled. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Fluttershy trotted over to Ditzy. Both ponies smiled broadly at each other.

"How much do I owe you?" Fluttershy asked.

"I... oh, horseapples, I forgot to set a price before we started!" Ditzy admitted.

"I... I'll just send you the money later," Fluttershy said. "Five-hundred bits."

"Fi-Fi-Five hundred?" Ditzy stammered. "That's so much!"

"Oh, you deserve it," Fluttershy cooed. "I put you through so much today."

The yellow pegasus removed her Wonderbolt outfit and gave it to Ditzy. "Spitfire will probably be wanting this back," she said sheepishly. "I'll see you later. I'm going to go 'hang out' with Rainbow Dash!"

Grinning, Fluttershy turned away and skipped over to her waiting lover.

"Wait!" Rainbow announced suddenly. "We can hang out, but only on one condition."

Fluttershy stopped. "And... that is..."

"Wash that dye out of your mane. You look like the Great and Powerful Trixie."

Fluttershy and Ditzy laughed aloud, and Ditzy waved goodbye to the new couple before taking to the sky once again.

Chapter 6

"Happy Birthday, Dinky!"

The tiny unicorn squealed with delight as she gazed upon her surprise party. The backyard of the little cottage had been transformed into a veritable filly's wonderland. Several tables were laid out, covered in festive tablecloths and adorned with balloons. A mountain of colorfully wrapped gifts was piled in on one of them, and the rest were laden with large amounts of sweets. There was even a huge custom birthday cake, a real one, professionally prepared at Sugarcube Corner, instead of the muffin topped with a candle Dinky was used to receiving on her birthday.

Many of the fillies and colts from Dinky's class at school stood in the yard as well. Dinky immediately recognized the trio who called themselves the Cutie Mark Crusaders, as well as Pipsqueak, the new colt who had moved from Trottingham a few months earlier. Twist, the geeky but friendly filly who sat next to Dinky in class, smiled warmly nearby. A whole host of others were there as well; Dinky assumed nearly the entire class had been invited.

Smiling the broadest of the whole bunch was Dinky's own mother, Ditzzy. The pegasus positively beamed as her ecstatic daughter raced into the yard to greet her friends. Ditzzy had been waiting for years to throw her daughter a proper birthday bash, and this year, she finally found herself financially able to do so.

Ditzzy trotted over to the corner of the lawn, where Pinkie Pie was going over her checklist, making sure she had delivered all the requested party elements.

"Wow, Pinkie Pie, this is amazing," the pegasus commented. "Dinky looks really thrilled; you really can throw quite the party."

Pinkie grinned. "Yeah, well that's what you get when you order the Doozy package," the pink mare chirped. "A party with all the extra trimmings! There's even some super-duper-amazing entertainment

coming! They'll be here in a little while."

"Great!" Ditzzy responded. "So, how much do I owe you for setting all this up?"

Pinkie frowned. "Well, I warned you that the Doozy package isn't exactly cheap. I mean, it's a lot harder to push the Doozy party cannon out here than my regular party cannon."

Pinkie pointed to the gigantic device, almost twice her height, its barrel gleaming eerily in the shadows as it awaited its next opportunity to spew party paraphernalia all over somepony's lawn.

Ditzzy blinked. "That... that probably explains what that explosion shortly after you got here was..."

"Yes ma'am!" Pinkie squeaked. "Now, usually the Doozy package is pretty pricey, but since you're a first time customer, I can give you a little discount!"

"Oh, no special treatment, please," Ditzzy countered. "I can pay full price. Really."

Ditzzy handed over the bits to Pinkie. It was only the sum of her last few jobs' pay; she could easily afford to part with it at this point.

"Okey-dokey-lokey!" said Pinkie as she accepted the money. "I'll just be on my way then! Good luck with whatever job you will inevitably wind up being assigned after the impending page break. I'll see you in the next chapter!"

"I... you'll see me... huh?" Ditzzy stammered. Pinkie didn't answer; she was too busy preparing to haul the Doozy party cannon back to Sugarcube Corner.

"I swear, that mare is even weirder than Watt sometimes," Ditzzy mumbled, turning back to the party.

"Hey everypony!" she called to the young ponies scattered around the yard. "Who wants some birthday cake?"

In an instant, the pegasus found herself surrounded by a horde of eager ponies, chattering and carrying on as they awaited their treat. Ditzzy quickly cut the cake, giving the first piece to little Dinky. Soon, everypony was enjoying Pinkie Pie's latest confectionary masterpiece.

Ditzzy was so busy watching the youngsters bury their faces in cake that she didn't notice the sound of another pony coming around the house and strolling up behind her.

"Excuse me."

Ditzzy turned around and was faced with an unusual sight. The visitor was none other than Ponyville's librarian, Twilight Sparkle, and on her back was Spike. But for whatever reason, Twilight was decked out in her dress from the Grand Galloping Gala, and wearing her mane in an elaborate style that could only have been the work of Rarity, and Spike was adorned with a top hat, cape, and magically conjured moustache.

"Um... can I help you?" Ditzzy asked, staring at Twilight with one eye and Spike with the other.

"Uh, yeah, hi," said Twilight awkwardly. "Pinkie Pie sent us here to do a magic show for a birthday party."

"Does that have something to do with why you're both dressed like that?" Ditzzy asked.

"Well, yes," Twilight sighed. "Spike is the 'magician.' I'm supposed to be the 'lovely assistant'."

Ditzzy blinked. "Spike can do magic?"

"But of course," Spike said, standing up on Twilight's back and bowing regally, sweeping his cape in front of him.

Twilight gave her hip a sharp twitch, causing the baby dragon to topple off. "No, he can't," she corrected. "I'll be the one actually *doing* the magic; I'm just going to make it *look* like Spike's doing it. That's why I have my mane like this; I have to keep my horn hidden. Because, you know, a unicorn doing magic is an everyday thing, but a *dragon* doing magic is

something special."

Ditzy grinned. "Pinkie pie sure knows how to come up with good entertainment ideas for colts and fillies!"

"That she does," Twilight agreed. "Pinkie's had us do this before; the crowd usually loves it."

"Well, duh," Spike added. "Who *wouldn't* love a show where the Amazing Spike performs fantastic feats of prestidigitation?"

Twilight glared at her assistant. "Don't get a big head this time, Houdini, or you might find some of your 'tricks' staring to backfire on you..."

Spike gulped. "Gotcha' Twilight..."

Ditzy called everyone together, and soon Twilight and Spike found themselves with a large audience.

"Good afternoon, everypony!" Spike announced. "Today I, the Amazing Spike, will put on a display of magic the likes of which nopony has ever witnessed before!"

"Oooooohh," the crowd responded.

"What shall I do first?" the dragon asked. "Someone in the audience, give me a suggestion!"

"Why don't you make miss Twilight disappear?" Apple Bloom called.

"Yeah!" Scootaloo agreed. "A vanishing trick! Making Twilight disappear would be awesome!"

"I really like her mane!" Sweetie Belle added, taking notice of Twilight's unusual manestyle.

"A simple trick," Spike commented. "But very theatrical. I like it!" He turned to Twilight and waggled his fingers mysteriously. "I summon the ancient dragon magic to make Twilight Sparkle... disappear!"

Twilight performed the mundanely simple invisibility spell and vanished from sight. The audience gasped in surprise, and then cheered.

"Now shall I bring her back?" Spike asked.

"Yeah!"

Spike again motioned in Twilight's direction. "Fine. Let's bring Twilight Sparkle back!"

Twilight reappeared in a flash, pretending to look shocked, as if Spike had actually sent her away somewhere of his own accord. The audience applauded.

Ditzy Doo sat at the back of the group, nibbling on some cake and watching the magic show. She couldn't remember ever seeing her daughter this happy before. Every year, Dinky's birthday was celebrated with a meager, homemade muffin, and a small, dull present costing only a few bits; it was all the money Ditzy could spare. Now she was able to afford a party like this one, and still not be met with financial hardship. Sure, her new job was hard, but it was worth it, considering the fulfilling results and the huge pay increase from her old job.

Applying to Equestria Speedy Shipping Services was the luckiest mistake I ever made, the mare thought, smiling to herself. Ever since Dinky's father died, all I've really wanted is to make her happy, and now I can finally do that.

Sure, there was still the minor complication of actually *telling* Dinky about her new job; Ditzy was hesitant to do so, even though she wasn't sure exactly why. She harbored a nagging feeling that breaking the news to a filly that one was employed in a business like matchmaking was something that needed to be handled... delicately, to say the least. So every time the thought came to her, she pushed it to the back of her mind.

I'll think of something eventually, Ditzy thought absentmindedly. For now, I should be grateful I even have such a good job.

Indeed, Ditzy's endeavors into pony shipping were still going well. She succeeded at the vast majority of her assignments, and got along well with

her coworkers. Well, except for one...

I wonder why Glow hates me so much, Ditzzy pondered. She doesn't exactly get along well with the others, either, but I wonder what I did to make myself the prime target?

Ever since the argument a few weeks ago, Glow had been acting... different. Instead of just spiteful, she seemed to have a haughty sort of air about her. She tended to greet Ditzzy with a nasty smirk, and the pegasus couldn't help but wonder if the unicorn was formulating some sort of evil plan. For now, Ditzzy found the best course of action was to ignore her coworker's taunts as much as possible.

Both Ditzzy and Breeze had not brought up Glow's comment concerning the two of them again. Ditzzy didn't feel an explanation was necessary.

Glow's accusations don't bother me. It's perfectly obvious that there's nothing going on between Breeze and I. I mean, we're just friends.

...Right?

Another thunderous round of applause snapped Ditzzy out of her reverie. It appeared that Twilight and Spike were about to conclude their show.

"Well, fillies and gentlecolts, we're almost out of time," Spike announced. "But I think we have time for one more trick. Twilight, whaddya' say we get the birthday girl up here to help us?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Twilight replied.

Dinky squealed with joy as she hopped to her hooves and ran over to Twilight and Spike.

Spike grinned and turned to Dinky with a grand sweep of his cape.

"Alright, Dinky Doo," he announced. "I, the Amazing Spike, have the power to perform any amazing feat you so desire! What would you like me to do?"

Dinky put a hoof to her chin in thought. Suddenly, her face lit up and she leaned over and whispered something to Spike, who in turn whispered it to

Twilight.

"Aww," the purple mare cooed. "That's so sweet. Alright, oh Amazing Spike, make it happen!"

Spike struck a dramatic pose, swung his arms in a grand arc and held them skyward, and at the same moment, Twilight released a burst of magic. A glowing orb rocketed into the sky, traveling higher until it was almost out of sight. Then suddenly it burst into a giant, colorful firework.

For a moment, the crowd thought that was the whole trick, but then the sparks from the explosion began to rearrange themselves in midair, beginning to form words and an image.

It only took a few seconds for the particles to take their new form. Ditzzy looked up, not sure if she could believe her eyes.

Multicolored particles spelled out the phrase 'Thank you, mommy!', and the image forming beneath it was a surprisingly clear picture of Ditzzy and Dinky, snuggled up together in a big, warm hug. The whole audience let out a long "awwwwwwww" at the sweetness of the gesture.

"What do you think?"

Ditzzy, who had been staring dumbstruck at the firework, finally looked down to see her beaming daughter standing in front of her.

"Dinky..." Ditzzy started, a few tears welling up in her eyes as she looked up again at the spectacular gesture of gratitude her daughter had wished up. "...dear, I... I don't know what to say..."

Dinky just laughed and tackled her mother, pulling her into a hug not unlike the one depicted in the iridescent masterpiece overhead.

"Thank you so much!" the little unicorn squeaked. "I've... I've never had a party like this before..."

"You're welcome," Ditzzy said lovingly. "It was high time you got to have a *real* party."

Dinky gave her mother a final affectionate nuzzle before sprinting back to her friends, who were now all talking to Spike about his amazing magic as the aerial picture finally began to fade.

Spike eventually said goodbye to everyone, and hopped onto Twilight's back. The pair made to leave the yard, strolling past Ditzzy on the way by.

"Payment is included in Pinkie's fees," Twilight said. "So you're already covered."

She leaned in a little closer to the pegasus. "And... I hope you know, you have the sweetest little filly I've ever met. I hope you take good care of her."

"I always do," Ditzzy replied with a grin.

Twilight smiled. "Come on, Amazing Spike, our work here is done."

Ditzzy wiped the last of the happy tears from her misaligned eyes, and returned to host the rest of the party.

Luna's moon was rising steadily in the night sky. It was time for a certain filly to go to sleep.

"Dinky! Bedtime!"

Dinky ceased playing with the 'Equestrian Filly' dolls she had gotten as a birthday gift and began to trot up the stairs. Halfway up, she stopped, and turned back.

"Hey, mommy? Can I ask you something?"

Ditzzy looked up from her seat at the table. "Sure, what is it?"

Dinky cantered quietly over to the table and hopped up onto a chair across from her mother. "Mommy, I was just wondering... how did you manage to throw me such a big party this afternoon? Wasn't it real expensive?"

Ditzzy smiled uncomfortably. "Um... I... I got a bonus at work. Delivering a

package to the princess, you know. So I decided to use the extra money on your party."

"That was really nice," Dinky commented. "I hope you liked my thank you gift in return."

Ditzy broke into a wide, sincere smile now. "I loved it. You're the best filly a mother could have."

Dinky smiled, and was silent for a few moments. Ditzy went back to what she was doing, aware that the filly was still watching her.

"Mommy... do you think daddy is up there somewhere, wishing me a happy birthday too?"

Ditzy's breath caught in her throat. Dinky almost *never* brought up her late father, mainly because she was too young when he died to remember anything about him.

"Of... of course, dear. Daddy's not with us anymore, but I'm sure he's up there somewhere, watching you grow up. You're making him very proud."

Dinky sighed happily at the thought of her father's comforting gaze. "It's too bad he's gone. I guess I'll need to find someone else to teach me about magic."

Ditzy smirked. "You could get the Amazing Spike to help you."

Dinky laughed aloud. "Yeah! Or at least miss Twilight. She was the one really doing the magic, wasn't she?"

Ditzy focused both her eyes on the filly. "Nothing gets by you, does it?"

Dinky shook her head. "Nope," she said proudly. "Now, I'll go to bed. Goodnight, mommy."

"Goodnight, sweetie," Ditzy said as she watched the filly bound up the stairs.

Nothing gets by Dinky, she thought to herself again. *How many of my*

excuses about work has she already seen through?

The mare pushed the thought from her mind and got back to work.

Pinkie Pie lurked between the page breaks, having lost her way to chapter 7 after leaving Dinky's party. After realizing that she had rather awkwardly created an unnecessary paragraph with her antics, she waved briefly at the readers before turning and setting off down the side of another page.

"Ditzy Doo, come to my office for your next assignment. Thank you."

Ditzy gratefully got up to answer Candyfloss's call. She had been stuck in the lounge with no one around but Watt for two hours, and she was eager to escape the Earth pony's endless chatter. She trotted down to the office of her superior.

"Good afternoon, Ditzy," Candyfloss said with the usual vague smile. "How are you today?"

"Fine," said Ditzy. "What's today's mission?"

"Today," Candyfloss started, "You're getting an unusual kind of mission, and so must be informed of a few additional parameters to your job. Today, we have gotten, as we occasionally do... a call from a young colt. As you might expect, the ethical standards held at Equestria Speedy Shipping Services cannot allow you to attempt to form a serious, lifelong bond among underaged ponies. Usually, when we get calls from young ponies, they aren't after that anyway. You are permitted to aid them in achieving a date with the object of their affection; a simple, informal dinner. Any requests of a young pony to get the object of their affection to form any sort of long term relationship, as well as any other requests that may be considered improper for a pony of that age must be denied in order to uphold our ethical standards. Do you understand?"

"Of course," said Ditzy. "I have a filly of my own, I know what's acceptable for kids."

"Good," said Candyfloss. "Here's the address. Off you go!"

Ditzy took to the air, and soon found herself at an average-looking house in Ponyville. She rapped briefly on the door.

A moment passed, and the door swung open, revealing a tiny, pudgy, turquoise unicorn colt with a pair of scissors as a Cutie Mark.

"Hello," Ditzy said. "Someone contacted Equestria Speedy Shipping Services?"

The unicorn's eyes lit up. "Snails!" he cried. "They actually sent someone! We're saved!"

He turned back to Ditzy. "My name's Snips, and my pal Snails is inside. And boy, do the both of us need your help!"

He trotted back inside, motioning for Ditzy to follow. Once they reached the living room, Ditzy caught sight of the other pony, an orange unicorn with a greenish mane, who was gazing blankly into space.

"Snails," Snips said. "This is... uh... the shipping pony! She's gonna help us out!"

Snails turned ever so slowly to stare at Ditzy. "...I like her eyes..." he drawled after a moment.

Snips chuckled. "Don't mind Snails, he's a little... slow. But the two of us need your help with a big problem!"

"Uh... sure," said Dtizy. "What's wrong?"

"Well," Snips started. "We were talking with our friends at school, and everyone was admiring our friend Peach Pit, because he's going out with this super-awesome filly in our class named Lemon Fresh. And I thought it was annoying how he was bragging about getting a date, so I told him that anyone can get a filly if he really tries to."

Ditzy didn't like where this was going.

"So naturally," Snips continued. "Peach Pit said Snails and I couldn't get a date in a million years. And so I said 'oh yeah?' and he was all like 'yeah'."

Ditzy didn't like where this was going *at all*.

"So," Snips continued. "I bet him that Snails and I could get a date with any available filly in our class within a week. And he said 'fine then, it's a bet', and everything would have been all set up for us to prove him wrong, but then he told us which fillies we had to get dates with... Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon."

"Silver Spoon is cute!" announced Snails to no one in particular, eliciting a puzzled look from Snips. The orange unicorn took no heed, continuing to stare at the wall and smile dully.

Ditzy put a hoof to her forehead in annoyance. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, if Dinky's description of her classmates was any indication, were two of the most mean-spirited and stuck-up fillies ever to curse Ponyville with their presence. They were also rich and extremely picky; Ditzy suspected ragamuffins like Snips and Snails were the very *last* ponies they'd ever consider dating.

"The point is," Snips continued. "We don't even like these two, but we need photographic proof that we were on a date with them, by tomorrow, or we'll lose the bet! So we need you to help us get a date! Please?"

Ditzy was under no obligation to accept every assignment, but then again, this might be a good chance for her to teach these colts not to accept stupid bets, and not to date snobby jerks like Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. She decided to accept; the alternative was returning to HQ and listing to Watt ramble on some more.

"Alright, kids, we'll give it a try."

"Woohoo!" Snips cheered. "You hear that Snails? We're gonna win this bet yet!"

Snails just blinked.

"Not so fast," Ditzzy said. "You have to pay for this service you know."

"Oh," Snips said, thinking hard for a moment. "Well, when we win the bet tomorrow, we get forty bits. You can take half of that."

Twenty bits was incredibly meager pay for a shipping job, but then again, these were young colts. Ditzzy took the offer.

"Come on Snails!" Snips called as he followed the pegasus out the door. "Let's go get some fillies!"

Snails seemed to register the instructions after a few moments, and trotted out the door after Snips.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon appeared to be in some kind of argument. Neither was aware of the three faces, two belonging to colts and one to a mare, peering around the corner of a building.

"Those two?" Ditzzy asked. She could tell just by looking that these two fillies everything that Dinky had described them as; rich, snobbish, and ill-tempered.

"That's them," Snips whispered. "What's the plan?"

Ditzzy scrutinized the target for a moment. "I need to see how they react to you. Just walk over to them and say hi, and don't even bring up the fact that you're trying to get a date with them."

Snips shrugged. "You're the boss. C'mon Snails."

Snips and Snails strode nonchalantly into the square. The fillies didn't notice their approach, as they were still locked in a battle of words.

Snips cleared his throat. "Uh... hi, ladies."

Both fillies quieted instantly and turned to face the new arrivals. Silver Spoon scrunched up her nose distastefully, and Diamond Tiara took a step back, lifting a front hoof and sticking out her tongue in disgust.

"Ew," Diamond Tiara proclaimed. "What do you two losers want?"

"Uh, nothing," Snips said quickly. "Just... I mean... uh... nice day, huh?"

"Yeah, until you loused it up," the pink filly responded. "Now go away before we catch the plague or something from you two weirdoes."

Snips sighed and made to go back the way he came. After walking a few steps, he realized Snails was not following; the orange colt was staring fixedly at Silver Spoon, whose expression was growing increasingly disturbed. Snips grabbed his companion's tail and yanked him away.

"Well, that went... about as well as expected," Ditzzy deadpanned once the colts returned to her hiding place.

"Yeah," Snips said. "But you've gotta' have some kind of magic strategy to make them like us, right? I mean, you couldn't be a shipper otherwise, could you?"

Ditzzy laughed. "There's no 'magic strategy', I'm afraid, but trust me; there's more than one way to catch a filly's interest."

The pegasus turned and trotted briskly down the street, with her young clients in tow.

Snips peeked out of the small closet he and Snails had been rummaging through. "Uh... what *exactly* are we looking for again?"

"I told you," Ditzzy replied impatiently. "You two need to find some way to impress those two with a display of skill. Don't you guys have anything in there that you can use to impress them?"

"I'll keep looking," Snips answered, plunging back into the pile of junk in the closet.

Ditzzy thought over her strategy yet again. In most situations, this would be considered a very blunt and rather shallow way for the client to get the

target's attention; but impressing fillies or colts was different than impressing adult ponies. Ditzzy remembered Dinky's detailed description of Applebloom's antics involving some device called a "loopy-hoop" a few weeks earlier; another example of her theory. Young ponies, for the most part, were easily impressed by some display of skill.

The question was, could Snips and Snails do anything impressive enough to interest Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon?

There was good news and bad news. The good news: Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were in a good mood. The bad news: they were in a good mood because the stunt Snips and Snails had just tried to pull had gone so catastrophically wrong that it had left both fillies rolling on the ground in laughter.

"Oh man, you two are so *pathetic*," Diamond Tiara squealed in malicious delight as she watched the colts struggle to untangle themselves from the bizarre position they had wound up in following the accident.

"I know, right?" Silver Spoon added between fits of laughter. "I mean, why would you even try something that random? I could understand if you were those three fillies who are still looking for their Cutie Marks, but the two of you... what were you even trying to prove?"

Snips and Snails just stared at the ground as the two giggling fillies walked away, describing the stunt again and again between giggles.

A few moments later, there was a flutter of wings as an exasperated grey pegasus landed next to the colts.

"Well, they noticed you," Ditzzy said dryly. "Not in the way we hoped, but..."

"But... we did what you said..." Snails responded. "We performed a feat of skill."

Ditzzy shook her head. "Uh... perhaps I should have been more specific. You two were supposed to do some stunt that you actually knew how to do, not just one that would be impressive but basically impossible

for you. When I saw you come out here with a beach ball and a dozen eggs, I wasn't sure what you were planning, but I figured it was some simple trick of yours. Instead, I watched you wind up in a tangle of legs, covered in egg yolk, with the two fillies you're trying to impress laughing their flanks off at you! And I don't know *how* you managed to set Leafy Green's cabbage cart on fire in the midst of all this, but I'm probably going to have to pay for it..."

"Alright, we get it!" said Snips. "We screwed up, okay? Sorry!"

Ditzy caught herself when she heard Snips' apologetic outburst. "No... I'm sorry," she said. "Customer service is an important part of my job, and more importantly, I'm usually such a friendly pony. I've been letting myself get too worked up over this. Sure, this isn't the type of assignment I'm used to having, and we've had a few setbacks so far, but that's no reason for me to turn into a grump." She looked at Snips and Snails, who were watching her curiously. "Do you guys forgive me?"

Snips and Snails grinned. "Sure!" said Snips, his usual vigor returning. "Don't worry about it."

"Great!" said Ditzy, relieved. "Now, let's do this right. I've got some other shipping tactics that just *have* to work!"

Six hours and nearly a dozen failed strategies later, Ditzy was finding it difficult to maintain her composure, but she refused to let her frustration show again; she was a better pony than that. Snips and Snails were getting discouraged, too.

"It's no use," Snips said with a sigh. "Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon have watched us make fools of ourselves over and over today. Maybe we should just give in and lose the bet."

"Well..." Ditzy began, feeling rather defeated as well. "Let's give it one more go, and then, if we still fail, we'll call it quits. Alright?"

"Yeah, why not," Snips mumbled. Snails just nodded vaguely in agreement.

"Ok then..." the pegasus racked her brain for anything else the colts could try. "Let's go with something simple. Just try complimenting them. Any feature will do. Tell them they have... lustrous coats, or... beautiful eyes, or something. At this point, they'll probably just laugh at you again, but there's no harm in trying."

"Sure, why not," said Snips unenthusiastically. "Let's go, Snails."

The colts exited the building in which they had been hiding and located Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon once again.

Silver Spoon was the first to see them coming. She poked Diamond Tiara to get her attention.

"Look who's heading this way."

Diamond Tiara turned around, catching sight of the approaching colts. "You two *again*?" she asked. "Seriously, can't you two just go away before somepony gets hurt from laughing at you so hard?"

Snips ignored the jeer as he tried to decide how to compliment the pink filly.

What feature do I praise? Snips thought. *Her mane? Her eyes? Maybe her tiara?*

"You're cute, Silver Spoon!" Snails suddenly yelled.

There was a long, awkward silence. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon glanced at each other briefly before once again collapsing in laughter.

Snails' face had turned bright red; he stood completely still, not quite sure what had caused him to admit his opinion of the grey filly. Snips just shook his head.

"That's it. We're done. Let's go, Snails."

The two colts began to trot away, yet again, from the gleeful fillies, but Diamond Tiara stopped them.

"Wait... wait..." she managed to choke out between laughs. "Just... hang on a sec..." The filly gathered her composure and stood up, facing Snips and Snails with a curious expression.

"I just have to know," she said. "Is there some particular reason you two have been following us around all day and doing stupid things? Are you really just that bored or something?"

"Nah," Snips said, deciding it was time to spill the beans. "We were trying to impress you two so you'd go on a date with us, but-"

"So we would *what*?" Diamond Tiara gasped. "Why would either of you *possibly* think that the two of us would ever want to date you two losers? I mean, I know you're dumb, but not *that* dumb!"

"I know," Snips mumbled. "It was a stupid idea. Snails and I will just lose the bet; it's not that big a deal."

"Bet?" asked Silver Spoon, walking up next to Diamond Tiara. "What bet?"

"Peach Pit at school was going to pay us forty bits if we managed to get a date with you two by today," Snips said. "That's why we were trying so hard."

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon looked at one another.

"Silver Spoon, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I think I'm thinking what you're thinking, Diamond Tiara."

Once again, Diamond Tiara faced Snips and Snails. "Alright, listen. We'll cut you two stooges a deal. We'll pretend to go out with you, just long enough for you to get the proof you need, and then when you win your bet, we get twenty bits from the winnings."

Snips' face lit up. "Really?"

Diamond Tiara shrugged. "Sure, why not. Just don't get any ideas; remember, we still hate you two."

"Fine by me," Snips said. "So, who's got a camera?"

"No... way..." Peach Pit breathed, unable to believe what he was looking at.

The photograph clearly showed Snips and Snails, sitting at a table at the ice cream shop, posing for the photo with Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

"There's your proof," Snips said smugly. "Now where's our money?"

"...Fine," Peach Pit grumbled, handing Snips a bag full of coins. "I don't know how you two did it, though..."

The confused colt wandered away, shaking his head, leaving Snips and Snails with the money. As soon as he was out of sight, a certain pair of fillies trotted over from where they had been discreetly watching from another part of the playground.

"Alright, we'll take our share now," Diamond Tiara said. She snatched the bag from Snips' hoof, dumped out the coins, and took twenty for herself and Silver Spoon.

"Thanks, losers," the pink filly mused, sauntering away with her newly earned funds. Silver Spoon remained behind for a moment, watching Diamond Tiara walk away and around the corner of the schoolhouse. She turned back to Snips and Snails; curiously, she was blushing ever so slightly.

"Um... Snails..." The silvery filly asked quietly. "Yesterday, did you mean it when you... um... said I was cute?"

A wide, dopey grin appeared on Snails' face. "Yes ma'am."

Silver Spoon looked left and right a few times to ensure nopony was watching, the suddenly hopped up and gave Snails a quick peck on the cheek before turning tail and scurrying off in the direction Diamond Tiara had gone.

Now it was Snips' turn to burst out laughing. The turquoise colt cracked up as his orange companion stood stark still, blushing madly and staring in the direction Silver Spoon had gone.

Snips might have gone on laughing for much longer if a certain grey pegasus hadn't floated down from the roof of the school and landed next to him a moment later.

"Oh... hello, again," Snips said. "Here for your share of the winnings, right?"

"That's right," said Ditzzy. "You promised me half, remember?"

"Yep," Snips said. "So let's see... we gave twenty to Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, and half goes to you, so that leaves us with..."

"Absolutely nothing," Ditzzy finished in a matter of fact tone, picking up the bag containing the remaining bits.

Snips blinked as the realization dawned on him. "Oh yeah..."

"Hopefully, you two have learned a little something about making bets you probably can't win," Ditzzy said.

Snips nodded. "I'll say. I'll that effort, and we came out of all this with nothing."

"Not quite nothing," Snails said, holding a hoof to the cheek Silver Spoon had kissed.

Snips laughed. "Whoa, buddy. Don't get ahead of yourself."

Ditzzy said goodbye to her two young clients, and with a quick grin and a wave, she launched herself into the sky again.

Breeze in gonna' laugh his flank off at this one, the mare thought as she soared back to headquarters.

Dinky Doo and her friend Twist peered out from the schoolhouse window.

"Was that...my mom?" the little grey unicorn asked her friend. "Talking to Snips and Snails?"

"What was she doing out there?" Twist asked.

"I don't know," Dinky said. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised; mom *has* been acting strange for the last few months..." She turned to her red-headed friend, determination in her eyes. "...And you know what, Twist? I'm going to find out why."

Chapter 7

"Mister Autumn Breeze, please come to my office. I have an assignment for you."

"Looks like the boss needs me," Breeze said. "I'll catch you later, Ditzzy. Good luck on your assignment, if you get one today."

He leaned in much closer to the female pegasus. "And... good luck with you know who," he whispered, giving his head a twitch in the direction of a certain blue unicorn, who was ignoring the pegasi and flipping through a magazine as usual.

"I hate being stuck here alone with Glow," Ditzzy whispered back.

"Don't let her get under your skin," Breeze replied quietly. "You know she's usually just full of idle threats and empty insults."

Breeze got up and trotted over to the door. "Anyway, see ya'."

"Bye," Ditzzy replied, watching her coworker trot down the stairs.

Silence reigned for a few moments. Ditzzy slowly made her way back toward the side of the room where she and Breeze had been sitting, as far as possible from Glow, but she could feel the unicorn's gaze upon her. He chanced a glance in her rival's direction.

Glow's violet eyes peered over the top of her magazine. Her gaze met Ditzzy's briefly, and the pegasus quickly turned away and instead moved toward the table to search for leftover muffins from the morning.

"Hey Ditzzy. Come here a second."

Ditzzy tensed at the request. Usually, when Glow addressed her, she'd use an insulting nickname like "walleyes" or "muffin breath." Hearing herself addressed by her real name probably meant Glow had something

particularly nasty up her sleeve, which left Ditzzy dreading the encounter more than usual.

Ditzzy turned to face the lounging unicorn. "Uh... sure. What's up?"

"I think it's time we had a little talk..." Glow said icily, using her magic to fling her magazine into a far corner of the room. "...mare to mare." Glow stood and began walking slowly around her pegasus coworker, like a predator circling its prey.

"I see you've been quite the success lately," Glow said, almost casually. "You fail your assignments even more rarely than I do. If I'm not mistaken, you've only had a hooffull of defeats, and it's been nearly half a year now since you joined our company..."

"Well... yeah," Ditzzy agreed. "I don't know why everything seems to go so well for me; I'm just glad it does. It's a lot easier and more fulfilling dealing with a satisfied client afterwards."

"Hmm," Glow hummed. "And what number is your success total up to these days?"

"I dunno," said Ditzzy, raising an eyebrow in suspicion. "I haven't been keeping track, but I'm sure Candyfloss has it in his records somewhere... but, why do you ask?"

Glow gave Ditzzy a bored look. "You can cut out the act, you know. You're not fooling anypony."

Ditzzy blinked in surprise. "Act? What act?"

Glow gave a sarcastic chuckle. "My, you really do play the 'totally innocent' card very well, don't you Ditzzy? But somewhere under that moronic expression you're wearing, I can tell you are secretly vying to become the new record holder here at Equestria Speedy Shipping Services. The way your success rate has been skyrocketing, you probably consider yourself a shoo-in by now."

"That's what this is about?" Ditzzy said loudly, her temper flaring at Glow's accusation. "You think I'm trying to *upstage* you? I'm just trying to do my

job and support my daughter! And I don't exactly control whether or not I succeed at an assignment. I would gladly let you keep the top-employee title if I could. But I'm not going to go purposely failing missions to let you stay ahead; I'd rather help ponies who need my aid than pacify the desires of a less-than-genial coworker."

Glow snorted and stamped her hoof. "There you go with that garbage again! Honestly, it's not the fact that somepony like *you* is actually threatening to beat my record that has me so very frustrated. It's your Celestia-forsaken goody-goody attitude! I simply don't understand how you can be successful when you let yourself get all flustered over the well-being of your client!"

Ditzy smiled smugly. "At first, failing an assignment almost broke me." She admitted. "But then Candyfloss gave me a little pep talk, and I-"

"Stop right there," Glow interjected, silently realizing her chance to turn the speech she had eavesdropped on against Ditzy. "I'm sure the boss gave you the whole 'sincere effort brings sincere ships' speech, didn't he?"

Ditzy was taken aback. "Y...yeah, he did. I wasn't aware he'd told anypony else about that."

Glow laughed darkly. "Are you kidding? That little fabrication of his is just a lie to keep stupid ponies like you from getting discouraged when they fail a shipping job. I see it worked perfectly on you."

"Why should I believe you?" answered Ditzy, undeterred. "I have no reason not to trust Candyfloss; in fact, he's a pretty great boss. You, on the other hoof, haven't given me a single reason to believe anything you say."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," Glow said coolly, turning and walking a few steps away from the pegasus while swishing her tail in a most annoying fashion. "And I could go on letting you live in the little fantasy world old Candyfloss has built for you. But since I'm feeling particularly helpful today, I'll show you *proof* that I am correct. Proof that has been hovering right under your nose since the day you walked into this place."

"Proof?" Ditzy asked skeptically, still hesitant to believe the malicious unicorn over her seemingly well-meaning boss. "How can you prove that?"

"It's easy," Glow continued. "You've overlooked the biggest piece of evidence against Candyfloss's rule. You've overlooked... *me*."

"You?"

"Yes!" Glow responded triumphantly. "Clearly, I don't use Candyfloss's advice in matchmaking, because I simply don't have concern for the true well-being of the customer. I use only two tools in my assignments; false politeness, and cold, hard strategy. I calculate the best way to make a pony appealing to another, and act on emphasizing that characteristic, no matter what it is. To me, it's no more intimate than solving a jigsaw puzzle. I enact my strategy, I complete my assignment, I collect my pay, and I leave."

"And so..." she continued, relishing the dawning realization on Ditzzy's face. "Surely even a thickheaded mare like you can see what this means. If anything Candyfloss told you was true, then all signs would indicate I would be terrible at my job. And yet... I'm the best. My record is still far higher than anypony else's, including yours." The blue unicorn trotted right up to Ditzzy, their faces just inches apart. "While you may want to believe the ramblings of old Candyfloss, you can't overlook the facts. I am the best shipper, and that is impossible if his theories hold true."

Ditzzy wasn't sure how to respond. She felt her chest tightening nervously as she struggled to find a loophole in Glow's logic.

"But... but I'm doing just fine with Candyfloss's method..." the pegasus said weakly. "Maybe... you're just an exception...?"

"Afraid not," Glow said with a smirk. "Sure, you do care about your clients. But that doesn't change the fact that your success stems from your strategy alone. And apparently, you're better at strategizing than I would like to admit. But when you do fail, the fault belongs to you, not to fate, and the only way you'll be able to bear that knowledge is to detach yourself emotionally from your client. Somehow, though, I doubt you can do that."

Ditzzy had no response. She slowly slumped back onto her haunches, sitting in the middle of the floor in a kind of shocked stupor as Glow continued to wander slowly around her, grinning evilly.

"Now, let me make one thing perfectly clear," the unicorn said quietly. "I am, and always will be, the top employee at this place. No matter how good you've been doing, you shouldn't allow yourself to get any ideas about overtaking my record. It's not going to happen. In fact, if this little discussion we just had bothers you too much... maybe you should just quit now. It would make things easier for both of us."

"But... I need this job," Ditzzy mumbled, slinking further away from the haughty unicorn. "I'm finally able to properly support Dinky. I can't go back to being a mailmare... and I don't really have any other special skills..."

Glow laughed darkly. "True. It takes a special kind of employer to want to hire a goofball like you. And your daughter's probably stupider than you are, so it's not like she can support herse-"

Glow barely managed to activate her magic in time to catch the metal serving tray that Ditzzy had flung at her from the snack table. She levitated it there as she stared at the pegasus in shock.

"Well... that was rather uncalled for!"

"Uncalled for!" Ditzzy was worked into a rage like none she had ever experienced. "You are the one whose actions are uncalled for! You can insult my eyes, my intelligence, and my disposition all you want, but I will NOT tolerate unkind words about my daughter! Now take it back, you overbearing, self-centered mule!"

Glow snarled. "How dare you!" The aura surrounding her horn flared, and the metal serving tray was whipped back in Ditzzy's direction at twice the speed it was originally thrown.

At precisely that moment, the door burst open and a yellow streak shot into the room. By some sheer coincidence, its trajectory happened to disrupt the hurled serving plate. There was a loud clang and a sharp cry as Watt tumbled backwards, knocked senseless by the projectile. He crashed into the far wall in an awkward inverted position, his back hooves dangling over his face, before he slumped down fully onto the floor.

"Watt!" said Ditzzy in shock, hurrying over to the Earth pony's fallen

form. "Watt! Are you okay?"

Watt was still; his eyes were closed.

"Okay, don't panic," Ditzzy said aloud. "I'll just go call for some first aid and..."

All of a sudden, Watt's eyes popped open and he jumped right to his hooves as if nothing had happened.

"You should watch where you're throwin' stuff, Cosmo!" he said in his usual rather hyper voice. "One of these days you're gonna' hurt somepony!"

Glow breathed a small sigh of relief that she somehow hadn't hurt Watt. She had actually been planning to catch the tray again with magic before it hit Ditzzy, just to give her a scare, but Watt's entrance and collision with the projectile had been unexpected.

"Don't scare us like that, Watt!" Ditzzy said. "I thought that thing knocked you out."

Watt snickered. "Come on, now. It was only moving forty of fifty miles an hour. I was going at least twice that, and I run into stuff all the time at that speed."

Ditzzy blinked a few times. "You... you're a unique one, Watt."

Watt smiled a toothy grin, before turning to Glow. "So, Cosmo, what's goin-"

Watt's question was cut off by the loud grating sound of the intercom. Candyfloss's voice crackled over the speaker.

"Miss Cosmic Glow, please come to my office for an assignment. Thank you."

Glow got up. "See you two goofballs later," she said. "Watt, try not to run into any other projectiles while I'm gone."

"You're worried about me now?" asked Watt with some confusion. "You

throw stuff at me all the time."

"That's true," Glow mumbled as she disappeared down the staircase.

Once she disappeared, Watt turned to Ditzzy with a slight frown. "Was Cosmo trying to throw that thing at you?" he asked with some concern.

Ditzzy nodded. "We, uh... got into a little argument; I guess we let it get out of hoof."

"Well, don't worry about it," Watt said. "As long as nopony got hurt, then who cares?"

"Are you sure *you're* not hurt?" Ditzzy asked. "That looked pretty painful."

"I'm fine. Really," said Watt. "Another benefit to being an Earth pony. We're built pretty tough!"

"Well, thanks for taking the hit for me," Ditzzy said. "Even if it was by accident."

Watt nodded quickly. "No problem!"

Ditzzy let Watt go off to do whatever it was Watt did while waiting for an assignment. She slumped down on the couch and tried to take her mind of recent events by continuing the novel she had been reading in her spare time. She found herself unable to pay attention, however; she couldn't stop thinking about Glow.

Could Glow really be right? Could Candyfloss be just a big liar who does whatever helps keep his employees working for him?

If any of this was true, it meant Ditzzy was back to square one; failed assignments really were something to get upset about, unless you were an unemotional jerk like Glow. The grey pegasus found herself feeling quite depressed about the whole situation again.

I wish I could talk to Breeze about it, she thought. If he can't tell me who to believe, then nopony can.

The silence was broken as, yet again, the loudspeaker crackled and Candyfloss's voice came forth.

"Ditzy Doo and Kilowatt Hour, I'd like to see you both in my office. Thank you."

Watt jumped up. "Assignments for both of us! Let's go!"

The excitable pony scurried out the door with Ditzy tagging along behind.

The pale unicorn braced himself for the usual commotion. The door flew open with a crash, and the bright earth pony flew in, knocking the chairs askew as he threw his front hooves up on the desk, looking his boss straight in the eye.

"Good afternoon, Watt," said Candyfloss calmly, impervious to his employee's exaggerated antics. "Where's Ditzy Doo?"

"I'm right here," Ditzy said, arriving in the small office. "Sorry, but you can't expect me to get downstairs as fast as Watt does."

"Quite right," Candyfloss admitted, motioning subtly for the Earth pony to get off his desk. Watt finally caught the hint, and returned all four hooves to the floor.

"Now," said Candyfloss. "Today, a most unusual situation is unfurling. A client has contacted me and requested not one, but two shippers be sent to her aid today. She, of course, offered to pay both the full price, so I see no reason not to oblige her wishes."

"Two shippers?" Ditzy repeated. "Why? Does she have a reason?"

Candyfloss produced a somewhat awkward expression and shuffled through his notes for a moment.

"Um... the client claims, and this is her words, not mine... that she will need reinforcements, because only one pony helping her will never be enough to overcome the... imperial army."

Watt's eyes lit up. "I have no idea what that means, but it sounds exciting!"

"Imperial army?" Ditzzy asked. "What imperial army? The closest thing Equestria has to a military is the Canterlot royal guard battalion. And even if that is what she's talking about, why would we need to 'overcome' it?"

Candyfloss shook his head. "I'm as confused as you are. The client actually requested my entire staff, but since you and Watt are the only ones not currently on assignment, you're all I could agree to send. But we've never refused a client before without at least visiting them and getting the whole story. So would you two please at least go and see what this is all about? If it turns out to be something illegal then of course you can, and should, decline and return here."

"Yes sir!" Watt cried, saluting his boss. "Where are we headed?"

Candyfloss glanced at his notes again. "A bakery in Ponyville. The place is called 'Sugarcube Corner'."

----- "Why are you so *slow*?"

"I think the better question," Ditzzy replied to her overzealous coworker, "Is why are you so fast?"

Watt was vibrating in place as he stood up the road a few meters, waiting for the pegasus to catch up. Ditzzy swore she could hear a humming sound emanating from him, roughly akin to that given off by high-voltage telephone wires.

"Can't you just fly there?" Watt whined. "I could have been there ten minutes ago if I wasn't waiting for you."

"I'm sure you could have," Ditzzy chuckled. "But what's the rush? It's a beautiful day, and I needed a relaxing trot to clear my head. I haven't exactly been having the best day."

"But aren't you interested to find out what this weird client wants us to do?" Watt asked, trotting in place as if he were warming up for a sprint. "I mean, what do you think this imperial army is all about?"

"I don't know," Ditzzy admitted. "But wouldn't you rather have a simple mission? A job description like this one fills me with concern, rather than interest."

"But that's no fun!" Watt announced. "Even a job like ours can get mundane after a while. I think it's about time we get something over-the-top to do!"

"Well, it's time to find out for sure," Ditzzy replied. "We're here."

The two ponies stood in front of Ponyville's premier bakery, the giant mock-gingerbread house known as Sugarcube Corner. Ditzzy entered the whimsical-looking building, with Watt following close behind.

Immediately, a torrent of pleasant aromas assaulted Ditzzy's nose. Beneath the glass of the display cases rested the widest assortment of baked goods to be found anywhere in Ponyville. Fresh, hot apple pies and sweet cupcakes with colorful icing sat cooling on the counters. A huge barrel was filled to the brim with assorted candies, and a wooden rack held a bright display of giant lollipops. A sense of cheerfulness pervaded the entire establishment, causing even Ditzzy's frayed nerves to be relaxed somewhat.

Watt licked his lips. "Hey Ditzzy, before we go, we should totally grab a treat for the road."

The thought of Watt on a sugar rush caused the mare to twitch slightly; instead of responding to the earth pony, she trotted up to the counter and rang the service bell.

A light blue earth pony with a wavy pink mane emerged from the kitchen and spotted the two customers. "Oh hello, Ditzzy Doo!" she greeted. "I haven't seen you here in quite a while! Are you here for a batch of muffins? Or maybe just ingredients for them?"

"Hello, Mrs. Cake," said Ditzzy. "I'm actually not here for muffins today. My coworker and I came to respond to a call made to Equestria Speedy Shipping Services."

"Equestria who now?" Mrs. Cake asked with a giggle. "I've never heard of

it. Maybe Pinkie Pie made the call; she's been up in her room since around lunchtime."

"Mind if we go see her?"

"Of course not," responded Mrs. Cake. "Just head up the stairs; her room is the first on the left."

"Gotcha!" said Watt, shooting up the stairs in a matter of seconds. Mrs. Cake didn't seem particularly surprised by his almost supernaturally-fast movements, but then again, she did live with Pinkie Pie.

Ditzy trotted up the stairs as Watt rapped on the door; a series of short, speedy knocks that reminded Ditzy of a woodpecker pecking at a tree.

"Come in!" a high voice sang from inside.

Watt pushed the door open and the two matchmakers made their way into Pinkie Pie's room. The party pony hopped over to greet them.

"Hey, it's you!" Pinkie said to Ditzy. "I told you I'd see you in Chapter Seven! And I see those readers are still following you around!"

"Those what?" Ditzy asked. Pinkie wasn't paying attention, however. She was waving at the readers again.

Watt's eyes went wide. "Wait... you can see them too?"

"Well, duh," Pinkie chirped. "They're right there! On the other side of the fourth wall!"

"I know," said Watt. "But I always assumed they were a product of my warped imagination combined with some concussive head trauma from Glow always hitting me."

Ditzy looked in the direction the other ponies were indicating, but saw only a blank paneled wall. She fought the urge to turn tail and leave the room right then, instead opting to try to get her friend and her client back on topic.

"Pinkie Pie," she said quickly. "By any chance, did you contact Equestria Speedy Shipping Services today?"

"Ooh, yes!" Pinkie squealed. "I almost entirely forgot about that! It's super important too, so it's a good thing you reminded me!"

"Okay then," said Ditzy, relieved to have gotten back on track. "So, who is it you're interested in? And what in Equestria does it have to do with an imperial army?"

Pinkie giggled. "Oh Ditzy Doo, you silly pony. I'm not the one who needs relationship help. I actually called on behalf of a good friend of mine." She swiveled in place, and jerked her hoof toward the corner of the room. "He's right over there!"

Ditzy turned to look in the direction Pinkie indicated, and was dismayed to discover that, once again, nopony was there. However, this time, Watt appeared equally confused, which was some consolation, albeit a small amount.

"I'm sorry," said Ditzy finally, trying hard to mask the slight irritation in her voice. "It might just be my bad eyes, but I don't see anypony there. Who are you talking about."

"He's right there!" Pinkie Pie insisted. "Sitting on the stool."

Ditzy looked at the stool. There was no pony, or for that matter any living creature, upon it. The only thing on it was a rather appallingly large ball of dust.

"The ball of dust?" asked Ditzy very slowly, not sure what to make of it.

"Yes, the ball of dust!" Pinkie screeched, as if it was plain as day what she was talking about. "This ball of dust is my dear friend, Sir Lintsalot! And he has found himself in a romantic predicament of fantastic proportions!"

There was a long, long silence. Ditzy stared, dumbfounded, at the clearly delusional pink pony, who simply stared right back with a disturbingly large smile on her face.

"Let me get this straight," she said finally. "You called our company and had Watt and I come rushing over here to help your ball of lint find love?"

Pinkie nodded fiercely. "I'll need all the help I can get if I want to regain my sweetheart," she said in an obnoxious accent.

Ditzy was momentarily confused, but then realized that Pinkie had moved the lint ball around with her hoof a bit as she spoke in the unusual voice.

She's speaking as the lint ball? Does this pony have any grip on reality at all?

"Oh, you talk!" Watt cried, excitedly. "That will make things much easier for us." He scrambled up to the stool where Sir Lintsalot rested, and sat down in front of it, like a colt eager to be told a story by his mother. "Oh, Sir Lintsalot, please tell us your tale of heartbreak."

"You have *got* to be kidding," Ditzy mumbled under her breath as she too plopped down to let Pinkie tell a story in the bizarre voice of Sir Lintsalot.

"You see..." Pinkie began, moving her mouth as little as possible and wagging Sir Lintsalot around for extra emphasis. "I am in love with the most beautiful woman in my homeland. Her luscious form is matched only by her sweet and generous personality. She is my ultimate love; she is the very reason for which I live! She is the beautiful and gracious... Madame Le'Flour!"

"Madame Le'Flour's a flour sack," Pinkie added in her normal voice. "And not a half bad looking one at that."

Ditzy placed her head in her front hooves in exasperation.

"And yet..." Sir Lintsalot continued. "The apple of my eye cannot be mine! Alas, she is the princess of a kingdom that wars with my own! And while she and I are madly in love, her father, the vile tyrant known as King Turnip, guards his daughter as his most precious possession. If I were to set foot into his kingdom, his army would surely strive to slay me and my allies immediately. But I can let nothing come between me and Madame Le'Flour! I need a group of brave heroes to help me delve into enemy territory and whisk my princess away from her evil father!"

"And that's where you two come in!" Pinkie finished.

Ditzy opened her mouth to tell Pinkie, (as nicely as possible) that she was utterly insane and no self-respecting pony would possibly engage in such a ridiculous fantasy adventure. But Watt cut her off.

"What... what a touching story!" The yellow Earth pony bawled. "Of course we'll help you, Sir Lintsalot! It's our duty to put our lives on the line to bring about true love!"

"Oh, thank you, brave heroes!" Sir Lintsalot cried. "For your aid on this noble quest I am most grateful!"

"Wait!" Ditzy interjected. "Watt, it's not our duty to put our lives at stake for this job. And besides, there's no job to do, because our client is just a ball of-"

A realization suddenly caught up with Ditzy. Sir Lintsalot and Watt had just exchanged a few sentences... yet Pinkie Pie had wandered away, and appeared to be busy packing a suitcase for the impending "quest." But if Pinkie was over there, then that meant..."

"The... the lint..." Ditzy stammered, swaying in place when the magnitude of the realization struck her. "It... it's talking..."

"...yeah," said Watt. "So?"

"No," Ditzy continued. "Now it's talking *on its own*."

"I'd prefer to be addressed as a *he*, rather than an *it*." Sir Lintsalot said indignantly.

"He's alive!" Ditzy cried out in fear. She jumped to her feet and scrambled to the bedroom door, yanking it open and fleeing into the hallway.

Only, she didn't find herself in the cozy second-story hallway of Sugarcube Corner. Instead, she found herself surrounded by intimidating dark stones, rough cut into huge blocks that formed a hallway reminiscent of a medieval castle.

"Where am I? What's going on!?" Ditzzy screamed, her voice echoing through the huge passageway.

"We're in my castle, of course," came the strange voice of Sir Lintsalot. Ditzzy turned back around to face her companions. Watt, Pinkie Pie, and Sir Lintsalot now stood in the passageway as well. Any sign of a door leading to Pinkie Pie's bedroom, the last shred of anything still linking Ditzzy to Ponyville and the reality she was familiar with, had vanished completely, replaced by cold, grey stone.

Watt watched with concern, and Pinkie with casual interest, as Ditzzy took off, flying full speed down the corridor, screaming incoherent things about reality's borders being broken.

"Well, that's no good," said Pinkie in a matter-of-fact sort of way once the echoes of the pegasus' screams disappeared along with her. "We're gonna' need her help too if we want to save Madame Le'Flour." She looked at Watt. "Hey, mister... uh..."

"Kilowatt Hour." Watt finally introduced himself. "You can just call me Watt."

"Okey-dokey-lokey!" Pinkie chirped. "Watt, would you please go and try to find Ditzzy and convince her to come along, while Sir Lintsalot and I go get ready to depart?"

"Of course!" said Watt, punctuating the answer with his usual salute. "Or should I say... okey-dokey-lokey!"

Pinkie erupted in a fit of giggles. "You catch on fast!"

Still giggling, Pinkie grabbed Sir Lintsalot and the two of them made for the castle's entrance, while Watt set out in search of Ditzzy.

----- "This is just a dream... I'm not really here... There is no Medieval castle, and there's no talking ball of lint... I'm just in my bed, at home at my cottage, having a very realistic nightmare..."

Ditzy Doo was curled up into a ball in a small, pitch dark closet somewhere in the depths of the castle, shivering and repeating her denials of her situation again and again. After a few minutes, the door opened a crack, and Watt's familiar form appeared.

"There you are, Ditzy," Watt said, relieved. "Come on, we have to help Pinkie and Sir Lintsalot."

Ditzy stared silently at Watt, her eyes fully focused for once.

"Watt," she said quietly. "I'm not sure you understand the gravity of our situation. We have somehow been transported out of Ponyville, and probably out of the whole of Equestria for that matter. We're about to go risk our lives to help a sentient ball of lint rescue his beloved sack of flour from something called, 'King Turnip.'"

"Well, yeah," said Watt. "That's the assignment, I think."

"And... you don't *care* that the laws of reality have been yanked out from underneath our hooves?" Ditzy asked.

Watt smiled. "Ditzy, let me share with you a little piece of Watt wisdom. To be honest, I'm as confused as you are about what going on right now. But Pinkie Pie doesn't seem concerned; I'm sure we'll be going back to Ponyville when this is all over. So I don't see this strange situation we've found ourselves in as a reason to panic; I see it as our one chance to experience something we'll never get to try again. Maybe that's just my ever-positive attitude talking, but I have a hunch about this whole thing. I've got this feeling that the more bizarre stuff we just take-in-stride instead of freaking out at it, the more smoothly this whole adventure is going to go."

"How do you know that?" Ditzy asked, getting to her hooves.

Watt shrugged. "I don't! But I'm not gonna' worry about it. I'm gonna' go out there and treat this like any other assignment, and before you know it, there will be love between that ball of lint and that sack of flour, and we'll be back in Sugarcube corner, drinking hot cocoa and laughing about this whole thing."

For the first time since arriving in this strange place, Ditzzy smiled. "...alright Watt, I'll give it a try. Just make sure you stick with me; I'm going to need your help."

"We're going to need each other's help on this one, I think," Watt said. "Just remember, anytime something new happens that doesn't make sense, just adjust your logic accordingly and respond in whatever way makes sense based on that new logic; if we do that, we can't go wrong!"

"I guess you're right," Ditzzy said with more confidence. "A crazy adventure might be just what I need to get my mind off the incident with Glow anyway. C'mon, let's go find Pinkie Pie."

Ditzzy and Watt trotted through the large stone hallways until they finally reached the front gates of the castle. Both were amazed to see the landscape surrounding them.

The castle sat in the middle of a wide, flat, barren moor, stretching in every direction as far as the eye could see. The ground was barren, and the sky overcast. The whole land had a rather depressing feel to it.

"Welcome to my country," came the voice of Sir Lintsalot, who was standing with Pinkie Pie near the castle gates. "This is Inanima, the place where objects considered 'inanimate' in your country rule over the land. It used to be a serene and beautiful place, but the corruption of King Turnip had choked the life out of the land, leaving this barren place."

"I'll say," said Pinkie Pie. "This place is looking worse every time I come here, Sir Lintsalot. We really have to do something about that."

"Well then, let us begin our quest!" The lint ball announced.

"Wait, we have one small matter to take care of first," Ditzzy interjected. "We're a hired service. How much will we be paid for this?"

"Oh yeah!" Watt added. "I totally forgot to ask about that!"

Sir Lintsalot laughed. "I am an important noble in this kingdom, and I am very rich. I can gladly pay each of you one-thousand of your Equestrian bits for your service."

Ditzzy's jaw dropped. "A thousand bits? That might almost make this worth it."

"Quite," Sir Lintsalot agreed. "Pinkie Pie, is our mode of transportation here yet?"

Before Pinkie could answer, the ground began to rumble rhythmically; it sounded like giant footsteps were approaching.

"That would be him now!" Pinkie squeaked.

A gargantuan creature rounded the corner of the castle; Ditzzy could think of no word to describe it, other than 'dinosaur.' The huge reptilian creature stopped in front of the ponies and stared down at Pinkie Pie with its huge, unintelligent-looking purple eyes.

"Hi Gummy!" Pinkie greeted. "Ready to carry my friends and me for awhile?"

Gummy responded with some sort of gurgling noise, opening his mouth to reveal his complete lack of teeth.

Pinkie grinned back and turned to the rest of her team. Ditzzy was trying as hard as she could to take Watt's advice and accept the arrival of a thirty-foot tall toothless alligator as just another average occurrence.

"Guys, this is Gummy," Pinkie Pie said. "Normally, he's a little smaller, but for some reason, when he comes to Inanima, he gets really big! Maybe crossing the dimensional boundary has that affect on alligators, or something."

Pinkie shrugged it off. "Anyways, Gummy will be carrying us, since King Turnip's castle is like, twenty miles away. It would take forever on foot."

Gummy lowered his large head, and Pinkie hopped up his snout and planted herself firmly in the middle of his back. "Well, come on!" she called. "I need to be back in Ponyville in time for dinner, so let's get going!"

Watt glanced at Ditzzy for a second, then turned and trotted up Gummy's

ramp-like snout to the top. Sir Lintsalot bounced on up as well. Ditzzy, not comfortable with walking on a giant reptile's face, opted to fly up instead. Once everypony was aboard, Gummy began to walk out onto the grayish plains.

"Now," said Pinkie Pie. "Once we leave the territory of Sir Lintsalot's kingdom, this is going to get a lot more dangerous, so let's talk strategy while we ride."

"I don't know anything about fighting," Ditzzy pointed out hurriedly. "Maybe when we get there I could stay back and make sure nopony... uh... hijacks the gator while we're gone."

Pinkie laughed. "Silly Ditzzy! No one can hijack Gummy without the keys! And I have them right here!" She held up the small key ring and jangled it a few times.

Ditzzy had no desire to know how an alligator could have keys, so she remained silent and simply nodded.

"Anyway," Pinkie Pie continued. "Since your company only had the two of you to send, we're still a little too short on reinforcements to defeat the king's imperial army. That's why we're going to make a stop on the way there and pick somepony up. He's the most powerful and deadly mercenary in all of Inanima!"

Sir Lintsalot gasped. "Pinkie Pie! Surely you, don't mean... him!?"

"I do mean him. And don't call me Shirley." Pinkie said, barely able to contain her giggles after making the blatant movie reference.

"But are you sure we can trust him?" Sir Lintsalot said nervously. "I mean... he's not exactly the type one would sit down to dinner with..."

"Yeah, but he owes me," said Pinkie, narrowing her eyes. "He'll help us. He swore he would."

Ditzzy and Watt exchanged unsure glances again.

"There!" Pinkie cried, pointing. "That looks like a good place to ask around

about... *his* whereabouts."

The building Pinkie Pie had indicated was a decrepit looking tavern on the roadside. Gummy walked up next to it and stopped, lowering his snout once again for the ponies and Sir Lintsalot to disembark. Pinkie Pie led the group through the swinging doors and into the tavern.

The building was rather dark and cramped. The few lights that there were flickered weakly, and booths and tables limited walking space. But what startled Ditzzy the most was that the tavern was packed with patrons... all of whom were inanimate objects.

Pinkie Pie, totally unfazed by the unfamiliar surroundings, bounced through the room and seated herself at a swiveling stool at the bar. Cautiously, Ditzzy, Watt, and Sir Lintsalot followed.

The bartender, a surly looking refrigerator, lumbered over to the four new customers. "What'll it be?" he asked in a grating voice.

"The usual! On the rocks!" Pinkie announced.

The usual? Ditzzy thought. *She's been here before?*

The refrigerator turned to Watt. "And you?"

"I'll have what she's having!" Watt announced, looking rather excited about the whole thing.

"And I'll have your finest wine, good sir," Sir Lintsalot added.

"What about you, then?" The bartender asked, turning at last to the pegasus.

Ditzzy, who had been busy processing how a refrigerator could in fact look 'surly', was caught by surprise by the question. "Uh... just w-water..."

"Aw, come on!" Watt called from two seats down. "You gotta live a little, Ditzzy!" He turned back to the bartender. "Bring her what we're getting, too. I'm buying."

Ditzy winced as the bartender lumbered away to fill the drinks. "Watt, what did you do that for? I'm not really a big alcohol fan..."

"Oh, you'll like this though!" Pinkie Pie said. "Everypony likes this little concoction."

Five glasses came sliding down the long table to the group. Three were the mystery beverage the ponies had ordered, along with Lintsalot's glass of wine, and Ditzy's water. Pinkie Pie snatched her glass up and drained it in a few gulps. She sent her cup sliding down to the bartender, motioning for a refill.

"Alright," Pinkie said. "I'm going to go use the little filly's room, and then we can get started asking around about... him." The pink pony smiled giddily and hopped off to the restrooms.

Ditzy scrutinized the beverage in front of her. It smelled vaguely sweet, and the aromatic twinge of alcohol was clearly present as well. She steeled herself and took a hesitant sip. Surprisingly, the drink was refreshing and rather tasty, but Ditzy refrained from consuming more until she had questioned Pinkie thoroughly about the drink's alcohol level.

Watt, on the other hand, had drained the majority of his glass. "Good stuff, eh Ditzy?" he asked with a grin.

"Yeah," Ditzy responded. "Not bad, I guess."

"See?" said Watt. "Nothing bad is gonna' happen. We'll just enjoy a quick drink and then we can get back to our-"

Watt was cut off as the tavern doors slammed open, immediately silencing all conversation. Standing in the doorway was a little pile of rocks of varying sizes. The other objects in the seating area shied away as the newcomer approached the bar.

"That's him!" Sir Lintsalot whispered in terror. "That's the mercenary miss Pinkie wishes to enlist. That's... Rocky!"

Rocky hopped up onto the stool to the right of the one Pinkie Pie would be occupying, had she been present at the moment. He ordered something

from the bartender, and sat silently. The conversation in the rest of the room slowly began to return.

Rocky rotated counterclockwise; in other words, he turned to look at Watt, who was separated from him only by Pinkie's empty seat.

"A pony, huh?" Rocky rasped in a deep voice. "Can't say we see too many of you around these parts. What are y'all doin' here, anyway?"

"I-I-I..." Watt stammered. "Well, I'm not..."

"Stop being so wishy-washy, son," Rocky said, more loudly.

"Well, I'm not sure if I can really explain," Watt continued. "Our friend is probably more qualified to..."

"Dang it, boy!" Rocky roared, jumping up onto the bar counter. "Whaddya' think you're up to? Do you know who yer' talking to? When Rocky asks a question, Rocky expects to get an answer!"

"Sorry!" Watt squeaked, shrinking back from the pile of rocks.

"You're gonna be!" Rocky said. "I'm gonna teach you why you don't go tryin' to pull one over on-"

"Rocky?" asked a high-pitched voice.

Everypony turned to the source of the sound. Pinkie Pie had emerged from the restrooms and was grinning at the rough-and-tumble pile of stones.

"Well, butter my biscuits and call me Delilah!" Rocky announced. "It it ain't ol' Pinkie Pie! I thought I recognized that old gator in the parkin' lot!"

"Hiya, Rocky!" said Pinkie gleefully. "My friends and I were just looking for you!"

"Friends? You mean these guys?" Rocky asked.

"Yes," Sir Lintsalot chimed in. "Please don't hurt us."

Rocky guffawed. "Don't you go all chicken on me, now. Any friend of Pinkie Pie's is a friend of mine."

"That's a relief," Ditzy breathed. "In that case, nice to meet you, Rocky."

"Pleasure," Rocky grunted.

"Now, about the reason we were looking for you," Pinkie said. "You owe me a huge favor, remember?"

"Uh... I don't really recall any-"

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. "Rocky..."

"Alright, alright, yeah," Rocky admitted. "What did you have in mind."

"I'd rather not discuss it in mixed company," Pinkie whispered under her breath. "Come on out with us, and we'll talk aboard Gummy."

"Sounds good," Rocky agreed. "Meet you fellas outside then."

Rocky hopped down from the stool. "Yo, put the drink on my tab!" He called to the bartender. "Heck, put all their drinks on my tab while you're at it."

The bartender nodded, which was an awkward movement for a refrigerator.

Pinkie grabbed her second drink and once again drained it in a few gulps. "Alright guys," she sang. "Finish your drinks and come on, we've gotta' get moving."

Watt sipped the last of his beverage and stood up to leave. Ditzy made to follow him.

"Hey, wait, you didn't finish your drink!" Watt observed.

"I don't want it," said Ditzy. "I hardly ever drink; I get tipsy too easily."

Watt darted to the counter and grabbed the drink. Using his near impossible speed, he darted over to Ditzy, and before she could react,

pulled her head back by the mane and dumped the remainder of the drink into her mouth.

"There," said the earth pony as Ditzzy coughed and sputtered, having inhaled a fair portion of the drink in her state of surprise. "Maybe now you'll lighten up a little bit for the rest of the trip."

Ditzzy just glared at her companion as he trotted out of the bar, grinning ear to ear.

Gummy stomped along the barren plains, now with three ponies, a ball of lint, and a stack of rocks riding on his back.

"You want to do *what!?*" Rocky roared.

"We need to invade King Turnip's castle!" Pinkie Pie insisted. "It's the only way we'll be able to unite Sir Lintsalot and Madame Le'Flour!"

"You gotta' be kiddin' me!" Rocky proclaimed. "We'd need an army to go up against the king!"

"That's why we have you!" Pinkie said. "You're the greatest mercenary in this whole country! If anypony can stand up to the king's forces, it's you!"

"Shoot, girl, yer' makin' me blush," Rocky said, despite the fact that that was quite impossible. "But I still can't take all the king's forces alone."

"That's why I brought these two to help us," Pinkie squeaked, motioning to Ditzzy and Watt.

Watt grinned at Rocky in his usual manner. Ditzzy, who was beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol, just hiccupped.

"Yeah," said Rocky sarcastically. "Real top-notch looking team you got there."

"Don't worry," Pinkie squeaked. "They're professionals!"

Ditzzy wanted to remind Pinkie Pie that she and Watt were professionals in forming relationships between ponies, not fighting an evil army, but her

mind was too clouded by alcohol to properly form the thought.

Another long half-hour passed. Gummy's footsteps rumbled rhythmically as the giant alligator approached the castle of the evil king. Everypony aboard waited tensely.

"This is very strange," Sir Lintsalot said after a while. "We've certainly passed over the border into King Turnip's territory by now, yet we haven't seen any resistance. I hope we aren't walking into some sort of trap."

"Well, we're about to find out," Pinkie chirped. "We're here."

"Well, boil my broccoli and call me Miriam!" Rocky exclaimed. "Look at the size of that place!"

A huge, foreboding castle, far bigger than Sir Lintsalot's, loomed in front of the group of heroes. A small squadron of guards, which once again were a variety of objects, marched in front of the main gate.

"We have to get inside quickly and challenge the king," Sir Lintsalot said. "We can't expend all our energy fighting the gate guards."

"Why don't we just have Gummy charge through the front gates?" Watt asked. "That should get us to the throne room pretty quickly."

"That'sh a fantashtic (hic) idea," Ditzzy slurred. "It'sh a good thing you didn't (hic) get me drunk, Watt, or I wouldn't be mush (hic)... much help in the fighting..." Ditzzy teetered a bit and had to step sideways a few times to keep her balance.

Still amused by his friend's alcohol intolerance, Watt tried his best to hide his giggling. "Yeah, that's true Ditzzy. Lucky for us, you're still *totally* sober." Watt and Pinkie exchanged mischievous grins.

"Well let's do this thing already!" Rocky yelled. "Charge!"

Gummy emitted a loud sound that was a mixture of a gurgle and a squawk, and began running full speed toward the castle. The guards cried out and raised their weapons, but all were easily bowled over by the sheer force of the gigantic reptile's charging bulk. The great metal gates were bashed

open, and Gummy finally came to a stop in front of the doors to the castle interior, which were too small for him to fit through.

"Please do not exit until the alligator has come to a complete stop," Pinkie said. "Thank you for riding with Gummy."

The ponies hopped down from the alligator's back, (with the exception of Ditzzy, who simply toppled off the side, barely managing to prevent a painful fall with her wings). Once Rocky and Sir Lintsalot had disembarked as well, the team ran forward and pushed open the huge wooden doors.

The grand hall of the castle was a massive chamber. Dozens of tapestries with the kingdom's symbol dangled from the ceiling, and a long red carpet led all the way up to the throne, upon which was seated a simple bucket, full of turnips and topped with a golden crown.

"Who dares barge into my throne room uninvited!?" the king demanded.

"It is I," Sir Lintsalot said, stepping forward. "I have come for your blessed daughter. Hand her over, you wicked scoundrel!"

The king laughed evilly. "My dear Le'Flour is far too good for the likes of you! But since you have the gall to enter my castle and demand her, I shall not let you escape!"

King Turnip whistled, and suddenly, another squadron of buckets dropped in from the ceiling. Each one held a different type of vegetable inside, and all wore black cloths around them like bandanas.

"Ninjas!" Rocky bellowed. "Dang it, why's it always gotta' be ninjas!"

"Do you surrender?" the king asked.

"Heck no!" Rocky cried, drawing a sword despite the fact that he had no limbs. "Hey you! The yellow guy! Help me out here!"

Rocky tossed another sword through the air. Watt caught the hilt in his teeth.

"Pinkie! And Lint boy!" Rocky continued, more quietly. "Try to find a way

around the action, and see if you two can take out the king."

"Okey-dokey-lokey!" Pinkie responded, tossing Lintsalot onto her back.

"And you! The mare with the wings!" Rocky said finally. "You're too hammered to fight. Go and find the princess!"

"I told you, I'm (hic) not drunk!" Ditzzy burbled. "I'm perfectly sh... shober!"

"Well somepony's gotta' do it!" Rocky replied testily. "Stick to the plan or we'll all get killed here!"

"Enough of this foolishness!" King Turnip bellowed. "Attack!"

Ditzzy, Pinkie Pie, and Sir Lintsalot darted into one of the many small hallways, leaving Rocky and Watt to fend off the ninjas.

Ditzzy trotted down yet another quiet hallway lined with torches and intimidating suits of armor. It felt like the whole castle was rotating slowly; the pegasus repeatedly stumbled and had to carefully regain her footing.

Who am I kidding? The inebriated mare thought to herself. They're right; I'm about as drunk as I can be. And combining that with my already lousy vision does not make getting around a simple task. Watt had the same drink I had, and Pinkie Pie had twice as much, and yet both of them are perfectly alert.

Cursing her severe intolerance for alcohol, the grey mare continued to search chamber after chamber in the seemingly deserted castle for signs of the princess. Eventually, she lost her footing again on a crease in the rug, and tumbled sideways through a small door, winding up sprawled on a plush carpet.

Something within the room gave a small gasp. Ditzzy looked up, trying to focus her very blurry vision on the source.

"Who are you?" came a female voice with a very heavy French accent. Ditzzy's eyes, (or at least one of them) finally came to rest on a large brown sack, with a tiny gold crown perched atop it.

"Are you... Madame Le'Flour?" the pegasus asked weakly.

"Oui, I am," the sack responded.

"My friend (hic) Shir Lintshalot has come looking for you." Ditzzy slurred. "He and the resht of my friends are in the throne room, fighting (hic) fighting your father's guards."

Madame Le' Flour gasped once again. "My dear, brave Sir Lintsalot! Quickly, you must take me to him!"

The princess leapt atop Ditzzy's back. She was a lot of extra weight, and the mare was having enough trouble walking as it was.

"Oh, this is gonna' be fun..." Ditzzy mumbled sarcastically as she staggered out the door.

"That's it, boy!" Rocky cried encouragingly. "Bring 'em down!"

Rocky was impressed with Watt's skills; the earth pony was so fast that most of the time, he had struck the ninja buckets before they ever saw him coming. Rocky had fantastic warrior skills as well; the little pile of rocks jumped around, swinging his sword furiously. Even when the ninjas ganged up in groups of four or five, Rocky would quickly cut them down. Together, the pony and the stack of rocks were proving to be an equal match for the enemy forces.

Meanwhile, Pinkie Pie and Sir Lintsalot appeared on a second floor balcony, located just above the king's throne.

"Listen closely, Pinkie," Sir Lintsalot whispered. "The only way to save Inanima from the king's tyranny is to defeat him right now. We just have to jump down there, and slay him before the ninjas notice us."

"Uh, I think it may be a little late for that," Pinkie Pie pointed out.

Somehow, a gang of ninjas had appeared from the shadows, trapping Pinkie Pie and her linty friend on the second floor balcony.

"Caught!" Sir Lintsalot wailed. "Oh, woe! We were so close!"

"We're not done yet!" Pinkie Pie announced, reaching into her saddlebag and removing a small, round device.

"What's that?" Lintsalot asked.

"A tiny, colorful explosive," Pinkie Pie explained. "For light shows at parties!"

"You're not going to-"

"Hang on to something!" Pinkie Pie cried, cutting him off. She hurled the explosive to the floor between herself and the ninjas.

Watt, Rocky, and the King were startled by the sudden flash of light and loud bang, and even more surprised when an upper balcony suddenly crumbled, dropping a slightly charred Pinkie Pie right at the base of the throne.

The King reacted faster than anypony could have guessed. In a flash, he was holding some strange, deadly looking weapon, pulsing with electricity, right at Pinkie Pie's chest. The earth pony held perfectly still, staring fearfully at the evil tyrant. Everyone in the room stopped battling and watched in shock.

"Finally," the king mused. "I would have settled for defeating the invaders, but the chance to *personally kill Pinkie Pie*...well, that's a blessing I wasn't counting on!"

The king laughed maniacally for a few moments. "This world, born of your twisted imagination, is at last about to become mine! I have corrupted the land, draining the joy from its endless fields, and now, at last, I can make it permanent! With you gone, I will be the new god of Inanima!"

"Well burn my britches and call me Annabelle!" Rocky gasped. "The king's gonna' kill ol' Pinkie!"

Pinkie Pie's pupils dilated as King Turnip lunged forward, his electrified

weapon aiming for the defenseless pony's heart.

"Pinkie Pie!!"

No one saw Watt move; not even a streak of yellow indicated his mad dash. Yet somehow, he was between the King and Pinkie. He grabbed the King in one hoof, and the weapon in the other, effectively creating a circuit with his body. Electricity surged through him and in to the king, who screamed as the sound of roasting turnips filled the air.

Watt hurled the weapon aside. Shaking from the powerful dose of electricity, but undeterred, he lifted the dazed Pinkie Pie and carried her down from the throne.

"Argh!" The injured king wailed. "How dare you! Ninjas, finish them off!"

The ninjas once again started to advance, but stopped once more as yet another pony dropped down from a higher level of the castle next to the king.

"I think I've had (hic) about enough of thish madness for one (hic) day," Ditzy announced. She unceremoniously flicked her hoof, knocking over the bucket and spilling the turnips.

"Noooooooooo!" The King wailed with his dying breath. "Curse you ponies! Curse you!"

Everyone stared at the dead king for few seconds. Then, a voice cried out in the silence.

"Madame Le'Flour!"

The sack of flour leapt from Ditzy's back. "Oh! Sir Lintsalot!"

The two love struck objects ran toward each other, leaping into one another's embrace.

...

Ditzy blinked a few times. Something was different. But what?

For one thing, she felt perfectly alert. It was as if she'd sobered up instantaneously. Looking around, she noticed similar negative effects on her friends had also been cured. Pinkie was no longer scorched, and Watt no longer was struggling to control the excess electricity surging through him.

The three ponies looked at Madame Le'Flour and Sir Lintsalot. Or, more accurately, a sack of flour, with a ball of lint sitting on top of it. Their motion was gone; they were simple inanimate objects again.

It suddenly occurred to the pegasus why her surroundings seemed so different. She was no longer in a huge stone hall, but rather, a warm, wood paneled room. Pinkie's room, in Sugarcube Corner.

"Huh?" was all the mare could manage to squeak out.

"That... was... awesome!" Watt screamed. "Best assignment of all time!"

"I know!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "I haven't had an adventure that epic for... for at least a whole month!"

Pinkie Pie turned to Ditzy and frowned; the pegasus was twitching a bit as she struggled to comprehend what had happened.

"So...so...so wait," Ditzy murmured. "None of that really... happened?"

"Of *course* it happened!" Pinkie Pie squealed. "Look, Madame Le'Flour and Sir Lintsalot are together now! And the king is dead, see?"

She jerked her hoof in the direction of the bucket, which lay on its side on the floor, the turnips spread lazily around it. Gummy, who was now barely a foot long, stepped over and attempted to eat one.

"So... if it was all real, why are your... friends unable to talk and move again?"

"They can still talk!" Pinkie declared. She ran over and set her hoof on Rocky. "Well, bang my bongos and call me Martha!" She said in a Rocky-esque accent. "The pony's talkin' crazy again."

Ditzy stared at Pinkie and the clearly nonliving pile of rocks for several seconds. "Can I just... get my pay and go, please? It's been a very, very long day."

"Sure!" Pinkie Pie chirped. "It's over there."

Two large bags sat on the stool where Sir Lintsalot had initially been sitting. Each looked easily big enough to contain the promised one-thousand bits.

Ditzy grabbed the bag and placed it in her saddlebag. "Thank you," she said. "Um, and that was... fun, I guess."

Ditzy trotted out the door, but stopped when she heard Pinkie speak again. She paused outside the doorway to listen.

"So, uh, Watt..." Pinkie began sheepishly. "Thanks for, you know, saving my life and all..."

"Oh, no problem!" Watt replied with his usual vigor. "That electric blast would probably have killed most ponies. If I hadn't redirected some of it into the king, it would have gotten bad."

"Well, thanks again," Pinkie said. "Inanima is tied to my life, since, you know, I somehow created it. I'm still not sure how that happened. Anyway, now that the evil king is dead, it should begin to turn bright and green again!"

"That's great!" Watt replied. "I hope your friends are happy that they're finally together."

"Oh, I'm sure they are," Pinkie squeaked.

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds.

"Well," Watt said. "I better get going. It's getting late."

"Unless," said Pinkie Pie, "You want to go out to dinner or something?"

"...Like... on a date?" Watt asked.

Pinkie giggled. "Well, I guess that's one way of putting it..."

Watt laughed along with the pink pony. "Sure! Let's go!"

Ditzy chuckled to herself as she trotted out of Sugarcube Corner. *Well, how about that*, she thought to herself. *Sir Lintsalot and Madame Le'Flour weren't the only ones with a budding romance today!*

The pegasus smiled as she heard the sound of her large pay jingling in her saddlebag. *I think I better go treat myself to a nice dinner too, after a day like that.*

Still smiling, Ditzy trotted up the dimly lit street, wondering how on Earth she was going to explain today's adventure to Breeze.

"Well, bake my Bundt cake and call me Suzy!" Rocky proclaimed. "That was a dang lengthy chapter right there!"

"Wow, you're right," said Pinkie, staring up to the top of the twenty-six vertically arranged pages. "But it was a lot of fun though." She turned to Rocky. "We should really stop breaking the forth wall, by the way. If we put too many holes in it, the whole chapter will come crashing down in a meaningless pile."

"Don't want that," Rocky admitted. "Well, then I guess I should say, 'goodnight everypony!'"

"Yeah, goodnight!" Pinkie agreed, before skipping off for her date with Watt.